NEXT LEVEL: Nights After Dreams

by RipVanGabriel

Summary

The silver medal was hard fought and won, but now the stakes are higher than ever. Five gold medals loom on the horizon, but more importantly, the "life and love" within the gold rings. Yuri and Viktor's relationship grows as they get back on the competition road, and new complications rise with them. (Proper follow-up to the TV series; not AU, no crack ships, no weird shit.)

I draw stuff from the story: http://koltirasrip.deviantart.com/

I also have an FB to keep people in the know about art, updates, and the upcoming semi-animation project that I'll be doing for this fic once I'm done: https://www.facebook.com/NightsAfterDreams/

Notes
1. 'Duetto' was fanservice; Yuri couldn't do a quad Flip OR a quad Lutz (in competition) before the GPF. I've moved that show to a later event so its development can be part of the plot, and its placement in the timeline fits better with Yuri's personal growth.

2. I am fully aware of the fact that Kubo said there's no homophobia in YoI, but she only said it in one interview somewhere and it's not mentioned in the show, where her idealized world is (effectively) indistinguishable from most of the regular world. I'm including SOME bigotry in the fic because it's factually impossible for a population of 7+ billion to all agree that being gay is okay when we can't even agree on what sports teams are best. Sorry Kubo, you cray cray on this one.

3. EDITS ARE CURRENTLY UNDERWAY, but so far they end at Ch12. I'm aware of the few things I need to change, I just won't be going back again until I'm finished with the rest of the fic. I still need to fix Yuri's Worlds Exhibition (I moved it to Ch1) but that's about the only major thing.

4. I DO NOT SHIP OTAYURIO. They are friends. The ship is crack. DO NOT ask me for it.

5. Music Playlist: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLXWmg3GCaalpqHYda7Q96Gu3oHU-TPfUP

6. FB Page featuring artwork from the story: https://www.facebook.com/NightsAfterDreams/

Thank you for your time, and sorry for the trouble. Happy reading!
CHAPTER ONE

-Go go go! The Grand Prix Final Exhibition Gala!-

"It's not a Gold medal, but..." Yuri started, holding his head down a little despite still being happy he'd won a medal at all. He held the Silver in his hands by the lanyard, letting the round, glimmering disc dangle beneath it. His coach stood ahead of him, proud all the same, even if a little disappointed deep down.

Tousling that silver hair, the Russian quirked his head to the side a little and smiled, "I don't feel like kissing it unless it's Gold."

Yuri blanched, the medal wavering as he took half a defensive step backward.

"Man... I really wanted to kiss Yuri's Gold medal..." Victor whined, mostly to himself, but then took a step closer to his student, "I'm such a failure as a coach." He walked right into the younger man's space, forcing him to back up, almost to the point of putting him right on the ice again. A mischievous look grew on Victor's face as he leaned over his student, "Yuri, do you have any suggestions?" His right hand came up to his chin, the gold on his finger gleaming under the lights high above, as his face took on a more serious expression, "Something that would excite me?"

Half a dozen truly inappropriate things ran through Yuri's mind in that instant. He just stammered nervously in response. It was all he could do to avoid toppling over where he stood.

"What did you think just now?" Victor purred.

Cherry-hazel eyes clamped shut even as Yuri's cheeks flushed, but he opened them again and looked at the man looming over him, trying to maintain some semblance of composure, "Oh...uh, well..." He stuttered incoherently. Mentally, he took a moment to regain himself, and then rose up, forcing the Russian back and pushing him down to the ground; the Silver medal was forgotten, and fell to the floor nearby. "Victor!" Yuri called out resolutely, perched on the heels of his skates over the man's right leg. He leaned in close to hug his stunned coach tightly, "Please stay in competitive skating with me for one more year! Next time, I'll win Gold for sure!"

Slate-blue eyes widened in surprise as Yuri pulled back, and Victor could do little more than stare at the man with hope and anticipation, "GREAT!" He suddenly chirped, eyes getting watery with excitement, bringing his own hands up close to his face, "But keep going!"

"Eh?" Yuri choked, leaning away where he was kneeling, caught off guard a little by the Russian's overzealous response.

Victor turned to the right and grabbed the forgotten medal with his ringed hand, "Even I'm worried about making a full comeback if I'm staying on as your coach." He said as he pulled the lanyard through his fingers and held it properly, lifting it up to place it over his student's head, settling the colored ribbon gently around shining shoulders, "In exchange, I'll need you to become a five-time World Champion, at least."

The sentiment was overwhelming. Tears suddenly fell from Yuri's eyes, sliding down his cheeks to drip off his chin. They fell past where his gold ringed hand clung to that Silver disc, "Okay." He said
weakly, trying to stay coherent. He leaned forward again and wrapped his arms around the man's shoulders, and cried.

['He Must Go On' - Luke Garret]

The arena had gone appropriately dark. Music was playing overhead for the Pair Skaters already on the ice. The Grand Prix Final Exhibition Gala was officially underway, and Yuri was to be the second of three from Men's Singles to get to go out. He stood at rink-side with his coach, butterflies rising in his stomach, his limbs feeling hot despite the cold of the ice nearby. He felt a hand come up and squeeze his shoulder, and he turned his head to meet its source.

"Knock it out, Yuri." Celestino said, giving him a thumbs up, "I can already tell what you're about to do."

The medalist nodded excitedly, "Thank you!" He bowed his head, his cheeks a bit pink, "It's been a long journey... I...I hope I make you proud tonight."

"You always made me proud." Celestino corrected, patting that shoulder again before letting go, and turned his eyes towards the man who'd replaced him as coach, "He's finally starting to live up to the potential I always knew he had. I guess you're not a half-bad coach after all."

Victor huffed, but smiled innocently anyway, "He just needed a different kind of motivation."

Yuri glanced back nervously, seeing the knowing grin on the Russian's face, "...You would say something like that, Victor..."

The silver affectionately leaned in to cling to his athlete's arm, and perched his chin on one shoulder. Hands came up around the front, and he batted his eyes slowly, deliberately, "Are you saying you didn't appreciate my unique approach?"

The younger figure just chortled in embarrassment and pushed the man away with a hand against his grinning face, smiling despite it all as Victor laughed at his reaction. Once standing normally again though, Yuri saw his coach give a happy sigh. He tried to get serious again after that, "It's almost my turn."

"Mh." The Russian agreed, nodding, "It's time to bring it all home. I skate the way your friends and fans have always know you could."

Yuri nodded as well, his skate-guard thunking against the ground as he took a step forward. He wrapped his arms around the man who'd gotten him back into the Grand Prix Final after such a close brush with retirement, "This is as much for you as it is for Celestino. For everything you've done, for bringing me this far...for helping to give me what I lacked...Victor, arigatou gozaimasu."

Returning the hug easily, Victor nuzzled his student's cheek, "You always had it in you. But I'm glad to have been the one to bring it into the light." He said, patting Yuri's back before pulling up again and looking him in the eyes. He pressed his palm to the younger man's cheek, and rubbed his thumb across it adoringly, "Go show the world how much you've grown. I'm proud of you, Yuri."

Hazel eyes got misty as he heard the words, and he buried his face against the Russian's shoulder a second time, eyes watering again for the happiness of it all. It was serendipitous that the audience started to clap and cheer at the exact same time; the Pair Skaters ended their Exhibition and came off the ice nearby.
"Ladies and gentlemen," The announcer said high above, "Please welcome to the ice...your Grand Prix Final Men's Singles Silver Medalist...Yuri Katsuki!"

Anxious, Yuri pulled back and rubbed his eyes on the back of his sleeve, pulling the track-suit coat off to reveal the costume beneath it. The gradient of black-to-blue flames on the stomach, rising up the chest to end in a short white turtle-neck. The sky-blue lapels to either side that came down to a point at the bottom. The royal blue sleeves that ended in white ruffles over gloveless hands. Yuri gently handed his jacket over to his coach and reached down to pull his blade-guards away, giving them over as well.

As Victor took the guards in his left hand, he reached with his right to pull Yuri's ringed hand up, kissing the gold thereupon and smiling, "I'd say 'Davai,' but I don't think you need to hear it. Go have fun out there."

Yuri nodded excitedly, the butterflies fluttering about with even more energy, "Mh."

Cheers and screams rose again, louder than before, when he finally set silver blades to white ice and started moving out into the rink.

"Some members of the audience may recognize this outfit," Newscaster Morooka was saying, though only the TV and streaming audiences could hear it, "The last time Skater Yuri wore it at an international competition was at last year's Grand Prix Final in Sochi, Russia, where he suffered a catastrophic defeat and came in 6th place. Many worried he would retire from the sport after such a crushing humiliation, but thanks to his coach, Victor Nikiforov, he not only returned to competition, but surprised us all by setting a new World Record for the Men's Free Skate, and won Silver in the process. From the bottom of Japan's heart, and the world's...Coach Victor, thank you!"

Yuri pulled to the center of the rink, mesmerized by the whole thing; the cheering, the adulation, the screams of his name and well-wishes. He knew when and where he was, but seeing himself with that costume from what he still considered his 'dark past' made him a little anxious...but for the first time, it was in a good way. He finally knew what he was capable of, and every muscle in his body twitched to show it off. He looked at his hands, his ring helping to ground him in the present. He set his feet apart, kissed his ring, and crossed his arms over his chest, one hand on each shoulder, and drew one last long breath.

['Firebird Suite Finale' by Stravinsky - found on YouTube channel PrimroseMagic]

The music was quiet, peaceful.

Yuri spun around on the spot in an inside spread-eagle, rotating out again to skate further from center, his arms spread out, descended in front of his chest, and then out again like wings flapping. As the music grew louder and more intense, so did his turns and twists.

He leapt into a flying camel-spin, moved upright into a scratch-spin, and then lowered himself into a sit-spin as the music got quieter again. The world was a blur all around him, even in the dark; lights twinkled from the void where the audience was hidden, looking like shooting stars as he spun. He rose again and pulled away backwards, skating with his eyes nearly closed.

Victor watched intently, practically without blinking. He'd remembered the last time he'd seen the performance himself, and the pity he'd felt for Yuri even back then.

"What's wrong with him?" Victor had overheard someone critiquing the performance in the prep
area, "He did well enough to place in the Final and now he's just falling apart."

"Is it first-time GPF jitters?"

"Who knows? His Short Program was pretty good though...held onto 3rd despite having only made it here for the first time."

Victor stuffed his hands into the pockets of his half-zipped track-suit coat; the black pants and sheer magenta tips of his Aria costume were still visible, but he'd taken his skates off a little while earlier. He had already done his Free Skate and was just waiting for the last handful of competitors to do theirs before claiming his Gold medal. The large screens in the prep-area made it easy for him to see every detail of every performance, but this one caught his attention more than the rest.

"Something happened to him." Victor said to himself quietly, pulling a finger up to his chin in thought, "This isn't like how he was before."

"What do you mean?" Chris asked, suddenly stepping up next to him and watching as well, "Didn't think you cared that much at this point."

"I don't care?" Victor repeated, looking at him side-ways, "That's harsh."

"You've never really paid that much attention to other skaters before, at least not like this. You always seem to get a bit aloof with the rest of the competition once you've gotten your final score and know how far ahead of the pack you are." The Swiss skater pointed out, "What do you see that's gotten your attention?"

Victor pulled his hand down and crossed his arms, "Yuri's Short Program the other day still had some excitement in it. This...even though we've all seen it half a dozen times leading up to today, it's different. There's a weird sort of melancholy to it. You're his friend..."

"I am."

"...Did he say anything to you that might explain it?"

Chris thought about it, "No, but...he didn't seem like himself this morning. He's been looking at the ground since he showed up for early morning practice. If something happened, it was last night, after we'd all left already."

Victor nodded, and then turned away from the screens, heading out to the rink-side area quietly. The Swiss skater watched him go with a ponderous expression on his face, but decided against following. Stepping out into the seating area, the silver legend looked out quietly, standing near a railing that guarded a ledge. A few people recognized him and called his name, but he was focused and paid them no mind.

'...Here comes the triple toe-loop...' He thought to himself, and winced as Yuri collapsed, sliding nearly into the rink-wall before struggling to get up again and continue on, 'This is painful to watch...'

Quad Toe-loop followed by a triple-loop. Yuri was in top form, spinning with ease as he entered into his step sequence.
"Come on, Yuri...shake it off." Victor whispered to himself, "Forget whatever is going on outside this place and just skate."

Yuri Plisetsky was in the lower level seats of the arena, feet propped up on the empty chairs in front of himself as he gawked at the skater in the rink. He seemed fixated. The jumps were embarrassing to look at, but the spins and step sequence would frequently grab peoples' attention, even that of the Russian Punk, 'He obviously knows how to move...but it's like he forgets what to do when his skates leave the ice.' The blonde thought to himself.

Quad Salchow, single Loop, triple Salchow. The audience was cheering, and the energy fed into Yuri's body and soul like fuel. He was in the zone now.

Yurio stood at rink-side, watching just as intently as he had the last time the show had been put on. Otabek stood quietly next to him, just as interested in the redemptive performance as anyone else.

This is exactly what I wanted to see back then, Katsudon.

Yuri's enthusiasm for the Free Skate was withering, and Victor could see Celestino at rink-side, watching like he was a hair's-width away from complete nuclear meltdown. There was nothing the coach could do at that point though, so Celestino crossed his arms and hoped for the best.

Quad Loop, and the crowd roared with approval. Yuri pushed on into a low sweep, rising into a series of two butterfly jumps before finally sliding into a triple-Flip, double-Salchow combo.

Victor turned his eyes back to the ice; Yuri's only quad for the Free Skate was coming up. He'd changed the program up to emphasize less-difficult combination jumps in favor of more difficult solo jumps. The Russian Champion wondered if Yuri would even try it at that point...but...he did...and again, he fell. Unlike Celestino though, who had since put his hands over his face to hide himself from his skater's collapse, Victor's eyes were wide open and analyzing.

Yuri spun a few more times, but then burst out in reverse to build up speed for his final major jump...and he threw himself into the air with a click of his toe-pick against the frost. He spun four times, and landed on the opposite blade...the quad Flip he'd admired; the audience screamed through the dark, and Yuri couldn't help but cheer for himself as well as the glided on.

He was utterly exhausted, but Yuri pushed himself up again from where he'd fallen and skated quickly to regain his previous momentum. He'd had to cut a few elements from the end of the program due to lost time, and so the entrance into his final spin sequence looked unpolished.

Yuri moved into a camel-spin variant, and hopped to the other foot to continue on. He lowered himself into a sit-spin variant to gain momentum, raising one arm above his head for added difficulty.
Ice crystals flew off his blades as he carved his mark into the rink. When he rose up again, he 'stepped' a few steps backward before rotating one last time, and reached up with both hands for the final pose. The rising crescendo and ultimate finale of the music was a perfect analogy to the way the skater himself felt; he'd finally risen above his past defeats - victorious - and stronger than ever.

_Born again like a Phoenix from the ashes of its own Death. Blue flames instead of red, burning three times as hot as any normal fire._

Victor had thought the same thing, a look of proud determination on his face as he heard the audience go wild. He clapped his hands along with the rest, but soon found himself unable to maintain the cool control he was trying to hold onto. He jumped up with his hands over his head, cheering wildly, "Yuri~! Amazing~!"

Yuri was panting heavily in the middle of the rink, but the feeling of having pulled off that program...especially with the difficulty having been raised so much higher than the last time he'd done it...made him feel like he'd won Gold after all. Tears ran down his face and he bowed to the audience in each of the cardinal directions, waved, and finally turned to head back to rink-side as the spotlight high above cut out, plunging the rink back into darkness. He rubbed his eyes again like before, but when he raised his face again, this time, he saw _not only_ Victor there clapping for him; Yurio, Phichit, Chris, Celestino...even Otabek and JJ...they were _all_ clapping. It was such a departure from the last Grand Prix Final that Yuri almost fell to his knees before even making it to the rink wall. Instead, he collapsed into his coach's waiting arms, and drank in the sweet sound of his own revival.

The Exhibition had ended, and everyone piled back to their hotel rooms to get ready for the Banquet. Yuri was starting to feel tired after the last few hours of adrenaline pumping through his system, and when he finally saw where the two twin beds were mashed together, he threw himself face-first across both of them, the Silver medal squished under his chest, arms flopped out to the sides.

Victor huffed a laugh where he saw from the hall, letting the door quietly click closed, and removed his long-coat, "You're going to fall asleep and miss the fun later if you stay like that for too long."

Yuri just waved his left hand lazily where it partly hung off the foot of his own twin bed, his words muffled against the sheets, "Just wake me up in an hour. I need a nap."

Blue eyes half-lidded in amusement, but the Russian moved off without answering, leaving the skater to his own devices while he plotted his own next move. Turning on the shower was the first order of business, and he discarded of all his clothes. He stuck his hand into the stream of water and found it acceptably warm...but then, instead of getting in, he left the bathroom entirely and padded softly across the carpet with bare feet, moving close to where Yuri's hung off the side of the closest bed.

The younger skater was easily asleep already, and didn't notice the figure looming behind him. Victor just observed carefully, a finger over his mouth as he contemplated things. He closed his eyes and smirked to himself as both hands went down to Yuri's feet, put a finger on the back of each heel, and pushed down, just enough to get each sneaker to slide off.

It was only when Yuri felt the weight of another body coming to rest along the entire length of his back and legs that he finally awoke. His eyes went wide, and he stammered incoherent protests as half-conscious confusion reigned. Pale hands went under his chest, one grabbing hold of the medal to pull it free, then lifted the glinting metal in front of Yuri's right shoulder, holding the trophy in front of them both.
It was enough that Yuri could see that his coach's arms were bare, but what made his cheeks go to a darker shade of crimson was feeling where the man wedged his knees between his own, "...You're naked, aren't you?" He finally managed, a look of amused but embarrassed surrender on his face.

Victor nosed his student's cheek affectionately, and curled his knees back behind himself, "What difference does it make if you aren't?"

Yuri took the point as it was and stayed quiet. Instead, he turned his eyes to where Victor was holding the Silver disc ahead of him, turning it slightly to glimmer in the light of the setting sun through the window. His eyes closed a little as he looked away, and despite his earlier pride and excitement, the stark truth of the night's events suddenly hit him...harder than before, like it was a bad thing, "He took it from us by less than a quarter of a point."

"It looks like Gold right now though, neh?" The legend asked, making Yuri look up to see how the silver-chrome finish reflected the golden color of the light outside.

"Yeah...but that doesn't make it Gold."

"You'll win it next time, like you said."

"You're not disappointed in me, deep down, are you?" Yuri wondered, turning his eyes as he lowered his chin down to the sheet, "After everything you did...in the end, I let you down..."

Victor's brow furrowed, and he set the medal down on the blanket to free up that hand. He moved to cross both arms under his student's chest, and held him close, "You could never disappoint me. I firmly believe you'll get your due in time...and really, you broke my Free Skate record yesterday, which I set during a Gold Medal performance of my own once. You should be proud of what you did here."

"I am...I just..." Yuri said, but let his words trail, pausing only enough to wiggle out from under his coach and roll onto his side next to the man instead. His eyes were low, staring at the ring on Victor's hand where he was holding up his head, "...I-"

"...-wanted to get me something round and golden." Victor finished, echoing the words from the days prior. He reached out his free hand and gently trailed a finger down Yuri's jawline, stopping just under his chin and making him look up with a gentle nudge, "You got that for me, and it's more precious than any medal could ever be."

Hazel eyes looked forward, seeing the Russian there as though for the first time all over again. Yuri rolled onto his elbows, and looked down as he pushed himself up onto them, feeling where his arm and shoulder pressed against Victor's chest. He felt the Russian's arm settle across his lower back, one knee sliding over the back of his leg, but only barely. A moment passed in silence before Yuri reached out to pull the medal up again, looking at his own reflection in its mirror-like surface before noting the gold band around his own finger; the matching ring that Victor had given to him at the Sagrada Familia.

...He must've realized what I'd done when I dragged him into that jeweler's store, and got this while I had my back turned. I can still hardly believe it...but...

He turned his eyes from his reflection on the mirrored disc, and found it again in the blue eyes that were watching him.

Victor waited. For a brief instant, it looked like Yuri was leaning closer...but then turned away again. He smiled despite feeling a little disappointed, but said nothing to question it, simply waiting quietly
for Yuri to make the next move.

"Whatever happens..." He started, "Don't let me hold you back."

"Eh?" Victor quirked a brow in confusion, "...Hold me back?"

"You said you were worried about making a full comeback. If it's..." Yuri bowed his head low, turning only enough to see his idol's elbow in the blankets, "If it's because of me...don't feel obligated to stay on as my coach. You sh-"

"Yuri."

He went quiet, a little embarrassed by his words.

"I know. You're going to say that I should do what's best for me..." Victor started, bringing his left hand up a little bit to stroke the skater's back gently, "But that might not always be what's best for my skating. I have to really think about what's going to happen... I'm turning 28 before the month is out; by figure skating standards, I'm a fossil. Staying on with you for one more year...that might be all I can manage."

The words made Yuri's heart pound in his chest.

"But you've thrown me a life-line." The Russian went on, drawing Yuri's attention back again, "You told me at Fukuoka Airport that you wanted me to be yours until you retire...and then after the medaling ceremony, you agreed to win five World Championships... That means I'll be able to stay in figure skating for another four more seasons after this. If it's as your coach...or as your competition...the one thing I know for sure is that I'll be there because I'm with you." He said reassuringly, and leaned close to kiss the figure's shoulder. He held for a moment, and twisted to sit up again, reaching back to pat the back of Yuri's leg, "Come shower with me. It's more cramped than the wash-room at Yu-Topia, but I'll do your hair again. Okay~?"

The hall leading to the Banquet was bright, just like Yuri's vague, beer-goggled memories of Sochi. Victor had snickered a few times as he'd gone through the photos again while they walked, each time offering to let Yuri see, and each time being turned down. Victor had honestly felt a little déjà vu at the constant rejection, but vowed that he wouldn't go to bed with tears in his eyes that time. Makkachin wasn't there to console him anyway. He huffed to himself and put his phone away in defeat, but slipped his arm over his athlete's shoulder as they approached the party. He felt a little better about the whole thing though when he noted Yuri's arm coming up behind his back in return, a hand settling gently over the crest of his hip. The longer he felt it there, the more he found himself smiling.

The pair strode into the Banquet Hall through massive wooden double-doors, and those within seemed to go a little bit quieter at the sight of them. The pause soon changed to clapping, and within a few seconds, practically everyone in attendance was adulating the pair's arrival.

Victor beamed under all the attention, and squeezed his student's shoulder where he held it, laughing happily as he brought his free hand back up out of his pocket to wave graciously. His pride as a coach of a medalist was withered only as those gathered decided to focus their attention on a certain rumor they'd heard, rather than on the star skater he'd taken time off to train.

"Victor!" Someone had called out, "Are you really going to skate at Russian Nationals!? That's only two weeks from now!"
"It's true!? You're coming out of retirement!"

"Does that mean you're going to stop coaching!?"

"Victor!"

Chris' eyes peeked up where he'd been standing in the crowd, a champagne glass already sitting in one hand. "You are coming back? I'd heard the rumors, too, and as much as I want you back, it seems a bit ambitious to say you can do so in time for Nationals."

The Russian's name, and various other comments, echoed throughout the room. Yuri could feel the man's fingers tighten a little around his left shoulder, and he looked up nervously. To his surprise, Victor actually looked a little annoyed; eyebrows twitching despite his desperate attempt to keep the smile he'd born. But, true to Nikiforov-style, Victor quickly turned his sour-tinted expression to one of jovial excitement. He stepped forward only long enough to quiet the inquisition and return attention to where he thought it should've been all along, "Yuri skated a perfect redemption-program today, especially with the flawless Quad Flip at the end!" He explained, pulling attention entirely off the rumors, and back onto what really mattered, "And I hope he continues improving for his own Nationals, and Four Continents after that. By the time the World Championships come up again in March, Yuri will have a lot of competition! Wish him the best of luck! He'll need it!"

"So you ARE coming back!" The crowd erupted, much to Victor's chagrin.

"Victor..." Yuri whispered, speaking in such a hushed voice that he could barely hear himself. Not knowing what to say or do, he softly rubbed his thumb back and forth against his coach's hip, trying to soothe the man's nerves as well as he could.

"So, he's decided to keep skating then after all." Yurio's voice came from the background, rising above the clamor of the rest of the crowd, "How does it feel, Victor? The only Gold you're going home with is the meaningless band on your finger, just like I told you. Looks like it was fool's gold all along, just like its owner."

Yuri could hardly believe the words, but hearing them from the Russian Punk, it almost didn't surprise him either. He practically hid in Victor's shadow, not wanting to be part of the confrontation, even if it was about him.

The crowd parted, and several coaches and skaters alike commented on the offensive language.

Yurio's Gold medal hung proudly around his neck, and Coach Yakov whisper-growled some choice words to the teen, but they went unheeded.

Victor breathed in a quiet sigh, and pulled free of Yuri's shoulder, stepping forward and facing the teen squarely. He pointed his right hand forward, and pressed hard against the medal dangling in front of the blonde's chest; he stared intently, but spoke softly, "There's more gold in this band than there is on your prize. It's 100% pure gold, just like the man who got it for me." Slate eyes focused on emerald, each of them unblinking, "If it bothers you so much that I have it, then try to steal gold from me at the next competition. You still have a long way to go before you're Russia's sole Champion, Yurio."

Hearing the nickname set the teen's teeth on edge, but he challenged the finger-poke against his chest with a jab of his own, and got right up into his counterpart's face, "Tell Katsudon that I'm glad he isn't quitting. I'll crush him, over and over again, until the day he finally gives up and retires for good. Maybe by then you'll regret putting your faith into the wrong Yuri."
"That's enough." Yakov finally said, pushing the two skaters away from each other to defuse the situation, "Yuri, he's your rinkmate again, show some respect." He scolded, then turned then back to his reinstated-student, "When are you coming home then, Vitya?"

The room finally went back to its previous tempo, calmed after the bustle of the conflict.

"Aha~!" Victor laughed meekly, trying not to let the Russian Punk get under his skin, "Pretty soon, probably."

The conversation seemed to go on as though it were the most obvious thing, but to Yuri, still standing a bit in the background, it was a hard pill to swallow. He gave a nervous look as his eyes went to the floor.

All the time he spent with me in Hasetsu, the plan all along was that he'd move back home after the Final. He still talks about it like nothing has changed. ...How can he keep being my coach if he leaves though? How can he talk about leaving at all after how upset he got on Friday when I said we should end things...? What's he thinking...? He's so impulsive. He probably has no plan at all. Stupid Victor...

Chris stepped up with Phichit just as Yuri turned his back to go towards the banquet display, leaving both skaters with their mouths half-open in planned-but-cut-off conversation, having no idea they'd even been there. They blinked at him quietly as he went off, seeing curiously as he held his head low. Chris just rubbed his chin, "Despite winning Silver this time, he still has that look on his face like last year. I wonder if this'll turn into another Strip Tease?"

Phichit wasn't sure what to think of it, "Maybe we should stop him if he plans to drink."

"He's a happy drunk though." The blonde shrugged, holding up his flute of bubbly, "Maybe it'll lighten his mood."

Looking a bit nervous at the idea, Phichit shook his head, "Drunk Yuri always regrets what he does though once he's sober again."

"Not if he forgets again, too." Chris put his free hand on his hip and sipped the drink a little, casting his eyes aside to spot his rival, "I still can't believe they went that whole year and the Sochi banquet never came up. Victor really spent that whole time in Japan thinking Yuri knew all about what happened." He laughed quietly to himself, "It's no wonder he chose to choreograph a super-sexy program after that. He got a taste of Yuri's sweet Eros and couldn't help but ask for more."

The younger skater just gave him a look, watching where Chris had a hand up against his cheek while he daydreamed, "I can only wonder what horrible things you're imagining right now."

"Yuri's special training. One more minute and I think I might cum again..." He sighed contentedly, closing his eyes to 'watch' the show in his mind.

"You can do that just standing there!?"

"Yuri!" Victor's voice suddenly called out. The Russian had turned from the conversation with his coach and realized his own student was missing, lost somewhere in the crowd.

The ominously absent skater had slinked off to where the food was on display at the far end of the room. He saw a bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice, and a dozen or more glasses already full in front of it. His hazy recollection of the previous year started with champagne, and he didn't want to forget again, so he snubbed his nose at the alcohol and turned it instead to the carefully-arranged hors d'oeuvres on a different table nearby. Before he'd even managed to put a single piece of prosciutto-
wrapped cheese in his mouth though, Victor had wrapped both arms around his waist from behind, and rubbed a cheek against the side of his neck.

"Yuri! Found you~"

The morsel fell from his hand, but his cheeks flushed and he forgot all about it. Just as quickly as he'd calmed from the surprise of having someone clinging to him unexpectedly though, Yuri's mind went back to the whole reason he'd moved off on his own in the first place.

"It's going to be so weird to train under Yakov again after spending so much time in Japan." The Russian was saying, heedless to his student's apprehension, "Reverting back to an athlete after being a coach for so long will be exciting!"

"Yeah..." Yuri mumbled, fingering for another hors d'oeuvre to replace the one he'd lost. He half bit-down on it, not quite focused enough to eat the thing even though he meant to. It was enough to taste the salty flavor, and everything else faded away.

Victor blinked at the lackluster response, and pulled off the man's back to turn him around. It was only then that he saw the anxious look on Yuri's face, those brown eyes cast down towards his tie rather than up into his eyes like he wanted. A gentle hand went under the skater's jaw, pressing the tips of two fingers to the underside of his chin, and lightly pushed the man's gaze up.

Hazel irises resisted the move, but Yuri couldn't help it, and reluctantly looked to his coach's face. His brow furrowed as the nerves coiled in his stomach, but he said nothing; he kept on biting down on that prosciutto-wrapped cheese, using it as an excuse to stay silent a little while longer so he wouldn't have to voice his worries out loud.

"Why do you look so nervous all of a sudden?" Victor wondered, snaking his hands forward to rest them on Yuri's waist, "Is it because of what Yurio said? Don't worry about him. He's always been vulgar like that. It might even get worse once you've beaten him for Gold at Worlds. You should look forward to it more."

Yuri still had no answer. Worlds was months away. Victor returning - leaving - to St. Petersburg was around the corner.

Victor was perplexed, staring down on his silent companion. For lack of knowing how else to make the man speak, he leaned forward with parted lips, and gently bit down on the end of Yuri's snack. Though Victor had closed his eyes, he could feel Yuri's stunned gaze, and all but kissed the man right there. The tips of their noses lightly brushed together as Victor held still there for a while, but eventually bit off his half of the snack before pulling away again.

Yuri blinked in embarrassed amazement, watching in continued silence as his coach finished the piece off. Reluctantly, he finished his own half as well, sighing and setting his forehead to the Russian's collarbone.

"What's wrong?" Victor asked again, feeling the younger man's arms come up around his sides, hands clinging to the back of his suit-coat, "Yuri...?"

"You're moving back to St. Petersburg." He finally said, doing everything he could to avoid letting his voice crack from the pain rising in his throat.

"Of course." The silver answered; it was as obvious as anything, but Yuri's response to it was mysterious as ever, "Aren't you excited?"

"Why \textit{would} I be? You're \textit{leaving}.
"Oh! I'm not leaving without you." Victor clarified, "We're moving to St. Petersburg. Together."

Yuri pulled his head up, shocked, "...But...what? ...Really?"

"Yeah. Wasn't that obvious from the start?" Victor asked as he offered a confused smile, "It wouldn't be the first time you've trained abroad, after all. Did you really think I was going to leave you behind? How was I going to coach you? Through FaceTime at 4 in the morning?" He laughed nervous, perplexed at the whole thing, reaching both arms around those trembling shoulders, and rubbed his cheek against the man's ear, "Yuri..."

"Well...I didn't...want to just assume..." He stammered, though his cheeks flushed all the same, ...Me...moving to St. Petersburg!? He thought in a panic, Living with Victor in his own home!? It'll be so different from Yu-Topia...there was always a whole resort between us, and a dozen or more people. In Russia, we'll be alone... He drew in a nervous breath, feeling the euphoria of that unexpected realization. He anxiously clung a little closer, eyes wide.

Victor seemed to enjoy it, and whispered quietly, "I know that we'd planned on me leaving after the Final, but we've exchanged rings now, Yuri." He started, speaking the words against the skin of that bare neck, "Plans will have to change. Having you follow me home is just the natural choice. Unless you don't want to come for some reason?"

"...Unless I don't!??" Yuri echoed in horror. He craned his head back to look at his coach squarely, "I... How could I refuse!?"

Victor offered a smile, calm and reassuring as he'd always been, "So you'll come?"

"Of course I'll come!"

"That's just what I like to hear." He mused, leaning in a little closer.

Chris chuckled into his champagne glass and elbowed the stunned figure next to him, "We won't have to imagine it for much longer, the way they are going."

Phichit had to fan himself with one hand as the other was up and clicking away on his phone, camera shutter noises resounding with every thumb-tap, "Yuri, you know not what you're doing..."

Yurio blustered quietly to himself, watching the spectacle from further away, "Someone should pull the fire alarm. The way they are now, it could get gross if no one stops them."

Mila put a finger on her chin as she looked at the pair, "So their matching rings..." She wondered, the thought lingering for half a second longer. She saw how precariously close the two had gotten, and how flushed Yuri's face had grown. She pointed at the both of them and utterly ruined everything by yelling her realization out loud, "Those rings aren't good luck charms AT ALL! You guys are ENGAGED!"

Yurio, Yakov, and half the people in the immediate vicinity, all turned to gawk at the red-head, but only the Russian Punk spoke, "Jesus, Mila...wasn't it obvious? Victor even said they'd get married if Katsudon won Gold." He turned his head slightly and muttered the rest under his breath, "Which he didn't...so they won't."

"When did he say that!??" She turned to him and grabbed his shoulders adamantly, leaving the spoken-of pair in confusion.

"O-On Thursday!" He answered frantically, though something clicked in his head and he deadpanned the woman instead, "Oh right, you weren't there."
Mila suddenly hefted the hapless Gold medalist over her head, and started marching around the room with him in spite of his flailing and protests, "I can't believe this! Why didn't anyone say anything!? This is going to be huge news back home!"

"PUT ME DOWN, BABA!"

Otabek and the Russians just watched quietly, eyes following the teen as he passed by them in the air.

Victor sighed and turned back, the moment lost, seeing the modest and reluctant expression returning to Yuri's face. Realizing there was no chance to go for it again, he reached instead behind Yuri's back and lifted two champagne flutes from the table, looking over to Chris and Phichit as though in invitation to come closer. The pair did as suggested as Victor handed the second flute to Yuri, and then held up his own into the center between them all, "A toast, then. To Yuri's Silver medal, to my officially announcing that I'm coming back to competition, to the move to St. Petersburg...and all the fun and challenges of the season yet to come."

"Here here." Chris agreed, holding his own glass up as well.

"To Four Continents for Yuri and I, and then, to Worlds!" Phichit added.

"To Worlds." They all agreed, clinking their glasses together.

The Banquet went off without a hitch after that; photos were taken of the various groups, cakes were cut, gifts given from the ISU to the various winners. Yuri made sure never to have more than that first glass of champagne, wanting on pain of death to remember the night. Victor had gotten plenty toasted though, ending up in a rather brief - if comparatively mild - dance battle with Chris. Event staffers quickly mobilized and pulled the two apart before more than just their shoes and jackets had come off, though many commented on how 'those two never change,' leaving Yuri flustered and wondering what had happened that he still didn't know about.

The opportunity seemed to present itself at that point though. While Yuri was trying to get the Russian's jacket buttoned up again, despite Victor's overtly affectionate drunken antics making it difficult, Mila came up behind him. She put her hand softly on Yuri's shoulder, getting his attention just long enough to turn his head back and feel his coach come slithering up all over him again.

"V-Victor!"

"If they won't let me dance with Chris then you should dance with me!" Victor called out with a slur, "It'll be just like last year, except this time I'm drunk! It'll be fun! We can do that bull-fighting thing again!"

The red-head laughed, sighed, and shook her head, reaching forward to help untangle her rink-mate's arms from around his helpless victim's smaller frame. She managed to get hold of Victor's wrists and pulled them up, giving Yuri a chance to escape, though the Russian continued to play grabby-hands in his direction even as he moved away.

"Yuuurrrriii! Yuuurriii~!" The silver genius whined.

The younger skater huffed a nervous laugh, but then turned his completely-sober self towards the lady who'd plucked him out of the situation, "Sorry about that..." He held his hands together in front of his head as he bowed it in apology, "Did you need something?"

"Just him." She answered, maneuvering the hazy Nikiforov towards a nearby chair until she could
dump him into it, "Can I have a word alone?"

Yuri blinked at her, "I don't know that much of it will stick..."

"Victor is Russian. He can drink all night without blacking out. This is just champagne." She explained politely, "I'll only be a minute."

"Oh... Okay." Yuri nodded anxiously, reaching up to adjust his glasses before stepping away, but glanced back over his shoulder as he moved off. His only relief from the growing swarm of butterflies in his stomach was hearing Phichit calling his name out to distract him.

Mila smiled and waved, waiting until he was out of earshot before turning back to Victor and giving him his wrists back, as well as giving him a strange look.

"What a scary face." The silver quipped, slouching where he sat.

"Victor...what you're doing is reckless."

"You just said yourself that it's only champagne." He defended, "I've had harder liquor before without problems. I drank all night in Hasetsu a bunch of times!"

"I'm not talking about the drinking, stupid." Mila corrected, "This thing you have with Katsuki...it won't be welcomed in Russia."

"Russia's opinion doesn't matter." He said simply, shrugging in his drunken haze and still looking quite merry, "The fans at Rostelecom didn't seem to mind when Yuri showed them his love." He leaned in close to whisper behind his hand, "He asked me later if I thought Russia would be mad at him for taking me off the ice...and when I told him 'no, they'd be jealous,' he got excited, like he was so proud of himself. It was so adorable."

"They didn't mind you guys because they're fans. Not everyone in the Motherland is so understanding. This is dangerous." Mila clarified pensively, "You could get hurt. He could get hurt. Don't you know what's happening back home? If people find out that you, Russia's Hero, are engaged to another man-"

"I can protect us." He cut her off, speaking with a bit more mental clarity than before.

"Victor..." Mila argued, quieter than before, but also more worried than before, "There's video online...a number of people have declared an open hunting season on same-sex couples or those seeking such relationships. They post fake ads on match-making sites and lure single men to hotel rooms, and beat them half to death for fun-"

"How could they bait me like that? I'm not a single man anymore," He interrupted, holding up his ringed hand for a moment before setting it back down on his leg, "...And I'm not going to let anything happen to either of us."

"You're not taking this seriously at all! They're beating people up in the streets, like it's a game!" She whisper-yelled, taking Victor's arm with one hand, "With you being such a high-profile character at home, you could be walking into a death trap as soon as you get off the plane. Too many people will see your relationship with Katsuki as something that needs to be erased. You'll both be torn apart, if not by the media, then literally... I can't watch that happen. Promise me that you'll keep all this on the down-low while in Russia. I don't want to find out that you won't make your return after all, because some gang on motorcycles broke both of your legs."

Victor could see the terror in her eyes as she spoke those words of warning, and he took her more
seriously than before, feeling himself sobering up unwillingly. Quietly, he nodded, and laid the woman's concerns to slighter ease, "I understand."

Mila wasn't sure about it, but at least she'd seen the man accept her caution rather than brush them off. She nodded and reluctantly let go, and the two parted ways again, leaving Victor to sit quietly in his own head for a little while. His slate-blue eyes looked down at the floor as he crossed his arms, his rink-mate's words rattling around in his mind like echoes off a canyon wall. Something seemed to stir under all of those thoughts, and his left eye twitched slightly under his bangs, but just as soon as he felt it, he shook his head and rose to stand again. He scanned the room for his athlete, and started walking over to where he saw Yuri standing with Phichit and Chris.

Yuri saw him coming, and noticed the sour look on his face, like he'd been kicked in the gut, "Victor? You okay?" He wondered quietly, reaching an arm out to put his hand on the Russian's lower back as he neared.

Victor nodded quietly, trying his best to put on a smile again, but it was just a façade and Yuri knew him better than that. Chris and Phichit could tell that something was off as well, but no one dared broach the subject. Instead, they focused on Yuri, as Victor had previously requested, and let the former Champion be with his thoughts until he was ready to return to the party. He just quietly slipped his arms around the younger skater's smaller frame and held there quietly until the night ended.
As the end of the night drew closer, sleepy skaters and coaches started taking their leave.

Victor had never quite come out of his cerebral silence. He hadn't let go of Yuri either though. He just listened quietly to people saying their goodbyes all around him, trying his best to acknowledge those who'd waved or spoken to him, but not really feeling like it mattered anymore. What Mila had told him was sobering and unwelcome, but deep down, he knew it was true, and it gnawed at him terribly.

"Please come to Bangkok one of these days, Yuri!" Phichit asked, "I don't want to have to wait until Four Continents to see you again."

"I'll try. Victor can be a bit of a slave-driver." He joked, his tone slightly subdued given how his coach continued to cling on him, "He won't wait around and let me get fluffy on katsudon before then."

The two clapped hands in farewell, and Phichit vanished like the rest, meeting with Celestino along the way and heading back to the hotel. Chris winked in his characteristically sultry way, bidding his own farewells and poking at his long-time rival in an attempt to get the man's attention.

Victor glanced up briefly, and he managed a smile, but there was a sadness to it that he couldn't shake. For a brief moment though, he let go of Yuri so Chris could get a hug in, and felt the man pat his shoulder reassuringly. Chris whispered something into his ear, and the Russian nodded quietly, but said nothing in response. The blonde turned his attention then to the youngest amongst them, and reached over to give Yuri a farewell hug as well, using the opportunity to slide a hand down and playfully grab the skater's backside. Yuri squeaked and pulled his hands back, rubbing the spot after Chris let go, being chased off by Victor.

"Careful, there! That butt's engaged now!" The silver defended, though with a tease in his voice, "And I claim exclusive rights to it!"

"Oh, sweet Victor..." Chris pouted comically, "I'll always find a way."

Yuri waved nervously with his free hand, still feeling his heart pounding in his chest. His attention was grabbed rather abruptly by the feeling of a boot against his back though, which sent him flying forward in a tumble. When he landed, the butt that Chris has just groped was sticking up in the air, and his glasses were disheveled on his face, eyes swirling in dizziness behind them.

"Victor," Yurio's voice boomed defiantly, "If you really plan on being at Nationals then you shouldn't piss around in Japan for very long."

"I don't expect to be there for very long." Victor answered dryly, moving over to help pull Yuri up from the floor, "When are your Nationals anyway?"

"...They'reintwoweeksjustlikeyours..." The dazed skater answered nervously, "We didn't sign me up because I thought I'd be done after the Final...remember?"

The Russian blinked at him, "Sure I do."

Yuri gaped at him, but suddenly it all made sense.
"He forgot again! No wonder he was so eager to say he was going to his own! He's never had to think about how Russia and Japan always hold their National Championships at the same time!"

"Then which one are you going to?" Yurio demanded.

"You know as well as anyone that spots for later competitions are given out at Nationals, Vitya."

"...Without...?" Yuri repeated, still sitting on the floor where Victor had flipped him over. He turned his gaze to the aforementioned Russian skater, looking for some sign of an answer.

"...Then I can't."

"The man said simply, rising to his feet and pulling Yuri up with him, casting slate eyes over to his own coach, "Maybe it's for the best. Two weeks isn't that long at all...I wouldn't really have time to get my shows and costumes together." He rationalized, much to Yurio's annoyance, "Euros then."

Yakov shook his head, "There are only three slots for Euros, and all three are taken by people going to Nationals. I can't cut one of them to let you go if you're not going to Nationals."

Victor just stared in annoyed silence, "I'm the one who won those three slots though..."

"No." The Russian cut him off and shook his head defiantly, then turned back to look into those hazel eyes, "What's the point of saying I'm your coach if I'm not there for you at competition? I'll just wait and go to Worlds. It's last year's scores that count the most for spot selection, so the RSF would be crazy not to send me, Nationals or not."

"You're really just going to give up your spots because of the pig?" Yurio wondered, incredulous, "It might be your last year, old man. Why are you throwing it away like this?"

"I'm turning 28, not 60."

"But for now, I'm still a coach first, and a competitor second. Yakov is right...I can't just announce my return and then expect to get everything handed to me because I'm a five-time consecutive World Champion." He said, a slight taunt in his voice as he eyeballed the Russian Punk, "Better make the most of this opportunity, and get as many Gold medals as you can before I take them all for myself again."

"Try not to switch teams while you're loitering in Hasetsu, Vitya." Yakov grumbled, shrugging as he and his ex-wife strode past, "We'll see you when you're back home then." He said with finality, leading the small group towards the doors. Mila looked back quietly as they stepped away.

"We won't be long." Victor waved at them as they vanished, and soon thereafter, turned back to dust Yuri's shoulders off, "You need to learn to stand your ground against Yurio. He'll kick you off a pier one of these days if you aren't careful, and the waters of Russia are unforgiving."

Yuri adjusted his glasses, hesitating a moment as he thought on the discussion about Nationals a while longer. He shook his head though, letting it go for the time being, "Yurio's so strange." He commented, "One minute, he's kicking me, then in the next, he's giving me pork-cutlet pirozhki that his own grandfather made...then he's back to kicking me."

"He's like that. You'll get used to him in St. Petersburg." Victor explained, "But stand your ground, even if he catches you off guard. He won't take you seriously otherwise."

Yuri noticed that Victor's eyes had returned to their mostly-normal affect, and he was glad for it. The
entire previous conversation seemed to slip right out of his mind as he felt the Russian's hand sliding around the back of his arm, seeking for his own hand. Feeling a moment of bravery, Yuri helped the process along, splaying his fingers to let the others find their places between them.

When their fingers locked, Victor glanced over at him, seeing Yuri's cheeks going pink right before his eyes, and all the prior anxiety in his heart melted away.

It didn't take long for them to get back to the hotel room; Yuri was ready to just flop on his face again and pass out without even changing. He could already hear the lecture about taking care of his suit though, so he made sure to change into his night-ware, the usual t-shirt and shorts, before doing so. Still, once he was changed, he took off his glasses and flopped face first on top of the bed nearest the window. It was only seconds before he was on the edge of sleep, only to be roused again by the sound of Victor climbing into the other bed right next to him. Quietly, Yuri turned from his right side to his left, and watched as the Russian tried to get comfortable, lying on his back and staring straight at the ceiling.

Without his glasses, it was nearly impossible to see if there might've been a bug or something that the man was so fixated on. Up close though, clearly able to see Victor himself since he was only a few feet away, Yuri could tell there was a nervous look on his face. He wasn't sure how or whether to ask what was on the man's mind though, since it could've been any number of things from just the Banquet alone, so he did the only thing he could think of...he reached across the cleft between their mattresses, where blankets and sheets were pinched between their beds, and nervously took hold of the hand nearest to him, pulling it closer and settling it over the gap.

Azure eyes turned towards him, and Victor seemed to take some solace in the gesture, "Sorry."

"Why?"

He turned onto his side as well to face the conversation, and let his head fall back down onto the pillow, silver hair flopping down all over the white fabric, "I made all these grand gestures about timing my come-back with Russian Nationals...but for some reason, it never occurred to me to wonder about the timing conflict with yours."

"You were excited." Yuri excused, "It's not your fault our competitions are held on the same weekend."

"I should've known though. ...Rather, I should've remembered." The Russian lifted his head again, propping himself up onto the side of his shoulder as he looked at where their hands were clasped together, bridging the gap between their two twin beds.

"I could've made it easier by saying I'd go to mine a lot sooner than now." Yuri offered, "I'll bet the JSF will be annoyed enough to see my ultra-late, last-second entry."

"How can they say no to their best skater?"

"The same way Yakov did to Russia's earlier."

"Well..." Victor shrugged a bit, moving to slide his free hand nearer to clasp over top of where Yuri held to the first, "It's done. If they let me go to Worlds, then that'll be my first and only competition this year. If not, then I'll just have to do everything next year instead. Georgi can rest easy knowing that I won't just throw him off the Euros team even though everyone knows I score better than he does..." Victor lamented, "It's fine though, really. Like you said...I got excited, and made grand
declarations about stuff without thinking first."

"...Can I do anything? If not for me..."

The Russian's cool eyes peered over, and he huffed a smile, "Yuri, I chose to abandon Nationals...it's not your fault."

"...I'm already starting to cause conflict with your competitive side. Even if you freely decided to do this, you wouldn't have had to do it at all if I didn't have to go to my own Nationals. I was worried this would ha-"

"I'm the one that said you should go for five World Championships." Victor mused, cutting off that line of thought before it could go further, "Let me accept responsibility for myself. I chose to come be your coach, I chose to take time off from competition...and I'm choosing to be by your side at Japanese Nationals. I'll go to mine next year."

Yuri wasn't sure how to contest it anymore, so he nodded quietly, feeling the warmth of the man's hands around his. He drew in a breath and twisted away, reaching far to click the light off on his side of the room before returning to where he'd been before. Victor did the same on his side, and the space plunged into darkness soon after. There was quiet for a while, though they hadn't let go of where their hands originally clasped together...and as their eyes adjusted to the lack of light, they realized they were still looking towards one another.

We're moving in together... Yuri thought to himself again, I'm going to St. Petersburg to be with Victor...

"It's a house, by the way." The Russian said, as though he could read the young skater's mind, "It's a small one...and I took over the second bedroom for my skating stuff, but it's still nice. All modern."

"...Then it seems like you'll finally get what you wanted since the beginning." Yuri commented, finding himself oddly relaxed with what was coming.

"...That's a long list." Victor purred, "You'll have to be more specific."

"You said right from the start that we should sleep together."

"We are. We have been...at least, as far as I meant it back then." Victor explained, watching quietly as the younger figure pushed up to sitting, and then withdrew his hand from the space above the gap, "Hard to avoid me when we share hotel rooms together at events."

Seeing the golden glint on Victor's ring-finger, Yuri drew in a breath, and resigned to his choice. The butterflies in his stomach started to flutter again, but for once, they were buzzing around in excitement and hesitant wanting, rather than because he was purely scared. All those 'near misses' floated through his mind; the unexpected kiss in China, the rink-side flirting in Moscow, and how close they'd become in the intervening weeks. He swallowed, and reached for where the blankets and sheets of their individual beds were still clamped between the two twin frames. He tugged them upward, and laid them down to weave them together, setting the thin flat-sheet of his bed down over the Russian's side first, then bringing the second flat-sheet to lay across his own, doing the same with the thick fleece comforter that came next, and then finally with the thick blankets on top. When he was done, it looked like they were sharing a single King-size bed, but with ill-fitting covers. The butterflies were flitting around like wild horses in Yuri's stomach, but he saw where Victor had just quietly been watching him, and leaned down to his elbow again. Pulling the inter-folded sheets up to make room, Yuri crossed the tiny mattress-gap, and then rolled over onto his right side, putting his back towards the older skater.
Victor blinked at him curiously. For once, he was nervous as well, rolling a bit closer where he'd been halfway onto his back. He slowly nestled in against the curve of the younger man's body, deftly sliding his left arm over Yuri's side, curling it up to put his hand against the younger man's chest. He could feel that heart pounding thunderously even through the fabric of his t-shirt. For lack of being able to think of anything to say, the Victor wedged his right arm under Yuri's waist as well as he could, and dared to pull him closer against his chest.

"There." Yuri said finally, curling his left arm so he could thread their fingers together where Victor's still pawed at his heart, "...See?"

"I do." Victor answered, trying not to sound over-excited, but nuzzling in closer and looking on adoringly, his heart soaring, "This is even better than what I meant back then."

Yuri's face was red, but it was impossible to see in the dark. He could feel his whole frame shaking, and he didn't doubt that Victor could feel it, too. Still though, like had been the case since 'Hot-Springs on Ice,' when he felt his idol's arms around him, he felt secure and safe. The trembling gradually faded, and the feeling of the man's warm breath against his neck - and the slow stroke of his thumb against his chest - helped him to relax.

"Are you worried?" Victor asked suddenly.

"...Worried?" Yuri echoed in confusion, turning his head a little, "...Well, I mean...I don't think this is quite what you meant when you said we should do stuff that would excite you, but..."

"Oh, I'm excited." The silver purred, his tone entirely different at that point, making his partner's face even redder than before. Though he couldn't really see it, he could feel it in the way Yuri's entire frame tensed up, and he laughed quietly against the back of one shoulder, "Relax. I won't do anything. Not tonight, anyway. ...I meant, are you worried about moving to St. Petersburg."

"...Oh." Yuri blanched, trying to organize his thoughts again. He twisted slightly, rolling onto his back, and turned his head. The hand that went under him pulled back a little, and he felt fingers curling around his waist, holding gently as the one on his chest continued the slow thumb-stroke, "...Well, it'll be weird training at the same rink as Yurio...it'll be easier to see what tricks he's planning, and he'll be able to see mine, too. Then, you'll be practicing, too...for your own programs, not just helping to refine mine... I'll get to see the creation of something new with my own eyes."

They were all valid points, but they were all miles away from what Victor had meant.

Still, that was an answer in itself.

"...I guess I'm mostly just worried about how things will change between us." Yuri admitted anxiously, "The scenery, the skating rink...the fact that we'll be on our own, rather than in the resort with my family."

Victor looked on him for a moment, but then smiled and settled in closer, resting his chin on the shoulder closest to him, "All good changes. I can't wait."

"You're that excited to go back to Russia...?"

"Only because I get to take you with me." He answered, bringing the hand up from Yuri's side to settle it on the side of his jaw, tilting his face closer and leaning forward to give him the faintest of Eskimo kisses, "A thousand Russian bears couldn't get me on a plane if I wasn't."

The butterflies were back in full force at that point, but Yuri couldn't help smiling to hear the words. He twisted again slightly where he lay, facing the man evenly, and nuzzled in closer so he could get...
his head just under the Russian's chin. He kept his left arm folded against his chest, but slowly, nervously slid the right over his idol's side, letting his elbow curve around it. He felt that larger body settling in as well, both arms around him to hold him against that pale, bare chest. What surprised Yuri though was feeling where Victor had wedged a leg between his, practically hooking onto one to pull it forward between his own.

"All good changes." Victor purred again, rubbing his cheek affectionately across spikes of soft raven hair, "I think you're going to like St. Petersburg...and me."

Their flight back to Japan was peaceful. Being an earlier flight, Yuri had no interest in sleeping again to pass the time. He even unbundled from his winter garb to get comfortable...and closer. With nothing to do the hours at a time except try to entertain themselves, finding things to do or talk about was somehow far more interesting than it had been.

Watching the in-flight movies, they leaned against one another over the seat-divider, and held softly to one another's hands. Fingers slid deftly past each other, slowly, savoring every moment of velvet-warm touch. Every so often, Victor would lift their hands up between them and press those fingers to his cheek, or kiss the ring on Yuri's finger. In one particular moment though, Victor kept his lips softly on that ring for a longer while than he had before. In nervous exhilaration, Yuri approached their clasped hands from his own side, and slowly neared to kiss his idol's knuckles.

Victor half-opened his eyes when he felt it, seeing those cherry-hazel orbits looking back at him from so near. They both looked up at one another, locked into each other's gazes for what felt like an eternity, all the while, lips pressed gently to fingers. For half a heartbeat, when they lifted up, Victor was certain Yuri would finally come to him...but at the last moment, got cold feet and recoiled into his seat, looking away with his skin nearly glowing red. Victor could feel the tremble, and though somewhat disappointed, he smiled anyway.

After a layover in Tokyo and another quick flight to Fukuoka, the end of their Grand Prix journey was almost in sight. JSF reporters and fans were waiting in a huge crowd to see the two athletes return from abroad. They both looked down to the public waiting area from the upper level, and though nervous, Yuri gathered the courage to wave. The throng of people cheered, and he showed them his shiny new Silver medal, lifting it up high before they finally came down to meet the gathered. Yuri answered a few questions, confirmed Victor's return to skating - and their plans to move to Russia - and after a thousand or so photos, they were allowed to head for the trains for that last leg to Hasetsu.

Arriving back home felt strange after being in Barcelona. With the revelations of the Sochi Banquet still fresh in Yuri's mind, not to mention the fact that he hadn't once let go of Victor's hand since they'd clasped them together on the plane...the air just felt different. Stepping off the train and onto the deck of the station, Yuri's fingers clutched a little tighter. He could feel the pressure returned, and he glanced up to that smiling face that had come back with him.

"There's nothing quite like coming home a victor." The Russian mused.

"Coming home a victor or with one?" Yuri asked back.

"Yes."

That brought a relieved smile to Yuri's face, and he started to head for the escalators that lead down into the main part of the terminal. He could hear the crowd at the bottom long before he saw them, but it didn't change his awe when his eyes beheld the sea of people waiting for him and Victor.
Though, in its own way, just as Yuri had expected - and half-feared - Minako and the triplets were waiting with half the town to congratulate their local champion. There were dozens of signs with Yuri's name on them, and even though not many expected Victor to return so soon, if at all, there were a few signs for him as well.

It made Victor happy that there was a place in the figure-skating fandom that appreciated his pupil the same way he did. He'd worked hard to get Yuri back up from the crushing defeat at Sochi, and at least in Hasetsu, people recognized it.

But that made the competitor in him itch. The posters that had been on the walls when he'd first arrived were still there, some covered only by newer posters advertising the 'Hot Springs on Ice' event. So much about being there made him want to get back on the ice as fast as he could, but he knew he'd have to wait. Still, the anticipation of what would come next was ever-present, and his artist's brain simply couldn't sit still.

For once, Yuri was happy to be home. He'd spotted his family in the parking lot as they came outside the train station, and realized that they'd had to shut down the resort just to be there. His eyes welled up with tears, and as he moved closer to get to them, he couldn't help but drag Victor behind him, still holding to that hand.

Victor shuffled along with pride though, simply happy that Yuri wouldn't let him go, even to make a break for it like he had. They made their way through the glass doors and back into the outside world, and only then did Yuri finally slow down. Minako and the triplets caught up just in time to see the reunion...and the ballerina caught her first clear sight of that hand-holding that she'd missed earlier.

She blinked at it, almost as surprised to see that as she had been to see the kiss in China. She pointed at their threaded fingers, then looked to Victor, but he just shushed her with a smile and a wink. Even she blushed when she realized what it meant; the kiss could be written off as a celebratory moment of craziness, but not this.

"We're so proud of you, Yuri!" Hiroko chirped, clapping her mittened hands in front of her face as Toshiya and Mari nodded beside her happily, "How about some katsudon to celebrate?"

Yuri's stomach growled like a lion even just at hearing the word, but his father laughed and pointed at him before a thing could be said in answer, "You just won a big competition!" The older man had said, "But don't sit on your laurels too long or you'll gain weight again!"

Clenching his eyes shut, Yuri could feel the blood drain from his face, but he had no come-back.

"We have to get ready for Nationals in two weeks," Victor said, saving him, "We get one katsudon per medal, and I think Yuri's earned it."

"Are you even ready for Nationals, Yuri!?" Minako asked pensively, "You'd been saying all this time that the Final might be your last competition."

He nodded nervously, "Y-Yeah... But Victor says he's coming back. How can I stay on the sidelines when he's competing again?" He pointed out, feeling a thumb-stroke gently across his own, "It's going to be complete madness when he steps out again for the first time."

"One step at a time..." The Russian interjected, "Let's get back to the resort. We've been traveling for 22 hours straight. In Economy. And the mention of katsudon is making my mouth water."

The ballerina pointed at him and laughed, "I got bumped to Business class for the trip between Paris
and Tokyo! Bet you're jealous!"

Those blue eyes went wide, and practically looked to fill with tears. Victor dropped his face to his partner's shoulder, "When we start competing out of St. Petersburg, we're traveling my way. I'm never flying Economy again!"

"...I fit into Coach seats just fine..." Yuri mused, reaching up to pat the man's head.

"I'm taller than you are!"

"By like 3 inches."

"Three inches makes a world of difference in a lot of places!"

Yuri stared blankly for a moment, but then went bright red, much to Victor's amusement.

"Come along then," Hiroko called, starting to wander off already, "We brought the van to drive everyone and everything back to Yu-Topia!"

Makkachin bounced with excitement to see his human again, and just as he'd gotten done jumping at Victor, he made for Yuri and bowled him over. Victor was tugged slightly down as Yuri hit the ground, being mauled with poodle-love in a helpless heap of laughs and pleading for the pup to let him up again.

Hiroko looked back after taking her coat off, and saw the one ring on Yuri's finger where that hand was visible outside the fray, "The announcers were saying you had matching rings for luck." She commented warmly, "But these don't look like cheap good-luck charms."

Victor glanced up, but then back down again and bent to pull his dog off his student, all the while holding onto that one hand.

Finally free to stand up again, Yuri's eyes went from where his mother was watching them from, and drifted over to his sister and Minako. Mari still had that 'wat' look on her face from the group dinner when the rings were first pointed out, but Minako had already confirmed what was going on, and smiled slyly without saying anything.

"They're real." Victor chimed in, setting his poodle down before raising his ring-bearing hand up to hold it on display. A moment later, he used that same hand to help get Yuri back up onto his feet, and once the man was standing, hugged him adoringly, "We're engaged."

Hiroko immediately fawned over the idea, both hands up on her cheeks in excitement. For the immediate moment though, Toshiya wasn't sure what to think, and just watched in surprised, yet confused quiet as his wife beckoned everyone through the empty resort. Food was on everyone's minds, so luggage was stacked up on the wall just around the corner from the hall that lead upstairs.

Once those well-anticipated bowls of katsudon were finally presented, the two skaters were like ravenous hyenas, gobbling everything up and making a mess in the process. Rice stuck to their faces, and the family around them marveled at how quickly they demolished their dinners.

"Since the resort was shuttered for the day, Yuri, the place is empty." His mother said in her usual happy way, "But I wouldn't expect it to stay that way. Ever since Victor promoted the town during the 'Hot Springs on Ice' event, there's been more tourists than ever. We might actually have to hire help soon!"
"That's great!" He answered, still somewhat famished, but feeling better since starting to eat.

"Would you mind signing some cards and banners before you leave for Russia?" Toshiya asked pointedly, "We could make a killing on Victor's autographs."

"That again..." Yuri grimaced, "I couldn't ask him to sign a bunch of things to make money for the family business..."

"I'd be happy to." Victor interrupted, reminding them that he was sitting there at dinner with them and not in some far off land where he couldn't hear the conversation, "I'll be family soon enough anyway, right? I want to help." He set his chopsticks down across the edges of the bowl in front of him and reached over to his partner's hand, setting his own gently over it, the gold glinting on his finger.

It was easier to reveal such things in front of a small group, especially since two members of it had been there when the whole thing had originally been revealed, but it still made Yuri a bit jittery to admit it in front of his parents. He looked down at the Victory Katsudon his mother had made, and then turned his hand to better clasp at the fingers curling around it, "No...you're already family."

"You must've gotten those sometime this past weekend." Hiroko said excitedly, looking at him from the other side of the table, "Or were you hiding them from us since China?"

"No...we got them in Barcelona." Yuri explained, feeling a bit anxious again, though supposing that moment was as good a time as ever to ask the question that had been bugging him since the whole thing happened, "I got one ring, to give to Victor as a Christmas-Birthday-Thank-You gift... At first, it was just my way of getting him some gold, in case I didn't win Gold...but then, he surprised me, and had the matching ring in his pocket. I'm still not sure how he managed it."

"That's easy." Victor laughed, leaning over slightly to rub their shoulders together, "I got it right after you bought yours."

"But...how did you do it without me noticing?"

"Oh! Tell the whole story!" Hiroko asked happily, "I want to hear all the details!"

Victor smiled, "Well... After Thursday practice, Yuri surprised me by suggesting we go sight-seeing. We spent the whole rest of the day being tourists around Barcelona, taking a thousand pictures, buying a bunch of interesting souvenirs and different local foods, and having a lot of fun. But then Yuri started looking around for something specific... At the time, I wasn't sure what he was looking for, but then we passed in front of this fancy jeweler's store, and he insisted on going inside."

"...It was a really impulsive thing..." Yuri admitted sheepishly, "I wasn't even really sure what I was looking for."

"I'll take this one." Yuri confirmed nervously, pulling out his wallet and handing over the credit card, "I'll pay in installments."

Victor watched quietly from behind him, a bit surprised, though not sure what the man had just done. When Yuri got the tiny black velvet box, it was placed inside a fancy tote-bag and passed across the counter, and he took the handles with a shaky hand, passing in front of the Russian to head back towards the door.

"I'm done...we can go now..." His voice said, though Victor barely heard it, a finger on his lip as he
gazed back down into the glass case to see if he could figure out what was missing, "Victor?"

"I'll meet you outside." He said with a smile, "I want to look around a little bit."

"Oh...okay." Yuri answered, blinking once in surprise, but then turning to move towards the exit. He looked down into the bag, his cheeks red, but smiling to himself anyway.

When he was outside, Victor turned back to the case, looking it over quite seriously.

"Is there anything I can help you with, sir?" The clerk on the other side asked, putting back the small red-velvet display cushion, one gold ring absent from it now.

Blue eyes opened wide in surprise, and the Russian glanced back towards the door, standing fully upright, "...Yuri...? You..." He turned back to the clerk and pointed at the small cushion, tapping his fingernail on the glass, "Miss, did my friend just buy the matching ring?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let me have the other one." He said resolutely, smiling even more than before as it truly dawned on him was had happened. He pulled his own wallet out after that, and grabbed for the credit card inside.

"Victor, why are you taking so long?" Yuri's voice returned, the door chiming again as he came back inside.

The silver swiveled so quickly on his heel that his jacket and scarf flared out to the side, but he gave nothing away, "Sorry, Yuri! You know how much I like gold though! I'd kiss everything in this store if I could!" He feigned, hands behind his back, waggling the card between his fingers so it wouldn't be seen. The clerk took the hint and grabbed the card discreetly, hiding it behind the display as she walked away with it and the second ring.

Yuri gave a skeptical look.

"I'll be just a minute! Wait outside?"

"...Okay?" Another skeptical look, but the anxious skater let the door close again.

Victor slowly turned back around, signing the bill for the near-800-Euro gold band, and put the small black-velvet box into his coat pocket, "Spasibo."

"We went to the Sagrada Familia after that... Yuri pulled my glove off and slipped the ring on my finger." Victor explained, reminiscing fondly, "There was a freelance Christmas choir there, singing a hymn...it was all really nice."

Yuri's face was red at the memory of it, but he wasn't quite so nervous about the responses or judgment as he had been earlier.

"I wish I could've been there to see the look on his face when you pulled the ring out of your pocket." Hiroko mused, looking at her embarrassed son.

"His face was almost as red as it is now." Victor laughed, leaning his head over to rub the side of his forehead against the man's cheek and ear.

"Your face didn't go red at all." Yuri pointed out, "Do you blush?"
"Well, I already knew what was going to happen." The Russian explained, rubbing his thumb back and forth gently over those nervous fingers, "Why do you think I was so excited while we walked over there?"

"I thought it was just the hot wine you drank before..."

"Nope!"

The relief was something Yuri could feel in his gut, though the whole thing was still nerve-wracking. He glanced across the table to meet his mother's eyes, but was surprised to see tears there, and for an instant, he felt a pit in his stomach, "Mom...why are you...? Just a second ago..."

"When you came home from America and said you'd never found a girlfriend there, I was so sad for you. A young man like yourself, 23 years old and still single... For a woman, that would be a social catastrophe!"

Yuri blanched at his mother's explanation. Minako had much the same look on her face, sitting on the opposite side of the table.

Mari grimaced as well, "Mom..."

"You'll get there, honey, don't worry!" Hiroko reassured, "You just need to put yourself out there more!" She turned back to the 'couple' on the other side of the family table, "After all the time you boys had been together, I was starting to worry that nothing would ever happen. But when Victor jumped at you in China, I thought that maybe you're not so hopeless after all!"

"I'm not hopeless..." Yuri sighed quietly.

It was only then that the 'prodigal son' realized that his father hadn't said a word about any of it yet. The topic had never really come up before. Coming home from a skating tour at age 24 with a fiancé would be one thing...but a male fiancé...that was something else entirely.

"How did this happen?" His father finally spoke up, almost too sternly, "He just came here to be your coach."

At that moment, Yuri was glad to have Victor next to him, still holding solidly to his hand. He adjusted his glasses and spoke calmly, "It just...happened. Over time. Victor helped me grow and be more confident in myself, and as the days and weeks went by, we got closer. At some point along the way, I realized I couldn't do all this without him, and when I told him to stay with me, he..."

"...It was a wedding proposal, don't lie!" Victor mused, brushing back raven hair affectionately with his free hand, trying to lighten the mood, "The ring you got me in Barcelona just made it official."

"I see." The elder man said quietly.

"You're not...angry, are you?" Yuri's gaze remained fixed on his father, and he felt like he was being slowly crushed by the guilt, even though on the surface, he didn't feel like he should be guilty for anything. Being with Victor made him happy, and the thought of losing him...well...he'd already made his peace with that once before.

"I support you in everything you do." The elder finally answered, "Just don't fool around in earshot of everyone. I wouldn't want to hear that even if Victor were a woman. You're still my child."

"We won't, sir." Victor said all-too-politely, looking aside to see Yuri's face go bright red at the thought of it.
After finally getting away from the rest of the family, Yuri couldn't wait to get into the hot spring. Just as they'd been told, the place was entirely empty.

Victor was pulling off clothes next to him, sitting back on the bench to get to his socks, "Hurry up, Yuri! I want to get into the water!"

"Okay, okay...I'm going..." He answered, slowly reaching to pull at his own socks...but Victor suddenly took him by the shoulder. Yuri turned his head, cheeks flushed, and looked at the half-dressed figure in front of him, seeing the man stepping out of his slacks as he used his shoulder as a support. He turned quickly away again, looking at the floor.

"What's wrong? Why are you so anxious all of a sudden?" Victor wondered, giving the shoulder a gentle squeeze, "You've seen me naked a thousand times just because of the onsen alone. What's one more time?"

Yuri wasn't sure how to answer. He felt a little paralyzed, but he managed to shake his head and look to the side, seeing the edges of those pale fingers, "I don't know, it's just...different now."

"Why, because of your parents?" The silver mused, stepping towards the corner that lead to the main bathing room, "I don't see why that should change things. It's not like we're different."

"...No..."

"Well, don't wait too long to come out." Victor called, a hand already on the door to the next room, "I might fall asleep before long!"

Yuri glanced back, seeing the same fingers as before holding to the corner of the changing-room wall, and caught a glimpse of the gold as they pulled away. The door opened and closed again before Yuri moved, setting his eyes down on the band around his own right ring-finger. He held his hand up in front of himself, practically able to see his own reflection in the glinting metal.

*Is he really serious about this engagement thing?* He thought to himself quietly, lowering his hand, resting his elbows on his knees, *Maybe he's just messing with me. Getting the ring was so spontaneous... It was just a present. It's not like I asked him to marry me. He didn't even suggest it until Phichit-kun mistakenly thought that's actually what we'd done. But, then again...*

*We'll get married after Yuri wins the Gold Medal. Right, Yuri?*

*V-Victor...'*

*But he way he's been explaining it to everyone...he can't just say he's kidding now. Yuri lifted his head, looking at the wall in front of himself, *I wonder then if this is just some joke that got away from him? Maybe he only meant it to motivate me to try harder to win Gold. I won Silver though... He can say we're engaged all he wants since he doesn't have to follow-through with the rest...*

By the time he'd gotten changed and stepped into the next room, the sound of the showers was off. Victor had already moved through to the onsen outside. Yuri moved into one of the open stalls and sat on the short stool in front of the water nozzle, yawning to himself quietly as he reached for it. The hand that covered his mouth brushed against his lips though, and he hesitated when he brought the
shower-head forward.

...Victor openly wondered if he should kiss me to help me feel better in China, and then he actually did it... Would he really be messing with me now if he was able to do that back then?

He lowered the fingers away from his mouth and pulled the shower-head up above his hair, clicking the button on the handle to let the water gush down over him, trying unsuccessfully to wash away the thought.

*He hasn't kissed me since though. Maybe he only did it for shock value...after all, he *did* say it was the only thing he could think of in the moment to surprise me. But then, the way we were last night...and all the way back home...*

He could feel the nervous sweat rolling off his almost as thickly as the water, and he made a face at the shower-stall.

*I really can't tell if this is serious or not! What should I do!? If I go to him and it turns out he's just messing with me, I'll die! Everything between us will be broken and shattered! Nothing will ever be the same again!*

The shower was brief, though it felt like a lot longer than it had been. When he was done though, Yuri reached for a small white towel to wrap around his waist, and headed for the last door to the outside., moving past the massive indoor bathtub along the wall. He could see the huge red demon-mask hanging on the wall just outside, and pushed through the slightly-foggy glass door, stepping onto the stone deck and out into the open winter air.

"There you are." Victor's voice spoke, gathering up his attention.

Yuri glanced up, seeing the man sitting in the water on the opposite side of the spring from himself; his usual spot.

"How did I say it before?" Victor wondered with a smile, reaching his hand out towards the younger figure, "Yuri...starting today, I'm your coach."

Hazel eyes watched, and he listened intently, keeping a hand around the towel clinging to his small frame.

"I'm going to make you win the Grand Prix Final." The Russian finished, giving him the wink again, but staying seated that time, "Maybe that all wasn't entirely true though." He brought his pale hand back to his lip in thought.

"...It wasn't your fault I didn't win." Yuri pointed out, slowly stepping into the water from his side of the spring. He gradually pulled the towel away before it could get wet, and quietly folded it to set on his head as he meandered through the mineral-bath to get closer.

"I've already told you that I'm happy with how things turned out." Victor explained, "I meant the part...about being your coach."

"You did that, too." Yuri said, gawking in confusion, pausing in front of the silver legend with just his head poking out of the steaming liquid.

"No...that's wrong now." The Russian smiled, "Yuri, starting today, I'm your *fiancé.*"

Yuri could feel his hackles raising even under the water, though he knew he should confront it,

"...Wouldn't that be true since Thursday though?"
"Yes...and yet, no," Victor pointed out, reaching a hand out to put a finger under the younger man's chin. "You've been playing along, but you haven't entirely been taking it seriously." He saw the nervous, worried look on his partner's face and smiled anxiously, "I've been watching you fidget and squirm every time it's come up in front of people you know, like you're scared of what they might think if you said it was true."

"...Victor..."

"It is true though, right?" The Russian wondered, nervously in his own right, "You're not just playing along to spare my feelings..?"

Cherry-hazel eyes opened wide at the idea, "...I've been wondering if you've been doing that to me!" Yuri said anxiously, rising up a bit out of the water, bringing his hands up to gesture at the man with one, the other hand on his chest, "Since this all started during competition...I've been worried that you were just doing it to surprise people... Every time we got back to Hasetsu, it was like things went back to before the Grand Prix started... I didn't..."

Victor blinked those blue eyes in hurt confusion, "...You didn't what...?"

"I didn't...want to get my hopes up..." He finished, looking away again as he sank back down.

"...Ah." The silver legend realized, "I see."

Yuri groaned quietly where he sat, all but blowing bubbles to distract from his embarrassment, "Even now, I'm just...not sure..."

"This whole time, I've felt like you were avoiding me." Victor explained, "I'd reach out to you, and you seemed interested, but then you'd back off again. Or you'd say things and then nothing else would happen. When I realized you'd gotten the ring, I thought that maybe this would be the moment where you'd finally stop running away...but you didn't even try to kiss me when you put it on my finger..."

"We'd planned since the start that you'd be going back to Russia after the Final though." Yuri explained, feeling guilt and shame all over like a dye that stained his skin, "The closer it got to the end, the more nervous I got. That's...why I said we should end things...so you could go back to focusing on your own skating, before it got too serious..."

"Yuri..." The Russian said quietly, reaching a hand out to touch a single finger under the man's chin, "Do you still have so little faith in me...? Do you really think I'd be able to just leave? After everything we've been through?"

"...I didn't want you to think that you were tied down by me." He answered, keeping his gaze averted for the shame of it, "I already took so much away from you. I just didn't want you to leave without some kind of gold from me...in case it wasn't the medal..."

"My plans started changing a long time ago." Victor said, reaching his hand up to run his wet fingers through that black, damp hair, "That's why I kissed you in China. That's why I asked you to never retire." He explained, brow furrowed for the worry of not being understood, "So I could stay close to you, even if only as your coach, if that's how it had to be. ...Stammi vicino..."

Brown eyes finally dared to look into blue, but Yuri didn't know how to answer to that.

"But it's okay now, right?" Victor went on, "Because you've agreed to come back to St. Petersburg with me. We can be together for real now, not just as coach and athlete. ...That's what you want, isn't it?" He paused, looking for some answer, but hearing nothing, "...That's why you finally let me hold
"Isn't that what you want?" Yuri finally let himself ask.

Nervous lips offered a sad smile, "I've wanted to since Sochi."

"...Eh?" The words took Yuri aback, "...Why since Sochi?"

"You've refused to look at the pictures and videos, b-"

"I get stupid when I'm drunk." Yuri explained, cutting him off, "I'd rather not know how stupid.
Celestino dragged me to that Banquet against my will. I drank myself into oblivion so I'd get a break
from feeling miserable."

"Yuri..." Victor huffed a dejected laugh, reaching for the pile behind him on the ledge of the deck
where he'd kept his towel...and his phone hidden within it, "Sit next to me. It'll make more sense if
you let me show you what happened."

Nervously, he did as bid, sliding forward to sit on the submerged stone bench. He extended his legs
out and crossed his ankles, not noticing at first as Victor slid an arm behind his back, a hand carefully
setting onto the crest of his hip. His heart skipped a beat to feel it, but he let it happen, and allowed
himself to be pulled in closer as his idol unlocked the phone. He fidgeted a little, watching as the
Russian went through the huge photo gallery list until [SOCHI GPF] came up. That pale thumb
clicked into it, and dozens of images popped up. Yuri looked away, even though he only saw the
tiny thumbnails.

"People started taking pictures as soon as they realized you were drunk." Victor explained,
remembering it all quite fondly, scrolling through a slideshow of the pictures; many were taken by
other people, but as Yuri started to look over, he could see a few of himself apparently dancing with
Yurio, and where it looked like Victor was slowly creeping into the shot from the background.

"...What...were you doing?" He wondered, intrigued now, "And why was I dancing with Yurio...?
He'd screamed at me to retire after catching me in the bathroom the day before..."

Victor gave him a puzzled look, "He did...?"

"Yeah." Yuri nodded, "Said he didn't want there to be two Yuris when he got into Seniors,
especially since I had bombed so badly."

"...Wow." The Russian gave an almost exasperated sigh, "Well, you challenged him to a Dance Off
after asking me to come here and be your coach. I hadn't even answered yet, b-"

"Whoa whoa, wait...I...asked you to be my coach? Back then?"

"Yeah, actually. I have a video of it." Victor answered, much to Yuri's surprise, "Why do you think I
came?"

"I don't know! It was months later!"

"I was still on a winning streak at the time! And you yourself said to wait until after the season was
over!" The Russian exclaimed, "Besides, we barely knew each other back then...and I was still kind
of surprised by how insistent you were with your request. I didn't even realize the impact you'd had
on me until after the Banquet anyway. Makes me really regret not trying to reach out to you
somehow afterwards."
The video pulled up quickly, jumping into the middle of a situation that had already started. Yuri had lost his pants at some point, and his tie was around his head. Yurio was snarling in the background, unbeknownst to the Victor on the screen. Yuri was rubbing himself against him in the middle of the crowd, drunk as all get-out, and speaking with a drunken slur. Chris was next to him, naked but for his underwear, apparently calming down from some big exertion from moments before.

"Victor... After the season ends, my family runs a hot springs resort, so please come! If I win this dance-off... you'll become my coach, right? Be my coooooach, Victoooor!"

A moment of silence passed, and it seemed like Victor was about to answer, but-

"He's not going to be your coach, crybaby!" Yurio barked, smacking the man to get him off his rink-mate, "He already has plans for next year that don't involve GPF wash-outs!"

"That not nice..." Victor had tried to calm the situation.

Yuri had been too drunk to be embarrassed, or to even back down from this Russian Punk. He stood as tall as his inebriation would allow, "...Then how about it... You and me... Whoever wins, Victor will coach them!"

"I don't have to do shit!"

"Are you chicken!?"

"WHAT WAS THAT-"

The video went on for a half-second longer before being stopped by the presence of a crowd. Too many people were in the way to get a good shot. Victor clicked out of it and turned to look at Yuri's reaction.

"I had... no idea..." Yuri said quietly, "I... I didn't even..."

Victor smiled and held him closer, nosing at the side of the man's head fondly, "You were drunk back then, but it planted a seed. One that would haunt me for all the days and weeks to come." He said, opening another folder labeled [WORLDS TOKYO.] At the very end were two thumbnails that looked remarkably similar, except one was Victor in full 'Aria' regalia, and the other was Yuri in just his practice clothes.

Yuri recognized the thumbnail and watched in silence as the viral video of his imitation of 'Stay Close to Me' started to play. He was still confused though, "Minako-sensei told me that you'd seen this video of me, and that it sparked your imagination, so that's why you came to Hasetsu. But... why? I've wondered for a long time... how could I have done that? You're a genius... I'm just... Katsuki Yuri..."

"You bombed out at Sochi so badly, and no one could really understand why. It was hard to watch you after you'd made it into the Final Six." Victor explained, "I was already struggling with figuring out what to do moving forward with my own career. So when I saw your imitation of 'Aria,' and how perfectly you'd pulled it off while thinking no one was watching... I thought that, maybe, it was my perfect chance to fulfill your request from before." He laughed softly and clicked the phone off, setting it back down onto the towel behind him, "It was the most perfect excuse to see you again. I had hoped to run into you again at the next competition, so I was pretty heartbroken to hear that you'd cut Celestino loose and moved back home."

"... Why didn't you just call me then? We're both friends with Chris; you could've just asked him for my number."
"You blew me off during hotel check-out." Victor said quietly, "I thought you were mad at me for not agreeing to be your coach at the Banquet."

"...I did what...? I don't remember that..."

"Yeah." The Russian nodded, "I saw you leaving with Celestino to go to the airport. The sad look on your face reminded me of when you turned down the photo with me after the Free Skate..." Victor looked out over the steaming water, thinking back on it, "I tried to get your attention, but just like before, you turned your back on me without saying a word. That's when I realized I'd already started to fall for you...because my heart shattered to see you walk away."

"...I don't...remember hearing you say anything to me in the hotel lobby... I don't even remember seeing you." Yuri stammered quietly, "I was so hung-over from the night before that I just kept my eyes down, and followed Celestino around like a robot."

Victor hummed quietly to himself, "Yurio would tell you how miserable I was the entire way back to Russia after that. I was even worse after I heard you bombed again at Nationals and retired. I poured all my sadness into 'Aria' after that. The song became so much more personal because of you."

"...Because of...me?" Yuri felt like he couldn't keep up. The whole thing was too much.

"Yeah. Haven't you ever listened to the lyrics?"

"Sure I have..."

"And you know what they say?"

"Of course I do, I've looked up the translation."

"Not just the translation...the original Italian."

"I don't speak Italian," Yuri grimaced, "The original words didn't mean much to me..."

Victor smiled sadly at that, "Italian is a Romance language, like French or Spanish, so many words come in male and female forms, depending on who you're talking to." He tried to explain, "Anche tu, sei stato forse abbandonato?" He spoke the lines quietly, "You know it?"

"Yeah, that's from the beginning, but I still don't..."

"StatO and abbandonatO are masculine forms of the words. There'd be an A in place of the Os at the end if it were feminine." Victor went on, "Always do the opposite of what people expect you to do; that's my motto, right? So, I thought, with all the female fans I have, why not make a program where my song calls out for another man instead of a woman like they'd all expect?"

"What!?" Yuri practically squeaked.

"The entire rest of the season, when I did Aria at Euros in Budapest, and Worlds in Tokyo...even at my own Nationals in Moscow before all that." He was listing them off on his fingers, "I had switched the meaning around in my head. It wasn't just some faceless, nameless figure anymore...it was a lament for having lost you. I didn't know how else to deal with it. So...when your video went viral, and I saw you doing the same program..." Victor had to lower his eyes a little, and pinch his fingers over the bridge of his nose for a moment, "...I thought you were calling back to me...that you'd forgiven me. I watched the video on my phone, and made up my mind right then. I came to Hasetsu so fast, Yakov must've thought my ass had caught fire. He barely caught me on the way to the airport, too...even tried to stop me. I was on a mission, though."
"After Nationals, I quit watching figure skating competitions outright..." Yuri sighed, feeling his eyes and throat starting to ache, "Seeing all my friends competing without me, and seeing you...I just...couldn't stand watching it all go on without me." He could feel the tears starting to build up, seeing his reflection on the water starting to blur behind them, "And yet, all that time..."

Victor reached a wet hand up from the water and cupped it around the man's cheek, turning his head to face him evenly. Slate eyes were half-lidded, and he spoke softly, "Yuri... When I came here, I'd been heartbroken and in love with you for three months already. I had no idea if you'd reciprocate those feelings, so I vowed that, at very least, I would show you my love by being the best coach you'd ever had. I didn't even dare to entertain the idea that you'd meet me half-way until I saw the smile on your face after I kissed you. I got so many mixed signals after that though...I thought, maybe you were trying to reconcile things in your head, or were trying to talk yourself down from it...but the longer it went on, the clearer it became that I'd never be able to leave you. As your coach, as your friend...as your lover...it didn't matter...as long as I could stay with you, I could find happiness."

Tears flowed freely down Yuri's face, but he couldn't bring himself to look at the man next to him. He reached a wet hand up out of the water to dry his eyes, though that wasn't the greatest idea he'd had, since it just made everything even more wet than it already was.

Victor found the sight somberly endearing, so he reached for the towel on the ledge behind him, setting his phone down on the tile to pull the white fluff away in its place, "So...to answer your question from earlier about whether I actually want this..." He said, dabbing the towel against that sad wet skin, "...Yes, I really do."

"T-Then why...did you let me think you were going to leave...?" Yuri stammered, "If you kn-knew this whole time, that you weren't going to go without me... You c-could've just, said so...and avoided this whole thing..."

"You never once kissed me back." Victor answered simply, catching the man off-guard. He gave a nervous smile, "And I didn't want to risk scaring you away by kissing you again myself...so I just went back to default, and decided to let you come to me instead. But you never did."

"I...I didn't...I don't..."

Victor just sighed, "Why are you still so afraid of me?"

Hazel eyes opened wide, "I'm not!"

"...Then...?"

Yuri could feel his heart throb in his chest, pounding so hard and fast that it practically vibrated inside him. His idol's expression was anxious, wanting but worried, but all Yuri could think of was all the lost opportunities, "...I've...wanted to, so many times..." He stuttered, twisting a little where he sat, feeling the man's hand sliding across his lower back as he moved, "Right after you knocked me over, I wished you'd kept on kissing me, so the whole world could see. I wanted to kiss you when you left in the middle of Rostelecom, but I got cold feet...so I thought I'd do it when I came...only to fall apart again at the airport. The whole two weeks between Rostelecom and the Final, when we were trying to nail my quad Flip... At rink-side before my last Free Skate... In our room before the Banquet, then at the Banquet before Mila yelled at us... On the plane when we kissed each other's hands at the same time... I've wanted to..."

"Yuri...I'm right here. What are you still waiting for...?"
He squeaked nervously, noticing only then how close the Russian had gotten to him while he was busy babbling. All he could see was the one slate-blue eye peering at him, Victor's face already slightly tilted before him, but holding a few inches away. He could feel his lips tingling, even the warmth of every breath against his skin...but the noise in his mind was holding him back. He felt his hands twitch where he held them together in his lap, but then all the voices suddenly stopped. He felt clarity and peace, blissful silence in his anxious head, and he let himself lift the leg that had pressed up against his idol's, moving his knee just over that pale thigh so he could twist himself inward more comfortably. Water dripped from his fingers and wrist as he brought his trembling hand out of the water, hesitantly sliding it forward until he could feel the skin of the man's chest against his palm. He held still for a moment, looking on into that one visible blue eye...but when he saw Victor close it, he knew the moment had come. Yuri drew in a quick breath, and leaned that final inch forward, closing the gap between them...

...only to realize he hadn't moved his lips at all, and he'd effectively just squashed their faces together awkwardly. Embarrassed, Yuri pulled back again, keeping his eyes clenched shut to avoid the judging look he was sure to be getting.

"I'm so sorry." He whined into the palms of his hands, "This is why I've always been single; I don't know...how to do anything right..."

"Yuri..." Victor said softly, "You're getting yourself too worked up. Is there something wrong...? ...Is it because it's me?"

Nearly sobbing but holding it in with every ounce of strength Yuri still had, he nodded and peered out between his fingers, "Everything about the idea of us makes me so happy, but I just... I can't...understand... Why me...?"

"Why not you?" Victor retorted, trying his best to soothe his terrified partner, "Are you too good for me?"

Yuri pulled his hands down instantly and gave quite the look, "Of course not! You're the one way out of my league!"

"If that's where we have to begin things..." Victor sighed, but tried to smile anyway, "Then let me reassure you. Whatever league you think I'm in, I've still been in love with you for a year now, waiting and dreaming that you'd come to me some day. Yuri Katsuki, you're the only thing I've been hoping for all this time. You'll break my heart if, after everything we've been through, you still think too highly of me to want me back."

Hearing those words broke Yuri's heart, and the tears let loose from his eyes, rolling down his cheeks.

The sight of it was startling, and at first, Victor felt a pit drop in his stomach. The personal fear he had, knowing he didn't know how to handle people who cried in front of him, made him worry he'd really messed everything up. However, even though it seemed like Yuri had been crying for hours in those few seconds, he watched one hand peel away from the younger man's face and reach for him. Victor took it gently in his fingers, and guided it over one shoulder, and soon, the other came with it. Yuri kept his face down towards the water, but inch by inch, he made his way closer, until he could feel his side press against Victor's under the surface. He turned in place, feeling that continuing gentle guidance of fingers on his arms, moving down the lengths of them until he could feel palms cupping over his waist. He practically clung to Victor's chest then, keeping his head tucked under the man's chin, and swallowed the hard knot in his throat, "I wish...you could know how hard this is for me... To want something so badly, and be too scared to reach out for it at the same time, even when
it's reaching back." He said, voice cracking slightly as he pressed his eyes to the crook of neck and shoulder, "To have looked up to you for so long, having always been too scared to even say hi to you... but always trying to catch up to you anyway..." He went on, digging deep for every ounce of courage he had just to lift his face, "...And maybe... it's because it is you... My hero, my idol, someone so precious to me that the idea of being with you makes me worry that I'd drag you down..."

"Let me lift you up then instead." Victor offered, "To take this further than just being your coach. You've impressed and enthralled me all this time... All I want is to spend the rest of my life with you... Is that too much to ask...?" He wondered, feeling a bit of hope as Yuri snuffled a laugh at that, even though he was still crying a little, "Let me be your first and only love. The one you share all of your firsts with; I already got your first kiss, didn't I?" He asked, seeing Yuri nod as he fought his tears, "Let me have all the rest then...and we can grow old together... We can share every sunrise, every sunset, as our bodies give out and we can't even skate anymore...we'll always have each other."

The pain in Yuri's throat intensified, but it wasn't from sorrow or shame anymore... it was from hope. He kept his hands on those broad shoulders and leaned back slightly, finally managing to look directly into those blue eyes, "I don't... even know what to s-say..." He stammered quietly, sniffing some, but smiling anyway, "Maybe I should... just ask you to..." He went on nervously, pausing for a moment to catch his breath before going on, "...Teach me how to kiss properly first...?"

Victor exhaled a relieved laugh, leaning forward to touch his brow to Yuri's, "It would be my pleasure." He answered easily, pulling one hand back from where he'd had it on the younger man's side that whole time, and brought it above the water. Thought it was dripping wet, he moved it closer, and cupped his palm over Yuri's cheek, using his thumb to gently wipe away the lingering tears. Those brown eyes with their faint reddish tint looked back at him, nervous but wanting, then closed, and Victor leaned in to close that last small gap between them.

"Starting today... I'm your fiancé." Yuri said, his voice barely above a whisper, mimicking those words he'd heard nearly a year before.

Victor smiled brightly, his own eyes watering a little as the joy and relief of it all finally settled in. His hand went back under the water and maneuvered Yuri's legs over his lap to make the angle more comfortable, then replaced his fingers under the man's chin to draw him nearer, "That's just what I want to hear... But now," He said quietly, his trembling worry settling down finally, "Let me kiss you some more."

Yuri smiled, and all his nerves finally melted away... and he let himself become one with his fiancé's taste.
Green robes were thrown on, and the enamored duo slowly made their way upstairs. Makkachin squeezed his way between them and the wall to race them up, and was sitting quite happily on Victor's big bed when they finally arrived. With their doors being only a few feet apart, Yuri glanced inside his own room for a moment, and a thought struck him.

Victor felt the hesitation to go in, and turned back curiously, "What is it? Forget something?" He wondered, coming back the way he'd come. He slid his hands over his partner's waist and gently kissed his neck as he nestled in against the younger man's back, "Or do you want to squeeze onto your bed instead?" He teased.

"No, I just..." Yuri started, rubbing his cheek against his fiancé's brow, "It's kind of weird to think of how useless my own room now is. I've slept in a room by myself every day of my life; even when I was training in Detroit with Phichit-kun, we had our own rooms."

"It can sometimes take a little while to get used to sharing a space with someone, but..." Victor explained, hands roaming around his partner's front to hug him back against his chest, "I think you'll like it."

"I like it already." Yuri answered, turning in place to face his silver love, and started to nudge him backwards into the repurposed banquet hall, "I pushed you away for such a long time, and then..."

"...You were the one to come to me in the end." Victor finished, nose to nose until he felt the bed on the back of his legs.

"Bridging the divide between us...literally and figuratively." Yuri described, watching those blue eyes lower as the Russian sat down. Makkachin eagerly came up and hopped up against Victor's back, panting happily over one shoulder as his human laughed. "Ever since those first days," Yuri started again, loosely curling his fingers around the hands that slid into his own, "My heart would pound in my chest... I thought at first that it was out of sheer terror and disbelief...and I'm sure that was part of it, but..." He added, looking down at that longing face, "When I let myself realize that it was because of how happy I was, I could hardly imagine that it would ever get any better than that. How could it?"

"How indeed?" Victor wondered, slipping out from under his dog's affection, and started to scoot back on the bed until he found his pillows at the head. Yuri came up alongside on his right, and sat on the edge.

"Did...you ever wonder what happened to me...?" He wondered, looking down at first as he contemplated his next move, "I mean, after seeing how physical I was with you at the Sochi banquet, and knowing how I was with you over the first few months of you being here...there must've been a moment where you wondered what was wrong with me."

"Wrong? No..." Victor shook his head, and lifted the hand he still had hold of and kissed the fingers there, beckoning his partner closer, "You were pretty drunk back then. I thought maybe you were just more open when you had some liquid courage; your distance afterwards was just the difference between being sober and being sauced."
Yuri made a face at him, but pulled his legs onto the bed and under the covers as he shuffled nearer, "I went from dry-humping you in public to running away in private."

Victor laughed at the pointedness of that truth, and flopped back down into the pillows, drawing in a happy breath as he looked out through the big window behind him, "Alcohol makes brave men of us all." He said, looking down and to the side again as Yuri fidgeted with the blankets, "So what do you want to do?"

"Do?" Yuri echoed in confusion, slumping over his outstretched legs, looking on that pale face and exposed chest. His cheeks went pink and he looked away again, smiling nervously, "...Well, get used to things, I guess. I'm going to wake up in this bed tomorrow morning, but I'm still going to wonder if what's happening is real. This is all just...so fantastical... I could never have thought this would happen, even in my dreams."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

Yuri looked back, then forward again as Makkachin rolled onto his back in front of him. He squished the poodles cheeks as that big pink tongue licked at his wrists, "...Be patient with me..."

"I waited a year for you," Victor pointed out, rubbing his right hand across his partner's back, eyes following the gold glint on one finger, contrasted by the green of the fabric behind it, "I don't intend to scare you away by getting overzealous. I'm in this for the long-haul."

"...Is there anything...I can do...?" Yuri asked nervously.

"Don't be afraid of me." The silver answered simply, turning his head on the pillow, bangs slipping over his half-lidded eyes, "All of me is yours. There's nothing of me that's off-limits; there's nothing you can't ask."

"Oh... Uhm...well," Yuri stammered, his cheeks getting a bit pinker by the second.

"What is it?" Victor purred, seeing that anxious mind getting to the very edge of a request, and dying to know what it was.

"It would sound absurd to you, after everything..." Yuri went on, fingers still weaving through the curly brown for on Makkachin's cheeks.

"What is it?" Victor asked, curiosity eating him alive.

Those nervous eyes turned back again, looking at that perfect physique, "If I... I..." Yuri stammered, practically choking on the request. He clenched his teeth and drew a breath, holding it tightly until he felt that hand moving across his back come to a stop, and he let it go in exhaustion, "...I want to...see you... I mean, I've seen you, but not up close; not really. But I don't..." He started, swallowing a nervous breath, "I mean, because I've never been with anyone before, I need...t-time...to make my way through everything regular couples do..."

"I'll never do anything you don't want me to do." Victor reassured, "You can tell me to back off if I'm going too fast, and you can ask me to do things for you."

"...Can I..." Yuri struggled, lifting his knees under the blanket to bury his mouth against, as though the sheets might filter any stupidity that might come out of him, "Can I touch you without...making it seem like I want it to lead to anything...? I mean, I'm just-"

"An artist trying to figure out his subject?" Victor finished, pushing up onto his elbows until he could wiggle out of the sleeves of his robe, and laid back down again, "Getting a mental picture, like a
blind man learning about what something looks like with just the use of touch."

Yuri let out that breath, and nodded, "Y-Yeah..."

"Of course." The silver answered happily, "I am your canvas."

Relieved to hear that understanding, spoken out loud in a way that Yuri couldn't even describe coherently in his own head, he twisted around where he sat on the bed, and let his eyes roam over the exposed skin above his fiancé's navel. He watched every rise and fall of the Russian's chest, the way the muscle moved under pristine skin, and how tightly it clung to that athletic frame. Every abdominal was so sharply defined, the intercostals, pectorals, even the ridges of muscle under the deltoid, curving around the edge of each shoulder before turning into biceps. Those cherry-hazel eyes drank in every inch of that perfect body, but something struck him, "...You don't have a mark on you."

Victor tilted his head slightly, silver strands of hair tousling lightly over his cheek, "I have one or two, but I'll never tell where they are." He teased, "If you ever find them, though, I promise I'll tell you what they are."

"...Can you at least let me know if I would be able to see them, given what I can see of you right now?" Yuri wondered, brows raised.

"You would."

"I see..."

"You can touch if you want, too."

Another nervous lump was swallowed, but Yuri nodded, and moved a bit closer, lifting his right hand up over his fiancé's ridged tummy. Victor twitched slightly when skin met skin, and Yuri pulled his hand back.

"It's okay," Victor laughed, "Your fingers are cold, that's all."

"Oh..." Yuri blanched, and brought his hands up to cup over his mouth, breathing a lungful of warm air against his skin. He then tried again, and he heard Victor hum a happy sigh. Those cobalt eyes closed as Victor savored every brush of that hand against his body, moving slowly from stomach to ribs, tracing the line of every muscle, creating a 3-D picture in Yuri's mind. He roamed over that whole trunk, from abdomen to chest, and pressed his palm to the spot right above his fiancé's heart, feeling the organ beat beneath his skin, "It's so strange..." He commented, earning one eye half-opening in curiosity at him, "How different it is to touch someone...through clothes or on skin... Whether as just friends, or as...lovers..."

"You've done some things that narrowed the gap between the two." The silver commented, "Like after you got your medal and knocked me over."

For a moment, Yuri couldn't think of what it was, and his brows wrinkled in confusion, "...I only remember you leering at me as you suggested we do something inappropriate." He said, only to laugh at it anyway, "What do you mean?"

"You sat on my leg."

"I did?" He echoed, thinking back and looking up, "Oh! That! When I said you should stay in with me for another year!"
"Mh."

"Yeah..." Yuri felt embarrassed again, but then did something that surprised his partner. Keeping his hand on the Russian's core, Yuri lifted up from where he sat, came out from under the blankets, and sat across his fiancé's thighs, "...It was something like this...

Victor watched very carefully, and rolled the rest of the way onto his back, looking up at the man straddling him, "...You've being brave."

"I'm...balancing on that wire." Yuri commented, putting his other hand on that pale hot skin to join the first, and spread his fingers out, "Even though it's not even an inch, there's...something safe about there being clothes and sheets and blankets between us. It's like watching something on television...you can be interested in it, knowing that no matter how terrible, or dangerous, or...intimate...it was...none of it could ever reach out and do something to you."

"We're not exactly separated though." Victor pointed out, arms casually laid out beside him, hands relaxed close to his head, "If you wanted, things could go very differently."

Yuri nodded, but gave a knowing smile, "If I wanted..."

"What are you thinking about right now?"

"...About how...surprised I am...that I feel so at ease, despite how strange this all is." He answered, "And how lucky I feel...that in spite of how far away you always were from me, that now...you're right here. Closer than I ever imagined, and...being so patient with me. Letting me figure out how brave I want to be, and just...letting me look, or touch, and not making me feel like I owe you anything for the privilege."

"...Owe you anything?" Victor repeated, "I don't follow."

Yuri nodded, and carefully started letting his hands slide forward from their perch on the Russian's stomach. Fingers grazed the crest of each pectoral, and came together where thumbs and the first few fingers pressed between those two muscles over Victor's sternum, "My view on all this is pretty biased, seen only from the perspective of someone who's never done it before. But... It always seemed, at least in America, where if a girl went out with someone, she felt like she was obligated to do something physical for her date. Some of the guys seemed to think that was an unspoken rule; he buys her dinner, and she..." Yuri's words trailed, and his hands stopped moving, the tips of his fingers just under Victor's collar-bones before he pulled them back again, gripping the edge of the blankets where they came over the man's frame, "She would have to go down on him for it."

"Have to?" Victor asked, incredulous, "Why would she have to?"

Yuri shrugged unknowingly, "The rules of dating are a bit different out there, I guess. No good deed goes unpunished."

"Apparently some folks forgot how courting is supposed to go." Victor supposed, reaching for the hands that had pulled away from him. He threaded their fingers together, and rubbed his thumbs against that nervous skin, "That's not how I operate. I would never even think to keep track of that sort of thing. If I buy you dinner, it's because I want to make you happy, not because I want to trap you into something you don't want to do. I'm looking for your smiles, laughter, and joy. You should never feel like you have to do anything for me. That would make me unhappy."

"I don't know why, but...I feel like that's something I already knew about you." Yuri answered, "Though my anxious mind is always churning out dark ideas, my heart seems to be completely at
ease with you. I...can sense that you're a generous spirit. I mean, there was this image I had of you in my mind from before you came into my life, when I had to put together your personality based on what I saw of it at competitions or on television. There was always this worry at the back of my head, this doubt I had over the things that, maybe, I was missing about you. But you never deviated from the imaginary boundaries I had about you."

"Well, there's a saying..." Victor explained, getting cozy under the weight over his legs, "'I want to be the person my dog thinks I am.'"

Makkachin lifted his head briefly, as though understanding that he was being referred to, and his tail thumped lightly on the bed-spread.

"But in truth, I just want to be the person you think I am," Victor added, "And I want it to be because I am that person, not just some construct that isn't real."

"Are you worried...?"

He nodded slightly, "Truthfully, having gotten this far with you...to finally be able to share aspects of myself with you that I couldn't before... I worry that you'll think less of me, because you'll be seeing things that don't show on television, and have no place at competition."

"...What do you mean?"

"Even though I've been with other people before, I don't think I've ever been as close to them as I feel to you." He explained, "I have my private fears that there are quirks about my personality that even I don't know about, because I've never been in this position before. As nervous as you may feel about being with me, for all the reasons that you have, I'm nervous, too. So I just hope...that if I mess up, you'll forgive me."

"I think we both have that fear." Yuri affirmed.

"Don't ever think that you can't tell me something." The Russian added, "That you can't ask me to back off or reconsider what I'm doing. I want you to be completely at ease with me. ...But keep in mind, as we learn about one another in this new way, there's going to be times where each of us will make mistakes. It's bound to happen."

"Yeah..." Yuri agreed, slouching somewhat where he sat, brow furrowed, "But...let's try not to let that little dark cloud get in the way of things. The only brakes I want on this thing we have, is me getting comfortable with it all. I have enough anxiety to keep us occupied for a while."

Victor smiled at that, "I think that's one of the things I'm looking forward to most; watching you grow into us. I'm super excited to see where we go together."

Smiling, Yuri nodded, and sallied up a little bit of courage to act on that excitement. He held his fingers a little tighter where Victor held them, and moved them up towards the pillows. He came down over top of his partner, his thumbs grazing the edge of silver hair. He reminded himself of their union in the onsen, and how much he learned just from those minutes, and did his best to act on that new insight. A gentle nudge of noses started things, and he slid the tip of his own upwards, into the dip at the bridge and up onto Victor's brow, where he kissed that forehead. He came back down though, and tilted his head, feeling the butterflies in his stomach before finally letting himself lower down to those soft, warm lips. He could feel that kiss returned, lips pressing into him, and breathed a happy sigh. He attempted that morph between the end of one kiss and into the start of another, and pressed a little harder into the second. Victor lifted his face a bit higher, and smiled as Yuri rose up again.
"Would you mind if I did a little touching?" The silver wondered, feeling the tickle of loose black strands against his cheek, "Nothing below the belt...just the same as you did to me."

That hue of pink darkened, but Yuri shook his head, and lifted to sit upright again. He wasn't surprised by how easily Victor's hands pawed at his chest, sliding under the open folds of that green robe still clinging to him. When it slid higher though, and pushed the fabric away from his left shoulder, Yuri couldn't help but notice something. He'd known it already from their days in the hot-spring, but having that direct correlation between hand and body, it just seemed more stark than ever.

"What is it?" Victor purred, fingers sliding along the back of his partner's left arm as that sleeve came further away, "You look really nervous."

"It just...occurred to me." He started, "I'm so much smaller than you."

"...Does it bother you?" The silver asked carefully, sliding his fingers back up again.

"No..." Yuri answered, though hesitantly, "I guess I just never really considered it. To be the smaller one in a relationship."

"What would you have thought if it were the other way around?"

"That I could use my size to keep my partner safe. That I'd have to be vigilant so it never seems like I would use that extra strength to overpower anyone." "Mmmh... That is a fine line to dance along." Victor agreed, "That's my responsibility now though. I must protect the cinnamon roll."

"Cinnamon roll?" Yuri balked, "Is that what I am?"

"As close as you can get." Victor laughed, sitting fully upright so he could wrap his arms around his partner's lithe frame, and kissed at the side of his neck with a nibble for good measure, "You're sweet and perfect and amazing~ And I want you all to myself. No sharing."

"V-Victor..." The younger man gasped quietly, realizing that the soft and warm attention on his neck gave him a weird tingly feeling all over.

"Oh~ Is this a sensitive spot for you?" The Russian purred, nibbling a bit more just under his partner's ear, "I think I just found my second favorite place to kiss you." He mused, feeling every muscle in Yuri's core get tight as he helped turn the man to lay him down in the blankets again. All the while, he stayed on that perfect neck, kissing and tasting that skin, and loving every gasp he got as reward for his attention. When Yuri's knees started to come up though, he backed off a little, and offered a nuzzle against his partner's nose. He set his hand gently over Yuri's waist and looked adoringly into those over-stimulated eyes, "I'm really going to enjoy learning about all these buttons you have." He said, stroking his thumb across bare skin, "This first one is going to be a real pleasure to tease."

Yuri practically had to catch his breath, and gave a nervous smile, "I didn't even...know that was one until now..."

"This will be rewarding for us both then."

Catching up from the loss of sleep after traveling, combined with having that velvet-soft body pressed behind him, Yuri slept like a log. It was practically a sandwich, with Makkachin in front of
him, and Victor behind, keeping him warm from both sides. He woke briefly as he thought he heard an alarm, but it was gone again as he fell asleep right away. The next time he woke up though...

It was almost noon when Yuri finally roused for good. He was still in Victor's room, but as he sat up and looked around, he realized Victor wasn't there anymore. He reached for his glasses, and then for his phone to turn the buzzer off.

...Where'd he go? I could've sworn he was still here on the last snooze alarm...

He checked his email first, then Instagram. A few posts down, he balked to see a photo on Victor's feed that showed a selfie of the man, with himself - albeit unconscious - in the background.

v-nikiforov
[picture]
v-nikiforov All tuckered out from his first major win at a big international competition. My lovely Yuri Katsudon~
#Hasetsu #GPFSilverMedalist #SleepIsRequired

He shook his head with a nervous smile to see the thousands of Likes already, and checked the timestamp...nearly 2 in the morning. Butterflies flew around in his stomach...at least until the growling of hunger scared them away. He barely registered the tease of a few posts expressing how jealous many followers were that he was getting to sleep with their skating hero.

Quietly, Yuri made his way downstairs. He stopped briefly to take a look in his own room again, feeling that same strange sensation as he had the night before. That odd realization that the room was no longer necessary; that he'd effectively moved out of it as he moved on to a new and unknown part of his adult life.

His ears perked up the sound of people talking further inside the resort though, and he snuck closer to the source, climbing down the many flights of stairs until he found the first floor. Soon, he could tell that the voices were coming from the kitchen area, and he peeked his head in to see Victor there learning to make pork cutlet bowls from Hiroko.

"Vkusno~! You're so good at this!"

"You're a natural at cooking, Victor! This is all you!"

Yuri was in awe of how well the man blended, even after the many months they'd spent there to train. Now, it really was like he was family, not just a guest to entertain.

"Frankenstein's Monster finally rises to mingle among the commoners." Mari said jokingly from behind, catching Yuri severely off guard. After he'd peeled himself off the wall, the terrorized skater heaved a sigh.

"You scared me half to death."

"You need a job that gets you up in the morning." She pat his head as she passed to go into the kitchen with a few orders for lunch, "The resort's back open, so you should help, or find something to do outside."

"Oh! Yuri~!" Victor finally took notice, holding up his new prize, "Good morning-afternoon-time! Hungry?"

"You're letting me have katsudon again already? But haven't won anything since yesterday..." Yuri
wondered.

"Last night was for your Silver Medal, but this one's for beating my Free Skate record! I think it's a good excuse to have your favorite food!" He beckoned his fiancé to the next room and placed the bowl on the low-sitting table, proud of his handiwork and hoping Yuri would like it. When the younger figure finally sat down, Victor looked eager, "Eat quickly, but not too quickly. We're going to go run after this. Every bite is another hundred yards."

Yuri balked, "Every bite!?"

"If we're going to Japanese Nationals after all, we need to make sure you don't get a squishy tummy." Victor quipped, and headed back to the kitchen.

Yuri gaped as the Russian moved off, and he looked down at himself...parting the folds of his robe just to make sure his athletic core hadn't become a marshmallow overnight somehow. Seeing that he still had abs, he layered the pieces together again and heaved a sigh of relief...and looked at the katsudon skeptically. He pulled a pair of chopsticks into his fingers and held them over the steaming food, picking up one of the breaded pork cuts. Brown eyes looked at it with lust, drool starting to slip down out of the corner of his mouth...and he succumbed.

By the time he was done, and given half a chance to digest so he wouldn't cramp up in the middle of the afternoon's first round of work-outs, the sun was at its apex. It turned out that the run was just a ruse though... They did run, but in the end, it was just one way Victor employed to away from the resort.

The cold winter weather made running less strenuous, making it easier to go farther or faster than it would be in the middle of Hasetsu's summer months. Victor ran them up the frozen rocky beach, Makkachin at their heels the whole way, only to walk back along the nearby road with their fingers laced together.

"I noticed that you don't wear gloves anymore." Yuri said sheepishly, "How come? You used to always wear a pair. Aren't your hands cold?"

"Can't see my engagement ring with gloves on." The Russian pointed out, "But you knew that."

Yuri's cheeks were a bit pink, but he stepped a little closer, rubbing his shoulder against his fiancé's, "I just wanted to hear you say it."

"Is there anything else you want to hear?" Victor wondered inquisitively, leaning his head down so he could look at his partner more evenly, "Yuuuuri~?"

"Say things in Russian." He suggested.

"Hah? Like what?"

"Anything."

"Čto-nibud'."

"What's that mean?"

"Anything."

"Victor."
He just laughed, "Then tell me what you want to hear."

"I don't know, pick something interesting...some common saying or phrase from back home." Yuri suggested again, looking for him to be creative.

"Okay..." Victor lifted his free hand and put a finger on his lip as he thought, but then picked something, "Ne ošibaetsja tot, kto ničego ne delaet."

"That sounds ominous." The younger figure teased.

"It means, 'He who makes no mistakes, makes nothing at all.'" Victor answered, slowing down a little as he felt Yuri do the same, "It's fitting, right? Net ničego nevozmožnogo, Yuri. Nothing is impossible."

Hazel eyes just watched him, as though the words had hit some deeper level that he hadn't anticipated. Eventually, Yuri nodded, his visage gaining a happy smile, "Not anymore."

They eventually made it to the yard outside Hasetsu Castle, moving to sit at the same bench they'd been on shortly after Victor had originally arrived. Yuri brushed the snow off of it with a bare hand, shaking it and putting those frosted fingers into the armpit of his coat to try and warm them up again as they sat down, only to feel his partner taking it back and put it between both of his own hands.

The Russian blew a warm breath between them, making Yuri's skin feel better rather quickly. With his lips still against his skin, Victor looked past their hands, watching his fiancé closely. Seeing the flushed cheeks and the nervous, but willing eyes, he reached his right hand forward and gently brushed it against one cheek, "I can't tell if you're blushing for my sake, or you're just cold."

"It's probably way colder in Russia anyway." Yuri pointed out, halfway avoiding the question as he gave a goofy anxious smile, "It's going to take a while to get used to this... Even when he does something so simple like warming my hand up, it makes my heart beat so much faster than normal..."

Makkachin flew by after that, kicking up more snow as he dove into a large pile that had been shoveled aside to clear the path earlier in the day. That drew Victor's attention away suddenly, and he reached down with a laugh to scoop some snow into his hands, tossing it above at the big brown dog. Makkachin jumped into the air to bite at it, and at each successive snowball that got tossed his way after that, until he finally bolted off again in another direction to dive into another snowpile.

Yuri had flopped down into a snow-bank while Victor was having his fun, and calmly looked up into the white-grey sky; the clouds that would no-doubt drop even more snow onto Hasetsu later on in the afternoon.

Suddenly though, the Russian was blocking his view, looking down on him from above, "Daydreaming? I wonder what about."

"Hm?" Yuri hummed, blinking a few times as he watched the man descend to lie down next to him in the cold white fluff, "Oh, I was just thinking about how it's going to snow again later." He turned his head slightly, "It had been pretty warm last year before you came...but then you literally brought winter back with you, arriving at the head of a rare April snowstorm. It's kind of poetic, in a way, considering that you came to get me back on the ice."

"I guess you guys celebrate Christmas here, too, since you mentioned it before." Victor said simply, reaching one arm back to settle it under his head, keeping his hair off the ground; his other hand went in search of Yuri's, finding it easily and clasping around it fondly, "Right?"

"Well, a little bit... We don't do it like in America." He explained, "The first Christmas I spent in
Detroit was really weird.

"Really? How so? I bet it's different from Russian Christmas, too." Victor wondered, turning onto his side.

"Well... In America, it's this...awkward...almost disjointed celebration, where half the people think it's a religious thing and the other half think it's a gift-giving thing. One family might have a Christmas tree and Santa Claus decorations, and the family next door would have a manger out. But...here in Japan, Christmas is more like...a time where people just spread happiness around, if that makes sense." Yuri did his best to explain, seeing his fiancé nod and smile, "And Christmas Eve is...well...it's...uhm..."

Victor caught on, "What is it?" He teased, leaning in closer to set his free hand over his partner's chest, lying closer next to him, "Christmas Eve is...?"

"Well..." Yuri continued to stammer, "It's...a romantic day, where couples give each other presents and spend time together."

"Oh? Interesting." Victor hummed happily, leaning in a little closer, fingering the edge of his fiancé's chin, "I'll have to get you something special then." He was looming directly overhead, inching his way closer, his fingers moving further and further up. He gazed into those brown eyes for a moment...and he lowered himself down to meet the man's lips with his own. He held there for a while, brushing his fingers against Yuri's pale but rosy cheek, moving them down to cup against Yuri's side. He brushed the tips of their noses together lightly and smiled, "Though I don't know what I could get that's more special than what you've given me." Victor said, pulling his partner's hand out from where he'd been holding onto it between them, and kissed the ring on it before settling his chin on Yuri's chest, feeling it squish down against the winter jacket. He paused for a moment, just looking at the man adoringly, "You've given me my L-words."

"...L-words...?"

"Life and love." He answered easily, "Things I've been ignoring for a really long time." He shifted a little, moving his right leg to settle it gently between his fiancé's, "Look at us..." He said, quieter, closer, "...It's almost like we're making love already..."

Yuri wasn't sure how to answer that, or if he even should. Instead, he raised his left hand up from where it had been lying uselessly in the snow until that moment, and brushed the back of his knuckles against the Russian's cheek, "You keep saying stuff like that...and then it happens."

Victor huffed a laugh, "Really? What else have I prophesied?"

"You suggested we should sleep together...and now we do. You asked if you should kiss me...and then you did. You said my request at Fukuoka Airport was like a marriage proposal...and then it turned into one." He said, cupping his hand around the man's head lightly, fingers combing through soft silver hair, "Maybe you can tell the future."

"Then I can't wait to see when my latest prediction comes true." Victor mused, leaning down to kiss him again before helping to pull Yuri back up to his feet, "Let's head back to Yu-Topia. We can grab our skates and go on to the Ice Castle. We need to make sure you're ready to take Gold at Nationals next weekend."

Yuri paused, but then nodded, "...Actually..."

"What is it?" The Russian wondered, looking over the side of his shoulder as they started walking
"Well..." He muttered nervously, "The last time I went to Nationals, I came in 11th place. Minami-kun wiped the floor with me. But this time...I'll be going in with a score that completely eclipses any of the other competitors. Even if I mess up somehow, I'll still probably come away with Gold..."

"That's a good problem to have." Victor joked, reaching to settle his arm over his partner's shoulders and hold him close, "But you sound like it's one you'd rather not have."

Yuri returned the gesture with his own arms around his fiancé's back, but he kept his eyes low to the scarf in front of him, "I'm going to be the oldest skater in my bracket, and the most experienced. If skating at Nationals is just a repeat of Regionals, then it'll be less of a competition and more like...a joke." He said pensively, turning his head up to look at his partner warily, "If I win Gold there, I don't want you to kiss it."

"Really?"

Yuri nodded, "It won't feel like I had to fight for it. So...unless someone got shockingly good over the last year... I'd rather wait until I win Gold at an international event."

Victor kept his eyes on the man silently, seeing how serious Yuri was...and sighed, "Well, okay..."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

The following days proceeded much the same way the first few had. Getting up sometime around noon, working-out until the Ice Castle was free, and then skating until the later part of the evening. Yuri focused as much as he could on mastering the quad Flip, and even started practicing the even-harder quad Lutz.

"You're letting the Flip become muscle memory too soon, Yuri." Victor scolded comically, sliding around where the younger skater was quietly cursing himself, "You keep turning the Lutz into a Flutz."

"I know."

"Just do it like you did when you skated to 'Aria' last year."

"It's not like I don't know how it goes." Yuri chided, "I just feel like I should keep working on the Flip for now, until I can get the 3+ GOE on it like I said I wanted after Rostelecom. The Lutz is harder for me to pull off. I've never even done it in competition."

"You keep trying to do it without the right set-up." The Russian pointed out, "The Flip is easy because all you have to do is skate backwards in a straight line. Maybe you should just turn the Lutz into a pattern, and always go into it with the same connecting move, rather than just trying to force yourself to remember what edge you're on. All that effort means you're thinking about it too much, and that inevitably leads to you falling."

"A pattern? Like what...?"

"Well, you do your Axels from an outside spread-eagle... Do your Lutzs from a deep 3-turn. Make that your muscle memory, so you always know you're on the correct edge when you toe-
pick." Victor skated up close, leaning over his partner's back, hands coming up under the man's arms to gently pat his chest, "The less you have to think about it, the better. So...deep breath, relax, and try again."

Yuri nodded and slipped forward, moving around the short end of the rink to line himself up with one of the opposite corners.

"Go deep on your outside edge," Victor suggested, "Force it low so you can't accidentally slip onto the inside edge right before take-off."

Blades scratched along the frosty white surface of the rink, and Yuri started building speed. He eyeballed a part of the colored logo within the ice, marking a spot to take off from, and then changed directions with quick footwork; left forward inside edge, swiveling 180° to glide into a left backwards outside edge...low dip, right leg out behind, but not too high...kick down, vault off the toe, spin four times...and to his great relief, landed with only a slight wobble.

Victor clapped, "Amazing, Yuri~! You'll do that perfectly in no time!"

"So what kind of food do you have in Russia anyway?" Yuri wondered, following his partner through the grocery store, watching him browse the meager selections of the International aisle.

"Nothing that's here." Victor answered, "Oh well. Only a few more days." He pulled away and started walking back towards the main aisle, reaching to hold Yuri's hand between them, "Even if I found something here, it probably wouldn't be the same anyway. I'll get you something authentic when we get to St. Petersburg."

"Still hard to believe I'm actually moving there." Yuri said, that 'seeking' look in his eyes that his partner enjoyed so much, "I always had this goal of skating on the same ice as you... But soon, I'll be training at the same Skate Club as you...with you."

"Hey, I'm looking forward to this too you know." Victor pointed out, bumping his fiancé's shoulder with his own.

"It's a little different for me..." Yuri explained, "You haven't exactly worshiped the ground I walk on since you were 12."

"Maybe not." The Russian agreed.

"What were you doing when you were 12 anyway?" Yuri wondered suddenly, "I only caught onto you when you were 16 already, and you had just taken the Junior ISU by storm, since you hadn't been in it that long beforehand. Maybe only two or three years."

Victor hadn't answered. The mood shifted a little; his left eye twitched a little under his bangs, although Yuri couldn't see it from his side.

Hazel eyes glanced up curiously, "...Did I say something?"

"Huh? No. It's nothing." Victor smiled, going back to his normal affect again, kissing the side of his fiancé's head lightly, "I just wasn't doing what I love yet. Call it 'Pre-ISU Victor.'"

"Oh..."
"Tadaimaaaaaa." Yuri called out, pushing open the front sliding doors of the resort; Makkachin barreled in beside him, shaking the snow off his fur as Victor came in as well. The big poodle barked twice and then bounded off out of sight.

"Okaeri, Yuri, Vic-chan." Hiroko called back, waving from the doorway of the far hall, "How was skating?"

"Good. We're gonna go upstairs and watch a movie or something." Yuri answered, pulling his backpack off as Victor did much the same, "Holler if you need anything."

"Haaaaaai."

"It's always so interesting to hear you guys talk to each other in your own language." Victor mused, putting his shoes away into one of the cubby-holes near the door, "I should try to learn it more. Most people here already speak English so they all kind of defaulted to it when I showed up. I hardly hear any Japanese at all."

"That's my fault." Yuri said, smiling nervously as they started heading towards the hall to the stairs, "Since this town isn't really known for anything but my skating, everyone automatically knew to use English once you got here. They'd probably just respond in English anyway even if I spoke to them in Japanese first."

"Then I'll have to learn it from the Katsuki Clan," Victor winked.

"You'll be learning the Kyushu dialect then." Yuri informed proudly, "We talk differently here than in other places in Japan."

"Fascinating~"

Making their way to the upper corridors, Yuri pushed aside the door that lead to the family's living-room on the second floor. After getting a few things set up, Yuri surfed through a dozen or more channels before the Russian had come back with snacks and drinks. Each of them had changed into resort fare by then, intending to go soak in the onsen before the end of the night.

"Find anything interesting?"

Yuri lifted his head a little, but then buckled down with the remote in his hand, "A million channels on satellite and I can't find anything I want to watch."

"Well, come and get comfortable then. You can keep channel surfing until something catches your eye." The Russian pointed out, moving to sit within the 'nest' of pillows and blankets Yuri had made. He reached back for the bottle of sweet-potato shōchū he'd swiped from the wine closet, and poured two small glasses. By the time Yuri had turned around and sat on the blanket close by, Victor was holding the second glass out in offering.

"Oh, thanks." He said wuietly, taking it in hand and then turning back to the television. Yuri clicked a few more times on the remote, and didn't even notice as Victor was sneaking one long leg around him. He yipped in surprise as the unseen leg suddenly curled around him and pulled him closer, squishing up the blanket where it slid across the hardwood floor and turned him slightly. By the time the slide stopped, Yuri was half-facing the Russian, holding his glass up close to himself reflexively.

Victor just clinked the glasses together, "Kanpai, Yuri."

"Y-yeah, kanpai."
Victor downed his pretty quickly, and reached back for the bottle to fill it a second time, "One of the many things I'm glad about having come to Hasetsu for is this shōchū." He said happily, pouring the glass and setting the bottle back on the low table behind him, "Every place I've been to has its own unique drink, but I think I like this one the best."

"...Really? You're not just saying that because I live here?" Yuri wondered, giving him a curious, if not skeptical look, "You can get shōchū all over Japan."

"But this stuff is made here. In Kyushu." Victor pointed out, taking a sip before setting the glass down and reached again for the man in front of him, "I like Japanese plum wine, too, and I've gotten some ever since I first came here, years back." He paused, looking up and away suddenly, "Oh look, there's a dog on TV that looks like Makkachin."

"Eh?" Yuri's head turned, seeing nothing of the sort, but abruptly felt hands go under his arms to spin him the rest of the way around. Half a second later, his back was against the Russian's chest, and Victor was snickering to himself where he'd set his chin behind a shoulder. Yuri side-eyed him, "You tricked me."

"Only to get you to turn around." He purred, moving his hands a bit further up his fiancé's chest, taking full advantage of the loose-fitting garment, and let his fingertips slip in underneath to touch skin, "I think it's better like this."

"I would've gotten here eventually." Yuri insisted, taking the tiniest sip from the shōchū glass still in his hand, paying no mind to those roaming fingers.

"You still get nervous." The Russian pointed out, "It's not just because it's me still, is it?" He leaned forward a bit and set his chin against the top of Yuri's shoulder instead, brushing his cheek against the man's neck, "I'd thought you'd gotten used to me by now."

"Mmmhhh..." The tense figure mumbled, and brushed his own cheek against silver-grey bangs, "It's...not that..."

"Then what?"

Yuri hesitated, feeling a bit ashamed of himself, "Remember when you asked about my past girlfriends?"

"You had nothing to say about the issue."

"That's because there was nothing to say."

"I know." Victor answered pensively, "That's why I said I would get all your firsts, remember?"

"...Well, er, yeah...but..." Yuri stammered, "The longer this goes on, the more anxious I get that...eventually you're going to want to do other things...and I'm just..."

"Oh." Victor answered, and he lifted his head to look at the man more evenly. Fingers came out of the younger man's clothes, and set down flat on top of them instead, "Well...I guess that's true...I'm not making you uncomfortable, am I?" He worried.

Cheeks got darker, and Yuri looked back up to the television screen, "No... I just... I have this nagging feeling that I'm not the dominant one in this relationship, I guess? And before you came along, it had never crossed my mind what it would be like to be with...another guy... Our options are somewhat limited, and...so..."
Victor gave a reassuring squeeze with both arms, "Like I said before, I'll never do anything you don't want me to. It's still early days anyway. It would be a bit unfair to expect you to go through all that when you're barely a week into your first real relationship."

"Victor..."

"I have to ease you into it." He went on adoringly, much to Yuri's embarrassed chagrin. The Russian leaned backwards, and looked on those rose-hued cheeks as Yuri tilted his head back to see him, "It's actually something I'm really looking forward to." He commented seductively, eyes half-lidded, lifting one hand up to play with a few strands of raven-black hair, "Some day, I'll get to be the first and only person to know you, Yuri. What do you think of that?"

"...That it's kind of sad that I'm 24 and still entirely oblivious to this sort of thing."

"That's not what I meant at all!" Victor laughed, "I was thinking more along the lines that...it's as though you've been saving yourself just for me." He went on, arms going 'round his partner's thin frame again as he hugged tightly. He hummed a few kisses against Yuri's bare neck, "So it's still okay if I use my hands for now, right?"

A thousand things and more went through Yuri's mind; responses he could've given to what he'd just heard...but all he could do was rub his cheek against his partner's head, and pat the other side with one hand, "Thank you...for not being annoyed at my inexperience..."

"Never. Your innocence is actually quite endearing." The silver answered, daring to take part of that non-answer as something of an answer in itself. He partly unwrapped his arms from that last hug, and moved one hand up to the bare skin over his partner's heart, gently rubbing his thumb over it as he felt Yuri's frame try to relax. The television continued to play; he wasn't even sure what Yuri had landed on when his channel-surfing had been interrupted. He wasn't aware either of the fact that Yuri wasn't watching it anyway.

Yuri felt where the Russian had started to lean back against the table again - and himself with it - the blanket shifting a little where it had been loosely pulled over the man's shoulders. He heaved an anxious breath, but let himself settle against his partner's chest, taking solace in the protective warmth of his arms where they held around him.

...No matter what we do or where we go, whenever he holds me like this...I feel safe...

He took another sip from his shōchū before he set the glass onto the floor, just past the edge of the big blanket, and brought the remote control back up again to continue where he'd left off. He clicked through a dozen different news channels before finally bringing up TV Guide, and looked at the giant list of channels. He was aware of the fingers going into his robe again, but didn't mind at all.

Victor just continued on with his soft and inconspicuous teases, and moved up some to nibble on the edge of one ear as he slid his fingers further inside the green spa-robe. He'd already managed to wiggle the knot loose that held it together with his other hand, and suspected Yuri hadn't noticed. It was only when the right side of the robe fell away, that Victor sensed Yuri realize what had happened.

A slight twitch, but nothing else... Victor thought, smiling to himself where his mouth deftly touched to skin just under his fiancé's ear, I wonder how far he'll let me go? His smile turned a bit mischievous, Let's find out.

With Yuri sitting between his outstretched legs, Victor crossed them under the man's knees. He lowered his attentive nibbles down the side of his partner's neck, and kissed at the top of one
shoulder, then made his way back up again. Yuri just kept scrolling through the TV Guide listings, holding up the remote like nothing was happening. Victor nosed at his ear a bit, and nibbled at the earlobe as he slid his hand under the remaining fold of the spa robe. There was a slight flinch, but Victor moved his hand down, felt across Yuri's abdomen, playfully traced a fingertip around the younger man's navel before sliding that finger up the center of his sternum.

Yuri twitched again slightly when the hand came to rest over the center of his chest, knowing full well that his heart was pounding like a jackhammer just a short distance under his skin. He didn't doubt that the Russian could feel it, and indeed he could. Wandering fingers curved to go flat against the contour of his frame, and pressed down against it.

Shh... relax... Victor thought, holding his hand still for the moment, and continued the light kisses on Yuri's neck, It's only me... it's just my hands...

He watched Yuri's legs came up a little, and the remote fell from his hands to the blanket; Yuri could no longer pretend to ignore everything. He felt a pressure against his chest as Yuri pushed back against him slightly, head tilting back against his shoulder, head tilting away to open up more space for attention. Victor was delighted at the gesture, and made good use of the moment, his kisses becoming a bit wetter as he licked at the skin as well. He smiled wide when he heard Yuri gasp, trailing the tip of his tongue from shoulder to ear. His fingers felt the arousal of one particular nub under the folds of green fabric still clinging to Yuri's frame, and decided to help it along.

Yuri twitched again, even vocalized a nervous breath as he exhaled, but gave no indication he wanted to stop, so Victor took his task a bit more seriously. He extended his middle finger to circle around the nub, occasionally pressing over it on purpose. Yuri gripped at the blanket, and Victor could feel that whole frame started to tremble a little, though Yuri did his best to keep still.

"You okay?" Victor wondered, kissing the words against his partner's skin, "I can't tell if you're shaking because you like it or because you want me to quit."

"Nn-ngh..." Was all the answer that came.

The right hand continued gently, especially when Victor felt his partner's grip on his knees, in one moment holding tight, in another, sliding up his thighs and down again to start the process over again. Victor half-opened one eye, peering through his bangs, and watched as Yuri's legs rubbed against one another where his knees had been bent upward. He knew that there was only one reason Yuri would be doing that, and gently moved his left hand over towards them. Fingers went between Yuri's knees, and he was surprised to find those legs parting as easily as they did, even if they didn't part that far. It only took half an inch for his fingers to get between them, and he traced them down the inside of one thigh. A few seconds at a time, a few inches at a time, he eventually got to the bottom of those legs, and felt the edge of the thing that had made his fiancé so squirmy. Even though it was only the side of his hand that felt it, he knew what it was...and he didn't doubt Yuri felt it, too.

The kisses and rubbing continued, and the television continued to play, forgotten, adding a weird background noise to their little session. With a few slides up and down those tense but permitting thighs, Victor turned his hand around, and moved his palm down again, careful to keep a feel on something so Yuri would know where he was the whole time. When he got low again, this time it was the side of his hand with a thumb, and he extended it out, taking a chance to feel the length of the aroused flesh he'd brought out to temptation. He pressed his thumb down against it, and Yuri clenched his legs together, pinning that hand where it was, and squeaked a surprised breath.

"Shh..." Victor calmed, kissing that sensitive spot under one ear, and cupped his hand around the thigh that had captured it. He rubbed his thumb gently, and soothed those tense muscles until the vice relaxed and he was free again. There were still a few pulses of tension, as though those legs pressed
against themselves with the pounding of Yuri's anxious heart. But, Yuri hadn't given any indication he was ready to push that hand away, and Victor slowly moved it back down again. The first test of his fiancé's resolve came then, and Victor slid three fingers very deliberately from well-between Yuri's legs, up the length of that hidden flesh, and then back again, this time with his palm pressing down to the tip. When he pulled his fingers back again, he felt for the edge of the green spa-pants, but paused there, "Oh...it's wet."

Yuri's whole body clenched up suddenly, and his knees clenched tight. He practically seized in the middle of a gasp, but Victor breathed a quiet laugh against his bare neck.

The small finger went under the edge of Yuri's clothing, barely feeling the subtlest beginnings of throbbing flesh and coarse hair, "You should let me help you with that."

"NO. NO NO."

"EEEEAAAAHHHH." Yuri yelped, his face redder than ever before, and his glasses fogged up. He flailed and protested, and his hands clenched around the blanket under them, yanking on it so hard that it pulled the whole thing right out from where they both had been sitting on it. Yuri fell forward with the massive comforter, thinking it would come down over top of him and shield him from sight, and it did...but so did Victor.

The momentum of the pull had forced the Russian forward, coming down over his partner's back, and landed his hips right up against Yuri's backside, even as the blanket finally came to rest on top of both of them. Still amused by the whole thing, Victor took it in stride, and brought his hands up to the crook of Yuri's legs, "Oh, is this what you wanted instead? I thought you meant you weren't ready..."

"EEEEAAAAAHhhhh." Yuri flailed again, pushing away just as he felt the Victor press hard against him. The blanket finally came down over his legs as he escaped the man's clutches, and he glowered at the man dubiously, but only got an amused wink in response. Saying nothing, Yuri held the blanket tightly around himself and literally caterpillarered out of the room, sliding forward where his arms were curled under his chest, then bringing his knees forward in turn, and repeated it until he was out the door.

Victor watched him go, propping his head up in the palm of his hand, elbow lazily set on the table where he'd twisted around, "I'll have you begging for it one day! Just watch!"

"Not today...!" Yuri called back, his voice muffled equally from the blanket as it was from the fact that he'd gotten out into the hall and around the corner already.

The Russian laughed again at the whole thing, drained the last of his shōchū and rose up to go after the spooked skater. He had a good idea where his young fiancé had escaped to, and indeed, found him stuck at the bottom of the stairs to the 3rd floor. Victor crossed his arms as he leaned against the wall, smiling to himself where he saw the burrito with its 'head' pressed to the first step, "It's going to start to hurt if you don't do something about it." He teased.

Again, Yuri twitched at the suggestion, "What, so you're going to stand there and watch me?"

"Well, if you won't let me finish what I started..." He continued to tease, shrugging up his shoulders, "What else can I do?"

Yuri could do nothing but listen to the sound of bare feet coming up on either side of him, and felt two arms wedge under his sides. He squeaked in surprise as he was hoisted upward off the floor. In disbelief, Yuri found himself slung over Victor's shoulder, staring at the corner of the wall, "V-Victor...!"
"Back to our room we go." He mused, starting up the flight, "That's where you were trying to go, right?"

It was already awkward enough to be hefted up like a sack of potatoes, but Yuri's face just went red again when he spotted his sister come into view at the bottom of the stairs.

She blinked at him, "...Yuri? Were you the one that screamed?"

"M-Mari-nee-chan...! Tasukete...!"

"Why are you being carried around like that?"

Victor suddenly turned around up, comically banging Yuri's head against the wall as he went, "It's fine! I'm taking care of him."

Mari just leaned and crossed her arms, giving smug look at her brother's expense, "You bagged a big one there. You look like you're about to eat him."

One finger over the Russian's lips, but he just laughed, "That's not a bad idea!"

"VICTOR-" Yuri barked in terror, and started flailing again. He couldn't wiggle far given how he'd wrapped himself up in the blanket, so all could do in the end was whack his head against the wall a second time. He went limp, having rendered himself half-unconscious, and flopped against the Russian's back, eyes swirling.

Mari was almost in tears laughing, and she waved as they disappeared behind the wall on the upper floor.

Yuri finally came around again as Victor heaved him onto the big bed in the old banquet hall, dropping him with a soft thud against the blankets, and curled up behind him right after. He was still practically shaking with embarrassment, even as his partner was adoringly rubbing one hand up and down his back.

"You should let me finish-"

"NO." Yuri protested from within the sheets.

"But you let me already for so long..."

"NOOOOO."

"So what are you going to do then?"

"NOTHING."

"How sad..." The Russian continued to tease. He wrapped his arms around the blanket-burrito and pressed his cheek to his partner's back, "Maybe next time."
It was the day before Japanese Nationals would start...and it was also December 25th.

Yuri was doing his best to perfect the quad Flip, still desperately wanting the 3+ GOE modifier on his score-card. The more he did it, the better he felt about the whole thing...and soon, he was landing it without the slightest wobble in his landing blade.

Victor had spent the entire day avoiding having anyone remind him it was his birthday. Thankfully, it seemed like only two people knew it was the day, and at least one of them was close enough to him that he could put his hands over their mouth to stop them from uttering the words.

Yuko, on the other hand...

"Happy birthday, Victor!" She said excitedly as the pair strode up to the Ice Castle.

Yuri was shaking his head emphatically, standing just behind his partner, but it didn't do any good and she'd said the words anyway.

Victor just smiled stiffly, "...Thank you."

Getting onto the ice as quickly as possible was all Yuri could do to get Victor's mind off of turning 28. Working on the Flip was an easy fall-back. He initially did a bunch of triples just to get into the swing of things, but soon, the quads were coming out again, and he practiced them relentlessly.

"You had enough stamina to do four quads in the GPF Free Skate..." Victor noted, watching him from the center of the rink, "Watching you here in practice...I think you could easily have six at Nationals."

"W-What!?" Yuri balked, "Six quads in one program!? That's two more than you've ever done! Only JJ was ever insane enough to set that bar and even he messed it up in the end."

"You have more stamina than I do, and more sense than he has." Victor answered with a smile. He skated a slow circle around his partner, skates pointed sideways in a lazy, wide inside spread-Eagle, "Do 'Aria' for me. You remember how it goes, don't you?"

"How could I forget?" Yuri wondered sarcastically; he measured the strength left in his legs, and resolved to try it despite himself. Victor gestured to the center of the rink, and Yuri moved into position, drawing a deep breath as he arrived in the middle of the Ice Castle logo. He closed his eyes, and tilted his face down, setting one toe-pick behind the opposite heel. He drew in a second, slower breath to compose himself, trying to remember how the music began...and slowly, quietly heard it playing in his mind.

He raised his head, then his right hand beside it, and dipped to the left to begin the dance.

Victor watched in silence, sliding along the ice to keep close without interfering. After Yuri cleared the quad Lutz, Victor found himself twitching at the same moment, as though his body had intended
to jump as well, with only his coach's mind reminding him not to. He watched a moment longer though, and with the quad Flip cleared as well, Victor started to skate a little faster. Yuri was caught off guard as he skated past, only to find him joining the dance, moving in time a slight distance away.

Yuri could tell the cogs were moving in Victor's brain, and continued on with the program without saying anything. By the time they were done, he was too tired to comment anyway. He finished the final scratch spin, raised his crossed-arms above shoulder level to enter the final pose, and quickly slumped to sit on the ice. He gasped for breath, and rocked back on his skates to lie down. His legs trembled, and he felt like his lungs would burst into flames, but behind his thrumming heartbeat, he could hear Victor laughing, and he turned his head around to look at man.

Victor was off in his own world though, looking at him and yet through him at the same time.

*What are you thinking right now, I wonder?*

"I just had this idea." The Russian said, as though he'd read Yuri's mind, "Stay here. I'll be back in 30 minutes."

"Huh?" Yuri blanched; he had no time to react, and watched...or rather, heard as Victor's skates clacked along the ice to slide him to the rink's exit. There was nothing he could do but continue to heave breaths as he lay on the ice. Soon thereafter, he heard more skates on the ice, but this time, the face that looked down on him was Yuko's.

"You going to make it?" She teased, and offered her hand to help him up. Yuri took it and hobbled back to his blades.

"I've thought for a while that Victor's a slave-driver...but I didn't realize how true it was until just now..." He answered, only to suddenly spaz and look around, "Wait, where are your kids!? They're not recording me are they!?!"

Yuko laughed, "They're not here right now." She thumbed towards the exit, "They went to video Victor riding off on his bike. Where's he going anyway?"

"Not sure; he said he'd be back in half an hour though, so I'm sure we'll find out." He answered, rubbing the tingling sensation from his thighs before he started to slide around again. "Can you believe he just made me do like 15 quads in 10 minutes?"

"He only made you do the last four, technically...but you did it though." Yuko pointed out, "Last year you could only do the Flip and Lutz when almost no one was looking. Now look at you. You can land four of the five quads in competition, you're an international Silver medalist, you own the world record for the Men's Free Skate, and you're engaged to your childhood hero. Millions of women and men around the world are cursing your name right now."

Yuri blushed and looked away with a nervous smile, "You probably understand what this is like for me more than anyone, Yu-chan...how completely impossible and unbelievable it is."

"We both grew up practically worshiping the ice he skated on." She agreed, "You even got that poodle and named him Victor."

"Vic-chan..." Yuri repeated, suddenly finding himself feeling a slight pain in his throat at the memory of his dog. He skated over to the rink's edge where a water bottle was waiting for him, and took a drink to try and calm the cramping. "No one ever really asked why I screwed up so bad last year."

"I knew." Yuko said quietly, and reassured him we well as she could, "Your parents should've waited to tell you until after the Final was over. I guess they just..."
"...Didn't understand..." He finished. "Maybe they thought they were doing the right thing by telling me as soon as it happened. But...even before the Short Program, I was getting nervous. I binged on food like an idiot. The SP turned out okay in the end, but then finding out about Vic-chan... It was like I mentally forgot my routine... My body tried to compensate... I could hear myself screaming that I knew the moves, that I'd done them a thousand times...that I'd done them enough, and well enough, to be one of the Final Six, but all I could do was twist and flail and fall." He paused for a moment, "I talked to them on the phone after my last event. They told me there had been a public viewing and everything, but that...I'd just done so badly, no one wanted to look. I guess they were just trying to be honest, but they were so blunt...I couldn't take it. When I got home, I didn't even want to watch skating anymore. I was so ashamed that I skipped Victor's Free Skate at Worlds."

"That's because you were here, doing it for yourself." Yuko smiled, "Then the video of it went viral, and then he saw it, and came to help you. He could see that you still had that fire of determination inside you that wanted to skate, and he came to fan those flames."

"That's basically what he said, too..." Yuri looked up and smiled, "For all the humiliation of those early days...I'm glad everything happened the way it did..."

It would still be a while before Victor would be back. The childhood skating-pair took to the ice and skated loosely, like they had back in their youth, not trying anything too adventurous. Yuri gushed about his experiences on the competition road, all the people he'd met and sights he'd seen, and Yuko drank it all in to live through him vicariously.

"And up next...St. Petersburg!" She finished.

"Yeah!" Yuri huffed a nervous breath, "It's still so hard to believe!"

And with that...the lights went out all at once, sending the entire arena into pitch darkness, their eyes slow to adjust.

Yuri was stunned. They could hear the sound of numerous little feet running around them, but said nothing even as he heard his friend calling out for her kids to turn the lights back on. They seemed to be running with purpose though.

"This is all really weird." He finally muttered, "What are you three fiendish skating-otaku doing?"

With that said, a spotlight finally cracked on above them, bearing down and searching the surface of the ice until finally coming to stop near one of the rink-wall doorways. Through the light, the duo could barely make out the darkened shadow of a tall figure. It was Victor...wearing a long-coat again, looking rather much like how he did while acting as a coach...except for his hair. It had been styled like he was about to do a show. The soft thump of his skates on the floor became clacks as they set down on the ice, and the light followed him a few feet before they both stopped.

Yuri's eyes squinted against the spotlight in the dark, "...Why are you being all mysterious?"

The Russian finally reached up to pull his coat off, slowly revealing a particular costume from a previous Grand Prix series. Black pants, black thumb-gloves, white shirt, golden cords across the front and on the left shoulder...and a translucent wine-pink coat, shining like stars in the night.

"...Victor..." Yuri was entirely perplexed, but in a good way. I've never actually gotten to see this costume up-close like this before... Why is he wearing it though...?

Yuko had her hands over her mouth and nose, trying to prevent a gush at the sight of the man.
"It's only appropriate that we do this properly, don't you think?" The Russian finally said, starting to skate towards his fiancé with the grace of an angel. He reached out his hands and gently touched Yuri's face as he passed, heading towards the center of the rink. A second and third light flashed on from above, and their beams converged on him as well, "I hope half an hour was enough time for you to recover." Victor mused, tossing the long-coat towards the rink wall as he took his position, "Ever since you told me about how Christmas in Japan is like a celebration for couples, I've been wracking my brain for what I could give you. I was really worried this day would come and go, and I'd have nothing to show for it. So...I'm so glad I got inspired, even if it was at the last second. Come, Yuri..." He said, and raised his hand out, just as he'd done in the onsen that first day, "Skate a duet with me."

Yuri was blank for a moment, but his eyes suddenly shone brightly and he nodded. He quickly pushed forward, looking back excitedly at Yuko before she turned and made her way to the wall. He felt that welcoming hand take hold of his own, and Victor pulled him close.

"Happy Couples Day, Yuri." He said quietly, and leaned down the small distance to find a kiss. Yuri's hands held to his waist, and he turned them around in place as the kiss went on happily. They only stopped when the sound of frantic camera clicks and fangirlish screaming echoed from all sides, and the two nervously laughed, knowing all-too-well that those photos would be going online by the end of the hour. Victor shook his head and smiled, but turned away from his fiancé to wave to the walls, "Girls! Focus!" He called, and the shrieking immediately stopped, followed by a trifecta of apologies from the dark. Blue eyes then turned back to Yuri, and he smiled, "Let's take position."

Yuri could only wonder how Victor had made such elaborate plans on such short notice, but remembering that Yuko had said her triplets followed the man out had quickly answered that question. The music started to play loudly overhead, and Yuri lifted his head with the cue, feeling his heart trilling in his chest as he spotted Victor doing the same just beside him.

Sent una voce che piange lontano  
(I hear a voice crying far away)  
Anche tu, sei stato forse abbandonato?  
(Have you been abandoned as well?)

In tandem, they landed the first of several quads; a Lutz, any semblance of their skate feeling like a regular practice was quickly out of Yuri's mind. The dark made the whole thing feel official - it felt like a real Exhibition - and Yuri steeled himself for the second side-by-side quad.

Orsù finisca presto questo calice di vino  
(Come now, let's empty this glass of wine soon)  
e inizio a prepararmi  
(I'll start getting ready)

Yuri followed in swiftly, and heard Victor's toe-pick in time with his own. The pink and black blur spun around in the air next to him, and they landed that signature quad Flip together, gliding off perfectly.

Adesso fa' silenzio  
(Now be silent)

Another jump. Their synchronization was perfection.

Con una spada vorrei tagliare quelle gole che cantano d'amore  
(With a sword I wish I could cut those throats singing about love)
Camel spin.

Vorrei serrare nel gelo le mani che scrivono quei versi d'ardente passione
(I wish I could seal in the cold the hands that portray those verses of burning passion)

Flying sit-spin. They both had their left arms up above them as they turned.

Yuko watched in awe of it; she could imagine her girls were recording every second from all
different sides of the darkened rink.

Yuri could almost hear the cheering of the crowd, and part of him stepped outside himself to watch
the performance. For a moment, he felt like he could understand what Victor saw; ideas coming to
life, inspiration becoming reality.

Questa storia che senso non ha
(This story that makes no sense)

The song got quieter after that, and they rose from the spin, reaching for the sky in longing, and
turned backwards in a slow circle. There was a pause where they both stood still on the ice before
using their toe-picks to push off, left arms out, reaching for something intangible on the horizon.

Svanirà questa notte assieme alle stelle
(Will vanish tonight along with the stars)

They followed it with an inside spread-eagle, and moved off to build up speed again.

Se potessi vederti dalla speranza nascerà l'eternità
(If I could see you from hope eternity will be born)

Quadruple Salchow. The music was about to enter a new crescendo, rising up with power that could
be felt in their bones. More than all that, though...Yuri could really see what the music meant to
Victor now. It wasn't just a tease at his legions of fans anymore, nor just words, spoken on the edge
of tears while sitting in the onsen...

It was their song.

Stammi vicino, non te ne andare
(Stay close to me, don't go)
Ho paura di perderti
(I'm afraid of losing you)

Step sequence.

Le tue mani, le tue gambe,
(Your hands, your legs,)
le mie mani, le mie gambe,
(My hands, my legs,)
e i battiti del cuore
(The heartbeats)
si fondono tra loro
(Are fusing together)

Triple Lutz.

Triple Flip.
Quadruple toe-loop, triple toe-loop combo, then the final combination spin, and as the last line of the song was sung, drums banged loudly like thunder overhead.

Yuko had watched it all, and was mesmerized by them. She could already sense that this impromptu performance would probably go viral, maybe even more so than when it had just been Yuri the year before. But for once, that probably wouldn't be such a bad thing. Yuri had gotten used to the idea of having eyes and lights on him from the competition circuit, and with Victor already there, it would probably even make him happy to see their skate seen by so many.

The final few scratch-spins brought the pair back to their feet, and they rose into the final pose with their arms crossed, hands on opposite shoulders, elbows raised high. Slowly, the song faded out, and Yuri panted heavily as he stood there, his legs threatening to give under him again; they felt like jelly under him. He forgot about them though as the lights started to come on around them, one section at a time, and he saw Victor skate past...no, around him; circling several times, clapping happily as he went.

"That was just like I'd hoped." The thrilled Russian finally said through panted breaths, "I think we can work with it."

"Why do I get this weird feeling you're plotting something?" Yuri wondered aloud finally, and wiped the sweat from his face with the sleeve of his right arm. Again, he flopped onto the ice to sit, and leaned back on his hands as Victor continued to skate wide circles around him.

It didn't last long though, as the silver-haired man skated straight at him, and scooped him up by his arms, dragging him along the ice until he managed to get his skates back under him.

"Victor, what are you-"

"Pair skating." He finally said.

"P-Pair what?"

"The two of us, skating together. Not just a solo program with both of us on the ice at the same time like a second ago, but one program featuring the both of us. I thought I'd see how it felt in the best way I knew how."

"...But I thought you meant my five World Championships would be in Singles...?" Yuri was perplexed, trying to go along with Victor's moves but terrified he might just trip them both up with one wrong twist of his blades. He'd never seen Victor fall on the ice and he wasn't about the be the reason it happened now. "I don't think the ISU would let two guys join the Pairs bracket anyway...all the rules are for a man and woman..."

"I've got my eye on an Exhibition Gala. Something unofficial, something that isn't being graded or scored. An announcement performance, to give people a taste of things to come since I'm not going
to Nationals or Euros after all." Victor repositioned Yuri in front of himself, spun him 'round to put them chest to chest, one on his partner's hip as he held Yuri's left hand out ahead of them, and they slid across the ice in wide arcs, "Are you up to it?"

Yuri's legs finally gave out and he dripped like water from Victor's arms, splaying out on the ice, face-down in a nervous sweat. He hated not being able to answer right away, but he hated even more the thought that he'd say something he'd regret when he was so tired.

Victor went down on one knee and poked him, "Yuri...?"

"My heart...can't take it..."

"Yuri!" Yuko called out. She hopped back onto the ice and slid over to him with his water bottle, and handed it over to the Russian's waiting hand. Together, they flipped the young figure-skater over to sit him up straight, and Victor poured some of the water over Yuri's head.

"Have I finally found the limits of your boundless stamina?"

Yuri pushed his messy wet hair back with one hand and shuddered under the cold, "Oh yeah...a while ago...! I don't think I have bones below the waist right now...it's all jelly..."

His partner could only smile, always enjoying the sight of Yuri's eyes coming up to meet his, "I've pushed you to the edge today, I know. Forgive me. You surprise me every day." Victor rose to stand again, and held his hands out to pick his fiancé back up off the ice.

When they'd finally managed to change and get ready to leave, Victor found himself having to carry Yuri on his back. The youth's legs were really a ruin by that point. He could feel them trembling where he held them up against his sides, with Yuri's arms dangling over his shoulders, hanging in front of his chest.

Yuri turned his head from the road to look out over the water, seeing the sun starting to set at the horizon.

"Things will be ready in St. Petersburg by the time we're done with Nationals." Victor suddenly mentioned, bringing his fiancé's attention back around, "I know you've been wondering about it."

"I'd started to think you'd forgotten. You haven't spoke a word about it since we got back..."

"There's been a lot to do." Victor confessed, "I didn't want to bore you with the details."

It piqued Yuri's interest though to think that it would take a week to get ready for a simple move, "What're you having done out there? It's not like my whole family's moving with me."

"Oh, plenty of things, don't worry. You'll find out soon enough."

"Victooooor!"

"I only just decided on the last details today. Besides, I didn't want to leave Yu-Topia too quickly. Once we leave, we won't be able to visit anymore hot-springs until or unless we come back. As much as I want to get back on the ice back home, I want to enjoy the time I have left in Hasetsu, too. You own a little piece of paradise, you know? I like it here."

"...Paradise?" Yuri repeated. He lifted his head to look around, not really seeing it the way Victor did. "I've lived here my entire life. All I see is the same boring town that's almost never changed." He thought on it a moment, "Well, I guess it has a little; the train has a raised track now...but most of the
changes happened only after you first showed up."

"Wow. Have I changed things that much?"

"I don't mean that the roads were repaved and the maps redrawn, but the energy here...it's different. People take interest now."

"The grand tour of Victor and Yuri on Ice."

"Maybe." He agreed quietly, blushing slightly at the nod to his previous program.

"This is your place, Yuri. Don't ever forget that. No matter how long you're gone or what changes before you return, this is always home." Victor said pointedly, and shuffled a little to get him in a higher spot on his back, "I've just touched it a little bit, that's all. Just like I've touched a little bit of you...or at least tried to." He quipped, and flicked his head back a little to nudge the man.

Yuri blinked, puzzled, but then the memory of their attempt at Movie Night was at the front of his mind, "I'm sorry I'm sorry..."

Victor could only laugh though, "Don't worry so much. We've only been officially engaged for a few days. I'm content with where we're at right now."

Still, Yuri kept his face hidden, "I'm holding you back."

"Nonsense." Victor huffed, "We'll eventually look back on these days with fondness, and be glad that we took the time to figure things out. For me, this is just the natural next step in helping you build confidence; that's actually part of why I asked you to skate 'Eros,' even though Yurio was asking for it. I don't know that you would've ever come out of your shell if I'd let you do 'Agape' instead." The Russian said, looking back over his shoulder again, and watched how Yuri was contemplating his words.

Finally though, Yuri brought his arms up a bit and hugged closely to the back of his partner's head, "...Back then, when you asked me what I wanted you to be to me. You weren't just kidding around when you said you'd act like a boyfriend."

Victor huffed a laugh, "No way. After everything I've told you? That was no act. I was determined to seduce you, even if it took the better part of a year."

They arrived back at Yu-Toπia a little while later, and true to Yuko's suspicions, video of Victor and Yuri's secret 'Aria: Stay Close To Me' performance was already online. Minako had practically run the pair of them over when they came through the dining area, holding her phone out with the recording playing as Victor let Yuri stand on his own feet again.

"I knew you were up to something when you barged in here and then took off again, Victor Nikiforov! You're going to break the internet if you keep this up!" She barked at them, "Look at this; there's already an account just for you two as a pair! See!?" She pointed at the username of the person who'd posted the video to begin with, "Victuri! They even combined your names like you're some kind of celebrity couple!"

"We are a celebrity couple." Victor happily stated, dutifully helping get his partner out of his heavy winter coat and scarf.

Yuri was doing all he could just to stay standing. His legs trembled beneath him, "That's probably Yu-chan's girls." He pointed out, "Victor had them help set the whole 'Aria' thing up. I didn't even know what was going on until it happened. Yu-chan probably got them their own account so they'd
stop posting on hers."

Minako seemed to be, comically, on the verge of tears, and she wedged her way past Victor to cup Yuri's confused face in her hands, "You're growing up so fast all of a sudden. I remember when you were still a little boy in my ballet class-"

Victormercifully pulled Yuri away, and started heading to the men's changing rooms with something of a penguin-waddle. Yuri's feet dragged between the Russian's, but Victor smiled anyway, "Growing up fast, and in dire need of a soak after all of today's hard work."

Back in Russia, Yurio saw the pair-skate video as well, reposted by Victor himself. He glared at the screen of his phone with an expression that couldn't decide if it was jealousy or rage. He didn't bother to throw the phone at the window this time though; he simply turned it off. His feline flufferbutt seemed grateful not to be woken up.

Snow was descending in sheets outside in the night.

Emerald-green eyes traced over to where his Grand Prix Gold medal hung with his historical trophies; there were boxes around him where he'd been unpacking.

'It'll win gold and prove to you that its owner is incompetent.' He recalled saying about Victor's ring, standing on that cold Barcelona pier.

It didn't even matter in the end. He decided to come back to competition before I even won the fucking thing, and then barely acknowledged that I'd won it at all, Yurio thought grimly, fingers clenched over his arms where he'd crossed them, "I broke your record, asshole, and all you do is slink back to Hasetsu with the piggy? Disgusting..."

Yuri and Victor both sneezed. Victor had already gotten settled into the onsen by then, but Yuri was still on the deck, and as he wrinkled his nose to clear the itchy feeling, he couldn't help the feeling that another sneeze was coming, "I guess...someone's talking...about us." He managed, but the second sneeze came anyway, and Victor seemed to do the same.

"...Eh?" The Russian tilted his head slightly, and pressed the back of one hand against his nose, "What do you mean?"

"It's an old Japanese joke that if you sneeze for no reason, it's because someone's talking about you. We both sneezed at the same time, so it must be that someone's talking about us both." He explained, and slowly lowered down into the warmth of the spring, but then gave an uneasy smile as he waded closer, "...We sneezed twice each though, so it must be something bad."

"Psht," Victor scoffed, "Yakov, probably. Cursing us both for me not being in Moscow right now."

"...You're sure you're okay with this?" Yuri wondered, feeling the soft probe of fingers sliding between his own as he got closer, "You sounded so excited before about coming back in time for Nationals..."

"My mouth often goes before my brain." Victor pointed out, tracing his fingers down each of his fiancé's arms, light as feathers, until he could cup them loosely around the back of his partner's head, and nosed him fondly, "You've seen that happen pretty often. Yakov knows it from a lifetime of experience."
Yuri nodded and smiled nervously, but the feeling of gentle pressure on his brow helped calm those anxious beans that lived inside him. He slid his hands forward and over his partner's shoulders, and closed his eyes, floating weightlessly in the mineral-rich spring. He could feel that Victor was slowly turning them in place, and his body curled and swayed in the subtle wake left behind.

Eventually they came to a stop on the rim of the spring, and Victor anchored his lower back to the edge of the underwater bench - just enough that they wouldn't float off again - and held his partner close. With his shoulders just above the water's surface, it made the perfect perch for Yuri's head, and the younger man slid partly off to the side, letting lean legs float beyond his knees. All was quiet in the onsen; peaceful, even. The bubbling of the fountains, and the subtle sway of naked winter tree-branches on the other side of the walls. It was sublime in its serenity.

Yuri felt the soreness in his overworked muscles melt away, and let himself have a moment to just be in the moment. The silky softness of Victor's arm where it curled around his back to hold him in place, the heat of the man's neck against his brow, and the fingers that wove together over his right hip. Yuri held to the Russian's frame lightly, suspended on the edge of one shoulder as his legs swayed with the subtle current, floating them over those pale legs. Feeling a little brave, Yuri pulled his right hand back from where it was holding to the opposite shoulder, and slid it softly over his partner's chest, watching the warbled image of his fingers under the water as they treaded gently over every curve. Each side was meticulously charted in Yuri's mind, distorted as it was to his eyes by the ripples of the water. He felt everything though, one or two fingertips at a time, slowly moving up until he could feel the water cresting on his skin. He wondered if Victor was watching or just feeling him as he went, but was too wrapped up in his process to look. Warm water cooled and dripped from the heel of his hand, and his fingers traced up and across the ridges of each collar-bone, then back again, and up the Russian's neck.

"This is the first time you've taken a moment to really look me over," Victor pointed out quietly, lifting his chin up as those fingertips made their way up under his jaw, "I can only hope this means you're starting to get more comfortable with things."

"I spent my whole life thinking I was supposed to be with a girl eventually," Yuri pointed out, though keeping up his dawdling exploration of that neck, "...This whole last year, I kept trying to figure out why you were getting so close to me. I thought it was just an extension of how flirty you always seemed with everyone, and that I wasn't just seeing something that wasn't there."

"You started to play along though."

"I was nervous about letting myself get carried away with it." Yuri explained, tracing his fingers along his partner's jaw, then nudged that chin around, and brought those cool blue eyes with it, "I started to emulate you a little bit, I guess... Pretty soon, I couldn't separate the game from what I really felt. That's when I started to get worried."

"Worried?" Victor echoed, giving a nervous laugh, "Why worried?"

"We were still planning on your return to St. Petersburg after the Final. That's why I backed off a little."

"I see..."

"I've had to let myself come down from that anxious high I had the whole time we were in Barcelona." Yuri went on, barely touching the edge of his partner's lower lip, "I guess I got through that phase on the plane back here. Playing along, a little bit more seriously, given that I knew I'd be going with you at the end of it...but still nervous that the engagement was just some joke that got away from you."
"I wouldn't joke about something like that."

"Shh..." Yuri cooed, moving his fingers aside for one last brush against those lips with his thumb, and moved his palm to rest against the side of his partner's neck, thumb sliding against the cheek, "I trust you...but I'm still new to all this. All I know is that we managed to skip some steps between being friends and being engaged...I'm trying to catch up."

"I guess I did jump the gun a bit." Victor smiled, "But I did say I'd be like your boyfriend right from the start."

"Yeah..." Yuri could feel his skin redden, "But I wasn't really yours..."

"Putting it like that just makes me feel sad."

"I still have trouble reading you sometimes. I'm...trying to get better, at a pace that makes sense to me. The idea that I can even get this close to you..." Yuri pointed out, deftly speaking those words against the silver's lips, "...Is still something I have to get used to, even if my heart's wanted it for a long time already." He finished, and ended the torment of his tease by giving his partner the kiss he'd been holding back. He hummed a contented smile against the soft warmth, and helped to continue that string of kisses, rather than leaving it all to his more experienced partner. The half-lidded eyes that gazed at him when they pulled back again said plenty on their own.

"You're starting to get really good at that," Victor teased, "But, there's something uniquely special about the way you do it."

"Oh, do other people do it differently?"

"Every kiss is different...I guess I just happen to like yours the best."

"You waited a really long time..."

"What's a year to the rest of our lives?" Victor pointed out, and gently touched their noses together, "This is just the beginning of things. There's still so much more we can do."

Yuri pushed open the lid of his suitcase, set on the bed in his old room, and went over to his closet. His costumes were hanging there as they always had been, and he pulled them down, folded them over one arm...and spotted a familiar sight in their place.

Oh...it's all my old posters...

He put the two garment bags into his big rolling suitcase, and went back to the closet, lifting the stack to look at them after such a long time. He knew the details of each photo, almost as well as if he'd been there to take the pictures himself. Victor walking in a park, with that same puffy black jacket and grey sweatpants that he'd worn in Hasetsu. Victor sitting on a proverbial throne, decked out like a Victorian era rockstar...or maybe a subdued Anne Rice vampire. Victor in the black, leather-looking Short Program costume from the year before, with the chains that hung around his core. All of them.

"Yuri?"

He looked up and put the posters away quickly, spotting Victor there in his doorway, a towel over his head and that characteristic green spa-robe over his pale frame. He squashed the papers into the closet again and grabbed a few empty coat-hangers before he stepped out again, pushing it closed with his heel as he went back to his suitcase, trying to look natural, "Oh, h-hey!" He stammered,
dropping the load on top of his clothes.

Victor blinked at him, "Do you need that many coat-hangers at Nationals...?"

"W-well...uhm, I mean...in St. Petersburg?"

"Oh... Okay." The Russian managed, "Don't take too long. We have to get up early for the movers tomorrow."

"They're not gonna be here that early..." Yuri said, and made a face.

"Anything earlier than 11am is early."

Brows were raised, but Yuri watched him leave the room again, and listened to the three or four steps it took to get to the banquet hall. He swallowed a breath of relief and looked back at his suitcase, took a mental tally of everything in it, and closed it, "...I think that's everything."

In his own room, Victor pulled the towel off his head, and stringy strands of steely hair stuck out in every direction. He shook the mess out, and ran his fingers through it like a comb, turning around just in time to spot Yuri pulling that big suitcase into the room, "Ah, got everything?"

"Think so." He answered, setting travel-case by the door, and pushed the sliding panel closed. Like Victor had, Yuri combed his damp hair back out of his eyes, and looked around the room as he approached the foot of the big bed to sit down, "It's really weird to think this is going to be our last night here."

Victor smiled, and went to sit beside him, "We've been abiding by this routine, in this place, for so long...even I'm starting to get anxious about going back home again."

He commented, and placed his palm over his fiancé's nearest thigh. He gave it a reassuring squeeze, as much for Yuri as for himself, "I know St. Petersburg really well though...I'll show you all the amazing things that are going on. This is a spectacular time of year to be all touristy out there. You'll see."

With a happy nod, Yuri put his own hand over the one pressed on his leg, turned to find a kiss, and pressed his brow to his partner's fondly, "I can't wait."

Victor smiled, and nuzzled adoringly for a moment before he pushed up from the bed to stand again. Hands went to the loose knot at his hip, and he peeled out of the resort robe, "I can still feel 'Aria' in my legs... I must've gotten out of shape being a coach these past months."

Yuri followed suit, untying his own robe as he moved to the other side of the bed, and pulled his arms from the green sleeves, "You must have a great metabolism if you're still thin despite it all. Unlike me..." He huffed, and smacked both hands to his bare tummy, "I get fluffy if I even think about taking a break."

"I won't let that happen." The Russian reassured, folding the short pants to go with the jacket, and put them both onto the edge of the blue corner-sofa nearby, "We'll both get right to work when we get to my home rink, and push harder than ever to be ready for Four Continents and Worlds."

"You're sure they'll even let you go?" Yuri quipped, and slung his own clothes over the headboard on his side, "The RSF was pretty mad that you left in the first place."

"They'll forgive me. They always have." The silver answered with ease, "Even Yakov is warming up to me again. He only called me an idiot twice in his last email."

"...Only twice...?" He gaped, finding it hard to believe that the two were close when Victor's coach
was so vulgar with him.

"I wonder where Makkachin is?" The Russian suddenly asked, putting a finger on his lip as he looked towards the closed door.

"It's still pretty early, all things considered. He's probably still downstairs with Minako-sensei."

"Ah...yeah, you're probably right. Should we not leave the door open a crack so he can get in later?"

Yuri watched the man go, words caught in his throat. The door shifted slightly to the side, only a few inches, enough for Makkachin the nudge his way through if he stuck his nose in, and Victor walked back to the bed.

Covers were pulled up, and lamps turned off on that side, and the exhausted five-time World Champion slithered into the coolness of the sheets with a happy shiver. Blue eyes turned, "What'er you waiting for? Come in~ I need a good cuddle before sleep."

"Oh..." Yuri muttered nervously. He pulled his eyes from the crack in the door and reached for the two long-necked lamps on his side of the bed, and pulled the blankets back...only to pause.

"What's the matter?"

He hesitated, but a flutter inside him made him go back towards the door, and he pushed it closed.

"...How's Makkachin gonna get in...?" Victor asked blankly, confused. He followed Yuri's footsteps back, but the man stood on his side rather than his own, and blue eyes looked up, "...You're acting weird suddenly."

"Uhm..." Yuri stammered, his face red despite there having been literally nothing obvious to inspire it.

Thoroughly perplexed, Victor pushed the blankets off his legs and pulled his knees up, and gestured through the open path, "...So you can get to your side...?"

The look on Yuri's face made it seem like his brain broke. He drew a breath in through his nose to gather his courage, and made a really weird face - probably one of determination - and he leaned down to grab the Russian by his shoulders, twisted him slightly, and leaned in to a less-than-graceful kiss.

Victor's eyes stayed open in confusion, even as he felt himself being pushed over. Yuri had managed to keep contact in that kiss as they tilted, but it felt incredibly awkward when the younger man tried to get on top of him, given that the rest of him was still twisted to face the foot of the bed. Though on his back, sort of, when Yuri started to lift off of him again, Victor tried to smile, but he could sense it wasn't convincing.

"...Jeeze, that didn't work out at all like I'd hoped..."

"Y-Yeah..." Victor stammered nervously, "I feel like you meant for that to go differently." He added, pushing up onto his elbows as Yuri moved to sit on the bed a small distance away, "...What were you...trying to do...?"

Hands went to cover Yuri's face, and he shook his head into his palms, skin glowing red under them, "I was...trying to give you a good birthday, Christmas, and Couple's Day present, but I...don't know what I'm doing..."
"Oh!" Victor realized loudly, only to feel relieved, and then elated, "That's so amazing~! Yuri~!" He cooed, leaning forward to wrap his arms around his partner's nearly-bare frame. He gave a bit of a seductive look then, and spoke tantalizingly close to one ear, "...Let me help you."

Yuri blanched a bit behind his hands, but spread his fingers just as he felt his partner's words turn into a breathy nibble, and the arms that were wrapped around his small frame pulled him further onto the bed. His heart ramped up, and he could feel it fluttering in his chest as he was practically deposited onto the blankets, and Victor loomed over him, and the realization that something was going to happen made his coherence falter. All he could do was sputter his partner's name in confused protest.

"Relax; deep breath." Victor suggested, simply lying down next to the man, stroking his hand across that pale chest, "I think I kind-of understand what you were going for."

"I don't even know what I was going for!"

Victor huffed a laugh, "And that's okay, too. Just the idea that you were willing to try is incredible. When I said earlier that there's so much more we can do...I didn't think you'd be wanting to start so soon."

Yuri just breathed out an exasperated breath, brows furrowed in dubious reconsideration, "I'm...suddenly not sure this was such a good idea..."

"You're over-thinking it. I'm not going to do anything you don't want me to. This first bit is really just more of what we've already been doing..." The silver explained, hoping to ease those suddenly-frayed nervous, "We can still do that stuff, right?" He asked, spotting a timid nod, and leaned down the last inch or so to press into a new kiss. The hand he had on his partner's chest could feel the rise of a full-body clench, and the thrum of an anxious heart thumping away just below the skin. He held there though, offering light, gentle kisses, and innocuous strokes of his thumb over that bare skin, waiting patiently for his partner's anxiety to fall away. Kisses moved from lips to cheek, chin, and down Yuri's neck, walking a few nibbles down to the younger man's collar-bone. That's as far as he's ever gone... Yuri thought, swallowing nervously as he wondered whether the Russian would go further this time. It almost wasn't a surprise when he felt those lips press down on the center of his chest, and felt the tickle of damp hair drag lightly across his skin where it was starting to collapse into its usual place over the man's left eye. He drew in a quick breath, but then realized it wasn't a scary feeling at all, and with the exhale, he let the rest of himself relax. He knew Victor could feel it; the nibbles on his skin began anew, and started to explore uncharted territory.

Victor followed those physical cues like a dance, knowing when he had to improvise and go off-plan. Muscles tensed as he neared the edge of his partner's chest, coming dangerously near a pink spot that carried with it plenty of societal taboos, so he veered from it for the moment, and the tension faded again. He walked his kisses across the other side of his partner's chest instead then, and slowly made his way back up. By the time he'd reached his fiancé's lip again, he'd tilted his own frame over, and pressed the front of his larger figure against Yuri's side. Like in Barcelona, he bent a knee over the man's legs, but unlike in Barcelona, where Yuri had stayed still throughout it, Yuri actually twisted onto his side...and pulled that overlapping knee between his own.

Hazel eyes looked forward for approval, and Victor gave it in spaced, smiling wider as he felt one hand move forward, slipping between his arm and ribs. The pressure he felt drew Yuri nearer, and Victor could feel that his partner was more at ease than before.

This is still familiar enough... Victor thought, I've teased him with this since Rostelecom. The only difference now is that we're skin to skin...
It surprised and delighted the Russian to feel the hand move from the side of his back, down to his waist, small finger barely grazing the edge of the one piece of clothing he still had on. He returned that touch in kind, and moved his own hand down along his fiancé's frame, familiar kisses easing the tension. He cupped his hand around the younger man's hip, then strokes his hand upward again, and continued that way until one finger, two fingers...all fingers were touching that thin black fabric. Yuri only flinched the tiniest bit as those fingers cupped around the round of his back end, and so Victor continued on, stroking his hand all the way around that curve, and gave it a gentle squeeze.

Yuri pulled back from the kiss when he felt it, and looked into those blue eyes.

Victor just smiled brightly though, and nuzzled the tip of his nose, "You have a very nice butt."

"I...erm... Uh...ehhh..."

He offered a gentle laugh, and moved his hand back up again, "This is going pretty well, I think...you're not near as tense as you were before."

Yuri stammered in his thoughts, but he knew somewhere in his head that Victor was right. Nervous as he was, and as little physicality he’d allowed in his short life, the attention that the Russian gave to him was far more pleasant than anything he’d gotten before, even by accident. He shook his head to clear the torpor, and tried to rationalize the concept, "...It...I...uhm... It's...really nice...what you're doing."

"Is it?" Victor purred, drawing in closer as he slid his hand back down again, this time moving his fingers under the fabric to feel gently at that unseen skin. He could hear the stunned gasp, and felt the slight clench of that muscle, but the more he felt at it, and the more he kissed, the more he felt it relax. Yuri clung to him a bit tighter, and the one leg started to crawl up the outside of his thigh with each new squeeze. Victor playfully started groping for more, laughing a few kisses against his partner's neck, but a few fingers suddenly went a bit too far around the curve between those two cheeks and Yuri practically thrust his hips forward with a yip. Victor kept his hand where it was though, hoping the surprise would fade, but that flesh stayed tense, and Yuri's face was brighter red than before.

"I...I didn't..." He stammered, "I'm not r-ready to...go there..."

"Ah...I wasn't going to do that, but I understand." Victor answered easily, sliding his hand back to safer territory. With fingers back over the fabric, he slid his hand down towards the leg that had raised up over his own, and gave it a gentle pull, "Where did you want to go?"

The higher his knee went, the more Yuri could feel the leg that went between his, and his nerves kicked up again. He clumsily pulled free of the whole thing, only to warily lift that same leg over his partner, and to Victor's surprise, actually sat down there. Somehow, someway, Yuri hadn't expected to feel anything out of the ordinary when he lowered down, but his expression went gaunt as soon as he was there, "Uh...oh, I...I can feel you..."

"I hope you can. You're sitting on me." Victor teased, and moved his hands to rub them up and down the tops of the thighs that straddled on either side of his waist.

Yuri just groaned, "You know what I mean."

"I do know what you mean." The Russian mused. It pleased him to no end that Yuri had gotten up on top of him on his own, but it was still endearing that Yuri was so embarrassed about it, pulling the palms of his hands up to cover his face, "This is actually my favorite spot," Victor reassured, and rubbed those legs a little more, "I can touch you with both hands like this, rather than needing one or both to hold myself up."
Yuri parted two fingers to peer through them, and gawked at the man under him, "I don't even know what I'm supposed to do up here. I feel dumb now."

"Don't," Victor reassured, and gently started to move his hips, "Let me show you why this is the best spot."

Yuri was momentarily mortified by the feeling. He knew innately that there was no way to avoid arousing his partner, but still, feeling it was so much different than imagining it. Feeling it here, like this, he corrected in his mind, I've felt it before, but... Victor was always asleep... or just barely waking up... There was no intent behind it; that's just how it is... but now... "Nhg..." He grunted quietly, not even really aware that he'd done it, feeling that length of hardened flesh moving under him, up against him. He drew a sharp breath, and lowered one hand to his partner's stomach, holding himself steady with it as the gentle rocking continued. There was no way to change course now though; Yuri could feel himself starting to respond, and the direction it started to take, still confined in his clothes. He wasn't sure if Victor could feel it the same way, or if he could see it instead, but the indirectness of that arousing touch was starting to become a torment. Despite his nerves, Yuri wanted something more direct, even if he was too terrified to say so, move himself to change where the rocking rubbed, or touch the spot himself.

Mercifully, of the many things Victor had learned over the eight months since his unexpected arrival, reading Yuri's willingness to engage in things was top among them. He knew how to get Yuri to skate 'Eros,' and work him up from thinking about food to thinking about him. He knew when Yuri was willing to accept a full hug rather than just a pat on the shoulder. He practically knew the instant that Yuri was receptive to the idea of a kiss... even if he'd said no to it at the time. The concept was still tested and true. He knew what he could do... and one of those moments had come.

Victor pushed up onto one elbow, then sat up, still rocking his hips as well as he could. One hand cupped around his partner's hip, the other around a cheek, and he leaned up into a kiss before dragging the younger man back down with him again. Yuri went easily, and he gasped a whined breath against those lips as he felt everything between them so much more prominently. There was no way to stop either of them from breaching the confines on their meager clothes, and elastic gave way to the pressure.

Feeling the obvious different between fabric and skin, Yuri's eyes opened wide in surprise, but the kiss went on, and so did the rubbing. It was hard not to think it felt good. Every time Victor's back arched just right, his abdomen lifted, and the pressure of having that sensitive flesh squeezed between them was enough to send the first few tingling jolts through Yuri's frame. The only thing that inevitably spooked him into sitting up again... was feeling that sudden cold spot where that bit of liquid had escaped him and cooled on his skin.

Victor was stunned, and blinked hard a few times as Yuri pulled away too quickly. He took a moment to regain his bearings, arms flat to the sheets beside his shoulders. He gave a severely puzzled look to his partner, "...What's wrong? I thought you were starting to like it."

Yuri's face was as red as Victor had ever seen it, but the odd thing was that even though Yuri had pulled away, he hadn't gotten up and off. All he did was look mortified, and pinched his knees together over his stomach.

"Ehh... I'm sorry... I'm doing it again... this is horrible..." The younger man complained bitterly, his tone making it seem like he thought he'd ruined everything, and still, he squirmed like he didn't want to stop.

"Yuri... whatever it is, it's fine, I assure you-"
"I'm leaking everywhere! Nothing is fine!" Yuri harped, trying to wedge himself between Victor's legs so he could twist and make an escape off the side of the bed without being seen.

"Leaking?" The silver echoed in persistent confusion. He looked down to his stomach and saw the barest glimmer of shine where something had dripped onto his skin. Thinking nothing of it, he put his fingers to it, just as Yuri was desperately trying to twist around between his knees. Realizing that this was the same 'wet' spot that Yuri had panicked about before, Victor crossed his legs around the man's seat and pinched him in. Yuri could only squeak in surprise, and Victor leaned over his back, "Why are you so worried about this?" He wondered, hands sneaking under the younger man's arms until he could hold him against his chest, "You're reacting like you think you're defective somehow."

"D-Don't make me say it out loud." Yuri begged, squishing his knees upright and tightly together again, "I've already made a mess."

Victor tactfully slid one hand back over his panicked fiancé's stomach, and felt even more of the cool liquid, but he just rubbed his fingers together and looked at the strands that stretched between as he spread his fingertips apart, "This is normal."

"H-heh!?" Yuri guffawed, looking back over his shoulder.

"It's fine, really. It's a good thing, actually."

"But I've read about it online and people always seem to be complaining about it."

"Who's opinion do you care about? Those faceless goons on the internet who don't know what they're talking about? Or me? The man you're making love with?" Victor posed, kissing the back of that shoulder as reassurance.

"Well, you, obviously, but."

"What are you so worried about? Does it hurt? Does it burn?"

"N-No... it's just..." Yuri stammered, the panic going down even if the shame hadn't budged, "It's... a lot..."

"At some point in the future, Yuri, we're going to be buying this stuff on purpose." The silver explained, rubbing his free hand across his partner's chest, and made a subtle pull to get him lean back again, "There's nothing-at-all wrong with how you make your own. I'm actually a bit jealous now."

Yuri grit his teeth anyway, but slowly let himself be pulled back, even though he kept his knees up. One finger from Victor's right hand came up and nudged them down, forcing them away, and making it practically impossible to 'hide' himself as he had been. Yuri gulped nervously as he felt the cooler air rush in again, but nothing made him more self-conscious than feeling Victor's hand press against his stomach, dangerously close to the source of his anxiety.

"Let me help you this time," The Russian asked quietly, stroking his thumb across that tense skin, "It shouldn't worry you so much more because it's my hand."

The feeling of those fingers slowly going down his stomach made Yuri clench up a little more, but the further back Victor leaned, the harder it was to keep his knees pinned. He hissed a breath at the first sensation of pressure against him, even if it was just one finger, and it slid down gently over the fabric. Three fingers pressed down on the return slide, traveling over the elastic band and over the super-sensitive exposed tip. He gasped a breath, hands clenching to the bedding on either side.
"...Is this okay?" Victor asked, nervous at the toll it seemed to be taking.

"D-Don't stop." Yuri finally managed, "I w-want to... I just can't help... being this nervous the f-first time..." He said between haggard breaths, "I'm not pulling away, I s-swear..."

It was a huge relief to hear those words, and Victor nodded. He pressed his mouth to the back of that shoulder again and eased his hand to its task, moving softly, slowly, and let Yuri himself decide how far to open up. He didn't need the man's knees parted anyway...but whether Yuri did or not was a good way to know how comfortable he was. Victor went about his purpose with diligence and care, letting his partner get used to the slide of a few fingers before adding his thumb, giving a soft squeeze through the fabric. Yuri pressed back hard against his chest, gasping a breath every few seconds like he was holding it between strokes. When those fingers finally took hold though, and wrapped around that aroused flesh, Yuri practically leapt straight into the air.

"Shh..." Victor cooed, keeping his fiancé where he was, but taking meticulous mental notes about tension of every muscle, and the gasp of every breath. He didn't expect his partner to be all that vocal - at least not yet - but every whimper and grunt was key to the 'sexy time' lexicon he was building. Slowly but surely, as Yuri got used to the feeling of someone else's hands on his tender parts, his body became less like a fully-drawn bow, and more like one that was merely nocked. Breaths became more regular, and came easier, without the sense of needing to hold it in like he'd drown otherwise. And his knees - even his knees - became a bit lax, coming apart only a few inches...but even that was a huge difference. With every subtle change, Victor felt more at ease with their newfound intimacy, and the guilt of making his partner so anxious melted off. The excess of fluid that Yuri had been so worried about was an afterthought by then, and for Victor, he considered it their perfect normal.

Yuri twisted in place after a while though, his arousal fully engaged, and pressed his left shoulder to the side of his partner's chest. No longer as red as he'd been, Yuri could look at the man again, and as he slid his left arm around his partner's back, the right came up to press palm to cheek. All the while, Victor kept up his rhythm on the member in his grasp, the sound of the strokes amplified by the slickness Yuri had given them. Still, he gasped a few breaths, and then pulled his idol close for a new kiss. Soon after, he was completely turned around in the man's encircling legs, with his own draped over one side as that heavy petting continued, "What about you...?" Yuri finally let himself ask.

Victor blinked at him as though he'd entirely forgotten what the words meant, but before he could translate it in his head, Yuri had already pushed him onto his back. Feeling the fabric against his skin brought him back to the moment, and he let himself stretch out the cricks in his legs and back. His limbs dropped back down as he relaxed, and he drew in a long breath, keeping watch on his emboldened partner, "Is this more in keeping with what you imagined?" He wondered, and closed his eyes to savor the feeling of his heart's desire sitting down on his hips again.

"It's getting there..." Yuri whispered back, and lowered down until he could feel the rise and fall of that pale chest against his own.

Victor hummed a smile, and moved his arms back down alongside himself. Thumbs hooked into the strip of black elastic on either side of his waist, and with a quick wiggle upward, he pushed the fabric down a few inches, revealing an equal measure of himself in the process. He smiled at the color coming back on his partner's cheeks, but there was no doubt that they each thought the same thing.

Skin felt better.

Yuri leaned down to find another kiss, and Victor's hands went up, sliding under the waistband around his partner's thin frame, and pushed them away as far as he could. They each hummed a note into their kiss as Yuri pressed down again, putting them into unblocked contact with one another.
Victor slid his hands up and down his partner's body with zeal, and as a reward, felt that thin frame starting to rock against him. It was subtle at first, barely noticeable even, but Victor could feel the sheets moving at his sides where Yuri's knees pushed further out, and in doing so, pressed even heavier onto his hips.

Even just a little of that precious self-made lube was enough to make the slide that much more titillating. Victor pushed his hips up, and Yuri slid back against them, then in reverse until they'd found a rhythm. Even when the pressure was enough to put Yuri near his limit, Victor did whatever he could to prolong the moment. Yuri pushed up on his hands, and Victor's went between them, taking hold of them both between his curled fingers, and continued to buck his hips upward. Blue eyes watched closely for his partner's creeping edge, and slowed for a moment...but as soon as he felt his own nearing, the delicate work of trying to make them hit it at the same time was key.

Of course, even the best-laid plans can have a few hiccups, and Victor could do nothing to curtail his partner's climax coming first...though he did relish in watching it. The desperate gasps, the whined gasps, the whole-body shiver, as well as the drip of hot white liquid onto his fingers; just witnessing it was enough to push Victor to his own ends. Silver hair tousled on the comforter, and he pressed his head back, trying to keep quiet for his partner's sake. He could feel Yuri's thin frame tremble as it came to rest on top of him, and then his own subtle shake as he lifted his arms to wrap them around, but found it harder to do than before. He hummed a laugh into his beloved's hair though, "Happy Couple's Day."

Yuri lifted his head, though the effort it took was significant, and then dropped it down again. Still heaving for breaths, it was all he could do to not fall asleep right there and then, "...Happy Couple's Day."

"This was a really great idea," Victor mused, stroking the length of his partner's back as Yuri lay near-catatonic on top of him, "I've gotten to touch you in a way no one else ever has or ever will." He whispered, "That look of the first time in your eyes...that will always be mine."

"I'm...glad it was you." Yuri answered quietly, his heart still pounding in his chest.

Victor smiled at that, and gave one more squeeze around the younger man's trembling frame, "Me too."
"Yuuuuri!" Hiroko was calling from downstairs, "Yuri! Vic-chan! Get up already!"

The younger of the two grumbled a little as he stirred, rubbing his eyes...but then fell back asleep again.

"YURI GET OUT OF BED."

"AH."

His mother's voice sounded much closer that time, though still distant enough that she was at least outside their shared room rather than in it. He was up with a start either way, pushing himself up so quickly that he saw his partner's arm get tossed where it had once been draped over him, landing in the meager heap of blankets that they'd been sleeping on. Seeing the arm land, Yuri suddenly realized the man next to him was naked...and he was naked as well. Clothing was still where he'd remembered them being placed the night before; Victor's on the couch, his own on the headboard.

Ohmygod we really did it last night. He thought in a slight panic, feeling his heart jackhammering away...only to slow down again almost as quickly as it had gotten started. Wait...why am I so freaked out? He reached over to gently comb the silver-grey hair out of his fiancé's face with his fingers, I agreed to marry him...to share everything with him; body, mind, and soul. It would've been inevitable...and I liked it anyway...

Victor stirred just a little, rolling from his side to his back. He hummed a little something to himself in a sleepy haze, but appeared to go right back to sleep.

Yuri smiled at it, scooting closer until he could rest himself across his partner's chest, one arm curled under himself as the other laid flat, fingers curled just in front of his nose. He listened quietly to the man's breathing, the beating of his heart, and savored in the warmth of his skin. He only turned his head a little as he heard the sound of scratching at the base of the sliding door...and then - even worse - footsteps thumping up the hall just beyond the walls.

"YURI."

"I'm awake!" He called out, hoping beyond all reason that his mother wouldn't just barge into the room, but braced for it in the event that she did.

"Is Vic-chan in there?"

"Of course he's in here; it's his room."

"Is he awake?"

"...I dunno, maybe?"

"It's nearly 10am. You two should be awake already! The movers are going to be here soon!"

"Nearly 10am!? Why didn't you wake us up sooner!?" Yuri was up right after that, scrambling for the pieces of his green spa-robe as he hobbled for the sliding door.
"I tried! I was hollering for you an hour ago!" Hiroko said, "Did you at least finish packing?"

"Yeah, yesterday, before we went to the Ice Castle." He answered. He pulled the robe closed over his chest as he neared the exit, and opened it just enough to get out; Makkachin wormed his way between his legs to get inside, and Yuri just watched the pup go. With a heave of a sigh, he looked at his mother, who just gave him 'that' look, "What?"

"You're not finished at all are you?"

"...I think we are!" He insisted, "All we left unpacked were the things we need to take with us to Nationals, or that we're using before we leave. I made sure of it last night."

"I hope that includes your soap and shampoo." She pointed out, "You stink."

One eye twitched furiously at the sound of those words, and Yuri just backed up through the doorway again, and fell in without another word, closing it with one foot.

"I'll make you boys breakfast after the movers are gone. For now, go clean up!"

"Haaaaai." Yuri heaved, looking up at where he still had a foot on the doorframe. He waited until he could no longer hear his mother's footsteps, heading towards the stairs at the end of the hall, and descended. Once the sound was gone, he flopped down the rest of the way down to the floor...only to tilt his head back and find Victor smiling back at him, holding his chin up in the palm of his hand. Makkachin was up on the bed next to him, and they both looked at the frumpy heap on the floor.

"Ohayo, koibito." The Russian mused quietly, his Japanese spoken with the added spice of his own native accent, "O genki desu ka?"

Yuri hadn't expected to be spoken to in Japanese by the man, so it was confusing for a moment, but when he finally understood what his partner had asked, he rolled onto his stomach and pushed up onto his hands and knees. He crawled over the few paces between them, pushed himself up onto his knees to make-up for the height difference of the bed, and answered the inquiry with a kiss and a nuzzle, "Genki desu."

"What did I miss?" Victor asked, nosing his partner back affectionately, "I only really woke up when you fell into the room a minute ago." He explained, reaching up to cover a yawn.

Cherry-hazel eyes watched quietly as Victor pushed up on his hands and sat back in the blanket pile; as usual, caring nothing for being completely exposed. Yuri shook his head, "It's nearly 10am. Movers will be here in the next 30 minutes. We should get cleaned up and get out there before they show up."

The Russian stretched, and let his arms slump at his sides lazily. He nodded though, and rubbed his face a little, "Are you ready for this? It's a big change for you."

"Mh." He answered, "I was only nervous about a handful of things, but after last night..." The words trailed as Yuri's face got pink, but he found no need to finish the sentence as he felt a warm hand come up under his chin.

"No more worries then?"

Yuri barely shook his head, smiling, "I'm ready for just about anything now."

"Perfect." Slate blue eyes half-closed, "That's just what I like to hear."
By the time the pair were ready and headed outside, Makkachin was already barking up a storm, tail flailing back and forth excitedly as a huge CedEx box-truck turned into the small parking lot in front of the resort. Yuri pulled on the dark blue coat that Victor had gotten for him just before their trip to Barcelona, and threw a scarf around himself as well.

Victor was close behind, yawning again where he stood shoeless just inside, but perked up as the cold winter breeze brushed across his face. Wearing only a loose-fitting thin sweater and sweatpants, he clearly wasn't about to go all the way outside like his partner was.

Yuri did all the talking, hearing the workers speaking in Japanese rather than English for once, and did the same in turn so everything went smoothly, [Yeah, everything is in boxes with your shipping logo.] He explained, pointing in though the open sliding doors, [There's a few more boxes upstairs still, but we'll bring them down for you.]

[Sure.]

There were three workers that went by them after that, one of them stopping to get a signature from Yuri to confirm the destination address, and then followed in after the others with a label-gun in his other hand.

"Well, I...I guess that's it then." Yuri said in English again, turning to look at where Victor was leaning against the doorframe, "You can stay and watch, or..."

"I'm hungry." The Russian said simply, an aloof smile on his face, "Let's eat something."

The first boxes were starting to get hoisted out through the doors on hand-trucks, wheeled through main entrance-way and under the resort arch towards the waiting mechanical lift at the back of the truck. Seeing their things being stowed away made butterflies rise into Yuri's gut, but Victor wouldn't let him dwell on it, putting an arm lazily over his shoulder.

"Hungry." He said again.

"Mom said she'd make something for us once the movers were gone..." Yuri explained, stepping inside just long enough to push his fiancé towards the common room, "Maybe she'll take pity on you and feed you early. I'll get the boxes from upstairs and join you soon."

"But I want to eat you." Victor said hazily, still half-asleep apparently.

"...Eh?" Yuri stopped dead in his tracks, snow crunching under his shoes as his face turned red, remembering the crude jokes that had passed between the Russian and his own sister the previous week, "Don't you mean you want to eat with me?"

"Silly Yuri." Victor said, still giving him a sly look, "You're the tastiest pork-cutlet fatale in the whole world, and I've barely gotten a sample..."

Yuri quirked a skeptical brow.

Victor turned around and stepped closer, though cautious of where the warm inside floor changed to the frozen cold step. One hand went onto the front of each of Yuri's shoulders, then he leaned in close, giving him fiancé a quick peck of a kiss by one ear, "I meant exactly what I said."

Glasses fogged up, but all Yuri could do was stand there and listen to his partner having a good laugh at him as he stood back upright.
Victor waved as he turned around to go to the common room finally, "Come eat when you're done."

When he was gone, Yuri reached for his face and pulled his glasses off, grumbling as he used his scarf to clean them off. As he set them back in place, he spotted a henna-pink blob out the corner of his eye, and turned to spot his older sister there snickering at him, "Mari-nee-chan..." He said dully.

"I wish you guys were staying a little longer, little brother." She teased, "It's so funny watching your reactions to everything. You're such an innocent."

The aforementioned younger brother just grabbed the scarf again and wrapped it fully around his head until nothing but the white glare off his frames could be seen, "I'm going to get the boxes from upstairs."

Mari just pat his shoulder as he walked by.

By noon, the CedEx truck was finally pulling away from the resort, and the skating duo stood on the street to watch it go. They had with them all their remaining belongings; backpacks with Yuri's skating gear, both of their skates, travel supplies and changes of clothes. It was all they'd need to leave for St. Petersburg right after Nationals.

"I'm a bit nervous about sending Makkachin ahead with all our stuff, but...it wouldn't be easy to sneak him into the hotel."

"Yeah... It'd be hard to have a dog to take care of while competing."

"Let's head to the Ice Castle." Victor said, holding Yuri's left hand with his right, "Yuko said there was a class until 1, so they should be done by the time we get there if we start walking now."

Yuri nodded, and the pair started heading towards the road bridge. The winter winds were colder as they crossed, and Victor stuffed his hands into his coat pockets, taking Yuri's with it where he held on.

"So how much colder is it than this in Russia?" Yuri wondered aloud, his nose and ears getting a bit red from the brisk afternoon air.

"Oh, much colder." He answered, "I'll buy you some proper winter gear though once we get there."

"Okay."

Yuri pondered those words for a moment, "You probably make so much more money than I do."

"Probably, but it's not just from prize money. Russian athletes are sponsored by the state, so I get to keep a lot more of it than skaters who have to pay out-of-pocket for everything." Victor huffed a laugh, "My mailbox will be overflowing by the time we get there. No doubt my return to the ice will be profitable. Then I can shower you with gifts~!" He nuzzled closer affectionately, "Now that you've been on the GPF podium, you'll probably see more, too. So keep going, and pretty soon, people will be sending you invitations for all sorts of opportunities."

"How soon do you think you'll know if the RSF is sending you to Worlds?"

"Pretty soon after Nationals. Knowing I'm not going to Euros will give me plenty to time to get ready."

"How are you going to get ready? Do you have programs in mind? Costumes?"
"I'll just use one of the programs I arranged before deciding to be your coach. 'Eros' and 'Agape' were only two of the four programs I was mulling over last year."

"Oh...there were four?"

"Yes...the Four Loves." Victor explained into his scarf, snow crunching beneath their feet as they continued on, "Eros, the erotic love. Agape, the unconditional love. Storge, the empathy bond, like with family members, and Philia, the love held between close friends. I was working on Eros and Agape mostly, but I had Storge at the back of my mind...I just wasn't really feeling it yet. You know as well as anyone that you can't properly tell a story on ice if you aren't invested in it. Yurio's 'Agape' always lacked a little because he couldn't keep his greed in check."

"Storge...the empathy bond..." Yuri echoed, thinking on it, "Like the bond between mother and child, or siblings. What was holding you back...?"

"To me, family meant impatience, loss, suffering, and amnesia..." Victor answered curtly, "But by the time I practiced it here in Hasetsu, my mind wasn't on that page anymore. My understanding of the 'family' bond changed drastically because of you and your family."

Yuri balked, surprised by the dour admission, "Why would family mean something so dark for you...?"

"It just does...and because it was so different from Eros and Agape, it put me in a rut." The silver answered with a shrug, "Not really true suffering, I know, but as an artist, I was in anguish." He squeezed Yuri's hand where he held it in his pocket, "Which is why I'm so glad your friend's kids posted that video of you. Being here with you has given me so much inspiration~! I could plan programs for the next 10 years if I thought I'd be in the game that long!"

"You do tend to be pretty impulsive when you've decided on something." His partner agreed, stepping closer to hold to Victor's arm with his free hand, "Is that what happened yesterday with 'Aria'?

"Sort of." Victor said cheerfully, "It was just so much fun to skate it beside you, after telling you what it meant to me. It just...seemed right."

"I wish I could keep up with you," Yuri sighed, though he tried to smile anyway, "You're so at ease with everything...but I'm playing it all back in my head like it's some recap of a sporting event."

"You don't regret it, do you?" Victor wondered anxiously.

"Huh? No. I didn't mean it like that." Yuri answered, stroking his fiancé's hand with his thumb where he held it, "Japan is...really conservative, that's all. My mom joked about how women would be seen as hopeless if they aren't married by my age, but it's kind of true. It's just seen as pathetic if a man isn't, but at least we have the benefit of being seen as career-minded, so the judgment isn't as severe." He paused slightly, not sure how to phrase his thoughts. He shook his head, "Everything is so structured and binary here. Fiancés are supposed to become husband and wife, not husband and husband...you know what I mean?"

"You're worried about being seen as less than what you are?" Victor asked, hearing Mila's words on the wind, like her warning was haunting him.

"No...I don't see the wife-thing as being 'less.' It's just 'different.' But if we had to define things, we both know who between us is the more dominant personality. By default, the stronger one is the husband; the leader. So that makes me...not a husband..."
"Well, you're not a wife either though. Do you think you'd be seen as not-a-husband if you married a woman instead of me?"

"Well, no...but..."

"Would the woman be the husband if she had a stronger personality than yours?"

"...No..."

"Then what are you worried about?"

Yuri grumbled to himself, not sure how to reply.

"The only person whose opinion matters, other than you own, is mine, and I say that I'm taking you as my husband. Not as my not-a-husband, not as my wife, not as my domestic partner. Say it with me, Yuri. Hus..."

"Husband."

"Say it over and over, until it loses its meaning when you speak it out loud, and it doesn't look right anymore when you write it down." Victor went on, "Say it so often that you have to start saying it in Japanese so you know what you're even talking about. ...What is the word anyway?"

"There's a bunch, actually... 'Shujin' is one most men use when referring to themselves, but that implies 'lord' or 'master.' Most young people go with 'danna' or 'otto' now. What's the Russian word?"

"Muz." Victor answered happily, "And we will be muž'já."

"...Moosh...mooshya..." Yuri tried, his attempt at a Russian pronunciation falling flat.

"Exactly!"

Half a hundred pictures were taken by the triplets when Yuri and Victor arrived at the Ice Castle. Yuko was a bit emotional, knowing that Yuri wouldn't be coming back to Hasetsu after Nationals, but her husband was all encouragement and well wishes.

"We wanted to see if we could skate one last time before we leave." Victor said, "If it's not too much trouble."

"Never!" Yuko said enthusiastically through her tears.

The whole bunch of them ended up on skates after that. The 'event' itself was incredibly casual; sliding along in wide circles at a leisurely pace. Yuri held to Victor's hand for most of it, and the girls held to a corner of Victor's long coat, dragged around the ice rather happily. A few times, the pair broke off to skate a bit faster, but they were never far apart from one another.

Yuko noticed how well they synched, able to execute several complex maneuvers without so much as speaking to one another. She supposed they each knew what moves were coming based on the position they were in when entering them. Once in a while, she recognized a few short cuts from different programs the pair knew. Victor even started performing 'Yuri on Ice' for the fun of it, which inevitably brought tears to Yuri's eyes, even without the music. Yuko consoled him on the sidelines as the girls recorded it. Never to be outdone, Victor performed the program flawlessly, including that
signature move at the finale, with one arm raised, reaching for his fiancé.

The thought then occurred to Yuri though, "Being able to do my program so well, you could’ve outdone your own record, too. Do you plan on trying to retake it at Worlds?"

"Of course." Victor purred, pulling Yuri back out onto the ice as he caught his breath, "I won't go easy on you just because I hope you win Gold. My fans and sponsors won’t be happy if they think I'm pulling punches."

"No, that makes sense." Yuri agreed, "It's going to be a really rough season. With you coming back, Yurio already a Gold medalist, and probably JJ getting his nerves calmed...never mind all the other talent."

"You were in warm-up mode until almost the very end." Victor pointed out, "The others were really trying. Yurio even had to start taking risks to beat you. Imagine if you started taking risks!"

Yuri's mind went on to do just that, but all he saw was the rink wall when his face collided with it at the Japanese Qualifiers. He shook his head, and pinched the bridge of his nose, "Maybe."

"We should probably start packing it in..." Takeshi said, rubbing the fatigue from his eyes as he went to round up his kids, "You guys should be getting to the train station."

Yuri looked at the time on his phone, "Wow, almost 7 already. Is there anything left to do before we leave?"

"We're missing one person to say goodbye to." "Minako-sensei..." Yuri said, worried they'd miss her somehow, "She said she'd meet us at the station. I can tell her we'll be there in half an hour if you can't think of anything else we need to do."

"You left your 'Aria' costume here yesterday, Victor." Yuko pointed out, coming onto the ice again, "You probably don't want to leave without it."

"Oh wow, no, thank you." He said, surprised at himself, receiving the suit bag with care, "I'll just have to bring this as a carry-on, I guess." He folded it and clipped the bottom of the bag to the hanger-hook to make it as small as possible, then turned back to Yuri, "All that's left then is saying your final goodbyes to your family."

As they all started to head off the ice, packing their skates away for the last time, Yuri's anxiety started to creep up again. It wasn't a fearful sort at least...it was a happy and excited form. He was last to leave the Ice Castle though, before Takeshi turned from where he held the door open to lock up once they were gone.

Yuri and Victor stood in front of the Nishigori family, smiles all around, "Thank you all for everything you've done to help get us to the GPF."

"It was our pleasure." Takeshi answered proudly, "Ice Castle Hasetsu is always happy to welcome you."

"We're going to miss you, Yuri!" The triplets chanted together, stepping forward to give him their goodbye hugs and well wishes. They then turned to the Russian, and Loop nervously asked on all their behalf, "Can we call you Uncle Victor? Since you're marrying Yuri."

"I'd love that~!" He answered enthusiastically, kneeling down to embrace the three of them. He kissed them each on the cheek in turn, "Do svidaniya."
"Mom, take a picture for us!" Lutz begged, waving her phone excitedly for Yuko to take.

Victor pulled Yuri into the picture, standing in front of the lights of the Ice Castle as they picked up the girls for a better shot, and all five of them smiled brightly. Victor even pulled out his own phone and had Yuko take the same photo for his own sake.

"Let me take one of just you two." She offered, and the triplets quickly vacated the spot to clear the frame. They clambered to their mom's legs with their own phones out, ready and eager to take pictures for their Instagram page.

Victor pulled his fiancé closer, holding both of his hands in his own for something of a formal photo. When that was done, he pulled Yuri against his chest and threw his arms over him, rubbing their cheeks together for another photo to post on his own Instagram. He held his fingers out in a V-shape and smiled brightly, "Yay! Hashtag #JapaneseNationals and then #BackToRussia!"

Yuko laughed and gave Victor his phone back, "You two are adorable. I can't wait to see what you have planned for your big comeback."

The group could see the lights of a taxi coming towards them, and they knew that time was up.

"Yuri..." Takeshi started, holding out his hand to the younger man. When the skater took it, he pulled him forward and patted him firmly on the back, "You've come a long way since you were a chubby little kid. Broke a world record and scored a good-looking foreign fiancé, too. But you still have so much more that you can accomplish. Don't come back until you have Gold, okay?"

Yuri blushed, but nodded, "I'll do my best."

Yuko then stepped forward, and hugged her life-long friend tightly, "He's right. You've achieved so much since we used to copy Victor together here at the Ice Castle. I want you to win Gold, but more than that, I want you to have fun and enjoy yourself. If you can't say you like what you do anymore, then it's a waste, right? Love what you do, and love those you do it with. You'll go far."

Yuri actually started to tear up at her words, and rubbed his eyes with a free hand as he hugged her goodbye, "Thank you, Yu-chan."

As the taxi parked, Victor started moving towards it, taking Yuri's hand to pull him along. It was bittersweet to be leaving the Ice Castle, and Yuri felt rather somber then. He took one last long look at it before getting into the back seat behind Victor, and waved to the Nishigori family as the car started to pull away.

"Take care, Yuri! Take care, Uncle Victor!"

"You tooooo~!"

When they were out of sight, Yuri pulled out his phone, just waiting for the triplet's fanpage to update. Instead, and perhaps because it took less time, Yuri spotted something else.

v-nikiforov

[picture]

v-nikiforov One last skate at Ice Castle Hasetsu before going back to St. Petersburg. I'm sad to be leaving these amazing hot-springs, but so relieved I'm taking a special souvenir home with me! #LeavingHasetsu #LifeAndLove #SkateHusbands #JapaneseNationals #BackToRussia

The formal photo of them just holding each other's hands came up with it. Yuri's eyes welled up as he looked over at his fiancé, seeing him with his phone out as well, the glow of its light illuminating
his face in the dark cab.

Victor reached over and squeezed his hand, "You're a very emotional person. It's quite endearing."

"I told myself I wouldn't cry while saying bye to everyone, and then this gets me." Yuri muttered, wiping his eyes with his free hand, "I thought you'd post the other picture; the silly one."

"I will later, but I liked this one better in the moment. It's like a wedding photo."

The cab driver suddenly piqued his head up, "I'd heard you two were getting hitched. It's news all over town."

Victor beamed and proudly held his ring-hand up for the man to see in the rearview mirror, "Yep!"

"Congratulations."

"Spasibo!"

Yuri looked over nervously as Victor sat back in his seat again, "Are you really going to make me wait until I win Gold somewhere important before we can have the wedding?" He asked, "I might not even win one. We could be waiting for years before it happens, if it ever does. You know I'll get nervous competing against you."

"You broke my record, and I had won Gold when I set it to begin with," Victor pointed out, "I think that's cause enough to go ahead and make plans."

Yuri's face lit up, "Really?"

"Naturally."

"Where will we go?"

"I was thinking of going back to Barcelona. It seems the most natural place, unless we come back here."

"Will one of you change your names?" The cab driver wondered.

"Hmmm..." Victor thumbed his lip, "I hadn't thought of that~!"

"Yuri Nikiforov..." Came a whisper.

Before Victor could really respond, his phone started buzzing loudly in his coat pocket, catching him by surprise as he pulled it out, "I wonder who'd be calling this late at night?" He asked himself, looking at the Cyrillic text on the faceplate, and suddenly got really excited, "Zdravstvujte! ...Da. Da. On gotov?" He paused only long enough to hear the answer, and somehow looked even more excited, "Dostavit' ego v moj dom. My budem tam vo vtornik. Spasibo bol'soe! Do svidanija." He clicked out of the call and put the phone back where it had been, only to turn his head and grin at his partner, "Now I can't wait to get back."

"What was that all about?"

"You'll see." He answered coyly, "You were saying, though?"

"Oh...I was saying...I like the sound of Yuri Nikiforov..."

Victor smiled, and then reached his arm over his fiancé's shoulders to pull him close, "So do I."
By the time they pulled up to the resort, the snow was starting to fall again. Goodbyes to his sleepy family were easier than they were with the Nishigoris, and with the last of their luggage stowed in the taxi's trunk, the pair were soon on their way again. It was only a few more minutes before they arrived at the train station.

Minako was waiting for them, looking a bit disheveled - like she'd gotten out of bed to be there - but it turned out that it was just because she'd been drinking a little. Yuri knew she'd taken a taxi herself to get there, so he put his hand on Victor's shoulder to have their own taxi wait a moment so their driver could take her home again. Victor paid the man and asked that he wait, which he was happy to do since Victor prepaid for that trip as well.

"Yuri..." Minako said proudly, though with an air of sadness to her tone, "You're leaving this town to go train abroad again. It may be another five years before you come home."

"Maybe." He answered sheepishly.

"I'm counting on seeing you at Four Continents, okay? To show me what you've learned, since I won't be able to make it to Nationals on such short notice."

"Mh!"

Minako nodded, and then turned to Victor, "You've been a bachelor for years. I remember all the days you were so liberal with your flirtations to the millions of fans you have around the world. But even with all that, you came to Hasetsu and claimed this guy as yours." She thumbed at Yuri like he wasn't there, which made him blush again, "What are you going to say to all of those ladies and gentlemen whom you've spurned?"

"I love all my fans." He answered easily, "I can only hope they continue to cheer me on, and Yuri, too. They all cheered loudly enough when I knocked him over at Cup of China."

The tired ballerina smiled, and then reached out with her right hand to cup the Russian's pale cheek. She rubbed it lightly with her thumb, and nodded again in approval before pulling it away, "Take care of him."

Victor smiled, and leaned in to kiss her on the cheek in turn, "I promise. Do svidanija."

"Davai. Both of you. I'll be cheering you on from Yu-Topia."

The Russian pulled Yuri close with an arm over both shoulders, carrying his costume bag over the other, "Spasibo! Our cabbie will take you back home, so don't worry about calling another."

"Bye, and thanks for everything, Minako-sensei. I'll keep in touch!"

"You better!" She waved, watching them go until she could no longer see them through the train station doors. Once they were gone, she got into their cab, and gave the man her address for home. She settled in for the quick drive, but pulled out her phone to check Instagram. First on the list was a post from the triplets' account.

\textit{victuri}

\textit{[video]}

\textit{victuri Victor Nikiforov skates 'Yuri on Ice' 
#YuriOnIce #VictorOnIce #IceCastleHasetsu}

She watched the video, not even realizing the music hadn't originally played when the footage was taken; Victor was so cued in to the song that he skated it in perfect time even without the beat.
Smiling as it finished, Minako could hear the sound of Yuri starting to cry off screen. As she scrolled on, she saw a photo of Yuri and Victor with the girls in front of the castle, and then finally below that, Victor's own photo post. That image brought happy tears to the ballerina's eyes.

_You two are so perfect._
CHAPTER SIX

-Think quick and rise high! Dominate the Japanese Nationals Short Program!-

A quick train-ride from Hasetsu to Fukuoka, and the duo were waiting in the terminal of the airport. It was nearly 10pm by then, and Yuri was trying to get a little sleep, leaning against his fiancé as they sat near the connecting tunnel. The plane hadn't taxied in yet, so there was still a little while yet to wait, but it was soon enough to boarding time that most of the other passengers were already there, waiting alongside them.

Victor toyed around on his phone with one hand, reading all the comments on the various posts they'd made earlier in the night. With his other hand, he held to Yuri's, slowly stroking his thumb back and forth across his partner's skin. It was still a bit surreal to him, even though it had been two weeks already since Yuri had purchased the ring that started it all.

'We'll get married after Yuri wins Gold. Right, Yuri?'

Victor pressed his cheek against his partner's head, and gently rubbed it back and forth on that soft, dark hair.

So much has changed in just the last few weeks, He thought, eyes still on his phone screen even though he wasn't really looking at it anymore, We had all that time over the summer to figure each other out, but you always kept just enough distance that I couldn't find a way in. I wonder if it was just being at a competition again that changed things for you? He huffed a sad laugh and closed his eyes, How did it never occur to me that he'd forgotten the Sochi Banquet? His distance makes so much sense in that light...

He turned slightly to kiss the man's crown, but stayed there, breathing in the sweet smell of Yuri's hair.

Everything started happening so fast once he opened up... It's hard to believe we've already made it this far. I thought it would take him months to get comfortable enough with me to let me touch him. Yuri... Victor thought, and let out a long slow breath as he hummed a smile into black hair, You're so much stronger than you give yourself credit for.

Brown eyes opened slightly, and Yuri looked up sleepily, only to close his eyes again as he felt warm lips on his own. He held still for the moment, even as the feeling changed from a kiss to just having their faces close together, "Getting anxious yet?" Yuri wondered, lifting his head up slightly.

"A little." Victor answered quietly, and used the opportunity to sneak another kiss.

Yuri wiggled a bit in his seat to sit up a bit higher, and gave the hand he still held a light squeeze, "I remember how it felt at the end of my last Free Skate." He admitted, "Not wanting to go to the kiss and cry, because I thought it was going to be the last time..."

"Mh..." Victor hummed in agreement, "I thought it might be the last time, too. You hadn't yet decided that you'd want to keep going, whether with me or without. And the way you spooked me the night before the Short Program..." He shook his head lightly, "I swear, if you ever tell me we need to talk again, I'll have a heart attack..."

Yuri dwelled on those words, feeling them rattle around in his mind like a rock had been thrown into
his skull. To Victor's surprise, after a moment, he moved his left leg to set it gently over his fiancé's right, and nestled in as close as he could with the arm-rest between them. He sighed a little, his mouth against the side of the Russian's jacket, feeling it get warm against his breaths. Hazel eyes turned up, seeing the man trying to look back at him, "...I thought it would've been selfish of me to suggest you keep on being my coach..."

"I faintly recall saying you were being selfish anyway, by not even giving me a chance to tell you what I wanted."

"Mh...my last act as the man who'd stolen you from the world." Yuri nodded slightly, "I was thinking that you were getting too normalized to the idea of being retired from competitive skating for good. I..." He paused, but then pulled up, looking down at where he'd set his knee over his partner's, "At Rostelecom, I was excited about the idea that I could get the whole world to hate me for being the one who pulled you off the ice. But when you said you would consider coming back, I thought...keeping you as my coach would just strangle you as a skater. I thought...the only thing I could do, was to retire from skating after the Final and just..." He slouched a little, "...Give you back."

"You can't get rid of me that easily, Yuri. Someone else did that to me once before and I learned from it." Victor said, and twisted in his seat so he could put his free hand over his partner's knee.

"...Someone else?"

"As soon as you gave me this ring, I knew I wouldn't be leaving you..." The silver went on, ignoring the comment, "It just hadn't occurred to me yet how I'd manage it. That's why I got so mad at you. You weren't giving me any time to think." He kneaded that knee gently, looking down at it as he did so, "I never considered that coming back to competition meant I had to stop being your coach. If there was a problem with bringing you to St. Petersburg, I guess I just thought I'd just stay in Hasetsu with you."

"Really?" Yuri wondered, a bit surprised, "You'd have trained for next season without Yakov?"

"How much do you think he really does these days to help my skating?" Victor teased.

"I guess not that much. You don't exactly need pep talks before you skate." Yuri answered, "Anytime I watched you skate before, you only ever spent ten seconds on the rink wall before you went out. I could only imagine what you and Yakov told each other in such a short amount of time, especially since you and I talk so much."

"He'd mostly just say things like 'good luck' or 'don't hurt yourself.'" Victor explained, "The last two years have mostly been him worrying I'd injure myself." He huffed a quiet laugh, "The way he talked, you'd think he was expecting me to fall apart on the ice at any moment, as though at age 26 I was already about to drop dead."

Yuri felt the hand on his knee creeping higher, and though his cheeks reddened a little, he didn't protest. Instead, he halfway let himself wish they weren't in such a public space. He shook his head though, the memory of Christmas Eve fading quickly with the thought of that gruff old coach, "Yakov seems like something of a father figure to you..." He said, looking down again as he realized those fingers were starting to sneak between his thighs, getting closer, "...This is weird topic to be on when you're doing that..."

The Russian stifled a laugh, giving his fiancé's thigh a squeeze where he could, "I want to get to Nagano so badly already..." He sighed dramatically, and fell back properly into his seat, taking that creeping hand with him, "...Four hours just to fly from here to Matsumoto...then we have to wait
another few hours for the first train to leave there...then another hour and a half train ride from Matsumoto to Nagano... The wait is torture. By the time we get there, we'll both be too tired to do anything other than sleep. Then the Short Program starts right away..." Slate-blue eyes turned, looking at the visage that was watching him, "You have such a kissable face...I bet other parts of you are kissable, too..."

Yuri's cheek went bright red at that, but all he could do was stammer, "It was your idea to do this thing overnight..." He pointed out dryly, "We could've left Hasetsu earlier and spent the night in Nagano..."

Victor smiled triumphantly, and leaned his head back contentedly, knowing what he'd just put into the hapless skater's mind, "Making plans on short notice doesn't leave me the benefit of being flexible with time." He explained, "Arranging the pick-up with CedEx to get all of our things from Yu-Topia, making sure my place in St. Petersburg is ready... Suddenly deciding to go to Nationals after all kind of threw a wrench in all that, and having to wait for confirmation that the JSF would even agree to let you come on such short notice..."

"...Sorry." Yuri grimaced.

"What? No, don't be, I'm glad we're going. It just made things crazy for a bit." Victor reassured, "I'm excited to go to Japanese Nationals as your coach. I didn't think we'd still be doing this after the Final." He tilted his head to nose at his partner's ear affectionately, "You had me convinced right up to the end that you weren't going to keep skating...so the inconvenience of last-second changes is a happy consequence of the fact that you changed your mind."

"...Is the RSF mad at you?" Yuri wondered suddenly.

"I have no idea." Victor answered with a laugh, and slouched in his seat so he could set his head on his partner's shoulder, "I'm sure Yurio is mad enough for all of them though." He huffed, thinking that at least a little funny, "He claims he doesn't care if I'm competing or not, but I bet does."

Yuri nodded, then glanced towards the huge floor-to-ceiling windows to see the outline of their plane finally coming forward through the dark, "...There's our ride. They'll be calling us soon."

Just as the Russian had stated, the plane ride, the wait, then the train ride...nearly 14 total hours of traveling and waiting since leaving Hasetsu...but, they were finally at the event hotel in Nagano. It was early morning when they finally stumbled into their room and dropped their things in the front hall. The Men's Singles Short Program wouldn't start until closer to 4pm, but trying to sleep during the day would still be an exercise, and they'd be missing the Official Practice before noon, too.

Dark circles under Yuri's eyes made it impossible to go though. His coat and scarf hung off his shoulders idly, and he stood at the foot of the Queen-sized bed in front of him.

"...We've never had just one bed in the hotel room before..." He noted, almost absent-mindedly. He barely noticed as Victor moved in behind him to pull the coat away, unwrapped the scarf, and stowed them away in the hall closet with his own things. Yuri just reached up to pull his glasses off and rubbed his eyes on the back of his wrist, yawned, and hazily stepped over to the side of the bed to set his frames and phone down before collapsing on top of the covers.

Victor saw him drop, not even bothering to get under the blankets. He stepped out of his shoes and up onto the clean floors of the main room, walked the short distance to the other side of the huge bed, and crawled on top of the covers as well. As he usually did, he wedged his right arm under his
partner's waist, draped the left over the other side, and pulled the man close to his chest. This time though, he slid his hand into his partner's clothes, and flattened his hand against the warmth of that lean chest.

It was around 2pm when Victor slowly started to wake up again. By then, Yuri had rolled over completely, arms wrapped around his silver-haired head, one leg draped over his side. He had his own leg wedge up as far as it could go between his partner's thighs, arms around Yuri's smaller frame, both having found their way into the man's sweater somehow. He could feel where Yuri's other leg crossed between his, just below the knee, and how his body twitched a little when he slowly started to wake up.

Yuri looked around the room a little to get his bearings, and reached up to rub his eyes before dropping his arm over Victor's head again to try and go back to sleep. Victor wasn't about to let that happen though. Yuri peeked his eyes open a little as he felt a bit of pressure between his legs, realizing Victor was pushing up a little with his own thigh still between them. The pressure faded, but only for a second before it came up again...over and over like that until the hands that had been against his back suddenly came around to his sides. Victor was already starting to kiss at his neck by then, and he drew in a quick breath.

Hearing it told the Russian everything he needed to know; his fiancé was awake, aware of what he was doing, and was, even if only vaguely, interested in what was going on. The leg that had been draped over his side raised up a little higher against him, and Victor could feel Yuri's frame twitch a little as his right hand went from waist to chest, brushing deftly over one pink nub as he was still nibbling at his neck.

"I can't wait any longer." The Russian whispered quietly, "I want you again. I need to feel you..."

Yuri's face was bright red already, "...But...we just...just yesterday..."

Victor looked up, pulling away from the pale neck in front of his eyes. He looked down into nervous hazel irises and smiled, "We should do it every day." He said softly. Both hands moved down to the small of Yuri's back, pulling on him, and he pressed his leg against the man's center even harder, hoping to stir interest.

Though the kiss that followed was welcome. it hadn't really occurred to Yuri that they would do something like that so often. But, the more needy Victor's body became, the more his own seemed to want it, too. Having been intimate once before made it easier to fall into it a second time, and Yuri let go of his nervous surprise. The leg rubbing up and down between his thighs was starting to excite him, and the feeling of Victor's bare hands against his skin made his heart race. Nothing got his attention quite so quickly though as feeling the man twist away from him, pulling out of that kiss he was enjoying.

Victor rose up onto his knees, and pulled one of his partner's legs up against his chest and shoulder; he pinned the other down, sitting on it where it had been between his thighs before. Eyes gazed down on the disheveled figure before them, and the small bits of exposed skin where wandering hands had pushed clothing away.

Yuri gasped quietly as that subtle grind started; it was familiar enough to the night before, but with their legs scissored together as they were, it felt uniquely new, too. He could see his toes flexing within his sock, his leg sticking up straight into the air where Victor still pinned it to his chest, cheek pressed to his calf. Yuri watched his partner's face - relishing in the freedom to move as he did - but when slate eyes met his own, their position changed again, and Yuri swallowed a nervous breath.

The leg held against one shoulder came down against Victor's side, and the one he sat on was
released, pulled up against the Russian's other side. Yuri could feel how excited his partner had become already, even through their clothes, and his heart jumped a few beats. Victor leaned down over him though, and that arousal became less obvious for a moment, only to feature prominently as the silver pushed against his hips, lowering down to nibble on his neck.

Hands slid up against the front of his figure, sliding under the rumbled edges of his already-messy clothes. The fabric pushed up, hooked on Victor's wrists, until it was piled up at the top of his chest, moved as much out of the way as it could be for the moment. Victor's hands slid down slightly, freed from the material, and thumbs quite-deliberately rubbed across those sensitive pink nubs on either side of him. Yuri hissed a breath as he felt them, and both arms and legs wrapped around the Russian's frame.

Victor hummed a laugh as he pulled back, the space at Yuri's neck being taken back with those arms raised up over his shoulders. He pressed his brow to his anxious partner's, and looked into those hazel eyes. All the while he kept rolling his hips, and his thumbs rubbed back and forth, palms holding to Yuri's ribs, "Mh...you're sensitive..."

"H-How do you k...keep finding those spots...?" Yuri asked breathlessly, and pressed his head back into the pillows, eyes clenched shut.

"Touch is different when it's done by someone else." The silver purred, "You can't tickle yourself, after all...you expect it..." He said, and sat upright, pulling his teasing thumbs away from those raised bumps on his partner's chest. He quickly crossed his arms over himself and lifted his shirt and undershirt off in one pull, casting it aside on the big bed. It wouldn't do to leave Yuri half-clothed still, and so Victor moved his hands up to the wrinkled pile still pinned under the younger man's arms. With a gentle tug, those clothes came away as well, joining the heap nearby. With all that newly-revealed skin, Victor couldn't help himself, and he went down to taste it.

Yuri gasped a loud breath when he felt the wet hot trail, and his back arched, pressing his chest to the one right above him. He felt hands go under his sides, holing him in that new place, and the pressure of a rolling grind began anew. Victor's moist attention lifted to his neck, and Yuri felt a light suck on his skin. The feeling traveled up under his ear, held for a moment, and then came higher. He looked on nervously, felt the tip of that warm tongue on his lips, and after the initial flutter in his chest, Yuri welcomed that heat in. He hummed a sigh into that new feeling, odd as it was at first, the sensation of a tongue in his mouth that wasn't his own, and slid his hands up and over his partner's back.

When Victor inevitably pulled back, he looked down into those brown eyes, seeing the flush on his partner's cheeks. The fingers that clasped to his back came back around his ribs, and slid over his chest as he lifted further up. The hands he'd planted in the sheets to lift himself, lifted around to return the gentle stroke across his partner's frame, but then came further to pull one of those hands away from his skin. Softly, he kissed those fingers, and the gold band one carried. He carefully moved those hands down to the pillows by Yuri's head, and slipped his thumbs through their palms before tracing fingertips down the man's arms, over his chest, and down the front of his stomach. He paused over his partner's waistband, one fingertip circling the brass button before releasing it.

Yuri listened - and felt - as the zipper as pulled down, and those soft, warm fingers slid along the rim of his jeans to the sides of his waist. With a gentle tug on each side, denim and elastic came away together, and Yuri watched the last bits of his clothes get pulled up and off of his legs. All that remained were his socks, but they were quickly forgotten as Victor pulled his legs back around his waist like before. Yuri swallowed an anxious lump in his throat, and he brought his hands up - almost defensively - over his chest.

"Something wrong?" Victor wondered quietly, eyes drinking in the look of that pale figure before his
eyes, "You look worried all of a sudden."

"Er...uhm, it's just... The way we were last night..." Yuri stammered, pulling his legs back a bit as well, knees pinching together, though his ankles were still pressed to his partner's sides, "I mean, I know you...felt everything...but it's weird... To be seen like this..."

"I've seen you naked a thousand times."

"Not aroused you haven't." Yuri clarified through an embarrassed smile. He squeaked a sudden shudder as he felt his fiancé's hand slide between his guarded legs, and straight up the length of the arousal he'd hidden from sight. He pinched his legs together harder, clamping down on the wrist stuck between them, not that it did anything to stop that tantalizing feeling. Four fingers circled around him, lifting that length of flesh from where it had been set against his stomach, and the fifth pressed down against its opposite side. Yuri gasped a breath, legs practically pulsing together in response to each gentle squeeze. He knew his body was giving in to the need for that touch, as the friction of that thumb rubbing against his skin soon slid across it easily. Too absorbed in the electric jolts of pleasure from his fiancé's touch, he didn't notice the man's other hand working to free his own flesh. It was just a weird addition to the already-odd feeling of foreign fingers around his member, but Yuri dared to crack open one eye to look at exactly what it was...and in his sudden embarrassment, pulled both hands up onto his face to cover it.

Victor smiled in amusement, but didn't relent in his movements. Instead, he sat up a bit on his knees and lifted up a little higher against the back of his partner's hips. With those legs pinched together, it offered a tantalizing tightness, and he started rocking his own hips against it, pressing his length through the small gap, sliding against his partner's delicate arousal on the other side.

Each desperate gasp was a response to the feeling of that member sliding along his own length, and though it felt good, Yuri couldn't bring himself to look. He read his partner's movements merely by feeling his position, and imagined the rest. He felt the way Victor rose up against him, and when his hand slipped back between his legs, leaving just that aroused member in its place. That hand came back around from the other side though, fingers curling under him again as his thumb hooked around his own flesh, keeping the two aligned with one another for each precious thrust. The strength in Yuri's legs started to give way though, and his knees started to come apart, making it easier for Victor to wedge his way through.

And he did, spilling between Yuri's parted legs like water. With hands still pressed over the younger man's face, Victor kissed at the back of them until Yuri pulled them away, and welcomed him closer with a new kiss. Victor let his weight ease him down, until he could feel the front of their bodies come together, and he could withdraw his hand. Both went under his partner's smaller frame, and they hugged into one another with that kiss. Victor let simple friction carry them on from there, wanting nothing more than to hold his fiancé close.

With all the heat, the rubbing, and the repeated pressure against center by his partner's rolling thrusts, Yuri was put close to the edge quickly. He pulled out of the kiss to catch a needed breath, and pressed his face to his fiancé's shoulder, fingers pressed hard to the man's back. His breaths became more ragged, gasps more vocal, until finally, his whole body clenched and grasped, and he uttered out a reluctant cry against his partner's skin.

Victor slowed his pace as he felt the pulses of that release between them. He gave a few gentler, softer kisses between his partner's desperate drags for air, before pulling up again. He eased the younger man's legs out from around his sides, and hugged his knees together in front of his chest, ankles resting over his shoulders. Like before, he pushed himself through the small gap between his partner's thighs, and kissed on pale calf as he felt the release of his own climax.
Yuri let his legs slide down, limp, around his idol's waist, and Victor slumped down over his chest between them, breathing quick gasps against his skin. He hugged his arms around the man's head, and gently stroked back stray strands of silver hair, "You...you really didn't...hold back this time..." He said quietly, still trying to catch his own breath.

Victor shook his head a little, and lifted up under the wrap of those arms, kissing his beloved's chin when he found it, "Oh, I did..." He mused, huffing a few tired laughs, "But not as much..."

The Nagano Wakasato Tamokuteki Sports Arena, otherwise known as the "Big Hat" arena, was once an Olympic venue, and most frequently hosted hockey events. Every once in a great while though, it served as host to speed skating and, of course, figure skating. In previous years, it had hosted the NHK Trophy, and presently, it was playing venue to the Japanese National Figure Skating Championships.

Skaters from all over the country descended on the locale, all wearing the same team jackets that Yuri was wearing. Victor looked around excitedly, decked out in his black suit, holding to Yuri's pinky finger so as not to get distracted and wander away.

"Look at all these local skaters!" He commented, "I wonder why too many of them never go to the Grand Prix or anything?"

Yuri leaned in close, "Remember what I said about not wanting you to kiss the Gold if I win it?"

"Sure."

"There aren't that many other 'top skaters' in the JSF that score as high as I do anymore. Before you came along, my Personal Best in the Short Program was around 85. That was still pretty high for my team, but it's really a wonder that I ever made it to Sochi in the first pla-"

"YUUUUURI-KUUUUUUUN."

"Uh oh..."

A short and bubbly teenager came bounding out of the crowd, yellow and red hair as spiky as ever. He rushed right up to the pair before pausing, eyeballing the pair enthusiastically, "YOU MADE IT!"

"...Mh."

Yuri answered stiffly; he could feel Victor laughing behind him.

"CONGRATS ON GETTING SILVER AT THE GP FINAL!" Minami went on, full-on going into fangirl mode, "That Russian Punk stole Gold right out of your hands though! I can't imagine how crushed you were!"

"Oh I was crushed..." Yuri said, side-eyeing his fiancé, "Under a great deal...of weight..."

The teen blinked brown eyes at him, and tilted his head, only to spot Victor behind the older skater snickering. Eyes went down after that and suddenly spotted where the two skaters were holding each other's hands, and those same eyes suddenly got rather wide.

"You're a lot heavier than you think, Victor." Yuri was saying, turning back and teasing him by pointing with the other hand...the one with the ring on it.

Minami's eyes couldn't get any bigger to see the gold there, and in his mind, math equations were
floating by as he pieced together what was going on. He quickly reached out to grab the hand and brought it close, mashing it against his face to get a better look, "SO IT IS TRUE."

"Huh?" Yuri turned back at him, giving the teen a look as he tried unsuccessfully to get his hand back.

"When Newscaster Morooka announced that Victor was saying a prayer for good luck over your matching rings, I nearly died!" Minami was saying excitedly, almost hyperventilating from it all, "I thought, there's no way those two are engaged, but why would they have matching GOLD RINGS if they aren't!?" He had Yuri's fingers splayed, one hand grabbing the index and middle fingers, the other holding to the pinky, singling out the ring finger between them as he lowered it from his face, eyes wet with happy tears, "WHO POPPED THE QUESTION!?"

Others were starting to look over at the spectacle. They'd known Yuri was there already so none were too surprised to see him. Most were just too modest to say anything, and many others still were too busy fawning over Victor. Minami, however...

"YOU HAVE TO TELL ME!"

Yuri finally clawed his hand back, holding it protectively close as he massaged his sore fingers, "...Technically Victor."

"...Technically? What's that supposed to mean?"

Yuri got a bit anxious, making a weird face like he wasn't sure how to explain it.

"Yuri bought one ring." The Russian explained, "As a birthday present and thank you gift for me, but I saw what he was up to and bought the other one without him seeing. After we'd exchanged them, one of Yuri's friends thought the rings meant we were married already, so I just jumped on it and said they were engagement rings." He slouched over his fiancé's back affectionately, arms wrapped around him warmly.

Yuri's face was flushed by then, but he leaned back into the hug and gently put his hands over his partner's, turning his head to nose the man's cheek a little, "I guess I should've thought how it would look to others when I decided a golden ring was the best idea for a present..."

"Nonsense," Victor teased, "If you'd gotten anything else, we probably wouldn't have come this far!"

Minami's brain was breaking to see them so physical - especially since the last time he'd seen them that way, Victor had only gone so far as to rub a fancy, expensive balm onto Yuri's lips with his own finger - and he reached out and put his hands close to their heads, "...Now kiss!"

"Eh? Here?" Yuri asked, confused, looking around and seeing more eyes on them.

"Okay~" Victor mused, and pulled off his partner's back. He reached instead of the man's hands, and held them fondly as he stepped inward, "Yuri."

The younger man's face was flushed, but it did no good to resist. Every other skater, their coach, choreographer, even some members of the audience that were still there from the previous show were watching them, eager to see what would happen.

The Eros inside Yuri's soul was begging to be let loose, and he slowly allowed it. He slid his arms over the Russian's shoulders, wove a few fingers together at the limits of their reach behind the man's silver-haired head, "Victor."
Looking into one another's eyes, the gaggle of gawkers quickly disappeared, and it was just them again. They leaned in close to each other and kissed fondly, and for a while. When they finally came back out of it again, it was to the sound of clapping and cheering all around. Yuri's cheeks got a bit redder, but he held close to his partner, feeling where the Russian pressed their cheeks together as he hugged him. Despite the embarrassment, Yuri could feel himself starting to relax into the excitement of being known as Victor Nikiforov's love-interest...and he turned inward, one hand set on his fiancé's chest as he stepped up onto his toes to kiss the man's cheek, to the cheering of many.

Minami cried as he clapped, long streams dripping from his wide-eyed face, "That was so beautiful. I always knew you were meant for each other." He managed, snuffling back a drip from his nose.

"Always?" Yuri echoed skeptically, "What do you mean...?"

"The minute I saw Victor putting balm on your lips at Regionals, I knew!" The teen explained. He pulled one arm up, and buried his eyes against the crook of his elbow, "I knew all this time...!"

"I didn't think you were so emotionally invested in this, Minami-kun..." Yuri blanched.

"I'm your biggest fan, don't you remember!?" Minami blurted out, lifting up his messy face from his sleeve, "And you'll be able to watch my version of 'Lohengrin' this time! I've been practicing really hard, and I can do a quad Toe-loop now! ...Sometimes! I'm not as good as that monster, Yuri Plisetsky, but I'm trying!"

"He is a monster." Victor agreed, still perched over his partner's shoulder, "And we'll definitely stick around for your version of Yuri's 'Lohengrin.' Right? Yuri~"

Though anxious about it, Yuri nodded and smiled, "We'll watch it. Let's go figure out what order we're going in."

[First to take the ice, hailing from Hasetsu, Saga Prefecture...skating to 'On Love: Eros'...Katsuki Yuri-san.] The announcer called in Japanese.

"...Ahhh shinjirarenai..." (I can't believe this.) Yuri sighed, leaning against the rink wall as he pulled the rubber guards off his blades.

Minami was hooting with laughter in the waiting are, "GANBAAAA...YURI-KUUUUN!"

"Hai hai..." (Yeah yeah...) He answered, waving at the teen dubiously.

Victor rested on his elbows on the rink wall rather casually, drinking in the excitement from the crowd, and looked over at all the signs that were cheering his fiancé on as well as congratulating their Silver Medal victory at the GPF. He turned slightly to find the blade-guards being held out to him, and he took them in one hand, "The home crowd is pretty excited to see you, Yuri. I don't really understand more than a word of what they're saying though."

"Yeah... After last year, I'm not surprised." He answered, looking around with bright but nervous eyes, "Hopes are high that I'll do better than 11th this time." He sighed, reaching for a tissue from the Makkachin-plush just next to Victor's elbow. He cleared his nose and crumpled the tissue in his hand, handing it off casually like normal, "But I think I can do better this time."

"I think so, too," The Russian nodded, going back to his casual slouch on both elbows, "Are you going to go for the Flip at the end again?"
"Mh." Yuri nodded, a fire in his eyes, "We've been practicing it a lot over the last few weeks, so I think I can land it cleanly. So...I'm off." He held up his right hand in a fist, feeling confident.

"Go do what you love." Victor answered; he cupped his hands around the loose fist, and pressed his lips to the ring in front him.

"I already did that earlier." Yuri retorted, turning his hand around to put a finger under his fiancé's chin.

Victor was not to be undone though, and he held fast over that upturned digit, only to pull back slightly and lower down unexpectedly.

Yuri's face went bright red instantly, feeling the man's tongue and lips sliding against his finger until it was out again, and Victor pressed it to his cheek, "I said do what you love, not who you love. Good try though." He reached to tap that red-hued nose, "I'll give you points for it."

"Add them to my Short Program. I want to score over 100 again." Yuri said back, finally taking off across the ice to present himself to the crowd...even though his finger felt especially cold, still wet from his fiancé's unorthodox attention.

That was so embarrassing...! I guess I haven't seen even half of Victor's true Eros yet either...

He held his arms out and felt the wash of adulation, moving in circles around the ice until he took his place in center. One gracious bow towards the judges ended his introduction, and he took his position, drew in a deep breath, and closed his eyes.

The guitar began, and Yuri brought up his arms to just above shoulder-level, descending them palms-down in front of himself. he brought them up again to rotate around himself, and dug his left toe-pick into the ice. He blew a kiss to his fiancé for good measure before he took off.

Though the stands weren't half as packed as they had been at the Grand Prix Final, Yuri still did his best to give a performance at least as well as he'd given in Barcelona. There was only one person whose approval he was seeking for anyway, and that person was watching him from the rink-wall.

This is the first time I've skated this program for competition since... He thought, though the words in his mind trailed. Moving on through his program, he caught a glimpse of Victor watching him, and he felt a flutter in his chest, seeing a flash of the man in a much different situation. His cheeks reddened again, ...Since Victor helped show me what real Eros is like... I'm not the same person I was before...I know what erotic love feels like now...

Their earlier romp was prominent in his mind's eye then, and Yuri could feel the warmth of that embrace towards the end.

...I know...what Agape feels like, too... I don't have to look for inspiration anymore, because I have these things now...

The time for thinking about katsudon and girls is over now, Yuri.' Victor's voice echoed in his head, and he remembered that soft smile.

He's right... Because now, I can freely think of him...

Most of the Short Program felt like a happy blur after that. The first half was packed with all the artistic elements; spins, moves in the field, exquisite choreography. Yuri's mind was everywhere but on the ice though, completely immersed in the flashes of his real-life Eros.
I feel like I can skate this program so much differently now... I'm not just acting out something I've been told about anymore. I wonder if Victor can see the difference...? I wonder if anyone else can...

The Usual Suspects from Regionals were all lined up on the rink-wall near Victor, and just like back then, were enamored by Yuri’s skill on the blades. Victor looked at them out the corner of his eye for a moment, but then looked back out to his fiancé, and slumped against his hand with a happy sigh.

It's like watching the change in his program for 'Onsen on Ice,' He thought fondly, How different it was, simply because Yuri change the point-of-view, and asked Minako to teach him how to move. This though... Ah, my lovely Yuri, you're really letting your Eros fly freely and unhindered. You're not the timid little thing you were when I found you last year. I'm really excited to see how much more you can grow.

The music had slipped into something of a lull, playing more softly. Yuri slid into the level-4 sit spin, charging forward into the basic rotation, and hopped mid-rotation for added difficulty. He reached to grab at where the right leg stretched out ahead of himself, and the world became a blurry streak all around him. Soon, he let go of the leg, spinning with his arms slightly out from center before moving off again into a third variant, holding his right skate by the blade where it came underneath his left thigh, then finally rose up again to skate away.

It's still so strange to think that we're like this now though... Yuri's mind went on, feeling himself slipping into autopilot, It only been a year since I turned my back on him in Sochi...too ashamed of myself to face him. Even when he came to Hasetsu, and I asked Kami-sama to give me just a little bit of Victor's time...

He sped towards the short end of the rink, and leaned back into an outside spread-eagle, feeling the cold, brisk air as it flowed all around him. At the end of the curve, he lifted his right leg, and thrust it forward for his favorite jump; the triple Axel. He landed it as he usually did, and slid off in reverse to head back down the rink, the sound of the thin audience's cheering following him. He flew down the rink, and kicked into a quad Salchow, triple Toe-loop combo.

It's almost like it was Victor himself who heard my plea, and answered it before I even thought to ask. If it's true that he's been keen on me since that Banquet last year...

Yuri slid down the ice on one knee, then rose up, twisted around, extended his leg out behind him...and kicked his toe-pick down as hard as he could.

...Then it's no wonder he's so eager with me, now that he has me... And after all this, in St. Petersburg...

He spun four times and landed, but the sound of the audience's shock was all he processed. He was still sliding, but he suddenly realized he could feel the cold on his thigh and right hand.

Shit! I fell!

Victor slid his hand up, and covered his eyes for a moment as he shook his head. When he looked up again, Yuri had gotten back onto his feet and was trying to catch up to his place in the program, ...I wonder what got to him just now? He was doing so well before.

The skater had already moved into the final required element, starting with the camel spin, left arm hanging down at an angle towards his knee.

There's still so much more of Victor's Eros that I have to learn... He thought, kicking off to descend into a sit-spin twist variant, I've barely seen the tip of the iceberg in his vast ocean... He switched feet
before he rose up again, picking up speed as the move finished with a swift cross-foot spin, I can hardly believe he actually wants to share this part of his life with me... Of all the people in the world, me...

The spin ended, and Yuri broke away, thrusting his arms forward together. The music above was at its peak, the entire wicked orchestra singing its lustful tune. Yuri pushed through the last inside spread-eagle, and took his place in the center of the rink, arms up around himself as the song climaxed and cut out. His eyes focused on the rink wall, staring straight at the black-clad Russian.

Victor... Yuri heaved, catching his breath, I want you to show me everything! I want to know your hopes and dreams, the things that scare you...your true Eros and Agape, and your Storge... I want to know it all!

The audience, sparse as it was, cheered wildly. Yuri recognized Minami's voice hollering louder than the rest, and he bowed towards the different ends of the rink. Plush sushi, nigiri, and poodles were thrown to the ice alongside flowers and whole bouquets, but as Yuri was moving through, heading towards the exit and the kiss and cry, he caught sight of a single, coral-colored rose. He clicked a toe-pick down to hold him still while he knelt down, and let his cold fingers clasp around the bare stem to pick it up. He held the petals up to his face and breathed in the sweet smell, and only then, finally, let himself get through the opening in the rink wall.

Happy, but slightly concerned, Victor slid his arms over his partner's shoulders, "I can tell that your recent new experiences have changed the way you move," He commented quietly, brushing his lips across that nearest cheek as he spoke, "But I can't help wondering if my earlier tease spooked you a bit. The quad Flip..."

Yuri shook his head, nuzzling his face to his coach's shoulder and neck before he pulled back, "No...I..." He started, unable to stop from smiling at the idea of it, "I wasn't spooked at all. I just got caught up in a thought and I stopped paying attention. Guess I can't auto-pilot the Flip as well as I hoped."

"Maybe next time."

[The score for Katsuki Yuri-san...106.45.]

"Not bad." The Russian mused, his tone somewhat sarcastic, "I guess the judges didn't appreciate your new...artistic expression."

"I'll skate it better at Four Continents." Yuri said, looking again to the coral-colored rose in his grasp, "And then, I'll skate it even better than that at Worlds."

"Oh~?"

"Mh." He nodded, "I'm sure you'll teach me all kinds of new moves by then. Right?"

Victor blinked, surprised at his partner's words, "...Y-Yes, absolutely. Lots of new moves. Very advanced stuff." He managed, watching the younger man rise up from the bench.

Yuri couldn't help but smile, and gave a gentle tug on the hand that held to his coach's, "Sorry, did something inappropriate go through your mind just now?"

"Oh absolutely." The silver laughed, and stood up finally, "I think I just fell in love with you again, too." He added, and bent his arm where Yuri took hold of his elbow.

"Again?" Yuri echoed, and took a few quick steps as he felt Victor start to walk, "You can do that?"
Inoue Hiroki - 66.34
Hashimoto Takeo - 74.15
Okamoto Masanori - 71.98
Takaki Kichiro - 69.73

[Next on the ice, from Hakata, Fukuoka Prefecture...skating to 'Lohengrin,' Kenjirou Minami-san.]

In the competitor's section of the stands, Victor leaned a little, and nudged his fiancé's shoulder, "Neh, Yuri...you said last year that this was a show from your dark past. Do you still think that now?"

"Mmmnnnh..." The younger skater sighed, "...Sort of."

"Minami scolded you thoroughly for it." The Russian went on, his tone sounding more like a coach again than a lover's, "He said he'd never forgive you if you didn't try your best during the Free Program."

"I remember."

The excited young skater went out onto the icy stage, waving at Yuri especially as he went by.

Yuri waved back, "GANBAAAAAA, MINAMI-KUUUUN." He hollered, trying not to let the dread of the anticipation seep into his tone.

"He came in 3rd at last year's Nationals, right?" Victor went on, clapping dutifully, but staying seated where he was, "He scored in the 60s for the Short Program at Regionals though, and totaled out at only 214. You've scored more than that in your Free Skate alone at this point."

"Now you're just trying to give me a big head, Victor." Yuri scolded, "And how is it that you remember scores so well but nothing else?"

"Whaaat? I remember plenty of other things!"

"What was my Short Program called last season?" Yuri posited, giving a challenging look.

The music above started, making the raven-haired skater twitch a little.

['Lohengrin: Morgenröte' - version found on YouTube channel TerminalEpistaxis - end at 2:23]

Victor blinked at him, "Uhm..."

Minami was off like a shot, the music carrying him off as though taking part in the battle-charge of some massive cavalry.

"Your programs last season were 'Scheherazade' and 'Aria.' You had a different Exhibition for every event."

Straight-line into a triple Axel; the bane of Minami's existence, but he pulled through.

The Russian paused, but then smiled and booped his fiancé's nose, "Your SP last season was 'Dark Eyes' by Yevhen Hrebinka, but I only remember getting to see a single Exhibition."

This time, it was Yuri blinking, eyes crossed where he looked down the tip of his nose.
Victor just laughed a little and pat his partner's hand where it was resting between them, and laced their fingers together fondly, "I really ought to scold Celestino for holding you back. He picked all your performances, right?"

"...Yeah."

"Why did he never give you more than one Exhibition? I feel like that's been a pattern throughout your career. One Exhibition per season, and that's it."

"Why bother with more?" Yuri wondered, leaning in a bit closer as flashbacks to his earlier skating days dazzled before his eyes, seeing his old self wearing the same outfit that Minami was wearing on the ice before him.

\textit{Back then...the triple Axel was already my favorite jump, but that was in part because it was the hardest jump I was capable of at the time. Unlike Yurio, I didn't come bursting into my Senior Premiere with a bang...it was more like a sad whimper.}

"Why bother?" Victor repeated in confusion, "Why not bother? The Exhibition is the most fun part of the whole thing... No rules to hold you back, no structure you have to follow... The ice if your canvas, and you can do whatever you want."

"I only skated in one Exhibition last year." Yuri pointed out, a dour tone to his voice then, "Just like this year, I only scraped my way into the Final by a technicality...and I only got on the podium one time." He sighed and shook his head, "Having to pay a fee to skate the Exhibition in place of having earned a spot... There was never any point in \textit{learning} more than one show when I'd only skate in one show."

Minami vaulted into the quad Toe-loop, landing with a hand on the ice, but then jumped immediately into a camel spin.

The silver Russian watched his partner carefully, feeling where the man's fingers were getting a bit tight where he held them. He gently rubbed his thumb over it to try and help it relax, "Sorry, I must've hit a nerve."

Yuri just glanced at him out the corner of his eye, feeling the caress, and took it for what it was. He leaned his head to the side and set it on the edge of his idol's shoulder, reaching over with his free hand to hold to the man's forearm as well, "At Regionals, when Minami-kun said he was doing this for his Short Program, part of me was relieved I missed it, because it would've gotten me down to be reminded of it back then, too." He admitted quietly, barely audible over the music, "I want to be able to look at it and think, 'wow, look how far I've come.' But that wasn't really my spring-board. 'Lohengrin' for me was just the sad skip of a small flat rock across a boring pond. There was nothing particularly amazing about me or my skating back then."

Triple Salchow, double Loop. Slight over-rotation on the Loop, but the teen didn't fall.

"Seeing Minami-kun dressed up in my old outfit..." Yuri went on, eyes fixed on the young skater, "He seems to get the same kick out of it that I do dressing up in your old costume," He explained, looking down to the leggings of his Eros costume, "...And I'm happy for him in that way. But..." He sank a bit lower against the man's shoulder, "I feel like he's celebrating mediocrity. When you last wore \textit{this} outfit, you were winning the Junior World Championship. When I last wore \textit{that} one?" He pointed a finger over the Russian's forearm, discretely aiming it towards the performer on the ice, "I was barely a blip on the local radar. I was considered a top skater in the JSF only because most other skaters were even worse. Going to competitions against Russia or Canada...really made it clear that I wasn't the top of \textit{anything}."
"No one becomes a Champion overnight, Yuri," Victor finally said, "It takes a lot of hard work and determination. You need to want something bad enough that you'll do whatever it takes to get there. You make sacrifices, and push yourself harder than anyone else ever could. Sometimes it feels like you're going it alone, and sometimes you can get help from people around you...but in the end, you're the sole architect of your own destiny." He leaned over to kiss the top of his partner's performance-styled head, "You have to look at every show as a stepping stone to something better, not a skipping stone. How else can you learn from your past if you're never willing to look back on it and see where you made mistakes, so you can fix them later?"

"What kind of mistakes have you made?" Yuri wondered cautiously, "You always seemed like you knew exactly what you were doing, and that you meant every step."

"Everyone fights a different battle. Mine was never on the ice." The Russian answered quietly, keeping his eyes fixed forward, "Skating was my refuge; my confidant, my best friend. Nothing bad ever happened out there. I felt more comfortable dancing on the blades than I did walking in shoes."

"Really?" The younger skater asked curiously, "...What were your battles then?"

"Nothing you should ever have to worry about; they were fought long ago." Victor said, his tone one of finality, "Oh, look...Minami finished. I wonder how his score will compare to your last 'Lohengrin'?"

Yuri side-eyed the man next to him, quietly adding it to a slowly growing list of things his fiancé didn't want to talk about.
Chapter 7

CHAPTER SEVEN

-Slowing it Down!? Japanese Nationals Free Skate!-

By the end of the afternoon's Short Program, no one else had come close to challenging Yuri's 'high score.'

Despite Victor's pep-talk, and doing his best to seem enthusiastic about Minami's performance when the teen came up to him later, Yuri still felt rather disappointed by everything. He couldn't shake the feeling even after they'd left the event, gone back to the hotel to change, and were already out looking for things to do until the night ended.

Victor had completely lost his mind when they found their way to the Nagano Jigokudani Monkey Park, and he could see the infamous macaques where they bathed in the natural hot-springs.

"YURI LOOK." The Russian was pointing over-enthusiastically, "COME TAKE A PICTURE." He was rifling through his jacket to pull out his phone and grabbed his partner before finding a place to stand. One arm extended forward to hold the phone while the other was out behind Yuri's head with his fingers giving a V-sign. He smiled much more enthusiastically than the other figure did as he took the picture, "This is so great! Hashtag #MonkeyBusiness!" He laughed as he posted it to Instagram.

The monkeys barely paid the silver man any attention, going about their business in the winter water as they did every day.

Victor wouldn't let his fiancé mope too much, and immediately took his hand to start walking again, "So what are you going to do about tomorrow then?"

"Huh?" Yuri looked up, taken aback by the sudden 180 on the conversation, "Tomorrow?"

"With the Free Skate."

"I dunno what you mean. What about it?"

"Are you going to change your jump schedule?" The Russian clarified, "Bring down the difficulty rating so your program is on the same level as everyone else's?"

The younger skater thought on it, but then shook his head incredulously, "I don't think I've ever heard of you doing that before."

"Me? No." Victor shrugged up his shoulders and huffed a laugh at himself, "If I changed up my program so soon after the Grand Prix, I'd be booed out of the competition. People expect me to have a high-difficulty program. Maybe it'll be different for you."

"Why would it be different?"

"This is Japan." He explained, practically waving one arm out to put the countryside on display, "People here are different than they are in Russia; more considerate and less cut-throat. If you lowered the difficulty of your program, you might be seen as a good sport."

"Or I'll be scolded." Yuri offered instead, "I don't know... I'm already in first place by a huge margin."
If I did anything to handicap my Free Skate now, they might think I'm being arrogant, especially if I win the competition anyway."

"So then you're going to leave it as it is?"

"...Yeah, I think that would be best."

"Oh. ...Okay."

Cherry-hazel saw the look on the older figure's face changing, getting less excited as they spoke. So, Yuri did the only thing he could think of that he knew would cheer him up in a hurry; he stepped out in front of him, wrapped his arms around the man's sides, got up onto his toes, and kissed him. When he felt his partner's arms come up to rest around his shoulders, he knew he'd succeeded, and hugged him back a little tighter, holding on a little longer.

"Sorry, I'm being a downer." He finally said, looking into those crystal-blue eyes, "...I just never thought I'd score 20, 30, even 40 points higher than anyone else. The Free Skate gap will probably be even more massive. You'd think it would be exciting, but I just...feel bad now. I'm skating against a bunch of rookies. The rest of the veterans have either retired by now or they've never even qualified for the Grand Prix before."

"I know." The Russian answered, putting his forehead down on his partner's, "It's not so much fun being a top contender when you're competing against everyone, rather than a small group of pre-selected top athletes. There are times where I don't even want to go to Nationals back home because I can see others giving up when they see me go by. At least here, people still get excited about their scores, even if they're far below yours. You haven't been burying them for so long that only the fans are happy to see you." He slid his right arm a little lower on his partner's shoulder, gently setting his palm against the man's face, fingers touching lightly to his hair, "But that's part of what makes what we have now so special."

"...What do you mean?"

"It's lonely at the top." The Russian said quietly, "So I'm glad you're here with me. You can see everything with the same eyes that I do, looking out from the same vantage point, rather than from somewhere beneath it."

Going first during the Short Program meant Yuri would be going last during the Free Skate. The new perspective he'd gained from his partner the day before made watching the event a bit less intolerable, but it was still difficult. With so many younger skaters, inexperienced in putting on a good show and lacking the capacity for power-house moves like quads and high-level spins, it was almost...boring to watch. 'Minami's Boogie' had gotten the audience riled up again like at Regionals, and a few other up-beat choices in music broke up the monotony of the rest, but easily half of the participants were so green that it felt like only family or friends would be all that impressed. The pair still clapped dutifully, occasionally pulled out of their daydreaming by an interesting show put on by a more seasoned athlete, but by and large, it was nothing to write home about.

And then it was Yuri's turn. Most of the audience had waited the entire afternoon to see him go up, so when he set blades to ice, the chorus of cheers were, by and far, a separate thing from how they had been earlier on.

Victor fingered some balm onto his fiancé's lips, hugged him, and sent him on his way to the center of the rink.
There's nothing wrong with lowering the difficulty.'

Yuri raised his arms up and presented himself to the audience, waving appropriately towards the judges, and took his place. He looked down at his hand, seeing the gold shine on his right ring finger. He didn't raise it up to kiss it though; he just thumbed it a little where he could and waited for the music to start.

Victor sighed as he saw it, though he understood it well enough.

The piano began, and so did the skater, raising his hands up in front of himself, lifting his eyes to the ceiling as they went, then letting them fall out to the side. His performance was as good as it ever was, though a bit muted for lack of enthusiasm. Though he kept the Flip at the end, he dropped one of the other quads, and by the end of it, his reach towards Victor was comparatively limp. None but that self-same Russian could tell that Yuri didn't really have his heart in it, and the young skater had to force a smile when he saw his 207.52 score at the end of it. He broke 300, and to Yuri's chagrin, it was 50-70 points higher than the next 2 skaters after him in the ranks. When he stood on the podium to accept his first official Gold under Victor's coaching, he had the same bored, albeit stoic look on his face that Yurio had at the end of the Grand Prix Final.

It didn't even matter when he'd been handed the oversized, chrome-plated, wood-mounted chalice that was awarded to each discipline's Champion. He just looked down into his reflection in its curved surface and felt miserable.

I should be proud of this...but... I only came to guarantee my spot at Worlds. Would Victor be upset if I filed this under 'skipping stones' and forgot about it? It's not my first win here, but it means so much less to me now than it used to...

He couldn't really hear how Minami was cheering for him to come back to rink-side. Yuri had something of a vacant expression in his eyes; even hiding his medal from Victor's greedy hands did little to arouse a more normal affect.

"But I want to kiss it!"

"No..."

Yuri had his hand out against the man's face, keeping him at the end of his reach while the medal hung from the other hand, hidden behind where the trophy-cup was wedged against his side, well beyond the Russian's grasp.

Victor flailed and fusssed for a good long time, "But it's the first Gold you've won since I got here!" He insisted, still reaching, still denied, "I HAVE TO-"

Abruptly, Yuri let him go, and the Russian flew forward to crash into him instead, hands still clambering towards the gold. Victor moved his arms from going around the skater to trying to go over the shoulder, but every which way he tried to get a better reach, the target was still too far away. Eventually, he saw blank brown eyes side-glancing at him, and he paused.

Thinking the man had finally abandoned his quest, Yuri let his arm down...but quickly found the medal swiped from it as Victor launched a quick-attack. The silver man spun around triumphantly and held the prize up by its colored lanyard, "I got it! And now, I kiss it-" He grabbed the disc with both hands and held it in front of his enthusiastically-puckered lips.

Yuri said nothing, barely turning his head to watch the spectacle, a disappointed look on his face.

You promised...
The Russian was suddenly acutely aware of his fiancé's dead-eyed stare, his one visible eye going wide as the younger man turned away from him. He frowned and let the medal drop away, dangling at the end of the lanyard where it hung from his hand. A few steps forward, and Victor was behind his perturbed skater, putting the prize against Yuri's palm...unkissed.

"Okay. You win." He said, feeling a bit defeated, "I won't."

Hazel eyes descended as he felt the metal against his skin, and he grasped at the circular disc as the Russian let it go. Slowly turning around, Yuri held it in both hands, and gradually brought his eyes up to meet the man in front of him, "Next time I win Gold...will be at Four Continents." He said quietly, "You can kiss that medal all you want. For now tho-

Victor cut him off, putting one finger over Yuri's mouth to stop him from speaking. When the skater blinked at him, one blue eye just winked, "Well, if you don't want me to kiss your Gold Medal, I'll just have to kiss something else then."

"...Some...thing else...?" Yuri stammered.

Slate eyes gave a knowing look, but the Russian gave out a quiet laugh and slid his hand from lips to chest, then around his fiancé's lower back, "Something I haven't gotten to kiss yet."

The cogs were turning in Yuri's brain...and suddenly, his face went bright red.

"Oh my, Yuri, what just went through your head?" The silver Russian smirked, reveling in the younger man's reaction.

"You're so inappropriate!" He said quietly through clenched teeth.

Victor just hummed an amused chuckle, sliding his hand a little lower as he tilted his head to nose his partner's ear. He could feel the younger figure tighten up a little as that hand parked itself on his rump. The Russian just smiled though and closed his eyes, "I'll only let you stay innocent for so much longer. Soon enough, you won't get all embarrassed by me, so I have to enjoy it while it lasts. Right? Yuri."

The younger skater made a strange face, something of a confused mess between coy and reluctant, but he eventually turned to face his partner straight-on, set the heavy trophy-cup on a nearby chair, and lifted his arms over the man's shoulders.

Victor blinked at him in sudden confusion, feeling where his fiancé put their foreheads together and drew in a deep breath, "...What is it?"

"Everything is still so new and fresh, so sometimes, I can hardly believe we're actually like this." The man answered, eyes closed, the palm of his right hand gently touching at his partner's neck, thumb feeling the first strands of silver-grey hair, "But then...I think back on the things you said in Hasetsu, when you were telling me about the Sochi Banquet, and I start to wonder... What were you thinking, all that time? Not knowing I didn't remember anything? Was it hard for you to watch me, being so close that whole time, yet being so distant, too?"

"Of course...but I've never been the type to give up easily." The Russian hugged his partner a little tighter and huffed a laugh against his neck, "Ah...if you could've seen the look on my face when I first saw the link to that video of you doing Aria...

Makkachin was trotting through the living-room, heading towards his water bowl as his human
surfing through the local television networks, trying to find anything at all that would pique his interest. The man's phone was on his stomach, face-down, but blinked and vibrated as a new text message suddenly came through. Lifting it up, Victor saw that the sender was one of his rink-mates, Mila, and the preview of her message was that of a YouTube link.

Unlocking the device, the Russian read the full text, eyes barely registering the words for a bored moment.

[Neh, Victor, you might get a kick out of this. That kid from Japan who bombed at the Final replicated your Free Program! He's gotten a bit fluffy, too, by the look of things... You better come back to practice before we pick HIM up to replace you!]

The link to the video was on display beneath the message, and Victor was suddenly sitting upright in shock, pulling his feet off the foot-stool and setting them on the floor. He clicked into the link immediately, seeing the face-plate go white as the page loaded too slowly.

Makkachin's toes clacked along the hardwood floor, sensing the shift in mood and whining where he sat next to the man. Victor hadn't taken his eyes off his phone though, the music of 'Stay Close to Me' starting, and Yuri beginning the dance at an unknown rink. The poodle nudged at his human's knee before hopping up to sit next to him, wedging his head under the Russian's arm as though trying to see what he'd been looking at. The big ol' woofer laid down where he sat, soon finding himself pinned in as the silver skater turned to prop his feet up in the pillows at the end of the couch, studying the performance as though it were he himself skating to it.

By the time the program ended and the video went to black, Victor had already made up his mind. He clicked his phone off and ruffled the poodle's head, "Makkachin...we're going to Japan. You start packing. I'll tell Yakov."

"ROWF!"

"Remembering what you said at the Banquet," Victor went on, kissing the man's neck lightly before pulling back to see him better, "It almost seemed like destiny. You wanted me to be your coach anyway, and I needed a good excuse to go see you so it wouldn't seem so arbitrary...becoming your coach was the best possible reason! It was only a matter of time before I'd get close to you after I arrived."

Yuri's face was still a bit flushed from before, but he smiled and nodded quietly to himself.

"You don't know how happy it makes me that we've come this far, Yuri." The Russian went on, "Being your coach has been fun and rewarding...but getting to be your fiancé? I can't even put it into words."

"Victor..."

"Anyway though..." He said suddenly, kissing the man's nose before turning to stand next to him, facing the curtain to the prep area, "Even if you won't let me kiss your medal, you've still won your first competition since I became your coach. We should do something to celebrate. This will be your last chance for a decent night's sleep before the Exhibition tomorrow, and then the long flight to St. Petersburg."

Lacking a variety of formal attire, their celebratory dinner out was more casual than Victor would've
wanted. But, to the Russian's surprise, one of the best places in Nagano City was actually set up like a mom and pop shop, so high-class attire wasn't necessary even if the food was apparently rather classy.

"...This place...?" He said skeptically, looking at the tiny establishment from the sidewalk.

The front of the building made it look especially tiny, built within the ground-floor level of a much larger structure. It had several potted plants lining the main front window, a blue awning overtop, and a single-wide door on the left. On the glass was a flower-like iconograph, and the words 'NOEL Bistronomic Nagano' beneath it in white English letters.

"The reviews say it's one of the 'Top 10' places in the city." Yuri explained, looking at the page on his phone with his free hand, the other held to his fiancé's between them, "The pictures of the food make it look super high-class. They even have a whole plate just for a decorative display of rock salt. At least I think it's rock salt...maybe it's small chunks of ginger root. I can't tell." He said, holding up a picture.

"Hm." The Russian hummed, a finger on his lip as he looked. Smiling then, he started moving towards the door, "Reminds me of Yu-Topia. Humble and rustic, but hiding a gem inside!"

The interior was largely made of wood displays; counters, shelves, flooring, chairs and tables. Above the bar-area was a chalk-board featuring the menu, beneath it, a long hanging-wine-glass rack, and opposite the bar, a few small tables lined up against the wall. It seemed like the entire place could only seat some 20 people at a time.

Waiting just inside the doorway, Yuri glanced around casually, reading over the menu while he waited for someone to notice them. It didn't take long. Patrons and staff alike immediately recognized the tall silver Russian standing next to him.

The slender foreign skater waved politely, but it was becoming plainly obvious that no one knew Yuri, who was looking quite plain and humble just in front of him. So Victor did the only thing he could think of, given how he didn't really know any Japanese...and yanked his partner's glasses off, set them on his own head, and reached around the man's face to pull that spiky black hair up and out of the unrecognizable skater's eyes. He smiled and leaned over one shoulder, looking at the folks just behind the counter, "...Kore wa...Katsuki Yuri da yo! Mitte ne?"

Yuri side-eyed him as best he could, "...V-Victor, what are you...?"

The patrons suddenly realized who he was, and all but a few of them suddenly rose from their seats to start clapping. Those who didn't followed suit soon after.

"Kin-medaru omedetou!" Many of them were saying.

Victor finally let his partner go, giving him his glasses back as soon as he had properly messed his hair back up, "No one recognizes who you are when you're in ultra-normal mode. I'd hate to think they only know who I am when we're both standing here...I'm not the one who just won the All Japan Championship, after all." He explained, seeing staff quickly rummaging around to set up a table for them; one that had already been empty, but hadn't been reset for the next guests yet. He smiled and lead Yuri over once they were done and let him sit before taking his own place, "I may not know much Japanese yet, but even a foreigner like me can see all the adverts around town for the Championship event. Pretty soon, people will be calling you a national hero!"

"...Psht, I'm no hero. I'm just a skater." The anxious athlete smiled nervously.
"Don't sell yourself short." Victor insisted, reaching across the table to lightly caress his partner's cheek before letting that hand slide down to where Yuri's was already clinging to the edge of the wood, taking hold of his fingers and bringing that arm to rest in center near the wall, "You'll win gold at the FC and then at Worlds. Once you've won all of them enough times, you'll be coming home to a hero's welcome."

"...I dunno, 'home' is about to be St. Petersburg. I doubt the RSF media will be breaking any doors down to interview me even if I win a bunch of events."

"Why not?" Victor posed, holding his chin up on the back of his free hand, elbow on the edge of the table, "The JSF did it to me when they found out I was in Hasetsu."

"You're a little different."

"This is only the beginning, Yuri." The Russian insisted fondly, sliding his fingers within Yuri's fist to loosen up his grasp a little, fingerling the golden ring with his thumb, "We all start small. I believe in you. But... If you're so convinced that no one will notice you in Russia even when you do start bringing back Gold...you could just join the RSF!"

"What!? No way!" Yuri was practically on his feet then, "Yurio would murder me!"

Victor laughed at that, "Then think about it like this. I'm already spoken of as a hero at home. You're the first person I've taken on as a student. If I can take a skater who got utterly crushed and came in last place, and turn him into a Gold Medalist over the course of a single season...then you'll be the hero student and I'll be the hero teacher!" He explained, thoroughly proud of himself.

Yuri just gawked at him with an awkwardly critical smile. I feel like I should be offended again. "...Don't pat yourself on the back too hard, Victor, you might hurt yourself."

It took a bit of effort to get the sauced Russian back to the hotel room, but Yuri did his best, and was eventually able to drop the man onto his back on their bed. Thankfully, unlike in China, Victor hadn't gotten to the point where he was stripping yet, so Yuri didn't have to go around looking for clothes to put back on him.

"Kanpaaiii Yurriiii...!" The awkwardly-buzzed silver legend was saying in a slur, waving an arm into the air above himself before letting it fall like a rock to the sheets just above his head, and seemingly falling asleep.

Yuri watched the whole thing unfold curiously, blinking at the man as he slipped away into drunken dreams. He shook his head and laughed, moving off to peel out of his things and get in a quick shower before going to bed as well. He rummaged through his carry-bag for his clean clothes and then stepped off.

With the hot water spraying down on the top of his head, Yuri put his hand on the tile wall and drew in a deep breath. It was really starting to hit him how things were going to be changing.

...This will be the last time I shower and sleep on Japanese soil for who-knows-how-long, unless a competition brings us here...maybe NHK... He thought, looking on as the water cascaded over him. I wonder how different things are in Russia? ...My only experience there was in Sochi...and the Russians really cleaned that place up to give a good impression.

He briefly thought on that weekend; the room he and Celestino had been put into by the ISU, and the view from the hotel window overlooking the coast of the Black Sea. It was a beautiful memory, even
When he'd dried off and changed, he wandered back into the main room, seeing Victor there on the bed where he'd left the man, though turned onto his side by then. The younger figure stepped over to the foot of the bed and pulled the Russian's shoes off, then moved to the side to peel the comforter from where it had been neatly folded into the thinner blanket and fitted sheet under it, tossing it over his coach's unconscious form as well as he could. A few tugs at the remaining blankets, and Yuri was under the cool fabric, turning off the lights and then wiggling his way under the sheets to get closer to his partner and hug against the man's back.

Victor seemed to stir a little when he felt it, moving his head up a bit as though he could sense the presence behind him, bringing one hand up to where the other had gone around him...but he never opened his eyes or said anything.

Yuri waited a moment, then decided the man hadn't woken up at all, and moved to wedge his right arm under his partner's neck to let it act like a skinny pillow. He kissed the top of the man's full head of silver hair, and closed his eyes.

When he awoke again, he wasn't sure how many hours had passed, but the previously-dim light of the room had entirely vanished by then, so he guessed it was some time in the middle of the night. He blinked a few times and glanced around, seeing little and less through the blackness, but hearing everything he needed to know.

"Victor...?" He asked quietly, almost mumbling the words.

"Sorry, did I wake you up?" The Russian answered, half-whispering. It sounded like he was changing out of his evening-wear somewhere at the foot of the bed, "I thought I was being quiet."

The younger figure rolled onto his back and rubbed his eyes on the back of one arm, "You were. I think I just noticed you'd moved away. I guess I've just..." He started, though pausing as he felt the weight of his fiancé getting back onto the bed from the opposite side, this time under all the same sheets he himself was under, and tossing the folded blanket over to its original place. He first felt warm arms coming around him, then the man's chest against his shoulder, chin resting above it as the Russian slid in to put his head on the same pillow.

"You were saying?" Victor purred, nestling in closer, nearly naked for all Yuri could tell.

"Oh..." He stammered, turning onto his side to face the man, feeling as cool hands came around him, "...I just... I'm so used to us sleeping together now that I guess I can sense when you're not there...and I woke up to figure out where you were..."

"Hmm..." The Russian hummed, twisting onto his side to get a little closer, and feeling the smaller body next to him do much the same, "I think I know what you mean." Hands moved a little further down and slipped under the edge of the t-shirt, savoring the feeling of skin against his arms, "I'd almost forgotten what it was like to share a bed with someone that I could touch, and cuddling with Makkachin just isn't the same." Victor went on, nosing his fiancé's lips in the dark, "This is much better."

"Makkachin liked being in my room a lot." Yuri pointed out with a bit of a smirk, "I think he spent half his nights with me. Though...I guess that...does kind of make me wonder..."

"...Wonder what?"

The younger skater could feel his partner moving in closer, discovering that he actually was entirely
naked, and was excited as well. He knew where that would lead, and was surprised to find himself wanting to let it happen. It was a shock to find his body practically moving on its own after that, rising up once the silver skater was comfortable and sitting right over his hips, hands going palm-down on that pale chest. Slender hands came up over his thighs, and fingers went under the edges of his baggy night-trunks.

"Yuri?"

That voice cut through the fog of sensation floating through the skater's mind, and he shook his head to reclaim his thoughts, "...Sorry..." Brown eyes opened, and he looked down on the man, his face flushing again at the sight of his fiancé's perfect physique; slender, strong, and his, "...How is it even possible that someone like you was single for so long? You could've had anyone you wanted."

"Sure...and I did, a few times. The reason I was single after that was because I was tired of becoming single." Victor answered simply, shrugging his softly-carved shoulders against the pillow under his head, "So instead of letting myself rebound again and again, I broke the cycle, and focused on skating." He paused for a moment, gazing up adoringly at the man sitting over him before raising his ringed hand to stroke a rosy cheek, "But then you came along."

"Uh oh..." Yuri gave a nervous look, slouching where he sat, "I made a mess of things for you."

The Russian legend just smiled fondly, "No... You put things into perspective." He explained quietly, stroking his thumb back and forth slowly, "I didn't know what I was doing anymore and I had no plan. How can I keep on skating? How do I stay inspired? What should I do with my career? What comes after I retire? What place will I have in the world? ...In the end, all the questions and doubts I had about myself...were solved by the same thing."

Hazel eyes peered into azure, and the young skater lifted his hand, reaching it over the one that still caressed his face.

"You don't know the things you do to me, Yuri." Victor said quietly, his tone tinted with the hint of a lament, "If this is a dream, I never want to wake up. I'll die before I go back to a world that doesn't have you in it."

The words were something quite a bit more profound than the young figure was ready to hear, but as soon as the last sound of them echoed around him, he could feel his throat seizing up. By the time he'd moved his hand over to soothe it, he could feel the Russian's own hand pulling back again, and he watched as Victor used it to rub the back of it against his eyes.

"...Hm...I've probably cried more in the last 2 weeks than I have in the last 10 years. Look what you've done to me." The older figure noticed, having a bit of a sad laugh at himself, and looked up in time to watch the spiky mess of black hair descend towards his chest. He brought his arms up over the younger man's back and held him there for a moment, not quite sure if the warm, wet feeling against his skin there was a kiss, or tears.

"...Victor..."

The right leg came up under the skater and nudged him forward, pushing Yuri's hands out of place, forcing them past sculpted shoulders and into the pillow behind them, bringing their eyes together in the process. The silver Russian smiled softly, leaning his head up to nuzzle his fiancé affectionately as his hands slid down to hold at the man's waist.

Yuri leaned in the close the gap between them, drawing in a sharp breath where his kiss was rewarded with a hip-roll under where he sat. Wanting to feel more, he swiveled his legs around from
where he'd still been sitting on his knees, extending them out behind himself to lay in tandem with his partner's.

Victor savored every moment, holding gently to his partner and kissing him adoringly, hands tracing the edge of the fabric and slipping just under the edge of the back of the man's shorts. Fingers slid under the wrinkles of the elastic band, palms curving over his partner's rump, only one layer of material between them, and caressing softly at every inch of him until he could feel arousal bearing fruit between them. He moved his kisses from lips to neck, slowly pushing himself up onto an elbow until he could tilt his young lover onto his side. His free hand pushed away at the fabric still clinging to his fiancé's waist, wanting it gone so he could have free and easy access to every bit of skin. He could feel where Yuri bent his legs up under the blanket to push the material away, losing it somewhere in the sheets and forgetting about it immediately after. Still lying partially on his side, the Russian pushed his partner onto his back and twisted in over him, leaning on one elbow as a leg went between two thighs, his free hand moving back under the t-shirt. He could feel Yuri's hands on his chest, sliding up to his neck to hold him close and kissing him more eagerly than before. It was exciting to feel his young partner wanting him.

*I didn't think he'd get comfortable with this so quickly.* Victor thought, sliding his free hand down the other skater's thin, lithe frame, maneuvering it under the edge of the t-shirt that still clung to the man's form, *Maybe he's wanted this longer than even he realized. I wonder how far he'll let me go now...?*

The Russian twisted a little further, getting fully on top of his partner, kissing at that pale neck as he went, and feeling eager hands against his upper back. He rubbed and rocked in a steady rhythm, guiding each leg until they parted loosely around his waist. It felt like Heaven, but Victor wanted to hear it, too.

Slowly beginning the descent, the silver legend kissed his partner deeply one last time, then moved down to his neck, and nibbled at the man's chest, hands roaming over his sides, but then continuing down lower than he'd gone before. He could feel the body under him tensing up again, holding in a gasp as he dipped his tongue into the man's naval. Yuri could tell where it was going, and brought both hands up over his mouth, his breath caught in his throat.

*Is he...really going to do this...?* He wondered in a panic, *He's been teasing me since before we even got here... Is it weird that I want him to...!?*

In the dark, it was difficult to tell what was going on, but the young, frantic athlete could still see a dim glow against his partner's skin where the light from outside came in through the windows. Yuri could feel his heart pounding in his chest as hard in that moment as it had the first time he felt the man's hand pawing at his center. The feeling he'd been so eager for came sooner than he expected, and he gasped aloud as he felt the warmth and wetness sliding from root to tip, pushing up onto his elbows in surprise. It didn't stop though, feeling his partner kissing the length of it, going back down and then up again, licking once more before using thin fingers to lift him up, taking the tip into his mouth. Yuri's legs were pinned straight under the man, so all he could do was drop down to his back again and clench his hands into the sheets, crying out quietly against each new sensation. Eventually, he managed the presence of mind to bring one hand back up to his mouth as he always had, stifling the sounds he would otherwise be uttering loudly into the darkness.

Still, he couldn't help but cry out against his hand...at least until he couldn't anymore. He pulled the hand away as he felt the Russian moving around, arms coming to rest across the sides of his hips, one hand grasped around him as the man's mouth continued to lick, kiss, and suck at the head of his arousal. With every dip and bob, he could feel the Russian's silver bangs brushing against his skin,
dragging slightly and then lifting off again. He felt goosebumps rising up all over his body the longer it went on. One hand slid up the front of his core, settling palm-down just below his chest as the warmth left center.

One hazel eye crept open to figure out why Victor had stopped, but just as his vision came back into focus, it was plain to see and feel that nothing had stopped...it had just changed. Victor had only withdrawn so he could lick and nibble at the sides again, traveling up and down the length of it, trailing his tongue over every part of it until it glistened in the pale light, then took it wholly into his mouth again.

Yuri dropped his head down against the pillows, his hands clawing at the t-shirt still clinging to his frame, biting at it where he could and whimpering with each twist and suck. He gasped louder as he felt himself inching towards release, fearing he'd do so directly into the Russian's throat, and reaching a shaky, trembling hand down towards the man's head to make him stop before it happened.

Victor was well aware, however, and had no intention of letting it all end so soon.

Before Yuri could touch a single finger to a single strand of that silver hair, he felt the man getting between his knees, wedging his own under the back of his legs, and slowly moving back up again, kissing at his stomach and chest as he went. It was almost torture that the warmth of that mouth was gone by then, but just as Yuri glanced down past the edge of his stretched-out shirt, he felt the man's hand take hold of him again, and all thought escaped him. He dropped his head back down to the pillow and let his fiancé do as he wanted. The kisses returned to his neck, hand pumping quickly, slowed only when the Russian brought himself against him, but then picking up again. Yuri's hands were up around his partner's back like before, almost clawing at his skin, careful to keep his palms flat and fingers straight despite how intense the pressure was getting.

It was almost like Victor could read his mind, holding himself up on one elbow as his other hand continued at its task between them, hips slowly starting to rock. He touched their nose-tips gently, whispering against his lips, "Do whatever you want."

"...H-hah...?"

"Don't hold back." Victor answered, "I can feel how hard you're trying to resist. Scratch me...claw at me... I want to feel you, even when we're apart again..." It was hard for him to see, but the silver Russian could tell his partner had an anxious look on his face. It was getting harder and harder to resist though, and he could feel the man's form pressing up into him, his back arching slightly where his hips bucked gently under him. Victor could sense when his fiancé's confidence shifted a little, hooking one arm around the back of his neck and shoulder as the fingers on the other hand raked across his skin, forcing him to gasp out in surprise.

The younger man's legs wrapped around Victor's waist after that, and he pushed up onto the elbow of his free arm, pressing himself harder against his partner's center until he could push himself up onto his hand instead. The arm over the Russian's shoulder gentled, hand cupped against the man's cheek, putting their foreheads together as the pumping between them continued uninterrupted. Victor's other hand came around the small of his partner's back and helped to hold him up, and the first soon joined it as Yuri's came down to take its place. Legs held tighter around the Russian's frame, hands pumping harder as the younger figure felt himself close to release again.

Perhaps a bit selfishly, or perhaps because of a lack of experience, Yuri couldn't stop himself from finishing when he felt himself on the edge, even though his partner was far from it still. Thankfully, as the silver genius quickly noticed, once spent, Yuri just let himself go and continued the pulls and squeezes on that remaining adamant flesh.
Victor held his fiancé closer, breathing harder with each tug. Soon, he could barely hold himself up, let alone his partner, and he lowered Yuri down to his back again. He held himself up on his hands for as long as he could, head dipping low between his shoulders, though finding his forehead against the man's chest as his strength waned. He pushed his hands against the fabric and slid them under his partner's back, fingers clambering at the younger man's skin as he felt himself getting closer.

Hips pushed against palms and fingers, slowly at first but then more forcefully, until all Yuri could do was hold his hands still, feeling his partner slide through his grasp. He pressed his cheek against the side of his fiancé's head, knees up on either side of his toned core, feeling as every push brought the man closer to the edge, until finally, the pale figure's body clenched up and he cried out against his shoulder.

Victor pushed through his partner's fingers a few more times before he slumped down to his side, breathing heavily against that favorite spot on Yuri's neck. He rolled onto his back after that, heaving breaths raggedly, his whole frame shaking slightly such that he didn't notice when the blankets were pulled back of them both. He felt wisps of raven hair gently tease across the skin of his chest, the head if belonged to settling against him soon after, and he brought his arm up to curl around his partner's back.

They each caught their breath in their own time, the sweat that had beaded on their skin drying against the sheets and cool air of the room. Yuri blinked in confusion when he heard his partner huffing a few quiet laughs at seemingly nothing.

"...What's with the chuckles...?"

"I just...remembered...how I once told you that you'd be begging for it one day." Victor answered, smirking in the dark, turning his head to kiss the top of his partner's, "I think we're one step closer to that day, right?"

Again, Yuri's face went a deep crimson, but it was impossible to tell without the lights on.

Victor could feel it though as the younger man settled in a bit closer, bringing his hand up close to his face where it settled against his skin. The Russian cooed at him and brought his own hand up to run his fingers through sweat-matted black hair, "Did you like it?"

"I liked everything."

"I meant, more specifically...when I used my mouth." He explained, "I've never done that before...so...was it okay?"

Yuri stammered a little, trying to force himself to be a bit more coherent than he felt, "..I-If that was the first time you've done it...I couldn't tell..."

The Russian nosed the top of his partner's head then, "Of course, that was the first time you've ever felt it, but...that's not what I asked."

The younger skater struggled to find words through his embarrassment, turning his face towards the man's chest to press his mouth to skin as he thought. He shook his head after a moment and lifted his face again, "...I-It felt amazing..."

"I'm glad then." Victor answered quietly, turning onto his side so he could hold his partner closer to his chest, wrapping both arms around the younger man's smaller frame, "I'll get better at it just for you."
After the finale for the Pair Skaters and Ice Dancers ended, there was a brief intermission before the Exhibition started. It was fun and light-hearted despite Yuri's disappointed affect going into it from the results of the day before. He performed Firebird again for the sake of his home-front redemption, and also for lack of a new program, since he hadn't expected to still be skating...and then sat back excitedly to see how people would react when he let slip that Victor had 'accidentally' brought his Aria costume and skates. There was some brief talk by the JSF event coordinators, but in the end, they decided to throw him out there as 'thanks' for bringing their top skater back to the Grand Prix Final...and humbly take credit for being the first event the Russian would perform at after announcing his return to competition.

"Yakov is going to have a heart attack to hear that I skated at a JSF event, considering he just told me not to get ideas about switching teams." Victor pointed out, quietly laughing at the absurdity of it all, holding one finger along his jaw as he came back from the changing room, "I'm never going to hear the end of it when we get to St. Petersburg..."

"It's not like there isn't precedent." Yuri pointed out, his team jacket hanging off his shoulders as he walked alongside the man, skate-guards thunking along the floor with each step. He carried the bag with Victor's skates for him in one hand, "And they already knew you were going to be here because of me, so..."

"I guess it was fortunate then that I had to leave this outfit at the Ice Castle when I carried you back to the resort." The Russian added, "It's kind of an honor to get to perform just for your crowd."

When he finished warming up, he swapped dress-shoes for skates, handing off his long-coat to his partner. Yuri held to it dutifully, but paused when Victor looked down at his own hands, and then up and around himself.

"What's the matter?"

"It's just...twice in a span of a few days, I'm wearing this again to go out onto the ice. I never actually thought I'd perform 'Aria' again, either because of retirement or a number of other reasons. Kind of makes me feel like I'm 26 again." Victor answered, sliding his hands down his front to smooth the sheer jacket against his chest, "...Hard to accept that I just turned 28. I don't really have that much time left anymore."

"It's a shame how short the years are that we skaters are actually competitive." Yuri agreed, putting his hands into his pockets, and lifting his head to hear the end of the music that had been playing before, "We give the sport everything we have and then it just...kind of stops one day."

"For most people, yeah." Victor nodded, reaching to slip his own hand into the younger skater's pocket, sneaking his fingers between his fiancé's where they rested within, "I had hopes that I wouldn't be one of them."

They started moving towards the curtain that lead to rink-side, and the Russian felt a nudge against his elbow, "You're not going anywhere anytime soon." Yuri said, smiling, "Not if I owe you five World Championship gold medals. And even if not for that...you're Victor Nikiforov...I doubt the world would just let you ride off into the sunset without giving chase somehow."

Blue eyes blinked at the younger skater, stopping the advance of gold-bladed skates along the floor. Yuri stopped and looked back when he felt the tug, seeing where it seemed like Victor was almost dumbstruck by what he'd said.

"...What?"
"Do you really think I'd just disappear...?" The taller man wondered, as though it hadn't occurred to him.

"Well..." Yuri said nervously, "To hear you say it, sometimes it feels like that's what you think would happen... Is that not what you meant?"

Victor shrugged and tried to put on a smile, "I hadn't really let myself think about life after skating. For the last 20 years or so, that's all my life has been about. I...can't even imagine..."

"Then don't." Yuri said suddenly, cutting off that whole line of thought, "You've already agreed to stay with me in this gig for one more year, and to keep being my coach until I retire. Who knows what will happen over the next few years? Approach each season like a new beginning and anything is possible."

The Russian just blinked at him again, a bit surprised. He tilted his head and smiled, reaching up with his free hand to cup the side of the man's face affectionately, "It's like you know how to get into my head. What did I ever do to deserve you?"

"Me?" The younger skater echoed, gently taking the hand and kissing the ring thereupon, "I ask myself the same question about you."

Victor huffed a laugh at that, moving then to get through the curtain. The skater who had just finished her Exhibition was coming off the ice, and the spotlights moved around rink-side until they fell upon the Russian coach and his student. Cheers and applause rose up as people started to see the trademark costume through the crowd at rinkside, and the pair started making their way to the edge of the ice.

Once there, the Russian held his hand to his fiancé's shoulder as he leaned to pull the guards from his blades and handed them off. He drew in an anxious breath, and looked from the ice to hazel eyes, "This is the first time I've skated for a real audience since the last World Championship. I don't think I've been this nervous in years."

"You're nervous?" Yuri echoed, a bit surprised, "We just did this program the other day."

"It's not that I'm worried I've forgotten my own choreography, Yuri." Victor pointed out, reaching with one hand to boop his partner's nose, "But it's like I said before...I'm skating just for your crowd today. No one else like me has ever gotten to jump into someone else's National Championship and skate, even just for fun. This is kind of a big deal for me."

"...Really?"

"Mh." He nodded, "Wish me luck then, I'm off." Victor pulled up the younger man's hand and kissed the ring on it before sliding out onto the ice, raising his arms up to the cheering and screams of the fans on all sides.

[Ladies and gentlemen...] The announcer overhead said in Japanese, [The final performance of today's National Championship Exhibition Gala...special guest, representing the Russian Skating Federation from St. Petersburg as a returning competitor, and representing Japan as coach to our own Katsuki Yuri...performing last season's 'Aria: Stay Close to Me,' please give a warm welcome to Victor Nikiforov!]

The roar from the audience exploded at that point, and Victor couldn't help but clap happily along with them, bowing his head as he made his way around the rink a few times to acquaint himself with the ice.
Yuri could tell the presentation wasn't typical, and he leaned onto the rink wall to watch.

Victor used to greet the audience like a King, taking the cheering on as though it were his birthright. But here...

The Russian finally found center, hands up over his mouth like the cheering had been more emotionally overwhelming than he'd anticipated. He drew in a deep breath, kissed his ring, and then let his hands go down to his sides, bowing his head and folding one skate behind the other.

Yuri watched closely, pulling the man's coach-jacket over his shoulders and leaning forward against the rink wall.

...It's completely different from before; he's grateful. This is really important to him...

The quiet hum of 'Aria' began above them, and the Russian lifted his head, bringing his right hand up to his face and dipping forward to begin the first official dance since announcing his return to competitive skating.
Victor hadn't waited long to introduce his fiancé to the luxury of Business Class, having refused to fly Economy even one more time after their return from the Final. Yuri, of course, was entirely thrown off by the whole thing.

"...I feel so out of place here." He commented quietly as they passed the water fountain behind the check-in counter, walking nervously into the Emirates Lounge in the Tokyo Narita International Airport. It was about the size of a two-person hot-tub, with lights mounted on the bottom to shine at the centerpiece; two fused rectangular pillars about 4 feet high, with a flower arrangement on the top. All around them were single-person upholstered leather seats, some colored orange and others off-white, clustered into groups of 2 to 4, with lamps on various wood-laminate tables set between them. The walls were a dark taupe, and covered with fabric to buffer the echo of the airport, making the area feel rather homey and quiet. There was even a small 'business center' area along the wall as they went by, with two computers and a fax machine on the end.

"You'll get used to it." Victor explained, rubbing his thumb gently over where he held to the man's hand between them, "Once you've done it like this enough times, it's unbearable to fly any other way."

"...Yeah, that time you asked for champagne when we were flying to China was really weird. Is that...standard in First Class or something?"

The Russian was walking them slowly through the first lounge area and into a second, where the decor changed slightly. The chairs were all the same, but there were marble-stone dividers between the groups, making them seem like each group of chairs were nestled in their own separate alcoves. It was a bit darker in that area as well, especially closer to the wall, where it looked like other passengers were trying to catch a nap before their flights.

"On First and Business Class, yeah." Victor answered, slowing his pace slightly to let the younger figure get a better look around as they made their way towards the dining area, "You want some dinner? We won't land for the layover in Dubai for another 12 hours."

"...Twelve hours!?” Yuri balked, though trying to keep his voice down.

"...Yeah, then the layover is 10 hours, then we fly another 7 hours to St. Petersburg." The Russian didn't understand what the fuss was about, "...I gave you the itinerary days ago."

"...I...didn't look at it." The other skater sighed, "I thought I'd leave it all as a surprise for myself, so I'd pay attention to my surroundings rather than the time." He grudgingly pulled out his phone and went to his email, letting his amused partner pull him along into the dining area.

...10pm from Tokyo Narita, landing in Dubai at 4:55am...then leaving again at 3:30pm and landing in St. Petersburg at...8:45pm.

Brown eyes looked up, a bit exacerbated and flustered, "...What a long flight..."

"Isn't that how you flew to Sochi?" Victor wondered, letting go of the skater's hand to reach for a plate near the buffet display.

"Of course not. We didn't even fly like that to Moscow."
"I guess that's true!" The Russian laughed, offering a second plate to his partner, "We flew with a different airline then though, and it was in Economy. I'd rather it take longer and be more comfortable though...being squashed into those tiny Aeroflot sardine-can seats for 10 hours can feel like eternity."

"...They're really not that bad..." Yuri contested quietly, taking the offered plate and moving down the line, collecting a few bits of bread and rice as he found them, "Are you claustrophobic or something?"

"Claustrophobic?" Victor echoed, looking back, "No... Maybe I'm just used to being in open spaces. On the ice, in the hot spring, even the banquet hall...everything's always big."

"You barely covered a single year of your life." The younger skater huffed a laugh of disbelief, trying to decide between Japanese curry sauce and the chicken shahjahani, indecisively glancing back and forth between the two white-ceramic hot-plates, but eventually reaching for the spoon for the latter.

"I guess it goes all the way back to the beginning." The silver Russian admitted tacitly, "Where I came from, there wasn't any light-pollution from the big cities...so on some nights, you could go outside and see the Auroras, and there were so many stars...more than you would've ever imagined being visible."

"Oh wow." Yuri paused for a moment, trying to imagine it, "So you come from a small town? I can't believe I never really asked you about that stuff the whole time you were in Hasetsu." He found himself thoroughly distracted from the buffet then, "Now that I think about it, I have so many questions! How old were you when you started skating? What kind of rink did you go to? How did you decide to get into competition? Have you been training under Yakov since the start or was it someone else at first? Did you ever train abroad or overseas like I did? Were you ever able to convince your parents to go to competition or were they oblivious to it all like mine were?"

The questions went on like bullets from a machinegun, but the silver Russian just watched in silence, blinking once or twice in surprise before Yuri finally stopped to catch his breath. He looked on to see those desperately-inquisitive brown eyes glancing at him, so he shrugged and smiled, "...Yes, technically since I was 5, an old one, I liked it, in a way, and sort of."

Yuri was the one blinking that time, trying to recall the questions he'd asked so he could match the answers to them, only to realize Victor had started to walk off again, "Wh...hey! You only answered half of those!" He caught up quickly enough, taking the seat opposite the older skater, "Victor...?"

Cool blue eyes were looking down at the items on the plate beneath them, but then rose quietly.

"What about the rest...?"

The Russian feigned a smile, sticking a fork straight through the center of a small, grape-sized green fruit, "It's more fun to talk about the stuff after I joined the ISU." He lifted the fork and bit the fruit in half, glancing at the core and smirking, spinning it around so the other figure could see it, "Look, Yuri! It's a kiwi-berry! It's like a kiwi but berry-sized!" He turned it around again though and looked at it more seriously, putting his free hand on his chin to keenly observe the morsel, "Not quite as tart though...it's more...sweeter than anything, like an over-ripe kiwi..." He ate the other half after that and picked at the rest of his plate, keeping his eyes down even though he reached his feet under the table to wrap around his fiancé's nearest ankle.

The whole time, Yuri was just staring at him, tilting his head a bit in a gaze that was equal parts
confusion, amazement, and stunned silence.

...He blew off the rest of my questions like they were dirt on his shoulder. I wonder what all that was about...?

Stepping onto the Emirates plane, the naïve traveler thought immediately to turn to the right, but Victor's hand guided him to the left, taking him down one of the aisles of Business Class. The Russian was glancing at the center array of seats, where they were arranged into pairs. On the walls of the cabin, more of the same kinds of seats, but set apart on their own for solo travelers.

"There are ours." Victor then said, stopping about 2/3rds of the way towards First Class and pointing to the two seats on the inside aisle. He turned to stuff his travel-case and suit-bag into the overhead compartment, then shuffled in to take the seat on the far side, letting his partner follow in after to take the seat he'd passed to get there.

Yuri found himself oddly shocked to see the seats once he got there, his eyes glaring dubiously at a thick plastic divider between them, "...Hm."

"What?" The Russian had paused where he was, half-way to sitting, with a hand on each arm-rest.

"Don't the designers of these fancy planes know that couples travel together?" He wondered idly, moving to tilt forward and grab the assorted items that were waiting on his own seat; a bag with socks and an eye-mask, and a larger bag with a thin blanket inside.

"Aww!" Victor cooed, fully sitting and resting a chin on the back of one hand, "You've already gotten so comfortable calling us that."

The young skater's cheeks flushed, but he glanced around a little before stepping slightly to the side, stuffing the bags under one arm as he reached the hand of the other under his fiancé's chin and leaned in close. Two fingers barely touched the man's skin, and he looked solemnly into those blue eyes, speaking quietly, "I've gotten comfortable with a lot of things."

"Do I still make your heart race?" The silver legend wondered, gazing adoringly with eyes half-lidded, leaning casually forward on his elbows, fingers laced together over his lap.

"Every day."

The Russian smiled, especially as he felt the kiss, and his own heart skipped a beat for it. To relieve his fiancé's annoyance, he lifted one hand as Yuri sat and gently pushed the divider down into its thin alcove between the seats, "...It doesn't go all the way down, but I think it's enough. Maybe one day I can take you on my favorite flight and we'll have a whole private cabin just to ourselves."

"Really?" The other skater wondered, taking his place and starting to examine the contents of the bags, "What kind of flight has private cabins?"

"The expensive kind going into Paris."

When they'd finally landed for their Arabian layover, it was an easy thing to go to the next First Class Lounge and get a little more sleep. Though the rest area was open, each pair of curved, reclining chairs was set between dividing posts, making each 'cubby' area in the hall feel parsed and secluded. There weren't many other travelers there at that time of morning though, so when Yuri sat
in the first one he saw, dropping his bag next to it and pulling the eye-mask from the flight out of his coat pocket, he knew what he'd be doing next.

Victor checked his phone one last time, looking at the clock's reading of 5:43am and huffing a quiet sigh to himself. After setting an alarm, he clicked it off again and spotted his partner trying to get comfortable, dark circles under those eyes where the hapless traveler was desperate for sleep. He smiled and pulled his long-coat off, letting it hang from his hand as he made his way down to join the man, making sure the length of the coat stayed over him as he nestled in closer. He could feel the twitch of sleepy surprise, and the wiggle as Yuri tried to back up into him, hand reaching back to grasp at one arm and pull it over. Victor let the tired skater have it, nuzzling at the back of his head fondly.

"Yes, we're about halfway back; there's only some 7 hours left before we're there." The Russian spoke quietly, sitting on the edge of the curved seats with his ankles crossed ahead of himself, "We should be landing in St. Petersburg around 9 tonight. ...No, would you mind? Has he been causing you any trouble? ...Oh, haha, so the usual then, he's a nutcase. ...Ah okay, perfect. ...Thanks, see you soon." He hung up, and then leaned way back to cradle his head against the curve of his partner's waist, "You awake?"

"Yeah." Yuri answered quietly, "Who were you talking to?"

"Yakov."

"What time is it in St. Petersburg right now...?" He followed, turning onto his back and letting his coach's head slide onto his stomach in the process, reaching a hand up to play with his hair.

"It's only an hour behind this place." The Russian explained, tilting his head a little to see the younger figure more clearly, "He's going to come pick us up when we get to the city. I left my car at home since I knew I'd be gone for a while."

"...Wow, yeah, I hadn't thought about that." Yuri said, looking up at the vaulted ceiling, combing his fingers through silver bangs, "You haven't been home in almost a year. Your place is probably all dusty."

"One more reason why I'm glad we went to Nationals before coming here." Victor explained, "I had time to hire some people to clean the place up and get my utilities turned back on. Had to ask a mechanic to go check on the car, too...it was probably in rough shape after sitting there for so long." The Russian suddenly laughed nervously, "I kind of dropped everything and left, and I wanted to be sure it was perfect before I brought you to see it. After all, it's your home now."

Cheeks flushed a little at the mention of it.

"So, what do you feel like eating? It's close to noon now."

It wasn't much, to the silver figure's surprise. Yuri nibbled on a small fruit salad and had a coffee, but that was basically it; Victor started picking at what was left so it wouldn't go to waste. The younger man was so scattered that it was hard to maintain conversation after a while, so Victor surmised it would be better to wait. Yuri was occupying the time with some photo-taking, completely enamored by the imagery of the Dubai airport. There were massive palm trees in the halls, as well as a huge white pillars holding up the 3-story ceiling.

"I noticed that you never post anything online." The Russian mentioned a little while later, casually
standing in the boarding area as their block was called to rise, "I know you have an account at least."

"Oh..." Yuri said, distracted, "Yeah, I usually don't post anything. I'm on so many other peoples' posts that I never thought it was worth making my own."

"I'm sure lots of people would like to follow you without having to hunt down who you're with first." The silver genius pointed out, stepping forward to give their tickets to the clerk behind the counter, "I mean, they know you're with me these days, but still. My posts are about my life. I can only speak to yours so much before there are gaps in the narrative."

They moved down the long ramp to where the tunnel connected with the side of the plane, entered, and followed to where their next set of assigned seats waited. Yuri flopped back into the plush chair, finding it more comfortable than the first plane they'd been on, and sat in silence while the rest of the plane filled up, scanning Instagram for last-minute updates while he still had the chance. Victor was putting his suit-bag and their backpacks into the carry-on compartment above his chair.

One passenger stopped with a startled gasp, looking down at the pair as though she'd seen a ghost, "...Y-Yuri Katsuki and Victor Nikiforov! I...I don't believe it...!"

Yuri blanched, unwillingly sucked out of his focus, but Victor was all smiles, "It's us~!"

The young brunette woman felt a shove from behind and pulled out of the line to step into the small alcove, apologizing for interrupting them, "Is there any chance I could get a...a photo with you two? Please!"

"Of course!" The excitable Russian answered for both of them, pulling his partner up with him as the woman got her phone out and set her camera to selfie-mode.

They crammed in together so their faces were all in the frame, and when the flash went off, Yuri felt like he was seeing stars. But, it was over...or so he thought.

"I was so inspired by your Free Skate. It was extremely moving." The woman was saying, though the dazzled skater was sure she was talking to Victor because...well, why wouldn't she? "It was like night and day compared to the previous year in Sochi. Can I ask what happened? You'd been doing so well before that...and then you just seemed to fall apart."

Yuri then realized she was actually talking to him, and coughed uncomfortably, "I...er..." He felt Victor's hand on the small of his back, and it helped ground him, "M-my...my dog died suddenly, and it messed me up. I couldn't focus."

"...I'm so sorry. I had no idea." The woman was taken aback by the answer.

"Thank you...it's okay now." He explained quietly, moving to sit back down. Victor followed suit, and the woman started to get back into the shuffle into the area further back.

"Good luck in Gangneung, Yuri! And congratulations on your first GPF medal!"

"Spasibo!" Victor answered, watching her disappear again with a wave, smiling to himself as he saw her fangirling over her phone. He turned back to his fiancé and reached for his hand, patting it gently, "That wasn't so bad."

The Japanese youth grumbled, "I'm so bad with fans."

"It gets easier." His partner reassured, "I'll protect you from the crazy ones. She seemed nice though. But you see? I bet, if you posted to Instagram once in a while, she'd be one of your followers. Maybe
she already is and wonders why you never post anything."

"Maybe." Yuri said with a sigh. The flow of people boarding the plane had reduced to a trickle by that point, "But you remember when I told you about that girl once that tried to hug me and I pushed her off?"

"Sure."

"Posting photos of my life online...I think it would feel like that... Like someone is intruding."

Victor looked on at him curiously, but then simply clasped the man's anxious hand a bit tighter where it was sitting on the arm-rest between them, "Is it okay when I post photos of us?"

"When you post?" The smaller figure was perplexed, looking at the silver-haired man with a start, only to turn his head again, "I hadn't...considered that. When I see myself in other peoples' photos, I just see it as a nod that I'm a part of their life. Like you said, it doesn't really say much about me on my own. Phichit-kun used to post a lot of photos of us together when we trained in Detroit."

"Oh, really~!?" The Russian was excited, whipping his own phone out again to go digging up the Thai skater's archive, "I want to see!"

Yuri could only smile, leaning over to rest his cheek against his coach's shoulder while he skimmed through hundreds of old photos. Phichit was a prolific selfie-taker, so there were more photos on his account than on probably most others. It took about 30 minutes before they really found anything that Yuri recognized, having to troll through nearly a year of newer content, but by then, the plane had started to taxi.

"It's a shame that the wifi on these planes is so appallingly slow. I could look at all these photos for hours, I bet." The silver skater commented, though smiling on several amusing shots from the Detroit Skate Club; many were obviously from practice, but there were a lot more of just Phichit's daily life, including a few he'd taken of Yuri in the apartment they'd shared while training together. Victor squinted his eyes at one photo in particular, "...Was that your bedroom?"

Yuri glanced at it, "Yeah."

"...Is that a picture of me on your shelf?"

Hazel eyes shot open, and the petrified man swiped the phone right out of his partner's hands, "N-No! Don't look!"

It was just after 9pm local time when the pair were finally at Pulkovo Airport in St. Petersburg, going past the luggage carousel to pick up Yuri's one suitcase, and then moving towards the doors where people could leave the airport. Victor scanned the area just in front of the exit and spotted Yakov from a distance away, easily visible in the late-night sparsely populated terminal.

The coach wasn't alone.

A certain blonde teenager was with him, to the mutual surprise of both skaters, "Yurio!"

"It's about goddamn time you got back here, Victor." The Russian Punk barked quietly, "Took long enough. The RSF folks were livid when they heard you weren't coming home straight from the Final. They've been putting off the post-event conference until after you got back."
"Nice to see you, too." Victor mused.

The bristling figure grimaced, turning from his rink-mate to the Asian skater holding the man's hand, "**Katsudon.**"

"Hey, Yurio." The Silver Medalist waved nervously, "How's your grandpa?"

"Tired. He moved to St. Petersburg after the Final to lighten the load, but there's still unpacking to do. Getting ready for **Russian Nationals** meant I wasn't around much to help him, because I was down in Moscow, where he had just come from. At **Russian Nationals.**" The teen was glaring heavily at his older counterpart.

"Did you bring Makkachin with you?" Victor wondered, completely ignoring the blonde and redirecting his attention to Yakov, who to that point had said nothing.

"He's outside with Mila." The elder answered, "But Yuri is right, it's about time you got back. It's unheard of for the commission to wait for a returning skater when they have a Gold Medalist to talk to. I'm surprised they didn't go ahead and host it after you were caught skating for Japan this weekend."

The silver Russian blinked and made a face, "I wasn't skating for Japan. I was skating in Japan. It was arbitrary...just for fun. I hadn't even planned on doing it."

"You were full and ready for it."

"Oh Yakov, you're talking like you think I cheated on you." Victor laughed, "I forgot my 'Aria' ensemble at Yuri's home rink, so I had to carry it with me for the trip to Nationals and then here. See?" He grabbed lightly for the suit-bag his partner was carrying, "It was all kind of an accident. I didn't join the JSF, if that's what you're worried about."

"Some would think you were considering it after all the time you spend out there."

Yuri felt himself sinking where he stood, every word sounding like it was a hair's width away from being made his fault. He soon felt a tug against his hand though, and shook his head, seeing his partner there trying to get his attention.

"Hey, we're going...are you with us?" The man smiled.

"...The RSF is mad at you, like I worried they would be."

"Yeah...seems so. I really didn't think they'd wait for me." Victor shrugged, "Let's go then. We can tell them that I'm back and we can do what should've been done 2 weeks ago." He turned then to pull playfully on the Russian Punk's team jacket sleeve, "**Congrats on Gold at Nationals, Yurio.**"

"It was too easy."

Yuri felt an awkward sense of déjà vu to hear him.

The group started heading to the exit, and as Victor spotted that telltale brown poodle, he broke away and rushed outside. The dog recognized him immediately and pulled Mila to get to him, barking and yipping desperately as the woman yelped in surprise. The woofer licked his human's face and jumped all over him in greeting, and Victor loved every second of it.

Yuri and Yurio slowly pulled up from the back, coming out after Yakov.
"Thank you for looking after Makkachin for me." Victor said excitedly, standing up and taking the leash from Mila, who was entirely unimpressed with the dog's sudden energy.

"You should've had him ride the same planes as you." Yakov scolded, "Spending the weekend at my place was crazy. That dog was a nervous wreck the entire time you were gone."

"We were departing from different airports by the end of things, and I couldn't exactly keep him in our hotel room while we were at competition. I had to choose between sending him early while I was still in Hasetsu, or asking Yuri's family to put him on a plane after we left so he wouldn't be waiting for us too long to get here. I just wanted him to be here already when Yuri and I arrived, so we could go straight home." Victor explained, smiling happily as Makkachin went over and greeted his second human with the same enthusiasm he himself had received.

Yuri got down on one knee to pet the poodle, happy to see him again, too. Unlike Victor though, Yuri was easy to bowl over, and before long, the dog was licking his face while he flailed on his back on the ground like an upended turtle.

Yurio had to wedge his leg between them to get the dog off long enough for the older skater to get up again, and looked annoyed the entire time, "Let's go already, it's boring here."

"You didn't have to come." The older skater pointed out, letting his partner help him back up to his feet, and using his sleeve to wipe the drool off his face.

"I just wanted to be sure I saw Victor arrive with my own eyes. Now I have. So let's go."

The drive to the house was cramped and fairly quiet; Yuri was wedged in the back seat of Yakov's black Mercedes between the two Russian skaters. Mila sat in the front passenger seat, talking about the usual things that happened while Victor was gone, up to and including Georgi's reaction to having Gold taken away from him at Nationals by a kid almost half his age.

"He was so convinced he'd get Gold this year since you didn't make it!" She said with a laugh, "You should've seen the look on his face when Yuri outscored him by such a huge margin!"

"Mila, it's not professional or sportsmanlike to make fun of your rink-mates." Yakov scolded.

The redhead huffed and crossed her arms, "But it's Georgi! He's been coming second to Victor since he started skating. Even Georgi's birthday comes the day after Victor's. I think the only thing Georgi ever did first was joining the Skating Club, but it's all been seconds after that. It's a huge joke!"

"Not to him."

"Alright alright..." She turned to look out the window, scratching at Makkachin's fluffy head to distract herself. The dog had nowhere else to sit but in the footwell by her feet, and he stared at his human the entire drive.

Yuri felt entirely out of place, but since he was holding Victor's costume bag on his lap, he at least felt like he had some purpose.

Victor, of course, kept his arm protectively over his fiancé's shoulders, making it feel more like he was keeping him close on purpose, rather than because the man was being shoved over by Yurio.

The drive took nearly an hour, and Yuri looked out the windows in silence as the Russian team conversed amongst themselves about official skating business. He took in the sights of St. Petersburg
with rapt curiosity, hoping that he would someday know those roads and buildings as well as he did Hasetsu's. They even got to pass the skating rink where they'd be training.

"Yuri." Yakov suddenly said.

"What?" Yurio answered naturally, though both of them lifted their heads at the mention.

"The other one." Yakov corrected, "Katsuki."

"Y-Yessir?"

"Tsh." The teen scoffed and looked back out the window bitterly, slouching where he sat and spreading his knees even further apart just to take more space from his older counterpart.

"What plans do you have for your next competition? You scored Gold this weekend in Japan, so there's no doubt you'll be getting chosen by the JSF to represent Japan at Four Continents and Worlds if you want to go."

"I'm going to Four Continents next." Yuri answered, "I wasn't at the FC or Worlds last year, so I went to Nationals just to cover my bases. I'm not Victor...I wasn't around secure my spot, and had to earn my place again."

"That's fine." The coach pointed out, "My reason for asking is just for the sake of ISU expenses for traveling. If you're staying here to train under Vitya, and he's training under me, then it would just be easier to have everyone coordinate things together."

"Is that okay? I mean, I'm not on the Russian team...I don't want to impose."

"It's just traveling," Yurio said curtly, elbowing him in the ribs hard where they sat squished together, "You're not joining the Russian team just because you'll be flying with us."

The middle passenger just grunted and cringed with each jab, at least until he felt a set of fingers getting between the side of his chest and the pointy elbow trying to grind into it.

"Cut it out, Yurio, you're going to mangle my cinnamon roll."

The teen just gave him an incredulous look, eyes wide open for a moment, but then narrowed again with simmering rage. He clapped his knee to the side and hit his 'rival's' leg painfully with it as he turned, then crossed his arms and moved to glare daggers out the window instead, grinding his teeth angrily.

The abused skater just reached a hand out to rub the spot where it stung, "...Yurio...?"

*Why is he so mad at me...?"

It was only a few more minutes before they were starting to pull into a residential area, and Yuri marveled at how...normal it looked. Normal, anyway, for a higher-end neighborhood that wasn't in Japan's cramped foothills. Yakov eventually stopped in a driveway, and Mila let Makkachin out as soon as the car was completely parked. The dog went ballistic, running around familiar territory and smelling everything that once was his. Mila brushed her leggings off and stepped out as well.

Victor pushed the driver's-side passenger door open and Yuri followed after him, but Yurio stayed in the car.
Yakov looked to the taller man, "We'll be at the rink in the morning if you feel like joining us, otherwise we'll see you there whenever you get over your jetlag."

"Sounds good." The skater answered, pulling his partner with him as he waved the group off, "We'll probably come tomorrow afternoon sometime. I have no doubt that I'll have a ton of stuff to deal with here once our luggage shows up, and I'll want to get away from it for a bit."

"Da, da...come whenever." The coach waved him off and went back to the car.

"Byyye~! And welcome to Russia, Yuri!" Mila called, stepping back into the car again and waving, "Stay out of trouble!"

The pair nodded, waving as the vehicle started to pull away again.

Victor waited for the car to be out of sight before turning to his fiancé, "Welcome home, Yuri."
CHAPTER NINE

My name is Yuri Katsuki, and I'm one of the dime-a-dozen top figure skaters certified by the JSF. I'm 24 years old, and the last year has been one of the most incredible in my entire life. After a disastrous 6th place finish at the Grand Prix Final in Sochi, Russia, and a close brush with retirement...my childhood idol, five-time consecutive World Champion, and legendary figure skater, Victor Nikiforov, suddenly turned up at my family's Hot-Springs Resort to be my coach!

With his help, I was not only able to get back into the Grand Prix Final again...I was able to win the Silver Medal, too! I even somehow managed to break Victor's long-held World Record score in the Free Program in the process! I still can't believe it!

But the best part...isn't even the skating success he's helped me find. It's the 'Life and Love' in our engagement rings.

Today is December 29th...and I've moved to St. Petersburg, Russia, to be with him. It's the eve of a brand new year...and our whole new life together.

Yuri looked at the house with wide eyes. He wasn't sure if he was hallucinating or not, but it seemed a lot bigger than he imagined, even though it was dark and snowing lightly. The neighborhood had decent lighting, so he could see the outline of the house where the snow glowed on the roof and iron-wrought fence. His head swam from the trip still, despite how much he'd tried to sleep, and it only added to his awe of what was in front of him.

"What do you think?" He heard Victor ask, one arm draped over his shoulder casually.

"...Is it still technically Tuesday right now...? Or is it Wednesday...?" Was all he could think of to say.

The silver Russian just laughed and started stepping towards the walkway that lead to his front door, opening the metal gate and pulling his sleepy partner along with him to make sure he got inside safely, "It's Tuesday night, late...almost Wednesday morning."

When the door was unlocked and pushed open, Makkachin rushed inside, barking excitedly. Victor shuffled in and hit the lights, careful to avoid two rather large packages sitting on his front step.

Yuri was ahead of him, still marveling at the whole thing, so Victor turned back to try and figure out a way of getting the big boxes inside himself. The smaller one was easy enough, so he tucked it around the door, and then scratched his head at the bigger one, which was more like a large crate than a box, reinforced by wood paneling, "Yuri...come help."

The younger skater was mesmerized though and hadn't heard him. Yuri took in a deep breath, drawing in the smell of this place that had been his idol's since before they'd ever known each other. It smelled much as he expected...like recently-used cleaners. Looking around, he saw walls filled with skating memories, dating back to when the Russian skating legend was still a rising star in the Junior ISU. He even saw a photo of the man's 16 year old self, where he wore what would eventually become the 'Eros' outfit, and his face flushed a little to see the teen so proud in that ensemble, having no idea back then what would happen in the years to come.
"Y-Yur...Yuri...!"

Five golden medals hung inside a large wood-framed rectangle, labeled at the bottom as World Championships, suspended on a wall in an adjacent room, protected from dust by treated glass. More medals from other events were behind glass on other parts of the wall, many of them gold as well, and even more trophies sat on the mantle and on shelves than Yuri realized Victor had even won. There were even a few newspaper articles clipped and framed. Oddly, Yuri never saw any photos of anything normal. Like family, friends, or anything else. Only a few shots of Makkachin here and there, or Yakov.

"Yuri!" Victor said again, louder than before, finally getting his attention.

"Huh?" The younger man turned around, seeing his partner still in the doorway, unable to lift the large wooden box high enough to get it over the lip of the last step to the indoors, "What's that?"

"My mail from the last few months, I think." He answered with a huff, looking a bit red in the face from his efforts, "I don't have a wheelie-thing to get it off the ground, so help me get it onto this ledge so we can push it inside."

"Just the last few months?" Yuri repeated in disbelief, setting the costume bag down on a nearby hall-table before going back to the doorway, "Is there more somewhere?"

"Probably. It just piles up! The post office probably heard I was coming back and wanted to get rid of it."

"No kidding."

Between the two of them, they were able to get the huge crate over the 8 inch step-threshold, pushed it along on a rug, got it in far enough to make clearance for the door, and then closed said door behind them.

Victor huffed a breath and turned around to sit on the crate, kicking his shoes off and heaving a relieved sigh, "It's good to be home, but now there's so much work to do~!"

"This place is incredible." Yuri was looking around again, "I don't even know where to begin." He pointed at the wall with the most photographs on it, "You don't have pics of family up there. Do you have any in St. Petersburg? Will I get to meet them?"

"Our stuff won't arrive until tomorrow morning, so if you want to rest, the bedroom is down that hall." Victor leaned back on one hand and pointed with the other, completely ignoring the questions, then twisting around with one knee on the box still as he leaned against his partner's back, "Make yourself comfortable."

Yuri could only pause and turn his head, looking at the Russian with a strange look on his face.

"Something wrong?"

"Is that a no?"

"Is what a no?" Victor asked, looking innocent.

"...Never mind." The younger man shook his head, turning back around again to look at the house all around him, "It's better than I could've imagined. I just...can hardly believe I'm really here." He fidgeted down to his hand and rotated the ring around on his finger a few times as he spoke, "I'm not dreaming still, right? This is real."
"After the last year, you think you might still be asleep?" Victor wondered curiously, crossing one leg over the other.

Yuri lowered his head a little, "I know it's real...it's just... It's more than I deserve. I feel like I'm going to wake up tomorrow morning and it'll still be the day after last year's Nationals. This house will be gone, this ring will be gone...you'll be gone...and I'll have to start all over again without you."

Victor's expression changed from curiosity to bewilderment. He raised an eyebrow and then settled to resolve the issue, "Close your eyes, Yuri."

"Close my eyes...?" The younger skater echoed in confusion.

"Just do it." Victor repeated, getting back up to his full height as the confused younger skater stopped second-guessing what was said and finally did as he was told. The Russian grabbed him by his shoulders, turned him around several times, making him even more dizzy than before, and then stopped him back in his original position. He put his hands over both ears for what seemed like a full minute. All Yuri could hear after that was his own heartbeat.

"...Victo-"

"Ssst."

Yuri went quiet again, and endured another minute of awkward silence. He could sort-of hear the sound of Makkachin's claws tapping against the wood floor in the kitchen, followed by soft panting as he came closer. Victor just stayed there, making him steep in his uncomfortable silence.

"I told you before that you're stuck with me." The silver legend purred quietly, "Now, on the count of three, you're going to open your eyes. You're going to be in St. Petersburg, Russia. You're going to be a Silver-and-Gold-medal winning, world-record-breaking top figure skater with the JSF, training under your coach, Victor Nikiforov. You're going to be engaged to him. You're going to have a golden ring on your finger, and he's going to have a matching ring on his finger, too...and he loves you more than skating and life itself. Ready?"

The younger man's cheeks were flushed, but he nodded.

"Okay. Ichi...ni...san...!"

Yuri awoke with a start, his eyes shooting open. A brown poodle was startled next to him, sleeping on top of the covers where the skater had been under them. The room was dark, the walls practically invisible on all sides. Eyes went down where the man realized he'd had his arm over the dog when he woke, and pat the poor creature on its head, "Sorry, Vic-chan, I didn't mean to scare you." He said quietly, his expression changing from mild concern, as he pushed to sit up, to near-crying disappointment as he turned around to hug his knees, "...It was all a dream after all. I knew it..."

There was a moment where the distraught figure just hugged his knees, pressing his eyes against them where the blanket folded over him. He drew in a deep, though shaky breath, and lifted his head to rub the side of his forearm against the burning feeling that was creeping up. As the wet feeling slid across his skin, however, he turned his hand and rubbed his face...and felt the brush of warm metal on his cheek. Stunned and confused, he pawed in the dark for his phone, confused even more for why the edge of the bed was so hard to find.

"This bed is huge...I've never had one this big...what's going on?"

When he finally moved far enough, he felt at the soft edges of a wooden night-stand, and found a phone there with a charge-cable plugged into it. Not even considering to look at it, he pulled the
phone free and clicked it on, using the light to shine onto his hand...and saw the shine of gold on his finger. His eyes were wide in disbelief, turning the phone over to see the time...only to find that the wallpaper on the phone's Lock screen wasn't the image of Vic-chan he'd had there for so long. It was something else entirely...not even a dog.

...This...is me...and Victor Nikiforov...!? I won Silver...? And Chris and Phichit-kun are there, too...? When did that happen? Wait...Vic-chan is here...and I know who Phichit-kun even is...haven't I moved to Detroit yet...? Where am I...?

The blankets came flying off himself after that, and the shaken young skater flew towards the dim glow of light under a door that he'd only just-then noticed. The door burst open, phone still in-hand, and a dull glow greeted him from the hall and the next room. Yuri's heart pounded and raced in his chest, and his eyes darted from one unrecognized wall to the next, each step forward feeling like it took too long.

"V-Victor...!?" He called out, a panic in his voice.

The silver-headed Russian twisted his head around, unseen by the fear-stricken man coming towards the livingroom, not having spotted him yet. In a mad dash, he gathered up a bunch of clothing that had been set out in front of himself and quickly stuffed them back into the cardboard box they'd come from, only to hear his name be called again in a different tone. He barely had time to turn before he caught sight of his fiancé falling to his knees in front of him with a hard thud against the wood-flooring, and then leaning forward, arms going around his sides.

Yuri collapsed against him, all but sobbing for the relief of it all, arms pinned under the man's back where he'd pushed Victor down. He could feel a leg pressed up against his side where the other was lying straight under him, parted slightly to go around his own legs where he'd slid down on the polished hard-wood.

"Y-Yuri...? What's the matter?" The Russian asked, worried beyond words, trying to push himself up onto his elbows to avoid squashing his partner's arms, "...Why are you so upset?"

The younger man's voice was ragged, but he refused to lift his head from where he'd buried his face against the older figure's chest, "I woke up suddenly and it was dark, I couldn't see but I could feel Vic-chan sleeping next to me like he always used to...I thought everything before was a dream and that I was still at Yu-Topia before I'd ever moved to Detroit in the first place, but then I grabbed your phone by accident and saw your Lock screen photo and used the light to see my ring...so it wasn't Vic-chan at all and this isn't even Yu-Topia and I jus-"

"Yuri." Victor cut him off, lifting his legs out straight to use as a balance to try and sit himself up, laying one arm after another around the rattled figure's small frame, "...It's okay, it was just a dream." He stroked his hand gently up and down against his partner's shoulder where he'd twisted slightly against his chest, "You were delirious from the trip, so I put you to bed when we got here." He explained, rubbing his cheek gently across his partner's hair, "You've been anxious about this move since before we even got on the first plane...you tried to sleep on every flight, but even after all that, you never did seem to get any rest, except for that brief time during our layover. Is any of that ringing a bell?"

The younger man still seemed too overwhelm to process it all, and his fingers clenched a bit harder around the silver Russian's t-shirt.

"...We're at home in St. Petersburg now. We got here a few hours ago."

The big brown poof strode by as the man spoke, nails tapping the floor as he passed, passing the
long blue couch on his way to the kitchen.

"The poodle that was sleeping with you was Makkachin..."

Yuri's quick, shallow breaths finally started to mellow out, calming to a normal pace even as he still clung on for dear life. Eventually, his panic melted away, making room for the normal anxiety he seemed to always have simmering at the back of his mind...though that on its own just lead him to feeling guilty and ashamed. He pulled back from the Russian's chest and tried to hide his eyes behind the fingers he pinched to the bridge of his nose, "...S-Sorry...I...don't know why I did all that..."

"Do you feel better now at least? You really had me nervous. The last time you had a melt-down like that, at least I could understand why...this just came out of nowhere..." Victor reached his arms forward again to pull the anxious skater's shoulder back down against his chest, "Did you have a nightmare or something?"

"B-Before...I feel asleep..." He tried saying, still feeling his heart thumping, "I didn't say anything weird or stupid before that, did I?"

"Well, you said you were worried that you'd wake up and all this would be gone...so maybe you managed to set yourself up. Never go to bed worried or mad or it'll stick with you all night." The Russian lifted a hand so he could point a finger up to emphasize the point, then looked down to see if his fiancé had any sort of reaction.

Yuri's expression changed a little, letting himself have the benefit of the doubt that he wasn't somehow still dreaming. He turned his head, trying to glance around the room some, finally taking in the sights and the small semblance of familiarity from his arrival. The more he saw, the less his mind got away from him, and soon, he was able to twist fully around and lie down on his back, sinking down against his fiancé's core such that his head was against the man's abdomen. He held there a moment and drew in a deep breath, feeling where the Russian pulled both hands up his front, coming to a stop against his chest. Cherry-hazel eyes lifted to look at the figure, but then closed again lightly as he felt the forward lean.

Lips met where Victor curled over his partner's head, fingers clasping around one another when he felt Yuri bring his hands up. Silver-grey bangs brushed against pale skin as the Russian finally pulled back again, "Maybe this is all a bit more overwhelming for you than I thought it would be. You say that you've gotten comfortable with things...but deep down, you're still the Yuri Katsuki who ran away from me for all those years, too scared to even say hello, and who could only get over those fears when you were drunk." He stroked his thumb back and forth slowly, soothingly, "I once said that you and Yurio should be more self-aware, but here I am completely unaware of some really important things."

"...It's...it's not your fault..." The younger skater sighed, letting himself be washed over with the feeling of his partner's arms around him, "Crippling self-doubt is something I've dealt with for years."

"...Self-doubt or doubt of me?" Victor wondered skeptically.

Brown eyes lifted again, but then turned, "Maybe...the doubt about what you see in me..."

"Let me assuage those doubts then." The Russian purred, pulling one hand away so he could reach to the side of himself, "I wanted to wait to show this to you until tomorrow...but I think now is better. You'll really like this." Victor was saying, still holding his fiancé close as the sound of plastic crinkling under a hand-grip resonated around the room.

What landed in the confused young skater's lap was a confusing sight; a neatly folded blue and black
garment with numerous crystal inlays, making it shimmer and sparkle before his eyes. The upper parts, on the shoulders of what Yuri could identify as the front of a jacket and shirt, were thin-braided silver epaulettes, and over the left shoulders were two silver cords.

"I don't get it." He shook his head a bit in utter confusion, then tilted his head back against his partner's front and looked at him skeptically, "Why did you get your 'Aria' costume redone? Are you going to use it for an Exhibition...?"

"This outfit isn't for me." The Russian answered with a huffed chuckle, reaching for the bag with both hands and pulling it open, withdrawing the garment and shaking it out before setting it down properly over the younger skater's frame, "I'm too tall to fit into it, just like how I'm too tall to fit into the black costume you wear for 'Eros' now." He waited a moment for the realization to settle in, but it seemed like Yuri was still a bit slow, "This is your costume, for 'Duetto: Stay Close to Me,' the Pair-Exhibition performance I've been thinking about."

The almost-deliberately confused figure rose to sit up, taking the outfit with him as he went. He turned his head back and looked from the sheer-blue and solid-black costume jacket, to the man who'd given it to him, "...What...are you saying...?"

Victor smiled proudly, but it was the wink after that finally allowed the man 'permission' to accept the reality of the gift.

"...EHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!?"

It was a while before Yuri could compose himself enough to even look at the costume again, clutching it tightly to his chest with both arms wrapped around it like it might slip through his grasp if he didn't. Victor held him where he stood, patting his head gently as he sobbed, "Breathe, Yuri. Breathe."

"But look at it!" The Japanese youth cried out, finally holding it out in front and gaping at it like it was just too precious to be real, "It's just like yours!"

"I know."

"But it's blue!"

"That's what I asked them to use."

"And you said it was for me!"

"It is for you."

"Because you want to do a Pairs version of 'Stay Close to Me!'"

"Everything on ice is a display of love, and this is how I want to show my love to you. Call it a late Lovers' Day gift." The Russian explained dutifully, stepping out in front of the man to hold his hands where they still held to the jacket in turn.

"...Lovers' Day?"

"You said that Christmas Eve in Japan is more like a special day for lovers, right? Where couples give gifts and spend time with each other." He smiled brightly, "I would've given this to you sooner, but my tailors are all here in Russia. Remember when I took that call in the taxi before?"

"...Sure, but-"
"Those were the tailors, saying the outfit was ready. I was asking them to deliver it here!" Victor explained excitedly, "That's why I didn't want to say a whole lot about what was happening out here while we were getting ready for Nationals. I didn't want to risk spoiling the surprise!"

"...Wow..." Yuri sat back on his haunches, eyes looking at the shimmering material in his hands again, "...I don't...even know what to say. This must've cost you a small fortune, and I...didn't really get you anything at all..."

"You got me the most of all!" The Russian corrected, spreading his arms out to the sides, "You gave me my ring, a new perspective on things...and...on the day itself, you made love to me!" Even Victor Nikiforov couldn't stop himself from getting a bit of color in his cheeks at the mention it.

The younger figure was, of course, rather pink for it as well, bringing the blue jacket closer to himself as he cast his eyes down and smiled sheepishly, "...Y-Yeah...I...I guess I did, didn't I?"

"Mh!" The silver legend nodded enthusiastically, "And 'Aria' was the thing that brought us together! I want the whole world to see it now." He pulled back a moment and reached into the cardboard box everything had come in, grabbing a second carefully-wrapped garment, this one black, and handed it off as well, "Go on, Yuri. Try it on."

The young skater was still in disbelief of the whole thing, but he nodded and scooted forward on his knees first, leaning into the man and sliding one arm over a shoulder, "Thank you thank you thank you!" He cried, though trying his best not to cry as he pulled away again. He returned to sitting where he'd been a moment before and started to unpack the rest of the outfit, finding the second bag to contain the pants, and pulled them on quickly. The jacket went on next as Yuri rose back up to his feet, tucking the bottom of the black inside shirt and carefully fitting his thumbs into the solitary thumb-gloves at the end of the sleeves.

Victor stepped in to help settle it properly on his partner's shoulders, moving his fingers down to clasp the silver cords across the front, then looking the whole thing over carefully for the tiniest of flaws.

"Is it ok?" Yuri asked, his face as red as it had ever been.

The Russian nodded, but reached forward to run his fingers through that mop of raven-black hair, slicking it back into show-fashion. As he held it there, keeping the skater's bangs from getting back into his face, he looked into those deep hazel wells and smiled proudly, "Perfecto! You look fantastic."

Yuri's face lit up at the sound of those words, but he could do little to stop the tears in his eyes that time. The happiness was too much for him to be able to think of anything else to say, so he just stepped into the silver legend's frame and kissed him where he stood, a hand settling on the crest of each hip.

Victor moved his arms over his partner's shoulders in return, kissing him back quite happily, beaming over his pride and joy. He had to huff a breath when they parted again, "...Hah...you'll have to practice every day."

"I will!"

"You'll have to land all your Flips and learn to land the Lutz."

"Quad Flip and quad Lutz!"
"Nothing but the best from now on, Yuri."

"Only the best!"

"No more 'warm-up mode.'"

"Not warming-up anymore!"

"And you're going to win the Gold at Four Continents, and every competition after that."

"...And I'm...going to try my hardest to win Gold!"

"No, no...Yuri...let's do that again. You already promised. So say it with me." Victor started, "I'm going to win Gold from now on."

"I'm going to win Gold from now on."

"Do you believe it?"

"I can't believe this is really happening." Yuri's eyes were welling up again, "I love you so much right now!"

Victor just sighed happily and laughed.

It felt like hours passed as the young skater practiced as many moves of the program as he could right there in the living room. His joy was contagious, and the Russian genius watched him dance, slate eyes following every move through perfection. Before long, Victor stepped into the fray as well, and moved to hoist his fiancé into the air like he would if they were on the ice. The Japanese youth was thrown off guard by it, but when Victor set him back down on the ground again, it made sense.

"Then I'll do this..." Victor explained, stepping his right leg around the back of his partner's feet, pulling him down with one arm as he held the other out on display, then backing up to let Yuri stand again, "And there's another lift a few seconds later...and then we do a move from the original program..." He stretched an arm forward, with one leg sticking straight out behind himself, motioning with his hands down his face and towards his chest. Yuri knew which moves Victor was referring to, and mimicked him in turn, the both of them reaching high up towards the ceiling and then pulling their hands down again as though in anguish, until it came time for them to do the single reverse flip and they ran out of room to jump.

Yuri was about to burst out of his skin with excitement, and they flopped back onto the long blue couch, clasping each other's hands between where they sat, "How long have you been thinking about this? Neither of us has ever done pair skating before, but you seem to know what to do already...!"

"Since you asked me to skate with you for one more year." The silver-haired skater answered, "You said 'with' and I thought about it literally, and it just poured into my mind like a movie after that. I hadn't solidified which program though until after I had you skate to 'Aria' with me at the Ice Castle; it just made perfect sense. This is the last program I skated before taking a break, and I want it to be the first one that I skate when I come back. It'll be my come-back announcement performance, featuring you as the centerpiece."

"Really?" The younger skater blinked, tilting his head on the couch's backrest, "...The centerpiece? How?"
"I'd like you to skate this as your next Exhibition. I've choreographed it so that it looks like a solo program at first, but at a point, you'll pause and hold your hand out towards where I'll be joining you from rink-side." Victor explained, giving the hand between them a gentle squeeze, "I left the ice to coach you, so I think it's only fitting that you get to bring me back onto it...neh?"

Hazel eyes were misty again, but the skater nodded, turning his gaze back towards the ceiling, and the light-and-fan fixture that hung from it above the center of the room, "...This is really going to be incredible."

"I'll have to make some calls to see if the ISU will allow a pair-skate Exhibition Program when we're still going to go on competing in singles, but I don't think it would be a problem. The Exhibition isn't judged, after all." The Russian went on, "But if they say no, then I'll just have you perform 'Aria' as your regular Exhibition when you win Gold and I'll just join you on the ice anyway!" He was too proud of himself for thinking of the contingency plan.

"Weren't you the one who said I should do more to take charge of my own programs?" Yuri side-eyed him skeptically, even though he had no hesitation to agree to the plan.

"Sure." Victor answered happily, like he didn't see the contradiction, "And you should freely choose of your own free will and without pressure to do 'Aria.'"

The blue-clad skater gave him a strange look, but then laughed and turned his head, "Let me think long and hard about that."

The Russian watched as his partner tapped his head, as though deep in thought, "Such a difficult decision!" He twisted where he sat on the couch, pulling one leg up to half-cross it in front of himself, draping an arm over the backrest.

"I just don't know, Victor." Yuri played along, pretending to be frustrated with the nonexistent conundrum, "It's such a tough program, and I don't know where I'll get the time to practice this routine that I've never done before."

Victor gasped emphatically, "Yuuuuuri! Whatever will you do!?!" He turned around fully and draped himself over his partner's lap with tremendous flare, one hand up to graze the side of his forehead, "The fate of the world depends on your choice!"

"Calm down there, Georgi." The younger figure laughed, pushing the older one off of himself to sit on his own again, then raised his right hand up with a finger extended, "That's it! I've decided. I'm going to skate 'Aria: Stay Close to Me,' and we'll turn it into 'Duetto' to officially announce your return to competition." He reached with that hand to put that finger under his fiancé's chin gently, "May the God of Skating favor me."

"He does every day." Victor purred, touching their noses together lightly before unexpectedly being pushed down to his back, leaning against a few pillows at his end of the couch. He watched with rapt fascination as his fiancé reached around to unsnap the elbow fastenings, freeing the sleeves of the sheer jacket from the button-down it fit over. More snaps came undone from under the black decorative bits onto the front of the shirt, then the three silver cords that hung across it. The sheer blue material came loose then, and Yuri set the garment gently over the back of the couch.

Before the Russian even realized what was happening, the young skater slipped forward between the his legs and pressed into another kiss, slowly descending to lie on top of him, pressing his chest down, then the rest, a hand sliding down each side. Victor settled his arms around his partner's shoulders, hands cupping around the back of the man's head, fingers weaving through jet-black spikes of short hair...but it was the push against his hips that made him draw in a light gasp,
"Yuri...this is unexpected..."

"You said once that there was an eros in me that no one, not even me, had ever seen. I want to show it to you..."

Victor could only raise his arms up excitedly, "Wow~!"
CHAPTER TEN

It only took a few days before the Russian branch of the ISU had gotten itself together for the press conference that Yurio had been denied. Cameras were clicking with a fever pitch as reporters from across the country were clamoring for a good spot at the front of the conference hall, others stacking along the walls on either side of the room.

At the table on the raised platform in front of them all, Yakov was seated at the far end dressed in his usual coach fare, with Lilia next to him, Yurio next to her with his Team Russia jacket and black hoodie, Victor after that in up-class casual-wear like from Barcelona, then Mila in business-casual, and finally Georgi, looking more formal like his coach...the entire St. Petersburg Skate Club.

Yuri watched quietly from the audience, a surgical mask over his face, wearing the most boring and normal clothing he could find, keeping all of it unrelated to skating or the JSF. The conference, however, was being spoken in Russian, so the whole thing was beyond him. He only knew a smattering of basic Russian, and nothing short of subtitles on his eyeballs would help him understand it any better. The energy in the room was all he could read, and he guessed well enough that Victor had just confirmed his return to competitive skating when everyone started cheering.

Yurio was bristling where he sat, but didn't dare have an outburst in front of so many cameras. He eventually had his turn anyway, and Yuri could see the teen calming down significantly as he received the attention he deserved.

*They're probably asking him how he feels about competing against Victor.* Yuri thought to himself, able to pick out the word 'Worlds' from the Russian dialogue. One of the reporters asked about 'European Championships' but the team shook their head, likely mentioning the same rationale as had been given when Victor himself asked the question at the GP Final Banquet.

"Hey...are you not Katsuki Yuri...?" Someone to the young skater's right suddenly asked. He glanced up from his phone and turned to look at the source of the voice, pulling his mask off his nose to hook it under his chin, and saw a complete stranger there; some reporter covering the conference. The man's broken English was rough, but Yuri could understand it.

"Ah...yes, I am."

"Why not at table with others?"

He was taken aback, unsure if his answer would be understood, so he spoke simply, "I'm not Russian."

"However, Mr. Nikiforov is coach of yours, yes?"

"...Yes, but..."

"Èj každyj! Katsuki Yuri nahoditsja zdes'!" The reporter called out, yelling above the clamor to get the crowd's attention.

Yuri flew out of his seat, ready to cling to the ceiling if it was the only way out, as all eyes suddenly turned from the Russian team to him. He staggered into the walking-space between his chair and the reporters that were huddled against the wall nearby. If looks could kill, Yurio would've been a serial killer by that point, staring death at everyone who dared turn their attention away from the main table...
to stare at the hopeless Japanese skater instead. The crowd was unsure how to proceed after that, speaking amongst themselves as more photos were taken to prove that Yuri was there as claimed. The young athlete simply balked, groping for space, looking past a few people to Victor and silently begging for salvation.

The Russian team-members were whispering amongst themselves; Yakov seemed slightly annoyed, but Victor nodded in apparent agreement and waved for Yuri to join them at the table. The foreign skater rushed through the crowd for safer territory, wanting nothing less than to put Victor between himself and the ravenous mob.

He didn't make it gracefully though, as Yurio stuck his leg out and tripped the Japanese skater as he was passing behind their chairs, causing him to land face-first behind his coach's seat. Victor looked back to see if he was okay, but it didn't do any good, as the Russian Tiger had already turned on his chair to put his boot on Yuri's backside where it stuck up in the air.

"Idiot, this isn't for Japanese skaters!"

"Yuratchka, leave him be." Yakov instructed calmly, "We should never have left him in the audience in the first place."

"But-

"Leave. Him. Be. We all know you won the Gold Medal and him Silver. You don't have to keep proving it. He's Victor's student though, so that makes him part of us, even if unofficially."

As the coach reigned in his rising star, Mila busied herself with getting another chair pulled up to the table. Victor had stood up to get behind his own chair, helping his fiancé to stand up again just as he spotted the redhead bringing a new seat closer. He reached across the table to take it from her, setting it between their existing seats, and positioned Yuri to sit in it.

The anxious foreigner sat low and awkwardly, wanting to be as small as possible. However, the smaller he tried to appear, the more he stuck out, and Victor could tell. The silver legend put a hand on the small of his partner's back to force him to sit upright, and then shoved the chair in closer so he couldn't slouch again.

"Don't try to be so inconspicuous." The Russian said in a whisper, leaning close.

"But I don't even speak Russian...I have no idea what's going on..."

"Victor," One of the reporters down front started; a woman with straight-cut black hair and bowl-cut bangs, "Since we're on the topic now, it seems...is it because of Yuri Katsuki that you skipped Russian Nationals and lost your shot at Euros?"

The young skater could've died and rolled under the table, if he were allowed to, banging his face against the top of it instead and holding his hands over his head. He groaned quietly for the shame of it before his hands slid off the table-cloth and went limp at his sides.

Victor just glanced between him and the RSF reporter, "Actually, it's because of Yuri that I'm hopefully going to Worlds. I hadn't planned on being at Nationals or Euros to begin with." He explained simply, moving his arm up from where he'd been rubbing his partner's shoulders to rest it over the backrest of the chair. Yuri lifted his head as he felt it, rubbing the sore spot on his forehead as his partner's voice continued, "Georgi will be representing the RSF at Euros alongside Yuri Plisetsky. They're both perfectly capable of bringing medals back. They wouldn't be training under Yakov if they weren't good. He hand-selected everyone one of us and he's never been wrong about
the quality of his team. We consistently rise up to represent Russia on the world stage, in spite of dozens of other reputable Skate Clubs across the country."

"We've heard it said that you had meant to go to Nationals." The woman went on, "There's footage from an interview at the Final, where your voice is caught in the background stating, and I quote, 'For now, I'll time my come-back with Russian Nationals.' Isn't that right?"

"I'm glad you included the part where I said 'for now,' because things changed before the end of the weekend. I had obligations that I couldn't bail on."

"You mean Japanese Nationals."

"Da. I couldn't send Yuri on by himself. As his coach, I'm responsible for him."

"Even he hadn't planned on going to the All Japan Championship until after the Final was over. Everything you both did was last-second."

"Sure." Victor had no problem admitting it, nodding as well, "I told Yuri I'd make him win the Grand Prix Final, not the World Championship. Our original plans were that I'd coach him through the Final. We had no inclination that either of us would continue on with it after the Final was over. But we both managed to convince each other to keep competing." He shrugged, "If Yurio hadn't decided to make his Senior debut this year, I'd be going to Euros as well as Worlds, in spite of missing Nationals. But, it is what it is."

The blonde seethed from where he sat next to the silver skater, [You can't blame me for your stupid choices!] He barked in Russian, [I more-than-earned my spot on the Russian team at Euros! If you'd come to Nationals like you were supposed to, this wouldn't even be an issue! You'd already been putting together programs for this year before you were in Hasetsu last year. You have no excuse for bailing.]

Yuri bunched his hands together in his lap, looking even more nervous as the argument went on.

He's talking in Russian so I don't know what he's saying. He's not even doing it because we're in Russia...he's doing it because he wants me to feel like an outsider... As if he even needed to do anything for me to feel that way...

"Yeah, and I gave one of those programs to you." Victor retorted, specifically doing so in English, "I spent a week finishing the choreography so you'd have a winning Senior debut, and you won Gold with it. I'll need a little more time to create something new from scratch, as well as getting my gear together for it, practicing it, and all the rest."

[I put together my Exhibition for the Final in a single night; costume, choreography and all. What's your excuse?]

"Perfection takes more than a night." The older skater said with a smile, setting the younger one's teeth on edge again

Yuri listened to the back and forth, trying to piece together what he could from just his partner's responses. The reporters ahead of him were doing much the same, though it was likely that most of them were trying to do so from Yurio's statements rather than Victor's. It gave the young skater's anxiety something the cling to, and he brought his hands up onto the table-top to lean against them and take the weight off his back.

[My Exhibition WAS perfect!] The Russian Punk argued loudly, getting up from his seat and
ignoring petitions from Lilia to sit down again, [I'm not the sad pig who had to had to skate a redemption performance!]

Victor had reached across the table with his left hand for one of the many water bottles as he tacitly listened to the whines of a jealous teenager, but conspicuously set it down again just in front of his student's right hand when he was done with it, not having even taken a drink from it, "What are you really mad about? You were clapping for him just like the rest at the end."

Green eyes went wide, but then narrowed again. He opened his mouth to speak, only for Yakov to cut him off.

[Yuratchka is just eager to compete against Victor.] The coach explained, whether or not it was true, and gave time for Lilia to wrangle the teen back into his seat. [They were rink-mates for a long time before Victor took time off. It just happened to be at the same time Yuri joined the Senior division. The delay in Victor's return to competition is unfortunate. We were all hoping to see them compete against each other in real time, not retroactively.]

[Victor, were you really considering joining the JSF?] A different reporter asked, catching the skater's attention.

[I never considered it at all.] He answered, turning his eyes away from the blonde next to him, [I skated their Exhibition as a guest. It was unplanned, and they basically offered it to me as a thank you for getting one of their own to the podium.]

Yuri could sense the shift in the direction of the inquiry, but it didn't make him feel any better. The whole thing felt more like an interrogation than a conference, and it made his throat dry. He pulled up the same water bottle that Victor had set in front of his hand a moment before and took a sip, but held onto the plastic after that, curling his fingers around anxiously.

[How can you possibly return to skating with the RSF though if you're coaching someone from another team?] Someone said pointedly, [Isn't that a conflict of interest?]

Victor tilted his head and smiled like he always did, [I don't feel that way.] He reached his left hand for a white RSF coffee-mug after that, taking a sip of it...and again, set the cup directly in front of Yuri's right hand, [Until I took time off, I was Russia's reigning Champion. I expect to continue that trend even as a returning competitor, despite staying on as Yuri's coach at the same time. I've been teaching him everything I know, so to me, it means there'll be two skaters in the field who want to surprise and impress the audience. The better Yuri gets, the more I'll push myself in turn. I want to win Gold as badly as he does. I'm not just going to let him have it because I want him to win, too...he still has to work for it, just like everyone else.]

[Don't you feel any shame for taking on a foreign athlete when your own team could use your experience?] Someone else asked, [Your talents would've been better served by coaching another Russian athlete, not a Japanese one. Now he poses the risk of taking medals for his own team.]

[Shame?] The skater echoed stiffly, [Why would I be ashamed? I choreographed Yurio's Short Program and he took Gold with it. His record-breaking SP score is the only reason he won.]

Lilia bristled and gave a dirty look. Yurio did the same, but for entirely different reasons.

[Yuri had scored over 100 at both the Cup of China and Rostelecom. The fact that he didn't break the triple digit barrier again at the Final was ridiculous, especially since he did the quad Flip at the end.] Victor went on, almost angrily, but tried to keep a level head about it, [But the point is, coaching Yuri doesn't mean I won't be available to my own countrymen. Being back at my home
rink will make me more accessible than ever. I don't think there will be any problems. I'm actually hoping that both Yuris will use the opportunity to push each other, so maybe Yurio can score even higher in his Free Skate and try to take that record, too. I'm sure the RSF will be very happy about having a 15-year-old who can score as well as I do at the end of my career. He's an exceptionally talented athlete, and I have no doubt that he'll be breaking records and setting trends long after both Yuri and I retire for good. Maybe he'll even let me choreograph something else for him in the future.]

[And the fact that you're engaged to marry your own student won't be a problem, either?] Another different reporter suddenly asked, causing the room to quiet down a little bit, [Many may question whether your presence at the St. Petersburg Skate Club might undermine the ability for the rest of your team to focus.] The figure went on, staring straight at the skater, [How can you even maintain credibility when you're going to marry a man? You can try to hide his ring with cups and water bottles all you want, but we all knew about it long before either of you ever sat at that table. You made all that exceptionally clear when you knocked him over in China, and kissed him for all the world to see.]

Yuri felt the energy change around him again, and he looked to see Victor's expression change again along with it.

[You've embarrassed the Russian team, and Russia itself.]

[That's uncalled for.] Yakov finally interrupted, standing from his seat and pointing at the figure, [We should be celebrating Victor's return to the ice, not lambasting him for things that have nothing to do with it.]

[President Putin signed an order banning the propaganda of nontraditional relationships ahead of the Sochi Olympics. It's not uncalled for to question the mental stability of an athlete who claims to represent Russia, while at the same time flouting this nation's values.]

Voices and murmurs echoed throughout the room, and the energy was becoming oppressive. Victor was briefly speechless by the whole thing, but then he narrowed his eyes, [Fine. Then I'll quit the RSF and join Yuri on his team, and take all the Gold Medals for Japan instead.]

[DON'T YOU EVEN SUGGEST IT.] Yakov barked.

Yuri nearly jumped out of his seat to see things devolving so quickly; people were starting to shout questions from the floor even as athletes and coaches were arguing at one another at the table. Instead, all he could do was watch as it all turned dark; a pair of unexpected hands had gone over his glasses, pulling him back and away from his partner.

"Try not to react." A woman's voice said, "They get like this sometimes."

"M-Mila-san..."

[WILL EVERYONE JUST SHUT THE FUCK UP ALREADY?] Yurio finally interrupted, catching all of their attention. He turned those piercing green eyes on the reporter who had instigated it all, [How dare you question the skill of one of Russia's top skating talent. Can you skate his programs better than he can with just the power of your raging heterosexuality?]

Mila lowered her hands from Yuri's eyes, and he looked up to see where Victor and Yakov both were staring at the teen in shock. He turned his head slightly towards the woman still holding him back, though he kept his eyes forward, "What's going on?" He whispered.

"...I'm not sure yet...the reporter asked some really rude questions."
IDIOTS. This is figure skating.] Yurio barked on, [We dance on ice and wear flashy costumes! The only thing more gay than that is grappling in MMA, and I don't see anyone complaining about how homo that is even when one guy's got his nutsack in some other guy's face, or even worse, if they're grappling balls to balls. It's absurd that any of you are wasting your time on this. Victor brought home 5 consecutive Gold Medals from the Grand Prix, Russian Nationals, Euros, and WORLDS, and the thing you're worried about is how he gets his rocks off when he's off the ice? How about worrying that he might tear a meniscus or rupture a disc or something? You know...REAL THREATS.] The blonde was standing with one foot up on the table by then, the other on his chair, both hands stuffed in the pockets of his track-suit coat, [You should be on your knees thanking him for coming back! We have TWO CHAMPIONS in Russia now! But go ahead and be stupid! Make Victor want to leave again! I don't think Japan will care if they suddenly have two Champions on the roster! They sure didn't care when Katsudon declared his super-gay love for Victor on national television a few months back!]

The room was silent after that, and Yuri could see that his coach was a bit slack-jawed at the outburst.

Yurio stepped on top of the table and then kicked off, landing in front and looking back at his team, then at the lone Asian in their ranks, "Let's go. The conference is over. ...What a clusterfuck."

Victor was quick to stand after that, pulling his partner with him and grabbing his coat from the back of his chair as the rest of the team disembarked from the table. Slate eyes caught sight of the Russian Tiger making a threatening gesture at the offending reporter while they passed, lunging unexpectedly just to make the man jump. The silver skater just pulled his fiancé to his opposite side, putting himself between the media and his heart.

"What just happened? What was that all about?" Yuri asked desperately, "Why did Yurio get so angry all of a sudden?"

The Russian's terse expression gradually softened as the whole thing sank in, and they'd escaped the clamor of media mob into an adjacent hallway. Yakov and Lilia had both started lecturing Yurio about his outburst, but he just looked annoyed and ignored them.

"He stood up for us...sort of." Victor explained quietly.

"Stood up for us...?" The younger skater echoed in confusion, "From what? Why did that whole thing turn into a yelling match?"

"Same reason you left the onsen that time after we did 'Aria' at the Ice Castle, among other things..."

Yuri looked down and away, clutching at his ring-hand nervously, "...I told you I should've stayed home."

"But I wanted you to come." Victor retorted quietly, looking up towards Yakov, and watching briefly as Yurio rolled his eyes from the continued double-sided lecture.

"And I wanted you to come to the JSF conference when they made me do my theme announcement earlier in the year, too, but you wouldn't."

"I didn't want to take attention off of you again like I did at your Regional competition." The silver figure said, drawing in a sharp breath as he slid his arms into his long-coat

"Like I just did to you?"
Yakov stepped closer after that, looking up at his reinstated student, "Don't think too much into what they said, Vitya." He advised, "It's not worth it. Just prove them all idiots by taking Gold at Worlds again...it'll be your 6th year running, so they can't complain."

"If they even let me go at this point."

"You're going." The coach said stiffly, "So plan accordingly. They might not give you the same kind of press coverage as they used to but they can't ban you from going."

"Yeah..."

Yuri's brow furrowed to hear it, looking between the two coaches anxiously.

"Let's just get the Hell out of here already." The Russian Punk said suddenly, "We all have better shit to do than get our pants in a twist over one guy. I have to go buy food for Potya anyway." He turned on his heel and gestured down the hall with a nudge of his head, "Well?"

"Yurio..." The black-haired skater said quietly, looking over at him. Before much else could be said or done, Yuri had latched both arms around the teen from behind.

Yurio was dead silent for a moment, but then shrieked, "I DIDN'T GIVE YOU PERMISSION TO-"

"Spasibo."

The pair were quiet, but the blonde continued to glare over his shoulder, barely visible to the Japanese skater past the rim of his dark-colored hood.

"I know it was hard on you for Victor to leave Russia so suddenly last year. You came all the way to Hasetsu to make him come back home, only to leave again empty handed anyway." The older figure stated solemnly, letting Yurio free again so as to look at him straight on, "You had years of expectation that you'd get to compete against him when you finally entered the Senior bracket, and I inadvertently took that away from you by getting Victor to be my coach the very year you got there. It wasn't intentional, but I am sorry for it."

"Forget it." Yuri said curtly, "I don't need to compete against him directly to score better than him. I'll surpass all his records before long. I already told him that it didn't matter if he was around."

"I know." The older figure answered, "But in a way, it does. Your relationship with Victor was different from mine because you both skated for the same team, and all I did was admire him from a distance. But I can tell that he's important to you in some way. I don't want to come between you guys just because I'm here." He explained nervously, but then bowed his head a little, "My...my mom taught him how to make katsudon before we came to St. Petersburg. Maybe you can come over some time and he'll make you one."

Yurio was a bit surprised at those words, but his acknowledgement was short-lived and barely earned a grunt in response. He turned and started to walk away, "You can thank me by giving me a good challenge at Worlds. If you don't or can't keep up, I'll be pissed that you bothered coming to St. Petersburg in the first place and wasted all our time."
Though Yuri had been awake for over an hour already, leaving the comfort of two big blankets, and the warmth of his fiancé, was unthinkable. He quietly pushed to sit up against the headboard with a few pillows behind himself, letting Victor's arm slide down his front to rest against his lap, the other still under his lower back, and brought his knees up to rest his right hand against while looking at his phone. His left arm slid over his partner's head and upturned shoulder, setting gently on his back, thumb stroking back and forth slowly. His coiled-up ear-buds were clicked into the phone soon after, and he quietly listened to some music while he checked the Instagram feeds.

He deadpanned the screen when he started seeing video-posts featuring the melt-down at the Russian Skating Federation conference from the day before, and he nervously clicked into one when he saw that it featured subtitles. One hand slid up to the center of his chest, trying to calm his heart since he knew what was coming already, to some degree, but he clicked Play anyway.

Footage was shot from somewhere in the center of the room, giving Yuri a clear view of the back of a certain reporter's head. He found his prior assumption correct about what was being said prior to the RSF noticing he was in the room, but it was surreal to watch the entire thing fall apart after he was told to join the team at the high table. It was especially weird to still see Victor putting the water bottle, and then the coffee mug, in front of his hand, but when the offending journalist started talking, and Yuri was able to read the translation of what he'd been saying, as well as his partner's responses, it made a pit grow in his stomach.

_The last thing I ever wanted was to cause Victor trouble in his efforts to come back to competitive skating, but this whole time I was only thinking about the way he'd have to divide his time between me and himself. If us being together is going to rock the boat like this...then..._

When Yurio finally made himself known in the midst of it all, Yuri's eyes were wide, and all the angry butterflies in his stomach were scared away. He watched in wide-eyed amazement at the things the teen was yelling, though he balked a little when his own 'super-gay' declaration on Japanese National television came up. He'd twitched forcefully enough that Victor stirred next to him, pulling his arms inward in a tight, cat-like hug around his core, but then released again, and the Russian buried his face in the space between Yuri's side and the pillow just beneath him with a half-groaned sigh.

The young skater was unsure if his partner had actually woken up in that moment and was just trying to go back to sleep, or if he had just moved _in_ his sleep. He wasn't about to go poking and prodding just to find out, in any case. That would be Makkachin's task, and the big fluffy woofer came in almost as if on cue then...with his food-dish in his jaws.

Yuri's eyes went wide yet again, and he frantically tried to shoo the dog away by brushing his hands through the air, but those soulful brown eyes just looked back at him in confusion. Makkachin lowered his head down and set the dish on the carpet...then rose his head back up again and sat down. The skater was petrified, seeing the drool hanging down from the pupper's mouth.

Then the bark came.

Victor didn't budge.
Another bark, followed by a pitiable whine, and the dog leaned down to pick up the dish again. He took the two steps forward to get his front paws on the edge of the bed and nodded the bowl around before dropping it on the bed behind his human's back and barked again. The silver Russian groaned quietly and cringed in his half-sleepy haze, but Makkachin reached a paw out and poked at his person's back clumsily through the blankets and whined again.

Yuri just watched in amused silence, pulling the ear-buds out to wrap the cable around his phone and set the whole thing aside, "I think he's hungry."

"...\textit{Whattimeisit...?}" The older skater mumbled.

"Nearly ten."

"\textit{AH!}" Victor was up with a start, and sent the metal bowl flying from the blankets to land on the floor and roll away, bouncing lightly off the nearby wall before rolling to a stop upside down, "We should've been up a while ago!"

"I was." Yuri mused, leaning forward to wrap his arms around his legs, resting his cheek over his knees since his partner had let him go, "I didn't want to wake you up though."

"But everything \textit{starts today}!"

"...Everything...starts?" The younger figure lifted his head again, his smile turning to a glance of confusion, "What are you talking about?"

"\textit{CHRISTMAS STARTS TODAY.}" Yuri gave an incredulous look, "...Christmas was like 2 weeks ago. It's your birthday? We were in Hasetsu still?"

"\textit{NO, ORTHODOX CHRISTMAS.}" The Russian's arms were up in the air for dramatic effect, but he gave a look anyway, "...Don't you know...?"

"...No?"

Blue eyes blinked, but then got watery from excitement, and the silver skater reached under the blankets to retrieve his fiancé's hands, pulling them forward and dragging Yuri around in the process, "This is perfect, then! Orthodox Christmas is a HUGE DEAL here! I can spend all week showing you around! It'll be easy to forget about everything that happened yesterday!"

"...All week?" Yuri echoed, "Christmas is a \textit{whole week} here?"

Victor smiled brightly, getting more excited as the seconds passed, happily leaning in over where he held their hands together to kiss his partner, "\textit{Mh. Until Orthodox New Year! This is going to be amazing! I can't wait to show you!}""...There's an Orthodox \textit{New Year}?"

"Yeah!" The Russian started stretching his legs towards the edge of the bed, getting Makkachin excited in his own right, and pushed up to stand, "Let's get ready and go! The Christmas markets in St. Petersburg make that one in Barcelona look like a kids' show! \textit{And} you'll be able to try the hot wine this time!"

Yuri was still surprised at the whole thing, watching his partner hop up and leave the room, utterly naked, but with something of a bounce in his step, stopping only to collect the dog's food bowl on
He was pretty upset after the conference yesterday. Seeing him this excited about Orthodox Christmas will be a nice change of pace.

The excitable Russian practically had a whole ensemble just for the occasion; a dark silver suit with a thick white long-coat overltop. He wrapped a woolen white scarf around his neck and shoulders, and topped his head with a fluffy white ushanka. Black gloves went onto both hands, and while probably not the most weather-appropriate thing, black leather boots on his feet.

"The party technically started last night." He was explaining as Yuri was putting his own cold-weather gear on; his same jacket and scarf from Barcelona, but with a thick grey hoodie underneath, the hood poking out to cover his head, much like Yurio usually did but not intentionally mimicking him, "But that part of the celebration is super churchy, with Masses held all around the city to wait for the first star to appear. The New Year's party is the really big deal around here, but I like to have fun for the whole week leading up to it. It's usually the only mid-season break I take."

The younger figure pulled on some gloves as well, flexing his fingers to make sure they were on right before turning to his partner, "Where do we go first?"

Pavlovsk Park was a ways south of the city, but it was well worth the wait to get there. By 2pm, the pair were sitting in the back of a Troika; a sledge drawn by three horses...quickly. Snow slid under them at a break-neck pace, the wind leaving their noses and cheeks pink as it whipped past. Yuri was absolutely terrified, but at the same time, thrilled. He held the top of his hood down to keep his ears protected, but before long, felt the warm fluff of a hat being squished down on top of it. When he turned aside, silver hair was lashing in the wind, perfectly accenting crystal blue eyes and pale-but-rosy skin; Victor was having the time of his life.

The horses' hooves thundered against the snow, galloping at full speed. The perfectly aligned trees along the wide roadway went by like huge pegs in a geometric maze, passing through one another as the sledge slid by.

The inside of Pavlovsk Palace was no less impressive, although significantly less adrenalin-pumping. Every wall held a painting; some huge, others in clusters where they were much smaller. Fireplaces dotted random walls, pillars between rows of innumerable windows held up elaborately decorated vases or candelabras. Golden chandeliers hung from the ceiling in prominent locations, flanked by candle-mounts held up by arrays of delicate chains, which in turn were separated by the presence of floor-to-ceiling green-marble pillars.

By the time they made it to their third and final stop for the day, the cruel winter sun was already setting. However, in lieu of daylight, St. Petersburg shone on its own; a dazzling array of Christmas lights coming to life along the streets, many even suspended in the air above sidewalks. The sound of music and revelry was coming into earshot as the pair walked along, and soon, the full sight of the Pionerskaya Square Christmas Market was visible.

"There's a few different set-ups like this around the city." Victor explained, eyes up at the glittery display, a backpack hanging off of one shoulder, "But this one has a skating rink."

A knowing expression cast across the younger figure's face, "...I was wondering why you packed our blades. Ikimashou!"
The rink was rather small, maybe only a quarter the size of a competition rink, but it was still smooth ice, and that's all it needed to be. A pair of gold blades set down on it first, followed by standard chrome-silver, the duo making their way out normally like all the other revelers. Under all their winter gear, it was hard to tell who either of them was, especially since Victor had taken his hat back and all his silver hair was hidden under the white fluff, save a tuft that came out over his left eye.

Yuri saw groups of other people linking up arms or holding to each others' hands for support, many being new to the ice and needing the balance. So, he took it upon himself to use it as an excuse to do the same with his partner, who to that point had not taken his hand since leaving the house.

"I'll just pretend I can't skate or something." The younger figure suggested quietly, sliding his gloved hand into the inside bend of his partner's elbow, letting the silver Russian pull him along, "No one will make a fuss again like yesterday if everyone thinks you're just making sure I don't end up on my butt."

Victor had still glanced around nervously when he felt it, but hearing the words made sense, and he nodded, letting himself enjoy the contact for what it was. His nervous expression changed over to the happy, fun-loving look he normally had, and he relished in the game of tugging his partner along the frosted glaze of ice, surrounded by hundreds of other people who had no idea who either of them was.

They skated easy laps around the makeshift rink for about 15 minutes before the sound of a familiar voice called out their names from somewhere in the crowd.

"Victoookkooorrr! Yuuuuuuuuriiiiiii!"

"Uh oh..." The Russian lifted his head, "...Baba Yaga cometh."

"That's not nice!" Mila barked from the other side of the rink-wall, practically clambering over it as she shook a fist at the laughing skater.

Yuri let himself be pulled along as Victor went over to where the red-head was trying to get onto the ice, dragging a toe-pick to slow down as they got nearer.

"I suppose it was only inevitable that we'd run into someone we knew." The Russian mused, offering his other elbow to her so she could cross the wall without falling off of it, "Are you on your own?"

"I was with Yuri, but he vanished around 30 minutes ago." She explained, taking the arm and gliding onto her blades, "Nice hat, by the way."

Victor waved his head back and forth, as though tousling his hair, "Setting trends all across the city."

The woman laughed quietly to herself, but then reached up to snatch it off his head, sticking it on her own instead, "Thanks for keeping it warm for me!"

The silver Russian just blinked a few times in surprise, his ears getting pink quickly where the cold air could get at them suddenly. His hair was disheveled and unkempt...but that didn't stop the domino effect behind them as they slid around the ice. Yuri heard the first gasp, then the shriek, a yell, three people collapsing on the ice, then a group of four after that as he turned around to see what was going on. More novices were falling on their backsides in an attempt to stop before colliding with the growing pile, while slightly-more-seasoned skaters managed to get around it.

"O boże!" They all heard, the trio now stopped to look back at the train-wreck in their wake, "O Gospodi, éto Victor!" Someone else called, pointing a shaky hand at the rough-looking silver skater.
from where they'd all fallen on the ice. Someone nearby was trying to push themselves up onto their hands and knees, but were still looking at the trio, "Alkash!"

"What are they saying?" Yuri wondered, leaning in and holding his free hand up to shield his voice.

"Everything from 'oh my god,' to calling someone a drunk, though I don't know if they're referring to me, or us, or one of the people they ran into." Victor answered, lifting his right hand briefly to set his hair back into place.

"...Is this my fault?" Mila wondered suddenly, holding both hands to the silver skater's arm as she watched the group starting to clamber back to their blades, "I pulled your hat off and suddenly everyone freaked out."

"Maybe that makes it my fault then." Victor shrugged, turning fully around to face the flustered group, "Allo~"

"AHHH! Èto dejstvitel'no Victor!" One of the ladies on the ice shrieked in disbelief, grabbing for a male companion right next to her and hugging him so tightly that he struggled to get free again while she giggled incoherently.

"I guess the jig's up." Yuri huffed, "Are you going to do a little dance so we can carry on, or...?"

Someone else in the skater-pile gasped after that, pointing straight at the Asian, "Èto tože Yuri!"

"Only if you do, too." Victor laughed, slipping forward on the ice to start helping people back to their feet.

Once the seething mass of fangirls, fanboys, and assorted collateral damage were back up on their blades and moving away, the silver skater moved backwards towards the center of the rink where it was clearest. He could see the eyes of most people on him at that point, even people who were beyond the rink wall and who'd only heard the screaming and come running. Only one blade scratched across the frost as he watched and listened to the murmur all around, moving backwards as though practicing the most basic moves in the field, one arm wrapped around himself while the other balanced an elbow on it, a finger on his lip. After a moment, he shrugged and smiled, deciding to give them a little taste as recompense for the pile-up his recognition caused. His free leg swung out a little further from himself as a silent gesture that he was going to do something, and people started making more room, keeping their small kids closer to the edge of the rink so they wouldn't wander across and get kicked.

Yuri had moved off with Mila to watch from the crowd, and he leaned closer to her, "Does he get recognized a lot here, too?"

"This place might as well be called St. Viktorsberg." She laughed, "He's been on television here so often, either as part of some RSF documentary about skating, or as the feature of any given news station's sports headline. A lot of networks around here are run by the state, too, and since professional skaters are sponsored by it, they kind of own him. They tell him to jump, and he asks how high and in what direction."

"That sounds kind of depressing..."

Victor had built up a bit of momentum by then, and leaned far over to show off a basic camel spin.

"It's not all bad." Mila turned slightly and took the older skater's arm like she'd done with her rink-mate a few minutes before. The silver legend had twisted into a low sit-spin variant, one heel gliding out from center while an arm went up above himself, "He gets exposure from the state events he's
dragged into, so then private companies see him, and they want a piece of him, too. By the end of it, all the stuff he basically has to do for free comes back as profit somewhere else down the line. Call it the 'reverse Victor Nikiforov loyalty card'...he'll do one thing for the RSF for free, and get 3 paid opportunities for his trouble."

"...I guess that explains how he has so much extra income. I was starting to wonder how he was going to afford all the expensive stuff he says he wants to have...like flying first class everywhere, instead of taking the ISU's voucher for tickets to fly Economy."

Victor moved up into a tall scratch-spin, both arms up above himself as he became a white and silver blur on the ice.

Mila just chuffed a laugh, "Yeah...he's high maintenance, that's for sure. But at least he lives within his means. He doesn't even have credit cards...just his one bank card."

"Have you known him a long time?" Yuri wondered, eyes moving from his fiancé to the woman standing next to him.

"A bit longer than our Yuri has, at least, but not by much."

"Does he have family in St. Petersburg? Or anywhere in Russia?"

The crowd around them had started moving again as they clapped and cheered, so the two skaters pushed off to avoid becoming speed-bumps. Victor was still in the center of the rink, giving a bit of attention to some fans who'd approached.

"Family?" Mila echoed, putting a finger on her lip and looking up in thought, "I'm not sure, actually. I'm guessing not though, since none has ever turned up for any reason. It's always been just him."

"He's been really evasive when I've asked about it." Yuri explained, "Acts like he doesn't hear the question."

"He's aloof like that. Sometimes I think he plays dumb so people don't expect much of him, but then he creates these masterpiece performances, and I can't help but be reminded that he's still a genius in his own way." The redhead said quietly, passing by the front of the Russian as they went around the tiny rink, then turned her head to face forward again to watch where she was going, "He may not be an intellectual, but he's smart in a lot of other ways. He's got a huge heart, and he cares a great deal about the people around him, even complete strangers...but he's pretty secretive, too. If he doesn't want you to know something, you won't."

"He's given me nuggets here and there, but nothing that really makes any sense." The older skater said, "The best I ever got out of him was him saying that 'family' meant a lot of negative things to him. I've been wondering if something happened to him in the past, but he just...refuses to discuss it."

"That sounds like him." Mila mused, "He resets himself every so often so he can approach problems with a fresh perspective, and he does that with everything, not just skating." They were coming around the small rink again, and Victor was getting closer with every blade-scratch forward, "I wouldn't worry too much about it, Yuri." She offered, looking straight at him and patting his arm where she held to it, "If you didn't know anything about it this whole time he's been coaching you, then he won't think you need to know later, either. He's already packed up that box and put it away on a high shelf somewhere. Maybe it's a box of bad stuff, or maybe it's just mind-numbingly boring...who knows? He doesn't think it's important. The memories he's making with you now mean way more to him than anything that happened 20 years ago."
"Hey!" Victor called out suddenly, waving a hand as he skated to catch up, and slid an arm around his partner's back as he got closer. "We should go get that hot wine now!"

Victor's little red Audi came to a stop in the attached garage, snow trailing in with the tires as it moved up the driveway and dragged it onto the concrete floor. Yuri pushed the passenger-side door open, but found it close on him again suddenly, and his toasted mind didn't notice until he'd banged his forehead against the window. The slender Russian laughed and moved to pull the door open from the outside, watching the garage door close when he clicked the button on his keys, and then pushed the car door closed again once his partner was clear of it.

"Let's get you inside."

"Let's get you inside." The blitzed young skater echoed, stumbling in with an arm barely holding onto the figure, and a dumb-happy look on his flushed face.

Victor did his best to get his fiancé out of his cold-weather clothing, even with Makkachin bouncing around them excitedly, "Hang on, hang on...I'll feed you in a minute." He laughed, settling his inebriated lover on the big blue couch before reaching down to ruffle the poodle's ears affectionately, "Come on, then. Dinner time for Mah-kah-chiiiiin~!

The flufferbutt barked and bounded around the side of the couch, heading for the kitchen just behind it, tail wagging frantically as he paced by his food dishes. When food and water were finally replenished, the silver skater cleaned up the mess...but then heard a loud thud, and a quiet moan after it.

"...Yuri?" Victor wondered, an eyebrow raised slightly as he came up behind the couch, seeing just beyond the edge of the seats where his partner had rolled off of it and landed face-down on the floor, feet in the air where his knees had been bent, but otherwise flat. The Russian gave half a laugh, shook his head, and moved around to the front to help the man up again, reaching down to settle a hand on the skater's back as he crouched on one knee, "You okay?"

"...Floors are...hard..." He answered tepidly.

"Yes indeed." The older figure laughed, moving his other hand down after that to grasp under the man's shoulders and hoisted him up, pushing him back until he could sit on his knees and hold himself up, "Oh, you have a red spot on your face where you hit the hardwood." He grinned, pointing at it and then booping it with one finger.

"Ow...quit it..." Yuri whined incoherently, only to look up with those drunken eyes and laugh as well, "...Did you know...that...you're really hot...?"

Slate eyes blinked at the sudden bluntness of the younger skater's words, but as Victor looked on and smirked, "You're really drunk."

"I'm not that drunk." The younger skater contested, "I just had a really good time."

"You rolled off the couch."

"I only had two glasses."

"They were kind of big and you hadn't eaten before you drank them."

"Oh c'mere I wanna look atchu..." Yuri slurred, leaning forward and tossing both arms over the
Russian's shoulders, squishing their faces together in what might've been meant as a kiss, but hadn't quite managed to become one.

It all reminded Victor of the drunken escapades of the Sochi Banquet, especially when the drunken figure started rubbing against him rather insistently. All the hapless skater needed was to lose the pants and get a tie to wrap around his head. Unlike back then, however, the Russian wasn't just looking on in confusion, arms pinned to his sides by a tight hug. His arms were free, and the man's gyrating was causing something to stir in him. Two more rolls and the Russian couldn't force himself to be the voice of reason anymore, letting his partner push him onto his back on the floor.

When they were down, Yuri paused, lifting his head and looking down with those hazy brown eyes, "Be my coach, Victor..."

"I am your coach..."

He lowered down a bit on his elbow, a few fingers weaving through disheveled wisps of grey hair, the other sliding down the Russian's chest and over to his side, curling around his waist, "Noooo...I mean...be my coach...in love...!"

The look on Yuri's face was identical to his drunken-Sochi-face...the face that the silver legend fell in love with; tired, messy, giving a half-incoherent look...but at the same time, honest, needy, and longing for him. Blue eye shut for a moment, and Victor shook his head briefly, looking up again after, "...Are you sure?"

"I thought about it...during my last Short Program..." Yuri insisted, moving to get one leg over his fiancé's slightly-parted thighs, "I want..." He went on, slower than before, pushing off the elbow that held him up above the floor, and crawling in over top of his partner, settling over his hips deliberately, "I want you...all of you... And I want you to have all...of me..."

Victor just huffed a nervous laugh, "...You don't know what you're saying."

"Vicooooorrrrr!" The younger figure whined, rocking side to side where he was perched on his fiancé's lap, only adding to the friction, "You hardly drank anything at all earlier!"

"I had to drive."

"Have some fun with meeeeee!" Yuri pleaded, fingers moving down towards the dark-grey suit-pants were buttoned, and undoing them, "I can tell you want to!"

"Of course...you're doing things to me..." The Russian huffed, only to feel his laughter catch in his throat as an eager grip took hold of him. His voice changed to giving out quiet gasps, his head turning slightly against the floor, bringing up one hand to put a knuckle to his lip, "Y-Yuri..."

The younger skater leaned forward, setting his left hand palm-down on the hardwood next to his fiancé's side, just under where the man had brought his arm up, and gazed down on him affectionately, "Victor..."

Each pull and gentle twist sent a warm, almost electrical pulse through the silver legend's core, rising up to his heart to encircle it, then fading again. His breathing became more ragged, and quiet gasps were turning to more emphatic moaned grunts of pleasure. He could've lost himself in the feeling, if not for his partner's words still rattling around in his brain, so he tilted his head around again to look forward. Sultry eyes gazed back at one another...and Victor was convinced. His hands went up around the man's head, cupping gently as they pulled him back down into a deep kiss, hips starting to roll under where Yuri still had a hold on him.
Clothing couldn't come off fast enough. Victor pushed up to sitting, reluctantly stopping everything else so he could undo the buttons of his suit-coat and shrug out of it, hands then moving swiftly at the smaller buttons of his regular shirt. All the while, Yuri had one hand set gently on his cheek, continuing the string of kisses as his other hand worked at center. The button-down shirt was gone a moment later, pants and underwear barely being pushed far enough away to be out of the way. Victor fell back down to the floor again, dragging his partner with him, hands moving between them to start working at the second set of clothes.

Reluctantly, Yuri stopped for a moment to undo the zipper on his hoodie and cast it off, leaving just a t-shirt between his partner and his own skin. That didn't last long; Victor abandoned his query to pull the t-shirt away, sliding his hands from front to back and then to front again, still rolling his hips as though for dear life. When he'd gotten enough of his partner's bare chest to sate him for the moment, he pushed back up to sitting, and slid his hands down to the man's waist, moving to guide him up and off his lap.

The younger figure found himself pushed forward against the seat of the blue couch, and scrambled to grab at one of the pillows to his left, holding it tight in his crossed arms as he felt the Russian doing the rest. A belt-buckle clinked as it was undone, the cord rustling quietly as the leather was pulled through, then a button clicked, and a zipper was undone. Fabric jostled and was pushed away, and a few seconds later, Yuri could feel his fiancé's desperation pressing up against him. Arms went around his smaller frame as the Russian clung to his back, panting already, one hand going down between his legs to massage at that newly exposed flesh. Yuri gasped as he felt it, biting down on the edge of the pillow. With every squeeze and pull, he could feel his partner's length sliding up behind him, then down again, not quite trying to get in yet but wanting to. The Russian's hands continued to roam and squeeze, silver hair dragging against his skin as Victor kissed the back of his shoulders.

But then the moment came, and the length became the tip, prodding gently while trying to find the right spot. In that last, brief moment before he felt the push, Yuri suddenly wondered what he'd gotten himself into. It became painfully clear in that moment that neither of them really knew what they were doing, and with barely half the tip inside, Yuri yelped like a kicked dog and clenched up, pushing up onto his hands against the edge of the couch and pulling himself off of his partner in the process. He twisted where he'd risen onto his knees, faced his perplexed fiancé, and comically dropped to his side with a petrified look on his face.

"...Y-Yuri...?" Victor's voice was asking, though the stunned skater on the floor could barely hear it, "Yuri."

The moment was utterly and completely lost...especially when Makkachin came running over to find out why he'd suddenly screamed. The dog even started to lick his face to make sure he was okay, and with it, Yuri found himself stone-cold sober. Eyes were wide open and unblinking, but turned slightly to look past the dog, seeing the confused look on his partner's face, 
"...Sorry...sorrsorrsorrsorry...!"

"Hah?"

"Sorry! I can't! I couldn't! I thought I could but I can't!"

Victor blinked incredulously, watching his fiancé cringing there on the floor where he'd fallen, all but crying for the embarrassment of having gone so far only to bail at the last second. He sighed and moved to sit on the side of his leg, reaching over to set his hand against the younger figure's ribs, speaking to him quietly, "...It's fine..."

The hapless older skater spent the next 30 or so minutes consoling his inexperienced young partner.
"Maybe next time."
It was a strange feeling to wake up alone in bed for once, as it was a particularly rare thing at that point, but that's exactly how Yuri found himself. Not even Makkachin was around. He grumbled and rose to sitting, only to feel a slight discomfort as he did so...and remembered the night before. Hands went up to cover his face after that, "...I can't believe I did that..." He whined quietly. Fingers parted, and the anxious skater looked through them to see the lumps in the blanket where his feet were, "...Victor must be really upset with me..."

The big brown fluffer raised his head from where he'd been snoozing on the couch, and glanced up at where Yuri was starting to come out of the bedroom. The dog gave a low whine and a quiet bark, his tail starting to thump against the upholstery as the skater came closer. The anxious figure came up and scratched the poodle's head, and Makkachin leaned against the man's hip, eyes closed and savoring the attention.

"Ah, there you are." Victor's voice came, drawing the skater's attention. Nervous brown eyes lifted to the sound, and Yuri saw his partner in the corner of the kitchen, a newspaper folded in front of him that he was reading. A slow-cooker was on behind him, and the sweet smell of red wine and orange peel filled the air. A pale hand came up and waved the man over, and Yuri reluctantly stepped closer.

"I...I'm really sorry about...yesterday..." He said quietly, stopping a few feet away and looking down, one hand reaching across himself to hold pensively to the opposite arm, "I just..."

"Huh? Why are you apologizing?" The Russian wondered curiously, wedging the folded paper under one arm and moving closer, clad in just a fluffy bathrobe and slippers, "Yesterday was a lot of fun! I can't wait to do it all again with different stuff today!"

"But...I...I mean, after we got home, and I..." Yuri fidgeted nervously where he stood, keeping his eyes low.

Victor wouldn't let it go on though, and stepped into the younger figure's space, one arm going around the man's back as the other came up to place a gently hand loosely under his chin, lifting his face up. His thumb stroked at the skater's pale jaw-line, gazing adoringly into those brown eyes before closing his own and leaning forward to kiss him. Once, twice...then for a long time on the third pass, long enough for Yuri to finally let his guard down and put his own hands on him in turn. Crystal-blue eyes opened again and the Russian smiled, "Don't worry about it. You can say no at any time, even if we're in the middle of something. Don't ever forget it."

The younger figure's cheeks were still pink though, and his brow still furrowed, "I know, it's just..."

"It was probably for the best anyway." Victor mused, pulling the newspaper out from under his arm and flipping it over until he got to the page he was looking at before, "I hadn't thought about it until after you fell over, but we didn't have any lube at the time so it would've been a bit painful, even if
you were really relaxed from the hot wine. I don't want to hurt you, especially not on the first try."

Yuri had no answer to that, and simply drew in a sharp breath against his partner's neck, holding to him quietly.

"Look." The Russian said, changing subjects and holding up the newspaper, "Let's go here first."

"What is it?" The younger figure wondered, seeing Cyrillic writing everywhere, but noting an advert for something that looked like a jeweler's shop.

"I've worked with this shop for some of the accessories I use on my skating outfits, and I've known the owner for years." Victor explained, setting the paper down and reaching for his fiancé's right hand, holding it out to expose the ring, "I saw their ad in the paper and thought, we should go down there and get our rings engraved."

"...Engraved?" Yuri wondered, incredulously, "Aren't they okay as they are though...?"

The Russian gave a sweet smile, and turned to face his partner more evenly, "They're perfect...but you only bought the one yourself. We should do something with them together. Something we can both agree on, maybe the image of skates or a snowflake or something, on the inside of each band, but that crosses over to both of them so they'll be a one-of-a-kind matched set."

"...Your guy won't give us grief, will he?"

"She will be over the moon about us." Victor held fondly to his fiancé, "I had to wait for someone perfect, that's all! And I found that someone!"

"OH MY GOD VICTOR YOU'RE FINALLY GETTING MARRIED I CAN'T BELIEVE IT I THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING TO WASTE AWAY AND BEING SINGLE FOREVER I WAS SO WORRIED." The older woman was saying loudly and quickly, practically hopping up and down on her side of the counter.

Oh good, she speaks English... Yuri thought nervously, smiling through the waning anxiety of their arrival in the shop. Her accent's super-thick but at least I can understand what she's saying.

Victor held fondly to his fiancé, "I had to wait for someone perfect, that's all! And I found that someone!"

"HOW DID YOU MEET? HOW DO YOU KNOW EACH OTHER? HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN TOGETHER?" She went on.

She reminds me of Yuuko-chan and Minako-sensei, but in one person... Brown eyes turned up to the man next to him, wondering how he'd tell the tale.

"We've actually known of each other for years and years and years, but we never officially met until more recently. We've been engaged for just about 3 weeks now." He started, pulling Yuri closer to the counter to speak more casually, "He asked me to be his coach last year, so I decided to go ahead and do that. That's why I've been gone for so long."

"Oh! So he's the skater you coached?" She beamed warm green eyes at him and reached out her hand, "What's your name?"

"K-Katsuki Yuri." He answered nervously, bowing politely, "Er, I mean...Yuri. My name's Yuri. Not Katsuki. That's my last name."
"He's Japanese. They say their names in reverse order out there." Victor explained happily, "He won Silver at the Grand Prix Final, but he's going to win Gold at Four Continents and Worlds! He's amazing~!"

"I'm so excited!" The shop-owner turned on a heel, "But now you have to tell me! What brings you in? Are you putting in a new order? Things have been so busy around here since the fall, I've had a hard time keeping up. I didn't even hear that you'd come home again until the other day! I heard you were going back to competition!"

"Da. Yuri convinced me to get back into it for another year. But I'm actually here for something else today." The Russian said, moving behind his partner to hold their right hands up together, "We were wondering if you could put an engraving inside our bands."

The woman's eyes got huge and her expression lit up, "Anything! What do you want in there?" She started reaching under the counter for ring cases and order papers.

"We were thinking something like this..." Yuri chimed in, pulling a small piece of paper out of his coat pocket, and unfolded it on top of the glass display case. Thereupon was a drawing of two rings stacked together, Victor's slightly larger ring on top of his own smaller one, with three small pictographs traversing over both. One big 6-pointed snowflake that had one half crossing each band, and two smaller snowflakes, one to the right of the bigger engraving on Victor's band, and to the left on Yuri's.

The woman held herself up on an elbow as she examined the drawing, "Mh, yes, this should be a simple thing. We could have these laser-etched in an hour or so. Do you want to wait, or pick them up later?"

"We'll wait." They said at the same time, without hesitation.

It was nerve-wracking, but Yuri pulled his ring off and handed it to the woman once she was done filling in the carbon-copy paperwork, and watched as she immediately tied a thin line of wire around it, attaching it to a name-tag securely, and placed it into the first of the two velvet ring boxes. Victor's came off second, and she did the same to his, then took the drawing and both rings behind the counter and into the workshop behind the store's front-wall.

The horrible weird-feeling of having a naked finger was driving Yuri slightly stir-crazy, but he let himself be distracted by the banter between his partner and the shop owner. By the time their rings came back, Yuri felt like he knew the woman's entire life-story. A gruff, but thin older gentleman with a short-cut salt-and-pepper beard and waxed-to-points mustache came from the back room, carrying a small tray with the two velvet boxes on them, and opened them to proudly show off his work.

Victor beamed to see the etching on each individual band, but he quickly pulled them both out and held them together to see how the markings lined up, "Look, Yuri...!"

The younger skater leaned in close, holding fast to his partner's arm and leaning his chin against the man's shoulder, looking down at the two golden bands with their snowflake engravings, "Wow...! That looks really great!"

"And no one but the four of us will ever know about these." Victor went on, watching as Yuri reached over to take the top, bigger band into his fingers, and as he himself curled his fingers around the smaller one to bring it closer. They turned to face each other, and the Russian reached forward to take his fiancé's right hand, "These snowflakes are a symbol of the ice that brought us together, and will serve as a reminder in all the days to come."
Hazel eyes watched brightly as the gold was slipped back onto his finger, sliding into place in the slight groove that it had already made in his skin. When it was in place, Yuri reached for the Russian's right hand in turn, and slowly started putting the ring back into place there as well, "Everything on the ice is love."

The fingers of each hand wove together after that, and the two looked at one another adoringly, stepping into the kiss that they'd both so desperately wanted to have in Barcelona, but had denied themselves for reasons neither of them could truly put into words. The shop owner was clapping excitedly, stopping only to dry her eyes on a handkerchief, only to continue again as she watched them hug each other afterwards.

Victor turned to face the woman even as he held on, swaying Yuri back and forth gently, "I'm sure I'll be back soon. We're taking the week to celebrate Christmas with the city, but after that, I'll need to start putting together ideas for my come-back outfits. I'll need some razzle-dazzle from you guys for sure."

"You know where to find us!"

The silver Russian nodded, and let go of his fiancé only long enough to give the woman a friendly kiss on the cheek, "Da. Uvidimsja pozže."

Watching St. Petersburg's ballet performing 'The Nutcracker' wasn't quite enough to get Yuri's mind off the day's earlier events. He couldn't stop the small smile he let himself have even as they walked side-by-side through the streets to get to the Hermitage Imperial Theater, still a bit too nervous to touch once they'd left the jeweler's shop. But, within the intimate little space of the ages-old theater, once the lights were low and the performance in full swing, they let their guard down a little.

There were only 6 rows of curved seats in a half-circle around the stage, with red velvet cushions and back-rests on the off-white wooden stands. In the center, two rows of individual chairs, and in front of them, two more rows of red-velvet benches leading down into the orchestra area. The stage was flanked on both sides by two massive orange-granite pillars, many more of which went around the circular room, and hanging above them all in the center of the ceiling, a massive crystal-and-gold chandelier.

The performance had entered into the second half, and Victor had huffed a laugh to himself, leaning over slightly to where he'd held his arm over his partner's shoulders, "Did you know that I used to do ballet stage shows?"

"Eh? Really? When? What shows?" Yuri wondered, turning his head slightly, one hand on the Russian's leg where it was next to his, "I had no idea! It was never mentioned in skating magazines!"

"Da." Victor nodded, keeping his voice low as the orchestra went on around them, "Back during Juniors, right before I got really good with skating competitively. I played a few roles in this show, Sleeping Beauty, and a few others, as part of the ballet lessons Yakov had me do. It was required as part of my training."

"...Wait...so when you did 'The Sugar Plum Fairy' for the Junior World Championships...?"

The Russian smiled and nodded, "I did it as a thank you to my former instructors." He leaned in a bit further to kiss the man's neck while he was there, then pulled back again, "The last time I did ballet on stage, actually...uhm...10 years ago I think? I did this show, in this place, and I've come back to
"watch a few times, too."

"Wow!"

Victor laughed and was about to explain more, but someone next to him suddenly whopped him good on the side of his arm, making him yelp and cast his eyes aside. Yuri pulled his hand back immediately, watching nervously as his fiancé loomed over their audience-neighbor darkly, "Dlja čego èto!?"

"SHH."

Blue eyes blinked, seeing a well-dressed elderly woman gesture with both hands towards the stage, then held one finger in front of her mouth, an incredulous look on her face like she couldn't believe he'd still be talking. The silver Russian sat back down after that, feeling a bit sheepish, and coughed to clear his throat, "Prosti, požalujsta..."

"...Sorry, I'll shut up..." Yuri whispered nervously, balling his hands together on his lap.

Victor just tugged lightly on the man's thin wrist and got those fists to unravel, then pulled the one hand out again and set it on his leg where it'd been before, "Don't worry. I thought someone was going to give us grief again like at the conference. Was about to take them outside. I'll tell you about this ballet stuff later."

"VICTOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOORR!"

They both lifted their heads at the sound of the shriek, pausing where they were trying to leave the theater after the show had ended. When they saw a small herd of dressed-down ballerinas rushing their way, Yuri blanched, but Victor seemed excited. It looked like no less than 10 ladies, and at least 2 men, tried to bowl the man over with an onslaught of affection.

Other members of the small audience that were nearby when the 'assault' took place were trying to get away before being dragged into it, but Yuri found himself pressed up against a wall in surprise. He watched in shock as Russian words were thrown back and forth from the mass of performers, and then up to Victor himself, who seemed entirely too happy with his situation.

[Well well, look what the cat dragged in.] An older woman's voice rang, piercing the adulation with authority. The ballerinas and other dancers quickly made room, but were still excited, cutting a path between them and the instructor they all owed their skill to, [Victor Nikiforov.]

"Katya!" The silver Russian called out, trying to adjust his disheveled clothing, but then stepped forward through the crowd and kissed the immaculately dressed and primped instructor on each cheek, [I haven't seen you in years!]

[You've always known where to find me. What's your excuse for being gone for so long?] She asked, smiling but serious as she leaned forward for each kiss.

[You know, the usual...proving to the world why Russia is the best at everything.] He laughed, taking both of her delicate hands into his, but then taking one back to reach an introductory palm for his fiancé, "Yuri."

The nervous young skater pulled himself off the wall, but stepped through the crowd of ballerinas to take his partner's fingers and be brought forward.
The woman wondered, folding one arm over herself, the opposite hand going up to touch her cheek inquisitively. [It was big news all over Russia when you vanished last year. Is this the morsel you fled the Motherland for?]

The silver legend nodded enthusiastically, [His name is Yuri Katsuki. He's going to continue training under me here in St. Petersburg.]

[Is he worth your effort?]

[Oh definitely. We're planning a Pairs performance right now, actually! You know I wouldn't share the ice with anyone unless it was for some big team event, or I found someone worth dancing with.]

Yuri's confused brown eyes went between them, but he stayed quiet. As long as Victor looked happy though, he knew there was nothing to be worried about, even if he couldn't understand a lick of what was being said.

[You have always been selfish that way.] Katya agreed, [But he has that look on his face like he has no idea what's going on.]

[He doesn't speak Russian.] Victor laughed, "Right? Yuri."

"...Uhh...?" Was all the young skater could manage, "...Yyyyyesss...?"

"Ah, English. I should have known." The ballerina huffed, uncrossing her arms and holding her hand out to the Asian, "I am Ekaterina Chudov, but everyone calls me Katya. You may do the same."

"Oh." Yuri stammered, unsure what to do with the hand held out to him, since it was pointing out to him with the fingers facing down, instead of sideways like a handshake. He reached a nervous hand out and held to the fingers, but then felt Victor's hand under his elbow nudging it up, and he suddenly realized he was meant to kiss that hand rather formally...and he nervously did so, "I-It's very nice to meet you, Miss Katya."

"How did you ever get yourself wrapped up into being a coach, Vitya?" The woman wondered, casting her eyes over at the man standing next to them with an amused expression on his face, "You never seemed the sort to want to do such a thing."

"I had to. He called to me." He explained with a shrug, but then turned to hold his partner by the sides of his shoulders from behind him, "Yuri, this is my old ballet instructor! She taught me everything I didn't know I needed to be good at figure skating!"

"Oh, wow!"

"Did you ever take ballet instruction, young man?" Katya wondered suddenly, eyeballing the shorter figure softly.

"Y-Yes ma'am...I learned from Minako Okukawa."

"Oh! Minako!" She seemed to light up at the name, "I should have suspected, given that you are Japanese! How is she?"

"She's well. She has her own ballet studio in our hometown. I just refreshed my lessons with her a few months ago."

"Ah yes, she had said once that she wanted to make a school of ballet back home. Goodness...the
"last time I saw her was in Moscow, when she received her Benois de la Danse award some years ago. It is good to hear that she succeeded with her goals."

"Small world!" Victor mused.

"Indeed." Katya nodded, turning back to him, "So why did you decide to become a coach suddenly? You were doing so well as a competitor. I thought someone would have to drag you off a podium somewhere, and put you in a box so others would finally have a chance."

The silver Russian laughed nervously at that, "It's a long story...but Yuri copied one of my recent programs, and I just couldn't help myself. I went to Japan as soon as I saw it so I could teach him how to do it perfectly. You should've seen the look on his face when he realized I was there."

"Wait..." The ballerina stopped, putting her hands into a time-out formation, "You're telling me that...last year, when the news was going ballistic about you leaving Russia...you did so immediately after seeing a video of him dancing, and were already moved into his house before he even knew you were coming?"

Yuri chortled, but Victor got a weird look on his face, as though being reminded of something he'd forgotten. He smiled innocently, "When you put it that way, it sounds terrible...!"

"That's about what happened though." The young skater huffed a laugh, waving his hands around anxiously, "It's okay though...my house isn't a regular house. My family runs a hot-springs resort, so his staying there wasn't really that big of a shock. We have guests there all the time. It was just surprising because he's Victor Nikiforov, and Hasetsu is a long way away from St. Petersburg."

"I see." Katya eyeballed the young skater, seeing the gold band on his finger suddenly, and reached to take his hand in both of her own to look at it. She pulled up the thin glasses that had been hanging from a silver chain around her neck, and inspected it like an appraiser. She then let it go from her left hand, holding it only with her right, and turned her left palm up towards the tall Russian next to her, "Vitya, hand."

He just smiled like an idiot and held it up, "They're a matching pair!" He explained excitedly, turning his hand to offer it forward.

The ballerina nodded and looked back and forth between the two rings, "Mhm, mhm... Well..." She started, letting them both go. She then removed her glasses, and reached her right hand out to pet it against Yuri's shoulder, looking at him squarely, "You trained under Minako Okukawa, and caught the attention of this fool..." She thumbed towards Victor, "...I expect big things from you."

Oh boy... The young skater could feel himself starting to sweat under his shirt, and gave an uneasy nod, "Y-Yes ma'am...!"

**January 13**

"Here we go." The silver Russian was coming back from the kitchen with two steamy mugs of mulled wine, and handed one off to where his partner was already sitting on the big couch. Victor quickly reclaimed his spot in the one corner, three pillows behind his back, and brought one knee up as Yuri moved in closer behind it, wedging himself between the man's side and the back-rest.

"I almost feel bad drinking it. You've been making this stuff for hours."

"Then you better drink it!" Victor laughed, sipping at the mug himself, "...Some mulled wine is quick and easy, but some take way longer. Depends on the mood I'm in."
"What's your record?" Yuri wondered, breathing in the sweet and spicy smell before letting himself taste it. Cinnamon, allspice, nutmeg, honey, orange peel, and a small wedge of fresh orange that floated on top.

"...Fourteen hours? Started at dawn and went to after dusk. I must've made some 20 different kinds."

"I can't even imagine what called for that much wine-mulling."

"I just felt like it." Victor mused, letting one hand go of the mug so he could play with his partner's hair a bit, "I've pulled all-nighters at the rink before, too. When inspiration strikes, you just go with it...be it skating routines, or mulled wine recipes."

"Have you thought anymore about your new routines? For Worlds?" The younger figure asked, tilting his head back against his partner's chest.

"A little bit." The Russian shrugged, "I've been putting it off."

"Really? You said in Hasetsu that your inspiration was overflowing."

"I guess my brain decided to do other things with all that energy." He mused, "This last week has been a lot of fun. Doing all this same stuff by myself or with rink-makes is okay, but doing it all with you...it's been like a dream."

Yuri's face flushed, but he smiled and nodded in agreement, "Deshou? I don't think there's been a single thing we've done all week that hasn't somehow blown my mind. St. Petersburg is amazing."

"We'll do Moscow sometime, too. New Year's in the Red Square is pretty intense."

"So what's up with Russia celebrating Christmas and New Years twice anyway? Everything is doubled-up and backwards compared to what I'm used to."

"Yeah? Maybe you only celebrate half as often and on the wrong day." Victor teased, "I dunno, it's been this way forever to me. Catholics get their stuff in December, Orthodox folk get theirs in January...Russia's church follows a different calendar and the dates are later. When I first realized the discrepancy, I sat around for days wondering how so many people could get the date wrong on something they thought was so important. Then there was the difference between Santa Claus and Grandfather Frost, and how the rest of the world gave presents on Christmas but how Russia gave them on New Year's, and of course how Russia has a New Year's fir tree rather than a Christmas evergreen tree. Now a days, I just look at it and think...'oh well, 4 parties instead of 2.'"

"What about your birthday?"

The Russian paused, a lip on the edge of his mug of mulled wine as he thought. He gave another shrug and took a sip, "Up until I turned 25, it was still fun to celebrate it. Ever since though, it just feels like time is slipping by." He turned and kissed the black fluff of hair on his partner's head, but then dropped his own back down to the arm-rest and pillows, "When I turn 30, I swear, I will disown anyone who mentions it."

Yuri just gave a look, "Yeah, I remember the look on your face when Yuuko-chan said happy birthday before. I tried to tell her not to, but I don't think she saw me until after she said it."

"It's okay. I know most people don't see birthdays and think, 'yeah, that guy's one year closer to being dead.'"

"That's...morbid."
"It feels like a morbid occasion sometimes." The silver Russian sighed, "All that lost time."

"What do you mean? You've done pretty well for yourself, I'd say."

Crystal-blue eyes turned down again, and gazed on the young skater with fondness, but a sadness as well. "We've passed each other a hundred times over the years, and neither of us had any idea what we could be. We could've been together and married for years already." Images of competitions past were floating through his mind, imagining his partner there in place of someone else who had medaled.

Yuri turned his head and set it down against the man's chest, holding the mug of wine precariously on his stomach, "I don't know...that it would've worked out the same way under different circumstances."

"You don't think so?"

"It's impossible to know for sure."

Victor looked on for a moment, but then moved to set his mug on the floor, and reached for his partner's to do the same before wiggling down a bit to face him more evenly. He twisted onto his side, back towards the big television as it showed live coverage of the nearly-midnight affair in Palace Square. His free hand settled on the younger figure's side, and he nosed his face forward until he could feel tufts of spiky black hair against his skin, "You really don't think we would've worked out any other way...?"

Yuri's left hand came up, touching gently to his fiancé's worried face, "I think about all the reasons why we've worked out so far...and I think...if you had never found a reason to come and stay in Hasetsu, there just wouldn't have been enough face-time between us for anything to happen. Meeting for a weekend now and again...it's okay for having competition friends, but not...for what we have now."

"You underestimate me." The silver legend mused, nuzzling in closer.

It didn't take much more than that to convince the younger skater to let the man in, one leg going over the Russian's hip as his fingers touched gently to his partner's chin. He felt the older skater's legs trying to get between his own, stopped only by the back-rest behind him. Undeterred, Victor slid his hand up his partner's thigh and pulled the man closer, tilting just enough onto his back to make room to get his knee up all the way. Hands moved to the silver man's shoulders, kisses gentle but eager, moving from lips to neck as hands continued to roam. Shirts were starting to pull up, fingers seeking at newly exposed skin, the leg between the younger figure's thighs moving gently in a circular motion.

Victor nosed at his partner's blue frames, but then smirked quietly, kissed the man's forehead and started to move down. He twisted around carefully, holding deftly to the smaller man's side to set him down onto his back against the arm-rest, kisses continuing to trail down the man's neck and to his chest. He stayed there for a moment, giving attention to one pink nub as his hands moved down to free his partner from the tortures and confines of fabric, smiling as he heard the hiss of a sharp breath being drawn in once he'd gotten that flesh free. Mercifully, since neither of them had gone outside that day, all that stood between them and fun-time was the thin, stretchy material of sweatpants and t-shirts.

Yuri was helpless to the man's touch, his senses overwhelmed by the attention more often than not, and all he knew to do as Victor went lower was to paw at the man's shoulders or arms where he could still reach them. When he felt the hot, wet warmth of a mouth around him though, his hands...
came right back up again. It was just a few kisses at first, moving up the length of him and down again, then a tongue trailing back to the tip before a few fingers helped to lift him up for better access.

Nervous, half-whined breaths spurred the silver Russian on, determined to get his partner to be louder on every new occasion. He'd already made substantial progress on that end, especially in seeing how the anxious young skater didn't completely ball up into himself whenever he was touched. Arms that once clamped down on his chest, hands held over his mouth...Victor had seemed them slowly come away, leaving the lithe figure more open and relaxed.

He bobbed and stroked against that stiff length of flesh, his free hand trailing across his partner's stomach, feeling for every twitch and twist his partner made. After a time though, both hands were moved to a single united front, one helping massage while the other struck for new territory. He knew his efforts were noticed when the leg pinned between his shoulder and the couch's back rest suddenly clamped against him rather tightly, and Yuri himself gasped differently than before. A finger gently rubbed at the skin just under his tender bits, pressing against it like a soft button. Within seconds, there was a slightly different taste in his mouth, so he pulled back a moment to see what had happened...and his curiosity was confirmed. A clear fluid was coming out; something he'd known before, but not so early in their romps.

"Wh...why...did you stop...?" Yuri asked between breaths.

"Oh...was it good?" Viktor wondered, his attention redirected as the fingers working at the apparent fun-button went up to gather the fluid up on them, "I thought I'd try something different."

Dazed eyes looked on in confusion, "What...what you do is always good..."

"I want to try something else then." The Russian mused, moving to sit up a little straighter where he'd been lopsided against the seat-cushions.

"What do you want to do...?" Yuri's voice was sounding urgent, like he couldn't stand the gap in attention.

"Be easier to let me try it, and tell me if you like it or not."

"Oh, o-okay... Nhg...ekh!" The younger figure's body clenched up as he felt it; a finger had gone well below where he'd normally expected them, feeling at a spot that had been unhappy with the last attempt. But it didn't go in, it merely pressed and circled, stroking slowly, but then was lost in the return of all the previous sensations resuming. His voice quaked under the overwhelming pulses of warmth from his core, and although it still surprised him, feeling the finger go inside didn't spook him as much as their first attempt had. He cried out against it, the leg that pressed against his partner's shoulder hooked over it after that, his other leg pinned under the man's free arm, an elbow against his thigh where that hand was still working at center.

It went on like that for a moment, but Victor pulled back, continuing on only with the 'come hither' motion of his finger, "Is it okay?" He asked.

"I...uh..."

I can feel it... The Russian thought, Am I not touching it right? ...Or is he one of those men that gets nothing out of it? He wondered nervously, "Yuri...feedback..."

"I don't...I don't know...it feels weird..."
"Does it feel good-weird?"

"...W-what...is it supposed to feel like...?" He was gasping still, but wasn't trying to pull away like last time.

"Everything should feel much more intense than normal." The silver skater explained pensively, **Please react... If it doesn't feel good then how can I justify wanting to go all the way later...?**

"O-Oh...is that...what happened...?" Yuri finally acknowledged, "I didn't...realize that was...was it..."

Relief washed over the older figure, and he went back to giving his fiancé his best; mouth, both hands, and the gentle sweep of his bangs across the man's skin. When the moment finally came, the silver Russian could tell he'd achieved his goal, as his fiancé did everything short of *scream* when it happened. The man's entire body trembled terribly, and continued to do so for nearly half a minute, though by then, Victor had moved back in over top of him, wedging his arms under the lithe figure's back to hold him close. He kissed at his partner's neck and chest, feeling desperate but weak fingers clambering at the skin of his back, twitching as he joined their centers together again and started rocking his hips.

"V-Victor..." Yuri panted, nuzzling cheek-to-cheek with his partner, his right hand coming up to weave through the Russian's silver-grey hair as his ragged breathing went on.

The older skater pulled back a moment, and nosed his fiancé affectionately, only to be surprised by how the man pulled himself up to kiss him. Slate eyes were wide, even as the weight pulled away again and he was able to gaze down at his flushed partner, "Yuri... I didn't think you'd...want to do that after I-

"*I don't care.*" He answered, still trying to catch his breath, even as his body continued to twitch with each soft and gentle thrust between them, "*I just want to kiss you, all the time.*"

The surprised look changed to a loving smile, and the Russian found his cheeks flushed to hear the words. He lowered himself down again, holding his partner tenderly, pressing close against his frame, "*I do too.*"

Chapter End Notes

Final Edits currently end here. All chapters after this may have some confusing content or might not perfectly align with things stated earlier on, but it's minor stuff and doesn't take away from the overall story. I'm slowly working my way forward.
Yuri quietly cursed himself, landing the Flip without a problem and wishing he'd done the same when it mattered most.

*If I hadn't touched down with my hand, I'd have scored higher in the Short Program and would've won Gold despite Yurio's higher GOE modifiers... Why did I score so low in the SP anyway!? Where did I lose **10 points** from!?*

He lifted his head and glanced around, trying to get his mind off the torment of that one mistake, "No one from the Russian Team is out here today. I wonder if something's going on that even Victor doesn't know about?" He shrugged and moved on, practicing some of the harder combination moves, trying to imagine being at Four Continents or Worlds. More often than not, he found himself thinking back on his previous events...Cup of China, Rostelecom, the GPF itself, Nationals...even the Japanese Qualifiers that preceded all of it.

*Things were so much easier when I had Victor as just my coach...but with him coming back to competition, it's like I can't focus. I'm anxious to see him skate again, but so scared that I won't live up to his expectations... How can I though? He's the greatest skater of our generation. How can I possibly compete against that?*

"Yuri!" He heard the man's voice calling from rink-side, "Bring it in!"

Nodding, he clicked his heels and started skating for where the silver legend was standing in one of the rink's many exits, and noted that he had a notepad in one hand, "So you've finally put your program to paper?" Yuri wondered, coming to a stop just a step or two away.

"Oh, this?" Victor held it up, "No, I was tracking what you were doing. What was all that, anyway? You started and stopped half a dozen times. I saw bits of both your programs out there but nothing consistent."

"I know, I'm just...distracted."

"You know where that leads." Victor mused, reaching out to ruffle the shorter skater's hair a little before sliding his finger along the man's jawline, tracing to his chin, "What's wrong? You're not still upset about the RSF conference are you? That was almost 2 weeks ago already."

"That does still get under my skin a bit, yes...but..." The younger skater sighed, "Just now, it occurred to me that Four Continents will be the last time you come to competition with me as just my coach, before we're both at Worlds and start competing against each other again. I mean...I know that's what I wanted, but...maybe it just took a while for the fact to really settle in. I'm nervous about competing against you. I don't know if I'll be able to live up to my end of the bargain, and win Gold...not when you're there trying to win it, too. I can't come close to beating your scores."
"You beat my Free Skate record! Plus, you're not the only one that's nervous." Victor said, trying to reassure him, using that finger to draw him closer to the rink wall, "Both of my records were shattered at the Final. It's not like I can just step onto the ice and be like, 'oh hey, it's me, Victor Nikiforov, I've already won this thing 5 years in a row so you can just go ahead and give me my Gold Medal because we all know I'm going to win it anyway.' You've gotten so good in such a short amount of time...it scares me a little to think about how high your scores can go, moving forward."

Yuri's face flushed, but his brows furrowed like he didn't want to hear it, "...Please don't say something like that."

"Why not? It's true. You and Yurio are really forcing me to step up my game." The Russian moved to put his hands on his fiancé's shoulders and turned him around, pulling him right up against the wall with a hug around his chest, "Close your eyes."

Yuri did as told, and the silver genius put his hands over them for good measure.

"Four Continents is a competition where you won't have to worry about my being in the roster, but I'll still be there like always. Imagine winning gold there. You blew away all the other competition at the Grand Prix Final...and on the non-European circuit, you practically have my reputation, and hopefully soon, you'll even have my surname. Think about that. Next to take the ice, representing Japan...Yuri Nikiforov..."

The hopeless young skater's cheeks flushed, and he opened his eyes behind his fiancé's fingers, "Are you sure I didn't have a heart attack and die when we got to your house? It's all too perfect, like my ideal afterlife."

Victor gave him quite the look, one eyebrow raised, but then huffed a laugh and licked the back of his partner's neck.

Yuri's whole body flinched when he felt it, and he had to bring his hands back up to his mouth to prevent himself from shrieking.

The Russian just laughed at him and held him tighter, resting his chin on the man's shoulder, "That works better than a pinch, I guess. Have I convinced you that you're alive and awake now?"

"...O-oh sure...fully awake..." He answered from behind his hands, lowering one to hold where Victor's were flat against his chest, while the other went back to rub at the spot where the man had left a wet trail on his skin, "No doubt about it."

"So...are you nervous about Four Continents or just Worlds?" The Russian wondered casually.

"...Mostly Worlds, but...only because of what I said before, about it being your first event back in the saddle." He leaned back against his partner's embrace, tilting his head to rest against the Russian's shoulder, "I don't really feel intimidated by the skaters who will be at Four Continents. I'm fairly confident I can win Gold there. Maybe not as easily as I did at Nationals, but I still out-scored all of them by a huge margin... JJ will be the only other person there who's broken 300 before, but even then, I scored 319. I can fix what's wrong with my Short Program and aim for beating Yurio's 118, and then I'll be-"

Victor looked at him with wide eyes and a slightly slack jaw, surprised to hear those words come out of his mouth.

The oblivious skater realized what he'd said and quickly covered his mouth again with both hands, blushing for having spooked himself with his own sentiment and pulling away from the rink wall.
before turning around, "...I...er..."

The Russian suddenly burst into laughter, descending to rest his elbows on the divider, chin cupped in the palms of his up-turned hands, "Yes, Four Continents will be a cake-walk. You won't have anything to worry about. No one else can come close to touching your high scores."

"I didn't mean it like that!" Yuri was flailing his arms around defensively.

"But you should." Victor explained, "If you don't actually think of yourself as a superior skater, how will you perform like one?"

It still didn't sit right with him, and Yuri shook his head, "I have no right to think of myself that way. I'm no skating genius like you are. I didn't even get to where I am because of my own efforts. It took a lot of help. I mean...I feel good about my odds, but I'm not 100% certain of them. To lift up my nose and go to Four Continents like I think I've already won...I'd just look full of myself. I'd look like..."

"Like?"

"JJ."

Victor huffed, "Yeah, I can see that. Well, it's up to you how you think of yourself, but regardless of how that turns out, I'll be with you." He then pulled back and reached down to his feet, pulling off the protective rubber bars from the blades of his skates, and set them aside before stepping out onto the ice. "Come on, let's practice while it's clear."

Yuri nodded, taking his partner's hand as they headed out towards the center of the rink, and let go again only to take his position. The Russian skated off a small distance before signaling to start.

Perhaps unknown to the pair, or maybe even in spite of it, Yurio was gawking at them from the rink's edge, slouching motionless over the wall like a can of frozen paint. He watched them quietly as Yuri performed the first part of 'Aria,' completing his two initial quads, though stumbling on the Lutz. Emerald eyes skimmed over to where Victor entered the stage after the second jump, touching Yuri's face briefly before they clasped fingers and started skating backwards together in an arc. Yurio couldn't decide if the display was weird or fascinating, so he reserved judgment for the moment.

A few seconds later, Yuri pulled out in front of his partner, and the Russian held fast to his waist, hoisting him up into the air before flipping him around, and then held him low against his side to drag the lighter figure's feet behind them. Yuri held onto Victor's left shoulder with his right hand, letting himself hang as low as he could before being pulled back up again, spinning over the Russian's back until he was upright and they could skate on their own again.

Unfortunately, just in that moment, Yuri's skate caught a fissure in the ice, and he went tumbling down with a crash and a shriek as Victor kept on moving.

Yurio's eyes went wide with perplexing concern, but just as he was about to holler at them to see if Yuri was even okay, he thought better of it and backed off. It just reminded him of the moment he wanted to call out 'good luck' to Yuri at the Rostelecom Cup, only for JJ to make fun of him for it. He could see Victor coming back around again anyway.

"What happened? Are you okay? You were doing really well."

"Someone must've cut the ice pretty deep...felt like my skate sank into a crevasse."

"You're not hurt, are you?"
"Only my pride. ...I'm just glad you didn't catch it." Yuri said, shaking his head, "We both might've gone down if you had."

"Tsh...Victor doesn't fall." The teen grumbled quietly, pushing up to start heading towards where he knew a spray-bottle and a hockey puck were tucked into the viewer's side of the rink wall.

"You sure you're not hurt?" Victor insisted, helping his fiancé back to his feet, "I saw how hard you went down...it was like you were pulled."

"I caught the crack just right." He retorted, brushing the ice dust off his backside and thighs, then looking around at the ice, "...Now that I look at it, it's like the ice hasn't been resurfaced in a while."

"That's because the zamboni was down this morning," Yurio said indifferently, approaching them in sneakers instead of skates. He carried with him a bucket of shaved ice, the spray bottle, and the puck he sought for earlier, and approached where he remembered Yuri getting snagged. Finding the crack, he packed it solid with the shaved ice, smoothed it down with the puck, and misted it for good measure. "That's why I'm not skating right now. Only you two idiots went this far out...the rest of the team stayed to the far side of the rink. We don't plan on breaking our legs before going to Euros."

"Weren't you planning on taking a break at some point anyway?" The older Russian wondered, standing a bit more casually then, "You were all worried about a growth spurt before."

"I'm still worried about a growth spurt, but I'm not going to stop skating until I can tell it's happening." The teen retorted, "But anyway, I wouldn't recommend skating on this thing until tomorrow. The ice is pock-marked. The next time you end up on your ass, it might be because you broke something."

Yuri wasn't sure how to handle the back-and-forth of the blond...one sentence he's concerned, then he's making threats, then he's offering advice again. He shook his head and looked back at Victor.

The silver-haired figure nodded, "Yurio, you want to come over tonight? I'll make you some katsudon."

The teen paused, shifting his eyes towards the sound of Victor's voice from where he was standing facing away. Before he knew what he'd even said in response, he realized he was following the pair outside the skating arena and was crossing the bridge with them. He was walking on Victor's side of the sidewalk, while Yuri was on the other, holding onto Victor's hand like a duckling-toy being lead along with string. He couldn't help but gawk at their hands.

"You two turds don't make any sense." Yurio finally said. "You know that?"

"What do you mean?" The oldest of them wondered, looking over at him.

"You two." He waved one hand at where they held theirs together, "That. This...thing you have going on."

"You mean our relationship?"

"Call it whatever you want; it's weird. I never expected you'd play on that side of the fence."

"Truth be told, there isn't really much of a fence for me." Victor explained, squeezing Yuri's hand a little to reassure him that what he was about to say was just that...an explanation. "I've had girlfriends before, as you know. I appreciate beauty in all its forms."

"Katsudon wasn't exactly beautiful when he did 'Aria' last year. He was just some fat, depressed
quitter."

Yuri blanched, but said nothing. 

"Even diamonds start as coal. *Kobuta-chan* just needed a little pressure to shine."

"Aw c'mon, don't go back to that..." Yuri begged, "I lost the weight just like you wanted..."

"And you're the tastiest little pork cutlet bowl in the whole world right now, don't you worry, Yuri." Victor mused, pinching the shorter man's cheek a little, much to his chagrin, "I won't let you get a squishy tummy again."

"Ugh gross." Yurio stuck his tongue out like there was a bad taste there, "Are you gonna make me listen to that crap all night? If so, I'll just go see if my grandpa will make his katsudon pirozkhi instead."

"Don't worry." Victor reassured, "I'll only be eating the *food* tonight."

Yuri dropped face-first into the snow, needing to be dragged along from then on. 

Yurio nearly jumped off the bridge. 

Victor just kept laughing. 

- 

Rice. 

Eggs. 

Breaded pork cutlet.

Katsudon was fairly simple as a dish, but that special something extra that only Yuri's family did made them taste even better.

Yurio practically vacuumed his out of the bowl as his older rink-mate put it in front of him, "This isn't half bad, Victor."

"*Spasibo~!*" He answered cheerfully from where he was on the other side of the kitchen island.

"So you really have a new routine already to take the place of Agape?" Yuri wondered, surprised to hear it. "When did you come up with it?"

"After the Final. I'm just not feeling it with Agape." He explained, "But it's not like it's a *bad* program. It's just not my style. I asked Victor to arrange a program that would get me gold at my senior premier, and it did that, so it served its purpose."

"What are you going to change it to?"

"A song you've probably never heard of." Yurio answered curtly, going back to his katsudon. 

"Ehehe...probably..." Yuri said meekly, eyeballing the bowl of food like a starving animal. On his own plate, after all, was *not* katsudon. By comparison, it looked like rabbit food, at least to him. His stomach growled, begging for the pork cutlet...even just a bit of rice that had fallen from Yurio's plate would be enough. 'Just one...little...piece...!' Drool dribbled from the corner of his mouth, and his eyes were wide like saucers.
"Quit gawking, fatty!" Yurio barked, whapping him across the hand with his fork, "BACK!"

"I wasn't anywhere near your food!" The Japanese skater protested, coddling his hand, "You attacked me from halfway across the table!"

"You're hovering!"

"No I'm not!"

"No fighting, kids, or you're both grounded." Victor said, cleaning up the dishes he'd been using.

"BUT VICTOOORRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR." They both argued.

"I won't hear another word." He said with finality, only to find Yuri practically crawling onto his side of the kitchen like an emaciated snake.

"Victor...I'm so hungry...please let me have just one pork cutlet bowl...I promise I'll go running after...I'll run twice as far...!" He begged, "This is torture!"

"You did this to yourself by rejecting the fact that you won gold at Nationals." Victor insisted, "So the sooner you win gold at Four Continents, the sooner you get your katsudon."

"But it's still weeks awaaaaayyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy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Yuri could watch the pair for hours, he suspected, and neither would ever bring him into the conversation, even though he was half of what they talked about. He was fine with that, though, for the time being. His attention was half-grabbed by his fiancé's cup of hot wine anyway. It smelled of cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves.

"You were already worked up." Victor continued, pulling off a piece of bread from the heel in a basket between them, "Maybe it's for the best that you part ways with Agape. You have too much spunk for that still." He nibbled on it a little.

"Too much spunk!?" Yurio was half on the table at that point, "I can do Agape all I want!"

Victor leaned against the counter, "But you don't feel Agape when you dance it, Yurio. That's my point. You're still shockingly unaware of yourself. Look at how you're practically bouncing off the walls with energy. Maybe you need to visit a temple again?"

Yurio grumbled and got back down off the table, practically tamed by the memory alone, "No, it's fine."

"A polar-bear dip might even work better for you."

"I'm not jumping into an icy lake." The blond finally sat back down, tossing the fork into the bowl casually, and knocking a bit of rice onto the table...right in front of Yuri.

The older skater eyeballed it carefully, practically trembling at the temptation. But...Victor was always on top of things, and before Yuri could try and grab the morsel, the Russian had already wiped it away, moving behind the pair's chairs to clear Yurio's dishes away, then taking it all to the other side of the island to the sink.

The blond just grumbled, sitting sideways in his chair with one leg bent up so he could hold his knee close to his chest.

"I'd go cheer you on if I could." Yuri said quietly, "I'd really like to see your new short program in person. We'll be watching the LiveStream for sure."

"Do whatever you want." Yurio huffed.

Yuri lowered his eyes away at that point, feeling a little defeated.

_Everything we do on the ice is a display of love..._

He narrowed his focus, remembering the training they did together before the Hot Springs on Ice event.

_Maybe that's all he knows how to do. He's such a blow-hard, but his skating is unlike anything most people will ever see. If he pushes himself this hard to keep one step ahead of me, then...his skating says more about what he thinks of me than he could ever put into words._

"...I'm going to win gold at Four Continents, Yurio, and then again at Worlds."

The blond turned his head, as though not sure he heard correctly. Even Victor had to turn his head over his shoulder to hear what else was going to come flying out of his fiancé's mouth.

"And then, I'm going to win gold at the Grand Prix Final in the fall next year." Yuri leveled a stare at the Russian Tiger, straight in the eyes. _So if you have any respect or affection for me whatsoever...then try and stop me!_ He thought, so loudly he thought Yurio could hear it.
Victor eventually left to drive Yurio back to the new house that he and his grandfather had moved into. When he didn't come back in the time frame that was given, Yuri started to worry. He started pacing around the house, holding onto his phone, waiting for a call or a text or anything. Makkachin watched him go...sometimes following, sometimes not.

"I should message him..." He said to himself, opening the text window to do just that.

[Victor, where are you? Everything ok?]

He sent the message, but none came back immediately. In fact, it was another 10 minutes before something finally came back. He stared anxiously at the little Delivered icon under his words, pleading for it to change to Seen. When it finally did, Yuri sat upright, seeing the three dots appear on Victor's half of the window.

[Is]

Is? What does that mean? Yuri wondered.

A moment later, the phone rang in his hand, startling him. He answered it quickly, "Victor!"

"Sorry." His voice wasn't normal, "I meant to call you sooner, but everything just got so crazy all at once."

"What happened? What...Victor, what's going on!?" Yuri had to hold both hands to the device for fear of dropping it.

"We got to Yurio's new place, and he went inside. I waited for him to let me know everything was good before I left, but he came running back out in a panic. His grandfather...he found him on the floor in his kitchen. We're at the hospital."

"...Do they know what's wrong?"

Victor looked from where he was standing at the nurse's station to the doors of the ICU. Yurio was standing close, and Victor held him in place with one arm across his chest and shoulder, "We don't know a lot. The doctors are still doing what they do. ...Oh, wait, here comes someone now...hold on."

Yuri held the line, trying desperately to hear anything, but whatever words were spoken, they were Russian, and he realized again that it made no difference whether he heard them or not. He sat back down at the kitchen table, propping his phone-arm up on a knee while his other hand held at his cheek with worry.

"Yuri."

"Yes!" He sat upright with a start.

"Get some bedding ready from the hall closet. Yurio will be staying overnight. His grandpa had a heart attack."

"A...heart attack...?" Yuri repeated with disbelief, "Is he going to be okay?"

"They're taking him to surgery. The doctor said he was stable for the moment but they need to find where the blockage took place and fix the damage. He'll be in there for a while...there's nothing more
we can do, so I'm bringing Yurio home now."

"Be careful coming back, okay?"

"I will. Don't worry."

Yuri could feel his throat clenching, "I love you."

Victor paused a moment, surprised to hear those words. They'd been tossed around in conversation prior to that moment, but never said so directly. He smiled despite himself, "I love you, too. We'll be home soon."

The younger skater pulled the phone away from his ear and watched the window change from an active call to the text message window he'd been looking at before. He closed the device and watched the screen change to black, and tried to calm his shaking hands.

Victor did much the same, putting his own phone back into his pocket before turning his attention to the teen trembling in his one-armed embrace.

Yurio looked blank, unblinking. He just stared ahead at the doors to the ICU, imagining all the horrible things that might be happening beyond his line of sight. He could feel Victor tug on him in an attempt to get his attention, but he couldn't really find the energy to react. Tears welled in his eyes and started to roll down his cheeks, dripping off his chin. Victor saw that much, and turned the teen around, pulling him close to his chest in a tight hug.

"Yuri..." He whispered, "It's going to be fine. He'll be okay. We found him in time."

"He could've been on the floor like that for hours." The blond finally said, staring blankly ahead as Victor held his head protectively, "If I had gone straight home when I found out the zamboni was down, or if I'd gone back when you guys left, instead of...instead of..."

"Don't think about it like that. You had no possible way of knowing this was going to happen."

Victor explained, desperate to prevent the teen from blaming himself, "There's nothing you could've done differently. You did everything right." He leaned down a little and held the blonde's shoulders, looking straight into those emerald eyes, "This is not your fault. Listen to me. Nikolai is a strong man, but he needs you to be strong for him right now. Can you do that?"

Yurio was still blank, staring ahead at nothing.

"Yuri!" Victor barked.

That seemed to snap him back to reality, and his glossy eyes became shiny again. He blinked a few times and looked around, but soon the energy of awareness escaped him, and he fell against Victor's chest, pulling him to kneel on the floor with both hands clinging to him desperately.

It was nearly 3am when Victor finally pulled into the garage, and helped escort his charge back inside the house. Yuri had done as asked, setting up a makeshift bed in the living room for the teen to hole up in for the night.

"Thanks for doing this, Yuri." The elder Russian said, unburdening the blond onto the couch.

By that point, Yurio had cried himself out and was exhausted, falling into the heap of blankets and pillows like a corpse. Victor pulled the teen's shoes off and hoisted his feet up into the comforter
before pulling the blankets over top of him and making sure they were snug. Even Makkachin came up, sniffing at Yurio's face, licking his nose once to acknowledge what was going on.

Yuri felt helpless, watching everything unfold while trying to keep out of the way.

Eventually, Victor came up and put his hand on his partner's hip, "I'm going to sleep out here tonight and keep an eye on him, okay?"

"Yeah. Sure thing..."

The silver Russian could feel the worry in Yuri's voice, and placed his hand gently over the back of his neck, kissing him lightly, "It'll be fine."

Yuri nodded, "I know, but..." He lowered his voice, "What about the European Championship? He can't go like this...he'll bomb like I did in Sochi..."

"I'll call Yakov in the morning. We'll sort things out. The best thing for him right now is rest, and to know that he's surrounded by people who care about him. I'll find out tomorrow how the surgery went and, who knows, if Nikolai pulled through, Yurio may not suffer too much of a loss from this blow. He just needs the night to recover from the shock of it."

"Right..."

"You get some rest, too, Yuri. There's no sense in everyone losing sleep tonight. Makkachin will keep you company." Victor insisted, trying to reassure his fiancé as best he could, "He's good for cuddles."

"I wish there was something more I could do. I feel like such a lump."

"Wait for me." The Russian suggested, "Let me take care of Yurio. There's nothing anyone can do about what happened, so there's no point lamenting it. But, I'll need you when this is all done...so, wait for me."

Yuri nodded, and Victor turned back to the teen, who appeared to have fallen into a dead sleep by that point. He watched as his partner moved to lift the teen's feet and sit down where they'd been before, setting them on his lap so he'd be immediately in sight if Yurio woke up in the night. Yuri then turned back to head towards the bedroom, with the big brown poodle trotting close behind.

By mid morning, Victor had already been on the phone with the hospital and their coach, just as he said he would be. With Nikolai making it through surgery, and stable in the ICU, Yakov decided it would be fine for Yurio to go to competition if he felt up to it.

"If Yuratchka decides not to skate because he's worried, then he can't blame me for not letting him on the ice." Yakov said, "At least he'll be there and he'll have the chance. That's the best anyone can do to that end."

"Agreed." Victor nodded, "Do you want to come get him or should I bring him to you?"

"I'll get him."

"Alright, we'll make sure he's ready when you get here. Do svidaniya."

Yurio still looked partly catatonic where he was lying on the couch, the blankets pulled up near his
head. Everyone in the house had dark circles under their eyes from lack of sleep, particularly Victor, who had taken the bulk of the responsibility for the night's events unto himself. Yuri could sense the fatigue pressing down on him, but did as told...and continued to wait.

By noon, Yakov had arrived with Lilia and collected the young skater. The former Prima Ballerina did her best to console her young pupil, but he couldn't hear her. He sat in the back seat of the black Mercedes and waited to leave in silence. By the end of the day, Yurio would be in Ostrava, Czech Republic. With any luck, there would be better news of his grandfather before he was set to compete.

Victor found himself looking up at the sky and saying a small prayer for the teen as the car pulled away, and then hesitantly closed the door. He slumped into the living room and took in the sight, now that it was calm and the tension had been breached. Yuri had already started picking things up to wash or put away, and while Victor had intended to help, he ended up just falling into the pile of blankets on the couch, exhausted.

Yuri saw him go down face-first, and shook his head, "You're going to bed properly." He said, moving over to help hoist the half-conscious Russian down the short hallway.

When he finally tumbled to the side and landed on his back, Victor let out an audible sigh of relief, spreading out on the covers as though he'd never known such comfort before. Yuri went to draw the blinds and pull the curtains closed, just as the Russian had done for him after they'd first arrived. When he went back to see if his partner needed anything, it looked like he'd already fallen asleep. So, not wanting to wake him, Yuri smiled and went quietly for the door.

"...Wait..." Victor mumbled, getting the younger man's attention, and raising his left arm to reach for him.

Yuri stopped and looked back, seeing the hand rising up, and moved back to return the gesture. As he felt the Russian's fingers against his skin, he sat on the edge of the bed, "What is it?"

"I need you." Victor answered quietly, barely louder than a whisper, "I roughed it last night and I'm all sore."

"Aww..." Yuri cooed, "Poor Victor, all tuckered out from being responsible."

"It's such a difficult thing to do..." He pouted, only one eye visible through his silver bangs, "Help me be irresponsible again." He raised his hand and pulled the younger man up with it, guiding him to sit over his stomach. He already seemed in better spirits just with that, "It seems I can't sleep right unless I'm with you. Look what you've done to me, Yuri."

"I couldn't sleep well either. Makkachin's a nice cuddle buddy and all, but he's not you." Yuri agreed, trailing his hands down his partner's chest until they reached where his thighs parted over the man's abdomen. One hand came up to pull his glasses off, and the silver Russian took them to set them on the nightstand. Just as the younger man was wiggling out of his t-shirt and it was coming over top of his head, Victor stopped him. Hands came up as the older figure sat up, trapping the man within the garment, leaving him unable to see or lower his arms again, "V-Victor..."

"Shh... It's no fun if I don't get to help get you undressed." The Russian whispered, laying his eyes on every inch of skin now revealed to him. His hands came from around Yuri's back to his sides, and then up to his chest, then down again, and he leaned forward to trail his tongue from sternum to collarbone. The sensation gave Yuri goosebumps, and he shuddereded under it, squirming all the more to get the t-shirt untangled from his arms.

Victor allowed his fiancé the freedom to move again, and as the man finally pulled the garment off
and tossed it to the floor, Victor did much the same with his own; he was still wearing the same sweater from the day before. That went quickly enough, and so did the undershirt beneath it.

When the cool air touched his skin, the older skater breathed another sigh of relief, falling back to the pillows with his arms up above his head. His face was tilted slightly away, but he looked up at his fiancé with one slate-blue eye, "Take me, Yuri..."

Yuri instantly balked, "EH?"

"Take me."

The younger skater was petrified, and Victor could feel him starting to tremble a little where he sat. Yuri’s fingers curled where they'd been flat against the Russian's chest, turning into scared fists instead, "$\text{Butwe'venever... Imean... I'venever...}\" The words came out in a jumbled slur, but it was all he could manage.

"I want you to seduce me." The Russian instructed, still looking at him with half-lidded eyes, "I want you to make me feel like the last day hadn't happened. Give me all of your Eros, Yuri... I may not be like this again for a long time."

"...Like...this?" The younger figure repeated in his confusion. The look on the man's face was enough to explain it though.

...He's letting himself be vulnerable. He's always been so strong and commanding before...but now he's too tired to worry about appearances. Is he being serious right now...? Wanting me to do that to him...? ...Can I even manage...?

"Are...are you sure? We don't have any...I mean, it might hu-..."

"Shpffbt..." Victor stopped him, then twisted over to the nightstand and opened the bottom drawer, "What do you want? Lube?"

Again, Yuri managed to turn a shade of red that he hadn't thought he was capable of, "...Y-yeah..." Two small bottles got tossed at him almost immediately after that, bouncing off his chest and landing on the bed near his knees, "...You had a stash of this stuff this whole time?"

"I got these almost as soon as we were in town." Victor said with a cocky smirk as he went back to neutral, lying on his back again. He saw the look on Yuri's face, "Yuuuri...~"

"Eh? When did you..." The younger man stammered, "When did you even have time? We're always together."

"It's easy to sneak things by you here since you can't read Cyrillic." The man explained, then tilting his head, "But you're stalling." He peered at his partner through those bangs like he could stare straight into Yuri's mind, "The bigger one has a warming sensation."

The younger man got suddenly curious, "Oh, really? Neat." He picked it up and looked at it, but the idea that he might spend a minute actually trying to read the ingredients made Victor impatient, especially since the man had just pointed out that he couldn't read it.

"Yuuuuuuuuuuuerrriiiii, you're killing me..." The Russian wiggled under his fiancé desperately.

He just laughed, as though making Victor squirm was the entire intention. Deep down though, he was just stalling.
Victor really wants me to do this... Yuri was still trembling, feeling his grip a bit weak around the small bottle. But why would he want me to...? Wasn't it enough, what we were doing before? I thought for sure, if it ever got to this point, he'd be the one to do it...never me...

It took two tries, but he pressed down the cap and opened the bottle, turning it upside down to let the warming liquid dribble down onto Victor's chest.

Slate blue eyes watched quietly, ...Is he doing it this way on purpose? Victor wondered, He obviously knows what the stuff is for, and yet...

"So sorry, did I spill it?" Yuri's voice came up quietly, forcing the Russian's eyes from the liquid on his skin back to the man who'd put it there, "I guess my hands just...slipped..."

One hand glided forward, spreading the clear fluid in its path. Victor's eyes watched intently, wholly surprised that his partner would play along so almost-willingly.

If Victor is going to show a side of himself to me like this, then I can't disappoint him, no matter how much this whole thing freaks me out. Yuri thought to himself, watching his own hand continue slipping forward, until that pale skin glistened from abdomen to collar bone. For the moment, it still felt enough like previous times that it wasn't too awkward, If I fail now, he may never let himself be like this again... I guess, I should consider it an honor? He trusts me enough to be like this...to ask for this...even knowing I have no clue what I'm doing...

Cherry-hazel irises looked on to see Victor's own eyes closing, as though relishing in the sensation quite literally being slathered all over him.

But I'll do it... Yuri decided, drawing in a breath to try and inflate his confidence a little, Or...at least...I'll do my best... That's all I can do, right?

"Mhh...I can feel it starting to tingle..." The Russian mused, peaking through one half-lidded eye.

But, there it was, the Eros look on Yuri's face. A switch had been flipped, and the younger man straddling over him was now the one that was determined to win no matter what... To be the tastiest pork cutlet bowl, to declare he'd win the Grand Prix Final, to intimidate all of Russia...all of it. This rare version of the young Japanese skater that was, even if only for a fleeting moment, fearless and driven.

"Was there someplace else you wanted me to put it?" Yuri asked quietly, bringing his hand back down towards himself, "You'll have to be veeery specific..."

Blue eyes closed as the Russian felt Yuri's hands moving all over him. He kept them closed and let his other senses take over, feeling as his fiancé lifted off his hips to pull the remains of their clothes away, and then, even if hesitantly, pulled his legs astride his waist, effectively reversing their prior positions. Their skin was slick with the warming liquid, and it started to tingle all over as Yuri slid over top of him.

Still, even in that moment, despite knowing what was expected of him, the younger figure felt the situation was familiar enough that it wasn't terrifying yet. After all, it had been almost a month since the move, and he had gained a lot of experience in that time. Victor had still been in control of 95% of whatever they did, but Yuri had allowed himself to reciprocate more than he had in the beginning, and he had, one at least the one occasion, been the one to initiate a romp.

Victor had been pretty-well ready to go since he pulled Yuri on top of him, but he savored the event-delaying foreplay all the same. This would be the first time they'd gone all the way, and he wasn't
going to waste a second of it. Every moment would be cherished, memorized, and replayed for days and years to come.

It was a while before Yuri even had the confidence to put himself in position, even if he didn't do anything after that except close his eyes and try to stall it even more. Victor could feel the reluctance...it'd been there with every anxious shudder since he'd first uttered those words.

"It's okay, Yuri." The Russian said, getting his fiancé to lift his face and open his eyes a little, "I want you to."

Those hazel eyes just looked aside though, "...I know, I just..."

Victor gently slid his knees up against his partner's sides, reaching forward to cup the man's face in his hands, "I'm not expecting you to break my brain. I just want to be part of you...be lost in you for a little while." He stroked his right thumb across a pale cheek, seeing the lingering fear under the Eros mask, "But if you want, I can do it."

"...Huh?"

He huffed that single quiet laugh, and pulled one arm away to push up onto his elbow. Yuri watched him with wide, confused eyes. They were fixated and unblinking, even as the Russian flipped their positions, setting him gently down onto his back where the blankets were still warm. The 'take charge' Victor had returned in that moment, and Yuri knew he'd lost his chance.

...I couldn't do it. Not on my own. Not like this. Victor, forgive me...

His thoughts were evaporated by the feeling of the man's lips on his own, as Victor came looming over him. He felt the Russian's weight on his hips, sliding back just a little bit before reaching with one hand to take him in his grasp, stroking lightly for a little while.

It was only when Victor was sure that Yuri had relaxed enough again that he even bothered to position him. He kept on with the kiss though, trying to keep the man a little distracted until the moment finally came.

"Yuri...I'm going to be selfish now, too..."

Hazel eyes opened again as the younger figure felt the descent, or at least what would've been the beginning of it. Victor's guiding hand had come back to rest by Yuri's side, mirroring where the other had been planted on the opposite side. Victor held his head low, silvery bangs hanging to hide his eyes...but Yuri could feel the expression on his face even if he couldn't see it.

"You...okay...?" He asked, his own face red, his voice haggard from the tightness he felt.

"...Da...yes, it's fine..." The Russian answered, almost curtly, rising up just a fraction of an inch and then trying to go down again...but stopped just like before.

"No, Victor, you looked like that hurt..." Yuri was starting to feel a heavy guilt, but just as he was about to sit up and try to fix things, Victor's right hand planted itself firmly in the center of his chest and pushed him back down again.

The young skater felt a pit in his stomach...but the Russian just shook his head gently.

"What, you thought I'd been like this with other guys before?" He actually kind of laughed at that and fully lifted his head to show that the painful expression was gone.
Yuri just blustered where he was pinned, "No, I just, I mean...er...the thing is...I thought..."

"No." The older figure smiled in his usual way, trying to hide the discomfort he felt, "It's just like at Nationals. I gave you another one of my firsts. All is fair in life and love, and I owed you a few of mine after taking so many of yours."

His fiancé still had 'the look' on his face, chiding but uncertain at the same time. It was only when Victor had finally inched his way all the way down, and finally exhaled a sigh of relief, that Yuri felt it was safe to stop pretending that it didn't feel good. Their romp was a bit more successful after that, even if it was awkward and short-lived.

The younger man had finished first, as Victor had anticipated, his first time being inside another person overwhelming his senses. Yuri tried to make up for it by building up some courage to use his mouth to please his partner, but as soon as he'd gotten down low enough to try, his nerves got the better of him and he stopped after one hesitant lick, too embarrassed to go on. Victor noticed, but didn't say anything, simply moving his hands down to help guide his fiancé's to the inevitable end.

...Maybe I should've given him more time before suggesting this? Oh well, it's done... I know what it's like now... Yuri, I promise I'll make it feel better for you when you're ready...

Yuri twisted onto his side and grabbed for the pillow just above his head, clutching at it tightly as he stared at the door to the hall just ahead of him. He felt a sight rustle behind him, but then felt Victor's arms come snaking around his frame, one wedging underneath of him to do so, and pulling him until his back was against his partner's chest. The Russian kissed the back of his neck and shoulder before setting his cheek against his skin.

"I hope I didn't go too far just now." Victor said quietly, closing his eyes and holding his partner a little tighter.

"N-no...it's okay." Yuri answered tepidly, but then realizing his answer wasn't that convincing. He pulled his right arm from where it held to the pillow and put his hand over his partner's, pressing in until he was able to lace their fingers together over his chest, "I just...never imagined we'd ever..."

"It'll get easier. I know it's different for you...but I promise, it'll get easier."
Yurio hadn't said much of anything since being taken back by Yakov and Lilia. His mind was stuck on his grandfather, and the image of finding him on the kitchen floor.

"Grandpa!" He called out frantically, rushing into the room and skidding to a halt on the floor, "GRANDPA!"

The old man was clutching at the middle of his chest with his right arm; his left seemed paralyzed. He was breathing with a lot of difficulty.

"VICTOR!" Yurio screamed, "VICTOR, CALL 112!"

No answer came though, and Yurio could only guess that the older man was still in the car waiting for a signal that he could leave. He didn't want to leave his grandfather alone though. Torn for what to do, he touched his grandpa's forehead.

"I'll be right back, I'm getting help!"

He ran past the edge of the kitchen wall, leading into the short hall to the front door, grabbing the wireless phone from its charger as he went. In his panic, he entirely forgot about his cellphone. He kicked the door open as he pushed buttons, and Victor saw him immediately, practically bouncing off the inside of the car door in his effort to get it open. Yurio was struggling with the antique device in his hands when Victor finally came up to him.

"What's going on!?"

"My grandad! He's on the floor! I can't get the phone to work!" Yurio panicked, "Call an ambulance!"

"Yuri!"

His eyes fluttered a little where he'd been leaning his head against the car window, and he glanced up at the sound of his name. Everything was such a blur though. He couldn't tell who'd called to him or even if anyone was still talking now. His eyes eventually trailed over to the window again, looking at the world as it passed him by.

They were entering the parking lot of the airport. It wouldn't be a long flight to the Czech Republic.

Yurio could see people trying to talk to him. Their mouths moved, and he thought he could hear the far-off sound of muffled voices, but he was too numb to care what they were trying to say.

He pulled out his phone and looked at its black screen for a few minutes before finally turning it on, going to his contact list and seeing Victor's name there. The thought occurred to him to FaceTime his rink-mate, but the longer he hovered his thumb over the touch-screen, the harder he found it to rationalize why he should press it.

I wish you were coming... You're the only one who really understands... The rest of these people, they're just...I can't even hear them anymore.
He became aware again when they were on the plane, and it was just starting to gain that final burst of speed before lifting off the ground. It all sounded so terribly hollow.

*I wanted to stay under that pile of blankets forever.*

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Yuri looked up from his phone and glanced at the sky, seeing a plane flying overhead on a westward trajectory. He wondered if that was the plane his Russian counterpart was on.

Makkachin was rushing around the back yard, catching snowballs as Victor made and tossed them.

The Japanese skater returned to his phone, checking the listings for the European Championships, seeing the final roster for men's singles.

"Looks like Chris will be one of the first to go on the ice." He reported, "Yurio's in the second group."

"We should call Chris and wish him good luck." Victor suggested.

"Yeah." Yuri nodded, checking through his contact list to find that particular name. A few seconds passed before the screen switched over, showing Christophe's face, happy to receive the message.

"Yuri!"

"Hey, Chris. You ready?"

"I'm always ready." The Swiss skater said with a wink, "So it's true then."

"What true?"

"You convinced Victor not to compete until Worlds. His name isn't on the listing." Chris shook his finger at the camera-phone, "I was sure he'd be at the EC after he said he was coming back to competition for Nationals, but this will be the second event he's shunned."

"I actually had nothing to do with that." Yuri said, smiling nervously, "Victor doesn't have everything ready yet. His new outfits still haven't arrived yet."

"That's a shame. After hearing him say he was going to time his come-back with Russian Nationals, I was really hoping he'd step on the ice right away." Chris sighed, "Now I'll have to wait until the end of March." He moved his phone to prop it up against something, freeing up his hand so he could cross his arms and rest his chin on them, "I don't think I ever got to congratulate you on winning gold at Japanese Nationals."

The younger skater just sighed a little, "It wasn't much of a competition. I only really went to secure my invitation to Worlds. No one else in Japan has even made it to the Grand Prix Final in a few years, and with the scores we saw, it might be a few more years before that changes."

"Well, it's good that you're going." Chris went on, "I missed you at least year's Worlds. In either case...I guess you're going to Four Continents next, right?"

"Yeah." The raven-haired skater nodded, "It'll be the last chance I have to win gold before Victor
comes back to competition."

"You'll win gold at Worlds, Yuri! Quit saying otherwise!" The Russian hollered from off-screen.

"You should be in bed!" Yuri called back.

"...Isn't it mid afternoon in St. Petersburg...?" Chris wondered idly.

The younger skater sighed with a laugh and nodded as he looked at the screen again, "Yeah, but Victor was up all night being responsible. He only took a short nap afterwards though. He's going to be delirious by night-fall."

"Being responsible, huh?" The Swiss skater echoed, "What's the occasion? Normally, if he's up all night, it's because he's drinking."

"Mhhh..." Yuri hesitated, lowering his eyes a little, but then looking back up again, "The Russian Yuri...his grandpa had a heart-attack yesterday. Victor was up all night making sure he was okay after they got back from the hospital. He spent the night with us."

"Plisetsky? His name is still on the roster for Euros though."

"That's because he's still going. He's on a plane heading there now." The Asian skater explained, "Coach Yakov is hoping there will be good news in time for Yurio's performance, so he isn't bogged down by worry."

"I see..." Chris nodded, unsure what else to say on the matter given how he had no relationship with the teen, "Well... In either case, how do you feel about Four Continents now? Considering the lack of competition there, I expect that'll be an easy gold for you. Don't you think?"

"Phichit-kun is going to be there. He's won more real gold medals than I have so far." Yuri scratched his cheek idly, "Besides...looking at all the scores, Phichit-kun would've won bronze if he'd been at Sochi with those same numbers. He scored even higher than JJ did back then."

"Really? I hadn't noticed that!" The blonde laughed, "But in all seriousness, Yuri...you'd have won silver at Sochi if you scored the same there as you had in Barcelona. You need to have more faith in your own abilities."

"That's what Victor keeps saying."

"Sound advice."

"How's Czech Republic? Are you already there?" Victor suddenly asked, popping up unexpectedly in the background behind his partner, waving happily at the Swiss skater on the screen.

"Not yet. My plane leaves late tonight." Chris waggled a finger at his rival, "I won't be able to take it seriously without you. I was really hoping you'd come."

"Such is life." Victor mused, crouching down and leaning his elbows across the back of Yuri's shoulders, looking aside the man's mess of black hair, "I'd have gone if I had my outfits already. I know what programs I'm doing. Been planning them since last year...I just hadn't picked which ones I'd be using until after Yuri convinced me to come back."

Chris made a light-hearted but sour expression, "Skipping Nationals and Euros...you're letting your legacy slip through your fingers, Victor. These kids are making it look easy."
The Russian shrugged and smiled, "It's not as though I'm going to let them continue like this forever. I intend to take my record back." He set his knees on the step on either side of his partner's waist, "I can't retire unless I do so with the record and the gold."

Yuri blinked and looked up from where he'd been teasing Makkachin while the other two skaters chatted, "...But...?"

"You'll have to work harder than ever. You've trained up your own worst rival." Chris pointed out, casting a casual finger at Yuri where he was barely still on-screen, "And you're 28 now."

Victor tossed his head back in dismay, "I only just turned 28 last month, Chris! Give me the year before you start making it sound like I'm about to get older again!"

The Swiss skater smirked, "And I'll be turning 27 during Four Continents. Even I know I can't push my limits much farther. You should take your post-skating career more seriously. If you get hurt because you got greedy at the end...you might not even be much of a coach to Yuri for his own final years."

Yuri's brows furrowed at that, "He's too good for that. He'll know when it's time."

"This is so depressing!" Victor lamented, "I thought coming back to competition would be more exciting than this...but all anyone has done so far is give me grief about my age and coaching Yuri on top of it all."

"Ahhhhh yesss..." Chris purred, "I think everyone on the circuit has seen the RSF press conference footage by this point, where they asked about that very thing. That was quite a speech Plisetsky gave at the end, too."

Yuri lowered his gaze away. He'd gotten to see a subtitled version of that event in the days since it happened.

"I'm actually still a little surprised Yurio would say the things he did." Victor admitted, huffing a single chuckle, "But I guess he's more offended by the idea of the Russian team being insulted than he is by the idea of my being involved with Yuri."

"Speaking of which, have you two tied the knot yet? Since Yuri won gold finally." Chris wondered, "I never got an invitation."

"Not yet." Yuri explained, his cheeks pink, "We've been so busy getting ready for Four Continents and Worlds that we haven't really had time to go over any wedding plans."

"I'm still surprised at you, Victor." The Swiss man pointed out, tilting his head a little where he still held his chin over his crossed arms, "It was one thing to surprise the world with dropping competition to be Yuri's coach, but the rest... It seems so out of character for you. You're not just trying to shock people now, are you?"

Yuri's stomach dropped at the very mention of it, and he turned to glance at Victor with a worried look on his face, "You wouldn't..."

"Of course not." Victor answered immediately. He swiped the phone from his fiancé's hands and glowered at Chris, "That was a cruel thing to suggest. Now he's going to worry about it until I can somehow prove myself."

Yuri found himself slouching against the lower metal bar of the railing, Chris' words repeating in his mind like a ball rattling in a tin can.
"Sorry." Chris said, worried now what he might've done, "I didn't mean it like that. You've just never been the sort to worry that much about others. To suddenly drop everything and do all this...being his coach, getting engaged...even at the expense of your own career and reputation..."

"See? Do you think I would go that far if I didn't mean it?"

"I suppose not." The blonde slouched, propping one hand under his cheek.

"Well, anyway, we wanted to wish you good luck this weekend." Victor said stiffly, finding himself bowled over a little as Yuri pulled out from where he'd been sitting to stand up again. He held one hand to the railing to prevent from ending up on the cold wet concrete with his arse, "Davai."

Chris could tell he's ruined the mood, "...Mhm..."

Yuri went back inside the house without a word.

Victor was gritting his teeth at that point, "Great..." He clicked off the conversation and pocketed the phone, pushing to stand and following his partner as quickly as he could. Makkachin was quick to follow.

He found his fiancé slouching deeply in the couch, practically lying down instead of sitting, his head propped up against the back of it. He looked kind of empty.

The Russian moved quickly to kneel in front of him, putting his hands on the man's knees to look at his face, "Yuri..." He then reached one hand to cup the man's cheek, "Forget what Chris said, please..."

"Why would he even say something like that?" Yuri wondered, looking defeated, "And with me right there, it's like he was trying to..."

"I know, it was rude." Victor agreed, moving to wedge himself between Yuri's knees so he could wrap his arms more easily around the man's waist, "He's always been a bit selfish of me."

"Is he interested in you?" Yuri wondered pointedly, "Do I have to compete with him for your affection?"

"You don't have to compete with anyone for my affection." Victor affirmed, "You're the most important thing in my life. No one could ever hope to replace you." He reached for Yuri's right hand to remind him of their bond, "These rings symbolize our commitment to each other, right?"

For whatever reason, Yuri couldn't find the words to answer. He looked at their rings, the golden shine under the lights above glinting brightly, but his mind was blank.

"Yuri!" Victor repeated desperately.

"...Sorry..." The Japanese youth finally whispered, "I shouldn't let what he said get to me."

"...Do you really harbor such doubt about me?" Victor wondered, holding Yuri's ringed hand with both of his, kissing the ring in front of him, "What can I do to make that disappear? I'll do anything..."

Yuri could feel the tears falling onto his skin, and as he refocused his eyes on Victor in front of him, the sight of his slight tremble broke his heart. He pushed himself up with his free arm and loomed over the Russian, taking back his ringed hand just long enough to wrap both arms around the Russian's head, his fingers lacing through that silver hair.
"It's not that I doubt you." Yuri explained, holding him tight, "It's that I doubt myself. I always have. You've always been so far out of my league... I mean, I've been looking up from the bottom of the barrel for so long...and then you reached down with your shining hand like God to pull me up. I worry sometimes that I pulled some of the muck up with me, that I've never quite been good enough...to be in the light, or to be with you in it...or worse, that I might just drag you back down with me."

"I'd rather be in the muck with you than in the light without." Victor answered, wrapping his arms around Yuri's waist again, rubbing his cheeks on the younger skater's coat to dry his face before looking him in the eyes again, "We'll crush him at Worlds for this. It'll be our revenge."

Yuri nodded and smiled, pressing his forehead against Victor's, "He'll be so jealous."
Group 1 had already finished their morning on the ice, and Group 2 was getting ready to start their short programs that afternoon. It was Day 1 of the European Championships. Chris was in the lead so far, as could be expected for someone who'd frequently scored Silver whenever Victor was in the lineup.

Emil was first on the ice that afternoon, scoring 86.17 for his Short Program. Michele came on after that, scoring 87.20 for his own. They were still well behind Chris' 92.73.

Yuri and Victor had managed to connect to the LiveStream of the event, and were watching it on Victor's bigscreen. Yuri was sitting cross-legged on the couch, thumbing through the night's roster on his phone as Victor made sure the settings on his laptop were working where they connected to the television. It kept stopping to buffer though, much to his dismay.

"I guess this is the trouble that everyone was having while trying to watch the Grand Prix series." He muttered, refreshing the stream a few times, "Sad that there isn't a dedicated channel for live international viewers."

"I'm sure satellite users get a channel." Yuri commented.

"I should've agreed to go with them." Victor sighed, "Then we'd both be there and this wouldn't even be a problem."

"Would you be content to just sit in the audience?" Yuri wondered with a wry smirk, looking over his phone at the man, "Everyone who saw you there would be asking why you aren't on the schedule."

"Of course I wouldn't be content to watch." Victor replied, pushing to stand up again, "But at least we'd be there."

The signal finally stabilized, and Victor felt sure enough about leaving the laptop that he went to join Yuri on the couch, leaning against the arm-rest to get comfortable as Yuri leaned against him in turn.

"Yurio will be going up after this next guy." He explained, "I wish we had something to tell him about his grandfather."

"I updated Yakov this morning, so Yurio should know there's been no change. We'll just have to wait and see."

The Spaniard who took the ice ahead of Yurio scored 84.67, and cursed himself alongside his coach when he heard it in the kiss and cry.

"Next on the ice, representing Russia, Ladies and Gentlemen...Yuri Plisetsky."

Yurio then finally took to the ice himself, and it was obvious that he wasn't as energetic as he normally was. He stood by the rink's edge to briefly listen to Yakov and Lilia giving him last-second advice, probably telling him to try to focus on his performance.

The camera finally panned close enough for the television viewers to see Yurio in detail. He was wearing the famous white and silver see-through outfit from the GPF.

"Oh, he's going to do Agape after all...!" Yuri said, surprised.
"...This might be the one time we actually see what it'd look like to be skated properly..." Victor said, "I guess he's seeing the silver lining to this whole situation."

"Or maybe he just doesn't want to ruin the premier of his new Short Program." Yuri suggested flatly, earning him a mussed-up head of hair as his partner ruffled it as 'punishment.' He laughed despite it and settled in again.

Yurio took to the center of the ice, not bothering with the crowd acknowledgements before taking position.

Victor pushed off the arm-rest, feeling anxious, and holding a bit tighter to Yuri than before.

Yurio began his dance.

Sic mea vita est temporaria... Cuprit ardenter cariatatem aeternam...

The first jump would be a Triple Axel...

...and then it wasn't.

Victor winced, "It was just a double...this doesn't bode well."

"The flying sit-spin is one of Yurio's signature moves...that should be fine..." Yuri pointed out.

...and then it wasn't. Yurio spun out entirely and ended up flat on his back.

Victor buried his face against Yuri's shoulder, "It's hard to watch."

"C'mon, Yurio...get it together." The younger man sighed.

The next set of jumps were well regarded at the GPF after Yurio had started putting one or even both arms in the air, but this time he decided not to. He finally landed something without messing up. Yurio then entered into his step sequence.

Yuri watched with a worried look on his face, "He's just going through the paces. He's not even trying."

The audience could tell that something was wrong, but there hadn't been any kind of announcement about Yurio's grandfather, so they didn't know what it was. The announcers were kind enough not to speculate as they spoke aloud the moves that Yurio was meant to try, only to then correct themselves to reflect what he'd actually ended up doing.

"Skater Yuri seems to be having a hard time out there today." Morooka was saying.

Oda agreed off-screen, "It's reminiscent to JJ Leroy's GP Final Short Program. I wonder if he'll be able to recover and make it onto the podium at the end as well though?"

Hanc felicitatem aeternam esse oro...

When the music finally ended, Yurio held his pose for a few seconds longer than normal, then slouched and skated right for the rink's edge without even bothering with a final address to the audience. Yuri's Angels were cheering him on despite the collapse.

Yurio sat with his face in his hands in the kiss and cry, and stood up to leave without a word when his score was called out.
Victor sighed, gawking at the screen with an exasperated look on his face, "...I should've been there for him."

The competition moved on after that, with a German skater coming on next to perform so spectacularly that people almost forgot Yurio's upset. 98.32 was his score, eclipsing that of the Russian and Chris alike.

Victor leaned back on the couch and pulled his phone off the footstool ahead of him, dialing up Yakov since he knew Yurio wouldn't have his phone on him at that moment.

When the elder coach answered, he looked despondent, [Vitya...you really should've come.] He said in Russian.

[I know, I know...] Victor answered regretfully, [Put him on, please...]

Yuri watched the television, seeing as Yakov was handing Yurio the phone on the screen. Yurio took it, looked around a little, and then ducked into the stadium's underbelly where it would be quieter.

"Victor..." The blond was barely whispering, and he sat with a heavy thud on the benches where his team had set up their gear, [I can't do this...]

[Yes you can, just forget about everything else. The ice is the only thing in the world when you've got your skates on, remember?] Victor said, his voice calm, like a big brother, [Nikolai would want you to do your best and stop worrying about him.]

[How can I do that though?] Yurio's eyes were dark, [He's all I have, and I nearly lost him.]

[But you didn't. He's fine, and he's going to be going home soon.]

Yuri couldn't understand the conversation again, and simply kept his eyes on the television screen, watching the next few skaters in silence. He leaned against Victor's leg where he propped it with his knee up, wrapping one arm around it as the Russian kept talking.

[Your granddad and your cat will be waiting for you when you come home. Potya's going to be so happy when you get back. She rubs all over me when I go check on her.]

[Did Katsudon see me just now?] [Of course, we're watching it together.]

[...Put him on.]

Victor's brows furrowed with surprise, but he agreed, [Sure, here he is.] "Yuri, Yurio wants to talk to you."

"...He does?" The Japanese man was perplexed, but took the phone all the same, "Hey."

"Izvinite."

"Huh?"

More words were spoken, but Yuri couldn't comprehend what was being said, so he turned to look at Victor, waving one hand out in utter confusion. He then put a finger on the mic and whispered,
"He's talking in Russian. I have no idea what he said."

Victor quirked a brow and took the phone back, then put it onto speaker so he could hear as well, "You'll have to say all that again so I can translate, Yurio."

"I SAID I WAS SORRY FOR YELLING AT YOU AFTER YOU BLEW IT IN SOCHI, IDIOT."

Yuri had been bowled off the couch by the outburst, and he looked up in confusion from the floor, "...What...in the world..."

"Ah, he hung up..."

"Figures..."

Victor set the phone aside and looked down at Yuri with an amused smile, "He almost never apologizes for anything. You should be honored."

"We need to do something..." Yuri insisted, trying to finagle his way back to a sitting position, since his feet were still on the couch when he fell off of it, "We can't let him screw up his Free Skate, too."

"What do you suggest? It's not like we're still in St. Petersburg or anything."

Yuri finally set himself upright, "I have an idea."

...

The next day came too quickly for anyone's tastes, but it came all the same. The line-up was the same as the previous, with Group 1 going on in the morning, and Group 2 in the afternoon.

Victor and Yuri weren't watching this time though. They had piled into Victor's car and were traveling across the city.

Yurio was sitting on the benches again, staring at the black fabric that covered his skates. He leaned over his knees, hands dangling close to his ankles, and he flicked the pink and red fluff where it sprung up from the inside of each skate. Like a cat that couldn't care less about the birds just outside the window, Yurio only paid attention to what was in front of him. The scores of the other skaters didn't matter. Their successes, their failures, the cheering of the crowd...it was all meaningless.

Mila tried to console the younger skater, but he brushed her off like always, calling her a hag and ignoring the rest. He couldn't even be bothered flailing like before when she hoisted him above her head, simply demanding to be put down with a flat tone.

Yakov appeared through the doors with his ex-wife, and they beckoned for Yurio to get ready to get on the ice for his turn. It was nearly 6:45 in the evening by that point.

As Yurio passed them, his hands stuffed into his coat pockets, Yakov felt a familiar vibration in his own pocket. He pulled out his phone and saw a FaceTime request from Victor. He wasn't used to such things though, and even though he accepted, he held the device up to his ear like a normal phone, "Vitya, what is it? Yuri's about to go on."

"Yakov, pull the phone away from your ear." Victor said with a laugh, "Let me talk to Yurio really
quickly before he starts."

The Russian coach sighed, and went to catch up with Lilia and the skater. Yuri had already made it to the rink's edge though, and pulled his coat off along with the rubber guards on his blades.

"Yuri!" Yakov called out, being ignored like he mostly had been since the event began, watching as the skater got on the rink, "Yuratchka, Vitya wants to talk to you again. Come back over here!"

Yurio glowered at the man, sighing and coming back as instructed, "What does he want now?" He took the phone from his coach, seeing not Victor, but Yuri there on the screen, "What is this? Where's Victor?"

"Hang on a sec, Yurio." The older skater said with a nervous smirk, "Ready?"

"Next to skate tonight, representing Russia...Yuri Plisetsky..."

Yurio couldn't hear what was going on in the background, but when Yuri flipped the phone around, he could see well enough. His green eyes went wide, and tears immediately started to form in them. Yakov and Lilia both noticed the change, and went to glower at what he'd just been exposed to on the phone.

It was his grandfather, with Victor, at the hospital.

"Grandpa..." Yurio could hardly believe it.

"Good luck tonight, Yuri." Nikolai said, smiling despite his current predicament, hooked up to machines and an IV drip, "Do your best. I'll be watching."

"Davai, Yurio!" Victor said happily.

"Davaaaaai!" Yuri in the background.

The blond had his hand over his mouth, still in disbelief, but he moved it up to rub the tears from his eyes. "Spasibo...Victor, Katsudon, grandpa...spasibo..."
Chapter 16

It wasn't enough to get Yurio on the podium at the European Championships, but he came within two points of setting a new Personal Best for his Free Skate. In the end, Chris took gold, the German skater silver, and Georgi the bronze.

The crowd *roared* their appreciation for the skate that they knew Yurio could perform. Yurio himself felt almost rejuvenated by the applause, as though it had somehow brought him back to life.

He felt like he was allowed to *breathe* again.

The fanfare upon his return to Russia was well deserved, and for once, he even gratefully took photos with the Yuri's Angels group. He hadn't quite lost his mind yet though, so he resisted *letting* them put cat ears on his head, though a pair ended up there eventually anyway.

Victor and Yuri had been waiting for him at the airport, agreeing to take him to the hospital where his grandfather had been staying. Fortunate timing meant that Nikolai would be discharged that same day, so Yurio would be able to go home with him, rather than having to leave him there and go home alone.

The black and white flufferbutt greeted him enthusiastically, rubbing against Yurio's legs until he picked her up, "Potya..." He cuddled the feline affectionately before turning back to the door to let Victor and Yuri help bring the rest of his things inside.

Yuri looked around curiously, seeing this tiny slice of his Russian rival's life. Like Victor's house, there was almost no sign of anything outside of skating. At least Yurio had his grandfather though. He turned his eyes to his fiancé and gave a subtle look, but only briefly, *I wonder why he won't talk about his family...? I've asked twice now and he ignored me entirely both times.*

As he left the small household to go back to the car, he noticed that Victor had stayed behind a moment. Looking back to see the tall man standing just inside the doorway, he could only bet that Yurio had a few last things to say.

"I can't thank you enough for what you did." The blond was telling him, still holding the cat, "If you had just left, instead of waiting like you did..."

"It's fine. You don't have to thank me for all that." Victor insisted, "Any decent person would've done the same thing."

"All the same." Yurio said, "Thank you."

"We'll see you at practice in the next few days. Take care and relax until then, okay?"

"Sure."

"Do svidaniya."

"Da..."
Practice for the pair intensified after that, as there were only a few short weeks left before Four Continents. Polishing their coordinated Exhibition skate was weighing heavily on Yuri's mind.

"What if I mess it up?"

"You won't."

"But what if I dooooooo? I haven't had a chance to practice a quad Lutz in competition yet, and we've been keeping to doubles while we work out the kinks..."

"You haven't even messed up the program yet in practice. Well, other than that time with the crack in the ice, but that wasn't even your fault." Victor explained, "Don't be so nervous. It's the Exhibition Gala, not the GP Final. You're supposed to have fun doing it. So...from the top."

Victor watched as Yuri skated back out to the center of the rink and took his position, lowering his head with one leg crossed behind him. The Russian hit the play button on the audio controller, and Yuri started the program.

A double Lutz and a double Flip later, Victor himself entered the dance. There were two other jumps to perform after Victor joined, one of which was done at opposite corners of the rink from one another, and the last was closer to the center, where they passed each other in mid-air before landing to skate backwards, sliding away from one another, right hand out, reaching to the other as though they were being pulled apart after just nearly, finally, coming together. In the end, their dance had them come back together in the center of the rink, pulling each other closer together with their left hands as they circled, and stopping with each of their right hands up near the other's face.

Despite being out of breath, Victor clasped Yuri's ringed hand and kissed it, "That's it. I can't wait for the Gala now. It's perfect."

Yuri's eyes shone with excitement.

"We should do a dress rehearsal next time, with proper quads and everything."

The younger man nodded, but as he wiped the sweat from his brow, he looked up in realization, "Did you ever contact the ISU about us doing the pair program?"

"Oh, yes actually." Victor affirmed, "They're fine with it. They even agreed to keep my participation on the down-low, so they'll announce it like you're going to do it by yourself."

"You sure do like to surprise everyone." Yuri smiled, "I can't wait to hear their reaction."

"Right!!?"

"So what about your new costumes? Are they going to be ready in time? It's been weeks since you sent in your request." Yuri wondered, starting to skate casually as Victor followed.

"They should actually be on the way now." The Russian answered, "It's a shame I'll only really get to use them for one event before the season's over."

Yuri put his hands on his hips as he continued to coast forward, and he wondered if he should open his mouth about another possibility.

Victor could tell something was on his mind though, "...What is it?"

"Well, there's always the International Adult competition in May..." He dared suggest,
"...You're...old enough...to qualify..."

Victor's face went pale, and slowly but surely, melted until he was little more than a Victor-shaped puddle on the ice, "...Old enough? ...I can't...recover from this..."

Yuri skated around and went back over to him, "Victor..."

"That's a competition for old people..."

"Masters."

"OLD MASTERS."

Yuri nervously scratched the side of his jaw, looking at the weepy older man as he stayed flat on the ice, "It's not that bad...it's for anyone who is 28 or older by the specified time."

"IVE BEEN OLD ALL ALONG."

"I didn't mean it like that!" Yuri pleaded, bowing over and over in apology, "I'm sorry! You're not old!"

"Promise you'll come visit when they put me into the old people home..." Victor pleaded, "Don't let me waste away all alone...!"

"You're not going to waste away in an old people's home!" The younger man insisted, "You're not even half-way old enough to be an 'old people'!"

"My tombstone should read 'Here Lies Victor Nikiforov...former world champion, gold medalist, died with a full head of hair...""

"Victoooorrrrr..." Yuri begged, "You're not that old... You don't even have a bald spot..." He stuck his finger on the top of Victor's head to prove it, "See? Can't you feel all that hair?"

"AHHHHHHHHHHHAAAAAAAAAAAAA..." The Russian wailed.

"Get off your asses before someone skates over you!" Yurio yelled from the other side of the rink, "You're both old! Get over it!"

Yuri prompted joined Victor in being a puddle on the ice, "But I'm only 24... Why does it hurt so much?"

Victor turned his head to the younger man, "Did you hear something?" He looked up and around, almost dramatically, "It almost sounded like there was a BABY speaking."

"Heh...BABY YURIO...the Russian Kitten!" Yuri agreed, buffering the taunt for everyone to hear.

Yurio just grit his teeth at them, "IDIOTS."

The raven-haired skater finally sat up on the ice, still laughing at the whole thing, "Glad he's back to his old self again."

Victor had pushed himself up to his hands and knees, looking sideways at his fiancé, "Agreed. He's more fun like this."

Yuri rested his elbow on the Russian's back for a moment before using him to get back to his feet, then offering his hand to pull Victor up as well.
"You should go through Eros and YoI a few times." The older skater suggested, "Maybe we can spot some areas for improvement or to make things more difficult for more points. You still want to get a 3+ GOE for your Flip, right?"

"You think I should raise my arms up for some of the jumps?" Yuri wondered nervously, "I don't know if I can just yet...but tano jumps are worth more than regular ones..."

"Well, that's why we're practicing now and not the morning of competition, right?"

"Shouldn't you practice your routines, too?" The shorter skater wondered, turning to skate backwards in front of the Russian, "I haven't really see you do your stuff in a while. It's just been Duetto this whole time."

"I've had my programs memorized since before going to Hasetsu, don't forget." Victor pointed out, "I'll go through them later."

"You sure?"

"Yes! I have all the time until Worlds to work on them!" Victor insisted, shooing the Japanese skater off, "Go take your position!"

"Okay!" Yuri sped off with a start, heading back to center, "Which one should I do first?"

"Eros. You've done YoI fairly recently."

"Alright..." He nodded, taking his stance.

That very night, the mail finally came in with Yuri's official invitation from the JSF to be part of the group that they would send to Four Continents and Worlds. Each participating country could send up to three entries per category, provided the skaters themselves met the standards of the ISU in previous international competition. Yuri had met that requirement by qualifying for the Grand Prix Series, and secured his position with the silver medal at the Final and gold at his Nationals.

Still, when he saw the official document, he let out a sigh of relief and fell back onto the floor in a heap, the letter falling to rest on his face.

"I don't know why you'd be worried about not getting picked." Victor said with a taunting smile, holding up his own invitation from the RSF to represent Russia at Worlds.

"I wasn't...I mean, not really..." Yuri fumbled for words, "But after bombing so bad and missing the cut last year, I still had that knot in my stomach."

"You'll get used to it." The Russian mused, "I'm actually pretty excited about getting to go to Four Continents. It's been forever since I had any reason to go to South Korea for an event, and never in Gangneung. Plus, obviously, I've never been to the Four Continents competition before."

"Another plane ride that feels like eternity..." Yuri grumbled, closing his eyes as he remembered the proverbial death-march from Japan to St. Petersburg. Going all the way back to South Korea would be 90% as bad. Soon after though, he could feel Victor sliding in overtop of him, and he opened one
eye as he lifted the letter to see the man grinning down at him, "What's with the look?"

"I always get excited when the official invitations arrive."

"It's not like you've ever had to worry about it." Yuri grimaced, smiling nervously as Victor lowered himself from his full height on hands and knees to hovering just above Yuri's chest.

"There was a time where even I wasn't sure I'd make it, you know." The Russian explained, sitting on his knees as he pulled Yuri's legs up on either side of his waist, trailing his nose along his chest until he was hovering over Yuri's abdomen, "I wasn't born with skates on."

"You did kind of take the RSU by storm when you did get your skates on though." The younger man pointed out, picking up the letter, and reaching up to put it on the floor far above his head, then dropping his arms there in relaxation. He could feel Victor's bangs brushing against his skin as he started to push his t-shirt up, "How did you get discovered anyway?"

"Wow, something Yuri Katsuki doesn't know about me?" Victor said with an amused chortle, "Maybe I shouldn't tell you, just so there's still a little mystery left."

Yuri lifted his head, "Maybe I do know and I just want you to tell me like I don't."

The Russian pulled up again, moving forward on his elbows until he could press his hips to Yuri's, sliding his hands over the Japanese man's arms until he could lace their fingers together where he held them over Yuri's head. He looked Yuri straight in the eyes, calmly, "You should tell the story then."

"It was a dark and stormy Russian night..." Yuri started sarcastically.

"Ohh, mine's a horror story, is it? Well, it was only a few years after the USSR fell apart..." The Russian quirked a brow, nosing Yuri's lips lightly, "Maybe you do know more than you're letting on."

"All right...it was a bright and clear summer day..."

"It wasn't that bright...and it wasn't summer..."

"Victor..."

The Russian just laughed quietly, pulling his right hand away and stroking his fiancé's side as he slid it down between them, "I guess you really don't know... I'll keep it that way for a little while longer."
It was already February 12th, and Yuri could hardly believe it. Bags were packed, routines memorized, music on CD, ready to go. Four Continents would be starting officially on the 14th, Chris' birthday, but the Men's Singles competition wasn't until halfway through the competition.

Yuri looked on his phone at the schedule for the 500th time, "Men's Short program on the 17th, then the Free Skate on the 19th...then the Gala at the end of that same day..."

"You ready?" Viktor asked, coming into the bedroom from behind, having already started taking some of their things to the shuttle that was waiting outside.

"Getting nervous, as always."

"Why would you get nervous before you even get there?"

"Because if I don't get a medal at this thing, then I might not get to do the Exhibition Gala, that's why." Yuri grimaced, looking over his shoulder at the Russian, "The pressure's on."

"You'll get a medal. You're too good not to at this point." Viktor wrapped his arms around Yuri's waist from behind and hugged him close, resting his chin on Yuri's shoulder, "And don't forget, you'll be allowed to have some katsudon if you get on the podium."

The shorter man started to drool at that thought, and Viktor smiled, patting Yuri's abdomen once before pulling away again.

"Come."

"You packed your modded Aria costume, right?" Yuri asked nervously.

"It was the first thing I packed."

"And mine is-"

"I packed that one second. I made sure to mash them together so it's like they're making love the entire time we're traveling."

Yuri went red as he said it, which amused Viktor for hours.

As they were taking the shuttle to the airport, Yuri's family had called to wish him luck. He was in better spirits after that, not being quite so nervous, but still feeling the exciting tingle in his stomach. Viktor kept one hand on Yuri's leg as they travelled, rubbing his thumb back and forth slowly as the airport loomed ever closer. He even leaned over onto Yuri's shoulder to greet his soon-to-be in-laws, and they were, of course, happy to hear him.

Soon after, Yuri went to check his emails one last time before he knew his phone would no longer have internet access, and he saw a message that surprised him.

"Oh, it's from Minako-sensei..." He said to himself, opening it up to read that she would be at the competition to cheer him on. Surprisingly, Mari was going to be there as well. "Mari-nee-chan is going to be at Four Continents, too?"
"Why wouldn't your sister come?" Viktor wondered casually.

"Well, she came to the GPF because of Yurio mostly..." Yuri admitted. "Heck, even Minako-sensei said once that she wished I hadn't bombed at Sochi because, with me as a competitor, she'd be able to find out all the hotel rooms that the others would be staying in at later competitions. I sometimes wonder if they come to cheer me on at all." Yuri sighed nervously.

Viktor laughed loudly at that, "Of course they do!" It suddenly reminded him, and he whipped out his phone again, pulling Yuri close for a sudden selfie before fast-tracking to Instagram to post it, "Hashtag #FourContinents!"

Yuri noticed then that Viktor's phone case had changed. No longer was it a caricature of Viktor's Aria costume...it was his own Aria costume now. He blushed lightly at the recognition.

"MOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!" Axel called out, the triplets looking at Viktor's post only a minute later, "They're on their way!"

Yuuko came rushing into their living room a moment later to check the post, "Go Yuri!"

"We should set up another public viewing at Yu-Topia!" Loop suggested, with the other two agreeing excitedly.

By the time the skating duo arrived at the Dong-hae Medical Spa Convention Hotel, Yuri was once again severely jet-lagged. He made it far enough to get into the hotel room, and immediately made for the sanctuary of sleep.

Viktor almost wouldn't allow it though, "Yuri! We should go look around first!"

"Look later. Sleep now."

"But you slept the entire way here!" Viktor protested feebly.

"I prefer to call that 'recreational dozing.'" Yuri corrected, turning his head to make his point, "I don't know how you can be so awake after such a long trip..."

"I never feel more alive than when I arrive for competition!"

"But you're not competing..."

"It's not just me, Yuri!" The Russian was still acting rather dramatically, "The energy of this place...it's intoxicating! I want to go out and see everything!"

"My events don't start for another couple days...we can go sight-seeing tomorrow..." Yuri suggested, "For now...sleep..."

Viktor shook his head and sighed, moving over to at least push Yuri into bed properly. It was early afternoon and bright outside, so he rummaged in their bags until he found the face-mask Yuri needed to be able to sleep normally within all the light.

Handing it to the raven-haired skater, he pat Yuri on the head, "I'm going to go take a look around
then while you sleep. I'll come back in a few hours. Message me if you wake up before I return, okay? I won't be far."

Yuri nodded, but before Viktor could leave, the younger man sat up in the bed and rose up to his knees, barely coming up to Viktor's collarbone as he leaned forward to hug him, "I'm sorry I get so jet-lagged after these flights...I want to come...I really do, I just..." He was looking at the man from under one side of the sleep mask, but he was clearly on the edge of passing out as it was.

"Yuri, it's fine. Really!" Viktor insisted, "Get your rest. I'll scout the arenas and see who all has arrived. I'll show it all to you once you're awake again." He moved to let Yuri lie back down again, and stroked his cheek before kissing his forehead and pulling the blanket over top of him, "I'll see you later."

"See you..."

Viktor quietly left the room after that, pulling his coat close, looking rather official again in his coach regalia. He headed down to the administration desk in the Press Building to check himself and Yuri in with the ISU delegates, getting their passes, and entering into the arena proper. He looked around curiously, looking at the information packet that the ISU had provided.

"All Championship events, as well as some official practices, will take place at the Gangneung Ice Arena, with an ice surface of 30m x 60m. The remainder of the official practices will take place at the Gangneung Ice Arena Practice Rink with an ice surface of the same. Both facilities are in the same venue, indoor, air-conditioned, and heated. Hmm..." He looked over the pamphlet and saw the location across the street, "This place is going to be used in the next Winter Olympics." He looked back at the pamphlet, "I wonder if Yuri would want to try out?"

He hadn't yet noticed the small crowd that had gathered around him, or the photos that were already being taken.

"Is that...Viktor Nikiforov?"

"Is he here to compete...?"

"I don't think he can, he's part of the European group..."

Whispers were rising all around, and he finally turned his head back to see the people grouping up nearby. He was bewildered for just a second, but then fully turned around and gave them all a casual wink, "Hi there, everyone~!"

"It IS him!!" The crowd cheered. Camera flashes went off like fireworks. Viktor could hardly move 10ft from that location for the next two hours, as wave after wave of surprise skating fans took notice that he was there. It was unheard of for a skater to turn up at a competition that they weren't participating in, but they quickly remembered that Viktor was playing coach to someone who was, and his presence started making more sense. He asked that they all wish Yuri good luck.

Phichit and Celestino arrived soon after the biggest crowds had already disappeared, and shook their heads at how Viktor was still drawing such numbers at a venue where he wasn't even supposed to be.

"I wonder where Yuri is if Viktor's here without him...?" Phichit wondered, looking around as though hoping Yuri would just be somewhere else nearby.

"Probably sleeping." Celestino suggested, "He never did travel well."
Phichit sighed, "Oh well, I'm sure we'll see him around soon. I'll call him later."

Viktor hadn't seen them as they passed, but soon, he found himself wanting to leave the area anyway. He'd given enough time to fams and was eager to scout the ice rinks. He politely bowed out from the next requests for photos, and high-tailed it across the road to where the newly-finished ice arena loomed overhead. He put in his ear-buds for music, hoping to be able to use them as an excuse for not hearing any other people wanting to distract him.

It worked well enough, and he skirted passed several large crowds without much notice. He showed his pass to the security guards at the door and was let inside.

The arena was enormous, at least 3 times larger than most venues he himself had performed at in the past. He whistled in admiration.

"Well well, if it isn't Viktor Nikiforov, come to grace us Continentals with his shining presence."
Came a voice, one that Viktor only barely heard.

He turned around cheerfully, but his expression stalled as he realized Jean-Jacque Leroy was standing there with his fiancé, "Oh, hi JJ."

"Too good for your own Championship?"

"I'm not here to compete." Viktor explained stiffly, "I hope that'll spare you more final-round jitters."

"You're not the one to beat anymore." JJ retorted.

"I suppose that's true, for now anyway. I'll be a competitor at Worlds."

"That's what I've heard." JJ pulled his sunglasses off his nose and settled them on top of his head, "But you'll have to outdo your own record if you want to get on the podium again."

"I don't see why I won't. I'm the one that set the record in the first place. I can always do better than I did in previous seasons." Viktor casually put his hands in his pockets, cocking his head to the side, "You've never been able to beat me before."

"Not yet, but my time's come. I'm a prime contender for gold at Worlds."

"You were a prime contender for gold at the GPF, too, and you barely coasted to bronze by the grace of other peoples' shortcomings." Viktor retorted playfully, "Yuri and Yurio will be ones on the podium with me at Worlds, I guarantee it."

"We'll see, old man." JJ laughed, turning back with his dark-haired fiancé to continue their tour of the facility. He raised his hand sarcastically in a taunting wave, "Pretty soon the only gold you'll see is the gold on your finger! We'll see how long that lasts after one of you quits skating!"

Isabella at least had the sense to scold him for being so mean, but she was saying so quietly, so no one really heard her.

Viktor just scoffed a little and rolled his eyes as he watched them leave, turning again to look at the ice. His legs itched with longing, but he knew he had to have patience. If Yuri didn't bury JJ's ego himself by getting top scores at Four Continents, then he himself would at Worlds. He knew he could. JJ's arrogant program, listing 4 quads in a single show to make it as difficult as his own and Yuri's programs, didn't mean anything if he didn't have the stamina to make it to the end without short-cutting himself.
Some other skaters he recognized started showing up to do the grand tour as well. Guang Hong of China was there with his American skating friend Leo de la Iglasia, Otabek of Kazakhstan sulked around alone as he always did, Seung-gil of Korea seemed more at ease on his home turf, among many others. There were even a number of female and pair skaters he knew, taking photos with them happily, and giving his well wishes in their own competitions.

It was strange to be at an event where he knew so few people though. It was a sad realization that most of his competition friends were part of the European bloc. He'd have to wait until Worlds to give Christophe the proper skate-thrashing he'd earned from the FaceTime chat they'd had prior to the European Championships. He smiled and kept on walking.

Fairly soon, the sun was starting to set, and Viktor knew he would need to head back to the hotel to check in on his athlete. He opened up the text message window and typed away.

[Yuri, are you awake yet?]

A moment later, a reply came.

[Working on it.]

Viktor smiled, imagining the poor man still half in bed.

[Take your time. I'll bring coffee. You're going to love this place! Maybe we'll both compete here together soon.]

[We will?]

[This is where the next Winter Olympics are being held. Don't you remember?]

[I guess I do...]

Viktor raised a brow, but then shrugged.

[I'll be in the hotel in about 30 minutes.]

[Okay, see you soon. LY.]

[LY2.]

He put the ear-buds back in place and started making for the exit, thumbing through the map packet to find the nearest café.
Yuri was sitting up in bed when he heard the sound of the door lock unlatching. He'd been sleepily looking through the skaters' Instagrams when Viktor finally managed to squeeze in through the door.

It sounded like people were hounding the Russian from outside, begging for photos or an interview and any number of other things. He closed the door with his backside and leaned against it as he caught his breath, holding up the coffee cups he'd promised to bring.

Not one word need be said between the skaters as the cacophony outside slowly dwindled. Yuri gave the 'mobbed again?' look, and Viktor huffed a nod, smiling. He glided forward to set the coffees down on the dresser opposite the bed, then slowly peeled off his long grey-blue coat, setting it on the back of a chair before sitting on the foot of the bed to unlace his shoes. When he looked back, he saw Yuri just...quietly watching him, hugging his legs over the blanket, "...Something on your mind?" The silver legend wondered.

Yuri blinked at him, "Oh...uhm, well... The usual." He admitted sheepishly, "I was just thinking, after this week, it might be a long time before we're like this again."

"Maybe not as long as you're worried about. There's a lot of places we could end up at during the next Grand Prix Series. With the ISU officials knowing our professional situation, they might even make it so each of us goes to different events from the other, so we'd end up at four competitions instead of just two. I mean, even though I wasn't in the last Final, I've taken Gold at past Finals often enough that they should consider placing me appropriately."

"I guess that's true. Still..." He pointed at Viktor's two lanyards, "Next time, yours will be a Competitor's pass...and you'll be in full costume when I get my scores in the kiss and cry. But you'll be with Yakov when you get yours."

"I don't see why you'd even be worried about something like that." The Russian pointed out, sitting sideways now, with one leg dangling off the end of the bed, "Even Sara sits with her brother in the kiss and cry sometimes."

"Sara isn't competing in the same event as her brother though. Maybe it'll be different with me, since I am, and I'm not your coach." Yuri explained, setting his legs out straight as he leaned back against the headboard, "It just occurred to me that I might not be able to share in your successes the same way you get to share in mine. Makes me a little sad."

Viktor's brows furrowed in a worried glance, but then softened into a weary huff of a laugh, "Is this the sort of stuff you think about when I'm not around?"

"I had a dream about it. I couldn't help it." Yuri shrugged, "If I could control my dreams..."

"What would you dream of then?"

The younger skater leaned his head up and smiled brightly, "I'd dream of endless bowls of katsudon, and that I'd never gain an ounce of weight from it...so I'd never have to hear anyone call me 'Kobutachan' or 'Debu' ever again."

The silver legend's smile faded in that moment, and he looked away a bit sheepishly, "Sorry."
Yuri glanced forward, but wasn't sure what to say. Part of him was glad that his fiancé recognized his own part in that minor torment, but another part was sad that he'd had to say something about it at all. He crossed his arms over his chest lightly and rubbed the side of one arm, "I guess you only said it to try and motivate me to lose the weight. I don't...hold it against you."

"You did end up working your butt off. I don't think I've ever seen anyone get on top of an issue like that in such a hurry."

"Hm..." The younger figure tilted his head a little, but laughed anyway, "I guess there's something to be said about getting myself in gear when 'Viktor Nikiforov' shows up at my doorstep offering to be my coach. So what would you dream about?"

"Eternal youth. A full head of hair. To skate forever." The Russian then sat up straight, and brought his arms up in a familiar pose, right hand close to his heart as the left reached out ahead of him, "...And a wedding."

Yuri flushed deeply at the mention of it, but nodded, and reached forward to clasp his fingers around those extended towards him, "...I dream of that, too."

"What do you see in your mind's eye?" Viktort wondered, pushing closer to where his fiancé sat, then leaning back between the man's legs so his head would rest against that formerly-squishy tummy, looking up at him for his answer.

"I picture twilight..." The younger skater started to explain, "...Vibrant color in the sky as the sun sets, like a painting. Floating lanterns let out like birds, to be carried up into the air by a soft wind. Trees with leaves the color of fire. I dream that my Vic-chan is there, and..." His voice got a little softer, "...still alive..." Yuri reached up with one hand to rub his eyes, "That's always when I wake up."

The silver Russian reached up and put both hands around his partner's head gently, just enough to make him look straight down into his eyes, "You carry too much guilt for one person to bear alone, Yuri. It's not like it's your fault that your pup died."

"But I wasn't there for him." Yuri explained, "I was gone for five years."

"I can see what you're doing, you know." The Russian said, trying desperately to pull his love out of the pit he'd thrown himself head-first into, "But you're not going to go anywhere without me. In the unlikely event that the ISU actually does say you can't be in the kiss and cry with me for my scores...you'll still be close, right?"

"As I can be."

"And I'll be right there with you when you get yours." Viktort said reassuringly, pulling him down to kiss him lightly.

"Only one of us can win Gold at a time though."

"You know I'll be cheering for you, Yuri." The Russian explained, "But I won't give it up easily. I'm a like a dog with a bone when it comes to that thing. Baowrow!"

Yuri couldn't help but laugh through his nerves, dropping his head down to Viktort's chest before finally toppling to the side, where the Russian could turn and look at him somewhat normally, "I'm so glad I don't have to go up against you at this competition... At least I have a fighting chance here."

"You're a bigger challenge than you give yourself credit for." Viktort said, brushing his fiancé's bangs
from his eyes, "I'm going to have to break a record all over again just to catch up to you."

Yuri couldn't help but feel a sense of pride at the idea, and a determined look crossed his face, "...Bring it."

Crystal-blue eyes opened wide in shock at those words, and the older skater quickly brought his fingers up to frame the man in his line of sight, "And that's the moment Viktor Nikiforov knew Yuri Katsuki was going to win gold at Four Continents. Hashtag #goldmedal!" He winked for good measure.

The anxious young athlete held on to that feeling as long as he could, energized anew for competition.

The following few days before the event actually started, passed in what felt like a blur. Opening Ceremonies came and went, and Yuri had started going to official practices. Aside from Otabek, who had won Bronze at the previous season's World Championship when Viktor had won his last Gold medal; JJ, who'd taken Bronze somehow at the last Grand Prix, and Phichit, who had taken Gold over himself at Cup of China and whom Yuri took seriously no matter what, there really wasn't any serious competition that he could identify. There was an air of intensity and admiration as other skaters watched him practicing with Viktor, and he ate it up like manna from Heaven.

"They're intimidated..." He whispered between rounds.

"All animals recognize when an alpha is in the area." The Russian quietly replied, "Use that energy to launch yourself ahead of all of them, like wind in your sails."

"Jump higher, fly farther..."

"Set the bar for what people should expect to see throughout the entire event. The earlier you go out onto the ice, the longer your program will have an impact. Use that to your advantage."

Their attention was grabbed by the far-off sound of a different, albeit smaller crowd cheering, and when the duo squinted, they could make out the green blob known as JJ Leroy taking to the ice. His fiancé had a boom-box with them and was playing JJ's 'King' theme. The gathering that stayed on their own side of the rink seemed to find the new crowd a bit conceited, and many of the fans were looking across the ice, muttering to themselves about how JJ seemed to have something to compensate for if he had to make such an entrance to try and steal attention as he had.

Yuri sighed, but turned away from the other group, "...I felt bad for him when he collapsed under the pressure of the GPF, but he doesn't seem to learn..."

"He's a paper tiger." Viktor explained, "All threats and ego...but when it comes down to it, he won't be able to go all the way. The judges don't like arrogance, Yuri. Be humble, show humility, and they'll respect you. Whether or not the judges like you can go a long way to how highly they grade your performance." He leaned forward against the shorter figure's left shoulder, wrapping his arms around Yuri's frame to lace his fingers together on the man's opposite hip, "Back a few years ago, when we still used the 6-point system, it was a well known fact that American judges scored Russian skaters poorly, and vice versa. Don't give them an excuse to do the same to you. It's a handicap you don't deserve."

"Mh...I remember. Your fame shot through the roof when you scored perfect 6s. It says a lot that you could pull that off even while being Russian." The younger figure turned his head and nosed his
partner's cheek affectionately, "You can charm anyone, no matter who they are or where they come from."

"It's a skill I should impart onto you, too." The skater-coach mused.

"YUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU!" Came a sudden shrill cry, one that immediately drowned out the crowd and music on the other side of the practice rink.

Both Viktor and Yuri had to check their ears afterwards, thinking they might've gone deaf from the shriek. Yuri looked around behind them though, and spotted a particular blond-and-red hairdo that was practically, unmistakably, "Minami-kun...!"

"Yuri-kun!" The teen called again, this time at a much more acceptable volume, "I made it!"

The older Japanese skater smiled, seeing Minami and his coach there touring the grounds. Viktor waved politely as he pulled off of his fiancé's shoulder. Yuri himself stepped forward to greet his younger counterpart with a one-armed hug, "You did! Are you competing? I know you've already made your Senior debut but you haven't gone to anything international yet."

"Not this time, but I wanted to come so bad...so my family footed the bill to let me come anyway." The teen explained, "My coach said it would be a good way to see how bigger competitions are held, that way it's not so crazy when I finally do get to compete myself!"

"It's good to get your feet wet before you jump in." Yuri agreed, "What do you think so far?"

"It's amazing! There's so much more energy here than there was at Nationals!" Minami was getting over-excited, "I can't wait to see you compete tomorrow! You'll win Gold here, too, I can feel it!"

"Anything's possible." The older figure answered casually, "There are lots of other good skaters competing for the same medal though, so don't underestimate anyone."

Viktor listened quietly, smiling as he took note of how much better his partner was at talking to his fans now.

*It may just be because it's someone he sort of already knows, but this is still much better than before.*

Minami huffed a laugh and pat the man on the shoulder, "Well, if anyone can take Gold this weekend, it's you, Yuri-kun. I don't envy anyone who has to compete here. I'm actually kind of glad that I'm not!" The teen looked a bit sheepish even as he grinned, "Nationals was enough for now! I have a lot of work to do if I ever plan on being on the same level as you! Don't stop now, though! Keep getting better and show people like JJ how it's done."

Yuri nodded, more determined than ever, "I will. Thank you for your support!" He bowed deeply to the younger skater, "I'll win Gold, if it's the last thing I ever do."
Chapter 19

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Lots were drawn, and Yuri was grateful not to be first. He'd actually pulled a number quite late in the roster; third to last. Minami congratulated him later on having that much luck for once. The rest of the afternoon was a nervous cacophony, as Yuri jogged laps and did his step-sequence training on the Olympic yard near the skating arena.

"You'd better eat something before it's too late, Yuri." Viktor advised, "Don't want you to get sick as you take the ice."

"Yeah..." He agreed, "Something light..."

Before he knew it, it was time to don his Eros costume and get ready to skate. He slipped into that famous costume, let Viktor brush and style his hair, and pulled his black and light-blue-striped track coat overtop. Viktor carried his skates as they headed over.

When he arrived, it was the first time he'd actually gotten to see Phichit in person since they'd all arrived. Despite being in contact via phone, they were never in the same place at the same time until that moment. 'Ciao Ciao' gave Viktor the usual grief about pretending to be a coach, and that it was good that he was 'going back to what he knows' for Worlds.

"I coached Yuri to silver at the GPF, so I can't be that bad as a coach..." He lamented.

"You're too young to coach other skaters, Viktor." Celestino explained, "Coaching is for old farts like me and Yakov."

Too young to coach.

Too young to coach.

Too young to coach.

The words echoed in Viktor's mind over and over, and it brought tears to his weary eyes, "I'm too young for something! Yuri! Did you hear that?!"

"Hear what?" Yuri wondered as Viktor was practically gyrating against him.

"I'm too young to be a coach! I'm not an old people yet! Ciao Ciao said so, so it has to be true! He's a coach, he knows things!"

Phichit was third to go on the ice after that, and his short program earned a respectable 96.92, even higher than the 95.73 he'd gotten for it at the Grand Prix Final. And just like at the GPF, his music had the audience singing along enthusiastically, even more so than when JJ took the ice 4 competitors later. JJ had redeemed himself though and his short program earned him 102.53, nearly 15 points higher than his bomb-out at the last competition.

The high scores were making Yuri nervous as he watched from back stage. He was trying to shake off his anxiety by doing short laps up and down a nearby hall. He put in his earplugs like Viktor suggested and tried to ignore the clamor. After all, his own short program scored 97.83 the last time he'd done it officially, and that time, he'd dropped his hand to the ice coming out of the quad flip near the end. He knew he could land it now. Some of his other jumps had even been modified to get a
higher base score. He’d heard some other competitors and coaches talking about it before JJ had
gone up to skate.

"STOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOP!!" He heard Leroy yelling from the kiss and cry as his score was
called, "IT'S...JJ STYYYYYLE!"

The crowd roared with applause. Not even plugged ears could block that chorus of cheering.

"He's certainly risen to the challenge and met it." Yuri said quietly, looking over to where others
were watching the show on a closed circuit tv.

Viktor patted him on the small of his back reassuringly, "You could beat his score just by landing the
quad flip at the end."

"I'm not going to miss this opportunity. I'm better than I was at the Grand Prix."

"You are." The Russian agreed, trying to instill more confidence, "I'm certain you'll break 100
tonight. You have everything you need. You have the best program in the house. You're ready for
this."

It felt like an eternity, and yet also an instant, before it was Yuri's turn to skate. He pulled the rubber
guards off his silver blades and slid across the pale white ice, rounding back to where Viktor stood
behind the rink edge with the poodle-plush box of tissue. Like usual, he blew his nose to free his
airway and clear his senses, and leaned close for one last pep-talk.

"Skate for fun, Yuri." Viktor told him, rubbing his shoulders where they connected to his neck, then
cupping his face gently, "Forget the competition and cameras. Ignore the crowd. Skate how you
want to."

Yuri listened closely, putting his own hands over Viktor's.

That's when the Russian touched their noses together, earning cheers and whistles from the crowd,
although the clamor was drowned out like the pair of them were under water.

"Seduce me, Yuri." Viktor said longingly, "Skate like you want me to come out on the ice and make
love to you in front of everyone in this arena tonight."

Yuri's heart pounded at the sound of that, "I might be disappointed if you don't." His eyes shone
brightly, pulling Viktor's ringed hand to his lips and kissing the gold around his finger, "Keep your
eyes on me alone, Viktor. I'm about to become the embodiment of Eros just for you."

Blue eyes blazed with excitement, and Yuri pulled away, greeting the roar of the crowd with the
gusto of a true celebrity.

He thinks of the banquet anytime I skate. Yuri thought to himself as he went back around to the
center of the rink. I've probably seen the photos and videos a hundred times now. I feel like I can
see blurs of the night from my own memory. Could I really have seduced Viktor in that state, as
depressed as I was? Do I have it in me to keep seducing him every time I take the ice?

He clicked the front of his skate down to come to a stop, and spun around slightly to take his stance.

Of course I can. He said to himself, the heat rising inside him. I'm the only one who can make
Viktor feel the way he does. I'm the one who took him off the ice in the first place, and I alone am
the reason he's coming back. Viktor's fire burns with the flames of my love.
He drew in a calm, slow, collected breath...and waited.

That passionate, spicy Spanish guitar started to play, and Yuri brought his arms up to begin the dance. His moves were perfect after that. Even with most of the hardest technical elements of the program shoved into the second half for higher points, he focused his attention on the dynamics of his presentation. That's what he'd been known for before Viktor came into his life...the spins and step sequences. His program already had two step-sequences, one more than was even actually necessary, so why not add more jumps? It wouldn't be harder to do than the Free Skate.

The camel spin was next on the agenda though, completing the foot change and amping up the speed, then flying off again.

The first jump was a triple axel from an outside spread-eagle at the GPF, and Yuri found that one easy to land cleanly, so he decided to up the ante a little.

*I know I can pull that one off...so if I do it now for normal point value, I can change what it would've been later into something harder for even more points, plus the second-half difficulty bonus...*

The audience and announcers recognized the challenge he'd risen to.

"Outside spread-eagle...into...a triple axel...good finish! Big point bonuses for a difficult entry! And how unexpected, too! That jump was planned for later! What does Skater Yuri have in mind to replace it?"

He twizzled out with flare, then brought his arms back out to add interest. The flying sit-spin was coming up, and that would officially send him into the second half of the program. He'd be free to see what his changes would feel like.

Yuri abruptly changed directions, heading for the center of the rink from the edge where the axel had left him. He could see the Exhibition Skate practice in his mind...Viktor had drilled him until he was practically doing the jumps *in his sleep*. The 3-turn came up, and he threw himself into the air...

"Unbelievable! He swapped out the axel with a quadruple Lutz! That's a new jump for him, too! Will he have enough energy for the Flip at the end?"

Yuri landed on the ice hard, but refused to drop, and forced his hands to stay up as he slipped backward into the next move.

Viktor was wide-eyed at the success of it.

*Ever since Hot Springs on Ice, I never doubted for a second that Eros was meant for Yuri all along, even if I created it for myself originally. He's perfected it to a point where I don't think even I could do it better...*

The young skater pulled into his second step sequence, spinning around as his arms rose into the air, moving across the ice from one corner to the other, then peeling into a wide arc around the shorter end of the rink to come back around.

"He's coming up to a combination jump..." The announcer said, his voice embodying the image of being on the edge of one's seat, "Quadruple Loop...triple toe-loop! He nailed it again!"

Viktor's hands clenched at his chest.

...*So why do I still feel like it isn't enough...!*
Phichit and Celestino were practically mesmerized where they watched Yuri's performance on the television. JJ was watching, too, but he was reserving his judgment...he wouldn't let others see him sweat.

*He still has time to mess up.*

"His coach's signature move, the quadruple flip, is coming up...it's very similar to the Lutz, which Yuri cleared just moments ago! But Yuri touched his hand to the ice at the GPF when last he performed this routine...here it comes..."

Viktor clasped his fingers together tightly, looking over where his knuckles were white under his gloves.

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**HE CLEARED IT!**

Viktor threw his arms up, then brought them down again hard into fists.

"VERY CLEAN!"

The audience was out of their seats to cheer for him.

Yuri was entering into the final few moves of the short program, and he felt hot and tingly all over despite the cold air on his wet brow. He rose from his combination-spin into the last maneuver, and as the music came to its climactic end, he stopped, his final pose perfect.

Viktor had his hands over his mouth in shock.

The skater heaved exhausted breaths, looking around at the audience until he finally spotted Viktor, who was running at full speed towards the kiss and cry. Yuri started to skate over, trembling from excitement, and as he came to the rink's exit, found Viktor reaching for his chest to grab him by the costume. The Russian yanked him off the ice and kissed him hard, running the fingers of his free hand through his fiancé's dark hair. Yuri wrapped both his arms around the man, practically deaf from the cheering crowd's uproar, not wanting it to stop...the kiss, and for once, the cheering, too.

Mari and Minako were in tears from where they sat, holding up their Viktuuri signs enthusiastically.

Minami cheered as well, the same red tie around his head that he'd worn when attending the GPF public viewing at Yu-Topia.

Yuuko, Takeshi, the girls, and the rest of Yuri's family cheered at the television.

Viktor finally let Yuri catch his breath. "I'd rip these clothes off of you right here and now, if I didn't think it'd make things complicated for you at Worlds."

"Viktor..." He heaved, his hair a bit disheveled where the Russian had mussed it up.

They made their way breathlessly to the kiss and cry bench, and Viktor held tight to Yuri's hands as he waited for the score.

"The score for Katsuki Yuri..." The announcer began with a knowing pause.
Viktor held Yuri's hands tight like a vice-grip, biting his lip.

Yuri's heart pounded.

"...115.54!!"

"KATSUKI YURI BROKE THROUGH AND SCORED OVER A HUNDRED!!"

"...115...54?" Yuri repeated, as though he hadn't heard it right. He squinted at the score card displaying on the screen in front of him, but it still didn't seem real.

Viktor pulled him back up again and squeezed him excitedly, "So close!" He was saying, "You're within 3 points of beating Yurio's record! You're unbelievable, Yuri!!"

Yuri was starting to feel faint, and his fiancé noticed him starting to go pale, holding him close to his chest until he could shake it.

"...I don't think...I can be more Eros...than that..."

The Russian team was watching the event at their training arena, and for once, Yurio was front and center, watching earnestly. He was just as much in disbelief at the score as everyone else was.

"He came within 3 points of beating me..." He said quietly, "He could go beyond that so easily if he wanted..."

No other skater that night came close to breaking that number, and none of them beyond JJ even got past 100. When Yuri's sister and ballet mentor finally caught up with him after the fact, they were still over the moon for his performance.

"You really knocked it out!" Minako was saying, hugging the man eagerly, "I couldn't be more proud of you!"

"You were great out there!" Mari agreed.

Dinner that night was a celebration in itself, and Viktor made sure to buy the best champagne available.

Yuri eyeballed it cautiously, "Are you sure I can drink this...? You...know how I can get..."

"Only one glass." Viktor winked, pouring it himself before setting it in front of the man, "Last thing I need is for you to stumble and hurt yourself, never mind forgetting what happened tonight...or what will happen..."

The younger skater flushed nervously, "...What are you planning?"

"I made a promise earlier, or as near as could be..." Viktor said seductively, though quietly enough that Mari and Minako couldn't hear, nuzzling close to Yuri's ear, "...I intend to get you out of your clothes one way or another." His hand went high on Yuri's leg, nearly groping between them but for
the fact that they were in public, "Nothing could be more exciting right now."

Yuri dared to challenge that, "...How about me scoring higher on the free program than I did at the GPF?"

The Russian had to fan himself and sit back down, "Ufuu...My heart couldn't take it."

Even one glass of champagne was enough to get Yuri started, and in his buzzed excitement, convinced Viktor to let him have a second. Then a third. Viktor was drinking right along with him, and that probably didn't help, as the both of them were starting to lose clothes as it went on. By the end of it, Mari was the one who had to stop him, as Viktor had let the man polish half a bottle despite what he'd said before.

The two women made sure to get the skaters back to their room without incident, and the two were quite ripe by the time they were shoved inside.

"Don't come out till you're both sober." Mari instructed them, hanging the DND sign on the door handle before letting it close as she and Minako waved them goodnight. Mari had a good idea what was about to follow behind that door, but for the sake of one of them being her little brother, did her best not to imagine it.

Viktor was way ahead of her though. He was already pushing Yuri's suit-coat off, shuffling the man backwards towards the foot of the bed with kisses and little nudges. Yuri paused only as he felt the blankets brushing the back of his knees. The Russian pushed him down to sit, looking down at him past his nose with half-lidded eyes, one hidden behind silver bangs as he moved to pull his own coat and vest off, throwing them aside and pulling the button-down shirt from where it had been tucked into his slacks.

Yuri held Viktor's waist as one knee came up against his side, pushing him down to his back on the bed. The Russian was on his lap soon after, pushing against him with all the passion that had built up since the score was read aloud. He could hardly contain himself. He rose back up, pulling away from a suffocating kiss, and gazed into those brown eyes.

The younger skater traced his right hand up Viktor's front, ending with a palm flat on his chest, lightly touching at the nearest button on his shirt. He looked up into those eager pools of slate blue, "...Do it."

The silver-haired skater's eyes widened a little, and his cheeks flushed, and a ripping sound came soon after. Yuri's button-down was shredded, and Viktor eagerly started licking at his chest, the flesh newly exposed to his sight.

He was going to have that man every which way he wanted that night. Once, twice, ten times...a hundred times if he could. Yuri was his life, his love, his prodigy, his rival, his everything...and he was going to enjoy every, last, second.
CHAPTER TWENTY

It was probably 4am before Viktor finally let Yuri sleep, and the exhausted skater fell into a blissful oblivion. His body was sore from toes to scalp, but it was a good hurt, he thought. He'd skated harder than ever and he knew he'd feel it when he was done. When he roused again and saw that it was 7:25, he thought for a moment that he'd slept over 12 hours and shot up, stiff as a board, frantic that he might've wasted the day...only to realize that the little glowing dot on the alarm clock that lit up for “pm” was dark...so he'd actually only slept for just over 3 hours.

He fell down to his back again in the mess of tangled bed sheets, turning his head to look over at his partner. Viktor's back was to him as he slept on his side, and the younger man saw the scratch marks where he'd raked him. The Russian's heavy breaths, cries, moans, every sound...they replayed in Yuri's mind again. That's when he remembered he had scratches of his own, and his cheeks flushed a little.

He supposed he should be grateful that Viktor had 'trained' him properly before they'd ever left St. Petersburg. He could only imagine how badly he'd compete in 2 days' time if he'd gone back onto the ice as 'hurt' as he had been after that first time Viktor took him. That was a good hurt too, Yuri felt, but it still stung a little for how much Viktor teased him over it. He absolutely would not have been able to compete in that state. He wouldn't let Viktor touch him that way again for 3 days straight after that, although Viktor had let him be for a week.

He brazenly wondered how Viktor had been able to tolerate his own first-day-after ache as well as he had...it's like he hadn't been bothered at all.

But, Yuri thought, he was probably just really good at hiding it. Or maybe I wasn't that good...

Too awake from being startled by the clock to go back to sleep, Yuri fumbled to the edge of the bed, pulled the one free blanket up and set it over Viktor, and stepped into the shower. The hot white rush of water poured over him, and thoughts of 'YoI' started flooding through his mind.

I can make it better...I can make it harder, get more points for the jumps...

He knew the other competitors would be wracking their brains over how to improve their Free Skates just to try to catch up to him, especially JJ, Otabek, and Phichit. Yuri was confident he could keep a spot on the podium no matter what he did, but whether he could keep gold or not...that nagged at him.

I have to stay 2 steps ahead of everyone, no matter what...

By 8:30am, he was down in the hotel's restaurant area, nibbling on a wedge of honeydew melon as he went over his jump schedule for the 5th time. He thought back on the days before leaving Hasetsu, when Viktor had made him do so many quads in 10 minutes that his legs had turned to jelly for it.

'You may not always listen to me, but at least believe me.'

'You're not going to mess it up.'

Yuri thought back on the things Viktor had said, but no matter how hard he tried to avoid it, thinking of things that had been said that influenced him the most inevitably reminded him of the worst thing
Viktor had ever said.

'If you mess up the Free Skate and miss the podium...I'll take responsibility by resigning as your coach.'

He pinched the bridge of his nose and tried to shake the memory, but it lingered like many things did.

This will be the last time he's with me as just my coach...

Mercifully, he wasn't left alone with his thoughts for much longer, and he saw Phichit coming up to the restaurant a few minutes later. Happy to see his Thai friend again, Yuri raised his arm to wave him over and join him at the same table.

"I didn't think you'd be up this early, Yuri." Phichit had commented, resting his hands on the back of the chair he intended to sit in soon, "But it's good to finally see you outside the lineup."

"Go get something to eat. We have all day to get properly caught up!"

"Where's Viktor?"

"Oh, he'll probably be unconscious till noon." Yuri nervously rubbed the back of his neck, "I wish I could sleep like he does, but competition makes me edgy."

"I know the feeling." The other skater nodded, then broke off to head to the breakfast bar, "I'll be right back."

Yuri held out his hand to grasp Phichit's as he went by, then turned back to his notepad.

I don't know what I can do other than turn my show into a program of nothing but quads...but wouldn't that be boring? People would see it and think I had stopped telling the story. It's just a bag of tricks. What else can I do to bring up the base score though...?

He thought again on how Yurio had started raising his arms. Nervously, he wondered if he could pull such a thing off. It was practically muscle-memory that he pull his arms in when he went for a jump.

Viktor and I tried for a little while when I mentioned it in St. Petersburg, but no matter how often I did it, I kept pulling my arms in. Can I really untrain myself so fast...? Especially without Viktor's help...

By the time Phichit had finally come back, Yuri had decided to give it the old college try. There were a few hours yet before Viktor would be up, so if he couldn't manage it, it wouldn't embarrass him in front of the legend.

"It's going to be hard to keep up with you if you keep advancing like you have been, Yuri." Phichit had started saying, setting his plate and utensils down so he could sit without dropping everything, "I can hardly believe you're the same skater I trained with in Detroit."

"Yeah..." Yuri agreed, setting his notepad aside, "I had no faith in myself to do well back then. Now...I feel like greatness is right there in front of me, and it's so close, I can touch it..."

"What kind of training does Viktor give you that makes you so good in such a hurry?" The Thai skater was eager to know, "You're the first person he's ever coached, but whatever it is...it's working!"
Yuri laughed nervously, "...I don't think I'd be able to tell you all the things he does to make me better..." He clasped his hands together and wedged them between his legs anxiously, "But mostly, he made me start to believe in myself. The more confident I got, the better I performed. I would never have achieved any of this without him."

"Yeah, he definitely brought you out of your shell." Phichit agreed, breaking up the eggs in front of him, "So what are you going to do for your Free Skate, now that the bar's been set?"

"...I have a mind to try and do the easier jumps with one of my arms up."

"Oh, like the Russian Yuri!"

"Yeah...that one simple change made a huge difference." Yuri nodded, reaching up to adjust his glasses, "Don't tell anyone though. I haven't even been able to pull it off in practice yet. I don't want to look stupid if I decide not to do it later."

"No worries!"

"What about you?"

The Thai skater seemed a bit defeated with that question, averting his eyes a little, "There's no chance I'll win gold, no matter what I do...so changing my program won't really help."

"No chance to win gold? Are you kidding?" Yuri was really surprised, "Look who you're talking to."

"Yeah, the Come-Back King." Phichit pointed at him, "And the one most likely to stand on the top of that podium tomorrow."

"Oh come on, JJ could sneak it out from right under me just like Yuri did..." Yuri protested.

"You're the one that broke the Free Skate record though." Phichit was pointing a fork at him, "JJ's was high, but it wasn't high enough."

"My 221.58 broke Viktor's record..." Yuri reminded himself, "But-

"And Yuri barely got over 200."

"He shattered me in the Short Program."

"And you caught up again. You were within 3 points of his new record. You'll break it at Worlds...and you'll break your own record again here at Four Continents."

Yuri slouched back into his chair and crossed his arms, "I don't know what more I can do though. I already brought my Free Skate program up to the same difficulty as Viktor's last performance...I don't think I can go any further, at least not by tomorrow..."

"Stop doubting yourself so much!" Phichit practically jumped out of his own chair, "You could break 225 if you believed in yourself!"

"...Mhh..."

The Thai man wasn't done yet though, "Yuri, how can you stand to put your skates on when you still have so little confidence? Do you know how much that insults the other skaters, when you score so high despite the crushing weight of your insecurity piled up on top of you like you do?"
"...In...security...?"

"All this 'oh I can't do any better,' 'oh don't tell anyone what my plans are because I don't want to look stupid if I can't pull it off,' and everything else. But then you go out there and you completely kill it! Plisetsky only stepped up his game because you were there. JJ lost his mind at the GPF because of you!"

"I don't think that was really what ha-"

"IF YOU DON'T WIN THE GOLD TOMORROW, I WON'T FORGIVE YOU."

Yuri had pushed away from the table a little as Phichit yelled at him. He had no idea what to say in response anyway. The intensity of his friend's outburst had left everyone in the restaurant speechless, gawking in their direction to wonder what in the world was going on.

Phichit had noticed the awkward side-eyes though and sat back down, muttering an apology under his breath as he looked down at his half-eaten plate.

"...I'll...do my best..." Yuri finally said, keeping his distance.

They finished breakfast in awkward silence, until Phichit finally took back what he'd said, realizing how much it weighed on his friend. They parted ways after that, and Yuri decided to walk around the as-yet-still-under-construction Olympic grounds alone, thinking about what he should do.

He looked up timezones on his phone, checking what time it was back in St. Petersburg. Realizing that it wouldn't even be dawn there for another couple hours, he decided against trying to FaceTime with Yurio...though he wondered if he should really call the teen even if he was likely to be awake.

"Yurio helped me learn to land a quad Salchow..." He said quietly to himself as he kept on walking, "But what could he possibly do to help me do jumps with my arms up when he isn't even here?"

He scrolled through Instagram again, checking in on the last thing everyone had posted.

For some reason, he couldn't focus on the posts though. He'd look at one...or rather, through each post, and then scrolled on like nothing was there. It was only when he stumbled onto a random pic from Yuri's Angels that he realized what he could do.

He looked around anxiously, checking how many people were around...and then ducked down a more secluded path. When he finally found a bench to sit on, he started scrolling through the Yuri's Angels archive. True to his hopes, they eventually posted galleries of freeze-frame images featuring every one of Yurio's jumps. He analyzed them carefully...the build-up, the entry...when he'd finally raised one or both arms up, how he balanced...then how he made the landing.

A determined look crossed Yuri's face...

A few hours passed, and the sun was high in the cool February sky. The skater had worn himself out, practicing as much as he could. His arms felt like they were on fire, but not nearly as much as his legs did. Practicing off the ice was exceptionally tiring...but there was nothing he could do about it. When at competitions, the practice rinks were reserved for different groups at certain times, and he couldn't just hog the ice because he'd gotten a great idea. He'd have to wait until it was his turn.

It was just after 2 when he finally stumbled back into the hotel room, and to his surprise, Viktor was somehow still asleep.

Yuri had found himself starting to get tired again though. The 3 hour nap, followed by the morning's
impromptu practice, had left him exhausted. He kicked off his shoes and set his jacket on the unused bed, put his glasses on the night-stand, and then lazily crawled onto the bed Viktor was still snoozing in.

He looked down at the Russian in his sleepy haze, and the sight of him there reminded Yuri of the morning Viktor had shown up at Yu-Topia all those months ago. In only two more months, it would be a year since that day. He could hardly believe how far they'd both come in such a short period of time.

Back then, it was all he could do to sit quietly and stare at Viktor as he slept on the floor of the dining room. Now though...Yuri crawled closer and wedged himself next to the man, one arm folded neatly between them as the other was draped over Viktor's stomach. Yuri set his head against the Russian's chest, listening to his heartbeat.

Ba-thmp...
Ba-thmp...
Ba-thmp...

Zzzzz...
.
.
.

"...Yuuuuuri..."

Zzzz...

"Yuri...!"

He opened his eyes in a blur, practically seeing bubbles and stars as light washed over him. The fuzzy shape of a grey-haired figure came into focus soon after that, and Yuri mumbled something that might've once sounded like Viktor's name...but now, wasn't even close. He fell back asleep again.

When his mind finally allowed it, Yuri started to wake up again on his own. It was after 7pm by that point. He could hear the quiet whisper of the television playing, and when he lifted his head, he realized he'd been propped against his fiancé's legs. His head had been on Viktor's lap, one arm draped over the man's nicely dressed and crossed legs, and the rest of him splayed out over 2/3ds of the rest of the bed.

Viktor gently stroked his black hair, "Finally awake, Yuri...?"

Yuri dropped his head back down again where he could feel the warmth of where he'd been lying for the last several hours, "...I completely wasted the day for both of us..."

"Not completely." Viktor corrected, "You got a much earlier start than I did."

The Japanese skater's eyes shot open, and he immediately lifted his head, gawking at Viktor accusingly, "What do you know!?"

The Russian was surprised at him, then smiled mischievously, "Wow~! What _should_ I know?"
Yuri backed off suddenly, "...Er...what...do you mean?"

"You were dressed when I woke up." The silver-haired skater pointed out, "That would only be the case if you'd gotten up before me and then came back to bed after. Your shoes also had dirt on them. Were you doing things without me, Yuri?"

He backed up to the edge of the bed, hearing the same tone in Viktor's voice as he used to hear back in the early days of their coach-athlete relationship...it was a voice that was ominous, secretive, and yet somehow all-knowing.

"...I...might've...gone for a walk...type of thing..." Yuri admitted cautiously.

"Oh? A walk?" The Russian leaned forward a little, lifting one knee to rest an elbow on it, "Where did you go?"

"...Around..."

_This guilt is killing me...!! I have to tell him!!_

"Were you practicing arm-up jumps on your own?"

Yuri balked, looking both dejected and worried all at once, but then calmed and sulked, lowering his head, "Yes, Coach Viktor..."

"Why didn't you ask me to help you?"

Yuri felt like he was shrinking under Viktor's gaze, "I didn't want to disappoint you if I still couldn't do it. You tried so hard before..."

"And?"

"...And?"

"Did you manage this time?"

Yuri looked aside, "I think I can do it, but only on doubles... I lose my balance on anything higher than that."

"Balance on the ground is harder to maintain than it is when on blades, since you can't build up the same momentum to launch yourself up." Viktor said, reaching over to touch his fingers lightly under Yuri's chin, "Events for today are over, so the practice rink should be available. Show me."
CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

The final night of Four Continents had arrived faster than Yuri had wished. His second late night in a row had ended sometime around 3am, and he still wasn't sure if he was ready. Thankfully, the Men’s Free Skate wasn't until 11am, and he was late on the roster, so he wouldn't take the ice until sometime closer to 3:45pm.

He felt more nervous for the Exhibition Gala after that though, at 5:30pm.

In true Nikiforov fashion, Yuri slept until it was practically his turn to go skate. Viktor gently woke him up, and they proceeded to get ready and head over to the skating arena.

They took with them all of the things they’d need for Yuri's Free Skate...and the rest.

He felt eerily calm. His skin felt cool despite his layers. He thought he could see more clearly than normal, even without his glasses. Colors seemed more vibrant, even sounds were richer, tastes more sensual.

He looked up from where he sat in the staging area, "Am I dying...?"

Viktor gawked at him, "...Are you what?"

The skater shook his head and looked back down again, "I read once that people who are consciously aware of the moment of their own death, will experience the world around them so much more intensely than they ever did before that moment. I kind of feel like that's happening to me right now."

"You'd better not be dying." Viktor pointed at him, "You haven't skated yet. We haven't skated yet!"

"I've never felt like this before." Yuri said quietly, moving off the bench to sit on the floor and stretch. He spread his legs far apart and moved to reach as close to the left foot as he could. Viktor crouched behind him and helped push him down, just like Takeshi once did in Hasetsu. "I think I'm too calm."

"This is good!" Viktor encouraged, "Go onto the ice with a clear mind."

Yuri agreed to try, finishing his stretch and then getting back up again. It was about 3:23pm by then, and he decided it was time to get his skates on.

When the laces were done, and he'd pulled the bottom of his costume pants over the heels, he paused...seeing Viktor kneeling in front of him unexpectedly, "What's wrong?"

He put his arms on the bench on either side of Yuri’s legs, and brought those azure eyes up to meet Yuri's, "It's almost time."

"...Yeah."

"Do you think it's strange that I'm probably more nervous than you are?"

Yuri tilted his head a little, but then smiled, bringing his hands together under Viktor's chin to toy at the knot of his tie affectionately, "Be nervous for me so I don't have to be."
Viktor nodded, and rose to stand, pulling Yuri up with him before heading over to the viewing area. Most other skaters had already had their turns and were just waiting to see what their final ranks would be.

Phichit's Free Skate score was 192.45, earning him a final score of 289.37, similar to his GPF final score. He was happy, but disappointed at the same time.

JJ managed a reasonable 214.89 with his own Free Skate, just under-shaving Viktor's old record, and bringing his total to 317.42. He was much happier with that score than he'd been with his just-barely-300 at the GPF.

According to the ranks, JJ was sitting on the gold medal at that point.

When Otabek finished his program, JJ still held on, with the Kazakhstani skater holding firmly to silver. An American skater held bronze for the moment.

Viktor felt a vibration in his pocket, and pulled out his phone to see a FaceTime request from Yurio. Tilting his head, but smiling, he accepted the call and saw the blond on the other end of the camera, "Hey."

Yuri was practicing a few moves from his step sequence in an adjacent hall when his coach rounded over to interrupt him and hand him his phone without a word. Getting a weird look on his face, Yuri glanced from him to the blue device being held out to him, screen down, and grasped it close. When he flipped it over and saw Yurio there looking back at him, the Japanese skater got excited.

"Yurio! Hey!"

"Davai, Katsudon." The blond said simply, his face as still as stone. To Yuri's surprise though, his Russian counterpart gave a thumb's up, "Give us all the show we want to see."

"Don't look away, or you might miss something." Yuri said eagerly, hoping Yurio would catch the subtle challenge.

The Russian Punk turned his head slightly, but then cocked a smirk and closed the conversation. It told Yuri all he needed to know, and he happily gave the phone back to his fiancé. At least...he meant to.

Viktor held the top of the phone with his fingers as Yuri kept holding onto the bottom with both hands. He was looking down at the phone, and then abruptly changed the position of his feet. Still holding to the phone, Yuri set his right foot behind the left, and then looked up into the eyes of his taller coach...then let go of the phone as he descended to the left with his right hand up near his head. He spun around, and then reached his fingers out to touch the side of Viktor's face before turning away again. Another spin, and Yuri was down on one knee, then rising again to throw his hands up and out to the left above his shoulders.

Viktor suddenly realized what Yuri was doing, and backed off to give him more space, watching gladly, even as Yuri only half-spun around for what would later be two quad flips. Viktor then joined in the dance as Yuri held out his hand to bring him in, and they continued with their Duetto right there in the staging area.

At least, until JJ sauntered through, a trail of skating reporters following him as he did a walking interview. He spotted the duo and immediately chortled at them, "Aren't you practicing the wrong program, Yuri?"

The Japanese skater paused, and Viktor sadly did as well, but Yuri put his hand on his coach's arm
gently and looked at the Canadian square in the eyes, "You were looking at the last program I do before I leave this place with the gold."

The reporters were all excited about that challenge, and looked to JJ for his response, but in his usual cocky manner, the Canadian brought his hands up to form his own initials, "Good luck in the attempt. You'll have to break Viktor's record a second time in a row to catch up to me. Considering how quickly you crash and burn..."

"I'm not the same skater I was in Sochi." Yuri cut him off, "And considering how hard you crashed and burned in Barcelona, you're the last person I'd expect to be giving me grief about that sort of thing."

JJ shrugged, "I still made the podium at that event. That's more than you did."

He started walking off again, the crowd of reporters following after to continue haranguing the man over how he felt following his flawless Free Skate.

Yuri just bitterly watched him go, the high of his euphoria long gone. He felt Viktor snaking an arm around him though, pulling him close and leaning over, slate blue eyes staring deep into him.

"...Crush him."

The younger man was a bit thrown off by the vulgarity of Viktor's request.

"I want to see the light leave his eyes when he watches you take center stage. I want him to know that as long as either of us has skates to wear, he will never touch a gold medal from a major ISU event. Winning at Skate America or the NHK Cup will never mean anything so much as winning here, or at Worlds, or even the Grand Prix Final." Viktor continued, soon reaching up with his free hand to trace a line over Yuri's heart, "The FC gold medal will be sitting right here in an hour."

"...No pressure..."

"There's nothing beautiful about JJ's attitude." Viktor explained, "He doesn't know how to be humble. It disgusts me." He moved the free hand from Yuri's chest to his chin, stroking his lower lip with his fingertips, "And since I can't compete here...I'm counting on you to be my proxy. So...Yuri. Go out there and show him what a real champion looks like. You want to do that, don't you?"

The raven-haired skater nodded, and pulled himself upright by yanking on Viktor's tie, pulling close to his face, "I do."

They heard the cheers of the previous skater's show concluding, and smiled at one another.

"It's time."

...  
...
...

Yuri held to Viktor's shoulder as he leaned over to pull the rubber guards from his blades, and then handed them to his coach so he could get his track coat off. He could feel the energy in the stadium, and it filled him with excitement.
Viktor looked at a list of the current top scores, and showed them to Yuri despite his better judgment. He felt the skater could handle it this time.

"You scored higher than all of these people at the GPF. 319.41, remember?"

"I'll have it on my tombstone," He said, "Next to yours, with your full head of perfect hair."

Viktor smiled and tossed his head a little to wave that very hair around, letting it fall to conceal one eye, "All you have to do is exactly the same as you did at the Grand Prix Final, and you'll still score higher than before. You've been boosted a lot by your Short Program...so don't take any risks if you don't 100% think you can pull it off."

"Next to take the ice...representing Japan, Katsuki Yuri." The announcer said overhead.

He took a deep breath and stepped through the gateway, feeling his blades slide on the ice beneath him. He turned back around to face Viktor one last time, but found that there wasn't really a lot to say. Viktor held his hands with his own, bringing them together to clasp them between them, kissing Yuri's fingers gently.

The skater watched as it happened, and looked up at his face when Viktor pulled away again. Unable to help himself, he propped himself up by his elbows on the rink wall and kissed him lightly. Viktor smiled through it, and brought up his right hand to deftly, barely touch his fiancé's jaw. After that, Yuri was off without a word, heading for the center of the rink with the roar of the audience propelling him forward.

He took his position, and took one last deep breath. Soon, it would be over and done.

The sound of the piano rose into the air, and the audience quieted.

The soft scratch of blades whispered beneath him as he started to move.

On the ice, he felt like he was home.

"Katsuki Yuri is opening his program with two consecutive quads again...the first one is coming up...a combination. Quadruple toe-loop...dou...no, triple toe-loop!" The programming announcer was saying, surprised.

Not that Yuri could hear what was being said while he was skating, but he could feel the excitement. He had already increased the difficulty of his program and he'd barely even started.

"Quadruple Salchow! Beautiful! Followed by a triple-flip! AND HE HAD BOTH OF HIS HANDS IN THE AIR!"

Yuri felt a wobble as he landed, but recovered from it without anyone noticing, and skated on.

The calmest part of his Free Skate came up. He slid forward on the ice for what seemed like forever, twisting only when it was time to complete the wide outside spread-eagle, following into a flawless Ina Bauer.

Viktor had one hand over his mouth as he held onto the poodle-plush tissue box. The whole display was like déjà vu. Yuri was going to put it all out there and go for the highest possible score with his current skill, and as it stood, it was even more difficult than his own last Free Skate.

The skater rounded back, and threw himself into the air, one arm over his head as he completed the triple axel. The crowd screamed its approval. They were even louder when he finished the
quadruple toe-loop after that. He didn't dare raise an arm for that one though.

"I think the triple is all I'll manage this time." Yuri had said, breathlessly slouching on the practice rink's wall at the end of their experiment the night before.

Viktor scraped ice shavings from his gold-plated blades, "Even a single with an arm in the air gets a higher score than one without. But are you sure you want to do this? You don't need all this extra stuff to win."

"It's not about winning anymore..." Yuri answered, stretching his arms before rubbing one shoulder, "It's about seeing how far I can push myself while I still have this chance." He looked at Viktor and put his hands over the man's hips, "I may never score this high again. Either because of nerves when you start competing again, or because I myself will start to wear down...this is it."

"Triple Lutz...triple toe-loop...! Very clean!" The announcers continued.

"I don't want you to think you're not allowed to try your hardest just because I'm on the roster alongside you." Viktor scolded, resting his arms over Yuri's shoulders in turn, "You've more than proven that you're my equal. Don't short-change yourself so much."

"I'll never be your equal, Viktor." The younger skater insisted, smiling up at him, "You've been my hero for more than half my life. I'll always look up to you. So...don't ever stop trying to surprise me, okay?"

"He's going to try for his coach's signature move again, the quad flip!"

Excitement rang high as Yuri entered the final loop before leaping into the jump.

Shards of ice flew off his blades, and the world spun around him. He felt the ground come back up at him, landing on the opposite foot from the one he jumped off from, and the wind blow by as he moved backwards, away from the final quad of his Free Skate.

It was over.

He'd landed all his jumps. He didn't slip, fall, or touch the ice with his hands...nothing went wrong.

The crowd was already cheering as he entered into the final spin series, then rising up calmly to put his right hand over his heart, and extend the left out towards the man for whom that heart beat.

Yuri was panting from exhaustion, but instead of a bewildered, tired look as he'd normally given, he had a smile on his face. He was proud of the show he'd just finished. The score...almost didn't even matter to him at that point. He raised both his arms to the audience and bowed, clasping his hands together in gratitude before finally pushing off with his toe to head for the rink exit.

Yurio watched the event intently from his grandfather's house, his fluffy cat snoozing next to him.

Viktor took Yuri's hands as he came off the ice and hugged him, patting him on the back as he pulled the skater towards the bench in the kiss and cry.
Yuri felt as calm at that moment as he had when he’d been waiting in the staging area. He couldn’t understand how it was possible. Sitting on that hot-seat had always been so terrifying before, yet now...

As they sat, Yuri slouched against Viktor's left arm, holding it to his chest as Viktor clasped their hands, lacing their fingers together. He was beaming at his pupil, and moved his free hand to push a strand of hair from Yuri's eyes as they both heard the voice on the overhead speaker echoing through the stadium.

"The score for Katsuki Yuri..."
CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Yuri felt like he'd gone deaf. The cheering of the crowd was gone, Viktor's voice was gone...his own heartbeat and breathing were all that he could hear. His vision blurred as he looked ahead at the screen that displayed his Free Skate and total cumulative score.

"This is a nice dream." Yuri said to himself whimsically, "I don't mind this. This is fine."

He wondered if he was actually unconscious on the ice somewhere. That he'd fallen coming out of one of his stupid-complicated jumps and rammed his face into a rink wall again. He felt that weird dizziness at the front of his head, just like the last time he'd hurt himself. He was certain he was about to wake up and be in a world of blazing pain. He set his elbows down on his knees and rubbed his brow nervously.

"This is just ridiculous." Yuri muttered to himself, crossing his arms and then lifting one to gesture at the screen, "That score can't be real. Viktor, tell it to me straight, what did I really get? I must need a new prescription for my eyes...or maybe that number is just some cruel joke."

"That is your score." Viktor answered flatly, "Why would they punk you?"

Yuri continued to eyeball it, even as the blinding flash of cameras pulsed all around him.

"...It's just not right." He said firmly, "How in the world could I have gotten a 219.24? That puts my new total right under your last Grand Prix victory..."

Viktor deadpanned him, "Mh..."

"This is actually kind of funny, now that I think about it." Yuri continued, "I guess I can let myself laugh. In a minute, I'm gonna wake up in a pool of blood and there's going be emergency techs all around me, waiting to carry my broken corpse off the ice. I've really died, and gone to skater paradise...where impossible scores happen for every average, run-of-the-mill, dime-a-dozen top figure skaters in the JSF..."

"...What are you talking about?" Viktor was perplexed, and Yuri's reaction was actually starting to annoy him. He lifted one hand and knocked on his head with his knuckles, hard, "YURI. That's your score!"

The skater winced under the cracks to his skull, "Ow, Viktor, why'd you do that?"

"Get yourself together. This is real."

"Eh?"

Viktor's eyebrows crinkled with a worried look, but he smiled anyway.

Yuri's mind finally came back around, and he snapped.

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!??"

"YURI KATSUKI HAS MAINTAINED HIS PLACE ON THE LEADER BOARD! WHAT AN INCREDIBLE COME-BACK! FROM DEAD-LAST AT LAST YEAR'S GPF TO FIRST PLACE AT
FOUR CONTINENTS! With only two more competitors to go, can he hold on, or will the gold be snatched away a second time!?

The skater was panicking when he finally made it to the staging area. He paced back and forth frantically, heaving fast breaths to the point of nearly fainting. He leaned back against a wall and clutched at his chest, feeling like he was about to have a heart attack.

Viktor followed him with his eyes, not really sure what to do. Phichit, Otabek, Leo, Guang-Hong, Sueng-gil, a dozen other competitors, their coaches, and even some of the arena staff, all had stopped to watch the panicking Japanese skater go through his paces. All but JJ. He hung in the background, gritting his teeth. Interviewers couldn't even get close because Yuri was so anxious that he couldn't hear them asking for his time.

The Russian finally decided he should probably step in, and moved to put himself between the crowd and his skater, "Okay, that's enough everyone...Yuri isn't ready to talk to all of you just yet. Please come back once the competition is officially over. It will only be a few more minutes."

The music for the last athlete had begun beyond the doors, and slowly, the crowd dispersed. Viktor looked back to see Yuri sitting on the far end of a bench next to a wall, and was clutching to the corner like a rat on the last exposed planks of a sinking ship. He sat behind the younger figure, and gently put his hand on Yuri's back. Yuri heaved when he felt it, so Viktor set it down again, eventually finding the man not cringing under his touch.

"Yuri..."

"I'm...I'm so sorry, Viktor..."

"What? Why?" The older man wondered, truly confused, "You just skated the best performance of your life. What could you possibly have to apologize for?"

"...I'm...creeping up on your old scores... I didn't mean to..." He answered, holding his head over his knees, "The judges must've marked something wrong. There's no way I could've scored as well as you do...I'm no genius..."

Viktor sighed, scooted closer on the bench so he was right behind his partner, and wrapped both arms around his trunk. He rested his head against the back of Yuri's shoulders, and rubbed his thumb back and forth slowly where he held his student, "Shh..." He suggested, "Deep breaths."

The young anxious skater just continued to stew, fingers clasping, trembling where they held to his coach's arms in front of his chest.

"You may not think of yourself as a genius, but regardless of all that...wouldn't it make sense for you to achieve the same kinds of scores that your coach gets?" Viktor went on quietly, "I'm teaching you everything I know, and I know what it takes to score in the 330s. The rest is all your own hard work and determination. You should be proud of yourself, not ashamed. It makes me feel bad that you're punishing yourself over your success."

Hazel eyes turned a little, and he clenched his fingers down a little harder where he held to his fiancé's arms, "...I'm sorry..." He whispered, then leaning back, setting his head against the silver Russian's shoulder, "...It's just...still so hard to believe..."

It took half of the last skater's program before Yuri started to calm down, though he still huffed a few half-choked breaths. Viktor just let him breathe though, staying where he was, continuing the slow, rhythmic stroke of his thumb, thinking it might help ground his partner and give him some support.
He turned his head a little where he'd kept it on Yuri's shoulder-blades, peering over to where one of
the only visible televisions in the hall was showing the final skater's program ending, and followed
him to the kiss and cry.

"...with a free skate score of 178.3, his final score is 265.2!"

"It's over, Yuri." He explained quietly, "They'll be announcing the medalists in a few seconds. We
should get up there for when they call your name."

Yuri nodded weakly and moved to stand, wobbling a little where his skates came under him.

Viktor put his arm under his partner's and held him close for support, starting to walk the delirious
man to the ramp that lead back up to the skating rink. He looked at the TV again as they passed,
seeing the official, final list of scores. It brought a smile to his face.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the judges of the International Skating Union are proud to present the
following athletes with their medals for this year's Four Continents Men's Singles Figure Skating..."
The announcer's voice boomed overhead.

Awards music started to play in the darkened arena, and blue and white lights gently glowed down
where black carpets had been rolled out onto the ice. A group of 6 warmly-dressed women starting
heading out to walk onto that black carpet, holding crystal-quartz trays in their hands. The three in
front carried the trays supporting a skating medal, while the other three carried handsomely wrapped
bouquets of flowers. The lanyards swayed back and forth as the women stepped forward together,
until they finally arrived at the center, where the announcing judge stood waiting with the
microphone. They passed in front of the triple-tier podium, with the medal-carriers stopping at the far
end, paused as they lined up behind one another, and then turned about-face together to look out at
the bulk of the skating rink and audience.

Viktor patted Yuri's chest a few times to get his attention, "It's time. I can't carry you out there."

"The winner of the gold medal..."

Yuri stood at the edge of the ice as Viktor untangled himself.

"...with a final score of 334.78..."

He finally woke up again.

The world felt new.

"...Representing Japan...YURI KATSUKI!"

A calm settled over him, and as the lights above shone down to bask him in the glory of his first
championship victory...Yuri stepped onto the ice, and skated to the center of the rink to the sound of
a deafening applause. He spun to a stop with a little flare, performing a mini inside-spread-eagle, and
then raised one arm towards the crowd in front of him, bowing to them, and then doing so again to
each of the other cardinal ends of the arena.

He could hear the calm part of his 'Yuri on Ice' theme playing above him, and tears started to form in
his eyes. He refused to let them fall so soon though, and skated over to the podium, looking at the
ladies on either side of it, and then...one skate at a time, stepped onto the central platform. The
highest of the three. The pinnacle.

His music kept playing, and the audience continued to cheer, clapping and crying as many of them
were. Yuri clasped his hands together as though thanking some intangible higher power for that moment. But for him, that higher power was something real.

...Viktor... I would never have come this far without you.

"...Coming in second place, and winning the silver medal...with a final score of 317.42...representing Canada, Jean-Jacques Leroy!"

'Partizan Hope' started to play overhead, and Yuri watched as the man stepped onto the ice, stiff with annoyance, but trying not to show it. The audience was screaming his name, and eventually, after acknowledgements were made, JJ skated his way over, and gingerly stepped onto the 2nd place podium. Yuri refused to look his way though, worried it might ruin the moment.

"And finally, coming in third place, and winning the bronze medal...with a final score of 303.29...representing Kazakhstan, Otabek Altin!"

'Symphony No. 9, 2nd Movement "Advent"' played just like the previous two skaters' Free Skate themes did, and Otabek came out onto the ice to give his thanks as well, taking his place on the bronze podium...just as he had several times before. Yuri could only wonder if the constant bronze was starting to burn the man.

With all three skaters on their marks, the music changed again to a more uplifting tune, and the head judge walked onto the black carpet to address the winners. One of the medal-carrying ladies from before came around, with the gold, and the judge took it from her kindly. She turned to look up at Yuri, smiled, and beckoned him to bow down his head.

Around his neck, she placed the gold medal, and she took Yuri's hand to shake it briskly. Her voice of congratulations almost drowned out by the music. To his surprise, she then moved to put her hands on the sides of his face, and kissed each cheek, patting his right shoulder proudly before letting him back up again to take in the weight of the moment. He almost didn't notice as she moved on to reward JJ and Otabek with their own medals.

A man came out onto the ice after that, stepping earnestly over the carpet, carrying authority on his shoulders. Another high level representative of the ISU. Just like the previous judge, this man came up to each of them and shook their hands in congratulations, and offered them the items on the crystal trays from the second group of young ladies. A richly fragrant bouquet of flowers, and to Yuri's amusement, a plush toy featuring the Four Continents mascot. He accepted them happily, and memorized the scent of the flowers as he stood back upright again, bowing his head in gratitude.

Several more ISU officials came out to shake all their hands. The announcer overhead was saying their names, but Yuri couldn't understand it all anymore. He was too overwhelmed. It wasn't long before he saw the Japanese, Canadian, and Kazakhstani flags being raised on the other side of the rink though.

"Ladies and Gentlemen...please rise...for the national anthem of this year's champion..."

It was his. It was the Japanese anthem.

For the next several minutes, the audience was paying him tribute, and he found himself mouthing the lyrics to the song, even though it was just the instrumental version that played.

The judges and officials stepped in front of the podium, and photos were taken of the whole group. Soon after, Yuri found Otabek and JJ both coming up onto the 1st place platform to take closer shots without the judges. Yuri nervously realized the other two were holding up their medals for the
picture, and he went to reach for his, finally getting his first real look at the gold hanging around his neck.

*It's just like Viktor said. In an hour, the gold medal would be sitting here on my chest.*

*You may not listen to me, but at least believe me'*

*Say it with me, Yuri...'I'm going to win the gold."

"I won the gold medal, Viktor..." He said quietly to himself, the tears finally starting to drip from his eyes.

It was only when he was finally allowed down from the podium, and skated over to the open, waiting arms of his coach, choreographer, partner, idol, hero...and soon-to-be husband...that he finally broke down. He presented Viktor with his gold medal, as though it was the most precious gift he ever had or *could* offer. The Russian smiled proudly, taking both of Yuri's hands, and the medal, in his own, and leaned over to kiss it. He then stood back up to his normal height, pulled Yuri close to kiss his forehead, and started swaying him back and forth in a tight hug like only a Viktor could. Yuri buried his face in Viktor's suit coat and sobbed, clinging to him desperately.

"We did it...Viktor, *we did it*...!"

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The arena had become dark after that, and the audience finally quieted down.

The Exhibition Gala was beginning.

Yuri, his eyes still a little red from crying, stepped into the barely-visible rink-side waiting area, in the blue-form Aria costume that Viktor had commissioned for him. It had taken him until that moment to realize that his Eros outfit was missing for a while because Viktor had sent it ahead to the costume designers in Russia. They'd been using it as a measuring guide to craft his *new* costume.

*You'd been planning it all that time.*

Phichit had managed to find him despite the dark, and gave him a big hug to congratulate him on his victory.

"So your Exhibition program is Viktor's old Free Skate?" He guessed, "That makes sense. That's the program that got your journey to here started."

Yuri nodded proudly, and made his way over to the gateway that would let him onto the ice. He held to the door for a moment, taking a deep breath, feeling the butterflies rising in his stomach and chest...and then he went on the pale white lake of frost. He skated to the center, spun lightly, stopped, bowed his head, set his right skate behind the left...and waited.

*"Four Continents Gold Medalist...and men's singles Silver Medalist at the Grand Prix of Figure Skating...Japan's Katsuki Yuri." The announcer started. Lights shone down on Yuri from above, illuminating him as he stood alone on the ice. "His exhibition is the free skate program of his coach, Viktor Nikiforov, who's just announced his comeback...last year's *Aria: Stay Close to Me.*"*
The music began, and Yuri began as well.

*Sento una voce che piange lontano*

Viktor approached the rink with the classic thunking sound of skates on his feet. Other skaters were surprised to see him there, thinking he’d be on the other side of the arena with some of the other coaches. They were even more surprised when they realized he had his skates on, but not only that, skates that had no rubber guards on the bottom.

JJ was standing nearby, looking at the man awkwardly as Yuri’s performance went on.

*Anche tu, sei stato forse abbandonato?*

He ignored the cheers of the crowd as the gold medalist landed the first quad of the program. He realized, under Viktor’s tan-brown trench coat, a particular magenta and black outfit was shimmering lightly in the dull glow of the arena.

"...What are you doing? You can't go out there...this is for the non-European bloc." He said, mostly to himself.

*Orsù finisca presto calice di vino*

It seemed like Viktor heard him though, and he turned his head, twisting just enough of his torso in the process that JJ got an eyeful of Viktor’s own Aria costume.

*E inizio a prepararmi*

"...You...can't be serious..."

"My fiancé already told you what was going to happen. He wasn't lying." Viktor said simply, then pulling off the coat to casually set it over the rink wall.

*Adesso fa' silenzio*

The Japanese skater finished the final jump before the cue, and as the audience was clapping for the success of the maneuver...the lights flashed onto Viktor. Yuri held his hand out and waited...and the stadium *completely lost its shit*.

Viktor skated out and went for Yuri's outstretched hand, stroking his cheek gently as he came closer, and the two began their exhibition skate.

*Together.*
Viktor had just entered the ice, and the crowd was still screaming in disbelief. They'd spun around each other quickly as Yuri gently stroked the taller man's face, and Viktor reached his own hand out to touch his fiancé's waist. They quickly broke off with their hands held together between them to quickly continue the program, skating backwards as the cheers carried them onward.

Yuri spun around to let Viktor's hands get onto his waist from behind, and as the song's next verse was heard overhead, the Russian lifted him into the air.

Stammi vicino,

His skates were back on the ice, but Viktor moved him around and he descended backwards, Viktor's right hand under his back as his left held to the man's shoulder. It was once terrifying to do that maneuver with his eyes closed, but now, Yuri trusted his partner implicitly, and it was easy, only opening them again as they spun around one another.

Fully upright again, Yuri could feel Viktor's fingers gently under his chin, and he returned the gesture, deftly placing his left hand on the man's cheek.

Non te ne andare

Viktor leaned into it, closing his eyes briefly to savor the moment of that touch with all the lights and cameras on them together. They moved around one another gracefully, and the younger skater again leaned his back to Viktor's chest, feeling the man's hands around his waist.

Ho paura di perderti

He felt himself be lifted off the ground a second time, this time spun around twice before coming back down again. They quickly unraveled from the maneuver, and parted from one another, skating in a wide arc with their right legs straight out behind them, left hands reaching out ahead. As the arc waned, they brought their free leg down again, almost dragging their hands down the front of their necks and chests before reaching both hands up desperately towards the heavens, and flipping back around with a single reverse jump.

They came back around, this time with Viktor's back to Yuri's chest. He dipped a little to compensate for Yuri's height, feeling the man's hands along his forearms, turning his head to only just nearly kiss him right there on the ice before pulling away again.

Le tue mani, le tue gambe,
They took each others’ right hand and skated away facing each other, twisting around each other until Yuri was behind again.

Le mie mani, le mie gambe,

They kicked out one leg each, skates scratching along the ice with intricate, delicate footwork, rotating around one another so closely that the audience thought they’d collide.

E i battiti del cuore,
Si fondono tra loro
They had skated apart, out into arcs at opposite ends of the rink, each completing a triple toe-loop, triple lutz combination before quick-stepping their way back towards the middle. As they spun their way around one another, they entered into a wide outside-spread eagle, swirled, spun back towards their opposite corners, and then headed back to the center again. Gaining speed on their left blades, they flung themselves into the air, beautifully passing one another with a quadruple Salchow before landing on their right feet to skate backwards away from one another, arms extended in longing as they parted.

Returning to their opposite corners, they slowed down into a combination spin, much like the set Viktor had choreographed into the original program shortly after the second quad. When they rose up, they reached out again to one another, skating in wide circles around one another; triple axel, single toe-loop, followed by triple flip, then spinning outward again.

In a risky maneuver, they skated blindly backwards towards the center of the arena, spinning around to pass only a second before they might've collided. A quick burst of energy brought them back around to the sides of the arena, and their paths converged again. Yuri took Viktor's hand, and was spun closer to him for a moment before they started to drift again. But they didn't let go...their eyes locked, and Viktor slowed them down. Yuri's skates went out ahead of him as his body started to tilt backward, and Viktor slowly started to lower himself into a wide rotation. Yuri felt himself descending so low at the end of Viktor's reach that he could feel his hair skimming the surface of the ice.

They spun three times before Viktor pulled him back up to his feet again so they could skate off into the final part of the program.

Partiamo insieme

They held to each other's hands for a few simple kicks and twists, until Yuri pulled Viktor closer and lowered him in turn. The Russian balanced on one skate, the other propped up on top, as Yuri leaned over him until he was nearly horizontal, holding the man up with one arm under his back, the other arm displayed out behind him. He lowered his face enough that he could practically touch his nose to the open part of Viktor's shirt. Yuri lifted him back up again though, and they spun away from one another to once again return to opposite ends of the rink.

Ora sono pronto

The music was coming to its end though, and so must the exhibition skate. They pushed off from their corners to slide slowly forward, nudging their advance with the toe of their back-facing skate. When they were finally within reach of each other, they held out their left hands to lace their fingers together, and slowly circled their way closer together.

When they finally stopped, and the music was over, they were facing one another, their faces lowered, left hands grasped tightly, right hands up by the other's face, but not quite touching.

Some members of the audience were in tears at the sight. That's when they could hear the low rumblings of a chant.

...Viktuuri...

...Viktuuri...

...Viktuuri...

...VIKTUURI...
Yuri and Viktor held their final pose for several seconds. They panted heavily from the exhaustion of their dance, the lights intense above them as darkness surrounded them on all sides. The roar of the stadium's chant was enough to make the very ice vibrate with energy.

When they finally broke out of the stance to acknowledge their fans, they continued to hold each other's hands between them. At least, until Viktor spun Yuri around to pin his back against his chest, leaning over from behind Yuri's shoulder to nuzzle his cheek. They looked ahead together into the pitch darkness, the black velvet sea coming to life with the flash of a thousand shimmering stars.

"This is even better than winning the gold." Yuri said, still catching his breath. He turned his head to the right so he could see Viktor there, "You made one of my craziest wish come true. You don't know how much this means to me...!"

"The feeling is mutual, Yuri." The older skater said, smiling brightly.

Yuri was starting to tear up again, and Viktor did his best to corral the younger skater towards the exit; their performance was done and the show had to go on. The audience was entertained by it though, seeing Viktor skating off with Yuri clinging to his back, being pulled off the ice like a dog being reluctantly dragged to a waiting bathtub.

The crowd cheered for them with one last big wave of applause before they slipped out of the light, and into the darker rink-side staging area.

Phichit and Celestino were there waiting, clapping enthusiastically for the pair and handing them their blade guards as they came off the ice. Viktor reached after his coat once the rubber guards were in place, and moved to put his arm over Yuri's shoulder as he met the crowd of skaters.

Congratulations, applause, fanfare, gratitude, jealousy, envy...all of it was there, like a soup bubbling over.

Before long, the duo had stepped back into the staging area where there was more light, and almost expectedly, a swarm of skating reporters was there to greet them with eager questions. A few dared to wonder if Viktor was getting their hopes up for a return if he was going to do pair skating instead of singles.

"This was just a treat." He explained, still holding Yuri close, "I've been wanting to do this with Yuri since I first saw the viral video of him doing it alone. The next time we skate at competition, we'll be rivals in singles again." He lovingly moved his hand over Yuri's hair, pressing the stray bits down into place again.

"Let me savor my victory a little longer before you crush me utterly." The younger skater protested, smiling through the anxiety.

"You're both going to be at the World Championships, correct?"

"Naturally." Viktor answered.

"Will you have new material ready in time?"
"I already had my programs ready before I became Yuri's coach. I'm just a little sad that I'll only get to use them in one competition before the season's over!" Viktor shrugged casually at the group, looking a little despondent, "Then it'll be time to get ready for the GP Series again, and the Russian Nationals. Look forward to it!" He ended the interview mob by winking at them all, pulling Yuri through them to return to the darkened rink-side viewing area.

They stayed and watched the other Exhibition skates for a while, FaceTimed with Yurio about the final scores, and then changed back into their normal clothes. It would only be another hour or so before the Four Continents Banquet, and they were eager to get back to the hotel room to get ready for it.

Yuri held up the tattered remains of his button-down shirt with a worried look on his face, "...I forgot..."

"Just wear the button-down shirt from your Aria outfit." Viktor suggested, texting someone as he slipped behind the man, touching to the small of his back with a free hand, "I promise not to rip that one off of you later."

"You can't let me drink tonight!" Yuri pleaded, "Mari and Minako-sensei won't be there as backup!"

"Don't worry, I'm saving that for later." Viktor winked at him as he disappeared around the corner to look at himself in the bathroom mirror, making final adjustments before they were ready to leave again, "I brought something special." He set his phone on the vanity and checked the lapels of his shirt.

Yuri pulled off his sweater and rummaged back through his costume bag, pulling the silky black shirt out and holding it up, "...It's so revealing though...it doesn't even button up the front all the way..."

"That's why I suggested it~!"

"I almost feel like you planned it this way." Yuri balked at him, "Neglecting to remind me I needed to buy another one and all..."

"It was the back-up plan in case you forgot." The Russian leaned against the corner and smiled at him, "But you really should show off a little more, you know? The competition arena isn't the only place where you can look good."

_The way he nitpicks my formal attire...I sometimes feel like I should be offended...but the way he looks at me when he says it..._ Yuri blushed and looked at the shirt in his hands again, then slipping it over his arms and shoulders, _...It's just like when he called me out on eating so much katsudon when I hadn't won any competitions..._

Realization awakened in him, and he rushed around the corner, seeing Viktor texting someone again. He grabbed Viktor's shoulder to pull him around, demanding his attention.

"...I just remembered...I won gold, so you owe me a bowl of katsudon!"

Viktor gawked at him in surprise, but then his expression softened with the memory of it, "Oh yeah, I do, don't I? I'll make you some when we get home, okay?"
Yuri realized the man seemed somewhat aloof, even distant, "...Everything okay?"

"It'll be fine."

"It will be fine?" The younger skater cocked a brow as he repeated the words, "...You don't have to tell me what's wrong if something's happened, but please don't lie to me something has."

The Russian looked a bit perplexed, but then looked down at his phone when it vibrated to tell him another message had come through. He glanced at the screen to see the Cyrillic text and then clicked the phone off. He set it face-down on the vanity again, turning his back to Yuri. For a moment, there was nothing but silence, but then he lifted his head to peer at his partner through the reflection in the mirror, only one eye visible to the dark-haired man.

"...Viktor...?"

"I'm not sure if anything's wrong." He answered, "I don't know if I should be sad or happy or...indifferent."

"I don't get it."

"Have you ever wondered..." Viktor started, though his words trailed off into a distracting thought. He had to shake his head a little to return to the moment, "...Have you ever wondered, truly, how would you feel if someone you were supposed to care about, but hadn't even seen in years, suddenly came crashing back into your life?"

A pit grew in Yuri's stomach, "...I don't know, I've never really been that close to someone that I'm not still close to now. Small town problem, I guess."

"Mh..." Viktor nodded, lowering his gaze a little, "It's hard to describe."

"I want to know..."

The Russian realized a tear had dripped down his face, falling into the sink below him, but he refused to acknowledge it. He turned his head a little to look away from his reflection, "I've been texting Yakov."

"...Okay?"

"Someone with the ISU had given his phone number to someone I used to know. Years ago. Someone related to a person I once cared for deeply, but had a falling out with." He explained, his fingers touching the blue case on his phone, "The thought of this person was so far removed from my mind by competitive skating that I hadn't considered it in ages. I haven't talked to her in years."

"Her?" Yuri's gut-pit grew even deeper. "Is this an old girlfriend of his?"

"My skating career has always been important to me." Viktor continued, "To the point where I put off everything else. Heh...at one point, when we were in Barcelona, I even thought about how much my skating had caused me to neglect both the 'life and love' in my existence. I had no life, I had no love...I just had the ice. And I was always such a hypocrite, skating to the themes of these ideas when I had no idea what I was talking about anyway." He finally lifted his head and turned around, reaching out to lightly put his fingers on Yuri's chin, gently touching his index and middle fingers to his lip, "You reminded me how much I'd been neglecting such important parts of myself. I can't even imagine myself without you by my side anymore. Even when we're both so old that we can't even walk without help, never mind skate."
"Viktor..."

"Yakov sent me a text message because he wasn't sure how I wanted to go forward with the information he had."

"It couldn't wait until we were back in St. Petersburg in a week?"

"Unfortunately, no." Viktor shook his head, "I'm afraid I'll have to go straight back. You'll have to go on to Hasetsu without me."

A sad look crossed Yuri's face, "...Everyone was looking forward to seeing you again..."

"I know. I'm sorry." The Russian really did look disappointed about that prospect, "I was really wanting to enjoy the onsen with you, too."

"This thing Yakov told you must be pretty important."

Viktor's eyes half-closed as he looked down and away, though his hand moved forward to cup Yuri's cheek, then slide down his neck to rest on his shoulder, "Even before I'd asked you to marry me...I started to really think of your family as my family. Mom, dad, sister...your friends became my friends...all these things that I never really had for myself back home in Russia. My life off the ice was a void. To the fans...and to me."

"You're not making any sense."

"My mother is dead." Viktor said abruptly, his fingers tightening on Yuri's shoulder where he held it. The Russian held there in silence for a moment, but then moved to pull Yuri to his chest and held him close, breathing in the smell of his freshly-washed hair and light cologne.

"...Viktor...?"

"I just found out my mother was killed, and...I feel worse about the fact that I don't care than I do about the fact that she's gone." He squeezed Yuri tighter, burying his face against the crook of the man's neck, "Forgive me...I'm a horrible person."

"W-...No you're not!" Yuri insisted, "Don't say that!"

"Let's just go to the Banquet. I don't want to think about this anymore."
CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

It was surreal to watch him after that. Yuri was sure that he himself looked more out-of-sorts than Viktor did, even though it wasn't his own problem that made him feel that way. He spent more than half the banquet just looking at his fiancé in silence, barely muttering a few grunts to people who asked him questions.

I can't understand any of this.

Viktor seemed entirely normal. He laughed and joked with people, took photos with practically everyone who asked, even pulling Yuri into several if he was within arm's reach before the flash went off. The Four Continents group was an entirely different menagerie of people and cultures from the European Championships though so it was quite bit more subdued than any party that took place anywhere else. It was like a 30-year high school reunion, where people were there because they felt a formal obligation, but not everyone entirely wanted to be there.

"Did you guys get into a fight...?" Phichit wondered, slowly sauntering over to where Yuri had been idly standing alone for a few minutes, "You've barely said a word all night and you're acting like a wallflower like you used to."

Yuri looked at him, and then back to where Viktor was socializing with some of the other coaches. He shook his head, "No, nothing like that."

"Then why are you acting like this? You're not yourself. I mean...you came off the Exhibition Skate so excited, and now look at you." The Thai skater pointed out, even offering some of his champagne to lighten the mood. Yuri refused though. He watched as a small group of people approached the gaggle already around Viktor.

"It's hard to explain." He said, trying anyway, "Viktor told me something unsettling before we came over here, but it seems to bother him more than it does me. Is that weird?"

"Maybe...depends on what it is."

"Hmm..." Yuri fumbled, "I don't think it's my place to say." He looked back to see Viktor waving at him, as though beckoning him over, but he shook his head and stayed put.

"If that's the case, then it sounds like you're upset over something that's his problem." Phichit said, nudging his friend's shoulder, "But if he isn't bothered by it, why should you be for him?"

"I don't know." Yuri said with a sigh, "I just suddenly feel like it's the Sochi GPF banquet all over again. Viktor's over there, I'm over here...and I'm just staring at him like I suddenly don't know anything about him all over again."

"The Sochi thing again? Yuri, this is Gangneung...and Viktor's only at this competition because of you. So why are you giving him the cold shoulder? He's been trying to get you involved in stuff all night."

"I'm not-" Yuri paused, "...Did I?"

"A minute ago, he waved you over to where he's talking with those officials, and you completely blew him off."
The Japanese skater banged his own head twice in frustration at himself, "I'm so stupid. I should go over there..."

"I wouldn't." Phichit said, holding his hand out to make sure his friend stayed put, "He's probably already apologized to for why you refused them. It could embarrass him if you changed your mind. Those people he's talking to...they're the core organizers for all official ISU events. They're not the kind of people you just refuse to talk to."

Yuri felt even worse, "Then I really should go over there...!"

"No. If they come to talk to you themselves, then you should, but at this point, stay here. It's not that out of character for you to seclude yourself, so I don't think they're offended that you didn't want to go over to them." Phichit explained, trying to reassure the man, "They probably think you just got stage fright or something."

"Probably!?!" Yuri was trying not to panic.

He saw Viktor turn again and usher him over with a bit more urgency on his face than the last time, and Yuri shot over there like an over-stretched elastic band. He practically stood at attention like he was in the service, looking at the group of 7 like they held his future in their hands.

"I was just telling them about how you need more sponsors." Viktor explained, "Now that you've won medals in two major events, you should be getting support from more mainstream entities."

"Will you be making St. Petersburg your home rink from now on?" One of the ISU organizers asked, "I know of several Japanese organizations that want to be part of your skating future, but they don't know whether to send their representatives to Hasetsu or Russia."

"Oh...uhm, I'll be staying with Viktor, so St. Petersburg, yes ma'am." He bowed his head politely. Viktor patted him on the back as he nodded with approval.

"You've really shocked us all, Yuri." She continued, with gestures of agreement from the other officials, "We were really upset when you collapsed to last place in Sochi. You'd pushed yourself so hard to make the final six and then you just imploded on yourself. When we heard that Viktor was taking a break from skating to coach you...we were all excited to see what would come of it, even as we were sad to see Viktor leave." She put her hand on Yuri's right shoulder, "We're very impressed with the results. He's done a good job getting you back into shape. We see promise in your future, so please continue skating for a few more years, okay?"

"Y-Yes ma'am, I plan to."

"Excellent." She beamed, then looked back to Viktor and extended her hand to shake his, and he took it, "We'll have Yuri's new sponsors send all the information to St. Petersburg then. Thank you for everything you've done to make him shine, and welcome back to you as well. We look forward to Worlds and next season."

"Thank you, Chairwoman. We do as well." Viktor bowed his head, much like Yuri had, and smiled as the group moved on to talk to other skaters and coaches.

Yuri finally felt his heart-rate go down as the group turned away, and he heaved a deep breath. He barely had a moment before he felt Viktor hugging him by his head, stroking his hair and tipping his glasses off center.

"My little katsudon is finally getting recognized." He cooed, "Pretty soon, your mail will be as
difficult to manage as mine is. Thank goodness the ISU doesn't require us to wear the logos of all our sponsors...otherwise we'd look like those ridiculous American racecar drivers."

"NASCAR ISN'T RIDICULOUS, VIKTOR." Leo called from where he'd heard the comment.

Yuri blanched at the whole thing, smiling anxiously where Viktor continued to hug him.

The rest of the night felt like a blur. There was a small ceremony where the medalists were all called to help cut into an enormous cake, and Yuri did so happily, albeit with that nagging feeling at the back of his mind, weighing on his heart. More photos were taken; he was sure he looked awkwardly uncomfortable in most of them, if not *everyone* of them.

It was a relief when the banquet was officially over and people started to trickle out to go back to their hotels for one last night's sleep before flying back to their home countries. The walk back to their own hotel room was pretty much done in silence.

Viktor kept his fingers interlaced with Yuri's as they walked, and didn't try to force a conversation. He looked up into the clear February night sky and admired the stars. His attention was brought back down to terra firma only when he felt Yuri leaning against his arm.

"Have you already bought your ticket?"

"Yeah."

"Mh..." Yuri sighed, walking in silence for a few more minutes.

Viktor wasn't sure what to say anyway.

"It'll be a week before I can go back to St. Petersburg, following the original plan." The younger skater finally said, "I wish you'd said something before you made all your plans."

"It's...a family thing," Viktor tried to explain, "I don't want to drag you into the middle of it. Remember when you jokingly tried to make up a story about my life before skating? I *wasn't* joking when I said the 'dark and stormy night' thing wasn't that far off the mark."

"Why didn't you tell me about it then?"

Viktor huffed a little and looked away, "I didn't want to. It's not a fun conversation."

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Yuri pulled off his formal clothes and started putting them away, grabbing his shorts and t-shirt as he got ready to slip into bed. He brushed his teeth, combed his hair back, and shuffled across the carpet to the foot of the bed. Viktor watched him crawl up on top of the covers from where he'd been standing as he pulled off his own formal attire, hanging the articles in suit-bags in the closet and zipping them up before closing the doors.

He heard the familiar buzz of an incoming text, and picked up his phone from where he had put it on the table. Thankfully, it wasn't Yakov this time, and he heard the 'new text' jingle from Yuri's phone a second later. It was an official SMS from the ISU, thanking the participants and wishing them all a safe voyage home. Dozens of messages populated the group chat after that from all the other skaters,
coaches, and officials who were still awake after the banquet. Viktor made his obligatory reply, saying thank you and looking forward to seeing them at Worlds, but he saw Yuri just set the phone to silent and close the screen down, setting the phone face-down on the nightstand with his glasses soon to follow. His back was to the room though as he looked out the dark windows, seeing the countryside beyond the last edges of the Olympic town.

Wordlessly, Viktor stepped into the bathroom to turn the shower on.

He let the hot rush of water cascade over him for what felt like an hour.

*He's taking the news harder than I am.* He thought to himself, staring at the water as it whirled around the drain by his toes. *How could I have ruined tonight for him like this? I should have told Yakov to wait until after the banquet to finish telling me what happened. How can I make it up to Yuri now?*

When he finally came out again, one towel overtop his head as he was tying a bathrobe around his waist, he looked over to see that Yuri hadn't moved. He couldn't even tell if he was relaxed where he was lying...he was just stiff as a board, staying firmly on his side with his back to the rest of the room.

To him.

Slate eyes scanned the area for anything at all that he could use to distract his partner from the news of earlier in the night, but nothing inspired a solution. So, he did the only other thing he could think of.

He turned the main lights in the room off, leaving only the one dimly glowing on the nightstand, and then slipped onto the bed behind the younger figure. He spooned the anxious Japanese skater gently, slipping his still-damp hand under the front of his t-shirt, folding the other against his back, nuzzling against the side of his neck. Yuri didn't say anything, but Viktor could feel him twitch and tense up, and he became more determined than before to help him relax.

The Russian kissed the back of Yuri's neck as his hands gently rubbed his chest and abdomen. His muscles were hard and toned, completely unlike the flabby mess he'd been a year prior, and Viktor could feel them sliding beneath his skin. His hand went lower, slowly but gradually, until he felt certain it was safe to slip it under the elastic band of Yuri's shorts. Yuri gasped when he felt the man take him in his hand, and he brought his own hands up to cup over his mouth to stop from making any more noise.

Viktor moved his lips up Yuri's neck, and gently nibbled at an earlobe as he started to massage him down below, feeling the younger man responding to his touch. It went on for a few minutes, until Viktor twisted to loom over top of his partner and pull him from his side to his back so he could kiss him more easily on the lips. He slowly moved down from there, kissing Yuri's neck, using his free hand to pull up the t-shirt so he could lick at the man's chest. His tongue encircled one nub and then the other, giving each loving attention before moving lower still, until he was kissing Yuri's stomach. It was only when Yuri could feel the man's hot mouth around him that he finally lurched up to sitting and pushed him away in a panic, "...*No!!*"

Viktor was astounded, one hand on his shoulder to push him up, blue eyes staring back into brown...startled.

"*No...*" Yuri said again, this time calmer...sadder.
"What's wrong? I've done this before...you seemed to like it..."

"It's not...that I don't like it..." Yuri said between desperate, ragged breaths, "It's just..." He had tears in his eyes, try as he might to stop them. He lifted his head and looked at the man, "After what you told me before, how can this be on your mind? You just said your mother was killed and all you want to do is party and fool around?"

"I also said we haven't talked in several years. Ten years, to be precise. I barely know the woman."

"But she's still..." Yuri was trembling.

Viktor sighed and pushed himself a bit more upright, watching quietly as Yuri finally collapsed back down to the pillow, still exposed where the Russian had left him.

"...I haven't lead the same life as you." Viktor said quietly, "I've been estranged from genetic relations for over a decade. I left home and married the ISU when I was 12, and I've been faithful to her ever since. I gave her everything...my body, my blood, sweat, tears...my soul... The actual woman who brought me into the world wasn't interested in being part of it after a while."

"What about the rest of your family?"

"My father was a drunk who thought I was a queer for skating, and wrote me off before I ever won my first medal in the Junior ISU. I had no one else. Not until Yakov, anyway. I had been skating without purpose for years when he found me, so it was only because of him that I got into competition. The ISU offered me my life and freedom. So I left, and became everything my father hated me for. I let my hair grow long, I got a poodle, I created programs that blurred the line between man and woman, and I danced about love and romance and broken hearts..."

Yuri wasn't sure what to say.

"My father was the one that reached out to the ISU to track me down through Yakov. Apparently, after my mother wrapped her car around a tree on the opening night of the Four Continents...he thought it a decent thing to try and let me know about it. Yakov at least waited until the competition was over before mentioning it. He didn't want you to worry about it, and blow your shot at the gold."

The Japanese skater was still speechless. The tears just welled in his eyes, stuck as he looked up at the ceiling. He turned his head to let the pools dribble away, and then finally propped himself up on one elbow, pinching the bridge of his nose with the other hand, "...So you're going to go back...and face your father at a funeral? With everything that's happened in the last year...?"

"I don't even know if he knows about anything I've done." Viktor explained, "He probably doesn't. He would have to show interest and go looking, which he would never do. The very idea of figure skating offends him."

"You literally just said he wrote you off because he thought you'd get interested in other guys because of skating...and look! This is where we are! Even though you'd have lady friends before, it doesn't change the fact that, in the end, you're engaged to me. I can't let you face this alone...!"

Viktor shook his head, "I can't put you at risk."

"Maybe we'll get lucky and he won't even know about it! We...I'll take off my ring and just be your skating friend for a while...! You can say your ring is matched to one on some woman's hand somewhere else! I don't mind...!" He pleaded...though he clearly said the last words with a pained tone in his voice.
Viktor looked extremely offended at that, and glowered at the man, "Don't ever say something like that again, Yuri."

The raven-haired man was stunned, and lowered his head, feeling horribly guilty and ashamed. Tears fell from his eyes freely after that, and he looked up again only to put one hand aside Viktor's face, "Don't leave me behind to deal with this by yourself...I'm begging you... I'll worry myself into an early grave if I don't know what's going on."

The Russian was bending under the pressure, but the threat was still enough that he couldn't voice his consent.

"The vows we're going to say soon..." Yuri was saying through trembling breaths, "This man, I marry...No matter what the health situation is, I will love this person, respect this person, console this person, help this person, until death, protecting fidelity. This I swear."

"I..." Viktor started.

"SWEAR IT!!"

"Yuri..."

He couldn't take it anymore. He could see how his own vision was starting to blur behind the tears forming in his own eyes, and he reached his fingers up to rub them away. When he looked again, Yuri was still desperately waiting for an answer. He took in a deep breath, and finally nodded.

"This I swear."
Yuri buckled down and made the unfortunate phone call home to tell his family that Mari and Minako would be returning without him and Viktor. He didn't go into much detail about what had happened, but apologized profusely and promised they would visit after Worlds instead.

He looked over to where Viktor had been waiting with the two women in the departures terminal, clicked the phone off, and put it in his pocket as he walked back to meet with them. He reached into Viktor's coat pocket to take his hand and stand next to him.

"It's done."

"Sucks you can't come back with us." Mari was saying, "But, it is what it is."

"I sent Yuuko-chan an email late last night so she'd know to tell her girls to cancel any kind of fanfare that they might've been planning." Yuri replied, "I'll try to call her before our flight if she doesn't email me back before then."

"How long do you guys have to wait?" Minako wondered.

"...Seven...eight hours?" Yuri couldn't remember. He looked to Viktor for help.

"Seven." He confirmed, "Which is better than having to wait a few days. We got lucky. There were still enough seats available that Yuri could tag along without having to be smuggled into cargo."

"Sounds like you're in for a pretty long day regardless, little brother." Mari said.

They all lifted their heads to the sound of a familiar announcement. Even though it was in Korean first, they heard the name of their destination city in Japan and knew it was the boarding call for their flight before the announcement repeated in Japanese.

Yuri reluctantly pulled his hand from Viktor's and moved to give his sister and teacher a hug before they left.

"Thank you both for coming out to support me." He said, bowing deeply, "I'm glad I could win gold for you."

"It won't be the last time!" Minako announced happily, "We expect you back home after Worlds so we can celebrate!"

Viktor was kissing Mari on the cheek as the ballet instructor gave Yuri her farewells, and then switched to give the same to her, "Do svidanija, Mari-nee-chan, Minako-san."

The two women waved and departed from the skaters, heading to their boarding area for their flight home.

Viktor and Yuri silently began their vigil after that, slowly walking over to what felt like the complete opposite side of the airport where their own flight's boarding area was located. There were three other boardings ahead of them though so there was no sense yet in taking up space where other passengers would need to sit.
Incheon International Airport wasn't an unpleasant place to spend a day at least. It was relatively new, another wing (Terminal 2) was being built and slated for grand opening the next year, possibly in anticipation of the Winter Games. Yuri had looked at a map of the place and realized that not only was there a skating rink, but a sauna/spa, cinema, a Korean Cultural Museum, Sky Garden, and if they felt they needed it, a Rest area. Yuri wondered if that meant it had those airport sleep pods he'd once heard about.

Viktor was unusually quiet.

Maybe not unusually quiet, but...expectedly somber.

The first hour of their wait, Yuri had seen the man pull out his phone and look at the black faceplate no less than 30 times, but each time he did, he seemed to put it away again without so much as clicking the screen on. Once in a while, it was because he had received a message, but he rarely replied.

Yuri held to his arm where they'd finally come to rest in the Sky Garden. The bubbling sound of the air pumps in the artificial ponds was relaxing, though Yuri could tell it wasn't helping Viktor any. He just slouched against the wooden bench, staring at his knees blankly.

The younger skater put his right hand on Viktor's thigh and leaned close, "Is there anything I can do to help...?"

"Can you speed forward in time so we can get to the part where it's over?" Viktor said, keeping his eyes low.

Yuri's brows furrowed, and he moved to put his left hand on the opposite side of Viktor's face to turn him and force him to look into his eyes. He held there for a moment, gently stroking his cheek where his thumb rested just under that pale blue eye, and then leaned forward to kiss him. Viktor relaxed a little, and when Yuri pulled back again, Viktor leaned to rest his head on the man's right shoulder. Yuri rubbed his ear against the top of Viktor's head where he settled, and the pair dozed there for about an hour.

Yuri eventually convinced Viktor to go with him to the indoor ice skating area, thinking being in his element would help cheer him up a little. There were even a few people standing on the sidelines that recognized the pair and cheered them on. Viktor smiled and waved like he always had, and gave them a little show, doing his signature quad flip and a few spins. They all clapped happily, and Viktor went back to skating next to Yuri.

The skating rink was crowded, with 4 massive pillar-like decorative structures poking out on the ice. Yuri thought they looked like enormous 20ft high ice trees. Directly above the rink were two tube-like structures, each containing the indoor rail system, and the 'trees' hid the pillars that held the tracks overhead.

There was a billboard panel at the far end of the rink, with a big display that welcomed tourists and guests alike for the Four Continents event.

There were a few families on the ice with their young kids, each wearing the signature blue rental skates and yellow helmets that the airport provided. Yuri and Viktor had kept their own skates with them for their carry-on luggage. A few times, some very young child, new to the rink, would skate past them without being able to stop, occasionally nearly colliding with them. Each time, Viktor would lean down to gently stop them by putting his hand out for them to reach out to, and he'd turn them back around to push them towards the waiting arms of their parents or older siblings. It was probably for the best that only a handful of people recognized who he was, as it might've been
difficult to handle fanfare from a nuclear family right then.

Viktor suddenly felt a surge of energy, and pulled out in front again, skating backward in a wide arc, disappearing behind the huge 'ice plants' periodically before reappearing again on the other side.

Peaks and valleys...moments of low and high energy. He's practically losing his mind with how long this is taking. Yuri thought to himself as he watched the Russian practically speed-skating laps around the arena. This must be what Hell feels like to him.

Viktor eventually slowed down when he caught up to his partner for the 4th time, and Yuri spun around to meet him. It felt like ballroom dancing to Yuri after Viktor took him by one hand and put the other around his waist, pushing him backwards with the remains of his previous momentum. His eyes were out ahead of them though, and Yuri could only wonder what had gotten him so focused all of a sudden.

"What kind of program should I do next season?" He suddenly asked, answering that one question with one of his own.

"Eh?"

Viktor spun Yuri back around again so he'd be facing forward as they skated, and he lazily draped himself over Yuri's back, "If I did a program just for you, what would you want to see me do?"

"I've never really thought about that before." Yuri admitted weakly, "Do you want me to think of something...?"

"What song would you pick?"

The younger skater thought on it for a while, but then gestured for Viktor to guide him as he skated blindly so he could check the music list on his phone for something he liked. He flipped around and wrapped his arms around the Russian's torso, effectively sitting on the leg bent between his own, letting Viktor coast them along as he looked at his phone. There were a few possibilities as he scrolled through the playlist, but eventually, he stumbled onto one song, buried deep in his archive, and he pulled the earbuds out of his pockets to let Viktor hear.

They continued lazily skating along as Viktor listened, and Yuri could tell he was starting to like it, as he bobbed his head a little to the beat of the music. As the song started to repeat the main part of its tune, Viktor pulled away, taking Yuri's phone with him, spinning a few simple moves as inspiration started to hit. As the song came to an end, Yuri watched Viktor go back and put the song on repeat, practically mapping out a new program right there in front of Yuri's eyes.

He didn't see the Russian do any complex jumps though. That would come later. For the moment, he just saw the choreography percolating through Viktor's mind, slowly but surely evolving into something tangible on the ice. At one point, probably on the 5th or 6th go-through, Viktor developed a move that loosely reminded Yuri of the end of his own Free Skate. Instead of one hand coming up to his chest as the other reached outward while he was standing still, Viktor skated slowly forward, descended to one knee, and thrust his right hand out ahead of him, reaching out at Yuri.

Yuri could practically hear the music playing as he watched, enamored by the performance even as it was barely being created. When Viktor finally thought he had enough to start, he came back over to give Yuri back his phone and ear-buds, beaming down at him.

"I'm going to use this for my next short program, Yuri."

"Eh? Really? But you only just heard it..."
"I have to take it now before you decide to use it yourself." Viktor said, stroking Yuri's hair back affectionately, "I'm surprised you never suggested using it to Ciao Ciao."

"...It's too long for a short program and too short for free skate, so..."

"What, you've never considered editing it for time?" Viktor was surprised, "Your conservatory friend, the one who made your 'Yuri on Ice' composition, she couldn't pare it down for you?"

"I never thought to ask."

"Which makes me lucky then." Viktor smiled, "It means I can dance to this song for you."

Yuri flushed a little, "What about your Free Skate?"

"I haven't thought about it yet. I wanted to dedicate my time to finishing this season before I got too worked up about it. I have to focus, and pretend like I've done my old programs a thousand times more often than I actually have, so my performance at Worlds is equal to what it would've been had I not taken so much time off."

"I did tell you that you should practice them..." Yuri deadpanned him, "Remember?"

"...Maybe." Viktor huffed a laugh to himself, "But I wasn't competing at Four Continents, so it didn't matter if I practiced my own programs or not. You needed my attention more than I did."

Yuri was just relieved that Viktor had finally found something to be happy about again. They skated in lockstep for another 30 or 40 minutes before the growling in Yuri's stomach demanded dealing-with. So they packed up their skates again and started heading towards the restaurant area, trying to find something to eat.

The time passed more quickly after that, and things seemed to feel a little more normal. For the moment, it felt like they were just getting ready to go home, like nothing was waiting for them in St. Petersburg but an anxious poodle. The upcoming 9 hour and 20 minute flight didn't seem like such a bad thing.

When it was finally time to board, however, Yuri could feel Viktor getting anxious again, walking slower than he usually did to get onto the plane. Other passengers passed them in the boarding tunnel, and Yuri had to stop and go back to help coax the older skater along.

"...Come on, Makkachin is waiting." He said, taking Viktor's hand.

The Russian finally let himself get on the plane. Their seats weren't far on board; he'd reserved a Sleeper Ottoman for himself originally, and was glad that the one next to him was still available when he had to go back and order the second ticket. If nothing else could be said about First Class, the fact that it was somewhat cost prohibitive to most non-business travelers made it possible to luck-out and have seat availability right up until the moment of take off.

When they were finally, safely in the air, and the seat-belt light turned off, Yuri peeled out of his own Sleeper seat and moved over into Viktor's. No words need be said between the couple, and Viktor started lowering the seat down to its horizontal position, and squeezed over so Yuri could wedge himself in next to him. Once they were well tangled into each other, Viktor tossed his long coat over them like a blanket, and wrapped his arms around Yuri's head to pull him close to his chest. He clung to the younger man desperately for most of the flight.

Thankfully, as long as they were asleep, none of the flight staff bothered them.
Nearly 10 hours later, with one break in between for an in-flight meal, they landed in Moscow. With the time-difference, it was almost 9 o'clock local time, and there was still another 3 or 4 hours on the Sapsan train to get to St. Petersburg, so it was after midnight when they finally got into the city.

The same sort of shuttle that took them to the airport had gotten them back to Viktor's front door after that. Exhausted and travel-weary, Yuri collapsed on the bed, even though he wasn't sleepy. He longed for the family hot-spring back in Hasetsu. After a minute of dozing, he pulled himself back upright and went to where he saw a light near the kitchen. Viktor had been stirring the red-purple contents of a small sauce pan as it came to a very low simmery-boil.

"...You're going to be up that long?" Yuri wondered, "Mulling wine always takes you a few hours, at least..."

"I don't think I'll sleep tonight." He answered, stirring with one hand as the other rested on his hip. He huffed a laugh, "And I really, really need this."

"This whole time, you haven't told me when anything is supposed to happen." Yuri pointed out, leaning over to put his elbows on the counter, "Is it tomorrow? Er...Later today?" He corrected, remembering it technically already was tomorrow.

"The funeral is tomorrow-tomorrow at 3." He answered, pulling the small cook pot off the stove to pour its steamy contents into a slow cooker next it. He tossed in his favorite spices, some orange juice, and orange hull, then covered it with the lid and set it to low heat. He set a timer for 2 hours and cleaned up the small mess. "But I have to meet him before that just to get the address for where the funeral's even being held...and that's later today."

"And that's the part that's keeping you up tonight?"

"Da."

"I feel like...you haven't actually talked to this man yourself yet." Yuri wondered cautiously.

"No, Yakov's been doing that for me." Viktor explained, "I don't want my father to have a way of contacting me directly. Yakov knows to filter things out that I don't want or need to know about."

"Couldn't your father just find out where you train and show up there to give you the info?"

"He could, but he's not exactly ambitious. He's just..." The Russian started, but then paused, reaching up to rub his forehead, "...I can't even think of the right word. Sorry."

"Spiteful?" Yuri wondered, "Like...really scornful, judgmental, that sort of thing...?"

"No...well, yes, but..."

"...Vindictive?"

"Yeah." Viktor brushed his hair back, feeling his left eye start to throb with the memory of a distant incident, "Whatever it is that's driving him to reach out to me now, it's not enough to go out of his way to make it easy for me. He's going to make me work for this. He probably doesn't even actually want to talk to me, but something's forcing him. If there was something else going on, some ulterior motive, Yakov would've found out about it and never told me about Konstantin ever making contact with him in the first palce."

"Yakov must be very protective of you if he'd go this far." Yuri wondered, reaching over to touch his hand to Viktor's, "It's well above and beyond what I think Celestino would've ever done for me."
"He was there when the falling out happened." Viktor explained, "He's going to be there later today, too."

"Do you expect it to go that badly...?"

Viktor huffed a laugh, and twisted his hand slightly so he could put his thumb over where Yuri's fingertips overlapped his, "The last time I saw my father, he knuckled me in the eye so hard, it bled for 4 days. I thought I would go blind, and I think my father meant for it to, thinking it would keep me off the ice. That was before joining the ISU though, so no one but Yakov knows. And you, now."

"...There's no way he would try to hit you again though...right?" Yuri gripped a little harder, worried now more than he thought he'd need to.

"I have no idea what he's doing to do." Viktor shrugged, "It's been 16 years since I last saw him. My relationship with my mother became strained after that and we only occasionally talked on the phone after Yakov pulled me. After a while, she stopped returning my calls, so I stopped making them. I'm not even sure if she was still married to my father when she died. It doesn't really matter anyway."

Yuri wasn't sure how to respond to that.

_Viktor was right...his life is completely backwards compared to mine. I could never imagine being so alone like he's been._

He drew in a deep, wordless breath.

Viktor turned his eyes towards him and tried to smile, "Promise you won't do anything stupid if he tries, Yuri."

"I can't just do _nothing._"

"If the years have been kind to him, he's bigger than both of us put together. You could say he was once the poster-child for Russian bear wrestling. He could break us both in half if he wanted." He turned to face Yuri and put his hands aside his neck, "I've let you follow me this far...please, Yuri, don't make me regret it."
Chapter 26

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Viktor had eventually succumbed to sleep after dawn that morning, eased into it with the help of his mulled wine. He was awoken only by the sound of barking outside, car-doors closing, and Yuri being bowled over again in the front hall as he opened it to the elder gentleman who'd just arrived.

"Congratulations on winning your first gold, Yuri." Yakov told him, "You have our Yuri sweating over Worlds already."

Yuri laughed as the dog continued laying on the love, jumping around like a hot bean, "It's going to be one hell of a competition."

"Where's Vitya?"

"I'm here." Viktor said sleepily as he emerged from the side hall, holding his arm up to shield his eyes from the bright sun, "Thanks for watching Makkachin again."

The dog was leaping up to try and lick Viktor's face, so the man caught him in mid-leap to hold him against his chest. Makkachin wriggled and licked, then licked and wriggled, unsure what order to do things in. Viktor eventually set the dog back on the ground, and the excited creature fell onto his back to demand belly pets, to which Viktor quickly obliged.

"Were you up drinking all night?" The coach wondered, an eyebrow quirked under the brim of his hat.

"I was up all night, and I was drinking, but only one glass." Viktor assured him, "I wouldn't be hung-over for something like this."

"And you told Katsuki what's going on?"

"More or less."

"More or less...?" Yuri repeated, "How much more could there be?"

"Sixteen years leading up to it." Viktor winked at him, as though it were some big joke. His partner didn't really find any humor in it though and worried all the more.

Yakov wasn't sure it was such a good idea to bring the younger skater, and Viktor had to assure him that there was nothing he could do at that point.

[I already told him it would be okay if he came. He got really upset when I originally told him to go back to Hasetsu alone. I can't just leave him at home now.]

[He doesn't speak or understand Russian, and your father doesn't speak or understand English. This whole thing is going to go right over his head.]

[It's not about whether he understands, he just wants to be there.]

"Vitya..." Yakov sighed, [He's a sensitive kid. I don't know if he can even handle this.]

[A skater with a heart made of glass.] Viktor said aloud, smiling, [I won't let anything happen. Konstantin won't get within 10 feet of me.]
Yakov grumbled to himself, but then nodded, and headed back towards his car, "Get ready and then let's go."

Viktor agreed, closing the door to go back to the bedroom and do as told. Once finished, he moved to grab his coat and scarf, and went to join where Yuri had been waiting outside. Yuri piled into the car as the older skater was locking the door. The dog watched them go from the front window, looking on as though heartbroken.

"Poor guy..." Yuri mused sadly, seeing the brown poodle disappear as the car moved on, "We just got back and now we're leaving him behind again."

"He's in his own house though so it'll be fine. He'll go to sleep until we return." Viktor said, "This shouldn't take long anyway. We're only going to get an address."

"Your father couldn't just give it to Yakov?"

"He refused to." The coach answered, looking back at them in the rearview mirror, "He said he'd only give it to Vitya personally. Believe me, I tried. I wanted to avoid this as much as anyone."

"I told you he was going to make me work for this." Viktor interrupted, leaning over to kiss him lightly in reassurance, "Remember?"

Yakov noticed and grunted a little to himself, "If you do that in front of him, he may knock Katsuki's block off as well as yours."

"Jeeze, is he really still that bad? He hasn't calmed down at all?"

"This is Russia." Yakov said flatly, "Most of the older generation is deeply conservative. Putin's revival of the Russian Orthodox Church has made a lot of people all too happy to stoke the fires of their old intolerances. Mila told me that she warned you in Barcelona to keep your situation quiet. She wasn't just saying that to worry you."

"...I know, I know."

"The only thing protecting you from the worst of it is the fact that you are what you are, and you've honored Russia with your talents." Yakov explained, "But Katsuki isn't famous, and he isn't Russian either. And if either of you end up in a situation where you're surrounded by people who don't know anything about skating, you could both get seriously hurt."

Yuri was nervously turning his ring around on his finger, moving it up to the knuckle and then back down again as the two Russians went back and forth. He felt like a fly on the wall, as he often did when Viktor talked to anyone on the Russian team when he was around.

"We're not going to be dealing with this for very long. I'm just getting an address and then we're leaving."

"Ah Vitya..." Yakov lamented, "The fact that he insists on giving it directly to you himself means this isn't going to be just a quick exchange."

Viktor dropped his head back and grumbled, "...I want today to be over already..."

It was a horrible 35 minute drive, but when they finally pulled up to stop, it had felt like eternity. A block away was the entrance to the Summer Garden in the center of the city. There were a few dozen people wandering around, but most of them were on the move, so it didn't look like anyone was waiting...for them, or anyone else.
"Konstantin said he'd be waiting at the Ivan Krylov Monument." Yakov explained, "You won't see him from here."

Grudgingly, the two in the back seat finally emerged, and the group made their way to the park. For such a dour circumstance bringing them there, Yuri still thought it was a nice place to see. They passed along the long sidewalk with the massive wrought-iron fence, black of bar and trimmed in gold, until they passed within its huge gates. Inside, Yuri marveled at the fountains, and walkways decorated with marble statues, even though the landscape was blanketed in snow and nothing was turned on.

"The statues were brought here from Italy by Peter the Great." Viktor explained, seeing the sparkle of wonder in his fiancé's eyes, "But most of them are modern replicas. The real ones were moved into a building somewhere else to protect them." He leaned closer to point to their left, "Over there is Peter the Great's Summer Palace."

"This place makes Japan look..."

"Different." Viktor said, cutting him off before he could say anything else.

"Yeah."

"You said that Hasetsu Castle was just a tourist trap with no historical value." Viktor continued, "Maybe we should go touring the real historical Japan one day?"

"We should come back here during the summer, too." Yuri suggested. He'd almost let himself forget why there were there in the first place.

"I can see him." Yakov said, stopping where he'd been leading the duo previously, "Wait here."

Viktor abruptly turned around, keeping his back to the direction his coach was walking. Yuri watched him quietly, but then looked past, seeing where Yakov was going, and hoping to catch the first sight of this relic from Viktor's past.

It was hard to see from their vantage, but Yuri thought he could see a dark blob rising from a bench near the monument. He squinted to try seeing better, "...Well, I think he's bigger than Yakov...but it's hard to tell from here..."

Viktor's half-hidden eye twitched under where his bangs covered them, "That's nice."

A minute or two passed in tense silence, and Yuri failed to notice as Yakov was walking back with the larger man until they were practically within earshot. He could see that Viktor was trembling a little, not wanting to turn around even as he could hear their footsteps crunching on the snow behind him.

"Vitya." Yakov started.

Yuri looked at the man with terrified curiosity, wondering how in the world he and Viktor could possibly be related. That's when he saw it.

*Their eyes.* He thought to himself, *Viktor has his father's eyes.*

Easily over six feet tall, the man looked half an ox. Thick, wind-burnt, a closely-cut beard that was dark as coal, but salted with grey...and those pale, slate-blue eyes peering through it all. He wore a long, dark, smoke-grey coat and a brimmed hat similar to Yakov's, and a clean but obviously-long-owned suit and tie.
Viktor.

Yuri could see his partner cringe at the sound of the voice, and he slowly turned his head to peer back over his shoulder. He refused to say anything in response though. He could only manage a half-turn, keeping his side-face to the man, his hands clenched in his coat pockets as the wind swirled in short gusts, whipping scarves and coat lapels all around.

[Who's the runt?] Konstantin asked the shorter gentlemen.

[Yuri Katsuki, a skater from Japan that Vitya's coaching.] Yakov answered.

[Why's he here?]

[I asked him to come.] Viktor answered for his coach, [Let's get this over with.]

The large, husky man took a step forward, and Viktor instinctively took one away as well. Yuri could feel the tension rising like water in a sinking ship.

[Scared?]  

[You nearly blinded me last time we met. I'd rather not try that again.]

Konstantin laughed at that, [I bet you would. King Queer and all, you need both eyes to keep on dancing.]

[I didn't come here to trade insults. You said you would only give up the address to my mother's funeral if I showed up myself, so here I am. Let's have it.]

[You refer to her like she's some alien.] The older, gruff man said sharply, [Do you even really want to be there when we put her in the ground?]

[The Bible says to honor thy mother and father. I don't have to like either of you, but I'll do my duty.]

[You were never much of a believer, Viktor.]

[The address.]

Konstantin held up his right hand, pulling an envelope from the inside pocket of his coat, [It's in here.]

Viktor's eyes twitched in bitterness at the gesture, realizing he'd have to get closer to his father to get the information. Yuri could see it, and stepped up to his partner's side in a gesture to continue moving forward.

"Do you want me to...?"

"No." The Russian said firmly, pulling his left hand out to keep Yuri behind him, "You stay there. I don't need you getting involved in my fights."

[The hell are you saying? Talking in Moonspeak now?]

[It's English. How else do you think I can coach a foreign athlete? We all speak English.]

[That's nice of you.]
Viktor's eyes narrowed, "Détestez-vous que je parle couramment le Français, aussi?"

His father bristled a little, [The weak language of fairies. I recognize that one. I'm not surprised you know it.]

[Put the envelope on the ground and leave. You'll see me again at the funeral, if you're even there.]

[I wouldn't be the one giving you the address if I wasn't going.] Konstantin pointed out, but refused to move his hand, or the envelope, one inch, [You'll take it from me if you want it.]

Viktor grit his teeth, unsure how to proceed. His father took another step forward, and he himself took yet another step back. The envelope was right there in between them, held at the limits of Konstantin's arm's length. Instead of cautiously stepping closer though, Konstantin just barreled forward, closing the distance until he rammed the envelope into the center of Viktor's chest with a speed that surprised all three of them. Viktor had his hands out of his pockets then, the right one up defensively as he stumbled over his own feet in shock at the sudden advance. He didn't fall though, and held his ground.

"...Viktor!" Yuri blanched.

"STAY WHERE YOU ARE." The Russian barked, not taking his eyes off the huge man in front of him.

The younger skater was on edge, but for the next few seconds, no one moved. Even Yakov was unsure what to do, so he stayed put as well.

It only took a second or two for Konstantin to notice the gold shine on one of his son's fingers, and his eyes glanced over to where Yuri had his hands up as well, seeing a matching ring there. The huge pale hand that was flat to Viktor's chest, with the envelope pressed between them, suddenly clenched, grabbing the front of Viktor's sweater in turn and yanking him unexpectedly closer. The strength of the man was enough to make Viktor, despite being 5'11", look like a small child.

Yuri acted on instinct after that, jumping into the fray to try and put himself between his fiancé and the man who'd grabbed him.

"Don't hurt him!!" Yuri pleaded, "Let Viktor go!"

"Yuri!" Yakov called.

It was too late though. Yuri's flailing was like a fly on a horse's backside, and it just annoyed the larger man. He reached his left hand under where his right had grabbed his son, and yanked Yuri clean under it to hold him up again on the other side. Cold slate eyes glared at him, like they could stare straight into his skull and bore a hole into his brain.

Konstantin just sneered, and literally threw Yuri away. The smaller figure landed with a crunch in the snow and skidded several feet more before coming to a painful stop.

"Yuri!"

[I thought I could forgive you for wanting to be a dancer instead of a man.] His father was saying, his voice quiet and deep, [Since you had apparently done so well, and become King of all the Fairies for 5 years straight. But this...] His huge left hand grabbed Viktor's right arm by the wrist and yanked it up, glaring past the ring, [...]this is unforgivable. This is exactly what I said you'd become if you skated. You shame us all.]
Viktor thought the man's grip was so tight, it was like to break his arm.

[Konstantin, I'll call the politsiya if you don't put him down.] Yakov warned, [You swore you wouldn't lay a finger on him if I gave him the message and brought him here.]

[I'm not going to hurt him.] The gruff man snarled, doing everything he could not to crush Viktor where he held him, [But our Father commands that men who lie with other men should be put to death. He also commands us to beat our children if they are disobedient. I should kill him.]

[Konstantin Nikiforov! That's enough!]

Viktor's father shoved him back so hard that he couldn't stay on his feet, collapsing backwards, spinning over himself before finally landing on his stomach in the slush and snow. The crumpled envelope fell into the walkway between them, and Viktor's left eye twitched nervously behind his bangs.

[Come to the funeral tomorrow, or don't, I don't care. My son died when he was 12, but Tatiyana deluded herself into thinking you were him in the flesh. For her, I give you this last gift, but that's it. After tomorrow, if I see you again, I'll end you.]

Yuri finally collected himself and slowly struggled over to Viktor's side. Viktor just cringed as he tried to push himself up to sitting again.

His father snarled at the both of them, spat a wad at Yuri, hitting him in the face, and then kicked snow over the both of them before finally leaving. He passed Yakov without another word and without looking back.

Yakov scrambled over to Viktor after he was sure Konstantin was gone, "Vitya, are you...?"

The skater was too busy using his cold, wet scarf to wipe the spit off his fiancé's face to answer. He shook terribly as he did so, and Yuri tried to avoid letting him get his own clothing even more dirty for his sake, trying to rub the wet spot off on his sleeve.

"I should never have let you come." Viktor finally said, dropping his arms to his lap, "You didn't need to see that."

"Are you okay!? Are you hurt!?” Yuri was too worried about physical harm than his own emotional state, and he grabbed Viktor's shoulders to try and shake him out of his stupor, "Viktor!"

The Russian just looked at his hands where they'd fallen to his lap, his clothing wet from the snow, the cold seeping in. His fingers were turning pink from exposure, but all he could think to do was use them to grasp at Yuri's coat and pull him close, burying his face against the crook of his neck.

Yuri wrapped his arms around the man and held him for a while...and Viktor cried.
Chapter 27

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Viktor was still choking on the occasional breath even as they were finally getting him back home. Yuri was helping get him onto the couch while Makkachin ran back and forth around them, sensing the tension and unsure how to react, given he was still excited everyone was back to begin with.

Yakov closed the door behind them, and stepped quietly into the room, "Vitya, do you want me to look through this before you do?"

The skater nodded, unable to form coherent words. Yuri had gone to the linen closet to find towels, trying to get Viktor as dry as he could until the man was willing to change.

Yakov pulled the crushed envelope from his jacket's inside pocket, and used a letter-opener on a nearby desk to start ripping it open. Inside was a single sheet of torn notepad paper with an address scrawled in Cyrillic text, which the coach set aside, knowing it was the location of the next day's somber event. He also found another, normal-sized mailing envelope, which was sealed with old, faded tape, and a few photos. The handwriting on the sealed envelope was different than that which was on the notepad paper, and Yakov could only assume it was Viktor's mother's.

He set that aside as well to look at the photos, trying to flatten them out again to get a better look in the dim light of the room. It was obvious that the photos were 20 or so years old; worn and faded, and showing a much younger woman than the one that had died in the preceding days, with a young child. They both had silver-grey hair, though it was hard to tell with how faded some of the colors were.

Yakov started setting the photos on a shorter table where Viktor could see them, and the skater glanced past where he held his face in his hands, elbows on his knees, to see what was in store. He recognized them.

"Is that...your mom?" Yuri wondered quietly, looking at the picture Viktor picked up first to get a closer look.

"Da." He rubbed his nose and snuffled a breath, "She was probably...33, maybe 34 here."

"It's easy to see what side of the family you got your good looks from." Yuri said, trying to lighten the mood, and Viktor did smile despite himself.

"These are all from before I really got into skating." Viktor pointed out, looking through the 5 photos before him, "There's nothing from after I turned 10, for sure. My father was never the sort of man to take pictures, so these ones of me and my Mama when I was really young were probably taken by my Un."

Yakov was reading the letter that had been separately sealed, but glanced an eye aside when he heard the words. Viktor had stopped and shook his head, moving on without finishing the thought, so the elder coach went back to the letter. It was easily three pages long, and Yakov had one hand over his chin as he scrolled through the hand-written text. When he was done, he realigned the papers so they'd be in the right order and folded them back into the smaller white envelope, putting it on the table with the pictures.

"Wait to read this until you've had some time to decompress, Vitya." He said, keeping his hand over
top of the folded paper until Viktor looked at him, "I imagine you won't be interested in skating for a few days either, so I don't mind if you don't come to practice while this all settles down." The coach went on, rising back up to his full height, "But you know where to find me if you need anything."

"Thank you for everything, Yakov, and sorry for dragging you back into this mess. I'm sure you had enough of it back when it first started...now it's all coming up again." Viktor added quietly, rising to stand and show the man outside again. They exchanged a few more words in Russian before Viktor closed the front door, keeping his hand flat on it as he heard the Mercedes turning on outside, fading away in the seconds after. He then slowly shuffled back to the couch where Yuri was still looking at the pictures. He grabbed the envelope with the three folded pages and sat down, damp and cold, and pulled the papers out to read them. He slouched and pulled one knee up to half-cross his legs, looking at the papers without unfolding them just yet.

Yuri reached over and stroked some of that silver hair, "You don't have to read it now if you don't want to."

"Yeah..." The Russian agreed, too anxious to look the letter over for the moment, "All I want right now is to get out of these clothes and warm up."

"...Can I do anything to help...?"

"Go pull a bath, would you?" He asked, tilting his head back to look at his partner, "It's not Yu-Topia, but we can still soak for a while, right?"

"Yeah!" The younger skater answered, kissing the man's forehead before standing to go do as he'd been asked. He was barely around the corner when he seemed to turn about-face and come back again, looking at Viktor, and swiping the letter from his mitts before he had a chance to unfold it.

The Russian didn't argue, though he was a bit dumbfounded that Yuri would take it from him either way. But, he smiled at the understanding that Yuri was just trying to protect him.

Before long, he was submerged up to his chin in hot water, and the memory of earlier in the afternoon was starting to melt away. Yuri was tossing the wet clothes into a separate hamper for later, and came back to sit on the edge of the large tub. He reached for a washcloth, folded it, dipped it in the water, and then flopped it on top of his fiancé's head with a squish.

"It's not exactly Yu-Topia, but I guess it's close." Yuri said, "At least here you can put the towel in the water."

"...There is one thing missing, for certain." Viktor pointed out nonchalantly, pushing himself up a little bit so his arms and shoulders were above the water. He propped his elbows up onto the sides of the basin and laced his fingers together, giving Yuri a bit of an elementary look, "Can you guess what it is?"

The younger man started listing things off on his fingers, "...Mood lighting, stone masonry, that fountain in the middle, the giant red kabuki demon-mask on the wall, a bunch of old men in small towels, uhh..."

Viktor huffed a laugh and then leaned over, wrapping one arm around his partner before dragging him, fully clothed, down into the tub with him. Though there was an initial protest, mostly because Yuri wasn't ready, the younger figure eventually simmered down and let Viktor hold him there. He managed to keep his socks dry though, and set his feet to dangle over the edge of the tub.

"There," Viktor said proudly, "Now it's perfect."
Yuri settled in and relaxed in the man's grip, and things once again started to feel like they were on the mend. But, Yuri had gotten suddenly accustomed to the idea that normalcy was just the eye of a series of storms, and it was bound to get worse again before it got better.

True to his fear, Viktor brought it all back around again.

"I'm not taking you with me tomorrow."

"Bu-" The water splashed a little where he whipped his head around so fast.

"No. I forbid it." The Russian said flatly, not moving a muscle, "I should have fought harder to prevent you from seeing what happened today, too. I'm sorry that I didn't. If you want to help me...the best thing you can do is to let me do this alone. I don't want to taint our relationship with a problem that hadn't even existed until now. I don't need you to remember me the way I was earlier. That's not me."

Yuri wanted to fight it, but in that moment, he felt he didn't have a horse in that race. He just furrowed his brow and tilted his head against his partner's shoulder, even with the water there making his hair wet. It mattered so little compared to everything else.

"Yakov and I will deal with this last thing tomorrow, and then I want to go back to how we were before. Whatever questions you might once have had about my family...forget them. You're my family. You already know the only important bits about my past that matter anyway."

"...Can Yakov protect you from that man? You alluded to him having had a hand in something like this before, but..."

"If my father tries something, I don't think anyone can stop it." Viktor admitted, "But that's not going to be an issue. I'm ending things tomorrow. Whatever happens...it'll be the last thing that happens. I promise."

"You forget promises sometimes..."

"Never something this important."

Yuri felt uncomfortable and helpless all day and night afterwards. Viktor had done everything he could think of to put his mind at ease, but it wasn't enough. Even the hard-won pork cutlet bowl seemed like a bitter victory when presented under those circumstances. Viktor upped the ante after that, claiming the man on the floor of the living room unexpectedly, thinking maybe that would finally get Yuri's mind off the next day...but it was only a temporary solution. Once it was over and Yuri could catch his breath, he still spent half the night awake worrying.

It truly didn't help that Viktor had finally gone to read the letter, and was gone for the better part of 2 hours, dead in the middle of the night, unwilling to return to bed or even discuss what it said. Yuri later watched him burn it, as well as the photos, and the envelope everything had come in. Even the address was rendered to ash, though Yuri supposed it was because Viktor recognized it, and wouldn't actually need it anymore to know where to go.

*He must really want to forget.* Yuri thought to himself, crossed arms as he was leaning against a wall, watching in silence. *To erase even the good memories from before everything went so wrong... This is all a side of Viktor that he probably never thought he'd have to reveal to me. But even with everything that I've seen, he still refuses to explain what happened that caused it to be this way...I know his father hates the skating, but why?*
When it was finally time to go, Viktor took his partner to the ice rink to leave him with the rest of the Russian skate team. He knew Yurio would be there at least, if no one else was. The last thing he wanted was for Yuri to be by himself while everything was coming to a head.

[...You want me to babysit your boyfriend?] Yurio was incredulous, [Do I get paid for this?]

Viktor huffed a laugh and shook his head, [No, but I'll really appreciate it?]

Yuri just watched the pair exchange comments in Russian, and sighed to himself, "I really should learn their language...it's too easy for them to talk about me when I'm standing right here."

When it seemed like they'd finally come to an agreement, Viktor pulled his fiancé aside. He took the man's hands in his own and squeezed them reassuringly, waiting a moment before doing something Yuri had never thought would ever happen.

"I know I chastised you fiercely for even suggesting this before...but..."

The Russian reached for his finger and pulled his ring off. Sighing, he kissed the gold, looked at the half-snowflake engraving on the inside of the band, and put it carefully into the palm of Yuri's hand, cautious to close his partner's fingers overtop of it before encapsulating the whole hand with both of his own.

Yuri was entirely confused, and his chest and throat started to hurt immediately.

"I need you to keep this safe for me." Viktor finally explained, "The last thing I need is for my father to try and take it away, and throw it into the woods...or to make me stumble, and have it fall out of my pocket without me knowing. I would never forgive myself if I allowed that to happen when I knew I could protect it, and you're the only one I trust to hold onto it until I'm back. You understand?"

The younger skater nodded, though he shook as he did so, "I understand..." He moved to take the ring and put it onto his middle finger, right next to the ring he himself bore, "I'll keep it here until you come to collect it."

Viktor smiled, the same sad but joyous smile he had born when asking why Yuri was still in warm-up mode during the GP Final, before both of them cried on the rink wall together. His heart felt heavy with the guilt of having to leave the ring behind, but he knew...he rationalized...everything said it was the right thing to do. He noted the odd perplexity of hoping his father would try to take the ring now, just so he could have the justification in his own mind for having put it into safe keeping ahead of time.

"Please don't get hurt." Yuri pleaded.

The Russian nodded, "I don't plan on it." He leaned in close to kiss his fiancé lightly, brushing his cheek with a thumb.

Yurio watched quietly from where he'd previously been standing, but turned his head abruptly to avoid getting an eyeful. The sight of their affection still made him uneasy.

When Viktor finally started to leave, seeing Yakov pulling up just outside, Yurio held his ground. Yuri stepped up next to him silently, watching the pair entering the car. He sniffled a little.

"You're not going to cry, are you?" The blond wondered pessimistically.

"You don't even know what he's about to do."
"I know that whatever it is, it bothers him less than it bothers you, so you crying doesn't make any sense."

"...Phichit-kun said the same thing at Four Continents."

"Fit-bit-coon?"

"Phichit Chulanont. The Thai skater I used to train with when I was in America. The older skater answered, "He was at the GPF. How can you forget it? He's the only Thai skater that ever did 'Shall We Skate' as a figure skating performance."

"I don't watch most of the other skaters." Yurio shrugged, "I only really watch the ones that I have to worry about being contenders for the podium."

Yuri deadpanned, "That's cruel."

"Still doesn't change the fact that you're bawling over someone else's problems."

"It's not that uncommon for people to share in each other's burdens when they care about one another." Yuri gawked at the younger skater, "Like how Viktor helped carry your burden when your grandpa was in the hospital."

"That was different."

"It's not entirely different." Yuri looked through the glass doors to see Yakov's car pulling away, and the butterflies started to rise in his gut. He hated that he only knew the 'event' started at 3, but not having a clue when it would end or when he could expect Viktor to return...that was killing him.

"Let's go skate." Yurio said suddenly, pulling Yuri from his thoughts, "There's no sense worrying about it until there's something to worry about."

Sighing, Yuri followed him back through the locker rooms, put on his skates, and went out onto the ice.

By 7pm, there was still no word, and Yuri had done basically nothing other than skate slow laps since 5. Yurio had even done his entire new Short Program, but Yuri was so distracted in his mind that he'd missed it completely.

Then 8 o'clock rolled around, and still nothing.

Then it was 9 o'clock, and Yurio was having to offer to let Yuri come back to his place for a while, "Unless you want to spend the night alone or something." When the older figure didn't answer, the teen rolled his eyes and stepped out of the locker-room to wait in the foyer.

Yuri was moving at a glacial pace to get his skates off and organize his backpack.

"YOU SURE ARE TAKING YOUR SWEET TIME IN THERE." He'd heard Yurio yelling from the exit.

The Asian got a fire under his butt after that and started to hurry, throwing the pack on and rushing to the doors. As they were rounding the last corner before leaving the arena, Yuri looked outside to see the familiar headlights of a Mercedes pulling up. He barreled out the doors and ran up to the sidewalk's edge, happy to finally see the car. When it stopped, and the engine turned off, Yakov was the first to get out.
He could see Viktor's outline in the front passenger seat, but for the most part, he was covered in dark shadows from the car, and he didn't move right away.

Yurio came up next to Yuri, curious, "Why isn't he getting out?" He looked to his coach, "Yakov...?"

"It's been a long day." Was all the tired older man could say.

Yurio noticed his coach had something of a scrape on his chin, and his long-coat had what looked like dried mud, and raised a brow at it, "Did you fall...?"

Yuri went around the other side of the car and moved to pull open the door for his fiancé, anxious to give him back his ring and go back to how things were, just as the Russian had said. Then he looked at the man's hands where they were still held on his lap, and saw the cuts and scrapes on his right-side knuckles, "...Viktor...?"

The silver legend's face, from that side at least, looked entirely fine, and it added a certain air of mystery to what was already a mysterious situation. Then the Russian finally started to move, reaching over to undo the seat-belt from its buckle, and got out of the car. When he leaned down to avoid hitting his head on the door-frame, Yuri could see that something was weird about his hair. It looked like it had been made wet and then dried without being brushed. There were a few red streaks in his bangs as well, especially at the tips, which were darker red than elsewhere.

Yakov looked uneasy as he watched as Viktor rose back up to his full height, even as Yuri threw both arms around the man in greeting, saying all the expected things to welcome him back. When Yuri finally looked up again though, finally able to see past the bangs that covered the opposite side of his fiancé's face, he saw true 'rewards' of the afternoon's events.

The skin behind those strands of red-tinted silver-grey hair was red, shiny, and swollen. Further inspection lead Yuri to see that there were a few deep cuts around the eye socket and cheek, black in the dark of the night, and a single slate-blue eye looking back at him through a slit where the eyelid could barely open, surrounded by a pool of dark red where the sclera should have been white. Whatever had gotten Viktor's hair wet earlier had smeared the blood around his face and left faded, crusty red streaks down his chin and neck, vanishing under the edge of that stained scarf.

The gentle skater couldn't handle it. He could hear the ringing in his ears just micro-seconds before the edges of his sight started to go dark. The world faded, and he felt the strength leave his legs. Everything became black, and he dropped where he stood.
It was a two hour drive north of St. Petersburg; his hometown was more like a hamlet than an rural pocket of modern civilization. Viktor barely remembered it, but he wasn't surprised that the funeral would be held there. He felt a little silly for thinking it would be held anywhere else.

*I almost could've gotten away with not meeting Konstantin at all. I should've known the funeral would be there. The whole family is buried there.*

Viktor was entirely unaccustomed to that kind of scenery. People stared as the Mercedes pulled through. It looked like a time capsule with a futuristic wonder-machine heading by.

The funeral was being held on a small farm a minute further behind the town. There were several cars there already. Some were more modern, coming from other nearby cities, but most were old and worn down. Some people had even arrived on horseback, and their mounts were tied to fences or trees at the end of the dirt road leading to the small, dilapidated house on the hill ahead of them. There was one singular modern vehicle aside from their own, a hybrid even, bright blue and sticking out like a sore thumb amidst the browns, greys, blacks, and whites of everything else.

From the look of everything, Viktor's lifestyle was miles apart from where his family had come from. He didn't doubt that this humble beginning is what made it possible for his mother to tolerate the ultra-conservative ideas of home-life that his father had forced onto them.

Dogs barked and ran around them as they parked and got out of the Mercedes, taking in the smell of the countryside like they'd just found themselves on another planet.

"Hard to believe these are your roots." Yakov said quietly, stepping out ahead of the vehicle to walk with his athlete up the small, wet hill. They could see a small crowd of people past the edge of the tree-line, where a small clearing gave way to what looked like a family cemetery.

Viktor was too busy scanning their surroundings for his father to notice anything else. He eventually spotted Konstantin coming out of the hovel with two other men, though thankfully, neither was near as large as he was. When the two of them caught sight of each other, Konstantin started calling for the group to gather around. A scruffy Russian Orthodox priest was quick to follow out of the house shortly after that.

The hole had already been dug, and a simple, white-painted wooden box was next to it. There was a framed picture sitting on top of it with flowers all around. The photo showed Viktor's mother from years ago. There probably weren't many photos taken after he'd left the family. Tatiyana was a beautiful woman in her youth, and probably into her elder years as well. Long, wavy, silver-grey hair cascaded over her shoulders and framed her face. She had warm green eyes and a pale, soft complexion. Truly a song-bird that married a monstrous wild boar.

There were simple benches set up, and people started to sit down as Konstantin gave his little speech. Viktor kept his eyes down, hearing the words but trying not to listen to them. People sitting nearby were whispering about him, turning their heads over their shoulders to gawk at him. He wasn't sure if he was seen as some morbid curiosity returning home, or if they were even sure who he was. He could only hope that his silver hair was enough to reveal who he was in relation to the woman about to be buried. There were enough people around with similar hair to make it clear that he belonged on *some* level.
Yakov kept himself between Viktor and the rest of the attendees, acting as a buffer in case there were problems.

Most of the whispers Viktor heard seemed to be about the days prior, and insulting remarks about how the 'ungrateful son' hadn't bothered to come during that whole time. He wanted to tell them that he didn't even know where everything was taking place until just a day and a half prior, but he knew it wouldn't make any difference. They would've already done the washing and dressing of the body when he was still at Four Continents with Yuri.

**What was I going to do from Korea anyway? I wasn't going to leave my fiancé alone in competition over the body of a dead woman that I haven't even seen since I was a child.**

He hadn't had the courage yet to look at the head of the coffin, where he could barely see the fluff of the blankets and pillow that made-up the 'new livingroom' his mother was to be interred in.

*They must've done the funeral procession this morning.* Viktor thought on, *Usually those things take hours...how long had they been finished and waiting for me? Did Konstantin deliberately give me the wrong time so I'd show up when it was inappropriate? Or maybe he just wanted to be sure I'd be here for the least amount of time.*

People started to stand and approach the coffin, placing things inside it as they passed and started to wail. When it seemed like it was Viktor's turn, he stood and followed the line. Anxiously, slowly, he approached the coffin, and for the first time since he was 12, looked upon the face of the woman who had given him life.

He barely recognized it. The accident had done extensive damage. But her hair...washed, combed, set with flowers...he knew it well. Silver-grey just like his, long and wavy, it framed the battered woman's head, neck, and shoulders before disappearing under the edge of the blanket.

Hidden in his pocket, Viktor withdrew a small gift. A small wedge of brie and a bag of candied pecans. He placed them near her right shoulder, alongside dozens of other gifts of food, money, and precious heirlooms that other members of the family had already left behind.

He noticed that the priest was giving him dirty looks though and he moved on, going back to sit with Yakov while the 'seeing off' ceremony began. The priest put the paper crown on Tatiyana's head, and Konstantin returned with the two men from before to nail the coffin lid down. A few minutes later, the coffin was in the pre-dug hole, and people started coming up to toss dirt and coins down onto it, symbolically uniting the deceased with the earth, and paying for her transit into the next world.

A horse whinnied at the bottom of the hill, and Viktor lifted his head, realizing most of the ceremony was over at that point. Several people were lamenting loudly, sobbing openly...be he couldn't bring himself to evoke anything close to that level of sadness.

He thought back on the contents of the letter.

**Viktor...**

*I don't know that we will ever speak to one another again, but if it ever comes to pass that you get this letter, you should know that I still love you as any mother could love her only son.*

There was mournful singing all around him; songs of family life, leaving to ascend to heaven, and other such melodies. If nothing else, Russians were loud at funerals. Most of them, anyway.

Viktor stood to approach the mound of dirt that had replaced the hole. He kept his hands in his
pockets as he looked down at the freshly turned earth, trying to think back on the happier times from his long-gone childhood. There were a few years, after all, before he developed his love for skating, where his family seemed relatively normal. It hadn't really occurred to him until years after his departure that things were so specifically structured as they had been. His mother stayed home, his father did manual labor, and their life was simple.

One particular winter, the ice had frozen rather smoothly at the local pond. He was 6, maybe a little younger, and had found the slippery surface to be the greatest thing he'd ever known. Even with the snowdrift and only his boots to slide on, it was tremendous fun. At the time, when his father had condemned his mirth and made him get back onto the banks, he thought that it was because the ice was dangerous. He would sneak out with his mother to play on it though anytime Konstantin was gone for the day.

It was his mother that got him his first make-shift skates.

His mind had gone blank after that, and he closed his eyes, trying to push the memories out.

He heard footsteps behind him, but for some insane reason, he thought it was Yakov, since no one said anything.

"Vitya...!" Yakov's voice rang up, further away than Viktor had presumed the man was standing.

His eyes went wide with realization, but then half-narrowed when he felt the cold trickle of a liquid being poured over the top of his head. His left eye twitched nervously, feeling the...whatever it was dribbling down the sides of his face, behind his ears, down his neck, and into his clothing. He was paralyzed though, aside from how he trembled.

The pouring continued for a while. When the last drips finally ended, the cold had made its way half-way down his chest, making everything bitter cold. He turned his eyes a little to the left see the shadow of Konstantin standing directly behind him.

[You made us wait.]

[We were here an hour before you said to show. Whatever tardiness you're accusing me of is your own fault.]

[At least you had the sense to leave your wife behind.] Konstantin chortled.

Viktor snapped. The world was red.

He felt a searing pain in his right hand as he turned on his heel to cram his fist as hard as he could into the older man's face. He felt the crunch of cartilage under the impact, and saw the droplets of blood that flew away from the site as Konstantin wobbled a little.

"VIKTOR!" Yakov yelled, "What are you thinking!? Get out of there be-"

Konstantin was too large to put off balance by a little peck like Viktor's sucker-punch, and he easily reached out with one hand to grab him by the throat as the other came up to set his nose back into place.

Viktor's coach came scrambling up to try and pull them apart, but Konstantin backhanded him in the jaw and sent him sprawling to the mud, then turned his attention back to the man in his grip. He put his thumb over one nostril, blew a snort to clear it, and then did the same with the other.

[So at least you had some balls in the end.] He taunted, holding tight even as Viktor was trying to hit
his arm for release, [But maybe it's just that, between you and your girlfriend, you had half a ball between you. Did you borrow it to come out here?]

[...Yuri...is a better man than you ever were...] Viktor said, trying to draw breath when he could, [You're just...an animal...!]

Konstantin shrugged, and used sheer brute force to push Viktor down to his knees by his neck. That massive bear-arm came up after that, and Viktor would only watch in horror as the world turned to slow motion.

He felt the first crack against his eye socket, but not the second, and he went sprawling to the ground after that. Searing pain shot through his entire body after that, and he felt a kick to his ribs, pushing him a few feet further back on the grave mound. His vision spun as he quaked, trying to see if anymore assaults would come.

Konstantin just looked at the broken heap in front of him, and moved to pull the large flask from his coat pocket again, taking a sip before pouring the remains onto Viktor's head again. The alcohol made Viktor's eye burn, and he moved his hand up to try and protect it, pulling it away only to see blood everywhere.

[What do you want from me!?] He barked, refusing to look up at the man.

[Nothing.]

[Do you get some sick pleasure from watching me suffer, then!?] The skater tried to push himself back to his feet, but found it difficult with his head spinning like it was, [Do you like inflicting pain on others!?]

[Only on those deserving punishment.]

Viktor was incensed, [...I never did anything to deserve this!]

Konstantin just howled with laughter at that, [You never did anything? You've spent every day of the last 20-something years insulting this family with your ridiculous prancing about on the ice.]

[So what!? So I can't knock down trees with my fists or scare wolves away with my presence. Who cares!?] Viktor finally found his feet, putting his hand up over his eye again, [I love what I do and I'm more successful than you ever were. My name is recognized around the world!! I have enough money that I can retire today and be well-off until I'm too old to care anymore!]

[And what have you done with all that success?] Konstantin wondered odiously, [Kept it to yourself. You come back here with all your nice clothes, chauffeured by a man in a black Mercedes, showing off to all these people who've broken their backs to put food on the table for their families...and all you did was, what...dance? Strippers do the same thing, selling their bodies for the world to gawk at. There's nothing honorable about what you do. Nothing noble.]

Viktor grit his teeth, [I'm not a stripper. I'm an ATHLETE. Figure skating is an Olympic sport for fuck's sake!]

[You perform for visual appeal, not skill. People throw money at you so they can look.]

[So this is about the money then.]

[I don't want your money.]
[What then!?!]

[I already told you. I don't want anything from you. Tatiyana asked me once that if anything ever happened to her, that I would find a way to tell you. I'm a man of my word and I did ask she asked. That's all.]

[I'm sure she'd be proud of you for what you've done since getting me here.]

[It doesn't matter what she thinks anymore. She's gone.]

[I wish it was you instead...] Viktor said quietly.

Yakov knew that was the end of it, and he moved in to gather his skater and push him back to the car before anything else could happen. Konstantin just watched them without a word. As Yakov was corralling Viktor away, the skater planted his heels, and turned once more to glare hatefully at the man who had sired him.

[I never want to hear from you again.] He said stiffly, [Don't ever find a reason to contact me. Don't contact Yakov, or even the ISU for that matter. I don't even want to hear about it when you finally die.]

[Just go back to your queer lover, Viktor. You're not welcome here.]

Viktor's brow furrowed at that, but for some reason, all he could do was laugh at it. Yakov thought the man had lost his mind and was trying to shove him down the hill again, but still, Viktor laughed.

[His name is Yuri Katsuki...and soon, it's going to be Yuri Nikiforov!! HOW DO YOU LIKE THAT, HUH?]

[Viktor I swear to God if you don't shut up and get in the car-] Yakov protested.

[He's going to be my husband and we're going to do all kinds of unspeakable things to each other!]

"VITYA!"

Konstantin just glowered at them, keeping his hateful slate-blue eyes on the man he knew was, but refused to accept as, his son.

A thin, silver-haired older man watched quietly from the door to the small house, grey-green eyes following after Viktor until he was too obscured to pick out from the trees anymore.

Yakov shoved the skater into the front passenger seat and slammed the door closed after him before heading to the other side. Despite the clamor, he pulled out calmly, not wanting to cause a scene in the little town as they practically fled from it.

It was a few miles down the road before Viktor finally let himself accept that it was over, and he look at where the skin on his knuckles had been slashed where he had punched his father's nose. Yakov pulled over briefly to pull a travel-size wrap of tissue from the glove box and threw it in Viktor's lap. No matter how much he tried to dry his face though, the alcohol that saturated his hair continued to drip for a long time after, drawing new, faint red lines down his face and neck until he finally gave up.

He felt tremendous guilt and worry as they pulled back into St. Petersburg. The weight of not knowing how badly Yuri would react was crushing him. But, when they finally got back to the ice skating arena and the younger skater had fainted, Viktor knew it was going to be okay.
He moved to pick the unconscious man up in his arms and carried him inside, back the way Yuri and Yurio had just come, and set him down to rest on the benches just within the doors. Yurio had wordlessly moved off to find the first aid kit and came back shortly thereafter, giving it to their coach so he could tend to Viktor's wounds.

"I'm not even going to ask what the hell you got yourself into." Yurio said stiffly, "But please tell me you at least popped the other guy."

Viktor smiled and looked at his ravaged knuckles, "...Well, I got him once, at least."

"That'll do."

Yakov was cleaning the blood away with gauze and some isopropyl alcohol, "The cuts aren't too deep, so you shouldn't have any scars."

"That's good to hear."

"But your eye..." He said, turning away to get some skin closures from the kit, "You won't be able to use it for a while. It's the same side he hit last time."

"I know."

"Do you want to cancel your spot at Worlds?"

Viktor shook his head, gently stroking Yuri's where he held it in his lap, "No, I'll be fine by Worlds. I'd rather go and be in last place than skip one more competition."

The younger skater seemed to finally be rousing again, and he slowly opened his eyes, looking up blearily to where Viktor was looking down at him. The sight of his swollen, red eye made Yuri blanch again, but he pushed himself to sit, and really looked at it. Viktor's hair had been pulled back so Yakov could more easily clean and dress the wounds, so it was more striking than before, but at least Yuri expected it so it didn't shock him as much as it had previously.

There were a thousand things Yuri wanted to say, but words weren't forthcoming. All he could think to do was drape his legs off the opposite end of the bench and wrap his arms around his partner, leaning in to put his forehead on Viktor's chest, clinging like he thought the man would slip through his fingers if he didn't. Viktor just held him in turn, quietly consoling him as Yakov finished putting the last skin closures on the few cuts around his eye and cheek.

"It's fine now." He said in a whisper, "It's over."
Yakov only tenuously allowed Viktor to drive himself home after everything that had happened, and he only did that after checking his vision several times with the good eye closed. Grumbling the whole while however, he watched as Viktor took Yuri back to his own car and started the drive away from the ice rink. Yakov drove Yurio home himself.

The drive back was relatively silent. Yuri still had difficulty believing the injuries Viktor had sustained. Every time he glanced over at the man, he was looking at the right side of his face, and he looked perfectly normal...but then he’d see his right hand on the steering wheel and saw the cuts and red scrapes on his knuckles, and he’d be reminded of how real it all was.

Unable to reach the hand while it was in use though, Yuri settled for resting his left hand on Viktor's leg as he drove.

The Russian glanced up as he felt it, looking to Yuri briefly. The younger man had already turned his head around to look out the passenger side door though and didn't see his sad smile, but he switched hands on the wheel and lowered his right to Yuri’s. He gave his fiancé's hand a gentle squeeze and continued the drive.

As they came to pause at an intersection, Viktor tapped on Yuri's hand with one finger to get his attention, and the Japanese skater looked back at him curiously.

"You have something of mine, I believe." The Russian said coyly, keeping sure to hide his left eye. He rested his elbow on the compartment between the two seats and wagged his ring finger.

He saw Yuri's eyes light up, and he immediately went to pull the ring off his finger and slip it back onto Viktor's, where it belonged. Viktor could tell a little tension had been released with that, and he leaned over to kiss Yuri's own ring before the light turned green and he had to look forward again.

Makkachin was barking furiously when he heard the car pull up in the driveway, and then into the garage. Yuri was ready this time though and caught the dog when he lunged out the door at them, carrying the heavy poodle back inside with Viktor huffing a light chuckle at them as they went.

Bypassing the kitchen, Viktor went over to the front door to put his coat and scarf away in the coat closet, only to realize how filthy they were and stopped. He sighed at the mud and blood stains he saw there in the light, and closed the door again without hanging them. Instead, he went back to the kitchen, found a garbage bag, stuffed them both inside and discarded them by the back door without a word. He wouldn't even consider sending them to be properly cleaned.

It would just remind me of this day every time I see them. I'll get rid of everything I wore today.

That done, he went back to the front door to collect a box that he'd seen sitting there as they arrived. Checking the Cyrillic on the label, he realized the box was from his costume designer, and his spirits were lifted a little, pulling it inside and moving to shut the door with his heel.

Yuri had finished putting dinner down for the poodle when he looked back and saw Viktor with the box, pushing in where the tape met the folded parts of the lid and yanking the tape off to open it.

"What's that?"
"The two outfits I need for this season...all one competition of it, anyway." Viktor answered, checking the top of the pile within to see a hand-written letter from the tailor's shop.

Yuri moved to sit on the edge of the big blue couch behind the man and watched as he opened the envelope. The text was in Cyrillic as well though and he was hopeless, "What's it say?"

"To Mr. Viktor Nikiforov," Viktor started, "We want to thank you again for your business and wish you well in your skating career. We hope these costumes suit you well and look forward to seeing you on the ice with them. Everyone here was so excited to get your order. Thank you, thank you, thank you for coming back!"

The pair smiled at that.

"Also," Viktor continued, realizing there was more on a second page. That text was all hand-written by the people who worked in the tailoring shop; seven signatures, and a beautiful calligraphy heading that read '...Congratulations On Your Engagement, From Everyone Here!'

Yuri squeezed Viktor's right shoulder happily when he read it aloud, and then gestured for him to put on a show, "Let's see them!"

"Ah...a little later, if that's okay." Viktor said sullenly, putting the letter back into the envelope and packing the box away.

"...You don't want to show off?"

Viktor turned back to him and leaned against the foot of the couch, resting his elbow on the edge of it, "I'm covered in blood and alcohol, and I probably reek. I don't want to get these outfits dirty before I've used them."

"Oh...right..." Yuri remembered, seeing past Viktor's head for the first time since he took his coat and scarf off, and seeing a rather large blot of blood and dried liquor over his collarbone and chest.

The Russian folded the panels of the box's lid together and shoved it into a corner of the living room for later, then headed down the hall for the bedroom, ruffling Yuri's hair reassuringly as he passed. Dubiously, Yuri followed soon after, practically being as nervous and reserved about going into the bedroom they'd shared as though he'd only been a nervous friend, seeing the house for the first time all over again. He saw the bathroom light was already on and heard the showed being started, but when Viktor came back out again, in the middle of pulling off his filthy blood-stained shirt, Yuri squeaked a gasp and pulled his hands up to his mouth.

Viktor looked over at him, not having expected him to be idling in the doorway as he had been. He looked down at himself, thinking it was just more of the blood that had stained his skin under the shirt, but he realized he'd been covered in bruises. There was a larger one on the front of his chest by the left side, and he put his hand over it tenderly, remembering the moment his father had kicked him. The impact had moved him 3 feet across snow and freshly-turned earth.

But, in the end, he was more surprised at how little it hurt at that moment.

"I guess it's a good thing that I was able to forget all these." He said warily, trying to find a silver lining to the whole mess.

Yuri was still in shock though and was at a loss for words.

"...I'll be fine, I promise." Viktor tried.
"You should be telling the police." The younger man finally managed, "He should be in jail for what
he did to you."

"I can't prove he laid a finger on me, and no one that saw it happen will say a word against him."
Viktor explained, "It would be pointless."

"Did he hit you as a kid, too?" Yuri was starting to get angry about the whole thing.

"No." Viktor said simply, "The worst he ever did before today was the hit in the eye I told you
about, when Yakov and I told him that I would be leaving home to skate professionally."

"I just don't understand..." The shorter man said, crossing his arms and approaching warily. "What's
his big problem with skating? Why does he hate it so much that he'd take it out on you physically for
it?"

"No idea." His fiancé shrugged, wincing as he felt a sharp pain from the biggest bruise, "I think the
fisty-cuffs these last two days was inspired by realizing you and I had a relationship, because he
didn't clench down on me until after he saw my ring, and then probably saw yours. Konstantin is a
very conservative and deeply religious man. I don't know how much western religion has influenced
Japanese culture, but here in Russia, if you go against The Word then you might as well be holding
up a sign asking for problems."

Yuri sighed in understanding. "Maybe we should move to Hasetsu instead."

"Because of my father?" Viktor laughed, "That would be fleeing. I'm not about to let him screw up
my life...our lives...because of a span of two days out of thousands that we're going to be together." He
didn't give Yuri a chance to reply to that though, crumbling his bloodstained shirt up into a ball
and tossing it into a wastebasket by the nightstand before removing his slacks to send them the same
way. He checked his legs briefly to find a few more bruises on his hips, probably from where he'd
actually hit the ground, and a few scuffs on his knees from when Konstantin had forced him to kneel,
"Jeeze...I bruise like an apple."

He looked over at his silent partner, and saw the worried look on his face, eyebrows furrowed.

"Your face is going to get stuck like that, you know." Viktor mused, turning back into the bathroom
as he saw the mirror fully fogged from the steam.

Yuri watched as Viktor's hand disappeared beyond the edge of the doorframe where he'd held it as
he entered, and then drew in a deep breath.

...I'm never going to be able to sleep, knowing the condition he's in and how nonchalant he's being
about it...

He turned to leave the bedroom and headed back to the kitchen. He knew there was a jar of
previously-mulled wine that Viktor had made after their return from Four Continents, and he poured
a cup before warming it briefly in the microwave. As the cup turned on the glass disc inside the
machine, Yuri watched it pensively, raising his hands up to rub his temples where he felt a headache
coming on.

The microwave beeped and went dark, and he reached in to grab the cup, swirling it a little before
smelling its sweet aroma and taking a little sip. Makkachin had come up after that and whined a little
for attention, so Yuri scratched the pupper behind the ears before making his way back to the
bedroom.

He set the cup on the nightstand on his side of the bed, and crawled on top of the covers to look at
his phone. Instagram was awash with new content, and Yuri was pleased to see a gallery of photos from his and Viktor's Exhibition show on the triplets' Viktuuri account. He went through each photo slowly, mesmerized by their performance, and in disbelief all over again that it had even happened.

*I'd been trying to catch up to Viktor for over half my life, and in the end, he surprises me more than ever by not only dancing with me for a real performance...he even says we're equals. But...

His eyes narrowed a little as he looked down.

*He's done so much for me...and what have I really done for him? Can I really make him happy when it's always him making plans? I feel like I'm just reacting to most everything. The one time I ever really surprised him was by doing his signature quad flip at the end of my Cup of China Free Skate...and then he one-upped me again a second later anyway...*

He remembered that first kiss like it had just happened; how his heart practically stopped beating in his chest, how soft Viktor's lips had been, and how happy he'd been when Viktor confirmed that it wasn't just a positional accident from the lunge-hug.

'**It was the only thing I could think of that would surprise you more than you surprised me.'**

As was usual for the younger man, when his mind wandered, it wandered far.

*I'm not good with people crying in front of me. ...Should I just kiss you?*

'**NO!! I just want you to stand by me! I need you to believe more than I do that I can win!!'**

He'd cried so hard after that moment that his whole face was red when they finally got back from the parking garage. He then tricked Viktor into leaning over the ice by dropping his tissue too far for him to reach as he'd planned, and then he stuck his finger into the supposed thin spot on the crown of Viktor's head, patting him lightly once and then skating off without a word.

Yuri realized that was probably the only time he'd even halfway been able to console his partner. The next time he'd even had the opportunity, Viktor was **inconsolable**.

*And this time...I wasn't even there at all. What kind of husband am I could to make if I can't do anything to help him?*

He heard the shower turn off after that, and soon, the man was coming out again. He worried all over again when Viktor finally opened the door where it had just been cracked before, and he saw the bruises again. Without the dirt and blood to cover him, some bruises looked worse than before, whereas others weren't quite so bad. The one on Viktor's left chest, however...he knew that would be quite ripe by the next day, and Viktor wouldn't be able to hide how much it hurt even to breathe.

For the moment though, he tried to hide it all by pulling a bathrobe over his arms, tying it over where he'd pulled on some sweat pants, and ruffled the towel over his head to try and dry his hair a little.

"Much better." He said aloud, moving towards the bed the sit on the edge of it. Yuri's side had been the one closest to the two legitimate doors in the room, whereas Viktor's side had been with the full-length windows to his right, and closet door by the foot-end of the bed. He liked to look outside as he roused from sleep.

Viktor had intended to just fall down to his back after sitting down, but he found that Yuri had other plans, and had quickly swept in behind him to catch him as he tilted. When he stopped, a little surprise where he'd landed, he looked up from Yuri's chest and smiled, "Yes?"
"I can't undo what happened today, but I can help you forget it, right?" He wondered.

"You can do whatever you want." Viktor said, reaching up with one hand to stroke Yuri's cheek, pushing up a little so he could kiss the man's neck before sitting fully upright in front of him, "What'd you have in mind? I'm a little tired for a fashion show right now, mind you..."

"No, you've done plenty today...you deserve to relax." Yuri pointed out, leaning back a little to cross his legs and reach behind him to grab the cup of reheated wine, offering it to Viktor, "It's not as hot as it was when I made it, but..."

The Russian waved his hand over the cup to draw up the aroma, and found it still pleasing, so he accepted the cup and took a sip. As he did so, Yuri went to stick his head in the bathroom briefly to grab a comb and come back, resuming his place, cross-legged, behind his partner. Gently taking the towel on Viktor's head into his hands, the comb held in his lips, he did his best to dry the man's hair without touching the tender flesh by his left eye. When he pulled the towel away, he found that the grey pattern in the fabric had a light red tint in a few places, but it wasn't too bad, so he drew a deep breath and set it aside.

He quietly took the comb in his hand and started to brush his partner's hair back, as Viktor had done for him half a hundred times. Viktor leaned back on his left hand to make it easier for him, and continued sipping at the lukewarm wine.

"You'd warn me if you got hit in the head anywhere, right?" Yuri suddenly wondered, thinking about how it would hurt if the comb's teeth caught the edge of a cut that was hidden under that silver hair.

"He only hit my face." Viktor answered, sounding half-asleep as he said it.

Yuri grimaced, supposing that was a good thing, but...not really. But he continued combing until that half-damp hair was soft, straight, and shone like platinum. He set the comb aside after that and moved his fingers down to Viktor's neck, deftly rubbing from nape to shoulders with slow and rhythmic circles. Before long, Yuri uncrossed his legs to get closer, folding them under himself and putting his knees aside Viktor's hips where he sat.

Even though Yuri knew why Viktor was wearing the bathrobe, he slipped his fingers under the edge of it near the top and started pushing it away so he could see skin beneath it. Now exposed again, Yuri went back to his previous mission, rubbing away knots and tension in his fiancé's flesh. He slowly went down Viktor's back and sides, reaching the point of the fabric-pile around the man's waist, and then moving back up again. He could feel Viktor melting little by little under his touch, and he was grateful to be able to offer even such a small gesture to the man as this.

As Yuri leaned in to kiss Viktor's shoulder blades, Viktor himself started to lean back against him, coming to rest in a slouching position like when he'd originally been caught half-falling a few minutes prior. Yuri gently kissed the man's right shoulder where it was set in front of him, and Viktor reached up to pull the glasses away, then tilted his head to the left to give his partner more access. Yuri was emboldened by it, as hoped, and warm fingers slowly started sliding up under Viktor's arms to his sides as his mouth moved up towards his ear. Careful not to touch the bruise, Yuri held the man close, hands flat against his chest as he kissed Viktor's neck higher and higher. Hands then started to go lower, and Viktor let out a quiet hum of bliss as he felt their travel. They didn't go too far though, and the tease only excited him more.

Yuri's left hand began the ascent again, drawing circles and other patterns idly on Viktor's chest, and the right went down to stroke at his leg. The Russian then propped himself up suddenly, drained the last of the mulled wine, set the cup on the nearby nightstand with Yuri's glasses, and then settled in
again with his back to his fiancé's chest. He reached for Yuri's hands and put them back where
they'd been a moment ago, happily nosing Yuri's own neck now that he was sitting up high enough
to do so.

The teasing began anew after that; fingers rising up Viktor's leg just enough to brush against center
before moving back down again. He held Yuri's hand against his chest with his left hand, lacing
their fingers together as his right hand was up to cup Yuri's cheek, reaching back periodically to run
through his dark hair. Viktor turned his face and then pulled Yuri's to meet him, kissing him lightly
just as that teasing hand \textit{finally} found their mark. He drew in a hissed breath against Yuri's lips as he
was drawn out from the folds of clothing.

The younger skater pulled their left hands up to his lips to kiss them before unlacing his fingers to
help his other hand, and Viktor twitched with delight at the extra attention. His own hands moved
down to grip where Yuri's knees were pinning him, practically bracing himself for what was to
come.

Yuri set his lips against the man's neck again gently, closing his eyes and beginning to focus on his
task. Every quiver, every arch of the Russian's body was a cue for him, and he read them like a
map. Every breath, gasp, hum, and moan was a sign. The pinnacle was hearing Viktor whispering
his name, and it was even better if he couldn't say the whole thing without his voice quaking in the
middle.

Three times, he nearly brought the man to climax, only to back off again and slow down, diverting
attention to less sensitive parts to ease into the build-up again. He liked to see Viktor on the edge.
The breathless whisper of a whimper against his ear, only to gasp and cry out a little as he was
denied release.

He could feel Viktor's heart pounding through his skin, and decided he would unburden his fiancé of
his tension finally. He twisted out from behind him and leaned down to the right, propping himself
up on a folded elbow before taking the man in his mouth. Viktor practically latched onto Yuri's side
as he did so, fingers clutching at fabric as he pressed his forehead and cheek against the man's hip.

Still a little unsure of himself, Yuri did his best. He kissed and licked at the tip, the sides, every inch,
rolling his tongue across it when he took it fully inside. After the teasing and stroking from before,
the sudden change of texture and warmth was enough to get Viktor over the edge quickly. He cried
out and bit down on the thick outer hem of Yuri's jeans as he finally felt release, his entire body
shaking after that. To his surprise, Yuri swallowed. He twisted a little to bring his knees up and let
his fiancé use his legs as a pillow, just as he was using Yuri's hip in turn, and he breathed heavy
breaths of satisfaction.

"That's only the second time you've been willing to do that." Viktor said quietly, touching his fingers
to Yuri's chin affectionately, "You were so embarrassed the first time, I didn't think you'd want to
again after that. Not for a \textit{long} time, anyway."

Yuri's face was red with remembrance, "I..." He started, then moving his own hand up to lightly
grasp at Viktor's wrist where it was closest, "I wanted to help you feel better, without you thinking
you needed to do anything for me in return. I'd do anything to-"

"I know." Viktor touched his thumb to Yuri's lip, "And I love you more every day because of it."

The raven-haired youth's eyes practically shimmered as those words were spoken, and he kissed at
the palm of the man's hand in gratitude.

\textit{I'm not so useless after all.}
CHAPTER THIRTY

Sleep came easy after the tension was released. Yuri barely managed to grab his night mask before passing out. When the light of the next morning started creeping through, the mask would protect him from being woken up too soon...but Viktor, well...he liked to bask in it like a snake on a rock.

At least, he usually did. That particular morning was different from others. No alarm sounded, the light didn't come in, and when Yuri started to wake up, he realized his t-shirt felt tight. He reached one hand up to put a thumb under the edge of the mask and peek around, only to find a big lump under his shirt, barely visible in the dimness of the room, and giving him a bit of a start. He quickly realized it was Viktor though; he'd put his entire head under that shirt and settled his cheek against Yuri's upper abdomen, right arm draped over him, and both holding onto him tightly.

Yuri dropped his head back down, settled the hand that had lifted his mask onto where Viktor's head was under his shirt, and tried to go back to sleep. For once, he didn't even care what time it was. They had nowhere to be and nothing to get up for in particular.

It was only after Makkachin came trotting into the room and jumped up onto the bed that either of them admitted it was probably time to get up for the day. The dog had actually brought his food bowl with him, dumping it on Viktor's legs before lying down behind him proudly, panting lightly as he always did.

"Meggershin...goway..." Viktor mumbled drearily, raising the hand that was draped over Yuri and trying to wave the dog off. He found the food bowl right behind his back where it had rolled after landing on his hip, and moved to drop it off the edge of the bed somewhere on the other side of his partner.

The dog would not be dissuaded though, and barked once loudly as the bowl hit the ground, causing Viktor to jerk with surprise and finally pull his head out from under Yuri's shirt, "Makkachin I swear...! You know the rules, one bork per day and none before noon!"

Makkachin seemed to understand, as he whined pitifully and rolled onto his back for forgiveness. Viktor patted the dog's belly twice and then reclaimed his head-space inside Yuri's shirt.

"Hey."

"Mmmhhh..." Viktor grumbled feebly.

"It's probably late."

"Don't make me get up yet."

"It's probably late."

"Quit playing, you don't know what time it is."

Yuri raised one hand lazily into the air and pointed, "That is correct, sir." And then dropped it behind his head.

He could feel Viktor turning under the shirt, his breath hot against his skin, "...Five more minutes..."
The younger skater hummed a breath in agreement, and fumbled to reach for his phone on the
nightstand. When he was sure he finally had it, he gathered it up and reached back up with his free
hand to pull the night mask off one eye. When he clicked the phone on, he was a bit surprised to
realize it was barely 6:15am.

"Well, I guess that explains why there's hardly any light..."

"Less talking, more sleeping." Viktor mumbled, settling his chin against Yuri's sternum to keep
dozing.

Yuri realized he could see a little of the man's hair through the neck-hole in that shirt, and as he
lowered his phone-hand down, he used the other to pull the opening up a little to glance within,
seeing one slate-blue eye peeking back at him, the other covered by silver-grey bangs, "Cozy in
there?"

The eye closed as the Russian smiled, "This is my house now. I live here."

"I'm afraid I'll have to evict you."

"What?" Viktor's eye opened again, "Noooooo..."

Yuri started to push himself up on his elbows, slowly forcing Viktor down and out, try as he might to
stay where he was. Eventually, the raven-haired man was successful though and he was able to twist
his legs off the side of the bed, even as Viktor was still holding onto him with both arms around his
waist. Yuri looked back down at him from where he sat, and patted the mussed-up hair on Viktor's
head, "You can stay here a bit longer if you want." Finally detaching from the man, Yuri headed for
the door, stretching his arms as he walked through.

Viktor watched him go, rolling himself up into a blanket-burrito as he whined about being left
homeless.

The poodle jumped over him and ran for the door as well.

"You've taken away my home and my dog!" Viktor called out pitifully, "Makkachin, you're a
traitor...!"

All he got was a second bark in return...and he finally rolled himself off the foot of the bed and into a
heap on the floor. Unexpectedly, he felt the wind get knocked out of him as he landed that largest of
bruises directly on top of where one of his fists had been balled up against his chest, and he felt as
though he was deflating like a balloon right there under the pile of blankets.

Yuri managed to get into the kitchen as Makkachin ran up behind him excitedly, sitting next to the
one remaining dish that was on the floor and wagging that big poofy tail happily. Remembering
where the actual food bowl was though, Yuri told the dog to sit and stay, and headed back to the
bedroom to get it. When he arrived, the pile of blankets on the floor was unmoving. He could see
Viktor's feet poking out the other side though, and after collecting the dog's bowl from the floor,
got over to kneel next to the head of the 'nest.'

"Is this your house now?" Yuri asked, poking at the top of it, "Viktooootoor...are you home?"

"I think I'm dying." He answered, his voice muffled from under the comforter, "In fact, I'm pretty
sure I am..."

"Hehhh...?"
"I rolled off the bed and fell and now everything hurts."

"You fell like half a meter onto a down-feather blanket."

"...I landed the biggest bruise right onto my balled-up hand...I regret everything..." Viktor whined, rolling a little until he could get his knees under him, "I'll bet I brought my mother's ghost back with me..."

Yuri cocked a brow, "...Whaaaat are you talking about?"

"I came back home with all the blood and tears from the funeral. I should've discarded everything before coming inside." He tried to explain, "Everyone else did...they threw the tissues away before going home..."

"I literally have no idea what you're talking about right now. Are you suggesting you should've stripped naked on the front lawn just to come into the house?"

Viktor started to push himself up to sitting on his knees, but kept the big blanket pulled around him, "Russian tradition says you should leave your tears behind at a funeral, otherwise you invite grief and bad spirits into your home. Maybe even the ghost of the person who died!"

"You think your mother's ghost is haunting you because you fell out of bed?"

"No!" Viktor replied, finally pulling enough of the blanket off that his head poked through so he could actually see the man in front of him, "Because I can't see out my left eye!"

Yuri gawked at him, but realized he couldn't even see the slightest hint of that clear blue eye under his hair like he normally could, and he reached out to push Viktor's silvery bangs aside. He sighed when he saw what was under them.

"How bad is it?"

"It's totally swollen over. You should see a doctor."

"...I thought so."

"You're going to hurt a lot more today than you did yesterday." Yuri explained, "It's going to suck for you for the next week or so."

"...I can't even practice skating without both eyes." Viktor grumbled sadly, "This isn't looking good for Worlds."

"You can still drop out if you don't feel up to it."

The Russian finally pushed himself to standing, "I refuse! It isn't for more than a month and I'm going to compete even if it kills me."

"At least go see a doctor about your eye before you do?"

Viktor reluctantly agreed...but not before burning the clothes he'd worn the day before. He got dressed and gathered up the articles he'd heaped into trash cans all over the house, and headed for the back door. Makkachin was out like a shot, and Yuri followed close behind as Viktor carried the bags of coats and shirts and pants. Not even the socks were overlooked.

He kicked away the snow with his boot and emptied the bags into the muddy pit, pulled some matches from his pocket, and tossed them down into the pile, lighting them one at a time. It wasn't
long before the fabric caught fire, and black smoke rose into the sky. Viktor watched closely as the
fibers sanged and curled, taking to flame and withering away into black dust.

Yuri watched quietly from the concrete stairs behind him, leaning over the bottom railing like he had
when they'd FaceTimed with Chris before the Euro Championship.

"Everything on the ice is a display of love." Viktor suddenly said, getting his attention away from the
billowing smoke, "Except when it isn't."

"When it...isn't?"

"The opposite of love is hate. I'm going to create a program that no one's ever seen me do before,
and I'm going to show the world all the hate I have trapped inside me."

"That's a bit intense, don't you think?"

"It's the one thing that keeps holding me back." Viktor explained, "I need to channel this negative
energy into something productive. So I'll skate your song for my Short Program to show my love,
and then I'll skate to this." He pulled out his phone from his inside coat pocket, pulling up the music
player as he turned his back to the fire, slowly walking closer until he stood right in front of his
fiancé. He connected the ear-buds and cable to the audio jack and offered them to Yuri, "Tell me
what you think of when you hear this song."

((Look up 'Evoke' by After Forever.))

Yuri accepted the device and put the ear-buds in, tapping the play button on the touch-screen.

The song started out calmly...Yuri wasn't sure how this could be what Viktor had meant if he was
serious about skating to the theme of rage. But then the guitar riffs banged into his ears, and he felt
like he could see the dance Viktor was planning in his own mind.

"There's so much energy..." He said, listening closer as the lyrics began; an operatic-style chorus
featuring a woman's voice. She sang of the forces of nature, the elements, its viciousness but also its
beauty and serenity. He thought he could feel the moments when certain jumps would be used in
time with the beat, where skating would be slow or when it would speed up as quickly as blades
would carry. He even thought he could see the step-sequence in his mind's eye, "Are you sure you
can do a program to this? It's even more demanding than I thought it could be."

"Yurio's Free Skate worked because he channeled his greed into his composition...his jumps were
energized by envy and lust. A performance is only as good as the emotions behind it. With
everything that's happened since we got back from Four Continents...I feel like this is the best time to
think of a program that would channel all the anger and frustration I have inside me. A high-intensity
Free Skate with a song like this to match it...I think it would be perfect. It would be the complete
opposite of the hopefulness of your song."

The music finally came to an end, and Yuri pulled the buds from his ears to hand them and the phone
back to Viktor, "Then I can't wait to see it."

Viktor held Yuri's hands where they cupped the device, and Yuri rubbed his thumb over the blue
Aria case affectionately before his fiancé finally took it back.

"There's also another thing I want to tell you about."

"Huh?" Yuri lifted his head, worried something bad was about to come up, "What is it?"
"We should..." Viktor started, putting the phone back into his coat pocket before reaching out to take Yuri's hands in his own, "...after Worlds...or maybe even before...we should have our wedding."

The younger skater's heart skipped a beat, but his eyes lit up, "Before! We should do it before! I want the whole world to know about it when they announce my name at competition!"

For the first time in days, Yuri saw the happy smile he knew Viktor had somewhere inside him, dying to get to the surface again, and he felt Viktor gently squeeze his hands.

Viktor leaned in to touch his nose to Yuri's as well, "Taking to the ice next, representing Japan...Yuri Nikiforov."

Yuri could feel butterflies rising in his stomach from the excitement over it, "I can't wait!" A few tears of joy started to drip down his face.

"Me neither."

The day pressed on after that, and Yuri finally shoved Viktor into a clinic that could look at his broken orbit. X-Rays were taken, eye drops and mild pain meds prescribed, and an eye patch given, along with instructions not to touch his eye, rub it, or even use it for at least a week.

"And the blood?" Yuri asked.

"It should be gone within 2 weeks." Viktor explained, looking at his pitiful reflection in a pane of glass where they'd stopped outside, seeing where the physician had put a loose bandage wrapping around his head for the time being, "I have to wear this horrible thing for the next 3 days...the doc says the eye patch would put too much pressure on the screwed-up area around my eye, and I would be even more miserable than this..."

"Konstantin did wallop you pretty good."

Viktor turned away from his reflection indignantly, "I told them it was a car accident."

Yuri sighed, his hands in his coat pockets to hide them from the cold, "It's like you're protecting him. I'm telling you, you really should file a report...at least put something on paper with someone."

"And what good would it do?" The Russian asked back, "If I press charges, then I have to see him again. If I don't, then he's out of my life for good."

"You don't want to punish him for what he's done to you? At all?"

"I already punish him." Viktor said glumly, "My very existence is a punishment for him."

"That's not fair to say."

"What father could possibly hate his son so much?" The elder grumbled, "He hates my career choices, he hates my romantic choices...he might as well hate my wine choices, too."

"He poured vodka on your head. He probably does hate your wine choices." Yuri quipped, reaching over to pull Viktor's hand into his pocket and held it there.

Viktor just looked at him incredulously, but then realized the humor in it and smiled a little, "Yeah, probably..."

"You still haven't told me about your program plans for Worlds, you know." The younger skater
pointed out as they started walking back to the car, "I haven't gotten to see the outfits you commissioned either, and I only ever saw your new programs when you turned Eros and Agape into mine and Yurio's new Short Programs, but none of the others."

"Yeah." Viktor agreed, thinking on the point, "I guess we can go home and I can show you the outfits at least."

Yuri got excited and skipped a few steps, "And the themes? The songs?"

Viktor allowed himself to get a little excited despite his predicament, "The Short Program is called 'On Love: Phillia,' and the Free Skate, at least for now, is 'The Prince of Winter.'" He explained, feeling Yuri eating it all up eagerly, "'Phillia' is in keeping with Agape and Eros...it speaks to the bonds between people who are not related, friends and comrades. In my head, because I want to do something epic and memorable, I want the music to be orchestral with a choir and all that, so the bond I'm focusing-in on is the kind between soldiers; brothers in arms. That kind of attachment and love is the most unnatural because there's nothing about friendship that adds to a person's capacity to survive, so in a way, it's the most altruistic and deep."

"What's the song name?"

"'Sol Invictus.'" The skater answered proudly.

"Ooooo... And the other one?" Yuri felt like a kid again.

"The song is 'A Winter's Wish.' It's kind of slow, melodic, like 'Yuri on Ice' was. I'm not sure I'll be keeping it though, since I created that program as something of a goodbye-piece when I was thinking this year would be my last. Knowing I'm in it next year kind of makes a farewell show a moot point. So, we'll see."
CHAPTER THRITY ONE

The car ride back home was at least a short one, given how Viktor didn't feel comfortable driving with only one eye. He drove slowly and deliberately, taking way longer to get back than normal. Yuri wasn't about to complain though. The last thing he wanted was more trouble...especially since he was finally about to see the outfits Viktor had planned for Worlds.

Aside from the tailors, he alone would be amongst the first who got to glimpse what was to come.

Someone honked at them repeatedly from behind, and Viktor was starting to get a little flustered, cursing in Russian as he tried to change lanes.

"Is it clear?"

Yuri looked back between the seats to check the rear, "Yeah."

Viktor powered on through, kicking up snow and slush behind them as the car moved ahead. Other cars honked, but no one collided, so they quickly sped off to rejoin the normal flow of traffic.

By the time they got back, Yuri felt like he'd told the Russian no less than 7 times that, no, he didn't know how to drive, because he lived in a major Japanese city that had good public transport and had no reason to learn, and that he couldn't take the wheel for him.

But, they made it back in one piece, and both dropped down onto the big blue couch with a huge sigh of relief.

"Well, at least the ice rink isn't that far away..." Viktor said with a huff, "I don't want to drive on a major highway again until I get my sight back."

"No comment." Yuri heaved.

The Russian raised his hand and dropped it onto Yuri's dramatically where it was clasping the cushions between them, "It's okay, you can say it..."

"We made it back...so let's get started already!" Yuri offered instead, sitting up excitedly, "You said you'd show me the new costumes!"

The Russian huffed a laugh, "Alright, alright...give me just a minute then..." He rose to stand and went to grab the box from where he'd cornered it the other day. Yuri watched him go happily, but sat patiently. A few anxious minutes passed, and soon, the Russian came back from the bedroom hallway bedecked in the first of his two new outfits.

This one was, Yuri guessed, for the Short Program. While the Eros costume had been black, and the Agape had been white, this new costume for Phillia was grey. Unlike the previous two outfits though, this one was not merely an older outfit that Viktor had used in his youth. Keeping in line with the theme, however, the Russian's outfit was made in keeping with the idea of war; Phillia was a nod to friendship bonds, and Viktor had wanted to return to competition with an epic score to remind everyone why he was famous in the first place, so he'd chosen to reference the bonds made between soldiers...brothers in arms. The costume looked somewhat ratted, as though it had been worn through the rigors of battle a few times already. The mantle was comprised of several sheets of torn-up and generally shredded grey and black material, with a gunmetal-grey loose-fitting bodysuit...
beneath it, tied at the calves and ankles with dark-colored rope. There were numerous straps that went around the legs and across the hips and torso, with the forearms and wrists wrapped in black material and silver rope. There weren't any embellishments or crystals embedded in the material, leaving the entire thing looking 'dull' compared to some other outfits, but Yuri supposed that was somewhat the point. What soldier runs through a battlefield shining and shimmering anyway?

"Wooow~!" He fangirled anyway, "That looks amazing!"

Viktor started mimicking a few of the moves from the Short Program right there in the living room, like when they had both once started performing parts of Aria when Yuri had first received his blue-form version of the costume. The motion of his arms looked more like martial arts this time though, with wide, sweeping motions that drew the eyes to center, and quicker motions that were too fast to follow. Yuri could only imagine how intense the footwork would be on the ice when Viktor was ready to get back onto it...never mind all the other elements that might've changed since he and Yurio had set a new standard with their own new world records.

The second outfit was another beast all together. Referring to the program as 'The Prince of Winter' was apt, as the Prince himself looked to be made of ice and snow. Black gloves and skate-covers like the bark of winter trees, fading into darker, then lighter blues, and finally crystalline white. Frost seemed to etch across the darker parts of the outfit, like the streaks left by skating blades on new, clear ice. Stiff, custom-colored feathers rose along the collarbone and up over the shoulders, rising in a cascade like vertically-facing icicles. Beneath them came a small 'cape' of softer feathers, more like the consistency of a feather boa, resembling the texture of freshly fallen snow rather than hard ice. More of the stiff icicle-like feathers came out along the sides of Viktor's forearms, and even up from his heels to half-way up the calf on each leg. There was a sheer part to the collarbone and neck area that faded from the white of the bulk of the costume to looking more like Viktor's pale flesh, rising up to just under his chin where it looked like the ice-tracks were creeping up his actual skin. The entire thing shimmered with crystalline luster, and there were traces of gold within the shine, making the outfit look like it was perpetually reflecting the brilliance of molten sunlight.

That one left Yuri somewhat speechless, just staring at the Russian like he was some kind of god. But, one thing did come to mind, and he slouched against the arm-rest, "Ahhh...it's really a shame you're only going to use this at one competition... You can tell the tailors put a lot of work into it..."

"Right?" Viktor agreed, looking himself over, "Maybe I should do some unofficial events..."

"What about that Adult Competition I told you about before...?"

"No!" Viktor insisted, "...Besides, I looked into it, and if I go to Worlds, I'm disqualified from the Adult competition anyway. Plus, it seems like they don't allow quad jumps at all, regardless of skill level...so that kind of kills it for me."

"So it's basically the back-up competition for those who don't qualify for anything else for whatever reason."

"Seems so."

"Well, I guess that's fine..."

"I'll have to do my best to make this one performance of the season worthwhile for everyone." Viktor said, "And I'll do it by taking back my claim on the world records." He winked at his fiancé daringly.

"Yeah!" Yuri cheered, only to pause, "Wait..."
The Russian hummed to himself, then moved forward to put a finger under Yuri's chin, "You don't get to start raising your hands during jumps without me doing the same thing."

"How come you hadn't before, anyway?"

"Didn't need to."

"So you've been holding yourself back this entire time."

"Four quads in a single program isn't exactly what I'd call 'holding myself back.'" Viktor explained, "Most skaters can barely manage 2 or 3, tops. Those who make it all the way through the GP Series are basically going on to the GPF as the Quad finalists."

"I never really thought of it like that...but I guess you're right."

"But, since you and Yurio are pushing me to do more, I kind of have to. So, get ready to see some skating that you've never seen before." Viktor mused, touching Yuri's nose with his thumb before practically spinning back into the bedroom to change back into normal clothing.

Watching him go, Yuri sighed to himself, "...Jeeze...he's just been messing with us all along... He's gonna destroy Yurio and I at Worlds..." He slouched so far on the couch that he was basically lying flat, staring at the ceiling, "...Well, I guess it wouldn't be so bad to win the silver to Viktor's gold..."

He threw his arms up over his head though, "...But he said I have to win at least 5 consecutive gold medals...! Ahhh!"

Days went by, and Viktor was able to take the bulky dressing off his head, only to replace it with the eye patch he'd been given instead. But, with his bruises healing, he felt like it was time for him to get his skates back on again, and brave the training arena despite not having both eyes to see still.

"Yakov is still the only one besides us who knows what really happened." He explained as they walked along the long bridge that lead to the rink, "So if anyone asks what happened..."

"It was a car accident..." Yuri grumbled.

"I know you don't like lying, but..." He continued, "I don't need anyone else getting into my business. What's done is done."

"I'm a terrible liar."

"It's not like you have to tell the whole story...the color of the car, what seat I was sitting in, whether I was a driver or not..." Viktor tried to alleviate the pressure, but knew he was failing, "Just..."

"I know..." Yuri cut him off, "I won't tell anyone what really happened. I'll just tell them to ask you about it if they really want to know, and we both know no one will."

"What? Why wouldn't they?" Viktor was confused, "People ask me stuff all the time."

Yuri side-eyed him comically, "Because you're Viktor Nikiforov, five time consecutive Gold-medalist at the GPF, World and European Championships, Russian Nationals and Gold medalist at the last Olympics. You have this weird untouchable quality." He tried to explain, looking forward again, "Pestering you about how you got hurt would be like someone was trying to tarnish your grandeur and drag you down. It just seems disrespectful."
"Hah, the concept of disrespecting me never stopped Yurio."

"And yet even he hasn't actually asked you what happened." Yuri pointed out.

"...Hm, that's true." The Russian put a finger over his lips as he pondered it, "I guess I hadn't thought about it since he'd asked if I at least got the other guy."

"Oh...he did?"

Viktor pulled his finger away from his mouth and held it up, smiling, "Yup! You were still fainted though, so that's why you didn't hear it."

Yuri's face went red at the mention of it, "...Ahhh...I still can't believe I dropped like that..."

The Russian just draped his arm over Yuri's shoulders and pulled him close, "It's okay, I caught you, and then I carried you over the threshold into the arena."

"How dramatic." The shorter man laughed weakly, moving his left arm to wrap around Viktor's lower back, and they continued their walk to the skating rink.

The training arena was fairly well packed when they arrived, but they'd expected it to be. It wasn't used exclusively by the Russian skating team, after all, and they couldn't very-well hog the thing all the time. But, the entire team did happen to be there, so when Yuri and Viktor entered the building, they were the first to recognize them.

"Oh my God it's true." Mila said suddenly, pointing at them, though mostly pointing at Viktor, "Someone beat you up!"

Viktor narrowed his eyes...eye..., "...I...can't even..."

She came rushing up to him and grabbed him by his shoulders, "Who did this!? I'll hurt them ten times worse! I did warn you this would happen! I told you in Barcelona, didn't I!?"

Yurio and Georgi were glancing between the two skaters, unsure what to say, if anything.

Viktor tried to calm her, waving one hand in a downward motion like he wanted to turn her volume down if he could, "Relax, it's fine, nothing happened."

"You're wearing an eye-patch like a damn pirate!" She argued, "Someone punched you in the face and I mean to break theirs for it!"

Yuri watched quietly, giving Viktor a knowing look.

"Enough already, both of you." Yakov's voice interrupted them, "Viktor says he's fine, so he's fine. That's the end of it."

Mila was forced to drop it, and she let go of Viktor's shoulders reluctantly. She did turn to eyeball him straight-on though, wishing she could read his mind to find the face of the one who'd hurt him. That failing that, however, she just went back out onto the ice and skated off.

"Vitya," Their coach started up again, approaching so as to speak more quietly and still be heard, "How does it look?"

The silver-haired skater huffed a sigh and reached up to lift the eye-patch a little, showing that the sclera was still blood-red, but that at least the swelling around his cheek had gone down considerably, leaving just an ugly purple-green bruise and a few dark-red cuts to hide beneath the
"Can you see?"

"It's hazy, but it's getting back to normal." He explained, putting the patch down again and straightening his bangs out to cover it, "It'll be fine in another week or two, I'm sure."

"That's good. You have a lot of work to do for Worlds and not a lot of time to do it."

"I'll wait until the ice clears a little before I go practice. I can still skate, I just don't want to risk someone being in my blind spot while I still have to wear this stupid thing."

"That's fine. Do what you have to." He patted Viktor's shoulder before heading towards the rink's edge, "I'm going to put some cones down so people know to stay off this side of the rink."

"Da." Viktor nodded, pulling his backpack up a little as he turned to look back at Yuri and gesture him over to the team's prep area.

They pulled off their heavy winter garb and set it aside, with each wearing their country's tracksuit coat underneath. They both put on their skates in relative quiet, listening to the scratch of blades on the ice and kids crying out in excitement...and occasionally in despair when they fell. Viktor was done lacing his first, and moved to stand up and step over to the rink wall, slouching over it to look out at the arena.

*It feels different today for some reason.* He thought, *Coming here to practice the programs I choreographed a year ago...it's like I'm right back where I started, to the day before I saw the video of Yuri doing my Free Skate.*

Yuri finally joined him, shrugging out of his aqua-blue coat and nudging him with his shoulder as he put his hands on the rink edge, "You want to put me through my paces for a while?"

"Go skate some laps and warm up. I'll think about what to have you practice first."

"All right..." The younger skater nodded, moving to shrug out of his coat and take his glasses off. He set them gingerly on the bench where he'd just been sitting, pulled the rubber guards off his blades, and then plodded of to the rink entrance.

Viktor watched him go, and then moved to do a little stretching of his own, holding onto the rink ledge as he leaned far back. He held there for a moment, feeling the pull in his back and shoulders, and when he came back up again...a certain pair of green eyes were staring him straight in the face.

"Oh." He started, "Hey, Yurio." He kept on with his stretching like before.

"You shouldn't skate with one eye even if no one else is on the ice." The blond warned, "I won't forgive you if you get hurt and can't compete at Worlds."

"Why so worried?" Viktor mused, pushing back to lean down on the benches, pushing up on them with his arms at a 90 degree angle behind him as he pivoted on his skates where he set them ahead of himself, "If I overdo it, then you'll have one less person to worry about."

"I've had enough of waiting." He explained stiffly, "You've been out of competition for most of the season. If you don't go to Worlds then you'll be done until fall when the GP Series starts again."

"So you're telling me not to skate?"
"Not until you can use both eyes again at least, dumbass."

"Glad to see you care." Viktor teased, standing upright again to circle his arms around, first forward, then back again after a few spins, "I didn't think you did."

"Hmmh..."

"How's your grandpa?"

"...He's good." Yurio answered warily, "I've been keeping him on top of his meds."

Viktor nodded, pulling himself back up to the rink's edge again, leaning against it right next to the blond and looking out over the ice to find Yuri, "That's good to hear. Having a strong support structure is important for any athlete looking to go the distance. It's hard to go it alone. I'm glad he decided to move up here from Moscow."

The Russian Tiger silently agreed, thinking back on his abysmal performance at the European Championships. He scuffed the ice with the barbs on the front of his right skate, "I'm going to redeem myself at Worlds."

The silver legend smiled at that, "That's exactly what Yuri said about the GPF when I first became his coach." He ruffled Yurio's hair affectionately, "You and him are more alike than you realize."

"We're nothing alike." He protested indignantly, spotting the Japanese skater on the far side, gearing up to practice the very quad Salchow he'd helped teach Yuri to land properly in the first place, "I don't cry to myself while sitting on a public toilet." He turned to lean his back against the wall; Yuri pulled through the Salchow as though it was nothing and even turned it into a triple-jump combo, adding a single Loop and a triple toe-loop before skating off again casually.

The older skater reached over and settled his hand on Yurio's shoulder, "You don't have to keep picking on him just because you both share the same name. You beat him fair and square at the Grand Prix Final and he's been sweating about how to beat you at Worlds ever since."

"Don't kid yourself. He's more worried about beating you than he is about beating me."

"He hasn't competed against me since he fell apart in Sochi, that's true." Viktor agreed, "But...you scored over 118 in your GPF Short Program, and he still hasn't reached that height himself yet."

"He scored higher than me in his Free Skate."

"He has more stamina than you do. He gets more points for putting bigger jumps closer to the end of the program. But unless he can catch up to you in the Short Program, he's still going to struggle a little."

"Tsh..." Yurio grumbled, twisting his head around to gawk at his superior, "I don't need you telling me-"

"VIKTOR." They both heard Yuri suddenly screaming from the far side of the rink, having fallen for some reason.

Yurio jerked his head around, seeing the man collapsed on the ice, "What'd that idiot do now...? I hope he didn't twist an ankle or someth-"

"VIKTOR!" The downed skater screamed again, this time with more urgency and panic than before.
The elder Russian practically tripped over his own feet in his attempt to get the blade guards off in a hurry, literally jumping over the rink wall and taking off across the ice like a black, red, and white blur. Yurio pulled up the rear after that, but was a bit less excited about it. When Viktor finally arrived, he dug his heels in and sent a flurry of ice up as he braked, coming to rest directly in front of his partner with one knee down on the cold hard surface, "What is it!? Are you hurt!?" He barked his questions, grabbing the man and looking for blood through his black clothes. Finding nothing, though still seeing Yuri shaking like a leaf, he leaned closer, "Yuri! Say something!"

The younger skater could only look through him, past him...and pointed straight at him, to where something had caught his eye behind Viktor's line of sight. The Russian turned his head to look 180 degrees back, and saw something on the rink's edge that he hadn't expected. His heart practically seized in his chest, and he froze in place, unsure what to do.

"The hell is wrong with you two?" Yurio asked as he finally caught up to them.

"...It's...it's Konstantin...!" Yuri finally managed to say, "Why is he here!?!"

"Who the fuck is Konstantin!?" Yurio growled, "And why are you shitting yourself over it?"

Viktor finally pushed himself to stand, holding his hand out to Yuri to pull him up as well, though keeping his one good eye on the brooding Russian man-bear that hadn't blinked since they'd each caught sight of one another. When he felt that his fiancé was finally on his feet again, he let go of his hand and stood about-face to glare at his father straight on.

Why are you here...?
I can do it... Yuri thought to himself, flipping from a forward-skate to a backward-skate, then picking up speed, I can do it!

He leapt, spun four times, landed deep into the Salchow...and cursed himself quietly...

I psyched myself out...! I'll never get the higher GOE if I don't raise my arms up more consistently!

He came to a halt and went through the initial move again, slowly sliding forward on the ice and trying to remember how his body moved at Four Continents, how he'd used the momentum of his arms to throw himself higher into the air, and kept his arms up in the process.

If I use my arms to get more height, then bringing them down again early will just change my center of gravity...I have to keep them up and only bring them down again for the landing to keep my balance...

He looked over to where Viktor was stretching and chatting with Yurio. They were both looking at him before, probably watching his jumps, but now they were looking at one another again. He pushed off with his toe, deciding to give the arms-up Salchow another attempt. As he lifted his head and twisted his body to change direction, knowing he had to enter the jump from a backwards-facing position, he caught sight of something dark on the other side of the rink.

That's weird...I thought Yakov was just here...?

And he was. The gruff older coach was barely 20 meters to Yuri's left, setting down the last of the small orange cones to cordon off the official practice area from the public area. He was wearing his usual dark duster, matching hat, and blue scarf, affirming that Yuri had at least remembered what the man was wearing and why he thought the 'dark shape' might've been him to begin with.

Yuri turned his head back around, thinking maybe he'd seen something that wasn't real, but when he looked...the dark spot was still there. Slate blue eyes were glaring at him from under the brim of a dark grey hat. Yuri's knees buckled under him and he dropped to the ice in a panic, "Vik- Viktor...!"

Yakov looked up, having seen the young skater fall out the corner of his eye, "Yuri?"

"VIKTOR!" The skater cried out, trying to scramble backwards, clicking his heel-picks into the ice in a desperate attempt to gain ground towards safety, "VIKTOR!"

The elder Russian coach was perplexed, looking from where Yuri had collapsed over to where he'd looked a moment prior, and when he saw the same dark entity standing there, his jaw clenched, [What the hell is he doing here? How long has he even been standing there?] Yakov dropped the remaining two cones and was heading for the nearest rink exit when he heard Viktor gouging a crevasse in the ice as he stopped in front of his partner, calling out for Yuri to answer his questions.

When everyone had finally realized what made the raven-haired skater drop, the air became tense. They all looked to Viktor, who to that point had said absolutely nothing. He'd only risen to stand up straighter and looked to the source of his partner's fear.

"Vikt, what should we do?" Yuri asked pensively, lightly touching his fiancé's arm like he wasn't sure he was even allowed to at that moment.
No words even needed to be said for Yurio and Mila to pick up on what was going on. The more Yuri sweated about that dark man's presence, the more obvious it became that he was a source of contention for the pair...and that could only mean one thing.

"That's the ass-bag who hit you?" Yurio blurted out, "Is he a stalker? We'll take care of him-

"Absolutely not." Viktor said sternly, unblinking, unmoving.

"Why?"

"Just stay here." He said with finality, breaking off from the group to skate forward alone.

Yuri watched him go, but the man's body language clearly stated this was his fight and not to follow. The entire population of the skating arena seemed to feel the rising tension in the air, and when their Nation's Hero skated into their midst, they parted for him and left the ice, seeing he had a purpose.

Bearing the big red R and U on his chest made him look somewhat official, and he knew the sight of it would make the dark figure bristle, so he held his head high as he finally came to stop about 10 meters away from the rink's edge. He drew a quiet breath, and spoke the name, "Konstantin."

He felt a weird serenity fall over him...the fear had gone. Unlike before, the man-bear was on his turf now, not the other way around.

[What do you want?] Viktor asked simply.

Konstantin said absolutely nothing; he just stood there like a statue, hands in his coat pockets, glaring straight ahead with an unblinking stare.

[Shit, you went ahead of me!] Came an unfamiliar voice, [I told you to wait outside until I got back!]

Viktor was deflated at the sound of it, and peered his one blue eye to the side where he thought he saw someone coming up behind his father. Finally, the new figure was fully in sight, and Viktor gawked at him awkwardly.

[I said I was going to get coffee! I wasn't gone for more than 20 minutes!] The voice continued; it came from a man of perhaps 55 years of age, thin but not skinny, pale complexion, and grey-green eyes barely visible from under the edge of a furry Chapka hat. When Konstantin refused to respond to him, the smaller man turned his gaze over to where he'd been looking, and thought he saw a ghost, "VIKTOR!"

"...Huh?"

[You've gotten so big since we last saw each other, face to face...] The older man continued, much to Viktor's chagrin, [Sorry to pop up like this all of a sudden. I wanted to say something to you at the funeral, but you seemed all weird, so I decided to keep my distance.]

[Seemed all weird? That's what you thought? Who are you?] Everyone around was confused...but none more so than Yuri, who couldn't even understand what was being said.

[It's probably been 25 years since you last laid eyes on me in recognition. I apologize for that.] The unknown man continued, approaching the rink wall with the aforementioned coffee in his hands. He set the cup down on the wall's edge and reached up for the edge of his hat, pulling it off...and revealing a head full of silver-grey hair, bangs fluttering down evenly on either side of his face, [I'm
Viktor turned his head a little to the side, confused beyond all reason, but a vague memory started to creep in, and there was a dawn of understanding. Not that anyone behind him could see, but for a brief moment, the slender Russian skater's face contorted from confusion to brief rage. He had to shake his head, clenching his eyes shut, to shake the feeling, and tried to look on normally again before anyone could question why he'd looked that way.

"...Uncle...Mimi?" Yurio repeated quietly in stunned surprise.

Yuri glanced over at him, but then turned back to watch things unfold, "...I think Viktor was about to mention him before." He whispered, "But he stopped like it was painful to think about."

[You look just like her, you know.] The elder Russian gestured for Viktor to approach, [Well, other than having the bear's eyes, anyway.]

The skater was still unsure of the whole situation, and he twisted back to his fiancé and fellow athletes, shrugging helplessly before turning back around again. Viktor pensively started to skate forward, extremely wary of Konstantin standing maybe 5 meters behind and to the side of this supposed Uncle. He caught sight of Yakov coming up from the other side of the rink, rounding the big curve where the rink turned, and he held his hand out for the coach to stop. Yakov paused where he stood, glowering at Konstantin, but silently agreeing not to intervene for the moment.

[Do you remember me?] The supposed Uncle asked.

Viktor continued to look at him curiously, side-eyeing him with his one good eye, and getting within 2 meters of the rink-wall. He finally raised his hand though, and pointed one finger to the ice, [Look down.]

[Huh?]

[Prove something to me. Look down, and I'll hear you out.]

The man shrugged and did so, bowing his head over the edge of the rink and looking at Viktor's skates for lack of anything else to see. He felt silly for it, but a moment later, he felt a finger being poked down on the crown of his head...and the full fluff of hair that covered it.

Yuri saw it, and the relief was palpable, so he started skating forward.

"Hey!" Viktor called back to the group, sliding backwards a bit to reveal the man properly to them, "Come meet my Uncle!"

"Oh, you want to speak in English then?" The silver elder asked, trying to keep his coffee from being knocked down, "I can do that." His accent was hardly tinted by his Russian heritage.

Yuri was surprised by it. His English is as good as ours. His accent isn't even half as thick as Viktor or Yurio's...I wonder if he's been living in America or something?

"I thought you were in the Ukraine." Viktor was saying, letting the man regain his upright position, his attitude shifting quite to the opposite end of the spectrum suddenly.

"I did originally, though I left for a while. I was back again recently, but, well...you know, Putin started bombing it, so I came back here."

"How long have you been back in Russia?"
Yuri finally arrived, but kept his distance anyway, and Yurio followed suit with Mila not far behind.

"About a year. I was in Moscow when I got the message that Tatiyana had passed. She'd told me years ago that you'd left home, but I couldn't remember what it had been for...but then when you and your father got into it at the funeral, I remembered."

"You saw what happened and you didn't try to stop him." Viktor was getting bitter again, "You didn't even say anything."

"What was I going to do, Vivi?"

"Don't call me that." The silver legend said curtly, surprising everyone with his bluntness, "You have no right."

The elder blinked, but nodded anxiously, "...Viktor. You and I are of a kind. I'm staring at my 28 year old self and you're looking at your 57 year old self. He'd have just beaten the crap out of both of us if I interfered. The best I could do was stay out of it and hope it didn't get worse."

The group was anxious as they heard the report of events, but green and blue eyes shifted over to where the behemoth Nikiforov patriarch was standing, and they glared with a desire for vengeance. He finally moved, causing Viktor to twitch and back off again, but Konstantin just turned on his heel and headed for a table and bench nearby, pulling out a newspaper and sitting to read it. The bear acted as though nothing was happening around him, and continued to stay silent.

The silver Uncle reached over the wall, and cautiously held that hand lightly to his nephew's shoulder, "...Don't bother worrying about how to explain your world to him, Viktor. He'll never understand you or what you do that way. This is all just noise; he's been tuning it out since we got into the city. Best not waste your breath on those who won't listen."

"So you know." The skater twisted to pull himself free of the man's touch.

"I've learned it all rather recently. You're a National Treasure." He answered, "As soon as I remembered that you were into skating, I went looking you up. Unlike some members of the family that prefer to live like it's still the 1800s, I live in the present, and I happen to greatly enjoy the internet and all its wonders. I know a lot of things about you now."

Yuri heard the words, and dared to do what he thought the man was alluding to knowing about. He slipped in under his fiancé's blind side, wrapping his arm around the man's waist and keeping the man's left arm over his shoulder, behind his head.

Viktor was a little surprised, but reached up his right hand to put it over where he felt Yuri's settle on his hip.

"Ahhh you must be Yuri Katsuki." The thin elder said, confirming that aforementioned knowledge, and reaching a hand forward in greeting, "A pleasure. I'm Mikhail Rozovsky, Viktor's Uncle."

Yuri reached out his left hand to take it gratefully, "It's nice to meet someone in Viktor's family that speaks a language I understand...and isn't obviously crazy."

"Oh, I'm crazy," Mikhail laughed, "Just not that kind of crazy." He looked at his nephew again, and saw a mild look of relief spreading across his face, "I expect an invitation, you know."

"Just as long as you don't bring any guests." Viktor said firmly, "Why is he here anyway?"

"I couldn't find you on my own. When I reached out to the ISU, I was told that I wasn't allowed to
find out where your home rink was, or even how to get hold of your coach. Apparently the whole family got black-listed after what happened between you and your father...and I don't blame you."

"He couldn't just give you an address then?" Viktor was skeptical.

"He burned all the information he had on you after the funeral and couldn't remember what it said."

Yuri huffed a nervous laugh at that, "Guess that's where you picked up that habit..."

Viktor just smiled venemously and pinched the younger skater's arm unexpectedly, getting a yelp, "Don't say things like that."

The older man shrugged, "Konstantin said he remembered how to drive here by landmarks and visual cues, but couldn't give directions...so I was stuck with having him bring me here himself. It took 2 days to convince him to do it, so don't say I wasn't eager to come find you. Why don't you come off the ice and sit with me? We have so much to talk about."

Yuri was anxious at that statement, "If your father knew how to find the rink by looking around, then it means he's driven by here before..."

"Mhm..." The silver genius was dubious, "...The same thought crossed my mind as well."

"He came by while you two were in Korea." Yakov explained, "I saw him pass by myself, once or twice, but I didn't recognize him at the time. Not completely. He must've been looking for you so he could avoid going through me. It seems he's taking what you said at the funeral seriously though."

Viktor looked over at the dark cloud at the table near the exit, "...Yeah, maybe."

Yakov shooed Mila and Yurio off after that, realizing that the entire rink had been cleared by that point, and there was no longer any need for the dividing cones. Georgi had been quietly watching from the team's bench area, and rejoined the group once they skated by. Yuri and Viktor exited the rink together, going for their blade guards before slowly making their way over to the table and chairs nearest to where they were...and farthest from Konstantin.

Mikhail sat first, on the opposite side of the table from the skaters, and Yuri sat second. The two of them had their feet under the table, but Viktor was still a bit hesitant, so he sat sideways, with only one leg under the table, deciding instead to lean forward against his partner, resting his chin on the man's right shoulder as his arms snuck around the man's small frame, clasping his fingers over Yuri's left hip.

"So why'd you want to find me anyway?" He wondered curiously, "After more than 20 years."

"Out of sight, out of mind...I'm sorry." Mikhail explained, nursing his cooling coffee, "I got a bug to reach out to you after what I saw at the funeral. I'm not even sure if most of those people had the slightest idea about who you are or what you've done with your life since leaving that little shit-hole town, but it killed me all the same to see how they looked at you so scornfully. I didn't get the welcome-mat either, if it makes you feel better, but it was likely for very different reasons."

Viktor wasn't sure what to say. He sighed and turned his head where he had his chin on Yuri's shoulder, looking back out to the skating rink, and watching Yurio go through his quad repertoire.

"Viktor..." Mikhail was trying to get his attention back, and the skater turned his head again to look at him, "The last couple weeks have been really hard on you. It doesn't take a Roscosmos Engineer to figure that out. I want to try to make it up to you...maybe even try to help you understand why it happened. You left when you were so young...you probably don't know anything."
"What are you talking about? Understand what?"

Yuri could feel the man getting tense again, and reached up his hand to squeeze Viktor's fingers where they clenched on his waist.

"Why your father hates you so much."

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Maybe not as obvious as you think. It's not Yuri that pisses him off, not entirely anyway."

The aforementioned skater blanched a little.

"Yeah, he hates skating, I know." Viktor said bitterly.

"It's not so simple." Mikhail went on, sipping at his drink, "Kon didn't just decide one day to pick skating as a thing he hated for no reason. There is a reason."

"I don't think it really matters much. Giving me some clue as to why he hates my profession won't make me forgive him for breaking my face twice over it."

"Twice!? This has happened before!?!" Mikhail was stunned and sat more upright, like he was about to slam his hands down on the table and storm off in a rage. He stopped himself though and cleared his throat, glaring over his shoulder towards the man-bear before sitting down again and drawing in a deep breath, "...Ahmm...maybe not, but gnaw on this a little. When he was a kid, he fell on the ice. The rest of the village kids made fun of him for weeks because he tore his pants on his skates, and his ass hung out the entire way back to his family's house. He never recovered from the shame."

Yuri would've laughed if it wasn't so pathetic, and Viktor felt the same.

"My point is...you've become exceptionally good at something that once humiliated him, so he doesn't want you to succeed, because that's humiliating to him, too. This whole thing you have with Yuri was just the cherry on top for him."

"He still didn't have to hit me over it." Viktor growled.

"He learned that from his own father. It's a cycle. I hope you break it."

"Viktor's never hit anyone or anything in his life." Yuri defended, barging into the middle of the conversation.

"Is that what he's told you?"

"Viktor broke his old man's nose." Yurio chirped from behind, having overheard the conversation and remembering that Yuri couldn't have known because he was still out when it was stated.

The Japanese skater was stunned, turning from the blonde's voice and looking to his partner, "You what?"

Viktor wasn't proud of it, so he avoided the man's gaze.

"Viktor...!"

"Konstantin had it coming." Mikhail said, draining the last of the coffee from the Styrofoam cup in his hands, "But you did swing the first punch. He may not have hit you back if you hadn't."
"He poured vodka on my head and called Yuri my wife. I felt like I had to defend both of us."

Yuri's face was a little red at the mention of it, and he lowered his head, *I'm male...that makes me a husband...eventually...*

"It was degrading what he did, believe me, I get that...but..."

"*Never mind.*" Viktor ended that conversational piece, "It's over and done. I broke his nose and he broke my eye socket...we're even."

"I think you can get him on your side."

"Why would I even *want* that? Even if he suddenly stopped hating skating today, I'd still have to worry about him taking his rage out on Yuri next time. I'd *never* trust him to be around us."

"I've seen people change their tune when it's their own kids who go through it. You may never convince him with your words that what you do is an honorable thing, but maybe you can *show* him. What it means to you, your teammates, and to Russia as a whole. You can show him the kind of blood, sweat, and tears that go into it...that it isn't just some 'dog and pony show.'" Mikhail tried to explain.

"*No.*" Viktor said with finality, "I don't care that he hates skating, and I don't care that he hates me for being a skater. His opinion hasn't mattered to me for nearly 20 years, and I'm *not* going to start thinking it matters *now.*" He stood up from where he sat on the bench and pulled his leg out from under the table, moving back over to the team's prep area, "Thanks for coming to see me, Uncle. I'm glad to be related to at least one person who isn't disgusted by me. But...I really need to go practice now... Come on, Yuri, you need to practice, too."

Yuri looked at where Viktor held out his hand, and rose from the bench quietly, looking back at the silver-haired elder. He bowed his head to the man, as was his custom as a Japanese person, and then turned to take his fiancé's hand to go back out onto the ice.

Mikhail watched them go without saying anything to try and convince them to stay. Instead, he turned his head back to his nephew's father and sighed, grumbling something in Russian under his breath before rising to stand and join the man.
Chapter 33

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Yuri could easily tell that the encounter with Mikhail had unsettled Viktor. His skating was haggard, rough, even amateur...but he supposed that might also be because of the eye-patch handicap. He didn't want to add to the problem though, so as long as the Russian skated casually, still holding to his hand, he said and did nothing to upset that.

Their pair-skating had always been rather cerebral anyway, so no matter what Viktor did, Yuri inevitably felt like he knew what he should do in return. That was true in the minutes that came, as Viktor finally spun around to gain a little speed, and pulled Yuri into a long arc, using him as a balance as he skated into it backwards with one leg held out straight behind him. It felt like ballroom dancing...and it briefly reminded the younger skater of how Viktor had supported and guided his own skating when they were screwing around at the Incheon Airport rink, and he'd been looking up songs on his phone instead of watching where his blades were carrying him.

He kept following Viktor's lead, acting as a balance in one moment, a rudder in another, or as just a buffer for his blind spot. Viktor would occasionally break off to do some step sequence or another, but he'd come back again a few seconds later anyway.

Yuri felt uneasy as he could sense Viktor tipping off balance now and again, realizing Viktor was putting his chin on his shoulder as often as he was because it was the easiest way to stop being dizzy. But, he continued to say nothing, vowing not to be the one to break the silence between them.

Yurio had gone back to practicing his Free Skate, polishing his jumps with one or both arms raised. His problems came down to lacking stamina, Yuri realized, watching the teen heaving ragged breaths at the end of each round.

"Are they gone yet?" Viktor finally asked.

The younger skater lifted his head a little to check past his partner's shoulder, seeing that Konstantin was indeed leaving the arena. Mikhail had stayed behind a moment and was talking to Yakov about something. As Konstantin was exiting through the main series of doors, Yuri caught sight of Lilia coming in. The two passed each other without looking at one another.

"They're leaving right now." He answered, "Konstantin is already outside."

"Finally." Viktor heaved a sigh of relief, pulling off of Yuri's support to spin off towards the rink's edge on his own. There was a weird moment where Yuri felt like something had happened, but he wasn't sure what it was, so he just kept his eyes on Viktor. The air had changed again...but maybe it was just the last vestiges of the tension from earlier finally dissipating.

Yurio was catching his breath on the sidelines as well, and on the other side of the arena, Mila and Georgi were practicing triple-to-double jump maneuvers.

KLOK...KLOK...KLOK...

Yuri looked up. So did the others, hearing a sound that they hadn't heard in almost a year. It was coming from Viktor's area on the wall. He'd kicked the rink's edge with his skate as he was tossing his track-suit coat towards one of the nearby benches...and then his eye-patch went with it.

It seemed to be something of a universal signal, and pretty much everyone cleared the ice at that
point. Even Yakov looked up from where he'd finally parted ways with Mikhail.

Yuri was the only one who hadn't gotten to the edge of the rink though, and Yurio barked at him, "Move off, Katsudon!"

"What's going on?"

"Viktor's about to put on a show. That's what he knocked on the wall for. Duh."

Beneath the track coat was a form-fitting maroon shirt, matching well with the black pants, and the gold gleam on his custom blades. Viktor stretched his arms one more time before cricking his neck and ruffling his hair, hoping it didn't look too silly after the strap of the patch was removed from around his head. With grace and expertise like Yuri remembered, Viktor pushed off, flying across the ice like the legend he knew the man was.

Yuri made it to the rink's edge near Yurio, having finally taken the hint, and watched in silent awe.

Viktor seemed to dawdle a little, probably getting his bearings now that he had both eyes again. His bangs whipped around, stinging his face, but he didn't care anymore. He needed to skate. He needed to do it right. When he finally took his mark in the middle of the rink, he could feel the eyes of everyone in the arena were on him.

Can I even do this right now?

The Russian went down on one knee, holding both hands together on the knee that was still propped up. He took a deep breath...the song started to play in his head...and the dance began.

"Sol Invictus" - Audiomachine

Still on one knee, the Russian began to turn, hearing the strings and horns in his head. He elegantly rose up to both feet, rotating as he went, and pushing off to skate backwards in a half-figure-8. He could hear the first set of drum-beats, and he hopped to face forward as they banged. The scratch of his blades on the ice was like the melody itself come to life.

The intensity of the music rose in his mind, and he hopped through the next set of drum-beats, each time getting higher. When the piano came into the orchestra, Viktor's pace picked up again, leaping into his first jump-combination; the quad Salchow, triple Toe-loop. He moved like fog over the frozen ground, twisting and turning until he could hear the thunderous addition of deep-bass horns.

The music's power grew, and the Russian's grew with it, moving faster, waving his arms in a stronger sweep, kicking higher and turning more tightly than before. The drums were pounding even heavier then, and Viktor moved to line himself up with the long-side center of the rink. Pushing forward, the thunderous orchestra raging in his head, he waited for the moment the music entirely faded out, slipping around to skate backwards for a moment, arms out and head bowed down...and as the music boomed back to life, the choir joining in, a toe-pick cracked down onto the ice, and Viktor vaulted into a quad Flip.

By the time the hour came when they were supposed to leave, they had all almost entirely forgotten about the earlier events. Viktor had reluctantly put the eye-patch back into place after finding that it was starting to throb from over-use, and went back into coaching-mode for lack of being able to practice himself. It wasn't long before he'd whipped Yuri's arm-up jumps back into him. Satisfied, they made their way outside into the dark of the St. Petersburg night, greeted by a storm of falling snow.
The icy white fluff fell in chunks, glowing in the light of tall lamps in the parking lot and along the streets. Yuri adjusted his backpack as Viktor went back to talk to his own coach. Unable to hear what was being said from his distance, he saw Yakov giving the skater something—too small to see what it was, but something that made Viktor rather happy. He clasped it protectively in his hand before finally pocketing it, and then went to rejoin his partner.

"Katsuki." Yakov said, forcing Yuri to stop mid-step and turn around to look at the older man.

"What is it?" Viktor wondered, having made it about halfway between the two when the coach had spoken.

"Vitya, wait there, this is just between him and I."

Viktor was perplexed, but nodded and waited where he stood, watching as Yuri walked by him nervously to speak with the man. He turned his head away from them as he heard Yurio calling out for his grandfather, who'd made an unexpected appearance in his old, beat up, turquoise car.

Yuri had turned to see them all, and smiled to himself as old-man Plisetsky got out to see Viktor and greet the two of them.

"Yuri." Yakov said, quietly, getting back the younger skater's attention.

"Y-Yessir?"

"This Uncle of Vitya's that came earlier today. He seems a decent man...I know a little bit about him. Viktor thought rather highly of him, at least at one point." The Russian had started, "Mikhail gave me his contact information in case Viktor wants to stay in touch. Viktor and I have an agreement though that I would never just give him that kind information, but I worry he might just forget about it and never ask." He held up a gloved hand and waited for Yuri to raise his before putting a small piece of paper in his palm, "Take it. Don't let him completely forget about today. Both Nationals and next year's European Championship are being held in Moscow...I think it would be good for Vitya to have family watching him for once. It would be a whole new audience for him to try and surprise."

"Are you sure?" Yuri was cautious, "What if Konstantin..."

"He was just a middle-man today, and took no part. If Vitya is in direct contact with Mikhail then Konstantin doesn't even need to be part of it. But I leave it up to you...Vitya never listens to me anyway, but maybe he'll listen to you." Yakov explained, "You know his heart better than anyone. If you think he can handle it, then I think he should try."

The Japanese skater nodded, pulling out his phone to take a picture of the paper before giving it back to the older man. The last thing he wanted was for the info to fall out of his pocket or something and for Viktor to find it unexpectedly.

They all parted ways then, with Yurio going home with his grandpa, and Yuri and Viktor walking to the far end of the parking lot where the little red Audi was parked.

Yuri noted that Viktor had more energy than before, and actually walked along with something of a half-smile.

"You sure seem pleased with yourself." He pointed out.

"Oh, I am." Viktor confirmed, "Quite pleased."

"What'd you do?"
"I'm a fox with the keys to the hen house." The Russian answered coyly, giving the younger skater a wink.

"What does that mean...?"

Viktor laughed and reached up to his sore eye, stopping mid-step to look out over the railing of the bridge. He pulled the covering off his face and looked down at it, then back at Yuri, "This is the spot where I told Yakov I was going to Hasetsu, and asked him to take me to the airport. He spent the whole drive trying to talk me down from it, but I've done random trips before, too, so maybe he thought I would be back right away." He explained, "I surprised everyone by taking most of a season off, and again by coaching you to GPF Silver and FC Gold. But now that I'm coming back again...I really have to step up my game."

'Surprising the audience has always been his top priority.' Yuri recalled the Russian Punk's words, 'He had the whole world in his hands. But now, how matter what he does, no one's surprised anymore. He knows that better than anyone. If you don't have any inspiration left, you're as good as dead.'

Yuri kept watching him in silence.

'He has so much weight on his shoulders to impress everyone with his come-back. If he doesn't win Gold or re-break the records Yurio and I did, people will start to think he's done-for...and he doesn't seem the sort who would be willing to blame an injury for his short-comings. He might even quit entirely if that happens, just so he doesn't have to deal with a slow decline from Gold to Bronze, and off the podium entirely as time goes on... What in the world are you planning?

"There are going to be times where I won't be able to practice with you." Viktor explained, "And when I won't want you to come watch me when I go on my own."

"...Hah...?"

The Russian pulled his hand from his pocket and held up a single key, "Yakov gave me this. It's the key to the ice rink. For the next little while, Yuri..." Viktor seemed to have a fire in his eyes, like the slump of the last week or two was finally being pushed away, "...We have to skate as rivals again. I won't be able to surprise you at Worlds if I show you everything I'm going to do before we get there, right?"

The younger skater balked a little, "That's hardly fair...you know everything I'm going to do."

"Of course I do, I'm your coach!"

"Viktor..."
A few weeks passed, and by mid March, the physical aspect of Viktor's prior injury had completely healed. He'd avoided Instagram the entire time his eye had been covered, posting nothing and reading even less, not wanting to know what people were saying about his eye-patch. Yuri had avoided mentioning the speculation to him, too. He might've been happy to know that people had bought his lie about the car accident, but Yuri wasn't about to inquire.

Mercifully, since Viktor hadn't been posting much, and since Yuri never posted anything at all, there really wasn't a lot said on the matter. They'd effectively fallen off the radar, save the occasional post the triplets made whenever Yuri sent them photos. So, naturally, when Viktor finally returned to the internet and had Yuri post photos of his public practices to his account for him, his profile exploded with activity from fans.

What surprised Yuri though were the number of comments asking where he was.

Viktor had pulled a small towel around his shoulders before coming back to reclaim his phone, though Yuri, sans glasses, hadn't noticed his approach, still somewhat baffled by the fan commentary. He'd tilted his head as he looked at the screen, as though somehow believing that changing his view of it would change what the dialogue said.

"What're you doing that for?" Viktor wondered, amused by it, and reaching out to retrieve his device.

Yuri twitched in surprise, but gingerly handed back the item to its owner, "People are asking about me on your pictures. I don't know why they would. It's your account."

"I think we've been over this." The Russian answered with a smile, scrolling through to see what the chatter was about specifically, "There's thousands of people who would follow you if you ever posted anything...but, since you don't, they're going to the one place where they think they'll find you. So...let's give them what they want!"

Viktor didn't give his fiancé a chance to resist, and pulled him close with an arm over the shoulder, squishing their faces together and winking as he took the selfie. Yuri's surprised/shocked/horrified expression in the final image made Viktor laugh all the more, and he gleefully posted it, "There...now they all know you were my photographer for today instead of Yakov. Hashtag...#practice, #WorldChampionships, #photographer, #YuriByMySide, #viktuuri, #SkateHusbands! ...I think that should do it." And with that, he posted the photo.

Yuri sighed at the last one, leaning onto his hands over where his elbows rested on the rink wall, "Still just SkateFiancés, actually..."

The Russian kept his eye on the phone screen, "Still working on it."

"You are?" Yuri lifted his head a little, "Why haven't you told me about it? I didn't want to bother you while this whole thing with your family went down, but..."

"You've been busy with other things, too." Viktor answered simply, finally looking at the man. He reached his free hand forward and ran his fingers through that black hair, then cupping the back of his head to bring him closer, touching their nose-tips together, "Your new sponsors coming to visit,
practice for Worlds, even deciding to get contact lenses for everyday use...that all takes time. That
doesn't even take into account all the attention I demand from you, which is substantial." He leaned
in for a long kiss, one that halfway caught Yuri off guard, since it wasn't often that Viktor did
something like that in front of others, least not his own teammates.

Yuri had long suspected it was because Viktor thought it made Yakov uncomfortable...but he'd
never confirmed it.

When Viktor finally pulled away, he nosed the man's lip, and then...pulled the phone down from
where he'd been holding it up.

"...You took pictures of that whole thing didn't you?" Yuri's face went bright red.

The Russian was too pleased with himself, and turned around to show Yuri the series. He scrolled
through about 70 photos, all taken at high speed so as to seem like a movie cut into still-frames,
"Annnndddd..." He was saying, going through them quickly, "This was the moment you stopped
panicking and started to enjoy it."

Yuri held his head low, "I hope you don't record everything we do."

"Hm?" Viktor was confused for a moment, but then realized, "OH! No, not everything, don't
worry. I may take pictures of our everyday lives without you knowing sometimes, but I'd never
capture footage of something that personal without you giving permission ahead of time."

The younger skater was visibly relieved, and felt safe to go back to his prior inquiry, "So you've
been making wedding plans on your own?"

"Nothing specific...I've been looking at stuff, wondering about locations, that sort of thing."

"Anything that sticks out? Worlds is only 2 weeks away...I feel like we're pushing it if we want to
do it beforehand...we won't even have time to send out invitations or give people time to make their
own travel arrangements..."

"I know. It's just..." Viktor shook his head, "There were a few promising possibilities, but nothing
that was perfect."

Yuri deadpanned him, "You'll be looking for a long time if you want something perfect."

"We can only get married for the first time once, right? If we decide to renew our vows later in life,
it won't be the same as the first time..." He started touching at where Yuri's hand was drooping over
the wall, "I just don't want to disappoint or underwhelm you."

The younger skater practically snorted, "Viktor, you've never been able to underwhelm me..."

That made him smile again, "And I want it to stay that way!"

Yuri watched him skate away from him after that, going backwards for a bit before finally spinning
off with dramatic flair.

He set his chin to resting on one hand, thinking back on the last year. In hindsight, everything
happened so fast.

Seems like everything with Viktor happens either at the drop of a hat, or never at all.

Yuri laughed at himself quietly, then descended to cross his arms and rest his head on them on the
We never even really went through a 'just friends' phase, now that I think about it. Before that video of me went viral, we barely talked to each other. Then, he just shows up at Yu-Topia, and...

He remembered the way Viktor had talked to him that first night; touching his face, even moving to hold his hand, all rather intimately...at least until Yuri himself panicked and retreated to the furthest wall. After that, Viktor had gone at Yuri's pace.

He could always tell where I was at emotionally after that, and met me there, never overstepping. He's always been careful like that.

Yurio had been doing footwork drills for most of that morning, and Viktor had gone over to join him, pushing him to go faster and faster.

Even that first time, after we looked out for Yurio while his grandpa was in the hospital. Did he plan it that way? For me to go first? Or is that just how it happened naturally...?

He couldn't stop himself from thinking about that night, and he closed his eyes, dozing there on the rink wall.

It was so completely different from when it was his turn... When it was me, he just let it happen on the first try. But I made him wait four attempts before he was able to go all the way.

He recalled those nights like they'd just happened.

The first time Viktor made the attempt, Yuri's entire body had clenched up like a concrete knot.

'Yuri, I can't do anything if you're this nervous. Just tell me if you want me to stop and we can finish a different way.'

Viktor was half-looming over him in bed, hands under his shoulder-blades where he'd hugged him. Yuri's face was flushed, 'I'm so sorry...I can't help it... I d-don't think I can do this...right now...'

The Russian's eyes were kind, if not concerned, 'Don't be sorry. Never be sorry. It'll happen when and only if you want it to.'

The second attempt was a few nights later, after a day of sight-seeing around St. Petersburg. He'd finally convinced Yuri to try some of the local hot wine, and as a result, had gotten frisky. They'd romped for over an hour before Viktor even tried, but even then, the fact of the matter still caught Yuri by surprise and he yelped like a kicked dog. He was so embarrassed by his high-pitched shriek that their little sortie came to an immediate end, and Viktor had to console him for the next half hour.

The third attempt was a little more successful. Viktor had supposed that sneaking in while Yuri wasn't looking probably wouldn't be the best approach, so like the first time, made the motion while they were facing one another. Yuri was on his back, and Viktor had pulled his legs up on either side of his waist, slowly and rhythmically pushing against him, all the while kissing his lips or neck. When he felt it was safe to make the connection, and reached down to position himself, he could feel Yuri tensing again beneath him. He put his free arm lightly over Yuri's chest and stroked his thumb along the man's jawline.

'Shh...' Viktor whispered, 'Only when you say okay.'
The younger man took a deep, but trembled breath, and again...and then nodded, 'O...okay...'

'To Yuri's surprise, and maybe a little to his relief, Viktor didn't just shove his way in. In fact, he didn't even press the tip. He used a finger. He massaged gently for a minute, then added another finger. He kissed at the man's neck and listened for the sound of pleasure to take the place of anxiety, though it was a little difficult to tell if or when it happened.

'...Yuri...feedback...' Viktor encouraged quietly, desperate to know if what he was doing was even pleasing.

'Tch...th-this...' He'd stammered, '...is really weird...'  

'Does it feel good at all?'

'I...don't know...' He finally managed to say.

Viktor concluded to finish him manually after that, keen to ensure that his fiancé had a positive feeling to go with the sensation, even at the expense of himself.

The fourth try was finally a success, as Yuri had ensured it would be, even though it was Viktor who initiated the encounter. It was an intense session and both of them were still almost fully clothed by the time it happened. They'd only really pulled enough clothing apart to gain access to each other, and nothing more.

When Yuri felt that Viktor was wanting to try, he flipped their positions, pushing Viktor to sit back, leaning him against the arm-rest of the blue couch.

Maybe it was just the fact that they were facing each other equally that time, rather than Viktor being on top or behind him, but it was easier then. Yuri draped his arms over his partner's shoulders, pressing his chest to Viktor's as he sat back onto his lap. Viktor kissed him, arms snaking around Yuri's sides and down behind him, daring to position himself again. It took a moment; they were both extremely slick from the warming liquid that Yuri had come to enjoy so much, but the tip went in. Viktor drew in a hiss, and Yuri buckled a little, moving to sit slowly back on it on his own accord. A few tense seconds later, a few rising and descending slides with gradual penetration each time, he was fully on Viktor's lap, breathing heavy breaths, hands flat against Viktor's chest. It felt extremely tight, and Viktor leaned his head down a little to catch his breath, looking up again to see if Yuri was okay. His partner was smiling nervously, almost in disbelief at what had happened.

'...I...finally...' He said despite himself.

Viktor wrapped his arms around Yuri's torso and pulled him close, nuzzling him affectionately while propping his knees up a bit behind him, 'You're amazing...!'

Yuri huffed a laugh, shaking his head a little at himself and opening his eyes again.

'With everything that's happened since we got back from Four Continents...I feel like this is the best...'
time to think of a program that would channel all the anger and frustration I have inside me.'

He pulled out his phone and looked at the photo of Mikhail's contact information closely. It was written in English, since Yakov knew he didn't read Cyrillic.

Viktor says he's angry...but this Free Skate is all he's shown of it. Can a person really be that mad and not show any outward signs? Or am I that blind to his feeling still? Sometimes it can be so hard to read him...he tries so hard to stay positive.

Yuri watched Viktor perform a triple axel followed by a double toe-loop, perfect as newly fallen snow. He checked back on Instagram idly, thinking on what to do. There was a short clip from Phichit, showing him having already arrived in Helsinki, where the World Championship was going to be held at the end of the month. Then there was a sample of the photos JJ had posted from his wedding. It was grandiose, as could be expected, and the man seemed happy...not the jealous mess he'd been at Four Continents. Yuri could only assume he'd felt cheated. But, maybe that's just how the world intended him to feel. It was exactly how Yurio felt when JJ stole the gold from him during one of the events leading up to the Grand Prix Finale.

Skate Canada...? Yuri hoped to recall correctly.

He hoped JJ would be at Worlds just so they could repair the damage and hurt feelings between them. The same could be said of Chris, who he nor Viktor had spoken to since their last FaceTime before the EuroChamps. Chris had genuinely seemed to regret suggesting that Viktor was only faking his affection for Yuri as a show to the audience, an attempt to shock them with something other than his skating...Yuri had known and accepted that Chris hadn't meant it the way it came out, but he hadn't had the courage to call him. He knew Viktor wouldn't do that kind of thing anyway. He'd invested himself far too much for their relationship for it to just be some vain, selfish attempt at staying edgy and relevant.

He kept scrolling, but stopped as he realized Viktor had actually posted the photo of them kissing. His face went bright red at the sight of it. It wasn't tagged to anything though, so Yuri almost wondered if it had been uploaded by mistake. It was receiving mostly positive feedback though. It seemed the legion of female fans that Minako had warned Viktor of spurning didn't feel threatened or angry by his having come into a relationship. What few negative comments there were had mostly centered around how they wanted to see more skate-related photos, not so much daily-affairs updates. There were a few viscerally disgusted posts, and a few in Cyrillic text that Yuri couldn't read, but when he hit the Translate button, was disheartened to see a number of the Russian comments had been threatening in nature.

He couldn't help but be reminded of how violently Konstantin had reacted to seeing their rings in the Summer Garden. But that only lead him to remember how amiable Mikhail had been in the days after, even asking for an invitation to the wedding.

The nagging was getting to him though, and he went back to the photo album with the number to Mikhail. For lack of thinking, Yuri added it to his contact list, and then stared at it for a long while.

What would I even say to him if I sent him a message? He seems nice enough...but I don't want to risk Konstantin getting involved...

He grumbled to himself as he debated, looking from his phone to the ice, watching Viktor for a few minutes as he worked on the choreography for Amnesia, and then back again. He waggled his thumbs beside the device, and furrowed his brow.

Almost without looking, he finally typed a message.
He hovered his thumb over the Send button for what felt like hours.

Would Viktor get mad at me if I sent this? Am I grossly overstepping by getting involved with his family? He seemed so happy to introduce Mikhail to the rest of us, but was pretty bitter by the time the conversation ended. He practically fled to the ice after that.

He looked out at Viktor again, who had since stopped skating so as to take out his notepad and jot some ideas down. The Russian tapped the eraser-end of the pencil to his mouth as he pondered his program.

Yuri looked back down at his phone, scrunching his mouth to the side as he continued to debate what to do. He scratched the back of his head and ruffled his hair.

"KATSUDON."

Yuri spazzed at the sudden shrill screech of his nickname, and the phone fell from his hands to land with a painful-sounding crunch on the ice.

"Ahhh nooooo...my phone..." Yuri moaned in despair, looking at where it landed face-down, completely out of reach.

Viktor grit his teeth in a wince, but moved over to get the device and for the hapless youth, "I could hear the crack all the way from where I was..." He handed it to Yuri, "Is it okay?"

Yuri took the battered phone in his hands and looked it over carefully, then clicked the side button to see if it would turn on. He heaved a sigh of relief to see that it did, showing the security screen with the time at the top and number-pad for the pass-code, and looked fit for use. He nodded, "Yeah, I think it's fine."

"Whew, that's a relief." The Russian said cheerfully. "Why don't you go get your skates on? I think we're about done practicing, so it's just casual-skate for a bit while a kids' class comes through."

The Japanese skater's eyes lit up, and he nodded, moving to sit back on a bench that was nearby and grabbed his silver blades.

Mikhail was sitting at the Sapsan train station, waiting for his ride to take him back to Moscow. He heard a jingle on his phone, and reached to pull it out and see what it was.

He pondered the unknown number for a moment, but supposed it could only be one of a small handful of people. His thumbs went typing away.

[Viktor?]
CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

Yuri had quickly pulled his skates on and headed out onto the ice, joining Viktor and Yurio in a casual free-skate. Yurio was clearly exhausted, but after watching their practice for the previous few hours, Yuri understood all too well how that felt.

"So you're not going to do that new Short Program after all?" Viktor was asking.

"Nah..." Yurio confirmed, hands stuffed in his track-suit coat pockets, "Since I skipped it at the Euro Championship, there's not much point. I'll just skate Agape at Worlds."

"That's good. Skating new material inevitably gets you lower scores. Best to just coast along with what you know and go for broke."

"Mh..."

Yuri felt a buzz in his back pocket, and moved to reach for his phone, thinking it might've been someone back home. When he clicked on the screen and saw that wasn't the case, he felt like his soul had just escaped his body from the panic.

Viktor noticed and looked back at him, "What's the matter?"

"N-nothing!" Yuri insisted, "Everything's okay! It's good!"

[Viktor?]

I must've hit the Send button when Yurio scared me! Yuri thought in a panic, What should I do?!

"I need to sit for a second, I think there's a rock in my skate." He lied, breaking off to head back to the rink exit.

The other two just continued on without him, waiting for him to come back in his own time.

Yuri sat on the bench near where he'd left his shoes, and motioned to take off the offending skate. But his eyes stayed on the message he'd received. He sighed and moved to reply.

[No, this is Yuri.]

The reply came faster than he'd expected, not even able to shake out the empty boot before he felt the vibration on the bench where he'd set the phone down.

[Oh! Hey! Did Viktor tell you to message me? I'm still in the city but I'm at the train station, about to leave.]

[Yakov gave me your information. Viktor doesn't know I reached out.]

[Ah, I see.] There was a pause, [Can I do something for you?]

Yuri realized he hadn't planned this far in advance, and wasn't really sure what to say in response. He watched Viktor and Yurio pass by as a group of preteens took to the ice on the other side of the rink with their skating teacher. He could hear the group of youths calling out greetings to their nation's skate champions.
The Japanese skater sighed, shaking his head and going for it, *Can you stay in St. Petersburg for one more day?*

*Sure. What do you need?*

*I want to meet with you. Viktor practices alone late in the evenings so I can get away without him noticing.*

*Where do you want to meet?*

There was a café within walking distance of home, and Yuri had left to head there within a few minutes of Viktor leaving for his aforementioned late-night solo practices. Yuri even took Makkachin with him to let him get out of the house for a while.

He sat outside at the café with a hot cup of cider and waited, butterflies in his stomach the whole time. Makkachin licked at a cup of whipped cream where he lay on the concrete patio, slowly wagging his tail contentedly.

"Yuri?" Mikhail's voice sounded, coming from just behind him and to the right.

He lifted his head to look, and sure enough, there he was; the taxi that brought the man there was starting to pull away, and Mikhail held his one small carry-bag in his left hand. Yuri huffed to himself and stood up, bowing in greeting before looking up again and reaching out his ringed hand, "Mikhail-san... Your resemblance to Viktor really is eerie." He bowed his head again when Mikhail took his hand to shake it, coming up to take a seat at the same table.

"Yeah, agreed." The elder nodded, "When I saw him that first time, I thought I was looking at my younger doppelganger. He really takes on our side of the family more so than the Nikiforov side."

"What's your family name?"

"Rozovsky."

"How did your families meet?" Yuri wondered, reaching down to scratch behind Makkachin's ear.

"Older generations of both families settled in the same little town. We all grew up together. Viktor escaped at a pretty early age."

"I can only wonder how. Almost every conversation that's happened about it has been in Russian and I don't understand it."

Mikhail nodded, "Unfortunately, I don't know the whole story myself...I had left prior to it all taking place. My sister...as much as I try to remember, anyway...said that Viktor had been found by some coach from the big city while in the area on other business. Tatiyana had taken Viktor to a bigger town with a proper skating rink, and the rest was just fortunate timing."

"Maybe not all so fortunate at the time." Yuri said, sipping at his cider.
"Indeed." Mikhail agreed, looking up into the dark and cloudy sky, "Viktor couldn't have known how his father would react. It's not his fault."

"Mh."

"So..." Mikhail veered off course, "If you're here without Viktor knowing, I can only assume that means you're trying to vet me."

"...Sort of." Yuri acknowledged, "He refuses to talk about his roots. He even told me not to ask about them. I don't intend for this to be a dialogue where you spill all the family secrets, but..."

"You must have a good family." Mikhail surmised, smiling, "And you want to same for him."

Yuri nodded again, "Viktor lived with us in Japan for a few months while he was coaching me last year. I came to St. Petersburg after the Grand Prix Final in December."

"That's what I read." The elder man leaned back to slouch where he sat.

"You've been researching?"

"You already knew that."

"Yeah..."

"I spent a whole day after Tatiyana's funeral trying to find out more about Viktor. I had no idea how skilled or famous he'd become since leaving home. I don't think really anyone in the family knew. The way the skating world completely lost its mind when Viktor dropped everything to go to Hasetsu all of a sudden..."

Yuri couldn't help himself, and he laughed a little behind his scarf, "It was all a whirlwind of activity. My family's hot spring resort was swarmed by media when it got out that Viktor was there. Even Yurio showed up."

"Yurio?"

"Yuri Plisetsky, one of Viktor's teammates. My sister named him Yurio to tell us apart."

"Ah, yeah...Viktor set up that Hot Springs on Ice event with you two."

The skater hummed his confirmation.

"So how long have you two been engaged?" Mikhail suddenly wondered.

Yuri looked over to his gloved hand, feeling the ring around his finger beneath the covering, "Since just before the Grand Prix Final."

"Have you ever been married before?"

Yuri snorted in disbelief, "I'm only 24...how could I have been married already and separated so I could get engaged again?"

"I've seen things." Mikhail laughed, leaning forward to put his elbows on the table, "I was just curious. There's almost nothing to read about you online except for the professional stuff. Not since before Viktor became your coach, anyway...then everyone started taking keen interest."

"I've noticed that."
"Viktor's had other relationships before you though."

"Sure."

"With women though."

"...Yes."

"Has he told you about them?"

"He tried once, but I cut him off." Yuri looked at the poodle and leaned back, "That was when we were first getting to know each other though. I don't know that I'd want to ask about it again now."

"You've never wondered why he wasn't with someone when he went to Japan?"

"He'd been a bachelor for a while before that."

"Not my point."

"No, I hadn't wondered."

"Hard to maintain a relationship when half of your life is in a sport." Mikhail explained, "But that's just my guess. You're lucky that you skate, too...and do so as well as he does, so neither of you is ever left behind."

Yuri nodded, looking back up again, "I'm only this good now because Viktor got me here. I was on the edge of quitting after Sochi."

"So that's how it works with you two then?"

"Huh?"

"The dynamic you have. The way you two work so well together." Mikhail was trying to put it into words but was having trouble finding the right ones, "Viktor was struggling with inspiration. You were struggling with whether or not to even go on. So...you fit well together, having a common goal, reaching it from different starting places."

"I guess so." Yuri said, "Viktor gives me what I need, and I give him what he wants."

"Oh? And what does he want?"

"Besides all this?" Yuri jokingly gestured to himself, making the older man laugh. He then got a little more serious though and looked up at the sky, seeing the stars through the clouds, and the moon glowing on high. It reminded him of their Exhibition skate in Korea, with all the camera flashes in the darkness, "Viktor wants to surprise people...and he does that by creating something beautiful. He's been pleasing the audience for years...but his time is coming to an end soon. Maybe he would never have come to Hasetsu if I were the same age as him...but since I'm 4 years his junior, I'm still pliable." He brought his eyes down again, "I asked him to stay with me in competitive skating for one more year... I don't know how much longer he'll be in it after that. He'll be turning 29 right after the next Grand Prix Final. Almost no skaters keep going after that."

"Does he have any plans for when he's done for good?"

"Staying on as my coach, until I retire. He hasn't brought up anything else yet. He doesn't really have to worry about it right now though. He wants me to keep going as long as I can and keep winning gold medals."
"Is that what you want though?"

Yuri's brow furrowed, but he shook his head and smiled, "I just want to keep eating katsudon with him...and the only way I can do that is by winning competitions."

Grey-green eyes looked at him in surprise, but Mikhail smiled as well, "Hmph, I can see why he likes you so much then."

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Yuri had settled on the couch with Makkachin as the night went on, watching some meaningless thing or another on the television while he waited for Viktor to return home. He was half asleep when he finally heard the sound of Viktor's car pulling up. The poodle awoke as well at the noise, and hurried off to the doorway to greet the skater excitedly.

When Viktor finally got in through the door, Yuri had sat upright and was rubbing his eyes, looking to realize it was after 1am.

"Wow...you had a late night." He said blearily.

Viktor dropped all his gear in the hallway and pressed on past the dog, practically lunging at where Yuri sat, "Sorry I was out so late, but I had to keep working!"

"Something big?"

The Russian latched onto him affectionately, "You'll see at Worlds. I'm so excited!!"

"You're freezing!" Yuri protested, nothing but bare skin and a t-shirt separating him from the frozen cold of Viktor's winter coat.

Viktor had no issue with shrugging it off, letting it thump to the floor in a heavy pile. Other clothing quickly went with it, until he was not but pants and socks. He was eagerly laying passion onto his fiancé, hardly able to slow down. Yuri could feel his eagerness, and his own interest slowly rose in kind.

"You must've pulled off something crazy to be this excited, Viktor." He'd said, letting the older athlete pull his t-shirt off and throw it to the growing pile. The intensity of it all reminded Yuri of the time Viktor had stripped down to nothing in the hot-spot restaurant in China, "But I bet you won't tell me what you did."

"I can't!" Viktor said cheerfully, "I really want to though!"

"Tell me."

"I can't!"

"Tell me!"

"NOOOOO!!" The man wrapped both arms around Yuri's torso and hugged him tightly.

"Viktor!"
"Fine!" He finally relented, moving to pull Yuri's legs around his waist so he could get closer and whisper into his ear.

When he heard the words, Yuri shook his head in disbelief, "You...what? That's impossible. No one can do that."

Viktor's eyes told the truth though.

Yuri still couldn't believe it. He shook his head a little, and then reached up with one hand to cup Viktor's face. His elder leaned into it, putting his own hand over it before turning to kiss his palm.

The energy changed after that, and Viktor leaned over him, "Let's just go. We'll book the first flight to Spain. Never mind the huge wedding plans that'll take forever to arrange...never mind inviting a bunch of guests. Let's just go, you and me..."

"You want to **elope**?"

"We'll make it an adventure. We'll go straight from Barcelona to Helsinki for the competition...and we can take our honeymoon in Hasetsu after that." Viktor's gaze was determined now, "Come with me, Yuri!"

"We..." He stammered, the whole thing like a blur in his mind, "...Yes, yes absolutely!"

He saw a few tears of joy fall from Viktor's eyes, and the man pushed in to kiss him after that.

It would only be two more days before the next flight out of St. Petersburg to Barcelona. It was a whirlwind of preparation, but they were sure everything was accounted for. They packed their belongings for the competition with the things they'd need for the next two weeks in Spain, and even brought Makkachin with them this time. Viktor had found out that they had to have an actual residence in Spain in order to have their marriage ratified, and made quick work of finding some low-cost apartment that they could claim as their home address. When it was all finally done and arranged, Viktor was practically pulling Yuri through the streets to the Barcelona Town Hall. They were heaving to catch their breath when they finally got inside. Mercifully, several of the people who worked inside spoke a smattering of English, so they were able to proceed without much difficulty.

Viktor had booked the appointment, and it wasn't long before they were called to enter the antechamber where the little ceremony would take place. Given the high profile nature of the Grand Prix Final from months before, the Mayor had recognized the pair's names and granted a reprieve from the requirement that they had lived in Spain for 2 years, given all they'd already done to meet the other requirements.

And so...the moment finally came.

"Do you, Viktor Nikiforov, take this man to be your husband?"

The silver-haired skater nodded, holding both of Yuri's hands in his own, "Yuri Katsuki...I take you to be my husband from this time onward, to join with you and to share all that is to come. To be your faithful spouse, to give and to receive, to speak and to listen, to inspire and respond; a commitment made in love, kept in faith, and eternally made new. Whatever lies ahead, good or bad, we will face together. Distance may test us for a time, and time may try us. But if we look to each other first, we will always see a friend. Yuri...look to me for all the days to come...today I take my place as your husband."

Yuri was practically crying already, but Viktor squeezed his hands.
The Mayor continued, "And do you, Yuri Katsuki, take this man to be your husband?"

Brown eyes rose back up to meet blue, "Viktor Nikiforov..." His voice quaked a little, and he took a deep breath before continuing, "I take you to be my husband. To share the good times and hard times, side by side. I humbly give you my hand and my heart, as a sanctuary of warmth and peace, and pledge my faith and love to you. Just as this circle is without end, my love for you is eternal. Just as it is made of incorruptible substance, my commitment to you will never fail. With this ring..."
He thumbed the gold on Viktor's finger, "...I thee wed."

The Mayor nodded, and looked out past them to the 'official witnesses' that had gathered to watch, "We are gathered here today to celebrate one of life's greatest moments. To cherish the words which have united Viktor and Yuri in marriage. Marriage is the promise between two people who love each other, and who trust in each other, who honor each other as individuals, and who choose to spend the rest of their lives together. This ceremony will not create a relationship that does not already exist between you. It is a symbol of how far you have come. It is a symbol of the promises you will make to each other to continue growing stronger as individuals and as partners. No matter what challenges you face, you now face them together, and no matter how much you succeed, you now do so together. The love between you joins you now as One. And so...it is with great honor that I pronounce you...Husband and Husband."

They both stepped towards each other after that, and kissed each other warmly. The officials that had gathered all started clapping and cheering for them. When Yuri pulled back to look up at his newly-made spouse, his eyes were heavy with tears. Viktor just smiled down at him, tears in his own eyes, and Yuri broke down entirely. He threw both arms over Viktor's shoulders and sobbing against his neck.

It was the happiest moment of his life.
There had been an unexpected downpour while the ceremony took place, but the sun was shining brightly through the few remaining heavy, grey clouds. The wet, rocky roadway was practically glowing in its light. People were slowly starting to come out from their hastily-gained shelters. Birds were flying down to splash in the puddles.

Yuri hadn’t been able to see any of it though, as he was too busy beaming over the sight of the marriage license in his hands. It was still so hard for him to believe it was really there.

He was sitting on a bench not far from the Town Hall. Viktor was right there next to him, explaining something, but Yuri was off in his own little world.

"Are you listening?"

"Huh?" Yuri looked over at him, practically coming back down from orbit, "Sorry...my mind wandered a little."

The Russian huffed a laugh at him, "I was trying to tell you how you can get your documents changed. Are you with me now? Back on Earth?"

"Yes, sorry..." He answered, carefully putting the paper back inside its envelope, making sure no corners were bent or torn as it slid back inside, "Go ahead...I'm listening."

"You'll have to start with the Court house." Viktor said, pulling Yuri close to have him lean on him where they sat, "That's where you can do the legal name change." He started playing with that black hair idly, running his fingers through it as his arm curled behind the man's neck, "Then you take those papers to the Japanese Embassy. You may not even have to tell them about the marriage thing and run the risk of them refusing to issue your new passport."

"We really got lucky that the Mayor knew who we were and waived the 2 year residency rule."

"We're citizens of the world, Yuri!"

"Would've been a real travesty otherwise..." He continued, moving to sit up a little bit so he could turn to look the man in the eyes, "Be like...hey, we want to get married...' No, sorry, you haven't lived here long enough, why would we give you a certificate?" He gave his best effort at a Spanish accent, though failed miserably, sounding more like a more-awkward version of himself than anything.

Viktor laughed, then whipped out the French accent for fun, "Bhut sir...ve came all zees vay..."

They finally started heading away from the Town Hall area to satisfy certain primal needs when an unexpected FaceTime from Yurio came through, buzzing Viktor's phone urgently. The Russian was pulling away from a bite of the fancy seafood in front of him and gawked at the request curiously.
"Who is it?" Yuri wondered, sitting across from him; their ankles were crossed together under the table.

"Yurio." Viktor answered as well as he could, the fork hanging from his mouth idly.

"You gonna answer?"

"Hmmm..." Viktor pondered, but then sighed with a laugh and clicked to accept, holding the phone out in front of him while he propped his elbow up on the table and finally pulled the fork from his teeth, "Hey."

"Idiot, where are you!?" The blond blurted, "You've been missing from practice for half a week and Yakov's about to shit a kitten over it."

Yuri choked back a laugh, pulling a hand up in front of his mouth.

Yurio seemed to have hollered at someone off-camera for a moment, "Yeah, Viktor finally picked up. He's not dead." He then turned back to face him, "Seriously. Where the hell did you go? People went by your place and said it looked abandoned. Everyone was freaking out."

"We did kind of abandon my place, so they were half right."

"The hell is that supposed to mean?"

Viktor just smiled deviously, "Give me 2 minutes, then check my Instagram."

"What!? Vikt-"

The FaceTime session was cut short, and Viktor motioned for Yuri to come closer, "Get out the certificate."

The younger skater caught on quickly, and did as told, bringing his chair around to Viktor's side of the table as he pulled the envelope carefully from his backpack. Making sure there was nothing on his fingers, Yuri then withdrew the precious paper and held it in front of them as Viktor held his phone up high with the camera on selfie-mode. He reached around Yuri's back to pull him closer by the shoulder, kissing the side of his forehead as he took the photo. That done, he quickly went over to post the pic online while his new husband put the paper back into safe keeping.

"Set location...Barcelona... Hashtag #CanSolé, #JustMarried, #Viktuuri!" Viktor was practically cackling with satisfaction as he posted it. Then, he paused, "Wait for it... Waaaaait for it..."

Yuri's stomach was tight from excitement, and he checked his own phone to refresh the feed and see the new picture from v-nikiforov. It already had 37 reactions and 8 comments by the time he got there...one of which stood out, making Yuri snort with sudden laughter into his drink.

yuri-plisetsky: ...fucking seriously.

Viktor's phone blew up again, but this time it was Yakov, and the Russian held it to his ear tenderly even as Yuri could hear the older gentleman yelling, "Yes...yes we are... No, not entirely sure yet. We're going to meet you all at Worlds. ...No, probably back to Hastesu, at least for a little while."

Yuri's own phone started ringing while that conversation went on, and he smiled to see that it was Yuuko making a FaceTime request. Unsurprisingly, she and her 3 girls were in the frame when he clicked it on, "Hey guys."
"Congratulations!!" They all said together. The triplets had their own phones in-hand with the Instagram feed showing the photo.

They were in their pajamas, and Yuri suddenly realized how late it must've been in Japan, "I hope none of this woke any of you up."

"Only a little bit." Yuuko admitted with a weak laugh, "Axel was the first to see Viktor's post, and it just went crazy from there."

"Is Uncle Viktor still there!?" The girls asked in unison.

Yuri nodded happily, and turned his phone around to show the Russian sitting back against his chair, still being yelled at by his coach but smiling anyway. When he saw the familiar faces, he pulled the phone away from his ear temporarily to wave at them, "Heyyy~!"

"You guys finally did it!"

"Yes~!" He confirmed, winking at them merrily, "Just today. It's only been about an hour since we got our license."

"You have to let us arrange a big party!" Lutz said, getting in the front of the field, "You're coming back after Worlds anyway so it's perfect!!"

"We'll set it up at the Ice Castle!" Loop agreed from behind her sister.

"It'll be a huge deal, like Hot Springs on Ice!" Axel pulled up on the side, trying to get into the frame but only managing the top of her face.

Viktor seemed excited for it, and threw an arm into the air, "Yeah!"

Yuri was already getting nervous, watching them making all their plans.

"We'll see you in a couple weeks! Do svidaniya!" Viktor told them before finally breaking away again to listen to Yakov.

Yuri turned the phone back to show himself, "Don't make it that big a deal...okay?"

"Are you kidding!? Yuri! You just got hitched to VIKTOR NIKIFOROV. How are you not wanting to brag about it to everyone on this planet!?" Axel was saying excitedly, "It's already huge!!"

"Well, sure...but..."

"No buts! We're gonna have a massive party!" Loop agreed.

"...Guys!"

"We've got this, don't worry!" Lutz finished.

"GUYS!" Yuri blurted between clenched teeth, trying not to get too loud while in the restaurant. They finally went quiet and started listening, "I know you mean well and everything, and what you want to do is really nice, but...I don't really want the entire universe to show up in Hasetsu."

Yuuko saw the worried look on her friend's face and pulled her kids close, "Yuri's not the sort to advertize, girls. Remember? We can always make it a small party."

"The big crowds are what I see at competitions." Yuri pointed out, "But everything's different since
Viktor became my coach. Everything is bigger and louder and crazier than it ever used to be. But that's only okay in skating...this is my life, right? I don't want a huge deal made over somethi-

He was cut off as Viktor suddenly pulled the phone from his hands, and turned it to face him, "Yuri only likes the lime-light when he's putting on a show. This whole thing is a little more personal, so let's just have a small gathering, okay?"

The triplets sighed audibly, but agreed, "Yes, Uncle Viktor..."

"Don't look so glum!" He said cheerfully, "Quality over quantity. If it's only a small number of people, it'll be better for everyone! I know you can do it!"

They started to get excited again, and Viktor returned the phone to its owner. Yuri was a bit surprised at him, but he decided to wrap up the conversation before addressing it, "I'll let you guys go back to sleep then. We'll see you after Worlds, okay? We'll be coming straight there, we promise this time."

"Bye, Yuri!"

"Goodnight!"

He clicked off the conversation, and saw the pop-up messages that several other people had tried to call him while the previous conversation was active. Hinako, Phichit, his parents, even Chris. He just set the phone aside face-down and set it to mute, looking up again to see Viktor just smiling at him.

"I guess I got a bit over-excited." He said, "Nishigori told me once that you had a hard time putting yourself out there and that you were something of a recluse growing up. I guess I forgot."

"I didn't mean to be a buzz-kill..." Yuri said with a sigh, "It's not like I go to skating competitions because I like all the attention. You saw how fast I fell apart when I was in the lead at Cup of China..."

"...Then why did you get into skating competitively?"

Yuri leaned back into his chair with his cup of ice water, "I started in ballet. Minako-sensei suggested I try out figure skating. Then Yuu-chan told me about you, and that's why I got into competition. I've been trying to catch up to you since you ever since."

"And how's it feel to get caught up and take the lead?"

Yuri nearly choked on his drink, "I'm not in the lead!"

"But you will be at Worlds!"

"You said I'd get gold at the GPF and I didn't." Yuri pointed out, almost sarcastically, grabbing the cloth napkin on the table to wipe the water off his face where it had splashed on him.

"By barely a difference of 0.12 points. And then I said you'd get gold at Four Continents and you did."

"Only because you and Yurio weren't competing."

"So you've already resigned yourself to bronze then?" Viktor was disappointed, "Yuri..."

"I already won the most important gold medal that I could ever hope to achieve." He leaned forward...
and reached for Viktor's right hand where he'd settled it on the table, thumbing his ring, "How could I ever win something better?"

The Russian gave him a happy but concerned look, "I don't want you to stop trying just because you got one thing you wanted... I'm worried about you now. Putting gold around my finger and having gold around your neck are different things."

"Huh?"

"We agreed you'd become a five-time World Champion, right? That was the price of my being your coach."

"...Yeah, but..."

"Don't give up, Yuri. You've already come so far and achieved so much." He lifted his hand from under his partner's and laced their fingers together, "Besides, if you're depressed about Worlds, think about what I'm up against. I have to set two new world records right off the bat. Imagine how disappointed everyone will be if I mess up?"

The Japanese skater could only lower his eyes."

"And Yurio, too..." Viktor continued, "He made history twice at the GPF...once by shattering the Short Program record, and again by winning the GPF Gold Medal during his first ever performance in the Senior division. Then he completely bombed out at the European Championships because of the scare with his grandpa. Think about the uphill battle he's climbing now."

Yuri could feel his heart sink, and he rubbed his eyes with the back of his arm, "I'm just being selfish again, it seems..."

"You just need perspective. We're all struggling. But..." Viktor paused, pulling his hand from his husband's and reaching out to lift his face up again with a finger gently under his chin, meeting his eyes again, "...You're the one who has the best chance at the gold at Worlds right now. I'm not even saying that as your coach, or your choreographer, or your husband...I'm saying that as a fellow skater. One that admires you and wants to see you do your best. You can win gold. Win it so you can see the look on my face when I take the lower podium!"

Yuri balked at that idea, "Why in the world would you want to be on a lower podium than me?"

"Because you're the only person in the world that I like being under."

The younger skater was practically on the floor after that, nose bleeding everywhere.

Viktor just laughed, "See? Now you have to win gold," He taunted, incredibly amused by the whole thing, moving out of his chair to help put Yuri back into his, "Just so I know exactly what's going through your mind when you step up there."

"Never mind what's going through my mind right now?" Yuri pinched the bridge of his nose to stem the flow.

"Well, it is our wedding night..."

"I'm not going to make it that easy for you." He challenged, giving Viktor quite the look, and reaching his hand to return the gesture, cupping the man's face lightly and rubbing his thumb against his lower lip.
"Yuri, stop that, we're in public."

"Everything on the ice is love, isn't it? Why not off the ice, too?" He reached to grasp his fingers around Viktor's wrist, and pulled his hand up to place it over his heart, "So...seduce me."

Cool blue eyes were staring at the man, practically in disbelief of him.

He turned away only for a second to raise his hand.

"Check please!"
CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

True to Yuri's word, he made Viktor work on seducing him for the entire rest of the afternoon and into the evening. By the time Viktor had finished gathering all the things he needed to make the night one to remember, they were both carrying numerous bags...though, to be fair, most of it wasn't just for that night.

Seven bottles of wine, two of champagne, one bottle of Baileys, freshly ground coffee, several other things...even some curious mixed white-and-milk seashell-shaped chocolates, all in the bags.

It was an effort to get everything into their hotel room, and Makkachin was glad to see them return. Viktor moved off to feed his aging poodle as Yuri started pulling bottles from the totes and set them on the table on the far end of the room. He looked at each one as he set them down, reading the labels again and checking vintage.

I don't even know why I'm looking. I don't know a thing about wine...

"Save some of those for when we get back to Yu-Topia!" Viktor asked, setting a bowl of bottled water down for his dog, "I want to mull them for my new in-laws."

"My dad's going to go nuts over it." Yuri said, "He's worse than I am with alcohol."

"Then it'll just be a good excuse for us to dismiss ourselves, won't it?" The Russian suggested, shrugging off his coat after putting the lid back on the large plastic bottle. He set the coat on its hanger in the closet, and stepped over to join Yuri by the table. He slid his hands up Yuri's chest, barely touching him as his hands went into the space between his shoulders and the inside of the coat, pushing it off of him. Yuri could feel the man's lips against his own, but like his hands...there was barely a whisper of a touch between them.

He's playing keep-away to draw me in...

Viktor pulled the coat off his arms and put it in the closet next to his own, then went to one of the other bags to grab some of the glasses he'd bought just for the night. It wasn't one of the wine glasses Yuri had expected though...it was the two ceramic mugs. He watched in keen, but silent interest as Viktor worked his drink magic, pouring more of the bottled water from earlier into the complimentary hotel-room brewer and scooping just enough of the newly-ground coffee into a filter for two cups. Once the brewer started sputtering, steam rising from the carafe in the back, Viktor turned away from it, grabbed the bottle of Baileys, and looked at his husband.

"Just enough to loosen you up a bit, but not so much that you don't remember later." He said, eyes half-lidded through his silver bangs.

Yuri just sat on the edge of the bed with a smirk, resting back on his arms, "I can't wait."

The smell of the coffee was already starting to rise into the air, and Viktor turned back to look at it proudly before moving to join Yuri on the edge of the bed. The younger skater looked over at him as the bed settled, but he just smiled and waited.

"You're really going to make me work hard tonight, aren't you?" Viktor mused, crossing his legs and reaching his hand up to brush the bangs from Yuri's eyes.
He nodded enthusiastically, "I've evolved. I used to be a pork cutlet fatale that seduces men...now I'm something different."

Viktor coughed a laugh at that, stretching one leg out to settle it over his partner's lap, "Now you're a gold ribbon pork cutlet fatale, and you still seduce men."

"Only you."

"You did a good job." Viktor said, quieter than before, deftly touching at Yuri's arm as he leaned in closer.

He closed his eyes, and in his mind, he could feel the kiss before it happened...but then it didn't. He could sense the warmth of his partner's breath against his skin, ever so close, but not quite completely touching. Yuri felt the man's nose-tip brushing his lip, moving up to the tip of his own nose as Viktor's left hand came up across his chest, tracing a finger up his center and over his collarbone, right up to his neck and under his chin.

"You're teasing me, Viktor."

"You're playing hard to get." He answered, nosing his chin before pulling away again to stand and finish the drinks.

"You're closer than you think."

"Don't say that, I won't try as hard." The Russian warned teasingly, looking back at him over his shoulder.

Viktor had poured the coffee by then and was unscrewing the lid to the cream liqueur when he looked back again to see a certain sultry look on Yuri's face. He whistled as he turned back to watch the liquid pouring into the two cups, "I'm suddenly really glad I gave you Eros to skate. I can only imagine the difference in our relationship if I'd given you Agape instead."

"I suppose I'd be the blushing virgin bride then." Yuri laughed, falling down to his back on the bed with both arms up above his head, stretching and reaching for the pillows, "Not the battle-hardened Eros skate-husband you've trained me to become."

"You'll always be my little katsudon." Viktor mused, finally returning with the mugs to sit with Yuri. The younger skater huffed a laugh to himself as he rolled to his side, taking the mug and drawing in the sweet smell. Viktor was already taking a sip, "Vkusno~! Such a hot after-bite."

Yuri sipped at it too, and felt the heat of the coffee first, then the heat of the liqueur chasing down his throat. It was sweet and spicy, and warmed him from the inside out, "This is really good!"

"Right?"

It was gone quickly though, and Viktor moved to lay on his side next to his partner, propping his head up on his hand as the other moved over Yuri's chest. He traced his fingers over the contours of the man's physique, the rise and fall of each muscle, before pulling those fingers back up to draw Yuri's face closer to his own. Yuri allowed it, letting himself be pulled onto his own side to face the man, and finally be drawn into a light kiss.

He could still taste the Irish coffee on Viktor's lips, and drew in closer, putting his free hand on the man's waist as he felt a leg come up between his own, to just above his knee. Viktor ran his fingers through Yuri's hair, sliding it down his cheek, jaw, neck, and finally back down to his chest, slipping his hand under Yuri's arm and down to his waist to match the gesture.
Yuri was practically itching to feel him, and cupped his hand around Viktor's lower back to pull him closer, feeling where their bodies were pressed against each other. He felt his partner's hand slide under the edge of his shirt, feeling the warmth of his skin, and the pounding of his excited heart. Within moments, Viktor had shifted again, pushing Yuri onto his back as he sat over his hips, using both hands to pull the form-fitting shirt away.

Similar to the time Viktor had told Yuri to fully claim him, Viktor stopped pulling the shirt away just as it was coming over Yuri's face, leaving his mouth and nose exposed but his eyes covered and his arms somewhat trapped. He watched with pleasure as Yuri started drawing in harder breaths, humming a little to himself with each inhalation as he slowly rolled his hips around in a small circle over Yuri's. The younger skater's hands became free, and found their way up to Viktor's thighs, and Viktor leaned down to kiss that mouth, pressing himself hard against him so they could feel each other through their clothing. Yuri drew in a sharp breath, twitching and pushing back against him.

As Viktor sat upright again, Yuri pulled one hand away to lift the edge of his shirt off his eyes, peeking with one eye as the Russian pulled his own shirt away, revealing a toned and pale body beneath it. It was just as solid and perfect as the day Viktor had shown up naked in his family's hot spring, but this time...he could touch it. He pulled the shirt off the rest of his head and cast it aside as he sat up, putting his hands around the sides of Viktor's shoulders, holding him close as he settled a little lower on the man's lap. As the younger athlete's hands slowly started to descend behind him, Viktor continued his slow forward and backward sway against his hips, wanting to feel every moment of new arousal.

Viktor pulled up a little to reach between them, starting to undo the buttons with one hand as the other pushed Yuri down to his back again.

Yuri was starting to feel the effects of the drink going to his head. The subtle hint of dizziness, but making his body feel light and relaxed. He almost didn't notice Viktor pulling their clothing off, but 'remembered' again when he felt skin against skin as his partner returned to him. But as Viktor was leaning down over top of him, Yuri recalled something the Russian had said earlier in the evening.

In one quick motion, Yuri flipped them, putting his husband on his back with his silver hair spread over the pillows. He looked down into those blue pools and leaned in to kiss him, but not quite...

"Your lips are a little chapped."

Viktor half-closed his eyes, "Maybe you should do something about it?"

"Maybe I will."

The Russian smiled eagerly at that.

Yuri licked his lips...and then leaned in to lick Viktor's. He felt himself getting pulled into a kiss that was deeper than any they'd shared before, and felt breathless when he finally pulled away again...and he only did that because he felt a sudden squeeze and had to gasp.

Viktor always enjoyed seeing that look on Yuri's face. No matter how many times they'd been intimate, every time he took hold of the man, Yuri reacted like it was the first time again.

The younger skater had to hold himself up a little, adjusting to the slight change in tempo as Viktor held them both in his hands, massaging gently and with expert finesse. He fumbled a hand to reach for the night-stand, reaching for a small bottle there with a pump-top. Slippery clear liquid dripped into his hand, and he pulled back again to reach between them. Viktor moved one hand out of the way to let Yuri's in between them, and helped massage the slick fluid all over them. It wasn't the
warming liquid Yuri liked, but it was still fine.

Yuri had to catch his breath a little as Viktor continued to work them together, pushing up a little to sit on his knees, putting them on either side of the Russian's hips. He hadn't gotten far before he felt Viktor taking one hand away to prop himself up on that elbow, folding one knee against Yuri's right side as his other leg rose up to rest against his shoulder. Yuri felt almost paralyzed by the sensation between them, and half-didn't notice the leg rising up ahead of him. But Viktor nudged his head with his calf to bring him back.

"Eyes on me, Yuri." He said coyly, "I didn't give you so much to drink that you'd pass out in the middle of this."

"No..." The younger man agreed, "I'm not going to." He slowly and reluctantly pulled out of Viktor's grasp, and leaned forward against the extended leg, holding the man's knee with one hand as the other settled on the sheets by Viktor's waist. He could feel the muscles in Viktor's leg tighten a little as he pressed forward, but he kept his sights on the slate-blue irises beneath him.

To Viktor's credit, even though he'd let Yuri take him first, it was still primarily him that did most of the work during their play sessions. Yuri supposed he liked being in control most of the time...but every so often, and perhaps only when he was in certain moods, Viktor liked being the vulnerable one.

This was one of those moments.

Viktor's back arched a little, and both arms rose up over his head to tousle his hair amongst the pillows. He twisted a little onto his side, and Yuri just inched in closer, beginning the push-and-pull rotation of his hips. He listened for the little hums of pleasure as he started to pick up a little speed, reaching over with his free hand to massage the man when he could. Multi-tasking was, occasionally, difficult though.

Before long, Viktor had pulled his leg back down off Yuri's shoulder and had rotated onto his stomach. Yuri pressed against his back, kissing at his shoulder-blades, hands clinging to his waist. He could see Viktor's fingers clenching at the sheets, and he started quietly crying out.

I'm the only one in the world who's heard these sounds from Viktor...who's gotten to feel him like this...

The Russian had even bit down on the thick-hemmed corner of one of the pillows, though it didn't seem to help much.

"Y-Yuri...!"

The younger man smiled at that. Hearing the sound of his name broken up like that was always a favorite of his. If Viktor still had enough of his senses to say his name normally, he wasn't trying hard enough. But his turn had suddenly come to an end when he felt Viktor twisting under him again. Yuri knew he only did that so quickly if he felt himself on the edge sooner than he'd wanted. So he waited to follow the older man's lead, and let Viktor pull him up into his lap as he sat with his back against the headboard. It wasn't an immediate reconnect though, as Viktor kissed him a little first, nosing at his neck as his hands roamed up and down Yuri's chest and back.

No matter what, Viktor always wanted to have their eyes locked whenever one entered the other. It was one of the highest signs of surrender and trust, in his opinion. And so, as he repositioned himself beneath his husband, slick with the clear liquid from earlier and wet from perspiration, he looked into those brown eyes that had given him so much happiness. Yuri put his right arm over his
partner's shoulder, letting it settle behind his neck as the other hand came up over his collarbone, and he slowly descended into Viktor's lap. Their eyes stayed together until it was done, and only after did Viktor close his to lean up and kiss the man again.

Yuri rose and fell slowly after that, adjusting to the new sensation again, and Viktor helped him along, holding him close with both arms around his back. Once he was certain the discomfort had dissipated, he pulled one arm from where it hugged the man and brought it between them, giving Yuri something to push into. It worked, and the younger figure picked up the pace a little bit.

Viktor soon changed their position again though, moving to put Yuri's hands against the headboard as he went behind him, holding onto his hips as he pushed inside again. Yuri cried out a little, a confused mess of pleasure and uncertainty, but Viktor kissed his back and held his hands flat against the man's chest, going gently.

He could never do this with another man... Viktor thought to himself, knowing deep down that this figure he'd become enthralled with had probably never considered his own needs prior to their meeting. He still tenses up a little, like he has to convince himself all over again that it's okay. He has to remind himself that it's me, and only me. I'm the only person he'll ever let do this to him. I'm the only person he's ever trusted with this part of himself.

When he felt Yuri buckling under him a little, he pulled him back from the headboard again, and settled the Asian athlete on his back beneath him. Black hair was matted to Yuri's forehead, and he was breathing heavily...but those brown eyes...they were still longing. So Viktor did his best, and returned to his day-long attempt at seducing this man beneath him.

He pulled Yuri's knees against to his sides and pushed on between them, taking him in his free hand as the other reached up to stroke Yuri's face. The younger man leaned into the touch affectionately, and then leaned his head back as Viktor started moving again.

"...V...Vik...tor...!!" He cried out, biting down on one of his knuckles in desperation.

The older skater could sense when Yuri was on the edge; certain muscles tensed, his back arched a certain way, and Yuri's expression changed. When he saw and felt it, Viktor leaned in close to the man's ear and whispered, "Ja tebja lublju, Yuri..."

Yuri clenched up almost immediately after, desperately trying not to cry out too loudly, wrapping his arms tightly around Viktor's head and shoulders as his body quaked. Viktor kept stroking gently, waiting for the trembling to stop before pulling his hand away. He kept pace with his hips until he himself was ready to finish, pushing deep inside as Yuri clung to him, panting heavy breaths against the crook of his neck. Viktor stayed right where he was for a while after that, letting Yuri hold onto him as long as he wanted, and hugging him tightly in return. When he finally withdrew, he leaned to his side, collecting Yuri in his arms again and holding him gently, his cheek to the man's shoulder. Yuri still twitched now and again, and Viktor slowly rubbed his chest.

"Viktor..." He finally said, causing the Russian to lift his head a little from where he'd pressed it to Yuri's skin.

"Hm?"

"Ja tože...tebja lub...lublju."

Viktor had to lift his head up fully to look at his partner at the sound of that, and when he saw a brown eye looking to the side at him from where his head had been submerged in the downy pillows, he felt a tear fall from one of his own.
Yuri was confused, and turned to look at him more straight-on, "Viktor? Did...did I say it wrong?"

"No..."

"...Then...why are you...?"

"...I don't...remember teaching you those words. I'm..." The Russian reached up to rub his eyes and smiled, "I'm just happy to hear them from you. You said them perfectly."
CHAPTER THRITY EIGHT

It was pitch darkness when Viktor twitched awake, woken from a light sleep by the buzz of a text message and a blinking, blindingly-bright cell-phone screen, flashing light on the wall. Yuri hadn't budged.

Blearily, the Russian reached an uncoordinated hand over the edge of the bed and towards the nightstand, trying to find his phone in the dark. When he grabbed it, he rolled over onto his back, knee raised up to pitch a tent under the heavy hotel blanket. Blue eyes squinted at the blazing white light directly in front of him, but as his vision adjusted and the image became more clear, Viktor rose to sit upright. He wasn't sure if he should be worried or angry at what he saw.

For one, it turned out the buzzing wasn't even coming from his own phone. It was Yuri's.

Second...the message scrawled across the screen came from a name he hadn't expected to see.

*Mikhail Rozovsky: [Congratulations, Yuri! I just saw the post on Viktor's Instagram!]*

Viktor's eyes turned away from the screen, trailing over to where Yuri had been sound asleep. He shifted a little under the blanket, but stayed unconscious, even as Viktor reached over angrily to grab his hand. More specifically, his thumb. He pressed it to the circle at the bottom of the screen and unlocked the device, giving him access to the archive of whatever messages had already been sent.

He paused a moment though, the phone bringing up the text message chat window and giving a brief preview of what had recently been said. Nothing in the last week at least, he'd noticed, trying not to read the actual messages. Part of him felt like he was already intruding too much...but another thought he deserved to know.

And so...he scrolled to the beginning, though it hadn't been far to go to find it.

*Mon, Mar 13, 3:17PM:*

*Are you still in St. Petersburg?*

*Viktor?*

*No, this is Yuri.*

*Oh! Hey! Did Viktor tell you to message me? I'm still in the city but I'm at the train station, about to leave.*

*Yakov gave me your information. Viktor doesn't know I reached out.*

*Ah, I see.*

*Can I do something for you?*

*Yuri?*

*Can you stay in St. Petersburg for one more day?*

*Sure. What do you need?*

*I want to meet with you. Viktor practices alone late in the evenings so I can get away without him*
noticing.]

[Where do you want to meet?]  

[The cafe where you got your drink before, down the street from the skating arena. They're open late. Be there at 11pm tonight.]  

[Okay.]  

**Fri, Mar 17, 1:28AM:**

[Congratulations, Yuri! I just saw the post on Viktor's Instagram!]

That was the end of it. His heart was pounding in his chest, anxiety and fear creeping up in him. His left eye and cheek started to hurt a little, remembering how that very man had shown up in the presence of the Nikiforov Patriarch before. A flash of memory played in his mind, seeing the fist come down into this face again like it was the first time.

'[Don't be mad at him! I'm the one who took him to the skating rink!]'  

'[I told you to never let him skate again! How many times do I have to say it!?]'

'[You can't choose for Viktor what he can and can't like!]'  

'[I'm getting really good, papa! If you let me go to St. Petersburg, I can compete and send money home when I win! Coach Yakov says-]'  

**CRACK**  

'[Konstantin!!]'

Screaming followed by sobbing.

'[He's not your coach! No son of mine is going to be a fucking dancer! You'll be working in the steel mill just like the rest of us!]'  

'[He'll be more successful as an athlete, Konstantin...give him a chance. He has the potential to be-]'  

'[Don't interrupt me, old man! This is my family and I make the decisions for what's best for it. Viktor isn't going anywhere.]

'[Viktor, let me look-]'

'[My eye...mama, I can't...I can't see!!]'  

Viktor could remember the sound of his own hysterical screaming like he'd been doing it again right where he sat. He cringed, trying to shake it off, looking back at the phone in his hand. He crossed his legs under the blankets and looked at the touch-screen keyboard under the text window. His brow furrowed and his eyes narrowed...and then his thumbs moved.

[Why are you talking to Yuri behind my back?]

It was a moment before Viktor could see the animated dots on the bottom left of the screen to indicate a reply being typed, and he felt a knot in his stomach when he saw them.
[Scroll up 2 inches and read it, Viktor.]

[I already read it. You met behind my back and talked in secret. How could you?]

[He's the one who contacted me first.]

Viktor growled at the answers.

[He's just trying to protect you.]
[Why are you so mad anyway? You seemed happy when I came by the rink last week.]

[That's because you approached me first, in a place I felt comfortable. This is an overreach.]

[Again, he contacted me first.]
[Don't be mad at him for wanting you to have what he has.]

[What's that supposed to mean?]

[He was practically interviewing me when we met that night. He wanted to make sure that if he approached you with the idea of meeting with me again, that there wouldn't be any risk of your father being there, too. I told him I'd support whatever decision he made on the matter. I assume he hadn't come to that point yet, given how he apparently hadn't told you we'd spoken.]

Viktor scoffed at the words, "You already knew where to find me by then. You wouldn't have needed to bring Konstantin with you again."

[He doesn't want you to be estranged from the entire family anymore, Viktor. Why don't you want to give us a chance?]

If it were his own phone, he'd have thrown it across the room and gone back to sleep if he could, but since it wasn't, he held it tightly, gritting his teeth.

[I don't even have words to describe how angry I am right now.]
[Why would I WANT a relationship with my family? Your sister was the only one who stood up for me when my own father nearly blinded me, almost ending my career before it even had a chance to begin...and even that was short lived. Not ONE of you people reached out to support me after I left home. Not one letter, not one phone call! You were all as silent as the GRAVE. So that's what you all are to me.]
[Dead.]

[Not all of us knew what happened until long after the fact.]

[Am I supposed to forgive you for being ignorant?]

[I don't expect forgiveness. I MIGHT not even expect an apology when this is done. But I WASN'T THERE WHEN IT HAPPENED, REMEMBER? I had been gone for 2 years already by then. How was I supposed to know? Your mother wasn't the only one your father terrified into silence. The entire clan was tight-lipped about what happened to you. Yuri told me about how your mother stopped returning your calls after you left home. You weren't the only one who lost touch with her.]

Viktor had to read that comment three times over before it made sense, but even then, he couldn't thumb a reply. The dots popped up again anyway.

[I didn't know how to find you.]
[Did you even try?]

[Of course I did. I must've called every skating arena in the St. Petersburg and Moscow area trying
to track you down, but no one said they knew you. Talking to you now, and having read so much
about your exploits over the years...I can only imagine that you were right there in the background at
one of those arenas when I was on the phone, and the person who picked up just didn't know and
didn't care.]
[I tried, Viktor. I swear on Tatiyana's grave. I tried.]
[You're my own flesh and blood, and my sister's only child. Don't just throw me out because it hurts
to remember.]

[It's not just you I have to worry about.]

[Konstantin wants no part of this.]

[Of course not.]

[Do you want him to?]

"ABSOLUTELY NOT." Viktor found himself whisper-barking at the phone as he typed it in all
caps.

[Fair enough...]
[You don't have to concern yourself with anyone other than me getting involved in all this either,
though. My wife left me years ago and took your cousins with her. Most of the rest of the family is
still in that little damn hamlet and have no real contact with the rest of the world.]
[So it's just me.]

He stared at the last message for a while, unsure what to say, if anything.

[I still love the little kid-nephew I left behind. I'd like to get to know the man he grew up to become.
But I won't force you to if you don't want to.]

Viktor brought his hand up to his mouth, covering it for worry of making a sound that would wake
Yuri. Despite his anger, he could feel the sting of tears in his eyes, and choked back a few ragged
breaths. Makkachin came up to the side of the bed and whimpered at him, but the Russian paid his
dog no attention. His hand rose up to his eyes instead, as though his fingers could force the tears
back inside. But they fell from his cheeks anyway.

"...Viktor...?" Yuri wondered, having awoken at some point earlier, unknown to the man, "What's
wrong?"

"I don't want to remember."

"...Remember?" The younger skater repeated, confused beyond all reason. He saw where Viktor
held the phone in his hand though, dangling from where he'd put his elbow over his raised knee. He
realized suddenly that it was his own phone, not Viktor's, that he held there. He saw the text
message window labeled with Mikhail's name, and hummed a breath of worry as he reached over to
take it back.

Twisting and pushing to sit upright next to his husband, Yuri put his free arm around Viktor's back
and leaned to rest his cheek against his shoulder, scrolling through the conversation to find out what
had happened. By the time he'd reached the end, Viktor was still drawing in a few involuntary
hiccupped breaths, having just barely managed to avoid crying outright.
"I'm sorry I didn't tell you..." Yuri said regretfully, "I wasn't sure when it would be a good time, so I thought I'd wait until at least after Worlds. I didn't even really mean to start talking to him...I was still debating whether or not to send the first message when Yurio startled me, and I must've hit the send button when I jumped and dropped my phone."

"Yakov put you up to it. I don't blame you." Viktor answered curtly, "He shouldn't have done that."

"...I thought I'd play along with Mikhail to see what kind of guy he is." Yuri explained, still feeling like it was his fault despite it all, "I figured that if I carried on long enough, I'd be able to tell if he was just trying to use or mislead you. You never know with long-lost relatives who find out someone they're related to is famous..."

Viktor hadn't had the courage to look at the man since he'd woken up, and instead, wrapped his arms around his legs, burying his eyes in the sheets above his knees, "And?"

"I can't say for sure after just one conversation." Yuri answered honestly, "But...he seems genuine."

"You think I should meet with him?"

"I don't think it would hurt to break bread once in a while." He said simply, rubbing his thumb along Viktor's back like Viktor had often done to comfort him in the past, "He doesn't have your contact information or our address, so if you ever get the feeling that he's sketchy...we can drop him, and I'll block his number."

The phone blinked in Yuri's hand, and he glanced at it to see Mikhail asking for some kind of reply.

"What should we tell him?"

Viktor snuffled, and finally pulled his face up from where he'd buried it against his knees, reaching over to retake Yuri's phone. He rubbed his nose on the back of his wrist and started typing.

[Do you want to come to Worlds with us?]
CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

March 29th had arrived too quickly, but at least the flight from Spain to Finland was relatively short. Yuri was still grinning to himself over where it said 'Yuri Nikiforov' on his new passport, which had arrived only just before they'd needed to leave for the airport. He wouldn't have needed it to fly within the EU, but it was still nice to have it, knowing he didn't have to go all the way back to Barcelona to get his mitts on it before returning to Japan.

Viktor was going over the program as they were in the taxi heading to the Hartwall Arena. For the first time since winning gold at his last European Championship, he was dressed back up in his full white and red track suit with R U emblazoned on the chest. Yuri was in his own track suit, the one with the primarily aqua-blue coat, and each of them wore their event lanyards with their competitor passes, though Viktor had a second one for his coach status.

"The Men's Short Program isn't until tomorrow at 12:30." He explained, "Then the Free Skate is on Saturday from about 11am to 3pm. The Exhibition of Champions is on Sunday starting at 2pm."

"I don't think I've ever been this excited for a competition." Yuri said, looking out the window as they were getting closer, "I'm about to jump out of my skin."

"Save all your energy for later." Viktor advised, looking up past his phone, "Don't need you wearing yourself out before you even set foot on the ice."

"I can't help it! This is different!" He twisted in his seat and beamed at the skater, "Think about it...last time I saw you in that whole outfit, in person, at an event, I blew you off. Now look at us!" His eyes were bright like his gold ring, making Viktor smile, "I feel like I could do six quads in my Short Program alone!"

"You wouldn't have time for the other required elements if you did."

"Still!"

There was already a pretty big crowd at the drop-off area in front of the arena. Yuri recognized the building from previous years; the last competition held there was in 2009, a European Championship, and the last World Championship was hosted there in 1999 before that. Cameras were flashing as other taxis and vans were pulling up with other competitors, and fans of every nation were there screaming for their skating heroes.

When their own vehicle finally pulled up, Viktor paid the driver and nodded to Yuri to exit. The door opened, and a wave of excitement washed over him, nearly pushing him right back inside the car. He finally managed to get out though and stood upright, looking out at the massive gathering, and for once, happy to hear their cheering. But it all paled when Viktor came out of the car after him, and fans started screaming his name. Dozens of people were holding up home-fashioned signs and flags to welcome Viktor back to competition.

Yuri couldn't have been happier, seeing the fire of life blazing in Viktor's eyes, breathing in the air like it had never been so fresh before. He finally addressed the throng of people, raising up his right hand to wave, and winking happily at the cameras, splaying his fingers as though trying to make an effort to show off his ring.
The roar became a storm, and continued on as Viktor took Yuri by the hand to start walking inside the arena with him. Their fingers were gently laced together, and Yuri felt more confident than ever, feeling Viktor's ring against his skin.

_The crowd loves him...but he's mine._

They'd been inside the arena a few times since arriving the previous Sunday, taking advantage of the practice times on Monday and Tuesday. They'd even reunited with their competition friends on the ice, accepting their congratulations and rebuilding damaged bridges with those who'd been damaged by previous events. Yuri had even been surprised by JJ's tacit apology for antagonizing him at Four Continents.

"We're here to compete as friends, even if we're all rivals." Yuri had said, "So we should all cheer each other on from now on, okay?"

Morale was high after that, and the energy of the competition shifted, especially after many of the skaters saw Viktor's Short Program practice. They quickly realized just how serious things were going to be again. He'd been absent from the Grand Prix Series, Russian Nationals, and the European Championships...but now he was back to reclaim his crown, and everyone knew it. Many had even given their sympathies to Yuri.

"He got you all trained up to win gold and now he's just going to dangle it in front of you like a carrot on a stick." Chris mused, sliding a hand down Yuri's thigh as they watched Viktor's Free Skate practice on the Tuesday, "Are you jealous?"

"Jealous?" He huffed a laugh, "I'm going to win gold this weekend. He's the one who's going to be jealous."

"Such determination..." The Swiss skater swooned, "If you perform your Eros program like this, you may melt the ice before I even have a chance."

"Don't worry, Chris." Yuri reassured, "If the ice has already turned to water, your mature sexiness will evaporate what's left into steam."

Despite the success of the practice, Yuri could still hear Viktor getting lectured by Yakov. Where it was once a chastising to Yurio for attempting quads while still in the Junior division, it was now an argument against quads for a skater entering the twilight of his career...but Viktor wouldn't hear it.

"You could hurt yourself!" Yakov insisted.

"That's always a risk." The skater retorted, "But I haven't been hurt yet."

"Don't jinx yourself!"

"I won't!" Viktor laughed, hardly taking it seriously at all.

Yuri listened to them intently, but his mind always went back to the moment when Viktor had revealed that one particular secret to him about the upcoming performance. Viktor hadn't shown it off to anyone yet, not even him...but Yuri could see the itch every time he went to perform his jumps. The spirit of that world record was in them. He could feel the power in the height and distance of each leap.

_If he actually pulls it off while being scored...his name will be in the history books for decades._
maybe even long after we're all bones and dust. It won't just be replaced by the next record setter in a generation or two...it'll have staying power. What more could he ask for than to have his name still listed as a current record holder when he's too old to even stand? We'll look back on these days together and wonder where all the time went...like we all just made history yesterday.

The announcers had begun the Opening Ceremonies, and the national anthem of Finland was played while several local skaters carried the large flag out onto the ice, one at each corner. The ISU flag came out after them, carried on a pole by a single elegantly-dressed female skater around the rink, followed by the flags of all the participating countries.

The competitors had all seen it a thousand times before and found it all rather dull. What they were looking forward to was the custom ice-skating show that the host nation would always put together ahead of time. Local singing talent would give something of a concert, or a storytelling exhibition would be presented, and with the lights and play of the ice taken full advantage of, a whole movie could be played in real time.

Yuri remembered the show from the World Championships when they'd been held in Shanghai a few years prior. He hadn't even come close to medaling at that event, but he remembered watching Viktor claim it like it was the easiest thing in the world. The Chinese show was an homage to ice, and how archaeologists and anthropologists had discovered a 10,000 year old cave painting on Chinese territory that depicted ancient people on a hunt...on skates.

This year, a few specific gold medalists from the past year's major events had been selected to put on a special show during the Opening Ceremonies to celebrate their accomplishments separately from the rest. Yurio had been among the chosen, and he performed a section of his Grand Prix Final Exhibition Skate; 'Welcome to the Madness'...although he was doing it to a different selection of music more appropriate to the tone of the event. Without the proverbial death-metal, the show seemed somewhat...neutered.

Yuri leaned over to Viktor where they'd watched it from the stands, "He barely stands taller than the kids skating around him."

"I'm sure he's thinking the same thing." The Russian laughed, clapping along with the rest as the show progressed.

When the mascot event came up though, and Yurio had once again been shuttled out onto the ice to participate, the pair could hardly contain themselves.

Yurio was forced to pretend to enjoy himself amongst the rabble and big annoying mascot costumes. *I literally could not hate anything more than I hate everything right now.*

It was only about a 30 minute wait before the Pairs Short Program would begin, so the two decided to stay and watch. Even though their own event wouldn't start until the next day, Yuri still felt himself starting to get nervous.

The Pair Skaters had different requirements than Singles did, and some of the jumps involved the man throwing his female partner through the air to perform her jump. A few landed hard and fell, and it unsettled the Asian's stomach.

Viktor could sense it, and touched the man's hand where he kept it balled up on the chair's arm-rest, "You aren't even competing against these guys. What's gotten you all stiff?"

"I see them jump and fall, and some might even be hurt..." He answered, "Yakov's worried about
that happening to you, too. This record-setting jump you have planned...is it really such a good idea?"

"It took me 2 weeks to get it right. You think I didn't fall a few times before I landed it?"

"The idea of you falling on the ice is a foreign concept to me." Yuri answered pensively, "I saw how banged up you were coming home from your solo practices...but I never thought it was because you were trying to do such an impossible jump."

"It's fine, Yuri..." Viktor tried to reassure, "I can do it. I made sure I could do it ten times over before I ever thought of celebrating the idea that I could land it in competition."

"Are you sure though?"

The Russian gave him a look, "I need you to believe more than I do that I can win."

Yuri was taken aback by the statement, "...Viktor..."

"If you heard 2 years ago that I was going to do this jump, would it ever cross your mind to doubt that I could do it?"

"...No."

"Then why doubt me now?"

"I'm not just a distant admirer anymore." He answered quietly, barely audible over the cheering of the audience as the latest skaters' scores were called out overhead, "If you somehow miss the jump and get hurt...I have to watch you suffer afterwards."

"Now I'm going to have to worry about you messing up your own jumps because I know that's on your mind." He reached his free hand across to caress the younger man's cheek, "Stop worrying so much and have faith in me. I wouldn't do it unless I knew that I could...and I know that I can."

To Yuri's relief, and perhaps to his dread at the same time, the order of performances had placed him on the roster after Viktor for the Short Program. So at least, no matter what happened, he'd know ahead of time if he had anything to worry about. Likewise...if Viktor fell or got hurt, it would entirely destroy his own chances of medaling. It felt strange to him to realize that both of their performances tied in so closely to one another.

But... He thought to himself as they left the arena for the night, ...At least, if something happens and I blow my chances at the podium like in Sochi...people will understand why this time. It won't just seem like a completely arbitrary melt-down.

After a while, they made their way out of the stands and started heading for the shuttle port. There were massive crowds standing outside, competitors and observers alike. Yuri looked around in wonder, looking for something to do while Viktor was pulled away by ISU media. He could hear them clamoring for information about the Russian's return.

Yuri suddenly felt a hard kick against his back, but to his own surprise, as well as everyone around them, he held his ground with only one side-step to keep his balance. He felt two more kicks, but still held steady. When he looked over to see the stunned but indignant look on Yurio's face, he couldn't help but smile, "Looks like you had fun out there tonight, Yurio."

"Shut your face-hole, Katsudon." The blond answered curtly, "We found your friend for you."
"Friend?"

"Viktor's uncle." He clarified, thumbing back to where the man had been talking to Yakov.

"Oh!" Yuri looked back to get Viktor's attention from where it had been grabbed by a small gaggle
of reporters, "Viktor, it's Mikhail! He made it!"

"...All right, it looks like I have to go then." He told the group, nodding his head politely to depart
from them and follow/get pulled along by Yuri.

Meeting with the man again had made Viktor more nervous than making a come-back to
competition. He knew what the ice of the arena felt like...but the ice of Mikhail was untested and
potentially thin. There was always the worry that something would cause him to fall through it and
drown.

So, unlike their first meeting in St. Petersburg, Viktor was a bit more reserved, and tensely held out
his hand, "Uncle."

"Nephew." The older man smiled, shaking Viktor's hand happily, "Good luck tomorrow during the
Short Program."

"Spasibo."

"Coach Yakov was telling me about the rules and scoring system." The elder went on, "It's all really
complicated."

"Only the judges make it complicated." Viktor pointed out, "Anyone with an HD camera can go
back and check the rotations on a jump, and see which foot and what edge was used to take off and
land on...but judges can be prickly when it comes to giving good scores for the artistry of the
performance. Plenty of skaters have been hurt by biases rather than an actual lack of talent or skill."

"You're worried about the American judge?"

"Every Russian worries about the American judge."

"I'm sure you'll do fine. You've been scored by them in the past and still whipped out gold medals at
15 consecutive international events, never mind the GP Series qualifiers and Nationals."

"Mh..."

"Viktor, I want a pork cutlet bowl when I win this thing." Yurio interrupted.

Yuri balked, "But that's what my reward's supposed to be..."

"That's why I want it." The blond retorted, "So I can eat it in front of you with the gold medal
around my neck."

"Ahhh you're so cold!

"Katsuki-kun!" Came a familiar voice, pulling the group out of the previous mind-set.

Yuri looked over, and had a serious feeling of déjà vu to see Newscaster Morooka standing there
looking back at him. But, instead of being depressed like he'd been the last time the announcer had
grabbed his attention, he stood proudly, and lifted the participant's badge hanging from his lanyard,
"It's Nikiforov-kun now."
He realized he was even wearing the same outfit from that day, too. Everything was the same, except he no longer needed his glasses.

"Ah yeah, I'd heard that! I guess it's official, then." The man answered, approaching the group, "You look like you fit right in with these guys. You're still skating for Japan though, right?"

"Absolutely."

Viktor had been watching quietly, but then smiled and put his hand on Yuri's shoulder, "How about that commemorative photo you bailed on before?"

Yuri's eyes lit up, and he realized in that moment...everything had finally come full-circle for him.
CHAPTER FOURTY

The final night before the Men's Singles competition was ending in the lobby of the event's main hotel; Scandic Park Helsinki. A significant number of skaters had wandered in and seen the growing number of participants...and soon, what began as just Yuri, Viktor, and Chris...had become more than 60, from all skating disciplines...men and women alike. Even Yurio stopped by and lingered a while...though he mostly did so because he saw Otabek wall-flowering there.

Many smaller conversations had been started within the group, since it was difficult to hear one another across the full length of the what-seemed-to-be-50-foot couch. Drinks were crowding the circular tops of the three small tables that were set up between the couch and the individual chairs opposite it.

Viktor had claimed the corner-end of the couch almost immediately upon entering the bar area when it was still empty, and Yuri naturally sat right next to him. The Russian had already had three drinks, and was starting to get into a heated debate with Chris. Yuri just watched them cautiously, huffing a laugh to himself once in a while as they made their half-drunken points.

"...and it's the only time I'll ever do these programs, so why would I want to spoil the big reveal to everyone by doing my full show in costume and with music during practice?"

"That's why it's called a Dress Rehearsal, Viktor."

"I was dressed!" He insisted.

"In costume." Chris retorted, "It's not fair that you've held out on us for so long. You're treating us worse than the audience." He was practically pouting.

"You'll see tomorrow!"

"I've seen his outfits." Yuri chimed in proudly, raising his hand up like a student in a classroom.

"That would only be surprising if it were the opposite." Chris explained casually, "We expect you've seen more of Viktor's plans than the rest of us."

"Well, I haven't seen everything." Yuri pointed out defensively, "He even had these super secret private practice sessions for a few weeks in St. Petersburg. I didn't know what he was up to until we left for Barcelona, and even now I haven't seen it all."

"Hmm...interesting pick, going back there."

"Chris has a point." Phichit said quietly, having just sat back and listened like Yuri was since his arrival, "Why did you go back to Barcelona? You could've gone anywhere."

"It's where we got engaged, so why not?" Yuri answered.

"It's weird to think you guys are actually married now." The Thai skater said, smiling as he nursed his one drink for the evening, "I was so embarrassed when I realized you weren't after I'd congratulated you already..."

"I was sure you'd stay a bachelor until you retired." Chris chimed in, "It didn't seem normal for you
to just veer off and find someone."

"It's not like I went to Hasetsu just to seduce Yuri." Viktor explained, only to pause and touch his chin with a finger, "...Well, okay, maybe partly I did, but not entirely..."

The younger skater practically chortled at him, "Viktor, you presented yourself to me completely naked. I couldn't even understand what you were saying at the time because of it."

"I was in the onsen! I'd have gotten grief if I even let my towel fall in!" Viktor insisted. Yuri just smirked.

"Tsh, Viktor, you're such a horrible tease...why did you never show up in places for me naked?" Chris wondered piteously.

"That's true! And you probably would've appreciated it more, too!" Viktor laughed, and the two reached out their glasses to clink them together.

"Ohhh...Viktor, come be my coach next year!" The Swiss skater beckoned, blinking his eyes slowly as he pulled his drink back.

"No! No, he's mine!" Yuri waved his arms around protectively, "I already called dibs!" He pointed at his ring, "See?" Then at Viktor's ring, "Dibs!"

"Maybe we should have another Dance-Off?" Chris taunted, "Whoever wins gets Viktor for the night."

"Oohhh!" Viktor clapped, "That sounds like fun!"

"You're not supposed to be happy about that!"

"Are you worried Chris might win?" The Russian ran his fingers though Yuri's hair before pulling him closer with a hand gently cradled around the back of his head, "Are you thinking about what he'd do to me if he did?"

"Viktor!" Yuri's face was bright red.

"Maybe it should be Viktor and I having a Dance Battle over who gets Yuri for the night?" Chris mused, rising from his solo-chair and setting his drink down, only to get down on his knees and wedge himself between Yuri's legs provocatively, leaning into him as well as he could, "If I win, then I'll get to find out what it is about you that made Viktor so happily leave the ice." His hands had descended the skater's chest and settled firmly on his backside where he sat on the couch.

The Asian skater was practically jumping out of his skin from the embarrassment, "C-Chris...!"

"Oh my..." Phichit whispered behind his glass, "This is getting PG-rated rather quickly..."

"He does have quite the kissable face, don't you think?" Viktor wondered, watching the two and quite entertained at it. He'd already pulled out his phone and started taking pictures.

The blond was looking Yuri in the eyes rather seductively, "More than just his face..."

"Viktor save me!" Yuri pleaded, trying to wriggle free but unable to.

"Okay, okay..." The Russian acknowledged, dropping his phone to his chest. He then leaned over from where he'd propped himself up against the armrest to liberate his husband from the evil Swiss skater's grasp. Chris played along and let up, watching Yuri be guided over as he sat back in his own
chair. Viktor was practically leading him by less than a finger under his chin, and he looked up at the younger skater longingly, "What kind of reward do I get for my daring rescue?"

Yuri couldn't find words for the moment, feeling more comfortable looking into Viktor's eyes than into Chris'. He suddenly gave a more devious expression, "I don't know, what kind of reward would you want?"

"Wow~!" Viktor smirked, suddenly pulling the man onto his lap, "And you haven't even had anything to drink tonight."

Chris whistled as he eagerly watched the Russian pull his husband into a deep kiss right there in front of everyone, and many started turning their heads to see it, several even cheering them on. Viktor had started pulling the zipper of his track-suit coat down when Yuri found himself bowled over, comically knocked in the head by the heel of a piece of bread that had suddenly been chucked at him.

"Knock it off, dumbasses!" Yurio barked at them, arm still outstretched from his toss, and leering at them despite the clicking of camera flashes and video recording all around him, "This is a public place! We don't all need to see you making out!"

Yuri was brushing the crumbs from his hair, and suddenly became hyper-aware of his situation...and all the smart-phones facing his direction. He quickly got off Viktor's lap and sat properly, trying to become as small and unnoticeable as possible.

"Aww you're such a kill-joy, Yurio..." Viktor whined, pulling his partner to lean into a hug against his chest, though Yuri didn't return the gesture because of his previous humiliation, "It was all harmless fun!"

"It's harmless till one of you whips your dick out!"

"It wouldn't have gone that far!" The older Russian insisted, protectively stroking Yuri's head where he held it under his chin.

"Says you, Mr. 'I run around the deck of the onsen buck-ass-naked.'"

Viktor just laughed at that, "It's more relaxing that way!"

"...Who would even want to see either of us naked in public anyway?" Yuri wondered, mostly to himself as he deadpanned the entire situation.

To his surprise, a few hands nearby started rising, including Chris'...and then Viktor's own as well.

"...Never mind...!" The Asian skater mumbled, his face turning even brighter red as he tried to hide it against Viktor's chest.

The sheer intensity of Yuri's chagrin had lead him to requesting one drink from the bar, and soon after quickly finishing it, decided to head up to their hotel room. He was checking his phone as he went up the elevator, his face going red again as pictures and video of the event started circulating online.

*I can't believe I let that happen...* He thought, mortified at himself, *It was already bad enough when Phichit posted photos of Viktor and me at the hot-pot restaurant...and he was still just my coach then. Now he's actually competing...this looks so bad!*

He tossed his phone onto the bed when he got back into the room, and went face-down next to it
soon after, half-wishing Makkachin had been there to greet him. The poodle had been put-up at a local pet hotel though since pets weren't allowed at the event. He hadn't even noticed as he fell asleep, with all the lights in the room on, until he felt himself jostled awake again by someone flipping him over.

Half-conscious and still slightly buzzed, he thought he could see Viktor there, and even worse, Chris standing behind him. Viktor was getting between his knees, pulling his legs onto either side of his hips, groping for the openings to his clothing in an attempt to pull them off. He could feel the man pressing hard against his hips.

Yuri shot up after that, yelling protests into the air of an empty room. Panting heavily, he realized all the lights were off, and he was alone in the dark. One open curtain to the city beyond the hotel was all that offered illumination. Yuri looked around, noticing that the yellow Chris-shaped blob in his nightmare had actually been a sunflower in a painting on the wall ahead of him, and with a heave, he fell backward on the bed.

...Just a dream.

He turned his head as he heard the sound of the door-lock being released, and the door opening after it. The light poured in for a moment, and then the door closed with a click again, and Viktor came stumbling in. His face was flushed and his hair was messy, and it wasn't long before the track-suit coat he'd started removing in the lounge finally came off and was tossed aside.

But, unlike in Yuri's waking nightmare, Viktor didn't just go over and force himself between his legs. He stepped to the edge of the bed and went face-down into it next to Yuri, just as he himself had earlier in the night. Yuri gawked at him ponderously, looking over to the alarm clock to see its face reading 2:37am.

"Too much to drink?"

"Mnh..."

"Are you going to be okay to skate this afternoon?"

"Mhmm..."

Yuri cocked a brow at him, "...Would you really let Chris have his way with me?"

"Mm'mm..."

The answer was easy, but Yuri wondered if Viktor was even really paying attention. That inquiry was soon answered though, and Viktor turned his face, then pushed himself onto his side, then onto his back, and looked up where Yuri had propped himself up on his elbow. The Russian reached up one hand to play lightly with the coat-zipper pulled up to Yuri's neck, but soon after, cupped that hand over the man's cheek.

"No one gets to have you but me." He said blearily, "We may joke around, but Chris knows I'd never let him touch you like that. Not seriously."

"What about you?"

Viktor smiled through his messy bangs, his eyes barely open as he looked up at his husband, "I've known Chris since we were barely out of the Junior division. We've always joked around...but we've never acted on those jokes. I'm not really that into guys."
"...Huh...?" Yuri felt a pit in his stomach, which was made worse by how Viktor's words contradicted what he was doing at that moment.

"You're different." The Russian said, putting Yuri's mind at ease again, "I'm not just into you...I love you."

...I've heard that alcohol can make a person say truths that they normally wouldn't...is this like that? Is he too drunk to tell a lie?

"What about you?" Viktor wondered pointedly, as though not realizing how weird his question was. The ball was back in Yuri's court.

"...What about me?" He repeated, "...Of course, I love you too...why?"

"Were you into guys before I came along?" The alcohol asked.

The younger skater furrowed his brow, but he shook his head, "I don't know."

"You were really freaked out by Chris. I almost felt a little bad egging him on like that..." Viktor mused, arms up above his head as he stretched, "But it was just so much fun..."

"...I'm not into him." Yuri answered with a shrug, "You're the only person I've ever let myself really fall for." He turned so he could lay on his side, resting his head on Viktor's abdomen and looking up at him, "So...I don't know that I would've ever gotten seriously interested in some girl eventually, or another man... Maybe I'm just Viktor-sexual."

The Russian lifted his head to look down at him, perplexed at first, but then smiling and letting his head fall back again, "Viktor-sexual." He repeated, "...That's good, I like that. I'm Yuri-sexual for sure."

"Careful who you say that to." The younger man joked, "People might get the wrong idea."

Viktor pulled himself to sit upright rather quickly, dumping Yuri's head into his lap and laughing at the whole thing, "Wouldn't that be hilarious!? I say I'm Yuri-sexual and everyone thinks I mean Yuri!"

"Please don't say that." Yuri muffled against Viktor's belly, finally pulling himself out again and sitting upright, "I couldn't stand the shame."

"He's half my age; that would be horrible!" The Russian still thought it was hysterically funny though, "I think people would see more sense in my saying I'm Katsudon-sexual!"

"...I haven't had katsudon in so long..." Yuri found himself drooling a little bit at the thought of the food, "...Promise you won't make it for Yurio if he wins gold?"

"Did I promise I would? I forget already..."

"You didn't have time to say one way or another. Newscaster Morooka popped up right after he'd mentioned it."

"Oohhhh yeah, and we got that photo!" Viktor said excitedly, "I haven't even had a chance to post it to my Instagram yet!"

"It's okay. I already did." Yuri admitted, a little nervous.

"...You did?" The Russian was entirely confused, "...Where? I didn't see it."
The Asian pulled his phone from where Viktor's legs had been covering it, and loaded up the Instagram app. With a few clicks, Yuri pulled up his account, and showed it to Viktor.

\[\text{y-nikiforov}\]
[photo]
1,213 likes
\[\text{y-nikiforov} \text{ Finally feels like everything came full-circle here at #Worlds. Got the photo I'd been offered at #SochiGPF with #v-nikiforov that I was too ashamed to take at the time. Now I'm on top of the world with him! Thank you for being my coach, Viktor! I'll make you proud! #WorldChampionships #ISUSkating #MensSingles #SkateHusbands #Vikturi\]

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Viktor just stared at it for what seemed like forever; the photo was simple, showing Yuri and himself together just outside the stadium where they'd been earlier in the night. Viktor had his arm over Yuri's shoulders while Yuri had his opposite arm snaked around Viktor's back, and they were both smiling excitedly. Viktor had even handed off his coach's lanyard so it wouldn't look out of place for the recreation.

"It really is like déjá vu." The Russian commented, "...If not for your glasses being off, and our rings, you'd really think this was Sochi."

"Right?"

"You even made a new account to post this." Viktor pointed out, "...y-nikiforov."

"A new name for a new time in my life. This is all possible because of you, Viktor." Yuri said, his cheeks a little pink as he sat cross-legged on the bed, watching the man looking at his phone, "I don't even know what I'd be doing with my life if you hadn't crashed head-first into it like you did last year. I...can't even find the right way of thanking you properly for all of this. I keep trying and it keeps being turned into something else..."

"Jeeze, you make it sound like you haven't done anything at all for me to this point."

"...Maybe I just haven't done enough."

"You're still on your way." Viktor reassured, "To thanking me for being your coach, I mean. You owe me 5 World Championship gold medals to hang on our wall back home, and every gold medal you can take between them. Four Continents, the Grand Prix Series and Finale, the Japanese Nationals...all of them. Every one."

Yuri held his hand out as Viktor gave him back his phone, and then lifted his brown eyes to meet the blue in front of him.

"For the rest...I married you, didn't I?" The Russian purred, rising up to lean into Yuri's space, touching their nose-tips together, "You've given me more than I could ask for on that front."

"...Viktor."

"Keep giving me everything, okay, Yuri? Your heart, body, soul...all of it. And you'll always have mine."
CHAPTER FOURTY ONE

"Next to take the ice...representing Thailand...Phichit Chulanont...!"

Yuri watched the television in the prep area behind the arena as his long-time friend went out onto the ice, skating around to meet Celestino on the rink wall for a few last words of advice and motivation. With a final nod, the Thai skater presented himself to the audience to a great amount of cheering, and headed to the center of the rink.

"His short program comes from his favorite movie, The King and the Skater...Ladies and Gentlemen...'Shall We Skate.'"

"Do your best, Phichit!"

Chris was already in the kiss and cry with his coach, having just heard his score over the intercom a minute beforehand; 102.49, a little higher than his GPF Short Program.

There would only be two more skaters before Viktor's turn, so he was in the back hallway stretching. Yurio was closer to the end of the afternoon, second to last, so he was watching the event from the skaters' waiting area.

Yuri was too nervous for Viktor's program to pull away from the television, thinking that if he kept watching it instead of going back to where the man had been getting ready, that maybe he'd never go up. But as Phichit's Short Program came to an end and Michele Crispino was about to go up, he knew that time was drawing close. He stepped away from the television after seeing Phichit's score; 97.21, nearly the same as his own score from the GPF Short Program, and headed to the far hall.

Reporters were crawling all over the place, and many were focusing on where Viktor was finally pulling his gold-bladed skates on, and rising to his new just-over-6-foot height as Yuri drew closer. Yakov was nearby waiting with him, and the two looked past the throng of media to see him.

"Almost time." Yuri said anxiously, "Phichit just got done... Only Michele and JJ before you go up."

"Promise you'll watch the whole thing." Viktor said, smiling; the bottom half of his 'On Love: Phillia' costume was visible by this point, but he still wore his track-suit coat. His hair was properly styled for the show though, his bangs no longer dropping straight over his left eye, but rather sweeping back elegantly towards and over his ear, "Don't look away even once."

The younger skater drew in a deep breath, "I'll try."

Yakov was confused at them, but shrugged and started stepping towards the curtained area where the skating rink was located.

"I'll know if you look away." Viktor continued, leaning one arm heavily over Yuri's shoulder as he pushed him back towards the viewing area, going the same way Yakov had.

"I don't think I'll even be able to breathe they entire time you're out there..." Yuri admitted, looking ahead to see Phichit coming back inside from the rink-side area. His bright red outfit was easy to spot no matter where he was, and he waved over at his friend.

"Yuri! Did you see my score!?!" The Thai skater said excitedly, rushing over with his blade-
guards thunk'ing along the ground with each step, "It's a new personal best!"

"I saw, it was amazing! You keep getting better every time!"

"Thanks!"

Celestino was just behind him, and looked at Viktor, "Good to see you back where you should be."

"Good to be back, Ciao Ciao!" The Russian beamed, "The energy is different when you're a participant rather than a coach."

"You're still a coach, Viktor." Yuri elbowed him a little.

"For the next 15 minutes, I'm a competitor." The Russian reminded him, "Then I go back to coach-mode."

"This must be weird for you though anyway." Celestino commented, "It's your big come-back, but it's so late in the season that it's both your premier and your finale until everything starts up again in the fall."

"I'm a little sad that there isn't anything going on in the summer, but I guess we all need some time off after this is over, right? Time to get everything ready for the next Grand Prix series." Viktor nodded and looked back at his fiancé, "And you won't even have to go to local competitions to qualify again. That must be a relief."

"I'll still go...I just won't be competing." The Asian said, surprising his elders, "I want to go cheer on Minami-kun."

"Really?" Viktor was surprised at that, but then hugged Yuri close, "That's so nice of you! He'll be thrilled!"

"Well, good luck out there, Viktor. Try not to hurt yourself." Celestino held his hand out, and Viktor shook it briskly.

"I won't!"

"Davai, Viktor!"

"Spassibo!"

"Vitya." Yakov suddenly called, holding the curtain open, "Your Uncle's out here."

"Uncle?" Phichit repeated, then leaning over to Yuri, "Has he ever had family show up at competitions before...?"

"No." The skater answered quietly, watching Viktor pull away a little to head to the rink-side area, "It's a long story."

Phichit watched the anxious tall silver man pause in front of the threshold, take in a deep breath, and finally go through it, "He doesn't seem overly thrilled about it."

Yuri nodded, "It's been a tense situation...Viktor didn't really want to go through with it but I accidentally forced him to. He's doing his best." He pat the Thai man on a shoulder and started making for the curtain, "I better go before I lose my chance to wish him good luck at rink-side. Laëw-ger-gan krâb, Phichit-kun!" He started heading up to the curtain and pushed his way through, looking one way and then the other before spotting the three men he'd been looking for. Viktor was
looking up at a railing in the stands, and Mikhail was there above him. When the older man above spotted him, he waved, and Yuri waved back amiably.

"So you really haven't shown anyone the full program?" Mikhail asked, continuing the prior thought.

"Not entirely. Can't very well surprise anyone if I show them all what I'm doing before I do it."

"The score for Michele Crispino..."

Viktor and Yuri both looked up, ",...Less than 5 minutes."

"Yuuuuuri! Viktoooooor!" They heard others calling, and they looked up to see Minako and Mari in the stands, waving their Viktuuri flags enthusiastically. The two skaters waved back happily.

Mikhail was looking over his shoulder at the women, then turned back, "Who're they? Fans?"

"The one with the headband is my older sister, Mari." Yuri explained, "The other is Minako-sensei, my ballet instructor."

"I didn't know you had family coming! We should all sit together to cheer you on!"

Yuri was excited about the idea, but he could feel Viktor getting tense, so he nervously shrugged, "You can sit wherever you like."

"Next to take the ice...representing Canada...Jean-Jacque Leroy!"

The crowd went wild as he took the ice; he looked calm, even eager, staring towards his Russian adversary as he glided by with his arms up.

*I created this Short Program specifically to stop Viktor from stealing Gold from me again at the GPF...but since he dropped out, I never even got to use it against him in competition. It's ironic that he's skating right after me today...I'll show everyone who's the King on this ice!*

Viktor shrugged and looked away, sighing as he reached up one hand to his Uncle, "I have to go get ready now."

Mikhail reached back down to shake it firmly, "You'll do great. Have fun, nephew."

"Thanks."

Nooowww...I ruuule the woooooorld...and the starry skyyyy...spreeaaading abooooeove...

Viktor turned away and drew in a quick, sharp breath before pulling Yuri close with one arm, walking back towards the kiss and cry where he'd be entering the rink in only a few short minutes. Yuri could feel a slight tremble, but he wasn't sure who it was coming from between the two of them. Suddenly, the Russian pulled him away from the rink-side area, not quite back into the prep area but close. Pushed against a wall beneath another section of the seating area, Yuri felt Viktor's hands trail down his shoulders and arms, finally to his hands, clasping them gently and pulling them up to press them above his head.

"...Viktor...?"

The silver skater wasn't sure what to say, so he just looked down into those brown eyes quietly. A few fans above had noticed, and were starting to take pictures and cry out or comment about it, and Yuri couldn't stop himself from looking up at them.
"Eyes on me." Viktor told him simply, getting his attention back, "Only me."

"You've got this." Yuri finally said, pulling his hands back down again to cradle the Russian's face, looking straight into his eyes, "Let me be nervous for you."

A huge part of the crowd had picked up the beat of the music and were singing along with JJ's song, but the pair couldn't hear them. Their focus was entirely on one another, and nothing else mattered.

"I'm not nervous." Viktor whispered, "I'm not scared, anxious, dubious...any of it. I'm calm."

"Is that such a good thing right now?"

"The ice is where I belong." He answered, "And with you here, I know I can do anything."

Yuri smiled at that, and pressed his forehead to his partner's, "I'll find you again by the kiss and cry."

Viktor nodded, kissing him lightly before moving to shrug off his track-suit coat. To Yuri's surprise, the coat actually ended up being placed onto his own shoulders, and he looked up at the man with amazement.

The crowd was practically screaming with enthusiasm as JJ finished his program, and Yuri saw the Canadian heading for the rink exit past Viktor's dark-colored mantle.

The Russian slid his hand over his partner's slicked-back hair, "Never mind JJ's score...I always beat it. Just let me perform for you, okay? Remember, eyes on me, and only me."

"I'd ask you to seduce me while you're out there, but I don't think this is the right program for that."

Viktor laughed at that, getting his spirit back finally, much to Yuri's relief, "No, not this one."

"Vitya!"

"Time to go."

"Davai, Viktor."

He nodded, kissed the man deeply, although quickly, and finally broke away, leaving his fiancé with the warmth of his coat and his lips. He could already hear the cheering of the crowd shifting from JJ's departure to his own approach; the difference was palpable. Russian flags started taking the place of Canadian ones, and signs with Viktor's name and, on others, Viktuuri, could be seen rising as well.

"The score for Jean-Jacques Leroy...105.19! He is currently in first place!"

Yuri was moving off to take his place in the seating area where other skaters were waiting, and slipped his arms through the sleeves of Viktor's coat before he sat down by Yurio. The Russian Tiger was mildly annoyed that a Japanese skater would be wearing his own team's colors, but for once, he held his tongue. There was no sense in pitching a fit over a borrowed coat.

"Viktor was right...if I hold my ground and don't let Yurio kick me through the air, he'll take me more seriously..."

"Now taking to the ice, representing Russia...Viktor Nikiforov!"

He was standing backwards in the gateway, listening to one last thing from Yakov before taking off, skating in reverse and doing something of a mini-Salchow to get the audience fired up. The roar of applause and cheering continued to rise, and Viktor stoked those fires even more by raising his arms
a few times as he slowly rotated towards center. Just like back in Moscow when he'd come home as a coach for Rostelecom...the audience was chanting his name.

"Tonight's performance is the third arc in a series that Skater Viktor has put together. Like the 'Agape' performance he choreographed for his countryman, Yuri Plisetsky, and 'Eros,' as he made for his student, Japan's Yuri _Katsuki_, Viktor's Short Program tonight is also based 'On Love.' Unlike the 'pure divine love' of Agape and the 'erotic love' of Eros, however, Skater Viktor performs to 'On Love: Phillia,' which describes the feelings between friends. It is the least 'natural' of the Four Great Loves in that friendship arises unnecessarily, so in that way, it is a higher level of love than that which is formed between lovers or family members, because friendship is freely chosen. In some cases, those bonds can become stronger than that of familial bonds because they might be forged in the crucible of war, such as those between soldiers, aptly referred to as a 'band of brothers.'"

Much like everyone else, Yuri had never actually seen Viktor practice his programs with the music playing overhead. For the most part, he'd done those sessions with his ear-buds in, going into his own little world, or he practiced without the music at all, hearing it in his mind instead.

Viktor went down on one knee like Yuri had seen before, holding both hands together on the still-raised knee in front of him. He took one last deep breath before he could hear the audience die out and the quiet sound of the music beginning.

["Sol Invictus" - Audiomachine]

It was the passive, yet hopeful hum of string-instruments to start, but the shift in mood could be felt throughout the entire audience. It was a complete 180 from JJ's boisterous pop-star 'King' theme.

The Russian began to rise slowly, turning in wide circles as he made the ascent to the time of the violins and cellos, pushing backward elegantly as he moved into the first loop of the rink-wide figure-8. He slid through several cross-overs as he moved around the inside edge of the rink's short side, and hopped into a high scissor-kick as the drums beat, slipping backwards again for the next arc of the loop. Each drum-beat made the orchestra's intensity rise just a little bit more, and for each new level of power, Viktor's performance increased as well. Each twist was harder, each hop of jump on the drum-beat was crisper, every turn and wave of his arms became more rigid and forceful.

Like the rigors of training, a soldier meets his companions on the precipice of looming war. Young men from all walks of life, joining together for this one common cause, united on a single front to defend home, side by side.

Halfway through the song's rising crescendo, Viktor leapt into his first jump, the quad Salchow, triple Toe-loop. The deep bass of the horns finally joined in, and the Russian twizzled swiftly through it, pushed through a few crossovers into his first spin-sequence, leaping into the flying sit-spin with gusto.

_Rising early, working hard, never leaving the side of your new brothers. You run together, sweat together, bleed together._

Swift rotations propelled the skater around like a blur on the ice; the initial basic position with one leg held forward transitioned to the broken-leg twist variant. Both skates went down to the ice briefly as the Russian pushed through to standing upright, rising into a scratch-spin and raising one arm up in sequence with the increasing intensity of the music, sliding his fingers gracefully past his chin as he tilted his head back. He broke out and skated backwards swiftly, coming close to the long-side of the rink wall as a second set to the wind-instruments section began, emphasizing the strings again with another layer of drums to fill the arena with enough power that the rafters shook.
...And then the dawn of war finally glows dim on that far horizon. You line up together, your training complete. Arm in arm, you look to break of day for any sight of the enemy...and then...the bombs begin to drop.

But then the music stopped abruptly, and Viktor appeared to be skating in a line down the center of the rink to nothing at all...only to kick his left leg out behind himself, and toe-pick down hard when the music came back to life again, shaking the very foundations of the building as he flew and the choir began.

"Incredible! A quad-Flip with both hands up! We haven't seen that from Skater Viktor before!"

The crowd was wild with excitement, feeding energy down into the rink.

The war rages for days beyond count...brothers fall, some even die in your arms, looking up at you with those glassy eyes as they draw their last breaths. You collect their tags and chains, and add them to the collection growing around your neck, knowing that you alone carry with you their last moments, the echoes of their dreams, their love and longing for home. You've seen a side of existence that no man should ever have to see, and you carry those scars with you for their sake. They were more than just your friends or team-mates. Your bond with them was thicker than blood. You made that bond because you wanted to, you had to in order to survive. Without them...we're nothing.

The Russian flew into the step-sequence then, starting at one corner of the rink and moving with speed and intensity across the ice towards the opposite side. His blades were a golden blur beneath him, and he continued through the serpentine path until there was a brief gap in the orchestra again.

"...This is where it might get bad..." Yuri said to himself, bringing his hands up to his mouth, but keeping his eyes open like he said he would.

Yurio was gawking at him, "Get bad? It's just a triple axel that's left..."

"Not a triple..."

"Not a triple? He's doing a double?"

"No."

When Viktor reached the other corner of the rink, and spun away to weave his feet until the next gap, he finally revealed his secret. The axel began like normal, going into it skating backwards on his right skate, and shifting to the left at the last second as he flipped to face forward again, kicking off to thrust into the air.

It's just you at the end of the long night...the sky still burns with the echoes of fire, lightning streaking across black clouds, thunder mixed with the ashes of your fallen brothers. Yet the enemy is still coming...

Yuri had jumped out of his seat as he watched. Yurio just gaped in confusion, not understanding what the big deal was.

The silver Russian hit the ice, blades cracking on the frost like a thunderclap. The entire audience was quiet, even as Viktor's hand came down on the landing.

Even the announcers weren't sure what had just happened, but they were calling for a recheck on the number of rotations before speculating on what just took place.
"Impossible! Did Viktor just make history with the world's FIRST QUAD AXEL!? That's four and a half rotations!"

Yurio had ended up on his feet as well by then, "...I don't..."

Yakov was slack-jawed from his spot on the rink-wall.

"He did it...!" Yuri was stunned, but then grabbed the blond next to him in an enthusiastic hug, "HE TOUCHED THE ICE ON THE LANDING BUT HE STILL DID IT!"

Viktor slowed down to start a camel-spin, bending slightly over for the sideways variant with one hand grabbing his blade and his free hand in the air, then pulling his foot in a bit tighter for the forward variant, straightening himself out into almost but not quite a Bielmann spin. He quickly leapt to the right, and continued the last aspect of that spin on the other foot before spiraling wide to skate along the rink-wall again.

_Dawn breaks on another day. There's far fewer of there than there were before. Reinforcements come to save you, but they're not the same men that you'd arrived with. The situation calls for new bonds to be formed; bonds forged in pain, duty, and honor. You get your second wind, and you're carried forward on wings made from the dreams of those who bled before you.

The show continued almost normally after that, but Yuri could see that the quad Axel had done its damage. Not that Viktor's wrist looked like it was causing him pain, or that he'd jammed a finger on the ice when he touched down...but the man was getting tired.

_Come on...you can do it...!

"Viktor's lost his mind..." Yurio growled, prying himself out of Yuri's grip, "He won't make it to the end with how hard he's pushing himself."

"He said he could do it..." The older skater said, keeping his eyes on the man on the ice.

Viktor reached out his arms as he skated away...he could feel how sore his legs were getting, but at least the worst was done. He went back to center, entering into his final spin sequence. It was a standard camel-spin entry, rotating several times before lowering down into a twist-variant sit-spin. The music overhead was thundering towards its climax. The choir was entering into its final three explosive chants...and then stopped.

_Is the war finally over? Have enough of you died to slake the thirst of the enemy? ...Even just for now...?_

The Russian held motionless for a second, the spin having ended in an upright scratch-spin, with a toe-pick digging in hard to brake at the end. Sweat rolled off the man's forehead and down his neck, but he heard the soft, quiet, almost inaudible sounds of the last few drums of the orchestra returning. He backed up with long, sweeping reaches of each leg, arms swaying like waves of water over the rocks at the end of a long battle, ceding the tumultuous cacophony of war to the harmony of the landscape left behind.

The Russian panted heavily where he stood; his lower back and sides hurt than they usually did at the end of a Short Program, but the crowd was a maelstrom of cheers and screaming. Succumbing to the ache, he finally dropped to his knees on the ice. His lungs were on fire, and his legs felt like they might as well have been, too. One hand moved down to hold him up as the other clutched at his chest, and the audience seemed to notice that he was struggling...
Yuri couldn't breathe as he watched, "V...VIKTOR!" He screamed, hoping it would encourage the man to rise up again. He felt like his voice echoed in the arena, the audience having gone oddly quiet.

The darkly-clad silver skater lifted his right hand up again after a moment, and pushed himself to rise. The audience cheered even more loudly for him as he rose to finally acknowledge them, bowing eagerly even as tired as he was. When he was done, he waved and headed to the exit. Yakov was there with the water-bottle, and the World Champion took it eagerly as they went to the kiss and cry. He practically fell onto the bench like a slab of raw meat on a butcher's block, and waited for the lecture that was to come...but he couldn't hear it. All he could hear was the ringing in his ears and the sound of blood rushing through his head between desperate, ragged breaths.

It seemed like it took forever for him to get his score. Every time he looked up at the monitors, there was still nothing listed. He was starting to wonder if something was wrong. But, he'd look beyond the screen to where the ice-bunnies were still collecting the myriad toys and bouquets that had been thrown to him by the audience, and thought that, perhaps, not so much time had passed after all.

"Don't worry so much; the judges are probably still reviewing the quad Axel you pulled." Yakov said stiffly, getting the silver skater's attention.

"Are you mad?"

"I warned you not to push yourself, but now look at you. You look like you're about to have a stroke."

Viktor laughed and poured some of the water into his still-gloved hand, grateful that his hearing had come back enough by then that he could understand his coach's remarks. His skin felt hot where he rubbed the water on it, over his face and the back of his neck.

"The score for Viktor Nikiforov..."

"Finally..."

Yurio nearly had a kitten when he saw it, and Yuri paled as well, falling back into his chair.

"HE JUST SET TWO NEW WORLD RECORDS IN ONE PERFORMANCE! A MASTERFUL COME-BACK BY THE LEGEND HIMSELF, VIKTOR NIKIFOROV!"

"...122...43..." Yuri repeated, looking at the screen where it showed playbacks of the quad Axel that had just changed the landscape of figure skating forever.
Yuri was barreling down from the waiting box as he saw Viktor finally coming out of the kiss and cry. The thrum of excitement around him was thick, cameras flashing and video rolling as half a dozen reporters were all trying to get his commentary at once.

"Viktor! You just set two world records in your Short Program! How does it feel!?"

"What are you going to do in your Free Skate to top this!?"

"No one has ever scored over 120 before! Did you anticipate this would happen!?"

Yuri couldn't get past them. He was jumping up trying to even see past them, but it was hard, "Viktor!" He called out, trying to be seen, raising an arm up and waving it around frantically. It was hard being shorter than many of the people between him and his husband, but there wasn't a lot he could do about it. He was 5'8" and most men were taller than him, Viktor included by 3 inches.

"Next to take the ice, representing Czech Republic...Emil Nekola!"

"You looked pretty ragged out there at the end! How confident are you about finishing your next program!?"

"I'll be fine." Viktor explained, "Short Programs don't leave a lot of time to breathe, that's all. The Free Skate will be much easier, even if it is longer."

"Viktor!" Yuri tried again...still unnoticed.

"Great job out there, Viktor!" He heard Mikhail calling from nearby.

It was strange how that man's voice cut through the crowd like he was the only one speaking, and the reporters noticed it as well. Viktor looked up at the source, and did his best not to change his expression, but anyone who knew him well enough could tell there was a slight twinge to it.

"Thanks."

The media was struck by the resemblance between the two, looking from Viktor to Mikhail and back again a few times before finally making the connection. It was almost uncanny how they all pulled away and started rushing for the older man in the stands, beckoning him to come down to rink-side to talk to them. They brushed past Yuri in a hurry, leaving him nearly spinning where he stood. But, at least they were out of the way now, and Viktor had finally found him.

"Thanks for keeping this for me." He said, rubbing the white and red fabric where it covered Yuri's arms.

"You were incredible out there!" Yuri beamed, looking like an awe-struck fan again, "I jumped out of my seat when I saw the axel! Even Yurio couldn't sit still! You should've seen his fa-"

"My hand touched the ice. I can do better."

"You did a quad though! One that no one else has done before! I think a hand on the ice can be forgiven, especially since you set a new Short Program world record." Yuri protested, "I'll never
catch up to you now."

Viktor smiled, leaning to rest his forehead against Yuri's as his hands came up on both his cheeks, "You will. Even if it doesn't happen until your last year, you will."

*He's shaking...I should get him back stage...*

They passed the remaining group of reporters to duck back behind the curtain threshold, and awaiting them there was a swarm of applause. Everyone had seen or heard about the quad axel by that point and many had stopped stretching to come see the man as he returned.

"Thank you, everyone..." Viktor explained politely, trying to cut through them to where the rest of his gear had been waiting for him.

Yuri looked up at him, a worried look on his face, *He's had a couple minutes to get his breath back since finishing...he should be okay again by now. Why can I still feel him shaking under his costume...?*

Viktor pulled him along, no longer using him as a support so much as wanting him close for its own sake, as he made his way back to the benches before finally slumping to sit and take his skates off. The gold blades glimmered under the halogen lights, and Yuri helped him get out of the elaborate costume coat he'd been wearing.

When he realized just how heavy it was, he tossed it around his shoulders over where he still wore the red and white coat, and tried to move around, "...How could you do any jumps with this thing on?"

"It felt a lot lighter before."

"All these chords and badges and layers though."

"I know."

"It must weigh nearly 7 kgs...that's a whole tomcat on your back."

"Almost."

"Viktor..." He gave the older man a serious look.

The Russian was almost avoiding it, *I know, I know...*

"Your Free Skate outfit is lighter than this, right?"

"By far." He reached out to tug a little at the half-skirt that peeked out under Yuri's own layers, *It's as light as this one."

Yuri shrugged the coat off and put it into the suit-bag where it had previously been stored, and sighed as he set it across the bench. Viktor had pulled off one skate by then and sat up a bit straighter to rub some soreness from his sides when he saw Yuri pull out in front of him. Looking up at him, the Russian tilted his head a little, blue eyes giving a confused glance.

"What is it?"

"I know St. Petersburg is home, but..." The younger skater started, "...Let's move to Hasetsu. We'll make the Ice Castle our home rink until we're both finished with skating."
"Yuri..."

"You're so determined to surprise people that you put your own program at risk, all because you didn't want anyone to see a dress rehearsal. It may have worked in the past, but..." He didn't want to say it, though he felt like honesty was probably the best thing now, "...You're not 20 anymore. If you push yourself too hard, you'll really get hurt. I don't want to see you announce your retirement right after coming back because you're too injured to skate. If you had been able to do a real dress rehearsal in advance, you would've known the coat was too heavy and you could've sent it back for adjustments before performing."

Viktor was just gawking at him, but he huffed a laugh and leaned back, "...Yes, Coach Yuri...

Brown pupils shrunk at the title, and he started waving his hands around frantically, "No no, NO no no...no...no...that's not what I meant! I'm not even close to being qualified as your coach...!"

"I'm going to need one if we're moving to Hasetsu. Yakov won't come with me."

Yuri realized the truth in his words, but then he shook his head, "You barely listen to Yakov anyway. When was the last time he actually coached you rather than just giving you a lecture?"

"A while."

"...So, I guess you're just using him to fill in the blank on the applications?"

"More or less."

"Would the ISU even accept having two competitors being listed as each other's coach?"

"No idea."

"I guess we'll have to try then." Yuri said, looking a bit happier now.

Viktor seemed happy, but there was something still hiding under the fatigue of his earlier performance. He huffed a sigh and ran his hand through his hair to get his bangs out of his left eye, and Yuri suddenly realized...and then bolted. The Russian watched him run, a black and red and white blur leaving the prep area as quick as the wind, but he knew where Yuri was going and didn't make a move to stop him.

The gaggle of reporters was still surrounding Mikhail when Yuri finally arrived, but to his great relief, Yakov had been there. The coach was tacitly holding onto Viktor's poodle-plush tissue box by the tail.

He must've been here the whole time...

The Russian coach saw Yuri through the reporters and nodded at him lightly, then held his hands up, "...That'll be the end of the interview. Thank you everyone for your interest in Viktor's uncle."

They started to depart, thanking the men for their time and heading off to find their next target. Once they were gone, Yuri approached them nervously, but Yakov gave him a look that told him everything he needed to know.

Mikhail knew what to say and what to avoid. He's more shrewd than I gave him credit for.

"I didn't realize they'd jump all over me like that!" The silver-haired man was saying hesitantly, "I would've waited until later otherwise."
"It's okay." Yuri said, shaking his head, "Even JJ's parents get interviewed separately sometimes, since they used to be Ice Dancing Olympic Champions in their own time. No one's ever seen relatives of Viktor's at shows though. If you go to the Russian Nationals, it may be even worse."

"I can imagine. These guys asked questions I hadn't even thought up answers for yet."

"They can be intrusive sometimes. They once assumed I was quitting before I'd even decided yet."

"Where's Vitya?" Yakov asked pointedly, seeing Yurio still gawking at them from the waiting box.

"He's in the prep area."

"Let's go then. You need to get ready anyway, don't you?"

"...I have about 20 minutes."

"You should've already been stretching by now. Viktor's a terrible coach..." The gruff Russian said bluntly, heading into the cordoned-off area, with (a flustered) Yuri and Mikhail following close behind.

Viktor was a little surprised to see the three of them rather than the two, but he made no sign of protest, reaching for his shoes. Yuri approached the bench from behind and leaned over Viktor's back, returning the track-suit coat in the process as he put his hands on the Russian's shoulders, and whispered something into his right ear before kissing his cheek lightly and pulling away again. He grabbed his rolled-up stretching mat and headed off to an adjacent hall. Viktor nodded and watched him go for a moment before slipping his arms through the coat, pulling on the second shoe, and standing upright.

"Welcome to the staging area." He said, somewhat stiffly, as he looked evenly at his elder, "Not many people get to see this if they aren't involved in the event somehow."

"This is the only way back up to the stands. I had to slip through the arena bars to get down to rink-side." Mikhail explained nervously, "I really had no idea the media mob would come after me like that. Sorry."

Viktor just looked at him, unsure how to reply. He was noticing how other skaters were looking at them, some whispering to each other about the physical similarity between him and his uncle, and some even commenting about how 'at least he'll still be hot when he's 50!'

Mikhail ignored them though, giving his nephew a worried look, "...I know having me around makes you nervous. I appreciate that you're giving me a chance though."

"I'm trying not to disappoint Yuri." Viktor answered curtly.

"I can respect that."

"But since he's not here, and this isn't being documented in texts...I can say my piece and be done with it."

Both Yakov and Mikhail got a bit on edge with those words, and said nothing to interrupt him.

[If you ever show up somewhere near me with my father in tow, we're done.] He said, suddenly switching to Russian so no one else could understand him, [It already makes me anxious to know he's one phone-call away, and his contact information is sitting on your phone right now. Don't make me regret allowing you into my life. I had a lot of other plans that got messed up by everything that's
happened, and it's put an unreasonable burden on my relationship with Yuri. I won't allow it to get worse.]

Mikhail just looked on, giving his nephew the exact same expression Viktor was giving him, [...And?]

[If you want to talk to Yuri, you go through me first.]

[I can't exactly do that right now.] The elder pointed out, pulling out his phone and waggling it in his hand, [No numbers.]

Viktor pulled his own phone out from his training bag, and handed the blue-cased device over to the man after unlocking it and opening the Contacts list, [Add yourself. I'll message you in my own time.]

Mikhail took the device, noting the custom case design to be the blue outfit that Yuri had gotten to wear at the Four Continents Exhibition, and he smiled. He quickly added himself to the list and gave Viktor back his phone, [Don't wait too long.]

[Don't put Yuri on the spot by messaging him just to ask what's taking me. He already thinks it's his fault that this is even happening.] Viktor nodded his head towards his coach, [But I know it was Yakov that gave him your numbers in the first place, and put in his head the idea that I needed outside family in my life. Make no mistake...I had everything I wanted before. This is all extra...if it causes me grief, I'll put a stop to it.]

[You make it sound like I'm some secret agent working for your father, reporting back everything I see or hear.] Mikhail deadpanned him, [I haven't even talked to him since he showed me where your home rink was.]

[You're the one who keeps asking if I want Konstantin to approve of my profession and offering ideas and insight into how to make it happen. But the bottom line is...I don't want him anywhere near me. I don't want to know if or when you talk to him. It'll take me a long time to trust you just on your own. Just keep that in mind...we're walking on thin ice for a little while, you and I.] Viktor explained, stuffing his hands into his pockets, [For Yuri's sake, I'm going to try though.]

Yakov had avoided saying anything, even after Viktor had basically blamed him for the situation they were in, but he was relieved to see Viktor making an attempt to work with it. With all said and done, he turned his head to the Rozovsky elder, "Let's go to the arena so you can get back to your seat. Yuri will be going up soon." He turned back to his own student, "Vitya, you better go prep him while you have time."

[Da.]

Mikhail noticed how Viktor's expression changed as he started to think about Yuri, and it gave him a little relief, [Someday you're going to be able to smile like that because of me, Viktor, not in spite of me.]

The Russian turned blue eyes back to him, confused at first, but then smiled a little differently, [Only Yuri gets that look. You'll have your own in time, if things work out.]

"I'm looking forward to it."
CHAPTER FOURTY THREE

Yuri had left the clamor of the main waiting area and descended into another hallway through a set of closed doors, unfurling his mat on the floor. Ear-buds were placed after that, and he took a deep breath to get started. It felt like forever before Viktor was fully redressed in his track suit and finally found him, but he was glad that he did.

"Everything went okay?" He asked, nudging his left ear against his shoulder to get the nub out again.

"As well as it could."

Yuri wasn't sure if that was the answer he was looking for, but he took whatever he could get. He continued stretching in near-silence, the only noise between them coming from what could be heard from his music.

Viktor leaned against the white-painted stone wall, hands still in his pockets as his mind wandered back to the previous conversation. He could faintly hear the audience in the arena above them, muffled as it was, "You picked a good spot." He finally said.

"Huh?"

"To stretch before going up. This is quiet."

"It'll do."

Viktor could hear the inflection in Yuri's voice; his mind was wandering too, but to where, the Russian skater couldn't be sure.

_He's about to skate Eros...how's he going to manage that under these circumstances, worrying about what I told to my Uncle before coming down here? The program will lose its appeal the same way Yurio's Agape does when he gets greedy... I have to do something..._

Yuri had moved to sitting upright, putting the soles of his shoes together before him and pressing down on his knees as he leaned down over top of them. He held there for a while until he felt the burn, then leaned back up again to shake it out. He looked up as he realized he'd heard Viktor starting to laugh to himself quietly, and saw him smiling rather proudly where the man still leaned against the wall, "...What are you thinking of?"

"You said once that you couldn't be more Eros than you were at Four Continents. I think you could be." The Russian answered, "It made me think of how Chris sometimes gets himself a little worked up before doing his own shows."

"I don't think I want to know...“ Yuri grimaced, leaning back down over his pressed-down knees until he felt like they, and his nose, could touch the mat beneath him. He could hear Viktor huff another laugh to himself after that, before pushing off the wall and taking a few steps, but he hadn't realized the Russian was standing directly in front of him until he leaned up again. Shoes, knees, waist, chest...Yuri kept craning his head up until he couldn't anymore, looking up to where Viktor's face was darkened by the bright halogen lights directly above and behind him. Cherry-hazel eyes watered a little and he shied away from the light, only to hear the sound of Viktor's track-suit rustling with his movements again. When he looked back, the slender Russian was kneeling in front of him, and he felt the man's hands come to rest on his thighs. Yuri wasn't sure what to say...slate eyes had
captured and paralyzed him where he sat. He felt Viktor's right hand leave its place on his leg, and reach for the dangling ear-bud, putting it into his own ear to hear what he'd been listening to.

'...Can you hear my heartbeat? I've got a feeling it's never too late. I close my eyes and see myself, how my dreams will come true. There'll be no more darkness when you believe in yourself...you are unstoppable. Where your destiny lies, dancing on the blades, you set my heart on fire...!' 

Viktor closed his eyes and smiled as he listened, but then unexpectedly leaned forward and kissed the man in front of him.

Yuri was a little surprised, but then supposed he shouldn’t be and melted into it. Before long, he felt his husband pushing him down to lie on his back on the mat, hands sliding down his body to pull his legs up on either side of the slender waist. The music continued to play. Yuri wanted to keep his partner close, but he knew time was running out. His heart pounded in his chest, and he lifted one hand over Viktor's shoulder to run his fingers through strands of silver-grey hair. It only served to encourage the man, and he felt a pair of arms coming up under his back, hugging him closer. It was enough though...Viktor had seemingly gotten what he wanted, "...Is this...such a good idea right now?" Yuri wondered, not realizing.

"It's a perfect idea." The Russian answered, pulling up a little to nose at the younger skater's chin, "I want to see what Eros looks like when you're a little excited. I thought I'd help get your blood pumping."

"You don't have to do much for that to happen." Yuri said anxiously, crossing his ankles behind the Russian's back to keep him where he was.

"Maybe I needed this a little too then." Viktor admitted, leaning down to kiss the man again, deeply. All seemed well and good for the time being. Several seconds of the wet and warmth passed, and they turned their heads a few times to renew the angle of the kiss from a different side. Yuri's cheeks went bright pink, feeling a pulse of passion rippling through him when he felt the texture of his husband's tongue on his lips, and opened his mouth to welcome it in. The Russian seemed to take that as a cue though, and Yuri felt the pressure against center right after that, a slow, deliberate grind against his front. When he could finally come up for air briefly, Viktor went for his neck instead, kissing and nibbling at it eagerly as he pressed in hard a second time.

Yuri gasped quietly as he felt it, brows furrowing nervously, "V-Viktor...we...we shouldn't...

"Why not?" Viktor teased.

"W-well..." Yuri stammered, his face quite red now, "If y-you...keep going, you'll g-get excited, too...and then..."

"And then?" Viktor purred, leaning in a bit closer to nose at the man's flushed cheek.

"W-what if someone walks in on us!?" The younger man finally managed, "This isn't e-exactly a private area."

The metal push-bar down the hallway was suddenly slammed inward, and the door it was attached to swung wide open.

"Viktor, you back here? Yakov sa-"
The silver Russian drew upward, pushing slowly up onto his hands to glance back over his shoulder with an unhappy look on his face.

Yuri's ankles uncrossed and his arms went out to the side almost immediately, but mostly, he just stayed paralyzed where he was with a horrified look on his beet-red face. He only moved his hands after that, to hold his heart in his chest where he thought it might burst out from the shock of being walked in on, exactly as he'd worried.

Yurio just glared at them in horrified surprise, then turned on his heel to leave, "Nope."

The door closed with a hollow metallic smack after that, and Viktor turned back down to where his flushed and terrorized husband was laying catatonic under him. He heaved a sigh, "I better go after him."

"...I...I'll just...stay here a second..." Yuri answered pitifully.

"Come on." The Russian pulled off of him and reached down his hand to help yank him up off the floor, reaching back to grab the exercise mat and roll it up before handing it back to its owner, "Here, go get your skates on. You're plenty warmed up now anyway."

They went through the same doors that Yurio had barged in through, and Yuri darted off to the side as they went out, heading for where his gear-bag was stored near Viktor's. Viktor himself went off after his younger team-mate, who he'd seen walking stiffly off in the other direction.

"Yurio!" He called out, half-running to catch up. When he arrived, he put his hand on the teen's shoulder, but the blond snapped around to swat him off.

"It's YURI." He correctly bitterly, "I'M YURI. YURI PLISETSKY. NOT YURI O.

"...What..."

The blond suddenly burst into speaking Russian instead, [HE should be the one getting called Yurio!] He angrily pointed at where the aforementioned skater was pulling his shoes off, [What makes him so special that he gets to keep his name when I don't!?]

Viktor could tell what he was doing, [...It was his sister that named you this way, don't you remember? What's all this about suddenly? I thought you were going to be mad ab-]

[I don't care!] The blond snapped, ignoring the question, [I was Yuri long before you ever even KNEW him! I shouldn't be getting punished like this because your dumbass decided to drop everything to coach some Grand Prix failure that had already decided to QUIT!]

[...You're not being punished.] Viktor said, smiling nervously, [It's just easier to go with the flow.]

[The FLOW!?] The blond was incensed, [Does the flow include fucking in a back hallway before a show!?!]

[We weren-]

[I SAW YOU.] Yurio yelled. His volume was getting the attention of everyone nearby, [You think I wanted to see that!??]

[You barely saw a thing.] Viktor glowered at him, [If we were standing it'd just be called a hug.]

[I don't even care anymore.] The youth had gotten much quieter after that, his face hidden both by
his long hair and the hood of his coat. [Do whatever you want. Screw the pig all you want. I'm not gonna play this game anymore. I'm tired of you and him and all this stupid bullshit that's happened because of it.] His eyes were red with frustration, but he went back into English again before turning away, "Just retire already!"

The infuriated Russian Tiger prowled away, furious and upset but refusing to shed tears, leaving Viktor there speechless in the middle of the prep area. No one dared say a word to either of them after that, trying to go back to what they were doing before the outburst. They had no idea what had been said anyway. At least, not most of them.

One person who'd overheard the exchange understood every word of it.

Viktor sighed, not sure what else to say or do.

That anger was more than just from the embarrassment of walking in on Yuri and I messing around. He's seen plenty of that over the last few months. Something else is bothering him... Is it just my new score? No, he wouldn't get angry about that, not like this... Spazzing about not wanting to be called Yurio anymore...I don't understand.

He turned back to head over to where Yuri was fumbling with his skate laces. Neither had been tied yet, so the Russian moved towards him and knelt down to help.

Yuri was afraid to ask what had happened. His hands were shaking so much that Viktor had to hold them briefly before moving them aside to take the laces from him.

"It's nothing." The silver Russian tried to say, "He'll get over it."

"Next to take the ice...representing the United States of America, Leo de la Iglesia."

Yuri looked up at the sound of it, "I'm up after him..."

"Let's get out there then." Viktor nodded, finishing the last ties on the second skate before standing up to help his husband back to his feet. He quickly moved to remove the lanyard and badge from around the younger man's neck and put it around his own for safe keeping.

The skater wouldn't move after that though, simply standing on there on his blade-guards with a worried look on his face. With his skates on, he was the same height as his coach, and he looked forward into those crystal-blue eyes, "...It's not nothing. He'd never yell at you like that."

"Oh sure he would. He yells at me all the time." Viktor tried to make light of it, "I think I was lucky that I walked away without getting round-house kicked, too. Right?"

"Yeah..."

The older figure knew he wasn't convincing Yuri of anything, so he moved forward and wrapped his arms around his husband's smaller frame, pulling him close. He gently brushed his cheek against his partner's, whispering to his ear, "A sanctuary of warmth and peace."

Yuri's eyes twitched open at that, and his arms came over his spouse's shoulders to return the gesture, "To inspire and respond..."

"Show me a sign that you're not going to let what just happened bother you out there." The Russian continued, "...I was trying so hard to help you before...I don't want to see you fall because of Yurio."

Yuri wasn't sure how to answer that. He still had a knot in his stomach from having overheard the
exchange, even if he hadn't a clue what was being said. He had an idea about what was spoken of, but he wasn't about to ask for a translation right at that moment. So he did the only thing he could think of in the moment...and reached down to unexpectedly, but gently, grab his husband by the backside.

Viktor's head came up in surprise as he felt it, and he turned his face to look at the man, "Wow~! Yuri!"

The skater glanced back at him, half-amused and half-in-disbelief at himself, but he huffed a laugh and pulled his hands back again to hug the man tightly, burying his face against Viktor's shoulder, "If you're fine, I'm fine. Let's go."

The coach only hesitated a second or two to reach for the poodle-plush tissue box before letting Yuri pull him along by the hand towards the curtained threshold.

'Every day I sing...the brotherhood of man, how grateful it is, we're still alive. I can feel my soul singing as a bird. Wherever I go, God stays with me. Them growing trees, or the rose in bloom, I see the God inside them and I feel alright...'

The crowd went wild as Leo entered into his final pose, and he waved enthusiastically. A few moments later, as the rink-bunnies skated the ice to clear the shower of gifts away that the audience had thrown out, Leo moved off to head to the kiss and cry with his coach. His score came quickly.

"The score for Leo de la Iglasia is...89.45!"

Yurio had parked himself in the waiting box again. His turn was still almost 45 minutes away, assuming most skaters got their scores quickly. Waiting for Viktor's turn had taken forever, it seemed like. He growled to himself as he spotted the duo coming out from the prep area, heading to rink-side where the entrance was located near the kiss and cry. He didn't even want to stay at that point...so he stood up from his seat and rounded the corner to head under the stands and walk until it was done.

"Next to take the ice, representing Japan...Yuri Nikiforov!"

It made Yurio cringe to hear it, and his disgust at the audience's maelstrom of cheering distracted him from where he was going.

"Davai, Yuri!"

"Ganbaaaaaa!"

"Go, Yuuuriiii!"

"Davaaaaaai!

When the angry teen shook his head to clear the feeling, he found himself running face-first into a taller figure that he hadn't noticed approaching.

Or maybe it hadn't even approached him...it was just there and he ran straight into it.

"What the hell-" Yurio blurted, rummaging with his coat to pull the hood back into place from where it had gotten shifted. He looked up to glare at the figure, only to see grey-green eyes staring at him from behind silver bangs, "Wh..."

Mikhail hadn't even said a word yet, and already Yurio was flustered.
"Out of the way, old man."

"You're an angry little man." The elder answered, unbothered by the Russian Punk's attitude, "Why is that, I wonder?"

"I don't have time for this." Yurio shoved his way past, knocking Mikhail aside as he went, "You're Viktor's uncle, not mine."

"There's no sense in your taking out your anger on Viktor, you know." The darkly-clad elder said after him, making the youth stop where he'd stepped, "Or your own fans, or those who come to support you...or anyone, for that matter."

"What the Hell do you know, or care?"

"Everyone seems to think I'm here just to soak up the lime-light off Viktor, so no one anticipates that I'm actually not that kind of person." He answered, "I heard what you said to him earlier. I'm probably the only one who understood what you'd said to him, too, since Yakov and Lilia weren't around when it happened."

The teen was practically shooting daggers out of his eyes by then, Why does he know all this shit about me? I thought he was only interested in Viktor and Katsudon. He shook his head again, "What difference would it make that you know what I said? You've barely been around a couple weeks. You don't know shit."

"Ah but I do." Mikhail winked, "I've learned a lot of things from trying to figure out who and what Viktor is about...by proxy, that means I know a bit about you, too...Russian Kitten."

Yurio glowered at him angrily.

They both heard the sound of the Eros program starting above them, but neither averted their gaze for it.

"You and Viktor are more alike than you know." The older man went on, "But while he has made peace with where he came from, you, on the other hand... Well, you look like you thrive on how much rage you hold onto."

"Don't tell me how I feel!"

Mikhail shrugged, "I don't have to. Everyone around you feels it. Look at yourself..." He pointed, "You're going to go out there and skate a program about unconditional love, and yet you're going to do it while seething with hate and fury. How's that working out for you? I saw the video of you bombing at the Euro Championships. The whole skating community was freaking out about it."

"Stalker, much?"

"It's not stalking to watch skating events to try and learn what the Hell my nephew is all about. I'm trying to learn as much about his passion as I'm trying to learn about him. Tell me...the Hot Springs event, did Viktor choose for you which program to do?"

"...Da."

Mikhail nodded and huffed a laugh, "That's why you ended up with Agape. It sure wasn't because you wanted it, clearly. 'Welcome to the Madness' is more your tone."

"I'm not skating an Exhibition program for competition. It doesn't have the required moves."
"Never said you should, I was just laying out the contrast. Viktor was trying to challenge you."

"No shit."

"Who do you have supporting you at home?"

Yurio glared at him, "Why should I tell you anything?"

"Humor me."

"My grandpa."

"You skipped a generation."

"My parents aren't part of my life."

"Like Viktor."

Yurio chortled, "My parents were just \textit{absent}. They didn't beat the shit out of me."

"Physical hurt or not, it's enough to make you really angry at everything." Mikhail said, daring to take a step closer to the wary teen, "But it doesn't make sense to take out all your frustration on those who are here for you. Why do you do that? Are you trying to push them away? Is there no room in your tiny little heart for anyone but your grandfather?"

The crowd had risen up in cheers a few times by then, no doubt celebrating a few successful spins and jumps.

Yurio wasn't sure how to respond.

"It's not a sign of weakness that you let yourself care about others...or even to admit that you do. I can tell you care about Viktor...like a big brother, maybe, or even as a substitute father figure. Whatever he is to you, it makes you jealous that he's putting all his attention on the Japanese Yuri, right? The way I read about it online, Viktor just up and left one day, disappearing into the sunset and not even bothering to really tell anyone that he was going. To that end, he kind of left you \textit{behind}. That's why you went out there afterwards, to chase him down."

Again, the blond remained stiffly silent.

"That's what I figured. I understand." Mikhail was getting closer, his hands remaining safely and non-threateningly in his coat pockets, "I'm a little jealous, too. When I first decided to reach out and contact Viktor, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. We were close when we were \textit{both} much younger...but it's obvious that the kid I remember has grown into a man that I don't know. I thought I'd have more time to talk to him, but he's put me at arm's length, practically using Yuri as an excuse not to think about me. But, Yuri's the whole reason I've made it this far. I have to consider myself grateful for that much. Where do you think you and Viktor would be today if he hadn't decided to go to Japan last year?"

The Russian's brow furrowed, "How the shit should I know?"

The music finally came to its climax, and was drowned out by the sound of excited applause. It would only be another minute or so before the score would be called out.

"How far do you think you'd have pushed yourself if you had gotten to keep Viktor to yourself in Russia? Would he have been your coach like he is to the other Yuri?"
"He promised to be my coach only if I won the Hot Springs event, after being in Japan already. As you can see," The teen practically waved his arm in dramatic presentation, "...That's not how it turned out."

"But he's come through for you on everything else that you'd asked of him."

"Tsh..." Yurio grunted, "The only reason I followed him to Hasetsu was because he didn't. He promised to choreograph a show for me at my Senior debut if I won the Junior World Championships without quads. I did my part. He flaked on his."

"So that's it..." Mikhail said quietly, "You hold a grudge against him for breaking his word."

"Don't reduce my life to one event. That's not the only thing."

"I understand. It's a combination of everything. But that's what set you off in the end...you feel like he forgot about you. I watched the Hot-Springs on Ice exhibition...and I'll bet...you walked out of the Ice Castle before it was even officially decided who won. You decided for yourself that Viktor wasn't going back to Russia."

Yurio's eyes twitched as the man's words settled in his mind, and he turned his face away angrily.

"Viktor's only human. The skating world may treat him like a demi-god, but he's fallible just like the rest of us. Sometimes all we can do is follow where our hearts lead us, and for him, it lead to Japan. But he went back home to Russia in the end anyway, and brought back with him the thing he cares about most. Is that so wrong?"

"I don't care."

Mikhail smiled, and reached his hand out to touch the youth gently on the shoulder. Yurio twitched, but didn't move to pull away, so the elder patted his hand there, "Skate Agape with all the unconditional love you have for Viktor. Give it everything you have. He'll notice."
CHAPTER FOURTY FOUR

Viktor and Yuri sat in the kiss and cry, waiting anxiously for his score.

Unfortunately, it hadn't even come close to breaking Viktor's new record. But...it had come within half a point of Yurio's from the GPF, so that was cause enough for celebration.

"118.08!" Yuri repeated happily, cheering as Viktor was hugging him tightly, "So close!"

"You'll get there!"

"Next to take the ice, representing the Republic of South Korea...Seung-gil Lee."

Yurio had watched the score come up from the hallway that opened up into the arena. He was hardly surprised.

"You Russians and Japanese are taking over the leader-board like you think you own it." Came a voice. Yuri turned around to see Otabek standing there, sipping at a bottle of water, "I can already see you knocking JJ off the bronze."

"Maybe."

"Leave whatever happened at the European Championships behind. You can come back."

"That's already done and over. I'll be in top form tonight."

The Kazakhstani paused for a moment, taking another sip of water, "I heard yelling at Viktor earlier."

"It's fine." Yurio shook his head, "When do you go up?"

"I'm dead last."

"So we both have a while to wait then. Let's go find somewhere to sit."

Otabek nodded and followed the younger skater into the stands, "If there's anything to like about the Grand Prix Final, there's not a lot of waiting when there's only 6 of us."

"Preach."

Beneath the stands, Yuri and Viktor were still celebrating the new high score. They were practically dancing with excitement, and the clapping from other competitors and coaches only added fuel to the fire. Yuri bowed to thank them all before heading back under the curtain to get his skates off.

His black and cerulean track-suit coat hung loose over his shoulders, open in the front to still show off most of the Eros costume, since he was still too warm from his performance to do it up yet. Viktor watched him coyly as he undid the laces on his skates and kicked them off to relax, twisting on the bench to have a leg on either side of it and then lying back down, head on Viktor's bag.

"You were right." He finally said, "I was able to do Eros with...more Eros...somehow." He laughed to himself, "A shame this is the last time I'll use it in competition."
"It's just the first of many programs we'll create together." Viktor encouraged, "Never forget the first, but always look forward to the next."

"You already have both of your programs for next season sorted out." Yuri said, completely relaxed, "I don't even have the songs picked out...just the theme."

"That's okay. You have all spring and summer to figure that out." The older skater reassured, moving to sit on the same bench, picking up Yuri's left leg to move it out of the way and then setting it back down again across his lap, "Just don't take the whole time! This last season has given me so many ideas!"

"I'm just curious about the Free Skate on Saturday." Yuri said, quieter, more calm than excited, "You've been so secretive about that one, I can only wonder what's going to happen. Even knowing the name of the song and having seen your outfit, I still can't imagine it all coming together."

"You got to see my practice earlier this week."

"Sure, but it's different with the music. You always have your ear-buds in when you do it. I haven't heard the song even once."

"I'm kind of reluctant to even do the thing at this point..." Viktor admitted, "People might get the wrong idea."

"Huh?" Yuri lifted his head a little, only to see Viktor leaning over to rest his head against his stomach and push him back down again, clasping his hands loosely under the bench in the gap between support posts, "Viktor...?"

"'History Maker' for the Short Program, and 'Evoke' for the Free Skate. Remember that."

"...Should I be worried? I have to wait almost 2 days before I can see what you're talking about."

Viktor turned his face to look up at him, "Worried? No... But..."

Yuri pushed himself to one elbow, "But?"

He wouldn't answer.

"Viktoooooooo..." The younger skater was trying to jostle him by the shoulder, but he just held fast and kept his cheek to Yuri's stomach, "You're killing me."

"...I need a nap."

Yuri gave up and fell back down to where he was before. He only looked down again to see Viktor repositioning himself, sitting up to put one leg on the other side of the bench so he could lean forward instead of sideways, and crept back up to rest his head higher up against Yuri's chest. He moved to hold his own hands together again under the bench like before, but then changed his mind and brought the left up under his chin, and finally settled.

Yuri smiled softly and put his right hand over where Viktor's was resting on his chest, feeling the man move his fingers a little to clasp it in place.

*I guess this is okay...*

More than half a dozen more skaters came and went, but by the end of it, the leader board hadn't really changed since Yuri came off the ice. Viktor at 122.43, Yuri at 118.08, and then JJ at 105.19.
But, it was getting to be time for Yurio to take his turn, and everything could change by the end of his two and a half minutes.

That self-same skater came by the benches to gather his gear, and saw the two unconscious there. By then, the hand Viktor had pulled up over Yuri's abdomen had fallen off the side again and hung loose a few inches above the floor, pulled forward only by where his fingers were still laced through his husband's. Yurio thought back on what Mikhail had said...but then scoffed, grabbed his black-bladed skates, and walked away without a word. He didn't notice the slate-blue eye that had cracked open to watch him go.

A little stiff, but feeling more rested than he thought he would be, Viktor pulled himself up from the spot he'd nested on and rubbed his eyes. Adjusting his hair a little bit and rubbing his eyes, he looked down to see if Yuri had stirred at all. Noting that he hadn't...he saw something else instead: a wet spot on Yuri's chest where his head had been. Viktor laughed at himself quietly in embarrassment.

"I drooled on him...I must've really needed that nap..."

He quickly shrugged out of his track-suit coat and set it over the sleeping man's figure before taking off after his team-mate.

He thought he probably looked a little ridiculous, emerging from under the curtain with his ill-matched red-and-white track-suit pants and a thin half-sleeved black shirt, but it didn't really matter much. He had other concerns. He caught sight of Yurio, Yakov, and Lilia heading over to the kiss and cry as the current performer, a German skater whose name he didn't know, was finishing up his performance. The song was intense, as one could expect...something by E Nomine, he suspected. It set the mood for sure, making him a bit more anxious than he would've been otherwise.

Media nox, obscura nox, crudelitas animarum...
Compana sonat duo decies...

Unfortunately, he couldn't even be discrete with his sneaking, since as soon as his silver-haired head popped out from under the curtain, he heard people calling his name from the stands behind him. Viktor stopped and looked back, waving politely before turning back around.

"What are you doing?" Yurio growled at him, one ear-bud pulled out by his fingers from under the hood.

"Supporting my team? You gave me grief once for not going to the European Championships to cheer you on, so..."

"Tsh..." Yurio put the stray ear-bud back in place and turned away, heading away with Lilia close behind.

Viktor crossed his arms and said nothing, glancing over at Yakov, as though seeking some word of reassurance or explanation. But, nothing of that sort came.

"What'd you to do make him so mad?"

"I didn't do anything to him." Viktor explained, a little sullen.

"Vitya."

He lifted his face away, a little embarrassed to mention it in front of his coach, "...I was helping Yuri get in the mood for his Eros skate and Yurio walked in on us." He pulled one hand back though and put a finger over his mouth in thought, "Come to think of it, he mentioned your name...did you send
him looking for me?"

"The ISU brass were looking for you."

"...Oh?" Viktor quirked a brow, "Did they say what for?"

"They were going to let you announce your Yuri's name, but since you weren't there in time, they had to do it the usual way. Maybe on Saturday."

The skater was a bit surprised, "...Did Yurio know that when you sent him to find me?"

"I didn't even know, not until after you missed your chance." Yakov shrugged, "Anyway, I have to go; Yuratchka's about to go up."

Viktor nodded and followed along quietly, smiling as he realized the meaning of his missed opportunity.

*Maybe Saturday.*

The song came to an end overhead, and the audience cheered, tossing their gifts onto the ice for the German skater. Viktor leaned onto the rink wall to watch the man bow and drink in the adoration before finally heading over the exit to find his coach, while the rink attendants skated out to clear away the debris. His score hadn't changed the leader-board, but it was a respectable 94.35.

Yurio handed his blade guards and coat over to Yakov and Lilia before taking a few steps out onto the ice, running his hand through his loose hair a few times to fluff it up a bit.

"*Next on the ice, representing Russia...Yuri Plisetsky!*"

The crowd was wild with enthusiasm, and Germany's red, yellow, and black flags switched to Russia's blue, red, and white. A number of Yuri's Angels had even made the trip to the EU for the event, and they happily wore their cat ears and held up their signs for their young hero.

Viktor smiled at it all and watched quietly from where he was still leaning against the rink wall. He knew that, outwardly, Yurio never really acknowledged the crowd, even hated doing so sometimes, but internally, he needed it almost more than any of them. The Russian wouldn't join the chorus though, simply keeping his eyes on his younger team-mate quietly. The crowd slowly quieted down, and the divine music began.

*Sic mea vita est temporaria, cupit ardenter caritatem aeternam*

Yuri was up with a start when the sound reached him, sensing it like an alarm had gone off right next to his head. He looked down to realize Viktor had been replaced by the red and white coat, and he quickly stood and took off, jogging over to the curtain threshold to enter the rink-side area. True to his worry, Yurio had gone onto the ice already and he'd missed the beginning.

*Maybe that's for the best though... The way he was yelling earlier, he probably doesn't even want me watching at all right now...*

He spotted Viktor over near the coaches, watching intently, and decided not to interrupt him, instead looking up to the crowd to see if he could spot Minako and his sister. The Short Program was practically half over by the time he spotted them, and moved back into the prep area to put Viktor's coat with his other things and then find the best way up into the stands. When he finally arrived, the song had come to its conclusion, and he twisted to stand side-ways on the stairs to look at Yurio's
final pose in the center of the rink.

A few people were commenting about him, a competitor, being in the stands like he was, but he ignored them and pressed on. He even paid little attention to the whispers he barely heard that mentioned his ring, name-change, or even the oddness that he'd married the reigning Russian champion.

"Yuri!" Minako called out, barely audible over the sudden explosion of cheering, waving her arms to get his attention. He waved back and hopped the last few steps to get to hers and Mari's level, then pardoned his way through the few people who were seated closer to the end before finally taking a seat next to them.

"Minako-sensei, Mari-nee-chan!" He greeted them warmly.

"Yuri Nikiforov eh?" Mari prodded teasingly, "Doesn't sound too Japanese anymore."

Yuri blushed, "No, maybe not..."

"How've you been? We haven't heard from you in ages. You never even returned my call after you and Viktor got hitched!" Minako pestered.

"Ah...it's been crazy. Good for the most part, but crazy."

"Who was that guy that got mobbed by the media after Viktor's skate?" Minako wondered, turning from where Yurio was leaving the rink to get his score, "I've never seen him before."

"...Thhhh..." Yuri started, unsure how to proceed given Viktor's opinion on matters, "...That's Viktor's uncle, Mikhail. He's part of why things have been crazy."

"Viktor's got an uncle!?" She beamed excitedly, "Why didn't you said so!?"

"It's a long story..." The skater answered pensively, "Vikto-"

"We should go introduce ourselves!" Mari announced, and the two women jumped to their feet, pointing excitedly over to where they knew he was sitting, "Let's go!"

Yuri balked, but realized there wasn't a lot he could do now that the two ladies settled on their mission.

*Viktor's not going to like this one bit...!*

It felt like a while before the announcer overhead finally called out Yurio's Short Program score, and to Yuri's surprise, it wasn't even has high as his own. It barely scraped by at 104.74, not even bumping JJ from 3rd place. As his sister and sensei marched through the crowded under-tunnels of the arena to make the circuit to the other side, Yuri paused to catch a glimpse of the monitors with footage of the kiss and cry on them, seeing Yurio growling at the camera, disappointed with his score.

...*I wasn't paying enough attention... I wonder what went wrong?*

He quickly turned away though, chasing after the two women who'd gotten ahead of him. A few people in the crowd recognized him and tried to stop him to ask for photos or autographs, but he was so determined to keep up with his sister and Minako that he found himself falling back into his old habit of ignoring fans.
The pair had stopped near an exit ramp, waiting for Mikhail to come down from the arena after Yurio's score was called, thinking he'd be filing in after a throng of people who had waited all night to see the Russian Tiger skate. They were commenting about how Yurio had done rather well, but it was still surprising that he hadn't done as well as at the GPF. They could only wonder if something was wrong or if he'd been hurt sometime before the show.

But, Mikhail hadn't come, and the two were wondering why.

Yuri was struggling to get back to them as the crowd wandered by. There were only a handful of skaters left, but many fans were getting fatigued by the long afternoon. The crowd was thinning out considerably as a number of them packed it in and started to leave.

"Maybe he got gun-shy after seeing Viktor's new record?" Yuri heard someone say, passing by rather closely.

"The other Yuri didn't freak out about it." Someone else had commented in response, clearly not noticing he'd been standing right there.

"The other Yuri is married to Viktor now. It's probably different for him."

"Wait...they're married? I read Viktor had actually adopted him as his kid."

Yuri nearly choked as he heard it, ADOPTED me? Who came up with that...!?

"What? No way! They're married! Remember the matching 'good luck' rings they had at the Grand Prix Final?"

"Isn't that a violation of the teacher-student relationship?"

The two spectators were laughing as their conversation continued, dissolving into the thrum of the arena's ambient noise.

"Ahh! There he is!" Minako cried out quietly in excitement. She and Mari watched the silver-haired figure emerge in the entrance-way, the skating rink barely visible behind him given how high up in the stands they were.

Yuri felt himself getting nervous...and then a pit of confusion rose up in him.

Mikhail had walked up to them entirely in silence, standing still as water with his hands stuffed in his coat pockets, even as Mari and Minako were trying to get him to say something. Even something as simple as a greeting would've been acceptable, but...the man was tight-lipped, staring straight past them and through to Yuri where he was trying to be small in the background.

"Yuri..." Minako leaned over, "Is he deaf or something?"

"No..."

"Then why is he just staring at us like that?" Mari wondered in turn.

"I have no idea."

Minako grabbed him by the track-suit coat and shoved him out in front of them, "Introduce us! Maybe he'll talk to you!"

"That's not fair!" Yuri barked in embarrassment, "I told you before that I wasn't gonna be your pass to meet people at skating events!"
"But this is Viktor's family! That makes him our family!" Mari insisted.

Mikhail just continued staring at them awkwardly, his brows furrowed in the middle to give him an air of concern...but still, he remained silent.

Yuri looked back at him, feeling a little desperate, "...M-Mikhail...I..."

The older man nodded lightly. It was probably the closest thing to an acknowledgement he'd given so far.

"Why aren't you saying anything...?" The skater wondered, really finding it odd now, "Normally you're as excitable as Viktor." He wondered back to what the two relatives might've said to one another while he'd been stretching.

It didn't matter though. Whatever Yuri might've said next was cut off by the sound of fans cheering for that very skater as he came through. He looked past the nearest people in the crowd to spot the red and white track-suit, and finally seeing Viktor, looking around as though seeking something.

When they met eyes, Viktor waved at him happily, "There you are!"

Yuri got anxious, "...Y-yes, here I am...!"

"What? Why are you so nervous all of a sudden?" The Russian wondered curiously, trying to push past the last of the fans that stood between them. He excused himself as he had to use his hand to get through a few, only to hear them excitedly talking about how 'Viktor Nikiforov touched them!' in a tone only a fangirl could express.

"Viktor!" Minako said cheerfully, "You did amazing out there!"

"That quad axel was out of this world!" Mari agreed.

"Minako-sensei, Mari-nee-chan!" Viktor greeted them warmly, hugging them both at the same time as he approached, and kissing each on the cheek in turn.

Yuri was still having half a heart-attack as he watched. Viktor was turned side-face to his direction, and Mikhail stood directly behind him, so maybe the Russian hadn't seen his uncle yet.

It didn't take long, though.

"Why doesn't your uncle say anything to us?" Minako asked rather directly, though quietly in a whisper as she leaned in towards Viktor's ear, one hand up to hide her mouth like she thought it would prevent anyone from hearing her, "We were trying to introduce ourselves but he's standing there gawking at us like a dead fish in an aquarium."

The older skater's expression changed then, and Yuri felt a chill go down his spine.

_Something must've happened when I wasn't there...!_ 

Viktor's gaze went through him and met his uncle's unblinking eyes.

"Yuri."

The Asian practically jumped out of his skin at the sound of his name. The whole thing reminded him of the day he'd returned to Hasetsu after his five-year absence, and Minako had startled him at the train station. He tried to become small under all his layers back then to hide how chubby he'd gotten, but in the current moment, all he could do was stand straight like he was at attention in some
military.

"V-Viktor!"

The Russian had a weird look on his face...annoyed, curious, and uncomfortable all at once. Whatever it was...it wasn't Viktor's normal look. It made Yuri uneasy.

"Why don't you introduce my uncle to them."
CHAPTER FOURTY FIVE

"Minakosensei Marineechan this is Mikhail Viktor's uncle I'm sure he's pleased to meet you Viktor why are you doing it?" Yuri blurted uncomfortably.

Mikhail couldn't stop himself from chuckling a little at that, and the sound of it immediately lightened the mood for the two women. They both heaved a sigh of relief and tried their introductions again.

"What Yuri meant to say is..." The ballerina started, stepping forward, "I'm Minako Okukawa. I was his ballet instructor when he was young." She reached out her hand to the man.

He looked at it awkwardly, looking past her to Viktor, as though seeking some tacit acknowledgement that he was being put on the spot and needed permission to participate. No one but him and Yuri noticed, but Viktor actually rolled his eyes before finally waving his hand a little to let him go.

"The pleasure is mine." The elder Russian said, taking the woman's hand in his and leaning in to kiss the back of it, "It's nice to learn more about the people in Viktor's life."

"I'm Yuri's older sister, Mari Katsuki." The younger woman interjected, "So I guess that makes you... my uncle in-law? What side of his family are you from?"

"Maternal."

"Mhm, mhm..." Mari was looking him over from top to bottom, "You definitely have the look."

"What do you mean?" Mikhail wondered nervously, watching her circle him.

Mari had gotten behind him and was continuing her inspection when she looked past his shoulder to see Viktor beyond him, "Yep." She held her hands up, as though taking a picture of them between her fingers, looking through the 'window' with one eye closed, "You and Viktor were absolutely cut from the same cloth." She explained.

Viktor grimaced at that... and so did Mikhail, though for entirely different reasons.

"Oh my, look at their faces, they even have the same expressions!" Mari was starting to fangirl over them.

Minako was glancing between them and nodded in agreement, "They really do look alike... How old are you?"

"...Fifty seven."

"Oh." She blinked at him, "That's... you're just older than I am."

Mikhail chortled at her, "There's no way you're in your fifties."

"...Well, a lady never reveals such things, but..."

Mari was elbowing the ballerina comically, "Better jump on him now for your own vintage version of Viktor."
"MARI KATSUKI I SWEAR." She retorted, embarrassed and shoving her off.

Yuri could tell that those words had put burning thorns under Viktor's skin, but the man just listened quietly. He reached into Viktor's track-suit coat pocket where he could feel his fist balled up tightly, and with a few gentle rubs, loosened it enough that he could lace their fingers together.

"Do you want to leave?" He whispered into the taller man's ear, "We can go."

"No."

"You'll just spend all night chaperoning him. Is that really what you want? To spend your time at the World Figure Skating Championships minding your uncle?"

He could feel Viktor's grip tightening around his fingers, even as he tried his best not to let the look on his face change, "...I...don't want him getting wound up in everything."

"...I just don't understand." Yuri finally admitted, holding Viktor's arm to his chest with his free hand, "Why are you so anxious about Mikhail being around? He's nothing like your-"

"He's a stranger." Viktor confessed quietly, "I feel like I'm just being followed around by some older fan who's trying his hardest to look like me."

"Is that really it?" The younger man wondered, turning his head a little to look at the side of Viktor's face, "You're trying so hard to imagine him as something other than family than you're actually starting to convince yourself that's the case."

"I don't want to think of him as family."

'I don't want to remember...'

Yuri sighed, pressing his cheek to Viktor's shoulder, "I wish I could understand what changed. When he first showed up at the rink in St. Petersburg, you seemed really happy to see him. Now, you practically cringe just to hear his voice."

The Russian wasn't sure how to answer, but he brought his free hand up under his bangs, "...Every time I see him, my eye hurts and my vision blurs a little."

The revelation made Yuri's eyes widen, and he pulled out in front of his husband, reaching his own free hand up to cover where Viktor's was already over his cheek, "Viktor...it wasn't him."

"I know that, b-"

"No, Viktor...listen to what I'm saying." Yuri insisted, trying to keep his voice low, "Mikhail is not the one who hit you."

Cool blue eyes just looked down into him, as though trying to rationalize it but unable to get over the precipice.

"This guy standing behind me...he loves and supports you." Yuri continued, moving his right hand only move Viktor's out of the way and replace it over his left cheek, "He likes figure skating, and he likes me. He's trying so hard to do everything you want that he wouldn't even say hi to any of us until you showed up to say it was okay. Can you really expect someone to be like that if they don't care?"

"...Yuri..."
"He told me..." The younger skater continued, "When we met in secret that one night. He told me about all the reasons why he left that town you both grew up in. About how he was tired of how backwards and old fashioned everyone was, how he never fit in with the rest of the family...and that he left abruptly when he did to escape the suffocating oppression he felt there. There was a whole wide world out there to explore and experience and he was stuck in some miserable little town where people cared more about their turnips and some rocks than they did about the fact that someone walked on the moon. He said he couldn't even understand why your mother stayed there, or why she kept you there. He even went back once, before you left on your own, to see if he could get you out!"

"...That's just not true."

"Why would he lie about something like that!?"

"Why wouldn't he? I don't remember him ever coming back."

"You were a child. Even I barely remember things that happened to me before I turned ten, and it was sure never anything important. Why are you so convinced he wants to hurt you?" Yuri was desperate for understanding, and it was getting harder to keep his voice low, "He's cursed himself for the last two decades because he feels like he failed you! Now you're giving him the cold shoulder and won't even giving him the benefit of the doubt!"

Viktor turned his eyes away, but held his ground.

"...Please, Viktor..." Yuri continued, lowering his hands so they rested flat on Viktor's chest, "You once dropped everything and risked your entire career to take a chance on a scrub like me. You're not risking anything to give him a chance."

The Russian looked up and around his partner, over to where Mikhail was still chatting it up with the ladies of Hasetsu. The man had pulled his phone out and was making grand gestures.

"...and so, I tell him...I have in my hand a device that gives me access to the entirety of human knowledge and understanding...and I use it to watch cat videos and get into pointless arguments with complete strangers."

The three of them laughed, realizing how sad and true it was.

Viktor sighed to himself and brought his arms up over Yuri's shoulders, wrapping them around his head and burying his face in the middle of it all. He held there for a while as Yuri returned the hug, holding him tight around the chest.

"You once told me that it was okay to be scared." Yuri whispered in the small space between them, "You can be scared too, okay? Mikhail won't ever lay a finger on you. And if he does, well..." He pulled back a little and smiled, "...I don't know if you're aware, but I happen to own a pair of boots with some pretty big knives bolted to the bottoms."

Viktor gawked at him, and then burst out into laughter, enough so that he had to wipe a tear from his eye. It drew the attention of the trio behind Yuri, and even some awkward glances from spectators who were passing in the hall. The Russian pulled his hand back and pinched the bridge of his nose before moving it up to run the length of his husband's slicked-back hair, "I can't believe how much I love you right now, Yuri."

Brown eyes shimmered as he heard those words, and he let himself laugh a little, too.

The Russian leaned in to kiss him right there in front of everyone, and Yuri was relieved for it. He
then finally turned to face his uncle evenly, "...Let's all go get something to eat. We can all take the same shuttle back to the event hotel so Yuri and I can change, and then meet you guys at the entrance, okay?"

By the time they were ready to come back down from their hotel room, the sun had gone down and the lights of the city were starting to come on. Yuri was looking at Instagram as the elevator descended the floors, sharing with Viktor the wave of posts that repeated the quad axel. Animated gifs, short clips of video, still-frames showing every second of the jump...all of it.

"Realizing how heavy your coat was, it's a wonder you were able to get all your rotations in." Yuri was saying, leaning against the wall with his free hand clasped with his husband's, "If you do it again during your Free Skate, I'm sure you'll pull it off without dropping your hand down."

There were a few people in the elevator with them who were just gawking silently, recognizing them but hardly believing it. Though maybe it was just the sight of them holding hands that was awkward for them...not everyone who followed skating followed the lives of the skaters, too.

"Oh, here...you'll like this." Yuri started, holding his phone a little closer to his face as he read the tiny text out loud, "...After the first day of Men's Singles, the leader-board is dominated by Russia, Japan, and Canada. Reigning Russian champion, Viktor Nikiforov, leads the pack in his come-back performance with an unbelievable record-setting score topping 122, while his husband, Yuri Nikiforov..." Viktor squeezed his hand affectionately, "...previously Yuri Katsuki, is in second place currently with a score over 118. It's speculated that both of these skaters will end the season with scores that will likely be insurmountable for generations to come."

"Wow..."

"Right!?" Yuri held his phone up excitedly, "We're history makers!"

The elevator finally came to rest on the lobby floor, and the doors opened, releasing the riders to the open atrium. Viktor spotted the trio waiting for them just outside, and he pulled Yuri through the revolving doors to get outside.

"The internet's going crazy over you two." Minako started, nudging her phone-hand out for emphasis, "That quad axel and both of your Short Program scores...it's unreal. Are you two sure you haven't been abducted by aliens and made into super-humans?"

"I was abducted by an alien!" Yuri raised his arm quickly, "But he's Russian, and I went willingly, so I don't know if that counts."

"Well, he definitely made you super-human, Yuri." She mused in return, "You're the ultimate come-back kid, that's for sure."

"I hope I medal..." The Asian admitted, unashamedly, "I want to skate the Exhibition so bad..."

"Got something big planned?" Mari asked curiously.

"Yes!" Yuri answered enthusiastically, "I can't wait!"
"Viktor...?" Minako gave him a smirk, "You know what he's up to?"

"For the Exhibition? No, actually." He shrugged, "He's keeping this one close to his chest."

"What are you planning?"

"Something easy."

"Would they let you guys do your Four Continents Exhibition again?" Mikhail wondered.

Everyone looked at him strangely, so he gave them a confused look in return, but then Minako agreed, "They should! I'd love to see that one in person! If you two both medal, you should ask if you can do it along with your other Exhibition shows!"

"I don't know that they'll let us do two even if we had everything ready..." Yuri said, "But we can do it for you when we come back to Hasetsu next week. We'll have the outfits for it by then since we're going to stop by St. Petersburg first. We didn't bring those ones with us for Worlds, or the music."

They started walking back to the shuttle port, while Mari was looking at a brochure that the ISU had put together for the event, detailing all the local attractions and restaurants.

"Yuuko's girls were saying you were going straight back to Hasetsu from here." Minako wondered, "Did your plans change?"

"A little bit." Viktor answered, "...I'm putting my house up for sale."

Everyone stopped, "What?!"

They got into an available shuttle before continuing, with Yuri explaining after that, "We decided that it would probably be a good idea to set up in Hasetsu, like before. It's just really hard to keep our plans under wraps when Yurio, Yuri's Angels, and everyone else on the Russian team is watching all the time. So, we'll put the house up for sale while we're in Hasetsu on our honeymoon, then go back to St. Petersburg until it sells, and then finally move everything back to Japan once we close."

"Sheesh..." Mari was saying in disbelief, "That's a lot of traveling. What are you going to get in Hasetsu though? I doubt you'll want to live at Yu-Topia."

"No..." Yuri laughed nervously, "Maybe an apartment to start, something close to the Ice Castle."

"So you guys think you'll be able to keep your plans for next year under lock and key when Yuuko's girls are always around?" Minako wondered cautiously, "They love to post content of you guys."

"They're good about laying off when I ask them to." Yuri said simply, "Or if they don't listen to me, they listen to Viktor for sure."

The Russian smiled, "They'll do anything for Uncle Viktor."

Mikhail huffed a laugh at that, "Uncle Viktor?"

"Mhm." He nodded, "They've been calling me that for a while, since Yuri and I were just engaged. Yuri and their mom were childhood friends, so he's practically a part of their family even if he's not blood related."

"Sounds like you'll have your hands full out there."

"It's going to be hectic." Viktor agreed, "But, I don't know how fast the house will sell."
"...You could sell it to me if you want." Mikhail shrugged, "That way you don't even have to list it."

"...Why would you want to buy my house?" The skater was a bit skeptical, but he felt Yuri grip a little tighter where he had his hand on his thigh, and he backed off a little.

"I have two houses already, what's a third?"

Yuri gawked at the man, "How do you afford two houses and offer to buy another?"

"I own a business. Since it's been relatively successful, I can sit back and reap the rewards without having to do much work now. I have a house in the Ukraine, or I will until Putin bombs it...plus a condo in Moscow, and a house in Canada."

"The heck kind of business gets you that kind of money?" Mari wondered, eyes visible over the top of the brochure.

"Engineering equipment."

"...And that makes you?"

"An engineer. I used to oversee jobs like dams and bridges, but now I run a company that provides the supplies and machines." He winked at her, "More money that way. More free time to go to international skating competitions at the drop of a hat."

"That still doesn't answer why you'd want to buy my house." Viktor repeated.

"Viktor..." Yuri tried to cut him off again.

"No, I'm genuinely curious."

"Why not?" Mikhail shrugged, "It's not like I have to live there just because I own it. You two could come back anytime. Call it your summer home or something. I dunno. I was just offering so you wouldn't have to worry about doing house viewings or deal with realtors. You could just be done with it and get on with more important things."

"Wow..." Yuri was impressed, looking from one silver-haired man to the other, "What do you think?"

"...I'd need to think." He said, putting his free hand over his mouth as he did just that.

Yuri wondered if he was actually taking the idea into consideration or if he was just formulating ways of blowing it off.

Soon enough though, they arrived at the restaurant, and the group disembarked for the last night of potential festivities before the competitors would have to buckle down and get serious again.
Yuri had gotten to watch in mostly-silent amusement as Viktor's anxiety about his uncle slowly melted away. What began as a somewhat trepidatious night had, over time, become much more relaxed.

But, that might've also been a side-effect of all the drinking, though Yuri supposed that was fine. Unlike himself, Viktor never reported any memory troubles after imbibing. He might've had the opposite problem, in fact. Viktor was remembering too much.

Yuri noticed the gaps though. There was a decided lack of discussion on Viktor's life from around age 6 through 13.

"There's a saying I've heard..." Mikhail had started, recounting the early days of Viktor's skating career, "...that a bird born in a cage thinks flying is an illness. I'm not surprised Yakov was able to get you to spread your wings so far. Once you got out of the hell-hole, it was nothing but open skies. I'm kind of envious."

"Why?" Viktor wondered, "You got out, too, and did what you wanted...didn't you?"

"I escaped and then found my way. You already had a vision, so it was easier for you to figure out your next steps once you were free." The elder said, sipping at a 2005 red wine, "It probably took me something like...uhh..." He set the glass down to look up at the restaurant ceiling in thought, "...Ten years and a failed marriage to get my shit straight?"

"Wow."

"But maybe my ten years at the start is just trading time-frames for sorting out life's problems." Mikhail pointed out, "Your ten years may just be coming after you've already succeeded at something. What are your plans for after official retirement? You're not far off."

Viktor sighed and leaned back, "One more year...that's what I said I'd do. I might get two, but I don't know. I hate that everything fell into place so late in the game."

Yuri was confused, "What do you mean, 'late'? You've been on a winning streak since you were even younger than me. You'd probably still be on it if you hadn't taken time off, and given your score right now, you'll be getting right back on the gold."

"I don't just mean the skating." He explained, "I meant the two L-words, too."

"You're not going to have a lot of time to consider that in a pretty big hurry, nephew." Mikhail said, bringing their conversation back around to his original point, "What plans do you have for retirement? I know you intend to stay on as Yuri's coach until he's done, but even that won't last forever. Surely you don't mean to just sit around and do nothing for the next 60 years."

"...I hadn't wanted to think about it." Viktor admitted, "It seems like another life. Someone else's life. I'm sure something will come up. World Champions don't just vanish off the radar."

"What about you, Yuri?" Mikhail wondered, tilting his half-empty wine glass at the Asian skater.

He practically jumped, not having expected to get asked anything, "...Ahhhh, well, I finished college,
so I could always do something with the degree I earned."

"What's it in?"

"Oh, something boring..." Yuri was trying to distract attention away from himself by seeming mediocre.

"And that is?" Mikhail wasn't falling for it.

"...Business." He answered quietly, "...Like most other Japanese men do when they have no inspiration to do anything else."

"Ahh the quintessential Salary-man." Mikhail raised his glass as if to toast to it, "Careful of burn-out. Being in business isn't nearly as interesting or exciting as being a top skater in the JSF."

The youngest of the trio lowered his head, "I know..." He sighed, "I may just help Mari with running Yu-Topia Katsuki once our parents stop."

"You could always put together the things that you know and force it to be interesting."

Yuri looked up again, "What do you mean?"

"Viktor already knows what it's like to be a coach. What if you two owned a rink together, teaching other people how to skate? I could see people from all over the world flocking to a rink where two record-setting gold medalists were offering training."

"...It's a bit early to be thinking about all that." Viktor said, not wanting to linger on the topic.

"I know. It's just food for thought."

Yurio was in his hotel room; he'd been allowed to have a suite of his own for once. The hotel's closed-circuit TV was showing replays of the day's competition, and he was watching bitterly from where he was sitting cross-legged on the large king-sized bed. He felt like he'd seen the 30 minute play-by-play 4 times already and it still bothered him every time coverage of his own Short Program came up.

'Skate Agape with all the unconditional love you have for Viktor. Give it everything you have. He'll notice.'

Was that really all I had to offer? An Agape worth 13 points less than what I scored at the Grand Prix Final?

His thoughts wandered back to earlier in the afternoon. The moment he went out onto the ice without even stopping back for a few last words with Yakov or Lilia. He barely even made the motions to present himself to the audience, merely skating to the center of the rink and taking position like he didn't even care. His eyes lifted only a little to see Viktor slouching over the rink wall, watching him from behind where his chin was resting in the crook of his elbows.

'I can't feel anything right now.' Yurio had thought, hearing the music playing from above, 'I just feel completely numb.'
His body had gone into auto-pilot after that. He remembered only how he'd forgotten to lift his arms for the jumps in the first half of the program, and even after he'd mentally kicked himself for it, the jumps in the second half barely went better. The triple-axel he'd been doing with both arms up previously had suddenly become a double-axel with only one arm up. By the time he'd ended the program, he wasn't even out of breath. He just had a headache, and looking up for the final pose just put him into a position where he was staring straight up into the stadium lights, making the blinding pain behind his eyes even worse.

Truth be told, he was surprised he still scored over 100 with that performance. When he left the ice to go to the kiss and cry, Viktor had tried to say something to him, but he completely ignored it.

'But that's what set you off in the end...you feel like he forgot about you.'

"Why do I keep thinking about what that old geezer said?" He berated himself, "What does he know?"

A scalding-hot shower hadn't helped burn the words from his mind either. He just leaned against the white and floral-patterned tile for what felt like hours. He stared at the water as it swirled into the drain.

I want to be washed clean of Viktor.

He reached for the Plexiglas knob and turned it back to the coldest setting, where the water would actually turn off, and stood quietly until the last sound of the water faded away.

I want people to stop thinking of me as his successor. I want people to stop seeing me as 'just' the Russian counterpart to Katsuki. Damnit, Viktor...if you'd just left well enough alone, he'd never have come back to skating, and this wouldn't even be an issue...! Why did it matter so much to you!? So what if he skated your program!? I could skate Aria if I wanted to! YOU DIDN'T EVEN KNOW HIM, BUT YOU MOVED INTO HIS FAMILY'S FUCKING RESORT LIKE YOU'D BEEN THERE A THOUSAND TIMES.

He found himself punching the shower wall hard enough to knock a tile in, and split his middle knuckle in the process. Blood immediately trickled down his still-wet hand and fingers, dripping off the tip to leave a swirl of pink to pass his feet.

Drawing in a few angry breaths, Yuri Plisetsky clenched his trembling and painful fist, and used the other to push aside the shower curtain, stepping out onto the cold linoleum floor. The chill of the air gave him something to gnaw on, even if it was uncomfortable, and he strode out into the main area again without so much as grabbing a towel first. He crawled, still wet and dripping, with all the lights and television still on, under the covers of the bed and closed his eyes. Bitter dreams came soon after and unbidden.

'Fuck's sake, Viktor, you just won gold for your 5th straight Grand Prix Final. At least try to look happy about it.' Yurio growled at the man, who had been sitting quietly and sullenly in his economy-class airplane seat with his arms crossed, staring straight ahead of himself with such intensity that it was a wonder the seat in front of him didn't catch on fire from it.

'I don't like these seats.'

'I don't like them either!'

'Quit complaining. They're the seats your sponsors are reimbursing us for. If you want something better, talk to them or pay for it yourself.' Yakov told them both, sitting in the isle, with Yurio between...
himself and the older skater.

'I don't like economy class.' Viktor continued, 'I'm too tall for these narrow chairs. This is torture.'

'You didn't complain on the way to Sochi, why should you complain on the way back?' Yakov asked irritably, 'It's not a long flight anyway. Be grateful the GPF was held in Russia this year, so you don't have to be in economy-class for several more hours, like all the other competitors.'

Yurio elbowed his older counterpart, 'Euros are going to be in Croatia.'

'I don't care where they're being held.'

'Well then you're going to really not care that Worlds is in TOKYO. That flight is going to be a WORLD of SUPER-NOT-CARING.' The blond barked, 'And that doesn't even count next season!'

Viktor lifted his head, 'Really? The next World Championship is in Japan?'

'...Uh, yeah...at least for now. Why would it suck less for competition to be in Japan than it would to be in Canada?' Yurio raised an eyebrow at him, 'Economy-class is going to fucking blow both directions. Might as well try to beg your sponsors for better seats now and hope they agree.'

Yurio tossed in his sleep, flipping over and dragging the large blanket off his feet.

'I know it's going to be your birthday but seriously.' He grumbled, walking by the silver-haired man as they waited in the airport, heading straight back to Sochi for the Russian Nationals. It hadn't even been two weeks since they'd left from the Grand Prix Final and they were already returning, 'You're only turning 27. So what if it's during the middle of a competition? You live for this shit anyway.'

Viktor was on his phone, looking at Instagram while they waited for their boarding announcement. Yurio couldn't see what he'd been looking at, but the older skater hadn't scrolled for quite some time. He'd become fixated on one particular image.

Yurio snatched the phone away to get his attention, 'The hell are you so obsessed over? Did your dog die or something?'

'No...'

The blond looked at what Viktor's screen showed; results of the Japanese Nationals. There weren't many competitors to speak of, but Yurio noticed that one particular figure wasn't on the podium. He just laughed, 'The idiot didn't make it. Good riddance. Maybe he'll retire now. There's no need for two Yuris in the Senior Bracket when I make my premier.'

Viktor swiped his hand to get his phone back, 'That's cruel to say.'

'I'm not about to have them pronounce, and butcher, my full name just to tell me apart from the failure. He's the fuck-up, he should use a different name.'

The silver-haired man just looked away from him wordlessly, clicking the circular button at the bottom of the faceplate to return to the home screen. Yurio was already walking off, and Viktor looked at his wallpaper, seeing a particular photo from the Sochi banquet there. He then turned the phone off and walked after the blond with a sigh.

Yurio had found a way to shove his head under no less than four pillows, and one had been knocked off the bed entirely, taking the alarm clock and night-stand phone with it. The clatter of plastic and electronics didn't wake him though.
'SERIOUSLY, Viktor!?'

It was the beginning of February already, and the European Championships had ended two weeks prior. But... Viktor was on his phone again. Yurio wasn't sure what his older counterpart had seen that had gotten him so upset and/or annoyed, but something had perturbed him enough to tell Yakov he wanted to take a few weeks off.

'You can't just take 3 weeks for no reason.' Their coach said, 'You're just going to plan your next programs, right?'

'Yes.' The man nodded, '...That's exactly what I'm going to do. Inspiration strikes when you least expect it and I need to go now.'

Yurio watched him go, and he grit his teeth. As the taller figure vanished through the skating rink's outside doors, he went off the ice to grab his phone. He was determined to figure out what Viktor had seen that had been so goddamn upsetting. He scrolled through Instagram, finding absolutely nothing that he could pinpoint as the source of Viktor's 'inspiration.'

'Chris posting stupid photos, JJ thinks he's a model, Stupid-Yuri officially fired his coach and retired... good ...schedule changes for the Junior World Championships...' He tossed the phone back into his gear bag, glowering at the doors again, 'The fuck got you so mad? None of this is bad news. VIKTOOR!'

"VIKTOR." Yurio yelled out, sitting up practically like Frankenstein's monster as he roused from sleep suddenly, "Vik..." He stared at the still-on television, seeing the play-back on the closed-circuit channel again. It was showing Viktor's quad-axel. Within 15 seconds, it would be playing Yuri's Short Program analysis.

His hair was still rather damp, and he felt his 'nest' on the bed was cold and moist as well, especially where his head had been. He pushed off and went around the corner, grabbing a large towel from the rack just inside the bathroom door. Sitting cross-legged on the one part of the king-size bed that he hadn't somehow gotten wet earlier, he pulled the towel over his head and shivered a little.

"...You giant dumbass." He snarled to himself, "You were keeping tabs on that retard the entire time. You'd been all pissed off because he didn't want to take the fucking picture with you after Sochi, right? You were mad for over three months because you got rejected ONE TIME, by ONE PERSON, EVER!? I still remember how fucking blank your eyes were and how fake your smile was when you kissed that stupid gold medal at Worlds last year! You weren't even mentally THERE."

He grabbed his phone from where it had been put onto the edge of the night-stand by the pillow from earlier, and pulled up the Instagram app. A dozen or more skaters' posts were flooding his ISU event feed, but eventually he got to a post made specifically by the v-nikiforov account.

The first picture he saw was just Viktor, looking up at the full moon of the clear Helsinki sky. Whoever had taken the photo must've been lying on the ground to get the angle that way. The next photo was Viktor with his uncle, and it seemed to be a happy shot. The caption read, 'Silver Russians Far from Home.' The one after that was the whole group of them; Mari, Yuri, Viktor, Mikhail, and finally Minako on the other end. They each had an arm around the next person's waist or over their shoulder and they were all smiling happily where they stood outside some local restaurant.

"Past and present collide in Helsinki at Worlds." Yurio read aloud, "Long-lost family meets the one I just recently made. Glad to have my uncle back in my life. Hashtag #BlastFromThePast."
He grumbled to see that Viktor and Yuri had taken the photo with their faces practically mashed together. He could only assume some random stranger had taken the pic for them and not run off with whoever's phone it was.

His brow furrowed though when he saw the other things that had been tagged.

"...y-nikiforov?" There was even a comment from that account, just hidden under the 'Show Comments' bar, "Had a blast tonight. Can't wait to get on the podium on Saturday." Yurio ground his teeth at that, "Idiot, you'll be lucky if you SEE the podium! There won't even be BRONZE for pigs when I'm done!"

He threw the phone at the pillow that was on the floor and yanked the blankets, damp as they were, and cold, back across his naked form. He growled and shivered under them until sleep took him again.
Chapter Fourty Seven

It was nearly 2am when the group returned to the event hotel. Only Yuri and Viktor got out of the shuttle though since said event hotel was reserved for participants, coaches, judges, and assorted event staff. Spectators were relegated to other hotels.

Viktor was practically dead on his feet though, and Yuri guided him inside as well as he could after bidding the other three farewell for the night. While they waited for the elevator, the Russian had parked himself behind his husband and was barely holding himself up on his own two feet, leaning his head against Yuri's shoulder as he was nodding off, hands holding each other where they came around Yuri's front. The ding of the elevator forced him to pull the silver-haired man forward again, and pressed him up into the corner of the small and thankfully empty chamber.

A few more minutes, and he had the man slouching over the side of the bed, barely conscious and unable to even undress himself. Yuri did the best he could, taking Viktor's coat, scarf, shoes, gloves, and other heavy outer-wear before finagling a way to tuck him under the blankets. He himself wasn't quite so tired yet and he wanted to shower anyway, so he turned the lights off in the main part of the room and quietly slipped away to turn the hot water on.

He peeled himself out of his clothing and rubbed his sore feet while the water warmed up, thinking back on his Eros performance as he waited.

It was the best show I've ever done... He thought, But Viktor still eclipsed me. I don't know how I'll be able to keep my promise of winning gold when he just flies past me on the score-board like that. He didn't even look like he was taking it all that seriously... He leaned his head down and ruffled his hair a little, I guess that's just what I can expect from a genius like him. He makes it look so easy...like it's the rest of us who aren't trying.

Steam as starting to fog up the mirror, and Yuri stepped gingerly under the water, letting it wash away the day's dust, sweat, and dirt. Soap, shampoo, conditioner...then just the water. The heat felt good on his skin, soothing the soreness of competition away and taking it down the drain. He must've just stood there for 30 minutes, letting the water pour over his head and down his back until the mirror just beyond the curtain was so fogged, it was impossible to see anything close to a reflection in it. It barely showed colored blobs.

And then that very curtain was suddenly and unexpectedly thrown back. Yuri nearly jumped out of his skin at the fright of it, feet slipping out from under him. He barely managed to clamber for ground and caught grip on the side of the tub wall with his toes, staying upright only by the grace of the gods. With his heart nearly cracking its way out of his chest to march off in protest of being startled to near heart-failure, Yuri composed himself and finally realized Viktor was the one who'd pulled the curtain back.

"I nearly died just now!" He said hoarsely, holding his hand on his chest as he found his way back to standing up normally.

"I tried to reach for you and you weren't there." Viktor said sleepily, eyes barely half-open, "You know I can't sleep long unless you're next to me."

Yuri took a deep breath, the last of his near-fatal-scare finally subsiding, "I'll be there in a minute. I
didn't realize how much time passed."

The Russian's sleepy haze dissolved a little, and his usual one-eye-hidden smile crept in. He propped one arm up on a nearby wall and lifted one foot to take his sock off, and then the other. Yuri watched in puzzlement as the remaining clothes came off, and Viktor stepped into the shower with him, reaching to pull him close and leaning against his back again.

Yuri turned his head a little to see the man's hair getting wet, "So your plan is to fall asleep wherever I am?"

"If not for you being in the shower? Probably..." Viktor mused to himself, "The water is helping me wake up."

The shorter figure reached down for the bottle of shampoo, "Let me?"

"Mh."

Viktor sat on one of the wider inside corners of the tub and leaned in to let Yuri do as he pleased. It was just a hair-wash, but the both of them still enjoyed it. There was precious little that Yuri liked more in their private time than getting to do such simple things as that, the solace of the silence being broken only by the sound of rushing water. Yuri had just replaced the shower-head where he'd rinsed the shampoo away, and was about to reach for the wash-cloth, when he felt an arm come around his waist, pulling him close again.

He braced himself with a hand on the man's shoulder, "...Viktor...?"

"We were interrupted earlier."

Yuri scrunched his brows in confusion, but then realization came, "Oh! Wait..." He looked curious, "How far had you planned on going when I only had 10 minutes to showtime?"

"As far as I could get away with." Viktor answered, keeping his head low to avoid getting water in his eyes from looking up. He kissed at Yuri's hip as he moved one hand down his thigh, pulling that leg to the outside of his knee, "But now I don't have to worry about going fast. We've got all night and day and night again before we have to do anything. Let's make the most of it."

The Russian pulled his head up and pressed himself back into the corner of the shower, getting his face out of the way of the cascade so he could look up. When he saw his husband's hazel brown eyes looking back down at him, he smiled, and moved to switch their positions, setting Yuri down where he'd been sitting. He himself stayed low though, kneeling on one knee, slipping his waist between Yuri's legs to lean in, and wrap his arms around the man's waist. Yuri's arms came over and around his shoulders, and he tilted his face to allow the kiss he knew was coming.

Viktor wasted no time, going straight for the foreplay that he knew would excite his partner quickest. He'd gotten good at that over the past few months. He knew exactly where all of Yuri's buttons were, and in such a desperate moment as the one he was in, pushed as many as possible all at once.

...I've been waiting all day to get to finish...

Yuri had practically wedged himself into the corner of the shower where he sat, feeling a little bit overwhelmed, but daring not ask Viktor to slow down. Once in a while, it was more fun this way...but with such spontaneity at the end of a long and eventful night, there was only so much they could do. It didn't matter though; they always found ways to work around the natural and unavoidable pitfalls of their situation.
The younger skater bit his lip and exhaled a clenched breath as he felt his partner take him into his mouth. The whisking sound of the water falling all around them masked most of the noise, but Yuri could still hear it in his mind. Viktor had gotten shockingly good at what he was doing.

...Or maybe I'm just a simple guy with simple needs...?

He felt like he should've been paying more attention to his surroundings in that moment. Viktor had brought him right to the edge, and Yuri's arms were out to the side as though bracing for it...and his hand mistakenly slid right over the water knob...turning it all the way to icy cold.

Some poor woman walking by in the hallway just outside heard the yelling and a few painful-sounding thuds, but couldn't make out what was being said. When they stopped, and didn't start up again like they might've for some heated argument, she shrugged and continued towards the elevators.

Yuri was piled over with towels and was practically sobbing with embarrassment, "I ruin everything!" He was sitting on the end of the bed, trying to hide his head under one of those same towels as Viktor came back around with a bathrobe on, and a towel over his own head.

"You didn't ruin anything." The silver-haired Russian laughed, "We've had mishaps before." He sat side-face next to his husband and pulled the wet towels off his head, stroking his cheek gently, "And I hope it's not the last time, either. It can be fun when things don't always go as planned."

The younger man still felt horrible though, "But you were doing such a good job and then I killed the whole mood!"

"It's not like I can't start again." Viktor said, smooth as silk, slipping his hand between Yuri's legs to make his point, "And it doesn't feel like I have to start entirely from the beginning, either."

Yuri leaned his head into the Russian's shoulder, gasping a little as the sensation quickened in him again. He was practically clutching at the bathrobe, like he would've crawled right on top of the man if he hadn't been held where he was, "...I don't...know how I managed...to deserve you. You're too...good for me."

"It's because I love you." He answered, nosing Yuri's wet, black hair, smelling the faint scent of lavender therein.

The cold-shock had practically made the man delirious, "But whyyyyyyy? ...Ah-!

Viktor silenced him with a kiss, and continued his sensual stroke between them. Soon, he found himself pushing Yuri down onto his back with his other hand, and moved to sit over his thighs shortly after that, never once letting the man go. He kissed at Yuri's neck and collar-bone, then back up to his mouth. Yuri could feel the moment Viktor had joined himself to the moment, and he bucked his hips a little at the excitement of it all.

Viktor pulled his hand away and reached up to clasp each of Yuri's, lacing their fingers together as he pulled those hands to just above Yuri's head on the bed. The rolling and rubbing did the rest. When it was done, they breathed heavily against each other, with Viktor holding Yuri's head close to his shoulder as Yuri's own arms came under his to hug him around the back.
When they finally managed to catch their breath, the Russian pulled up a little to look into his partner's eyes, his own half-lidded from exertion, "...I waited for you for months, and then went to Hasetsu never once expecting anything more than your friendship." He kissed him lightly then, "The day you said that all you wanted was to keep eating katsudon with me...was the day I let myself hope that maybe I could win you over."

"...Vik...tor..." The words were unexpected.

"So please don't ask me why I love you. It makes me feel like you still don't think you deserve to be loved, and you do. Yuri, you do."

"...It's just...no one else ever did, and now you do, of all people." The younger man hugged him closer, "It'll always be a worry at the back of my mind that I'll mess up really bad and drive you away... Like at the Cup of China when you said you'd resign as my coach if I didn't make the podium..."

Viktor was quiet after that, remembering the whole scenario like it had just happened that day.

*Why would you say something like that, like you're trying to test me? I'm used to being blamed for my own failures! But this time, I'm anxious because my mistakes would reflect on you, too! I've been wondering if you secretly want to quit!"

"I'll stand by you for as long as I live." He finally said, "And if I go before you, I'll still stand by you, even if you can't see me, until you follow after."

"I don't even want to think about that..." Yuri said, moving a little to get Viktor to sit upright again, which he did. The younger man propped himself up on his elbows, "It's too painful. I don't think...I'd make it very long without you."

"Me neither..." Viktor nodded, pulling off of Yuri's hips to lay down next to him instead, "But, you're right. We've already had enough grief at this competition to last for the next 5 years. Let's just enjoy the rest of it, right?"

"We should go out tomorrow, just us." Yuri suggested, moving up towards the head of the bed as Viktor stood up to pull the blankets out, "Like in Barcelona."

"That sounds perfect."
CHAPTER FORTY EIGHT

The morning began like many others, with Yuri waking up first, roused from sleep by the movements of Viktor behind him; wedging one arm under him where Yuri slept on his side, resting the other over the opposite side, and pressing his cheek to the back of Yuri’s shoulder.

He was never entirely sure if Viktor was awake himself when he did this, but it was so consistent that Yuri wondered if it had become muscle memory. It had been that way since the first time they’d actually slept together before the China Free Skate.

’Yuri, you haven't slept, have you?’ Viktor wondered, looking at the corpse-like expression on the younger skater's face.

The exhausted athlete just blurted out excitedly that he had though, waving his hands around frantically like that would somehow convince his coach.

Viktor wasn't buying it though. He dragged Yuri all the way back to the hotel room, pulled most of his clothes off himself, slapped the night-mask on, and shoved him into bed, ’Nap until this evening’s event starts.’ The Russian said simply, throwing the blanket over top of his student. He even crouched next to the bed and patted the man's side through the sheets, 'I'll be fine. I always slept in until the last minute before competitions, too.'

That was his opportunity. Yuri wasn't going anywhere, he wasn't going anywhere...so he leaned in and draped himself across the exhausted skater, one leg over where he could feel Yuri’s knees under the blankets.

'VIKTOR.' He heard the younger man shriek, tensing up immediately, 'DID YOU SET AN ALARM!?'

The Russian was already asleep though, and all Yuri could do was lay awake, hoping he didn't miss his turn. An hour had probably passed before Yuri felt safe enough to move his arms out from where Viktor’s clinging had kept them pinned to his sides, and he moved one hand up to lift the mask from one eye. It was weird, seeing Viktor there asleep on top of him. Yuri’s face flushed all over again. The thought of waking him up was unbearable though, so he looked around for his phone. He spotted it after pushing himself up onto an elbow, but it was in his pile of things near the hallway that lead to the door, and it meant he couldn’t reach it.

’...Oh no, it's all the way over there...what do I do?’ He thought in a panic, and looked back down at Viktor, 'If I move to get it, Viktor might wake up...but if I don’t...I won't be able to sleep...!’

The Russian seemed aware though, as his arms started moving, but before Yuri could say another word, Viktor had pushed himself further up the bed and clamped those arms around Yuri's small frame, knocking him back down against the elbow that had been propping him up. It was enough that Yuri was forced down onto his side, and Viktor cozied right up against his back, spooning him through the sheets as well as he could.

'Don't worry so much. I'll wake you up.' Viktor mumbled, 'I'll hold you down until you fall asleep if I have to.'
'V-Viktor...I can't...breathe...' Yuri pleaded.

'Ooh...sorry!' The Russian laughed, pulling one arm back a little to let him catch his breath. As soon as Yuri got comfortable though, Viktor dropped his arm over him again, both hands now resting against the younger man's chest. He then set his cheek against the back of Yuri's shoulder, 'Better?'

The man's face was bright red, ',...Y-...sure...' He stammered, though in his mind, all he could think was how he'd never be able to sleep that way.

Yuri smiled at the memory, 'Even though he probably didn't mean for it to happen like that...I think it left as much an impression on him as it did on me, and it felt weird to be alone again after that. Even the short time we shared the room at Rostelecom, he kept trying to find ways of doing it again, but I was way too nervous to just agree to it. It wasn't until we were in Barcelona that I finally stopped protesting...though I guess it didn't help that Viktor finally stopped asking and just did it.

'What are you...doing?' Yuri wondered out loud, standing in that Spanish hotel room with a confused look on his face.

They'd just returned from eating out with the other skaters at the outdoor pub. Yuri was still a little rosy-cheeked after the events of earlier in the day...giving Viktor the golden ring he so proudly wore now. His heart was still racing from Viktor's declaration.

'We'll get married after Yuri wins Gold. Right? Yuri...

The anxious younger skater hadn't entirely meant for the rings to be an engagement, but for some reason, he couldn't rationalize how he would've thought otherwise when the ring he bought was even listed as 'marriage ring' on the receipt. Maybe it was because Viktor had been standing right behind him when he bought it...some part of him though that the band might just actually be a normal birthday/thank-you present as he'd initially intended. Something 'round and gold' to offer the Russian in place of the medal if he didn't win.

'I've suggested we sleep together since I first came to Hasetsu, but you've refused me the whole time.' Viktor explained, rising up to his full height after having pushed one twin bed up against the other. He looked back over his shoulder at the confused younger skater, 'Now that we're engaged, we have to!'

Yuri's face became even more red than before, and his eyes scrunched closed; he could hardly believe was he was seeing anyway.

'Don't worry.' Viktor came up close and put his hands on the man's shoulders, forcing those hazel eyes open again. The silver legend winked at him, 'I won't do anything. Not unless you want me to, anyway.'

That first night with the beds together, even with the blankets pinched between them acting like a barrier...knowing for sure that Viktor would be sleeping in the same space as himself...knowing that if he went to bed last for whatever reason, he'd be crawling under the sheets with the Russian already there waiting for him...it was harrowing. But, somehow, Viktor had expected Yuri's nerves to be through the roof, and made an effort to ensure he was the one who came into the bed second.

Yuri had been settling in, plugging his phone in to charge overnight and positioned his pillow, when
he felt the elder skater clambering onto the bed behind him, feeling the bumps of the second twin against his own. His entire body went stiff as he felt where Viktor moved from one twin bed to the edge of his own. He felt a hand and arm go around the left side of his waist and chest, pulling him backward until he felt himself being spooned against the man's chest, even with two sets of blankets and sheets between them. Damp silver hair pressed to the back of his neck, and warm breath brushed against his shoulder, even through his t-shirt. He shook for a moment with anxiety, but as Viktor's soothing embrace went on, left thumb slowly moving back and forth against the chest of his shirt, he slowly started to relax.

Viktor could feel the pounding heartbeat against his wrist, even though the fabric of that t-shirt, 'Is this really such a terrifying shift?' He asked quietly, lifting his head a bit to look down on the younger man's face.

'I'm just...not...' Yuri stammered, cheeks flushed red.

'You claimed me.' The silver legend purred quietly, holding himself up on his right elbow so he could reach his left hand forward, finding Yuri's right, and touching the gold band around the one finger, 'I'm yours now, body and soul. I want to give it to you~!' Yuri's face was starting to hurt from how red it was, and he felt Viktor laughing quietly behind his head. The Russian nuzzled into his hair before settling down again.

'...Or have I overstepped?' Viktor wondered quietly, hesitating, 'You'd tell me if I did, right?' The younger man swallowed nervously, but then raised his free hand to hold where Viktor's had returned to settle lightly against his chest, and laced their fingers together there. He drew a deep breath, '...I'd have shoved you off by now if you did.'

'Promise?' The Russian asked, feeling a bit relieved but not entirely.

'...Promise?' Yuri echoed, looking back over his shoulder in confusion, 'You'd actually want me to tell you off...?'

'I like to think I can read you, but...' Viktor said quietly, 'I know I'm a special case as compared to, say, the girl who'd hugged you when you were training in Detroit. I don't know that you'd have the guts to shove me off if I did something you weren't comfortable with. So...promise that you'll tell me if I go too far.' He said, trying to get in a bit closer, speaking the words against the back of his would-be partner's neck, 'I want to be close to you, but I don't want to get there so fast that I scare you off.'

'Only if you promise not to be mad at me if I do.' Yuri answered pensively, worried his directness on the matter wouldn't be awkward.

'So you're saying that this right now is fine?'

'...Mh.' He answers quietly. Yuri could feel Viktor's smile against his skin, and the man hugged him a bit tighter. He started to let himself relax in that warmth, and closed his eyes, 'I promise.'

It dawned on Yuri that morning that Viktor had kept his word perfectly on that front. There had been no other surprises, at least not unless he himself did something. He turned his head a little, spotting a few tufts of silver hair beyond his shoulder.
'Don't you want to go to the Japanese Nationals?' Viktor had asked as they boarded the plane to go back to Japan.

'You told Yakov that you were going to time your come-back with the Russian Nationals, didn't you?' Yuri wondered, putting his one carry-on into the compartment above their economy-class seats. 'They're being held at the exact same time.'

'They are.'

'Do you even have anything ready for them?'

'I could manage. But...I was asking you about your nationals, not mine.'

'Up until yesterday, I wasn't even sure I'd still be skating after the Grand Prix Final.' He admitted quietly. 'But if I'm going to, then I have to go to Nationals, otherwise I won't get to go to Worlds. Not after my flunk-out last year.'

'You have everything you need.' Viktor pointed out, watching as Yuri took his seat next to the window, neck-pillow on his lap for later. He moved in to sit in the seat next to the anxious athlete, and reached over to squeeze his hand gently, 'You could win that one easily. Remember your scores at the qualifiers?'

'Yeah...' He nodded, 'And all my scores since then. They're far and beyond what anyone else normally gets...I'd...feel bad...'

'Knowing ahead of time that you're going to win by such a large margin isn't such a bad thing. You'd be more relaxed and get to have more fun.'

'I know, but...' Yuri shook his head, 'It wouldn't feel right. What kind of medalist would I be to just march into that competition and take Gold from whoever was the next-best skater? It'd be like taking candy from a baby. I don't want to do that. I don't want my first Gold medal under you to be from a competition where there...well, wasn't any competition. Besides, it'll actually be your birthday at that point...do you really want to be bogged down by a skating event when you could be celebrating?'

'...I'm turning 28. I'm practically a fossil.' Viktor laughed, though internally he was crying, 'I would much rather be at an event than having a party.'

'Just promise you won't kiss that Gold medal if I win it.'

'Why not?'

'I'm going to be the oldest competitor there, just like before. I'm a fossil too by comparison. Mostly, I just...' Yuri's words trailed, but he gathered his courage and pulled his hand free, only to set it down on top of the silver legend's instead, fingers curling around it, voice more determined, '...I want the first Gold medal you kiss to be one from an International competition!'

Yuri had gone and won Gold at Nationals just as he'd awkwardly worried, but in doing so, had secured his position going to Worlds. A Gold medal _there_ would make him a national hero back home, _especially_ given that the Russian Champion was in the roster, and it was only expected that said Russian would take Gold for himself as it was. It would be unprecedented to usurp the silver-haired legend.

He still felt anxious about the Free Skate. He shifted a little under the blankets to lay on his back,
with Viktor staying asleep despite the movement. He looked up at the ceiling, practically counting the texture-dots directly above him as he idly wondered whether he should get up or not. He reached for his phone where he'd left it on the night-stand on his side of the bed, and checked Instagram while he debated what else to do.

He ended up just staring at the screen blankly though.

...If I add a fifth quad to my Free Skate, I may yet be able to cancel out Viktor's 15-point quad Axel. I can only do a max of 3 combination jumps throughout the Free Skate though, so I'll have to make them all quad-triple or quad-single-triple combos...do I have enough stamina for that? And another 2 quads on top of that? Viktor can already do a quad Lutz with a base GOE of 13.6, so it's not like I can just single that one out as my trump-card...and I only just learned to land that one in competition for our Exhibition Skate...I'm nowhere near ready to try a quad Axel, too. I thought the physics of it would make it impossible anyway. And a quint is entirely impossible, even for Viktor. The ISU doesn't even have points listed for those...

His mind raced.

...The quad Axel alone must be completely exhausting, which is why he put it at the start of his Short Program. I wonder if he'll even attempt it during the Free Skate? Even with the lighter outfit, it would cause so much trouble with a program nearly twice the time. He'll still have three more quads to do, too, if he intends to keep the difficulty rating on par with previous seasons. I think I can manage 5 quads if I really need to... I really want to win Gold for hi-

"You're getting anxious already and it's only Friday." Viktor said suddenly, interrupting Yuri's train of thought.

"...You're awake?"

"You moved."

"...Sorry."

"I was going to go back to sleep, but I could feel you tensing up." The Russian explained, reaching his free arm up to touch his fingers to Yuri's neck, "You clench your jaw when you're over-thinking something. Also my arm went numb after you turned."

The younger figure was upright with a start, "Sorry!"

Viktor held it up and watched it flop with a laugh, trying to shake it out, "...Ah, pins and needles~! So what were you thinking about?"

"...How to beat you." Yuri scratched his jaw nervously, "Short of sabotaging you or asking you to consciously reduce the difficulty of your Free Skate, I'm not sure what else to do."

"You're underestimating yourself." The Russian said, sitting up as well and rubbing his fingers where sensation was starting to return, "This is a real competition between us now. If I go out of my way to make my program less difficult just to let you win, people will notice."

"I know."

"Plus, the way you've told it, if I don't skate at my best, then I feel like I'd be letting you down. It wouldn't mean as much to beat me if I consciously put in less effort."

"...Thank you."
"I'm not going to give up the Gold easily, okay?" Viktor winked at him before leaning over to rest his chin on his partner's shoulder, "I promise."

Yuri nodded.

"So please don't pull a Tonya Harding on me." The Russian said, half in jest and half seriously, giving an awkward smile.

"I would never!" The younger skater protested, "Viktor!"

"I like my knees." The silver legend continued, "And...le mie mani...le mie gambe...le tue mani..." Fingers slid along the soft sheets until he could feel his husband's hand, "...Le tue gambe..." Fingers moved to the younger man's thigh as he hummed the tune of his old Free Skate, and the rest of him moved until he was sitting on his knees before those hazel eyes. Quickly but fluidly, Viktor glided both hands over his partner's legs and pulled them both up around his waist as he leaned forward, nuzzling the anxious figure's nose adoringly, "...and I like all those things almost as much as I like sleeping past 7am."

They finally rose for the day around noon, and almost unexpectedly, both of them were mobbed by media when they came down to the lobby to get something to eat. Yuri was unsure how to handle the mass of reporters, cameras, and microphones being shoved into his face, but he saw Viktor taking to it like a fish to water.

"It was the hardest thing I've ever done~!" The Russian mused, recounting the quad Axel to inquiry, "I practiced for 2 weeks straight before I got it right!"

"Will you be attempting a quad Axel as well, Yuri?" Someone else asked.

"Ahh..." He answered nervously, "Not likely, at least not at this competition."

"Are you planning on changing your jumps to catch up to Viktor?"

"Anyone would."

"Will the victory lineup impact your relationship?"

"...I don't think it would. Viktor wants me to win Gold if I can."

The Russian coyly put an arm over Yuri's shoulder, "If he can." He repeated the words.

Yuri just blushed a little. "Don't worry...I'm going to give it everything I've got!"

Sea-blue eyes shone, "That's exactly what I like to hear. I won't forgive you if you slack off!"

It took another 30 minutes before the growling of Yuri's stomach forced them to excuse themselves. It was weird to watch Viktor go between speaking as a competitor for one reporter's questions and then back to a coach for another. But, the Russian had a neutral setting that he usually returned to when they weren't talking about skating, and Yuri liked that best. Yuri was an emotionally confused mess whenever they did talk about skating with others, because he was never sure if he should be excited about competing against his idol or if he should be terrified of not meeting his expectations. Being Viktor's husband was much easier than being his rival or student.

The rest of the day went pleasantly enough though once they'd escaped the easily-recognized area
around the skating arena. The further away they got, the fewer people knew who they were, which made it that much easier to just enjoy the day without being mobbed by press or skating spectators. It happened fairly regularly anyway though, with at no less than 4 people rushing up to them in the streets to ask for photos every hour or two. On a few occasions, Viktor had to coach Yuri just on how to engage fans since he'd keep stiffening up or try to escape anytime it took more than a minute to give them what they wanted. It was an odd sort of relief whenever people would ask just Viktor for photos...but every single time it happened, they'd ask for solo-photos with Yuri right after, and then group shots, and then pictures of them with only one fan out of a mob of 5 or more, and so on.

Yuri was starting to get worn out by it all, and they ducked into a park to escape for a while, "I don't know how you handle that all the time without going crazy." He pulled the lapels of his coat up to try and hide his face. Not that it would do much since Viktor, easily recognized as he was with this uncommon silver hair, could be spotted from half a mile away, and that would just make him stick out by default.

"You get used to it." The Russian answered, "When I was getting us signed in for Four Continents, it took forever to move 10 feet away from the registration building. People were so surprised to see me there since it wasn't a competition I'd ever gone to. They had all gotten so worked up about my come-back announcement that they forgot I was still your coach, and thought, somehow, that I was there to be in the competition since I'd skipped Euros, even though I couldn't have been since I don't represent any of the participating countries." He squeezed Yuri's hand affectionately, "I bet they'd do the same thing to you at Euros or Russian Nationals."

"...Probably not Russian Nationals."

"What? Why not? You're a top-ranking skater...and I know you have Russian fans."

"Maybe, but I have a lot of detractors, too." Yuri pointed out, "I once thought it was fantastic to let people hate me for taking you out of competition...but since we got together, it's a little different. I've seen a few horrible comments on some of your Instagram posts of us...and ever since the thing with your father, I've actually been kind of relieved that there haven't been any competitions based in Russia."

Viktor fell silent after that, unsure how to respond. They walked quietly for several minutes before answering, "...Not everyone in Russia is like my father."

"Have you talked to him at all since we last saw him in St. Petersburg?"

"No. If he ever reaches out again for as long as either of us lives, it'll be too soon."

"Mh..." Yuri nodded. He could feel Viktor's grip quality change where they held hands, and when he looked up, being the side of Viktor's face that was normally concealed by his bangs, he could see the left eye twitching a little. Yuri stopped walking and made the Russian turn to face him, and he lifted his free hand to touch the back of his gloved knuckles to Viktor's cheek. "...Sorry, I shouldn't have mentioned it."

It was the one thing that Viktor couldn't handle on his own, and Yuri knew it. He pulled his ring-hand free from the man's gentle grasp and raised both arms over his shoulders to hug him close.

"I just wish there was some way to reach him." He explained, feeling Viktor's arms come around his torso to return the hug, "If what Mikhail said about the guy is true, then it's just insane that Konstantin would hold a life-long grudge against others who like skating just because he himself can't."
"Why would it matter? Even if we could get him to appreciate figure skating, there'd still be the matter of us that makes him hate me."

"I just..." Yuri's words trailed off a little, "...Maybe it's just a dreamer's delusion, but I thought that if he could appreciate your genius then maybe the rest wouldn't matter so much."

Viktor gave him a look, "You say that like you're trying to diminish yourself again. You matter more to me than the skating, especially since you'll still be around after the skating, so if he somehow appreciates the sport but doesn't appreciate you, too, then there's no point."

The younger man sighed a little, "I didn't quite mean it like that, but I see your point."

The Russian shook his head, "I get that you want me to want my father's approval. You have yours, so it's only natural. But...Yuri, please let it go. You've already done enough by helping get my Uncle back in my life, but that's really more than I wanted or needed. I truly and genuinely do not want my father involved in anything."

The younger man furrowed his brows a little, remembering how it felt to be thrown by the bear of a man during their first encounter, "...Yeah, I get it."

"You're not upset with me for this are you?"

"What? No...no, I really get it. You remember how he flung me like I was nothing?" He went back to Viktor's side so they could keep walking, "It like I was just some insect he was swatting."

"I didn't fare much better, and I'm bigger than you are."

"On all fronts." Yuri grimaced.

Viktor turned his head, "What do you mean...OH! Haha~!" He threw his arm over Yuri's shoulder to pull him close and kiss the side of his head, "You're perfect just as you are."
CHAPTER FOURTY NINE

The day of reckoning had finally arrived. Skaters were arriving for their final official practices, and pressure was on for those who were serious contenders for the podium.

Yuri was still anxiously trying to decide how to try to jump ahead despite his anticipation of Viktor's Free Skate and all the surprises it might entail, but he still clung to a desperate sliver of hope that he might just be able to crawl his way up to the top level of the podium, even if he did so by a smaller margin than when Yurio stole gold from him at the Grand Prix Finals.

Come to think of it...I haven't even seen Yurio since the Short Program...

He looked around curiously, but no matter what, he saw no one else from the Russian team but Viktor. When the man came to the rink's edge, Yuri waved for him to come closer, "Where's Yakov and the rest?"

"Dunno." Viktor shrugged, "I haven't talked to them since Yurio did his Short Program."

"That's what I thought..." The Asian nodded, "I wonder if everything's okay?"

"Hand me my phone and I'll find out."

Yuri turned away from the rink wall and rummaged through his partner's gear bag until he found the device, still encased by his own blue-style Aria outfit design, and handed it over to its owner, "Yurio isn't still mad at you is he?"

"Never know with him. Probably though."

The younger skater crossed his arms over the rink wall and leaned on his elbows as the call to Yakov was made. He looked around to see other skaters that were sharing their own sections of the practice rink at the time. At most, three skaters at once could be on the ice for general practice, but when it came time for each skater to get an official full-program orientation, the ice would be cleared and only one person could be on it at a time, as would be the case with the actual performance. Music would be played and costumes worn...unless your name was Viktor Nikiforov and you skirted the rules for your own amusement.

"Hey!" Viktor finally said after what seemed like far too long, "Where are all of you? The practice rink opened an hour ago and we haven't seen you down here."

Yuri listened in where he could.

"Oh...I see. Is he okay?"

He furrowed his brow in concern, "...Okay?"

"...You can't be serious." Viktor continued, pausing only to nod at whatever was being said, "All right, all right...I'll talk to him. Do svidaniya." He clicked the phone off and handed it back to Yuri, "Looks like I have to go play big brother again."

"What happened?"
"Yurio punched a tile wall and didn't tell anyone, so now he's got a good-sized cut on the back of his hand that needs attention and he refuses to go see a medic." Viktor explained, "On top of that, Yurio refuses to come to practice."

"Where is he now?"

"In his hotel room."

"This is all a bit immature for him, don't you think?"

"Not necessarily." The Russian explained, heading for the rink-wall door as Yuri walked along to keep pace, grabbing the blade guards as he went, "Yurio always hated practice. Now that he's got the two gold medals, he might be slipping back into old habits."

"Is that really such a good idea after his performance on Thursday?" Yuri wondered, handing over the blade guards one at a time as Viktor took them to put them in their proper places.

"He's a teen with a huge ego. It's hard to tell what he's thinking these days or what he wants. It can change like the weather and for no reason at all."

"Should I come...? I know he probably doesn't want to see my face, but..."

Viktor laughed quietly, "No, probably not...but you're going to show it anyway." He pulled off his skates and gathered up his things, "Let's go see if we can find a medic that'll come with us."

Yakov was waiting with Lilia outside Yurio's room when the trio arrived, and quickly thereafter, a hotel manager showed up as well.

Viktor stopped just outside the door and Yakov moved aside, "Has he said anything?"

"Nothing but to leave him alone." Yakov whispered back.

"Did you see his hand yourself?"

"Barely."

"All right..." Viktor shook his head and drew in a breath, then knocked on the door, "Yuri, open the door."

"Piss off, Viktor!"

"You can either open the door or we're going to open it for you."

"Why do you care so much suddenly!?" Yurio barked.

"That's hardly fair..." Yuri grumbled to himself quietly, "After everything you did during that chaos with his grandpa? He says you don't care?"

"It's fine." Viktor put his hand on the man's shoulder, moving out of the way to let the manager forward with the universal key fob, "We'll get to the bottom of it."
The door was finally open, and Yakov went in first, followed by Lilia, then Viktor, then the medic, and finally Yuri, though he held back in the hall just inside the door so as not to create a scene.

Yurio had done enough to make a scene on his own though, as when Yuri looked around the room, there were blood smears all over the place. It even looked like a meager attempt had been made to clean up the mess, only to give up after a time and just ignore it.

The blond had already started loudly protesting the presence of the medic in Russian, but Yakov insisted he cut it out in English. Viktor just stood stoically, keeping his arms crossed as he watched.

"He busted it pretty good, but it's still superficial enough that it's just a skin wound. I can close it." The medic explained, examining the youth's hand, "I can do it right here if you want, or we can go to the infirmary."

"Do it here." Yakov said simply.

"Yessir."

"The hell you are!" Yurio protested, "I don't need this!"

"You're a minor and you need stitches." Viktor finally said, "So sit there and let the woman do her job."

"I don't have to stand for this!" He snarled, trying to get up from the edge of the bed where he'd been sitting, "You can't do this to me!"

"Yuratchka!"

Viktor had finally had enough of the teen's flailing and moved to sit next to him on the bed, wrapping both arms around him and even one leg over his lap to hold him still. He managed to wiggle the blond's injured hand out from where it was wedged between them, and gave it over to the medic. Once he seemed to finally give up, the lady continued her inspection in more detail and formulated her plan of action.

"Why do you think I hate you so much?" Viktor asked quietly where he held Yuri's head against his shoulder, "What did I do to deserve this?"

"You broke your promises, you left Russia without saying a goddamn word, you dropped out of competition so you could coach some half-baked nobody, and now that nobody is..." His voice trailed off as his breath caught in his throat; the medic had used alcohol to begin the process of cleansing the injury site and the pain was excruciating.

...He's mad because of me...? Yuri thought to himself from where he still hid behind the wall.

The medic used sterile gauze to wipe away the alcohol and blood that had been made loose, and as more clean skin was exposed, she got a bottle of lidocaine with marcaine ready. A 10cc syringe came out after that to draw up the mixture of anesthetics, after which, the needle was switched out to a 27G point and the injections began.

Viktor was certain that if he hadn't been holding Yurio still, he'd probably have left the room with a black eye later, but he held fast and offered his less-needed hand for the teen to squeeze. Yurio's grip was stronger than he expected, but by the look on his face, one wouldn't know how much it hurt.

"This will take a few minutes to set." The medic explained, opening her supply bag a little further to access more of her stuff, "Once it's numb, I'm going to irrigate it and then sew it up, okay?"
"Whatever." Yurio said between clenched teeth.

"...You were saying?" Viktor inquired, wanting the full confession before making his decision about what the teen meant.

He felt Yurio slump against him a little, keeping his head low as the pain in his knuckle started to fade with the numbing medication. "You left me to train some fucking worthless fat-pig-nobody..."

"Watch yourself, Yuri." The elder warned, "That nobody is my husband now and he's standing in earshot."

"See!? That's what pisses me off so much! You and him are practically tied at the hip! You even brought him back to Russia instead of leaving him in Japan where he belongs! And you fucking married him, too!? Are you serious!? This is just absurd! Like, SERIOUSLY WHAT THE FUCK, VIKTOR?" He would've jumped right off the bed if his senior wasn't holding him still.

"What? Am I not allowed a personal life that doesn't involve you? Does the fact that I found happiness really make you that angry?"

"It's a ridiculous mess!" Yurio barked, "You're so stupid, you don't even see it!"

"Maybe you're the one who's blind."

"You don't know what you're talking about!"

"Then what do you want from me?" Viktor wondered seriously, "What more could I possibly offer that I haven't already?"

"End this stupid mistake you made with the pig and get serious!" Yurio said flatly, but with intensity, "You belong in Russia, as a competitor, NOT a coach to some Japanese cry-baby failure!"

Yuri held his chest where he stood against the wall. The insults were getting to be a bit much.

All this even after he'd apologized for what he said at Sochi...

"You wanted me to be your coach once." Viktor continued.

"We're BOTH RUSSIAN."

"I don't see what difference that makes."

"YOU'RE HELPING THE ENEMY."

"This isn't a competition between you two for my affection." Viktor informed simply, "And I don't appreciate you treating my wedding vows like this is all some stupid game I'm playing. You think I'd go through all that effort to find a way to make that happen if I didn't actually want it to? Give me more credit than that, Yuri."

It was hard for him to listen to his husband using that name with the Russian Punk, but he knew it would be worse if Viktor used the nickname Mari had given him instead, so he remained silent.

The blond winced and groaned as he felt the medic starting to flush the wound. Several towels had been piled on his lap by then, and over Viktor's leg, to absorb the flow of blood and saline. Despite the anesthetic, he could still feel the sting of the irrigation being jet-streamed straight into the cut.

"I think you're just saying that because he's standing in ear-shot." Yurio growled, trying to ignore the
Viktor shook his head and sighed, "I didn't think you could be so cruel...to me or to Yuri. We're both done everything we could to help and support you through all of your own trials and this is how you repay us? By being nasty?"

"I never asked for your help!"

"That's because we're your FRIENDS. You shouldn't HAVE to ask for help when it's obvious that you need it."

"Is that really all I am to you?" Yurio suddenly asked, catching the whole room off guard, "I'm just a friend?"

"...What else do you want to be?" Viktor was really thrown by it.

Yuri peeked around the edge of the wall at that point, a little flustered as well, not sure how to think of the situation. Viktor saw him, and they exchanged worried glances, but the Russian turned back away a moment later.

"How long have we known each other? ...Years?" The blond explained, "Since I was old enough to be in the Junior ISU! Even before then, when I was still learning! You get paraded in front of all of us aspiring skaters and told about how fucking legendary you are, and you take me under your wing like your kid brother, and then JUST FUCKING DISAPPEAR."

Viktor had to hold him tighter during that outburst, as the teen threatened to jump up again as the suturing began, "Yuri...I need you...!"

The Asian gawked, oddly feeling like this time Viktor meant him and not the blond, and when he saw that Yurio's twisting and flailing had put Viktor right to the edge of the bed, he realized it was indeed him being summoned. He quickly came out of hiding then and helped keep his partner from falling off the corner and dragging the already-perturbed youth with him, shoving him up just enough to get him back on more stable mooring.

The stitching was almost done; the medic must've had experience with thrashing patients in the past.

Yuri sat on the corner to act as a buffer against the edge, ensuring neither Viktor nor his charge took a tumble.

"Why couldn't you just leave him in retirement?" Yurio said, quieter than before, "You gave him everything you had, and why? You should've given it all to me..."

"Quit being greedy, Yuri." The Asian finally interrupted, getting pretty-well everyone's attention, "Viktor helped raise you up for all those years that you mentioned. He's bent over backwards to help you when you needed it. The fact that he even offered to go back to Russia if you won the Hot Springs on Ice event should tell you how seriously he took you. You know how much of a heart attack that gave me when he said it!?" He rose back to his feet to loom over the teen, "He comes all the way to Hasetsu and offers to be my coach, NOT knowing I didn't remember asking him to, COMPLETELY upending my entire LIFE, and HE STILL GIVES YOU THE CHANCE TO STEAL HIM BACK. I don't even know if I could've recovered from the shame if you won and he'd actually left again! Can't you get out of your own head long enough to see how other people feel!?"

To the room's confusion, and Viktor's wry amusement, Yuri went off on a tirade in Japanese after that. He could only imagine what Yuri was saying. But he didn't come back around to English again while the rant ensued...and to Viktor's surprise, Yuri actually left the room. They expected to hear the
door slam as he left, but it never came.

"THE FREE SKATE STARTS IN TWO HOURS. GET IT TOGETHER OR GO HOME, PLISETSKY."

They could hear Yuri's footsteps as he stomped off down the hall, and the soft click of the door latching again, but not one person in the room said a word.
Yuri was looking at the listing for order of performance. He took a photo of the paper for lack of being able to focus enough to remember what it said. All he knew was that he was close to the end, and so were Viktor and Yurio, but he couldn't remember what order. Seeing 'Nikiforov' twice just confused his memory.

It wasn't uncommon for ISU events to customize the order skaters went on the ice, so as to maximize the audience's attendance. If it meant putting potential medalists at the very end, they'd do it.

He moved off from there to go to the practice rink for his own sake, not having done anything on the ice yet that day. But, the frustration of dealing with Yurio had made it hard for him to do much that was meaningful. People were watching with morbid curiosity as he flubbed his jumps over and over...and over... It was pitiful when he finally landed something and it was just a double toe-loop.

When he finally got his turn to practice the entire YoI show, he ended up declining. His ego couldn't handle how poorly he'd warmed up and he didn't want it to get worse. So, he moved to the benches on the other side of the rink wall and looked at his phone, hoping Viktor would call or text him to tell him what was going on. There was only an hour left until the Free Skate Program would start.

_I should just send him a copy of the line-up…_

Yuri sighed and did just that, attaching a copy of the picture he'd taken and sending it. Viktor wasn't looking at his phone though, since the caption by the message only said 'Delivered,' never 'Seen.'

"Yuri...?" Came a familiar voice.

The skater looked up and saw his Thai friend looking back at him, Celestino just behind.

"You okay?"

"...More or less."

"I haven't seen you mess up jumps like that since Soch-"

"I know, I don't need a reminder." Yuri interrupted. He lowered his head, "It'll be fine."

"Did you and Viktor...?"

"Huh?" He raised his head again, "Oh, no...it's not Viktor. It's the Russian Yuri. He's being super melodramatic and it just...I got angry."

"Well, that's why they call him the Russian Punk, right? Bad temper, bad manners, poor social skills..."

"Nice list."

"Foul language, arrogant, bratty, selfish, egotistical..." Phichit went on, listing the descriptors on his fingers as he went, trying his best to get his friend's spirit up, "The complete opposite of you..."

"...He has some redeeming qualities..." The older skater said, "He just...chooses not to make them common qualities."
"I can't even understand why his little fanclub likes him so much." Phichit said, moving to sit next to his friend, "You ever really look closely at the photos they post take with him? He looks absolutely miserable when he's with them."

"He is absolutely miserable." Yuri agreed, "I think the only person who has fewer social graces than Yurio is Seung-gil Lee. At the Rostelecom Cup...I was waiting for the elevator, and Michele's sister Sala saw Seung-gil there in the lobby near me. She tries to invite him out to dinner and he just...completely dismisses her. He actually tells her to her face, 'What do I get out of being nice to you?'"

"She needed some cold water for the burn, huh?"

"Right?" Yuri agreed, "I took another elevator after that."

A moment later, Yuri felt his phone buzz in his hand, and when he looked at the screen, he was relieved to see Viktor's name there as the messenger.

"I gotta go." He said, reaching down to take his skates off, "Thanks for cheering me up, Phichit."

"Sure! If I don't see you again before you go up, good luck!"

"You too."

Yuri finished getting his skates off and grabbed his gear, heading to a less noisy area before actually looking at the message.

[Where did you go?]

[I went to practice.]

[Come back to the hotel as soon as you can.]

Yuri felt his heart go up into this throat, "What in the world...?" His thumbs were a blur on the touch screen.

[What happened?]

[Just come back.]

[You're going to make me sit on a shuttle for 10 minutes, not knowing what's going on, with a message like that sitting in my mind?]

[Dealing with Yurio is exhausting.]
[Since you sent me the schedule, I know we have time.]
[...so...come back to the hotel!]

Yuri's face flushed where he stood, and he glanced around to see if anyone noticed. People were walking by him without fanfare though.

[Besides, you left your outfit in the room when you stomped off in a huff. You should come get it~]

"Oh heck." He started running at that point, making his way through the throng of crowds as they were starting to arrive for the Free Skate.

He even shot past Chris, who waved as Yuri ran by.
"Yuri!" He called out to him, "Why the rush? The event's about to start!"

"I'm not up till the end...and I left my outfit at the hotel!" The Asian hollered back, turning as he ran, "Besides, Viktor needs me!"

"...What for?"

"The stuff he stopped skating for!"

Even Chris' face flushed at that, and he smirked deviously as he watched the Asian get onto the nearest hotel shuttle, "Yuri, you sly dog. Go get him."

By the time the shuttle finally arrived at the hotel, Yuri was ready to jump out the door, whether or not the vehicle was still moving. He'd messaged Viktor when he saw the street signs close to the hotel, and expected to see him there in the lobby. That failing, Yuri rushed over to the elevator; one of the doors was opening as he ran up, and to his delight, Viktor was one of the people within it. There were some stragglers that made Yuri impatient, waiting for them to get out of the way, but when they were finally clear, he rushed through the opening to lunge at his husband.

The whole thing reminded him of the Japanese Regional Qualifiers...but this time, he didn't have a bloodied-up face to give Viktor the excuse to duck at the last second.

"Yur-"

And so he jumped at the man as he was half-way off the elevator, and pushed him right back inside again with both arms up over his shoulders.

As Viktor was trying to reorient himself, Yuri tilted his head around to see where he was reaching his foot, using his toe to hit the 'Door Close' button repeatedly to prevent other people from boarding. They seemed to get the hint though without needing the doors to shut them out, too.

"Wow...Yuri..." Viktor was finally able to say, returning the hug as Yuri turned his head back around, the doors finally closing and the elevator starting to go back up again, summoned to some unknown floor. The Russian pulled up and practically dragged his husband over to the terminal to hit the button for their level before returning his attention where it belonged, "You're eager."

Yuri pulled in close to the taller figure, "After what happened earlier, I feel like I have to claim you again."

"Being territorial?"

"Absolutely!" He leaned up, and pulled Viktor's head down at the same time, kissing him right there in the elevator. The Russian's arms snaked up his back to hold him closer, fingers clenching at the thicker fabric of the man's black track-suit coat.

They didn't even bother with clothing when they made it back to their room, simply moving whatever they needed out of the way to get at one another. Coats were thrown onto the floor, shirts pulled up over just one arm, pants off only enough to gain access to each other.

Viktor was still inside him when they finished. Clothes were messy where they hadn't been thrown onto the floor outright, and Yuri wasn't entirely sure the door had latched...but that didn't matter...he wanted his husband and he got him. All his reservations went out the window and he cried out as loud as he ever had, much to the pleasure of his partner's ears. The frustration and tension of the earlier afternoon was finally gone, and the pair heaved relieved breaths.
Viktor just huffed a laugh between heavy gasps against Yuri's chest, "Well, that worked out rather well." He leaned his head down to kiss at the man's neck a little, "So now all we have to do is go to the Free Skate, win the thing, and come back."

"...What time is it now?" The younger man wondered, panting as well, legs still tightly clenched around Viktor's waist, ankles crossed behind his back.

The Russian reached past him to the night stand, grabbing his phone and leaning up just enough to hold it in front of him, keeping himself firmly planted inside the younger man, "...Just about 12:30."

"Still two hours before either of us goes up."

"Interesting that they chose you to go dead last today." Viktor mused, finally withdrawing to lay on his side next to his partner, drawing half a moaned gasp from the smaller figure before moving to rest his free hand on Yuri's half-bare chest, the other holding his head up, "You know why, right?"

"...I'm last-last?" Yuri pulled his ringed hand up to place it over Viktor's, "I knew it was one of us, but...I couldn't think clearly earlier so I wasn't sure which it was."

"Yeah, it's all you."

Yuri thought for a moment as he caught his breath, lifting his left hand to move the bangs from his eyes where they'd been stuck there with sweat, "...They expect you're going to win gold. So...they're putting me last to give me a fighting chance; to make last-second changes to my program in an effort to beat the score I'll know you get."

Viktor nodded and smiled, drawing in closer as his hand moved through the cooling mess on his husband's stomach, never ever wanting him to think he should be the only one to get dirty during their romps, "So, how was practice?"

"...Unhelpful." Yuri laughed nervously at himself, "Had some stuff on my mind...you know how it goes..."

"Did you land any jumps?"

"...A double toe-loop I think?"

"Hah, wow...~!"

"How'd things with Yurio turn out?"

Viktor sighed, turning to lay on his stomach, arms crossing under his chin, "Turns out he has abandonment issues. He thinks I've forsaken him, and he really really resents me for it."

"Hm..."

"Both of his parents ditched him when he was really young...I mean, they were physically around, but they never took any interest in him, so they might as well have not been there at all. His grandpa was the only one who stepped up. When he got into skating, he made it his whole life, as many of us do...and a skater's team skating team becomes their second family. Since Yurio barely had a first family, the skaters he knew stood in for the people missing in his life."

"So how does he see you?"

"It's hard to describe..." Viktor said, trying anyway, "A mix of a brother, father, and guardian...does
that make sense?"

"I guess so."

"He absolutely refuses to be called just 'friend.' I think Japanese has a word for that sort of thing...a bond that's deeper than just friends, but not lovers?"

"There's no specific word for that, but in recent years, people have regarded the term 'nakama' with that meaning. It really just means friend, associate, colleague, etc."

"I guess that's close enough." Viktor turned his head to glance at where Yuri was still lying on his back, "What were you ranting about before you stormed off?"

"...I said some unkind things." He admitted sheepishly, "I had to get it out of me...but I didn't want anyone to know what I had said. Hearing you guys talk in Russian sometimes...I figured it'd be the same if I suddenly spoke a language none of you understood."

"I don't think I've ever seen you so flustered before."

"I try not to get angry if I can help it." He said quietly, "I guess that's why I cry so much instead..."

"Do you feel better?"

Yuri turned his head to look back at him, "I felt better only after you texted me." He then hoisted himself up to sit astride Viktor's somewhat-bare back, reaching his hands under the man's arms and around his chest to hug him, and settled his face against the crook of Viktor's neck and shoulder, "And I especially feel better now. I'm going to get ready though...I'll just change here and be done with it."

"Okay."

..

Within the hour, the two of them had finished cleaning up and gathering their things, heading down to the shuttle run in front of the hotel. Yuri didn't need much more than his skates and backpack, but Viktor ended up having to bring a whole rolling suitcase and a large carry-bag with him.

"I'm still a little sad that you won't give me even the tiniest shred of a hint at what your Exhibition is going to be." Viktor said, holding fast to his hand as they approached the last waiting van.

"I might have a bit more self control than you do." Yuri pointed out with a smirk as he put the rolling case into the back hatch, "Years of avoiding drinking taught me a lot of that."

"I have plenty of self control!"

"Sure, just like that time you stripped naked and threw your underwear at some poor kid's head in China? Phichit got photos of the whole thing." He closed the door and came back around, "Or the other night when you practically started making out with me in front of everyone?"

"You were in on that one. I can't claim total responsibility."

"I guess I'm a bit of an enabler." Yuri laughed, taking Viktor's hand again and kissing the ring as
they got into their seats for the short trip.

Most of the crowd was already inside the arena when the pair arrived, so they were able to get in without much trouble. When they stood outside the doors that lead into the prep area, Yuri paused and took a deep breath.

Viktor looked over at him curiously.

"...Let's do this thing."
Scores for the familiar competitors had been comparable to past performances, but Chris had managed to knock JJ off the gold medal slot by a fraction of a point. He'd even manage to squeeze out a new personal best and was quite pleased with himself. When he spotted Viktor and Yuri finally arriving, he sauntered over with a knowing look.

Yuri was already red-faced when he saw the blond, "H-Hey Chris."

"Yuri." The man nodded amiably, "Viktor."

"Congrats on your new high score, Chris!" The Russian said happily, "Sorry we missed the show. We just got here."

"I know." He mused, stepping up near Yuri, "Your sexy little plaything told me you'd be late."

"Oh? Did he?" Viktor wondered, amused now, and he leaned closer to his partner's ear, "What'd you tell him?"

"Some...stuff. You know. Nondescript...things." Yuri was getting nervous, and he started to slither off to avoid more questions.

Chris stood next to the Russian and they both watched him go with a sigh and a laugh, "...He was so proud of himself when he left, too."

"Oh, tell me!"

"You wouldn't believe how fast he was running to get to the shuttle." The Swiss skater nudged Viktor's side, "So, do you two start with sword fighting or oral?"

Viktor just acted bashful suddenly, "I couldn't tell you all that...Yuri would never forgive me!

"You can tell him it's for research purposes."

Yuri could hear the two having a mighty-fine laugh, likely at his own expense, but he just kept going, trusting that Viktor wouldn't give away any details that might embarrass him later. It was one thing to brag about a future event, but it seemed like another entirely to talk about it after it happened.

He headed over to the televisions to see what was going on up on the ice, and to see the exact scores. His phone app was a bit behind and he didn't know who was at what rank anymore.

With so many competitors, it was always interesting to see the full list from top to bottom, especially since it was usually the difference of a single point that separated whole classes of ranks. The top scoring skater might be well-and-beyond the 2nd place athlete, but below that...it was just fractions of points. It could be crushing to see a score that was, for all intents and purposes, fantastic, but have 14 people squeeze ahead with scores just barely 0.01 points higher.

Yuri could see that there was a fairly wide variety of scores. Most skaters had done fairly well, with Short Program scores in the high 80s and low 90s, and their Free Skates were equally respectable with scores ranging from the 170s to 190s. The top 10 skaters were above all of those, with Short Programs above the mid 90s and Free Skates in the mid to high 190s. And then there was Viktor,
whose 122+ Short Program made everyone else's look sad. Until he did his Free Skate though, his name was at the very bottom of the list, along with his own, Yurio's, and a few others who hadn't skated yet.

He tried to remind himself of his own scores at past events, and how it put him in at a combined total of over 300 points.

*All I have to do to get on the podium is do exactly like what I did at Four Continents and at the Grand Prix Final...but to beat Viktor, I have to do even better…*

He whined pitifully and felt the butterflies growing in his stomach. In just under an hour, it would be Viktor's turn, and he was sure that he'd be witnessing history in the making all over again.

When he looked back from the scoreboards to return to where he'd left Viktor with Chris, Yuri spotted an odd group of people standing near to them. They were in business suits like anyone could expect for non-competitors, but none of them were carrying cameras or microphones. Viktor was just standing there looking at them rather seriously, the mirth of his previous conversation completely extinguished, his hands casually hanging off his track-suit coat pockets by two fingers each. Chris spotted Yuri approaching and excused himself from the group to keep him back.

"Hold here." He said simply, grabbing the shorter figure by the shoulders to spin him about-face and push him back the direction he came.

"What's going on? Why do they want to talk to Viktor?"

"It's a surprise."

"...I don't think I like this surprise!"

"You will. Ignore the look on Viktor's face, he's always like that when talking to the bosses."

It wasn't long to wait before the group moved off again and left Viktor to exhale the breath he'd been holding since they first came up to him. He didn't even get a chance to look back at Yuri or Chris when he felt his phone buzzing in his pocket. When he clicked it on to accept the call, he held it to his ear briefly, and then pulled it away. Yuri could hear Yakov yelling at him even from as far away as he was standing.

"DID YOU REALLY ONLY JUST GET HERE!? WERE YOU SLEEPING AGAIN!? YOU WON'T EVEN HAVE TIME TO GET DRESSED OR STRETCHED!"

"I'm already loose...I just need to change..." Viktor protested pitifully, trying to find the humor in it, "I'll go right now." He clicked the phone off and heaved a bemused sigh before putting the phone away again and turning to approach the two skaters, "Sheesh...did you hear that?"

"Half the audience probably heard it." Yuri said meekly, "But yeah, you should go change. You have maybe 30 minutes before showtime."

"Yeah...I'll be right back. Don't wander too far." Viktor nodded, stepping close enough to kiss his partner's forehead before taking off with his luggage.

Yuri and Chris watched him go, taking off one direction and then another as he looked for a changing room. When he finally vanished into the crowd of media, other athletes, and coaches, Yuri looked back at the Swiss man next to him, "So…?"

"Hm?"
"What'd they say?"

"Can't tell you. Viktor would put my head on a spike."

"It didn't even look like you were there for the whole conversation...how'd he have time to tell you to keep your mouth shut about it to me?" Yuri glowered.

"I've known him longer than you. I know his posture and body language," Chris explained, "He doesn't put his hands in or near his pockets unless he's trying to be sneaky."

"I see him with his hands in his pockets all the time."

"It doesn't count if it's cold out."

Yuri scoffed, "What...but... We're at an ice rink! It's always cold here!"

"He's Russian. He can handle this like it's nothing. I mean really cold like snow falling from the sky cold. This is barely a chill to him." Chris went on, "...Yuri...don't tell me that you can't read his body like a book at this point?"

"...I've never considered looking at his skin for letters." He answered sarcastically.

Chris sighed, raising his hand up to cup his cheek, "And here you have the advantage of getting to see him naked... Such wasted opportunity."

Yuri's face flushed, "Well, I saw him naked long before we got married..."

The Swiss man seemed eager for details, "Really? So you took him for a test drive before you agreed to buy!?"

"W-what?! No! I mean...well...we did, but...I meant that he was naked to be in my family's hot! We've been over this!"

"Next to take the ice...representing Russia...Yuri Plisetsky..."

Yuri looked anxious at that, and Chris could sense it easily, putting his hands on the shorter skater's shoulders to reassure him, "You still eclipse him in the Free Skate. Breathe. You beat him in the Short Program by a huge margin, so unless the skies open up and real angels descend to play his song and carry him into hands-up quint jumps...he won't be able to catch up."

"...For once, that's actually not what I'm worried about." The Asian said, lowering his head as the intense piano of 'Allegro Appassionato' started above them, "I want to go cheer him on and see him do his best, but..."

"What's wrong?"

He sighed, "Yurio's developed this weird vendetta against Viktor and I. He accuses Viktor of basically robbing him of his future because Viktor came to Japan to train me instead of staying in Russia to train him. He thinks that all the skill I gained should've been his own and that Viktor was basically 'helping the enemy' by being my coach. I feel like he hates me now because of it. Viktor doesn't think of it like that at all...you know how he is."

"He's proud of who and what he is, but he doesn't think that representing Russia is something that should hold him back or draw arbitrary lines in the sand." Chris clarified.

Yuri nodded, "He came to Japan because he wanted to coach me, Yuri Katsuki, not 'that Japanese
guy who screwed up so bad at the Sochi Grand Prix Final that he couldn't even show his face the whole next season from the shame of it." He held up air-quotes as he said it, "I don't know if Yurio knows yet that Viktor plans to move with me to Hasetsu permanently."

"He does? Viktor's leaving Russia for good?"

"Well, maybe not forever, but at least until we both retire from skating. No one really knows yet..." Yuri explained, but then put a finger up to point at the skater in front of him, "So if I start to hear rumors, I'll know who started them!"

"I won't say a word." Chris said, though doing so as he stepped away to gesture for Yuri to move forward, "You're up in a few more turns. I doubt you want to be stretching when Viktor's on the ice."

"No way…!" He agreed, stepping off to a more open area with Chris in tow. The blond leaned against a nearby wall as Yuri started to warm up, doing windmills with his arms, "...But, anyway...Yurio also has this thing where he's mad that Viktor just left Russia in general. He feels like he's been forgotten or set aside, like I replaced him in Viktor's eyes. So, Yurio basically hates the both of us. It's probably why Viktor didn't think it was all that necessary to get here earlier than we did. Not like Yurio wants us to watch his program anyway." He grumbled and rubbed his shoulder, "And to think this all came about because Yurio just walked in on Viktor helping me warm up..."

"And I suppose this is why you were getting intimate with the ice this morning?"

Yuri's face was red with embarrassment, "...Y-Yeah...you could say that…"

"Does Viktor know you were cheating on him?" Chris laughed.

The Asian just balked, "Chris!"

The blond just laughed at him, "...Don't worry...I won't tell him." He winked.

They could hear Allegro coming to an end above them, faded as it was through the auditorium walls. Soon, they'd know Yurio's final score.

"Well, in either case, it's just Otabek, Michele, and a couple other people left before Viktor's turn. Are you ready?"

Yuri sighed and went back to loosening up against the wall, "...I think I'll get my skates on. I feel pretty loose already anyway."

The Swiss skater just laughed and pulled Yuri close with a hand around his back, leading him over to where he could drop his gear. When his skates were finally on, Yuri drew in a deep breath, looking around to see if Viktor was coming back yet.

True to his word, Viktor looked a bit silly even without the track-suit attempting to smother his Free Skate costume...but the wrap-around cape-looking thing wasn't much better. He was doing his best to prevent even the tiniest part of his outfit from poking through as he walked, though it made it difficult to pull his suitcase behind him, so Yuri hopped over to get it for him.

"The lengths you'll go to..." He mused, taking the telescoping handle from his partner so he could hide his arm again.

"Sacrifices." Viktor agreed, both eyes visible now that he'd styled his hair for show.
There was always a sort of ethereal quality about Viktor whenever he was all done up for a competition, almost so much that it was surprising to see he still walked on the ground like the common rabble.

'The score for Yuri Plisetsky...'

All three of them looked up in silence at that point.

'...195.15, bringing his combined total to 299.89. He is currently in 3rd place.'

"Ouch..." Yuri grimaced, "Bet he's not happy about that."

"Not much we can do about it. It's his bed, he has to lie in it." Viktor replied with a sigh, "He's going to have to live with the revelation that he isn't the center of the universe."

"...Did you tell him about our plans?"

"It would've been cruel not to." The Russian said, "After he finally admitted all the reasons why he was so angry, I couldn't keep the move secret."

"How'd he take it...?"

"You heard just now how he took it."

Yuri sighed, "I feel terrible about all of this. I don't know what to do."

Viktor approached and reached a frosted, black-gloved hand out from under his cape, touching his fingers lightly to Yuri's chin, and raising his face a little to look him in the eyes, "There's nothing to do. This is his journey now. He's not a child anymore and he's going to have to face that. All we can or should do is give him his space."

The Asian nodded, lifting his head only as he saw Yurio walking by, hands stuffed into the pockets of his track-suit coat and his head covered by the hood. The blond didn't even glance his way as he walked by. Viktor noticed the shift in Yuri's expression and looked back behind himself, seeing Yurio there as well. But, not one of them dared to make a sound. The upbeat music of the current competitor made the scene especially awkward. Yurio appeared to only be back there to refill his water bottle, replace his skates with shoes, and then went back out again, likely to show solidarity with Otabek, who was one of the only competitors left before Viktor's turn.

It had already been a long day, and it was barely early afternoon.
Ladies and Gentlemen...representing Russia...Viktor...NIKIFOROV!' 

As expected, the audience went completely wild.

Yuri drew in the energy of their enthusiasm like manna from Heaven, closing his eyes and raising his head a little to breathe it in an out. He and Chris stood next to rink-side to wait for Viktor to come over to them before heading to center stage. Viktor briefly stood by Yakov, still with the bulky cape over his shoulders, getting some last little bit of advice before skating.

When he was done, he nodded and skated just to the side of the kiss and cry, where he held out his hands to reach for Yuri's as he stopped again.

"This is it." Yuri said excitedly, "You're going to kill it."

The Russian nodded and smiled, "As my one and only Free Skate of the season...I hope to." He leaned over the rink wall to pull the two into a hug, each with one arm over their shoulders to pull them to his own, "Next season will be even better."

"It's been a little boring without you, Viktor." Chris said, "I expect you'll go put us all to shame now that you're back."

"Yuri will be the one to watch out for once I'm done, don't forget it." Viktor said, letting them both go again.

"Mhh...well, I suppose if I had to look at anyone's backside flying ahead of me, if it isn't yours, Yuri's isn't so bad." Chris said with a sigh, reaching back over to grab the Asian's tush to make his point, since no matter how often he did it, Yuri always squeaked and jumped a little when he did it, and it was endearing.

Viktor laughed as he saw Yuri's face twitch, and moved to pull him closer, both hands on either side of his face, and leaned in to whisper in his ear, "Remember...this isn't the end."

"You keep saying that...but why? I know you're staying on one more year..."

"Eyes on me alone, and it'll all become clear soon enough." Viktor answered, kissing his husband gently before finally standing back upright to pull the shroud from around his shoulders, revealing the Winter Prince's splendor underneath.

The crowd saw the big reveal and were cheering excitedly for it.

Chris whistled a little as he finally became beholden to the costume, "It's been a while since you wore a one-piece."

"Figured I'd spice things up a bit." The Russian laughed, folding the cloak over one arm before handing it to Yuri, "I'm off. Wish me luck...and I'll see you both on the podium!"

"Skater Nikiforov set two new world records at Thursday's Short Program, earning a new personal best with a score of 122.43, and becoming the first skater across all disciplines and in all of skating history to complete a quadruple Axel jump. What new surprises lay in store for his Free Skate?"
Newscast Morooka was commenting for the television viewers.

Viktor was finally heading for the center of the rink, holding his arms out to get the audience riled up. The cheers became a roar, and as he finally made it to the middle of the icy stage, the roar became a maelstrom. Viktor was loving every second of it, but he knew what his own program was about, and as he took his position, he looked around to the audience with a finger over his mouth in a gesture to silence them. Within a few seconds, they got the hint and fell quiet, and the Russian gave his signal to the coordinator on the side of the rink that he was ready.

He set his left leg straight under him, and raised the right only enough to stick his gold toe-pick into the ice. Right arm came around his torso, held out only a few inches, and his left arm was raised up to curl slightly over his down-turned head.

The music then finally began; a quiet piano.

((Look up 'A Winter's Wish' on YouTube, on channel Harrys Cupboard Music. Careful not to pick the remix called 'Believe' though as they use the same background art.))

Viktor rotated on the toe-pick, left skate going backward and around in a circle until he finally pushed off to skate away with his arms out to either side.

Yuri could feel the energy of the audience shifting as the program began.

"Viktor has four quads planned for this program. The first is coming up..."

He left the ice with a graceful click, rotated four times, and landed elegantly.

"Quad Lutz, beautiful. Not many skaters are able to do that one, but he polished it like it was child's play."

There was an interlude where Viktor slowed down, entering into a flying sit-spin that rose up into a camel spin, switching legs with a hop to continue on. When he was finally upright again, he didn't seem to move far from that spot, his arms and hands becoming the focus more so than his footwork. He would gesture to the audience, then pull back in, then turn his attention to the judges themselves, then back to himself again, each sweeping motion being open, welcoming, then sad as he turned away again.

Yuri finally started to understand what Viktor had meant before. He could feel the tears forming in his eyes, and Chris looked over at him as they fell from his cheeks.

"Yuri...?"

"...This...was supposed to be his goodbye show." He answered, "He was going to retire this year after all. Look at him...he's thanking the audience and judges...then turning away like he's leaving them behind..."

The Swiss skater nodded, "No wonder he didn't want anyone to see."

"This next move is listed as just a triple Axel...will Viktor rise to the challenge?"

The Russian built up speed, and Yuri clung to the rink wall, watching carefully.

Viktor came in in reverse, switched to a forward stance, and threw himself into the air…

"HE DID IT! HE LANDED THE QUAD AXEL WITHOUT A FLAW!"
Yuri let out a heaved sigh of relief.

Viktor went into his first Step Sequence, starting from the far end of the rink. Yuri was starting to see the parity of this performance to his own 'Yuri on Ice' program. The longer he watched, the more he could see the timeline of Viktor's skating career being laid bare for everyone to see. The ups, the downs, the victories...all of it. He even thought he could see the moment Viktor's dance reflected the moment he'd gone to Hasetsu to start a new chapter in his life. His motions had become more open, more loose, and then were pulled into himself like he was holding something close to his heart.

"He's dancing about you right now." Chris said, "Can you see it?"

"Quad Toe-loop, single Salchow...triple Toe-loop...wonderful!"

"I can see it..." Yuri whispered, trying to dry his face on his sleeve. There were other things he could see, too, though. Notably...Viktor starting to get tired.

_The quad Axel wipes him out...what's going to happen to his quad flip? It's the only quad in the second half of the program, but he still has one more before then...and with the Axel being marked as a triple in the listing, but turned into a quad for the actual show...will he really do five quads for the whole Free Skate? No way...even Viktor has admitted he doesn't have that kind of stamina..."

"His next official quad is a Salchow...will he keep it...?" Morooka wondered, watching intently, "Ah, no, he downgraded it to a triple. Wise. Seems he's saving his energy for his signature move. Skater Nikiforov seems to be trying to emulate his pupil by putting that move at the very end of his program, when fatigue would be highest, to go for the highest point bonus."

Yuri couldn't take his eyes off his partner, feeling the hope...and yet hopelessness of it all at the same time. Viktor had poured his heart into that program, clearly...the passion of his skater's life and love was being laid bare for all to see. If not for Yuri knowing that Viktor was already making plans for next season, he'd have been inconsolable for realizing this would be the end. The audience seemed to be picking up on it, but no one dared interrupt the performance's tempo and mood with clapping at any given jump. They were enthralled by the story.

There were only about 30 seconds left on the clock, and Yuri was anxious for it to be over, if not for his own sake, then at least for Viktor's.

"Here it comes..."

_The final quad of the program..."

Yuri practically hid behind the rink wall, peeking over his fingers as he watched Viktor slide into the jump...

One...

...Two...!

...THREE!

...

...and he fell.
Both Chris and Yuri were wide-eyed to see it, completely in disbelief.

"Ohhh big fall there...but he got right back up again to continue!"

The audience was in shock as well. It was the first time in ages that anyone had seen Viktor drop to the ice entirely.

"...That was only three rotations..." The Asian muttered, "His own signature move, and he fell… He's too tired for this, I should try to convince him to stop doing the Axel...

The final spin-sequence was in full force then, with Viktor looking like a blur on the ice. He entered into it while holding up one skate behind his back, letting it go only as he rose to stand straight. That same leg was thrown out to the side as he finally came to the end of the show, skating backwards in small circles until he finally found his last position.

He bowed his head low and held his right hand across his chest, a gesture of gratitude. The music finally stopped, and he tried to catch his breath.

The audience burst to life again with screams and cheers, throwing their gifts at the ice...plush poodles, bouquets of flowers, and many others.

Viktor felt his lungs bursting into flames again, just like during the Short Program, but he was determined not to drop to his knees again.

...I messed up the quad flip…unbelievable…!

When he finally turned to head to the kiss and cry, he almost couldn't even bear to lift his head to meet Yuri’s gaze for the shame of it. He was heaving breaths, and Yakov met him at the rink exit with his skate guards.

"That was good." The older man said, oddly optimistic despite the flubbed jump.

"No lecture...today?" Viktor asked between breaths, "I'm...surprised."

"No coach could ever ask more of their student than what you've given." Yakov said simply, "And you never listen to me anyway."

The skater managed a laugh through a cough, and found Yuri coming up quietly with his water bottle to offer it. Viktor looked at him with disappointed, sad eyes, "...I screwed up."

"Are you kidding?" The younger man was stunned, but tried to be supportive, "That was incredible!"

Viktor was about to go into a blur of explanations for all the things he'd done wrong in the program, his mouth already open, but as he saw Yuri gushing about how good it was, he decided against it, closed his mouth again, and smiled. He reached an arm over and pulled his husband close to hug him, and use him as a support to help him get over to the kiss and cry. He actually wouldn't even let Yuri go once he and Yakov were on the bench, pulling him down to sit as well.

"You said before that you were upset that you couldn't share in my successes the way I do in yours, right?" He explained, "So...sit with us. You can't start until I'm done anyway."

Yuri nodded and got more comfortable where he sat near the edge, keeping his arm around Viktor's back, his right hand settling on the man's hip as Viktor kept his left arm snaked across Yuri's shoulders. They waited for what seemed like ages. Footage of the flawless quad flip was being
replayed on the large auditorium monitors.

"The score for Viktor Nikiforov..."

Both skaters' hearts were in their throats.

"...223.43...bringing his total score to 345.96! Viktor Nikiforov just reset the world record, beating the previous record score by 3 points! He's currently in first place!" Morooka announced for the television viewers.

The announcer overhead read the score aloud without the analysis, but both skaters knew what it meant anyway.

"I didn't beat your Free Skate, but I beat your total score..." Viktor said proudly, rubbing his cheek against the side of Yuri's head, trying not to mess up where it was styled for the competition, "You can still win."

Yuri still felt tight in his chest as he let the score sink in, but then nodded and rose up again to his feet.

"Go on and get on the ice." Viktor told him, "I'll be right there. They'll give you extra time since they know I was on right before you."

"All right..." The younger skater nodded, moving off to the doorway.

I guess that's what the brass was talking to him about earlier?

Chris gave Viktor a wink and a thumb's up as he waited quietly off to the side.

As Yuri gave his blade guards over to the Swiss skater, removed his track-suit coat, and stepped out onto the frozen lake ahead of him, he realized he hadn't heard anyone announce him yet. He looked up and around in confusion, wondering if he should even be on the ice yet...but when he turned back to the kiss and cry, Viktor wasn't there.

"...What...in the world?"

"Hello? Is this on?"

Yuri spun his head up again to hear the voice. The crowd seemed to know what happened and started cheering.

"Hey!" The voice continued, "Viktor Nikiforov here! Is everyone ready for the last athlete of the Men's Singles Free Skate!?"

"...V-Viktor!?" Yuri balked, finally spotting him about 30 paces away with a microphone in hand, waving at him cheerfully. With the audience's cheering getting louder, Viktor held his hand out towards him. The Russian skater knew cameras were on him.

"Then I'm proud to present the final performance of the day, of the World Championships, and of the last international competition of the season, my husband... Representing Japan, YURI...NIKIFOROV!"
CHAPTER FIFTY THREE

The sound of Viktor's announcement was still ringing in Yuri's head, even as the tidal wave of cheering from the audience pushed him back and forth. The energy in the stadium was intense. He almost couldn't handle it, overwhelmed with emotion. His vision blurred a little as new tears formed in his eyes, and he couldn't see Viktor coming down to rink-side from where he'd been with the microphone slightly higher in the stands a moment before.

"Yuri!" He called out, "Yuuuuuri!"

The Asian lifted his head, half-unsure what direction the sound even came from, but when he rubbed his eyes, he finally saw the white blob reshaping itself into his partner, and he slid over quietly. Viktor pulled him close once he was within arm's reach and wrapped both arms around him.

"You going to be okay?" He asked, laughing a little.

Yuri nodded as he drew in a hiccupped gasp, "...I'm just...a little...emotional right now..."

"I can see that~!" Viktor stroked his hair with his gloved, ringed hand as the other held him steady, pressed to his lower back, "Take a deep breath. You're okay."

The younger skater finally returned the hug.

"Skater Yuri Nikiforov seems overwhelmed by Viktor's announcement..." Morooka said over the television, "We've been given leave to give him a moment."

Yuri's parents were watching the show from Yu-Topia, despite the time difference making it nearly 10pm in Japan. Hiroko was almost as overwhelmed as her son, "Look at him...he's grown up so much!"

"He's not freaking out anymore about being good at what he does...but he's still a sensitive kid."

Yuri's father agreed.

"We'll have to do something special for Viktor when they come back. He's done so much to help Yuri come out of his shell."

Even the Nishigori family was awake to watch the World Championship finals, despite it being way past the girls' bedtime.

"Do your best, Yuri!" They all cheered.

Viktor finally pulled back and held Yuri by his shoulders, patting one side, "It's time. You can do this."

The Asian nodded nervously, reaching his right hand up to wipe the tears out of his eyes.

Before he could lower his hand again though, Viktor snatched it gently, pulling it to his lips to kiss the ring, "The time for needing me to believe in you is over...you have to start believing in yourself as well, okay?"

He looked at the Russian quietly.
"You're not just some dime-a-dozen skater in the JSF anymore, Yuri." Viktor continued, "You're the best skater Japan has ever seen, and you've only just begun. You'll make the podium even if all you do is the same thing you did at the last two competitions. If you win gold today...I'll give you anything you want, okay?"

"...Anything...I want?" Yuri was confused.

_I already have everything I want._

"A gift!" Viktor explained, "New skates? Maybe get them gold plated like mine! Do you want another dog, like Vik-chan? Anything!"

Yuri shook his head, then looked up and smiled, "...I already told you what I wanted. That never changed. All I want is to keep eating katsudon with you, Viktor."

The Russian's eyes shone when he heard the words, and he pulled Yuri close for one last kiss before turning him around and shoving him gently forward, "Then go win gold, Yuri! I want to kiss that medal, too! Daavaaaat!"

He looked back over his shoulder and nodded, trying not to let himself cry again, and headed out to the center of the rink. He held his arms up to present himself to the audience, and they roared their approval in response, holding up their Yuri/Viktuuri signs and Japanese flags as he went. He heard them screaming out for him to do his best in Russian, English, and Japanese. It made his heart soar.

He finally made it to center and took a deep breath, reaching up to kiss the gold ring on his finger like Viktor had, and took his stance.

The piano began, much like Viktor's had a few minutes before, but with a different energy. He wasn't saying goodbye. He'd been born anew and was going to take the world by storm.

_This is the last time I'll get to do this program...but Viktor was right. This is just the beginning. Even if he retires after next year, we'll still be skating together. He'll be with me. He'll always be with me. His heart and soul will be in my programs as much as my body is...he'll carry on through me. So...I can't be a disappointment...I have to live up to him, be worthy of him!_

The first of his major jumps was coming up...at Four Continents he'd changed the combo from a quad and then double toe-loop to a quad and triple toe-loop, but this time he wanted more from it.

_"Here comes Yuri's first Quad..."_ Morooka was saying, nervously excited, knowing Yuri was good at changing things on the fly. He watched as the new jump sequence unfolded, _"Brilliant! Quad toe-loop, one-hand-up triple toe-loop...and a double loop with both hands up as well! He's using the momentum of throwing his arms up to help gain height so his legs don't fatigue so fast!"

Viktor was stunned, _He's increasing the base point-value of his jumps...? Will all of them be like that? Yuri, don't push yourself too hard..._

The next quad was a Salchow, and the Russian watched eagerly, but anxiously.

Yuri's skates clicked as he launched himself up, spinning four times with one arm up, landing easily. _He did a quad with an arm in the air!_ Viktor had his hand over his mouth in surprise, _When did he learn that!?_

Yuri flew across the ice a little further for the camel spin, and then doing a triple flip with both hands up like last time for good measure.
"Yuri is pushing himself to the limits with this performance... He's come a long way, thanks to his coach!"

The calmer part of his program came up, and Yuri slid into it with grace. He held his arms up high, bringing them down the front of his neck and chest as he descended low with his left knee bent, the right out behind him to slightly drag. He then rose up again, pulling into a reverse spread-Eagle and shifting into the Ina Bauer, bending over back as far as he could go without feeling dizzy.

The tempo of the music changed, and Yuri could feel the audience's eyes on him. The triple axel combo was coming up.

"Will Yuri go for the quad like Viktor? ...No, still a triple axel, single flip, and a double loop, but he had an arm up again for higher points! What a performance! And here comes the quad Lutz with the triple toe-loop combo! PERFECT!"

Yuri was really starting to feel the burn, but he pressed on.

This is the moment where I show everyone how far Viktor's brought me. I can't let anyone down! This is as much his show as it is mine! I'll bring everything I know to the table!

His step sequence was in full force, moving his skates in time with the energy of the music. Piano keys and violins were helping him fly over the ice.

"Here's the quad toe-loop! Beautiful! Yuri's last quad is at the very end of his program, and it's his coach's signature move, the quad flip! Does he have enough energy left to pull it off!?"

Viktor had both hands over his mouth, his eyes wide as he watched on, his heart racing. Chris was just as anxious, but for entirely different reasons.

The last few spins brought Yuri around...and ice flew off his silver blades as he launched himself with everything he had left into the air. Viktor was watching through the spaces between his fingers. Yuri landed...wobbled, and continued on backwards.

"YURI LIVES UP TO HIS NEW SURNAME AND SURPASSES ALL EXPECTATIONS! HE'S THE FIRST SKATER EVER TO DO FIVE QUADS IN A SINGLE PROGRAM!"

The audience was wild. Everyone was on their feet, screaming, clapping, cheering, hollering. Mari and Minako were sobbing from their place in the stands. Mikhail clapped next to them, appreciating the show but not really, fully understanding what had just happened. Not hearing Morooka's descriptions from the audience didn't help.

All that was left was the camel spin, sit spin, and his rise into the finale...holding his ringed hand over his heart, reaching his left hand out to Viktor.

The maelstrom rose again on all sides, loud as a hurricane. Yuri heaved for air, tears in his eyes as it truly sank in that he'd made it to the end without falling or tripping. But...he found it hard to catch his breath. He tried to calm himself by breathing in slower through his nose and exhaling through his mouth, but it really didn't seem to help. He could feel his body giving out.

The roar of the audience was getting harder to hear, and Yuri felt his extended arm starting to dip. His relaxed hand became more of a desperate reach, his finger splayed out towards Viktor as he realized things were about to go bad.

His sweat turned cold on his brow, and his skin went pale. He could almost feel the blood leave his
"Something's wrong..." Viktor said nervously, moving a few steps to the side where the rink entrance was, though Chris grabbed his arm.

"You can't go on the ice, Viktor, you know that."

"He's not okay...!"

"Viktor-"

Yuri felt like every breath was just going through him without stopping in his lungs. His head felt tingly, noise around him started to get hollow, and he could hear the sound of his blood pounding in his ears. Then the peripheries of his sight started to go dark.

"V...Vikt...he..lp..."

The world fell away after that. All he could feel was the burning pain in his chest and the weakness of his legs. He didn't feel the ice coming up at him as he dropped.

Viktor watched in horror as Yuri went down, and despite Chris holding him back, he yanked himself free and pulled off his skate guards, "He fainted! Chris, get water!"

The audience was a confused mess of waning cheers and anxious gasps as they watched Viktor skating out as fast as he could.

Mari and Minako were rushing from their seats, practically clambering across Mikhail to get to the stadium stairs. They were blocked from getting closer to the ice by the raised wall that descended into the rink-side area, "YURI!"

"Skaters Nikiforov and Giacometti are out on the ice...it looks like Yuri overdid it and passed out! Does he need a medic!?"

Viktor dropped to one knee as he slid close to the heap Yuri made, and pulled him from his side onto his back, holding his head in his lap, "Yuri!"

The younger man's eyes were rolled back, and his skin was clammy. Viktor wasn't even sure if he was breathing anymore.

[VIKTOR, WHAT'S WRONG WITH HIM?] He heard his uncle calling in Russian from the same ledge Mari and Minako were standing on, [IS HE OKAY?]

[I DON'T KNOW!] Viktor yelled back, his voice catching a little from the stress.

Chris trotted up carefully, shoes in place of skates since his turn was so long ago, and pulled the pop-top off the water bottle before carefully squirting some of it onto Yuri's face.

When the skater's eyes started to open, he felt a little delirious. He saw Chris first...three Chris', actually, spinning around in a circle until finally converging into one person again.

...Wow, I really must've messed up if Chris is out here... Yuri thought to himself, his head still spinning. I didn't think it could get much worse considering how many times I fell. Did I crash into a rink wall too or something? I don't feel hurt...just dizzy...

"Yuri, are you okay?" Viktor said again, looking down over him, brows furrowed with worry.
The skater's hazel eyes tried to focus upward, but it was difficult. When he caught sight of the silver hair though...

*What...? Is that... OH GOD-

"V-Viktor!" Yuri yelped, his face getting color again but for all the wrong reasons. He pulled up to sitting as fast as he could, using the rear picks on his skate blades to twist out of the Russian's gentle grasp and push away as quickly as humanly possible.

In his mind's eye, Viktor was wearing the Aria outfit again, rather than Winter's Prince.

*Why is he here!? Oh no, oh no, what did I do!?*

The audience started to cheer again as they realized the skater was awake.

"I'm so sorry! Whatever I did, I didn't mean it! Did I mess up your show!? Did I mess up THE MEDALING CEREMONY!? I can't believe it, I'm so sorry!" Yuri had spun back around and bent forward, his nose to the ice, bowing as low as he could. He was practically crying for the shame of it...whatever it even was.

The Russian and Swiss skaters glanced awkwardly at one another, and Viktor tapped the top of Yuri's head to get his attention back, "How many fingers am I holding up?"

The Japanese skater barely dared to look up at the silver-haired skate-god, and gawked at him as he held up his thumb, index, ring, and small fingers, "...Uh...four?"

"What event is this?"

"...The...Grand Prix...Final...?"

Viktor heard it all too clearly, and his heart dropped. The lack of recognition and understanding on Yuri's face was too much. He pulled his gloved right hand back from where he'd held it up before, and fingered the ring hidden underneath as tears started to roll down one cheek, "Yuri..."

*He thinks it's Sochi all over again... Did he really forget everything? Why does he think it's Sochi again!?*

Chris couldn't take seeing Viktor's heart shattering right in front of him, and he grabbed the younger skater by the shoulders to shake him a little, "Want to try that again? Do these outfits we're all wearing look like the ones you'd expect to see?"

He looked them both over, seeing the imagery shift, then at himself, "No...but if...it isn't..." He said, quieter, "Wait, that...no..." Yuri held his head where it was starting to throb. The flood of memories started returning in a confusing mess, and he looked around at the audience, "...What happened to me?"

"You finished your Free Skate and fainted." Viktor explained, rubbing his face into the palm of his hand, "What do you remember?" He was still anxious as all hell, but hearing Yuri question himself gave him a little hope.

Yuri still held his head, but when he pulled his hand away, he saw the ring there on his finger, and everything slowly started making sense again. Viktor was becoming less a distant, idolized stranger, and the look of grief and fear on the man's face became an increasing worry for Yuri, rather than just a strange thing to see. Yuri's body seemed to move on its own after that, and his mind had to catch up after, as he scrambled his way forward and latched to his husband's chest, wrapping both arms
around him tightly, "...Viktor!"

The Russian drew in a desperate breath of relief, and returned the hug, pressing his cheek to the top of his husband's head, "Yuri..."

"...I need aspirin...badly..."

By the time they made it to the kiss and cry, Yuri had gotten his pain meds from the medic and a fresh bottle of water, feeling the migraine coming. It seemed to take longer to judge his performance than it did to judge Viktor's, and he sat anxiously while the Russian held close to him, both arms around his waist where he sat next to him, chin resting on his right shoulder. Neither had bothered putting the blade guards on their skates. For Yuri, it would've required bending forward and that would've just caused all the blood to rush to his head, causing more pain. For Viktor, he just didn't want to take his hands off the man.

Yuri focused his eyes on a single rose petal on the massive bouquet he was holding in his lap. Water droplets still fell from a few strands of stray hair that had come loose from where he'd styled them back.

"You overdid it, you know." Viktor said quietly, practically whispering in his ear, "Why'd you decide to do five quads? That's inhuman."

"So is a quad axel." He answered quickly, "I wanted to tell you...that you should probably stop doing it, at least for competition. Save it for the Exhibition, okay?"

Viktor gawked at him, but then smiled, nosed his cheek a little and hummed his agreement, "Yes, Coach Yuri."

"The score for Yuri Nikiforov..."

The both of them looked up anxiously. It was finally the moment of truth.

"...227.95! His total score is 346.03. He is currently in first place."

"YURI JUST WON THE GOLD MEDAL! HE BUMPED VIKTOR OFF BY LESS THAN A TENTH OF A POINT!"

Viktor lifted his head, though still held his hands clasped around Yuri's waist. Yuri was too scared to look at him.

The audience was bursting into a fit of screaming cheers.

Mari and Minako dragged Mikhail into a tear-filled group hug, making him dance around with them in an awkward circle as they celebrated.

The Russian wasn't even sure what to think or how to react. He'd said a thousand times that Yuri could win gold even if he himself was in the competition, but something deep inside him never thought it would actually happen, even if he didn't want to admit it. It felt like forever before he finally regained his senses enough to react, and he turned his head to look Yuri in the eyes, or at least try to.

"...I can't believe it..." Yuri said absentmindedly, his gaze still fixed on the scoreboard. He wasn't sure whether to celebrate or cry. But, given that he was who he was, the tears started to well in his eyes, and he brought his hand up to cover his mouth in disbelief, "...There's just no way..."
He suddenly felt himself being pulled over to his side, and his leg came up over the bench as Viktor loomed over top of him. He realized Viktor had pulled him over his lap, and was smiling down at him, "You did it. You won gold, Yuri. You're a World Champion now."

Yuri clenched up, both hands defensively in front of his chest, "No! No no! There's no way! They must've counted wrong!"

"Why so modest?"

He felt Viktor's hand come up to caress a finger across his jaw, ending with a thumb gently touching the end of his chin, moving up to touch his lower lip. He could feel his cheeks flush.

Viktor had never kissed him in the kiss and cry before, but this time...he did. For a while. He only stopped to draw breath when Yuri dropped the bouquet and wrapped both arms around.

"Yuri...?"

"Kore wa...watashitachi no kachi desu..."

Viktor just looked at him in confusion.

Yuri pulled him down, "This victory belongs to both of us."

The Russian continued to gawk at him as the words sank in...and finally, he smiled. They cried, and they kissed, and the whole world saw them do it.
CHAPTER FIFTY FOUR

The medaling ceremony was similar in scope to the one at Four Continents. Three podiums had been raised on the ice, and each skater was called out by name from gold to bronze.

"Please congratulate your World Championship Gold Medalist for Men's Singles...Yuri Nikiforov!"

He pulled out of the hug he'd been in with Viktor while they waited, and skated out across the darkened arena, spotlight following him. He casually performed a quad flip to entertain his fans, and then waved and bowed to each side of the arena, knowing the audience was there, shadowed in the darkness. Camera flashes twinkled like bright stars.

His heart raced as he finally went back around to take his place on the three-tier podium, and looked at the center. 'Yuri on Ice' was playing above him. One step at a time, Yuri put a skate on the tallest platform and got up on top of it, turning around slowly to behold the ice ahead of him. There were no flags out there this time though. Yuri thought that was strange...but only for a little while.

"Next up...your World Championship Silver Medalist...Viktor Nikiforov!"

People could hardly hear the super-quiet piano of 'Winter's Wish' as the Russian came out onto the ice; the audience was cheering too loudly for all that. For the fun of it, instead of doing some complicated jump or another, Viktor spun around in a long series of multiple singles, going maybe 20ft across the ice before he spun back around to wave his thanks to the cheering fans. He went back around towards the podium and looked at the lower level, then up to Yuri. He smiled, sighed, and laughed as he hopped up onto the 2nd place pedestal, reaching over to take Yuri's ring-hand and kiss it briefly before assuming his place.

"And finally, your World Championship Bronze Medalist...Christophe Giacometti!"

'Rapsodie Espagnole' began in earnest, and Chris came out like the other two, graciously accepting applause from the unseen audience and giving them a super-sexy spin before heading over to the 3rd place podium.

I wish Phichit could be up here, too… Yuri thought, But without him, this is probably the best moment I could ever hope for.

He looked to the side to see the medal-bearers and bouquet-holders as they came out onto the ice, taking their places on either side of the podium. The ISU officials and special judges came out after them and started divvying up the awards. When the official came in front of Yuri, the Asian skater took a deep breath, looked over at Viktor, and then bowed his head to accept his medal.

He could hardly believe it. Even with Viktor right there next to him, the gold medal was around his own neck. He took the big bouquet of flowers and his small plush mascot toy, got his hug and handshake, and watched as they moved on to do the same with his husband.

Viktor was gracious as could be expected, but Yuri could tell he was disappointed. In either case, when he had his medal, flowers, and little plush toy, he tilted his head a little to wave his bangs out of his eye and glanced back at him. He had a sultry smile only for Yuri...and the words came back to the younger skater's mind.

'Because you're the only person in the world that I like being under.'
Yuri's entire body was probably red from embarrassment at that point, and Viktor just laughed, knowing exactly what had just gone flying through Yuri's imagination.

Chris looked over to see them as he stood back upright from getting his medal, but knew he was looking at an inside joke and just smiled.

The arena took full advantage of modern technology and raised massive digital versions of the countries' flags along the walls, the Japanese flag bigger than the other two as that anthem played for Yuri's sake.

And then...the best part of all. The three skaters descended from their platforms and were allowed to skate to the other end of the arena to face the media with their prizes.

Viktor had been so used to skating front and center that it was strange to be behind anyone, even Yuri, seeing Chris next to him for once.

Yuri wasn't even sure what to do with himself. He propped the bouquet of flowers in the crook of his elbows and held his gold medal up with both hands, smiling nervously.

Viktor wasn't even holding up his medal, simply letting it dangle around his neck as he waved politely to cameras on all sides.

Chris noticed and motioned to get his attention, "Viktor, if you don't want it...I'll trade you!"

"Pssh!" He scoffed, finally reaching to hoist the silver thing up by its ribbon, "I guess silver's not such a bad color."

"Matches your hair."

He huffed a laugh and half-amused agreement, but then skated ahead, "Time for group photos!" Chris followed quickly after and the two draped themselves over Yuri's back to get into his pictures. He was caught off guard though and looked even more awkward for some pictures than he did on his own. He only straightened out again once Viktor reached for his gold and held it up, "Smile, Yuri! Don't be so stiff!"

The younger skater did his best, but it was only after his partner winked at him and kissed his medal that he started to loosen up again. Hundreds of camera flashes dazzled his eyes after that. Before he could even think about it, he was already sitting at a high table with the media asking him questions in a much-better-lit room. They'd all already switched back over to their track suits for the conference, and Yuri felt so out of place being in the middle.

It was, after all, one thing to medal at Four Continents, where neither Russia nor Switzerland were competing, but it was another entirely now that they were, and he was still sitting in the middle of them. He was smaller than both Viktor and Chris, and clearly less physically imposing given how small he'd try to make himself. Yuri always felt a little overwhelmed with the media attention, even if it was just in the prep area or on some sports show where the JSF would ask him what his theme for the next season was.

Viktor lifted his chair to move closer to Yuri and kept an arm wrapped around him, giving him that last little push of security he needed to be more confident in front of cameras.

"Skater Yuri!" A reporter asked, "With the absolutely mind-boggling progress you've made since Sochi last year, what goals do you have in mind for next year?"

"Uhm...I guess..." He stammered, taking a deep breath as he felt Viktor's hand squeeze him gently
around the upper arm, "...I want to go back and refine some of the things I used to be known for, like my step sequences and style. Viktor and I focused a lot on my technical capabilities this past season, so now that I've built up my repertoire of jumps, I think it'll be good to focus on the art of it all again."

"Do you already know what you're going to be producing?"

"Like, themes?"

"Yes!"

"We originally considered something like Metamorphosis." Yuri answered, scratching his jaw, "But I don't have any music picked out yet...it's all just...amorphous ideas."

"Will you be staying to train in St. Petersburg?"

Yuri was thrown by the question.

Why would anyone ask that unless they'd suspected we were leaving? Chris couldn't have said anything...he's practically been with Viktor and I since we told him about out plans in the first place... Was it Yurio...? Or am I just over-thinking it?

Viktor put his hand over the microphone and whispered into his partner's ear, "Do you want me to answer this one?"

"It would probably be best coming from you." Yuri answered back, "Makes it sound like your idea, so we don't have to explain why we're going."

The Russian nodded and leaned forward to speak up, "We're actually going to go back to Hasestu, so the Ice Castle will be our home rink again."

A whirlwind of questions flew at them after that, but no matter which way they sliced it, the media wanted to know why anyway.

Viktor had already thought of the Plan B answer, thankfully, "We accomplished a lot over the months between seasons, before the Grand Prix Series started last October. Since I'm only going to be in this for one more year, maybe two, we both think it would just be easier to train where we're familiar and there isn't so much of a language barrier. Hasetsu has become a home away from home for me! I'm looking forward to going back to be with family again."

"Didn't you just have an Uncle show up, Viktor?"

The Russian nodded, "Da, Mikhail Rozovsky. He comes and goes as he pleases."

"What about the rest of your family?"

"They're in Hasetsu." He said simply, ending the dialogue about it right there with a smile that ever-so-clearly said 'shut your faces about it or we're done.' He could feel Yuri's hand going down to his thigh, giving it a gentle, reassuring squeeze to help relieve the tension.

"So what will your theme be next season, Viktor?"

He had to think about it for a moment, realizing there wasn't really any specific theme that tied together the two shows he had planned, so he shrugged and laughed, "I don't really have a theme. My Short Program was chosen by Yuri kind of randomly, and it's dedicated to him as well... My
Free Skate, well...I guess _it_ has a theme..."

"What's that?"

"Rage." He was smiling as he said it.

The media mob got kind of silent after that, not sure what to think or how to react.

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The both of them were too exhausted to bother going out to eat with Mari and the rest, so Chris went with the trio in their place and left them to their own devices at the hotel. He'd expressed some heightened curiosity about this Uncle of Viktor's that had been mentioned and decided he should add Mikhail to his list of 'research' subjects.

After they'd left, the only thing on either skaters' mind was _relaxing._

"The hotel has a pool and a hot tub. Want to go?" Viktor wondered, looking at the list of amenities as they ascended the elevator.

"...Mmmmmh...soaking in the hot tub for a while sounds really good." Yuri said longingly, "It'll almost be like home..."

To their shock, when they got there, the entire pool area was completely empty other than themselves.

At least, for the first 15 minutes.

Viktor had gotten used to the solitude all too quickly and was settling in to nibble on Yuri's neck when they heard people coming in on the far side.

"See?" Yuri chided under his breath as Viktor reluctantly pulled away, "Just like I said...as soon as you start, someone's gonna show up."

"...I couldn't help it. I had to try." He mused, sitting normally again in the hot tub, then sinking to where the water was just above his collar bone, "By the time we get back up to our room, I'll be too tired to try again."

"Hey you two!" Mila waved, finally seeing them as the group rounded the last corner to get to poolside, "How are our Men's Singles champions?"

"Hiiii~" Viktor waved meekly, his head bobbing around the center of the hot tub like flotsam, his body invisible under the frothy white bubbles.

Yuri stayed where he was sitting at the edge, one arm propped up on the deck, "Hiii~" He echoed.

The rest of the group included Sala and her twin brother, and Emil, who followed them around anywhere they went.

"How's it feel to come in second place, eh Viktor!?" The Czech skater couldn't help but taunt/ask.

"...I'm still trying it on for size." The Russian answered, trying to be nice.
"No one can lie when they say you did this to yourself, you know?" Emil continued, "You trained up a skating beast. All the previous medal contenders have pretty much kissed their chances of getting gold or silver for the next few years goodbye."

"Rightly so." The Russian agreed, rising up a little bit higher as he put his hands on the underwater ledge that Yuri had been sitting on, "Yuri's going to win every gold medal there is next year." He put his hand on his husband's shoulder as he said so.

"Oohhh...them's fightin' words!"

Yuri just tried to make himself small again.

It didn't help though, as Sala and Mila go into the hot tub with them, sitting on either side of him. He suddenly felt super uncomfortable.

"So Yuuuuuri..." Mila started, being more familiar with him since his stay in St. Petersburg, "You've won two gold medals in a row now. You think you can keep it up?"

"...I hopeto yes please thankyou..." He said nervously.

"I'm really glad you decided to come back!" Sala added, touching one hand to his shoulder, "After what happened in Sochi, and then quitting...ah, I was so sad! Viktor really brought the best out of you! People can't take their eyes off you now!"

"...Thank you very much I appreciate your kind words..."

Viktor was watching quietly from the center of the hot tub still, trying not to crack up laughing at his expense. Yuri could even see where the tips of Viktor's fingers were poking up just above the foam where he was trying to cover his smirk.

Emil had just teasingly shoved Michele into the main pool and the splash was enormous...and so was the protesting that went along with it afterwards. Emil was just cracking up, but then jumped in with a cannonball after him.

As Mila and Sala both looked up, the splash getting their attention, Yuri slithered out from between them to go back to safer territory, going so far as to flip around backwards, back up into Viktor's chest and pull his arms around him just to be sure. He could feel the Russian smiling against the back of his neck as he reversed to sit on the opposite ledge of the hot tub from the ladies, with Yuri slouching casually against his front. Viktor could feel the man relaxing tremendously in his embrace, but he was sure most of that was just because Yuri had been so highly strung after getting pinned between two nearly-naked women all of a sudden.

"We can leave if you want." He whispered into Yuri's ear, hands flat against his abdomen and chest beneath the foam, "I'll make you that Irish coffee you like as a night-cap. It's late enough to go to bed if you're tired."

"You don't mind? We haven't been down here that long."

"We'll soak extra-long in the onsen back home. I'll buy the whole place out for a weekend if I have to for us to have the spring to ourselves."

"Mh..." Yuri sighed, leaning back into the man as he thought about it. He felt Viktor starting to nuzzle at the back of his neck again, and nibble on his earlobe, as though trying to give him incentive to stay just a little longer despite his concessions, "...Well, I guess this is okay for now."
The Russian huffed a quiet laugh, "Thanks"

"Even if this situation is entirely less than ideal...I think we both need the soak before tomorrow." Yuri whispered, "This isn't so bad."

The play-fighting went on between Emil and Michele until Sala finally got out of the hot tub to silence them, jumping into the main pool to set them straight. The shock of going from the hot water to normal though was enough to make her yelp, and it caused the two men to immediately pull out of their half-joking-but-not-entirely fight to see if she was okay. Michele was all over his sister.

Yuri and Viktor had floated to Mila's side of the hot tub to peek at them over the ledge, holding their hands to the edge of the underwater bench as they let the rest of their bodies float up behind them.

"...That's a bit weird, isn't it?" Yuri wondered quietly, only the top half of his head visible over the stone masonry of the deck.

Viktor was between him and Mila, "...A bit clingy for brother and sister."

"They're twins." Mila pointed out, prodding Viktor's shoulder, "Cut them some slack. A lot of twins are like that. Some even have their own language when they're younger." She leaned in closer to whisper, "Sala likes that Korean guy anyway."

"...And Emil seems to have a thing for Sala, but her brother won't let anyone get close." Yuri observed, "...Ah, I'm so glad I was never in the middle of anything like that."

"Oh careful there, Yuri." Mila mused, "You might jinx yourself and have some of Viktor's old flames show up."

He seemed to go blank as she said it, but then looked to Viktor, "How many do you even have?"

The Russian looked up a little as he thought, "...Thhhhhthree? Two? No, three. For sure, three."

"You don't even remember?"

"It's been a while." He shrugged, kicking his feet a little where they stretched out behind him, "I was stupid and hormonal when I was younger. What do you expect? They were all throwing themselves at me and a few caught my attention for a while, that's all."

"So you didn't really..." Yuri tried to say the word but it wouldn't come out.

"...Love them?" Viktor finished, "There was a form of it there, sure, but it was nothing like what we have. None of them lasted very long...5 months, 8 months..."

Yuri looked nervous, "...We've only been together for 4 months..."

"We're married." Viktor pointed out, "But don't forget how long I was hoping for the idea of you before I ever went to Hasetsu. To me, this has been going for over a year already."

"I don't know if having an unsubstantiated intercontinental crush on someone counts towards the total." Mila pointed out with a brow raised, "...But, seriously? Over a year? You only just went to Japan a year ago. The heck happened?"

Viktor got bashful again, turning to sit against the stonework with his back to the trio in the main pool, "Lost opportunity."

"It all started cuz I was drunk at the Sochi Banquet and forgot everything I said and did." Yuri
answered for him, "I knew nothing about what happened until we were all at the GPF in Barcelona."

"...What happened at the Sochi Banquet?" Mila was curious now, "I saw the strip-tease, but..."

"Yuri seduced me." Viktor said simply, remembering it fondly.

"I seduced the heck out of him." Yuri clarified.

The red-head remained unconvinced, "Go on."

"I got into a territorial dispute with Yurio over Viktor." Yuri laughed nervously at himself, "I still don't remember all of it, but I've cobbled together enough of a memory from the photos and videos I've seen that I can sort of figure out what happened."

"Mhm?"

"I was imbibing to drown my sorrows, and ended up doing that big strip-tease with Chris. At some point the alcohol gave me the courage to ask Viktor to be my coach..." Yuri continued, "So I drunkenly asked him to come to Hasetsu with me, and Yurio got all bristly about it."

"It's cuz I had promised to choreograph his Senior debut if he won his Junior Championships without quads." Viktor explained, "I'd made the promise ages beforehand, but he remembered that whole time...I'd long forgotten by then though."

"He was already trying to scare me into retirement at that event." Yuri sighed, "He did apologize for it later, but now..."

"Nope, nope." Viktor scooped up some of the hot water and dumped it onto his husband's head, "No." "All right all right...!" The Asian protested, "But anyway...after asking Viktor to come back to Japan, Yurio and I got into a Dance Battle over it, saying whoever won would get Viktor's attention after Worlds. Viktor ended up creeping in at some point and danced with me though...so I guess that means I won?" Yuri scratched the side of his jaw and laughed weakly, "But afterwards, I forgot the whole thing, so I was back to being my sad self the next day."

"I saw him moping in the lobby of the hotel as everyone was getting ready to go home again, but he wouldn't even look at me...I was crushed. I thought he was mad at me for not agreeing to be his coach." Viktor added, moving to pull himself out of the water and sit on the ledge with just his legs dangling into the froth, "And so...I sat back and watched things unfold from a distance after that. I thought I'd approach him at Worlds in Tokyo, but he didn't make the cut, and then he quit skating outright after coming in 11th at the Japanese Nationals. I was reeeeeeaaaally upset about it."

"I remember. You tried to hide it, but I could tell you were a miserable wretch for a while. I didn't know that was the reason for it though."

"Mh..."

Yuri just listened quietly from where he'd started to float in the water, just the top half of his head poking out above the bubbling tumult. He felt bad all over again for how things turned out back then.

"My entire performance at Russian Nationals, Euros, and Worlds after that was dedicated to how the loss killed me." Viktor continued, "Thought it'd be more helpful to channel that energy into my skating than to let it fester."
"Oohhh yeah, Aria!" Mila nudged the man's knee where he had it near her shoulder, "I read the translation...! I guess it really fit the situation, didn't it?" She got a little dramatic and started acting out the motions, "Using a sword to cut peoples' throats or strangling them if they talk about love and passion... Dark stuff, Viktor! But it sounds so nice in Italian."

"And then after Worlds, the skies opened up and I was given a sign." Viktor got a bit more optimistic after that, and he leaned forward to reach for Yuri's black mop-top, mussing it up affectionately, "My little katsudon replicated Aria and called out to me!"

"I didn't know what I was doing." He protested, "Yuu-chan's girls recorded and uploaded it without me even knowing. I thought the whole world was going to make fun of me until the day I died... This little fat piglet trying to be all amazing like Viktor freaking Nikiforov..."

Mila just laughed quietly, "I remember seeing it. Viktor left St. Petersburg so fast... He was gone before most of us even realized what had happened."

The silver-haired skater gave a bemused shrug, "Yuri needed me."

"More like you needed him."

"Same thing."

"You must've been jet-lagged as Hell by the time you got there. Going from Japan for the Championships, back to Russia, then immediately back to Japan a few days after..."

"Oh yeah, it was bad...but it was worth it."

"Yeah, you fell asleep on the floor of the common room." Yuri teased.

"Worth it!" Viktor repeated before sliding back into the water again to get closer to Yuri, taking his arms and pulling them up over his shoulders, "I got exactly what I wanted in the end."

Yuri's face was red, but he didn't protest.

"Hm...the top- and the under-dog." Mila hummed to herself, "I guess you went hard and fast to make up for lost time, Viktor?"

"...Nah." He answered, "I just would've scared Yuri away. I probably wasn't all that subtle though..."

The younger skater started listing infractions off on his fingers behind Viktor's head, "Introduced your intentions to me while naked, held my hand on the first night, got so close to my face that I could feel your breath while you were saying we needed to build trust in our relationship before you could coach me, saying we should sleep together..."

"Wow, smooth, Viktor. Real smooth." Mila taunted.

"...Maybe I got a little excited."

"Yeah, you backed off in a big hurry." Yuri agreed, "Especially after Yurio showed up."

Viktor twitched a little at the teen's mention, and pulled his head back enough to look up at his husband. The man just looked down at him awkwardly.

"...Oh, right."
"Why's Plisetsky off limits suddenly?" Mila wondered.

The two turned to look at her. "You don't know?"

"I wouldn't be asking if I did."

"...There's been something of a falling out between us."
It was reasonably late by the time the pair of skaters made it back to their hotel room...the ripe old hour of 8:15pm. Both were still rather sore from their way-overdone-it Free Skates, but they felt immeasurably better after getting to soak in the hot tub and swim for a while.

They'd each already showered off the chlorine of the pool before leaving it. When they'd finally gotten in and the door softly clicked closed behind them, Viktor silently watched his half-conscious partner head straight for the bed.

Yuri yawned and stretched before hazily pulling at the loosely tied belt around his hotel bathrobe. His swimsuit beneath it was a little damp still, but it wasn't so wet that he felt like changing, so when he discarded the robe over the back of a nearby chair, it was nothing to him to just flop face-first onto the covers as he was. He was about to get serious and pull the comforter over himself properly when he realized Viktor hadn't followed, and was still standing on the threshold to the main part of the room, just...looking at him strangely.

"You okay?"

The question seemed to rouse the Russian from some thought that had turned him into a space-cadet, and he shook the feeling off quickly before nodding and giving a fake-as-hell smile, "I'm fine, Yuri."

"Mhm... What is it?"

Azure eyes scanned the room, seeing the skates piled next to each other by a mound of luggage containers with the rest of their gear, ready for the Exhibition tomorrow afternoon. Their gold and silver medals were flat on the empty table, the lanyards folded over one another lazily. Viktor stepped over to them and touched the gold, and the flash of Yuri falling on the ice replayed in his mind, superimposed over the image of seeing him flop onto the bed a moment before.

"Guess I'm still a little on edge from when you fainted after your Free Skate. Seeing you drop just now reminded me of how you fell on the ice."

Yuri sat up and cross his legs in the bed, a worried look on his face, "I pushed myself too hard, I know...I won't do that again."

"It's not just that." Viktor shook his head as he shrugged out of the bathrobe, setting it over the same chair Yuri's had been left on, "What do you remember from waking up?"

The younger skater rubbed his head as he thought, "I remember everything fading to black...and then..." His words trailed, "It's a bit spotty after that. I don't remember anything all that clearly until we got to the kiss and cry. All I have is this feeling, just...this overwhelming sense of dread, like I really messed up somehow..."

Viktor didn't bother changing either before slipping under the covers on his side of the bed. Yuri watched him quietly as he sat there, wordless for a moment, then turning his head just enough to see where the Russian's hand was reaching for his own, clasping the one with the ring on it.

"It was scarier than anything that involved Konstantin." Viktor explained, thumbing Yuri's ring idly, "For a while, you acted like you thought it was Sochi again."
"Really? Sochi?"

"Mh." He reached one hand up to rub an eye on the back of his wrist, "That 30 seconds was the longest of my life. I thought I'd lost you. If you hadn't come around when you did and remembered-"

Yuri cut him off with a laugh.

"Why...are you laughing? I don't really find this all that funny..."

"I know why I thought I'd gone back in time to such a specific moment." Yuri answered, slipping in under the covers finally, "You'll see soon."

"Why do I get the feeling you're plotting something...?" Viktor crossed his arms, "...and that it's something at my expense?"

"It's not at your expense." Yuri reassured, "But it's something I have to do."

"...Is there anything I can do to help?"

Yuri shook his head, "Stammi vicino...that's it." He leaned over to cut off any other thoughts from the Russian with a kiss, both hands cupped around the back of Viktor's neck to hold him close. He continued on and kissed him twice over again before pulling back, pressing his forehead to his partner's, "And don't ever let me forget. If I do, make me remember. Don't give up even if it seems hopeless...I'll always want to remember and come back. This...happened...we happened. I don't want to lose it, ever."

Viktor nodded, then moved to push Yuri down so he could lay his head on his chest, "Me neither."

Yuri reached up only to turn the last light in the room off and then settled in, feeling Viktor holding him tighter than normal. He returned the gesture to make the man feel better...took a deep breath, and then smiled to himself.

"...Can you hear, my heartbeat? Tired of feeling...never enough..."

Viktor's eyes opened, but he dared not move. He just listened to the barely-whispered singing.

"I...close my eyes and...tell myself that my dreams will come true..."

"There'll be no more darkness when you believe in...yourself...you are unstoppable..." Viktor joined in, much to Yuri's pleasure, "Where your destiny lies...dancing on the blades, you set my heart on FIRE...!"

It was time to get ready for the Exhibition of Champions, and Yuri was the happiest kind of anxious he'd felt since he and Viktor had planned Duetto for Four Continents. To keep from spoiling the surprise though, once Yuri had changed behind closed doors, he wore his full track-suit, not just the black coat with cerulean lettering. All Viktor could see was a short white turtle-neck poking up from under the rim of the hood.

"Ahhh I wanna see!" He whined as they went to the shuttles.
"You will soon."
"I wanna see nooooowwwww!"
"You haven't even shown me your Exhibition outfit."
"That's different!"
"How?"
"...Reasons."

Yuri shook his head and laughed as he hopped up into the shuttle, taking a seat at the very front, with Viktor coming up right behind him.

_I wonder what Yakov and the rest are doing since Yurio didn't make the podium? I doubt they've already left since they probably expected he would..._

He turned away from the window as the last people from the hotel were getting into the big van and put a hand onto Viktor's leg, "Did you ever decide what to do with Mikhail's proposal?"

"Mmmmmh...no..." The Russian admitted, putting his own hand over Yuri's, "I would need to actually talk to him about it. I'm selling my house...normally that means I wouldn't expect to get back into it later. It's not like I have enough furniture for two places."

"Yeah." Yuri nodded, "You'll consider it though, right? It seems like a really good deal. He'll probably even give you what you ask for it instead of trying to haggle it down."

"Since when did you know about selling houses?"

"My family's hot spring isn't so different. People try to negotiate prices for their stays all the time."

"Guess I should be glad they aren't charging me. I'd have probably run up quite the bill by now~!"

"Enough to pay off your coaching fees?" Yuri teased.

"Not even close! You'll be paying that off in installments for years to come! But you've done well with the last two payments, even if you missed the first."

The skater pulled the gold medal out from where he'd had it tucked inside his coat, hanging around his neck proudly, "It's still hard to believe it really happened." He rubbed his sleeve on its face to make it shine a little brighter, and the shuttle started moving at the same time.

It wasn't long before they were back at the skating arena, and they disembarked from the van to quite a bit of fanfare. It almost felt like the Exhibition had drawn a bigger crowd than the competition itself...though Yuri thought that wouldn't be entirely unexpected since it meant the audience would only be subject to the best of the best performances.

Yuri spotted Minako and his sister in the crowd near the pathway that had been designated for the Champions, and they waved him over eagerly. Viktor followed close behind with his rolling suitcase, and he saw his uncle waiting just next to the ladies. Unlike the ladies, who were dressed loosely for the nice weather and the mostly-climate-controlled stands, Mikhail was done up proper Russian style with a heavy long-coat, scarf, and a brimmed hat.

"Hey guys!" Yuri called out affectionately, stopping just on the other side of the barrier, "Shouldn't you be inside already?"
"Mikhail got us box seats so we can take all the time we want!" Minako said excitedly, "So we figured we'd stay out here and wait for you two to get here so we could see you! How do you feel?" She reached her hand up to touch it to the skater's forehead, but he felt normal.

"I didn't drop cuz I'm sick, Minako-sensei..." He protested, "And I feel fine now. I just know better than to do five quads in a single program from now on. With all the other jumps, even my stamina can't hold out forever."

"Are you drinking enough water?"

Yuri blinked, but then turned his head and put a finger on his chin, "Maybe that's what it was..."

Viktor squeezed Yuri's shoulder, "Don't even think about it."

"Yes, coach..." The younger skater scratched his jaw anxiously and laughed, but then turned back to his ballet teacher, and the others as well, "Why don't you guys come down with us? We can give you a small tour before we go up, especially since you don't have to fight people for seats anymore."

"That'd be so cool!" Mari cheered excitedly.

Viktor held the barrier tape up so the trio could come under, and as Yuri walked ahead to talk to Minako and Mari, Viktor held back to walk with his uncle.

"This is all really interesting." The elder commented, "Even though Minako had to explain to me what happened yesterday in both of your shows, I'm really starting to get into this whole shindig."

"You think you'd want to come to other competitions then?" Viktor wondered, waving to the fans that greeted him along the way.

"I don't see why not. This is the last competition of the season though isn't it?"

"Da." The younger confirmed, "For some reason that never made any sense whatsoever...the ISU skating season starts in the summer of one year and continues into summer of the next year. The Grand Prix Series in the fall is the first major event, leading up to the Grand Prix Final in winter. Most countries usually host their National competitions after that, right before or just after the New Year, then the European Championships are hosted for Europe and Russia, Four Continents for everyone else, both in February, and it all leads up to this, the World Championships in March. All these events are squashed into a period of basically 4 months, so the rest of the year is kind of dull by comparison."

"There's other competitions though, aren't there?"

"Sure, but if they aren't recognized by the ISU then anything a skater does or wins there doesn't count towards their record. Plenty of records have been broken by people during non-official events but they didn't get noted."

"I see."

"Then there's the Olympics...which basically everyone wants to be a part of, but only the best from each nation go."

"You've done the Olympics before, too."

"Da, a few times." Viktor nodded, "Won gold there across the board the last go-around."
"Would you and Yuri go next time?"

"I thought about it briefly when we were at Four Continents, since the next Olympics is being held at
that same venue...but..." He put a finger on his mouth in thought, "...I'm not sure it would work out.
It wouldn't be fair to Yuri to ask him to take part in a competition where I don't think I'd be allowed
to be his coach. He'd be all alone there."

"Why wouldn't you? You've been his coach all this time anyway."

Viktor pointed to the 'JAPAN' letters on the back of Yuri's coat, and to the 'RU' on his own chest,
"Conflict of interest. The Olympics are a different organization from the ISU, and they are really
strict with their rules and regulations. Maybe it wouldn't be an issue if I didn't compete as well, but
I'd never get away with ditching the Russian team to coach the Japanese one. The whole idea of
'national pride' suggests athletes are trained by their own countrymen anyway."

"Ah...right."

They were finally descending into the belly of the stadium, where the scant few skaters who had
made the cut were getting ready; men and women alike, as well as the pair skaters and ice dancers.

"Wow...look at this place!" Mikhail said enthusiastically, "This is great! So official! I got to see a
little bit of it when we talked before, but...we were talking so I wasn't paying attention to the rest of
it."

"It's a mad house when competition is in full swing, but the Exhibition of Champions is always much
more subdued. We're just here to have fun and show off now."

"Speaking of having fun and showing off..." Mikhail turned back to his nephew, "Minako and Mari
were saying you two were going to Hasetsu for your honeymoon?"

"Yeah, but we're going back to St. Petersburg to deal with the house thing first."

"Did y-"

Viktor held up his hand, "Yuri just asked me earlier. I haven't thought about it yet, really..."

"It's a big change." Mikhail said simply, "You're not just going to Hasetsu like before...you're
leaving Russia behind, the only place you ever really knew. You have roots there. Much as you like
to think you've cut most of them off and gone free, you're still part of that place. You've just made
your own roots anew."

Viktor was watching him quietly.

"New roots are green and they can grow deep again somewhere else though, right? It's not like you
can't come back at some point."

He was about to answer, but Yuri jumped at him suddenly, "Viktor! They're almost ready to start!
We should get to rink side!"

"Okay~" The Russian said quickly, returning the hug with his one free arm, "Go on ahead. I'll be
right behind you."

"Don't take too long! It'll be weird if you aren't in the group when we all go up!" Yuri gushed
excitedly, stroking Viktor's cheek lightly with a thumb before turning to his attention to the elder
Russian.
"Go get em, kid." Mikhail said happily, extending his hand, which Yuri took eagerly, "We'll be cheering you on."

"Spasibo!"

Yuri had already gotten his well-wishes and farewells from his sister and ballet teacher, so he quickly swiped the wheely-suitcase-thing from Viktor and ran for the rink-side exit to get his skates on.

Mikhail watched him go, "He's a keeper. You caught a good one."

Viktor's expression softened, "...Sometimes I think he's too good for me. I've been cruel to him."

"...How'd that happen?"

"He was freaking out before his Cup of China Free Skate earlier in the season." The younger Russian explained, "I thought...if I made him think of something else, to get his mind off other peoples' scores, he'd perform better, but...it just kind of backfired spectacularly. I meant to just get him worked up a little, challenge him, break his heart just enough to make him want to fight for it...but..."

"Oh boy..."

"Yeah..."

"You dun broke'd him entirely into pieces."

"It was bad. So bad that when I offered to kiss him to make him feel better, he didn't even really seem to register it...just yelled no at me and moved on."

"I guess that means you hadn't to that point yet?"

Viktor shook his head, "When I jumped at him after that very skate was over, that was the first time." He tussled his hair a little bit but then started to shift his feet, "Anyway, I should get out there. This Exhibition is kind of a big deal to him." He held his hand out, "We'll see you after, okay? We have a red-eye flight back to St. Petersburg so we'll be up late."

Mikhail nodded and took the hand firmly in his own...but then leaned ahead, and pulled Viktor towards himself to press their shoulders together and pat Viktor on the back unexpectedly, "Have fun. We'll talk about the house thing later if you want, or I can just shut my big yap about it." He laughed, "Whatever you prefer."

"I'll think about it, I promise." The skater said, pulling back from the surprise half-hug, "Thanks, Uncle. I really appreciate your help in all this."

Hearing Viktor say those words made the elder Russian quite proud of himself.
Chapter 56

CHAPTER FIFTY SIX

"It's that time again when we close out the greatest skating event of the season. The best skaters from all 4 disciplines have their prizes, and now...the time's come for them to let their hair down and have a grand ol' time! ISU World Figure Skating Championships Gala Exhibition is the final event where skating fans all over the world can see the crème-de-la-crème putting on a stress-free show without rules or regulations...so let's hear it...for the showcase...of the stars!"

The stands were packed. Cameras were rolling from every angle on the rink-side. The lights were all still on for the moment, but it was only a matter of time before they'd go dark.

Yuri was practically jumping where he stood on the ice, digging his toe-picks in for balance as he hopped from one foot to the other. He and Viktor were standing with Chris in a rather sizable crowd of other skaters, clustered on one far end of the rink, waiting for the cue to start the show.

Out of the three of them though, Yuri stood out a little bit, still wearing his track-suit. Viktor had at least convinced him to ditch the pants so he wouldn't be so clunky. Secretly he was just trying to get a better look at whatever outfit Yuri had on underneath, but it didn't help. Yuri's showcase pants were just as black as the track-suit ones, just a bit more body-hugging. Viktor himself wasn't exactly dressed up like a show-pony either though, but it wasn't his actual Gala outfit so it didn't matter that much. Slick black pants with skate covers, and a dark maroon button-down with black suspenders, plus a black bowtie for good measure.

"Ahhhh this is intense!" The younger skater said anxiously, "I hope it never gets old!"

"Oh, it doesn't." Viktor reassured, fussing over Yuri's hair despite his hopping around, "Most skaters have a new Exhibition program for each event so it's always fresh and interesting. Didn't you?"

Yuri gawked at him, "Are you kidding?" He seemed to finally stand still.

"No? You made it to the final 6 in the GPF before this season...why wouldn't you plan a new show for the Gala?"

"Never thought in a million years I'd get to be in more than one or two, so why worry? It'd just be disappointing to never get to perform the thing...so I treated each season's Gala performance like a 3rd competition program, and just do the same one anytime I somehow medaled."

"He has a point." Chris chimed in, "Especially the last few years...people just assume they know the top 2 likely contenders who'll take the podium after you do. The rest just get lazy."

"What? Wow~!"

Viktor acts like he doesn't know...but I'm sure he does... Yuri was deadpanning him severely. When he heard Viktor laughing in spite of himself, he reached up to undo the front of his track-suit coat to toss it over the rink wall since they were near where the rest of their gear was anyway. Viktor literally stopped laughing as soon as he realized it, and his eyes were wide...only to be intensely disappointed again.

Yuri had planned ahead and still wore something over his Gala outfit; a simple button-down black jacket that was snugly fit to his torso, with a V-cut in front to show a little more of the short white turtle-neck that Viktor had seen poking out of the coat earlier.
"How many layers are you wearing on top of your costume anyway?" Viktor sighed as he smiled, brows furrowed, "You're like a little Yuri-shaped Matryoshka doll... Take off one coat and there's just one more under it..."

Yuri grinned as only he could, "This is the last layer, I promise. When this blazer comes off, you'll see what I brought."

"Ahhh the anticipation is killing me!" Viktor whined again.

Yuri's eyes lifted as he noticed the lights starting to die down, colors being shone down onto the ice from the rafters via spotlight. The butterflies in his stomach were practically trying to get out of him, his excitement was so high. His enthusiasm was contagious though and Viktor let himself get hyped as well.

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"Let's join the opening ceremonies and the presentation of the skaters...!"

"Ohmygodthisisreallyhappening!" Yuri said excitedly, grabbing hold of Viktor's arm to ground himself as the music started.

"Let's go!"

The entire 'herd' of skaters shot out together after that, heading towards the center of the rink and spreading out. Many of them were clapping to the beat, getting the audience riled up as well. Viktor fell in line and started clapping too, spinning a few times as they got out to their places. Yuri was a bit more reserved, but he could feel himself nodding his head slightly in time with the clapping.

They'd spent half the morning practicing the Exhibition group-skate, but without the audience, with all the lights on, and being told to stop and start over numerous times. It had an entire different feel now that they were doing it for real.

Yuri was a little kid again; a ball of energy that was finally getting cut loose for the first time. Each skater was paired up with someone to dance with, and Yuri naturally went with Viktor, skating to and away from him with the planned choreography. It was like a techno remix of a Texas two-step or Irish dancing song...and it was entirely different from anything Yuri had ever skated before...but getting to dance with Viktor in front of an entire arena full of people, and with as much spunk and energy as there was...he loved every second of it.

The swarm dispersed into more individual routines after that, the pair skaters converging to do some of the off-limits tricks they knew, such as the men swinging around their female partners up and down in the air while only holding onto their feet, their heads coming dangerously close to hitting the ice. The Singles skaters stuck to what they knew though, ducking down into various camel or sit spins. That was more Yuri's element, and he became a blur on the ice before everyone broke off once again to spin in wide arcs with their previous partners. They skated backwards, weaving in and out from one another like converging flocks of Starlings, spinning and throwing their arms up as they went.

On cue, many of the skaters started making for the rink edge, skating quickly around it as certain performers went to the middle areas to do a more personalized part of the bigger routine. Yuri and Viktor were in the center rink, with two pairs on either side of them in their own thirds. The Russian hoisted his partner into the air, threw him up just enough to spin him and caught him again as he was coming down, letting him droop with one arm hanging to his shoulder like in their Duetto routine, then rotated around to take one hand and enter the wide rotation.
Yuri wasn't sure which move made him more nervous...being lifted in the first place, spinning in mid air without having been the one to get himself there, or the death spiral Viktor had just lowered him into...but it was all exhilarating regardless. The audience seemed to love it as well, and they cheered wildly for each unique addition to the group show. When Viktor pulled him up again, he put one hand behind Yuri's back and they skated back to rink-side so other skaters could take their turn. Only a few seconds later, the flock returned to its prominence on the ice in a wave, with several skaters casually leap-frogging each other as they rounded the turns. Viktor just yanked Yuri into a ballroom maneuver to keep pace, spinning the younger man to skate backwards as their legs wove into each other like a skating version of the Tango.

One of the last parts of the intro show was coming up, and Yuri departed from his partner to join most of the other skaters at the far end of the rink where they’d started. Viktor, one other male skater, and a woman, departed from them and skated back out alone to the middle of the rink to perform a move that even Yuri didn't know Viktor was capable of until that morning.

The three skated out backwards in unison with Viktor in the middle, and then...launched themselves head-over-heels into the air, literally no-hand back flipping together, and landing gracefully with a clatter of skates and shards of frost bursting at their heels from the impact. When the trio came back around, the rest of the group joined them in the middle, and everyone stood together again as the cacophony of sound ended.

As the music drifted and left the group in 'silence,' the crowd went insane with clapping and cheering, and the skaters heaved to catch their breaths, several of them laughing with excitement, others clapping along with their fans.

But it wasn't over yet...the music began up again with new energy, and the skaters flew apart from one another like that self-same flock of Starlings was being dive-bombed by a hawk. As they split into two groups and headed for opposite ends of the rink, the winners of the Junior World Championships entered the rink, did their own brief little show, and then blended in with the Senior Champions for the actual conclusion of the opening performance.

"And there's the full cast of winners for this season...the penultimate Titans of Figure Skating!"

Yuri was practically crying from the joy and excitement of it all, but Viktor pulled him along to rink-side to get him off the ice with the rest so the first Gala performance could begin in earnest. The younger skater was still heaving from the whole thing when he felt his blades leave the rink and get onto normal ground again, and he threw his arms over Viktor's shoulders, flopping onto his back.

"This is amazing!"

The Russian moved his hands back to hold Yuri down as he spun a few times for fun, "Welcome to the Big League, Yuri!"

"It's almost better than Four Continents!" He continued, "If only we could do Duetto here, too!"

"We'll get to do it for the Hasetsu crowd, don't worry." Viktor reminded him, putting him down again so he could face the man, and rubbed his shoulders gingerly, "It might not be the World Championship crowd, but performing for people you know and love is just as good."

"Yeah, you're right. I can't wait!"

Unlike with the medaling ceremony where the Gold Medalist went out first, the Gala went in the opposite direction. Yuri got to watch Viktor bristling in anticipation for over half an hour before the man had to go out and do his Silver Medal performance.
"Please don't forget your own performance while you brood over what mine is." Yuri advised with a huffed laugh, holding both of Viktor's hands in his own as they waited for the announcement overhead.

"I'm your choreographer...how can I not brood when you do a show without letting me lay a single finger on it?"

"Please...welcome to the ice, your World Championship Silver Medalist... From Russia...the legend himself, Viktor...Niki...FOROV!" The announcer called overhead.

"Ah, time to go."

Yuri patted the center of Viktor's chest twice with his ringed hand to send him off, and the Russian went with flare.

The outfit he'd finally revealed was simple but still rather stylish; black from top to bottom, but with delicate lines of small Swarovski crystals embroidered down the chest and spine like veins of glitter, springing forth from the nape of the neck and dip of the collarbone.

The audience roared their approval as he headed to the center of the rink. They didn't seem to care that he wasn't the gold medalist this time around...their enthusiasm was still palpable. To his surprise, he actually managed to catch sight of the viewing box that Minako had mentioned before the Gala began. He saw the trio within it, the ladies holding up their signs and flags, his uncle sitting casually with one leg crossed and his hands folded in his lap, and Viktor waved and bowed specifically to them before taking his position. The ladies screamed with delight, but Mikhail just tipped his hat with a smile.

"Viktor has come here with several years' worth of consecutive gold medals from numerous competitions, including Worlds. He returns to us after taking a break to play coach for this year's Men's Single's gold medalist, Yuri Katsuki, who he actually ended up marrying, too, and who has taken the Nikiforov name in Viktor's honor.

"Viktor surprised us all again here at Worlds with a first-in-history quadruple axel, which he performed perfectly during his Free Skate just yesterday. He also set a new world record for the Short Program, scoring over 122, and briefly reset the cumulative total world record, scoring over 345.

"Tonight, he continues skating with a Russian theme for his homeland, performing to Jackie-O's 'You Only Live Once.' ...I won't even try to say that in Russian!"

Viktor couldn't hear what the commentators were saying to the television audience, but he knew well enough what they might be talking about anyway. He kissed his ring and then set his skates across one another, lifting his face to the roof with both eyes closed and holding his arms out low, palms up, as though he were basking in a ray of sunlight.

Yuri watched excitedly, clinging to the rink wall like he'd be on the ice with the man if he could. Not counting 'Duetto,' which he himself was a part of, this was the first time ever that he'd gotten to see Viktor's Exhibition in person. He'd seen so many in videos online or live on television, but he'd never had the guts to go to a Gala when he'd been in the competition it was for. It was almost too much of a stab that he wasn't good enough to be on the ice himself, so he didn't want to be in the audience either. This time was...for obvious reasons, quite different on many levels.

"Viktoooooor! Davaaaaaaai!"
The song finally began...and Viktor stood still as a pond for the first several seconds of it. As the melody of lyrics began, he slowly started to move, only his hands at first as the first set of lines came and went...

Ahh ahh ahh...
Živěm odin raz!

Then more of his arms, then beginning to rotate on his back skate, progressively moving a little bit more of himself until the true lyrics began, when he spun around with a hop and charged backward.

Ty krasívý v ètu noč'
Očarovan ja toboj
Vremja bol' unosit proč'
Duh zahvatyvaja moj

The energy of Viktor's footwork reminded Yuri of Minami's Boogie, since it seemed like each beat had a foot stepping to it. There was even an Eros-like element with the arm movements, coming up and around in sweeping motions that accentuated the flow and direction of the rest of his body.

Nam s toboj dano sijat'
Dlja togo i roždeny
Bleskom solnce zatmevat'
Bez somnenija my prosto dolžny

The audience was starting to clap along with the emphasized beats of the song, and it just seemed to add more energy to Viktor's dance. His jumps seemed to go higher, his spins faster...

Čtoby jarče vseh sijat'
Sléž i boli ne bojus'
Ty daëš' mne sil letat'
I bol'ših ysvot ja točno dob'jus'!

...and when the first half of the song burst out before going back to the instrumental aspect, the quad axel shot up as well.

The audience roared its pleasure at the sight of it again.

"No quads till that one..." Yuri noticed, tapping his arm in time with the audience's clapping, "Maybe he learned." He laughed.

Ahh ahh ahh...
Živěm odin raz!
Ahh ahh ahh...
Živěm odin raz!

As the chant of the chorus began again, Viktor made his way around the rink, spinning periodically and gesturing out enthusiastically to draw people further into his performance. He stopped abruptly with a complex turn near where his partner was watching, and like Yuri had once done to Yuuko as he replicated Aria, Viktor came right up to the rink wall to draw Yuri in as well. He ran his hands
over both sides of the man’s head, gave him an Eskimo kiss, and then quickly spun back away again, carefully overlapping his feet as he skated backwards towards center-rink again, arms extended out to the man.

Yuri’s face flushed, and the audience loved it, cheering for him all the way. He was starting to notice the dozens of Viktuuri signs that people were holding up, mixed in with all the normal fanfare for Viktor alone.

Ty prekrasen kak vsegda
Nužnyh slov ne podobrať...
Sily tajut inogda
Toľko nužno ustojat'

Pravit mirom krasota
Grust' otčajanno ljubja
Daže v hudšie goda
Verim my v tebja…

Viktor jumped into a flying camel spin, even using some of the momentum to carry him in a diagonal across the ice rather than just staying and spinning on one place. He switched legs with a flip and then shot off in the opposite direction again.

Verju v to, čto den' pridët
Nam vozdastsja za trudy
Ot ovacij vzdrognet lëd
Snova sbudutsja mečty

Čtoby jarče vseh sijat'
Slëz i boli ne bojus'
Ty daēš' mne sil letat'
Kak učil menja, ja k zvëzdam stremljus'!

He leaned over into a layback Ina Bauer, dipping over even further than Yuri had in his Free Skate.

Aaaaaahhhhh...  
Aaaaaahhhhh...

"...He’s even more flexible than I realized." The younger skater commented with a grimace.

Outside spread-eagle.

Quad flip.

Perfect landing.

The audience exploded.

Yuri jumped after he saw it, arms raised up, cheering excitedly, "He did it!"

The rest of the routine was rather mild after that, slowing down into an easy finale, and ending with Viktor down on one knee, one hand palm-flat on the ice, and his head bowed low. When the music finally faded, the Russian only lifted his head and looked up, his slate-blue eyes piercing through silver bangs to look straight at his husband.

Yuri was practically shaking Chris back and forth as any true fanboy would when senpai finally
notices them, "This is the greatest day of my life!"

The crowd was equally enthusiastic, rising up to give the Russian a standing ovation as he bowed to them all before heading to the rink exit, waving a few more times to soak up as much of the energy as he could before it was over.

Yuri was waiting for him with his blade guards just inside the rink-side area, and was practically glowing with excitement, "That was so incredible...! Even with only two quads, you still knocked it out!"

"The two most important quads." Viktor nodded, accepting the guards and placing them one at a time before flipping Yuri around to drape himself across the man's back, "...And it was all I could manage after yesterday, really~!"

"Legs giving out?"

"They'll be burning for days~! I can already tell..."

Yuri guided the exhausted skater back to the bench where they'd left their gear. There were only a few performances left before the 'big reveal,' and Viktor was getting anxious about it. The two watched the show in near silence after that, until it was finally time for Yuri to go up.

He stepped over to the rink entrance as the Ladies' Singles Gold Medalist was leaving it, and Viktor followed close behind. Yuri reached down to pull the blade guards from his skates and handed them off, the butterflies more intense now than ever before.

Viktor was leaning against the rink wall, holding his chin up in his hand where his elbow was resting on the top of the ledge, "Weeeeeeell?" He taunted excitedly.

Yuri had his fingers around the zipper on the front of his thin blazer, and he took a deep breath before turning to face his husband and pull it down.

The Russian's eyes immediately went wide as he recognized the first thing he saw...the gradient of black-to-blue flames. The sky-blue lapels to either side that came down to a point at the bottom, the royal blue sleeves that ended in white ruffles over Yuri's gloveless hands. By the time Yuri had the whole blazer off and was setting it aside, Viktor had his hand over his mouth in disbelief.

"...A do-over?" He said aloud, "But...why? Even if it was a terrible disaster, it...was kind of what lead to us."

Yuri shook his head, "Not a do-over, as though I want to go back and replace what happened. I'm going to do my Sochi Free Skate again, in the here and now. I want to show everyone what that performance would've looked like if I had everything back then that I finally have now. Confidence, skill, a coach and choreographer who knows how to make me move, and...a husband that helps me see and understand what love really feels like. All these things that I knew absolutely nothing about back then..."

Viktor reached his arms over Yuri's shoulders and held him tight. He huffed a soggy laugh against the crook of Yuri's neck, trying to hide where his eyes had gotten misty again, "...No more than four quads, okay?"

"I promise."

"Davai, Yuri."
Chapter 57

Chapter Summary

PLEASE BE AWARE THAT THIS EXHIBITION IS A REPEAT FROM CH01 AND WILL BE CHANGED LATER. It will be replaced with [Dark Eyes] eventually (Yuri’s Sochi SP that I’ve imagined.) Sorry for the trouble.

CHAPTER FIFTY SEVEN

"Ladies and Gentlemen...the final performance of this year's World Championship Gala Exhibition...your Men's Singles Gold Medalist, Four Continents Gold Medalist, and Grand Prix Final Silver Medalist, Yuri Nikiforov!" The announcer called overhead.

Viktor gave his husband one last kiss before sending him off, and Yuri flew out onto the ice like a phoenix reborn. Spotlights shone down on him from several places, extending his shadow out 20ft in all different directions. The audience was a dark mass beyond the edge of the rink wall.

"Some of you may recognize the outfit Yuri's wearing tonight for his Exhibition as his last season's Free Skate. He writes that he hopes people remember what he was like the last time he did this show on an international stage, at the Sochi Grand Prix Final, where he had a nervous breakdown and came in last place. He wishes for the audience to see him perform it again tonight and see how far he's come since Viktor Nikiforov became his coach last year. He also hopes his coach from that previous season, Celestino Cialdini, is watching, as this program is dedicated to him tonight."

You tried so hard to keep me in the fight back then, Coach Celestino... Yuri thought, putting on a little pre-show for the audience as he slowly made his way to center stage, If it hadn't been for you dragging me to the Banquet, practically against my will, nothing else would've happened. Thanks for sticking with me until the end.

And indeed, the man himself was watching with Phichit and a number of other skaters from the event hotel theater room, where the Gala was being projected on a massive screen.

Phichit was trying not to cry.

Ciao Ciao held up a glass of champagne, "You've got this, Yuri. You always had it in you to be great. Go show them what you're made of."

The skater finally pulled to the center of the rink, mesmerized by the whole thing. He knew when and where he was, but seeing himself with that costume from his 'dark past' on again made him a little anxious...but in a good way. He finally knew what he was capable of, and every muscle in his body twitched to show it off. He looked at his hands, seeing Sochi like before, but his ring helped ground him in the present, and he closed his eyes and drew in a breath.

He set his feet apart, kissed his ring, and crossed his arms over his chest, one hand on each shoulder.

The music was quiet, peaceful.

Yuri spun forward in an inside spread-eagle, rotating out again to skate further from center, his arms
spreading out, descending from where they'd started, in front of his chest, and then out like wings. As the music grew louder and more intense, so did his turns and twists.

Flying sit-spin, rising into a camel-spin as the music got quieter again. He pulled away backwards, skating with his eyes nearly closed.

Viktor watched intently, practically without blinking. He'd remembered the last time he'd seen the performance himself, and the pity he'd felt for Yuri even back then as he flubbed most of his jumps.

"What's wrong with him?" He'd heard someone asking nearby in the prep area.

"He did well enough to place in the Final and now he's just falling apart."

"Is it GPF jitters?"

"Who knows? His Short Program was pretty good though..."

Viktor stuffed his hands into the pockets of his track-suit coat; the black pants and sheer magenta tips of his Aria costume were still visible, but he'd taken his skates off a little earlier. He had already done his Free Skate and was just waiting for the last handful of competitors to do theirs before claiming his gold medal. The large screens that had been provided made it easy for him to see every detail of every performance, but this one caught his attention more than the rest.

"Something happened to him." Viktor said to himself quietly, "This isn't like how he was before."

"What do you mean?" Chris asked, standing next to him and watching as well, "Didn't think you cared that much."

"I don't care?" Viktor repeated, looking at him side-ways, "That's harsh."

"You've never really paid that much attention to other skaters before, at least not like this. The Swiss skater pointed out, "What do you see that's gotten your attention?"

Viktor put his hand on his chin, "Yuri's Short Program the other day still had some excitement in it. This...even though we've all seen it half a dozen times leading up to today, it's different. There's a weird sort of melancholy to it. You're friends with him, aren't you?"

"Sure."

"Did he say anything about something happening?"

Chris thought about it, "No, but...he didn't seem like himself this morning when we all arrived. He's been looking at the ground since he showed up for early morning practice. If something happened, it was last night, after we'd all left already."

Viktor nodded, and then turned away from the screens, heading out to the rink-side area quietly. Chris debated following after, but his turn was still coming up and he needed to stretch out, so he went in the opposite direction to furl out his work-out mat in an open area.

Stepping out into the seating area, Viktor looked out quietly, standing near a railing that guarded a ledge. A few people recognized him, and called his name, but he was focused and paid them no mind.
'...Here comes the triple toe-loop...' He thought to himself, and winced as Yuri collapsed, sliding nearly into the rink wall before struggling to get up again and continue on, 'This is painful to see...'

Quad toe-loop followed by a triple-loop. Yuri was in top form, spinning with ease as he entered into his step sequence.

"Come on, Yuri...shake it off." Viktor whispered to himself. "Forget whatever is going on outside this place and just skate, for Heaven's sake."

Yuri Plisetsky was in the lower level seats of the arena, feet propped up on the empty chairs in front of him as he gawked at the Asian skater. He seemed fixated. The jumps were embarrassing to look at, but Yuri's spins and step sequence would frequently grab peoples' attention.

That's where Yuri felt most comfortable, and it was obvious to anyone who knew anything about how difficult figure skating was. Viktor would see it as easily as any other seasoned veteran of the ice.

'He obviously knows how to move...but it's like he forgets what to do when his skates leave the ice.' He thought to himself as he leaned against the railing.

Quad Salchow, single loop, triple flip. The audience was cheering, and the energy fed into Yuri's showcase like fuel. He was in the zone now.

Yuri's enthusiasm for the Free Skate was withering, and Viktor could see Celestino at rink-side, watching his student like he was a hair's-width away from complete nuclear meltdown. There was nothing he could do at that point though, so he crossed his arms and hoped for the best.

Quad Lutz, and the crowd roared with approval. Yuri pushed on into a low sweep, rising into a series of quick singles before finally dipping off to leap into a triple-flip, double-Salchow combo.

Viktor turned his eyes back to the ice; Yuri's only quad for the Free Skate was coming up. He'd changed the program up to emphasize combination jumps in favor of more difficult solo jumps. Viktor wondered if Yuri would even try it at that point...but...he did...and again, he fell. Celestino had his hand over his face, thinking it was too painful to watch, but Viktor kept his eyes open.

Yuri spun a few more times, but then burst out in reverse to build up speed for his final major jump...and he threw himself into the air, spinning four times, and landing the quad flip with ease.

The Asian skater was exhausted, but he pushed himself up again from where he'd collapsed and skated quickly to regain his previous momentum. He'd had to cut a few elements from the end of the
program due to lost time, and so the entrance into his final spin sequence looked unpolished.

Flying camel-spin, hop to the other foot to continue on...Yuri lowered himself into a sit-spin to gain momentum, raising one arm above his head for added difficulty. Ice crystals flew off his blades as he carved his mark into the rink. When he rose up again, he back-walked a few steps backward before rotating one last time and reaching up with both hands for the final pose.

Sweat dripped off him, and his legs and back were a ruin of soon-to-be large bruises. Frost clung to his pants, leaving big, cold, wet patches as it melted against his skin underneath. The audience cheered, and gifts and flowers were thrown on the ice, but he had an angry, disappointed look on his face...wishing for it to be over.

Viktor sighed and shook his head, turning away from it all to go back into the prep area, "What a shame. I wonder what it would have looked like if his heart was in it? Can't force something like that...ah well."

The noise of the audience was deafening, and Yuri cheered from where he was in the center of the rink. He rotated a few times where he stood and waved to the audience, bowing his head in gratitude before finally sliding off to go back to the rink exit. His partner was there waiting for him, excited as the audience, holding his arms open for him. Yuri jumped into him happily, tears freely falling from his eyes.

"You could've won gold with that performance!" Viktor told him enthusiastically, "But there's just a few things th-"

"No!" Yuri protested comically, putting both hands over Viktor's mouth to silence him, "Not for this one. Firebird is off limits to criticism!"

The Russian just huffed a laugh behind the man's hands, and pulled them away to kiss him instead.

"Wow! Yuri really knocked this one out with a flawless performance of his old Free Skate! What a moment that must be for him! And what a week we've all had here at the conclusion of the World Championships..."

The lights all started to change color, changing the hue of the arena from dark blue to bright red and orange. The pair hardly had a chance to even think about it before Viktor was shoving Yuri back out onto the ice, following after him, and in turn being followed by all the other skaters. The music above was upbeat, like a mix of techno and rock, and similar to the Gala's opening performance, the closing ceremony was loosely planned and choreographed earlier that morning. The skaters all clapped along with the beat, lining up on the ice in four big groups, each forming up with their own discipline and taunting the other groups to show off.

Ever the showman, Viktor went out first, doing his signature quad flip in the midst of them all before the Ladies Gold Medalist spun past with a triple axel. When the Russian came back to his place in the group, he shoved Yuri out to try as well, and the anxious skater did his best with the only thing he could think of...doing the final spin sequence from his YoI program. When he pulled up again, the group flocked around, and Viktor pulled Yuri back into it as they skated and clapped to the beat with the audience.
Yuri noticed them starting to converge by where a camera had been lowered over the ice on a long crane, and were posing for photos in front of it. Viktor saw the opportunity and pulled his phone out from his back pocket, jumping out in front of the group and holding the device up in selfie-mode. Everyone seemed to notice and posed for it.

The music faded away and left the audience with nothing but their roar of applause. The skaters chimed in as well once the photos were done, and slowly started dispersing a little further away from one another as the congratulations continued.

"All right, skaters! ALL RIGHT!" A different announcer called overhead, "It's been a great week here, and a fantastic Gala Exhibition to close it all out! Thank youuuuuu!"

The winning athletes all pulled out into a long line before grabbing the hand of the person next to them to bow to one side of the audience; Viktor held to both Yuri and Chris, with Yuri at the end of the line. New music started to play after that, something more somber than before, but the skaters just flipped around and turned to grab hands again, raised them up, and bowed to the other side of the arena.

Viktor suddenly realized what the song was, and was looking around as though déjà vu was hitting him, "Hmph...wow..."

"What is it?"

"...This was practically my theme song back after you quit skating." Viktor admitted sheepishly.

("Stay' by Gregorian))

"It's been an honor and a privilege to watch all of these amazing skaters this year. But now it's time to pack things in...and as much as we don't want to see you go...this is farewell until next time!"

The line of skaters started to move again, sliding towards the rink wall before turning to follow it all the way around, everyone waving to the audience for their final goodbye.

My whole life, waiting for the right time...
To tell you how I feel...
And though I try to, tell you that I need you...
Here I am without you...
I feel so lost, but what can I do?

Cuz I know this love seems real, but I don't know how to feel...

We say goodbye in the pouring rain, and I break down as you walk away... (Stay...stay...) Cuz all my life, I felt this way, but I could never find the words to say... (Stay...stay...)

Viktor pulled Yuri from the line and held him close, skating backwards as he guided the shorter man out towards the middle of the rink. Yuri went with it easily, but could tell the feeling had changed from a moment before. This was a private dance now, no longer partial to the whims of the audience.

Alright, everything is alright...
Since you came along..
And before you, I had nowhere to run to, nothing to hold on to...
I came so close to giving it up.
And I wonder if you know, how it feels to let you go?

Yuri noticed a spotlight had come down on them...now two, then three...but he returned his focus to
Viktor. He pulled his arms around the man and tuned in closely to his movements, following each turn like he knew it was coming before it did...and they just skated together as the song continued.

*You say goodbye in the pouring rain, and I break down as you walk away... (Stay...stay...)*
*’Cause all my life I felt this way, but I could never find the words to say... (Stay...stay...)*

*So you change your mind, and say you’re mine.*
*Don’t leave tonight... (Stay...)*

*Say goodbye in the pouring rain, and I break down as you walk away... (Stay...stay...)*
*’Cause all my life I felt this way, but I could never find the words to say... (Stay...stay...)*

*Stay with me, stay with me,*
*Stay with me, stay with me,*
*Stay, stay, stay, stay with me...!*

When it was all over, and the song faded away, all the other skaters had already left the ice, leaving just the two hopeless fools in the middle of the rink together. Yuri had become hyperaware of the audience after that, but Viktor pulled him back out of it. He had the same look on his face as he did when Yuri had first put the gold ring on his finger in Barcelona.

"I’d do it all over again if I knew it would lead back to this moment." He finally said.

The younger skater nodded, trying not to cry again, reaching up to put both arms over the Russian’s shoulder, "In a heartbeat."
CHAPTER FIFTY EIGHT

There was no point in goodbyes so soon after the Gala, not with the post-event Banquet later that evening anyway. The skating duo reunited with the non-skating trio and headed back to the event hotel to drop things off before leaving for a much-deserved celebration.

Yuri was still bouncing off the walls with excitement about the whole thing, letting his gold dangle around his neck for all to see. It warmed Viktor's heart to see Yuri so proud of himself, even if it still stung to know he'd had to settle for silver to see it. Still, there were things that needed to be done, so while Yuri was, for lack of better terms, dancing with himself in an open space in the lobby, Viktor was dealing with the concierge service.

"Yes, we'll be back to pick everything up around midnight." He explained, handing off the last of their competition luggage to be bundled with the things that were already in storage since their pre-Gala check-out. Once he got his confirmation ticket, he pocketed it and started heading for the doors, waving to his partner, "Yuri! Let's go! I wanna bust my dog out of jail, and I'm starving!"

The Triple-Ms were waiting outside for them. As Viktor and Yuri came back out through the rotating doors, a slick black vehicle was pulling into the pick-up lane. Neither of them had any idea what was going on though, so they immediately made a B-line for the nearest shuttle to take them to wherever they were going for dinner.

"Not so fast." Mikhail said, holding up a hand in a stopping gesture, "Where are you going?"

"...On...the...van-thing? To get Makkachin?" Yuri answered cautiously, one foot already on board. He glanced back at the equally-confused Viktor, "Why's he questioning us?" Yuri whispered.

The Russian shrugged, "Where are you going?" He asked back, "Are we walking somewhere? The boarding facility won't be open all night...I have to get Makkachin now, remember?"

Minako and Mari were having a hard time containing their excitement, and they rushed back to a long black limousine as the driver was getting out to open the doors, "Our chariot for the evening!"

The pair looked at one another awkwardly, "A limo? Isn't that a bit much?"

"For champions who've won so much prize money over the last year, I don't think so." Mikhail said, stepping back to go towards the now-open door, "But you guys can always walk if you want to."

Once again, they glanced at one another strangely. They turned around, and Yuri leaned in to whisper, "I don't think he knows how little of it we actually get to keep in the end..."

"You get to keep a lot more than others do." Viktor pointed out.

"What? Why?"

"Cuz I'm only charging you a symbolic cost for coaching fees, not real money."

"...You make a lot of money as it is." The younger jabbed.

"That's only because I have a track record and a lot of sponsors and supporters, and I did a lot of other work besides skating to earn an income. You'll start to see that soon too, now that you've won
another gold medal."

"...What else were you doing?" Yuri quirked a brow, thinking the worst.

"The posters you still won't show me?"

Yuri's face turned red, "...What about them."

"I got paid for those photos." Viktor stood fully upright again after that, listing opportunities off on his fingers, "Modeling, interviews, endorsements...the whole bit."

"You weren't doing anything like that while you were coaching me though."

"That's cuz I was in Japan, away from all the studios and customers who would normally ask for me."

"You weren't doing that stuff when we were in St. Petersburg either!"

"The huge box of mail that you helped me push inside the house when we first got there was full of requests. I had to turn most of them down or postpone them. I had to get ready for Worlds, plus the whole 'I got hit in the face and my eyeball was bloody' thing." Viktor put his hand against Yuri's lower back, "How've you been paying for things up till now? You don't have a huge debt, do you?"

"My family." The younger skater deadpanned, as though his answer was the most obvious thing in the world...but then thought better of it when he remembered Viktor's situation, "...The...yeah. Them. They paid for it. I've never really..."

The Russian tilted his head, but then laughed and put his arm over Yuri's shoulders to guide him over to the limo, "Don't worry, don't worry! Now that you've won so much this season, I don't doubt that you'll get all kinds of opportunities before next season starts! You got a bunch of new sponsors after the Grand Prix and Four Continents, so as a World Champion, the sky's the limit! Plus you're cute, so that helps a lot."

Yuri's face flushed as he heard the words, and took a deep breath as he passed Mikhail to get into the back seat of the limousine. The scenery inside was a stark contrast to how he was used to traveling...it reminded him of the transition Viktor had forced on him to travel in first or business class on planes rather than economy. But, he'd eventually come around to agreeing with the change, as it was a lot easier for him to rest while they flew when he wasn't being crushed in a tiny little seat, trying to sleep while upright with a neck pillow. Never mind the fact that it was always easier to sleep when he was able to curl up with Viktor, and that was only possible in the much larger first/business class international travel seats. It had gotten to a point where Yuri wondered how he was ever able to compete before the Russian had come into his life, since he felt so much better physically and emotionally now that he was.

_Who am I kidding? Before Viktor, I wasn't really competing anyway...I was just physically present._

As the Russian settled into the plush leather seat next to him, Yuri looked back to watch the other three come in after them. Mari took one of the side-facing seats, while Minako and Mikhail took their own rear-facing seats near the front. Mikhail pulled his hat and scarf off to get more comfortable in the climate-controlled vehicle, and leaned his head up to open the small sliding panel that gave him access to the driver.

"We're all ready, let's go."

"Yessir, Mr. Rozovksy."
The panel slid closed again and the group could feel the vehicle starting to move.

Viktor had taken notice of something at that point though, "...Uncle, what...did you do to your hair?"

The elder Russian looked a bit surprised, but then laughed nervously, "Oh right...Minako did this between your Gala performances."

The woman next to him was all excited that someone had noticed now that the hat was off, "It took a while to get the part to stay, but now he really looks like you!"

"I tried to tell her it would seem creepy..." Mikhail insisted, looking up to blow some of the bangs out of his left eye where the new style had let them fall, "But...well, here we are."

"Well, no one can say we aren't related...the resemblance is eerie, especially now."

Yuri was looking between them, "...Yeah."

Viktor reassuringly squeezed Yuri's leg where he had a hand resting on it between them, "At least you know what you've bought into for the long haul. I won't look much different from him when I'm his age."

The younger skater suddenly got really nervous, thinking about his own parents in their ripe ages, "Oh no..." He started to panic, "If I look like my dad..." He spun around, "Viktor, I'm so sorry! I'm not going to be cute when I'm old!" Comical tears were forming in his eyes, "Please don't leave me!"

The group was laughing at the youngest member's expense, but Viktor mussed his hair and shrugged, "In my mind's eye, you'll always look like you do now. And besides, we'll get old at the same time, so maybe we won't even notice the changes. ...And you really don't look that much like your father anyway."

It made Yuri feel a little better to hear those words, and he let his pounding heart calm some.

"You look more like your mom."

"VIKTOR."

Mari and Minako were in tears laughing.

"Welp, anyway, I've been wanting to do this all night, so let's get started!" Mikhail said, clapping his hands down on his knees as he knelt forward to the limousine's small interior fridge, pulling out a small jug of orange juice, and a bottle of champagne from a bucket of ice that neither of the skaters had noticed till then. He handed them both to Minako, and then rummaged around for five champagne flutes, mixing the drinks and dispensing one each to everyone in the cabin, "So! A toast! To precious metals and precious people! Kanpaaaaai!"

Yuri was surprised to hear Japanese from the old man, but he smiled and lifted his glass, "Kanpai!"

"Kanpaaaaai!" The rest joined in, clinking their glasses together before drinking.

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Instagram was being flooded by multiple accounts as events of the night unfolded. The special Italian
dinner, the poodle bouncing around excitedly before falling asleep under the large table, the drinking, the removal of particular articles of clothing as a certain person whose name shall not be mentioned reminded everyone how he couldn't hold his alcohol, and the slow return to calm as he half-fell-asleep at the table afterwards.

Viktor was starting to regret that he'd already checked them out of their hotel room.

"What are we going to do about the Banquet?" Yuri asked, head on the table and red-faced from the champagne and mimosas. His voice was something of a happy slur, similar to how he'd sounded at the Sochi Banquet, but...slightly more subdued.

"We don't have to go..."

"They'll notice we aren't there, though, right?"

"Oh yeah, they'll notice." Viktor confirmed, gently stroking Yuri's back where he was hunched over, holding his own head up with his free hand where the elbow was propped up on the table, "But we still don't have to go, if you'd rather just head to the airport and sleep this off before the flight."

"...I was gonna sleep on the flight..." Yuri explained, "But I dunno...if I'll make it that...lo...nnhh..." He was out where he sat, and it made Viktor smile.

"Man down." The Russian mused.

"Ahhh Yuri, what are we gonna do with you?" Mari wondered with a sigh, "You weren't even drinking anything serious..."

"Don't worry, I'm training him." Viktor reassured, "I've gotten him up to actual wine and cream liqueur."

"Ooooh, fancy!"

"I'm sending a bunch of stuff back to Hasestu, too." The Russian continued, "I had it shipped from Barcelona, so it should've arrived by now at Yu-Topia. Hopefully no one cracks it all open before we get there!"

"I'll make sure they don't mistake it for a shipment of their own stuff." Mari suggested, "Though I doubt they'd mix it all up. You want me to put it in your room with the rest of your stuff?"

"That should be fine. Spasibo."

"It's gonna be weird when that banquet hall is completely empty again." Mari continued, putting her elbows on the table to hold up her head, looking down at where her little brother was snoozing, "I kinda got used to the space being taken up. The bed's still in there right now, but that's only because we knew you guys were coming back. Won't be much sense in keeping it there once you guys find a place of your own though."

"We won't be too far." Viktor explained, "We just..."

"...Need your space, I know. I'm not saying you should stay at Yu-Topia. Yuri was gone for so long while he was in Detroit, it was weird even for him to be back, and he grew up at the resort. You just happened to be in that banquet room for a long time, and also happened to have a lot of stuff!"

"Sorry!" He laughed, "I rarely travel lightly, and in that case, it was for a planned extended stay, so..." He then turned his head to his uncle, who had been relatively silent for the last little while,
since he was looking at his phone, "Will you be returning to St. Petersburg or Moscow?"

Mikhail's eyes were going back and forth, as though he hadn't heard.

"Uncle?"

"...One second."

"Huh?"

The man seemed to be caught off guard by something, but he shrugged and put the phone away again, "It's nothing. I'll deal with it later. What were you saying?"

"Are you going back straight to St. Petersburg or are you going to Moscow?" Viktor was skeptical.

"My flight? Oh, it goes to Moscow. I booked it before anything about your house came up. Do you need me to change it?"

"No, it's fine, you can take your time. The Sapsan train is pretty easy to get back and forth on anyway."

"...Is that a subtle way of saying you want to close on the house with me?" Mikhail raised a brow as he nibbled on a meatball from his pasta bowl.

"I have to do something with my car, too." Viktor realized, "Not much point taking it to Japan when the public transport is as good as it is."

"You can always put it into storage. Just take all the fluids out and cover it properly."

"Ehh...I don't want to pay the fees. It'd almost be easier to sell that thing, too."

Mikhail huffed a laugh and shook his head, then set his fork down so he could encircle his face with it, "This is a guy who sells heavy machinery for a living. I could store your car easily and I won't charge you for it."

Viktor gawked at him, "...Why?"

Minako and Mari both gave an exasperated sigh and leaned back heavily into their chairs.

The skater just gawked at them, "What? What'd I say?"

The ballerina just pointed at him, "Why are you so superstitious about Mikhail? He's a good guy!"

"Nothing is ever free." He answered quietly, still gently rubbing Yuri's back as he slept, but then turned his eyes from the women back to the man, "Why would you offer so much to help me out when we barely just reunited a couple weeks ago? It all just seems weird, and oddly without obvious consequence."

"Who else am I going to fuss over?" Mikhail answered, "I have no one back home, remember?"

Viktor recalled the text messages from the night he'd taken Yuri's phone.

[My wife left me years ago and took your cousins with her.]
[So it's just me.]

"...Mh." He hummed, "How many were there?"
"...How many what?"
"Kids."
"Three. Two girls and a boy. All three are high-school aged."
"Do you still talk to them?"
"Only when their mother allows. Why are you suddenly so curious?"
"Dunno."

Mikhail was starting to get just as skeptical as his nephew, "They're in Canada. It's part of why I have a house out there. I see the kids during the summer for a few weeks and then they go back home."

"Are you not on speaking terms with your ex-wife?"
"Not particularly."

"What happened? If it's okay that I ask."

The elder Russian nodded, "She had a health scare and found religion. I found it particularly difficult to reconcile, since I was too busy thanking the doctors and nurses for curing her and she was too busy thanking her new imaginary friend for saving her, as though leukemia were punishment for some intangible crime she didn't even know she'd committed. It created a massive rift that we weren't able to bridge."

"So you don't believe?"
"Do you?"

Viktor turned his head, "I like to think there's something out there, but I'm not ready to define it the way some people do. The way my life has turned out, I could hardly subscribe to the commonly held mainstream beliefs, since most of them would condemn me to eternal torture and hellfire for how I feel." He raised his hand to stroke Yuri's hair, brushing his bangs from his eyes. He noticed then that Yuri's hair was starting to get a bit long.

"And according to those same commonly held mainstream beliefs, my wife was supposed to be my property and I could've beaten her severely for trying to leave me. My kids could've been put to death for supporting her and effectively disobeying me. Do you think that's right?"

"Of course not."

"Me neither, and for the life of me, I can't understand why Mylene would subscribe to such ideas herself. But...I would fight to the death for anyone's right to believe whatever they want, even if it seems like complete insanity to me. So instead of arguing with her and the kids about it, I stepped out of the way and signed the papers when presented to me. She was no longer the woman I married and I wasn't going to stop her from leaving."

Viktor was quiet for a while, but then leaned back in his chair, letting his hand slide down Yuri's back as he went, "Sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

"It happened years ago. I've given up that things will ever return to how they were...but that's why I was so glad to run into you again, Viktor." Mikhail explained, "It's lonely being estranged from..."
everyone you once loved or had family ties to. Having you back again...even if it's been rough...I'm glad of it. So...in all seriousness, if there's anything you ever need, please ask me. I'll do whatever I can. I'll make sure your car gets put into proper storage, and that your house is maintained until you decide to come back to Russia, if you ever do. I can even arrange to have your things freighted to Japan on one of my regular shipments."

"And you'd do all that for free." Viktor still seemed skeptical.

"Free for you, not for me." Mikhail laughed, "But that's fine. Like you said, nothing is ever truly free. Somehow, eventually, someone one pays for it."

The two women had watched in awkward silence as the conversation bounced back and forth.

Viktor sighed and pulled out his phone, realizing the time...7:04pm.

_We've been out for nearly 3 hours. If we left now, and Yuri slept the whole time, we could still make it to the Banquet at 9. Is it really worth it though?_ He shook his head, knowing he was trying to distract himself from what his uncle had said. He pulled up the contact list with his thumb, _Can't keep avoiding this._

"All right." He said finally, "Come to St. Petersburg. I'm texting you the house address. We'll figure out the rest once you're there." He finished typing and sent the message, which he could hear arriving on his uncle's phone a few seconds later.

Mikhail beamed to see the contact information available to him finally, and he added Viktor quickly, "All right. Sounds like a plan. Now...let's wrap things up. Where are we taking you?"

"First to the hotel to get our things, then to the airport. I'm not going to worry Yuri about being awake and aware for the Banquet."

The dog's fluffy brown ears perked up a little, but he stayed curled up on the ground where he was and continued to snooze.
After a brief stop-off at the event hotel to pick up their luggage, they were on their way back to the airport. Yuri had been awoken only long enough to get him from the table to the limo before letting him fall back asleep again. Mercifully, the seats were large enough that he could actually lay down sideways to set his head across Viktor's lap without having to twist around too much. Viktor continued minding his partner quietly as they were drive off, gently rubbing his thumb back and forth where he held to Yuri's shoulder.

Makkachin quietly panted in the seat next to Mari, watching the world go by outside.

"So when do you guys leave?" She asked in a whisper.

"3am."

"Why so late?"

"I figured we would be at the Banquet, which goes until midnight." Viktor answered, "We'd have just gone straight to the airport from there and the timing would've meant we wouldn't have had to wait long before take-off. But this is fine."

"Isn't the Banquet kind of a big deal?" Minako asked from the opposite end of the limo, "Is it really okay for you guys to skip it?"

"It's just a time to socialize with other skaters and coaches, maybe network a little between the ISU and various event sponsors." Viktor shrugged, "They'll notice we aren't there but it's not like they can punish us for not showing up. A bunch of skaters left before the Gala was even over."

"But those skaters weren't the gold or silver medalists." Mikhail pointed out.

Viktor shrugged again with a smile, "It wouldn't be the first time I've bailed on a Banquet. Without Yakov around to make me go, I don't always see the reason."

"Isn't it your responsibility then as Yuri's coach to make him go?"

"Sure, but…" Viktor nodded his head at the man, "You really want me to force him in this state?"

"Psht!" Mikhail scoffed, "If a nap is all that stood between me and free food... Give him some coffee and he'll be fine."

The younger Russian huffed a laugh and shook his head, "I couldn't. If you guys knew how sore we both were right now...you'd appreciate naps more than food anyway, and he's probably in worse shape than I am. He's earned the rest."

Yuri stirred a little, as though unconsciously knowing he was being talked about, twisting until he was lying awkwardly on his back, left leg bent against the corner wall and the right dangling off the chair with his arm. Viktor waited until he stopped moving, then settled his hand onto the man's chest.

The airport came up shortly thereafter, and the limo pulled into the drop-off terminal. Viktor gently roused his husband from sleep and pulled him up to his feet outside, even though he was latched to his arm, still half-conscious where he stood as their luggage was offloaded onto a trolley. Mikhail
told the driver to wait a while as they went in to see the pair off.

Yuri shuffled along as well as he could, eyes barely open to see where he was going. It was 9:30 by the time they'd gotten checked in, tickets printed, luggage tagged and taken away, and Makkachin crated and sent off to freight with a whine.

"Sorry, Makkachin...at least this flight isn't so long..." Viktor apologized, waving as the dog vanished on a small forklift to wait until the plane arrived.

They turned to face the trio as they waited to enter the security line, and the Russian moved to help Yuri stand straight on his own so he could say his farewells properly. The younger skater just blearily rubbed his eyes as he struggled to stay awake. Viktor hugged the two ladies and kissed their cheeks, "Do svidanija. We'll see you in Hasetsu in a week."

"Safe travels, Viktor." Minako said.

They moved over to Yuri and hugged him together, "Don't sleep the whole time!"

He smiled and hugged them back as well as he could, "I'll try not to...but it'll be really hard."

"The girls are really looking forward to you guys coming back. You don't want to sleep through your own wedding party!"

"I'll be awake in a week, I promise."

Mikhail then stepped up after the two women backed away, "Not sure it's worth saying some big goodbye when I'll see you both again in a day or two."

Viktor smiled, but then moved in to hug his uncle, "I always say goodbye before a flight."

Mikhail was rather surprised at the gesture, but nodded and returned it, patting Viktor's back as he pulled away again, "It's only farewell until the morrow." He then turned to Yuri, who unceremoniously dropped against his chest.

"SeeyouinRussiaUncleMikhailgoodnight..." The skater blurted sleepily.

The elder patted Yuri's shoulder, "Goodnight, Yuri...see you later." He laughed.

Viktor helped pull his husband upright again and then started to guide him away, waving at the group as they went.

With such a late flight, there wasn't such a long wait to get through the security checkpoint, and soon enough, they were at their gate, slouching on a plush bench near a tech-charging station with both of their phones plugged in.

It had been about an hour since their arrival, and Yuri was a little more awake than before, thumbing through Instagram as he leaned against Viktor, the Russian's arm draped over his own. Viktor was looking through the same app, seeing photos posted from the Banquet through Chris's feed. He was a bit startled when he found his phone switching over to a FaceTime request from that very man.

He accepted it and waved as the broadcast started, "Hey."

"You're missing all the fun, Viktor! Where are you two?" The Swiss skater asked; the party was in full swing behind him.
The Russian rotated his phone around to show off their location before pulling it back in front of himself, "At the airport."

"Who's that?" Yuri asked, looking up from where he wasn't paying attention.

"The Banquet." He answered, turning the phone to include Yuri in the shot.

"Oh!" Yuri was upright with a start, "Hey, Chris! Sorry we're not there!"

"Why'd you guys bail? We were all looking forward to another Strip-Tease Dance-Off!"

The younger skater nervously scratched the back of his head, "...I got started drinking a little early."

"Oh Yuri, you light-weight." Chris scolded teasingly. His attention was grabbed by something off-camera, and he seemed to be talking to someone about a Bluetooth connection, only to return a moment later, "Hang on, we're going to put you on the projector."

"...The...projector?" Yuri repeated.

There was a minute or two of silence as the pair watched the screen, seeing various people taking hold of the phone as they worked on something. Eventually, Chris focused the camera on himself again, "Say hi to everyone." He held the phone so they could see how they had been connected to a massive theater screen against one wall, and their own surprised faces were showing on it as it appeared on Chris' device, then turning it around to show the crowd.

Someone had a microphone and was starting to say something, "Everyone, your Gold and Silver Men's Singles medalists have finally arrived!"

"Oh wow, we're on a bigscreen." Yuri said, nervous suddenly, "...H-hi everyone.

"Hi!!~!" Viktor chimed in, using where his arm was already over his husband to pull him closer into the shot.

Chris' phone showed off the rest of the people in the Banquet hall as they all hollered their greetings back, and then he pulled it back to show himself, "It's great that one of you picked up. There's been a lot of chatter about your last dance at the Gala. Apparently quite a few people were really taken by it!"

Yuris' face flushed, "Really...?"

"Sure!" Chris nodded, "Some of the skating media really want to do a professional photoshoot and interview with you two. They were wanting to know where to find you to make arrangements."

The younger skater wasn't sure how to answer that, so he looked over at Viktor, "...Do you...?"

He nodded, "We'll be in St. Petersburg for a week, then we'll be moving to Hasetsu to make the Ice Castle our permanent rink. They can find us there. We'll even be performing our Four Continents pair-Exhibition for family there, so if the media is fast, they can get pictures of it."

Yuri balked a little, bringing a hand up to cover his mouth as he whispered something into his husband's ear, "...Do you really want a media swarm all over our honeymoon?"

"If it's only for one day, I don't see why not. What kind of wedding party doesn't have a few photographers anyway? Besides, this would cater to both of our interests...you still get the semi-private party that you asked for, and I still get the wider recognition I crave!"
"As if you need more recognition." Yuri deadpanned him, "But all right..."

"It'll be fun! Photoshoots are great! Think about all the posters they'll make of us...not just as individuals, but together! This is huge!" Viktor's excitement was a bit contagious.

His husband's face was bright pink at the thought of it, "...All right, all right...!"

"Are you really abandoning the Russian team?" Someone in the background asked.

Viktor looked perplexed, "Abandoning the...what? Yakov knows how to get hold of me...I'll always be available!"

"But you won't be choreographing any of the Russian team's programs for next season, right?"

"I was never particularly responsible for any of that." Viktor shrugged, "I promised Plisetsky I'd arrange his Senior debut but that didn't mean I was going to arrange all of his future programs. Besides, he has a retired Prima Ballerina as a choreographer now...what more could he want?"

"She dropped him."

Yuri and Viktor's hearts and expressions dropped, "...Oh. Why?"

"We had hoped you would know."

"Sorry."

Yuri looked away from the phone, Yurio must've been really rude to her after his falling out with Viktor... Anyone with her history and credentials wouldn't put up with his sass for very long...

"We'll figure it out, don't worry. But anyway, have fun...we'll see you all next season at the start of the Grand Prix Series." Viktor waved, and nudged Yuri to do the same before finally clicking the call off. The screen went dark after a moment.

Yuri could feel his husband's body clenching a little in discomfort, "...Viktor...?"

"He's imploding on himself. I don't know what to do. I utterly and completely failed him on every level..."

The younger man sighed, "You can't take responsibility for everything bad that happens to Yurio. He'll have to figure things out on his own eventually."

"It's not his fault things happened to him the way they did either." Viktor retorted, "All he wanted was for someone to be there for him, and..."

"You have been. I've seen it, and I said it to him, too. But he can't expect you to follow him around every minute of every day to pick him up after every scraped knee and stubbed toe."

"I thought he'd have gotten used to my not being around after the Hot Springs on Ice event, when he left on his own to return to Russia." The man replied pensively, "I just don't get it."

"He thought you were going to come back and stay back eventually." Yuri pointed out, "Things don't always turn out as planned. It doesn't always work out for everyone, so all we can do is take it as it comes."

Viktor didn't seem entirely satisfied with the answer, and he looked out into the empty space of the terminal in thought.
"We can go see him while we're in St. Petersburg."

"...Or we can go see him now."

"Huh?"

Viktor pointed, and sure enough, Yakov was coming up the terminal with a grumpy teenager in tow. Lilia wasn't with them. Neither had noticed them yet, and when they turned off to sit in an area of the seating bay that was closer to the boarding desk, Viktor watched in silence.

"...You really want to do this now? If he's here then he obviously isn't at the Banquet." Yuri wondered quietly.

"They're probably on the same flight as us. If that's the case, they'll pass right by since business class boards first. Do you really want to let it sit until then?"

"Give it a few minutes at least...maybe call Yakov first like we aren't even here. They both probably think we are at the Banquet."

"I don't want to put this off for too long..."
Half an hour passed in uneasy silence. Every time Viktor would move to stand up, he'd sit back again and slouch. Every time he pulled out his phone to call Yakov, he'd shut it down again. Yuri was just watching quietly, half the time with an eyebrow quirked.

"...I'm gonna go this time."

"Okay."

Viktor was on the very edge of his seat, further than he'd made it before...but then took a breath and threw himself back with a grumble, "Never mind."

"Why do you keep retreating?"

"I don't even know what to say to him."

"What was the last thing you guys said to each other?"

"Something along the lines of 'If all you're going to do is leave, then leave, and don't ever come back' but with more colorful language."

"And your reply?"

"...'Okay.'"

"Hm." Yuri slouched on his part of the bench, legs crossed where they stretched out before him, arms crossed over his chest as he leaned slightly against Viktor's shoulder, watching Yurio and Yakov curiously, "Are they even talking to each other?"

"Hard to tell from this far."

"...This is getting ridiculous." Yuri grumbled, rising to stand, putting his hands in his coat pockets, "You want something? I'm going to get coffee."

"You're going to end up walking right by them."

"And I look like 90% of other guys they might see. Unless they actually look at me, they probably won't even notice me. There's enough other people in the terminal that I'd blend right in."

"Aside from your coat being recognizable."

Yuri shrugged out of it and set it on the bench, revealing a form-fitting dark blue shirt, "Last call." Again, his hands went casually into his pockets, just this time into his black jeans instead of a coat.

"All right, all right...get me something with Chai tea in it." The Russian answered, scrambling for his wallet, though Yuri raised a hand.

"Relax, I got it."

Viktor slouched again, "We really need to get a single bank account..."
"Psht, just so you can make me feel bad for my meager drop in your vast ocean?" Yuri laughed as he stepped off.

Viktor just watched him go quietly, "...I don't have that much..." He leaned down as his husband stepped away, "...Okay maybe I have a bit."

As Yuri got closer, he noticed that the jacket over Yurio's usual black hoodie wasn't even the Team Russia track-suit coat...it was just a normal white and grey jacket. He tried to act natural and walked right by with the flow of several over people. He didn't look back to see if either the teen or coach had recognized him, but when he made it far enough past that it was likely he was seen as just another black-haired man-blob in the crowd, he figured he'd gotten by unnoticed.

Viktor had finally relaxed a little as he saw the same thing. He pulled up his phone again and started fiddling around on Instagram, thinking there wasn't much to worry about for the moment. He lamented to himself as he saw photos starting to pop up from the Banquet to show that Chris hadn't been lying about there being another half-naked strip-tease going on. There wasn't a pole this time around but they had a stage, "...Ahhh we should've gone!" He whined to himself.

He glanced up to see if Yuri was coming back yet, only to see his Russian counterpart rising from his seat, say something briefly to Yakov, and then step away. Viktor kept his eyes focused like a laser, following as Yurio went onto the main track and found one of the terminal maps, looked at it for a minute or so, and then stepped off again.

"...Where...is he...?" It was hard to see from where he sat, but Viktor squinted his eyes as well as he could anyway. Yurio disappeared behind the info obelisk though and the crowd covered his tracks soon thereafter. In a panic, he tried to text his partner.

[He's coming your way!]

The Russian's heart sank as he felt the buzz on the bench next to him, and looked down to see Yuri had left his phone behind, still plugged into the charging station, just under where he'd left his coat. The blue poodle-themed case seemed an oddly cheerful sight considering the context of the situation.

"Blin!" He cursed to himself as he unplugged their devices and ran as fast as he could.

Weaving through one group of travelers after another, the Russian couldn't believe how many people were waiting to catch flights that late at night. Still, he flew past Yakov through a small clearing.

The older man's attention was caught by the sound of footsteps blasting by, but as soon as they were past, he looked down again...only to look up again as he realized the frantic blur had silver hair, "Vitya!?!"

Viktor ignored him and kept running, hoping to catch sight of either of the Yuris before they caught sight of one another. Sadly, he'd come too late...they were already in the midst of a stare-down in the middle of the wide hall.

Yuri had the two drinks in his hand and casually sipped at his while Yurio remained still, hands firmly in his jacket pockets.

"...Hey."

The teenager said nothing, one green eye staring straight ahead through a few strands of messy, pale blond hair, unblinking.

"I guess you didn't go to the Banquet?"
Still no answer.

"Yeah, we didn't go either. That was my fault though since I drank too early in the day." Yuri tried to make light of it. He'd seen Viktor in the distance behind the blond, but tried not to react to it to prevent the teen from getting angry. People were walking on all sides of them to get by, but none seemed to cross between them or get in the way, "Did you see the Gala?"

"...I don't care about the fucking Gala." Yurio finally answered.

"Oh..." The Asian lowered his head a little, "Maybe next time then."

"There won't be a next time, dumbass." The blond said between grit teeth.

"What do you mean?" Yuri wondered, thinking perhaps this was just another arrogant taunt.

Yurio just laughed though, a sad sort of laugh that even Viktor picked up on from his distance. The teen shook his head, his hair falling in front of his one visible eye, "It's so fucking ironic. You and the grey-haired retard are the last people I want to see right now, and yet, here you are."

Yuri's expression changed to worry after that, "Sorry you feel that way."

"And don't think I haven't noticed Viktor behind me." Yurio continued, "Anyone could've heard that elephant stampeding over here. What'd he think, that I was going after you or something?"

"No..."

"Good, cuz I didn't even know your stupid face was here until just a minute ago anyway. If I knew you were down this way I would've gone somewhere else."

Yuri sighed and shook his head, stepping forward and then around the angry teenager, like he wasn't even there, and headed for Viktor. He passed off the drink, said something Yurio couldn't hear, got a nod, got his phone back, and then moved away again, "Come along, Yuri. I'll get you whatever you were coming this way for." He said as he passed the blond by, not even pausing to see if he'd follow.

Yurio did go though, keeping pace about 15ft behind the older skater. It was only when they were finally out of Viktor's sight that Yuri slowed down to let the teen catch up, and they walked side by side in silence while Yurio figured out his next move. He paused once or twice to get his bearings and then made for a small Asian-style food stand, one of the few places still open at that time of night. Yuri said nothing as the teen placed his order and then stepped back again, watching the cook behind the glass pull assorted shredded veggies like carrot and cabbage from a holder on the side of the grill, gathering them up into a small pile, adding water from a small ladle and then putting a metal cover over top. Another pile came second, but this one was chicken and assorted sauces.

There was nothing to say for a long time. When the food was done, Yurio grabbed a bottle of green tea from the ice bin next to the register and left to let Yuri pay for it like he'd offered to. As he waited for the receipt, Yuri looked at his phone to see the message Viktor had previously sent, as well as a new one that got his attention.

[He's coming your way!]
[Stay where I can see you. I'll come pull you apart if he starts anything.]

Yuri shook his head and thumbed a quick reply as he got his debit card back.

[I think it's fine. Might be a while though.]
Typing. Stopping. Typing again. Then gone.

Yuri looked at the coming and going of the indicator that Viktor was replying, wondering what he was doing. He went to catch up with the blond at a nearby table, and eventually put the phone away as he realized Viktor wasn't sure what to say and had given up typing.

They sat in complete silence for what felt like forever, but Yuri was determined not to be the one to break that silence. He just sipped at his drink until he noticed it was half gone, and Yurio's plate was almost empty.

"I was cut."

Yuri lifted his head at those words, "...You...were cut?" He thought immediately about the hand injury, but wasn't sure that was what the teen meant.

"After my Free Skate." The younger skater explained, "I was so furious with everything...with Viktor, with you, with my skating, with failing, feeling so completely fucking helpless in it all...I walked out of the kiss and cry as soon as I heard my score. Yakov and Lilia came after me, but I told them to go fuck off, and they took me at my word. The old lady said she wouldn't work with someone like me and Yakov said basically the same. He told me if I ever wanted my spot on the Russian skating team back, I'd have to earn it from the ground up again, like I was just learning how to skate all over again. I passed you guys in the prep area to refill my water and get my shoes after all that happened. At the time, I still wasn't taking it seriously...I thought they were just saying things, not really meaning it."

The Asian skater listened quietly, patiently.

"I don't even know what I'm going to do. I didn't make the podium, so my winnings are paltry compared to yours. What I got from the Grand Prix won't cover expenses until next season, especially with my grandpa being sick." Yurio was clenching the plastic fork in his fingers so tightly that Yuri could see it starting to crack, but beyond that, he could see the small bandage that covered where the stitches had previously been tied. It was carefully hidden under the extra-long end of the jacket's sleeve, maybe pulled that far specifically to cover the injury, "I've lost sponsors because of my crashing ranks...everyone's lost confidence in me."

Yuri felt terrible for the teen. Nothing about what he was saying had ever entered into his mind before.

"I'm not going to make it..." Yurio's voice was cracking, and his head lowered, but he finally let go of the bent fork, "I can't afford to..."

"Haven't you talked to Yakov about this?"

"He knows...but I've fucked up so much..."

He could see where the tears were falling to the tray, but Yuri wasn't sure what to do.

"I've had so many chances, so many opportunities to do better...but there's just...so much anger in me..." The teen continued, but then he roughly dropped back against the vertical part of the bench with a grunt, keeping his face low so Yuri could only really see the top of the black hood and some dangling pale blond bangs, "I don't know why I'm telling you all this shit."

"Maybe cuz you know I come from somewhat humble beginnings too." Yuri offered, "But my situation was very different. I wasn't competing to put food on the table. It was just a hobby...something I did for myself because I wanted to be like Viktor. My family was my only real
financial support up until this season."

"My grandpa's on a pension. He can't afford the fees or upkeep. I've been the breadwinner between us since I was in the Junior division."

"Pushing everyone away because you're scared isn't really the smartest thing to do though, honestly." Yuri explained, moving from where he'd been sitting sideways on a wooden chair to sit next to Yurio on the padded bench opposite him, and cautiously put an arm over the teen's shoulders, "When Viktor said we would help you because we're your friends, it wasn't a lie. He meant it, and I do, too."

"What can either of you do?" Yurio said, reaching up his hand to rub his sleeve over his face, keeping it well hidden under his dangling hair and the sides of his hood, "Both of you are deucing out."

"We're moving to Japan, yes, but it's not like we're dying." Yuri pointed out, "I'm sure Viktor would agree...no, I know he would agree...we want to help however we can."

"Short of packing me up in a box and taking me with you, I don't know what else you can do."

"You came a really long way without Viktor and I in your face. I think you could go further if that continued."

"Is that your subtle way of telling me to fuck off?"

"No, it's my subtle way of saying Viktor and I are a distraction and you aren't at your best when either of us is around. But just because we're away doesn't mean we're inaccessible. Viktor was even saying so when Chris FaceTimed us into the Banquet earlier. Someone asked if Viktor was abandoning the Russian Team and he instantly refuted it, saying Yakov always knows how to get hold of him if he's needed. He and I have an open door policy for you guys...if you need something, we'll figure out how to make it happen."

"Then make something happen!" The teen barked angrily, desperately, pounding the table with his fists lightly, trying not to make a scene despite his fury, "Please...!" He said quieter, his hands shaking.

"Shh." Yuri hummed, "We're still just talking. I'll need time for the rest. You know I need to go over it with Viktor before I can make any suggestions." He still had his arm over Yurio's shoulders, speaking quietly, calmly, "I have a couple ideas though."

He felt his phone buzz in his pocket, and withdrew it with his free hand as he let Yurio digest what he'd just said. It was just a late notification of Viktor saying [Okay] from the previous text conversation.

"You're not telling Viktor all this shit over text right now are you?" The Russian teen glared at him finally, the one visible eye red from his frustration as he watched the Asian skater typing away with his one free thumb.

"No. I'm not messaging him right now at all."

"Yuuko?"

"Mmmm...no, but I'm sure she'd be happy to hear from you." Yuri answered, slower with one thumb than with two, but then finally sending out the message, "You and her used to keep up with one another during the lead-up to the Grand Prix Series, right?"
Yurio nodded quietly.

"Did you stop talking after that?"

He nodded again.

"Why?"

"Wasn't much to say anymore. She mostly told me about yours and Viktor's training, so when you left Hasetsu..."

"I see." Yuri tried to smile, "Then I guess you guys will have something to connect over again soon, right? And it's not like you're forbidden from coming to Hasetsu ever anyway. You can come whenever you want. You'll always have a place at Yu-Topia to stay and soak your feet."

The younger skater couldn't bear to look at him. He just reached up to rub his face on his already-damp sleeve again.

So...Yuri did the only thing he could think of. Both arms went right around the teen's chest and pulled him close, resting his chin on the back of Yurio's shoulder. To his surprise, Yurio didn't twitch, fight, resist, or do anything, really. He just sat there and let it happen, so Yuri held him for a while.

"The last thing you want to do in a bind is push everyone away who could help you. I don't know if lashing out is a coping mechanism or what...but we've got to teach you a better way. You do have people besides your grandpa that care about you...and you've got to learn to treat them better." He explained, "Your first lesson will be with me."

"...Ehh...?"

"From now on, anytime we meet or depart, you gotta give me a hug, and let me hug you back." Yuri said simply, "It doesn't have to last long...just a quick hug, that's it."

"...Why?"

"It's something Viktor taught me...and it's important. Being held by someone makes you feel good. The longer you're held, the better you feel, and the calmer you are. Every time I get anxious about something, Viktor hugs me somehow, even if it's just one arm. Plus, he hug me a lot anyway, so I don't often get a chance to become anxious in the first place. How do you feel now?"

Yurio wasn't willing to admit it.

"That's okay. You don't have to say. Just think about it." He finally pulled back, patting the teen on the shoulder in a gesture that suggested they start heading back. He stood up and drained the last of his coffee, realizing it had gone cold a long time ago, "Come on, they're probably worried about us."

The teen took a deep, ragged breath, rubbing his eyes on a dryer part of his sleeve before moving over on the bench to get out from behind the table. He kept his sights on the floor, "You're only going to be in Russia for a week before you leave again. What good is this 'training' if you're going to be gone as soon as it starts?"

"A week is still a long time. We have a lot of work to do in a short period of time. For now...I have to get Viktor on board." Yuri reached up to squeeze the teen's shoulder reassuringly, "You're not in this fight alone."
It was almost 1:30am when the two re-emerged from the neighboring wing of the airport. Yuri spotted Viktor and Yakov sitting together where Yakov had been sitting with Yurio originally; Viktor was so anxious that he was leaning forward in his seat, hands together in his lap, staring straight ahead like a young kid that had just walked in on his parents making out and wasn't sure what to do with his life anymore.

They got pretty close before either coaches noticed them coming, but Viktor was immediately up and ran the final length to close the distance, throwing his arms over Yuri's shoulders to pull him close. Yuri slid his arms inside Viktor's long coat to hug him back, eyes closed as he savored it.

Yurio watched silently, thinking back on what the Asian had said about the matter, and even further back on what a mess Yuri had been before that odd kind of 'therapy' had ever started. They pulled apart again shortly after, though held hands between them. Viktor was whispering something that Yurio couldn't hear, and he saw Yuri nodding in some kind of acknowledgment before turning back to face the teen.

"We're going to go talk. We'll come sit with you guys when we're done, okay?" The Asian remarked.

Yurio nodded, turning to step off when he heard Yuri clear his throat. He turned his eyes to see the older skater holding up his free arm. The teen hesitated, looking around, but then stepped briskly to give the brief hug, get his own back, and then trotted off as though he had hoped no one noticed it happened.

Yakov and Viktor side-eyed each other in complete shock at the sight, but said nothing.

Yuri started pulling away, nudging Viktor along where their hands were locked together, and they started heading back to their prior seats near the tech charging station. As they got out of ear-shot, Yakov stood next to the young skater left by him.

[What happened…?]
[Katsudon is...helping me.]
[In what regard?] The elder was a bit surprised to hear it.
[I'm not sure yet. I think probably in the way I need most.]

"You guys were gone forever it felt like." Viktor was saying, "What in the world happened? He just..."

"I think I got through to him. Or maybe he reached out...not sure, but we're making progress." Yuri explained, "There's a lot to go over." He felt a buzz in his pocket, and reached back to pull it out and see what had come through. He smiled and realized the first part of his plan had been successful, "Great, I can check that off my list."

"What did you do…?"

"Called in reinforcements." He answered with a smile, "Gonna need all the heavy artillery I can get"
my hands on for this."

"Explain."

As they sat back on the bench, Yuri pulled his coat back over his shoulders, keeping his arms free though, and he began to explain the conversation. From the long periods of silence, to Yurio's fears...the whole lot of it. Viktor sat in silence as he listened, eventually sitting back on the bench with a finger over his mouth in thought.

"The first person I called out to for help was Mikhail." Yuri explained, "He just messaged me back saying he was open to the idea, but with a catch, so that's what I'm trying to find out now."

"What kind of help are you asking my uncle for…?"

"Yurio needs a heavy-hitting sponsor that won't burden him with useless requests or demands. Something to cover basic expenses so he can focus on skating again rather than where his grandpa's next med refill is coming from." Yuri answered, typing away to ask what the catch would be, "Hopefully Mikhail's side-demand here isn't too unreasonable."

Viktor leaned over his husband's shoulder out of curiosity, trying to catch a glimpse of what had been written so far.

[When are you going to be coming up to SP?]

[Probably the day AFTER I land. I get migraines being on planes!]

Those messages had been from earlier in the night, shortly after they'd been dropped off at the airport in the first place.

[Sorry, it's late. I have a weird request. A skating friend I've told you about is in a bad way and needs a sponsor. Would you help?]

There was a gap in the time-stamps, likely because the older gentleman had been asleep when the message came through.

[A sponsor…? I guess so. Who is it?]

[Yuri Plisetsky.]

[Hm...the angry one. I'll give it a shot but he's going to have to meet me half way on some things.]

[Like what?]

That's when the new message had finally come in. Viktor actually took the phone to read it better.

[He needs therapy.]

Viktor looked at the screen sideways, as though looking at it from a different angle would make the message make more sense.

[Viktor here. Therapy?]

[Oh hey!]

[Yes, therapy. Anger management.]

"He's not going to like that."
"I think he'd benefit from it though, don't you?"

"Sure, but...you can lead a horse to water and all that..."

"He's the thirstiest horse on Earth right now."

Viktor looked at him skeptically, "You sure?"

"Yeah." Yuri took his phone back.

[Yuri again. I think that should be okay. When you said 'the angry one' though, have you talked to him? I know you saw him at the SP rink, but...]

[Oh yeah, during your Short Program.]

Viktor gasped, "He must've overheard Yurio yelling at me just before you went on! Scandalous!"

[Hang on, I'm gonna call. I'll put you on speaker so we can both hear you.]

Yuri stood up and looked around, seeing if there was someplace quieter and more private than where they were in the middle of the terminal. They eventually found a spot near a long line of closed stores, where other travelers had no particular need to go, and pulled up at a high-set table just outside a cafe. Yuri set his phone in the middle of the circular table and dialed out to the older Russian, then set the phone on speaker like he'd said and listened to the dial-tone until Mikhail picked up.

"Hey. Can you hear me okay?" He asked.

"Yes, we can hear you." Yuri answered, "So we're assuming you overheard Yurio yelling at Viktor."

"Certainly." The elder answered with an amused tint in his voice, "He was really pissed."

"I don't understand Russian, so...all I got was the last thing he said in English." Yuri sighed, "I think he was probably yelling about how he didn't want to be called Yurio anymore, because both of us stopped after that."

"In part. He was making his grievances known on the matter, so it was a good move to stop using the nickname. He was also really flustered about walking in on you two. The hell were you doing? You were right down to the wire at that point so I can't imagine you were doing much, but...goddamn, whatever it was..."

"Just as a disclaimer," Viktor chimed in, "We were both fully clothed at the time."

"We were on the floor." Yuri clarified, his cheeks pink, "That should say enough."

"So he made a mountain out of a mole-hill."

"I guess."

"Well, I can't imagine what went through his head after that, but since it sounds like he never calmed down, it probably wasn't good."

"His coach kicked him off the team and his choreographer dropped him like a bad habit." Yuri went on, "I think we can convince Yakov to take him back but we need help to show that Yurio will take this all seriously. If he has a sponsor, then at least he has one less thing to drag him down, so he can
focus."

"It's an investment, that's for sure." Mikhail agreed, "And he's young, so it'd be an obligation for years to come."

"You don't have to stay on until he retires." Viktor explained, "Just long enough to get him through this slump, so he can medal again somewhere. Once he shows that he's back in the game, his regular sponsors will probably come back, too."

"You two are going to make it really hard for him." Mikhail pointed out, "The only slot he can hope for is bronze. Is that enough?"

"There's enough competitions where the three of us won't be up against each other. The Grand Prix series especially since we may not all be at the same Cup events, and European Championships after that. Besides, new season means new programs, so we'll all be under-performing while we get used to our new routines."

"Hmm." The elder hummed to himself, thinking it over, "Do I have to do anything other than give him money?"

"Not really." Viktor answered, "If you want any kind of recognition, you could give him supplies with your company's logo on it, but that's up to you."

"Right."

"So what do you think?"

"If he agrees to my condition, then...yeah, I can sponsor him. That boy needs some serious work."

"Thanks, Mikhail! You're a life-saver! Sorry again for waking you up!" Yuri said, finger hovering over the red disconnect button.

"It's fine. Goodnight and safe travels."

"Do svidanija."

The call was disconnected, and Yuri cheered silently to himself, "Yes!"

Viktor slumped down to the table, face buried where his arms were crossed, "This is exhausting...! Here I was hoping for a relaxing flight..."

"Me too, but I feel better about the whole thing now that we've gotten to touch on it a little." Yuri said, patting Viktor's head.

"And I can't even request my usual post-dealing-with-Yurio fun until we get back to St. Petersburg..." The Russian whined, still keeping his head down, "What a long time to have to wait!"

"You'll survive." Yuri said with a huffed laugh, "You waited almost a year before that."

Viktor lifted his face a little so his eyes could see over the sleeves on his arms, "That was different. I didn't actually anticipate getting to that point with you. So it was more like...5 or 6 months, after I decided I was going to make you mine." His voice was muffled behind the coat.

"Still longer than a day."

"We haven't gotten to do anything since before the Free Skate!"
"That was yesterday."

"It's after midnight! It was almost two days ago!"

Yuri watched the man's amusing lament, and pulled up his phone from the table to take a picture while Viktor wasn't looking. He pulled up Instagram after that and posted it, "Hashtag...#TheStruggleIsReal."

"Ahh you posted that!?” Viktor's head lifted up quickly, and he got up to look over Yuri's shoulder to see what it looked like.

"Only a photo of you laying across the table." Yuri laughed, showing it.

Ahh! He got a shot of the top of my head! Viktor internally panicked.

The Russian swiped the phone to get a better look, zooming in on the crown of his head as well as he could, and then heaving a sigh of relief as he realized it looked normal. He gave his husband back his phone and then draped himself across his back, arms coming up under Yuri's so he could put his hands against the man's chest. He was even grateful in that moment that the chair and table were up as high as they were so his 5'11" frame didn't have to bend so far down to get what he wanted.

"Let's go tell Yurio the good news. There's only a little while left before the plane gets here, so this came at a good time."

"In a minute." Viktor said quietly, resting his cheek against the back of the younger skater's shoulders, his hands wandering a little where he could feel everything through the thin, form-fitting shirt against his husband's chest.

"You know I'm not gonna do anything too crazy while we're in a public space, Viktor..." He pointed out, his cheeks a little flushed, but allowing what was happening as long as that's all it was.

The Russian whined comically again, "Let me savor at least this much before I have to start fasting again..."

They'd walked quite a distance to have their chat, so when Yurio saw them coming back, he was up out of his seat in anticipation. He practically ran to them to find out the news, "So!?"

Yuri let go of Viktor's hand and spread his arms out, waiting for the requisite action before speaking, though the look on his face boded good news so it was easier for the teen to accept his immediate fate.

He ducked in and threw his arms around Yuri's torso, letting the older skater hug him over his shoulders before pulling his head up again, "What's going to happen!?"

The Asian looked back at his husband and nodded, letting Viktor explain.

"My uncle's going to sponsor your skating career for now." He said. He found it interesting that Yurio hadn't let go from the hug yet, "He has one demand in return, but I don't think it's unreasonable."
"...There's always a catch. What is it?" The blond asked, steeling himself for the worst as he looked past Yuri's shoulder at the taller man. It couldn't be any harder to deal with than the grueling training he went through under Lilia, "I'm ready for whatever it is."

"You have to go see an anger specialist." Viktor said, "That's it."

Yakov practically choked as he heard it, and lightly pounded a fist against his chest to clear the surprise, "...That Mikhail..."

"...An...anger specialist?" Yurio repeated, "I have to see a shrink? Where?"

"Probably in St. Petersburg. Mikhail made no mention of making you move to Moscow." Yuri said, he himself still curiously enamored by Yurio still holding onto the hug even after all the time that had passed by then, "So if you accept those terms..."

The blond was on edge; the idea of actually seeking real help had always been far from his mind, since he never thought his anger was an issue. It was always someone else's problem. Someone else made him mad. Someone else set him off. Someone else had gotten in his way or messed up. It was never his fault. He was Yuri Plisetsky, The Russian Tiger, Russia's Rising Star, the man who had ushered Russia into an age where it had two champions...and he'd be the last man standing between himself and Viktor. If anyone thought that was arrogant, tough. It was the truth.

The more Yurio thought on the matter, the more he realized how right the Katsudon Skater had been...'wrathful' had become his default setting. He pushed absolutely everyone away. The only person he could call 'friend' was a stiff older skater who propositioned his friendship like it was a job interview. They'd had one night out after this official designation had been ratified between them, and even that had been spoiled by others.

...No, it wasn't spoiled. Katsudon's sister and the old lady didn't even join our table until Viktor and Katsudon themselves showed up, and it was just a big pile-up of other skaters after that. Is there anything that's happened in the last few years that hasn't somehow pissed me off? Was I always like this...? Do I lash out at grandpa the way I do at Viktor...?

That thought made him more upset than the rest, and he had the urge to call everyone around him stupid for having suggested there was ever anything wrong with him...but he stopped. Yuri was still hugging him, and the thought of yelling didn't seem to make it past the critical threshold for lift-off. It just...faded.

He's right. This does make a person calmer... I always thought it was just because it was my grandpa before...but now...

"Yuri?" The taller figure asked, looking down at him.

Green eyes met brown, and the younger skater suddenly felt like he understood.

Despite all the horrible things I've said and done to him, Katsudon ended up being the only one who was willing to stick it out with me. I've kicked him, I've screamed at him, called him cruel names, told him to quit, and done everything I could to ruin whatever happiness I saw him having...and yet he's the one who's figuring things out for me right now. Who is this guy? This big idiot with a heart made of glass...

"...I'll do it." Yurio finally said, much to the relief of those around him.

Viktor smiled and looked past them to the elder coach. The look on his face was enough to get the
unsaid message across, and Yakov seemed to understand. But, he shook his head.

Viktor's expression changed when he saw it.

"We'll see what happens." The gruff old man said, "If things start to get better, you can come back to train with the rest of the team. I'll need to see a real effort though, Yuratchka."

The teen turned around and nodded, "...I'll do whatever it takes."
The rest of the wait for the plane was relatively quiet. Both Yuris were twiddling around on their phones, one ear-bud per Yuri and Viktor sharing one playlist while Yurio had both of his in, while both coaches tried to get a little sleep before boarding. The crowd of travelers grew exponentially in the remaining 30 minutes before the clerks had even arrived to start taking peoples' tickets. A large group was even starting to loiter around the gate, as though being there somehow meant they'd get onto the plane sooner.

Yuri was oogling a series of Gala photo albums that had been tagged to him and Viktor, marveling at all the HD shots that had been taken of the opening and closing group skates, as well as his own and Viktor's Exhibitions. It was still a weird feeling to see photos himself wearing the old Sochi costume again, and to increase the difficulty of that program to be on par with his current level of skill.

_Back then I had 2 quads and they were both the easiest of the 6, and I could only consistently land one of them in competition, too...now I can do 5 out of the 6... The 6th took Viktor _himself_ 2 weeks to perfect...it'd probably take me years..._

He looked up as he heard what sounded like the boarding call for first class, and he nudged Viktor awake, "Hey, we're up."

The Russian looked a bit disheveled as his eyes opened, and he looked around like he wasn't sure where he was. Reality dawned on him soon after, and he yawned, stretched, and then stood up, losing the ear-bud that had been holding on while he rubbed his eyes, ",...I hate that feeling...you doze off just enough, and then when you wake up, it's like...Who am I? What is this place? What day is it?"

"I've done that watching videos online before..." Yuri agreed, stretching as well as he stood up, "I'll just be staring at the screen, and my eyes close for what feels like a second, but then it's dawn and I'm just sitting there wondering...the heck is this? The heck is _that_?"

"Right!?"

Yurio and Yakov stood up soon after that, each of them rubbing out the stiffness of having been sitting for so long.

"It's weird to say 'laters' when we're on the same flight, but..." Yurio started, "I guess we'll see you back in St. Petersburg when we land."

Viktor was running his hand through his bangs to sort them out again as Yuri nodded, "Yeah, we'll see you back on the ground." He held one arm out.

Yurio was unsure, "...But...we're on the same plane..."

"Different parts of the plane. We won't see each other again for 2 hours."

"...You're gonna make me hug you for a 2 hour-"

"_Every time._" Yuri repeated, waggling the arm in the air a little for emphasis, "C'mon. Our gate's calling."
The blond grit his teeth, but acknowledged his agreement and stepped forward, putting one arm around the older skater as Yuri did the same in return. That hug was significantly briefer than the one from earlier, but Yuri wasn't bothered...it was training, and for someone as typically bristly and confrontational as the Russian Punk, it would take time before the hugs would be more friendly. With that done though, they said their farewells for the time being and headed over to the gate.

Viktor was rummaging in his coat's inside pocket to get their tickets as Yuri guided him through the crowd. As they approached the counter, Yuri looked down the long hollow corridor that lead to the plane outside, and then...heard a startled scream. Thinking someone had spilled coffee on themselves, he lifted his head to look around, only to see Viktor gawking at a woman behind the counter with a stunned look on his face, and having pulled the tickets close to his chest again like he wasn't sure he should show them.

"...Are you...okay?" Viktor asked, unsure what else to say.

The younger skater looked between them, realizing nothing was really wrong, "What happened?"

"Dunno. I was putting up our tickets to get scanned and she screamed." Viktor answered.

The woman had already started frantically telling her co-workers something in the Finnish language that neither of them understood, but when she started speaking names, it all made sense.

"Etkö tiedä kuka hän on!? Se Viktor Nikiforov! Hän on kuuluisa!"

"Voi, hän puhuu luistelu uudelleen." One of the other ladies said, giving an exasperated sigh.

"We are sorry. She is big skate fan. She ask for shift for seeing skates." A third woman apologized, the only one of the group that spoke any English, broken as it was, so she to do the announcements, "Ehhm...Russia skates." She went on to clarify.

The first woman regained her composure, but was still gushing, "Voino halata sinua!?"

People around were starting to get impatient, and Yuri took notice, "Viktor...we have to go...we're holding up the line."

"...What did she ask?" He wondered, their tickets taken by one of the other attendants.

"Oh, she want...ehhhm...how to say..." The English-speaker was wracking her brain for the word, "Touch? No..."

"Oh!" Viktor understood, "Hug?"

"Kyllä se siitä!" She answered, as though the word had been on the tip of her tongue and she just couldn't get it out there.

Ever the provider of fan-service, the Russian held his free arm out and the woman came running around the counter and launched at him, knocking him back a few steps as Yuri watched quietly, being tugged as Viktor caught himself. He'd seen dozens of fans give Viktor hugs in the past so it didn't entirely bother him, but there was always a spot in his gut that turned over when it happened.

It seemed to go on for a while, and Viktor was trying to do his best to peel the woman off without seeming rude, but it didn't seem to be working. Yuri noticed.

"Ahem."
The crowd was getting more annoyed. One man had started rolling his newspaper in irritation.

"AHEM."

The woman looked over, only one eye visible from where her face was burried against Viktor's chest, partially hidden by his scarf and the lapels of his coat. She caught a glimpse of Yuri there looking down at her with a 'move along now' look on his face. She went completely red and let the Russian go immediately, moving back to hide behind the desk, muttering something in Finnish as she went. She avoided eye contact with other passengers after that, and Yuri swiped their scanned tickets and rushed Viktor down the suspended corridor that lead to the plane.

Once on board, they found their seats on the far isle and flopped into them exhaustedly. Yuri still held to Viktor's hand even as they sat. The Russian noticed the slight clench and moved to settle his other hand on top of it to ease his fingers off a little, and even leaned over to nose his husband's ear a little, "You're adorable when you're territorial."

"That's...not it..." Yuri blushed a little, "It went on for too long. People were complaining." He kept staring straight ahead though.

"Sorry, if I knew Finnish..." Viktor pulled back again, looking a little nervous now, "It happens every so often, when a fan gets so overwhelmed that they don't let go. You did that once too, you know."

The younger man's face went more red than pink after that, "...Sorry."

"What? Why? It was the night I fell for you!" Viktor pulled his hand free so he could put both his arms around his partner, nuzzling his cheek affectionately, "The awkward, drunken hug that lead to everything else!"

"...She didn't even recognize me." He finally said, a bit stiffly, "She looked right through me like I wasn't even there. I was holding your hand the entire time, and she looked at me like she had no idea who I was."

"Not all skating fans care about all skaters. That's just a sad fact. Don't let it bother you...she'll probably maul Yurio too once he gets to the gate. That one lady said she was a fan of Russia's skaters, so..."

Yuri still looked a bit depressed by it, "With all the footage of you that has me in it, you'd think more people would at least be like, 'oh, you're that awkward Japanese guy that Viktor keeps as a pet' or something."

"You're doing it again." Viktor said, quieter than before, as he reached up on hand to fuss over his husband's hair a little, "You're letting what other people think get under your skin."

"...Only this one." He grumbled, "Seemed like everyone we met in Helsinki recognized both of us no matter what, even when they only wanted photos with you. I don't care that I'm not as popular, but..."

"Yuri."

"...it's just weird nowadays that people still seem to not know who I am when...

"Yuri."

"...I'm literally married to you and we do a lot of skating stuff together now. I mean, it's not like you
took almost an entire year off to be my coach or anything..."

"YURI!"

He turned his head finally, "...What?"

"I want you to do something."

"...Uhh...okay? What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to do something that no other fan will ever get to do so long as I live."

Yuri could only blink at him in confusion, and smile nervously, "...Right here...!?"

"Yuri!" Viktor laughed and settled in his chair, "...You went straight to 11 with that one. I was going for something a bit simpler than that."

"Oh!" The younger skater was bright red after that, "...Sorry, it was on my mind since you complained about the lack of it earlier."

"Keep it on your mind!" The Russian insisted, "So I know what you're thinking about for the next couple hours." He couldn't help but settle his hand high on Yuri's thigh after that, "I'll think about it, too."

"You're making me want to reconsider my proud Japanese modesty." Yuri grumbled, lowering his voice so no one around could hear, "But I'm really not ready to get my Mile High Club card just yet."

Viktor's eyes went wide and he pulled his hand back up to cover his mouth, "...Wow! Yuri...! That you even know what that is...wow~! We have to get home immediately."

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It was still dark when the plane landed in St. Petersburg; Viktor had gone out of his way to avoid picking a flight with a layover after all the other flights they'd done in the previous 2 weeks. It was especially nice since the airports had been aware of the World Championships and arranged for bigger planes to carry the more-than-normal numbers of travelers to major cities, so the nearly-6-foot Russian had the option of a seat that gave leg-room.

When they finally got back into the airport, they stood together in front of the huge windows that looked out onto the tarmac and threw their arms out to the side happily, "We're finally back!"

Even Makkachin seemed to be glad.

It wasn't long before the two absent Russians finally came into the terminal as well, and they walked out of the airport together to where the long-term parking lot was located. After that, they parted ways again, with Yuri explaining that Mikhail would be coming to St. Petersburg in the next few days so they'd bring him by Yurio's place to make the final arrangements.

After that, Viktor hurried along to find his car, walking much faster than normal and forcing Yuri to half-run just to keep up. The poodle bounced along contentedly, happy to finally get to stretch his legs after being in the crate.
When they found Viktor's car, Yuri was heaving to catch his breath, "V-Viktor...it's not...so easy...to run after you when...you have...so...much...luggage...!" He dropped several of the man's extra bags together next to the rear passenger door, leaning over his knees to get his wind back. He heard the car door open on the driver's side, and Makkachin barked excitedly to get inside. The luggage was stowed in the trunk soon thereafter, and by then, Yuri had finally caught his breath and stood upright. He was about to reach for the front passenger door handle to get in when he heard Viktor's footstep coming around the side of the vehicle towards him, and he looked over to find him approaching quickly.

A second later, the Russian had Yuri pressed against the car, looking longingly into his eyes for a silent moment before kissing him deeply, and for a good long while. It caught Yuri off guard briefly, but he soon settled into it, enjoying his husband's warmth against the bracing St. Petersburg pre-dawn cold. When Viktor eventually pulled away again, he still held close.

"Let's go home."
Chapter 63

CHAPTER SIXTY THREE

Makkachin raced in through the door as soon as it was open, literally skidding across the hardwood floor with a clatter of claws to get to the back door. He barked and jumped, tail wagging so frantically that his butt shook, too, and as soon as Viktor opened the latch, the dog bounded off the concrete stairway into the yard.

It was time to reclaim the property from the elements. That dog was on a mission. New smells had to be put on everything.

Once the poodle was safely taken care of and new food and water bowls were put down outside the back door, Viktor shut it and returned to the interior, quirking a brow in perplexity as he saw Yuri trying to bring in literally all of their stuff at once, "...Whaat are you doing?" He went over and pulled some of the bigger items off his arms.

"...I can...do it in one...trip..." Yuri insisted, trying to twist in through the door to the garage.

The Russian settled the items he'd snagged on the floor in the livingroom, near the solitary blue couch, pulled his coat off, and started opening the cases up to put their things away. To his pleasure, the first bag happened to be the one with their new medals in it. They'd been put back inside their velvet cases for safe keeping, and Viktor pulled them out to set them on the small end-table next to his multi-jointed lamp. He looked around the room and inspected the numerous picture frames that housed his own historical medals, as well as the centerpiece where he and Yuri had arranged new frames for Yuri's own achievements.

While Yuri was still hauling the rest of their luggage into the bedroom, having retained the bulk of their clothing and toiletries bags, Viktor was pulling frames off the wall.

While Yuri was pulling costume bags from their biggest suitcase to hang them on a rack for drycleaning later, Viktor was undoing the fastenings on the back of a few frames and was removing the golden glittering plates under the glass.

By the time Yuri was done with everything, he'd wondered why Viktor hadn't helped, and went out into the livingroom to find out what his hold-up was, "Viktor, I could really use your...help...?"

"What do you think?"

The younger skater was baffled, "...How'd you get all that done without me hearing a hammer?"

Was all he could manage as he stepped up to where Viktor was casually standing; he almost missed the fact that Viktor had 8 or 9 gold medals hanging from his left hand.

"People still use a hammer and nails to hang picture frames? How archaic~!" He answered, pulling Yuri close once he was within grabbing distance.

In place of the library of Viktor's achievements spanning all the way back to his days in the Junior ISU, there were now only the medals from his Senior years. There were 6 frames now, forming a circle about 4 feet across in the middle of the wall. There was no single frame at the top, but rather, two...on the left was the fuller frame with Viktor's 5 World Championship gold medals in it, and now solitary silver, and next to that was a frame of equal size, but with Yuri's first gold medal from the same competition. Below and slightly further out from those, were their European Championships and Four Continents frames, and below that, the Grand Prix Finals. It was oddly aesthetic that Viktor
had a single silver medal on his side to match the one Yuri had earned for his own.

On the outskirts, Viktor's frame for the Russian Nationals, and opposite it was an empty frame for Yuri's presumed Japanese Nationals medals.

"You've done your country's championships, right?" Viktor asked, almost naively assuming his husband had won something there without having asked before.

"...Well, I was a dime-a-dozen top figure skater in the JSF with enough cred to get into the GPF once, so I hope I did." Yuri pointed out, still looking at the display with wonder.

"...So is that a yes or no?" Viktor gawked at him.

"Yeah."

"Oooh!" The Russian mused happily, "What'd you win?"

"A smattering of everything." Yuri admitted, "Expectations were still high for me at the Japanese Nationals when I went after Sochi, since I'd won at home before, but...well, you know that story."

"We have to get your medals in the frames!"

Further out from the center circle, below the Nationals frames, were six other frames...some with medals, others empty. Yuri stepped over to Viktor's side since it was the only one that had content, and realized those medals were from the GP Series.

"...Rostelecom Cup, Cup of China, Skate America, NHK Trophy, Skate Canada, even the Trophée Éric Bompard...you've been to all of them." He touched the frames lightly, "I've watched every one of them, too."

"You medaled at both Grand Prix Series' you've finalized in, so we'll have to get those for the frames, too." Viktor said softly, approaching the younger skater from behind, wrapping his arms around his sides to pull him back a little bit, then pointing at the center, "And there, where it's empty, when we move this stuff to the new wall in Hasetsu...we'll put one of the photos from the shoot we're going to do next week."

"Sounds like you have something specific in mind." Yuri answered, leaning his head a little so his ear pressed against Viktor's hair.

"Something with our Duetto outfits, I think." He said ponderously, "But maybe something else."

"That sounds good, actually. I like it." Yuri turned his head, putting them cheek to cheek, "We should frame and hang our marriage certificate, too."

"Mh!"

"So how long are you going to stand around looking like a coach?" The younger skater suddenly wondered, reaching up to tug on the man's tie a little bit, "You're overdressed."

"If these clothes are coming off, it's because yours are, too, Mr. Nikiforov." Yuri's cheeks were as red as the day he'd put the ring on Viktor's finger, and he had the same sweet smile...without the glasses though, he looked a little more mature. He turned where he stood in Viktor's embrace and raised his hands up to put them gently on either side of the Russian's face, touching their foreheads together, "Then what are you still waiting for? Mr. Nikiforov. I thought
you'd have bowled me over as soon as we walked in the door."

"...It occurred to me to do just that, but..." Viktor started kissing him as he pulled him back towards the couch, "I thought maybe I shouldn't be that obvious."

"Still trying to surprise me?"

"Every hour of every day. If I ever stop, I expect you to check my pulse."

As Viktor backed up into the sofa and felt the seat against the back of his knees, he lowered himself to sit, but before allowing Yuri to follow, he pulled his phone out from the pile of his coat. The younger skater moved forward to sit anyway, but stayed more towards the end of Viktor's knees until he gestured otherwise. It seemed the Russian had something in mind. When he twisted over to pull a small remote control from the footstool, and turned on the sound-bar by the television, Yuri understood.

"Pairing your phone?"

"Trying to set the mood a little." Viktor answered as he continued on his task, "There we go." He clicked the 'Source' button on the remote until the digital display on the bar said 'BT'. Soon after, that disappeared, and new letters scrolled across from right to left, 'WELCOME, VIKTOR'S PHONE.' Yuri jokingly held his hands together in prayer, "Blessed be, O Holy Bluetooth."

"An invisible power that we can all appreciate in times of dire need." The Russian added, hitting 'Play' on a random playlist.

The beat started (Tobu & Itro -Sunburst [NCS Release],) and Yuri lifted his head from his worship, "Oh...I recognize this...it's from the World Championship Gala starting ceremony! How'd you get hold of it?"

"Someone online tagged me in a link to the full ISU playlist for the weekend, and since I saw how much fun you had during that dance, I figured I'd download the song that went with it." Viktor answered as Yuri started to unloop the scarf around his neck, "There's a bunch of songs on this list. You'll recognize a few, probably." He was saying, quieter, more alluring now.

It reminded Yuri of how Viktor spoke way back before the GP Final Free Skate, when Viktor had asked how long he was going to be in warm-up mode.

...I should've kissed him back then... Would it have seemed so weird? I don't even remember why I didn't...

Yuri leaned in to kiss the man right then though, letting Viktor's hands pull him further into his lap. Those perfect, pale hands rose from Yuri's thighs to slip under the dark blue shirt that had teased Viktor all night, finally able to feel the skin he'd so desperately wanted. They slid up Yuri's abdomen and chest before moving off to caress his shoulder blades, going lower to the small of his back to pull him even closer onto his lap. The Asian felt exactly what he expected to feel now that they were directly on top of one another, and he could only wonder how long Viktor had been holding back. Yuri decided then to be kind to the man and withdrew him despite the fact that they were still entirely clothed.

Viktor drew in a hiss, not having expected that so soon, but he wasn't about to complain. It just drove his passion even further, cupping his husband's face in his hands to kiss him harder as that man's own hands went gently to their task.
He stroked and rubbed for a little while, moving away only as the music changed over to the next song...his own song. The piano trill echoed softly in the room, and Yuri removed one hand from between them to nudge Viktor to turn to his right, to lay him up against the arm-rest where the big white pillow was waiting for him. He kept kissing his partner, and then withdrew his second hand to undo the knot of Viktor's tie, tossing it aside and then moving to undo the buttons of his dress-shirt. He kissed and nibbled at each new inch of skin that was revealed as he went down until he was practically sitting on Viktor's knees again, pulling the shirt from where it had been pinned under the rim of his slacks.

The Russian was a bit surprised at how seamlessly his husband had moved through the paces, having made no gesture to tend to his own needs at all yet, even as he'd started to use his mouth to please him. Sides, tip, base, back to tip, then taking it wholly in, moving up and down with the tactile grace of an expert, even though he hardly was.

All told, despite how many times they'd been intimate, Yuri was still novice; always eager to please but not always sure how to do it. This time, though, he seemed to have hit a stride he was comfortable with and was going for it. After the horribly long 2 day wait, Viktor was loving every second of it. Yuri could've done anything he wanted to him in that moment.

The song switched over again, this time to Viktor's newly-chosen Short Program. As Yuri continued his wet and warm attention, the Russian fondly thought back on when the younger skater had actually sung that very song to him.

...He has a really nice singing voice, too. I never knew before then. Maybe I should ask him to do his own version of the song for me?

Viktor gestured for Yuri to come back up for air after that, guiding him back to his previous position with a finger just under his chin, and kissing him when he arrived. Eager hands went back down over Yuri's back and curled under the edge of the shirt, pulling it forward and eventually right over the man's head, casting it to the floor alongside the tie. He wrapped his arms around Yuri's back after that, drawing him down so both of their exposed chests now touched. Yuri slid his arms over Viktor's shoulders, settling into another string of kisses.

He only jolted a little when Viktor's hands went between them, starting to undo the front of his jeans. His head went up a little at the feeling of those warm fingers reaching for him, and he felt Viktor kissing at his neck in turn; one hand around his center, the other stroking his chest gently.

The soft sound of 'Aria: Stay Close to Me' started to rise into the room after that, which actually made Yuri laugh a little.

"What's so funny?" Viktor wondered, continuing his fun, doing his best to bring his partner to full arousal.

"...I guess I didn't expect to hear this song play just now." He answered, "Thought I'd hear Duetto before Aria."

"It's on the list."

"Do you have all of our music on here?" Yuri wondered, his voice a little strained as Viktor's strokes started to have their desired effect.

"Everything on the ice is love..." Viktor repeated those hallowed words, "So why not make love to the music we dance to? Every time you hear these songs now, you'll think about this moment."
Yuri smiled at that, "Now watch, Eros will play next..."

"Nah, it'll play later."

"You know the song order?"

"I didn't set it to randomize."

"Sheesh, Viktor...you planned even this? Mh..."

Viktor nuzzled Yuri's neck again, smiling as his lips moved across pale skin, "I didn't entirely plan it...I just know Eros is later."

The Asian suddenly twitched up a little bit, "You didn't put Agape on here, did you?"

Viktor raised his blue eyes up to look at his husband, and all he could do was smile...and then flip them over so Yuri was against the pillow in his place. He touched their noses together, "No." Viktor leaned back then and started yanking at the jeans until they came away, and everything else with it, tossing them to the floor to join the growing pile before leaning in to kiss the man eagerly again.

Yuri let his legs relax where they parted around his husband's waist, the right one dangling right off the edge of the sofa where it poked out over Viktor's left. The Russian inched in closer, holding his hands to Yuri's sides until he could feel their centers pressing against each other again, kissing at his neck and chest all the while. The younger man drew in a quick breath as he felt the older taking them both together in his hand again, gently squeezing and rubbing in all the right places. Viktor then raised his head back up and touched his forehead to Yuri's, watching the expression on his husband's face as he did his best to please them both.

Soon, Viktor moved his hand away from them again and gently touched it to Yuri's side where it was nearest the back of the couch, and pressed himself to the man's front with a kiss. His left hand went down below the edge of the seat cushions, feeling the lowest part of the sofa before it was nothing but air and 4 wooden legs, searching for a small bottle that he knew was there somewhere.

Long ago, they had repurposed an unsuspecting bottle of bitter-apple, and set it under that part of the couch in case the need arose. That way, their playtime would never be interrupted by such pesky things as the need for someone to get up and run to another room for supplies while the other waited, usually wet and getting cold, for him to return. It also looked like the typical sort of supplies one would keep around in a household with a pet, so should anyone ever come over, none would see the bottle and wonder at the couple's private affairs uninvited.

As Viktor found the bottle and pulled it up with two fingers, he felt his partner starting to clench up a little, and eased off where he'd been pushing his hips against him. Yuri's smaller frame started to relax again after that, and Viktor moved on, rising up a little so he could see as he dribbled a little of the clear fluid over his fingers. Yuri's flushed face watched as well, and Viktor saw the subtle change in his expression.

"What is it?" He mused.

"You know..." Yuri huffed between breaths, "When you do that...it's probably the single weirdest thing I've ever felt in my life, right?"

"I know!" He agreed with a laugh, "I remember the first time we were like this, back at Yu-Topia..."

He reminisced, not giving Yuri a break to ponder the inevitable, moving his fingers lower until they found where they were meant to go, "...You had this perpetually terrified look on your face."
"...I thou...mh...I thought you were going to try to...ahhh go all the way that first night..."

"No way..." The Russian teased, one finger inside now, "I wouldn't have, even if you made it seem like you wanted me to."

"...R...Really? Why?"

Viktor was looming over him at that point so his arm wouldn't be twisted up as he continued the finger-up internal massage, but he lowered his face to kiss him gently, "You had only just been brave enough to kiss me on your own 2 weeks prior." He explained quietly; two fingers now, "Doing this with a guy..." He listened to Yuri's breaths, trembling as they were, "...it's even more intimate than being with a woman for the first time."

"...I...I wouldn't know..." The younger man twitched as Viktor used his other hand to massage in front at the same time.

The Russian just smiled and continued on, "The stigma against this sort of thing means most men will never know what it feels like. But for people like us..." He felt where Yuri's legs were starting to clamp around his waist again, "...who probably never considered our future love-lives as anything but boring and standard..." The Asian's fingers were gripping at where Viktor's knees were parked on either side of his hips, "...and who came together despite having no history of attraction to other men..." He withdrew his fingers and positioned himself in their place, reaching for the small bottle again to replenish the supply, and then slowly starting to push himself inside, "...we're left with no other recourse but to face those taboos head on."

'Aria' had faded out long ago, replaced by 'You Only Live Once,' and then 'Duetto' as Yuri had expected.

Yuri's expression was strained...the beginning was always a little uncomfortable, though it had gotten better over the weeks and months. Viktor continued to massage and stroke the front to make it easier.

"So we're both as...nh...vulnerable to each other as any man could ever be for anyone." He finished, sliding forward until he was half in, then withdrawing again before trying to go a little further. He didn't speak again until he was all the way in and Yuri could catch his breath, "...So..." He whispered, his silver-grey bangs dragging across the man's collarbone, "...If you had suggested it that first night...or even tried to go for it...I would've stopped you." He paused, "How are you now?"

"...Need a moment."

"Okay." The Russian said quietly, tracing his lips over the skin of his partner's chest and neck as he waited for the go-ahead to move again, "...Anyway, it would've been too much back then. I think maybe even for me."

"...Really?" Yuri was surprised to hear that. He tried not to let the tension out in his voice, but he suspected Viktor could pick up on it no matter what he did.

The Russian lifted his slate-blue eyes to look into the hazel pools under him, "Hah~ Even I was hurting for a few days after you took me the first time. I was scared back then, too, you know?"

"...But...you were always so stoic about it...like it didn't bother you at all...!"

Viktor could literally feel that the confession had made Yuri's body relax a little, as though hearing those words had relieved some of the stress of feeling alone in the subtle pain between them. He just huffed a quiet laugh and shook his head, "I didn't want you to feel bad for hurting me."
Yuri just glowered at him awkwardly, "No, it just made me feel inadequate..."

"I didn't mean for that." The Russian kissed him gently to reassure him, "I was actually sore longer than you claimed to be."

"Wh...but...huh?"

Viktor slid back a little to test the waters, and when Yuri didn't wince, he slid forward again, planting his hands into the couch cushion on either side of his husband's waist to hold himself up, "You had so much faith in me to know what to do." He explained, easing Yuri into a slow rhythm, "But I had no idea what I was doing...so I decided way back at Yu-Topia that when it did happen, you would go first. ...How is this?"

"Mh..." The raven-haired skater mumbled, pulling his hands up from where they'd been clenched around Viktor's knees to place them behind the man's neck, pulling him down a little so he could press the sides of their foreheads together.

"I wanted to know exactly what it felt like..." The Russian continued, "...so I could then do something to make it feel better for you, and maybe hurt less."

Yuri was taken aback by his words, and he raised his knees up a little higher against Viktor's sides, "...You can go faster if you want."

It was an ironic cue at that point, as Duetto faded out, and the sassy guitar of Eros started.

The younger skater couldn't help but laugh as it did, "Yeah...nh...there it is... Knew it..."

Viktor laughed as well, kissing at his husband's neck happily, and picking up the pace as had been requested. They only flipped positions twice after that; once to turn Yuri on his side, with Viktor setting the man's right leg underneath of him while he held the left up against his chest, leaning over it as he continued, and then once more as he dropped to lay directly behind him, holding that same leg up a little to make access easier. When Yuri felt both of Viktor's arms wrap tightly around him, and fast breaths against the back of his shoulder, he knew the moment wasn't far off.

The Russian clenched up, and drove in as deep as he could, quietly crying out Yuri's name against the back of his neck. He was a little surprised to find Yuri's free hand reaching back to encourage him.

"...K-keep going...don't stop now..."

He did his best despite himself, and reached around front to ease the burden. He soon felt his partner clench up as well, even as he was still inside him. Yuri's eyes were wide open as he tried to catch his breath, hands up with his fingers pushed through his hair as though he might pull on it if the sensation were any more intense than it already was.

"Heh...you okay? Yuri..." Viktor pushed up a little on his elbow to see over to his partner's face, nosing his ear a little to encourage him, his free hand now coming up his abdomen to rest on his chest gently.

"...I didn't...feel like that before..." He answered, still heaving a little for air, "...What'd you do different?"

"I dunno." Viktor mused, kissing his cheek before lying back down again behind his partner, wrapping both arms around him, "I'll take full credit for whatever it was though."
CHAPTER SIXTY FOUR

It was odd to see the sun rise after having done so much for the day already. Yuri was sure he'd end up half-asleep again by the afternoon, even with all the coffee in the world. Viktor seemed as energized as ever though, eagerly starting to get things arranged for their move, and even trying to look up listings for apartments, condos, and houses in Hasetsu.

Yuri was waiting for it.

"Neh neh, Yuri..." The Russian was tugging on his sleeve as he sipped at his drink, "What does this all say?"

Viktor held up his laptop and the mass of Japanese text it displayed. Yuri couldn't take his eyes off how expensive it looked though.

"...Uhh...how much do you already know about what this says?"

"I was able to figure out the menus for price range and size, but..." Viktor laughed at himself, "The rest..."

"...You already know what the cost is?"

"Yeah. It's about the same as what this place cost me." He gawked, "Why?"

"And you did the currency conversion already?"

"Ahuh?" Viktor was starting to wonder if something was wrong, "What's it say?"

Yuri scanned it briefly before offering his translation, "...It's crazy-talk, that's what it says."

"Yuuumuuri!" The Russian was practically begging.

"I know the area this listing is in. It's really far away from the Ice Castle, practically on the other side of the city."

"Oh, is that all? For a second I thought you were going to tell me a family had been murdered inside or something." Viktor took up the laptop again and wandered back to the blue sofa to keep poking around.

"You want me to look into this...?" Yuri wondered, sitting a bit more upright where he was at the small table next to the island in the kitchen, just a few feet behind his partner, "It would probably be easier to find what you're wanting if you just give me a list and let me do the search. I'm going to have to read you all the pages anyway..."

Viktor was hunched over the laptop where he held it on his lap, sitting cross-legged, squinting at the screen, "How'm I gonna learn to read it if you read it for me?"

"You're going to learn to read Japanese...?" Yuri was skeptical, "You don't even speak Japanese."

"I picked up a little while I was in Hasetsu before! How else could I go out drinking all night by myself?" The Russian puffed out his chest and held up a finger, "Puramu wain ga hoshii, onegaishimaasuu~! Itadakimaaaaaasuu~!"
"...Mhm..." Yuri lifted a brow at the words, but then his mind went back to the World Championships, "So how much of my rant about Yurio did you really understand then?"

"Hah~!" The Russian leaned back against the sofa and turned his head slightly to peek at Yuri from behind his silver bangs, "I kind of understood the structure of it, but most of the fluff...nah. I heard a couple 'daikirai da's in there, so I guess you really hated something, but..." He spun around after that, "You should tell me what you said!"

"I'd feel bad repeating it now that Yurio and I have found common ground." Yuri admitted, scratching the back of his head.

"I guess that's only fair." Viktor turned back around to the computer, then sighed and closed it, "But you're right...there isn't much sense in me looking for places when I can't read any of the property listings." He paused for a moment and looked around, as though seeing his own house for the first time again, "It's going to be weird to leave this place for good. I've been here so long."

"...Yeah, when I moved to Detroit, it was scary." Yuri agreed, looking around as well, "That was right when your major winning streak started, now that I think about it. I was gone for 5 years and you won for 5 years. You quit skating right when I finally came home."

"Wow."

"So what kind of place were you looking for anyway?"

"Something like this, but maybe with another bedroom." Viktor answered.

"Why do we need three?"

"One of them ought to be a room for guests, don't you think?" The Russian laughed, "We've already taken over the second bedroom for our skating gear. We're sorely underprepared to have anyone over. We've been lucky that it's only been Yurio so far."

"Speaking of him..." Yuri put a finger on his chin, "We should drag him out and take him someplace fun before we leave. What's there to do in St. Petersburg besides skate?"

"A tourist might make the rounds of theaters and museums and Tsar-era palaces...but a resident lives that stuff every day so it's not as alluring."

"...Yurio likes cats, right? Isn't there something where he could see some?"

"Only at the taxidermy museum." The look on the Russian's face was dubious, "Leningrad Zoo isn't much better, and he's been there before. Don't ask him what he thinks about it."

...But, he did.

"The zoo was founded over 150 years ago and wasn't exactly designed with the welfare of the animals in mind, especially the cats." Yurio was explaining as they walked along one of the canals, "Some of the cages are still the originals, and are appallingly small. They have a black jaguar there and it's cage is smaller than Viktor's fucking liv-"

"Language." Yuri chided quietly.

"...smaller than Viktor's livingroom." He finished, glowering past the rim of his hood, "The tiger got a new habitat recently but it just looks like a human-minded rock pathway winding through a stone garden. Every time I go past the place, I want to bust all of them out."
"Don't you have a cat at home?" Yuri wondered.

"A Siamese-point Himalayan."

"Fancy."

Viktor watched in mostly-silence as Yurio spent the next half hour showing off photos of said feline while they sat at one of the many canal-side cafes. At some point after they had all decided to actually buy something from the place, and their drinks were brought to their table, Viktor finally relaxed a little and pulled his phone out to pass the time. Still though, even with the device in his hand, he still peeked his eyes up every so often.

What's wrong? A text message popped up on his screen unexpectedly.

Viktor looked around before looking back to realize the text had come from Yuri, even though he was still, for all intents and purposes, paying full attention to the blond.

Just people-watching.

This time, the Russian watched his partner intently, seeing how Yuri had the phone in his hand casually even as Yurio was still telling stories about his cat's adventures. He couldn't hear a beep or buzz, as it seemed Yuri had set his phone to silent for the day, but he checked it after a few minutes and started typing again.

You look like a well-dressed Meerkat on the look-out for hawks and lions.

Viktor raised his eyebrows at that, Didn't realize I was that obvious.

Maybe it wouldn't be to anyone else.

"Didn't you say you had a dog before?" Yurio was wondering, having run out of things to say about his feline for the moment.

"Ah, yeah...I had a poodle."

...Like Makkachin?

...Just like Makkachin. Yuri felt like he'd gone pale, realizing where this was going.

What was its name?

And all the color was out of his face, ...Viktor.

Yurio gawked at him for a moment, as though unsure how to proceed. He looked across the table at the dog's namesake, and then back at the Asian skater, and thumbed over at Viktor with a brow raised as though wondering if the dog's name was connected to the man.

...We called him Vikku-chan for short! Yuri tried to distract away from the embarrassing admission, flailing his hands around defensively.

He was sure Yurio would just make fun of him for it, but the blond just reclined in his chair and pulled his drink from the table casually, That's the one that died right before Sochi, right?

Mh...

...Sorry. Yuri said quietly, entirely unexpectedly. The older skater looked at him curiously, but
then nodded and reclined back as well. There was a period of silence after that as they all nursed their drinks, hot cider or spiced milk to ward off the cold early-afternoon breeze, but then the blond nudged over at the entirely-silent elder amongst them, "How's Makkachin?"

"Hm?" Viktor looked up from where he'd been waiting for a reply on his phone, thumbing through Instagram in the mean-time.

"He's like...what...6 now? Maybe 7?"

"He's getting up there, yeah."

Yuri had an odd look on his face, "...If Makkachin's that young, what happened to the dog from when you still had long hair?"

Viktor and Yurio deadpanned him, "Do you have to ask...?"

The Asian banged his head down on the table and stayed there, "Iamsosorrythatwasastupidquestionahhh."

Viktor tried to make light of it, "The dog I had before Makkachin died during the off season. You thought Makkachin was the same one from that magazine article?"

"I...never heard or saw anything about your other dog, I'm sorry..." The younger skater finally picked his face up from where it had landed, "But Makkachin looks just like it...I always thought it was the same dog. I guess it was dumb...most dogs don't live past 12, but Makkachin would be like...14 or something by now if they were the same animal...and yet he's just a big puppy."

"Yeah..." The elder Russian nodded, sipping at his spiced milk, "I was a lump for weeks after Kubochin died. I wasn't even really looking for another dog, but the girlfriend I had at the time found a brown poodle puppy for sale at someone's house, and she grabbed him up."

"...Oh, you were involved with someone back then?" Yurio asked, almost too casually.

"Why do you think my winning streak only started after that?" Viktor laughed, setting his cup down, "I wasn't getting consecutive golds until she and I split. Felt like I got my soul back after that and could focus."

The raven-haired skater gawked at him. The whole realization reminded him of something Mikhail had said when they met at the cafe near the house while Viktor was doing his late-night solo practices.

"Viktor's had other relationships before that."

"Sure."

"With women though."

"...Yes."

"Has he told you about them?"

"He tried once, but I cut him off." Yuri looked at the poodle and leaned back, "That was when we were first getting to know each other though. I don't know that I'd want to ask about it again now."

"You've never wondered why he wasn't still with someone when he went to Japan?"
"He'd been a bachelor for a while before that."

"Not my point."

"No, I hadn't wondered."

"Hard to maintain a relationship when half of your life is in a sport."

"...Was she a fan or something?" Again, it was Yurio who asked. Yuri was starting to wonder if the blond had become the mouthpiece for his own anxious brain.

"Yeah, a regular groupie." Viktor admitted sheepishly, "But she absolutely hated how much attention I still gave to other fans when we were together. It was fine at first, she even seemed grateful that I had noticed her in the crowd, but she started to worry that I would notice someone else the same way and got obsessive. We'd get into fights before I'd leave for competition, even tried to tell me I was banned from interacting with fans...and, well...that's not gonna fly..."

"You don't lose anything by shaking hands! Be polite! Viktor Nikiforov is always nice to his fans!"

The Russian leaned over the table, delicately holding the ceramic cup over where his elbows held him up, "She even FaceTimed me right before I was supposed to do my second show at Skate America in Oregon, and questioned me about how I greeted the crowd while on the television! So I was just like...'Buh-bye!' and hung up." He even gave a cruel smile and waved as though he were reliving the moment.

It just turned Yuri's stomach, "...Sheesh, I hope you never do anything like that to me..."

"Maybe that's why you jumped the fence." Yurio joked, "You've only ever had crazy girlfriends."

"That's not true!" Viktor insisted, slouching back again, "The second one was nice..." He lifted his head as he thought back on it, "She was beautiful, too..."

Yuri looked a little uncomfortable, even though he told himself over and over that he shouldn't feel that way given how long ago it was.

But Viktor continued on, "Long, wavy, pale blond hair...blue eyes like the ocean. Ahh if only she hadn't gotten hurt..."

"Huh?"

"She was a skater." The Russian explained, "But she tore her ACL during practice once, and the surgery to fix it left her in recovery for almost an entire year. She was so heartbroken by the process that she got really depressed and broke it off with me, saying she didn't want to hold me back." He seemed somber at the memories of it, "I dedicated my Grand Prix Final to her that year, but she never took me back. I even started learning French for her, since she had a hard time with English..."

"So...she was French?"

"Mh. We met at the Trophée Éric Bompard."

Yurio pointed at the ponderous skater while still holding his own cup, "I feel like we're obligated to ask about the first one now."

Viktor started to laugh at that, "That was a secret scandal!?" He set the cup down and got dramatic, "It was my second year in the Senior Division, and she was one year older than me. I had won gold
at Skate America and silver at the NKH trophy...and then here comes this Ice Dancer with her partner at the Grand Prix Final. I was infatuated!"

"...Second year in Seniors..." Yurio repeated, "So that means y-

"You were still in diapers!" Viktor said, cutting him off all too happily, "Baby Yuri!" He laughed.

It just made the blond's face red.

The Asian skater could tell Yurio's top was about to blow, so he reached over to put his hand over the teen's forearm, "Breathe. Breathe. Breathe." It was an oddly welcome distraction from the topic.

"...But, yes, I was 18. Hormones were running wild through me like a herd of cats. I met her on day 1 of the event, and by the end of the Short Program, we were sneaking off behind her dancing partner's back. They bombed the Free Skate part of their show because of the fight they got into over me." The Russian was almost proud of himself, "But the worst part was how, before the Exhibition, we snuck out again and that time we actu-

"No, stop, stop." Yuri finally cut him off, "I can't.

"You almost let me tell the whole story! I'm impressed."

"It's more than I wanted to hear." The younger skater said defensively.

"It all happened years ago..." Viktor tried to explain, "It's long over and done with already. They're only memories."

"Some memories seem to be thought on more fondly than others."

"Oh, are you worried about the second one?" Viktor wondered, leaning over to take his husband's ringed hand, though he had gloves on, and pressed his own gloved thumb over where he knew the ring would be, "I told you once before that what I felt for them isn't the same as what I feel for you."

"It's still hard to hear."

"I don't know what else to tell you..." The Russian admitted, "I thought they were just fun stories I could tell."

"I guess I don't want to think about how I might just be a 'fun story to tell' one day."'

"...Oh Yuri..." He sighed, feeling bad about the whole thing now, "I didn't mean to upset you."

The Asian suddenly found himself pulled over, away from Viktor, as the Russian Punk yanked him back with his arms around his head. Even Viktor had a perplexed look on his face, maybe more so than the one Yuri himself had put on.

"I egged him on. Sorry." Yurio said stiffly, the words hard to say. He let go of the older skater pretty quickly after that and went on acting like he hadn't done anything at all, even as Yuri was trying to straighten out where his hair had gotten messed up. The teen refused to make eye contact after that for a while.

Yuri and Viktor exchanged confused glances, but then shrugged and smiled, trying to move on from the awkwardness of the prior conversation. The whole point of the outing had been to do something fun with Yurio anyway.

They started heading out again, walking along the canal until they got to the bridge that would take
them back to where Viktor had parked his car. Once inside and buckled in, gloves came off, and the
couple loosely held hands together over the center console while Yurio sat alone in the back seat,
gawking out at pedestrians and other cars as they passed.

Yuri thumbed around on his phone while Viktor drove, looking at the news from back home before
checking his email. There wasn't much to see, but soon, he saw a notification bubble descend from
the top of his screen showing a new text message.

"Oh...it's Mikhail." He said aloud, getting everyone's attention, "He says he'll be here tomorrow
afternoon around 2. He's wanting to know where he should go first once he arrives. Also, he says,
'And tell Viktor to check his damn messages once in a while.'" Yuri laughed.

"He should come to the house." Viktor answered, "We'll deal with that and then go to Yuri's place."

"Okay." The younger skater said, using his one free thumb to type the reply, then looking over his
shoulder to the teen in the back, "The house thing shouldn't take us long, so we'll come by your
place around 4?"

"Whenever."

By the time they got back to Yurio's grandpa's place, it was mid afternoon, and the teen was quick to
hop out of the back seat, leaning forward enough to pat the Asian's shoulder before practically
fleeing. Yuri just held his hand up and waved conspicuously as the teen disappeared through the
doors, "...Where's my hug...?"

"He'll resist as much as he can." Viktor laughed, squeezing his husband's hand where he held it, "I
think you got more miles out of him today than you would've if he stuck to the plan, so cut him some
slack." He reached into his inside coat pocket though to pull out his phone and see what his uncle
had complained about him not seeing. He thumbed through his texts with the man and saw nothing
he hadn't already read, but then shrugged and went to the voicemail bubble. There, he saw a message
he hadn't noticed before, and it had been there since earlier that morning, "Huh...I wonder why I
didn't see this?" He clicked it and held it out, putting the message on speaker since Viktor thought
nothing of letting his husband hear what was being said.

"Hey, it's me." Mikhail's voice was starting, "I know you don't want to hear about this so I'll get right
to the point..."

Both men's faces contorted into worried expressions.

"The lawyer overseeing your mom's Will has been trying to get into contact with you. Apparently
she had a sizable life insurance plan, and...well, you're the sole beneficiary. Her Will stated explicitly
that Konstantin not be made aware of the whole thing, but without any contact information for you,
the lawyer had to reach out to him to try and find you. Konstantin gave the lawyer my info since he
knows we're in contact, and now he's bugging me to try and find out why there's so much interest in
you again suddenly. Long story short, we gotta deal with this before you leave. Sorry to drop this on
you, nephew. I know you said you never wanted to deal with the family again, but I really think you
should consider this. We'll talk later. I get to St. Petersburg around 2 tomorrow afternoon. I'll holler at
Yuri if I don't hear back from you soon. Bye."

The message ended, and Yuri could feel where his husband's fingers had gotten tighter around his
hand. Yuri wasn't even sure what to think at that point. He just sat straight in his seat and drew in a
deep breath.

"...Well, at least the car wasn't moving when you played that."
"I don't want to deal with this."

"...I know."

"I really don't."

"You want me to message Mikhail back and tell him not to bring it up?"

"He's not going to drop it." Viktor said, dropping the phone into his lap as he pulled his free hand back under his bangs where his eye had started twitching again, "I just can't believe this."

"...That's two big events we've come home from only to have to deal with something like this." Yuri sighed, "Maybe it's a good thing that there's nothing else on the horizon till October."

"There's something entirely not normal about all this." Viktor went on, "Why would my mother go to such lengths to hide things from my father? Why didn't she just leave him if she was under so much pressure to conform? First, it was that package of unopened letters and photos, now this? I'm starting to wonder if the wreck she was in was entirely an accident."

The younger skater was starting to feel a yawn coming on, though he tried his best to hide it, "Let's just get back. I don't want you driving when you're all worked up and worried."

"...Mh..."
CHAPTER SIXTY FIVE

Viktor had done his absolute best to stay awake as long as possible after they got home again, despite the fact that he'd effectively been awake for more than a day, not counting his brief naps along the way back. Yuri hadn't made it easy, falling asleep numerous times while they reviewed footage of the World Championships.

Every time Viktor would point out some maneuver that could use improvement, or which had seemingly become so mastered that it was flawless, Yuri had dozed off again.

"...Yuri..." He grumbled, stepping back to the couch from where he'd been pointing at something on the television screen. He touched the man's shoulder to rouse him, "Yuri."

The man snorted as he awoke with a start, looking around quickly before looking up at his husband, "Whut-"

"You keep falling asleep."

The younger man was practically turning to liquid as he drooped off the couch, "Viktorit's beenawholedaysincewesleptpleaseletmegotobeeeedddd..."

"But-"

"I know you want to go over the footage, but it's not going anywhere." Yuri finally said from his puddle on the floor, "I can't even remember what you've saaaaaaid!"

"But it's only-"

"Viktoooooor!" He was practically crying he was so tired.

The Russian knelt down so he wasn't looming so intensely, and stroked where Yuri's hair was getting disheveled again, "Fine, fine..."

He was up with a start, kissed Viktor's forehead and literally ran to the bedroom, jumping into the bed with too-much enthusiasm. It was a few minutes before Viktor finally followed, and he just sat on top of the covers for a while. Yuri had wrapped his arms as well as he could around the man's waist before passing out, his grip becoming lax the further into sleep he dove.

Viktor sighed, looking at the bubble where Mikhail's message was still stored, and clicked it again to listen to it against his ear.

Why in the world would she set up a life insurance plan with just me as the beneficiary? Nothing about any of this makes any sense. We didn't even have a relationship...why would this sort of thing cross her mind after we stopped talking outright?

Yuri stirred a little, lifting his head from where it had been wedged against Viktor's leg. He mumbled a little before settling again, "...I know you don't want to sleep, but you really should."

"The sooner I sleep, the sooner tomorrow comes."

"The sooner tomorrow comes, the sooner next week comes." Yuri pointed out, "And all the things you're looking forward to so much about going back to Hasetsu."
"Why do you have to make sense?" The Russian wondered, setting his phone aside to stroke his husband's hair.

"Wisdom oft come from the mouths of babes...and on a rare occasion, the mouths of really-tired SkateHusbands." He answered, moving just enough to encourage the older man to lay down.

Viktor sighed and stood up, pulled his sweater and slacks off, and joined his partner under the covers. Yuri immediately wrapped his arms around the man's head and pulled it close to his chest, protectively holding him there.

"It'll be fine." He said, "Maybe you won't even have to see Konstantin. Not like he was involved in the process beyond giving that lawyer Mikhail's information. He has no business in the rest of it. I don't know a whole lot about life insurance or inheritance or whatever, but if your mom went this far out of her way to make sure Konstantin didn't even know the policy existed, then it means he had no part in it and can't act like a grizzly-bear gatekeeper. He can't force you to deal with him to get what's yours."

"I already have what's mine. I don't need what's hers, too."

"It's always been yours."

"We don't even know how much it is."

"It's not going to be lunch money." Yuri pointed out, gently moving his thumb back and forth through Viktor's silver hair, "It could cover your skating upkeep for years to come."

"And all the surgeries my back and knees will need if I keep skating past the ancient age of 31?"

"Don't invite trouble." Yuri huffed, "And 31 really isn't that old."

"I'm going be a fossil soon."

"I perfectly normal, incredibly attractive fossil with thick and beautiful hair." Yuri clarified. He didn't see the look Viktor gave him for it, "Your mom's side of the family seems to have good genes. If Mikhail really is your nearly-60-year-old reflection, you're going to be a really hot old guy."

"So you think my uncle's hot?"

"My 60-year-old self thinks so, sure, but by the time either of us is that old, Mikhail's going to be 80 or something."

"At which point he'll look like a fish."

"Yeah, probably." Yuri laughed, "And by then, we will be known as Pisces instead of Viktuuri."

"My future self is rolling in his grave already."

"We could always go the cremation route and turn you into a little blue diamond if you prefer."

"Wait, what?" Viktor lifted his head as well as he could, looking up at his partner, "They can do that?"

"Sure." The Asian nodded, "Heck, if we go together, we could get our ashes mixed and turned into a slightly bigger blue diamond."

"Hmph..." He settled back to where Yuri had been holding him before, listening to his heart beating
quietly under his skin, "Much as I like to think neither of us is left behind for long, I'd rather not think about being gone at all."

"Same." Yuri nuzzled the top of Viktor's head, "So let's be grateful that tomorrow is coming for us at all and meet it head-on. We'll sell the house, get your insurance pay-out, help Yurio get set-up with Mikhail's sponsorship, and then work on getting this place packed up. As soon as we're back at Yu-Topia, we can soak in the hot spring and mom can make us both pork cutlet bowls for our wins at the World Championships."

"Mmmh...vkusno~!"

. . .

The knock came sooner than expected. Yuri's head popped up first, and he scrambled for his phone on the nightstand, lamenting how it wasn't turning on, then reaching for Viktor's on the other side and seeing that it was 2:19pm.

"Viktor! Mikhail's here! We slept over 12 hours!"

Makkachin was barking at the front door.

The Russian didn't want to wake up though and just rolled over, pulling the blankets back up, "Five more minutes."

"Mikhail's at the door now!"

"So go let him in and then come back to bed." The Russian sleep-mumbled.

Another knock. More barking.

Yuri finally pulled himself out of the bed and stumbled towards the front door, looking entirely disheveled, his t-shirt and sweat pants unkempt. He shuffled the big poodle out of the way and pulled the door open, momentarily blinded by the sun as it shone directly into the house. Makkachin ran out and jumped at the figure outside excitedly.

"Hey Yuri." Mikhail said with a laugh, trying to keep the dog from jumping on him too much, "Sleep well?"

"Glad I recognize your voice cuz you're a big grey-white blotch right now." Yuri answered, rubbing his eyes to get his vision normal again, "Come inside so I can close the door."

The elder Russian coaxed the dog back through the threshold and then followed after, letting Yuri do as he'd planned, and looking around. Yuri blinked deliberately a few times until he no longer saw so many spots, and he glanced up to see Viktor's uncle pulling his coat and scarf off.

"Yeah, I thought it would look like this." Mikhail mused, setting his shoes along the wall near the door, "All modern."

"Viktor likes lamps." Yuri pointed out, "He likes it bright inside."

"I meant everything overall." The man clarified, "There isn't an antique in this place. Maybe it's only obvious to me though, since I know where he grew up."
"He seems to like the rustic half-antiqueness of Hasetsu."

"That's because it's Japan."

Yuri smiled, "I guess that...yeah."

"Anyway, where is Viktor?"

"Refusing to admit today's already here."

"I'm here, I'm here..." Came the man's voice as he shuffled out of the far hall, tying a bathrobe around himself, "We overslept a little."

"I can see that!" Mikhail laughed, "When did you finally go to bed? That middle-of-the-night flight was brutal."

"Uhh..." Yuri thought back, "I think it was like...6?"

"And now it's 2...you both slept for nearly 20 hours."

"Yeesh..."

"Guess you needed it after your Free Skates and the Gala." Mikhail shrugged, tapping his carry-bag with his foot, "This can wait for a while if you need to wake up."

"Nah, let's just get to it. We told Yurio we'd be at his place by 4." Viktor said, yawning a little as he walked past them to get to the kitchen to feed his dog. Once that was done, he went to pull the paperwork he'd dug out of storage after his and Yuri's tryst the morning before, and quietly set everything on the tiled part of the kitchen island while his uncle set his bag on the shorter wooden table-attachment next to it.

Within 30 minutes, the details had been hammered out, and Viktor nervously signed the final bill of sale to give the house away. Mikhail cut a check right there and handed that over before stuffing everything back into his bag.

Viktor looked at the check with distant eyes. He could hardly believe it had really happened.

"I can have the bulk of your things professionally packed and shipped once you've found your new place." Mikhail was saying, "So you don't have to deal with that on top of everything else."

Viktor just turned his head and handed the check to his husband, "Put it into safe keeping until later."

"Okay..."

"You got my voicemail I'm guessing." Mikhail went on, finishing the last of the coffee Yuri had made them.

"Please tell me Konstantin doesn't have to be part of all this." Viktor said into his hands where he'd clasped them over the bridge of his nose, his thumbs pressing the corners of his eyes, "Please."

"He's being nosy. He's the big, bad, ultra-Orthodox Christian patriarch, and his wife did something behind his back. It involves a son he disowned, and now he's been contacted by a lawyer that he didn't even know existed until a week or so ago. If you were him, wouldn't you want to know what was going on?"

"I can't think from his perspective because I'm not insane."
"How did you feel when you found out Yuri and I were talking behind your back?"

Viktor paused, recalling the night in question. Yuri had gone even more silent than before. The Russian sighed, "I was furious enough to unlock Yuri's phone with his thumbprint while he was still asleep."

"See?" Mikhail roughly pat his nephew's shoulder, "Konstantin's wife did something she shouldn't have and without his knowledge or consent, just like your own spouse did. He has the right to be angry about it."

"And he can continue to be angry about it from the comfort of his own rancid little shack in the woods."

"I think he's just annoyed because of what the papers have been saying." Mikhail said, pulling a rolled up newspaper from a different section of his back and unfurling it for the pair to see. On the front cover was a full-color image featuring Viktor, a standing photo of himself in his Russian tracksuit, with a shot of his Short Program on the left of himself and the Free Skate on the right.

The Cyrillic was impossible for Yuri to read, but Viktor spared him the confusion by translating it out loud, "National Figure Skating Legend, Viktor Nikiforov, wins Silver at the World Championships." The under-title said even more, "Did he give away his gold to the Japanese skater he trained last year?"

Yuri noticed the small inset photo of himself further down the article.

Viktor was still reading, mouthing the words but not saying anything aloud as he went. Mikhail watched quietly.

"It's basically asking if I let you win." The Russian explained, setting the paper down, "Like I wasn't even trying."

"You set a new Short Program and Total Score record, and landed the world's first quad axel. Did the article mention any of that?" Yuri wondered.

"No."

"That's the media for you." Mikhail said as Viktor slouched back, disappointed, "They care less about the actual achievement than they do about the perception a part of it might leave."

"I'm surprised they didn't get into the fact that we're married, too."

"That would be an embarrassment." Mikhail reluctantly explained, "Suggesting one of Russia's national heroes is involved in a same-sex relationship would make the whole rest of the developed world crawl up Putin's arsehole to make him recognize LBGTQ stuff in Russia. But, Putin's so far up the Patriarch's arsehole that he'd never allow it. If Viktor didn't have gloves on for those programs, or his hands in his pockets for the smaller center inset, I'm certain the editors would've Photoshopped his ring out."

Yuri's brow furrowed and he went running back to the bedroom where he'd plugged his phone in after the battery had died, and started rifling through the sports news on Japanese networks. To his horror, sure enough, his own ring had been edited out as well, and he walked back to the kitchen like he'd been kicked in the stomach.

"They did it to me back home...or they picked photos that didn't have my hands visible." He said, "The only place that didn't was the ISU."
"They're pretty conservative, too, but they'd be eaten alive by international Viktuuri fans if they did anything to deny that you two are involved. It's one thing to straight-wash lesser-known skaters, but you two...well, you're international champions. They can't just mess with you like that. It's honestly, probably, for the best that you guys move to Japan. Even if they edit your rings out of local publications, you won't face nearly the backlash that you might here in Russia."

"I know." Viktor sighed, "I spent most of yesterday watching out for trouble."

"...Is that what you were Meerkating for?" Yuri was surprised.

"There's only one nightclub in St. Petersburg that allows same-sex couples to be who they are, and routinely, there are hecklers who wait outside to harass people as they come out. The night before we got back home, there was a beating, and a male couple had to go to the hospital."

Yuri was stunned by it, "...Japan doesn't have stuff like that happen."

"Japan has schoolgirls who offer to sell old men the opportunity to smell their panties, while still wearing them." Mikhail teased, much to Yuri's chagrin, "I even heard there's vending machines with used panties in them for sale."

"Whaaaaaat?"

"Then there's the whole hentai industry..." The elder continued, "Half the population thinks Japan is the most perverted place on Earth!"

Yuri pulled back from where he'd been leaning on Viktor's chair, "Th-that's ridiculous."

"You had the luxury of being born into one of the most polite societies in the world." Mikhail went on, "And yet, also, one of the most curious. All this stuff that people are allowed to dabble in, and you get a population with one of the lowest rates of sexual crime anywhere, but it comes with the adage of being looked at as sexually deviant, even if they're still conservative enough behind closed doors not to recognize same-sex marriage."

"Yeah, and one of the lowest and declining birth rates of any 1st world nation." Yuri defended.

"All the fun without all the responsibility?" The older man laughed, making Yuri's face go red again, "No, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make this whole thing so political. I only meant to say that even if Japan doesn't officially recognize your relationship, you won't be all that bothered there. Even the most strident conservative is still polite enough to not threaten you to your face."

Yuri looked over to where his husband was avoiding eye-contact with them, "Have you been looking over your shoulder the entire time I've been here with you...?"

"...Sort of."

"That's terrible."

"Remember the Grand Prix Banquet, when Mila pulled me aside?"

"Sure."

"She mentioned how scared she was for us. I didn't want to think about it because I was just so happy, but..." He shook his head, "And that night, when I asked you if you were worried...I didn't mean future skating competitions."
Yuri stepped forward and put his arms over Viktor's shoulders to hug him tight, "We need to get out of here."

"Let's go deal with this thing with Plisetsky." Mikhail said, trying to get off the topic.
CHAPTER SIXTY SIX

Once again, they piled everyone into the car, with Viktor driving, Yuri in the front passenger seat, and their solitary guest alone in the back. As Yuri buckled in, he slid his hand over to settle on Viktor's leg, and the man's own free hand joined it soon after they'd gotten on the road.

"So what's your company called anyway?" The younger skater wondered, looking back to his in-law.

"The most boring and obvious name ever." Mikhail laughed, "Rozovsky Engineering Equipment Incorporated."

"Mh, very creative."

"So you guys don't have any other skating things until fall right?"

"Nah." Yuri confirmed.

"This is off-season for us." Viktor elaborated, "We use this time to make new routines for the fall. There are a few competitions but they're mostly local, and people who won prizes at international events don't generally go."

It wasn't a terribly long drive to Yurio's place, and the door was thrown open before anyone had even had a chance to knock.

"Dobryj den'~" The two Russians said.

Meanwhile, Yuri just had both arms out, waiting for his due. Yurio just gawked at him, then at the two silver-haired men standing behind him. He sighed, stepped through the door, gave a half-assed but well-intended hug, waited impatiently for Yuri to give one back (which he did extra slowly just for fun,) and then ducked right back inside again. Once everyone had followed, he stuck his head out the door one last time just to be sure no one saw, and then closed the door.

Yurio's grandpa was watching some sports game or another on the small television when the group piled inside, and he waved to those he recognized as they came into sight. Yurio's cat snuck by along the base of a wall and scampered down a hallway to get out of sight.

"Yuratchka, why didn't you tell me people were coming over?" Nikolai started trying to get up, but the young blond rushed over to make sure he didn't over-work himself.

"It's just business stuff! It's fine! You don't have to get up!"

"Business?"

Mikhail suddenly felt rather awkward, leaning over to Viktor, "Shouldn't he have known why we're coming?"

"Probably." The younger Russian turned to the blond, "Neh, Yuri...didn't you tell him?"

Yurio turned around slowly, then made a gesture whereby he raked his thumb across his throat and then pointed at them all. The message was clear...say something and die! So they stayed quiet, moving over to sit at the small kitchen table, everyone with their hands clasped in their laps like
children who'd been put in time-out, waiting for Yurio to set them free again.

It was a tense few minutes, but eventually, the teen came back around and sat at the one empty spot at the square table, spinning his chair around to sit in reverse on it, and huffed a sigh, "Let's get this done, then."

Mikhail nodded and pulled his bag from the floor onto his lap, withdrawing a number of papers and a sealed envelope.

"I've already put together everything technical that needs to be done. My company has sponsored other things before, so I'm guessing that sponsoring an athlete is similar...but the long and short of it is, I'll have your career in my hands for a period of one year. In that time, I don't expect you to win anything, though if you do, I get a 50% cut of whatever you take home. I'll cover all your skating expenses...rink rental fees, blade sharpening and replacement, new boots, new costumes, music editing, travel and food for competition, whatever. If Yakov takes you back, I'll deal with his coaching fees as well. If not, I'll vet whoever takes you next. Same thing with the choreographer lady. You'll wear my company's logo on your off-rink uniforms like all your other sponsors. Plus...you get a $500 stipend each month to do with whatever you want that doesn't involve skating. At the end of the year, if I'm pleased with your progress, I'll sign you on for another 2 years with more reasonable percentages and a nicer allowance. Are you still in school?"

"Yeah."

"Plans for college?"

"Not entirely."

"Figure something out. You'll need something to fall back on once you're done with sports. And finally..."

Yurio braced for it.

"...the therapy."

He heaved a sigh, "...Yeah."

"I've compiled a small list of people I think can help you. Figure out which one you hate the least and set up an appointment. I'll be going with you as a chaperone unless I'm not in town, and I won't be in the sessions with you unless you say otherwise. You go as often as they say you should go, and as long as they say you should go."

Yurio struck his finger down on the table, as though trying to cut off the conversation without speaking up.

"What?"

"One condition."

"You're really not in a position to bargain."

"They can't put me on meds." Yurio said anyway, "I refuse. It'll fu-...er...compromise my performance on the ice."

"You're angry, not depressed. If someone tries to put you on meds, we'll find someone else."
The teen seemed relieved to hear it, and leaned back in his chair to let the Russian finish.

"Anyway...that was basically my whole schpeel. This envelope..." Mikhail held up the standard letter-sized article, "...has some paperwork you need to fill out for insurance purposes, and a debit card. You don't touch the card until I get a confirmation that you've scheduled the consultation. I'll get an alert on my phone anytime a transaction posts."

"Jeeze, microma-"

"Hvatt!" Mikhail held his hand up, "Think about what you're about to say and ask yourself if it's worth it to finish. I just offered you a life-line, and my stipulations are not excessive. Do you really want to undermine me with an attitude?"

Viktor and Yuri were both a bit shocked at the whole thing, side-eyeing each other like they wanted to ask if the other saw and heard what just happened.

The man reminded Yurio all too much of Lilia, and his heart skipped a beat, realizing that, like with her, the elder Russian wouldn't bend to his jabs like most others did. He lowered his head.

"Well?"

"No sir."

"Perfect!" Mikhail was all smiles again, "Go over the papers in there and mail it to me when you're done. There's stamps inside and the address has already been marked, so just put yours like normal. Once I get it, you'll be added to my company's health and life insurance policy, which will cover you in case anything happens while you're out of the country, too."

Yurio looked at the front face of the envelope, "This is addressed to Canada."

"Yeah, my main residence. My condo in Moscow is a time-share, and I'm not about to move into Viktor's old house."

"...And you can afford all of this." Yurio was skeptical.

"I wouldn't be offering if I couldn't."

"Just seems weird. You..." Yurio wasn't sure how to proceed with that line of thought, and he grunted under his breath as he slouched against where he leaned on the back of the chair, "...You just popped up out of nowhere not too long ago, didn't know a thing about skating, didn't know a thing about any of us...and now you're ready to drop literally thousands of dollars on someone you've only had one shaky conversation with before this very moment. Where's the catch?"

"Did any of your other sponsors know you personally before offering contracts?"

"...I guess not."

"The only thing that makes this different from that is the fact that I'm related to those two." He thumbed at the married couple, and they waved meekly, "So...do we have a deal?" He moved the same hand forward towards the teen.

"How are you related to both of them?" Yurio's grandfather suddenly asked, his ears having barely caught the comment, "Only Viktor's native."

Viktor and Yuri went pale, the hands they'd been comically waving with being their ring-hands, and
they nervously held them up to the Plisetsky patriarch for him to see.

Nikolai gawked, seeing the golden bands, "Oh." He then went back to watching his show, "Da..."

Yurio held up his hand to obscure his voice, "That's probably the best you'll get."

"We'll take it." Yuri mused, letting his heart settle again.

Viktor finally felt comfortable as well and scooted his chair closer to his husband so he could wrap an arm around him as they continued to listen. Yuri just lifted his left hand, since it was closest, and poked Yurio in the face to turn his head back towards his new sponsor.

Mikhail still had his own hand out, and the teen nodded, reaching back to take it in his own, "Deal."

With that all done, the group stood up and prepared to leave. The elder Russian left a copy of the entire sponsorship agreement with the teen, though he knew it would likely end up on a pile of forgotten paperwork to gather dust eventually. Yurio followed them to the door and stepped out with them for a moment, shoving his hands into his hoodie's pockets to brace them against the cold Russian air.

He looked up at Viktor, who had in turn been looking up towards the sun, basking in what little warmth it could offer him, "It's almost a year to the day that you flew out of this place and went to Hasetsu. Now you're about to do it again."

"I won't leave without saying goodbye again, don't worry."

"That's actually not entirely what I meant."

Yuri percolated on that for a moment. Something about it was bothering him. He looked from Viktor to the teen, then at Mikhail, then at where he'd pulled his phone out to check what day it was again...something was off.

Then realization dawned.

"VIKTOR!"

"Hm?"

"We haven't invited either of them to our honeymoon party!" He blurted, "We haven't invited anyone!"

"Well, you said you wanted to keep it small and informal..."

"Yeah but that doesn't mean we shouldn't invite anyone." He clarified, turning to the others again, "Do you guys want to come!? Yuu-chan and her girls are setting up the whole thing at the Ice Castle! We're gonna do encore performances of some of our old shows so the family can see them in person! You should do some of yours!"

Yurio looked at him sharply, his one visible iris shrinking a little as he was reminded. He shook his head, "Wait here a minute."

The Asian was left dumbfounded, "...What...

They waited for what felt like a while, but pretty soon, the teen was coming back out again, this time with something in his hands. Clean and folded, packaged neatly in a paper bundle with a clear plastic window in the front to show what it was...the trio recognized it as Yurio's Agape costume. He held it
for a moment, and then stepped up to Viktor to give it back.

"I won my Senior debut at the Grand Prix Final with this...but I've been a poor example of living up
to what it means. I want to return it."

His elder was a bit stunned by it, and he took the package gently in his own hands, "...You had your
reasons. I'm glad you tried anyway though."

"I'll come to Hasetsu and I'll do a show to replace this one." Yurio continued, "But it'll be the one I
abandoned before the European Championships. I think you'll both like it better anyway. I'll...work
on it this week to iron out the kinks, now that I know I can pay the rink fees again."

Mikhail was happy to hear it, but he said nothing.

Yuri was comically overcome with emotion at that point, latching onto the teen like he'd intended to
after winning his spot in the Grand Prix Final Six at the Rostelecom Cup, "I can't wait to see it!"

Viktor joined in on the hug, pulling both his favorite Yuri's close...then reaching to grab his uncle
and yank him into the pile as well.

"That went pretty well, I think." Viktor said as they started heading back, stopped at a light for a
moment, "I think he might actually pull through this one."

"Then there's only one last thing to deal with." Mikhail reminded him.

"Can't we do that tomorrow?" The younger Russian whined.

"You keep talking about it like I have to call your father. We're just calling the lawyer."

"Mmmmmmmmmmnnnnnnnnnnnn..." Viktor growled, lowering his head as the light turned green again.

Yuri could feel his tension rising from where he had his hand on the man's thigh, and he rubbed his
thumb back and forth slowly to help ease it off again.

When they finally got back to the house, Viktor was still a bit ruffled, watching dubiously as his
uncle dialed the dreaded phone number and set his phone to speaker on the kitchen island. He was
sitting sideways on the couch, with Yuri close by, while their elder pulled up one of the wooden
chairs from the side-table.

The conversation clicked in, and what sounded like a secretary answered. Once again, everything
was in Russian, so Yuri settled in with his phone to wait for the end, or a translation, whichever
came first. His mind wandered to all the skating friends he'd have wanted to invite to their late
wedding party if he'd realized it was okay to do so...but last-minute air-fare and travel plans were
notoriously difficult for people to plan for, especially if they weren't rolling in victory winnings.

*Maybe Phichit can come...he won a nice pot from his gold at the Cup of China...maybe Chris, too...*

A different voice took over the phone after Mikhail identified himself.

[Hey...he's here.] The Russian explained, [You're on speaker.]
Greetings from Michurinskoye, Mr. Nikiforov. It's been difficult to track you down.

Hi~ Viktor tried to sound amiable, even if he was screaming internally.

We thought it would be a lot easier since we know who you are, but when we went through the Russian Skating Federation to try and get your contact information, they said there was a ban from the upper levels of the ISU to not give it out unless there was a Court Order. We don't have that kind of power when just doling out insurance policies, so unfortunately...

I know. Carry on.

Very well... Your mother had a policy on her life and listed you as its sole beneficiary. The policy is worth ₽100,000,000, but-

Wait, what? It's worth how much?

₽100,000,000

Mikhail was doing math pretty much immediately, picking up his phone to check the currency conversion rate. Viktor was doing the same.

Yuri lifted his head in confusion, "What's all the sudden energy for?"

"That's almost ¥200,000,000!"

"Oh, you went for Yen? I guess that makes sense."

"What'd you convert it to?"

"American dollars, since they style themselves the world currency standard. It's almost 2 million buckeroonies."

Yuri was practically choking on himself. Viktor pulled him close and pat his back, "Breathe, Yuri...in and out, slow."

Mr. Nikiforov.] The lawyer continued: Mikhail set the phone back down sheepishly, [I know it's a lot to take in, but there are a few things we need to discuss before we can make this payment out to you.]

[...Like what?]

This policy was started only 2 months before Mrs. Nikiforov's passing. There are rules in place to prevent fraud, and...well, for a policy to come due so quickly...it's suspicious.

[...What are you saying? I can't prove anything. I wasn't even in the country when the accident happened.]

We know, you were in South Korea. But we need to conduct an investigation anyway.

You're not going to find much on me. I hadn't talked to her in nearly 10 years.

It's not you we mean to investigate.

Viktor smacked his face, [Oh.]
CHAPTER SIXTY SEVEN

The night was an uneasy one. Mikhail had left to go to his hotel, having a taxi come pick him up instead of making Viktor drive him around. When the younger Russian finally closed the door, he pressed his forehead to the dark panel.

"See? We should have a proper guest room."

"You sure you want to wish for that right now?" Yuri wondered, standing slightly behind him with his arms crossed, "You always get a bit randy after a conflict, and I doubt you'd be so eager if your family was in earshot."

"Keyword being 'after.'" Viktor corrected, hardly being eager at all in that moment, "This is 'in progress.' I don't even feel like I can breathe right now. I'd rather just drop this whole thing and let the money vanish than go back up to that stupid little town to find out if Konstantin drove my mother to run her car into a tree on purpose or not."

"You wouldn't be going alone." Yuri pointed out, stepping up behind his partner to wrap his arms around him, "Whatever the results end up being...I think this would be a good opportunity for closure."

"That's what I thought last time."

"We really should've seen this coming. After the package your mom left behind, it's a wonder an inheritance of some sort didn't come up already."

"And if my mother was pushed to suicide, then I'll have a black mark on my soul and I'll be out the insurance payment. The money isn't worth it to me. I'll be bald from stress by the time this is all done!" Viktor cupped his head with both hands, "My hair means more to me than that!"

"Viktor..." Yuri gawked at him, but then reached up to pull the man's hands off his head, cupped it in his own, and pulled him down enough to kiss his crown, "I won't let any of it fall out. Not one strand. Now, come... You said before that you wanted plum wine, so I'll get you some."

The Russian found some kind of dry humor on that, and smiled in spite of himself, "Well, at least my Japanese was understandable... There's hope for me yet."

Yuri nodded enthusiastically, "There's always hope."

He moved his husband back into the livingroom and put him on the couch, going back to the bedroom only long enough to grab several blankets from the linen closet, return, and wrap the man in each and every one of them.

"There, now you're a Viktor burrito...a Vikturrito." He mused, leaving the man in the newly-made blanket nest on the floor just in front of the aforementioned couch.

Viktor was starting to enjoy the strange attention, and he nestled into the warmth of the pile as he faintly heard the clinking of glasses and the uncorking of a new bottle of wine in the kitchen behind him. If there was anything Viktor was good at, it was keeping an ample supply of a variety of drinkables. There was something for every occasion...especially the plum wine he'd developed a taste for while in Japan for the Grand Prix Final in Fukuoka; the very city that they'd use to fly out of
When Yuri finally returned with two glasses of the wine he'd promised, Viktor looked at him curiously. He slid one hand out through the folds of the numerous blankets and took the glass as it was offered, smelled the aroma as he spun the purple liquid around in the flute a little bit, and then sipped at it.

"It occurred to me...this wine came from Fukuoka." He started saying as Yuri sat cross-legged next to him and was starting to sip his own wine, "I was in Fukuoka once for a Grand Prix Final."

"Yes." The man nodded, "I was still in Detroit at the time. I had to watch you on TV after the fact because of the time difference. I made everyone around me crazy because I was complaining so much about how close you were to my home town, especially since Skate America was in Detroit that year, and you'd been made to go there for the GP Series. I could practically throw a rock at the Joe Louis Arena from where I was staying at the time. Ahhh I was so mad I couldn't go... I had gotten a really bad cold at the time and was delirious in my apartment while on meds. Felt drunk the whole time. Phichit-kun could tell you."

"Drunk on cough medicine...that would've been a sight to see."

"...Yeah, except for all the snot and coughing and misery." Yuri pointed out.

"You know, when I was in Tokyo for Worlds..." Viktor went on, "I'd considered going to your family's hot spring, but I thought better of it. Even without knowing you'd forgotten what you said in Sochi, I felt bad thinking I'd go there to dangle myself in front of you, only to leave again without agreeing to be your coach."

"I would've legitimately died if you'd come for any reason other than the coaching thing...that in itself was already hard to believe for a long time."

"Yeah." Viktor nodded, "So being in Japan at the time was really weird. Yurio even told me that I had this dead look on my face when I got my gold medal there, like I didn't have my heart in it even though I'd just won. It was the last time I'd done Aria in competition...my siren-song for someone who wasn't even listening anymore...! I had my whole heart in that Free Skate...I just didn't have the energy to be excited about winning anymore." He had such a sad laugh at that, "I just went home after that and took some time off to be a lump, not knowing what else to do."

Yuri stretched his legs out and leaned against the couch, holding himself up with one arm on the seat cushion as the other held his half-empty wine glass, "Do you ever wonder what would've happened if we'd have run into each other after that, if not for you coming to be my coach? I was trying to get back into shape on my own, so I might've seen you in competition if you'd found your inspiration some other way."

"I like to think I would've done the right thing." Viktor drained the last of what he had and set the glass aside where his blanket-pile wouldn't knock it over, "But you were so timid back then..."

"Yeah, I probably would've run away." The younger skater admitted, "Slightly less gracefully than I did in Sochi, too. Might've involved some screaming."

Viktor shook his head and laughed quietly, twisting around to grab the remote control for the television, and clicking it on to resume watching footage of the World Championships from the night before. As he set the controller down next to his leg, he held that same hand out to invite Yuri closer, pulling the blankets away just enough to wrap them around his husband as he sat in front of him, between his crossed legs.
It was already nice and warm under the pile when Yuri settled, leaning into his partner's chest as the man's arms came around him beneath the blankets. Viktor pressed his cheek against the back of Yuri's neck and shoulder, holding for a moment before finally looking up again to see what was on the screen ahead of them.

"Ah...your best Eros performance ever." He mused, "Not one mistake. You even did the lip-lick again at the start...nice touch."

"I had a lot of fun doing that one." Yuri said, watching his own performance curiously, "Even after Yurio barged in on us." He turned back to look at his husband with the Eros-face he'd gotten so good at, "I think you'd done just enough to get the results you wanted, hm?"

"Just enough." Viktor repeated, moving his hands again suddenly, "...for then."

For once, Yuri didn't jump or flinch when his husband took hold of him, he just leaned further into him and let him do what he wanted, "...Viktor..."

"Hm...maybe I am getting too obvious..." The Russian wondered, doing as he will down below while starting to nibble at his partner's neck.

"This is a good obvious." Yuri insisted, "An...incredibly good...amazing kind of obvious..."

The performance on the screen went on entirely unnoticed. Neither could even remember who'd gone up after Eros ended. Paying attention to the television wasn't on either of their minds anymore anyway. Viktor kept on with his play and Yuri continued to do his best to keep the blankets over them. Fairly soon though, his fingers lost their strength, and the layers started falling away, landing in a circular heap around them.

The longer it went on, the more Yuri pushed back against Viktor's chest. It was almost to the point where Viktor couldn't even hold himself up anymore, and was about to lean against the seat-cushions of the couch when he realized...he was too far away for that. Mild confusion quickly turned to internal panic, and his hands came away to brace himself before he fell completely backward.

As the Russian thumped down onto his back, Yuri found the whole thing rather funny, twisting around despite himself to watch his husband reacquaint himself with his surroundings.

"Ah...sorry about that!" Viktor mused, a little embarrassed, "Thought the couch was closer than it wa-"

Yuri was on top of him, pressing firmly against the taller man's hips as he kissed him. He held there for a moment, but then pushed up where his hands had become set on either side of Viktor's lithe frame, "...I don't...feel anything..." He commented, pressing against him again as though second-guessing himself, but still confused, "Viktor... You're not...?"

Pale hands went between them again to retake what they'd held before, and Viktor raised his legs up on either side of Yuri's waist to pin him close. He craned his head up to touch his nose to his partner's, "I'm doing this for you, not for me."

"But...nh..."

"Later." Viktor insisted, continuing his expert movements, "Sometimes all I want to do is make you happy, because that's the only way I'll be happy."

Yuri pressed his forehead against his husband's, stuck as he was, and kissed him just as Viktor's tugs and strokes finished him. His body became weaker after that, and he slumped down, lying directly
on top of the man in the heap of blankets on the floor.

Viktor snaked his hands under the man's shirt as he moved them back around him to hug him close, and held him there as long as he could.

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The trip began early. Too early. And somehow, despite having it explained some 4 times already, no one could understand how or why Yurio was in the car with them as Mikhail drove them north.

...Something about the skating rink not being open yet...? And his grandpa couldn't pick him up so he called Mikhail? Huh...? It's not bright enough outside yet for any of this to make sense...

Viktor had given up trying to understand it after the second attempt anyway. He and Yuri had piled into the back seat of his car after Viktor handed his uncle the keys, and the both of them proceeded to sleep for as much of the trip as possible. Thankfully, no one really tried to make any conversation. Yurio listened to music on his phone while the radio played quietly for the elder, and the other two were too unconscious to care what was playing either way.

There was a brief intermission to the trip and Viktor was forced to be awake for a moment. He blinked blearily at the small woman who greeted him in the last big town before the ramshackle hills of his childhood. She sounded familiar...

Oh, she must be the lawyer lady. She seems nice. Konstantin will eat her alive, but she seems nice.

She was saying something, but he couldn't really hear the words. Mikhail took over the conversation after that, mercifully, and soon after, Viktor was asleep again in the back of the car. Yuri was fully awake though by then, and he quietly held onto his husband as the last leg of the journey ended.

...He wouldn't be so tired if he could sleep properly... Yuri thought, stroking the man's hair idly as he watched the countryside pass by, Hopefully this can all be sorted out today...I don't want him thinking about this when we get back to Hasetsu. He's been looking forward to that too much for it to be ruined now by something like this.

He started to feel a little guilty though.

I wonder if all of this would've even been half as bad if I hadn't been there for the first meeting? If Konstantin hadn't seen our rings...?

Viktor suddenly sneezed lightly and was up again, looking forward and then out the window like a zombie newly risen from the grave, "Are we there yet?"

"Not quite..."

Grumbling, Viktor pulled out his phone...and realized there was no service, "The world conspires against me."

"It'll be maybe 20 minutes." Mikhail said.

"Remind me again why I agreed to this?"

"Because the voice of reason prevailed." He answered, "And also because I said so."
"Yes, dad."

Mikhail practically choked on himself the same way Yuri almost had the night before when they’d heard the benefit total. Viktor found it oddly funny, and had a devious smile on his face where he leaned his head back against the seat.

"Does...does Konstantin even know we're coming?" Yuri wondered for both of them, "Or is this going to be some huge surprise?"

"Mix of both." Mikhail answered, "I talked to him after I got to my hotel room last night."

"Isn't that kind of like tipping off the enemy?" Yurio asked dubiously, pulling one earbud out, "Now he's just gonna hide everything."

"I don't think he has anything to hide." Mikhail said with a shrug, "He would never have cooperated with the lawyer in the first place if he did. He may still have a rotary phone, but Konstantin isn't an idiot."

"What's a rotary phone...?"

In that moment...Viktor suddenly felt very...very...old.
CHAPTER SIXTY EIGHT

The dreaded hour had finally come, and Viktor started to recognize things. The old rickety bridge that was bound to collapse any day, and had been for years...and tree that had been split in half by lightening...the hamlet whose buildings probably hadn't been updated since the 1930s...

"I don't think I've seen so many abandoned structures in my whole life." Yuri commented, "This must be the 4th factory just since leaving Michu...Michu rain socky?"

"Michurinskoye." Viktor corrected; his fingers were starting to get stiff where he had them laced through his husband's.

"The fall of Communism wasn't pleasant for rural Russia." Mikhail explained, "Unlike Japan after the bombs fell, Russia never quite recovered."

"I heard that peoples' shadows got burned into the ground, and you can still see them to this day." Yurio said morbidly, almost too interested.

"Hasetsu really isn't that far from Nagasaki." Yuri noted grimly, "It's only a 3 hour train ride, slightly further away than Fukuoka is. My grandparents probably saw the glow on the horizon."

The realization seemed stark, and Yurio turned back to face the front of the car quietly.

"We're here." Mikhail announced soon thereafter.

Yuri could feel Viktor's fingers tighten around his hand, but he just continued the slow rub back and forth over where his thumb covered the other. It was only a temporary relief though, as Viktor pulled his hands away to put his gloves on; the wind outside was still bitter cold. Yuri followed suit, and soon, they were all exiting the car, shoes crunching on snow and frozen mud.

The car that had followed them the last stretch of the journey pulled up right after that.

Mikhail closed the driver's side door and then turned to face the pair, looking specifically at the shorter of them though, "None of these people have ever ventured more than 10 kilometers away from this place, and none but Konstantin himself has ever seen an Asian before. They'll look at you like you're an alien. Try not to take it personally."

"...Oh." Yuri wasn't sure how to answer, and that was the best he could think of. He blinked to regain his train of thought, only to feel Viktor taking his hand to pull it into his coat pocket and hold it there. That's when he could feel the slight tremble, and he gave his husband's hand a gentle squeeze as they moved off to ascend the small hill.

Yurio was looking around in bored disgust, "What a little shit-hole..."

"Language."

"...What a perfectly horrible little...place." He corrected with a tone of annoyance.

"It's looked like this since before I was born." Viktor said.

"You kidding?" Mikhail mused, "It's looked like this since before I was born."
Viktor grimaced, "Yeeeesh."

The group and their official tag-alongs started heading up the hill; to the left was the town graveyard, though it felt more like a family graveyard given how most of the interred were Nikiforovs and Rozovskys. To the right, by a meager distance, was the childhood home that Viktor had labeled 'the rancid little shack.' The door opened, and Viktor stopped walking immediately.

"...Viktor..."

"I can't do this." He answered, backstepping to retreat, though Yuri held him where he was anyway.

"You don't have to be there for the first part." Mikhail explained, "Go say hi to your mother or something."

Viktor took the escape route for everything it was worth, but...he completely bypassed the path that went left and instead went right over the top of the hill and went down behind it, dragging Yuri with him. Yurio followed after them for lack of any other ideas.

To Yuri's surprise, Viktor let go of his hand and started running at full speed, easily able to out-pace them. Try as they might to keep up, the silver-haired figure was out of sight fairly quickly, practically disappearing into the woods, hidden by black-barked trees and the sides of small hills and large rocks. He didn't answer when the two called out to him.

"...Does he want us to follow?" Yuri wondered.

"Not like he can hide." The teen pointed out, trying to get a better vantage by standing on one of the large frozen stones in the midst of the valley-like 'pit' that Viktor had abandoned them in. As they walked across, following Viktor's footsteps in the snow, the older skater felt his foot go through a patch of thin ice, splashing at the freezing-cold water just beneath it.

"...Is this a pond?" He wondered aloud, looking at the meager snowdrift going across it as he set his shoe back on normal terrain, "I wonder if he skated here as a kid."

"We better find him before he breaks a leg on a snow-covered root or something." Yurio insisted, jogging ahead. Yuri followed close behind.

Viktor's trail was as obvious as any, but the terrain was unforgiving. The woods were thick and obstacles seemed to get in the way every time it seemed like their path might be clear for a moment. The way the trail went that the Russian had carved though, it was like he knew where he was going, though that was blatantly clear enough that neither of two had to mention it. They followed cautiously for 15 or 20 minutes before they finally found the man again...sitting on the top of what looked like an abandoned tank, half-buried in the snow and partly reclaimed by nature.

Trees weren't quite so densely packed around the area, perhaps only being new growth since the tank had originally made its way through who-knows-how-long ago.

Both Yuri and Yurio were mystified by the area, realizing there were 2 other abandoned and broken tanks not far away, blending in with the trees and rocks. The 'clearing' was more like a large area where the trees were shorter and thinner than the ancient forest surrounding it, and didn't look as thickly planted until reaching the brush of old growth.

Viktor had somehow managed to get onto the top-most part of the metal shell, probably using the upward-slanting cannon barrel to hoist himself up. His reach was further than either of the younger skaters' though and they found it unlikely that they could follow unless they had help, so they skulked around the base of it and looked up at him.
"...Viktor." Yuri said softly, "Why'd you run off?"

The man was holding his knees where he sat, looking out over top of them to observe his frigid domain, "...This used to be my Fortress of Solitude. It looks different after 20 plus years, but...it's still more or less the same." He lifted his head a little, "I even saw a bear here once. Hid inside the tank to avoid notice. Scariest moment of my young life, up until my father found out I was skating. I'd rather have dealt with the bear."

Yuri watched cautiously as his husband finally stood up again, gloved hands stuffed in his coat pockets as he looked out again, then pointing east, "That's the direction of the steel mill I should've been working in if I hadn't left. I'm surprised they never took these tanks and melted them down to make them useful...but maybe they don't know they're here."

"Or it's too much of a pain to dig them out." Yurio suggested, kicking the snow off a few stones that had likely left the tank too crippled to move in the first place, partly crushed and sticking through the bands that protected the huge metal wheels.

Viktor pointed south, "That's the way back." Then west, "Helsinki is that way, across the Gulf of Finland, almost perfectly following the parallel lines on a globe. And these..." He continued, reaching into a small open hatch that had a small tree growing out of it, pulling out a ratted-up and tattered green backpack, tossing it to the ground at the others' feet, "...are the first skates I ever owned."

Out of the moth-eaten bag came the clatter of metal; two long, thin bands of grey wood that held precariously to the bent and worn aluminum blades, which in turn had been bolted to the bottom of what looked like a child's pair of boots. The blades were too large for the wearer, by far...an adult's size.

"Those were in that tank this entire time...?" Yuri wondered cautiously, "They must've been here for..."

"Since before I left." Viktor confirmed, finally coming down from his perch with a thump, and looking down on the mess with tired eyes, "Twenty three years? Twenty four? Something like that."

"Jeeze, these have been here as long as I've been alive."

"You aged better." Viktor mused, sneaking an arm around his back, "And I can get more out of you."

Yuri's face flushed a little even as Yurio was rolling his eyes.

"It's weird being back here after so long." Viktor went on, looking around, "In a way it looks exactly the same, but...it's different enough that I know time hasn't entirely stood still while I was away. In a few weeks, most of the snow will be gone...the woods will actually have noise in them again. For now...it's just a cold, hollow wasteland. You can hear the wolves singing out here sometimes, though, and watch the auroras."

"...Wolves, bears...what else is out in these woods?" Yuri wondered anxiously.

"Lynx, badgers, foxes...boars." Viktor laughed, "Massive, angry, blood-thirsty Russian boars."

"Aaaaaaand I think we should go back." Yuri gestured to the path they came from.

It took longer to leave than it did to arrive, and when they finally made it past the 'pond' and climbed back up the wavy hill that lead back to (what could only loosely be called) civilization, they found
Mikhail waiting for them, looking at his phone with an exasperated expression.

"Now I know why Konstantin keeps that petrified relic." He grumbled, unable to send messages or call out on his smart-phone, "Oi!" He hollered, seeing the trio coming up the way, "You've been gone for over an hour. What the hell? Thought I was going to have to send a search party."

"Viktor needed to go sightseeing." Yurio explained.

Mikhail cocked a brow, then gestured around, "Well, there's the sights...you've seen them...now let's go!"

Yuri found the tone odd, "...You okay, Mikhail? You seem kind of...antsy."

"You sit in a room with a lawyer and a bear for an hour and try to keep your cool." He answered.

"...Point taken."

"Did something happen?" Viktor wondered pensively, walking slower again.

"In the strictest interpretation of the word 'happen,' no...it's just tense. You're papa really hates being interrogated about Tatiyana."

"Please don't call him that." The younger Russian pleaded, "He's nothing to me but 'Konstantin.'"

"Whatever you want, kid, but you still have to go in there." Mikhail gestured towards the small single-story house and started walking over.

They could see that everyone but the bear himself had left the household to take a break outside, and were talking amongst themselves as the group approached. The small woman from before, the lawyer at the center of it all, stepped off as she saw them coming.

[It's good that you're back. We can't proceed without you there.] She said to Viktor.

[Great...]\n
"Let's just get it done. The sooner you go in, the sooner you can come out again." Mikhail said, trying to find some menial silver lining.

Viktor held tight to where he held Yuri's hand in his coat pocket, and leaned down a little to whisper, "Stammi vicino."

He nodded in return, "Io sono pronto. Andiamo."

The Russian lifted his head right away in surprise, only to see Yuri smiling up at him.

"I've been wanting to use that forever." He said, quite proud of himself.

The small woman and the two men who stayed near her were waiting, holding the door open to let them all inside. Viktor went with Yuri in tow, and Yurio followed close behind, but Mikhail stayed out. The younger Russian looked back at him, "Aren't you coming?"

"I've done my part. The rest is you. I'm...going to say hi to my sister." He answered, turning away before anything else could be said on the matter.

"...Oh..." Viktor lowered his head, and reluctantly went through the threshold, keeping his eyes down as he instinctively rounded a corner to avoid where he suspected his father was sitting, waiting.
Yuri looked around on his behalf while Yurio scuttled in behind them, taking up a place near the wood stove to warm up after their winter adventure. The Asian kept his hand where it was, hidden in Viktor's coat pocket, trying to be what little support he could even as he felt Viktor's obvious tremble.

[You let go of that boy's hand, Viktor, or you get nothing.] He could hear Konstantin's voice saying.

Viktor went straight to 11 though with his reply, [I swear to God, if you say one more word about my relationship with my husband, I'm going to kiss him right here in front of you, with tongue, and you'll never get the image out of your mind. BACK OFF.]

Yuri's fingers hurt where his partner clenched them, but he didn't complain...he held fast until Viktor himself loosened his grip a little. Yurio just side-eyed everyone, listening quietly while he warmed up his hands.

[Mr. Konstantin, with all due respect, whether this policy is paid out doesn't depend on what you think of your son.]

The gruff old man crossed his arms even tighter, but the presence of the two men with the lawyer made him behave. They weren't just associates of the firm...they were Russian police meant to keep the proceedings peaceful.

[So let's confirm some things. Mr. Viktor, you'll need to answer most of these.] The woman was starting, looking at the documents in front of her, [Is it correct that you left home at age 12?]*

[Yes.]

[For what reason did you leave?]

[I was scouted by Yakov Feltsman for a skating career with the ISU, and my father didn't want me to go. So in his infinite wisdom, he decided to punch me so hard in the eye that I thought I'd go blind, thereby attempting to ruin my plans. Yakov took me to the hospital in St. Petersburg, and I never came back here.]

[And you became an Emancipated Minor soon after that.]

[Yes.]

[For how long were you in contact with your mother, Tatiyana, after that?]

Viktor thought for a moment, [The last official correspondence was 12 years ago, but we had been speaking only sporadically by then.]

[Were you at any time aware that a life insurance policy had been enacted, whereby you would be a beneficiary?]

[No.]

[And you understand that if it turns out that this unfortunate death was due to suicide, your claim to these benefits is null and void.]

[Yes.]

[Tatiyana didn't kill herself. That's a sin, and she knew it.] Konstantin interrupted, [Don't smear her name by suggesting otherwise.]
[It's not a suggestion, Mr. Konstantin.] The lawyer wasn't even looking at him, marking off the paperwork as she spoke, [On February 14th of this year, the accident occurred, and it took place 3 kilometers from here. Correct?]

[Yes.]

[Under what circumstances were you notified?] She finally looked up at the huge man.

[I found her myself.] Konstantin answered, [She left the night before with our only car. I took a horse when she didn't come back after dawn. She had already died when I found her.]

[Did you, at any time, handle the body?]  

[Yes, I tried to get her out to bring her home, but she was too cold from the storm. I had to le-] The man drew in an unexpected breath, and started again, [...I had to leave her there to come back and phone for help.]

[Did you see anything unusual about her circumstance or the accident site?]  

[It was covered over with new snow. I saw nothing.]  

Yuri was just as surprised as Viktor to see the patriarch stumble over his words as he had, and he looked up at his husband, whispering, "What happened? What'd he say?"

Viktor leaned down a little to explain, "He said he had to leave my mother behind in the car after he found her. She was too frozen to get out."

"...That's awful..."  

[So there were no tracks to follow, debris, animal tracks or roadkill?]  

[There was a snowstorm. Whatever might've been there had all night to get covered up. I imagine it was the storm that killed her.]  

[And why did she decide to drive in those conditions?]  

Konstantin fell silent after that, turning his head away grimly.  

[Mr. Konstantin, please answer the question.]  

[We fought. She wanted to leave.]  

[Leave the house or leave you?]  

[Both.]
CHAPTER SIXTY NINE

Viktor was still stunned, even though numerous questions had been asked and answered since the one he'd considered the bomb-shell. Yuri noticed him being a space-cadet and waved a hand in front of his face to bring him back. He shook his head and drew in a breath, "...She wanted to leave him." He whispered, listening to what he considered meaningless details about further in the past than he was interested in, "After all that time."

"Why?" Yuri whispered back curiously.

"I think they're getting to that."

[...]was always a contentious issue, but she never let it go. An obedient wife does as her husband commands. I commanded she stop watching figure skating. She refused. God's law is the Final Law and I reminded her what her place was.] Konstantin was saying.

Yurio was immediately in front of Viktor at that point, both hands on his chest to keep him where he was, which surprised both Viktor and Yuri.

"...What was that for?" Yuri wondered quietly.

"Dumbass just admitted to beating his wife." Yurio explained.

Viktor's momentary shock at the blond's actions had lapsed and his was grinding his teeth in simmering fury.

[Can you explain exactly what you mean by that?] The lawyer asked.

[The wife is to submit to the husband, as the husband submits to God alone. Those who do not submit are punished.]

[You don't need to explain religion to me, Mr. Konstantin, only your specific actions. Did you hit your wife the night she left?]

[No.]

[LIAR!] Viktor yelled out, held back only by both Yuris doing their best to keep him rooted, [WHAT DID YOU DO TO HER!?!]

[I never once laid a hand on Tatiyana.] Konstantin continued firmly, [Although I would have been well within my right to do so if I had.]

[Please explain then what you did that made her want to flee in a blizzard.]

[You'll notice there is no television here.] The man held his hand out, [But the stand where it would've been is present.]

Both Yuris felt Viktor's body ease up a little bit under his many layers, though they still held him down where they had him. Yuri saw the gesture the gruff old man had made and furrowed his brow as he tried to piece together his understanding of what it meant.

[I caught her watching skating for the last time. She had put on a documentary program about Viktor.
So I took the television outside and threw it in the pond.

The group could practically hear the echoes of the argument bouncing off the walls of the small wooden house, followed by the jingle of keys and the slam of a door. Viktor was clearly shaken, [I always knew you were the reason why she cut me off...] He started, quietly, [I always knew it was because of you... but to hear you admit it like this, in your own words...]

[You could've quit your dancing and come home anytime. You did this to her.]

[Oh! This is MY fault!?] Viktor barked, barely held back now, [ALL I DID WAS SKATE. I thought one day you'd be proud of my accomplishments! FIVE TIME consecutive champion at EVERY MAJOR INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION ON THIS EARTH! FIVE! I EVEN WON GOLD FOR RUSSIA AT THE OLYMPICS! But you!? You didn't care at all! You've spent your whole life SO hung-up on ONE embarrassing moment from CHILDHOOD that you wouldn't allow anyone else to enjoy something that's been part of Russian culture FOR OVER THREE THOUSAND YEARS.]

The bear's eyes narrowed, but he stayed quiet.

[If you hadn't grown up to be the biggest man in the town, your inane hatred for skating would've made you a laughing-stock.] Viktor finally righted himself and adjusted where his coat and scarf had become disheveled, then pulled away and headed back towards the door, feet stomping as he went. The door was yanked open roughly, [BOTH OF YOU, OUT.]

Yuri just stood there in a confused stupor, so the teen grabbed his wrist and pulled him quickly from the hovel, realizing the Asian had no idea what had been said... or maybe mostly that Viktor didn't realize he was still speaking in Russian. Viktor slammed the door so hard behind them that the handle broke, and then continued to stomp off through the snow in a fury.

Mikhail even noticed from where he'd been in the graveyard, his head peeking up from where he'd had it lowered in front of his sister's grave marker. He rubbed his nose and eyes quickly before standing and heading over to find out what Chernobyl-level meltdown had just taken place.

Yuri tried to go after his husband but Yurio held him back, still holding to where he'd grabbed his wrist a minute before, "Viktor!"

"Let him go. He needs a bit to himself."

"But-"

"He doesn't need you smothering him all the time!"

"But I-"

"If he wanted you all over him right now then why didn't he drag you off himself!?" Yurio barked, "He doesn't!"

"That's cruel." Mikhail said, stepping closer to them as Yuri was on the verge of tears, "Even if you're right, you didn't need to say it like that." He gestured with one hand to the Asian, and gave a look, "Apologize."

Yurio was gritting his teeth.

"Sometimes people are too proud to ask for help when they need it! Remember!?!" Yuri finally blurted out, the tears falling from his eyes, "But I know him and I know what he needs without him
having to *ask!* He pushed his way past and started chasing after his partner, leaving the two alone at the fork in the path.

Mikhail and Yurio watched him clamber through the snow until he vanished past the two cars parked at the bottom of the hill. The elder cleared his throat a little.

"Don't say a word. I already know." Yurio grumbled to himself.

Yuri could see where Viktor had gone, following along the fence-line where a thick section of the forest had been allowed to continue growing. He'd rounded a corner just before the entrance to the more populated part of the small hamlet, and was heading east along the dirt road.

...*East...towards the steel mill...*

He finally caught sight of the man; Viktor had gotten rather far in the short time he'd been running. Yuri went as quickly as he could to catch up, calling out his name as he got closer. Viktor finally turned around as he heard Yuri's feet crunching in the snow close behind him, and he held his arms open for his husband to crash into him. He stroked the raven-black hair to soothe him.

"Yuri..."

The younger figure lifted his head, still trying to catch his breath.

"Why are you crying...?"

"Why...why are you running!?" Yuri panted, "*Stammi vicinino, right!? Non te ne andare, ho paura di perderti!*" His Italian accent was atrocious, but Viktor knew what he was trying to say anyway.

"*Partiamo insieme.*"

He was so relieved to hear those words, Yuri nearly collapsed right there, though Viktor held him up, took his ringed hand, and moved to make him run again. A single fossilized car passed them along the road before Viktor made a B-line for the interior of the woods after it was gone, dragging Yuri behind him. They'd run so far after that, that they were both huffing and puffing to catch their breath once Viktor finally stopped.

"...*So...so what'd...he say...*" Yuri asked, red-faced from the exertion, "...*What'd...YOU say?*"

"Their...last fight was over...*over me...*" Viktor answered, leaning with his back against a tree, "He...Konstantin took...the television...and threw it in the pond...cuz she..." He coughed a little, "Cuz she was watching some skate show about...me..."

"So he didn't...hit her after all...?"

"That's what he says...at least..."

There was silence after that as they finished catching their breath...feeling hot from the rush, but cold as ice again from the northern winter weather. Viktor kicked the snow a little bit before reaching down to grab a handful and form it into a ball, then chucking it at a thick tree some 20 paces away. It exploded on impact, leaving a small white smudge where the snow had stuck to the bark. Yuri did the same thing after, but hitting a different tree...almost. He had to throw a second snowball to finally hit the thing. Viktor couldn't help but smile at that, and together, they made it their mission to make sure every tree, no matter how big or small, had been walloped with snowball smudges. By the time they were done, they were out of breath again.
"...Feel better now?" Yuri wondered, crouching down in front of where Viktor had cleared off an old tree stump to sit down, and leaning into him with his arms wrapping around the man's chest, both of them still heaving for air.

"...A little..." The Russian answered, patting Yuri's head before leaving his hand weakly where it landed.

"I wonder how...long we've been gone...?" The younger man lifted his head, resting his chin on Viktor's scarf as he was leaning back.

"Probably not more than 20 minutes."

"We should head back."

"You keep making me go back to that mess. You should stop."

"Only because, at some point, when we leave again, we won't have to go back." Yuri explained, pulling up again to stand, and forcing Viktor up with him. He had that determined look in his eyes, as though trying to say 'we can do this' without speaking the words.

Viktor couldn't help but kiss him for it...and then drop a small ball of snow down the back of his coat, "Snega v pal'to~!" He laughed, bounding off the way they came as Yuri was frantically trying to get the icy block out of his clothing.

As they were walking back, the car that the lawyer's group had driven up in stopped alongside them, the window rolling down in front, [Mr. Nikiforov...we weren't sure when you'd turn up again so I gave everything to your uncle. We'll be in touch.]

[I'm moving to Japan next week...can I give you the address?]

[Yes, that would be helpful. Here...] She said, turning around to withdraw a paper and pen from her leather bag, [Write it here with your name and I'll see to it that future correspondence goes to you. Put your phone number as well, please.]

Viktor handed it right over to Yuri, "Put the address to Yu-Topia, if you don't mind."

"No, sure..." He answered, quickly writing it down before handing it back, "Here."

"Spasibo," The Russian quickly scrawled his contact info on the paper as well and then returned the items to their owner.

[Great.] The lawyer answered, putting them back into her bag. [Our review process won't take long. We'll be in touch soon.]

"Do svidaniya." Viktor nodded, waving as the window rolled up again and the car moved on down the dirt road.

"Well, at least this means we're done here."

"...Almost." The Russian said quietly, starting to walk again, and pulling Yuri gently along where he
once again held his hand in his coat pocket.

Soon, they were passing Viktor's car again at the base of the hill, and in turn, passed where Mikhail was waiting with Yurio. The Russian paused though, seeing Konstantin up in the graveyard where he himself had intended to go, and he let go of Yuri's hand.

"Go wait with the others. I'll be right there."

"Viktor..."

He shook his head, "Not this time." He spun Yuri around where he stood and gently pushed him towards the car, then turned off as well and started walking up the hill.

Mikhail went around to collect the nervous skater to make sure he wouldn't give chase; he had need of Yuri anyway.

Viktor anxiously walked up the hill and made the left turn, stepping up to the iron wrought gate to the small graveyard. Crosses dated back generations, but the stone marker that noted his mother's plot was an angel in prayer.

Konstantin didn't acknowledge him as he stepped up, and Viktor kept a safe distance, looking at the angel's face as though wishing it was Tatiyana's, just so he could know what she looked like at the end...before the end. He remembered what the accident had done to her, and so he'd blocked out everything he could except the look and feel of her long, wavy, silvery hair.

[You broke my door.]

The skater flinched a little, but stayed where he was; his left eye twitching, [You broke my face.]

[You broke my nose.]

[...You broke my face.]

There was an awkward silence between them.

[Mikhail told you, that shit.]

[Yes.]

[He and his sister were little scoundrels as kids. He was the first and foremost to taunt me after the incident.]

Viktor was a little surprised to hear it. Mikhail had never once confessed to his part in the childhood humiliation of his father.

[But...that wasn't the only reason I hated skating. Just the first one.] Konstantin said with a shrug, [In this place, you're strong, or you die. A man who couldn't work in the steel mill wasn't really a man at all. You had such a passion for skating that I thought it would make you weak.]

[I was never meant for the mill.]

[Seems the Lord had a different plan for you, right from the day you first cried out into this world.] He stood up, making Viktor take a step away, but he stayed still in front of the grave marker, [And I was a fool to try and make you deviate from it.]

[...Why the sudden about-face?] Viktor wondered cautiously.
[You broke my door.] He answered simply, [I've slammed that door a hundred times and never broke it...but you did. Only my son could do that.]

[Hmph...you loosened it for me.]

The gruff older man huffed a little, moving his hand to withdraw his vodka flask and take a small swig from it before putting it back, [I prayed long and hard, begging God for years to tell me why He took you from me, to put you into skating instead of inheriting my place here. I was never sure you'd make it as an athlete...so much competition, and with so many others working hard as well, if you weren't lucky, you'd have failed. At the mill, at least, if you worked hard, you'd get your due. There was no risk.]

Viktor wasn't sure how to answer that.

[But the Lord granted you the power to win in spite of everything. You came from nothing, and were granted a few years where you got to bask in His Glory with your achievements.]

He wanted to tell Konstantin about all the years of training, blood, sweat, and tears, heartbreak, and disappointment that went into getting to the top...but he supposed...a man who was so convinced that a deity was responsible for all of it in the end wouldn't appreciate the sentiment, so he kept it to himself.

[Now that I've accepted God's plan for you...I feel an overwhelming sense of regret. For driving you from home, and for quarreling with my wife...an argument that would eventually make God want to call her home. I've lost everything except the mill...that horrible Hell that I wanted you to join me in. It's all I have left now.]

[Maybe this point here is how it was meant to be all along.] Viktor suggested, willing to meet his father half-way.

[Mh...God wanted to teach me humility, I suppose. The more I fought against His Will, the more He sought to teach me.] He turned and looked at his son for the first time, [It took almost 20 years, but I think I've finally learned.]

[...So...you don't hate me?]

[I can't accept that you lie with another man, so don't ask me to. But...the skating...] He looked up at the sky, [That's God's work...and I suppose that makes it beautiful.]

Viktor forced himself to hold his ground as he saw his father turn on his heels and start walking towards him, but he couldn't stop himself from clenching his eyes shut as the man reached for him.

Mikhail was holding Yuri down with a hand over his mouth as they watched from the car, not knowing what had been said. Yuri flailed terribly.

The Russian felt that large, callused hand come up under his bangs and cup around the side of his head. He opened his right eye to see those blue eyes staring back at him, and felt the man's thumb circling around his eye. Oddly, as rough as Konstantin's skin was, he felt around with a gentleness that Viktor didn't know a steel worker could manage. When it was done, Konstantin moved his hand away and pat his son on the shoulder twice before stepping off again.

[You look just like her.]
Chapter 70

CHAPTER SEVENTY

Viktor was left speechless for quite some time after Konstantin went back to his house. All he could think to do was sit at the bench in front of his mother's grave and wonder about things.

...Should I say something to the gravestone? I wouldn't even know what to say. If everything my father believes is true, then she would know everything that's happened anyway.

He looked down at his gloved hands and drew in a deep breath.

"...Ja tebja ljublju, mamu. Ja vsegda znal vy smotrite mne."

"...How long should we leave him up there?" Yuri wondered, having calmed down significantly since seeing Konstantin walking away.

"As long as he wants," Mikhail said, "He told you to stay with us, so we'll all wait here until he's ready to come back."

They didn't have to wait long though, as the Russian rose from the bench and started heading back down the hill only a few minutes later.

Oddly though, his first statement was entirely unexpected.

"Why are you sitting on the hood of my car?"

Yurio gawked at him, and quietly slid off, standing to the side like he was trying to make it seem like he hadn't been sitting there at all.

Viktor just smiled, "Let's go back to St. Petersburg. I really want to skate."

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The week ended faster than any of them could've expected...but at least it was largely uneventful. There was skating, wine mulling, staying up all night and sleeping in all day, love making, more skating, a little bit of packing, saying goodbye to the Russian team...and then, finally...the flight.

Mikhail sat in the back seat with Yurio as Viktor drove his car to the airport, possibly for the last time. As they parked in the drop-off area, Viktor stayed in his seat for a few moments longer than he meant, trying to take in the smell and feel of everything, putting his hand on the steering wheel one last time. Finally though, he left the vehicle and went to meet Yuri at the back to grab their luggage.

They'd packed only what they'd need for the week; the costumes and gear for the show, the medals they'd won since last being in Hasetsu, their secret stash of fun-time items that they didn't want anyone messing with when the professional movers came through to package up everything they didn't take with them, the dog, and all of Makkachin's things.

A concierge attendant came to put all of their things on a trolley to move it through the airport more easily. Yuri kept the one small bag with the medals, but the rest went to be put into cargo. Viktor said
his goodbyes to his poodle before the poor creature was put into holding for the flight, and then turned to his uncle.

"You've done an unbelievable amount of stuff for me since popping up after Four Continents." He started, "I'm not even really sure how to thank you properly."

"Just put on one Hell of a show when Yuri and I get to Hasestu in a few days. Don't start without us!"

"We won't. I've been going back and forth with Yuu-chan and her girls, and they know we have a few more people coming." Yuri explained, "They've agreed to push things back until Thursday because the flight over is pretty brutal."

"What's it look like?" Yurio wondered, thinking it couldn't be worse than the flight Mikhail had booked for their own travel.

"A bit over an hour to get to our first layover in Moscow...then an 8 hour flight back to Incheon International in South Korea, then another short flight from there to Fukuoka." Yuri looked at their tickets, "Heh, the layovers are longer than the two shorter flights themselves are. Just over 14 hours for everything."

"That's shorter than ours. We have a 3rd layover in Tokyo." Mikhail said with a sigh.

"Good luck with that. I hope you picked 1st class seats!" Viktor laughed.

"For the big one, yeah...the short little flights, nah."

Viktor shook his head and laughed, "Yuri insisted on the same thing. He saw the price for the tickets and nearly had a heart attack!"

"Even before the currency exchange, seeing a ticket for 75,000 rubles was crazy." Yuri agreed, "And that was just for ONE."

The Russian nodded, but then moved to fiddle with his keychain, unhooking the keys for his house, mailbox, and car, and putting them delicately into his uncle's open hand, "Well...it's all officially yours then, I guess."

"Don't worry so much. I'll take care of it. I haven't let you down yet, have I?"

Viktor shook his head, "No... Just nervous in general. Time to go..."

Mikhail stepped forward to embrace his nephew, "We'll see you again soon. Safe travels."

Yuri had his arms out wide for the blond in front of him, "C'meeeeeere!"

"You embarrass me so much when you do that." Yurio grumbled, but doing as was expected, wrapping both arms around the slightly older skater as Yuri did the same in turn. But, this time, things were a little different...when they pulled back, Yurio moved in to kiss his cheek, "Do svidaniya."

Yuri was red-faced from the unexpected gesture, and eyeballed Viktor for answers, though all he got was laughter from both the silver-haired Russians, "You forgot about that custom? It's not as common anymore but it used to be all the rage! Some people still do the kiss three times! Or even worse, he could've kissed you on the mouth like they used to do!"
"I wasn't gonna kiss him on the mouth, Viktor!" Yurio protested, annoyed at all the fuss over such a normal tradition.

"I would hope not." Viktor mused, "I'd have gotten jealous."

"That would've been super weird." Yuri added, as each of them switched people to say goodbye to. Viktor made it entirely uncomfortable for the teen by literally draping himself over the blond rather dramatically.

"Damnit Viktor it's only gonna be like 3 days before I'm in Hasetsu!"

"But you kissed my little katsudon goodbye, like it's going to be for a long time! I have to live up to that!"

"Idiot! Get offa me!"

Yuri and Mikhail laughed quietly at the display, but then turned to one another and hugged fondly, "Even if it's only a few days, I'll be looking forward to when we see you again."

"Me too. I didn't realize how boring my life was until I started hanging around you guys." Mikhail agreed, "I might have to come by Hasetsu once in a while just to get my fix of fun."

"Just let us know. My family will always have room at Yu-Topia Katsuki for you."

"We should get pictures!" Viktor suggested, grabbing his phone quickly and shoving everyone together to get them into frame. It was more like a line-up, with everyone from front to back leaning slightly more forward than the person ahead of them, with Viktor in front holding up the camera, "Hashtag #BackToJapan, #LeavingStPetersburg!"

"You should document the whole trip." Yuri said, mostly sarcastically but partly seriously.

"That's a great idea!" The Russian gushed, adding more hashtags to the photo he'd just taken. Soon though, he pocketed the device again, and looked back at the group, "...All right, time to go for real now. We'll see you guys soon." He said, waving at them as he turned to head towards the doors. The two remaining Russians waved, and Yuri bowed, then headed off to catch up to his husband.

Within the hour, their first plane to Moscow was taking off. Viktor had to sit in the isle, which he hated, just to have some semblance of leg room, but Yuri put the arm-rest up so Viktor could lean on him until they had to land again. Despite it all though, by the time they landed just over an hour later, Viktor was stiff.

"I'll never let you look at prices again." He complained, trying to rub his lower back as they walked through the exit tunnel from the plane, "Never!"

"Sorry!"

Stepping into the terminal, Yuri took a good look around and reminisced.

"Coming here..." He took in a deep breath, as though the very air in Moscow was somehow different from other places, "It's like being back for the Rostelecom Cup again, and Sochi before it."

"I've been here too many times to appreciate it anymore." Viktor shrugged, "But I guess our places will be switched when we get back to Fukuoka." He looked around, trying to find the best place to take the next Instagram photo, but realizing there was nothing particularly unique about
Domodedovo Airport. He decided on the only other option. He dragged Yuri outside despite knowing they'd have to do their security check again to get back in...and took a pic of them standing in front of the main entrance with the airport's name on top. That pic of the two of them soon evolved into a pic with 4...then 12...then some 30 people in it, as numerous travelers recognized them and wanted photos of their own. Viktor was all too excited about it, especially since most people who came up addressed them as ‘Viktuuri’ instead of just by their own individual names. The final shot required someone to lend him their selfie-stick and he held his phone out far to get the entire group in frame. There were hugs and cheek-kisses and congratulations for winning the World Championships all around after that, which was still really weird for Yuri, but he started to get into it with Viktor's encouragement. It took up almost all of their time to finish up and get back to their wing, since Viktor wanted to tag everyone who'd been in the photo, or at least write in their names to the post if they didn't have their own Instagram accounts.

The Russian's mood calmed when they finally boarded the flight to Korea, with him stretching out in the over-sized plush seats of Business Class, "This is the only acceptable way to travel!"

"I can't believe how many people recognized us here," Yuri said, stowing his one bag in the overhead compartment, "I think that crowd photo had more people in it than the pic you took on the ice at the end of the Exhibition Gala."

"I think you're right..." Viktor mused, looking at the number of hits and comments the pic he'd just taken had accrued since posting it, "A lot of people are watching our progress right now. They're even asking what our next stop is so they can get there ahead of time. Should I tell them?"

"No," Yuri said, catching Viktor by surprise.

"...But..." He was practically pouting as Yuri moved to sit in his isle seat next to him.

Yuri just smiled though, "We should tell them."

Viktor's eyes glimmered as he said it, and pulled up the video function on his camera phone, "Ready?"

"Yes!"

"Recording!" The Russian hit the button, then waved at the image as the camera rolled, pulling Yuri closer into the frame, "Hey everyone! Viktor Nikiforov here with..."

"...Yuri Nikiforov!"

"...on our way out of Domodedovo Airport in Moscow! It's about 10:35pm local time, and our next stop is..."

"...Incheon International Airport in South Korea! It's a little over 8 hours of flight time..."

"...so it'll be about 2pm local time when we arrive..."

"...and we hope to see you when we land!"

"The plane should be starting to taxi in about 30 more minutes. We'll see you all at the Incheon ice rink! Bye for now~!"

Viktor clicked off the video and excitedly texted Yuri a copy to post on his own account, then moved to post the video on his own.
Yuri gawked at the tags when he saw the post show up on his feed, and his face flushed at the last one especially, "...Mh."

"Go on and post it to your account! Your fans won't know you're coming otherwise, and you probably have more on the Asia circuit than I do anyway!"

He scoffed at that, "That'll be the day."

Viktor just kept refreshing Yuri's page until he finally saw the video there.

"Aww..." Viktor hummed, "You don't sound excited at all!"

"Would an exclamation point on the end make it better?" Yuri wondered, putting his phone away, "I'm excited! I just don't do it in text very well I guess."

The Russian just pulled Yuri's hand up and kissed his ring between them, "Maybe that should be the thing I coach you on next."

"Throw another 2 gold medals on top of that as payment?"

"Oh no, at least another 20."

The younger skater fell back into his chair, "I'll never get to retire. I'll be out on the ice with my walker, the one with the tennis balls on the bottom, spinning around slow as can be and calling it a quad."

"I expect to see that in 40 years."

The plane took off about 45 minutes later, and after a glass of champagne, Viktor moved over to Yuri's fully reclining chair the same way Yuri had done in his when they'd first flown back to St. Petersburg together. It was entirely against the rules and flew in the face of security precautions, but no one was about to convince Viktor to go back to his own seat, especially after he'd already fallen asleep.

They skipped the in-flight meal in anticipation of better fare at Incheon...and when they finally arrived, they weren't disappointed. No less than 150 people had packed into the rink-side area.

"...For it having been practically 4am here when we made our posts, that's a really big group." Yuri commented, the both of them still partly unrecognizable from a distance.

"Wow~!" Viktor agreed, "Look! A bunch of them even brought snacks!"
"Well, I'm starving, let's go!"
Chapter 71

CHAPTER SEVENTY ONE

Viktor still had Yuri by the hand as they inspected the crowd from a distance, but the two exchanged looks and finally came out of hiding, half-jogging over to where the mass of welcome signs was waiting for them.

Somehow, shockingly, they were able to get pretty close before anyone really noticed them, since most of the crowd seemed busy talking amongst themselves in anticipation and weren't keeping an eye out.

"Hi~!" The Russian called out, "We're here!"

The nearest people who heard him turned their heads, and then realization dawned...and the entire crowd went crazy with excitement, rushing up to surround the pair. Similar to when they'd been spotted in Moscow, the crowd was pouring congratulations over them, especially Yuri, just as Viktor had predicted. Not that he himself was lacking attention, but...Yuri was Asian, and they were Asian, so he was kind of their hero.

Snacks and food were on offer fairly quickly after that, but feeding the weary travelers wasn't all the crowd was excited for. There were certain photo ops they were hungry for.

"If you two are married then why don't you ever post photos as a couple?" Someone asked, "You know, doing couple-type stuff!"

"...We've posted pics like that." Yuri blurted, although quietly, "The marriage certificate, the Gala that we danced at together... Uhh..."

Viktor suddenly realized what they meant, and pulled up from where he'd been nomming on a cupcake someone gave him; he didn't notice the frosting on his nose, "I know what they want!"

The younger skater looked at him, then laughed to himself, "I think I do, too." He leaned in to unexpectedly lick the tip of Viktor's nose, taking the icing with it, and pulled back again to watch the Russian's reaction. Several people took photos of it, and were leaning in as well as though the act were just a prelude.

Viktor just gawked in surprise, but then smiled, licking his fingers quickly before moving in to pull Yuri close and kiss him right there in front of the crowd. Cameras flashed and people cheered, some even hollering out to those who weren't so close that 'They kissed!' and 'They did it!' and then 'They're STILL DOING IT!'

When Viktor finally let Yuri come up for air again, they were both trying to catch their breath. Viktor nosed him a little, "We should skate with them a little! We still have time!"

"We have like 30 minutes."

"That's enough!" Viktor was up, trying to pull Yuri along, "We brought our skates as carry-ons because we knew we'd be in Incheon anyway! Let's use them!"

Those who were close enough to hear the man's words were off like a shot, rushing over to get their blue rental skates before there weren't any left. Yuri then reached for his backpack and unzipped it, handing Viktor the velvet cases with their medals before getting the skates from the bottom, and then
putting the medals back in the empty space.

Viktor had his on in record time and pushed to stand, hopping to get his blade guards off as Yuri was finishing with his laces. With all 4 guards safely stowed in Yuri's pack, they made their way onto the ice...with about 50 other people. Many of them even seemed like aspiring skaters themselves, able to keep pace with the pros as they skated in reverse or went faster. Some even tried to show off their own tricks, replicating some of the maneuvers the pair recognized from their own programs, though nothing more complex than a double jump.

They were begging the two to perform the signature quad flip, but both were reluctant.

"We just ate! It'd just turn into a quad bleh if we tried now!" Viktor laughed.

Yuri nodded emphatically in agreement, although he had an idea and leaned over to whisper, "We could do the death spiral from Duetto..."

"Okay~!" The Russian said excitedly, stepping away just enough to give a signal for folks to start clearing out, "Make space! Make room!"

The fans were starting to get energized, watching Viktor skating quickly around the rink as the open space widened, then finally going back to where Yuri had gone to the center. He skated around his partner with an arm around him as they whispered, deciding where to start off. The fans could only wonder what they were saying, watching as both of them were pointing to various ends of the rink and making spinning gestures with their hands as they made up their minds. When they'd agreed, Viktor moved off again, and Yuri skated the opposite direction, giving them the most space possible.

Viktor stepped on his toe-pick, looked around, glanced over at Yuri, and they nodded at one another, so the Russian clapped once and they lifted their right hands, reaching out to each other at the moment in Duetto where they'd come up out of a combination spin. They built up speed with their wide circles, then kicked off into the double axel, single toe-loop, and double flip, then spun outward again. The blind backward skate was done with their eyes open this time, given how many people were on the ice, and the four huge pillars, but to the audience, it looked more or less the same; they spun around and passed one another before the feigned near-collision.

Back out to the sides of the rink, moving close by the spectators who were still on the ice with them, and Yuri took Viktor's hand, moving back towards the center of the open area where Viktor spun him closer for a moment before letting him drift again, holding tightly with their clasped hands as Yuri started to tilt over, skates going way out ahead of him as he was turned in a wide circle. Viktor was good at dipping his partner so low to the ice that his hair could skim the surface without dropping him, and he spun the younger skater three times before pulling him back up again to vertical.

Still holding hands, they moved through the next set of elements, a few kicks and twists that lead into the last balance maneuver of the program. Yuri leaned in close and held his hand under Viktor's back as the man crossed his legs and let his husband lower him down. Yuri's free arm was up, and Viktor's was out ahead of them, whilst Yuri lowered his face down close enough to nearly touch his nose to his partner's chest. Soon, he was pulling the Russian back up again, and they split off without looking at one another to go to opposite ends of the rink.

They paused where they were, reaching one hand up to the rafters as they started to push off with their toe-picks again, moving back towards the center of the ice. They reached out both hands for one another, the fingers of their left hands lacing together as they pulled each other into a slow rotation, pulling one another closer until finally entering the final pose, with their ringed hands up to nearly touching the other's down-turned face.
The crowd was cheering wildly.

Yuri was still panting despite having only done a quarter of the program

'Now boarding...Japan Airlines flight to Fukuoka, Japan. All guests please return to Gate...'

They couldn't hear the rest of it, but they knew it was theirs, so Viktor pulled Yuri quickly to the rink exit amidst the continued cheering of the crowd.

"Thanks everyone! Oh wait- **SOMEONE GET ME A SELFIE STICK**!" Viktork called urgently, moving back around towards the rink wall instead of the doorway, "Everyone come over to this side!"

The crowd rushed like a school of fish, and someone leaned over the wall to hand Viktor the item he'd asked for. He quickly crammed his phone into the holder and extended the line out as far as it would go, grabbing Yuri around the small of his back to pull him as close as possible. As he held the phone high up in the air, making sure everyone behind them was in the shot, he tilted his head back a little, **"EVERYONE READY?"**

"READY!"

He then turned his face to his husband, "Yuri!"

"Huh?"

Viktor quickly lip-locked him and took the picture...**several pictures...a whole bunch of pictures.** He practically had his thumb stuck down on the button like he was recording a movie. He only let go again after he was sure he'd gotten at least one picture where Yuri didn't still look surprised, and at least a few after he'd pulled away again and they were just smiling for the camera.

He pulled his phone back down and waved the selfie-stick until its owner claimed it, "Spasibo! We really have to go now! Thank you everyone for coming and feeding us! **VKUSNO!**"

"Thank you everyone!" Yuri agreed, calling out after.

They quickly pulled their skates off and stuffed them back down into the bottom of Yuri's backpack as the crowd was clapping and cheering, and the pair waved and bowed one last time before rushing off to catch their next connecting flight.

They were out of breath entirely by the time they got back to their gate and handed off their tickets...and as high as their spirits were at that moment, as soon as Viktor realized they were back in Economy again, he gawked at Yuri with a 'you did this to me' look on his face. Yuri nearly died seeing it.

"Never again."

"Never again, I swear!" Yuri agreed frantically as Viktor shoved him next to the window seat to take his own and comically sulk with his knees jammed up against the seat in front of him. But, as soon as he was resigned to his fate, he pulled his phone out again and started going through the album to pick the pictures he liked best so he could post them before the plane took off and he lost his wifi signal.

Yuri rested his cheek against his husband's shoulder as he looked through the photos as well, seeing one in particular that looked really nice, "I like that one. You gonna post these?"

"Absolutely."
"So that one lady that asked why we never posted pics of us doing couple-type things...I guess I never really noticed, but...did you?" Yuri wondered, watching as Viktor's thumbs were clicking away on his phone's little keyboard.

"I made sure it was like that." The elder admitted, "Being in Russia and all."

"Oh..."

"But now that we're gone, I can post all the kissy photos I want!" Viktor mused, making his husband's face flush. The last details of the post were entered, and he uploaded it to his Instagram account proudly.

v-nikiforov
[picture]
v-nikiforov Flying out of Incheon International! Thank you everyone who came and saw us off on such short notice! We love you! Next stop, Fukuoka! #y-nikiforov #BackToJapan #LeavingSeoul #SkateHusbands #Viktuuri #ThreeHoursToHotSpringBliss #Katsudon #IncheonInternationalAirport #HeTastedLikeCupcakeFrosting

He made a second post after that using one of the not-kissy pictures instead, but with all the rest the same, save the last tag. His goal was to please his fans, and he knew that not every single one of them wanted to see the more intimate details of his life, so he made concessions for the ones who'd be alienated otherwise.

Yuri made a similar post to his husband's, but since his entire skating career was because of Viktor, he made sure everyone knew it. He would make no concessions. Every photo he posted, since they were so few and far between, was carefully selected and posted with serious intent.

If they don't like that I'm married to Viktor, then I don't need them as fans. Simple as that. He's the only reason I'm still skating at all right now. I owe everything to him.

The flight time itself wasn't as horrid as Viktor had worried, since it was just the last hour or so to get across South Korea, and then the tiny body of water that connected the East China Sea with the Sea of Japan. The train ride from Fukuoka to Hasetsu would actually end up taking longer, he realized, but at least on the train, there was more leg-room than even he needed.

"Nikiforov-san desu ka?" A meek woman's voice came.

Both men lifted their heads.

"Ah! Sumimasen...Katsuki-Nikiforov-san?"

"Hai...?" Yuri responded curiously.

"Kawari ni faasuto kurasu ni suwaru no ga suki desu ka?"

Viktor side-eyed him, thinking he understood what was just asked, but not entirely sure.

"Viktor wa kuru no desu ka?" He held up the man's hand in his own to indicate they were traveling together.

"Hai!"

Yuri smiled and nodded, "Arigatou. Wareware wa ukeireru."
"Did we just...?" Viktor wondered.

"We did. Let's go."

They were ushered all the way to the front of the plane and presented with new seats right near the exit. Viktor stretched his legs out as far as they could go anyway once they sat down.

"I wonder why we got upgraded like that?" Yuri asked quietly, mostly to himself as he put his pack in the new overhead compartment.

"This is much better." The Russian mused next to him.

Time passed quickly after that, but the situation still nagged at the young skater. He kicked his feet out nervously only to find that same stewardess coming back with a glass of champagne for both of them.

"Nippon no kinmedaru o kakutoku shitekure te arigatou!" She bowed her head several times as they took the flutes.

Viktor was entirely confused, but Yuri's face was flushed, so he could only guess at what had happened, "She said Japan...and thank you...and medal..."

"It's for winning gold." Yuri explained, still shocked, "They...they know me."

"Of course they do!" The Russian exclaimed, pulling Yuri over with an arm over his shoulders, "Everyone in Japan was watching you at Worlds! You haven't been home since Four Continents either so they haven't been able to thank you yet!"

The Asian's face went pale after that, "Oh boy..."

"What? What's wrong?"

"What if there's a big official thing waiting for me in Fukuoka?" Yuri wondered nervously.

"Better drink up!"
Yuri had gotten himself so worked up about the potential for the JSF to meet him at Fukuoka Airport that he couldn't touch the champagne he'd been given. He just gave it over to Viktor and proceeded to stew in his growing anxiety.

Viktor couldn't help but worry, "Yuri...why are you getting all riled up about this? Going home is making you more paranoid than going on the ice to do a show..."

"I don't actually have to talk to anyone when I skate..." He answered, his seat straight up again and one arm crossed over his chest, the other propped up where he had his hand over his mouth nervously, "At competition, I can just make an excuse to leave if an interview is getting to be too much, but at Fukuoka, they know perfectly well that I'm not in any real hurry because train tickets don't get bought ahead of time."

"We can just say you're family's expecting you home right away."

Yuri shook his head, "I can't just ditch JSF reporters when I'm skating for them. It would be incredibly rude to just run off. I couldn't stomach it."

"You can barely stomach the idea of facing them at all."

"I knoooooowww..." Yuri whined, rubbing his hand over his eyes, "Tasukete...Viktor..."

"I wish I could." He answered, "If we were still on the ground, maybe I could do something, but on a plane...we're already stuck. But maybe there won't even be anyone but the fans, like here at Incheon?"

"...You're right..." Yuri nodded, pulling his hand down and thinking on it...then leaning over to hold his whole head over his knees, "What if they're all at Yu-Topia?"

"Yuri...!"

The young skater suddenly had an idea, and pulled out his phone, sending a group text to his sister, Yuuko's whole family, and Minako.

[Guys! If there's any JSF people skulking around Yu-Topia, tell me!]

He watched the screen desperately for some kind of answer, but nothing was incoming. He supposed they were all too busy with other things to see the message on their phones. He lowered his head in disappointment, and was putting the device back when he felt a buzz. He frantically pulled it back and looked, seeing a message from Mari.

[No one's here but customers, little brother.]

He let out an audible sigh of relief, but that only meant they weren't there yet.

[Will you tell them not to hang around if they show up later?]

[We would anyway. This is still a business, even if you and Viktor are here.]

[Hey Yuri!]
[Yuri!]
[Uncle Viktor!]

The triplets had seen the message together.

[Didn't you read the JSF page, Yuri?]

He gawked at Takeshi's message.

[...They posted about it!?!]

[Sorry. We all thought you knew. They're arranging a big thing at Fukuoka Airport for when you land. We're on our way there now to join them, actually.]

Yuri was surprised at that last part, and shook his head before dialing them up with FaceTime to make it easier. When the call was answered, it seemed like the phone was being tossed around by everyone trying to get at it first.

Lutz managed to secure it and was the first to officially answer, "Hey guys!"

"Hiiii~!" Viktor chimed in, trying to get into the shot but only seeing half of himself in the frame as he leaned over.

"Uncle Viktor! Yuri stole the gold from you!"

"Snatched it right out of your hands like Yurio did to him at the Final!" Axel added, swiping the phone.

"Girls!" Yuuko was saying off-screen.

Viktor was just gawking, giving Yuri the same vibe as back when it became known that he hadn't mentioned providing his own music in the past.

"Guys, c'mon, he worked really hard too! And I didn't snatch anything from him! If his coat wasn't so heavy during the Short Program, he'd have gotten the gold easy!" Yuri explained, "Plus the quad axel is really hard! He should've gotten the gold medal just for pulling that off..."

"Yuri, it's okay, really..." Viktor started, drawing the man's attention away from the phone, "I came to Yu-Topia to coach you until you won gold...and I did that, so mission accomplished, right?"

"...For the Grand Prix Final...not the rest..."

The Russian shook his head, "You won the gold fair and square. Every skater goes back and criticizes their own performance, telling themselves that if they did this or that differently, they'd have gotten enough points to win 1st place...but the truth is that hind-sight is 20/20 and you can't go back. All you can do is work on being better for the future. I made mistakes and you didn't, it's as simple as that."

The group on the other end of the line was just listening intently, watching the exchange like curious birds.

"And it's not like I've never won silver before. My winning streak was 5 years running because I didn't win gold before that, remember?"

"Still..." Yuri sighed.
Viktor pulled his husband's ringed hand away from his phone and kissed the gold on it lightly, "Don't be so hard on yourself. You're not some dime-a-dozen top skater for the JSF anymore. You're the top skater. I can't be the only one acknowledging your skill all the time...own it a little! Besides, I wouldn't have done Duetto with you if I didn't think you could keep up, and you know me well enough to know that much is true." He mussed the man's hair a little affectionately, "I did once threaten to ditch both you and Yurio if you didn't have the skill necessary to do one of the shows I'd planned for myself, didn't I?"

"...Would you really have left?"

Viktor just laughed at that, "Considering all the reasons why I went to Hasetsu in the first place, no way! I just wanted to see how badly you wanted me to stay. You'd replicated Aria perfectly before so I already knew you could do it. And given where we are now..." He leaned into the frame to kiss his husband on the cheek, "...I'd say you wanted me pretty badly."

"Ooooooooooooono!" All 3 girls on the other end cooed together.

"That's enough!" Yuuko said frantically, swiping the phone, "This is a rated G line!"

"But moooooom!"

"They were just getting to the good part!"

"Let them keep going!"

"NOOOOOO!" She yelled, "You're too young!"

"Send us pictures, Uncle Viktor!" Lutz called out just as the line was disconnected.

Just in time, Minako finally replied, but not with text...she sent a photo into the group chat showing her happy self in front of a massive media crowd at the airport.

Yuri dropped, practically frothing at the mouth at the sight of it.

Viktor laughed and took Yuri's phone, taking a picture of himself just barely in the foreground with an 'oh my' expression on his face, and the catatonic Yuri in the background.

[Don't let him die before he gets here, Viktor!] Minako messaged, [His adoring fans have been gathering here since noon!]

[I'll pull his ghost right out of the ether if I have to.] Viktor typed in, smiling to himself as he hit 'Send.'

He clicked off the device and set it back in its owner's hand just as the plane's seatbelt sign finally came on. He nudged Yuri until he came out of his stupor and pointed, leaning over to do the buckles himself since the man seemed too delirious in thought to process what the sign meant.

Viktor then moved to cup Yuri's head in his hands, and turned his face to meet his own, touching their noses together lightly, "Just think...the sooner we get back, and wade through the quagmire of JSF reporters...the sooner we can get into the hot spring and get your fix of pork cutlet bowl. And after..." He was so close that Yuri could feel the words being spoken against his lips, "...we can have a little fun in my room."

The statement made Yuri deadpan him, "...In your room? Why so specific?"
"Because we did it in your room last time!"

"...We're a little bit noisier now than that time!" Yuri pointed out quietly, his face going red, "And my parents' room isn't that far away from where we put you in the banquet hall!"

The Russian just huffed the breath of a laugh against him and let him go again, moving back into his seat as the plane began to taxi under them. He winked, "Better keep it down then."

"You're the noisy one!"

"Oh! Right! ...I forgot!" He laughed, "You're still too nervous for all that!"

Yuri frantically put his hands over his husband's mouth, "Keep it down or you'll tell the whole cabin about it!"

He could see Viktor laughing behind his hands, just by the shape of his eyes alone, but that didn't stop the man from continuing his teases, sticking his tongue out to touch the palm of Yuri's hands. The wet sensation made Yuri pull his hands back quickly in confusion, but when he turned back again, Viktor still had the tip of his tongue sticking out. He looked way too pleased with himself.

"You're going to be the end of me..." Yuri sighed, watching as Viktor leaned forward on the arm-rest between them, as though offering him an out, "...If I do this, you'll give me peace for a while?"

Viktor nodded...he was still blep'ing, too.

The younger skater nodded, his face already flushed before he'd even done anything.

The Russian had closed his eyes in anticipation, but Yuri was going to drag it out. His hand between them came up and gently stroked the man's cheek, just barely under where his bangs came down over his eye. He leaned in and touched the tip of his nose to his partner's, gently drifting around idly, even moving down a little to touch it to the tip of Viktor's tongue where it was still poking out between his lips.

Viktor curiously opened one eye, and deftly moved a hand forward to put a finger under his husband's chin, trying to encourage him to go faster. The anticipation was killing him. Yuri knew it though, and that's half the reason he prolonged the build-up as long as he did. He was just about there though, sticking out his own tongue just enough to match what Viktor was doing, and leaned in to touch them together. Viktor felt it, and immediately reacted, moving the hand from under Yuri's chin to cup around the back of his head and hold him where he was. It was a deep kiss, one they normally shared only when in private, but it was enough to sate the Russian for the time being.

They peeked through the barrier from where the second floor arrivals had let them off, and glanced down at the media mob on the lower deck. They were on their stomachs like snipers looking for a clear shot, given that the wall was almost entirely glass.

Yuri could feel his heart pounding in his chest. Dozens of people had signs welcoming Yuri home, with a few for Viktor scattered amongst them. Many held Viktuuri signs as well, which Viktor liked best anyway.
"You've got this."

"I don't got this."

"You've got this."

"THERE THEY ARE!" Someone yelled, pointing at where their conspicuous heads could be seen over the edge of the floor.

Yuri was up on his feet in a panic, and Viktor slowly pushed himself up after him, moving forward to wave at the group excitedly, "Hiii~! Minako! Nishigori family! JSF!"

"Uncle Viktor!" The pair heard being called back, although the girls were hard to spot in the crowd.

Yuri finally waved, nervously as it was, and they headed over towards the escalators that lead down into the main waiting area. Minako was way out front with her sign, displaying it with a proud display of her ballerina skills just like when Yuri had arrived home in Hasetsu the previous March. But, this time, her sign had been changed to welcome Viktor home as well.

The interview came on like a swarm, but at least the reporters doing the questioning had the decency to do so in English, unlike in Russia, so Viktor wouldn't be entirely left out of the frenzy.

"You've just won Four Continents and World Championships gold for Japan! How do you feel, Yuri!?"

"Do you plan on continuing to compete!?"

"How was it to train alongside the Russian skating team!?"

"Are you really moving to Hasetsu's Ice Castle permanently!?"

"Will Viktor be choreographing your next shows!?"

"If Viktor's back to competing again, how is he going to coach you at the same time!?"

"How did it feel to compete against Viktor after he coached you to GPF Silver!?"

The questions were like bricks, coming at Yuri from all sides; when one hit, he stiffly answered.

"Training in Russia was different. I had a great time and learned a lot, but I'm glad to be back home again. Viktor and I are doing our programs for next year together so it won't be so hard to coach and practice at the same time. It'll probably be weirder for him to not have an official coach for once, since Yakov stayed in St. Petersburg."

"Competing against Viktor has always been my goal, so getting him to come back to competition after he stopped to coach me was a great feeling. I hope to continue skating on the same ice as him for a long time to come."

The questioning went on for some time after that, asking Yuri and Viktor both about how the two major competitions went and about all the things that happened while they were there aside from the shows that were put on television. Eventually though, Yuri got too tired to continue, and even though he was too polite to say so, was ready to leave.

Viktor entered coach-mode at that point, rubbing Yuri's shoulders from behind where he stood and
stepped around him to wave a hand at the press corps, "I'm afraid that'll have to be it for today! Thank you everyone for your support, and for meeting with Yuri upon his triumphant return to Japan! We hope to bring many more gold medals back for the JSF!"

"Can we see them before you leave?" One of the reporters asked, "The gold medals!"

The prospect of showing off gave Yuri a little bit of energy back, and he moved to pull his backpack off his shoulders and open it. The three velvet cases sat on top of the pile of skates, and he pulled all three of them out, opening each in turn to make sure he had the right ones, passing them off to Viktor as he went. Since the second case was Viktor's own Silver medal, Yuri knew the last one was his own, and he opened it proudly, moving to grasp the wide colored lanyard around his hand, then the other where Viktor moved it closer to him...and then finally pulled both Golden discs from their cases at the same time to hold them high.

The mob started clapping enthusiastically.

At the back, the Nishigoris and Minako were clapping as well, and there was hardly a dry eye between them.

Viktor was clapping along with the rest of them, and only moved in closer when Yuri looked back at him, getting a bit overcome with emotion again at the outpouring of support. The Russian stepped closer to wrap both arms around Yuri's small frame, reaching one hand up to kiss each medal where he held them, and then kissed his cheek before squeezing him hard happily, "I told you you had this."

"I'd never have gotten to this point without you. Don't ever retire from being my coach!"
It was already sunset when the pair was finally able to get away from all the adulation. Leaving the airport had taken 3 hours, not including getting Makkachin and their luggage, followed by the hour-long train ride, only to be greeted again by even more people at the station in Hasetsu. Every gathering was greeted by less and less enthusiasm, until at last, the group was finally standing under the arch to Yu-Topia Katsuki.

"We're finally back..." Yuri said, heaving a sigh of relief.

"Would I be a horrible person if I said that I just wanted to go to bed?" Viktor wondered, his voice practically flat from exhaustion.

"Maybe, but..." The younger skater tilted his head to look at the man, "We'll just have to go be horrible together then."

Viktor smiled at that. Unfortunately...just as it seemed like they would finally get to rest, Yuri's family noticed they were there and came rushing out to greet them. Yuri nearly dropped on his feet, but found the energy to at least lean forward instead of back, so his slumping over looked at least half-way like a bow.

"Yuri! Everyone!" His mother called out, waving emphatically from the doorway, "Come inside, it's cold out there!"

The rest of the group took as much of the luggage as they could to allow the skaters to walk freely, and as the pair stepped up into the resort, Hiroko busied herself with chatting about the same stuff they'd been hearing from everyone else since leaving Helsinki. Yuri couldn't even hear the words anymore. He looked back over to Viktor, who had the same exhausted expression on his face.

"...Mom..." The younger skater managed, getting the woman's attention from the middle of her congratulations, "...We're going to go to bed..."

"Oh." She was a little surprised, "Don't you want some katsudon first? Or a soak in the spring?"

"I do, but..."

"...We've been awake for over 24 hours..." Viktor finished, trying to sound pleasant despite how tired he was, "...Sleep first, then food, then soak..."

They both hobbled off like zombies after that, slowly making their way up to the banquet room where Viktor had once been allowed to stay. They slid the door aside to step in, and realized...or maybe just remembered...that they had fully moved everything out when they'd left Hasetsu to go to St. Petersburg. All the lamps were gone, the CedEx boxes, the Roman-style bust, the pictures Viktor had set up around the room, even the set of nesting dolls...the room was a hollow shell of what it once was.

The huge king-sized bed was still there though, and it had been made ready since the family knew they were coming, but it didn't have the same feel as when Viktor had actually made the place his home away from home.

They stepped in like they were being let off on another planet, and Yuri quietly closed the door and
latched it as Viktor moved further in to take his heavy coat and scarf off. They hadn't even bothered turning the overhead light on, or changing out of any of the rest of their clothes, before kicking their shoes off lazily and piling in under the blankets. Once fully, and finally, tangled into one another, they each let out a sigh of relief...the final one.

"I didn't know winning Worlds would be so exhausting..." Yuri muttered quietly against where Viktor held his head to his chest.

The Russian had already fallen asleep.

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.
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It was still pitch black outside when Yuri woke up again, stirred by the buzz in his back pocket where he'd forgotten to turn off his phone.

...No...I'm sure I turned it off... What in the world could this...?

[Alarm APRIL 11 - REMINDER: One year ago today, Viktor Nikiforov showed up at Yu-Topia to be my coach. Good or bad...what happened?]

The words were stark...a message from himself on that same day last year. He'd created it just after Viktor had finished his first dinner at the resort and had fallen asleep on the floor.

It was midnight by then, and Yuri had entirely forgotten about setting the reminder at all. He realized that the light from his screen was starting to wake Viktor up though and quickly moved to turn it off, hoping the Russian would be lulled back to sleep by the dark.

"...Mnh...what was that?" He asked instead, not going back to sleep at all, rolling onto his back and stretching as far as he could before relaxing again, "...I thought you turned your phone off."

"I set it to silent, that's all." Yuri nodded, realizing there was no point in hiding the light then and clicked the phone back on again, "But this wasn't a text or a call...it was a blast from the past." "Hm?"

Even with the light settings on the device set to get dimmer depending on the ambient lighting around it, Viktor still squinted against the brightness as he put his hand around his husband's to hold the phone steady.

He dropped back down to the pillow with a smile, "Well? What are you going to tell yourself from a year ago, Yuri?"

The younger skater thought on it a moment, staring up at the ceiling as everything from the last year came flooding back into the forefront of his mind. He rose his right hand up and looked at the ring on his finger, dimly glinting in the blue-white glow of his phone before it finally timed out and shut off again.

"Well?"

"...If I could tell the me from a year ago about what's happened...I wouldn't even know where to begin. It's a story he wouldn't even let me finish, never mind believe it." Yuri answered, pulling his
arm back down to clasp with the other over his chest, "...What would you tell him?"

"I'd tell him...Yuri...believe in yourself, because you're going to win gold at the next World Championship." The Russian mused.

"Spoilers."

"Wouldn't it all be spoilers?" He rolled back to his side, propping his head up on his hand as the other moved to slide over his partner's abdomen, "I think the gold medal would be easier to believe than the rest of it, much as I'd like to gush about how everything else turned out."

"I'd probably say something like...one-year-ago-me...listen. Listen closely." Yuri started, moving his hands up as though animating the gestures he'd make as he spoke to his younger self, even as he still looked straight up, "It's really happened. Viktor really did come...it's not some screwy dream. You never thought you'd be good enough to skate the same ice as him again, but he's right here at Yu-Topia...dropped everything just to be with you and make you better. Don't be scared by the things he asks of you. Don't be scared of him. Pretty soon...you're going to realize...he means everything to you. Oh and also, don't screw up that one jump during your GPF Short Program cuz you'll only win silver if you do."

"Nothing else?" Viktor laughed at the last line.

"The old me would think I was on drugs if I told him the rest."

"Mmmh...it does sometimes seem like an absinthe dream, doesn't it?"

"Sure..." Yuri agreed, turning his face to look at his husband in what little light the room could provide, "...It'd be like...You're not going to believe this next part. Not only does Viktor coach you to World Championship gold...but by then, you'll be married to him...and on the one year anniversary of him coming to Yu-Topia..." He twisted onto his own side to face the man, slipping one knee between Viktor's as he lifted his free hand to run his fingers through that silver-grey hair, "...you and he are going to make out in the old banquet hall."

"Are they?" Viktor quipped, "Hmm...yeah, the old you would probably run screaming out of the building at the embarrassment of it..." He leaned in close, "But part of me hopes he'd eventually go back to his room, with all the posters of me still on his walls, and imagine what it might be like if it were true."

"Let's give my old self something to look forward to then."

"Are you sure? You were worried about your family hearing."

"...Are you trying to discourage me? Viktor..."

"What!?" He was up with a start, "No no no no no! Never!" The Russian was sitting in Yuri's lap a split second later, trying to pull off his shirt so fast that he encountered a...problem, "Ah~! It's too dark...I'm stuck."

Yuri practically burst into laughter at that, which gave Viktor pause. He could feel Yuri's hands roaming up the front of his abdomen, touching despite not being able to see much more of him than a dark outline against a slightly-less-dark background, until he'd reached as high up as his arm's length would allow.

"...I don't think I've ever heard you laugh like that." The older skater said, calmer than before, "...Are you making fun of me?"
"How could I?" Yuri wondered, sitting upright and wrapping both arms around his husband, setting his forehead against the man's chest, "I can hardly see how you look right now."

Viktor wiggled and struggled a little bit more after that, but finally managed to find his way out of the labyrinth of his tangled clothes, tossing them to the floor before curling down to hold his partner's head and kiss him deeply. He was about to reach down to start pulling Yuri's shirt off as well when he paused again, "...We have to go downstairs."

"What? Why?"

"We didn't bring any of our stuff up when we got here."

"We should go get it...but we'll have to be sneaky. The floors creak sometimes."

Viktor suddenly got really excited, "WE'LL BE NINJAS~!"

He quickly hopped off his husband's lap and went for the door, feeling around until he found the latch that locked it and unfastened it to slide the doors open. Yuri followed close behind, smiling and shaking his head as he illuminated Viktor's path with the flashlight app on his phone. They'd quickly made their way down the flights of wooden stairs to the last doors that lead to the public area of the resort, and pushed them aside to see if there were any late-night guests in the common room. Finding it quiet, they quietly moved on to the entrance-way antechamber where they knew their things had been left.

Viktor moved around dramatically, skimming along the walls or pretending to sneak by moving forward in wide steps on his toes. Yuri just pulled up the rear normally, still holding his flashlight phone up to light their path and avoid knocking anything over. He looked aside though, seeing the table that brought up a memory of the previous year. He huffed a laugh to himself, catching Viktor's attention.

"Tsst!"

"Huh?"

"Shhhh!" Viktor repeated, whispering at him, "We'll be heard!"

Yuri tilted and then shook his head, amused at the man's antics but curious about reminiscing. He stepped away, taking the light with him, and leaving his partner in even worse pitch-dark than before, given how his eyes had gotten used to the white glow from behind. Viktor was calling after him as the light moved away, but Yuri felt like he was on a mission at that point. He stopped in front of the table, still covered over by the dark blue table-cloth that it always had been, but...the awkward, nude, ceramic babies that once adorned it were long gone.

He touched his hand to the table, finding new appreciation in the way it looked...especially when Viktor came looming over his shoulder from behind.

"...What are you doing? You're not stalling, are you?"

"Pfft." The younger man scoffed, "I was just reminded of how I knocked this whole table over a year ago, after my dad told me that a certain good-looking foreigner had arrived with a big brown poodle. I was in such a hurry to see if it was really you or not... Ahh it took an hour to clean it all up..."

"You know what else is going to take an hour?"

"...What?" Yuri looked back at him sheepishly, casting the light from his phone onto the man and
giving him a creepy affect.

"...Getting our thiiinnggssssssss." 

"Sorry! Sorry."

"What's all the noise down here!??" Came a woman's voice, slamming open a door not too far away. Lights came on in a hurry after that, followed by the sound of a bark and claws clattering on the ground.

Yuuko was in the doorway, tired and annoyed, as Makkachin clambered into the huge entrance hall, tail wagging enthusiastically.

"There you are!" Viktor said, kneeling down to greet his dog.

Yuuko just looked at him blearily for a moment...realized he was entirely shirtless...and immediately fell backwards with a spray of blood from her nose.

"Mom...?" Another voice, followed by another, and another...all three of the triplets had come out after that, wondering why their parent had suddenly been yelling. They saw her on the floor rather quickly, twitching comically as she tried to keep the blood from spurting out of her face by holding both hands over her nose, and then looked over to what she'd seen to cause her to be in that state.

That's when they saw him...and all three sets of eyes went wide.

"DON'T GO ANYWHERE." They all yelled, disappearing quickly, clambering over their catatonic mom as they scrambled back to their resort room before rushing back.

Pictures galore were taken after that. Viktor had almost forgotten the reason they were even downstairs in the middle of the night, overtaken by the fun of such an impromptu photo-shoot. Between the three girls, they must've gotten well over a hundred glamour shots before Yuuko finally regained her senses and sat back upright. Takeshi finally came out after that, looking even more tired than Yuri and Viktor had when they'd first arrived.

Seeing Viktor half naked though, and Yuuko getting up from a pool of her own nose-bleed, he couldn't help but wonder, "...You tryna seduce my wife?"

Viktor shook his hands defensively, "No no no! This is all a misunderstanding!" He laughed, "We were trying to be quiet! Someone had to stop and go sight-seeing though." He coughed Yuri's name for emphasis before side-eyeing him.

The skater just laughed nervously, scratching his jaw as he turned off the flashlight app on his phone, noting how it wasn't needed anymore with all the regular lights on.

"Why are you guys sneaking around in the middle of the night!??" The girls started asking, hopping around the pair inquisitively, "You live here, Yuri! Why not just turn the lights on!? What are you looking for!??"

"ENOOOOOOOOUGH!" Yuuko called, pounding the floor to get their attention.

"But it's midnight!" Axel pointed out, "Don't you wanna know why Yuri and Uncle Viktor are wandering around like a couple burglars?"

"We aren't burglars..." Yuri deadpanned the girl, "We were trying to get back to our luggage. I got distracted, that's all."
"Half the resort is probably awake now." Takeshi pointed out, hearing some thumps and bumps on the floor above them, "We should probably just help you get your things upstairs so we can all go back to sleep."

Makkachin barked, tail wagging away.

"Yes, yes...thank you...sorry again...thank you...!" Yuri was saying, waving off the family as they went back down the stairs to their own rooms again. The big poodle had followed after them, being ridden like a horse by the triplets.

All the luggage from Barcelona, St. Petersburg, and Helsinki was in the room with them finally. It seemed like a lot more, now that they'd finally gotten it into their room again. Viktor was already looking through their things, trying to find the bag with their fun-time supplies. It took the better part of 10 minutes to go through all the suitcases since he'd forgotten specifically which one housed the items, but when he finally did, he pulled the small bag out proudly...and went dead-silent as he saw Yuri on the bed.

Yuri hadn't actually intended to look like he was presenting himself, since he was just casually lying on his stomach, arms crossed under his chin, watching his husband search through the bags. He had his legs crossed and up behind him, slowly swaying them back and forth. But perhaps the fact that he'd taken his shirt off while waiting was what did it.

The silver-haired man saw that Yuri had the look on his face...the same one from Barcelona, and Sochi before that. The seeking look that made his eyes shine a little. Viktor was spell-bound by them, unable to move for a moment; his cheeks had even flushed a little.

"...You okay?" Yuri wondered, lifting his head a little, "You just stopped."

Viktor had still been crouching down on one knee when he'd found the suitcase he was after, so he was effectively on a level with where Yuri was lying down on the bed, only looking down a little bit to see him. The bag felt a little heavy in his hand after that, and he tossed it onto the bed to be done with it. Yuri's eyes followed it until it was beyond him, feeling it thump against the blanket near his knees, and when he glanced back around, he saw that Viktor had slid closer to him on the wood floor until he was sitting with one knee folded under himself right in front of him.

The Russian leaned in close, quietly, touching his nose and mouth to the other side of Yuri's arms from where he'd settled himself, and then raised both arms to wrap around the man's head.

"...Viktor...?"

"I wonder if there's a limit to how many times I can fall in love with you at a glance." He answered, "I hope I never find out."
A few days had passed, and not once had Yuri or Viktor been allowed to set foot within the Ice Castle.

The first time they’d tried, Yuri went up the stairs alone while Viktor had meant to put their bikes away, only to find a sign on the doors saying they were closed for the week. Yuri had even tried to call Yuuko and Takeshi to find out whether they could go inside anyway, but both had effectively shut down notions of that rather quickly.

The second time, the pair had spotted people going into the arena through a delivery truck door at the back, and tried to sneak in alongside them, only to be spotted by Takeshi and promptly kicked out again like stray cats.

The third time, Viktor had spotted Yuuko on the road below the stairway heading to the main doors, and both he and Yuri latched themselves to her legs as she tried to go in, begging and pleading to be allowed to skate. She dragged them up half the stairs before finally, comically, knocking them both in the head, and rushing up the rest of the way while they laid there in painful confusion.

"We're skaters, Yuu-chan! We need to skate!" Yuri called after her, seeing her disappearing through the inner doors once they’d finally made their way to the top, only to find that the outer doors were already locked. He hung around on the glass like a sucker fish for a few minutes before Viktor convinced him to give up.

They sat at the top of the concrete steps and sighed in unison, chins on their hands and elbows on their knees. Makkachin panted quietly next to his human.

"I know they're making plans for us, but..." Yuri whined, "Couldn't they just cordon off the area they don't want us to see?"

"Maybe they're doing up the whole place."

"But that would take so much time..."

"They've had a few weeks to think about it, Yuri." Viktor pointed out, "Remember? They called within minutes of us posting the pic of our marriage certificate online, and they've been working on it ever since."

"Have they told you anything about what they're doing?"

"Not really."

"Have you asked?"

"Even I like to be surprised once in a while." Viktor pointed out, "Being the surpriser all the time gets kind of dull."

"So what should we do?"

"...We could go hang out with Yurio, I guess."

"We...huh?" Yuri was about to question it, but then saw what Viktor saw. His eyes lit up and he was
up on his feet, bounding down the steps several at a time until he got to (and nearly lost his footing on) the bottom, "Yuri!"

"Thought I'd find you two here." The Russian Tiger answered, watching his Japanese counterpart coming around the railing.

"You got here sooner than we thought!" Yuri exclaimed, forgetting for a moment that he was supposed to challenge the youth to come to him with the hug by practically throwing himself on the teen excitedly. "How was your flight?"

Yurio had pulled one hand out of his jacket to return the unexpectedly fond embrace, but then replaced it again once Yuri pulled off of him, "Not as bad as it could've been. We were diverted straight to Fukuoka by a snowstorm that shut down the airport in Tokyo, so it worked out."

"That's great! Not for Tokyo, but..."

"Where's my uncle?" Viktor asked, finally coming down the stairs as well, slowly as usual, "Weren't you coming together?"

"He's back at Yu-Topia." Yurio answered with a shrug, "So why are you guys outside like this?"

Yuri sighed, "Yuu-chan won't let us in. We haven't been able to skate at all since we got back."

The Russian quirked a brow, then whipped his phone out and pulled up his contact list, thumbing in a few keys and sending the message, "...Wait for it."

"Heh! This sounds familiar..." Yuri smiled back at where Viktor was standing behind him.

A few quiet seconds passed...and then...

"YURATCHKA!" Yuuko's shrill voice could be heard from the top of the stairs, "What are you doing back in Hasetsu!? Wait, don't answer that! Welcome back!" She was waving from the railing excitedly.

Yurio strut up the steps, rather proud of himself, with the other two following after him, wondering if, somehow, he could manage to get them all inside the arena where their own attempts had failed. Viktor was eyeballing the automatic doors as Yuuko gushed over the blond, and he even tried to sneak around behind them while the woman was surprised by Yurio giving her an unexpected hug.

"...Your face is leaking fluids again." Yurio said nervously, "...Sorry?"

"It's fine! I'm fine!" Yuuko insisted, spinning her head around and pointing at the older Russian, "DON'T YOU EVEN THINK ABOUT IT."

Viktor was stiff as a board, stopping in his tracks within mere inches of the doorway...but his foot set off the motion sensor with the last step. The doors parted in front of him like the Red Sea.

"NO, VIKTOR, BACK." Yuuko insisted, seeing the temptation in his eyes.

Viktor could only see the reception area, but he noted that the doors that lead into the actual skating rink were blocked with black paper on the inside. He snapped back to it when the doors started to close again, and resolved to make a break for it.

"VIKTORRRRR!" The woman cried out.

Yurio was on him like a police dog, kicking him in the back and sending him sprawling into the
check-in desk in an oddly familiar way. Yuuko chased after him as well, the both of them getting onto his back in a hurry while he was on the floor, even as the Russian was still trying to scramble for the last set of sliding doors. Yuuko was too light to stop him though, and Viktor nearly bucked her off like a mad horse, only for the three of them to see Yuri trying to run by desperately while they were distracted.

Again, Yurio was on top of it, sticking his leg out just far enough to trip the Asian and send him face-first into the glass door...which didn't open as he slid down to the floor in a daze.

Takeshi and the girls were just inside, and heard the awkward thump and slide outside, wondering what the heck was going on.

The pair was dragged back out by their feet and left there as Yuuko moved to close the outer doors.

"I'm really sorry, you two! But you really can't come in yet!"

The both of them just looked up at her with the saddest eyes, "Yuu-chan, pleeeaaaasseee!

Yuri begged, "You're letting him stay inside!" He gestured both hands at the blond, who only grinned in return.

"He's not the one that just got married!" She pointed out, "It's only for two more days! Please be patient!"

Yurio smirked at them devilishly, "Heh! Bye!"

The outer doors were closed and locked, and the younger Russian turned his back on them to go inside with Yuri's childhood friend. Yuri and Viktor had their faces to the glass, trying to see anything they could, but even with the windows blacked out on the rink-side doors, they saw nothing but more black as they opened to let the pair in.

"...They have a hemi-circular curtain in there..." The Asian skater whined.

"These guys are really going out of their way to make sure we don't see anything." Viktor agreed, his tone the same.

And, once again, they were sitting with Makkachin on the top-most set of concrete stairs.

"...So..." Yuri started up, taking them right back to the original question, "...What should we do?"

"I guess we could go back to the onsen." The Russian suggested, moving to stand up and offer his hand, "I don't know that my uncle's ever experienced a Japanese hot-spring resort before. I doubt we'll have any luck getting into the Ice Castle until they let us."

"Yeah..." The younger man agreed, taking his husband's hand to let him pull him back to standing. They started walking down the steps together, the poodle trotting along beside them, when Yuri looked up ahead of them and smiled, "...I guess it's kind of nice that people are fussing over us like this."

"Mh." Viktor agreed, pausing where he was to pull Yuri back around and taking his other hand into his own, "It's the complete opposite of how things were in Russia, that's for sure."

"You make it sound like the whole time we were out there was a complete waste." The shorter figure said, still happy but his tone a little quieter compared to before, "I really liked St. Petersburg though."

"It had its moments...but I like the ones we've had in Hasetsu better." The Russian explained, slate
blue eyes looking down into happy hazel ones before the man leaned down to kiss his partner fondly, "...I would never have felt safe doing that back home."

Yuri realized all too harshly how true the statement was, but instead of getting dour about it, he decided to capitalize on their better situation and pulled his hands up so he could wrap his arms around Viktor's larger frame, and pulled him down slightly so he could kiss him back more easily, "You're right."

Viktor quickly returned the hug before they turned off to start walking back across the bridge to the main part of the city. It didn't take long for them to get back to the resort, and Yuri's father was there just inside the entrance when they walked in.

"Hey! You'll never believe it!" Toshiya started, "We just had another good-looking foreigner show up! No dog though, just that cranky blond kid from last year. Did you see him?"

"Yurio? Yeah, we ran into him outside the Ice Castle."

"The foreigner didn't tell you who he was?" Viktor wondered, "He didn't brag or anything?"

"Why would he?"

"That's my uncle."

"Oh!" The elder Katsuki laughed cheerfully, "That explains a lot! He looked familiar but I didn't realize that was why!"

"Where's he now?" Yuri wondered.

"He took his things up to his room, but I didn't see if he came back downstairs or not."

Makkachin snuffled around the floor as Yuri turned back to close the door behind them, and eventually barked as the man in question reemerged from a side-hall.

"Hey! There you guys are." Mikhail said warmly, dressed down to probably the least amount of clothing that either Yuri or Viktor had ever seen; while usually clad heavily in a winter long-coat, scarf, and hat over top of everything else, Mikhail now just had slacks, a charcoal grey button-down, and a vest overtop, "This is one heck of a place you live in, Yuri."

"You like it?"

"Hiii~!"

"Hey kid! But...yeah!" He came up to them while rubbing his left shoulder, "You'll have to educate me though. I don't know anything about...what's the name? An 'onsen'?"

"Mh." The young skater confirmed, "There's not much to learn...did you want to soak for a while? Viktor and I usually try to after a flight, but we know how tiring the trip from St. Petersburg can be. Yurio told us you'd at least gotten to skip the third layover."

"Ah so you did run into him, that's good." Mikhail nodded, "For now I think I just need a drink. Warm the belly before I warm the rest of me, right?"

Yuri smiled and pointed over towards the common area, "We'll meet you over there."

The elder Russian nodded and headed in the gestured direction while the couple stayed behind to get their shoes and outer-wear off, putting it all into the lockers to the right of the entrance for safe
keeping until they went back to their banquet-hall room. They'd found Mikhail at one of the short tables when they caught up, watching soccer where one of the other patrons had changed the channel, sitting cross-legged and leaning over the table casually.

"What's your pleasure tonight, uncle?" Viktor wondered, staying on his feet while Yuri got comfortable on the floor, "You want something familiar or something exotic?"

"You have hot wine?"

Viktor put a hand on his hip, "You'll have to be more specific."

"Japan has hot wine? I didn't even think they had grapes."

"Hot rice wine...Sake...you've never had it?" Yuri was surprised, "Someone your age...?"

Mikhail gave the youth a 'don't just me' kind of sarcastic look, "I've seen, done, and experienced a lot of things in my antiquity...but my liquor has always been domestic."

"Coming right up then." The younger Russian turned on his heel and headed back for the store room.

"So how've things been so far?" Mikhail asked, leaning forward on his elbows, "Better than back in stuffy Russia, right?"

"It's always nice to be home after so long away." Yuri nodded, relaxing a little, "But...yeah, having the hot spring right here has been great. It'd be better if my friends would let me in the ice rink, but..."

Mikhail clapped and laughed at that, "They locked you out? You? How many other professional skaters are around here besides Viktor?"

"...And Yurio, none." The younger man shrugged, "The whole wedding party thing is being set up there though, so they don't want Viktor or me to see."

"I've heard people call it the Ice Castle...is it really that big thing on the hill?"

"Oh, no, that's just a tourist trap. The Ice Castle is just a name...the rink is at the base of the hill, just on the other side of the bridge from here. That's where we saw Yurio. How'd he been anyway? Did he do as you asked?" Yuri wondered, leaning over the table on his elbows much like the older Russian.

"He's started, yes." Mikhail confirmed, "But the majority of his attitude adjustment seems to have come from whatever you knocked into his head. What'd you do to him? Put a knife to his throat?"

Yuri nearly choked on himself at that, "Noooooo...!" He coughed, patting himself on the chest with the side of his fist until he caught the wind in his lungs again, "...No...ahem. No. If I did anything to him, it was just...hold him." He put his hand on the back of his neck shyly, "I used to have really bad anxiety. One of the first things Viktor did to help me get over it was hold me. Well...hug me, but, you get the idea. Even just feeling his hand on my back or on my arm was enough to ground me. I could think more clearly when I didn't feel like the gentlest breeze would knock me over. So I thought, if that was so helpful, maybe the same thing would help Yurio. I guess it worked better than I thought."

"You're telling me." Mikhail huffed, leaning back onto one hand as he saw Viktor returning out the corner of his eye, "He's even hugged me once or twice. Kinda freaked me out."
"Wow, really?" Viktor mused, setting the drinks down on the table before sitting around the corner of the table, next to his husband, "That's...peculiar for him."

"No kidding." Yuri agreed, "Maybe he had an epiphany or something. Sometimes it doesn't take much."

"Whatever it is, a lot of people have noticed a shift." The elder continued, "The councilor he eventually saw for his initial eval wasn't even sure he'd been put on the books for the right thing. She said he seemed really well adjusted, right up until she hit a certain button, and then...well, the rest made sense after that."

"We all have our buttons." Viktor agreed, pouring some of the Sake from the large white bottle into only one of the two small thimble-cups on his side of the table, watching as his uncle sipped at the hot mulled wine carefully, "Some are just easier to find than others."

"His might as well have been a giant red one on the top of his head." Mikhail pointed out, holding the wine glass carefully in front of himself, smelling the spices while it cooled enough to drink, "I imagine your buttons are pretty small and hard to find these days, Viktor." He noticed that Yuri took the choko cup that had been poured for himself, but that his nephew wouldn't take one until Yuri had poured it for him.

"Oh there's still a few, but it takes a lot of effort to find them." Viktor answered as he sipped at the small cup once it was filled, "I'm not about to ask anyone to go looking though. I'm pretty content."

"You look like it." Mikhail mused, "Pouring each other's drinks like that."

"Oh...that's a Japanese thing." Yuri laughed quietly, "If you're with people, you don't usually pour Sake for yourself, at least not the first round. After that it's not so strange anymore, but in more formal settings, you really don't pour for yourself at all."

"Ah."

"So you want to know how the onsen works?"

"Yes!" Mikhail was keen on that, "It looks relaxing!"

"Well..." Yuri started, "The first thing you should know is that people bathe nude in the onsen, but if you're really out on a limb with that, we can get you a private tub with spring water in it. Always bathe before getting into the onsen. There's stations and tubs in the changing room for tha-"

"Wait...wait. Stop. Nude?" Mikhail's interest had been piqued, "So there's...ladies in there?"

Yuri blinked at him, but then realized, "OH!" He shook his head, "No, the onsen is divided. But...even when some resorts that have mixed pools, women don't usually mingle with the men, so it ends up defaulting t-"

"...A big wiener party." Mikhail sighed, "...Got my hopes up. I'd heard so many stories about Japan! You're killing me now, Yuri."

"Sorry." The young skater chuffled a nervous laugh, "...You can't really see anything below the water so it's not like it's all in your face, and everyone gets towels. No photography while in the spring though!"

"Cuz I wanna take a picture of a bunch of naked men." Mikhail winked at him, "Nah, it's fine."
Everyone's heads rose up at the sound, gawking back around to see where a door had been slammed back. Therein stood a familiar woman.

"...Oh hey, Minako-sensei!" Yuri waved politely from where they were sitting, "We didn't know you were coming."

She stalked over to them, and loomed over Mikhail like a dreadnought. She stuck a finger out, as though about to scold him over something...but then just leaned down, stuck the finger through his hair just above his right eye, and parted it from there to dump his bangs over his left eye. He was dumbstruck but said nothing...and the rest of the guests, Yuri and Viktor included, were just as wary of saying anything.

"There, that's better." She mused, quite pleased with herself, "Welcome to Hasetsu. I stopped by the Ice Castle and saw the other Yuri, so I figured you were here."

Viktor and Yuri's eyes went between the two as they listened.

"Yeah...we just arrived. Two days left until the party, right?"

"Yes!" Minako said excitedly, moving to sit at the table with the trio, "It's going to be bigger than the Hot Springs on Ice!"

"Eh...?" Yuri finally piped up, "But I thought..."

"...It's supposed to be a somewhat small thing." Viktor finished, "How'd it get to be a big deal suddenly?"

"Oh! No no, sorry, I don't mean that it's going to be a huge event for the public!" The ballerina waved her hands defensively, "I just mean that there's going to be a lot of skating planned!"

"There...is?" The youngest amongst them was perplexed, "How is there a lot of skating..?"

"Have the girls not given you the program yet?"

"There's a program?"

"Sure!" She pulled out her phone to load up the PDF of the item in question, and presented it to them, "See? A whole day of skating! The triplets are calling it 'The Best of Nikiforov on Ice' but I prefer to call it 'The Journey.'"

Yuri took the phone to zoom in on the timeline of planned events, "Sheesh, this looks like a program schedule for a competition..."

"...No joke." Viktor noted, leaning in on his husband's shoulder as his eyes scanned the list, "Some of these are for people who aren't even here."

"...Firebird, Aria, Soldier, Shall We Skate, Intoxicated, Eros, Winter's Wish..." Yuri shook his head, "I don't even know that third one. What's with this list?"

"Did you really think we'd miss your wedding party?" Came a voice, this time following a simple slide of the door rather than a slam.

When Yuri looked up, he saw Phichit standing there in the doorway, and his eyes went wide. He practically lost his breath when Chris came in after him.
"What...what are you guys...? Phichit-kun...! Chris...! I didn't...we didn't..."

"We were really hoping you'd invite us yourself, but...we figured out a way." Chris said, winking at the young skater, "Hope you didn't miss us too much since Worlds."

Yurio finally wedged himself in through the door and past the two skaters blocking his way, dragging someone unexpected with him...Otabek. Yuuko and the rest followed in soon after.

"Get out of the way!" The blond barked, shoving past them to get into the common room.

Yuri was dumbstruck by all the people that had suddenly piled into Yu-Topia Katsuki, and he leaned back against Viktor to get his bearings, turning his head to whisper, "...Did you know this was going to happen?"

"Nyet." The Russian answered, "...But I'm starting to like it. Don't you think it's better this way?" He whispered in turn, moving to snake an arm around Yuri's back, settling his hand on the man's hip, "It's not much of a wedding party if we don't have any of our friends around."
CHAPTER SEVENTY FIVE

Yuri was still in disbelief at the arrival of Phichit and Chris even after an hour had passed. It just seemed so surreal to see them all there. His family had quickly gone about the business of serving everyone, and the common room was humming with activity because of it. It had only been just under two weeks since the skaters had all seen each other last, so there wasn't a whole lot to get caught up on, but it still felt like a lifetime of conversation had taken place.

Though maybe that was just what the Sake made him think.

The room had become almost unbearably warm after a while. Yuri took a survey of the room just to see where everyone was at...Chris and Phichit were sitting on either side of Mikhail to share their same table, Minako was on the shorter end to Yuri's left, and Viktor at the short end opposite her on his right, leaving him alone on his own long side. Yurio was at a different table with Otabek, making the stoic Kazakhstani skater discover the joy of katsudon. The older teen had even been gifted with a tiger-faced t-shirt like Yurio's. Yuuko, Takeshi, and their three daughters were sitting at the same table as them. The remaining tables in the common room had other resort guests sitting at them or were empty.

But one thing nagged at the Asian skater more than anything. He held up his hand to interrupt whoever was speaking; he wasn't even sure who it was at that point, and gathered the attention of those at his table, "...How in the world did all of this happen?"

"How'd what happen?" Phichit wondered, sipping at a glass of plum wine that Viktor had recommended, "How'd we get here?"

"When Viktor and I got married, we had it in our heads that this wedding party honeymoon thing here in Hasetsu would be a really tiny family affair." Yuri explained, or tried to, "I'm really glad you guys are here but I just can't get my head around how you arranged the whole thing without us knowing."

"It's my fault." Minako admitted, "When Chris came to dinner with Mari, Mikhail, and I, I just kind of gushed about it. So, naturally, Chris wanted to come...so I gave him my number and told him I'd let Yuuko and the girls know."

"Then I ran into Phichit at the airport." Chris continued, "And since he was the one who first thought you guys are here but I just can't get my head around how you arranged the whole thing without us knowing."

"So you guys have been planning to come since the end of Worlds." Yuri said out loud, explaining his understanding, but then he leaned in to whisper, gawking over at the other table, "...But what about him?" He gestured a side-eye at Otabek, "I don't think we've ever exchanged words with that guy, so why's he here? I know he was at the table with us at the GPF but it's not like he made conversation."

"Yuratchka asked if he could invite a friend." Mikhail admitted, "He wanted someone impartial to hang out with while this whole thing was happening. Otabek's probably the only person that'll talk to him about something that has nothing to do with you two. I know it's shocking, but that kid really doesn't live, eat, and breathe Nikiforov gossip."
"...I guess that makes sense."

"Wasn't Yurio going to do his new Short Program though?" Viktor wondered, "Have you seen it?"

"Yeah, it's the one called 'Soldier' that I'm guessing you guys didn't recognize on the program list."

"...Yuuko didn't even sound like she knew Yurio was coming though. How'd he get his stuff added to the program so fast?" Yuri wondered, "Or did she make it new after he got here?"

"I made the program list." Minako explained, "I made the edits myself after I went to the Ice Castle to see how things were coming along and ran into him. I thought he was going to do Agape, but they told me he'd given the outfit back. Is it true?"

Viktor nodded.

"Ah, that's a shame...it was a nice program."

"This new one sounds more his style." Yuri admitted, "He said he'd started working on it as far back as Euros, but he'd decided against using it in competition until next year."

"Mmmh...Euros..." Chris sighed, remembering the disaster that had unfolded for all of the European skaters to see, "That was almost more painful to watch than your Sochi unraveling, Yuri. The kid had done well winning gold at the GPF and Russian Nationals, but..."

"Yeah..." Yuri nodded, not sure how much of what had happened he should explain to them all without the teen's permission, "It wasn't his fault. Life happens. I'm sure he'll be back in form again when the Grand Prix Series starts up again."

"The way things are shaping up," Phichit chimed in, "It'll be more of a competition between you and Viktor, while the rest of us scramble for the last spot on the podium."

Viktor laughed at the notion, but Yuri shook his hands defensively, "Don't say that!"

"It's kind of true." Chris agreed, "Viktor's turned you into a monster, and until he retires for good, we all know the gold won't be up for grabs to pretty much anyone but you. He tilted his glass of red wine at the raven-haired skater, "Unless both of you break your legs beforehand or something."

"Don't tempt fate, Chris!" Viktor warned, swirling his own glass of plum wine.

"Could you have imagined anything like this when we were still in Detroit, Yuri?" Phichit wondered, remembering those days fondly, "You always said you'd be content if you could just skate the same ice as Viktor, but now you've actually sort of surpassed him."

Yuri was across the table in a heartbeat, both hands on the Thai skater's mouth, "Don't say that! I didn't!"

Phichit just nudged him off by poking him in the chest with a free hand, "You won gold at a competition he was competing in."

"BARELY. If Viktor's coat wasn't so heavy in the Short Program, I wouldn't have-"

"And you're going to win the next one, too." Viktor pointed out, "You have to. You won the World Championships, so now my expectations are really high." He held his hand up, gesturing that the level was over his head, "If you win anything less, it'll be because you were lazy, and I won't forgive you if you start slacking off."
"But-"

The Russian shook his head, "I told you at the Grand Prix Final that even I was worried about making a full comeback. What I just did at Worlds was probably the apex of my career, flawed as it was. I'll perform next season, but...I'm thinking of limiting the quads in my programs to just three..."

"What!?" Yuri was incredulous, "You...why!? You literally just did the world's first quad axel and set a new world record score for the Short Program, and now you're backing off!?"

"I fell doing my own signature move." Viktor pointed out, "Doing the quad axel wasn't the only reason why I was tired, and I can't let you keep making excuses for my poor performance. The coat, the axel, not practicing enough beforehand...those were all stupid, sure, but I'm 28, Yuri. I'll be 29 after the next Final. A skater with any sense would never have agreed to come back after taking off when I did. Winter's Wish was supposed to be my last, and I knew that even before coming here to coach you."

Yuri's eyes widened, and he couldn't help but glance at Chris across the table, remembering their exchange while watching the Russian's Free Skate.

'...This...was supposed to be his goodbye show. He was going to retire this year after all. Look at him...he's thanking the audience and judges...then turning away like he's leaving them behind...'

'No wonder he didn't want anyone to see.'

"...What are you saying? That you're only coming back because I asked you to?"

"...Basically, yes." Viktor confirmed.

The table had turned awkwardly quiet as the words settled in Yuri's mind. It was hard to take.

"...You say how you won't forgive me if I don't win gold from now on. But how am I supposed to forgive you? It's like you're saying you're not even going to try." He said quietly; his throat was starting to hurt.

Viktor wasn't sure how to answer, so he turned his head away, slightly ashamed of it.

"How am I supposed to make myself want to win gold if I know you're practically handing it to me?" The sad words went on. They could all hear Yuri's voice starting to crack under the distress, but none knew what to say, "I know you said you always want to surprise people, but this isn't what I expected at all! It was already bad enough that Chris thought you'd only claimed we were engaged for the shock value!"

The Swiss skater's cheeks flushed from the shame of being reminded. Everyone else gawked at him like they could hardly believe the accusation. He wasn't about to try explaining himself though, not at that moment.

"But this!? You're going to surprise everyone by underwhelming them!? Don't you dare tell me you're coming back unless you're going to give it everything you have! You...YOU'RE VIKTOR NIKIFOROV! Three quads!? Are you kidding!? What are you thinking!?" Yuri had gotten to his feet by then, making the entire room go quiet, not just their own table, "You turned 28, not 60, remember!? That's what you said to Yuri at the Banquet! You're better than this!"

Viktor remained silent. All he could think to do was stare at the last little bit of wine in the cup in front of him.
"...Aren't you going to say anything!?” He paused, then clenched up a little, "...Are you even listening?"

The Russian lowered his head, "I'm not good with people who are crying in front of me."

Yuri huffed at him incredulously, "...I'm not even in front of you.” He moved off and left the common room in awkward silence, all eyes except Viktor's watching him go. The young skater just stomped off towards the resort's front doors; Makkachin was following after him, rising up from where he'd been sleeping between the two tables. Viktor could hear Hiroko asking something, but wasn't sure what, and a moment later, more footsteps, followed by the slamming of the front sliding doors.

Everyone that remained had their sights set on Viktor, entirely unsure what to say or do.

Both of Yuri's parents stuck their head into the room after that, "What in the world happened? Why is Yuri crying?"

"They had a fight.” Mari explained, having heard everything from an adjoining hall, "Or rather, Yuri had a cow and Viktor let it happen."

"R...right now?” Hiroko was worried, "But the party is the day after tomorrow...! Viktor..."

The Russian was entirely uncomfortable with the situation and pushed to stand, leaving the room without a word and heading to the banquet hall upstairs to be alone.

Phichit was the only one who dared to stand after that, and went for the front door to grab his coat, scarf, beanie, and shoes. He turned back to the family, "Where would he go if he's upset like this?"

"Normally, to the Ice Castle, but he isn't allowed in right now..." Yuuko answered for them, "He may still try though."

"Where is it?"

"Turn left outside the gate, and go straight until you cross the bridge. It's on the right, just on the other side."

"Thanks.” He answered, pulling the doors aside to step out into the encroaching cold. The front that had shut down Tokyo Airport had finally arrived in Kyushu, and it was starting to snow.

When the door closed again, Mikhail rose to stand, "Yuri may not go to the rink if he knows he can't get in. Where else might he go?"

"My ballet studio, but he knows I'm not there." Minako suggested.

"Any other ideas? We have to find him before the storm does."

Eyes shifted around the room, but no one really had any answers, which made them all feel even worse.

Mikhail sighed, "Then I guess I'll just hope he's the only one walking around out there and see if I can't follow his tracks.” He stepped off after that and followed Phichit's lead, getting his things before heading outside. At least, as a Russian, he was slightly more accustomed to the bitter cold than the thin Thai skater that had already gone before him.

"Wait, I'll go with you." Minako said, standing up as well, "We'll cover more ground in my car."
"...You've had enough to drink to make that a terrible idea." Mikhail said dubiously, watching her come anyway.

"You haven't."

"...You're going to let me drive your car." He wondered flatly.

"Someone has to. Let's get a move on!"

"What about Viktor? Shouldn't someone try to talk to him, too?" Hiroko asked.

"He's not the sort that would want that." Chris said simply, "I've only seen that look on his face once before, and back then, he needed his head-space. He'll come back when he's ready."

Yuri had already made it half-way across the bridge when he remembered the doors would be locked to him, so he stopped and kicked the railing in frustration. He leaned over it, his coat brushing away the meager snow-fall that had already landed, light as dust as it was, and he held his head. He could hear Makkachin whining a little next to him, but he ignored the dog. All he could focus on was how much his throat hurt. His head was starting to follow suit, and the tears he was holding back were starting to fall from his eyes, even as he clenched them shut.

He dropped down to his knees after that, and slowly turned around to sit on the ground and lean over himself, sobbing into his coat sleeves.

The poodle watched over him quietly, even as a car stopped in front of him, "Hey, there's a snow storm coming...you should get to shelter." The stranger said, concerned the see the white dust starting to pile on the skater's hair and shoulders.

"Go away!" He barked at them, barely lifting his head, hoping the person or persons wouldn't recognize him.

"...All right..."

The car moved off again slowly, and the dog whined a little, panting softly. Once the sound of tires on the road was too far off to hear, Yuri finally lifted his head, peering over his arm to where he could see his right hand in front of him, looking at the golden band on it.

"Yuri Katsuki...I take you to be my husband from this time onward, to join with you and to share all that is to come...Whatever lies ahead, good or bad, we will face together.'

He clenched his fist against the cold and brought it close to himself, crossing his arms under his chest to lean against his knees.

No one ever said anything about being the cause of the bad...

"Yuri!" He heard someone calling from afar, "Yuri!"

Makkachin barked and ran back the way they came to meet the figure, running around him and then following until they were back with the depressed skater.
"Yuri...it's going to get much colder out here as the sun goes down. You need to come back to the resort with me."

"Phichit-kun..."

"I know that what Viktor said was hard to take, but...you're overreacting a little, don't you think?" The Thai man knelt next to him and put a hand on his snow-dusted shoulder, "It's not like he lied to you."

"How am I supposed to keep having faith in myself to keep going when my own coach has no faith in himself?" Yuri said between painful breaths.

"He's just being realistic." Phichit suggested calmly, "He's the oldest skater in the Senior Division. He's probably in worse physical shape than he's willing to admit, and is avoiding possible injury."

"I'd know if he was hurting though..." He insisted, but then he remembered, "...Nevermind. I wouldn't know if he's hurt if my life depended on it."

"You know more than you realize, even if you aren't aware of it." Phichit continued, sitting next to Yuri despite it making his clothing cold and wet, "Viktor has so much to live up to, and expectations for him are through the roof. He'll do anything he can to avoid letting people down by looking weak. He'd probably try to walk off a broken ankle if he got one...but I also imagine he doesn't want people to remember his last performance as the one where he had to be carried off the ice. He doesn't have the luxury of time anymore, or the ability to bounce back. If he overdoes it, that's the end for him."

"But at Worlds..."

"...and it's going to be another half year before the GP Series starts again. That's a long time." Phichit squeezed his friend's shoulder where he still had his hand, "Cut him some slack. He needs you to accept that he isn't a superhuman, even if he puts on a show like he wants everyone else to think so. He's flawed and damaged just like the rest of us. You're probably the only person he's ever been willing to show that to. Think about it...I'm right, aren't I?"

*He's told me a lot of things...sure...but none of them ever made him seem flawed. Yuri thought to himself, It's just that things have happened to him. When has he ever made a mistake? When has he ever screwed up? All the time I've been with him, on and off the ice, I've never...*

His mind finally wandered back to the end of their first interaction with Konstantin, and how Viktor had cried for almost an hour after it was over. It was different from when Viktor been mad after he'd said they should end their coach-student relationship at the GP Final.

*Back then, all I wanted was to free him from the burden of being my coach so he could focus on being a competitor again...but even then, he refused it. He didn't want to stop, even though it would hurt him professionally to split his attention like that.*

"He needs you to accept him as he is, and be there with him as he slowly steps away from competition." Phichit said quietly, "He said he's coming back for another year because you want him to, right? It's not like that means he doesn't want to. I'm sure if he could go back 10 years and start over, the only thing that would stop him is knowing he'd lose you in the process. But that's part of his battle right now, too. Coming to grips with knowing he's at the end of something he's done all his life...and he still has so much more life left in him. What's he going to do with the rest of it? What would he have to fall back on if he didn't have you around to give him time?"

"...I...I don't know..."
"...Be there beside him as he slows down...and for all that's good and sacred in this world, don't question him in this. If he only wants to do three quads, let him. He's done a lot in the 15 or something years he's been competing. The last thing he needs is for someone to jump on his back and tell him he isn't trying hard enough. You probably ripped his pride apart like a paper towel when you said all that stuff earlier."

Yuri didn't know what to say after that.

Phichit just gently grabbed for his right hand and put the ring right in front of Yuri's sights, "Viktor clearly loves you a lot, and your opinion matters to him more than probably anyone else's. But that's a double-edged sword. You have to be careful when you lay it on so thick about the skating stuff. Skaters' hearts are made of glass, right? He's no different from the rest of us. He's just had the benefit of keeping people at a distance until now, hiding behind his wall of gold medals. You're the first person he's ever really let in like this...and the fact that you've been on this journey together means you know things that some random non-skater spouse wouldn't. That knowledge makes you powerful...so don't use it against him...okay?"
CHAPTER SEVENTY SIX

[Yuri's friend just messaged Chris. They're coming back now. You should, too.]

Minako was looking at her phone, reading the message from Yuuko as it came in.

"Phichit found Yuri." She said, nodding her head over to where Mikhail was in the driver's seat, "We can go back."

"It's going to be awkward there for a while until Yuri apologizes to Viktor. Do you really want to jump back into the middle of it?" He wondered.

"...Maybe not." She sighed, putting her phone away, looking out as the snow was starting to really come down, "We have to go somewhere though. We'll be sliding around like air-hockey discs in this before long."

"Lady's choice."

"Oh!" She got excited, "I run a snack bar! We should go there. At least there's wifi."

"A ballet studio and a snack bar? You're quite the entrepreneur."

"Have to pay the bills somehow!"

Yuri and Phichit were standing just under the entrance arch to Yu-Topia Katsuki. Yuri sighed, not wanting to step through it.

"You don't have to confront him right now, you know." Phichit explained, "He went upstairs anyway, right after you left. I doubt he's come back down already."

"...Can you check?"

"Yuri...!" Phichit lamented, "All right...all right...hang on." The Thai skater went up and did as asked, sticking his head in through the front door before disappearing inside briefly, then coming back out a minute later to wave his former rink-mate inside as well.

Yuri went in nervously, not all that keen on confronting the rest of the crew either, but at least they weren't Viktor. Unexpectedly though, as soon as he was in the door and closed it behind himself, his mother whirled him around, pulled off his backpack, and pointed at the doorway to the onsen.

"Don't come out until you're ready to deal with what happened." She said firmly, as only a mother could.

He wasn't going to argue though, and nodded solemnly before stepping off, pulling his heavy long-coat off as he went. By the time he'd changed, washed, sat in the indoor tub, and then finally moved to the outdoor pool, it was already dark. There weren't any other guests in the spring at the time,
which was fortunate.

Yuri put the small towel on his head carefully and slowly stepped into the hot water, sitting on the ledge where he entered, and sinking to just under his chin.

...Mom says not to come out until I'm ready to talk to Viktor...but I'm not supposed to sit in this thing all night, either...

He sighed and lifted his head to the falling snow.

I don't even know how to approach him about it now. I messed up so badly... I wonder what he's doing right now...?

Viktor was just lying on his right side in bed, earbuds in, playing music from his phone. He had his arms crossed tightly, head on the pillow above him, and an angry look on his face, even with his eyes closed. He still hadn't changed out of the practice clothes he'd worn since the last attempt at getting into the Ice Castle. The lights were all off, but there was still enough ambiance through the windows that the room was cast darkly in a blue shade.

Yuri sat on the outer ledge for a little while, his feet dangling into the hot water. It had been an hour and a half since Phichit had made him come back, and he decided it was finally enough...he had to deal with this. He went back into the wash room, changed back into his clothes, and nervously made his way up to the banquet room.

Careful not to make any sound as he approached, Yuri stood in front of the closed doors, staring at the latch quietly. He shook his head and drew in a deep breath, letting it back out slowly, "...Viktor? You in there?"

No answer.

Yuri wasn't sure what that meant, but he went on, assuming the man was there anyway.

"I'm sorry I made a big scene. I don't know why I got all worked up about your plans. It didn't even come out the way I meant it..."

Still no answer.

The fragile skater's heart was starting to break all over again, but he didn't dare touch the door to go inside. He could feel the tears splashing against his toes where they fell from his down-turned face and hit the floor. He shook his head, "I'm sorry...!" He whispered with finality, turning away to go back the way he came. By the time he got back to his old room, he was an even bigger mess than he had been on the bridge, but thankfully it was far enough away from the common room that no one would hear him.

He pushed the door open, and made his way inside...only to find his breath catch in his throat with surprise.

Viktor was lying on his bed, back towards him.

"If you still have that ring on your finger, then don't come in." The Russian said flatly.

Yuri just rubbed his eyes on his arm, "...But this is my room." His voice was scratchy, but he found his words anyway.

"This room belongs to Yuri Katsuki."
"I am Yuri Katsuki."

"Oh?" Viktor finally pushed himself up and swung his legs over the edge, the earbuds coming out of his ears as he went, "Then so sorry for the intrusion. For a minute, I thought you were Yuri Nikiforov. My mistake. I'll see myself out."

The younger skater watched in horror as his idol rose back up to his full height and was stepping forward towards the door, but instinct took over and his right hand came up, planted itself in the middle of the Russian's chest, and stopped him.

"...That's not what I meant and you know it." Yuri said quietly, not daring to turn his head.

Viktor was the same, staring straight ahead...but soon, he moved his eyes, lowering them to see that Yuri still had the gold band on the hand holding him where he stood.

"It was cruel to set up that word-game just now." Yuri went on, his eyes and throat still raw, but feeling a sense of calm somehow, "You had two hours to think of what you would say when I came back, and that's what you came up with? A way of tricking me into suggesting I'm not your spouse anymore, no matter how I answer or what I do?"

"I didn't think my husband would humiliate me in front of friends, family, and strangers alike."

"What I said came out wrong." Yuri said painfully, reaching up to his throat with his free hand; not that it would do any good, "I'm sorry for that."

"How can I accept an apology when it's clear you don't even know what you're apologizing for?" Viktor asked, pushing Yuri's hand away to stand side-face and glared at him, "You don't even get why I'm mad at you right now."

"I thought I was trying to encourage you not to give up, the same way you've encouraged me...but I entirely failed to see that what you're doing isn't even the same thing." The younger figure said, trying not to cry again, "In the end, I just blurted out all the things you're worried other people will say, when I should've been the one to stand by and support you. I heaped my insecurities onto you like we process things the same way...and completely disrespected everything I know to be true about you."

Viktor continued to glare at him, but his expression softened a little.

"...So my attempts at being supportive turned into what felt like an attack. I can't take back what I said, but I understand now what it sounded like to you and I am so sorry."

The Russian drew in a deep breath and crossed his arms.

"...Vik...tor...?" Yuri chanced a glance at the man, but averted his eyes again when he could see that Viktor was still glowering at him, even if he wasn't looking directly his way.

"You don't know how worried I am about this next year because I don't want you to worry, too." He finally said, stepping forward to close the door, and keeping his hand on it, "You already worry so much about everything else. Until you can learn to manage it, I don't want you stressing over me, too."

"We're supposed to be in this together."

"...I know."
"So why aren't we?"

Viktor shrugged.

"What else don't I know?"

The Russian leaned his shoulder against the door, turning slightly to face into the room again, "...Too much, and yet nothing."

"If it were up to me, you'd tell me when something was bothering you, even if you know I'll worry about it." Yuri pointed out, "I'd rather worry about something real than about the unknown and maybe nonexistent. 'Sanctuary of warmth and peace' and all that, right? Even if there's nothing I can actually do to fix whatever's wrong, stressing over it makes me feel like I'm at least in the fight with you. Remember when you were still on the fence about Mikhail at Worlds? And I said I owned a pair of boots with knives on the bottom?"

Viktor couldn't help but smile and huff a laugh at that.

"Even though Mikhail ended up being totally fine...feeling like I could do something to protect you made everything else easier." Yuri could feel the tightness in his chest starting to let up, "Especially for something like that whole debacle with Konstantin... I'd like to think that that was something more I could've done, but-"

"You did more than I could've ever asked of you." Viktor cut him off, "More than I ever even expected. You even came in handy that one time..."

"...I did?"

The Russian nodded, finally turning to look at his partner again, "My father was telling me I shouldn't even hold your hand. So I told him if he didn't mind his own business, I'd French kiss you right there in his house, and sear the image in his mind forever."

"That would've gone over like a lead balloon."

"...It would've been worth it. He'd have to have burned the whole house down to remove the taint."

"You never did say how it all turned out in the end." Yuri noted, cautiously reaching his right hand out to Viktor's, "I nearly had a stroke when I saw him reaching for your face on the hill."

"Me too." He answered, feeling the man's fingers brushing against his skin. He moved his hand forward and took Yuri's wholly into his own, lifting it to his lips to kiss the ring, raising his other hand to join it and holding them all together there for a few seconds, "He said he'd basically been forced by Divine Edict to accept my skating, but not to bother asking him to accept us."

"...I guess that's enough."

"I don't even know that I'll ever see him again. He'll never actually apologize for the things he did to me...and it didn't matter much before that he didn't accept my skating, so it still doesn't really matter now that he does."

Yuri furrowed his brow at that, "So you really didn't get much resolution out of it after all."

"I didn't go up there to find resolution, or make peace, with Konstantin. I found out the truth of the circumstances surrounding my mother's death, and soon, we'll both find out how the rest turned out. Whatever it is...I can't let it change me. I refuse to let it. The person I am now and the one I would've
been if I never left...they're too different to reconcile. Besides..." He moved his left hand forward and
brushed it through Yuri's hair before settling it on his cheek, sliding his thumb just under the younger
man's eye, "...If I had never left, I would never have met my soul mate. I'd take a thousand punches
in the eye if it meant I'd still get to be with you in the end."

Yuri's eyes widened as he heard the words, and his cheeks flushed, "...You...really think of me
as...?"

Viktor nodded, the happy smile back on his face where Yuri had seriously wondered if he'd ever see
it again, "There's an old Greek story that says people were originally created as one being, with four
arms, four legs, and two faces. Fearing man's power, Zeus split us apart, and condemned us to seek
out our other half forever." He stepped forward and pulled Yuri into a tight hug, "...Even though you
sometimes do things that make no sense whatsoever, or even drive me crazy...I've never felt more
whole than I have since I finally caught you and made you mine."

The younger man buried his face in the crook of Viktor's neck, holding him tight as well, happy tears
falling from his eyes. The relief at the whole thing was palpable, and he could feel his whole body
easing up. He felt the Russian leaning down as well, kissing the side of his neck where he could get
at it. Yuri knew where this would go and was all for it, even starting to move away from the door,
pulling Viktor with him a few foot-shuffles at a time, leaning his head up to kiss him as they went.
Soon, he turned the taller man around and gently guided him down to his bed before crawling in on
top of him.

Yuri could feel his husband relaxing under him, especially when he pulled out of a kiss and flopped
his head and arms down to the pillow. He was looking up with half-lidded eyes and a 'do whatever
you want' look on his face...and Yuri was going to do just that. He leaned down to kiss him again as
his hands moved down Viktor's chest, tugging on the black t-shirt he usually wore for practice, and
pulling it up until he could see skin.

Viktor's whole body flinched as Yuri's apparently-rather-cold hands touched him, but he just laughed
at himself for it and settled to let them warm up as they moved. He got a little revenge though since
his own hands were fairly cold as well, and Yuri jumped as he slid them under his own shirt. That
just made the Russian laugh again, and he pushed his hips up against his partner as he came back
down again. Viktor wasted no more time though, feeling he was starting to stir, and reached those
hands up to pull Yuri's dark-blue practice shirt away, then the rest of his own, and tossing them both
to the floor next to the bed.

He started to move his hips a little more after that, pushing up against where Yuri straddled over him.
The feeling of it caught the younger man, and he paused a little to savor it...at least until Viktor
literally took hold of him rather unexpectedly and he drew in a rather loud gasp, crying out in
surprise.

"...Viktor!" He whisper-yelled.

"Oh...you should keep doing that. That was great~."

"Half the resort probably heard me..." Yuri's face was bright red, and he brought his hands up to
cover his mouth from the embarrassment, looking around as though he worried someone would
come running to check if he was hurt.

"Then I'm going to make it my mission to make sure the entire resort hears you by the end of it."

His brows furrowed in worry at the prospect of it, but Viktor didn't let him dwell on it for long,
keeping hold of him in his right hand as he rose to sit up, parting his knees like he were sitting half-
cross-legged, and forcing Yuri to sit slightly deeper on his lap. He pressed his forehead to Yuri's and looked in his eyes as he started to stroke, which inevitably caused the younger man to lose focus until Viktor started kissing him again. Yuri's arms went over Viktor's shoulders, the fingers of one hand running through his silver-grey hair as Viktor leaned forward and over him. He could feel the Russian's free hand tracing down the entire length of his spine, slowly teasing until finally coming to rest against his lower back and side.

The further back Yuri leaned, the further down Viktor's kisses trailed, until it became apparent that the remains of their clothing were going to get in the way. Viktor leaned back again after that, pulling Yuri with him, and then pulling at the edges of his black and aqua practice pants. Yuri took the hint and rose up on his knees to make it easier, leaning over Viktor's head and kissing him as the garment came away. He only settled back to where he was after he could feel that Viktor had pushed both of their clothes off and was ready. By then, Viktor was half-sitting-up again, and held Yuri close against his chest as he slid back down to sitting. He took them both in his hand to hold them together as Yuri moved to slide back up again a little, then back down, then up again...rhythmically, but slowly, steadily.

Viktor only moved to twist over the edge of the bed briefly after that, catching Yuri by surprise again but for entirely different reasons. He watched as the Russian pulled the corner of the mattress up a little bit.

"...What are you doing?" Yuri wondered.

"I hid stuff here." Viktor answered, reaching his hand down to try and find what he was after.

"You hid stuff under my mattress?"

"Sure!"

"...Already?"

"The day after we got here~!" He finally came back with the small bottle happily in hand, "I made sure to put the warming one here since you like it."

Yuri's face was red again.

...I need to get rid of the posters before he finds them-

Yuri could've died in that moment, his mind going blank.

"I noticed you had a bunch of the same images though. I'll have to get you a better variety..." The Russian went on, even as he was dribbling the warming liquid between them like it was no different from any other chore he'd ever done, then capping the bottle to drop it to the sheets and replacing that hand around them where it had been before, spreading the liquid around. He moved back up to touch his nose to Yuri's affectionately, "Did you ever do this sort of thing by yourself, when all the posters were still up?"

"...I'd have to be a eunuch for you to believe me if I said I didn't." Yuri answered cautiously, his mind half-wandering between the embarrassment of the confession and how good it felt where Viktor held him, sliding his hand up and down and around.

"Did you think of me when you did it?"
"...My walls were literally a...ahh...a shrine to you..."

"That's not what I asked, Yuri~." Viktor purred, continuing on, squeezing a little harder as he went.

"...Maybe."

"Yuuuuri~!"

"S...Sometimes..."

"Did you imagine me on top or you?" The Russian asked pointedly, looking into his partner's eyes as he did so. It put Yuri on the edge rather quickly, and Viktor could feel it, so he eased off with a smirk, "...Well?"

The younger skater was thoroughly embarrassed, but he knew he'd have to answer, "...You...always you."

"Mmh...I thought so." The Russian mused, moving both hands over Yuri's legs to curl behind and under him, pulling up a little against his skin to make him rise. As the man did so, Viktor repositioned himself, and then let Yuri sit back down again, "Did you want me to dominate you?"

"...V-Viktor...!" Yuri answered between clenched teeth, hardly able to comprehend what the question even was anymore. He could feel the man beneath him though; long, thick, slick, and ready for his answer.

"I always felt you responded better if I made it as equal as possible, but...I could be convinced..." Viktor continued, smiling devilishly, resting his forearms on Yuri's thighs where they parted around him, and using one hand to hold himself up to press against the man's lower half, moving just enough to remind Yuri that he was anxiously waiting, "So what do you want me to do, hm?"

The younger man flinched, "...Here I thought I'd be doing most of the work tonight to make up for my faults earlier..."

"You're avoiding the question~!" Viktor hummed, moving in closer to kiss at Yuri's neck.

"...I..." He started, nervous.

"Mhm?"

"...I want you to do whatever you want to do."

"And if I want to go hard and fast?"

Yuri gulped, "...Then just ease me into it."

"Always." The Russian lifted his head again, kissing Yuri's chin and then nose before looking into his eyes, "This should be fun~!"

The younger man nodded anxiously, feeling where Viktor was starting to press harder against him.

"Cry out." Viktor said suddenly.

"...Huh?"

"...I want to hear how it feels when I get inside you."
The group in the common room had settled into watching whatever the other guests had put on the television, conceding dibs on the entertainment after their group-mates had caused a scene earlier in the night. Some soccer game was playing, which numbed the minds of those who cared little for it, Chris especially.

He lifted his head as he heard something though.

"What is it?" Phichit wondered.

"...Turn the TV down."

The Thai skater moved off to get the remote from another table, hitting mute for a moment to the complaints of the other patrons. Everyone listened closely though, and heard another noise.

"There it is again." Yurio said curiously, "Sounds like a cat."

"...I don't think that's a cat." Chris mused, only to be validated by a rather loud cry after that, but in a voice that was more familiar, "...Oh, good. That's a relief." Chris felt the tension lifting a little when he heard it again.

"Oh my god they're fucking." Yurio said incredulously, looking up at the ceiling like they were doing it right above them.

"LANGUAGE." Yuuko chastised him, "There's kids here!" She had already bundled her triplets together in a row, her hands covering the ears on the two on the outside while the sides of their heads covered the ears of the one in the middle. They were smirking though despite their mother's efforts.

Yurio slunk lower, "...They're...doing it..."

"Sounds like it hurts..." Phichit said anxiously.

"...It's make-up sex. It can get rough." Chris laughed, watching with hilarity as both Phichit and Yuuko burst backward with nosebleeds as they definitely heard Yuri yelling out Viktor's name.
CHAPTER SEVENTY SEVEN

Viktor had done just as Yuri requested, easing him into the faster pace until he was used to it. It was almost as painful as when Viktor had stretched him unexpectedly on the deck of the onsen a year prior, which was where most of Yuri's louder noises came from...but this was a hurt Yuri wanted...mostly.

Viktor had flipped him half a dozen times, getting into him from every possible angle that the younger man would allow. He finished though while looming over his partner, panting heavily where they faced each other.

"...Is...is this how...you imagined it?" He wondered, leaning down to touch his brow to Yuri's.

"M-More or less..." The younger man admitted, trying to catch his breath as well, feeling weak even though he'd hardly done anything for the last few minutes himself.

"What was...different?" Viktor asked, moving down a little further to wrap his arms under Yuri's back, drinking in the feeling of his partner's heat around him.

Yuri thought back on it, though it had been quite a long time since he'd had to imagine the act. He looked back into those slate blue eyes, "...If it makes sense at all, I never actually imagined it was me under you. It was...always someone else, but that I could see through their eyes. I never imagined you were with another man, so...it was definitely never me. Not really."

"So you were watching through the eyes of some woman?" The Russian clarified, smiling at that, trying to see it in his own mind's eye, "I guess that makes the most sense. But...why never you? It was your imagination. You could've thought of anything you wanted."

"...I thought it disrespected you. I never, ever imagined you being made to do something, or put into a position or situation that seemed offensive." Viktor quirked his head at that, but then moved down to nose at Yuri's neck affectionately while retaking him in his hand, even as he was still inside him, "...I see. So even the idea of me with another guy seemed offensive to you?"

Yuri was having a hard time focusing, but he still had enough regular circulation that his brain worked a little bit, "...I'd never known you to have considered it, so it wasn't so much that it was offensive to me, as it was just something you didn't do. So I didn't think of it." His breathing became more labored as Viktor started to stroke a little faster.

"Is that why you don't often take part in our romps at the same level I do?" The Russian wondered further.

"...What...mh...what do you mean?"

Viktor let go of him for a moment, leaning back up again so he could look down at Yuri's confused face, "You let me get inside you all the time, anytime I want really...but you almost never do it yourself. Maybe only once a month, or if I insist. Why? Am I not giving you enough opportunity?" His hands roamed over his partner's chest, slowly moving up and down the length of him.

Yuri's face flushed and he averted his eyes a little, "...No, I just...don't want to."
The Russian blinked at him, utterly confused, "...Why?"

"It's just..." Yuri reached up to rub his face, trying to gather his thoughts despite where most of the blood in his head had gone, "...I don't feel the need to do that to you."

"...Why?"

"Too many questions!" Yuri blurted, arms and legs flailing where they could, "I can't think straight! If you want answers you'll have to restore circulation first!"

Viktor just laughed quietly at that, "...I'll do my best." He leaned down to kiss his husband before setting back to his task, and continued kissing him, until he started to trail down. He kept himself inside his partner until the angle made it difficult, kissing lower onto Yuri's neck and chest until finally withdrawing to move down his abdomen. The younger man drew in a hissed gasp as he felt Viktor pull out, but then gave a reluctant half-quiet moan as the Russian took him into his mouth.

He kept a close eye on Yuri as he moved, glancing up at him anytime he could. Yuri's darker moods always made it a little difficult to know when he was close, since his body language drifted a little. But Viktor could still read him for the most part, and knew to focus on one thing or another depending on how close he thought the younger man was to finishing. His hands and feet would clench up when he was on the edge, and when Viktor saw it, took Yuri wholly into his mouth and swallowed. He licked the man clean as Yuri caught his breath, then moved up to take his place on his side, wrapping his arms around his partner and kissing the shoulder closest to him.

Viktor waited a few minutes, until he realized Yuri was on the edge of falling asleep. Part of him just wanted to let the man stay where he was and fall asleep alongside him...but another part was reminding him that he hadn't actually eaten anything since before their last trek to the skating rink, and as the saying goes, 'booze ain't food.'

He nudged Yuri awake and then helped him to sitting, "Come on, let's go get cleaned up. I'm starving!"

Grudgingly, Yuri followed him, throwing on their practice pants to make the trek down the hall to the family's private bathroom. Viktor was literally in the middle of washing his husband's hair when he posed the question again.

"...So? Why?"

Yuri nearly fell off the small stool he was sitting on when he heard it, "...That again? I didn't think you really wanted to know that badly."

"Of course I want to know!"

He grumbled a little, reaching up to wipe some of the water from his face, "I don't need it."

"I don't either, but I still like to." Viktor pointed out, "Why don't you want to?"

"It just sits better in my mind not to."

"That literally makes no sense." Viktor said...but then started to wonder, "...Oh no, is there something wrong with me!? Do I need a doctor!?"

Yuri nearly choked on himself when he heard it, getting soap in his eyes and flailing and falling off the small stool as he tried to get it out again, "No! Absolutely not! There's nothing wrong with you, you're perfect!" When he finally got the stinging to stop, he turned to see the blurry image of Viktor
comically lying on the shower floor, "Viktor!?"

"...I must feel weird inside..." He said disquietly, "My husband doesn't want me..."

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" Yuri protested, trying to get the Russian up again. The whole thing reminded him of when he'd first poked the top of Viktor's head and the man had gone down on the ice, thinking his hair was thinning. Yuri was practically begging him to get up again, just like back then, "You feel perfectly fine! I swear!"

Viktor twisted up again and took Yuri's hands in his own, "You have to take me more often then! It's only fair!"

"W-what? Why does it have to be 'fair'? I like how things are..." He shook his head, not realizing, "Unless you want me to because you want it for its own sake..."

Viktor blinked at him, "...Well, I wouldn't ask you to do something you don't want to do just to appease me."

"...It all depends on the real reason why you're asking!" Yuri blurted, his face red, "Do you want me to do it, or do you want me to want to do it!?"

"It depends on the real reason why you aren't doing it!" Viktor turned the words back on him, "Why?"

The younger man glowered at him, trying to figure out how to explain it. He retook his place on the small stool in the large flat shower-room, staring at where the soapy water was collecting in a foamy mass on top of the drain. He saw Viktor's hands coming aside his head before he felt the man leaning against his back, draping his arms over his shoulders and waiting for the answer.

"Mmmmh?"

"I just..." Yuri started, "It's the same reason why I never imagined myself being with you back then. It just isn't something I imagine you doing...so, I don't imagine myself doing it to you. It just seems weird. Besides..." Yuri looked up, "...I like the other stuff more anyway."

"Which other stuff?"

"You're gonna make me say it out loud?"

"Da."

His face went red again.

"I can't read your mind. You need to tell me what you like so I know to keep doing it." Viktor explained, "Switch!"

Yuri drew in a deep breath as the Russian pulled off of his back, and then stood up so his partner could take his place on the stool, stretching out his legs, crossing them at the ankles, and relaxing. Yuri reached for the shampoo nearby and lathered it into Viktor's hair as he tried to think of how best to answer.

"Well?"

"...I like it best when you use your hands." Yuri finally said.

"Really? Why's that?" Viktor wondered, his eyes closed beneath the white froth on top of his head.
"Your hands tell me more about how you feel than anything else, besides your eyes." He explained, content with the lather and reaching for the shower nozzle, "When you use your hands on me, I know you actually want me. Especially when you have us both at the same time. When I'm doing stuff to you...it isn't the same."

"...So you have performance anxiety?" Viktor blurted, making Yuri lose his grip on the sprayer.

It landed on the tile with a clatter, making Yuri wonder if it had broken, but when Viktor handed it back gingerly, and he saw that it was fine, he heaved a sigh of relief, "...NO." He answered the question from before, "I don't have performance anxiety. ...Okay maybe a little, but that's not the point."

"Mhm?"

The water was starting to run clear from Viktor's hair, and the man leaned his head up a little to wipe the rest from his eyes before tilting all the way back to stick the top of his head against Yuri's abdomen, looking straight up at him. His piercing blue eyes really wanted answers.

"...Fine, you want the truth?" Yuri bit the bullet, "I have 'putting something into Viktor freaking Nikiforov's butt' anxiety."

The Russian burst out laughing at that and leaned forward again.

"That's not supposed to be funny!"

"Sure it is! Think about what you said!"

"I know what I said!"

"How is that not funny? I think it's hysterical."

"You would! You're not the one who said it!"

Yuri had squeezed way too much conditioner into his hand, and when he finally noticed, he sighed and squished the whole pile onto Viktor's head. The Russian was still chortling to himself, even as Yuri did his best to massage the mess into every silvery hair he had.

Yuri just sighed, "If you want me to do it then I will."

"I don't want you doing anything that you don't want to." Viktor answered simply, leaning his head up as he felt the sprayer again, warm water dripping down his back and chest, "I'm happiest when you're happiest. Easy as that. If you like it best when I use my hands then I'll do that more often."

"...But...what about what you like?" The younger man wondered conspicuously, "It's a two-way street. I like it when you're happy too, you know?"

"It's hard to explain." The Russian shrugged, "You already let me do whatever I want physically, so there's nothing to improve upon there. I like that you let me control how most of our romps go, and I like that you take initiative sometimes. But...I like it best when you feel good, so I'll do about anything to make sure that happens. When you told me how you used to imagine us, back before we even were us, it told me all I needed to know... that I was doing everything right, and that it was how you wanted. Unless you imagine it differently now?" He turned to peer one eye back at his husband.

Yuri shook his head, "No, this is how I want it. I think it works best this way. It's..."
The Russian had moved to stand up, and slicked back his wet hair as he looked back at his partner, "...Yes?"

"...It's like how we are on the ice. I'm happiest following your lead. I feel like I know what to do when you guide me first."

Viktor smiled, "Okay." He pulled Yuri's wet frame close in a hug, then pulled back just enough to kiss him before reaching for their towels and handing his partner one, "...I'm glad we talked like this. I feel a lot better now."

"Me too."

"Now let's go downstairs! I'm famished! I'll even make you some katsudon if your mom's already done for the night, okay?"

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Fully dried and clothed, the pair made their way back down to the common room, not realizing everyone's eyes had turned in their direction until they were both fully inside.

Viktor gawked at them, but then put his arm over Yuri's shoulder, "Sorry about earlier! Everything's fine now!"

"We know." Yurio deadpanned them, "Everyone knows."

"Hah...?" They both said together in confusion.

Chris held up his phone, showing a picture of the number 6. Phichit was next, showing a 10. In fact, everyone in the room had a number displaying on their phones, ranging from Yurio's 0 to the 10 Phichit had.

"...What's with the numbers?" Yuri wondered.

"Plisetsky notwithstanding, on a scale of 1 to 10, the score of your performance earlier." Chris explained, giving a knowing wink.

Yuri was confused. He looked around the room again, seeing the weird looks on peoples' faces, and the unusual presence of cotton pieces in Phichit and Yuuko's nostrils.

And then...cogs turned in the young skater's mind.

3...

2...

1...

His eyes suddenly widened.

"OH MY GOD THEY HEARD US."

Viktor was laughing again, "Chris! Why such a low score!?!"
"...Goodnight..." Yuri dropped to the floor, immediately starting to snore.

The Swiss skater smiled as he put his phone back on the table, "Low score because we only heard him."

"You get a zero for us hearing you at all!" Yurio barked.

"You should've turned the TV volume up then!" Viktor mused, winking at him to make him uncomfortable.

Yurio just simmered, "We did, idiot! We just thought Yuri was a dying animal before we realized what the noise was!"

The older Russian was still highly entertained by the whole thing, and moved down to pull Yuri around by his arms until he could sit down again next to Chris, putting the unconscious skater in front of him to lean his back against his chest, "Forgive him, I told him to."

Chris just pat him on the back, as though congratulating him on his conquest, "No need for forgiveness from us. We're just glad it happened between you two. Now we can get on with the party and there's no hard feelings."

"Oh there's still a few hard feelings...just not those kinds." Viktor teased.

The Swiss skater laughed, Phichit reached for more tissues, and Yurio banged his face on the table.
CHAPTER SEVENTY EIGHT

By the time Yuri woke back up again, it was well past midnight. The common room had been darkened to almost pitch black, illuminated solely by the light of the television on the far wall. Some movie or another was playing, but he wasn't worried about figuring out what it was, as he sat upright and rubbed his eyes sleepily.

"...Ah, you're finally awake." He heard someone say quietly, barely a whisper. It wasn't Viktor's voice though.

"...Yuu-chan."

"They didn't think you'd wake up again until tomorrow." The Madonna mused. She pointed at where the few remaining guests were asleep at their tables or on the floor next to one.

Yuri blinked, then turned, looking at where Chris was out cold with his arms crossed on the table, head resting within them, at Phichit nearby, curled up with his head on Makkachin's back, and finally, Viktor, slouching against the same table as Chris, but leaning onto it with only one arm, his cheek resting on it.

Yuri sighed then, remembering why he had even fallen asleep at all, and lowered his head.

"...Sorry." He whispered.

"Why?" She whispered back.

His cheeks flushed, "For being loud. I didn't... I mean, your kids..."

Yuuko smiled at him, "They didn't hear."

"...But Yuri said..."

"I knew what the noise was before he even caught on that there was a noise." She pointed out, stretching briefly before moving across the floor on her hands and knees to get closer and sit next to him, "Mine aren't exactly virgin ears, you know." She said, almost sheepishly, "Takeshi took the girls to our room afterwards anyway. It was time for them to go to bed."

"...Why are you still down here?" Yuri wondered, checking the time on his phone, "...It's nearly 3 in the morning."

His friend nodded sleepily, "I wanted to make sure you were okay when you woke up again. I knew you'd be out until either noon or not long at all. I banked on the 'not long at all' possibility."

"...I'm so embarrassed..." Yuri had his hands on his head, ruffling his hair anxiously, "I usually don't make a lot of noise...so...I didn't realize I was so loud... I'll never live this down."

"It's your wedding party. Why should it matter?" She wondered back at him, "If anyone tries to give you grief, I'll protect you." She smiled again and leaned forward to give him a reassuring hug, "You have too much to look forward to, just to let something like this get you down. You've earned the privilege of getting to scream out your spouse's name. No one else is ever going to get to. Think about how it makes him feel."
"...You're being surprisingly understanding." Yuri said quietly, wondering where the catch was.

She just ruffled his hair a little as she pulled out of the hug, "I'm the one that introduced you to Viktor in the first place. I feel like I should get to dote on you a little now. My little Yuri is growing up so fast suddenly!" She moved to wipe a tear from her eye, "We all thought you were hopeless when you came home from America single!"

The skater suddenly flinched at the reminder, "...Did my parents hear? Or my sister?"

Yuuko shook her head, much to Yuri's relief, "I don't think so. They were all shutting down the kitchen when it happened. If they heard you over all the noise they themselves were making at the time, I'd be surprised."

Yuri suddenly felt movement behind him, and a second or two later, looked back to find Viktor rising like the dead, only for him to slump over his back, snake his arms around Yuri's small frame, and fall right back to sleep again. Yuri laughed quietly at it, "...I can never be sure if he's conscious when he does that."

The Madonna had her hand over her mouth, trying to muffle her snickering, "Happens a lot?"

"Like clockwork."

Yuuko smiled happily as she leaned over the table, "I can't wait to see the looks on both your faces when you see what we did to the Ice Castle."

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The next morning, the group finally saw how much snow had fallen, and Yuri's mom had put every last one of them to work to clear the sidewalk in front of the resort so guests could come and go as they pleased again.

Of course, by 'every single one of them,' it mostly meant Yuri, since there was only one shovel...the rest stood around for moral support, cheering him on from the background like the nameless crowd of some old side-scrolling fighting game. By the time he was done, it was nearly noon, and he was even more exhausted than he'd expected to be. He'd started the day fairly sore as it was, but the work of clearing so much snow made it worse.

He was about to head back when he saw a pair of notably absent people walking up. He felt a little energy return as he looked up and waved, "Minako-sensei, Mikhail...where were you guys all night?"

"We went out looking for you, but the snow got bad after a while, so we holed up at my snack bar since we were close at the time." The older woman answered, chipper as always, "You look better!"

"Mh." Yuri nodded, letting the shovel lean against the wall as he stuffed his hands in his pockets to warm them.

"It all worked out?"

"Mh."
"Where's Viktor?" Mikhail wondered, looking around.

"Doing everything he can to avoid shoveling snow." Yuri answered jokingly, "He's probably inside by no-"

"YURI!" The man's voice came yelling unexpectedly, "YURI!"

"What, what?" He answered, wondering what in blazes was going on. He stuck his head around the gate, only to get bowled over by the Russian.

"They're going to let us in the Ice Castle!"

"Eh?"

"Today! In an hour!" Viktor took Yuri's hand, "We have to get ready!"

Mikhail and Minako watched with amused looks on their faces as Viktor dragged his partner off, paused, came running back with Yuri still in tow, waved at them happily to welcome them back to the resort, and then rushed off again, pulling Yuri in behind him the whole way. Mikhail grabbed the shovel and brought it with them as they made their way up after them.

Fairly soon after, there was a proverbial avalanche of professional skaters evacuating the hot spring and running down the street like all their butts were on fire. Viktor was in the lead, still holding Yuri's hand, as they rushed across the bridge together, easily outpacing the rest of the group. Yurio and Otabek walked calmly, barely crossing the last street that lead to the bridge as the rest of them made it all the way to the other side.

When the group finally made it to the concrete steps leading up to the main entrance to the ice rink, they had too much momentum to wait for the doors...and crashed into it rather unceremoniously. As it finally slid open, Viktor dropped in first, followed by Yuri, then Chris, and finally Phichit.

"...Why didn't...the doors...open...?" Yuri wondered, delirious from the impact.

"We must've...run into the motion sensor too fast..." Phichit suggested, pushing off the pile to stand up again and rub his head.

"You guys all got here in a hurry!" Yuuko laughed from behind the skate rental desk, "You're not going to see anything we don't want you to, though!"

Viktor was clawing at the floor, trying to get to the second set of doors, "Must...skate...!"

Chris hoisted him up like a beached dolphin, even as Viktor was still 'paddling' in the air, and set him down again to let him walk it off. Yuri was still on the floor, rubbing his forehead where he'd hit the door, finding himself picked up quickly thereafter by the same man. When they finally found themselves in the rink-side area, they looked around, half-expecting some form of display to hint at what was to come on the morrow...but there was almost nothing flashy to see at all.

There were numerous rolled-up tapestry-like things hanging from the rafters all around the rink's edge, and the rink walls themselves were covered in boring blue tarps. Yuri was almost disappointed, given how much effort had been put into keeping him and Viktor out of the Ice Castle that whole time.

"Two conditions to skating today." Yuuko said suddenly, interrupting his train of thought.

Viktor had already run out onto the ice with his shoes on, and collapsed onto his back like he had
been some shipwrecked survivor that finally found land again. He lifted his head at the sound of the woman's words, curious.

"First, you absolutely do not lift the blue tarps." She was saying, pointing at the rink walls, "If I hear so much as a crinkle, you're all out!"

"...And the second condition?" Yuri wondered nervously, standing close to the rink entrance.

She winked at him, "Practice the routines listed in the email I'm sending you. This is the final list! Be ready for it!"

"...Why are we having to work so hard for our own wedding party?" Yuri asked pointedly, thinking the whole thing rather odd, "Shouldn't other people be performing for us?"

Yuuko shook her head, "Are you kidding? You guys live for skating. What better way to celebrate your wedding than by sharing the journey that got you there with the rest of us?"

*The triplets are calling it 'The Best of Nikiforov on Ice' but I prefer to call it 'The Journey.'*

Viktor was busy getting his skates on after that, literally throwing his shoes over the rink wall as he pulled them off. Yuri absentmindedly went to collect them as he looked at his phone, waiting for his email inbox to refresh before finally seeing Yuuko's most recent message. He pulled up the email, and loaded up the PDF attachment, curious to see what the final listing would look like compared to what Minako had showed them.

"...You are humbly invited to Ice Castle Hasetsu on this very special occasion, April 16th, to celebrate the wedding of Yuri Katsuki and Viktor Nikiforov." He read aloud, his cheeks flushing as he did so, "We are happy to present the following performances from these two World Champion Gold Medalists and some of their closest friends."

He lifted his eyes to see Viktor and Chris messing around on the ice already, trying to out-jump one another as they warmed up. Phichit wasn't part of their clique though and he came sliding up to the rink wall near where Yuri was still reading his email.

"What's it looking like?" He wondered.

Yuri pushed to stand, leaving his backpack on the floor as he moved to turn and let the Thai skater get a look, "Literally looks like a competition program for the GPF or something, with there being so few of us."

Phichit leaned on the wall to get a better read on the small device, "...Firebird...Aria..." He said out loud, "Your Free Skates from the year before last."

"Then it gets into the stuff we did this past year." Yuri nodded, "Shall We Skate, Intoxicated...then this new one from the Russian Yuri, Soldier...then back to me with Eros."

"I was really surprised to hear he'd given back the Agape outfit." Phichit commented, "But then I thought about his GPF Exhibition Skate and realized it was entirely not his style." He huffed a laugh, "Viktor really pulled a number on him by making him do that one instead of Eros."

"Right?" Yuri agreed, "He really wanted to do Eros, too." He looked back at the screen again, "Looks like there's a bit of an intermission after that's done...only for me to come back out again doing YoI..."

"YoI?"
"Easier to say that than 'Yuri on Ice' all the time." Yuri explained, "Then the other Yuri is doing Allegro Appassionato, then back to Chris with Rapsodie, you with Terra Incognita...then finally back to Viktor with Winter's Wish, and finally...Duetto, and a freestyle skate." He lifted his head again to see Viktor and Chris horsing around like little kids, skating as quickly as they could in one direction, only to stop as close to the rink wall as they could and take off again in another direction. Ice was flying everywhere as they scratched their way over it, "...What a weird way to end the official program."

"Why? Duetto is perfect."

"No, I mean with Winter's Wish. They had it a lot earlier on the list before, even before YoI."

"Maybe they realized what it was about?"

"I'm still surprised Viktor even kept that program when he knew he was going in for one more year. It probably confused the heck out of a lot of his fans."

"Not as much as Aria did!" Phichit laughed, "There was a whole Thai skating forum where they were freaking out about how the lines were talking to a guy! Everyone was wondering if Viktor even knew!"

"Oh he knew. He did it on purpose." Yuri pointed out, "One of those subtle, under-the-table surprises for anyone who was paying close enough attention."

"Ahh...I knew you'd pick up on it, being such a huge fan of his." Phichit laughed, "You'd never have missed anything about Viktor back then."

"I missed that one, actually." Yuri admitted sheepishly, "Viktor told me about it only after we got back from the Grand Prix Final." He wasn't sure how much more detail he should go into explaining what Aria meant to them now though, "He has a really crazy Free Skate planned for next season, too."

"Oohhhhh!" Phichit got excited, "I saw the interview you guys did after Worlds! A theme about 'rage' seems so out of character for him! Where'd he get the idea?"

Yuri just smiled, "...From some stuff that happened while we were in Russia. It's all good now, though...but..." He looked back out onto the ice again, seeing where both Viktor and Chris had gathered up some of the ice they'd sheared off the rink's surface with their power-stops, mashing it into small snowballs and threatening to put it down the other's shirts if given half a chance. They were circling each other, panting from the exertion, twitching once in a while to make the other flinch in defense, laughing at the absurdity of it but neither giving up the game yet. Yuri got an idea, and started moving for the rink entrance, "...I'm sure he'll find something to rage about to inspire him."

Phichit watched curiously as Yuri stepped out onto the ice, still just wearing his shoes, and something of a devilish grin on his face, like he was planning something dastardly. He saw Yuri gathering up some of the frost crystals where he passed a pile on his way out to the center of the rink...and carefully, ever-so-quietly, snuck up behind Viktor. Chris had seen him and knew what was going to happen, so he made extra certain to keep Viktor's back facing the direction Yuri was coming up from.

"Giving up already, Chris?" The Russian wondered, the ice starting to melt in his ungloved hand, "I can keep this up all day!"
"You won't have to." The Swiss skater winked, "You've already lost."

"Hah...?"

Yuri was right behind him, and tuck the small ball of frost down the back of Viktor's shirt rather unexpectedly.

Viktor twisted as he felt it, dropping his own snowball in the process, "AHHH! TRAITOR! I trusted you!"

"Snega v pal'to~!" Yuri called out, retreating quickly as Chris came up to dump his own snowball down the front of Viktor's shirt, making him twitch and yell out again in protest. The others were howling with laughter as he tried to shake it out.

Yurio and Otabek had finally arrived at the rink by then, walking in on the odd sight, but not daring to question it. They watched with rapt curiosity though as Viktor finally regained his composure and went skating off after the shoe-born Asian.

Yuri was so close to the safety of the rink-side area, still laughing at their antics, only to find himself literally barreled into with a BOOF. Viktor carried him off, spinning him around so he couldn't wiggle free, and skating backwards with his arms around Yuri's torso.

"You're lucky you're still wearing your coat." The Russian said, "Otherwise you'd have two ice-cold hands going up your back right now."

"Is that a threat or a promise?" Yuri wondered.

Viktor nearly dropped him from the surprising nature of the question, but then laughed, "Maybe both."
CHAPTER SEVENTY NINE

Access to the Ice Castle wasn't wasted. Hours and hours were spent on the ice that afternoon, testing music and rehearsing programs. Yuri had heard Aria play at the Ice Castle once before, in the days prior to the original move to St. Petersburg, but it was still surreal to hear it again. Anticipating the entire show to be performed right there in front of his eyes, without the distraction of a competition he was losing, and without being dragged out onto the ice to participate...he was giddy with excitement.

The late-night march back to Yu-Topia was even more surreal though. After the frantic rush across the bridge earlier in the day, getting to slow down and really take in the feeling of Chris and Phichit being there made the young skater feel even more excited about the next day.

By the time they'd all finally gotten back to the resort, soaked in the onsen as a group, and finally got to eat, Yuri felt ready.

But not necessarily for bed, or for the wedding party to come...but to present his music choices to his choreographer for the next season. The day's euphoria over the skating to come had solidified how Yuri wanted the next season to feel for him.

The music had been sitting on his phone for weeks by then. He'd discovered them while home alone during Viktor's late-night solo practices in St. Petersburg. He'd gone through possible routines in his head a thousand times, and by the time the moment had come to reveal them...he almost couldn't imagine the next season happening with anything else.

Viktor was posting photos from the day to Instagram, and was quite pleased with a good number of them. The best one, he thought, was one where the five skaters had lined up along a bench, side by side with one foot on top of it, looking back over their left shoulders to replicate a similar photo Yuri and Phichit had once taken of themselves in Detroit.

"...Neh, Viktor..." Yuri said quietly, looking at where his laptop was glowing on the bed in front of his crossed legs, "I want you to listen to something."

"Hm?"

The younger skater pulled up onto his knees and shuffled over to put the ear-buds in his husband's ears, then sat back on his heels, "I've been thinking about my theme for next year and...I want you to hear the music I've picked. See if you can picture a show while you listen, okay?"

"You seem pretty set on this."

"Mh." Yuri nodded, "Listen close to the lyrics. I think it fits me pretty well."

The Russian set his phone down on the blankets and leaned back, putting his hands under the back of his head to wait for the music to start. He closed his eyes, and Yuri hit Enter on his keyboard.

Yuri could hear the soft echo of the song, but watched Viktor's face anxiously. Viktor had encouraged him before to be more confident about his music choices, but even then, he'd still been honest enough to point out when said choice...was kind of awful. That criticism, but the encouragement to try again, was what lead to 'Yuri on Ice.'
The Russian had actually smiled a little as the music got past the intro and he could hear the actual words, and he started moving his fingers to tap along with the beat as it continued on.

"I know this song." He said.

Yuri wondered if that was a good thing or not, but didn't say anything.

Viktor rolled over and pulled the laptop in front of him to look at something, then looked up at his partner as he pulled one of the ear-buds out, "What's this going to be for?"

"The Short Program."

"You'll have to pare it down. It goes over the limit by about 45 seconds. Are you sure? You'll probably have to take out an entire stanza, or at least the second half of the intro."

"I know. Editing songs for time isn't an issue. What do you think though?"

"Why did you pick this?"

Yuri flinched, wondering if that was approval or rejection, "...I wanted to do something upbeat like Eros for my Short Program because I have something a bit more serious in mind for my Free Skate." He answered, "Since my theme is Metamorphosis, I think it would be important to use a song that reflects how someone...or rather, how I...came from humble beginnings and kept moving forward until I got to where I wanted to be. That a person can drop to their lowest point and still come out the other end stronger, just so long as they keep trying."

Viktor nodded, and the song ended, "I like it."

The Asian's heart skipped a beat, "Really?"

"I can already envision the program. Even the costume. Do you have an idea for that too?"

Yuri nodded, flipping the laptop around again and looked up photos, "I liked how Phichit-kun based his outfit on the movies his songs came from...so I kind of want to follow in that idea. So...something like this, but...modified, obviously..." He turned the computer back around again with a large thumbnail on the screen.

"Yeah." Viktor laughed a little, seeing the glittery image, "I don't think the judges would take too kindly to you going onto the ice mostly naked like these characters."

"Mh."

"So what's your Free Skate then?" The Russian wondered, moving to put the lost ear-bud back in place as he watched Yuri scrolling through his media archive, "Do you have an outfit in mind for that already too?"

"I do." Yuri answered, looking at his husband briefly, "It's...how to describe it... I guess it's kind of like the Aria outfit, but with longer coat-tails and a solid, dark blue fabric rather than sheer. I almost wish the ISU would allow more theatrical outfits because I can think of a hundred extra bits I'd want to do with it if I could get away with it, but-

"Why not do it for the Exhibition then? You can do whatever you want there."

"I know, but...I've had my heart set on this being my Free Skate since I figured it all out back in Russia." He said, finding the song and selecting it, "Here it goes. Listen closely, and reserve
judgment until you've heard the whole thing. It's...kind of like a ballad. There's a story to it, and it builds up to the climax kind of near the end."

"Mh. I'm ready." Viktor flopped back to the pillow and waited. He opened one eye again as he felt Yuri crawling across the bed to flip off the lamp and plunge the room into near-darkness, scooting back only far enough to hit Enter on the keyboard again and start the song.

Yuri watched and waited, barely able to hear the beat as it played quietly in Viktor's ears. He could feel his heart pounding in anticipation of Viktor's judgment, and he anxiously watched each second tick by on the song's timer. Eventually though, after what felt like an eternity, the song hit its peak and faded out, and the Russian drew in a deep breath.

"...W-well..?"

"These are both good." He said, pulling himself up to sit again, "I'm kind of curious though what you'd want to do with your outfit for this song that would disqualify it from competition."

The younger skater huffed a laugh at himself, but then sat up straight, "The part leading into the crescendo...When the night is starless...I imagine the glittery bits of my outfit trailing off from my shoulders to around my elbows...Only we can spark it...light it up in the darkness, oh oh oh... But my gloves would actually have some kind of lighting effect, so it would glow on cue and make it look like I actually was lighting up the darkness."

"It's not dark during the Free Skate!"

"Technicalities!"

"You could have your whole outfit light up for the Exhibition Gala."

"But then I'd only really get to do it once...and if I somehow miss the podium, I won't get to do it at all, cuz I'd want to save it for the Gala at the GPF or something, not just one of the lead-up events."

"...Technicalities." Viktor huffed a laugh and shrugged, "So this is your Free Skate, sans glowy-hands."

"...So what do you imagine?"

"With you properly hydrated and getting enough sleep?" Viktor put a finger over his lips as he thought, "Five quads of increasing difficulty, with the flip at the end, and a complex spin sequence for the crescendo. Go for major point bonuses by putting the last 3 quads in the second half. You'd knock out all the other competition even if you took it easy for the GP Series."

"...And hopefully not pass out at the end and forget what year it is for a minute." Yuri joked morbidly.

Viktor heaved a breath at that, "Yeah, don't do that again...I nearly had a heart attack when it happened before."

"Sorry." The younger skater said, thinking it funny in hindsight, "...As much as I wanted you to win gold like you used to, part of me just wanted so badly to win gold for myself and impress you... It was hard to decide what I wanted more. I had to push really hard to compensate for your Short Program score...adding the extra quad was all I could think of."

"You did what I asked you to." The Russian said simply, moving to pick up the laptop and move it over to the nightstand on his side of the bed, closing it just enough for the glow to dim the room, but
not completely darken it, "I wanted to kiss your gold medal more than mine anyway~." He leaned back towards his husband and nudged his way into the man's personal space, gently nosing him affectionately, "...And I meant it when I said that I expect you to win gold from now on, even with me in the competition."

"...Viktor..."

"Don't look at it like you're usurping or surpassing me. Think of it as though I'm passing the torch to you, Yuri." He cupped his husband's face in his hands and leaned closer to kiss him lightly, "I came here to coach you to a GPF gold medal, and even though that didn't happen the way I wanted it to, you still surpassed all of my expectations. More than anything...I want you to properly take over my winning streak and make it yours. You can do that now, and not even because I'm winding down."

"...Three quads though...when you want me to do five..."

"It was just a thought, you know." Viktor explained, "I haven't decided yet. I'm still going at my normal difficulty level for tomorrow...but I'll wait until we actually get to my first Grand Prix Series event to decide what jumps I'm doing. I'm not going to make it that easy for you." He started motioning for Yuri to follow him to the head of the bed, but was surprised to find him hesitant.

"...Ah...I'm..." Yuri stammered quietly, "...I'm still a bit sore from yesterday..."

"I know. You were stiff as a board during practice today." He winked at his partner and gestured again for him to lie down next to him, which Yuri finally agreed to, crawling up to meet the man. Viktor kissed him again as he came down to rest, moving his hands down Yuri's chest until they came to rest on his waist, "I'll be gentle. It's our last night before our proper wedding though, right?"

"Maybe tonight...we can just do like we used to, before Russia." Yuri suggested weakly.

Viktor nodded without a second thought, sliding his hand under Yuri's t-shirt as he slipped one leg between his partner's, "...I'd like nothing more."

Hearing the words, Yuri finally relaxed, knowing Viktor would stay true to his word, and let himself enjoy the attention, moving to slip his own hands under the Russian's clothing as well.

The next day finally came, and Yuri was the first to wake, his eyes opening just a few ironic seconds before Viktor's phone alarm went off. Yuri leaned over his husband to grab the device and shut it off, then returned to the warm spot he'd just left, and brushed the side of his finger against Viktor's cheek, "...Time to get up."

"...Sleepy..."

"I know. We were up really late. I'm still sleepy, too."

They could hear Makkachin scratching at the floor just outside, but the unexpected bark was what finally jolted the Russian into consciousness. Yuri shook his head and moved to get out from under the heavy covers and let the poodle inside. As the dog happily greeted his human, Yuri returned to sit on the edge of the bed, watching as Viktor returned the greeting to the pupper and then shooed him off the blanket again. He then reached for Yuri's hand and fell back down to the pillow, pulling the
man down with and on top of him.

Yuri was a little confused, half sitting and half twisted over his husband’s chest, but the perplexity faded quickly as he felt Viktor's other hand come up and lace his fingers through his dark black hair, pulling him down into a long kiss.

"Everything about today is going to be perfect." Viktor said quietly, "Let's go see what they've done."

The other skaters had been ready for a while, having packed their gear the night before like sane and rational people. They ate, and sat, and waited for 10:30am to finally come around before everyone gathered their things and started walking over to the Ice Castle.

When they arrived, things were noticeably different, with big flower arrangements greeting them at the door alongside the first gaggle of reporters who couldn't help but cover the event.

Viktor had reminded his husband that they would be there, but even then, Yuri was a little reluctant to accept them. For Viktor's sake though, he didn't complain.

They went in through the freely-opening sliding doors, and then past the skate rental desk, finally entering into the rink-side arena to behold the end result of weeks of planning.

Yuri was awe-struck, seeing first where the blue tarps had been removed. The entire interior of the rink wall had been replaced with caricatures of his and Viktor's outfits from across the last 2 years, inspired on a whole by Viktor's cell-phone case. Yuri recognized every one of them, noting that they switched between Viktor's and his own and then back again.

"...Sheherazade...Firebird...Aria...Dark Eyes..." He started listing them, pointing at them as he went, "All the Sochi programs..." He moved on, seeing the newer ones after that, "December...Eros...Winter's Wish...and YoI. They're all here."

"Oh yeah, you did do your old Short Program to Dark Eyes. I totally forgot." Viktor mused, leaning against Yuri with an arm over his shoulder, "One of Russia's most famous romance songs. I wonder why you did it?" He nudged the man a little.

Yuri's face flushed, but he shook his head, "...Honest, it was just a coincidence! Celestino picked it and thought it sounded nice!"

"You guys ready for the best part?" Yuuko asked, getting their attention from where she was standing in the doorway to the observation room. The group nodded, and she ducked back inside to hit the controls.

Slowly but surely, the rolled up tapestries hanging from the ceiling were starting to unfurl. Yuri pulled forward, taking Viktor with him by the hand, and walked out onto the ice to look at them all as they revealed their art.

At the far ends of the rink were two massive images, the biggest of the group; at one end featured the image of Viktor in his Aria outfit...but it was the black-collared version, and the background was black, like the photo had come from Four Continents instead of some normal competition. Yuri
turned his head in curiosity, seeing the matching image of his own Aria outfit unfurling opposite it.

"Pictures from Duetto." Viktor said out loud, "Good ones, too."

"They would've all been good." Chris pointed out, "I'm excited to see that one in person."

"I already saw it!" Phichit noted, "But I can't wait to see it again!"

Several other tapestries of varying sizes were still unfurling even after the main two had already opened, and they looked at each one by one.

Similar to competitions where all the skaters would have life-size photos of themselves cropped and touched-up for display around the event, the unrolling images that hung from the ceiling were similar. Four featured images from the past year's performances, one each from the pair's Short Program and Free Skate. The other six images were from what looked like the triplets' Viktuuri account, or even some pilfered from Viktor or Yuri's personal Instagrams, displaying massive versions of photos they'd seen before. These included the photo Yuri and Viktor had taken on the last night at the Ice Castle before leaving for St. Petersburg; the quiet and simple one Yuuko had taken with Viktor's phone, where they held each other's hands calmly, as opposed to the excited one Viktor had taken half a second later. Another showed Yuri and Viktor at the medaling ceremony at Four Continents, another that had apparently been candidly taken by someone when they were still in Hasetsu, just after returning from the Grand Prix and had only just formally become engaged. They all turned on their heels to see each image fully, and Yuri drank in the memories as each photo came before his eyes. The next one was of the impromptu photo Viktor had taken of them in the restaurant in Barcelona where they were showing off their marriage certificate, then the next one was from Chris' Sochi Banquet gallery, where it showed Viktor and Yuri dancing together; the one where Yuri had gotten strangely close to kissing the older skater while holding up his leg behind him. Then the last one...Yuri got a little emotional. It was the Sochi Vindication photo they'd taken just prior to the World Championships, to make up for the photo Yuri had bailed on.

Viktor had hugged Yuri around his shoulders from behind as his eyes started to well up, and Yuri turned to where Yuuko was waiting on the rink wall, "...I can't... You guys really did a great job with all of this..."

"Viktor was a huge help, getting some of the harder-to-find pictures...like that one from Sochi." She pointed at the dance picture, "That one was really cute. I had to use it!"

"I had that one as my phone's wallpaper for like 3 months." Viktor admitted sheepishly.

"Why'd you change it?"

"Cuz I came to Hasetsu and didn't want to weird you out if you ever saw it!" He answered with a laugh, hugging him a little tighter, "I got my new Aria-themed phone case around then, too."

"Oh right, you had that gaudy gold case before...I remember now." Yuri laughed, rubbing his eyes to get the last tears out. He turned back to Yuuko, seeing Takeshi and the girls and everyone else starting to pile in behind them. Yuri drew in a deep breath, and then bowed to all of them, "I can't thank you enough for putting this all together." He rose back up to standing, and snaked an arm around his husband's back, "It means a lot to both of us!"

"Let's get started!" Viktor cheered excitedly.
CHAPTER EIGHTY

The slow trickle of known people had grown into a slightly bigger trickle of unknown people, and pretty soon, Yuri was gawking at an arena full of spectators just like back during Hot Springs on Ice. They'd all come so quickly that the Nishigoris and Minako had a hard time stemming the flow, and eventually gave up entirely.

Yuuko apologized profusely, "I don't know where they're all coming from, but a good chunk of them seem to be media, and..."

"...And?" Yuri wondered pensively, unsure how to process it all.

"...They said that they were invited."

"Invited!? But...how? When? By who!?" He was starting to panic, "This was supposed to be a small thing!"

"I know, I'm sorry!"

Yuri looked around for an answer, but only saw Viktor off near the entrance where he'd already been caught by journalists.

"...This is sure a lot more people than I thought were going to be here." Minako was saying, "The girls are trying to stop people at the door, but they just keep coming."

"How many more are out there?"

"You're not going to like the answer."

The young skater was at a loss, and grabbed both women by the wrists to pull them into the men's locker room for lack of knowing what else to do. Once inside, he backed up against the door to keep it closed, "We have to do something!"

"...I don't know that there's much we can do." Yuuko said unhappily, "Short of throwing everyone out, but..."

"No...I couldn't do that, but..." Yuri sighed, "How in the world did all these people get invitations? We didn't even send any out!"

"Don't you remember?" Chris' voice came, followed soon after by the man himself, who had apparently already been in there changing for his part of the show, "Viktor told them to come."

"...What?" The Asian could hardly process it, "But...that was just supposed to be for a few photographers..."

"Not the way they understood it."

"Maybe he's out there trying to fix it?" Minako wondered, "He wasn't exactly hiding when the press showed up. He practically threw himself at the cameras when he saw them..."

Yuri was half-sliding down the door when he was suddenly launched forward, flying between the two ladies before landing face-first about 20ft further into the locker room. Yuuko and Minako
watched him go, but soon they were looking back at the source of the impact, and saw Yurio bludgeoning his way in with his foot against the door.

"KATSUDON." He barked, stepping in with his hands stuffed in his pockets, only to see the two women looking back at him, "...Why are you in the men's locker room?"

"We were dragged in here." The older of the two explained, thumbing back at Yuri, who was still face-first on the floor with his arse in the air.

Chris went over to help him up, and Yurio loomed over them both as he turned around, "Viktor wants to know what you want to do."

"...Eh?" Yuri was dumbfounded, rubbing his face where he'd skidded, "What do I want to do? It's a bit late for that, isn't it?"

"The JSF is out there interviewing him right now. It'd be easy for him to just tell them all this is a private event and send them away."

"T-The JSF is out there!?" Yuri was up and sweating bullets, "I can't just have them leave! It could be bad for my career!"

"So let them stay. Does it really matter?"

"Of course it does! This is supposed to by Viktor's and my wedding party, not another skating event! I didn't even want the photographers to come!"

Chris had pulled out his phone by then and was looking at the JSF website, seeing first the big thumbnail for the LiveStream of the 'event,' and second, a big photo of Yuri from the World Championships. It was big enough for him to see Yuri's hands without having to enlarge the photo, "...Yuri, did you know the JSF edited the ring out of your photos from Worlds?"

"...Yeah..." He answered dejectedly, "I found out when Viktor and I were stopped over in St. Petersburg." He moved over to one of the benches and sat down, head in his hands, "They edit out my ring or they pick photos where no one can see it."

"You know what?" Chris wondered, sitting next to the younger skater and putting his arm over the man's shoulder reassuringly, "They can't edit anything on live television."

"...Are you saying I should go out there and make a huge stink about it?" Yuri wondered, sidelong from where his face was pointed to the ground.

Yurio and the others had pulled up their phones by then and were looking at the JSF site as well, seeing the photo Chris had mentioned. Yurio had pulled up the video feed though, and sat down next to Yuri with the device in his hand to make him look, "It's like they don't even know what's going on here today."

Yuri looked anxiously, and the blond turned up the volume for everyone to hear.

"...think it would probably be best if Yuri were out here himself to answer that question, but I'm not actually sure where he went." Viktor was saying, trying to look amiable, "Anything having to do with his plans for next season would be unfair of me to reveal without him here. We already told you everything we had to say about it when the media met us at the airport in Fukuoka anyway. It's barely been a few days!"

"So then what's up with this huge gathering of skaters?" Someone off-screen asked, "It seemed even
more impromptu than last year's Hot Springs on Ice event, and you all at least told us about that ahead of time!"

"It's...just a gathering of friends." Viktor tried to explain, "Is it really so crazy for us to be friendly with fellow athletes?"

"Viktor isn't going to be able to bullshit forever." Yurio explained, resting his forearm on Yuri's closer shoulder the same way Chris was doing on the opposite side, "You need to get out there and do something."

"I don't know what to do though..." He sighed, shaking his head.

"Text him then." Yuuko suggested, "If he has his phone on anyway...you could buy some time."

Yuri nodded quickly and pulled his own phone out, pulling up his archive of texts with his husband and sending out a new message.

[Bail out, Viktor. Come to the locker room.]

They all looked back at Yurio's phone to see what would happen, but their attention was grabbed by the sudden explosion of noise on the far end of the locker room; the door being frantically shoved open and then closed again followed by yelling.

"That was Phichit!" Yuri was on his feet, "What's going on back there!? Phichit-kun!"

"Yuri!?" He called back from around a corner, "It's a circus out there! Why are you hiding in here!?"

"Cuz it's a circus out there." Yuri answered, "Come around, a bunch of us are here."

The Thai skater stuck his head around a corner, hoping and pleading that the door wouldn't just open after he took his hands off of it, but thankfully, the reporters didn't seem that keen on getting footage from inside the changing area, and the door stayed peacefully still. He sighed in relief and came around to join the group, only to pause and point at Minako and Yuuko, "...Why are you guys in the men's room?"

"...We were dragged in here." The younger answered this time, smiling nervously.

"Why are all of you in here? I mean, I know, but..." Phichit went on, getting closer.

"Trying to figure out what to do about what's out there?" Yuri answered, sitting back down and reaching for where Yurio had pulled his phone away, "Did Viktor get my text?" He looked back at his own phone, seeing that it said 'Delivered' at the bottom at very least.

Oddly, the Russian wasn't the one on the screen anymore...it was Otabek.

A split second later, Viktor himself was barging into the locker room, rushing in and shoving the door closed behind him in much the same way Yuri and Phichit had before him.

"Ah I can't believe it!" He lamented, feet out ahead of him where he leaned back against the panel, "There's so many people!" He looked at the two women and raised an eyebrow, "...Why are yo-"

"I dragged them in here." Yuri answered for them, sitting back down again between Chris and Yurio with a huff, "What are we going to do? This is turning out to be a bigger deal than the actual event we once hosted here, and back then we were actually trying to get peoples' attention."

"We only had two skaters performing back then though." Viktor said, realizing no one was trying to
push the door in from behind him and he reluctantly pushed off of it to stand normally again, "Now we have two, plus one, plus two..." He pointed at each of the new-comers in turn, himself included. He then went down on one knee in front of his husband and put his gloved hands on the man's knees, "...I'm so sorry."

Yuri couldn't help but look at him with a slightly blaming expression on his face, but he shook his head, "...I know you didn't mean for it to turn out like this."

"I did my best to keep them all at the door as soon as I saw the cameras, so I sent Yuri to find you in my place." The Russian explained, "What do you want to do?"

Otabek and Mikhail were tumbling in through the doors just as the words were spoken, one through each door, and each in turn trying to shove them closed again.

"Getting a bit crowded in here." Yurio pointed out, "We can't hide in here all day."

"How bad is it out there now?" Minako wondered, picking up Mikhail's hat where it had fallen onto the tile floor, "It must be getting pretty hairy if they're going after you now."

"...Sort of." He answered, dusting the garment off before putting it back onto his silver-haired head, "A bunch of them are starting to catch on that this isn't just some random get-together like Viktor explained. Something about all the hanging portraits and the rink walls being decorated." He said sarcastically, "Maybe it was all the flower arrangements. Hard to say."

I can't take this anymore. Yuri thought. Viktor was so worried something bad would happen to us if he was too open about our relationship while we were in Russia...but we're back in Hasetsu now. This is my home. No one would hurt us here.

He could feel Viktor's hand coming up to cradle the side of his face, and he looked into those slate blue eyes for the answer. Viktor wasn't sure either though.

...I'm a World Champion Gold Medalist now. Would the JSF punish me if I forced them to upload something that undeniably showcased that Viktor and I are more than just a coach and student?

He lowered his eyes away, pressing his forehead to Viktor's, wishing he could meld their minds in that moment.

I'm going to go out there and tell them everything. I know now... All the confidence I gained this last year came from my slow acceptance that I was falling for you. Every time we got closer to each other, I did better on the ice. My heart and my skating are one and the same. One can't exist without the other. Viktor...you are my life and my love...and I'm going to make sure everyone knows it!

"...I'm going out there." Yuri said, rising to stand suddenly, "If the JSF drops me because of this, then fine. But I'm not going to hide in here anymore. They can't censor out my ring when I'm on a LiveStream...and I'm not going to let them shame me into silence about what we're doing here today." He turned his face up to where Viktor had risen back up to his full height, "You stay here." He looked back at his in-law, "Mikhail, Yuri, you come with me."

"...Why me?" The older Russian was skeptical.

"Because I said so." Yuri answered simply, marching back towards the door he'd come through and pulling the panel open to go back out. The two followed gingerly while the rest of the group stayed behind, watching them go with utterly perplexed looks on their faces.

The mob saw Yuri first and immediately tried to get his attention, but he just kept walking. Mikhail
suddenly realized his purpose and went ahead to clear a path to the rink doorway.

As they went, they heard equal parts about Yuri's being the latest World Champion and Yurio having been cut from the Russian Team, but neither was willing to address the questions as they continued forward.

Everyone in the locker room surrounded Viktor after that, as he had taken Yuri's place on the bench and loaded the video stream on his phone, wondering what the brave young fool had planned.

Takeshi saw the group making their way through the crowd, and his daughters were stunned to see them.

"Dad! They're going onto the ice!" Lutz said, pointing at the rink wall where the opening was just ahead.

"Get the spotlights!" Loop agreed.

"Where's the megaphone!?" Axel looked around in a panic.

The Nishigoris went into overdrive after that, trying to accommodate the sudden turn of events. As soon as one of Yuri's dark sneakers touched down on the ice, a light shone down on him from above, joined soon by another and then a third, following his slow shuffle out into the middle of the rink. Yurio was close on his heels, but Mikhail stayed at the doorway to prevent anyone from going out after them.

"Everyone..." Yuri started, getting under a very specific tapestry. No one seemed to hear him though, "Everyone, please!"

"EVERYONE SHUT YOUR FACE-HOLES AND LISTEN." Yurio yelled on his behalf, silencing most of the clamor almost instantaneously. He looked back at his Japanese counterpart, "There."

"...Thanks." Yuri sighed, a bit embarrassed either way, "Figured I'd need you for that." He cleared his throat, "...Everyone! Please listen to me!"

The crowd seemed on edge, confused and curious, but they stayed quiet.

"I know you all must be really bewildered by everything you see here today." He went on, speaking as loudly as he could without screaming at them, "This wasn't supposed to be a big deal. It was just Viktor and I wanting to put on a show for our family and friends since we didn't get to come back home again after Four Continents."

"Seems more like they set up a show for YOU." Someone called back; Yuri couldn't tell who.

"That's because they wanted to help us make it as special as possible. You see..." He swallowed nervously.

Viktor had one hand over his mouth as he waited anxiously for the 'big reveal.' Everyone else was piling in close around him as well.

"...This whole thing was supposed to be our honeymoon celebration." He held up his right hand to show the ring, "Because of how things are here in Japan and back in Russia, we had to go all the way back to Spain to get our papers. The JSF has even done everything it could to hide my ring in all its official work about me...but I'm not going to let them hide it anymore." He could feel the emotion rising up in him, just like back when he was presenting his theme for the previous season
and had gotten all riled up, "...I told you all before the Grand Prix Series that Viktor was the only person I've ever wanted to hold onto, and that I was going to call that 'love' for lack of a better word. Well, it IS love! I LOVE VIKTOR AND I MARRIED THAT MAN RIGHT BEFORE WORLDS." He pointed straight up at the tapestry above him and Yurio, the one featuring the photo of them with their marriage certificate in Barcelona. "My name is Yuri Nikiforov and this is OUR WEDDING PARTY."

The aforementioned Russian was in stunned silence.

"So you can take it or leave it!" Yuri continued, "We made no secret about it online! Viktor even called me his husband when he announced my name during my last Free Skate! So you can stay and celebrate with us or you can take your stuff and leave! I won't have bigotry ruin this. NOT TODAY, NOT IN MY HOME TOWN, NOT ON MY TURF."

The crowd was quiet for a moment after that...

...and then burst into raucous applause.

The two Yuris looked around in surprise at it all. The more they looked, the more they realized it was Viktuuri fans in the crowd, not so much journalists from the JSF. It seemed a bunch of them had even suspected what was going on and had made flags or banners with wedding-themed cartoon versions of themselves decorating the panels.

Yuuko and Chris were the first to see the droplets fall onto the small screen, and they looked up to see Viktor trying to hold back. His gloved hand was still over his mouth, tears falling from his eyes as he lowered the phone away.

"...Viktor?" The Swiss skater wondered aloud, only to find the man rising up to rush out of their hiding place, "Viktor!"

He was out the door in a hurry, pushing past the crowd where most of it had their backs turned to where he was coming from. From so far in the rear, it was hard, almost impossible to see him moving though, but eventually, he found his way to where Mikhail had guarded the rink door and slipped by, rushing out onto the ice with dress-shoes on his feet.

The crowd cheered even louder to see him, and the couple went for one another like it was even more urgent than their reunion after Makkachin's emergency.

The actually-small-number of JSF reporters were stunned by the excitement of the crowd, but the camera man just kept rolling.
Chapter 81

CHAPTER EIGHTY ONE

The maelstrom of cheering made it difficult to hear anything else, but Viktor took hold of his two Yuris and pushed them back towards the rink exit. He had to yell into Yuri's ear just to tell him to go ahead and start getting ready and that he'd be right behind in a moment. The younger skater nodded and headed back for the locker room where they'd all been sequestered before, and Yurio went after him to avoid prying questions.

By the time they were inside, Viktor had made it over to a loudspeaker so he could acknowledge everyone in the building, and even outside, "Welcome, everyone!" He started, his voice drowned out by more cheering, "Please stand by for just a few more minutes while we get ready! We really didn't expect so many people would find out about our little party and show up, but we're happy to have you! Spasibo!"

"WE LOVE YOU VIKTOR!"

More screaming as he got back down from his small perch to follow after his husband.

Yurio was a little unsettled by all the bad press, but he kept silent as Yuri started pulling off his coat and scarf nearby.

"Maybe I should've put a gag on the media while I was out there..." The Asian said, half to himself, "No questions about professional stuff today. This is all for fun."

"I don't think they'd care." The blond grumbled, "It's huge news back in Russia already. People are wondering if I'm even coming back."

"We know you are, so why worry?"

Yurio just gawked at him, "You're not the kind of person who gets to ask questions like that."

The older skater laughed nervously, "I guess not... But still. Once you've had a little time to yourself, Yakov said he'd let you back, and we know he wouldn't be crazy enough to stop you."

"Maybe." Yurio turned back away again, leaning against one row of lockers.

Yuri had pulled the metal door in front of him open to find the ensemble for his Firebird show; each locker in the row had been labeled ahead of time so the skaters would know where their things were. Each of them had their things clustered together though, with Chris, Yurio, and Phichit on their own side, and then Viktor and himself sharing an isle back-to-back with their own things.

"...I just realized I'm the one doing the most programs today." Yuri deadpanned himself, "I gotta skate 4 times today..."

"It's your wedding party."

"Not even Viktor is skating that often." The older man sighed, "Maybe the girls should've made him do Scheherazade, too..."

"It would've made more sense for him to do Amnesia."

"He can't do that one again unless his coat is altered." Yuri explained, "There wasn't enough time."
"What's wrong with the coat?"

"It's as heavy as a small dog. He didn't realize it until he was using it at Worlds." He answered, stripping down to his undergarments to make room for the infamous blue costume.

"So why are you doing this one again anyway?" Yurio wondered, cocking his head back to watch the man sliding his legs into the slick black pants, "It was your worst nightmare the last time you did it."

"Actually..." Yuri smiled, pulling the flame-embroidered collared white shirt next, "I did this for my Worlds Exhibition. I got to do it over with all the things Viktor taught me this last year. I finally got to do that show the way I saw it in my head way back then. So...now I get to show my family what it looks like in person."

"...That's who you were talking to when I found you in the bathroom." The blond muttered, "I overheard the end of your conversation before I kicked the door."

"...Sheesh, you were there that long?" Yuri was surprised, "I didn't even notice you..." He slipped his arms through the long, patterned blue sleeves, his fingers coming out past the white ruffles at the end.

"At the time I was letting it sink in how pathetic I thought you were." Yurio answered, "You didn't say why you'd fucked up so b-"

"Language." Yuri cut him off, smiling, though the Russian didn't see it.

"...You didn't say why you messed up though, so I just thought you sucked."

"Thanks a lot."

"Even Viktor was surprised how badly you performed back then." Yurio went on, "I saw him watching you from the stands."

"...He came out from the prep area to watch me?" Yuri was surprised to hear it, but then a little embarrassed, "Why?"

The Russian Punk shrugged, "Morbid curiosity, I guess. You at least had good spins and footwork back then. I guess he was just wondering what the hell was wrong with you, just like the rest of us. Not like you make it to the Grand Prix Final because you come in last on a regular basis."

"We both medaled at Skate Canada that year." Yuri remembered, "I got silver back then. It was the closest I'd ever gotten to him at that point."

"You were too terrified to even look at him most of the time."

The older skater remembered it well; standing on the podium next to Viktor while the audience cheered.

JJ had already descended from his bronze tier and was skating off. By that point, all three of them had secured their places in the Final and need not worry about being bumped off by some other skater at a different event.

Yuri stood on the ice and looked at his reflection in the silver-tinted glass medal, only to suddenly see through it as two black skates came into his line of sight. Black skates with golden blades, though he could barely see the toe-picks from where he was. When he looked up, he caught sight of the sheer
magenta coat with the gold chords, and the slate blue eyes looking back at him from behind silver-grey bangs.

Viktor held his hand out, "Yuri Katsuki, right? I'm so bad with names!" He laughed amiably, "You'd think I'd remember after hearing them announced overhead so many times, but the announcers are so hard to understand sometimes...especially over the crowds."

The younger skater's face was red, and his medal fell from his hands, caught only by the fact that the lanyard was still around his neck at the time. He anxiously held his hand out to return the gesture, but Viktor had to make the final reach to grasp it and shake it.

"See you at the Final, okay? Good luck."

"T-Tha...thank you...!" Yuri squeaked.

He watched the Russian smile again before turning his perfect face away to head off, leaving him there alone on the ice.

"It was the one time Viktor ever said anything directly to me before Sochi." Yuri finished, adjusting his costume a little before pulling his skates out of the lower locker, "I don't even know if he remembers that first meeting."

"Knowing him? Probably not. All the events blur together after a while, especially when you're on a winning streak. Nothing stands out anymore. Only the Exhibition matters, after the medal."

"Yuri!" Viktor suddenly called, coming into the locker room unexpectedly, "How close are you to being ready?"

"I just have to do my hair real fast." He answered, seeing the elder Russian step past the younger, "...Though I probably should've done that first, now that I think about it." He ruffled the ends of his sleeves, realizing they'd probably just get gel on them if he set to the task himself.

"Oh, let me!" Viktor was too excited, coming around behind his partner and pulling his gloves off in the process, "This is the fun part!"

Yuri moved to grab his second skate as the Russian pulled his coat off, rolled up his sleeves, and went digging for the things he needed. Both skates were on by the time he was ready, and Yuri settled in with his eyes closed as Viktor set to his task.

"You know, I don't think anyone left after your proclamation." He started, "Which means everyone who came here knew what they were going to see. Isn't it exciting?"

"Yuri and I were just reminiscing about my first meeting with you." The raven-haired skater said, "I think my heart was pounding as hard back then as it was when I was out there just now."

"...What was our first meeting?" Viktor deadpanned him, a little embarrassed that he couldn't recall.

"See? Told you." Yurio huffed a laugh.

Yuri joined in, "Skate Canada, before Sochi. It was the first time I medaled at the same competition as you. Before that, I either didn't make the podium or it was at a different competition. I got bronze at Skate America that same year, securing my spot in the Final."

"Oh! Skate Canada! I remember!" He was brushing back the black hair he often played with, "You even scored higher than JJ!"
"He was recovering from the flu at the time. I'd have gotten bronze and lost my shot at the Final if he had been healthy. I never understood why he didn't wear a mask during competition...there's so many chances to get sick..." Yuri said quietly, listening to the sound of Viktor's hands getting slick with the hair gel, then moving his fingers through his hair to push it back and out of his eyes.

"Your hair is getting really long." Viktor pointed out, "You could almost tie it in a ponytail back here."

"I can get it cut after the honeymoon."

"Mmmmmhh..." The Russian hummed to himself, thinking on it, "...Actually..."

"...You want it long?" Both Yuris were a little surprised.

"Well, not long...but for some reason, I get this image in my head of your new Free Skate, and you've got your hair up in a messy bun like in those old Samurai movies, just without the shaved bits!"

The younger skater pulled his hand up to his chin in thought, "...It's still a long time until any other competitions. My hair sprouts like grass...I could let it grow out." He tilted his head back to look at his husband, even though the man was upside down from his vantage, "Would you ever grow your hair out again?"

"...Mh...nah." The elder smiled and shrugged, "I'd just look silly." He capped the styling gel and put it back into the small bag with the comb, then moved over to a sink to wash his hands, "Why don't you guys go out there? I'll be there in a minute. Yuuko said she was going to formally start the event and I don't want to miss it!"

Yuri rose to stand, "As though she'd start without you."

"Right?"

The two younger skaters moved back towards the door to rink-side, "Don't be long."

"Mh."

When the door finally closed and silence resumed, Viktor dried his hands...and immediately went for his phone. In a panic, he went looking up pictures of Skate Canada in a desperate bid to jog his memory.

I met Yuri back then!? How did I forget!? I remember the scores but nothing else!

He was practically sweating bullets over it.

I'm getting old! I have Alzheimer's or something! ...But I was only 26 back then! Youngzheimer's!?

"Yuri forgive me!" He pleaded to the empty room, snapping out of it only as he finally saw photos showing up on his screen. Unsurprisingly, there was a small archive on the triplets' Viktuuri account, and he clicked a few to expand them to full size. The look of sheer terror on Yuri's face was enough to bring a smile to Viktor's, and he lightly touched the screen where he zoomed in on the man, "...Don't give up, Past Yuri...it'll suck for a while, but I promise, it only gets better from there." He leaned in to kiss the screen lightly, and then clicked it off so he could get ready.

Outside, the two Yuris were approaching the rink wall, surrounded by cheering fans and family alike. Yuri's father came up abruptly and pat him on the back, "I don't think Viktor brought enough
alcohol for everyone!"

"Oh wow...I didn't even think about any of that." Yuri stammered, "The intermission is supposed to be when we all get a chance to eat and relax for a little while...if everyone sticks around to see Duetto at the end..."

"They'll be fine." Yurio said, elbowing him a little to stop him from worrying, "If they want food or booze, they can leave and come back."

"...You're right." The Asian said, rubbing his side, "I can't worry about everyone."

His attention was suddenly grabbed by the sight of a formally-dressed Yuuko gliding across the ice. His cheeks flushed at the sight of her; she wore a strapless, ruffled, maroon ball gown, which went so low that it hid her skates beneath the skirt. She had her hair done up rather nicely as well, with a few pearls strung through it, and a gold necklace with a single ruby around her neck. She spotted Yuri staring at her and waved anxiously, but then skated off again with a microphone in her hand.

"It's almost time, everyone!" She announced, "One of our grooms has already come onto the floor! Let's welcome him onto the ice, okay?"

The crowd cheered, and Yuri made his way over to the doorway, handing his blade guards to his younger Russian counterpart before sliding out onto the frozen lake. He found himself stopped though, the ruffle on his left wrist yanked back unexpectedly. He paused and turned around, only to find Yurio reaching over with one arm around his shoulder to pull him close enough to speak into his ear.

"I've been a real shit to you and Viktor since as far back as I can remember. Even long before I kicked the door to your stall at Sochi. Yet...through everything, you were always right...and you were always there, no matter how much I thrashed and screamed and swore at you."

Yuri's eyes were wide open where he was looking over the teen's shoulder, listening intently.

"But...I'm grateful you put up with me long enough to let me come here and be part of this with you. I can't undo what I've done, and if I apologize too often, my sorrys will lose their meaning, so I'll have to use them sparingly...so instead I'll just say thank you."

"...Yuri...?"

"And congratulations, I guess. Now go out there before I take it all back."

He felt the teen pat him hard once on the back and then spin him around to shove him further onto the ice. As he looked back though in utter disbelief, Yurio just nudged him again with the end of his own blade guards, pushing him far enough away that he'd actually have to skate back if he meant to say anything and expect to be heard. So, he smiled at the teen, got one in return, and then went out to join Yuuko in the center of the rink.

"Ah! And there's our second groom!" Yuuko said happily, raising her free hand up to gesture over at where Viktor had finally made his appearance at rink-side. He waved excitedly at everyone and then reached down for his blade guards, then sitting on and lifting his legs over the wall, setting his blades down on the ice, too impatient to wade through the crowd to get to the actual entrance. He skated over to Yurio to pass of the rubber guards and then quickly skated out to encircle the pair that were waiting for him.

He made the trip more of a show than Yuri did, spinning around elegantly a few times and skating in reverse before finally coming to a dramatic stop, throwing himself over Yuri's back affectionately.
"Groom and groom accounted for!" He said, taking both of Yuri's hands into his own to swivel off with him unexpectedly.

"...V-Viktor!" The younger man cried out, anxious and excited all at once.

"We haven't worn these outfits at the same time since Sochi, right?" The Russian whispered to him as they moved away, sliding across the ice with their usual cerebral grace, "And we first met in these same outfits...well, first officially met, anyway. It's crazy how much things have changed since that first terrifying meeting at Skate Canada, right? You couldn't even reach far enough to shake my hand yourself, and now..."

Instinct took over after that, and Yuri pulled out of the reverse skate, still holding to Viktor's hand as they went in a wide arc around the short end of the rink.

Yuuko just watched them happily, waiting one more lap before raising up her free hand again, "It gives me great pleasure to introduce tonight's honored couple!" The crowd roared its approval, especially after the pair synchronized a quad flip together without even needing to discuss it first, "Tonight we're celebrating the wedding they already had without us nearly a month ago!"

"...Hey!" Yuri called out at her as they flew past.

Yuuko just winked and laughed at him, "Who am I kidding? It's super adorable that you guys just eloped like you did." She said into the mic, "But now we finally get to do it for real! EVERYONE! Yuri and Viktor Nikiforov!"
Yuuko corralled the two speedy skaters and shuffled them over towards one side of the rink, leaving them both somewhat confused. The other skaters were there nearby to make sure they stayed put.

"Aren't I supposed to do Firebird now...?" Yuri wondered.

The lady shook her head, and appeared to give a signal to someone behind the crowd on the far end of the rink, then turned her attention back, "You won't skate for a little while. We have to do this properly! It's not just an ice skating event."

"...Properly? What else could there be?"

"It's a wedding party, right?" She smiled at him, "We have to start from the top. It's a story!"

"Oh, this should be good!" Viktor mused, looking up as the lights were dimmed.

On the opposite end of the rink, a huge white panel was unfurled over top of where ‘ICE CASTLE HASETSU’ was displayed on the wall. At the same time, the huge hanging wall-scroll of Viktor was rolled back up. A projector came to life from the rafters, casting its pale light onto the makeshift screen.

Yuri was about to have a coronary when he realized what was about to play.

Fading in from black, the audio was unmistakable...

"Next up at your Sochi Grand Prix Final, representing Japan...Yuri Katsuki. He just turned 23 this year before the Rostelecom Cup. This is the first time he's made it all the way to the final competition of the series, and expectations for him back home are fairly high." Newscaster Morooka's voice was saying, narrated over the footage.

"Oh no..." Yuri whined, "...Why are you guys-"

"Tsst!" Yuuko hushed him.

Viktor reached his arms around his partner's waist to pull him close, "I'm sure it's not what you think it's going to be. Just watch."

"Mmmnnnnnhhh..." He was fidgeting horribly.

"Skater Katsuki's Short Program from yesterday, Dark Eyes, earned a respectable 87.45. Competition this year is pretty stiff though so he has a ways to go to get onto the podium! What tricks does he have up his sleeve?"

Oddly, the sound of Morooka's voice faded out towards the end, and the screen went dark. It didn't even show the footage of that last Free Skate, at least not the way Yuri had expected. Instead, it showed still-frames of his falls, and his entirely unenthused final pose, all while the sound of the after-skate interview audio played over it.

"Skater Katsuki, what happened out there?"

"Are you feeling okay?"
"...I think I'm just going to go sit down. Sorry."

"It must've been the pressure." Viktor's voice suddenly came on, and the screen resumed moving footage, showing an interview with the Russian that even Yuri didn't know had taken place, "Everyone gets a little nervous when they get to the Final for the first time."

"As the reigning Champion, what advice would you have for him?"

Yuri watched the screen with wide eyes. His hands clenched down where Viktor's arms were around him.

The Viktor on the video touched his chin in thought, but then looked straight at the camera and winked, "I'd tell him to keep trying. It may seem rough to come in last place here today, but coming in 6th when there were dozens of competitors all vying for the same spot...that still puts him in the top bracket, and that's something to be proud of. I expect to see you here at the GPF again next year, Yuri!"

The screen cut out, and numerous news broadcasts became superimposed on one another. Many were in Russian, but a good number were in Japanese as well, and even some in English. All the dialogue was subtitled, to pull out to important points that were being made.

"Shocking news this week in Figure Skating; five-time World Champion Viktor Nikiforov suddenly left the country to become a coach!"

"Viktor wants to take time off until he finds his motivation again." Yakov's voice was saying, standing outside the St. Petersburg training rink, "Personally, I doubt he'll be able to return if he takes a break now."

"He's going to train Katsuki Yuri in Japan-"

"That man only thinks about himself! He'll never be anyone's coach!"

Viktor burst out laughing at that, "Yeah, Coach Yakov would say that about me! I already miss him..."

"TSST!" Yuuko chided again.

"Oh-!"

Yuri smiled nervously between them.

"Rumors are going around the JSF that one of its top skaters has recruited Russia's top talent to become a coach! We are looking to confirm those rumors by sending reporters to Hasetsu in Kyushu..."

"Personally, it'll be interesting to see what happens. A five time World Champion, multiple record holder, and an Olympian on top of that...what can he do to impart some of that talent onto someone who recently announced he was going to stop skating after coming in last place at two competitions in a row? Will Yuri Katsuki become the next Viktor Nikiforov or will he just flounder? We're all anxious to find out."

Spotlights suddenly shot onto the ice, and Yuuko pulled away from rink-side to go stand in the light. She pulled the mic back up and gestured to the screen, "Well, that was a trip down memory lane, wasn't it?" She laughed as she could feel Yuri eyeballing her, "Almost exactly one year ago, Viktor showed up at Yu-Topia Katsuki to be Yuri's coach. What Yuri didn't know at the time..." She turned
to raise her hand over to where the Dance Off scroll had been hanging, and a spotlight shone down on it to single it out from the others, which were still shrouded in shadow, "...was that he'd actually asked Viktor to do just that for him right after Sochi. Yuri is definitely Kyushu born and bred! We'll make sure you don't drink too much tonight though, okay?"

"...Is this my wedding party or humiliation night?" The man grumbled to himself.

The audience was just laughing all around him. Yuri could even hear his father specifically, which made the his drunken escapades burn even more.

Viktor suddenly let him go, and moved around to skate over into the light. Yuuko was confused to see him coming, but she stayed where she was, and even let him swipe the microphone out of her hands as he rotated around her. She already knew the man was taller than her, but skating in circles like that, their 9 inch difference became super obvious, especially when he came up beside her with a hand against her back. He had to lean down a little so as not to entirely tower over her.

Yuri was completely confused, "...Wh...Viktor...?"

"Even diamonds start as nothing more than rocks, right?" He was starting to say, "But with enough pressure and time, they start to shine. Every once in a while they crack though. Sometimes that diminishes them, but sometimes...it means they've left the worst part behind, to move on and become even more beautiful than they would've otherwise. Those pieces that broke off were just a hindrance, extra baggage that kept them from realizing their full potential. Yuri..." He lifted his head and rose back up to his full height, reaching his hand out through the light and into the dark beyond it.

'It's not that I doubt you. It's that I doubt myself. I always have. You've always been so far out of my league... I mean, I've been looking up from the bottom of the barrel for so long...and then you reached down with your shining hand like God to pull me up. I worry sometimes that I pulled some of the muck up with me, that I've never quite been good enough...to be in the light, or to be with you in it...or worse, that I might just drag you back down with me.'

'I'd rather be in the muck with you than in the light without.'

"You left your broken pieces behind in Sochi." Viktor continued, his hand still outstretched, "Come show everyone the diamond you've become."

Yuri just gawked at him.

"Even though you know about as much as I do about what everyone has planned today...you still manage to come up with something like that to say to me when you can feel me getting anxious?"

He could feel Phichit and Chris pushing him away from the rink wall, telling him to go out to Viktor, but for some reason, he couldn't shake the surprise. He felt just as paralyzed as when he'd first met the Russian at Skate Canada, wanting to reach out for him but too scared to.

"Yuri! What are you waiting for?"

"Yuri, go on!"

"Get out there, you're making Viktor look stupid!"

Viktor finally moved forward, too quick for the spotlight to follow, falling into the darkness next to the rink wall. The gold on his finger still gleamed from the light behind him though, acting like something of a beacon to Yuri's eyes, and he watched it as the man approached. The feeling of his husband's warm hand finally brought him back from where his mind had gone into orbit, and he
blinked a few times before letting Viktor pull him back to where he'd just come from.

"Ah...sorry, I just..."

"Déjà vu, right?" Viktor whispered.

"Oh yeah, big time..."

"Me, too." The Russian mused, and motioned his free hand up for the spotlight to follow. He pulled the younger skater out towards center stage as Yuuko moved off to make space. Viktor stayed with him there for a moment in the light, all three spotlights down on them, with the horizontal stage lights blinking on beyond them, and the large tapestry of Viktor's Duetto finally descending to take its place again. He put his fingers gently under Yuri's chin to lift his face, "Don't forget to breathe. You're a cute little piglet that became a pork cutlet bowl fatale that enrthalls men, and ended up growing into the most perfect Prince, bedecked with gold and silver like none other. Skate this like the Exhibition. I'll come find you again when you're done, okay?"

Yuri couldn't help but see Skate Canada superimposing itself on the Ice Castle, with Viktor there in front of him again wishing him good luck.

"I love you." Yuri blurted unexpectedly.

The old Viktor turned his head back and looked at him, but then smiled, "I know."

Yuri blinked again and shook his head, and his husband was looking back at him then.

"I love you too, Yuri. Now skate!" Viktor stroked his cheek as he pulled back again, leaving Yuri there in the spotlights alone. The scratching of the gold-plated blades faded out soon after, and the young skater instinctively took his position. He set his feet apart, kissed his ring, and crossed his arms over his chest, one hand on each shoulder, exactly like he had at his World Exhibition.

The music started above him, quiet as a whisper, and the crowd hushed even more just to hear it. His skates scratched the ice as he started to move.

No longer did anyone see the old program. Even for Yuri, the more he skated, the further his disastrous Grand Prix Final sank to the back of his mind. This was natural now...and freeing. He knew how to move, he knew how the jumps felt, the spins, the step sequence...it was all muscle memory.

I wonder if this is what Viktor feels like? This sense...that you'll never fall again.

Viktor had propped himself up to sitting on the rink wall, resting one arm on Chris' shoulder where he'd come to watch next to him, recording the skate on his phone with the other hand. The whole performance had the group completely enamored.

It's completely different from the last time I saw it. Yurio thought, watching curiously, entranced like the rest of the crowd.

By the time it was over, and Yuri had his arms reaching up for the sky, his bomb at Sochi was entirely forgotten. He was a diamond. The audience roared its approval as the music faded out again, and Viktor was clapping his free hand on his leg so he could keep recording.

"Yuri! That was amazing!" He called out, eagerly watching as his husband finally broke away to skate over to where he'd been perched.
Out of breath, but excited, Yuri came right up to the rink wall and wedged himself between Viktor's legs, hugging him around the waist as well he could given how high up the man was. Chris joined in as well, and Viktor leaned in with his free arm, recording the whole thing with the other.

"I did good, right?" Yuri asked, gasping for breaths.

"I think it was even better than the Exhibition! You were really relaxed out there!" Viktor said, finally clicking off the phone and setting it down so he could get his blades back on the ice and properly hug the man in front of him.

Surprising the both of them though, Minako came out into the rink instead of Yuuko, and the woman was decked out like the rest of them, looking much like the regal ballerina she once was. Her gown wasn't nearly as expansive as Yuuko's though, being much more slim and form fitting as befit an older woman.

With another hand gesture to Takeshi and the girls, another of the two largest hanging tapestries was furled back up towards the ceiling, this time being the one of Duetto Yuri. A second temporary screen came down, making Yuri nervous again.

"...What other terrors of my past are they going to put on display for everyone?" He wondered aloud, though mostly muttering to himself against the opening in Viktor's shirt.

"Don't worry so much Yuri, this isn't all about you!" Minako said, as though she could hear him, "Time to dig on Viktor!"

"...Is this a roast or something?" The Russian wondered, half-worried now what could've possibly been found on him that came anywhere close to being as embarrassing as what they'd put together for Yuri.

"Not a roast, per se." The older woman answered, "Just perspective." She gestured towards the audience, "I don't think there's a pair of eyes in the building that isn't aware of your illustrious history."

Footage rolled that showed a small clip of every one of Viktor's last World Championship victories, each slightly superimposed onto the other like a moving collage. What was interesting though, as Viktor noticed, was that the chronology was going backwards in time, having shown his Aria victory first and going back. Soon, it was showing his last victory at the Junior World Championships, where Viktor had last worn the costume that would eventually become Yuri's Eros outfit.

"Yuri was 12 when we all saw that event." Minako explained, "But even back then, he was already in deep. How interesting to look back on that and realize what lay in store for that outfit only 12 years later?" She gestured straight to the couple, "He'd have to wait his entire life all over again to see it in person."

"At least he was born already when I wore it!" Viktor called out, "Plisetsky was hardly a twinkle in someone's eye when I wore the Agape outfit!"

"Mh! It was one of your first! Do we have pictures of that?" She wondered at the triplets.

"We have pictures of everything!" They called back excitedly.

The imagery on the projector changed over suddenly, and soon after, a photo of Viktor in the Agape outfit came up.

"Sheesh, I was 13 and so awkward." Viktor laughed, looking at himself on the bronze side of the
podium, "Still trying to figure out how the world worked." His hair was growing out at that point, but it was still short enough that his ponytail was a bit stiff behind his head.

"You'd only just left home by then, right?" Yuri wondered quietly, not wanting to speak too loudly where others could possibly hear.

Viktor stroked his cheek with his gloved thumb, "Mh. It was my first year officially with the Junior ISU. I even stayed an extra year there so I could be sure my Senior Premier was perfect." He raised his hand to get the triples' attention, "Are you guys linked to your Viktuuri account right now?"

"Naturally!" They called back.

"Bring up a slideshow!" He told them excitedly, patting Yuri on the head before pulling away again to go to where Minako was standing in the light.

He was about to swipe the mic again like he had from Yuuko, but Minako wasn't one to give it up so easily. She kept it out of his reach as he skated around her, "Not so fast, hot-shot!" She warned him, keeping a deft eye on any quick or sudden movements. The ice wasn't her element though and she slid around a little unsteadily, and soon, the Russian was right on top of her.

Almost literally.

"You were saying?" Viktor mused, being the only thing holding the woman up from falling on her butt in front of everyone.

Her skates had gone forward just as the Russian moved in for the kill, but he saw her tipping just as he was reaching for the mic, and diverted the direction of his arm to going around her waist and back instead, and then holding there with dramatic flair. She was gawking up at him with pink cheeks, and almost let him have the mic at that point. He just laughed and plucked it from her hands with his free one, winked at her, and then pulled her back up to standing, "Minako Okukawa, everyone. World renowned ballerina...not so much skater."

The crowd clapped and laughed along with him, even though the woman herself was a bit flustered. She noticed that Viktor hadn't let go of her though even as he'd set her upright on her unsteady skates, effortlessly gliding her around in slow circles, "You're being free with your flirtation tonight, Viktor."

"I don't want you to fall." He answered simply, "I'm taking over your show...the least I can do is make sure you don't end up on the ice."

"Uncle Viktor! It's ready!" Axel called out, "You'll like this album!"

"Oh~?" He spun around with the woman still in his arm, and looked up at the big screen to see what they'd provided. To his surprise and interest, it wasn't just some slideshow of his own past events, it was a mash-up to show the comparison between himself and his husband. The photos had been well altered to make it seem like the two had been taken at the same time and in the same place, even sometimes seeming like the two were interacting somehow, "Oh! That's clever! How'd you do that?"

Even Yuri was impressed by it, looking up at an image of himself in the Eros costume alongside the 16 year old Viktor in the same outfit, leaning against a rink wall as though having a conversation. His cheeks flushed to see such widely different periods of time converging like that.

"There's a bunch of Viktuuri fans out there who donated their time and skill for these!" Loop explained, "Some of the others are really good, too!"
Lutz came running out along the ice after that, looking like quite the tiny little creature compared to Viktor's blade-included 6 feet. He reached down to pick her up and settled her on his shoulder, and she held up her phone to go through the gallery, "I like this next one the best!"

The photo on the screen faded out, and the next one came up fairly quickly after, showing merged photos from when Yuri and Viktor were the same age...24. Yuri was in his YoI costume, holding up his first World Championship gold medal, and the Viktor from 4 years ago was next to him, holding up his 3rd in a row. The way the photos were melded together, it was as though they'd somehow won their gold at the same event, and were having a good laugh about it.

"Wow~! Amazing!" Viktor said, "Yuri, do you see!?

"...That's...yeah, wow!" He agreed, finally letting himself skate out towards the spotlight again, coming up on Minako's open side to help hold her up, "You guys really outdid yourselves with these! Let's see the rest!"

"You guys are taking over my part of the show!" Minako protested, much to their amusement.
The photo album continued on, some drawing laughter, others leaving the audience quiet. The one that Yuri liked the most though was one that the girls waited to show last, due to it being something of an 'animated' photo. It was a particularly wide image that showed almost a timeline of his and Viktor's skating career over a period of the last 10 years, each 'slide' of animation revealing another year after the first as they came towards the center. Starting from the left with Viktor, and himself way at the other side, each year that appeared leading up to Sochi where it seemed like they were standing face-to-face staring at each other in the center of the image, only to pass each other, standing back to back wearing the next year's outfits. Himself in 'Yuri on Ice,' and Viktor with 'Winter's Prince.' The final images superimposed over the 'timeline' were much bigger than the ones that came before, featuring each of them in their Duetto outfits.

Yuri couldn't even hear the clapping when he saw it, just looking up at the final image with awe. It didn't help that the girls had been playing his YoI theme while revealing the image, with the calmest part coming up as the Duetto figures appeared on the screen.

The background almost faded into a grey tone, even darkening a little to help make the Duetto figures' colors pop even more.

Yuri lifted his head as he heard blades scratching around behind him, and he saw Viktor skating off to unexpectedly finish the YoI program, too excited about the photo to contain his energy. The audience was applauding it as he went, picking it up from the Ina Bauer maneuver and continuing on.

No matter how many times he and Viktor had done the routine together while first putting it together, it was incredibly weird to see the man doing it while wearing the Aria costume. He moved Minako around carefully to make room for any moves that would bring the Russian through where they were standing, but kept his eyes carefully on the man, only to break away in time to mirror the final quad flip and enter the last spin sequence before crossing his leg behind the other and raising his arm up to reach for Viktor, even as he was doing the same thing from the other side of the rink.

The two were laughing about it as Viktor saw him, not having noticed Yuri getting into it until that moment, and then came back to center so Minako could finish the show they'd usurped from her.

Viktor had taken the microphone with him when he did his little show, and only then finally gave it back to her, "Sorry, we should let you continue~!" He said breathlessly, catching up from the sudden exertion.

She held her hand out and let the Russian place it in her palm, curling her fingers around it with look, "Are you going to do this every time we have a break between skaters?"

"Only if you let me." Viktor mused, "Can't help it."

Yuri moved around to help give Minako her show back, pulling up behind his husband to start pushing him over to the rink wall where the other skaters were waiting. All but Yurio anyway, who had left to go get ready for his own show coming up soon.

The ballerina just shook her head and laughed, raising her free hand to gesture at the pair, "It's going to be a long day with these two." The audience clapped its approval, "But, we were about to do
Viktor's part...I wonder if he's worried we might've found something embarrassing?"

"Of course!" He called back from the darkened part of the rink.

"You're too perfect for that, Viktor!" Minako called back, "Although we did find a little bit..."

"Uh oh..."

The connection to the triplets' Viktuuri account had been disconnected by that point and returned to where it had interrupted the previous display. The last photo was put back to get the timing right, showing the younger Viktor with the Eros outfit again, and Minako continued where she'd left off.

"Mhm...so, 12 years to see this outfit in person, is that where I was?" She wondered to herself into the mic, "But for a guy who was so serious on the ice...I wonder how many people knew how much of a goofball you were off the ice?" Minako watched the images change over to a video from years ago, which displayed what looked like some Banquet party or another, "Exhibit A..."

"Oh!" Viktor recognized it as soon as he saw what 'version' of himself was on the screen, and he reached over the rink wall to pull Chris closer with an arm over his shoulders, "This was from the first World Championships we were in together!"

"This should be fun then. I wonder how much footage was captured?"

"You were so serious at first, too." Viktor laughed, "How little I knew back then!"

"You were serious, too, Viktor." The Swiss skater pointed out, "Being so flirtatious with the rose you tossed me before."

"I threw a rose to you?" The Russian wondered, "...I forget."

"It was our first meeting 11 years ago." 

"It was!? Ah!"

Yuri was just shaking his head and laughing, "You're too forgetful."

"Selectively forgetful." He corrected, "Ask me the score from any event and I could probably list them...but ask me about people I've met, and I'll draw a blank. There's too many!"

"Hashtag #UltraPopularGuyProblems." Yuri jabbed.

In the locker room, Yurio had his phone propped up against his jacket as he was changing, watching the LiveStream on the JSF site so he would miss as little as possible. It was hard to see what was being shown on the big theatrical screen when his phone was so small though.

*I'll have to ask Yuuko to show me the slideshow properly later.*

He lifted his head a little as he heard the locker-room door being pushed open and then sliding closed again, followed by footsteps. Leaning over a little, he spotted Mikhail coming towards him.

"Almost ready?" He asked.

Yurio nodded, adjusting where the long black coat sat on his shoulders as he grabbed his phone, "This will be the second time I've premiered a Short Program in this place."

"Not such a bad thing, all things considered." Mikhail added, "You want your hair done like before
"You're the only one who's seen the full show." The blond answered, "You tell me."

The older Russian just huffed a laugh, "You're asking the wrong guy about artistic style. If you want my opinion on the mechanics, I can tell you your outfit is spot on, but the flair...that's a bit beyond me."

"Ms. Baranovskaya always did my hair before a show." Yurio said quietly, "I wonder if she'd come back?"

"All you have to do is prove that you've made changes." Mikhail said, looking down at the teen, "You've already come a long way since you and I even first met."

The teen nodded, then pushed to stand, pocketing his phone as he went looking for an elastic band in his bag, "I still have a ways to go though. I'm not sure how much longer my body will hold out before I have to take time off, but I'd like to think I can mend the bridges I've burned before that happens."

Mikhail nodded, watching the teen pull some of his bangs out from the rest of where he was pulling his long hair up behind his head, tying it back into a ponytail, leaving it in a droopy bun with the last loop through the elastic, then tying a second one around it just to be sure it was secure. He took a deep breath as he checked himself in a mirror and then nodded to himself, "Viktor's about to do Aria. I don't want to miss it."

By the time they got back to rink-side, they walked into a chorus of laughter. Yurio pushed past them to look at the big screen to see what had gotten them all so loud, and saw a picture of a much younger Chris and Viktor, each one covered in cake and frosting, and looking like they were about to belt more at each other.

"...What in the world?"

He heard Viktor having a good laugh about it as well, and he moved over to get closer to hear what was being said about it.

"I remember that now!" Viktor was saying, "It's just like the other day when we were trying to drop ice in each other's shirts!"

"And you started it both times." Chris pointed out, "The cake thing really threw me off though."

"That's because you were still trying to be so serious!"

"So were you!" The blond mused, "Prim and proper Viktor Nikiforov, the guy who could never do anything that wasn't somehow innately charming or adorable. You were like a puppy back then, I swear...even in the most compromising situations, you still somehow made it look like you intended it to be that way all along."

"More like a cat then, right?"

"Oh no, a puppy for sure." Chris reaffirmed, "If you had the personality of a cat, you'd have been knocking fragile things off tables just to see if they bounce, and being a jerk about it after. I don't think I've ever seen you be mean to anyone in your whole life."

"It's been known to happen on rare occasions." Viktor said quietly, "But don't tell anyone, I have an image to uphold."
"An image like that?" The Swiss skater pointed at the screen where the photos of the pair looking rather normal at that particular Banquet had suddenly changed over to a video, grainy as it was.

"...V-Viktor!?" The younger Chris shrieked, finding his face covered in cake frosting.

"You're being too serious! Lighten up a little! You won bronze, not a prison sentence!" The younger, long-haired Viktor retorted, his hand covered in white and blue fluff. He was laughing at the Swiss' expense, only to suddenly have a huge wad of the same cake shoved in his own face.

Chris was laughing triumphantly, and the two started grabbing handfuls of the same cake to fling at each other, even as both of their coaches was trying to pull them apart, only to get cake on themselves as well and suddenly give up.

Yakov looked particularly unimpressed with having his suit covered in icing, "Vitya!"

"Sorry, Yakov!" The teen joked, looking up as he heard music changing over in the room. He recognized it and looked over at the younger skater, who was busy trying to get some of the frosting off his face, looking at it on his finger and shrugging before putting it in his mouth, not wanting to waste it, "Hey! You know this song?"

Chris listened, "...Oh, yeah!"

It was hard for the audience in the Ice Castle to hear what was playing given the audio quality of a cam-corder recording from 10 years prior, but it wasn't the song that was important. It was the hilarity that ensued as the two cake-covered skaters started dancing with each other in over-the-top dramatic flair.

The two in question were laughing at the memory of it, and Viktor was wiping away a tear, "I think we became best friends right then."

"Close as could be." The blond agreed.

"So now that we've set a completely inappropriate mood for the next performance," Minako mused, watching as the impromptu dance on screen came to a close and the screen went dark again, "Let's have it for Viktor's Aria!"

Chris immediately hoisted Yuri up off the ice, pulling him to sit on the rink wall the same way Viktor had been during Firebird. Similarly to that as well, Viktor quickly wedged himself between his husband's legs and hugged him before heading out to take his spot. The audience was cheering wildly for it, and Viktor did everything he could to keep getting them riled up, laughing quickly to himself before taking his place.

He was about to get into the starting pose when he realized something, "Axel! Lutz! Loop!" He called out with urgency, much to the audience's confusion.

"What is...he doing?" Yuri wondered, just as perplexed as everyone else to see Viktor come rushing back to the rink wall, only to grab his phone and hurry off to where the triplets had gathered at the rink-wall entrance. No one could hear what they were saying, but Viktor had handed his phone to them and made some gestures before the three nodded excitedly and ran off with it. Viktor stood back up and went out to center rink again, waiting until he could see their flash-light app signal before finally getting into his starting position, "Okay, sorry! You can play it now!"

The girls had gotten to a familiar part of the rink wall and were starting to film with Viktor's phone, and the music above started to play.
Sento una voce che piange lontano
Anche tu, sei stato forse abbandonato?

The crowd had gotten appropriately quiet as the performance began and the Russian started the
dance. Yuri kept looking from him to the triplets though, feeling like he should know what had just
happened.

It suddenly became clear though.

E i battiti del cuore
Si fondono tra loro

Viktor came right up to where Yuri had been perched on the wall, doing the same thing to him that
Yuri done to Yuuko when he did his copy of Aria a year prior, although with the added touch of his
hands on Yuri's face before backing up again with his hand over his heart, and continuing on with the
program as normal.

Yuri's cheeks were flushed, and he clapped even harder than the rest when Viktor entered the final
pose, the drums of the song banging loudly overhead. The crowd had started cheering before the
song was even over, many having done so when Viktor came to rink-side. Yuri was just over the
moon about it though.

The one time Viktor had done Aria at the Ice Castle in full-costume was when he was starting to plot
Duetto, and had pulled Yuri into the performance as well, so Yuri couldn't actually watch the whole
thing from a spectator's perspective. There was no such 'interruption' this time though. Yuri was able
to watch it from start to finish, and loved every minute of it, especially knowing that the last time it
had been done in competition, Viktor had done it with his future husband in mind.

Minako-sensei was watching the World Championships at Yu-Topia that night, while I was doing
Aria myself here at the Ice Castle. I wonder what she'd think if she knew what Viktor was thinking
while the show was playing on the television? Even I could hardly believe it, even when Viktor told
me about it himself...

As the Russian was busy catching his breath in the middle of the rink, Yuri hopped off the wall and
skated out to him excitedly. Viktor caught him coming out the corner of his eye, and turned to catch
his husband as he lunged for him, throwing his arms over the taller man's shoulders as they spun
around together. The audience just kept cheering, many whistling excitedly.

Yurio was clapping from rink-side, Mikhail behind him doing the same.

"A world-class performance, if anyone's ever seen one!" Minako said into the mic, "I bet that even
topped his last showing at Worlds in Tokyo last year!"

Viktor nodded and blew an affectionate kiss out to the woman for lack of being close enough to be
heard speaking his appreciation, but then took Yuri's hand and skated back to where the triplets were
waiting. He thanked them quickly as he took his phone back, "Quick, one of you guys pull up your
mom's account. I want to see how close it was."

"Way ahead of you, Uncle Viktor!" Loop said happily, showing him her own phone with the video
already qued up.

Viktor quickly turned his back to the rink wall so the triplets (and anyone behind them) could see
what he was looking at, and put his own phone up next to Loop's. The timing was only off by a
fraction of a second as Viktor thumbed play on both devices, and Yuri looked down to see what his
"This is the exact spot where we recorded you last year, Yuri!" Axel explained, "Uncle Viktor wanted a side-by-side!"

For once, the younger skater wasn't entirely humiliated by the sight of himself in that video, and was actually quite impressed to realize how perfectly timed he was compared to the real thing.

"Even without the music to go by, Yuri hit all his marks at the right time." Yuuko said, coming up from behind her girls to spy over her friend's shoulder, "It's great to see how well he did it with a video like this! Seeing Viktor do it from the same angle, it's really obvious."

"My little katsudon knew how to move." Viktor nuzzled him affectionately, rubbing his cheek on the top of Yuri's head before giving Loop her phone back, "We'll have to splice these videos together somehow! Do it like with the photos from earlier!"

"Yeah!" The triplets cheered, "We could even put in parts of Duetto, Uncle Viktor!"

"Wow~! Yes! I can't wait to see it!" The Russian said anxiously, wanting to see it as soon as instantly, but knowing he'd have to wait. He turned to look over at Chris, but caught sight of Yurio just beyond him, and raised his arm up to wave, "Yuri!"

Both Yuris lifted their heads to the sound of their names, but they both realized who Viktor was referring to rather quickly, with the blond squeezing his way along the spectator-side of the rink wall to get closer.

"Hope you didn't miss too much of the show while you were changing!" The older Russian lamented, "I can't wait to see the one you're about to do though! You already look like you're going to go into battle as it is!"

The older Yuri nodded in agreement.

The younger Yuri was about the say something when he suddenly felt Chris and Viktor hoisting him up over the rink wall like a duffle-bag, placing him onto the ice despite still having his blade-guards on. He was too stunned to protest, and just kind of gave an exasperated look once he was upright again.

"You ready?" Yuri asked, coming around to the teen's other side and putting a hand on his shoulder, "You've had this show in your back pocket for longer than you meant to."

"Hopefully it'll be worth the wait to see." He answered nervously.

"Oh, good timing!" They all heard Minako say suddenly, and they looked out to center-rink to see her reaching for the teen, "We're about to do the part about you!"

"...About...me?" Yurio repeated dubiously.

"This ought to amazing." Viktor taunted, following after as Yuri gently pushed the reluctant teen out to meet with the woman.

"You don't really think you could come to Hasetsu and not be followed around by a trio of skating otaku, do you?" Minako wondered teasingly.

Yurio looked up at the screen cautiously, wondering what horrors the triplets must've captured if he was going to be part of the sort-of-but-not-really roast. Photos scrolled in quick succession, each
showing some embarrassing image or another of his training for the Hot Springs on Ice show the previous year. Viktor had been relentless back then, leaving both Yuris exhausted at the end of each day, especially on the days where they'd been put through their paces while trying to make them find their own personal Eros and Agape. Oddly, the photos chosen were more of a showcase of the competitiveness between the two younger skaters than anything else.

The work-outs, the miles-long runs where the two of them chased after a bike-riding Viktor, the proverbial death-marches back to Yu-Topia where the younger duo was almost too exhausted to get back. There were even numerous photos from the time when Yuri had told the triplets that the training sessions were private and not to be shown online later, with half a dozen clips of both Yuris finding their ways flat onto the ice, heaving to catch their breath while Viktor laughed at them both.

"Still too average!" The old Viktor was telling them.

"Get up and try again or I won't do either of your programs! Don't forget!"

"That free leg is too loose, Yurio!"

"Too much energy! I gave you Agape, not Eros! Quit creeping on Yuri's theme! I'm not going to switch them!"

"Maybe you need the temple again...?"

"Noooo!" Yurio protested in the video, "If it's not up to par then just tell me!"

Viktor pat Yurio on the head affectionately, "Maybe you needed a repeat trip to the waterfall back then instead."

"...That was worse in its own way." The blond mumbled.

"Does everyone want to see the new program Yuratchka created?" Minako asked the audience, getting a raucous cheer in response, "What was that? Do you?" More cheering, louder than before, "I'm afraid I can't hear you..." The crowd roared, some kicking at the rink wall to add the hollow thumping of the arena to the clamor. Minako clapped, "That's more like it! You ready then?" She turned to the blond.

The young Russian nodded.

"Then let's have it for Yuri Plisetsky, debuting his new Short Program for the next season!" Minako announced.

Yuri and Viktor were clapping alongside the rest in excited anticipation.

Yurio just glanced around though, seeing how a lot of people in the audience were whispering amongst themselves, probably about what Minako was talking about given how he'd been dropped from the Russian Team, and hadn't yet been reinstated at that point. There was still a chance Yakov wouldn't take him back, and it made him incredibly nervous. He caught sight of Mikhail making his way through the crowd as he headed for the rink entrance though, and it helped him focus his mind away from the inaudible whispering.

Viktor and Yuri had suddenly pulled him into a group hug though, and he lost sight of the older Russian.

"This is going to be great!" He heard Yuri saying, "And what an appropriate theme!"
"Our little Yuri, never giving up! Bulldozing his way through the toughest obstacles to make it to the top!" Viktor added. It must've been a funny sight for the older Russian to have to bend over so far just to hug the both of them.

Yurio wasn't sure if he should answer to that, given that he'd already said enough to his Asian counterpart. The two of them finally pulled up though and beamed at him excitedly. Minako had already moved off to the rink side to give them a moment on the ice alone as a group, only to be bypassed by Mikhail as he went out to join them in her stead, awkwardly scuffling his way across the ice with his shoes.

Viktor quickly went out to skate around him, careful to watch for him to slip, only to not be needed. Mikhail stood defiantly upright despite the slippery footing beneath his feet, and did his best not to look uneasy about it.

"Time to show them what you're made of." The older Russian said with a smile, "Even though it hasn't been that long since everything changed, I think it already shows how much you've grown."

Yuri and Viktor had already started to pull away by then, heading over to where Chris and Phichit were watching from the side-lines. They all kept their eyes out on the pair standing in the spotlight, waiting for the show to start.

"What you and Katsudon did for me was more than I ever thought anyone would do." Yurio said quietly, barely audible over the continued clapping of the crowd, "I won't let you down."

"You're a soldier, just like your show tells." Mikhail nodded, "You've made it through the worst of the fighting, so now you can relax a bit before the next battle. Try to have a little fun, okay?"

"I never really thought of skating as a 'game.'" The blond said, looking down a little, "It's been so competitive and nerve-wracking that I saw it as more like a job than a sport to enjoy."

"Now's the time where you can stop doing that though." Mikhail suggested, "Especially here and now, where your career isn't on the line or being scored. This is family, friends, and fans today...no judges, no officials to pester you. It's just us having a good time."

Yurio nodded, suddenly becoming hyper-aware of his surroundings as they were pointed out to him.

...Calm down, calm down...he's right... This isn't a competition. I'm not going for grades here today. It's...like the Exhibition. The lights are down, I can't even really see the audience...it's just for...fun.

He slid forward a little and wrapped his arms around the thin older man, leaving him a bit speechless at the gesture. Even the audience was surprised to see it; Viktor and Yuri less so, but still partly.

"I've dedicated this program to you and Viktor and Katsudon." Yurio said, "You've all been my allies all along, even though I've made it so difficult for any of you to want to be. So...watch closely, okay?"

"We will. Do your thing, Yuratchka." Mikhail patted the teen gently on his head, and then moved away to shuffle back to rink-side.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Minako's voice could be heard overhead, "Yuri Plisetsky presents...'Soldier.'"
CHAPTER EIGHTY FOUR

Viktor had hopped back onto the rink wall, and Yuri settled in as well, standing with his back to the man and his arms over Viktor's legs. The Russian had busied himself with smoothing out where Yuri's hair had become a little unruly from the skating, and then settled them to cross over the younger man's chest, fingers slipping just inside the sky-blue lapels. Their eyes rose up to focus on the blond in the middle of the rink, waiting for him to give the cue that he was ready.

The younger Russian finally stopped fidgeting though, and he nodded over the Yuuko to start the music. She reached over with a small remote to hit Play, and a half-second later, the deep techno began.

['Inner Universe' - Origa. Note: I prefer the intro to the full version of the song, so the time-edits will cut off the repeating chorus and the weird middle-section interlude.]

Yurio pushed off with a burst of energy, flying to the left with the tails of his coat flaring out dramatically. He spun around a few times in sync with the ups and downs of the song's intro, moving his feet quickly in a brief step-sequence, then switching into a flying camel-spin as the lyrics began. He grabbed the blade of his left skate and pulled it up behind his head as he rose that leg up with it.

Angely i demony krujili nado mnoy
Rassekali ternii i mlechnye puti

He lifted both hands over his head as he let the blade go, but continued spinning around, stopping only to drop both arms down as he started to skate backwards in a wide loop, shrugging out of the long black coat as he went. When it finally fell off his shoulders to land in a pile close to the rink wall where he passed at that moment, the hidden part of his costume was finally revealed.

Black boot-covers rose up to meet grey military-style pants, a replica gun-holster around his right leg, ending with a black belt around his hips. From there up though was different. His upper body looked like a half-finished cyborg, with the red flesh of synthetic muscle playing contrast to panels of white that looked like a plastic chassis. There were segments along his back that looked like sockets for cables to link up, and a clever trick of the light made sections of his arms look like there were holes through them where portions of his robotic body were yet to be installed. It all ended at his collarbone, where from there up it looked like his neck and head were complete like the lower half of him.

Ne znaet schast'ya tol'ko tot,
Kto ego zova ponyat' ne smog...

He threw himself into a series of half-jumps as he 'skipped' across the ice, sliding into an outside spread-Eagle into his first jump as the first part of the chorus began.

Mana du vortes, mana du vortes
Aeria gloris, aeria gloris

Triple Axel, double flip combo, followed by a speed-skate backwards as he pulled out of it, spinning several times as his arms went from being out to his sides to being overhead.

Mana du vortes, mana du vortes
Aeria gloris, aeria gloris
He stopped suddenly to the 'quiet' part of the song, then stomped his right skate down as the lyrics came back with full force, launching forward into his second jump, a quad Salchow.

*I am Calling,*
*Calling out!*
*Spirits, I am calling!*

He quickly scissor-kicked through the air, camel-spinning across the ice after that before finally continuing the spiral in one spot, hopping from one foot to the other to energize the spin a second time.

*Soboy ostat'sya dol'she...*

He spun outward again, throwing himself into quad Toe-loop in time with the second thrum of the chorus.

*Calling, Calling, in the depths of longing!*
*Soboy ostat'sya dol'she...*

Viktor was entranced by the enthusiasm of the skate, thinking it suited Yurio as well as 'Welcome to the Madness' had after the Grand Prix Final. A thought crossed his mind as he watched the young teen continue on with the performance.

Yuri could feel the idea creeping through Viktor's mind just by the feeling it left in the man's fingers, where Yuri had them against his chest. He didn't have more than a moment to wonder what it was though before Phichit caught his attention, leaning in close over the railing so Yuri could hear him.

"Everyone's noticing the difference in the Russian Yuri's performance." The Thai skater said, "It's how they figured he would've performed at the Grand Prix Final or something. This isn't what people are expecting to see from someone who just lost their spot on their own country's team."

"There's more to what happened than just that." Yuri answered, leaning in over Viktor's leg so he could be heard as well, "Viktor and I ran into him at the airport the night we skipped the Banquet."

"But you guys said you didn't even know he'd been dropped by the ballerina who'd been choreographing his Free Skate. How'd you know about anything else?"

"We didn't. We only saw him after the call ended." Yuri explained, his eyes remaining on the blond even though he was talking, "I ended up talking to him alone after that and found out what happened only then."

His train of thought paused as he felt Viktor shifting behind him, and he stood upright as the man's legs crossed in front of him, careful of the extended part of the blades that went behind the heels of his boots, then finally relaxing again as they pinned themselves to the outside of his thighs. He leaned back into the man, bending his elbows so his hands dangled off the inside of Viktor's knees.

*Soboy ostat'sya dol'she...*

Yuri could feel that Viktor was talking to someone from how far back he'd suddenly been leaning, since the man's legs were wrapped around him to keep from falling off the other side of the wall. He turned his head around from where Phichit had inquired about what they'd talked about at the airport, only to see Mikhail there behind them, too far away to hear what either of them were saying. The look on Mikhail's face said enough though, since the man seemed somewhat surprised at whatever
Viktor had just mentioned.

"Yuri!" Phichit said, trying to get his attention back.

"Huh?"

"What'd he tell you?" He asked again, "About why he was cut."

"Momentary lapse of judgment and a few unkind words to the wrong people." The Asian skater answered, "We're hoping to get him reinstated though. Yakov said he was open to the idea but only if Yuri showed he was serious about making up for what happened."

"But nothing has happened on that end yet, right?"

The final part of the song was coming up, and Yurio had gone into his last set of signature spins.

"We got Viktor's uncle to agree to sponsor him for now, that way he can worry about his personal stuff rather than other things."

*Mana du vortes, mana du vortes
Aeria gloris*

Yurio had gone down to his knees with his arms reaching into the air...

*Aeria gloris*

...and then pulled them down to the top of his head before extending them down and out to the side.

The song was over, and he was panting heavily, but at least this time he felt good about his performance. The audience was cheering for him wildly, moreso than at Euros or even at Worlds.

...*Maybe it's just because this place is small and it feels so full.*

The roar was so loud that he couldn't hear the scratching of blades coming up behind him, and Yuri was able to tackle-hug him unexpectedly.

"K-Katsudon...?"

"That was amazing!" Yuri cheered, "I can't wait to compete against that next year!" He pulled off to let the teen finish catching his breath.

Yurio looked over to see Viktor skating to where he'd thrown his jacket to the ice. As the older Russian slung it across his arm, he came back around to center rink, clapping the whole way.

"Perfecto!" Viktor said happily, "But you forgot your phone was in here."

Yurio jerked, then reached for the pocket where he'd suddenly remembered putting the device, pulling it out to see if it was still operational. To his relief, it came on like normal. He then looked back up to the older skater, and bowed his head, "...If I can improve it at all, please tell me."

"Oh don't do that!" Yuri warned, waving his hands around frantically as he recalled how Viktor had picked his own performance apart the first time he'd done Eros at competition.

Viktor had a sinister gleam in his eye to match the grin on his face, but then pat Yurio on the shoulder to spare him for the moment, "I'll tell you later."
Yuri heaved a sigh of relief, watching Viktor pull the teen back towards the rink exit as Yuuko was coming back through it. She cheered him on as they passed each other, and headed back for the middle of the arena. She threw her free hand up into the air and spun around, "Yuratchka Plisetsky, everyone! Grand Prix Final gold medalist! Next year looks like it's already going to be crazy-interesting! I can only wonder what everyone else will do to match that!"

More cheering and whistling followed that, and Yurio finally let it lift his spirits. He slipped his arms back into his long coat and put his blade guards back on, eagerly anticipating the next segment of the between-skate display.

"The next skater on the ice is one of Yuri's long-time friends, Thai skater, Phichit Chulanont!" Yuuko announced, getting a new round of applause as the man in question peeled out of his track suit, scarf, and gloves to get onto the ice. He'd gotten ready before ever leaving the locker-room earlier in the day, just as Chris had started to before everyone ended up hiding in there. With blade-guards given to his long-time friend, Phichit skated out quickly, making long circles around Yuuko before finally standing with her in the stationary spot-light, "Happy early birthday, by the way!"

He bowed his head happily, "Korb kun krup!"

The screen from before was lit up again with a new set of images, mostly featuring from Phichit's vast library of photos on Instagram.

"You know, as a prolific selfie-photographer, it was really hard to go through all of your archive to find the best pics of you and Yuri from when you were in Detroit...I don't think the ones we picked in the end even come close to telling the whole story of the time you guys trained together!" Yuuko was saying, "So thank you for knowing exactly what pics would work best and digging them out for us! It would've taken weeks to get through it all ourselves!"

Phichit laughed, "Sure! I think I've already taken over a hundred pics in Hasetsu, too!" He was entirely unapologetic about his obsession.

The very first photo though wasn't a selfie. It wasn't even of Phichit himself. It was a photo taken of an extremely ill-prepared and entirely not-ready-for-a-photo Yuri. The older skater was trying his very first Coney Island hot-dog and had mustard, chili, and onion bits all over his face.

Yuri nearly died seeing it, "PHICHIT-KUN."

"Sorry!" The Thai skater laughed, "This was our first meeting though!"

"I didn't even realize you took a photo! You could've let me wash my face first!"

Viktor and the rest were in hysterics over it.

"It wouldn't have been as memorable!" Phichit called back.

"How old were you when that was taken, Yuri?" The Russian wondered, leaning against the rink wall near the doorway. He had his free hand up to wipe the tears of laughter from his eyes.

"...Like...21 or something."

"Yuri had already been skating under Ciao Ciao in Detroit for a couple years before I got there." Phichit explained into the mic, scrolling through a few other choice pictures from when they'd first become friends, "We were roommates to save money. As you can kinda see in the background..." Phichit was pointing at a small section of the back of the room, "...there's a big poster of Viktor."
"Aww." The Russian moved to gently pinch Yuri's cheek affectionately, "You took me all the way to Detroit with you."

"This video was priceless though..." Phichit added, letting Yuuko hit Play on the next part of the show.

"Phichiiiiiiit-kuuuuuuun! There he iiiiissssss!" Yuri was saying, his words slurred, sitting under a pile of blankets in front of their small television, "Can you believe he's here in the city for Skate America right now!? The skating rink is so close!"

"You sure you want to watch this while you're sick?" Phichit had asked, turning the camera around to show himself briefly as he laughed weakly at his friend's expense, then turning it back around to show Yuri looking right at him, gesturing at the television with both hands.

"You don't understand!" Yuri was saying, "HE'S RIGHT DOWN HIGHWAY ONE FROM HERE... Viktor freaking Nikiforov is practically IN OUR BACK YAAAARD."

"You have a horrendous cold and you're high on decongestants. You'll probably imagine he's talking to you next."

"I'm sick, **not** insane!" The older skater protested, "If I had been told to go to Skate America this year then I'd be there, too!"

"Not as you are."

"**Maybe I wouldn't BE** sick if things were different."

"Have you ever even said one word to Viktor when you **have** been around him?"

"...No." Yuri said sheepishly, pulling the blankets over him like a protective shield. He spun around after that, "**Next year!** I'll talk to him next year, if I see him! I swear it!"

Phichit went to Yuri's room and grabbed the framed poster from where it was sitting on a low-set shelf at the foot of Yuri's bed, went back out to the common room, and set it in front of his roommate, "Here."

Yuri grabbed it and hugged it to his chest under the blanket, "...He's gonna win gold again this year. I can feel it."

"...What year was that anyway?" Viktor wondered as the video cut off with Phichit shrugging with a smile in selfie-mode again, "Obviously not the one where we met..."

"No, that was two years prior...the same year Phichit got to Detroit. You were at Skate America and Cup of China that year, then at the NHK Trophy and Rostelecom Cup in the year between, and then at NHK again and Skate Canada when we did finally meet." Yuri answered.

"Ah, yeah, that's right." Viktor nodded, "Were you at any of them...? I don't remember even seeing your name on the list."

"I was at different qualifiers from you in all those years, and I didn't make the cut for the Final until the year we went to Sochi." The younger skater said, "I had all that time to work up the nerve to say hi to you, and I ended up freezing when you ended up being the one to start the conversation."

"It's always different to do things in reality than it is to imagine them." Viktor said, moving to step directly in front of his husband and slid his arms over the man's shoulders, peering slate blue eyes
down into hazel brown, "I know what that's like, too."

"...Well, it's probably a bit different for you, Viktor." The younger skater huffed to himself, "When have you ever been in a position where you were trying to work up the courage to talk to someone you idolized your whole life?"

"What, you think telling you I was going to be your coach wasn't nerve-wracking?" The Russian wondered, putting his forehead down to Yuri's, "That was probably one of the most anxious moments of my life!"

"...Why? It was...just me, practically no one..."

"To me, you were a lot more than no one, Yuri." Viktor reminded, "Ah if you could've heard the things I was telling myself before you came bursting out onto the deck of the onsen...!"

"Konnichiwaaaaa~!" Viktor said, standing in the entrance-way of Yu-Topia Katsuki, "I hope it's okay if I bring my dog here."

Yuri's father glanced past him to see the big brown poodle panting contentedly at the tall man's side, "Well, I don't see why not...but he can't go into the onsen!"

"That's okay! He can stay outside for now!" Viktor agreed, "This place looks really great! How much to stay for a while?"

By the time he'd gotten himself into the spring, most other patrons had already gotten out and went to eat in the common room, which was fortunate for him. He was sure that a skating town like Hasetsu would be familiar with him at least a little bit.

"Wow~!" Viktor said to himself quietly, looking around. He looked at the small towel in his hands and folded it before setting it onto his head happily, then finally stepping into the hot water.

'I haven't seen Yuri anywhere yet, but I don't want to just announce that I'm here, either.'

Viktor looked up as he heard the sound of what might've been an avalanche inside, then saw a door bursting open and a frantic black-haired young man in an oversized brown coat come rushing outside.

"Vik...Viktor...?" Yuri said, dumbfounded at the sight of him.

The Russian gawked right at him, almost as surprised, but then pulled the towel off his head and stood up.

'There he is. This is it. Be cool. Don't blow it by saying too much!"

"Yuri..." He started, "Starting today, I'm your coach. I'll make you win the Grand Prix Final." He did the wink for good measure, since most people responded to that well.

Yuri just kept staring in disbelief though, wordless as the huge red mask hanging on the wall behind him.

'...Did he hear me?' Viktor wondered, his hand still outstretched.

The Japanese skater finally cracked though, "EHHHHHHHHHHH!? "
Viktor just laughed and sat back down, gingerly folding the towel and setting it back where it was.

"...But that...why!?!" Yuri blurted, taking a hesitant step forward, further onto the deck, but staying well clear of the water's edge, "You...you just won your 5th consecutive gold at Worlds! Why would you...stop...?"

"What, you don't want me after all?" The Russian pouted, "And I came all this way, too..."

"Th-That's not what I meant!" Yuri protested, flailing his hands around, "You're a competitor though! If you're saying you're going to be here as a coach, then you..."

"...Will be taking a season off, that's right." Viktor nodded, moving through the water until he was closer to Yuri's side, then propping his elbows up onto the edge of the deck, resting his chin where his forearms crossed, "Is that okay? Yuri."

The wheels were turning in the younger skater's mind, but he couldn't find the clarity to say anything. His glasses just fogged up after that and he turned around, heading back for the door, and promptly running straight into it like he'd forgotten what direction it opened.

"...Yuri?"

'Have I scared him...? He's almost as speechless as he was after the last Final... What's the problem? You asked me to come! Why so quiet?'

"...I'm going to go shovel snow and think about what I've done with my life..." Yuri said flatly, escaping slowly through the men's changing room, and leaving the Russian to wonder what had just happened.

Viktor was a bit stunned, but then back-slid into the water a little until just his eyes were visible over the rocky ledge, 'What was that...? Such a cold response...I thought he'd be more excited. Was it because I didn't ask to see him straight away? Maybe he thinks I'm not serious.' He pouted a little, his brows furrowing...

...and then the door cracked open again, and Yuri was peering back at him.

"...Yes?"

"...N-nothing! I was just..." The Asian stammered, "...Making sure you were really there. You ARE really there, right?" His eyes narrowed since he wasn't sure, "Mom just woke me up, but maybe I fell back asleep or something..."

Viktor cocked an eyebrow, but then extended his right arm to lie straight along the deck, waggling a finger in a 'come hither' fashion. The younger man quietly slipped out through the door again, but stayed by it as it closed. Viktor waggled his finger again, and Yuri stepped a few nervous paces closer.

The Russian looked up at him from the onsen...then abruptly flung hot water straight at him without warning.

Yuri felt the water on his face, and rubbed it in surprise on the back of his sleeve as he stumbled backward, "Ah, what was that for!?"

"You're awake! See?"

He had to pull his glasses off to dry the water, but as he did so, seeing Viktor with just the nakedness
of his unobstructed eyes, he suddenly saw the man with more clarity than before. Yuri quietly
dropped down to his knees, Viktor’s eyes on him just as intent as his own were in return, "...You’re
really here."

Viktor nodded and smiled.

'And I’ll be here tomorrow, and the next day, and every day until you win gold at the Grand Prix
Final.'
Phichit's performance was just as well received as any of the others, with fans clapping and singing along. The brief interlude between his and Chris' presentation was filled with photos and funny videos of the antics Chris and Viktor had gotten to in more recent years, as well as some of the funny shots Chris had gotten at Yuri's expense. There was even a brief video of the three of them as a group, where Yuri had already been hanging out with the Swiss skater the day of the GPF Short Program when Viktor showed up, but Yuri was paralyzed by his nerves and didn't say a thing the whole time. Even when Viktor had made the effort to say hi to him and welcomed him to his first Grand Prix Final, all Yuri could do was squeak a nonsensical greeting and wave weakly before retreating.

Embarrassed, Yuri just buried his face against Viktor's chest, hiding from all the eyes that were so entertained by his historically crippling anxiety. Viktor patted him gently on the back to reassure him.

There was a short break after Chris skated to Intoxicated, as they gave Yuri time to go change into his Eros costume for the last performance of the day prior to the long intermission. It had already been several hours since the event started. The JSF had done its best not to be intrusive, switching from 'actual competition' mode to almost a documentary style of filming. They interviewed more fans than they did skaters, leaving them to their plans for the afternoon after hearing Yuri basically yelling at them to back off if they couldn't play nice.

Viktor followed the other skaters outside as they waited, pulling on his long-coat and gloves as they went. Just as they were about to get through the double-doors though, Minako, Yuuko, and Mikhail all jumped ahead of them and protested that they stay inside.

"I'm sure Yuri will be back out in just a minute! We don't want to keep him waiting right!?!" Yuuko asked frantically.

"There's nothing out there but a mob of fans anyway! You'll be stuck out there forever!" Minako pointed out; she wasn't lying on that part at least, since the group could see a good number of people waiting out there with umbrellas. A few had somehow seen them just inside the inner set of doors and were rushing forward to see them, only to be stopped by the locked outer doors. It would be easy to push them open from inside, but from outside, they couldn't be budged.

"Look, it's even starting to rain!" Mikhail added. He was shockingly unconvincing, even if what he said was true.

"...O...kay?" Viktor wondered aloud, but finally relenting and turning around.

Of the rest of the group, Chris was the only one who followed him. To Viktor's surprise, Yurio, Otabek, and Phichit were all allowed to pass through the doors without protest.

"...So it's just me that can't leave." The Russian said to himself, "They're up to something."

"If they're letting the others go outside, then maybe I can find out." Chris suggested.

Unfortunately, it appeared that Yuuko heard him, and she shook her head with a knowing smile, so the two sighed and went back into the rink proper. It seemed like forever that they were waiting on Yuri after that. The trio that had gone outside had come back already, and even had time to wade through the numerous fans that wanted their attention or photos. They inevitably only hurried their
return because Yurio was getting flustered over the questions about his spot on the Russian team, and it was mostly Otabek that ended those lines of inquiry by dragging Yurio away from them like back when he'd saved the teen from Yuri's Angels in Barcelona.

Viktor cozied up to Yurio and asked indirectly what he saw, but even then, the teen was so focused on what'd happened to him that he had nothing to say about any forbidden knowledge.

Phichit wasn't much more helpful, but that was because Viktor didn't really know him that well and wasn't sure how to approach a question like that to him.

Otabek was...well, Otabek. Viktor got as much information from him as one could get milk from a stone.

He resigned himself to knowing that he wouldn't know, so he went towards the locker room to see what the hold-up was. When he pushed the doors in from the entrance near the building's outer doors, he rounded the corner and was surprised to see Yuri there with his parents and sister, having a private conversation. Yuri spotted him, and the voices quickly died out.

"...Well, at least you've been ready this whole time." The Russian mused, pointing at the Eros costume, "But this is super awkward...sooooooo I'll just be going now." He pointed back towards the exit and ran for it.

"V-Viktor!" Yuri called back after him, though too late to give chase.

As Yuri came rushing out through the same doors, he was stopped by the sudden muffled shrieking of a familiar voice coming from outside. The skater turned his head and saw Minami there, plastered to the glass of the outside doors like a starfish against the inner panes of an aquarium, "...Minamikun!"

"YURI-KUN LEMME IN!" The teen begged.

Approaching quickly, his blade-guards thunking along the ground as he went, Yuri quickly opened the door and permitted the blond-haired youth within the inner sanctum. He even went so far as to step outside, not realizing the doors were locked from out there, and was quickly mobbed by several close-by fans who'd spotted him.

It was chilly outside, but after what his parents had told him, he couldn't help but want to look around. His attention was grabbed though by Minami yanking him back through the doors before too many people could get in the way. The fans that had gotten close were trying to peer inside, hands on the glass with disappointed looks on their faces.

Yuri bowed deeply in apology, "Sorry! The entire Ice Castle is already full to bursting with people! There's no more room! We'll all be coming outside in about half an hour though!"

That seemed to satisfy them for the moment, and they went back to looking at the event LiveStream on each others' phones.

The skater then finally turned and came back through the inner sliding doors, and was promptly mauled by the teen, "Yuri-kun! Why didn't you invite meeeeee!? I got the alert that the JSF was LiveStreaming an event and then it turned out to be this and AHHHHHHHHH!" He was too hyper, proverbially bouncing off the walls.

"Sorry!" Yuri apologized again, "We didn't actually intend for this to be such a public event. Viktor and I just wanted to do Duetto for the family, but then it turned into this whole thing. I hope you weren't traveling for too long."
"I got on a train as soon as I realized what was happening!" Minami explained as Yuri was pushing him towards the safety and quiet of the locker room, "My phone ran out of juice about half-way here though, so I don't know what I missed!"

"What was the last thing you saw?" The door closed behind them.

"Viktor was in the middle of his old Free Skate. What's happened since!?"

"Well, the end of that one, obviously...the Russian Yuri did his new Short Program for next year, and then Chris and Phichit-kun did their Short Programs from this past year. I'm about to go do mine, then there's a big break where everyone's gonna get kicked out for a little while. We'll pick up again after that with our Free Skates, and then Duetto at the very end."

"Oh good, I didn't miss it then!" Minami was super relieved, "I was so high up in the audience when you guys did it at Four Continents that it was hard to see! I was so happy to hear that Viktor had told the press that you were going to be doing it again once you got back! I just didn't know when! I really want to see it up close!" His eyes got wide, "CAN I SEE YOUR COSTUME!?"

"Oh, sure." Yuri nodded, moving over to the line of labeled lockers and pulling open the one that was earmarked for Duetto. He reached within to pull the hanger off its hook, and the clear plastic bag containing the outfit crinkled and rustled as it was moved out.

"WOOOOOOWWW!!" Minami spun around excitedly, "It's JUST LIKE VIKTOR'S!"

The older skater nodded, silently wondering where the man had run off to.

"I got to see your Gala performance from Worlds on TV!" The teen had continued, "It was so great to see you get vindicated! I can't believe I missed that you did it again here!"

"Viktor and I are making this place our permanent home-rink, so you can come visit anytime you want." The taller figure said, putting the costume back into its place within the locker before gently closing it. "I should probably get out there though. Everyone's been waiting a really long time since Chris got finished. There's going to be a whole new showcase before I do Eros, too."

"Let's go then!"

They came back out through the rink-side doors, and found the audience clapping Yuri's appearance.

"Took you long enough, Katsudon!" He heard Yurio chiding, "Get out there!"

"Yes, yes, I'm going...!" He said sheepishly, wading through the thin path that attendees had cut for him to the rink entrance. It was impossible to see over them, so it was only after he'd gotten to the doorway to get his blade-guards off that he spotted Viktor again, waiting for him alone in the middle of the rink.

The Russian spotted him and waved, still sporting a slightly awkward look on his face from earlier. Yuri saw his coat and gloves hanging over the edge of the rink wall, as the man had been too embarrassed by the previous encounter to go put his things away in the locker room. The crowd was starting to cheer again as Yuri set his first skate onto the ice, and then got louder as he started to move away from the wall, even picking up speed to playfully skate wide circles around his husband. He even went into a long outside spread-Eagle into his quad Salchow like he would in the actual program, and then finally went to join Viktor in the center with the stationary spotlight.

"Sorry about earlier." He said quietly, keeping Viktor's mic-hand down so it wouldn't pick up his words, "I didn't know they were going to come in there until they did."
"Everything's okay though?"

"Mh!"

The complete lack of hesitation or obfuscation in the shorter man's tone gave Viktor all he needed to know it was true, and he drew in a breath of relief, "That's good to hear. Let's get on with it then, okay?"

"Okay."

Viktor signaled to Yuuko after that, and the rink went slightly darker than before, with the horizontal lights on the far ends of the rink being turned off, leaving only the glow of the spotlights and the projector above them to illuminate the ice. Yuri went close to take hold of his husband's free hand, moving behind him like he was a bit nervous about what was to come. Without Yuuko or Minako with them though, it was even more anxiety-driving than anything else, since Viktor was...well, a genius that never stopped surprising him, no matter what it was.

"Next, we have the skater Katsuki Yuri, who's thought to be the next leader of men's singles in Japan. Please, show us."

The narrator's voice could be heard. The image of a particular pre-GP series interview started to fade into view, and Yuri recognized what it was immediately.

"That's Newscaster Morooka...at the unveiling." He said quietly to himself, seeing the footage of his past self hesitating with the white-board in his hands. Photos were being taken from all angles, half-blinding him in the process with the flashes.

"Uhm...please show us your theme for this year. Skater Katsuki?"

Yuri's face was flushed, but he finally moved, turning the white-board around as he set it against the podium.

'GRAND PRIX SERIES' the board read on the top left, and in the middle in a huge font, the Kanji for 'LOVE,' followed by the Kanji for his own name way down on the bottom right.

"My theme in this year's Grand Prix Series is 'love.'" He said, keeping his eyes low even as he spoke into the microphone, 'I've been helped by many people in my skating career thus far, but I've never thought about 'love' until now. Though I was blessed with support, I couldn't take full advantage of it. I always felt like I was fighting alone. But since Viktor showed up to be my coach, I've seen something totally different. My 'love' is not something clear-cut like romantic love, but the more abstract feeling of my relationships with Viktor, family, and my hometown. I was able to realize that something like 'love' exists all around me. Viktor is the first person I've ever wanted to hold onto! I don't really have a name for that emotion, but I've decided to call it 'love!' Now that I know what 'love' is, I'm stronger for it, and I'll prove that to myself with a Grand Prix Final gold medal!"

Yurio suddenly felt really awkward after seeing the footage, and hid behind the rink wall with nothing but his eyes to peer over the edge of it, grasping to it with his fingers.

Viktor gently squeezed his husband's hand before pulling his out of the man's grasp, and skated casually in a circle around him, tracing around the very edge of the spotlight's perimeter on the ice, "You didn't end up winning gold though, Yuri..." He started, making the younger figure feel a little guilty. He winked at the man, and then snapped his fingers, signaling for something else.

Yuri could hear the clatter of very tiny skates on the ice, and he quickly spotted the triplets skating all around him like cats underfoot, each one carrying one of his medals so Viktor could grab them and put them over Yuri's head one at a time.
“You won silver...” Viktor was saying, sliding the lanyard over that raven hair, "Which really wasn't so bad, considering you broke my Free Skate record in the process.” The next medal came up was gold though, and Viktor held it in his hand to look at it fondly, "You did win gold at Four Continents though. Your very first one at an international competition, and your first gold after I came on board as your coach.” He moved the lanyard up over Yuri's head to follow the first one, holding the disc in his fingers for a second longer to kiss it before letting it go to hang. He then reached down for the last of the three, "...and then, the biggest surprise since doing my quad flip at the end of the China Cup...Yuri, you won the gold medal at the World Championship, an event I myself was competing in...” He put the mic in Yuri's hand and then moved his arm up to hold it between them so he could get his own hand back again. He held the medal up by its lanyard and looked at his husband through the opening, "As your coach, your choreographer, and your husband...it was the proudest moment of my entire life. Winning gold myself was never so special as seeing you win it."

The younger skater's eyes were starting to well up as he heard the words. He had to lift his other hand up to hold the mic, and clenched his fingers around it like the device would just slip through his fingers like sand if he didn't.

"Never in my life, after all the years I'd been on the ice, or even in the years before that when I was hailed every day as this national hero of Russia, being an international gold medalist or champion, big-time winner this, ultra-champion that...world's most eligible bachelor and everything else...never once had I thought that sharing all that with someone would ever be possible. It was either a fan who couldn't see the world through my eyes and tried to control me...or a fellow skater who was already with someone else...or even another one who gave up too easily. Like you, I ended up believing that I was in this fight alone. The best I thought I could ever hope for was that maybe someone would appreciate me after I retired, and no longer had the lime-light on me as a distraction. I thought that would be the only time where I could trust someone to be honest with me. So I put everything and everyone at arm's length and focused everything I had on skating. My winning streak only started after I resigned myself to being by myself.” Viktor had lowered the medal by then and was just looking at his husband normally, his gaze slightly down-cast for their height difference, "But everything changed in Sochi, Russia. That Grand Prix Final of Tears. I saw you leave that event at the lowest possible point. Offering to take that photo was the first time you hadn't completely squeaked-out on me, and it broke my heart to see you so sad that you'd turn away without saying a single word. But I knew because of Chris that you weren't a miserable person all the time...and you proved that in spades after Ciao Ciao dragged you to the banquet that night. You danced, Chris danced, you and Chris danced, even the other Yuri danced, despite what I'd heard he'd done to you before then...and then...we danced."

The projector had slowly gone through the Banquet photo album to show the specific photos Viktor had mentioned, and he idly looked over at the screen with the gold medal still in both of his hands.

“Viktor... After the season ends, my family runs a hot springs resort, so please come! If I win this dance-off...you'll become my coach, right? Be my coooooach, Viktoooor!”

The words echoed throughout the silent arena as the footage played for all to see.

The video ended, and Viktor turned back to where Yuri was trying not to cry. He quietly moved in a little closer and placed the gold medal around the man's neck, still holding his fingers around the lanyard even as the medal hung down just above the other two.

"I can't even count how many times since that night that I've fallen in love with you, Yuri." He said, "Every single day, I wake up with you next to me, and I wonder how I'd ever been so lucky. Every time I see you skate, I'm in awe of how far you've come, and it makes me so incredibly happy to have had the honor and privilege of helping you get there. Every time you glance around at the
world with that special look in your eyes, like you're looking for something...I realize just how much I want to protect and cherish you. Is it even really appropriate to use a word like 'love' to describe how I feel for you?" Viktor wondered, "I feel like there isn't a word strong enough to describe it. So, like you, I've settled to call this feeling 'love' for lack of knowing what else to do with it..."

Yuri was failing the fight to hold his tears back, and a few fell down his cheeks. Viktor just smiled at him though, and raised up his right hand to dry some of them away with his single-gloved finger.

"We went all the way back to Barcelona to say our wedding vows." He continued, his hand staying there on Yuri's face, "And every day since has been the best of my life, even when some of them were the absolute worst of my life. You were there. You were my rock to lean on, my pillar to hold me up, my sanctuary of warmth and peace to shelter me. You've been everything I thought I would never find, and best of all, you were able to share the journey with me as an equal, not as someone I was dragging behind me."

Most people in the audience were already misty-eyed as they listened to the Russian's declaration, but none moreso than Yuri himself.

"So for the rest of our lives, Yuri, and into the next...Stammi vicino."

The younger skater nodded, "St...stamm...vi...cin..." He couldn't even say all the words, his throat too sore for it. He leaned forward to wrap his arms around his husband's chest, clinging to him tightly as he started to cry freely.

Chris was crying...Phichit was crying...Minami was literally sobbing...Yuri's parents were crying, even his sister...Minako, too, and Yuuko as well. Pretty much everyone was crying. Even Yurio, who did his best to hide it where he was still lowered behind the rink wall. Not even the JSF reporters were immune from the outpouring of emotion. They could only wonder how many people across the world were bearing witness to what was happening at that moment. Other media folk that had been hanging around were rolling cameras and snapping photos as well, loving every second of it.

Yuri finally came up for air after a while, as Viktor had rocked him back and forth slowly and gently while he cried himself out. His eyes were red and his voice hoarse, "...H...How am I...supposed to do...Eros when you...when you've gotten me like this?"

"I expect you'll do the best you can." Viktor smiled, leaning down to kiss that man in front of everyone.
CHAPTER EIGHTY SIX

Even after the kiss, it took another few minutes before Yuri could breathe normally again. The other skaters eventually came out onto the ice alongside the couple to show their support, and they skated around as a group for a little while.

Minami was spazzing internally to be surrounded by so many international athletes.

The 30 minutes Yuri had guesstimated for the outdoor fans had gone by without much progress, but Viktor wouldn't let him go until he was sure he'd make it.

"I think I'm okay now..." Yuri whispered, holding to the Russian's front, skates dragging along the side as Viktor carried him along in reverse, "...Maybe I should skate Agape instead though." He tried to laugh, snuffling against the back of his arm.

Viktor turned his face slightly to look at him, "Do you even know the moves? I've never seen you practice it."

"I practiced it a few times when I was struggling to figure out what Eros meant to me, and I've seen it enough to know the rest." The younger skater pointed out, "I just don't have an Eros bone in my body right now. You turned me entirely to mush."

The Russian nuzzled his cheek a little as they came slowly around the shorter end of the rink, the others in tow behind them, "I could always help get you in the mood."

Yuri snorted, wondering if anyone close by had heard the man, his face red at the possibility. Seeing no one glancing at him with a knowing expression told him it had been said too quietly, so he looked back at Viktor sideways again, "...I'm already on the ice, it'd be weird to take off and come back."

"My loss, I guess." Viktor sighed.

"Mine, too."

The idea had given Yuri something to chew on though, and he found himself twisting around to skate forward on his own after that, taking Viktor by the hand and then reaching for Yurio's wrist before heading to rink-side where he knew Yuuko was watching.

"K-Katsudon, what are you...?" Yurio protested in confusion.

Viktor followed along quietly, wondering if his husband was serious. When Yuuko came up to have Yuri whispering into her ear, the look on her face said it all, and she nodded before twisting away to get through the crowd again, taking Yuri's medals with her for safe keeping. Yuri just dragged the two of them back out to the center of the rink after that, letting Yurio go about 10ft to his left, and pushing Viktor another 10ft further away. The other skaters were a bit confused, but Yuri gave them a nod and they went to rink-side to make space.

"What the hell is going on?" Yurio asked again.

"Agape. The three of us, together." Yuri finally answered.

"A-Agape!?" The blond was stunned, "But you're supposed to do Eros!"
Yuri just smiled, and he took position just after Viktor already had, leaving the youngest of their trio to follow-up last incredulously. The audience realized what was going on soon after that, but their yearning to cheer and clap was cut off by the angelic sound of Agape starting to play overhead.

*Sic mea vita est temporaria, cupit
ardenter caritatem aeternam*

It was strange to see three people on the ice doing the same program together, especially since all three of them had wildly different outfits. Viktor still with Aria, Yuri with Eros, and Yurio with the Soldier costume...none of them looked particularly in tune to the theme of the song.

Yuri was surprised how quickly his memory of the program came back, and he was able to keep up with Viktor and Yurio easily enough, even as they came into the first major jump, the triple Axel. Viktor, never to be outdone if he could help it, turned his into the quad Axel just for fun, but neither of the other two skaters saw it while in the midst of the jump themselves.

*Credam, dabo, sperabo, honorabo
laborabo, gratias agam!*

All three leapt into the flying sit spin with flare.

By the time it was over, and the trio had their hands clasped and raised to the rafters, Yuri felt he was finally over the previously overwhelming flood of emotion. Channeling it through Agape was exactly what he needed...part of him even wished he'd let Viktor watch it instead of participating, just to hear what he had to say about it. The crowd cheered, and Yurio quickly fled back to the safety of the rink wall, having entirely not expected to ever do that program again.

The older skater just waved as he went, "Thank you, Yuri!"

Viktor regained his attention, puffing to catch his breath, "Feel better now?"

"Enough so." Yuri nodded, holding to both of the man's hands where they stood facing one another, "I think I'll manage."

"Do you want to take a quick break before you do Eros though? Two shows back to back..."

"It's only a little longer than a Free Skate would've been. There were only two quads in Agape and only two more in Eros...I should be fine."

"What about water? Are you thirsty? I haven't seen you eat or drink anything in a while..."

"Viktor!"

The Russian just looked at him, but then gave an uneasy smile, "If you faint again, I'll never let you hear the end of it."

"It's fine! I promise!"

"All right...all right..." Viktor relented, pulling up Yuri's hands to kiss them and then stroke his hair, "Don't forget yourself. I'll be waiting."

The younger skater nodded and watched him go, heading back to rink-side to watch the last event...
before the intermission. Yuri could feel his stomach growling though, and realized quickly that Viktor had a point.

I can get through this...it's just 150 seconds... An incredibly energetic, tense, passionate 150 seconds...

"GANBAAAAA, YURI-KUUUUUUUUUN!"

"What was all that about?" Chris asked as Viktor returned to his perch, handing the man back his phone and a water bottle for good measure, "I've never seen Yuri to that show before."

"Yuri momentarily lost his Eros and found Agape instead, it seemed. Did you record it?"

"On your phone? No, it was locked. I'll send you mine."

"Okay." Viktor nodded, unlocking the device for just that purpose, then turning his head back up to face the center of the rink where Yuri was getting himself psyched for the change of pace, "This Eros may be pretty subdued compared to normal, maybe even pretty close to the first time he did it here, back when he was still picturing katsudon as motivation."

"It's funny to think there was a time where that's what he had to do. He was such an innocent." Chris laughed, "Look what you've done to him, Viktor."

"With pleasure."

True to Viktor's prediction, Yuri's Eros was rather placid compared to when he'd done it at Worlds. Only other veteran skaters could really tell though. The program was still flawless in every other way, it just lacked the special flair that Yuri had learned to show since Rostelecom, when he'd blown a kiss to the judges to 'intimidate' them. There was no one to intimidate in Hasetsu though...that was his turf. So when the spicy guitar music finally came to its conclusion, and Yuri stood defiantly in the middle of the rink with both arms up around him, he knew it was safe to show weakness. He flung his arms out to the side and slid backwards to lie down and catch his breath, much like Phichit had done at the end of the Cup of China.

He was heaving breaths as the audience cheered, but all he could do was splay out spread-eagle on the ice and look up at the lights shining down on him. He did his best to wave but his strength had left him and the arm dropped again comically.

He heard the scratching of blades, and Viktor was looking down on him soon after that, "Well?" The man asked, the knowing smile on his face.

"...Maybe...I'm a little hungry..." He finally admitted.

"That's it then for the first half of the day!" Yuuko's voice resonated around the arena, "We'll pick thing up again in about three hours!"

The audience was clapping as they watched Viktor hoist Yuri back up onto his blades, and even idly skated around a little bit with Yuri on his back as rink-side cleared out. When enough people had gone, the old prep room where Yuri and Yurio had been waiting during the Hot Springs on Ice event was finally opened, and the immediate family and friends that had originally intended to be the only guests were finally allowed in. Yuri had even granted Minami permission to stay, despite his unexpected arrival and late showing. The Nishigori clan had pointed out that Minami had been at Yu-Topia Katsuki during one of their Public Viewings during the Grand Prix and was welcome to stay regardless.
"Well, that's a relief then...I was worried I was the only person you knew here." The older skater said, queuing up with the rest to get in through the small doorway.

Yuuko and Minako had changed by then, and busied themselves with helping divvy out the food. Yuri wasn't going to wait anymore though, and he flew along the line grabbing a bit of everything he could. No one argued with him though, as he was hungry enough to want to eat despite still being in full costume and with his skates still on.

With said skates though, it was impossible to sit at any of the tables that had been set up, since the skates pushed his knees up too high and jammed them into the underside of the horizontal plane, so he reluctantly took his food back out to rink-side to eat at one of the benches out there.

Viktor sat with him, but was waiting to change before eating, spending his time watching the video Chris had sent to him. The other skaters soon followed suit, but most had their track-suit coats with them to guard their outfits, so they were less willing to put off the feasting. Yuri was desperate though, and shoveled food as quickly as he could...but carefully. By the time he was done with Round 1, he felt 150% better than before though, and sensed his energy coming back.

"I'm going to go change then before I go back in there. I'm still starving!" He announced, quickly heading off to the locker room to do just as he'd said.

"You probably should too, Viktor, if you want to eat anything other than crumbs." Chris pointed out.

"Mh. We'll both be right back, then. Save us something if we take too long."

The Swiss skater nodded and watched the man hop up to his blade-guard to chase after his husband. Phichit was taking photos all around them and hardly noticed the pair had left.

Yuri had already been getting the laces undone on one of his skates when the sound of the door echoed through the room, followed by a soft click, the slow but steady succession of thunk-sounds as blade-guards stepped past, followed by a less audible click, and more thunking. Yuri had finally managed to get the skate off, and set that foot over the opposite knee to rub the soreness out of it a little. Only a second or more passed before he felt Viktor leaning against his shoulder dramatically.

"You know, for never having done Agape in front of others before...that was actually pretty decent." The Russian said, "Maybe you could do it properly as one of your Exhibitions at the GP Series next season."

"Nah...Agape was Yurio's thing. I think I should move away from doing other peoples' material, or even historical ones of my own." Yuri shook his head, "It was fun though while it lasted."

"What were you thinking about?"

"As if you have to ask." Yuri taunted, turning his head to glance at the man, "What else could I have thought of other than the big speech you just gave? I don't even know how I'm going to be able to top that later." He turned to set his skateless foot back on the ground and sat up straight, holding a hand up as though getting ready to give his own speech, "Yeah so I know this guy and his name is Viktor and we do stuff like skating and that's all pretty dandy. Heeyyyy time for him to do Winter's Wish! Ta-ta~"

Viktor laughed at the thought of it as he leaned down to rest his head on Yuri's open lap, looking up at him, "How underwhelming...we do more stuff than just skating."

The younger skater's cheeks flushed at the mention of it, but he settled his hand on the man's chest all the same, "That's not for their ears though."
"Just leaving it to their imaginations then?"

"Mh."

"What about when you did Eros?" The Russian continued, smiling the same way he had when he'd pointedly asked why Yuri was eating katsudon when he hadn't won anything the previous year. "Forgive me for saying so, but it was a bit limp."

Yuri's expression was priceless as he heard the man going into a too-fast-to-understand explanation of all the things that seemed lackluster; a mixture of deadpan, horror, embarrassment, and resignation to the truth. He held his head low when Viktor finally stopped, "Sumimasen."

Viktor just smiled, lacing his fingers together over his chest as he crossed his skates at the end of the bench, "I suppose I could forgive you."

"...You suppose?"

He nodded and then abruptly pulled up, swiveled around where he sat on the bench so he was facing the younger skater and settled one skate on either side of the bench, and then leaned ahead to set his chin on Yuri's shoulder, "We have a 3 hour gap."

"Part of it is spoken for."

"...Oh?" Viktor's one-track mind had suddenly gotten unexpectedly derailed, "How so?" His expression changed from excited to dour in half a second flat.

Yuri just laughed at his expense, "Wow, that killed you just now, didn't it?"

The Russian sighed dramatically and leaned back after that, holding himself up where his fingers curled around the edges of the bench behind him, "Are you in on their plans?"

"...In on their plans? What do you mean?"

"...Hm, maybe not then."

"Viktooooorrr..."

"They wouldn't let me leave earlier. I thought maybe you and your family were up to something when, after that, I came in here and saw you guys talking." He answered, "You all got so quiet in such a hurry, I thought I'd walked in on something I wasn't supposed to hear."

"They just didn't expect anyone to come in!" Yuri tried to explain, "They actually said they'd planned on finding you next anyway, which is half the reason I went after you. You were gone like smoke though...don't know how you escaped so quick."

"It's a trick you learn to avoid the skating paparazzi." Viktor explained, his eyes moving down as he felt Yuri's hand on his leg. He wasn't sure what it meant just yet, so he glanced back up again, "You'll learn it this coming year, I'll wager."

"Is that how you avoided the RSF when we got back to St. Petersburg after Four Continents and Worlds?" Yuri wondered, the hand slowly starting to move up, then stopping half-way.

"Well, no one would've been there after Four Continents." Viktor said, trying not to be too blunt, "But after Worlds? Absolutely. Why do you think I booked the red-eye? I've skipped out on the airport ambush for years now...they know not to bother coming anymore. I make it too annoying.
They have to wait until a few days later to tag me."

Yuri pulled the hand back to hold it over his mouth dramatically, "What!? Viktor Nikiforov avoiding
the press!? What sorcery is this!?"

The Russian smirked, but then moved to blow away some of the bangs that had come undone from
where they'd been styled above his eye, "I know, I know...it's shocking. But yes, even I avoid the
media mob sometimes, especially after I've been cramped into an economy-class seat with Yakov.
Yurio sometimes ditches, too, when he spots Yuri's Angels waiting for him."

The whole thing suddenly caused a dawn of realization to rise in Yuri's mind, "The Russian skating
people never contacted you after Worlds...did they? You didn't get interviewed or anything."

Viktor's face suddenly went pale as he realized the same thing, "...I don't think they called. Yakov
didn't mention it either. AHHHHH!" He was sitting upright with both hands on his head, "Did they
decide not to after I won silver instead of gold!? The newspaper article we saw..."

"Viktor."

"...Maybe they were all too disappointed in me to want to bother talking...did they blow off Yurio,
too!? They would've wanted a comment from him after hearing he'd been dropped from the team
and..."

"Viktor."

"...Or maybe they did reach out and I just wasn't paying attention because of everything else that
happened, and now I've moved to Japan where they can't easily get to me!? Maybe there's another
huge crate of mail that I've ignored somewhere!? Did I forget to check before we left St.
Petersburg!?"

"VIKTOR..."

"Do they hate me now!? I have to call Yakov and find out what happened! This is so unusual!
They've never forgotten to call me in for an interview after a big skating event, even before my
winning streak starte-"

He had already grabbed his phone and pulled up his former coach's name in the contact list when he
found himself abruptly cut off. Yuri had turned slightly on the bench and grabbed him with both
hands gently behind his neck, and yanked him forward like he'd once done with one of his ties, lip-
locking him for lack of knowing what other way to make him stop talking. Viktor's eyes were wide
open in surprise, but soon, his phone was forgotten, and Yuri deftly pulled it from his hand, setting it
as far behind him as he could before rising up to lift one leg over the bench to match how his
husband was sitting. The sudden kiss went on, and Viktor finally relented under it, lifting his arms to
rest them over Yuri's shoulders as he felt the man's hands against his sides, slipping in under the
sheer magenta fabric of his competition coat.

Yuri was inching closer every few seconds. Viktor could feel where his partner had moved one leg
over his own, and then the other, sitting close on his lap as he kept up the passion of the kiss. Yuri
was soon pushing him down to his back, only finally pulling away from the man's mouth when he
felt he could go down no lower

Viktor just tried to catch his breath, still a little taken aback by the sudden move.

The younger man just looked down on him, a bit winded as well, "...It...it was all I could think of...to
get you to stop worrying."
"...What was I worrying about again?"

"Nothing important." Yuri finally had the true Eros look on his face again, "What are you thinking about now?"

Even Viktor's cheeks were flushed when he heard the question, "...How much I want you right now."

"We have some time."

"You said it was spoken for."

"Only the last 2 hours."

"Ah...no, my jacket! Outside on the rink wall!"

"...What about it?"

"I have some of our stuff in it!"

"...You were planning on this?"

"There was a scheduled 3-hour intermission. Weren't you?"
Chapter 87

CHAPTER EIGHTY SEVEN

Viktor unlocked the door and cracked it open, but it was hard to tell through just a few inches of clearance if it was safe to run out and get his coat without being seen. Yuri just went by him and pushed the whole door entirely open.

"Why are you trying to be sneaky? Just go get it!"

"We've been in here this whole time and the furthest either of us has gotten to changing has been you taking off a single skate. It'll look suspicious." Viktor explained, "Oh, there it is..."

Yuri stuck his head around the door frame, and saw where Viktor was pointing...it was close to where the others were still loitering with their food, "There's nothing suspicious about getting your coat."

"What if they ask questions?"

Yuri moved his eyes up to gawk at the man where he was higher up on the door, but then pushed out and made a break for it, even without a skate on the other foot.

"Y-Yuri!??" Viktor called out, half-wondering if he should chase after him.

Everyone in earshot was glancing towards the rink wall, wondering what was going on; Viktor scrambled back behind the door. Half of the group openly asked about what was going on, but Yuri wasn't stopping to answer them, hobbling along awkwardly to grab the jacket and gloves from where they'd been left, and then high-tailed it right back the way he came.

"Yuuuuri!" His mother's voice suddenly rang, making the young skater stop dead in his tracks as he turned his head to look back.

"...Y-Yes?"

She was standing there by the door to where the mini-banquet had been set up, "What are you doing that's taking so long? Viktor hasn't gotten to eat anything yet and we have to get moving soon! They aren't going to wait all day!"

"...They??" Viktor repeated to himself curiously, fingering his chin as he listened from where he'd cracked the door a little, "Does she mean the fans that got stuck outside? We don't have anything specific planned out there though..."

"W-We'll be back out soon, I promise!" Yuri stammered, "We just got distracted! Viktor was just telling me what he thought of our Agape earlier! You know how it goes..."

"Well, hurry up then! You can talk all about Adepi later tonight!" Hiroko shooed him along, "I'll just put something aside for Viktor before all these vultures eat everything."

"Sankyuu~! Okaa-sama~!" Viktor waved at her happily.

It was enough of a distraction that Yuri was able to get back in through the door without any other interruptions, and Viktor quickly pulled in after him, quietly pushing the door closed and locking it again with a soft click.
Yuri was already rifling through the coat's pockets, trying to find whatever Viktor had brought, but finding his search fruitless, "See? No big deal."

The Russian was silent as death, even with the thunking of his skate-guards, and he quickly snatched the coat from his husband's grasp with one hand, wrapping the other around his back to pull him close, "Don't worry about it for now. I know where it is." He was practically looming over the shorter figure, with Yuri having put his weight on the skate-less foot, so Viktor was easily 5 or 6 inches taller while still wearing both of his. He tossed the jacket onto a nearby bench, only to look back and find Yuri rising up onto his blade-guard to slide both arms over his shoulders.

Things seemed to slow down quite a bit after that. The urgency had faded away like fog in the rays of the dawning sun. All Yuri wanted to do was hold onto his husband for a while, keeping his arms wrapped around Viktor's shoulders, feeling Viktor's own arms coming around him after that to return the gesture. The Russian seemed to feel the change in the air as well, and said nothing to break that unexpected silence.

Yuri drew in a deep breath, turning his eyes against the taller man's bare neck, "...Where...did you come up with all those things you said earlier?" He asked quietly, "How long did you...?"

"You'd laugh if I told you." Viktor answered quietly, lightly kissing his partner's neck.

"I won't."

Slate eyes a little towards him, but then reached up one of his hands to stroke his hair, "It came to me only while I was out there."

"...But, the video clips...?" Yuri pulled away just enough to set their foreheads against each other, "You planned that much, didn't you?"

"A lot of it was on the fly, honest." The Russian answered, "It was easy enough for the girls to find the clip of the Pre-GP interview, and I had sent them the Sochi album ages ago, so they could pull the pics they liked to make them huge... After everything the others had already said, I knew I had to say something, too. My Uncle was standing nearby when I thought about it, so I asked him to put in a word with Yuuko and her kids to help me out."

"So that's what they were talking about..."

"I know you get a bit stage-fright though, so I don't expect you to have some big speech of your own to make later." Viktor continued, lifting half-lidded eyes to look into the hazel irises already looking back at him, "Inspiration hit me like a train at the time though, so I went with it."

"...You really came up with that all on the spot." Yuri repeated, almost unbelieving.

"More or less."

"Hmph..."

He's a genius that's always surprising me...

"Does it bother you...?" Viktor wondered abruptly, jamming Yuri's train of thought, "You almost sound as though you didn't like what you heard."

"I'll be thinking about it for weeks." Yuri huffed and lightly shook his head, "You'd just laugh if I told you why."
"Try me. You've got me curiously worried."

The younger figure paused a moment to gather his mind again, but then sighed and lowered his arms off of Viktor's shoulders, trailing his fingers down the man's arms until they pulled his half-gloved hands from behind his back, "This whole afternoon has just...really put into sad perspective that I've practically been infatuated with you since before I even knew what the word meant. I think about how it must look to anyone who's seeing it from the outside, and I wonder...does it seem normal? Am I just some fan like millions of others...or was it an unhealthy obsession? I mean...I had posters of you all over my bedroom walls, got a dog like yours and named him after you... I was skating long before I'd ever heard your name for the first time, but...I don't think I ever would've taken it half so seriously if I hadn't made it my mission to compete against you one day. To meet you one day. And yet...even with all these stupid videos everyone's been laughing at all day, showing how I've been chasing you for literally half my life...you...barely even knew I existed till Sochi, and that was only because I made a fool of myself."

Viktor listened quietly.

"I always feel like only half of me is really here." Yuri admitted, "The other half is still just...watching from behind someone else's eyes, too terrified to believe this is all real, to speak up, or do anything with the gifts I've been given. It's the half that's always asking what you ever saw in me. You could've had anyone in the world that you wanted, but you...chose me." His right leg was starting to get tired from holding his whole weight up, so he finally lowered himself back down to the skate-less foot to take a break, sliding further away from his partner in the process, "We probably exchanged ten words before that Banquet, and most of mine were probably unintelligible. I wouldn't have given someone like me a second thought, never mind all the things you did."

"It's not like I couldn't tell you were nervous around me." Viktor finally said, "I'd seen you skate, and I'd seen you interact with other people...I knew you were different. It all came to a head in Sochi, that's all. I saw that look in your eyes when I asked if you wanted that commemorative photo, and it was the first time you really looked me in the eyes without panicking. You were...above all, embarrassed, sure, but there was more to it than that. Even though we had no connection then, I got this feeling like you thought you'd somehow let me down, and I felt horrible about it. Then that time we were on the beach, you basically said that was the case; how you ignored me so I wouldn't see your shortcomings. But I've seen all that now..." He leaned down to kiss the top of his husband's head, "...I've seen all of it. Your hopes and dreams, the things you want, the things you're scared of...I've seen every part of you; body, mind, heart, and soul...and I've done my best to be a part of it. I just hope that the person still hiding deep inside you, the part that I can't seem to reach, gets what he needs the same way the part you show to the world does."

Yuri was taken aback by those words, just as much as he had been by the ones spoken on the ice, and he had no idea what to say in response. It wasn't enough for him to cry, but he still felt his heart skip a beat.

"...But, that's all a moot point anyway, I guess. I told you once not to question why I love you, because I can't explain that. I just do. So...if you don't mind, we have maybe 20 minutes left, and my love for you is only occasionally matched by my lust, and one of those occasions is now."

Yuri's face went immediately red, dragging him out of his previously somber thought-process and into an entirely different world in half a second flat. He didn't even register the 10 or so feet Viktor had pushed him until he felt the cool of the locker doors against his back, shocking his senses through the sheer fishnet segments of the Eros outfit. Kisses were lathed across his lips, fingers were rising up his chest and roaming through his hair. His mind was trying frantically to catch up, but his body was moving on its own, eager and desperate for the caresses.
...That's what happened... Yuri thought, feeling his husband's tongue in his mouth, one of his legs coming up between his own, Viktor didn't just create two opposing themes for the Short Program... He practically named the opposing feelings inside me. In other people, it's more balanced...but in me...Eros and Agape are constantly fighting for control...

'I don't need you to be any of that. I just want you to stay the way you are.'

Yuri could feel a part of himself sinking away to the back of his mind. A part that didn't want to see what was going on, or to feel it. The part that always made him see Viktor as a figure of myth, as untouchable, unrelatable, too perfect for this world. The part that always made him doubt Viktor's love, and question his own self-worth...the part that made him fall on the ice.

"...Philos..." He said quietly, feeling Viktor's mouth against his neck, half sucking, half kissing.

The Russian paused though, lifting his face a little, trailing the tip of his nose along Yuri's cheek as he went, until one slate-blue eye was looking at the man, "...Philos?"

"The third love." Yuri explained as well as he could despite the sensory overload, "The one that makes me look out from behind the eyes of others. The ones that loves you as my best friend and coach. That's the one that runs and hides when Eros takes over."

Viktor just gawked at him, but then smiled and pressed in closer, pushing his thigh against his partner's center, "Then what about the fourth?"

"...Storge..." Yuri mumbled, "Love for the thing that brought us to the same place...the love for our sport."

"And which am I with now?" Viktor wondered, his hand roaming down his husband's chest and side, coming to rest on his hip.

Hazel eyes half-lidded, looking into the calm blue in front of them past loose strands of black hair, "Moving from Agape to Eros, one kiss at a time."

"Not fast enough, I can tell. I'll have to try harder."

"Hah...?" Yuri deadpanned him in confusion, only to find himself abruptly flipped around, chest and arms pressed against the locker door that his back had been against a second before. Viktor was against him a heartbeat later, spooned against his curved back, left arm snaking around under Yuri's torso to help hold him up as the other crept under the half-skirt panel to grab the man's thigh. Yuri paused for a moment as he adjusted to the switch, lifting his head as he felt Viktor's hand creeping up his chest and under his neck, fingers deftly placed under his jaw as the man himself came up behind him, whispering against his ear.

"And now?"

No words need be said. The transition had been finished. Yuri's cheeks were flushed, but he moved his hips back against Viktor's, and as he turned his eyes just enough to look back at him, Viktor got the message loud and clear.

"That's it. That's what I like to see~" The Russian purred, both hands suddenly moving down to grab the younger man by the crook of his hips and pulled him back, making him feel every inch. When he let out a half-hesitant but still-vocal breath, Viktor knew he had him. He pressed his forehead against the upper part of Yuri's back and started rolling his own hips, keeping his left hand on that still-clothed waist as the other found their way inside the layers.
He found that Yuri was already half ready for him. A few deliberate strokes finished it. More vocal breaths, even a few gasps, encouraged him to go faster. Viktor could almost feel where Yuri was starting to push back against him, though it was hard to tell for sure when he was losing ground against the locker doors. Where once he'd been tilted up against them, Yuri had slid down to nearly horizontal, arms crossed to rest his forehead against them as he tried not to let his legs give out under Viktor's attention. His skate-less foot had gotten weak against the floor, standing on tip-toes until he felt the Russian's bare skin against his center. After that, he moved it up and actually used Viktor's own skate for leverage, standing on the toe to hold himself up.

Viktor's left hand moved from Yuri's waist to join the other underneath the form-fitting black fabric, but went up to touch his chest instead of down to join his right around Yuri's center. Viktor pushed his hand up against him to make him stand a bit more vertically, only to withdraw his hands entirely.

Yuri turned his head in confusion, wondering why without saying so, but realizing they were just moving spots again. Viktor had already set one of his blades to the other side of the bench as he reached for his partner's hand to guide him over as well, wordlessly encouraging him to sit the same way but facing him. Yuri was quick to do as bid, but instead of just setting himself down on the bench, he waited until Viktor was already there and then slid in to sit on his lap, arms up over Viktor's shoulders as he slid down the front of his body, kissing him all the while.

It was a bit easier to move after that, and Yuri took full advantage, rising up and down slowly against the Russian's hips several times. It was music to his ears to hear the man's ragged breaths against his ear, even feeling the slight clenches where his pale hands clutched to his sides, holding him tight to add his pressure to the grind.

Yuri laced his fingers through Viktor's silver-grey hair as they kissed again, thoroughly relishing in how he was one of the only people on the planet to be able to mess it up after it had been styled so perfectly for a show. Maybe even being the only person. He didn't want to ask right then, though. It didn't matter.

Viktor Nikiforov is mine. I'm the only one who will ever hear these sounds or see these sights of him again.

His last slide down took him further than before, and his hands followed after, trailing down the Russian's neck and the open part of the white shirt. He looked down only long enough to watch his fingers play with and then unclasp the golden cords that came across his abdomen, letting them hang to the side so he could undo the small, well-hidden buttons on the front of the shirt.

Blue eyes watched intently, almost unblinking, not wanting to miss a microsecond of the sight in front of them. Viktor drew in a hissed breath and leaned back a little as he felt Yuri's cold fingers against his skin, sliding in under the fabric as he leaned into him again, kissing the bare chest. The kisses soon turned to nibbles and licks, trailing up to Viktor's neck. The Russian was eventually forced to pull his hands back to hold himself up, clasping to either side of the bench where they came to rest behind himself. He almost found his left arm giving out under him as he felt Yuri's fingers reach down between them suddenly, cupping him through the thicker fabric of his almost-black dress pants.

"Nh...Yuri..."

A few practiced movements, and the Asian freed his husband, keeping his eyes solidly on the azure pools in front of him. Yuri watched those eyes flicker a little as his hands started to stroke, listened to the raspy breaths, the gasps, and quiet, muffled moans. He was almost sure his manipulation would put the Russian down onto his back, but Viktor was always ready to surprise him, pushing himself back to upright again and then looming forward. Yuri found himself tipping backwards instead,
caught only by Viktor's hands snaking around his waist. The Russian was practically hunched over from the sensation of Yuri's fingers around him, and he breathed more deeply just to catch up.

The younger man just started at his task again, even as Viktor pulled him closer and attacked his neck. He could feel Viktor's hands coming up under the shirt again, sliding up his naked back until it forced the entire garment up. Not to be underserved, once the top was half-way up, Viktor pulled one of his hands away to move the thing further out of the way of Yuri's chest on purpose, letting him slip further down until he could kiss at the newly exposed skin. He immediately went for one of the pink nubs, sucking on it briefly before moving to the other, and then kissing further and further down until Yuri was laying flat on his back in front of him.

Even from that, Yuri found himself a little out of breath already, and he watched Viktor move further down his abdomen as he quietly got his wind back. The black pants were in the way after that, and Viktor could go no further until he'd pulled them away. He didn't do so right away though, just gently kissing at the man's toned core and the crests of his hips, his hands roaming over Yuri's chest all the while. The teasing was relentless, and Yuri was starting to get antsy, much to his husband's delight.

Viktor pulled away though, reaching back for his jacket, finding the little bottle and setting it beside his right skate before rolling up the garment to set it behind Yuri's head for his comfort. The younger man just watched in silence, their eyes meeting briefly before Viktor went to start pulling the lower garb away, only able to fully get it off of the one leg where Yuri had been able to get the skate off. That was enough though, and the Russian pushed the rest to hang off the other leg. He reached up with his right thumb-gloved hand and gently stroked his partner's cheek before trailing those fingers down the length of his chest and abdomen. He reluctantly pulled away from where he'd pressed their centers together before, but leaned over Yuri's core as he went, quietly kissing each inch lower until he was where he wanted to be.

Yuri could only muffle his cries as he felt Viktor take him in his mouth, his free leg kicking out a little at the sensation, and his whole body clenching against it. He felt every lick, every kiss, every suck, and slowly let himself cry out a little louder each time. He knew how thick the walls were and he knew no sound could be heard from the rink as long as something was going on out there, so there was no worry about being heard again. He ran his fingers through his own hair as he raised his arms up above his head, being pulled closer and closer to the edge with each lathe of that hot tongue against him. As Yuri's gasps became more like reluctant squeaks, Viktor withdrew, giving Yuri half a moment to relax before moving on.

He raised Yuri's bare leg up against himself, propping it against his shoulder as Yuri caught his breath. He'd reached back for the small bottle behind him on the bench and prepared the slickness between them without a word, removing the thumb-glove on his right hand without the younger man's notice. He glanced up though as he felt Yuri raising his skate-leg up against his side, setting the guarded heel of the blade on the bench where the bottle had come from and knocked it off. It fell to the floor with a slightly hollow thud before rolling a few inches, and then stopping.

Viktor slid forward on the bench, pressing themselves together again as he loomed over his partner, pushing hard against him as he came down to kiss him. His hands roamed up to find his partner's, and their fingers laced together as they slid against each other for a little while. Viktor continued the kisses, moving off to nibble Yuri's neck now and then, kissing his mouth again, then moving down to the other side, all while keeping up the slick grind down below, encouraged by Yuri's legs curved around him. He was starting to ache for the warmth though, and he moved his hips a bit lower, removing his gloveless hand only long enough to position himself, feel the tip slide in, and then replaced his hand where it was before. He could feel Yuri's fingers clenching around his own the further he pushed in, pulling back several times in an effort at sliding forward a little further each
time.

Yuri cried out against the crook of his shoulder, soon forced to pull his hands free again to clutch at the man lying over top of him. Viktor hissed a gasp as he felt his husband lightly rake his back, his skate-less leg kicking a bit against his side, but it only served to make him arch his back and push in further. Yuri arched his back as well as he felt it, practically hoisting himself up on the back of his head where it rested against the rolled up coat.

"...You okay? Yuri..."

"Nh...you just...went in faster than...normal..." The younger man gasped, slowly letting his back straighten again as he went back to lying down flat, "It's...fine..."

"Sorry...I'm excited~"

Yuri blinked one eye open to look up at the man, but found the energy through his discomfort to smile, "I couldn't tell."

"I'll show you then." The Russian said, giving him quite the look, and sliding almost all the way out in the process. The music of Yuri's reluctant gasp filled the room, and Viktor pushed in again as far as he could.

"Nnnhh...Vik-Viktor...!"

The older skater slid his arms under Yuri's shoulders to hold onto him better, and then settled into a slow rhythm, moving as well as he could until the awkward added height of his skates made his legs hurt. He pulled upright to sitting after that, and hauled Yuri up with him. He leaned around to grab his rolled up jacket and set it down behind his own head before lying down on his back. Yuri's hands were flat against his chest, but he drooped down to kiss his husband, setting their foreheads together as he felt Viktor's arms come up around him.

The slow thrust began again after that, with Viktor pushing up into him now instead. It was a lot easier to move from that angle, and Yuri heard his husband making a lot more noise after that. He felt Viktor's hands come down from where they'd gently clasped around the back of his neck, roaming down his chest, then parking over where his legs spread over his hips. He could feel that Viktor was practically anchoring him there, and the thrusts became faster and harder. Yuri had to push up from where he'd been resting on his elbows and forearms against his partner's chest, sitting fully upright against the sensation.

...He's going to finish before I'm even close at this rate...

Completely unexpectedly, Yuri rose up far enough that Viktor fell out, leaving the Russian rather confused as his rhythm was stalled.

"Yuuurriiiii..." He grumbled, "We don't have a lot of ti-"

"I know." The younger man put his finger on his husband's lips to silence him, "But don't worry about it." He settled back down onto Viktor's hips, taking them both into his hands gently and starting to move them as he'd been taught to. The Russian resigned to watching him, slowly stroking the man's thighs, one clothed and one bare. He leaned his head back against the makeshift pillow as Yuri's efforts drew him closer to the edge that he'd just been denied. Nearly there though, he could tell that his partner wasn't, and he realized why Yuri had moved when he had. He reached his hands down to cover where his husband's still grasped them together, stopping him where he was without saying a word. He quickly sat upright after that, pushing off from the bench until he could pull his
leg over so they'd both be on the same side. He hugged his arms around Yuri's small frame, kissing just under his chest as he guided him back down into his lap, allowing him the bench so he'd have something to rest his knees on.

Once settled, Viktor repositioned himself and pushed inside again, gasping against Yuri's damp skin as he went lower and lower. He wasn't about to let the man move though without giving him something to push against, and he deftly circled his fingers around where he was pressed against his abdomen. Yuri seemed to understand, and started the motions as he felt the gentle massage between them.

That did the trick. Viktor could feel his husband's body starting to tense up against him, his legs trembling where he was starting to falter in his movements. He helped the younger man along with his free arm, slipping around his lower back to pull him up. He kissed at Yuri's chest, feeling as the man wrapped his own arms around his head, hugging him tighter as he got closer to release. Fingers ran through silver-grey hair, almost clenching it, but not daring. A few more ascents and squeezes, and Viktor felt the hot liquid against his skin, dripping over his hand and down to his abdomen. Yuri cried out against the side of his head, his whole body seizing against the climax.

Viktor followed soon after, almost clawing at Yuri's back where the shirt had still been pushed away.

They panted against each other for what felt like several minutes. Yuri eventually slid back down to Viktor's lap, leaning back just enough to see his leavings on the man's skin, unsure what to do about it at that point. Viktor wouldn't let him think about it though, putting his fingers under his chin to pull him into a gentle kiss. He turned his face just slightly after that, setting their foreheads together and smiling, "You get better at this every time." He said quietly, still a little out of breath.

"...Mh."

"Pretty soon, I'll have you wanting to take me again."
CHAPTER EIGHTY EIGHT

With the main entrance to the locker room spilling out into the skate rental area, sneaking out without being seen was easy. Viktor's stomach growled relentlessly though as they got towards the inner sliding doors, and he hunched down in his coat like a turtle retreating into its shell as he looked outside.

Yuri glanced back at him, "What's the matter? You've been wanting to get out there since you realized you weren't allowed."

"...Hungry..."

The young skater just furrowed his brows and shook his head, then turned their path around to go right back to rink-side through the regular doors. By the time they got there, the rest of the group had gotten restless waiting for them, having been ready to leave for 10 minutes already.

"YURI-KUN!" Minami yelled out, spotting them first and pointing, "We were about to send a rescue party!"

"That must've been quite the analysis if it took you 45 minutes to come back." Yurio was grumbling.

"...Yeah, sorry..." The raven-haired skater said, nervously scratching his jaw, "We're ready to go now though. Viktor just wants that food mom put aside for him, and we can go."

Both of his parents came out after that, looking ready to leave as well with coats and scarves on, but when they spotted the pair, plans quickly changed. Yuri could see them whispering something to one another, and then, oddly, getting Mikhail's attention to say something to him as well. They discussed something inaudible for a moment, added Minako to the huddle, nodded in agreement over something, and then broke off. The entire group seemed to split into two parties after that, with Chris and Yurio moving off with Mikhail and Minako, followed by Otabek, and then a second group with Phichit, the Nishigoris, Yuri's own family, and Minami following (confused) after them in turn. Hiroko only stalled for a moment to grab the sort-of-bento-box she'd put together for Viktor before coming up to the anxious couple.

"You ready?" She asked, looking up at them with that fond motherly smile, "It's time."

"I am so confused." Viktor answered.

Hiroko just smirked at him fondly, then stepped up and handed him the lunch arrangement, "Minako-sensei and the others will explain it on the way. Yuri will be coming with the rest of us."

"Come along, nephew." Mikhail mused, snaking his arm over Viktor's shoulders to pull him away and start walking him back towards the doors. He looked back over his shoulder to wave at Yuri as they left, "We'll see you down there. Do svidanija for now."

Viktor looked back as well, his gloved hands tenderly holding the box in front of himself, but not sure what to do with it in that moment. All he could do was give a confused expression as he was pushed back out through the doors and out of sight of his husband.

Yuri heaved a deep breath, "...I hope they explain it quickly."
Chris stepped up and put his hand on the skater's shoulder reassuringly, "We will. See you there."

"What's going on?" Minami asked, feeling a little left out.

Yuri had been quiet the entire half-mile walk from the Ice Castle to the shrine, barely noticing the short bridge over the river between the two. Periodically, he'd look back over his shoulder to glance at the 'ninja house' high on the hill above the skating rink, but his mind was too blank to even think words to himself about what was coming.

"Hasetsu Shrine said they would be willing to do the ceremony for you two." Hiroko told him as he tied the last knots on his skate laces, "We've already taken care of all the details, so all you and Viktor have to do is show up!"

"...You guys really went so far out of your way to do this for us?" Yuri was in disbelief, "I...don't know what to say." He rose up off the bench to stand up at his full height, turning around to look at his family. He clasped his hands together and bowed his head behind them, "...Thank you so much!"

"It's our pleasure!" His parents said together.

"This is our way of saying thank you to Viktor, too." His mother went on, "He's done so much to help you grow as a young man and a skater...we thought, if he's going to be part of our family, wouldn't it be nice to do it in the old way? We're really excited to see what you both think!"

He paused in front of the massive white Shinto arch that loomed over him, and Phichit paused next to him. The older skater heard the click on the phone app and glanced over at his friend, "...Did you just take a selfie in front of a shrine?" He deadpanned.

"What? No! I took a photo of you in front of a shrine!" The Thai skater smiled, "With all the cherry blossom trees blooming, this place is really beautiful! It'd be a shame if no one took any pictures!"

Yuri turned his head back up at the monument, "...We didn't get any photos when we did this in Barcelona."

"All the more reason for me to do it here for you!"

"Let's get inside where it's warmer!" Yuuko suggested, moving off towards the steps that were further inside, just within the tree-line that bordered the property.

_I wonder what Viktor's doing right now...?_

The not-really-a-bento-box had been emptied by then, set aside as the practice began. Small red cups were filled with water, lifted, emptied, filled again, emptied again, set back down, started all over. The Russian was trying to figure it out as well as he could, guided mostly by Minako through the ceremony.

..._I wonder what Yuri's doing right now...?_

Raven-black hair was slicked back again, set into place by Yuuko as the triplets brought in the folded raiments; garments of black, white, and one that was striped in white and grey. The vestments were
slowly and meticulously placed around him; he watched the whole thing taking place like it was a movie. He'd known it would happen for only about 90 minutes, but it was still a bit of a shock.

The under-kimono was set and folded across his chest, white as snow, with the black outer kimono following suit after that. The hakama came after, folded up around his legs and tied at his waist, striped in grey and black with a gradient that went light to dark from top to bottom. His waist was tied with a grey obi. The black haori went on top of it all. Yuri poked at the pom-pom-like haori himo that held the jacket loosely closed in front.

His mind was still blank as slate, hyper-focused on everything that was going on around him, not wanting to miss a single detail. He noticed as people would come and go from the room, leaving in normal garb and then returning several minutes later wearing something a bit more formal. Phichit had even brought a traditional Thai outfit with him, which looked quite similar to his 'Shall We Skate' ensemble, but a bit more subdued so he wouldn't stick out like a sore thumb amidst the most docile colors of the Japanese surroundings. Yuri's parents had donned traditional Japanese clothing by then as well. They pulled him to the next room and let him practice with the cups the same way Viktor had done earlier elsewhere.

"...Shouldn't I be wearing a white montsuki haori hakama?" Yuri suddenly blurted as he held up the middle-sized cup, setting it down on his lap, "...I mean, I took his name..."

"We thought about that, but...no." His mother explained.

"Mh." His father agreed, "You're the one that's native, and you'll be the one who has to read the note that the priest wrote for you two, which is normally the role of the one husband involved. Since you can read Japanese and he can't, you'll be the one leading the ceremony today, Yuri."

The skater's face was pink, "...I wonder what Viktor will think of that?"

...He broke his own father's nose for referring to me as a 'wife.' There's nothing inherently wrong with that, but as a man, I would take the role of 'husband' no matter who I marry. Will Viktor be the one in white then, or will he wear the same thing as me? This is all so strange...

Still...

He lifted the cup again and looked at the water within it.

...He's the one who planned out the shotgun wedding we had in Barcelona, and he went first there, so maybe this is appropriate. Even if, between the two of us...he's obviously the more dominant personality.

He was eventually fully practiced and felt he knew what to do, so he rose and went with the rest to leave the preparation area, soft white tabi-socks gliding along pristine hardwood floors to where their shoes were waiting. He saw the traditional setta sandals that were there for him, and he swallowed nervously, wondering when he'd finally run into the other group again. There were only so many places in or near to the shrine where they'd have been able to get ready.

However, that was answered soon enough, as once he stepped outside and took in the sights with new eyes, he finally spotted them way down at the end of the Sandou walkway, just at the edge of the stairs.

He thought he saw Viktor almost immediately, but squinted his eyes to realize that the slender man with the black suit was actually Mikhail, and Minako was there with him in a simple kimono. Chris was next to them in a similar suit ensemble, Yurio after that, and Otabek at the end looking awkward
and out of place, but playing along anyway.

His own group moved down to meet with them, and Yuri struggled to understand why he only saw the five people there.

**Viktor isn't even with them... Where is he?**

"This is pretty great, isn't it?" The man's voice came from behind.

Yuri would've leapt into the stratosphere at the surprise on any other occasion, but the shrine had given him a sense of calm that helped keep his feet firmly on the ground. His heart skipped a beat though, and his eyes turned before the rest of him did. He could hear the triplets already freaking out about it, taking photos like crazy as Yuuko tried to corral them off so they wouldn't be intrusive. But, even Yuuko wasn't completely immune to the splendor of the Russian, and one hand was up to stave off the nose-bleed as the other tried helplessly to round up her kids. Even Takeshi whistled at the sight of him.

"Wow!" Phichit chimed in, photos being snapped quickly. Minami was right behind him, swooning over the photos since his own phone was still dead.

*I'm the only one who hasn't looked at him yet.* Yuri thought, feeling his heart rising in his throat. *He and I literally just made love in a locker room less than an hour ago and now I'm scared to see him clothed? He'd laugh so hard if he could hear me...just four months ago, he was teasing me about the exact opposite.*

He finally turned around though and saw with his own eyes what the others had already seen. It was completely expected, and yet beholding it was still a shock...a pure white montsuki haori hakama, with stripes moving down the hakama from light grey to dark silver.

Yuri couldn't form thoughts again.

Viktor held the folded fan in his hand, lifting it to just under Yuri's chin to raise his face up a little, "Use your words, Yuri." He mused, blue eyes peering past immaculately styled silver hair.

"...I..." The younger man started, his cheeks red, "...Can't..."

"You're adorable when you're speechless." The Russian purred, stepping closer to kiss his husband's forehead lightly, "You look amazing, too."

"There's the priest! Let's go!" Yuri heard his mother saying, though she sounded far away.

He shook his head to get his bearings again, and felt Viktor's fingers lace into his own to start guiding him down to where the others were going. A Shinto priest was there with two shrine maidens, 3 pipe players wearing orange robes, and another lesser priest who carried a large, red, paper umbrella in his hands, the pole suspending it almost 8 feet in the air.

When all three groups were finally assembled, Yuri was given a long folded letter to tuck into his kimono. They gave the indication that they were ready to start, and the priest stepped to the front of the group. The pipers moved in behind him in a line, and the two mikos just behind them standing next to one another. Yuri and Viktor took their places behind the maidens with Yuri on Viktor’s right side, reluctantly letting go where their hands had still been together until that moment. The second priest stepped up behind them, shading them in the massive paper umbrella. Behind the priest on Yuri's side was his father, and Mikhail on Viktor's, standing in for the father who would never have been there even if begged. Hiroko was behind her own husband after that, and Minako came up
behind them in turn as a stand-in for the mother Viktor had lost twice.

The remaining members of the group were shuffled off discretely to a different part of the shrine, further up the path.

The ceremony then began, with the pipers playing their instruments, one after the other in slow succession. The pipes themselves played no particular 'song,' as it were...it was more like a Buddhist chant in musical form, low and consistent. The Priest and the shrine maidens bowed towards the shrine in reverence, and the procession began to move down the Sandou.
...The cherry blossoms are in full bloom now... Yuri noticed, looking around to catch every miniscule detail. As his head turned to get a panoramic view, he finally set his sights on his husband,
his cheeks flushing again. ...All in white like that, he's practically glowing...

I wish I could touch him, even just a little bit... Viktor thought in turn, having seen the glance, This must be his Philos showing through again, just being a spectator to this whole event. I guess his Eros fell asleep after earlier... He was smiling to himself.

They finally spotted their friends ahead of the procession, standing on either side of the walkway to greet them again as they passed by and then falling in line at the end as they all made their way up towards the shrine itself. There was another small set of stairs leading into the building, with a wooden altar at the top, followed by sliding wooden doors.

They held up their hakamas as they rose the stairway, and paused on either side of the altar briefly. A drum sounded, and the doors opened, parting the way for the group to start moving inside. The grooms stepped up onto a slightly raised wooden platform and took two bench-like seats in the middle of it, while their parents or stand-ins sat behind them in turn. The meager group to follow through the doors parted to take their seats in the wings, spreading evenly onto each side.

I wonder if other weddings have had family attendance this small? Yuri wondered anxiously, the size of the room too large for the number of people filling it. ...I wonder if it would be any bigger if we gave more notice that we were even doing this? Would any of my extended family come for a wedding like this?

The Russian's thoughts were of a similar sort, but...still vastly parted from his partner's. ...Well, at least I have one true family member for this today... He kept his eyes straight ahead to watch as the Shinto priest came forward again, setting a thin black stand before them.

The elderly man soon turned back away again to go back the way he came.

A flute suddenly played from 'off-stage' somewhere, and the pair stood up before the makeshift altar, watching as the priest returned with the shrine maidens, and what looked like a shiny black box. The maidens each held large, beautifully embossed golden ladles in their hands, and stood ready with them as the priest set the box on the stand. The pipes joined the flute, and as the two shrine maidens held up the gold dispensers in presentation, all five of them bowed politely to one another.

Within the box, Viktor spotted the small stack of silver cups, the one on top smaller than the one beneath it, and so forth for all three. The priest withdrew the smallest cup tenderly, and stepped over to his right to present it to Yuri. As the item was traded hands, the two bowed to each other, and Yuri held it before him as gently as if it were a Faberge egg. The priest stepped back, and the two mikos stepped forward, 'dipping' their ladles forward twice, and then on the third, pouring a little Sake into the smallest of the sakazuki.

The pair stepped back, and Yuri looked down at the cup in his fingers, seeing his reflection in the rice wine. He bowed his head nervously, then lifted the cup to his lips, touching the liquid to taste it once...twice...then finishing it, and extending his hands a little to return the saucer to the priest. As the elderly man took it back, he turned it around, then stepped over towards the much-taller Russian, and extended it out to him in turn.

Viktor bowed his head as he took the cup, and like before, the maidens came forth to tilt, tilt, then pour Sake into it, and just as he'd been coached to do earlier in the afternoon, and as Yuri had just done before him, he sipped twice and then finished the drink on the third tip.

The ceremony continued with the two slightly larger cups, each with a little bit more Sake each time. The medium size was handed first to Viktor though rather than Yuri, only to return to start with the latter as they got to the largest of the 3 cups.
Yuri was suddenly extremely grateful for having gotten to eat beforehand. He and Viktor still had two programs to skate and the last thing he wanted was to do so drunk. With that little, he would be surprised to even feel it later.

When the final cup was taken back and set into the box, the maidens moved away, and the priest took the box back as well. When he came back out, he did so alone, and the trio bowed to one another.

Yuri's stomach was in knots at that point, and he withdrew the folded letter that had been sitting just inside his kimono, sticking out like a flag to announce that it was always there. He swallowed nervously and unfolded it, seeing the Kanji there in columns across the entire length of the parchment.

"W-..." He started habitually in English, words catching in his throat for a moment before switching to Japanese, [We have now become united as husband and husband inside this shrine. We respectfully pledge to make our hearts as one, give mutual help and support, faithfully execute our marital duties and responsibilities, and spend all the days of our lives together with unchanging trust and eternal affection...]

Viktor looked on with a blissful 'I have no idea what you just said but I'm sure it was lovely' look on his face.

Yuri heaved, his fingers itching to reach out for his partner as he set the folded paper down on the stand, but knowing he couldn't. The solitude that was forced onto him during the ceremony was making his anxiety levels rise steadily throughout, and it was especially bad since they already had their rings so there was no excuse to pause between sections to exchange any and get some minor relief with even that small touch.

Maybe Viktor could sense it, but even he couldn't stand it anymore, and broke from tradition to reach out and take his husband's hand. He could feel Yuri's fingers clenching around his own as he held there, his hand shaking a little. It soon calmed though, and he saw the younger man take a quick but deep breath.

*Stay the course, Yuri, we're almost done.*

The mikos came out again as the priest stepped back, and handed the pair a sprig of the Sakaki tree, each branch tied with the zig-zag white patterns of the Shinto tradition. Viktor had to let go of his husband's hand so they could take the branches, and they each turned them around a full 360 before setting them down onto the stand, with the end of the branch pointing towards the center of the shrine. Everyone in the room was on their feet by then, and everyone in turn bowed twice towards the shrine, clapped twice, then bowed one more time, and paused.

The Shrine maidens departed for a moment, and returned with wooden boxes like the black one from before, presenting a small ceramic cup of Sake to each of the parents and stand ins, then the grooms, before taking their place on either side of them and raising the boxes up to eye-level.

Viktor listened to the priest's foreign words, but had no idea what was being said. He knew only what was said at the end...

"Omedetou gozaimasu."

The elderly man bowed, and the rest of the people in the room repeated the words and bowed as well, those in the wings clapping as those on the platform drank the Sake. The mikos gathered the empty cups in their wooden boxes again, and the priest bowed one more time as they left. More
words in Japanese. Another round of congratulations.

It was finally over.

Yuri lead the way, circling around to the back end of the platform and taking the step down. He paused only long enough to reach back and take hold of the sanctuary of Viktor's grasp, holding tight to his hand like he thought he'd float right out the doors and into the sky if he didn't. As the sliding panels pulled apart again to let them out, Yuri's eyes went wide...then watered as they squinted shut against the sudden and unexpected flash of a camera.

"Wow~!" He heard Viktor saying, "They all came!"

Yuri was trying to blink his vision back to normal, but he was seeing spots, and had to follow after his husband where he felt the tug of his hand. When the white and black dots finally subsided, he saw what Viktor had meant.

All the fans, media, and local supporters who had been at the Ice Castle had converged on the Shrine, clapping and cheering excitedly as the pair finally emerged. Front and center, just in front of the doors, was the small photography mob that Viktor had 'invited' during the Worlds banquet. Their camera flashes had been responsible for temporarily blinding the younger skater.

Yuri was still partly horrified at how many people had descended on the venue, but Viktor seemed to love it, so he tried not to drag it down. Viktor wouldn't let him anyway. He pulled his husband close and leaned over him, holding him up with an arm snaked around his lower back, and looked him in the eyes longingly.

"Mr. Nikiforov."

The younger skater gawked at him, but then settled into his gaze and relaxed a little, "Mr. Nikiforov."

Viktor leaned in to kiss him then, feeling his husband's arms come over his shoulders to hold him close. Camera flashes went off like wildfire, and the crowd cheered even louder.
Chapter 89

CHAPTER EIGHTY NINE

"Just think about it like when we ran into fans at Incheon." Viktor told him quietly, sitting for the formal photos that had been arranged in front of the shrine.

Regardless of the crowd's presence, Yuri's family had done everything they could to have a traditional wedding ceremony, even if it meant occasionally herding people like cats from one side of the grounds to another so they wouldn't be in the background of all the pictures being taken. Even as the flashes from the professionals blinked in front of them, hundreds of smaller flashes were twinkling beyond them, trying to catch a tiny piece of the moment even from afar.

_I can only wonder what kind of firestorm this will create online later._ Yuri thought to himself, remembering how the net had exploded when word had first gotten out that Viktor had ever left Russia in the first place. _I never really paid that much attention to what people said on social media until that video of me went viral, but Viktor uses it so much... When was the last time I even made a post of my own?

"Yuri."

He blinked and looked around, feeling like he'd lost time somewhere.

"Did you space out?"

The young skater shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose as he tried to regain himself, "...I think so." He looked up after that, expecting to see Viktor, but seeing grey-green eyes looking back at him instead, "...Oh, Mikhail..."

"Hmph, Viktor was right, you were practically orbiting around Jupiter." The older Russian chuckled at him, then rising back up to his full height, "Was the Sake too strong?"

"I think I just got caught up in my own head. Where's Viktor?" Yuri asked, looking around.

"He went to go play with his fans about 20 minutes ago." Mikhail pointed to a corner of the shrine near the first staircase, which was a good distance away.

The Russian skater was easy to spot even in the crowd, shining ethereally in his white ensemble. He'd been all too happy to take photos with anyone who asked, and Yuri didn't doubt that there were hundreds of pictures taken.

"Did everyone take a break or something?" Yuri wondered aloud, looking around after that and seeing no one else nearby.

"...Eh, sort of." Mikhail said with a shrug, "While photos of the family were being taken, your skating friends broke off to go hang out with the crowd that had gathered. I guess they wanted to soak up some of the attention while you and Viktor were busy and inaccessible. The Thai kid suggested they go take photos in the sanctuary garden since the cherry blossom trees are easier to photograph over there, and a whole bunch of people broke off to go with him. The ones that are left are the diehard fans that came to see you or Viktor or both." He stuffed his hands into his pockets for lack of a jacket to suspend them in, "But you don't really seem all that interested."

Yuri was watching the crowd without answering, "...I never got into the sport because I wanted to be
cheered at by other people." He shook his head, "Minako-sensei gave me grief because I never wanted to interact with any of them either. She'd guilt-trip me into at least shaking peoples' hands because 'Viktor Nikiforov is always nice to his fans!'" He gave his best impersonation of her, which just made the elder laugh out loud.

"That sounds like her."

"You guys must've spent most of the snow storm working things out for today." Yuri went on, "You went through the whole thing like you'd done it a hundred times."

"...I didn't really have to do a whole lot. I just took my spot behind Viktor and followed you guys around. But, yes, that was addressed at the time."

"I guess she's given up trying to style your hair like Viktor's, too?" He pointed at where it was parted down the center in the man's usual affect, rather than over his right eye like his nephew's, "I can't say I've noticed it look that way in a little while."

"She still tries sometimes." Mikhail shrugged, "But a guy can only stand a lady's attention for so long when she's only giving it because you look like someone else that she already crushes on."

Yuri deadpanned him, "Minako-sensei doesn't have a thing for Viktor...she's a year older than my own mom."

"She'd be crazy not to pine for him! Look at him!" He made a wide gesture as though dramatically presenting the younger figure in the distance.

"...Not seriously."

The Russian sighed and laughed at the same time, pulling his hands back to the warmth of his pockets, "No, I suppose not. There's a difference between loving a celebrity and loving a friend, family member, or intimate partner."

"...Mh." Yuri pulled his own arms up, slipping each one into opposite haori sleeves so they were crossed in front of him, shielded from the chill winter-spring air. There was a strange moment of silence between them after that, broken only by a cold breeze forcing Yuri to turn side-face to avoid it, "So...did you tell her to stop doing it or something?"

"...Sort of."

"Mhm, sounds like it was pretty awkward then."

"Sort of." He answered more quickly that time.

Yuri just kept looking at him, wondering if he should inquire further or let it be. He ended up just clearing his throat for lack of being able to make a decision on the matter, and Mikhail glanced back at him with those grey-green eyes.

"What, you want details or something?"

Yuri waved his hands around reflexively, "I don't want to pry! You can say however much or little as you want!"

Those eyes turned back again, looking out at where his younger counterpart was being asked to sign things by the mass of people at the other end of the walkway. He drew in a breath, "You know as well as anyone that people do stupid things when they drink."
The skater's brow furrowed, "...You didn't."

"Oh but we did." The older man was a bit embarrassed to admit, "I didn't start it though, if that's what you're wondering now."

"But you guys don't even act differently around each other. Did she forget or something?" Yuri was surprised at how nonchalant he felt about it. He'd known Minako his entire life and yet this 'turn of events' hardly seemed to bother him. It was just...new information, almost inconsequential even.

"No, she didn't forget." Mikhail shrugged again, "But she said she wasn't sure what she meant by it, so we agreed to forget about it for now. When you're my age, or maybe only after you've been through the things someone like me has experienced, you aren't so bothered by stuff like that anymore."

"Not sure what you mean."

"I guess maybe you wouldn't." The Russian turned to face him better, only to be standing directly in the path of the cold wind, "You're a pretty emotional kid. I don't think you'd be able to separate a physical interaction from a psychological one. One without the other for you would be meaningless, maybe even off-putting. Right?"

The younger man thought on it, but then nodded, "Probably."

"So the idea of intimacy with another person would be entirely alien to you if there wasn't some emotional connection to it. That's understandable though...what you have with Viktor is pretty special, I think. You guys connect on more levels than most other people...even a non-skater like me can see how well you two sync when you're on the ice, like you can read each other's minds. That's more than what most other people have, and it's probably a huge part of why he's attracted to you. Someone like me though...? I'm just a USB drive. A plug 'n play device that can interface with anyone and anything and not worry about it later."

Yuri wondered about that, trying to comprehend what being like that would feel like, but then shook his head, "So you're saying you don't care about her at all?"

"Not necessarily." He looked up at the sky, and the swirl of cherry blossom petals that had been whipped up by the wind coming over the shrine, "I've just gotten jaded in my years and have learned how to control how invested I become in people. Minako is an acquaintance, bordering on friend. To get anything more, it would be like an arranged marriage that just 'works out' in the end. I don't think I could be as passionate as Viktor again. This old man's heart just couldn't take it."

"You're scared to be hurt again."

Mikhail was quiet, looking back down from the sky again to a puddle that had formed from the rain earlier in the day, "I hurt every day already." He said simply, pausing a moment to gather his thoughts, "Losing my wife the way I did...she might as well have died from the cancer. The change was so quick... It hurts to know she's still alive out there somewhere, but...it's not her anymore. Not really." He turned to eyeball his nephew-in-law, "You guys all say how much Viktor and I look alike...imagine what it would be like if he suddenly got knocked in the head one day and woke up with my personality. Imagine I'm your Viktor now. Would it be the same?"

"...No."

The Russian nodded, "You still love him as much as you always did, but he no longer feels the same. His day-to-day habits are different, he likes different food, he acts like you're just someone he
knows from somewhere, rather than being your partner. But it's still him. His face, his eyes, his hands...everything is still him, except his mind. That's gone. You'll never get him back. You're stuck with this other person that's just wearing his skin. What do you do with that?"

"...I can't even bear to think about it. I'm sorry you went through that." Yuri answered, remembering what Viktor had said about his own reaction after passing out at the end of his Worlds Free Skate. At least, in that case, the retrogression was only temporary.

Viktor had still been bothered by it even at the end of that night, despite everything else seemingly going back to normal. I practically had to sing him to sleep...

"After loving someone so deeply, giving up every secret, exposing yourself body and soul to this person...for that to be taken away from you...you never even get to say goodbye, because that person is just...gone. Can you ever really feel safe loving someone else that way again?"

"No..."

"The opposite can be true, too." Mikhail went on, "And that's the problem I face with Minako. She sees me as just an older version of Viktor. But I'm more than what my person-suit looks like. Who I look like. I'm not Viktor."

"...I know..."

The older man huffed a laugh at himself after that, "But maybe it's not so hopeless as it seems. She didn't jump my bones until after I stood my ground about my hair. But maybe it was just the alcohol. Who knows? Anyway...sorry, I unloaded on you."

"It's fine... I don't think we've gotten to talk like this since we met at that café back in St. Petersburg." The skater said simply, actually feeling a little better than before, "Even if the topic was a bit weird..." He closed the small gap between them and hugged his in-law around his back with one arm, "I should go be with Viktor. I won't hear the end of it if I leave this place without having something to post about online later."

Mikhail was a bit surprised by the gesture, but then smiled and returned it before patting the shorter man's back, "Don't feel like you have to do things you don't want to do."

Yuri shook his head, "I wouldn't if it was just me...but Viktor likes it when I try to interact with fans, and if he's happy, it makes me happy, so it works out in the end."

The elder Russian nodded and sent him on his way, watching quietly as Yuri approached the large group at his own pace. The crowd had noticed him coming, but it wasn't until he was fairly close that they started to believe he wasn't just going to call for Viktor to depart from them and leave. Viktor quickly dragged him into the mob, pulling him into a whole new round of photos to satisfy the Viktuuri fans who'd been so patient.

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It was later than intended when they finally got back to the Ice Castle and prepared for the last few shows of the evening. It had truly become competitive at that point, with each of the skaters trying their best to out-do the one who'd skated before, until it finally culminated in the presentation of Duetto.
To the delight of the audience, the final pose of the show was altered at the last second, with Yuri pulling Viktor down into a kiss instead of just holding his hand up near his chin.

By then, it was starting to get late though. After the freestyle skate where everyone who wanted could join them on the ice, Viktor set a formal date with the photographers that had shown up, and spared them all the dread of feeling like they were still expected to 'perform' later on into the night. A huge, 5-level, chocolate-inside vanilla-outside cake was rolled out onto the ice, with two little Duetto figurines at the top for good measure. It was completely gone by the time everyone in the audience got to have their own piece, and they all clapped with excitement as the 'newlyweds' offered a piece to one another on their own forks.

It was almost midnight when the last of the crowds had finally been shooed from the Ice Castle, leaving only those who would be helping clean and close the rink. Yuri and Viktor stayed behind as well, waving off their friends as they grabbed their gear and headed back to Yu-Topia. It meant they had some quiet time on the ice together without an audience beyond the last busy stragglers, and it turned into a slightly playful exhibition.

Skating slowly together, then quickly apart, showing off various different segments of their old programs just to see what they'd look like doing so while wearing their Duetto outfits, then back to skating together again.

By the time they were ready to go, the Nishigoris were practically sleeping on a bench near the exit. Viktor nudged the triplets awake while Yuri did the same to their parents, quietly telling them they could go home finally and apologizing for keeping them so late. Viktor helped carry the sleepy girls to the car just outside, and they both waved as it started to depart.

They looked up at Hasetsu Castle above the rink, and then started to head down to the long bridge that lead back to the resort. Hand-in-hand, they walked together quietly, and snuck into the onsen once they got back for a good soak before finally heading to bed.

Viktor was down first, simply peeling out of most of his layers before crawling under the covers of the huge bed in the banquet room. He was already half asleep when he felt Yuri get in next to him, and muscle-reflex made him turn to spoon against the younger man's back, arms coming around his sides like they always did.

"Today was perfect." Yuri said contentedly, curling his own arms in front of him to hold his husband's ringed hand against his chest, "Just like you said it would be."

"There were a few hang-ups...but otherwise, yes."

"Makes me anxious to start practicing for next season already." Yuri was smiling, feeling as Viktor squeezed him a little tighter when he heard the words.

"We'll start tomorrow."
The search for the new Nikiforov residence began in earnest within days. With skating practice relegated to late afternoon and evening due to an uptick in interest for daytime youth skating lessons, it left the pair with little else to do but seek out places to move. Bikes were ridden halfway across Hasetsu and back again as each new potential location was scouted over the weeks, but each time...

"...No..."

"...No...not this one..."

"There's not enough light."

"The doorways are too narrow."

"Too small."

"No..."

"Nope."

"Are you sure this is the right address?"

"VIKTOR..." Yuri blurted, exasperated. He pushed back outside, going right past the confused realtor who was too scared to stop him, and looked at the sight of the house from the street and compared it to the photo from the listing page, "This is the right place! What's wrong with this one?"

Viktor stood in the doorway and pointed dramatically to the southwest, "That."

Yuri turned and gawked in the direction his husband had indicated, but saw nothing, and turned back, "What?"

"We can't even see Hasetsu Castle from here."

"Of course we can't, there's buildings in the way." Yuri thought he was being clever.

Viktor just quirked his brows and waggled his finger to make the shorter man come closer, then pointed again, grabbing Yuri's head from behind to put him in the right spot, "There. That's where it's supposed to be."

Yuri squinted, but realized that from the doorway, it was, in fact, possible to see through the spaces of the building across the street. From that vantage, he noticed that he should've been able to clearly see the castle, but from their distance, it was just a white speck on a green-brown hill.

"It'd take an hour to bike there from here." Viktor explained, "And since you rejected the first listing I showed you when we were still in Russia for this very issue..."

"...Ahhhh I didn't realize we'd gotten so far away..." Yuri sighed, closing the app on his phone and turning back around, "This is harder than I thought it would be. What should we do? There's so few places to pick from to begin with...and we've been looking for almost a month already."

The Russian nodded, putting one hand on his hip as the other came up to finger his lip in thought,
"...Maybe we should hire someone to do the scouting for us. Draw a circle on a map around the castle and say not to bother showing us anything beyond the line."

"...Can we afford one?"

"We were going to pay for the place in full with the money my uncle paid for my house in St. Petersburg...what's a little extra?"

"You said you didn't want to touch your settlement though."

"I'm not going to." Viktor shrugged, moving back to where they'd left their bikes near the curb, "I'm pretending it doesn't exist. But we got some pretty good deals with the photo book we did after our wedding, and since you finally agreed to do one on your own...we could just move the funds we got and will get into a dedicated person to find our house."

Yuri nodded reluctantly, still feeling a little awkward about the prospects of a solo photo shoot, "...Maybe."

The Russian could hear the change in tone, and set his bike down to go back the way he'd come, reaching out to stroke Yuri's cheek gently and kiss his forehead, "...It's not your fault. I'm being difficult."

"Let's just go to the Ice Castle for a while. By the time we get there, I'm sure we won't have to wait long to get the rink to ourselves."

Viktor nodded, feeling a little bad about having rejected yet another location, but followed his husband with his eyes as he dismissed the Japanese man who'd unlocked the doors for them and turned back to their bikes.

By the time they got back to Yu-Topia to get their skates, another hour had passed. Half the trip was spent in silence as it really dawned on them how far away they'd had to go trying to find a place. Yuri's mother was just inside the sliding doors as they came inside.

"No luck again?"

"No..." Yuri sighed, "We're thinking of getting an agent to look for us so we can stop."

"This came in while you two were out." Hiroko said, "Maybe whatever it is will cheer you up?" She moved under the counter to withdraw a decently large box.

It was Viktor who got excited though, rushing over and grabbing it to check the sender's address. Confirming it, he took Yuri's hand and pulled him to the common room, "I've been waiting for this! Come on!"

"W...V...Viktor!"

The box was set on the top of a table and Viktor clawed his way in, then paused abruptly, "Yuri, close your eyes."

"Hah?"

"You always do that! Just close your eyes!"

"Okay okay!" He finally did as told, sitting quietly with his eyelids down, listening intently to the sound of paper and foam peanuts being pulled out of the box. Finally, he heard the sound of plastic,
a ziplock closure being breached, and the clinking of metal being set on a wooden surface in front of him, "...When can I look?"

"Now."

One eye opened first, catching a tease of what was before him, but then the other opened with a start, "...Wow!"

"You like them?"

Yuri reached his hands forward and took the dark boots with gold-plated blades in his hands, "...Th...this is great! They're just like yours!"

"Mh!" Viktor nodded happily, "Sorry they took so long to get here. I actually hoped they'd be here by the end of the wedding party, but apparently, someone who's name shall not be mentioned decided to forget to update his home address and the box sat in front of a recently-sold house for like 2 weeks before that certain unnamed person's uncle went by and found it."

Yuri looked over the new skates, "What was Mikhail doing at the house?"

Viktor slouched across the whole of the table-top and smiled awkwardly, "Inventory. Like...full check-list on a clip-board, taking notes, photos, the whole bit."

"...He's taking the move more seriously than we are."

"So let's hire someone! I kind of want my couch back."

"...All right..."

Viktor crawled around the table to get closer, then kept going to tip Yuri over and onto his back, lying on top of him like a big dog that was unaware of his size, "I know you wanted to do it yourself, but you're getting too stressed about it."

"You've rejected literally every place."

"It's a house, Yuri, not dessert." The Russian pointed out, lazily setting his chin on his husband's chest as Yuri's arms went out to the sides to make room for him, "If it's not perfect, it's difficult to do take-backs and try somewhere else."

"I know..."

Viktor tilted his head a little at him, only the one eye visible under his bangs. He wedged his arms under his husband's lower back and then rolled them over, flipping their positions until Yuri was upright and sitting on his stomach. He casually lifted one foot to set his heel against the top of the table, and then loosely crossed his arms over his chest, "You did a good job, I promise. I'm just super-extra-special picky. It makes me the problem, not your selections."

"What is it about the places we've been that you don't like tho-"

"VIKTOR." Hiroko's voice suddenly came, startled and distressed.

The pair looked up immediately with wide eyes, seeing the short woman in the doorway in a panic. Neither moved though...

...Except for Viktor, casually slipping his foot off the table-top to lie flat on the floor. They continued gawking at one another nervously in abject silence, unblinking.
Hiroko was all smiles after that though, "Better. Carry on."

The Russian winked at her from where he was still 'pinned' under her son, "Sumimaseeeeen!"

The woman passed through the room to go towards the entrance way like she'd planned, leaving the pair alone again. Viktor glanced up at his husband, noticing he'd hardly even blushed at the sudden interruption by his mom.

"It's nice to see you getting used to this."

Yuri looked down at him, "What do you mean?"

"Only a few weeks ago, your whole head would've been beet red for anyone walking in on us like this. But just now, your own mom walked by and you hardly got color in your cheeks at all. I wonder what else I'll be able to get away with in the future?" Viktor smirked devilishly, reaching up to slide his hands up his husband's thighs where they'd parted over him, settling on his hips.

That was enough to finally get the color to rise on Yuri's skin, even moreso as he felt Viktor moving under him, sitting up and forcing him to slide back directly into his lap. He hardly had half a second to think about how embarrassing it would be to get walked in on then when Viktor leaned closer to nibble on his neck.

"V-Viktor...!" Yuri protested.

He felt the man's fingers come in under the back of his shirt though, and cold skin made him contort backward, falling back down to his side dramatically before swiveling back to being straight, ending up sliding into the shadow of the table and staring up at the bottom of it. He could hear his husband laughing at him, wanting nothing more than to continue the teasing, almost hoping someone else would walk in just to see what would happen. It didn't take long.

"Yuri, why are you under the table?" Mari asked unexpectedly, stepping in with a basket of laundry in her arms.

"N-Nothing!" He answered, entirely unconvincing given where his legs were still visible, parted closely around his husband's waist, no space between them. It was only a second more before the same cold hands that had put him down on the floor came forward to slide under his shirt again, this time from the front, going in fast enough that they got across his stomach and onto his chest too quickly for him to protest.

Instead, he just twitched and whacked his forehead against the underside of the table.

Mari winced, "...You okay?"

The younger sibling just flailed pitifully in embarrassment, whining in defeat. He could only imagine the entertained grin on his husband's face. Feeling the man's hands roam across his front only added amused insult to hilarious injury, and he eventually gave up.

Viktor was grinning the whole trip to the Ice Castle, incredibly pleased with himself.
"You enjoy tormenting me." Yuri said quietly, deadpanning him despite his best intentions.

"Of course I do. I have to make up for the fact that Yurio isn't around to embarrass with our antics." The Russian answered, "Your own friends are too proud of you to get red-faced when I get all lovey-dovey with you around them."

"So the new challenge is to see how long it'll be before I stop getting flushed when you do that?"

"I actually hope you never stop." Viktor mused, leaning in to nose his husband's cheek as they walked, "Maybe I should be more careful with how often I try to tease you."

Yuri sighed and laughed, slipping his arm around Viktor's back, "I can only wonder what it would take to embarrass you in front of my friends."

"I don't think you could." The Russian answered proudly, "I'm too happy with the situation to be red-faced about it."

"I guess married life suits you."

"Would it sound weird if I said it didn't feel like much had really changed since we got married?" The taller man said curiously, "We've been together longer than that, we've lived together for a while already, been intimate with each other since after the Grand Prix...making it official seems more like a declaration for other people than for us."

"...I guess so."

"Maybe it's different for you since it took so much longer for you to come around to the idea." Viktor pondered, "Do you think I went too fast?"

Yuri shook his head, "I would've stopped you long ago if I thought that. You practically made me promise I would, remember?"

Viktor just smiled, "...Sure I do."

The younger man deadpanned in his mind, *He forgot...!*

"It was after I had formally asked you to marry me," Viktor went on, wracking his brain for the memory of it, though trying to make it seem like he knew it by heart, "When I was still trying to get you used to us actually being a couple, rather than just together in the same place. Everything we did in public after we'd gotten to Barcelona for the Final was hardly unorthodox, even for people who were just very good friends, but you seemed to back off a little after our rings got everyone thinking we were married already."

Yuri listened quietly, watching the Ice Castle getting closer with each step.

"You were trying to keep things the same as they had been since before then, almost trying to regress our relationship to the moment right before I'd kissed you at the Cup of China. I was really worried that you were trying to back out entirely when you told me the night before the Free Skate that we should 'end it.'"

The younger man felt a flurry in his gut at the memory of it.

*It was the first time I'd ever seen Viktor cry... He really took it hard... I still feel bad about it.*

"I couldn't understand why you would say something like that after giving me this ring." The
Russian continued, holding that hand out in front of him and splaying his fingers to get the best look at the gold band, "That was the moment I knew you didn't accept us as actually engaged. Then, right before your last Free Skate, when I was sure you were about to kiss me...only to slip by my face and go for my shoulder instead, I practically cried more for the missed opportunity than I had for the anxiety of seeing you off for your last performance. I struggled to reconcile my interest in coming back to competition because it felt like if I did, you would've actually sent me back to Russia over it. But when I saw you skate, and then heard your score...I thought, maybe this will be enough to keep you in the game alongside me. If you won gold, you wouldn't want to stop, so I said I'd come back to encourage you to want to keep going."

"...Mh..."

They were finally at the base of the concrete steps that leads up to the Ice Castle's outer doors.

"So even after you had gold stolen right out of your hands after that, I could think of only one way that would solidify it in your mind that I wasn't just going to leave you over some skating thing. I had to convince you that we were really engaged...that we would actually get married, and be true husbands, not just SkateHusbands." Viktor went on, remembering more of it as he told the story of his perspective, reaching up from where he'd had his arm behind Yuri's shoulders to run his fingers through the younger man's soft black hair, "That's why I wouldn't kiss you again until you kissed me first, and then spent the next couple weeks getting you used to the idea of us really being a couple before I ever dared to do anything more. I wanted to be sure you were willing because you wanted to, not just because you were too scared to say no to me."

Yuri reached out for the door to push it open, and they stepped inside the Ice Castle, spotting Yuuko on the other side of the counter just beyond the second set of doors. Viktor paused though before they could set off the motion sensor and cause them to slide apart.

The younger man looked back at him.

"I slowly acclimated you to the idea of being my true fiancé, to the point where I could get you to want to be intimate with me, by assuring you I'd never step over the line and do something, or make you accept something, that you weren't willing to. So even though it took weeks and months to get to that point...it was only because I made it clear that I would never intrude on your feelings, make you feel unsettled, and give you reason to push me away."

Yuri knew what the man was referring to, and nodded slightly. The words rested in his mind, giving him pause for a moment as he reflected on them. Viktor could tell the wheels were turning, and waited to move again. It didn't take long though, as he watched his husband turn to face him, and rise up slightly on the toes of his shoes to kiss him. He felt his husband's right hand come up to gently rest against the side of his neck, so he slipped both of his own hands to settle on the shorter man's sides, enjoying the kiss immensely.

"...Thank you, for that." Yuri said finally, close enough to still feel Viktor's lips as he spoke, "I know it must've been frustrating for you to wait so long for me to catch up."

"It was worth it."

"...And yet, it isn't over yet, is it?" Yuri said, slipping back down off his toes to stand normally.

Viktor blinked at him, but then realized and smiled, "You still have a shred of Philos that makes it difficult for you to get past your old views of me. Maybe it's because I'm overall slightly bigger than you are and it just seems awkward...maybe it's because I'm more of an extrovert and you an introvert, or maybe it's because your Philos just doesn't want me to stop being who I used to be to you,
but...eventually, maybe...you'll be more comfortable. I'm not setting a timeline for you though. Even if it takes 20 years for you to want to take me the way I take you, that's fine. I want you to be happy, and do what makes you happiest, even if that means you never want to have me that way. Some people are content to never go that far, and if it makes you uncomfortable to even think about it, who am I to say you're wrong? All I can tell you is that I hope you're willing to consider it again one day, and forget the mistake I made after asking you to take me that first time, and then acting like it was nothing after. Trust me, it wasn't nothing. I may not have thought it felt good at the time, but how long did it take for you to think it did?"

"...That one time on the couch back in Russia, when I asked what you did differently..." Yuri admitted, "Maybe it was just the position, but...I've never felt something so intense before. I haven't felt anything like it since though, so I still don't know what you did."

Viktor smiled at him, "Thinking back, I know what it was." He leaned in close and whispered it into his husband's ear, then leaned back again, "I'll do my best to make it happen again, and I want to feel it too some day, okay? Only you can help me do that."

Yuri's face was red, and he was about to say something, but felt a sudden buzz in his back pocket, completely derailing his train of thought. Viktor just laughed at it, and watched as his partner pulled the device out reluctantly to see what had so rudely interrupted him.

[Are you guys going to come inside or just stand in the entrance hall all day?]

Yuri looked up in confusion, but then glared through the door to see Yuuko waving at him.
The pair finally went into the main atrium and greeted the woman behind the counter, seeing through the next set of doors that there was still a class of young teens on the ice. Even a month later, most of the wedding party decorations in the arena were still up, though the smaller hanging tapestries featuring more personal shots of Viktor and Yuri as a couple had been furled up, leaving the ones specific to skating as inspiration to those just starting to learn how.

"It'll only be about half an hour before they're done, if you want the ice to yourselves." Yuuko explained, "But I doubt anyone will tell you that you can't skate until they leave."

"It's fine, we'll just do laps for a while or something." Viktor said, stepping away to kick his shoes off by the benches just in front of the doors.

"Yuu-chan...take a look!" Yuri continued, pulling his backpack off to set it on the counter and show off its contents, "Viktor just gave these to me!"

"Wooooooow~!" She swooned, "They have gold-plated blades! That's SO COOL!"

"Mh!"

"We should post a picture!" Yuuko went on, hopping across the counter to shove Yuri and his things over to where Viktor was already tying the laces on one of his skates, "Go on! Put them on! GIRLS!"

Yuri's cheeks were pink, but he nodded and went to do just that, having his new skates on just moments after his husband. The triplets were in there soon after, and when they spotted the gleaming yellow-orange metal, they immediately started getting out their gear in an excited fangirl blur.

Viktor watched them happily, but then twisted on the bench to lift one leg over it and set it on the floor on the other side, then reaching for his left skate to pull the guard off, "Yuri, copy me."

The younger man watched him to figure out what he meant, but then nodded and did so, then slipping in close to spoon against his husband's back where they sat on the bench together. His arms went around Viktor's sides and clasped over his stomach, and he hugged him tightly, "Thank you, thank you!"

"You're a World Champion gold medalist, so your blades should show it to everyone." Viktor explained, leaning back into him as he lifted his leg up to rest the display-blade on the bench in front of him.

Yuri lifted his own skate as well, setting the heel-blade just below his husband's knee on the bench, turning to face the triplets' cameras. For once, he was actually excited to have pictures taken, practically beaming with pride over his new skates.

viktuuri
[photo]

viktuuri Check out the new Nikiforov bling!
#newskates #weddinggifts #SkateHusbands #GoldMedalsGoldBlades #WorldChampions #IceCastleHasetsu #v-nikiforov #y-nikiforov
They quickly put their guards back on and went to look at the new post as they headed to rink-side, already seeing hundreds of likes and dozens of comments even just those few seconds later.

"Sheesh, you'd think some of these people never get away from their phones when they respond this fast." Yuri commented, thunking his way through the open glass doors.

"That's just the people who happened to be on Instagram at the time. People will be filtering in for hours afterward." Viktor said, stating the obvious.

People on the ice looked up quickly when they heard the familiar voices, and many of them stopped what they were doing to wave or holler at the pair, getting all the more excited as Viktor acknowledged them happily. Yuri was still looking down at his phone, only to suddenly feel a light whop against his stomach, and he quickly waved at the other skaters so it wouldn't happen again.

"...I was going to say hi to them, I swear..." Yuri pleaded quietly, putting his phone away as they got to the rink door, his free hand on the spot where Viktor had thumped him.

"I'm going to have you ready for the attention by the start of the GP Series, Yuri." His husband explained with a wink, "I fully expect that I'm going to get to be jealous sometimes after you learn to love your fans."

"Why would you wish that on yourself?" Yuri wondered dubiously, "Being jealous is awful."

"You have to learn to be flattered by it, too." The Russian explained, pulling off the blade guards and setting them onto the rink wall, "After all, whatever attention you give and receive in public is nothing like what happens when it's just us."

"So you see me as a carrot on a stick when it comes to the crowds?"

"Of course!" Viktor purred, "I get to dangle you in front of everyone, and give them a taste, only to yank you back and get to keep you all to myself...and sometimes..." He turned back as Yuri followed him onto the edge of the ice, slipping one gold-plated skate blade between the others and getting close, putting his thumb against his husband's lower lip, "...I even like to be jealous, because it just makes me want you more later."

"It's a little different to get attention from fans than it is to get attention from you though." Yuri said quietly, setting his hands flat against his partner's lithe frame where they stood so close together, "Mikhail made a point about it the day before he went back to Russia."

"Oh?"

"Mh." Yuri nodded, "Loving a celebrity is nothing like loving someone you actually know. I don't ever really feel jealous when the fans throw themselves at you, not like that anywy."

"Even after I told you one of my past girlfriends was a fan to begin with?"

"Yeah."

Viktor just laughed hard at that, just like back when he laughed at Yurio in the past, "That's a lie! You get super jealous! Remember that ticket agent in Helsinki!?"

Yuri gawked, his cheeks a little pink as he watched Viktor starting to skate backward from him, though still staying close, "...That was only because her antics were holding up the line and I didn't want people to hate us for delaying things."
"Pfft." The Russian scoffed, "You're too comfortable in knowing I'm faithful."

"...Are you saying you think I'm not?" Yuri raised a skeptical eyebrow.

Viktor immediately had his hands up and waving around defensively, "No no no no!" He quickly skated close and put his arms around Yuri's head, stroking his hair affectionately, "You're so loyal, I have a hard time even imagining you pining after someone else. You waited for me for half your life, why would you suddenly cast me aside for someone else?" Yuri was still side-eyeing him, "My point was that sometimes envy can be fun, just like when you won gold at Worlds and I had to look up at you from the silver podium. It might've stung a little, but it was so much more rewarding to see you on top of the world that I actually kind of liked the burn."

"...And if Yurio had won gold instead of me?"

"Oh, I would've thrown him off the podium and put you in his place." Viktor said immediately.

Yuri just laughed at the mental image of it, "I can see that."

The Russian nodded happily, then took his husband's hand to start skating the slow laps they'd spoken of earlier, "Mh. As soon as this class is off the ice, let's do your Short Program from the top. We've settled things with Yurio, but we're still going to beat him."

By the end of May, a month after the realtor had been hired, the perfect small house had finally been found, located only about twice as far away from the Ice Castle as Yu-Topia had already been. The process of closing the sale had finally force the pair to merge their bank accounts, since it bothered Yuri to no end to think that Viktor was paying for the whole thing himself, even if, at the time, it was only a withdrawal from the money that had already been earmarked from the check Mikhail had given them for the old house.

"At least let me think I'm sort of helping to pay for it." Yuri had said, "I don't want you to feel like I'm riding the coat-tails of all the money that keeps falling on you."

"I would never think that, but I guess this is as good an excuse as any to pool our resources like a normal married couple."

"We are a normal married couple."

"Exactly! So stop worrying."

"...We're still merging our assets, right?"

"Of course!"

Mikhail had initially returned to St. Petersburg after the wedding party to empty out the former Nikiforov household, shipping it all swiftly to Japan once given the all-clear that there was somewhere for it to get shipped to. It was what precipitated his first return trip to Hasetsu with the blond teen.

"This is actually a nice little place you guys found." He'd commented, arriving with the freight. The
house had a decent view of the sea on its north face, with a balcony on the second floor to make good use of it, "Pity there's not really a yard though."

"There's a park nearby." Yuri explained, "Makkachin will be fine."

"Do you have enough furniture to fill this place, nephew?"

Viktor shrugged, "If I don't, we can get more stuff. I haven't had a second floor before though so I'm sure we'll bring in some new things."

"You actually have a guest room now, too." Yurio pointed out, "Don't fill it with all your crap if you want to use it for what it's meant for."

"We won't!" Yuri insisted, "We're going to keep all our current skating junk upstairs, but my family is letting us keep the excess in the banquet hall at Yu-Topia."

"I'm staying here tonight." Yurio said simply.

"Nope, you're staying at the resort." Viktor answered, patting the teen on the head affectionately.

"What? Why? You guys aren't even going to be there so it'll be boring."

"This is our new house. We're breaking it in tonight. Loudly, and in every room."

Both Yuris' faces were bright red.

"...Every room?"

"Gross, Viktor...gross."

Mikhail laughed hysterically at the sight of them, "Wow, that was subtle." He reached up to wipe a tear away.

Two weeks after that, Yurio had finally been allowed back onto the Russian team, and one more week later, the end of June, Lilia had even agreed to come back as his choreographer. She'd learned he'd been helping teach younger kids how to skate during down-time, something he couldn't have been bothered with before. The mandated therapy that Yurio's 'sponsor' had required had also started to have its desired effect, and the teen's parents' complete disinterest in his skating had finally stopped being so much of a focus for him. Their absence was noted, but Yurio divorced himself from the need for their acknowledgement, and went on to accept it from others instead. He'd even made a second trip to Hasetsu at the end of the first week of July with Mikhail to get the SkateHusbands' input on his Short Program.

"Three of my old sponsors even came back once they heard Yakov let me back on the team." Yurio explained during one of his breaks, "I'm sure the rest will come back, too, once the GP Series starts up and I'm back in top form. I'm sure I'll medal even if all three of us are in the same event before the Final."

Yuri happily rested his arm on the teen's shoulder where they waited against the rink wall, "It's really going to be great to see you back to your old self. The start of the New Year was really unkind to you, but things are finally starting to settle down."

"Mh." Yurio nodded, "Lilia even had me move back in with her, so my grandpa could go back to Moscow again. I feel better about it all now that I know he isn't going to be alone when I'm at competition."
The third visit to Japan had been in late July, but it had mostly been for Mikhail's sake, with Yurio as something of an (insistent) tag-along. It had only been for a weekend, but when they were about to leave for Russia again, there was an unexpected guest going back with them. Unexpected, at least, for the Russian Tiger.

"What is it with you two anyway?" Yurio grumbled, gawking at the pair while waiting at the airport in Fukuoka, "It's weird."

"Weird?" Minako replied, sitting sideways so she could casually rest one arm over the older man's shoulder, "What's weird about it?"

"Are you a couple or not? Make up your minds. Goddamn."

Mikhail huffed at him teasingly, "Maybe it's more fun to make you wonder."

"It's annoying!"

"Why?"

"Because if you are then it changes things!"

"...Not really." Mikhail shrugged, shifting in his seat a little, "I'm your sponsor, not your dad."

"The way you hang around, you might as well be! Christ!"

"Calm down." The elder held his hands out to gesture the idea, "Or is that your subtle way of saying you want me to adopt you, too?"

"I never said that!"

"Oh, you like Viktor and Yuri being your SkateDads more, huh?"

"I NEVER SAID THAT." Yurio was getting visibly uncomfortable, much to the pair's entertainment, "This trip to Moscow is gonna be so damn weird because of you guys, ugh. How long are you going to be there anyway?" He turned green eyes to the woman.

Minako blinked at him, "...I dunno, a few weeks? Other than going for Yuri's competitions, I haven't been out of Hasetsu in years. Might as well make the most of it if I'm leaving at all, right?"

"And where are you staying?"

"At Mikhail's condo? Where else would I stay when I don't speak or read Russian?"

"YOU GUYS ARE SO CONFUSING."

"You'll live."

No one was really sure what it meant, since neither Mikhail nor Minako was willing to clearly define it. A few days into their stay in the capital, Yurio ended up fleeing back to St. Petersburg alone just to get away from it, throwing himself into his skating so as to stop being the super-awkward third wheel all the time.

In mid August, when Minako had returned to Japan, Mikhail had lasted maybe a week before he packed up the teen and was right back in Hasetsu again.

"...You don't have to come with me, you know." The Russian elder said, standing outside Lilia's
expansive household where Yurio was struggling with his bags.

"If you go to Hasetsu, I go to Hasetsu. I don't care why you're going." The teen answered.

"Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned it then."

"Yeah, and the first time I see Viktor or Yuri post a pic with you in it, I'll know you're there without me and."

"I know, I know...if I go, you go, I get it."

"Don't dawdle too long, Yuri Plisetsky." Lilia said behind him, arms crossed as she watched him heave his things into the back of Mikhail's rental car, "Viktor Nikiforov's input on your programs isn't going to help you win the Grand Prix...only hard work will."

"Y-Yes ma'am." The teen shrunk a little, "I don't intend to show them the Free Skate you've created until I'm using it against them in competition."

And finally...Viktor had eventually, after many weeks of effort, a lot of frustration, many failed attempts and even nearly giving up, trained his younger husband to enjoy the 'taking.'

"I can still do all the moving if it's easier for you." He offered, lying next to his husband. He could see Yuri's face getting red though, but the younger man shook his head. Viktor was confused, "What do you mean?"

"...I...don't want you to have to do anything." Yuri answered, "I'm just nervous..."

"Why? I've been hounding you for weeks about this."

"And I know from personal experience that the process is uncomfortable for a long time."

"So enlighten me as to why you let me do it?"

Yuri sat up, even though his husband still had him in his hand, "...Because...I knew you liked it...and I didn't know how else to please you."

"Don't you remember what I said about how I wanted to know what it felt like to experience this the same way you do?" Viktor pointed out, finally withdrawing his hand since it was difficult to reach from his angle.

"...Of course I do..."

"So why do you deny me?"

Yuri sighed, "I just don't know if I can do it as well as you can."

"...Because I would know what it feels like to take myself from behind." Viktor teased, tapping his husband's back with his fingers with a huff of a laugh, "C'mon, Yuri...I know you liked it a little bit when you did it before...even if you had to clench your eyes shut."

The younger man quickly turned back to gawk at him, "I-I'm sorry! I didn't mean...to upset you..."

"What?" Blue eyes blinked at him, "...I know you're not imagining someone else, so what's the problem?"

Yuri had no words. He was just stalling for nerves at that point.
Viktor could tell, and so he rose up from where he'd been lying down and reached over for the warming liquid on the nightstand, got some in his palm, and then leaned onto his husband's back to retake him in his hand again, "If you're worried I'm just going to fake it to make you feel better...I swear that I won't. But I want you to feel as good as I do, and when you don't want to take me, it makes me feel like I'm derelict in my duties as a spouse. Remember what I said in Barcelona? You're the only person in this world that I enjoy being under. Let me show my love for you in this way, Yuri."

The younger man was losing himself in his husband's handling, but his words still pierced their way through. He drew in a deep breath and then lifted his head where it had drooped a little, and turned to where the Russian had perched his chin on his right shoulder, "...All right...

Viktor's eyes closed as he smiled, and pulled off his partner's back to reach for a pillow and lay on his stomach with his arms around it, watching excitedly as Yuri started to move behind him. He waited for some signal to position himself differently, keeping his sights on the younger man out the corner of his eye, past his own shoulder, but realized that maybe it would be better to just let Yuri figure it out for himself, and stayed quiet.

Yuri was debating how to proceed, sitting on his knees between where the Russian's legs curled up on either side of him. He reached his hand over to touch the back of Viktor's thigh, and started inching his way forward, eventually putting both of his hands knuckles-down into the bed-sheets on either side of the man's hips. Viktor continued to watch and wait. He felt Yuri kissing the back of his shoulders before anything else, his hair tickling his skin as he moved down a little bit, then at least finally pressing his hips against him. As he felt Yuri sliding up slowly and then down again, trying to get his courage, Viktor pressed back into him to encourage it wordlessly. A few hesitant moments later, Yuri gently eased inside him, pressing himself flat against Viktor's back like it would somehow distract from what else he was doing.

"Mnh..." The Russian breathed into the pillow he'd grasped.

Yuri was gone again.

"YURI." He craned his head around, "You've done this before!"

"But you just-"

"I make noises! Lots of them! Frequently!"

"But-"

"YES. THAT. NOW." He pushed himself back again, this time crossing his ankles behind Yuri and shoving him forward to make his point, and keeping him there firmly, awkward an angle as it was.

The younger man finally resigned himself, and placed himself again as he was told, though no matter what he did, he couldn't finish. Viktor even flipped over again to face his husband with his ankles crossed behind his back, thinking maybe really seeing him would help, but it hardly did a thing. Yuri eventually gave up, exhausted from his effort, and Viktor had to finish them both on his own.

They tried again two nights later, and while Yuri had at least done enough to get his husband over the edge, he himself was unable to despite Viktor's best efforts.

The following three days, Viktor wouldn't even let Yuri attempt it, thinking it would just bruise his ego. He did his best to please this man without expecting anything else in return. He was getting the
feeling that his husband was beginning to dread their intimacy, because every time they started, Yuri would get reluctant whenever it seemed like it was about to be 'his turn.' Viktor simply stopped asking. While Yuri's 'Eros' had done his best to learn and won a few meager battles, his 'Philos' had won the war.

It went on like that for half the summer, until finally, when the Russian had already gotten used to the idea that it would be that way forever...Yuri had found some liquid courage and took him of his own free will, and somehow enjoyed it enough to finish them both himself. It was the turning-point Viktor had been waiting for. A few weeks later, Yuri had even managed to beat his 'Philos' into submission, and was able to look his husband in the eyes even while inside him. By then, the process had even stopped being uncomfortable for the Russian, and they were each able to enjoy the other fully and equally.

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The end of August had finally rolled around, and the Grand Prix Series assignments had finally been posted. Viktor and Yuri had promised not to look so the triplets could do their great unveiling like they had the previous year, and they did their best to remain ignorant. Viktor had even gone so far as to temporarily uninstall the Instagram app from his phone so he wouldn't run the risk of accidentally finding out while looking at other peoples' posts.

"Okay!" Axel started, her sisters ready behind her with the massive illustration boards, "Time to unveil the events!"

"Starting with the first skaters and the first event...Yuri and Yuri! You're both going to Skate Canada at the end of October! It's going to be in Calgary, Alberta!" Loop added.

Lutz revealed the cards and their crayon drawings upon them, colorizing the reveal with Calgary Stampede and hockey imagery.

"Mmhh...Skate Canada again...that fucker JJ be-" Yurio started.

"Language." Yuri and Yuuko cut him off with a look, reminding the teen that there were kids in the room.

"...That particularly annoying Canadian guy, JJ, better not be there..."

Yuuko nodded approvingly.

"Not to worry, Yuri." Loop said, "He'll be at Skate America and the Rostelecom Cup."

"And none of these guys will be?" Mikhail wondered, sipping at some plum Sake that Viktor had gotten him to try.

"You'll see!" The triplets said together.

"Next is Viktor!" Axel continued, "Mid November, you're going to Trophée de France! You'll be facing Plisetsky here as well! This event is being held in Bordeaux!"

The illustration cards featured the Eiffel Tower and various other French imagery, like mimies and bread and wine.
"Ohh...not even Paris this time? Wow~!" Viktor mused, "We'll have to go sightseeing after it's over. Paris is too much fun to miss." He said, leaning onto Yuri's back casually where they sat by one another in the common room.

"You won't have much time, since Yuri's next event is five days later at the Cup of China in Shanghai!" Axel warned, "You don't want to be jetlagged, so fly as soon as you can!"

"I'll be jet-lagged anyway, flying from here to France... Those events are going to be rough, back to back like that." Yuri whined comically.

"We could go to France early then." Viktor suggested, "Go there right from Calgary so we can be tourists beforehand, like how we went to Barcelona before Worlds."

"Ah! Yeah, that sounds great!" Yuri was excited about it, then turned back to the triplets, "But chronologically, that leaves only the NHK Trophy for Viktor, before the Final."

"Correct!" Lutz explained, "That one will be in Sapporo, Japan!"

"Where's the Final this year?" Viktor wondered.

The triplets all grinned at each other, and pulled the last card off to reveal the location, "DETROIT!"

Yuri's eyes lit up, and he turned his head excitedly to exchange happy glances with his husband, then turning to the girls again with a determined look on his face, ",...I'm going to win gold in my old stomping grounds."

Viktor hugged him and nuzzled his cheek with his own, "Yes~!"

Yurio just gawked at them.
"Okay, Makkachin...absolutely no sticky buns this time." Viktor explained, crouching down in front of his dog where they waited in front of Yu-Topia. He held the poodle's front paws in his hands tenderly, but then let them go and leaned in to hug the pupper. Makkachin could tell his human was going to be gone for a while and whined, flopping down onto his back in a bid to keep him there. Viktor gave it a scratch, but then stood up and drew in a deep breath.

"Good luck, boys." Hiroko said, stepping forth from the open doors, and pausing at the base of the step, "We'll see you all again after the Japanese event."

"Bye everyone!" Yuri waved.

As usual, the flight was exhausting, even though they'd flown in first or business class to make it as comfortable as possible. There were two layovers though, which wiped Yuri out entirely; one in Tokyo, and another in Seattle.

"That's what you get for insisting on saving money." Viktor teased, "We could've skipped the US layover."

Yuri was too asleep to hear him, sprawled out over the bench in the waiting area. Viktor looked down at him and sighed, shaking his head as he took a spot next to him and pulled out his phone.

_I guess there's nothing else to do but wait until he wakes up..._

He poked around on Instagram for what felt like forever, seeing several posts multiple times before realizing it was because he'd seen them before, not because they were being posted by multiple people. He'd even stumbled onto a video feature for the Skate Canada event, which he had actually avoided looking at previously for lack of time (and also because he promised he wouldn't.) Coaching and practicing had taken up the bulk of his attention for the last several months, as well as the reality of his final year in competition weighing in at the back of his mind.

..._I could go another year after this...but..._

He shook his head and clicked into the video, stroking his husband's hair where he'd set his head against his lap to use as a pillow.

The screen was white, and the logo for Skate Canada 'folded' itself onto the screen; a simple text image with a render of the Canadian maple leaf. When it folded itself off again, different letters bled onto the white background like ink from under a piece of paper, revealing the words 'PARTICIPANTS...'

Three photos appeared after that, and to Viktor's delight, saw an image of Yuri from Worlds there in
the center, with two other skaters on either side. The 'slideshow' went on to show several other skaters for the Men's Singles event, until it finally stopped to focus on each one individually.

NIKIVOROV
YURI
JAPAN

The Japanese flag came up on the bottom left, and Yuri's image came in again in the center, this time showing one of his Duetto photos. More text appeared to the right of the photo.

'Last season, Yuri broke the world Free Skate record several times, setting the stage for an incredibly tense finale at the World Championships, where he set a new Total Score record with a jaw-dropping 346.03. Yuri joins an elite group of skaters whose total scores enter into the 300+ range. He is currently considered Japan's top skater, and also enjoys status amongst the world's all-time best skaters.'

The page flipped, and a new photo emerged, depicting an image of Yuri in his Firebird costume, but using the much-more-flattering Worlds Exhibition version, where he didn't look like he was about to have a coronary at any moment.

'Before last season, many would remember Yuri for not only his incredible spins and step sequences, but for how he was consistently dogged by his inability to land most of the more complicated jumps. It seems that he and his coach, five-time World Champion, Viktor Nikiforov, have solved this problem.'

The next image to come up was a composition featuring both of Yuri's final poses at the last GP Final in Barcelona...his collapse onto the ice after his Short Program, and his victory-cry after his Free Skate.

'Yuri is a true warrior. Despite his crash at the Sochi GPF 2 years ago, he came back to claim World Championship gold, and continues to fight until the end.'

The next photo showed both Yuri and Viktor. It was a shot from Four Continents, with Yuri facing the rink wall, having his shoulders rubbed while Viktor gave him some last words of advice before the Short Program. Viktor smiled at that.

'Though he is obviously a world leader at the moment, Yuri never stops improving himself. In September, he and his coach announced new programs for the coming season, which include 3 quads in his SP (4S+3L, 4Lz, 4F) and 5 quads in his FS (4T, 4L, 4S+3T, 4Lz, 4F) - both incredibly difficult programs, especially in light of the fact that he fainted at the end of his Worlds FS performance, where he unexpectedly did 5 quads for the first time.'

The photo switched again to show his Worlds medaling ceremony, with Viktor and Chris on either side.

'The only way Yuri can lose is if he makes some huge mistakes. For the most part, he is entirely unmatched in all of his GPS events, so his only rival is himself.'

"Sheesh, I better not let him see this...or Yurio..." Viktor laughed weakly.

The video finally moved on the other skaters, but Viktor had already seen what he wanted. It seemed like serendipitous timing after that, since as soon as he clicked off his phone, an announcer overhead called out for the boarding process to begin for the final leg to Calgary. Viktor reached down to wake his husband gently, stroking his hair and whispering in his ear.
"Neh neh, Yuri...time to go."

The younger skater snorted as he woke up, looking around blearily to reorient himself, "...Wh...really? Already? Didn't we just get here?"

Viktor smiled and shook his head as he stood up, "You're in the Twilight Zone...it's been 2 hours. You ready for the final leg?"

Yuri just rubbed his eyes and yawned, then finally pushed to stand, "...I think so... I can't wait for teleportation machines though...these flights are brutal..."

With two full days to recover from the flight, Yuri was in fighting form by the morning of the Short Program. However, the whole thing reminded him of Rostelecom the year before, where other than Yurio, he really didn't know any of the other skaters. It made it easy to take the whole thing more seriously than he normally would, where he'd otherwise be stuck wanting to win the event on top of wanting his friends to win as well.

SP practice had been simple, practicing the triples and quads he needed to land, taking a half-nap in the prep area while other skaters did their shows, and doing a brief interview to discuss whether or not he'd lost his mind to put 3 quads into a 2.5 minute performance.

"I've done it a hundred times at this point." Yuri explained, his new outfit entirely hidden under his full track-suit, "Viktor and I worked really hard to perfect this one so the show isn't just a jump-fest. I think everyone will really like it."

"How do you feel about the Series assignments? You won't be competing against Viktor at all unless you both make it to the Final." A reporter asked.

"Oh, we'll both be going to the Final, I have no doubt about it." He answered, showing the same burning confidence he'd had when he'd revealed his theme the previous year, "The lead-in events will be pretty relaxed by comparison...but once the Final arrives, I think we're all going to have to buckle in for a ride."

"Oh, wow...Yuri's really fired up." Yuuko said, watching the interview on the television in Yu-Topia's common room.

"He was really in a slump there for the first half of summer for some reason, but after that, he really started taking everything super seriously." Hiroko explained.

"Has he ever seemed so sure of himself?" Toshiya wondered, sitting next to his wife, seeing the fire in his son's eyes like it had gone from a mere ember to a raging maelstrom, "I wonder what happened."

The interview continued, "What about Yuri Plisetsky? We've seen the reports that he's gone back to Hasetsu numerous times during the off-season, mostly since being reinstated on the Russian Team. Can you comment on that?"

"Mh." Yuri nodded, "Most of his trips weren't for skating reasons, but he did swing by once to get pointers on his Short Program. He refused to show us his Free Skate, so we're both looking forward
to seeing it this weekend."

"Can you tell us a little about your Short Program?"

Viktor slipped into the frame suddenly to whisper something into his ear, then waved politely before pulling back out of the shot again. Yuri turned to face the camera, "Looks like I'll be showing you instead. I'm up after the next skater."

The interviewers cut away from the skater to focus on themselves for the television audience, but the Katsuki clan could still see Yuri walking off in the background.

Coach Viktor slipped his arm around Yuri's back as he got closer to the rink-side entrance, holding back the curtain to let him through and follow after.

"No one's gotten over 90 yet." He explained.

"How many were there?"

"Eleven have gone up so far. It's just you and five others now."

"The score for Helmute Knabe...89.25."

"Still not over 90. This will be easy." Yuri said, crossing his arms loosely over his chest as he looked out over the ice.

Viktor just gawked at him, his jaw a bit slack.

Yuri turned his eyes over at him, "What's the matter? I scored over 90 the first time I did Eros last year."

"...This will be easy? You're getting really confident." The Russian said.

"...O...kay..? Is that bad?"

"On the contrary. It's really hot." Viktor was smirking behind the poodle-plush tissue box as he held it up to his face, "I wish I could bottle it and sell it for a premium."

"Hah..."

"Next to take the ice...representing France...Fleurent Beaumont!"

"Yuri!" They both heard, turning their heads towards where the curtain had parted again and seeing the Russian Tiger coming out after them, "Shouldn't you be halfway onto the ice already? You haven't even gotten out of your track-suit yet."

"I was about to." The Asian skater reached his arm out to pull the teen into their customary greeting.

The speakers above them started to play the next competitor's music; Tears of the Sun. The athlete was a small figure, about 5'3", wearing body-hugging black leggings, a grey tunic, black straps across it, and a loose, sheer, wine-colored shirt with fringed cuffs.

As Yuri broke off to go pull his track-suit off, Viktor was looking around for his own former coach, "Where's Yakov?"

"He ran into Mikhail earlier. They're probably chatting like old ladies right now."
"I guess I'll find him when he comes out for your Short Program." He turned to where he spotted Yuri pulling the buttons apart on the side of his dark-colored track-suit leggings.

Seeing him there, Yuri handed the track pants to his coach; the pattern below was revealed to be dark as well, but with shimmering silver stripes with occasional breaks to reveal a little skin through sleek fishnet windows, similar to the long stripe that had gone down and around the left leg of the Eros outfit. These stripes were shorter though, like tiger-stripes across the outside of Yuri's thighs, fading away below the knee to just black.

"Putting on another sex show, Yuri?" The blond wondered with an eyebrow up, "You want a rose in your teeth, too?"

"Oh, that's a good idea~!" Viktor mused, nudging his husband with his elbow, "We should get one for you for Shanghai."

The skater's face was bright red at the thought of it, "...It's not a sex show, sheesh. Where do you guys come up with this stuff?"

"Let's see the rest of it, then."

Viktor stood back excitedly, oogling his husband even as he leaned comically against the teen's back, much to his annoyance, "Take it off, Yuri!"

"You two are making me all self-conscious now!" The skater protested.

The music above was coming to a close though, and he had no choice but to start unzipping his coat, turning his back to the gawking duo to avoid their prying eyes. Trying to out-wit them though, he let the coat stay over his arms, keeping the last little bit of the zipper clasped at the bottom, and then moving off towards the rink entrance about 20ft from the kiss and cry.

"Aw, he got all flustered..." Viktor whined, slouching heavily against Yurio now.

"Get offa me, idiot!" The teen protested, bucking like a wild horse, though still not shaking the older man.

"The score for Fleurent Beaumont...82.45."

"Ah...time to go..." Yuri whispered to himself, turning to where he spotted Viktor finally coming up to him, still grinning about the prior exchange.

"You ready?" The Russian asked, stopping just near the doorway so his partner could hand his blade-guards off, taking them in-hand just a moment before the pink-cheeked skater stepped onto the ice, came back around, and finally moved his hands up to pull his coat off.

Yuri nodded nervously, "Not sure what the butterflies are for though...skating, or showing off my outfit." He glanced sideways to see Yurio still watching him, and Viktor's hungry eyes on top of that, so he just closed his own and shrugged the jacket off without looking at anyone at all. He still heard Viktor whistle at him though as he bowed his head in embarrassment and jerked his arm out to give the jacket over.

The costume jacket that had finally been revealed was similar to the pants, but instead of fading to solid black at the end of Yuri's arms, the silver stripes became wider until they took over the whole of the sleeves, ending in black ruffles at the cuffs. The jacket was form-fitting to the skater's thin frame, open in the front and short-cut, the silver and black alternating stripes coming around his sides from the back to end just aside his abdomen. The decorative buttons on the front were black, going up in
two rows to where the black lapels came to a point. Under the jacket was a black shirt with a slight turtle-neck, and a zipper chain with a quarter-sized ring at the dip of his collarbone. Where it came down over the rim of the pants, it was trimmed in silver, matching the cut pattern of the jacket over top of it, and coming around to a point for the coat-tails in back.

The Russian gingerly took the track-suit coat and hung it over his own arm like always, and waited patiently as Yuri cleared his nose and handed the tissue over as well. Though Viktor took it into his gloved hand, he kept the hand out, extending his finger to stick it under his partner's down-turned chin and lift his face again. Blue eyes looked into brown, half-lidded with a happy-calm affect. Yuri looked back in anxious silence.

"I tease you because I love you." Viktor explained quietly, "But I do think the rose thing is a great idea~!"

Yuri deadpanned him, "You would."

The Russian sighed happily, but then shook his head and decided to get serious finally, "Okay, okay...it's time."

"Next to take the ice...representing Japan...Yuri Nikiforov!"

"You said that this program was supposed to be to sequel to 'Yuri on Ice,' but it's a lot more upbeat than YoI was. You've come a long way since that story was told, though. This isn't the sad story of a lonely warrior trying to find his way anymore...you've beaten all the odds and come out on top, learning from your mistakes, and growing with the love and support of those around you. Go show them what your love looks like now." Viktor said, his hands over his husband's where they rested on the rink wall. He gathered them up and pulled them close to his face, kissing the ring and then leaning forward to kiss the man himself. They closed their eyes and held for a moment, even amidst the wild cheering of the crowd, hearing the chants of 'Viktuuri' and 'good luck' in various languages. When they parted, Viktor leaned in to kiss him lightly a second time, then grabbed his shoulders to spin him around and leaned close to his ear, "Like you already said, this will be easy. You don't even have to take this one all that seriously. Drop the 3rd quad if you don't feel like it."

"I won't be a history maker if I don't up the ante." The skater said, tilting his head slightly to glance back at his husband, "I have to keep being worthy if you're going to pass the torch to me."

"You only need two quads to stay on par with me for the Short Program. But do as you like...just go have fun."

"Mh. I'm off."
CHAPTER NINETY THREE

The deafening cheering of the crowd came at him in waves as he made his slow and leisurely display, heading in lazy circles towards the center of the rink. He twizzled and rotated in a quick spin to loosen his back out a little, but then resigned himself to taking his position. His gold blades stuck out in stark contrast to the shimmering silver of his outfit, but he knew that would only draw the judges' eyes to his skates, forcing them to really look at his coming footwork.

The group at Yu-Topia watched eagerly, holding the same crowd of people as had been there at the Grand Prix Final the year before; Yuri's parents, the Nishigori clan, Minami Kenjirou, and various patrons who were there for the onsen anyway.

"Ganbaaaa, Yuri-kuuun!"

"You can do it, Yuri!"

"Skater Yuri Nikiforov is 24 years old, and comes to the ice as a former underdog who went from dead-last at the GPF 2 years ago, to silver last year, and taking the gold at the World Championship after that. His nearly-350 point overall score has left quite a few skaters feeling rather intimidated...but Yuri doesn't seem to be letting it get to him...he even has three quads planned for this program, something most other skaters don't even try for in their Long Programs. The weight of Japan's hopes and dreams is riding on this young man's shoulders...can he keep it up?"

Yuri took in a deep breath, and set his skates slightly apart beneath him, his hands slightly up with his palms facing away from him. The music began.

Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh

He raised his right hand up as his left skate twisted in an arc behind him to turn him around, bringing the hand down again as he spun.

Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh

His blades sang across the ice in a reverse thrust, his arms making slow gestures.

Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh

He kicked his left leg around and jerked around twice.

Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh

The beat began, and Yuri's first jump sent him flying through the air; the triple axel.

I messed up tonight, I lost another fight, I still mess up but I'll just start again.

He slowed down with the tempo of the music, swiveling into a semi-step-sequence, listening to the sound of the audience starting to clap and stomp their feet to the beat.

I keep falling down, I keep on hitting the ground, I always get up now to see what's next.

Yuri spun off and paused, swiveling his hips and side-clapping his hands before taking off again.
Viktor watched the show intently with Yurio close by, tapping his arm with his fingers just like the audience. Yuri was about to enter the first spin, and the more of his moves timed in with the music, the more the crowd got excited.

_I won't give up, no I won't give in, 'til I reach the end and then I'll start again_

"Combination spin...one of Skater Yuri's trademark moves."

No, I won't leave, I wanna try everything, I wanna try even though I could fail.

"Here comes the first quad..." Newscaster Morooka said excitedly to the television audience.

Yuri threw himself high, spun four times, landed, then threw himself again.

"Quad Salchow, triple Loop! He's putting on his A-Game! His coach, Viktor Nikiforov, doesn't even seem to be worried at all!"

As though the fact that Viktor had half-started dancing along with the music wasn't enough of a clue. Yurio was trying to be cool though, ignoring him.

_I won't give up, no I won't give in, 'til I reach the end and then I'll start again_

To those in the home-audience, they could tell that the Russian was doing what he could to replicate the easy parts of Yuri's program off the ice.

No, I won't leave, I wanna try everything, I wanna try even though I could fail

"Now, the flying camel spin."

Yuri broke out of it for another nod to his presentation score, leaping into the camel spin with gusto.

_Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh_
Try everything
_Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh_
Try everything

He hopped and built up speed again on the other foot.

_Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh_
Try everything

He reached for the ridge of his blade with one hand and kept spinning, soon stretching to bring the blade over the top of his head, holding there for several rotations until he could let it go and raise his arm up in its place.

_Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh_

"Huh, I didn't know he could bend that far." Yurio commented as he saw the move.

"The blade-grab was the hardest thing he's worked on this summer." Viktor explained, "He would get super dizzy lifting his head up when he was still spinning. Almost ran his face into the rink wall again...it was funny and terrible all at once."

_Look how far you've come, you filled your heart with love, baby, you've done enough, take a deep breath._
Yuri slid across the ice in an Ina Bauer, then spinning back around again to pick up speed.

*Don't beat yourself up, don't need to run so fast, sometimes we come last, but we did our best.*

The shimmering silver blur came to an abrupt stop, sending shards of ice flying. He then cracked the ice three times with his right skate in time with the last 3 beats, then flew off again in another short twizzle to get to the other end of the rink.

"He really has the audience fired up today! This might be his most engaging program to date! Go Yuri!"

Triple Toe-loop, single Salchow, triple Loop...Yuri was really starting to have fun with the program, easily able to push away the start of the burn in his legs.

*I still have two big jumps coming up...I can do it! Just like in practice!*

High up in the audience, the Triple M's were watching intently, Minako and Mari holding up their signs excitedly. Mikhail watched calmly as always, shaking his head and huffing a laugh to himself as he watched his nephew almost as often as he did Yuri.

*I won't give up, no I won't give in, 'til I reach the end and then I'll start again*

"It's the deep end of the Short Program, and Yuri's hardest two jumps are still coming up! He looks like he's got plenty of energy though!"

*No, I won't leave, I wanna try everything, I wanna try even though I could fail*

The skater moved out backwards along the longest length of the rink, dipping down with his left leg going straight into the air above him as he held close to the right, gliding nearly 20ft before rising up again to switch feet, kicked off...and watched as the ice flew away from him...rotated four times, and landed.

"He did it! A Charlotte spiral into a quad Lutz! This late in the program is just crazy! But he's not done yet!"

Viktor jumped and spun at the same time excitedly, clapping as he landed and grabbing Yurio into an enthusiastic hug. "Go Yuri! You're almost done!"

*I'll keep on making those new mistakes, I'll keep on making them every day,*

The younger figure slid across the ice in a wide outside spread-Eagle, spinning a few times at the end as he continued on, then paused.

*Those new mistakes*

Shoulder waggle.

*Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh  
Try everything*

*Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh  
Try everything*

He slid down to the center of the arena, pulling his hands up against his sides as he went.

*Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh*
Try everything

He blades whipped around, spinning his whole frame, lifting his left arm out behind him at an angle as the right went low before him. He quickly flipped the direction of his skates; this time employing a mohawk turn.

Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh

He raised his arms up to about horizontal, dug in his right toe-pick and kicked off with all the energy he had left.

The crowd was already screaming and cheering before he'd even heard himself land, and with the quad flip finished, he quickly wound down, spinning into a stop to enter the final pose; skates apart, left arm bent up towards his face, looking back over his shoulder...right at his coach.

Try everything.

Viktor was comically swinging Yurio from side to side and then back again, but then abruptly let him go to rush over to the kiss and cry. The disheveled teen watched him go in a daze, clambering back up to his feet by pulling himself up onto the rink wall.

That fucker, Viktor...! He grumbled in thought, his last sanctuary for swearing all he wanted.

Yuri heaved as he bowed to the audience, waving and trying to catch his breath at the same time.

I guess it's not so bad to accept the fans' freak-out at the end of a show when I think I did a good job...

He finally turned away from the cheers of the crowd and lazily skated over to the rink door, flopping into his husband's arms to get dragged away and hear his score. The Russian pat him on the back as he slipped the track-suit coat over Yuri's shoulders, and handed him his water bottle and skate guards.

"You looked pretty relaxed out there for this being your first event of the season." He commented, watching as the younger figure dumped some of the water on his head and slicked it back through his hair to cool off.

"Everything's different now." Yuri answered, reaching for the bench before sitting on it, his husband wiggling in next to him, "I've finally gotten over what happened in Sochi and learned to have fun again."

"It took you this long?"

Yuri shook his head, "I had this weird epiphany back at Worlds...this feeling...like I thought I would never fall again. When I'm on the ice now, it's like I'm flying more than skating..."

"Mh." Viktor nodded, "I know it."

They sat anxiously as the judges replayed the program and graded each move, tallied up their points and finally submitted them for the average. The pair sat in the kiss and cry for nearly 4 minutes before they finally heard the announcer overhead.

"The score for Yuri Nikiforov...108.25."

The audience was as much in shock as the skaters were.
Yuri practically choked on himself as he heard it, spewing water everywhere, "W-what!? I didn't even break 110!? But...why...?" He turned his head and looked to Viktor for answers, but even the Russian seemed perplexed by it.

"...Maybe we overdid it with three quads. Or maybe they're being extra harsh on you because of your records?" He offered, "After I set mine, it often took most of a season before the judges would score me normally again."

"But even just the technical aspects of my SP should've gotten me a higher value than that..."

"You can still win gold even if you didn't get the high numbers you were looking for."

The viewers at Yu-Topia could see the young skater deflating before their eyes. Viktor practically had to carry him off screen.

"Don't stress about it. This is the first show of the series...we all expect to do poorly until we're back in the right frame of mind."

"...Did I under-rotate? Lift off on the wrong foot? Did I mess up the Lutz and do a Flutz instead?" Yuri was grumbling to himself, unable to listen to anything but his own worrying, "Maybe I didn't do all 8 rotations in the spins...? I had to have messed up somewhere..."

"Yuri." The Russian said more firmly, slipping his arm over the young skater's shoulder to pull his head close, pressing his cheek to the side of Yuri's forehead and forcing his attention to shift, "Calm down. You still cleared the Short Program nearly 20 points higher than the second highest score. We'll figure out what happened later."

The skater just sighed and twisted in his husband's grasp, pressing his eyes to the man's shoulder like it was all he could do not to cry for the shame of it. Viktor just hugged him where he stood. He could see past Yuri's hair that the media mob was starting to close in on them, but he could feel his partner's shaky breaths and held his hand out to stop them.

"Not right now."

Yuuko recognized the posture even from as far away as the camera had been from the pair, and winced at the sight of it, "Yuri..."

"Those judges are on drugs!" Axel chortled, "Mom, why would they score him so low!? He did more than anyone could've asked! He should've gotten graded the same as Viktor's Worlds SP score, easy!"

"...There, look." The Madonna pointed at the screen, where it finally switched over to show the breakdown of the different elements, "He scored well on the Technical side of things, but his Program Components took a big hit. I guess the judges thought he spent too much time worrying about showing off his new skills than telling a story."

"...That's practically the opposite problem he used to have." Takeshi pointed out, reaching over Loop to take the notepad out of her hand so she'd stop trying to chew on it in frustration, "Hopefully he can fix it. Is his Free Skate the same way?"

"With five quads, I'm guessing it probably is..." Yuuko crossed her arms, "They don't have much time to fix it, but I'm sure they'll figure something out. Viktor will know what to do."

Yuri's grip on his coach's coat lapels was enough to make his knuckles white, but he kept them hidden with the rest of his small frame. He kept his eyes down against Viktor's shoulder to hide from
onlookers as well. There were a few tears, but he managed to stop them from going too far, and he drew a deep breath as he felt Viktor pulling him back again to look at him. To the Russian's surprise, Yuri had bitten down on the lanyard to his badge, so it pulled on his neck a little as he put some space between them; Yuri hadn't let it go yet, even as he did his best to avoid his husband's eyes.

"Don't be upset. You still scored really well! ...Being angry now will just throw off your game for the Free Skate."

Yuri nodded, but his eyes were still downcast.

"Yuri."

He just nodded again, like he wasn't listening that closely.

Viktor reached up for the lanyard hanging from his husband's lips, pulling on it a little, and then finally lifting it up to take the skater's gaze with it, but all he got was a disappointed look, "I know it was a burn. We'll swap the Flip at the end for the Lutz and take the extra quad out so you can put more effort into choreography elements."

"Swap the Flip for the Lutz?" Yuri was almost incredulous, but at least he was no longer fish-hooked on the badge, "But..."

"The Lutz is worth more than the Flip."

"But the Flip is your signature move...how can I just drop it?"

"Yes, my signature move. You want to be a history maker? Turn the Lutz into yours." The Russian explained, putting his hand aside his husband's face, gently stroking his cheek with his gloved thumb, "Stop trying to be me out there. Make your own mark on the ice."

Brown eyes just widened at him, staring for a moment before finally half-closing in understanding. He stepped closer and buried his face against his coach's neck, and snuck his arms into the man's coat to hug him.
Chapter 94

CHAPTER NINETY FOUR

Viktor watched his partner sulk for the entire rest of the day, try as the young skater might to take what was said to heart and not be bothered. Not even the praise offered by his sister, ballerina instructor, or uncle-in-law could pull him out of his dour mood. So the Russian stood by him quietly, watching as he picked at his food, then looked aimlessly at his phone, stared straight through fans who'd come up to acknowledge him, and be generally disconnected from everything.

*What could I say to him to get him back to normal? He's only had one event so far this whole season and he's acting like someone kicked his dog.*

He grimaced.

...*My dog...?*

That didn't help either.

...*Our dog?*

It was nearly midnight, and he turned his head a little from where he'd been looking at his own phone while sitting up in bed. Yuri was lying flat, staring at the ceiling like he was counting the popcorn-texture dots above him.

Viktor's phone buzzed in his hand quietly, getting his attention back.

[Is he still moping?]

The Russian sighed, bringing his knees up as he typed a reply to his uncle.

[He hasn't acted this defeated in a long time.]

[Wow.]

[Is he still awake?]

[Da. He's been staring at the ceiling for the last half hour. Hasn't said a word.]

[Have YOU said anything?]

[Not since we left the arena. I already said everything I could think of. It's like he's stuck in a feedback loop. I tell him something and he just...nods at me.]

[Yeah, he hasn't answered anyone's messages since dinner.]

[I don't think he ever turned his phone back on after the SP.]

"...Who are you talking to this late?" Yuri suddenly wondered, breaking the silence of the room.

Viktor looked over at him, but then handed the man his phone to he could see for himself.

Yuri took it with an odd look on his face, not having expected such a gesture, but when he read the last few snippets of the conversation, he clicked it off and handed it back, "Oh."
"Everyone's worried about you."

"...I don't want to think anymore."

"At the last Grand Prix, you were pushing yourself to the limits just to get over 100. Now you breeze past it like it's nothing and you're still dissatisfied." Viktor pointed out, picking up where Yuri had set the phone down on the blanket between them. He clicked open his camera app and snapped a photo of the deflated athlete, "...Hashtag #TopSkaterProblems?"

"You're not going to post that, are you?"

"No. I just wanted to say the tag out loud." Viktor teased, putting the phone down on the nightstand and then sitting back upright again, leaning over one knee held close to his chest, "But like I said before, this was the very first performance of the season for you. Not only are we fresh back to competition, but so are the judges. You just came off a World Championship with a score never before seen in skating...maybe they just wanted to humble you a little."

"And if they don't do the exact same thing to you in France?"

"They might. Won't know until we're there."

Yuri just groaned loudly and folded his arms over his face to cover his eyes, "I still can't believe that score I was given today. The judges might as well have just come out onto the ice and told me to stop skating in the middle of the thing." He twisted and pushed himself up onto his hands and knees, the blanket clinging to his back, only to shuffle in front of his husband and flop back down again, burying his face against the man's abdomen as the rest of him went between his legs.

Viktor pet the top of his head and looked at him quietly.

...Before I became his coach, anytime Yuri felt pressure, he'd just kowtow to whatever authority was there, like with Celestino and the music selection problem. Even with me...once it got to be too much, he'd just crumble and let things happen around him without taking any control over it.

He felt the younger man's body as it pressed against him with every breath, more so with a deep breath and the long exhale. He just kept stroking that soft raven hair in silence.

He was so excited about this Short Program. He was sure he'd be able to catch up with my Amnesia score with all the extra elements and jumps. I'm certain we didn't overlook anything with how the judging system works... There was never a rule that said skaters couldn't attempt more jumps than the minimum required. Extra jumps would only be marked at zero if they were the same jump done too many times, and Yuri didn't do any of the same jumps more than once, even in combination.

Yuri's arms slid along the sheets to wrap around his husband's waist and settled in the pillow-space behind his back. Another deep breath.

Having hoped for such a high score and then getting what he did...he feels utterly defeated right out of the gate. We have time to fix the Short Program before Cup of China, but what about his Free Skate? He hasn't even talked about it yet.

"I'll rework the program if you want me to." Viktor finally said, getting a tepid response in the form of a shrug. He scrunched his brow, "...Is that permission or dismissal?"

"I don't know what to do." The smaller figure said simply, "It was my idea to do the program this way. I was the one who insisted on more jumps. Having the whole thing thrown back in my face has kind of made me go numb."
"So let me fix it."

"...What would you do?"

"For now, strip it down to just what's required. A triple axel, three spins, one step sequence, a combo jump, a triple or quad jump with connecting steps, and nothing more."

"Half the program just evaporated then."

*Maybe I should put my foot down...*

Viktor lightly shook his head, "Yuri, flip over."

The reluctant skater sighed and pushed up to do as told, leaning his back and head against his husband's chest and looking back out into the room. Not liking what he saw, he raised his knees to block his line of sight, and folded his arms over his stomach to wait for the rest.

Viktor just wrapped his own arms around him, and pulled him a bit closer, enough so that he could nose the man's hair a little, "You said before that you were happy with the progress you'd made on the technical side of things, and that you wanted to focus on the elements you used to be known for. The spins, the steps, and presentation value of it all. It's admirable that you wanted to incorporate jumps into that idea, but the judges don't see it that way. They don't know you as well as your friends or family do, so they wouldn't be able to see the plot you're weaving with those jumps."

Yuri just listened, staring at the fibers of the blanket covering his legs.

"So take the SP down to its skeleton...dumb it down for a group of people who don't know the first thing about you."

"Why did you never say any of this while we were still practicing?"

Viktor would've spat his drink out if he had one, but instead he just ended up coughing and had to twist aside to catch his breath, "...I **did**! Frequently!"

"I think it's too much."

"Nah...every time I add another quad to my Free Skate, people get all excited. Why not do the same with the Short Program?"

"...Okay."

"...Don't you think this is a bit of a jumping party?"

"The jumps go with the music. If people listen to the lyrics, they'll get it."

"...All right..."

"Yuri, it's too many jumps. I know you're excited that you can finally do these, b-"

"Why stop with just two quads? You **yourself** did three with the Axel. Don't you want to see me
"score in the 120s, too?"

"...Of course, but..."

"I'll never be able to pull off the Axel, so I have to do something else..."

"Okay..."

Yuri grumbled to himself at the reminder.

"It's not an attack on your skill as a skater." Viktor explained, his hands gently working at where Yuri had his arms clenched across himself in a vice-grip, "You're just trying too hard. There no sense in putting all of your skills on display like it's some big buffet. Leave them wanting more. Give them a taste and then leave them hanging. Skaters who put everything out there all at once don't leave room for surprises later, and just wear themselves out faster, too. You still owe me four more World Championship gold medals...I can't have you getting tired now."

"...Viktor..."

"What?"

Yuri said nothing else as he felt the Russian's fingers edging under the rim of his shorts, his cheeks a bit pink despite his best effort to stay serious. His arms were still clenched across himself though and getting tighter.

"You're too tense."

"You always try to solve or put off problems by making out."

"Are you saying you don't want to?"

"...No."

"Then it worked?"

Yuri scrunched into himself like he was trying to make himself smaller, "...I'm slowly warming up to the idea."

"Submit, Yuri." The Russian purred into his ear, nibbling at it from behind.

"Mnnhhhh..."

"Submiitttttttt~!"

The Free Skate wasn't scheduled until the last day of competition, giving everyone participating a day to figure out what adjustments to make and time to practice them. It wasn't easy to get access to the ice though with all the other events going on, so it was rather late by the time anyone was able to set blades to the rink before the next morning's official practice.
Yuri was too anxious to wait that long though. With so many changes to be made to the Free Skate, on top of the Short Program, he didn't want to risk any potential loss of points. Yurio's 102.45 SP score was already creeping on him. When he saw the Russian team had gathered at rink-side as well, despite the hour, it made him feel even worse.

"There they are." Minako pointed at them from where she and Mari had been sitting in the lowest set of audience seats, standing up to lean on the railing and wave, "Yuuuri! Viktooor!"

"Konbanwaaaa~!" Viktor waved back eagerly. Yuri was much more reserved, simply looking up at her as they got closer.

Yurio watched him approach and pass him without stopping, and he side-eyed Mikhail in confusion. He cleared his throat in an effort to get the older skater's attention, and it barely seemed to work, as he finally stopped and turned around. Viktor kept going as he spotted Yakov just a few paces further on.

"Oh...hey Yuri, hey Mikhail." The skater muttered, looking tired, "Good job on your Short Program yesterday."

"...You look like you haven't slept." Mikhail pointed out.

Yurio was stepping close, eyeballing the taller figure like he was waiting for the cue, but Yuri never got the hint and didn't raise his arm out like he always used to, "When was the last time you drank something? You look dehydrated."

He just rubbed his face at the sound of all the questions, "I'm having trouble focusing."

"No kidding. You're forgetting the basics."

"Basics...?"

Yurio was almost as incensed at the sound of that word as he had been when he'd arrived in Hasetsu the first time and realized Viktor had forgotten his promise. He reached out and grabbed the front of Yuri's jacket and pulled him down to eye-level, getting right in his face, looking almost as terrifying as he had been back during the Sochi bathroom incident, "If you're going to let one Short Program freak you out this badly, then you're done for. Hasn't Viktor taught you anything? Rebound and try again, idiot. Your past self is dead. Only those who can be reborn as many times as necessary are strong."

Lilia heard the words, and smiled a little at the recollection.

Yuri wasn't sure what to say in response. Just as Mikhail had surmised, he hadn't been able to sleep the night before, even after Viktor had done everything he could to help him relax. He'd gone through half a notepad after the fact trying to reconfigure his Short Program, since Viktor had fallen asleep when they were done.

"...My old self isn't dead." He finally managed to say, keeping his eyes down, "He's just become a fixture on a wall to remind me of what I've done and where I've been. That's what Viktor deals with every day."

Yurio glowered at him, then let him go, looking past the dark rim of his hood to see if the ice had cleared at all. There were still nearly a dozen people out there from across the disciplines, but he'd been patient enough, and kicked the wall with his blade-guard, "Get your skates on. I don't care if these other idiots are in the way."
"...Yuri...?" The Asian skater was perplexed.

Impatiently, the Russian Tiger just grabbed the taller man by his jacket again and started dragging him along to the rink doorway, even as he flailed and protested. It gathered the attention of the rest of the group, Viktor included, but no one moved an inch to stop them. By the time Yurio had let Yuri go, long enough to get his blades on anyway, a few people had seen them and politely exited the rink. It took until the pair were in the center of the ice before others left to give them room, and the two stared at one another stiffly.

Viktor leaned against the rink wall and watched carefully, while Mikhail, Yakov, and Lilia stood nearby as well.

Yurio still had his hands in his track-suit coat pockets, peering that one green eye out past his bangs, "So what if you didn't score over 120 on the first event of the season." He started, getting right to the point, "I didn't score as high as I wanted either."

"...I just thought..."

"You were getting arrogant." Yurio cut him off, "There's a fine line between being proud and being conceited. Who do you think you are, JJ?"

Yuri blanched at the comparison, ready to defend himself but knowing he wouldn't get a word in edgewise.

"You used to be this really quiet, humble kind of guy. But ever since you started winning, you've been getting a bit full of yourself. It wasn't so bad after Worlds, but the longer the summer went on, the worse I saw it get. Maybe it was easier for me because I was only there a few times, but it was as obvious as the nose on your face."

...Jeeze, he went straight to the max just now. Yuri grimaced, ...How offended should I be?

"Did Viktor even notice?"

"...He just thought I was just...getting more confident..."

"That's what I thought. He's too into you to notice your flaws, especially since he's half the reason you've developed them." Yurio pointed out, moving off to start skating slow circles around his elder, "Did you become a Nikiforov and forget how to be a Katsuki?" His black blades scratched the ice loudly as he got back up in Yuri's face, pointing so closely at him that Yuri almost felt the teen's finger on the tip of his nose, "You're still Katsudon! Change your name all you want, it shouldn't change who you are! This new persona doesn't suit you."

"You're one to talk. You've changed a lot since last year."

"Some would argue for the better. What about you?"

"...What...about me...?" Yuri's brows furrowed, "...I don't feel like I've changed."

"You used to get so freaked out by being on the leader-board that Viktor would have to take you out of the prep area just to calm you down. You used to be the kind of person who would apologize for surpassing those around you. What are you now? Some kind of skating aristocrat who comes onto the ice to look down your nose at the peasants who soiled the rink before you?"

"...I don't remember acting anything like that." Yuri was taken aback.
"Viktor told me you didn't even want him kissing your gold medal if you won one at Nationals, because you were so worried about how easy it would be to get one that you didn't even want to win it. That's pretty shitty of you."

The older Russian practically died on the rink wall when he heard the words.

"Who the Hell do you think you are to say that you can just walk into a competition and take gold like it's nothing? No wonder you got bad scores on your SP."

"...You used to be exactly the same way. Remember how you said you'd crush me at Hot Springs on Ice?"

"And then I didn't. I ate my words and went back to Russia with my tail between my legs."

Yuri glowered at him for lack of a come-back.

"Take your shit down a notch. Kill this gold-hungry creature you've become and be reborn as the kobuta-chan you used to be. I had to learn how to do the same thing. Helping me do that was one of the last things Katsudon did before turning into whatever this thing is in front of me. This guy who forgot to hug me a minute ago."

The realization stung, but Yuri knew it would be an empty gesture to try for the hug right then. Instead, he found Yurio skating past him again.

"Do your old Free Skate and remind yourself of where you came from. When you've shown me that you know who you are again, I might let you make it up to me."
Yuri could still hear the sound of the Russian Tiger's skates scratching the ice behind him, heading back to rink-side where the others were waiting. Their eyes were drilling holes into the back of his head, but no one said anything. He himself had felt like he'd just been hit by a bus after what Yurio had said.

...Until I know who I am again...? He makes it sound like my whole brain was transplanted...

He could feel his heart pounding in his chest despite his confusion. Part of him just wanted to crawl under a blanket somewhere and hide until the event was over.

All I ever wanted was to skate on the same ice as Viktor. But my wildest dreams of even just getting to meet him have been exceeded...I'm married to him... He's called me his equal, his successor, even did a pair skating Exhibition with me...he coached me to GPF silver and Worlds gold, and even bought custom gold-plated blades for me to match his own...

...So who am I? Someone who...got everything he wanted and more? Is that so wrong?

"...What in the world did you say to him?" Mikhail asked as Yurio finally got back around on his blade-guards, "He's practically catatonic out there."

"His cavalier self-pity is making me nauseous." The blond answered, "Not even Viktor got so full of himself after winning competitions, and he had won them five years running. That guy only won once and he's acting this way."

The older Russian heard the words and slouched against the rink wall, watching his partner stay still as a statue in spite of everyone staring at him from all sides of the ice.

"So you're going to fix the problem by making him feel like crap about himself?" Mikhail went on, "Here I thought you were going to help him."

"Sometimes you have to hit extra hard to break something." Yurio shrugged, "I meant to break the mask he's put on. That isn't Yuri, not to me. I told him to figure out who he is now, by at least trying to remember who he was. He's supposed to be doing his old Free Skate, not just standing around like some big dumbass."

"...Oh, there he goes." Minako pointed out, having heard the exchange.

Mari was too busy being a subtle fangirl over Yurio to really take notice of her brother.

Viktor had laced his fingers together and propped his mouth behind them. He watched with trepidation as his husband glided across the ice to the unheard tune of a piano.

"You've been awfully silent on all this." Yakov pointed out, stepping up to his former student and looking out as well, "You're still his coach, aren't you? Or are you just part of the cheering section now?"

They watched as Yuri skated backwards in a circle, then raised his hand up the length of his chest, under his chin, and brought it out ahead of him as he worked his way into the combination jump...only to see him drop on the first landing and miss the launch on the second as a result. The
Russian unfolded his hands and put one over his eyes, under his bangs, and sighed.

"I spent the last year getting him to be more confident in himself and his choices. It took long enough just to get him to like himself. I don't know where I went wrong, if people see him the way Yuri described. Arrogant?" He peered through his fingers at his old coach, "...Conceited?"

"It only seems that way because of how suddenly it happened." Yakov answered, "A lot of the other coaches were discussing how it seemed like Yuri had let his recent victories get to his head. If the judges had seen the interview he did right before performing, I don't doubt he would've scored even lower. He carries himself now like he thinks he's entitled to the gold, like he doesn't have to earn it anymore."

"That's so far off base from what I see."

"How can you see it? You aren't impartial anymore." He pat the silver-haired skater on the shoulder and held there, "As a coach, you have to be an authority. You can't be his friend, never mind his husband. It seems like you can't make the tough choices anymore, or stick with them even if you try. I knew that when I read about the jump lineup. You let him override your decisions. What does that say about you as his choreographer?"

"...He wanted to do as much as he could on his own this time. I didn't think it was a big deal."

Another jump...another fall. Yuri was slower to get up that time, and even took a moment to dust the ice off his pants before trying to pick up where he'd left off.

"This is the consequence of an anxious mind trying to make up for past failures." Yakov said, withdrawing his hand to settle it in his coat pocket again, "And you've just been lead right into it. He's been blindsided by gold, and you've been blinded by your desire to see him succeed. You'll both go down hard if you can't find balance again. You still have so much to learn about being a coach, Vitya."

"...I know." He lowered himself to crossing his arms on the top of the wall and setting his chin on them, "I don't even know what to do about this situation. I couldn't see him getting a big head, but now I see clearly that he's losing it. It was easy to fix before...all I had to do was hold him or offer a kind word. Now he's so used to me that my touch hardly matters, and what I say goes through one ear and out the other more often than not."

"I know you've already thought of what to do about the Short Program. Have you told him?"

"He was up all night trying to figure out what sacrifices he wanted to make. I told him this morning to give me his top three and I'd approve the one I thought was best, but...he only offered up one and it didn't cut enough of the extra stuff. I didn't want to start a fight over it so I just agreed to what he gave me."

"You see?"

"Mh..."

Yuri fell for the last time. He didn't get up that time, and just laid there on the ice for a few seconds before sitting up and hunching over.

"...Maybe I was harder on him than I meant to be." Yurio grimaced, "Now he can't skate at all."

Viktor's brow furrowed as he saw Yuri pulling his skates off, throwing them several feet away and then making his way in just his socks to a rink-side exit on the other side of the arena. The pain
Viktor felt stabbing through his chest as the blades clattered on the ice was enough to wind him. Mikhail saw the pained look on his nephew's face.

The Calgary Saddledome was a huge venue though, so any attempt to catch up with Yuri from clear across the ice was futile, so all Viktor could do was call out the man's name and hope he'd stop running...but it didn't work, surprising no one. The skater disappeared under the stands in a hurry.

"Welp, there he goes." Mikhail said dryly.

"...Unbelievable..." Yurio added quietly.

Mikhail just raised a brow at him, making the teen go quiet before anyone could remind him of his own outbursts in the past.

Viktor shook his head and stepped away, gathering up his husband's things before walking onto the ice and getting his skates. Several people who had been standing around waiting had moved out of his way without a word, feeling the tension in the air. He could still hear them whispering once he was passed them though.

'You're a World Champion gold medalist, so your blades should show it to everyone.'

The words came unbidden to his mind as he looked at the golden sheen on the metal, but stuffed them into the backpack to make the reminder fade. He realized then that Yuri's phone was in the bag as well, so any hope of calling or texting him to find out where he'd gone had suddenly gone out the window.

"...Great."

"We'll help you find him." Mari said, staying safely behind the rink wall. The other two were right behind her, but Yurio and the other Russians had stayed behind.

Viktor knew they weren't going to ditch a practice opportunity to go sort out some other skater, even if it had technically been Yurio's 'fault' that Yuri had ended up the way he did. He rose back up to his full height and threw the backpack over his shoulder, "If you find him before I do, message me, and if you can help it, don't talk to him. I want to do this my way."

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It had eventually taken Mari going outside for a smoke-break, after 45 minutes of looking and asking if anyone had seen the young skater, before anyone finally found him. He had gone out the west entrance and was sitting at the bottom of the concrete staircase, leaning against the red-painted railing where it lead under the covered walkway with its yellow roof. Mari hadn't even recognized it was him at first, since he'd somehow acquired a dark maroon beanie while he was missing, and she couldn't see his hair from where she'd been standing at the top of the stairs behind him.

She knew she wasn't supposed to say anything to him, but part of her desperately wanted to. She was still Yuri's big sister, even if he had gotten married.

...Viktor just said not to talk to him...he didn't say anything about sitting quietly by him...

Mari pulled a drag on her cigarette one final time before stepping it out on the ground, and moved
down the stairs quietly, eventually sitting on the last step next to her brother. She silently noticed he'd acquired more than just the hat, but a Styrofoam cup and something to drink as well. His socks were wet and dirty though...he hadn't found shoes, apparently.

Yuri didn't say a word to her, simply staring into the cup as he heard her texting someone. He felt as she leaned against his shoulder as she put her phone back away, and then cozied up closer to him, still quiet as a shadow.

"...Wooooowww..." She finally said, having lifted her head to the dark Canadian sky and seeing a waving band of green there.

The skater lifted his red, sunken eyes as well, wondering what she'd seen, and saw the auroras waving in the night. He couldn't bring himself to reciprocate her awe though; his throat was too sore for that.

The sound of the Saddledome doors being pushed open clicked him back away from the northern lights though, and he lowered his head, losing all interest. Mari seemed to be paying keen attention though, as she rose to stand up and pat her brother on the head lightly before stepping away.

The thought that she would leave him there without having said a word, or even seeming to be worried about him, made Yuri feel even worse. He set the Styrofoam cup down and wrapped his arms around his knees as new tears filled his eyes again. He didn't hear the quiet whispering at the top of the stairs. The sound of footsteps coming down them again didn't mean anything to him; they could've belonged to anyone. Dozens of people had walked by him since he'd gotten there.

It suddenly mattered though when he heard the sound of a bag being settled on the step behind him, a sigh, and then felt as his legs were pulled out from his grasp and turned so his entire body twisted. He was about to protest, but he caught a glimpse of the silver-grey hair, and immediately took back the thought.

Viktor pulled Yuri's legs across his own and immediately pulled the ice-cold and visibly-wet socks off, wrapping them in a towel from the younger skater's backpack to dry them off. He left them bundled there and then turned a little to pull Yuri to his chest, setting his chin over the maroon beanie and just holding him.

A few minutes passed in silence, with the Russian looking up at the auroras as the cold crept in.

"How long have you been out here?"

"...D...don't know..." Yuri answered, his voice hoarse. It had only just dawned on him then that his throat was so sore because he'd cried so hard he'd lost part of his voice, and he reached his hand up to touch at it before lowering his head a little more, "...I came...straight he...here..."

"You'll get sick, and then you won't be able to skate tomorrow." Viktor leaned back a little to see if Yuri would let him look at his face, but all he got was the top of the man's covered head. He saw a black C on the front of it with flames coming off the left side, bordered once in white and again with yellow, "...Who gave you this thing anyway? You're not a hockey fan."

"S-Someone thought...I was homeless." He answered raggedly, "Gave me coffee...t-too..."

"Let me help you get inside before you catch pneumonia or something." Viktor suggested, moving to do just that, but finding Yuri stiff as a board and resistant to moving, so he settled back where he was again, "...Yuri...?"

"...Why...am I like this?"
"Yurio said some unkind things...?"

"N-no...I mean...what did I do...wrong? Why does...does everyone think I'm...arrogant?" The tears were coming fresh again, one trickling down his cheek to land on his coat, "I never...meant it this way..."

"Because I'm a bad coach." Viktor answered quietly, "I take full responsibility for what happened here."

"But...it was me..." Yuri said in a confused tone, lifting his head a little.

"No, Yuri. Listen." Viktor's own tone suddenly got rather serious, "I pushed you too hard to be just like me, and I realize that's not what I should've been doing. I got you to be more confident in yourself and to take more control over your programs, but in the process, I stopped being what I needed to be for you. By letting you have as much control over your shows as you did, I ended up letting you sow the seeds of your own failure. I should've put my foot down a long time ago and cut you off...but I spent so much time trying to be a compromising spouse that I neglected to do my duty as your coach and choreographer. I just didn't realize until it was too late that what was happening wasn't healthy for you."

Yuri just looked at him incredulously.

"So...starting today, when it comes to skating stuff...if you still want me to be your coach, then you have to play by my rules. You can have your way right up until the moment where I know it's a bad idea, just like when we did YoI together. Leave the rest to me."

"...So you're...s-saying my ideas...are bad...?"

"What? No. You're just doing too much at once. The whole point to having me as your choreographer in the first place was to help you find balance in your shows. You already have incredible talent...and after last year, your technical capabilities are vastly superior to what they used to be, too. My task is to put everything I know about your skill set to good use. If you trust me to do all that, then let me do my job, and stop usurping me when I tell you no."

Yuri was quiet in his understanding, and he nodded, even as he felt a shiver run down his back from the creeping cold. Viktor could feel it where he held the man's small frame in his arms, so he pulled one away and pat Yuri's knee to signal the time to move. He reached back to the backpack and pulled out the younger skater's shoes, slipping them onto the cold but dry feet, and then helped him back to standing. To Yuri's surprise, Viktor then shoved the backpack into his grasp, and looked at him sternly.

"...And don't ever let me see you throw these off again. I know you only meant to suggest that you didn't think you were worthy of them, but that's not what it felt like to me. You gave me this gold band," He held up his ringed hand, "...and I gave you these gold skates." He pressed against where he could feel them under the fabric of the pack, "They were my wedding gift to you, not just some trivial token. Seeing you toss them onto the ice like you did...it was like when I had to give you my ring back, except there was no explanation that you ever intended to wear them again. Don't do that to me again unless you mean to end it between us, okay?"

The words came out like a nail gun, and Yuri was stunned into horrified silence, just staring back at him like a cow just lead to slaughter.

Viktor saw the look on his face and realized what he'd said, feeling the pit in his stomach open up.
"...I...I would...n-never..." He started, "...I...c-couldn't...

The Russian reached out with his scarf to dry the younger skater’s eyes before any tears could fall, and when the scarf came away again, he leaned down to kiss him, "...I know. Me neither."
CHAPTER NINETY SIX

The night was hard to process after the humiliation of fleeing the ice, but Viktor wouldn't let Yuri simmer on it. He was already writing things on the notepad he'd brought with him and was scratching the codes for different maneuvers, pulling the entire Free Skate from memory. Yuri was walking quietly behind, trying to look inconspicuous as they passed various other skaters trying to get in one last late-night practice before the game began again the next morning.

"You'll be able to save a lot of energy this way." Viktor was saying, clearly in the middle of something that Yuri hadn't quite heard.

He bluffed though, "...O- ahem...okay."

"You're not mad at me, are you?"

"What?" The younger skater was baffled, his voice still raw "N-no!"

"Then what's with the look?"

They were getting back to rink-side by that point, but Yuri held back in the hall so no one from earlier would spot him, "...I j...just...made a huge scene..." He coughed, "...I don't...want to face th-them..."

"Don't worry about them right now. Focus on yourself. We have a lot of work to do and not a lot of time to do it." The Russian explained, though it didn't look like his words helped alleviate any of his husband's anxiety. He folded the notepad back up and put it into his coat pocket along with the pencil he'd been marking it with, then quietly stepped back into the thin hallway to run a gloved hand through Yuri's hair, "I'm going to take care of you. It'll be fine."

The younger man nodded, his sore throat forcing him to cough again.

"Don't get sick though. I forbid it. That's an order from your coach." Viktor said, trying to lighten the mood with a bit of light sarcasm.

Yuri couldn't see the humor in it though and just lowered his eyes.

"Ahhhh you'll be fine!" Viktor went on, moving in to hug him instead, "You should know by now that you're only allowed to take one thing as hard as you're taking this."

"...Huh? What's...th-that?"

"Me."

Yuri's face was so red that he was practically glowing at that point, getting the desired effect and leaving the Russian in a better mood than before. He could only hope it would do the same for his athlete. So he took his husband's hand and walked him out to the rink-side area, letting him put his skates on away from the others, and put on his own as well after going back to grab them from where he'd left them by Yakov. Once they were finally out on the ice, Viktor shrugged out of his coat and tied the arms around his waist in his customary way, and stood casually with his left heelblad anchored to the ice. The notepad was back in his hand, and he flipped through the pages to get to where he'd been writing before.
"I'm cutting two quads off the top." He explained, looking over the spiral ring to see Yuri's reaction, though he just stood there, unblinking like a soldier, "...Yuri."

"...Cutting two q-quads..." He echoed reluctantly.

"You can still react if you want."

The young skater had nothing to say; he just kept his eyes low.

Viktor had the strangest sense of déjà vu at the sight of him. Yuri looked just as terrified and defeated as he had in the minutes before his Cup of China Free Skate the year before.

'Should I just kiss you or something?'

'NO! Just stand by me! I need you to believe more than I do that I CAN WIN!'

The Russian narrowed his eyes a little bit in thought.

Would that even work this time? To just stay back and support him while he figures things out?

He crossed one arm over himself as the other came up to set a finger over his mouth, "...Yuri."

Brown eyes lifted a little at the sound of his name. The sight of it brought Viktor back to Sochi, and the look he'd seen on Yuri's face when he had finally lifted his head to face the audience's judgment after his appalling final Free Skate.

Sweat dripped off him, and his legs and back were a ruin of soon-to-be large bruises. Frost clung to his pants, leaving big, cold, wet patches as it melted against his skin underneath. The audience cheered, and gifts and flowers were thrown on the ice, but he had an angry, disappointed look on his face...wishing for it to be over.

Viktor sighed and shook his head, turning away from it all to go back into the prep area, "What a shame. I wonder what it would have looked like if his heart was in it? Can't force something like that...ah well."

"Do you want to drop out?"

The young skater finally gave more than a tepid response, looking a bit shocked to hear the words, "N-no...! I want to k-" More coughing, "...I want to keep going...?"

"Then I need you to act like it." Viktor said, stern in tone but with a softer look on his face than before, "I can't coach you if your heart isn't in it."

Yuri averted his eyes again, but at least he wasn't looking down at the ice that time. He painfully cleared his throat, raising his hand up to rub at it. His eyes were practically watering from it.

Viktor listened a moment longer, but then pushed off and skated away, leaving Yuri alone there on the ice. He raised his hand to the other group, "Uncle!"

The elder Russian pushed up from where he'd been leaning on the rink wall and saw the gesture, then seeing the younger skater clawing at his neck behind the man, and realized what was needed. He looked back around to where Viktor had left his things before and saw the water bottle that was
still on the bench, grabbed it, and tossed it quickly to his nephew. Viktor caught it while still moving, but continued coming closer until his toe-picks were practically digging into the yellow rubber guard that lined the edge of the ice. He pointed at the bench as well, "Hand me my bag. I have to do something to get Yuri out of this funk before he drives himself crazy."

Mikhail reached for it as asked and handed it over, watching his nephew rummage through it as Yuri stood awkwardly on the ice far behind him, "He's still not over it?"

"The heart is willing but the mind is holding him back." Viktor answered, slowly finding the things he was looking for.

"You don't think he's just over-tired and taking it all worse than he normally would?"

"That's part of it, but I don't have the luxury of time. If we put it off till after he sleeps, it could cost him his shot at the Final. He might not even sleep unless this is resolved first anyway."

"So what are you going to do?"

"...Try to reset him to a better time." Viktor answered, "He's sensitive. He came to this place feeling like he was on top of the world, and got shot down faster than a dove in Argentina, so his ego was shattered into tiny little pieces. I have to rebuild him from the bottom up again."

"And you can do that in a night?"

"With some duct tape and a prayer, maybe." He finally found the last of the items he sought, closed the bag, and handed it back to his uncle, "His anxiety can't be cured...only managed. So...all I can do is my best."

He glided off across the ice again, stopping only when he returned to his husband's side, falling back to spouse-mode for the time being. Mikhail watched curiously, despite not being able to hear a single thing that was being said between them.

"...What if I'm...getting s-sick though?" Yuri asked warily, looking at the water bottle that he knew wasn't his, "...What if I g-get you sick...?"

"We rise together and we fall together." Viktor said simply, "Wet your throat. I'll get you tea later."

The younger skater nodded quietly, though lifting his chin to take a drink made him cough again anyway. He watched through watery eyes, trying to catch his breath, as Viktor seemed to be playing with his phone. He plugged in his ear-bud cable, set one into his left ear, and then slid closer to put the other into Yuri's ear as well.

"Yakov says I can't be your coach and your husband at the same time...but the joke's on him, I think." Viktor said, pulling up a song he liked, "Almost since day one, I've considered myself your coach and your lover, even if you didn't think of it that way for a long time yourself. Remember that time on the beach?"

"What do you want me to be to you? A father figure?"

"No..."

"A brother?"
"...Nh..."

"A friend, then."

"...No..."

"Then, your boyfriend."

"What!? No no no no no no no!"

"I can do my best."


Yuri's pink cheeks answered better than his words could at that point, and Viktor smiled to see it. He slid even closer after that, lifting Yuri's face up with his fingers gently under his chin, thumb on his lower lip, "And before that, I'd imagined the potential for months already. Doing Aria at my Nationals, Euros, and Worlds...all while thinking of you, and the brave, happy fool you were at the Sochi Banquet. I asked once if there was a limit to how many times I could fall in love with you at a glance...but it keeps happening every single day anyway...because you're my life, my love, my everything...and I'll go down with this ship before I let you go." He leaned in the last half inch and kissed him, sneaking his phone into his back pocket before sliding his hands up his husband's chest, settling his arms over his shoulders casually until he could loosely lace his fingers together behind Yuri's head. He held there until he could feel the man starting to relax.

The few skaters that still remained on the ice paid them no notice. The sound of blades scratching against the frost, clicking with the launch of a jump and cracking again on the landings, the hollow noise of coaches and athletes talking to one another...it was all drowned out into the background.

Yuri finally let himself enjoy the moment, his previous hesitation melting away with the warmth of his husband's touch. He let himself pass off the water bottle to his left hand so he could raise the right up between where Viktor's arms went to either side of his head, touching his fingers deftly to his jaw and sliding up. As he wove through the silver-grey hair, his hand paused, thumb gently touching to the side of the Russian's left eye.

Viktor paused and pulled back a little after that, a little nervous to feel that particular spot being brought back to his attention. He saw the look in those hazel eyes though, and he leaned his cheek against the palm of Yuri's hand, bringing his own back to place over it.

"...I don't...want to g-give up..." Yuri managed, "...I can...keep fighting, because y-you're with me."

The Russian could see the fire burning in those eyes again, and a wave of relief washed over him. He leaned in to kiss the younger man lightly again before slipping in behind him, snaking his arms around Yuri's lithe frame and pulling him back along the ice. He reached away only long enough to hit 'Play' on his phone before returning his arm to where it had been a moment before, gently gliding across the frosty surface, guiding their slow movements in wide arcs as the music of the Worlds Exhibition began to play in both their ears.

Yuri leaned his head back against Viktor's shoulder and let himself be pulled along with his eyes closed, finally settling into the calm safety of his husband's embrace.

On the ice, no matter where on the earth they were, they were home.
The score for Yuri Plisetsky...192.65. His combined total is 295.1."

The Russian Tiger seemed pleased with himself, and both Yakov and Lilia were satisfied as well. He'd even allowed himself to voluntarily put a headband with cat ears onto his head, and to the shock and awe of practically everyone who knew him (especially Yuri's Angels,) he 'Nyaa~'d at the camera.

Viktor had a good laugh about it from where he stood just a few feet away from the kiss and cry, "You're going to have to do that every time you get your score from now on, Yuri!"

"...Only if I score well." Yurio said conditionally, "If I score less than 190, they get nothing."

"That only seems fair." The older skater smiled and shrugged, pulling the band off the blonde's head as he passed by and stuck them onto his own head instead. The crowd seemed to notice and started to cheer excitedly, and Viktor couldn't resist but to wave at them and suck up some of the attention.

Just behind him, inside the edge of the prep area, Yuri was leaning against a concrete wall with his phone in his hands. He looked more rested than he had been the night before, and wore a small hint of a smile as he listened to Yuuko on the other end of the FaceTime session. He had his ear-buds in to hear her better.

"...Don't forget to breathe when you're out there!" She was saying, "And drink lots of water!"

Yuri nodded, having the same sheepish look on his face as he had the first time he'd gone to the Ice Castle after his 5-year absence, "...It's...chmm...it's almost time..."

"You really should've just texted me if you lost your voice." She winked at him despite it, "You sure you're able to skate though like this?"

Again, Yuri nodded, trying his best to answer despite his raspy whisper, "Viktor went out and...got me some lemon tea and lozenges... I might've lost my vo-" He coughed, "My voice, but...my throat doesn't hurt so much... Just dry..."

"Oi, Yuri, you're up soon, you should get to rink-side." The Russian Tiger's voice came suddenly. The raven-haired skater looked up to see Lilia and Yakov holding back the curtain as the blond came through, looking at him directly like he'd known he was there the whole time. Viktor came up behind him soon after with a similar sentiment.

"Who's there?" Yuuko asked, hearing voices but unable to identify them over the ambient background noise.

"Viktor and Yuri." He whispered back, turning the phone around to show them both, "Say hi."

"Yuuko!" The blond waved, "Did you see me!?"

Viktor waved as well, but stepped out of frame soon after, moving to where Yuri stood behind the camera.

"Yeah! You did great!" She answered, though he could only see her response.

"Ah, shit, I can't hear what you're saying...Yuri's got ear-buds in. I'll just text you later." Yurio said,
flicking the cord where it dangled over the phone, "Davai, Yuri."

"Sp...Spasibo."

The FaceTime window came back around again. Yuuko’s attention had been grabbed off-screen somewhere, "...Ah, I should get going. The girls want to get over to Yu-Topia before you go on."

"Better run quickly. It's only a few more minutes." Viktor explained, squeezing into frame by smooshing his cheek against his husband's, "Talk to you after!"

"Ganba, Yuri!"

The screen's imagery suddenly flipped around, and the pair were beholden to the triplets looking up at them, waving excitedly and wishing him good luck as well.

"Arigatou gozaimasu, mina-san." Yuri bowed his head a little, and the call was disconnected. He set it to silent and handed the device over to his coach, then drew in a deep breath, "...I'm ready. How many...are left?"

"Three. Yurio's the one to beat right now. Get perfect scores on the presentation section, and it won't matter that you're only doing three quads, so don't push yourself." Viktor answered, licking his thumb before smoothing out the skater's eyebrows, "You have a great program. Even Yurio is taking it easy right now and only did two quads for his Free Skate. Chris and your friend Phichit did the same thing at Skate America."

"...I didn't ask what...events they were going to be g-going to..." Yuri said, clearing his throat before reaching for his honeyed lemon-water.

"You'll see them, but only at my events." The Russian explained, "Chris will be in France and Phichit in Japan."

The younger skater nodded, soothing his throat by not saying anything else. He could see a media posse starting to gather and head in his direction, and he pulled Viktor through the curtain to avoid them, not wanting to bother having to explain what happened to his voice since his last interview. Viktor understood it well enough and followed after, watching as the event's French skater went through his Free Program. 'Nocturne No 20.' by Chopin played above.

Viktor settled his ringed hand against Yuri's lower back as they approached the rink wall, "Remember...be proud but humble. You don't have to prostrate yourself before the judges when you go out there, but acknowledge them politely before you do the audience."

Yuri nodded again, feeling the butterflies rising in his gut. It suddenly felt like the first event of his return to the Grand Prix Series the year before again, knowing he had something to prove, but also that he had a lot to make up for. It was the only kind of anxiety he knew what to do with...and he was excited to put the energy to good use finally.
CHAPTER NINETY SEVEN

It was about 5:30pm in Calgary when the last person before Yuri took to the ice. Concurrently, it was only around 8:30am in Hasetsu, in what could be considered the next day. The Nishigoris had quickly arrived amidst a late-fall rain storm, bursting in through the doors in a flurry of mist. The triplets quickly kicked off their boots and ran for the common room to get front and center in front of the television, which had already been set to the channel showing the Skate Canada event. Makkachin was panting softly next to Hiroko, where she'd settled in at one of the front-most tables to the screen.

"Good timing. Yuri's up next." She told the family as the rest came in, "Just after this guy that's out there now."

"We just talked to him and Uncle Viktor!" The triplets announced proudly, "Yuri's sick!"

"...Sick?"

"He's not sick." Yuuko clarified anxiously, "He just lost his voice."

"Why did he lose his voice if he's not sick...?" Hiroko wondered, patting the dog on the head gently.

"...He wouldn't say, actually." The Madonna took her place behind her girls as Takeshi took his spot next to her in turn, "He seems okay though. Viktor's taking care of him."

"There he is!" Loop pointed at the screen, and a tiny dark blob on the opposite side of the rink where the cameras were pointing, "And Uncle Viktor, too!"

Yuri was still in his aqua blue track-suit jacket, doing a few last-minute stretches as the current competitor finished his Free Skate.

The television screen split horizontally to show both Yuri and the current skater, and Newscaster Morooka's voice echoed for all to hear, "Japan's top skater, Yuri Nikiforov, is going to be hitting the ice once Skater Fernando is done." The bottom half of the window split again to show an excerpt from Yuri's Short Program, "He surprised us all this morning by having his coach, Viktor Nikiforov, announce their intention to reduce his much-anticipated, high-difficulty Free Skate from 5 quads to just 3. Skater Yuri has a number of his fans somewhat worried since he's avoided interviews since his Short Program on Friday, despite his unbelievable 108.25 score. Coach Viktor insists everything is fine, however, and Yuri seemed to do well at the official practice this morning."

Hiroko's face took on a worried look, "He must be sick if he's doing that."

Yuuko looked nervous, "Hmm...maybe..."

Yuri raised his right arm, put his hand behind his neck, and pulled down on the elbow to stretch out his shoulder, then did the same with the other before swinging them around to shake them out. Viktor was watching him quietly as the Spanish skater's song, 'El Padrino,' played overhead. It was going to be over within the next 30 seconds, and it meant Yuri's turn was only a few short minutes away. He had his ear-buds in though and wasn't really listening, tapping the toe-pick of each skate's blade guard against the floor as he moved from one foot to the other.

The Russian pulled up from where he'd been leaning against the rink wall, leaving the poodle-plush
tissue box there, and stepped closer to his partner, gently setting his right hand against Yuri's hip as he slid in behind him. Yuri watched him go, standing still as he felt the man's arms come around from behind him.

He wasn't sure if his husband was saying anything, but he soon felt Viktor nosing the ear-bud out from one side and settled his chin on that same shoulder.

"How's your throat feel now?" He wondered quietly, "You think you'll have any trouble with it out there?"

Yuri shook his head and cleared it, "...I think...I'll be okay. The cough drop you...gave me earlier is still working."

The Russian nodded and hugged him a little tighter for a moment, "Try to avoid falling back on muscle memory, if you can help it. No one will know any different if you don't lift your head when you would've normally, but they will notice if you go into a coughing fit."

...That's the only thing I'm worried about right now... Yuri thought to himself, Any tight pull on my neck sends me into an instant spasm... Trying to look up with just my eyes at the last second, when I've been fully looking up all summer...I hope I don't get too comfortable out there and forget...

The song above them came to an end, and the Spaniard froze in his final position. The crowd was wild with excitement, waving their flags and signs, and tossing their gifts onto the ice. As he finally moved to exit the rink, waving as he went, Viktor let his husband go to let him pull the track-suit off.

Yuri had taken a page from Viktor's play-book about hiding his costume until the last second, but he hadn't quite gotten so extravagant about his methods that he was willing to wander around with a proverbial shower curtain around himself like the Russian had at Worlds. Instead, like at the Short Program, he wore his usual coat, but his lower half was hidden under a pair of pants with buttons all along the outside of the leg on both sides.

The jacket came off first, and Yuri handed it to his coach like usual, moving down to his hip to start undoing the snap buttons. When he was done, he handed those over as well, and sorted out the wrinkles, trying to flatten them out against his legs.

The Free Skate costume was much darker than the shimmering silver ensemble of the Short Program, but had subtle nods to Viktor's 'Winter Prince' and his own old Sochi outfit. The shoes and gloves were black as night, moving in a gradient to lighter colors as they made their way up the legs and arms, though the colors didn't get much lighter than a deep, albeit vibrant purple. A closer inspection would reveal wavy dark lines along the sleeves, traveling up, and rotating slowly around, as they moved up to the shoulder, then fading out again as they were replaced by Swarovski crystal. Amidst the purple and black, they shimmered like faint stars in a twilight sky, especially when the outfit was seen from behind. The pattern moving across Yuri's back looked like a water-color painting of a dark sunset, getting a little lighter as it moved down to the 'horizon' around his waist, then fading to dark again like a reflection of the sky on the surface of a quiet lake. A pair of long coat-tails parted behind him, coming to points just behind his calves, rising up in a U-shape along the side of his thighs, and then descending to another pair of points in front of his legs at just above his knees. There were crystals embroidered into the material there as well, though significantly fewer than were going across his shoulders and upper arms.

"The score for Fernando Rodriguez...168.45, bringing his combined score to 239.65."

The skater didn't seem too terribly displeased with his score, even though it had come within 7 points of being the same as Yuri's Sochi total.
Being 17, it's not bad for his first Grand Prix Series...but that would've been entirely unacceptable as a Grand Prix Final score... Yuri thought to himself grimly as he heard it, ...Especially for someone who was 22 at the time and had a lot more experience by then...

Viktor started guiding his athlete along towards the rink entrance, then paused to wait for the skate guards to be handed to him.

"Next to take the ice...representing Japan...Yuri Nikiforov."

Yuri cleared his throat, but ended up coughing again instead, making Viktor give him a worried look. Before the skater could move off, Viktor pulled him back by his wrist. Brown eyes met blue, but words weren't forthcoming. Yuri could tell the yank was just reactionary. He turned back around to take hold of that hand with his free one, pulled it up to kiss the ring, leaned in close to quickly kiss his husband, and then went out onto the ice.

Alone now, Viktor waited behind the rink wall anxiously. The sound of the crowd cheering went entirely unnoticed at that point, but at least Yuri hadn't forgotten what he was supposed to do. Even with all the individual fans calling out Davai or Ganba or Good Luck, Yuri ignored them until he'd gotten to the center of the rink, faced the judges, and gave a dancer's bow just for them, right hand under his chest as the left went out to the side. That done, he skated away and greeted the audience, waving to them as he went in small circles.

"Skater Yuri is nearly 25 years old. He skates tonight to the song 'Heroes' by Zayde Wolfe, in collaboration with Generdyn. His theme this year is Metamorphosis, which he announced while living briefly in St. Petersburg, Russia. He and his coach, Viktor Nikiforov, have since returned to Hasetsu in Kyushu, Japan, where they currently train as rivals as well. Skater Viktor is returning this year for his first full season since taking time off to be Yuri's full-time coach, after a masterful second-place victory at his only event last year...the World Championships."

Morooka was saying as Yuri anxiously fidgeted around, rubbing at his throat, standing in his official starting place but not yet having given his signal to begin, "At an unofficial skating event held in Hasetsu shortly after Worlds, skater Yuri's friend and former rink-mate, Thai skater Phichit Chulanont, joked that this coming season would be more of a competition between the two Nikiforovs as they face off against each other for the gold in the Grand Prix. Many have speculated that this belief is part of the reason why neither of them were assigned to the same events in the GP Series. Skater Yuri stated before his Short Program that he firmly believes he and Viktor will eventually square-off against one another in the Final. Both skaters are World Record setters, so many are anxious to see how they stack up."

Viktor watched nervously as Yuri continued to stall, Keep it together, Yuri...focus on your feet, not your neck...

Yurio watched from a section of stands that had been reserved for waiting skaters, hands stuffed in his track-suit pockets as he kept his skates up on the backs of the seats in front of him.

With one last deep breath, Yuri took his position. He kept his head low as he brought his hands up to either side, his right leg bent behind him to dig the toe-pick into the ice just behind his left skate.

The low, almost inaudible start of the song began to play over head. Yuri pushed forward with his toe-pick, gliding ahead with his eyes still closed. The audience's cheering died down as the skater began to move. He stayed fairly close to where he started, weaving his feet delicately across one another as the lyrics began.

I can hear the lost crying,

He came to an abrupt stop in time with the deep boom in the song, sliding out of it again.
I can hear the truth hiding, hiding.

His hand came up to his ear, then out again as he rotated, then in again close to his chest.

Yeah the shadows are calling us out,

Yuri sank low on his right leg, the left still going around him as he slowly spun backwards.

I see the fear rising,

He went back up to his full height, his arms both in the air as the left leg came up, then down behind him. He remembered to keep his head down in that moment, since he'd normally have raised it up to follow his hands.

Yeah when hope is burning, the shadows are calling us out.

He started to build up speed, moving backwards along the edge of the rink, waiting for the next boom in the music.

It's feeling like the sun's hiding,

The thrum of the bass launched him into the air, digging his toe pick in to push him up; he spun four times and landed the Flip cleanly. The audience cheered him on, and Viktor clenched his fist in approval. The song was starting to get a little more energetic.

But we're gonna keep moving, surviving,

Yuri launched again with the boom, entering the first combo jump; triple loop, single Salchow, triple loop. It was like his jumps and landings were timing in perfectly with each syllable of the song. The audience was creeping up onto the edge of their seats, anticipating each new maneuver as the music became more and more intense.

No we won't go quiet tonight, stand up and shout louder.

It was practically 3am. Viktor and Yuri were the only ones still on the rink by then, although Mikhail had stayed behind to keep an eye on them, sleepy as he was. Watching Viktor drill the younger skater, trying to force the changes into him, was like watching someone trying to herd cats. It wasn't for lack of trying though...Yuri was just exhausted in every conceivable way. It was only when he'd ended up in a coughing fit that Viktor finally relented, realizing there wasn't much point in trying to continue when the skater could hardly stand anymore.

"I know, I know, I'm sorry..." The Russian said, patting Yuri's back as he pulled the man back towards the rink exit, "I think you've got it, though."

"...I h-hope...so..." The skater heaved, spraying more water onto his face than into his mouth at that point.

"We'll work on it a little more once we're in France. We'll go to some public rink in Paris and practice. Gradually work all the quads back in as you feel better."

Oh no, no, we won't be silent. The shadows are calling us out.
Flying camel spin, then the foot-change, and another camel spin. Yuri grabbed his blade and pulled into a horizontal doughnut spin, keeping as much speed as he could during the minor musical interlude into silence.

We are heroes

He let go of his blade and went backwards again, gaining into the first step sequence.

Heroes in the darkest times, when there is no light, Oooh...

Yuri was sitting cross-legged on the bed as Viktor made the tea he'd promised. Thankfully, Lemon and Earl Grey were standard fare in most rooms, so there was no need for the Russian to leave and come back. There were no actual lemons on hand though, just imitation honey, so he had to make do with what he had. Yuri was still clearing his throat more often than not.

"I'm still a little surprised that you ended up getting yourself into this state." Viktor commented, stirring the cup as he turned around to bring it to his husband, "Normally that only happens if you scream too much. You weren't yelling profanities in the parking lot, were you?"

Yuri tried to answer, but his voice was more of a rasp so he stopped as soon as he felt it. Instead, as Viktor held the steaming cup in his hands, Yuri reached for the notepad in the jacket the Russian had left on the bed next to him and pulled out the pencil along with it. He scribbled a quick note before trading the note for his drink.

Viktor looked at it, reading it aloud, "Whispering is worse than screaming." He looked up from the notepad to see Yuri blowing at the hot liquid, "...You sound like a pro. Done it before?"

The younger skater sipped a little, then traded the items back again, writing a little more before the swap.

Again, Viktor read the scribbles out loud, "I used to be 10 times worse. I first met Yurio while I was crying in a bathroom stall, remember?" He slouched a little, "You're too hard on yourself."

Yuri took back the notepad, but put it against his leg to write this time instead of giving his tea back, then held it up. The Russian gawked at the little doodle Yuri had drawn of himself shrugging, but then huffed a laugh as he realized his husband was trying to be funny. Yuri started writing actual words on the next page though.

"You just told me earlier that only one thing is allowed to be that hard on me." Viktor read, bewildered for a moment, but then remembering and laughing once, "Does that mean you're back to your old self now?"

Brown eyes moved away a little, making Viktor wonder what it meant, so he handed the notepad back and waited for the next message. It seemed like Yuri was writing a dissertation, turning one, two, three pages to write down what he couldn't say. When it was finally finished, Yuri was almost reluctant to give it over, so the Russian continued to wait until he was ready. He could see that the text was smaller and straighter on the lines than the previous scribbles, so he could already tell that the content of the message was more serious than before. When Yuri finally gave it over, Viktor leaned back against the headboard, crossed his ankles where his legs stretched out in front of him along the edge of the bed, and read it quietly in his head.

'I feel a lot better now...but I can't help but feel like this was an eye-opener for me. This was my first
event back after winning at Worlds...and look what I did to it. I got a bunch of people mad at me, and my attitude made the judges score me less than I thought I deserved, just like you said they would at Four Continents. I became the very thing you described as disgusting. I forgot how to humble myself to others, and actually had the audacity to think winning gold here would just be some joke. I mistook arrogance for pride and self-confidence, and I don’t think either of us noticed until it was too late.'

Viktor looked up at his husband over the spiral wire through the top of the notepad, but then looked back at the pad, flipped the page, and kept reading.

'Part of it was because of how much control you gave me to produce my own show this year, and let me override you when you tried to make changes. I was nervous at first, but every time you backed off after making a suggestion, it made me think I was doing the right thing, so I started getting a big ego about it. Another part of it is...how persistent you were in having me take you. When I poked you in the head that one time, and you collapsed on the ice thinking your hair was getting thin...it kind of brought you down to earth, in my mind. That was enough for me. But making such a convincing case that I should top you...I think it threw off my perception of the dynamic between us.'

Another page was flipped. Yuri knew exactly what the writing said as each paper turned, and he kept his eyes on his drink as his heart jack-hammered in his chest.

'I didn't think so much that I was getting power over you, but that you were seceding power to me...and I hated it. I felt like I was seeing the pretext of our first fight all over again...when you said you were wanting to back off of the difficulty rating on your own programs. I got all weird about it, and ended up hurting you. So with this...I didn't want to go there again. I did my best to do what you wanted, but I was losing part of myself in the process. I became the worst version of me that I can think of. Tonight, you got me back to where I needed to be on the ice, but I think I need the rest dealt with, too, before I can go on.'

Viktor was almost a little worried to flip the page to see what laid beyond it. But...he turned it anyway.

'I feel like the skating event for our wedding party was the last time I really got to be who I want to be, before everything started to change. I...want to go back to then. I can still find confidence in myself without becoming a seme, and you can still let yourself be vulnerable with me without becoming an uke. ...I can only hope that made sense...sorry...there really aren't any good words in English for it...'

Viktor stared at the notepad for a good while after finishing, not sure what to say in response to it, so he just let it down to his lap where he slowly let down his arm.

Yuri made his way across the length of the rink as the chorus played overhead, spinning and stepping and trying not to trip over himself as he went.

We are heroes, heroes in the darkest times, but we'll rise above, Oooh...

"Skater Yuri's next jump is a quad-triple combo..." Morooka stated, the television showing the build-up as Yuri rounded the end of the rink, "Quadruple Salchow, triple Toe-loop...bit of a wobble there at the end, but still fairly clean."

We are heroes...
Yuri threw himself into a flying sit-spin, becoming a black and sparkling blur on the ice.

*When the night is starless, only we can spark it...*

One hand rose up as he continued to spin.

*Light it up in the darkness, Oooh...*

He came back up to his full height, kicking his leg out to dig his toe-pick into the ice and stop suddenly.

*When the night is starless, only we can spark it...*

He rotated slowly, bringing his arms up and out in front of him as he went backwards towards one corner of the arena. He spun and crossed his legs, wheeling around to each beat of the song.

*Light it up in the darkness, Oooh...*

...I had no idea you were that unhappy." Viktor finally said, leaving the notepad on his leg as he brought his arms up to cross over his chest, staring at the paper.

Yuri nearly died to hear the words, and he waved his hands around desperately, "...N-no! I wa-" He choked in his attempt to speak, and dropped his head down as he tried to catch his breath. Viktor leaned forward to nudge the tea back to him to soothe his throat. In his frustration, Yuri went over to his travel bags and pulled out his laptop, opening a blank writing document, and made the font large as he wrote down what he had just tried and failed to say, and then flipped the screen around.

*I'm NOT unhappy! I'm the happiest I've ever been in my entire life! There's just aspects to how we are that I'm not coping with very well.'

Viktor read the words, then raised his eyes back to Yuri's like he was expecting a better explanation. Yuri recognized it and pulled the screen back around to himself to type more. He filled the screen as well as he could and then turned it around again.

'It used to be a huge joke that I was 23 and still single. Even YOU teased me about it sometimes. I used to have this thing for Yuu-chan before I went to Detroit, and half the reason I was so quick to leave, even knowing I'd have to leave my dog behind, and then stayed gone for FIVE YEARS...was because she got together with a guy who tormented me as a kid.'

Viktor recalled the early days of coaching the young skater. How Yuuko had said Yuri had a hard time 'putting himself out there,' and how Takeshi Nishigori had pointed out that Yuri had a hard time making friends. It dawned on him that the very man who said the words was probably a huge reason why that was the case.

The laptop soon came back around, 'I never wanted to feel that betrayed again. That hurt. I was never a take-charge kind of outgoing person to begin with, so when it came to dealing with other people, the safest course for me was to keep them at arm's length. The only time I ever felt safe was when I was around people who I thought would never want to get that close to me...like my rink-mates and coach. Phichit-kun was the first and only person outside my family that even knew how much I idolized you.'

Blue eyes scanned the text, and then raised to meet Yuri's again to say he was done and waited for the next blurb.
'Not even Celestino knew. I didn't want it to get used against me. I didn't want anyone to really know that much about me. I probably would've been able to keep it from Phichit-kun, too, if he hadn't ended up being my roommate while we trained together. But my point is...when I said before that I couldn't even imagine you doing certain things or being with certain people, it wasn't just because I respected you too much for all that. It's also because I can't imagine myself in those situations, being the dominant one.'

Viktor leaned forward to press his fingers to the mouse-pad and scrolled down a little to keep reading.

'I don't want to be there. I stayed single all my life because I knew that doing otherwise would force me to do things I wasn't mentally willing to. ...I'm happier following someone else, not leading them. I can only be myself when I have someone else's strength to hold me up. You're the first and only person I've ever let myself lean onto. Maybe it's because I already admired you so much and wanted to be around you, so I let my guard down...but you managed to find a way through the wall I'd built around myself. Inside the wall though, I never stopped being a small and broken tower... So long as you're holding me up, I'm okay, but...I'll just fall down if you pull away, even if you're just trying to help me stand on my own. I need you to keep being who you've always been to me. I admire you too much to be able to handle any kind of power over you, literally or figuratively.'

Viktor leaned back against the headboard again, pulling his finger up to his lip as he let the words sink in. Yuri watched him anxiously for a response, feeling as nervous and apprehensive as the day he'd premiered his 'Yuri on Ice' program at the Japanese Qualifiers. The thought of disappointing Viktor weighed on his mind...but the same thing that happened back then ended up happening in that moment as well. The Russian reached his hand up under his bangs as though frustrated, but then looked straight at him, and reached both arms forward. Yuri flinched a little to see it, the serious expression never quite leaving the man's face, but he finally relented and set the laptop aside. He scooched forward over the bed and sat sideways on his knees to Viktor's right, wrapping his arms around the man's chest as Viktor did the same in turn over his shoulders.

"You're not as broken as you think, Yuri." The Russian whispered against his neck, "But if it makes you happiest to go back to how we were at the wedding party...then that's how we'll be." He could feel Yuri's relief as he spoke the words; his smaller frame relaxed against him and his slight tremble eased up a little. Viktor nosed his way under the layers of his husband's jacket and kissed the man's neck where he could, "...Besides, that time in the locker room was probably the best we've had anyway."

Viktor couldn't see it, but Yuri's eyes shone to hear his words, and he closed them as he hugged his husband tighter. The younger skater let out a deep breath that he'd been holding in since they'd come back from the rink...things were finally going to go back to what he considered 'normal.'

"We are heroes"

Yuri threw himself into the air again for another combo; triple axel, half loop, triple flip. Viktor watched it happily.

"For once, it seems like he's actually listening to me." He mused to himself.

Heroes in the darkest times, when there is no light, Oooh...

There would've been an Ina Bauer maneuver at that point in the program, but they'd switched it out
for the Lutz take-off from the Charlotte Spiral like in his Short Program. It caused no irritation to set off a coughing fit to lean forward, and it freed him from having to worry about the quad Lutz at the very end, too.

"Perfect quad Lutz right there! Skater Yuri is making that one his own! His friend and rival, Swiss skater Christophe Giacometti, will have to pull out all the stops to keep that one for himself pretty soon!"

*We are heroes*

Outside spread-eagle into a twizzle, then another backwards maneuver to gain speed.

*Heroes in the darkest times, but we'll rise above, Oooh...*

"Yuri's favorite part of any program...the long combination spin sequence!"

*We are heroes*

Butterfly jump, illusion spin, rising into a scratch spin, descending into a sit-spin with a twist variation...he was a blur on the ice.

"Skater Yuri's spin sequence is dizzying! He might go longer than his coach did during his Worlds Short Program!"

Yuri leapt into the foot-change and kept going, the next spins being the same as the ones at the end of his YoI program.

*We are heroes*

The most intense part of the song came up, and Yuri broke out of the spin to rush backwards along the rink wall again, flying right past Viktor as he went, then heading back out to the center of the arena. The drums were building up to the crescendo, and with the last one, Yuri planted his skates down to send up a flurry of ice crystals.

*Oooooh*

He rotated slowly, his left arm out in front of him, turning it down around himself as the right came up in its place, then bringing it down around himself as he turned again with his eyes downcast towards the ice. He pushed himself back around the other way, and then forward on his toe-pick.

*We are heroes...*

He raised his hand towards the audience, as though allowing for the lyrics to apply to them all now, and then descended to the ice on one knee. The last boom of the song echoed throughout the arena as the young skater stretched out his other leg, and reached his hand down over it, and brought it back up in a fist near where he bowed his head.

His throat was a knot of pain by then, but at least it was over. The song faded out and the mob of cheers and screams faded in. Breathing was painful already, but by the end of his Free Skate, it was even worse, feeling like fire passing through him. In that moment, he was grateful that Viktor had neutered the program as harshly as he had...he was certain he’d have passed out again if it hadn’t been done.

Flowers, plushy poodles, and even the odd plush nigiri were thrown out onto the ice, and he could hear the soft 'paft' noise as they landed. He finally rose back up to his feet to wave and bow in
gratitude for their attention, but his throat was so cramped that he could barely lift his head. He let himself turn to start heading for the rink exit so he could meet back up with Viktor and go to the kiss and cry, but he did so with a reluctant hand up against the middle of his collarbone.

Viktor saw it and knew what it meant, having Yuri's water bottle on hand already as the program ended. He pat his skater's back gently and moved down to put the blade-guides on himself so Yuri wouldn't have to, then slipped his track-suit coat over his shoulders and guided him to the kiss and cry. The skater held one hand under his chin to catch the stray drops of water as he tried to drink and cool off the burning, and he threw his skated feet out in front of him as he dropped onto the bench. The Russian sat next to him immediately after, and Yuri latched to his arm like he thought he'd fall right off the back of the seat if he didn't. Viktor clasped their fingers together and ran his free hand through Yuri's hair to get the few stragglers out of his husband's eyes.

"Try to breathe more slowly. In through your nose, out through your mouth." He said quietly, "You did really well out there...but even reducing the difficulty level this much might not have been enough."

Yuri glanced up at him with a confused look in his eyes.

"I could see you getting tired in the second half. You're still exhausted even now. You've pushed yourself to the limit and you're probably going to suffer for it later. At least you don't have another event for a couple weeks..." Viktor explained, "You might get sick now no matter what you do."

Yuri sighed and held his head low, but then jerked it up again, trying to speak but finding it painful. Instead, he pat his free hand against his chest twice, moved it up to touch his sore throat, then moved his hand over to his husband's chest and gave another worried look.

Viktor stroked the man's cheek lightly with a curled finger, "It'll be fine. If I get sick too then that's just how it'll be. It might be the only chance Chris ever gets to win gold at an event we're competing in together." He mused.

The younger skater was baffled at that, but then shook his head and smiled, leaning his cheek against his coach's shoulder to wait for his score. When it finally came up, he was relieved to see it was even better than he'd hoped.

"The score for Yuri Nikiforov...194.21. His combined score is 302.46."

The Russian seemed to approve, and clapped happily to hear it, snaking his arm around Yuri's head as he pulled his hands back together to make a heart-shape with them at the cameras. Yuri followed his lead and made the same shape with his own hands, even if half his face was obscured by Viktor's arm. The giant plush tuna nigiri on his lap made the whole thing look comical at best.

His family and friends back in Hasetsu were relieved to see the numbers they did.

"Amazing! Skater Yuri is back in first place after his Free Skate!" Morooka announced, "With only a handful of competitors left, can he hold onto the gold for his first event of the season!? Stay tuned for the conclusion of this year's Skate Canada!"

The last 30-or-so minutes of the Men's Free Program seemed to last forever. Yuri chewed down two cold-relief lozenges as he waited, hoping to make his throat go numb so he could at least talk a little again, though there wasn't much likelihood of that. He could already feel the chill of an actual cold coming on, even with his jacket on, and Viktor holding close as they watched the last skaters from the relative quiet of the under-stadium prep area. Yuri had already pulled a surgical mask over his face to prevent from getting any sicker than he already felt.
I have a feeling I'll be going to bed as soon as we're done here... I may even have to skip the mini-Exhibition later tonight...probably the Skate Canada Banquet, too. I can't be sick when Viktor skates in France...not after he asked me to do his Short Program like he did... People are going to ask about it... I'd be a fool to refuse to answer questions when it directly relates to him...

Even though it was 99% certain that the leaderboard wouldn't change with the last few performances, Viktor was still excited enough to see the final results that he hugged Yuri close and practically gyrated against him like he had during the previous year's Japanese Qualifiers. He even nuzzled against Yuri's cheek like back then, too.

"You did it, Yuri!" He was saying, "It's your first-ever gold at a Grand Prix Series event, and at Skate Canada, too! What a great place to start out, neh?"

*It's the place where Viktor first really noticed me...and I won silver back then.*

"We should get you out there to collect your medal!"

Yuri nodded, but then pulled away enough to waggle his hand close to his ear like he was holding his phone, and then held that same hand out to receive it. Viktor nodded and pulled it out of his coat, and watched as his husband tapped his gloved thumbs against the not-so-cooperative touch-screen before holding it out to him.

[Bed after]

Viktor nodded, putting the skin of his wrist against his husband's forehead just to be sure, "Don't worry. I'll get you there. You aren't running a fever yet so it'll be okay. Just put the mask back on as soon as you're done and we'll go back to the hotel."

Again, the younger skater nodded, and pulled the mask off of where it clung around his ears, letting Viktor have it (along with his phone) while he went back out to rink-side. The crowd was cheering as the podium was shuffled out across the ice.

Yurio was there already with Yakov and Lilia, arms crossed over his chest for lack of a jacket to stuff his hands into. He turned back to see his Japanese counterpart coming out from behind the curtain, "Well done, Yuri. How late were you up last night after we left, anyway?"

"Two more hours." Viktor answered for him, "We would've been out there longer if not for other things."

"Mh." The blond huffed, watching as the German skater came out to rink-side as well; the bronze medalist.

They were all finally called out to take their places and get their rewards, and Viktor held back to clap with the other coaches off the ice. Yuri got to wear his flag around his shoulders like a cape that time, and seemed to enjoy himself despite his illness. Yurio had even allowed their customary hugs to resume after that, and waved goodbye to the pair as they ducked out while they still could. Viktor only left Yuri alone long enough to let the event managers know that they were leaving early and not to expect them back for closing ceremonies, and then helped him escape from the venue without being asked for interviews on his way out.

He hadn't even bothered changing into his regular clothing to make the short shuttle-ride back to the official event hotel; the Hotel Arts Calgary.

It was almost more exhausting to peel out of his costume than it was to make the trip up to their hotel room in the first place. Yuri could no longer be bothered to put it away completely, merely setting the
pieces over the top of a chair and then slouching over to the edge of the bed where his night-mask was already waiting for him on the nightstand. He sat on the edge of the mattress, pulled the mask over his head, positioned it over his eyes, and twisted to finally get in under the covers...only to feel his husband crawling in behind him and shoving him over just a tad to make more room and then snaking his arms around his lithe frame like he always did. Yuri could feel the skin of his husband's chest against his back; cold at first but warming quickly as he pressed them together.

That wasn't so much of a surprise...there wasn't much else for Viktor to do if Yuri was just going to be sleeping. But the younger man still felt a little bad about it.

"...Y-you...don't hav...have to..." Was all he could manage with his raspy whisper of a voice.

"Shh. Go to sleep."

He was out before Viktor even managed to pull the covers over them and turn the light off.
Chapter 98

CHAPTER NINETY EIGHT

Viktor was the first to stir the next morning. He was a little surprised to find that neither of them had moved much since falling asleep to begin with, aside from how he'd managed to wedge his head under the back of Yuri's neck where he'd previously had it on top. He debated whether or not to try going back to sleep, since it still seemed like it was dark outside from what little light would've normally been coming through the curtains, but after a few minutes of dozing, found it wasn't going to be easy.

He raised the left arm up that he'd draped over his husband's side and put the underside of his wrist against Yuri's forehead, checking for fever again, and was glad to find there was none. But he noticed the younger man was breathing through his mouth, rather than his nose.

...He'll be fine if he just caught a cold...

Viktor rubbed his eyes and then twisted onto his back, reaching awkwardly for where he'd left his phone on the night-stand. When he finally found it, he quietly checked the time; 5:09am. He was only able to see the number after dismissing the 14 missed called and texts blocking his line of sight to the home screen.

He idly scrolled through the list of people who'd messaged him; Yakov, Yurio, Chris, Mikhail, Minako, Yuuko, and some unknown numbers. Most of the messages had involved questions about where he was, or he wasn't at the Banquet and that it was starting without him, or why Yuri wasn't at the Exhibition, or telling him to get Yuri to turn his confounded phone on again. Yakov was the most forward, saying he should quit pretending to be a coach if he wasn't going to do his job in making his skater make the appropriate appearances.

The thought crossed his mind that he should message them all to explain, but in the end, he decided to just ignore all of them and marked them as 'read' without replying. It was barely after 5am and he doubted anyone would care to hear his excuses that early, or when they woke up later.

Anyone who's that interested or persistent will ask again later anyway...

He stretched a little as he dropped the phone back where he'd found it, and then returned to spooning against his husband's back. He let his hands roam though, lightly tracing a curved finger down the sleeping man's side, finding his contour under the blankets, how and where his legs bent...and the inevitable result of being a normal sleeping male. It took all of half a second for him to decide to take advantage of it.

His free hand went slowly to its task as the one wedged under Yuri's side wrapped around to pull him closer. Viktor traced his nose and lips across his husband's neck and the back of his shoulder, nibbled at his ear, breathed in the smell of his hair. He stroked gently, yet methodically, over where he felt the man through the fabric that separated them. He could hear where Yuri's breathing had changed a little, even as he continued to stay asleep. It was only when his fingers went under the fabric that Yuri twitched a little.

Viktor continued his delicate work, setting his lips to the back of his husband's shoulder and closing his eyes, listening to every breath, waiting for the raspy squeak that would mean the man had woken up. It was hard to pinpoint though. It was hardly the first time he'd helped rouse his partner this way, but it was the first time Yuri had been half-sick at the time...so it was only when he felt Yuri's hand...
reach up to grab his hip desperately that he knew he'd finally come out of sleep. Breathless gasps came forth from the younger man as his fingers gripped tightly to whatever they could hold onto.

Yuri's attempt at words were barely a whisper; whatever he was trying to say was inaudible.

"Shh." Viktor whispered, "Rest your voice."

The Russian started moving his hand a little faster, up and down, up and down, pausing at the tip to squeeze, then down again. Each movement made the younger man's body twitch a little, getting more tense, until Viktor could feel his back starting to arch a little. He kept his free hand against Yuri's core, even as he felt Yuri's own free hand gripping tighter to the crest of his hip. That hand moved further though, fingers curving around and then pulling a little, as though trying to get his body closer than it already was.

Yuri started to turn his shoulder towards Viktor's chest, trying to get onto his back. The Russian made a little room to allow it, and the younger man turned a little more. He was all twisted up after that; head turned to face him, back against the bed, hips still slightly pressed to Viktor's own, one leg bent slightly up as the other followed the curve of the Russian's knees. Yuri's breaths were ragged against the early-morning sensation, and he raised his left arm from where it was pinned against Viktor's chest, raising it to touch the man's cheek and ran his fingers through his silvery bangs.

Viktor slowed the strokes a little, not wanting things to end so soon. That's when he felt his husband's hand come back out of his hair and reach down, and grasped him where he could. It was an awkward angle to try moving from, but Yuri tried his best anyway, pawing through the fabric. Yuri twisted again, fully rotating to 'face' him even though he still had the night-mask over his eyes.

It's still pretty dark in here...but maybe Yuri thinks it's later than it really is. Not being able to see what's happening...I wonder if it's more exciting for him this way? He's doing more than I expected he would, too...I wonder how far he wants to go with this...? Guess I'll find out...

Yuri had already withdrawn his husband, and moved to press their bodies against each other, leaving only enough room for where Viktor still had him in his own hand. He knew what the younger man was aiming for; he'd openly stated once that it was one of his favorite parts of their romps, and he was all too happy to oblige him. So he moved to wedge one of his legs between his husband's, then moved his thumb to catch himself, and brought them right together.

There was a gasp with each slow pull; Yuri's best attempt at being more vocal despite himself. Both of his arms came up over Viktor's shoulders, one hand mussing through the silver-grey hair as he pressed their foreheads together.

...You're still worried you'll get me sick, neh, Yuri? I don't mind... If I do, it'll have been for a worthy cause...

Viktor leaned in to kiss his partner, caring nothing for the slightly runny nose. It just served to remind him that a long kiss probably wasn't the best idea at the time, since Yuri had no other way of breathing at that moment. He pulled his hand away from where he'd been massaging them and wrapped it around his husband's back, pulling him closer to press them harder together.

He felt Yuri starting to rock his hips against him; it was probably the closest thing to 'control' he was comfortable exerting, since in all parts, their situations were still equal.

...It was the first thing Viktor ever taught me how to do in this situation...

The Russian realized soon after that he was creeping up to the edge of his side of the bed. It was as
good an excuse as any to move things around again, wedging his shoulder and arm so that it would force his husband up on top of him. That done, his hands roamed down Yuri's back, moving down slowly until he could push away each of their solitary articles of clothing until there were nothing but skin against skin. He parked his hands on his husband's hips after that, joining to the motions with a gentle rocking of his own hips.

Yuri was trying to catch his breath, so Viktor homed in on his neck, kissing and nibbling at it all he liked, his own breaths heavy against his partner's ear. He was a bit surprised when the man pulled his knees up against his sides and sat upright, freeing one leg from his black undergarment and sitting directly over the Russian's hips. One thing lead to another, and the younger figure had reached down behind himself to pull his husband into a better position, and then backed himself up against it.

"...Are you sure?" Viktor wondered, "I wasn't going to, but..."

One hand reached up to lift just the underside of the right side of the night-mask, and Viktor caught a glimpse of one hazel eye peering down at him, giving a look of longing where a lacking voice had been unable to. Though, at that point, Yuri could tell how dark it still was, and pulled the whole mask off, tossing it aside, and then leaning over to the night-stand to pull a small bottle from the drawer. That's where Viktor stopped him though, pulling the tiny blue bottle from his hands as he sat upright under him. Arms went around the younger man's small frame, holding him close, and nosing his chin lightly as he opened the bottle behind Yuri's lower back to manage the task himself. His skin was sleek a moment later, the bottle tossed to the blankets, and Yuri rose up a little on his knees, feeling the man beneath him and then slowly lowering himself again.

It took a few moments, and Viktor descended to his back again, before Yuri was comfortable enough for either of them to start moving again. He held himself up with his palms flat to Viktor's chest, drinking in the sensation of his partner inside him. Even as the Russian was starting to move though, Yuri felt the man's hands come up over his own, clapping them and then pulling them up above his head, effectively forcing him down until they were face to face again. When he was close, Viktor pulled his hands away again, and carefully set them along his husband's back, leaning his head up so he could kiss him as well.

Slow thrusts became more eager, then backed off again, and Yuri could feel Viktor's fingers leaving delicate marks across his skin, and even a slight twinge of pain where he'd practically latched his mouth to the top of his shoulder, just by his neck.

The Russian flipped them after that, slipping his arms behind the crook of Yuri's knees and held both of his legs up in the process, pushing against him with new fervor. The new angle was more intense, and Yuri arched his back as he felt it growing. His raspy voice was desperate to cry out, but all he managed were some whispered gasps. Viktor slowed down again after that, releasing his husband's legs to push his arms under his back, his fingers creeping out to grip the underside of his partner's shoulders, and pressed his forehead to Yuri's chest. Yuri crossed his ankles behind the man's back and held him close. The pushes were even slower after that, but went deeper than before, holding, and then withdrawing again. Each time, Yuri clenched his eyes shut, and wished his voice worked.

...Viktor would've liked it if he could hear me...I wonder how long it'll take for my voice to come back...?

The Russian pulled up, moving his right arm to pull Yuri's leg up in front of his shoulder, and then pushed it further to the side, forcing the smaller figure to turn to his side. He fell in behind him though, snaking his arms around his husband's waist and spooning against his back like before, kissing his shoulderblades and the back of his neck. It was only a few pushes before Viktor could feel the man fidgeting a little, arching his chest forward a little, pressing his hips back, as though
trying to wiggle his way free, but never quite getting there.

"...What is it?" He wondered finally.

Yuri reached his free hand back again, and Viktor could feel the pull against his lower back, reading the sign as a cue to keep moving. Fairly soon, Yuri had configured them in such a way that the sensation was so intense, he was biting hard against the corner of the closest pillowcase. Viktor understood what he'd done despite the wordless instruction, and did his best after that to please the man. He could feel every muscle as each group started to tense up, especially when Yuri curled his arms around to grab at where Viktor's hands held him fast against his chest. He laced their fingers together as his breathing became more labored; the only noise between them being Viktor, and the wet sounds of their passion.

It was almost a relief when Viktor felt his husband's body clenching down on itself, his back arching against his chest, his head pushing up against the pillow. Viktor nosed his ear and kept going, holding him even tighter in his arms until he, too, finally felt release.

He caught his breath hard against Yuri's back, sweat gleaming across both their naked bodies. Yuri's was still giving the odd twitch even a few minutes after it was over.

"Sorry, did I wake you up...?" Viktor mused quietly, leaning over Yuri's shoulder a little.

The younger figure just huffed at him, still trying to catch his breath a little.

"I guess I finally found the sweet spot again, neh?" He pressed his mouth to the back of Yuri's shoulder, holding him a little tighter. "I even got to mark you this time...though I guess I should've asked first if I could."

Yuri turned his head a little to look back at him, confused, so Viktor pulled one hand back to gently touch to the spot he had been referencing.

"You'll have a bruise here in an hour or two." He mused, almost proud of himself, "It's called a love bite. At least I put it low enough that no one will see it when you skate next, right? Though I guess it'll be gone by then. I'll have to give you another just to be sure..."

Yuri just nudged him playfully, You would put one right where everyone could see it if you could get away with it. He lifted his eyes to look at the curtains after that, seeing the faint red-orange glow of an early sunset beyond them. He turned his shoulder and tapped the back of his wrist to ask what time it was.

"Early enough that we don't have to worry about going anywhere for another 4 hours."

He got a confused look.

"To meet my uncle and the others for breakfast like we agreed," The Russian explained, then cozied up close, "We could take a nap and go again before we even have to think about getting ready."

Yuri wondered at that, and turned away from the curtain, twisting until he was lying on his back and Viktor was leaning over him. He lifted his right hand to gently press it to his husband's cheek, looking into those cool blue eyes for a moment before lifting his face up to kiss him. As he settled back with his head in the pillow, Viktor smiled back at him, then lowered himself to get comfortable again.

"My alarm is set to 7:30."
By 10am, they were finally making their way down to the lobby, took their things to the concierge desk, checked their bags to collect them later, and officially checked out of their room. Yuri scanned the area, the surgical mask over his face and his newly-donated Flames beanie over his head. He was determined not to get more sick than he already felt.

Less than 2 weeks until the French event. I should get my voice back long before then, as long as I don't get worse than I am...

"It's all done. We can go." Viktor explained, coming up behind him as he was tucking their luggage ticket into his coat, and then reached down to take his partner's hand in his own, "My uncle said he'd be here in about 10 minutes, so it won't be long."

Yuri pulled his phone from his pocket and quickly thumbed a message, then held it up for Viktor to read; [I don't think you've ever actually said his name, have you?]

"My uncle's name?" Viktor echoed, "I dunno."

Another message was written and held up, [Say it now. ;p]

Viktor grimaced, "...M...Mik..." He saw the look on Yuri's face even in spite of the mask, "What?"

The younger man shook his head and typed some more, [You can't say it, can you? Why not?]

The Russian raised a brow at him, "I call him uncle. Isn't that enough?"

Yuri raised a brow in response, tapping Viktor's hand with his thumb where he held it.

"I guess not." Viktor answered his own question, but then shrugged, "I've never felt like it."

More thumbing the phone's touch-screen, [You're so weird sometimes.]

Viktor started pulling him towards the hotel's exit, and pushed against the glass doors as he looked back, "Do you ever refer to your parents by their names?"

[That's different.]

"Maybe."

The elder Russian was there within minutes, driving yet another rental car and pulling up to the hotel with Yuri's sister and mentor in the back seat. Greetings were swift, and Minako moved to take the front passenger seat while the two skaters piled in back, squishing Yuri in the middle.

"Where did you go last night, Yuri?" The older woman asked, turning back in her seat to face him, "Everyone got all worried when the announcer at last night's Exhibition said you wouldn't be performing."

"He needed to sleep." Viktor explained, "We'll be lucky if he doesn't catch the flu or something before we leave."

"So you haven't gotten any better since we saw you at the rink the night before last?" Minako asked.
Yuri shook his head, then cleared his throat. He wasn't ready to try croaking out any words though, and no one pushed him. Within a few hours, they'd be on the plane to France, and the last thing he wanted to do was ruin their planned pre-event mini-vacation by being holed up in the next hotel because he was too sick to move.
"What!?" Minako banged her hands on the table, practically crawling over it as she gawked down at Yuri, who in turn was trying to sink as far back into his chair as was humanly possible, "How did you- What!?"

"It's my fault." Viktor said defensively, trying to draw attention away from his partner and pointing at himself.

"Don't try to take the blame!" Minako gawked at the Russian, "He's responsible for his own actions!"

"Sure, but...seriously...it is my fault..." Viktor insisted, putting his hand behind Yuri's chair before it tipped over and took him with it.

"Technically the first one was my fault." Mikhail raised his hand to interrupt.

"Don't take his side!"

"You agreed to the plan back then, too."

"Viktor wasn't supposed to let Yuri drink that night!"

"...He didn't drink that much..."

"Unbelievable!" Minako threw her hands up and then finally slumped back into her chair. She threw a finger over the table at the younger skater across from her, "If you skip out on the Banquet one more time, people are really going to think you're too far up your own butt to do the right thing! That's the whole reason you had your melt-down, isn't it? Because you were all upset that people thought you were being arrogant? How do you think it looks to skip the Exhibition AND the Banquet after winning Skate Canada? No one knows why you did it...so it just looks like you bailed for no good reason. Now they're making up their own reasons, and the whole thing isn't helped by the fact that neither of you two were answering your phones all night."

Yuri was practically melting in his chair, dripping onto the floor.

"It's not like he wanted to skip anything..." Viktor defended, scooping the man up to put him back in his seat, "At Worlds, he already was asleep, and yesterday night, he needed to sleep. I'll make sure he gets there at Cup of China, and I'll drag him to mine at Trophée de France and NHK."

"You said you'd make sure he didn't drink at Four Continents, too, but then you both ended up drunk." The ballerina pointed out, "Does someone need to chaperone you two?"

"You guys are practically around all the time already. Even Mari-nee-chan comes out to more events than before." Viktor gestured towards her, and her eyes widened for being put on the spot suddenly, even as she was trying to put a spoonful of food in her mouth at the time.

Minako raised her hand, her mouth open as though about to make some reply, but then she pulled her arms around herself and turned her head, "...Just because we're at the events doesn't mean we're around you guys all the time."
"Even Yurio skipped the Banquet at Worlds. It's not unheard of."

"It's a little different when a skater doesn't show up because he's been kicked off his team. Yuri just won gold twice in a row, and has become something of a figurehead in the JSF. People are going to start to wonder what's wrong with him again if he stops showing up at events he's expected to be at."

Yuri's eyes passed between each person as they spoke, wishing he could say something to stop them, but realizing there wasn't much point anyway, and thus was grateful that his voice prevented him from stirring up more arguments. He sighed and sucked on the straw to his orange juice, listening to the banter continue back and forth.

*I actually wanted to go to both Banquets pretty badly, especially the one for Worlds...* He thought to himself idly, *We had booked our flight specifically so we could go, and then I ended up drinking too much at dinner and got tired... This time, I don't know that I could've prevented what happened. I barely made it through my Free Skate as it was. We slept for nearly 12 hours after we got back... or at least I did. I don't know about Viktor.*

Brown eyes moved up to look at the Russian quietly, seeing how he was getting flustered at the lecture.

*He always used to ignore or laugh off any lecture he'd get from Yakov. I wonder why Minako-sensei has him all bothered? I better do something before someone's feelings get hurt.*

He slid his left hand over and set it against his husband's leg, sliding up and settling his palm high on the man's inner thigh. The Russian's voice suddenly stopped, and he glanced over at the source of the unexpected interruption, about to say something, only to have one end of a croissant stuck in his mouth.

There was an awkward moment of silence across the long table, even as Viktor blinked a few times in confusion. Yuri looked at him, then at the croissant...which he then leaned in to and bit down on as well.

Slate blue eyes peered into brown for a while. Everyone watched cautiously, waiting for something of a tug-of-war dog-fight to start up between them over the breakfast bun. It never came though. Yuri just lifted his hand and set it gently against his partner's neck, waiting for his pulse to drop a little before pinching the bread and tearing his half away, leaving Viktor with his own. The Russian just leaned his elbow onto the table to hold up his head and nibbled on the bread for a few minutes in silence. Yuri just smiled.

Minako was still looking at them from across the table though, wanting to say more but knowing it would be in poor taste to continue when Viktor had just been silenced.

"So how come Yurio isn't with us today?" Mari suddenly wondered, breaking up the tension, "You and him are practically tied at the hip, and yet..."

"He's with my kids right now." Mikhail said with a shrug, not even looking up from where he'd been glancing at his phone.

"He's with my kids right now." Mikhail said with a shrug, not even looking up from where he'd been glancing at his phone.

Mari blinked curiously.

Viktor and Yuri turned to stare straight at him, though neither was in a position to ask the man to repeat himself, so they just glanced at each other instead. They then turned their eyes to Minako, looking for a surprised reaction to match their own, though getting nothing. Viktor finally yanked the last bit of the croissant from his mouth, "...Okay, why is no one acting surprised?"
The older Katsuki was squinting at them, but said nothing, as she was still processing the statement herself.

"...I met them already." Minako pointed out, "You didn't know they were here?"

"No." Viktor answered, "...How did you meet them already if Mari-nee-chan hadn't?"

Mikhail was starting to look nervous, turning his head away as his nephew glanced at him again.

"Minako ditched me last night after the Exhibition, so I spent the night by myself." Mari explained tellingly, making Minako's face go red, "I'll let you guess why."

"...Okay?" The younger Russian avoided the thought to move on, "Then why did you leave them with Yurio?"

The elder coughed a little, trying to deflect, "Better than leaving them...in...the street?"

Viktor continued to gawk at him.

"It wasn't my idea!" Mikhail insisted sternly, "They just messaged me as they were coming into Calgary! I only took a week to see them over the summer instead of the usual month, so I promised that I'd make it up to them later. I had no idea they were going to just show up here."

"How did they even know you were here?"

"You think they never asked why I blew them off for 3 weeks in June while I was taxiing Yuratchka around all over Hell's creation?"

Yuri could tell his husband was getting apprehensive; he was internally unraveling just like before and during Worlds.

"Quit being so worried about it. They're here to see me, not you."

The comment was almost as much of a stab as their unexpected presence was, but the look on Viktor's face was half-comical. His eyes got small and he looked down slowly, stiffening up like an arctic breeze had just sent a chill down his back.

Yuri would've laughed if he could, but all he was able to manage was a quiet chortle at his husband's expense.

...He said it so coldly... Viktor thought to himself, staring at his reflection in outward curve of the untouched spoon in front of him. ...I feel like I should be offended...

"So then why aren't you with them?" Mari asked from her end of the table, giving him a bemused look, "They're about the same age as Yurio, so I doubt he's babysitting them while you're here with us instead."

"I know it's shocking to think of it, but sometimes I like to spend time with adults." Mikhail said dryly, "And besides, we already had plans for this before they showed up, so I told them to wait for me to get back. They don't know anything about skating or the competitions that go with it, so they waited to get here until after the show was over."

"Guess they got lucky you hadn't left yet." Mari pointed out.

"Where would I leave to that they couldn't find me?"
"...What do you mean?"

"I have a house here, remember?"

"You said you had a house 'in Canada.' Canada's huge. You could mean practically anywhere."

"...True." The Russian nodded and pressed a curved finger against his chin, "But, no, it's in Edmonton, a bit north of here. My ex-wife and the kids are in Banff, west of here. It didn't take them long to get here at all."

"...Is the ex-wife here, too?"

"No. I'm not even sure if she knows the kids came. She'd probably shit a kitten if she knew I was here."

Viktor was trying to hold in a laugh, but was failing, and sputtered it out anyway, "Why, does she hate skating, too?"

Mikhail just looked at him, then brought his hands up to frame his face, "Behold, the ugly mug of the guy who didn't buy into her delusions, and thus failed her as a husband."

Yuri was listening quietly, but when he heard those words, pulled out his phone to write a message. Viktor had been stunned into silence by the statement, and was somewhat glad to have Yuri tap his arm to get his attention so he could look away.

'If his ex is that unhappy, what are his kids like? They live with her, so...'

"What's he saying?" Mikhail wondered, trying to see the screen past his nephew's shoulder.

"He wants to know if that means your kids are crazy, too." Viktor answered.

Yuri just gawked at him with an 'I didn't say it like THAT' face.

"...Not really." The elder answered, leaning back again with his mug of coffee, "They're surprisingly normal for what they put up with every day."

Viktor was skeptical, but just as he'd expected, he felt Yuri latching to his arm with a look on his face that was begging to meet them, "No."

Yuri grumbled.

"...No. No." Viktor repeated, "No."

Viktor was glaring, staring straight ahead, stiff as a board. He couldn't even process the words being spoken to and/or around him, even as Yurio was lumbering at the group like they couldn't have gotten there soon enough.

"Are you kidding me!?" The blond was barking, stomping right up to Mikhail as they piled out of the car in front of the Skate Canada guest hotel, "I was gonna get one more round on the ice before Yakov stuffs me into an Economy-class seat and you dumped your hellspawn on me!!"
"Oh come now, they're not *that* bad."

"They don't know their asses from a hole in the ground about skating!"

"I never said they did."

"It's already bad enough that I still have my regular fans skulking around, but at least I can avoid *them* when I want to." Yurio went on, "I feel like these three would walk out into traffic or something if I wasn't keeping half an eye on them."

Mikhail squinted his eyes as a brow went up on one side, glancing past the skater to where his trio were leaning against the side of the hotel's rotunda, each of them playing on their phones. He finally broke away from the rest of the group to go corral them, "You three at least look both ways before walking into the street, right?"

The closest one to him, one of the two girls, pulled out the ear-bud from her right ear, but then went from looking bored to seeming excited, "Papa!" Her sudden rise and rush got the attention of the other two, and they too pulled an ear-bud out to pay a little closer attention. The first of the teens ploughed headlong into their elder, "You're early! We didn't think you'd be done until later!"

Like most of the Rozovksy line, the trio had the same silver-grey hair that Viktor did, but had the grey-green eyes of their father. The two girls wore their hair long; the one that was still hugging Mikhail, the youngest of the three, had styled it in a wavy fashion, tying it back in multiple braids that came together, behind where most of it flowed freely down to her waist. Comparatively speaking, she looked rather like a typical 'girly-girl,' and despite the cold of Calgary's autumn, wore a skirt. The outfit reminded Yuri of the school uniforms from back in Japan with the thigh-high stockings and crisply-ironed jackets with their pleated skirts. The second of the two girls was entirely the opposite, styling herself more in the same vein as Yurio than anything else. She had a hoodie on under her coat, and her loose ponytail hung down the front of her chest where it flowed out from under the hood. She'd styled in a few streaks of purple, magenta, and blue from her bangs, and was holding the end of a candy stick in her mouth. Otherwise, aside from the white of the stick and the colors in her hair, the rest of her was done in black, from hoodie to skinny-jeans and the knee-high buckled-and-belted boots on her feet. The oldest of the three was the lone male, his hair cut short, but styled forward in front with gel, giving it a slightly darker, more rigid appearance. As Viktor's slate-blue eyes narrowed in on him, he could've sworn he'd just been reintroduced to JJ Leroy all over again, except with someone else's head cut and pasted onto his body. He even had the same kind of sunglasses on his head.

The youngest was still clinging to her father, peering around him like she was shy to the large group of strangers, and she turned her eyes up to get answers, "Are these the other people you said you were mingling with over the summer?"

"Mh."

"And I guess..." She moved her slender hand around him and pointed straight at Viktor, "...He's the one that-"

"...Got his ass handed to him at a funeral." The boy finished for her, stepping forward as he stuffed his phone into his back pocket, "...What was it again? Vicar?"

The entire rest of the group was staring from the upstart to Viktor, looking for some kind of reaction, or at very least an explanation for what he'd meant about the funeral butt-whooping, save those who knew what it meant.
"Sergio, that was inappropriate." Mikhail scolded, "You don't have to lay the bravado on so thick around these guys. No one here is going to judge you. Apologize."

"Does he even know what I said?" The teen wondered, "He's staring straight through me like he doesn't understand English or something."

"He understands English perfectly well. They all do. Especially that one." He thumbed at Yuri, making him twitch nervously at being targeted, "He almost doesn't even have an accent. Lived in Detroit for a few years."

Grey-green eyes descended on the Japanese skater, and Viktor suddenly stepped in front of him. Those same eyes rose up after that to meet the slate-blue irises glaring back at him, "What?"

The Russian wouldn't speak; he just kept staring, unblinking.

"These guys are weird, pops." Sergio finally said, backing off, "When you said they were a bunch of figure skaters, I expected them to be a bit more froofroo and dramatic."

"And when I said my kids were here, I expected you all to be a bit better behaved. What is all this? Tired from the drive or something? You're embarrassing me."

"Sorry, pipaw." The third teen finally said, pulling the candy stick from her mouth with her right hand, "Sergio's been like this all day."

Mikhail sighed and finally stepped around, pulling his youngest daughter along with him, "Everyone...my kids. Nikkita," The youngest girl waved, "Sergio," The older teen tilted his head up, "...and Viktoria." The darkly clad young lady lifted her candy-holding hand again, putting the small scarlet sphere back in her mouth.

"...Viktoria?" Yurio repeated; he was suddenly being Yuri's mouthpiece again, saying what he was thinking but too nervous (or unable) to utter.

"Yeah yeah," Mikhail was getting defensively nervous again, holding his arm across the front of Nikkita's shoulders, "I did."

Viktor's expression hadn't changed. Yuri was trying to see past his shoulder though, wondering if it was safe to step out from behind him by then.

"Anyway..." Mikhail started up again, starting to point at each person in the group from left to right, "That's Mari Katsuki, you already met Minako and Yuratchka...then that's Viktor Nikiforov in front, aaaaand Yuri Nikiforov in back, Mari's younger brother."

"Shouldn't he be Yuri Katsuki then?" Sergio asked, blunt as before.

Viktor's eyes twitched.

"It was, and now it's Nikiforov. What's it to you?" Mikhail asked, trying to defuse the situation his own way.

Yuri was about to stroke out from the abrupt nature of the question, but instinctively threw his arms around Viktor's frame as he saw the man taking a step forward. Neither him nor Yurio could stop him though, and he walked the short distance towards his cousin like they weren't even there. His ringed hand came up out of his pocket and grabbed the teen by his face, pulling him close and staring straight into his eyes bitterly.
"...Vik...Viktor...!" Yuri pleaded, "...It's...not worth it...!"

Minako and Mari weren't sure what to do, wanting the tension to die down but not wanting to jump into the middle of it either. There were already enough warm bodies trying to deal with it.

"He learned that from his own father. It's a cycle. I hope you break it."

"Viktor's never hit anyone or anything in his life." Yuri defended, barging into the middle of the conversation.

"Is that what he's told you?"

"Viktor broke his old man's nose." Yurio chirped from behind, having overheard the conversation and remembering that Yuri couldn't have known because he was still out when it was stated.

The Japanese skater was stunned, turning from the blonde's voice and looking to his partner, "You what?"

Viktor wasn't proud of it, so he avoided Yuri's gaze.

"Viktor...!"

The Russian held his hand out, looking at the ring where it glistened along the horizon over the water. His eyes shot open in surprise as he felt a kick from behind, then several more.

"Viktor Nikiforov is dead."

When he finally turned around, it was Yurio standing there bitterly, staring at him like he was nothing.

"Why do you look so happy to be looking after that damn pig?"

The older Russian took a few steps forward, and then leaned slightly so he'd be right in the blonde's face, "Did you want to compete against me?"

"Don't be so full of yourself. Not all skaters look up to you." Yurio said stiffly, even as the older skater was smiling at him heinously, "Just go away already, geezer."

That was enough to make the silver-haired legend move again, grabbing the teen by his face and yanking him up to make him work a little to look at him evenly rather than the other way around. The wind was cold around them, whipping up their hair and clothing in a rush.

Yurio wouldn't quit though, staring straight ahead without resisting, "The ring you got from that pig is garbage. I'll win just to prove how incompetent its owner is."

Viktor just looked on him with those blue eyes, like he could crush him without another thought, but doing so with a hand as soft as velvet. He just huffed a single laugh to himself as the teen finally threw out his arm to free himself.

He still wouldn't speak. His eyes were cold and bitter that time. He'd had enough of his own blood
trying to tear him down when they didn't even know him.

"You're wearing your rings on the wrong side." Nikkita interjected, instantly snapping the tension in the air, "...If you're engaged or married, the rings go on the left hand, not the right." She was pointing at where she could see the gold bands on both of their fingers.

Viktor finally turned his eyes away from Sergio, and looked over at the source of the voice. The younger teen was strong in her glance back, not backing down, but not looking threatening either. She actually smiled.

"I just thought...you should know."
Chapter 100

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED

Viktor's fingers were starting to cramp where he'd held tight to Sergio's face. Even though he'd looked away briefly, his eyes came right back to where they'd been a moment before, boring holes into the forehead of this boy who could call himself 'cousin.'

"Leth me go...!"

The Russian furrowed his brow angrily, "Your opinion means less than nothing." He said darkly, clenching just a little bit harder, "But if you're going to insist on taking shots, take them at me. Leave Yuri out of it. If you say anything to, at, or about him again..." Viktor leaned in close, whispering the next words, "...I'll show you first-hand exactly what happened at that funeral."

Yuri had given up trying to pull Viktor away from behind, and instead wedged himself into the tiny space between the relatives. Viktor was too strong and confident, so moving him would be impossible...but after seeing the look on Sergio's face, Yuri knew. He put his hands on the teen's chest and shoved him off as hard as he could, ripping him from Viktor's clawed grasp and sending him sprawling to the ground several feet away. The young skater then backed up a step, until he could feel Viktor's frame behind him, and then reached back to hold to the side of his legs as well as he could.

"...I th-thought...it would be fun to..." He coughed behind his surgical mask, but then reached up to pull it down, tucking the edge under his chin, "...To meet Mikhail's family. I thought...it couldn't be worse th-than dealing with Konstantin... But you..." The young skater pointed at where Sergio was still trying to process his situation, "...You made me...re-realize why Viktor...is always so...apprehensive about meeting his relatives." His whispers were hard to hear with the traffic nearby, but they listened closely, "...So n-now I regret...ever trying to convin-...convince him to come here."

Viktor listened quietly. He couldn't help but be a little moved by his partner's sudden courage, and it helped to quickly dissolve his previous feeling of fury.

"...It s-seems like...no matter what, Viktor's alw-always right. Even when he's...wrong...he's still...right..." Yuri went on, his eyes starting to water from the strain.

He was a little surprised to find Viktor suddenly wrapping his arms around his torso, right arm going around his chest as the left curved up to hold his shoulder. The Russian leaned forward a little to account for the difference in their height, and set his chin next to his fingers, resting it on Yuri's scarf and casting those slate-blue eyes down on the Rozovsky teen.

Yurio recognized the smile. It was the same one Viktor had given to him on the concrete pier in Barcelona; the condescending look that said more than any words could. He even huffed the same single quiet laugh. Seeing it from an outside point of view gave the blonde a chill down the back of his neck.

...Viktor can be scary when he's pissed. That kid was lucky Katsudon was here. He looked like he was about to shit his pants.

"Is everyone done being super melodramatic?" Mari asked, the solitary voice of impartiality in the whole group, "Seriously, you're all way tense over one stupid question."
"He's just jealous that he doesn't have a perfect husband like I do." Viktor mused, his voice eerily optimistic despite what he'd just done a moment before, "I'm the luckiest man in the world to have Yuri."

The younger skater's face was red at the sound of it, but at least it was a relief to hear Viktor uttering something other than threat-like warnings...or nothing at all, which was worse, in its own way. But, he could sort of tell what Viktor was trying to do, and decided to play along, raising up his left hand to touch it gently to the side of his husband's face, feeling as the man tilted his head slightly to nuzzle into it.

Sergio looked bristly at the sight of it, especially as he saw Yuri turning his face to lightly kiss the side of his husband's bare forehead, and the look of sheer bliss on Viktor's face as he did it.

"Psht..." Mari retorted, "You didn't grow up with him." She hardly noticed the teen on the ground anymore, and even less so as his younger sister came up to get him back to his feet.

Pale grey-green eyes stared almost hatefully at the slate-blue ones that looked back at him, but Sergio finally turned away. He dusted himself off and turned his nose up slightly as he walked with heavy footsteps into the hotel lobby to get away from it all. Viktoria was waving at him sarcastically as he went.

Mikhail sighed, looking down where Nikkita was still standing close to him, "Christ, what crawled up his arse today?"

"We made him drive us out here even though he had plans." Viktoria answered, pulling the candy stick from her lips again, "He's been giving us shit all day because of it."

"Plans? What sort?"

"He was gonna go canoeing at Lake Louise with some school friends." Nikkita answered, looking up from where she held her father's arm with both of her small hands, "You'd think the lake was going to vanish overnight or something with as much as he complained on the way out here."

"Why didn't your sister drive then?"

"I've only had my license for a few months, pipaw...I didn't want to go that kind of distance."

Mikhail shrugged, lightly patting his youngest daughter's shoulder where he held it and then letting her go again, "I guess that's fair." He turned to the couple, "...Sorry about him. He's a momma's boy and listens to her craziness too much. He'd never made his opinion on this topic known though so I had no idea he'd get a stick up his butt about it."

"Maybe he needs something else." Viktor teased.

"V-Viktor...!" Yuri gasped, his face bright red.

Yurio gave a disgusted look, sticking his tongue out like he was going to barf, but Minako just laughed. Mari seemed entirely unimpressed.

Mikhail just huffed a laugh to himself, "...He probably does."

Viktor found that hilarious, nudging his head against Yuri's in his mirth, the previous tension entirely forgotten.

"So what...are we going to do now?" Yuri wondered quietly, feeling more relief as the seconds went
"You guys are sure staying late. My flight leaves in less than 3," Yurio said, "Why are you waiting so long to get out of this place? I thought you were going on a mini-vacation before the Bordeaux event."

"We are. This is part of it." Viktor explained, turning Yuri so he could see the blonde more easily, "But we're taking a special flight from Washington DC to Paris, so we had to wait a little longer for the connecting flight out of Toronto."

"...A...special flight?"

"Mh." The Russian nodded happily, "We're flying La Premiére."

"... Seriously?" Mikhail repeated, "How much did you spend on those tickets?"

"I can't say. Yuri would have a coronary if he knew." He purred, turning his face to mouth the words across what little of his husband's neck he could get past the scarf, "But don't worry, I got a $500 credit for each of us from our sponsors for travel expenses." He moved up to whisper in his ear, "Perks of being World Champions. Subarashii desu ne~?"

Yuri nodded, "Maido."

*I get this weird feeling the $1000 credit is probably just a drop in a rather large pair of buckets. Although...* He looked up, staring at a dim light in the roof of the hotel rotunda, *...I'm starting to get used to this kind of travel... Viktor spoils me.*

Yurio had pulled his phone out to do some research, and was silently bugging his eyes out when he saw the amenities...and then the prices.

Viktor saw the look on his face and held out his hand to cover the teen's mouth, "If you say one word about the cost, I'll do something you won't like."

The Russian Tiger just gawked at him from behind the hand, his eyes getting big and watery like the day he spotted the Tiger-face T-shirt in Hasetsu, "...Take me with you..."

Viktor just guffawed at him, "Oh don't give me that look... You hauled ass to get back to St. Petersburg just being around my uncle and Minako-sensei when she went back to Moscow with you guys. You wouldn't last one day around Yuri and I while we're on vacation, and we'll be staying in Paris until the morning of the Short Program."

"Couldn't I just go with you on the plane and then take the TGV train to Bordeaux without you!? I'm doing the train ride anyway!" Yurio begged, "Yakov's making us fly coach! I'll die!"

"Pfft...you're shorter than Yuri and he does fine in Economy Class." Viktor teased.

"It's a NINE HOUR FLIGHT just to connect in London!" The teen pleaded, practically clinging to Viktor's back the same way Viktor clung to Yuri's, "Smuggle me in with your carry-on bag! I'll survive if it's only for a little while!"

"...If you pony up the money and there's still a seat, you can book it yourself." The Russian pointed out, gawking over his shoulder at his former rink-mate.

"Viktoooooooorrrrr...!" Yurio whined, "Leaving me like this should be child abuse!"
"Why don't you talk to your sponsor about a ticket then?" The older man winked.

Mikhail just turned on his heel militarily and started walking off, "Nope, nope, nope..."

The two silver-haired daughters followed after him, snickering to themselves about Yurio's plight...only to bump into their father's back abruptly. Mikhail had stopped in the space between the two sets of doors, then turned like Frankenstein's monster to go right back out again.

"...I forgot...I have to take all you guys back to the event hotel." He turned to his kids, pulling the key-card out from his coat, "Room 825. Find your brother and keep him out of trouble if you can. I'll be back in a little while."

Nikkita took the card as Viktoria started heading in to find Sergio, and she turned to look at the group. Her eyes went from Viktor to Yuri, who had since turned to look right back at her. Brown eyes met grey-green, remembering what the young teen had said earlier about their rings. She smiled sweetly and motioned with her hands as though removing a ring from the right and putting it onto the left, then bowed dramatically and turned to skip away, waving goodbye as she went.

Yuri just looked down at where his hands had been settled over Viktor's right arm where it crossed over his chest, and stared at the golden band.

...I never even thought about which hand was the 'right one' for a wedding band...but when I put the ring on Viktor's finger, I wasn't thinking that it was a wedding band at all. Viktor never said anything about it either...even after he said they were engagement rings.

He pulled his phone out as Viktor started nudging him back towards the car, even as Yurio still clung to him in turn like a ravenous monkey. A quick internet search revealed the truth of the matter. It almost blind-sided him that they'd been wearing their rings on the wrong side that whole time.

"Hey, Yuri..." He heard his sister's voice, "I'll see you back in Japan when you get home."

"...You're not...coming to the other events?" The skater wondered, surprised.

"Mom and dad said I could go to one event before the Final, so I picked the one where it was you and Yurio. I still have to help at the resort though, so this is goodbye for now." She explained, "I'll be cheering you guys on from Hasetsu until Minako and I fly to Detroit."

Yurio was growling from where he was already sitting in the front seat of the car, "The way these two idiots are, I'm surprised she's not going to Detroit straight from St. Petersburg."

The trio looked over the top of the car to leer at the pair, seeing what looked like Mikhail pulling back from kissing the back of Minako's hand...but they weren't quite sure.

He gave her his spare room key and put his hands together in front of his nose as though in prayer, "Please don't think you're babysitting them...I really didn't think they'd come like this, but I can't transfer my rental car to Viktor, and there isn't enough room for everyone to tag along..."

"Relax." She pat his shoulder reassuringly, "I've kept an eye on kids and teens before. I'll just start teaching them ballet or something until you get back."

"...If I'll only be like 45 minutes, pending traffic through downtown..."

"Relax. I got this."

Viktor made a funny face, remembering saying the same thing to Yuri after Worlds...but his funny
face quickly morphed to shocked horror as he saw his uncle lean in and steal an unexpected, albeit short kiss from the woman. Her eyes were still open as he frantically got into the car and barked at everyone to get in, too. Yuri's eyes were as wide as Minako's from what he'd seen, not sure what to make of it. Yurio just put his feet up on glove compartment impatiently. Mari...still, unimpressed.

"Welp, all right then, see you later little brother. Good luck in China again." She pat his head over the Flames beanie, but then morphed into a fangirl as she waved at the blond, "Davai, Yurio~!

"...Spasibo."

"...Bye, Mari-nee-chan..." Yuri said weakly, waving as she finally started to leave.

She waved more urgently though at her travel companion, "Don't wait too long! I'm not packing your stuff, too! We have to be checked out by 2pm or they'll charge us for another night!"

"...Oh...yeah." Minako finally said. She looked down through the driver's side window, but only saw the top of Mikhail's hat and some of his silver-grey hair, and where his fingers were clawed around the steering wheel like he thought the car would drive itself away if he didn't hold it down. So, instead of trying to get his attention and put him on the spot, she just set her hand against the glass as she walked back around the car to say her farewells as well.

Mikhail side-eyed her as she went, his heart pounding in his chest, but he then looked straight ahead again.

Yurio was just deadpanning him severely.

"No." The older Russian said flatly, "No. No...no..."

"I ain't even gonna." The teen looked away again. He felt his phone buzzing in his pocket after that, and when he looked at who was calling, saw Yakov's name there in Cyrillic. He answered it trepidatiously, answering it on speaker and holding it far away from his face, "Da?"

"WHERE ARE YOU? WE HAVE TO GET TO THE AIRPORT."

"I'M IN A CAR WAITING FOR TWEEDLE DOOFUS AND TWEEDLE DUMBASS TO GET IN SO WE CAN LEAVE." He yelled back, rolling down the window to hold the phone slightly outside the car, "TELL VIKTOR AND KATSUDON TO HURRY UP."

"VIKTOR!!?" The older man yelled, "GET IN THE CAR ALREADY SO YURATCHKA CAN COME BACK."

"Hiiii~ Coach Yakov~!" Viktor mused, "We're just about ready, so don't worry~!"

Yuri was busy getting his cheek pinched like a child by his ballet teacher, "Don't stay up all night and get jet-lagged. You sorted out all your troubles here at Skate Canada so you should be able to focus on just skating from now on, right?"

"...Mh."

"I'll see you guys in Bordeaux then. Safe travels. Viktor, keep him out of trouble."

"Da. Do svidanija." He held her left shoulder gently as he kissed her cheek, "On vous vera à Bordeaux."

"...You know French?" She was a bit surprised at how natural his accent sounded.
Viktor nodded happily, "Je suis à l'aise en français, en fait."

"GET IN THE CAR OHMYGOD." Yurio barked again.

Yuri piled in, holding to the sleeve of Viktor's coat as he went, and waving at the woman at the same time. Viktor huffed a laugh and finally followed, waving as well once the door was closed. The car started to pull away, faster than it probably should've, and Minako just waved anxiously at it, putting her hands on her hips as it disappeared into traffic. She shook her head and sighed, but then huffed a laugh to herself and started heading for the hotel doors.
"...You're not mad because of how I manhandled your kid, are you?" Viktor wondered with a brow raised, holding for dear life to the 'oh shit, I'm gonna die' handle above the passenger-side door, but trying to look composed even as he did so. Yuri was clinging to the same handle on the driver's side passenger door, and they each held each other's hand between them, just in case it was the end.

"Nope. I am perfectly calm." Mikhail answered stiffly, white-knuckling the steering wheel.

Yurio was the only one who wasn't stuck to a door somehow, but he had brought one foot down off the dash to cross it over his knee, and he pointed daringly at the older man across from him, "Didn't you and her alr-"

"Not your business, Yuri."

"Then quit being all weird about it! So you kissed her! Who cares!? Just don't get us killed before we get back to the hotel!"

"You aren't going to die." The elder said stiffly, pulling out quickly from a red-light, enough so that everyone in the car jerked back as they started moving again.

Yuri was looking out the window, seeing the Calgary Tower a bit in the distance. The Hotel Arts building was a 10 minute walk from there, so it was a good gage for how far away they still were in the car. He reluctantly pulled his right hand away from where it held to his husband's, and pulled his phone up from where he'd dropped it into his lap, typing a message quietly as they continued the trip.

[We should go to the tower before we leave.]

A moment or so later, the message beamed back down into the car from where it had been shot up into space, bounced off a satellite or two, and found itself causing a jingle as it landed in Viktor's phone 2 feet away from the phone that sent it. He looked at the screen with a neutral expression on his face, but then smiled, and leaned forward with a hand on the right shoulder of the driver's seat, "Hey Uncle, can you drop Yuri and I off at the Calgary Tower instead of the hotel? We'll just walk back to get our things later."

The question seemed to cut the teeth off of Mikhail's anxiety, and he finally started to relax a little, leaning back into the seat normally where he was previously stiff and hunched over. He glanced back past his silver-grey bangs and nodded, then flicked on the blinker to change lanes and adjust their course.

Yurio just groaned and complained that it would make them even more late.

...
his face, so he held his hand out to answer the call for him.

The blond glanced at him, and reluctantly handed the device over, then stepped over to where Yuri had started to cough again from stretching his neck too far.

Viktor was stepping away to prevent the yelling from spoiling the mood, clicking to answer and holding the device up to his ear, "Èto Viktor."

"VITYA. Vy deržite Yuratchka v založnikah!? Vernite ego v otel'!"

The Russian just nodded and smiled awkwardly as he took in the brunt of the yelling. He hardly noticed that a few passersby had recognized him and were starting to take photos on their phones while he did damage control.

"I hope this doesn't get me booted from the team again." Yurio grumbled quietly, "I'm still on probation as it is..."

"I guess that's why Viktor took the call for you. If he takes the blame, they can't fault you." Mikhail shrugged, "Besides, I'm the one driving, so if Yakov has a problem even after talking to Viktor, I'll deal with it. He's not the only coach that trains the Russian team."


"Viktor..." Yurio pointed at him, helping the older figure notice the small crowd that had started gathering around him while he was distracted.

"GASP!" Someone in the group said loudly, "IT'S YURI PLISETSKY! EVERYONE, THEY'RE BOTH HERE!"

"Ah crap..." Yurio stood side-face defensively, "Quick, we gotta go! VIKTOR!"

"Bye Yuri! See you in France!" Viktor laughed, already soaking up the attention and posing with the fans for pictures.

"YOU STILL HAVE MY PHONE, DUBINA!"

Yuri just stood quietly, watching the banter while being unrecognizable under all his layers. It was almost comical to watch the blonde trying to swim through the crowd to get close enough to Viktor to get his phone back, since Viktor wasn't making it easy in the slightest.

Mikhail leaned over and set his forearm on Yuri's shoulder to watch as well, smirking at the whole thing, "You still don't care much for the lime-light, do you?"

The young skater shook his head, blinking brown eyes nervously.

...It's one thing for fans to come up to us at the events themselves, but in the streets like this, I'm always worried something will happen.

Yurio finally managed to get his phone, but the crowd was holding him down like quick-sand, shoveding him back over to his elder for pictures even as he was yelling that he had to leave. It was only after Viktor helped get him removed from the swarm of hands and arms himself that the teen was finally able to escape, and rushed over to where Yuri and Mikhail were still watching.
"We really need to go." The blonde huffed, stepping over to Yuri to give his expected hug, "Do svidanija."

"...Poka." The Asian answered, hugging him back over his shoulders, "Safe travels."

"Stay warm and drink enough fluids." Mikhail followed up, patting the young skater's head as he finally moved off with the impatient teenager, "And sorry again for Sergio. If I didn't need to pick up Yuratchka, we could've avoided that whole debacle."

"It's fine." Yuri bowed his head a little and waved as they finally started to walk away, then turned back to watch his husband.

He let them have their fun for a few more minutes before he looked back up at the tower, wanting to get up there where it was warmer and less noisy. Reluctantly, he started moving towards the small crowd. It wasn't nearly as big as the one in Moscow or at the Incheon airport, but it was still enough that he had to reach through the thickness of several people to find Viktor's coat to tug on it and get his attention. The Russian couldn't tell it was him though and just carried on like it was some other fan trying to grab at him, so Yuri did the only other thing he knew how.

He moved away from the back of the crowd and stepped around it to get in front of it instead, standing between them and the few who were holding cameras behind him. Some fans were agitated, telling him to get out of the way, but Yuri finally reached up to yank off the beanie and mask and revealed who he was. The crowd went quiet.

"...Oh, it's the other Yuri...!"

"Didn't he skip the Exhibition cuz he thinks he's too good for it now?"

"...Isn't that...Yuri Katsuki?"

The comments were coming from all sides, some good, some bad, some still not realizing who he was, others knowing, but not acknowledging the name-change, others still having no idea what his relationship with Viktor was. It made his heart pound even harder to hear his old name again, but his sore throat prevented him from bothering to argue, least not so close to the road where no one would be able to hear a word he said anyway. He cast his eyes up towards his husband with a look that begged him to move on, and Viktor nodded.

The Russian peeled himself from the mob, and slung his arm over Yuri's shoulders, "Please don't get the wrong idea...Yuri didn't skip the Exhibition because he wanted to. He went into his Free Skate feeling under the weather already, but his sore throat prevented him from bothering to argue, least not so close to the road where no one would be able to hear a word he said anyway. He cast his eyes up towards his husband with a look that begged him to move on, and Viktor nodded.

The Russian peeled himself from the mob, and slung his arm over Yuri's shoulders, "Please don't get the wrong idea...Yuri didn't skip the Exhibition because he wanted to. He went into his Free Skate feeling under the weather already, so once he was done, I made him go to bed. He pushed himself pretty hard as it was, and I didn't want him to get even more sick."

"Why doesn't he just say so then?" Someone asked.

"He lost his voice. As his coach, I ordered him not to speak so he could recover quicker." Viktor explained, holding up his free hand as he did so, "Hopefully he'll be back to normal by the Cup of China. For now, he needs his rest. Thank you everyone for your support!"

It was a relief when they finally got into the Tower Center and were making their ascent. Yuri had pulled up the Tour app on his phone, and was looking down at it as he held to, and leaned against, Viktor's shoulder. The Russian was looking down as well, and they each had one ear-bud in to listen to the audio. When the elevator doors opened and they were able to step out, the first thing they saw was the completely-glass exterior going around the lower part of the tower's main atrium. They stepped out in sync to avoid pulling on the audio cable clipped to Yuri's phone, and glanced around
in awe at the view.

"Wow~!" Viktor said characteristically, shuttling Yuri along to get to the glass-bottom edge as quickly as possible, pulling out the ear-bud so he could put his hands down on the 'floor' and gaze down at the street 600 feet below, "This is amazing! Yuri!" He looked back up like a kid at Christmas, and handed over his phone, "Take a picture of me!"

The younger skater nodded and clicked the phone on, side-swiping past the Lock screen to get to the camera as Viktor flipped onto his back like a typical tourist and made a stupid face. Yuri shook his head and laughed, getting him into frame, snapping the picture, and then handing the device back. It still had the custom case featuring the Aria outfit, but by then, Viktor had gotten one that fused the two versions of the costume together, so one half of the case was wine-colored and the other blue.

The Russian quickly opened the photo, cropped it, and posted it online, "Hashtag #FallingForCalgary!" He said proudly, laughing at how the picture made it look like he was 'falling' from the height, "Do you want a picture like that, too?"

Yuri shook his head emphatically, reluctantly crouching down to look way down at the street. He kept one hand firmly on the edge of the carpet as the other clung precariously to one of the nearby support posts, but pulled back again as he got dizzy. A few camera flashes caught his attention, and he looked around to see other people taking photos of them where they still sat on the floor.

Viktor turned as well and waved politely, but then turned back to his husband, pulling off his gloves and reaching over to touch his fingers gently to the man's chin, "I guess we should've thought about it before coming up here, but do you want to go to the Sky 360 lounge? They'll probably have some real lemon tea and honey for your voice."

The younger skater nodded, and they moved over to the stairs that lead to the upper level. When they finally had their seats, a small two-person table right on the glass, Viktor ordered their drinks, and then turned back again to find Yuri reaching across to take his right hand. He watched curiously as the younger man thumbed the ring a little.

"What my cousin said...?" The Russian wondered.

Yuri nodded quietly.

"I hadn't thought about it. To me, it's always been on the right finger, not just the finger on the right."

"Me too..."

"Do you want to switch them?"

He gave a hesitant shrug, holding his hands out like it was more complicated than a simple yes or no.

"...What is it?"

The Asian youth pulled out his phone and typed a message, feeling it was too long to say with his raspy voice. When he was done, he offered it forward. Viktor took it and read the note carefully,

[What side do YOU want them on?]

"...Well, in Russia, they go on the right hand." He explained, giving the phone back, "Countries out west put them on the left."

Yuri looked down at his phone, like he wasn't sure how to answer.
"Hmm..." Viktor smirked a little, "Does it bother you at all to think that we're wearing them on the wrong side?"

Again, Yuri paused and gave a hesitant shrug, picking his phone up once more. When he was done, he flipped it around on the tablecloth and slid it forward, and the Russian leaned over to look, [I had never thought I'd be married anyway, considering my luck with girls before. The only thing I really know about wedding rings is that they go on the other hand if the person is a widower. Last thing I want is for someone to assume you're dead or something because of what hand my ring is on, or the other way around.]

"I guess that's true...but you'd only have to think about that in the USA or something. Most places in Europe are the same as Russia in this regard. Besides..." Viktor tugged on his ring a little, letting it dangle around the middle joint as he cupped his hand upwards, "...this ring you gave me has made itself comfortable on that finger. With the exception of the one time, I've never taken it off. I don't really want to get used to it being on a different finger. I'd probably forget we switched them and give myself a heart attack to think it's missing."

The younger man looked at his own ring, realizing he hadn't taken it off, not even once, since it was put there in Barcelona the previous year. It felt like it was part of him. He drew in a breath as he moved his hand over to hold his husband's just above the tablecloth, and slowly thumbed the gold there.

Viktor watched quietly, seeing as the ring was turned around back and forth like Yuri still wasn't sure what to do. After a tense moment though, he felt the gold band slide back into its usual place.

"...I don't...want to change it."

"That's good." The silver man said, a bit of relief in his voice, "I wouldn't change it just because some Canadian teenager thinks it's on the wrong side. This was the finger you put it onto, so as far as I'm concerned, it's where it should be."

"It was...the first gold...I was able to get for you, too."

Viktor smiled at that, and the thought of 'firsts' brought something else to mind, "Almost to the day, one year ago, we had our first kiss, too."

The Russian was running around the rink wall as fast as he could, even as Yuri was still presenting himself to the crowd. The skater turned his head though, having lost Viktor for a moment before finally seeing him again near the doorway to rink-side. He started skating over, holding his arms out.

"I did good, right!?"

Viktor caught his breath for a second, then stood to his full height and nodded, smiling...and then lunged onto the ice unexpectedly.

The world went silent for a moment, and Yuri's eyes shot open wide even as his coach closed his own. Brown-sleeved arms went over his shoulders. He could feel a hand going through his black hair...and soft, warm lips on his own. Everything was moving backwards after that...and a second later, he felt the impact as his back hit the ice, and Viktor's face slid down into the crook of his shoulder and neck.

Still shocked, Yuri watched as Viktor pushed up again to see him.
"It was the only thing I could think of that would surprise you more than you've surprised me."

"...R...really?" Yuri wondered, almost too happy for words, his face red as he watched his coach smiling down on him. The sound of the crowd freaking out all around them roared into his ears.

Viktor pulled his right hand back and propped his elbow up on the table, setting his chin into his palm and thumbing his husband's ring fondly, "Ahh...I wanted to keep going, too..." His imagination was running rampant at that point, thinking on exactly how he would've done it; how he'd roll onto his back on the ice, and pull the man on top of him so he could hug him properly as he'd continue on.

Yuri was imagining much the same thing, giving himself away as his cheeks went from pink to red.

"I love how you still get a little embarrassed." Viktor quipped, pulling away only as the waiter brought their drinks and set them down on the table. A small plate of cheese and bread came with it, and the waiter left again after being dismissed for the moment. The Russian grabbed his fork and picked up a bit of brie, holding it up as he looked past it to see his husband glancing out the massive windows to the city beyond it, "...I can't wait to see the look on your face when we get to Washington DC." He started.

Yuri looked back at him curiously.

"I've gone on a trip with La Premiére once before, and was totally blown away by it. I've wanted to go back on it since, but I haven't had any events in France, so I couldn't. Getting to finally go back, and to have you with me...it's going to be amazing. You're going to love it."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED TWO

The flight from Calgary to Toronto was benign and uneventful, traveling in first class for the few hours to cross the continent. Viktor had spent the entire time trying to keep his mouth shut about their next flight.

"...I wish I could tell you about everything that's going to happen, but I don't want to spoil it!” He explained excitedly as their plane was taxiing towards the gate to let passengers off, "I wonder if they'll remember me...? It's been a few years, but...maybe."

"If they don't remember you, I'll be shocked." Yuri said quietly; his voice was getting better, and it no longer hurt to speak, but it was still a bit raspy. Tea with honey, and lozenges, were finally doing their jobs.

They pulled their carry-on bags from the overhead compartment and started to make their way up the tunnel that lead into the terminal, and the closer they got, the more it seemed like Viktor was starting to skip rather than walk. His eyes were scanning ahead for something, but Yuri wasn't sure what.

"Monsieur Viktor Nikiforov?” A woman's voice came, thick with a French accent.

"Oui!” He answered excitedly, lifting his free hand up like it were roll-call, and then lowering it again to take the woman's hand in greeting. She seemed excited to see him.

"Je m'appelle Angela. Puis-je prendre vos bagages?" The attendant asked; she was dressed classically in a black dress-suit with a red ribbon tied in a bow around her waist, with a black choker around her neck, accented by a big black poof that reminded Yuri of the one he and Viktor wore on their wedding hakama ensemble. The Russian handed over his carry-bag and motioned for Yuri to do the same, then gave over their tickets and passports before taking his husband's hand again, "Qui est votre compagnon de voyage?"

"Cest mon mari, Yuri Nikiforov." Viktor answered proudly, "Nous nous sommes mariés en Mars à Barcelone."

"Est-ce qu'il parle français?"

"Non." The Russian shook his head, "Il parle couramment l'anglais."

The woman nodded, but then reached over with one hand and spoke English with her thick accent instead, "It is a pleasure to meet you, Monsieur Nikiforov. La Première welcomes you, and we hope you enjoy your travels with us."

Yuri blinked at her, but then accepted the hand-shake with a slight bow of his head, "...Merci."

She smiled at the sound of it, atrocious as his accent was, sounding more like 'meru-see' than anything, and then held her hand out towards the open terminal, "Par ici, s'il vous plaît."

Yuri had no idea what was being said, but he followed along anyway as Viktor held his hand and
guided the way. The woman lead them down to a private elevator, taking them down to where a black BMW was waiting, and then drove them across the airport to a semi-private lounge to wait for their next flight.

The main area had a lot of seats for all travelers on Air France; comfortable-looking single-person sofas, tables, a few nooks for small groups, but further to the side was a more secluded space with red walls accenting the white with wood finish. The attendant encouraged them to get comfortable, and then left with their documents.

Yuri looked from the red walls to the big red square pieces of 'art' that hung in sections on other walls, then out through the windows that showed a row of gates and a handful of planes waiting to be loaded or unloaded. He stretched a little and then flopped down into one of the stiff-looking sofas, only to find himself sinking into it, and let out a breath.

"Pretty good so far, neh?" Viktor asked, looking around, "I was by myself the last time I came through here. It was that time I was in Detroit for Skate America." He winked down at his partner, and the dawn of realization rose on him.

"...No way!"

"Mh." The older figure nodded, "I went from Detroit to here with Yakov and Mila, but then broke off to come to this lounge while they went to theirs, and then flew from here to France on my own. Stayed in Paris for a few days and then went on back home for Rostelecom after that. I must've spent every cent of my Skate Canada winnings before I ever set foot back in Russia!" He laughed to himself, "Good times."

"That figures." Yuri muttered, "I was sick back then, too. We've both come full circle, in a way."

Viktor just laughed at that, "You're getting better! By the time we get to Bordeaux, you'll be good as new. Besides, this time..." He loomed over where Yuri sat in the sofa, his hands on the high armrests, "...You won't have to resort to cuddling a framed picture of me, since you have me in the flesh~!"

Yuri sighed, remembering the video of it from their wedding party, "Phichit-kun...you traitor..."

The Russian laughed again and then pushed himself back upright, seeing a different attendant coming up to them. He turned his head back down to look at him again though, "I think the only shame is that this lounge doesn't have any massage services. I could really go for one right now..."

He reached up to rub the side of his neck a little, and then turned back as the new attendant came right up to them.

It was a man this time, which Yuri though was particularly strange, but said nothing as he watched the interaction between him and Viktor. More words were spoken in French, and quickly thereafter, a fancy tray of fruit slices with a yoghurt dip was set on the table in front of him, and the pop of a champagne bottle echoed around the atrium. Viktor took his glass gladly, and looked over as the server forced Yuri to interact briefly to give him a glass as well, which he took nervously.

"Don't be so anxious!" The Russian reassured, "One glass won't put you under the table."

"How many bottles are they going to bring us...?"

Viktor raised his head as he sipped at the glass, thinking, tallying up the glasses of his memory, "...Three? Maybe two. This one just now, and one more for sure when we get on the plane...I think the third bottle I got before was one I asked for, but I forget!"
"Do all the attendants who meet us introduce themselves?"

"Yup!"

"Hm."

"What is it?"

Yuri finally let himself sip at the champagne he'd been given, then reclined back again, "I'm used to being greeted in department stores back home, but not being given formal introductions by everyone I stumble by. It feels weird...like I should be writing their names down so I don't forget later if I run into them again."

"You spent too much time in America." Viktor quipped, stepping around the low white table to take a seat next to his partner, "And too much time in your own head, watching other peoples' experiences and never making them your own."

"What do you mean?"

"I've gone shopping with you enough in Hasetsu to know you only barely acknowledge the staff in any department stores we've gone to. Things are different in Europe. Everything is small and tight-knit, like a community, since the cities have been there since long before cars or trains ever existed, back when everyone walked to where they had to go. But the tradition of knowing and recognizing your shop-keeps and customers never went away. That follows here, too. Once they've done their little song and dance though, they back off unless you request their attention."

"Do you recognize any of the people we've seen so far?"

"The first one, Angela." He nodded, "If she wasn't part of the La Première team, I bet she would've gone nuts." He reached down for the plate and skewered a piece of sliced kiwi, dipping it in the sweet white paste and savoring it quickly, "Vkusno~!"

Just as he was about to reach for a second piece though, he found Yuri stepping in front of him, and then sitting on the end of his knees. He tilted his head a little as he watched the younger figure set his glass down on the table behind him, and then pull out his phone, typing something, and then setting his right palm directly in the middle of his chest, fingers fanned out.

"...Yuri?"

"Paris is the City of Love, right?" He answered, trying to pull back on his phone as far as he could while still trying to see what was on the screen, centering his husband on it and trying to get it to focus properly.

"Ah, I see." Viktor mused, moving his own ringed hand down to lightly overlap his husband's, making it so their wedding bands touched as the phone finally took a picture.

"It's been a while since I uploaded anything. I'm sure people are going to give me grief when I post this."

"Why would they?"

"Cuz it's a picture of you, rather than me."

"Then let me take some pictures!" The Russian suggested, getting interested, "You can post a whole bunch then!"
The younger figure got a little nervous, "...I dunno, it feels weird still to post selfies. Seems a bit self-absorbed."

"They aren't selfies if someone else is taking the pictures." Viktor pointed out, "Besides, the best photos are the ones you aren't consciously posing for. I'll take them when you aren't paying attention!"

Yuri almost felt bad saying no at that point, since Viktor had gotten all excited about the idea, so he relented and handed over his phone to let him do as he wanted. The first picture came much quicker than Yuri had ever expected, hearing the click only just after he'd turned around to retake his champagne off the table. Viktor was grinning to himself and admiring the image, and turned the phone around to show it off.

"See? You look really good!"

He eyeballed it a little, "Mh..."

"What?" The Russian turned it back around, wondering if he missed something, "Is something wrong with it?"

"...Maybe it would be better if you posted this stuff on your account first."

He got a blank look.

"All those people that surrounded you at the Calgary Tower acted all weird when they realized I was there. Like I was a total buzz-kill. If I had done my exit interview after the medaling ceremony, people would know I was sick and had to leave." He explained.

"You could always do your own interview." Viktor suggested, "You still sound sick enough."

"...Do my own interview?" Yuri wondered, clearing his throat.

"Mh. Post a video explaining what happened. Anyone that follows you will see it. You could clear the whole thing up before we even get to France."

The younger skater wondered about it, taking another sip from his champagne glass before deciding, "...What should I say?"

"Whatever you want. It's your video. If you don't like it, we'll do it again until you do."

He looked a little nervous, but then nodded, "All right..."

Viktor held the phone side-ways and set it to start shooting video, "Say when ready."

Yuri looked straight at him, thinking about what he should say, but then looked up at the wall behind Viktor instead. A moment or two passed, making the Russian wonder if he was ever going to be ready at all, but then finally got the nod to go ahead and start recording, so Viktor hit the button and waggled a finger to say he was rolling.

The younger skater cleared his throat again, "...Hey everyone..." He started nervously, keeping his eyes low for the moment, but then raising them, "...I know a lot of people have been wondering what's wrong with me since the start of Skate Canada. I've caught a lot of flak for being mad at my Short Program score, and then for bailing on the Exhibition and Banquet even after I won gold anyway." He paused a moment, feeling his throat getting a little scratchy, "I wanted to clear the air once and for all. ...You can probably tell by how I sound that I'm not exactly in top form right now.
I've been sick since the day before the Free Skate." He stopped to clear his throat again, "...That's part of why Coach Viktor knocked my program down to 3 quads from the original 5. By the end of it, I could barely breathe, and I couldn't talk at all without going into coughing fits. I was lucky to finish my Free Skate without stopping because of my throat. We stayed for the medaling ceremony since we were already there, and then Viktor made me go to bed. Uhm..." He trailed off a little, not sure what else to say on the fly.

"How do you feel about missing the Skate Canada post-competition stuff?" Viktor asked, giving him something to chew on.

"...Awful! I really wanted to go!" Yuri lamented genuinely, "The whole thing turned into a giant cluster, and it all looked really bad because I avoided interviews like the plague right from the start. I'm hoping my supporters will forgive me." He held his hands up, palms together, in front of his forehead, "Shitsureishimashita."

"What are your plans for later?"

"...Oh...uhm..." He brought his hands down again, scratching the side of his jaw with one finger nervously, "Well, I'll be with y...er, Viktor...for Trophée de France, and then I'll compete again at Cup of China after that. I plan on being where I'm expected to be at all the remaining events of the Grand Prix Series. If I'm still sick, then I'll make sure I at least show my face."

"And how do you feel about telling everyone that you did the vocals for my Short Program?" Viktor asked teasingly, turning the phone around to beam at the camera before turning it back around again to show Yuri's embarrassed face.

The younger skater anxiously moved his hand from his jaw to the back of his neck and settled it there to calm his nerves as his cheeks got a little pink, "...It sounds better than I do right now, at least..."

"That's not what I asked!" The Russian nudged his leg to put Yuri off balance for a moment.

"...V-Viktor...!" Yuri protested, "...I don't know what to say! It was a lot harder than I thought it would be! I've never done a recording before...I just hope it sounds good."

Viktor turned the camera back around again and winked at it, "Don't let his modesty fool you, or his sore throat. Yuri has a great singing voice! I can't wait to skate to it for everyone! That's it for now though!"

The embarrassed younger figure slumped down under Viktor's arm and wedged himself into the small space between his husband and the arm-rest, trying to get into frame just enough so they could wave bye at the camera at the same time. The Russian moved his arm down and settled his hand on the back of Yuri's shoulder, tilting the camera a little so they'd both be seen.

"See you in Bordeaux!" He said for them both.

When it was finally over, and Viktor lowered his phone-holding hand down to set the device on his stomach, he leaned forward to nose the top of Yuri's head, "See? That was pretty good."

"...Mh."

Viktor twisted a little so Yuri had a little more room, and watched as he started twiddling away on his phone to make the post to Instagram.
A quick message from Viktor and I as we leave North America! Mostly an apology, though... #SkateCanada #v-nikiforov #vikturi
One down, three to go!
You're doing fine, Yuri! See you in Japan! Congrats on gold! *freaking out*
I'm going to kill you two when I see you next, I swear to god

Chris looked through a few more comments from people who followed Yuri's account; other fans, but his attention had already been side-lined by Viktor's last statement.

"...You had him sing your Short Program for you, huh? ...This, I can't wait to hear."
Chapter 103

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED THREE

With the late afternoon start, and the 2 brief plane rides earlier in the day, it was close to 11pm when they were getting ready to board the Air France vessel bound for Paris. Viktor was given their documents back in a fancy red envelope, and similar to when they were brought to the lounge, a private car took them to a separate entrance onto the plane.

"Wow~!" Viktor looked around, "It's like an apartment with wings!"

"...Is no one else here?" Yuri wondered, seeing every seat empty.

Attendants came and took their coats and scarves, and the woman who'd met them at the gate, Angela, stepped up again to explain, "It is not often that we only have so few travelers, but tonight seems to be an exception." She started, "You can choose where you want to sit."

Viktor was scanning the cabin, "...I think I sat over there last time. It was almost full back then." He pointed to seat 1A, "But that flight was way earlier in the day."

Yuri started wandering around; there were three rows from front to back with huge reclining seats, each with partitions that allowed for a curtain or a sliding wall to come across. From one side of the cabin to the other, there were 4 seats, with one each against the windows and two together in the middle. There were complimentary lounge clothes folded neatly on the center two seats, with a blue leather box each with Carita Paris amenities inside, socks, and even slippers. Yuri found the whole thing somewhat intimidating. He turned back around to ask where Viktor wanted to sit for take-off, but found he'd already become distracted by the gaggle of female attendants that had heard he was on board.

They were all speaking in French though, so all he could do was imagine the conversation.

...I wonder what this flight would be like if Viktor didn't speak French? I guess I should be glad he had that one girlfriend...made things easier for me in the end.

He went to sit at in the very last row along the wall, and looked out into the black of the night, seeing the airport below and the luggage carts being driven by. There was a ruckus of laughter that came from behind, but Yuri paid no attention to it. It was the silence that came after that got his attention, and he peeked his head out from the cubby-area to see what had happened, only to find Viktor and all three flight attendants looking his way.

"...What?" He asked nervously, "Did I do something?"

"Il n'est pas habitué à voyager comme cela." Viktor said, looking at him even though he was obviously not talking to him. It made Yuri a bit nervous, so he pulled back into the cubby and sat normally, deciding that would be where he'd stay until after the plane had gotten to cruising altitude.

The Russian continued to mingle while the rest of the plane boarded somewhere beyond their line of sight. Yuri found himself waited on by another member of staff; the same man that had originally brought the champagne in the lounge. Perhaps because of the language barrier, the attendant simply handed Yuri a glass of bubbly without saying anything; the second round of champagne that Viktor had spoken of.

...It's definitely stronger than anything that's served at a post-event Banquet... The young skater
thought as he looked at it. He shrugged though and started drinking it, No sense wasting something as expensive as this probably is...we'll be here for the next nine hours. What's the worst that could happen?

"How are you liking it so far?" Viktor's voice suddenly asked, the man crouching down next to the seat Yuri had chosen, crossing his arms over the armrest.

"It's a bit over my head since I can't understand what anyone's saying." He answered quietly, "But the seats are pretty nice."

"Ah, sorry." Viktor mused, moving one hand up to rest his cheek against his palm, "Half the staff on this flight was here last time I passed through. They were asking how things have been since then. I guess I left an impression."

"How couldn't you?" Yuri wondered with a smirk, reaching over to stroke his fingers through the silver bangs, "Being inconspicuous is against your prime directive."

The Russian laughed at that and stood back up again, taking the seat opposite him in the isle, "Maybe." He thought back on the flight fondly, "I spent that whole night drinking and had to sleep it off in the terminal once I got to Paris. I'm sure I was eccentric though. It's a little hazy."

"I've only really seen you drink that much once." Yuri pointed out, "And Phichit-kun posted the proof of it online."

"That was a lot of fun!" Viktor clapped, "We should do hot-pot again when we get to Shanghai! You won't have to be so reserved like last time, either! And Yurio won't be there to stop us!" The cogs were turning, which made Yuri worry a little.

"Yurio stopped us...?" He thought back on the time the teen had walked in on them in the back hall, but wasn't sure.

"At Worlds!" The Russian explained, "In the hotel lounge, after I saved you from Chris! That could've gotten really exciting if Yurio hadn't thrown that bagel-thing at your head."

Yuri's face lit up in recollection, "...I hadn't even had anything to drink yet at that point. How embarrassing...!"

"Psht! It was fun!"

"...How far would you have let that go on?"

"As far as I could get away with." Viktor smiled deviously.

"I often wonder what that threshold is." Yuri said in his slightly-whispery voice.

"To the point where you say to stop." The Russian winked at him.

Yuri deadpanned him comically, wondering then how far he'd allow things to go, especially if he had alcohol in his system at the time. If there was anything to be said about his husband that was true...it's that Viktor was excitable...and an enabler. But that just made him wonder other things.

...If the Sochi Banquet happened after Viktor and I had already gotten together...I wonder if it would've been him half-naked on a pole with me instead of Chris?

His mind wandered again, his face getting more and more red as the images flooded through his
imagination. He shook his head though, and twitched a little in surprise to see Viktor looking at him with a knowing expression, "W-What...?"

"What are you thinking of right now?" The Russian wondered lecherously.

"...How come you didn't get in on the strip-tease back in Sochi anyway?" Yuri asked pointedly.

Serendipitously, the attendant from earlier finally brought Viktor his glass of champagne, and he took it and raised it up a little, "Who do you think was taking all the pictures?"

The younger skater raised a brow at him, "That's not what I asked."

Viktor huffed a laugh and sipped his bubbly, turning back to sit straight in his chair, "I didn't drink that much that night, and I was trying to be good for Yakov's sake. By the time I might've joined in, you had already asked me to be your coach and had half-gotten-dressed again. I kept taking pictures until I couldn't help myself anymore, and that's when I joined in. Chris took over the role of photographer after that, which is why you could see me creeping in the background during your Dance Battle with Yurio." He thought back fondly on the whole thing, "...It's a shame my Nationals are in Moscow this year. If they were in Sochi..."

"A shame they're still being held on the exact same weekend, like usual." Yuri said, "We'll never be able to make it to both."

"Mh..." Viktor's voice trailed as he realized something, "...Come to think of it, when all's said and done, we're actually only going to get to compete directly against each other twice this season."

"Only twice...?"

"Grand Prix Final and Worlds. That's...it. Since we ended up at different events throughout the GP Series."

"...And that assumes both of us make it to the Final in the first place." Yuri said, thinking out loud as the seat-belt sign came on above.

"It would be shocking if one of us didn't make it." Viktor pointed out, "The question is who is going to be there with us this time. Chris and Yurio, likely...that leaves two other spots. We know a lot of skaters who could fill that roster, more than there are availabilities."

"More like one, since JJ will probably make it..."

The Captain's voice came on overhead to do his little 'song and dance' as Viktor called it.

Yuri pulled out his phone to check his messages one last time before his internet signal would vanish. Most of Air France's planes still didn't have on-board wifi yet, and wouldn't for another year or two. A few quick scrolls through his email, and then to Instagram...and Yuri found himself spraying champagne everywhere.

Viktor gawked at him, looking up from checking his own messages, "...What was all that for?"

The Asian skater turned his phone to face the man, "M-my apology video! It went viral!"

"...Really?" The Russian was a little confused, taking Yuri's phone to see what was posted. He read the script from the news article out loud like he had previously, "...Five time World Champion and coach, Viktor Nikiforov, announces that his athlete will sing the vocal portion of his Short Program music selection. Will Yuri be breaking new ground with an original composition?"
He scrolled a little farther, but then jumped to Yuri's profile to see that the post he'd made earlier in the day had gotten nearly 100,000 Likes already.

"This is great!" Viktor added, giving his husband the phone back.

"They completely ignored most of what that post was even about!" He protested.

"The fact that everyone's all excited about you singing my song means they've forgiven or forgotten what you had apologized for. This is good news!"

Yuri just slumped into his seat, "...It makes me crazy... I put all that effort into saying I was sorry and then all they do is react to the last thing that happened in the whole video."

"Just go with it." Viktor suggested, reaching across the aisle to thumb the back of his husband's tense hand, "If you act all weird in France, you'll just bring it back onto yourself! It's about the music now, okay? Skate Canada's done and over."

"Is it going to be good enough to be worth all this hype though? It's not like I did an original song...it's just a cover..."

"Yuri." The Russian said, coaxing the man to turn his head, "Do you really think I would do a program to a song I don't like?"

"No, but..."

"I've been wanting you to do that song for me since you sang it to me way back last year, and I'm not just saying that because I love you. You really do have a talent for singing!" He continued.

They could feel the plane starting to move beneath them, and Viktor drained the last of his champagne, motioning for Yuri to do the same.

"...If nothing else though." The Russian went on, "Tonight, you're not allowed to worry about anything. As your coach, your husband, and your biggest fan...I forbid it! We're on vacation! We're going to have fun!"

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Within 45 minutes, the plane was finally sky bound and at cruising altitude, and the seatbelt sign was turned off. Viktor was practically jumping out of his chair and went for the fancy pajamas like a kid at Christmas, throwing off clothes in the middle of the cabin like it was home. Yuri stretched and stood up, slowly meandering to the seat opposite Viktor where another set of the same amenities had been laid out. The half-bottle of champagne he'd drunk since being in the Air France lounge on the ground was starting to work through his system, and Viktor could see the slight flush on the man's face.

He stepped out of the way though as two attendants came by to convert one of the middle-section seats into a bed as he'd requested earlier, and instead moved to the other aisle to 'help' his husband change.

Yuri was gathering up the things he'd been given and was about to head to the lavatory, only to find Viktor standing in the way. He had the previous year's Cup of China look on his face again, and
before he knew it, Viktor had stripped him down to nothing but his underwear just like before. Despite how embarrassing it was to have himself spun around like he was, at least in front of the flight staff, Yuri found his attention grabbed exclusively by the silver-haired Russian once he was done.

"I almost don't even want you to get dressed again." Viktor said quietly against his ear, nudging him past the edge of the wall that separated the center and front compartments of the cabin, "But I guess I should let you wear these clothes for a little while, so you know what it's like..."

Flushed cheeks got brighter as Yuri felt the man nosing down the side of his neck, and stopping right on top of a particular reddish purple mark he'd left there before. He kissed it lightly as his hands moved down Yuri's chest, settling on his waist.

"I'll let you finish. Don't take too long~!"

Yuri watched him go back around quietly, and moved one hand up to touch at the bruise. He thought back on the moment he'd felt the flash of slight pain there, the moment Viktor had placed the mark, but then blinked and shook his head, remembering that he was almost naked in the middle of the cabin. He quickly grabbed the clothes that Viktor had scattered around, and ducked into the cubby next to the one where the other seat had been fashioned expertly into a proper bed. Within the surprisingly open space, he slid the table-top into the wide cabinet space between the two sections, and then pulled closed the curtain behind him to finish changing. The curtain was thick and heavy, almost like a double-thick tent wall, and it clipped snugly to the opposite side, bringing that section into slight darkness.

Yuri folded his things and put them into the drawer under the seat, rising up to his full height again just as Viktor came up on the other side. He watched quietly as the Russian tossed one of their carry-on bags towards the head of the bed, and then promptly fell in on top of it with a happy sigh. He quickly rolled over though and rummaged through all the different compartments available, looking for the one with the headset and TV controller.

"You want to watch anything or...?" Viktor wondered, pulling up the panel that showed the plane's flight path before clicking over to the cinema menu.

Yuri was only just then pulling the soft grey garment over his head, straightening it out and then looking at the heavy curtain. He shook his head and opted for the easier way over to the bed-side of the double-wide cubby; crawling over the wall between the seats, before unexpectedly and deliberately flopping onto his husband's back in the process.

"What's there to see?"

"Movies, TV shows, video games, music...lots of stuff."

"You can pick. I don't even know what's available."

"You put too much faith in me." Viktor laughed, "I don't know either."

Yuri leaned forward and slipped his arms over the man's shoulders, taking the controller from his hand to see how it worked, and then looking at the decently large flat-panel on the opposite wall. He'd scrolled through probably 20 pages of movies before Angela walked back into the aisle to check on them, but Viktor simply told her that they were going to settle in for the night and to wake them up 2 hours before landing. She nodded, pulled the privacy screen across, and dimmed the cabin lights.
"...You know, there probably isn't even an external audio option." The Russian realized, "Only one of us will be able to listen to whatever you settle on in 3 hours."

Yuri nudged him playfully, "Yeah I know...there's just nothing that grabs my attention though. I don't know any of these movies. I guess it's for the best if only one of us can listen at a time..."

"We could always set up both TVs and then bring the other headset over, and play the thing we pick at the same time." Viktort suggested.

"Assuming we ever find something to watch."

"Let's find something scary!" The older figure took the controller back and went on to seek his query, finding something acceptable before scrambling over the partition to do the same on the other screen. He grabbed the headphones from the second compartment and handed them over before crawling back across to retake his previous place in front of his partner, "Ready?"

"Mh." Yuri answered, putting the Bose 'muffs over his head.

Viktor had both controllers in his hands, about to hit play...but then stopped, "...You want something to drink first?"

"We should probably polish off that champagne they brought earlier."

The Russian turned his head to look back at him, a little surprised, especially since Yuri's cheeks were already a little flushed still from the last round. But he huffed a laugh and nodded, "Okay." The curtain was unclipped from the wall and shoved back a little bit, and Viktor hung out with only one leg sticking behind him for balance, "Mademoiselle! J'ai changé d'avis! Champagne s'il vous plaît!"

He shuffled back in, and sat cross-legged patiently while they waited, looking over at where his husband was glancing back. Viktor almost had no time to even comment on it before two filled glasses, and the rest of the bottle in a fancy bucket of ice, were brought out to them.

"Ah, merci, merci." He said, taking the items and setting them onto the flat top of the partition.

Yuri took his and drained it almost immediately, holding the empty glass out for a refill before Viktor even got a chance to taste his. The Russian just gawked at him in surprise. The younger man waggled the glass again, "...If we're watching something scary, I'll need this to sleep."

"You're drinking it too fast." Viktor deadpanned him comically, "You'll be passed out before the title even comes up!"

"...One more fill, and I'll drink it slower." Yuri bargained, "I don't plan on falling asleep right now anyway."

The Russian blinked at him, but then took his glass with a knowing smile and traded his own back instead, moving to grab the bottle and fill the flute he now claimed as his own.

"Four glasses of champagne, 30,000ft in the air, a comfy bed, a dark room, and a movie he's probably not even going to watch. ...This ought to be an interesting flight."
The first twenty or so minutes of the movie were...peculiar.

The opening sequence had made Yuri wonder what he'd gotten himself into, as it silently depicted footage from an old-style film reel of a normal-seeming modern family being hanged to death from a tree, presumably in their own back yard. The 'found footage' ended, and the movie went on to show its main protagonists moving into the same house that the previous family had lived in, although all but one of them were ignorant of its history.

Yuri was practically using Viktor as a shield to hide behind, especially after the first jump-scare had made him flinch enough to accidently whack the back of the Russian's head in his panic. Not hard, but enough to ruffle his hair a little and make him sit up to turn and gawk back at him.

Viktor was giving the same look as he'd given the morning he had once insisted they go to the ocean, and had practically broken Yuri's bedroom door down in the process...but just like back then, his apparent fury quickly subsided and he just laughed at his spooked husband before turning to settle in again, leaning back into Yuri's chest.

"You didn't see that one coming a mile away?" The Russian teased.

"...I'm used to scary movies building up tension through general creepiness, not sudden loud noises at unexpected times." Yuri answered anxiously, "I'll be seeing that thing's face in the hedges everywhere I go now."

Viktor crossed his ankles, and started to melt a little as he felt Yuri's fingers starting to gently press into the knots in his shoulders, "...I once got Yurio to watch The Ring. He was 11 or something. Hilarity ensued."

"I saw that movie when I was in Detroit still." Yuri followed, almost unconsciously kneading the Russian's skin, "I had to turn TV and computer screens away for like a week. Phichit-kun even put water on the floor under my door just so I'd step in it and freak out."

"Did you?"

"NO MATTER WHERE YOU GO IN THIS WORLD, PHICHIT CHULANONT, IF I DIE...I WILL FIND YOU, AND I WILL HAUNT YOU."

The Thai skater was in stitches, practically crying from laughing so hard. Yuri was in tears, too, but for entirely different reasons.

"...Nah." Yuri denied.

Viktor stretched his arms up as he laughed in spite of his husband, "You're a terrible liar. I'll have to go trolling through Phichit's archives to see what really happened."

The younger skater was flailing his hands around in a panic as the Russian sat up to arch his back.
forward, "N-no, no no! You don't have to do that! I-I don't think he recorded anything anyway! ...He was too busy laughing at me."

"Ahah! The truth comes out!" Viktor twisted a little to point a finger to the tip of his partner's nose, flicking it lightly before turning back around again.

"...Viktoorr...!" Yuri just pressed himself quickly against the man's back before he could lean into him again, pressing his forehead between Viktor's shoulder-blades as his hands clasped each other around his front, "...Maybe...I just spook easily."

"You do."

Just then, and much to Yuri's chagrin, another banging sound reverberated through the headphones and startled him enough to make him jump. After a few seconds of feeling like his heart was about to explode, he managed to half-peel himself off of his husband's back, and took in a deep breath, "...I think I'm too tipsy for this movie... Every jump-scare seems to be worse than it would be already."

He shrugged each shoulder up to push the device off the side of his head, letting it fall around the back of his neck.

"You want to turn it off?" Viktor pulled one muff off and set it just behind his ear.

"...No. You can keep watching if you want. I'll just...go back to doing what I was already doing."

Viktor turned his eyes to watch Yuri crossing his left leg in front of him, while the other stayed where it was, following the curve of his own leg where it stretched out beside him. Yuri's hands then went back to their previous task, kneading out the knots in his shoulders. It went on like that for a minute or so, before the grey shirt was too much of a hindrance to Yuri's efforts, and his hands went underneath of it instead, pressing his thumbs against the Russian's back in slow circles as he worked his way up.

He caught a glimpse of the movie every once in a while, as he worked his way around Viktor's shoulders again, but it seemed like every time he did, there was something disturbing being shown. The last straw for the hapless, slightly-drunk skater was seeing another found-footage scene where a family was tied to deck chairs and dragged into a pool to drown, only for some demonic-looking thing to turn under the water and slowly start moving towards them.

But, instead of simply complaining, or asking that the movie be shut off, he scuttled out of the way and pushed Viktor down to his back. All of three seconds later, he was perched on the man's lap, and had turned the front of his shirt into a new 'house,' shoving his head under it and staying there.

"...You sure you don't want me to turn it off?" Viktor laughed, using a finger to hold open the hole around his neck to see the fluff of black hair just within.

"...I keep looking at the weirdest moments..."

"It gets worse."

"...How much worse could it get?"

"...Lawnmowers."

Yuri turned his head a little to look 'up' and saw the Russian just smirking at him through the opening, "So you've seen this movie before!"

"Sure. As soon as I saw it was on the list, I figured it'd be the easiest choice. Better than spending
another hour channel surfing, right? Not like this flight lasts forever." Viktor explained, moving his arms up to wrap them around his perturbed spouse.

Yuri just grumbled. He could feel the Russian's right thumb starting to stroke where it held onto his back, slowly moving back and forth to soothe him, and within a few minutes, his pounding heart finally calmed back to normal. He listened to the sound of Viktor's where he had his head pressed against the man's chest, and soon decided that it probably wouldn't matter if the movie was entirely ignored. He pulled his head out of the makeshift 'shelter,' ruffled his extra-messy hair back to its only-slightly-messy look, and then rose up on his knees a little, "...Roll over?"

"Hm?"

"No point leaving a job half-done."

"Oh~!" Viktor did as asked, and felt Yuri sitting back down on the back of his legs.

Having seen the movie before and not caring if he finished, he discarded the headphones and pulled the carry-bag close as he felt Yuri's hands going back to their work, starting on his lower back and sides. From the bag, he pulled out his phone, unlocking it as Yuri watched.

"...What's the point without wifi?" The younger man wondered, pushing the soft grey fabric a little further away as he moved his way back up the man's torso.

"Not looking to get online. Silence can be deafening though in its own right."

Yuri watched as the music app was pulled up, and Viktor started shuffling through what seemed like a hundred different playlists.

Night Music, Opera, Techno/Dance, Worlds Helsinki Exhibition, Potential Short Program, Potential Free Skate, Yuri's List, etc.

"...I have a list?"

Viktor huffed a quiet laugh, "...That's Yurio's list, actually. Years back, when I promised to choreograph his Senior debut, I thought I'd put together a bunch of music for him to pick from so it'd be easier for me to get inspired. But then I forgot all about it! Given his tepid response to doing Agape, I guess it was good that he didn't have to pick from my own choices."

"So they were all kind of like Agape?"

"Not thematically-speaking...but even back then, seeing how rebellious he was, I thought I could tame him a little by giving him music that was calmer. Wanna hear?"

"Sure."

Viktor nodded and clicked into the playlist, and a rather substantial number of songs popped up. He just clicked the Randomize button though and then put his phone onto the top of the dividing wall, grabbing a pillow just above him and 'hugging' it as he let himself relax for the rest.

The music was initially difficult to hear over the sound of the plane's engines, but Yuri focused, closing his eyes as his hands continued to press against pale flesh.

(Anything at all from the NieR or NieR: Automata OST. I have Automata's "'Tower' (Calm Version) [Vocals]" playing to start.)
He could almost imagine someone skating to the song...but the person he saw wasn't Yurio. It wasn't even himself...it wasn't Viktor, either, at least not as he was in that moment...his younger self, maybe, when his hair was still long.

Yuri continued the meager massage, doing his best to work on every inch of muscle in front of him. A few songs went by as he went about his business...but then an idea came to mind, and he stopped abruptly to reach for the bag Viktor had brought. The Russian glanced back a little curiously, but waited patiently as the sound of Yuri rifling through their things went on. Soon, the bag was back where it came from, and Viktor felt a sudden cold against his back.

It made him jump a little, and he turned back to glance at the man, "...What was that?"

"My favorite thing." Yuri answered ambiguously, making the man turn back around to how he was before by moving his hands through the cold spot and spreading it around.

Viktor waited a moment in confusion, but then felt his skin starting to get warm, and he realized what Yuri had done.

...He's definitely more creative in these circumstances when he'd had something to drink first. Or maybe he's always considered it, and having a bit of liquid courage makes him more bold? I wonder what else he's going to do?

Hands moved more easily after that, sliding up and down the man's back and sides, stopping just short of Viktor's shoulders, where the grey shirt had gotten bunched up. He unraveled his arms from where they'd wrapped comfortably around the pillow, and reached up behind himself to yank the material over his head and give his younger partner more space to roam. Yuri took full advantage of it, moving his hands up immediately. He started to move forward against Viktor's legs, sitting higher up so he wouldn't have to reach so far, pausing...looking...thinking.

Viktor turned his eyes slightly to look by the wrinkles of the shirt around his shoulder, wondering what was going through Yuri's mind as the motions changed. He felt Yuri's hands pull away from where they'd stopped moving, heard a little rustling, and then felt the fullness of his husband's bare chest against his back. Yuri's arms came around under his own as well after that, palms flat against his chest as he started nibbling at his right ear.

"...Yuri...?"

No answer came, only light kisses trailing down the side of his neck, until Yuri buried his face against the crook of his shoulder and held there for a moment.

...How interesting...

The younger man hugged him tight before moving down again, kissing his way past each inch, moving to just between the Russian's shoulder blades. Viktor felt a hand against his side, nudging upward a little, which he took as a gesture for him to turn onto his back again. He did as bid, slipping one arm out of the grey top as he went. Yuri settled to sit over his waist and went right for his neck, kissing him there eagerly as his right hand stayed on the side of Viktor's chest, the other weaving through the man's silvery hair. The Russian was loving every second of it, moving his own hands up over Yuri's back, roaming gently back and forth until his left hand was as much through that black hair as Yuri's was through his own.

Before long, kisses against each others' neck and ears forced them to face one another. Viktor just smiled.
"You're eager."

"I feel sorry for whoever tries to tell me to stop."

"...I'd almost like to see that."

"I want you..." Yuri said, even quieter than he already was, nudging their foreheads together as he closed his eyes.

"I'm yours."

"...Even...here...?" Hazel eyes half-opened again.

"Isn't that what you had in mind all along?"

Yuri's already-pink cheeks got redder, "...It was...a thought."

"Don't stop now." Viktor encouraged, turning his face slightly to speak the words against his partner's lips, "I'll be disappointed if you do."

Yuri gathered up all four flutes of champagne in his system and went for it, kissing the man without hesitation. He could feel the rest of his body wanting rock forward already, so he started trailing down Viktor's neck again as he moved his way down, hands caressing the man's sides as he went. He paused over Viktor's hips and pushed into him there with his own, making the older figure draw in a hissed breath. Yuri wasn't done there though, kissing his way to the side of the man's chest, taking the small pink nub into his mouth.

"Ahh~!"

Yuri peeked an eye open and glanced up, but then pulled away entirely, "...Ohmygod, I got you to blush."

"...Hah?"

"I did!" Yuri said again proudly, "Your face is probably almost as red as mine is!"

"...Only half as much." Viktor insisted, bucking the man a little to make him keep going, which he finally did.

Arms went under the Russian's back to hold him close, and Yuri went back to what he was doing before, lathing his tongue over the nub and then circling around it. A moment later, he was doing the same thing to the other one, giving it the proper attention, and then moving lower again. He kissed his way down to the man's navel, dipped his tongue into it, and continued down again.

Viktor watched intently, fascinated, and felt where the younger man settled on his lower legs. He was a little surprised to find that Yuri didn't immediately withdraw him, but he supposed that with greater experience, he'd know to prolong the teasing until it almost hurt. So he felt as the man paid him all sorts of attention...through two layers of clothing. He'd gotten so used to the feeling that he actually gasped loudly and pushed up on his elbows when Yuri finally had him in his mouth. The noise made Viktor worry for a moment...in all his previous escapades, he'd never had to worry so much about being caught in the act...but this time, and especially with Yuri being so unusually fearless...the anxiety of it actually crept up a little inside him. For the first time, it was Viktor himself who had his hand over his mouth, trying not to make so much noise.

Yuri's motions were more refined than ever, and the bubbly gave him the courage to do what he
liked without the worry that he was doing it wrong. He looked up briefly to see his husband biting down on a knuckle. It only encouraged him to do more. Hands suddenly did more than just hold the man in position, and the sound of Viktor trying so hard not to make noise was like music.

...I wonder if there's a point where even he wouldn't be able to stop himself from crying out?

He wasn't *that* drunk though, and pared everything down a little afterwards, though mostly because he didn't want his husband to finish before they'd even really gotten started. A few more moments, and Yuri lifted away, intending to slowly make his way back up the way he'd come, but finding Viktor too eager for that. The Russian pulled him up quickly, sitting up to kiss his husband passionately, then dragging him back down again as one knee came up aside Yuri's legs. The kiss was interrupted though as Viktor had to bring his hand up to his mouth again abruptly, feeling Yuri press hard against him, and even go further to wedge both of his knees against the side of his hips, forcing the other leg to come up around Yuri's waist.

Seeing the pink shade on Viktor cheeks turn redder made Yuri even bolder, and he moved down to the man's neck as the grind began. Arms came down again as Yuri held himself up on his elbows, sliding his hands and arms under the Russian's shoulders, pressing himself against the man's center, slowly but firmly.

It was almost too much to take. There were still too many clothes. Viktor wanted *skin*. His hands came down from Yuri's back in a desperate bid to push the remaining clothes away. When enough was gone and Viktor was able to take his husband into his hands, he crossed his ankles behind Yuri's back and squeezed him in close.

Viktor did his best after that to seize back control, taking them both in his hands like he usually did, removing one hand only long enough to look for the bottle of warming liquid that Yuri had dropped sometime earlier. When he realized that Yuri already had it, and felt it being drizzled onto their skin, he realized that he wouldn't be getting control back at all at that point.

It was...a weird feeling, to say the least.

His eyes shot open as he felt Yuri lifting him up, dragging him a slight distance up the make-shift bed, and depositing him to lean against where a pile of pillows stacked up against the back of the chair. Slate-blue irises scanned the younger man for answers, but all he got were hazel pools looking right back at him.

His own words came back to his mind after that.

*Submit.*

*Submiiiittt...*

Yuri was on his neck again, moving down just past the turn of his shoulder, picking up the slow push against Viktor's hips.

...*He's only ever been this out-going in short bursts before...a few seconds at a time, if that.*

The Russian's thoughts went back on those moments...last year's Cup of China Short Program, when he'd put his hand over Yuri's closed fist on the rink wall, trying to tell him that the time of thinking about katsudon for inspiration was over. Yuri had unexpectedly opened his hand and clasped their fingers together, even leaning up to touch their foreheads, staring straight into him.

'*Don't ever take your eyes off me.*
It happened again at Rostelecom, right before that Short Program as well. He was waving at his home crowd when Yuri grabbed his tie and yanked him back around.

'...The show has already begun, Viktor.'

'You're right.'

'Don't worry. I'll show my love to all of Russia.'

Showing Yuri the Duetto outfit for the first time had gotten him excitable, too. Viktor wasn't sure it that counted, since that moment had a lot of history building up behind it.

But, Four Continents had its moment as well, even if it wasn't on the ice at all that time. It was after Yuri's 115.54 SP score. Viktor had promised to rip the clothing off of him and make love with him right there in the rink, but had spared his then-fiancé the trouble of needing to repair his outfit for Worlds. The look on Yuri's face when they got back to the hotel though...

'...Do it.'

He'd ripped every button off the front of Yuri's shirt after that, forcing him to wear his open-chested Duetto shirt to the Banquet after the event was over.

The most recent time Viktor could recall that Yuri had been so eager to get close was at Worlds, lunging at him through the elevator doors.

No matter what happened or what was going on though, Yuri inevitably went back to letting me lead. I wonder how he'll be like lat-

His eyes went wide. He'd stopped paying attention for just long enough that Yuri had gotten into him. The surprise was enough that Viktor felt frozen for a moment, and Yuri had to look him over just to make sure he was okay.

"...Did I...do something wrong?" The younger skater wondered, worried now and moving to withdraw, only to feel the man's legs clamp down on him again.

"...Y-Yuri..." He finally muttered, both hands coming up on either side of his partner's face, "...I just...didn't expect that..." He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead to Yuri's, "...After what you said before..."

"I was an emotional wreck at the time." Yuri explained quietly, staying put for the moment until the tension wore down and he felt safe to move again, "...I said things that I didn't entirely mean, at least not as much as it probably seemed."

"And you're not just half-drunk now?"

The younger skater pushed all the way in, derailing Viktor's train of thought, and forcing him to bring his hand back to cover his mouth. He bit down on the tip of his thumb after that. He could feel Yuri leaning in, nosing the edge of his ear as he slid past silver-grey bangs.

"I am, but I'm an honest drunk, aren't I?" Yuri proposed, pulling back a little, "If I hadn't been completely blitzed in Sochi, we wouldn't even be here now, right?" He pushed in again.

Viktor drew in a quick breath, keeping his left hand on Yuri's head as the other went around his back, "...You better not forget this."
"I won't. I only had four glasses, not four bottles." He answered simply, pulling his head back around to touch his nose to his husband's, pausing a moment to savor the look in his eyes, and then leaning down to kiss him.

The slow push and pull began anew after that, and Viktor held fast to his partner with both arms around him, the right reaching up further to feel raven hair on his fingers. Yuri did the same in turn, hugging the Russian tightly where he leaned up against the back of the chair and pillows. Both were careful to be as quiet as possible, having no idea where any of the Air France staff were at any given time. They could only assume most had gone to staff quarters to try and sleep, leaving only one person awake to keep an ear out for requests, but not listening so closely that they'd overhear conversation and eavesdrop. So the pair went about their business unbothered.

Viktor hadn't been able to keep his ankles crossed forever, and they soon loosened behind Yuri's back, giving the younger skater opportunity to hook his arms under the man's knees and pull his legs higher up. The Russian's face was fully red at that point, which was odd from Yuri's perspective...it was hardly the first time he'd taken his husband.

I wonder why he's so embarrassed tonight...? Is it that different? ...Is it the risk of being walked-in on? Or is it me...?

He kissed the man again, only to find him raising his right leg right up over his shoulder, twisting a little bit, returning to center, turning the other way, then pausing.

"What is it...?"

"You keep almost hitting it, but then the feeling fades..." Viktor explained, trying to catch his breath, "I was trying to find it again."

Yuri tilted his head a little, but then realized, "...Oh...turn around, then."

The Russian pulled his leg back down and pushed to sit up a little, feeling the moment he'd come off his partner entirely and uttering a light breathy gasp as he did so. Yuri put his hand on Viktor's side as he turned about-face and sat again on his knees. He leaned over the man and kissed his back lightly, hands stroking slowly over his sides as he inched in closer from behind again.

"I find that it's easier from this angle, when you do it." Yuri said quietly, the music from Viktor's phone still playing softly from where it had been set on the small wall between the two seats, "I'll try my best."

The Russian waited quietly as his husband got back to position, placing himself and then leaning against his back again with the right hand coming around to his chest while the left moved down to the crook of his thigh. He felt the hand pulling him up a little bit, and he let it guide him until he was just above the younger man's lap. Yuri then nudged his forehead against Viktor's upper back to make him lean a little forward, and gently eased into him again as Viktor moved down.

It took a few moments and a little repositioning, but when the Russian had to bury his face into his arms where he held to the head-rest of the seat, Yuri knew he'd found the right spot. He took the whole thing rather seriously at that point. He added a little more warming liquid, and started moving with purpose. Yuri was on a mission. He hadn't been able to please his husband the way he wanted up to then because of nerves and self-doubt, but he wasn't going to fail him now. The man had literally given up all control...the least he could do was make it worthwhile.

Hands moved slowly downward, palms flat against the Russian's chest and abdomen, sliding closer to center until they encircled around the member. He kissed at the man's back as he pushed in, hands
pulling and rubbing, listening intently to every restrained gasp and moan that Viktor tried to keep quiet.

Slate-blue eyes widened though as he heard the words.

"...Let them hear."

He turned those eyes back slightly, like he wasn't sure he understood correctly. Brown eyes gazed back at him intently though.

"Cry out."

It's just like Rostelecom...! He wants everyone to know!

Viktor had no trouble with that order. It was easier to enjoy everything without the responsibility of trying to protect his husband's modesty. It was quick and intense after that, and the Russian was sure everyone in the front of the plane heard him...which was half the fun anyway. He wanted to know how red everyone's faces would be in the morning. These people who had seen how quiet and reserved Yuri was when they boarded...he wanted them to know how passionate the young skater really was. But, just as he was on the edge, he pushed back far enough to force the man back to sitting again, pulled off and then turned around. One hand came up to caress the younger man's jaw, and he leaned in close.

Yuri was entirely confused, but as soon as he felt himself getting bowled over with a kiss, and his husband pushing between his legs, he understood. More of the warming liquid, a few hard and deliberate thrusts against center, and Viktor moved down to get inside him in turn. He gave the younger figure a moment to adjust, and then slowly made his way deeper until his hips were pressed right up against him. It was almost rough after that, arms around Yuri's frame like Viktor was worried the man would slip out of his grasp if he didn't. Yuri himself had both arms over his head to keep from getting pushed right into the other seat. His back arched up as the Russian picked up the pace, practically desperate for him.

"V-Vik...Viktor...!"

One arm under Yuri's back pulled up and hoisted the smaller man's body up into the Russian's lap, slowing him down somewhat. He kissed at the toned frame, the muscle he'd helped build up after Yuri had let himself go before. Yuri was a work of art now...his work of art. Chiseled to perfection, and all his own. Viktor leaned over him, kisses moving from each side of the younger man's chest, back to the center of it, then going up to Yuri's neck, then to his lips again. Arms went under Yuri's back to hoist him up again, and Viktor twisted to cross his legs as he felt his husband's arms come up over his shoulders. Yuri held there a moment, kissing his idol and coach until he got brave again...and lifted himself off the man's center.

Viktor was a little confused, but went along with it anyway, holding Yuri's core close to himself as he moved to sit within his crossed legs. Yuri's legs wrapped slightly around the man's waist, ankles crossed behind his back as well as they could. It felt a little like the very first time they'd ever been intimate, sitting so close with their centers pressed together, holding one another in the dark. It suddenly changed though. Viktor didn't just lean back down to pull Yuri over top of him. It was Yuri doing things this time.

The younger man craned his head up to keep kissing his partner as his hands moved down to take them both, massaging as well as he'd been taught how. One hand slowly moved away though and pressed against Viktor's abdomen, forcing him to curl his back and, as a result, tilt his hips forward again. That hand then moved down discretely, stroking at the Russian's thigh for a moment before
moving further down.

Viktor gasped as he felt two fingers go back into him, legs twisting upward at the unexpected move. The 'come hither' massage began soon after, and half-lidded brown eyes watched him closely.

W-Where did he learn this!? Viktor's mind was racing, ...It's overwhelming...I can hardly think straight...!

Yuri knew he was winning that 'battle' when his husband couldn't even hold himself up anymore, slowly leaning back onto his elbows until he was on his back again, fingers clenching to the red and white blankets, silver hair tousled and messy against the one pillow close enough to fall into. Yuri continued to watch the man closely, each hand keeping up the pace until he saw that Viktor was right on the edge. Right as the Russian's body was starting to clench up, Yuri withdrew his fingers and pushed himself inside again, practically on the edge himself from Viktor's prior attention...and just as he had hoped, and almost prayed, Viktor cried out *loudly* just as he himself climaxed. His own cry was barely a squeak by comparison, but only because of his still-slightly-lost voice.

Sweat beaded on both of them, and Yuri drooped his head as he tried to catch his breath. Viktor panted just as hard, left hand going over his head as the right squeezed Yuri's shoulder, patting him there gently twice until Yuri leaned forward and collapsed on top of him. The Russian hugged and kissed his head, pressing his cheek into the raven hair as he held on.

"...I swear, I'll get you half-drunk every night from now on if it means I get to feel like this again." He muttered quietly through ragged breaths, "No more take-backs. You owe me this."

"...D-Don't worry..." Yuri said, just as weakly, "...I don't...think I can go back again either now."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FIVE

It wasn't exactly unusual for Yuri to sleep on a flight...but actually feeling rested when he woke up was something more elusive. When the polite knock came a few hours later, one eye peeked open a little and then closed again, only for both to finally open as the knock came a second time. A woman's voice was saying something, but he was only half-conscious and didn't quite understand it. He wasn't even sure what language it was in at the time. He was quite tangled with his husband, his head wedged just under the man's chin, one arm draped over Viktor's side as the other was curled up between them...but he was awake.

"...Merci." He said blearily, pulling the hand over the Russian's waist to rub his eyes. The world was a little blurry since he'd taken out his contact lenses, but it wasn't terrible. His vision was never so awful that he'd lose depth perception when he took his glasses off to skate before anyway. He pushed himself up on his elbow a little until he was nose-to-nose with his husband, "...Viktor."

"Mnn..."

"Staff is knocking. We must be close."

"Mhm..."

Yuri smiled and brushed back Viktor's bangs a few times, then kissed his forehead, "I'm going to clean up and get dressed. Think about what you want to eat, okay?"

"...Mh."

The younger skater sat up fully at that point, rummaging around for the pants he'd thrown off the night before and pulling them on before grabbing his contact lens case, and got ready to unlatch the curtain. Just as he was about to though, Viktor finally pushed to an elbow and sat up a little, blindly fumbling for Yuri's hand. When he found it, he twisted to face his partner, trailing his fingers up the man's arm until it found its place under his chin, and brought him back into his sights.

"You remember last night, right?" He asked quietly, his eyes barely open.

"Of course."

The Russian smiled, kissed him lightly and then flopped back down to the pillow where it was still warm, "Just checking." He peeked an eye open to glance back at the man as he was about to unhook the curtain, "Your voice is back to normal again, too."

The night's escapades had made Yuri entirely forget how raspy his voice had still been the day before, and he reached one hand up to his throat, "...Ah, yeah, so it is. Good timing." He pushed the heavy fabric wall aside and hopped out, "I'll be right back."

As Yuri vanished from sight, and turned to close the gap again so Viktor could get half-dressed again himself, Viktor turned flat on his back and stretched as far as the length of the cabin would allow. He looked up at the ceiling, and the darkened little lights that would eventually be on, then over to the side at the bucket of melted ice and a half-empty bottle of expensive champagne sitting within it.

'...But I'm an honest drunk, aren't I? If I hadn't been completely blitzed in Sochi, we wouldn't even be here now, right?"
Viktor huffed a laugh to himself and finally sat up, ruffling his hair a little. He shrugged though and moved his arm so he could grab his phone and check the time, seeing that it was the ungodly hour of...11:30am.

"...Hah?"

He looked at it again, blinking in confusion, thinking it should be closer to 5:30am...but then remembered that his phone automatically changed the time based on the time-zone it was in, and Paris was 6 hours ahead of Washington DC. They were probably floating somewhere over Britain at that point though, so they'd gain another hour on the day before landing.

The skater slouched where he sat and looked around again, finding his pants like Yuri had and decided to go ahead and get ready. He grabbed the complimentary socks and slippers while he was at it, and by the time he'd unlatched the curtain and stood up in the aisle to stretch again, he finally felt normal and awake.

A quick glance to the side, and he saw two attendants there, gawking at him awkwardly. Their faces were red as they looked at him, and though he initially believed it was because he was still half naked...and who wouldn't be flushed to see him that way?...he remembered how loud he'd been a few hours earlier. A knowing smile crept across his face, and he said 'good morning' in a sickly-sweet tone. The ladies sputtered their greetings as well and watched as his pale self meandered over to where his other carry-bag had been stowed so he could get fresh clothing.

By the time he was presentable again, the bed had been deconstructed and the fold-out table prepared with a fine white cloth, and fancy plates and silverware.

Yuri was sitting in the backward-facing chair already, looking down at the menu with one hand over his mouth in thought. He looked up as he heard shuffling in the aisle behind him, and smiled to see his husband coming up towards him.

The day's new raiment for the Russian included charcoal grey slacks and an off-white light grey turtle-neck. Yuri noticed the man had even styled his hair like he was going to put on a show. It made his cheeks flush a little to see Viktor all 'fluffed up.' Yuri himself wasn't exactly 'dressed down' though. Viktor had made sure he had the proper attire for meandering around Paris, and so the younger man had on a form-fitting black button-down with white buttons and folded-back exaggerated cuffs, and black slacks.

Viktor came right up to him, running his fingers through raven-black hair to push it out of his eyes, leaned down, and kissed him. He held there for a good few seconds before pulling back again, and lightly kissed his forehead before finally taking the seat across from him.

"...Did you see the look on their faces?" Yuri asked quietly, sticking his head slightly out of the mini-cabin to check if anyone was nearby.

"Bien sûr." The Russian smiled as he set his elbows to the edge of the table, holding his head up in his palms, "I've only seen two of them so far, but I doubt the rest can avoid us for long. You?"

"I think I saw all of them." He answered, his cheeks still a little pink, but looking rather proud of himself despite it, "The guy and three stewardesses?"

"I only saw two of the ladies." Viktor answered, "Probably the bravest of the group after getting an eye-full of you." He leaned forward then and reached over the table, fingering the two highest buttons on his partner's shirt and undoing them, "...You should show off a little more."
"...If you want me to."

"Oh don't tell me that, I'll have you running around Paris naked if I could."

Yuri just laughed nervously.

Viktor just continued looking at him, leaning back in his own chair as they waited for the breakfast ballad to begin. He had his right arm propped up on the arm-rest, leaning his head against the tips of a few fingers, slate blue eyes looking straight at the man across from him. A few thoughts were percolating like the coffee faintly noted in the air.

The younger man peered back at him curiously, wondering what was going through his head. He turned his face a little to look at him sideways, "...Viktor?"

Eyes were intently on him, and the Russian almost seemed not to even blink. His ring finger came down to trace the edge of his lip though, "...Hm."

Yuri quirked a brow at him, wordless this time.

"I'm going to keep you restricted to three quads for Cup of China." Viktor finally said, making the younger figure twitch a little, "Then you can go back to five for the Final."

"...Why? I thought...you were going to let me gradually go back up."

"You may feel like you'll be back to 100% by the time we get to Shanghai, but I need you to take it easy for a little while longer. We won't be flying La Première when we leave France, and I know you still have trouble sleeping even in first class. So for the sake of keeping you healthy, I don't want you overdoing it, and compromising yourself. Three quads. That's an order from your coach." He was still smiling despite the seriousness of the directive, but Yuri reluctantly saw the sense in it.

"...Hai, Viktor-kōchi."

"I'll only be doing three quads, too, so don't feel like I'm trying to sabotage your chances." The Russian went on, "Chris and Yurio are doing the same."

"I wouldn't think you're trying to sabotage me." Yuri said simply, shaking his head a little, "I know you want to see me win, even if you're competing, too. You pushed me to win gold at Worlds, even if it meant you had to take Silver because of it. It would never cross my mind that you'd use your position as a coach to undermine me for the sake of yourself as a competitor."

"Mh." Viktor nodded, "You're right. Pushing you means I have to push myself, too...and I like to see the others sweat. I really want to see us both at the Final, where everyone's eyes are on us alone. Nikiforov vs Nikiforov. Nothing else in the wide world will matter so much as seeing which of us will take Gold. It'll be different this time, compared to Worlds."

"...You think so?"

"Yes." The Russian nodded again, paying no mind to the stewardess who'd finally come by the table to start setting breakfast drinks down; coffee, juice, sparkling water. Viktor kept his eyes firmly on his rival, "I'm in it from the start this time, not just jumping back in at the last second. I've been training all summer for this season. It will likely be my last, so I have to go out with a bang, right?"

"...You told me I'm forbidden from worrying about things while we're on vacation, and then you bring that up..." Yuri sighed, lowering his eyes a little.
'He needs you to accept him as he is, and be there with him as he slowly steps away from competition.' Phichit's words came back to the young skater's mind unbidden, '...Be there beside him as he slows down...'

"You're right, I don't want you to worry." Viktor's voice brought him back, "This season is going to be intense, but I don't intend to just vanish when it's over. It won't even stop with my being your coach when I'm done as a competitor." He reached over for the sugar cubes as the coffee press in front of him was plunged down and poured into the small ceramic cup just next to it, "...But if it makes you feel better, it has crossed my mind to do the Grand Prix one more time. Challenge myself...see how far I can go on style points. It wouldn't even be a disappointment to my fans and supporters if I go into it saying I wouldn't be pushing myself. It's just be for fun, almost." He poured just enough cream to cool the drink so it wouldn't burn, but not enough to change the color all that much, "That would be okay, right? Yuuri-kōchi."

Hazel eyes shot up at him, "...Oh no, don't go there again...I'm wearing the badge to get back stage, but I'm not your coach!"

"After last night? I almost think you could be." Viktor huffed a single knowing laugh at the younger skater, "You've suddenly taught me so many things."

Yuri's face was red, "...Is it really teaching you anything when I learned it from you in the first place?"

Viktor closed his eyes briefly as he took in the scent of the coffee, sipping it lightly and then setting it back to its coaster as Yuri did the same with some of the orange juice. He opened those slate blue eyes again, "Back in Barcelona, right after we got there...I was up in the roof-top pool while you slept off your jet-lag. Before Chris showed up, I was thinking about how I had neglected myself for more than 20 years."

The younger man listened intently, knowing the conversation was private even with a few people floating around now. None of them spoke English, so far as he could tell, except Angela, and she wasn't there.

"You know the reasons why that's the case...but part of that 'life and love' that I had ignored for so long came alive only because of you. You've taught a lot of people about that, not even just me. You've gifted Yurio with it...even my uncle a little, I think. I may teach you things about skating...but you've taught me so much more about living." Viktor explained, quietly pausing to sip at his coffee again as warm towels were set down close to each of them, followed by croissants and other food, "There's a tiny part of me that clung to competition for as long as I did because I was so unsure what I'd do when I stopped. Most skaters don't go past their mid 20s...but there I was, 27 years old, winning gold for my 5th consecutive year, being asked after Worlds what my plans were going forward. ...I had none. That was weird for me. I mean, I had a few skating programs floating through my head, but nothing that solid."

Yuri continued to listen in silence.

"You saw at our wedding party how Yakov said I had lost my inspiration, and took the time off to try and get it back... That was true. Seeing you replicate Aria turned that waning flame into a roaring inferno. In the end, you even managed to convince me to come back to competition. But I could only do that...because we became us." He reached his right hand over the table to take Yuri's, then pulled it up and leaned forward to kiss the ring, "If you had kept me around as just a coach, and then sent me on my way back to Russia after the Final...that probably would've been it for me. I don't think I ever would've come back. I wouldn't have been able to take the shame."
"...The...shame?" Yuri finally spoke, but he felt the words catch in his throat a little as he said them.

"You know full well that I already had feelings for you before I ever set foot in Hasetsu." The Russian said, holding fast to that hand, speaking the words against the gold band, "I risked a lot to try and get close to you. What if you rejected me? You said you moved to Detroit in part because you were pining for Yuuko before, and had that whole situation with Nishigori shoved in your face. Then at Worlds, you actually said outright that you probably could never imagine yourself being with a guy other than me. It wasn't just because we were already married by then...it was because you don't sit on that side of the fence."

Yuri lowered his eyes again.

'During the five years that I was away, I tried to ignore a lot of things by focusing on my skating. I wonder what I need...so I can keep skating on my own...?'

"And even though I'd said before that I don't sit on either side of the fence, I really hadn't ever been interested in other men, so there was that worry." Viktor went on, "...So what does one, generally speaking, heterosexual man do when he realizes he's in love with another one? And what does he do to try and win him over?" He narrowed his eyes slightly, looking at the rings on both of their hands where he held them in the center of the small table.

"...I don't...know." Yuri said, "It always seemed like you knew what you were doing, and what you wanted."

"It only worked out in the end because you were receptive. You were 'Viktor-sexual,' as you put it." He said with a smile, rubbing his thumb gently where he held his partner's hand, "And that's what keeps me going. That's how I've managed to stay focused on the skating...because now I finally have something to look forward to when I'm done competing. I have my answer. I have my life and love because I have you."

He could feel where Yuri's fingers slightly folded down to grip his own fingers.

"But if it hadn't worked out that way..." The Russian said, pulling back around the original point he was trying to make, "If you had avoided me or rejected me outright...called me 'friend' or 'coach' and sent me home again...I would never have been able to face you again, on or off the ice. My heart wouldn't be have been able to take it."

Yuri looked up in time to see a tear slide down the Russian's face, and he sat fully upright with a start.

"I don't even know where I'd be right now if you hadn't come into my life when you did." The man went on, trying to hide where he could feel another drop forming, "...So, yes, Yuri...in many ways, you are my coach. Maybe not in skating, but in everything else. When we get to Bordeaux...wear that coach's badge and lanyard for me, and wear it proudly...because now you know what it means to me."

"...Viktor..."

There was a moment of strange silence across the table after that; the only noise being that of the engine, and the far-off sound of attendants going about their work in some other part of the plane. Yuri looked from one item on the table to another, but when he got to looking at the French Press, he finally scooted out of his corner of the cubby and pushed to stand. For a moment, he just stood next to his husband with his left hand on the man's shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze even as Viktor was still pinching the bridge of his nose.
The silver skater looked up though, but then shook his head and laughed quietly at himself, "Sorry, I got a little carried away."

"...Don't be sorry, Viktor." Yuri reassured, keeping the one hand where it was even as he leaned forward, with the other holding against his leg for support, "I may have only been a part of your life for a short while, but I've gotten to see a pretty good-sized chunk of what you endured before. I understand why you put everything off to focus on skating. In my own way...I kind of did the same thing when I didn't want to deal with the things going on back home." He leaned down to snake his arms around the man's shoulders, pulling his partner's head to the crook of his own neck, "So don't think so much about what you'd be doing now if things hadn't turned out the way they did. You're Viktor Nikiforov, a living legend in the sport, to the point where they might as well have called you King Midas...every event you touched gave you gold for five years straight. No one in their right mind would let you retire and just vanish off the face of the Earth. You'd probably be some big-time movie star or something by now if not for me."

Blue eyes could only stare forward where they looked over the younger man's arm. He leaned his head a little to nuzzle against Yuri's shoulder, and felt his partner hugging him a little tighter in turn.

"...I'm not sure what I'd be doing right now if not for you," Yuri went on quietly, "...But I know for sure that the world absolutely would not let you go gently into that goodnight."

Viktor's eyes widened a little at that last line, and he pulled back to force the man to look at him squarely. Hazel irises just glanced back at him in slight confusion.

"...Old age should burn and rave at close of day." The Russian finally said, clasping one of Yuri's hands and moving it to get him to turn around, then pulled him sideways into his lap, leaving his legs to dangle into the small walkway.

The younger man went into it easily, putting his right arm behind his husband's shoulders and huffing a single quiet laugh as he leaned in closer, "...Rage, rage, against the dying of the light."

Viktor couldn't help himself after that, and he lifted his free hand from the side of the man's leg to place his palm against Yuri's cheek, and drew him down the last inch between them.
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SIX

The lone male steward was coming back down the row with the hot chocolate that Yuri had pointed out on the menu while Viktor was still changing. As he rounded the last corner to get to the side the pair was set up in, he immediately saw black-clad legs sticking out into the row. He thought he could hear something, but over the plane engine, it was difficult...so he went back into the other row to go around and come back up from the front end of the plane.

Just as he finally got back into the row he needed to be in to deliver the drink, he saw past the wall of the middle cubby, and got an eye-full of a rather passionate...and ongoing kiss. He stood still as a statue for a moment, hoping the two would stop so he could do his job and leave again, but they didn't seem to notice he was there.

Viktor lowered his hand from Yuri's cheek and slid it over his outer thigh instead, the other wrapped around Yuri's back, fingers creeping out around his side. Yuri, in turn, put his own hand over Viktor's cheek, and held tight to the man's shoulder where he still had it in his other hand. The kiss went on...

The steward was getting a bit shifty and uncomfortable at the sight, so despite his nerves, finally cleared his throat to interrupt them as politely as he could.

Viktor crept one blue eye open where he could see past Yuri's face, and stared straight at the man wordlessly. His attention was on his husband, and the potential sudden leap out of his lap that might make him whack his head on the cabin roof...but that didn't come. He was surprised to find Yuri ever-so-slowly opening his own eyes, and turn them to look at the attendant like he was barely more than a man-shaped bird that had fluttered by. It was probably the most Eros thing Yuri had ever been able to manage in public. The look on his face alone put it a level above the hasty display from the Worlds 'just saved from Chris' scene...but the young skater outdid himself again even in that moment by slipping the hand on Viktor's face down just a little bit, so his fingers slid into the curve of the man's neck, just under the back of his head. The fact that his cheeks weren't even all that pink was like a cherry on top for the Russian...and he silently ate up the entire exchange.

"M-Monsieur...!" The attendant finally stammered, gathering up some modicum of courage to approach and set the ceramic cup, with its mound of chocolate-powder-sprinkled whipped cream, onto the table in front of where Yuri had previously been sitting. His hand shook a little as he withdrew, but he held his professionalism in high regard and pulled through, standing up straight again, "V-Voulez-vous autre chose...?"

Viktor's one visible eye closed as he smirked behind Yuri's arm, "Je ne sais pas encore. Qu'est ce que vous recommandez?"

Yuri kept up his doe-eyed stare in silence, though he stroked his husband's neck gently where his thumb had come to rest, feeling at the slight dip where his jaw ended and ear began.

The steward stammered out a few items from the menu as well as he could, and practically ran for it when Viktor finally made his choice and cut him loose.

A moment or so passed before the pair burst into laughter.

Yuri was wiping his eyes, "...I don't know how much longer I could've kept that up." He blurted,
holding his free hand to his chest, "I thought I was going to crack up before he left."

"It was all rather impressive." Viktor complimented.

"Really?" Yuri scratched the back of his neck and then settled his hand there casually, "How embarrassing...!"

"Your cheeks hardly flushed at all the whole time. For a second, I even thought you were going to start up again while he was listing off the menu..." The Russian added, pulling his hand back from Yuri's leg to put one finger on the side of his husband's chin, "You know what this means though, right?"

"What?"

"...There's three more attendants...and I have an idea."

The silver-haired skater whispered some words into Yuri's ear, and he nodded a few times in approval as he listened. Viktor pointed down the aisle and made a few other gestures until they finally came to an agreement, and Yuri hopped back over to his own seat.

It wasn't long before two of the three stewardesses came back towards them, looking a bit apprehensive from what they'd heard, but still wanting to do their best. *La Première* cost Viktor $5400 per seat...and they had a job to do to make it worthwhile. They were bringing the first course anyway and it would go cold if they waited too long to make sure the coast was clear.

Unfortunately for them, it was a land-mine, and they both stepped into it with both feet.

Yuri had seen the slight silver cart before either of the two women came into view, and at that point, he gave a nod to his husband and the game began. He took a quick sip from the drink that had been brought out to him, and got quite a bit of the whipped cream on his face in the process. So Viktor, ever the loving spouse, moved his hand forward to help wipe it off, only to get his fingers covered in cream as a result. That just wouldn't do...Yuri couldn't let his husband take his hand back in that condition, so he did the only proper thing...and started licking the cream off the man's fingers. That was about the moment when the two stewardesses had arrived, and got an eye-full of Yuri running his tongue from the base of Viktor's hand all the way to the tips of his small and ring fingers. Small gobs of cream still trailed down though, and the Russian turned his hand over to catch them in his palm, only for Yuri to lean into it and suck the white fluff into his mouth. Viktor made a bunch of dramatic breathy noises as he went, and when Yuri moved from licking his palm to sucking on the two fingers again, he let out a moan, and tossed his head back to tousle his silvery bangs.

The two women backtracked so fast they left the cart behind.

Even Viktor was flushed after that display, and Yuri was practically dying from laughter as he held the small hot towel up to clean his face.

"Oh, we got those two pretty good." The Russian said haughtily, watching as they went scrambling down the hall back to their prep area. He could hear them making protestations, but couldn't quite make out what exactly they were saying. He looked back over to his partner and then reached for the second hot towel, wiping off the sticky cream from his hand, "Only Angela is left."

"She might be prepared." Yuri pointed out, his face bright red this time.

"You're right." Viktor nodded, rolling the towel back up and setting it down onto the plate it had come on, "Quick, Yuri...take off your clothes."
"...Eh!?"

Viktor had already half-started when the fabled woman finally stepped up to their mini-cabin, arms crossed and a nonplussed look on her face. The Russian had his arms curved over himself where he was trying to pull his sweater off, but when he realized she wasn't reacting like he'd hoped, he stopped, so all he could do was look at her from behind where the shirt had tumbled over his head.

Yuri was gawking at him with beady eyes, then glanced up at the head stewardess.

"Monsieur Nikiforov..." She started, looking at Viktor like she was about to lecture him.

"...Oui?"

"Was it you who ordered the waffle?"

The younger skater practically choked on himself trying not to laugh, and Viktor paused...then nodded with an uneasy smile.

"Yes."

The domed plate was set down in front of him, along with various condiments that accompanied it. Angela then cast her eyes over to Yuri, who squeaked in surprise as he realized her gaze was on him.

"Monsieur Nikiforov." She said again, "You requested the breakfast omelette?"

"Y-Yes..."

Another covered platter, though shaped a little differently, was set in front of him along with its own accompaniment of condiments.

"Is there anything else you need?" She asked, French accent thick as molasses.

The two skaters looked up at her nervously, "...Non, merci."

"Then...bon appétit."

As the cart was briskly taken away...but not too fast, as it would seem like retreat...Yuri stuck his head out of the cubby again to watch the woman leave as calmly as she could. When he pulled back again, Viktor was trying to pull his shirt back down. His silvery hair was a bit mussed up at that point, but he smoothed it out quietly, then exchanged looks with his partner.

"Well..."

"Mh."

"Three out of four isn't bad." Viktor mused, practically giving Yuri permission to quietly chortle the laugh he'd been trying to hold back since Angela first appeared, "We can get her on the way out. She won't expect that..."

"Viktor..."
They had been on their best behavior as the plane landed, and looked quite dignified as they allowed
the still-flustered staff to gather their things for them and move with them to be the first off the plane.
By then, Viktor had styled Yuri's hair back into his skating style, and they both pulled on long, albeit
light coats for the brisk Parisian air.

Even though it was raining outside, Viktor still pulled on his sunglasses, and the two followed
Angela down to the waiting Mercedes that would take them to the last part of their journey through
the airport. He thought long and hard on how they could embarrass the young flight attendant, but he
was starting to wonder if it was possible.

...Maybe I overdid it when I came through before, so she's desensitized? I shouldn't have had so
much to drink...! I was probably bouncing off the walls half-naked at the time...

Viktor had a finger over his lips in thought.

...Or was I **totally** naked? I don't remember...

"You getting in?" Yuri's voice brought him back around.

The Russian looked, seeing where Angela had held up an umbrella to shield him from the rain so he
could get in the black vehicle. Yuri was already inside, looking back at him like he wasn't sure what
was taking so long. Viktor finally stepped up and got in though, and the door was pushed closed
behind him.

"There has to be something we can do..." He said as the woman made her way around the front of
the car to the driver's-side door.

"I don't think she's going to fall for it now." Yuri pointed out, smiling weakly, "We don't have time
to set anything up."

Viktor grumbled as he quietly admitted defeat, watching the woman get in behind the steering wheel
to drive them off the tarmac. He folded his right arm over his chest as the left came up to rest on it,
hand in front of his face where he tapped his nose with a bent finger. The wheel in his mind was still
turning, but the hamster had fallen off long ago...so he just tilted to the side and flopped against
Yuri's shoulder.

He heard Angela softly laughing.

[What's so funny?] He asked in French.

[You've given up trying to make me blush.]

Viktor sat upright rather quickly and scooted forward on the seat like the back-rest had suddenly
cought fire, [You knew!]

[Of course. The others told me what they saw.]

Yuri looked back and forth between them as each of them spoke, wondering what was going on.
Futility set in soon after and he settled to look at the rain outside as they headed for the baggage
terminal.

[And I remembered how you were last time you flew with us, so this was almost expected.] Angela
added, slowly coming to a stop at an intersection to check for cross-traffic before moving on again.

[...Expected?] Viktor's curiosity had been piqued, [How so...? I was alone last time.]
[You had joked last time about how you'd want to join the Mile High Club while flying La Première. You even tried to convince someone on staff to help you in that regard.]

Viktor's eyes went wide, [I did? Scandalous!] Those eyes narrowed right after that though, [...]Not someone who was there today, right?]

[No, someone else.] The woman laughed, [You get quite excitable when you drink. We spent half the flight trying to convince you to stay clothed.]

[How far did I get?] Viktor mused, finally sitting back in his seat and draping his hand over his partner's leg like he often did back in St. Petersburg.

[By the time you fell asleep, you were down to your underwear and one sock, if I recall correctly.] The Russian laughed, holding up his free hand, [Yuri's seen worse!]

[The hot-pot in Beijing, right?]

"GASP!" He returned to English, "Yuri! She knows about the hot-pot photos!"

The younger skater's face went red immediately, "H-How are you even talking about this!?"

"You didn't seem to recognize Yuri when we met you in DC!" Viktor went on, "If you knew about the hot-pot photos, then-"

"In the airport and around co-workers, I must keep a certain decorum while speaking with clients." She explained, "If I behaved as I would with friends, it would have been much different."

"Ooohhhhh..." He turned back to his partner, smirking, "So that's how you knew..."

"...How...I knew?" Yuri echoed.

"Not you; her." Viktor nudged his head over to the driver's seat, "She knew we'd mess around on the plane. Apparently I made some grand declaration last time I was on board that I'd join the Mile High Club in one of their cabins one day. Seems I was right, even if I forgot! A self-fulfilling prophecy!"

When the car finally stopped, the woman grabbed the document bag she'd carried around since DC, and stepped out of the vehicle to open the doors for the pair, having parked under a garage over-hang so as to avoid the rain. As they stepped out, she opened the bag and withdrew a hardcover book, and looked at both of them individually before looking at the book in her arms.

"...Would it be presumptuous to ask for your signatures?" She asked meekly, folding her arms out to reveal the tome.

"Wow~!"

"It's...our photo book, from during and after the wedding party!" Yuri recognized it, seeing the two of them in their Duetto outfits on the cover, "She had it the whole time!"

Viktor pat himself for a pen, though knowing he had none, and he gave a nervous look, "...I would love to sign it, but..."

"Oh, it's okay, I have some markers..." Angela moved to hold the book in one arm as the other rummaged around in the front of the bag, pulling out two silver sharpies, "Here!" She then held out the book excitedly.
Viktor opened the front and turned the first page over until he saw the pristine white inner cover, then bit down on the sharpie cap to pull it off and started to write. When he was done, he handed it to his husband, who looked at the fancy silver scrawl and tried to decipher it, but realized it was in a combination of French and Cyrillic text. About all he recognized was the name, and *that* was only because French and English used the same alphabet.

Yuri started to write as well though, speaking the words aloud as he wrote them, "Thank you for putting up with us on this long flight, and for making the start of our Grand Prix Parisian Vacation a great success...Yuri...Nikiforov." He wrote his name twice, once in English text and once in Japanese.

"Oh, do mine in Japanese, too!" Viktor begged, clapping to himself as he saw Yuri do just that for him. Even though his own name looked relatively simple, written only in katakana while Yuri's first name was in kanji, it still pleased him to see it. He even swiped the book back quickly to write Yuri's name in Cyrillic so they'd be even...and then finally handed back the book to its owner.

She hugged it fondly, put it back into her bag for safe keeping, hugged *them*...and then, slowly but surely, gathered up their things to take them up to baggage claim.
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SEVEN

The bulk of the Russian team was sitting on a train on their way to Bordeaux. Like Viktor, they had decided it would be sensible to go straight from Skate Canada, Yurio's first event, to Trophée de France, his last, and Mila and Georgi's first.

Mila was giggling quietly at something she saw on her phone, sitting in the reverse-facing seat across from Yakov by the window. Yurio was next to her, and Georgi was across from him. Lilia wasn't there with them, preferring to travel with a bit more style, with the plan to meet them at the event on the day of the Short Program.

Yurio was half asleep, nodding in and out as he listened to music on his phone. Bordeaux was only another 20 or so minutes away, and the teen's legs were sore as Hell from all the sitting over the last day. More than that, his very mind felt numb from the lack of stimulation.

That's when he felt the nudge from Mila, "Neh, Yuri, have you seen Viktor's latest video-post on Instagram?"

"Hah?" He answered blearily, rubbing the drool from the side of his mouth as he pulled his head up from the back of the chair.

"Look!" The red-head put her phone in front of him, showing off the aforementioned content, "He and the other Yuri went to practice at some public rink in Paris, and ended up putting on a show for all these people that recognized him."

"...So?"

"So?" Mila scoffed, "He mentioned you in his video!"

"He was probably talking about Katsudon."

"Pfftbhbphtbthpt." She practically spat all over him, "I think I know the difference between you and him. Just watch! The video is on the verge of going viral with all the skater fans out there, so it's worth looking!"

Yurio just rolled his eyes and pulled out his own phone to find the post himself, having to dig through half a dozen 'Grand Prix Grand Vacation Day01' photos before getting to the video, which had been posted earlier in the day. To Yurio, it was confusing how so many people seemed to keep showing up in the background of the photos; not just some obvious crowd of people who were there on their own business, but people who were invested in the skater's presence, trying to squeeze into the background as well as they could.

The video thumbnail wasn't all that interesting to look at; a crowd, with a stick-figure-like silhouette of Viktor somewhere out in the middle of it. Novice skaters seemed to make way for him, like schooling fish avoiding a shark in shallow water.

v-nikiforov
[video]
64,078 Likes

v-nikiforov Looks like we were found out! Keep an eye on #y-nikiforov for a hint on where we'll be
Yurio ignored the comments section and hit play on the video, watching as it looked like whoever was holding the camera was figuring out what to focus on as Viktor looked to be posing for the start of Aria for the crowd. He couldn't make out what was being said behind the phone by whoever was taking the video, but it sounded like Yuri. The blond fast-forwarded through the impromptu performance and then rewound again when it looked like Viktor had come up to rink-side.

"Oh, you're still recording?" He asked.

"You should say something else!"

Yurio could see where instinct took over for his former rink-mate, as Viktor suddenly started putting on a whole new show, "Hiii~!" Viktor said excitedly, catching his breath and waving at the screen at the outdoor park, "Salutations de Paris! It looks like a lot of people watch Yuri's account here in the city!" He held his hand out as though to put the crowd on display, and the camera panned around a little bit to show some 200 people, most of whom were standing against the metal railing that went around a high ledge around the rink, showing off the street beyond them, but eventually came back to the skater, "Yuri and I be practicing at different skating rinks all over town while we go sight-seeing until Trophée de France next weekend, so come join us!" He put his hands on his waist and winked.

"Blah blah blah..." Yurio grumbled, looking at Mila, "How long does it take for him to get to the point?"

"Just listen or you'll miss it!"

Viktor's voice was already in the ear-buds before Mila could even finish, "Today, we're at *Patinoire Pailleron*! Tomorrow, who knows! You'll have to watch Yuri's account to get a hint! But speaking of Yuri..."

"Oh don't you eve-"

Viktor took the phone right out of his husband's hands and spun it around to show where he'd been perched on the rink wall; white on the ice-side, red on top, and *too red* behind him where all the benches were set up in a row, with the skate rental counter behind that, "Say hi, Yuri!"

"...Hiii~" He waved weakly and pushed off the wall, landing with a clatter of blades on ice, "...What...else should I say...?"

"Tell everyone about what we talked about last night at the hotel!"

Fans were starting to crowd behind the younger skater, trying to get into the shot behind the rink wall, waving and holding up their fingers in a V-shape as they cheered.

"Oh...well..." Yuri started, "This is a challenge for the other Yuri!"

"...Hah?" Yurio blinked at the screen.

"Ever since Phichit-kun mentioned it back in Hasetsu, a lot of people are saying the Grand Prix is just a show-down between Viktor and myself this year. But...I think it could be any one of the three of us who wins Gold in the end...!" Yuri declared boldly, "So last night, I thought...since Viktor and
I were allowed to put together Duetto for Four Continents, why not do a group Exhibition if all three of us get on the podium at the Final?"

Viktor turned the camera back around to face himself, "It'll be really hard to pull that off...there are a lot of talented skaters in the competition, many of whom are GP Final medalists in their own right. But...there you have it! Yuri Plisetsky...join us on the podium at the Final and do a Team Skate with us at the Exhibition! It'll be a special treat for all our fans and supporters!"

He went around and pulled Yuri back into the shot after that, squishing their cheeks together as he held the phone up ahead of them.

"Let us know! We'll come to Bordeaux early to figure out the details if you're up to it! À la prochaine!" Viktor pulled his arm back from where he'd held his husband's shoulder behind his back, and gestured with his hand in a half-heart shape, which Yuri finished with his own hand next to it.

"Allons-y, Yuri!" The younger skater added just before the video ended.

"What's with the look?" Yakov asked, glancing up as he adjusted where his brimmed hat sat on his oddly-shaped head.

"Katsudon and Viktor want to put together a Team Skate Exhibition if all three of us medal at the GP Final." He answered apprehensively.

"You should do it!" Mila encouraged, hugging him like she often did when she was trying to make him uncomfortable for her own amusement.

Yurio didn't seem to react though, which was typical in its own way. "I guess."

"What's wrong?" The woman wondered, moving a slender hand over to brush some strands of pale blond hair from the teen's eyes.

"It's nothing."

The train stopped at the palace-like Gare de Bordeaux-Saint-Jean, and Yurio followed the Russian team as they gathered their suitcases and made their way into the terminal. As expected, there were advertisements for Trophée de France plastered on the walls and hanging like tapestries from the ceiling, prominently featuring the French skater for the most part, but with a few that showed other skaters. Yurio was hardly shocked to see a big one featuring Viktor. He looked all around the granite-walled atrium; the double-level waiting area with snack kiosks and a ticket center, and the huge windows on the second floor with the doors to outside.

What surprised him was seeing Mikhail looking down at him from the upper level. The sight of him there, so casually, reminded him instantly of the moment Viktor had done the same thing, looking down on him from a higher level, right before promising to choreograph his Senior debut if he managed to win Gold at his final Junior World Championships without quads.

The flash of that year's Sochi Grand Prix Final flashed through his mind right after; yelling at Yuri in the bathroom and demanding he retire, cursing him for stealing Viktor, later swiping Gold out of
Yuri's hands at the last second with some 'cheap tricks' that he hadn't used beforehand, and then his own comeuppance at Euros and Worlds after that. He shook his head and pulled his cat-print travel case towards the far staircase, ignoring Yakov as he protested dispersing from the group.

"It's okay, Coach Yakov, I've got him." Mikhail hollered down, "We'll keep him out of trouble until he makes us crazy, and then we'll send him back."

"We?"

"My ballerina friend." He answered, pointing over at where Minako was oogling some of the competition ads.

"...She's a ballerina? Did you know that before?" Mila wondered. She then elbowed the older man with a smirk, "If Lilia finds out Yuri's hanging out with some other dancer...!"

Yakov shrugged, "Lilia is a former Prima. What would she be jealous over?"

Mikhail heard him and formed a smile that could kill, "Minako Okukawa is a winner of the Prix Benois de la Danse, ballet's most prestigious award. She's a Prima in her own right. She also runs a ballet school out of Hasetsu."

The woman sneezed suddenly, and looked up, "...Someone's talking about me." She looked around, and saw that her companion was looking down into the foyer, so she came back over to where he was slouching over the metal and glass railing. She touched one hand to the trunk of a massive light fixture on the corner as she looked over to see what he was smirking at, "Oh! Yuratchka's here!" The brunette quickly ran off to go greet him as he came up the stairs.

Yakov seemed to bristle, "...She hasn't been teaching him, has she?"

The younger Russian tilted his head slightly as his eyes closed into that same smile, "Would it rustle Lilia's feathers if I said yes?"

"...Mikhail..."

He just laughed and shook his head, "No, she hasn't. She keeps all her magic tricks for her Yuri."

"...Mh..." Yakov grumbled, turning back to Mila, "Better keep this between us. We don't need Lilia to think her efforts are being sabotaged."

"Da."

The older gentleman looked back up at the Rozovskiy, "Have him back by 10, or you're keeping him overnight. He knows the hotel we're staying at."

"Yessir." Mikhail saluted him casually, then pulled off the railing to go trail after the woman.

Minako had already caught up with Yurio, but he was about as bristly towards her as he usually was, almost walking by her as he rounded the last step to the upper level. Her words caught his attention though, "Did you see what Viktor and Yuri said!?"

"...Yeah."

"And!?"

"I'll think about it."
"It'd go a long way to show you work well with others." Mikhail suggested as he got within ear-shot, "Your own choreographer might be impressed by it."

"Maybe."

The older Russian pursed his lips to the side a little as he looked down on the teen, "...Rough trip or something?"

"Forget it. Where are we going? My ass hurts from how long I've been sitting."

The adults exchanged glances, but then shrugged and started heading for the glass doorways. Yurio followed close behind, and Mikhail took the larger travel bag, leaving only the backpack for Yurio to carry himself.

"Skate France is usually held in Paris, so I doubt you've been here before, right?" The older Russian wondered, looking down at the teen as he held the door open for him.

"Right."

"Well, the good news is that the Meriadeck Ice Rink isn't that far from here. Too far to walk, but too close to make it worthwhile to rent a car while we're here. So, yay, you don't have to sit right away again."

"...Which means what?" Yurio was gawking up at him, though he quickly pulled his hoodie closer over his head where the sun was shining right into his eyes. He pulled his sunglasses out soon after that and slipped them on, "...We'll be walking half-way there and then stopping?"

"Sort of."

"Aren't you hungry at all?" Minako asked, walking idly beside the teen with her hands clasped lightly behind herself.

The Russian Kitten suddenly felt his stomach growl with the power of a thousand suns, and he stopped and lowered his head, "...Yeah."

"There's a bistro right across the street that Minako and I were scoping out while we waited for your train. We'll get lunch and then take your stuff to the event hotel. We can figure out what to do after that to pass the time. There's sure to be some sight-seeing things around this place before the competition. It'll be almost two weeks before it starts anyway."

Yurio paused, forcing the other two to stop as well. He looked at the ground for a moment before kicking his toe at it to stir up road dust, "...Can I stay with you guys tonight?"

Mikhail blinked at him, "...You want to what?"

"...Stay with you guys. Just tonight, or whatever."

Minako had her arms crossed in front of her, but she looked from the blond teen to the silver-grey man across from her, "I don't mind. There's two big beds."

Yurio felt a chill go down his back, and he stomped forward one step to point a finger at Mikhail's face suddenly, "Are you kidding me!? All this shit you guys do and you're still sleeping in separate beds!? Christ, I'll just meet up with Yakov then after all."

"Why are you so testy today? And what difference does it make? I'll just have the hotel people bring
up a rolling bed and whoever draws the short straw gets it.

Yurio just deadpanned him, as though the situation should be so obvious. He pinched the bridge of his nose under the sunglasses, "You two are more aggravating than Katsudon and Viktor. At least they know what they want, and they don't make me feel like a broken third wheel."

"Ah, so that's it."

"Don't simplify everything! There's more to it than that!"

"Well, then explain."

"Why? It won't change anything."

"Maybe you just don't know what you need to know to be comfortable around us."

Yurio started stomping off again, "Like I said, it doesn't matter. Knowing why you're being super irritating won't change the fact that you'll still be super irritating."

"We should stop tormenting him." Minako suggested lightly, "We've put him through enough, right?"

Yurio turned on his heel and made a grand gesture at the woman, like he was putting her on display at some show, "See? She knows what I'm talking about. You should be like her...it'll make you less annoying."

Mikhail shrugged his shoulders up, looking something like a puffed-up and perturbed bird, "What? Why am I the annoying one?"

"...Gah, idiot." The teen rubbed his forehead with one hand, "The reason Katsudon and Viktor aren't annoying by comparison is because they don't hide themselves. They don't go out of their way to change their behavior around me. At worst, they get extra-special affectionate at one another just to piss me off, but they do it because they think it's funny, not because they feel sorry for me. I can feel it when I'm around you guys. It puts my teeth on edge. It's like you think I can't handle it or something. So what is it? If you're dating, fucking act like it and quit wasting my time. If you're not, then quit acting like you wish you were. Literally everyone saw you kiss her in Calgary. If she's still here, it means she didn't kick your ass for it later."

Mikhail looked up at the sky and groaned loudly, but then lowered his head again...and reached to take Minako's hand. He pointed the other straight at Yurio's face, "I was avoiding it because I didn't want you to think we were trying to be surrogate parents or something. So if this pisses you off later, you brought it onto yourself."

"Why would you think that would bother me? It's not like my actual parents did such a great job."

The blond went back to face the other way and started to cross the street.

"You've gotten all blustery about them before, like you don't want to talk about them."

"I don't. They're nothing to me."

"See?"

"You don't even know the first thing about them, so how can you judge?"

"I judge your opinion of them, and it seems to be pretty low."
"My mom is a former Russian idol. She was going to come to Hot-Springs on Ice but then bailed at the last second like she always does. She's so focused on her post-show-business-lime-light social-life that she ignores my skating entirely...and when she does seem interested, it just gets my hopes up and then disappoints me later. My grandpa was the only one that gave half a shit."

The pair listened closely, not wanting to interrupt now that he was spilling the beans.

"Trophée de France is my last qualifying event for the Grand Prix Final. I'm worried I'll fuck it up at the last second, and miss my chance to be one of the Final Six. It's my first event back since all the shit hit the fan last year. My grandpa's heart attack, and then the whole thing with Viktor at Worlds...getting kicked off the team and having to crawl my way back onto it..." He growled, turning his head slightly to look at them, "I already have enough shit to worry about. I know you only follow me around because it gives you an excuse to be around Viktor. Don't waste my time with worthless platitudes about how you think you're just trying to protect me. You're my sponsor, not my dad."

Mikhail was taken aback by the last few statements, and it made him crinkle his nose a little, "You really think I only tag along to be around Viktor? Give me a little more credit than that. I'd be at your events even if Viktor wasn't there."

"Fine, then you're just making good on your investment. I don't care what the reason is. Just don't fucking play with me."

"Oh Yuri..." The older Russian reached over and put his free hand over the teen's shoulders, "You have such a low opinion of me still."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED EIGHT

Shoveling food like a starving animal had become something of an art form for the Russian Punk, especially when he didn't have to pay for it himself. His 'provider' had moved off outside to take a call though, leaving him and Minako alone at the table inside.

For lack of knowing what to talk about, Minako kept herself busy with her phone, not having been particularly hungry anyway. She couldn't help but scroll through the dozen or more photos that Yuri had posted throughout the day; they stuck out in stark contrast to the images Viktor was posting, and they featured more the 'setting' of their vacation more so than themselves. Pictures of the skyline of the city from their hotel room, the restaurants they'd gone to, sometimes pictures of the food, pigeons, clouds that looked like things, and store-fronts that were interesting or clever. Every once in a while, she'd catch a glimpse of Viktor in some of the pictures, but it seemed like Viktor himself had the lion's share of the photos they took of themselves. She could imagine the man noticing the differences in their content, and using it as the inspiration for suggesting fans watch Yuri's account for clues to their location.

Before long, she had Instagram open in two different tabs, and was clicking between them...seeing where they were through Yuri's, and seeing what they were up to through Viktor's.

It's been over a year and a half since Viktor showed up to be Yuri's coach. It's still a little surreal sometimes to see how much things have changed since then. All Yuri ever wanted was to be like him...it's funny how compatible they ended up being. I suppose fate allows dreams to come true sometimes, even if it happens in the strangest of ways.

There were several pictures that were quite endearing, even in their simplicity. Given that none of them were taken with a selfie-stick though, Minako could only wonder if Viktor carried around a photographer in his back pocket somehow. The one she liked best was taken the night before; the pair were standing on one of the city's many bridges, and the Eifel Tower was lit up in the background. Viktor was standing behind Yuri, arms wrapped around, hands clasped casually over his partner's. He was leaning in close, nuzzling into Yuri's hair a little just behind his ear, and the both of them were looking out at something in the distance.

"...What's with the smirk?" Yurio wondered suddenly, still noshing on a piece of bread.

The ballerina glanced up at him, but then clicked her phone off and set it face-down on the tablecloth, "Yuri and Viktor being adorable, as usual."

"...Hmph."

She couldn't help but smile mischievously at him as she rested her chin in the palm of her right hand, "I was just thinking about how much has changed for Yuri since Viktor showed up, but I suppose a lot of things have changed for you too since then. You talked about all the bad that happened before, but why not think about some of the good things?"

Yurio gawked at her silently for a moment, saving face by ripping a chunk of the bread away and chewing on it until he could think of something reasonable to answer with. When he swallowed, he shrugged, "It's easier to complain than to praise."

The woman laughed at that, "Too true! But even still...it's healthy to think back on all the nice things
that happen rather than dwelling on the bad. Mikhail's told me a lot of what's happened since he popped in on things in Russia. You really got to meet Viktor's father?"

"...I was physically in the same place as him, but I didn't actually meet him, per se." Yurio answered nervously, "...Why?"

She shrugged and leaned back in her chair, "It was just really shocking to hear about what the man was like. To look at Viktor, you'd never know he had such a rough background."

"You probably know more than I do." He turned his head to look away.

"It'd probably mean a lot to him if you agreed to do that Team Skate Exhibition."

"It presumes all three of us are going to be on the podium at the end. We don't even know for sure if all of us are going to be at the Final."

"Don't sell yourself short." Minako pointed out, "I know you're worried, but...it's not like you to be full of so much self-doubt. It's good that you're a bit more humble than you used to be, at least compared to when you came to Hasetsu for Hot Springs on Ice. It just seems kind of uncharacteristic for you to be this anxious about the whole thing."

The blond looked at the crumbs left on his plate, then at the droplets of water condensation on the side of his drink as they rolled down to the table. He shook his head, "Katsudon got haughty. Look what it bought him."

The woman laughed again, "Yuri's new to this whole 'feeling good about himself' thing. Cut him a little slack."

"Tsst..."

"Considering that Viktor was allowed to do that Pair Skate Exhibition at Four Continents...an event Russia isn't even permitted to compete at...I wouldn't be surprised if he figured out some way of making sure you three would be able to do the Team Skate even if only one of you made it through to the end. I'd be pretty shocked if that happened, but in the event that it does...wouldn't it still be nice to get to do a GP Final Exhibition Skate of some kind? You pulled Otabek into yours last year and he didn't medal."

"He made it to the Final though. That was different."

"Again...Viktor wasn't even supposed to be at Four Continents, but the ISU let him skate for Yuri's sake." Minako reminded, watching the teen for his reaction. He still kept his eyes low though, avoiding her, "...Are you even going to consider it?"

"Of course I am!" He barked, "I barely found out about it an hour ago though, jeeze."

"You'll make it into the Final." Mikhail said, coming back unexpectedly, "You've put enough hours on the ice this summer to make it into every GP Final for the next 20 years."

"Hours don't mean shit when the judges are being stingy with the scores."

"Some would say they were too liberal with points before." The older man said, pulling back into his chair across the table from the teen, "Scoring Yuri nearly 350 at Worlds? I may be new to this whole skating thing, but I've looked into it enough by now to say I've got a good grasp on things. Yuri may have skated a great program, but..."
"...What the left hand giveth, the right hand taketh away." Yurio shrugged.

"Maybe the ISU told judges to take 10 points off the top of any score they award?" Minako mused, "We should call it the 'Nikiforov Effect.'"

Yurio scoffed, "They weren't the only ones who set a record last season, you know!"

"Ah!" The woman pointed at him, "That's exactly what I wanted to see!"

The blond's face went a little red, and he hid it behind his hair by turning his head around quickly, "Whatever!"

"You have to believe in yourself! You can skate better than most of the rabble out there. Do like you promised to do to Yuri at Hot Springs on Ice...crush them!"

Mikhail nodded in agreement, "Things happened last year...so what? It's done and over. Your grandpa is safe and at home, Viktor isn't mad at you for yelling at him at Worlds, Yuri got you to open up, and the two of them worked together to get you back in the game. Your SkateDads love you. What better way to show it than to challenge you to medal with them at the Final? You're already motivated to get there...you won Gold last year...show them both up by winning Gold again! Don't you want to see the look on their faces?"

Yurio couldn't help but smile at the thought, "...Ohuénno."

Mikhail pushed the door to the hotel room open and let Yurio barge in, stomping his way in, only to find one of the two previously-mentioned beds covered in suitcases and other travel bags. He looked back at where the older Russian was closing the door, "...I call dibs on this one." He pointed at the one in front of him with all the luggage.

"Relax, we haven't used either of them yet." Mikhail explained, "We just threw our things in and then went to the train station. Haven't even been here a whole day yet."

"...Oh." The teen muttered...but then the math started going through his head, "...Wait...if you only got here this morning, and you aren't jet-lagged as all Hell, what were you doing?"

"After I dropped you off with Yakov, we took my kids back to Banff and flew to Paris that night." The older man said simply, "Spent the day and next night there, then took the train here. We were here for maybe 3 hours before you arrived."

"...You dropped your kids off with the crazy ex-wife while Minako was with you?" Yurio was almost laughing at the idea, "Do the Rocky Mountains even exist anymore?"

Minako put a finger on her lip as she remembered it, "...We actually didn't even see her."

"It's cuz I was there." The Russian sighed, "...I haven't physically seen her in like...4 years? Talked to her every other way, but not in person."

"...Why?" Yurio would've needed to pull his eyebrows off the back of his head from how high he raised them.
The man gave a blank look, and made an 'I dunno' noise as he shrugged, "Never mind all that. Put your stuff wherever and let's go!"

"Aright aright..."The blond grumbled, setting his suitcase in a corner and his backpack next to it. As he rose back up to his full height, he heard the jingle from his phone that a new text had come in, and when he looked, saw it was Otabek messaging him. He clicked into the window to see the message normally and followed the pair out the door.

[You going to do it?]

Yurio half-rolled his eyes, and typed like he was ignorant, [Do what?]

A moment passed by as he walked, only half-watching where he was going as he stepped into the elevator and leaned against the wall. When a message came back, Otabek had linked the video Viktor had posted. He grumbled loudly.

"What is it?" Mikhail wondered as the elevator door closed.

"A friend is bugging me about Katusdun's challenge." He answered, thumbs typing away, [I'm being told I should, but I haven't decided.]

[Why?]

[I just haven't.]

[Sucks that we don't have any of the same events this year. We could've issued a counter-challenge.]

[Yeah.]

Yurio sighed to himself, thinking about it. He closed his eyes and set the back of his head against the elevator wall, feeling the vibration of its descent.

*It'd be stupid to issue a counter-challenge when only one of us has ever won Gold, and has had a shitty year since winning it. It's practically certain that Viktor and Yuri will be going...the ISU might as well just let them skip the qualifiers and hand them their invitations. JJ and Chris are likely going to go, too, since they've been going for the last few years...but the last two spots? Practically up for grabs between a dozen or more other skaters.*

The doors opened and he followed the pair out, trailing like a faint shadow behind them as he kept his eyes glued to his phone, unsure what else to say, and feeling like Otabek was at a loss for a clever come-back as well.

...*I have to be one of the finalists. I've worked too hard to be left in the dust now. I could go into a growth-spurt at any time and be out of the game until it's over...*

Green eyes stared straight ahead, looking forward rather seriously.

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Yuri sighed as he looked at his phone, walking alongside Viktor as they went down a canal-side walkway. It was around sunset by then.
"He still hasn't answered?"

"No," he grumbled disappointedly, clicking the phone off to put it into his pocket, "Maybe it was a stupid idea."

"It's not stupid. I like it! I've been choreographing the whole thing in my head ever since you suggested it!" Viktor pointed out, then taking a sip from his latte, "There's so much I want to do!"

"Really? You're not worried he'll be too proud to agree?"

"Nah." The older skater shook his head, "If Yurio hasn't answered, it's because he either hasn't seen it yet, or he's figuring out the best way of agreeing. After being kicked from the Russian team, and then reinstated, he's probably worried what people will think. He may not even give us an answer until he knows whether he made it to the Final or not. That way, if he somehow doesn't make it, he won't be embarrassed about saying yes and then having to take it back."

"Oh..."

"I'm sure he'll be fine though!" Viktor said more cheerfully, "I wish he'd at least message one of us to say if he's even interested!"

"Right?" Yuri nodded. He gave his husband's hand a squeeze and looked up at him excitedly, "So if you've already been making plans, what are you thinking of? What music?"

"That's easy." Viktor paused where he was walking, gesturing for Yuri to take his drink so he could get out his phone. He untangled his ear-buds after that and scrolled through his playlists, "I think everyone will be happy with this one. You and I both like telling stories in our programs, and Yurio likes his music to be really exciting and fast-paced. So...here."

Yuri let the man put the buds into his ears, and felt a flutter in his stomach as he waited anxiously for the music to start.

"There's three major parts to the song," Viktor explained, holding his thumb over the touch screen, "...So there'll be one solo-like dance for each of us in the program, while whoever isn't up is doing something minor in the background. The first one will be for Yurio, the second for you, then the third for me. There's a fourth part towards the end that's separate from the chorus, but I imagine all three of us doing stuff for that one together. There's even parts where I think we could pause to try and get the audience in on the show. Well, anyway...listen and tell me what you think." He finally hit play and waited.

The music started...and it took all of two seconds for Yuri's eyes to light up. He hopped onto his toes a few times as it went on, "This is great! It's like a follow-up to your Short Program, almost!"

"Completely unintentional, promise." Viktor laughed, "But you're right, it kind of seems similar. I think it fits though, since all three of us are in history books now as World Record holders."

"I bet if you told him what song you were thinking of using, he'd agree in a heartbeat." The younger skater added, "This is right up his alley. The energy of his Exhibition from last year would fit in so well with this."

"...I'm thinking we should probably call him just to find out what he thinks. There's no way he doesn't know about what we said, not after posting it half a day ago..."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED NINE

Yurio was staring down at the table in front of him rather intently, a hand over his mouth in thought.

"...Well?" Mikhail asked, sitting opposite him.

"...Hit me." The teen finally answered, "This is going to be my Street of Death." He reached down to pull the bits of colorful fake money out from the piles in front of him, and was awarded a small card in exchange for it.

"Better hope you get Boardwalk on your next go 'round." Mikhail taunted.

"I already own Penn Avenue and Pacific Avenue. Even if someone else gets Boardwalk, I'm still going to own this side of the board." The blond warned back, already seeing fake dollar-signs in his eyes. Two turns later, the Russian Kitten rolled a 2 and landed squarely on the last blue tile before the corner. He laughed almost maniacally as he grabbed the handful of fake money to get his card, "EAT IT."

"Don't get too excited. You have almost no money left." Minako pointed to his $5s and $20s, "If you land on anything, you might have to give it up."

"I'm about to round the corner and collect $200. No one has houses yet, and I'm not going to be ruined by a $20 rent fee." He pointed across the table tauntingly at the woman's small collection of light blue 'cheap properties.'

Minako gave him a look, then glanced down at her cards as she jiggled the dice in her hand. Eyes turned up at their banker and she smirked, "$250 for a hotel on each one..."

"You sure?" Mikhail had a hand over the box of pieces.

The woman turned her eyes back over to the teen and grinned, "Hit me." Two seconds later, three little red plastic hotels were perched on all three of her properties, "I dare you to land on one." She then rolled the dice, and moved her little metal car from St. Charles Place to St. James Place. No one owned it, but she passed the turn on to Mikhail without buying it for herself.

He rolled an 11...and landed on Boardwalk.

Yurio cackled and held his hand out, "$100, sir." He waggled his fingers to make the man hurry up.

The older Russian just lamented to the ceiling, "Curse you and your inevitable betrayal!"

Just as the teen got his payment and sat back in his seat to count it out, his phone started to go off where he'd left it charging on the nightstand. Oddly, Mikhail's went off almost immediately after that, so the both of them left the table to go see who was calling.

Looking at the caller IDs, they glanced at each other.

"You?"

"Your doppelganger. You?"

"Your master."
They turned from each other and answered, though Mikhail went to step out of the room entirely and speak in the hall, "Zdravstvujte, čem ja mogu pomoč'?

"Allo." Yurio said simply, sitting on his bed and pinning the smartphone between his ear and shoulder. He waited a moment while Viktor spoke, then collapsed down onto his back dramatically, "...You idiots should've tagged me then."

"Eh?" Viktor was confused, "I forgot to tag you?" He looked over at Yuri, "Did I forget to tag him?"

The younger skater pulled up Instagram on his own phone to check.

"Either way, it sounds like you know about the video. So...?" Viktor went on.

"I don't want to give up my own Exhibition for it."

Viktor huffed, "You wouldn't be; this would be extra."

"...I'll have to think about it." Yurio closed his eyes.

"Okay..." The older Russian seemed a little disappointed to realize he was right, "Well, let us know. We're going to be really busy with the last few events once Bordeaux is done, so we may not have a lot of time to work out the details if we don't start soon."

"...Ja ponimaju. Do svidanija." The teen looked at the phone's face and clicked out of the call, then dropped the device next to his head on the comforter.

Minako looked at him curiously, "I can practically see the sad look on his face." She said, "Even after everything we've mentioned, you're still not sure about it?"

He crossed his arms over himself and raised one ankle to cross over the opposite knee, "I just want Viktor to squirm for now."

"...Ah, naruhodo. So you've agreed to do it then, in your head." The ballerina smiled, "How long are you going to make him wait before you tell him?"

"Long enough."

Yuri nodded and held his phone up with a dry look on his face, "Yeah, you forgot to tag him. Someone else must've told him about it."

"...Oh, whoops." The Russian laughed, "Ah well, he knows. We should start doing our part tomorrow in expectation that he'll be there in the end. It's easy for him to pick something up if he sees someone else doing it first."

"...Yeah, I remember how he memorized Agape just from watching you do it once."

"His brain is good that way. He choreographed his ‘Welcome to the Madness’ Exhibition the night before he performed it, too. He should be fine even if he waits till the last second to tell us about it. Anyway...let's head back. I want to hit up the pool before the night's over."
More sightseeing and more skating took place over the course of the remainder of the week. By Friday, Viktor had checked off all the important places he wanted to see in the north end of Paris on a map; touristy locations were circled in purple, interesting locally-known gems were in green, restaurants he wanted to go to were in red, and finally, all the skating rinks in blue.

"Haven't you already been to most of these places before?" Yuri wondered, snapping a few photos of the glass pyramid in front of the Louvre Museum.

"Sure." The Russian nodded, "Well, half of them, I guess... But, it's still nice to go back. You don't notice everything the first time." When he saw Yuri looking back at his phone, scrolling through the pictures he'd taken, he pulled the slim iPhone-holding tripod out of his carry-bag. As had been the custom since arriving in Paris, Viktor finagled with the phone's settings until he got the frame he wanted, set a timer, then pulled Yuri close and snapped his own set of pictures, "This place looks even better when it's dark and all the mood lighting is on. We should come back again later tonight."

"You don't want to watch the Rostelecom Short Program?"

"I'm not really friends with anyone competing in it. You?"

"...I was just thinking we could see what the competition is up to. This'll be when we start to see who's guaranteed to be at the Final. JJ's going to be there; it's his last event."

Viktor practically 'haroomph'd at that, "...I never particularly cared for him. If he's at the Final, then...well, he's at the Final." He moved back over to the camera set-up to take it down.

Yuri thought back on all the times he’d seen Viktor and JJ interacting the previous year. Given the look on Viktor's face at the time, he might as well have been watching ice melt.

"Did you hear that? Emil landed a quadruple loop, too." JJ had said as the Czech skater's music played overhead, "Applause!"

"I don't recall." The skater-turned-coach said flatly, not even bothering to turn his eyes to glance at the man talking to him.

"Ehhh!"

"WAIT A SECOND!" JJ barked unexpectedly, showing up with his fiancé suddenly where all the other skaters had gathered around Yurio and Otabek in Barcelona, "I'll be the one who wins gold and gets married, of course!"

"That's right!" The slight woman added, clinging to him, "It'll definitely be JJ."
The temperature in the pavilion dropped 50 degrees by the looks on everyone's faces, even Mari and Minako's.

"Sorry we can't congratulate you on that future marriage." JJ finished.

Viktor abruptly stood up and started leading Yuri away, carrying some of their bags and walking by like the Canadian wasn't even there, "Well, tomorrow's an early start. Better call it a night."

"Huh? What?" JJ watched them go, confused, "Hey! Wait a second! I WAS JUST KIDDING!"

Yuri hadn't even seen the way Viktor and JJ reacted to one another when JJ realized the costume Viktor was wearing under his coat at Four Continents. That was probably for the best, though.

"I guess we don't have to watch it..." Yuri said, looking around again briefly before pulling out the map Viktor had made, "It's a shame we aren't here next month. All of the city's Winter Skating venues open only in December. There's even one at the bottom of the Eifel Tower."

"Why don't we have our own Rostelecom Cup?" Viktor suggested abruptly, forcing Yuri to look up over the map at him, "Let's go down to Bordeaux tomorrow and see Yurio. He'll be hard-pressed to avoid giving us an answer about our Team Skate if we're standing in front of him, plus we can show him what we've already practiced."

"Should we warn him we're coming?" Yuri wondered, getting a bit excited about the idea.

Viktor thought a moment, but then shook his head, "Nah, let's surprise him. We'll get there early. He's been staying with my uncle all week and I know what hotel they're in, so we can just show up."

They skipped the skating 'event' that day with an obvious apology online for it, and decided to turn in early. Viktor had wanted to catch the first train out of Paris to make the most of the day, but it meant getting up at 4:30am. Even with a decaf Irish coffee as a night-cap though, Yuri found it difficult to sleep.

His eyes moved up from where he had his head on a pillow and saw 21:25 on the alarm clock on the nightstand. He sighed to himself, not feeling tired at all. Viktor was on his back behind him, out cold...but almost as soon as Yuri had made a note of him there and was about to turn around, the Russian unconsciously moved to latch onto his back, as was his habit. Arms went around his torso, pulled him to his chest, and pressed his forehead against the nape of Yuri's neck.

Effectively pinned down, all Yuri could do was stay where he was. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep again, but his brain just wouldn't shut down. Giving up the attempt, he reached over for where his phone was charging on the nightstand ahead of him, and clicked it on as close to the mattress as possible so Viktor wouldn't be woken up by the light. A few quick clicks and a little typing later, and Yuri was looking at the scores for the previous Grand Prix Series events.

Chris, JJ, and Phichit had all medaled at Skate America, but with Phichit only taking Bronze, it put him at risk of not making it into the Final Six.

...He's probably sweating bullets over the NHK Trophy at this point.

He clicked over to his phone's World Clock and saw that it was 02:26 in Bangkok. Part of him wanted to message his friend, but another was certain Phichit was probably asleep already, like he himself should've been.
"What's it looking like?" Viktor suddenly asked, making Yuri twitch in surprise.

"...Sorry, did my phone wake you up?" He turned his head a little to try and see the man, but he was too far behind him, so he couldn't even see the outline of Viktor's silhouette in the dark.

"No, but you started moving around. So? What's it look like in Moscow?"

"I was actually looking at the Skate America results just now. JJ took Gold, Chris Silver, and Phichit-kun Bronze. ...I haven't even pulled up the SP scores for Rostelecom yet. Like you said, no one we're rooting for is there." Yuri answered, setting the phone face-down next to the pillow. He sighed quietly, "I just can't sleep. I was trying to find something to do until I do get tired."

"It's been said that people who look at their phones in bed will cause their own insomnia." Viktor wondered, pulling his right arm back to rub his eyes a little, "Something on your mind?"

"Until a second ago, not really. I'm worried for Phichit-kun. If he doesn't get Silver or better at NHK, he might not be at the Final, and he has to wait all this time to see how it goes."

"That's in his hands. There's nothing you can do except hope for the best."

"...I know..." Yuri rubbed his arm a little, but then twisted to sit up, pushing back against the headboard, "I was thinking, maybe we should invite him to come back to Hasetsu with us after NHK, and then take him to the Final regardless of whether he competes?"

"After refusing to let Yurio tag along with us after Calgary?"

"Yurio's not going to be at NHK unless he goes as a spectator." Yuri pointed out, "Plus he was asking to tag along on a non-typical kind of flight. Phichit-kun and I trained together in Detroit though...it would only be natural for us both to go back there one day."

Viktor rolled onto his back and crossed his arms behind his head, "...It's up to you. Just keep in mind, if Phichit isn't competing in the Final and you have him come with us anyway, he won't have Ciao Ciao's room to go stay in while we're there. Are you ready for him to stay with us for all that time?"

"Obviously." Yuri quirked a brow at him.

Viktor gave him the same look back though, realizing the man didn't really get it. Or, perhaps he did. The Russian watched quietly as his partner slowly pulled up the covers and slid beneath them until he was perched on his lap, looking down on him.

"Maybe you aren't ready for that though." Yuri mused, leaning down to cross his forearms over his husband's chest.

"...It's a terrible concern." Viktor said half-seriously, "If he stays with us at the house instead of at Yu-Topia, it could be a whole week where I don't get my daily dose."

"As though the potential of someone hearing us has ever bothered you."

"...It's slightly different if I'm trying to be good around your friends."

"Did you forget the score-cards?"

"Those were for you." Viktor laughed, "Chris scored us especially low because he didn't hear me. Besides, it'll be harder to hide it when Phichit's in the same room with us."

"So we'll have Phichit-kun stay at Yu-Topia, then it'll only be 3 days for the Final."
Viktor moved his right arm from where it was folded above him, and set his hand over Yuri's cheek, tracing a finger along his jaw until he got down his neck, "Or maybe I'll just sneak you off in the middle of competition like I did in my younger days."

Yuri just deadpanned him, "...I don't think I want to know how I compare against your old girlfriends."

The Russian just scoffed at him, continuing to move his hand lower, tracing a finger down the center of his partner's chest, "As though you had to hope that you were my favorite." He splayed his fingers out and set his whole palm against Yuri's chest, just to the side, over his heart, "You captured this," He then reached up and ruffled his partner's hair, leaving his fingers to grip lightly around the side of Yuri's head, "...and this." Viktor then pulled his hand back again, and brought the left out from where it was wedged under his own head, "Besides, you have a few things of your own that set you higher up on the bar than the others."

"...Yeah?"

Viktor nodded, then moved to sit up, inadvertently forcing Yuri down onto his back as he rose. He smiled though as the younger man glanced back up at him where he'd ended up amongst the folded blankets and sheets, "...Mh."

"Enlighten me."

The Russian just huffed his usual singular laugh, eyes half-lidded, then started listing things off on his fingers, "...Well, you're not crazy. You aren't controlling, obsessive, petty, jealous, selfish, and you've yet to tell me who I can and can't talk to...it helps that you weren't already with someone else when I came along, too...plus, you've yet to be irreparably damaged by our sport."

"Sheesh, don't jinx me."

Viktor shook his head, "Never." He then shifted his hands forward again, bringing them down the man's front until they got to the rim of his loose-fitting t-shirt, and slipped under it so his fingers felt skin, "I'll just do my best to wear you out so you can sleep."

Yuri exhaled at the feeling of it, closing his eyes and smiling to himself as the Russian's hands went further up, "...I guess that would be all right."
The train ride out of Paris was made in drizzly wet darkness. Rain splattered against the outside of the windows, the dim light of the cabin glistening off every drop.

They were on board an antique-looking train called the 'TGV Atlantique.' Despite outside appearances, the fact that the model had been built around the time either of the two skaters had been born was just a façade. The inside had been refurbished at some point to be much more comfortable and modern. First class wasn't quite on the same level as an airplane, but it was still better solely by virtue of the fact that Viktor didn't have his knees squashed up against some other seat right in front of him.

By virtue of luck, or perhaps the hour, there were no other passengers sharing their small 4-person unit. The two slate-grey plush seats faced forward, with an odd-looking table between them and the reverse-facing pair of seats on the other side. The table itself was interesting, as Yuri noted when Viktor fixed it to make room; it was built in segments, with the edges folding up to make room for passengers to get into their seats and sit down. Each small cabin was open for the most part, but with darkened Plexiglas panels for the 'privacy' of the aisle-seat passenger. On the other side of the aisle were single-wide seats, one each facing another reverse-facing chair like their own compartment.

Expecting to sleep a while longer, Yuri took the aisle side, while Viktor sat against the window. But in the end, it was Viktor who ended up asleep, and Yuri had to finagle a way to get his neck-pillow around his husband without waking him up, which was a little difficult. He managed in the end, and settled to lean against Viktor's shoulder while he played around on his phone. He couldn't help but listen to the song the Russian had picked for their Team Skate on repeat for almost the entire trip to Bordeaux, bobbing his head now and then to the beat. The more he thought about performing it at the Grand Prix Final, the more excited he got, especially since Viktor was pretty confident Yurio would agree to be part of it.

His mind wandered back to his Thai friend though.

I'll call Phichit-kun later and see if he's interested in hanging out in Hasetsu after NHK. I'll have to go to Bangkok with him at some point, too...

It was pouring even harder when the train finally pulled into the station, and it pounded on the metal roof of the terminal like a thousand military drums. Yuri moved his hand down to the Russian's thigh to try and wake him up.

"Neh, Viktor...we're here."

"...Mmh..."

Yuri shook his head and laughed quietly as he moved out into the aisle to pull their meager travel bags down from the open shelf directly above their seats. Viktor reluctantly pushed to stand, shuffling into the small walkway as he grabbed his own bag from Yuri's hand, slinging it over his shoulder before following his husband to the exit.

The terminal was still dark because of the weather, but it was at least a little lighter since sunrise. The Russian yawned and blearily moved towards the arrival building.

"You've been here before, right?" Yuri wondered, adjusting where his backpack sat on his shoulders.
as he followed and looked around.

"Mh. My last French event was here, back when it was still called Trophée Éric Bompard. It's been eight years though. I was starting to think the ISU didn't want me coming here again."

"...Why would they do that? Would it matter?" Yuri wondered.

Viktor got a little quiet after that, but then shook his head, "Second girlfriend. She lives here. Or at least, she did back then."

"Oh..." The younger figure answered, remembering the story Viktor had told.

"Maybe that's why you jumped the fence." Yurio joked, "You've only ever had crazy girlfriends."

"That's not true!" Viktor insisted, slouching back again, "The second one was nice..." He lifted his head as he thought back on it, "She was beautiful, too..."

Yuri looked a little uncomfortable, even though he told himself over and over that he shouldn't feel that way given how long ago it was.

But Viktor continued on, "Long, wavy, pale blond hair...blue eyes like the ocean. Ahh if only she hadn't gotten hurt..."

"Huh?"

"She was a skater." The Russian explained, "But she tore her ACL during practice once, and the surgery to fix it left her in recovery for almost an entire year. She was so heartbroken by the process that she got really depressed and broke it off with me, saying she didn't want to hold me back." He seemed somber at the memories of it, "I dedicated my Grand Prix Final to her that year, but she never took me back. I even started learning French for her, since she had a hard time with English..."

"She always wanted to move to Paris, since that's where all the action was." Viktor went on, "I don't know if that ever happened since she stopped skating though."

"Do you miss her...?"

The Russian paused and looked back at him, "...Sure, we were good friends aside from the fact that we dated for a while. She helped me get my accent right." He went back around to get into the main atrium, the bright lights shining down onto them, casting their reflections into the polished marble-looking-but-not-quite-marble floor, "After she broke things off with me, it's like she vanished off the face of the Earth though. I messaged her for a long time to see how she was doing, but she never answered back. The one time I got a text reply, it was from a friend of hers using her phone, asking me to stop. So, I did..."

Yuri couldn't tell if the look on Viktor's face was just from being tired, or if he was sad to be reminded of that particular part of his past. He didn't want to keep prying though, since it made him anxious to hear about it. He looked around the atrium to get his mind off of it, seeing all the posters advertizing the Grand Prix event, and the images of various skaters on each of them. It didn't take him long to spot one of himself on the second floor, and when he looked up, saw the huge hanging ad with Viktor himself on it.

The silver-haired skater paused when he heard Yuri's footsteps stop, and looked back over his shoulder to wonder what happened. Seeing his husband's eyes looking up, he turned his own to follow them, and saw the ad as well, "...Yeah, they would do that."
"Eh?"

He huffed a laugh at himself and lowered his head, "I'm often called a 'National Hero' back home, but the French took a special liking to me, too. Look..." He pointed up at where the one other hanging ad was located at the end of the second floor overhand, "The only other skater that got a picture that big was a native. The French Federation of Ice Sports likes to brag about how I chose to learn French over any other language. Hmph...if only they knew it was for selfish reasons...or if they knew I'm trying to learn Japanese now, too."

Yuri was wordless, entirely for lack of knowing what to say.

"Oh, look...there's yours." Viktor said, pointing to where he could see the poster above the end of the stairwell, "It's the first one people see coming up the stairs, so that's a good spot. The one of me might be huge, but it'll probably get overlooked by anyone who isn't coming in from the far termina-"

Arms went around him suddenly, clutching behind his back as a face buried itself in his scarf. Raven-black hair brushed against his face softly, and those arms squeezed a little tighter.

"Sorry."

"...Huh?" The Russian was entirely lost, but he returned the hug before it got awkward that he hadn't already.

"I wasn't thinking. I should've been able to guess the answer to my question before I asked it." The younger skater said, keeping his head low, "Sorry."

"...It was years ago. Don't worry about it."

Yuri grabbed at the fabric of Viktor's coat a little tighter, "...I know what it's like to be fond of someone and have it taken away from me suddenly, remember? I know how unfair it can feel. It might've been eight years ago for you, but it's been six for me and it still sometimes burns. It's like the person died and you never had a chance to say goodbye. They're just gone. They move on without you and never look back."

The older skater held on for a little while, thinking on Yuri's words.

...It's interesting to realize how similar we both are, even if we're so different...

"Yuri." He finally said, "Yuri, look at me."

Messy black hair moved aside to reveal curious hazel eyes, but Viktor just closed his own and turned his head, leaning in to kiss his husband. Yuri's eyes were wide open for a moment, closing only when he felt the Russian's hand softly coming up behind his head. He held there for a little while, only opening his eyes again a little when he felt Viktor pulling away.

"...There's a saying, that everything happens for a reason." The silver-haired skater started, rubbing his thumb through Yuri's hair where he still had his hand on the back of the man's head, "...But sometimes, that reason is because we're all a little stupid and make bad choices. In this case, two women made the worst choices they ever could've because they chose to ignore or forsake us. It wasn't our fault. To me, it just means I got one step closer to finding you. I may wax poetic about lost love, but I think...even if I somehow ran into Sophia again, I'd probably spend the whole time showing off my ring and bragging about how happy I am. So...don't worry about it."

Hazel eyes got rather shiny to hear it, and Yuri nodded, leaning into Viktor's scarf again before
finally unclasping where his fingers were clutched around the man's jacket.

"Now, let's get out of this place. We have a Russian Kitten to torment." Viktor suggested, slipping his arm behind the younger man's back to pull him towards the stairs, "...Also, I need coffee."

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They stood just outside the hotel door. It was just past 9am when Viktor sent the message to his uncle that they were there. A few seconds after the message was sent, the door opened, a bag was thrown out onto the floor by Yuri's feet, and a particular blonde was shoved outside after it.

"Have a great day, Yuratchka!"

The door closed hard. The deadbolt and an inside-only lock could be heard getting fastened, and then silence.

Yurio looked up at the silver-haired Russian with an utterly perplexed look on his face, but then rage settled in and he spun on his heel to kick hard at the heavy brown panel in front of him, "IDIOT, WHAT WAS THAT FOR!? GEEZER! OLD MAN! STUPID! OPEN THE DOOR!"

"Hi, Yuri~" The two said together.

Yurio side-eyed them, "Hang on a minute." He went back to kicking the door, "MY PHONE IS STILL IN THERE."

The door cracked just enough for the item to get tossed out and then slammed shut again; more clicking.

Viktor wouldn't give it anymore time, wrapping an arm across the blonde's chest from behind and dragging him backwards across the carpet towards the elevators, "Let's go practice!"

"Haaahhh?"

Yurio started to flail, eventually getting loose as they stood in the adjacent hall, though it was mostly because his superior let him go.

"The Hell are you guys doing in Bordeaux already!? The competition isn't until next weekend!"

"We know. Rostelecom is happening right now." Viktor pointed out, "Surprise!" He waved a few fingers at him where they had held onto a coffee cup, the other hand back in his coat pocket by then.

Yuri just stood with both arms out to the side, "We're going to do our own Rostelecom while we're waiting for Trophée de France to start, with just the three of us."

Yurio just blinked at him, but then scoffed and stepped forward to give the hug he owed, "Why didn't you warn me? I could've been better prepared."

"The whole point was to surprise you!" Viktor said eagerly, "You've had enough time to think about doing the Team Skate Exhibition. We thought we could help coerce you into agreeing by coming down to show you what we've worked on so far."

"...What, you think you can get me to want to say yes by trying to make me jealous that I haven't
already?" Yurio raised a brow at that, "What kind of plan is that?"

"The best we can come up with given the circumstances." Yuri pointed out with a weak laugh, letting the blonde go after that, "Today and tomorrow will be the last times the skating arena here is open to the public before they shut it down to get it ready for the event. So, now or never."

The elevator doors opened up, and the trio went in.

Back in the hotel room, Mikhail dropped face-first into the first bed, arms and legs splayed out like road kill, "He's finally gone..."

"How long are they going to keep him for?" Minako asked, doing much the same, but face-up.

"Viktor promised to keep him at least until late afternoon." The Russian answered, "So we have all day to ourselves."

"I haven't been so exhausted in ages. Watching a teenager for more than an hour a day is hard work...!" The woman lamented hazily, "...Sweet sleep...here I come..."

"...The truth has been spoken..."

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With the Russian Tiger fed and sated for the moment, the trio finally made their way through pouring rain to the soon-to-be competition venue. They quickly shuffled their way up the curving stair-way and ran for the cover of the green triangular-shaped overhanging 'roof' over one of the many entrances along the front of the building. "Patinoire de Bordeaux" was in big blue letters above the doors.

Despite the downpour, a few people who were walking by with their umbrellas still seemed to have the time to holler at them from across the street. Viktor waved back at them happily, but the two Yuris kept to themselves, as usual.

A sign on the door stated that the rink was booked for a private event for half the day, and Yurio pointed it out, but the older Russian just winked at him.

"That's because I booked it."

"...How much money do you have sitting around just so you can do shit like this?" The blonde wondered.

"Pfft, plenty. Yuri just won $18,000 for his gold at Skate Canada, remember? Since he doesn't have to waste it on coaching or rink fees, we can waste it on stuff like this instead!" Viktor announced, "Besides, if I medal at all this coming weekend, we'll recoup what was spent today. It really wasn't all that expensive anyway."

"If you medal?" Yurio gaped, "As if you have any reason to doubt it."

Viktor just laughed, "Even if I already knew for a fact that I'd win, giving the benefit of the doubt is always for the best. After all, you beat my Short Program record by nearly three points before I took it back."
"...And you beat it in turn by four more points. How is a mortal human even supposed to be able to catch up with that now?" The blond complained, "People are going to have to learn how to fucking fly."

"Language." Yuri elbowed him, "Anyway though...we've booked it until 4pm. After that, we'll go shopping around for our outfits!"

"Quit talking about this like I've already agreed! If I don't like what I see, I'll leave!"
"Let's go again!" Yuri suggested excitedly, "It's really coming together now!"

Yurio and Viktor were huffing and puffing on the rink wall.

"You're a monster." The blonde jeered between breaths, sliding down to sit on the ice, "How do you have so much goddamn stamina!? We did it like 8 times!"

The oldest of the three propped his ankle up over one knee, brushing away the ice that had collected on his blades, "This is why he's doing five quads, remember?"

"Does he ever get tired!?"

Yuri slid forward on gold blades and crouched down, perched in front of the Russian Punk on his toe picks, "What's wrong? Viktor wears me down almost every day."

Yurio went slack-jawed, his face going bright red. Viktor blinked once and then burst out laughing.

"...I walked right into that one." The teen lowered his face.

"Yes you did." The Asian skater gently pat the teen's head and then rose back up to his full height before skating away innocently.

The silver-haired figure was wiping tears out of his eyes from laughing so hard, "He got you good."

"...As if the idea of you two bumping uglies wasn't bad enough, now he has to put the thought in my head where I can't make it go away." Yurio scratched his head with both hands, then gawked over at his former rink-mate, "I hope you're satisfied."

"Well, it's been about 12 hours...but, yes, generally speaking..." Viktor mused, only to lean closer and nudge the blonde with an elbow, "...Very satisfied." He then skated away before Yurio could bluster at him, though he laughed to himself as he heard the teen's protestations behind him. As he casually glided by Yuri, he saw his partner standing idly with his phone in his hand, typing something into a text message, "Who's that?"

"Phichit-kun." He answered happily, "He's agreed. I'm just confirming that I got his answer." He looked up as Viktor came closer to see what he'd written, feeling the man's arm come up to rest over his shoulder, "We'll have to get the other ticket as soon as we get back. He says he'll reimburse us at NHK."

"Eh?" The Russian said, confused, "...Oh, gimme that." He then swiped Yuri's phone to type something himself. [We'll cover your ticket.] He hit send and handed the phone back, skating around him in lazy circles afterward.

Yuri glanced at him as he went, but then looked down at his phone to see Phichit freaking out.

[Thank you so much! Yuri, you're the best! I can't wait!]

He didn't have the heart to say it was Viktor who'd sent the message, so he just typed a reply like it was him the whole time.
[You don't mind rooming with us if Ciao Ciao isn't there at the Final?]

[I should be asking YOU that!]

[We've already discussed it. It's all good. But that doesn't mean you can slack off! I want to see you SKATE in Detroit!]

[Right!?]
[I'll do my best! The competition is stiff this year! Everyone's been putting on their A-game from the start because Viktor's back! You should've heard the banter at Skate America!]

[What was being said?]

[Exactly what I thought they would when I said it in Hasetsu! Fans, officials, other skaters from across all disciplines...they're all looking at this like some big Viktor vs You event.]
[I've heard some rookies saying they think Viktor took time off to coach you just so he could train you to be his only legitimate competition when he did come back, like no one else was worth skating against.]
[The other big-name regulars are trying really hard to get attention because interviewers keep asking what they're going to do when they face-off against you two at later events.]
[I even heard at the Skate America Banquet that the ISU officials planned it this way to build hype for the Final.]
[They're counting on you and Viktor to win Gold at all of your events so the Final is a huge deal.]
[...No pressure.]

Yuri could feel himself starting to sweat, and glanced up from his phone to see Viktor playfully chasing Yurio across the other end of the rink.

[I don't know what's coming down the grapevine right now in Moscow, but I bet everyone's talking about the Team Skate EX show you and Viktor said you wanted to do with the Russian Yuri. Not to mention...you singing Viktor's Short Program.]
[They hype is real, Yuri!]

[Wow...]

[What song is it anyway? Something original?]

[No, it's a cover of 'History Maker.']
[When we were passing through Incheon on our way back from Four Continents, Viktor asked me to pick a song I liked so he could use it for his Short Program this season. He half-planned the whole performance on the spot after that. I ended up singing it to him at one point for some reason, and I guess he got it into his head that I should do my own version of the song later.]
[What he consistently fails to mention is that he sang parts of it, too.]

[He did? But it's just one guy doing vocals on that, if I remember it right...]

[The chorus, where it sounds like there's an echo. He's the echo. He thought it would be fitting, because the parts that I sing are from a singular 'I/me' perspective, but then the chorus is from a plural 'us/we' perspective.]

[Ooohhhhh...]
[Can he sing? wkwkwkwk]

[He's better than I am, I think.]
Yuri clicked his phone off and put it back in his pocket, looking up and around to spot where the two Russian skaters had gone. It didn't take long, and it was rather good timing, too...since Yurio was backing up quickly in his direction, and Viktor pummeled right into him. Yuri was caught in the crossfire and frantically held onto the both of them as Viktor kept pushing them back along the ice.

"Idiot!" Yurio barked, "I don't want to be in the middle of your stupid gay sandwich!"

"Don't you know? We make our own topping." The older Russian teased.

Yuri's face went red instantly, but Yurio basically died.

Viktor just kept laughing.

As far as event hotels went, the Novotel Bordeaux Centre Méridadeck wasn't the worst either of them had ever seen. But...the rooms left them making a lot of really crude jokes at the expense of all the other participants.

"There's only one queen size bed in every room, maybe two small twin beds really close together." Viktor started, setting their things on the desk on the far end of the small space, "And the 3-person room at the Ibis next door has a bunk-bed on top of the double-bed..."

"I guess a lot of coaches and athletes are going to be getting really well acquainted this weekend."

Viktor laughed at that, but then slouched over Yuri's back, "If only you'd been made to come here last year, you couldn't have avoided me for so long. We could've gotten 'really well acquainted' earlier on..."

The younger skater just blushed, "My old self would never have slept."

"Just think of it..." The Russian went on, starting to pretend like it was the year before, "...Oh look, Yuri! There's only one bed! What'll we do!?"

"...I'll sleep on the floor?" He played along.

"Never! You're the athlete! You have to be in peak health, so you have to sleep on the bed!" Viktor practically spun, wrapped his arms around the younger figure, and pulled him side-ways to the bed, "Don't worry, Yuri...I'll keep you warm on these cold winter nights..."

Even then, Yuri's cheeks got a little pink, "You did that anyway, remember?"

"...I did?"

"You forgot!?" The younger figure pushed himself up onto his elbow, "But-"

Viktor scratched his head, "Oh, wait...it was right before your meltdown, right?"
"Uhh... Yeah!"

"Da, now I remember..." The Russian held up a finger as he smiled at the memory, "I made you try to sleep until you had to go do your show, so I stripped you down to next to nothing and then held you down so you wouldn't try to get up again!"

"And by the time we were in Barcelona, even before I got the rings, you were pushing the beds together." Yuri explained, "That time you came in with Chris from the pool, you both had to vault over your bed because it was right up against mine, so you couldn't just go between them to maul me with both of your miserably cold and wet, nearly-naked bodies."

"That was fun." Viktor reminisced fondly, "There's a pool here, too...and Chris should arrive soon. You should come this time since you aren't jetlagged! Then all three of us can take sexy poolside pictures!"

"Maybe..." The younger figure sighed to himself anxiously, sitting up and resting his elbows over his crossed knees, "...Who even took that photo of you two with your legs in the air anyway?"

Viktor paused, eyes going wide...but then laughed nervously, "...I have no idea."

It wasn't worth it to get a cab or even take a bus to the rink since the event hotel was literally right up the street, so when the start of the Men's Single's Short Program was about to begin, pretty much everyone just walked.

Even though it was still raining.

Since squaring things away with the RSF the previous year after worrying so much that they'd spurned him, Viktor had gotten a new track suit for the start of the season. Though it looked much like the previous ensemble, this one had a different color scheme. The decorative line of trim that trailed from the collar-bone to the wrists was hemmed in red, as was the outline of the R and U emblazoned on the chest, though the letters themselves were white. With the exception of the upper parts of the sleeves being white, the rest of the outfit was black. For flare though, the double-headed imperial eagle, Russia's official Coat of Arms, was emblazoned on the back in place of the old Olympic logo, with the wings wrapping around to the front of the coat.

Yuri looked much more subdued, dressed up almost like he normally did when not skating. He wore the same coat and scarf that he'd had in Barcelona though, and had both his and Viktor's event badges hanging around his neck. In a vague attempt at looking more official, he had donned his glasses once more. He held to Viktor's right hand as they walked, dragging his luggage behind them and his carry-bag over one shoulder, while the Russian held up a large blue umbrella overtop of them.

The media mob already started when they got out onto the streets, with the number growing steadily as they got closer to the Patinoire Méridieck. Fans were spilling out into the streets, flashing photography alongside all the sports journalists despite the umbrellas obscuring most every athlete who hadn't turned to greet them.

Viktor was never one to stay hidden for long though, and as the crowds got larger, he waved more enthusiastically. One group screamed out as they saw him, and he spun around with the umbrella still
in hand to tousle his hair dramatically and wink at them. As the umbrella moved though, it practically
tscooped Yuri up to make him move around with it, settling him down again only long enough for it
to happen again as Viktor turned about-face to the sound of a familiar voice yelling after him.

"Chris!" The Russian waved, returning that hand to clasp once more to his husband's as the Swiss
skater came rushing up to them, carrying his own clear umbrella with him. His coach was staying
behind though, walking without urgency despite his athlete rushing ahead.

"Oh, Yuri!" The blond huffed as he caught his breath, "I didn't see you there at first. You look so
official." He winked at the younger skater.

"He's my coach for the weekend!" Viktor announced proudly, turning to walk again with Chris in
tow.

"Coach Yuri...that's entertaining."

"...We figured it was the best way to get me in like normal." Yuri whispered from Viktor's opposite
side, "So far, no one's actually asked me what I'm doing as a coach this year. Hopefully no one
does...!"

"I think the big question on everyone's mind is with regard to you singing Viktor's SP music." Chris
said with a sultry smile, "Maybe I should have you do one for me, too. If he likes it, it must be good.
Coach Viktor is notoriously picky."

"Pfft, I'm not that picky..." The Russian protested.

"You had Aria completely redone for your Pair Skate Exhibition."

"I had to. I needed all the bad parts taken out! The song wouldn't be right for us to do together if I
hadn't."

"Mhm."

"Congrats on Gold at Skate America, by the way." Yuri spoke up, "I guess you're taking this all
more seriously again now that Viktor's back?"

"Naturally." The Swiss skater nodded, "Congrats on your own Gold at Skate Canada. I hope you
don't bail on the Banquet here though."

"No no no no!" Yuri protested emphatically, "I was sick before! That's the only reason I didn't go!"

"Sick? Oh, right, you did mention that... But sick with what? You looked fine during your Free
Skate."

"I lost my voice after the Short Program." He admitted sheepishly, "It took 3 or so days to get over it.
Every time I looked up or turned my neck too far, I'd start coughing. I was lucky to make it through
my Free Program without hacking up my entire esophagus."

"Not bad then, to win 1st prize while in that condition. I guess it was Viktor's doing then that you
reduced your insane five-quad program down to three?"

"Mhm." Yuri nodded, "I'll be back to five at the Final though. My Free Skate will look completely
different now that I'm better again."

"He's going to win Gold at the Final this time." Viktor announced happily.
“What about you?” Chris wondered.

“I’m going to win Gold, obviously.”

The blonde shook his head and laughed as they went up the last steps to get into the venue, surrounded by blockaded fans and reporters on all sides, screaming for their attention, "Compartmentalization at its finest."
"Welcome, viewing audience, to the start of this year's Trophée de France Men's Singles event! In less than an hour, we'll be starting with the Short Program...and the lineup is tough!"

Footage played of all the different skaters coming into the building, acknowledging the indoor 'official' media for the event as they shuffled through to the prep area under the stands.

"Reporting to you from the city of Bordeaux in beautiful France, this is Newscaster Morooka! As you can see, a number of this evening's athletes have already arrived with their coaches. Some long-time favorites and familiar faces have already gone back-stage... Czech Republic's Emil Nekola, South Korea's Seung-gil Lee, and the United States of America's Leo de la Iglesia. We also have some shockingly talented newcomers, such as Germany's Helmut Knabe, who just made his Senior Premiere this year at Skate Canada with a Bronze Medal. Skate Canada's Silver Medalist, Yuri Plisetsky, is also here representing Russia, along with rink-mate Georgi Popovich, who is skating today in his first event of the Grand Prix Series."

The Asian reporter was standing with his back to the doorway as Chris and Yuri finally made their way in, with Chris shaking out his umbrella to the side of the entrance before finally ducking within. Yuri pulled in with Viktor's things as well, seeing the media-man and waving, "Newscaster Morooka! Hi~!"

"Ah! It looks like the entire Skate Canada podium has come to Bordeaux this weekend...we have that event's Gold Medalist, Yuri Nikiforov, here alongside Swiss skater Christophe Giacometti, who took Silver himself at Progressive Skate America. We are also pleased to present Russia's very own five-time World Champion, Grand Prix Final Gold Medalist, European Champion, and National Champion..."

Viktor backed in with the massive umbrella as Chris held the door, pulling the wet fabric around the aluminum pole to tie it off. He reached over to get his carry-bag back, slipped the damp umbrella through the top, and slung it over his shoulder as he put his free arm over Yuri's.

"...Returning to regular competition for his first event of the year, following an unexpected break to become a coach last season...Viktor Nikiforov!"

The announcer finally turned back to face the camera after holding his hand out to introduce the trio to the audience. They all waved politely as they went to take their place in the prep area backstage.

"As many in our viewing audience recall, Viktor took time off after winning Gold at the World Championships in Tokyo the year before last, and became coach to then-Yuri-Katsuki, one of Japan's top skaters. Yuri had made it to his first Grand Prix Final that same season, but after a humiliating collapse, coming in 6th at the Final, and then 11th in his subsequent National Championships, was thought to be planning retirement from the sport. Skater Viktor shocked all of Russia when he suddenly went to Japan to pull Yuri back into fighting form, and coached him to win last year's Grand Prix Final Silver Medal! Skater Yuri went on to defeat Viktor by a razor-thin margin at the World Championships, taking Gold for himself and leaving Viktor to win Silver for the first time in an unbroken five-year winning streak. With both Nikiforovs participating in this season's Grand Prix Series, excitement is high as expectations loom that both skaters will face off against one another in the Final. Who will rank amongst the remaining Final Four to challenge them? Stay tuned!"
Chris lead the way into the backstage area, and as Viktor guided Yuri through the doors, he pulled his arms up and drew in a deep breath.

"I love the smell of competition!" The Russian sighed happily.

"Doesn't it smell the same as Calgary?" Yuri quipped.

"This is my event though. It's different!"

The younger skater shook his head and laughed quietly to himself, but then turned his attention around the hall. Dozens of people were bustling about; skaters, coaches, choreographers, judges, event organizers, even the odd high-ranking ISU official. Every now and then, he'd see a small wave of heads turning his direction, though he suspected it only looked that way because he was standing by Viktor.

[The other big-name regulars are trying really hard to get attention because interviewers keep asking what they're going to do when they face-off against you two at later events.]

[I even heard at the Skate America Banquet that the ISU officials planned it this way to build hype for the Final.]

He shook his head, and felt the Russian moving off again, slowly coaxing him to come along as they found and claimed their own small corner of the prep area. Almost mercifully, they spotted Yakov with his team soon thereafter, and quickly shuffled over to set up shop alongside them.

Yakov took one look at Yuri, and the two lanyards around his neck, and gave a flat look. He stepped over warily, bypassing Viktor's greeting as he reached for the badges, pulling Yuri a little closer as he held them up to read them.

"Competitor Viktor Nikiforov...and Coach Yuri Nikiforov." He side-eyed his former pupil, "Vitya, seriously."

"What?" Viktor's bemused look instantly changed to flat, yet sarcastic indignation, "I didn't want to sequester him to the audience! This was the easiest way to make sure he could be backstage."

"You'd never get away with all of this if not for your record."

"Which is exactly why I'm taking advantage of it!" The silver-haired man mused, "What good is being a Champion at anything if there aren't any perks?"

"You should've gotten him a guest pass then."

"He wouldn't have had the same kind of access. That's why my uncle isn't down here right now, right?"

Yurio glanced up at him from where he was giving his due to his Japanese counterpart, "He's not down here because he came and left already. He's up in the stands right now, waiting for shit to get started."

"Minako-sensei is with him, right?" Yuri wondered, holding one hand to the teen's shoulder.

"Yeah, they're glued at the hip these days."

"And you really spent all 2 weeks with them instead of your team?"

"Yeah?" Yurio gawked at him, green eyes giving a suspicious look, "Why?"
"N-nothing!" The older skater backpedaled quickly, waving his hands around defensively, "I just didn't think they'd be your style! Especially after hearing that you went back to St. Petersburg early after Minako-sensei went back with you guys to Moscow that one time!"

"That's because they were insufferable back then." The teen grumbled, "After shit went down in Calgary, I knew that if Okukawa was here, I couldn't let them be all obnoxious with their game of 'we're not into each other but we really are' while I was around."

"What? So you made them admit they're dating and then inflicted yourself on them for 2 weeks as punishment?" Viktor laughed.

Yurio shrugged, but he seemed to be smirking a little, "Maybe."

"And you call me a monster." Yuri scratched his jaw with one finger.

Chris leaned into Viktor's space and whispered quietly, "I'm going to go find Josef. I'll see you guys again in a little while."

"Mh. Bye~" The Russian turned to watch him go, but it only served to bring his attention around to something that was even worse than what the two Yuris were talking about. The media frenzy.

The Swiss skater vanished quickly before being caught by the stampede of cameras, smart-phones, and notepads. Reporters were calling out for Viktor, not even seeing Yuri at the back of the group. The young skater's eyes went up though as he saw his partner turning away from him, and only seconds later, the whole lot of them were surrounded in a semi-circle by a pressing throng of reporters, each asking questions at the same time, and none of them heard over one another.

Viktor held his hands up to quiet the swarm, though it took a little effort given all the excitement. When the thrum of questions had finally died down enough that any given person could even hear themselves think, he lifted his head, "...Hiii~!"

They erupted with questions again, almost shouting over one another in an attempt to be heard. Viktor's hair was practically blowing back from the intensity of the onslaught. Almost unexpectedly, Yuri snuck out in front of him and held up his own hands, "ENOUGH!"

The crowd silenced again, leaving everyone, the Russian included, blinking at him in confusion.

"He can't hear a single one of your questions when you're all talking over each other! One at a time or NONE at a time!" He insisted, scanning the crowd for whoever he thought would be the most 'worthy' to ask their question first.

Viktor huffed a quiet laugh to himself and perched one arm over his husband's shoulder, "You've gotten good at crowd control since the wedding party."

"I didn't need a Yurio-phone this time." He said back, then finally picking his first 'victim,' "You...what was your question?"

She was an older woman with brown hair styled up in a swirl, and her microphone bore the insignia of the ISU. She was a natural first choice, and she nodded in acknowledgment, holding the mic out towards the Russian Champion, "Viktor Nikiforov...I won't bore you with the same old questions you're going to hear all weekend." She started, getting their attention like a can opener in a room full of hungry cats, "We've all heard the story that your partner is singing your Short Program for you.
It's expected that both of you will make it to the Grand Prix Final. We know you've challenged Yuri Plisetsky to medal with the you at the end, so you can do a Team Skate for the Exhibition. That's all fine and well. The real question that fans want answered though is...

The Russian's expression was keen, focused. Slate blue eyes watched her carefully, wondering if it was a trap of some sort. His arm on Yuri's shoulder slid behind until his hand held to the man's back, grasping lightly to his still-damp coat. Yuri could feel it, but he waited.

"...You said at your World Championship post-event interview that one theme for you this season would be rage."

"Mh." Viktor nodded.

"Would you be willing to explain in detail where that came from? What inspired that after so many years of programs like The Lilac Fairy, Amnesia, and Stay Close to Me?"

Yuri felt a little tension where Viktor's fingers clasped to his coat, but he did his best to keep himself from reacting to it. Yurio and Yakov behind him were tense as well, but did their best to mask it and let Viktor answer for himself.

"A close brush with retirement." He finally said, trying to keep a brave face in spite of having to hide the deeper truth, "I'm turning 29 next month. The Free Skate I did at Worlds...I originally intended for that to be my last show as a competitor.

The mob was silent, recording every word and listening intently.

"When I won my fifth consecutive Gold Medal at the Tokyo World Championships, I was asked what my future plans were. Back then, I had only just recently turned 27, and I was already out of answers. I went back home to St. Petersburg without a plan. I had a few skating programs partly choreographed, sure...but I felt like I was at the end of my rope anyway. It was getting harder and harder to surprise people." The Russian went on, getting a little quiet towards the end, "But then this lovable fool came crashing into my life like a freight train when he perfectly copied my Aria." He explained, moving his hand from where it was only lightly touching Yuri's coat, to fully pulling him closer with it, "We were only loosely acquainted before that, but Yuri had once suggested I become a coach."

Yuri reciprocated the embrace and snaked his own arm around his partner's lower back, his hand coming to rest on the man's hip.

"I thought it was a good idea, so...why not coach him?" Viktor continued, "Of course, there's so much more to that story than my simply deciding out of the blue to quit my day-job and start something new that I'd never done before...but suffice it to say, becoming Yuri's coach made it possible for me to get my inspiration back as a competitive skater. My rage stems from the fact that I have all these ideas now that I won't have enough time to put together before my time runs out. I've given over my entire bag of tricks to Yuri at this point though, so I can continue showing my love on the ice even after I stop skating on it for medals myself."

"So is that your official retirement announcement? This will be your final year?"

"...I'm not sure yet." He leaned his head down slightly to rest it against the side of his husband's, "I've considered doing the Grand Prix again next year on an artistic level, and see how far I get just on that. I'll know better how I feel about it after Worlds."

Reporters looked back and forth at one another, not sure if their own questions were valid anymore
A middle-aged man stuck his microphone out a little closer though, this time pointing it towards Yuri, "...So you're his Coach now, and his student?"

The young skater went rigid, "...Ah...ehm...sort of?"

"Did you all see the gold skates I got for him at Skate Canada!?” Viktor took the conversation on a total B-line, pulling his own skates from his carry-bag and showing them off, "They're just like mine! So he can win Gold at the GP Final!"

"Back in Coach Viktor mode now?” Yuri mused, side-eyeing him nervously.

"Wish him the best of luck! He's going to do great!" The Russian had set his skates on the ground next to his feet and slid in behind his partner to rub his shoulders.

"...You're talking like I'm the one skating this weekend."

"Oh, right! Sorry! Habit!" He laughed.

"Our first skater for the Men's Singles Short Program is Russia's Georgi Popovich..." Morooka started, with the dark-haired Russian skater heading out onto the ice, rounding back again to meet with his coach on the rink wall.

His ensemble was a bit less clownish as compared to the previous year; black, dark blue, streaks of deep purple, the train of two black sashes coming off his hips, and a voluminous feather boa with matching colors and silver tinsel interspersed within, hanging around his neck and shoulders. Lace went across most of his back, and went around his arms like ribbons to trail off at his wrists. He wore purple eye-shadow to highlight the whole thing.

Yakov was stoic as ever, "You've corrected the mistakes from last year and shone with a Silver Medal victory at the Russian Nationals. Don't let the fact that Viktor's getting all this media attention cloud your vision."

"Mh." The skater nodded, and peeled away to skate a few circles towards the center of the rink to remind his legs it was time to work.

"Skater Georgi's theme this year is similar to last year, but with a twist. No longer bound by the burn of betrayal and heartache, Georgi now performs to the feelings of reciprocated love from a partner beyond one's league. In tune with this, he skates tonight to 'El Tango de Roxanne' from Moulin Rouge."

Ever the dramatic artist, Georgi moved to the center of the ice and took his position, looking like a man who was on the edge of going...

...Maaaaaaaaaaddddd!
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED THIRTEEN

Triple axel.

Why does my heart cry?
Feelings I can't hide.

Combination spin.

Why does my heart cry?
Feelings I can't fight.

Big finish!

ROOOOOOOOOXAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAANNNNNNNNNNN!

Final pose.

"The score for Georgi Popovich..."

The extravagant skater and his conservative coach sat in the kiss and cry anxiously, hearing the announcement overhead.

"...92.76."

Georgi was on his feet, throwing his arms into the air as he cheered his score. As Yakov clapped in approval, the skater's eyes went over to the waiting area where the rest of his team, and 'the defector,' had been watching.

Did you see that? Viktor... Georgi thought to himself, shrugging on his track-suit coat, strutting like a peacock from the kiss and cry to go backstage, I wasn't even pushing myself this time. By the end of this, I'm going to shell out a new Personal Best and get into the Final. You won't be the only Russian skater with a long track record of stunning victories...

Viktor just clapped politely, commenting something to the people around him that Georgi couldn't hear. The group laughed though, making the younger Russian skater a bit anxious as he went back into the prep area again.

"Next on the ice, representing Germany...Helmute Knabe!"

The 16-year-old with auburn hair made his way out onto the rink, wheeling around to get one final pep-talk from his coach. Camera footage showed him nodding a few times, shaking the woman's hand, and then heading out into the arena to the cheers of the crowd.

"Skater Helmute is an interesting case this year. While many skaters enter the Senior Division as soon as they can, especially when they do so well in the Junior circuit, Helmute was forced to stay an extra year because of a technicality on his birthday. He was born one day too late to make it into the listings last year. Members of the audience who are new to skating should know...athletes must be aged 15 before July 1st of the previous year in order to compete in the Senior Division. Helmute is last year's Junior World Champion, and competes against his former rival, Yuri Plisetsky, for the first time since then."
Yurio scoffed, sitting with the others in the waiting area with one ear-bud in from his phone, "He won Silver at my last Junior World Championships...that doesn't mean he was my rival."

"Huh?" Yuri looked back at him from the lower row.

"...Listening to Morooka talking about the event on LiveStream. He said this scrub was my rival back when I was still in the Junior Division."

"Well, he might not be your rival, but you're his for sure." The older skater pointed out, "He won Bronze at our last event, so he's not doing all that bad for his Senior premiere."

"I guess."

Morooka went on, unheard by all save the blonde, "Skater Helmute's song for the Short Program is an older one...'Black Betty' by Ram Jam. He really got the audience in Canada going with it, so we're looking forward to hearing it here in France!"

The young skater held his arms out to the cheering of the audience, relishing in the sight of the German flag waving all around him.

**Half of the Final Six spots have already been called for, practically...** He thought to himself quietly, twizzling a little to get himself in the mood, Plisetsky is expected to make it to the Final again, despite his disastrous fall from grace after the Final last year... His green-brown eyes rose to see the blond in the stands, watching him intently as he had in their Junior days, With all the training he's done since Worlds though, and taking Silver at our last event, he seems to be back in form again. Do I even have a chance?

He took his spot in the middle of the rink and entered into his starting pose, crossing his right leg over the left and lowering his head a little.

**It's bad enough that Viktor Nikiforov is competing at this event... But Yuri's here, too, and Christophe... I know the ISU has to put competitors somewhere, but if they're going to be selective with where they put previous Gold medalists, why couldn't they take pity on a newcomer and put me somewhere less stacked?**

The audience's cheering slowly dwindled, and the sound of the drum-beat started up.

Each skater is ranked and given points based on their standings in each event.

The song was high-energy, introducing bass and electric guitar, and the footwork was crisp to match it. Black blades were clicking along the ice in swift sweeping movements as the skater went back along the arena, turning as he came close to the rink wall on the south end.

Fifteen points for 1st place, 13 for 2nd, 11 for 3rd, and so forth... Those skaters whose ranked scores are highest will be eligible for a spot in the Final Six. Those who tie will have other factors taken into account... Yuri Nikiforov and Michele Crispino had the same Grand Prix Series total score last year, but Yuri managed to sneak in because he medaled at Cup of China... Silver counts for more in the eyes of the ISU if the total point value is equal...

Quad loop, and the song's lyrics began. Triple axel, other elements, triple toe-loop with triple Salchow combo. The first stanza ended, and the step-sequence began.

With my Bronze from Skate Canada, I have 11 points on my ticket so far. It's unlikely that I'll medal at this event...but I think I can take 4th place, earning me 9 more points. If only Viktor wasn't here...I had bad luck ending up at the same event as him...
The Russian watched the show quietly, leaning against his hand where he'd clasped it to his partner's. He was almost unblinking as the performance went on, idly rubbing his thumb back and forth where he felt warm fingers against his cheek.

"Minami-kun would love this." Yuri said, leaning in a little to be heard over the music, "It's so high-energy and up-beat. This is right up his alley."

"...How old is he?" Viktor wondered.

"He turned 18 over the summer."

"Really?" The Russian was stunned, "But...he's so small..."

The younger skater laughed, "Yeah, isn't he? I don't exactly remember his birthday, but it's sometime in the summer. He technically made his Senior debut last year."

"So how come he isn't in the Series?"

Yuri shrugged, "Maybe his coach doesn't think he's ready. But speaking of being ready...shouldn't we go?"

"Mh. After this one." Viktor kissed the ring on his partner's finger before lowering their hands to settle on the arm-rest between them.

The German skater's Short Program was coming to an end, and he leapt into the flying sit-spin to round out the finale of his performance. He dropped down to his knees and leaned back, arms out to the side, as the song came to a sudden end. The crowd roared its approval. He held the pose, catching his breath for a few moments, and then sank forward to put his hands on the ice.

...Whatever my score here turns out to be, I'll be better at German Nationals and Euros...

"The score for Helmute Knabe..." The announcement came overhead, and the teen looked up with his coach and choreographer in the kiss and cry, "...96.25!"

"Wow~!" Viktor cheered, clapping.

Yuri clapped as well, but was somewhat more subdued, watching the younger skater jumping all over both of the figures with him in the score box.

...He's even better now than he was in Canada. If not this season, then the next...he's going to be a force to be reckoned with...

Yurio was clapping, but he was being sassy about it. When it was over and the next skater was getting ready for his turn, the teen stood up and started making his way to the aisle, "Viktor, we should go. This is the last of Group 1."

"Da, we're coming."

"Next on the ice...representing the United States of America...Leo de la Iglasia!"

The audience was clapping and cheering all over again as the trio of skaters moved to go backstage, leaving a few non-Men's Singles athletes to wait and watch for Group 2. There was plenty of time to prepare though, as the zamboni would resurface the rink between sessions, so no one was in any particular rush. By the time they got down into the prep area, work was underway by the next set of skaters getting ready to head onto the ice.
Yurio broke away from the group to check the listing on the wall one more time, and Yuri soon followed after him. Viktor 'danced' his way back to the benches they'd claimed earlier, practicing a few easy maneuvers from his Short Program as he went.

"I don't think it's going to change if you stop looking at it." Yuri pointed out, standing next to the teen as he analyzed the listing.

"It's not about whether it changes. It's about ice conditions, judge fatigue, and audience apathy." The blond answered, raising his hand to make an example of the skating order, "Haven't you ever considered it?"

"...Well, I never really got into competition so I could climb to the top. I just wanted to-

"-skate the same ice as Viktor, I know, I know..." Yurio grumbled, "Maybe you should think about it more now then. Look." He put his hand over the block for Group 1, "The ice is going to get resurfaced before Group 2 goes out there, but that only means a perfect skating surface for the first guy out there. Whatever toe-assisted jumps he does will leave gouges in the ice for the next person, and so on. The last person out there has a small disadvantage because of it." He slid his finger down the list, "Giacometti is the lucky fuck going out first, then the Czech clown, then the South Korean guy with the big eyebrows, the French guy, then me, then Viktor."

"So you're saying you and Viktor have the biggest handicaps?"

"Don't you remember that time your dumbass fell on the ice in St. Petersburg because of the crack your skate dropped into?"

"...Sure I remember." Yuri deadpanned the teen.

"Well, imagine having that happen when you're skating for competition. If there's a jump-scratch deep enough, you might get tripped up by it."

"You'd have to hit it absolutely perfectly though. It seems like a really minor thing to quibble about."

"Swimmers will shave their eyebrows for that microscopic difference in water resistance." Yurio explained, "But that's less important than knowing about judge fatigue. Everyone knows that the very first person on the ice is at a disadvantage because the judges haven't 'warmed up' yet. Skaters in the middle will do the best on average, and then the heavy hitters at the end, if the ISU tweaks skate order after lots are drawn."

"...Yeah, I noticed that Viktor didn't even bother drawing a number." The older skater said, looking at the other lists idly.

"He doesn't always have to." Yurio explained, "It's just like at Worlds, when they put you and him dead last to keep the audience from leaving early. At 'minor' events though, it's not always important."

"Are you worried the judges will score you low because they'll be tired?"

"In part." Yurio said, pulling his hand back from the chart to put it back in his track-suit coat pocket, though he kept his eyes up, "The judges really crafted this whole season around you and Viktor."

The Asian skater sighed, but said nothing, his mind drawn right back to what Phichit had said again.

"It would've been nice to skate at an event on my own." Yuri went on, "Instead of being stacked up against you guys at both of them, I could've gone and swiped gold from that shit-eating cunt JJ or
something. I should've been at Rostelecom."

"I think you'll do fine. Viktor's only doing three quads...you could always up the ante like it were the Final and push ahead." Yuri suggested, "I doubt he'll deviate much from his plan even if he sees you pushing yourself. It's your final event for the Series...he's probably expecting you to."

"I don't want to win anything if it's only because someone else held back for my sake." The blonde turned his eyes a little, "If Viktor doesn't change his plans after I do, then it'll mean he's slacking."

Yuri just tilted his head and huffed a slight laugh, "That'll depend on your score. If he doesn't think you'll beat him based on what he already has in mind, then he'll just stick to the plan."

"You two were real dicks to not show me what your programs looked like while I was in Hasetsu."

The older skater just slouched over Yurio's back dramatically, dangling his arms in front of the teen, "But it would ruin the fun! Even Viktor had to disappear and train by himself sometimes when I was living in St. Petersburg. I didn't even know he was working on the quad Axel until after he'd pulled it off, and I never even saw it until he did it in front of everyone in his Worlds SP, remember?"

"...Mh."

Yuri pulled off of him and tugged on his jacket, "You should go stretch though, and get something to drink. You'll be out there within the hour. I can't wait to see what your new score is going to be."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FOURTEEN

"Our next skater on the ice tonight is Switzerland's Christophe Giacometti...."

"Chris, davaaaaai!"

The blond waved at the audience as he started to shuffle his way across the ice.

He wore a one-piece like he usually did; the majority of it was black, rising up into paint-splatter-like white accents and trims along a long, thick cut window through the chest, covered over by lace. Over his heart though, a starburst of red crystal, which almost looked to 'drip' down to waist level.

He skated back around to get a few words from his coach, but then slid back a little bit, waving over at where Viktor and Yuri were standing just outside the curtain to the prep area.

"Skater Chris appears to be taking a moment to talk to his long-time rival and friend, Viktor Nikiforov."

"What is it? You should be getting to the center!" The Russian half-scolded, making a 'shoo' gesture at him.

Chris just smiled a little, but then reached over the rink wall to put one hand on the man's shoulder, getting his attention rather squarely, "Viktor...we've been doing this for a very long time." He started, "I think it's time I showed my appreciation for all the years we've been friends, don't you think?"

"Eh?" Blue eyes blinked in confusion.

The Swiss skater winked and clapped the man's shoulder, "You'll see."

Both Yuri and Viktor watched Chris skate away, then turned to glance at each other, "I wonder what that was about?"

The audience cheered louder as the figure skater went out to greet them, waving at all sides as he circled the rink and headed to center.

"This year is a marked departure from the mature sensuality of Chris' programming theme in the previous season. He tells us that, this year, he was inspired by Skater Viktor's looming possible retirement. The two of them have been competitors together for around a decade, and have often shared a podium together at various competitions. Tonight, he skates to 'Broken' by Lifehouse."

A gentle guitar began, and Chris moved off to the side to pick up speed.

_The broken clock is a comfort, it helps me sleep tonight,_
_Maybe it can stop tomorrow from stealing all my time._

The lyrics caught Viktor's attention rather sharply, and he couldn't help but look up, as though the music was speaking straight to him.

Flying camel-spin. Change of foot, continue on.

_\textit{And I am here still waiting though I still have my doubts,}
\textit{I am damaged at best...}
He backed out of the spin and rounded the end of the rink, spinning and twisting elegantly as he made his way back to the other side.

...like you've already figured out.
*I'm falling apart*,

Outside spread-eagle into a triple axel.

*I'm barely breathing*.

Step sequence.

*With a broken heart that's still beating*.

Yuri felt his partner's hand sliding into where he'd held his own in his jacket pocket, lacing their fingers together and stepping a little closer. He looked away from Chris' performance to see Viktor pulling up his other hand to cover his mouth, shining eyes fixated on the Swiss skater.

*In the pain, there is healing,*

*In your name I find meaning.*

Quad Lutz from a 3-step.

*I'm hangin' on another day*

*Just to see what you throw my way*

"Oh Chris, what have you done?" The Russian asked himself quietly, reaching up to rub his eyes.

"...Viktor?" Yuri asked, "You okay?"

"He's trying to make me cry so I mess up my SP." He answered jokingly, trying to stop himself.

The younger skater could tell the attempt was succeeding though, and he moved in to put his arms around the man's frame, pulling his head down to his shoulder and slipping one hand through Viktor's silver-grey hair. The Russian turned his face against Yuri’s scarf, but then tilted his head to rest his cheek against it instead and looked back out onto the ice.

*And I'm hanging on to the words you say*

*You said that I will be OK.*

Quad toe-loop, triple toe-loop.

Viktor's head snapped up at the sight of it, tears falling from his face, "Chris! Amazing~!"

*The broken lights on the freeway left me here alone,*

Yuri pulled his head around to look out at the skater, only to have Viktor smoosh his face against him, wet as it was. The move unsettled his glasses, and he suddenly couldn't see half the rink that well anymore, but he held tight to his husband despite it.

*I may have lost my way now, haven't forgotten...my way home.*

Yuri put his glasses back in place and watched intently. Chris' movements became a little more sensual than before, twisting around in a way that was more Viktor's style than his own. There were definite nods to Aria between original maneuvers.
I'm falling apart, I'm barely breathing
With a broken heart that's still beating
In the pain (In the pain) there is healing
In your name I find meaning

...Viktor... The Swiss skater thought to himself, throwing himself across the ice in a blur of wide, open moves, ...When you do stop skating competitively, there's still so much more you can do on the ice than win medals.

So I'm holdin' on (I'm still holdin'), I'm holdin' on (I'm still holdin'),

Chris' renowned spins came into play, Even Stéphane Lambiel hasn't quit skating, despite the fact that he's officially retired.

I'm holdin' on (I'm still holdin'),
I'm barely holdin' on to you

He dropped to his knees on the ice, leaned back, and wrapped his arms around himself.

As long as you have legs to stand on, I'll never let you leave the ice for long. Retirement isn't the end of everything...it just marks a new beginning.

The music faded, and the skater pushed to stand to catch his breath, waving at the audience as they roared their approval. When he finally turned to head back to rink-side, he caught sight of Viktor dragging Yuri around the edge of the wall, almost shoving his way into the doorway that lead to the kiss and cry. Chris smiled to himself, seeing where his friend and rival's eyes had gotten a little red.

"I can't believe you did all that." Viktor said, reaching up to rub the remaining tears away, "You've been planning this show all summer."

The Swiss skater loomed over his Russian counterpart, already 6 feet tall without his skates on, but as he set his blades on normal ground, he set his arms over the man's shoulders and hugged him tight.

"What a development! Skater Chris is hugging his rival! And Viktor appears to be...crying...!?"

"Life on the ice isn't just about winning multicolored metal discs, you know?" The taller skater said, patting Viktor's back, "You'll be surprising crowds for years to come at all the Exhibitions you'll be getting invited to. So stop talking about your retirement like it's the end for you. I think the fact that you won't be constrained by rules and regulations will be great for your muse. The competition circuit is holding you back."

Yuri watched and listened closely, rather surprised by the skater's efforts. His impartial observation was suddenly ended though when he felt Chris grab his coat and dragged him into the hug as well.

"Let your cute young husband deal with the rigid structure of these events." The taller man went on, "Look how far he's come because of you. He thrives on what you do for him. So...use him to bring home the gold, but free yourself to be the artist that everyone knows you wanted to be all along."

"C-Chris..." Yuri mumbled, slightly squashed between the two taller figures.

"Besides, what higher honor could there be for a skater than to be accessible exclusively at Galas? Only the best get to skate in the dark. You've more than earned your place on that field."

"He's right..." The youngest amongst them agreed, pulling his head up to see the Russian better, "You're the Exhibition King. You said before our move to St. Petersburg that you had enough
inspiration to create new programs for another ten years. Do it! Skate them all! I bet half the people in this audience here tonight are here just for you anyway!"

"...Yuri..."

"Chris...we need you in the kiss and cry." Josef urged, "You can't just make one of your own over here."

"Aw..." The skater pouted, turning his head to smile back at his silver-haired friend again, "Don't forget what I said, okay? I breaks my heart that you made this 'rage' program at all. Retirement just means you're moving on, not out."

"...Here I was about to say what a great friend you are, Chris." Viktor finally said, rubbing his nose on the back of his sleeve, "But now you're the worst!" He laughed, "How am I going to do my Free Skate now!?"

The Swiss man started moving off, but winked back at him, "Rage at how I'm going to finally beat you and win gold."

"Fat chance!" The legend called back, "But good luck!"

Chris' coach just laughed and shook his head, "Good to have you back, Viktor. This suits you. If he doesn't get a new Personal Best with this, I'll be shocked."

The Russian nodded and smiled, rubbing his eyes one last time against the back of a knuckle. He turned his face to find his husband and pulled him close again, "So will we."

They all waited patiently as Chris took his place in the kiss and cry, holding onto a large bouquet of flowers in each arm. He raised his head anxiously as he heard the announcer above.

"The score for Christophe Giacometti is...107.5!"

"He got it!" Viktor cheered, shaking Yuri back and forth in his excitement, "I'll say I'm retiring every year if it makes him skate like that again!"

The younger skater was just feeling nervous after that. His hair and glasses were a mess again after the new jostling, but the butterflies in his stomach were fluttering out of control by then. It seemed that Viktor might've finally noticed though, since he found himself suddenly being dragged back into the prep area.

"That was really great! He's pushing the limits here today! It's making me nervous!" The Russian went on, dashing Yuri's anticipation that his husband might've recognized his anxiety. Viktor continued to pull him along by his hand until they were back in their little corner of the prep area, seeing Yurio busy already stretching. That seemed to be the thing on Viktor's mind though, as he grabbed his own stretching mat and set it on the ground next to his younger counterpart, "Did you hear!? Chris set a new Personal Best!"

"Still more than 15 points too low for me to care! Tell me when he beats 122.43."

"Aw, Yuri...you're heartless." Viktor chided, moving down to inch one long leg out as far in front, and the other as far behind him, as he could. The Russian was nothing if not flexible, and he reached his hands forward to grab his shoe and pull himself down, "I don't think anyone's going to beat that score anytime soon, not even me!" He laughed.

Yuri listened quietly as the banter between the two Russian skaters went on, but all he could do was
...Tsh, listen to myself. He thought, furrowing his brow as he turned away to walk idly a little bit, *I used to be so proud of my SP scores in the 80s. Now I'm actually complaining about my scores in the 100s being too low. I can't expect to get ranked that highly every time I skate.*

He looked around the halls and open atrium, carefully taking in the sight of all the other skaters, coaches, and event staff. A few reporters seemed to notice he was alone though and started moving over towards him. Yuri shrugged to himself and decided it wouldn't be a crime to allow them their few minutes.

It was a small group, with one man holding up the large camera, a fair-skinned woman with light hair holding a microphone bearing a logo Yuri didn't recognize, and another man to her side with the fluffy grey windscreen on a pole and a bag of audio equipment around his shoulder.

"...Yuri Katsuki?" The woman asked, approaching ahead of the other two, "Do you have a moment?"

It made him twitch unexpectedly to hear his old name, but he tried not to let it bother him, "Oh...you must be local media." He answered, picking up on the French accent, "I don't recognize your sigils."

"Oui. We're from the local news branch. We're documenting all the hype of the event as a showcase to viewers who don't know anything about figure skating."

"...Do you?" Yuri asked pensively. It would be weird to do an interview with people who had no idea what they were asking about, or who might not understand his answers.

"I do. They don't." The reporter smiled sweetly, "That's why I was chosen to do the talking."

"That's good then." The skater nodded, "I have time. Viktor doesn't go up until the end, so..."

"So tell us about this whole thing like we don't know what's going on!" She asked him, "Introduce yourself first though!"

"...Sure." He answered, feeling the butterflies again, "When should I start...?"

The woman clapped her hands where she could, holding the shaft of the microphone with one of them, but then stepped up to him and allowed the camera operator to get them both into frame. He gave the signal, and the woman started doing her song and dance.

[This is Sportscaster Belmonte, and we're here again at the Trophy of France. With me now is a friend of France's favorite Russian, Viktor Nikiforov.] She started to describe in French.

Yuri listened for key-words, hoping he'd recognize enough that he'd know what she was saying before she made him reply to her.

[...Before we go on, I'll let him introduce himself! Bear with us though, he doesn't speak French!] She said, turning to put the mic close to Yuri so he could speak, "Tell the audience your name and why you're here!"

The skater nodded, not having understood the tepid description she'd given of him, "...My name is Yuri Nikiforov. I'm a skater registered with the Japanese Skating Federation."

He'd barely started before he saw the look change on the woman's face. The audio and camera guys
seemed to realize something was weird, too, but they continued on like normal.

"...I'm...I'm here with Viktor as his surrogate coach since he's been training back in my hometown in Japan instead of St. Petersburg like before." Yuri went on, trying to ignore the looks he'd gotten, and suddenly wishing Viktor was there to back him up, "We're here for the second of the four Grand Prix Series events that we're listed in...the first was at Skate Canada, where I took 1st place. Viktor is here for his first event as well. We'll be going to Cup of China for me next, and then to NHK for Viktor last."

"...Aha, well...I see." The woman was a little uncomfortable suddenly, "Explain what the Grand Prix Series is, if you don't mind."

"...Sure..." He nodded, "It's the first major international event in the figure skating season. Those skaters who qualify are assigned to skate at two to three out of a handful of different events, each hosted in a different country. Trophée de France is obviously held here in France, Rostelecom Cup is in Russia, then there's Skate Canada, Progressive Skate America, the NHK Trophy in East Asia, and Cup of China. There used to be an event in Germany but it was discontinued." He explained, immersing himself in the description so the awkwardness wouldn't feel so potent, "Skaters are given points based on how they ranked at each of their pair of events, and the top six skaters from each of the four disciplines will go on to compete at the Grand Prix Final in mid December. The GP Final changes location every year and can be anywhere...last year it was in Barcelona, and this year it's in Detroit."

"You said you won Gold at Skate Canada. Does that mean you've won medals elsewhere as well?"

"Mh. I won Silver at last year's Grand Prix Final, and Gold at both the Four Continents event and the World Championships."

"That's quite impressive." The reporter exclaimed, "So tell us how you know Viktor."

"Oh..." Yuri's heart sunk a little, feeling like that conversation had the potential to get messy if he went into too much detail, "...The year before last, I'd gotten into the Grand Prix Final for the first time, but I came in last. I couldn't shake the failure, and I ranked poorly in the Japanese Nationals after that, too. I was having a hard time deciding whether I should keep skating or not. Viktor agreed to be my coach after he finished out the rest of the season. So...I know him because he came to my hometown to make me a better skater." He decided to bite the bullet after that, knowing people would wonder why he had Viktor's last name as a Japanese man. He held up his right hand and had a dumb look on his face, like the day he first revealed the ring to his friends in Barcelona, "...We ended up getting married right before the World Championships last year."

...This is so stressful...! How do they not know any of this stuff!? Why are they giving me such weird looks!? This reporter lady knew my old name, and said she knows about skating, but she's acting totally clueless about all the important stuff!

He was practically sweating bullets.

"Well that's...great!" She feigned, turning back to the camera, [So there you have it! Viktor Nikiforov is set to compete within the hour, so wish him luck!] The woman turned back to Yuri one more time and extended her hand.

The skater hesitantly took it, shaking it lightly before letting go again.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Kats-...er...Nikiforov."
The media group half-ran once they were far enough away. Yuri still saw them go though, and he sighed, turning on his heel to go back the way he came. When he finally got back to where Viktor and Yurio had been stretching, he saw that Viktor was up on his feet again, and shuffled in quickly to latch himself to the man's back like a cat.

"...Yuri?" The Russian wondered, arms still up where he'd been pulling on his shoulders.

"...I just had the single weirdest interview in my entire life." The younger man answered, getting Yurio's attention as he said it, "Some local news station. Not one of them seemed to know my name changed!"

"Why would they if they're local?" The blonde posed, "Only skating media would really be in the know on that one. You aren't a participant at this event so they wouldn't have seen your new name."

"I know, but the reporter lady recognized me. She singled me out from halfway across the big hall, and they knew Viktor! Even called him France's favorite Russian! How could they say that if they don't even keep up with what he's doing?"

"Or who he's doing." Viktor smirked, much to Yurio's chagrin.

The Asian skater's cheeks were pink, "...Y-yeah..."

"I'm sure it was nothing. Like Yuratchka said, if they were local news, they probably don't actually follow skating. Calling me what they did was probably on a prompt they were given." The Russian suggested, shrugging as he held to his husband fondly, "If the lady recognized you but used your old name, then maybe she was a skating fan from before last year and just doesn't keep up with SMS. There's a thousand ways it could make sense. Don't take it too seriously, okay?"

Yuri sighed, but nodded, "...Yeah, it was probably nothing."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FIFTEEN

Looking more Cyber Punk than Russian Punk, Yurio stepped out onto the ice for his turn at the Short Program. His fangirls shrieked excitedly from the stands, watching him come around to meet Yakov and Lilia on the rink wall, and then getting his well wishes from Viktor and Yuri before finally heading out to the center of the rink.

This competition has to have the strongest lineup of all the Series events. Yurio thought to himself, circling around his starting position to loosen up a little, holding his hands up at the audience, Between Viktor and Chris, getting gold won't be easy. But I've beaten both of their best SP scores before, so I know it's not impossible to out-score them here.

His eyes wandered back to rink-side to see Viktor watching him intently, but he finally took his position and dug in a toe-pick. The blonde drew in a deep breath.

Viktor's last GP Final total score was over 335... My best is just under 320. Even if I can't get past their insane 346 totals from Worlds right now, if I just focus on Grand Prix totals, I can still beat Viktor while he's still competing... Then again...

The music started, and he bolted to the side, blades scratching at the ice. He spun and twisted, making his way across the slick white surface with the grace of a Prima.

...He was getting those kinds of crazy scores without ever even trying to make his elements or jumps harder. In a way, raising up my arms for my jumps at the end kind of made everything even more difficult for me, because now both Katsudon and Viktor are going to do the same thing... That's the only reason Yuri's Worlds score was so fucking high...

Flying camel spin, change of foot into a figure-8 to reverse the spin direction, blade-grab into an overhead.

Angely i demony krujili nado mnoy
Rassekali ternii i mlechnye puti

"Looks like our Beautiful Monster has finally stepped up his game again! This is the Yuri Plisetsky we remember from last year's Grand Prix! He's upping the ante with the clockwise-to-counter-clockwise rotation in the same spin, so he'll get big bonuses for that one!"

Viktor watched excitedly, leaning onto the rink wall on his elbows near Yakov, with Yuri standing just next to him. Yuri had one hand around the Russian's right arm as he watched as well.

Ne znaet schast'ya tol'ko tot,
Kto ego zova ponyat' ne smog...

Yurio moved out into a twizzle, skipping in a series of mini-jumps across the ice until he landed backwards into the outside spread-eagle, vaulting into his first required jump element; the triple-Axel. The audience cheered happily as he landed it.

Mana du vortes, mana du vortes
Aeria gloris, aeria gloris

"He's really going for it this time." The elder Russian commented, "He's even borrowing from Eros
now."

"What, because of the entry?" Yuri wondered.

"Mh, but he made it even harder with the twizzle." Viktor turned his head slightly, looking at his partner, "He's realized he can't easily beat your consistent Level 4 spins, so he's going for point bonuses in other places to try and catch up."

The younger skater nervously reached his free hand up to adjust his glasses, "...Well, he did once say that even back in Sochi, my spins got his attention... It was the one thing I could do that he thought didn't suck. That, and my steps..."

Viktor nodded, turning his head back to face the ice...only to suddenly choke on himself as he spotted something he hadn't expected.

I am Calling,
Calling out!
Spirits, I am calling!

"He just did a quad flip!" The Russian and Japanese skaters both said together, "When did he learn to do a quad flip!?!" Their hearts were racing tandem, wondering what other shocks awaited them.

Yurio followed-up by scissor-kicking through the air, camel-spinning about 12ft across the ice, launching his upright leg with each spin to help continue his momentum. When he stopped, he continued the upright spin in one spot, hopping once on the same foot to energize the spin a second time, lowering himself to the ice with one arm above him.

Soboy ostat'sya dol'she...

"...It's like the performance we should've seen him do at Worlds." Yuri commented quietly, feeling his pounding heart in his throat and arms, especially in his hand where he realized he was holding tight to Viktor, "I wonder what he's going to do at the Final now."

"He's going to beat your Canada score." Viktor teased.

"I know!" The younger skater sighed, sliding his cheek along the Russian's arm despondently, "I'll have to beat him again in Shanghai...!"

"Hmm... Yuuko-chan and Nishigori were right about you." The elder mused quietly, rubbing his shoulder against Yuri's head, "You really do hate to lose, even if you also hate being the one to beat."

Calling, Calling, in the depths of longing!
Soboy ostat'sya dol'she...

"...A conflicting state of mind, let me assure you." Yuri sighed, pulling up again, only to find Viktor pulling his arm free to step behind him and wrap both around his waist, leaning in close against his ear. The soft thud of the Russian's skate-guards along the ground, the sign of a performance to come, were little comfort.

"A heart yearning to be the best, but a mind holding it back with anxiety, and a body too confused to know which one to listen to." The silver-haired skater stated, "That's why it's so interesting to watch you."

"Mnnnnnh..." Yuri sigh-whined, leaning down onto his elbows again on the rink wall, pulling his
partner down with him.

*Calling, Calling, in the depths of longing!*
*Soboy ostat'sya dol'she...*

Yurio's step sequence was intense, carrying him from one side of the ice to the other. To Yuri, it looked like the younger skater was fighting a battle, slicing his bladed-feet through the air in wide arcs, fending off a dozen enemies by himself. It ended with a Russian split jump, landing hard with a crack and moving off again backwards.

*Mana du vortes, mana du vortes*
*Aeria gloris, Aeria gloris...*

Yuri felt Viktor pressing in harder, moving to rest his chin over the scarf on his shoulder, one hand sliding in under the edge of his jacket to better feel the contour of his chest. Maybe it was for the Russian's own sake, but then again, maybe it was to feel how hard Yuri's heart was pounding, and try to calm it.

"Let's head over to the kiss and cry." Viktor suggested then, giving the man a slight pull to encourage him.

*Mana du vortes, mana du vortes*
*Aeria gloris, Aeria gloris...*

Yurio was down on his knees, sliding into the final position, panting heavily as he raised his arms up towards the ceiling, as though desperately seeking approval...or salvation...from some power on high.

The pair moved around the rink wall, listening excitedly as the crowd cheered and cried out as the music faded away. The maelstrom intensified as the youth got back up to his feet and bowed as he heaved.

The teen's green eyes moved around to see where Viktor and Yuri had gone, spotting them easily enough as he moved to the exit where Yakov was already waiting with Lilia. They were both clapping for him and smiling in approval, with Yakov holding his hand out to put against the teen's back as he came back onto normal flooring. The former Prima handed him his blade-guards, and he slipped them on as he stepped, still trying to catch his breath.

"Yuri! That was fantastic!" He heard Viktor calling, still getting closer, "You'll get a great score, I'm certain of it!"

The older Russian handed him his water bottle as they passed, and Yurio nodded quietly, his heart racing as much from the exertion as it did from the nerves of waiting for his numbers. The kiss and cry was just ahead of him, and he slouched into his spot in the middle.

Chris came back out from the prep area, having watched the program on the televisions in back while he took off his skates and cooled down from his own performance, "That was pretty intense. Much more refined than when he did it at your wedding party."

"Right?" Viktor agreed.

Yuri was too anxious to say anything, and simply waited for the official's voice to boom on the overhead speakers. It felt like hours as the judges reviewed the playback on the program, evaluating each jump, every element, the step sequence, and tallied their marks accordingly.
"The score for Yuri Plisetsky..."

The moment had finally come. Viktor turned his eyes as he felt his husband clutching tightly to his arm, and looked over at him to see the man's worried expression.

"...112.45!"

There was another squeeze, tighter than before, and Viktor suddenly felt rather conflicted. Slate-blue eyes moved over to see Yurio cheering with his coach and choreographer, but then returned as he felt Yuri pulling his hands away to clap as well as he could.

*It's a weird feeling, neh, Yuri?* He thought quietly to himself, clapping as well. *After what happened at Skate Canada, it's hard to want to be the best anymore when it seems like Gold comes with such consequences. Don't be too hard on yourself, though...you can be happy for your friends getting scored well without feeling like you should pull punches for their sake later.*

He leaned close to Yuri's ear again, sliding his fingers through the mess of black hair, "How much do you want me to out-score him by?" He asked quietly, smiling at the idea.

Yuri seemed to flinch though, and brown eyes turned to look so he wouldn't have to turn his head, "...I don't know."

"I know you want to out-score him yourself, but you'll have to wait until Cup of China next weekend for that. Let me be your proxy." The Russian followed, moving to grasp his partner's right hand to bring up the ring, "With this, I'm always on the ice with you. It's the same the other way around. We'll beat him together."

Hazel eyes turned down to the floor, feeling Viktor pull away from him to start taking his jacket off now that it was his own turn. Yuri raised his hands to take it, and folded it over his arm, waiting for the rubber blade-guards to come with it.

"The next, and final skater to take the ice tonight at the Trophée de France Men's Singles Short Program...representing Russia, Viktor Nikiforov!"

The audience went completely wild with excitement, and the legend stepped out onto the ice to greet them briefly before coming back around to where Yuri approached, looking a little sullen. Viktor leaned over, half-tipping against the rink wall to reach, and pulled his husband closer with both hands on his waist, looking into those worried brown eyes.

"Don't worry so much about the score Yuri just got." He said quietly, *You've still done better and you know it.*

The younger skater sighed though and looked up, *...Shouldn't I be the one giving you the pep talk? You're the one about to perform, not me.*

Viktor smiled and laughed, but then just leaned in and kissed him, much to the excitement of the audience. When he pulled away, he nosed his husband affectionately, *All I want to hear from you right now is a number.*

Half-lidded eyes looked beyond raven-black spikes of hair, over the blue rim of the glasses between them. Hands clutched to the blade-guards held in front of his chest. Yuri drew in a deep breath, but then nodded and leaned in to speak quiet words against his husband's ear, *...119.*

Viktor pulled back and nodded, *Done.*
The younger skater was mystified, watching his partner skate off to the chant of his own name. Half the audience seemed to be screaming VIKTUURI instead of just VIKTOR though, which made the butterflies rise in Yuri's stomach.

...Viktor's a genius, but can he really pull off that score just because I asked him to? Can he really control his program so well that he can decide his own total? It's less than his current record, but it's still higher than anything he got when he was on his winning streak before...

The Russian rounded the rink and soaked up as much of the cheering as he could, twisting around gracefully as he went. His outfit was attention-grabbing as much as his own presence was, and the energy in the stadium just continued to rise as Viktor made his rounds about the ice. Just like Yuri had said, Viktor knew that half the audience was there for his performance, and he knew he could milk it for as much as it was worth.

It had, after all, been two years since he last competed in the Grand Prix Series, and many fans had been deathly worried he’d never come back, especially after his 'farewell' Free Skate at Worlds.

Golden blades clicked on the ice beneath black leather boots. Above them, nearly-black dark-blue pants, with one thin silver streak rising along the outside of each leg, a thinner light-blue streak going up next to it to the hip. A deep blue coat rested above, tied at the waist with a thick black sash that, almost like Phichit's 'Shall We Dance' costume, faded out into a gradient at the tips. Instead of yellow to black though, it was black to blue, with cerulean at the tip, and a few shining crystals embedded within. Beneath the sash were three, necklace-thin chains, which curved down from just above each leg to rise up again by each hip crest, then looped down again to come up together in the center at the back. In the front, the chains dangled down in a sequence, from 4-inches to 8-inches in length, with a 1-inch-wide metal circle hanging from the end of each. The jacket was figure-hugging, primarily a medium royal blue with a slightly lighter blue trim around the base where it came out under the bottom of the sash. It opened at mid-chest level, and was cut in a very similar way to the coat Yuri wore for his Free Skate the year before, though the Russian's wasn't cut into panels with lace between them and thus had no need for another shirt underneath, thus exposing part of his chest like his Aria costume. The jacket was a wavy gradient of different shades of blue, fading out to the same near-black color of the pants as it got closer to the cuff of the sleeves; the whorl of colors looked like crashing waves, rolling into and fading into one another. It shimmered with silver, clear, and gold crystal where the gradient was most striking, covering over both shoulders, and then part-way down the sleeve, almost to each elbow. The trim around the cuffs was the same light-blue around the bottom hem, and sported a shimmer of its own.

"Viktor Nikiforov is the oldest competitor in Men's Singles this year, and will be turning 29 shortly after the Grand Prix Final. His music tonight was chosen by his partner, skater Yuri Nikiforov, and was actually redone with Yuri's own voice. Many are excited to hear what this rendition of the music will sound like. Ladies and Gentlemen...the final Men's Short Program performance...'History Maker."

The Russian took his place in the center of the rink, kissed his ring, raised his left hand out in front of him while the right went behind, cross his right foot behind him, and waited for the music to begin.

Yuri held tight to the rink's edge, the moment of truth nearly upon him. He'd heard the song a thousand times at the Ice Castle in Hasetsu, and Viktor had frequently bragged to the family about how much he liked it, but even then...he was as nervous for it as he was for his last Free Skate in the previous year's Grand Prix Final. He practically trembled from the nerves. To his relief, and a bit to his surprise, Yurio came up beside him with an elbow on his shoulder to help ground him.

"Breathe a little, sheesh." The teen instructed, "You're even more pale now than normal. It's just a
song."

"...I know..."

The music finally started, and the silver-haired legend began the dance.
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SIXTEEN

The instrumental start to the music gave Viktor a moment to gain speed, rounding around the rink with flare, spinning into the first set of lyrics with his right hand up next to his ear, excited for Yuri's voice to resonate throughout the arena.

*Can you hear my heartbeat?*
*Tired of feeling never enough.*

He twisted around with his arms out to the side, heading back along the far end of the rink to get back to center.

*I close my eyes and tell myself,*
*That my dreams will come true.*

He leapt into a quad flip, landing elegantly and spinning off again.

*There'll be no more darkness when you believe in yourself, you are unstoppable.*

Yurio lifted his head, realizing the voice had changed, "...Wait, is that...Viktor singing now?"

The older skater nodded, "He didn't want anyone to know until they heard it."

The crowds seemed to notice the difference, too, and roared their approval, drowning out all thought.

Where your destiny lies,
Dancing on the blades,

Viktor thrust his hand out as he slid forward on the ice, reaching straight for Yuri at the opposite end of the rink.

You set my heart on fire!

Yuri couldn't help but smile and reach back. Viktor saw it and felt energized anew, rising up from the kneeling slide and launched into a scissor-kick, then moving off again, chains jingling softly at his hips.

"We sing this next part together." Yuri said, looking over at his blonde counterpart.

Serpentine step sequence.

*Don't stop us now, the moment of truth,*
*We were, born to make History!*
*We'll make it happen, we'll turn it around,*
*Yes, we were born to make History!*

The Russian skated eerily close to the wall as he came back around, flying right by the judges before throwing himself into a flying sit-spin further out towards center.

*Born to make History!*

He dipped down, corkscrewing one leg over the other as he descended, one arm up above him. The
blue and silver blur grabbed his left blade with his free hand, holding onto it as he half-rose-back-up again. He brought his upward arm back down again for balance in the pancake spin, then moved his captured blade behind him as he rose back to normal height. He pulled his skate even higher after that into a full Biellmann spin, with both hands on the blade.

"Incredible! Flying combination spin! Beautiful flow and execution!"

B-b-born to make History!

Viktor kicked out and moved away again, bringing one hand to the center of his chest as his husband's voice echoed throughout the arena once again.

Can you hear my heartbeat?

The Russian twisted, arms up and open as they went around him, then swinging his right leg forward like a pendulum.

I've got a feeling, it's never too late.

The right leg came back and pulled the skater into a sway-back Ina Bauer. He clipped the ice to face forward into the jump, and turned to launch into a double-tano triple Axel, landing in reverse and moving off cleanly to pick up speed.

I close my eyes and see myself,

Tano triple-flip, tano triple toe-loop combination.

Yurio grumbled to himself on the rink wall, pulling his elbow down from its perch on Yuri's shoulder, "...He's gonna waste the both of us like it's a game."

The older skater's face went blank with knowing anxiety,...If he really scores around 119 for this, I'll never forgive myself... What was I thinking!?

How my dreams will come true.

Viktor hydro-bladed with the left leg crossing in front of him into the next set of lyrics, both arms up and to the side like wings. He listened as the audience cheered to hear his voice in the song again.

There'll be no more darkness when you believe in yourself, you are unstoppable.

Ice flew as he brought the left blade back across to brake, forcing the Russian to stand slightly, then descend into a tighter circle as he rotated it back around himself and moved into a broken-leg sit-spin, left arm out as the right curled over his head.

Where your destiny lies, dancing on the blades,

Viktor rose up again, sliding forward a little slower than before, crossing both hands over his chest.

You set my heart on fire!

Inside-spread eagle as he raised his hands up towards the ceiling, then moving back out again.

Yuri found himself mouthing the words as they went on, watching his idol skate the program with the same eyes that once only saw him from a distance.

Their voices began in tandem again, signaling the start of the program's second half. Jumps' base
values would be multiplied by 1.1 from then on, and Viktor was going to capitalize on it. He moved into another step sequence, in line with historical rules for the Short Program, and hoping to get more points for it as a result.

Don’t stop us now, the moment of truth,
We were, born to make History!
We’ll make it happen, we’ll turn it around,
Yes, we were born to make History!

The Russian reached back with his right arm and leg, then kicked off on his toe-pick, spun four times, and gracefully landed on the right blade for a flawless quad Lutz.

Born to make History!
B-b-born to make History!

An effortless glide, reversing direction and a backwards-entry camel spin; five rotations.

Don’t stop us now, the moment of truth,
We were, born to make History!

Change of foot, building speed again; five more rotations.

We’ll make it happen, we’ll turn it around,
Yes, we were born to make History!

...I can’t believe you roped me into doing this..." Yuri sighed, standing in the sound booth by himself.

"It’s just practice for now!" Viktor insisted, standing on the other side of the glass with a finger on the comm.-button, "We aren’t even going to record it."

"...But what if I can’t get it right? You should just use the original! It’s going to sound all weird with my voice instead!" The younger skater said nervously, sweating a little in the tiny room.

The Russian huffed a laugh on his side, "It’ll only sound weird to you because you sound different to yourself in your own head. To me it’ll sound perfect! It already sounds weird to hear it the other way!"

"Viktoorrr..." Yuri grumbled.

"Tut tut...no arguing! If you could perfectly copy my Aria when you were still a little piggy, you can copy this song!"

Yuri’s face just went red from the humiliation of the reminder, and the sound-tech assistant sitting in front of Viktor blinked nervously as he listened.

"...You had to bring that up again...!"

"You should believe in yourself more! You sound like an angel, now SING!" Viktor clapped once, signaling the tech to start playing the audio into Yuri’s head-phones. The cue to begin the lyrics came and went, and the anxious skater just stood in the booth without moving. His mouth was open like he’d meant to start, but sound just wasn’t coming out. Viktor hit the pause button, then the comm.-link button again, "What’s wrong?"
"...I...froze up."

"Why?"

"I dunno! I've never done this before! It's weird!" He lifted one side of the head-set and put it over-top of his ear instead of over it, "No one's ever asked me to sing for them before!"

"Do I have to come in there?" Viktor asked pensively.

"...Maybe you should anyway." The younger figure sat back on the tall wooden stool behind him, sighing as he lowered his head behind the mic screen. He heard the sound-booth door open and close, and then felt his husband's arm over his shoulders.

"Think of it like Hot Springs on Ice then..." The Russian suggested, pulling the head-set completely off the man's fluffy black head of hair, flipped the muffs over to reverse their direction, and held one against his right ear, "It's just like skating. You practice the moves, make adjustments, and then do the thing. You've known about this song for ages and you know the lines by heart...so what's the hang-up?"

"...I'm a skater, not a singer."

Viktor quirked a brow, but then moved his free hand to nudge the other head-set muff towards Yuri's left ear, "If I sing it first, will you do it after?"

"...I feel bad making you go that far."

"Well," Viktor laughed, "I planned on doing a part of the song myself anyway, so this just knocks it out sooner than I expected to."

"You did?"

"Sure. The lyrics were practically gift-wrapped for us." The Russian nodded, pulling a pen from his back pocket and scribbling on the line-card in front of them, "See? This part is you...this is me...then this is us at the same time."

"But I thought..."

"I don't want anyone else to know I'm doing a part of this." Viktor explained, "It'll be a surprise! Now..." He cleared his throat, "Ore no uta wo kike!"

Yuri blinked at him, "...You're getting better at Japanese, too."

"Deshou!"

"Sou desu..."

Wide arcing moves across the ice, leaving impressive scratches along the path.

Don't stop us now, the moment of truth,
We were, born to make History!
We'll make it happen, we'll turn it around,

The final required element for the Short Program...a normal-entry combination spin with a foot-change... Starting with the camel spin, hands initially behind Viktor's back as he rotated swiftly on
his right leg.

*Yes, we were born to make History!*

He moved his arms outward, and in a seemingly-impossible fashion, bent entirely over backward with his free leg bent, arms out 'above' him, body horizontal to the ice. He then descended gracefully without losing rotational speed.

*We were born to make History!*

Sit spin with twist variant. Brief touch of his left skate on the ice, and he was on the opposite foot, continuing the spin as quickly as he could, falling into a shoot-the-duck position, holding out his right leg perfectly straight and grabbing his calf as he rotated.

*We were born to make History!*

Viktor rose back up to standing, settling into what almost looked like a ballerina's spin, slowly raising his arms up above himself to spin even faster. He controlled it well enough that he didn't travel, even as he lost perspective of where he was on the ice.

*Yes, we were born to make History!*

The spin abruptly ended, and a dizzy-as-all-hell-but-trying-not-to-show-it Viktor planted his toe-pick into the ice and thrust his arms out, lifting his head...and then music ended.

The audience was quiet for a moment, but then burst into a cacophony of screaming and cheering.

"He's still got it! Viktor Nikiforov, everyone! Showing us all how it's done!"

The Russian panted heavily where he still stood alone on the ice, clasping his fists where he still had his arms out. His face was a little red from exhaustion, but he finally leaned his head forward and allowed himself to relax, letting his arms drop as he caught his breath a little, only to then spin around slowly and wave at the audience gratefully. Taking a page from Yuri's book, he bowed to each cardinal end of the arena before pushing off to head to the kiss and cry.

Yuri couldn't wait for the man to get back onto normal ground before lunging at him, but Viktor took it in stride and welcomed the jump. With his husband's arms over his shoulders, he spun around with the momentum, hugging him back despite his muscles starting to feel the post-show burn. As Yuri scrambled to feel his toes on the ice, the Russian started to lower him, letting him at least get a small foothold before Yuri had one hand running through silver hair.

"That was probably the best program you've ever skated!" Yuri fanboy'd, "The ISU might as well just give you your GP Final Gold medal right now so the rest of us can fight over Silver and Bronze!"

"No way..." Viktor huffed, "If I'm taking it, it's only after I've beaten you on the ice, fair and square."

"Really?" The younger skater wondered, almost rhetorically.

The Russian had the strangest feeling of déjà vu in that moment, and was half-tempted to put his husband onto his back on the ice and redo that first kiss all over again. Instead, he just rolled his toes forward a little to anchor the jagged front edges of his blades, and leaned the last inch to kiss him while standing. The audience cheered loudly anew.

Half the people on rink-side were watching closely as well, wide-eyed as they were, but clapping
alongside everyone else. Only the Russian team seemed a bit awkward about it, barely patting their fingers together in a thinly-veiled uncomfortable tap. Yurio grumbled at the sight of them even as Chris clapped rather enthusiastically next to him.

"...The ISU should just give him the Gold? Is Katsudon nuts? A bunch of us have a good chance at winning it!" He deadpanned the pair as they finally disconnected and came back through the doors. Viktor reached for where Yuri had left his skate-guards on the thick top of the gateway.

"Let the guy sweet-talk his husband." Chris scolded half-heartedly, smiling as he still clapped, "Maybe you need a girl to whisper sweet nothings into your ear like Yuri does to Viktor?"

"I don't need anyone!"

"You have enough fans in that little club that follows you around to every event." The Swiss skater laughed, leaning onto the rink wall as Viktor pulled his track-suit coat over his arms and moved with Yuri over to the kiss and cry bench, "Surely one of them annoys you less than all the others."

"Did I stutter...?" The blonde growled, moving off to get out of ear-shot.

Chris just huffed another laugh to himself and watched the teen go, leaning his chin into the palm of his hand where he held it up by an elbow.

The silver-haired skater sat onto the bench and leaned back, stretching his legs out in front of him eagerly, "Whew! That one was really tiring, too...but it was a lot of fun!" He tilted his head back to look at Yuri as he sat next to him, looking over his shoulder to see the man's anxious face, "Just wait until we get backstage! The media's gonna be all over us over that song!"

"...I'm super nervous about that, actually." Yuri confessed, "Now that they all know you had a part in it, too."

"Maybe I should do one of your programs for next year!" Viktor suggested, nudging the man with his elbow as he leaned forward to rest over his knees.

"Maybe..."

"Aww, Yuuri-kōchi..." The Russian cooed, "You sound like you didn't enjoy the song at all!" He leaned his head to the side and rested it on the edge of the younger man's shoulder, weaving his arm around Yuri's to take his hand where it rested on the bench between them, "I'm sure everyone loved it!"

"...The hype was so high though...I hope I didn't underwhelm everyone..."

"Not a chance!"

"...The score for Viktor Nikiforov..."

Everyone's heads craned up at the sound of the announcer's voice. Yuri was starting to sweat bullets, and he clamped down hard where Viktor held to his hand, making the Russian grimace through his excited smile.

*He's even more anxious about my score than I am... Oh Yuri... Ye of little faith...*
Yuri gulped, "Shimatta..."

Yurio and Chris were surprised to see those numbers, and both crossed their arms dejectedly to realize they'd just been steamrolled. Again.

Viktor just burst out laughing, pulling his arm up to lay it over his partner's shoulders instead and pull him close, "Don't be so disappointed! This is what you wanted, isn't it?"

"...I had half-thought there was no way you could pull something like that off though!" He protested, "There's just...I mean...how!?!"

"Sore wa himitsu deeeeesu~!"
"Y-yahari..." Yuri just deadpanned him.

Camera-flashes were practically blinding as Viktor held Yuri nearby while the post-skate interviews began. Yuri was seeing spots before his husband had even started answering a single question.

"Is this part of your retirement plan, Viktor!? Do you mean to start a singing career!?!"

"Hah? Well...not really." The Russian laughed, rubbing the back of his head nervously, "We just did it for fun! Doesn't he have a great voice?" He looked down at his slightly-shorter partner affectionately.

"V-Viktor..."

"Since we're going to be producing a lot of our own programs in the future, I don't see why we couldn't do another with our own vocals. Then it would really be our show! Right? Yuri! That way we never run the risk of accidentally having the same music as someone else." He leaned in closer to whisper into the younger skater's ear, "You know how many other people have done 'El Tango de Roxanne' before Georgi? Half the pair skaters have, at least!"

They shared an in-group laugh between them even though they were still prominently on camera.

Beyond the media mob, Chris watched quietly, shaking his head and laughing to himself despite his jealousy, "...Way to steal the show, Viktor. The rest of us are always picking up crumbs after you."

"...He did it again, huh?" Came a voice.

The Swiss skater turned his head to face the direction it came from, only to suddenly choke on himself in disbelief. He lightly hit his chest a few times to clear the sputum from his lungs, "...It...it's you! Why are you here...?!"

"...Ça fait longtemps."

Yuri blinked past the reporters when he spotted Chris looking like he'd just had a stroke, but as he
got a better vantage, he realized who he'd been surprised by. He lightly touched Viktor's arm to get his attention from the media again, "...I need to step away for a second. Be right back."

"Okay~!" The Russian answered, entirely oblivious to everything beyond the sparkle of the camera flashes.

The younger skater nudged his way through, and soon rounded his way back to where Chris had been waiting. He stuffed his hands in his coat pockets as he approached, "It's you again. I guess you want to interview Viktor alone or something since you aren't pressing into the media frenzy?"

The Sportscaster from before Group 2 went on the ice was standing in front of him, looking a bit wary. She couldn't take her eyes off the young skater.

Chris raised a brow, "...You two...know each other?"

"We met earlier. Briefly." Yuri said flatly, like he hadn't been impressed, "She caught me unawares in the main hall while I was wandering around on my own."

"...On your own?" Chris echoed, "So Viktor doesn't know she's here?"

"...Why would it make any difference? She's a reporter. There's dozens of them floating around."

The Asian skater pointed out. The blonde looked unusually nervous for someone who was normally rather composed, which made Yuri wonder if something else was going on. His eyes went from Chris back to the Sportscaster, and then narrowed a little suspiciously, "Who are you?"

She fidgeted a little where she stood, "...I knew Viktor. A long time ago."

Realization was slow to settle in...Yuri evaluated the woman carefully.

*Fair skin, pale hair, long and wavy, blue eyes...like...the ocean...?*

His own eyes went wide at that point, "...Y-you're..." His cheeks went a little pink, and he turned his head to realize Viktor was trying to get his attention again. The young skater turned his whole body after that, and saw the journalists all parting a little to form a path.

"Yuri! I don't want to answer all these questions about the music by myself! Come back already! It's your song, too!" The Russian called playfully, waving, "You said you'd only be a secon-"

Chris put a hand over his chest anxiously, "...Here it comes."

Slate blue eyes got really small suddenly, and the hand that was up in a wave slowly went limp and fell to his side. The happy look on his face vanished. All he could do was stare.

"Ça va? Viktor..."

"...S...Sophia...?"
Chapter 117

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEEN

Viktor cleared his throat, then held up his hand just over his chest in a gesture of introduction, "My name is...Viktor Nikiforov. Your name is...?" He then moved it out to the pale-haired woman in front of him. His accent was thick, but his English was understandable even by someone who knew next to no English at all.

Blue eyes blinked back at him, but understood what the hand movements meant well enough, "...Sophia Belmonte." She answered.

It was the morning of the opening ceremony for Trophée Éric Bompard, and a dozen or more reputable skaters were hanging out on the rink wall, preparing to be told by event coordinators what they were going to have to do as part of the show. Choreographing things like that was always fun, even if hectic, much like practicing for an Exhibition Gala. In the case of the opening ceremony for a Grand Prix Series event, the available top three from each discipline were invited to be part of the show. Viktor was there representing Men's Singles along with two other older skaters; one from Italy and another from South Korea. The Russian had singled out the Ladies' Singles skaters while they all waited to be ordered around. His hair was about half as long as it had been a few years prior, but it was still long enough to be held in a small bun high on the back of his head, and a few loose strands still waved about messily around his face.

Unsure what else to say, Viktor pulled out his phone and looked up a translator website, typed in a few words, and then tried his best to read them aloud, "...Com...comment allez-vous auj-" He tilted the phone like he wasn't sure what was written or even how to pronounce it, "...Aujourd'hui?" He nodded and smiled as he made it through, then set the phone aside a little to look past it at the woman, "Ma chère?"

The woman's face was flushed immediately, and her fellow Singles skaters started teasing her relentlessly, especially her French team on the other side of the rink wall who'd been waiting patiently for things to get started, "...Je vais bien, et toi?"

Viktor could only assume what it meant, so he started typing into the translator again. When he got his lines, he cleared his throat and spoke them as proudly as he could, like he knew exactly what he was saying, "Je suis partait maintenant que je vous ai recontré."

Yakov rolled his eyes, "Vitya...we've been here five minutes and you're already flirting? Focus!"

"I am focusing." The skater sighed happily.

"...You're going to what?" The elder coach's tone was flat, "You can't be serious."

"I am!" Viktor explained, "I've already booked my flight back to Bordeaux after Nationals are over!"

"When are you planning on coming back? You should be staying in St. Petersburg to get ready for Euros and Worlds."
"I will be getting ready for Euros and Worlds...I'll just be doing it at the Bordeaux arena. I don't get super-powers from being in Russia." The skater explained, trying to sound convincing in front of the French skater, who really had no way of knowing what he was saying either way. They were all dragging their luggage through the Seongsa Ice Rink in Goyang, South Korea, heading for the exit after the GP Final Exhibition Gala had ended. Viktor proudly wore his Silver, and Sophia had managed Bronze in her own event, "I'll come back during the summer sometime."

Yakov coughed abruptly, "Summer!? That's half a year from now! Why even bother coming back then if not immediately after Worlds!?!"

Chris was laughing at the older man's expense, "No sense trying to talk him out of it."

"You're a selfish kid!" Yakov went on, berating the silver-haired skater like he were his own son, "You can't just run off like this! Where will you even stay!? Who will feed you!?"

Viktor laughed and tried to explain it all again.

[What are they saying?] Sophia leaned to whisper at the Swiss figure. Chris' French wasn't fluent, but he spoke it well enough to get away with basic conversation.

[You've been there for more than seven months!] Yakov yelled in Russian over the phone; Viktor had to hold it out at the end of his arm's reach to avoid getting a sore eardrum, [Come back to St. Petersburg before you forget what country you're skating for!]

[I know I skate for Russia, sheesh!] He answered back, [But I'm finally settling in here and getting a lot of work done! If I suddenly move back now then I'll be discombobulated for weeks!]

[Quit making excuses and come back to Russia NOW!]

[I'm 20 years old now, Yakov! I have to start making choices about my own life some time! For the moment, I'm going to stay in Bordeaux!]

[VITYA-]

The Russian hung up the phone and sighed anxiously, "...I've never cut him off like that before." He said, mostly to himself. He tapped his silver toe-pick on the rink wall, but then set his phone to silent and stuffed it into his back pocket before grabbing a small green towel, putting it over one shoulder, and skated out in the middle of the rink.

Sophia was off on the other side, practicing her double Axel, stopping only when she heard the sound of blades scratching on the ice, getting louder as they approached. She huffed to catch her breath, and then felt Viktor brushing up close, wrapping the towel over her shoulders and around the back of her neck. She turned her head to see him, [That didn't sound good.]
[He's always like that.] The Russian mused; half a year immersed in France had immeasurably grown his skill at the language, [But it's never worked on me.]

[If being yelled at wouldn't work, what would?] She wondered, using the towel to wipe her forehead.

Viktor's right hand went down around the small of her back, and he skated slowly in a circle around her, making her rotate as he went, [He's never thought to just ask me nicely.] He laughed, [I can't even imagine what his voice would sound like if he did!] He pulled his hand back and got all dramatic, [Vitya...! Please, no...don't leave me alone in St. Petersburg with Georgi!] His best impression of his elderly coach was appalling, but Sophia laughed anyway, which was the entire goal, so mission accomplished.

[Georgi...that poor guy...] The French skater, [He's always coming in second to you somehow. At skating, at life in general...you and he are of an age but his birthday is the day after yours, too. I bet that's caused him grief.]

[I never noticed!] Viktor admitted sheepishly, [We aren't exactly besties.] His hands went down around her waist and he started to pull her across the ice as he skated in reverse, [I'll pay more attention if he starts to get ahead of me.]

Deep blue eyes met slate, but the woman's expression went from amused to being a little more serious.

Viktor noticed it, [What's the matter? ...Am I being too mean?]

[No, I just...if you've made it official that you're going to stay here in Bordeaux for a while, what does that mean about us?]

[...About us? Same as it's been already, wouldn't it?] He twisted around to skate facing forward next to her and slid his hand down her arm to take her elbow into his, [Why would anything change?]

[Viktor...] Sophia said, a little in disbelief at him. She paused and dug in a toe-pick, forcing the Russian back in front of her where their linked arms pivoted him. Her cheeks were pink but her focus went down to the ice, looking at the black boots that came into view. She could feel her heart pounding, but she managed to lift her head, [We met in this very arena back in November... We made it together to the Grand Prix Final... You came to my Nationals a few days later, and then came back here after you took Gold at your own the week after that. You're a huge flirt, but I never really see you talking with any other women. Your focus has always been on me...]

[...Yes?] He gave her a weird look, like he didn't understand where she was going with the train of thought.

She pulled the towel off of where it hung around her shoulders, and twisted a corner of it nervously, [...Shouldn't we be a couple or something?] The color in her cheeks got darker, and she anxiously looked away, but quickly found a finger under her chin guiding her back to look forward, and she reluctantly did so.

[You say that like we haven't been.]

[...It's not like we've done anything.]

[Do you want to?] A smile crossed the Russian's face, and he moved his hand where it as still under the woman's chin, thumbing her lip lightly.

[Only if you mean it.]
[You think I don't?] He inched closer, silver bangs brushing her pale skin.

[...I think you're the kind of person who feels like you will always get what you want in the end.]

[With hard work, patience, and understanding...would that really be so unexpected?] The Russian wondered, [Or do you worry that if I take you, I'll leave you because the chase is over?]

[It crossed my mind.]

[I feel like I should be offended...!] He tried to make light of it, [But I'm really not that way! If I was, don't you think I'd had have chased everyone in this town already? You yourself pointed out that I don't pay them much attention.]

[...Maybe it's just nerves talking.] She admitted, tilting her face down a little to press her cheek to Viktor's palm, [...I've been burned before.]

[Let the past teach and guide you, but never let it hold you back. They're only bad memories now. We can make new ones, better ones...] Viktor said quietly, slipping his free hand behind her back to pull her closer, [I don't want you to ever have bad memories of me.]

[...Are you asking me to marry you now, too?] Sophia wondered anxiously.

The Russian shook his head, [I'm asking you to believe in me. All this time that I've been here and you still don't entirely trust that I'm being sincere. How can I get you to stop doubting my intentions? Tell me what I should do.]

The pale-haired figure could feel herself shaking a little, but it eased off as she felt her hip touching his. She drew in a deep breath and finally looked at the man squarely, putting one hand over the center of his chest, [...Make me yours, and don't ever let it change you.]

"CHRIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIISSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS!" Viktor hollered, spotting the Swiss figure from the far end of the Arrivals terminal at the Norman Rogers Airport. By sheer luck, all three of them shared their first event at Skate Canada in Ontario, "HEEEEEEEEEEEXEEEEEEY!"

The target of the call turned his head, his coach nearby as well, and they both spotted the Russian and his French girlfriend waving at them excitedly.

"Viktor! Sophia!" Chris waved back, then turned to whisper something to Josef before leaving his luggage to meet the pair as they galloping closer, "Sorry I didn't answer your call earlier. I was on the line with someone else at the time."

"Yeah?" Viktor huffed as he caught his breath, adjusting where his carry-bag strap sat on his shoulder, "Someone wishing you luck?"

"Yup. A friend from Juniors. He's in Japan right now though so I didn't want to let him go to voicemail."

"Yeah, the time difference would be brutal. Have I met him before?"
"Don't think so. He's a massive fan of yours. I'll introduce you if we're ever all at the same event."

"Perfecto~! Hey, have you spotted Yakov anywhere yet?"

"Not yet. You'll probably hear him before you see him though." Chris winked at him.

Official Practice for the morning of the Ladies Free Skate had started early for Rostelecom, and Sophia yawned terribly on the way to the rink. Viktor had finally come back with coffee, and she took hers with a tired groan.

[...I shouldn't have let you keep me up all night.]

[But you had a lot of fun, right?] The Russian mused, sipping his latté innocently, [Moscow is great if you know where to go!]

[It's a shame you aren't on the list for this one.] She answered, finally looking up from where she sat on the rink-side bench, halfway through tying the laces on her white skates, [Must be a thorn in your side to be in Russia again but not getting to skate for your people.]

[I'm sure they'll survive without me for a weekend. I'll show them my love at the Final. Not participating in the Rostelecom Cup though, it just leaves me with all the time in the world to show my love to you instead!]

[Hah, my own dedicated cheering section. How thoughtful.]

[Never leave home without one!] He sipped at his drink again, but then set it down onto the bench to go in front of the woman. He finished tying her skates for her while she sleepily starting tasting her own drink, then put his hands gently on her knees and looked up at her, [You've improved so much since last year. Everyone's been really impressed with your triple Axel. I think you should try it in competition!]

[...Really? But I can't land it most of the time...the double is my only certainty...]

[Show them all how strong you are. You nail the triple more often than you give yourself credit for...and if you under-rotate, then it'll get counted as a double anyway, so what's the harm?] [I guess...]

[That's the spirit!] He said excitedly, leaning forward to kiss her before standing back to his full height, [You should get out there before time runs out.]

[I'm going.]

Practice went off without a hitch, with a dozen or so other skaters on the ice, each working on last-minute adjustments to their skill set. Sophia was gliding along effortlessly. Jumps were something of an Achilles Heel for her, especially the Axel, the only jump to launch from a forward-facing progression...but she'd been getting better. As she rounded the far end of the rink, she decided to try the triple just to see how it felt. She vaulted, spun, and landed easily enough. Then, a second time. Viktor was clapping excitedly for her from rink-side.
That's when everything took a turn, though.

Sophia lined up the jump, spun to face forward, launched...and ended up on the ice.

Viktor winced, expecting her to get up in short order like any other time she'd fallen, but when she rolled from her stomach to her side and was reaching for her right knee, realized something had just gone horribly wrong. He rushed quickly for the rink-side entrance closest to where she landed, and ran carefully across the ice to check on her.

[Sophia! What's wrong!?!]

[...M...My knee... I felt a pop, like glass breaking inside...!] She explained, trying to hold back the tears, but failing as the pain increased. The swelling was already obvious even in just the minute or so after she'd fallen.

Viktor tried to help her up, but it was painfully obvious in rather short order that she couldn't put any weight on it.

[It's a complete tear of the ACL.] A doctor was saying in Russian. Viktor was leaning against a wall, listening, watching as the woman scrolled through several slides of an MRI, [There isn't a lot that can be done about it except surgery, or leaving it alone.]

Sophia looked from the doctor to her partner, [What's she saying?]

[Your ACL is done for.] He said bitterly, feeling rather angry about the whole thing, [The only way you'll skate again is with surgery.]

[But...that means.. I'll have to withd-] Her words cut off as the reality sank in, and the tears came uncontrollably after that.

Viktor moved in quickly to comfort her, but he already knew what the prognosis was. Both of them did. No one in sports was ignorant to the realities of torn ligaments, especially those in aggressive sorts...like figure skating.

[We'll wait a few days for the inflammation to go down, but we can fix this rather soon.] The physician started, speaking to Viktor, [She should be able to skate again by next year, assuming she doesn't overdo it just because it'll feel fine again within a few months. You athletes are your own worst enemies.]

[Next year, the year after that...what difference does it make? Rostelecom is happening now .]

[She can't even walk, Mr. Nikiforov.]

[I know!] He barked, but then paused and sighed, [...Sorry, I'm just saying things.]

[Think it over. She can have the surgery here or we can send her imaging back home with her to get it done there instead. In either case, if she ever wants to skate again, the surgery will have to be done.]
[Don't worry about me so much.] Sophia said from her end of the phone line; she was back home in Bordeaux while Viktor was getting ready to do his Free Skate at the GP Final in Quebec City,
[You'll mess up your Free Skate too if you don't focus.]
[I wish I could've been there.]
[There's no sense in having you withdraw from the Grand Prix over me being injured.] She insisted,
[The surgery is done and over, so now all either of us can do is wait. Healing doesn't happen faster just because two people are worried about it.]
[I know...]
[It's fine now. Honest. It doesn't hurt anymore.]
[...Okay...]
It didn't help though. The Russian Legend couldn't shake the worry, and he came out the other end with a score that was barely average. 81.5 for the SP and 176.1 for the FS. It wasn't last-place, but it wasn't enough to get on the podium either.

Skipping French Nationals was hard. Leaving Sophia behind for Russian Nationals was harder. By Euros, the stress of their divergent paths was enough to start arguments.

[...It hurts too much to watch you falling apart out there.] The French former-skater lamented, [I'm barely at a point where the doctors are even letting me jog. You've stopped practicing because you think you have to take care of me all the time! You're too good for this!]

[...But...]
[No! Viktor... please ! You're going to lose everything if you stay here...]
[I can't just leave you like this...] He insisted, [What good am I if I take off when you need me?]
[You're just making it harder!] She said cruelly, holding onto the kitchen counter, [And it just makes me feel even worse when I see you go to competition and fall short of your own standards! You haven't medaled since before the Final, and it's my fault!]

The Russian was left a little speechless. Dark circles had been under his eyes for weeks by then, but the whole thing was wearing him down even more as the conversation went on.

[I love you, Viktor...and the only thing I can do for you is let you go.]

There was no sense arguing. It would just make him look desperate.

The flight back to St. Petersburg was miserable, and the absence of a lecture from Yakov was even worse. It would've made more sense to him if his coach had given him the 'I told you so' speech instead of the silent treatment. The only argument he got in the end from Yakov was the lecture about his decision to withdraw from Worlds. In the end, Yakov had made him go anyway though, but all Viktor did was watch from the sidelines. Not even Chris could cheer him up.
When he finally got home again from that miserable event, Viktor had his hair cut short...and it stayed that way from then on.

The Russian's unblinking, wordless stare continued, and he felt his fingers going stiff at his sides. He watched as the two techs with the camera and audio equipment were saying things that he couldn't hear, and tried to convince Sophia to do the interview like she was supposed to, but even she didn't seem that interested.

[I told you I didn't want to interview him!] She said through grit teeth; too quiet for anyone but Chris and Yuri to hear, even though only Chris understood it, [This was a terrible idea!]

"Yuri." The Swiss skater said suddenly, getting his junior's attention like a rattlesnake's jangle, "Get your things. We're leaving."

"Huh?"

"Just go. I'll call you if you don't find us."

"Why would you have to? Where are you going...?" He was even more anxious now than before, but when he looked from Chris to Viktor, he realized why. There were tears already falling from Viktor's face, and Chris had moved quickly past him to gather the Russian up and start moving him away. It was a retreat with no planned destination. All Yuri could do was watch them go, shake his head with worry, and try to follow Chris' instructions and catch up to them as quickly as he could.
It was a mad dash to gather skates and bags, but Yuri did his best to be thorough. He knew Viktor's inventory like the back of his hand by then, and when a certain pocket or pouch was empty, he knew what to look for. The only thing he couldn't find was the man's water bottle...and that turned out to be because Yurio had it.

"What's with the rush? You look like you're panicking about something." The blonde wondered, handing the bottle over.

"...You remember that time in St. Petersburg when we tried to take you out for the day, and Viktor got on the subject of his old girlfriends just to see how long it'd take before I got weird about it?"

"Sure."

"The French one is here."

Yurio cocked a brow as he watched Yuri trying to close the rolling suitcase. Every time he tried though, one end of the golden-bladed skates would stick out again and prevent it closing at some other point. The blonde sighed and shoved him off, completing the task for him and pulling up the grip bar for him in turn, "And?"

"And?"

"Did she throw herself at him? Kiss him in front of you? Shove you out of her way?" Yurio offered.

"No...she..." The older skater struggled to figure out how to explain it, "...She's a sports reporter and...I don't even know now. It happened so fast."

"So it's over already then."

"I don't even know if that's true. Chris made Viktor leave, and told me to come get his stuff, but...Viktor looked really upset when he realized she was there. I just..." The carry-bag over his shoulder slid off and jerked on his arm, and Viktor's umbrella tumbled out in the process, clattering in a damp heap under the bench, "I'm su...supposed to...follow after them..."

The Russian Tiger watched as his 'Skate Dad' started to unravel.

"Yuratchka, come get your stuff." Yakov said, seeing Yuri just beyond the teen but being oblivious to what had happened.

"You take it. I'm gonna hang out with Yuri and Viktor for a while." The blonde answered, grabbing the two cases from his older counterpart. He reached down for the umbrella and pressed it to Yuri's chest, letting him take it in hand, before moving off.

"Yuratchka!" The coach barked.

"Please!" Yurio turned his head and paused, giving his coach a look and hoping he'd get the message.

It was only when Yakov heard the Japanese Yuri snuffling a reluctant sob that he understood something was wrong, and he sighed to himself, "Fine, go on. We'll see you later. I'll tell Mikhail..."
The duo wordlessly left the prep area and exited out into the main hall. They didn't see anyone that familiar again until they'd managed to get outside. The rain was coming down even harder than it had been when they first arrived, and lightening rolled across the sky as they pushed through the doors. Those who didn't want to wait inside for photo-ops or interviews had already scattered to leave, avoiding the downpour by retreating back to the hotels down the street, or looking for cabs where the street wasn't blocked.

Yuri had enough presence of mind to open up the umbrella and held it over them as Yurio scanned the area for his second 'Skate Dad.' They didn't spot anyone, even as they'd gotten to the first street corner. Behind a thick concrete pillar, Viktor and Chris had taken shelter under another 'wedge' of the large green roof. Chris was on his phone and hadn't seen them yet, but Viktor recognized his umbrella and then saw Yuri's golden mop underneath of it. It only took half a second longer to realize Yuri was the one holding said umbrella, and the Russian moved out from the shelter of the overhanging roof to get to him.

"Huh? Viktor...!" Chris looked up and saw him go, instantly getting soaked as the Russian went right out into the onslaught of rain. The blonde realized where Viktor was going though, and clicked off his phone, sensing there would be no need to text Yuri about where they'd gone to anymore since he was standing right there.

Hearing Chris' voice caught both Yuris' attention, and they looked up just in time to see Viktor get drenched. The rain was thick and heavy, and even though the pair were standing only 15ft away from the protection of the roof, the Russian was still practically soaked to the bone when he got under the big umbrella and threw himself over his husband.

Yurio scrambled to stay under the webbing as it shifted where Yuri was holding it, but he still ended up a little wet. The patter of rain on Viktor's rolling suitcase, and the sound of cars on the corner, was all the noise between them for a moment as the Russian held onto his partner for a while.

"...V-Viktor...?"

The older man wouldn't answer, not with words anyway. His hands reluctantly let go of their vice-grip around where they'd clamped down on the back of Yuri's coat, the left moving down the length of Yuri's arm to find his right hand and bring it forward. When he saw the ring, Viktor kissed it, and kept his lips against it for a moment as he tried to reclaim his thoughts.

Yurio moved off to stand under Chris' umbrella instead as he got closer, "The Hell was all this about anyway? I thought we were done with all the running in Calgary."

"There was running in Calgary?"

"...Oh, right, not your event." The teen grumbled, averting his eyes as his former rink-mate moved from kissing the ring to kissing its wearer, "Never mind then."

Chris never went back to answer the original question, and instead waited quietly. A minute or so went by before Yuri suggested they leave.

"We're staying at the Novotel. He needs dry clothing before he catches something."

"All right..." Chris nodded, "Let's at least get to the other sidewalk. We'll avoid most people that way."

The long walk was done mostly in silence, with Chris and Yurio in front and the others behind.
Viktor had quickly moved in to relieve Yurio of half his burden though, grabbing the rolling suitcase to pull it along himself. Yuri held tight to his hand the whole time, staying to Viktor's left so he wouldn't have to see the Patinoire as they walked by it again. Mercifully, it didn't look like anyone they recognized was still on the deck or on the sidewalk, so they were able to pass without incident. The corner on the next street even had a bus stop, so they ran for it when they saw one go by to stop and collect passengers. Chris paid their meager fare, and all of 30 seconds later, the bus stopped again on the other side of the street from the Ibis and Novotel.

"Where are you guys staying anyway?" Yuri wondered as they carefully crossed back over to the other side of the road.

"I have my own room at the Ibis." Chris answered first.

"I have one with Mila in the Novotel." Yurio followed-up, "Yakov is with Georgi and Lillia is someplace fancy farther away, probably the same place Mikhail and Okukawa are at."

"Okay."

They paused in front of where the two hotels separated, and Chris stepped in to pat Yuri's shoulder before moving in to hug his rival and say something quietly in his ear. Viktor seemed to nod slightly, but still said nothing as the Swiss skater moved off, pulling out his phone again. They heard him contacting his own coach about the things he'd left behind at the rink, and started a vague explanation about why he'd left in such a hurry.

He was still on the sidewalk as the trio finally got inside the Novotel though. Yurio was almost entirely soaked as they came through the doors, but he went in without complaint as Yuri shook out the umbrella before bringing it in with him.

"Thanks for helping." The older skater said, wrapping the small fabric belt around the base of the umbrella to tie it off neatly, "You probably missed out on a bunch of interviews..."

"They can wait until tomorrow." The teen answered, "Yakov can tell them anything they want to know right now anyway."

"Mh..."

"I guess you guys are calling it a night then?"

"...Probably." Yuri answered quietly, turning his head to see Viktor waiting idly, free hand in his coat pocket as he looked down at his feet where a small puddle was forming, "I'll let you know if anything changes."

Yurio stepped forward to give the hug he owed at their parting, "I'm sorry this happened."

"...It's no one's fault." The older skater sighed, resting his chin on the younger figure's shoulder while he had him there, "But thanks." He pulled back and drew in a breath, mentally getting ready for the next part of things, "You should dry off too so you don't get sick. Last thing we need is everyone trying to be like me."

"You lost your voice on your own. We'd be bringing a plague. Small difference." Yurio said, half-jokingly, "Da skorava."

"Mata ne." Yuri answered, taking the carry-bag that the teen still had over his shoulder, and shaking it out a little to get some of the water off that had accumulated on the sides before slinging it over his own shoulder and turning away.
The Russian Kitten moved off to play the game of 'hurry up and wait' for the rest of his team, remembering suddenly that he didn't carry his own key-card to get into the room and had to wait for Mila to get back with the others.

Yuri had already pulled Viktor around to the elevators by the time Yurio had settled in one of the many chairs in the lobby. The nearest lift was still 5 floors from arriving.

_He hasn't said anything since he laid eyes on her._ The younger skater thought, turning to look at his husband, finding glassy eyes looking at the floor. _It was so long ago though... Why's he this upset...? Maybe he's not as over it as he thought he was...

The 'ding' of the elevator finally came, and the doors opened, letting out several people before the pair moved in. Two previous passengers recognized them and got excitabale, but Yuri pushed past them and shook his head wordlessly, hitting the button for their floor, and then the one to close the doors. He heaved a breath as he leaned back against the side wall, reaching up with his free hand to try and brush some of the wet hair from Viktor's face.

The younger figure's brow furrowed with worry as he looked at the shadows under his husband's eyes, and the water still dripping from under his hair to make his skin wet.

_He stops caring about himself when he gets like this. And he won't say anything either... What should I do? Just wait for him again, like before...? I don't like him thinking he's in it alone though...

The elevator stopped briefly on a lower floor, and a woman with a small child stepped in, realizing the unit was still going up, but resigning herself to wait it out. She glanced at Yuri, "What goes up must come down again, right?" She said, trying to poke fun at herself.

"...Yeah."

There was a moment of awkward silence as Yuri put himself between her and Viktor and tried to regain his thoughts, but the woman didn't seem to notice their circumstances.

"My son is competing at the skating event down the street. I came to show support. France is really something." She went on, "If you guys are in this hotel, you must be here for the event, too, right?"

The younger skater was a bit baffled, looking from the woman to Viktor's track-suit and then back again, "...Ah, yeah...we are. ...You don't...know who we are?"

"Oh, are you famous?" She asked kindly, thought clearly oblivious.

"That's Viktor and Yuri Nikiforov, mom. _God you're so embarrassing..._" The young girl, maybe 8, explained, "Viktor skated last in Singles today. He's going to win. I _told_ you that we should've watched. They always put the good ones at the end."

"Your brother is a skater?" Yuri asked, trying to make light of the situation so it wouldn't be so strange, "What in?"

"Pairs. He skated this morning. He's in 5th right now."

"What country?"

"United Kingdom!" The girl said happily, "I'm glad he's not competing in Singles though. Going up against you two would make him cry...probably."

"Petra!" The mother chided.
The girl giggled, but then the elevator came to a stop, and the light for their floor went off to signal their arrival. Yuri lifted his head to see it, and nudged Viktor lightly as the doors started to open. As they stepped through, the girl was waving, and Yuri turned back briefly to smile as well as he could, "Tell your brother we said good luck."

"I will! He'll love that! Byyyyyeee!"

The doors closed behind them, and Yuri shuffled his husband down the hall until they were in front of their door. He pulled out their key card from his coat pocket and pushed the door open with his foot, letting Viktor go in ahead of him before following in after. As soon as the door clicked behind him, Yuri set the carry-bag down next to the bed and grabbed the rolling suitcase from his partner's hand soon thereafter, setting it against the wall before moving to the bathroom to grab a towel.

When he came back, Viktor was sitting on the edge of the bed, leaning over his knees with his elbows on them. Water was dripping from his hair still, splattering onto the grey carpet between his feet.

"...It's always something, right?" Yuri said, breaking the silence.

It was enough to get Viktor to move a little, but not enough to make him speak.

The younger man came back around and set one large towel on the bed next to Viktor's leg, using a second over the man's head, ruffling it around to dry the majority of the excess rainwater away. With silver-grey hair entirely mussed up into an unintelligible mess, Yuri tossed the soaking-wet towel aside and grabbed the dry one to continue on with his task. He left that one where it was though once he was done, moving down instead to try peeling the soggy track-suit off. Shoes, coat, and pants came off easily enough, but the water had gotten through to the skating outfit underneath of it, making it damp all the way down to Viktor's skin.

"...Ah, you should've waited for us to notice you instead of coming running out into the rain like you did. I don't know what I'm going to do with you if you catch a cold or something. I think the judges will notice if I try to do your Free Skate for you..."

"...I didn't want to wait." The Russian finally said, catching Yuri off guard.

"Why? It would've been 10 seconds."

Viktor didn't answer that one, simply moving his right hand up to undo the decorative button on the front of his display-jacket, and then the small zipper hidden underneath of it. The coat came loose from his frame, slipping off one shoulder, but otherwise staying put, clinging to him like his hair had.

"Well, we should get you into the shower and warmed up... I'll order room service or something."

The Russian drew in a quick, shaky breath, but then pulled the towel off his head and ran his hand through his hair to push it back, "...I'm sorry you saw all that. I froze up."

"I wish I knew who she was before you saw her." Yuri sighed, "She was the one who did that super awkward interview with me between Groups. If I'd known it was her, I would've..."

"...Done what, tell her to leave?" Viktor finished, huffing a weak, disbelieving laugh at that, "She didn't even want to be there in the first place."

"Is that what she said?"

"I could see the look on her face when she realized I'd spotted her."
"If that's the case, she should've done more to avoid you then." Yuri pointed out, getting a bit defensive as he reached up to undo the buttons on the front of his own coat.

"I can't read minds. I don't know why she was there when she obviously didn't want to be." Viktor said quietly, his show-coat slipping off his shoulder a little more, "...You sound angry though."

The younger skater put his coat in the hall closet, and slid the mirrored door closed, seeing himself in the reflection. He did have a bitter look on his face, so he blinked and shook his head, trying to be rid of it as he turned back to the main part of the room, "I don't like seeing you upset. Today was a roller-coaster of emotions as it was, what with Chris' SP, and then with everyone getting such good scores. I feel like she-

"Like you said, it's always something." Viktor finished again, "...Last year, it was your melt-down at Cup of China...but I got to turn that into our first kiss. Then at Rostelecom, it was the sticky-bun scare with Makkachin...but I got to hear you ask me to be yours until you retire from skating, like it was a marriage proposal. At the Final, you got these rings for us..." He held up his right hand for emphasis, "...but then you brought the whole thing crashing down that very night by saying we should end things after the competition was over. In the end, you convinced me to come back to skating, and I got you to agree to winning five World Championship Golds for me. Four Continents ended with my finding out my mother was killed...but by Worlds, you'd gotten my uncle back into my life, someone I liked as a kid. Then at Worlds, skipping over the Yurio drama, you passed out and forgot the whole previous year...but even after that, after you remembered...you sang History Maker for me to help ease my mind." He lifted his head, slate blue eyes scanning his husband, "...It's always something...but it always turns out fine in the end. We just...have to wait this one out, and see where it goes."

"I know that going with the flow seems easiest, but..." Yuri started, moving back around to gently set his hands on his partner's shoulders, leaning down a little to rest his forehead against Viktor's and closed his eyes, "...I can't just sit by and watch you throw your Free Skate away because of this woman."

The Russian looked on quietly, half-lidded eyes glancing forward to where his husband's were still closed in solace, "...What makes you think I'd do that?"

"Same reason I can't land my jumps sometimes." He answered, leaning up to kiss the spot he'd been pressing against a moment before, "You might be a genius, Viktor...but you're still human. Seeing whatsherface brought up a lot of memories for you. A lot of...unresolved...stuff."

"You think I still want her?"

Yuri's face got a little red, but he couldn't find the words to answer, simply twisting to the side to sit on the end of the bed as well.

Viktor reached over with his wet hand to take his partner's, and nudged him with his elbow, "I didn't cry because of that. She's the one that ended things between us, remember? I moved on. I found you."

"...But...then why?"

"The whole thing caught me by surprise." The Russian admitted, "Seeing her there so suddenly, in that skating arena where we'd spent the better part of a year together...it just reminded me of how bad I felt back then. To be cast aside like less than nothing, after everything I had done to try to be there for her. That's the difference between you and Sophia...when you were at your lowest point, and I came to help, you accepted it. She didn't. It's her loss now...and all she can do is look on at what she
Yuri let the man's words settle in his mind, and he felt his racing heart starting to finally calm.

"Now..." Viktor's voice picked up again, "...If you don't mind, since these clothes are coming off anyway..."

The younger man shook his head and laughed, looking up to see the happy gleam in his husband's blue eyes again, "Post-conflict carnal urges?"

"I'd prefer to think of it as 'post-I-just-owned-everyone-in-the-Short-Program' carnal urges, actually." He answered, leaning in to nuzzle against Yuri's neck, "Care to join me?"

"In a heartbeat."
Rain pattered hard on the huge window, with an occasional roll of thunder high above.

Soaking-wet show-pants were pulled away and cast aside in three seconds flat, landing in a heap on the floor. Yuri stood upright again from where he'd leaned down to yank the slacks off Viktor's wet legs, and his hand was taken in quick succession to pull him closer.

It didn't matter that the Russian's skin was cold as stone; Yuri wanted him. There was a fleeting, secret part of his mind that wanted to feel the words that had been spoken, rather than just hear them. The only way his anxious, self-depreciating heart would rest that night was if Viktor claimed him. To mark him, and leave a part of himself behind in turn.

Viktor pulled his partner high onto his lap, wrapping both arms around him to hold him close, craning his head up to meet the younger man's face. The subtle, almost needy whimper he heard as he kissed him was like music. He felt the eager fingers of one hand running through his wet hair, the other pressing against the upper part of his back, sliding across cold, wet skin.

"...Sorry, Yuri...I was cruel to you. I should've expected her to show up, and thought of what to do before it happened. How can I get your mind off of it? ...Ah, I know...

"AH!" The younger figure shrieked abruptly and rose up on his knees, as he felt those clammy, icy hands go under the back of his shirt.

"...V-Viktor!" Yuri grimaced, reaching back to warm himself up again as well as he could while his partner pulled himself further up the bed, sliding out from under him as he went. As Yuri turned his head back around, he glanced at the light switch on the wall, and quickly reached over with a stretch to flick it off. The room was only half as bright after that, glowing dimly with the light of the two 'lamps' that were built into either side of the headboard.

The Russian had grown impatient even in those two seconds, and leaned over to pull his husband forward. In the process, he flipped the man onto his back and set his head against the pillows, looking down on him longingly. A few strands of damp silver hair tumbled down from where they'd been pushed back before, but those slate blue eyes just kept looking.

"...Hah?" The younger skater quipped, "...Why'd you stop...?"

"It occurred to me that you haven't worn your glasses since you first came back to St. Petersburg with me." Viktor answered quietly, "You had your glasses on the first time we were like this, too."

"Not for long."

"Hm...no...not for long." The Russian agreed, reaching up to pull those very glasses away from Yuri's eyes...and then put them over his own, "How do I look?"

"You're going to give yourself a headache."

Viktor gave him a smirk, but then just leaned in to start kissing him again, wedging one leg between
his husband's as he half-rolled on top of him, and moving his free hand down to Yuri's side to pull him into it. Lips, neck, chin, wrist, hand, hip...anywhere the Russian could find skin, he kissed. Eventually, he propped himself between his husband's knees and pushed up the front of the man's shirt, nipping and licking at his abdomen, and moving up to his chest as the two layers of fabric were moved further away.

Yuri's breaths became more obvious, but at least he was finally starting to relax. Viktor's hands were warming with his touch, and allowed the younger man the solace of closing his eyes and enjoying himself.

...It's been almost a week since we were like this... He thought, creeping one eye open to watch the silver-haired head moving up his chest, ...Even if he didn't notice it, he must've been nervous that she would make an appearance somehow. He hasn't really wanted to mess around since the night before we came to Bordeaux to kidnap Yurio...and it didn't stop even after we went back to Paris.

His small frame arched to every sensation, and each quiet gasp made the Russian want him more. Protective hands went from where they held to Yuri's waist, sliding up until they were pulling at the two shirts covering his figure, separating the V-cut dark grey sweater from the white button-down underneath it. One last kiss, and Viktor pulled the sweater over Yuri's head, tossing it to join his own clothes where they'd been scattered on the floor already. Eager hands pulled the older man down again, arms scrambling over shoulders as he drew nearer, and ankles went up to cross behind his back. Viktor let himself be pinned in, wedging his own arms under Yuri's back to return the hug.

When Yuri had him, and the man finally took the hint and held still, he tilted his face towards his husband's ear. He gently rubbed his cheek against it and drew in a breath, "...I will never, ever send you away."

The words settled for a moment, but Yuri could feel the hug getting a little tighter after that, and Viktor pressed his face into the crook of his neck, glasses and all. He could feel a shaky breath being pulled in, held a moment, and then let go again.

"...Thank you." The Russian finally said, mouthing the words against Yuri's neck, "...I'd be a mess if you did."

"Me too."

Viktor snuffled a little as he pulled his head back, took the glasses off, and rubbed the side of his face on his arm. He moved his hand off to set the glasses on the nightstand, and then turned back to look at his partner normally. Like before, he just looked into those brown eyes for a little while, even as his still seemed a bit wet, "...Hah...this is why I'm no good dealing with people who cry in front of me."

"...Eh?"

"Because I get hopeless when I cry." He explained, "But...I think I finally found the thing to inspire the rage I lost for my Free Skate."

"...I guess...that's...good?" Yuri was giving him the 'is this the best time?' look.

The Russian's eyes shone, and he tilted his head a little, damp bangs coming down in front of his eye, "All that lost time."

"Eh?"

"The moment I saw her..." He started, sitting back a little, feeling where Yuri's legs pressed in
against his sides, and stroked his hands gently aside each of them, "...It felt like that whole time flashed in front of my eyes. There was a day when Chris told me he’d been on the phone with a friend of his from Juniors, wishing him luck at some Grand Prix event. A friend that was a big fan of mine, and who lived in Japan at the time." Fingers moved from thighs to abdomen, gently picking at each button of the dress shirt, "Chris said he’d introduce me to that friend if we were ever all at the same event...but it was years before that ever happened."

"A Japanese friend of Chris', huh?" Yuri echoed, feeling the cool air on his skin as each subsequent button was undone, until there were only two left under his chin, "And a big fan of the legendary Russian skating genius, Viktor Nikiforov...? Don't know who he's talking about."

The silver man's eyes were laughing even if he didn't voice the sound, flicking away the last button and letting the thin white fabric fall where it may in front of him, "Yeah...just some scrub in the Junior division that could never even beat Chris. I heard he moved to Detroit sometime later, getting coached by some weird Italian guy that never let him pick his own music."

Yuri quirked a brow, but almost pouted, "Celestino would've let me pick..."

"Le gasp!" Viktor said suddenly, getting dramatic, then descending with both hands flat on his partner's chest, "That friend was you!? So you're saying we've known each other through one degree of separation for over ten years!?"

"...That makes it sound really bad."

"Right!?" The Russian agreed, pressing in close, leaning in over his hands, "So therein lies my rage...we were so close that whole time, and yet..."

"And yet I was so terrified of you that I literally ran away the first time Chris tried to introduce us. I don't think he even had a chance to say who I was before I was gone."

"You'd remember better than I would then." Viktor pointed out, "How many times did he try?"

"Four."

"And then we just ended up meeting on our own at that one Skate Canada, right? During the medaling ceremony."

"Yeah..."

"You couldn't run away that time." The silver man joked, "You were forced to get up there next to me."

"...Mh."

Viktor gave him the sexy eyes after that, "What were you thinking at the time?"

"...Something along the lines of...oh my god it's Viktor, oh my god it's Viktor, oh my god it's Viktor..." Yuri answered emphatically, perfectly replicating his old anxieties, "Interspersed throughout all that were thoughts of oh yeah I won silver, and oh jeeze don't pass out while he's around, and don't panic and wet yourself..." His hands started sneaking back around from where they were lying on the bed-sheets next to his head, "...and one other thing..."

"Hm?"

Hands went between them and slid under the black fabric of the only remaining article of clothing
that clung to Viktor's pale body, forcing his eyes to go wide suddenly at attention.

"You're talking too much."

He uttered a breathy gasp, "...I wasn't...ready yet."

"I'll make you ready."

"Or maybe I should put my mouth to better use?"

Yuri's face went from slightly pink to bright red, but he refused to let his hands stop moving, doing his best to remind himself that they'd done this a thousand times and that he shouldn't be so embarrassed anymore. But as long as Viktor found it endearing...maybe it was for the best that his face still got color whenever they were that close. Too much confidence in the young skater was like an ill-fitting suit...pretty, but leaving a lot to be desired.

Viktor let him do as he pleased for a little while though, leaning down to the side to nuzzle at his neck and ear. When he felt himself starting to rock against Yuri's hands though, he knew to slip away, and started working his way back down the man's now-exposed chest. Deft fingers undid the button on the front of the younger man's jeans, and quietly slid the zipper down. As his kisses trailed past Yuri's neck though, his frame scooted too far away for the attention at his center to continue, and he reluctantly pulled out of it. Those hands found themselves with little to do after that but wait.

Yuri's leg twitched at Viktor's side as he felt that warm attention through the fabric. He could feel every movement, every tease of silver hair against his skin, every brush of lips where clothing prevented contact, every throb of his heartbeat pulsing through him, **demanding unobstructed attention.** The Russian was enjoying the tease as much as anything else though, waiting until the last possible second before using teeth to pull the fabric away a little. His left hand went to the side of his partner's hip, thumb feeling the crest as the other fingers curled around, dipping under the edge of the sheet beneath them. The right hand slid back up Yuri's abdomen, making it nearly to his chest before slipping slowly back down again. He kissed and licked and nosed at his husband lightly until he was firm enough to take in hand, and then gave him the hot, wet attention he so craved. The music began anew.

"V-Vikt-...tor..."

Another leg-twitch, this time stiffening out straight where it emerged past the Russian's side, toes splaying and clenching down through the thin black sock.

**...I can never believe he's doing this, even when he's doing it...!**

Yuri's mind raced, his eyes clenched shut against the intensity of the feeling. For lack of ought else to do, his hands went up to grab a pillow just above his head, and pulled it over himself, squishing it down over his face and clutching at it desperately.

"Try not to smother yourself?" Viktor laughed, "I know some people have a thing about nearly-but-not-quite fainting during this, but..."

"V-Viktor!" Yuri barked, his voice muffled through the pillow where he gripped it a little tighter from the embarrassment of the suggestion.

The Russian went back to his task though, forcing him to squeak loudly as he felt it. The barrier of downy feathers couldn't stop the sound of Yuri's ecstasy, and Viktor worked even harder after that. He was certain the pillow itself would be blushing by then if it could. The skin in front of him was slick and wet, slightly flushed in its own right...but he could hardly stand his own neglected throb...
anymore. He hoisted up the stiff left leg to raise it higher against his side as he got closer, and joined their centers together, watching excitedly as the sensation made his husband's back arch to feel it.

One hand went to work between them, but the other went up towards the pillow, trying to nudge it away so he could see the man's face beneath it. Yuri let go of it easily enough, the rest of his body tensing up then from the sensation, his breathing heavy and loud. Viktor smiled to see it and leaned in closer, sliding his hands between the sheets and the back of his husband's shoulders to hold onto him. One hand stayed in the middle of Yuri's back as the other pressed to the nape of his neck, feeling the beginnings of his raven hair, and he lowered his face to the crook of his neck again.

Yuri gasped as the up and down slide began, dismayed at the feeling of a meager fabric barrier between them still. His hands went down the Russian's sides to push it away as well as he could, sliding them up again to rest on his back when he was done. He could feel every muscle moving beneath that pale skin, and he found himself digging his fingernails in as he felt a sharp pain against his neck. He cried out a little as it lingered, but he wouldn't shy away, knowing what had happened. It happened again a few inches further down his shoulder, just under where his dress-shirt was still clinging to him. Every bruise on his neck left three or four scratches on Viktor's back though, so he supposed it was worth the ache. He had two on each side before the Russian pulled up again, crying out finally against the marks in his flesh, but then casting down slate blue eyes to his husband.

"Eck...sor-sorry!" Yuri pleaded, thinking he'd gone too far.

"Don't be!" Viktor insisted, "At least, not for that...I liked it."

"...Then...what...for?" The younger figure wondered, panting lightly where he'd been left in the pile of sheets.

"I'll have to leave you like this to get our things so we can keep going."

"Huh? No..." Yuri blinked and shook his head, but then reluctantly pulled up from his warm spot to lean onto his elbow.

Viktor watched him go curiously, seeing as he twisted over onto his side to reach for something under the corner of the mattress, "What are you...?"

"I hid stuff here." Yuri explained, trying to find where the bottle had gone to. When he found it again, he held it in his hand and pushed back to his elbow again, "See?" He held it up.

"...You've never hidden stuff like that before." The Russian gave him a surprised look, casually crossing his arms as he sat on his knees and crossed ankles, caring not for how obviously his arousal had been exposed, "Why now...?"

"Er..." The younger figure stammered, not having expected to get questioned about it, "...This is the first time you've shown interest in doing this kind of thing since we first came to Bordeaux last weekend. I didn't want you to think I was being pushy by leaving it out in plain sight, so I put it away. When we got here to kidnap Yurio, you said this place had history, so I had a feeling you'd...you know...lose interest for a little while."

"...Oh." Viktor's eyes went down a little, but before he could let the awkward realization settle in, he reached to take the bottle from Yuri's hand and set it on the sheet next to himself, using that same hand to guide his husband to rising up onto his knees to meet him. He slid his hands around Yuri's sides, slipping them under the dress shirt, and leaned in close, lightly setting his lips to his partner's so he could feel the words as they were spoken, "I didn't realize I was neglecting you so much. I'll make it up to you..."
He wouldn't give Yuri a chance to protest or say it was fine, kissing him before he could speak a single word. It seemed to work, and the younger man gave in easily enough, bringing his own hands up to rest on his partner's upper arms as he settled into the kisses. Viktor could feel where the man was pressing against his abdomen, and where he himself had slid between his legs. His hands moved down from the small of his husband's back to slip under the loose edge of his slacks and trunks, pushing them down and out of the way, then bringing his hands up again to hold to Yuri's waist as the kisses became more needy.

Yuri's fingers moved as well after that, left hand coming up to weave through silver hair as the right went down around the side of Viktor's chest. He felt a slight nudge, and realized the Russian was trying to get behind him, so he turned to meet him halfway. Pale fingers came up to the back of his shoulders as he settled in on his knees, pulling the dress shirt off his arms and casting it to the floor to join the rest. Viktor pressed himself to his back after that, kissing the back of Yuri's shoulders greedily as hands wrapped back around to give his center a little more attention.

The younger man's hands went from clutching at his husband's forearm to grabbing at the blanket beneath him, closing his eyes as the sensation poured through him. Each stroke, pull, twist, and grab was enough to make him gasp aloud. The Russian's free hand came up under his jaw, lightly lifting his face as he started to slide up and down directly behind him. The kisses and nibbling against Yuri's neck continued until the younger skater heard the click of the bottle, and again, feeling where his husband's skin suddenly felt a little cold again. He tilted his hips a little bit in anticipation, but Viktor did most of the work after that, folding his hands through the crook of hip and thigh, positioning himself, and then gently pushing in a little.

"Nh...ngh..." He winced quietly, trying to catch his breath where he'd stopped allowing himself to inhale before.

"You okay?"

"Mhm..."

Viktor could tell the confirmation was slightly feigned, and moved his hands back down to help Yuri relax a bit. He knew it would only be safe to start moving again when the man's back arched a certain way, and though it took a minute or two, he finally felt it. He left one hand to massage where it was, and moved the other up to place it flat against Yuri's chest, leaning over him from behind with his chin on the back of the man's shoulder.

The slide was slow but deliberate, and Viktor listened closely to the sound of every breath, waiting for the moment that discomfort resigned to pleasure. There was a strange correlation though that Viktor noticed...the further along that transition came, the lower Yuri descended to the bed, until he had his head turned against the sheet and was looking back at him from there, arms curled under himself, just in front of where his knees were parted, keeping the rest of him up. The Russian leaned in closer when he saw it, setting one hand into the sheets to hold himself upright while the other slipped under his husband's abdomen, kissing the back of his shoulderblades where he could reach them, and starting to pick up the pace.

Even though Yuri had gotten better at showing initiative and taking command of him more often, it still felt best when he had 65% of the control. The other 35% was his meager concession, and he knew, no matter how many times he claimed to want otherwise, he had to be in a certain mood to
allow it. That moment did not lend itself to one of those moods. The day's events had left him wanting to assert his dominance again, and it played well to Yuri's need to feel monopolized. It was a far cry from the way they'd been on the La Premiére flight, when Yuri's unexpected reversal of their roles left Viktor too surprised and vulnerable to counter it. It was probably just the alcohol though...

The Russian loomed over his husband, reminding him full and well exactly who he 'belonged' to. Yuri eased into the surrender rather willingly, and his whole body relaxed all the more for it. He pulled his arms out from where they'd been folded under his chest, and crossed them under his forehead instead, closing his eyes to feel Viktor push into the deepest parts of him.

He felt Viktor pulling him up again though, continuing the upward thrust as hands went flat against his chest and stomach to keep his back firmly against his own chest. The Russian brushed his cheek against Yuri's hair, nosing his ear gently, listening closely to each needy breath even as he gave his own.

Yuri looked back curiously with half-lidded eyes as he felt his husband withdraw, but then take him by the shoulders to nudge him to turn around, and subsequently pushed him down to his back. Viktor slid back between his knees and pressed urgently, kissing him again as one hand guided him back to where he wanted to be and pushed in again. The pace picked up even more after that; Yuri could feel his whole body jerk with each thrust. His hands went up over Viktor's shoulders and neck to hold steady, even as his knees and feet came up aimlessly against the man's sides.

He was sure Viktor was about to finish when he flipped their positions one last time, fully rolling from his knees to his back. Yuri found himself on top after that, hands on his husband's chest as he tried to catch his breath. Viktor didn't give him long to think about what to do, hands going to task where Yuri's center had been neglected for a few minutes, and making him twitch in the process.

To the younger man's credit, his body knew what to do even if his mind was too enthralled to think straight. There would always be a tiny part of him that would see Viktor as the genius skater he'd idolized in the years prior, separate from his husband. A slim 8.64% of him felt like a super-lucky groupie anytime Viktor paid him any kind of attention.

But he rose and fell as well as he could, tilting and turning his hips as he'd been taught over the past 10 months to best please the man. It was hard though when Viktor was stroking him at the same time, though he knew the Russian did it specifically to see how he managed.

'It's the look on your face. I love seeing how you process how to keep moving, while I'm doing my best to make you incapable of it.'

It was enough though...Yuri's lithe frame had reached its limit. Hot liquid dripped down Viktor's hands as he felt the younger figure clench up around him, reluctantly crying out as he balled up a fist against his chest. As the tremor slowly faded, Yuri peeked open one eye in time to see his husband licking his fingers. When they were clean again, those hands came forward to brace against his waist, and a smirk crossed the man's face to warn his young husband to expect the end. Yuri braced for it, hands flat against Viktor's chest as the upward thrusts began again. He was already weak from release though, and try as he might to stay upright and looking down, his arms were giving out. Viktor raised his own arms up once Yuri was low enough and embraced him tightly, kissing at his neck where he could, and burying his face against the crook of the shoulder when he felt his moment had come. He pressed up as hard as he could, crying out his husband's name against his ear before collapsing as well.

Yuri stayed where he was though, feeling where Viktor was gently rubbing his thumb back and forth against his back, both of them trying to catch their breath, and let the trembling come to a slow and gradual end.
"...Give me...ten minutes...and I'll be ready for that shower..." The Russian said between breaths.

Yuri just went limp where he laid on the man's chest, sighing to himself contentedly as he heaved.
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED TWENTY

The thunderstorm continued well into the night, with thunder rolling gently across the sky after a prelude of lightning. Yuri had found himself awake and listening to it, taking comfort in the ease of droplets on glass, coming in waves on the wind.

A flash of lightning crept across the underbelly of the storm-head, illuminating the room with a strobe of pale light.

One... Two... Three... Four...

A crack of thunder, tumbling down into a crescendo of lesser thrums, like a lion's roar being replied to by others farther away.

As per usual, sometime in the middle of the night, as though on a timer, Viktor had rolled to his side and pulled Yuri's back to his chest, arms around his smaller frame to keep him close, cheek against the nape of his neck. There were a few times where he'd relaxed and slipped off again though, and this was one of those times. He was halfway onto his back again, the arm wedged between his partner's waist and the mattress staying in place while the one that went overtop started the drift away. Another crack of thunder rolled through though, and it was loud enough to actually make the silver skater twitch and wake up with a start.

Startled blue eyes scanned the room as Viktor pushed up onto his elbows, but when nothing was there, he lowered down to his back again with a 'paff' against the pillow.

"That was the loudest one yet." Yuri commented, turning his head away from the thinly-covered windows, "You've slept through the rest."

"...You've been awake the whole time?" The Russian wondered blearily, his words almost drunkenly incoherent from still being half in slumber, "Why?"

"I like to listen to the rain sometimes." He answered, "But thunder actually woke me up about 15 minutes ago, so I haven't been up all that long." Yuri flipped over after that, twisting until he was on his opposite side and facing his husband instead of looking away.

Viktor rubbed his eyes and then turned to meet him, feeling a leg come up between his own as a pair of thin arms went around his neck and shoulders, fingers going through his hair to gently pull his head down.

"Try to go back to sleep. It's almost 4am." The younger man advised, "Sleep right up to the start of the Free Skate."

"Hmm..." The Russian mused, sliding one arm under Yuri's and settling the other in the curve of his waist, "Always."
Viktor's team track-suit was stiff and smelled faintly of the rain when the pair finally got up to get ready, so the Russian forewent wearing it altogether. That, and his SP outfit. Both were gathered up into clothing-totes and given over to the hotel's laundry service to be dry-cleaned. Viktor was anxious about leaving them in untrained hands, but Yuri eventually convinced him that a 4-star hotel would have a lot of explaining to do if they lost or damaged his outfits.

"...Or are you just using that as an excuse to avoid going to the Patinoire until the last possible second?"

"Why not both?" Viktor huffed, pulling his scarf up a little over his chin as Yuri, sans glasses this time, pulled him closer to the doors to leave.

They were about halfway down the block, stepping through fading puddles and listening to cars drive through larger ones, before Yuri could feel his partner starting to slow down again. Even the excited shrieks of passing fans did little to instill cheer in the Russian, and often garnered little more than a half-assed-but-well-meant smile and a nod before returning back to looking at the ground just ahead of where he was stepping.

Yuri stopped where he was, the sound of small, hard-rubber wheels from Viktor's rolling suitcase coming to a halt as well. Viktor paused quickly as he noticed it, and lifted his eyes a little, trailing from the bottom of his husband's scarf to finally looking at his eyes.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't want you to think you have to walk on eggshells all afternoon." Yuri answered, "We don't even know if she's going to show her face again."

"She will. She has to." Viktor said, looking off with a pained half-sigh, "Neither of us can avoid it."

"...What are you talking about?"

The Russian looked back down again, adjusting where the clothing bag sat over his shoulder where he slung it, "While you were getting dressed, I was checking local news websites to see if I could find which one she belonged to. I found it, but unfortunately, they've gone out of their way to make a huge deal out of my being here...Sophia's basically being strong-armed into finding a way to interview me, one way or another."

"Seems kind of cruel to do to either of you." Yuri commented bluntly, twisting on his heels to keep walking again, giving his husband's hand a gentle squeeze where he held it between them, "Or maybe they don't even know about your shared history."

"I doubt that." Viktor said, huffing a quiet sigh as he lifted his head to look out at the road, "Odds are good that, aside from the French skater, mine's the only name they know...so if anyone ever caught wind of the fact that Sophia knows or knew me, they'd want to bank on that association to get them easy access, regardless of what it means for either of us. A lot has changed since I left this place. Coming back here with the record that I have now...all these people are going to want a piece of me, like some long-lost relative finding out their cousin won the lottery. Everyone suddenly wants to be best friends because they want a piece of the pie... It's just that in this case, the pie is me."

"Well, you can't make it your fault that her bosses want her to talk to you. If you'd rather avoid her outright, then I'll keep an eye out to make sure she never gets that close." Yuri suggested.

The Russian just shook his head lightly, "It's fine, really. I had my moment when she turned up yesterday. I don't think I'll be that emotionally raw again if I see her today. I think I'd almost feel
"...I'll leave it to you, then."

"You don't want me to talk to her at all." Viktor said flatly, more a statement than a question, slate eyes scanning the younger man for a flinch of guilt, but finding none, "I get it."

Yuri just shook his head, "I don't want you to be upset. You said at the train station that if you ever ran into her, you'd probably just brag about how we're married and show off your ring...but that's entirely not what actually happened. It's not that I don't believe you, I just think you're underestimating how much the past still haunts you."

The Russian had nothing to say to that, pursing his lips a little as he struggled with how to reply.

"You're pretty good at putting stuff at the back of your mind, and ignoring things that bother you, right up until the moment where it's brought out and shoved in your face. Then, it's like...you get these glassy eyes. It happened back at Four Continents when you were trying to explain Yakov's texts, it happened when we had to go meet Konstantin for the address of the funeral, and it happened yesterday when whatevershertempted showed up by Chris."

"You know her name, yet you refuse to say it."

Yuri nodded, but shrugged, turning brown eyes up to meet blue, "Naming a thing gives it power. I refuse to give her any. You're my husband, not hers, and until or unless I know what she wants, I have to keep her as powerless in my mind as I can."

"She wants to run away from this place as fast as legs can carry her."

"Maybe that's just what she wants you to think. Did she play hard-to-get originally?"

Viktor's eyes winced, but he nodded, "...It was like trying to catch vapor with a net. No matter what I did, she only ever accepted me as a slightly flirtatious friend... Things only changed after she decided they would change."

"And she initially seemed fairly happy and interested when she did that interview with me, but as soon as I made a point to correct what my last name was, she and her crew got all shifty. My first thought was that they were all disgusted to hear it, but now that I know who she is, I wonder if it wasn't just stunned disappointment." Yuri stepped in closer and rubbed shoulders, "She might've come up here thinking she could rekindle what you had, only to retreat when she realized I was an obstacle. All this 'wanting to get away' stuff might just be because her grand plans got messed up and she's trying to regroup."

Again, Viktor was left without a response.

"But if you have a better idea on what I should do, then I'll just follow your lead like always."

"I'm at a loss on this one." He answered with a whine, ",...I don't feel like she was ever the sort of person to try and cause problems, but I never thought she'd kick me to the curb either, so I don't really know what she's going to do here. It's been such a long time, too...people change."

The short, rounded staircase leading into the arena was just ahead, and the crowd of people got thicker, held at bay only by a pair of barricades to give athletes a path to walk through. At one point, Viktor caught sight of someone who had a brown poodle puppy in their arms, and it made him miss Makkachin all the more. He was half-tempted to go over to whoever the puppy belonged to just to pet the tiny creature, but he thought better of it when he felt Yuri tugging on him to avoid tripping on
"You'll never get away if you go over there." The younger skater pointed out.

"...I know..."

"Two more weeks, and then we'll be back in Hasetsu." Yuri offered, turning on his heel where he stood on the first step, letting go of the rolling suitcase long enough to press down on the fluff of his husband's scarf to give the man a quick kiss, "Back in our own house, with our own bed, and our own couch, one crazy poodle, and two huge bowls of my mom's katsudon for each of us for the Gold Medals we'll bring back before the Final."

Viktor's eyes closed as he smiled and tilted his head a little, "Two for you, maybe, but I can have all I want. I'm not the one who gains weight easily."

Yuri deadpanned him, "...That's so cold...!"

"As your coach, it's my duty to make sure you stay in peak physical condition!"

"You aren't a coach at this event though!"

"I won't retire from being your coach until you retire from skating, remember? That's what you asked of me."

Hazel eyes widened a little at that, but then Yuri's face relaxed into the same smile he'd given the Russian when he'd made that proposition in the first place at Fukuoka Airport, "Yeah."

Camera flashes were going off all around them, but neither paid any attention. Yuri was too busy leaning off the edge of the stair and into his husband, and Viktor was too busy making sure Yuri didn't fall because of it. Neither noticed as Viktor's rolling suitcase was dragged away; there were too many people passing by as it was. One last kiss and Yuri was standing normally again, hand reaching for the handle he knew should've been there, and suddenly having a mental panic attack as he realized it was gone, his hand groping at air.

"I swear, I could rob you two blind if I wanted." A familiar voice stated from the top of the stairs.

Brown and blue eyes looked up to meet grey-green, and a wave of relief washed over the young skater to see the suitcase just ahead of him.

"Mikhail! We missed you yesterday!"

"You should really be more careful where you decide to get lost in each other," The older Russian explained, trying to look cordial despite the gravity of what he was saying, "Not everyone around here would intend to give you your stuff back."

"Uncle." Viktor followed, "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough. Let's get inside before it starts to rain again. This system's going to hover until long after we're gone." He answered, pointing a finger casually at the sky.

More camera flashes followed as the two silver-haired Russians stood next to one another, and Viktor gave the crowd one last wave before ducking in through the doors. It took all of three seconds before Viktor found his uncle pressing the underside of his wrist against his forehead suddenly, holding, and then letting him go again.
"Well at least you aren't feverish." The Rozovsky said, handing Yuri back the rolling case so he could pocket his hands again, "That was kinda dumb to run around in the rain like you did yesterday."

Viktor balked, "...Sheesh, you weren't even there; what'd you hear?"

"I wasn't there?" Mikhail echoed, "Maybe not for all of it, but I went outside trying to find you and saw your dumbass running through the rain without an umbrella. That's why you aren't wearing your team colors today, right? It got soaked right through and probably smells like pond scum now."

The younger Russian was, for the third time that early afternoon, at a loss for words.

"Yakov asked me to find you if he didn't find you himself. Can't you feel the energy in this place? If people were bees, half the audience would have to be out here, buzzing their wings just trying to keep the place cool. You really stirred up shit yesterday."

"What? How'd I do anything?" Viktor retorted, almost defensively.

The younger skater nodded in agreement, "You didn't do anything...he's just being dramatic."

Mikhail held his hands out as though holding things in the palms of each, "Something about a 'young, beautiful woman' and then 'Viktor's sweet, sweet tears.'" He slapped them together in a loud clap, drawing the attention of half the atrium, "Boom!" Jazz-hands, "Drama."

"Sheesh, lay it on a little thicker, will you? I'm only standing right here." Yuri grumbled.

"Some old flame turned up." The elder went on, being rather on point, and to the point, "That's why you practically ran out of this place like rat from a sinking ship."

"...It's a little more complicated than that." Viktor explained, nudging his head for them to move along to the prep area, and started to walk that way, "But it's no one's business but my own."

"You guys are normally all over Instagram. Haven't you seen the posts about it? You're acting all oblivious."

"Err..." Yuri commented tepidly, "Well, I haven't been looking...have you?" Eyes went up to his husband curiously.

"I haven't checked since before the Short Program."

"So you are oblivious."

"How bad is it?"

"It's getting a bit rough. Some folks have found archival footage of you and that girl back when you were still dating. A lot of people are wondering you're going to leave Yuri to go back to her."

Yuri choked on himself as he heard it, and had to pause and cough, trying to catch his breath.

Viktor stopped and rubbed his husband's back gently until the fit had passed, then turned back to his uncle, "A lot of people were wondering if I was retiring as a competitor when I went to coach Yuri last year, too...and they were wrong. They're wrong about this, too. Why in the world would I leave him for someone who broke up with me nearly a decade ago?" He had a pained look on his face; the idea was incredibly offensive to him, "Why would I leave Yuri at all? We're practically inseparable. We had to change all of our plans after the Final last year because we'd gotten engaged."
Mikhail shrugged, stuffing his hands back into his coat pockets, "I'm not the one asking...but others might. I'd advise you avoid Instagram until after this event is over and things have settled down again. I'll keep an eye out for this woman in case she's here again today. Do you want me to send her off if I see her?"

Yuri looked up from where his eyes had been watering from the coughing fit, waiting to hear the answer. With all the new information, it might've changed the paradigm.

"No." Viktor said with finality, "I already told Yuri the same thing earlier. If she's here, let her come to me. If she's not, then a whole lot of people got their feathers ruffled over nothing. I'm not going to let it distract me...I have a Gold Medal to win." He grasped his partner's head gently and pulled him close to kiss the side of his cheek, "Practice starts in 30 minutes. I'm going to go change. You should find Yurio and the rest and set-up shop there. I'll be along soon enough."

"...Shouldn't I come with you?" Yuri wondered, feeling where the Russian's fingers were still woven through his hair, holding him there briefly, "If she's here, I don't want you to face her alone."

"You shouldn't have to feel that way." Viktor pointed out, giving the younger figure some slack to turn and face him, "It won't be like before. I promise."

Yuri sighed, but knew it would be pointless to argue.

...You sometimes forget your promises though...
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED TWENTY ONE

For the moment, the press had been mercifully sparse in the prep area while skaters were getting ready for their Official Practice for the day. Mikhail practically dragged Yuri to where he knew the rest of the Russian team was setting up; almost the same corner as the day before but slightly closer to the rink-side entrance.

Yuri was having a bad case of déjà vu, watching as Mikhail pulled him along by his wrist. He grit his teeth though and dug in his heels, twisting his arm around to get free...but unlike when Minako had been there, Mikhail's grip was a bit more sure of itself, and he didn't let go.

"Struggle all you like, kid, you're not as slippery as you think." He chided.

"You don't have to pull me so hard! I can walk just fine!" Yuri insisted, albeit weakly.

The elder Russian raised a brow at him behind silver bangs, "And you'd walk yourself in the other direction if I didn't have a hold on you."

"You respect my judgment, don't you?" Yuri stood a little more normally.

"Sure?" The older man was skeptical though.

"You told Yurio to let me go after Viktor when he ran off into the woods that one tim-"

"And then I held you back when he went to confront his father in the graveyard."

"Because he told you to."

"I'm not letting you go after him right now, Yuri." Mikhail said firmly, "He's just going to go change. He doesn't need you to hold his hand for that."

"You know as well as I do that I don't mean to help him get dressed." Yuri grumbled, "If she finds him on the way there or on the way back, and I'm not there to make sure it doesn't go sou-"

"Every word you're saying right now is just a fancy dress you're putting on a pig." The Russian said, letting Yuri go and putting his hand in his pocket.

"...I have no idea what that means."

"You're dressing up a lie to make it seem like a valid concern. If you don't trust Viktor to be faithful then just say so."

"That's a horrible thing to say!" The young skater protested, "That's not even what I'm worried about at all."

"Then what?"

Yuri paused, grimacing as he rubbed his wrist, but then drew in a short breath, "...'I'm not afraid of heights; it's the ground I'm suspicious of.' I'm not worried about Viktor, it's her that makes me uneasy." He admitted, "I don't know anything about her. When she and Viktor were a thing back in the day, I was 16 years old and trying to figure out if I was ready to leave the Junior ISU yet or not. I literally did not give a single flip about Viktor's love-life at the time...it was him and his skating I was
enamored by. But...I'm turning 25 in a few days...and I'm not just admiring him from a distance anymore...I care a whole lot about everything now. I'd put his stories about his past lovers at the back of my mind because I can't stand the thought of him being with anyone else, even in the past."

"What's your point?"

"I want to find her so I can keep an eye on her."

"And?"

"And what?"

"And just...stalk her all afternoon?"

"...No..." Yuri sighed, looking a little defeated, "Well, I don't know...maybe...? I just want to do what I can to prevent her from getting close to Viktor. If he wants to deal with her, fine, he can do that, but I want to make sure it doesn't happen before his Free Skate. Viktor's always been a genius at skating, and other than at Worlds, I can't think of any time he's fallen...but I don't know what would set him off. Finding out my dog died was enough for me back at the GP Final in Sochi. I can't even land my jumps when I'm worrying about something. But Viktor? I have no idea! NO IDEA what would make him fall apart on the ice. I'd be happy if I died never knowing."

"Knowing your partner's weaknesses is supposed to be a good thing." Mikhail said, tilting his head a little, which confused the young skater in front of him, "When you guys did your marital vows, I'll bet there was some provision in there somewhere that said you'd he the other's crutch in times of weakness, right?"

"...Sure."

"How can you be Viktor's crutch if you can't even be sure when he needs you to be one? A crutch is worthless if it's leaning against a wall in another room."

"I'm not going to ignore this situation because you want me to wait and see if Viktor collapses during his Long Program."

Mikhail shook his head and chuckled at that, "Not even close to what I'm saying. We got off on a tangent. The point I was making there is that it seems like you still don't really know all that much about Viktor. But going back to the previous point..."

The Russian's words were fading to the background by then, and Yuri couldn't hear him. His eyes descended to look at the ground.

...I...don't know that much about Viktor still? Is that really how it is? But...

"Yuri."

"Huh?"

"You zoned out." Mikhail said flatly.

Hazy eyes became clear as the younger man shook his head. He looked at the Russian squarely, "I know you don't want me to go do anything, but I'm going to go anyway. This is my marriage and I have to do what I think is right. Viktor would do the same." He turned on his heel and started heading back to where he knew the changing rooms would be, leaving his in-law behind him rather perplexed.
"Yuuurrrrrriiiiiiiiiii.

Mikhail groaned.

Viktor only had his show-pants on when he paused and sat on the small bench in the changing booth, glaring at the Instagram icon on his phone's home screen. He hovered his thumb over it and circled it around slowly.

"Mmmhhhhhh..."

He closed his eyes finally and set the phone aside, face down on the bench next to him, and then rose back up to unpack the rest of his outfit. By the time he was done, he slipped his long-coat back on for lack of his track-suit to wear overtop of it, and stepped out into the main locker-room area. There was a long row of mirrors not far off, and he quickly hair-sprayed his bangs into place. A few other skaters were also getting ready, but none really paid any other any mind while they were in there. Viktor slung his carry-bag over one shoulder and pulled his rolling suitcase along to leave the room, poking around on his phone again as he pushed through the doors that lead to the main prep area. A quick glance up and around to get his bearings, and he started heading for where he knew the Lists would be posted on the walls.

Ladies Singles and Pairs had already gone up and done their performances for the day, so it was just Men's Singles and Ice Dancers left. Whoever won would go on to perform at the Exhibition Gala later on that same night, followed by the traditional Banquet after it was all said and done.

"Vitya."

The Russian looked up, glancing to his left to see Yakov approaching. Behind him, Yurio was still looking at the lists, but turned soon after to see him.

"You're going up first this time."

"Da." Viktor nodded, "I was just making sure nothing changed."

"Don't push yourself too hard. Your body can't take the strain for much longer. Even Georgi is retiring this year."

"Oh, he's finally calling it quits then?" Viktor huffed a laugh, "I thought he'd keep going until after I stopped, just to spite me."

"He's using his head and accepting advice." Yakov said, "Figure skaters are only competitive for a short period of time. Mikhail already has Yuri figuring out what he's going to do when he retires, and he's only 16."

"My uncle thinks differently than I do."

"Yes, he thinks about the long-term. You're still quite reactionary, and act in the moment." The elder coach pointed out, "I heard that your Swiss friend put it in your head that you can do Exhibitions after competition ends for you. That's all fine and well, but you're not winning prize money from invitationals."

"I won't be destitute when I stop competing!" Viktor laughed, "Right now I just want to focus on finishing this year and coaching Yuri."

Yakov pat the skater's shoulder, "Think about the long-term, Vitya. Not even Katsuki will be skating forever."
"Nikiforov." Viktor corrected.

"You three share too many names. I have to differentiate him somehow without referring to him as food."

"Fair enough."

"Oh, did you know that Sophia is here?" Yakov continued, starting to move past, "You once dropped everything to go be with her, too. That didn't work out too well."

"Are you suggesting I'm doomed to repeat history?" Viktor wondered dubiously.

The older man shrugged, but then nudged his hat with a finger as he departed, "Only if you don't learn from it. You were short-sighted back then, too. You've aged, but you haven't really grown up. Push off retirement as long as you want, but eventually you're going to have to look in that mirror and explain to yourself what you did with all the time you wasted. You're both the most impulsive person, and the worst procrastinator I know, Vitya. It's going to get you one day."

"See you on the ice, Viktor." Yurio turned briefly, "I'm up right after you."

"...Okay." Viktor said quietly, watching as the pair headed back to where their gear was waiting. He adjusted where the carry-bag strap sat on his shoulder and started shuffling on down the line to briefly look at the scores for the earlier events. A smile crossed his face, "...British Pair Skaters...Silver. Good for him."

[There he is!] Came a French man's voice, somewhat distant, [They were right!]

Viktor turned his head, as did several other people nearby, wondering what the commotion was about even if most of them had no idea what had been said. He sighed and half-rolled his eyes as he saw the camera and audio guys there that he recognized from the day before. He still had his phone in-hand though and wondered half-heartedly if he could get away with walking by them, pretending to be on a call, and acting like he didn't notice them wanting his attention. He clicked open the home screen and looked over his contacts, trying to avoid eye-contact with the two. Only one of them was starting to approach though...the other had ducked into an adjacent hall like he was after something.

...This is just getting weird now.

When the camera operator finally came back, he had Sophia around the waist and was dragging her back. She was trying not to cause a scene, but the scene had already set before she was even there, and so everyone was looking at her despite her best efforts to stay quiet. A small crowd had gathered in a semi-circle around the trio, with Viktor somewhere in the back still 'looking' at the scoreboard, gawking curiously. It was almost too pitiful to take his eyes away where he was side-eyeing them all through the growing crowd.

"This local newsgroup has been really weird." He heard someone nearby saying, "The techs keep asking where Viktor is and then their reporter goes in the other direction."

"Did you see the super awkward interview she did with Yuri yesterday?" Someone else mentioned, "I doubt they aired it. You should've seen the look on his face when she called him 'Yuri Katsuki.'"

"Wow, she messed that up? Is she living under a rock?"

"They're not skating press. Who knows how much they actually know about what goes on around here?"
"Haven't you two seen Instagram lately? That reporter used to be Viktor Nikiforov's girlfriend!"

The crowd's back-and-forth was starting to get on Viktor's nerves; in part because he was standing right there, but also in part because he was standing right there. They were event personnel, and had already been closer to the newsgroup than he himself had been when everything started, so it was likely they had no idea he was right behind them. The sudden gasps and whispers as he excused himself to push forward confirmed that much.

Sophia was still trying to get away, and Viktor just looked at her silently.

[Soph, he's standing right here. There's no sense in trying to avoid him anymore. Let's just do this so we can leave.] The audio tech was saying. He turned to face the Russian like he was just some other stranger on the street, [Do you mind if we interview you?]

[Yes.] He answered firmly, looking down on the man that was barely taller than Yurio.

[...Yes?]

[See!? He doesn't want to do it! Let's just leave!]

[It's not the job of the camera man or the audio guy to ask people to do interviews.] Viktor said, pointing at them, [If any of you wants an interview, it would be her, the newscaster. She asks the questions, not you.]

The three glanced at one another awkwardly.

[...Do any of you have the slightest idea what you're doing?] He followed.

More anxious side-eyeing between them.

Viktor drew in a deep breath, and then exhaled in a sigh, [That's what I thought.] He lifted his phone again and clicked the side button to see the time, and then put it into his coat pocket, [Look, I don't have a whole lot of time right now. I saw on your network's website that you're expecting some big interview with me. Normally, something advertised like that is a scheduled sit-down, but here you three are, showing up at a skating competition like you can just walk in and talk to anyone you want. That's not how this works. Were you counting on Sophia to make it happen anyway?]

Nodding.

[Well, that's a shame then. Look at her.] He gestured with his phone-hand, [She can't even stand to look at me.]

[She's just nervou-]

[Don't tell her what she is.] Viktor said more-than-firmly, moving his hand to point at the figure who'd spoken the words. Sophia was at least looking at him by then, but not directly.

...This whole thing is no different than when Yuri and Yurio ran into each other at the Helsinki airport. I really don't have that kind of time though...

He glanced between the trio, then shook his head and walked through them, right past the woman who'd spurned him. She watched him go in stunned silence, and flinched as he paused and looked slightly over his shoulder, [If you want that interview, then come along. But only Sophia for now. You other two need to learn your place.]
The pale-haired woman stammered, watching Viktor stepping away again, [Where are you...?]

The Russian turned side-face, not really looking so much as acknowledging the direction he was speaking, [Practice starts soon. I have to put my things away, stretch, and get my skates on. Plus, my husband has an anxious heart. He should be around.]

[...So...you really are...]

Viktor turned fully around at that, looking wary at first, but then thinking on Yuri and finding a smile cross his face, [I'm the happiest I've been in a long time. Now...come along. I need to be on the ice in 15 minutes.]
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED TWENTY TWO

There were only two halls that separated where Viktor had been from the place he was going, and while Sophia skulked about 15ft behind him, he pulled his phone back out from his pocket. He quietly admired the phone-case for a moment before pulling up the contact information for the person half of it belonged to, and set the device against his ear.

Yuri was down a different corridor when he felt the familiar buzz in his pocket, pulling out his phone and looking to see it was Viktor calling. He stopped where he stood and tapped the touch-screen to answer, holding it up to the side of his head, "Hey."

"Oh, there you are. I can see you from here." Viktor answered, causing the younger skater to lift his head and look around, "Other way. Warmer...warmer...ah!, there...see me?"

Relieved, Yuri clicked out of the call and pocketed the device again as he came trotting over. He hardly slowed down as he came in close, snaking his arms around his husband's chest as he collided with the man, and buried his face against his shoulder and neck.

"Don't look now, but..." Viktor whispered, returning the hug as well as he could with his phone-hand, "Sophia's a car-length away to my left."

Brown eyes shot open, but Yuri did his best not to look like he'd heard the words. His fingers clamped down a little harder around where they held to the Russian's coat though, at least until he consciously forced them to let go. He pulled out of the hug a little bit, just enough to bring his right hand around to cup around his husband's cheek, fingers curled slightly around the back of Viktor's neck, barely touching silver hair as he looked into those blue eyes, "Does she know that you know she's there?" The younger skater asked quietly.

"Da, I told her to follow." The older one answered, still whispering, "That's why I called you. I had a feeling that my uncle couldn't keep you tied down for long, and I didn't want to talk to her unless you were there."

Yuri felt a wave of relief, and he lifted himself up onto his toes to kiss his husband right there in the middle of the intersection of hallways. Both arms came up over the Russian's shoulders as it went on, and it emboldened the young skater when he felt Viktor's own arms coming around his frame to pull him closer. Viktor loved every second of it, especially when they heard some passers-by whistling at them.

Sophia was just looking away nervously, one hand up with fingers to cheek and forehead as she shielded herself from the sight. It almost seemed like forever before they finally stopped, since she glanced up three times before they were done. Her face had gone a little red when she thought she'd seen tongue involved, but she wasn't about to look again just to be sure.

The Asian skater reached to pull at the rolling suitcase in his left hand as he took his husband's with his right, and they quietly started walking back towards the Russian team's benches. Viktor looked away only to set his phone to silent and put it back in his coat pocket, and he turned his eyes behind him just to see if Sophia was even still there. To his wry amusement, she was, but she was looking at the ground and fidgeting with the microphone in her hands as she followed. A small part of him felt a little bad for subjecting her to the kiss, but the feeling was fleeting, and it was gone entirely when he saw Yurio and Mikhail in their little corner of the hall.
"See?" The elder Russian pointed out to Yuri, "Nothing happened."

Viktor tried to stifle a laugh, but shorted to himself quietly a little in spite of his efforts. Yuri just smiled, stepping aside just enough to give Mikhail a clear view of the woman behind them.

"...Mhm. Insert foot in mouth." The Russian said, mostly to himself as he deadpanned the situation.

He watched quietly after that as Viktor set his things down by Yurio's, and sat down as Yuri pulled the rolling case in front of himself. A few clicks, and the hard plastic cover was open, revealing the dark-leather boots with their Russian-flag insignias on the heel and their golden blades. As Viktor pulled one ankle over his knee to start untieing to laces to his shoes, his words went out to address the pensive woman still standing at a slight distance.

"So you interviewed Yuri yesterday. That means your English has gotten better since we last spoke." He started, turning blue eyes up as he pulled the first shoe off, "Am I right?"

"...It has."

"Mhm. Your accent is still pretty thick though." He nodded, moving on to the other foot as he handed the shoe to his husband, "But you didn't know Yuri's situation, which makes me wonder what you've been doing the last year or so."

"I haven't paid a lot of attention to skating stuff for the last 6 years." She admitted, stepping a little closer so they wouldn't have to speak as loudly, "The last event I actually watched was the GP Final in Sochi, and that was only because a friend made me. The announcer had said you'd just won your fifth consecutive year there, so it seems like you've done well for yourself."

Yuri felt a pit in his stomach to be reminded that anyone watched that event, especially this particular 'anyone.' But, he waited quietly, sitting on the bench next to Viktor with one leg on either side of it as he waited to take the second shoe. The suitcase with the skates was open next to his right leg.

"Yeah, the five years before then were pretty good." Viktor followed, trading the second shoe for the first skate, "You don't sound like you know what happened after that though."

"I've been busy."

"Da?"

Sophia got a little anxious and looked up, crossing her arms so she held to her elbows in front of herself, "My daughter started kindergarten, an-

"Daughter?" Yuri was making a face at her, his tone accusatory.

Viktor laughed, but nudged him slightly, "Kindergarten is for 5-year-olds, not 8. Relax. I might've been stupid when I was younger, but by then I wasn't that stupid."

"Oh, I'm sorry, was I a huge mistake for you then?" Sophia growled, looking straight at him with her brow furrowed.

"I said I was stupid, not you."

"That's not what it sounded like."

"You weren't a mistake." Viktor said, his tone a little exasperated, lifting his head from where he was
tying his laces, "I was referring to the Pair Skater I had a fling with when I first got into Seniors. I'm sure I would've heard something about it by now though if anything unintentional came out of it." He turned his eyes back down to his skate and continued pulling the loops through the eyelets, "In either case, you were saying...you've been busy. You have a kid now."

"Oui." Sophia answered, still a bit tense, but trying not to give herself away, "The last thing I heard from the skating world was that you'd quit and moved on to other things, so I was a little surprised to find out you were competing here."

"I took time off; I didn't quit." Viktor clarified, tying the laces and taking the second skate from Yuri, pulling it onto his other foot, "And I did that so I could be a coach. His coach." He nudged his head to his husband, "If Sochi was the last thing you watched then you know how he performed back then."

"Yeah, he performed like most other skaters. His score was only bad compared to yours."...

"...It was a 100 point difference..." Yuri grumbled to himself quietly, crossing his arms as he narrowed his eyes, "More than an entire Short Program..."

"Then how do you feel about how he took Silver at last year's GP Final and then Gold at Worlds after that?"

"I guess that means you're as good a coach as you are a skater." She answered, "Shocking no one."

Viktor huffed a laugh to himself, tightening the loops on the second skate, "And what if I said I was a competitor at that particular World Championship?"

"You're saying he beat you?"

"He did. Fair and square. I set a new World Record and he knocked it out 10 minutes later."

Sophia had nothing to say to that.

Viktor had slipped his arm over to pull Yuri closer, nuzzling against his hair, "He broke my old Free Skate record too last year." He pulled up a little to thumb over at the blonde not far behind him, "That one broke my Short Program record. It was a really weird year."

"You broke it again at Worlds, idiot. You and your quad Axel can bite me." Yurio grumbled, lacing his own skates.

Mikhail laughed at that.

"...Quad Axel?" The woman echoed, "Seriously?"

"Yeah...I'll show you when the rink opens for warm-ups." Viktor said, rising back up to his full height to start stretching out his legs, "I don't do it in my actual programs now."

"Why not? It'd be worth more than any other jump."

"Yuri asked me not to." He shrugged, "Don't you remember how hard it was for you to do the triple?"

Sophia narrowed her eyes at him slightly, "How could I forget? The triple ruined my career."

Yuri looked up quietly from where he was putting his husband's shoes away at the bottom of the suitcase, trying not to look conspicuous.
"The triple Axel is one of my favorite jumps...

"You're the one who pushed me to do it." She went on, "I was content with the double."

"...If I knew your knee was going to blow, I wouldn't have suggested it." Viktor said, letting go of where he held his foot up behind him to stretch his quads, "Have you been blaming me for that all this time?"

"...A tiny little bit."

"That's hardly fair." Yuri blurted, but then sitting up and putting a hand over his mouth like he had meant to think it rather than say it out loud.

Two sets of blue eyes looked down at him after that.

He just grit his teeth, closed his eyes, and crossed his arms, resigning to take responsibility for his words, "I wanted to learn how to land a quad flip and Viktor supported me, so now I can land that and a quad Lutz. When he came to be my coach though, I couldn't even land a quad Salchow. I had to beg a teenager to teach me that; one that hadn't even made his Senior debut yet at the time."

"Yeah, you were pretty terrible." Yurio commented, rolling out his stretch mat on the floor, "How did you even make it to the GP Final the year before that when all you could land was a quad toe-loop anyway?"

The Asian skater pointed at him, feeling a slight surge of confidence, "Let's not forget that I can do more jumps than you can now, Mr. 'I just learned to land a quad Flip this season.'"

"Tsch...as if I have anything to feel bad about. Did you even have quads in your repertoire when you were 16?"

Yuri deadpanned him, and he slouched comically, "...That's so cold..."

Yurio's teasing dug in deeper though, "Viktor had to talk me down from doing quads at my last Junior World Championships."

"That's because you wouldn't listen unless you were bribed first." Yakov pointed out, not even looking up from the newspaper he was reading while the whole conversation was taking place.

Viktor huffed a laugh as he heard it, leaning slightly to grab his other foot by the blade and slowly inching it up his back as he stretched it out, "You make it sound like it made winning Gold that year so difficult without quads."

"It would've been a lot easier."

"Hmph, maybe." He shrugged, the blade-guard just behind his head by that point. Slate eyes turned back to the anxious woman standing 6 feet away, "Anyway...given how you'd been acting this whole time, I've guessed that it wasn't your idea to come to this event."

"And you'd be right."

"So how'd you get here? Between you and your entourage, it looks to me like none of you are even versed in this sort of thing." He let go of his skate and pulled that same knee up in front of himself instead.

"I'm on temporary assignment. The crew is borrowed." She explained, looking away as Viktor
switched legs again, "I normally work behind the scenes. I've never done interviews before."

"Why now?"

The woman held her arms closer and looked down, drawing in a sharp breath before looking the Russian straight in the eyes, "Because Linette told everyone at work that you'd been assigned here for the Series and made a huge deal out of how we used to be together. She normally does the on-camera reporting..."

"Linette..." Viktor repeated, thinking it sounded familiar, but then realizing, "Oh, she was the one who told me, as I recall the words, to 'screw off and leave you alone' with your own phone."

"No, that was Anthy. I felt terrible about it for a long time, too."

"You never said anything."

"She blocked your number before she even gave me my phone back." Sophia explained, "Told me to let you go once and for all instead of dragging it out like I had been. Anthy wasn't a skater so she didn't know who you were. To her, you were 'just some clingy ex who wouldn't move on.'"

Viktor paused, unsure how to respond to that. His eyes went down and to the side a little though.

Yuri just glared from where he was still sitting on the bench. When he saw his partner's head turn, he rose to stand and wrapped his arms around the man, continuing to glare at the woman who'd spoken the words. If he were a cat, his ears would be flat against his head and he'd be spitting hisses by then, but since he wasn't, all he could do was stare.

"Her words, not mine." Sophia explained, not that it made much difference, "Anyway...Linette was supposed to be here with me to do all the actual talking, but she got strep-throat and hasn't been fit to come, leaving me to do this by myself. I tried to get off the hook, but her boss was too excited about the whole thing to let me go. Next thing I knew, they had posted a big ad on the site about you being here, and I was told that if I bailed, it would make the network look bad, which could cost me professionally."

"You've been mostly avoiding me since you got here." Viktor pointed out, patting where Yuri's arms came around him so he could let go, "I overheard how you'd keep going out of your way to make sure we never ran into each other, especially after we did yesterday."

She sighed and nodded, "I thought if I avoided you, I wouldn't get in trouble later. No one can say I wasn't here, but you're perpetually swamped by ISU and actual sports media...if a little local journalist couldn't get close, that wouldn't be my fault."

"No one would believe that." The Russian huffed, crouching down on one side as the opposite leg stretched out next to him.

"Maybe."

"Do you really hate me so much that you'd put your career at risk just to avoid talking to me?"

"I don't hate you."

Yuri got anxious again, *Here it comes...*

"Then why be so passionately against meeting with me?" Viktor asked, casually sliding over to switch legs, fingers balancing him on the ground as he looked down.
Sophia got pensive again, turning side-face, "I never wanted to leave you to begin with. But you were falling apart when my knee thing happened. You never wanted to admit it, but you only ever had one true love in the world, and that was the ice. Who was I to stand between you and that?"

The woman's choice of words made Yuri think back on things Viktor had told him. When he saw the man's eyes glancing back at him just then though, and then felt one hand coming to rest on, and gently squeeze his knee, he knew it was true.

...He loves me more than skating.

The younger skater softly returned the gesture by placing his own hand over his husband's, then let him take it back so he could keep doing his exercises.

Sophia looked up at the ceiling, "I tried to move on after that...found someone else for a little while, tried to start a family, got a regular job that entirely took my mind off of what had happened before...but Linette just brought it all back. Even after all this time, I knew I'd eventually have to face it. I just didn't think I'd have to do it alone."

"What did you think was going to happen? That I'd beg to have you back?" Viktor said, almost too stiffly for anyone's tastes, "And you'd have to find some way of saying no, like it was so hard for you?"

"I don't know that I would say no if you did." She answered, equally as rigid, "But you're already married so what difference does it make?"

"None, I guess."

"Would you have wanted to pick things up again?"

"That's a shitty thing to ask when Yuri's right there." Yurio pointed out, not even looking up from where he was leaning down against one out-stretched leg.

"No, I wouldn't have...and I don't." Viktor answered rather quickly, like it took no thought at all. His response took Sophia by surprise, but not Yuri; though he was glad to hear it. The not-really-a-reporter watched quietly as the Russian stood back up again to tug an arm in front of his chest and pull on his shoulder, "No?"

"The fact that I'm in love with Yuri now doesn't change the fact that you threw me out before." He explained, keeping his eyes down as he rolled that shoulder before pulling the other in front of himself, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result. What would I have gained from trying to restart a relationship that had already failed once before? I would've spent the entire time worrying you'd just do the same thing to me again at the slightest hint of a problem." He paused for emphasis, but then stared at the woman straight-on, "I can't trust you the way that I did back then."

The words stung, and Sophia looked a little hurt, but she shook it off as well as she could, "Then why the tears yesterday?"

"You hurt me in a way that no one else ever had. Seeing you just reminded me of that pain, and for a little while, those wounds were fresh again. That's all."

"...Oh."

"The ice rink is now open to all athletes of Men's Singles Group 1. Will Group 1 please make their
way down to the arena floor." An announcement came through the overhead speakers.

Viktor rotated both arms in slow windmills, then twisted his back a little bit before turning to his husband, "Time to go."

"Mh."

The Russian looked back over his shoulder as Yuri rose from the bench, "I'll do your interview after my Free Skate, if you want."

"...Okay."

"À tout de suite." He said simply, then turning away to put his hand lightly to the small of Yuri's back as they headed with Yurio and Yakov to the rink-side doors.
Chapter 123

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED TWENTY THREE

The Patinoire seating area was almost entirely empty still at that point, save for the scattered event staffers who were making one last check for trash and readiness after clearing it out after the previous event. Spotlights and speakers were being tested as the members of Group 1 poured out to rink-side, and its skaters were starting to shuffle out onto the ice.

Viktor held back until everyone else was out there, waiting until Yuri found a spot to set down the poodle-plush tissue box and water bottle. Yurio was already on the ice, skating past to hand off his blade-guards to Lilia before pushing out towards center. Mikhail was making his way up the stairs of the stadium-style seating to find a pair of seats with a decent view of the rink and the huge screens above it. When Yuri looked up at him, he could see the man texting someone on his phone, and assumed it was Minako.

The Russian pulled the badge and lanyard off from around his neck and wrapped it over his partner's, and then slipped his long-coat off to give that over as well. Underneath was revealed to be a slim black coat, entirely covering the upper 2/3rds of the costume.

Yuri shook his head and laughed, "Yeah, that's much better than the shower curtain from Worlds." He folded the long-coat over his arm gingerly, "I wonder where you got the idea for this?"

"Some guy at an Exhibition somewhere." Viktor answered, looking himself over to see that the tails of the coat covered as much as they could. Without the fog-coat, some of the outfit was revealed; folded and 'tattered' sheer material in red, yellow, and orange with black and gold rhinestones mixed throughout, making it look like flames that reached down to his calves, coming to a singular point behind him. A small section of dark grey and then black sheer material could be seen layered overtop of the fire-like colors, but the rest was obscured by the long coat-tails of the cover-jacket. Pants were black as well, but when Viktor reached down to fold the skate-covers over his boots, the material revealed itself to look like molten cracks through obsidian, trailing up to just under his knees, "The gloves and choker are in my coat, but I'll get all them later."

"What's all this supposed to represent?" Sophia wondered quietly.

"My Freeskate theme is Rage." Viktor explained, tugging a little at the end of his coat's sleeves to pull them over the crest of his wrists, skate-guards clunking softly as he made his way to the rink doors, "The song I chose represents that emotion through the four major elements of nature. What you can see is the fire and earth aspect, but there's nods to water and air as well. Just not as much. You'll see."

"...Rage...?" She repeated, leaning over the barrier as she watched the pair walking away.

When Viktor finally paused at the doorway, leaning onto Yuri's shoulder as he pulled his blade-guards off, she saw the younger skater whispering something. Viktor held still for a moment, stopping in the middle of his task as he was nodding, and then finally pushed to get the other rubber bar and step out onto the ice. He came back around immediately, as though Yuri wasn't finished yet, and said something in return that no one else could hear before stroking the younger man's cheek and taking off. Yuri seemed quite pleased with himself as he started coming back, almost but not quite skipping as he went by the older woman.

Her dark-blue eyes watched him go, but then went back out to watching the figure skaters who were
actually on the ice, and she recognized where Viktor was starting to do a few easy jumps to warm
up. Only doubles at first, then easing into a few triples. It took a few passes, but once there was
enough clearance from the others, Viktor raised his right arm to signal to the woman to pay close
attention.

"Here he goes." Yuri commented, resting on the rink wall about 6 feet away from her.

The Russian belted into it quickly, picking up speed as he headed into the corner closest to them,
then flipped around to face forward and threw himself into the jump. Four and a half super-human
rotations later, he landed facing backwards again, dipping down low almost like a Salchow, and then
slid off again.

It always made Yuri's heart race to see the jump. He'd never failed to see the Russian land it, but it
was such an impossible maneuver that he always had a twinge of hesitation when Viktor left the ice.

"...That was always the difference between him and all the other skaters." Sophia commented
quietly, hardly even surprised, watching the legend go through the paces of a few spin combos. Yuri
raised his eyes towards her, but said nothing as she finished her thought, "It always seemed like
Viktor could fly. By comparison, all other skaters look like they have rocks tied to their feet. I used to
think he was part bird...as though his secret was that he actually had hollow bones, so he wasn't as
heavy as the rest of us."

There wasn't anything that came to mind, so Yuri remained quiet, returning his eyes to where his
husband was skimming across the ice. He had the itch to go out and join him, but his skates were still
in their hotel room, so he pushed the thought away.

I wonder why Chris isn't down here yet?

"...So..." Sophia started again, as though she were actually trying to start a conversation with him,
"...How...long have you guys been together?"

Yuri glanced at her, past where he held his head up on his chin in the palm of one hand, "In thought
or in practice...?"

"Oh, it happened like that with you, too?"

He grimaced at her, but tried not to let the comparison bother him, "Viktor considered us an item
almost as soon as he came to Hasetsu to be my coach. So, for him, it'll be 2 years in May."

"And for you?"

The young skater thought on it a moment, "I'm not sure there was a specific time for when I thought
about us that way. I've been fascinated by him since I was a kid...so, it was a transition between
loving him as a celebrity like everyone else, and loving him like a partner. I think I only slowly
awakened to it over the span of time that he was my coach." He looked down at where his right hand
hung off the inside edge of the wall, turning it palm-up to look at the shine of gold on his finger, "By
this time last year, when he had to return to Japan to take care of an emergency with his dog, I
realized I couldn't stand to be apart from him. He met me at the airport in Fukuoka and I asked him to
stay by my side until I retired from skating. He commented that it sounded like a marriage proposal. I
guess that's when I got the idea to get him a gold ring, in case I failed to get him a gold medal at the
GP Final."

"So it wasn't him that proposed." She clarified.

"Actually..." Yuri smiled to himself at the memory of it, "When I got the rings, I hadn't thought of it
as actually being an engagement. Viktor turned it into one when a friend of mine mistook us for married already. The rings were meant as a thank you, and a birthday present for him. Most of the skating world just thought they were good luck charms for the longest time. By the time the Final was over, and we were back in Hasetsu, Viktor went out of his way to make the engagement official."

"I don't just want to coach you until you retire, because you can't skate forever, so it just sets a clock until we part ways. I want so much more than that. ...Do you want more than that from me?"

"You...you really want to...to marry me...?"

"Will you?"

"It was surreal to me for the longest time." Yuri went on, telling the story almost more for himself than for the woman standing nearby, "I idolized him for years, but was always too scared to talk to him when we were at the same events. Then...there he was, out of the blue, saying he was my coach. Then he was my fiancé...and then, finally, my husband." His cheeks had flushed by then, "He'll always be my hero, though. If I was going to jump the fence for anyone, it'd be for him."

"So you've been with women before, too?"

Yuri fell off his hand, but regained himself and gawked at her, "N-no!" He protested, "...No... He...Viktor got all my firsts."

Why am I telling her all this stuff? It's like she's making a checklist between us or something.

"YUUUUUUUURI!" He heard a woman calling from afar.

Yuri turned his head towards the sound of the woman's voice and found Minako there on the railing of the second floor at the north end of the rink, waving at him with her 'Vikturi' flag. "Minako-sensei!" He quickly took the invitation as an easy way to flee, and rushed around to the nearest set of stairs to get up to her.

Minako did much the same thing, meeting the young skater as he came bounding up the first set of stadium steps through the seating area, "We missed you yesterday! What happened? I've heard all sorts of crazy stories!"

"They're probably half-true, if what Mikhail said is the same for everyone." He answered, catching his breath a little, "Everything's fine now though."

"So one of Viktor's old girlfriends isn't really here...?"

"Well, that's the half-true part, I guess." Yuri said, quieter than before, and thumbing down at the rink-side area, "The lady there with the platinum-blonde hair is her."

"You seem strangely calm about that." She deadpanned him as she was folding the flag over her arm, "Or did I just miss the fire?"

"There really wasn't all that much of a fire, actually." He explained, gesturing for her to continue walking with him so they could get to where he knew Mikhail had seats already.

"MINAKO-SENSEEEEEEEL!" They heard Viktor calling from the ice, and she waved at him as he did the same in turn.

"Watch where you're skating!"
"HAAAAAAAAI!"

Sophia watched the exchange quietly.

Yuri huffed a laugh, turning onto the stairs that lead up to the third floor, and the last row of first-section seats before the nosebleed section, "Mikhail told us to stay off Instagram for a while, so neither of us is really sure what's been said...but he told us some people are speculating that Viktor was going to leave me over this lady. We're planning something to get them all back and cement the fact that it isn't going to happen, no matter who shows up."

"Yeah? What are you going to do?"

"Viktor's agreed to do an interview with her after his Free Skate, and he won't go without me, so there's that. Plus, we're pretty sure he'll be in the Exhibition later tonight, so we're going to change over from him doing his solo show to us doing one of our new Pair Skates."

Minako was almost fangirling over it, "Ahhh! I can't wait! You've really helped bring out a whole new world of programming from Viktor. I'm really excited about the Team Skate you have planned with the Russian Yuri, too!"

"Same here." He agreed emphatically, letting the woman into the row first so he wouldn't be in her way. When she finally took her seat next to the Russian, Yuri sat on the back-rest of a chair in the lower row and crossed his arms loosely to look at them both, "I've been meaning to ask... This is Yurio's last event before the Final. Are you guys going to be there for Cup of China and NHK? Flying to four different cities is expensive, I know, but..."

"Five." Minako corrected, "We'll be at the Final, too."

"Oh, so you are going to all of them? That's a relief." Yuri held a hand to his chest as he drew in a breath, "Phichit-kun is going to come back to Hasetsu with us after NHK, and then to the Final after that, whether we're all skating in it or not."

"I figured he would be." Minako winked at him, "You two spent years together in Detroit. It'd be a shame if one of you wasn't around for an event being held there."

"That's exactly what I was thinking. We're all really hoping he gets into the Six. Competition this year is really something else."

"That's what you guys get." Mikhail commented, "Phichit created a prophecy and now it's being fulfilled."

"Right?"

"It's funny that you would be at peace with having a problem like this." Minako continued, "A few years ago, you were sweating bullets over getting into the Final at all, and now you've gotten so good at this whole skating thing that you can hardly think of a situation where you wouldn't be going."

"Yeah..." Yuri nodded, turning his upper body a little to look down at the ice, finding his husband soon after, "That's all Viktor's doing though. He lit the fire under my butt and now I can't help but dance over it. He made me promise to win five World Championships, too, so I can't slack off." He turned back and smiled happily, "Besides, he refuses to let me eat katsudon unless I bring home Gold, so if I ever want to taste it again..."

"Aha! Your true motivation reveals itself!" Minako laughed.
"It's true..." Yuri lamented dramatically, "It's not the medals that drive me...it's the promise of that pork cutlet..."

"Well, you better get back down to rink-side. Practice will be over as soon as the arena fills up, and I doubt that'll take long with Viktor going up first. Tell him we said good luck." The woman finished, patting his knee gently as he nodded and rose to stand up again, "Oh, and great job on that song yesterday! I knew it would be good, but wow!"

"Domo!" Yuri bowed his head and clasped his hands together in gratitude, "I'm off!"

Within about 45 minutes, the arena had gotten full to bursting, with dozens of people clambering along the ledges of the second and third-floor when they could no longer find seats. Viktor had come off the ice a while before that though to relax and recover after the quad Axel, sipping lightly at his water bottle. By the time Yuri had returned from talking with Minako, Sophia had wandered away already, finding a seat in the audience since she wasn't part of event staff and wasn't allowed at the rink's edge during the show. It would still be a short while before the competition got underway though; it was only 2:39pm and the show didn't start until 3pm. Group 1 had around 7 skaters in it, so there would be an interlude once they were done to allow Group 2 to practice for a little while, and allow for the ice to get resurfaced.

They finally spotted Chris in the competitor's section of the stands, and waved at him from where they were sitting on the opposite side. He even started a small group chat with them via text.

[So you actually talked to her this time?] He'd asked.

[Yeah, it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be.] Viktor replied. [I think the worst part was hearing my uncle tell us about all the stuff being posted online.]

[Yeah...]

Yuri chimed in after that. [Neither of us has looked since the SP yesterday. Mikhail told us to avoid it, so we've stayed out of it. We have plans to get our revenge though for what we heard is out there.]

[Revenge?]

[We're going to bump up our Pair Skate Exhibition to tonight rather than waiting until NHK. We were originally going to use it as something of a celebratory performance if/when both of us got into the Final Six, but...well, yeah.]

[Makes sense.]

[I guess that means it's pretty sexy then? ;D]

Chris saw Yuri shake his head and laugh, [I wouldn't say it's sexy, but it definitely wouldn't be something we could do if Viktor was planning on leaving me.]

[What Yuri means is that once we're done, there won't be any ice left. It'll all be water. We'll be swimming back to rink-side.] Viktor chimed in.

[I'm counting on it!]

They could hear the sound of the speakers coming to life overhead, and the two skaters lifted their heads together to listen for whatever was about to be said.

"Welcome everyone, or rather, welcome back everyone!" The announcer started, causing the audience to start clapping and cheering, "We're about to get started with the Men's Singles Free
Skate! What say you!?

The clamor exploded with excitement, the volume rising to 11 right away.

"That's what I thought. LET'S NOT WASTE ANYMORE TIME THEN!"

Viktor shook his head and laughed to himself, standing up and reaching for the thin zipper on the front of his figure-hugging coat. Yuri had reached for his fog-coat for the gloves and other accessory, and watched quietly as the jacket came off to reveal the outfit that only he had seen.

The heavy black coat-tail that was revealed looked like magma, rising up through cracks of obsidian just like the pattern on the legs. From the wrists, it looked like cracks of ice, more intense at the ends and fading to slivers just past the elbows. The back and chest were designed to look like the sky of midnight, with 'stars' rising up in the center and becoming more numerous as they crossed over the shoulders, some going down the arms as well.

"These outfits will be a pair, just like our rings." Viktor had explained, revealing the costume to his husband for the first time several months prior, "The crystals will have the same pattern on the front, back, and upper sleeves. I doubt anyone but us would notice, but...I like it! We live and love under the same sky, so why not skate under the same star pattern?"

Yuri had found the whole idea rather flattering, since it was his idea in the first place to make his outfit look the way it did. Getting to use Viktor's tailors back in Russia had been icing on the cake as it was, but to find out Viktor had gone so far as to copy his idea for himself...he was sure his face was red for days after finding out.

With the gloves on, it looked like Viktor's hands were made of ice, matching where the sleeves came out underneath the cuffs to complete the pattern. The gloves themselves had two 'tails' coming off the ends as well, very similarly to Yurio's Agape outfit, but which looked more like streams of water than angel's wings. The 'wind' element came in only as a slight nod at the very end, with a loose choker of thin leather cords coming together to hold onto a downy feather around the skater's neck.

"The ISU is happy to begin this afternoon's event here at Trophée de France! Without further delay, let's get our first competitor onto the ice! Ladies and Gentlemen...representing Russia, VIKTOR NIKIFOROV!"
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED TWENTY FOUR

The crowd erupted into a different sort of cheering...going from simple hoots and hollers to screaming out either Viktor's name, Viktuuri, good luck in various languages, or amplified shrieks that only the most die-hard fangirls could utter. The flags and signs came out in force as well. Viktor caught sight of a few blown-up photos from the wedding photobook, and he smiled to see them.

He made a few lazy laps around the south end of the rink before twisting back to the wall to find his 'coach' for the last moment before starting. He set his curled-up fists on the top part of the barrier and lowered his head, closing his eyes and listening to the roar of the crowd, trying to get into the right frame of mind.

"So...the last year has been pretty crazy, right?" Yuri asked quietly, his voice breaking through the cacophony, reaching the silver skater like no other voice could. He gently set his own hands over his husband's, rubbing the back of each with his thumbs, "A lot of things went down that upset you more than anything else has in the last 20 years..."

Slate eyes opened a little, looking down on where their hands were set in front of him. He focused on the gold he could see on his husband's finger.

"No matter what happens, or how happy I am going into it...I need you to remind me of everything." Viktor said, getting ready to do his first dress rehearsal in the Ice Castle, "I need you to bring me back to the worst moments. I can't do it on my own. Bring it all back to the front of my mind. Make me see it again like it just happened."

"...Viktor..."

"Promise you'll do that for me."

"Promise you'll do that for me."

Yuri looked on quietly, but then reluctantly nodded, "...I promise."

"Something as unintentionally painful as my selfishly suggesting you should stop being my coach so you could come back as a skater... Or as serious as having to deal with your father on the horrible occasion of your mom's death... Getting hit in the eye, to the point where you were almost blinded, and not even for the first time, but the second..." Yuri reached up with his right hand to touch lightly to the side of Viktor's normally-hidden eye, thumbing the faint scars that only he knew were there, "Remember the pain. Remember the feeling of the vodka and blood trailing through your hair and down your face, making your clothes stick to your skin. Remember the moment Konstantin grabbed you by your shirt, and then threw the both of us down into the snow like we were less than nothing..."
He heard the shaky breath being drawn in, and though it pained him to speak of it, he had sworn to go on no matter what.

"Remember the tank in the woods, and finding your first pair of skates, the ones you hid inside it because you were scared Konstantin would destroy them if he ever laid eyes on them. Imagine your life if you’d never escaped, if you’d ended up in the steel mill like he wanted. Think about how different things would be if..." In this case, even Yuri felt the agony rising in him to mention it, "...If we never got to meet."

That forced Viktor's eyes closed again, clenched shut like the sights coming to his mind were too much to bear. He pulled his hands from the rink wall and slid them up around his partner's neck, sliding velvet-soft thumbs up just enough to feel the thrum of Yuri's heartbeat just under his skin. He nodded his head twice, kicked his toe-pick against the rubber wall-guard loudly enough to confuse the audience into briefly going a bit quieter than before, and then pulled away without saying a word.

"...Davai, Viktor..." Yuri whispered, watching the man skate away as rigidly as he'd ever seen him, "...And I'm sorry."

Newscaster Morooka watched the Russian slowly get to center, carefully observing how he held himself. The announcer leaned forward dubiously, and started to speak into the microphone for the television audience, "Skater Viktor is bringing a new emotion to the ice today, as he skates to the furious and violent nature of rage. The years catch up to all of us in the end, he tells us, and the ever-looming fact of retirement has hung over him like the vapor of death. Tonight he skates to 'Evoke' by After Forever. Ladies and Gentlemen...five time consecutive World Champion, Grand Prix Finalist, and European and Russian National Champion...Viktor Nikiforov."

The roar of the audience was slowly fading away in the Russian's mind, keeping his eyes low to the ice as he made wide arcs. When he started to see his own scratches in the frost though, he knew to bring it in, and twisted sharply to finally take his position. He could feel his heart pounding in his head, his fingertips...even his toes. The reminder of everything that had infuriated him over the last year had served its purpose...and even though most of it had been resolved, to an extent, it still felt like it was too much.

Maybe it's just because of how raw I still feel after yesterday. He thought to himself, drawing in a slow, deep breath. He brought his arms up, and then down in front of him, like he was channeling the energy into a ball below his hands.

His eyes closed again, and slowly exhaled.

The music finally began, deceptively calm at first. He popped his head up, opening his eyes as he twisted his right leg away in a wide circle around where he stood, then pushed off backwards, rotating gracefully as his blades left their marks in the ice.

The music exploded then, and he stopped, slamming his right skate into the ice hard in time with the boom, going partway down on one knee with both arms up at his sides. Shards of crystalline ice rose into the air from the impact.

So wild, so beautiful and pure

He raised his arms up above, and then brought them down around himself as he turned and rose back up, the lyrics following him. The left skate slammed down to the second boom.

All elements divine
He swung his right leg out, picking up speed as he rounded the far end of the rink, pushing into a 3-turn.

*The essence of all life*

Quad Lutz right out the gate, timing his landing with the next loud boom in the music.

*So vast, extensive and remote*

He rushed back out in a long line, twisting and weaving his feet across and behind one another, arms coming up and around him.

*Unbridled and erratic*

The envelope was right there in between them, held at the limits of Konstantin's arm's length. Instead of cautiously stepping closer though, Konstantin just barreled forward, closing the distance until he rammed the envelope into the center of Viktor's chest with a speed that surprised all three of them. Viktor had his hands out of his pockets then, the right one up defensively as he stumbled over his own feet in shock at the sudden advance. He didn't fall though, and held his ground.

"...Viktor!" Yuri blanched.

"STAY WHERE YOU ARE." The Russian barked, not taking his eyes off the huge man in front of him.

The younger skater was on edge, but for the next few seconds, no one moved. Even Yakov was unsure what to do, so he stayed put as well.

It only took a second or two for Konstantin to notice the gold shine on one of his son's fingers, and his eyes glanced over to where Yuri had his hands up as well, seeing the matching ring there.

*Savage but glorious*

Viktor lowered down to one knee and spun several times as he slid diagonally across the ice, then rose and kicked off into a triple Flip, triple Loop.

*It bursts, Its energy is stirring*

Layback Ina Bauer into a triple Axel, double toe-loop, triple loop combo.

*It calls, its drawing power*

With his right foot on the ground, Viktor pulled the left out across him and went immediately into an outside spread-Eagle...

*Will enchant us with its might*

...and at the end of it, launched into another triple Axel.

*Its massive spirits bright*
Yuri acted on instinct after that, jumping into the fray to try and put himself between his fiancé and the man who’d grabbed him.

"Don't hurt him!" The small figure pleaded, "Let Viktor go!"

"Yuri!" Yakov called.

It was too late though. His desperate flailing was like a fly on a horse's backside, and it just annoyed the larger man. Konstantin reached his left hand under where his right had grabbed his son, and yanked Yuri clean under it to hold him up again on the other side. Cold slate eyes glared at him, like they could stare straight into his skull and bore a hole into his brain.

Konstantin just sneered, and literally threw Yuri away. The young skater landed with a crunch in the snow and skidded several feet before coming to a painful stop.

"Yuri!"

LET IT FLOW!

He threw himself into a butterfly spin; flying entry into a standard camel spin.

Its endless beauty WILL EVOKE

His arms extended out from himself; layover variant.

A timeless sequence we ALL SHARE

A long reach back to grab his free leg by the blade, pulling it in close to the back of his head to increase speed on the rotation; donut spin with an arm raised.

We cannot break through NOR CONTROL

He finally moved out again, slowing down slightly in time with the music.

But to feel its true soul

Yuri finally collected himself and slowly struggled over to Viktor's side. Viktor just cringed as he tried to push himself up to sitting again.

His father snarled at the both of them, spat a wad at Yuri, hitting him in the face, and then kicked snow over the both of them before finally leaving. He passed Yakov without another word and without looking back.

Yakov scrambled over to Viktor after he was sure Konstantin was gone, "Vitya, are you...?"

The skater was too busy using his cold, wet scarf to wipe the spit off his fiancé's face to answer. He shook terribly as he did so, and Yuri tried to avoid letting him get his own clothing even more dirty for his sake, trying to rub the wet spot off on his sleeve.

"I should never have let you come." Viktor finally said, dropping his arms to his lap.
Dare to concede and to connect

The energy picked up again, and Viktor went into the first step sequence, pushing from one corner of the rink to the other with an intensity that even made the audience feel the burn. The memories were becoming more vivid, playing in front of his eyes like he had only just experienced them a second beforehand.

He knew he'd used the mildest of excuses to inspire his theme officially...the looming threat of retirement did make him angry...but remembering the rest, the true source of his pain and anger...the private torture that he'd endured so soon after bringing Yuri back to St. Petersburg...that was enough to make him forget the ache starting in his legs. All he could feel was the adrenalin surging through him.

Emerging waves and brightened skies

"I know I chastised you fiercely for even suggesting this before...but..." Viktor reached for his finger and pulled the ring off. Sighing, he kissed the gold and put it carefully into the palm of Yuri's hand, cautious to close his partner's fingers overtop of it before encapsulating the whole hand with both of his own.

Yuri was entirely confused, and his chest and throat started to hurt immediately.

"I need you to keep this safe for me." Viktor finally explained, "The last thing I need is for my father to try and take it away, and throw it into the woods. I would never forgive myself if I allowed that to happen when I knew I could protect it. You understand?"

The younger skater nodded, though he shook as he did so, "I do..."

The sun that burns in your eyes

Yuri was feeling as out of breath as Viktor must've been, even though he was just watching from rink-side.

The wind that blows and pounds

It was always different to see the programs on the official field, no matter how many times it'd been done in practice at the Ice Castle. But this time...it wasn't just different in the normal sense. Yuri hadn't wasted his breath before to inspire his partner's fury. He knew that he'd have to save that for the competitions if it was going to have enough of a lasting impact. But now that he'd fulfilled his promise, seeing the man skating like he was fighting a losing battle, kicking, slashing, and punching at targets he couldn't hit; Yuri regretted making that promise at all.

It shines, its energy is whirling

The young skater crossed his arms over the rink wall and settled his chin there, brows furrowed with worry, ...Remember, Viktor, but don't let it consume you... You're just skating now. The war is over.

It fights, will not be interfered with people

.
[At least you had the sense to leave your wife behind.] Konstantin chortled.

Viktor snapped. The world was red.

He felt a searing pain in his right hand as he turned on his heel to cram his fist as hard as he could into the older man's face. He felt the crunch of cartilage under the impact, and saw the droplets of blood that flew away from the site as Konstantin wobbled a little.

"VIKTOR!" Yakov yelled, "What are you thinking!? Get out of there be-

Konstantin was too large to put off balance by a little peck like Viktor's sucker-punch, and he easily reached out with one hand to grab him by the throat as the other came up to set his nose back into place.

Viktor's coach came scrambling up to try and pull them apart, but Konstantin backhanded him in the jaw and sent him sprawling to the mud, then turned his attention back to the man in his grip. He put his thumb over one nostril, blew a snort to clear it, and then did the same with the other.

[So at least you had some balls in the end.] He taunted, holding tight even as Viktor was trying to hit his arm for release, [But maybe it's just that, between you and your girlfriend, you had half a ball between you. Did you borrow it to come out here?]

[...Yuri...is a better man than you ever were...] Viktor said, trying to draw breath when he could, [You're just...an animal...!]

Konstantin shrugged, and used sheer brute force to push Viktor down to his knees by his throat. That massive bear-arm came up after that, and Viktor would only watch in horror as the world turned to slow motion.

He felt the first crack against his eye, but not the second, and he went sprawling to the ground after that.

.

Who can't feel, it is all nature's flow

Yurio was watching close by, but he had his ear-buds in so he could focus. There was no doubt that he could still hear, or at least feel the music, even if he was trying not to listen to it. Yakov and Lilia were watching the show as well.

LET IT FLOW

Viktor made a wide, slightly-spinning arc around the north end of the rink, one arm above his head as the lyric was sung. He was on the threshold of the second half of the program, and he'd saved his two remaining quads for the 10% point bonus therein. The flashes of memory in his mind were sending a new surge of energy through him, overriding his love of the sport with an intense, all-encompassing hatred that made his very heart hurt to feel it.

It's endless beauty WILL EVOKE

.

Yakov looked uneasy as he watched Viktor rise back up to his full height, even as Yuri threw both arms around him in greeting, saying all the expected things to welcome him back. When Yuri finally looked up again though, finally able to see past the bangs that covered the opposite side of his
fiancé's face, he saw true 'rewards' of the afternoon's events.

The skin behind those strands of silver-grey hair was red, shiny, and swollen. Further inspection lead Yuri to see that there were a few deep cuts around the eye socket and cheek, black in the dark of the night, and a single slate-blue eye looking back at him through a pool of dark red. Whatever had gotten Viktor's hair wet earlier had smeared the blood around his face and left faded, crusty red streaks down his chin and neck.

The gentle skater couldn't handle it, and he fainted right there in Viktor's arms without a word.

Viktor kicked a leg out, then dipped low into a sit spin, raking his right toe-pick across the ice and sending shards flying away from him as he went. He stretched his left arm out behind him, the other gently touching to the top of his head as he spun.

A timeless sequence we ALL SHARE

Both arms came around as he straightened out again, sticking his free leg out in front of him and crouching overtop of it as he continued. Within a few rotations, the free leg bent again, pinned over his knee as both arms lifted out to the sides.

We cannot break through NOR CONTROL

He rose again and stood straight up, waving his arms and twisting his core as he moved to get back around the shorter end of the rink and return to center.

But to feel its true soul...

Quad Toe-loop, triple Salchow. The speed of coming out of the landing lent well to starting the next step sequence, moving in a serpentine formation from one end of the rink to the other. The 'fight' from before looked more like a 'retreat' this time.

Its endless beauty will evoke
A timeless sequence we all share

Yurio pulled out one of his ear-buds as he watched the display in front of him. It was becoming more and more obvious that the reasons for Viktor's fury on the ice weren't what the newscasters had been claiming. His eyes turned over to where Yuri was waiting by the rink-side doorway, and how he was hardly blinking.

We cannot break through nor control
We should cherish it

Viktor kicked away the snow with his boot and emptied the bags into the muddy pit, pulled some matches from his pocket, and tossed them down into the pile, lighting them one at a time. It wasn't long before the fabric caught fire, and black smoke rose into the sky. He watched closely as the fibers singed and curled, taking to flame and withering away into black dust.

Yuri watched quietly from the concrete stairs behind him, leaning over the bottom railing like he had when they'd FaceTimed with Chris before the Euro Championship.

"Everything on the ice is a display of love." Viktor suddenly said, getting his attention away from the
bellowing smoke, "Except when it isn't."

"When it...isn't?"

"The opposite of love is hate. I'm going to create a program that no one's ever seen me do before, and I'm going to show the world all the hate I have trapped inside me."

LET IT FLOW!

Viktor threw himself forward, skidding halfway across the ice on his knees, bending way backwards as he went, arms up over his head. When he slowed, he twisted into a kneeling spin, using the momentum to rise back up to his feet and slide out to the side. The final jump of the program was coming up, and the audience was ready for it.

Oddly, the Russian's mind went back to the last World Championship in that moment. All he could think of was how he'd fallen the last time he'd done his signature move in competition...and how he'd been so embarrassed and angry about flubbing it that he couldn't even look his new husband in the eyes as he came off the ice. His eyes narrowed and he resigned himself to this different kind of fury.

LET IT FLOW!

Quad flip; hands on hips instead of pulled in. Perfect landing.

The audience roared and screamed with excitement.

Viktor could feel his right leg wanting to give out, but he stuck the landing and continued on like the wobble hadn't happened. There were only a few seconds left.

This endless beauty will evoke

Combination spin...camel entry, then dropping down into a donut sit-spin variant with arms bent up in front of a down-tilted head.

A timeless sequence we all share

Seamless foot-change to continue with a different sit-spin, head lifted up this time, hands out in a 'giving' gesture. He grabbed the blade where his free leg was pinned beneath him, and slowly started to rise up again.

We cannot break through, no control

Blade still in his grasp, he rose to his full height, free hand over his chest as he lowered his face slightly. He then kicked the free leg out and brought both hands in across himself to increase speed.

It is not in our command...

Arms were up above his head in the final scratch-spin.

...NO!

Right leg went out as both bent slightly, digging into the ice to stop and come into the final position. The music was gone by then, and Viktor could finally feel the cold sweat on his forehead. His lungs quickly burst into flames. It was only after all that, that he heard the audience starting to fade in.
Did I finish? I forget what happened...

Looking around, the stadium came in and out of focus. He was still dizzy from the final spin, and wobbled until he was down on one knee trying to catch his breath, one hand on the ice to keep him steady.

It wasn't that uncommon for skaters to drop a little at the end of their programs; Yuri had seen both Yurio and Phichit do so during their own events. Seeing Viktor do it was a bit weird though for him.

"...C'mon Viktor...get up..."

"Absolutely unbelievable!" Morooka was yelling into the microphone, not even sure if he could be heard over the cheering of the crowd in the stands behind him, "With a performance like that, even with only three quads, can anyone really say Viktor was taking it easy!? He just set the bar for the rest of the afternoon! A true Master of the Ice!"

The Russian finally pushed to standing again, feeling weak and cold all over. He kept his sights low as he made his way wearily to the rink exit, looking up only as he crossed the threshold and felt someone latching onto him. He brought his left hand down from where he was rubbing his eyes and found his husband there.

"I did it..." He said between heavy breaths, "I didn't fall this time."

"You completely killed it!" Yuri beamed, pulling back again to offer his partner the water he needed. Viktor wrapped his arm around his husband's back as he took a quick drink and then traded the vessel for his blade-guards. Yuri watched him curiously, "...You okay? I thought you'd be a bit happier."

"Just starting to regret that I agreed to do that interview right away." He answered, letting Yuri hobble him towards the kiss and cry, "I just want to sit and not move for a while."

Hazel eyes blinked at the man, but nodded and quietly moved him over to the couch. Viktor lazily pulled on the figure-hugging black coat, hunching over himself and taking back the water soon thereafter. It still hurt to breathe for a while, and Yuri watched over him without saying anything, simply rubbing his back gently while they waited for his score.

I shouldn't have had him remind me of everything right away... Viktor thought, looking at the magma pattern on his skate covers.

The feeling of Yuri's arm over his back reminded him suddenly of the reddish-pink claw-marks that were still there, and he finally allowed himself to huff a quiet laugh through his panting. Closing his eyes, he leaned over and set his forehead into the crook of Yuri's neck and shoulder, letting him hold him up instead of forcing himself to do it on his own.

The younger figure embraced him fondly, "You'll probably out-score your last GP Final with this. Your performance was unreal. I don't think anyone's going to be able to top you today."

"Really?" Viktor echoed, "No one? That's disappointing..."

It took Yuri a moment...but when he understood, his cheeks went pink. He gawked at the man as well he could, given how Viktor wasn't looking at him, "Well, at least you didn't lose your sense of humor out there."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED TWENTY FIVE

Earlier in the Year - September

Viktor had skated around the Ice Castle more than half a dozen times, not really saying anything, and not really paying attention to his surroundings either. Yuri was watching quietly from rink-side with the triplets...and they'd given up recording the silver Russian long ago for his lack of really doing anything.

"...Is he sick?" Loop wondered, leaning closer to Yuri with a hand over her mouth to hide her voice.

"I dunno. He's just been that way since we got here." He answered, equally as quietly, though not bothering with the hand, "He said he wanted to practice his Free Skate and told me to wait here till he was done."

"He never started though." Axel pointed out, her arms crossed over where she sat on the rink wall.

"I know."

"Come to think of it..." Lutz put a finger over her chin, "He's never actually done the whole thing in one go, has he?" She turned her head to Yuri as she spoke the words.

"No."

"Why?" All three asked at once.

"I dunno!" He answered, practically cowering beneath the bombardment.

His eyes suddenly opened again when he heard a crack against the ice that he hadn't expected, and the girls looked out as well.

Viktor had stopped skating entirely, but it wasn't a normal kind of 'stop.' He'd gone down into a sit-spin position, right leg far out to the side, toe-pick against the frost. By the look on his face, and the position of his arms...it looked like he'd expected to still be turning, "Ah...that's not right at all." He grumbled to himself.

"Viktor...?"

The Russian stood up again and surveyed the ice directly around him, crossing one arm over his chest as the other came up to set a finger over his mouth, "Mmmh...no..."

"...What are you trying to do?" Yuri asked, loud enough to be heard this time.

"Hm?" Blue eyes came up to meet him, but then turned away again, "Oh. It's nothing."

It wasn't nothing. I get what he was trying to do now. That's why he made me bring up all those
horrible memories right before he skated.

Yuri thought back on the moment his partner had raked the ice so hard with his sit-spin entry that ice flew away from him in a full circle, like a hockey-style power-stop. In that case though, it with the toe-pick instead of the heel, and without the intention of stopping at all. He gouged the ice and kept on spinning, like it was no more of an obstacle than the air itself.

He lacked the motivation before, the anger to energize a move like that so it wouldn't stop the turn.

Hazel eyes went up to where Viktor was looking at his skates, watching as he idly reached down to flick away some of the lingering frost by the blade guards.

He wanted to leave a mark on the ice...something deep, like the mark that had been left on him.

The Russian had finally caught his breath by then, and had the tip of the water bottle pinched lightly between his teeth, holding onto it like some paper-pusher might loosely bite down on a pen. They were still anxiously waiting for his score.

"I didn't overdo it, did I?" Yuri finally let himself ask.

Viktor let go of the plastic nub and looked up, "What do you mean?"

"Reminding you about everything. You were just...really intense out there."

"That was the point though."

Yuri hesitated, but then nodded reluctantly, "Mh...

The Russian wasn't terribly convinced that Yuri had been satisfied by the answer, but the kiss and cry wasn't exactly the best place to get into it, so he stayed quiet.

"The score for Viktor Nikiforov..."

"Oh wow, finally." The young 'coach' sighed, and both lifted their heads to listen for it.

"216.51."

Yuri blinked at it in disbelief, "...What...? That's it...?"

"...It's not a bad score." Viktor shrugged, "It's in line with what I used to get."

"Yeah, what you used to get...that's like me being satisfied with my 11th place 'victory' at my last Nationals." Yuri grumbled, pulling out his phone and looking something up. He had a sneaking sense that something wasn't quite right with the total, and when he found what he was looking for, he rubbed his temple with his free hand, "Yeah, you literally came within 1/100th of a point to your last GP Final score. See?" He held up the screen so Viktor could look, and the man lightly touched his fingers to the bottom of it as he glanced at it, "You got 335.76 back then, but only 335.75 now."

"Yuri..." The silver skater lowered his hand from where he'd reached to steady the phone, and reached instead to touch it to his husband's chin, "It's my first event of the Grand Prix. I was taking it easy with a reduced-difficulty program. Coming so close to my last Final score just means I'll beat it when I get to this Final, and bring my Free Skate back up to four quads again." He leaned forward to rise back up to his full height, taking Yuri's hand as he went and pulled him along.

"So you're actually going to?" The shorter figure wondered, having to crane his head up a little to find his partner where his skate-assisted height had made him so much taller than normal.
"I'm still thinking about it. We'll see how I feel after the Exhibition."

"Next on the ice...also representing Russia, Yuri Plisetsky."

The older Yuri was almost caught off guard by the announcement, having gotten too much into his own head about everything to remember that his Russian counterpart was up immediately after Viktor. He caught sight of the young Punk out the corner of his eye, and quickly bolted forward as he saw black blades stepping out onto the ice, "Yuri!"

Green eyes came back, and the teen turned side-face with one blade on the rink, wondering what was going on, "What?"

Without hesitation, Yuri threw his arms over the Tiger's shoulders, "Davai!"

The Free Skate outfit was a stark departure from the black, red, and magenta one-piece ensemble from the previous year. It was all black this time, with skin-tight sleeves of sheer pale material that well matched Yurio's complexion, each adorned with the patterns of skulls, snakes, roses, and other melancholy imagery, making it look like full-length tattoos. The tattered remains of a black sleeveless t-shirt clung to his lanky frame, looking quite similar to the one he wore for his previous GP Final Exhibition, but much better fit to his figure. He had the same black leather pants, though now they had ripped-up strips hanging off the sides, exposing the pale skin beneath along the outside of his legs.

"...What's all this for? You're not leaving, are you?" Yurio wondered pensively, returning the hug briskly with his free arm before any of his fangirls could see it and be inspired for later.

"Unfortunately, we are..." Yuri answered quietly, pulling back again but keeping his hands where his arms had been, "Viktor agreed to do that interview, remember?"

"...You didn't see my Free Skate in Calgary either though."

The older figure could feel the weight of his guilt piling up, and he sighed, lowering his head, "I know, I was on that call with Yuu-chan...I'm sorry... If it were any other kind of interview then I'd stay, but..."

"...Whatever. It's fine." Yurio grumbled quietly, turning his head and pulling out onto the ice without another word.

Yuri felt even worse after that, watching the blonde skating away to get his last words from Lilia and Yakov. It didn't get any better even after he felt Viktor step up behind him to slide an arm over his shoulder and chest; he held his poodle tissue-box in the other hand, having retrieved it while the two Yuris spoke.

The younger skater just brought his hands up to hold the arm in front of himself and lowered his eyes, "...I forgot that I still hadn't seen his Free Skate."

"You'll see it at the Final, don't worry."

"Can't we put off the interview until after?" The younger man turned his head to look up at his husband, "Isn't he more important?"

"It's not that he isn't important." Viktor explained, "But he knows as well as any of us that when we're done our shows, we get off rink-side to prevent people from being distracted. It's no different than putting in your ear-buds before going out onto the ice... You're not doing it because you don't like the other guys' music, you're doing it so you can focus on yourself. I'm blowing off a bunch of
official interviews for this one, too. But Sophia unblocked my number and is texting about where to meet, so...

"...So what? She waited 8 years. She can wait another 30 minutes."

"...Yuri...?"

Barely a sigh for an answer.

Viktor huffed discontentedly and started pulling his 'coach' towards the curtain that lead into the prep area, giving one last wave to the crowd before vanishing through it so they could turn their attention back to where it should be.

The music came on rather quickly after that, muffled by the barrier but still easy to hear.

[Black Veil Brides - In The End...there's an AMV for Assassin's Creed Unity that has an extended opening sequence for the song. I listen to that one when I imagine this program, cuz the violins at the start are amazing. Also the speech is neat... ...And stuff.]

"Your face is going to get stuck like that." Viktor warned playfully, trying to lighten the mood as he looked at the sour expression Yuri had put on.

"Mmh..."

"I know you don't want to go. You don't have to if you'd rather stay."

"That's entirely not the point..." Yuri growled, looking at the floor as Viktor continued to shuffle him forward. He finally had enough though and pulled himself free, gesturing back at the curtain when his partner looked back, "He means more to us than she does, so why aren't we staying to support him?"

"Because I said I'd do this after my Free Skate, and we're leaving tomorrow?"

"You said you'd choreograph Yurio's senior debut and forgot."

Viktor side-eyed him, "As nice as it would be to conveniently forget that I'd agreed to this interview, I can't use the passage of time, or the unexpected discovery of my future spouse, as an excuse. I literally just made this arrangement. I can handle this...it's just a chat about skating. Why don't you stay and watch Yurio?"

"Because I love you and I don't want you to go alone!" Yuri protested, "Whatserface is still into you!"

"Who wouldn't be? Look at me." Viktor mused, holding up his hands to frame around himself.

Yuri gave the man an incredulous look, but his attempts at trying not to smile were futile, "That's not fair! I'm trying to be serious!"

"Just go out there and watch his Free Skate. You can meet up with me again later." The Russian held his partner's shoulders and started pushing him back towards the curtain, "We're not going anywhere private...I told her I'd do it in the lobby, where a hundred people a minute are passing by. What could go wrong?"

"Everything could go wrong Viktor! Mikhail already said people were speculating! What would it say if you talked to her alone!?"
"You've already missed the entire first half of the show. If you don't go now then you'll miss the rest, too. It's two minutes."

Yuri was panicking where he stood, lightly bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet as he looked from the curtain to his husband and back again several times. Just as he felt like he was on the verge of deciding to stay, even if it meant hauling ass as soon as it was over, he heard the familiar jingle of his husband's phone and turned his head. It wasn't difficult to see that it was Sophia's name on the chat window, and Yuri growled at it severely.

"What? I already told you she texted me..." The Russian looked at him curiously.

"You already added her to your contact list? When did you even have time?"

"She was always on my contact list. I never changed phone numbers, and it doesn't look like she did either."

"But why wouldn't you delete her after she...?"

"I never delete people."

"... Eh? Wouldn't it just be a bad reminder when you scroll past her?"

"What's worse...seeing her name when I'm looking at a list, or deleting her, and then unintentionally answering her phone-call because I didn't recognize her number?"

Yuri gawked at him, "...You and your logic..."

"You're just anxious." Viktor mused, mussing his husband's hair a little before thunking off again in his skate-guards, "Let's just get it over with. We better be away from this area before Yurio is done anyway, otherwise he'll be mad at both of us more than he already is. We'll make it up to him later somehow."

The not-really-a-coach sighed and nodded, reaching for where Viktor held his hand out and taking it nervously. The way out to the entrance area was a proverbial land-mine of official sports and ISU press, and Yuri watched and listened as Viktor carefully declined them, saying he'd be back later and to take a rain-check until then. The more Yuri heard it, the more he wished they could use them as an excuse to delay everything even longer...but in the end, he didn't think his heart could take it much more anyway.

When they finally got out to the main lobby, Viktor glanced around and eventually spotted the platinum-blonde mane of hair through the crowd. There were a few fans walking around in the area, some even coming rushing up to beg for photos and autographs, not having expected to see the man trying to 'leave' right after his program. Yuri found himself having to do the declining in that case.

...I feel sick having to do this. He thought bitterly to himself, 'Viktor Nikiforov is always nice to his fans'..."

"We just have to do this quick thing and then we'll be back, I swear." Yuri said aloud, trying to make a path as well as he could.

Viktor might've quipped about his partner's anxiety, but it was becoming more and more apparent that he himself was probably feeling it the most between them. He couldn't take his eyes off of where he knew he had to go, looking through the small group of people like they weren't even there. His fingers tightened a little around where he still held to his husband's hand, and moved reluctantly forward.
It was only then that he noticed the side of his left eye starting to twitch a little where it was hidden behind his bangs. He swallowed and drew in a breath.

"...Okay...I'm ready." He finally said, coming up to where the trio was pensively waiting, "Let's do it."
The chosen spot was next to one of the main lengths of floor-to-ceiling windows that adorned the front of the building. In the center was a circular coffee table of silver metal with a glass top. Surrounding it was a huge donut-shaped couch, divided into 3 sectionals. One of the sections had been moved out of the way to make room for the tripod and off-camera crew.

Sophia stood quietly nearby, looking through a small stack of index cards, shuffling through them with nervous hands.

"Skater and coach have arrived." Viktor announced, trying his best to look and act normally. He looked to the trio, "Where should I go?"

"Anywhere you like. We'll work around your preferences." Sophia explained, gesturing to the two sections of the couch in front of the camera.

The silver Russian avoided looking at the two techs as he slid between the seats and the glass-top table, pulling Yuri along gently until he was near the center of the couch, and then sat down. The cushions dipped fairly low though, and with the blade-guards and skates, Viktor had to sit sideways with his knees pointing towards where Sophia would be sitting, which forced him to turn his back to his partner. He propped his right arm up against the back of the couch and curled it back to lightly rest his cheek against his knuckles, looking back over his shoulder like he didn't know what else to do.

Yuri didn't complain though, he just sat where he could and waited, trying not to clench his teeth too hard.

The nervous woman looked down at him from where she was standing on the other side of the table, "...Y-Yuri...you don't have to be on camera if you don't want to be." She moved in to take her own place directly opposite her interviewee, sitting on the end of the couch where the two halves parted, "You look a little...ah...strange there, sitting by yourself almost. I'm only asking Viktor questions anyway."

Brown eyes glanced upwards to look at her past Viktor's back-turned shoulder, and then down again, and Yuri hesitantly stood up, "...Oh, okay."

He started making his way down the end of the circular sectional, and Viktor pensively watched him go. His eye twitched again under his bangs, but he kept his face as still as stone.

"Ahhh noooo Yuri what are you doing, get back here!

The younger skater was maybe 5 feet away when he abruptly rounded the immediate end of the sectional and came walking back up behind it instead, squeezing through where it was almost right up against the glass. Two sets of blue eyes watched in confusion as Yuri came up to the foot-wide space between the two sets of couches, and abruptly sat down again, this time in front of his husband, and thus between them.

"I'll sit here." He said, almost nonchalantly.
Viktor felt his heart skip a beat in relief, and he dipped his head a little as he drew in a quick breath. He wouldn't even hazard a glance at Sophia as he stretched his right arm out just behind Yuri's head; his left arm moved to settle his hand on his husband's thigh. He felt a little more at ease after that, especially when Yuri nestled in a little closer, lifting his left leg to settle it over where his own were curved against the seat cushions, skates folded neatly under the table. By the time the raven-haired skater was done, he was shoulder-to-chest with his husband, and Viktor curled his arm up around the man's head to idly play with his hair.

"I hope it's okay like this." Yuri finished, giving a 'pleasant' look that clearly defined that moment as being the only way the interview would be 'okay.'

"Oh...uhm...well, I suppose...yes, this is fine." Sophia finally said, looking down again at where her shaky hands were trying not to drop the cards.

That, Yuri noticed, and suddenly he felt a little bad for imposing himself...just not enough to make him move. Viktor had his fingers woven through the hair on the crown of his head anyway, and who was he to deny him that?

She'll do the interview like this or she won't get one at all. I have to stand my ground on this one, or I'll never be able to face myself again...

[We're ready to start when you are, Soph.] The camera guy said, looking at the view-finder panel on the side of the camera. Beside him, the audio tech was holding up the microphone with its fuzzy grey muffler.

[Okay...] She nodded, looking from them back to the cards again. She cleared her throat, then looked to the pair, "Well, Linette gave me these so I'd know what to ask...so, I guess...let's start."

The crowd of fans that had been spurned before had, instead, gathered around in the background to watch the interview. Many were recording it themselves, and others were taking a few photos.

[We're rolling. You can begin anytime.]

Sophia drew in a nervous breath, and tried to pry her eyes away from the cards. The words on them were going in and out of focus as her heart pounded in her chest. She shook her head and tried to compose herself. The first few lines of the interview were easy enough. She'd said them half a hundred times for other skaters she'd talked to over that weekend.

[This is Sophia Belmonte with France 22, broadcasting from beautiful Bordeaux, on the banks of the Garrone River in the southwest of France. At this time I am joined by our honored guest, and France's favorite Russian, World Champion skater Viktor Nikiforov. He is here today with his...]

Her words trailed off, and she glanced at the man for help, [...Coach? Student?]

[Both.]

She glanced back at the cameras, [Coach and student...Japanese skater, Yuri Kats-...er...Yuri Nikiforov.]

Yuri's face twitched a little, but Viktor didn't need to see it to know about it, "We're not live. Can we do that again?"

"Sorry?"

"Husband, coach, and student, Japanese skater, Yuri Nikiforov." Viktor repeated in English, "S'il-vous-plaït."
"Oh...I...I messed it up again. Je suis désolée. I'm not used to hearing it. I even..." She held one of the cards up, trying to make light of it, "...I even wrote it down."

The Russian gestured out with his left hand briefly, turning it over where it was settled on Yuri's leg, and nodded to let her start over as he flipped it back to where it was.

[I'll just do it over from the start.]

The crew nodded and reset, then gave her a thumbs up to go ahead.

Sophia turned back around and went through her paces, [This is Sophia Belmonte with France 22, broadcasting from beautiful Bordeaux, on the banks of the Garrone River in the southwest of France. At this time I am joined by our honored guest, and France's favorite Russian, World Champion skater Viktor Nikiforov. He is here today with his husband, coach, and student, Japanese skater, Yuri Nikiforov.] She managed to finally say, then finally reverting back to a language Yuri understood, "We're here on the final day of the Trophée de France, the fourth of six major skating competitions on the road to the Grand Prix Final of Figure Skating, held this year in Detroit, Michigan, in the United States. Many in our viewing audience will know of Viktor's illustrious career, but for those who don't...Viktor?"

The Russian huffed a laugh, "It would sound insincere coming from me. Yuri?"

It was even weirder to be put on the spot suddenly, but the younger skater did his best, "Up until last year, Viktor was a Gold medalist at the World Championships, Grand Prix Final, European Championships, and Russian Nationals for five consecutive years. He took time off after that to become a coach to me, and then went on to win Silver at the World Championships before the season ended. He's also a Gold Medal Olympian. He's broken and held numerous world records, and is currently the only person alive or dead who's been able to do a quadruple Axel jump."

"And can one of you explain why the quadruple Axel is so difficult?"

"Because there's technically four and a half rotations, not just four." Viktor explained, "It's the only jump that takes off from a forward-facing glide, so the extra half comes from having to get back into reverse, where all jumps end."

"Viktor...you're no stranger to the Grand Prix Series. What's it like being in France again after so many years being assigned elsewhere?"

"I was always disappointed to get left out of Trophée de France. The last time I was here, it was still called the Trophée Éric Bompard. But, while I may not have competed here for some time, I often stopped through while on my way back to Russia. Paris is one of my favorite places. Yuri and I even came here 2 weeks early to have some fun before the competition. He was at Skate Canada, and neither of us was placed at the Rostelecom Cup in Moscow, so we had the extra weekend to wait anyway."

Sophia pushed through her cards, looking up again, "Where will you be going next?"

"We'll be in Shanghai next weekend for Yuri's last event at the Cup of China. Mine will be in Sapporo, Japan, the weekend after that, for the NHK Trophy."

"And would one of you mind explaining how it's decided who goes on to the Final?"

Viktor let Yuri take that one to give him something to do besides stew, "That's decided by how well skaters do in the two Grand Prix Series events they're assigned to before that. Those who get Gold will get 15 points, Silver gets 11, Bronze gets 9, and so on down the line. The 6 skaters with the best
scores will make it to the Final. If there's a tie in points, it's broken by whichever skater either medaled, if either did, or by other factors. I tied with another skater last year for the 6th slot, but I made it into the Final because I won Silver at one of my events."

"Interesting." Sophia answered, then moving back to the Russian, "Viktor...to have such a highly-regarded career, you must've started skating at a very early age. Would you mind telling us when you started and how you got to where you are now?"

Yuri's brow furrowed, and he glanced from the woman to his partner, wondering how he'd answer.

"Well, you're right...I started early, as most professional athletes do." Viktor began, "Yuri was on the ice at a younger age than I was, even...what were you, four?"

"Something like that."

"I was five when I got on the ice for the first time, and probably six before I got my first skates. I would go on the pond behind my house. Eventually, I was discovered by my long-time coach, Yakov Feltsman, when I was on a proper rink in a nearby town. I fell in love with competition pretty quickly after that, and dedicated all my time and energy into being the best at it that I could be."

"Wow...not even a flinch. Yuri noted silently, He must've had that one figured out ages ago. I don't know that anyone's ever asked him a question that specific before."

"Your family must be very proud of your accomplishments." Sophia said, reading the prompt.

The silver Russian was quiet for a moment as he thought, feeling where Yuri touched his fingers, but then nodded, "I suppose they are, in their own ways. My Uncle tags along at events these days, and even used his company to become a corporate sponsor for my previous rink-mate, Yuri Plisetsky."

The young skater curled his fingers around his husband's, "I wonder if she has the slightest clue about Viktor's past...?"

Sophia nodded and went on, "I've done a lot of interviews with other skaters at this event and have asked them about their impression of you. Many jokingly lamented having to skate at the same event, but consistently held you in rather high regard despite it. With your scores being so much higher than most other skaters, what would you say is the defining reason for that?"

He was about to answer, but Yuri cut him off before he could even breathe the first whisper of a word, "Viktor's a genius...he's a living legend in the skating world. His programs always have the highest difficulty rating, and has the most difficult jumps and spins. Telling his shows apart from the rest...that's easy. No one can come close to the almost magic touch he has on the ice." He explained, "Before Viktor came to be my coach and choreographer...I was considered just one of many top skaters in the Japanese Skating Federation. I made it into a single Grand Prix Final on my own only once...and Viktor outscored me there by over 100 points. That's more than what most people score on their entire Short Program. He ended that Final with a score of 335. After he became my coach...not only did he help me close the gap to 16 points, but he got me to win Silver. Without Viktor's help, I doubt that I would've made it into the Final again, never mind medaling."

"Is that the highest you've ever scored, Viktor?"

"What, the 335? No, Yuri and I both scored just under 350 at Worlds last year." He answered proudly, pulling his husband's head close so he could nuzzle affectionately against his cheek and ear, "My little katsudon is all grown up now."

"You actually just made that 335 score again here at Trophée de France, correct?"
"Yes, and with a program that's less technically difficult than the one I skated at the GP Final."

"The other skaters are saying that this year is basically going to be a competition between you and Yuri. How do you feel about that?"

"I think it's great!" Viktor said excitedly, "I've been told I trained up my own biggest rival. But, on a really personal level...I think people forget that competing against Yuri is only one of the many things I get to do with him now."

The younger skater's cheeks flushed, though he wasn't sure Viktor would actually make such suggestive references during an interview, so he stayed quiet.

"Before Yuri came into my life, I always skated alone. I choreographed almost exclusively for myself, and went into each season like it was a fresh challenge. Eventually, people stopped being surprised at the things I did. I'd done it all. I'd been around too long. Yuri was a huge new dose of inspiration for me. Not only can I choreograph and imagine programs for someone who has an entirely different skill-set from myself, but we can even do some of them together. Yuri can compete at the same level as me now, so it made sense that we do joint programs together whenever we could. Our first Pair Skate was at his Four Continents Exhibition Gala last year, where he won his first Gold medal with me as his coach. We'll be doing another here tonight if I qualify. The whole skating world is so much bigger now that Yuri's in it with me. We can do anything we want, now that we're together."

Yuri felt the light squeeze against his fingers where his husband had moved his on top of his hand. He felt a slight flutter in his chest as the words echoed in his mind. His own words came out almost instinctively after that...and he looked Sophia straight in the eyes as he said them.

"Sometimes...there's a place you can't reach unless you have a dream too large to bear alone." He said quietly, then turned back to his husband and gently stroked his cheek with his free hand, "We call everything on the ice...'love.'"

Viktor blinked a few times, but then raised his hand to meet where his partner's was, closed his eyes, and smiled, "...Yuri..."

Chapter End Notes

I did a proper digital render of Yuri and Viktor on the couch during the interview; check it out here:

http://koltirasrip.deviantart.com/art/I-ll-Just-Sit-Here-680260150
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED TWENTY SEVEN

The rest of the interview seemed to be largely benign, despite Yuri's initial worries. The questions had all been pre-written on the index cards, and aside from the two that were a little more personal than Yuri was comfortable with, even those questions were simple enough that Viktor could answer them without giving away anything he didn't want to.

And then...it was over.

Fifteen simple minutes of completely normal sport-related questions...and that was it. When the crew started packing things in and the fans gathered-in behind them started clapping and taking pictures, Yuri actually felt a little bad for having been so worried before.

Sophia collected her cards together and straightened them out over where her knees had been crossed over the edge of the second couch. She then set them down on the glass top of the coffee table and rose to stand, sorting out the wrinkles in her business-casual suit and skirt, and looked down at where the two skaters were still sitting, "...Well, that wasn't as bad as I thought it would be."

Viktor nodded in agreement as Yuri scooted to the side and rose to stand again in the space between couches, "Your friend did the right thing by giving you those prompts." He pushed off the edge of the seat to stand up as well, towering over everyone, "I'm kind of glad it worked out this way, without Linette."

"...You are?" Yuri and Sophia asked at the same time, and in the same surprised tone. They glanced at once another, but then Yuri looked away.

"Mh." The Russian nodded again, twisting at the waist a little to stretch out after having been in the same tilted position since before the interview started, "I think it would've been really weird if you'd shown up with her, singled me out of a crowd, and then run off again like you'd been trying to this whole time. At least, this way..." He rubbed his side a little where it had been squished into the lean, "...It forced the conversation, so we got to clear up a lot of things that had been left kind of open-ended before."

"...I suppose."

"Well, Yuri and I should be getting back to rink-side. Plisetsky is probably wondering where we are."

"Oh...okay."

Viktor was already trying to step through the narrow space between the couch and coffee-table, and Yuri was quick to follow after him. Once he was free of the confined space, Viktor reached his hand for his husband's and then turned to face the woman again, "It was good to see you again, Sophia."

Dark-blue eyes looked up into slate, and she nodded softly, "You too, Viktor."

"You should stick around for the Exhibition Gala later. Our new Pair Skate is going to be a lot of fun."

"Oh..." She started again, "...Sure."
This is getting awkward… Yuri thought to himself, turning his eyes from Viktor to Sophia and then back again as each one made their comments. Instead of letting it get dragged out though, he huffed a quiet sigh to himself and started walking towards where the crowd had created a path, "Let's go."

"Mh."

The crowd had started clapping again as the two slowly departed, circling back around to encapsulate them as they went though, just like how they had back at Incheon when Viktor had skated with those fans. Neither turned back to look at the television crew again before getting engulfed by the mob. There where hoots and hollers as could be expected, but the trio's attention was grabbed as the ruckus suddenly exploded into cheers and whistling. Flashes could be seen lighting up the walls and ceiling around the doorway back to the skating rink. Sophia had to jump up onto the nearest couch in an attempt to see what had happened, but when she finally had a vantage, all she got was an eye-full of Yuri having been pulled backwards off his feet, with Viktor leaning down over him into a surprise kiss where he held him up, so she stepped down again before she fell down instead.

[What was all that about?] One of the techs on the team wondered.

[Fanservice.] She answered quickly.

By the time the skaters had returned to the prep area, another 3 skaters had gone onto the ice, and a 4th was getting ready for his turn. There would only be 1 left before the break, and then it would be Group 2. They look around anxiously for Yurio, but failed to find him.

"Do you think he left or something?" Yuri wondered nervously, "I wonder how he scored…?"

Viktor moved along towards the area where they could find out, and when they saw the numbers, Yuri was wide-eyed in shock.

"211.72!?” He blanched, "He scored better than I did…! Chikushou..."

"I guess you should've stayed after all." Viktor quipped, "Maybe he'd have scored less."

"What's that supposed to mean…”? The younger skater was feeling worse by the second.

"You left, so Yurio was mad...and he used it to fuel his show just like I did. He did the same thing at last year's GP Final, remember?" The silver figure pointed out, "No matter what my uncle's done to help him get past his fury, Yurio is still an angry little bean."

All of two seconds passed before Yuri suddenly found himself bouncing off the wall and landing in a heap on the floor, a certain boot-print prominent on the back of his jacket.

Viktor casually turned to look at the source of the impact.

"I hope your interview was fucking fantastic." The blond growled at them.

The crumpled skater on the ground flipped over painfully and looked up, seeing the silhouette of the Russian Tiger there darkened by the lights just above him, "Imsosorrypleaseforgiveme!" Yuri wept dramatically, holding his nose where he thought it might be bleeding, "Itwon'thappenagainIswear!"

"We'll see if you keep your promises better than Viktor."

"Wow..." The older skater said, almost flatly, though still sporting the remnants of the dumb-happy look on his face from before.
Yurio just stuffed one hand in his pocket and pointed the other at his elder indignantly, "Don't look so pleased with yourself. I'd have kicked you, too, if I could get you both at the same time without making a fool of myself."

"Why would you have kicked me…? I was supposed to get off rink-side. I wouldn't have been able to stay regardless."

Yuri was still twitching on the floor, struggling to get up, "V-Viktor…"

"You should've told him to stay."

"I did." He smiled as warmly as ever, "He was really torn, but..."

"But you were meeting with an old girlfriend who had the gall to suggest picking up where you left off. Of course he's going to follow you. Do you think he's an idiot?"

"No."

"Then you're the idiot." Yurio snarled, pulling his hand back, "And that's why I should've kicked you."

Viktor had his mouth open like he was going to say something, and a finger up in his defense, but hearing the words...made him go silent. He pulled the finger back and put it over his lip as he turned and closed his eyes in thought. They opened soon after though, and he leaned down finally to help collect his husband from where Yuri had been clambering at his skates, trying to get his attention. Once on his feet again, Viktor casually started dusting him off like he had so long ago at the last GPF Banquet, when Yurio had kicked him to the ground as the Russian team was leaving.

"One day, when you've had love and lost it, you'll understand why I did this the way that I did."

Viktor explained simply, "It's impossible to explain to someone who hasn't been through it."

"I don't care. It was still shitty of you."

"I'll expect an apology for that one day."

"From me? Fat chance." Yuri huffed, turning to move away again, "The only apologizing around here should be you to me and katsudon." He showed his back to them as he moved on, "I'll see you on the podium, baka. Then you can shove that gold medal up your ass along with all the other stuff you're putting up there lately, including your head."

Yuri could feel himself sinking into his coat, retracting his head through the opening like a turtle retreating into its shell.

Viktor wouldn't let it go though, and his skate-guards gave him away just soon enough for the blond to turn away and feel a hand come up on his face again. Slate blue eyes glared down at him, but this time was different than on the ocean-side walkway in Barcelona. These eyes were angry, not half-amused condescension.

"You have a lot of nerve talking like that after everything we've done for you."

A small crowd had slowed down their passage as they saw the conflict. Yuri noticed them in turn, and tried to calm the storm.

"Viktor, it's fine...let's just go..."
The Russian had ignored him though, pulling hard enough on the teen that he was up on the toes of his skates. Like before, he had his mouth open, about to say something...but unlike then, his words were cut off rather than stifled.

"Ah jeeze, what'd he do now?" A certain Russian elder asked, coming up from the arena floor and walking right into the middle of it.

"...Mikhail!" Yuri was relieved to see him, and rushed up to the clashing pair to try and separate them, "It's just a big misunderstanding, really!"

"Pretty serious misunderstanding if this is what it lead to. C'mon, Viktor...let him go. You're causing a scene."

Yuri looked between them all and hoped for resolution, but nothing came. At least, not until Mikhail reached in for his nephew's forearm and jammed his thumb between the two long-bones just before the wrist. Viktor winced and his grip went limp, leaving the Russian Punk to fall back out of his reach again.

The silver skater pulled his arm back and scowled at both of them as he tried to shake the pain, "Your mouth is still too big for your brain, it seems, but I guess we do live in a world where the ignorant are always so sure of themselves." He turned on his skate-guard and started walking away, saying nothing, but looking back briefly to his husband.

Yuri was internally panicking again, not sure whether the look was a gesture to follow or a warning to stay where he was. By the time he'd decided to follow, Viktor had vanished into the crowd, and Yuri couldn't spot him even when he'd jumped to see past everyone that was taller than himself. He could feel his hands shaking where he stuffed them into his coat pockets, and the groaned pitifully to himself.

"What the Hell did you say to him?" He heard Mikhail lecturing a few paces behind.

"I didn't say anything that wasn't true." Yurio answered bitterly, "He was acting like a tool."

"What? Why? And where do you get off just saying it to his face like that?" The elder was clearly flustered.

"Why is everyone so angry...?" Came a woman's voice unexpectedly.

Yuri glanced up, recognizing it immediately and finding a bit of solace in it, "Minako-sensei!"

"Yuri, why are your eyes re-"

"No time, let's just go." He said, whipping back around to take the woman by the wrist and started marching off with her in tow. He took her the opposite direction Viktor had gone though, and kept going despite her calls for an explanation, until he'd fully dragged her out of the building and was standing at the top of the stairs just outside the entrance.

"Yuri!" She called out to him...and he finally stopped, and let go of her wrist, "What was that for?"

The young skater turned back around to her, "...I'm in France and I don't have anywhere familiar to go! I just...I want to go to your ballet studio and hide for a while."

"What? Why?"

"Everyone's just so intense right now!" He blurted, half on the edge of tears from the stress of it,
"First it was Viktor's Free Skate, then it was the interview he agreed to do with that old girlfriend of his, and now this... It's too much. I can't...I don't want...to deal with it. It's not even my problem but they're both just so mad at one another now!" His voice was starting to crack.

"...Yuri." The older woman sighed and stepped forward, slipping an arm over his shoulder. She started pulling him down the short set of stairs towards some trees nearby. The rain had stopped long enough by then that the long edge of a short brick wall, acting like the 'pot' to the small field of trees and bushes decorating the corner of the block, was dry enough for someone to sit down. Minako gently set the skater down to let him lean, and then just waited quietly. When it seemed like the tears had finally passed, she stroked his hair out of his eyes and looked at him, "What's the matter? You mentioned all those things before, but..."

"Why is he still like that?" He asked pointedly, "I thought Mikhail had taught him how to be normal."

"Oh, Plisetsky?" Minako wondered, looking up a little in thought, "Well, he's come a long way, but he still has outbursts once in a while where he goes back to how he used to be. Don't worry so much, it's not just you."

"He did it to Viktor..."

"Oh, well...I imagine he feels more comfortable dishing on Viktor because he's known him the longest." She explained, patting the younger man's shoulder softly to help ground him, "What's he say?"

"That Viktor was an idiot." Yuri said, reaching up to rub his eyes on the back of his coat sleeve, "I get that he's mad that we weren't there to watch his program, but I can't be in two places at once and I had to decide which one to go deal with..."

"And the interview was the other thing?"

He nodded, drawing in a tense breath.

"Why did she want to do that anyway?"

"It wasn't even supposed to be her..." Yuri said, raising red eyes to his former teacher, "She works for some local news station and got suckered into coming here when a friend of hers found out Viktor was skating this year. Sophia was only...supposed to point Viktor out, and maybe help get him to agree to talk about the event, but then that friend got sick and Sophia had to do it all herself. I couldn't let Viktor do it without me so I...I left Yurio behind..."

"And what does Viktor's Long Program have to do with it...?"

"He couldn't do it unless he was all fired up about things that happened when I was with him in St. Petersburg. Some really bad things happened that no one else really knows about... He told me to remind him about all of it so he could truly embody his theme for the skate." The raven-haired figure said between shaky breaths, "So he was already tense when he came off the ice..."

"And Yurio set Viktor off after all that?"

Yuri nodded, rubbing his dripping nose on his sleeve to join where it was already wet from his eyes. He drew in a deep breath, and went on a fast-paced diatribe about how the whole thing happened, "Viktor agreed to do the interview after his Free Skate even though he knew Yurio was going up after him, so when he was done, he was already fired up about all the memories I dug back up, and
was going to do the interview while in that frame of mind. I wanted to stay and watch Yurio but Viktor said he couldn't because, as the previous skater he shouldn't be at rink-side when the next person goes up, so he said I should stay and just catch up later...but I couldn't let him talk to Sophia without me there because she openly said she wanted to date him again if he asked. Even though he said he didn't want to, I didn't think that would stop her from trying something anyway if I wasn't there, so I went with Viktor instead of watching Yurio. The interview started out really tense, but for me it turned out okay...I guess it wasn't so easy for Viktor because he was still on edge when Yurio drop-kicked me for missing his show. Then Yurio started saying Viktor was an idiot because he knew I'd go with him instead of staying to watch, and then made a really cruel comment about how Viktor had everything, including his head, wedged up his backside...like it was some horrible stab at how he and I are married and-

"That's fine, I get it..." Minako stopped him, patting his head lightly as the young skater started sobbing into his hands again.

"...So Viktor went and defended himself by grabbing Yurio by the face like he did to Mikhail's kid, but this time he was actually really mad and wouldn't let go until Mikhail jammed his thumb into his arm...then he left...and I...didn't go after him..." He continued, clasping his fingers in front of his knees as he dropped his lead low, "So now Viktor's alone again and he has all this stuff going through his head... And on top of all that, Yurio's mad at me for missing his Free Skate twice in a row... I don't know what to do! I told him I was sorry but all he did was throw it back in my face!"

"Mhm..." The ballerina nodded, taking in all the information and processing it quietly, "Well, I can't make a magic portal that'll take you to my studio...but you knew that, and that's why you brought me out here, right?"

Yuri bobbed his head, raising his hands up to rest just under his messy black hair.

"Do you want to stay, or do you want to go someplace quieter?" She offered, "I'd take you back to our hotel room but it's really far away...and the medaling ceremony will start in an hour or so...I know you don't want to miss tha-"

"I don't know that I can face either of them right now." Yuri choked, "Yurio would just get even more mad at me because he'd think I'm taking sides against him..."

"Well, where are you staying then? Do you want to go back early?" Minako rose back to her feet, and offered her hand, "We can walk and talk. This isn't your event so you don't have to be here until the end. If you're not comfortable staying then Viktor ought to be the first person to accept and understand that, right? It's not like he's mad at you."

"He might be if I'm not there when he gets his Gold..."

"As if he doesn't have enough of them already." The ballerina pointed out, getting Yuri to look up at her, a stunned look on his face, "Come. Let's move before it starts to rain again."
Minako escorted the young skater by the arm, holding to his just above the elbow as they made the distance back to the Novotel. Every so often, Yuri would glance up over his shoulder, wondering if Viktor, or even Yurio, might suddenly show up there behind him...but neither ever did. There wasn't really a whole lot left to talk about that Minako was comfortable asking about while still in public, so she just watched over her friend's son quietly until they got back.

Once the door had been opened and closed again though, the questions were begging to be asked. She kicked off her shoes, and gave Yuri time to take his coat off and put it away before starting.

"You said Viktor's Free Skate had to be inspired by things that happened in St. Petersburg...things that were so bad that it would be enough to enrage him even this long after. Yuri, I know it's not really my business to pry, but...it's going to bother me a lot if I don't ask..." She started, sitting on the end of the bed and crossing her arms as she watched Yuri lean against the entertainment stand in front of her, "Did something happen to you boys? Russia's never been the most accepting place...and you two moved back to Hasetsu after only a few months..."

The young skater nodded, and Minako feared the worst.

"What happened?"

"Viktor...had been estranged from his family since before ever becoming a professional skater." He started, his throat a bit sore still. He kept his eyes low, "But on the last night at Four Continents, right before we were supposed to go to the Banquet, Yakov told Viktor that...he'd found out Viktor's mother had been killed."

The ballerina had her hand over her mouth in surprise, but refused to interrupt.

"Viktor was really torn about the whole thing. He hadn't spoken to his family in over a decade by then, so he was saying...he wasn't sure whether he was more upset about his mother being dead, or about the fact that he didn't care."

"Mh...yeah, after so long..."

Yuri bobbed his head, "It was hard for me to understand it at first. But the more we talked about it, the more I realized he and I are miles apart in how we relate to others. I learned that his father so passionately hated skating that he'd actually nearly blinded Viktor to prevent him from getting into it."

Minako's eyes were wide to hear it.

"After all this time...I still sometimes feel like we could've avoided the entire thing if I hadn't been such an emotional cluster about it while we were still at Four Continents." The skater explained, "Viktor didn't care one way or another about what happened. He could've just refused to answer the call and we could've gone on with our lives like nothing had changed for him...since really, nothing had. But because I'd been so upset over the whole thing, projecting myself onto him like he should care as much about his mother's passing as I would be if it were mine...he ended up agreeing to go to the funeral. Just getting the address was a challenge though, since Viktor's father was the one who had it, and demanded that Viktor come get it himself if he wanted it at all. And let me tell you..."

Yuri lifted his head, and pushed off of the entertainment stand for emphasis, holding out his arms, "If
people were like pygmy elephants, Viktor's father was like the biggest bull mastodon you've ever seen!

"Wow..." The ballerina let it sink in a little, "So Mikhail wasn't kidding when he said Viktor was a Nikiforov practically in-name only..."

"It's true! I got to see first-hand what those two clans are like! The Nikiforovs are all thick and burly, while the Rozovskys are all thin and dainty. The only thing Viktor got from his father was his eyes..." Yuri leaned back again and held his elbows in his hands, looking back down at the floor, "You remember how we were supposed to come back to Yu-Topia for a bit after the FC ended..."

"Yeah, you wouldn't tell Mari or I about what had happened, just that it was an emergency back in Russia."

Yuri nodded, "Viktor tried to make me go back to Japan without him, but I begged to stay with him to see it all through. He reluctantly agreed, and the next thing we knew, we were in this huge park in the middle of St. Petersburg with Yakov, staring down this huge bear of a man. The whole thing was really tense, and just as it seemed like we were going to get the information we needed so we could leave, Konstantin saw Viktor's ring, and then noticed that I had the matching one...and it all went to crap after that..."

"Uh oh..."

"Konstantin already had Viktor by his shirt by then, since he was trying to unsettle him...but when he saw the rings, he grabbed Viktor. I freaked out and jumped into it, and-"

"Yuri, you weigh like 150lbs when wet...what were you thinking?"

"By then, I wasn't...it was all instinct...I couldn't just stand there and watch Viktor get hurt..." He reached up to rub his eyes on the side of his hand, "Konstantin grabbed me like I was just some gnat buzzing around, and literally threw me away. He did the same thing to Viktor a few seconds after, then he spat on me, kicked snow on both of us, and left. Viktor tried to keep it together, but...he must've cried for over an hour after Konstantin was gone..."

Minako had her hand over her mouth again, shocked to hear it all, "And this is all the stuff you reminded him about before his Free Skate?"

"...It's bad! I know! And this is just the tip of the iceberg..."

"Oh, Yuri..."

"Viktor refused to let me go with him to the funeral the next day. He even..." The tears were back again as he remembered, and his heart broke all over again, "He even took his ring off before he left... He gave it back to me and said to keep it safe until he came home, thinking his father would try to take it and throw it away. But when he finally did come back, the sight of him...I just... I fainted..."

"...You fainted?"

"Viktor doesn't keep his left eye covered just because he likes how it looks. You know how he worries about going bald...? He worries even more about scars...he used to cover his eye even when he had his hair long, anytime he thought someone might be able to see his face too closely. He's never once mentioned it, but I've seen how his left eye twitches a little when he gets really stressed out. It's like muscle memory from the first time Konstantin hit him as a kid." Yuri turned his gaze,
looking towards the door, "When Viktor came back from the funeral, he'd gotten hit in that same eye two more times. All I saw before I dropped was how much blood was on his face and in his hair, and how the white part of his left eye was completely red...it was almost black because of how late it was already when he returned."

"Jeeze, Yuri..."

"We thought it was all finally over though, and that Viktor would never have to deal with Konstantin again...but then he showed up at the skating rink in St. Petersburg. That's how we met Mikhail...he'd seen Viktor getting the life beaten out of him at the funeral and wanted to reconnect after, absurd as it sounds..."

"Mikhail saw Viktor getting beaten up but didn't do or say anything until after…?"

"He said it would've been pointless. Viktor didn't want to have anything to do with him for a long time. Once again, because I'm an emotionally confused mess most of the time, I forced him to stay in touch. I thought...here's a guy who, upfront, accepts and understands Viktor's life and situation, wants to learn about him, wants to be involved...he even did all this skating research before he made Konstantin show him where to find us. I thought it would be great if Viktor had at least one person in his family accept him for who and what he is."

"Yeah, I remember how tense it was at Worlds...but Viktor seemed to mellow out after a while."

"Mikhail had to prove himself. Viktor was worried having him around would mean he'd have to deal with his father again at some point. In the end though, it wasn't even because of Mikhail that it happened..."

"You guys had to get involved with Konstantin again?"

Yuri nodded, looking back at her when it became clear that the door wasn't going to suddenly open, "Viktor's mother had a life insurance policy with his name on it. We had to go help with the inquiry, to make sure she hadn't just killed herself, since the policy was only a few months old when she died. It all looked really suspicious. Mikhail was going to drive us there, but he had Yurio with him for some inane reason, so all four of us ended up going to Viktor's hometown to deal with this thing. I...I saw so much. There were tanks in the woods. Old, worn down, trees growing through them... Viktor spent his childhood playing on dilapidated war machines rather than on swings and slides. He'd even hidden his first pair of skates inside one of them, and they were still there after all these years..." He snuffled and grabbed a tissue from a box on the table nearby, "By the end of it all, we learned that Konstantin's passionate hatred for skating came about because Mikhail and his sister had tormented him as a kid over some incident that actually involved skating. It was his big excuse to get on Viktor's back, and Viktor's refusal to abandon it just made everything so much worse. Konstantin was worried too that being a skater would turn Viktor gay, and well...there we were, engaged at first and then married... I'm not sure if it would've made any difference if Konstantin knew of Viktor's exploits with women in his younger days, or that it wasn't even a specific attraction to guys that drew Viktor to me... We're just...kindred spirits, and gender didn't even matter after that."

"Mh."

"Viktor did his best to patch things up when the dust settled, and we knew for sure that his mother's death was an accident. He said that his father even tacitly accepted the skating, citing religious belief that 'God Himself had given Viktor that talent,' but that Konstantin would never accept Viktor's and my relationship. But...even after all that, Viktor had already made plans to use the anger and frustration he felt over the whole thing to fuel his Free Skate this season. So, he told me to remind him of everything we'd gone through, and bring him back to how he felt before that last trip." Yuri
pushed off again and face-planted in the bed next to where Minako had been sitting. His voice was
muffled by the sheets, "I didn't want to do it, but Viktor made me promise… And now I have to
worry about this same sort of thing happening every time I do..."

Minako counted on her fingers, "Today, NHK, the Final, Russian Nationals, Euros, Worlds...and
any number of smaller events he may decide to go to..."

Yuri groaned loudly and pitifully, reaching to pull an edge of the thick comforter over his head.

"It's not healthy for either of you to keep rehashing all these horrible things that've happened. It was
cruel of him to ask you to take part in it."

"He's my partner though...how can I tell him no when he asks me for help…? He'll stop asking me to
help with anything if I refuse him...and I gave him so much grief over keeping things to himself
before..."

Minako pat the center of his back twice, and then set her hand still there, "I remember when you
were little, and you had just started skating at the Ice Castle. You'd become fast friends with Yuuko,
but that bigger kid, Takeshi, picked on you relentlessly. He'd call you all kinds of horrible names,
and he'd knock you down so he could laugh at you as you struggled to get up again, since the skates
were always so big on your tiny little feet. You'd come running back to my studio and sat between
my feet, even if I had a class, until you stopped crying."

She smiled fondly on the memory, but Yuri just turned his head and peered one eye back at her.

"But you'd always get up again, no matter how hard it was or how long it took. You grew taller, you
got stronger...and one day, Yuuko introduced you to competitive skating, and its
competitors...namely, one particular Junior rising-star named Viktor Nikiforov..." She opened her
arms up wide and then fell down to her back, hands still up towards the ceiling, "And suddenly, you
were awe-struck. Everything became Viktor Nikiforov. You lived, ate, slept, breathed him. You got
that poodle puppy and named him Viktor. Your bedroom walls were covered over with his image.
You put everything you had onto the ice for this dream where you could finally meet him.
You became good friends with someone who was, in turn, good friends with him...and yet even when
you had that chance, you never once asked for an introduction. And then, this silver Russian who'd
been the center of your universe for years and years suddenly shows up at Yu-Topia Katsuki, saying
he's going to be your coach...and in spite of all of your crippling anxiety and relentless self-doubt, he
fell in love with you and asked you to marry him."

Yuri was still watching with that one eye, but he turned his gaze towards the sheet beneath him, his
arms curling up under his chest. Minako sat back up and crossed her legs, turning to lean over and
rest her elbows casually on her knees as she faced him.

"But even to this day, after everything you've been through together, you still hold him on this
pedestal like you can't touch him, or you can't disagree with him. Yuri..." She reached over and
ruffled his hair, "...For your health, on at least this one thing, you have to tell him no. More than that,
though...you need to be the reason he comes back out of it when he's done. He's invited you in to be
a part of his life, but there are some things that you don't need to do. Helping him feel terrible about
himself is one of those things. Don't turn into an enabler, okay?"

The young skater finally turned onto his side, though he still kept his arms crossed in front of himself,
"...I'll try."

Minako beamed down at him, "That's all anyone can ask of you. Now...I need to head back. Mikhail
will already have talked to Yuratchka, but I'll be sure to talk to Viktor before he has a chance to
leave."

"Don't tell him I told you about Russia."

"I won't. I promise."

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The medaling ceremony was a lukewarm event. When Viktor got his expected Gold, he didn't even bother with his normal ritual. He simply bent down, let the lanyard be put around his neck, stood back up, wore his flag on his back, waved, and then went straight for rink-side to get his things. He hadn't spoken to or even looked at Yurio, on the Silver podium or off it. He barely exchanged a few words with Chris on the Bronze side, and even that was barely more than a 'See you at the Final.'

He changed, swapped skates for shoes, put on a pair of thoroughly unnecessary sunglasses, clipped his ear-bud cable into his phone, put the buds into his ears, and entirely ignored everyone as he started pulling his rolling blue and silver suitcase towards the exit. At most, he only tepidly confirmed that he would be at the Exhibition after the Ice Dancers were done with their final event...and then left without another word.

Or at least, that's how he saw it in his head as he was grabbing the handle on his suitcase, and turned it around to face the direction he intended to go. He made it maybe 10 steps before a certain ballerina silently latched onto the arm under which he was holding onto his carry-bag. He turned his eyes behind the sunglasses, but said nothing.

"Be nice to Yuri when you get back." She told him quietly, walking in-step with him as he led the way, "He's scared you're going to be mad at him for not being here to see you get your medal, but I told him to stay in the hotel room for his own good."

Viktor pressed his left shoulder against the glass door to push it open, and picked up the suitcase to swing it outside before sliding the rest of himself through the exit and out onto the steps. Minako was still holding to his right arm as he hefted the case up again to get to the bottom of the five or so stairs before hitting the sidewalk. They made it to the bus stop in front of the Bibliothèque Mériaudeck before Viktor stopped, letting go of the suitcase and pulling the sunglasses off his face to gawk at the woman.

"I really made a mess of things."

"Even the best laid plans can go bad." Minako told him, pulling up her free arm to pat Viktor's where she still held it, "Yuri did his best to explain to me what happened before I showed up, but he can't tell me how it made you feel beyond saying what you did when it happened and when it was over."

"I wanted to throw Yurio off the podium." He answered, looking away again, "You've spent more time with him in the last year than I have...so tell me, does he even realize some of the words coming out of his mouth?"

"He means exactly what he says." She told the silver Russian, "He just doesn't always take into consideration how it makes other people feel. He'd rather be honest and have everyone hate him, than be loved for his lies."

"He can say what he means without being rude."
"He could, but learning how to speak differently takes time. His filter is still developing." The ballerina said, "I know that doesn't excuse what he said, but..."

"No, it doesn't." Viktor agreed, sighing and slouching a little bit.

"You need to unwind before the Gala later. Go take a nap or something."

The Russian nodded, and replaced the sunglasses before reaching to grab the rolling suitcase again. Minako was waving as he started to step off, but he paused and glanced back at her, "Would you walk back with me?"

"Eh?"

"You don't have to make conversation or anything, I just don't want to go alone. It's a long way."

"Oh...yeah, sure." She nodded and closed the distance, moving in to take the carry-bag off his shoulder so he could relax that side a little. He put his now-free hand into his coat pocket, waited for the ballerina to settle the strap of the bag over her own shoulder, and felt as she took hold of his arm again before he started walking, "The march begins anew!"

"...You walked all the way back with Yuri before?"

"Hai!" She answered quickly, "And now, I return with Skate Husband #2!"

The taller figure smiled a little despite the atmosphere, and turned to face forward, "Off we go, then."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED TWENTY NINE

Viktor slid the key-card into the latch-slot and heard the click, and ever-so-quietly pushed it open, just in case Yuri was asleep. With the door open just enough to let light in from the hall, he confirmed the lights inside were out, as he'd suspected, and turned to face the woman behind him.

"He's probably out cold." He whispered.

She smiled and nodded, keeping her voice low as well, "Remember...be nice to him. He was looking over his shoulder the entire walk back, like he thought someone was going to come after him for leaving early."

The Russian reached back with his free hand and touched it to her shoulder, "Thanks for coming, and for talking to him. Are you going to be okay going back on your own?"

"Mikhail's getting the car right now and says he'll be out front in a bit. We're going out to get something to eat before the Exhibition tonight."

"What about Yurio...?"

"He was left with Yakov."

"Oh..." Viktor managed a smile, "Not sure who that's punishing more."

"Right?" Minako huffed a laugh, trying not to make a racket, "Anyway, go in and get some rest. We'll see you two tonight."

"Da. Spasibo." He waved a little before reaching down for the rolling suitcase again, pushing the door open just enough to squeeze inside without letting too much light follow him. When he was finally past the heavy panel, he set the case against a nearby wall and purposefully closed the door as gently as he could, hearing only the quiet click of the electronic lock as it went.

The room was almost entirely dark; the curtains had been drawn and all the lights were off. There was still enough sunlight casting a hazy glow through where the curtains weren't quite completely overlapped that Viktor could see around the room without having to turn on any extra lights. His eyes adjusted quickly anyway, after having worn the sunglasses all the way back from the rink. His long-coat came off quietly, and he set it over the edge of a chair instead of hazarding the noise of opening the sliding-doors of the hall closet. Shoes were deftly pushed off, set against the wall neatly.

He had no way of knowing Yuri had actually been awake since the door clicked open. The young figure hadn't moved a muscle, lying on half on his side and half on his stomach in the middle of the bed, with his phone abandoned next to the pillow, fingers loosely touching it.

I wonder if he fell asleep watching the LiveStream?

Yuri had managed to keep the blanket over him, save one leg that stuck out freely off the edge of the bed.

Viktor came up stealthily, gently lifting the stray foot and setting it under the comforter. He then put one hand on the edge of the mattress while the other reached over to pluck the phone away. Yuri heard the two clicks and double-buzz noise of his phone being set to Silent and getting plugged into
the wall-charger; it was down to 7% by then. He then felt where two fingers had come up just above his eyes to brush a few spikes of his bangs away, but still, he refused to open his eyes and confess his wakefulness.

The Russian pulled away after that, and before Yuri knew it, he'd left the room again entirely. It was hard to tell without his phone, but it felt like almost 20 minutes before Viktor came back. He'd pushed up to sitting and was about to reach for his hand-held when he heard footsteps outside the door, and the gentle click of the door-latch unlocking, so Yuri quickly dropped down again. On his back this time with arms splayed out to either side, hair tousled on the pillow, he tried not to let the brightness of the exterior hall make him flinch. Turning his face away from the light would've given him away.

Yuri could hear the rustling of what sounded like thin plastic, and this time, the sliding doors of the closet were moved. Viktor did his best to do it all quietly, but he couldn't stop the plastic from rustling like leaves in the wind. He placed the two long, clear bags onto the high metal bar in the space, and used both hands to slowly push the door back into place. Sweater and undershirt came off quickly after that, but he ended up leaning against the wall with his phone in-hand instead of settling into bed like he'd meant to.

His thumb hovered over the Instagram app again, but this time he clicked into it.

What's the harm in looking at what people said, now that it's all done and over with? Maybe there'll even be take-backs posted by now...

812 Comments, 2,315 Likes, 189 New Follows. The little orange box was like a giant middle-finger for being absent for a whole entire day.

He ignored it though and went on to the feed; it was awash with hundreds of new posts, and the majority of the initial posts were relating to the results of the weekend's event. A dozen or more were discussing his 'triumphant return to the top of the podium' as though it had only happened by some miracle, which made him raise a brow.

...Maybe I'm being too critical...

Content further back into the archive of the last 29 or so hours was showing clips and photos of all the different Free Skates, composite images showing all the more difficult jumps, whether landed or flubbed...and then, there was his.

'Viktor Nikiforov skates on Blades of Rage: What's he REALLY mad about?'

The photo that went with the caption was his frost-throwing sit spin, making it look like some wall of ice around him. He squinted his eyes at it and clicked the link that went with it.

...This ought to be hysterical. What do they know?

Another page loaded up, and an article appeared, continuing the thought from the Instagram post, 'Fans of Team Russia will remember a terrifying moment last year, just after the GPF, when Viktor emerged with bandages around his head, covering his left eye. He disappeared from social media for weeks and tried to play it off like nothing had happened. His coach, Yakov Feltsman, made an unofficial statement that Viktor had been in a minor car accident, but...' There was a photo of his car, parked at the airport when he'd given his keys over to his uncle; he could even see the group of them standing just on the other side of it, saying their farewells, '...as you can see, in this image of Viktor's Audi, there's no damage on it whatsoever.'
Viktor had been no stranger to having candid photos taken from afar by people who didn't make themselves known. But, in this case, he still felt a little unsettled. There were more photos, some having obviously been taken with a telescopic lens, showing much greater detail of his days with the eyepatch, and he felt his eye twitch just over his cheek at the sight of it.

'A few days after the bandages were first noticed, we'd gotten notice that two strange men arrived at Viktor's home-rink in St. Petersburg. Rumors flew regarding Viktor's then-fiancé, Yuri Katsuki, going completely ballistic at the sight of the larger one. He hasn't been seen since, but the smaller one...turned out to be a family member; Mikhail Rozovsky, an engineering equipment salesman, and Viktor's Uncle.'

There was an embedded video just beneath the text, and Viktor set his phone to mute before starting it, clicking Play and hitting the CC button for subtitles to replace the sound. It was a clip of the random interview Mikhail had been thrown into at Worlds, when everyone realized their resemblance and called him down for 'questioning.'

"...I hadn't seen Viktor since he was just a little guy skating on the pond behind his house. When I heard from his father that he'd made it to the big leagues and was killing it there, I knew I had to see what he'd been up to all these years!"

"So Viktor's parents support his skating? Why are they never at Nationals to show support?"

"Aaaeeehhhhh..." Mikhail struggled for an easy answer, "...They're...not...really into skating, that much... Actually... They're into industry, not athletics. It was just an offhand comment the man made."

Yakov had looked particularly unnerved by the whole encounter, standing around with Viktor's poodle-plush tissue box in his hand the whole time, almost acting like some North Korean minder, making sure Mikhail never said anything he shouldn't.

The article went on.

'Does that mean this man, who'd shown up with Mr. Rozovsky at the St. Petersburg ice rink...’ A zoomed-in photo of Konstantin appeared below the text; courtesy of Yuri's Angels, ‘...is the Nikiforov Patriarch, and Viktor's father?’

Slate blue eyes were narrowed at the sight of him, but just as Viktor was about to keep scrolling, he suddenly found his phone being yanked straight out of his grasp by a hand that emerged from the darkness beyond the tiny screen's bright white glow. Before his eyes could adjust to the room again, he felt a tug on one of the belt-loops of his dress-pants, and then the edge of the bed against his knees. He huffed a surprise protest, but then felt hands coming up over his bare shoulders, pulling him down, and before he knew it, he was listening to a heartbeat through a warm t-shirt. The arms that had gone over his shoulders were then wrapped loosely over his head and the back of his neck. His eyes, blind as they were in the dark, were wide open.

"How long were you going to stand there looking grim?"

"Depends on how long you were going to lie here awake watching me do it." He answered, still a little shocked at the whole transition. Viktor turned his head though and looked ahead, where he could only assume Yuri's face would be, "...And on how much longer the article was. It was kind of important. I need my phone back."

He heard Yuri give a slight sigh, but then felt him twist a little to reach for where he'd let the device fall to the sheets and set it by his hand. Viktor clicked into it quickly, trying to find his place again as
he held the iPhone in front of his face right where Yuri had pulled him down.

"Must be important if it'd stop you in your tracks when you looked like you were getting ready for a cat-nap." Yuri commented, feeling the Russian lift his head up a little to reply.

"I made the mistake of checking Instagram too early. Found something I didn't like."

"Oh..."

"Not about Sophia though."

"...Oh." Yuri blinked and rose up on his elbows, "Wait, what?"

"Someone's asking if I lied about the source of my Free Skate anger." He answered, "Turns out they know a lot more about what's been going on than I'm happy with."

"...How much more?"

"You swiped my phone just as I saw that they'd posted a picture of Konstantin." Viktor explained, pushing back up to sit on his knees and keep reading, "They're speculating on who he is."

"As if things couldn't get worse." Yuri sighed, dropping back down again with his arms out like before, "Here I thought we could just have a nice, quiet couple hours and then do the Pair Skate and be done with this place."

"If only." The Russian agreed. He glanced past his phone to see Yuri staring at the ceiling miserably.

...I left in a hurry so I could find Yuri and make nice with him, not make him feel worse...what am I doing?

"Sorry."

"Huh?" The younger skater lifted his head just enough to see his partner twiddle around on his phone for a second longer, but then turn it off.

Viktor leaned forward, right over top of him, to set his phone on the nightstand next to his own, before moving to make a pile out of the pillows that were lining the headboard. That done, he moved down to wedge an arm under the small of Yuri's back and picked him up just like Yuri had done to him on the airplane, and moved him until his smaller frame could be settled into the plush pile. Confused brown eyes watched quietly, closing briefly as the Russian leaned in to kiss him, opening again only when the man pulled away and turned around. Blankets were moved, legs were found, and Viktor settled to put himself between them, leaning back with his head against the upper part of his husband's chest. He pulled the covers back over them and stared out into the room blankly.

Yuri waited a moment for Viktor to stop moving before sliding his right arm over his shoulder, setting his hand on the Russian's chest, then moving the left down to go through silver-grey hair. He kissed the not-even-slightly-balding crown of his head before dropping his own back into the pillows again, "Did you sort things out with Yurio?"

"I didn't talk to him."

"Mh..."

"I guess that means you weren't watching the stream when you got back here."

"I couldn't get it to work." Yuri said, still idly toying with his partner's hair, brushing it back in long,
"slow strokes, "Did you get your Gold?"

"Da."

"One more to go."

"Hoping Shanghai and Sapporo go a lot more smoothly than this." Viktor commented, crossing his arms over the comforter, "The GP Series is a lot less fun when one or both of us ends up crying before it's over."

"...I was...going to say something about that." The younger figure said dubiously, making Viktor tilt his head back a little to try and see him.

"What is it...?"

"I think...we're doing your Free Skate thing in the wrong order." Yuri explained, "I don't want to have to remind you of all the bad things that've happened, just to help you stoke the flames of your anger. I don't like being part of that."

Viktor listened quietly.

"It goes against the whole 'sanctuary of warmth and peace' thing that I swore to be for you when we said our vows in Barcelona." He went on, "So...if you can figure out how to get your rage on without me, I'd rather be there at rink-side to help bring you back from the edge once you're done. I couldn't be that for you today, and I feel like it just turned into some messed-up Rube Goldberg machine, where every little thing we did just needlessly compounded on the anger that I initially stirred up. Dealing with Sophia, and the interview, and then Yurio... I don't know that either of us could've stopped those things from happening, but I feel like we would've responded differently if we hadn't already been so amped up."

"You're upset that I grabbed Yurio."

"...Not...necessarily. What he said was really inappropriate, even for him. I don't think he really meant it specifically as an insult against us though... I think he just...took the 'head up your butt' jab one step too far. On its own it would've been meaningless. He might even feel bad about it now, and like you said last year, getting an apology from him is a rare thing, so I doubt he'll be coming to us to clear it all up."

"If he expects me to apologize for scheduling an interview during his Free Skate."

"I won't let you do that." Yuri said, cutting him off, "You could've been interviewing with literally anyone at that same time, and a lot of press had thought you were going to do just that. Let him be mad at me for choosing to stay by you instead of him. That's the crux of the whole thing anyway. He doesn't want to be mad at me, so he's deflecting the blame onto you instead."

Viktor let the words sink in for a moment, then uncrossed his arms and reached his right hand up a little to curl his fingers around where his husband's were settled on his skin, "I just wanted it over with."

"I know..."

"I didn't even see her again after I stormed off. I went out of my way to make sure I couldn't run into her by accident..."

"...What'd you do?"
"I took a page out of the 'Yuri Katsuki Grand Prix Final of Tears' playbook and hid in a bathroom."

Viktor couldn't see the look on his face, but Yuri wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry, "The...Grand Prix Final of Tears? Seriously?"

"Well, you cried in that bathroom, sooo..."

"Did you?"

"No, but good try." He held up his left hand and gave a thumbs up, "A+ for effort."

"Viktor..."

The Russian huffed an amused sigh to himself as he lowered his hand back down again, staring blankly out into the room after that. His mind wandered a bit, and he lifted Yuri's fingers where he'd clasped them, kissing the ring there, "...You know..."

"...Hm?"

"I wonder how different things would've been if I had found you in that bathroom instead of Yurio."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED THIRTY

Red plastic walls. Blue and white tile.
...and then the jingle of a cell phone.

"Hello?"

A grey and black sneaker twisted on the cold floor, fidgeting nervously.

"Mom, were you sleeping? Sorry. ...Oh, you were watching on TV? Huh...? Public viewing ?"

The young skater panicked, but tried to laugh off the shock of the admission.

"Please! I'm so embarrassed!"

His flustered laughs suddenly cut off though, and he leaned forward, tears forming behind his glasses.

"I'm sorry. I messed up."

His phone-hand dropped like a rock to his knee, and he clicked out of the call with a tap against the screen. The faceplate went dark, and the anxious figure clenched up, tears now falling freely from his eyes. He tried to stifle them, holding his hands up to his face as he leaned forward, but it didn't help. His glasses just filled like basins as he wept.

BANG

"Yuuuuuri!? Are you in here!? Where'd you go!?"

He shrieked at the sudden explosion; the main door to the washroom had been kicked open so hard and fast that it sounded like a car had crashed in somehow.

"Sorry! Did I scare you!? Yakov is waiting! Let's go!"

"Viktor, what are you doing?" Came a muffled voice; someone out in the hallway.

"Oh, there you are!" The older skater laughed, "Yakov wants to do that press conference. We should go, otherwise we'll never hear the end of it."

"Whatever."

Footsteps echoed softly, and then disappeared. It sounded like the door had even closed, and the noise of the outside faded away until only the soft breezy sound of the air conditioning was left. Yuri pulled his glasses off and rubbed his eyes on the sleeve of that same arm, but the tears only began anew.

"...That figures...the one time I hear Viktor say my name, and he doesn't even mean me ..." His voice was a squeak of a whisper, twinged with the previous, and now this new hurt. He dipped his head lower then, hands on either side of his head.

"...Yuri?"
He shrieked again; the voice was much closer this time.

"... Katsuki Yuri?" It repeated.

The sound of skate-guards on tile floor gave away the approach; the tall Russian skater had somehow stepped into the room before the door closed and had waited silently.

"I didn't mean to scare you before...I was just looking for Plisetsky. I didn't realize you were in here." Viktor said, entirely reasonably, "Why don't you come out? I'd rather not be that guy who apologized through a bathroom stall and then left!" He tried to find the humor on it.

Yuri found it difficult though...he could barely handle being in the same event as the Russian legend, never mind stand right in front of him...in a bathroom. His heart was jackhammering in his chest, and as scared as he was, reason seemed to prevail, and he reluctantly reached for the circular latch. The metal felt colder than before, but he finally managed to turn it, and cracked the door open a little bit.

There before him was the living legend himself, still decked out in his Aria outfit like he'd literally just walked off the ice; skates, guards, and all. The expression on his face was initially warm and welcoming, but when he got an eye-full of the younger figure before him (as well as he could anyway, given how Yuri was still mostly hiding behind the red panel,) it changed to worry.

"...Are you okay? You look like you were...crying."

Yuri let the door open all the way after that, but he couldn't come out. His feet felt like they were welded to the floor, and all he could do was lower his gaze, staring at the dark-blue pants around Viktor's knees. Those long legs moved though, and Viktor set to leaning against the dividing wall, giving him the space to step out without feeling boxed in.

"Coming in last doesn't mean you did so badly." Viktor went on, "You can always do better next year, or even at the next competition. You have your Nationals after next weekend, right?"

"...Y-Yeah." Yuri answered cautiously, hiccuping, keeping his eyes down by focusing on clearing the tears he'd left on his glasses. He wiggled his arm to pull the sleeve past the end of his fingers and rubbed the fabric against the lenses with his thumb. He still drew in a few shaky breaths though, despite his best efforts to keep it in so Viktor wouldn't see.

"I don't think I've ever seen someone so upset over the results of a competition though. Angry, sure...but...you look really sad. Is something else wrong?" The silver Russian wondered, turning his head to watch the younger figure, "Being in here by yourself, it looks like you don't want to talk to Celestino about it... You can tell me if you want."

Yuri flinched a little, but went to look at his phone again, clicking into it and finding something. He couldn't manage the words; speaking to his idol was terrifying, but he found a photo and held it up.

"Oh! Is that your dog? I have one just like it back home!" Viktor said cheerfully, holding Yuri's hand with both of his own as he held the phone steady to look at the picture, "Mine's name is Makkachin! What's yours?"

He drew in a sharp breath, but kept his eyes low, "...V-Viktor." He said, barely audible.

"Huh?"

The tears were back in full force after that, and Yuri couldn't find the strength to hold up his phone anymore, "...H-he died...yesterday..."
Blue eyes opened wide to hear it. Yuri started crying all over again, and he brought both hands up to hide his face...but then Viktor did something entirely unexpected. He twisted where he'd been leaning against the red dividing wall, resting his back against it instead, and drawing Yuri into a hug. Right hand went up behind the younger skater's head to hold him close, and the other went around his back.

"I'm so sorry."

The fact that it was Viktor holding him didn't matter anymore, and Yuri pulled his arms down to latch around the man's sides, clinging to him like he was the only person left on Earth, and sobbed against his shoulder.

"We should probably get going."

He heard the words but didn't answer.

"My alarm's about to go off and we have to do our Pair Skate, then the Banquet. No time to waste here." Viktor explained, still holding him, "Besides, I'll be hungry when I wake up."

"Eh?"

Yuri's eyes blinked open slowly. The room was darker than before...the sun had started to set since he'd fallen asleep. Viktor was out cold, almost exactly where Yuri remembered last seeing him, though at some point he'd flipped over and had his arms wrapped around him, hands wedged under the pillows, cheek to his chest.

And then the alarm went off.

He twitched slightly at the sudden noise, but reached over to grab for the Russian's phone to turn it off. The words on the faceplate were all in Cyrillic, but the numbers were still the same as anywhere else. It was 7:30pm.

*The Ice Dancers should be done by now since there aren't a whole lot of them... The Exhibition will start in an hour...*

"Neh, Viktor..." He started, reaching up with one hand to gently stroke the man's head again, "Your alarm went off. We gotta go."

"Mmmnhh..." The Russian grumbled, though refused to move.

Yuri huffed a quiet laugh to himself, realizing it was up to him to make sure the man woke up again. After all, it was Viktor's Exhibition they'd be missing if he didn't...and people just wouldn't stand for that. He pushed up onto his elbows and then twisted onto his side, moving Viktor the same way as he went, and eventually got the man onto his back and lightly sat on his stomach. Arms were still around him, though looser now, and Yuri sat back a little further until he could see Viktor's face. As he leaned down to kiss him, he felt the man's arms coming up again from where they'd slid down, coming to rest against his mid-back.

"I'm getting ready. You can sleep another 5 minutes if you want."

Viktor felt his partner get off and heard him step away, but just as Yuri had suggested, he stayed right where he was for a little bit longer. It was only after he heard the younger man come back into the main room, and started turning on the dimmest of the numerous lights, that he finally let himself sit up in the bed. He slowly blinked his tired eyes around the room and spotted the skater in front of the mirror by the desk, slicking back his hair into performance fashion.
He'd already changed into the Exhibition outfit he needed to be in for Viktor's show; it looked rather much like regular clothing though. That was to be expected, however, given the nature of the program. Wearing something flashy, shiny, or otherwise as gaudy as they normally did...wouldn't really fit. The only way it set itself apart from anything Yuri normally wore was that it wasn't entirely his style of normal-wear. Regular blue-jeans were something Yuri almost never used...black ones, sometimes, but never anything like what he had on at that moment. He usually had khakis, sweats, slacks, or training pants. He wore a normal V-cut white t-shirt, and overtop of all that, he had a slim-fit jeans jacket, open down the front. The sleeves had zippers at the ends, which he had open halfway to give them a slight flair. Around his neck he wore a faux bear-tooth, hanging down on a leather cord.

Yuri gawked at himself in the mirror as he set his hair back with the gel in front of him.

"I look like some American teen, sheesh... But I guess that's the whole point."

He reached for the damp towel he'd brought with him to wipe his hands off once he was done, but before he could set it down again to tell Viktor he should really think about getting up at that point, the Russian had unexpectedly latched to his back.

"...Oh, good, I was worried I'd have to drag you." Yuri mused, turning his head slightly to press his cheek against the side of the man's forehead where he'd parked himself in the crook of his neck.

"Tonight is going to be fun. It has to be." The Russian commented, hands going around Yuri's front, "We'll make everyone eat their words."

"Maybe we can sort things out with Yurio before we're done, too." Yuri suggested, "I'd rather not leave on bad terms if I can help it."

"That'll be up to him." Viktor shrugged, letting his hands roam a little. He kissed the side of his partner's neck before opening his eyes a little, and then huffed a laugh, "Ah, one of my love-bites is showing."

"Eh!?" Yuri clenched up in a panic, reaching up both hands to hide where his neck was exposed, "Ah jeeze, I should cover it..."

"Why?" Viktor hummed, moving his hands under the front of the t-shirt just then, "Let everyone see."

Yuri's cheeks were flushed, but the feeling of his partner's hands on his skin made him slowly forget about the potential embarrassment. His own hands came down off the sides of his neck, the right going back down to touch the table as the left stayed up to reach back and weave fingers through silver hair. Yuri knew where his partner was going, "...Do we really have time for this? The thing starts in less than an hour."

"Are you suggesting I stop?" Viktor purred, fingers moving low to unclasp the jeans in front, "There's always time for a quickie, and I know where all your buttons are."

"...V-Viktor..."

"Mhm...that's what I thought." He laughed, fingers starting to tease by going barely under the edge of the man's clothing. Right hand stayed where it was to continue the taunt, and the left came back up under the shirt, softly moving across velvet skin.

Breaths soon became heavy, and Yuri's second hand came back down to the table, holding him up in place of where his legs were starting to feel weaker. He pushed his hips back a little as he felt the
Russian take hold of him, and Viktor pushed right back against him in turn. Yuri looked up a little, remembering suddenly that the mirror was right in front of him, and he watched their reflections doing what he normally only felt. He could see where the Russian's pale white arms had come around his sides, and part of his hand had vanished down the front of his clothing, the other clearly visible where it was flat against his chest, even through the t-shirt. The lower hand was starting to get the better of him though, moving a little faster as his body gave Viktor what he wanted. He felt where the Russian had moved one of his legs slightly under him, helping hold him up where he was starting to falter.

Yuri's head started to sag, closing his eyes against the sensation and losing sight of the mirror. That didn't matter for long though, since Viktor suddenly pulled his hands back and turned him around, pushing him up to half-sit on the edge of the table as he wedged himself between his husband's legs. The motion was quick, and Yuri heard the table bang against the wall as Viktor got in close, sliding his arms under the jacket to pull into him as he leaned in closer to his face. The younger man's cheeks flushed red as he briefly wondered what the neighbors must think, if they were there at all and heard the sudden thud...and another, and one more, the Russian getting more needy as they went. Hands that had settled over Viktor's bare shoulders pulled back, sliding down the man's arms and going to center, moving quickly to get through the fabric of his clothing and return the gesture. The table hit the wall one last time before Yuri had him, and he heard the Russian suck in a hissed breath as his frame twitched.

"No sense in only one of us enjoying this." The younger skater commented, whispering the words against Viktor's ear as his forehead dipped to his shoulder.

"Who says I don't enjoy making you squirm?" The silver wondered, lifting his head again to press it to his husband's, looking deep into those hazel eyes as Yuri went about his task, "A year ago, you could hardly handle the notion of me sleeping next to you...and now..."

"And now?" Yuri echoed, half-lidding those eyes as he lifted his knees, crossing his ankles behind the man's thighs to press him in closer. He reached back with his thumbs to bring himself into the fray. Hands continued moving up and down, twisting slightly.

"...And now..." The Russian could barely form fluid sentences by then, having to pause between words as he felt the strokes, "...Your Eros...is almost as...as strong as mine..."

"Almost?"

Pale hands went down from Yuri's back to cup under where he was sitting against the table, pulling him up and forward, and then turning to push him in reverse towards the bed. Viktor lowered him gently, kissing and licking at his neck as he went. Yuri's hands had gone around the man's sides by then, trying to keep balanced during the move, then pulling him closer as the Russian lowered in on top of him, one leg going between his own. The methodical grind began in earnest; Viktor slid his arms under the back of his husband's shoulder-blades as he went, holding him in place as he picked up the tempo a little.

Yuri had gotten less self-conscious over the last year, and though he still wasn't very loud, he allowed himself the occasional utterance between urgent breaths. It was so much different then, compared to how they'd been the first time. Viktor had been cognizant of Yuri's fear of being heard back then, but now, and especially when it was Yuri doing something, he didn't care if the neighbors on both walls heard him.

And such was the case when Yuri's hands slid off his back and went between them, clasping them together and gently squeezing. Viktor had even pulled his arms back and pushed up onto them, looking down on his husband as he kept on moving. He paused only long enough to fit his other
knee between Yuri's and pushed them apart, sitting back and hoisting them up against his sides as he put his own knees on either side of the man's waist, then pressing in again. Yuri hadn't let go of them, and now it was even easier to please his partner than it had been. He let himself go for a moment and focused just on Viktor, freeing up his left hand to clasp it around the back of the man's neck and pull him down again as the right went about its slippery business. He gave a light kiss, pulled back a little, then pressed in harder, and Viktor went down on his elbows soon after, setting them down aside Yuri's head, weaving his fingers through raven hair. It didn't matter that it had just been styled...it could be done again.

"Y-Yuri..."

He could feel the man pushing against his hands, and knew he was doing well. Viktor pressed his forehead against his, and his breaths were getting more urgent with every stroke. He moved quickly after that though and flipped them again, pushing Yuri above him, and pushing his feet against the wall to get off the edge of the bed.

Blue eyes gazed up at brown, knowing time was running short. Viktor moved his hands forward and took them both again, and shifted his knees up to force Yuri to sit a little bit further up, matching them more evenly before setting out to finish. The younger figure went palms-down against his partner's chest and let more experienced hands go to work, barely able to hold himself up against it. The Russian moved his hips a little under him, adding to the sensation.

Once in a great while, they'd managed to time themselves to finish fairly closely to the same moment, but in that moment, they actually did finish together. And for once, the sticky mess was on Viktor's stomach, rather than anywhere else.

Yuri huffed to catch his breath. He felt a finger under his chin and lifted his eyes, meeting the slate irises below him.

"...Okay..." The Russian said, trying to catch his breath as well, "Now I'll get ready."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED THIRTY ONE

Viktor was a blur of activity as he tried to make himself presentable again, all the previous primping for his Free Skate having been lost when he fell asleep. While he got into the first of his three Exhibition outfits though, Yuri made sure their suitcases were ready to go. They'd be going straight from the Gala to the Banquet at the Hotel Burdigala Bordeaux, and there wouldn't be time to come all the way back to the Novotel to change and get moving again.

Just as Yuri was about to ask how much longer his partner would be, however...he got a loud gurgle as an answer.

"...So hungry..." Viktor lamented, looking run down already.

"Sheesh, when was the last time you ate anything?"

"This morning."

"Viktor...!"

"I knowwww..." He whined, "And I wasted all our time just now..."

"It wasn't a waste of time; don't even suggest otherwise." Yuri said firmly, rising up to his feet to pull his phone from his back pocket, "I have an idea though."

The Russian watched curiously as his partner flipped through a few windows, then dialed a number and set the phone between his ear and shoulder. Within a few dial-tones, he got his answer.

"Hi Mikhail, can I ask a favor?"

Viktor was stuffing his face in the back seat of his elder's rental car, eating as ravenously as he ever had. His older counterpart was a bit surprised at how quickly the food he'd brought back was disappearing.

"Sheesh, you'd think he hadn't eaten in days or something." He commented, looking back at them through the rearview mirror.

"Vkusno~!" Viktor managed to say between mouthfuls.

"Don't forget to breathe." Minako commented, turning back to glance at him.

Wearing his usual black-and-azure track-suit jacket again, Yuri was eating as well, but at a significantly slower pace. He hadn't been starving yet by that point. Something other than his stomach had been gnawing at him anyway. He leaned forward a little when the car came to rest at a stop-light, "Hey...how's Yurio been since earlier?"

"He's been ultra-stoic." Minako answered, "We took him to the rink before swinging back to get you guys, and he's trying to blow everything off like nothing's wrong."
"But he hasn't actually said anything about it."

"No..."

Yuri sagged back into his seat sullenly, "...This is going to be so stressful..."

Viktor gradually came to a stop where he'd been shoveling food into his gob, glancing past the long diagonal slice of bread he held in one hand to see his partner, "...You can't let Yurio bother you, otherwise you're gonna mess up your jumps."

The younger skater just sank further into his coat and groaned. His voice practically echoed from inside, "I can't help it. After that talk we had at the Helsinki airport, I feel responsible for him..."

"But you're not..." Viktor retorted, giving him a strange look.

"After all the things he said though... He looks to both of us like we're surrogate family, and anytime we do something to upset him, it's like we're letting him down on a deeper level than just run-of-the-mill disappointment. He takes it so personally..."

"We're his friends, Yuri, not his parents. He's going to have to learn eventually that we can't be there all the time." The Russian pointed out, "Besides, like I said before, we'll see his Free Skate at the Final. He should be glad that we're so confident that he'll be there. It's not like we put together our Team Skate Exhibition just to torment him."

"That's the other thing that worries me... If he doesn't come around, we'll have gotten everyone all excited about our Exhibition show for nothing. How do we explain it if he won't forgive us? 'Sorry everyone, Yurio got a wild thorny hair up his arse and is too proud to come skate with us?' Yuri sighed, looking down at the remains of the cinnamon sweet-bread he held there, "We were going to do it regardless of whether all of us got on the podium at the end or not, but..."

"He'll come around. He always does." Viktor shrugged, "He's always been this way. You yourself pointed out how difficult he is to read, as far back as last year's GP Final Banquet. I told you to be careful around him and keep your guard up, else he'd kick you off a pier, right?"

"Yeah."

"And he ended up kicking you into a wall instead. Bounced you off of it like you were a fútbol. You've gotten to a point where the only way he could've done that is if you're letting him get to you. You can't let yourself feel so guilty."

"That all just comes back around to how bad I felt after psyching you out for your Free Skate though." The younger skater pointed out, "The whole day had just made me feel guilty about everything..."

Viktor watched him for a moment, warily looking out the window as the car came to stop outside the Patinoire. There was a massive crowd waiting outside to get in for the best seats, and none of them yet were aware of their arrival. He wasn't even sure yet if they were all aware of the extra performance being put on that night. Yuri looked back down again as he felt a hand come up against his thigh, glancing from it to the arm and then the man it was attached to.

"I already agreed not to put you in that position again." Viktor said, giving the leg a gentle squeeze, "I can't force you to change how you feel about things, but I can ask you to stop worrying so much about it. This isn't the first time Yurio has gotten mad about something trivial. He chose to get angry that you weren't there to watch his show. He put you into this position because he knew you'd feel bad about it later. I know he's come a long way, but he's still the same person who screamed at you
to retire back at Sochi." He had the same look on his face as he had during the moments before
Yuri's final Free Skate at the previous year's GP Final, "...How long are you going to let him
emotionally blackmail you?"

Mikhail and Minako listened quietly from the front seats, but silently agreed to give them the moment
alone, and stepped out to curbside.

Slate eyes watched them go, and then returned to look at the guilt-ridden younger skater next to him,
"Yuri...I know it means a lot to you to finally have his approval after what he put you through
before, but this is just part and parcel to all that. To get Yurio's respect, you also get his scorn and
condemnation. You think today was the first time I've had him by his face?"

Hazel eyes were surprised to hear the words, and Yuri turned his face up to look at his husband
squarely, "It's...not?"

Viktor shook his head, "Last year, the morning after you got us these rings." His hand raised up to
display it, "Yurio told me he'd steal the Gold right out of your hands, just to prove to me how
incompetent I was to put my faith in you. And yet, a second after that, despite saying something so
horrible...he also said the seaside of Barcelona reminded him of Hasetsu."

In that brief moment, Yuri saw Viktor with the same eyes that once looked up at him like a god. He
felt the man's soft fingers come up aside his face, holding palm to his cheek, and he lowered his eyes,
feeling the guilt practically being drained out of him.

"I know you probably think I've been cold to Yurio's feelings all this time, but I've known him much
longer than you have. I don't do this out of malice for him. To be his friend...you have to be careful.
He's the Russian Tiger...beautiful to look at, but not safe to touch. You have to build up a glass wall
around yourself. Thin enough so that you can see each other, but thick enough that you don't hurt
one another. ...Wakaru?"

Yuri drew in a breath, and then bobbed his head, "Wakatta."

Viktor saw it and smiled, reaching a thumb around to touch his partner's lip, "Then let's go in there
and have some fun. It's the Trophée de France Exhibition Gala! No stress and no worries. Just you,
and me, and the ice."

The younger skater started to give himself permission to feel better about the whole thing, nodding
once excitedly. Viktor leaned in quickly to seal in the happiness with a quick kiss, and then moved to
pile out of the car. Yuri did the same on the other side, and within seconds, camera flashes were
glittering in the night and a cacophony of clapping and cheering erupted.

Viktor came around the rear of the car and moved to grab his things from his uncle, only to be
denied.

"We'll follow you guys in." Mikhail explained, already looking ready to carry Viktor's bags in on his
behalf. Minako had Yuri's in turn.

A little surprised, but grateful either way, the pair agreed and started heading towards the small stairs
in front of the building, each with an arm wrapped around one another.

There were a few gasps as they got to the top and were at the closest point to the fans.

"Oh my god, Yuri's wearing his track coat! Is he performing!? YURI, ARE YOU SKATING
TONIGHT!?!"
"He's skating!?"

"Are you in the Exhibition!?"

"TELL US YOU'RE DOING ANOTHER PAIR SKATE!"

They paused briefly, listening to the onslaught from both sides. At the last comment, Yuri spotted the questioner; an older teen girl holding up a Viktuuri banner, held back by a metal half-fence. When their eyes met, the girl immediately became paralyzed, her sign getting a little scrunched up as she seized up.

Yuri smiled at her, and like his husband had a thousand times, winked before walking into the building. The crowd roared excitedly as they disappeared through the doors.

Yuri watched happily from rink-side as the event's multi-disciplinary medalists took to the ice for the opening of the Gala, putting on a show similar to the one from World's the year before. Viktor and Chris flocked together, being massive dorks as they were wont to do, while Yurio hung out on his own. By the time the Exhibition's starting ceremony had ended, Yuri had almost forgotten the tension of the afternoon and was even starting to enjoy himself again.

"Let's hear it for our star athletes!" The announcer called overhead, getting the audience riled up all over again, watching the gaggle of skaters rushing towards the center for one last wave-off before all but one would exit the ice.

It was almost painfully ironic that it was Yurio who stayed in the rink. He made long, idle circles over the inner third of the icy lake as the other skaters headed through the exits on either ends of the arena.

Yuri moved off towards the one closest to where he was standing, waiting with Viktor's skate-guards as he shuffled through with the rest. His first outfit of the night was rather simple, but the Opening Ceremony ensemble usually looked more like 'formal' street-wear anyway. It wasn't so different from his World's Exhibition opener in that respect; black figure-hugging pants, slightly glossy in the lights of the darkened arena, black dress-shirt open part-way down his chest.

"You two are crazy out there." The younger skater huffed a laugh, handing over the first of the two skate guards, "It's a wonder people don't think Viktor's going to leave me for you." He pointed the second blade-guard at Chris.

"Don't give me such hope, Yuri." The Swiss skater mused, rubbing his face with a towel that his own coach handed him, "I've been on him for 10 years."

"Oh Chris..." Viktor finally joined in, "You know as well as I do that the promise of me is more alluring to you than actually having me."

"I dunno, Viktor...the way Yuri ran off during Worlds to get to you..." He rested his forearm on the Russian's shoulder as he pulled on the second blade-guard, "I might be willing to take the risk. I doubt you'd disappoint me."

"Really?" The Russian wondered, putting a finger over his lips in amused curiosity. His other arm
went over his friend's shoulder in a sultry tease, "I might get in trouble with my husband if you keep
talking like that."

Chris turned his head, putting his face dangerously close to his silver counterpart, "What he doesn't see can't upset him..."

Except that he did see, and Chris got two fingers up his nose for the comment as Yuri wedged himself between the two obscenely tall skaters, pushing the man's face away in a comical territorial display, "Thaaaat's enough of that..."

Viktor was laughing hysterically, tears in his eyes as he leaned over the doorway in the rink wall. He pointed a finger at the blonde, "Denial by Yuri! That's almost a fatality...!

The raven-haired skater backed up into his husband, "He's mine."

Defending his partner from their mutual friend's pretend ambitions was all fun and games, and Yuri allowed himself to see the humor in it, no longer bothered by the jokes like he had been at Worlds.

The Russian casually leaned forward and draped his arms over his partner's shoulders, curling one of them around to put his hand deftly under the man's chin. He leaned in close to Yuri's ear and whispered something that made him nearly explode into a nosebleed on the spot, and the young skater held his face desperately to prevent the gush from getting any worse. All the while, Viktor was laughing at him.

"...Yuri, you gonna be okay?" Chris asked, shaking his head, "What'd he tell you?"

'That's the third time today you've put yourself between me and my pursuers.' The memory echoed in the younger skater's head, 'Keep that up, and I might have to take you right here at rink-side, in front of all of these people...'

He was just about to make a crude suggestion about what had been uttered, but then the lights above them changed, and the trio looked out over the white frost to see Yurio finally taking his position.

"Ladies and gentlemen...your Trophée de France Silver Medalist, Yuri Plisetsky."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED THIRTY TWO

For the opening show, the blonde had covered his Exhibition outfit like any sensible skater would. For all anyone knew, he was dressed rather normally for his usual style; black skinny jeans, with a black and grey loose hoodie overtop. He'd rolled the sleeves up to his elbows and kept the hood over his head...until the whole thing came off.

Yurio handed the hoodie over to Yakov and Lilia as he made one last pass by rink-side. He glanced over to where he could see Yuri and the others messing around as Viktor and Chris got off the ice. Seeing their happy enthusiasm made a pit grow in his stomach, but he turned away from it and started making his wide circles around the rink, pulling his hair up into a ponytail as he went. His hair had gotten rather long by that point; he'd let it go all summer, only trimming it a little before the season started, so even when pulled up, it went a little past his shoulders.

The rest of him looked a bit uncharacteristic as well, wearing an outfit that flowed almost as much as his hair did. A charcoal grey cloak billowed out to his sides where he untied it from around himself, transforming the lanky teenager into something like a wraith. Two loops at the farthest corners of the cloak came up around his fingers, giving the look of two huge wings. The entire ensemble had a similar vibe to his Appassionato outfit, but with a dark taint to it.

The trio's mirth in the previous few moments had entirely died away when the piano music started playing high above; slow and melodious, heart-wrenching in its melancholy. It was entirely unlike anything anyone had expected from the Russian Punk...and perhaps that's why almost no one could take their eyes off of him. No one except Viktor, anyway.

['Down' by Jason Walker]

Yurio slowly slid forward on the white field, the breezy shawl flowing out behind him like smoke.

The older Russian quietly started to pull away from rink-side. Yuri had almost missed his passing since Viktor didn't want to interrupt, but they exchanged a few whispers before Viktor finally took off, and the younger skater returned his attention out onto the ice. Chris followed after him, and they made their way over to the prep area to get ready for their own performances.

I don't know where I'm at
I'm standing at the back
And I'm tired of waiting

The teen flipped to glide in reverse then, inching his way towards the rink wall, the motions of his arms and posture telling the story as it echoed overhead.

Waiting here in line,
Hoping that I'll find
What I've been chasing

Yuri leaned onto the rink wall, suddenly wondering if the teen had planned his show this way or if it was just unfortunate timing. It was hard to tell what had inspired the use of this kind of music.

I know he planned his old GP Final Exhibition the night before he performed it, but...could he really have done this one so soon? Or maybe he really had planned this ahead of time...
The blond was practically on the other side of the rink from him by then, slowly turning in an inside spread-eagle as his arms rose up towards the ceiling, ponytail and shawl lagging behind like mist on water.

_I shot for the sky_
_I'm stuck on the ground_

Hands came down, as though presenting the ice, and he slid away in reverse as he came back up, then flipped around to face forward again.

_Why do I try,_
_Triple axel._

_I know I'm gonna fall down_

He used the momentum to scissor-kick into a low sit-spin, left blade on the ice as the right came up over his knee. Yurio's arms were out to the side, coming up and back in slow wavy motions.

_I thought I could fly,_
_So why did I drown?_

He rose back to standing, one arm up above him as he came. The leg that had been perched over his knee went way out to the side before coming down gently on the toe-pick behind the forward skate.

_I'll never know why_

Emerald eyes shot across the ice and met hazel, locking into one another for a moment that felt like an instant, and yet eternity.

_It's coming down, down, down_

Yurio's upraised arm came down in a low sweep, taking him down like a bow, touching the ice with a fingertip as he turned. The piano chorus came into play again between stanzas, and the Russian Tiger moved off once more, twisting and arcing himself as he picked up speed.

_Not ready to let go_

He launched into a quad Salchow on the last word, hitting the ice again in time with the piano keys.

_'Cause then I'd never know_

Another jump, this time a triple Toe-loop, and again landing in time with the background music.

_What I could be missing_

The blonde came to a stop, left arm out gracefully behind him as he bowed his head down towards the rink.

_But I'm missing way too much_

He lifted his head again, eyes closed as the right skate went away from him and pulled him into another slow turn.

_So when do I give up_
Both hands were up, pleading, begging for answers.

*What I was wishing for*

His arms came down, spreading out to the sides, even as he entered into a 3-turn.

*I shot for the sky*

Double-tano triple Flip.

*I'm stuck on the ground*

Landing, regaining his footing, half-loop and then immediately descending into a hydroblade, kicking his heel out to skid across the ice to keep his balance.

*So why do I try,*

His free leg kicked up suddenly to force him into another low spin.

*I know I'm gonna fall down*

The teen held his arms in close to his head.

*I thought I could fly.*

As he rose back up again, he kept spinning, reaching back to grab hold of his black blade and began pulling it up behind himself as his free hand gestured out towards the audience.

*So why did I drown?*

He pulled his leg up further into a one-handed half-Biellmann spin.

*I'll never know why*

Yurio let go of the blade, letting the leg swing forward and around like a pendulum to kick him into a slow scratch-spin.

*It's coming down, down, down*

He pulled his arms in close to go faster.

*Oh I am going down, down, down*

Arms came up again, pulling back from the spin to head back down the center of the rink. With each repetition of the word, his hands came lower and lower again, until they were clasped together against his chest, and he held his head low over them.

*I can't find another way around*

He spun to go forward, weaving his feet carefully as he scratched his way across the ice and turned into the end of the rink, sliding by mere feet away from it.

*I don't want to hear the sound,*

*Of losing what I never found*

Yuri watched the blond lifting his head after that, spreading his arms way out to the side before lowering himself into a slide. He lifted his own head as he recognized the move, surprised to see it.
performed by the teen in that moment.

I shot for the sky
I'm stuck on the ground
Why do I try,

As Yurio rose back up again, he slid his right leg forward into the air, and then kicked it back as he arched over himself in a long Ina Bauer.

...That's right out of my YoI Free Skate... Yuri thought to himself, The calm right before the storm at the end.

I know I'm gonna fall down

Yurio twisted out to skate in reverse again along the long center of the rink, and threw himself...

I thought I could fly,

...Triple Lutz, triple Loop.

So why did I drown?

He flipped back to skating forward again, sliding quickly along the far edge of the rink.

I'll never know why
It's coming down, down, down

He turned back towards center, and threw himself into a death drop.

I shot for the sky

He immediately went into another sit-spin, rotating quicker than any of the other times, twisting a little to raise one hand up above himself.

I'm stuck on the ground
Why do I try,
I know I'm gonna fall down

Frost started to shear away as he dug his toe-pick forward to slow the spin down again, and the rotations finished with the teen on one knee.

I thought I could fly,

Both arms went out to the side again as he held his face down, moving his hands like they were wings before bringing them back to wrap around himself as the other knee came down to the cold surface to match the other.

So why did I drown?
I'll never know why

Hands continued moving down, sliding down his legs until he had his fingers flat on the ice. In that moment, he found Yuri on the rink-wall again, and he leaned forward onto one hand, the other reaching out to the older skater. Both emerald eyes blazed as he stared ahead, making Yuri wonder what was going through the teen's head.

It's coming down, down, down
Each repetition of the word brought the hand back again, until both hands were palms-down on the ice. The piano faded back in again, and the teen 'reluctantly' got back to his feet, sliding off with his back to the older figure. Yuri had brought his own hands back off the rink wall after that, his brows furrowed in worry. As the song came to a close, Yurio made a few final lazy spins, and came to rest in the center of the rink with his head down.

It felt weird to hear the audience clapping after that, but Yuri hesitantly joined them, patting his hands together once for every sound of four from someone else nearby. He watched the teen move off to an exit through the rink wall near his coach and choreographer. As two new skaters started to enter the rink, the Bronze Ice Dancers, Yuri moved off, deciding that this was his moment to try and make amends.

He ran as quickly as he could along the outside of the wall, careful not to run into others as he made his way through the dark. By the time he'd gotten close, he could see Yurio putting his second skate-guard on, slipping his arms through his team jacket and saying something to Yakov that Yuri couldn't hear. The young skater swallowed nervously and then made his way through the last set of people between him and the Russians.

"Yuri..." He started, not sure if anyone even heard him.

Yakov looked up as he spotted the skater coming though, and the sudden turn got the blonde's attention. Green eyes glanced briefly, but then turned away again without a word.

"Please stop being mad at me." Yuri said anxiously, "...I don't know what else to tell you. Your Exhibition..."

"It was about last year." The teen said stiffly, "For my grandpa back in Moscow."

"Oh..."

"What, did you think it was for you?" Yurio almost scoffed, pulling the tie from his hair and letting it tumble loose around his head and face again, obscuring his right eye like usual before pulling the black hood up over it all, "Don't be dumb."

'I know he's come a long way, but he's still the same person who screamed at you to retire back at Sochi.'

"I didn't think it was for me." Yuri said, "But that doesn't mean it didn't send a message...to your grandpa, to me, to this whole audience. Everyone saw you put on a show that no one would've ever expected from you. No one could take their eyes off you."

"Except Viktor."

The older skater rubbed his temples, but then abruptly closed the gap between them and grabbed the Russian Kitten by the back of his jacket and started hauling him off. The teen put up a small fuss, but went along. Yuri only let him go again once they were in a small section of the prep area that was secluded from the bustle of the main atrium.

He finally turned again, and a reluctant hand came up to point at the teen, "Stop blaming Viktor for the things you're mad at me for." He said firmly, an exasperated look on his face if there ever was one, "Viktor's up after these Ice Dancers, and he didn't have the luxury of hiding his outfit under a coat like you did." He put his hands on the Punk's shoulders, staring him straight on, "Come on, Yuri...you can't sit on top of this wall of anger and hurl insults like you think you can get away with pretending you don't know what goes into these shows. We miss performances all the time, and it's
"not because we think they're lame or unworthy of attention."

"No, you just skip them because you think you have something better to do."

"That again?" Yuri sighed. He shook his head, but then took his hands back, putting them into his jacket pockets like Yurio already had with his own. "You've got to understand this at some point...things between Viktor and I aren't the same as they used to be. We've changed, grown closer, gotten mar-

"Married, I know, God, you rub that in my fucking face all the time. I GET IT ALREADY."

"...I...don't think you do." The older skater said, making the teen glower at him, "It's not just some agreement we have, where as long as we're wearing these rings, we hang out all the time, and make racy jokes to try and make you uncomfortable because we think it's funny." He held his right hand close to his chest, fingers touching the gold there on his finger as he averted his eyes a little, "There's more to it than that. We're a team. We support each other. I can't keep apologizing for putting Viktor's feelings before yours, but...that's how it is for us." Hazel irises came back up again to look at the teen directly, his expression serious, but having a softness to it, "I swore a vow to always be there for him. Sometimes that means doing things for him that I'd never do for anyone else...and sometimes that means putting him ahead of my friends. I'm not doing it because I like you less than I used to. I just...have more responsibility to Viktor now than I did back then. Neither of us wanted him to face Sophia alone, and he wanted to get it out of the way as fast as he could so he could enjoy the rest of the event without it looming over him."

"Tsh..."

"Scoff all you want..." Yuri shrugged, mostly to himself, "But leave it at that." He paused a little for emphasis, but then took one step forward, "I don't ever want to hear you insulting us like you did earlier ever again. Every time you do, it makes it easier for the next time that I have to choose between you and anything else. I can't keep supporting a friend who weaponizes the most intimate and vulnerable parts of my relationship with someone I love. It would never even occur to me to do that to you...and it hurts me a lot to see how easy it is for you."

Green eyes moved away from him, and the teen said nothing in response.

Yuri pulled back a little bit, watching the younger skater carefully before turning his head and motioning like he was going to leave, "I don't expect you to apologize for what you said before, but going forward...there's a line in the sand. Viktor and I are your friends, but that doesn't make us your punching bags. Cross the line again, and you may get more than Viktor holding you up by your face."

"What, you're threatening me now? That's out of character for you."

Yuri turned his head back, "You're projecting what you would do onto others, just like I do...and yet you also know that's not what I meant. For you, being left behind would be worse than any physical punishment you might endure." He explained, speaking in a softer tone than before, "Mikhail already told you once that he'll drop you if you don't fix your attitude, and Viktor's already shown a propensity to estrange himself from people he doesn't want to be around. If both of them distance themselves from you, what do you think I'm going to do?"

Yurio fell silent, turning side-face from the Asian skater.

"...And what do you think they're going to do if I hit my breaking point? I'm...a lot weaker than they are, and my skin isn't as thick. I can only guess what Viktor would do if someone other than him
ever made me cry. I mean, you haven't managed it yet, but you've come pretty close..."

The teen still held quiet, keeping his eyes low.

"...Anyway, I guess that's all I wanted to say. I'm going to head back to rink-side. You can come with and we'll start over, like today didn't happen...or you can stay here. It's up to you."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED THIRTY THREE

Yuri wasn't even sure if the blond was following him after he'd said his piece. He hadn't bothered looking back over his shoulder to check.

If I look, it means he still has me...and Viktor's right. I can't keep letting myself be snared like that.

Just as he was about to pull the curtain back to get to rink-side, he heard what sounded like a group of people having a good laugh. Within the clamor, he could swear he heard Viktor's voice, and when Yuri lifted his head to check, he realized he was right.

The Russian was still carrying his things around, one bag loosely slung over his shoulder by one hand as the other held onto the rolling suitcase's telescoping grip-bar. He was standing with Chris and a pair of strangers, though they seemed to be getting along well enough to be old friends.

Do they know one another...?

"Yuri!" Viktor called, having spotted him past the bleach-blonde fluff of Chris' head, "Yuuuuri!"

Curious eyes blinked, and the younger skater finally got his feet to move again, turning a full 180 from where he'd meant to go and half-jogging over to keep the man from waiting. He wedged himself between the two ridiculously tall athletes and snaked one arm around his partner's lower back, glancing between what he assumed to be a set of Pair skaters. Looking at their team jackets, Yuri could see the big NISA badge across the right front side, and it suddenly dawned on him who they were talking to.

"You're Petra's older brother!" He pointed at the male half of the duo, "You're...a lot older than she is." He blurted right after, pulling back his hand cautiously.

The skater laughed anxiously, moving a hand up behind his neck, "You remembered her name? That's surprising! For having only met briefly in an elevator, I mean..."

"She left an impression." Yuri mused, "But if you're here to present an Exhibition, it must mean you did pretty well for yourselves."

"We got Silver!"

Yurio watched from a distance, scoffing as he heard it and clicking his blade-guard against the tile floor impatiently. Hearing Yuri congratulate them and go on like business as usual was unexpected, given the conversation immediately prior to that. Not knowing how or why either him or Viktor would give two shits about a British Pair skating team, too, made the sting feel like a burn.

"You should've seen his face when his kid-sister told him you guys had said good luck." The lady skater said, crossing her arms and nudging her partner with her elbow, "Erik just about had a heart attack."

"Van!" He protested, his face flushed.

The woman tilted her head towards Viktor and smirked at her partner's expense, "He watched videos of your first Pair skate almost every day for like a week after it came out. Even made me learn Yuri's part so we could do a version of our own." She winked over at the Asian figure, "Just like how you
did Aria back in the day."

He just blinked back at her, not realizing his face had gone pink.

Viktor just laughed and nosed the side of his cheek, "He knew just what to do to get me on a plane to Japan, that's for sure." He lifted his head though as he realized the music overhead was fading out, and the audience replaced its volume with a cacophony of applause, "Ah...looks like it's time to go. I'm up."

"Are you guys doing another duet tonight?" Van wondered, pointing at Yuri's track coat, "You look like you're getting ready to skate, but this isn't your event."

Yuri smiled and let Viktor pull him away to get to the curtains, "Later. It's a surprise." He waved politely, "Have fun with your own show!"

The duo was shocked, but Erik moreso than his partner. He latched onto Van's head and started sobbing excitedly, "Ohmygodthey'regonnadoonerightthereandIgettoseeitpersonJesusisrealholyshit!"

Viktor passed Yurio without saying a word. The blonde just let his eyes follow the man through the curtain, equally silent. He followed them though, after Chris had gone by, and then the Pair skaters in turn. By the time all of them were out there, Viktor had already pulled off his skate guards and handed over his things to Yuri for safekeeping. Spotlights were searching the ice for him, but the Russian took his time anyway.

The black, red, and white team jacket came off once the second blade-guard was removed, and Yuri carefully slipped his own arms through it happily, keeping the skate covers together in his hands.

"Please welcome your Men's Singles Gold Medalist to the ice...in a masterful return to competitive skating after taking off for most of last year, Russia's...Viktor...Nikiforov!"

The clapping and cheering roared back into a fever pitch, but even with the announcement, Viktor still hadn't picked up the pace. Instead of stepping out into the rink, he stepped closer to his husband and slid both arms over the younger man's shoulders, drawing in close as he laced his fingers together at the limits of his lazy reach. He then leaned in, pressing their foreheads lightly together where he loomed overhead.

"Did you get what you needed?" The Russian asked quietly, voice subtle enough that no one but Yuri could hear him.

"...Eh?" The younger skater blinked in confusion. He could hear the audience starting to chant Viktor's name like they had at Rostelecom the year before, getting impatient for him to take the ice.

"I was in the hallway already when you dragged Yurio through. I can only assume that means you talked to him."

"Yeah...but, I don't know."

Slate eyes turned from brown and scanned the background for the blonde, finding him close to the curtained exit into the prep area, "He didn't apologize."

"I didn't ask him to, but you need to get moving!"

"Okay." Viktor huffed a laugh, pulling his right hand back over where it was draped over Yuri's shoulder and slid it down, fingers light against his skin to lift his face, "I expect a full report when I'm
"Fine, just go!" Yuri begged, smiling despite his anxiety about the audience's growing demand.

"Not before I get what I need." The Russian purred, descending the last quarter inch between them to steal his kiss before finally setting blades to ice. As his left arm came back over his husband's other shoulder, he traced a finger along the edge of his jaw until it finally left off from the tip of his chin.

Yuri felt a flurry of butterflies in his gut as the audience roared its approval, finally getting what it wanted. He felt Chris' elbow come up over his shoulder, and the young skater tilted his head a little towards him.

"He's being really flirtatious suddenly." The Swiss man commented.

"Nah. He's always like that with me."

"...Hm...now I'm really jealous."

"Oh, don't be jealous of that, Chris." Yuri commented, getting a sly look on his face suddenly, "Be jealous of the fact that I get to take him home afterwards."

"You're such a tease..."

Viktor made a wide circle around the edge of the entire rink, holding his arms out to the audience and soaking in the adulation like it was all he needed to live. When he finally came back around to his starting point at the rink exit, he made his way into a tighter circle and came towards center.

His chosen outfit for this solo Exhibition harkened back to his early days in the Senior division, weaving intricately designed lace windows through various sections. The ensemble was a gradient of iridescent silver coming up the left sleeve and right leg, fading into black, where the lace patterns cut through for a subtle glimpse of pale skin going down the right arm. The lace itself bore a fishnet pattern, with chromatic silver sequins woven throughout, similar to the formerly-known-as-Agape outfit. The angular, tribal pattern of the cut-outs was matched by a mirror of the same pattern on the other side, but in black where it moved over the silver. The back bore a pattern like wings, though very subtly so, and the long 'feathers' of the wingtips descended and wrapped all the way down to the Russian's ankles, interrupted only by where the base of the jacket overlapped the pants.

He took his spot and tapped the ice with each toe-pick, reaching up with his right hand to kiss his ring for luck and then took his stance.

Yuri had his elbows crossed over the rink wall, with his lips pressed to his own ring as his eyes focused on the figure ahead. He watched his husband reaching out to hush the crowd by waving his hands down, and as their noise started to fade out, he tousled his hair to the left to get it out of his eye again, closed them both, and lowered his face.

['Era-Ameno (Dance Remix)' - on YouTube channel EraMusica96]

The low bass faded in, and the Russian slowly started lifting his arms, outward at first, and then moving them in front of himself, palms-up, bringing the sides of his wrists together and raising them towards the rafters.

_Dori me_

He opened his eyes and looked past his fingers, opening his hands to the sky as he continued to raise them up, as though in offering.
Interimo adapare

Hands clenched into light fists and be brought them back down in front of himself, lowering his face against them.

Dori me

Arms went out to the side again, and he looked out over his left as he slowly started to rotate in place.

Ameno, ameno, latire...

He started to pick up speed as he made his way close to the narrow end of the rink, raising his right arm up above and then gracefully bringing it back down in front of himself again.

Latiremo, dori me

Skates scratched the ice as he maneuvered into a 3-turn, locking down his golden blade on the back inside edge. The right foot was ready...

Ameno

He kicked his toe-pick into the ice and vaulted on the first of the song's emphasized beats, spinning through a quad Flip before landing a few seconds later.

Omenare imperavi ameno

He slid backwards through the landing, mohawking to face forward again.

Dimere dimere

Right arm reached forward as the left leg went out directly behind him, and he brought the hand down, sliding past his chin and under his chest.

Matiro

A quick bob, and he twisted himself around, moving diagonally across the ice like a spinning top while still in camel-spin formation, kicking his extended leg up to vault him forward until...

Matiremo

...he scissor kicked from the camel-stance, and spun swiftly into a broken-leg sit-spin on the opposite foot.

Ameno

The spin continued, morphing as he brought the free leg in and changed feet again, holding to the left skate as it crossed in front of the right, and his left arm reached out above himself.

Omenare imperavi emulari

Ameno

Speed increased as the Russian went from a sitting stance to rising into a camel spin, grabbing the golden blade on his free leg as he went, then adding his other hand to the grip until he was finally in a full Biellmann spin.
He released the blade and swung the leg out, fixing himself to face forward in a ballerina-like spin, turning his head only at the limits of his body's ability to twist, and then moved back again.

Three beats passed, and Viktor rounded by the opposite narrow-end of the rink from where he'd been before, twisting around in a mini-step sequence, and bringing his arms up again around himself.

He hopped through a half-loop, and went around the other end of the rink in a wide outside spread-Eagle, twisting into a forward stance at the end, and kicking his right leg out to throw himself into the air again...

Quad Axel. The audience roared their delight to see it. Camera flashes dazzled like fireflies.

He spun around loosely, slowly, right hand coming up to the center of his chest and extending forward as the left rose up slightly behind him. 

A slight intermission from the lyrics, and Viktor slowed down briefly in turn, leaning back as he slid diagonally across the ice.

Ina Bauer.

He pulled back up to normal and spun to change directions against the long end of the rink wall.

The Russian glided through another pause in the lyrics with a few consecutive twizzles.

The spinning continued, but Viktor moved down to slide along on one knee, using his arms to power the turns as he glided.

Dimere dimere mapiro  
Matriremo
He rose back up to his feet again and pushed off in a half-mohawk forward thrust.

*Ameno*

A few twists into some meager spins, making his way elegantly across the ice, stepping and pushing onto each foot to each major syllable of the next stanza.

*Omenare imperavi emulari*

Ameno

Omenare imperavi emulari

Vault into a triple toe-loop.

*Ameno dom*

Dori me reo

Ameno dori me

Another set of twizzles, then a pause on the ice, scratching his right toe-pick around himself in a circle and then moving off backwards again.

*Ameno dori me*

*Dori me am*

He gestured out towards the audience, sweeping his arms as his skates crossed over one another, flipping him forward, then back, then forward again as he went.

*Ameno*

Ameno

Ameno dori me

Quad Salchow, triple loop, sliding away in a tight circle.

*Ameno*

*Ameno dori me*

He dug in his toe-pick and spun to a stop, moving to take an exaggerated step into a forward-facing Ina Bauer, leaning back as he went and bringing his arms up over his chest, extending them beyond and above him as he slid.

*Ameno dom*

Dori me reo

Ameno dori me

Viktor turned his head around, the rest of him following suit right after, and he twisted his hips before gliding a little and flipping over on his heel-blades.

*Ameno dori me*

Dori me

(Echo)

The Russian slid in a serpentine pattern, twisting the direction with each echo of the lyrics, spinning around on some turns, until finally spinning over at the end of the rink to come back around to center again and picking up speed as he went. He checked back behind himself and then stretched his right leg back.
Ameno

Triple Lutz.

Ameno dore

He half-looped himself back to facing forward again, raising his arms up around himself, one slightly more forward than to the side as his head bowed.

Ameno dori me
Ameno dori me

The audience noticed the sound of a clap within the song, and started to clap along with it, giving the skater an adrenaline rush as he realized what was going on. He huffed a breathless laugh to himself and continued on, renewed energy pouring through him.

Ameno dom

Death-drop into a sit spin, heel-blade sliding along the ice, leaving a long circular scratch as it went. Viktor held to his knee and bowed his head low, close to his leg.

Dori me reo
Ameno dori me

He rose up a little and hopped, continuing on with the spin and raising an arm for flair.

Ameno dori me
Dori me am

The spin slowed down and he held both hands to the knee of his free leg, rising up and keeping that leg straight as he went, kicking it around himself and raising one arm up to the rafters before spinning around quickly and breaking off again.

Ameno dore

He rounded the short end of the rink, pulling back in towards center with a series of consecutive twists and spins.

Ameno dori me
Ameno dori me

Both arms and a leg spread out from center, tapping into a single Loop, then putting one arm behind his lower back as he rotated into reverse.

Ameno
Ameno
Ameno

Ameno dori me

He lowered down close to the ice, hydroblading into a wide arc as he bowed over himself, arms out to the side.

Ameno
Ameno dori me

His inside hand came down onto the ice, forcing the arc to tighten until he was practically spinning
on the pivot of a single finger.

*Ameno dom*

He pushed back up to standing again and kicked off with a swirl, moving backwards with his free leg high in the air.

*Dori me reo*
Ameno dori me
Ameno dori me

The leg came down like a pendulum, slinging him back into a series of spins as he made his way across the ice.

*Ameno dom*

Triple axel, sliding away elegantly into another half-Loop and an inside spread-Eagle.

*Ameno dore*
Ameno dori me

He twisted around backwards and threw himself again; the music was starting to fade out, but he wasn't done yet. Triple Salchow, triple Toe-loop, double Loop, double Loop.

*Ameno dori me*

The audience was wild for it, and the sound of their cheering quickly drowned out the ebbing volume of the song.

*Ameno*

He pressed into a final, albeit brief, standard camel-spin.

*Ameno dori me*

Descended into a sit-spin.

*Ameno*

And finally sat on the ice as the friction of his own form brought him to a stop.

*Ameno dori me*

The audience was up on its feet, clapping and stomping and banging against walls as Viktor heaved for breath in the center of the rink. Yuri was cheering excitedly too, though behind him, Yurio was barely giving a golf-clap where he leaned against a wall, legs crossed at the ankles beneath him.

Spotlights all converged on the silver Russian, and he finally pushed back to standing, spinning lazily as he waved to the audience and bowed his head several times before making for the rink exit.

"Ladies and Gentlemen...Viktor Nikiforov." The announcer called overhead, and the skater returned to rink-side, throwing a heavy arm over his partner's shoulder before slouching over his back entirely.
"Whew..." He heaved, "Suddenly super glad that the next one isn't until the very end. That was hard to do after eating so recently!"

"It's been a busy day..." Yuri agreed.

The British Pair skaters and Chris were still clapping as Viktor returned to his full height and pushed his hair back out of his eyes. He happened an unintentional eye-lock with the Russian Tiger, but immediately looked away before it got too awkward and accepted the first of his blade-guards.

"Please welcome your next Exhibition performance...Trophée de France's Bronze Medalist from the Ladies Singles bracket, Spain's very own...Lola Santiago!"

A woman quickly sped out onto the ice behind the group, taking over the audience's attention and renewing the chorus of cheers.

Viktor had the second blade-guard on and was slipping his arms through the sleeves of his track-suit coat when the music above started.

['Beautiful Things' - Andain]

It was difficult to get through the curtain to the prep area without practically squashing Yurio against the wall as they passed, but Viktor wasn't willing to give an inch. The rest of the group moved on through after him, and those emerald eyes watched them go, bitterly wondering why none of them was willing to say anything. When the curtain stopped moving, and the performance out on the ice was officially in full-swing, the teen glanced out at it and then back through the way to the prep area, and briskly pushed the tarp out of the way.

"VIKTOR." He barked, forcing the entire group to pause after the silver skater did.

Slate eyes moved back, and the older Russian glanced at him, though his gaze seemed to go through the blonde like he wasn't even there.

Yurio could feel it, and the pit in his stomach came back again.

Viktor's already shown a propensity to estrange himself from people he doesn't want to be around.

He practically went slack-jawed at the realization. Yurio turned his gaze to Yuri for help, but the raven-haired skater said nothing, looking from him to Viktor instead. Yuri's expression changed, like he wasn't sure what to say to either of them.

I can't keep apologizing for putting Viktor's feelings before yours.

"So is that it, then?" The blonde asked stiffly, "You're officially done with me?"

"...Viktor...?" Yuri asked quietly, enough so that only the man in question would've heard it.

"Hm?" He answered, turning his head back, "Sorry, I thought I heard something." He spoke a little louder then, "It must've just been the wind."

Green eyes got really small as Yurio heard the words, and he felt himself go numb all over as the group started walking away. The only thing he could feel as they left him was the tight, wrenching pain in his throat.
"...That was really cold." Yuri commented quietly, the group making their way back to the benches so Viktor could get his skates off. He held timidly to the Russian's fingers, like he almost wasn't sure it was a good idea.

Viktor felt the man's grip sliding through and reached down to take it fully, palm to palm, and turned slightly to pull it up and kiss the ring, "He won't take it seriously unless he feels like he's actually going to suffer some consequence. I want him to stew in it for a while."

"So you're going to talk to him at some point then?"

"Eventually. ...Maybe."

"What'd he do this time?" Chris wondered, finding himself in the awkward position of carrying all of Viktor's gear on his own, lest it be forgotten at rink-side where he'd left it with Yuri before.

"Spoke before thinking. You know, the usual." Viktor answered, continuing the lazy saunter back to the Russian corner, slowly swinging Yuri's arm between them where he held it, "It's been a while since he's said something really awful, but this time he took it a bit too far, like he was condensing all his prior malice into a single statement to make up for all the lost opportunity. I feel a little bad, but I almost legit drop-kicked him for it..."

"He is in that age range..."

"I have this sneaking suspicion that every one of us made it through our teen years without ever once saying something too horrible." Viktor pointed out, arriving at the bench area and turning around. He wove his arm over Yuri's head to spin him around and leaned against his back, holding to his hand throughout the turn, "Yurio's a product of his past...we all are...but he's been given a lot of help since Worlds. I can't really understand why he's gotten so spiteful all of a sudden."

"You don't think it's you that's overreacting?" Chris posed, setting the two bits of luggage down next to the bench nearest to where the Russian was still standing.

"Me?" Blue eyes blinked at him, "Maybe initially." Viktor offered, shrugging before leaning back to sit on the row of seats, and taking Yuri down with him as he went. He pressed his face against the back of his husband's shoulder, scrunching his nose up in the process and half-closing his eyes, "I'm used to him throwing curses at me like it's nothing. But this time, his insults dragged Yuri into it, too, and I won't stand for that."

"Mh..."

"So what do you expect him to gain from this then?"

"A little perspective." Viktor shrugged again, sitting back a little as Yuri twisted to sit sideways over his legs instead. He gazed up to see his favorite hazel eyes, and reached with his free hand to push back a few stray black hairs, "What'd you tell him, anyway?"

Yuri gave him a puzzled look, but then shook his head lightly, "I told him to stop blaming you for the things he's mad at me for, and...I guess I gave him a warning."
"What sort of warning?"

The younger skater paused, eyes moving down to look at his knees, feeling the guilt in his belly, "I tried to explain how the two of us are something of a package deal...he can't go after one of us without it hurting both of us. I feel like, in a way, no matter how often we say it or act on it, he still doesn't really understand what it means that we're together. So...I warned him that he should be more careful what he says. If he upsets one of us too much, then we're both gone...maybe even Mikhail if it's that bad. The worst possible thing anyone could do to him is to repeat what his own parents did already." He slid his left arm over his partner's and leaned into him, pressing his chin and nose lightly against the crook of Viktor's neck and shoulder, "I feel really horrible saying so now, because you did exactly what I told him you would do if pushed too far."

"I haven't spoken to him since earlier in the afternoon. What makes this so different?"

"I think he felt like he still had time to fix things."

"He doesn't think he did anything wrong."

"...Mhhh." Yuri sighed, not knowing what else to say.

Viktor tried to nuzzle in closer, but the younger figure avoided him, turning his head away so he'd be looking down the Russian's back instead. That could only mean one thing. He looked up at Chris, and then to the two British skaters who'd been wall-flowering despite how awkward things had become after they'd left rink-side...but instead of asking them all to leave, he put his left arm under Yuri's knees and hoisted him up as he rose back to his feet.

The younger skater yipped in surprise, holding tight to the man's shoulders, "V-Viktor!"

"We're leaving for a bit. We'll be back by the end." The Russian explained, turning on his blade-guard and carrying his husband away.

The Pair skaters waved awkwardly as well, but were relieved to no longer have to find an excuse of their own to bolt without seeming rude.

Viktor made his way through the halls of the prep area, and once he was to an area that was slightly less crowded, he turned his focus back to his partner, "You have your phone with you, right?"

"Y-Yeah, why?"

"Call up my uncle, we need him in on this."

"...What if he's with Yurio already?"

"He wouldn't be. He's up with Minako-sensei in the stands. If he's already with Yurio then he must have telepathic superpowers or something."

"Yurio could've texted him..."

Viktor gawked at him, "You think Yurio would reach out to my uncle for help?"

"I dunno." Yuri shrugged as well as he could, "He spent the whole 2 weeks before the event with them..."

"Would you sooner bet that it's because he valued the company, or that he just wanted to get away from Yakov and the rest?"
The younger skater sighed, twisting his hips a little so he could get at the phone in his back pocket, and then 'sat' normally again where Viktor was carrying him. He sent a quick text and then let the phone fall against his stomach, then crossed his arms over it and leaned his head against the Russian's collarbone, "It's always something."

"Cup of China and NHK will be fine. I promise."

Yuri felt the buzz from his phone and lifted it up again, "He wants to know where we are."

"No, I haven't seen him since his show." Mikhail said, gawking at the pair where he found them.

It was next to impossible to get anywhere in the building without being mobbed by fans who were wandering the halls between performances they were interested in, so they had to stay in the prep area. Mikhail was only able to get past the event staffers because he had a guest badge for being Yurio's sponsor. Once he was through the doors though, he pocketed the badge back into his coat, his hands going in after it.

"But the way you guys are acting, I feel like I should go find him."

"We were actually thinking that might be a good idea, too..." Yuri said, "But I think we need to have some kind of...plan first?"

"A plan?" The older Russian echoed skeptically, "He's a teenager. He lives beyond the realm of plans. Besides, if you've already made him think that you don't want him around anymore, what good is a plan to contradict yourselves? You should let him go to you, that way he doesn't think this whole thing was some horrible practical joke at his expense."

"It's not a joke. I am mad at him." Viktor clarified; he was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, "And I do expect him to apologize for what he said at some point."

"What exactly did he say anyway? He wouldn't quote it to me."

"It's hard to repeat..." Yuri said quietly, "But the long and short of it is he told Viktor to take his gold medal and put it where the sun doesn't shine," He held his fingers up into air-quotes, "...along with all the other stuff you've been putting up there lately, including your head."

Mikhail snorted, trying not to laugh. Viktor just narrowed his eyes glowered at him dubiously.

"What?" The older man had his hand over his mouth, his head turned slightly.

"...Mikhail..." The younger skater blanched, "It's not funny."

"No, the thing itself isn't, but hearing you sanitize it for me is." He answered, stepping forward to sling an arm over the man's shoulders, "You're too modest to even be able to repeat the words as they were said." He lifted his free hand to poke a finger under the brim of his customary hat, and looked straight at his nephew, "I can only wonder how long it took for you to get him to do anything with you."

Yuri's face was bright red in a heartbeat, "M-MIKHAIL..."
"Da, and the last thing I want is for that little pizda to use it against me." Viktor retorted casually.

"Language, sir."

"Yuri doesn't know what it means."

Mikhail cocked a brow, but then looked at the aforementioned skater, "It means cunt. Viktor called Yuratchka a little cunt."

Yuri quirked his head around, looking at his husband incredulously, but Viktor just shrugged and gave a look like 'it is what it is.'

"Well, anyway," Mikhail started again, pulling his arm back and giving Yuri a rough couple of pats in the center of his back, "I guess if I need to find him then I should start looking. Who knows where he's gone after you crushed his tiny little soul."

"Maybe Yakov would know?" Viktor suggested, turning off his shoulder to lean his back against the wall instead, slinging his free leg around to pin the heel of the blade-guard against the painted concrete, "I'd call him myself but he'll just yell at me."

"About this?"

"If not, he'll find something." The younger Russian mused, "He always does."

"Nah, if Yuri is as upset as I think he is, he won't want anyone to know about it. He'll be hiding somewhere." Mikhail pulled out his phone and started typing a message with one hand, using the other to push open the door to the main area, "I'll find him." Green-grey eyes lifted though and he pointed the phone at the duo, "I'm taking a break when you two do your pair skate though, so message me when you're about to go up."

"We will." Viktor nodded, "Thanks, Uncle."

Those same eyes furrowed at him briefly, and the phone was replaced by a finger pointing right at him, "One day you're going to say my name, too."

Yuri laughed meekly at the statement, waving as the older man finally left. When he turned back, Viktor was looking down the other end of the hall, acting like he hadn't heard the statement. The corridor returned to near-silence after that, the only sound reverberating through the walls being the hollow echo of the performance beyond them. Yuri rubbed his temples again, but then moved in front of his husband and sat down in the space between the man's skates, loosely wrapping his arms around his knees as he buried his face against them.

Viktor turned his eyes back and looked down, nudging his partner with the inside of one knee to try and get him to look back up at him, "Yuri."

"What are we even really trying to solve anyway?" He answered, not moving, "Yurio being mad at me for skipping his Free Skate? You being mat at him for taking shots? Him being mad at you for being why I missed the Free Skate?" He lifted his head a little and settled his chin on his knees instead, "Am I mad at anyone and don't realize it?"

"It takes a lot to make you mad." The Russian pointed out, "I've only ever seen it twice. Once was because of him."

"And the other?" He couldn't even recall.
"Because of me."

"Huh?" Yuri's ears perked, and he turned his face upward to look at the man looming overhead.

Viktor leaned forward, leaning his lower back against the wall to keep balance, and glanced at his partner from the upside-down vantage, "Right before the wedding party."

"I wouldn't say I was angry at you...just confused and disappointed." The younger skater retorted, eyes turning down again.

"Passionately so."

"...All the same."

"You should go find us some seats. If we've sent my uncle on a tiger hunt, we might as well record the show for him while he's gone. I'll go get into my last outfit and meet you after."

"Yeah..."

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.

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Mikhail was glancing down at his iPhone, waiting for a reply from the youngest skater.

[Where are you?]

[...]

The three 'typing' dots were starting to make him crazy, so he wrote another message.

[You know that I can tell when you're typing by the dots on my screen, right? Where are you?]

[Why, so you can lecture me more? You're not my dad.]

[So where is he then? I'll be happy to hand this off to him if you prefer.]

[Wow.]

[You're an asshole, you know that?]

Mikhail huffed and shook his head, [Not as much an asshole as your papa. At least I'm here and I'm trying.]

[So, where are you?]

[I'm not saying shit unless you can guarantee the dumbasses aren't with you.]

[Fine, come find ME then. I'll wait under the Bar sign at the northeast end of the rink.]

The elder Russian clicked out of his phone and started moving off to the designated spot, keeping half an eye out for a potential ambush along the way. He tried to look out onto the ice as he came around the wall, but there were too many people watching from the second floor balcony to see what was going on, so he kept moving. He'd already seen 2 of the 3 shows he wanted to witness anyway, and he knew the last was about 45 minutes off.
There was some rock-like music playing on the speakers, but it wasn't anything he recognized.

_Hm...my kids would probably know this. Shame they don't get skating. Yuratchka might've had some
friends that were his same age otherwise. Maybe I should drag him back to Canada at some point..._

When he finally got to the right spot, he leaned against the first of several rectangular brick pillars. From there, he was able to see the rink again, since right in front of him was the end of the lower-
level seating area, and the closest head was 5 feet beneath his own. The Russian crossed his arms, and folded his right ankle behind the other...and waited.

The Pairs Gold medalists, Ladies Silver, Ice Dancer Bronze, and even Chris, had gone on to do their
Exhibitions before Mikhail began to wonder if Yurio was even going to show.

_He sure is taking his damn time..._

A tingle suddenly went down the man's spine, and he instinctively spun around and held his hand
out, abruptly catching a skate as it was being thrust towards the center of his back like a rubber-
guarded battering ram. When he realized what it was that he'd caught, he glowered at the surprised
teen in front of him and raised the skate high, taking Yurio's leg with it and forcing him into a vertical
split.

"How did you-"

"You think you're the first moody teenager to try and kick me from behind?" Mikhail answered
curtly, keeping his hand firmly on the blade-guard even as the blonde struggled to pull it back, "I have _Dad Powers._ Sergio used to throw paper airplanes at me while I was working, too...the silent
death. I learned to hear _them_, and I can hear _you_. Now, let's go someplace less noisy."

The older man started pulling the younger one along, keeping the blade up at around his shoulder-
level, and effectively dragged Yurio several feet before the teen finally managed to get his leg back. Several people had noticed them and were turning to comment, but thankfully, none had the
ignorance to try and get in the middle of it for anything.

"What the Hell was that for!?" The blonde barked, standing funny where his legs had been painfully
stretched.

"I don't think I've ever had to repeat myself so often as I have with you. _Let's go someplace less
noisy._"

"I heard you the first time! You could've let me walk!"

"This is taking too long." The older Russian sighed to himself, stepping forward quickly and
grabbing the teen by the waist. Before Yurio even knew what had happened, he was watching the
hall pass by him in reverse...and he looked down to see the back of Mikhail's coat and legs.

"Put me down!" He hollered, flailing as well as he could where he'd been flung like a sack of spuds
over the man's shoulder, only to get a finger jammed in his kidney. He deflated instantly.

"You need a serious talking to. I was volunteered. I intend to be back before Viktor and Yuri's pair
skate at the end, so let's get this thing done."

The only thing Yurio could hear after that was the muttering of people who'd heard the words, and
who were checking the program list on their phones to see if the statement was true.
Yuri had found seats in the very front row at the south end of the rink, close to where most of the skaters were entering and exiting the ice. He was slouching in his seat, feet up on the green metal railing in front of him, recording the shows as they came and went with his phone.

When Viktor finally found him, the Russian was decked back out in his full mostly-black team tracksuit. He sat down in the seat to his partner's left and slouched just like Yuri had been, taking the man's hand where it was set on the arm-rest between them, and then lazily leaned against that same shoulder.

"Anything?" Yuri wondered, tilting his head to the side to set his cheek against the top of the man's silver head.

"No, but I can see my uncle way on the other side of the rink." Viktor answered, pointing to the spot under the red Bar sign, "He must be trying to get Yurio to go to him instead."

"I really hope this doesn't drag out." The younger skater sighed, "If this doesn't get fixed before tonight's over then it'll be sitting on the backburner until the Final. My hair's gonna start falling out over all this stress..." He tossed his head lightly to ruffle the fluff he had, "Minami-kun didn't give me this much grief when I missed his Lohengrin performance last year...and that was a copy of one of my own shows! You'd think if anyone had reason to be mad that I didn't watch, it'd be him, not Yurio..."

There was a slight silence between them while Yuri half-whined to himself.

"Do you blame me for this?" The Russian asked idly.

Yuri hesitated, trying to find the right words. The pause was long enough that Viktor registered it as a confirmation though.

"Sorry."

"I don't..." Yuri tried to recover. He looked at his phone and clicked out of the recording, realizing he wasn't even on the skater out on the ice anymore anyway. Once the phone was back in his coat pocket, he nudged his shoulder to get the Russian to lift his head, and looked at him squarely, "How could I blame you for this when it was my choice to follow you for that interview?"

"It could've waited."

"Hindsight is always better than what we see in the moment...and at the time, everyone involved was really high strung. Yurio wasn't going to suffer at all for us not being there to watch him skate, but you would for being made to stand around." He explained, "It might've only been for a few minutes, but even for me it felt like an eternity. I imagine it probably felt the same for you."

"...Mh."

Yuri sat back again, retaking his former position with his cheek against his husband's crown. "I wish I understood better why he's being like this though. He could've just said sorry when he saw how mad you got over it."
"That makes sense to you because that's what you would've done." Viktor shrugged a little, "Yurio's the sort who would stand his ground even if it makes him look stupid."

"...I really thought we were past all this after Worlds."

"He had me fooled, too."

They watched the end of the Ladies Silver medalist's performance, and the Bronze Ice Dancers started their own, before either of them spoke again.

"...What if something else happened?" Yuri wondered, "We haven't seen a whole lot of him since last year, save the few times Mikhail brought him back to Hasetsu for a weekend."

"Hard to know unless he tells us."

"Do you think Mikhail would've said something?"

"I don't know, Yuri."

"You guys look like you aren't enjoying the show."

Yuri nearly jumped out of his seat from the surprise, but he looked around for the source of the voice and eventually found Viktor waving at it.

"You're up next, Chris?" The Russian wondered, spying the Swiss skater through the bars of the dividing wall.

"Yep." He confirmed, "Good timing, too...I was starting to worry Yuri wouldn't be here to see it."

"Eh? Why would you worry about me not being here?" The younger skater echoed, sitting normally again, "...Why is everyone so concerned with me being around lately? You don't secretly have a bet with Plisetsky to see whose shows I stick around for, do you?"

Chris snorted with laughter, but winked, "No, no, I wouldn't make a bet about something like that. Not with him anyway. He's too tense for my liking." He leaned as well as he could into the space between the bars, "I meant that it's because my show is for you, just like my Short Program was for Viktor."

"...Eh?" Yuri deadpanned the blonde incredulously.

"Really?" Viktor seemed excited.

"You seem so shocked, Yuri." Chris mused, "It's not like we've been friends longer than I've been friends with him." He thumbed at the silver man.

"Oh right, you guys have known each other since Juniors." The Russian commented, turning his head and patting Yuri's arm with his free hand, "This is perfect!"

"Wow...Chris..." Yuri was still a bit stunned, but he finally found his feet and slipped over the top of the bars, dropping the few feet to rink-side before reaching to hug the man, "I can't wait to see it!"

As the Ice Dancers finally came off the rink, and Chris made his way over to the entrance to get on the ice, Yuri clambered back over the railing and retook his seat. His excitement for seeing the Swiss' Exhibition had almost made him forget about the problems simmering in his mind. It was a welcome reprieve, even if fleeting.
Chris was decked in mostly silver, shimmering on the sides and arms, and slashed with green and blue. The crowd cheered excitedly for him as he rounded the ice and made his way to center.

['Rise Up' by Andra Day]

Getting Yurio out of the building was harder than Mikhail expected. Everywhere he went, people either wanted photos of the Russian Tiger, or they were wondering if he was kidnapping the teen. Every time the question came up though, he just spun around and let the super-annoyed-but-not-at-all-terrified look on the blonde’ face do all the talking.

Mikhail took the teen fully around the corner of the block, almost getting to the back end where the truck-receiving doors were located, before finally putting him back down on his skates again. He did the teen the service of dusting him off and straightening out his coat and hair before finally nodding in approval, "There, now you can say words."

"I hate you."

"You'll have to take a number and get in line if you want to do something about it."

"When did your whole goal change from wanting to be around Viktor to wanting to be everyone’s fucking bartender anyway? It seems like you've managed to get your damn tentacles into everyone’s business at this point. Who the Hell do you think you are!?"

The older man quirked an eyebrow. He reached up and pulled his hat off, ruffled his hair to fluff it up again, and then ran a finger through it just above his right eye, and flipped the mess over to the left, "Do you see?"

"It's super creepy that you can do that, but styling your hair like Viktor doesn't make you Viktor."

"No, but I look a damn lot like him, and a lot of people were attracted to that. I've gone pretty far out of my way to make people understand that we're not the same person even if we're related. But I can't change what people are or what they see, and the fact that I look like an older version of my nephew got people to accept me into the group a lot faster than if I looked like, say, Konstantin."

"What's your point?"

"I got my tentacles into everyone's business because they wanted me there, so I'm here now whether you like it or not." He rolled the hat up and put it into one of his coat pockets, then crossed his arms, "We're all creatures of habit, and we flock to things we're familiar with. We gravitate towards the stuff that make us comfortable and push away the stuff that doesn't." He let the words sink in a little before bringing it all back around again, "I'm an older version of Viktor, so people feel comfortable coming to me because I feel familiar. But at this point, I've managed to separate myself from him, so people now see me as 'that old Russian fuck that doesn't mince words or hold punches.' I'm the closest thing to a dad either of you two twerps has ever had, and the way both of you act sometimes, it seems someone like me is sorely needed around here. After all, Viktor doesn't listen to Yakov, and you don't listen to anyone, so who's left?"

"We didn't ask for you."
"And I didn't ask for two more kids, but here we are anyway." Mikhail grumbled, leaning forward slightly, staring at that one emerald eye peeking from behind pale blond hair. "We develop customs that make us feel safe in the worst of circumstances...but unfortunately, when some of those contradictory feelings and rituals get merged together at the wrong time, we piss off the people we care about."

Yurio was quiet.

"But what I don't understand about you still is...after everything that those two boys have done for you, why are you still trying to hurt them?"

"Viktor didn't do shit. It was all Yuri."

"So you resent it that it wasn't Viktor's idea."

"I don't care!" Yurio barked, "I can't count on him for anything! Whatever promises he makes are meaningless because he's just going to forget! You already know that!"

"That's cruel to say about him." Mikhail sighed, "He's nearly twice your age and is coming to the end of his rope on a lot of things right now. You can't hold it against him that he's got different priorities than he used to."

"What the Hell would you know!? You've barely been around for 9 months! You barely know him anymore."

"I've known Viktor since he was born. I know where he came from and I know what his life was like before skating." Mikhail retorted, "I've looked up everything I possibly could about what his life was like after I lost track of him. To that end, I may even know more about him than you do right now. You probably think you know everything you need to know about him because you've been rink-mates, and don't care to learn about what made him who he's become." The older man said flatly, "You've gotten a tiny peek into what Viktor's life was like before. You got to meet the man who nearly blinded him on two separate occasions. Your own parents didn't give two shits about your skating, but imagine if they hated it enough to beat you for it and drive you from home? Come on. You treat him with the same kind of hostility that his own father did, just without the capacity to really hurt him physically, despite how much you've tried."

The blonde narrowed his eyes scornfully. It didn't stop the lecture though.

"So instead of that, you try to wound him in the only other way you know how...hitting him with a verbal assault right where he's most vulnerable. Can you really blame him for wanting to distance himself from you after all that? He gave you all the patience he had, and every possible chance, to show him that you were able to get past all that anger, but for every 10 steps you take forward, you take 9 steps back all at once. And like I said before...I'm utterly and thoroughly confused why you still hoist all your rage onto Viktor's shoulders anyway. Why do you focus on him to always be the target of your fury? You could stub your toe on a coffee table in your own house and I feel like you'd still find a way to blame Viktor for it just to spite him."

The teen just scoffed and turned his gaze away, looking down the street to avoid seeing the man before him.

"Maybe it's just easier to attack Viktor because you've known him the longest. Maybe you just like to see him hurting because you don't like hurting alone." Mikhail suggested, "It's easy to find him at fault for the things others do because you're so used to blaming him for everything already anyway. And this all started because Yuri didn't stay to watch your Long Program, right? Yuri wasn't there
and you think it's Viktor's fault."

"He scheduled an interview right as I was going up." Yurio said bitterly, "He could've done it any other time, but he picked then."

"The interview involved someone he had history with. Did you not see his reaction to seeing Sophia for the first time yesterday?"

"I wasn't there. What difference does it make?"

Mikhail grit his teeth and pulled out his phone, doing a quick search online for a clip of the interrupted interview. Given the sensationalism of the skater's reaction, it wasn't hard to find footage, so he clicked into one and shoved his phone into the teen's sights, "Watch it."

Yurio glared at him, but bitterly took the device, holding it up and watching. It was a normal interview reel, with flashes all around as Viktor was explaining the music from his Short Program with Yuri at his side. The younger skater seemed distracted by something though and abruptly excused himself. Another 15 or so seconds passed before the questions came back around to Yuri's involvement in the music, so Viktor gestured for the journalists to move away a little to make a path for him to come back, and then waved, "Yuri! I don't want to answer all these questions about the music by myself! Come back already! It's your song, too! You said you'd only be a secon-"

The pause was unusual, and the cameras jerked a little, going from Viktor to whatever he'd been looking at. The new scene showed Yuri, Chris, and Sophia beyond the media mass, and then immediately went back to get Viktor on screen. He'd been completely dumbstruck by the sight, and a moment later, tears started rolling down his face. Yurio's brow crinkled at the sight of it, and turned up the volume to hear things that were being said off-camera. Chris suddenly appeared on-screen and was turning Viktor around by his shoulders to shove him away. The clip ended a few seconds later, and Yurio handed the phone back.

"I saw Yuri when he was getting Viktor's things." The blonde said, keeping his head low, "I helped them get back to the hotel afterwards."

"So you saw how much of a mess Viktor was."

"He wouldn't even speak."

"All he wanted was to get away from the situation. Most of his time here at Trophée de France has been a complete clusterfuck. Forgive him for wanting to get it dealt with in his own way, and forgive Yuri for supporting him in it."

"...I even skipped on a bunch of my own interviews to help them."

Mikhail was surprised to hear it, blinking grey-green eyes at him, "...Your little tirade earlier today must've really thrown them for a loop then. Being so supportive in one moment and then condemning them in the worst way in the next. To them, it's like you don't know which way is up half the time."

Yurio just grumbled to himself.

The phone in the older Russian's coat jingled suddenly, and when the man lifted it from its holster to glance at it, the faceplate read off a new message from Viktor.

[It's time. We're up in 10.]
He pocketed the item once more, and pulled out his hat to unroll it and replace it where it was normally nested on his mess of silver-grey hair, "That was Viktor. Their pair skate is coming up. I want you to watch it with me." His event badge came out of the other pocket a moment later, and he placed the lanyard around his neck before reaching with his free hand in a gesture to the teen, "Idite za mnoy."

Yurio just looked at the hand for a moment, but then reached up to tug his hoodie a bit further over his head before reluctantly stepping forward. He felt the hand come around his back and hold to his shoulder, and he let the silver Russian guide him back towards the entrance.
Yuri did his best to look inconspicuous as he pulled his skates from his luggage, hiding the gleam of gold blades from a chance encounter with a spotlight. Viktor and Chris practically stood point to make sure he was well obscured, one on either side of him behind the rink wall where he was tying his laces.

The British Pair skaters were still out on the ice, the last to perform before the presumed end of the Gala. A melodious piano-techno hybrid played overhead.

"Children - Dream Version' by Robert Miles"

Yuri finally rose back to his feet and clapped his hands down on the rink wall where he wedged himself between the two taller skaters, "Okay!"

"You remember how it goes, right?" The Russian mused, leaning against the same wall on one elbow, "It's been a few weeks since we last went through it."

"It'll be fine. I do this show every day in my head." Yuri answered, drawing in closer as his partner settled his free arm over his shoulders, "Not having the Ice Castle to sneak off to when I'm anxious has made me all antsy. I could skate this program half a dozen times in a row right now..."

"Save some of that spunk for the after-party." Chris pointed out, "You two promised to be there."

"We will be!"

Mikhail pulled the teen skater through the main doors as quietly as he could, though the skates made it too easy to be spotted. Yurio's own fanclub was loitering outside and had caught a glimpse of his straw-blond hair where it flitted out from under the hood of his sweater, and started shrieking for his attention. The older Russian just grabbed the teen tighter and quickly made the last push inside to get out of sight. Ducking through different halls and corridors, going up a flight of stairs to the uppermost level, and almost-impolitely making their way to the railing, they finally had their spot. Mikhail only let go of the teen's shoulder once he was sure Yurio wouldn't just bolt.

It was hard to spot anything familiar at rink-side from so high up, but at least from where they were, they could see the entire ice field unobstructed. The Pair Skaters were still in the midst of their performance, but it looked like they were getting close to the end of it.

"Why do you want me to watch this thing anyway?" Yurio wondered suddenly, stuffing his hands into his hoodie's pockets and glaring from behind the safety of his bangs, "So you can rub them in my face?"

"You think I'm punishing you?" Mikhail huffed, "Au contraire, mon frère. I came to the Gala only wanting to see three shows, and their's is the last. It just occurred to me that making you watch Viktor and Yuri do their thing might be beneficial to you, too."

"Tsh... Like I've never seen them skate together before."

The music on high started to fade out, and the Pairs fell into their final position. The crowd roared
with applause, cheering them on from the darkness off-stage. The pair waved, bowed, blew kisses, and spun around excitedly as they finally made their way back to the exit. The energy of the arena seemed to shift after that, as though the crowd was winding down, expecting the final bow-out from the skaters that had performed and for the show to end. The energy changed again after a good 45 seconds of nothing...but then a voice came over the speakers.

"I bet everyone's wondering what's going on?"

Clapping and cheering, albeit of the confused sort.

"What do all of you think about a last-second special performance?"

The thunder of the audience grew a little, but they still didn't know what to expect, so the tremble in the rafters was minimal.

"I don't know if you're properly **excited** for this! Let's try again. How about a last-second special performance by Viktor Nikiforov !?"

That got them going. Yurio grit his teeth as he watched four different spotlights converge on the opposite end of the arena, shining down on the silver Russian, decked almost completely in ragged white, come strolling casually out onto the ice.

"Look at him, he's practically glowing!" A nearby fan commented.

"Three shows by Viktor in one day! This is great!" Someone else mentioned.

Viktor slid around the rink, occasionally raising up one blood-red hand and arm to the audience as he waved and went by. He could almost feel the rumble from the crowd through his blades, and butterflies fluttered in his gut as he waited for the announcer to make his amendment.

"Ladies and Gentlemen...while it gives me great pleasure to welcome a World Champion onto the ice...how about we sweeten the pot a little bit, huh? What say you to a last-second surprise performance with two World Champions?"

The crowd went **nuts** with excitement, slowly starting to realize what was going to happen.

Spotlights changed colors and shot around the arena before finally coming down on the rink entrance again, and Yuri finally came out, skating quickly around the perimeter to the thunderous cacophony of cheering. Viktor slid idly around in the center of the rink as Yuri passed by, going backwards around the ice and twisting excitedly. When he'd made it halfway around, he spun a little and started making his way closer to Viktor, reaching out for his extended hand and letting the man rotate him inward.

The cheering was almost deafening, and Yuri was lost to the moment, "...They're really excited for this... I didn't think they'd get much louder after seeing you come out...but..."

"Two is always better than one." Viktor pointed out, his deep-red arms coming up under his husband's to clasp gently at the front of his shoulders, pulling him close to speak against his ear just to be heard, "Besides, you're the guy who beat me at Worlds and broke my winning streak. Who wouldn't be excited to see you skate?"

"Yuri and Viktor Nikiforov, everyone...in a special presentation just for Trophée de France!"

Mikhail leaned forward on the metal bars of the balcony railing, hunching over his elbows and watching proudly. He glanced over at Yurio, despite his lack of enthusiasm, "At least try to act like
you're excited to see them skate."

The teen managed to clap half-heartedly, but stopped soon after he started.

The pair took hands and bowed together in front of the audience, holding their arms up as they parted and went to take their positions. Yuri was close to center, whereas Viktor was farther off, near the rink wall on the south end. The spotlights dimmed a little, darkening the rink into a neutral ambiance. The whole thing looked like the prelude to a concert, with sparkles of camera flashes coming from the audience in spite of it being too dark to really capture anything. Within the darkness, Viktor pulled a scraggy-looking white hood over his head, the rest sagging behind his back. His outfit looked like rags, but the pristine white color of the majority, save the 'blood dipped' red going up to just above his elbows, gave him a creepy wraith-like look, and he glowed under the bright spotlights from overhead before they'd dulled to start the show.

One thin beam of white light descended on each of the two skaters, bright enough that they could be seen amidst the darkness, but not piercingly so.

The audience was so busy cheering still that the start of the song was almost hard to hear, but as soon as the first deep thrum of the bass hit them, the applause quickly died down.

['NIVIRO - The Ghost' - NCS Official Video...but don't watch the video XD]

ARE YOU...AFRAID OF THE DARK?

Both of them moved slowly from their starting places, rotating and twisting, unable to see one another through the glare on the ice. Viktor kept close to the rink wall, but was making obvious gestures at his husband as he went by.

ARE YOU SCARED?

They almost figure-eight'd right over one another, but the Russian came up close behind his younger partner and shadowed him, the creepy sound of a little girl's laughter resonating overhead.

I...CAN...SEE...YOU...FROM...BEHIND...

Viktor's hands were deftly rising behind Yuri's back, barely not touching him as they skated in tandem, with the younger skater pretending not to know his partner was on his heels.

YOU...CAN...HEAR...ME...IN...YOUR...MIND...

Those blood-red hands came up around the outside of Yuri's shoulders, reaching past the sides of his head to cover his eyes, forcing him to lean back. Yuri's own hands went down, reaching back to hold fast to the side of the Russian's legs, letting the man be his rudder on the ice while he was 'blinded.'

RUN...SO...FAST...AS...YOU...CAN...GO...

Viktor's hands slid down his partner's frame; neck, shoulders, back, then around the front of his hips, grasping eager fingers to the upper part of his thighs. The silver skater was practically on the verge of making love to his husband right there on the ice, nuzzling in close against his neck, lips against his skin where he knew one of his love-bites was showing, even if only he could see it.
TIME...WILL...CATCH...YOU...

Yuri twisted about-face, arms above him as he spun, moving to skate backwards as Viktor kept pressing in forward. One white-clad knee went between Yuri's own, and Viktor brought up his right hand to gently touch it to his husband's cheek, the other against his chest, and a finger slid down the side of the man's jaw.

...BEFORE...YOU...KNOW...

The Russian had his thumb on Yuri's lower lip, but as the lyrics ended, he quickly put on the brakes, and Yuri went sliding out away from him. The younger skater moved into a 3-turn, and vaulted into a quad Lutz on the thunderous BOOM.

Viktor threw the hood off and took off at a break-neck speed, rounding the other end of the rink as Yuri came back around in turn, the music pounding overhead. They passed each other with dramatic
flair, death-dropping into a variant arm-up sit-spin, kicking out as they rose back up, and finishing with an arm-up scratch-spin. Another BOOM echoed overhead, and they struck out in wide arcs away from each other, twisting over several times before landing into an outside spread-Eagle as they went past the opposite ends of the rink.

A calm rushed through the music, and the creepy child's voice started up again.

**ARE YOU...AFRAID OF THE DARK?**

Mikhail huffed to himself, "Those two are something else."

The teen's eyes were fixated in his Asian counterpart. All he could think of was how he had once ridiculed the man for being a GP Final washout, yet at the same time, wanting to know what it would look like for him to skate without any mistakes. Now, Yuri was skating with a legend, and was doing quad jumps like Flips and Lutzs like they were no harder than doubles.

**ARE YOU SCARED?**

The song was revving up again, and the pair were moving in a wide circle with a forward scissor-kick, then reverse, then forward again in quick succession. They stopped dead in front of each other, almost staring one another down. The music stopped.

**I AM YOU.**

They turned away from one another and broke off as the beat shook the rafters again.

Mikhail moved one arm back off the railing and set it over the edge of Yurio's closest shoulder, glancing back at him, "Do you see how they move? They're perfectly in sync with each other."

"Hmph...what would someone like you know about pair skating anyway? They could trip over each other and you'd still call it graceful."

"I'm a mechanical engineer. I know when shit looks right. I see the equations floating over everything I look at...and those guys out there, right now, they match up better than any of the other duos that took the ice today. There's just..." Mikhail paused, looking for the right word as he turned his eyes back down onto the rink, seeing the pair move through several choreography elements as they spun and twisted around each other, leaving creative serpentine streaks in the frost behind their blades, "...They have that unique *something* that doesn't happen between people just because they train together. It's...like moving parts that were custom-machined just to work with one another, and no other parts on this earth could possibly do the job half as well. But sometimes people try to wedge imperfect parts into the mix anyway, thinking they're helping, and maybe it does for a time, but eventually the machine breaks down and new parts have to be put in."

"Your analogies are the worst."

"Your face is the worst."

Yurio just gawked at him, "Give me a break already..."

"Oh, buckle up, buttercup, I'm just getting started."

The song paused briefly, the chime of a child's music-box playing before the beat overwhelmed it again, even harder than before. The whole stadium shook from the intensity. The dance moved the skaters much closer together again, kicking against the ice within mere feet of each other.
Mikhail tapped his fingers against the railing to the tempo, and he spotted several people starting to hold up bright lights on their phones, changing colors in a slow strobe effect, turning the arena into a proverbial techno dance floor, "Other skaters don't get the audience nearly as riled up as they do." He commented idly.

"Is there a point you're trying to make with all this?" The blonde grumbled discontentedly, "Or can we just watch and be done with it?"

"You're not going to be able to get them on your side again unless you understand who and what they are. You need to know your place in the pecking order." The older man explained, "Just because you knew Viktor first doesn't mean he's obligated to put you first."

Green eyes went wide, but then narrowed as the teen took particular offense, "That's not even why I'm mad at him."

"Ah, but see?" Mikhail tapped the teen's chest where his hand was slouching over his shoulder, "If it weren't true, you wouldn't have gotten all hostile about it. You're slipping down the ranks and you hate it."

"We already resolved my anger over Viktor leaving Russia. Why bring it up again like I'm still pissed about it?"

"Because this is a different kind of slippery slope."

The music boomed overhead again, and cut out to a less intense movement. The child's music-box returned, and the little girl's laughter filled the air. Viktor moved closer to his husband, even as the man was skating backwards, looking over his shoulder as though trying to find some way to escape. The Russian had his 'bloody' hands out, reaching for him in thrilling pursuit.

**I'M COMING CLOSER...**

Yuri was right at the rink-wall, hovering a few feet away from it, and twisting around to let the silver figure circle around him like a wolf. One red hand came out between them, and Viktor traced a finger across his husband's shoulder, around his back, moving to the other shoulder.

*La lala lala lala lala lala lala la la la...*

He was in front of Yuri again, and he got right up into his space, grabbing both shoulders with both hands.

**I WILL GET YOU.**

Hand right hand went down the raven skater's arm, taking his hand and pulling him back out to the majority of the ice.

**THE TIME...IT GOES...**

They stopped. Yuri dug in his toe-picks, taking a short step forward with each lyric of the time.

*Tick...tock...tick...tock...tick...*

He stopped. Viktor pulled him back in hard, spinning the younger skater as he brought him close and locking his arms around the man's smaller frame, facing him.

...**TOCK.**
The song boomed again, and the intensity grew from an ebb to a roar. Viktor spun Yuri away to the ends of his reach, then pulled him back in again, switched hands and moved him out to the other side. One more pull inward, and they switched hands again as Yuri started to move around his partner in a circle. The younger skater started to tilt inward as the circling got faster, skates moving out as the Russian started to follow the turn, helping the descent.

Yuri could feel his hair brushing against the ice, but he held himself stiffly as he went around several times. He came up again as the intensity of the music waned again, and Viktor continued to hold to his hand as they started moving away in reverse. With the next boom, they let go, and vaulted into a split Flip.

ARE YOU...AFRAID OF THE DARK?
Chapter 137

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED THIRTY SEVEN

ARE YOU SCARED?

The music started to rise again into a crescendo, the pair twizzling out of the split Flip before rounding the short end of the rink again, heading side-by-side back to center. As the beat became so fast that it was more like an audible strobe-light, Yuri scratched over a little, moving directly in front of his partner. Viktor moved in close behind, hands reaching for the man's waist, knees bent as Yuri's right foot extended back between the Russian's skates, getting ready...

I AM YOU.

BOOM

Viktor threw him straight up; the younger skater spun four times before coming back down again into his husband's waiting arms, getting set down gracefully to land on his right blade, left extended out behind him. He spun around and took his husband's hand again, crossing over together as the thrum of the beat went on. The music carried them into another step sequence, spinning and kicking out one leg or the other on each thump of the bass, spinning and bringing their arms up, perfectly in time with one another.

The music-box resounded again, and the tempo of the beat changed. The skaters single-Toe-Looped and then launched into a quad Salchow together on the Boom. As they landed, they twisted off again in another intense foot-work sequence. Halfway through the 'stanza,' they came back together again; Yuri had one hand gently on his husband's cheek as Viktor had both of his around the man's waist once more. The younger skater spun around a few times, their tandem-step-sequence keeping the audience members on the edge of their seats. The big finish was coming up.

Hazel eyes met slate blue, and Yuri readied himself, crossing one ankle across the other to turn back around as the music box echoed overhead. On the final thunderous thrum of the beat, Viktor threw him forward with all his strength. Yuri spun four times, landed, and quickly descended to his knees in one fluid motion, rotating several times as he came to a stop and the music overhead faded to silence.

The audience roared.

Viktor followed soon after, falling to one knee and sliding backwards right into him, completely neutralizing Yuri's attempt at a serious closer. As the younger skater fitfully tried to regain his balance, he sat back on his heels and looked down to see his husband comfortably resting his head on his knees, looking back at him.

Both were still out of breath from the show, but suddenly the whole thing was reduced to the smallest microcosm of the whole event.

Just you, and me, and the ice.

"Viktor..."

The Russian smiled warmly and propped one leg up onto the opposite knee where it was held up on the heel of his golden blades, and he reached his hands up to pull his husband's head down. The audience's cheering rose up in a new wave as they witnessed the unexpected kiss. Chants of
'Vikturi' came up over the applause, just like they had at Four Continents when they'd first performed 'Duetto: Stay Close to Me.'

Mikhail joined the rising wave of hoots and hollers, putting two fingers to the corners of his mouth to add his own whistle to the clamor. He grabbed for the nearest spectator and pointed unashamedly at the ice, "That's my nephew and nephew-in-law out there!"

Yurio just pulled the hood of his sweater down even further, trying to avoid the embarrassment by association.

"THAT was intense!" The overhead announcer called, "Yuri and Viktor know how to put on a SHOW!"

The two skaters finally got back up to their feet, using each other as support while they started waving at the audience, reluctantly letting themselves be pulled out of their own little world.

"Trophée de France would like to thank every one of its athletes tonight! Let's have them all come out for a final curtain, okay!?"

Several other skaters started pouring out onto the ice after that, and when Chris came, he went straight for the pair, tossing an arm over each of them excitedly, "That'll teach me to trust in your level-headed descriptions about all your future pair skates, Yuri. You entirely let me down!"

The younger skater just smiled nervously, "Well..."

"Yuri doesn't know what it means to bring sexy back." Viktor taunted, winking at him from his side of the Swiss skater, "...But, maybe the answer is that we should take the average between our descriptions. I almost feel bad that the ice didn't actually melt."

"Oh, it melted well enough, don't you worry." Chris mused.

The two had a good laugh about it, much to Yuri's chagrin.

With all the excited adulation and congratulations, even from all the other skaters, it took Yuri and Viktor the better part of 30 minutes just to get into the changing area, let alone get to change into their Banquet ensembles. Chris had departed almost as soon as they got off the ice, having wanted to go back to his hotel room first rather than changing at the event and walking there in all his finery.

Yuri was busy washing the gel out of his hair at one of the large sinks when Viktor finally came back, decked out in a suit and vest as befit his taste. The Russian barely gave Yuri time to notice him before latching to his back, pressing in close from behind and wrapping his arms tightly around his smaller frame.

"You were really great out there." He purred, rubbing his cheek against the upper part of his husband's bare back, "We'll have to see about doing another pair skate soon."

The four or more love-bites on Yuri's neck were as obvious as the nose on his face, but he'd waited until the changing rooms were empty before he bothered risking their exposure. Proud of them as he was, it was still a little embarrassing to show them off to anyone but the man who'd put them there.

Warm water dripped in excess from where he'd been scooping it out of the sink and over his head,
trickling down the sides of his face and neck where it didn't risk getting Viktor's suit wet, "We should think of one for the Final. We'll be able to practice it at the Ice Castle once we're done with NHK." Yuri suggested, reaching up to start pressing the water out of his hair, and then reached blindly for the towel on his right. Just as he could feel it, he also felt a not-so-subtle push from behind...and then another, "Viktor..." He blanched.

The Russian didn't say anything. He just pulled back, slid his hands from Yuri's chest to his waist, and spun him quickly around, looking deeply into those brown eyes as he pressed in hard from the front. He smiled and reached up to ruffle the towel over the man's hair, turning it into a spiky mess before laughing to himself and sighing, "I know, I know... But mark my words, Yuri...one day, I will take you in the middle of an event."

"You already do that. At every event." Yuri raised a skeptical brow, "Sometimes multiple times a day."

"I don't mean in the hotel room." Viktor retorted, having thought the implication was obvious in itself. He reached up to boop the man's nose with a finger, and then moved to push him along to finish getting dressed, "Go on, I'll wait here. The sooner we go, the sooner we can get back, and I can have my way with you again."

Yuri's cheeks went pink, as they usually did, but he reached for his rolling suitcase with one hand before reaching with the other to set it on his husband's hip, "Post-conflict carnal urges?"

"A successful end to the unexpected Sophia Saga." The silver Russian replied, returning the gesture with a gentle hand on his partner's cheek. He kissed the man lightly, "I hope she saw every minute of us."

"Hm... Would I be a horrible person for saying I hope we never find out?"

"Not necessarily." Viktor laughed, kissing him quickly again while he could, and then turning to lean his back against the long multi-sink vanity as Yuri pulled away to go get his own suit on. When the younger man disappeared around a nearby corner, the Russian pulled out his phone and clicked it on to pass the time as he waited.

The memory of the 'news' article from earlier in the afternoon had been lost, and Viktor was all too happy to see Instagram awash with content from the Exhibition. People were already posting freshly-written bulletins about how he and Yuri had 'killed it' with their surprise show. He even found his new wallpaper image; a front-shot of a moment from the beginning of the show, where he'd been right up against his husband's back and had his hands clenched around Yuri's upper thighs. Viktor grinned proudly as he set it, and then clicked to his home-screen to admire it.

His mirth was abruptly interrupted by the sound of the door opening just to his left, and he lifted blue eyes to see emerald green looking back at him. Not one to act surprised, Viktor turned his gaze back to his phone and continued trolling through Instagram as though the teen hadn't shown up at all.

"Oh wow, what are you still doing here?" Mikhail's voice followed, forcing Viktor to lift his head again, especially after he felt the man sliding in to take the spot on the vanity ledge next to him, "I thought you'd left ages ago."

"Nyet, we were mobbed as we got off the ice at the end." The younger Russian explained, entirely ignoring Yurio as he passed in front of him with his own gear, "Yuri wanted to wash his hair anyway, but he didn't want to get all the way into the showers, so I agreed to wait for him so he could just use a sink instead." He looked at the time, "He should be up in a minute or two."
"Do you want me to drive you guys up to the other hotel? It'll be a tight fit with Minako, bu-"

"No." Viktor answered flatly.

"No? It's a long walk and it's getting colder." Mikhail was a bit surprised.

His nephew just clicked out of his phone and slipped it into the front of his long-coat's inside pocket, "We already planned on walking, so this is hardly a sacrifice." Viktor's left eye was obscured by his silvery bangs, but at least he made eye-contact with the teen in front of him with the other, "We'd rather not impose."

Yurio just sneered, and let his better judgment get away from him, "You have something to say, old man?"

Mikhail smacked his face so hard he thought he'd given himself a bloody nose.

"A dog doesn't concern himself with the opinions of fleas." Viktor retorted coldly, "Unless those fleas are about to issue an apology, anyway."

"I'm not apologizing for shit. You brought this onto yourself." The blond snarled, "You're so fucking blinded by your own self-pity that you don't even realize the position you're putting everyone else into!"

"Yuratchka-" Mikhail tried to quench the blaze before it got too hot, but he felt Viktor's hand come out in front of him, stopping him from where he'd tried to push off the ledge.

"My own self-pity?" Viktor echoed, "How about you try to check yourself? The world doesn't revolve around you and your massive ego."

Yuri's ears perked from where he was buttoning up his black dress-shirt, eyes turning a little in the direction the voices were coming from.

"See!? There you go again!" The teen barked, "This isn't about me. It's about how you negatively impact him, and how that impacts everyone else." He gestured away from the two silver Russians, knowing Yuri was somewhere nearby.

Both men gawked at him in confusion.

"He goes where you go, and he always does what you tell him to! He even said so himself!" Yurio went on, "That if I happen to piss you off just enough, and apparently it's not that fucking hard anymore, and you ditch me? He'll ditch me, too."

"Well, I don't know what to tell you then. All that's part and parcel to the fact that we-"

"I SWEAR TO CHRIST IF YOU PEOPLE REMIND ME ONE MORE TIME THAT YOU'RE MARRIED I'M GOING TO FUCKING LOSE IT."

Mikhail side-eyed his nephew, not sure how to interrupt the whole thing. He decided against trying, and pushed off the ledge to go find the missing member of the quartet. Neither of the remaining two seemed to notice him leaving.

"Maybe you should stop trying so hard to make me mad then." Viktor pointed out, "Because it sometimes seems like you're going out on a limb in the attempt."

"I wasn't trying to piss you off, I was trying to protect him from your shitty choices!"
"So this all really does boil down to how you're angry that I did that interview during your Free Skate."

"You're just like your goddamn uncle! Stop oversimplifying me!" The blonde snapped, causing Viktor to glower at him rather darkly, "It's just like I already said, you're too self-absorbed to realize how your pity party is impacting others. Don't you know how much it meant to me that Yuri was going to watch my show!? Did it even occur to you that it would hurt me when he left to go with you instead!?"

Yuri had moved to sitting on the small bench inside the changing stall, his blazer pulled over the top of his head. Mikhail was just a few feet away, looking down the short corridor of half-open curtain doors, looking for the one that was fully pulled over.

"I already told you that he wanted to sta-"

"SHUT UP." Yurio screamed, the first hint of tears in his eyes.

Mikhail stood just behind the curtain, "Yuri? You in this one?" He asked quietly, though not getting an answer. He drew a quick breath and squeaked a finger under the fabric, pulling it back just enough to see if there was a human in the stall, but not enough to see what it was doing; he spotted the trembling black mass just within, "Yuri..."

"You're not making any sense." Viktor growled, "There's plenty of occasions where we've all missed the shows our friends have put on. Why are you suddenly so worked up about Yuri missing one now?"

"It's my first set of events since Yuri got me reinstated on the Russian team, idiot!" Yurio snapped, "After all the shit that happened last year with my grandpa, and Worlds...I wanted him to see how hard I worked to do everything right, and show him that helping me wasn't a waste of time!" A few droplets fell from his eyes as he shook his head angrily, "He'd already seen my Short Program at your damned wedding party, but this was different! These were my only two shots to get into the Final and redeem myself."

Yuri cringed to hear the words, and Mikhail saw the twitch. He quickly moved into the small space and set his right hand gently on the back of the younger man's shoulders, "Yuri, don't listen to them--"

Viktor was taken aback, but then his brow furrowed and he looked at the teen with an incredulous expression on his face, "...Are you in love with him?"

The snarl he got in response would've made the biggest tiger in Siberia tremble, "ARE YOU F***ING KIDDING ME!?"

From under the blazer, it was difficult for the elder Russian to see what Yuri's condition was, but when the teen screamed, the coat opened a little, and he could see it all too clearly. Yuri had his hands over his face, his eyes barely visible through where his fingers parted over them, and he was numb, looking blankly straight ahead.

Yurio's fists were balled up so tightly that if his fingernails were any longer, he'd like to cut his own skin on them, "HE SAID THAT HIS ANXIETY GOES AWAY BECAUSE YOU HUG HIM, SO HE STARTED DOING THE SAME THING FOR ME TO MAKE MY ANGER GO AWAY. BUT BECAUSE OF YOU, BECAUSE YOU'RE TIED TO HIS F***ING HIP, I HAVEN'T GOTTEN A SINGLE MOMENT ALONE WITH HIM SINCE HE TALKED TO ME AT THE AIRPORT IN F***ING HELSINKI." The teen unleashed, "DO YOU NOT KNOW HOW HARD IT IS TO DEAL WITH THAT? TO REALIZE THAT THE PERSON WHO GOT
ME BACK ON MY FEET AGAIN IS COMPLETELY INACCESSIBLE!? THAT ANY INTERACTION I GET WITH HIM IS CONDITIONAL ON YOU BEING THERE, TOO, AND IF YOU'RE NOT, THEN HE ISN'T!?”

Mikhail saw the tears starting to fall, even as Yuri did his best to contain them behind his hands. The young skater lowered his face into his palms, his ragged breaths giving him away. The Russian was quick to get down on one knee and pull the figure to his shoulder, but all that did was temporarily stifle the sound of Yuri's agony.

"I helped him get you and your shit back to the hotel after your run-in with that ex of yours, and for a fleeting moment, I thought I was important. I thought I actually meant something to him. That I wasn't just some burden, some kid to be taken care of or babysat. And then YOU brought all that crashing down! You made me realize exactly how in-fucking-significant I really am, EVEN TO HIM."

"He doesn't think you're insignificant." Viktor pointed out, "But he can't be in two places at once and he was genuinely torn over what to do. If not for the fact that I'd reacted so badly to seeing Sophia, Yuri wouldn't have hesitated to stay and watch you. But we can't choose the cards we're dealt and he had to pick the thing he thought was more important. Your Free Skate was already half-over by the time he decided to go with me. We both thought it'd look disingenuous if he went back at that point."

Yuri had suddenly appeared from behind the corner, and though Mikhail tried to stop him, the skater shrugged him off. Viktor lifted his head, a worried look on his face, and Yurio turned around when he saw it.

"I can't believe you guys." The Asian skater said through shaky breaths, tears still wet on his skin, "How long are we going to fight about this!?” He glanced between them, giving each one a deliberate stare, but settling on the blonde directly in front of him, "If it's that important that I spend time with you then I will! I didn't know it was that big of a deal to you! I'll do whatever you want!"

"Yuri-" Viktor started, taking half a step forward before he saw his husband's hand come up to make him stop. He grit his teeth and went quiet.

Yurio just continued to glare.

"I never meant to make you think I didn't care. I just...thought you were strong enough to do this on your own again." Yuri explained, "You've always been stronger than me, and you gave this impression like you were ready to take the world by the horns again like you used to. Everything had fallen so well into place, and your skating had gotten so good again...I just...I thought I'd get in your way if I stuck around..." His voice was starting to crack under the pressure, the last few words coming out half-sobbed.

Emerald eyes looked down and away, and the teen tightened into himself, pulling his hands up to hold his elbows.

Viktor pushed passed him, desperately wanting to comfort his partner, only to find the man hold up his arm defensively to keep him from doing so. The Russian was stunned, "Y-Yuri...?"

"If I let you hold me then I'll just keep crying and never get this out." He explained through his tears, turning his eyes back to the teen, "Yuri... I once told Viktor, under these same sort of circumstances, that he didn't need to tell me anything...all he had to do was stand by me, and believe more than I did that I could win." He reached his arm up to rub his eyes on his sleeve, though it didn't help much, "But you and I are completely different kinds of people...and what works for me might not work for you..."
For the teen, that was easy enough, but for Viktor, it was hard to watch. He still hadn't forgiven Yurio for the words he'd chosen to use as a ballistic missile earlier in the day, so letting him touch his husband was hardest thing he'd had to do since choosing not to dropkick the teen off the podium. But since Yuri had asked for it, Viktor grudgingly allowed the hug, even if it lasted much longer than he was comfortable with at that moment.

"I want you to keep doing what you were doing before..." Yurio finally said, unclenching his fingers from the back of Yuri's dress-shirt, but keeping his eyes low as he pulled away, "And don't stop just because I look like I know what I'm doing."

Admitting that he was faking it half the time was a bit beyond the teen's capabilities, but he hoped Yuri got the message even if it went unspoken. It seemed to work, because the older skater nodded, snuffling and reaching up again to wipe his eyes.

"Then I just...need one thing from you in return." Yuri said, his throat raw.

The blonde looked at him curiously, a pit in his stomach growing suddenly.

"Apologize to Viktor for what you said earlier." The older figure said squarely, "Even if the message was on point...you had no right to use the words you did to get it across."

Mikhail and Viktor side-eyed each other, surprised to hear it, and then looked to Yurio for his response.

The teen was noticeably apprehensive. He drew in a breath, chancing a glance at the older skater, but finding a dubious stare coming back at him. It was clear that he knew a forced apology would be unacceptable, so he shook his head and looked at the man straight-on, "Hurt me however you want to make this better."

Viktor gawked at him, "...You want me to hit you?"

"I'll accept whatever punishment you deem appropriate for what I said. Saying sorry won't cut it, not like this, not right now." Yurio said flatly, "So..."

Yuri's eyes widened when he saw his husband make good on the offer as quickly as he did, stepping side-face to extend his hand and set his fingers nail-side directly on Yurio's cheek, and then bring it back to wind up the strike. Yurio clenched his eyes shut, but withdrew the hood over his head to give him a clean angle, and both Yuri and Mikhail stopped breathing as they watched, neither of them sure if they were really seeing what was happening.

Viktor wasted no time, and swung hard...

...

...and stopped half an inch from the teen's skin. Instead of smacking him clean in the mouth, which he felt the youth no-doubtedly deserved, he just turned his hand and flicked the top of his ear with his
middle finger, and then walked right past him.

"Let's go. I'm hungry."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED THIRTY EIGHT

The sound of the locker-room door closing with a squeaky thump echoed throughout the tiled hall. None of the remaining trio could think of a single word to say.

Yurio stood wide-eyed before his elders, breathing slow, shaky breaths. One hand came up towards his face, cupping his cheek where he’d been convinced he was about to get the wallop of his short lifetime. His skin still tingled from the anticipation. The pinna of his ear stung fiercely where Viktor had flicked it.

"You gonna be okay, kid?"

Green eyes twitched, but the teen looked up at the remaining silver Russian who'd spoken the words, "...I was sure he was going to do it." He answered, pulling his hand back and looking at his palm. He almost thought he'd see blood there, like he wasn't entirely convinced he hadn't been hit, "I'm not even...entirely sure I understand why he stopped."

All he could think of was the look on Viktor's face as he pulled his hand back, and it sent a chill down his spine.

...Was he really going to do it? Did...did he change his mind at the last second, or...?

The blonde shook his head, looking down at the tile floor. His entire body felt hot with adrenaline, and the slightest touch of the cool air around him felt all the more intense against his skin.

"It's done now. Go get ready. We'll wait for you."

The Russian's words sounded like they came from far away, but they managed to get through all the same. Yurio wordlessly turned away and reached for the rolling bag that Mikhail had left near the doorway, and moved with it around the corner to the line of changing stalls. The older two watched him go, and Mikhail gently pat the teen's shoulder as he went around them, turning then to the older skater still standing next to him.

"Are you going to be okay? You look pretty rattled."

Yuri almost twitched to hear the words, but then moved his eyes down again, "I was sure Viktor was going to hit him, too. I'm not even sure what I would've said or done if he had..."

"Maybe that's why he didn't."

Yuri hesitated, but then drew a shaky breath, keeping uncertain eyes low, "Maybe." He raised his hand up to his chest and pressed it over his heart, trying to calm it from the tension of the past few minutes. Another deep breath to settle his nerves, and he turned on his heel to get his things. His hands still trembled a little at his sides, but it was slowly starting to go away.

Black turtleneck, black dress-shirt opened in the front to the third button, black blazer held closed in front by one fastening...Yuri was a far cry from his funeraillesque black-coat-white-shirt-black-tie wardrobe from his 'Grand Prix Final of Tears.' The perpetually worried look on his face was the only thing that spoiled what would otherwise be a rather slick set-up.
When he came back down the row with the rest of his things, he realized that Viktor had left without taking any of his own. A quick look around and he spotted the blue rolling suitcase and carry-bag near the sinks where the Russian had previously found him. Mikhail was practically standing over them, tapping at his phone with both thumbs.

"Minako's out front with the car if you want to throw your stuff in it." He offered, eyes peeking over the top of the device.

"In a minute." Yuri shook his head, "You said 'we' would wait, so I'll stay for now." The younger figure stepped up to the vanity and set his things aside, turning around to lean his back against the smooth white countertop. He pulled his arms up around himself, a hand loosely on each elbow as the time passed.

The silence between them after that was a little awkward. Mikhail's thumbs tapping on his phone screen was all that could be heard, save the occasional rustle of fabric or shoes around the corner.

After a minute though, the Russian huffed a laugh to himself, and then held his phone out to Yuri, "Maybe you'll like this, and it'll lighten the mood a little."

The younger man blinked, but then looked at the screen and saw something he never thought he'd see. A silver-haired kid of maybe 4 years, sitting in the snow next to a hulking, shaggy black dog.

"...Is that...?"

"Yeah, Viktor." Mikhail nodded, "With Losi."

"How did you get this...?" Yuri asked, looking back at the picture, "Viktor's mom left some photos that Konstantin grudgingly gave us, but they were all from when he was a bit older, before Yakov took him to St. Petersburg."

"I took these myself." The older man answered, pulling the screen back again to look at the image, "I dug them all out of storage after seeing Viktor at the funeral, and scanned them to my computer so I could have digital copies."

"There's more?"

"Yeah, swipe through, there's a bunch." Mikhail said, reaching over the slide his finger across the screen and get to the next photo as an example, giving the phone over to let Yuri peruse at his own pace.

The new picture there before Yuri's eyes was from the same time-frame, but the kid-Viktor was further off, chasing the shaggy dog through a snowdrift. The next was during summer, a 5-year-old sitting on top of a dilapidated tank in the middle of the woods. More photos, more memories, even a few that showed Tatiyana...and a few others that had Konstantin as well. It was weird to see images that showed what looked like a normal family; two parents, and a kid that looked pretty happy to be around them, and their big dog and their house in the middle of the wilderness.

"There aren't any photos that show you." Yuri pointed out quietly, pausing on a photo of just Viktor and his father, with Viktor looking rather excited about something where his tiny self clung to the hulking man's shoulder.

"Well, I was the one taking the pictures most of the time, but there's one or two of me that my sister took. Keep scrolling, you'll find them."

The young skater did as such while they continued to wait, huffing a laugh to himself as a few baby
photos went by, revealing that even Russian Skating Legend Viktor Nikiforov did, in fact, look like a potato at one point in his life. But then he stumbled onto photos that seemed to show the present-day Viktor, albeit with longer hair. One in particular stuck out; the figure was asleep on a couch, with a silver-haired toddler asleep on his chest.

Yuri turned the phone and gave it a strange look, wondering if he was really seeing what was shown, "Jeeze, is this you?"

Mikhail looked over, "Yup."

"You look just like Viktor." The younger man gawked, "I mean, I almost thought this was Viktor!"

"It goes back another few generations before that look kinda dissolves." The elder shrugged, "Viktor looks like me, I look like my grandfather, he looks like his uncle and so on...but then it's too ambiguous to tell where all the features came from. The silver hair though...that goes back a long ways. Far enough back that even I don't know when it started. The Nikiforovs all have those slate blue eyes though. People in that little village used to quip that Viktor was my kid rather than Konstantin's, which got really awkward sometimes...but I'd always remind them of his eyes."

Yuri sighed, "...I look like my mom when I let myself go..."

Mikhail burst out laughing, "I could see that!"

The skater cast his eyes back down to the phone, sliding through another few photos. It saddened him a little to realize that they were all from when Viktor was 5, "...These must be from right before you left."

Again, the Russian leaned over to see what Yuri was referring to, and he sighed as he pulled away, nodding, "Da."

"How come you never said you had these before?"

"I didn't want to stir up trouble."

The memory of Viktor burning the photos and letters came freshly to Yuri's mind, and he nodded again as he turned away, "Viktor said you'd never gone back after leaving...how come?"

Mikhail kept his eyes straight ahead, his poker-face cracking a little as he reached up to pull his hat off and scratch the top of his head before settling it back again, "Same reason he didn't. Once you escape...once you see the wide world and everything it has to offer...a shanty town on the side of the woods really doesn't seem that appealing anymore. Besides, I'd been there for some 25 years already...I wasn't lacking for memories of it." He shrugged up his shoulders as he drew a breath, then let them down dramatically as he exhaled, "It broke my heart to leave Viktor behind, but at least back then, he still seemed happy. If I had known what was going to happen after I left...a thousand wild horses wouldn't have stopped me from taking him."

Yuri wasn't sure how to respond to that. If Viktor had gone with his Uncle, he'd have had a better life, but maybe he never would've...

"Knowing what and who he is now though, I guess maybe it was worth it in the end." Mikhail ended the thought.

"He found out about skating pretty soon after you left."

"Guess he needed something to do to pass the time. There weren't any kids his age around at the
"What about school...?"

"He was home-schooled by his mom. She was brilliant. Viktor got his genius from her, no doubt about it. *All* his best qualities came from her. Seems he got a few of Konstantin's worst though." He crossed one arm over himself and looked at his hand, rubbing his fingers together lightly, "He's a bit more vindictive than I thought he would be."

"A lot of wrong was done to him..." Yuri said, handing back the phone as he realized that was the last of the photos in the album, "But I think he does well enough keeping himself in check most of the time. We all slip once in a while though...even him...and the last little while has been pretty stressful. We're both hoping China and Japan will be better."

"Yeah."

The awkward silence came back after that, but it was mercifully brief, as Yurio finally finished and came back to join them. His hair was up, tied loosely behind his head, and he wore a deep burgundy suit, with a dark blue dress-shirt and silver tie. Over all of it was a long, black velvet coat with a dark grey shaggy lining. It folded over onto the front of the lapels, looking quite warm.

"Ready?" Mikhail asked, reaching for Viktor's rolling suitcase.

The blonde nodded, but had nothing to say.

Yuri's brow furrowed a little to see how subdued the teen still was, so he stepped closer and put one arm over his shoulder, patting it a little where his hand came to rest on the opposite side, "You don't have to go if you don't want to."

"I'll be fine."

Yuri nodded, and pulled his backpack over his shoulders, letting the clasps dangle at his sides instead of fastening them around himself, wanting to keep his suit smooth. Viktor had picked it out, after all. As Mikhail held the door open with his foot, Yuri followed the teen out, and reached into his blazer's inside pocket to withdraw his phone, realizing he had 3 missed texts and a phonecall from his partner. He felt a slight twinge as he checked the side to see that the 'silent mode' lever was still flipped. He reset it, then unlocked the device.

[Minako-sensei is out front.]
[Yuri?]
[Are you coming or what?]

The voicemail had no message, just a click.

[Sorry.] Yuri typed with one thumb, dragging his suitcase behind him with the other hand, [My phone was still on silent from the EX and I wasn't looking at it until just now.]

By the time he'd been able to finish typing it, they were practically outside as it was, so he hit 'Send' just in time to spot Viktor at curbside, looking at his pocket. The silver Russian was leaning against the rental car next to Minako, and she held an umbrella open above them. The ballerina spotted them easily enough, raising her arm up to holler at them and getting Viktor's attention away from his phone in the process. It was hard to tell if he'd been able to read the message or not.

The man didn't look particularly thrilled to see them, though he didn't quite look angry either...he just...looked. From their distance, it was difficult to see that it was a look of emotional fatigue. It was
getting harder to muster the energy for anything beyond a neutral setting.

It was lightly drizzling; enough to make their faces wet but not enough to make puddles just yet. Yuri slipped his dark-blue top coat on, and the trio moved over to the back of the car as Minako popped the trunk, reaching to help get Yurio's things while Yuri waited at the back of the 'line' with his own gear. Mikhail set Viktor's things in next, and then reached for Yuri's own cargo, shuffling things around in the trunk like a weird game of Tetris.

When he finally had his bags stowed, the young skater stepped over to where Viktor was looking back at his phone, still leaning against the passenger-side front door. He stood stiffly in front of the man, waiting for even the slightest, most tacit recognition that he was even there, but it came bitterly.

"What is it?" The Russian asked, the circles under his eyes a little more obvious in the dark of the outdoors.

Yuri felt his heart sink into his stomach, "...We're still walking there together, right?"

"Hm...I thought you were on Yurio's clock now." Viktor looked back down at his phone, thumbing through Instagram but not really looking at anything that scrolled by. His chest felt hot and his throat was sore, but he refused to give in to them.

Minako gaped at him.

Yuri's hazel eyes went wide, "...That's not...what I..."

"Viktor, knock it off." Mikhail said suddenly, "He's your spouse, not a condo. You're not Time Sharing him."

The younger Russian looked over the back of the car to his uncle, but said nothing, simply giving him a look of indignation. The hot spot dissolved with that, but the sore throat lingered.

"Viktor!" Minako called out, stepping out of the parked car as she unfurled the umbrella overhead, "Over here!"

The silver Russian glanced up from where he'd been looking at the stairs, having initially thought the voice was coming from some fan or reporter who wanted his attention. Realizing who it was though, he paused, and turned on his heel to walk towards her, "Oh good, someone who isn't mad at me."

"Hah?" The ballerina was perplexed, "What do you mean? Where's Yuri?"

"Inside still." He answered curtly, stepping off the curb as Minako came around the front of the car with the shelter.

She held it up a little higher to account for his height, and blinked at him as he immediately moved in to hug her, "Viktor?" She returned the gesture as well as she could, fleeting as it was.

He pulled back then and slouched back against the wet front door, exhaling a sigh as he thumped it, "I don't know how you and my Uncle handle that kid." Viktor reached up and pinched the bridge of his nose, eyes clenched shut, "I'm trying really hard to be patient, but he's working my last nerve, and just now..." He paused, looking down at where the slightest hint of a trickle was starting to stream down the edge of the curb. "...Yuri told him to apologize for his choice of words from earlier in the day, but Yurio decided to ask me to hit him instead."
“Yura wanted you to hit him...?” Minako deadpanned him.

"Da." The Russian nodded, keeping his eyes down, "Some deep, dark part of my soul really wanted to do it, too..." His eyes closed, hiding the world for a moment, "I'm worried about the kind of person I'm turning into...someone who, even for a split second, was actually willing to hit a kid."

"Everyone has moments like that." Minako said, reaching over to take the man's arm in her free hand and leaned in close, "You have the unique privilege of dealing with a guy who makes it his mission to push peoples' buttons as hard as he can sometimes. You can be forgiven for the temptation of reacting like you did. It's the fact that you restrained yourself that really matters, and that you're reflecting on it now."

"The thing of it is..." Viktor went on, turning his head slightly to look at her, "Yuri said he'd do anything to make Yurio happy again. **Anything.** What am I supposed to do about that? I have no problem telling Yurio to back off, but...I can't just tell my husband what he can and can't do. I feel like he entirely left me out in the cold on this."

Minako nodded, listening and contemplating, "Yuri didn't grow up with too many friends, so the ones he did have, he cherished above all others. He's fiercely loyal to the people who manage to get close to him, and he always aims to please, even at the expense of himself. He doesn't handle pressure well though...you know that better than most." She pat his arm with her fingers where she held it, "He'll calm down and revisit what he said. You and him just have to talk about setting healthy boundaries, and make sure he knows where you stand on this. Your experience with Yura is entirely different than his."

The Russian's eyes narrowed a little, skeptical of the whole thing. He pulled out his phone and loaded up the text window to his partner, "I really need him out here..."

"Yuri...you and Yuratchka are in the car with Minako." Mikhail's voice was commanding, "Viktor and I are walking."

"I am?" Yuri echoed, "You are?"

"Pile in, kids." Minako said anxiously, handing off the umbrella as the older man stepped over to her, "The party's probably already started."

As he took the black plastic handle on the aluminum shaft, Mikhail held it over the door to let her get into the car without getting wet, and pushed it closed before stepping towards the back of the vehicle again to get out of the street.

Yurio was already in the back seat and closing the door before she'd finished talking, but Yuri was still a little confused and hadn't moved a muscle. Viktor's coldness had literally frozen him in place. Every muscle felt tense, even as he saw the man finally put his phone into his coat pocket and reach for him.

The Russian's fingers felt like cold metal on his skin, but when he allowed himself to look up, he saw the calm blue eyes he'd known, and the hardness of his touch softened. Pale white fingers traced the edge of Yuri's jaw, lifting his face as they came to his chin, "Prošú prošénija. Ja vas ljubljú."

Yuri only understood one word of what was said, but it was enough to let him relax a little. He snaked his arms through the opening in the front of the Russian's long-coat and slipped in past his hand, pressing his face to the man's shoulder. It was an anxious few seconds before Viktor returned
the gesture, but he finally did, hugging him tightly. A few seconds passed that way, and the Russian
pat his partner's back gently before getting out of the way of the passenger-side front door.

"Get in and warm up before you catch another cold." Viktor said simply, opening the door and
gesturing over the door with his right hand for his partner to sit, the left still on the small of Yuri’s
back, "We won't be long behind you, so don't get sauced before I get there."

The younger man nodded, stepping off the curb before reaching to take the out-stretched hand with
his own and kissed the gold thereupon. Brown eyes glanced back as Yuri turned, setting one leg into
the footwell, half-wondering if that would really be it...if that would really be how they parted ways.

Viktor seemed to have the same thought, and when their eyes met, he gently took his hand back from
where Yuri still held it, and cupped the side of his husband's cheek with it. He stroked his thumb
across the damp skin, and leaned forward to kiss him properly, "We'll talk later, okay?"

The words were barely audible over the sound of other cars passing on the wet street.

Yuri blinked at him, bringing his left hand up to put it over where Viktor's was still on his face. He
downcast his eyes a little, but leaned in to acknowledge the whispers with a light kiss of his own,
then one more for good measure.

Once inside, Viktor pushed the door closed, and tapped the roof of the car with his free hand. As it
was starting to move off, the Russian suddenly became acutely aware of his uncle's stare.

"Chto?"

The switch from English to Russian gave the new conversation a strangely detached feeling.

[You're even crueler than your father in some ways, you know that?] Mikhail said dubiously.

[I was mad, okay? It's fine now.]

[Fine? You're going to give him a coronary one of these days.] Mikhail argued, holding the umbrella
over his shoulder, [Yuri doesn't deserve that.]

[You make it sound like he's the only one suffering.] Yuri suffers because he feels guilty about everything. You're suffering because, what, you didn't get to pop Yuratchka in the mouth after all?] The elder Russian said, moving quickly to catch up,
hoisting the umbrella more vertically so it would properly shield them both from the drizzling rain,
[Would you really have done it?]

[No.] Viktor shook his head.

[Then what in the world are you still mad about?]

Viktor bit the inside of his lip, but then turned slate blue eyes to the man next to him, [Yurio's putting
me in this weird position where it's my fault if he doesn't get acknowledged by Yuri.] He turned his
head back again and looked at the damp sidewalk, [He doesn't even want me around anymore, like
my very existence is an assault on his sense of self-worth. So if I don't give him Yuri's time and step
back, then I'm the badguy.]

[It's not like you won't get Yuri back.]
I'm not worried about not getting him back...I'm worried about letting him go in the first place.

Viktor practically sulked as he said it, [He and I have never been apart for that long unless it was specifically for a skating thing. Handing him over to Yurio makes me nervous.]

Maybe it's time you do it a bit more often then.] Mikhail suggested, [Distance makes the heart grow fonder, right?]

That isn't exactly something that worked for me, Uncle. I'm the guy that fled from home and never looked back, remember?

The older Russian gawked at him, but then shrugged and looked away, [You make a habit of running away, and people will eventually stop chasing after you. But this is Yuratchka we're talking about here, not some rival for Yuri's love. He's just a kid. All he wants is someone to be proud of him.]

I WAS proud of him!] Viktor said, his voice getting a little louder, [He crashed into his Senior debut and took Gold AND broke my Short Program record, with a program I choreographed for him! Then he took Gold at Russian Nationals 2 weeks later! The thing with his granpa was awful but it's not like it was his fault. No one would have expected him to perform as well as he usually did when he was so worried, and I never stopped being proud of him because of that.]

The only reason he took those Gold Medals was because you weren't there to stop him. You sent Yuri in your place and he resented it. He thought it was some kind of cruel joke. 'Five Time World Champion Viktor Nikiforov, represented by Grand Prix Sochi wash-out and general loser who, at age 23, still can't land a quad Salchow, Yuri Katsuki' and all that.

Viktor looked at him incredulously, [Why would you say something like that? How would you even know? You weren't around back then.]

It's true that I wouldn't have known just from watching the events or from listening to interviews, but Yuratchka told me this stuff himself.

Blue eyes blinked, [He...told you that himself? Why? He treats you like a Minder.]

Mikhail shrugged again, [Momentary lapse in judgment? I dunno. But that's what he said. We were on our way to Fukuoka on one of our trips back to Hasetsu, and he mentioned how mad he was that he wasn't at his best at Worlds when you'd finally come back to competition. He hated that you quit skating the same year he was going to join you in Seniors, and that he'd have to compete against a guy he hated and looked down on instead. He vowed to crush Yuri and take Gold just to spite you.]

The younger figure just grumbled to himself, [He puts on a good show about how he doesn't care if I'm around or not. Tried to kick me off a pier in Barcelona before saying just that.]

The trees dripped heavier droplets of water on the umbrella as they passed beneath them.

Did he also tell you about his ulterior motive?]

Viktor glanced at him sideways, [He had one?]

[Yuri hadn't planned on continuing to skate after the Grand Prix, right? Yuratchka told me he wanted to take Gold so Yuri would regret quitting for the rest of his life, like a punishment.]

[And this is the kid that I'm supposed to let Yuri have unsupervised visitation with?]

Mikhail laughed, [You make it sound like you're sending Yuri to visit him in prison or something!]
[This isn't funny! I'm being serious!]

[That's all ancient history. Everything is different since the end of Worlds. What could possibly happen between them now?] The elder glowered at him, though still amused from before. [Yuri is Yuratchka's only real friend. He knows that guy from Little Former Russia, but it's not like either of them has the funds to go hang out with one another outside of competition, and he can't just book a plane ticket as a minor anyway. Yuratchka's outburst at Worlds was basically his death-scream for realizing you were entirely lost to him. So, when Yuri came along to try and prop him up, he latched on.]

[I'm not going to start marking my calendar for Yurio Night.]

[Yuratchka still lives in St. Petersburg, and you two don't. It won't kill you to just let them hang out on their own once in a while when we're in town. Yuri has other friends he already does that with.]

[Yuri's other friends don't have a habit of making him cry or feel bad about himself.]

[Oh, you mean like you just did?]

Viktor sunk into himself, but said nothing.

[I'd give you credit for that one, but I can't. Like I said, that's all in the past. Lilia told him that the only people who are strong are the ones who can be reborn as many times as necessary...and Yuratchka considered himself dead to the world after he got cut from the team. Yuri helped him be reborn again.] Mikhail nudged the man with his elbow, [Yuri is the only person he really cares about. Hurting him was only ever a side-effect of his attempts at hurting you, and he really never meant for it to hurt Yuri as much as it did. He's still learning what it means that you two are a unit. When it's just them on their own, it's all 'katsudon pirozhki.']

Viktor grumbled, [I don't like it. I haven't seen Yuri be nice to anyone in a really long time. Yuri even told me about the pirozhki thing at Rostelecom and I still have a hard time believing it.]

He turned to face his elder, hands up and expressive, [After everything that came before, Yurio gives his hated rival a birthday present straight from his own grandpa's kitchen? It just blows my mind.]

[It's not like you have to let Yuri go right now. The competition is over and everyone's getting ready to leave. You won't even see Yuratchka again until the Final. By then, I hope you've had a chance to cool down and talk to your spouse about all this. I really want to see that Team Skate. I think working together would go a long way to mending some of the broken bridges.]
Chapter 139

Chapter Notes

Everyone who read Ch138 before 5/27 please go read it again. I've added some 2.5 pages of content and drastically altered other parts. It seems like a lot of folks have gotten the absolute worst impression from it and it's become obvious that the message wasn't clear at all...so hopefully now it'll make more sense and people can stop being mad at Viktor for loving his husband and wanting him to be safe.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED THIRTY NINE

The Burdigala Hotel was a lot fancier and modern than either of the Mériadeck event hotels used for the competition, and when the car pulled up, it was an easy thing to let the Valet Parking team take it.

Minako grabbed a few things of her own that had been set aside in the back seat, and then gave over the keys. The boys were out and looking up at the multi-story building, then around the area to see other stragglers still arriving. When the rain started coming down more noticeably, the trio ducked inside before getting drenched. There was a bustle of activity from hotel staff, putting down mats on the slick tile floor to prevent people from slipping as they came inside. Signs had been erected all around, thankfully in both French and English, guiding the way for Trophée de France participants and guests to the Banquet hall on the upper floors.

"Can you two manage on your own?" Minako suddenly asked, adjusting where she had a coat-bag slung over her shoulder, "Or do you want wait for me?"

"We'll wait for you." Yuri answered, "You always wanted me to give away event secrets and hotel room numbers, right? This is your first time at an after-party, so..."

She smirked at him and pat his head affectionately, "That's my boy. I'll be back in a few minutes!"

As the ballerina trotted off to change into her official evening-wear, Yuri glanced around the lobby, looking for a place to set up camp until she came back. Spotting some couches and tables just around the corner from the sliding glass entry-way, Yuri pointed and started moving over towards them.

Grey suede upholstery, three black pillows set against three yellow pillows on the couch, with two dark grey ones in the two singleton chairs on either side, and a sleek, metallic-looking table in the middle of it all.

Yuri fell into the first chair he passed and kicked his shoes off before putting his feet on the table, then looked over at the teen. Yurio was standing with his hands in his pants pockets; the heavy coat had been left in the car. He looked out through the slightly-parted curtains, eyes peering onto the street to see the lights of slowly-passing cars through the rain. It was coming down even harder by then.

"Sheesh, Mikhail and Viktor are going to be soaked to the bone by the time they get here." Yuri commented.

"If they get here at all." The teen amended, "In weather like this, they may seek shelter instead."
Yuri turned his head, looking outside as well, "I'm sure at least Mikhail will call if they need someone to go pick them up." He watched as the burgundy-clad skater passed him and sat quietly on the adjacent couch, pulling his hands out of his pockets just long enough to cross one arm over his chest and use the other to pull his phone from his coat, "So what'd you all do for the 2 weeks before the event anyway?"

Yurio glanced up, "They went sight-seeing. I just followed." He answered, leaning his head back, "Well..."

"Well?"

"I made them take me to the zoo." The blonde looked a little sheepish to admit it, "The city's tourism page had a tiger and a cheetah right on their front page, and Mikhail made me pick something to do, sooooooo..."

Yuri allowed himself to laugh quietly at that, "It was better than the one in St. Petersburg, I hope?"

"By far." He answered emphatically, then quickly looking back down at his phone again, "I took pictures. You wanna see?"

"Sure."

Instead of just handing him the phone like Mikhail had earlier, Yurio stood up and wedged himself in the open space next to him. The chair was half a love-seat to begin with, being wide enough to sit two thin skaters such as them easily. Yurio wasn't quite as kind to the table though, propping his shoes up against the edge of it and bringing his knees up, setting his head against one of the two pillows that had been set against the back of the chair, and then held up his phone. He flipped it to landscape-view and showed off the photos excitedly.

*Nothing gets him going quite like talking about cats...* Yuri quipped in his head. He crossed his arms casually, and then his ankles, and let the younger skater go on for nearly 15 minutes about every animal he saw at the locale. The white tigers and white lions became something of a lecture in genetics though, as the teen went into great detail about how neither was an actual, legitimate species, and all were byproducts of incestuous breeding by people who wanted the color. Yuri hadn't anticipated getting a college education on big cats, and it threw him off a little, but he listened anyway.

"They'd never survive in the wild if they were born like that out there." Yurio explained.

"...Aren't there tigers in Russia though? White would blend right in with the snow and dark-colored trees..."

"Sure, if it were winter all the time, but it isn't." The teen explained, "The woods are dark and green. The areas of Siberia where tigers roam aren't perpetually covered in snow. They'd be spotted a mile away by any prey during spring and summer."

"...Mh."

"You two look comfortable." Minako mused, *finally* back from getting ready.

Yuri sat up quickly, leaving Yurio to slip down into the space he once occupied, twisting awkwardly. The older skater turned his head though to glance at the woman, and his cheeks went pink at the sight of her. Yurio clambered up his back to right himself, but then *his* cheeks went pink too when he saw the woman.
"M-Minako-sensei...!" Yuri gaped, "Wow, you look really great!"

"It's been a while since I got to dress up all fancy for something!" She answered excitedly, spinning around in her usual fashion to show off.

It was a deep blue-purple iridescent color, with solid material from chest to just above her knees, and sheer covering her shoulders down to the elbow, and then down over the under-skirt, shorter in the front but extending nearly down to the floor in the back. It was held together at the waist by a simple belt with a few pearls and appliqué. She held a small matching purse in one hand, and wore a simple small-pearl necklace and bracelet on her left wrist. Her hair was styled in a loose up-do and was accented by delicate, thin silver chains.

"...Has Mikhail seen you in this yet?" Yuri wondered suddenly.

She shook her head and grinned.

"Yeah, he's gonna lose it when he gets here." He followed, then turning to whisper something behind his hand to the teen next to him, "If you thought they were annoying before..."

"Right...?"

Yuri just laughed, pushing to finally stand up and collect his shoes again and straighten himself out. He stepped up to his Sensei and offered his arm, "Shall we?"

...

By the time the Russians arrived at the Banquet hotel, the rain was coming down like a monsoon. The umbrella did precious little to keep either of them dry, and everything below their knees was soaked through. Thankfully, the hotel seemed to be slightly prepared for the deluge, and had a space in the reception area where box-fans and space heaters were set up just to help people dry off and warm up again.

[Are you gonna tell them we're here?] Mikhail wondered, shaking out the umbrella just through the doors and then slipping it into a plastic bag so it wouldn't drip everywhere.

Viktor fell into the grey-suede single-person chair just in front of the window. He glanced at his phone where he held it lazily in his hands, elbows high on the arm-rests, "...Nyet."

[...Why not?]

[Maybe I'll get a chance to spot how Yurio treats my husband when I'm not around, if they don't know I'm watching.] He answered, unlocking the phone and looking at his homescreen wallpaper again, [I need to see it with my own eyes.]

[The second you walk in that room, you're going to be mobbed.] Mikhail said, deadpanning him as he slithered into the chair opposite him across the table, [You're the event's gold medalist, never mind the rest...you think you can just sneak around?]

Viktor slouched even further, looking pitiful, [Why do you always have to be right? It's kind of annoying.]
[My kids say the same thing.] The older man laughed lightly, [You can try though.]

[Seems futile now.]

[What about Chris?]

[What about him?]

[We're Russian. What do we do when we can't be where we want to go, but still want to know what's going on?]

Viktor gaped at him, but then understood, turning back to his phone to pull up Chris' last text message and send a new one of his own, [Psst.]

On the top floor of the hotel, the Banquet was in full swing. The Swiss skater felt a familiar buzz in his grey suit-coat's front pocket. He smiled to see the message, and typed his reply quickly, [Hey. Where are you?]

[Nearby. Are Yuri and Yurio there?]

Chris looked around. He knew they were, but he wanted to have eyes on them when he answered, soon spotting them over by the food display along the far wall with Minako. He snapped an inconspicuous photo and sent it in lieu of words.

Viktor squinted his eyes as he tried to make out what was going on in the picture, holding the phone close to his face like it would somehow make a difference. It was a bit too dark to make anything out specifically though. He shook his head, [Does Yuri seem okay to you?]

[He's a bit subdued, but his lady friend from back home is keeping him in good spirits.]
[Come up already.]

[I can't right now. I made a scene earlier, so my uncle and I walked.]

[COME UP HERE.]

[Chriissssss]

[You promised you'd be here. Things will liven up once you show yourself.]
[Everyone's anxious to see you.]
[They've been haranguing Yuri about your surprise Pair Skate since you're not around.]

[Good haranguing at least?]

[Do you have to ask? Lol]
[Are you at least in the building?]

[Da]

[Where?]

[Ground floor, drying off. We got soaked in the deluge. We'll be up in a little while.]

"HEY EVERYONE, VIKTOR'S DOWNSTAIRS IN THE LOBBY." The Swiss man yelled over the clamor, getting most everyone's attention, "LET'S GO DRAG HIM UP HERE."

[Don't tell Yuri I'm here. Or Yurio.]
[Whoops.]

[...What did you do?]

[You'll find out in about 10 seconds.]

Viktor's eyes went wide and he jumped onto his feet, "We gotta run."

"Eh?" Mikhail tipped the front of his hat up to see the man looming over him, "Why? We just got here. My tootsies are still wet." He waggled his toes where he had them propped up on the short table.

"There's no time to explain...suffice it to say, Chris just-"

"THERE HE IS!"

Viktor blanched, his eyes getting comically small, turning his head to see people starting to pour from a nearby stairwell. They quickly grabbed him and started taking him back the way they came, and the Russian spotted his Swiss friend along the path, "CHRIS! BETRAYER, SCOUNDREL, I TRUSTED YOU."

The blonde just laughed and waved as he was carted by though, "See you upstairs!"

Mikhail blinked and watched his nephew disappear. After a second though, he groaned loudly and moved to sit up, grabbing his wet socks and shoes and putting them grudgingly back into place. When he rose to stand up, he stood in front of one of the space heaters and let it at least turn his cold wet pants into *warm* wet pants

"Sorry, did you guys just get here?" Chris asked suddenly, being the only person left from the stampede that had stayed. He waved innocently.

The Russian nodded glibly, "Took half an hour to walk."

"Yeah, Viktor mentioned you two doing that. He said he'd caused a scene...I hope it wasn't too dramatic."

Mikhail cocked a brow, but then turned about-face to let the space-heater get the back of his legs, and looked back over his shoulder, "It's not really my place to say. How's Yuri? Did he make it?"

"He's fine. It doesn't look like he followed the herd down when I told everyone Viktor was here, so he's probably still in the Banquet hall." The skater answered, then pointing his finger upward, "We should get up there ourselves."

"Yeah...probably so."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FOURTY

There were about thirty or so people left in the event hall when the herd returned with their quarry. There was a small 'stage' set up against one end of the room, placed right in front of a rather large set of windows; the curtains were drawn, and the lights from outside made the water on the glass look like a decorative waterfall display, especially since the lights inside the room were fairly dim, almost dark even. There wasn't any thunder as yet, so the sound of the rain was calming without the risk of suddenly being jarring or abrasive.

The stage was only about a foot higher than the floor itself was, so when Viktor was tossed onto it, he didn't stick out too much more than he normally would've. The people who'd stayed in the room started clapping and cheering to see him, paying no heed to how awkward and uncomfortable he looked up in front of them all.

"I'm really not in the mood for this...!" He thought, trying to act natural anyway though.

The lights in his eyes made it hard to see more than 10ft out from where he was standing, so scanning the room for his husband was an effort in futility unless Yuri came right up to the front.

Minako and the boys watched from the opposite side of the room, each with a plate in hand and a few assorted bits and bobs from the banquet table behind them. Yuri was holding onto a toothpick between his lips where he'd bitten down on something a moment before, watching his husband desperately try to calm the crowd so he could get down again, entirely unsuccessfully. He was about to comment about it to Yurio, but found the teen suddenly missing.

"Eh? Yuri...?"

"PUT ME DOWN, BABA!" The teen shrieked.

Mila had grabbed him and hoisted him above her head, and though he flailed in an effort to get loose, it did nothing. The lady skater threw him onto the stage next to his older counterpart, and suddenly they were both being assailed from all sides.

"Gold and Silver accounted for, where's Bronze!?" Someone called.

"I'm heeeeeeere!" Chris answered, stepping through the doorway with Mikhail.

The Swiss skater seemed almost too pleased with the idea of having a mob of people whisk him away, and he held his arms out in preparation for the move. A few seconds later, he was gracefully thrust onto the stage to Viktor's right, and he held his arms up triumphantly, looking more the Gold medalist than Viktor himself did just by virtue of actually wanting to be there.

The Russians both looked impressively miserable, though Viktor was at least trying to pretend otherwise. Yurio just stood indignantly like he always did, planting his hands on his hips and looking like he had better places to be, though tacitly accepting his fate for the moment and staying put.

A strobe-like effect of camera flashes and videography bombarded the trio, and aside from the largely-unknown personal squabbles that had dampened the mood a little, the whole Banquet suddenly felt like old times again. Viktor presiding as the event's winner, Chris sharing the podium, and...well, someone else there with them. The camera flashes faded to clapping and cheering.
Mikhail stayed close to the doorway, watching the display and waiting for something to happen, though mentally praying nothing did. Thankfully, it all seemed to look rather rehearsed, and both anxious skaters behaved themselves like nothing at all was going on otherwise. He took one step to his left, felt the squish in his wet shoes, and then stopped again, looking down at them, and where his slacks were soaked from the knee down.

"Just my luck." The elder grumbled to himself, "I get all spruced up and then I get wet." His eyes went back to his nephew, "He must feel even worse."

"Can we take your coat, sir?" Someone to the side asked.

Grey-green eyes turned towards it, and Mikhail saw several members of the Banquet's wait staff waiting to offer service. He shrugged to himself and nodded, withdrawing his phone and peeling out of the dark grey, nearly black top-coat he was almost never seen without, even indoors.

The suit worn underneath was predictably modern-looking, in utter and complete rebellion to the antiquated feel of his upbringing. The coal-black and slightly glossy material of the suit itself was matched by a dark, wine-red 6-button vest underneath, a white dress-shirt, and an off-white silverish ascot pinned in the middle with a red-glass button. He even had the chain of a pocket-watch dangling across his left side for good measure.

His hat soon joined his coat, forcing the Russian to remember that he'd never put his hair back into its usual way after flipping it for Yurio during the Exhibition. It was comfortable where it was at though, and he left it there, figuring it would probably just look silly if he restyled it after having worn his hat over it for so long.

Hmph...if not for the crow's feet around my eyes, Viktor and I could really have a good laugh at these peoples' expense... Ah, to be young again...

His feet were miserably cold by that point though, and he flexed his toes in his shoes, then looking up at the server who'd taken his coat and hat, "...Is there any chance I can get new shoes and socks, or something close to it?"

The server nodded and raised his hand to get the attention of someone behind him, hollering out commands in French and sending a few members of staff rushing away. A few moments later, they were back with hotel-issue socks and slippers; it was the best they could do on such short notice, but it worked. They couldn't help with the damp pants, but at least the Russian's feet weren't wet or cold anymore.

Mikhail pointed to his nephew where he was still stuck on stage, "He'll need some too when he gets down. Make sure you get a pair of each to him as soon as you can."

"Oui, Monsieur."

He flicked at his hair a little bit to try and get it out of his left eye, and started meandering around the room, looking for the other expected familiar faces. In the dim lighting, it was hard to see anything specific beyond a few nearby people at a time, and inevitably, his eyes were drawn back up to the bright lights shining on the skaters on stage. He saw Yurio escape the spotlight and disappear into the crowd, shorter than most everyone around him and thus able to sneak in any direction unseen.

Mikhail wasn't sure where he'd pop up again, or when, but at least with the teen gone, he could tell Viktor was a bit more relaxed.

He turned back around to look in the direction he was walking, and finally spotted Yuri straight ahead. The skater waved casually with a fork in his free hand, chewing on something but obviously
in better spirits than when he left.

And then...he spotted Minako.

"Hey, you made it finally!" She said, coming out in front of Yuri where she'd previously been obstructed by him, "Don't *you* look slick!"

"Ah..." Mikhail started, practically gawking, unable to form coherent *thought*, never mind speech, "...I..."

Yuri smirked, trying not to laugh as his prediction came true.

Minako stepped closer, relishing every moment of the man's stunned stupor, "What do you think?" She asked, turning so he could see the whole thing, "Do you like it?"

Mikhail could hardly *breathe*, let alone respond. In the end all he was able to manage was, "*I'm having inappropriate thoughts right now.*"

The ballerina was chortling to herself, thoroughly entertained by him, and moved closer to take his arm and hopefully bring him back down to Earth before turning back to Yuri, "Should you go save your husband?"

"As if he needs saving from this." Yuri thumbed his fork-hand back at the stage, "He settled in pretty well after Yurio got down."

"He'll be wondering why you're the last person to find him though." She pointed out.

"Last but not least." He answered, "He looked pretty uncomfortable when he got brought in. If nothing else, giving him the extra time will make everything else easier. I'd rather he be in a good mood for tonight. Chris always seems able to make him happy again."

"Shouldn't that be your job?" Mikhail pointed out, still a little flustered but getting better.

"I was part of what brought him down before." Yuri admitted sullenly, but then smiled and turned to them, "Besides, if all goes well tonight, I'll make him happy in other ways later on."

"Oh my...Yuri..." Minako said, stunned, "Have you had alcohol already that I haven't somehow noticed?"

"Hah, no...not yet. Viktor told me not to." He answered, "Maybe later."

Yurio finally managed to resurface, having swam through the thick crowd to get back to where he'd started before Mila snatched him, "Sheesh. You'd almost think the media was allowed in here with all the pictures everyone was taking a minute ago."

"You'll only hate to hear the reason why." Minako pointed out, elbowing the teen lightly, "Once you're Russia's sole champion though, the frenzy will be because of *you*, not him." She pointed at where Viktor and Chris were posing for more pictures, being giant dorks again like they usually were, "Though, if you manage to steal gold from him at the Final..."

"I plan on it." He said confidently.

"Jeeze, you talk about it like *I'm* not skating too or anything..." Yuri chimed in from the background.

The blonde looked at him squarely, and leaned forward a little with a challenging smirk, then thumbed at himself, "I'm going to take gold at the Final, Yuri. You'll be looking up at me from
Bronze, if you're on the podium at all."

The older skater scoffed, "Up at you? Pffsht... If I'm on a lower tier, I'll still be looking evenly at you. But I don't plan on it."

"You still have to make it into the Final."

"I'm going to win Gold at Cup of China." Yuri said, smiling confidently, "Then I'll win Gold at the Final, and then I'll win it again at Worlds when we compete against each other next."

Yurio puffed his chest out, "Fat chance. I'm not the same as I was last year. I already beat your Calgary Short Program score."

The older skater's smile changed from confident to nervous, "...Yeah, so you did..." He switched back to being proud though, "But I still have you beat on the Free Skate side of things."

"Not for long!"

"We'll see." Yuri nodded, moving to set his plate and fork aside and stepped over to where pre-poured glasses of champagne had already been set out. He grabbed two flutes with one hand and then stepped away, moving towards the back of the stage-gathered crowd. Once close, he cleared his throat audibly, and the people nearest him turned to see him standing there, and then moved out of his way. It went on like that until the people at the very front were moving aside as well, and Yuri looked up at the stage, left hand in his pants pocket as the right held the two glasses between his fingers.

Viktor had been holding Chris up with a hand wrapped under his back, the both of them in a pose much like after the first lift in Duetto when Yuri hung off his then-fiancé with one hand on his shoulder. When he spotted the younger skater though, blue eyes went wide and he suddenly let go, dropping the blonde to the stage like a rock.

"Ow."

Yuri smirked, "Sorry, Chris."

The Russian was entranced though and hadn't looked down, simply standing upright and then stepping slowly off the lip of the stage, entirely ignoring the squish of his wet shoes, "Y-Yuri..."

The younger skater held out his right hand, and his partner accepted one the of the champagne glasses. Holding it in his fingers, he watched as Yuri raised his own.

"To the first of every gold medal to be won this season." Yuri announced.

Viktor looked at the glass, and the champagne bubbling under the golden gleam of his husband's ring. He then looked down at his own, and then rose his hand up to meet it, "They can't stop us now."

"The moment of truth."

The Russian smiled, "We were born to make history."

Clink.
Dozens of pictures were taken; just the medalists, each of the performers from their respective disciplines, huge group shots, individual photos, candid shots when no one was expecting to be captured. Everyone had moved from the main, open room to the adjacent hall at one point or another, where large tables had been set up with small signs to designate all the different representing countries that had competed. Coaches, sponsors, choreographers, and skaters alike all piled in for the late night fancy meal. Yuri had sat for a little while with the members of Team Japan, being the only representative of Men's singles at the Trophée de France even if he wasn't participating, but eventually he joined his husband at Team Russia's table.

Mila was there, as was Georgi. Yakov, Lilia, a few other coaches, some Pairs and Ice Dancers that trained in Moscow, Sochi, even as far east as Vladivostok, which was as close to Japan as Russia got.

"I'll take you back to Sochi someday." Viktor said, in a better mood now that his feet were warm and dry in the pair of slippers his uncle had sent his way, "Maybe we could go there in the off season. We'll retrace our steps from that Grand Prix Final!"

"You should really think about competing in Pairs a little before it's too late, Viktor." One of the Ice Dancers across the table pointed out, "Everyone already knew you were good in Singles, but after the show you put on at Four Continents and here tonight..."

The silver Russian huffed, "It would be impossible." He stroked his husband's hand with his thumb where they held each other on the table-top, "The ISU won't allow same-sex Pairs and I won't skate with anyone but Yuri."

"Even if they did allow it," The younger skater pointed out, "I don't think either of us would be willing to drop our representative countries for a joint event. We'll just stick to Exhibitions for now. I think it's more fun that way anyway, right? Viktor."

He nodded, "No rules, just fun. It's more relaxed since we aren't being scored, so there isn't as much pressure to be better than anyone else. We can just skate to something we both like, and let the audience decide if they liked it too, rather than going out of our way specifically to please them."

"You should really tone down your Free Skate, Vitya." Yakov interjected, "The intensity you had out there earlier today was enough to make my joints hurt, and I wasn't even skating."

Viktor just laughed, "That was the point though!"

"You'll break your ankle with that stomping maneuver you did." The gruff man pointed out, a fork in the skater's direction, "If you slam your skate on the ice at just the wrong angle, you'll be on your ass faster than you can say borscht and never skate again."

"I've done it a hundred times already without problems!"

"And the hundred and first will be your last!"

Yuri smiled anxiously as the two argued back and forth like the old days. He cast his eyes over to where Yurio was sitting between Lilia and Mikhail, noting that the teen was silent as Death, picking at his food idly as the banter went on.

*He's been quiet around Viktor since the locker-room thing... He thought to himself, Thinking he was going to get hit really must've spooked him. I don't blame him... The thought of the silver Russian's dead-serious expression was enough to make Yuri anxious, even though he wasn't the reason Viktor*
looked that way. He glanced to where Minako was sitting next to him, then at Mikhail sitting next to her in turn. The photos on the elder Russian's phone came back to mind then as well, and he turned then back to his husband on his left, and reached for the champagne glass in front of him, sipping at it as the two Russians continued their back-and-forth. The flute only had enough left for two sips, and Yuri suddenly realized he’d just emptied his 5th glass. He became acutely aware of how his head was starting to swim a little.

Every glance around the room seemed to lag a little, and all the colors were a little more vibrant. The hand where Viktor held onto him seemed a hundred miles away, so when he stood up to leave the table, half his mind was convinced somehow that he was leaving it behind and his husband wouldn't notice his absence.

*I'll only be gone for a minute anyway.*

The table got awkwardly silent as everyone turned to see Yuri stumbling away, pulling Viktor along as he went.

"I guess I'm going somewhere." The taller man said, waving sarcastically as Yuri moved him towards the doorway to the earlier half of the Banquet hall, "Uvidimsja popozže~!

"Where are *they* going so suddenly?" Yurio wondered, gawking as they went, "Katsudon didn't even say anything."

Mikhail shrugged.

Yuri sluggishly moved through the open double-doors, having difficulty with the change from the bright lights of the table-room to the darker ambiance of the stage-area. He squinted his eyes against the dimness, trying to focus his hazy vision on where the exit hall was, and undoing the single button on his blazer as he went.

*It's really hot in here...*

He tugged a little at the turtleneck as he fumbled his way along the wall, only to find himself back at the Banquet tables with the pre-poured glasses of champagne on it. He reached for one, but grabbed the open bottle instead, and then started moving away again. Viktor watched him quietly, intensely curious as to what was going to happen.

*Does he even know he's got me...?*

The young skater suddenly turned about-face though and ran right into him, looking up in abrupt surprise, "V- ...-hic-... -Viktor!"

"Where are you going, Yuri?" The silver Russian asked curiously, smiling devilishly.

"What are you doing here?" The younger man asked, hazy, "I left you at the table with the others."

Viktor held up his hand where Yuri had a vice-grip on his thumb, "That's quite a trick if you did. You left without saying anything though, so I would've followed you anyway."

"I'm really hot. I was just...-hic- going to the bathroom to cool off. I would've been right back." He explained.

The Russian quirked a brow, *He's toasted.* He took the rather large bottle from his husband’s hand and gingerly set it back on the table, *"You're going the wrong way if water is what you want."*
"It's really dark in here. I lost track of where I was going." Yuri answered, eyes half-lidded already.

Viktor huffed a laugh to himself, then turned his partner by his shoulders and started pushing him towards the outer hall. There was a water cooler just across from the elevators and the lighting was better than in the stage room anyway.

When they found it, Yuri had already undone the remaining buttons on his dress shirt and was again pulling at his turtleneck sweater. He pulled the blazer and shirt off and folded them over his arm as Viktor grabbed the small cone of water. He saw it being presented to him after he pulled his hand off his face, pinching the bridge of his nose, and reached with that hand to take it. "Thanks -hic-.”

The Russian watched him quietly. Yuri went to refill the cone, but could hardly coordinate his hand enough to get the water into it without spilling half the liquid onto the carpet, so Viktor went and did it for him.

"You didn't get anything for dinner. That little breakfast bun was all you've had to eat since before my Free Skate, wasn't it?" The silver asked, handing the cone over again.

"I wasn't that hungry. I had a few little snacks while I was waiting for you to get here." He answered, draining the second cup and rubbing his face with a few drops that were left, "My head is swimming already. It's really hot..."

"You've mentioned that already." Viktor mused, "Come with me, we'll walk a circuit around the floor until your head feels normal again."

Wordlessly, the younger figure followed along, letting his partner lead him by the hand like he'd done himself just a moment before. Viktor pulled him closer and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, and Yuri returned the gesture with a lazy arm around the man's lower back, leaning against him as they walked.

It was nearly midnight by then.

They'd made it to almost the opposite side of the building before Yuri refused to walk another step and fell into a couch in the hall, just in front of a long row of full-length windows, thin sheer curtains pulled across them like in the first Banquet room. Viktor sat next to him and stroked his hair quietly, waiting like that until it seemed like Yuri had actually fallen asleep there.

The hall itself was desolate of people, all the activity retained around the doors to where the party was being held. The other end of the floor was abandoned for lack of events being held in the other available conference rooms. That made it easy to get away and have a moment of relative quiet before returning to the bustle of activity.

"...Stammi vicino..."

"Hah?" Viktor looked down from where he'd been scanning the corridor, feeling his partner rise up again from where he'd faceplanted.

"We used to say it all the time, but not since the wedding party, really..." Yuri added, "Stammi vicino." He'd sat back onto one foot, the other set on the floor, his hands on the couch cushion beneath him in the small space between his knees and the side of Viktor's leg, "It used to be such a huge deal to us, but we haven't said it in so long."

"Stammi vicino, non te ne andare." Viktor repeated.

Hearing it made Yuri smile through his buzzed haze, and he leaned forward. The Russian wasn't
sure if he was going for a kiss and missed, or if he meant to land face-first on his chest in the first place, but that's where Yuri ended up in the end. He huffed a laugh to himself and then turned to make the whole thing easier, twisting himself around and wedging one leg under his partner so he could lie straight against him more comfortably, and settled his hands over the man's back. Yuri held there for a moment, but then pushed up again, palms flat against his husband's chest as he moved into the kiss he'd intended a minute before. That achieved, Yuri held there for quite a long time, moving only his lower half to rise up on his knees a little. As he moved them onto either side of his partner's waist and sat back down onto his lap, his hands worked at the tie around Viktor's neck. The Russian hardly paid it any attention, not wanting the long kiss to end for anything. The entire after-party's attendees could've been watching them at that moment and he still wouldn't have stopped.

Yuri eventually pulled away though, once he had the tie fully undone and was able to slip it out from around the man's neck. A few quick motions, and he had it tied around his head proudly. He immediately slid his arms over Viktor's shoulders and held tight around him, leaning back into another kiss, his cheeks flushed more from the lingering alcohol than sheepishness from his actions.

Viktor could feel his young husband pushing against his hips, and at least for a moment, the fact that they were in an open hallway meant nothing to him. His hands went under the other side of Yuri's sweater, up his back, down again, slipping in front and rising up the front of his chest, the same kiss continuing the whole time. It was only when the second hard grind came that he could feel the man was well and beyond eager for him, that he stopped.

He's too sauced to know what he's doing... The Russian thought abruptly, He'd never forgive me if I let this go on and someone walked in on us. It would be a thousand times worse than any photo from the Sochi dance-off ever was...

"Viktor what's wrong...?" Yuri asked with a slur, pushing into him a third time like he thought it would get him going again, "You've never stopped before..."

"Let's go someplace else." He offered, reaching his right hand up to cup his partner's cheek as the left did its best to pull Yuri's sweater down again. As the younger man blinked at him blearily, Viktor glanced around the hall, looking for literally any solution. Not finding anything immediate, he twisted his legs off the couch and forced his partner to stand as he rose, and moved off to pull him around the next corner.

It almost seemed futile. The bathroom had no lock on the door and the multi-stall room was constantly in use at any given moment anyway. The other conference rooms were locked. Even the one maintenance closet was locked. Viktor could hear Yuri getting frustrated behind him, but when all hope seemed lost, he jigged the handle to an electrical room and found that it opened freely. Relief flooded him, and he pushed the door in, yanked his husband in after him, shoved the door closed so hard that it almost slammed, locked it, and pressed Yuri up against it.

The younger man's arms were over Viktor's shoulders in a heartbeat, pulling him into the kiss like it was the last one he'd ever know. The Russian's hand were just as quick to undo buttons and pull away clothing, pushing the sweater up and pants down. Yuri drew in a hissed breath and gasped when he felt his husband's fingers around him, and he almost climaxed right there for the desperation of it. Pale lips went from his mouth to his cheek, neck, bare chest, and lower, and Yuri dipped slightly against the door a little as he felt the hot, wet feeling around his center.

Viktor had him well-pinned, so even as his legs started to give out under the sensation, he didn't slide too much farther down than he had already. Licking, sucking, bobbing, twisting, stroking, and every combination thereof, the Russian did his best to please him. Yuri had to put both hands on the man's shoulders just to stop himself from collapsing. He felt release at the back of his husband's throat a
little while later, and the man swallowed, licking him clean and then finally letting him fall against
him, panting heavily as he went.

Yuri parked himself on his husband's lap and draped his limbs around his sides, under the man's
arms, catching his breath raggedly as he felt slow strokes along his back. He slouched weakly,
upright only for the angle Viktor held him up at. They stayed there like that for a few minutes, Viktor
gently kissing at his partner's neck and shoulder as he recovered.

"...Thank you...for that..." Yuri finally managed, still a little dizzy from the alcohol but feeling better.

"I'll always find a way to take care of you." The silver Russian answered, looking up into hazel eyes
as the younger man pulled back a little, and ran his fingers through that raven hair, "I love you and I
want you to be happy."

"Me too."

"Let's head back then. We can dance a little and then head back to the hotel."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FOURTY ONE

The trip back to the Banquet hall included a brief switch from the turtleneck sweater to just the button-down and blazer. Feeling much cooler, Yuri had no trouble getting his bearings back. He still had his husband's tie around his head though, and the thought of returning to just the same old boring champagne was almost depressing.

"Neh, Viktor..." He turned and tugged a little on his partner's suit coat, just above where he held his hand between them, "Let's go down to the first floor before going back."

"What's on the first floor?"

"Didn't you see the bar?"

"...You want more to drink?"

"The champagne I had before is wearing off already and I'd rather not down half another bottle. It just sounds sad."

"Only when you say it like that." The Russian mused, letting himself be pulled towards the elevators.

"Get something fancy with me!"

The temptation was overwhelming, and Viktor was finding it harder and harder to resist. The last time either of them had drank into the night together was at Four Continents, but back then, Mari and Minako were playing chaperone to make sure they didn't get into any weird or troublesome shenanigans. The Russian hadn't gone drinking into the early morning since getting engaged though, and he was sorely missing the fun of it.

...The last time I even got half-toasted was at last year's Cup of China, I think... He reflected, looking up at the designer light fixtures as they waited. Yuri had busied himself with a few lazy ballet moves, slowly making his way around in a big circle. He'd tied the sleeves of his sweater around his neck, letting the body of it hang over his back, looking something like a cape as he twirled. Yuri got really embarrassed by the photos Phichit posted though.

Ding .

They moved through the opening doors, and waited for the carriage to start lowering them to the ground floor. Yuri was still bouncing up onto his toes as they went, trying not to disturb the three other people in the elevator with them. Viktor glanced around, smiling pleasantly at the patrons who were gawking at him excitedly, and then followed his husband out when the doors opened again.

When they were in the doorway to the bar area, he looked at the big display behind the counter. There were easily half a hundred bottles of various liquors right out front, and probably as many wines in the menu. Above the counter were about ten mini-chandeliers, twinkling in the dim lights above. The bigscreen television embedded in the wall between the bottle-display and the second row of fancy glass-ware on the right was showing off highlights from the Trophée de France, and just as Yuri was pointing out what he wanted to the barkeep on the menu, it started playing footage from the Exhibition Gala.

The tender paused suddenly as he was moving to grab the liqueur needed to make Yuri's drink,
seeing The Ghost on the screen and glancing back at the two men on the other side of the counter. Being taken aback, he pointed from the display to Viktor and then back again, as though wordlessly trying to confirm they were the same person.

[Yes, that's us.] Viktor mused in French, again surprising the barkeep.

[You speak French! My apologies, I must've seemed rude just now...] He turned to gawk at Yuri though, [He's not the other skater...is he?]

Viktor glanced at the younger man, who was looking at both of them like he thought he was in trouble.

"...What I do?"

The Russian laughed and went behind him, then reached for his eyes and pushed up against his forehead to pull his hair back, "Nothing; you're adorable." He looked back at the bartender, who had a glimmer of recognition then, [You see?]

[He looks so different with his hair down.]

[He used to wear glasses, too. He looks really hot like this, right?]

"You guys are talking about me." Yuri grumbled, trying to blink where his partner still had his skin pulled taut.

"He's talking, I'm bragging." Viktor explained, letting him go again and ruffling his hair to put it back into its former messy affect, "He didn't recognize that you were my partner in the EX because your hair is down."

"Should I put it up again...?"

A colorfully layered drink was placed in front of him, and he offered his debit card in return.

"Well, you went out of your way to wash the gel out after the Gala, so do whatever is most comfortable."

[Anything for you, sir?]

Viktor turned from his husband to the barkeep and leaned over the menu on the counter in front of him, [The penultimate question...]

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The remaining gaggle of Russians and their cohorts had made their way back to the darker stage room after finishing with the late-night dinner. Minako was scanning the room for her former pupil, but couldn't see him.

"They've been gone for a while." She commented.

"Mh...Yuri might've passed out somewhere." Mikhail answered, looking around as well. He laughed when he spotted Mila forcing Yurio to dance with her, much to the young skater's protests. Shaking his head, he reached into his inside coat pocket and pulled his phone out, "I'll message them to ask
where they are."

It seemed Viktor had the same idea though, and just as the phone was clicked on and Mikhail was taking a sip from a champagne flute, the elder received a message from his nephew that made him spew the bubbly everywhere.

"Sheesh, what happened?" Minako gaped at him, reaching for and then offering a napkin from the nearby table.

Mikhail just offered his phone and let it speak for itself, wiping his face after he swapped the device for the offered napkins.

[Hey dad, make sure Yuri and I don't do anything especially stupid, ok? We're gonna drink.]

"Aww, you got upgraded!" The woman laughed, "He'll never say your name now!"

"I really thought I was close, too." He sighed, accepting his phone back, "Ah well."

A few minutes passed before either of the skaters was seen returning to the Banquet, but when they did, it was clear they were on a mission. The music in the room even seemed to change as they made their appearance. What was once a calm tempo for slow dancing, morphed into something a bit more energetic.

[I'm listening to 'Jane XØ - I Don't Wanna' and 'Ella Vos - Down in Flames' by MrSuicideSheep, so something along these lines.]

Mikhail spotted the pair in the doorway first, spotting them ahead where he looked past Minako's shoulder, "Uh oh..."

"Uh oh?" She echoed, turning to look, "Uh oh. Yuri looks completely toasted."

"Viktor does, too. They didn't waste any time did they?"

"Better make room. This ought to be good."

Yuri adjusted where Viktor's tie was tangled around his head, and the Russian next to him was pulling off his blazer and vest. Both of them went out to the middle of the room with their dress-shirts half unbuttoned, seeming to have some plan for how to completely take over the floor. Others were already starting to make way as the pair came through, already seeming to choreograph a whole new skating routine as they went. By the time they made it to center, Viktor was holding Yuri just above the ground with a hand wrapped around his front, the younger skater's back to his chest, posing much like in a Pairs lift as Viktor turned slowly in a circle.

The crowd clapped along to the beat of the music, many of them excited enough by the display to join in in their own ways. The dance floor came alive with energy.

Coaches and sponsors waited along the wall, watching as the skaters put their talents on display. It wasn't long before a few of them were getting pulled into the fray. Not even Yurio was spared, as Yuri came drunkenly sauntering out of the throng unexpectedly, and yanked the teen in. The music changed above them, and soon Minako was missing as well, leaving the elder Russian confused where he stood.

He spotted her in the thicket with his nephew, and smacked his forehead, "Does this count as 'especially stupid' I wonder?"
Off to the side, Yuri and Yurio were in a mess of something that looked like a hybrid of break-dancing and ballroom moves. It looked confusing, but at least the teen looked like he was starting to enjoy himself, even if only reluctantly.

Minako was even more flustered than she had been when Viktor caught her during the wedding party, since in both cases, his shirt had been half open and he loomed over her. This time it didn't end with just making sure she didn't end up on her butt on the ice though. He danced with her quite properly, and for the entire duration of the present song. When the switch came again and Viktor went back to find his husband, he traded her off to Chris, and she just about died of happiness. Yuri forced Yurio to stick around even as Viktor came back for another round.

When the music changed a few more times, even Mikhail wasn't safe from the mass of dancing, and Minako pulled him into the thick of it. He felt super awkward...dancing wasn't really his shtick.

It was close to 2am before the music was turned off and everyone was too tired to go on. The alcohol started wearing off again, too, at least for those who had imbibed. The 'infamous' trio had seemingly made drunken amends by then, and were in a triangular pile on the stage, completely worn out. Viktor was down on his back, arms over his head, his knees bent over the lip of the stage so his feet were at least on the ground still. By then, his shirt had been completely undone, and was barely hanging onto his arms. Yuri was face-down on his chest, feet dangling straight off the edge of the stage to the man's right. Between them, Yurio was barely clinging to the stage, left arm dangling off where he had his head propped up on Viktor's thigh just above the knee, right leg propped up over Yuri's hip, the rest of him splayed out like a cat trying to take up as much space as humanly possible.

Minako had at least found a chair nearby, nursing a glass of champagne, having no idea how many she'd had by then. She was good and tipsy, but a lifetime of enjoying alcohol had made her tolerance for it rather robust, and she was still able to laugh at the whole situation.

"Well, they seem okay with each other again I guess." She mused, turning to where Mikhail had face-planted on a row of chairs right up against the wall, "Right, dad?" She chortled.

"It just sounds weird coming from you." He answered, lifting his head just enough to turn it and face her, "But you're probably right. They're turned themselves into quite the SkaterPile." He paused, uncurling one arm to reach up and touch his chin, "We should probably get them back to their hotel so they can sleep it off."

Enough people were still standing that it wasn't quite a clear shot to where the trio had wound up on the stage, but Mikhail pushed himself back up to his feet and started sleepily hobbling over, stumbling through the stragglers and onto the stage, half-crawling to just above where Viktor's head was resting.

"Oi."

The younger Russian didn't respond.

"Vik, get up, time to adult again." Mikhail said again, poking his nephew's forehead with a finger.

Viktor at least moved that time, blearily swinging one arm up over his forehead to get the poking to stop as he turned onto his side and grabbed to Yuri's head gently, like he'd done with Makkachin forever ago. Yurio hadn't seemed to notice where his 'pillow' had moved, pushing him even more precariously close to the edge of the stage.

Mikhail sat back, legs half-crossed as he looked down somewhat, feeling largely defeated. He could hear Minako trying not to laugh at him off to the side. Giving her a look like 'well you come try it
then,' he turned back to the SkaterPile and shrugged, resigning to just watch over them until they roused on their own, or until everyone got kicked out, whichever came first.

A few minutes passed that way. The elder Russian leaned back on his hands and slouched somewhat, watching the other party-goers slowly starting to trickle out, the room becoming more and more empty as they went. He started idly humming to himself, not even really sure what tune it was until a voice popped up, quietly, ahead of him.

"...Ahh...I know that song..." It said.

"Hm?"

[The Parting Glass' as sung by Peter Hollens]

"...Of all the money...that e'er I had..." Viktor sang softly, "...I spent it in good company..."

"And all the harm, that e'er I've done." Mikhail added, surprised and yet not at the same time.

"Alas it was to none but me." They sang together, "And all I've done, for want of wit, to mem'ry now I can't recall. So fill to me the parting glass. Goodnight and joy...be with you all."

Even Chris chimed in from where he'd been previously unseen, hidden on the floor on the backside of the stage, joining the Russian choir as he rose to sit and slouched over the short lip of the platform, "So fill to me the parting glass, and drink of health what e'er befalls. Then gently rise and softly call, goodnight and joy be to you all."

Viktor pushed up onto his left elbow, using his right hand to gently move his husband's head as he pushed to sitting upright, turning him onto his side where he'd been on his stomach before. He sang the next line on his own, "Of all the comrades that e'er I had, are sorry for my going away."

His uncle got the next line solo as well, "And all the sweethearts that e'er I had, would wish me one more day to stay."

Yuri's eyes started to open as he heard the song, the two silver Russians getting the next line together again, "But since it falls into my lot, that I should rise and you should not."

Viktor alone again, "I'll gently rise and I'll softly call,"

The full trio-ensemble, "Goodnight and joy be to you all."

Even Yurio started to rouse, suddenly pushing off the edge of the stage and onto more stable ground as he realized how close to slipping off he was. One elbow was wedged between Viktor's knees as he turned, hearing the trio continue.

"Fill to me the parting glass, and drink of health what e'er befalls. Then gently rise and softly call, goodnight and joy be to you all."

Chris faded out, leaving Mikhail and Viktor in a last duet, "Fill to me the parting glass, and drink of health what e'er befalls. Then gently rise and softly call, goodnight and joy be to you all."

Viktor finished it out, "Goodnight and joy be to you all."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FOURTY TWO

Despite the trio having at least half-woken-up since passing out on the stage, getting the three of them down the elevators and into the car was still a challenge. Viktor was nudged in first, the driver's side passenger door closing against his shoulder. Yuri was hoisted in next, wedged against him in the middle seat. Yurio had roused enough to sit himself down next to his Japanese counterpart, leaning his head against his jacket on the door panel before crossing his arms and promptly dozing off again.

The eldest Russian tipped the Valet staff and yawned against the back his hand before moving to get into the open driver's side door, finished with the task of sorting the SkaterPile. The car was already on, so there was no need to ask for keys. His fingers curled around the steering wheel before he leaned his forehead against it briefly.

Minako was already waiting in the front passenger seat, wearing his top-coat to shield against the cold of the late night air. She watched the man quietly, listening as the door on his side was closed for him by staff, "You gonna make it...?"

Mikhail held a moment before turning his head to look past his knuckles, but then pulled back and sat normally again, putting the car into Drive and moving forward, "Getting too old to play babysitter. We'll have to get them into their rooms again once we're at the Novotel, too."

The ballerina examined his demeanor quietly, but as they rounded the corner to take them down the main street back south, she reached over to pat his leg gently, "What you're doing is often a thankless job, but you're doing great. I'm sure they appreciate it."

The words bounced around in Mikhail's head like a pingpong ball, echoing until they finally faded off again. As the car came to a tapered stop at a red light, he looked back at the trio through the rearview mirror, noting how there was no chance any of them was awake, given their likely-uncomfortable positions or how at least two of them were drooling. Catching sight of himself, and where his hair was sloughed over his left eye, he shook his head and ran a finger through the normal center part and put everything back into its original place, flicking at it a little until it looked half-normal again. Seeing that it still looked a bit unkempt, he reached for where Minako had his flatcap on her lap, and set it on top of the silver-grey mess, squishing it down a little for good measure.

"I never thought I'd be a dad again to three completely different kids." He commented idly, leaning his elbow back onto the arm-rest between the two front seats, left hand barely clinging to the wheel, "The three I already had were enough."

"You don't really see them that often though, do you?" Minako wondered. When he didn't answer immediately, she turned her head back to face straight ahead, "Sorry, I know it's a touchy subject sometimes."

Mikhail stayed quiet for a moment, the light having a chance to turn green again before he spoke, "I buried myself in my work after everything changed. Went back to my old stomping grounds in Kharkiv in the Ukraine until things started getting weird in Crimea...tried to forget about everything. I think my kids resented me for it, especially Sergio. You'd never know just by the one time he came to Calgary, but he used to be a sweet kid."
The roads were surprisingly populated for being so late at night, and with the rain, travel was especially slow. Another red light came ahead, and the vehicle slowed to stopping again.

"I sometimes wish I would've made the three of them come with me instead of leaving them in Canada, but...we gave them the option of choosing for themselves, and they all wanted to stay. Not necessarily because their mother was their favorite, but because she wasn't leaving." Mikhail explained, keeping his eyes ahead, "They all had their lives and their friends established in Banff already...what right did I have to uproot all that? None of them spoke a lick of Russian anyway, so they would've been worse off for going to the Ukraine than if they at least had some terse understanding of it. English isn't really spoken out there."

"I guess it was providence then that you ran into Viktor when you did." Minako suggested, reaching over to take his hand where it was hanging limp over the end of the arm-rest.

"I'd have rather done so without my sister having to die first." The Russian sighed, slouching a little where he sat, but curling his fingers where he felt the ballerina's anyway, "First that, and then seeing Konstantin beat the Hell out of his own kid, not being able to do a damn thing about it." His voice got a bit quieter after that, and he leaned closer, in case any of the trio in the back really was awake and just doing a damn good job pretending otherwise, "Getting hit in the eye wasn't all that happened. I wouldn't have been surprised if Konstantin cracked a rib or two on top of that. He really let that kid have it, though he made it look like he was barely doing anything."

Minako's brow furrowed, and she looked back at where the younger silver Russian was squashed up against the doorframe, his left eye conveniently hidden from view by the turn of his head.

"Maybe I was just too numb from Tatiyana's passing." Mikhail went on, "When I saw Konstantin pouring his flask out on Viktor's head, I wanted so badly to do something...but I just froze. I was still kind of shocked that Viktor was there in the first place...I hardly recognized him...but then everything happened in slow motion, and yet...too fast." He paused a moment, remembering the whole thing unwillingly, "I tell myself I did nothing because I would've gotten a beating, too, but...maybe I was just a coward."

The ballerina had no response to it, so she simply rubbed her thumb once or twice against the man's hand. The Novotel was barely around the corner by then, and it was only 30 seconds of awkward silence before they were pulling into the drop-off area.

Minako had cast her heels off before leaving the Banquet, having her flats back on, and she moved around to the passenger seat behind her to try gently rousing Yurio as Mikhail did the same with Viktor and Yuri. Collecting the sweaters, jackets, shoes, and socks that had previously been taken off, they escorted the hazy men and teen into the building.

The ballerina broke off on the 3rd floor to take Yurio to where the rest of the Russian team was still (hopefully) winding down and expecting him. Mikhail stayed with the two older skaters, getting to the 2nd-to-last floor before disembarking again. Yuri had fumbled around in his coat pocket enough to get his room key, but he was too bleary-eyed to be able to get it into the slot and open the door, so Mikhail reached ahead and guided his hand, then pushed the door open to let the two stumble in.

Yuri paused in the small hallway as Viktor went on through, fumbling at the buttons of his half-open dress-shirt as he tried to at least pretend he could get ready for sleep before passing out.

"When is your flight?" The Russian asked, "Should I call to make sure you wake up?"

"It's not until evening." The young skater answered, reaching up to rub his eyes; he still had Viktor's tie around his head, though his hair was quite a bit messier than it had been when he'd originally put
it there, "We won't sleep that late. But you can call anyway if you want; we don't mind."

"Are you flying straight from here?"

Yuri shook his head, "Viktor wanted to get dinner one more time in Paris before we left, since we're not sure when we'll be back."

"All right. Well, get some sleep. I don't know how much you drank tonight, but..."

Yuri just smiled in his hazy way, "Five glasses of champagne and two fancy high-octane cocktails." He blearily recounted.

"Too much. Go to bed."

"Mh. 'Night, Uncle Mikhail." The skater said, falling into a lazy hug rather than stepping into it.

The Russian pat his shoulder and then pushed him back upright, turning him around so he could just walk straight ahead and not have to coordinate himself much more, "G'night, Yuri." He glanced into the interior of the room, but couldn't see his nephew, so he quietly let the door latch and started heading back down the hall towards the elevators.

The light for the 'down' button was glowing as the elder Russian waited, hands stuffed into his pants pockets for lack of his coat. He pulled out the pocket-watch briefly to check the time; nearly 3am. 

I'm half a mind to see if I can't just get a room for us here so I don't have to drive again-

"You left in a hurry."

Mikhail would've jumped out of his skin if he were able. He regained his bearings before turning to look at where Viktor was leaning casually against the corner of the hall, staring straight at him with a half-drunk haze in his eyes, "You scared the ever-living Hell out of me just now."

Viktor huffed a laugh, "Sorry. I thought my footsteps gave me away."

"No. You're wearing slippers. You were as silent as the ghost you skated about tonight." The older figure said, righting himself as he felt his heart starting to calm again, "What is it?"

"I just wanted to say thank you for tonight." The younger silver answered, "You never answered my text but I'm guessing you saw it anyway."

"I did."

The curtness of the answer threw Viktor off a little, "...Was it too much to call you dad?"

"What? No..." Mikhail felt a little ruffled, "You just hadn't done it before, save that one time when I nearly ran us off the road after."

The skater laughed, "I remember. That's why I said it again." The laugh faded and Viktor just smiled at the memory.

The older man examined him, turning his head a little, "...Is that the smile you said at Worlds that I'd eventually earn?"

"Hah?" Viktor looked a bit more serious then, digging through his memory for a moment before finally recalling it, "Oh...right. Yeah...I guess so, maybe." He paused a little, looking at the floor, "I was horrible to you back then."
The elevator arrived, a subtle 'ding' resounding through the air as the doors opened. Mikhail stuck the toe of his damp shoe into it to prevent them from closing again, thankful that there were no other passengers, "You had your reasons."

"I couldn't really remember you that well." Viktor admitted, reaching up to scratch his cheek under the bangs, "I had...this nebulous memory of the idea of you, but...nothing concrete. No real events to think about."

"Even if you had straws to grasp for, I was away for too long anyway." Mikhail shrugged, feeling a bit naked without his coat suddenly, "Both of us were different people coming back into things by then."

"Still. I was unnecessarily cruel to you for a really long time."

"Hindsight is always 20/20. You had your reasons. I don't hold it against you. I made my own mistakes in how I handled it all, too."

Viktor lowered his eyes as he nodded, remembering the behind-his-back conversations the man had had with his then-fiancé. He looked out at where his left foot was propped up on the heel, posturing himself like he normally stood while idling on the ice, even if the pose felt uncomfortable without skates on; the lack of the elongated heel-blade made his hips feel uneven. He pulled his leg back and crossed it behind his right ankle instead, "Truth be told, I just didn't want to remember anything from before I got into the ISU. When you showed up, it reminded me of everything I had been dealing with since Four Continents, and by then, I was ready to just let myself forget it all. Yuri and I had just gone to Barcelona to tie the knot and...it was just a lot of emotions to handle at once. I didn't want anything bad to come up while so much good was happening, too."

"I understand."

"But I've learned over the last few months that you're really not all that different from how I remembered...or rather, conceptualized you from back when I was a kid." Viktor went on, bringing his eyes back up again to look at his Uncle squarely, though softly, "I feel...like I looked up to you back then. Weird as it sounds, I don't have a lot of memories of Konstantin from before you left. It's like he didn't really exist yet in my mind. I don't know if that makes any sense."

"Sure it does." Mikhail nodded, pulling his foot back to let the elevator go about its business. If no one else called for it, it would still be there behind the closed doors when he hit the button again anyway. He turned himself to face his nephew evenly, "You were my little silver shadow back then. You and that massive bear-dog."

Viktor huffed a laugh, "The one that Konstantin wanted to use to hunt wolves and boars, but ended up being too kind-natured for the task?"

"That dog only ever got aggressive when you were in trouble." Mikhail noted, recalling it fondly, "You once walked half-way across town by yourself, throwing clothing onto peoples' doorsteps as you went, dragging a rake behind you...and that dog followed you the whole way. Snapped at your father when he came and found you. Konstantin was so pissed, but Losi wouldn't let him near you. He was a good dog."

Viktor looked up curiously, "...I did all that? Why?"

"I dunno," Mikhail laughed, "I guess you were trying to come to my place."

"But the clothing...? And dragging a rake...?"
"You were three. Who knows what you were thinking. I just heard the barking and came running cuz I thought you were hurt." The elder was still half-chuckling at the memory of it, "I saw that my old house burned down sometime after I left, though."

"I didn't notice. I imagine a lot of things about that place changed while we were gone."

"Yeah." Mikhail nodded, the mirth fading, "...I'm going back for a few days once we get Yuratchka settled in St. Petersburg."

Viktor's pupils widened even as he narrowed his eyes, "...Why?"

"It's been a while since I paid my respects to my sister." He answered, lowering his head such that his own eyes were somewhat hidden behind the 'curtain' of bangs framing his face, and under the brim of his hat. He rubbed his nose on the back of a knuckle idly, trying not to let himself be overcome, but then lifted his head again.

Like before, he didn't hear his nephew's footsteps, and his eyes went wide as he felt the man's arms go around him from the side, "...Uh..."

Viktor held there in silence for a little while, speaking only once he felt the older man's stiff frame relax a little, "I'm sure she'd be happy about what you've done since the funeral. I am."

"...You are?"

"Mh." He answered, "...It took longer than it probably should've, but I am. I'm sorry for that."

"Don't be sorry." The elder said simply, patting Viktor's arm awkwardly where one was around his chest, "Things are better now. I'd do it all again if I knew it'd get to here."

The skater finally nodded and withdrew, crossing his arms loosely in front of himself, "You're coming to Cup of China?"

"Da." Mikhail answered, "Minako and I are making the big pilgrimage back to Japan. It just suits us that everything we need to do and all the places we need to go are in sequence going east. From here to St. Petersburg, then on to Shanghai and Sapporo, then south to Hasetsu...lines up pretty nicely."

Viktor nodded, but then grinned to himself, "Well, I'm going to go make-out with my husband for a little bit before I go to sleep. We'll see you in a week."

The older figure's face was a bit red to hear it, but he reached out and pat his nephew's shoulder, holding it briefly before letting him go again, "Until then."

"Spokushki, Dyadya Mimi*."

Mikhail stopped dead where he stood, not sure he heard correctly, watching Viktor move back off towards the hall he'd come from. The younger man hadn't looked back though, as though he hadn't realized what he'd said or what it meant, leaving the older figure to just blink a few times in utterly confused shock. Mikhail raised his right hand weakly, not quite waving but meaning to, and not feeling the tears roll down his face, "...Spokoynoy nochi**...Viktor..."

Chapter End Notes
*'G'night, Uncle Mimi.'
**'Goodnight.'

NOTE: No one's commented on the last couple chapters so I'm guessing no one's getting the Update emails. I'm not, and I've been looking for them. I sent an email to the admins to see what's going on but they say everything's working as it should. Work in progress... Please check back manually periodically. I update almost daily.
"Wow~!" Viktor chimed excitedly, "I haven't been here since the last World Championship was held in Shanghai! Seeing this place is always breathtaking though!"

It was evening along the Huangpu River, and the last light of the setting sun was shining on the face of the Shanghai Oriental Sports Center. The oblong structure was lined with a series of long, upside-down-pyramid-like structures, which rose higher around the short ends of the building, giving the venue something of a saddle-shape, similar to the Calgary Saddledome where Yuri had last competed. It was surrounded on all sides by calm water, with a long, wide bridge connecting it to the main roadway.

"The last time I was here..." Yuri started, adjusting his glasses as he stared up at the building, "...Was at that same World Championships. I think I came in 7th or something. That was right smack in the middle of your winning streak."

"Seventh isn't too bad." Viktor mused, coming around behind the younger skater, sliding his hand along Yuri's lower back, "You'll get Gold here this time. No one else on the roster has come close to your scores."

"Don't let me get back into that mindset again." Yuri warned cautiously, "I'd rather not lose my voice two events in a row."

The Russian just huffed a laugh before leaning against his husband's back, the hand that had been on Yuri's back now wrapping around to the front as the left came up around the younger man's chest. He settled his chin on the shorter figure's shoulder, "I won't. But there's nothing wrong with being at least a little confident in yourself. You just need to learn how to moderate it. This is a whole new area for you!"

"I don't know that it mixes all that well with my anxiety though...I'd rather let you be the one that's confident that I'll win. I'll just go out there and skate."

"Hm..." Viktor hummed to himself, "Well, we've already made the necessary changes to your program. Just do like you did before and acknowledge the judges before you do the audience. But, this is also the Asian circuit...the judges may like you better than the rest anyway just by default."

"Maybe..."

Mikhail had left Minako with Yurio once they'd returned to St. Petersburg. He gave the obligatory tour of all the places Yuri had been while he lived there, and even showed off the empty husk of Viktor's old house, but a few days into the week, duty was calling. He kissed his Lady Love's hand and cheek goodbye, pat the teen on the head, asked them to watch out for one another, and then piled into the cobalt-blue rental car alone to make the solemn journey north.

It was late afternoon by the time he'd gotten there. His phone lost reception and the internet signal was gone, so it was just a really fancy and expensive calculator by the time all was said and done. He still got the same queer looks from the few remaining townsfolk as he drove by in his Futuristic
Wonder Machine, but the looks turned to disinterested glances of ‘oh it's you’ once they saw his grey-haired head step out of the vehicle. By then, he’d had to swap his usual flatcap for the more robust winter hat he'd worn when he first went with Konstantin to the St. Petersburg Skate Club. The hat was old and musty, but the fur lining was still soft, and kept the winter wind at bay.

Snow was falling all around, obscuring most everything past 50 paces in any given direction. He could see the outline of the trees and the hill, with its ‘rancid little shack’ sitting to the right side of the path, and the family graveyard to the left.

*How can he stand to sleep so close to Tatiyana's grave…?*

[Didn't think you'd be back so soon, Mik.]

The skinny Russian turned at the sound of the voice, and spotted the hulking man-bear there behind him, coming up around the other side of his hybrid.

Konstantin held an axe over one shoulder and a bundle of firewood under the other, [Not after everything that happened the last two times you were here, anyway.]

[There's an American song,] Mikhail started, grabbing a small briefcase from the back seat before closing the door, and followed the Nikiforov patriarch towards the snow-buried path. [It goes...’country roads, take me home, to the place I belong.’ I don't think I'll ever completely get away from this place. Not now, at any rate.]

*Even in death, Tatiyana never escaped this place...*

They came to the fork in the road, and Mikhail took a step to the left as Konstantin paused behind him, wondering what he’d do. The younger figure could see the outline of his sister's grave marker through the fog and gently-falling white fluff, but he felt a strange hesitation to step towards it.

[You want to come inside first? It's a long trip even from St. Petersburg.]

Grey-green eyes went back around, but then closed as Mikhail shook his head, [I'll be there in a few minutes. Gonna say hi first.]

[Suit yourself.]

Snow crunched beneath the larger man’s feet as he started moving away, fading as the noise of a wooden door opened and closed. Mikhail waited until he was sure the man was gone before he started walking again, reaching up with a gloved hand to pull his scarf a bit higher over his face. It wasn't far to the bench in front of the angel statue denoting Tatiyana's plot. He cleared the freshly fallen snow off of it and sat down, grateful for his thick coat, protecting his skinny backside from the bone-numbing cold of the marble seat.

He kept his eyes low, staring at the white ground where his sister was hidden away forever. He pulled up the briefcase and opened it, withdrawing a tablet, and setting it on his lap as it turned on.

[Been a while, Tat.] He started, [I've been Viktor's shadow since I saw him. You'd be proud of him.]

The tablet's home-screen wallpaper was the 'Silver Russians Far From Home' photo that had been taken in Helsinki. There was still a subtle hint of insecurity on Viktor's face, but it was obvious he was doing his best. If you didn't know he was uncomfortable with the whole thing, you'd almost be unable to tell he had been at all.

[I should've given you all the details the last time we talked, but it was kind of a rough day for
everyone, so I kind of forgot. Sorry about that. Viktor got what you left him though, so that's good news.] He went on, opening up the first photo gallery, which included mostly photos he'd copied from ISU or RSF sources. [But...anyway, I found out kind of late that you were tracking Viktor on television. I imagine the signal out here was pretty bad though, especially in winter, so I brought a bunch of stuff to show you. I even have copies of his music. You'd like Aria.]

Fingers went across the touch-screen to pull up iTunes, and hit play on the aforementioned song. As the lyrics resonated through the graveyard, Mikhail swiped through the gallery. There were photos of every performance since the young Russian's first performance in the Junior ISU, poor-quality as some of them may have been. He pulled up a photo specifically of the Aria costume just before the song ended.

[He serenaded his future spouse with this song.] Mikhail explained, [Yuri is a skater just like Viktor is, and a World Champion now, too. I...] His words trailed as a photo of Duetto unexpectedly came up, [...Thought I had that in the Pairs folder, sorry. Spoilers.] Fingers went over Yuri's image, [I don't think I ever really knew what your opinion was on this sort of thing, but after everything you went through, and after losing Vik the way you did, I bet you'd just be happy if you knew he was happy...and I can safely report that he is. Vik had a few girlfriends in the past...even ran into one just this past weekend unexpectedly...but in the end, his soulmate turned out to be one of his own fellow competitors.] He recalled the few minutes Viktor had spent on that very bench after his father had tacitly accepted the skating, [I hope he at least told you a little bit about what's happened to him, since he had a few minutes alone with you last time he was here...but if he didn't, the long and short of it is that he flew off to Japan after winning his 5th straight World Championship Gold, to be Yuri's coach. By the next season's World Championships, they were married.]

A damp feeling on his eyes quickly turned icy cold in the breeze, and the silver Russian reached up to rub the frost away.

[I guess I got back just in time to get to be a part of all that...for myself, and for you.] Mikhail could tell that his efforts were futile, since as soon as he wiped the existing tears away, new ones came to replace them, so he just lowered his hand again to the side of the tablet, [Those two dorks eloped to Barcelona right before Worlds so no one got to hear their real wedding vows, so Yuri's family arranged a big to-do with a Japanese wedding ceremony and this big skating party. All these other skaters turned up for it, and I swear, half of Hasetsu tried to pack into the Ice Castle to see them and celebrate. The JSF LiveStreamed the whole thing, too...it was insanity. Viktor even did this big speech at one point, and I don't think there was a dry eye in the building...]

He pulled up a video of the event, finding Viktor's moment as a clip of its own and sliding through the timeline until he found the part he wanted.

"I can't even count how many times since that night that I've fallen in love with you, Yuri." Viktor's recording said, "Every single day, I wake up with you next to me, and I wonder how I'd ever been so lucky. Every time I see you skate, I'm in awe of how far you've come, and it makes me so incredibly happy to have had the honor and privilege of helping you get there. Every time you glance around at the world with that special look in your eyes, like you're looking for something...I realize just how much I want to protect and cherish you. Is it even really appropriate to use a word like 'love' to describe how I feel for you? I feel like there isn't a word strong enough to describe it. So, like you, I've settled to call this feeling 'love' for lack of knowing what else to do with it..."

Mikhail fastforwarded again.

"So for the rest of our lives, Yuri, and into the next...Stammi vicino."

[See?] He huffed through happy tears, [He came up with that whole thing on the fly, too. Yuri
couldn't even skate his program for a while after because he was a complete wreck from the whole thing. You'd have really liked him. He's a sweet kid...modest, sensible...pretty bad anxiety though. But he gives everything he has when he puts his mind to something...pushed himself so hard at Worlds that he fainted at the end of his Free Skate.]

A few clicks, and he brought up the video of Duetto from Four Continents. Watching it start, hearing the piano music and the slightly-more-subdued lyrics, Mikhail crossed his arms and watched Yuri skate. Quad Lutz, quad Flip...and then Viktor. The sound of the crowd losing its mind was enough to give Mikhail goosebumps.

[This was the last time they skated before the whole thing out here happened...] He explained, [I wish you'd have tried to call me or something... I could've helped you... What's a brother good for if not protecting his sister?]

He had to pause for a little while to collect himself, raising the scarf over his whole face as Duetto went on.

[Maybe nothing at all since it was me that stopped calling home.] He sighed, speaking the muffled words into the dark-blue wool, [I abandoned you the same way I abandoned Viktor... I can only hope I'm on the right path to eventually earn your forgiveness...] He rubbed his eyes on the scratchy material before he looked down at the tablet again, seeing Duetto come to an end. He pulled up the video list again and highlighted the one for The Ghost, but hesitated to play it. He pulled his hand back again and wedged both between his arms and sides, [Viktor called me Uncle Mimi again for the first time since before I left. It happened just the other day...completely blindsided me, too. It's been 8 months since I really got involved with the boys, and it took all that time for Vik to finally accept me. He'd been calling me just 'Uncle' the whole time, like he thought that if he avoided saying my name, he could avoid accepting and moving on from what happened here.]

The scarf fell away a little as the elder Russian pulled his hand back. He drew in a sharp breath as he composed himself.

[I haven't gotten to talk to him directly since he said it though, so I'm not sure that he meant it, or even if he remembers saying it at all...he was a bit drunk at the time. But, with any luck, he's an honest drunk like his husband. I'll be seeing them both in Shanghai in a few days for Yuri's next GP event. Viktor knows I'm here this week. I'll tell him you said hi. He's still a bit shy about dealing with this place, so he didn't give me any message to pass along...maybe one day he'll come back on his own.]

Instead of playing The Ghost, he went back to the towards the top of the list and played a file labeled 'Helsinki Worlds EX Gala Opening Ceremony.' He watched quietly as the huge group of skaters poured out onto the ice, with Viktor flocking close to Yuri the whole time. He smiled when the part came up that Viktor did his unexpected back-flip, recalling how even Yuri hadn't known he could do it until he saw it.

[Could you have ever imagined how good he'd get at this, when he first skated on that pond?] Mikhail wondered, looking past the statue to where he knew the small spit of ice lay just beyond the crest of the hill, [Five time consecutive World Champion, Russia's hero...people all over the world screaming his name. And here I am, following him around like he used to do to me, and yet, if I set foot on the ice, I'd be on my arse in a hot second.] He laughed at his own expense, [Thankfully, no one's asked me to get into the rink yet, so they don't know what an embarrassment I'd be.] He looked up at the face of the statue, [I bet you'd be a glorious skater if you'd had half a chance.] His throat started to hurt, so he lowered his face again as he held it over the scarf, [I still don't understand why you had to marry Konstantin. Of all the people in the world...why him? You could've done so
much… You left this place, went to school, saw the world...and yet came back and settled for this? Mikhail cast his arm around in an arc to put the hamlet on display through the frosty, fog-laden air, [I mean, I'm glad you did, cuz Viktor wouldn't exist if you hadn't...but still… For you, this was a massive step back. Was being on your own really so terrifying? You could've come to the Ukraine or Canada with me. We were practically tied at the hip as kids, I wouldn't have minded. Hell, maybe having you around would've prevented the kerfuffle with my ex...I wouldn't have been so desperate for company if I already had family around.]

He scrunched his shoulders indignantly, like he almost held the whole thing against the woman.

[Water under the bridge, I guess.] He paused, but then huffed a laugh and shook his head, [Between Vik and Yuri, and even their teenaged competition, Yuratchka...I ended up having three more kids. It's so depressing how you never got to meet a single one of them. And all this, after I spent half my life insisting I'd never be a father. If there is a God, this must be His revenge for how much of a terror I was in my younger years.]

Another pause...Mikhail stared at where his ankles crossed in the snow ahead of himself. He suddenly started laughing though, despite the tears rolling down his face anew.

[I have this lady-friend from Yuri's hometown...she's just like you used to be. Spirited, passionate, excitable... We messed around once, almost by accident, way back before Viktor and Yuri's wedding party, but not since. She got drunk and I got bored, and well, that's always a recipe for success, right? We were snowed in for a whole night...but I don't know if that's enough of an excuse.] He sighed, looking just past the Nikiforov house, down the ridge towards where his own house once stood, [I feel like she wants more from me, but I don't know... I feel like I'm too old to do all this again.] He looked to the tablet and saw that it was November 29th. [It's Yuri's birthday today...he's turning 25. I'm turning 59 in April. AHH I HATE BEING OLD...]

Another 30 minutes or so passed before he finally finished and allowed himself the warmth of the indoors. His eyes were red, but he knew Konstantin wouldn't mention it, which was a blessing in itself. The large, gruff man was at the small kitchen table, looming over a newspaper. Two page-turns later, and he was staring at a full-page insert in the sports section showing off Viktor's gold medal victory, announcing his return as Russia's hero. Slate blue eyes scanned it seriously.

Mikhail saw it as he passed behind, having swiped the Cognac and a glass from the kitchen while Konstantin wasn't looking. He'd shed the thick exterior shell of coats and sweaters and hats by then, looking like a wet cat by comparison. The collage of all of Viktor's different outfits, printed in color, were splendid to behold, and he pulled up the chair next to the man to explain each of them. Mikhail smiled to notice that the press hadn't even bothered editing out Viktor's ring this time around. A finger went down on the first outfit, [This was for his Short Program, called History Maker. He and Yuri sang it together as a duet.]

The younger man looked for any reaction, but Konstantin's face was like stone, so he shrugged and went on.

[This one's from his solo Exhibition, and this one from the Pair Exhibition he did with Yuri at the end as a surprise. This one was from his Free Skate or Long Program, called Evoke. You actually inspired it.]

[Heaven help me.] Konstantin rubbed the bridge of his many-times-broken-nose, [Why?]

[You beat his ass and he was mad about it?]

The larger figure just half-growled to himself, leaning back and crossing his arms.
[The program was about rage. He packed all his fury into 4 and a half minutes and had Yuri remind him of all the shit you’d done to them just to get himself all riled up again.]

[I thought we were even on the skating thing.]

Mikhail shrugged, [Viktor had already made plans for that show before I came back with him for that last visit. I imagine he was happy with it so he didn't make changes. I have video of it if you want to see.] He offered, waiting anxiously for a reply again. To his shock and surprise, the hulking figure nodded and waved his hand, like some King being forced to acknowledge a peasant. Mikhail got excited to show it off though, pulling up his tablet again and finding the footage he'd saved.

Konstantin's face didn't change as the video played, although his eyes did widen a little to see how much ice was kicked up during the sit-spin. Mikhail huffed a laugh as he noticed it.

[Viktor's rink-mate,] A finger went down onto the smaller insert in the newspaper, on the right side of the page, [Yuratchka Plisetsky, ended up tripping over the scar that move left behind when he went out after.] He explained, [Almost fell right over. I nearly choked on myself when I saw it. I'm his sponsor now, you know? The event staffers had to go patch the thing once he was done just so the next skater wouldn't end up on his ass on the ice. He was fuming about how he probably lost points and how they should've known to pack the gouge before he went on.]

[Maybe that's why I got that phone call.]

[Eh?] Mikhail stopped, [You got a call about Yura?]

[No, about Viktor. The person on the other end spoke shit for Russian so I only understood half of it.] He explained, reaching for the Cognac and pouring himself a drink with the glass Mikhail had meant to use for himself, and thus getting quite the look for it, [Asking something about Viktor's skating rink or another.]

[But why would anyon-] The silver man paused, recalling suddenly a brief glimpse at a fan-news-article that he'd seen while scrolling through Instagram the afternoon of the Free Skate. He unconsciously reached over and swiped the glass right out of Konstantin's hand before he could even drink it, and sipped at it himself idly as the whole memory percolated in his mind.

[I'm not going to get dragged into any of this shit, am I? I hung up without saying anything else, so I better not get more calls. If someone shows up here...]

Mikhail blinked, but then quickly drained the glass in a single swig, setting it down on the wooden table with a 'klink,' [If no one ever called you back, then probably not. There's these self-styled paparazzi in the skating fandom, and someone got photos of us from that time you showed me where Viktor's home rink was. They rightly guessed who you were, but I don't know that anything else came of it. I don't even know if Viktor saw the post. He didn't mention it.]

[Would he have?]

[With everything else that happened? Even if he didn't say so with words, I think I would've been able to tell.]

[Don't make me chase you down a rabbit hole, Mikhail. Out with it.] Konstantin grumbled, tacitly trying to show interest even if it bothered him to know.

Mikhail just shrugged and grabbed the glass bottle of caramel-colored liquor, pouring his own drink that time, [A former girlfriend of Viktor's from years ago turned up at the competition as a sports reporter. Viktor had a minor melt-down about i-]
[Girlfriend?]

[...Ex-girlfriend, but...yes?]

[So then why is he with that man if he's been with women before?]

The conversation got really tense suddenly.

Mikhail downed the second glass almost as quickly as the first, gingerly setting the cup down again, keeping his fingers around the lip as he looked on skeptically, [That man is Yuri Nikiforov now and he makes Viktor very happy. No woman could ever do for him what Yuri does, without forcing him to sacrifice everything he already knows and is passionate about.]

More grumbling. He clearly wasn't thinking about the skating aspect of it. The very concept of his son being intimate with another man made him cringe visibly.

[I know you hate it, but it is what it is.] Mikhail explained, leaning back in the chair and crossing his arms, bringing one ankle over his knee, [I could go on and on about why you should accept it and be happy for your kid, but I know it's a pointless conversation...so I won't. Suffice it to say, half the planet is on the edge of their seats right now because your son and his husband are top-ranked skaters going into competition against each other in a winner-takes-all sort of Royal Rumble. The entire Final is basically 'Nikiforov vs Nikiforov' and 4 other skaters of varying import.' If he married some lady-skater, no one would even care this much...Viktor probably wouldn't even be skating anymore. Yuri's the only reason he came back, and he's going to make everyone regret ever thinking he was retiring for good just because he took time off to play coach.]

Silence. A tacit sigh, and a look to the side. Mikhail waited.

Konstantin just took the glass back and poured another drink, [Let the world be in awe of the skating then. His marriage is not recognized in the eyes of God.]

[I don't think Viktor cares what God thinks.]

[He'll be judged one day.]

[...I don't think Viktor thinks that's true.]

[Then he's a fool.]

[An exceptionally talented fool who happens to be incapable of controlling who he falls in love with, just like the rest of us.] Mikhail deadpanned him, arms crossing a little tighter than before, [You can't scare him into heterosexuality anymore than you can convince Yuri to turn into a woman. Hell, the way those two are, they're only gay for each other anyway.] He let himself laugh at it, [Both of them had interested in the ladies before they found each other.]

Konstantin growled all the same, [That doesn't change what Viktor is now.]

Mikhail threw his arms up dramatically, [He's not hurting anyone!]

[It's an abomination.]

[If God doesn't want men to be with each other then why did he make it so guys can orgasm with butt-stuff, huh? If God only ever wanted men and women to have purely vanilla sex, solely for the purpose of reproduction, then He never would've made it possible for women to enjoy it to begin with, or for men to enjoy being penetrated themselves.]
Konstantin looked visibly uncomfortable, but his younger in-law wouldn't stop.

[But maybe you wouldn't know that because you've never felt it? Well, here's an anatomy lesson...there's this crazy little organ called a prostate that can only be meddled with through the back-door, and shockingly...if it gets meddled with, a man can get pleasure from it. Might even get off without anyone ever touching his cock. Did God put a fun-button in every man's derriere just to fuck with us? To tempt us into sinning?]

[That's enough.]

[No, think about it.] Mikhail insisted. [Your big bad Book of Rules came from an era in human history where people didn't know their asses from a hole in the ground. They thought epileptic seizures were demon possession and that by swinging a chicken around their heads, they could transfer sin out of themselves. Believe in God all you want, but accept that the Book was written by men and they might've gotten a few things wrong. If two dudes banging makes you uncomfortable then that's fine, but don't think you can get away with condemning your own son to eternal Hellfire because God made him fall in love with another man. You can't think God's in control and then say Viktor managed to usurp His will at the same time. Who has more power here? God or Viktor?]

[God, always.]

[Then this is God's doing as much as Viktor's skating talent is.]

[God would never do this. God made man and woman for the purpose of bringing souls into the world.]

[And if that were always true, why are humans one of the only animals in the world that don't have a rut? Why do humans not have a mating season, huh? Why are men not fighting each other in the streets for breeding rights over whole groups of women?] Mikhail pointed out. [People have sex for pleasure and bonding, at any time of the year, because the whole thing is much bigger than just reproduction. Women can't even get pregnant all the time.] His heart was racing and his body felt light, worried Konstantin would just wallop him to get him to shut his face-hole, but he couldn't help himself, [The real world is a lot more complicated and messy than The Word makes it sound like. If God made Viktor love another man while at the same time saying that it's a torment-worthy offense, then God created Viktor for the sole purpose of burning him forever. Why would He give such a man such incredible talent and genius, only to turn His radiant light into a shower of burning fire in the end?]

The inquiry was making Konstantin shut down. Mikhail could see it, so he relented, sighed, and shook his head, then reached back for his tablet, [I'll digress. Let me show you photos from Viktor's shows. I even promise not to show you anything you might find objectionable. Viktor's more than just a sinner.]

The man-bear looked up, grit his teeth, remembered what he'd said the last time he saw his son, and grudgingly allowed the photo montage to go on display. It was a meager relief from the previous topic.

The album chosen first was from Worlds, showing Viktor's 'On Love: Philia' show, and then 'Winter's Wish.' All seemed well and good until the last few shots in the gallery. Konstantin rubbed his eyes, as though the sight of Viktor sitting in Yuri's kiss and cry was painful to behold.

[Oh bah.] Mikhail scolded, [This is actually kinda interesting, if you look at it from just a coach-and-student perspective...you can actually see the moment where Viktor realized Yuri swiped the Gold right out of his hands…] He was flipping through the last few images, still-frames from a video it
seemed, with the skater's face changing from excited to suddenly being in shocked disbelief. He knew Konstantin wasn't looking anymore though, so he kept flipping through to look at the full set on his own, including the big 'finale.'

Slate-blue eyes peeked open just in time to get a full visual of Viktor hoisting Yuri over his lap and kissing him, the big bouquet of flowers falling from Yuri's grasp. The patriarch got up so quickly from his chair that he hit the table with his legs, and Mikhail had to swiftly grab his tablet (and the alcohol) before it went flying, a similar look on his face to Viktor's when Yurio had tried kicking him and Yuri out of the kiss and cry at Rostelecom.

[Nothing objectionable huh?]  
[You weren't even looking anymore!]  
[You're a shit.]  

Mikhail watched the older man leave the 'room,' but then waved sarcastically, [And I'm here all night!]
Chapter 144

Chapter Notes

Ch143 was substantially expanded-on the morning after I posted it. Nothing really changed- per se, but the word-count nearly doubled, so I'd recommend going back and re-reading everything after Viktor and Yuri's part before moving on, or at least making sure you've read the one that's posted currently

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FOURTY FOUR

"Okay, ready?"

"Ready."

"PULL."

The path was clear; all the furniture had been moved from one side of the Master Bedroom suite to the other, the lamps had been unplugged and relocated, and the curtains pulled open. The window was nearly full-length from floor to ceiling, save a foot-high lip at the bottom where a short section of it could be lifted open, a screen behind it to keep the bugs and birds out.

The Queen-size bed was harder to move than it should've been. Slowly but surely though, it started to skid across the carpet, pulling away from the small cubby it had been designed to fit into.

They were on one of the upper floors of the Sheraton Shanghai Hotel & Residence, the official event hotel for the Lexus Cup of China.

"Okay, that should be enough. Get ready to turn it." Viktor said, moving around his partner towards the sleek black headboard. The pillows had been piled up into the middle of the bed so they wouldn't fall off, and the overhanging ends of the big cover-sheets were hauled up as well to avoid them getting pinched during the move.

Yuri followed and took his place on one corner of the headboard, nodding to the Russian before pushing, so the whole thing would turn around, pointing the foot-end of it towards the windows. That done, it was a straight-shot to the end of the room, and they pushed until they felt the mattress come up on the window sill. When the whole thing finally stopped moving, they slumped against where they'd had their backs against the wooden frame and slid to the floor in a heap.

"No bed has any right being this heavy." Yuri said, rubbing one shoulder, "It should've only taken one of us to move it."

"The view will be worth it." Viktor added, pushing to stand and then offering his hand to hoist his husband up to his feet again.

They each moved around to opposite sides and started resetting all the blankets and sheets, piling most of the pillows at the headboard like before, but tossing two or three towards the other end, and then flopped on top of the whole thing. Shoulder to shoulder, lying on their stomachs, they looked out through their high-rise hotel room windows and looked out over Shanghai.
The skyline at evenfall was a breathtaking sight, with all the lights of the city starting to come into full display. Yuri's eyes were wide with excitement and awe at the whole thing. He glanced back only momentarily as Viktor rolled off the edge of the bed again to go rummage around in their luggage.

It took a few minutes, and Yuri was starting to get curious as to what he'd gone looking for, so he twisted where he was lying and moved to look past the headboard. Just as he was going to peek his eyes past the black wood fixture though, Viktor came back around the side and sat half-cross-legged on the edge of the bed.

"What were you looking for...? Took you a while to find it, whatever it was." The younger skater commented, looking at the Russian's hands. He didn't get a good look though before Viktor startled him upright again though, and he looked at the man's face instead.

"The Men's Short Program starts Friday afternoon, so it's my sacred duty as your coach to motivate you as much as I can." Viktor answered, revealing a shoe-box, and earning a quirked brow from his young husband.

"...What did you bring that would motivate me?"

Pulling the lid off, the silver Russian withdrew a smaller box from within; a square, black-velvet case about 4in across. Yuri recognized it immediately, but said nothing as Viktor pried the lid open. A few more seconds, and Yuri was looking at the Silver medal he'd earned at the previous year's Grand Prix Final. Just like that night, after the Exhibition, but just before the Banquet, Viktor held up the medal by the lanyard and let it be bathed in the light of dusk, and just like back then, the Silver suddenly shone like molten sunlight.

"You've won Gold at every event you've gone to since winning this." Viktor explained, moving to grasp the lanyard with both hands and then spreading the material apart, laying it around Yuri's neck gently, dousing it in shadow enough that the Silver gleamed its normal shade again, "And you'll win Gold here, too, and then again at the Final. I said so last year and I'm more sure of it now than ever."

"I still have to beat you and last year's winner..." Yuri pointed out, fingering the metal where it hung low on his chest, "Team Russia isn't exactly holding punches."

Viktor just smiled, "Team Japan isn't a push-over either."

"You practically decided your own SP score...and Yurio beat me there, too..."

"At one event." The Russian corrected, "And you still have him beat in the Free Skate, which is where it really counts." He reached his right hand out and gently touched it to his husband's face, feeling as Yuri leaned his cheek into his palm, "I know it probably makes you anxious to think about it, but you and I are actually fairly evenly matched. You can do all the same jumps that I can-"

"I can't do the quad Axel."

"...That I can do for competition." Viktor amended, stroking his thumb across pale skin, "The only person here who even might give you a challenge is Otabek Altin, and I only say that because he's physically won medals before. You still tower over his best scores though."

"Ota...bek..." Yuri echoed, "Oh, he's the one that Yurio became friends with last year. He was at the wedding party, too. He was such a wall-flower that I hardly remembered him..."

Viktor nodded, "He doesn't say a whole lot and he mostly keeps to himself. It's hard for me to read him, but he seems to get on with Yurio pretty well. I entirely forget where they said they'd met
"Yurio will be upset that he isn't competing at the same events as Otabek until the Final, if they both make it."

"He'll be upset that he isn't here, this weekend." The Russian corrected, "It was one thing to miss an event when he had no one else to go for, but Minako-sensei and Uncle Mimi are coming here for your sake, so Yurio will be peeved he isn't tagging along."

"...Uncle Mimi?"

"Yeah." Viktor looked across at his husband curiously, "What?"

"Does Mikhail know you're calling him that behind his back now...?"

"Behind his back?" He huffed, then leaned down so his elbows were on his knees, "That's what I used to call him, as a kid. I said it to him back in Bordeaux."

Yuri sighed, but then leaned down onto his elbows too, mimicking his partner, "I bet he was really happy with that, then."

"I actually don't remember how he reacted! I was still pretty tipsy." The Russian admitted with a nervous laugh.

"Viktor!"

"YOU HAVE TO LET ME COME WITH YOU." Yurio begged, clinging to Minako's back as she wandered through a small open-all-night grocery store, trying to figure out what all the Cyrillic writing on the cans said, "YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND."

"Off."

"OTABEK IS GONNA BE THERE AND I GOTTA GO. YOU'RE ALREADY GONNA BE THERE TO WATCH KATSUDON SKATE SO I HAVE NO EXCUSE FOR MISSING IT. HE'S GONNA ASK WHY I'M NOT THERE WHEN HE SEES YOU GUYS."

"We already booked the flight though." She explained, returning the can and grabbing the one in the next section, "I don't think we'd be able to get another seat on the same plane."

"PUT ME INTO A CARRY-ON BAG, I DON'T CARE, JUST LET ME COOMMMEEE."

She deadpanned the teen where he clung to her, "It's not really up to me. I didn't buy the tickets."

"WELL ASK MIKHAIL WHEN HE GETS BACK."

"He's not getting back until the day before we fly out of here." Minako pointed out, "And by then it'll really be impossible."

Yurio finally let go and kicked his shoe against the floor in frustration, growling quietly to himself.
The ballerina just stared at him, quirking a brow, trying not to let his sulking reel her into pitying him, "Didn't you manage to get to Hasetsu by yourself that first time?"

"My grandpa bought that ticket on my behalf, and I gave him the money to do it." The blonde grumbled, "But he's been giving me grief about my spending habits since last year. I..." He turned his head a little and looked away, his face mostly obscured by his hoodie and a few strands of pale hair, "...I had to tell him I got dropped from the team after Mikhail came and did the sponsorship thing. He was really suspicious about it because of how everyone was acting."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

Yurio shook his head, "It's fine now, but he won't let me spend anything that isn't necessary...and he won't think this is." He looked the woman squarely and lunged a step closer, the wet, wide-eyed 'what great fashion' look coming across his face, "SO YOU HAVE TO HELP ME OUT."

She turned away from him and started pushing the cart down the aisle, "Like I said, it's not really up to me, and Mikhail isn't going to be back until it's basically too late."

"Isn't there some way you can message him!?"

"You could try if you wanted, it's not like you don't have his number." Minako pointed out, "The question is whether he'll get the texts before he starts to head back. With the reception nonexistent that far outside the city, odds are that he'll just get a flood of new messages as soon as he drives by the first cell-tower near St. Petersburg, but by then, he still won't be able to do anything about it."

Yurio practically melted, turning into a puddle on the store's tile floor, "...I can't..."

The older woman finally stopped and looked back at where he was lying in a catatonic state. She crossed her arms and sighed loudly before moving towards him, picking him up off the floor, and then walking back to place him in the basket of her cart. She held to the handle-bar on the front of it, but then slouched forward onto her elbows, seeing the growing melancholy on his face.

Another loud sigh, and she lowered her head, "I have a way of getting hold of Mikhail in case of an emergency."

Yurio was on his knees to scramble forward, "REALLY!?"

She wagged a finger at him, "Yes, but I swear to God, if I make this call, you owe me big time."

"Anything!"

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.

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Being so far from any major light-pollution, seeing the auroras was easy that far north. It was even easier when there was a roof to get up onto, and it was slanted just enough to lie down on without sliding right off of it.

Though maybe it was because of the small window that had been installed in the middle of the thing, and it sported a non-slanted mini-roof over it that could be sat on. It only stuck out about two feet from the rest of the roof, but it was enough that with a leg on either side of it, it served as a decent seat.
Having been that way for the better part of an hour, the aged Russian pushed to stand, looking up at the colored sky like the worst ninja sentry in the history of ninja sentries. He stretched one leg and then the other, and then hopped backwards to sit against the apex of the roof, crossing his ankles in front of him where the snow had been brushed away.

The snowstorm had abated the morning after his arrival, and the skies had cleared up rather nicely.

Talking to the grave marker had been rather cathartic, even for one such as himself. It felt like talking to a mute bar-tender. Having someone to brag about his nephew's accomplishments to, that wasn't already aware of them, was something he entirely lacked otherwise, and Konstantin wasn't exactly gushing with enthusiasm, despite his best efforts.

There was a quiet click on the other side of the house, and Mikhail turned his head, seeing light pouring out through the open door, bathing the freshly fallen snow in a faint yellow glow.

[Oi.]

[What?]

[Phone.]

[Eh?] Grey-green eyes narrowed skeptically, [...For me?]

[No, for the other idiot sitting on my roof.] Konstantin said gruffly, stepping out just enough to get his eyes past the rim of the house to see his younger companion gawking back at him, [Yes, for you. It's probably one of those damn media people again...it's some woman who doesn't speak any Russian, but is trying anyway and failing miserably at it.]

[...Some...woman?] Mikhail echoed. His heart immediately sank, and he scrambled to get off the cottage as quickly as possible...only to slip and end up going down backwards instead. He flailed as he saw himself sliding right towards Konstantin, but...the big man just side-stepped with a really unamused look on his face and watched the younger Russian land ass-first on the cleared-off walkway he'd been standing in. Adding insult to injury, the snow Mikhail had pushed loose fell down after him, hitting him with a pift and a paft as they landed all around.

Mikhail was stiff where he'd tanked, but then fell further onto his back and groaned loudly. His hat fell off as he splayed out painfully, his eyes soon turning to see Konstantin deadpanning him severely, holding a lit candle in one hand, [...You saw me sliding. Why didn't you try to catch me?]

[Why didn't you try to not fall off the damn house?] The older figure said flatly, then pointed inside, [Phone.]

The skinny old-timer pushed slowly, painfully to standing, and hobbled in through the door with a hand on his lower back. Konstantin scooped up the forgotten hat and threw it, snow-covered and all, at the back of the man's silver-grey head, hitting him with a light but sloshy whop. Mikhail scrambled to gather his senses, but ignored the hat as it peeled off his head and hit the floor, and went reaching for the phone receiver, pulling it quickly up, "Minako?"

"...Are you okay? You sound like you're hurt."

"I fell off a roof. What happened? What's the emergency?"

"You fell off a roof!? Are you okay...?"

The Russian was starting to realize what was going on, and he slouched where he stood, "This isn't...
an emergency is it?"

"Well, depending on who you ask...it's nothing, or it the worst possible thing." She answered meekly.

Mikhail looked around the room and gauged the length of the curly phone cable, then limped over to a nearby reclining chair, leaning over the arm-rest to keep the phone from coming off the wall where it was pulled to the limits of its range, "...What does Yuratchka want?"

"A plane ticket. To Shanghai."

*Facepalm.*
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FOURTY FIVE

Bags were thrown into the back of the hybrid early the next afternoon...but not by the man who'd arrived there. He was already in the front seat, white-knuckling the steering wheel as Konstantin closed the door behind him.

[Don't think I've ever seen you get hurt so bad from falling off the roof before, Mik.] The huge man said through the open driver's side window, one arm resting on the roof of the vehicle as he leaned down to the door.

[I'm not 20 anymore.] The silver Russian grumbled, [I should've known better.]

[Don't get into trouble before your phone starts to work again. No one will know you're stuck out there.]

[I'll be fine.]

Konstantin examined him closely, but then shrugged and stood upright, [Stick to the main road and drive slow. I'd rather not have to plant you by your sister so soon after putting her there in the first place.]

That got Mikhail to raise his head, turning as well as he could to look at the Nikiforov patriarch. He huffed a whined laugh, [I escaped this place once before...I won't let you drag me back here even if I die. I'll haunt you if you do.]

[You belong here just like the rest.]

The silver Russian got a little quiet after that, but shook his head, [Doesn't Viktor belong here too then?]

There was an awkward pause, but just as Konstantin was about to go into his spiel, Mikhail stuck his hand out the window and held it up to stop him.

[Never mind! I'm going now.]

The azure-colored vehicle started backing down the dirt road, and Konstantin watched it go quietly, crossing his arms lazily. He could see where every rock and crevice along the way was sending shooting pain up the man's spine. He could only hope it would be better once the roads were properly paved a few miles outside of town.

_You Rozovskys are all so fragile. It's a wonder you made it this far._

The first Official Practice day had finally come. Many skaters wouldn't be arriving until later that same day though, or even the _following_ day, which meant the ice was sparsely populated. Other than Yuri, at least for Men's Singles, there were only three other competitors already present.
Czech Republic's Emil Nekola

Republic of Korea's Seung-gil Lee.

And Kazakhstan's Otabek Altin.

Each one had already performed at one other event, so like Yuri, Cup of China was their last shot for a spot at the Final. However, unlike Yuri, none but Otabek had taken Gold so far that season.

Actual scores aside...rank is all that matters when it comes to getting to Detroit... Yuri thought to himself, sipping at his water-bottle as he leaned on the rink wall, watching the other skaters practice. His eyes were on Otabek though; stoic and on his own as usual. He bit down lightly on the plastic nub, Everyone's so focused on me getting Gold this weekend so the Final is super-charged for competing against Viktor...but all I can think of is whether or not I can even pull it off. Expectations are really high now...

His brow furrowed into a worried expression, and he hardly noticed how he was drifting away from the wall until he felt a tug on the back of his practice shirt, pulling him back again. He didn't make it far though, and as he turned his head to see what had happened, he saw Viktor hanging off the top of the wall, one arm out where his hand was pinched to the back of Yuri's outfit, "...What are you doing?"

"Pulling you back before you get run over." The Russian explained, "But you got too far out and now I'm stuck." He laughed at himself, "Help me get upright again?"

Yuri shook his head and huffed a laugh, turning around to push the man back to his own side of the wall and onto his feet. He set the water-bottle down next to his glasses and then casually crossed his arms in front of himself, looking down to touch the gold on his ring finger.

"You haven't actually practiced anything yet." Viktor went on, "Why not?"

Hazel eyes went back over the ice, "Sizing up the competition. Everyone here today is getting extra time on the ice since they arrived early like we did...but they've all gotten really good since the last time I saw any of them compete... Especially Otabek."

"Getting nervous already? It's still two days to the Short Program." Viktor mused, resting his cheek in the palm of his hand where he'd propped himself up on his elbow, "Otabek didn't medal at last year's Final, and he only took Bronze at Four Continents." He said, trying to instill some semblance of confidence into his athlete, "He'll probably be at the GP Final, but if last year's roster is any indication...even a scrub who tied for the last available slot can still get on the podium at the end. Lest you forget, you bumped off Michelle Crispino that time, and he scored more than 20 points higher than you at Sochi."

Yuri turned his head and gave the man a look, "'Tied for the last spot'...Makes it sound horrible."

"You still made it, and that's all that matters. Besides, anyone who wins Gold at any of their GP Series events is basically guaranteed a spot at the Final, so you won't have to stress about it like at Rostelecom before." Viktor explained, "You'd have to come in dead last here to lose your place, so you can take it easy."

"Everyone's expecting me to take Gold here too though. If I don't, it'll take the wind out of everyone's sails that we both be on a winning streak going into the Final."

The Russian reached forward and took Yuri's anxious hands into his own, "Yuri...what everyone
else expects is irrelevant. There's no guarantee I'll take Gold at NHK anyway. Anything could happen between now and then. Maybe I'll take Silver on purpose just to spite them."

"That doesn't sound like something you're capable of." The younger skater huffed, "You'll win Gold or you'll die trying."

"Hm, maybe." Viktor agreed. He shrugged and then pulled Yuri's hands forward so he'd slide closer, then let him go to snake his arms around the man's lower back, nosing the front of Yuri's neck as he felt the skater's hands go over his shoulders, "The point is...you can do whatever you want. Go for Gold, or go for something else...it's up to you."

"Shouldn't you be encouraging me to get Gold anyway?" Yuri wondered, folding his right arm around so he could play with the silver hair, "It's not like you to say that I can or should settle for less."

"Cup of China is where you kind of had an epic meltdown before. I want you to be able to sleep normally." The Russian said simply.

"To be fair..." The skater pulled back a little to look into slate-blue eyes, "That was your fault." He could feel Viktor twitch as he said it, so he pulled back a little and put a thumb on his partner's chin, "So...don't say you'll leave me if I don't get on the podium and everything should be fine."

"You should definitely go for Gold then."

"Only if you do the same at NHK."

Viktor huffed a laugh and winked, "As if you had to convince me."

"As your coach, it's my sacred duty to make sure you do your best." Yuri said pointedly, holding up a finger for emphasis, "If I sense even the slightest hesitation, I'll have to scold you."

The Russian just gaped at him a little, surprised to have his own words thrown back at him so soon. His surprised look turned to a warm smile again though, and his cheeks flushed a little, "I really should keep a log of all the times you make me fall in love with you. It just happened again."

The younger skater grinned in his usual way, but then tilted his head and moved in closer, kissing his husband fondly, "Well...I should probably go out there and pretend I know how to skate for a little while."

"Probably." Viktor agreed, "Oh, before you take off...we were so busy with registration yesterday that we didn't even do anything for your birthday. Do you want anything?"

"Nothing that immediately comes to mind..." Yuri sighed, "With everything that happened in Bordeaux, I entirely forgot about it."

"Hmm..." The Russian was already starting to think of things, "I'll have to do something to get you to forget about Bordeaux then." Arms immediately started to descend from where they'd been parked just around the younger man's lower back. They went palms-down on a double-handful of SkaterButt before Yuri flailed from the embarrassment and kicked away from the rink wall, his face as red as Viktor had ever seen. He just laughed and waved as his athlete went to go do his late-start practice.

The other skaters hadn't seen what happened, so they all gawked at Yuri curiously as he went by to find a spot on the ice.
Four hours of driving, three rest stops, 14 texts, 37 emails, and 8 missed calls later...Mikhail finally got back to St. Petersburg. Sitting in the car around the block from Yurio's original apartment, he thumbed at his phone and sent the message that he'd finally arrived.

[Hey, I'm in the parking lot. We can head straight to Moscow if you want.]

[...]

[...]

[...]

THUD.

"MIKHAIL."

The aged Russian nearly had a coronary from the shock, hit flat-cap knocked clear off his head after jerking from the surprise. His phone went to the floor in the passenger-side foot-well, but he ignored it in favor of turning the other way to deadpan a certain blonde teenager who was glued to the driver's side door like a home-aquarium sucker-fish.

"Yuri."

"YOU GOTTA TAKE ME TO SHANGHAI."

The flat look continued, even as the older man hit the button on the center console to lower the window a crack, just enough to get his eyes over the edge of it to stare at the teen unobstructed, "Why didn't you ask to come at the start of the season? You should've known where your friend was competing way back when event assignments had been made."

"I didn't know you'd be going!"

The deadpan morphed as one eyebrow rose up a little, "...You didn't know I'd be going." He repeated, "How? Yuri and Viktor are going, Minako's going...naturally that would mean..."

"Katsudon is competing, so duh Viktor and Okukawa would be going!" Yurio explained, trying to pull the door open but finding that it was still locked, so he abandoned it, clinging to the window again instead, "But I already asked Viktor to let me fly with him once and he turned me down, plus I can't just ask to tag along with your girlfriend!"

"But it's okay to ask me...?"

The doors unlocked, and when Yurio heard the click, he raced to pull the panel open as the silver man within slowly unbuckled the seatbelt, "You're different! You're a sponsor so you roll differently!"

Mikhail just huffed, "I'm your sponsor, not a sponsor, but it's the ISU pays your way...to events you're going to."

"I can pay for my ticket, I just need someone to buy it for me!"
"Still doesn't answer why you didn't mention it before."

Yurio grit his teeth, "I...didn't want to jump to conclusions and assume I was going to make it to the Final. If I didn't make it, I was going to stay here and focus on Russian Nationals with the rest of the wash-outs."

Mikhail turned slowly, setting one foot on the ground at a time, and then using the door frame and the back of his seat to push up to standing. He grit his teeth and tried to ignore the searing pain running down his spine, but it just winded him and he had a hard time standing upright again.

The teen glanced up at him, curiously at first but then with a worried look on his face, "...Are you okay?"

"Getting old sucks." The elder said between breaths, "I don't recommend it."

"I heard you fell off a roof, but..." Yurio started, his attention suddenly B-lined by the feeling of something slipping over his backside. He turned quickly and spotted Minako there, holding her phone up.

"You ran off so fast that you forgot to give this back to me on the way out." She said, waggling the device at him before putting it into her own back pocket, "Would've been nice to know about the message I'd been sent before you vanished."

"Sorry, I just..."

"...Want to go to Cup of China, we know." Mikhail finished for him, still holding to the car to keep himself from dropping.

Minako gave the man a worried look, seeing how he struggled, "Sheesh, you must've really taken a tumble if you're still like this."

"It'll be fine...I just need a minute..."

The ballerina had seen her fair share of sport-related injuries in her hay-day, so the sight of agony in the absence of blood was no stranger to her. She stepped quietly closer and started to press her fingers against the Russian's back, feeling through his heavy coat, one bone at a time. A blinding shot of pain made the man's legs give out as she felt around the lower part of his mid back, but she and Yurio quickly caught him.

"How did you land?"

"R-Right on my ass." He answered, wincing as he sat back into the driver's seat, "Like a damned idiot..."

"Sitting upright?"

"D-Da."

"Hm."

"What is it?" Yurio asked, his own back starting to hurt a little from the sight of the older man's pain, "What happened?"

"I thought one of the boys would get hurt before any of us did." She answered, "Lots of skaters are forced into early retirement after back injuries, even when they're careful...but in your case..."
Grey-green eyes looked up, dreading to hear it.

"...You're a bit old for quad jumps, so falling off a roof is probably the only thing you could've done to hurt yourself, short of having really bad bones in the first place." She went on.

"Sounds...like I'm not going to China then."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FOURTY SIX

After a brief side-trip to drop off skates and other related equipment in the hotel room, the rest of the day was spent sight-seeing. A little had already been done while scouting the competition venue, but largely, Shanghai had been left untouched.

"If we start at The Bund, we can see a whole bunch of other things." Viktor explained, trying his best to look at a map he'd found at the hotel while he and Yuri were crammed like sardines into the subway, "The east side of the river has photo-ops like the Oriental Pearl TV Tower and the Financial Building, but if you're not interested in just looking at stuff, we could stick to the west side of the river and go to the Shanghai Museum and Yuyuan Garden." He tilted back a little so he could look down and get a better view of his partner, "The Nanjing Road is there, too, so maybe you'll find a souvenir you like?"

"I'm so claustrophobic right now." Yuri mumbled, squashed right up against the Russian by the pressing crowd. That in itself didn't bother him whatsoever...but feeling some other body behind him did. It was all he could do to avoid panicking in the swarm of other people.

He'd held a map in his hands as well, and had meant to look at it while they decided where they were going to go, but as people clambered on board the train alongside them, it quickly became clear that he would have no such luck. Viktor had to wrangle his husband out of the mass of business-casual flesh, one arm tight around his torso to keep the shorter figure from being dragged away like a log in a tsunami. After that, Yuri just turned and buried himself into the Russian's long-coat, arms around his sides, trying to hold the map up behind the man's shoulder in a desperate bid to avoid eye-contact with whoever was standing in front of him.

"Keep calm and stammi vicino." Viktor suggested, gently rubbing the younger man's back a little to try and calm his nerves. He turned his face inward to kiss his partner's neck a little, "We'll take a taxi back after this, okay?"

He could feel Yuri's fingers clamp down a little harder where they gripped at his coat, the younger skater turning his own face to bury it against a shoulder anxiously. Slate-blue eyes moved up to scan the carriage, trying to see if there was anywhere at all where there was a little more space, but found nothing. In fact, all he found were dozens of brown eyes looking back at him, only to quickly turn away when spotted. The Russian blinked in confusion.

"People are staring at us." He whispered quietly, "I don't think they're skating fans though...no one's freaking out like they normally do."

"They're not staring at us." Yuri corrected, "They're staring at you."

"Hah? Why just me?"

The shorter figure glanced up at him, "How many other nearly-6-foot-tall silver-haired Russians do you see standing around?"

"Oh." Viktor deadpanned, smiling anyway though, "I guess I do kind of stick out more than normal~!

"Only 'kind of'?' Yuri echoed, hazarding a glance around, and seeing the waves of black-haired heads all around, "...Jeeze, I really blend in with this crowd... If I got dislodged, you'd probably lose
"Don't kid yourself." The Russian huffed, "I'd recognize you even if you had your head covered."

"Eh? How?"

"Only you carry yourself like you do. The way you walk, even the way you look around...only you do it that way." Viktor explained, raising up the map again behind Yuri's shoulder as he continued to hold to the man's back with the other arm, "There's no one else in the world like you, Yuri."

The train was starting to slow for the next station, and the young skater held on a little tighter as Viktor's map-holding hand folded the paper away to reach for one of the poles bolted to the interior walls. The flood of people inside the car quickly evacuated as the doors opened, only to be replaced just as quickly with a new wave, each one scrambling to claim their single-square-foot of real-estate. And just like that, the train started picking up speed again.

When they were at cruising-velocity, Viktor let go of the post, and moved that arm to wrap around his partner's shoulders, "You got really quiet all of a sudden."

Hazel eyes blinked, "Oh...I..." Yuri started, turning his head around on Viktor's shoulder to look around the cabin again briefly, "I guess I've just been around people like you too much lately. Being in Europe and Canada, everyone looks so different and unique...even me. But as soon as we got here to China, I had this couple of hours where it felt like everyone looked exactly the same...even me. I was reminded of it just now, and it made me a little sad, that's all."

Viktor pulled his head up and looked evenly at his partner, the pair of them so close that he could see his own reflection in the man's glasses. He had a somewhat serious look on his face, which starkly contrasted his usual happy-aloof demeanor, "You're doing it again.

"Eh?" Yuri squeaked in surprise, "D-Doing what again!?"

"Doubting yourself."

"...Am I?" He turned his eyes to look away.

"Maybe it's because of Skate Canada, or maybe it's just how you've always been...but I notice that when you get anxious about a competition, it's not enough that you mess up your jumps." Viktor explained, pressing his forehead and the bridge of his nose against the side of his husband's head, just above his ear, "You lose sight of yourself. You forget everything you've learned and ignore your own accomplishments."

"Am I really that bad...?"

"You told me at the wedding party that your heart, mind, and soul are divided among the four great loves. That Agape sometimes gives way to Eros, but sitting at the back of it all, never quite gone but never quite present either, was Philia. It waits and watches, clinging to a view of the past that's no longer reconcilable. The part that constantly questions what I see in you, why I chose you over everyone else...the part that makes you see yourself as unworthy." The Russian went on.

To Yuri, the sound of his voice was all he could hear. The train, the tracks, the sound of people bumping up against each other, phone screens being tapped on, some kid in the back making weird noises like he couldn't quite figure out if he was hurt or not...it all faded into the background, almost inaudible altogether.
"When you let it take over, you forget what you're capable of." Viktor continued, "You forget things, like skating, that are second-nature to you. You let yourself be absorbed into the collective and try to disappear, to be invisible, like you feel you always have been." He nudged his shoulder a little to get the skater to look at him again, and when slate met hazel, he leaned forward to kiss the man for a few moments. When he stopped, he barely pulled back enough to speak, eyes half-closed as he looked on, "You may think that the world sees you as less than nothing sometimes, but to me, you are the world. You're my partner, my lover, my best friend, my husband..."

Yuri's face went red again, but it just served to draw a smile on the Russian's face.

"But beyond all that...you're Japan's best figure skater and you've won Gold at your last 3 straight events, 4 if you let yourself count Nationals.. You know you're good enough, so keep going. It's okay to let yourself be anxious, just don't let it cripple you. Let me be the one to bear the weight of that worry."

"V-Viktor..."

"You're a pork cutlet fatale that seduces men...a mistake here and there won't be enough for you to lose your charm. No one's perfect all the time anyway...if we were, the world would be pretty boring, don't you think?" He went on, moving his hand away again to reach for the post, seeing the signal that the next station was a few seconds away.

Yuri held a little tighter again, looking around nervously as he felt the carriage starting to slow beneath them. The bustle of people getting ready to disembark was enough to silence them both for a moment, giving the young Asian skater a reprieve to gather his thoughts.

"I'm so nervous about whether or not I can win Gold this weekend that I can't even let myself enjoy going out on a date with Viktor. I'm too focused on all my doubts... If I can't figure out how to let them go, I'll crash and burn like JJ did last year, just like how I did at Sochi the year before..."

The passengers that were leaving had all finally gotten off the train, and the new arrivals were starting to pour in, surrounding them on all sides again.

"But I don't even know why I'm so worried. I have the best coach and choreographer in the world, and I don't skate any worse than before just because others around me have gotten better."

The sliding doors closed again, and the train started moving, lurching everyone back a little until the speed evened out.

"You don't look the same as all these other people." Viktor's voice came back, "Black hair, brown eyes...they're all just trying to look like you. But they'll never be able to come close to it." He nosed the raven hair in front of him affectionately, "You're the tastiest pork cutlet bowl there is, and you're mine, whether you're wearing gold, silver, bronze, or nothing at all."

Sheremetyevo International Airport was as busy as ever, even for late-evening. Minako looked around the terminal for the self-check-in kiosk, but finding the matching Cyrillic was hard for her untrained eyes.

"What are you looking for?" Yurio asked, standing quietly by her with his leopard-print carry-bag at the end of his reach, a black, studded backpack over his shoulders.

"I can't tell which of the kiosks are the ones I'm supposed to get our tickets from." She answered, eyeballing the Cyrillic in the forwarded email on her phone, and the signs above three different
"What airline is it?"

"Aeroflot."

He quirked a brow at her, "You're focusing too much on the Russian writing. Aeroflot has a sign in English." He pointed at it, "Right there."

"Oh." She deadpanned it, seeing that it was probably the most obvious thing in the terminal at that point. They walked over quietly and got the tickets printed, checked their bags, and then moved on through International security, until they were finally sitting at the terminal to wait for boarding procedures to start.

Yurio had kept his backpack, and was holding it on his lap, leaning over to rest his chin on it as his arms held around it in a lazy hug. He tried to doze, listening to the music on his phone, but found that he couldn't. He twitched a little to feel a hand go flat against his back, patting twice softly before sliding down a ways and then pulling away again.

"He'll be fine."

Emerald eyes turned towards the older woman, "Who are you trying to convince?"

"Whoever will listen." Minako huffed dryly, "You're not worried at all?"

"They said it was an out-patient procedure. What's to worry about?" He said, pivoting his chin on the top of the backpack as he turned to face forward again, "That he'll fall off another roof somehow? They're only keeping him because he'd be alone if they sent him home while he waits."

"I guess you're right."

She glanced down at the tickets poking out of her small carry-bag.

"I swear to God, if you stay in Moscow just because of me, I'll never forgive you." Mikhail glowered at her, "I've already started to forward the email confirmation. Go to China!"

"But-"

"No!" He repeated, "I'll catch up with you later. Take Yuri with you in my stead. There's no sense in wasting two tickets when both of you really want to be there anyway. You have people to cheer on."

"And you don't?" Minako asked pointedly, crossing her arms and looking at the Russian dubiously despite his being in a wheelchair.

"I don't mean that I don't." Mikhail protested, looking quite miserable in his hospital-issue bathrobe and sweatpants, arms crossed as a nurse wheeled him along, "I meant that you aren't crippled, so you don't have any excuse for not being there."

"You're not crippled."

"Temporarily crippled, but crippled all the same."

They came out of the radiology section and were turning through the waiting area to go towards some elevators, and Yurio caught sight. He bounded over to catch up, "So what's the verdict?"
"I'm an old shit and I'm dying." Mikhail said, harshly sarcastic.

The blonde just scoffed at him, turning instead to Minako, "I defer to the more sensible party for answers."

"T10 compression fracture." The woman said, "He needs surgery."

"So you broke your back." Yurio repeated in normal terms, "Way to go."

"I didn't ask for your opinion." Mikhail sulked, "I've fallen off that roof a hundred times and never so much as scraped a knee."

"Maybe we should be getting your head examined instead of your back then." The teen quipped, "Falling off the same roof so many times can't be a good sign."

Minako tried to hold in a laugh, "Remind me...what's the definition of insanity?"

The elder Russian sulked even further, but felt a twinge and had to uncross his arms just to get the pain to stop, "...Doing...the same thing over and over...and expecting a different result... I know ... That's not what happened though!"

"Then why do you keep getting up there?" The pair asked at the same time.

Mikhail's eyes were wide as he was taken aback, "Don't even start! I won't be ganged up on!"

Minako shook her head, but then put her hand on the teen's shoulder to pull him aside. The nurse parked the wheelchair and hit the button to go up in the elevator.

Once out of earshot, the older woman slung her whole arm over the blonde's shoulders, but kept her voice low, "Hang out here a little while longer. They're keeping him until Saturday morning. I'm just going to make sure he doesn't try breaking out as soon as we leave."

Yurio just huffed a melodramatic groan, pulled out his phone, and went back to sitting. The spot he'd been in was still warm, "Fine. Don't take forever."

Blue-grey eyes followed him for a moment, but Minako nodded and turned away, heading back to catch up with the nurse just as she was backing Mikhail's wheelchair, and its incredibly grumpy occupant, into the big elevator. She leaned up against the wall as the carriage started to lift upward towards the in-patient suites.

"I could stay in a motel." He tried to barter, "I don't want to stay overnight."

"If you want Yura and I to go to Shanghai then we can't hang out and keep an eye on you." Minako explained, "The hospital will be able to manage your pain better than you can anyway."

"...I could manage..."

"Just like you managed to get yourself out of the car and into the passenger-side seat earlier?" She shot back. It just got her a look of disdain, "Why are you being so cantankerous? You're lucky the fracture is all you ended up with. It could've been a lot worse."

Arms folded over again, and Mikhail stared at a corner of the floor, "I didn't want the fracture in the first place."

"No one asks for trouble. It finds us on its own easily enough." The ballerina retorted.
The elevator doors opened again, and the nurse pushed the chair forward, turning to the left to go down another corridor. She checked a list at the nurse's station briefly before signing it and continuing on quietly. The cranky old man was put into the bed he'd be stuck in until the following day, was given brief instructions on how to call for help if he needed it. The nurse then left the room, quietly closing the door to just a crack.

Minako had her arms crossed as she leaned on a wall nearby, watching as the silver Russian reached up with both hands to cover his face, moving them up a little through his hair and then back down again with a disgruntled sigh.

"You'll be up and walking within an hour of the procedure." The ballerina said, trying to cheer him up, "So all you have to do is wait until then."

"They booked it almost at the exact same time that the flight is leaving. It's like the universe is mocking me." Mikhail grumbled, pinching the bridge of his nose, "I was really looking forward to this weekend, too."

"Why? What's so different about it?"

He gaped at her in disbelief, and it only made him sulk again, crossing his arms and looking away with a sour look on his face.

"What? Seriously, what's so special about Cup of China?"

Mikhail muttered something under his breath that she couldn't hear.

"Say again?"

"...Yuratchkawasn'tgonnabethere."

"Sorry?"

"Yura wasn't going to be there this time! It was gonna be just us!" He blurted finally, his face going red from the admission. The silver Russian tried to turn onto his side, but regretted it immediately, feeling the wind get knocked out of him again from the twist.

Minako saw the look on his face and went over quickly, pulling him down onto his back by his shoulder. She couldn't help but smile at the fact that, despite the pain, the older man still couldn't stand the embarrassment of looking at her after his admission.

"Aww, were you gonna flirt with me this weekend?" She mused aloud.

"...Maybealittlebit..."

"Only a little?" The teasing continued, much to Mikhail's chagrin. Minako was relentless though, sitting on the edge of the bed and poking at him, "Were you finally going to put on that sweet Rozovsky charm and try to woo me again?"

"Again?" He echoed, cheeks even redder than before somehow, "...Wh-what's that supposed to mean?"

"What, you forgot the night before the Vikturi wedding party? When we got snowed in at my snack bar?"

"Ohmygodyou **remembered** that!?" He hid behind his hands.
"Why would I forget...?"

"You drank a LOT."

"I drink a lot all the time!"

Mikhail would've sunk into himself if he could've, but all he could manage was trying to vanish into the pillows behind his head...though that didn't work out all that well either. He felt a gentle hand on his forearm, and parted his fingers on the left just enough to glance at the woman ahead of him.

"You're like a girl who just got asked to prom for the first time." Minako teased, "It's kind of cute."

"I'm never going to live this down." Tears comically ran down the sides of his face.

"You only live once, and neither of us is getting any younger." She added, "I can tell you want more from this, but I can also tell you're scared as all Hell. What's the big deal? You act like you're starting from square one again every day."

The silver Russian could feel his heart pounding like a jackhammer in his chest. It just made his back hurt all the more. Drawing in a deep breath made it even worse, and he exhaled with a slight grunt of pain, trying to catch his breath again with shallower drags after that. He pulled his hands off his face, anxiously holding them together in front of his chest instead, "I've been burned really badly before."

"I know...you've told me."

"But...I..." He struggled, closing his eyes and trying to be stoic again, "...I also...really like you, too."

"Thank you for finally saying so." She pat his knee where it poked up through the thin blankets.

"I'M A CONFUSED MESS." His hands were up on his head again, ruffling his hair madly and making quite a mess of it, "I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M DOING OR WHAT I WANT."

"Hmm..." Minako mused, "You remind me a lot of Yuri."

"Hah?" He stopped abruptly and gawked at the woman.

"When Viktor first showed up in Hasetsu, Yuri couldn't believe it." The ballerina started, "He was freaking out for days. If you knew what he was like before, how much he looked up to Viktor and aspired to be like him...you'd be as amazed as the rest of us to see how far he's come. Not just as a skater, but as a person. It took a while to get there though. He was worried Viktor was just using him as an excuse to take time off and didn't actually want to be there for his own sake, but...Yuri eventually grew to understand the truth of it all. Viktor actually cared about him." She explained, remembering those days fondly, "But my point is...you can't grow unless, like Yuri, you stop being afraid and just go with it. You'll never know what could happen unless you give it a chance."

Two hours had passed by then, and Yurio had drifted to sleep, leaning against the woman such that his face was mashed between her arm and the space behind it. The ballerina looked at her phone, seeing the time, and sighed to realize the plane was already 30 minutes late.

"...Viktor wasn't kidding about Aeroflot making him wait..." She sighed.

Her phone jingled just then, and she pulled it back ahead of her, lifting her right arm to drape it over
the unconscious teen more comfortably.

[Well, I'm not dead, so I guess that's pretty neat.]

She huffed a laugh to see the message, and one-thumb typed her reply, [You'll do great, hun. Get some sleep. We'll call you in the morning.]
"Okay, this easily has to be the most interesting thing I've seen so far." Yuri commented, stepping through the hotel room door with a decently-large box in his arms. Viktor held the door open to let him through and then followed in behind, "I've seen pictures before but never had a chance to see it in person."

"You're oddly excited about this." The Russian observed, letting the door click shut on its own as he carried a few more bags within. He peeked around the room briefly, "Hm...we're going to have to think about upgrading our suite in Sapporo if this keeps up...we won't have room for us amidst all the stuff."

Yuri was already unpacking the box, setting two smaller white-cardboard containers on the bed next to where he sat. The larger container, sturdier wood, was placed on the floor and nudged out of the way, "Get the lights, will you?"

"The lights?" The silver man echoed, but clicked them off as asked, "Sure..." The room got significantly dimmer, but the bustle of lights from a night-time city was enough to illuminate the room so the pair could still see where they were going. As Viktor set the lighter bags aside, he pulled his coat off and shuffled over the top of the bed on his hands and knees, moving closer and then crossing his legs to await the 'big reveal.'

"There's basically two major kinds of carvings that I know of." The younger skater started, pulling the protective paper packing from the first of the two smaller boxes, and unwrapping the item within carefully, "There's the sort where it's just an object, like this one..." He held up a 6in figure of a Pheonix sitting amongst roses, its long peacock-like tail acting as a 'stand' for the piece. Viktor already knew what it looked like, so Yuri set it onto the table next to the bed, moving back to retrieve the second of the two containers, "And then there's these other ones..." More paper was carefully removed, and Yuri held up a more rounded, almost egg-like shape, with a carving inside. Next to come out was his phone, and he popped up the Flashlight app, holding it up directly behind the sculpture.

"Wow~!"

"Deshou?" The younger figure was quite pleased with the display.

"Subarashii!"

"We'll have to get some kind of dim under-light when we get home." Yuri said, eyes shining as he looked on at the jade sculpture, "It's like one of those lava lamps that look best when it's dark."

"I didn't think you needed a night-light, Yuri." The Russian teased.

"N-nani!?" His face was bright red, but in the dark of the room, it was impossible to see.

Viktor just huffed a laugh at his partner's expense, "A back-light shouldn't be hard to find. But I am kind of surprised at you..."

"Eh? Why?" Yuri was puzzled, turning the flashlight app off and reaching for the discarded paper packing, carefully wrapping the object up again before placing it within its 'nest' of more paper inside the white cardboard box.
"These two together are probably the most expensive things you've ever purchased, that I know of. You've always been so frugal otherwise."

"...Well, I bought your ring last year, and that wasn't cheap..."

"You weren't thinking about it like an engagement ring at the time, just a thank you present. I think I can forgive you for keeping it simple."

Yuri hesitated, his fingers inside the box where he was trying to put the second sculpture away. He eventually started moving again though, releasing the bundle of paper-wrapped jade into the container and closing it, "...It was nearly €800, 10 karat yellow gold. It was actually...all I could afford at the time, even with a payment plan."

"I see." Viktor answered quietly, thumbing his ring a bit where he held himself up, "Then by comparison, the ring really was the most expensive thing you've ever bought. You didn't have to put those souvenirs on any kind of payment plan."

"Maybe not..." The younger figure tacitly agreed, "It's a side-perk to how you've helped me become a better skater." Hazel eyes glanced over at the Russian, then went down to the wedding band where Viktor was holding himself up with both hands on the comforter, "But...if you'd been the one to get them, I imagine they would've been a lot more fancy. Maybe 24 karat gold or something...maybe have some stones in them."

"I've honestly never thought about it." Viktor pointed out, "Even the idea of wanting to replace these with anything is an entirely foreign concept to me. This is the ring you picked, so that makes the pair of them perfect already." He held his right hand up to admire the shine in the city-lights through the window, "You'll have to pry this off my cold, dead hand to get it back." He smirked.

"I would never take it back." The younger figure said simply, reaching to set the second box on the table top behind him, then looking at his own ring, "The one time you took it off was enough, and even though you had a perfectly valid reason for it, it still hurts to remember it ever happening at all."

Slate blue eyes narrowed a little as Viktor saw the pained look on his partner's face, his own expression reeling with guilt from the mention. Instead of letting the sour moment linger though, he scooted forward on the bed, pulled his partner's scarf and coat off, and then pulled him back towards the headboard. Leaning his own back into the pile of many pillows, Viktor turned Yuri around and pulled his back down to his chest, wrapping both arms protectively around his smaller frame, "I'm sorry I put you through that."

"It wasn't your fault." The younger figure answered, resting his arms around where he'd been pinned between his husband's legs, "It's just life. Sometimes it throws us curve balls. We dodge some, and we get beaned in the face with others."

"That was a barrage of curve balls then." Viktor retorted, "All of them were meant for me, but a bunch ended up hitting you, too. ...I had hoped we could've made it more than just a few weeks before we had to weather some major storm, but Mila was right with her warning, way back from the start. St. Petersburg was a pretty rough situation, even though we both tried to make the best of it."

"Well...other than the RSF conference, and basically everything having to do with your father...I really liked St. Petersburg."

"Hm."

"I still want to go back and see the Summer Garden when it's actually summer, too." Yuri suggested,
"We were so preoccupied with finding the house that we never really took a vacation."

"Maybe we can figure something out during Nationals." Viktor wondered, "I'd rather neither of us miss them this year, even if the timing is precarious."

"Yeah...of all the weekends Japan and Russia could host their events, it's always on the same one." The younger figure sighed, slouching a little and looking back out through the massive window at the foot of the bed. Shining orbs of headlights far away moved across thin lines of the roadways down on the ground, and Yuri focused on a few, but then blinked his eyes closed for a moment as he considered the possibilities. He then abruptly sat up, turned around, wedged his knees under Viktor's thighs where they were still parted to make room for him, and moved in close. His hands went down on either side of the man's waist, fingers lost under the first set of pillows from the big pile, eyes looking straight ahead.

Viktor just looked at him, a little surprised, "What is it...?"

"I don't like to think about going to competition without you, but I know that if we plan on competing again next season, we both have to go. I don't want to think about you losing your spot at Euros again because you skipped Nationals to come to mine like last time." He started, "So...I think we should just bite the bullet, and accept that we'll be FaceTiming before events instead. It's only a 6-hour difference so it's not like one of us has to be up at 3:30 in the morning just to say 'Davai.' I'll just...catch up with you in Moscow after I'm done in Tokyo, and we'll go from there."

The Russian just gawked at him, making the younger figure wonder if he'd said something wrong. However, when Yuri suddenly felt the man's legs wrap around and cross behind his back, pulling him in closer, he knew it was fine.

"You keep doing that." Viktor mused, forearms loosely going over his husband's shoulders, right hand playing with raven hair, "That's twice today that I've fallen for you."

"I hope that doesn't mean you keep falling out of love with me..." Yuri teased...though wondering it half-seriously at the back of his mind.

"Never." The Russian answered quickly, pulling his husband forward to kiss him.

The gesture calmed Yuri's nerves rather quickly, and he let himself dissolve into the warmth.

Short-Program day finally arrived, and with it, the crowds, the announcers, the judges, and the rest of the competition. Joining the four that were already there earlier in the week were Leo de la Iglesia and Michele Crispino, along with his twin, and all the shenanigans that went with it.

Yuri was second on the list, so he was in the prep area stretching while his coach was looking at the rest of the roster.

Black long-coat, dark charcoal-grey suit, black tie, white shirt, no gloves. Viktor had a finger on his lip as he looked at the paper posting, "Hmmmmm... Emil, Yuri, Leo, Seung-gil, Otabek, and then Michele. Not a huge roster for Cup of China but still tough competition. Yuri will be nervous all afternoon. He hates going close to first."

One of these days, I'll teach you to love going first. The Russian thought, When you're the one that sets the bar for everyone else, and makes the rest of the competition dread to see you. He smirked to himself, Everyone always hates going after me because of that. Embrace it, Yuri!
His attention was suddenly cut by the familiar feel of his pocket vibrating, and he pulled it out to see Minako's name on the Caller ID, "Oh, looks like they made it." He clicked to answer and held it up to his ear as he made his way to rink-side, "Konnichiwaaaa~! China e youkoso~!"

"You're such a ham, Viktor."

"And you love me for it. Where are you guys?" He mused, pushing back the curtain.

"Looking from the ice, we're on the left side of the box-seating reserved for other skaters. Oh! I see you. I'm waving!"

Viktor looked up and around, checking for the seating area she mentioned, and then waving back once he spotted her. It didn't seem strange at all that she was by herself at the moment, and he quickly jogged over, pocketing his phone as he went. A few other fans started shrieking when they saw him, and he waved at them as well as he passed.

The inner wall separating rink-side from the audience was taller than Viktor, and a dark blue color, rising up around 10ft high before even touching the floor of the seating area, so by the time the Russian made it over, it was all he could do to crane his head back and wave from far below.

"You look pretty snazzy there, Viktor." Minako gushed, "You're really in coach-mode again!"

"Domo~!" The Russian winked, "How was your trip?"

"Aeroflot kept us waiting for almost 2 hours. I don't know how they stay in business!"

"Right!?!" Viktor agreed emphatically, "It's probably because the government owns just more than half of it, but...anyway, Yuri's going out second, so he'll have to come say hi when he's finished. Where's Uncle Mimi?"

Minako's face went blank, not having expected the question so soon, "...He didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what...?" His expression went quite dour.

"He's in Moscow."

"Eh? Why?"

The ballerina tried to hide behind the bars of the railing, "He fell off a roof and hurt himself kinda bad."

_Facepalm._

"But he's fine! Really! We just talked to him this morning and he's already walking, and the hospital's kicking him out soon!" She insisted, waving her hands around, "He'll be at NHK!"

_Already walking? Hospital is kicking him out?" Viktor pulled his hand down his face a little, but then pointed at her with that same hand, "Don't tell Yuri anything.""

"I know!"

"And what do you mean by 'we' if Mimi's still in Russia? Wouldn't you have come alone?"

"Oh, you know...a certain blonde teenager who waited until the last minute to beg to come cuz his best buddy is skating."
"...Yuri is his best buddy now?"

"Otabek!"

"...They're best buddies now?" Viktor blinked at her.

"The way Yura acts, you'd think so. He was crawling up both our butts this past week trying to get a plane ticket. He lucked-out that Mikhail had a momentary lapse of sanity, because he wouldn't have gotten a ticket on such short notice if the big doofus hadn't hurt himself."

Another, but slower facepalm. Viktor glanced around, thinking he'd spot the Russian Punk, but realized the aforementioned teenager was no where around, "Does he know to keep his mouth shut about what happened?"

"Yura's not looking for Yuri right now. But I can message him to make sure he knows not to mention it, if you want."

"Please do; I'm going to make sure they don't run into each other." The Russian started pulling away again, waving as he half-ran back to the prep area, "We'll find you again when the Short Program's done!"

Within said prep area, Yuri was rolling out his stretching mat in an open area off the beaten path. He had some ear-buds in from a wireless headset around his neck, his phone set aside by his backpack against a nearby wall. Listening to music before a show was better than having ear-plugs in, because at least with the music blaring, it prevented him from thinking too much.

He moved down into a forward split, reaching for his right leg and leaning down over it for a few seconds. Rising back up again, he planted both hands on the outside of the mat, just near his hip, and pushed against it to stretch out his back. He repeated it for the left side, and then set his legs together behind him, pushing up on the mat into a Cobra Pose. His lower back popped once as he did it, but he kept going, craning his head back to bend as far as he could, eyes closed as he went.

His phone was playing 'Yuri on Ice,' something calm and uplifting to keep his anxiety down.

"Hey."

Brown eyes opened at the unexpected voice, and he saw the upside-down visage of a face he hadn't expected. Yuri's arms gave out immediately and he slumped forward again, legs flailing behind him, the voice turning to laughter at his expense.

"Y-Yuri!" He blurted, "What are you..." One ear-bud had already fallen out from the panic, "I didn't think you'd be here! Shouldn't you be in St. Petersburg?"

"You sound like you're not happy to see me." Yurio crouched down, elbows over his knees, balancing on just the balls of his feet.

"No way!" The older skater protested, righting himself and then moving forward to give his hugging, "I just didn't expect you! No one said you were coming to Shanghai."

"I got lucky at someone else's expense."

"YURI PLISETSKY." Viktor's voice came, shrill and loud.

Both skaters glanced up in surprise as the older Russian came bounding over, immediately kneeling behind his athlete and covering both of his ears with his hands.
Blue eyes met green, and Viktor wordlessly shook his head as Yuri glanced between them in complete confusion.

"The heck was that all for?" Yurio grumbled, pushing to stand up again, hands in his hoodie pockets. He felt his phone vibrate in his back pocket and pulled it out nonchalantly.

"V-Viktor...what in the world...?" Yuri grimaced.

[Don't tell Yuri about Mikhail's accident, okay? It'll mess up his SP.] Minako's text read.

Yurio just huffed, pulling his other hand out to reply, [But he's fine, what's the big deal?]

"There's...ah..." Viktor tried to explain, pulling his hands back again so the skater could go back to his work-out. He held both hands up emphatically, a weird look on his face, "It's...there's a surprise later! I didn't want it to be spoiled already!"

"Smooth." Yurio commented, feeling his phone buzz again.

[Nothing is 'fine' until Yuri can talk to Mikhail and see it for himself. Just don't tell him anything! As far as he's concerned, you tagged along and all 3 of us are here. Got it?]

"You guys are both acting weird." Yuri grumbled, "I really have to finish though...I can hear the thing starting out there already so it's only a few minutes until my turn."

"Did you see Otabek anywhere?" Yurio asked, "I was looking for him when I ran into you."

"Oh...uhh..." The older skater looked around, "I saw him when we all got here but not since. He might be changing or something since he's not up till later. Keep looking, you'll find hi-"

"Yuri?"

"Speak of the Devil..." Viktor mused, spotting the Kazakhstani skater coming up from the hall that rounded the short end of the skating arena.

"Hey." The blond huffed, waving casually.

"Hey." The Kazakh replied, looking expressionless as was his manner, but holding his hand out, "I didn't think you were going to be here."

Yurio felt a bead of sweat run down the back of his neck as he reached back to tap the hand with his own, and he was suddenly grateful that neither Minako nor Mikhail were there to hear what had just been said. He could hear them mocking him at the back of his mind though.

'All that worrying about him being mad you wouldn't be there to cheer him on, and he didn't even think you were going to be there!' 

"Y-Yeah!" He finally blurted, "It was a last second thing. You know how it goes. I figured I'd come watch since I have nothing else to do until the Final."

"It's good that you made it." Otabek went on, though taking another step forward as he meant to go on, "Let's both get on that last podium, okay?"

"Of course! I won't go easy on you though."

"You'd better not." The slightly-older skater said, pointing at him, "If you did, I'd have to reconsider thinking that you're a soldier. Don't disappoint me." He took another step, having to turn slightly by
then just to see the teen, "But I'll see you later. Sau bol, Yuri."

Viktor snickered behind his hand, but watched quietly as Otabek finally started moving off again. Once he was out of earshot, he snuck up behind his younger counterpart and gingerly pat both of his shoulders, "You want some water for that burn?"

Yurio's face was priceless; a desperate attempt at keeping cool while at the same time stunned and horrified, "...Reconsider...thinking I'm a soldier?" He shrugged Viktor off and huffed to himself, "THAT'S THE WHOLE REASON WE'RE EVEN FRIENDS."

Yuri chortled quietly to himself from where he'd pulled his knees up in front of himself, trying to keep quiet.
I gotta tweak Yuri's SP cuz the rules weren't that clear before (I could only find mention of the minimum requirements, and none of them ever mentioned limits/maximums like they did for the Free Skate rules.) He isn't technically allowed to do all the quads I originally wrote, so I have to scale it back to be in line with regulations. Sorry. Moving forward, it'll be as though I never messed up; 3A, 4S-3Lo , and 4Lz will be all he does. I'll probably make the excuse that his program wasn't artistic enough or something, as many skaters IRL have been penalized for focusing too much on jumps and not enough on expression/other skills. Also OMFG it's been more than 50 chapters since Yuri did this program at Skate Canada -_. What have I done.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FOURTY EIGHT

"First to take the ice for this evening's Men's Singles Short Program, is Czech Republic's Emil Nekola!"

Czech flags and signs came out all around the arena, washing the stadium over in red, blue, and white color.

"Cheer loudly for me, okay guys?" The skater asked, giving a thumbs-up and a wink to the Crispino twins as they waited in the front-row stands, just behind where he was waiting by the rink entrance. The 6-foot tall, scraggly-looking hipster dashed out to the cheers and cries of the audience, making a big circle as he acknowledged them and the judges, and then meandered over to his place in center.

His outfit was 20 different shades of blue, with blue and clear rhinestones across the left shoulder, and a long, billowy sash around his waist that waved about from his right hip. He even had a streak of ultramarine in his hair, just enough to frost the tips of his bangs.

"GANBAAAAAA, EMIL!" Yuri hollered from the curtain to the prep-area. It hadn't been lost on him that Emil was the only person who had returned his hug at Rostelecom the year before. Everyone else had been too surprised to move, shocked into screaming, stunned into silence, or ran away like their ass was on fire.

The Czech skater lifted his head and looked to see him, then smirked and flicked his fingers off his forehead in a half-assed-but-well-meant salute of thanks, and finally took his pose. A drag of bass boomed overhead.

Yo listen up here's a story, about a little guy that lives in a blue world
And all day and all night and everything he sees is just blue
Like him inside and outside, blue his house with a blue little window
And a blue corvette, and everything is blue for him
And his-self and everybody around 'cause he ain't got...nobody...to listen...

The audience had already started singing along with the lyrics, the song popular and well known by many, even in China. Emil was gliding around the short end of the arena, looking for his take-off spot...and vaulted into a quad Loop on the next boom.
Yuri ducked back behind the curtain, skate-guards clunking along the floor as he looked around for his coach.

Viktor was still shooing Yurio back to the audience section where he should've been, "You don't even have a badge, you shouldn't be down here."

"Everyone knows who I am though!"

"And everyone knows you're not competing here so you gotta goooooo." The older Russian went on, pushing the blonde right out the swinging double-doors. He ducked out right behind him though, and then spun the teen on his heels to face him, looking him straight in the eyes with a serious look on his face, "Did you at all mention Mikhail?"

"...Shit, you actually said his name for once."

"Did you mention him to Yuri or not?"

"Does he look anxious to you?"

Viktor glowered, not willing to ask the question a third time.

"No, I didn't. Not directly anyway." Yurio shrugged the hands off his shoulders, "But he won't know what I meant until he knows Mikhail's not actually here."

Slate eyes blinked, "...Not directly?"

The door suddenly pushed open behind him, whacking him in the arse and vaulting him forward, squashing Yurio between himself, the door, and the wall rather unceremoniously. When Yuri finally squeezed through, wondering why it wouldn't open all the way, he caught a glimpse of the SkaterSandwich and promptly tried to pull them apart.

"Ahhh I'm so sorry! I didn't see you!" He protested, peeling Viktor's face off the wall, and then Yurio off Viktor's chest, "Why were you hiding right behind the door like that anyway?"

Both figures deadpanned him for lack of knowing how to answer, though Yurio looked rather grumpy either way.

Viktor rubbed his nose and forehead, "It...uh..."

Like before, Yuri glanced at them skeptically, "...You're both being weird again." His eyes went from his husband to his rival, "...You're not making plans for some crazy surprise birthday thing for me, are you?"

The blonde just lifted his head and rolled with it, looking at Viktor like they'd been found out, "Well, there goes the surprise."

"You really don't have to do anything..." Yuri insisted, waving his hands around slowly, "Viktor and I already did some stuff for it so...it'd be weird to celebrate the same thing twice...

The older Russian was finally starting to think that maybe his partner really didn't know anything about the accident yet, and glanced back at Yurio with the relief easy to see on his face. He turned back to Yuri after that and stepped forward, grabbing the handle to the door and pulling just as he put the other hand around his husband's shoulders, "We should get back. You're up in probably a minute or less."
"Viktor, wait a second." The blonde protested, stepping clear of the door and around the pair's backs. They both glanced over at him, and watched as he pulled one hand back out of his hoodie's front pocket, extending his arm, "Davai."

The older skater smiled excitedly, and reached his free hand back to return the gesture, getting an unexpected second hug from the Russian Punk in less than 15 minutes, "Spasibo! See you after!"

The music in the arena finally came to a dramatic end, and the crowd's cheering roared.

Yuri was pulling off the wireless ear-bud collar from around his neck, and handed it off to his partner as they moved towards the curtains to get back to rinkside. The butterflies in his stomach were coming back in full force. Just as he was about to expect Viktor to reach for the curtain though, the hand that extended outward came around instead and pulled him into a tight hug. His own arms were pinned somewhat to his sides as the Russian pressed in closer, cheek and lips against his neck, warm breaths slowly moving across his skin.

"There's nothing wrong with the score you got in Canada." The silver man said against his flesh, raising a few goosebumps, "It's not as high as it was at Worlds, but that's the difference between the first and last performances of a season. You've gotten so much better than you used to be, but that's no guarantee that you'll always score better than the last time you performed."

Hazel eyes turned slightly as the younger skater listened, and he finally managed to unpin his arms enough to return the hug as well as he could manage.

"The time we practiced in Paris was enough to retool the program and bring it back to the artistic level everyone expects from you." Viktor went on, moving his face up just enough to speak gently against his husband's ear, "So aim for a score over 100, but stay loose out there. Your program is fun and upbeat, so enjoy yourself a little, okay?"

"The score for Emil Nekola...88.52!"

The crowd cheered excitedly, and the sandy-blonde skater did too, fully standing upright in the kiss and cry to wave his arms around.

Yuri felt another tight squeeze before Viktor finally let him go and turned to pull the curtain aside, the fans still cheering as Emil was getting out of the kiss and cry. They hustled over to the open rink-wall and quickly moved to get golden blades on the ice.

"The next skater performing...representing Japan, Yuri Nikiforov!"

It almost felt like thunder when the cheering began, morphing from the excitement of a skater that just scored a new personal best, to exploding with enthusiasm for a Gold medalist about to take the ice. The boom pounded against Yuri's chest like ocean waves, making his throbbing heart feel like it was beating out of synch with itself. He reached a hand up to try and slow it.

Calm down...calm down... You can still get to the GP Final even if you don't take Gold at this event... It's not a requirement... It's just...what everyone in the world wants from you and you better not mess this up. You'll be a huge disappointment, and it'll make Viktor look bad...!

"Yuri."

"Hah!?" He practically jumped, feeling like he'd been yanked out of a deep sleep suddenly.

The young skater flipped around and found Viktor there with his hand out, waiting for the blade guards. The sound of the crowd was deafening, but Yuri didn't need to hear anything to notice the
look on Viktor's face changing from its usual 'go out there and do good' expression, to 'oh shit what
just happened?' He nervously turned away and held to the rink wall as he reached his hand down to
grab the first blade guard...only to drop it. A shaky hand went to grab it, but found a paler one
grabbing it first.

"Yuri, what's gotten into you suddenly? You were fine a minute ago." Viktor asked quietly, tucking
the rubber sheath under his arm to wait for the second.

The younger figure just moved faster to get the other guard off, handed it over, shrugged out of his
closet, and bolted for the ice. The Russian followed him along the rink-wall to where the poodle-plush
tissue box had been stashed, and as soon as Yuri paused, he reached over to take the skater's hands
to pull him around.

"Yuri...!"

"I'm just..." He stammered, "I just got really nervous. I-I can't explain it."
"Take a deep breath. Slowly. Relax." Viktor advised, moving his hands up to cup around his partner's face, fingers just around the back of his neck, "Close your eyes and breathe."

Yuri did as told, but his breaths were shaky despite his best efforts. By the third inhalation, he felt where Viktor had leaned in to kiss him, but it did little more than make the audience scream even louder and make him feel even more anxious.
When the Russian pulled away, Yuri opened his eyes, but kept them low until he felt a thumb stroke his cheek.

"I had hoped you'd go blank when I did that, but I guess it didn't work." Viktor said, dismayed, "I don't know what else I can do now."

"I'm going to fall apart out there now, aren't I?"

Minako watched Yuri's body-language carefully, seeing his head droop despite his eyes being wide open. Yurio was only just getting back to reclaim his seat, scooting past other spectators' legs, and suddenly getting grabbed by the hand.

"You didn't tell him about Mikhail did you?" The ballerina asked nervously, not even letting him sit yet.

"What? No." The blonde said pensively, yanking his hand back and moving to sit next to her.

"Then why is he about to have a nervous breakdown?" She wondered, pointing at where the skater was hesitantly moving away from the rink wall, "He looks like he's about to cry."

"...I literally just talked to him a minute ago. He was fine."

Minako had her hands up over her mouth, but then reached again for Yurio's wrist and hoisted him back to standing. She drew in a deep breath, "YURRRRIIIIII!!"

Somehow, her voice cut through the crowd, and the skater lifted his head, scanning the audience for its source, "Minako-sensei?"

"GANBAREEEEEE! YURRRRIIIII!!" She called again, holding up her banner in one hand and
making Yurio hold up the other side himself.

"Huh?" Yuri blinked at them, seeing all the other seats around them occupied, "...Where's Mikhail?"

'I just didn't expect you! No one said you were coming to Shanghai.'

'I got lucky at someone else's expense.'

"...Someone...else's expense..." He echoed the words in his memory, gliding slowly across the ice, "...Is that why everyone's been acting weird? Did something happen to him...?" He turned his head to glance back at his husband, pointing up into the stands to where Minako and Yurio were waving at him still.

When Viktor realized what Yuri must've figured out, he went down on his knees behind the rink-wall, only his eyes, hair, and fingers visible anymore. The guilt of it made him want to be invisible.

...This isn't going to end well...

.

The door was pushed open, dress-shoes kicked off, hat and coat set onto the coat-rack just within the hall...and two tired feet scuffled across the dark hard-wood floor. It was just after 11am in Moscow, and a certain formerly-crippled-but-still-feeling-crippled Russian wandered in like a zombie.

He mashed his face against the nearest wall and stood there for a minute in silence. It happened again when he peeled out of his dusty, hospital-smelling clothing, and again as he stood in the shower, and again as he face-planted against the sofa in the livingroom. He'd at least managed to set his briefcase down next to the coffee-table earlier, so he hazily reached for his phone and glanced at the World Clock tab.

"It's 6:15 in Shanghai now..." He mumbled to himself carelessly...but then grey-green eyes shot open and he was up with a start, fishing for his tablet and the remote control for the television embedded in the wall ahead of him. Both were on quickly, and as quickly as he could, Mikhail synched them together, then went looking for any working LiveStreams of the Cup of China event.

Finally finding one that was working, he looked up at the massive flat-panel, and immediately started to worry. He saw Yuri pacing idly in a big circle, looking at the ice...and then even worse, he saw Viktor still in his hiding place. He immediately went for his phone and started tapping away.

.

Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh

The music finally started high above, energetic and exciting...completely the opposite of how Yuri felt at the time, but he raised his right hand up all the same. His left foot turned in a semi-circle behind him, forcing him to turn in place, and he brought his left hand out as he continued the rotation.

Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh

Minako and Yurio had returned to sitting, realizing their last-ditch effort to show support had done little or nothing to motivate the skater. The ballerina could hardly look away, save for the moment she felt the vibration in her coat pocket. Withdrawing it, the motion caught Yurio's attention as well, and when he caught sight of Mikhail's name at the top of the screen, pulled his own phone out, too.
What the Hell happened? Why is Viktor hiding behind the goddamn rink-wall?

I messed up tonight, I lost another fight, I still mess up but I'll just start again.

[Yuri just realized you're not here and Viktor was trying really hard to prevent that.] The woman answered, looking up at the ice just in time to see Yuri barely land his triple Axel.

I'm sure there were enough rotations for that one, but he'll get points taken off for the bad landing...

[That's ridiculous.] Mikhail texted back, [Why would my not being there cause this much of a kerfuffle? It's really not that big of a deal.]

[Skaters' hearts are made of glass.] Minako answered, [Especially his. He only just noticed you weren't here when he saw Yura sitting in your place, so no one's had time to explain what happened yet.]

[Something else is going on.] Yurio messaged them both, forcing them into a Group Chat, having read the messages on Minako's phone discretely over her shoulder, [He was already freaking out before he even looked at us.]

I won't give up, no I won't give in, 'til I reach the end and then I'll start again

"Coming up is one of Skater Yuri's trademark moves...the Level 4 Combination Spin."

No, I won't leave, I wanna try everything, I wanna try even though I could fail.

All messages stopped for a moment as eyes went to the ice. Mercifully, Yuri seemed to pull through that one. He rose back up again and started gaining speed.

"Up next is the first of two Quads in the program...and!"

Everyone had their phones up in front of their noses, eyes wide.

"Oh! It became a double-Salchow double-Loop..."

I won't give up, no I won't give in, 'til I reach the end and then I'll start again

Viktor had finally risen back to his feet by then, but was even more anxious about the rest of the show than the non-skaters who were watching.

Come on, Yuri...get it together, you can still do this...! I know you can!

[This is embarrassing.] Yurio typed.

No, I won't leave, I wanna try everything, I wanna try even though I could fail

[What's he all worked up about then? Yura.] Mikhail messaged back.

The teen grit his teeth, but then tapped away at his screen, [My guess is it's the pressure. The whole thing with everyone expecting him to win gold here, like they know Viktor's going to at NHK.]

The flying camel spin lost the death-drop element, and Yuri mentally cursed himself, knowing he'd just lost out on one of the Short Program's required components.

Oh, oh, oh, oh, try everything
Oh, oh, oh, oh, try everything
He hopped, almost doing a butterfly kick as he vaulted into the second half of the spin.

*Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, try everything*

The Biellmann spin didn't go as planned either though, as he lost his grip on the bottom of his skate about halfway through, forcing him to donut-spin the rest of it.

*Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh...*

*I'm too dizzy...* Yuri thought, seeing the world spin around him uncontrollably, unlike how he knew it should look, *I don't know if I'm going to make it...*

*Look how far you've come, you filled your heart with love, baby, you've done enough, take a deep breath.*

*Ina Bauer.*

*Don't beat yourself up, don't need to run so fast, sometimes we come last, but we did our best.*

The shine from the silver of the costume was becoming distracting, but Yuri continued on as well as he could. His sudden stop in the middle of the rink was less dramatic than it had been when he had been hyped for the program in Calgary, and he was sure people were starting to notice the exhausted, stressed-out look on his face where it should've been happy and confident. He cracked the ice three times with his right skate in time with the last 3 beats of the stanza, and then moved off again in another short twizzle to get to the other end of the rink.
Chapter 149

Chapter Notes

I drew 24 storyboard images depicting a scene from the last chapter. Please enjoy~

http://koltirasrip.deviantart.com/art/Chapter-148-Scene-Sketch-685394702

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FOURTY NINE

It was a mercy to enter into the second half of the program...it meant there were only a few seconds left before sweet release...and a quick retreat. Yuri felt exhaustion kicking in hard already, his legs and chest burning.

I can hardly breathe...! He thought in anguish, sweat beading on his skin.

I won't give up, no I won't give in, 'til I reach the end and then I'll start again
No, I won't leave, I wanna try everything, I wanna try even though I could fail

Thoughts of trying to figure out a way to reinsert the flying jump somewhere else into the program were flying through his head, but the growing power of his panic attack was making it harder and harder to focus. Plans that were once easy to think of were becoming like the jumbled up pieces of a massive jigsaw puzzle, but with the added fun of being thrown around from all sides like in a wind-tunnel. As soon as he thought he had one, another would hit him and knock the idea out of his head, and then 18 more would jump at him all at once in a confusing mess.

All he could do was let himself go into autopilot and hope that his body knew what to do, even if it meant going back on the muscle-memory he had from before Calgary.

He felt himself moving backwards down the length of the rink, spreading his arms out to the side as his left leg went behind him. As he slid in reverse, he dipped forward, reaching his hands for the right skate, the left rising straight up above him. It all felt familiar enough to make sense for a brief moment...but maybe that was a lie. He righted himself, switched feet, heard his name being yelled from somewhere far away, and jumped.

The wall came at him quickly, and his hip hit it hard, sliding into it with only a foot of clearance and forcing him to bowl over it a little as the wind got knocked out of him. He could hear the audience crying out in stunned, confused horror, and at least in that moment, he felt like his mind and body were thousands of miles apart from each other. It was like watching the show from somewhere in the rafters. He no longer felt like part of himself, and he couldn't feel his hip hurting.

This has to be a nightmare.

It was weird to watch from above himself, seeing how his body clung to the wall in slow motion as he tried to push himself back to standing normally, desperate to get back to the ice.

That bruise is going to be huge by tomorrow.

Everything felt like it was taking place under water. The crowd was little more than kelp, arms
waving about like long green leaves in the riptide, their screams like the waves passing overhead, beating against the shore. The music itself was so muted that, behind the ringing in his ears, he could barely tell what the lyrics were anymore.

*I'll keep on making those new mistakes, I'll keep on making them every day,*

Viktor had his elbows on the rink wall, hands up over his face, almost opposite the arena from where Yuri landed. He watched through his fingers where the skater had finally managed to put his blades down again and started skating off to pick up where the music left him. Viktor wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry; his partner knew he was going to mess up, but this was well and beyond either of their expectations.

*There isn't much of a chance for recovery at this point.* The Russian thought, dismayed, *The song alone is almost an insult to him in itself, given how bad he felt going into it. I wonder if he'll still be able to get on the podium at all...? It was too much for the ISU press to push him like this. He's not a different person just because he changed coaches; getting married didn't cure his anxiety either.*

Yuri spun from the outside spread-Eagle, pausing to do a half-assed shoulder-waggle before continuing on.

*Those new mistakes*

Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, try everything
Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, try everything

He slid down to the center of the arena, pulling his hands up against his sides as he went.

*Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, try everything*

The blades whipped around, spinning his whole frame several times before throwing himself into a tri-vaulted butterfly jump. It felt like, even in quick sequence, the semi-single jump was all he had the energy left to do.

*Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh*

As he spun around again in the landing, twisting across the ice on one skate, he raised his arms up to about horizontal and twisted to a stop to enter the final pose. He raised his left hand up to touch his shoulder, but couldn't bring himself to look past it to find his coach on the rink wall. In part...he was terrified of what Viktor was going to say, and in part because he'd lost his bearings ages ago, and had no idea where his husband was anyway.

*Try everything.*

As the music faded away, the audience wasn't sure what to do. A few people clapped slowly, hesitantly, and a few others tossed their plush nigiri out onto the ice, but most were just so stunned by the performance that they weren't sure clapping was even appropriate. They could see how Yuri let his arms slump and held his head low. The humiliation was worse than his Barcelona Short Program. In fact, it was even worse than Sochi before it.

Yurio was appalled by the audience, looking around at them with a disgusted look on his face. When he finally turned far enough around to see Minako, he could tell she was just as disappointed and frustrated as he himself was.

"CHEER FOR HIM, GODDAMNIT." Mikhail yelled at his television.

Yuri had already fallen to his knees by that point, deaf to the silence anyway, only really able to hear...
the sound of blood rushing through his throbbing head. He reached up to cross his hands over his chest and gripped tightly down on his shoulders, and dipped forward until he could feel his forehead on the ice, his whole body trembling.

"KATSUDDOOONNNN! MOLOYEEEEETS!*" Yurio's voice pierced the air, "MOLOYEEEEETS!" He screamed again, this time while standing on his seat, both hands up around his mouth to amplify the sound.

And with that, the stadium finally filled with the cheers that should've been there from the start. More plush food and a few plush poodles flew to the ice, along with flowers and other gifts. The skater was little more than a shaking heap though, and he wouldn't move. It was taking everything he had not to cry right there in the open for everyone to see.

Viktor felt his heart pounding in his chest, but it was at least a small relief to hear the audience finally cheering. Seeing his husband unwilling to get up though was disheartening. He looked around to the ushers around rink-side and saw one of them give the OK for him to go out and collect his athlete, and the Russian slowly scuffled his dress-shoes across the ice to get over to him. A few seconds later, he crouched onto one knee and set his hand gently on Yuri's back.

The younger man just twitched to feel it though, and moved his hands from his shoulders to his face, sitting up only enough to hunch over his knees. He was sure Viktor was going to say something, and couldn't bear to look at him, but instead found that the Russian remained quiet. Yuri felt the cool touch of plastic being slipped over his neck, settling there, and two nubs being put into his ears.

'Power on... ...Connected.'

Light boom...echo...the sound of water dripping '...Are you...afraid of the dark?'

Viktor pat his back again and let the sound of the music take hold over the audience, then helped his skater get back to the rink exit. It was subtle, but the Russian turned his head when he heard the haggard breaths, and watched the tears starting to roll down his husband's face. He gave Yuri's shoulder a squeeze, noting how the younger man still wouldn't look at him.

The score came up rather quickly after they sat in the kiss and cry. Yuri kept his head down, elbows on his knees, staring at his skates. Viktor could hear the music pounding from the ear-buds, knowing full and well that the skater wouldn't be able to hear as the number was called, nor the cue to look up, so he listened on Yuri's behalf.

"Next to take the ice, representing the United States...Leo de la Iglesia!"

Facing the reporters was harrowing, but Yuri just let his coach do all the talking. He wasn't even sure what they were saying specifically, though he had a good idea of at least the topic. The music was too loud for him to hear...and he wanted it that way.

"I don't want to think right now..."

As the songs changed over, there were a few seconds where he could hear the exchanges.

"...Yuri's got a really strong Free Program, so I'm certain he'll make a big come-back and still take the event." Viktor was saying, "The Short Program is the Achilles' Heel to a lot of skaters, and Yuri's no exception."
"How does it make you feel as a coach that Yuri scored so low after such a strong start at Skate Canada?" One of the reporters asked.

Yuri blinked, his brow furrowing, and he turned his head to look at the floor disappointedly. Viktor saw it out the corner of his eye, and reached back to take hold of his hand reassuringly.

At least this guy had the sense not to state the number, the Russian thought. He turned back to the media, "I'm disappointed, of course; any coach would be-"

The words were drowned out again by the next song; the Worlds EX Gala Opening Ceremony. The memory of how much fun Yuri had at that event was in stark contrast to everything else at that moment. He wanted to be there again, to win again, but he just felt frozen in place.

"Come on, Yuri, let's find somewhere to sit." Viktor's voice came back, muffled by the music and barely discernible, but the skater nodded and let his husband guide him off.

Leo's program had ended, and the sound of Seung-gil's music starting was barely audible as they passed the hall that lead to the rink-side entryway. Yuri wasn't sure what it was.

He looked up only long enough to see Otabek there by the curtain, who in turn was looking back at him. Oddly, the 19-year-old gave him a nod, which Yuri took as the man's subtle way of showing solidarity with him, so he nodded back in thanks and kept on walking.

Yurio says they're friends because Otabek saw that he had a soldier's eyes. Tsh... I wonder what he sees in mine? A coward...? A naïve idiot who had the gall to think he could compete evenly with our generation's best skater...?

They passed Michele and Sala quietly. Yuri didn't notice the sad look on the woman's face, nor the passive-aggressive 'what happened?' look on her brother's.

Viktor felt a buzz in his coat pocket, realizing it was his partner's phone that was ringing, and withdrew it to see who it was. Yuri was looking aside by then, since he heard the jingle in his earbuds as the music got cut off by the incoming call. The Russian held the screen for him to see; it was Phichit.

The young skater lifted his left hand to click the 'answer' button on the front of the collar, "Sa was dee krab, Phichit-kun."

"Hey...I was watching the LiveStream just now...are you okay?" The Thai skater answered, a worried tone in his voice, "What happened? You wouldn't even talk during that interview after."

"...I don't know." Yuri answered, his voice still a bit raw from trying for so long to not cry.

The Russian finally pulled him around to a quiet hallway with a few plastic seats along the wall, and gently guided his partner to sitting, then took the place next to him.

"All this talk about Viktor and I both getting gold going into the Final really got to me, I guess...and it really hit me at the last second how disappointed everyone would be if I couldn't pull it off." Yuri explained, lowering his head again as he clasped his fingers together ahead of his knees, "It's like...I took the Nikiforov name and now I'm supposed to consistently perform like one."

Slate eyes turned, but the Russian said nothing.

"How am I supposed to do that? I'm still just Yuri Katsuki at the end of the day." He reached up to rub his nose, feeling a few stray tears rolling down to the tip of it.
"You're your own worst enemy in that respect, Yuri."

"I know..."

"Hasn't Viktor taught you yet how to perform under pressure...?" Phichit wondered.

"It's not like I haven't gotten better." The skater sighed, leaning back up again to slouch in the chair, crossing his arms in front of himself, using his partner's arm as something of a neck-pillow where it was resting behind his head, "He can't stop me from having a panic attack anymore than I can."

"That panic attack didn't need to happen." Viktor pointed out.

"Huh?" Yuri finally turned his eyes to look at the man, "Viktor...I can't control it..."

"Oh, sorry." Phichit said nervously, "I should've guessed he'd be right there."

"Ten seconds before you stepped onto the ice, you were fine. You were confident and ready to score over 100 just like how I told you to. Why did you suddenly get so freaked out? You normally panic well ahead of time, if you're going to at all." Viktor went on, pulling his partner's head closer to rest on the front of his shoulder, "What changed? Did something set you off?"

"...I don't know... It's like a switch got flipped in my head." The younger figure answered nervously, feeling the ear-bud on the left slip out where his cheek was pressed against Viktor's coat, "I felt great when I got here...a bit nervous, but nothing too much more than usual..."

"...Was it because of Yurio?"

"...Yurio?" He turned his head up, confused, "Why would he-"

"Or was it me?"

"Eh?"

"I don't know what you guys are talking about." Phichit said awkwardly.

Yuri flinched, but then reached up for the loose ear-bud hanging in front of his chest. About to put it back, he paused...and then reached to put it into Viktor's ear instead, "Sorry, Phichit-kun...I've put Viktor on the line. He can hear you now."

"You pointed at the audience like you realized Uncle Mimi wasn't out there. I'm guessing you put two and two together, and figured out that the reason we were acting weird was because we were trying to keep it from you." Viktor went on, adjusting how the nub sat in his ear before letting his arm fall back behind Yuri's neck, "I didn't want you to worry about it unnecessarily before you went out there, but..."

"Maybe...I don't know..." Yuri sighed, slouching a little, "I mean, it didn't help anything that I saw Yurio was in his seat...but before that..."

"Yeah, Viktor's come-back was as smooth as a bear's arse." The teen's voice suddenly resounded, forcing the pair to crane their heads a little to see him leaning against the corner of the hall, "If someone were recording the look on your face, I could point to the frame where you started to look nervous." He kicked off to stand normally, pointing at him directly, "If you weren't consciously thinking about trouble before that moment, you sure were afterwards. Your worry about what was really going on probably pulled on your latent worry about whether you could win gold this weekend."
"I did try to make sure you two didn't run into each other before he skated." Viktor pointed out, giving the teen a look, "But Yuri seemed happy to see you, so I didn't shuffle you out right away like I probably should have." A finger went up to waggle at the blonde, "And again, without a badge, you shouldn't be down here."

"ISU staff let me through." Yurio retorted, putting his hand back in his pocket, "Otabek's about to skate, so I came to wish him good luck. If you two are done throwing a pity party though, come watch him with me. Maybe you'll get inspired so you can skate again tomorrow like you normally do. You can still turn this thing around."

The older Russian looked at his partner and shrugged, "It won't hurt. Might give you some sense of normalcy to be in the audience like we usually do while waiting." He reached into his coat and withdrew Yuri's blue-framed glasses, giving them over so he could see normally again.

Yuri nodded, put his frames on and drew in a deep, but still strained breath, before turning his attention back to the call at hand, "Phichit-kun...we're going to go sit in the stands and watch the rest of the Short Program."

"Okay. Rau kui gan thi lang. Feel better, Yuri."

"I do a little already. Thanks for calling."

Beep. 'Call ended.'

Brown eyes went between the two Russians, "So what happened to Mikhail then? Why isn't he here? If you went so far to try and keep it a secret from me, it must be serious..."

Viktor was a bit reluctant to answer, "I only know the basics..."

"The idiot fell off a roof and broke his back." Yurio answered in his stead, standing side-face to get the pair to follow him more quickly, and watched them push to stand, "He waited a whole day to let anyone do something about it. Made us take him all the way back to Moscow like everything was fine before he admitted he had to go see a doctor. I was just texting him with Okukawa before you started your show."

"...Is he okay then...? If he's texting you guys..." Yuri asked anxiously, clipping both ear-buds to the magnetic docks on the front of the collar. He felt Viktor's fingers slide through his own after that, and they followed the blonde towards the curtain to rink-side.

"They injected cement, late last night, into the bone he crushed." Yurio explained, walking quickly, "This late in the day, he's probably home already. In that case, he's fine." He turned his head to the side to glance back at his Asian rival over his shoulder, "We just didn't know that until you were getting on the ice."

"I didn't want you to go out there worrying about whether he was ever going to walk again." Viktor went on, "You already had enough on your plate. Minako-sensei says he plans on being at NHK still."

The relief of knowing 'the big secret' was a weight off the young skater's shoulders. He heaved a still-pained sigh, but leaned in a little to walk a bit closer to his partner, "So then what was he doing on a roof in the first place...? Didn't he say he was going back to your hometown?"

"Yes, but I have no idea about the rest." The Russian answered with a slight shrug, then turning his eyes to glance at the back of Yurio's head, "Do you know?"
The teen glanced back, pulling the curtain away with one hand, "He never actually said.

Chapter End Notes

Molodyets = Good job.

Sa was dee krab = Hi.

Rau kui gan thi lang = Talk to you later.
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FIFTY

"The score for Seung-gil Lee...90.15."

The crowd was already cheering for the Korean when the trio came back into the stands, rounding the few corners before arriving at the seating box where cued-up athletes, and those who'd already finished (if they were so inclined,) were waiting. With the Men's Singles having such a small playing field at Cup of China, there were a lot of seats available; front and center, directly behind the stand where the cameras and judges were set up.

Viktor held to his partner's hand as they went through, though paused as he found Yuri wasn't following. The young skater's eyes were turned up at the four-sided projector high above the rink, showing Seung-gil and his coach just-then leaving the kiss and cry. The score was all Yuri was looking at though.

"Yuri...?"

Brown eyes turned around, taking a step forward to continue walking like he'd paused for nothing. When they finally managed to get to the seats they wanted, Viktor was already suspect of what his partner was thinking, and waited for him to sit before following suit.

"How bad was it...?" Yuri finally asked, rubbing his thigh where he'd previously hit the rink-wall with it.

The Russian was hesitant, stalling for time by bringing up the hand he'd been holding and kissing the fingers, then keeping it there for a moment.

The younger skater just eyeballed him, "Viktor, how bad was it?"

"Are you sure you want to talk about that right now? Yuri..."

"I'd rather find out from you than anyone else," He answered, a worried look on his face, "I know it was bad...I messed up every jump but the Axel, and I completely missed the flying entry on one of my spins... Did I score less than 75?"

The Russian's eyes went down, and it told Yuri almost everything he needed to know.

"Next to take the ice is Kazakhstan's Otabek Altin...!"

"OTABEEEEEK! DAVAAAAAAAI!" Yurio cried out, all but crawling over the top of the railing as he waved to get a sign that he'd been heard.

The pair behind Yurio clapped dutifully, and even though their eyes followed the older teen out onto the ice from where he'd entered from rink-side, they were looking through him all the same. Their minds were entirely elsewhere. Yuri stopped clapping early, reaching for his phone and holding it between his hands quietly, tempted to go looking up what his numbers ended up actually totaling, but scared to find out, too. He looked aside when he saw Viktor's hand come down over his own.

"Please don't make me take this from you." The Russian asked, "I'll tell you what you scored when
we're back in the hotel room. Try not to stew over it for now. The number isn't so catastrophic that you can't still recover with a good Free Program."

"...Viktor..."

"Trust me." The man went on, giving his husband's hands a light squeeze, "Trust me and give it a little time."

Yuri finally looked back down at where he could see the bottom of his phone past Viktor's grasp, but then sighed and nodded, voluntarily giving the device over by letting it go.

The Russian blinked at him, but saw that Yuri was at least doing his best to not give in to temptation. He quietly took the phone and slipped it back into the inside-coat-pocket he'd kept it in previously, "Domo."

"You think I can still recover from this...so..." Yuri started, leaning in closer to wedge his left arm under the back of his husband's, reaching forward to take his hand while clinging to that same arm with his other hand as well. He set his cheek against Viktor's shoulder and huffed a sigh to himself, "...I'll put my faith in you like always, and trust to hope that I won't mess up tomorrow, too."

Otabek was making the rounds around the rink while he gained his senses on the ice, feeling the energy of the room, and the eyes of the judges on him.

Unlike the previous year, none of his garb was light in color. In contrast, it was almost entirely black, with embroidery in silver and dark blue, shimmering in segments with the glimmer of onyx. The outfit looked like something out of 18th century aristocracy, with a fitted long-coat, figure-hugging waist-coat underneath of it, fitted breeches, dark grey spats over his black skates, and light grey suede gloves.

He found his way to center and scratched to a stop.

*Sorry, Yuri...I'll have to capitalize on your collapse and take Gold from you.*

['Requiem - Dies Irae *specifically* on YouTube channel 'fanworldmusic']

An orchestra rose up into the rafters, powerful and heavy. A choir of Latin singers accompanied it. Otabek slowly rose from a half-bowed position, making wide, slow, sweeping motions as he slid backwards along the ice. His body moved like the conductor of that self-same orchestra, gesturing at the audience with the power of a man who could bend them to his will.

And then the music paused... So did he. Both arms were up, ready for the next chapter.

*Dies irae, Dies illa*

He twisted around, drawing the audience into a serpentine step sequence right off the bat. The energy was intense, almost every emphatic syllable of the choir earning a thrust of an arm or a kick, and a spin or twist.

*Solvet saeclum in favilla*  
*Teste David cum Sibylla*

The older teen pushed towards the short end of the rink, pulling out of the step-sequence with a long outside spread-Eagle into a triple Axel. The audience roared its approval, waving their teal and gold flags excitedly. The Hero of Kazakhstan was about to steal the night, if not with his performance, then by his choice of music alone.
He thrust himself into his first spin, going low with one skate out, barely scratching the surface of the ice as he reached up with one hand to counter-balance.

\textit{Quantus tremor est futurus}

He crouched from the right skate to the left and continued the spin, thrusting his right arm out behind himself as far as it could while the left held to the boot of his skate.

\textit{Quando judex est venturus}

Rising up again and pushing out of the spin, he waved his arms forward, one at a time, in grand upward gestures, scratching each skate in succession of steps to the thrum of the music.

\textit{Cuncta stricte discussurus}

Otabek moved back towards center, twizzling and twisting, arms up and about with dramatic flair. His footwork was impeccable, kicking up a storm of ice as he carved his way down the rink.

\textit{Dies irae, Dies illa}
\textit{Solvet saeclum in favilla}

He vaulted into a Quad Salchow, triple Toe-loop combination jump, landing easily and skating off backwards.

\textit{Teste David cum Sybilla}

The Kazakhstani made his way down the length of the rink, turning with speed as he rounded the short end of the ice in a Cantilever, leaning as far back as he could to drag his fingertips across the ice.

\textit{Quantus tremor est futurus}

He started moving backwards again, watching the wall for the right moment... He pushed through a Walley jump, and then kicked off into his final \textit{major} jump...a Quad Lutz. His form going in was good, but his skate twisted as he landed, forcing him to over-rotate and drop one hand to the ice before moving backwards again to finish it out.

Yurio was on the edge of his seat, "Damn! So close!"

Viktor sat between them, and all Yuri could do from his side was rub his hip where his own quad Lutz had left him with a bruised leg and a shattered ego.

\textit{Quando judex est venturus}
\textit{Cuncta stricte discus surus}

Regaining his focus, Otabek launched into a Death Drop camel-spin, one arm ahead as the other was wrapped around his torso. He dipped a little to pick up speed, morphing the standard spin into a catch-foot camel spin, reaching back to grab his knee and foot with both hands.

\textit{Quantus tre-e-mo-or e-est fu-you-turus}
\textit{Dies irae, Dies illa}

He let go of his leg and threw himself to land on it, continuing the spin with his arms out to the side. As the revolutions continued, he slowly twisted his core to face the rafters, one arm up and the other down, a finger just above the ice in a layback spin.
Yuri watched the performance with a slightly dead look in his eyes, not sure anymore that this particular show was the best sort to ‘inspire’ him to do better. The music and the power of the younger skater just left him feeling small and fiercely intimidated.

Even over-rotating the Lutz... The young skater thought pensively, ...at least he landed it without crashing into anything.

The final move the Short Program; an intense combination spin. Otabek started with a sweeping descent into a sit-spin with a twist variation, left arm straight up above him.

He brought his arm down and stuck his free leg out, reaching for his skate with both hands, tucking in his chin and keeping his head low.

He rose up from the sit-spin and grabbed his blade, pulling it behind himself, and then pulling the leg even higher into a Y-spin. When he let the boot go, he kicked that leg far to the side to build momentum again, twisting into a corkscrew spin.

With the last violin-string of the music, Otabek stabbed the ice with his toe-pick and came to an abrupt stop, panting heavily as he looked down and to the side, the opposite arm out behind him.

The stadium filled with the chant of an excited crowd, screaming their approval and adulation, throwing teddy bears and flowers to the ice in appreciation. Otabek rose back to standing normally, holding his fist out to the crowd and then bowing his head in gratitude.

Yurio was clapping proudly, "He's going to be tough to beat now."

Yuri just sank further into his seat.

Moving over to the kiss and cry, the Kazakh sat and waited with his coach. He brooded over his flubbed Lutz, looking at the floor in front of him silently with his arms crossed.

"The score for Otabek Altin...108.67!"

"He can get over 110 if he fixes the Lutz." Yurio went on, "I'll bet he can nail it by the Final."

Viktor leaned to his right, nosing the top of his partner's head where he'd sunk so low that he was leaning against the side of his arm rather than the edge of his shoulder, "Get out of your head, Yuri."

"...I can't help it..." He whined, "How am I going to close a 30 point gap!?"

"By scoring really well on your Free Program like you did at Worlds." The Russian retorted, "Most people routinely score in the 180s and 190s in their Free Skate, but you’ve scored in the 200s several times now. Plus, you aren't sick anymore, so you'll be at your best out there, provided you get out of your own head."
Yurio pushed to standing after that, stuffing his hands into his hoodie pockets and squeezing past the Nikiforovs' knees to get by. He paused only long enough to wave back at them, "I'm going to go hassle Otabek about taking me someplace fun tonight. You wanna come?" Green eyes were down on hazel.

Yuri just blinked at him, "W-What? Me? Hang out with you and Otabek...?"

"Da."

More blinking. The older skater turned his head to glance at his husband, "...Should I?"

"I believe the operative phrasing was 'do you want to,' not 'should you.'" Viktor retorted.

"Next on the ice, and the last competitor of the Men's Singles Short Program...representing Italy, Michele Crispino!"

"I tried to go with him to a nightclub in Barcelona last year, but he buggered off without me, saying I was too young. I had to sneak out and follow him without him knowing. But he can't ditch both of us." Yurio quipped, "So come be my backup."

"...Oh, I see what's going on here..." Yuri grumbled, a stiff look on his face.

"Tsh... I'm not using you to get into a nightclub. I'm saying you should come so he won't find something else to do. Besides...maybe you need a change of scenery. Not counting competition, when was the last time you were out of earshot of Viktor?"

The Asian skater balked, "...Uh..." He turned and thought hard, but every circumstance that came to mind involved some skating event or another, even as far back as the weekend Viktor had to fly back to Hasetsu for Makkachin's sticky-bun emergency, "...Hm. When I yelled at him and ran off crying before our wedding party?" He said the words dryly, like he wasn't seriously using it as an example.

"See?" The blond pointed out, "Come with us."

Viktor was trying not to say anything, practically biting on his upper lip to prevent his mouth from opening. All he could think of was his conversation with his Uncle the night of the Trophée de France Banquet. The walk in the rain and the discussion about letting Yuri go to do things with other people for a change.

It's not like he hasn't had opportunity to go off on his own. The Russian thought, ...He's just never really done so.

"...It's just...such short notice..." Yuri stammered, trying to make excuses.

"It's not like Otabek's agreed to anything yet." The blonde explained, "If you don't want to come then fine, but at least think about it. Whatever you decide, we'll all be at the hotel anyway, so we'll just meet in the lobby if you choose to come with us." He pulled his right hand out of his pocket and extended it in a low arc, "I'm gonna go now either way."

"Oh, o-okay..." The older figure said stiffly, finally pushing to stand up. He let go of his husband long enough to give the teen his hug and send him on his way, waving weakly as Yurio rounded the corner and went out of sight.

Viktor pushed to stand behind him, stepping forward to slide his arm behind the younger man's back, "Why didn't you say you'd go?"
"Hah?"

"You're acting like no one's ever wanted to hang out with you before. You don't exactly need my permission to go. If you want to go with them, then just say so."

"...That's...that's not it." Yuri said, turning slightly to be more-absorbed into the embrace than he already was, "...I'm just not sure my head's in it right now. All this unresolved stuff from my Short Program...I'd be bad company until I figure it out."

"Let's head back early then." Viktor suggested, "Maybe you'll get what you need before they're even ready to leave."

"...Are you saying I should go?" The younger skater was a bit surprised, "What are you going to do...?"

"Wait for you to come back?" The Russian huffed a laugh, "I don't know. Maybe I'll call my Uncle and see how he's doing. I'm sure he'll want to know how today went, if he wasn't watching it himself anyway." He raised his hands up and rubbed his partner's shoulders a little, pushing him forward at the same time to get him to start walking, "Uncle Mimi told me I should let you go be with other people anyway. Yurio's right at least on that end...maybe you do need a change of scenery for a little while. Something so entirely different from what you've come to expect that it pulls you out of this funk you've fallen into."

"...I'm not in a funk..." Yuri argued pitifully, letting himself be pushed around the corner and back into the hall that lead under the stands.

"Would you rather I say depression?"

"Are you diagnosing me now, Dr. Nikiforov?" Brown eyes turned back to give his partner a look, "I know I'm depressed...but I also scored really badly tonight. If it's less than 75 then it's as low as it was when I was still in Juniors. I think I'm entitled to be a little depressed about it."

"Maybe." Viktor shrugged, moving back around to his husband's side to take his hand normally, "Point is...you need a break. I think this might be good for you. So let's get back to the hotel and sort all this out so you can go have a little fun, okay? It'll be a neat change of pace for you to be the oldest one in the group for once."

Yuri huffed a sigh, but then nodded, "...Okay..."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FIFTY ONE

The shuttle ride back to the event hotel was made in silence. Yuri idly listened to the music from his commandeered phone with his headset, soothed by both the sound of the songs, and Viktor slowly stroking his hair. He could hear the periodic jingle of his phone getting a new text message, but Viktor never motioned to get the device from his coat to see what it was.

He only finally gave it back when they were actually back in their room; the texts were from Yuri's mom, saying she wished him good luck on his skating but that she wouldn't be able to watch until the next day. As Yuri held the phone up in front of himself, staring at the texts, Viktor looked over him quietly, leaning on the tall black headboard and waiting. The younger skater finally clicked the phone off and held his head low.

"My mom says good luck. She hasn't been able to watch the show yet. Guess it's been busy at Yu-Topia Katsuki." Yuri grumbled, not even sure what to do with his phone at that point, "Maybe I should warn her."

"Ignore it, or just tell her thank you and leave it at that." The Russian advised, "No sense inviting more trouble."

Yuri nodded, and then hesitated...staring at the screen with the intent of sending the message...but eventually deciding against it and slouching.

"Are you ready then?"

Another reluctant nod.

Viktor stepped in front of his partner and put his hands on the sides of the younger man's arms, pushing him a little gently to make him sit on the edge of the bed before speaking. He drew in a breath, and simply spoke the number, "73.12."

Yuri already knew it was less than 75 given the Russian's tepid reaction to his earlier guess, but hearing the actual number felt like a kick in the gut. He entirely forgot about his phone after that. His hands felt limp where he'd set them to rest on top of his legs, and his eyes, wide open, stared through the Russian's legs and down at the floor.

"Yuri...?"

"...73...12..."

"Mh..." A skeptical huff replied to him.

The look on Yuri's face was almost as pained as when he'd half-flown over the rink-wall after the collision.

Viktor sighed and reached to pat the younger figure gently on the shoulder, "It's like I told the media after you were done...you have a strong Free Program, so you can still beat this thing." He started, leaning down to take a place on his partner's right, setting his chin on the man's shoulder, "But I don't want you going out tonight with this sitting at the back of your mind. You won't be able to have any fun at all if this is all you're thinking about."
"This is really bad...really horrendously bad."

"Yuuko told me once that you hate losing," Viktor said, his hand settling on the blanket behind the skater's opposite hip, and he stroked his side slowly with a thumb, "I'm sure if she were here, she'd tell you to take this proverbial bull by the horns and ride it out as best you can. You may doubt yourself, but you'd never give up, so don't think this score is the end of the road."

"I just...never thought I'd see numbers like this again..." Yuri said with a sigh, leaning back over Viktor's arm to slump onto the comforter to stare at the ceiling, hands up to loosely cover his face, "I feel like I'm right back in the kiss and cry again...and all I want to do is cry."

"You've spent the last hour doing everything you can to avoid it." The Russian pointed out, leaning down onto his side, propping his head up where he curled an arm back against his cheek, "Maybe you just need to let it out."

"...I don't even have tears to cry with right now..." The younger skater pointed out, feeling where his husband's free hand had come to rest on his chest. He softly took it with his left as he raised his right arm to cover his eyes entirely in the crook of his elbow, "Maybe I'm just in shock." He drew in a long breath, "...73.12..."

Viktor watched him without speaking, wondering what to do or say.

*I'd told him everything I can think of already... All we can do is wait and see what happens tomorrow.*

Words didn't seem wanted anymore either way, as the Russian saw his partner slowly shifting on the bed.

The younger skater rose his hands up to the zipper of his team jacket and pulled it down, shrugging out of it, tossing it over the headboard and letting it hang there, and then falling down to his back again. He hesitated a moment, but then turned onto his left side and started backing up, until he felt his husband's chest against him, and reached back to pull at the man's arm. He tugged briefly on the cuff of the heavy coat, holding onto it as he felt the Russian sliding his arm out of it, and then let it go again. The rest need not be said, as Yuri closed his eyes and felt his husband wrap both arms around him, holding him tight, feeling his warm breath against the back of his neck.

The silver Russian waited patiently that way, not sure what else he should do, if anything...waiting for some sign, or none at all.

Yuri fidgeted a little, but then turned his head slightly, "...Can I...ask something...?"

The words came as a bit of a surprise, but Viktor wasn't about tell the man no, "...What is it?"

"...I...want to feel better, but I want to be selfish about it..."

The older man huffed a laugh, and reached to pull the glasses from his husband's face, "Say no more. Leave it to me." He turned to set the frames onto the comforter behind himself, paused there only long enough to fish for something out of his jacket, and then curled right back up again, pressing himself hard against his partner's back, and all the way down his legs. He nibbled a little at the back of Yuri's neck eagerly, the smell of competition still lingering on the man's skin. Hands went all over the younger figure's chest and abdomen, the right coming up over his waist while the left was still pinned under the opposite side. That hand simply made due with sliding down until it could get a grip on Yuri's leg, only able to turn it enough to half-way get a thumb between those same legs before finding itself at the limits of its reach.
The right hand was free to do as it pleased unobstructed though, and as fingers caressed over the side of the lithe skater's small frame, it went further down, tracing over his hip lightly and down the thigh. Viktor pressed his hand harder when he brought it back up, just about to reach between them when Yuri suddenly winced.

"...What happened? What'd I do?" The Russian wondered anxiously.

"...My hip, where I hit the wall..." Yuri answered, the lingering pain still giving him grief, "...It just...really hurt when you ran your hand over it just now..."

"...Ah, sorry..." Viktor said quietly, gently moving his arm past the tender spot to get to where he wanted to go without messing with it anymore. Fingers were starting to paw at the rim of the t-shirt, pulling it up to gain access to the pale skin underneath. The Russian returned to nibbling at his husband's ear as well, kissing the back of Yuri's neck, hoping the momentary interruption wouldn't set back the mood too much.

It was only a minute or two before other clothing was being pushed away, but only just far enough to be useful. By then, Yuri had his left arm curled under the pillow-pile, coming back to wedge his wrist and hand under his cheek, his whole right arm draped over his eyes. Viktor's own right hand was missing, but only for a moment. The feeling of cold, slippery liquid made itself known on Yuri's skin soon thereafter. It warmed up quickly enough as the Russian pressed in close again, the heat of his own skin sliding over him. He rubbed and teased, sliding between his partner's clenched-up legs a little, then up behind him again, hand gently gliding down soft pale skin. He did everything he could to help his partner relax fully before moving on. He had his husband in one hand as the other guided his own presence, sliding it up and down to spread the liquid around, and then finally, slowly, slipping in.

Yuri gasped, his sore leg twitching a little as he felt it all.

The Russian was only half in before he wedged his knee between his partner's thighs, withdrew a little, and then pushed the rest of the way inside.

Another gasp; Yuri's whole frame tensing up slightly. He was hardly given a chance to catch his breath before he could feel the gentle roll of his partner's hips behind him. The arms around him held a little tighter. The Russian's modus operandi was different than normal, going at a slow but steady pace, and never quite going any faster. At most, he'd push in as far as he could go, held for a moment, and then went back to his previous motions.

Yuri turned slightly, more on his back than on his side like before, twisting until he could wedge the arm that had been over his eyes under his partner's head instead, and the rest of his body turned as well. When he settled again, he was 'sitting' sideways against Viktor's lap, and had buried his face into the man's silver-grey hair, fingers running through it until it was a messy heap of its former glory.

The Russian wasted no time, continuing about his lazy thrusts even as his partner had been repositioning himself. His free hand roamed eagerly under the man's t-shirt, and he listened intently to the increasingly desperate breaths against the top of his head. Fingers grasped a little tighter, and Viktor relished in hearing his partner's first vocal gasp. He reached his free arm and hooked Yuri's right leg behind the knee to pull it higher, and finally started moving a little faster.

The black jeans Yuri had worn back from the skating event were still mostly on though, so when one leg got pulled up, the other basically went with it. The Russian held him there for a little while, and then capitalized on it, moving to sit upright and pull those same legs against his shoulders. He paused only long enough to pull Yuri's shoes off and toss them to the floor on the other side of the
headboard. He did that not only to avoid getting knocked in the head by them, but also so he could watch for his partner's toes to curl and extend at his touch.

Viktor held those legs against himself for a few moments, but seeing his partner lying before him, arms curled up over his head, eyes closed and head turned aside, a look of contented surrender on his face, hair tousled just-so against the pillows...he wanted to get in closer. The jeans prevented him from being able to do so though, keeping his partner's legs fairly-well together. One last push, and he moved his hands from where they held firmly around Yuri's waist, and moved them down to wedge under the back of his hips, pulling him closer and then up a little bit against himself. Those same hands worked deftly to pull the jeans up to the younger man's knees, and released one leg fully, then pulled them both astride his waist as he leaned in overtop.

Hazel eyes opened a little as the Russian came in closer, gaining a slight cherry-red hint to them in the dim light of the room.

Red... Viktor thought, seeing his reflection in them, The color of passion. Is he about to let his Eros run loose?

The look on Yuri's face was naïve though, almost innocent, cheeks flushed like it was the first time all over again. The Russian was about to lean down to kiss him, but hesitated suddenly.

I should be able to feel him like this... He thought, slate eyes turning down between them briefly, seeing then the reason for the lack of his husband's presence. He grimaced a little, ...Ah...he went soft already... Did I mess up?

The younger man raised his legs up higher around his partner's frame, ankles crossing above his back. Regardless of his physical state, he still wanted his husband's touch.

No... The Russian corrected himself, I see what's going on...

He'd all but come to a stop by then, and he abruptly changed course. Passion switched to comfort, and he lowered himself down to his partner's chest, arms going under him to pull him closer as he nuzzled in close to Yuri's neck. He felt the younger man's arms go loosely up over his shoulders, palms and fingers gently grazing the back of his blazer.

 Barely a minute passed that way before the Russian felt a warm, wet smear against his cheek, and he pulled up from his long hug to find Yuri's eyes finally giving up.

Yuri tried to hide the tears as soon as he realized they were there, but found Viktor putting his hand in the way, resting it on his cheek. Instead of trying to get past him, the younger figure simply clung to his partner's fingers, "...I'm...s-sorry, I don't know why I'm..."

"Shh." The Russian cooed, "I had a feeling they'd come out eventually. It's okay." He moved his thumb across his partner's pale skin, touching it to his lower lip briefly before moving both hands under Yuri's shoulders to hoist him upright. He shifted his legs beneath where his partner now sat, crossing them under and partly around his hips, folding them tightly to bring the man in closer before wrapping his arms around his small frame again, "You're safe here. You can cry if you want." The right hand slowly started moving up and down against Yuri's back, "Or do you just want me to keep going?"

"I-"

His thought was cut off by the sound of his phone buzzing where it had been forgotten in the blankets earlier, and his eyes went wide.
"...I..."

Viktor huffed, slouching a little where he sat, "You can answer it. We already know who it is."

Yuri blinked, but then nodded, turning to the side to finagle at the sheets where he could see the edge of his phone's light, and just as they'd suspected, it was Yurio. Reluctantly, and that was only because of the precariousness of his present situation, he clicked into the call and held it to his ear, "Hey." His free arm came up to rub the remaining tears off his face.

"You coming or what?" The teen asked immediately, "We're trying to figure out where to go. If you don't come down soon, you won't get to pick."

"Oh." The skater answered nervously, "Er...well..." He looked down to his partner, seeing where those blue eyes were glancing back; Viktor was trying his absolute best to avoid the temptation of moving suddenly while the call was still active, "...Give me 10 minutes."

"Fine...10 minutes."

The call ended and the screen went dark; Yuri looked at it anxiously before finally tossing it aside again, and returning his eyes to his partner, "...You heard?"

"It's not a lot of time."

"Well?" The younger figure posed; the call had entirely uprooted him from his previous mindset, and the urge to finish what they'd started was growing, "Go go go!"

The sudden demand to hustle caught Viktor off-guard, but Yuri was already pushing him down onto his back. He didn't stand a chance.

. . .

It was already dark by the time a shuttle took the awkward trio to the riverfront, but Yurio had bulldozed his way to making the final pick, and no one was about to argue with him once he'd made up his mind. The Bund at night was a dazzling display of neon lights, incredible architecture, and an intense bustle of people enjoying the nightlife. But the thing Yurio had in mind was the late-night river cruise.

"Wow..." Yuri started, looking past the wharf, "This place looks totally different in the dark."

"...You came through here already?" The blond gawked at him.

"Well, Viktor and I have been here since Monday, so..."

"Don't tell me you already did the boat thing!"

"No, we did the private tour during the day."

"Oh." The teen stopped short of a jealous freak-out, "Well."

"We should go before the ship leaves without us." Otabek pointed out, holding his finger up towards the dock, "The last one that has food leaves in 15 minutes."
Yurio was off with a start, and Yuri gave chase, trying to keep up and keep an eye out, "Don't run so fast!"

"Run faster then!"

"Give me a break, *I jumped into a wall earlier.*" The older skater jeered, feeling the throb on his right hip already.

The younger figure abruptly stopped, almost as though *he* were about to run into a wall, and Yuri crashed right into him.

Otabek stoically pulled up the rear and gawked down at them, "Will you two quit messing around?"

"He started it!" They both barked back at the same time, pointing at one another from where they'd ended up on the ground in an awkward pile, "NO I DIDN'T."

"Yuri..."

"What?" They both asked, again in unison, trying to get back to their feet.

The Kazakhstani just glowered at them, "*Mh.*" Brown eyes turned unblinking towards the older one of the two, "You should be more careful." Then towards the younger, "And you shouldn't set traps."

Both skaters were up on their feet by then, and then nodded solemnly together, "O-Okay..."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FIFTY TWO

Twenty minutes and a shower later, Viktor Nikiforov scanned the quiet room. The awkwardly empty space where the bed had originally been, before being shoved base-board first against the window, the big chair that had been moved out of the way, the desk that had been pressed against the wall with nowhere for the office chairs to go...in fact, the way almost everything had been moved to the other end of the room. It was just him, standing in a hotel-room-shaped void.

This is really weird.

Water dripped from the tips of his silver-grey hair, even with the towel over his head. A pale grey bathrobe clung precariously to his form, barely tied together in the front. He'd managed to lose a slipper somewhere between where he'd been standing and the bathroom door where he'd put it on.

It's so quiet.

He shuffled across the room to sit on the edge of the bed, looking out through the parted curtains to the city far below. Even the muted sounds of Shanghai seemed too silent for the Russian's taste. He ruffled the towel on his head again before letting it fall around his shoulders, and then reached for where his phone was charging on the nightstand.

He clicked through a dozen or more messages that he'd missed since the start of the Short Program, most of them from Chris, Yakov, and a few from Mila, and then moved into Instagram. He twisted where he sat until he was laying on his stomach, propped up on his elbows with his phone close to his face, ankles crossed where he had his knees folded up behind himself. The other slipper fell off by then, too.

As always, his inbox was awash with unread comments, new follower notifications, and +likes, and as always, so he ignored the inbox outright. There was never much point in trying to clear it when it'd be full again by the end of the weekend, or even the end of the day during a competition. Instead, he twiddled his way through his feed, checking for the inevitable drama that would surround his husband's appalling failure earlier in the evening.

'YURI NIKIFOROV goes from Gold at Skate Canada to Last Place at Cup of China with an unprecedented, All-Time new Low Score. Is this SOCHI all over again?'

'What Happened? 10 Things Yuri Nikiforov Doesn't Want You to Know.'

'Is This the End of the Road for Viktor Nikiforov's Coaching Career? How Yuri Went from First to Last in less than 3 minutes.'

It was depressing to see the feed so full of unofficial, bogus 'news' articles, but so long as he was being tagged into them, he couldn't help but see them. Half of him desperately wanted to comment, to dispel the flagrant gossip with the cold-hard facts, but the other half knew he'd already done what he could in the post-skate interview, so nothing more truly needed to be said.

I just hope Yuri doesn't see all this. He's done fairly well to avoid this sort of thing in the middle of competition, but if things with Otabek and Yurio get awkward, he might check into things just out of
boredom... Maybe I should warn him not to look? Viktor thought to himself, but then shook his head, Nah, if I warn him, he'll just get curious and look for sure. Best trust him to let it be until we're done here.

It occurred to him then that he still hadn't called his Uncle like he said he would, and checking the time, it was only about 2pm in Moscow. Shrugging, he pulled up the man's contact information and sent a FaceTime request. It rang a few times, and eventually, the other end of the line was answered.

A disheveled-looking Mikhail was staring back at his phone, "Privet, Viktor."

"Kak dela?"

"Neploho." The older figure tried to push his hair back out of his face a little, [What the Hell happened to Yuri? You look too upbeat for what I saw out there earlier.]

Viktor's expression changed, [Well, I was going to ask how you are first, but I guess if you want to go into that already...]

[Er...] Mikhail stammered, [Oh. Sorry.]

The younger silver shrugged, [Minako-sensei said you fell off a roof. Whose was it?]

[Your father's. It's an old past-time of mine...being on the roof, I mean, not falling off of it.] The older man laughed nervously, [The auroras are particularly nice to look at that far north, so I did like I used to, back when I was young and could take a punch without dying from it. Unfortunately, I slipped and fell right off the damn thing. Your father didn't even try to catch me! It was unbelievable! He was standing right there.] He had his hands up, expressive as ever, the phone sitting on his coffee-table so he didn't have to hold onto it, [All that cuz Yura wanted to beg for a ticket to Shanghai.]

Viktor cocked an eyebrow, [Forgive me for saying so, but Konstantin doesn't exactly come across like the kind of guy who would help like that.]

Mikhail glowered, but realized his nephew had a point, [Okay...well...think about how different it would be if there was no skating and no Yuri for him to get angry about.]

[That would make mine a completely joyless and meaningless existence.] The younger figure huffed, [Was that a serious question?]

[Hmmmh...I'm on pain meds. I think I'm stupid right now.] The elder rubbed his face with one hand, [Sorry. Where is Yuri anyway? You guys are usually tied at the hip.]

[Yurio invited him out to go hang with Otabek. He'll be gone for a few hours.]

Mikhail immediately had his phone in-hand again, [And you let it happen!??]

[Y-Yeah.] Viktor was taken aback a little, pulling his face away from his own phone like he thought his Uncle might suddenly jump through it, [I'm trying to be good. That, and Yurio specifically didn't invite me to come, too, so I didn't make a fuss.]

[I'm proud of you.]

The younger man gave a look, slightly embarrassed, [You make it sound like this was such a sacrifice.]

[Well, after the fuss you put up about it in France...]
That was dif-

I know, I know, you were worried, I get it. Point is, it's good to see that you \textit{can} let him go, especially with Yuratchka.] He paused a moment, but then got a little serious again, [So, tell me what happened. I tuned in just as Yuri was about to start, and all I saw was him looking like a nervous wreck already while \textit{you} were hiding behind the rink-wall.]

Viktor sighed and buried his face in the blankets for a few seconds, then came up, but spoke the words against the sheets, keeping his eyes low, [He was doing great right up until the moment he put blades to ice. I mean, he'd been nervous about Cup of China the whole week going into it, but it wasn't \textit{serious}. We still got to be all touristy and he \textit{seemed} to have fun. But then he got out there and...] The younger Russian raised his head, [...] It's like he had a \textit{complete mental collapse}. He started having a panic attack and he just fell apart. I hid behind the wall when it seemed like he'd only just noticed you weren't in the audience. We were trying to avoid telling him until after.]

[Yura was saying he thought it might've been because of the pressure to win Gold, like you.] [\textit{Mh}. Yuri had a panic attack at last year's Cup of China, too, since he was worried he wasn't good enough.] Viktor thought back on it, cringing at the memory.

'I don't know what I should do... Should I kiss you or something?'

'\textit{No! Just have more faith than I do that I'll win! You don't have to say anything, just STAND BY ME!}"

[I wasn't really much help back then either.] The Russian admitted sullenly, [He managed to pull through that one almost entirely on his own, but...I guess that's because he had time to get his frustrations out \textit{before} he actually went out there to skate. He was already skating when it happened this time.]

[How does he feel about tomorrow then?]}

[He's worried.] Viktor answered, still keeping his eyes down, staring at the bottom of his phone where it touched the blanket, [I feel bad saying it now, but I told him the other day that since he already won Gold at Skate Canada, he'd have to come practically in last to lose his spot in the Final. I said that to \textit{encourage} him though...not as a challenge to see if I'm \textit{wrong}.]

[It's not like he did this on purpose. You're talking like you think you're responsible for what happened.]

[I put the idea in his head, even if he wasn't aspiring to make it happen.] The skater explained, [I wish you were here. You can talk sense in a way I can't.]

[It's not about sense.] Mikhail explained, pulling out his tablet and looking something up with it, [It's impossible to talk someone down from a panic attack. It was just bad timing that there was no chance for him to calm down before skating.] He paused a moment, touching his fingers to the larger screen, [Yeah, here...] He held the tablet up so Viktor could see the screen, though it was too small to see on his own phone, [Yuri's done well on his home turf, and was considered one of Japan's best skaters even back then, but he never really shone in international competition. Not until the year he went to Sochi. After that, he had a total upset when he went back home for Nationals, coming in 11th, which is really bad even for him...then he didn't qualify for Four Continents or Worlds that year.] He set the tablet back down again and slouched against the back of his couch, [So here he is, this guy who'd never qualified for the Final before...goes to his first one and has a complete meltdown, coming in dead last by a big margin. Then \textit{you} show up saying you're going to make him \textit{win} the next one, and
there's a huge amount of pressure just to make it to the Final again. He finally gets there, effectively redeems himself with Silver, goes on to win Four Continents and Worlds outright...and now everyone thinks he's as good as his coach. Five-time World Champion, blah blah blah...] Mikhail huffed, [You get it. Trying to live up to that standard is probably killing him more than any other expectation anyone's ever had for him. I clearly don't know how you've been handling it so far, but-]

[Badly, apparently.]

[...But you're also his spouse, and that changes things. You're not just his coach, and it skews how he thinks about everything you say.]

Viktor sighed into the blankets.

[It's not as easy to get into someone's head as it is to get into their heart. All you can do is keep trying. As long as he knows you're still there for him when he's done, even if he does badly, he won't give up.] The elder went on, [I'll bet, tomorrow, he'll go out there like someone lit a fire under his ass and really kill it. If he somehow wins Gold despite his SP upset...it'll really help rebuild his ego. He needs to find some way of having faith in himself again.] Mikhail said simply, looking to his phone for some reply. All he saw was his nephew's silvery hair covering half his face while he still stared downward, [Stay the course, Vivi.]

Viktor looked up at that, the comment ringing a faint bell of familiarity somewhere at the back of his mind.

[Yuri may be an anxious little dog for as long as he lives, but you're his giant, shockingly good-looking Russian wolf-bear-dog. No matter what happens, always be there for him, and he'll always bounce back.] Mikhail said, finding it slightly amusing that his nephew was wracking his brain over the nickname, [Anyway...Minako's bored out of her skull right now. If you have nothing more pressing to do, maybe you could go bother her for a while.]

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"Why am I wearing this?" Yuri asked dubiously, a paper band around his head with 'NERVOUS' written on it.

Yurio pointed his fork at him, "Because you are."

The trio were in the interior section of the river boat, the two Yuris on one side of a table and Otabek on the other.

Yuri had barely touched his fare...though that was partly because of the 'crown' Yurio had fashioned for him from one of the disposable menus, "That's...not really what I asked..."

Otabek sipped at the small tea-cup in his hand, "You're nervous. So we're telling the whole world about it. When you stop being nervous, you can take it off."

"Sheesh, you guys are really ganging up on me..." Yuri sighed, trying to look small, "Is this because of my Short Program...? Is this some horrible punishment for messing up?"

"We're trying to prove a point." The blonde answered, poking at the rice on his plate, chewing on a piece of chicken at the same time, "You said earlier that you got all worked up about everyone
expecting you to win Gold. They don't know how you'd react to that kind of pressure though. Unlike me or Otabek or Viktor, or even your Thai friend Pitch-it-"

"Phichit." Yuri deadpanned him.

Yurio ignored the correction, "...You have absolutely zero moxy."

"What does that even mean?"

"Most athletes rise to the challenge when competition is involved." Otabek pointed out, leaning an elbow back onto the top of his bench-seat, holding the little tea-cup up a little bit in a gesture at the older skater. "But you? I'm not even sure why you're in this thing, if you collapse so hard when people expect you to succeed after you've had a little taste of it. You have no moxy."

Yuri poked at the baby-corn in front of him, practically analyzing the color and texture as he thought about the words being said to him. He huffed a sigh to himself and pulled the paper band off his head, looking at the letters where he held it on the table top.

"Why are you in skating?" Otabek asked stiffly.

Hazel eyes rose to see him, "...A friend of mine from home introduced me to skating through Viktor, and ever since, I've just...wanted to be like him. For a long time, I was just excited about the prospect of being able to skate the same ice as him, but then when he came to be my coach, everything got all crazy." Yuri admitted, "Viktor helped give me the confidence that I was lacking before, and now...everything's moving too fast for me to keep up."

"Maybe you shouldn't have let him turn the rings into more than what they were." Yurio suggested, almost under his breath, "The way you protested about it last year, it's obvious that getting engaged isn't what you meant by them."

"...Mhhh..." The older skater thumbed his ring under the table, "That was last year though."

"Maybe the thing that moved too fast wasn't peoples' expectations about your skating. Maybe it was how fast you let Viktor get into your pants."

Yuri's face was bright red, "Y-Yuri! You shouldn't say stuff like that!"

Otabek just glanced between them, moving his eyes from one to the other as they spoke and retorted back and forth. *Sip.*

"All the times that people have been super annoying reminding me that you two idiots are married, maybe it never occurred to you that you are." The fork was pointing again, and a grain of rice fell to the older figure's lap.

"I'm not sure how you can sit there and suggest I don't realize that I'm married." Yuri raised an eyebrow, pushing the fork away with a finger on the end of it, "It's almost been a year already. I got over my disbelief over the whole thing a long time ago."

"But you still hold Viktor in such high regard, like he's on some pedestal." The teen said, stabbing a piece of beef with the fork instead, "But really, he's just some forgetful jackass who moved into your family's house and told you to start buying him groceries. *Now*, he's a forgetful jackass who lives in your house, asks for groceries, and sometimes puts his dick in your butt."

"OHMYGOD." Yuri would've crawled under the table if he could have. He could feel the refuge of a comatose-sleep tempting him behind his eyes, but he resisted it at all cost,
"I can't even believe you just said that."

Otabek was trying not to smirk, desperately holding onto his image despite himself.

"My point is...Viktor's got moxy. He knows what he wants and he's determined to get it. He wanted Gold, so he won it. He wanted your ass, so he flew to Japan to get it. What do you want?"

Yuri was still too busy being humiliated by the commentary to know how to answer, but it seemed like the teen had done so for him.

"Is it still the whole 'eating katsudon' thing?"

"Ah..." The older skater stammered, trying to compose himself, "I...guess so... I want to keep winning gold, too, but... I'm not Viktor. People can't just expect me to win all the time because I did well recently. I'm not so good at all this that I can pick my score like he can."

"...Pick his score? What's that supposed to mean?" Yurio grumbled.

The Kazakh peeked from behind the tea-cup, setting it down gently and listening curiously.

"Viktor asked what he should get for his Short Program score back in France. I told him 119."

"Y-You TOLD HIM to score 119!? How is- WHY!?" The blonde barked, "That's just over my best SP score!"

Yuri just smiled nervously, "...That's part of why I picked it." He got a little coy, turning back to look at his plate, "He asked how much I wanted him to outscore you by, and all I could think of was the score you got at last year's GPFinal that won you Gold, when I wanted it so badly for myself." He shook his head though, "But that's just the thing...Viktor's a true genius. I can tell him a number and he can skate a program to get that score. His old world records were done with choreography that didn't even include some of the more difficult elements...like the tano jumps that you started doing to up the ante." His eyes turned back to the teen next to him, "I'm not a genius. I can't compare to him...I never will. I can take his last name, and call him my coach and my husband, and maybe win a few Gold medals of my own along the way, but in the end, he's still the legend, and I'm just..."

"...The guy that went from last place at Sochi to second place at Barcelona." Yuri finished, "By a hair's width. If you hadn't flubbed the jump during your Short Program back then, you'd be the one who got Gold instead of me, in spite of the tano jumps I started doing." He thumbed over at Otabek suddenly, "And also, he should've won bronze. JJ should never have gotten on the podium at all after he fucked up so bad."

"Cheers." Otabek raised his cup again.

"Language." Yuri chided.

"So...what then?" Yurio went back to the original question, "You want to keep eating katsudon with Viktor, and you only get it if you win Gold, right?"

"R-Right..."

"So go back to that."

"Eh?"

"Ah...I remember all that." The older teen finally chimed in, "How the commentators would say you
thought about your favorite food when you skated Eros. Why did you stop? It seemed to work for you."

Yuri balked, "Er...well... Viktor told me to..."

Both pairs of eyes blinked at him.

"It was a stupid idea to think of it anyway!" Yuri laughed nervously, waving his hands around, "I had no Eros of my own to pull from so I thought about food as a substitute! It was super immature!"

The Kazakhstani reached for the porcelain teapot next to his empty plate and poured another cup of the oolong it was steeping. "Try it again tomorrow."

"...Hah?"

"Forget what other people are saying, about how you should win Gold so you and Viktor square off for the Final evenly. The Final isn't just about you or him anyway. There's four other skaters who all want Gold, too." Otabek explained, holding the small cup close to his face, blowing on the hot liquid to cool it off enough not to burn himself when he drank it, "Think only about what you want...and what you want is katsudon. There's only one way to get it...so go out there tomorrow and skate your 'Ode to Pork Cutlets.' The Gold medal is just currency for you...and if you don't win it, it's not the end of the world."

"...O-Otabek..." Yuri was surprised by the teen.

"I can only think of one thing that, if I were you, would ever motivate me to fight harder than ever to win." He went on, "And that's the unbearable thought that someone else might win it instead of me. That I'd be staring up at the podium and watching someone else eating my katsudon." Dark brown eyes stared straight ahead, and the tea-cup was set down quietly, "No one gets my katsudon and lives." That hand came up again, and pointed at the Japanese skater with one finger out, the other three curled in, and the thumb up, looking like a gun.

BANG.

Chapter End Notes

Privet = Hi

Kak dela? = How are you?

Neploho = Not so bad
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FIFTY THREE

Minako was lying on her back on her hotel bed, the television playing something quietly that she wasn't really paying much attention to. She pulled a pillow over her face and groaned dramatically, "This is so boring!" Kicking her legs, she suddenly sat up and squashed the pillow against her lap, "There has to be something to do around here."

Reaching for her phone, she did her best to look up anything at all that she could entertain herself with, but everything that came up was either too far away or too expensive to be worthwhile to do alone, "On occasions like this, without Mari around, it would be easy to just drag Yuri out to do something. But he's probably too busy with trying to sort out what happened today..." She grumbled to herself.

KNOCK... KNOCK KNOCK

"Eh?"

Two dainty bare feet touched down onto the carpet and strolled towards the door, taking a look through the peep-hole. A blurry, pale, grey-haired figure stood outside, much to the woman's confusion.

"...Only two people look like that and both are equally unlikely to be standing in the hall right now." She whispered to herself skeptically, "...But it must be..."

The door was unlocked and unlatched, and Minako leaned down to peek a single grey-blue eye past the crack, seeing two slate eyes peeking right back at her.

"Hii~"

"V-Viktor!" Minako threw the door open, watching as the young Russian rose back to standing upright again, "What are you-? Shouldn't you be with Yuri?" She looked around the hall, "Where is Yuri?"

"He's off on his own adventure tonight."

"But...shouldn't you guys be working out the Free Program for tomorrow...?"

"Sometimes the best thing to do is relax and have fun. That's his training tonight, so he's out with Yurio and Otabek." Viktor answered, turning side-face and extending his bent elbow, "So...since both of our partners are MIA, come drink with me."

She blinked at him, but then looked excited, "Yeah! Stay right here-"

The door closed with a click as the woman rushed back into the room to pull on her shoes and grab her purse and jacket, but just as she was about to get back to grab the handle, she paused. Turning towards the window, past the two queen-sized beds, one of which was covered in Yurio's stuff, the ballerina smiled, "Thank you for seducing Viktor, Yuri...this is way better than just having you tell me their hotel room numbers!"
Following along dutifully, Yuri had taken somewhat of a back-seat to the conversation since the trio departed from the tour boat. He walked next to, and slightly behind, his younger blonde counterpart, listening to their conversation idly. His mind had wondered far and wind since Otabek had 'shot' him though.

'No one gets my katsudon and lives.'

The words echoed in his mind.

'You have no moxy.'

Skating has always been a performance art to me... Yuri thought, looking at the brilliantly-illuminated architecture along the riverfront, It's competitive, sure...but, most of it has been about telling stories and expressing myself on the ice...

"...then where are you skating these days?" He heard Yurio asking, "Kazakhstan keeps losing its bids to host big winter sports events."

"It's not like Almaty is some horrid shanty-town." Otabek explained, "The Medeo Ice Skating Rink is one of the highest-elevation skating rinks in the world."

"Really?"

Yuri turned his head to look at the two.

"It's up in the mountains just outside the city." The Kazakh went on, "Sits in the shadow of a big dam. It's an outdoor rink though so there's no heating, but the view is great, especially in the winter." He pulled out his phone and started to look up photos, careful to keep an eye on where he was walking so as to avoid running into other people, "Once the Final is over, I'll be training there when I can until Four Continents. ...After that, the ice will be gone and I'll have to go back to train inside the city again at the Almaty Arena. The Medeo rink is a really popular tourist place." He finally held out his phone and showed a photo of the rink, surrounded by snowcapped mountains, pine trees, and the valley below, "You should come sometime."

Yurio looked at the photo excitedly, "Yeah!"

"Where will you be training after the Final anyway?" Otabek wondered, taking his phone back to put it away, "The way you bounced around during the off-season, it's like you don't even have a home rink anymore."

"St. Petersburg is technically my home rink, even if I skate in Moscow and Hasetsu sometimes." The teen explained, pausing to take a photo of a giant bronze bull statue as they meandered around the north end of The Bund. The iconic imagery of the Shanghai Oriental Pearl Tower glowed on the eastern bank of the river, "Yakov would have a cow bigger than this if I ever tried to change rinks officially."

"Oh, Yuri..." The Japanese skater said, breaking his silence abruptly.

The teen glanced at him, and saw the figure pointing just up and across the street, "What is it? Did my mention of Yakov suddenly make him appear...?"
"Phsht..." Yuri scoffed, "No, look. Just in front of those windows on either side of the main entrance arches of that building."

The blonde gazed over, but saw nothing initially. Yuri grabbed him by the head from behind and moved it around to help him see in the right direction. The teen's eyes suddenly went as wide as saucers and he took off running as fast as he could, leaving Yuri huffing a laugh to himself as he watched.

"What was that all about?" Otabek wondered, not sure what had gotten the younger skater's attention.

"If there's nothing else in this world besides skating that gets Yuri going...it's cats." The oldest skater explained, looking back long enough to give the subtle hint that they should chase after the Russian Punk, and then starting to jog.

Otabek was perplexed, but followed after briskly. The pair crossed over the road, finally catching up to the teen, and saw him almost in tears where he stood in front of the first of two bronze lion statues.

"YURI TAKE MY PICTURE."

A phone was abruptly shoved into the older skater's hands, and before Yuri could even get a decent hold on it, having it hop between hands briefly until he could catch it, Yurio was already climbing on top of the statue's stone base. In truly dramatic fashion, the teen sat sideway between the big lion's paws and wrapped his arms around its bronze mane, and put on a face like he was oh-so-vulnerable and the stoic lion was his guardian.

"You're not really gonna look at the camera like that." Yuri grimaced, "That's-

"TAKE THE PICTURE, KATSUDON."

"Aright aright...!" The man huffed, backing up a little to get the whole lion into the frame. Jeeze, I wish Phichit-kun was here...he's so much better at taking pictures than I am...

Yurio ended up making him take half a dozen pictures with that lion alone, then moved over to the one further up the building. That one was reclined like the first, but it had its jaws open in a roar, looking more fierce. The blonde yanked Otabek to get into the pictures with him in that case, and the normally-quite-proud-and-mature Kazakhstani let loose briefly. He sat on the back of that lion and pointed forward like the Commander at the head of some fantasy army, a completely serious look on his face, while Yurio clung to the side of it like some noble Watcher.

Just as Yuri thought it was over, still quite entertained by the Russian's reaction, the teen pulled him into the frame too and took a quick selfie with all three of them in sight.

Quite proud of himself, Yurio started typing away into Instagram, "That one's going online for sure."

"...I haven't been online since Friday." Yuri admitted, "The whole internet's probably losing its mind over my horrid Short Program. I'm scared to look."

"Yeah. They are." The teen answered nonchalantly, "It's pretty bad."

The older skater held his head where his hair was still slicked back from earlier in the afternoon, and sighed audibly, "...I have to do better tomorrow..."
"KANPAAAAAAI!"

_Clink._

It was already the 7th round of drinks by then.

The 58th floor of the Shanghai Ritz-Carlton Hotel hosted a restaurant and bar called Flair. It was on the opposite side of the river from the Bund, with the shining yellow glow of the financial and government buildings looking like Christmas decorations from so far away. The Shanghai Oriental Pearl Tower was rather close to them, just to the right of their vantage, with the tourist path of the Bund far ahead.

Viktor set his empty glass down, "This is fun~!"

"Better than sitting around in a hotel room all night!"

"Vyp'em za to, čto my zdes' sobralis', i čtoby čaše sobiralis!" The Russian announced excitedly.

Minako just blinked at him, "I have _no idea_ what you just said, but okay!"

"We should do this more often, that's all!" He 'translated,' then leaned back into his chair.

They were sitting right along the ledge in one of the 3-part sectional couch areas, with a short table in the middle and a quaint yellow lamp sitting on top of it. It was nearly 1am by then, and only 1/4th of the patio was occupied; most of those patrons were sitting at proper tables so they could eat. For the world-class skater and ballerina, sitting on the couches just to drink was well and good enough.

Viktor was fairly toasted already by then, but Minako was barely getting started. She easily had 20 years experience on the Russian's liver...and she'd had the sense to eat before going back to the hotel.

"So what'd you do with Yuri then?" She asked pointedly, sipping at her Sake, "I doubt you just sent him on his way with Yura without having at least talked about his SP."

The Russian kept his head back on the couch, but raised a hand and limply waved it at her, "He'll be fine, I'm sure of it... I told him his score and I helped him feel better and then he cried and then he left."

The ballerina blinked at him, "In that order?"

"Yeah, why?" He looked up, a happy-tired look on his face, cheeks flushed from the alcohol.

"You sent him out the door while he was crying...?"

"What? No way!" Viktor sat up and leaned onto one knee, twisting awkwardly towards her and pointing, "Yurio called and totally upended his train of thought. We got to finish our sexy times before he left, so he was fine."

Minako leaned her side against the back of her part of the couch, looking at him awkwardly, "Hearing about Yuri having any kind of sexy time is so weird. This must be what it's like for kids to walk in on their parents making out."

The silver Russian just laughed and fell back again, draping himself across the sofa like a wet towel,
"Oh you should've seen his face the first time..." His filter was long-gone, "I thought he was going to pass out."

"I don't know if I want to hear this." Minako mused dubiously, "I've known Yuri since he was a baby."

"Really?" Viktor turned his head, his silvery hair tousled against the fabric of the headrest, "How come you've known him so long? I thought he only knew you from ballet."

"Oh, no, his mom and I were in school together. Haven't you ever heard Hiroko call me 'Senpai'?"

"I don't remember!" He laughed, reaching into his coat to find his phone, "I wonder where he's at right now? It's really late." The numbers swirled on the touch-screen, and he blinked one eye at a time in an attempt to decipher them, "...I can't read right now apparently...!"

"Did you come get me on an empty stomach?" She quirked a brow at the skater.

"Maybe~!"

"No wonder you're so sauced already." She poked his shoulder, "You should get something! You're drinking like a lightweight!"

"I'm not hungry though!" Viktor protested, "I haven't had an appetite!"

"Why not? When was the last time you did eat something?"

"Lunch I think. Yuri and I got something ahead of the Short Program, but I haven't wanted to eat since." He got rather sullen at that point.

"...You're not blaming yourself for what happened, are you?" Her poking changed to a gentle touch against his arm, "Viktor..."

"What if he doesn't want me to be his coach anymore?" The Russian suddenly wondered, staring up into the night sky with anxious eyes, "Every event this season so far has been a disaster in some form or another. He ran off in Calgary and got himself sick...then this..."

"Viktor...after the Final, let's end this.' The words echoed in his mind like they'd just been said to him all over again.

"OH MY GOD HE BROKE UP WITH ME IN BARCELONA." Viktor was up on his feet and in a total panic, "WHY WOULD HE DO THAT!? HE JUST GOT OUR RINGS AND WE HAD SUCH A NICE NIGHT AND-"

"Viktor, sit down, you're drunk-"

"HE WAS SO SWEET AND WE WENT TO THE SAGRADA FAMILIA AND THE CHOIR WAS SO ATMOSPHERIC-"

A few other patrons were looking up from their tables, seeing the frantic Russian on the lower deck losing his mind.

"AND HE PUT THE RING ON MY FINGER AND I THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO DIE I WAS SO HAPPY-"

"Viktor, sit down!" Minako was up then, trying to pull him down again but failing to budge the man.
"-BUT THEN HE ONLY WON SILVER WHEN I TOLD HIM I'D MAKE HIM WIN GOLD...I'M A FAILURE AS A COACH...!"

"He won gold at Four Continents and Worlds!" The ballerina pointed out, "Plus he won gold in Calgary even if he had a total melt-down in the middle of it! That was his own fault though for setting his expectations so high! I even told him once myself that it was a bad idea to expect to get over 110, at least not right off the bat!"

The Russian collapsed back onto the couch, practically sobbing in his drunken despair. He twisted over to where Minako had returned to sitting side-face like before, putting both hands just below where her knee was folded over the cushions, "HE SCORED THE WORST EVER TODAY AND MAYBE HE WON'T EVEN GET ON THE PODIUM TOMORROW AT ALL AND HE'LL LOSE HIS SPOT IN THE FINAL AND IT'LL ALL BE MY FAULT."

"H-How would it be your fault?"

"Uncle Mimi said it was because I'm Yuri's husband too! Yuri doesn't listen to me like he would if I was just his coach! WHAT IF THE ONLY WAY HE'LL DO BETTER IS IF HE DIVORCES ME?"

"Are you kidding...?"

"WHAT IF HE DOESN'T LOVE ME ANYMORE?"

"Vikt-

He buried his face against the back of his hands, forcing the woman to raise both eyebrows at him. She could feel his tears on the scant bit of skin around her ankle, "I love him so much but I keep failing him...!"

"You haven't! What are you talking about!? Yuri worships you! He'd never leave you! He probably thinks he failed you out there today, not the other way around!"

"HOW CAN YOU BE SURE!?" The Russian lifted his face up again, his eyes red and wet, tears falling down his cheeks, "HE HAD TO TELL ME WHAT TO DO TO MAKE HIM FEEL BETTER, LIKE I DIDN'T KNOW HOW ON MY OWN ANYMORE. IF I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHEN I SHOULD MAKE LOVE TO HIM, HOW CAN I BE A GOOD COACH TO HIM!? I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M DOING-

"You don't have to yell, I'm right here." Minako blanched, "And I know because it's like I told you; I've known him his whole life. He comes running to me too sometimes, remember? You came looking for him once at my Snack Bar because someone told you he'd sometimes come to 'my place' if he was anxious or upset."

Viktor just went back to sobbing uncontrollably, this time at least into his own hands rather than against the woman's leg.

I don't know how to get him to calm down...he's completely irrational... Minako thought. I need Yuri up here...
The younger skater was sleepily walking with the two teens towards a waiting shuttle, ready to head to bed and at least try for a decent night's rest. He slumped against the window where he sat and felt himself starting to nod off.

"Yuri,"

"Huh?" Both answered, one half-asleep and the other wide awake.

Otabek just glared stiffly again, but pointed at the teen, "Since you're not competing here, where are you even staying?"

"Viktor's Uncle is my sponsor, remember? He was going to be here with his lady friend. Since he hurt himself and couldn't come, I just took his place, so I'm staying with her instead." Yurio answered simply, "There's a hotel just on the other side of the river. You can see the rooftop bar from here, just next to the Pearl Tower." He pointed out the window at it.

"...You're staying at the Ritz-Carlton? Damn. That's way nicer than the hotel the ISU booked."

"They're cheap-asses." The blonde laughed, feeling confident that he'd at least one-upped the older skater this one time off the ice, "Only willing to pay for plane tickets in Economy Class, rooms in the cheapest hotels, a food card that barely covers two meals a day..."

Yuri felt a jingle in his pocket, and he lifted his head from where he'd set it back against the window after realizing he wasn't the one being addressed. He blinked his tired eyes at the screen, but saw a call from Minako coming through. He yawned and blearily answered, "Hey."

"Yuri I really need you right now."

"Eh? Why?" He rubbed his eyes a little, his gelled-back hair starting to look more disheveled where strands were coming down over his forehead, "Is everything okay?"

"...YURI I LOVE YOU...I MUST OVERCOME..." Viktor's voice was audible in the background.

Yuri was immediately upright, glasses tilted slightly in his disbelief, "Wa-was that Viktor just now?"

"Yeah he's having a drunken meltdown. I need you to convince him you're not going to divorce him or fire him as your coach. Like now."

"Ah jeeze..." The skater sighed nervously, "Alright, put him on..."

"What's going on?" Yurio wondered suddenly, looking over at him.

"Viktor's drunk."

"I have Yuri on the phone right now if you want to talk to him!" Minako said, holding the device out.

"THAT COULD BE ANYONE.-"

"What!? IT'S HIS CALLER ID."

"HE'S WITH OTHER PEOPLE."

"VIKTOR NIKIFOROV, GET DOWN FROM THERE RIGHT NOW."

"M-Minako-sensei...?" Yuri asked pensively, "What's he doing?"
"Please come to the hotel with Yura. We're at the 58th-floor outdoor bar." She said frantically,
"...And come quickly, he's starting to take his clothes off."

"What!? No! Tell him NOT to take his clothes off!"

"Viktor, your husband is telling you NOT to get naked!" She hollered to no avail, then turning back
to her phone, "He isn't listening to me! Come quickly!"
Convincing the shuttle driver to adjust their course was harder than it should've been, but an irritated boot to the head from Yurio eventually 'convinced' the man, and the van changed direction. After that, the trip across the river to the Ritz-Carlton became the longest journey in the history of the world.

Yuri kept his eyes out whatever window would let him see the Pearl Tower, knowing that the building they were after was just nearby. From their vantage though, the hotel was hidden behind most of the rest of downtown Pudong. Once clear of them, the building was easy enough to spot; it looked like a carved block of black ice, rising into the night sky with blue lights setting it apart from the reds and yellows of the rest of the sky-rises. It even had a building next-door that looked somewhat like its twin.

They soon arrived at the drop-off rotunda, and Yuri went flying from the doors before the van even had a chance to fully stop. Yurio was quickly after him, and Otabek came in last, walking calmly. The oldest skater was repeatedly hitting the 'up' button in the elevator hall, drawing the eyes of staff and other hotel goers alike.

"Hitting the button over and over again won't make the elevator come down any faster." Yurio pointed out, "But it may slow you down if you do it enough that staff thinks you're crazy."

Yuri looked up, seeing the stares from employees and passersby alike, but it didn't worry him any, "My husband's having a total meltdown on the 58th floor! TRY AND STOP ME."

"...Oh, he's yours?" Someone asked, catching their attention just as Otabek was rounding the corner into the elevator hall.

Hazel eyes glanced behind himself, spotting two hotel security officers who seemed to be having a good laugh about something, "Yeah, what of it?"

"You'll see."

"This isn't funny!"

The first officer shrugged and chuckled again, "What's not to laugh at? There's a crazy naked man on the rooftop bar, shouting at all of Shanghai. Be glad the management is giving you a chance to get up there and defuse him yourself. If we had to do it...

Ding .

Yuri wouldn't let him finish, bolting for the opening doors and mashing down on the 'Door Close' button even as the Russian and Kazakh skaters were still trying to follow him in. Just as the doors started to close and then jerked open again with Otabek getting on board, Yuri paused...then stuck his head out.

"He's MY crazy naked man! And don't you forget it!" He held up his wedding band for emphasis, and then yanked himself back into the elevator.
"Viktor, you're going to fall off if you don't get down from there!" A red-faced Minako protested, holding up her cardigan in a pitiful attempt at shielding Viktor's completely naked frame from being recorded by other patrons, "Also you're embarrassing me!"

"What if that's the only reason he didn't even suggest I come along with him tonight!?" He was still ranting, though at least he'd stopped yelling about it, "What if he likes Yurio better!? He's going to leave me for a younger man...!"

"Are you kidding!? Yura's 16 years old! He isn't EVEN a man yet!"

"Minako-sensei!" She heard her name called from afar, and the woman turned her head to see Yuri hauling ass through the interior portion of the restaurant, banging into tables and knocking a few over as he ran for the doors to the patio.

"V-Viktor! Yuri's here! Come down!"

The silver Russian wouldn't turn around from where he stood on his perch, even as he could start to hear someone yelling his own name from further behind, "Èbanoe dniše..."

"...What's he saying, standing there totally naked like that?" Yuri wondered quietly, coming up close to the ballerina where she was still holding up her cardigan.

"I don't speak Russian. Your guess is as good as mine."

"He basically said, 'Just when you think a situation can't get worse, it inevitably does.'" Otabek explained, just as Yurio was about to do the same thing.

Yuri turned back at him, "You know Russian?"

"Most of Kazakhstan speaks Russian. We used to be part of Russia."

"Oh." The Asian skater felt a bit sheepish, but then turned back to looking at his husband.

The man had gotten onto the outside ledge of a glass railing, likely by stepping onto one of the nearby low tables. He'd moved towards a corner pointing towards the river, and was standing with his back towards the rest of the bar area, hands on the metal railing that topped the clear wall. The wooden deck extended about 1.5 feet from there, at least giving him something to stand on that wasn't just a lip of flooring, but there was a 3-4 foot drop to a lower, 4-foot-wide concrete walkway that would hurt to land on without shoes. Beyond it was another rather tall glass barrier, which went around the entire exterior perimeter, with the lower walkway eventually raising up to form a wall where it came above the patio entirely on each end of the 58th floor.

Yurio had whipped his phone out by then just like the other patrons and was recording it...for 'research purposes.' Also potentially for blackmail later. He hadn't decided yet.

"What's gotten into him?" Yuri wondered quietly, leaning towards Minako, "Why's he standing on the other side of the railing like that?"

"I dunno," The woman started, turning her head and holding the cardigan up a little higher, "He was all happy-go-lucky when we started, and then he suddenly got worried about you. He started blaming himself for your Short Program and then came up with all these doomsday scenarios where he thinks you're going to leave him, and fire him as your coach. Currently he thinks you're going to divorce him to marry Yuratchka instead."

"...What?" Both Yuris asked in tandem, one more in disbelief while the other was more awkwardly
embarrassed.

Otabek chortled, but then held his hand over his mouth as he coughed to try and dispel the stunned laugh, clearing his throat. Yurio just turned his face to give him a look like, 'you dare mock me, sir!?'

Yuri shook his head, finally stepping past the woman to address his partner directly, "Viktor!"

The Russian cringed a little, but still wouldn't turn around, "Pizdek..."

"Come onto this side of the railing already! You'll break your ankles on the lower deck if you slip!" The younger skater went on, keeping back a distance in case he'd startle the man into jumping, "Viktor!"

Still nothing.

"At least tell me why you decided to take all your clothes off!" Yuri pleaded, "It's cold out here!"

"I don't deserve to be warm." The Russian finally answered in English.

The younger figure was taken aback, "What? Why? It's not your fault I blew my Short Program!"

"I'm a...a failure at being a coach and a spouse." The silver Russian went on, the wind blowing his hair around, his voice trembling from his despair, "If you want to fire me, just tell me...I'll understand..."

"I'm not going to fire you! I don't want anyone else as my coach! Why do you think otherwise, after everything we've been through!?" He's really upset about all this...but until now, I had no idea...

Yuri thought, his brow crinkling with worry, Why didn't he say anything before I left...?

"What good am I as a coach if I'm the reason you fell apart on the ice?" Viktor turned his head around finally, his eyes red, cheeks wet, a few strands of hair stuck to his skin where the wind had whipped it against his face, "This is all my fault!"

"If I hadn't agreed to come back to competition, no one would've said the things they had about us both winning Gold going into the Final!" The Russian explained, turning back towards the river again.

"Don't forget that I'M the one that asked you to come back!" Yuri argued, "And that's just the thing though! You've done such a good job coaching me that people CAN say that! If you were bad at it, I'd still suck and no one would suggest otherwise! But I've only gotten this far because we did this together! 'Sometimes, there's a place you can't reach unless you have a dream too large to bear alone,' remember?"

"...Literally anyone would be better for you than me right now..." Viktor said darkly, choking a breath, tears falling into the wind.

Yuri was shocked, feeling a pain in his chest, "That's not true! Don't say things like that!" He anxiously took the last few steps forward, quickly stuck his arms around the man's sides and wrapped them around, pulling him closer to the railing, "Come back onto this side! Please!"

"...I didn't even know what to do to make you feel better..." Viktor continued like he hadn't heard the rest, "I'm a complete failure as a coach and a husband..."
"There's no one else I'd rather be married to!" The younger figure hollered against the man's naked skin, "I'd sooner go the rest of my life alone than be with anyone else!" He pulled his chin over Viktor's shoulder, and set his ringed hand flat against the man's bare chest, "I could search the whole world and I'd NEVER find someone better than you!"

The silver Russian turned his head a little, not quite able to see his partner there behind him, but at least tacitly acknowledging the words.

Yuri saw the gesture, but realized he still hadn't said enough. He doesn't completely believe me...what else can I say though? Is he too drunk to see reason...? Will he even remember this tomorrow?

"Yuri..." Minako said quietly, getting his attention long enough for him to see that security was starting to loiter near the doors.

Hazel eyes turned back, but the young skater realized time was running short. He pulled his arms back, and set his left hand against the Russian's shoulder so he'd know he was still there, and looked at the trio ahead of him. A moment passed, but he made up his mind, and quickly stepped onto a nearby table to vault over the railing, joining his husband on the other side.

"YURI WHAT ARE YOU DOING." Minako barked between clenched teeth, "Get back over here!"

"Viktor hears me but he doesn't believe me, not like this." He answered, "I have to do something instead." He held quickly to the railing, his back facing the river, and then reached up to touch his fingers to the side of his glasses. He breathed a hesitant breath, but then pulled them off, folding them and holding them out towards the blonde in front of him.

Yurio blinked, but reached out to take them, "...What are you about to do...? Something idiotic?"

"Probably." The Asian laughed nervously, running a hand through his hair to calm it from the wind a little. Keeping his hand there, he suddenly looked over at Otabek, and gave his best smile, "...I do have moxy. Watch."

Dark brown eyes blinked at him, but the older teen was too curious to argue.

That's when the brown long-coat came off.

"YURI-" Minako practically shrieked.

Shoes. Socks. Scarf. Shirt. All the S-clothes.

Camera flashes were starting to sparkle and people near the doors were chattering excitedly. Yurio kept his phone up and recording the whole time.

Pretty soon, the skater was down to his pants, and he held to the railing as he pulled each pant-sleeve off his legs. Slate blue eyes watched hazily and quietly.

"Yuri I swear! Your mom is going to kill me!" Minako protested, not sure whose arse she should be hiding behind her sweater, moving over to Yuri only briefly before returning back to Viktor, "You're supposed to make Viktor GET dressed, not get UNdressed yourself!"

"I have to meet him where he's at." Yuri counter-argued, "It's the only way he'll hear me." His face was already starting to turn red, and he was down to just his underwear by then, the rest of his clothing slung over the railing. But...in another second, those were gone too, and both Nikiforovs stood buck-nekkid on the banister, facing out towards the river.
"Yep, that's idiotic." Yurio said quietly.

"Idiocy for a good cause can be noble though," Otabek said, putting his hands into his jacket pockets.

"Viktor..." Yuri started, sliding along the last few feet of the glass wall to get closer to the man, "You're the best coach I've ever had, and the single most important person in my entire life. I can't understand why you think anything that happened today is your fault... You did everything right..."

"I didn't fight to stop people from egging you on." He answered, "The first interview we had, I should've said something to calm the media storm. But I didn't because I'm a damn idiot."

"You were excited!" The younger skater countered, "I was too at the start! I had no idea I'd freak out about it later!"

"I should've known..." More tears fell, and the Russian lowered his head a little, "I crushed you myself once, so I should've known... I could've protected you this time... and instead, all I did was push you..."

Yuri reached for his partner's right hand, holding to it as he continued to inch closer, "You can't stop the fans or media from saying things anymore than you can cure my mental weakness. I don't even know that anyone would've chosen not to say the things they did even if they knew how it'd make me feel. But it's done now... I... I had my freak-out and I think I'm okay now..."

"How can you be so sure...?" Viktor asked, turning red eyes aside to look at his partner, "How do we know you won't fall apart again?"

"There's never any guarantee. But even if it happens again... there's only one thing that I would want you to do anyway."

The Russian looked up a little, curious and worried all the same.

"Soba ni ite."

Blue eyes blinked, not immediately sure what the words meant. But then realization dawned, and the silver man could do little more than cry again. He moved his right hand to clasp his fingers around his partner's, and reached up with his left arm to rub his eyes against it, snuffling and drawing in shaky breaths. Yuri stepped in closer to put his free arm around the man's side, making sure he didn't slip left and fall to the lower deck. Viktor then pulled his right hand back again and wrapped both arms around his husband's head, sobbing against the crook of his neck.

Oddly, the crowd that had gathered started clapping.

"What'd he say...?" Yurio whispered, leaning aside to mutter the words to Minako.

She leaned towards him in turn, "Stay close to me."
Getting the thoroughly-inebriated Russian back over the wall was a challenge, but they eventually got him back by walking him down to where the lower deck rose up to create the barrier wall. Yuri gave back the coat he'd borrowed to go out earlier in the night, quickly threw on the pants that had been tossed to him, and went back to gather up his husband's things where they'd been thrown everywhere. Minako stayed to make sure Viktor didn't wander off, pulling her cardigan back on and rubbing her arms where she'd become a bit chilled.

Yurio watched the Asian skater closely as he wandered back and forth between various couches along the wall, picking up where Viktor had tossed his things, and putting on more of his own clothes as he got to where he'd hung them on the railing.

"Guess you'll have your hands full tonight." The teen suggested.

"Maybe for a little bit." Yuri agreed quietly, pulling one sock on and then the other before slipping his feet into his shoes, "I'm just going to put him in the shower and then to bed. I'm more worried about the hangover he's going to have in the morning than anything else."

"You two make me question the sanity of drinking."

Yuri just laughed at that, "I promise...in moderation, it's fine. Just...don't drink when you're really emotional."

"You couldn't tell he was when you left?"

The older skater paused then, halfway into the shirt he was trying to put back on. His brow crinkled a little, but then he shook his head and pulled the garment over his head, "He gave me no indication that he was even half as upset about today as I was. I thought he just felt sorry for me." Yuri explained, straightening out the vestment where it came down over his lithe frame, "But I'm not sure it's worth discussing with him while he's still filtering so much alcohol out of his system. If he remembers what happened tomorrow...I'll talk to him about it then."

"Hm?" Dark-brown eyes turned towards him, "Oh, this?" Otabek looked over at where Viktor was still snuffling a few shaky breaths, leaning against the wall, holding his coat closed with a hand pinching the front together from the inside, "No. But...it's competition. There's a reason the score box is called the 'kiss and cry.' People are bound to go from one extreme to the other, pending their results...and yours earlier today, well... You didn't cry, so someone had to."

"Well, I better take him back so he can sleep this off. We should go." He turned then to the blonde, "Are you going to shuttle back with us or are you just going to call it a night, since we're already here where you're staying?"

"I'll go with you to the shuttle, but I'm going to stay here." Yurio answered simply, "Babysitting
Viktor is *your* job.

Minako held the hotel room door open as Yuri shuffled his half-clothed partner through, and then followed after them, letting the door gently click closed.

Viktor hadn't said anything since coming back over the railing, looking rather run-down and introspective.

The water to the bathtub started up, and Yuri waited for it to get luke-warm before plugging the drain and coming out again. He stood next to the ballerina, and they both watched as the Russian turned his back to them and laid down sideways against the bed, legs still hanging off the end. He pulled lightly on the woman's sleeve and had her follow back towards the door, their voices obscured by the running water behind them, "...Thanks for making sure we got back. I know it's late."

"I feel like I'm partly responsible for this." She answered, glancing back towards the main part of the room, seeing only the silver man's lower legs past the headboard. He moved only to kick his shoes off. "But I promise, he didn't seem out of sorts when we started. I don't know why he started gushing like he did. I would never have let him drink if he I knew he was this upset."

Yuri shook his head, "It's fine. I had no idea either, and I *should've* been the one to know." He lowered his head and sighed quietly, "He's gone through a lot in his years...I guess he's just gotten so good at repressing the things he doesn't want to think about, that he can fool even those closest to him into thinking nothing is wrong even when there is."

"That just makes things harder for *you* in the end."

"...Yeah."

"Well, at least you had fun with Yura and Otabek, right?" Minako wondered, trying to lighten the mood a little.

"Actually, yeah, I had a great time." Yuri smiled, "I feel a lot better about what happened today because of them. Tomorrow will be fine."

The ballerina nodded, and pat the skater's shoulder before turning to head towards the door, "That's good to hear. I'm looking forward to your big come-back. If anyone can pull it off, it's you, Yuri."

He just huffed a nervous laugh, "Well, I can't make any guarantees about my Free Skate, but I'll do my best."

"That's all anyone can ask. *Oyasumi*, Yuri."

"*Hai. Oyasumi.*"

The door closed with another click, and Yuri drew in a deep breath, stepping back into the main room to check on his partner. Viktor was lying on his right side, so his bangs were hiding half his face, and he'd reached out from inside the jacket and had a pillow between his arms where he'd squished it against himself. His eyes were barely peeking over the top of it, and though his hair was in the way, his barely-open eye could still be seen through it.

Yuri wasn't sure what to say, if anything at all, so he just sat in front of Viktor's bent knees and put
his left hand on the man's hip, patting it gently. He held there a moment before twisting around to kiss the side of the Russian's head, "I pulled a bath for you. It should help you relax."

One visible slate-blue eye turned a little, but not completely, towards him, and after a moment, the silver man seemed to agree. He pulled away from the pillow and pushed to sitting upright, his coat falling off his bare shoulders as he went. He let Yuri pull him towards the bathroom, where the large Jacuzzi was almost full.

Yuri cut the water off so it wouldn't overflow with the man sitting in it, and then looked at him quietly before moving to get him undressed again. Wordlessly, he undid the belt and button and let the slacks fall to the floor, then casually put his palms on the man's waist to guide him out where the clothing still clung around his sockless ankles. He looked up and away from the edge of the tub only long enough to see the Russian reach up with his right hand and rub his nose on the back of it, then turning to make sure he didn't trip over the lip and fall in rather than step in.

The water was warm, but not hot, making it less likely to start a headache prematurely. The Russian sat with hardly a splash, and sunk down to just above his nose, his knees still managing to stay under the water despite being so tall. He kept his eyes on their rippling image under the surface.

He hasn't looked at me since I got onto the railing with him. Yuri noted, sitting on the edge of the tub and stroking his husband's messy hair a little. I wonder what he's thinking...

That seemed to be answered rather shortly in itself, since Viktor rose back up above the water to sit forward and make space behind himself, nudging his head just-so to tell the younger figure to get in with him. The gesture was obvious enough, and Yuri did as bid, pulling his things off and then slipping into the offered space. The Russian leaned back against his chest and sank a little again, keeping his hands over where his husband's had come around the front of his chest. The water had risen enough to spill over the lip a little with Yuri included, but it didn't matter. The bath mat absorbed most of it anyway, and the rest drained out through the over-flow spigot under the faucet within a few minutes.

They held there wordlessly for a while, with Yuri pressing his nose against the back of the silver head in front of him, at least until Viktor tilted a little to lean back against the side of the younger man's shoulder. Yuri waited until he stopped moving again to do anything else, then leaned forward a little to press his lips against the newly-exposed neck, and stayed there quietly.

A vague memory crept into Yuri's mind at that, and he huffed a quiet laugh to himself against the man's skin, kissing it lightly and then moving up further to just under his ear, "...We were like this just about a year ago, right after we'd gotten back to Hasetsu after the Final." He started, speaking the words against the pale flesh in front of him, "Of course, it was you behind me at the time, and we weren't in a tub, but...otherwise the same..."

Viktor kept his eyes down on the water as he listened.

"We were in one of Yu-Topia's smaller, private rooms, watching tv or something...you were leaning against a pillow that you had propped up against the table, and I was in front of you. You had your arms around me like this, trying to get me used to the idea that we were finally more than just friends, that the rings I got really were for an engagement, not just for good luck... And you started kissing the side of my neck." He did so to his husband for emphasis, going from just about the shoulder to just under the man's ear like before, "My heart was going like a jackhammer. You'd snuck your hand under my shirt to put it against my skin and felt it pounding away, and pressed against it like you thought you could slow it down by sheer force of will, but the closer you held me, the harder it beat." He nosed the damp silver-grey hair a little, "You did that for a few minutes, until I'd lost my focus on the television entirely and couldn't pretend you weren't doing anything anymore. I finally tilted my
head away so you could do whatever you wanted. My face was probably beet-red by then, though I'd clenched my eyes shut so I couldn't see. Then you moved your hand over like this..." His right hand went from over the Russian's heart to the farther side of his chest, fingers barely brushing across a certain pink nub, "...and I squeaked like a little kid. But you kept going, kept kissing, nibbled on my earlobe...and let your left hand wander." Yuri said, mimicking the description as well as he could while he was still speaking, his left hand going lower. He huffed another quiet laugh, "I didn't even know what you were doing to me, but then you said, 'Oh...what's this? Did I excite you?' and put the tip of your pinky finger under the edge of my spa pants. I brought my knees up so fast after that, but all you could do was laugh at my expense, and said, 'You should let me help you with that.'"

The hazy Russian could barely think, but the vague recollection was there.

"You tried, but I started to flail and protest, and eventually I yanked on the blanket so hard that it pulled it out from around you. I wrapped myself in it and caterpillarled out of the room in a big hurry... I forget how long it took, but I managed to get back to my room somehow, and threw myself onto my bed, still somewhat rattled by what had happened." Yuri went on, moving back down to his partner's neck, "I was so surprised at myself for having gotten that way because of you...I didn't even know what to do with myself after that. You came and found me a little while after that, and slung me over your shoulder to get me back to your room...but you didn't try to get at me again that night, even though you teased me about it. It was another week before you made another attempt...and that was the night you'd gotten all dressed up to do Aria at the Ice Castle."

Viktor remembered his fast-as-lightening bike ride back to the resort to get his outfit, and how excited he'd gotten to perform that piece at the rink he'd known for the previous 9 months; putting the long-coat on to get back to the Ice Castle and the look on everyone's faces when he'd taken it off, stepping onto the ice.

"I'd finally gotten to a point where I could see you as another human, rather than a deity...and then you stepped out on your gold skates wearing that outfit, and you were a god again." Yuri went on, "Then you told me to skate Aria with you... It was probably the craziest moment of my life up to that point, right after having you show up in the first place."

"...Mh."

It was the first sound the Russian had made since ending his rant in tears, but Yuri took what he could get, "Yeah. Ever since the first day I knew about you, you were always full of surprises...but I never imagined I'd ever been involved in any of them. But now, we're getting to surprise the whole world toge-"

"I didn't know how upset I was until I was drunk."

"...ther..." Yuri finished abruptly, his breath caught in his throat. He coughed, "Viktor..."

The silver Russian slid a little further into the water, "...I didn't even know I was upset."

"You must've been bothered somehow for it to come out like this," Yuri pointed out, raising one hand up out of the water to push the man's hair out of his face, "Screaming off a rooftop that you'd overcome this?"

The Russian just blew bubbles where he sunk even more.

"You spend so much time and energy worrying about me that you don't worry about yourself."

One visible blue eye turned aside at the words.
Yuri leaned closer, "Am I really that much of a burden?"

Viktor was up like a shot, splashing even more water out of the tub, twisting where he sat and looking squarely at his partner, "You're not a burden. Don't ever say that."

"But-"

"I like worrying about you."

"But you just-"

"...It's easier than worrying about me. At least I can do something if it's you."

"You were literally just screaming off a rooftop about how you thought you were a failure at everything involving me." Yuri crossed his arms, "You can't blame all of that on the fact that you're drunk."

Viktor blinked at him, his mouth open like he was about to say something, but then stopped and sank into himself a little, "...Point taken." He turned around again and resumed his prior position.

"What was it that set you off anyway? Minako-sensei said you were perfectly fine and then you just went off the deep end."

"...I don't even remember." He said quietly.

"Viktor."

"I don't!" The Russian insisted. He raised one hand out of the water to push his hair back, but kept his palm against his forehead, "...I'm going to have a raging migraine in the morning."

"Mhm."

"I can't guarantee I'll remember any of this after sleeping it off." He continued, "Sorry if I made a mess of things. I probably ruined your night."

"Nah, we were on our way back when I got the call. But now I worry about leaving you behind for anything again." Yuri mused, rubbing his cheek against his partner's ear, "I'll have to set-up a Baby Monitor or something so I can listen to you when I'm gone."

"...Might not work across continents."

"Eh?"

Viktor waited a moment, "I'm going to give my ticket to Sapporo to Yurio." He explained, "I'm going to Moscow."

"...What are you talking about? Sapporo is your event."

"I'll meet up with you again after I'm done, but I have to go. My Uncle..."

"Oh."

"I talked to him just after you left. It was his idea I go do something with Minako since he said she was bored. But he told me what he did to himself and...I want to go back. He's done a lot for me since he popped up. Helping him out and being with him to get to NHK is the least I can do." He reached back the hand that was on his forehead and set it against his husband's cheek, "There's no
sense having you come back with me for this, since we'll lose our reservation if one of us isn't there to check us in on Monday, so I'm going back on my own."

"Does he even know you're coming?"

"No."

"...Do you even know where he's staying?"

"Minako does."

"...You haven't even asked her yet?"

"She stayed with him during one of their trips to Russia."

"She doesn't speak or understand Russian and she can't read Cyrillic either. What makes you think she's going to be able to tell you where Mikhail lives?"

"...Fine, then I'll ask Yurio"

"You didn't think this whole thing through, did you?" Yuri scolded, "Have you already bought your plane ticket?"

"Yeah."

"And you weren't planning on talking to me about it first?"

"I was going to tell you in the morning. I wanted you to relax before your Free Skate tomorrow." Viktor explained, "I didn't think you’d be bothered by it."

"Well...I'm...I'm not, it's just...I wish you'd tell me what you're going to do before you do it. I hadn't expected to watch Yurio for a week by myself."

"It won't be a week. I bought the tickets to Japan already and we'll be there Wednesday."

"You should probably talk to Mikhail as soon as you can then, before he buys his own ticket to NHK."

"I'm sure he already has. I'll pay him back for it."

"...This sure is turning into an expensive season." The younger skater lowered his face a little, pressing his mouth to the pale skin in front of him.

Viktor tilted his head a little, "Why are you worried about it? We've more than recouped our expenses in winnings already. The rest is gravy."

"...Still." Yuri sighed, pulling his arms up to wrap them over the man's shoulders instead, "I may not win anything at all tomorrow, so it'll be a big setback."

"Yuri..." The Russian sat up and turned, sitting on his knees, running one dripping-wet hand through his partner's hair, cupping it around the back of his head and looking at him squarely, "There's nothing I want more than for you to get on the podium, but it-"

Yuri wouldn't let him finish; he leaned forward through the water and planted his lips on his husband's.
The Russian was immediately silent. The hand that had been behind Yuri's head had flipped to go palm-down on the wall. Eyes were wide with surprise, but closed soon after, melting into the feeling, especially when he felt the younger man's arms go back over his shoulders to pull him closer. He let his own slide down his husband's back, and familiarity took over for a moment, hands finding their way down to the man's waist and hoisting him up and forward onto his lap.

It seemed that's what Yuri was hoping for though, since when he pulled back again, the relief was obvious on his face, "Hm…" Yuri started, pulling his left hand back to run a finger down his partner's pale jaw, "You were saying something?"

"Was I? I forget."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED FIFTY SIX

It was less 'organized chaos' than it was 'a giant heap of blankets, pillows, and limbs.' Sunlight was cascading through the big part in the curtains, reflecting off the solid-wood headboard with its shiny black varnish, making the pile look like a glowing hill. Within the jumble of sheets and comforters, two figures laid intertwined, and neither had any idea it was almost 1pm already.

A light-blue phone with poodle icons on it was at 0% power, forgotten in a jacket that had been left hanging on the bathroom doorknob.

Another phone, one half colored Aria-wine, the other half Aria-blue, was in an assortment of clothes that had been left on the floor near the door; by then, it was also at 0%.

Under the feather-down lump, one figure stirred. He was behind the other, spooned against the man's back, one arm on either side of his neck and clinging to him as well as he could in his sleep. The form in front used the arm under his head like a pillow, hair tousled over it loosely, no longer damp from the bath the night before, but still unwashed all the same.

Hazel eyes blinked open a little, seeing the silver hair first, then his own shoulder. They opened a little further, shielded from the bright light of the outside by the dome overtop of them. Closing once again though, he nestled closer, wrapping his arms a little tighter before falling back asleep...at least for another 30 seconds...then those eyes opened again, and this time, all the way.

Yuri blinked and glanced around as well as he could, not entirely sure where one sheet began and another ended. There were pillows everywhere, and it was warm all around, but his left foot was considerably colder than his right. He lifted it up a foot or two, only to be greeted by the near-blinding glow of the room. The foot went down again immediately, and the skater realized he must've had that leg sticking out over the base-board, giving him a direct line of sight to the sun right outside.

He pulled his left arm back, pressing his forehead to his partner's shoulder as he pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers, and then braced himself. That same hand moved towards the opposite side of the bed, peeking out from under the covers where cool air greeted skin, and slowly pulled the heap back. Yuri pushed the blanket down, uncovering the upper part of himself, but at the same time, building something of a wall that protected his eyes from the light outside. He kept pushing it until his husband's head was uncovered as well, and then went right back to snoozing against his back, this time burying his face to the right instead, effectively hiding his face from the room. He could still smell the faint aroma of cigarettes, liquor, and cologne from the night before in the Russian's matted hair.

"...Mnhhh..." That very Russian grumbled, pulling his own left arm up to drape it over his eyes, wanting to twist away from the dim glow over the edge of the blanket-dam, but realizing he couldn't go too far. One slate-blue eye opened at a time, turning towards the roadblock behind him, "...Oh...hey... You awake?" He asked blearily.

Yuri opened one eye to see him, but then closed again, "...Sort of..."

"When...did you get back?" The older figure wondered quietly, managing to turn onto his back, bringing his hand up to gently touch it to his partner's shoulder where that arm was now crossing over his upper chest, "When did I get back...?"
Brown eyes blinked a little wider to hear the words, "...Huh?"

"Wow~..." Viktor winced, "I turned over and my head started blazing...!"

Wordlessly, Yuri pointed towards the table. He remembered having gotten up after Viktor had initially fallen asleep, setting out a glass of water and two migraine tablets, and covering the glass with a thin cardboard coaster to keep anything from landing in it while they slept. He knew the man would need it come morning...afternoon...time.

The Russian rose at the waist like a vampire from a classic horror movie, coming loose from where Yuri's arm had been over him, and hearing it flop to the sheet where he'd once been. His motions had rustled the blanket-wall though and sunlight came straight at them both. Viktor hadn't seemed to notice though, unlike the Nosferatu who would have burst into flames for it, scooting forward until he could reach for the glass of water. The room was cool and gave him goosebumps, and he was all-too-eager to return to the warmth of the moment before.

The younger figure turned to flop down to his back again, closing his eyes and ruffling his hair a little as the Russian drained half the glass in one breath. He peeked one eye open again as he felt the blankets shift under him, seeing Viktor moving down slowly to set his head down onto his chest.

"...I must've been drinking a lot..." The man's hazy voice said simply, "I didn't do anything stupid, did I?"

...He doesn't remember anything. Yuri thought to himself, folding his right arm over to set it gently on his partner's head, playing idly with his hair, "I was only there at the end."

"I remember calling Uncle Mimi...and then going to get Minako-sensei...and going to the rooftop bar, but...it's hazy after that!" Viktor laughed at his own expense, "I wonder if my drink was spiked?"

"You had 7 drinks." Yuri informed him quietly, turning again to move his free arm over his partner's head and pulled him closer against himself, "Hard ones."

"Oh~!" The Russian found it all rather funny, "That would probably do it. The last time I drank even half that much was when Yurio first came to Hasetsu!"

Yuri huffed a laugh against the top of the man's head and closed his eyes again, moving one leg to casually hoist a knee over his partner's waist, "I remember. You showed up at the Ice Castle just as he was showing me how to land a quad Salchow. You looked all disheveled."

"It was the only rational way I could deal with the fact that he'd showed up at all." Viktor explained hazily, "I had hoped to get a bit more time alone with you before he found out where I was. Even without forgetting my promise, I suspected he'd pop up eventually anyway."

"Really?"

"Mh." The Russian confirmed, twisting around a little to set his chin on Yuri's chest where his ear had just been, looking on his partner fondly in his hung-over haze, "I hadn't known yet about how he found you in the bathroom, but he had shown a bit of hostility to the idea of you long before I left St. Petersburg. I was worried he would intimidate you...but you actually handled it all really well."

For the moment, Yuri found it to be a comfort that his husband was in such a decent mood despite his migraine. He supposed the man would find out sooner or later about his roof-top extravaganza anyway, so the longer it could be put off, the better. Not knowing how the man would react to
learning about what he'd done was enough of a worry in itself.

_Viktor normally doesn't express his feelings so blatantly._ He started thinking, recalling the hazy words that had been spoken to him in the tub, and from the inner ledge of the 58th floor, _He blamed himself enough for my Short Program that he actually thought I might leave him over it. I wonder if I don't give him enough attention...? I should do something nice for him before we go back to the arena._

"...Whew, I got really dizzy suddenly..." Viktor huffed another uneasy laugh, _"Also I think I got hit by a truck... Is that where you found me? Was I in the street?"

"Huh? No, I got you from the Ritz-Carlton." Yuri quirked a brow, _"You were totally naked when I got there though. You tend to have that habit when you start to get buzzed."

"Oh nooooo!" The Russian lamented comically, rolling off his husband's chest to lie on his own back again, bringing his arm up to his forehead dramatically, _"Poor Minako-sensei! She probably got an eye-full! I hope she didn't mind..."

The younger figure finally found some humor in the whole thing, _"I doubt it. She always found you easy to look at."_ Yuri rolled over, flopping himself over his husband's frame the same way Viktor had done a moment before, and reached up his right hand to brush his fingers through the man's silver-grey bangs a little, _"I tried to get you to shower last night but you got a bit...excitable. Care to try again? I haven't gotten to wash your hair for you in a while."

"Ah jeeze...we made out last night, too? I don't remember! How sad!" Viktor lamented again, pushing himself up onto one elbow so as to see his partner more easily. He brought up his free hand and stroked Yuri's cheek, _"You have to tell me everything that happened. Maybe I can piece it together."

"Well..." Yuri started anxiously, worried that revealing anything about the previous night's events would spark that very memory to return. He drew in a breath and pushed himself up to sitting, resting one hand on his husband's athletic, solid core, _"How about we shower and go eat something first? You'll probably enjoy the story better when you don't feel like you have an ice-pick being driven between your eyes."

"Mmmmhmm...probably..." Viktor agreed, reaching his hand up to press it against his face and forehead again as he stretched the rest of himself. When he flopped back to normal, he stared up at the ceiling wordlessly...and pulled his hand back away from his eyes, looking at where unexpected tears had made his skin wet.

"What is it?" Yuri wondered, looking back as he was about to get up from the edge of the bed, seeing where Viktor was staring at his fingers, _"You okay?"

Another tear fell from the sides of each eye after that, and the Russian just continued staring upward, eventually letting his hand fall slowly to his chest, _"...Why do I feel so sad all of a sudden?"

Yuri knew there was only one sure-fire way to get his husband's mind off whatever had bubbled out of his subconscious, and that was skating. He packed up his MacBook Air and a USB plug to charge his phone, forced the Russian to leave his own phone behind to charge in the hotel room, and
dragged him out into the world. Food was the first order of business, but once that was procured, finding the closest skating rink became top priority.

They found themselves in the All Star Skating Club at the Mercedes-Benz Arena, one of the nicest rinks available in the city...and home to one of the better known figure skating clubs. There was even a big logo within the ice featuring a female skater doing a one-hand-blade-grab Biellmann Spin. The rink seemed to be like it was built inside a pit within the arena, the walls easily rising up 15ft all around, leading to an observation deck with a series of mall-like kiosks further in. The walls of the rink were tile, blue on the bottom and white towards the top, and scattered throughout were massive guitar-pick-shaped light-panels, which glowed cerulean, as though windows to a swimming pool or fish-tank. Three huge gunmetal pillars lined each of the short ends of the rink, and on the far left wall, overlooking the ice...a floor-to-balcony advertisement for the Cup of China.

Yuri had his skates on first, and stood at the rink wall from the locker-room side to see how crowded the place was. It was around the middle of the day by then, and it wasn't as crowded as it probably could be...but there were still a sizable number of locals on the ice.

Viktor finally came up from behind, leaning against Yuri's back lazily, "Too many people for an official practice..."

"Eh, I didn't think I'd get to have one anyway after missing the real one this morning." He answered, "It'll be fine though. We went through everything so much in Paris that I think I should do alright."

"Mh." The Russian nodded, looking up to see the big ISU poster and realizing that it had photos of all the events big-name skaters on it. He wondered if Yuri had noticed it yet, but supposed he'd find out soon enough.

Yuri had already pulled off his glasses and put them with his backpack in a small locker. Blade-guards followed soon after, and skates were set onto the ice, scratching across the frosty surface. They lazily slid around with all the other skaters, holding each other's hands quietly between them as they made the circuit. Yuri had placed himself closer to the rink wall though, so he was never really looking towards the big poster when they passed it.

By the third go around, Viktor had to go out of his way to stop moving forward, and actively pointed up at the massive advert, "Are you avoiding looking at that thing for a reason or...?"

"Huh?" The younger figure turned to glance at the poster, but then turned back, "...Oh, yeah, a little. My big fat head is right in front and I don't want anyone to recognize me."

"Why?"

Yuri gave him a look, "People will probably point and laugh at me because of my SP. I'd rather not hear it before going into my Free Program."

"How sad." Viktor sighed, "You sound like you think the fans are all out to get you."

"It only takes one." The younger figure pointed out, wanting to move off, but finding himself having to drag Viktor for his lack of moving on his own, "...Now you're being stubborn."

"You're getting stuck in your own head again." Viktor pointed out, "People here recognize you whether you look at the advert or not. Haven't you seen them looking?"

"You sure they're looking at me rather than you?" Yuri retorted, "It's just like on the train."

The Russian quirked a brow at him, looking around the rink, and all the other people who were
skating past them. He pulled his hand back, idly tapping his lip with a finger...and then backed up and away from his partner. Yuri watched him go nervously, seeing him weave through the oncoming skaters as he backed up against the rink wall...and waited.

"...What's the point of this...?" Yuri wondered.

"Watch."

Dozens of skaters made the circuit between them, a few of them initially looking at the silver-haired Russian leaning on the wall, but then immediately turning to see Yuri as they passed by. One or two had even stopped to gawk between him and the big advert poster, blinking at him and then quickly skating way again, making Yuri wonder what they were thinking. No one said anything, but the longer Yuri stood there watching, the more obvious it became what was going on.

*I may blend in really well...but the second they see Viktor, they realize I'm probably here, too...* He thought quietly, eyes going back to his husband, *But what's the point of this...?*

"You see?" Viktor wondered, pushing off from the wall; other skaters moved to avoid him, like fish avoiding a shark. It felt eerily like Incheon Airport all over again, "You're the important one here. This is *your event*. This is *your region*. Even though we're in China, these people look to skaters like you and Phichit to represent them as fellow East Asians, and most of the people skating here today are probably watching the Cup of China, too." He suddenly extended an arm, pointing towards the big flat-panel television mounted to the wall just above the locker area, "I bet they'll be watching from here once the day's events start. It's Ladies up first, then Pairs...then you."

Pale white hands went around the younger skater's waist, and Yuri could feel himself being pushed further towards the center of the rink. When Viktor let him go, he slid a few more inches and came to a stop, and brown eyes rose in confusion, "What's all this...?"

"Skate for them."

"...But there's so many people on the ice, I won't have room."

Viktor cocked his head, his hair shifting a little as he smiled mischievously, looking much like the moment when he'd once said he wouldn't kiss a medal unless it was gold, "I can change that."

"No, Viktor, no, don-"

Two fingers went up to the Russian's lips...and he whistled as loud as Yuri had ever heard a whistle before.

Yuri felt like he was about to have a coronary, as it seemed like the overwhelming majority of the other skaters piqued their heads at the sound of the shrill sound; everyone at least looked, even if only half of them slowed the speed of their own skating.

Viktor whistled one more time, this time doing so as he was starting to skate circles around his partner. More and more people were starting to slow down, many even stopping to see what was going on. Yuri felt the butterflies in his stomach starting to rise up again, and he looked around in a nervous panic.

*What are you doing!? Why are you making everyone look!?*

"It seems to me like a lot of folks here know who this is." The Russian said, loudly, pointing straight at the younger skater, "Who knows his name?"
"YURI!" Someone yelled out. Another called out the same thing from the other side of the rink. Soon, a third was doing so as well, then a dozen or more...then half the arena was shouting his name. Before long, the random shouts melded into a unified chant, "YURI! YURI! YURI!"

"SKATE FOR US!"

"You skipped practice this morning!"

"You should do your Free Skate!"

The skater had his hands up over his mouth by then, perplexed and astounded by the feedback. He barely noticed as Viktor came skating up next to him again and fished his phone out of his back pocket.

"Unlock it. I'll find a way to connect it to some speakers in here."

"V-Viktor..."
It felt strange to do his Free Program in such a public setting, surrounded by so many people, but he didn't really have much of a choice. Viktor had quickly found a way to access the arena's speaker system, and one of the attendants had been all too happy to hook up Yuri's phone to it and play the music.

To Yuri's own surprise, he managed to get through the whole thing without any problems, though his right thigh did throb by the end of it. By the time he'd fallen into his final pose, and the music faded out, he had lowered one hand to rub at the huge bruise. Recalling the dark purple blotch on his skin from the shower beforehand, he shuddered at the memory of the impact that had caused it. It was sore enough that he had a hard time focusing on the storm of applause that had risen since he'd finished skating.

Viktor was clapping as he came out from where the crowd had been pressed up against the rink wall, but lifted his head as the next song on Yuri's playlist began. The Worlds EX Opening Ceremony music.

['Sunburst' - NCS Release]

The entire crowd seemed to get energized to hear it, and everyone started to pour back onto the ice, skating around the edges of the rink to surround the pair.

Yuri was still catching his breath at the time, seeing all the excited faces passing him by, clapping for him and looking thrilled about the whole thing. His cheeks were flushed as he watched them all go, but finally turned back to where Viktor was still clapping and getting closer.

"How do you feel?" The Russian wondered.

"Equal parts tired and amazed." He answered, pushing off with his toe-pick to get nearer to his husband, pulling his hand off his hip and wrapping both arms around Viktor's waist. He set his forehead against the man's shoulder, "You're always surprising me."

"I think you surprised everyone here even more." Viktor suggested, leaning his head down to better see past Yuri's dark, spiky bangs, "Considering that you premiered this program when you were sick and upset, these people must've thought they were watching a whole new show, just set to the same music."

"You think so? It was that different?" He looked up, finally allowing himself to feel a little pride in himself again.

"Mh! For sure!" Viktor agreed emphatically, turning side-face to join the crowd in their laps around the rink, keeping one arm around his partner as they moved, "Do you see though?" He asked, gesturing with his free hand to all the people that were still clapping as they slid by, some slowing down to stay close, as though being in such close proximity to two World Champions would somehow imbue them with skating talent through osmosis, "There wasn't one nay-sayer in the entire crowd. Every single person who hollered for you was cheering for you to keep going. I know you haven't often wanted to worry about what fans thought, but I think it's important that you see how much they all love and support you, even when you hit a low point."

Yuri thought on it, sliding from one golden blade to the other, leaning slightly as they hit the short
end of the rink, "You know..." He started, slipping further out to take the man's hand between them, "Dueto is next on my playlist."

"Is it?"

"Are you up for it?"

"Well..." The Russian was a bit skeptical, "I'm trying not to complain, but my head is pounding..."

"Oh..." Yuri made a disappointed face, but then shook it out, "That's okay. It would probably be hard to get everyone to clear the ice again anyway."

"Sorry."

"No, it's fine...it's kind of nice to just get to skate like everyone else for once." He said, finding the silver lining to it all, "We can skate it anytime we want. We should do it for an Exhibition again one day."

"Maybe..."

They made another circuit around the rink before the weird shift in the Russian's mood had made Yuri wonder if something else was going on. Did he remember something about last night...? Should I ask...?

"It's hard to believe I'm turning 29 next month. Next year, I'll be 30." Viktor finally said anyway, "It feels like I'm leaving this life and stepping into another one."

Yuri gave his hand a gentle squeeze, "It's just a number."

It didn't seem to offer any consolation, as Viktor was still looking down at the ice, rather than where he was going.

"Turning 30 will only change you if you let it." Yuri said instead, shifting his weight to turn around, and skating backwards in front of his husband instead, reaching over to grasp at his other hand to hold them both, "We play an unforgiving sport, and we're competitive for less time than most other kinds of athletes. If anything is unfair, it's figure skating..." He explained quietly, doing his best to round the corner of the rink without having to take his eyes off the man ahead of him, "...That, and maybe American football, mixed martial arts cage fighting, and race-car driving."

"...All those left turns. It's horrible." The Russian mused, smiling a little.

Yuri laughed at that, looking up as Sunburst ended and the quiet piano of Duetto slowly started, though it seemed most other skaters were having a hard time realizing it was playing at first, "I was thinking more along the lines of all the crashes, but yes, the left turns are quite brutal as well."

Sent una voce che piange lontano

People were starting to hear the lyrics, and many of them started cheering and clapping, craning their heads around to see if another show was about to start.

Anche tu, sei stato forse abbandonato?

The younger of the two professional skaters just slowed to a stop in the middle of the rink's long side, setting a toe-pick into the ice before raising his arms up over the taller man's shoulders. The flock of other skaters were moving past them on both sides, moving to avoid them in wide lazy arcs.
"You told me a long time ago that we'd grow old together." Yuri said, pressing his forehead to his husband's, "And while it's sad that we can't actually skate forever, we can always skate in our dreams, and we'll always be there for each other no matter what."

"From this life, and into the next..." Viktor added quietly, tilting his face slightly to kiss the man in front of him.

"Welcome back everyone for the start of Cup of China's Men's Singles Free Skate." Newscaster Morooka spoke excitedly, "All of this afternoon's participants are currently on the ice for the last warm-up period...soon, only one will remain to kick things off. Our first skater tonight will be the last skater from yesterday's Short Program; Italy's Michele Crispino."

Yuri had always hated going up first, so it was a mercy that he was second to last for the Free Skate. Not only would he immediately know what his chances were, but he also had more time to stretch and get his thoughts together before going out onto the ice. His blades scratched at the ice like they had at the Benz Arena...but unlike there, the cheering and applause was coming from thousands of people in the stands, rather than just one or two hundred surrounding the rink.

"Don't psyche yourself out before you even have a chance to start, stupid."

"All skaters, please make your way to rink-side. Repeat, all skaters, please make your way to rink-side." The announcer overhead boomed.

Yuri lifted his head to hear it, and slowly swiveled around to get back to the exit.

Viktor was there waiting with his blade-guards, handing each one off, "Getting anxious at all?"

"I feel decent."

"First on the ice tonight, representing Italy...Michele Crispino." A female announcer called into the arena.

Italian flags and other fan-banners were already being raised by then, and the olive-skinned skater strode out into the arena on his own, raising his hands to present himself to the audience and judges. Yuri watched him go quietly, reaching his hands up to put his ear-buds in, playing his own music to drown out the rest as he usually did. He took his partner's elbow and headed past the curtain, leaving the rink-side area behind so as not to be a bother to those who actually needed to be there.

"Oh! Yuri!"
He could barely hear the voice saying his name, but he looked up anyway, seeing the female half of the Crispino Twins there to the left as they came through the curtain, "Hey Sara..." He reached up to pull one ear-bud out, hearing Michele's music starting to play despite his best efforts not to listen.

['Sleepsong' by Secret Garden]

The purple-eyed Italian came right up in her usual happy cantor, pausing just in front of him and leaning in with her hands clasped loosely behind her back. He leaned to the side slightly to wave at the Russian, "Hii~ Viktor." He waved politely, and she turned back to the Japanese skater in front of her, "You feeling better today? You sure look like it."

"Mh." Yuri nodded.

"Mickey thinks he's going to be able to beat you today, but I warned him not to get ahead of himself." She regaled, "You're far too well known for your sudden comebacks to be stopped by yesterday's Short Program. Besides, I saw you skating at the Benz Arena...and you were in top form! I'm really excited to see you skate officially!"

"You were at the Benz Arena...?" Yuri echoed.

"Oh, no, not in person...a bunch of people posted video of it to Instagram though! A few people seemed to have recognized who you were, and started recording before Viktor outed you." She said with a sweet grin, "Though I'm glad he did. You looked really relaxed."

"I'm trying to forget what happened yesterday." Yuri admitted sheepishly, "I'm going to give my Free Program everything I have."

"That's good to hear. I'd hate to see Viktor screaming off a rooftop again."

Yuri went pale as all the blood left his face, eyes wide.

"What'd I do?" Viktor blinked; he wasn't sure he heard correctly.

Sara had her mouth open like she was about to question why he didn't know, but Yuri was on her in a second, hand over her mouth and pushing her backwards through the curtain. Once she was out at rink-side, he backpedaled and started pushing the Russian away in the opposite direction, almost fleeing for how fast he was moving. Sara stuck her head back through the curtain curiously, "What was that all about?" She wondered, seeing them vanish into a different hall.

Yuri only let go once they were out of sight, though when he turned around, Viktor was already on his phone and had Instagram loaded up.

"Ahh! Noooo! What are you doing!? Don't get online!" The younger figure protested pitifully.

"I want to know what she's talking about. If I was acting out then someone had to have gotten it on film, even if they had no idea who I am." The Russian said simply, scrolling through his feed, seeing nothing out of the ordinary as yet. He paused, turning blue eyes away from the phone and glancing at the other skater instead, "Or you could tell me."

Yuri squeaked in a panic, turning side-face away from the man, "M-me!? Tell you!? I already said I was only there at the end!"

"What did you see? What do you know, Yuri?" Viktor asked, stepping closer even as the younger figure was backing away from him, "Tell me." He seemed too eager to find out, as though it was some joke at his expense.
"I-I don't know all of it!"

"Tell me what you saw."

"Why!?" Yuri asked warily, "Why would you want to know something so sad!?"

"...Sad?"

"Y-..." The raven-haired skater paused, trying to quell the nervous feeling rising inside him, "You were really upset about my Short Program and started blaming yourself for it. Minako-sensei said you got completely thrashed. She called me to come get you because you were yelling from the top of the Ritz-Carlton about how you thought I'd leave you for Yurio and fire you as my coach!"

Blue eyes blinked at him, "...Wow, really? That's a bit more eccentric than I thought I'd get, but not entirely unexpected."

"...Y-you're not...acting...surprised...?"

"When did I start getting naked?" The Russian wondered comically, "What else did I say?"

"I don't... I mean..." The younger man was stammering for lack of knowing what to say, "Minako-sensei told me you were starting to take your clothes off when she had me on the phone, but that you didn't believe it was me on the other end telling you to stop... By the time I got there, you were already naked and you were standing on the wrong side of the railing..."

"Wow~!"

Yuri was gawking at him, no idea how to handle his reaction. He hadn't planned for Viktor to think it was funny.

"I guess I was really upset that I didn't get to follow-through on my plans yesterday like I wanted!" The coach-skater explained, "How hilarious!"

"I don't really think this is funny Viktor." Yuri said stiffly.

"Sure it is!"

"HOW."

The Russian just stepped forward again, this time not letting Yuri get away, sliding both hands over the skater's sides and holding to his back, looking down into confused hazel eyes, "When you told me to help make you feel better afterwards, didn't you wonder where I got the lube from?"

The directness of the question made the skater's face go red immediately, "N-No..."

"It was in my jacket."

"...Okay...?"

"I promised you once that I'd take you in the middle of a competition, didn't I?"

"...Y...You did..." Yuri started to feel his legs getting a little weak, but the silver Russian held him close, "What's...your point?"

"I was going to sneak you off somewhere after your SP if you scored over 110. I was so convinced you were going to pull it off that I was ready for it."
Hearing the words just made Yuri's heart sink, "...I'm...I'm sorry, I messed up..."

"I should've taken you anyway, I guess." Viktor lamented, "Maybe I should take you now?"

"Eh!? No way! I'm gonna go up in like 15 minutes!"

"You sure? I can make it quick..." The Russian leaned in uncomfortably close, forcing Yuri to push his face back with both hands, "Yuuuuri~! I want to!" He whined, still holding on despite his husband's reluctance.

"Later!" Yuri insisted, finally slipping free and taking off.

Viktor quickly gave chase, arms out to reach for him, "Come back!"

It was hard to sprint with skates and blade-guards on, but the young athlete made the best of it. There was an awkward sort of hilarity in the way his husband was chasing after him; it reminded him of the happy-drunken affect the Russian had had at the hot-pot restaurant the previous year.

"Stop running, Yuri, I love you!" The silver-haired coach laughed, amazed at how quickly Yuri had managed to get away despite his foot-wear, "I want to kiss your cute kissable face before you skate!"

"You'll have to catch me first!"

Half the other skaters and their associated coaches saw them rushing by, and everyone was blinking in thorough confusion at the sight of the pair. Otabek and Yurio were amongst them, gawking awkwardly as Yuri finally got ahead and out of sight, slipping into a different hall that lead to the other side of the arena.

"You're violating the coach-athlete relationship, Viktor! It sets a bad example!" Yurio barked at him, "You're really terrible at this!"

Blue eyes blinked back at him, "Oh, hey. Didn't see you there."

Otabek was silent as stone, but quirked a brow as he glanced from the shorter Russian back to the taller one.

"I have to do whatever it takes to make sure Yuri doesn't get anxious again." Viktor insisted, "That's my sacred duty." He had a hand on his chest, "I just happen to have more tools at my disposal than a conventional coach."

The young teen had the urge to make a reference to the tool being alluded to, but Otabek was quick to notice and head-locked him instantly, dragging him off before he could say anything.

Viktor just waved at them and laughed, "Davai, Otabek~! You're up next, I think!"

If the Kazakh had made any sort of reply, it was impossible to hear over the blonde's flailing and demands to be let go. Once they were out of sight though, Viktor's expression changed, going from his usual happy-aloof self to something a bit more serious. He moved quietly over towards a row of folding chairs that had been set up along the wall, and pulled out his phone again. It only took a few more scrolls to find the first of several videos that had been posted about his drunken lamentations. He plugged in his ear-bud cables and played it, jumping into the middle of what was already taking place before the filming started...and wasn't really all that surprised by the things he heard himself yelling.

"...-AT ALL AND HE'LL LOSE HIS SPOT IN THE FINAL AND IT'LL ALL BE MY FAULT-
"H-How would it be your fault?"

"Uncle Mimi said it was because I'm Yuri's husband too! Yuri doesn't listen to me like he would if I was just his coach! WHAT IF THE ONLY WAY HE'LL DO BETTER IS IF HE DIVORCES ME?"

"Are you kidding...?"

"WHAT IF HE DOESN'T LOVE ME ANYMORE?"

Viktor put a finger over his mouth as the video went on, though some parts were a bit more difficult to hear than others. It was easy to find another video, one that had better audio, and he scrolled through the timeline to find his place. He ended up skipping so far ahead that Yuri was already on camera when it started playing again after the buffer caught up.

"If you want to fire me, just tell me...I'll understand..." He heard himself say, naked now and on the other side of the glass banister.

"I'm not going to fire you!" Yuri was insisting from the proper side, though keeping a short distance, "I don't want anyone else as my coach! Why do you think otherwise, after everything we've been through!?"

"What good am I as a coach if I'm the reason you fell apart on the ice? This is all my fault!"

"I had a panic attack! You couldn't have done anything! NO ONE could have!"

Blue eyes weren't blinking, watching the scene unfold on his phone...and hazily in his own mind. He saw flashes of his own perspective from the night before, and the memory of the pain he felt was bubbling back into his heart as well. He lowered his hand from his mouth to his neck, pressing his palm against it where he could feel it starting to clench up.

"If I hadn't agreed to come back to competition, no one would've said the things they had about us both winning Gold going into the Final!"

Viktor lifted his head and ignored the video for a moment, looking around in case Yuri was about to pop up again while he'd been distracted. He was nowhere to be seen though; the only people passing by were ISU officials, event staff, and a handful of skaters from earlier or later events. A few of them saw him as they went by, waving politely, but curious why he was alone, even if they didn't openly ask it.

"I'm a complete failure as a coach and a husband..." The video went on, catching his attention again. Slate eyes lowered to look at the screen where the recording had suddenly zoomed in on him rather closely. Yuri had managed to get close by then and was clinging to his back, holding him against the railing like he thought he was the only thing preventing a jump.

"There's no one else I'd rather be married to!" Yuri yelled desperately, "I'd sooner go the rest of my life alone than be without you! I could search the whole world and I'd NEVER find someone better than you!"

Those words caught the Russian by surprise as much in the present moment as they likely had in that moment, but what really shocked him was when he saw Yuri pull away and get onto the same side of the railing he'd been on.
If I didn't know already that he was fine, I'd be having a heart attack right now... Viktor thought, watching as Minako was trying to convince the younger skater to stay on the safer side of the railing, but failed to move him. His eyes went wide as he saw Yuri handing his glasses off to Yurio, and then started taking off all of his own clothes. Neither of them were easy to see on the hazy, shaky camera-phone video, but it was obvious enough what was going on.

"Viktor..." Yuri was saying again, inching closer on the railing's meager ledge, "You're the best coach I've ever had, and the single most important person in my entire life. I can't understand why you think anything that happened today is your fault... You did everything right..."

"I didn't fight to stop people from egging you on. The first interview we had, I should've said something to calm the media storm. But I didn't because I'm a damn idiot."

...I am an idiot...

"You were excited!" Yuri argued, "I was too at the start! I had no idea I'd freak out about it later!"

"I should've known... I crushed you myself once, so I should've known... I could've protected you this time...and instead, all I did was push you..."

Viktor closed out of the video after that, pulling the ear-buds out and stashing the whole tech-pile into his pocket.

I don't care how it ends. I have to find him.
“The score for Michele Crispino...186.58, bringing his total to 272.89. Skater Michele is currently in first place.”

“Maybe you'll make it to the final this time after all, Mickey!” Sara cheered, hugging her twin in the kiss and cry, "You keep scoring better every year!"

"As long as you keep believing in me, I can do anything!"

Yuri clapped nervously from where he was watching in the participants' waiting area, blade-guards set onto the railing in front of him casually. He turned his head a little to see Otabek and Yurio at rink-side, with older of the two waiting to get called out onto the ice.

_Otabek's the one to beat. _Yuri thought to himself, _His SP score was what I wanted for myself... But if he does really well here with the Free Skate, too, I might not be able to catch up..._

He couldn't stop his mind from echoing Viktor's words from the day before, revealing the appalling score he'd received that afternoon.

73.12...

The young skater crossed his arms tightly over his chest, looking at his knees where they were pressed together in front of him.

_If he and I both got the exact same FS scores as we did at last year's Final...I could narrowly beat him and still get Gold... But I had more competition experience with my YoI program by then than I do with Heroes right now...and YoI didn't need radical changes made right after doing it the first time..._

"Next on the ice, representing Kazakhstan...Otabek Altin."

Yuri clapped dutifully, then brought his hands up to cup around his mouth, "Otabek! Davaaaaai!"

The dark-eyed skater raised his hand in a casual wave and nodded in his direction, then turned back to the blonde in front of him. They spoke some words that no one else could hear, bumped fists, and then parted ways. The skater went out to make a few lazy laps around the center of the rink, giving Yurio time to find a seat in the stands.

The younger teen quickly ascended through the prep area and came back out in the waiting box, finding a seat next to his Japanese counterpart, "You sure you want to watch?" He wondered carefully.

Yuri nodded, getting his hug before the teen sat down, "You and Otabek helped me out a lot yesterday, and you didn't even have to...the least I can do is watch."

"Where's Viktor?"

"Not sure. I lost him in the prep area somewhere a few minutes ago.” He answered, "If he doesn't pop up by the time Otabek's done, I'll probably text hi-” He stopped, eyes going wide suddenly, "Oh no."
"Oh no?"

"He's probably looking at videos of last night!" Yuri cringed, sinking into his seat, "I took off right after I told him not to look!" He grabbed the arm-rests of his seat and was about to push off, but just as quickly, he felt Yurio's arm go straight across his lap and grab the arm-rest on the opposite side, effectively blocking his path upright. Brown eyes turned in confusion, "...What are you...?"

"Stay where you are, Katsudon." The blonde said firmly, keeping his hand clamped around the arm-rest, "Focus on yourself for now. You have a chance to make up for your appalling performance yesterday...don't screw it up by worrying about something you can't change."

"But-"

"If he was already trying to look up videos of last night and you had to stop him, then that cat's already out of the bag and there's nothing you can do about it." The teen continued, "Besides, he looked fine when he was chasing you. That means he knew about the videos' existing beforehand. Don't fall into the same trap as you did when you were living St. Petersburg, worrying about shit on someone else's behalf."

Yuri blinked at him, but allowed himself to let go of the arm-rests and sank back into his seat.

"Still doesn't change the fact that you're bawling over someone else's problems."

"There's no sense worrying about it until there's something to worry about."

Yurio's words from the day of the funeral were as fresh in that moment as they were when they were first spoken, and they seemed to ring true even so long after. However, the nagging fact that Viktor had come back from that funeral with a bloodied eye seemed to vindicate his worries at the time...and Yuri couldn't help but think that something would happen that would justify his worries a second time. The only thing that stopped him from trying to get up as Yurio took his hand back was the fact that Viktor had seemed to think the event was funny.

"Maybe you're right..."

Otabek was finally taking his place in the center of the rink, noted by the sudden rise in cheering from the crowds.

His outfit was as far removed from the one featured in his Short Program as it possibly could be, going from the Aristocracy of the European Renaissance to the Shield Wall of Viking Norway. He wore a dark grey-green tunic with a studded leather belt around his waist, the long end of it hanging off his right hip. Over his shoulders was a faux wolf pelt, which hung half-way down his back, accented by two faux grey-fox tails. Under the sleeves of the tunic, which ended at the elbow, looked like the hint of a coat of chainmail, and under that was a dark grey shirt that went to the wrists. Baggy dark-colored pants followed, and from knee to skate-cover, what looked like leather, fur-lined boots.

['Völuspá' - Wardruna]

The music started calmly enough, with the single, hum-chanting voice of a man and the strings of a Klaviklyre. Otabek moved slowly in time with it, bringing one arm up to flow with the tone of the hum, scratching across the ice in a serpentine pattern. He looped back around when the voice paused, bringing up his second arm as the hum-chant began again. He slid towards the far end of the rink, twisting into an outside Spread-Eagle, and just as the sound of a thunderous drum reverberated into the rafters, he vaulted into a triple Axel.
Yurio seemed really entranced by the thrum of the music, drawn into the ritualistic sound like a moth to flame. The pounding of the drums went on like the welcome call to the Old Gods themselves.

Yuri felt it in his chest; each heavy beat moving through him like it could change the very pattern of his heartbeat. It shook the foundations of the building.

Quad Toe-Loop, half Loop, triple Salchow.

Below the arena, Viktor could feel the drum-beat as well, but he was still too busy looking for his husband to go out and watch the show. It suddenly occurred to him though that that's probably what Yuri himself was doing, and there was only really one place where another competitor would be able to go to watch other skaters.

"Coach Viktor!"

The Russian twitched.

"Coach Viktor, a word!"

He turned his head and saw a small mob of event-reporters coming right after him. He deadpanned them at first, wanting to move on, but running off when he'd just been standing or wandering aimlessly around for the last several minutes wouldn't really fly, and he knew it. He sighed to himself, put on his mask, and turned to face the group.

"Is Yuri somewhere close by as well? Can we get a word with him, too, before he goes up?" One of the reporters asked, holding out the mic towards the Russian.

"He took off somewhere a couple minutes ago. I was looking for him." Viktor answered, "I'm sure he's somewhere around here."

"Is he nervous about this afternoon?"

"Probably, but he was in a good mood when we got here." He went on, "We went to one of the local skating rinks to practice since he missed out earlier this morning."

The war-drums were thundering away behind him, making the whole interview feel more like a pre-battle strategy check. But Viktor was a showman and he did his best despite it all.

Flying sit-spin, change of foot into a donut-spin, rising up into a half-Biellmann spin before letting the leg go to finish in a fast scratch-spin.

"That'll easily be a Level 4 move for Skater Otabek. His technique has really improved since last year." Morooka observed.

"I agree." His co-caster, Oda, said to his right, "The music is a good choice for him; strong and steady like a war-march. I can't help but feel that sometime during the off-season, he must've spent a lot of time working out the artistic merit of his choreography. He isn't as stiff anymore."

"Yes, that's quite a big change." Morooka went on, "He's evolved into some new kind of skating beast this year, just as he had before. I almost can't wait to see what he does next year!"

"Yuri was able to land all his quads during an impromptu performance, and he got a real confidence..."
boost from the people who were at the rink watching." Viktor continued, the chanting dying off a little bit in the stadium, "I think today will be really interesting. He's pretty pumped."

"So where is he then? You said he took off...Skater Yuri doesn't usually do that unless he's upset about something."

"That's true!" The Russian huffed a weak laugh, "I was teasing him earlier. He ran off laughing this time. I'm sure he's with Yuri Plisetsky somewhere, probably watching Otabek right now. I was trying to catch up, but I got distracted."

Quad Loop.

"Skater Otabek has added the quad Loop to his repertoire this season, and increased the difficulty of his Free Program from two quads to three." Morooka described, "For a 20 year old, he's doing remarkably well."

The path ahead of me was never guaranteed to be an easy one. Otabek thought, pressing on through a step-sequence, But the first virtue in a soldier is endurance of fatigue; courage is the only second virtue. If I'm to be a soldier, I must press on, no matter the challenge.

The step-sequence ended with a cantilever around the short end of the rink, one hand dragging across the ice as the other reached for the rafters.

"Would you say that you took Skater Yuri's SP score yesterday better or worse than he did?" One of the reporters asked suddenly, catching Viktor off guard a little.

"Not sure what you mean." He answered innocently, "We were both upset about it."

There were a few glances back and forth through the media group, none of them quite sure how to press on.

"You want to ask about my drunken melt-down at the Ritz-Carlton." Viktor asked for them, "Right?"

"Yes."

"I forget!" The Russian said, toying with them as he shrugged, "I went to have some fun with Yuri's ballet teacher while he was out with others, and I got a little bit tipsy. The rest is a blur. Sorry!" He smiled innocently.

The reporters all looked at one another again, confused.

Quad Salchow; bonus points for being in the second half the Free Skate.

"I'm afraid that's really all I can say about the matter. Everyone should focus on giving Yuri the support he needs to finish out today's event."

"So you think he can still...overcome the Short Program?" Someone asked, the emphasis on 'overcome' being a little strange to the coach.

"Sure." Viktor said, tilting his head a little, "Yuri's the Comeback King. If anyone can do it, he can. That's enough for now though...it sounds like Otabek's about done and I need to go find my skater."

The music had gone from chanting and drum-beats to a quick flurry of clattering, and Otabek's finale was just as quick-paced; quad-rotation forward-outside twizzle, exiting and immediately vaulting into
a butterfly kick, using the momentum to go into his final sit-spin sequence. As he rose, he hopped, carrying on into a standard camel spin before ending it on a quick scratch-spin. The music ended on the exact moment he dug his toe-pick into the ice and stopped moving altogether.

The audience lagged a bit, but then burst into applause, cheering and screaming for the former dark-horse skater. Once known as little more than 'forgettable,' Otabek was now a leading contender for the Gold...not just at Cup of China, but the Grand Prix Final as well. His scores were comparable to all the other known guaranteed finalists. All that need be known now was whether he could keep his rank or if he'd lose it at the last second.

He went with his coach to the kiss and cry carrying three different Ted plushes, and one bouquet of flowers just to be safe. Yurio and Yuri watched anxiously from their vantage, though Yuri was sweating bullets over it.

"The score for Otabek Altın..."

Yuri grabbed the blonde's wrist and clamped down like a vice.

"Ow, hey! Let go!"

The older skater's eyes were clenched shut.

"...186.27...bringing his total score to 294.94. He is currently in first place."

"Incredible!" Morooka cheered, "It's only his second competition of the season, and yet Skater Otabek just outdid his score from last year's Grand Prix Final!"

Yurio was trying to unclamp his older counterpart's fingers from around his wrist, but they were tight like tree roots. Suddenly, Yuri let go on his own, and the teen went flying from the strength of his own attempts to get free, landing a few feet away in the aisle. Looking up from the floor, he angrily pulled his hoodie up over his head where it had been displaced in the impact, "IDIOT. WHAT WAS THAT FOR?"

"I...I still have a chance..."

"Haaaaah!"

"I STILL HAVE A CHANCE." Yuri was up out of his seat, skate-guards thunking against the ground. He reached down, grabbed the Russian Punk by his shoulders to hoist him off the ground, hugged him tightly, kissed him on the cheek, and then ran off again towards the under-arena halls, "I STILL HAVE A CHANCE!" Yuri yelled again, his voice trailing as he vanished, "VIKTROYRRRR!"

The Russian in question was still trying to get away from the media, but his ears twitched to hear Yuri yelling his name from somewhere further away. He got up onto his toes to look around, but just as he spotted the black-haired skater coming, Yuri was already less than 10 feet away.

And then he was zero feet away.

"I STILL HAVE A CHANCE! IT'S NOT HOPELESS! I CAN STILL WIN GOLD!" He was yelling, literally jumping through the crowd to lunge at his partner, clinging desperately as the man tried to keep on his feet, "Otabek didn't break 300! I still can!"

"Whoa, calm down." Viktor laughed, his eyes still spinning from the impact. He returned the cling with his arms around his partner's back, and pulled up so he wouldn't continue sliding down.
Cameras were flashing at them, "What'd he score?"

"295! I can still beat that! It's a long-shot but *I can do it*!"

"...You'd have to score as high as you did at Worlds to break 300..."

"I CAN DO IT."

Viktor saw the determination in his husband's eyes, and the confidence was contagious, "You can do it!"
Preparing for the Free Skate was suddenly the most important thing. Yuri felt the adrenaline rushing already, and was practically having to run laps around the long end of the arena just to burn the extra energy, lest it start to drive him crazy as he waited. Waiting the 15 or so minutes for Seung-gil Lee and Leo de la Iglasia to do their Free Programs and get their scores almost felt like torture though.

The time finally came though. Yuri felt the hand on the back of his shoulders, and he pulled the buds out of his ears as he turned, seeing his coach and husband there.

"It's time."

"Yosh."

"You're even more fired up about this than you were a minute ago." Viktor pointed out affectionately, taking his partner's hand in both of his and raising it up to kiss the ring thereupon, "You're really ready to fight for this."

"I've scored around 225 before. I know I can do it again. I have the best program and the best coach in the entire ISU." Yuri answered back, a fire burning in his eyes.

Slate orbits blinked at him, but then met hazel with the same determination. Viktor nodded, patting the back of his partner's hand where he held it and giving it a gentle squeeze, "Yes you do. Let's go."

Picking up the poodle-plush tissue-box, they moved on towards the curtain to rink-side, and stepped out just as Leo was leaving the kiss and cry, fans cheering and hollering at his new Personal Best score. Viktor pulled the curtain aside and Yuri stepped through, drawing in a deep breath as he closed his eyes, a strange sense of calm falling over him.

My heart is racing...I feel like every muscle in my body is primed and ready to spring...

He opened his eyes and looked around. Suddenly, the entire arena seemed to explode with cheering. It was difficult even to hear the announcer telling him to get onto the frozen stage.

"Next to take the ice, representing Japan..."

The screaming was like a tidal wave; Yuri thought he'd be bowled over by it if it was any stronger. He felt his husband's hand on his lower back, and moved over towards the entrance in the rink wall.

"...Yuri...Nikiforov!"

That's when the signs started coming out.

Japanese flags, banners with Yuri's name on them, some even with 'Vikturri,' others still with blown-up images from his and Viktor's wedding photobook. They were all there and accounted for.

The young skater reached down and pulled his blade-guards off, handing them over to his coach one at a time before shrugging out of his team jacket. His heart was pounding even harder then. Just when it seemed like the adulation couldn't get more intense, Yuri set one blade onto the ice and pushed off...and the tidal wave became the biggest tsunami he'd ever heard.

Wow...! He thought, looking around at all the people who were up out of their seats cheering,
screaming, ready to throw their plush sushi and nigiri out onto the ice alongside the plush boodles and bouquets of flowers, even though he hadn't skated yet. The incoherent waves of cheering started to merge into something more stable...people were stamping their feet on the ground in every aisle, at every level. Soon, the stomping became a chorus of thunderous beats, even rivaling the war-drums of Otabek's Free Skate. The chanting of Yuri's name came after that.

"YURI! YURI! YURI! YURI! YURI! YURI! YURI! YURI!"

That's when he spotted the new signs. They weren't flags, banners with his name, or photos from the picture book. They were carrying messages.

**OVERCOME THE SHORT PROGRAM**

The skater turned around then, looking to find his coach like he needed a second set of eyes to confirm what he was seeing, but the Russian was just as mystified. In fact, the closer Yuri slid over towards the rink-wall for his last pep-talk, the more he realized...Viktor was starting to cry.

Blue eyes were open towards the stands, paralyzed, seeing *OVERCOME* in numerous places. He couldn't even manage the strength to blink anymore; tears ran freely down his cheeks, falling off his chin to land on the lapels of his jacket.

"Viktor...!"

"Huh?"

Yuri set his hands on the top of the wall, then reached one forward towards his husband, sliding it inside the front of the man's coat to curl around his waist and pull him closer. Stepping up onto his toe-picks, Yuri was even taller than his coach for once, and he tilted his face down a little to see his partner evenly, "You're crying again. Are you going to make it?" He asked, his words flavored with a slight laugh as he spoke them.

"I'm what?" Viktor asked, reaching up to rub the droplets off his face, realizing it was true, "...I'm..."

"Do you remember now?" The skater wondered.

Hazy images were flashing before the Russian's eyes, the echoes of words spoken and forgotten, tears shed and thrown into the wind. Even in spite of having seen the videos, Viktor suddenly knew, in entirety, what he'd done...the things he'd said and how upset he'd been. Tears fell even more heavily than before, and both arms went up over Yuri's shoulders as he took the last step forward to bury his face against his husband's neck. The poodle-plus tissue box in his left hand suddenly fell from his grasp, bouncing off Yuri's back and landing a few feet behind him on the ice.

No words needed to be spoken; Yuri understood perfectly well why his husband was sobbing as heavily as he was in that moment. He moved his other hand into the man's coat and hugged him close, still standing slightly over him on the tips of his toe-picks, leaning forward against the rink-wall. He could feel all ten fingers where they clenched desperately to the back of his shoulders, not wanting to let go...but Yuri knew he had to. He pulled his head back, and gently lifted both hands to the Russian's face, setting their foreheads together as he closed his eyes, "There's no place else I'd rather be than by your side, Viktor. Even on the ice, I carry a part of you with me always." Hazel eyes half-opened after that, seeing azure looking right back at him the same way.

"Y-Yuri..." The silver Russian spoke with barely a whisper of a voice, feeling one hand move up and away to come down on his shoulder, the other doing the same, then slipping a finger under his chin to lift his face. Even with all the time they'd already been together, Viktor had never once felt so
vulnerable as he did in that moment, looking up into his partner's eyes. He felt nervous, excited, warm, anxious, protected...terrified...but above all else, loved. He knew in that moment, the man he called his husband would never leave him. His fingers still held tight to Yuri's back, but gentled a little when he felt those lips on his own. Blue eyes closed, and the maelstrom of cheering surrounded them again.

Time was running out; Yuri pulled away a little, nosing his husband affectionately before starting to slide back down onto his blades. He smiled confidently, hands coming down over the silver man's arms until they were only touching by their fingertips, "I'm off. I'm looking forward to having you kiss my new gold medal."

Viktor's cheeks went pink to hear the words, and through his lingering tears, he nodded and smiled, "I can't wait."

After quickly tossing the Makkachin plush back into waiting hands, golden blades scratched at the ice as the younger skater took off, finally presenting himself properly to the judges and audience as he made his way quickly to center. With one last deep breath and a kiss on his ring, he took his position, head tilted down as his hands came palm-up at his sides, right leg crossed behind the left. Eyes closed, Yuri slowly exhaled...and the music began.

The bass slowly rose into the rafters of the stadium, rattling the roof on each boom.

Yuri nudged himself gracefully forward with a push on his toe-pick, gliding ahead with his eyes still closed. He felt relaxed, calm...even if every fiber of muscle in him was itching to burst. Staying relatively close to where he began, he wove his skates intricately over one another, arms up and delicately vibrant, moving like still, clear water over smooth stones.

I can hear the lost crying,

He dug his left toe-pick in ahead of him, stopping on the boom in the lyrics. His right hand was out high behind him as the left was low in front, head tilted down to look at his upturned palm.

I can hear the truth hiding, hiding.

He rotated his arms, bringing the right up in front instead, setting it close to his ear as the left went out to the side. His legs twisted under him, rotating him in place, slowly sliding him away from center in reverse.

Yeah the sha dows are calling us out,

Hydroblading backwards, Yuri sank low on his right leg, the left carefully extended out from under him, left hand gliding along the ice by a single finger.

I see the fear rising.

He went back up to his full height, twizzling three times on a forward inside trajectory before extending his arm out on the next boom.

Yeah when hope is burning, the sha dows are calling us out.

Pushing through a 3-turn, Yuri flipped himself back into reverse and built up speed, moving backwards along the short edge of the rink with his arms extended to the sides, waiting for the next boom in the music.
It's feeling like the sun's hiding,

The thrum of the bass launched him into the air, sliding back on the inside edge of his left skate, then digging his right toe-pick in to push him up; he spun four times with both hands above his head, and landed the right blade cleanly.

Viktor had a hand over his mouth in awe, *Yuri, you really will manage to get that 3+ GOE quad Flip you wanted so badly last year... You can’t ever doubt yourself again after this...*

*But we're gonna keep moving, surviving...*

Yuri launched again with the boom, entering the first combo jump; triple Lutz, triple Toe-loop.

Judging the height and speed of each jump had become second nature by then, unlike the previous year when he was still applying what he’d only just learned from his idol. Now, he could draw the audience further into the program by leaping and landing with the beats of the song. They were on the edges of their seats as the music gained power and intensity, and the performance met it head on, getting more and more difficult as it progressed.

*I bet Minami-kun would like this sort of thing...* Yuri thought randomly, recalling how quickly the teen had caught the crowd's attention solely on the merit that he danced in time with his Boogie.

*No we won't go quiet tonight, stand up and shout louder.*

Serpentine step-sequence; twisting and weaving along an S-shaped pattern on the ice.

*Oh no, no, we won't be silent, the shadows are calling us out...*

He ended on a double-twizzle, extending both of his arms out as he slid towards the middle of the short end of the rink, almost paralyzed during the brief interlude, but for the end where he swung his arms back and...

*We are heroes*

...Death-drop into a camel spin.

*He roes in the darkest times, when there is no light, Oooh...*

Arms behind his back at first, then with them out to the side. He curled into himself just long enough to throw himself upward, leaping into a foot-change to start another camel spin. Yuri grabbed his left blade and pulled into a horizontal doughnut spin, rotated several times before pulling that same blade behind his back. Not letting go, he pulled the skate up behind his shoulders, reaching back with his free hand to grasp just below the knee and continued to spin.

He let go abruptly, kicking that leg out to flow backwards along the ice with the momentum.

*We are heroes, he roes in the darkest times, but we'll rise above, Oooh...*

Second step-sequence, this time diagonally across the ice. Yuri drifted from one corner to the next, skates a blur as his arms conducted the orchestra.

*We are heroes...*

Yuri threw himself into a flying sit-spin, becoming a black and sparkling blur on the ice. He lowered his left leg from being straight out in front, to crossing in front of the right, and raised his left arm
straight up above himself.

*When the night is star less,*

The dark-colored blur morphed with the boom, and both hands came in to grab the left leg where it was already just above the ice.

*Only we can spark it...*

He pulled out of the spin and dug his left toe-pick down hard into the ice, then immediately raised both hands up towards the ceiling. He spread his hands out wide as his arms moved them out in an arc away and then down.

*Light it up in the darkness, Oooh ...*

His body flowed with an unusual sensuality, hands coming up along his thighs and sides as he started gaining speed around the short end of the rink.

*When the night is star less,*

Three-turn on the boom into a quad Lutz, triple Loop combo. Bonus points for being *just* inside the second half of the program.

*Only we can spark it...*

He rotated slowly, bringing his arms up and out in front of him as he went backwards towards one corner of the arena. He spun and crossed his legs, wheeling around to each beat of the song.

*Light it up in the darkness, Oooh ...*

Yuri twisted and vaulted, throwing his body as hard as he could into a quad Loop, lifting off and landing on the right skate in a flurry of frost. Skipping from reverse to forward-face again, the skater delivered himself across the ice gracefully.

*We are heroes... He roes in the darkest times*

He threw himself into the air again for a triple-jump combo; triple Axel, half Loop, triple Flip.

*...When there is no light, Oooh ...*

Twisting from front-face to backwards, Yuri pushed on, leaning back as far as he could into an Ina Bauer from one side of the long-end of the rink to the other. He threw himself around, crossing one skate over the other as he turned to avoid the wall with ease.

*We are heroes...*

He dipped low on one knee, bringing both hands in front, and rotating them towards himself twice over as he raised them up in time with the lyrics.

*He roes in the darkest times,*

Another quad, this time a Salchow, sweeping his legs low before landing deep and moving on.

*...But we'll rise above, Oooh ...*
Viktor was grabbing hard to the rink-wall, *That's already his fourth quad and he's still got time...* Yuri, what are you planning for the very end? *You're running out of options...you won't get points if you repeat some of those jumps again...*

**We are heroes...**

Butterfly jump, illusion spin, rising into a scratch spin, descending into a sit-spin with a twist variation...the young Asian skater was a blur on the ice. He hopped into the foot-change and kept going, scratch-spinning away.

**We are heroes...**

There was a brief pause; then the song cut into the most intense crescendo of the entire piece. Yuri pulled out of the spin with flair, rushing backwards along the rink wall and heading towards center. The drums were beating like thunder, and adrenaline was pumping wildly.

*This part reminds me of the end of Eros...* Yuri thought, intense footwork pushing him through the deafening beat of the climax. He twisted around and set himself to skating *forward* again, and then the silence came.

**Yuri, you're not...** Viktor was wide-eyed and breathless as he watched, *You are!*

The skater threw himself with every ounce of energy he had left, rising from the forward-facing stance, spinning four *and a half times...* landing hard and falling, but immediately getting back up again and moving on as though he'd planned it that way all along.

**Oooooh...**

He pushed into his final move; the combination-spin. He entered as a back scratch-spin, arms close to himself, but raising them up high and gaining speed. Arms came back down again as Yuri lowered himself into the leg-out sit-spin.

**We are heroes...**

He raised his hand up towards the rafters and leaned out over his extended leg, toe-pick hovering just above the ice as the right blade carved a circle beneath him. Rising back up again, he spread his arms out wide, crossing one leg over the other and then bringing his arms back in to speed up one last time...

The final thunderous drum-beat of the song signaled a toe-pick into the ice, and the end of the program. Breathlessly, Yuri extended his right arm out ahead of himself, and brought it back down with fingers splayed in front of his face, clenching it into a fist as he looked out towards his coach overtop of it, panting heavily. The song faded out, and all Yuri could hear was the thrum of his heart beating like a machine in his chest, blood rushing through his ears. It was hard to tell where that sound ended and the screaming of the audience began, but at some point, the cheering and applause overtook the pounding in the young skater's head.

*I feel so light... I don't know if I'm over-tired or if I still have energy left in me... I'm sure I'll feel this later.*

"**THAT WAS INCREDIBLE!**" Morooka yelled into his mic, "**SKATER YURI REALLY BROUGHT IT HOME! Now we wait for the judges to tell us whether he's going be able to OVERCOME HIS SHORT PROGRAM!"**
Yurio and Otabek were speechless where they stood near the curtain to the prep area. They weren’t sure if they really saw Yuri out there on the ice anymore, or if it was some monster that just happened to look like him.

"...Five total quads...and...a quad Axel at the end...?" Yurio said stiffly to himself, not-quite clapping, but trying to, "When did he...?"

"Maybe we shouldn't have encouraged him so much yesterday." The Kazakh offered, clapping where he could despite the three Ted plushes still in his arms taking up most of the space around him, "He just turned into a 10,000 calorie katsudon out there."

"No kidding."

Viktor was practically jumping out of his skin as Yuri came back to the rink-wall, grabbing for the skater's water-bottle and squirting some of its contents on the hapless athlete's head. Rubbing it back through the dark raven hair to help cool Yuri down, the Russian was overjoyed.

"I don't even know what to say!" He started, kissing him several times and everywhere, "That was incredible!"

Yuri was still panting though, rubbing the water over his face where it dribbled out from the messy black mop on top of his head, "I have...to score... Score over...222...to win..."

"Let's get to the kiss and cry! This is so nerve-wracking!"

They sat anxiously; Yuri had finally managed to get his wind back as he put his skate-guards and jacket loosely back on, leaning exhaustedly onto his coach. His lungs were ripe and burning by then, but at least he wasn't breathing so hard, so it didn't hurt as much. His right thigh was really throbbing though, and he pressed his hand hard against it, not that it helped any.

Viktor stroked his partner's hair a little bit, whispering quietly as they waited, "You really outdid yourself. I'm sure you'll get a perfect score. Though...I'm a little shocked you attempted the Axel at all, never mind at the end of the program... I've never seen you practice it."

The younger figure drew in a hissed breath as he pushed off the massive bruise on his hip, "The triple Axel is one of my favorite moves, so...I...I wanted to try the quad... I never expected to land it, but if I could at least get all the rotations in, even losing a point for the fall still gets me 14.0 for the base value alone... It's still higher than a perfect quad Lutz..." He explained, "I don't... I don't think I'll try it again, that was really hard... I just...want...to win..." He heaved, gritting his teeth against the pain in his leg, "I need ice..."

"The score for Yuri Nikiforov..."

They both looked up, their hearts in their throats.
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SIXTY

"The score for Yuri Nikiforov..."

The roar of cheering in the audience abruptly died out with the announcer's voice. Breathing stopped, mouths gaped open, people even stopped blinking...it felt like an eternity before the number was revealed.

Even the staff-skaters on the ice, picking up all of the gifts thrown out by fans, had to pause and pay attention. Participants on the rink-wall and in the prep area had stopped what they were doing to turn their eyes to the kiss and cry any way they could.

Minako was practically chewing on her banner, on her feet like everyone around her in the stands.

Back in Moscow, Mikhail was breathless, clutching the tablet to his chest like the stream on television would cut off if he didn't protect its source, "C'moonnnnn..."

Yurio had his hands on his hips, waiting anxiously and yet... He turned his eyes aside briefly to look at Otabek just next-to and behind him. Otabek himself wasn't sure if he hoped Yuri pulled through or not.

Yuri and Viktor were frozen where they sat in the kiss and cry; feelings of dread and excitement were difficult to tell apart. The Russian held his arm around his skater's back, grasping tighter with every microsecond-century that passed. They could feel each others' hearts pounding even through their clothing.

Thmp-THMP

Thmupa-THMP

Thmp-THMP

"... 227.56. His total score is 300.68. He is currently in first place."

SCREAMING.

Yuri had jumped to his feet, gaping at the sight of his number on the score-panel. Viktor rose up just after him, equally shocked at the number. They turned to face one another wordlessly, wondering if maybe it was a fever dream. The longer it went on though, the more obvious it became that everything was real. The young skater suddenly lunged though, throwing his arms over his coach's shoulders, laughing and crying at the same time. Viktor pulled him up, arms wrapped around his back, and spun him around in the kiss and cry.

"YUURRRIII!!!" Minako screamed, jumping up repeatedly.

"YES!!" Mikhail threw his arms up, nearly losing the tablet in the process.

Yurio's eyes were wide, his hands falling from their perches and going limp at his sides, "227.56? ...Unbelievable. It's almost as high as his Worlds score." He looked on at the big screen suspended above the rink, seeing the footage of the pair still dancing around in the kiss and cry.
"I don't think I could complain, losing to a score like that." Otabek said simply, clapping still where he stood, and catching the blonde's attention, "It just goes to show that even someone as sensitive as him can have the soul of a warrior. He just needs a reason to fight."

The blond nodded, turning back away again to see across rink-side to where the pair were finally coming out, moving over to where Emil was about to go and put on the last performance of the Men's Singles. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but he could see from the Czech skater's body language that he was both happy for Yuri's score, and nervous that he wasn't going to be able to put on a show that would come anywhere near as good as the one that had just ended. The teen almost felt sorry for him.

Almost.

"The last skater of the Men's Singles event for the Cup of China...representing the Czech Republic..Emil Nekola."

The crowd was good about their cheering, keeping up their energy in follow-through from Yuri's score to the final performer stepping into the rink. Emil got a hug from the exhausted Japanese athlete before stepping out, raising his arms up towards the crowd and bowing his head.

Yurio could see that Yuri was limping a little on the right, and realized the toll the Free Skate had taken on him. He turned to face the older skater as the pair were getting closer.

[\'Love Comes Again feat. BT\' - Tiësto]

"You really killed it out there, Yuri."

Brown eyes leveled on the teen, and he smiled, "Thanks. I wouldn't have been able to do it without you guys though." He turned from Yurio to look over at Otabek, who gave him a thumbs up, and then at Viktor again before focusing on the teen ahead of him and stepping forward, wrapping his arms around his shoulders, "Thanks for helping me get my act together."

"What's going on with your leg? You weren't limping before."

Yuri blinked at him as he pulled back, though kept the left arm over a shoulder to help keep himself upright, "I hit the wall pretty hard yesterday." He explained, rubbing his hip with his free hand, "It wasn't bothering me that much until I did my Free Skate. Now it feels like I just got hit in the leg with a sledge hammer."

"You going to manage the Exhibition okay?"

"I hope so. It's not until tomorrow, so I'll have a chance to get over it." He answered, "Oh...Viktor has something to tell and then ask you."

"Hah?"

"Let's go into the prep area first. It's a bit noisy out here." The older Russian said, pulling the curtain back. Otabek was quick to go through since he was closest, and Yurio followed through soon after, eyeballing his former rink-mate curiously. Viktor just smiled innocently and waved him through, then reached an arm around his partner and went through as well.

The media frenzy kicked into high gear as soon as Yuri was off rink-side. The Russian whispered something into his ear before sending him off to do his after-skate interviews, then moved away with Yurio to an area where it was less distracting.
"What's going on?" Yurio asked, a bit anxious about the whole thing. Otabek followed him for lack of anything else to do.

Viktor finally turned and huffed a laugh at the teen's confused expense, "I'm going back to Moscow tonight to pick up my Uncle. I want to give you my original plane ticket, so you can go with Yuri from here to Sapporo."

"You're leaving tonight?" The blonde was almost incredulous, "But you're going to miss the entire Cup of China finale. You're Yuri's coach; you're supposed to be there with him."

"I can't do anything about flight schedules. The next one out of here isn't until Tuesday, and we didn't book the hotel room to include Monday night. It's up to you though. You can fly with Yuri, or you can fly with Minako-sensei again. You're going to Japan either way at this point, right?"

Green eyes blinked at the older skater, and he stuffed his hands into the pockets of his hoodie, "...I'll take your ticket." Yurio said calmly, "Was that the thing you had to tell me or the thing you wanted to ask?"

"Tell." Viktor answered quickly, "I actually don't know Uncle Mimi's address in Moscow. I was hoping you would know, since Minako-sensei can't read Cyrillic and wouldn't be able to tell me herself."

"...You know I've only been to his Moscow place once, right?"

"Really? I thought you were there a bunch of times."

"No, Mikhail and Okukawa get weird sometimes, so I've stayed with my grandpa when we were in Moscow all the other times."

Viktor stifled a laugh as he heard the words, "They get weird or they stop paying attention to you?"

"What's the difference?"

"Touché." The older skater shrugged, "Anyway...I have to leave in just a few hours. The flight tomorrow is at 6pm." He pulled out his phone and loaded up his email, getting the ticket confirmation notice up so he could forward a copy to the teen in front of him, "I don't know how you and him want to arrange how and when or where you meet up."

"If you're leaving tonight, why don't I just stay with him?"

"Well...you could...but there's only one bed."

"Okay? It's competition. We've all had to double-up before. The ISU doesn't pa-"

"We've had s-"

"WAIT." Yurio cut him off instantly, "STOP RIGHT THERE. I get it. I'll stay with Okukawa one more night, God. Gross."

Viktor just huffed another laugh, "Once we're done with the medaling ceremony, we're gonna head back and sort out our stuff so I can get moving. If you don't know Uncle Mimi's address then I guess I'll just have to tell him I'm coming."

"Why wouldn't you anyway? Wouldn't that be important?"

"Always do the opposite of what people expect, that's my motto, right?" The older Russian held up a
finger for emphasis, "I wanted to surprise him."

"The only one who's gonna be surprised is you." Yurio pointed out, "He's probably already booked his flight to Japan. If you don't call him to let him know you're coming, you might miss him outright, and then you'll just be in Moscow, alone, feeling really stupid."

Viktor crossed his arms, a blank look on his face, "...You're right." He turned away from the two skaters suddenly, whipping his phone out and texting furiously.

Yurio cocked a brow at him, but then turned to Otabek, "Let's go, I think we're done here."

Taking gold in an unprecedented underdog-victory, Yuri stood on the highest platform of the podium with the medal around his neck, and a big bouquet of flowers in the crook of his arm. On his right, Otabek held up his silver, and on the left, Michele held his bronze. The flashes from dozens of cameras blinked all around them. By the time the trio were allowed to get down, each of them was wearing their nation's flag on their backs, draped over their shoulders and fluttering out behind them like huge capes.

Yuri skated around the rink to wave at the fans, keeping his flag wrapped close over his arms as he went.

_Yuktor looked so sad when he saw all the 'overcome' banners._ He thought, pulling the gold medal over his head to hold it up in presentation; the crowd cheered all the more to see it being held up just for them. _He said he didn't realize how upset he was about the Short Program until he'd already gotten drunk...but to realize how many people had shared in that, and still wanted to show support..._ He kicked up frost to stop at the final side of the rink, holding his medal up for the fans on that end before turning back to go towards the exit where his coach was waiting for him.

As Yuri stepped back onto normal ground, he presented the medal to the Russian, "Last but not least, Coach Viktor."

Blue eyes smiled brightly, and he took a step forward to cup the medal in his pale hands, kissing it lightly, and then putting the lanyard back over its recipient's head, "I never doubted you could pull it off. You just had to believe in yourself."

"I'm going to do better with the Short Program at the Final. Even though I didn't beat my Worlds Free Skate score, I came really close...not bad for having only performed this version of Heroes once, right?" Yuri wondered, letting Viktor take the flowers in place of his skate guards, putting each one onto his blades before folding his flag over one arm.

"You did it beautifully. As your coach and choreographer, I couldn't have asked for better." The Russian said fondly, gently putting an arm around his athlete to start moving him back towards their spot in the prep area so they could leave, "But...as a fellow competitor, you've got me really nervous!"

"Really? You don't have any of the same hang-ups that I do."

"I have to figure out a way of getting myself in the right frame of mind for my Free Skate, but on my own now." Viktor answered, stepping slowly to give Yuri's limp time to keep up, "It won't be easy."
Yuri felt a little guilty about it, switching the arms he carried the flowers in so he could wrap one around his husband's back. "...Sorry."

"No, don't be." The Russian said quietly, "I should've thought about how it would make you feel, when I asked you to remind me of all the bad things that've happened since last year. It was stupid. *I'm* the one that's sorry."

"Mh..."

"Well, whatever I figure out, you'll be there to bring me back out of it, so I'm grateful." The taller skater paused in front of the benches where they'd left the rest of Yuri's gear, "It's my favorite thing to have you there at the end to make me feel better."

The younger figure's face flushed a little, thinking back on the day before, and how he'd used the same words to get his husband to make love to him. He shook his head and set the flowers down, turning around and then sitting back down on the bench. He had the laces of one of his skates partially undone before he paused and looked over to his partner, "There's still a few hours left before you have to leave."

"Yes there are."

Yuri realized they must've both had the same thing in mind, and quickly moved to get his skates off to replace them with shoes, stuffing his blades into his backpack, putting everything on his back, and then rising back up to stand. Without his skates, he was back to being obviously shorter than the Russian, but he leaned in and hugged him anyway, "Let's go then. I'm going to miss you while you're gone."

"Me too."

They started moving down the hall that lead to the exits, moving through the last set of restricted-access doors before finding themselves in the main atrium. Dozens of fans were there to see all the skaters leave, and the noise rose tremendously as the duo came into sight.

Yuri paused, still surprised by the energy of it all. He turned his head to see them all, but then laughed, and looked up at Viktor, "I guess there's one funny-awkward take-away from all this craziness about 'Overcoming the Short Program.'"

"What's that?"

"Every single one of these people has seen us both naked."

Viktor blinked, looking from Yuri to the bustle of spectators. His cheeks got a little pink again, and he laughed, "...I need to stop drinking so much."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SIXTY ONE

The door to the hotel room cracked open, and light poured in from the hall, illuminating the darkened space with a thin sliver of yellow-white radiance. Two figures stepped quietly in, and the door closed again after them with a soft click. Bags were set on the ground near the wall, added to the big pile of suitcases and other travel-packs that were already there.

"So you ended up having to tell him you're coming?" Yuri asked, pulling his team jacket off and setting it over the top of the headboard.

"Yeah." Viktor confirmed with a dramatic sigh, "So much for my surprise."

"Can I say it now?"

"...Fine."

"Told you so." Yuri quipped, pointing at his husband with both hands.

"Yeah yeah." The Russian retorted, "You did." He put his long-coat in the hall closet and then turned 180 to face the pile of luggage, a finger rising to his lip in thought, "I really hate leaving all this stuff for you to deal with."

"It doesn't make sense for you to take your half of the gear all the way back to Moscow just because it's yours." The younger skater pointed out, sitting on the edge of the bed, pressing down on the heel of one shoe with the toe of the other, and then doing the same to the second, "It's all going to end up in Sapporo anyway."

"I still feel bad about it. I brought a lot of stuff." Viktor explained, crouching down to pull out the contents of a carry-bag so he could fill it instead with just the things he was taking with him, "I'm only going to need enough stuff for 3 days. ...Most of this pile won't change."

"Well, if you want to take all of it, you're more than welcome to, but you really don't have to. I can handle it."

"You sure?"

"I'll make Yurio carry it." The younger skater suggested with a grin, looking over his shoulder.

Viktor just glanced up and blinked at him skeptically, but then busted out laughing and fell back on his hind end, "That'll be the day! Yurio doesn't even carry his own luggage half the time!"

"Who was asking him to before?"

"...Yakov."

Yuri just brought his hands up and made a face, wordlessly saying 'well there you go' before falling down onto his back on the bed. He listened to the rustling of luggage, zippers, buckles, and cloth for a few minutes before sitting up again to see where the Russian had gotten to with his packing. He grabbed his phone briefly and looked at the time.

Two hours until he has to go to the airport. Yuri clicked it off again and set it face-down on the table in front of him, casting brown eyes over to the silver figure again, It's going to be weird to be alone
tonight. We haven't slept apart since last year. But even then... He looked up at the wall, then to the right, staring out through the part in the curtains to the city beyond,...It was only for a day and a half. This time it'll be three full days...

"You got really quiet there for a bit, Yuri."

"Huh?"

Viktor was sitting cross-legged on the floor, three suitcases open around him and the half-empty duffel-bag he'd been trying to fill just in front of his shins. Blue eyes were examining the younger figure, though what for, Yuri wasn't sure. The Russian smiled though, "Have you picked what you're going to do for the Exhibition tomorrow?"

"Mhhh... Not really." Yuri answered, turning to look down at where he was poking one of his shoes with a toe, lifting it up a little bit and letting the sneaker drop again to tumble where it may, "It'll be weird to go without you."

"You're still upset that I didn't tell you what my plans were until after I'd made them." Viktor said simply, stopping what he was doing and putting his elbows on his knees, slouching a little, "I hadn't even thought about it until after I talked to Uncle Mimi though, after you left."

"You've always been impulsive." The exhausted skater pointed out, dropping to the sheets and blankets again, and lacing his fingers together over his chest. He stared at the ceiling for a moment, but then closed his eyes and drew in a breath, "I can't fault you for being who you are."

Yuri couldn't hear the quiet rustle of socks on carpet, but he did feel the sudden deepening of his imprint in the comforter when two hands went down on it on either side of him. He barely had a chance to open his eyes again before he felt the Russian lying down directly on top of him, one knee coming between his own as those hands slid under the back of his shoulders.

Viktor nosed his lip a little, his bangs tracing light lines across his husband's cheek, "I didn't decide to go because I thought it was okay to leave you behind." He said quietly, holding himself up slightly on his elbows so as not to put his full weight down on the smaller man's chest, "If it weren't for the fact that he got hurt..."

The hands that had been on Yuri's chest unlaced from themselves and went up around the Russian's frame, holding him there lightly as Yuri lifted his head just enough to kiss his husband. He could feel the slight tension in Viktor's body dissolving away, relaxing to his touch, and he moved even further up until he tilted to the side a bit, gently setting his partner into the pillow-pile under the headboard. He raised his right leg up a little where it had been pinned between his partner's, and pressed in close to kiss him again, their positions mostly flipped by then. His hand stroked gently at the man's side, slowly moving from his waist to his chest, then up to caress his cheek.

"I'm not mad for you wanting to go back to meet with Mikhail." Yuri explained in a whisper, lips so close that Viktor could feel the words as they were spoken, "It was a last-second decision you made, and it just happened to take place while I was out, doing things I normally wouldn't be. So while I'm sad you'll be gone, I'm happy that you finally accept your Uncle enough that you'd be willing to go back to Russia just for him."

"...Yuri..."

Lips met lightly again, and for a longer period of time. The raven-haired skater moved in a little closer, hand sliding back down to his partner's waist. Viktor hugged him tighter in turn, fingers pressing into the fabric of the event costume the same way they had earlier in the evening. Just like
then, the Russian felt like he was relinquishing control, letting his husband and lover decide everything and do whatever he wanted. Yuri took it in stride, his free hand sliding from his partner's waist, over his hip, and down his thigh, stopping only to pull that leg over his own.

_He hasn't been his usual self since he saw all the banners before my Free Skate._ The skater thought, the deep kiss still going on as he moved a bit further on top of his husband's body, _It's strange...feeling how easily he surrenders when he gets rattled. I don't often get a chance to make him feel better._

Viktor twisted under him a little, one hand staying on the small of his partner's back as the other slid down loosely over a shoulder. He was sure that Yuri was about to sit on his hips like he usually did, but was surprised to find him doing the opposite...getting in between his legs and pulling them aside his waist before leaning in overtop of him again. They were each still fully decked out as Coach and Skater, minus only their shoes and coats. Yuri paused only long enough to pull the two event passes away, slipping the thin lanyards over his husband's head before setting them further down the bed and leaning in to kiss him again, giving a slight grind of his hips as he went.

The silver Russian savored every moment, hands sliding under his partner's arms to move along his sides, down his back, feeling the soft, yet firm roundness of that telltale skaterbum. He could feel his husband's hands going to work at the front of his suit-jacket though, pulling the tie free and undoing the buttons, pushing the heavier fabric away before fumbling at the smaller buttons of his dress shirt. The tie was still half-knotted when Yuri pulled up again, pulling the white shirt free from his slacks to undo the last remaining fasteners. Yuri let the thinner material fall away and beheld the pale flesh before his eyes, leaning in quickly to kiss and lick at it. Viktor pulled his hands back as he felt the warm wet sensation against his skin, letting them fall to the blanket as he raised his arms up over his head, arching his back up a little as Yuri went further up.

The younger skater gave due attention to each pink nub, kissing and sucking on each before moving up to his husband's neck. For once, he had no apprehension about what he was doing, no anxiety or embarrassment...he was doing what normally would take the addition of liquid courage to pull off. But Yuri wanted nothing more than to bring his partner back from the small pit of despair he'd been flung into with the resurgence of all the previous night's memories. He's won the gold medal for the man, now he was going to remind him why they had gold rings, too.

Another push of his hips; Yuri could feel his partner starting to get excited even through all the layers of fabric that remained between them. He could feel the tingle and heat of his own body starting to respond, and it only made him want his husband more. A few more kisses, and Yuri pushed up onto his hands, resting them on his partner's chest until he was fully upright. Viktor clamped his knees a little tighter around Yuri's smaller frame, making sure he didn't get _too_ far away, and let his hands roam around the man's front to where he knew the tiny hidden clasps were discretely sewn into the costume's dark colors. Three tiny hook-and-eyelets at the V in the front of the outfit, followed by a very thin zipper, and beneath it...skin. Yuri shrugged out of it, carefully tossing it over the headboard next to his runer-jacket, then descended again on top of his husband, chest to chest, flesh to flesh. More kissing, hands roaming under the remains of an open dress shirt to feel every inch, every muscle, every contour and curve.

The younger figure pulled up a little, touching their nose-tips before moving down, kissing his partner's chin, then his neck, moving an inch at a time down his chest and abdomen, dipping his tongue into the Russian's naval. He kissed the man's right hip before rising up a little to undo the button and zipper on the dark-colored slacks before him. He pulled them away just enough, and kissed lightly at what he found within; only one layer of black fabric left.

Viktor drew in a vocal gasp as he felt his husband's affection, closing his eyes to let him do as he
will. It was only a few seconds before he felt his center exposed to the air, and the warm, wet sensation that came after. Initially, one long warm stroke from root to tip, then encompassing everything, rising and falling, licking and sucking. The difference in texture; tongue versus lips, bringing in a hand to help, focusing on different parts...it was everything he loved. He gasped loudly a few times, arching his back and twisting, reaching one hand down to run his fingers through slicked-back raven hair. He supposed this was as close as he'd get to taking his husband while in the middle of an actual event...at least for the moment. There were still yet two before the Grand Prix was over.

Yuri pulled up after a while, keeping his partner in-hand until he needed said hand to push the remains of his own clothing away, then leaned forward and descended again. He felt an immediate push up when their hips pressed against one another, fingernails lightly raking across his back where the Russian's hands held him firmly against the grind. Slowly but mutually, they rocked against one another, and Yuri nibbled at his partner's neck and ear all the while. He only stopped to catch himself when he felt his husband's hands clasp between them, giving a squeeze before gently pulling, tugging, and twisting. He put his forehead against Viktor's chest and drank in the feeling of the man's handiwork, putting everything he'd learned over the past 11 months to good use.

It had been more than a year by then, since their first kiss as Cup of China, but the anniversary of their first truly intimate night wasn't until closer to the end of the month. Viktor's birthday, in fact, though Yuri long-doubted the Russian had planned it that way.

A small shuffle, and Yuri moved a bit forward, bringing his knees aside his partner's waist as he hoisted both of the legs parting around him a little higher around his chest, yanking off the remaining clothes from Viktor's ankles as he went and tossing them aside. The grind continued. Yuri paused only long enough to reach under the pillows where the small purple bottle of fun-liquid had been abandoned the day before, dripped a healthy amount onto himself, and capped the bottle again as he spread the liquid around with the other hand. Returning the little item back to the hiding place it had been pulled from, Yuri leaned forward again, looking down into his husband's eyes before kissing him again. The grind was slicker then, the cold of the fluid warming between them with each slide up and down.

The Russian cupped his partner's face gently, looking deep into those eyes as he felt the new pressure. He relaxed his legs and let his head fall back to the blanket, hair tousled to the side as his hands slid down his partner's chest. An inch in, then back, then two inches, then back again, repeating until he could feel his husband's hips pressed right up against the back of his legs. He could feel where Yuri put his arms behind his knees, lifting his hips a little higher and leaning forward, getting a little deeper.

"...Ah...hnnnn..."

The rocking began slowly, picking up only as Yuri felt his partner relaxing under him. Watching every change in the Russian's expression; how hard he closed his eyes, how far he turned his head, whether he gasped openly or through clenched teeth...every muscle where it was tense or loose, whether fingers were clasping tightly to where they'd fallen to the sheets, then looking aside to see whether the older skater's toes were curled or splayed. Reading the man's body was like reading a book, and Yuri was fluent in its language. He waited until he could see the tension of the man's core fade before he moved any faster; rocking his hips in a circular fashion rather than pulling away and thrusting in again. He unhooked his right arm from behind the man's leg, letting it press against his ribs as he brought his newly-freed hand around front, massaging and stroking in time with his other movements. He continued on that way, sliding his hand down from the man's center, across his abdomen and coming to rest on Viktor's chest, pressing gently to feel his heartbeat.
Slate eyes opened a crack to watch him, and Viktor turned his head a little, looking a bit coy there in the bed sheets. Yuri saw it and fell under their azure spell almost instantly, shifting the man's second leg in front of himself and twisting to get down onto his side behind him. Pressing his chest to the back of his husband's shoulder, he draped an arm over the man's front to hold him close. The gentle grind began anew, slowly pulling further out and pushing back in again. Viktor gasped with each thrust, one hand coming up behind his partner's head where he'd been kissing lightly at his neck, running fingers through dark hair. Soon, he was fully curled back against Yuri's chest, holding to the arms wrapped around him like they couldn't hold him tight enough. He shrugged up his shoulders and tossed his head against the blankets, crying out louder as each thrust went deeper. Eventually, he rolled onto his stomach, forcing his partner to lay on top of him.

Yuri went with it, wedging his hands under Viktor's chest and crossing them in front of him, knees pushing the man's legs apart. He kissed at the back of his husband's shoulder as he pushed on, breathing in the smell of his hair, and the last vestiges of cologne from earlier in the day. A few moments of it, and Viktor was lowering himself to lie flat against the bed, his whole form limp and relaxed to his husband's touch, lying still save for the gentle rocking of Yuri's own movements against him. The younger figure pushed up onto his hands, kissing at his partner's back before sliding them down to the crook of his hips and legs. He gently squeezed each thigh before putting his knuckles down against the blankets, pinching the man's waist between each wrist, and picking up the pace of his motions. He could feel the slight tilt of his partner's hips, and he rose up a little higher onto his knees to accommodate him, trying to move in the way he knew would give the man the most pleasure. He knew he was rubbing up against the sweet spot when Viktor curled his arms under himself and seemed to clench up a little, biting down on the sheet where he was gripping it tightly in his fingers. He even bent his legs up where they'd been spread, toes curling tightly.

Viktor's cries and gasps changed pitch a little, and Yuri knew he was close, so he slowed down again. He pressed himself close, going deep, before reaching both hands under his husband's sides and pulling up a little to get him to rise up onto his hands. The Russian did as bid, and Yuri again hugged him close from behind, right arm wedged through the tight space along the man's side, coming to rest against the inside of his right thigh, the left hand flat against Viktor's chest. He pushed on until he felt he was close as well, only then letting the left hand slide down against pale skin to give attention back to his partner's center. The Russian reached back when he felt it, holding to his husband's leg tightly, breathing becoming more labored, gasps becoming more like cries.

Yuri could feel every muscle in his husband's body tense up all at once before he felt the hot liquid dripping against his fingers. Viktor dipped his head low, crying out against release, moving both hands out in front of himself in an effort to keep upright. The tension pushed Yuri over the edge as well, and he gently bit at the back of his partner's shoulder as he finished, pushing in as far as he could go. He withdrew and pushed in a few more times just for good measure, then stopped, breathing heavily against the wet skin in front of him.

The silver Russian reached for his partner's hands, weaving their fingers together as he brought them forward and pressed them against his chest, turning his head back to kiss the side of his husband's forehead. He said nothing, just trying to catch his breath for a moment before letting the man's hands go again. Yuri just wrapped his arms around his idol's waist and drew him back down to their sides, hugging him tightly, still inside him as they went.

Viktor eventually turned around, pulling off of his husband reluctantly, until he was able to face him normally. He kissed the man lightly a few times, one hand sliding up the length of him until a finger came to rest on Yuri's lip, "I thought I'd just carry you back with me to Russia in spirit, but I guess I'll be taking a little bit of you with me in body as well."

"Hah?" The younger figure blinked at him, but then in spite of everything, his cheeks still flushed a
deep crimson, "Oh."

The Russian huffed a laugh and nosed him affectionately, moving his hand from Yuri's lip to run it through his messy raven hair, "I'll wait until you're asleep before I go, okay? No goodbyes. I'll call you as soon as I land."

Wordlessly, the younger skater nodded, nestling in closer and closing his eyes.
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SIXTY TWO

Viktor did as he said he would, waiting well over an hour, until he was certain his husband was deeply asleep, before moving even an inch. The entire time, however, he kept the man close, kept his arms around him, breathed in the scent of his hair and skin, taking in everything he could before he knew he'd have to leave.

*This really was the worst possible time to decide to go somewhere without him...* The Russian thought to himself, cringing nervously as he knew his time was running out, *Everything that happened after I talked to Uncle Mimi just...makes this so hard...*

He drew in a deep, quiet breath, and started to unravel from where he'd let himself get intertwined with his partner, gently putting a pillow under Yuri's head where it was previously resting on his chest. He gave a soft stroke against that raven hair, kissed his husband's forehead, and hesitantly moved away. He took a quiet shower, dressed, and grabbed the bag he'd barely finished packing before he let his husband take him. Snatching up his dress-shoes, he walked in socks towards the door to make less noise, and reached for the handle...

"...Viktor..."

Blue eyes stayed low, watching his hand's reflection in the curved brass doorknob for a moment before looking up and then back, turning his head over his shoulder.

Yuri was barely peeking over the headboard, fingers curled over it in front of his cheeks, an anxious look on his face.

Viktor turned side-face, "You weren't supposed to wake up."

"I couldn't help it. No pillow in the whole world could ever be half as comfortable as you." He answered, pulling up a little higher to reach an arm out and wave down, beckoning the man closer.

The Russian couldn't help it, and turned on his heels to step back into the room, dropping everything in his hands so he could reach them around his partner instead. He could feel skinny arms coming up around him in return, and he held tighter, "You're just making this harder, Yuri."

"I could come with you to the airport and see you off properly." The younger figure offered, "Just give me two minutes to throw some clothes on an-"

"No...I'd never leave if you came with me." Viktor stopped him, pulling back and reaching up to push strands of black hair from his husband's face, "Or I'd find a way to smuggle you onto the plane. Either way, it wouldn't go well...I need you to go to Sapporo like we planned." There was a twinge of sadness in his voice, and Yuri could sense it.

"Okay..."

"Try to get some sleep tonight. I'll be watching the Exhibition from Moscow tomorrow." He huffed a slightly laugh, "...So give it your best despite this, alright?" A hand slid down the younger athlete's side, touching gently to the ripe, waffle-sized bruise on Yuri's outer hip.
"This makes it twice that you've left before the end of a competition to go home for family." Yuri pointed out, resting his forehead against the crook of his partner's neck and shoulder, arms still around his sides, "At least this time it isn't an emergency." He pulled back and nosed Viktor's chin, "Give Mikhail grief for being on that roof in the first place."

"I planned on it."

"I love you." He followed, lifting brown eyes to look into blue one last time.

"I love you, too," Viktor smiled and kissed him, "Bojus’, čto mne pora. Do svidanija." Another kiss...then one more...and he finally pulled away, feeling Yuri's fingers trailing down his arm until they were at the limits of their reach with their fingertips. Viktor paused to gather the things he'd dropped, and shuffled his way back towards the door, glancing back one more time as he opened the door...smiled...and reluctantly stepped through.

Yuri slouched back down to the blankets, pulling up the pillow that Viktor had put under him before and squished it to his chest, "Ki wo tsukete."

Both of them suddenly felt incredibly alone.

... ... ...  

Yuri awoke the next morning under a pile of Viktor's clothes, the black and red runner-jacket wrapped over his head. He found it was the only way he could sleep; finding things that still had the man's scent on them and surrounding himself with them. The blankets themselves weren't enough.

His phone was ringing on the table ahead of him, and he fumbled a hand forward to find it, realizing it wasn't even his alarm-jingle...it was the sound of someone calling. It wasn't Viktor though...he was going to be on a plane for another 2 hours...it was Yurio.

Grumbling from listless-sleep, Yuri clicked into the call, "Hey."

"When are you coming down from your Ivory Tower?" The teen asked abruptly, "It's 10am. The Ice Dancers are about to start, and the Exhibition is an hour after."

"I know, I know..." Yuri grumbled, rubbing his eyes, "I'm coming."

"We'll meet you in the lobby."

"Alright..." He lowered the phone to his leg and closed out of the call, yawning, and looked around the room. It was an even bigger mess than he thought he'd left it...but apparently in his quest to find things to bury himself in, he'd opened literally every suitcase they had.

_I'm going to spend half the afternoon just putting all this stuff back together..._ He thought nervously, hiding back behind the headboard so the mess would be out of sight. His phone suddenly beeped, noting a new text message, and when he looked at the screen...

**Yuri Plisetsky:**

[QUiT MOPING AND GET OUT OF BED]

He gaped at the message, looking around like he thought the teen was somehow spying on him, but
then let his thumbs do the talking, [I AM]

[GO FASTER, WE'RE HUNGRY]

[Okay!! Sheesh! I gotta shower first!]

[You've got 30 minutes, Katsudon, then we're leaving.]

Yuri raised a brow and gave the phone quite the look, but then huffed a sigh, [I'll be down in 15.]

[Setting a timer...now.]

"Chikusho!"

.

The elevator was going as slow as it possibly could be, and when the doors finally opened to the Lobby level, Yuri was busting-ass to get out. Scrambling to stay on his feet as he vaulted towards the doors, he spotted Yurio and Otabek standing just outside. Yurio had his phone in-hand, watching the seconds tick by his timer.

"I'M HERE." Yuri heaved as he pushed through the revolving door, "I MADE IT."

The Russian teen just held up his phone so he could see; 16:43...44...45...46...

"AHHHHHHHHHH."

"Forget it. Let's just go." Yurio said, pocketing the phone again...and pausing to gawk at the older skater, "You really are pitiful."

"Huh?" Yuri blinked at him, then at himself, "What, you're gonna make fun of me for wearing Viktor's team-jacket again?"

"Wearing it isn't going to change the fact that he's gone."

"I know that." Yuri grumbled, pulling the lapels up a little higher around his neck, sinking into them like a turtle pulling its head into its shell, "I just want to wear it."

"We'd better go." Otabek interrupted, trying to be the voice of reason between the three of them, "I don't want to skate on a full stomach."

The Russian Punk agreed and turned around, revealing the backpack behind him. Yuri gaped at it, but then shook his head and dismissed it.

*He's not going back to the Ritz-Carlton after the show...I don't know why I thought he was carrying anything other than his travel gear.*

They started moving towards the row of idling shuttles, looking for the one that would take them towards food.

."
Not even First Class could offer Viktor respite from his nerves, and when he disembarked from the plane at Sheremetyevo International Airport...he looked like he'd been awake the entire time.

_Did I sleep at all?_ He wondered, looking around the terminal like there was some kind of weird Instagram filter overtop of it, making everything look like it was bubble-wrapped, _Can I see sounds now? What day is it...?_

He turned his head and started making his way for the car-rental desk...only to stop half-way in a daze and look instead for the exit. A taxi would probably be a better idea. When he found one, he practically fell against it, holding out a piece of paper with his Uncle's address on it and dropping into the back seat. He wasn't sure that he noticed when the car started moving, since when he sat up again to look around, they were far enough away from the airport that they were inside the city proper.

[Rough flight?] The cabby asked, then cracking a laugh at his expense, [Or did you have too much to drink before you landed?]

Viktor blinked one eye at a time in his daze, but reached up a hand to rub his face a little, [I just couldn't sleep.]

[What do you call what you just did back there then?] Eyes were in the rear-view mirror.

Viktor wasn't really in the mood for small-talk, and leaned his head back against the seat as he yawned again, and closed his eyes, [Death by exhaustion.]

When he opened them again, it was only because the cabby was trying to get him out of the back seat, shaking him by the shoulder. Slate-blue irises yielded to the light of the early, overcast morning sky, pupils getting tiny. He blinked a few times to adjust, rummaged around in his pocket for his wallet, handed the man the money he was owed, and stepped out of the car. Looking around, Viktor realized he was in front of a high-rise apartment building...and a rather fancy one at that.

[This is the right place?] He asked idly.

[This is the address you gave me. Whether or not it's the place you're looking for? Who knows.] The man answered, getting back into the cab and starting to move away.

Viktor watched it pull out of the parking lot, but then turned his eyes back up at the building. He vaguely recalled how his Uncle had mentioned having a time-share in Moscow.

_I didn't think it would be this fancy though. Who would want to pay rent on a place they don't even live in?_ He paused then, recalling even in his exhausted haze how he was still making monthly payments on the hovel in Barcelona that he'd leased to claim residence for his and Yuri's marriage certificate, and puffed a laugh at his own expense. He shrugged his bag a bit higher onto his shoulder and started walking towards the doors.

There was a weird feeling of déjà vu as he moved through the building. Not necessarily because of the way the place itself looked...that was all brand new...but the feeling of going to where he knew his Uncle was staying, even if only temporarily. He went up the elevator to the 14th floor, looked back and forth to orient himself to the numbers going down each hall, and eventually found himself outside the door he'd been looking for. It felt strange then, even worse than before, the familiarity of knocking on that panel, knowing who was behind it. He clenched his eyes shut for a moment and shook his head, thinking he was just overtired, and raised his hand up to rap his knuckles on the white-varnished entrance.
He waited a moment, taking a step back, and soon heard the sound of locks being undone on the other side. When the door opened though, Viktor tilted his head, not seeing the man he'd expected.

Instead, he saw himself.

"...Počemu ty ostavljaes' menja?" He asked quietly, eyes closing, too heavy to hold open anymore.

.""

.""

The silver-haired child at the door was in complete hysterics, but the 34-year-old looking down on him knew it was his fault and could do nothing for it.

"Počemu ty ostavljaes' menja!?!" The boy screamed again, tears falling from his face as he rushed in through the entrance hall, latching to the man's leg like he thought it would stop him.

[Vivi... Mikhail said, his voice ragged, [I can't stay here anymore. I'm sorry.]

[It's not fair!] The boy sobbed, words broken up by his tiny body trying to catch a breath between cries, [You have to stay!]

The 1989 Volkswagen Jetta was packed full to bursting already, the driver's side door open and the engine already on. Mikhail knelted down where the child had blocked his way out of his house, pulling him into a tight hug, feeling how his cheeks were sopping wet with tears. He cupped one hand around the boy's head, trying not to cry as well, [Maybe when you're older, you'll understand.] He pulled back and looked into the slate-blue eyes, tinted red from hysteria, and tried to rub a few tears away with one thumb, [But it won't be forever. I'll come back one day and see you, okay?]

[WHEN!!?] The boy begged, tiny fingers clenched to the older man's jacket.

Mikhail looked out past the child's shoulder, seeing Tatiyana and Konstantin there, the big black dog that followed Viktor everywhere...it even seemed like half the town had come to watch him go. None were as desperate for him to stay as Viktor though. He turned grey-green eyes back down on his tormented nephew, [Vivi...I don't know...]

[THEN DON'T GO!! YOU CAN'T GO!!]

[I HAVE to. There's nothing LEFT for me here. I'd take you with me if I could, but...]

[JUST TAKE ME!! I WANT TO GO WHERE YOU ARE!]

[Viktor, don't torture your Uncle that way... Tatiyana said, coming into the doorway and reaching down to pick up her hysterical son, [We've told you already. Mimi wants to go abroad. You have to stay here.]]

It really wasn't so simple, but Mikhail wasn't going to complicate things for the boy. The dog barked where he stood in the muddy roadway; it was summer, but it was often still wet in the woods. The silver man finally stepped out, pausing only to kiss his sister's cheek and muss his nephew's hair one more time before making a hasty retreat to the waiting car. His heart wrenched to hear Viktor screaming all over again, writhing and wiggling in his mother's arms until she had no choice but to put him down. The door closed with half a slam, and started pulling away, making a big U-Turn in
front of the weather-worn house and heading down the drive to the old main road in front of it. He turned his eyes up to the rear-view mirror to see the boy running after the car.

[UNCLE MIMI!!]

He turned his eyes away for a second, only to turn them back again and see Viktor trip and fall face-first in the mud. Losi bounded up next to him and whined, tail wagging anxiously as Tatiyana went rushing after him as well to hoist him up. Konstantin just stayed here he was, leaning lazily on a tall walking-stick, a pipe hanging from his mouth.

The boy was just crying out incoherently after that, reaching for the car as it disappeared from sight.

"...Ne hodite...Djadja Mimi..." Viktor mumbled, face-down on the couch in front of the big flat-panel television.

Mikhail glanced at him from the kitchen, hearing something but not sure what. He finished drying the glass in his hands before filling it with water from the fridge-front filter-tap, and walked it out into the livingroom to set it on the coffee table. His iPad was next to it, connected to the Cup of China Stream already; it was playing reruns from the day before, showing highlights of all the medaling skates from each of the disciplines before the Exhibition. The older Russian sat on the edge of the couch and pat his nephew's shoulder, [Hey, Vivi...you okay?]

"...Huh...?"

[You were mumbling something. Are you sick?] He pressed his wrist to the younger man's forehead, but found him to feel normal, [No fever... When was the last time you slept?]

[...Uh...Saturday night...?]

[I'm surprised. I thought you were going to say Friday. You're hopeless.]

Viktor pushed up with one hand, at least managing to flip onto his back, [...I made it...]

[Barely.] His elder chided, [You got to the door and then fell in. If I hadn't been standing there when I was, you'd have gone face-first into the door.] He reached a hand over and brushed the skater's bangs from his eyes, [Have you called Yuri to tell him you landed?]

[...What is phone...?]

[Jeeze, you're completely delirious. I'll call him then so he doesn't worry.] Mikhail said, standing up again to go find his phone in the bar-area of the kitchen. A moment or two later, he got the answer, and waved at where he saw the younger skater on the other end of the FaceTime feed, "Hey Yuri, I thought I should let you know that your husband made it in one piece."

"Yeah? That's good. Where is he?" Yuri wondered; he was in the prep area of the Sports Arena, with Yurio standing just behind him talking to someone off-screen. The skater turned his head and poked at the blonde's shoulder, "Hey, it's Mikhail, say hi."

"Dobroe utro, stáryy perdún." He said, turning his head back and waving with a smirk.

"Watch your mouth, kid. I'm not that old." Mikhail retorted; at least it all seemed to be in good fun. He was carrying his phone around to the couch again, and turned it so the face-plate would face the exhausted figure practically writhing on his back, "Say hi, Viktor."

"Yuuurriii..." He moaned, trying to sit up.
Mikhail shook his head and sat back where he'd been before, and held the phone more at his nephew's level so he wouldn't look so ridiculous.

Yuri seemed to think it was a bit funny, "Viktor, you look like you've been awake for days. You should go to sleep."

"Sleeping is when the remembers come back." He answered, not entirely aware of what he'd said, "The Exhibition."

"It can wait. You can always watch it later," Yuri explained, looking a bit worried then, "You really need to get some rest. I'll call back when Yura and I are about to leave from the airport, okay? It'll be in the afternoon for you by then, instead of practically dawn."

"It's 8am here, Yuri." Mikhail corrected idly from behind the screen, "Not that it really makes much of a difference, but...yeah."

"Davaaaaaii..." Viktor called, reaching for the screen like he thought he could reach through it, "I'll stay awake until I know what show you picked...!"

"I picked the shortest one! Now go to bed!"

"Is your leg bothering you still?"

"Not as much as it did right after my Free Skate, but it's still sore, yeah." The younger skater answered, "Now please go to bed. I'll worry about you if you don't. You know what happens when I worry!"

"What? Nooooo. Don't worry! I'm fine!"

Mikhail finally turned the phone around to face him, "I'll fix him up. Go do your thing. Congrats on belting out Gold, too. That was one Hell of a show you put on yesterday."

Yuri's cheeks flushed a little, and he smiled brightly, "Thanks! And sorry if it seems like you're babysitting him. I know that's probably not what you expected when he said he was coming to help you out."

"He'll be fine once he's had some time to recover from the weekend." The elder answered, noting that the LiveStream was starting to connect to the event, "Oh, the Exhibition stream is finally working. Have fun! I'm looking forward to what you've got in store for us."

"Alright, and thanks. Bye Uncle Mikhail. GET SOME SLEEP, VIKTOR."

The video ended, and the screen went dark again a moment later. Mikhail set it face-down on the table and took up the iPad in its place, moving to slouch back into the corner just ahead of where his nephew was still splayed out on his back. He barely had a moment to cross his ankles and get comfortable before he felt Viktor drop his head on his lap, facing the television and desperately trying to keep his eyes open.

"Y-Yuri...dav..ai..."

The elder Russian shook his head and sighed, patting the younger's shoulder, "Go to sleep, Vivi. You got what you needed."

Viktor was out before he'd even finished hearing the words.
Bojus’, čto mne pora = I'm afraid I have to get going
Ki wo tsukete = Take care
Počemu ty ostavljaeš’ menja? = Why are you leaving me?
Ne hodite...Djadja Mimi = Don't go, Uncle Mimi
Dobroe utro, stáryy perdún = 'Morning, old man/geezer
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SIXTY THREE

Feeling like he was experiencing Cat Paralysis, Mikhail gave his nephew a look and crossed his arms. It had been about ten minutes since the younger Russian had fallen asleep with his head on his lap, and it didn't seem likely that the man would wake up anytime soon...not that he should, but still.

Mikhail looked from the skater to the water he'd put on the coffee table...and reached as far as he could go...but it was still two feet too far away. He slumped back into the corner of the sofa, thinking maybe he could slide out from under Viktor's head without waking him up. As soon as he tried to sneak to the side though, one of Viktor's arms came up to go over both of his legs and pinned him even more than he'd been before.

Goddamnit, Viktor.

The announcers on the television were saying something or another that he wasn't paying attention to. However, footage descended onto rink-side, and Mikhail got a good look at the mob of skaters that were about to go out. Yuri and Yurio were slightly off to the side, like the teen was trying to explain something to his older counterpart at the last second, making wide gestures with his hands as Yuri was nodding repeatedly. From that vantage, it was easy to see that Yuri was wearing Viktor's team jacket, and Mikhail smiled to know that Viktor himself probably would've enjoyed to see that.

He reached for the tablet at least, and finagled a way to record the footage for later.

The LiveStream was sourced out of Japan like usual. It seemed like NewsCasters Morooka and Oda were following Yuri to every one of his competitions. Thankfully, they were speaking in English, so understanding them was easy.

"Welcome, International audience, to the Shanghai Cup of China Exhibition Gala! The skaters are about to get started!" Morooka was saying.

"This weekend was fairly intense." Oda added, "And despite some hang-ups, I think we really got a good taste of the kind of competition we're going to be seeing at the Final. For Ladies Singles, we've confirmed Sara Crispino of Italy has made it again. In Men's Singles, Yuri Nikiforov of Japan has secured his place as well. This will be his third year running in the Final, and the home crowd in Japan is really excited to see what he can do."

"That was quite the last-second victory for him, too, wouldn't you agree?"

"Absolutely. We've seen Skater Yuri collapse under pressure before, but this time, he was able to shake it quickly. Coming out of the Short Program with a score less than 75, then belting out over 225 in the Free Skate and securing a Gold medal for Japan...he had us really worried there for a bit."

"Skater Yuri's Coach and competition, Viktor Nikiforov of Russia, is slated to go on the ice next weekend in Sapporo, Japan. We expect he'll be confirming his place in the Final as well at that point."

"Yes. Currently, the other guaranteed Finalists for Men's Singles include Otabek Altin of Kazakhstan and JJ Leroy of Canada, both of whom took a Gold and Silver each at their qualifying events. The last several slots are up for grabs between Yuri Plisetsky of Russia, Christophe Giacometti of Switzerland, and Phichit Chulanont of Thailand, who will be competing against Skater Viktor at
NHK. A similar roster to last year, but we're already seeing some rather interesting scores."

"It looks like the skaters are ready to get started. Let's get down to the ice."

Mikhail looked back down on his nephew and pat his upturned shoulder, resigned to the fate that he’d be stuck where he was until the man woke up again...or until the end of the Exhibition, whichever came first. He could feel how his nephew twitched at times though in his fitful sleep, eyes darting this way and that under his eyelids. He could only wonder what the man was dreaming about. Lifting grey-green irises back to the television though, he heard the *absolute weirdest mash-up* being played for the skaters as they flew out across the darkened field.

[*Rednex Vs Psy - Gangnam Eye Joe* - on YouTube channel magebarf]

The mob burst out onto the ice to excited cheers, and Mikhail caught on quickly to what Yurio must’ve been telling Yuri to do. The skater was hanging rather close to Otabek, following slightly behind in his footsteps so as not to be in the way.

*He must've missed practice this morning. Did he not sleep either?*

There wasn’t a whole lot of specific choreography, which was good for Yuri; the gaggle of skaters moved like a flock of birds just like at Worlds, weaving through one another on the ice and executing various trade-moves as they hit certain marks on the ice. Yuri had at least taken off the Team Russia jacket by then, likely handed off to the only member of Team Russia who was actually (still) in China that weekend.

Yuri really seemed to be enjoying himself at least, figuring out the pattern of the other figure skaters and falling into place. When it came to having individual groups of folks go across the ice while the rest stayed closer to rink-side, he was even encouraged by the others to go out and take-part despite not having practiced it with them. He managed reasonably well, twizzling across the ice and vaulting into a triple Axel where he could. Thankfully, he’d been familiar with both songs, so figuring out how to do the dances with the other skaters wasn’t terribly difficult.

For his last set of solo-moves, Yuri whipped out the camel spin and choreography from the end of his old Eros program, figuring it would probably be the easiest thing to mix with the song’s energy. All the other skaters formed two long lines across the ice, getting ready for the big coordinated finale. Otabek and Sara were out front together, leading the rest.

*Heeeeeeey sexy lady~! Op...op, op, op...oppa Gangnam style!*

The entire group started doing the horse-dance with the lasso, then jumped onto toe-picks to put their hands on the left knees and kick their right legs out.

*Heeeeeeey sexy lady~!

They hopped back to standing upright, pumping their arms out near their chests, then doing what could only be described as the ‘Sprinkler’ move.

*Op...op, op, op...Hey-hey-hey heyheyhey...oppa Gangnam style!*

All the skaters got into the final pose at the same time, throwing out their right legs ahead of them, and then thrusting it behind, digging toe-picks into the ice as they all brought their right hands up to give a coy look, putting it aside their chins, the left hand hooking down at their sides.

*BOOM.*
Yuri was catching his breath, but laughing, bumping fists with Otabek as they both went back towards the rink exit, "That was great." The older skater was saying, wiping the sweat from his forehead, "I haven't heard either of those songs in years. Someone would put them together like this."

"Oh, you like mash-ups?" Otabek wondered, "What about rock remixes?"

"Sure." Yuri answered, stepping off the ice just near where Yurio had been waiting with Viktor's jacket and both their blade guards, "You DJ, right?"

"Yeah. You're even older than I am, so you'd be able to come if you wanted."

Yuri grimaced at the mention of their comparative ages.

Yurio looked like he was about to have a heart attack, "Wait, you won't let me come, but you're inviting Katsudon? What the Hell!?"

"He's old enough to go. You're not." Otabek said with a playfully mocking smirk, reaching out a finger to thwap the teen's nose with a flick before taking his skate-guards, "You can come when you lose your jailbait status."

"Shots fired." Yuri grinned.

"JAILBAIT!? ...BUT THAT'S FOREVER FROM NOW."

"Isn't your birthday in March?" The Asian skater wondered, putting the second guard onto his skates, "You're 16 now. You'll be turning 18 right before Worlds...next year." He pulled Viktor's jacket on after that, reaching out to pull on the sleeves where the Russian's arms were just slightly longer than his.

"It's December 1st right now! That Worlds still another 15 months away!" The teen was still protesting.

Yuri just laughed at Yurio's protests, pushing him along the rink wall so they'd be out of the way until their turn. The first Exhibition on the ice was the Pairs Gold medalists, and they had already started by then.

Not having any particular attachment to the Pair skaters, Mikhail twiddled around on his iPad, keeping the stream active in the background while he played some Russian knock-off of Fruit Ninja. He passed a few minutes that way, getting through the Bronze Ice Dancers and the Ladies Silver medalist before something else caught his attention.

Viktor had rolled onto his back, but his breathing had gotten shallower and he had sweat beading on his forehead.

Mikhail's brow furrowed at the sight of it, and no longer cared so much about whether moving would wake his nephew up. He pulled himself out of the corner and set a pillow under Viktor's head in place of his leg, feeling at his forehead again.

Still no fever... Is he having a nightmare?

The younger Russian's hands were twitching where they'd come to rest on his chest and stomach, and his head turned from one side to the other. The look on his face was one of fear, confirming
Mikhail's worry.

Poor guy can't rest even now. I wonder if it would be a mercy to wake him up, or just to let him get through it?

He moved off towards the kitchen to get a cold washcloth, and set it over Viktor's forehead to keep him cool.

Winters north of St. Petersburg were cold and unforgiving, but when the snows finally stopped falling and the countryside was able to dig itself out again, there could be beauty and fun. It was barely October, but 5 year old Viktor was still depressed from the proverbial disappearance of his Uncle Mimi. Even the playful antics of Losi couldn't cheer him up.

Tatiyana followed close behind as the tiny silver boy wandered over the hill behind the house, making his way in whatever direction the massive black bear-dog carved through the snowdrift. It was hard to see where they were going under 2 feet of cold white fluff, but so long as the dog was content in where he was going, so too was Viktor.

The woman knew the pond was somewhere at the bottom of the hill, but the rocks surrounding it had been buried, so the lump of every tree stump, stone, log, and bush looked exactly the same.

Viktor found it, though.

[It's slippery...]

[Careful, Viktor...the pond isn't that deep but it'll still be cold if you fall through.]

Slate-blue eyes glanced back at her, but the boy did what any curious child would, and jumped up and down where he stood just to see what would happen. The water was frozen solid though. Not even the slightest bubble from closer to the ground sloshed around under the ice. For the first time since summer, the silver child found something to smile about.

He gave it his best effort, and cleared a tiny patch around himself, making the world's smallest skating rink, and carefully slid around on it in his little winter boots.

Losi was barking somewhere close by, and Tatiyana glanced over to see the black behemoth of a canine jumping from one previously-formed 'body print' to the next, gradually getting closer. She glanced back at her son though as he fell and gasped in surprise, and was about to reach out to pick him up again, but found him laughing instead of crying. Hearing the sound was a relief, and the silver-haired woman moved closer, helping to clear an even bigger patch. By the time they were done, there was a 10ft diameter circle of frozen pond exposed to the air, surrounded by a small wall of shoveled snow.

The dog bounded through again, not expecting the ice, and collapsing into a completely graceless slide right past the boy, stopping only as he hit the far snow-pile. Viktor laughed at it and gave chase. The dog hoisted himself back to his feet and barked playfully, jumping around on ready paws...still slipping once in a while, but at least staying upright.

[Does this happen every winter, mama?] Viktor asked, jumping on the dog's back and rolling with him as he flopped around to expose his belly, tail wagging away.

[Every winter.] The woman answered, a bit nervous to say so, glancing around briefly.
[The pond is frozen.] The boy went on idly, hanging onto Losi as the dog got back up again, and let himself get pulled along as four paws started walking again, [This is fun!]

[The ice will melt as soon as the winter's gone, Viktor.] The woman went on, [In summer it'll just be water again. Water and mud.]

[Do other people play on frozen ponds, too?]

[Sometimes.]

[But if this pond freezes every year, how come no one has played here before?]

[That's just how it is.]

[Why?]

[It's always been like that, for years and years, even before you were born.]

[...Why?]

[Get off the ice, Viktor.] A gruff voice came, catching both figures off guard, but none so much as the woman.

They looked up to the top of the hill and saw Konstantin glaring back at them.

[Why?] Viktor asked, innocently enough.

The older man narrowed his eyes, [Your father gave you a command. Your place is to obey without questioning it.]

[Just come off the ice, Vivi.] Tatiyana begged quietly, going over to wrangle her baby and get him clear of the pond before anything else could be said about it, [Just stay close to me and don't argue, okay?]

Viktor twisted to his side again, facing the back-rest of the couch. The cloth on his forehead fell off, and his bangs got messy from the water, but he stayed asleep.

[Don't ever let your father see these, okay?] Tatiyana said in a whisper.

It was January. Viktor was 6 by then. He beheld the oversized blades with wonder...and confusion.

[What are these for?]

[You wear them on your feet so you can skate!] She explained, [They're like shoes just for the ice.] She put one of the old-fashioned beams against the sole of her left boot to show him, [They're a bit big for you, but I think they'll do for now. Just promise me...you'll never use them when your father's home, okay? This is our secret, for when he's at the mill. And you don't tell anyone else about it, okay?]

[Okay!]

[Here, I'll help you put them on. You can skate for 30 minutes, but then we have to go back inside]
and finish with your school for today.

[Yeah!]

Fully strapped in and ready to fly, the anxious child stood up...and didn't know what to do. The blades were adult-sized for his kid-sized feet, and they were heavy, but more than that...Viktor just didn't know what to do with them.

He turned back to his mother with confusion written on his face, [...How do I go...?] Tatiyana laughed and stood up, walking out onto the pond in front of him and taking his tiny hands to pull him forward. He slid along the flat ice easily, blades scratching as he moved, and those azure eyes were wide with wonder.

[This is great! Mama!]

She let go of one hand and let him slip into a wide arc around her, staying in the center to act as a pivot, [Move your feet, Viktor...move them like you're walking.]

He lifted one tiny leg and set it down again, starting to get the hang of how the ice felt. When he was ready, his wind-chafed little face turned towards the woman and nodded...and she let him go. Viktor managed well enough, but he soon realized he didn't know how to turn, and he flailed as he went straight into a snow-mound at the edge of the 'rink.' Tatiyana stifled a laugh with a hand over her mouth, and Losi barked excitedly as she went over to pull the poor boy out of the cold fluff.

[When you want to turn, you have to lift your leg and turn your foot, then set it back down in the direction you want to go. Try again?] She explained, dusting the snow off his head and coat. Determined, the boy nodded, and his mom took a position behind him, [I'll turn this time.] He said confidently

[Ready?]

"Da."

A gentle nudge moved him forward, and the little silver child glided across the ice. About halfway across the pond, he lifted his right foot, set it down with a slight tilt, and quickly lifted the left as he started moving in a curve. His footwork got better with each step, and he slid all the way back to where Tatiyana was waiting before.

He skated right into her, and she playfully let him knock her over, [Ohh! Viktor, you got me!]

[How do I stop...?] He asked with a huff, clinging to her coat as his feet scrambled under them.

Mikhail saw his nephew's breathing change; they were pained or ragged anymore. They had normalized. It was a bit of a relief, and the older figure sat in his corner again, wedging in just next to the pillow under Viktor's head.

The following year, the tiny silver Russian had improved his form significantly. It was still cumbersome to have the adult-sized blades on his shoes, but he'd grown into them a little, and was making his way in swift circles around the cleared patch of ice. Tatiyana stood in the center of the
'rink,' clapping and smiling excitedly to see him whiz past.

[You're getting really good at this! You have real natural talent, Viktor!]

[How come I can't tell anyone about this?] He asked pointedly, twisting around to slide backwards around the woman instead, hands no longer needed for balance, [I think everyone would have fun here.]

[We tell your father that we clear the pond so people don't accidentally fall into it, trying to find their way through the snow. Just leave well enough alone, okay? He has his reasons.]

Viktor pouted a little at that, but didn't argue.

"...Nyet..." The younger silver figure whimpered quietly, "On skoro pridet..."

Mikhail blinked at him, pulling the water-glass from where he'd been sipping at it, "...He's coming? Who's coming?"

[WHAT DID I TELL YOU ABOUT THE POND?] Konstantin's voice boomed.

All skating came to a sudden stop, and Viktor looked at the top of the hill, just near the house where his father had unexpectedly popped up.

[Y-you're home early!] Tatiyana said, shocked, standing quickly, [Don't worry, the pond is completely frozen solid!]

[GET OFF THE ICE, VIKTOR. NOW.]

The boy wasn't going to question it like before, and moved towards the nearest snow pile and jumped into it without a second thought, antique blades in the air behind him where he landed.

[Konstantin, this isn't fair!] He could hear his mother saying, [Ever since Mikhail left, he's had nothing to do! There's no kids his age here! I can't keep him cooped up in the house all winter...at least skating gives him something fun to look forward to! Let him have just this one thing!]

[No son of mine will skate.] The gruff older man said belligerently, [I'll fill the pond with concrete come summer if I catch him with those blades on again.]

Viktor's face changed again, like he was on the edge of tears. His eyes twitched and his arms trembled where they curved up towards him.
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SIXTY FOUR

It was summer again. Fortunately, the pond hadn't met a gruesome fate. Unfortunately, there would be no skating in the warm weather.

Alone, the tiny Nikiforov walked through the woods behind his home, passing the first of several tanks that had been grounded there since long before he had come into the world. He glanced at where the trees had grown through the wheel tracks, the moss that had moved up the old worn shells, the vines that wound their way around the main cannon turrets on the front.

The tank he was looking for was to the left. It had been mangled on a large rock, left crippled and alone in the deep woods for decades. Inside though, something a bit more modern.

He climbed up the sides like a little silver mongoose, and dropped back down into the cockpit. There, a backpack was waiting, and within...his winter blades. But not just that.

Skating books.

His mother had found three to sneak to him, and he'd read them each through a hundred times by then. The cover of each was from the major competitions from the previous season; Worlds in Chiba, Japan, Euros in Copenhagen, Denmark, and Russian Nationals in St. Petersburg. There wasn't even a Grand Prix Final back then. Rostelecom Cup didn't exist yet either.

[...Toe-Loop...Lutz...] He said quietly, looking at grainy old photos showing a representation of each. Slate-blue eyes scanned the pictures, examining them for every detail of every microsecond of each jump, [...Flip...]

He was immediately back outside again, and took the books over to a large tree stump. He did a few practice jumps just by leaping forward, clearing the landing spot of small stones, sticks, and leaves. Then he tried his first backwards jump; putting his left foot on the stump while the right stayed on the ground. He glanced at the diagram one last time, and bent his right knee, half-intending to launch up a few times, only to hesitate at the last second and stay down. He looked at the direction of the pond and the hill, listened to the sound of the woods...and resigned to himself that there was no one around. He lifted himself up a little bit on the stump, and pretended to kick his right toe down...leapt up, spun twice, and hit the ground...

A little while later, he was running at the stump, vaulted off of it, spun three times, and landed.

[...I can only do the Axel like this... Winter, come soon!!]

By the time winter did come back around again...the clunky, massive, antique blades were holding him back. They'd moved to a different pond, further away and deeper in the woods...more difficult to get to, and thus being able to spend less time on it.

Tatiyana had a finger over her mouth in thought as she watched her 8-year-old trying to do jumps on blades that were still twice as long as his feet.

[Let's go home for now, Viktor...you're just going to hurt yourself doing that.] The woman said, pushing to stand up from where she'd been sitting on a large boulder.

[Go??] The boy echoed, looking worried suddenly, [I don't want to! Not yet!]
"Come back with me."
She repeated, walking up to him on the ice. [I promise, I'll make it worth your while.]

"Huh...?"

"Trust me."
She went on, grey-green eyes smiling down on him, silvery hair waving lightly in a winter breeze.

"These are for girls...but they should do just as well."
Tatiyana said, tying the laces on a pair of rental skates. [They may just make your feet sore later.]

Viktor looked around nervously. The skating rink was old and run-down, probably from the Soviet era, but there were still a number of people using it. He glanced down at where the white boots and silver blades were tied to his feet, sticking them straight out before setting them down on the ground and standing up. They were familiar enough to the antique blades he'd been tying to his regular boots before that, but different enough that he walked awkwardly with them on.

Wobbling his way over to the rink entrance, he looked out in wonder at the field of white. It was like a foreign country all of a sudden. All he could do was stare. The handful of other people who were already on the ice just went by him like there was nothing special happening.

"Well?"
Tatiyana asked from behind him. [Don't you want to go out?]

Blue eyes looked up at her, then back at the white stage. A nervous toe-pick came down on the cold, then the other, tip-toeing forward a few feet before stopping again.

Flashes of the photos from the books came flooding into the boy's mind, and he closed his eyes, taking in the feeling of the rink around him. How flat and perfectly smooth the ice was compared to the slight inconsistency of the pond, the cold on his cheeks, the sound of other blades scratching along all around him.

When he opened his eyes again, the world was new...and he slid forward.

Focusing on his feet, Viktor thought back on everything he'd read. The anatomy of the skate, the blade, their care...and the edges. He tilted his right foot inward, [Forward inside edge...]. Then the opposite way, [Forward outside edge...]. He even flipped around backwards and repeated it, [Backwards inside edge...backwards outside edge...]. Blades went into the most basic maneuvers after that, slipping through a simple curve while still going backwards, then bringing the inside of his free foot to the back of the skating heel, and switched feet, [Mohawk turn...].

Tatiyana watched him going faster, flying around the rink like he'd been born for it. His lanky little body moving around with a grace he hadn't been able to achieve with the older skates she'd given him before. Seeing how quickly he adjusted to using real skating blades made her smile. Seeing him starting to jump though...that made her heart go into her throat.

Flying along the mostly-empty far end of the rink, Viktor felt like he'd found new legs...ones that worked better than those he'd been born with. The blades were extensions of his feet. He knew what to do. He lined himself up with the next corner, turned forward, and kicked as hard as he could with the right leg.

"VIKTOR!"
Half a dozen people looked up and back to where they heard the sound...but the soft hiss of blades scratching along the ice suddenly changed to an 8-year-old laughing.

[I DID IT! I DID A DOUBLE AXEL!]

Tatiyana peeked through her fingers where she'd brought her hands up in front of her face, seeing the boy skating off like he'd never jumped at all. His face had come alive for the first time in ages, like he'd finally found his reason for existing.

He went around the rink a few times normally after that, flipping to skate backwards on the 3rd pass, getting a feel for it. How his feet crossed over one another to keep the curve smooth, the way the wind flew past him, how to compensate for his blind-spot while looking over one shoulder...all of it. Feeling how the Axel went, Viktor decided to try something a bit harder...a double Flip. As he went along the long-edge of the rink, he stuck his right leg out and tapped the ice with the toe-pick a few times.

[Back inside edge...] He said quietly to himself, unaware of all the eyes on him, [Push off with the right toe-pick, land on the back outside edge of that same foot... I can do this...]

[Oohhhh he's not...] Tatiyana said to herself, watching in disbelief.

Skshhh-TAK...THOK-Skshhhhhhhhhhh...

Grey-green eyes were open wide, jaw a bit slack.

[DID YOU SEE?] Viktor cried out triumphantly, [I DID A FLIP!]

[I saw it!] The woman called back, still shocked, [Where did you find time to learn all that?]

The silver boy came to a dramatic stop and bowed excitedly, [I ran at a tree stump all summer. I've been dying to get to do these on ice!]

[Well...you're really good...shockingly good...]

He grinned devilishly before flying off again to try other moves.

[I can't get you a real coach, Viktor...you know that.] Tatiyana said.

The 10-year-old in the car next to her was already pouting, arms crossed as he stared ahead at the glove-box, [...But you sai-]

[I know what I said, and I regret it.] She explained, sighing audibly, [Your father controls all the family finances. To pay for a coach, I'd have to get him to give permission. We've done so much to keep your skating secret all this time...we can't just throw that away by asking him to help you with it. It would just infuriate him to know we've been doing this behind his back.]

[You've never told me the real reason why he hates the skating so much anyway.] Viktor grumbled, reaching down for the backpack just between his heels in the foot-well, and heaving it upwards pull it into his arms, [The excuses stopped making sense a long time ago.]

[Oh my, Viktor...you're an old soul.] Tatiyana said quietly, reaching over to pat the boy's head,
which just made him sulk even more, [Things were so much easier when you were younger.]

Realizing that was the end of the conversation, the young Russian hugged the backpack close and went the rest of the trip in silence. The skating rink wasn't that much further ahead anyway, and he could lose himself on the ice and stop caring about the rest, even if only for a little while.

To both of their surprise though, the rink was fairly highly occupied when they arrived. Viktor looked around, seeing a dozen or more families there, all with one or two kids of varying ages who were there to skate, [What's going on, mama?]

[I'm...not sure. Go put your skates on; I'll find out.] She answered, patting his shoulder and stepping off.

With blades on a few minutes later, Viktor was holding to the outside of the rink-wall, looking in at where a bunch of the kids were lining up on the ice. There were three adults standing in the direction they were all facing, directly across the rink from him. One of them started to call out names, and the kids answered back to say they were there.

[It's a try-out.] Tatiyana's voice suddenly explained, coming up from the left, [Those guys are representatives of the Skating Clubs in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Petrozavodsk. Every few years, they come through little towns like this looking for talent to take back with them.]

Viktor's eyes were as big as saucers, and he gaped out across the ice like it was a moment made just for him.

[...And their parents signed them up for it weeks ago. They don't take drop-ins.] She said, crushing him instantly. Seeing where his small hands let go of the rink as he dropped to his knees, the woman sighed and knelt down next to him, a hand on his back, feeling how his whole body trembled, [I'm sorry, Viktor...]

[Why would you even bother telling me if it was going to be something I couldn't do?] The boy asked, his voice cracking as tears rolled down his cheeks, [This is all papa's fault, right!? I can't do anything because of him!]

[He already has plans for your future, Viktor... Skating was never going to be something you could do forever...]

[I don't care about his plans!] The young Russian snapped, rising back up to his feet and running along the rink-wall to the nearest entrance.

[Viktor!]

The raucous had gained the attention of everyone on the ice, and eyes were following the silver-haired head as it bobbed up and down in a sprint towards the open gate to the ice. Tatiyana hadn't even bothered giving chase, thinking he'd get away from her anyway.

He barged out onto the ice, looking rattled but determined, [I want to be part of the try-out!]

All eyes blinked at him in surprise and confusion. One of the adults with a clip-board down at the end tapped a pencil against his lip, [All the kids here have spent several years practicing in classes already. Their coaches speak for their talent and their parents have spent a lot of money on their training. What makes you think you can just run out here and demand to be given a chance without going through the same channels they did?] He was an older man with a spindly black beard, long grey coat and a fuzzy hat.
[I bet I can skate better than any of these others!] Viktor announced daringly. [Give me a chance and I'll show you!]

[Viktor, you're being rude!] His mother called, [Come back off the ice and give them their space; you can skate after!]

He barely had a chance...within 30 seconds, he'd been escorted off the rink and was stuck sitting on a bench in the area near the skate rental station. The try-outs took so long that he never even got to do his skating that day either, and it would be another 3 weeks before he could come back. He sobbed until his voice was gone, and went straight into his room as soon as they were home again.

Konstantin's eyes followed him as he marched through angrily, then turned back to Tatiyana pulling up the roar, closing the door behind her, [What was all that about?]

[You were right.] She answered with a sigh, pulling her scarf off. [...He hated the petting zoo. Passionately.]

Viktor barely did more than skate in big circles when he got back to the rink next. All he could do was stare at the ice as he moved. Tatiyana watched him from her usual place, holding her head up in the palm of her hand.

[Is that one yours?] Someone asked from the side.

Grey-green eyes turned towards the voice, seeing a middle-aged man there in a dark coat, blue scarf, and dark brimmed hat. He had light brown hair with wisps of grey, and teal eyes.

[What gave it away?] She asked, looking back out at her boy again.

[Nothing in particular.] The man answered.

[Wait...] Tatiyana stopped, pushing to stand fully upright and looking at him squarely, [...You were here before, at the try-outs...or am I making that up?]

[No, you remember correctly. It's Viktor, right? Call him over here.]

The silver woman tilted her head a little bit, but did as asked, [Vivi, come over here. This man wants to talk to you.]

Slate eyes looked up briefly, but Viktor didn't make any motion to get over to them in any hurry. He just continued his circuit around the rink...and eventually stopped where they were standing on the wall. He stuffed his hands into his pockets and kept his eyes down, [What do you want?]

[I want to see you skate.] He answered quickly, [You issued a challenge 3 weeks ago.]

The boy looked up then, giving the man a skeptical look, [...Who are you?]

[Yakov Feltsman. I'm a coach with the St. Petersburg Skate Club.] He answered simply, [I came pretty far out of my way to find out when you'd be here next, and to be here when you were. So...show me what you can do.]

Those deep blue eyes opened wide, and Viktor nearly lost his feet when it really dawned on him what was happening.
[I really don't think you understand what you're saying, Mr. Yakov...] Tatiyana said anxiously, [We really can't aff-]

[I'm not asking you to pay me.] He answered, walking with the pair to their car in the parking lot a few weeks later, [That boy has more talent in his pinky finger than most professional skaters have in their whole body.]

Viktor was skipping along innocently, holding to his mother's coat sleeve as they left the skating plaza.

[He could really go far in professional skating.] Yakov went on, [He should come to one of the Skate Camps I host in St. Petersburg. He could learn a lot in a really short period of time, I'm certain of it.]

[It's not that-] Tatiyana went on, her voice getting low once they were far enough away.

Yakov eyeballed her, unsure what to say.

[Vivi's father hates figure skating with every fiber of his being. He doesn't even know we come out here. If he found out...] She explained nervously, [Konstantin would never let Vivi go away from home, let alone for something like this.]

[So he's been doing this in secret all these years.] The gruff older gentleman deduced, [You should've said something sooner.]

[...It's not really our place to dump our problems onto strangers.]

[Well, I'm not a stranger anymore, am I?]

[...I guess not...you've done a lot for Viktor this winter... I don't know how we'll ever repay you.] The silver woman acknowledged, reaching out then to pull the man out of the boy's earshot, [But you're giving Viktor too much hope. I've played along until now, but at this point, everything you're suggesting is just going to hurt him.]

[Surely the man can be reasoned with.] The coach posed, [It's just figure skating.]

Tatiyana would've laughed if it weren't such a serious thing, [You don't understand... Konstantin threatened to pave over the pond behind our house a few years ago because he caught Vivi skating on it. He's perfectly normal when it comes to basically everything else, but when it comes to skating, even hockey, he just goes ballistic.]

[Why?] Viktor had gotten into the front passenger seat by then and was idly kicking his legs as he waited, hugging his backpack as usual. He occasionally looked up and out the window to see the two adults still talking, but without being able to hear them, it was just boring old-people chatter. Eventually though, his mother came away and headed for the driver's side.

Yakov stood outside the passenger door and waited for Viktor to roll the window down before leaning in a bit on his elbows, [I'll see you then in two weeks, Viktor. Like usual.]

[Mh!]

The older man reached into his coat and withdrew a small piece of paper; a stiff rectangle with Cyrillic written on it, [If you find a way, this is where you can contact me. Otherwise...until next
[Yes, thank you for helping Viktor out with this hobby of his.]

[I have a gift for you, Viktor.] Yako said, smiling in the best way he could manage, [You'll be turning 11 next week, and I think it's high time you had these.]

[What...did you get me?] The boy wondered, leaving the laces to his second white skate undone as a heavy box was handed to him. He held it up and looked at it from a few different angles, shook it to hear if anything jingled inside, and then set it down on the bench next to him to unwrap it. There wasn't any colored paper on it, but it was nicely tied with twine. Undoing the knot, Viktor pulled the lid off...and beheld a proper pair of boy's skates within. His breath caught in his throat, and just as he was about to scream for joy, a heavy sense of dread fell over him, [...I...I can't...]

[Why not? I thought you'd be happy to get these.] Yakov wondered, a bit perplexed.

[If my papa finds out about them...]

[Ah, that again.]

Tatiyana was giving him the stink-eye, though the coach didn't see it.

[That's okay. I can hold onto them when you aren't skating. I'll maintain them, and bring them to each of our practice sessions, okay? That way you never have to worry.]

[...Really?]

[Of course. Now, try them on, make sure they fit so I don't look like a fool.]

The silver Russian let himself get a little excited, and quickly pulled off the white skates that had always been slightly too narrow for his feet. Setting them aside, he oogled the pair of dark brown boots within the box, pulling them out one at a time, and sliding each foot into them slowly.

[There's different kinds of blades.] Yakov started, kneeling down to tie the laces himself, [These are standard blades that you can get anywhere, but there's other kinds...some specially made for speed skating, others for hockey, and a few different kinds for figure skating. Some have bigger toe-picks, others have shorter tails.] He explained, pointing to the heel-end of the blade, [The tail helps you land jumps. The most important part of the blade though...] He held up the foot in front of him and pointed to the rocker near the front, [...]is the curve, just here. This is where you jump, spin, and land. A bad rocker, too small or too big, will make a difference. You have to know how to feel for it, so you can adjust the curve later on.]

[Mh!]

[Go out there and warm up a little bit. I'll teach you about different sit spins today.]

[Okay!]

A bit older and a bit better at his craft, Viktor was starting to learn his own style on the ice. No longer was he a rough ingot of metal...he was refined, and all the impurities had been hammered out. His form was smooth and flawless, far beyond what most other kids his age could have
managed. But like everything, the winter was coming to an end, and the outdoor skating arena was going to be closing.

The trio stood outside the main doors, heading back into the parking lot. The snow and ice was starting to give way in larger patches, revealing dry concrete and bits of grass here and there.

[Hard to believe the season is already over.] The elder Russian commented, [You've come a long way in the few months we had here.]

[I can't thank you enough for coming all the way out here as often as you have, Yakov.] Viktor said, happy and yet sad at the same time, [I wish I could come train in the city. The ice doesn't melt indoors.]

[It doesn't, you're right.] The man nodded, looking to Tatiyana, [Mrs. Nikiforov...it was truly a pleasure to instruct this young man. I'll be expecting him back on the ice next winter, as the weather allows. There's so much more I want to teach him.]

[We'll see.] She answered, a little stiffly but still amiable.

Unexpectedly, the little Russian lunged forward, wrapping his arms around the coach's thick frame, [I'll miss you. Can't we send letters or something?]

[That's up to your mother.]

[...You already know how that will turn out, Vivi. If you want to keep skating at all, we have to keep playing this out like you aren't skating at all.]

[What do you tell him you guys are doing anyway?] Yakov wondered, hoping he wasn't prying too much.

[Ladies' church group.]  

[Oh.] The man said stiffly. He shook his head, and then looked down at the silver-haired boy still clinging to him. With a gentle hand, he set one each on Viktor's shoulders, [Take care for those skates, okay? I'll have to get you new ones next year. I expect you'll grow ten feet tall before I see you again.]

[Mh!!]

Summer was in full swing again, and Viktor was bored out of his skull. The fake Church group trips continued every other weekend, but for lack of a skating rink to go to, the trips had become utterly boring. Tatiyana had done her best to offer a reasonable substitute...but roller skating really just wasn't doing it for the boy.

But, it wouldn't matter. By the end of that day, even roller skating would've been the greatest thing in the world that Viktor could think to do, given the alternatives.

It was well into the late evening when the old beat-up Volvo pulled into the dirt 'drive-way,' as it was called, just off the side of the main road leading past the house and graveyard. The long walk up the hill, taking the right path at the fork, and heading up to the hovel, was serene...birds were in the trees, the sky was clear, the woods were warm.

But when they entered, Konstantin was sitting at the main table just within, and he had Viktor's
backpack on the floor next to his feet. The boy's eyes were on him, and he felt his heart stop in his chest. Tatiyana's felt much the same.

[...K-Konstantin.] She stammered.

[I'd say you have some explaining to do, but I'm well past that.] The man-bear said, eerily calmly. He reached down one massive hand into the child-size backpack and pulled up the first of two skates, [I made it clear a long time ago that skating was forbidden, and yet I find these.]

[P-Papa...please, don't...]

[No son of mine is going to be skating...and by the look of these, figure skating.] He went on, reaching down for the second blade and then standing up to his full height, [Is that what you've really been doing, all this time? Tatiyana, you've been lying to me. For years.]

The silver woman was too scared to back down; fight or flight had chosen to battle it out, [I stand by what I told you before...there are no other kids Viktor's age around here. Without Mikhail, he had nothing to do outside of his schooling. I wasn't going to take away the one thing he found that he liked just because you have a hang-up about it.]

[A hang-up?] He echoed, slate-blue eyes turning down to the terrified 11-year-old standing between them, [Come here, Viktor.]

Already on the edge of tears, the silver boy took an anxious step forward, then another, until he was finally standing in front of his behemoth of a father. He craned his head up, and watched the man hold the skates out just above his head.

[We're going to take care of this once and for all.]

The terror changed into something that had no single word to describe it. Horror, anxiety, nervousness, trepidation, panic, breathlessness...all of it, and more. Viktor felt the skates being put into his arms, and a hand come behind his back, pushing him towards the wood-burning stove in one corner of the large room. Konstantin pulled the iron poker from the hanger nearby, and used it to pry open the heavy metal door.

The heat was so intense that Viktor could feel it burning his skin even from the few feet away he was still standing.

[Put them in.]

[N-No...please no...] The boy begged, tears turning to steam on his cheeks.

[Do as your father commands.]

The man's voice was as if it were imbued with the power of God Himself, and the tiny silver Russian could do nothing but obey. He held the bladed boots close to his chest and sobbed as he started taking the last couple steps forward the open door.

[Hed me, boy.] Konstantin went on, watching as Viktor hesitated despite the pain of the heat, [You will never skate again. Understand?]

Slate eyes met one another, and in that moment, everything inside Viktor died...and he watched the leather boots burn.
The first snows of winter came and blanketed the countryside in a thick layer of cold white fluff. Viktor watched it from his room, looking up into the dark, moonless night sky. The only light to give the snow away came from his bedroom window. The nearly 12-year-old Russian stepped away and moved through the quiet house alone...it was well past midnight, and no one else was awake. He looked at the iron-cast wood stove quietly, and moved over to stand in front of it, reaching for the poker that hung nearby to pry the heavy door open.

As he’d seen every day since the incident, the scorched remains of his skates were within; the blades blackened and dull. Even though the wood-ash had been cleaned out, his father had made sure that the skates went right back in, to serve as a reminder of his authority. He sighed and closed the door again, went back to his room, pulled the curtains over the window to hide the sight of the snow...and crawled under the covers to drown his misery in sleep.

The phone rang; it wasn’t a common occurrence, so when the shrill sound of the old rotary device bellowed out into the afternoon air, everyone looked up. Tatiyana was closest, so she went over to pick it up, "Allo."

Viktor watched her for a moment, glancing back over his shoulder from where he’d been lying on the floor with his grade-school books, but then turned back around when it didn’t hold his interest. Not that his schoolwork held more interest, but at least he knew what was going on in them. The phone conversation...not so much.

The silver woman had gone silent for a long while though, and that got his attention again more than anything else. He watched for a moment, then rolled over and sat up, wondering why she was so quiet if she still had the receiver up at her ear.

Finally though, she uttered a few words, [Oh, uhm...yes, this is the Nikiforov household. No...we’re not interested. Thank you.] She hung it up again, and hurriedly went back to the kitchen where she’d been before, not even looking back to see if anyone was watching her.

It wouldn’t be for several days that anyone would know the truth of that call. The answer came with a knock on the door.

Viktor rubbed his eyes and pushed to stand, leaving his books on the floor as he headed for the exit. It was confusing for a moment, opening the door and looking up at the figure that stood just outside. The boy tilted his head and looked on, wondering if what he saw was just his depressed imagination playing tricks on him.

"Viktor."

"...Y-Yakov?"

[Looks like I just missed your 12th birthday. How have you been?]

It was like he couldn’t understand the language anymore, and the silver figure just stood paralyzed, hand still on the inside of the door.

[Can I come in at least? It’s cold out here.] The older man asked, flicking his hat where some snow had already collected on the brim.

Not knowing what to say, Viktor just stepped aside, watching wordlessly (and without breathing) as the coach stepped through.
What's going on? Who is this? Konstantin asked stiffly, stepping in from where he'd been reading in another room, Who are you?

The skating coach kept calm, I'm from St. Petersburg. I'm a coach, and a scout for athletic talent with the Russian Skating Federation. My name is Yakov Feltsman.

The two men stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity, and it wasn't even either one of their own voices that broke the silence; it was Viktor's, How...did you find where we live?

I don't think that's important right now, Viktor. The man answered, reaching up to pull his hat off, never taking his eyes off the Nikiforov patriarch, What's important is your future.

...My...future?

He has a future. In the steel mill, alongside his father. Your kind are not welcome here. Konstantin followed, pointing at the door, You should leave.

Let him speak, Kon. Tatiyana's voice came, rising up from the couch. Her serenity about the situation gave her away...she knew Yakov was coming because she was the one who'd invited him to do so, He knows better than any of us what Viktor's future could be if we give him a chance.

Cold blue eyes leveled on the coach, then turned to the woman coming up to his side, Apparently I haven't made myself clear all this time. I thought it would be best to offer a reasoned, calm approach...but it seems that perhaps the only way I'll be understood and obeyed is if I do something more drastic.

Mr. Nikiforov, please let me speak... Yakov attempted; being a 'guest,' he thought he might be able to speak the words that others would not have a chance to, Viktor has the potential to be an international champion. He could represent Russia to the entire world. Figure skating has been a national icon as far back as the Czars. I understand that you have a particular dislike for skating sports, but-

Do you? Do you understand? The patriarch asked condescendingly, No, you don't have a clue. You can't just come into my house and tell me what I don't know.

Viktor has more talent as a self-taught skater than most kids I know who are older than he is. Surely the fact that I've come all this way here, knowing your opposition, would tell you how seriously I'm taking his potential.

I don't care about his potential as a skater. He already knows he's never skating again. I made that perfectly clear when I found his skates. Right, Viktor? He glanced over at the petrified boy.

Viktor nodded hesitantly, but then vigorously. Yakov frowned at that.

You see? At least someone here pays attention.

...I want to skate...though... Viktor squeaked, his voice barely a whisper, his whole body trembling, ...I want to skate...!

Tatiyana's voice was caught in her throat, and she just gaped at the boy. She and Yakov could feel the energy in the room change. Konstantin was no longer on the defensive...he was now on the attack...and the first assault would be the child that had questioned him. Two steps took him all the way across the room, and he had the silver boy in his hand, hoisting him off the ground like he was nothing.
[Say that again?]

[...I... Viktor winced, legs kicking under him where there was nothing but air. He scrambled for the massive limb holding him up, [...] I want...I want to go to St. Petersburg...I want to train!]

[Don't be mad at him! I'm the one who took him to the skating rink!] Tatiyana finally found the courage to say, stepping between the two and putting her small, gentle hands on her husband's massive arm. He had done nothing but rattle the boy by that point, and that's normally all he ever aimed to achieve if he lost his temper...but this time felt different.

[I told you to never let him skate again!] Konstantin barked, holding still and staring at his son throughout, unblinking, [How many times do I have to say it?]

[You can't choose for Viktor what he can and can't like!] The woman went on, a little more desperate, trying to pry his fingers apart where they held to Viktor's clothes.

[I'm getting really good, papa!] The boy pleaded, having no idea how serious the situation was, [If you let me go to St. Petersburg, I can compete and send money home when I win! Coach Yakov says-]

CRACK

All 4'11" and 85lbs of the boy went crashing into the shoe-rack next to the door, and he collapsed onto his front in a heap, too stunned to do anything. Shoes and boots fell all around him.

Yakov was shocked, almost too stunned at what he'd just seen to even process it.

[Konstantin!!] Tatiyana screamed.

Viktor finally regained himself and started screaming, crying out as only a bleeding child could.

[He's not your coach!] The behemoth bellowed, [No son of mine is going to be a fucking dancer! You'll be working in the steel mill just like the rest of us!]

The silver mother rushed past and went to her knees by her son's side, pulling him over onto his back on her lap and checking for injuries. She was sure he'd hit the back of his head on the rack, but the obvious blood was coming from his forehead and left eye. The skin had split just under it, above the cheek, in a backwards C-shaped crackle of a cut. There was another cut just under the side of his thin eyebrow. His hair was already smearing the vitae around.

The gruff man-bear was shocked at himself, but only for a second. Yakov's voice cut through the air like a knife.

[He'll be more successful as an athlete, Konstantin...give him a chance.] He was saying, stepping between the man and the sobbing heap behind him, [He has the potential to be-]

[Don't interrupt me, old man! This is my family and I make the decisions for what's best for it. Viktor isn't going anywhere.]

[Viktor, let me look-]

[My eye...mama, I can't...I can't see!] He cried out, reaching for his face with both hands.

Tatiyana tried to brush them away, but every time one hand moved off, the other came up in its place. Tears formed in her own eyes, and she pushed to stand, carrying her son in her arms as she
went, [...] I had never thought it would get to this...over figure skating!?

She snapped, pushing in front of the coach and handing him her bloodied child, [Take him...please, take him and go...get him to a doctor!]

Stunned, Yakov wasn't sure what to do. He hadn't banked on the day turning violent at all. Everything was happening so fast.

[TAKE HIM AND GO!] She yelled again.

He had no words to argue, simply turning on his heel and running out the door. The snow was coming down even harder by then, already having covered most of his shoe-prints.

Viktor just looked up into the bright grey sky. His cries had abruptly stopped once the cold of the outdoors hit him, and he barely hiccupped each breath. He could hear the faint yelling of his parents fading in the distance, and the crunching of Yakov's shoes in the ground. He could even hear the faint cry of a wolf miles away. He watched the world change from woods to car-interior, hearing the doors closing on each side of him, the engine turning on, and the vibration as the vehicle started pulling away.

He lost time after that...he wasn't sure how much had passed before he became aware again. When he did, he saw Yakov kneeling down in front of him just outside the passenger-side door, reaching towards his face with white tissues, bringing them back red.

[Viktor...] The coach said; his voice was hollow and echoed. [Viktor, can you hear me?]

[...Y...Yak...ov...]

[Yes, good, that's my name. Can you remember yours?]

[V...Vik...tor Niki...forov...]

[I'm not going to let you go back to that place. Do you understand?]

[Hu...h...?]

[Do you hurt anywhere else besides your face?]

More tissues came forward, more blood went away.

[My...head... Back...]

Yakov pulled the boy to his shoulder and reached for the back of his small shirt, pulling it up to check for bleeding there. Finding the red marks where his tiny body had hit the shoe-rack, the skin peeled a little but not bloodied, he put the shirt back down and set his hands on Viktor's shoulders, [I'm sorry that this happened to you...we're going to go to St. Petersburg. There's a hospital there. We're in this together now, okay? I'm going to protect you.]

Slate blue eyes just blinked hazily, but he found the strength to nod.

Yakov nodded back, then pulled off his coat and wrapped it around the boy before turning him back around in the seat and buckling him in. A few moments later, the older man was back in the driver's seat, and the car was moving off again.

[Your mom called you Vivi sometimes...would you like it better if I did, too?] The coach asked, trying to comfort the child as well as he could given the circumstances.
Yakov pondered on the words, wondering what was going through the boy's mind at that point that would make him reject even a nickname. He reached over and pat the boy's shoulder gently through the thick coat, [Vitya then. I'll call you Vitya.]

Blue eyes slowly opened, the feeling of cold on his skin, vision a bit blurry. The pain in his head was significant, and it got worse as Viktor pushed up on his elbows and sat up. The room looked familiar for the brief seconds that he was looking at it before blinding pain shot through his head, his circulation catching up with the change in posture.

"Viktor...are you okay?" A voice asked from behind, "You've been delirious. I was starting to wonder if you'd gotten poisoned or something."

"Poisoned...?" Viktor turned back, seeing a familiar face, but needing a moment to pin the name to it, "Uncle Mimi..."

"How do you feel? You're all pale and clammy."

"I've been better...what time is it? How long was I out...?" He glanced around for a moment, but then bowed his head again, reaching up to press his hand to the left side of his face and forehead.

"It's been just over 6 hours. It's about 2:30pm right now. What's happening to you? Do you even remember getting here?"

"Not really." The younger Russian answered, "My head is killing me."
Chapter 165

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SIXTY FIVE

"...I don't know where it all came from..." Viktor said.

They'd moved to the dining room table by then. The younger silver figure had a blanket wrapped over his shoulders, sitting in his chair with his legs crossed despite how little space there was under the table. Mikhail set a cup in front of him and filled it with peppermint tea, then set the pot down and sat opposite him.

"I just had this weird feeling of déjà vu while coming up here, and the next thing I know, I'm reliving every day of my life since you left."

"...Just since I left?"

"More or less..." Viktor looked at the steaming liquid in front of him, feeling at the three oblong white tablets in his left hand, "I guess more, including the actual day you left."

"Back when you two were still living in St. Petersburg, Yuri told me that you didn't like to think about the past. That you'd even shut him down about any possible discussion about it."

"I did." Viktor said flatly, like there was no budging on the subject.

"So he has no clue about who you are beyond what he already knew from skating, and what he's seen himself."

"Pretty much."

"Why?" Mikhail asked, almost aghast at it, "Why on earth would you not share that kind of thing? He's the closest person in your life. He should know this stuff. He's probably told you everything about his past."

"I told him already that his family is my family, and the rest didn't matter. That was long before you popped up though." The younger answered, picking up the cup by the curved finger-hold on the side, and blowing lightly across the top of it before sipping a little, "I asked him not to poke into things. I told him that I don't want to remember. I still don't, but it seems I don't have a choice in the matter right now."

"But-"

Viktor lifted his head and looked over at his uncle sternly, "I got out of a bad situation, and as soon as my eye finished healing and I realized I was safe, I cut the past off. I went out of my way to forget. I threw everything I had at my skating and focused on that exclusively. The last thing on my mind was being reminded of all the things I left behind. I was never going to go back, so it had no right to bog me down."

"It's part of who you are though." Mikhail pointed out, "It's a gag that you're forgetful, but that all comes specifically from the fact that you wanted to be that way, and you're impulsive as all Hell because you were denied for so long as a kid, after being so patient. How can you not see how much those few years still have an impact on your life now?"

Viktor just side-eyed him, one lip curled barely over the top of the cup's rim.
"You're a fractured person, Vivi." The elder went on, "I could see that, plain as the nose on your face, when I saw the viral footage of your colossal melt-down at the Ritz."

The side-eye ended, and the younger silver turned back to his tea-cup, staring at the liquid as it rippled.

"You probably think it's because you were drunk, but there's a bigger reason why you fell apart like that." Mikhail pointed out, stirring a sugar cube around at the bottom of his own cup, "If you've never once talked to Yuri about your history, then it's no wonder it comes out in explosive bursts like this. You still carry so much resentment for the fact that I abandoned you that you think everyone else you love is bound to do the same eventually. You were just trying to convince yourself that you could control it this time, by telling Yuri in your drunken stupidity that he should just say so if he was going to leave you."

"I don't tell Yuri because I don't want his pity." Viktor clarified bitterly.

"His pity?" The elder coughed incredulously, "Why do you think he'd pity you?"

"I like that Yuri sees me the way he does. I don't want to drag his views of me down by putting all this ancient history on his back." Viktor answered stiffly, hackles raised, "He used to say that I was like a God in his eyes. He-"

"Whoa, no, stop. Viktor, stop."

"What?" He looked up, a bit offended.

"Of course he looks up to you. I know where you both were when you went to Japan to be his coach, and how things changed after that. I've heard the story of the Sochi banquet, and seen the pics and videos. But the thing of it is, Yuri worshipped the idea of you, but he fell in love with the real you, flaws and all." Mikhail pointed out, rising from his chair and holding his hands up dramatically, "Viktor Nikiforov, five time consecutive World Champion, Grand Prix Final Gold medalist, European and Russian blah blah blah...that's a caricature of who you are, just one of the many pieces that make up the whole. That's the face you put on when you're looking out at the whole world. Then there's Viktor Nikiforov, figure skating coach to Yuri Katsuki, and then Viktor Nikiforov, husband to Yuri Nikiforov. But on the side, there's this Viktor Nikiforov that got the shit kicked out of him by his father two or three times, and created this class-clown complex like he thought putting on a funny face and laughing a lot will hide how miserable you really are deep down. You need to tell him."

"I'm not telling him anything." Viktor said, looking away and popping the headache pills into his mouth, chasing them with a bit of the tea, "It's all over and done with."

"Apparently not."

"Just because it's all coming back to me right now doesn't mean it's because I'm trying." The younger Russian argued, pulling the blanket a bit higher onto his shoulders, "I didn't ask to start remembering. I'm just stretched thin from everything that happened and an epic lack of proper sleep."

"Offloading at me isn't going to help you much." Mikhail pointed out, "I can only apologize so many times for leaving before you stop giving a damn."

Viktor just slouched, setting the little ceramic cup onto its little ceramic coaster. He grabbed the blanket with that hand and used both to pull the blanket over his head before sinking even further in the seat, enough so that he could no longer keep his legs crossed over the edge of it and set his feet
onto the floor.

Mikhail quirked a brow at him, "...What?"

"I'm not even mad at you because you left. I got over that a long time ago." Viktor answered, words muffled by the blanket.

"Then why are you being all dramatic suddenly?"

The younger man went quiet for a moment, though Mikhail could see him turn his head through the blanket, then lower it a little. The elder lifted the teacup in front of himself and held it to his mouth idly, waiting for his nephew to speak, even if it took a while for him to do so. Thankfully, he didn't have to wait long.

"Yuri said you came back for me once. I thought he was lying to make me think better of you, because I had no memory of it. He told me it was probably just because I was a kid and that even he had forgotten things from when he was that young, but..."

"I didn't see you the time I went back." Mikhail answered suddenly, "I don't know where you were at the time. Probably playing in the woods somewhere since it was broad daylight."

"...So it was summer then."

"I ran into Konstantin almost first thing." The elder went on, sipping at the tea again, watching as a single blue eye came back into view through a slit in the folds of the blanket, "His reception was lukewarm at best, but since it had been a few years, he didn't challenge it. I went and found my sister an-"

"...Why did you really leave?" Viktor suddenly asked, the sheet falling off the right side of his head lazily, "You've said before that the village residents were backwards and simple, but you never really went into detail."

"Are you going to let me finish one story before you ask me to tell another?"

The blanket came up again, and the eye continued to stare.

"...I went and found Tat. She had called me a few weeks beforehand, saying your father had done something incredibly cruel to you. I'm guessing it was when you said he found your skates and made you burn them."

"...It was stupid of me, leaving my backpack behind when I'd always taken it with me before..." Viktor sighed, head lowering under the blanket again. He'd snaked his hand out from under it though and was fingering the rim of the cup in front of him, "Especially since Yakov had told me to keep the skates after the winter, so I wouldn't forget to go back."

"I was really angry at him for it, even though I wasn't really sure on the details at the time. The thought that he would hurt you so badly when you were just a kid...that really pissed me off. But even after I showed up, had plane tickets and everything ready for you...Tat backed out at the last second. I don't know if it's because she saw Konstantin and freaked out or what, but in the end, she said no, and Konstantin escorted me back to my car without a clue as to what we'd even gotten into an argument over. After that, and up until Tat's funeral, I hadn't gone back. The next time I even heard from her was years later, when she told me Yakov had taken you, and I called all those skating rinks, like I texted about before you invited me to Worlds."

"You gave up pretty easily." Viktor mumbled.
That just earned him a swat against the side of the head.

"OW." He barked through grit teeth, the blanket falling off him, revealing the swath of messed-up hair under it, "What was that for?"

"Don't even go there, Viktor Nikiforov." Mikhail said, pointing at him from where he'd been leaning over the table, "You may be famous but you're not above reproach. Not with me."

"Jeeze, I already have a migraine, why'd you have to hit me in the head?"

"Cuz apparently Yakov didn't do it enough." He answered, sitting back down again, "Did he exert any kind of authority over you?"

Slate eyes turned aside, "...A little bit, but... Not really. At least not until it was too late and I wasn't willing to listen anymore anyway."

'You don't get to say that when you've never done as I said in the first place!'

'That man only thinks of himself!'

"I guess he just let me do whatever I wanted for a long time because he thought doing otherwise would make him seem too much like Konstantin." Viktor finished, sipping at the tea again before straightening out his hair, "Everything happened so fast back then... I'm sure I don't know all the details of what he went through, but I owe a lot to him. He put his whole life on hold just to give me a chance at having a life of my own. I should've listened to him more."

Mikhail just sat back, crossed his arms, and cleared his throat loudly and purposefully.

"...And maaaaaaaybe listen to you a little more, too."

"Tell your husband about your past." The elder said, both brows raised skeptically, like he wasn't sure Viktor was going to be true to his word, "You owe him that. Who else would be willing to get on the wrong side of a barrier-wall and strip naked on a public rooftop just to convince you not to jump?"

"It was a four foot drop!" Viktor said emphatically, "Where was I really going to go?"

"Then why bother with the theatrics?"

"I don't know, maybe in my drunken stupidity I thought it was higher!"

"My point still rests."

Viktor sulked, pulling the blanket around himself a bit tighter then, "Fine."

"So you'll tell him?"

"...In my own time."

"That might as well mean no!" Mikhail said, exasperated, "TELL HIM. While there's still some semblance of context for why you'd bother! Get it over with before NHK starts, so maybe you can have one event in this Grand Prix series that doesn't end with one or both of you crying."

"Alright alright...jeeze..." The younger Russian grumbled, "...To think I came all this way to make sure you got to Japan safely..."
"Keep it up, buttercup..." Mikhail glowered at him, "At the rate we're going, it'll be me making sure you get there at all."

"I'm not going to bail on my own event." Viktor said, pointing one thin hand at himself from under the blanket, "This season is my glorious return to competition. I have to make it amazing."

"...Mhm." The elder hummed skeptically, leaning casually against the back-rest of his chair and crossing a leg over the other, "Anyway... You asked why I left, too. The real reason, not just the general theme of it."

"Da."

"Travel the world, get away from home, see something other than the ass-end of rocks and turnips all the time...yadda yadda..." He generalized, waving a hand around to emphasize how trivial it all was, "The thing that set me off though..."

Viktor watched him carefully.

"...I actually kind of told Yuri about this in Bordeaux, but I don't think he realized I was being serious." Mikhail said, his voice a bit quieter, "Right after you faked-out Yura about hitting him. That was good, by the way...you really had us all convinced."

"Now who's digressing?"

"Mh... When you were really little, you were always following me around. My little silver shadow. You were with me more often than your own parents. At some point, and I don't know who started it, but someone started making the ill-fated joke that I was more of a father to you than your actual father was. Not that that took much effort...showing you the most basic affection and giving you a kind word now and then was all that it really took to dethrone Konstantin at being a dad. I guess...someone got a hair up their ass about me at some point, being the village rabble-rouser that I was, and started making the suggestion that I actually was your father. The joke became a rumor, and the rumor became an attack." Mikhail paused a moment, and side-eyed the younger man, "Did anyone ever tell you that Tat and I were twins?"

"...No."

"Da. Had the whole secret-language when we were kids and everything. We were really close, practically symbiotic, to hear it told. People thought we were telepathic. Anyway, that got used against me. Once it got to a certain point, even when I'd constantly point out the fact that you had the bear's eyes, and that of course you'd kind of look like me because Tat and I looked like each other...Konstantin started getting a bit weird about it. Maybe he believed the rumors for a split second, but then he and I got into it, and at that point I just said 'forget it.' I started making plans and packed my shit."

"...So that's why it seems like you were there one minute and gone the next. I had no idea."

"Of course not." Mikhail said glibly, finishing the tea quickly and setting the cup back into its saucer, "You were just a baby back then, barely 5 years old. That was back when Konstantin wasn't entirely fanatical, too. He got all spooky-religious and ultra-authoritarian only after I left, according to Tat. Made her nuts. In fact..." He twisted in his seat and pointed lazily at his nephew, "...Now that I really think about it, I'll bet that's what his real issue was that whole time. It wasn't the skating...it's that you and her kept going out of your way to undermine his authority. He's supposed to be this big-bad 'I am the head of the wife just as Jesus is the head of the home' kind of guy, and here you two are, lying to him for years about your secret skating adventures. Every time he thinks he's nipped it in the
Viktor answered dryly, "You know, when he made me meet him to get the address for the funeral...he actually told me to my face that he had divine right to kill me for being disobedient. Said he'd 'end me' if he ever saw me again after the funeral was over."

"And then I made him show me where you skated!" Mikhail laughed, "Oh how he hated me for that. I wouldn't leave him alone though. He agreed only on the condition that I'd shut up and leave him alone after."

"...You're laughing but I don't think it's all that funny."

"Maybe not, and I can see why that'd be. Hindsight is always 20/20. But at the time, not really knowing anything from you directly...all I saw was Konstantin getting a prickly pear up his arse, and I thought he deserved it, so I laughed." He then moved a hand onto his chin, "...Though, for the life of me, I don't know why he went inside the rink area. I thought for sure he'd stay outside."

"Maybe he's a masochist who wanted to stoke the fires of his own hatred. Who knows. It doesn't matter." Viktor said, getting even more prickly than before, "I would've been happier never having had to deal with any of it. If Four Continents could've ended without Yakov ever sending me that text...Yuri and I would probably be in a very different place. I hate that he got dragged through all of this." He sighed, staring at his reflection in the pale green water.

"You may think it damaged your relationship...but I would argue that it made you two stronger."

Slate-blue eyes glanced up at the elder Russian cautiously.

Mikhail nodded, "In Japanese culture...the sword-smiths of old would strengthen their blades by folding the ingots. They'd blend in carbon to give the iron flexibility. They'd hammer away at the metal for weeks on end, beating out all the irregularities until it was pure and perfect. In the end, the violence that sword endured turned it into one of the sharpest, strongest, and most beautiful weapons that ever graced this earth." He raised his hand again and gestured at his nephew, "Your relationship with Yuri is like that sword. You've weathered hardships together, and been so folded and intertwined into each other's lives that it would be impossible to completely separate you two again into the people you used to be. You're stronger together because of what you've been through, and flexible to new conflicts, rather than brittle. Even though you say you hate how everything might've negatively impacted your relationship...I doubt Yuri would've wanted it any other way."

Mikhail put a finger on his chin and looked aside, "Well, other than you getting hit, he probably could've done without that..." He gestured out again and smiled awkwardly, "But you get what I mean."

"...Like...a sword..." Viktor echoed, thinking on the man's words for a moment. Suddenly though, he dropped his forehead to the table with a thud, making the tea splash and the ceramics rattle.

"...The heck was that for?" Mikhail gaped.

"ImissedYuri'sExhibitionnnnnnn..." The younger man whined, lifting his head to put his chin down where his face had been, "I told him I'd be watching and I missed it..."
"...He told you to *sleep*. Besides, I recorded it. We can watch it now if you want."

"...You did? *Really?*"

"Sure."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SIXTY SIX

Viktor was properly bundled up in a massive feather-down comforter when Mikhail finally came back and resumed his position in the corner of the L-shaped couch. The elder handed his nephew a mug of mulled wine and grabbed for the tablet on the seat-cushion just ahead of his feet, "Alright, ready?"

"Ready." The younger answered, smelling in the spices of the drink, "I'm suddenly really glad I taught you how to make this stuff when you were in Hasetsu with us."

"Yeah, it's pretty nice stuff. I started brewing pretty soon after you texted that you were coming." Mikhail agreed, sipping at his own mug carefully as he tapped through the windows to find his recording, "Here it is. I missed the first minute or two but I got the rest. The only thing you'll miss is this one take-away where the camera panned on Yuri and Yura at rink-side. I think Yuri slept through Gala practice so Yura was telling him what he missed."

"Did you watch the whole thing already?"

"Yeah. It's pretty neat. The opening song is an absolute abomination though."

Viktor laughed nervously at that, "An abomination...?"

"You'll see in a second." Mikhail winked at him, then sat back in his place to get comfortable.

Morooka and Oda did their introductions again, explaining the guaranteed Finalists and those who were still fighting for the last 2 spots. Viktor kept a lip on his mug as he listened, squinting his eyes periodically to try and find his husband on the split-screen. Above, footage of skaters loitering around, waiting to start, and on the bottom, recycled footage to recap the event as a whole. He winced visibly as he saw the clip of Yuri hitting the wall.

"How's he doing with that now anyway?" The elder wondered suddenly, "He does a good job hiding it for the most part, but it's easy to tell he favors that leg."

"Pancake-sized bruise on the hip, right where you can feel the bones." Viktor answered, moving the blanket enough so he could get his hand out and touch a finger and thumb to his uncle's iliac crest and greater trochanter as an example, "Everything from here to here." He said, then taking his hand back to wrap around the mug in front of him, "I accidentally brushed my hand against it that night, before it really looked like much. You can imagine how he felt about that."

"Ouch."

"He'll have 2 weeks to recover from it though so I'm sure he'll be fine by the Final."

"You two are going to be completely wiped out by the end of it."

"Oh, the Final's not even the end of it. Two weeks later, we both have to take off for our National Championships, then we're going to Euros for me, then to Four Continents for Yuri again, and Worlds after that. Then we'll be done for the season." Viktor said, looking tired just explaining it.

His Uncle blinked at him, but then slouched over onto his arm where he'd propped it up against the corner of the head-rest, "Yeesh."
The announcers were finally done with their analysis of the event, and footage switched over to showing the rink from a distance, rising up like a drone overhead. The arena was dark, save the spotlights coming down onto the ice, and the deep, undulating bass with its overlaid redneck honky-tonk music started to play.

*If it hadn’t been for Cotton-Eye Joe*
*I’d been married a long time ago*
*Where did you come from, where did you go?*
*Where did you come from, Cotton-Eye Joe?*

Viktor's eyes were open as if in shock, staring at the screen where all the skaters were coming into the rink.

Mikhail watched him carefully.

"Ohmygod."

And he burst out laughing, "SEE!? It's an abomination!"

"...But it's...it's so *catchy*..." Viktor said, "...I'm going to have this stuck in my head for *days*. Who thinks of stuff like this?"

The skaters all seemed to think it was perfect, throwing themselves across the ice with gusto as they each took their turns going across in smaller groups.

*Oppa Gangnam style!*
*Gangnam style...op...op, op, op...oppa Gangnam style!*

Yuri and his younger Russian counterpart were finally at the airport. Due to it being winter, the sun had set already despite it still being early, making it feel way later than it actually was.

"That's the last of it." The older skater said, watching as porters came to haul off the ridiculous amount of luggage, "I think Viktor brought *everything he owns*..." He grimaced, recalling all the clothing he'd had to fold and put away after dismantling everything just to find what he needed to help him sleep.

"How much of it is yours?"

"Uhh...*two* suitcases? Plus a small one for souvenirs."

"There were like...*sixteen*. Plus a bunch of smaller bags."

"Right?" Yuri agreed, "He's pretty high maintenance... You know that jar of fancy lip balm he carries around? *$40*!"

"Well, I already knew that much." The blonde said, following his older counterpart into the airport, "He's never been on such an extensive trip before though, as far as I'm aware. You guys have just been hopping from one event to the next without much of a break in between, save the weekend where neither of you had to go to Rostelecom. The RSF is still kinda bristling over how the ISU didn't send Viktor home during his big come-back."

"Yeah..." Yuri nodded, moving through the automatic doors, "At least these last few plane rides haven't been too bad. Going from Hasetsu to Calgary was the worst. Going from Calgary to
Bordeaux..." His words trailed, suddenly remembering how that was their La Premiere flight, and everything that entailed.

"I still think you guys should've let me come." Yurio interjected, "I bet it was a lot nicer than flying coach."

The older skater's face was red, but he tried to shake it off, giving the teen a knowing look, "Oh it was fun, but you would've hated it."

"Why? Each ticket was worth several grand. You guys probably had staff waiting on you hand and foot."

Yuri couldn't stop himself from chortling a bit of a laugh, and shook his head at the memory of it all.

"What?"

"Viktor and I had a go at them." He admitted, "We were pretty loud overnight...and then the next morning we were super inappropriate, just to see what would happen."

The teen just deadpanned him, "...You guys are gross."

"What?" Yuri was still laughing, even having to bring his hand up to rub the tears from under his glasses, "We thought it was hysterical. Turned out, too, that the lady who was kind of our minder the whole time...she was a fan of ours. She even had us sign her copy of our wedding picture book at the end."

"The way you guys are always referring to yourselves as my 'SkateDads' on Instagram. I swear, hearing about you guys having sex is like hearing about my real parents having sex, or even worse..." The blonde lowered his head, "...The old man and Okukawa."

Yuri snorted at that, unable to contain himself anymore. He brought his scarf up in a desperate attempt to at least not draw attention to himself, though under it all, he was dying.

"Yeah yeah, rub it in. Like salt in a wound."

"Well..." The older skater was trying to regain himself, but was still huffing a few laughs as they approached the ticket kiosk, "Mikhail and Minako-sensei are in a better age-range to be like surrogate parents than Viktor and I. Even I get a weird tingle down my spine to think about it. Minako-sensei's older than my mom, and Mikhail's older than that."

"They're a bunch of old farts."

"We'll all get there one day." Yuri said, finally getting his calm back, and picking up the tickets as they printed below the kiosk. He looked around the terminal for where to go, and started moving off in that direction, "This flight has one layover, but it's not that long, and we won't really have to take a train between cities like when Viktor and I went to Japanese Nationals. New Chitose airport is basically on the outskirts of Sapporo."

"Do you guys make a habit of flying in the middle of the night or something? Flying out at 1:30am and arriving before dawn..."

The older figure waved at the blonde weakly, "It's my fault we do it this way." He explained, "I'm jetlagged no matter what we do, so Viktor figures if we leave late and arrive early, I'll get some sleep on the plane, and then finish in the hotel before afternoon, instead of sleeping right through everything like I did in Barcelona. I missed out on a bunch of fun stuff because of it." He pointed a
finger into the teen's face rather dramatically then, "You don't want to know what it was like to have two mostly-naked men who were cold and wet come jump all over me while I was still in bed."

"Two?"

"Viktor and Chris."

Yurio just quirked a brow at him, "Mhm."

The older figure just stood upright defensively, "You're judging me right now, aren't you?"

"Severely."

Viktor had pulled his knees up under the blanket, resting the half-empty mug in the small space between them and his chest, still keeping one lip on the edge of the cup. He'd gotten to see three different Gala performances by then, but none of them were Yuri.

"You'll probably think the next one is pretty neat." Mikhail explained, "It's that friend of Yura's from Former Little Russia."

"Otabek."

"Yeah that guy." He said, then pointing at the screen, "Here it is."

The crowd started cheering in the background as the Kazakh push off from rink-side, spotlights coming down on him from three different angles. He made a wide arc around the ice, waving as his blades scratched along, until finally taking his place in the middle.

His outfit was entirely black, looking almost like the polar opposite of Viktor's The Ghost ensemble. Ragged and torn, a tattered hood pulled over the teen's head, but with chains across the shoulder and chest, and a black surgical-mask with a grotesquely toothy smile across it covering the lower half of his face. Under the shadow of the hood, Otabek's eyes were painted dark, giving his face a sunken, skull-like look to it.

[The Vengeful One' - Disturbed]

The audience got quiet, and the music began. It was quiet at first, soon joined by drums, then one, and then two guitars, and finally the bass. With each heavy beat, the skater would crack his toe-pick down, clap, or dip slightly as he slid and spun along the ice. The audience got into it fairly quickly, clapping along with the drums.

As I survey the chaos, taking in the lack of raw humanity

Otabek brought his hand up like a visor over his eyes.

It's as if the entire world's fallen in love with their insanity

Skates still clacked down on the ice to each heavy beat, the skater twisting around as he moved past the short end of the rink. He made a gesture like he was confused at the crowd, then raised a hand to his ear as he twizzled in a diagonal line.

Hear the innocent voices scream

He stopped abruptly, one toe-pick digging down into the frost, bending down and holding his head
like the sound was painful to hear.

As their tormentors laugh through all of it 
No forgiveness for all I've seen

He pointed all around him, letting each person hidden in the darkness know that they were on notice.

A degradation I cannot forget

Another spotlight suddenly shot down onto the ice, hitting the rink wall in the middle of the short-side nearest the skater. Sitting on said rink wall was a certain blonde, black blades accenting the dark, nearly-black crimson of the rest of the outfit. A long cape clung to his shoulders, dark red on the inside, with long, almost hair-like spines coming off the shoulders. His skin was painted mottled white, eyes darkened like Otabek's, long blonde hair left loose around his face. A hidden band held up a pair of twisted horns on top of his head.

"Oh!" Viktor sat upright when he finally recognized the figure, "It's Yurio!

So sleep soundly in your beds tonight

The teen looked up slowly when the lights shone down on him, and he kicked off the wall, skating eerily forward, raising his right hand up slowly as he went, then twisting around to point at the older skater.

Judgment falls upon you at first light

I'm the hand of God

Otabek rose again to his full height, and the two moved off in unison, each making bold declarations with their arms as the lyrics spoke the words.

I'm the dark Messiah
I'm the Vengeful One
(Look inside and see what you're becoming)
In the blackest moments of a dying world

They each paused, standing about 20ft from each other, turning their heads sharply and pointing at one another.

What have you become?
(Look inside and see what you're becoming)

Abruptly, they turned their backs on one another and pushed off towards opposite ends of the rink. As the voice overhead faded out for the moment, Yurio threw the cape off the same way Otabek tossed the tooth-mask, and each of them went into a flying camel spin, spreading their arms out as they spun before breaking off again.

As the violence surges
And the teeming masses have been terrorized

The Kazakh spun across the ice on his knees, coming to rest right in front of Yurio. The younger teen put a finger under the man's chin, forcing him to look up, and glaring down in return with disdain, looking all the more imposing with the horns still sprouting from his head.

Their human predators... all gone mad
The older figure seemed to fall to the ice dramatically when Yurio feigned a strike, and moved around him like a hungry wolf in a wide inside spread-eagle.

Are reaping profits born from their demise

Otabek 'struggled' to get back to his feet, digging in a toe-pick and casting his dark eyes on the 'demon' moving around him.

The rabid media plays their role
Stoking the flames of war to no surprise

Yurio moved off quickly then, speeding backwards along the rink edge as Otabek started moving towards the opposite side.

Only too eager to sell their souls

They each moved back towards center, pivoting through a mohawk-turn to change directions at the corners of the arena.

For the apocalypse must be televised

Moving closer, they kicked out their left legs, and pushed off into a side-by-side triple Salchow, turning past each other in mid-air before landing again and moving in reverse away from each other.

"Hm, that looks familiar." Viktor mused.

So sleep soundly in your beds tonight

"Where from?"

"Yuri and I did a move like that in Duetto."

Judgment falls upon you at first light

They descended into an arching hydroblade, forming one half of a figure-8 opposite each other before coming back towards center again and rising to their normal height.

I'm the hand of God
I'm the dark Messiah
I'm the Vengeful One
(Look inside and see what you're becoming)

Meeting back in center, they smacked their right hands together in passing; Otabek suddenly stopped even as the blonde kept sliding in a circle around him, each swinging their hands back again the other way, this time catching at the forearm. Yurio kept moving, lifting one skate up as he started to tilt back into the Death Spiral.

In the blackest moments of a dying world
What have you become?
(Look inside and see what you're becoming)

Otabek hoisted him back up again, 'throwing' him into a forward slide. The teen twisted around and went in reverse, holding his free leg high as his older counterpart started following after him.

The lyrics faded out again, and an intense drum-sequence took their place. The skaters met back up along the long end of the rink, swiftly moving down in sequence with each other, vaulting into a
quad Toe-loop at the end and landing in time with the other.

*When you die*
*You'll know why*
*For you cannot be saved*
*With all the world enslaved*

The blonde reached out one hand, then the other, each wrist crossed over the other and held firmly by the Kazakh before the younger skater was suddenly thrust out low to the ice. With the momentum, Yurio partly came up into the air, and Otabek quickly moved under, vaulting the teen onto his right shoulder and lifting him up as he rotated.

*When you die*
*You'll know why*

Parked on the skater's shoulder and back, Yurio was like a Demon King, waving his arm out at the audience accusingly before being spun back down to his own blades.

*When you die*
*You'll know why*

"Wow~!" Viktor mused, "I wonder where he learned that one?"

*For you could not be saved*
*This world is too depraved*

Mikhail shrugged, "I don't even know where he had time to. This is quite the elaborate performance, given how he wasn't even expecting to be there."

*When you die*
*You'll know why*

"Hah, maybe he was?" The younger Russian laughed, "Could be why he was freaking out so bad about wanting to be there."

The two skaters had moved to skating in tandem again, each having hopped as they grabbed the blade of their left skate, and moving across the ice in a long twizzle.

*I'm the hand of God*
*I'm the dark Messiah*

They broke out of the sequence, switched feet, and started spinning in another long twizzle in the opposite direction, hands clasped behind their backs.

*I'm the Vengeful One*
*(Look inside and see what you're becoming)*
*In the blackest moments of a dying world*

Finding the short rink-wall ahead of them, they broke away swiftly in opposite ways, each coming back down the long end of the wall to converge in center again.

*What have you become?*
*(Look inside and see what you're becoming)*

Otabek reached again for Yurio's forearm, grabbing for the left side to yank him forward and then
ahead of himself. The blonde twisted and spin around to face him, skating backwards then, only to be pulled forward and suddenly thrust up over the Kazakh's back again, twisting until his low back was hinged over the older teen's shoulder. He threw his arms out to the side and held as stiffly as he could, staying straight while the older skater spun and continued moving along the ice beneath him.

I'm the hand of God  
I'm the dark Messiah  
I'm the Vengeful One  
(Look inside and see what you're becoming)

Yurio tilted himself up and let the darker-clad figure maneuver him down, keeping his back to the man's chest as his legs were held for another series of spins before he was turned head-over-heels and up again, and then finally allowed to set his own blades to the ice once more.

In the blackest moments of a dying world

He wasn't allowed to go far though, each keeping a hand on one another's wrists tightly. The teen was yanked back again; Otabek's hands went to his waist, hoisted him up and threw him into a triple twist, letting the teen out ahead of him with nary a wobble on the landing.

What have you become?  
(Look inside and see what you're becoming)

They each leapt into a Butterfly Kick, spun twice more, and then dug their toe-picks in for the finish, standing back to back.

(Look inside and see what you're becoming)

The music cut out, and for a second, all the two skaters could hear was the sound of their own drags for breath. The crowd wasn't far behind, clapping and screaming enthusiastically, letting the skaters relax again and bow in their exits.

"That was Otabek Altin of Kazakhstan, this event's Men's Singles Silver Medalist, skating with his friend and Silver Medalist from Skate Canada and Trophée de France, last year's Grand Prix Final Gold Medalist, Russia's Yuri Plisetsky." Morooka explained over the television, "We're all expecting great things from those two teens. Seems they've been somewhat influenced by Skater Yuri's newly-returned rink-mate, Viktor Nikiforov, who did a surprise pair-skate with his spouse at Trophée de France last weekend. These guys are always out to surprise us. I can't wait to see what's in store next weekend, and at the Grand Prix Final after that."

"It's certainly shaping up to be as exciting a season as we were all hoping for." Oda agreed, watching as the two finally made their way off the ice, "And shortly, we'll have that self-same spouse of Viktor's that you just mentioned, performing his own Exhibition; the Cup of China Men's Singles Gold Medalist...Yuri Nikiforov. But first...this commercial break."
Sara Crispino was the next skater to go out after the Altin-Plisetsky performance, sliding across the ice in a dark navy sheer tunic, pinned across her left shoulder, and cinched about her waist with a silver cord. The EX Gala was one of the few places where lady skaters could wear their hair down, and she took full advantage, having it done in a small, loose bun behind her head while the rest of it tumbled down her back and shoulders. She waved to the audience as she made her way around in a wide circle, eventually taking her place in center, bowing her head and holding her hands loosely at her sides.

['Clair de Lune' - Claude Debussy]

"She's cute." Mikhail said casually, glancing sideways at his nephew, who was looking far too focused for no particular reason. The older Russian raised a brow, then raised his right hand, carefully balancing the mug of mulled wine on his stomach, as he reached out to poke at the side of the younger man's head where it was still covered over by the big blanket. He nudged against the fluff, and pushed Viktor over a few inches, only then getting the skater's attention.

"Huh?"

"I said, sh-

"Yeah." Viktor answered, pausing briefly, then cocking his head aside, "She's a twin. Her brother's in love with her."

If the older man had a ghost to give up, it would've flown screaming from the flat in a flurry of mad agony at the statement. Instead, Mikhail just coughed uncomfortably, "You're making that up."

"Nyet."

The older Russian gave him a look, but then held a hand up in questioning, "Anyway. Why'd you get all serious all of a sudden?" He asked, turning where he held his chin in the palm of his left hand, "You were all impressed by Yura and his friend, and then you got really quiet."

Slate blue eyes narrowed a bit, "...I can't remember if I talk to Yuri before I passed out."

"You did. I told you that already. He told you to get some sleep. He meant for you to rest though, not just be unconscious for a while."

"Oh good...for a minute there, I was thinking I made the memory up entirely."

"You realize that you're making absolutely no sense right now, right?"

"Where'd my phone go?" Viktor wondered aloud, setting the mostly-empty mug on the glass-top table in front of him and rolling to the side to find the device, "Where's my jacket?"

"Hall closet." Mikhail pointed, keeping his eyes fixed on the television as he dropped his hand again. The skater and the massive feather-down blanket rolled into a heap on the floor, right off the edge of the couch...paused...and then rose up to trot off towards the aforementioned location. He slid the door open and rummaged around in the coat, trying to remember which pocket he'd put it in. When
he finally found it, he slowly wandered back into the living-room, unlocking the device and then almost too-casually sitting down, thumbs clicking or sliding on the slick surface.

"You look like you're after something, Vivi." Mikhail wondered, watching as the younger figure was glued to the phone.

"Yuri said he was going to do the shortest Exhibition, right? I'm not making that up in my head."

"That's what he said. Why?"

"...I have this weird feeling...he's going to do..." Viktor scrolled through his music library, pulling up the playlist he'd created just for their Exhibition music choices.

Ameno_Solo - 3:55
You Only Live Once_RUS_Solo - 4:02
Firebird_Solo - 3:49
The Ghost_Pairs - 3:24
Song of Demeter_Solo - 2:01

"...Hm." He had a finger on his lip as his eyes spotted the time-counter, "That has to be the one."

"What's wrong with the song he picked? I thought it was really nice." The elder went on, "He did the best he could given his injury."

"It's not that I'm disappointed." The younger Russian clarified, "He worked really hard all off-season to have a variety of Exhibitions." He slouched back against the couch, "I gave him grief at Nationals last year because his last coach only let him do one, only for him to tell me there was no point because he thought it would be a waste to have more." He lifted his eyes over his phone to see Sara finishing her own program, taking her bow and moving off to rink-side for the next skater to take her place, "He picked this one because it was the shortest. I just...think it's kind of ironic, given what it is."

"What do you mean?"

"'Song of Demeter'...is about loss, hard choices, and doing what you have to despite how much it will hurt you and those you care about." Viktor said, watching as his husband finally came out onto the ice, and rising back up to sit properly for the occasion, "Yuri..." His words drifted, slate-blue eyes carefully following the Asian skater on the television, seeing clearly how he slid along the frosty stage on his left skate, keeping the right slightly up unless he needed it.

"Putting it like that, why would Yuri choose to do an Exhibition to such a somber melody?" Mikhail wondered, finishing the last of the wine in his cup, then leaning down to set it on the table, "Making it into the Gala should be a happy occasion."

"He wanted to have a variety." Viktor said, "Even after he explained the theme to me, I never really understood what he was aiming for when he picked it. Sure, it fit into the gradient of emotional range... But, like you just asked...why such a somber melody? His leg is sore but it's not killing him, at least not unless some idiot with grabby-hands comes along to remind him it's there."

The older Russian smirked at that, but said nothing to interrupt.

"He picked this one with purpose."

"Here he comes, the Cup of China Men's Singles Gold Medalist...Yuri Nikiforov." Morooka announced anxiously, "He almost missed the podium entirely this weekend, but here he is at the top
of his game, shocking everyone with his astonishing last-minute come-back. He fought hard for Gold, and showed us all why he's the current Men's Free Skate world record holder."

The young skater went around the rink, waving appropriately before focusing on himself to get his head in the game, setting the mood for himself before finding his spot.

Viktor watched carefully, leaning forward to put his elbows on his knees in thought, fingers clenching tightly to the blanket where he'd pinched it just under his chin.

The skater's outfit was quite a bit more theatrical than his competition-wear was, with a heavy, mid-length cloak that wrapped all around him. The neck and edges were hemmed with black feathers, rising up under his jaw like a frill. The cloak itself was streaked in different shades of grey and black, with occasional dark blue splashed throughout. It was tied in front with black cords, with feathers of black and dark green lying flat against it from shoulder to mid-chest, all angled down with their tips. Beneath the cloak, a black, double-breasted vest, dark-blue dress-shirt, dark grey pants, and skate-covers that rose up to the knee, looking like leather boots, several buckles and straps going across them at various levels.

Yuri went around in long, idle circles, holding both hands up near his chin, his ring touching his lips the whole time. From a camera-angle so far away, it was difficult to see exactly what was going on, but Viktor could swear it looked like his husband was saying something, even if only to himself.
"He looks like some kind of Steampunk Druid." Mikhail laughed, leaning a bit heavier on his arm, "I entirely don't get it."
"Sometimes the outfit comes before the music." Viktor explained, "Yuri saw the cloak online once and said he had to have it. Then he got to thinking, black feathers are like those of crows and ravens, birds often associated with melancholy and death. So he built his program around them."

"You let him build an Exhibition around melancholy and death?" The older man asked, huffing a nervous, uncertain laugh, "You're an enabler."

The silver skater just turned and smiled past the edge of the blanket, "I love him and I want him to be happy." He turned back to the television, seeing that his husband was finally starting to drift closer to the middle of the rink, "Besides, I liked the song. It was like the polar opposite of Agape in tone and theme."

The skater on the television finally swung his arms out, bowed his head, and went to center. Spotlights converged on his position, lighting him up in the dark.

Viktor crept even closer to the edge of the couch, pulling the blanket a little tighter under his chin.

The music began; a choir of voices rising up like they were pouring out of the ice itself.

*Amor floris*
*(Love of flowers)*

Yuri raised his right arm through the part in the front of the cloak to guide the song, then closed his hand, *and* his eyes, and slowly turned in a wide backwards spiral, bringing his hand down in front of himself as he went.

*Vicinum rumor.*
*(The sound in the air.)*

Both hands flowing out behind him, the skater changed directions on the ice, gold blades scratching through the 3-turn before pushing into a camel-spin. He held his hands behind his back, slowly turning until he descended into a twisted sit-spin, getting lower to the ice with the lowering tone of the choir, and raising an arm above himself as he went. The cloak flowed around him gracefully, feathers delicately brushing against the ice.

*Boris ventus, nobis sonus oblibio.*
*(To the voice of the wind, we are oblivious.)*

With the voices fading out, and the wind instruments fading in, Yuri lowered his arm, both hands on his knee as he kept spinning. He slowly rose back up to standing, letting his free leg come up and around to rotate him into reverse. He pushed forward on his toe pick, *both* hands going up ahead of himself before he went down on one knee, hands clenching into fists in front of where he bowed his head.

*Immemoratus Dominus,*
*(Unforgettable Lord,)*

He brought his hands in close to his chest, his whole body practically vanishing under the cloak.

Viktor had pulled one hand out from under the blanket by then, cupping it over his chin and mouth, eyes wide open. He rose, almost unconsciously, from where he'd been sitting on the edge of the couch and shuffled over to the space between the table and the entertainment stand under where the television was mounted to the wall behind it.

*Dona gradus renutio.*
The Russian was back on the floor, sitting on his knees, watching the performance with unblinking eyes, "He's doing it again..."

"Doing what?" Mikhail wondered, daring to wonder if his nephew had lost his mind from lack of sleep.

"Calling to me."

The skater landed a quad Salchow, changing from reverse to forward again and picking up speed as he traveled along the long end of the rink.

_Amor floris, vicinum rumor._
(_Love of flowers, the sound in the air._)

"Look at him." Viktor tried to explain, "How he moves his body...hands, legs, core...all of it...it's like he's _creating_ the music rather than skating _to_ it. I can _feel_ it." He raised his hand up to touch it to the bottom of the enormous flat-panel, rising up onto his knees under the blanket and watching.

Yuri moved around the rink in a serpentine formation, his lithe form flowing to the tone of the choir like water over smooth rocks in a gentle river. He gestured and turned, twizzled and arced around as he came to the shorter end of the rink.

_Boris ventus, nobis sonus oblibio._
(_To the voice of the wind, we are oblivious._)

"It's just like when he did 'Aria' before..." The Russian went on, entirely entranced by the performance, "I felt it, like hands came out of my screen, grabbed my heart and wouldn't let go."

The young skater landed a quad Lutz, slid through the landing, and twisted back around to face forward with a toe-pick half-jump.

_Boris ventus, nobis sonus creditum._
(_To the voice of the wind, we believe the sound._)

As the final line of the choir echoed through the stadium, Yuri went down on both knees to slide to a stop, head bowed low, and arms spread out to the side, palms up.

"Yuurriiiii..." Viktor whined, slumping back to sitting and immediately pulling up his phone again, texting furiously.

[I just saw your EX! You're making me cry!]

There was a brief pause before the three jumping dots came up on the left-hand side of the window. Mikhail rose from the couch to see what was going on, even as Viktor lifted his head to watch the last few seconds of his partner leaving the ice, the audience still cheering for him.

[Did you get any sleep?]

Viktor's eyes went wide, "That's not...what?" He hunched over and tapped away with his thumbs,

[Sort of. But your Gala performance! It was really moving! Were you trying to tell me something?]

Yuri gawked at his screen where he and Yurio were waiting for the plane to arrive, not sure what to make of the messages he was getting. He thought for a moment, his hesitation catching the blonde's
"What's wrong?"

"Viktor's awake. He just finished watching my Exhibition." He explained.

"Okay?"

"Mhh..."

[It was so different from practice!] Another text message read, followed by more jumping dots on Yuri's screen, [It had so much more impact than before!]

[I'm glad you liked it.] The skater finally answered, a bit dubiously, [...I wasn't trying to do anything different though.]

[So you...weren't...trying to tell me anything?]

Yuri could practically see the sad, disappointed look on his husband's face already, and he grimaced anxiously as he replied, [...No, I really just picked it because it was the shortest Exhibition in my list. What did you think I was trying to say? Are you sure you slept?]

Mikhail practically snorted with laughter when he saw the text over Viktor's shoulder, and rose up to walk away before his nephew could try to throw something at him. When he got safely around the corner into the kitchen though, he called back mockingly, "You're over-tired and you're reading too much into things. You should really go to bed and get some actual sleep. I have some allergy tabs that'll make you drowsy, if you want."

Viktor was just pouting at his screen, hidden under the big blanket, "...I was so convinced there was more to it than this." He sighed loudly and dramatically.

Yurio gawked at the face-plate of the phone, and how his former rink-mate still hadn't answered. Huffing a laugh, he went to sit normally again, lifting his right leg to set the ankle across his other knee, "I think you broke his tired little heart."

"...I didn't want to lie to him." Yuri sighed, "There really wasn't anything more to it. Now I feel bad." He clicked out of the text window and tapped the button for FaceTime instead, hoping the man on the other end wasn't too embarrassed to answer. Thankfully, his tired visage finally appeared on the screen, and Yuri drew in a quick breath of relief, "Hey." He said, trying to smile despite the previous messages.

"I'm all deflated now." Viktor answered, still pouting a little under the blanket.

"Aww don't feel that way. It's hard enough that you left under the circumstances that you did..." The younger skater pleaded quietly, "I miss you. Was your flight okay? You look exhausted."

The Russian dropped onto his side and held the phone loosely with one hand, the top corner of it lying against the floor, "The flight was okay. I couldn't sleep. I passed out a couple times but then I'd wake up feeling it was just for an instant. Then earlier I..." His words trailed, and he realized he was wandering into territory he wasn't ready to go into, and paused, looking away from the screen, "I was out for around 6 hours but I woke up feeling like it hadn't happened at all, just like before."

"Only a few more days." Yuri said, looking a bit despondent at the sight of his partner's condition, "By the time you get to Japan, you're going to be jet-lagged a hundred times worse than I ever was. How come you're having such a hard time sleeping? Normally you're out like a light, even if you're
Mikhail listened quietly from the doorway to the kitchen, leaning against the white-wall frame by the closet, arms crossed over his chest. He badly wanted to say something, but knew it wasn't his place, so he kept silent.

Thankfully, or rather, mercifully, it was the Russian Punk who interrupted and broke up the awkward silence that followed the question, "Did you get to see Otabek's Exhibition? It was before Katsudon's." His face was barely on-screen, coming in from the side where he'd pushed the side of his head against Yuri's, almost trying to overtake him in the picture.

"Da."

"And?"

"It was interesting." Viktor said simply, then realizing it was his lifeline to avoid the previous topic, "I guess that was why you wanted to go to China so badly? How long had you been planning that show?"

"We only figured out the details after I got here." Yurio explained, "It was just like last year's Final, where I choreographed my show the night before. Otabek jumped in at the very last second, getting the idea to have a bit role when he was at rink-side watching other skaters. We did what we could with the time that we had, so that's why he didn't actually skate back then, even if he was on the ice with me."

"So you're saying you planned all this at Cup of China?" Yuri asked, trying to get control of the conversation again and shoving the teen out of the way a little, only to find them both mashing their cheeks together trying to be the most relevant on camera, "Where did you even find time? I had no idea, and I was with you guys for a bunch of it."

"A bunch of it, but not all of it." Yurio pointed out, "Otabek's been practicing this show since summer. When you guys issued that challenge to me while we were all in France, though...he said he'd be interested in issuing a counter-challenge, but that it'd be hard since we had no events together so we could meet up and figure it out. That's why I wanted to come here, so we could work on it. It was easier to modify a program he already knew than to come up with one from scratch."

"...What about that crazy elaborate costume you had?" Viktor wondered.

"Okukawa went with me to get it the morning after your colossal melt-down." The teen pointed at the screen, "After the Free Skate official practice that you two dumbasses slept through. Otabek came with us."

"Oh." They both echoed.

Mikhail rolled his eyes a little and sighed.

"Anyway though." Yuri said, shoving the teen off to be alone on camera again, "Viktor... Try not to let yourself get too worn down. I'd hate for you to get sick before your skate. Take a hot shower, drink some warm milk, and go to bed. I'll call you when we get to the hotel, okay?"

The silver Russian nodded, but then looked aside, then back at the camera again. For lack of knowing what else to say, he brought the phone close and kissed the screen, holding for a second before pulling it back again to find that Yuri had done the same thing in return. He smiled despite his exhaustion, and nodded, "I might not have a signal by then, but leave a message anyway. I'll be glad to hear your voice."
"...You won't have a signal? What do you mean?" The younger figure wondered, utterly confused.

"Tomorrow...I'm going to do something that I should've done a long time ago. I might not be in range of a cell tower until right before Uncle Mimi and I go to the airport. But I'll call you as soon as I'm able, okay?"

"...What are you planning, Viktor?" Yuri asked skeptically, "There's only one place that I know of in Russia where you won't have cell service."

The silver Russian smiled sadly, "Da. Only one."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SIXTY EIGHT

The call had been disconnected for half an hour already. Yuri couldn't help but stare at his phone though, as if quietly wishing Viktor would call back to say he'd changed his mind about his unexpected side-quest. The thought of his partner going back to that place sent chills down his spine.

"You haven't said one word since the call ended."

"Huh?" Yuri lifted his head, shaken from a daydream, "Oh...sorry. He...just blindsided me with that last comment."

"I can tell." The teen retorted, pulling up a knee to wrap his arms around and lean against it on the chair, "He'll be fine."

"...A 50% chance that he'll be fine." The older figure sighed, slouching a little and sliding down his seat in the process, "I almost wish hadn't told me he was going. It'd be easier if he waited until he was at NHK to say he'd been there at all."

"Viktor does what he wants, when he wants, regardless of what anyone else says. Yakov's been trying to corral him for years and it hasn't happened. He chased the idiot all the way to the airport the night Viktor said he was flying to Japan, and all Viktor did was wave at him from his seat and say Yakov should join him sometime."

Yuri huffed a laugh at that, "Yeah, sounds like Viktor. Still though..." He got somber again, "This isn't like that. No one ever hit him in Hasetsu. Konstantin though..."

"The last time Viktor saw his father, I was there, and so were you." Yurio reminded, "We all saw how they kind of established a truce of sorts. If he's going out there again, he has a reason for it. You could say it's just business."

"...I just hope he knows what he's doing..."

. . .

"Goddamnit Viktor, GO SLEEP IN YOUR OWN ROOM." Mikhail barked, trying frantically to kick the figure off the end of his rather large bed, "You're a grown-ass man!"

"I can't sleep!" The skater protested hazily, "I don't have Yuri OR Makkachin!"

"You're not a toddler anymore!" The older man argued, finally shoving his nephew off the end with a thump, "You're not cuddling with me!"

"I wasn't trying to!" Viktor insisted, staring at his senior over the edge of a bed like a kicked dog.

"You were touching me." Mikhail glowered.

"I had my back to you!" The younger Russian slumped down to his side, pulling his big blanket around himself again where he came to rest on the floor at the foot of the bed. He stared bitterly at
the bottom of the black cabinet in front of him, listening to the rustling of blankets as his uncle got up and started walking closer to stare down at him. He could practically feel the man's eyes drilling holes into him.

"You're not sleeping in my room. What's wrong with the one you're using?" Mikhail finally said, his tone a little more empathetic, but not by much given that it was midnight by then, "You'd been sleeping in there all afternoon already."

"...I wasn't asleep."

He could hear the slap of a hand against a face, and the slight, quiet groan of a man about to give up.

"Then what were you doing all day?"

"Trying to sleep." Viktor pinched the bridge of his nose, turning slightly over to face the floor, "I just can't. I feel like a broken-down car with an engine that keeps screeching when you turn the key, and it just never quite turns over and starts. It sits there on the edge and makes you think it'll finally go...only to disappoint you." He pushed up reluctantly and leaned against the footboard behind him, leaning his head forward to rest against his upturned knees, "My entire head feels tight. The front of my brain is tingling."

"Not sleeping for days on end will do that to you. But again, I defer to the offer of sleep meds. It's all I can do for you." Mikhail explained, "If you don't want the drowsy allergy tabs, then I'll give you one of the muscle relaxants the docs gave me for my back. I'm out like a light on those, so I don't take them."

"I don't want my head to be cloudy tomorrow." The younger silver quietly protested.

"It's not like I don't know where you want to go. The only thing I don't know is why you want to go." The elder said, crossing his arms over his skinny bare chest and sitting on the edge of the bed, "But if you don't get some sleep, you'll be messed up from the lack thereof, and that'll be worse because you can't shake it. At least the meds will be out of your system long before we even get through St. Petersburg." He dropped a hand on the blanket covering his nephew's head, "Vivi, for your sake, and for mine, please take the sleeping aids and go to bed."

The skater huffed a sigh, feeling defeated, "...Fine..."

The older man put his hands together as though thanking the heavens for this turn of events, and rose to stand, ushering his nephew from the room and pushing him towards his own, turning back only to get the prescription and something to wash it down with. Once the exhausted heap was finally in bed, Mikhail turned back and quietly stepped out the door, looking back briefly before putting the door to. He was out within two seconds of crawling back under his own blankets.

For Viktor, sleep came reluctantly, yet not without significant effort even then. His head swam as he felt the effects of the muscle relaxant going through him, taunting him with the promise of sweet oblivion. Behind it though, like an expected but unseen trap, Viktor knew something was waiting for him. Something sinister that he wanted to avoid at all costs, but he was pushed through like a paper boat in a raging river.

Strangely, though...this trap...sounded like skates scratching on the ice.

The familiar sound was unexpected, and for a moment, perhaps lulled into a false sense of familiarity, Viktor allowed himself to close his eyes.
Viktor's heart pounded in his chest, taking in the sight of the arena. The huge, professional, new-looking skating rink, the massive windows, the river just outside, and the sound of skating instructors on the far end of the ice. It was all so strange, and yet...it was like he knew he was meant to be there.

[Who's this kid? Someone you found in a gutter?] The first skater asked condescendingly; a pale, skinny figure about Viktor's same age, with black hair slicked forward to a short point above his forehead.

[Georgi, this is Viktor. He's going to be joining the team starting today.] Yakov explained, putting his hand behind the 12-year-old's back reassuringly.

The silver boy clutched harder to the backpack in his arms, looking with his one good eye to the figure that had spoken before, then to the others...teenagers, and two adults. They were a mix of men and women, all of whom were part of Russia's professional skating team. It was an intimidating group to look at.

[How's he joining the team if he's only got one eye to see with?] One of the older men asked.

[He'll be fine soon. I just wanted to bring him down here to get acquainted with all of you and get used to being here.] The coach explained, keeping a firm hand against the boy to reassure him. [He comes from north of the city. He's the prodigy I told you all about last year. I was finally able to convince his parents to let him come train.]

[What happened to his eye then?] One of the ladies asked. [Does he speak?]

[Of course he speaks.] Yakov chortled. [Just give him time to get used to things before you crawl up his backside. He comes from a really small town that didn't have any other kids, so this is all new for him.] He turned to the boy after that. [Viktor, meet your teammates. That's Georgi. He'll be your main competition when you start going to events, since you're the same age.]

Standing only a head taller than the edge of the rink wall, it was difficult for Viktor to make a good impression, but he tried his best, stepping forward and letting go of the backpack just long enough to reach over the wall, [...It's...nice to meet you. I'm...Viktor Nikiforov.] His small hand shook a little, but he did his best to hide it by pressing his wrist against the plastic guard along the top of the divider.

The other boy looked at him skeptically, but then returned the gesture, squeezing the hand briefly before pulling back. [Georgi Popovich.]

Each introduction got a little easier after that, and before the tiny Russian knew it, he was getting his skates on. New skates, better fitting to his year-older feet, and most importantly...unburnt. When he was done lacing them, he took a deep breath and stood up, nervously reaching for the bulky square of gauze that had been taped over his eye and cheek, peeling it off with a wince as it tugged on tender flesh.

[Are you sure you want to do that now?] He heard Yakov asking, coming up to him on the ice-side of the rink-wall, [I wasn't going to expect you to do anything strenuous today. Having you come here so soon was just to give you something to do besides sit around my place watching television.]

[I have no depth perception with only one eye.] Viktor answered, blinking deliberately a few times as his uncovered eye got used to the light. The area around it was a deep purple and red, with paper-
tape holding the cuts closed where his skin had torn from the strike. He looked down and shielded his sensitive sight from the light with one hand, slowly trying again to adjust to the brightness of the arena by looking through the spaces between his fingers instead, [I want to skate. I feel better on the ice.]

[Come on out, then. Do a few laps and get acquainted with the arena. Don't do anything reckless though; you're still recovering.]

[Okay... He said quietly, pulling off the blade guards and slowly making his way towards the rink door. He looked around again before setting one skate down on the ice, but when he felt the slide beneath his feet, he pushed off quickly, letting the cold air all around numb the throb in his cheek. Skating idle laps around the edge of the rink, Viktor glanced around at all the other athletes. The oldest looked to be in their mid-20s, while the youngest, to his surprise, were barely old enough to know how to run, let alone skate...and yet there they were, learning how to figure skate professionally. The youngster felt a bit cheated to see these proverbial toddlers gliding around.

He turned his eyes up to where Team Yakov had cordoned themselves off in one half of the rink, practicing moves in the field and spins according to instruction. It occurred to him in that moment that this was his first time on the ice since the previous winter. Since his father had burned his skates during the summer, and he'd been forbidden from leaving home once the snows started falling, he hadn't even been able to throw himself around the pond in his boots, let alone pull his old antique blades out of the tank where he'd left them. The new skates on his feet were hard and tight, needing a couple weeks of use to break in...but at least he had them. He felt whole again. But that's where hubris took over, and the young silver Russian felt the itch to remember what it felt like to fly again. He was already going backwards around the rest of the team when Yakov realized what he was about to do.

[Vitya! Slow down! You're not ready!]

It was too late. Viktor had rounded the curve and had put himself into an outside spread-Eagle, then twisted just enough to launch forward, spin three and a half times, and land like it was nothing.

[...Did he just...?] Voices started rising up around him, [How old is he?]

[That's enough.] Yakov answered stiffly, [Alright everyone, calm down and go back to what you were doing. Vitya, come talk to me.]

Anxiously, Viktor did as told, holding one arm with the other as he started to worry what punishment he'd face for his disobedience. He slid after the coach until the man paused by rink-side and turned to watch him follow, taking a drink from a water bottle that had been on the wall near his gear. Terrified, Viktor said nothing until spoken to, and winced even then.

[Vitya,] Yakov started, speaking quietly, especially after he saw the boy twitch. He put his hands on the little Russian's shoulders and leaned down slightly to look at him more evenly, [I know you want to go all out, but you need to take it easy until you've recovered.] He said, then getting a bit quieter, [The accident was only two days ago. I promised I'd show you the rink today, but promise me that you won't jump again until you don't have a bloody eye anymore, okay?]

Viktor was a bit confused, [...I'm not...in trouble...?]

[Trouble? No, why would you be?] The man answered, seeing the stunned look on the youngster's face, [You're a skater, doing skating things. I just want you to heal quickly, and I know that being here will help with that. But you can't be overconfident and risk hurting yourself more by doing complex jumps, because if you fall, you might do more damage than you mean to. After everything...]

you went through, I'd hate to see it be for nothing because you pushed yourself too hard, too soon, and killed your chances by blinding yourself. You need to be patient a little while longer.

[...Sorry...] Viktor held his head low, looking down at the ice.

[If I tell you one thing, will you promise not to do jumps until you're healed?] Yakov bargained, putting his hand under the boy's chin to make him look up again.

[Tell me...one thing...?]

The older man nodded, [You only barely turned 12 a few weeks ago, and you just did a triple Axel in front of everyone here. It's the most difficult of the triples to land. Most kids learn to do that when they're 13, 14, or even 15, but you told me you perfected that one when you were 7, launching yourself off a tree stump. Some skaters may never learn it at all. You're already way ahead of the curve...I can feel it in my bones that you're going to be phenomenal in competition. Please don't ruin your chances by getting excited. I'll let you go full-steam-ahead once you're ready, but that may take a week or two. For now, get reacquainted with the ice...practice other elements, moves in the field, simple spins, connecting elements, all the other stuff I taught you last winter...but leave the jumps for later. Promise me.]

Viktor blinked, one normal slate-blue eye, the other peering through a pool of crimson, the cheek and eyelid swollen over it slightly. He finally nodded though, [I promise.]

Yakov nodded, and pat his head gently, [Good boy.]

It was barely another week before the first call came. Viktor was poking at a cereal bowl in front of him with an over-large spoon. He could hear the conversation in the other room, and from only the first few exchanges, he knew who was on the other end. He hopped down from the chair and quietly made his way over to the edge of the hall where Yakov had disappeared, and found the man nearly tripping over him as he came back around.

[Vitya!] He hollered, [...You scared me!]

[Sorry.]

[I guess you know who it is though. Do you want to talk to her?]

The boy nodded, and reached up to take the phone, feeling the squiggly cord pull on it a little as the coach let it go. Anxiously, he put it up to his ear, and spoke quietly, [Mama?]

[Vivi!] She answered excitedly, [I'm so happy to hear your voice! How are you?]

[I'm okay. Coach Yakov is taking care of me.] He answered, sounding a little reluctant, [I'm...going to stay here with him, in St. Petersburg.]

[Yes, that's what we were just talking about. I think that's a good idea.] Tatiyana replied, a slight twinge of sadness in her voice, though mostly relief, [There's a lot of things we grown-ups have to talk about, but...I think it's for the best. You deserve to follow you heart. We've been keeping you trapped here for too long.]

[...How's papa? Is here there?] The boy wondered reluctantly.

[Oh, I don't think you need to worry about him, Vivi. Just...let all that go. Yakov's your papa now,
okay?

[Papa's my papa. Yakov's my coach.]

[Yeah...yes, he is. I'm sorry. Uhm...anyway... Her voice trailed a little, unsure what else to say. There was too much going on and it was likely too much and too complicated for a 12 year old to really grasp. All she could do was look into the room that her son had once occupied and be reminded of how it had been completely emptied out since he'd left. Pieces of the wooden bed-frame were still stacked against the wall near the cast-iron fireplace, the brittle steel skate-blades still cooking inside it, [I'm looking forward to hearing about your first competition. When do you think you'll start?]

[I don't know.] Was all the boy could think to say in response. It was the truth, but it was only so for lack of knowing what his coach was planning. It was too soon to know anything.

[I'm sure Yakov will tell me all about it once you've got something started. You'll do great, I'm sure of it. I love you, Vivi.]

[...I love you too, mama.]

It was difficult; both of them held the phones to their ears for a while in silence before the call finished. Tatiyana was the one who clicked the disconnect button in the end. Viktor just held the receiver in his hands, listening to the muffled sound of the dial-tone blaring like a far-off, hollow siren.

At least, until the plastic device slipped out of his hands and fell.

CRACK

He was up with a start, eyes open wide as a breath caught in his throat. The silver Russian felt dizzy as he pushed up on an elbow in a slight panic...but as he looked around the room, realized it was different. Modern. The walls were painted white, entirely unlike the floral wallpaper from his dream. There was a huge vase in the corner with colored sticks poking out of it, not the window-sill planters he'd remembered a moment before. And it was night.

Still.

Viktor dropped back down to the pillow, reaching up with his hands, looking at his ring briefly before covering his eyes in frustration. His head was still swimming from the combination of the lack of sleep and the muscle relaxer he'd been given.

I have to finish this... He thought, It won't stop haunting me until I go back. I can't still be like this when I see Yuri again... I can't keep dragging him down into this...
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SIXTY NINE

BREEP...BREEP...BREEP...

The still-sleepy old-timer opened one bleary eye as his phone alarm went off where it was charging, face down, on the night-stand just in front of him. He unfolded his left arm from where it was nestled under his head and the pillow beneath it, and reached for the device. He grabbed it and pulled until the charge-cable clicked free, and then rolled onto his back.

Sort of.

Grey-green eyes turned suddenly to the side, the man's shoulder having hit something he hadn't expected to be there. A mound of blankets, wrapped like a cocoon around a particular restless figure within.

Mikhail drew in a hissed breath through flared nostrils, annoyed as all get-out as he pushed to his elbows and further to sit fully upright. In the time it took to finally turn off his phone's alarm though, he saw the big pile cringe a little, and his irritation turned to pity. One eyebrow raised skeptically as the older man wondered if the younger had woken up within the protective layers.

"Viktor."

Nothing.

"Hm." Mikhail scratched the side of his head, then finally shrugged and got up from his side of the bed. A brief and lazy stretch, interrupted by a slight twinge in his back, and the elder Russian shuffled out of the room. By the time he'd showered, dressed, and returned...the blanket-burrito had retreated. It hadn't gone far though, only into the living-room at the end of the hall...and not even onto the couch, but into the foot-space between it and the glass-top coffee table. The Russian crossed his arms where he stood, still holding to hid phone, but then flipped it up to look at it and unlocked the device. He clicked into the World Clock app and saw the times...7:49am for Moscow...1:49pm for Tokyo. For a moment, he considered calling his nephew's spouse, thinking Yuri might be able to convince the man to get his act together...but then he thought better of it.

"C'mon, Vivi..." Mikhail said, stepping closer to nudge Viktor's feet where they were barely poking out of the blanket, "The sooner you get ready, the sooner we can leave and get this whole thing over with."

Those pale feet just withdrew into the covers until they were out of sight again.

Sighing, Mikhail retreated to the kitchen. With any luck, maybe the smell of coffee would perk his nephew up. The television came on a moment later as he clicked the remote where he'd left it on the bar the night before, shuffling through various channels until settling on some local news. Grey-green eyes keyed in on the weather, huffing a quiet sigh of relief to see that the area north of St. Petersburg wouldn't be in any sort of snow-storm while they were in the area. As he was looking at the huge flat-panel, he caught sight of the blanket-heap rising up from the space beyond the edge of the couch, slithering on top of it and creating a nest of sorts in the corner. For a split second, he even saw the briefest glimpse of silver-grey hair sneaking out from the top of the pile, only to be covered
over again a moment later.

"Looks like it's going to be decent out there today, Vivi." Mikhail said casually, turning his attention back to the espresso grinder he'd been pouring beans into a moment before, "I was worried your little adventure would get side-lined."

No answer...so he flicked the switch on the bottom of the little machine and let the beans be ground into fine powder. As the machine finished and shut down again, the elder Russian reached for two tiny ceramic cups from the cupboard above, scooped the espresso powder into the machine that would brew it, and placed the two small cups under the spouts in its front. Before letting the espresso brew though, Mikhail grabbed some heavy cream from the refrigerator behind him and poured the cups half-full with it; maybe just over an ounce each. He grabbed two small spoons after that and, holding them curve-up with one hand over each cup, flicked the switch with the other and watched as the caramel-colored liquid started to sputter out. The streams struck the top of the spoons, and spilled gently over the sides. With the hot espresso sitting just on top of the cream, he set the two spoons in the sink and took the cups out to the living-room.

"Vivi. Coffee." He said quietly, "I made it special and it goes bad fast. Five seconds till I drink them both."

The blanket moved aside rather quickly after that, and Mikhail gaped at the pale, clammy figure that reached out from underneath of it, taking the cup from where it was hooked to his finger. He was almost too stunned at the sight of his nephew to remember to drink his own creation, simply watching as Viktor downed his in one swig before hanging the little cup from the same finger it had just been taken from. It was only then that the elder regained some presence of mind and remembered to drink his cup as well, "Yeesh, you look absolutely wretched."

"...Please...don't be mad...at me..." Viktor said weakly, slumping back into the blanket pile after that, only to slide down the back-rest of the couch onto his side. If the dark circles under his eyes gave no indication of how miserable he felt, then the fact that he was sweating despite looking severely chilled gave him away.

A pang of worry went through the older man, and he stepped around the corner of the couch to set his wrist against his nephew's forehead, "You're burning up. Forget about seeing your father, you need to see a doctor."

"...I have to go..." The younger Russian insisted, twisting his head to get away from the wrist, "I'll just keep getting worse until I deal with this."

Mikhail sighed and went back to the kitchen, replacing the cups with a cold cloth, then returned and put it where his wrist had been a moment before, "What exactly are you hoping to achieve with this trip? You had zero obvious desire to go back after the last time. Why do you suddenly want to go now? What about Konstantin can't wait until after the Final, when you're going to be back here for Nationals anyway?"

Slate-blue eyes just looked at him, "I'm not going for him. It doesn't even matter if he's there." Viktor tried to explain, "I'm going...to make peace with her."

"Oh." Mikhail said flatly, though a little surprised, taking a seat on the end, just past where his nephew's head had come to rest, "I thought you did that already...when you stayed in the cemetery for a few minutes after Kon left."

"I said some words." The younger silver grumbled weakly, eyes a bit sunken from lack of sleep, "But back then, I'd still refused to let myself remember what I was even there for. Now..." He
reached up from under the folds of the blanket and unraveled the cold cloth against his skin, pressing it against his whole face before putting it against the back of his neck instead and closing his eyes, "...Every time I dream, I see her face... I'm remembering all these things that I made myself forget about before, so I could move on."

"Vivi..."

"It's gotten so much worse since I got on the plane." He went on, "Ever since I set my mind to the fact that I was coming here... Ever since I said I'm going to Uncle Mimi's house, 'it's been nothing but flashbacks since the last time I'd done so on the day you left."

Mikhail wasn't sure what to say. He already knew about the earlier dream his nephew had mentioned, but with this new context, he just felt even more guilty than he'd been already.

"I can't sleep anymore. Every time I close my eyes and nod off, it's another memory forcing itself from the recesses of my mind. It happened a little bit, back before Worlds...when you texted Yuri your congratulations on his and my finally getting married... I remembered the moment my father hit me. That was the last time I ever saw him, before the funeral, and the last time I ever saw her."

Viktor explained, suddenly feeling a few bitter tears in his eyes, though he brushed them away before his uncle could see, "I told Yuri I didn't want to remember...and being with him kept the memories away. But with everything that happened this weekend, and coming back to Russia, leaving Yuri to go on to Japan without me... It's like I set myself up. Now it's all I can think about. She's haunting me."

"You were supposed to leave your grief at the grave." Mikhail said, his tone more sober and understanding than before, "Though, I guess you didn't really feel any back then. After being gone and out of contact for so long, you probably felt like the whole thing was just a chore."

Viktor stayed silent, feeling a sense of finality with the way the older man was putting things together.

"When was the last time you even spoke to your mother?"

"When I was 18. My second year in the Senior Division." He answered, "Though it had been two years since we last spoke before that." He paused for a moment, reluctantly thinking back on that day. "She'd sent a post-card to the ISU after I'd won gold at Skate America, and the ISU forwarded it to Yakov, who gave it to me. I called home a few days after, not really sure what to say to her. The first time though, Konstantin answered, so I hung up without saying anything. I forgot about it for a little bit...went to NHK and won silver, securing my spot in the Final. When I got back to Russia though, I saw the postcard again and decided to try calling one more time...she answered that time. The conversation was tense and distant. I'd mention the skating and she'd avoid it, but eventually she said that she'd seen photos of my shows in the newspaper, and that she liked my outfits. The next thing I knew, I could hear my father screaming in the background about...all of it."

"What do you mean?"

Viktor pushed up a little, trying to sit normally, keeping a hand on the cloth so it wouldn't fall from its place around the back of his neck, "He made fun of my long hair. He raged about how he was right, that his son had died when I left, that I'd been reborn as a freak... That soon, I'd be sleeping with men for money, and the whole family would be shamed for it." He said with dead eyes, staring straight ahead to where his knees peeked under the blanket, "This is what I've been saying would happen all along,' I heard him yelling, 'Viktor ran away from home to go skate, and now he's an abomination in the sight of God. He wears his hair long and dresses like a woman, shaming the
"...You didn't cut your hair after that because of him, did you?" Mikhail wondered suddenly, "I can't remember when I noticed the change in the photos...but you were older..."

"No." He shook his head slightly, "I trimmed it back a little a year after, but I cut it short like this only after Sophia left me." The silver Russian paused a moment, then looked down even more, crossing his arms tightly across his chest, "I did something even worse."

"...I wouldn't really consider a haircut to be a bad thing." The older man said flatly, not really understanding where the point was going.

Viktor continued to look like he felt he'd committed a crime, keeping his eyes low, hidden behind where his bangs lay messy over his face, "I was so angry over what Konstantin had said, that when I got to the Final, I..." He started, drawing in a ragged breath, "I took advantage of a lady Ice Dancer who was nice to me."

"...You did...what?"

"Do I really have to spell it out?" Viktor asked stiffly, turning his head slightly to peek past his hair, "I was a horrible person. I was angry and I wanted to prove to myself that I wasn't a freak like my father thought." He looked away again, "Because of my focus on the sport, and all the home-schooling Yakov put me through, I'd never been with anyone before...but I made sure to be with her. I snuck off with her any chance I got, trying to gain her trust...her skating partner realized it and they started to argue. I wasn't leaving without getting what I wanted though, and I got it right before the Exhibition. We went at it like animals in heat, and I went out on the ice an hour later...but she and her partner got into a huge fight about it and ended up having to cancel their own Gala program. He tried to confront me in the prep area, but I put on that sweet, innocent face again and went about my business like nothing had happened... She was just a means to an end, and I felt like I'd been able to prove a point. The arrogant superiority-complex I'd had about it lasted only until the plane landed in Moscow though. By the time the team got back to St. Petersburg on the train, I felt like I'd just barely gotten away with murder. I swore I'd never take advantage of someone like that again...so when I met Sophia 2 years later, I took it really seriously. Maybe...I took it too seriously...or maybe she didn't...since she threw me out as soon as the going got tough. I was devastated for a long time after...it ruined the rest of my season." He half-slid down the couch again, the blanket rising up past his shoulders as he slipped back into it, and pulled it over himself a little more tightly, "It was just me and my dog for a while after that...Kubochin...and then he died in the off-period between Nationals and Euros..." He sighed quietly to himself, remembering the big brown woofer, "I was still a bit depressed when I got there, and met this fan as I went to the rink for the Official Practice. I guess I was craving attention or something, so I got involved with her. She'd be really sweet and affectionate when we'd get together at events, since she was from America and would go back home after...but as soon as we went back to long-distance status, she'd get controlling. I put up with it through Worlds, went to visit her once over the summer...she found a poodle puppy that looked just like my old dog; I named him Makkachin. I took him back to Russia, then she came to visit me there in the fall, and then the GP Series started again. We met back up at Skate Canada, but she couldn't make it to Skate America, even though it was in Oregon and she was only a few hours away in Washington State. I don't even remember what the reason was. All I remember is her FaceTime Freak-Out where she tried to tell me I shouldn't talk to fans while she wasn't there. I'd had it up to my eyeballs by then and cut her off. No one tells me when, where, how, and least of not whether I'm allowed to interact with my fans."

Mikhail nodded as he listened, "Does Yuri know all that?"
"Huh?" Viktor looked at him, a bit surprised, "Sort of. He knows the general timeline of my past relationships, and he knows where Makkachin came into things, but he didn't want any details. That's twice he's cut me off while I'm trying to tell him about my past." He held up two fingers for emphasis.

"Your past and your past girlfriends are very different topics. One makes him uncomfortable, the other doesn't." The elder pointed out, "If you're trying to figure out clever ways of avoiding the topic with him later, this wasn't the best attempt."

"So I don't get to avoid the topic when it makes me uncomfortable?" The younger silver said flatly, "That's not fair."

"I'm trying to convince you to talk to him about where you come from because as your spouse, he deserves to know what made you who you are. You've also told me about all this by now, so why not him?"

"You're different. You grew up in the same place I did. You already know all the people, places, context...I don't have to explain it all. I just tell you what happened." Viktor pointed out, pulling the cloth off his neck to rub it against his forehead, leaving it there and sighing, "The sooner I can get all this out of me, and put it behind me again, the better. I want to go back to Yuri feeling like I did before all this happened. I don't want him to get hurt again."

"All you're doing is cutting him out of a situation where he feels like he should be able to support you." Mikhail said grimly, "Yuri isn't stupid or oblivious. He knows you're struggling. But if he knows how you've been with those women, then he's probably also terrified that if he pushes too hard to get involved, you'll just push him away...maybe permanently, just like the fangirl who was too controlling."

Viktor kept his sights low. His chest felt tight as the words sunk in, and his heart hurt. He lowered the cloth from where he'd held it to his forehead and put it over his eyes instead, hiding them where he knew they'd give away his fear.

"Don't sideline him while you fight this battle alone. It's not going to be over just because you go to Tatiyana's grave and mutter some things in front of a statue." The older man's words cut like knives, "She's dead and gone, and you know she won't hear a word you say. You're only going there to admit to yourself that you were a jerk for cutting her out of your life, just like you've done with everyone else whose love stopped being easy to maintain." He paused for a moment, feeling like a massive hypocrite given how he'd done the exact same thing not too long ago, even showing videos of skating events to that self-same statue. But as long as Viktor didn't know about it, it didn't matter, "You could just admit it right here and now, and save us the trip...but you've already made up your mind that we're going, so we will."

The younger Russian just growled at him as he lifted his head, "I can kind of tell you're trying to offer advice...but you're really just being cruel now."

"No crueler than you've been to your own husband at the best of times." Mikhail threw back, pushing to stand, and walking slowly behind the couch, "Telling him you'd cut your losses and leave if he didn't get on the podium last year, refusing to tell him what he should know about your past, sidelining him when he wants to be in the fight with you while you deal with that past."

"I'm just trying to protect him."

"From who? Konstantin? Or you?"
Viktor's eyes were wide as he gawked at his uncle. He couldn't even muster the strength to react when he felt the washcloth being swiped from his hands as the man stepped back into the kitchen with it.

"You're not a bad person, Vivi." Mikhail explained, wringing the cloth out under the faucet and making it clean and cold again, "You're dealing with a situation that caused you a lot of pain and suffering when you were younger, and I understand that you don't want to put Yuri through that same Hell. You escaped from the worst of it and made something of yourself in spite of it, made mistakes along the way, hopefully learned from them, and met and married the love of your young life. I entirely understand that you want to protect that at all costs. But telling me about it isn't going to help you heal and move on. I know what you went through because I went through part of it in my own way, too, like you said. Sometimes though, the only way you can get past it is to share the burden with someone who isn't already weighed down by their own part in it."

Viktor could practically hear the echo of those very words in Yuri's voice. It made his heart hurt even more to truly realize that he had never actually made the effort to do anything about it.

*I've let him participate in a few things, and regretted it every time. I thought if I could keep him ignorant of the rest, I wouldn't regret at least that much. Now it just feels like I'm making a mistake no matter what I do...*

"You know...in a lot of ways..." Mikhail said, getting the skater's attention again, "Even though you've gotten bigger, you're still that same poor kid that fell in the mud as you chased after my car. I've carried the guilt of that ever since. I've tried to make peace with it by reconnecting with you when I saw I had the chance, but it's still a work in progress." He stepped back into the living-room and squished the cold cloth against Viktor's forehead again, pushing him back down into the corner of the L-couch, "I expect I'll be sorting through the fallout of that proverbial Armageddon for a long time. The same goes for you. Apologizing to your mother's grave is a well-intentioned first step, and if it helps you somehow, then great. But I promise...telling Yuri will do you a lot more good than telling the face of a stone angel."

Viktor nodded, and felt as Mikhail withdrew his hand, leaving the cloth to cool his skin unaided.

"Now...it's going to be a long day, so I'm going to make breakfast. We'll eat, you'll shower and get dressed, and we'll be off." The elder said, resting his hands on the stiff back of the couch, "And once we're on our way, you should try to get some actual sleep. You'll get what you need out of having another warm body close by, and I won't have another heart attack from finding another man in my bed again. Deal?"

Blue eyes raised to green, and again, Viktor nodded, feeling a little embarrassed. He felt a hand come down on top of his head, mussing up his hair a bit before withdrawing again.

"Good."
"Wow." Yurio grumbled, sitting cross-legged on the end of the one bed in the room, holding his phone in front of himself, "This city is the most boring place I think I've ever been."

The television was on ahead of him, the remote on the entertainment stand, just within reach. The volume was low; loud enough to know it hadn't been muted but too quiet to hear whatever was being said.

"Really?" Yuri wondered a bit hopelessly, loosely wearing Viktor's team jacket even under the blankets, "What's here?"

"...A bunch of boring parks...a really boring-looking historical district...a super-boring sheep...park...thing..." The blonde listed, "The Sapporo Beer Museum...? They make those?"

"...A beer museum?" The older skater echoed, lifting his head up slightly from where he was still in the bed, shaking off his jet-lag, "Viktor might've liked that. He drinks beer sometimes."

"BOOOORIIINNNGGGGGG."

"Well, we have to think of something to do for the next 2 days..." Yuri muttered, finally sitting up and looking out from under the night-mask he'd put on when they'd arrived earlier that morning, when it was still pitch black outside, "Have you heard from Minako-sensei? Maybe she has some ideas."

"Yeah, a few hours ago." The teen answered, twisting slightly to look back at the man over his shoulder, "I've been awake for a while."

"What'd she say?"

Yurio raised a brow, then clicked into his text history, showing the message to the skater so he could see for himself.

Okukawa:
[This place is so boring! Why'd NHK have to be here?]

Me:
[NHK is probably the most exciting thing this place has seen since the Olympics]

Okukawa:
[Starting to think we should've gone back to Hasetsu first]

Me:
[Preach]

"Sheesh. Why not tell me how you guys really feel?" Yuri grimaced, rubbing his eyes as he leaned back, "I figured Viktor would've looked ahead to see what there would be to do here while we waited for the event."

Green eyes just blinked at him, and soon, the teen was pointing his phone at the older figure, "You make it sound like Viktor ever plans that far ahead."
"He was the one who booked all our flights and hotel rooms."

"Yeah, cuz if you did it, you'd be booking flights in Economy and your hotel rooms would be basic."

"What? That's not true."

Yurio just gave him a look.

Yuri returned the gesture, crossing his arms like he thought that would somehow make himself more intimidating. He broke down pretty quickly though and just flopped back down to the pillows, "...Okay, maybe, but only because it would've been free that way. I don't even want to know what he spent for us to travel this season so far. The La Premiere tickets cost more than everything else combined, I bet."

"Don't you guys share a bank account now or something...? Shouldn't you be able to tell what he paid?"

"Sure." He answered sullenly, "But when he got that money from his mom, he kept a huge chunk of it separate, and used some of it to pay for our travel expenses. He said he'd never be able to surprise me if I could always see what he bought just by looking at the bank app." He pushed over onto his side, reaching for the night-stand where his glasses and phone were resting. With the glasses pressed to his face, Yuri picked up the phone and unplugged it from the charger, seeing the screen come on to show that it was already nearly 4pm. He sighed and dropped it to his chest, "It's about 10am back in Moscow right now...I wonder if Viktor and Mikhail have started traveling?"

"If they're smart." Yurio suggested, pushing to stand up and stuffing his hands, and phone, in his pockets as he went, "It's a 4 hour ride just on the Sapsan train, 8 hours if they're taking a car, and that's just to get to St. Petersburg. If Viktor says they'll be here by Wednesday, they won't have a whole lot of time to waste by taking the scenic route to the middle of nowhere."

"Yeah..."

"Well, anyway, if Your Royal Highness doesn't mind, I'm starving." The teen went on, bowing sarcastically, "Sapporo is apparently good for ramen at least, so let's meet up with Okukawa and go."

Barreling at 155mph through the snowy Russian countryside, the bullet-train was making its way steadily towards St. Petersburg. It was hard to see much through the pre-noon snow and fog, but the shadows of trees and power-line poles flying by made note of its progress.

Viktor was passed out in his seat, ear-buds in, arms crossed, coat used like a blanket, scarf wrapped around his whole head. He wasn't recognizable under all the layers, which was for the better, given the newspaper his uncle had in-hand next to him.

[National hero, Viktor Nikiforov, is set to compete in Japan this weekend. After announcing after last year's Grand Prix Final in Barcelona that he was returning to the sport, he was only able to make it to the World Championship, where his 1st place, record-breaking victory was usurped by the very skater he'd briefly retired to coach. However, winning gold at his first event of the season at Trophée de France in Bordeaux, he's showing the whole world why Russia consistently produces the best figure skaters in the world.] Mikhail read aloud, though still quietly. He huffed a little and shook his
head, reading a little further down the page of the sports section, seeing the podium-photo of Viktor, Yurio, and Chris, where it was inlaid over the massive page-length image of just Viktor himself in his Free Skate ensemble. The way Viktor looked all excited, him and Chris hugging and being giant dorks like always, and Yurio to the side like he was miles away...to an outsider, it might look normal, but to Mikhail, it gave away the rift that had formed. He knew about the fighting that had been going on that day, and how tense it had been throughout the afternoon.

*I wonder how that whole thing would've played out if Viktor's old flame hadn't been there? Would there have been any fighting at all at that point...?*

The scarf around his nephew's head came loose and tumbled down around his shoulders when the man fidgeted a little in his sleep. One ear-bud came loose as well.

As the older figure reached to put it back into place, hearing the quiet piano of 'Yuri on Ice' playing, he noted where it paused to make way for the distinct jingle of Viktor's phone ringing. He gently tugged on the cable to pull the other bud out, and used the line to fish the device from the man's coat pocket before it woke him up. When he saw that it was Yuri calling though, he couldn't help but answer, and set the ear-buds into his own ears as his thumb hit the screen.

"*Dobroe utro, Yuri.*"

"*Dobrik din, Dyadya Mikhail.*"

The man's eyes were wide, but then he laughed, "You're getting better at that. Your accent is terrible though."

"Let me move back to Russia and I'll figure it out." Yuri answered, smiling despite the diss, "I guess Viktor's asleep if you're answering."

The older man glanced back at his nephew, who wiggled a little to get comfortable again, head tilted towards the window, "Yeah... We're almost to St. Petersburg though. I can tell him to call you when he's awake."

"It's okay if he's too tired. We were just going to ask if he knew of anything to do in Sapporo that we might've missed. This place is boring."

"Really? That's hard to bel-"

There was a sudden ruckus in the background, and Mikhail could hear the struggle going on. He heard Yuri yelling something and what probably sounded like his phone hitting the ground, then someone yelling *IDIOT* really loudly. There was a rustle, a pitifully quiet whine where Yuri was begging for his phone back from the woman who'd swiped it, and then a voice that sounded like all smiles and sunshine.

"Mikhail." Minako said sweetly, almost *too* sweetly, "Dearest, best friend, buddy, pal."

"*Uh oh.*" He answered stiffly, "You listed those in *descending* order. Am I in trouble?"

"*Minako-senseeeeeeiiiiii...*" Yuri whined again in the background, "*You're sitting on me...*"

"Quit being grabby-hands at the phone." She answered, smiling innocently and patting the skater's head beneath her, sitting on his back where he'd slipped side-ways on the bench in his desperate bid to get *his* phone back, "The grown-ups are talking now." She turned her attention back to the conversation, leaving the hapless younger figure to go limp under her weight, giving up and sulking.
Yurio just sniggered mockingly at him from the other side of the table, taking his own phone out to grab a few pictures while he could.

"Please do tell me exactly what your plans are for this weekend in light of recent developments." Minako said, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "If you'd be so kind."

"...Uhh...well, from the sound of it, sleeping on the couch, probably..." He answered weakly, pulling the front of his flat-cap down a little to hide his eyes from the rest of the cabin, "Is it a big couch or a small one...?"

"It's a chair."

"...Mh..."

"It's a pretty nice chair, but it's still a chair." She went on, then pulling her hand up to cover her mouth while she spoke, whispering after that, "Where is Yura going to stay? No one planned on him being here."

"Oh, uh...I hadn't thought about it. With Yuri?" Mikhail held his nephew's phone nervously, feeling a bead of sweat slide down the back of his neck.

"Do you really think either him or Viktor are going to want him around when they get back together?"

"...I guess I could get him his own room then..."

"There aren't any rooms left. I already checked." Minako whispered, putting her hand down on Yuri's head where he was trying to get up again. "Practically everything is sold out because of the event. Even the local hot springs resorts are sold out. The only places with vacancies are so far away that they might as well be out of town."

"That is a problem."

"Minako-sensei-"

"Shhhhh!"

Yuri found new strength and flailed one last time, finally managing to uproot the woman long enough to twist onto his back before she came back down on him, half-sitting on his stomach with a confused look on her face. He reached for her hands again, "Mikhail! Tell her to give me my phone back!"

The man was just sweating bullets by then and said nothing, listening to them arguing with each other in the background. He nearly jumped out of his seat though as he heard Minako scream suddenly, and his ghost left him a second time as he realized his abrupt panic had caused him to grab Viktor's arm. The hazy skater grumbled a little, rousing partly from sleep. Mikhail turned his attention back to the 'conversation' though, "Minako!"

"Gah, no, it's me, I got it." Yuri said, heaving breaths. He turned back to the ballerina, "You're heavier than you think! And you've got a bony butt, sheesh!"

"What'd you...do...? Exactly...?" Mikhail asked dubiously, "Why'd she scream?"

"She was sitting on my back before to pin me down, but I managed to turn over...so when she had her arms up trying to play keep-away with my phone, I got her sides. She's ticklish."
"DON'TYOUTELLHIMTHATYURIISWEARTOGOD-" Minako had her arms wrapped tightly around herself protectively as she glowered at him from Yurio's side of the table.

Yuri just smiled devilishly at her expense, setting his elbow on the tabletop casually, "Right on the ribs."

"I don't know if I should be grateful for that bit of info or not..." Mikhail said anxiously.

"Anyway...I was trying to say..." The skater went on, "If you keep him the first night you're both here, we'll take him the second, and we can trade off like that until we're all heading back to Hasetsu together anyway."

The blonde just gawked at him curiously, "...The Hell are you saying...? Why does it sound like you're talking about me?"

"...Oh yeah...sure...that... That sounds great." Mikhail's voice drifted a little bit though. He watched, seeing the sight in front of him practically in slow motion, as his nephew turned slate-blue eyes straight at him, albeit sleepily, "...Uhhh...uh oh..."

"Uh oh?"

"I woke the beast."

Yuri blinked in confusion, "Eh?"

Viktor stared, only his eyes moving, looking down the length of the white ear-bud cable until they came to rest on his phone in Mikhail's right hand, "...Who's on the other end?"

"...A...bunch of people...?"

"You mean Viktor?" Yuri asked, his voice inaudible as yet from the younger Russian's perspective.

A long pale hand came forward towards Mikhail's left ear and snatched the one ear-bud, and Viktor squished his head to his uncle's and replaced the nubbin in his own ear, "This is Viktor, who's my uncle talking to?" He asked, sounding eerily chipper for someone who'd just been woken out of a near-coma.

"Viktor!"

Blue eyes lit up at the voice, "Yuri!" He practically would've jumped out of his chair if he could, but he swiped the phone back and curled back up into his seat instead, leaving his uncle a bit stunned and disheveled, "Sorry, I was trying to sleep just now...what'd I miss?" He asked, putting the other nub in as well.

"Not a whole lot...I was calling to ask if you knew of anything fun to do in Sapporo, but..."

"Oh, no, that place is boring." The Russian answered cheerfully, "My to-do list was going to be shockingly short there."

"Really? You had a to-do list?" Yuri was a bit skeptical, "Did you have a to-do list for the other places we went to?"

"Sure. The first three things are always the same though."

"...The first three things?"
"Da." Viktor said, dropping his phone to his stomach as he started counting off on his fingers, "My to-do list, in order...1, Arrive, 2, Get luggage inside, 3, Yuri."

"...Eh?"

Mikhail gave his nephew a look, but then rolled his eyes and laughed anyway. He wished he could be there to see the look on the young skater's face when he heard the words.

No one in the Sapporo restaurant knew what had been said though. All they could see was Yuri's face turning red as he found himself a little speechless.

"Things are a little out of order now though." Viktor went on, "You're already there and the luggage is with you, so I guess...I can skip straight to doing number 3 as soon as I get there."

"Oh, well..." The younger man coughed a little, trying not to draw more attention to himself than he had already, "Speaking of all that... We're going to have to let Yura stay with us a few times this weekend."

"Eh?" This time, Viktor was the one confused, "Why?"

Yuri glanced across the table, but then huffed to himself and stood up, heading towards the doors of the venue to exit. Once on the sidewalk, he glanced around for a spot of wall to lean against so he could finish the thought.

"Yuri? Why'd you go quiet all of a sudden?"

"Sorry, I wanted to step outside." He answered, "I was texting with Minako-sensei earlier about what to do in this city, and she happened to ask how it was with Yurio staying with me last night. ...Oh...er, is Mikhail still listening?"

"No." Viktor said simply, turning his head to look out the big windows, watching the snow fly by.

"Phew...okay, well. Apparently Mikhail said something before sending Minako-sensei and Yurio on to Shanghai and...long story short...she doesn't want to babysit all weekend. I suggested that we could take him every other night, as long as they took him the first night."

The Russian just went silent for a moment, making Yuri worry, but then he huffed a laugh and shook his head, "...We really are SkateDads. We should get shirts. It would be hilarious because of how embarrassed Yurio would get. Think about it..." He went on, raising one hand as though setting the stage for his imagination, "They'd have text on the front that reads, 'Proud SkateDads to a good kid who's kind of a MUDAK sometimes.'"

"...Mudak?" The younger skater echoed in confusion, "...I can only assume that's a short list of words."

"I'll let your imagination fill it in."

Yuri couldn't help himself, and just started quietly laughing. It was quickly contagious, and he could hear his husband starting to do the same thing on the other end of the line. The young Asian skater sighed, his mirth mixed with a bit of sadness, "I really miss you... It's hard to sleep without you here."

"Same..." Viktor agreed, "I've had a really hard time getting any sleep at all since I left. I just keep..." His words trailed, and he slouched a bit in his seat.
"Viktor?"

"It'd be so much easier to deal with all this stuff if I could just...hold you, even if only for a minute..." He went on reluctantly.

"You mean...the trip back to where you grew up?"

"Yeah..."

"I don't really understand why you want to go back there all of a sudden. You said you were just going to Moscow to be with your uncle for the trip to Sapporo...but now all this, too?" Yuri said, "What are you hoping to achieve by going back there...?"

The Russian paused, his words catching in his throat a little. He shook his head and lowered his eyes, bringing his knees up a bit where he could perch his feet on the extended foot-rest, "...There are a lot of things I've...never really had the guts to tell you about. Things I wanted to put so far behind me that even I would forget about them. I don't want you to have to worry about me going back to my home-town, since things are better now... There's just some things I need to deal with. I won't be able to skate if I don't."

Mikhail listened quietly, thinking it was at least a reasonable first step, even if only half of one at best.

"I promise...I'll tell you everything once I'm with you again." Viktor said, "The things you told me before though, when we were still at Four Continents... I guess, it's just taken this long for it all to really hit me. I'm... I'm trying to be a better man now, to be more like you... So, I'm going back..." He reached up to rub his eyes on the front of his wrists, "...And I'm going to finally let myself feel the way I should've felt back then..."

"Viktor..."

"Wish me luck, okay? I love you, Yuri...and I'll see you soon."
Chapter 171

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY ONE

The sun was already low in the sky by the time the rental car pulled onto the last semi-paved road before it became frost, dirt, and stones. The forest had grown right up to the side of it, stopping only short of growing right in the middle to block what little traffic passed through. It was only a few miles before they'd be moving through the heart of the tiny little hamlet, and then...the 'rancid little cottage on a hill' that lay behind it.

Viktor was feeling the pit in his gut growing the closer the car got, crossing his arms tighter across himself as more of the landscape looked more consistently familiar.

"This'll be your, what...third time back here in the last year?" Mikhail said suddenly, breaking up the silence.

"...Yeah." The younger man answered quietly, "For a place I'd put so far out of my mind that I'd forgotten where it even was...I've been back a lot lately."

The silhouettes of old buildings started to creep in past the limbs of frozen, naked trees, looking like something of a haunted Halloween town than anything else. The only things that gave away occupancy were the smoke rising from chimneys, and the occasional window whose shutters weren't straight, letting light peek through the cracks. Not every building was being used.

"It looks even emptier this time than last." Viktor pointed out, "Now that I really look at it... For all that it still looks the same as I remember, part of me realizes that this place is just the withered husk of a town it once was." He turned toward his uncle, "How do you remember it?"

"It was an actual town, once." Mikhail answered, looking a bit grim as he thought on it, "Before everything fell apart, there were a lot of people here. Well, maybe not a lot, perhaps around a thousand, but still far more than there are now."

"...Everything fell apart? What do you mean?"

"Didn't you learn about the fall of the USSR...? It happened almost right after I left."

"I was 5 when you left. And sure I know about all that."

"So?" The older man side-eyed him a little, as though not understanding why the younger figure wasn't following. Realizing Viktor seemed entirely oblivious, Mikhail sighed, switching hands on the steering wheel before explaining, "Maybe you were too young to notice the changes as they were happening. Or maybe, being out here, you were so far removed from it all that you were sheltered from it. The rest of Russia wasn't so lucky though."

Viktor listened quietly.

"There used to be six small towns around here, all built up around the steel mill. I poked around, back before the funeral...only one of them is still standing, and it seems like most of the people who stayed to man the mill congregated together there. Everything else was..."

"...Abandoned?" Viktor finished, curious as to his uncle's sudden short stop.

"I think we just crept up on your father."
"Eh?" Blue eyes looked forward, seeing the shadow of a huge figure farther down the road, barely singled out of the woods by the headlights, "...How can you tell it's him?" His heart was in his throat either way.

"He's the only one with a horse around here."

The annoyingly-modern hybrid car slowly rolled in closer, coming up on the heels of the massive, shaggy creature. It seemed to be getting irritated with the car though and whinnied a little before kicking its back legs a little and trotting further ahead. Mikhail stopped the car after that, and watched as the horse, which to Viktor looked more like a wooly mammoth without tusks, turned around side-face towards them.

Not one word need be spoken by the man-bear sitting in the old saddle, frost on his whiskered face, slate-blue eyes glaring down at the car, only for him to roll those eyes and turn the horse back around, [Why are you back so soon?] Konstantin veered the animal to the left, letting the vehicle pass, though it seemed to just coast next to him instead.

Mikhail lowered the window, his cheeks and nose getting red from the cold wind almost immediately, [I thought you'd be happy to know that I'm okay! You know, cuz I fell off the roof.] [I remember.] [You don't sound relieved at all!] The silver man pouted, keeping half an eye on the road.

Viktor, in the meanwhile, was having a coronary event where he sat, and tried to stay quiet and unnoticed.

[I knew you'd be fine.] Konstantin went on dimly, the horse's hooves clopping along in the packed snow and rock, [I'd be worried if you'd called to say you didn't recover...though I think I'd be more surprised that you'd call to tell me in the first place.] [After all the calls you've been getting recently because of me and Viktor, I'd have thought you'd thrown the phone into the pond.] Mikhail said flatly, [I guess this means you haven't?] [I think I've thrown enough things into the pond.] The bear answered, his tone still largely indifferent, though getting impatient, [Why are you back, Mikhail? Come to make me watch more skating videos or something?] Viktor blinked as he heard it, but he held his tongue, thinking his reaction instead, ...Make him watch...skating videos? What's he talking about?

[No, not this time. I don't have anything new since last time I was here. Viktor isn't skating until the weekend.] The older silver Russian explained, [I'm actually here on other business.] Konstantin side-eyed him a little, looking down from his high vantage, but then shrugged and looked forward again, [I don't play guessing games. Say what you mean or don't.] Mikhail just huffed a laugh and reached out of the car window, patting the side of the shaggy horse's chest before pulling back into the vehicle properly again, [We'll meet you at the house. Don't take all night to get there, okay?] The window was already scrolling up before Konstantin had a chance to react.

Viktor was paralyzed in his seat though, turning his head with a slight tremble, "How is it that you can talk to him like that...? Are you a wizard?"
Slate eyes spied him through the rear windshield, and then narrowed slightly. The car was already getting ahead, but through the snow, it was still slow-going. With a light kick, the horse swung its head up and started to canter, then fully started running, kicking up snow in its wake as it carried on past the hybrid.

The silver Russians watched it go, looking like a creature of legend as it barreled by the car, pulling out ahead and gaining a bit of distance before finally coming to a stop and turning again, right in the middle of the road. The car was forced to stop, coming to rest some 20ft away. Konstantin looked straight in through the front wind-shield, eyeballing the skinny figure in the passenger seat as the horse trotted around anxiously under him.

"OhgodheknowsI'mhere." Viktor whined anxiously, gripping the handle on the door like it was his last night on earth, knuckles practically white from how hard he clenched down.

The gruff old man didn't say a word though, simply keeping those unblinking slate eyes on his son for a moment longer. They turned back to Mikhail for just a moment before finally turning away again, and the horse kicked off at full gallop down the road.

The car stayed still for a minute or so, before the older figure finally started moving forward again, "Did you think you'd escape notice or something?"

"It crossed my mind." Viktor answered nervously, gradually unclenching his fingers from where they'd locked down, "...I didn't expect that we'd run into him before we got there. Why's he on a horse?"

"Him and Tat only had one car between them. She crashed it, remember?"

"Well, yeah, but that was almost a year ago already." The younger man retorted, "And it's winter. Shouldn't he have replaced it at this point?"

"Tat was the only one between them who ever went far enough away from home to need it." Mikhail explained, passing through the middle of the dilapidated town, seeing the tell-tale hill not too much farther ahead, "Konstantin's an old school country bumpkin. He'd take the horse even if he had a car."

"...This place is so weird..."

The car eventually pulled into the same little hutch on the side of the road that Mikhail always seemed to park in when he came through, and both men stepped out soon after. Viktor's eyes moved from the empty peak of the hill, to the left where the path cut to the cemetery, then back to the right where the old wooden house still stood, and then further to the right, where he supposed he'd never noticed the mini-barn that was there until that very moment, barely visible through the trees.

...Was that always there? I can't remember...

He quietly watched as Konstantin closed the large door on the front of it, lowering the bar to prevent it getting open again in the middle of the night, and walked slowly towards the front of the house. Everyone was eerily quiet. He turned to look at his uncle over the front of the car, and watched the man nudge his head towards the house.

"Let's go. It'll be dark in an hour."

"...I'll...meet you after, then." Viktor said instead, moving off to find the path before he'd even heard the confirmation.
Mikhail just watched him go, stepping through the snow to carve his own path to the cemetery rather than taking the one that had already been made by previous footsteps. But, Viktor stopped almost as quickly as he'd arrived, standing still as a statue just in front of the 'entrance' area, staring into the morbid wonderland like he wasn't sure what to do after that. Not wanting to interrupt the man while he considered his next move, Mikhail stepped up the path and took the right-side of the fork, heading to where the Nikiforov patriarch was still standing outside.

The haggard older man just watched him come, [Guess this explains a lot, and yet doesn't.]

"Huh?" Mikhail answered in confusion, looking up at the massive figure before turning back to see Viktor still standing where he had been a moment before, [Oh, him? Yeah, he's the 'other business' I came for. We came all the way up here from Moscow.]

[Why?]

[Unresolved issues.] The skinny figure answered with a shrug, [When Viktor heard I'd fallen off the roof, he left a skating event early to come help me out. We ended up coming here, too.]

Konstantin just narrowed his eyes a little, giving a look of suspicion. [I thought you said he hadn't skated since you were here.]

[Viktor didn't skate. It wasn't his event. It was Yuri's.]

[...Yuri?]

Mikhail quirked a brow, though it was barely visible under his hat, [Your son-in-law. Yuri Nikiforov.]

The big man's eyes twitched to hear it.

[...Yuri...is a better man than you ever were... You're just...an animal ...!]

[His name is Yuri Katsuki...and soon, it's going to be Yuri Nikiforov! HOW DO YOU LIKE THAT, HUH? He's going to be my husband and we're going to do all kinds of unspeakable things to each other!]

Konstantin drew in a long breath, grit his teeth, and exhaled without saying a word. He just turned back towards the front of the barn and unlatched it again.

Mikhail watched, and then followed after, looking in through the part in the big door. He spotted the man-bear easily enough, and then the horse he'd parked within a few minutes prior. The entire barn was built just for that one horse, like a shed that happened to have a stable inside. Konstantin grabbed a bristle-brush from a peg on the wall and stepped in next to the shaggy beast, setting the brush down on the half-wall of the stable before turning his attention to the straps of the saddle.

[Kon?]

The gruff man twitched a little, but turned his eyes, looking past his shoulder to see Mikhail there looking at him from just inside the barn door, [Pull it closed. Don't let all the warm air out.]
[Oh. Sorry.]

The big wooden panel slid shut, and Mikhail reached for a rope that was hanging on the wall, looping it around to keep the thing from swinging back open again as soon as he let it go. It was awkwardly quiet again after that; the sound of the leather straps being unbuckled, then the saddle being pulled off and set on the half-wall next to the brush. The blanket came after, then the halter and bit around the animal's head. The soft scratch of the bristles rose up after that as Konstantin worked methodically.

[Were you coming back from the mill just now?] Mikhail asked, trying to break the silence.

[Yeah.]

[How many people still man that place now anyway? It can't be many.]

[It won't be any soon.] The older man said darkly, still brushing away, [It's closing down.]

Grey-green eyes widened a little, then looked down at the straw along the floor, [Oh. ...What are you going to do?]

[Start digging my own hole, I guess.] He answered, not missing a beat, [It was inevitable. We all knew it was coming...it was just a matter of when we'd see the papers.]

Viktor listened quietly to the sound of the winter wind through the trees. It wasn't much of a gust...more like a breeze. The sky was starting to turn grey-golden at the horizon, the sun sinking into the uppermost branches to the west.

*Helsinki isn't too far from here.* He thought to himself, looking towards the sun, then turning directly around, seeing the sky where it was turning to night already far to the east, ...*And Yuri's a thousand miles that way... What was I thinking...?* His eyes went down after that, looking at where his thin dress-shoes were starting to get cold around his feet, ...*Apparently not a lot. Uncle Mimi's right, I'm too impulsive. ...I thought it would be fun to come back and fly with him to NHK, but now it's turned into this.* A quick look at his phone, and the little NO SIGNAL message at the top, and he sighed heavily. Reluctantly, he finally stepped into the grave yard, snow crunching under every hesitant step.

There was only one angel statue in the entire area, and it was just a short few steps away from the middle of the plot. Viktor found it easily enough, standing behind the small stone bench that had been set at the foot of the grave, practically at Tatiyana's feet, deep within the ground. The wind blew through again, a bit harder than before, and Viktor pulled up his scarf a little bit to shield his ears and nose.

*I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do now.* He thought grimly, brows wrinkled a little where he looked at the statue nervously, *I had all this time to think about what I'd say or do once I got here...and now that I've arrived, my mind's completely blank.*

[...I remember.] He blurted out suddenly.

Blue eyes went wide as he realized he'd said something at all, he the hand that held the scarf suddenly moved to cover his mouth, as though he hadn't intended to speak in the first place. He nervously glanced around the grave yard, worried someone or something might've heard him, feeling his heart pounding in his chest all over again. He glanced back towards the house, just in case someone was going to come out at any moment...but then calmed again when he realized no one
had.

One big inhale, and Viktor lifted his eyes to the sky, then looked back at the statue straight ahead again, [...I... I remember. I remember all of it. I hadn't wanted to, and I'd gone out of my way to make sure I didn't...but it's...all coming back to me now.] He admitted openly, hoping some fragment of his mother could hear him, [I don't know what to do now.] His gloved hand went down to the bench in front of his knees, brushing the snow and frost away before stepping around it to take a seat, [...I feel like this would be such a long conversation if you were here. I have so many things to apologize for...I don't even know where to start...]

Even in spite of the cold, Viktor felt a shiver go down his spine, and it forced him to sit up straighter than before. The stone was frozen where he's set himself down on the marble bench, but even that wasn't as cold as the shudder he'd just experienced.

This must be what it's like...to face your fears head on...

Slate eyes rose to the bottom of the statue, reading the Cyrillic where it displayed Tatiyana's name, and barely visible under the frost and ice, the year of her birth...and her death.

I thought I knew what that was like before. I've known how it felt to fear for my life. To fear the unknown. But this is so different... After I left this place, and started that new life, it's like I reset my existence to Year Zero. I forced everything that happened before to the back of my mind. I pushed it so far down that I couldn't even be reminded of it. Every time I'd be forced to remember, I felt like I was being dragged right back into the thick of it again, and I'd have to start all over...resetting myself...back to Year Zero.

[If I approached every season like a new beginning...things would always be fresh... I'd never find myself walking a path I'd already gone down before, revisiting things I'd already done, seeing things again that I'd already known. In a way...I treated my skating like I treated my past... But in a way, maybe that's part of why I stopped being able to surprise people. I'd start doing the same thing I'd done before and not even realize it. I know why I'm here now.] Viktor said quietly, lifting his eyes to meet those of the statue's angelic face, [I haven't wanted to talk to Yuri about where I came from because it hurt too much to think about how I'd pushed you out of my life. All you ever wanted was for me to be happy. I didn't realize...or maybe I didn't want to think about...how much you'd risked to help me follow my dreams, and how hard it must've been for you to put me into Yakov's care and push me away. And what do I do...? You sacrificed everything for me...and I had the gall to resent you for wanting to stay in my life. I don't know if I'll ever be able to atone for that...but...maybe if I at least admit to myself all the things I did wrong...I can start to do things right instead.]
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY TWO

As quickly as the winter sun set behind the horizon, it felt like a lot more time had passed than really had. By the time the last sliver of light faded away, and the stars could be seen as clearly as though they were painted on a canvas, the Russian countryside was as dark as ebony. There were a few meager lights on in the small hamlet down the road, but they were too far away to illuminate the graveyard. Even the small lights from inside the house nearby weren't good for much.

A dog barked somewhere far away, then a second joined in. Otherwise, the night was quiet.

Viktor was still sitting on the marble bench, elbow on his knees, forehead on the back of his wrists, cradled where his fingers were laced together. In the dark, he'd completely lost track of time. He'd said everything he could think to say, and had managed to become thoroughly disgusted at his younger self in the process.

All those years, I blamed her for falling out of touch...when it was really my fault. I wonder if Yakov stopped telling me when she called...? How many times did she try, only to get told I wouldn't answer...?

"Viktooor!" He heard Mikhail calling, unable to see him in the dark but knowing where he was. The older man's outline was obvious enough against the light on the front of the house, but the flashlight on the front of his phone only illuminated the area immediately around him.

The younger Russian lifted his head a little to the sound, seeing the dark shape with the bright light in front of it nearly 100 yards away, then hearing his name called a second time. For lack of knowing what else to say, he drew in a breath and rose to stand up again, stuffing his cold hands into his coat pockets, and looking in the direction he knew the statue stood.

I burned everything she'd saved for me, even the letter... I never even finished reading it. That would've broken her heart, I'm sure of it... I really am horrible.

Mikhail squinted as he looked into the dark beyond the wooden house, and was relieved when he finally saw the camera-phone flashlight turning on a ways beyond the hill. He waited quietly and patiently as it got closer, until his own flashlight app was strong enough to cast a pale glow onto the figure approaching.

"Did you get what you needed?"

Viktor paused long enough to turn the app off and put his phone back into his pocket, shielding his now-ungloved hands from the cold, and shrugged, "Don't know. I actually feel a bit worse now that I've basically confessed to all the horrible things I did after I left."

"We all go through phases like that when we're young and stupid. We can only hope to learn from it early enough that we don't end up old and stupid, too." Mikhail answered, "Come around the other side of the house. Kon's digging out the fire pit."

Nervously, Viktor nodded and followed, stepping the path through the snow where feet had pushed the white fluff down already. Once behind the house, the young Russian paused, looking out towards the woods, and seeing the faint glow of moonlight on the pond in the caldera-like depression at the bottom of the hill.
The sound of a crack, and the faint but steadily growing light of a fire, caught his attention and forced him to look back again. With the fire rising, Viktor could see where his behemoth of a father was using a wide shovel to dig a wide edge around it, scooping it up into three big piles all around the center, packing it down after every few scoops. When Viktor finally realized that his uncle had vanished, the man was already returning, carrying what looked like tarps and horse blankets over his arms.

"Here, do something useful." The older figure said, holding out one of each until Viktor took them, not sure what to do, "It's for snow-chairs. Put the tarp down first, then the blanket, then sit."

"Oh."

"It's like sitting in a big bean-bag. You'll get it." Mikhail said, moving off to do the same with the remaining two sets.

Viktor watched in silence as his uncle did as he'd explained, and then promptly flopped back into the covered snow-pile, making a custom seat for himself by fire-side. Blue eyes looked down at the items folded over his arms, and cautiously stepped closer to mimic what he'd seen, setting the tarp down over the pile, then the horse blanket, and then turning around to try sitting. It felt really awkward.

"Just fall back into it. The snow will conform to your shape." Mikhail said, trying to encourage him.

"What if there's a rock under it?"

"There's no rocks up here. None big enough to bother you, anyway."

"Ja ne govorju po-anglijski." Konstantin grumbled, setting the big shovel into the snow against the back of the small 'barn,' and then dropping into the pile that had been made ready for him. The tarp crinkled as it moved under his weight, and then one more time as the big man crossed one ankle over the opposite knee to settle in.

"Izvinite." Mikhail answered back, [Force of habit.]

Viktor just looked around nervously, being the only idiot still standing.

[Oh jeeze, just pull me up and take my spot if you're that worried.] The Rozovsky elder muttered, holding his hand out and flopping it around dramatically for emphasis. The younger man did as instructed and yanked his uncle up, then cautiously took his place in the pile that had already been tried and tested, turning his eyes to watch the man drop into the untested snow-mound like it was no big deal. He landed without issue, and retook his previous pose, crossing his legs out in front of him to warm his feet by the flame-pit, [See? Nothing to worry about.]

[For a guy who just had surgery for a broken back, you sure are careless.] Viktor said meekly, [Maybe that's why you fell off a roof in the first place.] [I broke one bone.]

[In your back. That'd be the end of my career if it happened to me.] Viktor pointed out, only to then go quiet and look away as he realized he'd mentioned that thing. He cleared his throat nervously and said nothing more.

[Oh bah, there's plenty of people who've had worse injuries and got back into the game after recovering.] Mikhail went on, heedless of his nephew's discomfort, [After seeing you in action, I'm surprised you haven't already gotten hurt. Your back must bother you sometimes at least.]
"...Mh..."

[Knees then?]

"...Mhhh..."

[That move you do at the start of your Free Skate.] The older figure still hadn't gotten the hint, [Where you stomp your one foot down really hard. I was sure you'd break your ankle with it.]

Viktor just looked at his knees, and at the fire just beyond them, not wanting to speak of it.

[I'm glad you've at least decided against asking Yuri to get you all riled up before you go out there. His poor little heart couldn't take it.] Mikhail went on.

[Can we talk about literally anything else?] Viktor finally said, keeping his eyes down as he spoke, and bringing his legs back to cross them under himself, [Seriously.] He pulled his phone out to look at something that was familiar, idly checking the World Clock app to see that it was just past midnight in Japan by that point. Without internet access to check Instagram with, the perturbed skater started scrolling through his photo albums instead, trying to calm his pounding heart with better memories.

Mikhail watched him, but then huffed and shrugged, turning to the man-bear who'd been silent to that point, [Anything you want to say?] [No.]

[You're both so boring!] The man lamented, kicking both feet up dramatically.

Slate eyes scanned left, and Konstantin looked on his bristling son, seeing the phone case past his hand and being surprised at himself for recognizing what it was...sort of, [...Isn't that one of your skating outfits or something?]

"Huh?" Viktor looked up nervously, turning his phone around and realizing he still had the Duetto mash-up case on display, [...Ah, yeah. Kind of.]

[Kind of? Either it is or it isn't.]

The young Russian just sank a little.

[Relax. That's just how he talks.] Mikhail said, trying to be reassuring, [He doesn't like it when people are vague. Be literal or say nothing at all.]

[It's...] Viktor started again, his heart going a thousand miles an hour again, [...It's not just mine. It's Yuri's, too.] He tried to explain, moving his fingers to the bottom of the case and then pointing at each half with the other hand, [The wine-side is mine, the blue is his.]

Those telltale eyes looked at the phone-case as the explanation was given, but then couldn't help but move to where the golden band on Viktor's finger glinted in the fire-light. The huge man drew in a sharp breath and then turned his head away.

Viktor just glowered, tilting his hand where he realized what had made the older man recoil, and then settled back into the snow-seat with a grumble, [I wish you weren't so judgmental. If you knew the relationships I'd had before, maybe you wouldn't care so much what I'm doing now.]

[Were they all men?]
No, actually.] The younger silver figure said stiffly.

Mikhail glanced back and forth between the two as each said their piece, not sure whether it was worth it to interrupt or if he should just quietly let it play itself out.

[And it's not exactly like I dated those women and then decided one day that I was done with them, and that I'd only be interested in guys after that.] Viktor went on defensively, [I didn't choose it.]

[You know it's wrong.]

IT'S NOT WRONG.

[Yeesh, that went to 11 in a hurry.] Mikhail said quietly, mostly commenting to himself.

[How can it possibly be wrong to love someone!?] The young Russian continued, looking like he was about ready to jump back to his feet at any moment, sitting forward in the snow-chair. [You know how hard it is to trust, in my position? How hard it is to tell apart the people who only care about my skating fame from the ones who actually give a damn about me as a person? Do you even know how long it took for me to trust Mikhail again after everything that happened, when he popped up in St. Petersburg after the funeral?] Viktor pointed at the man for emphasis.

[Ohhhhh shit, he actually said my name.] The older silver said, shocked.

[And the only reason I'm even here right now is because of Yuri!] The skater barked, [If it was just me back then, I'm not even sure I would've told Yakov to go ahead and arrange for us to meet. But in spite of all the horrible things that've happened to me, specifically because of you, at least I got Uncle Mimi back, and finally covered over one of the gaping, bloody holes in my soul...one that was put there, I've since learned, because you and the people in this god-forsaken town drove him away in the first place.]

The bear's cold eyes just stared, unblinking.

Viktor grit his teeth, and then fell back against the horse blanket, [I don't even know why I bother letting myself get riled up about this. You'll never be rational about it. The fact that Yuri makes me happy is entirely irrelevant to you.]

The fire crackled between them, sparks flying up into the night. Viktor just went back to the photos on his phone, scrolling through them without really looking at them.

[Why are you even here then?]

Viktor just glared over the top of his phone, then looked back down again, [It wasn't for your illustrious company, I can assure you. I came to apologize to my mother for putting her through literal Hell; for being good at the one thing you hated most in this world, and for leaving her alone with you after the fact.]

[You make it sound like you think she hated me.]

[I wouldn't be shocked if she did!] Viktor snapped, pulling his knees up after that to make a proverbial wall between them, [I don't even know why she married you, never mind being close enough to create me somehow.]

The huge man narrowed his eyes, going silent for a moment and looking up past the fire. A quick glance over at Mikhail, and Konstantin sighed quietly, [Things were different before.]
"They were always the same to me." Viktor grumbled, keeping the phone up.

"Tell him."

"Hah...?" Mikhail answered, a bit surprised at being dragged into it suddenly, "Tell him what...?"

"Tell him how things were before. He won't listen to a word I say, or believe me even if he does."

Grey-green eyes quirked a little, "...How far back do I have to go?"

"All the way. Tell him everything."

But-

"ALL OF IT, ROZOVKSY."

Mikhail just quietly growled a little, crossing his arms over his chest, "What difference will it make if he knows any of it? His experience is entirely separate from ours, growing up here. We grew up in the USSR, him in the Russian Federation."

"I'm not talking about the politics of the time, idiot." Konstantin said stiffly, "I'm talking about us. You, me, and Tatiyana."

Viktor side-eyed his uncle from his side of the fire, quietly wondering why the man was so reluctant to speak.

"Asking me to explain it all makes it sound like you're asking me to take the blame for how things turned out, and that's not fair." Mikhail protested finally.

"You are half the reason things turned out the way they did." The bear pointed out, "After all the things you did, you're lucky you didn't end up in the pond."

"Oh come on, you can't expect me to take responsibility for the tension between you and Tat. I was horrible as a kid, sure, but I can't make you do anything."

"'Horrible?'" Konstantin echoed, as though the idea were absurd, even scoffing a little, "You were an unholy little monster. The entire town suffered because of you. Would you have still been such a nightmare if our families hadn't arranged for Tatiyana and I to be married? You were so petty, jealous, and vindictive over the whole thing that it's amazing you weren't chased out of town with torches and pitchforks. Viktor being born is probably the only thing that stopped you. Those few years short years after that, before you left, were the only years of peace Tatiyana and I ever had."

The skater lifted his head cautiously, "What's he talking about?

"He thinks I tried to break up the marriage when all I was doing was having a bit of fun." Mikhail said defensively, keeping his eyes on the bear to his side, "It's not my fault Kon reacted the way he did."

"Your definition of 'fun' is pretty fucked up then, Mik." The gruff older Russian said bitterly, "Only a psychopath would think what you did was anything less than vicious and sadistic."

"What is he talking about?" Viktor asked again, more firmly this time, "Tell me."

"What good would it do to tell you about the delinquent I used to be? It's all in the past. I'm a completely different person now." Mikhail answered his nephew stiffly, rocking forward to thrust himself back up to his feet, then turned back to Konstantin, "Viktor's only just starting to forgive me..."
for leaving in the first place. Don-

[After all this time, telling me I needed to tell Yuri everything about my past, don't you think it's a little hypocritical that you refuse to tell me about yours?] Viktor wondered, lowering his phone and knees a little.

[Sure it's hypocritical...but there's a saying about doing what I say, and not what I do. You should consider it sometime.] The older silver man said angrily, turning his back to the fire and stepping slightly out of its glow, the toes of his shoes touching the edge of where Konstantin had stopped shoveling snow away.

[Maybe you're right.] Viktor answered, turning his back to the man, sitting sideways on the horse blanket. [Maybe I've only just begun to forgive you for leaving. But your stubborn refusal to tell me what happened is starting to make me wonder if even that was premature. If you're not the same person you used to be, then admitting what you did before shouldn't be a problem, right?]

[It's not that simple.]

[Nothing ever is. We keep moving on anyway. You're acting like you think I'll hold a grudge against you for stuff that happened before I even existed.]

[Sure, because the things I did left an impact that carried on well into the future...so much so that I was surprised I was even told Tat had died.]

[Viktor wasn't the only one who had a care package set aside in case something happened to her.] Konstantin said grimly. [If she hadn't left instructions to contact the both of you, I never would have...but she never forgot. She was stubborn and willful that way. No matter how much I pleaded with her to let you both go, she never would. No matter how much it hurt her that you were both gone, she kept hoping you'd both come back one day anyway.]

[Oh, and you had no personal hand in making her miserable?] Viktor argued. [I remembered all the times you got furious over catching me skating, yelling at her over it. I remember hearing you screaming in the background when she was on the phone with me after I left.]

The bear's slate-blue eyes narrowed again, and he growled a bit as he exhaled. [I had a short fuse over a few things.] He paused for a moment, watching as his son glared at him over his shoulder. [It's a shame you were too young to remember how things were before the skating. After you got on the ice, it's all you ever lived for, and I know that now, looking back on all the years you two were sneaking out so you could skate. Can you really blame me for being mad when I found out my own family had been lying to me for so long?]

[We only lied because you were so unreasonable about it.] Viktor said, turning back around again to face the back of the house. [We both thought it was stupid.]

[It was. I recognize that. But this is now...and that was 20 years ago. I can't undo what happened back then, and I can't change the fact that your precious Uncle Mimi made me hate it so much...but that's how it was back then.] Kon went on, quieter than before, [If I could go back and change one thing, that would be it. Maybe if I hadn't been so angry about it, you'd never have felt the need to skate in town, and Yakov never would've found you and taken you away.]

[Then maybe I should be grateful that Mikhail made you hate it.] Viktor shot back bitterly, hugging his knees in front of himself. [After all, I would've ended up at that god-awful steel mill if I hadn't escaped this horrible place. I would never have met Yuri, either, and the thought of being without him is almost entirely unbearable to me. If not for him, I'd have probably thrown myself into some
icy river somewhere by now.]

[You can't possibly mean that.]

[I do.] The skater said, clenching his eyes shut indignantly, then turning slightly, setting his hand down as he twisted to stare at his father, [I'm nearly 30 now. My skating career *is going to be over* soon. My *whole* life has been about skating. I had no idea what I was going to do once I couldn't compete anymore; I didn't even want to *think* about it because it was *too depressing*. If Yuri hadn't skated my program when he had, and if I hadn't gone to be his coach afterward, I not only would be retired from the one thing I ever did that I was *proud* of, but I'd be *miserable and alone, too.*] He held his right hand up after that, the gold glinting on his finger again, [He's been my life-line in more ways than I can count. Being the reason I can stay in skating somehow, keeping my head above water as I deal with everything that came up *with this place*... I wouldn't be able to do *any* of this on my own. He means *everything* to me because of it. I'm *not* going to apologize for being married to him, and I'm *not* going to let you make me feel bad about it. *I love him*. You can either learn to *accept that*, or you can *shut up about it.*] He twisted back away to face the house again, his hand going just above his head, [Cuz I've had it *up to here* with this. You don't even want to know who I am, what kind of person I've become, what I've done with my life... You think you can read a newspaper article about my events now and then, and think you know enough. And despite all that, you think you have the right to *judge me* because you knew all along that skating would make me *like this*. No, I made me like this.]

Both men listened anxiously, though for entirely different reasons.

[And maybe, *just maybe*, if you could stop being such a bigoted *ass* about the whole thing for five minutes, you'd actually get to see what I'm like *normally*...] Viktor ranted on, [...]I hate being like this...feeling *angry* and *anxious* all the time... I came back to put my ghosts to bed. I did that as well as I could. Now I just want to get back to Japan so I can be with my husband again. ...*I hate it here...*]
Yuri's arm flopped over the edge of the bed, dangling to within a few inches of the floor. He grumbled as the pillow he'd put over his head started to creep up, no longer pinned by the arm that had slipped, and he looked out unwillingly into the dark of the room...tired, and yet wide awake. Grudgingly, he temporarily gave up his attempts at sleeping, and pushed up quietly to sit on the edge of the bed, reaching for where his phone was charging on the night-stand. He rubbed his eyes with one hand as the other clicked the phone on, trying to block the bright light of the screen from getting around him and bothering Yurio, who was sleeping under a different set of blankets on his own half of the solitary bed.

3:43am... 9:43pm in Moscow... I wonder what Viktor's doing now...?

He clicked over into the text message window and read over the last few messages he'd swapped with his partner, right as Viktor had been leaving the city limits of St. Petersburg.

[I got a little sleep on the train...some folks recognized me when Mimi and I got on board, so I spent half the trip buried under my scarf and coat, hoping no one else would]

[Yeah, sorry to wake you up...]
[Are you sure you're going to make it back in time to catch your flight? It's going to take you most of the day just to get out to that place...]

[I'm sure it'll be fine]
[We decided to just skip the Moscow flight since there would be a layover in St. P's anyway, so we'll catch it from there. We should be in Sapporo by dinner-time on Wednesday. I sent you the itinerary right?]

[Yeah]

[Will you be coming to the airport?]

[Of course I will, we'll all be there]
[Yurio says he feels like a kid being swapped between a divorced couple lol]
[I guess it kinda works out like that...you and Mikhail being family, and me and Minako-sensei being similar enough to it...but now it's them as a pair, and us.]
[I can't wait for you guys to be back. Place feels weird without you.]
[brb crying]

[Aww!]
[Viktor?]

[Sorry I needed a minute]
[That was really sweet]
[Considering how you backed off so fast at first]
[I still sometimes can't believe where we are now]

[Me too]

[I think we just passed the last cell tower. I'm going to lose the signal soon.]

[Ok...]
[Try not to let your father get under your skin]

[I'm honestly hoping we don't even run into him, but if we do...we'll see. We have a tenuous truce
over my skating, but if he rails against you/us again like before...well, I don't have a lot of patience
with that]

[There's some people you just can't reach. Just walk away if he starts taking shots. Better to have a
wounded pride than get into a fight with him over it.]

[I'll try...]

The conversation went on a little further after that, but it was just the usual long goodbye, fading out
until Viktor stopped answering. Yuri sighed as he got to the bottom of the text window, then turned
back to see Yurio fidgeting a little under the blankets in his sleep. The older skater just turned back,
grabbed his spouse's team jacket where it had slipped off his shoulders before, and moved off to the
bathroom, clicking on the light only after closing the door.

He leaned against the vanity and called his partner's phone, knowing full well that it would go
unanswered, and unseen, until he was back in the city again. The dial-tone rang several times
anyway, before finally clicking into the voicemail message.

"Allo! Èto Viktor Nikiforov~! Izvini, ja propustil tvoj zvonok. Ostavit' soobšenie~! Byebyeee~!"

Beeeeeeep

"Hey." Yuri started, feeling a bit somber, "Don't mind me...I just wanted to hear your voice. I know
you don't want me to worry, but I can't help it. I hope everything's turning out okay. Call or text me
whenever you're done, day or night, and let me know how you're doing. We should go to the Beer
Museum when you get here. I'll make sure Minako-sensei doesn't drag me there before then and
spoil it." He paused a moment, looking down at the white tile floor, "...Love you. Miss you. See you
soon. ...Bye."

Yuri closed the conversation and let his phone-hand sag where he crossed his arms, feeling the tingle
in his gut where his worrying was starting to creep up again. After a moment, he turned around to
splash some water on his face, clicked off the light, and stepped back out into the dark of the room.
He crept along the wall, feeling his way around, his eyes no longer adjusted to the lack of light, but
eventually he found his way back to the bed and sat back down again.

"What was that for?"
The older skater nearly jumped out of his skin to hear the unexpected voice, his phone flying off to hit the wall and land in the dark somewhere. He put his hand on his chest though to keep his heart from exploding right there and then, and flipped around where he sat to stare at where he thought the blonde was, "You nearly killed me!"

"Sorry." Yurio said half-heartedly, leaning his head on his arm where it was propped up on one knee, "Who goes to the bathroom and then doesn't use the bathroom though? You're weird."

"You were listening to me?" Yuri grumbled, getting onto the floor to paw for his phone, "That's gross."

"Not listening specifically, but I could hear some just cuz it's quiet out here."

"What did you hear then?"

"Talking, but I couldn't understand what you said through the walls." The teen shrugged, reaching for the lamp switch on the table nearby and flicking it on, bathing the room in light so Yuri could see, "Who could you possibly be talking to at 3 in the morning though? Not your Thai friend, it's really late for him right now, too."

"No, I didn't call Phichit-kun. I texted him earlier today though, just to find out when he'd be getting here, but that was the last." Yuri answered, finding his phone on the floor under a small desk. Once he was back on the bed, he crossed his legs and clicked into it again, realizing it'd be a while before he'd be trying to sleep again, "I called Viktor, that's all."

"He's not going t-"

"I know." He sighed loudly, "Things were so much simpler when his family wasn't part of things. Sometimes I wish we could go back and forget about it all."

"Some families aren't worth it." Yurio agreed, "Best to just cut them off and move on."

"...Viktor really wants to deal with this though." Yuri went on, clicking into his photo albums to look at some of the most recent pictures, realizing quickly that most of them were from as far back as the Trophée de France already, or at least the 2 weeks leading into it when they were still in Paris, "What about your family? What are they up to lately?"

"My grandpa is taking it easy back in Moscow. He's thinking about going to watch Nationals in person." The teen said simply.

"...And the rest?"

"The rest don't matter."

Yuri was a bit surprised, but then looked back down to his phone, thumbing through a few of the same photos before going back again, "You said once that your mom had thought about showing up for Hot Springs on Ice. She doesn't follow your skating anymore?"

"Not everyone is as supportive or interested as your family." Yurio grumbled, "Most of the rest of us just get by on scraps, if that."

"...Even my family was never all that interested." The older skater said stiffly, "We had to explain the rules and set-up for the Grand Prix Series last year because none of them knew what I was in for...and they only did that much because Viktor came." He huffed and leaned back against the headboard, pillow-fluff easing his way down, "Minako-sensei was the only one who really followed
my skating before then. My mom was actually happy that I washed out after Sochi, because I went back home afterwards. ...If it hadn't been for Viktor, I don't know that I would've found a reason to get on the ice again. I'd probably just work at the onsen, and avoid the Ice Castle entirely, so long as they kept the big sign on the roof congratulating me on getting to the Final in the first place."

"Mh..."

"Are you nervous...?"

"...Nervous?" The blonde echoed, green eyes scanning the skater skeptically.

"About getting to Detroit."

Yurio shrugged, "I'll get in before Giacometti does, since I got Silver at both my events, and he got stuck with one Bronze. I'm pretty sure I'll get in. Your Thai friend probably won't make it though."

"What makes you say that already...?"

"Well, he didn't get Gold at his first event, and he's sure not going to get it at NHK. Not with Viktor skating." He said methodically, "So assuming he takes Silver...and I think he got Bronze at his first event, I don't remember for sure...but that would put him at the same rank as Giacometti. Pretty sure his actual scores weren't as high though, and that'd be the deciding factor." The younger skater reached a finger out and poked Yuri in the middle of the forehead with it, "With you, Viktor, me, Otabek, and that fuckwit JJ being the likely Finalists...Phichit and Chris will be fighting for the last spot. My money's on Chris. He has more experience and a bigger repertoire of quads."

"I'm sure Phichit-kun already has all that in mind and has been practicing... He should have more quads this go around, just like you do." Yuri pointed out, "Even Otabek only has 3 quads...and it's not just about the big jumps anyway. Viktor wants to see how far he can go just on artistic merit next year, reducing the difficulty of his programs and focusing on other elements instead."

"He can get away with that though. Your friend...not so much."

"...Maybe. We'll just have to wait and see. Anything can happen this weekend."

... .

"What do you mean, we're spending the night?" Viktor said incredulously, standing close to the bottom of the hill, "That wasn't part of the plan."

"Well, I'm tired." Mikhail said glibly, rubbing the side of his head a little, standing about halfway between the house and the car, "I don't want to drive like this, and you don't have a clue where to go."

"I could figure it out. Mama used to drive us all around this area when she'd take me skating in town."

"There are no towns anymore. The roads and villages around here are ruins. Even if you somehow did manage to remember the way there, most of the area has been reclaimed by the woods by now, and I doubt you could find you way back by recent memory alone in the dark." The older man grumbled, "Besides, neither of us has eaten since we got here, and I'm starving. Kon has food. You
"I brought food!" Viktor protested, pointing at the car.

"You brought snacks."

"Snacks are food!"

The two stared at each other, realizing they were at an impasse.

However, being the older of the two, and the holder of the keys, Mikhail won easily enough and turned on his heel to go back up the hill, "I'm going inside. It's cold out here."

Viktor grit his teeth, bristling under his layers, "How is it that my father can even stand to have you around after all the things you apparently did when you were younger? By the sound of it, you two should hate each other."

The elder paused where he stepped, hands clenched a little in his coat pockets, "We used to. Then something happened, and he took pity and forgave me...and after a long while, I felt obligated to do the same."

"Why? How?"

"Don't you get it yet?" Mikhail asked sternly, turning slightly to look back over his shoulder, "Everything about this family...there's the time before you, and the time after you. Everything changed when you were born. You probably wouldn't even recognize any of us if you could see how we were before then."

Viktor wasn't sure how to process those words, simply blinking a few times and shaking his head, "That doesn't make any sense. Why would a nothing like me change anything?"

"Kids change people, especially the first one." The older man answered simply, "And even though you weren't mine, you changed me more than anyone else. You were the reason I wasn't chased out
of town, and you were the reason I ended up staying as long as I did. ...In that same vein, you were the biggest contributing factor to why Kon and Tat stayed together, and in the end, I guess, why they split apart. Here or there, it doesn't really matter, you shook this place to its roots." He turned back around and started walking again, "Now come on inside before you freeze to death."

The skater held his ground, "...I'm not going in there."

"Now you're just being obstinate."

"I didn't come all the way out here to break bread with a man that basically hates everything I care about. I'm not going to sit around like a target waiting to get hit."

Mikhail rolled his eyes, slowing down his pace but still walking, "If he was going to hit you, it would've been the moment you yelled 'it's not wrong.' But it's like I told you before...Kon was never really the kind of person to do that kind of thing anyway."

"I once thought he was going to kill me."

"Yeah, and apparently he thought the same thing, and he was wracked with guilt over it for a really long time." The elder argued, pausing just in front of the door, gloved fingers on the handle, "Now are you coming inside or not?"

Viktor's eyes were a bit wide, but he narrowed them and just glowered at the man, "I already said I'm not going in there."

"Vivi, it's a thousand degrees below freezing out here. Where else are you going to go?"

"I'll just sit in the car."

"All night? The car won't even be on. You'll just freeze in there."

"Then give me the keys."

Mikhail tilted his head back, "...How do I know you're not just going to drive off?"

"I came all this way to make sure you got to NHK...you think I'm just going to ditch you now? Minako-sensei would break me in half if I showed up alone."

"It crossed my mind." He answered, "You're particularly ornery tonight."

"And I'd rather it not get worse."

The older Russian grit his teeth and drew in a vocal breath, "Vivi...your father doesn't hate Yuri. He hates the fact that you're married to a guy."

"I fail to see a distinction." Viktor pulled his hand out and held it up, "Keys."

Mikhail just glowered at his nephew dubiously, fingers clenching the fob in his pocket. This is all starting to feel like how it was back at the beginning. He shook his head, pulled the door closed again where it had slightly opened, and started walking back down the hill again. Viktor still had his hand out as he approached, and the older figure roughly placed the fob in his nephew's palm, but then abruptly grabbed the hand where he held it, and looked straight into those slate blue eyes, "I'll tell you all you want to know about what happened before if you come inside."

Viktor just pulled his hand back, taking the key fob with it, and went the rest of the way down the
hill in silence. The lights on the hybrid flashed as he unlocked the doors, and he plopped down into
the driver's seat. A few quick motions, and the vehicle was quietly running. Viktor shut the
headlights off and clambered into the back seat, all but out of sight, save the slight glow of his phone
behind the front passenger seat. Within another few seconds, the car's music system could be heard,
and felt, quietly thumping away as the skater's playlist connected to the Bluetooth stereo.

The older Russian just sighed, "...Alright...be that way... Not sure Yuri would approve of this
though."
Chapter 174

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY FOUR

Viktor lasted around 3 hours before the boredom of being without the internet finally settled in, and he drifted into an uneasy sleep.

His music thumped away into the dark of the night, quiet enough to be tolerable, but still audible within the house on the hill. With nothing but a hundred miles of densely wooded and frozen Russian wilderness in every direction, there was little else to hear except the occasional hooting of owls...and the subtle, far-off bass of whatever song was playing in the hybrid at the time.

It was nearly 2am when Konstantin refused to listen to it anymore. Irate eyes opened in the dark, hearing the quiet thumping through the walls. It was barely audible...but the fact that it was audible at all upset the delicate balance of the quiet night.

By the time Mikhail heard the bear getting his snow-boots on, it was already too late to stop him. The skinny silver Russian could do nothing but rise up in surprise from where he'd been scattered all over the old couch. The door closed behind the Nikiforov Patriarch, and a bit of snow fell from where it became dislodged from the roof, landing with a quiet _paft_ in the ground. Mikhail quickly jumped to his feet and scrambled to the door, pulling it open and spotting Konstantin skulking down the narrow path in the snow.

"Kon!" He called out, "Kuda ty ideş!??"

No answer came, at least not in words. It became obvious enough when the bear made a B-line for the car, peering into the back seat to spot whichever side Viktor's head was at and then going to the other side. Mikhail was scrambling for his shoes as he saw it, yelling out again as he came flying through the door with his coat only half-on, pausing suddenly before taking an unwise step into 2-foot-deep snow.

Konstantin had stopped. His hand was up, as though he were about to bang on the window to wake the skater up and demand he silence the infernal screeching coming from within. But he held it there, simply staring down into the back seat instead.

Viktor hadn't noticed any of it. He'd bundled up as well as he could, arms crossed tightly in front of himself as he slept on his side, his scarf rolled up under his head to form something close to a pillow. Slate eyes stared at the skater, and soon, the hand came back, stuffed into the coat pocket at the big man's side. The thumping within the car seemed to stop anyway...the song had ended and something much quieter had taken its place. Konstantin grumbled quietly to himself and started to step away after that, boots crunching through the packed snow as he went back to the path and came up the hill.

Mikhail was still trying to close his coat when the bear finally got close enough to the door that he could be spoken to without yelling, [What was all that about?]

[His music was keeping me awake.]

Grey-green eyes watched in confusion as the man went inside again, [...But...you didn't even do anything. The music is still playing just as it was before.] The smaller man went in after the larger, closing the door and kicking his frozen shoes off, scuttling over to the cast-iron oven that heated the room, [Kon?]
The Patriarch was still hanging his coat by the door, but he looked up before stepping over to sit in the big reclining chair nearby. He pulled the lever on the side and set his feet down on the padded lift that folded out, [He reminds me of you, before you left. All hot-headed and defensive. If I didn't know what year it actually was, I'd think it was 1990 all over again.]

Mikhail was stunned, blinking a few times and shaking his head, but then stepping over to where his blanket-pile waited for him on the couch, [That doesn't explain why you stopped yourself.]

The older man thought on it for a moment, lacing his fingers together over his chest as he looked up at the wooden ceiling. He shrugged after that and closed his eyes, [I decided that I didn't feel like waking him up and pissing him off over nothing. I already have enough to be angry about...no reason to add him to the list.]

The silver Russian watched in thorough perplexity as Konstantin seemed to settle in where he was, resigning to sleep in the chair instead of his own bed. There wasn't any sense in asking why, so Mikhail just tossed his coat over the back of the couch and pulled the blankets back over himself again like before. He barely lasted a few seconds though before he lifted his head again, [If you could forgive me, you can forgive him. What he's doing is far less offensive than what I did, and he isn't even doing it directly at you. He's just living his life the best way he knows how.]

He waited a moment...but no response came, so the silver Russian just set his head back down onto the pillow and let himself go quietly back to sleep.

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By the next morning, Viktor had tossed and turned, and wrapped his scarf around his head in a desperate bid to keep the light out for just a little longer. It was no use though, since just as he felt like he was finally going to be able to fall asleep again, the doors on both sides of the car suddenly pulled open, and the entire vehicle shook from the entrance of the two new occupants. The front passenger seat got shoved all the way back, forcing Viktor to sit up to avoid it hitting his arm where it dangled into the foot-space. He was ten different kinds of confused and surprised, the scarf still clinging over one eye, barely giving him enough room to look around and process whatever the hell was going on just then.

Mikhail clicked over his seatbelt and put the car into reverse, just as Konstantin was finally settling into the passenger seat and pulled his own seatbelt over as well. The car was moving before Viktor had regained his faculties enough to get behind the driver's seat, where there was still room, and buckle in as well.

"What the Hell is going on?" He finally asked, unraveling his scarf to rewrap it properly, "Where are we going?"

"We're going to the steel mill." The Rozovsky answered, like it was obvious. He kept his eyes down on the navigation panel on the center console, making sure he was clear of the trees behind him until he was reversed far enough to pull ahead again.

"ARE YOU KIDDING ME?"

"Nope." He put the car in Drive and started turning the wheel all the way to the left, setting out onto the snow-packed dirt road that lead through the remains of the hamlet. A handful of people were out
already, walking the streets on their usual morning errands to the only little store in the area. But, instead of driving through the town, the car turned onto the road just before it, heading well beyond the edge of the tree-line.

"I swear to God, if you hadn't just had back surgery, I'd be channeling my Inner Yurio right into the back of your chair right about now." Viktor snarled, "Stop the car and let me out."

"I'm thinking...no..." Mikhail shrugged, looking at the radio faceplate as the quiet 'Song of Demeter' changed over to 'Aria.' It was barely audible over the sound of the car moving, so he reached over to turn it up, much to Viktor's chagrin, which he saw through the rear-view mirror, "What's the matter, you don't even want to listen to your own music now?"

"I really don't feel like I should have to explain why I wouldn't want to listen to my own music right now." The skater argued, eyeballing where his phone was set into the cup-holder between the front seats, connected to the car via the charging cable. He didn't dare reach for it at that moment though, so he grudgingly listened to the Italian opera. It made the hair on the back of his neck bristle when Mikhail turned the volume up even higher for the climax.

Stammi vicino, non te ne andare
Ho paura di perderti
Le tue mani, le tue gambe...le mie mani, le mie gambe,
E i battiti del cuore, si fondono tra loro...

It felt like it took forever for the song to end. Viktor didn't think it was possible to dislike hearing it, but in that moment, he passionately hated it.

Partiamo insieme, ora sono pronto...

When the drums finally finished out and the song ended, the skater felt some semblance of relief. However, that only lasted a few seconds, and his eyes went wide to hear the sassy guitar of 'Eros' starting instead. With that, he lunged forward, only to get yanked back by the seatbelt activating...so he leaned forward more slowly after that and snatched his phone before much more of the song could go on. A few quick clicks, and he disconnected from Bluetooth, plunging the car into utter silence.

"Aww." Mikhail whined, "I like that song."

"I'm not going to play Yuri's skating music for my father. You already just ruined 'Aria' for me."

"Ruined it...? How did I ruin it?" The man wondered, gawking back via the mirror again.

The woods abruptly ended, revealing a massive clearing where a huge swath of the terrain had been flattened.

Viktor wouldn't answer, simply retreating into the farthest corner of the back seat so he could avoid the front-seat stare. He turned his head to look out the window instead, pocketing his phone as he watched the tree-line fade into the distance. Soon, the pristine snow-pack changed from white to brown, the ground giving way to industrial train lines. The skater hesitated to look after that, pulling back to stare at his knees instead, and then finally closing his eyes. It was another ten minutes before he could feel the car starting to slow down, and then eventually park and shut off. The two men in front got out, pushing the doors closed and leaving the interior in silence. Viktor couldn't hear them, and was thoroughly caught off guard when he felt the door next to him suddenly pull open as well, leaving him to catch himself before the seatbelt had to. He glanced up in confusion, seeing his uncle there holding the panel away, "What's going on?"
"You already spent all night in here. You're getting out for a stretch."

"The next time I get out of this car is when we're at the airport in St. Petersburg." Viktor said stubbornly, unclicking the seatbelt just so he could scoot further inside, squishing himself into the space behind where his father had previously backed his own chair right up against the seat. He crossed his arms and legs, and glared, "I'm done with this trip."

Mikhail just cocked a brow at him, then seemed to look at something over the roof of the car. Just as the skater realized what was about to happen, the door panel opened behind him and he nearly tumbled out backwards, heels-over-head. He caught himself just in time and scrambled for the middle instead, "I'M NOT GETTING OUT." Viktor barked.

[You can either get out on your own, or we can get you out on your behalf...] Mikhail's voice said in Russian from outside, [But one way or another...]

"I'd really rather not have to get vulgar." The skater countered, continuing to speak in English defiantly.

Mikhail leaned in after that, and Viktor leaned away again, just out of reach. He could feel the shadow of his father before he saw it, and in two seconds flat, one big hand came around his side and hooked around the front of his stomach, pulling him back and then tossing him over a shoulder before both car doors unceremoniously closed, ending the farce.

"PUT ME DOWN. THIS IS UNDIGNIFIED." Viktor yelled, writhing where Konstantin had him firmly in his grip. He saw his uncle coming up behind the big man though, looking up at him from his vantage closer to the ground, "You set me up!"

[You need to see something.] Mikhail said simply, shrugging.

With that, Konstantin suddenly hoisted Viktor up again like he was less than a sack of spuds, and set him, almost gently, on the ground. The skater grit his teeth, adjusting his coat and scarf again where they'd been ruffled from the struggle. That's when he heard the voices.

[Isn't that...?]
[...Is...that really him?]
[Viktor Nikiforov...?]
[Isn't he supposed to be in Japan right now?]

Viktor turned around, seeing where a small group of mill workers had gathered and were staring straight at him. He panicked and stumbled back, only to run right into his father, who once more...almost gently...set him right again.

[How'd you manage to get hold of him, Kon?] One of the workers asked more directly, [We all thought you disowned him years ago.]

Konstantin shrugged, as though he wasn't really sure how to answer.

[It's been ages since I saw this place up close.] Mikhail mused to himself, looking all around at the rust-red ironworks, [Absolutely nothing has changed.]

[...Mikhail?] One of the other workers wondered, an older man, face thick with whiskers, skin dark
from fire-smoke. Bright eyes seemed to glimmer under all the soot-staining though, and the man poked his hard-hat up with a gloved hand, [Mikhail Rozovsky?]

[The very same.] He answered, lifting his flatcap up and bowing a bit dramatically before setting it back on his head again.

[Well, shit. What brings you all the way back here? We all thought you escaped.]

[I did. I came back to show my nephew what he missed while he was being Russia's hero on the ice.] Mikhail mused, nudging an elbow at Viktor for emphasis, though he didn't seem to take it very kindly, [I actually took what I learned from here and made something out of it in a different way.]

[Yeah? How so?]

[I buy the stuff coming out of places like this and turn it into engineering equipment, then sell it to someone else.] He explained proudly, [Got a big company back in Canada now.]

[Lucky!]

The group of workers seemed to be inching their way closer, more coming as others heard the talking and saw them. By the end of it, some 15 men were coming out of the mill's main doors, all clad in the same sort of filthy clothing and barely-yellow hard-hats as the first few. Their ages ranged widely, from some barely-19-year-old to someone in their 70s.

Viktor was looking around at them all like they were aliens, entirely unsure what to do and really uncomfortable about the whole thing. He felt trapped though; his father behind him, Mikhail to the left, and a bunch of the mill workers surrounding him on every other open side.

Why are they all coming over here...? He wondered, brows furrowed in confusion, glancing at each of them one at a time, Shouldn't they still be working...?

[So what'd it take you guys to get Viktor Nikiforov to come grace us commoners with his presence?]

A different man asked; he had no beard, but his face was still black from the smelting furnace deep within the building, [He never came here even before running off into the sunset to be a famous skater.]

[Oh jeeze, I'm standing right here.] Viktor finally said in Russian, [I'm not deaf.]

[Oh!]

The group all seemed to laugh at that, muttering amongst one another throughout the mirth that they thought he'd forgotten the language, given how he'd shown up yelling in English.

[Since the mill is shutting down, we figured it'd be the only time we could get Vivi to come here without him running off screaming as soon as he saw it.] Mikhail explained, still chuckling with the rest of them, [But a bunch of you saw how difficult it still was.]

Viktor's eyes went blank as he heard the words, [...]Shutting down? You never said-]

[You weren't listening anyway.] The elder quipped, [Would you have come willingly if we told you?]

[No.] The skater deadpanned him.

[See?] Mikhail laughed nervously in response, but then waved one arm at the massive complex, [But
since it is shutting down...you can look at it without having to worry that you'll never get to leave again. Besides, Yuri would hunt me to the ends of the earth if I didn't get you to Sapporo by tomorrow. Yakov probably would, too, now that I think about it. So, don't worry so much. Relax a little.]

Viktor's eyes twitched to hear his husband's name, and he cautiously looked at the faces of all the men around him, wondering who'd be the first to start taking shots. He felt a tense few seconds pass though without any of them doing so. In fact, there was only one comment about Yuri at all to be heard.

[Way to give all our national secrets to Japan, by the way.] One of the men who'd recognized him before said, [There should be rules against that.] Both comments were made in a friendly tone though, so Viktor couldn't find a reason to set his teeth on edge over it.

[...I...didn't teach him anything he didn't already have the potential for.] He finally said, [I just helped him believe in himself.] He reached up with his right hand to brush a loose strand of hair back over his ear, the gold on his finger glinting in the sunlight...and catching the group's attention.

[Oh hey, when'd you get that thing?] [Huh?] Viktor looked up, then at his hand, then back at the worker who'd asked him the question...thoroughly confused again. He glanced back at his uncle, who seemed a bit stunned as well, but then the realization hit, and he leaned close to whisper into his nephew's ear.

"I doubt these guys actually watch the skating...they just know about it because of the newspaper, and because you're Kon's kid. The newspapers here have never once mentioned that you and Yuri are married though, and they still edit your ring out of publications...so unless these guys watch the shows live, they'd never know. I wouldn't be surprised if the RSF still refers to Yuri as 'Yuri Katsuki,' too...but I haven't checked. I always watch the Japanese streams since Minako hooked me up."

[What's the problem?] The mill worker asked again, [Who's the lucky lady?] Viktor looked back at them, feeling nervous. It was one thing to defend his honor against his father, but Konstantin was only one man, even if he hit like 10. This was a whole group of people though, and he had no idea what their opinions were. He could only assume the worst.

"You don't have to say anything if you don't want to." Mikhail went on, whispering still.

[Shouldn't you idiots be working?] Konstantin finally spoke, [The mill is shutting down but it isn't shut down yet. Get your asses back in there and do your jobs. There's still another month to go.]

The group completely B-lined their train of thought, bursting out laughing at the comment and starting to turn back to go inside again slowly. A few turned back and waved their well wishes and 'good luck's to Viktor for his next event, but that easily seemed to be the end of the whole thing. Within a minute, it was just the three of them again, standing in the railway yard just outside the main building.

Viktor glanced back at his father for a moment, unsure why he would've spoken when he did.

Was it to avoid having me admitting the truth and embarrassing him...?

When those slate-blue eyes glanced right back at him, Viktor turned away quickly, and tilted his head down, though towards his uncle, "If there's nothing else here to see, can we go...? Please?"
Mercilessly, the trip to the mill wasn't over yet. Just as Viktor was about to retreat to the car again, he heard it squeak twice and saw the lights blink, indicating the fob had been triggered and the doors were all locked. He just turned back at his uncle and glared desperately, only getting a laugh in response before the older man turned away and started walking into the building. The young Russian just stood defiantly by the car, opting to wait for the pair to come back rather than follow, but he wasn't even allowed to do that much, feeling his hand get yanked right out of his pocket by the wrist as Mikhail dragged him along.

Grudgingly, he started moving his feet on his own, and reluctantly tagged behind the duo. The bright light of the day soon faded to the darkness of the forge, and the peace of the outdoors was overtaken by the noise of factory machinery. It made his heart pound to see this entirely foreign place, especially when he nearly tripped over one of the railway lines.

"Mimi, I gotta get out of here." The young Russian pleaded, "I could get hurt."

"Just watch your step then. It's a factory floor, not an ice skating rink...you have to be careful." Mikhail answered back, walking around the rough and ragged terrain as though he were floating over it.

"Yuri's going to murder you on my behalf if I twist an ankle before we go." Viktor pointed out, "And then Yakov will find a way to bring you back, just so he can murder you, too."

The older Russian just laughed, "Probably! Don't worry so much, the stairs to the upper level are right over there. If you can make it that far, the rest is easy."

"What are we even doing right now? I came, I saw...I want to leave!"

Mikhail set one foot on the old iron grate step; Konstantin was already up the flight to the next platform. The thin figure turned on his heel and stared straight at the skater, "You know this place is shutting down, but it doesn't make you wonder at all what your father's going to do after?"

Viktor didn't like the question, so he refused to answer.

"Look," The elder said, reaching out to pat his nephew's shoulder, "You might not care what happens to your papa, but I do. If we're not done in 20 minutes, I'll give you the key fob and you can sit in the car."

"Can't you just give it to me now? What good am I here?"

Grey-green eyes examined the younger man, and he shook his head before turning to go up the other 3 steps to get onto the next platform. "It's good for you to be exposed to things you've turned a blind eye to all your life. Maybe being here will give you some perspective."

Viktor just gaped at him, but then reluctantly followed, feeling at least a little better once his feet were on level ground. He turned quietly as he got up the last step, looking around the small mill. His mind's eye couldn't help but spot the ghosts of what he would've been if he had never left...seeing himself in old skating outfits, at various ages, toiling away doing the same work that the others were. He looked particularly horrified when he spotted the specter of himself in his 'Evoke' outfit, only for the costume to vanish, to be replaced by the dirty coveralls and yellow hard-hat that the other
workers were wearing. The specter lifted his head and seemed to stare straight at him with empty, dead eyes, and Viktor stumbled, turning away quickly to try and catch up with his uncle before the ghost could do anything else.

He was right on Mikhail's tail in a hurry, and grabbed his arm with both hands, "Mimi, I want to go. I want to go now."

"Calm down."

"No. Where are the keys?" Viktor asked, more panicked than before, reaching into the man's coat pockets one after another, pawing for the fob, "Give me the keys! Please!"

Mikhail tried his best to get out of his nephew's grasp, twisting away and keeping the fob firmly in the palm of his hand, "Why are you freaking out suddenly? Nothing happened."

"Just give me the keys!"

Neither had a chance to say much more, when one big arm grabbed the both of them and shoved them through a door, closing it behind them with a soft click. The dank heat of the mill was suddenly replaced by the sterile white halogen lights and pale walls of an air-conditioned office. Not that it was much of one, but it had a desk, an old computer, two office chairs, one of which looked like it no longer worked that well, and a trash bin. There were binders and clip boards, lining the shelves of two book-cases on the left side of the desk, and a big window with a foggy pane of glass in front of it, giving whoever sat at the desk a good view of the factory floor.

The quiet was enough to help break up some of the anxiety, but Viktor could still hear the faint sounds beyond the room, and his heart wouldn't slow down. He could see the massive, dark outline of his father past Mikhail's shoulder, but because they were both standing between him and the door, he just felt trapped.

"I want to go home..." The young Russian finally managed to say, his vision starting to blur a little as tears started to form.

Mikhail saw it, and quickly stepped closer to put his arms around his nephew's frame, patting his back, "We'll be going soon, don't worry."

"I want Yuri..." Viktor's voice cracked a little as the tears fell down his face, and he buried his eyes against his uncle's shoulder, fingers clenching the back of his coat.

Konstantin watched quietly as his son tried to hold back, but failed miserably, crying openly as Mikhail tried to calm him down. All he could think of was the myriad times where Viktor had gone running to his uncle for comfort even as a young child.

"It's okay, Vivi, we'll be going soon."

The gruff old Russian just turned away, reaching for a handful of personal effects on the desk, and then reaching for the door again, [We're done here. We can go.]

Mikhail looked back, and nodded, pulling away a bit from his nephew before using his scarf to try and dry the man's face. New tears just formed as soon as the old ones were gone. The older silver man thought to wrap Viktor's head in his own scarf, but that just made him look like an old woman, so he pulled it back down again. Konstantin half-rolled his eyes and reached for the brimmed Fedora on his head, and squished it down onto Viktor's before turning to pull the door open again and stepped through.
Both younger figures stared in confusion and surprise, but dared not question it, simply following after him quickly and clicking off the lights as they went. Viktor pulled the brim down to shield his eyes, keeping his sights on a single rail line to follow it outside, lifting his head only as he started to notice snow falling around him. A brief look back at the mill, and Viktor pulled the car door open, hearing it beep and the locks clicking to release a moment before. He quickly climbed in from the passenger side, scrambling over the narrow space until he could turn around again behind the driver's seat, and only then pulled the Fedora off again. He held it quietly in his lap as the car started moving down the snowy road, reaching up with his free hand to rub his eyes again.

[Did you get what you needed?] He heard Mikhail asking, looking up a little to watch him.

[It wasn't much, but yeah.]

[What all did you have?] Konstantin explained.

Viktor could feel the car slowing down as Mikhail stopped it, taking the small rectangular object in hand. Everything seemed to get quiet after that, at least until Mikhail huffed a nervous laugh, [Yeah.] He rubbed his nose a little, but kept looking, [How long have you had this at work?]

[Almost since it was taken. I just never took it down.]

The skater in the back seat moved his eyes between the men as each one spoke, and soon, he couldn't help his curiosity. He skooched forward on his seat until he was creeping up on the back of Mikhail's and he could look over the shoulder. He was surprised to see that the object was a small picture frame, with a nearly-40-year-old photo nestled under a thin pane of glass. It was hard to see what the photo was because of glare from outside, but Mikhail soon turned around and handed it off to him. Viktor nervously took it in his hand and sat back again, seeing finally what had caused even his stoic uncle to take a moment.

[This is...]

[Their wedding photo.] Mikhail finished, making the car move forward again, heading back down the road they'd originally come down.

Viktor stared down on the picture a little while longer, recognizing his mother, but hardly recognizing his father. The man in the picture wasn't *exactly* smiling, but was as close to it as Viktor had ever seen...and Tatiyana herself looked excited. As near as Viktor could tell, the pair cared for each other.

[Take the whole thing out, Viktor.] Konstantin said, [It's folded. There's more.]

The skater was a bit surprised to be spoken to so directly...even so calmly...but he nodded and turned the frame around. The back-panel was held in place by four swiveling brackets, and then popped out easily enough, letting the photo come free. True to what the big Russian had said, the image had been folded...several times. By the time Viktor had unraveled the whole thing, the image had grown several times its original size.
The newlyweds were in the center, the background a wall of flowers, but on either side of them, standing in the wings, were a number of other people. He looked at the faces of each one...it was strange to see them all so well-dressed, compared to how the townsfolk looked in the modern era...but eventually he had to stop, blinking and shaking his head as he spotted what he could've sworn was himself in the photo. Realizing quickly though, he held the photo up a bit to get better light, and realized that his doppelganger from 40 years ago looked pretty angry, and wasn't hiding it well.

[You look like you're about to stroke out in this photo, Mimi.]

[I do?] Mikhail wondered, [Oh...yeah, I guess I would've. I'm surprised I was even allowed to be at the wedding, actually.]

[Tatiyana insisted.] Konstantin explained, [She wouldn't go through with it unless you were there.]

[Sounds like her.]

[Why? What happened?] Viktor asked, wondering if it had anything to do with all the other vague mentions of his uncle's storied history.
[A lot...it wouldn't make sense just to say why I had a grumpy face in that photo without knowing what lead up to it, too.] Mikhail said simply, [You sure you want to hear?]

[...I think so?] The skater said hesitantly, wondering what it meant.

[Alright...just promise me one thing.]

[What's that?]

A single grey-green iris looked back at the young Russian in the rearview mirror, [Whatever you learn when I tell this story, just remember...I'm not that same person. Everything that happened is ancient history and forgiven, if not forgotten, okay?]

[...Okay?]

Mikhail nodded, then glanced over at Konstantin briefly, [I guess I should ask you too if it's okay that I tell this tale.]

[It's fine.]

The driver nodded, and then drew in a breath, [Welp... I guess you could say it all started when Tat and I came into the world. I was called the 'older brother' only because I came out first. Growing up though, Tat and I were like one person. We did everything together. Heck, most of the time, we dressed up the same way, too, just to mess with people.]

Viktor listened closely, still holding the photo in his hands, and the hat on his lap. He quietly folded the photo and placed it gently back into the frame, packing it away so it would look just like it had before he'd touched it.

[Back in those days, these abandoned towns were full of people. The steel mill was the epicenter of everything. Most families here had one or two members working in it, and it was an even bigger project than it was when you were growing up.] Mikhail went on, [So there were schools here, and even a small medical clinic. Everything was as modern as it could be for the time, and life seemed pretty good. But Tat and I were hellbent on being crazy, even at other peoples' expense sometimes...folks said I was a bad influence on her, and I was...I truly was. If the world was ever really divided into yin and yang, good and evil...she was the light...and I was the dark. But despite the wide differences in our personality, no one could really tell us apart that easily. Short of stripping us naked to see which parts we had, you'd have to sit us in a room for an hour and wait until one of us started getting into mischief...and they'd know instantly it was me. Unfortunately for everyone who had anything to do with us, or who had plans for us, we were both rather late bloomers.]

[What do you mean?] Viktor wondered skeptically.

[It took till we were about 15 or 16 before either of us really started to look like a man or woman. Back then...families who got it into their head to arrange marriages usually didn't wait until either of the people involved were ready before they started making plans. My parents, and Kon's family, decided to merge the clans the old fashioned way. They originally meant for me to marry one of their clan's ladies, but it didn't work out, so everyone put their hopes on Kon and Tat.]

[Why didn't it work out?]

[I made sure it didn't. Even back then, I wasn't going to let anyone tell me what to do or how to live my life, so...I did everything short of actually hurting that poor girl, just to get the Nikiforovs to call it off with me. It eventually worked, but I wasn't satisfied. Tat was my twin, and my better half...I wasn't going to sit idly by and let our parents sell her off like a goat.]
[They never treated it like that.] Konstantin interjected, [The arrangement was only inspired because Tat and I were already close growing up.]

[Sure, but not as close as she and I were. To me, anything less than her getting on one knee with a ring was tantamount to selling her into slavery in my eyes.] Mikhail retorted, [The whole thing was unthinkable. But anyway...this story is for Viktor...you already know the details.]

[Yeah yeah.]

Slate eyes blinked at them, but the skater stayed quiet.

[Anyway.] Mikhail got back on his prior train of thought, [Arrangements were made from the time Tat and I were 13 or so...Kon was 17 I think at the time. But because of me, the whole shindig was postponed until Tat was 19. I couldn't convince her to try and break things off...she was too nice for that...so I made it my mission to do to them what I'd done to my own 'betrothed.' I made it a nightmare.]

Viktor could see where his father was starting to fidget a little, looking more and more uncomfortable as the story progressed.

[Since I couldn't convince Tat to contest the betrothal, I took matters into my own hands. Up to that point, she and I had our hair long, and we still looked almost exactly alike. I used that to my advantage, and...well...sometimes I'd take her place in things, whether she agreed to it or not.]

The young Russian suddenly felt like he knew where this was going, [I have a bad feeling about this...]

[I was desperate.] Mikhail said, [I didn't want to lose my sister. If souls are a thing and twins shared one between them, it really felt like I was being torn in half. Whatever it was, I was willing to do absolutely anything to, as I considered it, save her.] He turned his head slightly to the man-bear next to him, [You generally hate this part of the story. You want me to tell it in English so you can't understand?]

[No, tell it in Russian. I want to make sure you don't leave anything out.] Konstantin grumbled, [I want Viktor to know exactly what kind of a little shit you were back then.]

[Fair enough...just as long as you don't get mad at me all over again for it.]

[I won't. Just get on with it.]

[Alright...]

Like before, Viktor turned his eyes back and forth as each man spoke, but then settled on his uncle as the story continued.

Mikhail drew in a breath, [Thinking back on it all now, I'm really embarrassed by how far I went in my efforts. If I could go back, knowing what I know now, I'd probably have kicked my younger self's ass for the Hell I put Kon and the others through. I had no real business doing the things I did. Tat was getting married, not beheaded, you know?]}

[...Sure.] Viktor answered uncomfortably.

[I had no scruples or shame back then. When the three of us were together, I'd pick on Kon relentlessly. When I saw an opportunity for them to be alone, I'd try to switch places with her. Usually she'd get me to go away, but once in a while, I'd catch her unawares, and she wouldn't have...}
the heart to stop me. On no less than six occasions, I had Kon convinced I was my sister right up until the moment he saw for sure that I wasn’t.] The man let go of the steering wheel for a moment and held up three fingers on each, waggling them in the air for a moment before retaking the wheel again.

Viktor blinked at him, then scanned his eyes over at his father, who in turn just looked out the window and grumbled quietly like an massive angry crocodile. The skater looked back at his uncle again, as though in disbelief, [...You're not saying you practically had sex with my father.]

Mikhail burst out laughing at that, and had to fan himself to cool down again, [Oh no, we never got that far, but I had him going almost right to that point. Remember...I was willing to do anything back then, and part of my grand scheme was to make it so Kon could never be sure who he was trying to court. I wanted him to doubt. My sister and I were identical twins...until the bigger changes started, neither of us really looked that different, so I could get away with pretending to be her right up until Kon got me naked. I made him really paranoid. Usually, after he realized he'd been tricked, I'd torment him with taunts and gestures about how he must like men, because he'd get so far with me without realizing.]

Viktor just put his hand over his face and leaned back, not sure how to feel. It was a mixture of disbelief, horror, embarrassment, and disgust...but then he looked at his father and felt pity, too.

[He got his revenge at the end though. The last time it had gotten that far...he was so mad that he dragged me, all but naked, back into town by my hair.] The elder explained, his tone changing as the memory of it flashed in his mind. He paused a moment before shaking his head and going on, [Practically everyone in the area turned up and watched. Tat found out about it and tried to stop it, but she backed down when Kon got his knife out. I was a bit surprised...she thought Konstantin was going to slit my throat with it, but she said nothing. I'm still not sure why.]

[It was too serious for her.] Konstantin explained, [She never had a particularly strong constitution...and she always had a gentle soul. She shut down when she thought it was the end.]

[I guess.] Mikhail said with a subtle sigh, [Anyway... The town leader-guy even showed up, seeing all the commotion, and when Kon said what I'd done...saying I'd violated the laws of nature, that I was nothing but a trickster, was untrustworthy and all that... he agreed that my reign of terror had to end, and gave permission for Kon to punish me however he wanted. No one had ever really done anything about me to that point because they thought I was 'just being a kid.' The one time Kon tried to explain what I'd done to him, he was dismissed as a liar. So this time...he'd had enough. My sins had gone unpunished and disbelieved for too long, and he wanted me to know for sure that I had to stop. He threw me face-first into the mud; the whole town saw it, and the next thing I knew, Kon had a knee in my back and was hacking all my hair off with that knife.] One eye went back up to check on his nephew in the mirror, seeing that Viktor was stunned by the whole thing. He looked back down at the road ahead, [He apologized to Tat for being that way, but he warned her that she should never cut her hair to match mine, and that the time for stupidity was over. We were all on the cusp of adulthood and we should act like it. After my punishment was served, the group dispersed, and I was left there in the muck with all my hair scattered around me. It was really long at the time, too, so it was like a bunch of thin horse-tails had been thrown down on the ground.]

Viktor couldn't find words. The car drove on in silence for a minute before Mikhail said anything again.

[The two years that followed that day...I was a mixture of rage and depression. I felt like Tat betrayed me, so I avoided her. I started working at the steel mill just to get my anger out on something that wasn't going to cry about it later.] He said, [So when their wedding finally came up,
and I was asked to go...I was fit to be tied. I went, but I stayed on the periphery of everything. Our parents made sure I didn't spoil anything, by keeping me apart from Tat and Kon. That photo in your hands...was the closest I got to either of them that whole day.

Blue eyes went back down to the picture. The new context made it look like a very different image.

[Almost six years went by like that. Tat lost her first pregnancy, and then she and Kon moved to St. Petersburg for a while, so they could finish school. The whole time, they kept trying to start their family. It wasn't until they finally moved back to this town that they succeeded, because almost a year later, they had you.]

Viktor glanced up when he heard it, but still had no words to say.

[She doted on you like crazy. You were probably six months old before Kon gave permission for me to see you up close, but when I did, it was like the world was new. The hateful, angry person I'd become after the hair-cutting thing...the person I'd been that deserved it...all that was gone. Kon had forgiven me long ago for the things I'd done, but it wasn't until you that I forgave him. You were like the center of my little world. It killed me when things went south and I had to leave. I moved to the Ukraine...and almost as soon as I did, the USSR collapsed, and literally everything went to shit.] Mikhail said, as though the memory of it was fresher than the 25-some-odd years it had really been,
[Had I transferred out of school from Kiev and went to Edmonton in Canada instead. I always made sure Tat knew how to get hold of me, but she rarely did so, especially after the time she begged me to come back and take you.]

The skater drew in a breath, and turned to look out the window, seeing the tree-line getting closer again as they neared the forest that hid the tiny hamlet. His eyes went down to the road, flying past as the car drove through, [So...between your relentless teasing after my father had that accident while skating...and then making him paranoid about whether he was actually courting my mother or not...It's no wonder things turned out the way they did for me.]

[That about sums it up, yeah.] Mikhail agreed reluctantly, [So now you know why I suggested that you learn and grow from your mistakes while you still can, so you don't get old and stupid.]

Viktor nodded, the whole thing weighing rather heavily on him.

The pieces all fit together...it's basically Uncle Mimi's fault that my father became the man he is.

He quietly drew in another breath, and looked down to place the picture frame inside the Fedora, and gently handed it back to the man they belonged to, [I'm sorry you went through all that.]

Konstantin blinked those slate-blue Nikiforov eyes at him, curling a few fingers around the brim of the hat as Viktor let it go and sat back again. He himself turned back in his seat again as well, looking at the hat quietly before shaking his head, [It's all ancient history.]

[I once thought that the past no longer touched me.] The skater explained, [And it took more than 20 years for me to realize that my history would be with me no matter how far or fast I ran from it. It took someone else pointing it out to me, too...that the person I am today was created way back then, even if I didn't want to see it, or admit it. Maybe it's the same for you.]

Mikhail caught a glimpse of his nephew, and noticed how his expression had changed. All the anger seemed to be gone. It was strange to see.

[So...I won't ask you to accept my relationship with Yuri.] Viktor suddenly continued, [But I can assure you that I'm not doing it because I want to punish you the way Uncle Mimi did. I didn't ask
Yuri to marry me out of malice for you. I didn't become a skater out of some misguided desire to rebel against you, either. These things are part of who I am, because I want them to be.]

The bear wouldn't respond, simply sitting quietly.

[Maybe one day...you'll be able to see past all the traumas of your own past, and accept me just for who I am, as I am, and not just as some reminder of the worst things that ever happened to you.]
Chapter 176

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY SIX

Yuri lay awake all night, it seemed, clutching his phone to his chest like he thought he'd lose it if he didn't. Tuesday night drifted into Wednesday morning as slowly as any midnight ever had, that he could recall, and it made him envious beyond all reason that his roommate had been able to fall asleep so easily.

But Yuri was expecting a phone call, and he had been since the day before. It was making him nervous that Viktor still hadn't done so.

*They either stayed overnight out there, or something happened... Or maybe they stayed overnight because something happened...*  

His heart pounded more and more as the night wore on. Unable to sleep, Yuri gently pulled the cover off of a pillow, and set the light material over Yurio's head so the light of the television wouldn't wake him up. At least, in Japan, he could watch whatever was playing and not have to worry about the language barrier, or the sad attempt at Close Captioning that had been provided in English to bridge the gap in other countries.

He sighed and looked at his phone yet again, the knots in his stomach tightening even more.

*It's nearly 8pm in that part of Russia right now...what in the world is taking so long? Their flight leaves in 3 hours, and it takes 2 just to get to St. Petersburg from that little t-*

VRRRRRRRRRRrrr

Yuri nearly jumped out of his skin when his phone vibrated, and nearly lost said phone in the surprise. He reached for it in mid-air, only for it to bounce off his hand each time, eventually landing on the floor, and forcing the young skater to dive over the side of the bed just to reach it. With legs and feet still on the sheets, elbows on the carpet, and arse in the air, Yuri finally managed to get hold of his phone and saw the urgently-wanted Caller ID and custom background that he'd practically been begging for since he woke up the day before, "VIKTOR!"

Green eyes opened suddenly.

"Yuri!" The silver Russian called back, "I'm so sorry it took so long to finally call you! We're about 20 minutes outside St. Petersburg right now."

Relieved, Yuri let the rest of himself slide down off the edge of the bed, and flipped over, resting his feet just over the ledge, splaying one arm out to the side as the other held the phone to his ear, "You really had me worried. What happened? I was scared you guys had gotten into an accident or something and no one was going to be able to find or call you."

"I can't apologize for that enough. Everything's okay though, I promise." Viktor answered, the snowy Russian countryside passing by quickly, "We ended up staying the night out here, and then spent most of today touring around the area. I wanted to try and find all the places I knew from when I was growing up, so I could take pictures for you. Almost everything has fallen into ruin, but there's a handful of places that are still standing. My first real skating rink apparently burned to the ground a few years ago, but they rebuilt it. It was one of the few things that people wanted to preserve, I guess."
"Sounds crazy." Yuri agreed, "I can't wait. Are you going to make it to the airport in time? You'll have to go all the way through customs and stuff again, never mind the fact that it's on the south end of the city."

"Yeah, it'll be fine. Pulkovo Airport isn't as big as the international hubs, so it shouldn't take as long as Sheremetyevo. This late at night, there isn't that much traffic either." The older skater explained, "I'm really interested in that Beer museum you mentioned. I didn't think you'd want to go."

"It's probably the only thing in Sapporo worth checking out." Yuri answered quietly, staring up at the popcorn-textured ceiling, "Minako-sensei said she wanted to look at it, too, but she hasn't tried to drag me there yet. I guess she's waiting for Mikhail to get back."

"Speaking of when people get there... When is your Thai friend showing up?"

"Huh? Phichit-kun?" He echoed, "Thursday afternoon. Why?"

Viktor paused a moment, looking around the car from where he'd settled in the back driver's-side passenger seat like before, then looking back out the window again, "No reason. Curiosity. Even though we've been to half of all the Grand Prix events, you haven't gotten to see him at all this season so far, so I imagine you'll want to hang out with him as soon as he arrives."

"...Well, sure, but it's not like I'm going to do that without you. After the last few days, people are going to wonder if I got myself super-glued to you by accident or something."

The Russian just laughed at that, leaning his head back against the head-rest and closing his eyes as he savored the thought.

"Besides, we were texting earlier and he subtly suggested I should ask you to give him quad pointers." Yuri went on, stretching a little now that his worries were melting away, "He's hoping some of that Nikiforov Skating Genius will rub off on him before the competition so he stands a chance of getting to the Final with us."

"How many quads does he have this year? He only had one last year."

"He has two now...Toe-loop and Salchow, but he's having trouble landing a Loop." The young skater explained, pausing a little, "...Yura mentioned that him and Chris would be fighting for the 6th spot at the Final. I'll be glad for whoever takes it, but Chris has gone a bunch of times already, so I'm kind of hoping Phichit-kun snags it. Will you help him?"

Viktor stared up through the window for a moment, snow falling in a dazzling display, caking everything in white, "Chris left a message on my phone while I was here, saying he can't wait to meet back up again at the Final, since he was late to seeing the video of me freaking out on top of the Ritz-Carlton." He said, quieter than before, his tone almost serious, "I think I'd feel bad if I worked to help someone else get into the 6th spot, knowing he was in the running for it."

"Oh..." Yuri turned his eyes back the other way, feeling a bit dejected.

"But since you asked me to, I'll help your friend."

Cherry-hazel eyes went back up to the ceiling, "...Really?"

"Mh." Viktor answered, nodding as well, "I'll do anything you want me to; you need only ask. So I'll help Phichit learn to land a quad Loop before he skates his Short Program on Friday."

"Arigatougozaimasu, Viktor-kouchi."
"Dou itashimashite." The Russian answered fondly, "Anyway though, how's your hip?"

Yuri switched phone-hands and reached with the right to where his sleep-trunks were covering the bruise, pulling up on the bottom until he could see the mark, "...It's gotten to that sickly green-yellow phase. It should be gone by the end of NHK."

"Does it still hurt?"

"Only if I mash it against something."

"Hm..." Viktor set a finger from his free hand over his lip, "I never did kiss it better before I left. I'll have to do that when I get there." He said, smiling to himself.

"I expect nothing less."

"Mh." The older skater hummed, seeing the lights of the city starting to glow in the distance, even through the snow, "Well, it's probably absurdly late for you right now. Sorry to have kept you up all night waiting. I'll let you go to sleep."

"Okay..."

"Less than 24 hours until we're together again."

Yuri huffed a laugh, somber as it was, "This is going to be the longest 16 hours of my life."

"Sleep as late as you can then. I'll be keeping you up all night again anyway."

The young skater's cheeks flushed, "Tanoshimi. Aishiteru yo."

"Ja tebja ljublju. Do skorogo."

"Mata ne."

When the call finally ended, and the screen went dark, Yuri kept his eyes on it for a moment and then set it face-down on his chest, keeping his fingers wrapped around it all the while. With a deep breath, be pulled his legs off the edge of the bed and twisted to get back up onto his feet again, sitting on that same edge only long enough to reach for the remote control and turn the television off. The room plunged into darkness; Yuri pushed back along his edge of the bed until he felt the edge of the blankets and started pulling them over himself. A quick search on the nightstand next to him, and he plugged in his phone to charge, and finally let himself settle in, setting his head down on the pillow and kissing his ring...

...and then found himself right back on the floor again.

The kick to his back had come quickly, silent as death. He didn't even hear it coming.

Blinking in confusion, Yuri pushed up from where his eyes were still swirling after landing, looking back up onto the bed and seeing glowing cat-like eyes glaring back at him from under the pillowcase, "...What was that for!?"

"You're being too loud."
Despite his best efforts, Yuri was still awake way earlier than he wanted to be. His 12pm alarm went off a full 5 hours after he'd already risen for the day. He barely managed to eat a few crumbs for breakfast, and every plane that he spotted flying overhead was the one Viktor was on...until Yuri checked his phone for the time again and realized that plane was still over Siberia somewhere.

"Your face is going to get stuck like that, Yuri." Minako mused, poking his cheek with her finger.

Yuri glanced up briefly, seeing his reflection in the pane of glass in front of him, separating him from the strange artwork on the other side. The woman's finger finally came back, and the skater rubbed the spot she'd poked, "...Sorry."

"He's not going to get here any faster if you sulk enough or check your phone so many times." She teased, "It'll be dark when the plane lands."

"Only because it's winter." The skater sighed in frustration, "It was just weird, hearing him talk about what he was doing."

"Why?"

Yuri paused a moment, not sure how much sense he'd make given how little he thought the ballerina knew about what had gone on in the last year, "Viktor had always been anxious about going back to his hometown. To hear him talking about taking pictures and sight-seeing there suddenly...I didn't think he would even consider doing something like that, especially when he said that most of the area is in ruins. And staying overnight? He was practically crawling out of his own skin when I was there with him before. Where did he sleep? Was it even his idea? He said he wanted to avoid his father like the plague...and yet, he didn't mention Konstantin at all."

"Maybe they didn't see him." Minako offered, moving down the hall to the next 'art' display under the glass. They were meandering through the 500m Underground Walkway Gallery, trying to pass the time. Yurio had gone off on his own hours earlier, "I can't imagine they spent a lot of time outdoors though. It would've taken them most of the day just to get there from Moscow, given what Mikhail's told me about where this place is."

"I feel like Viktor would've told me one way or another if they saw him. I was just so happy to hear from him though that I didn't think about it until after...he sounded eerily relaxed. I thought he'd either be grumpy or somber. I forgot to even ask about whether he got what he needed out there." He ruffled his hair a little bit, "I just asked if he'd be willing to help Phichit-kun when he gets here tomorrow."

"Ah."

"Ah?" Yuri echoed, looking at the woman curiously.

"You and he have had such bad experiences out there that I'm not surprised neither of you really wanted to talk about it. Going back to things that are familiar to you, stuff that you both like, is a good way to avoid talking about things that make you uncomfortable." She explained, peering through the glass at what looked like a long display of stalagmites...or termite mounds...she wasn't sure, "You knew absolutely nothing about his past before the skating, even though you practically could've recited everything else about him, given how closely you followed his career before. Honestly though, I'm not surprised he had it so rough."

"...Why's that?"
"All things considered, he was one of the lucky ones."

"You call what happened to him lucky?" Yuri asked, aghast at her.

"Considering what happened to other people? Yeah." She said, shrugging, "Viktor would've still been a kid when Russia fell apart. Wars raged across the whole country as smaller regions vied for independence, and tens of thousands of people died, civilians included. Places that used to be safe, where kids could roam the streets at all hours and families would know they'd be fine, suddenly had to bolt the doors shut after dark for fear of raids. People would go to work, not being paid for months at a time, and when they did, it wasn't even enough to buy bread. I can't imagine how many people probably starved to death out there."

Yuri was gawking at her, feeling a mix of confusion and horror.

The ballerina turned towards him though, smiling awkwardly, "If the worst thing Viktor ever worried about was whether his father found out about him skating...then he escaped with hardly a scratch."

"You make it sound like you think he didn't go through much at all."

"Not at all." Minako shook her head, "From what I've been told, he had it bad, in his own way. It just could've been a lot worse, too. I imagine a lot of really talented people, smart people, were lost to the annals of time because they were born in the wrong year and suffered the fall-out in their prime. Yura and his friend Otabek...they have no idea how good they had it, because both of them were born long after things had finally settled down again."

"...How is it that you know all this stuff?" Yuri wondered, "Seems like it would be way beyond the realm of things you'd be interested in."

"Mikhail tells me stories." She said, moving down the length of the hall, the stalagmite/termite mound display going on for some 100ft, "He's strange that way."

"What do you mean...?" Yuri caught up and walked next to her.

The woman's expression changed a little as she tried to figure out how to explain herself, rubbing her chin with her thumb, "It started last spring, right before yours and Viktor's wedding party...in the snowstorm... We took shelter at my Snack Bar."

"Oh, that." Yuri huffed a nervous laugh, "He told me."

Minako's face went red immediately, "He did!? How much did he say??"

"Just the facts." The skater teased.

"Shimatta..."

"Anyway though."

"Yeah." The woman cleared her throat nervously, looking away from the man as she started speaking again, "Anyway... That happened, and then he acted like it hadn't. He slowly started warming up to me again after that, inviting me back to Russia now and then, but nothing ever really happened. It's like he thought about getting serious, and then he'd back off. Whenever he was about to go into full-retreat, he'd start telling stories about Russia's history, as though trying to sabotage himself by talking about things that were really...unattractive."
"...That's weird."

"Right?" She mused, finally turning back to him again as they continued their slow stroll forward, 
"Back in Bordeaux, when we picked up Yura, he called us out on the whole thing, and Mikhail 
actually pretended for a little while like we were going steady...but with Yura always around, 
nothing more came of it, again."

"What about when we came to pick him up and you guys threw all his stuff into the hall like you 
couldn't get rid of him fast enough? You had all that time to yourselves afterwards." Yuri wondered. 

"After spending a week with him? All we did was sleep." She laughed, thinking on the whole 
situation like it was some farce, "He didn't go off on his own until the rest of the Russian Team 
showed up, and by then, I think it was just because he wanted a change of scenery. Mikhail went 
back to basics after that, but then everything went south between Yura and Viktor, so he wasn't in 
the mood for much. He flipped a switch, as though going from bachelor-mode to dad-mode, trying to 
sort those boys out before they killed each other."

"Oh."

"Then we went back to Russia for a bit, but then Mikhail fell off that stupid roof and hurt himself, 
like an idiot..."

Yuri smiled nervously, but made no comment.

"...And Yura ended up going to Shanghai with me instead." She said quietly, sounding more 
disappointed than previously.

"From what Yurio told me, Mikhail was all fixed up and ready to go home before you guys even got 
on the plane."

"Yeah, but I almost didn't go. We went to go check on him in the hospital. He was really cranky 
about the whole thing, saying he'd never forgive me if I skipped Cup of China for his sake. He'd 
really go out of his way to point out that he was old and crippled, but that he could still somehow 
take care of himself. I finally got him to admit the real reason why he was so cranky, and it wasn't 
even about his back...well, not exactly."

"Eh?"

Minako paused, holding her elbows as she crossed her arms, "Yura wasn't going to be able to go to 
China, if not for Mikhail's accident. In the end, I got him to half-admit that he had intended to use the 
alone-time in China as his golden opportunity to flirt, and he was mad because he couldn't go at all 
anymore."

"...Oh."

"He actually thought I'd forgotten about the time we got snowed in before your wedding party, and 
he was really embarrassed to find out I hadn't. Unlike certain people who won't be named, I can hold 
my liquor without getting amnesia from it." She said, teasingly pointing a finger at the skater.

Yuri just deadpanned her.

"Anyway though, that was the last time I saw him. I asked him why he would keep trying to get 
close, only to run away again, and repeat this same cycle over and over. He basically said it was 
because he liked me but that he was also worried about getting burned again, like with his ex-wife."
"Do you like him though?" The skater wondered, not sure anymore.

"I like the idea of him." She said, almost bluntly, looking at the floor, "But I don't want to let myself get attached to someone who doesn't know what he wants."

"...I guess that's fair." Yuri answered...then checked the time on his phone again. To his surprise, a good 15 minutes had passed; steady progress to the destined hour. He put the device away again and nudged the ballerina with his elbow, "I guess we'll see how he reacts when they get here. Maybe he just needed time away to figure things out."

...It was nearly 7pm, and the plane still hadn't landed. Yuri neurotically checked the Arrivals/Departures site on his phone, seeing the listing admitting the flight was delayed, but not giving an ETA. It had snowed in the late afternoon, but only lightly, so the runway was wet, but not unsafe for landing. It was causing things to back up though.

The next 30 minutes seemed to take even longer than the eternity of the whole day preceding it...but then the 'DELAYED' tag finally changed to 'ARRIVED.'

Even then, however, it still took forever for passengers to be able to get off the plane, down the ramp, into the airport itself, and then down the escalators to the baggage claim area. Yuri waited impatiently, Yurio and Minako nearby, staring down the wide corridor to where they suspected the two men would finally appear. There were dozens of other people standing around as well, doing much the same thing, or waiting for the busses and taxis outside, so seeing all the detail was difficult.

"YURI!"

The skater lifted his head, having heard his name but not being able to pin down where it had come from.

"YUUUURIIII!"

Cherry-hazel eyes finally spotted that silver-haired head; Viktor was leaning so far over the railing of the escalator that he was like to fall off if he wasn't careful, but it didn't look like the man had spotted him yet. Yuri took off running, trying to weave his way through the crowd. By the time he pushed his way into a slight clearing, he could see Viktor jumping down the last few steps of the moving stairwell and running around in a U-turn to come up the hall the other way, looking around frantically.

"YUUUURRRRIIIIIII!" He called, more urgently than before; desperately.

"VIKTOR!"

The Russian turned his head and spotted him immediately with eyes that were heavy with stress, anxiety, sleeplessness, impatience, and worry. It all seemed to melt away when their eyes met. There was a slight pause between them as they each realized the other wasn't a hallucination, and then finally ran at full-throttle towards each other, covering the last 50ft between them in a heartbeat. Yuri nearly tripped over his own feet trying to get there, but recovered just in time to throw himself at the man.
Everything seemed like it was going in slow motion after that.

Yuri's arms were up and out, and went over Viktor's shoulders, wrapping around him as they collided. Viktor in turn wrapped his arms around his partner's whole frame, and spun him around twice before finally setting his feet back on the ground and clinging to him hard, face buried against Yuri's shoulder. The younger skater could feel the tears against his skin almost immediately, and held his husband harder as well, only to feel tears forming in his own eyes, too. He snuffled a bit and pulled back to rub his nose on his sleeve, trying to clear it before Viktor could see, but it didn't matter. Their eyes locked, and they set their foreheads together.

"I missed you so much."

The younger man pulled one hand back, reaching up to press his palm to his partner's cheek, brushing one tear away with his thumb before smiling, pushing up onto his toes...and kissed him.
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY SEVEN

Viktor held tightly to his husband for a good, long while, even as he could hear the usual well-meant taunts that could be counted as a greeting from Yurio, and the more polite version from Minako. He barely allowed himself a moment to detach from his partner so he could give his greetings back to them in turn, reaching one hand over to give them a brief hug while still holding to Yuri with the other.

"How was your trip?" Minako wondered, "Yuri was turning himself into knots the whole time."

"A lot happened, but I think it ended on a high note." He answered, "Yuri and I have a lot to talk about."

"I think you're in trouble." Yurio teased, speaking behind his hand sarcastically as he leaned in closer to the older skater.

He just gave a nervous smile, "I don't think the talk is about or because of me."

"Actually," Viktor mused, turning around to face him, his back to Minako as he moved to grab for his partner's free hand, "Most of this is because of you, since I'd never have bothered to go if you hadn't made a good case for it way back in the beginning."

"Oh..." Yuri said, a bit concerned, "...But that would make it my fault that the bad stuff happened, too."

"No..." The Russian shook his head, stepping in closer and wrapping his arms over the man's shoulders to draw him in, eyes drifting forward as he spotted his uncle coming down the escalator, "That stuff is on me exclusively. It would've happened if I had ever gone back at all, whenever it happened. You're the reason all the best came out of it."

"Hey everyone." Mikhail called, waving as he turned around to come away from the moving stairs. Dozens of other people were passing behind and around him as the rest of the passengers from recently-arrived planes made their way down to the baggage claim area, and it seemed like he was a bit reluctant to remove himself from the crowd. He poked his flatcap up with a finger as he smiled nervously towards Minako, "Hope I didn't miss much."

"Only the entirety of Cup of China and the benefit of my illustrious company." She teased, taking a few steps forward, only to pause as Yurio stuck his arm out in front of her. She blinked and looked down at him, "What's wrong...?"

Green eyes narrowed at the silver man, and then at the huge shadow coming up behind him through the moving crowd, "What did you two dumbasses do?" He asked apprehensively, catching his Japanese counterpart's attention.

Yuri looked up from where Viktor had been hugging him, and tried to turn his head, only to find his husband refusing to let him do so, putting a hand on the back of his head and forcing him to stay where he was, "...Viktor...what..."

"He doesn't want you to know how bad he fucked up." Yurio answered for him, "Who's idiotic idea was this?"
Mikhail anxiously held his hand up.

"What are you talking about?" Yuri asked again, trying to turn his head once more but finding the same resistance, "V-Viktor...why won't you let me move...?" One final twist, and he found the Russian finally giving him slack, though reluctantly. Cherry-hazel eyes turned faster than the rest of him did, but when he beheld what Yurio had seen, he almost wished he had just let Viktor hold him forever. His pupils got twice as big as before as he cast his gaze on the enormous figure standing just behind his uncle-in-law, staring straight into those Nikiforov slate-blue eyes, and seeing them staring right back at him in turn. In an instant, the terrified skater pushed back on his heels, nearly knocking his husband over as he clambered back in a panic.

He was sure half the airport heard him scream.

Viktor pat his back and consoled him quietly as he crouched down on the ground with his hands on his head, all but crying as he turned his back to the rest of the group. Yuri just whipped his face up, tears of frustration replacing the tears of joy from before, as he looked at his anxious partner, "Why is he here!? He's going to ruin everything!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry...!" Viktor pleaded, "It was Uncle Mimi's idea and I didn't have the heart to say no after everything else that happened over the last few days."

"You couldn't warn me!?"

"I didn't want to make you worry!"

Yuri fell back onto his butt, holding his head again and practically weeping from frustration, "No, I'm just going to have a stroke instead..."

"Don't say that... He wouldn't be here if things were like they used to be..." The Russian begged, pulling his husband to his chest and sitting on the floor next to him, gently stroking his hair to help calm him down, "Uncle Mimi wants to expose him to the things we do for a living."

Minako's eyes went from the pair on the floor to Yurio, who she saw was side-eyeing her in turn, the same annoyed expression he had when anything ridiculous had happened, and then carried over to Mikhail, who was looking a bit defensive suddenly. She crossed her arms, "Why is everyone losing their minds? Who is this?"

"...This is Konstantin Nikiforov...Viktor's father." The smaller Russian answered, "He's the one who picked up the phone when you guys called to ask about Yura going to China."

Her eyes narrowed a little as her expression went from confused to disappointed, "It couldn't be helped that he answered his own phone, but I'm a bit surprised that you'd ask him to come to a skating event given what he did before. Is he even safe to be around, or do we have to worry about getting punched in the eye anytime something doesn't go his way?"

Mikhail tried to approach, waving his hands defensively, "It's not like that... I swear on my life, what happened to Viktor was an exception to the norm... He may be huge but he's never hit anyone else."

"Even if Viktor's the only one he's ever struck, the fact that he did so at all is inexcusable. Look at the size of him!" She held a hand out towards him for emphasis, "Getting hit by that behemoth would be like getting hit by a bus, and Viktor was a kid the first time he did it."

"I know, but-"

"Where's he even going to stay? We already established that there aren't even any rooms for us to put
"Yura into."

"Yeah, but-"

She turned her nose up at him and twisted slightly to the side, "I'm really disappointed in you right now, Mikhail Rozovsky."

"Ahhhh! Noooo!" The Russian went down on his knees and scuttled forward, clinging to her waist desperately, even knocking his hat off in the process, "It's going to be fine, I promise!"

The woman started walking away, dragging him with her a few steps before he finally let go and fell to the floor, practically next to his nephew. He lifted his head and watched as Minako went through the crowd to where the baggage claim carousels were starting to fill up, "We didn't check any bags! We had all carry-ons!"

The ballerina paused only long enough to turn on her heel and go down the hall she'd originally come from, disappearing into the crowd. Mikhail reached for her desperately, but then dropped his hand and his head down, sitting on his knees, "...Damnit..."

"Way to go, old man." Yurio taunted, moving off to follow the woman, "What in the Hell made you think this was a good idea?"

Mikhail just kept his head down, hearing the teen stepping away. He grudgingly reached for his hat, slapped it back onto the top of his head, and pushed back up to standing...just in time to watch Konstantin step past him and go right for his son and son-in-law. For a split second, his heart was in his throat, but when he saw all 6'10" and 450lbs of the Nikiforov Patriarch simply reaching down to hoist both younger men to their feet, and nothing more, he breathed a sigh of relief.

[You said we were going to get into the city on a train.] The big man said simply, [Where is the terminal?]

The silver Russian sighed and pointed in the direction Minako had gone, [The rail kiosk is down that way.]

[Then let's go.]

Yuri was still too busy having a minor heart-attack from being picked up by the man-bear to realize he was being gently pushed along down the hall after him.

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The group of six seemed to split into three groups of two when the train finally departed from New Chitose airport. Viktor had ushered Yuri into an entirely different rail car from the others, and Minako sat with Yurio a few feet away from where Mikhail was standing between them and Konstantin, both of them holding to the hand-grips hanging from the ceiling. The silver elder copped a glance back at his lady-friend, only to see her turn away from him again, apparently preferring the company of much younger Russians for the moment. Yurio, in turn, just gave him a 'you did this to yourself' kind of look, which made Mikhail turn around again and sulk.

[Everyone here already seems to have a stellar opinion of me.] Konstantin muttered, entirely not surprised, [What horror stories did you tell?]
Minako has been a fan of Viktor's skating for many years. She knows you hit him, and she knows I didn't try to stop you when I saw it happening.

The bear just turned his eyes a little, and then twisted a little so he'd be facing the window ahead of him rather than down the train-car in the ballerina's direction. He rubbed one temple on the hand that was holding to the handle, [And how does she know you?]

She came as part of the package with Yuri. She was his ballet instructor and has known him all his life. I met her when Viktor and Yuri invited me to the World Championships last year. Mikhail explained, [Hmph...I remember how Yuri's older sister basically called me Vintage Viktor... They both got all giggly about it.]

Konstantin just rolled his eyes a little, [...Ballet? Is that part of all this, too? What kind of man does ballet?]

[The kind that do ballet on ice, while wearing knife-boots.] The smaller man answered dryly, [Got a problem with it?]

The bear grumbled a little.

Mikhail just bumped his chest against the man's arm, suddenly getting rather hot-headed about it, [Go on! I dare you! Insult ballet! I'll take you on! Minako is one of the world's best!]

The woman twisted a little where she had her elbow resting on the back of the padded bench, chin resting on her palm, "What is he doing? I heard my name in that garble of nonsense."

"Konstantin just learned that figure skating branches out of ballet. I think Mikhail's trying to defend your honor or something." Yurio answered quietly, "But I didn't hear everything they said."

Her eyes stayed on Mikhail, curiously watching as the much smaller man continued to taunt the giant in front of him as though they were the same size, and he stood even a whisper of a chance of making good on his threats. She drew in a deep breath and turned her head again to look out the window as she exhaled.

At the far end of the next rail car, Yuri was still trying to recover from his prior anxious mood. He pressed himself into the corner of his seat, shoulder up against the small barrier wall that kept him from spilling out into the exit area by the train doors. Viktor was next to him, holding gently to his hand where it rested between them, stroking his thumb back and forth slowly to help calm the man's nerves.

The nervous skater finally sighed and leaned his head against the Russian's shoulder, saying nothing as he felt Viktor's cheek rest against his hair after that.

"I didn't mean to scare you with that." The Russian said quietly, barely audible over the sound of the train, "My father is-"

"Are you even going to be able to skate knowing he's watching?" Yuri asked pointedly, moving his left hand over to set it lightly over where Viktor held to his right, "Can't we just have one event this season where nothing insane happens? Just one?"

"Uncle Mimi was very persuasive..."

"What could he have possibly said that would make this seem like a good idea? You said yourself that you hoped you guys wouldn't even run into him, and now he's here in Japan, coming to NHK."
The silver Russian nodded quietly, "I know..." He turned slightly on the padded bench until his knee pressed against Yuri's leg, nudging again until he lifted it so he could get in closer and sit more comfortably, "The whole trip to my hometown was an adventure into the realm of the absurd." Yuri was still looking down, eyes fixed on their hands resting on his thigh, but Viktor soon reached his right to cup his partner's cheek and pulled a little to turn his face. Blue eyes looked into brown, "I said no initially, but Mimi just kept giving valid reasons for why I should say yes. I learned a lot about the both of them this week that changed how I look at everything. The decision to let my father come to NHK wasn't made lightly."

"...After hitting you those two times though..."

"It's not like I've forgiven him for it." Viktor explained, lightly touching the tip of his nose to Yuri's, nuzzling him fondly, trying to reassure him, "I may not ever forgive him for that...especially since he has yet to actually apologize for it. But the fact that he's gotten over his hatred for my skating, and is willing to even come watch and show support... I mean, weren't you at least a little surprised that he helped both of us up off the floor earlier? Last year he would've put us both into an early grave, so he's come a long way in a short period of time..." He lightly pressed his lips to his husband's, then kissed his forehead as well before he rested his cheek there as he went on, "I can't keep being the one to hold a grudge...not when he's made so many adjustments in his own mind. I spent all but the last 6 hours of my trip out there being furious about the fact that we ran into him at all. I spent the entire night in the car because I refused to sleep in that house. They even made me go see that hell-forged where my father wanted me to work, before I left to pursue skating instead. The whole thing was really stressful, but eye-opening, too... I kind of understand his world a little more than I did before. He's trying to learn about mine now. I can't be the one to deny him that when he's reaching out."

Yuri grumbled a little, "What about us...?"

"What about us?" Viktor echoed, confused.

"You don't think...your father's presence changes things? I feel like if he was there when we kissed before, that he'd-"

"I made him swear that he would behave." The Russian cut him off, "I made him state, out loud and in his own words, that he wouldn't do anything to either of us if he sees us being normal with each other. He knows we're lovers, he knows we're married...he knows what all that means. I told him that I wouldn't let his presence stop me from doing what I want when I'm around you... Don't let him stop you instead. Keep on seducing me like you always do."

Yuri absorbed his partner's words, letting them sink in a little bit before finally nodding. He turned on his seat and set his back against the small plastic wall, bringing both legs up to rest over his husband's, and settled one hand flat against the man's chest, "...Guess I should get started then."

"Hm...maybe you should. It's been too long." Viktor hummed, smiling and leaning in closer again as Yuri's hand went from his chest to his cheek. "Yeah... Everything else aside... I'm really glad you're back."

"Me too." The silver Russian agreed, leaning in to kiss him again.
He wrapped his arms around his partner's smaller frame, and then pulled back to rest the side of his head against Yuri's shoulder. He closed his eyes and savored the feeling of his husband's arms coming up over him in turn, holding his head close, cheek against his hair.

He was home.
The familiarity of Japanese subway lines was all Yuri could focus on as the JR Line from the airport connected at Shin-Sapporo station. No matter how comforting or reassuring Viktor had been about the presence of his father, the hulking man-bear had the affect of the shadow of Death itself, keeping the young skater on edge and looking over his shoulder every few steps. Just leaving the one train car and finding their way over to the Tozai Line platform where their next train would leave from, felt like an obstacle course...but with the obstacles coming from behind. Every step he heard was like the killing-charge of some prehistoric predator.

He held firmly to his partner's hand as they walked; he could tell Viktor was still secretly apprehensive about the whole thing as well, even if he played along like he was all for it. Yuri supposed the man would unburden only once they were truly alone. He hoped it wouldn't be so much that he could no longer focus on the reason they were all in Sapporo to begin with.

Viktor kept the group together for the next leg of the trip; the train that would get them closest to the event hotel would drop them off at the Nishi Juitchome station. That would be the last common point between the travelers though. The Sapporo Prince Hotel was, after all, only really for participants and event staff, which meant only 2 of the 6 would be staying in it.

"So where are the rest of you staying anyway?" The younger silver Russian asked, turning his head to the right where Minako was walking alongside him.

"Just down the street," She answered, pointing to the east, "The Leopalace Hotel Sapporo. It's okay, but it's no Ritz-Carlton."

"Guess I should be grateful for that then." Viktor laughed dryly.

Mikhail continued to sulk in the background, walking several yards behind the Main Four as he stayed back with Konstantin. It burned him severely to see Minako taking his nephew's arm and being quite pleasant and content there.

The event hotel was just across the street by then, barely a 5 minute walk from the subway station. Yuri adjusted where he held onto Viktor's carry-bag, and when he lifted his head again, it seemed like all the skating fans in the world had suddenly spotted them. People screamed from all sides of the road, though mostly from the entrance rotunda in front of the hotel, cameras flashing like ball-lightening from all angles. The younger skater looked up at his partner, knowing most of the adulation was for him, and was relieved to see some of the life bubble back up into the man's tired eyes.

"These guys all seemed to know Viktor was going to be here." Yurio commented quietly, scratching the side of his chin as he watched the growing mob gathering in front of the hotel, waiting for them to cross, "I wonder who tipped them off?"

"Maybe they just got lucky." Yuri suggested, "It's not like they didn't know Viktor was going to be here."

"No, but how many of these people would really be waiting around the event hotel at this hour unless they did know someone was coming?"

"It's not like this is the first time this has happened." Viktor quipped, seeing the lights change and
pulling his husband and Minako along to cross, Yurio following quickly alongside, hands stuffed into his hoodie's pockets, "Minako-sensei knew when Yuri would be home when he first got back to Hasetsu. He wasn't even skating anymore back then. Fans just find these things out."

"Would be nice to know how."

Crossing from one corner to the other, and then from that corner to the hotel-front, the fans' cheering and excitement grew. Signs started coming out welcoming Viktor to Sapporo, but the more Yuri looked, the more he realized the fans were holding up Viktuuri signs, some sourced as recently as their Exhibition performance from Bordeaux. Even though he'd let go of Viktor's hand by then to let him get his dose of fanfare, it wasn't long before he felt hands pawing at his back to push him into the throng. Viktor quickly gathered him up again with an arm over his shoulders, and the next 15 minutes was spent inside the almost protective bubble of mass-hysteria and flash photography.

Being shorter than most people when they had their arms up to hold their signs and cameras, Yuri had almost let himself forget the presence of the Russian man-bear standing just beyond the crowd. It was Yurio who forced the reminder though, pulling Yuri out of the crowd just far enough to point out that they all had places to be.

[Is it always like this?] Konstantin wondered quietly, standing way back with Mikhail near the road, [Seems excessive.] The smaller Russian just looked on indignantly, [Yeah. Always. Viktor's the King.] He said, almost sarcastically.

Slate-blue eyes narrowed slowly at him, Mikhail's choice of words forcing a certain memory to bubble back to the surface uninvited.

[I thought I could forgive you for wanting to be a dancer instead of a man...since you had apparently done so well, and become King of all the Fairies for 5 years straight. But this...this is unforgivable. This is exactly what I said you'd become if you skated. You shame us all.]

Viktor had apparently told the crowd something, which made them all roar with excitement again, even as he had started to pull Yuri through them towards the hotel doors. All the signs went up at once as the mass of people were giving their farewells and cheers for the weekend's event.

[Is this the hotel we're staying at or not?] Konstantin wondered, more impatient than before. Mikhail just shook his head, [No, we're down the street.]

[I'm going to get my stuff!] Yurio suddenly called out in Russian, getting the elder's attention, [We'll be back in a few minutes.] The two older Russians watched the two younger Russians disappear into the hotel with their Japanese entourage, the fans still cheering as they went, and only then slowly starting to disperse.

[He was Russian this whole time?] The bear asked, a little surprised, but trying not to show it. [Who, Yuratchka?] Mikhail wondered, looking back up at him, [Yeah, the whole time...you didn't know? He was there with us when I brought Yuri and Viktor back to deal with Tat's insurance thing. Since we got here, he's been translating what you said to Yuri and Minako.] [He's been speaking English at them. Do you think I understood that he was translating?] Grey-green eyes just blinked at the huge man skeptically, but then turned back to look at the hotel,
and started stepping towards the big, frozen-over water fountain to the left of the entrance. Kon followed slowly after, watching his smaller, grumpy counterpart take a seat on the ledge of it and grumble to himself.

[I told you this was a bad idea.]

Mikhail glanced up, one eye visible past the edge of his cap, but then turned back down again, [I knew it was a risk. But I think Viktor needs this. He went back to make peace with Tatiyana's ghost, but I think he went there knowing it was you had had to make peace with. I tried to point that out to him by reminding him that a grave can't hear him.]

[You were always one of the cruelest men I knew.] Kon shrugged, looking around the foreign land like a fish out of water...but one that wouldn't be arsed to flop around in a panic, simply lying down and resigning to its fate, [These people may hate me for the worst 15 seconds of either mine or Viktor's lives, but they don't even know what you can be like.]

[Used to be like.] Mikhail corrected immediately.

[Old habits die hard.] Konstantin retorted, [The fact that you even bothered to remind Viktor that a corpse can't hear him was the old you, still wanting to be selfish over her.]

[How can I be selfish over someone who's dead? She can't play favorites anymore.] The younger Russian growled, putting his elbows on his knees and his chin in his palms roughly.

[You've spent more time talking in front of Tatiyana's grave than anyone else I know. I wasn't even asleep yet when you got up from the couch to sneak outside and sit there in the cold for half an hour. I wouldn't be shocked if you said that you knew she'd died before I ever even called to let you know about it.] The bear explained, much to Mikhail's chagrin, [Deny it all you want, but the more you learn about what happened after you left, the more you blame Viktor for the fact that Tat died at all, just like I do. Subtle as it was, telling him that going to Tat's grave was pointless was kind of your revenge, sabotaging his efforts to get resolution by saying he wouldn't get any.]

[I was being rational. I didn't want him to get his hopes up that sitting in front of a statue was going to give him what he was looking for.]

[Telling Viktor that his mother can't hear him when you've convinced yourself she can hear you is not rational. It's vindictive.] Konstantin said flatly, [I might've hit Viktor's body, but you're cutting deep into his heart and soul, ripping it up without him even knowing.]

[I find it horribly ironic that you're the one giving me grief right now, of all people.]

[Viktor and the rest look up to you. If you don't even know what kind of advice you're giving, who else would?] The Russian bear looked around again, but then down on the silver man well below, [You're a bitter old man with a habit of abandoning people when they don't do what you want or confront you with uncomfortable jabs at your behavior. If these people ever find out what kind of man you really are, will you abandon them, too?]

[I'm not like that anymore.] Mikhail growled, [I didn't even realize what a hypocrite I was with Viktor until after I told him Tat couldn't hear him. You make it sound like you think I planned it all on purpose.]

[Maybe not consciously. In the end, we never truly stop being the people we were when we were younger.] Slate eyes watched as the silver man pulled his hat off roughly and buried his face in it, [You and Tat used to always say you were both the same person, one mind, one soul split into two.
With her gone, what does that leave you?

[Half of me is dead.] Mikhail said quietly, voice muffled by the hat, [The best half.]

Yurio quietly gathered up his assortment of things from around the hotel room, the final item being his phone charger. As he wrapped it up into a small ball and shoved it into his studded backpack, he cast emerald eyes on Yuri, who was trying to clean up a bit, apparently having become hyper-aware of the mess they'd made since arriving. He stepped over and poked the older skater's shoulder to get his attention, "I have all my stuff. We're gonna go."

"Okay." Yuri nodded, rising back up to his full height before turning a little so he could hug the teen, "I don't know what Mikhail's plans for Viktor's father are...but please be careful."

The blonde returned the gesture with one arm, "He always pretends to know what he's doing, so I'm sure he has something in the pipe. The way he moped around after realizing he couldn't go to China, I doubt he would've sabotaged himself by thinking that wooly mammoth would be staying with them."

"If it gets bad, just call us... I'm...sure we can figure something out." The skater said.

Yurio pat the man's back before pulling away again, "Well, by the time it gets to that point, I'm sure you two will be done with the night's events. Just open the windows for a little while." He teased, though being entirely serious in his own way.

Yuri's face just went pink and he looked aside, eyes going over to where Minako had been whispering things to Viktor almost since they'd gotten into the room. She looked rather serious, which made him a bit nervous. The pair had noticed him looking at them though, and the mood quickly shifted.

"Guess you're going to kick us out now, huh?" The ballerina mused, looking curiously perky considering how dour she'd been a moment before, "Did you find all your stuff, Yura?"

"Da."

"Alright." She nodded and moved to pat Viktor's chest as she stepped off, only to stop as he wrapped both arms around her and pull her back for a moment. The Russian whispered something into her ear briefly before letting her go again, and stepped out of the way to let them get to the door. With a sigh, Minako stepped over to her student and hugged him in turn, "Maybe you should take Viktor down to the hot-spring later. It's not like Yu-Topia, but I'm sure it's decent."

"I was planning to." He answered, hugging her back before letting her go.

Viktor opened the door quietly, and Yurio shuffled out quickly enough. Minako lagged behind a little, patting Yuri's hair and then touching her hand to the Russian's arm before finally nodding and taking her leave as well. When the door finally clicked shut, and a calm quiet settled on the room, both men seemed to draw in a tired breath at the same time.

"You look exhausted." Yuri pointed out, stepping forward and reaching for his partner's scarf, "Do you want to sit in the onsen for a little while first?"

"There's only one thing I want to be in right now." The Russian mused, feeling his scarf come loose from his shoulders, and reaching to pull his husband closer by his own, "I've been looking forward to it since before I got off the plane." One hand came up, and careful fingers reached for the younger
figure's blue-rimmed glasses, gently pulling them off before folding them and putting them into his coat pocket with his phone, "Yuri."

"I have been, too." The skater said, finally letting himself relax a little bit, sliding his hands into the Russian's coat to push it off his shoulders. He lifted his face up a little to nose his partner's lip before turning slightly to put the coat away properly, only to feel Viktor pulling him back again as soon as he was done. Hands went into his own coat as well, but instead of rising up against his chest like he'd just done to push the coat off, they went down and behind. He felt both palms and all ten fingers grab a handful of his backside, pulling up and forward to draw him in closer as the Russian's mouth went to his neck eagerly. Yuri shrugged out of his coat on his own after that, letting one arm slide out as the whole garment slid down the other, swung lightly to the edge of the hall so at least it would be out of the way. Viktor was still pulling on him, kissing and licking at his neck as insistent hands groped for all they could. Yuri felt a knee go between his, just before the man's right hand slid down his left leg, pulling it around him as he pressed back in turn, "Viktor..."

The younger skater found himself abruptly being turned around, Viktor's chest against his back, pale hands roaming over his front as they started pulling at his sweater, then at the t-shirt that had been tucked in underneath of it. He could hear the small gasp of excitement as fingers finally got to touch his bare skin. Wanting his partner to have all the access he craved, Yuri lifted his arms up, curling them back to hook over the taller man's shoulders. Hands went crawling up the front of his torso as he moved, feeling every contour, every muscle, pawing at every curve and arch as they made their way up, pulling on clothing as they went. Yuri's fingers went through the man's hair, arching his lithe frame forward a bit as his hips pressed back. He could feel his husband's excitement starting to rouse already, and he turned his head slightly to face him, half-lidded hazel eyes meeting blue before they closed as he drew in a sharp breath.

Viktor had pinched a nipple unexpectedly, forcing Yuri's whole body to twitch, bucking against the front of his hips. The Russian huffed a quiet laugh as his hands moved from chest to sides, slowly turning his partner back around to face him and kiss him properly, gently starting to push him back into the main part of the room.

Yuri felt the back of his knees against the end of the bed when he brought his hands down the Russian's arms and then between them, pulling the thin cream-colored shirt up and fumbling for the front of the man's dark dress-pants. He was leaning back by then, held upright only by his husband, kissing at him eagerly as the sound of buttons clicking open and a zipper going down could be heard between them. Not to be seen as overzealous, Yuri made Viktor wait a moment longer to feel him, moving his hands instead to the man's sides and around his back, sliding his fingers across velvet-soft skin.

Viktor pressed in a little harder, kisses moving from mouth to jaw, then under to the start of his neck, left arm wrapping around the smaller figure's back as he started to tilt him over the bed. The other hand went down to the blankets, but the Russian paused a moment, drawing in a hissed breath as he felt those most-wanted-fingers going into his clothing and taking hold of him firmly. Yuri's other hand had parked itself on his partner's hip, gently stroking his thumb back and forth over the crest of bone. They held there for a moment, Yuri's right arm making the only true movements between them, quietly stroking until the Russian could barely hold himself up anymore, never mind the both of them. With a slow burst of energy, Viktor set a knee against the edge of the bed and started to pull Yuri over the top of it, only setting him down finally when he saw a pillow to place him against. Soft fingers were still pulling and squeezing with expertise, even as Viktor pulled back to hold himself up on an elbow, looking down into those longing brown eyes. Silver-grey hair gently brushed against Yuri's cheek, and he lowered his face to nose his husband affectionately before moving to kiss him again. His excitement grew with each stroke of his husband's careful hand, feeling the eager throb growing with it. He pulled out of the wet kiss and rolled onto his back, kicking off his dress-shoes as
he felt Yuri's fingers leaving his center.

The younger figure seemed to know what to do either way, kicking his own shoes off with a toe against each heel, then following after his partner as he saw Viktor moving back against the bed until he was falling into the pillows as well. Yuri was quickly sitting on the man's hips, pressing hard against him, but his hands went onto either side of Viktor's head, grasping to the cushioned headboard as he looked into those azure eyes. He felt the Russian's fingers sliding up the outside of his legs, curving around to grope at him again as they moved further up, thumbs sliding under the back of his shirt and grazing against his skin as they continued their way up. He kissed the man again as he felt his clothing bunching up under his arms, pulling back only long enough to let Viktor pull the garments away and cast them aside, then returning to another long kiss. He took his husband in-hand again just as he felt the tip of his tongue on his lip, opening his mouth for it. Pale hands returned to his sides, caressing his back softly, a few fingers creeping under the back edge of his khakis before sliding and turning as they came around front. For a moment, Yuri had become so focused on the motion of his own hand, and the feeling of his husband's tongue in his mouth, that he didn't even notice when Viktor's fingers undid the button in front.

Slate eyes opened a little as he moved from mouth to chin, then down Yuri's neck again as his hands went back around to start pulling him up a little. Yuri reluctantly lifted off his partner's lap, coaxed up a few inches at a time, until he could no longer reach down far enough to keep him in his grasp. Lips went down from neck to collarbone, then to chest, giving one nipple attention before switching to the other and continuing down, all while those hands kept pulling the younger man further up, right onto his knees. When Yuri was finally where he was supposed to be, Viktor was kissing his navel, fingers working at the front of his khakis and then pushing fabric away to get him free. The younger man's hands were already on the Russian's shoulders when he realized what Viktor was about to do, and Yuri all but buckled when he felt soft lips against his exposed center. Arms went back around to hold him up and keep him close, and Viktor went about his business, gently kissing and licking at the new flesh as it pressed up against his partner's abdomen.

Yuri drew in a gasp, feeling the hot warmth around him, and cried out as he felt the suck that followed. Viktor had to push out against the skater's hips to give him room, but then gave him all he had, bobbing up and down against the man's length. When he was sure Yuri wouldn't sink away again, he pushed his left arm back around to help in front, the right tugging clothing away a little further, pushing it down the figure's athletic legs before coming back up again and going between them from behind. It wasn't long before wandering fingers found their way inside, first one, then two, all while lips and tongue continued at the front. Yuri could barely hold himself up by then, drawing in vocal breaths until his legs practically trembled and he had to sit back down again. Viktor curled his arm to keep his fingers where they were, smirking to himself as he slid them in and out slowly.

"W-Why are you so good at that...?" Yuri asked, voice shaking a little from the sensation of it all, hands clinging to the Russian's shoulders as he looked into those blue eyes.

"I learned what to do just for you." Viktor hummed, leaning in close to kiss at his husband's nose, wrapping his free arm around the small of Yuri's back to pull him down against his chest.

He went easily enough, pressing his face against the side of his partner's neck, feeling the fingers continuing their work as lips teased at one ear. He could feel the course edges of fabric and zipper against his tender flesh though, so Yuri pushed up onto his knees to get rid of it all, throwing his khakis off the edge of the bed before going back to pull the rest of his husband's slacks off to join them on the floor. Viktor cast off his shirt as they went, and slid down a little further to lay more on his back as Yuri came back up to join him, sliding in on top with not but skin between them. He gently set his hands on either side of Yuri's lower back, feeling his partners own hands come up
under the back of his shoulders, wedging their way between skin and bedsheets before the man leaned down to kiss him again. Viktor slowly started rolling his hips under his husband, feeling where they rubbed together, and eager for more of it.

Yuri soon lifted his head up again, looking quietly at the man in front of him, even as he felt the slow rolling of the pale body against his own. He pulled his hands out from where they'd been pinned, setting them gently onto Viktor's chest as he pushed up a little bit, knees parting behind him as he brought his ankles up and crossed them loosely above himself. He felt one of the Russian's legs coming up between where his had parted, hands sliding down from his back to his backside, feeling between them again like before. In a moment of déjà vu, when he felt those fingers slide against his skin, Yuri slid forward, and just like in his memory, Viktor gave a vocal gasp and a grin.

"It's just like the first time." The younger skater huffed, sliding back down into place again, looking into his husband's eyes as he went, reaching one hand up to slide his fingers through silver bangs, then resting his palm against the man's cheek, "Remember?"

"Always." Viktor smiled, sneaking those two fingers inside again as he spoke the words, "You've come a long way since then."

Yuri gasped a little as he felt it, dipping his head a bit, and wanting more. He closed his eyes to savor his husband's touch for a moment, but then moved to rise up onto his knees, reaching slightly over to the night-stand to retrieve the small bottle of warming lube hidden within the drawer. Viktor had withdrawn his fingers again by then for lack of reach, and instead worked at massaging their centers together, watching quietly as the liquid dribbled down onto them. As it started to spread around, making everything it touched slick and wet, Yuri pooled a little more into the palm of his right hand, then capped the bottle and cast it aside. He let his husband go on for a little while longer before finally rising up, and reaching down with his free hand to place his partner's member behind him instead, then sitting down again where he'd been before. The palm-full of liquid soon went to task as Yuri reached back to slather it all over his lover's length, sliding his hand just as Viktor continued to do to him as well. He then closed his eyes, twisted a little bit, and put his husband into position before sliding back down onto it, feeling it getting inside him just as the man's fingers had been a few moments before.

A few adjusting slides, rising, and falling a little further each time, and Yuri could feel his partner's length entirely within him. He brought his hand back around so both were flat on Viktor's chest, letting himself start to rock against his hips, twisting just enough to give added sensation without letting his partner slip out.

The Russian's hands went to Yuri's waist, holding there without needing to guide him anymore, breathing out a vocal sigh with each movement. He could feel Yuri's hands sliding a bit further up his chest, until he'd gone down to his elbows over top of him, gently pressing the side of their heads together as he continued to rock. He kissed as he could where Yuri's shoulder was closest, and then started to roll his hips as well, gradually picking up speed as he thrust up inside him.

When Viktor reached a fever pitch, Yuri pushed up a bit onto his hands, trying to sit upright again and look down onto his partner. Viktor soon sat up to meet him, wrapping his arms around his smaller frame, kissing him several times, and then turning to put his husband onto his back where he himself had been a moment before, then picking up where he left off. Legs came up around the Russian's pale core, his own knees aside Yuri's waist as he pushed in again. Yuri's hands roamed up the front of his partner's chest before going up over his own head, arching his back into the thrusts, feeling where they pushed him into the pillows over and over again.

It was the best feeling in the world; feeling his husband sliding in and out of him, pressing in on top
of where he was on his back. The mutual combination of being wanted, protected, and pleasured all at once.

Viktor hooked his arms around his partner's knees, forcing his hips up a little higher and continuing on, looking onto the man's face for every sign and signal. When Yuri twisted a certain way, tilting his head back to press it against his arm, Viktor slowed and then withdrew. He reached a gentle hand for his partner's waist and pulled up on it, watching as the smaller figure flipped over and presented himself again, reaching to grab a pillow and holding onto it as the rest of him was held up on his knees. The Russian moved in front behind and pressed in, leaning far over his partner's back as he pushed all the way inside, wedging his arms into the crook of Yuri's waist where he could pin the man in and hold his legs apart at the same time.

Yuri cried out against the pillow as he felt it; at that angle, Viktor was pushing all the right buttons. He could feel it almost immediately, the change in pace and pressure sending jolts of pleasure through him with each thrust. He knew his husband was getting close when the man's arms wrapped tightly around his smaller frame, holding him down like Viktor thought he'd pull off for going too hard or too fast, but Yuri wouldn't dare. The more urgent the movements, the better it felt. It even felt good when he noted the hot-spot inside, and the throbbing that accompanied it as Viktor pushed in as deep as he could go, crying out against his back and all but clawing at his skin.

Panting heavily, the Russian sat back again, pulling his husband with him and staying inside as he went. He reached around front to take the man in his hand, continuing a subdued pressure from behind for as long as he could, kissing at the back of Yuri's shoulders and neck until the man's body arched against him with its own release, and then trembled.

Exhausted, they fell to their sides together, Viktor still refusing to withdraw as he clung desperately. Yuri didn't want him to pull out so soon anyway, careful to keep in alignment so they'd stay joined as long as possible, hugging the man's arms where they came around his chest and sides.

To his surprise...or maybe not so much...within a few minutes, Viktor had fallen asleep behind him, hair sticking to his skin where they'd worked up a sweat. Yuri had a feeling, in that moment, it would be the first real sleep Viktor would have gotten since the weekend, and the idea of waking him for anything was unthinkable. He only turned when he felt the man finally slide out some time later, pulled the edge of the blankets to toss it over them, and slid in to hold Viktor's head against his chest.
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY NINE

[This is it?]

[This is it.]

The doorways were too low and the halls too narrow. For a Japanese hotel room though, it was fairly large...not that the Russian man-bear knew that. He looked around the small space with skeptical eyes, but didn't complain further, simply squeezing in and setting his bag on the floor in the space between the wall and bed.

Mikhail watched the man carefully, [It's the only one that opened up since people started having the opportunity to cancel or fail to arrive. I'd have gotten another one for Yura if there was one, but this was it...so, you win the prize.] He stepped further into the room and pushed the curtains aside with a few fingers, [At least the view is nice.] He shook his head suddenly and turned around, fishing for something out of his coat and handing it to the older fellow, [Here, I got this phone for you. If you ever need something, just call me. I already programmed my number into it.]

Konstantin looked at the tiny device, seeing the teensy-weensy buttons, and then looked back at Mikhail, [Yeah.]

[Oh, right.] The silver Russian rifled around in another pocket with his free hand and withdrew a stylus after that, handing it over as well, [For your big fat sausage-fingers.]

Still a bit dubious, Konstantin finally accepted the small device and the plastic pen that went with it, looked at it closer-up, and set it down.

[You know how to use it?] Mikhail asked, tilting his head a little, [Have you ever even held a cellphone in your hand before?]

[I know how to use a phone.]

[But it's a cell phone. It's newfangled and different. I can show you-]

Slate eyes just looked down on him, [I can figure it out.]

[Just call my phone real quick then so I don't stay up all night wondering if you can't.] The smaller figure grumbled, [Do it and I'll go.]

Grumbling with annoyance, the bear reached to pick up the tiny object again and used the stylus to finagle his way through the menus. Before long, Mikhail's phone jingled in his coat, and just to be sure, the silver Russian reached to pull it out and checked to make sure it was the expected caller ID.

Satisfied, he clicked to cancel the call and put his phone back in place again, [Okay...I'm going then. If I come back right away, it's because Minako hates me. If not, it's because she doesn't hate me as much.] He started walking back towards the door, pulling it open halfway before turning back again, [No one in the building speaks Russian, so if you decide you want something to eat, just call and I'll come translate.]

[I'm just going to sleep. I haven't been on a flight like that since before Viktor was born.]
...You've flown internationally before?] Mikhail wondered, a bit surprised.

[When Tat and I were doing school in St. Petersburg.] The bear explained, pulling his heavy coat off, [We had to do part of it in Almaty. Didn't she ever tell you?]

[...Oh, I thought you meant you went to somewhere far away...like Peru or something.] The silver Russian started heading out, waving as he went, [Anyway...goodnight, and thank you for not killing Yuri.]

Konstantin didn't even have a chance to respond before the door clicked closed, so he just rolled his eyes and grumbled something under his breath.

Taking the elevator to an upper level, Mikhail twiddled on his phone again, connecting to the wifi and checking his email for the number to the room he'd booked months ago. All he could recall without the reminder was the floor. When he stepped out, he was still looking at his phone, barely paying attention to anything around him as he walked. He looked up only to see what direction he had to go to find the room. Once he was standing outside the door, he fumbled for the key-card he didn't have, and then reluctantly reached his hand out to knock on it.

A few awkward moments passed before the door started to click from the other side, and finally cracked open a little, getting a weird eyeball from within before the door finally opened all the way. Minako held her arm out on the doorframe to block him from entering and gawked, "What?"

"What?" He answered, caught off guard, "...Can't I come into the room I paid for?"

"You can sleep with your huge friend. The one you brought to Japan without telling anyone because you already knew we'd all say no." She said stiffly, starting to close the door again.

Mikhail just blinked stunned grey-green eyes, hardly even managing the presence of mind to react before seeing the panel nearly shutting right in his face, "...Well, I already did that, so..." He said tensely, almost blurting the words out without really thinking about them first.

The door clicked anyway.

He grit his teeth and turned on his heel, resigning to the sad fact that he'd rubbed Minako entirely the wrong way, and quietly moved down the hall like a shambling zombie.

"Of course you already did that. It was your idea." He heard the woman's voice whisper-barking at him from behind, having barely opened the door again.

Mikhail stopped, tilting his head only slightly to acknowledge her, "I meant the first thing you said, but whatever. I'll just go find a chair in the lobby to sleep in."

"...What."

He could practically feel the woman boring holes into the back of his skull, eyes like daggers, but he kept walking, "Nothing."

Footsteps heralded her entrance into the hallway, but the Russian still hadn't turned fully around to look at her, "Mikhail Rozovsky, explain yourself."

"What'd he do?" Yurio suddenly wondered, sticking his head out of the bathroom with a toothbrush hanging out of his mouth.

"I think he just said he's slept with Viktor's father?" She whispered back at him, "I'm not sure."
The teen wasn't sure whether to spit his toothbrush out, swallow it, choke on it, or let it fall from his mouth. He just froze, eyes getting small as they narrowed, "...What in the... No way. He's messing with you."

"...I honestly can't tell." She whispered again, hand over her mouth as she continued to glare down the hall.

"I'd explain it all to you but apparently I'm not welcome in my own room, so I'll have to go sing my sad song to someone else, somewhere else." Mikhail called back, raising one arm to wave goodbye, "Tah-tah~"

Yurio cleaned his face off really quickly before sticking his head out through the main door, hair still half-tied-back. He saw where the older man was starting to get a good distance away, and had nearly made it to the corner where he'd vanish, but the teen turned green eyes up at Minako instead, "You want me to drag him back here?"

"He's being a child." She said, crossing her arms and making a face, "He's just trying to goad me into hearing him out about Viktor's father."

"Probably." The blonde agreed, "...Still, you want me to bring him back?"

"How would you even manage? He's nearly two feet taller than you are." The ballerina looked at him skeptically.

"Watch me." Yurio huffed, taking it as a challenge now and taking off in a brisk jog towards the end of the hall.

Mikhail had already gone around and out of sight, so Minako could only imagine what happened once the teen rounded the corner as well, hearing the awkward yelps, grunts, and eventual thud that came after.

The silver Russian had heard the teen bounding up, and felt the tingle up his spine like in Bordeaux, spinning around just in time to grab Yurio's foot where it was about to come crashing against the middle of his spine...and just like in Bordeaux, that foot, once firmly grasped, was pushed high into the air, keeping the teen off balance. However, unlike in Bordeaux, Mikhail felt a sudden twinge in his back as he'd twisted...and he went down to his knees, then to his side with a grunt of pain, letting go of Yurio's leg while trying to reach for the spot, but unable to.

The Russian Tiger just looked at where the man was twitching, grabbed him by the ankle, and started dragging his weighty frame back the way they'd come. He huffed a laugh and glanced at Minako as he came around the corner, "Told you."

"...What did you do to him?"

"The more often someone falls off a roof, the more likely they are to be giant idiots." The teen answered, looking back on the man, seeing him weakly flailing his hands for where his hat had fallen off and had been left somewhere further up the hall, but then gave up, arms flopping down to get dragged as well.

The ballerina watched hesitantly as Yurio dragged the hapless man into the room, scraping his ribs against the doorframe as he made the final turn, but finally got him all the way in, hands still up where they'd been dragging on the floor over his head. With a sigh, Minako went back into the hall, collected the hat, and finally went back into the room as well, closing the door with a click and locking the deadbolt like before.
Mikhail was still writhing on the floor, hair all messed up where it had dragged along the carpet, but at least Yurio had let him go by then.

The teen sat on the edge of the bed with his legs crossed, resting his chin in the palm of one hand as he looked down, "You're pathetic," He commented, then leaned back, "I dunno what she sees in you."

"M-more than she sees in you I'd hope..." The elder grunted, moving his arms from overhead to his sides, holding there like he thought it would do something about the shooting pain. He glanced up a little when he saw the woman's shadow looming over him, but just as he was about to catch sight of her, she dropped his hat on his face and covered his eyes, "V-Vivi...save me...from your cruel friends..."

"Maybe you should've thought of that before saying weird shit." The blonde argued, nudging at him with a foot, "You should probably explain yourself if you expect to get up off the floor sometime before morning."

Minako joined the younger Russian on the edge of the bed, putting her elbows on her knees and her chin in the palms of her hands, "Agreed."

"Why should I have to explain anything...?" He muttered, pulling the hat off with one hand finally, and glaring knives back up at the pair, "I'm the one who just got assaulted."

"I missed. You went down on your own." Yurio shrugged.

"And if I hadn't moved, you'd have crammed your foot so far up my arse, I'd be able to taste what socks you wore today."

"Sounds like it wouldn't have been the first or only thing to ever go up that way." The blonde shrugged, "Unless that's not what you meant."

"Of course that's not what I meant." Mikhail argued, roughly grabbing his hat with both hands over his chest, "What kind of sick minds do you two have anyway? Jeeze."

"You're the one who said you slept with him." Minako pointed out dryly.

"I said 'I already did that' after you told me to sleep with him, and I'm pretty sure you didn't mean anything more than simply sharing the room." He said between grit teeth, trying desperately to push himself up onto an elbow, only to feel the twinge again and go right down onto his back again with a grunt, "...W-What...kind of weird...sexual kinks do you people think I have anyway?"

The two on the bed side-eyed each other, but then Yurio stood and went back towards the bathroom, "...I was about to shower. I'll just go do that now. I don't want to hear about the sex swing you have in your condo." The teen quickly hopped over where Mikhail was still splayed out on the floor, disappearing from sight a few seconds later and closing the bathroom door behind him with a loud click.

Minako finally sighed out loud and stood up, moving to crouch just above the Russian's shoulders and reached down to slowly start pushing him up, "You really are strange."

"Ah...ow ow...ow..." He groaned, every inch upright like another stab. Eventually though, he was able to sit, and with a little help, got back onto his feet long enough to sit on the end of the bed, trying his best to stay straight.

"I'd almost say you deserved this." The ballerina chided, crossing her arms again as she sat on the
corner, "Seriously. Bringing Viktor's father here? What were you thinking?"

"A lot happened while Viktor and I were out that way." Mikhail said pensively, still wincing as the pain slowly subsided, "By the end of it, I thought maybe I'd convinced Viktor that his father wasn't the brute he'd remembered him as. There's so much more to Konstantin than those two bad moments."

"It's not like those two bad moments were minor events." Minako argued, "Viktor was practically a baby the first time."

"He was twelve."

"Try to tell a mother that her twelve-year-old isn't her baby."

"What, are you a mother and I don't know about it?" He countered, turning his head slightly and giving a look.

"No, but your sister was, and I imagine she didn't appreciate it." The ballerina pointed out, "Besides, if someone ever hit Yuri the way Konstantin hit Viktor, there'd only be ashes and a skid-mark where that person once stood when I got done with them. Yuri might not be my blood, but he's my family, and now Viktor is, too. I'll protect both of them, even if it has to be from you or from Konstantin."

"You don't have to protect either of them from me." Mikhail defended, feeling a little hurt, "Kon wouldn't even be here if Viktor had said no."

"He did say no."

...It's different, but...it's still the same.] He commented idly, seeing about a dozen younger skaters on the ice, practicing hockey, with another dozen or more at rink-side waiting their turns.

[So this is where you both came all those years ago.] Kon commented, [I remember hearing about it burning down. The locals insisted it be rebuilt for some crazy reason.]

[Probably because of the talent scouts that still come through the area. The whole region descended on this place for a chance to get noticed, even as far back as when we used to come here.] Mikhail explained, [Well, when Tat and I came here anyway. You were always too pissy about it to join us.]

[I wonder why.] The bear asked bitterly, staring down with a cold glare.

[Oh don't be salty. You could've come anytime you wanted.] The smaller man contested, [You act like what I did was the worst possible thing.]

[If you hadn't spent every waking second reminding me and everyone else about it for that entire winter and following year, it probably wouldn't have been, but since you did ...]

Viktor huffed and rolled his eyes, "You two argue like an old married couple."

"You're lucky you said that in English." His uncle quipped, "Not that I like it much myself...the old
part, anyway. Getting old is shit. I don’t recommend it.”

“I tend to think you two are talking bad about me when you start prattling on in languages I don’t understand.” Konstantin grumbled quietly, “I’m standing right here.”

“We’re just commenting on the grandeur of being vintage.” Mikhail explained, patting the big man’s arm before stuffing his hand back into his pocket and going towards the rink entrance, “I’m sure you’re starting to feel it, too, under all that bear-meat you tuck away so well.”

“Sometimes.”

There was no admission fee to get into the rink, only to rent skates if someone wanted, so they were able to access the arena without being bothered for money.

Viktor barely made it three steps towards rink-side before someone hit a wall hard nearby, collapsing to the ice with a loud crunch, and pointing at him emphatically, “...Are you okay?” He asked awkwardly.

“Y-You...you’re Viktor Nikiforov!” The boy shrieked, voice cracking in surprise, “W-What are...why are you here!?”

Murmurs and muttering started to rise up from all sides of the rink as more people saw and recognized him, although not everyone did. Nearly half the hockey players had converged towards center by then, most of them gawking over their shoulders at him and whispering amongst themselves. Those at rink-side were doing the same thing.

Viktor’s eyes caught a glimpse of someone flashing a photo from the side, and he turned and waved anxiously, “...Ah, hi~...?”

“Maybe you should’ve been a hockey player, Viktor.” Konstantin suddenly suggested, “At least it isn’t as froofroo as figure skating.”

“I like figure skating.” Viktor argued suddenly, still a bit tense despite everything else, “It’s more challenging than hitting a block of rubber with sticks and crushing people against walls.”

Mikhail’s eyes went between them as each made their points, but he soon found himself stepping closer to his nephew. As soon as the man was done saying his piece, he nudged an elbow against his side, “We should bring Kon to NHK.”

“WHAT? NO. NO WAY.”

“What?” Kon wondered, eyes squinting at them, “You’re doing it again.”

“I’m serious.” Mikhail went on, “He doesn’t seem to have a clue about how hardcore figure skating can be. I think we should take him with us and show him what it’s like. He can’t get the full picture just by me forcing him to watch your programs on my tablet.”

“ABSOLUTELY NOT.” Viktor insisted, looking incredulous, ”Yuri will have a stroke the SECOND he sees my father.”

“So we’ll warn him before we get there.”

“No!” Viktor insisted, ”He’ll just have a stroke over the phone instead!”

“You don’t want your papa to see what you do, for real? To gain an appreciation for the kind of Hell
"If it was just me then that would be a different issue! But he literally picked Yuri up and threw him down a road the first time they met. I can't put him through this!" The younger Russian explained, "Mimi, please, don't..."

"This is your one golden chance to prove to your papa that what you do for a living is the real deal, and not just some frivolous hobby with no point."

"So have him come to Nationals at the end of the month then, when Yuri won't be there!"

"So you're just going to lie to him about your father being around? That'll go over well." Mikhail shrugged, "He already worries about you coming back right now. Prove to him that things are different and it's okay now."

"...You're unbelievable. How is this okay?"

"Have him come with us to NHK. I already checked that he's got a valid passport. I even floated the idea yesterday of him seeing an event and he didn't outright laugh at me. Give it a shot. Let him learn about you. He has a lot of catching up to do."

Viktor just growled, "...If Yuri kills me for this, I'm going to find a way to come back just to kill you, too."

"That's fair."

"...He might've offered a small protest, but he eventually agreed." Mikhail said, looking a bit to the side to avoid the skeptical gaze, "It's not like I just said to Kon that he should come without asking Viktor first."

"I asked him about this before I left him and Yuri in their room earlier." Minako pointed out, "How do you think I know how he feels?"

"It wouldn't be the most shocking revelation even if someone just guessed." The Russian pointed out sarcastically, reaching up to start unbuttoning his coat, the warmth of the room starting to get a little uncomfortable, "But didn't he tell you that he agreed, too?"

"He said he's still really worried about how things will go over once the event actually starts on Friday. He said Yuri's scared to touch him when Konstantin's around, and that the only reason they were even holding hands on the way back from the airport was because he made Yuri do it. Why do you think they went to their own train car?" She explained firmly, then leaning closer into the man's personal bubble, looming over him a little as she rose up onto one knee, "If Konstantin makes Yuri scared to be with Viktor, a guy he's worshipped since he was twelve years old..."

"It'll be fine!" Mikhail insisted, twitching a little as he tried to shrug his heavy jacket off, "Viktor made Kon promise not to do anything to them!"

"Words are wind, Mikhail!"

"I won't let anything happen! Kon's been doing fine anyway! He helped them up off the floor at the airport after Yuri had his little freak-out!"

"Y-" Minako found herself stopping short, "...Wait, what?"
"...Kon...helped them up from the floor...?" Mikhail repeated, leaning forward on his knee a little as his right hand went around to rub his back, grunting quietly between grit teeth as he looked to the floor, "I was really surprised when I saw it...but Kon was really gentle... He's always been gentle..."

"Except those two times when he nearly broke Viktor's head in half." The ballerina pointed out, sinking back to her prior spot and crossing her arms a little tighter across her chest.

"...I wish I could give you my memories of him..." The Russian said quietly, "...I wish I could make you see how I remember him, how gentle he always was with my sister... You'd think she was the most precious, delicate thing in the entire world because of it. He once wrestled an actual bear to protect her. He's huge and he made two really horrible mistakes, unfortunately with the same person... But I swear on my life, he's not like that all the time. What happened with Viktor..." He tried to sit up again, but his back was just pulsing with pain, putting him nearly to tears for it, "...I swear...it was...his biggest regret..."

"Maybe the first time. What about the second? People in the skating community were told he'd been in a car accident, but we all knew it was a lie because pictures showed that his car was fine."

"Viktor hit him first." He answered, cringing and pulling his hand back, fists trembling where he had them over his knees, "I don't know that Kon would've done anything else, if not for that..."

Minako blinked at him, his words pulling her out of her cold-hearted trance long enough to realize his pain finally. She pushed off the edge of the bed and moved to sit behind the man, reaching nervously for the back of his shirt before finally just shaking her head and pulling it up, and the undershirt with it, to see where he was hurting. She could see the two red spots on either side of his spine where the surgery had been done, still healing, and a lot of bruising around it.

"W-What are you..." Mikhail asked, trying to look back at her but finding it impossible, dipping his head again to avoid another spasm.

She didn't answer, just moving to press her thumbs into the sore flesh, digging in and sliding them up along either side of his spine. She could feel him go practically breathless from the flash of pain, but held still despite it, and the more she worked it, the less it all seemed to hurt. She dug a little harder only when she saw the man setting his forehead into his palms, gritting his teeth but otherwise not feeling the sharp stabbing pain anymore.

"I doubt you re-broke your back just now, but twisting to avoid Yura's kick put your lats into a spasm." Minako explained, carefully continuing her work, "You're lucky I know how to handle this sort of thing. Cramps, spasms, and strains were always the worst thing for dancers; ballerinas and skaters alike."

"...It...still hurts..."

"I'm trying to break up the fascia." She explained, "It'll feel better later."

"...Is this your way of punishing me yourself now?" He wondered, eyes finally turning back to peer through silver-grey bangs.

"I have a feeling you'll be punishing yourself soon enough." Minako explained, working her way down, pressing her thumbs along the rear crests of his hips, running along the length of each one as carefully as she could, but knowing that there would be pain now for later gain, "Honestly, I just want you to feel guilty for what you're going to be putting Yuri through. Viktor may have tacitly agreed to this insane plan of yours, but Yuri didn't, and it's not fair to him at all. You sprung this on him like the worst trap. He was saying yesterday that he was really hoping that NHK would be the
first event of the season where they could all just kick back and have fun, especially since his friend from Thailand will be here. But you kind of ruined that."

Mikhail felt the pit in his stomach growing, "...I knew...it was a risk... I thought if he knew Viktor agreed, it wouldn't be so bad... Kon's changed a lot since they first met last year."

"For your sake, I hope that's true. If it gets bad enough, I expect you'll ask Konstantin to stay behind."

"...I will..."
Chapter 180

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY

It was dark and quiet when Yuri's restless mind refused to give him anymore peace. In an instant, he found himself wide awake, despite refusing to open his eyes.

He remembered falling asleep with his arms around his husband's head, Viktor's arms around his torso in turn, but at some point that had flipped. He could hear the man's heartbeat, slow and rhythmic.

...At least he's getting some sleep finally... I feel like my stomach's in knots ...

There was a slight crick in Yuri's neck that he suddenly became acutely aware of, and he grumbled quietly as he turned onto his other side, wincing a little as he was reminded of the bruise still trying to heal there. Finding that more annoying than the neck cramp though, he twisted onto his back again, flopping his hands onto his chest for lack of anywhere else to put them, and stared up at the black ceiling.

He drew in a quiet breath, not quite comfortable lying on his back either, but just as he was about to return to his original spot, he found Viktor turning instead. As had always been the Russian's custom, at some point in his sleep, he'd figured out a way of getting his chest against Yuri's back and both arms around him, setting either his cheek or forehead against the back of Yuri's left shoulder. This time it was his forehead.

The hand that had gone over Yuri's chest pressed palm and fingers against his skin firmly, as though trying to calm the throbbing heart just underneath.

"...I don't know what to do to make this okay again." Viktor said quietly, pulling his partner a little closer, feeling that heart pounding just a bit harder for a moment, "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you just now."

"How long have you been awake?" The younger figure wondered quietly, reaching both hands up to paw at the one against his chest, turning his head a little to try and see his spouse past his shoulder, though barely seeing a few tufts of silver-grey hair in the dark.

"Probably thirty minutes. I haven't checked..."

Yuri thought to reach for his phone, but in a queen-size bed, it was 3 feet too far away for him to get it without having to leave Viktor's warmth, and he refused to move from it. The Russian's free hand came up to clasp over both of his anyway, keeping him where he was and nuzzling the back of his neck.

"Can't sleep?"

The younger figure shook his head a little, "I was out cold...but then my brain decided it was done, so now I'm wide awake, like it's high noon already."

"Me too."

"Tell me you at least got some rest..." Yuri pleaded, twisting a little to finally see the man behind him, the hand that had come up around both of his being pulled free for lack of reach.
Viktor just kissed his shoulder, holding there for a moment before sliding his unused arm out from under Yuri's back, propping his head up on it where he curled it at the elbow. "The best I've had in a week, probably." The hand still on Yuri's chest started to move one finger, drawing a small circle against his skin, "But I knew I would as soon as I saw you. Now I just need to do something so you can rest easy..."

"...Can you pack your father into a box and send him home?"

The Russian huffed a laugh, gently pulling the hand from Yuri's grasp and trailing down slowly. He leaned in a little closer to nose his husband's ear, "If only it were so easy..." He stroked his hand carefully over tense abs, tracing circles there like he had on the man's chest a moment before, sliding over to Yuri's side and then down further towards his hip and leg, "Just getting him on the plane was challenge."

"Did you have to check him in as cargo?" Yuri wondered, trying to find the humor in it, though still struggling a little.

"The biggest cargo." Viktor huffed, smiling a little finally as he leaned in a little closer to nose his partner's lip, hand gently sliding over the soft-spot of Yuri's right hip, "A huge box of wood and metal, with 'live animal' written in print on the outside." His forearm grazed across center, testing the younger figure as lips touched briefly further up, "There's little I want more than to make him see us." He said, suddenly changing subjects a little.

"...Are you sure that's such a good idea though?" Yuri wondered cautiously, feeling that soft hand glide over his thigh, a fingertip sliding across his skin before the whole hand went between his legs, gently cradling against athletic muscle before slowly making its way higher, "What happened at the airport was the first thing he saw, and it wasn't even that much...a friendly hug that could've happened between you and absolutely anyone. Do you think he'll be able to keep his cool if..." His words trailed a little as his mind became slightly distracted, feeling that hand creep right up to the inside-crook of his thigh, fingers roaming and caressing where they could before descending away again in a delicate tease against his senses, "...If...if we..."

"If we what?" Viktor coaxed, "Are you worried that I'll kiss you in front of him on purpose? I threatened him with that once before..." He pressed in closer, lightly doing just that, barely touching him before pulling back again and looking on with half-lidded eyes, hand continuing to tease below, "Or maybe that I'll nibble on your ear a little?" Again, he did just that, "Or your neck?" And again. He twisted to lie on his side, curling his knees forward and drawing his husband's left leg over them, then sliding his hand all the way back down the man's inner thigh, fingers and thumb parting just before center in yet another relentless tease, "Or that I might suck on your fingers like I did at Nationals last year?" The Russian trailed a little further down, tracing the tip of his nose across pale skin until he found the man's hands clasped loosely over his own chest, kissing and mouthing at his pointer finger until Yuri raised it for him, then licking its entire length before taking it in and closing his lips over it lightly.

"...I don't know that his reaction would be quite as fun as the La Première attendants when I did that to you before."

Viktor huffed a quiet laugh, gently biting down on that finger before letting it go and looking up again, "That was probably the most Eros thing I've ever seen you do in public." He mused, touching the tip of his nose to Yuri's and nuzzling him affectionately for a moment, "Part of me wishes you'd do it more often...but another part of me thinks those moments more exciting because they're so rare."

"I still have enough trouble being Eros with you in private." The younger figure countered, "I
still...get embarrassed..."

"I know." Viktor hummed, leaning in to kiss him properly, his hand finally roaming over center, feeling the man was still a bit soft but making progress, "And I love it."

Yuri drew in a hissed breath as he felt it, the back of his left hand pressing up against the Russian's chest.

"But do you know what I love even more than that?" The silver skater wondered, carefully massaging the tip with gentle fingers.

"...Hah?"

"The look on your face...when you're all embarrassed, but you're still letting me do stuff."

The younger figure's face was already pink by then, but his cheeks got a little more red as he looked into his husband's eyes, seeing the excitement there, and the longing. It wasn't lust though, as Yuri had expected given what Viktor was doing to him, but rather, a craving to get some different kind of satisfaction...something intangible, maybe not even sexual at all. He felt the kisses trailing from his mouth to his chin, down his neck, across his chest and abdomen, and lower still. His eyes closed before he felt the hands coming up to either side of his head, the side of one knuckle just against his lip as he tilted his face against the back of his hand. He felt the light kisses against his center first, the long lick from root to tip and back down again, he felt how Viktor lifted it from where it had been lying against his abdomen and gave attention to all sides. Everything he knew about pleasing his husband had come from all the different things Viktor had done to him first. Rarely did he have the courage to actually watch the man as he was at his task, paying close attention to tactile sensation alone for his education, but every once in a while, he'd peek an eye open to glance down.

The sight of Viktor Nikiforov going down on him was often as unbelievable as knowing they were married in the first place. Never in Yuri's wildest imaginings had such a sight ever come to his mind's eye...and yet, there the man was, and he was enjoying himself as well. One in a while, Viktor would notice him looking, too, and glance back with one half-lidded blue eye, smiling as he went on with his business. Yuri would immediately look away though, cheeks as red as ever, trying not to suddenly get louder in his vocal gasps.

But that's exactly the sort of thing the Russian wanted to hear, so he'd go out of his way to try to illicit those sounds. He kissed, licked, and sucked lightly on the tip, getting the underside of it particularly wet and then gently blowing on it. Yuri wouldn't be able to stop the leg twitch and loud gasp when he felt it. Viktor huffed a quiet laugh to himself and then went on, taking the man wholly into his mouth and bobbing slowly. Every reluctant utterance from his partner was like music, every twitch a reward; the best was hearing him cry out and arch his back. A few more moments like that, and the Russian kissed it one last time, then moved up again, pulling his husband's legs against his waist as he crept in closer.

His hand was on the sheets as he moved, and his fingers graced the edge of the warming liquid bottle that Yuri had discarded earlier, quickly grabbing it up as he continued working his way up without missing a beat. He kissed at the center of his partner's chest before looming forward to kiss the tip of his chin, admiring the look on the man's face and seeing the fruits of his labors thereupon.

Yuri was already partly out of breath by then, face red, panting and gasping when he wasn't biting down on that knuckle. One cherry-hazel eye peeked open when he felt Viktor rise up again to sit, and watched as he dribbled some of the liquid into the palm of his hand before capping the bottle and setting it on the night-stand next to his phone.
Viktor was careful not to slather the initially-cold liquid anywhere without warming it up first, rubbing it between both hands before placing them around his partner's member. Between the slickness and the warmth, it wasn't long before Yuri was crying out with each stroke. Quick and slippery, Viktor's hands went about their task; rubbing, squeezing, twisting, and grasping with expertise. He backed off a little bit when he felt his husband's legs clamping down around his sides sooner than he wanted, and pulled one hand away to put it to other use. With both knees beside his partner's hips, Viktor drew in even closer, applying his pressure to the man's center and then leaning over top of him, one hand continuing to pull and tug, the other holding himself up. He kept keen blue eyes on the younger man under him, watching his face, looking for those brown eyes to glance back at him.

When he saw them, the Russian withdrew his slippery hand for a moment, sliding it up his husband's side as he leaned down to kiss him. He felt both of the man's arms come up over his shoulders, fingers going through his hair where they could, hips rising up against his own in a desperate bid to keep feeling those slick tugs from before.

Yuri's whole frame buckled a little when he felt those fingers around him again, picking up where they left off, "Faster...faster..."

The Russian was all too happy to oblige, feeling his husband's fingers clawing at his back and shoulders as he went. He knew his partner had reached his limit before he felt it. Yuri dug his teeth into his shoulder, enough to leave a mark but not enough to hurt, in one last desperate attempt at quieting his cries. One moan managed to squeak out of him though as he let go of the skin, legs clamping down hard around the silver legend's waist, fingernails raking across the man's back.

Viktor couldn't help but gasp a little as he felt it all himself, looking down longingly at his lover as he felt the man's whole body starting to tremble under him.

Yuri was panting heavily by then, one eye clenched shut against the convulsing pulses of pleasure still coursing through him, fingers still around him, though looser by then.

The Russian only finally let go as he slowly descended to the man's chest, pressing in over him and kissing at his neck. Hands went under the younger man's back and shoulders to pull him closer, feeling where legs and arms were still twitching where they came out from under him, kissing him all the while. Viktor let his partner catch his breath for a little while before pushing back up onto his hands, looking down fondly as he felt his partner's palms roaming over his chest lightly.

"N-nothing for...you...this time?" Yuri wondered quietly, one hand going up past the man's neck to touch his cheek.

The Russian reached up to join his hand to his husband's and gave it a gentle squeeze, "All I wanted was for you to feel better. I didn't need anything for myself to achieve that, I hope." He turned his face to kiss Yuri's palm, then turned the hand to kiss the ring there as well, "Besides, if tomorrow night is a slumber party...I need to do everything I can for you before I lose the chance."

"...I can't promise that...I'll be as openly affectionate as I want to be...but I'll try..." Yuri said reluctantly, still trying to catch his break a bit, brow furrowing a little with worry, "I...can't lie that your father doesn't scare me...or that I trust him."

"...I know." Viktor nodded, kissing his partner's palm again before lowering that hand down to his chest, "I don't blame you."

"Will you...will you warn me next time something like this...going to happen...?"

Blue eyes blinked a little, "Would you really want me to? You were already nervous enough when I
said I was going back to my hometown, and that's when I had every intention of avoiding my father..."

"...I do."

Viktor was a little surprised, "...Really? But why...? You'll give yourself stomach ulcers worrying so much."

The younger skater shook his head, "I want to know when you're in trouble." He explained, finally having enough wind back in him to speak somewhat normally, "I want to know when you need help, or even just if you're in a situation where you're not sure what to do. I may not be able to do anything in every situation...but it's like I've told you before... I'd rather know what I'm worrying about, than make something up in my own head and worry about that instead. Not knowing when you're hurting, or why, is killing me. You hide it really well sometimes...or maybe I'm just too thick to pick up on it..."

"You're not." The silver Russian sighed quietly, lowering his head, "To tell the truth...I'm...really scared right now, about everything. I just go out of my way to try and keep that stuff to myself, because I tell myself that it's for the best to keep everyone else in the dark. I managed well enough for the last 20 years that I couldn't even remember what I used to be so upset about. But now, it's all coming back to me...and the more I try to deal with it my own way, the more it hurts everyone else, especially you... I don't want to do that anymore..."

Yuri watched him carefully.

"I said before that we had a lot of things to talk about..." Viktor went on, his eyes going to the side a bit to avoid the ones looking up at him, "And it's a hard story for me to tell, because you weren't there back then... Plus..."

"...Plus...?"

The Russian sat back on his knees, offering one hand to let Yuri pull himself up to sitting as well, unwrapping his legs from their place around his partner's waist, "...I've been so envious of your past...I didn't want to spoil it with mine."

"What happened back then is done and over with. You're the man I fell in love with because of it, not in spite of it."

The younger figure explained, keeping hold of where he'd held to the skater's hand between them, "We're all dyed in the colors of our upbringing. I used to think I knew so much about you, because of how much I read from the Junior ISU books. I knew your favorite color, movie, song, food...I knew that you hated getting up early because you'd rather stay up late. I knew that you liked practicing alone because no one would know what your programs would be if no one saw you figuring them out during the day. I knew your birthday, your horoscope...I thought I knew it all. But I...really never knew anything at all." He shook his head and huffed an incredulous laugh to himself, "I didn't even know your dogs had changed until we were already married. You were always so open with your superficial self...I guess I never noticed how I hadn't a clue about your private self. I must've filled in the blanks with examples from my own story, and never really questioned how I didn't actually know the truth. Why would any other skater's past be different from mine anyway? It seemed so obvious..."

Viktor looked down at where Yuri was still holding firmly to his hand, but then shook his head and started to move around. He shifted his weight along the edge of the bed until he was sitting against the padded headboard, and pulled his husband back to join him there, Yuri's shoulder wedged under his arm as he set that black-haired head against his pale chest. He raised up his right hand to stroke those raven-dark tufts, breathing in the smell of him as he collected his thoughts, "...I never told
anyone about where I came from or what I'd been through. I didn't want anyone to tell me that the only reason I was any good was because Yakov played favorites with me out of pity. I wanted them all to take me at face value, and see me for who I presented to them, not for who I used to be. I wanted to be a hero, not a victim."

"...What about..." Yuri started, then hesitating.

"What about...?" Viktor echoed, stroking dark hair again.

"...Sophia...?"

"No. Not even her. She probably knew less about me than you did, even at the end. I mean, she knew of me, but she wasn't exactly my biggest fan or anything. I was just some idiot Russian skater who started hitting on her one day and wouldn't leave her alone." The silver skater pressed his cheek to the dark fluff, "Yakov was the only one who ever knew anything about me, and I asked him never to tell anyone anything either. He got really nervous about how things would turn out when Uncle Mimi showed up, especially when the ISU media mobbed him at Worlds."

"...I remember."

"People were really starting to dig into me after that. Fans online were taking pictures like the bloody paparazzi, trying to figure out who all these new people were that I was running into, especially after I'd been hit. Everyone got so worked up about the fact that I'd gotten hurt that they went pretty far out of their way to discredit the excuse I made, and then make up their own stories to explain my injuries. Someone had even gotten pictures of my father when him and Mimi first showed up at the St. Petersburg Skate Club. I can only wonder how it'll get when people realize they're both here, with me, for NHK." He turned his face and kissed the top of his husband's head, holding there for a moment before pulling up again, "...I told you that I took pictures while I was in Russia, featuring the hollowed out ruins of my childhood. It...it wouldn't be the same as I remember it, but it should be enough to give you some kind of scaffolding for the general idea of things."

Yuri glanced up at the man, feeling a little nervous, "...So you're going to tell me?"

Viktor nodded hesitantly, "I'm going to try."
Sleeping in a chair had its benefits, but a good night's sleep was not one of them. The bag of ice had melted long ago, leaving little more than a cool, soaking wet towel in its place, and a big soggy spot on the leather it had been set against. Grey-green eyes slowly opened, one at a time, to the darkness of the small hotel room, and the man they belonged to grudgingly took his feet off the desk they'd been propped up on earlier. He reached out from under his blanket and pawed for where he knew he'd left his phone, found it, clicked it on, and saw that it was close to 4:45am. He grunted a sigh quietly as he reached with his free hand to rub his eyes, and then slowly pushed off the chair to get to his feet.

His back was still a little sore, but the shooting, cramping pain had long gone. Minako's torture and the ice had seen to that. There was still a bit of tightness along the left though, so the old man pulled the blanket over his shoulders and started shuffling quietly towards the door, grabbing for the empty ice bucket as he went.

It took a few minutes to find the ice machine, and the sound of each small block hitting the inside of the plastic holder was like the sound of gunfire to his ears, still too used to the quiet to tolerate such a sound. He pulled the bucket off the small shelf with one hand and turned back around slowly, and as soon as he rounded the corner out of the small alcove, he stopped.

Dark grey-blue eyes were looking at him squarely, and the woman they belonged to was blocking his way back.

Mikhail stood a little bit more upright after that, caught a little off guard, "...Hi?"

"How's your back?"

"...Can't complain? I think...?"

The silence that followed felt uncomfortable and awkward, even by Mikhail's standards. The ice bucket felt like it was getting heavier the longer it went on, so he rolled his shoulder a little and cleared his throat before finally side-stepping the woman and headed back down the way he came, holding the blanket closed in front of his chest with his free hand.

"You keep saying..." Minako's voice followed him quietly, forcing the Russian to pause and look slightly back over his shoulder to see her, "...That Viktor's father basically isn't who we all think he is. But in all the weird stories you've told me, about you, or Russia, or you in Russia..." She turned around to face him, holding a night-robe closed near her collarbone, even though it was tied already at her waist, "...You never once mentioned anything from that far back. I can't understand how you and Konstantin have such a cheeky relationship given what you know he did to his own son."

Mikhail's expression hadn't changed, but he blinked at her a little before turning his eyes away, "Viktor keeps making excuses for why he doesn't even want to talk to Yuri about his past. As much as I want him to, it would be shitty of me to go around his back and spill all his secrets by explaining it to someone else. Yakov all but had a gun to my back at Worlds last year when the media mob hurled questions at me about Viktor, making sure I didn't say too much."

"I get that." The ballerina said, "But you're older than Viktor. You knew his father before all that bad stuff happened." She hesitated briefly, but then took a nervous step forward, leaning a bit into her
question, "Help me understand what makes you think bringing him here was anything other than a mistake."

He gave the woman a skeptical look, trying to rationalize it all in his head before he opened his mouth, but it wasn't coming to him easily at that hour. He just nudged his head back down the hall, "Let me put this ice away first."

The lobby was almost empty when they got down there, but at least there were a few chairs and sofas to sit in that were comfortable. There was a small alcove on the white tile floor, between the main stairwell and the railing of the raised part of the first floor. There was a small decorative wall nearby, with what looked like spun cotton to represent snow, a bunch of small evergreen bushes, and five, tall, tree-like sticks that were wrapped densely in purple lights.

Minako took a seat first, but Mikhail stayed standing; mostly because the effort of sitting put a strain on his back and he'd rather not feel it. He still had the thin blanket over his shoulders, but he wore it more like a toga by then, folding it carefully around his shoulders and arms so it would hold itself to his frame without needing to be pinned somewhere.

The ballerina watched him carefully, but wordlessly, waiting for him to find his own starting place. It felt like forever before he finally did, and he spoke quietly, towards the glowing purple 'trees.'

"My first memory of Kon... My sister and I were really young, but we'd snuck out to go to the nearby river. He's 4 years older than us, and he was always big, even as a kid. This one time, my foot got caught between two rocks, and I panicked in a big hurry... Tatiyana started screaming, and the next thing either of us knew, this huge kid came running out of the woods towards us." He explained, reaching one hand forward to touch at the glowing branch nearest to him, "I don't even remember if that was the first time I saw Kon, or if that's actually the moment when we first met...but I remember clear as day how he lifted that rock off my ankle and pulled me out of the river like both were as light as air." He huffed a quiet laugh to himself and closed his eyes, "He put each of us on one of his shoulders and carried us out of the woods like that. We were so small compared to him, it was like having two silver birds perched on him, like he was some Disney Princess...or maybe a pirate."

Minako just raised her eyebrows at that, even if Mikhail thought it was funny.

"It was like that for years though. One of us would get into mischief and Kon would always come bail us out. Usually it was me though, and Tat would have to go find Kon to help me undo whatever I'd done. Eventually, we were something of a unit... If people weren't referring to us as MikTat, it was MikTatKon. We were always together." He turned so one eye could see the woman, "There's these tanks out behind Kon's house, a bit of a way into the woods...we used to always go back there when we wanted to avoid adults. Tat and I were around 12 or something, and she'd wandered off for something...and like always, if something happened, she froze in place and just screamed. Kon was with her at the time though, so it was me who came running...and I saw him fight off a damn bear that had snuck up on them. At the time, I thought it was the biggest beast in the whole world, but thinking back on it now, it was probably a yearling or something. Still, back then, I was really impressed...and so was my sister." He looked back at the glowing purple 'trees' again and raised his head, eyes following the tall wall behind them, "I always used to think that I could feel the same thing she felt...we were always so in tune with each other. We were even 'those creepy twins' who had their own secret language when we were really young. But after that incident, I realized things were starting to change. She started acting differently, and I couldn't always tell what she was thinking anymore. I thought something was wrong with me because I was the only one between us who seemed all that bothered, and the more obvious it became, the worst I felt about it."
"She started to like Konstantin as more than just a friend?" Minako guessed.

"...Not romantically, at least not yet. But she drifted from me, seeing Kon as her giant protective teddy bear. More and more I became this weird 3rd wheel to my own sister, and when things did start to change, I really didn't take it well. Like most kids, even most similarly-aged siblings, when we got to that age, we started experimenting, figuring things out...truly starting to realize, maybe even for the first time, that we were actually different at some level. I was the one who rebelled against it the most though, probably as a result of how we looked so alike before that, and thus making sure that never changed. I was the one to keep up appearances, letting my hair grow long. I was the one who refused to let others treat us differently, as folks started to think we needed to act like the man and woman we were going to be one day. If someone made me go cut wood, I made Tat do it, too. If someone made her learn to cook, so did I. There was no Mikhail and Tatiyana. It was MikTat, and I was going to make sure it stayed that way. But...then it slowly became TatKon, and oh boy I wasn't gonna have none o' that." He shook his head and sighed, "I swear...Kon never deserved half the shit I did to him."

"...How bad was it?" The ballerina wondered, watching as the silver Russian finally turned to take a reluctant seat on the end of her same couch, though staying on the edge of it.

"...Bad enough...that Viktor was still feeling the repercussions of it as recently as last year."

Minako blinked at him in confusion, "How did what you did have anything to do with Viktor?"

"No one is born with an innate hatred for things that are different from themselves. That's learned behavior." Mikhail explained hesitantly, "I'm the one who taught him those 'values,' if you could call them that." He paused and twiddled his fingers a little nervously, "Kon tries to pass off his disgust for Viktor and Yuri as being religious, and that reinforced it, no doubt...but it's deeply rooted in the fact that I went so far out of my way to try and sabotage his relationship with my sister. I was willing to take her place at times just to make him paranoid. And that's why I can safely say that Kon was always a really gentle person, and that what happened with Viktor was a fucked up anomaly... The absolute worst thing Kon ever did to me, even after what I did to him, was drag me back into town and ask permission to punish me somehow...and I deserved way worse."

"Please don't tell me you actually slept with him."

Mikhail kept his eyes low, "No, it never got that far. In my head, I was willing to let it, though. If that's what it took to keep my sister to myself, that's what I'd do. She was part of me, and I didn't want to lose her. Konstantin Nikiforov is no fool though...and even a big fluff like him eventually got pushed too far by my shit. When I'd gotten to the last straw, he cut all my hair off in front of half the town, making sure everyone knew it was happening, and why. I'd committed crimes against man and God and nature, and it had to be stopped. The way I changed after that...being this merciless little punk as a kid, and turning into this reclusive, angry, hateful little creature as a teen...Kon felt sorry for me. Enough to forgive me for what I'd done, anyway, but only because I hadn't been able to do it to him again. I, on the other hand, refused to forgive or forget. I blamed Tat as much as Kon for how things changed, because she didn't try to stop him, and then took his side after it happened. I felt betrayed and abandoned." The Russian rubbed his nose a little on the blanket-toga, "I never once considered how the things I'd done to Kon would follow any of us into our adulthood though, or even into the lives of those who weren't involved. But it never really came up. Tat and Kon got married, moved away for a little while, came back, had Viktor...and the torment I inflicted on Kon never got addressed. I thought it was in the past. But then, like a knife in my chest...last year, when Tat died in that blizzard... When I went back to Russia for the funeral, and saw Viktor getting pummeled...and he started yelling about how he was going to marry some scrub named Yuri, using the fact that Yuri was a guy like it was a weapon... That's when it all started coming back to me. This
kid that I loved like my own, this kid that I left behind...grew up to get involved in the two things
Kon hated the absolute most; figure skating and guy-on-guy action. And both of them were my
fault."

"...How was the figure skating your fault?"

The Russian scratched the side of his jaw, "There's a pond behind Kon's house that us kids used to
skate on in the winter. This one time, he tripped on a rock poking up from the bottom, and tore his
pants to shreds on his skates as he fell. I thought it was the funniest goddamn thing, so I teased
him...and teased him...and for a year and a half, I teased him. It got to a point where I could just
mention skates or skating and he'd go off the deep end raging about it. People stopped skating on the
pond after that, and Kon's size made it scary when he was mad, so people stopped talking about it
around him, too. Combine that with Kon's attempts at courting my sister, only to realize it was me,
and the guy was set up to hate everything Viktor stood for by the time he got back for that funeral.
It's truly a wonder I made it out of my formative years alive and with all my teeth."

"It seems like Viktor took the punishment for what you did." Minako said, almost too bluntly.

"...Yeah." Mikhail agreed, lowering his head until his bangs covered his eyes, "He got what I
deserved. Viktor told me about all the things that happened after I'd left, and I felt like I could've
done something about it if I never had...or if I'd tried harder to take him with me when I came back
that one time to get him. I couldn't do anything for Tatiyana, but I could have helped Viktor, so I
really and truly failed him." He snuffled a pained laugh, his throat starting to hurt a little, "I told Yuri
about how I'd gone back, and Viktor actually thought it was a lie. He just didn't know, because I
didn't see him while I was there. If I had, I would've grabbed him up and never looked back. Things
would be very different if he'd been there. Instead...Yakov got him, and only after taking a shot to the
eye for my mistakes."

"Have you told Viktor about all these things you did?" The ballerina wondered, a bit shocked to hear
it all herself.

"Yeah. I told him about the skating thing the day I caught up with him in St. Petersburg. The
rest...didn't come up until Tuesday, and that's part of why I wanted Kon to come to Japan." Mikhail
lifted his head a little to look at the woman, though a bit indirectly, "Before I fell off Kon's roof, I had
made him watch a bunch of Viktor's programs. I've been trying to gradually get Kon used to the idea
that Viktor's success should be something he can be proud of, not something he should resent as
rebellion. Russia calls Viktor a National Hero for Christ's sake! How can Kon be angry about
that!?"

"...So, I guess, in a way...bringing him here to see Viktor skate...is your attempt at making up for
your own contribution to how things turned out." Minako surmised, "That's noble, even if
misguided. You're doing all this at the expense of Yuri's health and peace of mind. That's a bit
selfish."

"Viktor suggested waiting until Russian Nationals...but I killed that idea by making up some bit
about how he'd have to lie to Yuri about his father being there." Mikhail sighed, "I really just want
Kon to know what a good kid Yuri is. I know it's hard on him, and I feel terrible about it, but... Yuri
is the only one who can prove what kind of person he is, and how much he and Viktor care about
each other."

"Yuri didn't come here to prove himself to anyone." Minako pointed out, giving the man a look
again, "That's not fair."

"I know, I know...I'm sorry! I didn't think it all the way through... Everyone probably hates me now.
I just wanted to fix things and I made a giant mess of them instead..." He held his face in his hands, leaning over his knees, "I was so caught up in what I know about Kon that I didn't consider how he looked to everyone else... To me, the man that picked Yuri and Viktor up off the floor is the man that Kon has always been... A big Russian puff who would fight off bears to protect the people he cares about, who literally let me torture him for years and never once raised his... hand against me... even though he... had every reason to..." His voice started to crack, "...I don't know this person who would hit his own child... Viktor was everything to them... But I ruined it... and then I left..."

The ballerina was taken aback by the man's sudden breakdown, seeing the tears falling past his hands even if she couldn't see them in his eyes, "...Mikhail..."

He just moved his hands to pull the blanket up over his shoulders a little more, hiding his face within the fabric instead, and muffling his cracked, shaky breaths. He twitched a little as he felt an arm go around his back, and a chin rest against his shoulder.

"I don't hate you."

Grey-green eyes peeked past the edge of the blanket, through damp silver hair, "...You... don't?"

"No one does." Minako went on, "We were just... unprepared for this. If you say that Konstantin is a better man than we've thought so far... then I believe you..." She pulled on him a little and guided him back, careful not to go too fast as she leaned against the couch, moving the hand around his shoulder to the side of his head and pressing her cheek to the other side in turn, "But... the situation is what it is now, so we'll have to make the best of it."

The Russian just nervously turned his eyes towards her, entirely unsure what to say, if anything at all.

"At any rate, it's almost 5am, and I'm still sleepy." The ballerina went on instead, "You brought Konstantin here to watch the competition, but it doesn't start until Friday. So we'll figure out something for him to do to keep him occupied today... and then let's go to the Sapporo Beer Museum. Just us."

Mikhail had to lift his head at that, refusing to acknowledge the tears still on his face even enough to wipe them away, and looked at her, "...Really?"

"Mh." She nodded, reaching up her free hand to rub the last two drops away with her thumb, "It'll be fun. You can put on the Rozovsky Charm like you wanted to last weekend."

He blinked in confusion, "...You... still want me to...? After the shit I pulled...?"

"You made a mistake, even if you had the best intentions... and you understand why the rest of us aren't thrilled with it. It's still your problem to fix, but you've been resourceful so far, so I'm sure you'll figure it out." She explained, fingers moving up from his cheeks to his hair, putting it back into place where the blanket and tears had messed it up a little. When she was done, she booped the end of his nose, "But I'm banning him from coming back with us to Hasetsu and to the Final, and if you want to drag him to Russian Nationals after that, you'd better be sure Viktor actually wants him there first."

Those eyes just stared for a minute, the man completely surprised at her. Without even thinking, he leaned forward and kissed her, barely pulling back half an inch to open his eyes and see her reaction... hoping she wouldn't beat him over the head and run off. To his surprise, and relief, she didn't... she just brought her hand back up to his cheek again, and brought him closer to kiss him back.
He held as long as she'd let him, and only reluctantly pulled back when he felt her moving again. He swallowed nervously as those eyes opened into his once more, "...Would it be premature to ask you to marry me?"

Minako just cackled loudly at him, "One step at a time. I think we only just officially started dating right now. We can come back to it later though."

Another wave of relief washed over the tense Russian, but when she finished speaking, and laughing, at him...he unfolded his arms from where they'd gotten tangled in the blankets and wrapped them tightly around her, heaving a loud sigh against her neck.
Even though the sun had come up ages ago, the curtains were still drawn, blocking the light from coming into the room. Enough glowed around the edges though to illuminate the small space with a thin break through the dark and gloom. By then, Viktor had told all he could think to tell. He'd shown the photos, recounted the memories that had gone with them, extrapolated into the tales that grew out of them, and had given up as much detail as his mind could give him, given how he'd tried so hard to forget in the first place.

He was leaning back against his partner, head against Yuri's chest, holding his phone in landscape view as he slid through the different pictures he'd taken. He slowly lowered it until it was face-down on his own chest, reaching to settle his left arm around where Yuri had raised his knee against his side, the right going up to rub his eyes a little.

The younger figure had rested his arms over his silver husband's shoulders, forefingers lightly hooked together just under his collarbone. He had leaned his head back against the padded headboard as the tale really sank in, looking up at the ceiling like he'd bit off more than he could chew.

"...I don't even know what to say." Yuri said in a hushed tone, "...Everything that happened...and you haven't even told me yet about how you handled it after Yakov took you away." He tilted his face down, and leaned forward a little as he hugged the man, pressing the side of his cheek into silver-grey hair, "Last year, at Rostelecom, when you had to go back to Hasetsu for Makkachin... You told me that if I ever felt like I was in trouble, I should hug Yakov, and he'd help me...but it just confused me. I hadn't even seen you do it yourself, but now it all makes sense. It must go all the way back to then..."

The Russian just leaned his head into the hug, quietly rubbing his cheek against raven-black hair, "Yeah."

"After leaving things off on such a low note with your father though," The younger skater went on, "I...can't help but wonder, if you have any good memories of him...?"

Viktor thought back again, but then shook his head, "I'm sure there must've been, before...but now I can't recall. Even the bulk of memories I have of Uncle Mimi are kind of scattered." He admitted with a deep breath, "I mostly just remember the idea of him. It's like thinking back and feeling like this person you cared so much about...was really just some imaginary friend you had. Someone you'd made up because you were just so lonely, and then someone took it all away from you by convincing you that he wasn't real. That heartbreak though...he was real, and he left, and I thought I was going to die because it hurt so much."

"It's like your father just didn't exist though, the way you tell it." Yuri pointed out, turning his eyes to see the man a little better before pulling back to lean against the headboard again and stroking silver-grey hair where it brushed over his skin, "Even after Mikhail disappeared, it seemed like it was just you and your mom."

The Russian sighed a little, reaching to his forehead to rub a sore spot that he knew would turn into a headache later, "I feel like I could see him, standing on the peripheries like some shadow... But the only things that ever really stuck out were the bad things. Even remembering how he'd tell me to get off the pond...I can't remember the specifics of it that well...but you heard me go into pretty stark
detail about the day he made me burn my skates."

"...I feel like I was there." Yuri admitted, "Like some ghost that couldn't do anything except watch. My heart still hurts from hearing about it. But..."

Slate eyes turned back a little, "But?"

"Knowing how you never forgot that moment, and how you kept going with it even after everything that happened. Other people probably would've stopped skating entirely if they'd gone through the same thing you had. They'd have given up because of how horrible it had been before. Not you though..." Yuri explained, running his fingers through the man's bangs lightly, "I think you're probably the strongest person I know. I don't know that I could've managed the same way you did."

Viktor blinked slowly a few times before lowering his eyes again, closing them and shaking his head lightly, "I waffled. Right after the hit, while Yakov was still trying to figure out what to do with me...I kept going back and forth between wanting to quit so I could go back, and hope my father would forgive me and I could come home...but then I'd tell myself that it wasn't worth it, that it was too painful, and all I wanted to do was run as far away as I could. When Yakov pulled the car over to check on me, and called me Vivi like my mother had...I made up my mind in that moment that I would never look back. Vivi was dead...I was a new person after that, and he honored my wishes to move on by giving me a new name...Vitya."

"Wow..."

"After that, every encounter with my father that came up was just one more negative memory to add to the long list." He went on, "I'd hear him ranting and raving in the background of phone calls, so I slowly stopped taking them. My mother would send letters or post cards, and I'd slowly stop answering them. Yakov never let me send them myself, and I never really cared that there was a reason, but when I was older, he told me it was because he never wanted Konstantin to know where we lived. He'd send the letters from a box at the post office so our address would never show on the envelopes."

"You said last year that you and your mom stopped talking to each other because she was the one who stopped reaching out..." Yuri recalled, "As though she'd stopped caring."

"I don't know that I was lying at the time." Viktor answered quietly, fingers pawing at the edges of his phone, "At least...not on purpose. I remember how I felt when Yakov first texted me about the whole situation...and it was just a lot of anger and resentment. I think I blamed her for vanishing because I had such a high opinion of myself, that I couldn't conceive of actually being the one to blame. I was always nice to my fans...why wouldn't I be to my own mother?"

"It's a little different with family." The younger figure offered, "You carry their thoughts and feelings with you even when you're apart."

"The last time I let that happen was probably my lowest point." The Russian said, feeling a little tense as he mentioned it, "I was so shaken up by what I'd done with those feelings that I felt like I'd committed a crime."

"What do you mean?"

"Back in St. Petersburg, when I was talking about my past girlfriends." He answered nervously, "The Ice Dancer that I said I'd had a fling with...it wasn't entirely innocent fun. Right before then, my mother had sent a post-card or something, and I called her... But there was my father again, ranting and raving in the background, saying I was no better than some male prostitute because of the
skating... I was so angry about it that I went to my next competition thinking I had to prove that he was wrong. The Ice Dancer was less a fling, and more like...a victim of my wounded pride and malice. I used her to make a point. I didn't actually care about her, and when I got what I wanted, I didn't care that I'd destroyed her relationship with her skating partner. At least, not until I was heading back home again...then it all weighed on me like a ton of bricks. I realized that what I'd done was the worst thing I'd ever done. I made someone else feel the pain that *I* was feeling because I didn't know how else to deal with it.

"You realized your mistake pretty quickly though..." Yuri offered, though still feeling a slight twinge.

"I never forgave myself for it...but I did my best to make sure it never happened again. I just made the opposite mistake when I met Sophia later instead." He huffed a disappointed sigh.

"The opposite...?" Yuri raised a skeptical brow.

"I went from caring too little to caring too much." Viktor said flatly, "I made that relationship entirely about her. Everything I wanted or needed got put on the back-burner, so it hurt a lot when she cut me off after I'd made so many personal and professional sacrifices to be with her. Then when I was with that groupie...it was all about me again, but not because I wanted it to be. It was just this really messed up situation where it felt like I was dating a butler and a jailer at the same time. Everything was either for me or it was my fault." He shuddered a little at the memory of it before rising up, setting his phone aside, and flipping over. The blankets went up with him, and he looked into his husband's eyes briefly before lowering himself down again to put his cheek where the back of his head had been a moment before, wedging his arms into the pillows under the man's back so he could hold onto him, "Being with you now...it's like I can breathe."

Yuri wasn't sure how to answer to all that, so he just stayed quiet for the moment and went back to gently stroking his partner's hair, setting his free hand on Viktor's back and rubbing a thumb back and forth slowly, soothingly.

The Russian went on, "I get everything I could possibly need or want...but you let me give back, too." He explained factually, "More importantly, you don't take things from me. I can be who I am without having to make big sacrifices for the sake of us. The handful of big things that *did* change...didn't even seem like sacrifices."

"...Like what?"

"Giving up skating for most of a season to be your coach. Moving to Hasetsu, and leaving St. Petersburg behind. Dealing with the occasional fall-out of being in love with another man rather than a woman." Viktor explained, then lifting his eyes again to see his husband more clearly, "These things I did gladly, because it meant I got to be with you. Every little thing I did, was one step closer to you...and to my happiness."

Yuri's cheeks got a bit pink, but hearing it made his smile fade, and he just felt a bit sad instead, "You've gone through a lot of pain and suffering because of me too though."

"My father is not your fault." Viktor insisted, turning his head back down again and hugging his partner a little tighter, "It was all there long before you...and I'm hoping, that by the end of the weekend, *he* might even acknowledge the cruelties he inflicted on me and others...maybe even apologize for them. I would never have gotten to this point if it hadn't been for you. ...You say I'm the strongest person you know...but I've needed your strength more than you probably realize."

The unpleasant feeling in Yuri's gut dissolved quickly to hear those words, and he reached his arms
around the man's head to hug him close against his chest, recalling a few specific words from what felt like a lifetime ago, "Whatever lies ahead, good or bad, we will face together. Distance may test us for a time, and time may try us, but if we look to each other first, we will always see a friend. Look to me...for all the days to come."

'Today...I take my place as your husband.'

The memory of it was as clear as crystal. Viktor could hear himself saying the words like they'd just come out of him a moment before. He turned his face in towards his partner's chest, holding there tightly for a moment before pushing up to sit on the side of his hip. He held himself up with one hand in the sheets as the other reached forward to cup around his husband's cheek, feeling a tear roll down his own to fall off his chin, "You did it again, you know. Just now."

"Did what?" Yuri asked, feigning ignorance as he leaned into the man's palm.

"Made me fall in love with you."

"You really should keep a record."

"It would go to the moon and back again already by now." Viktor purred, leaning in to nuzzle his husband affectionately. Two quick kisses, and he was back to leaning against the man's chest, pressing his forehead to the side of Yuri's neck as his hand against that beating heart.

The Sapporo Beer Museum had lived up to its name in spades. From the outside, it looked like an old brewery; two stories tall and built from century-old red brick, even sporting three stacked rows of barrels with kanji written on them in place of a regular sign out front. There was a massively-tall chimney on the right side of the rear building with 'Sapporo Beer' written vertically in katakana on several faces, a red star at the top of each column. Winter-killed barren vines crawled all over the outside of the establishment, making the building look even older. Snow was two feet deep where a path hadn't been cleared, leading up to a big snow-sculpture, and the grounds were dotted with an assortment of different trees.

"...What is it?" Viktor wondered, looking at the 'mascot' awkwardly.

The 'sculpture' was one big round snowball with a smaller one stacked up on top, and black discs put in place of buttons on the front, with eyes in the face, and three rectangular plates alongside, two for eyebrows and one for the mouth. Two wads of snow on top looked like rounded ears. On the sides of the big snowball were two protrusions that could be called arms, small as they were. Beneath it all was a big block of snow shaped like a slab, holding the 'mascot' about four feet off the ground.

"...Is it a bear?" Yuri wondered, tilting his head a little like it would make any difference. He pulled his free hand up to rub his chin, the other wrapped around the Russian's back, "...A cat maybe?"

"It's a mystery~!" Viktor mused, pulling his partner along where he had an arm draped over his shoulders.

Within, there was a long series of halls featuring displays from the bygone era; long, half-transparent displays of tree photos from the brewery's summers, two crystalline panels featuring the brewery's founders from the late 1800s, various bottles of vintage beer, and assorted photos from the local area
throughout the decades. There was a domed display that they walked through, the interior walls of which were plastered with stacked rings of imagery showing the various simple ingredients of beer; yeast on the bottom, barley above it, then hops, and finally the sunny sky at the top of the dome. In several display-jars, there were examples of those very items, with a few of them having lids to open to smell a sample, or taste one from the pour-bottles.

Viktor was thoroughly enthusiastic about it all, which was refreshing, if not odd to see, considering the topic of the early morning hours. But, seeing the Russian excited about something eased Yuri's worries about what would likely come later.

*We have to take our joy where we can, I guess. This weekend is going to be a rollercoaster. I'm so glad Hasetsu is our next stop...*

He glanced around the room, looking at the two long display cases flanking the raised dome display, then back at Viktor.

*We're going to need to soak in the onsen for days when we're done here... We'll be able to go home, sleep in our own bed, skate in our own rink, and Makkachin will be there, too. We haven't seen that poor creature in over a month now...he's probably worried sick.*

"Look! Yuri!" Viktor suddenly said, getting the skater's attention again where he'd gone ahead to look at something, "These bottles date all the way back to the first batches this place ever made!"

The raven-haired figure stepped forward, sliding his fingers through the Russian's before seeing what he was pointing at. As told, there were three bottles there on display beneath the glass, dating to 1878, 1881, and 1883 respectively.

"I wonder if beer ages like wine." He asked hesitantly, "...Or maybe it's really gross now."

"Oh, it's for sure gross by now." The Russian explained, as though aghast at the idea of sampling it, "Once it's in a bottle, you're supposed to drink it pretty soon." He turned back to looking at the date plates, unable to read the Japanese text that accompanied them, "It'll sit for maybe a week or two, but if you don't drink it around then, it'll start to go stale. Some places, like in Belgium, they'll age their stock in oak barrels for two years...but again, once it's in the bottles, it needs to ship. These things probably taste like dust by now, even with the dark glass protecting it from light."

"You're like an encyclopedia of random knowledge, Viktor."

"I've made home-brew before." He answered happily, "Like when I mull wine. It's just been a long time."

Yuri brought his free hand up to his cheek at the fond memory of it, "You make really good mulled wine, too. I can't wait to get back...you should make some for Phichit-kun."

"Okay~"

The lunch crowd filled almost the entire Beer Garden half of the building, even spilling into the second floor where normally only large, reserved groups would be seated. The moment Viktor stepped into sight of the main area, it was clear why there were so many people filling the building, as heads turned and clapping rose from many patrons. Viktor pulled his husband closer, pressing his cheek to the side of the man's head fondly, waving back at the fans before passing through to where their table awaited them.

"Wow~!" He called, hands up excitedly as the big Mongolian-style grill plate was set in front of
them, a small cube of butter melting on the top of it. Chopsticks in-hand, he started piling up the fancy, thin-sliced meat, sprouts, and cabbage that were on separate plates all around the table.

The beer sampler came after that, and Viktor looked like he was in Heaven. There were three medium-sized glass cups, set within three cut alcoves in a small wooden crate-holder. One was pale yellow-golden and clear, the center one was practically black, and the last one on the right was opaque yellow-orange, each one with typical foamy beer-froth on top. The Russian happily sipped at the first one while Yuri was starting to pull the first round of foodables off the black grill-mound, setting it all onto a shared plate between them. There were several small dishes around it, each with a different kind of dipping sauce.

Yuri clapped his hands together in front of himself, getting his partner's attention and watching him do the same thing, then both saying together, "*Itadakimaaaaasu~*"

Then, the 'Nomageddon' began.

...And then it prematurely ended, at least for Yuri. He held a piece of sliced pork in his chopsticks, the end of it dipped in one of the sauces, but his eyes were fixed ahead, staring at something beyond Viktor's shoulder.

"...What's wrong? Why'd you stop?" The silver skater asked, giving him a weird look, "Do I have something on my face?" He grabbed out his phone and set it to selfie-mode just to check; satisfied there was nothing there, he clicked it off and put it away again, reaching for the dark-colored beer and setting it against his lip, "...You're being weird!"

"...Uh, don't look now, but...it's Mikhail."

**PFFFFFFT**

Yuri wasn't sure whether to laugh, cry, or just gasp...but there was beer-spray all over his face and glasses, and he froze, the pork bit still sitting tip-down in sauce where it had been a moment before.

Viktor roughly set the glass down into its holster in the crate and pounded lightly on his chest with the thumb-side of his fist, trying not to choke, but then quickly stood up and grabbed a handful of napkins as he went to the other side of the table. He laughed quietly and tried to clean away the mess he'd made, pulling his husband's glasses off first and then wiping at the man's face, "*Sorry!" He whispered.

"Oh, hey you two!" Minako called unexpectedly, waving at the pair from where she'd popped up next to her date, "I didn't think we'd see you here so soon!"

"*M-Minako-sensei...* Yuri grimaced, eyes following the woman as she got closer, dragging Mikhail behind her, "*I-If you guys are here...then where's...*

"Ah!" She reached over the plastic dividing wall that kept them in the waiting area, "*We don't speak his name here.*"

" unofficially, waving at the pair from where she'd popped up next to her date, "I didn't think we'd see you here so soon!"

"*M-Minako-sensei...* Yuri grimaced, eyes following the woman as she got closer, dragging Mikhail behind her, "*I-If you guys are here...then where's...*

"Ah!" She reached over the plastic dividing wall that kept them in the waiting area, "*We don't speak his name here.*"

"*Hah?* Viktor wondered, a bit stunned, paused in his progress, "...But...where is h-"

"Nope." Mikhail followed, making a motion like he was zipping his own mouth shut, "*Out of sight, out of mind. Try to enjoy yourselves. We plan to.*"

The two confused and nervous skaters watched their non-skating counterparts go past, and get seated in some other part of the Beer Garden, going about their business like nothing had happened. They glanced from the older pair back to each other, looking around the whole area just to be sure, and
then heaved a sigh of relief.

"He's not here."
Chapter 183

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY THREE

Even though they knew, at least in their heads, that they were safe for the time being, those fragile skater-hearts kept pounding for several minutes more, eyes darting this way and that and all around, looking for any sign of the skulking shadow.

Yuri finally relented and cleaned the beer-spray off his glasses, then set them back into place before casting one last glance around the large, warm room...still seeing nothing to suggest the Russian bear was anywhere in the area. He put his hand over his chest lightly and breathed a sigh of relief, then looked up and across the table to his husband, seeing those pale blue eyes still scanning. Under the table, the younger skater reached his feet forward, toeing at the man's legs until he could get one untangled from where Viktor had tightly wound them both together. Once he had it, both feet went around it to pull it forward, and Yuri held it there, ankles around ankle. He kept his eyes on the man across from him until that anxious expression softened a little, and he felt Viktor's other foot come forward to join that second ankle to the fold.

"He's not here." Yuri repeated, "I don't know where he is, but he's not here."

"Yurio's not around either." The Russian noted, blinking down at the half-empty lager he'd roughly put back a few moments before, "...I hope they're not absent in the same place. They're all staying in the same hotel."

"He wouldn't have much reason to stick around Konstantin anyway." The younger man pointed out, "But he said he always used to take off when Mikhail and Minako-sensei got, as he put it, too weird...so, this probably counts. I'll bet he's checking out that big underground shopping mall. We only went once to pass the time and didn't really look at anything."

Viktor still had his hands in his lap, looking down at the table, and then back around and to the right, seeing where those two aforementioned people were sitting. A member of the wait-staff, dressed in a white shirt, black tie, and black pants, was already bringing two trios of beer samples to them, one small set for each, totaling out to six different varieties between them. His eyes turned back to his own table when he heard Yuri make a subtle laughing sound, trying to keep it under his breath, "What is it?"

"Look. They're doing the same thing we are." Yuri pointed at the pair discretely.

"Eh?" Viktor looked back again, not really understanding...but then seeing the bigger picture. The duo had their ankles overlapping one another like they themselves did. The Russian lifted himself a bit straighter when he realized it, but then lowered himself back down again to rest the side of his jaw against the palm of his hand, elbow on the edge of the table, "...Ah."

Yuri noted the strange, lackluster reaction, but filed it away for the time being, "Minako-sensei told me what she thinks of him." The raven-haired skater said, finally reaching for the forgotten chopsticks on the table again, and going for the piece of pork he'd set aside after he'd been sprayed. He set it back onto the hot grill for a moment to warm it up again, "Given the way she reacted when Konstantin first revealed himself at the airport...Mikhail must've done a lot to get back on her good side."

Viktor turned his head back slightly to look at his spouse as the man spoke.
"...Your uncle isn't an idiot...he'd know not to bring your father around when he's trying to be charming."

"...Yeah." The Russian shook his head and huffed a half-amused sigh, "He wouldn't stand a snowball's chance of impressing Minako-sensei if Konstantin were breathing down their necks like the biggest, most awkward 3rd wheel ever."

"Exactly. So...crisis averted, then." Yuri said, clicking the chopsticks together so Viktor would look at him again. When those blue eyes came back around, he smiled and fished for the reheated pork strip, "Let's finish eating. This city's huge...we shouldn't have to look over our shoulders. We'll see him when we choose to and not sooner." He dipped the bit of meat in the sauce from before and held it up a little to let it drip, "Besides, what's he going to do here? This is our turf. There'd be rioting in the streets if something happened to you."

The Russian nodded, smiled, pulled his elbow off the table and reached for his own chopsticks again, "You're right. ...Though, I can't help but wonder what he's doing." He drifted his hand over the different offerings before finally picking two prawns to set against the crackling heat.

The younger figure blew gently on the pork before finally getting to eat it, then reached for the next piece to set on the black-domed grill, "Don't dwell on it. I'm sure Mikhail figured something out before they came here."

Tak...tak tak... Tak...

Konstantin hunched over the tiny Japanese desk in his tiny Japanese room, stylus in hand, and Mikhail's tablet in front of him. At least the Wifi signal was decent. It was no newspaper, but at least the screen displayed text that he could read.

With the meal over, and Yuri about to fall into a meat-coma, Viktor made the gestures to pay their tab and then hoisted his over-stuffed partner back to his feet. Coats were pulled over arms and shoulders, and scarves replaced, but just as Viktor had put his hand on the lower part of his husband's back to help guide him out, his attention turned over to the side again.

Minako had started laughing about something; her face was flushed and almost all the beer was gone, so the silver Russian had a good idea what was going on. Still, his curiosity was getting the better of him, and he stepped off after tapping Yuri's shoulder to make him aware of it.

Hazel eyes lifted and turned to see Viktor moving away, heading to that particular table by the wall, and Yuri slowly followed after, rubbing his over-full tummy as he went. By the time he caught up, all he could do was sleepily paw for the back of the man's coat, burying his face against it as he barely managed to wrap his arms around to hold himself up.

Viktor turned his head and smiled, twisting a little so Yuri's head was against his side instead, and pat his hair, "You ate too much."

"I ate waaaaayyyyy too much." He muttered in agreement, keeping his face hidden between the man's hip and his arm.

"He looks like he needs a nap." Mikhail chuckled, draining the very last drops from the last beer glass before he set it down, "Are you leaving?"
"Da."

"Where are you heading?"

The younger Russian rubbed his hand back and forth slowly across Yuri's shoulders as he answered, "Not sure. I was thinking we'd go check on Yurio. You know where he went today?"

Minako shrugged, "I'm guessing he went to the underground shopping center to pass the time. He took off pretty early this morning though. Haven't heard from him since." She leaned back in her chair and put a finger against her lip as she pondered, "I actually half-way thought he'd have caught up with you two already by now, so I was a tiny bit surprised when we didn't see him here when we spotted you guys."

Viktor shook his head, "We haven't heard from him, actually. We thought he'd stay with you guys until later. Ah well...I'm sure we'll find him. He thinks this city is boring so that shopping center is probably the only place he'd go to. Or maybe that big arcade thing that isn't actually an arcade."

"When are you heading to practice anyway?" The woman wondered, "The rink's been open all day for it, but it doesn't look like you've been there yet."

"No, we just went to registration to get our badges. We'll go to the rink later on. I didn't have my head in the game this morning." The Russian answered, resting his forearm on his partner's shoulders and gently thumbed the side of Yuri's head instead, playing idly with a few strands of hair, "Had other things on my mind."

Minako had set her chin against the back of her hand by then, and side-eyed Mikhail on the other end of the table.

The elder just cleared his throat nervously, "...Oh, well...yeah... I...ahem."

"What? I thought you'd be happier to know that Yuri and I finally had that long talk." Viktor shrugged, half-smiling to himself as he turned and started to pull the younger skater away, "We'll catch up with you after practice then maybe."

Grey-green eyes just blinked for a moment, but then went wide, and the man jumped up from the table to give chase quickly, "Vivi!"

Viktor paused and glanced back over his shoulder; Yuri grudgingly lifted his face from where he'd pinned it, and both watched as the elder Russian came around in front of them. Mikhail held there for a second, just looking at his nephew, but then reached his arms over the man's shoulders and hugged him. One hand pat Viktor's back, and he pulled away again, moving both hands to the side of his nephew's arms instead, "Ja goržus' toboj."

Wordlessly, the younger silver watched as Mikhail turned and went back the way he came.

"What'd he say...?" Yuri asked quietly, seeing as the elder set his hand gently to Minako's back, and leaned down to whisper something to her before he took his seat again, "That was weird."

"Not really." Viktor said, smiling and turning toward the exit again, nudging his partner along, "He's been bugging me for a while to tell you about my past. He just realized I did...so he said he's proud of me."
The underground shopping center appeared to be a bust. Yuri clicked out of his phone and sighed, "We've been trying to find him for two hours. Can't we just message him to ask him where he's actually at?"

"Mhhh..." Viktor grumbled, "I didn't want him to know we were coming. He wouldn't have to sit around waiting for us that way."

"What else would he be doing other than wait around? He could be back at the Leopalace hotel and we'd never see him." Yuri pointed out, pinning his phone between his fingers in front of his chin, "Pleeeasssssee let me call him. Phichit-kun's going to be here in 3 more hours, and by the time he's all settled in with Celestino, it'll be dinner-time, and then we all have to head to the rink anyway... There'll be less confusion and travel if we're all together to begin with."

"...Less confusion and travel?" Viktor echoed, confused.

"...Yurio's...staying with us...tonight...?"

"Oh." The Russian made a strange face, then laughed nervously.

"You forgot, didn't you?"

"I forgot."

"Viktor." Yuri gave him an exasperated look, then turned his face down at his phone to pull up the teen's contact information, "Here you were just saying early this morning that you had to make extra effort while you had the chance, because you knew we'd have company later."

The silver skater quietly chuckled to himself as he stepped closer, loosely wrapping his arms over his partner's shoulders as Yuri put his phone against his ear, "I would've done that anyway. It was a long week. I'll just have to figure something else out for tonight."

The shorter figure just huffed a laugh and rolled his eyes a little as he slipped one arm around his husband's back, then heard the dial-tone on his phone click and the Russian Punk's voice answer, "Hey Yuri, where are you? ...We're at the underground shopping center. ...No, we just ate like 2 hours ago, why? ...Oh, no, that's fine. We'll get you something. ...Okay, we'll figure out what train line to get on and we'll meet you there. See you soon." He pressed the small red button on the touchscreen and put his phone back into his back pocket, "He's at the arcade that isn't an arcade."

"That figures." Viktor nodded, pulling one arm off the front of his partner's frame and put that hand into his pocket casually instead, keeping the other where it was, "Let's go."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED EIGHT FOUR

Much to their surprise, getting to the Tanuki-Koji Shopping Arcade was a lot easier and faster than they'd thought it would be. Yuri glanced up at the awning covering the entrance-way, standing near where they'd come up through the Pole Town part of the underground shopping area.

"Yeah, there it is." He said, pointing across the street, "...Feels like this city was designed for moles or something."

"Makes it comfortable to walk around at this time of year, at any rate." Viktor shrugged, "Other than some underground train lines, St. Petersburg doesn't have anything like this."

"Is the cold bothering you? I brought a hat with me if you want it."

Another shrug, "It's fine, but I'll bet my ears are getting red." He huffed a quiet laugh as he pulled his free hand up to rub the left side, "Maybe we can stop at that café before we go on."

Nodding, Yuri looked around to check for traffic before the pair hustled across the street, moving through the glass doors and dusting off the snow that had collected on their shoulders during their brief excursion through the outdoors. The younger skater went to stand in line as Viktor held back to look at the menu, squinting his eyes a little as he tried to translate the Japanese text in his head.

"...You need a hand?" Yuri looked back, taking another step closer to the register.

The Russian put a finger on his lip, "It's interesting how they mix English and Japanese together like thi-" A few flashes from the side cut off his train of thought, and blue eyes turned, looking around but not sure what the source of the light pulses was. He shrugged and turned back around again, "...Ah...what was I saying?"

"English and Japanese? Pick what you want!" Yuri said with a bit more urgency, taking another step closer to the register.

"Are you getting anything?"

The younger figure looked back at the man; only 2 patrons away from the cashier. He had his mouth open to speak, but no words came out, seeing Viktor suddenly surrounded from behind by a small mob of people.

"What is it?"

Cameras clicked and flashes sparked, finally getting the taller man's attention, and he turned his head only to be bombarded by girlish squeals and a strobe-effect of picture-taking. Caught by surprise, Viktor entirely forgot about the menu board as he turned fully around to the admiration of his small gathering.

Yuri could hear him laughing happily as the small mob of 7 descended on him officially, a few holding out their paper event programs for the Russian to sign, others holding out photos, each one holding out a sharpie of some color or another. Viktor did his best to sign everything offered to him.
The younger skater just grumbled and turned back around, practically sinking into his jacket, face half-hidden behind his plush scarf. Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a red and gold fluff of fabric, and then squished most of his head inside the Calgary Flames beanie he'd been given back at Skate Canada, pulling it down past his ears on both sides. By the time he was done, aside from his glasses, he was unrecognizable.

The cashier certainly had no idea who he was, but it seemed he didn't know who Viktor was either, as the older teen glanced at the fanfare with a look of confusion on his face. The teen shook his head and looked at the disgruntled customer in front of him, but put on that pleasant sales-person face anyway, "Nomimono wa nani ni shimasu ka?"

"Chīsana kōhī to kōcha o kudasai."

A few taps against the touch-screen, and the order was placed, but the barista glanced up and past his customer at the Russian again, "Kare wa dare?"

Cherry-hazel eyes lifted a little, but then down again, "Viktor Nikiforov. Yūmeina figyasukētā desu."

"Dono yō ni otagai o shitte imasu ka?"

Yuri held up his ring hand, "Kekkon shite iru."

Brown eyes blinked, but then nodded, "Ah, sō ka. ...Namae wa?"

"Yuri desu." He answered quietly. He didn't even hear the total for the transaction, but handed his bank card over anyway, taking it and the receipt back a moment later and then stepping aside for the next person. He waited quietly at the end of the counter, still unwillingly listening to the mirth and excitement of the fan-mob closer to the entrance. It had died down a little bit by the time the drinks were set down on a small black tray, and the skater could pull them down to find a place to sit, but he was still a little disgruntled about the whole thing.

With the tray set down on the top of a wooden table, Yuri crossed his ankles under his seat and set his chin in the palms of his hands, watching quietly. He wondered silently how long it would take Viktor to realize the drinks were ready. After a minute, the skater pulled his phone out and grudgingly called his husband, glaring daggers at the mob that kept that silver head so well-hidden from his line of sight. No answer came to the phone though, which miffed Yuri quite a bit, so he pocketed the device and took a deep breath.

"VIKTOR."

Like a prairie-dog, or a desk-jockey sitting in a cubicle, the Russian's head suddenly popped up above the other heads around him, looking around nervously until he spotted the red and gold beanie on the other side of the room. The skater glanced back down at the small gathering around him and started apologizing with a smile, backing out through them and waving as he finally got loose, "I have to go now. Byebyee~!"

They took a few more pictures as he moved away, many waving back at him, and then finally trickled out of the cafe. Yuri just stared narrow eyes at them until they were gone.

"Yikes...you're really prickly all of a sudden." Viktor commented, taking his seat on the other side of the small table, "Everything okay?"

When the door closed, Yuri shook his head, suddenly rather aware of himself. He sighed and nodded, sitting upright and pulling his hands out of his coat pockets, one reaching up to pull the
beanie off his mop of messy black hair, the other reaching for his scarf to pull it loose, "...Sorry. It's nothing."

"Looked an awful lot like something." The Russian commented, looking down to reach for the ceramic cups in front of him, only to pause and smile brightly, "Wow~!"

"What?"

"Didn't you see?" He asked, looking up and removing his hand from where it had been over top of the cup, "Look."

Cherry-hazel eyes descended on the coffee, seeing an intricately designed carp image 'painted' into the velvet froth, "...Oh, wow. That's...shockingly detailed for coffee art."

"I got distracted a minute ago. Sorry for that." Viktor went on, sliding the black tray around on the table-top so as to make room, then setting the two cups and the small teapot onto the glossy wooden surface, "I kind of stranded you in line without ever answering your question."

"...It's fine." Yuri insisted, though not being all that convincing, "It's not like I don't know the kind of drinks you like."

The Russian picked up on it easily enough, "Seriously. What's the matter? You've never gotten like this over a bunch of fans before."

The younger skater just sunk into his coat again, "...It's stupid. I have no right to be jealous right now."

Viktor tilted his head a little, but then glanced around and stood up, moving to his husband's side of the table and yanking his chair out from the edge of it, turning it, and then moving to sit facing the man on the end of his knees. Hands went gently to the scarf still barely hanging around Yuri's shoulders and neck, moving it out of the way so fingers could touch skin, "Tell me."

"...Like I said, it's stupid."

"Tell me anyway."

Yuri's arms just sagged at his sides, and he looked aside anxiously, clenching his eyes shut for a moment before leaning forward to put his forehead against his partner's shoulder, "Everything's just been so stressful since I messed up my Short Program in China last Friday. Then you left on Saturday night to go back to Russia... I missed you so much, and then when I finally got you back, I saw that you'd brought your father with you, and now I just can't rest easy at all. I don't even want to close my eyes anymore because you'll be out of my sight again, even just to blink."

Viktor's heart hurt to hear the words, so he hugged the man a little tighter, "Wakatta."

"I guess...I'm just not ready to share you with other people again yet." Yuri went on, reaching his hands up to slip them into his husband's coat, sliding them around his sides to hold to his back, "I still need a minute to know that you're here and that you're okay."

"That's not stupid. The Russian said quietly, pressing his cheek to messy raven hair, "Your experience with all this has been completely different from mine. The only thing you know of my father is what you've seen and dealt with yourself. Being thrown by him at your first meeting, seeing me come back from the funeral with my face and eye all bloody... Going back with me to deal with things my mom left behind, and worrying at the end that the man might hit me a third time.
I should've fought harder to prevent him from coming. I guess...I just got pulled back into everything more than I thought I had." Viktor whispered, speaking the words gently to Yuri's ear, then pulling back a little, lightly sliding his fingers down his partner's jaw and pausing on his chin, thumb on his lower lip, "You asked me this morning if I had any good memories of my father, and I told you that I couldn't think of any. I don't know why, but his presence in my memories is...utterly benign and unremarkable. I don't know if he chose to be that way, or if I was just too focused on other things to really notice him, but when Uncle Mimi and I were back in Russia, after we got all our frustrations out, and I spent the night in the car...my father went back to giving off that weird, unremarkable affect that he used to have. I wouldn't go so far as to say he's harmless...far from it...but I feel like he's in a place where he's just observing now. I don't feel like he's a threat." He slid his left hand down Yuri's right arm, finding that hand and pulling it out, kissing the ring thereupon, "This is more important to me than anything though. Until you feel better again, I'll try to keep a low profile, okay? I can't stop all the fanfare, given what we do and what we're here for, and all the other people who are here for the exact same reason, but I'll do what I can."

"...I feel kind of dumb having to ask you to do that for me..." Yuri said nervously, keeping his eyes low.

"It's not dumb." Viktor insisted, nudging a finger against the man's cheek to get him to look up again, peering into those brown eyes before leaning forward to kiss him lightly. "Your feelings mean more to me than anything else, and since you're unsettled, I want to do something about it. If that means I have to politely refuse my fans for a little while, then I'll do it without hesitation. They'll just have to get over it. Now..." Another quick kiss, and the Russian reached his free right hand towards his coffee, "...We should probably drink these before they get cold."

The younger skater nodded, seeing out the corner of his eye as his husband took a light sip of his latte. He pulled his hand free from the Russian's gentle grasp, and returned it to the man's back, inside the heavy winter coat. His fingers clenched to the soft Kashmir sweater, and buried his face against the man's chest, holding there until he was sure he wouldn't cry.

Thirty minutes passed, but Yurio finally arrived at the café on his own, having been instructed by his former rink-mate to meet them there. Yuri quickly rose from the table to greet the teen, giving and getting his customary hug before waiting in line with him.

"So why do they even bother calling this place an arcade if there's no arcade here?" The blonde grumbled, "It's just a shit-ton of little pharmacies and outlet stores."

"I think it's because of the Pachinko parlor..." Yuri offered, "But why they'd call the entire place an arcade because of one gambling den is beyond me. What do you want to eat anyway?"

"Whatever sandwich they have that doesn't have weird stuff in it."

The older figure gave him a look, "...What do you consider weird these days?"

"Relish."

"You don't like relish?" Another step towards the counter; one patron to go.

"On a sandwich, it's weird. You don't put mustard on ice cream do you?"

"Only sometimes." Yuri teased.

"Gross."
"I'm kidding."

Yurio glanced around the establishment as the older skater got up to the counter, spotting Viktor not far off, twiddling around on his phone. He looked normal for a moment, but then his face contorted into an expression that looked worried. The teen nudged Yuri with an elbow, "What's gotten into him?"

"Nothing?" He answered, turning to hand his card off again, "Why?"

"I'm gonna go find out."

"Eh? But nothing's wrong." Yuri insisted in a confused tone, getting his card back and stepping over to the other counter to wait. He muttered a little under his breath, "...Oh, no, Yurio...I don't mind paying for and carrying your food to you...not at all..."

"Oi." The blonde said suddenly, getting up to the table and pulling a spare chair over from a nearby set.

"Oh hey. Glad you made it." The silver Russian said, a bit absently, "Did you have fun here?"

"You look like someone just kicked your dog."

"...Is it that obvious?" Viktor sighed, setting his phone down, "Yakov is coming to NHK."

"Yeah, it's Baba's last event before the Final." Yurio quirked a brow, "Didn't you know?"

"I haven't really kept track of anyone else's events beyond mine and Yuri's." Slate eyes turned to find the third skater, seeing Yuri pulling another black tray off the counter and coming back around. With the tray on the table, Yuri nudged it over towards the teen, "See? I told you, nothing's wrong."

"Viktor seems to think something is." He answered curtly, twisting on his chair to start reaching for the sandwich now in front of him, "Tell him."

Viktor huffed a sigh and looked at his husband as he sat, "Yakov just arrived in Sapporo with Mila."

"...Okay?"

"Don't you remember what she said before...?"

"Oh my God it's true." Mila said suddenly, pointing at them, though mostly pointing at Viktor, "Someone beat you up!"

Viktor narrowed his eyes...eye..., "...I...can't even..."

She came rushing up to him and grabbed him by his shoulders, "Who did this!? I'll hurt them ten times worse! I did warn you this would happen! I told you in Barcelona, didn't I!?"

Viktor tried to calm her, waving one hand in a downward motion like he wanted to turn her volume down if he could, "Relax, it's fine, nothing happened."

"You're wearing an eye-patch like a damn pirate!" She argued, "Someone punched you in the face and I mean to break theirs for it!"
"...Oh...right..." Yuri grimaced, "...Well, my money's on her."

Viktor couldn't help but laugh at that, but then buried his face in his hands and whined dramatically, "...This weekend...is going to be the end of me..."

"Well, she doesn't really know what happened back then..." The younger skater pointed out, reaching across the table to pull at one of the man's sleeves, "So as long as you don't tell her, she won't make the connection."

"Are you kidding?" Yurio asked, lettuce shreds stuck to his face, "You two walk around like a billboard saying 'hey everyone, look at us, something's wrong, please inquire within.' She's going to take one look at Viktor, and the look on his face when Konstantin's nearby, and she'll put the pieces together faster than you can stack a nesting doll."

The two older skaters glanced at one another, then lowered down to put their faces in their folded arms on the tabletop, "...Whyyyyy..."

"We could always avoid them." The blonde suggested, taking another big bite out of the sandwich, "I've been avoiding people all day. It's easy."

"Who are you trying to avoid? Your fanclub isn't here." Yuri wondered, lifting his eyes from where they'd been hidden in the crook of his elbows.

"Mikhail and Okukawa." He answered simply, "They've been weird since way early this morning."

"...We ran into them at the Beer Museum. They seemed pretty normal." Viktor pointed out, then leaning over to rest a forearm on the blonde's shoulder, "Well, aside from how they're official now."

"I KNOOOOWWWWWW." Yurio groaned, bits of food flying out of his mouth, "IT'S SO ANNOYING."

Yuri chortled against his coat sleeves, "Minako-sensei said you took off. I guess it's cuz they chased you from the room or something so they could have it to themselves?"

The older Russian huffed and sat back upright, taking his arm back as he went and looking marginally uncomfortable. Like before, Yuri noted it, but didn't pry.

"Not exactly." Yurio said, drawing the middle skater's attention back, "I was asleep. I guess they woke up at some point cuz Mikhail was in the chair before, and Okukawa split the bed with me. But when they woke me up, they were together, practically using the bed like a damn trampoline."

Yuri drew in a breath and laughed quietly to himself, "You mean, they got into bed."

"Use whatever semantics you want...it was obvious they didn't want me in the room after that. I was supposed to spend the night with them because you two were gonna be banging, but then I got chased out so they could bang. Am I the only one with other things on my mind around here? Jesus." The teen complained bitterly.

The raven-haired skater sat upright and leaned back into his chair, "Maybe you should find someone."

"Yeah, cuz girls are just falling out of the sky." Green eyes leveled at the man, almost scoffing in their own right, "I have better things to worry about."
"What about Otabe-"

"DON'T EVEN." The teen was up on his feet already. "We're friends. Just cuz you two turned gay for each other doesn't mean everyone else is going to."

Yuri felt like the blast of hot air could've knocked him right back out of his chair and onto the floor. He reached up to set his glasses and spiky bangs back in place, "I didn't...mean it like it was a bad thing, sheesh..."

"Me thinks the lady doth protest too much." Viktor teased.

"Call me a lady again!" Yurio challenged, getting into the silver Russian's face, though only finding a smile and a laugh coming back at him. He grudgingly took his seat and reached for the last bit of food on his tray, popping it into his mouth, "Otabek's cool. He's got motorcycles and DJs rock music, and he treats me like a brother. We're like war buddies or something. It's better than what you two are."

"We're your SkateDads." Viktor clarified, "Very different."

"You're annoying."

The older Russian just pat the teen's shoulder endearingly, "If we ever stop being annoying, we aren't doing our jobs."

Chapter End Notes

Nomimono wa nani ni shimasu ka? = What would you like to drink?
Chīsana kōhī to kōcha o kudasai. = Small coffee and black tea please.
Kare wa dare? = Who is he?
Dono yō ni otagai o shitte imasu ka? = How do you know each other?
Kekkon shite iru. = We're married.
Ah, sō ka. ...Namae wa? = Ah, I see. ...Your name?
Wakatta. = I know/understand.
Chapter 185

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY FIVE

Braving the cold once again, the time had come to depart for the airport. Disinterested in going, however, Yurio departed on his own.

"I'll just meet you when you get back." He shrugged, standing outside the Excelsior Café once he'd finished eating, snow falling all around and caking the landscape and everyone in it in a flecked layer of white fluff, "I don't have a lot of stuff in Mikhail's room anyway. I left most of it in yours."

"Oh." Yuri deadpanned the teen, "I didn't notice."

"Yeah I left all my skating gear with you. No sense dragging it all over this city when the only reason I'm moving around is because no one planned on me being here."

"Maybe you can stay with Yakov and Mila." Viktor suggested, looking entirely less than his usual majestic self with Yuri's Flames beanie on his head, "I doubt they'd mind."

"Eh."

"Eh?"

"Eh." The teen repeated, "I'd sooner room with your pops than with that horny toad."

Yuri gave a look that was a mixture of horror, confusion, and surprise, "...Horny toad?"

"Mila. She gets clingy. Makes me crazy."

"Why would you say you'd sooner room with my father than with people you know...?" Viktor asked, less confused and more defensive.

"Because he's quiet." Yurio answered with a shrug, "He barely said a word to me this morning unless he had to."

Yuri could feel where his partner's hand was clenching a little harder around his own, likely without realizing, so he gave it a deliberate squeeze to make him more aware of it, then turned to the blonde standing on the curb, "Can't you just say what you two were doing in each other's company without being evasive?"

Yurio rolled his green eyes, "It was close to 5:30am when I got chased from the hotel room. I spent an hour dozing in the lobby and then went to the restaurant buffet for breakfast. Old Man Nikiforov seems to be an early riser so he ended up down there on his own around the same time. I watched him for a bit but then realized he was having trouble figuring the place out, so I helped him."

"...Why would you help a guy you barely know? Especially since the only thing you do know about him is what you've seen yourself." Viktor asked stiffly, entirely not liking where that story was going.

"Same reason I defended you at the RSF conference last year, after you and Katsudon moved to St. Petersburg." He answered, leaning back on one foot to stand more casually, staring up at his much-taller counterpart, "It was less about my approval of either you or him, than it was about my not wanting a fellow Russian to be seen as weak. Your pops is a big, ugly fish out of water here, and
like some other certain people around here, he's too proud to ask for help, so I forced it on him so he wouldn't look stupid in front of all these foreigners."

Viktor grimaced at him, "You're one to talk."

"I never said you were the one I was referring to." The teen shrugged again and spun on his heel, heading to the edge of the street and glancing down both ways, "I don't know your dad that well, but h-"

"He's not my dad." The older Russian corrected curtly, "You have to earn that title. He's just my father. There's a difference."

Green eyes turned back to glance past the edge of that black hoodie and some strands of pale blonde hair, one eye squinting a little as the teen gave Viktor a look, "...Whatever floats your boat. My point was, Konstantin seems to have started to pull that giant stick out of his ass, so at least this morning, he wasn't entirely as insufferable as he was the last time I saw him."

Viktor drew in a long breath and exhaled slowly, turning his blue eyes towards the interior of the shopping center, "I'd really rather you not spend time alone with him."

"We weren't alone. There were other people around."

The older Russian wasn’t going to argue semantics, so instead of picking a fight over it, he simply started to step away, pulling Yuri along with him, "Let's get going."

"Ah, wait...Viktor..." The younger figure protested slightly, reaching back with his free hand towards Yurio. When the teen came closer, Yuri pulled him into the expected hug, but held there a moment, whispering into his ear, "I get that you want to look like you're strong and in control, as though all these personal problems are beneath you...but please try not to antagonize Viktor by talking about his father like what happened to him is irrelevant. It's a really tense situation and the last thing he needs is to feel like his own friends are picking sides."

"...I'm not picking sides. I was just saying-"

"I know." Yuri cut him off, still holding on, "But when you talk about Konstantin as though he's no different than any other old man you know, it belittles what Viktor's gone through. Konstantin isn't like Yakov or Mikhail or your grandpa. He's an outsider. We're allowing him the chance to see our world, since Mikhail shoe-horned him into all this, but we're not necessarily welcoming him into it."

Yurio scoffed a little, but then turned his head slightly away, "...Fine."

"Thanks."

Viktor watched quietly, unable to hear what was being said, but seeing that it was over, whatever it was. Yuri drew closer to him again as he let the teen go.

"So what are your plans until later?"

The blonde looked back again, "Wander around some more. I'm sure there has to be something around this place that's interesting." He waved and started heading across the street to the next section of the shopping arcade, "Thanks for lunch, Katsudon."

"Mh." Yuri raised his hand to wave, "Call us when you want into the room."

Within a few seconds, the youngest skater was already vanished into the next crowd, and the pair
started making their way in the opposite direction, going through the massive, covered outdoor hallway with its dozens of little shops on each side. The walk was quiet between them for a little while, neither of the pair having much to say.

Viktor eventually reached up with his free hand to pull the edge of the beanie down to just over the tops of his eyes, pulling Yuri's hand into his pocket at the same time, warming it against the winter cold. He kept his sights ahead though, only finally relaxing a little bit again when they were halfway between the different connecting streets, "...What'd you tell him?"

"To behave himself."

Slate eyes blinked at the shorter figure, but then warmed a little as the Russian turned to face the direction they were walking again. He stepped a little closer to brush their shoulders together, "Thanks."

Snow was coming down even harder than before, and the sky was getting darker as the sun set through the cloudy grey-blue sky. The airport train pulled into the terminal, coming to an easy stop inside the underground terminal, the doors screeching open to let everyone unload.

Viktor stepped out first, pulling Yuri along behind him as they squeezed through the crowd. By then, he'd managed to get a different hat; dark blue and 3 feet long with a fancy tassel at the tip where it swung behind his back. Making it more fun, though, was the fact that it had a series of triangular 'spikes' coming off the top and going down the length of it, making it look like a dragon's tail; it even had comical droopy dragon ears hanging from the sides. If nothing else, people would stare at the hat and entirely not notice the man wearing it, which was half of why the Russian chose to wear it in the first place, honoring his word to keep under the radar.

Yuri had reclaimed the Calgary Flames beanie for himself by then, but as soon as they had disembarked and had found seats in the waiting area, he pulled it off and stuffed it back into his jacket. He looked around the area nervously, glancing at and examining every face that passed him by.

"We're really early." Viktor said, grabbing the young skater's attention, "He won't even land for another hour at least, assuming the snow doesn't delay the plane."

Yuri grumbled and slouched in his seat, "Starting to think we should've just gone straight to Hasetsu instead of waiting."

"Well, our boredom will only last a little while longer. Once your friend gets here, it'll be a whirlwind of stuff to do."

"You're still up to helping Phichit-kun with his new quad?" The younger figure wondered, leaning his head against the man's shoulder, "We'll only have tonight and tomorrow morning before NHK actually starts."

"Of course." The Russian answered easily enough, reaching up and back to playfully wind the length of his dragon-tail hat around his husband's shoulders and neck, letting the tassel at the end hang in front, "It'll be fun to see if I can coach someone that I'm not in love with."
"You make it sound like all you had to do to get me onto the podium was seduce me up there."

"Didn't I, though?" Viktor mused, "You said you've been chasing me for half your life."

"I guess that's true."

"It's almost been a year since we got engaged, too." The silver skater went on, thumbing at his ring as well as he could given how his fingers were laced through his partner's, "The whole Grand Prix Series means so much more now than it used to."

"Agreed." Yuri nodded, rubbing his cheek against the woolen coat, "Something's been bothering me though."

"What's that?"

"The way you cringe and go quiet whenever the situation between Minako-sensei and Uncle Mikhail comes up." He explained, "You've done it twice today alone. I thought you'd gotten past all that."

Viktor went quiet at that as well, looking vacantly straight ahead. After a moment, he grit his teeth and shifted where he sat, "For a little while, after Bordeaux, I had let myself stop caring about him getting so woven into this life I have with you. It took that long just to call him something other than Uncle. But then I just... It's hard to describe."

"Try."

The Russian stewed in his desire not to, but Yuri's voice urged him on, "When was the last time he saw or talked to his kids?"

Yuri was caught off guard by the question, blanching a little as he thought, "...Including Skate Canada or no...?"

"No."

"I dunno, not since summer I guess? ...Actually...I forget if he went back. All I remember is the stuff he did with Minako-sensei and Yurio in Russia."

"Exactly."

"...I don't follow."

"I'm just nervous about the future, given the past." Viktor said stiffly, drawing in another long breath, "There's only two ways it can go down."

"Only two...?" Yuri lifted his head a bit and sat up a little straighter, "Why only two?"

"History either repeats itself..." The silver Russian explained, then turning azure eyes towards his husband, "...Or it pays you back. I'm not sure which one makes me more nervous."

"I don't think it's like that at all..." The younger figure said, twisting on his seat, leaning a shoulder against the back-rest to look at his partner more easily, "Mikhail's been working really hard at all this. He's trying to make up for the mistakes he made. Why would he give all that up by running away again?"

"...The way he talked about his kid in Calgary." Viktor said, remembering the tense confrontation and the aftermath like it had happened only the day before, "Whatever his name was...the boy."
"Sergio."

"Yeah, that one." He nodded, "Uncle Mimi said that Sergio's lovely opinion of us came from his mother. The one that got cured of cancer and lost her mind after. Uncle Mimi himself has always been entirely on board with the way we are, and yet somehow, he wasn't able to instill that value into his own kid enough that when he left, it stuck."

"The daughters seemed okay." Yuri offered, "Well, at least Nikkita... I can't entirely be sure about Viktoria. She didn't say much, least not to either of us."

"...The fact that you remember their names after hearing them once is baffling."

"The fact that you don't is really telling about how you feel about your own family, immediate and extended." The younger figure pointed out, "But that doesn't really explain why you finally got over your reservations about Mikhail, only to regain them 2 weeks later. What happened in Russia that would make you feel like that again...?"

"...All that unwanted remembering I did." Viktor said anxiously, "I was forced to really confront everything that happened way back in the past, and try to reconcile it with the way things are now. It didn't really hit me like some revelation though. It just kind of crept into my head like a rat sneaking onto a boat, making trouble unseen and being a nuisance, getting worse and worse until someone finally spots it. It just became really obvious when we saw him and Minako-sensei at the Beer Garden earlier. I don't want him to hurt her."

"Oh..."

"Minako is really protective of the both of us." The Russian went on, slowly stroking his thumb back and forth across the side of his partner's fingers, more to sooth himself than anything else, "That's what she was whispering to me about last night before she and Yurio left. She's worried about how Konstantin will impact us, but I'm worried about how Mikhail will impact her. I just...haven't said anything about it to her."

"...I think that's the first time I've heard you say his whole name since you first saw him at the St. Petersburg Skate Club. This must really be bothering you."

"It's like I told you way back last year... Your family is my family. Forget and ignore the rest. My...blood relations seem to be a lot of trouble, no matter their intentions. The way Uncle Mimi just drops people when things don't go his way...he did it to me, he did it to my mom, his own sister...he did it to his own kids... Why would Minako be any different?"

"I think it would be best if we let her worry about that." Yuri suggested, "Yurio says they chased him from the hotel room so they could do stuff, but I really seriously doubt that's actually what happened. He was just being selfish and dramatic. Minako-sensei is strong and knows what she wants. She doesn't need him. She'll make Mikhail put effort into this, see how bad he wants it to work between them, before really letting him close. Plus, it's still his fault that your father is here at NHK, and I don't think one night or one conversation is going to be enough to redeem him. Not entirely."

"Mhh..."

"She's been on this earth twice as long as I have." Yuri continued, leaning forward to press his nose and mouth against the Russian's shoulder, "If anyone knows what to do or how to handle it, it's her. She'll drop-kick him if he does anything dumb."
"Still. I'm just really apprehensive about the whole thing. I know it's not my business, but I can't get rid of this nagging feeling that something's going to happen."

Hazel eyes drifted up a little, seeing the worried look on Viktor's face. He waited a moment, but then lifted his head and leaned in a little closer again, brushing the tip of his nose against the Russian's ear where it poked out from under the edge of the plush felt hat, "...I really hope that's not another one of your weird predictions that come true."

"Me too."

The following two hours went by at a snail's pace, passed by watching videos or playing games on their phones, idly scrolling through Instagram, and a brief but uplifting FaceTime call back to Yu-Topia. Viktor felt infinitely better after Mari had gone to find Makkachin and put the big brown woofer on the screen, especially after the poodle heard his human's voice and went bonkers for it.

Yuri was sure his partner would stay on the phone for the rest of the night if he was allowed, just chatting with his dog for the first time since they'd left for their Grand Prix Adventure a month prior. But the bustle and hustle of the hot-springs resort required the call be cut short, and Mari, along with the two senior Katsukis, waved good luck and goodbye before having to disconnect the call. Just as Yuri was about to suggest calling the Nishigoris, he heard the familiar call of his own name.

"Yuri!"

"Ah! Phichit-kun!" The skater was up on his feet, all but dragging his partner out of his seat and rushing over to the wide, open gateway.

It was almost absurd that Phichit could possibly have found a hat that was even more silly than Viktor's, but having fashioned a big plush hamster-head-hat from fluff and felt, the Thai skater seemed to have managed anyway. Before Yuri could even do his proper greeting, Phichit had already whipped a second hamster-hat from his carry bag and squished it over his older friend's head with a laugh.

"There!"

"W-What-"

"I've started working on promoting skating back home! You get an honorary first-hat since you've been there since I first got ideas about it!" Phichit explained excitedly, even grabbing a third hat from his bag and squishing it down on top of Viktor's head as well, right on top of the dragon-tail spikes, "I made one for you too as thanks!"

"Oh~!" The Russian mused, adjusting the hat a little so it wouldn't feel so lopsided, "This is neat!" He tilted his head and gave a confused but happy look, "...What is it?"

"It's a hamster, Viktor." Yuri explained with a quiet chuckle, "Phichit-kun keeps them as pets."

"I made one for Ciao-Ciao but he won't wear it in public." The Thai skater sighed dramatically, but then laughed again anyway, "He said he'd wear during the medaling ceremony it if I won gold this weekend, but I reminded him that Viktor's competing...so he agreed to wear it if I got silver. I'm just glad you're not competing this weekend, too, Yuri! I still can't believe your come-back at Cup of China! How's your leg after your SP anyway...? Mine hurt to see you hit the rink wall like that...you crashed into it like a freight train."

"...Still a little sore if I bump into something, but it'll be healed by the Final. I'm rooting for you to get in again."
"Well, thanks to you guys, I'll be getting to go to Detroit even if I don't make it into the Final Six..."
Phichit got a little more serious, though he was still smiling brightly, and he bowed his head, "So thank you for that. Now I can skate easy without worrying that I'll have to watch you from home if I don't."

"Let's go find Ciao-Ciao and get your things." Yuri said excitedly, "We've got work to do before the night's over!"
Picking Celestino out of a crowd wasn't all that difficult. He was at the baggage claim area with two small carry-bags on his shoulder, waiting for the plane to start unloading its cargo, patiently standing amidst a large 

impatient crowd. Finally, the carousel turned on, the rotating metal plates moving along their belts.

"Ciao Ciao!" Phichit called out, "Look who I found!"

Bright green eyes turned to the sound of the younger man's voice, seeing a train of skaters being dragged quickly through the waiting area. He squinted a little to look at their faces.

Phichit...Yuri...who is...? Oh.

"Almost didn't recognize you for a second there, Viktor." The older coach mused, waving at them, "It's not like you to cover your head. Trying to avoid someone?"

Yuri blanched quietly between Phichit and his partner as Celestino seemed to look entirely past him.

Viktor pulled the hamster-hat off first, then the dragon-tail hat, and shook out the static that made his hair stand on end, but then shrugged and smiled in his usual friendly way, "Not really, just keeping my ears warm." He pulled his hand free from Yuri's only long enough to wrap that arm over the man's shoulders and lean against his back, "Coach's orders to not get sick, since I refuse to wear those surgical masks like he does."

"It's an east Asia thing. Phichit does it too sometimes." Celestino explained, casting his gaze onto his former student finally, "You've done really well for yourself, Yuri. Congrats on your gold medals."

"Thanks!" The Japanese figure bowed his head gratefully, glad his former coach had taken notice of him, "I wasn't actually sure I'd make it at the end."

"How do you feel about going back to Detroit after 2 years?"

"Excited!" Yuri said emphatically, "I never thought I'd get to go back...so going there for the Final this year after losing it so bad in Sochi before, it feels like some things are coming full circle. I'm really hoping Phichit-kun gets to compete there with me."

Celestino nodded, then turned his eyes back towards the Russian skater-coach, "Think you can go easy on the competition this go 'round? With that hat, you're really becoming a dragon sitting on a mountain of gold back home."

Viktor just grinned, setting his other arm around his husband's frame, clinging to his back, "If I'm a dragon, then you know I can't let any gold escape my clutches. If I sees it, I needs it."

"Well, it was worth a shot."

Phichit moved off as he saw his luggage sliding down the ramp and onto the moving belts, "Viktor said he'd help me land a quad Loop!"

The Italian seemed to go a little pale, then turned his curly-haired head back to his apparent competition, "You're not poaching are you? I'll be out of a job if you keep stealing my skaters."
Viktor just laughed at that, "Only this one." He nudged his partner from side to side a little, "I'm just going to offer pointers since Yuri asked me to."

The younger skater just raised his fingers in an anxious but well-meaning wave where he held his hands to the Russian's arms, giving a nervous smile, "Phichit-kun said he's having trouble landing the Loop, and I know he sometimes watches clips of Viktor's old programs for help... So, since Viktor's actually available to me, why wouldn't I ask him this favor?"

The coach's eyes got dark, and for a moment, Yuri could've sworn he was 30 feet tall suddenly, "...Are you saying I'm a bad coach?"

The skater's head thrashed back and forth in a panic, "N-no no! No way! It's just pointers between friends!" He pulled free of his husband's arms for a moment and went to the ground, face to the floor as he rubbed his hands together over his head, "I'm sorry! I didn't mean it like that!"

Viktor just put a finger against his cheek as he watched, curling his free arm around himself to prop that elbow onto it, and smiled awkwardly, "...Haven't seen you do a downward dogeza in a while. Get it? Downward dog-eza?" He thought he was hilarious, "It's kind of like the yoga pose."

"It's nothing like the yoga pose!" Yuri just grimaced at him from the floor, "Downward dog looks like this." He demonstrated, hands on the floor and butt going into the air, only to realize Viktor was beaming at him suddenly and went back down again, "I'm trying to be sincere!"

The Russian continued grinning, moving his hands around to pull the dragon-tail felt hat back down over his fluffed-up head before reaching down to pull his husband back up to his feet, "And you did a very good job." He nuzzled close affectionately and pointed at the older man, "See? He totally forgives you."

Celestino just glowered at them awkwardly, entirely unsure how to respond to that. Thankfully, he was saved by his one remaining student coming back with their bags, and he turned his head as Phichit came close again, dragging several stacked suitcases behind him, "Is that all of them?"

"Yup, all five. They call came down the chute together, luckily, so we can get out of here." The Thai skater answered, his hamster-hat slightly lopsided on his head.

"There, you see it?" Yuri wondered, stepping out from the underground subway station and pointing southward down the street, "Barely a five minute walk from here."

"Wow! It really does look like a modern Tower of Pisa, just...without the terrifying lean!" Phichit said excitedly, dropping his one big suitcase at his feet after hauling it up the stairs, "What floor are you guys on?"

"Close to the top. Viktor likes having a view."

"Neh, Yuri...I'm getting hungry." The aforementioned Russian said, tugging a little on his husband's sleeve, "We should go somewhere to eat."

"...Isn't there a restaurant inside the hotel?" Phichit wondered; the group started moving to cross the street, heading in the direction of the Sapporo Prince, "We'll be there anyway, so let's just eat real
quick and head to the rink."

"Sapporo's short-list of claims to fame include a bunch of really neat ramen places." Viktor pointed out, "You want to skip them for hotel fare?"

Celestino looked back over his shoulder, dragging his two rolling suitcases behind him, one handle in each hand, "The last time we went out to eat with you two, I got food poisoning. We'll eat at the hotel."

The Russian sighed dramatically, "You're no fun, Ciao Ciao... You only live once!"

"Exactly. I'd prefer to keep on living for as long as I can."

Yuri just quietly smiled to himself as he listened to the banter, but paused as they arrived at the intersection of Ishiyama Dori and 10 & 11 Chome. The Sapporo Prince Hotel was on the opposite corner, but Yuri's eyes went to the east.

"What is it?" Viktor wondered quietly, looking the same way curiously.

"Shouldn't we tell Yurio that we're back? He's been up almost as long as we have been, and he hasn't had down-time...if we leave without him to go to the rink, he might fall asleep in the wrong room or place and never get over here."

"He once fell asleep at a bus station in Moscow and woke up covered in cats. He'll be fine."

"...But the Leopalace is right there." Yuri pointed at it; the building was barely more than two blocks away, "We could just go there and get him."

"Assuming he's there."

"So I'll text him." The younger skater said, pulling his phone out and doing just that, "Even if he's still at the shopping arcade, it's just a bit further down the road. He could run over while we walk."

"Are you guys coming?" Celestino asked, looking a bit impatient in the cold, "Or can we go ahead?"

It seemed the coach had spoken too soon...before he knew it, he was in possession of all five suitcases and two-carry bags, and the three skaters were walking away from the Sapporo Prince. Celestino just gawked at them as they got further and further away with each step.

"Thanks for checking us in, Ciao Ciao! We'll be back in a few minutes!" Phichit said happily, waving as he walked backwards, then spinning on his heel to face forward again and keep going. He nervously leaned in close towards Yuri, "...I feel really bad doing that, actually..."

"That's why they get paid." Viktor pointed out, walking on Yuri's other side, "Besides, the hotel's right across the street...and there's bellhops right inside to help with luggage. He'll be fine."

The Leopalace Hotel was barely another 5 minutes down the street, but the growing chill of the evening made it feel like much farther. Yuri was forced to pull out his Flames beanie again to protect his ears as the snow started to flurry around them, whipping scarves and reddening cheeks and noses. It was a blisteringly warm relief to finally get inside the doors. Viktor pulled it open and held it there as Phichit jumped through first, followed by Yuri, then Viktor himself, keeping a hand against his husband's back as they went.

"BRRRR!" The Thai skater hollered, hugging his arms around himself, laughing as he shook off all the snow that had clung to his coat and hat, "It's been a while since we had a real snow storm like
"There is." Yuri answered, pulling the beanie off to shake it out quickly, then putting it back into his pocket, "And thankfully it's not that far. The road we walked down before turning to come here...the rink is actually just a ways further down, across the river."

"It's almost stifling in here." Viktor complained quietly, "The rink will be a nice break from both extremes."

"Yeah." The younger skater agreed, reaching back to dust the snow off his husband's shoulders as he pulled the dragon-tail hat off again and straightened his hair, "At least Yurio doesn't have a lot of stuff. We'll be in and out and back at the Sapporo Prince in 15 minutes tops."

"So he's here?"

"Yeah, he said he was walking in when I messaged him. The weather was turning so he decided to come back early."

"Isn't that him up there?" Phichit wondered, pointing towards a certain blond-haired head that was half-hidden under a hoodie and behind a wall on the second floor, "...Wait, no, maybe that's a girl...

"No," Yuri laughed, trying not to be loud, "That's him. He let his hair grow out."

The Thai figure huffed to himself nervously, then whispered back at his friend behind his hand, "Don't tell him I got confused. He'll yell at me like he did at you that one time."

"Just don't let him corner you in a bathroom." The older skater whispered back, only to suddenly feel his partner retaking his hand and holding tight. Cherry-hazel eyes glanced back for a moment, but then returned to where Yurio was finally coming down the stairs, waving at them as it seemed like he'd departed from some unseen person behind the corner of the wall.

"Sorry, I forgot something and had to go back up." The teen was saying as he came down, adjusting the backpack straps on his left shoulder, "Looks like it's getting bad out there."

"Yeah, hopefully it'll die down again by the time we're ready to go to the rink. We missed the whole day so we need to get out there." Yuri answered, "Do you want to come with after we're done with dinner?"

"Eh, sure, nothing else to do."

"Be careful out there," Came another voice.

The trio looked up, behind where Yurio was still coming down the long flight, spotting another silver-haired head at the top of the stairs.

"Weather report looks pretty lousy for tonight."

Seeing Mikhail up there made Yuri feel strangely nervous. Not even spotting Minako a moment later would calm the odd feeling in his gut.

"Are you guys finally going to go practice?" She asked, coming down the stairs, but staying on the level platform where the stairs changed direction in a U-turn to go back towards the registration counters, "Will the shuttles still run in this weather? Maybe you should buckle down for the night."

"For this?" Yuri thumbed back towards the doors, the snow coming down a little harder than it
had been a moment before, "...It's hardly the worst snowstorm any of us have seen."

"If the shuttles stop, I'll laugh." Viktor huffed, trying to keep up his normal affect, "In Russia, we keep moving even if the snowfall is 10 times worse."

"In Japan...the snow stops the shuttles. But in Soviet Russia..." Phichit joked, giving his best Russian accent, "...Shuttle stop snow."

"Oh stop." Yuri teased, "You makes it sound like the shuttles are just so angry out there that they stop in the middle of the road and yell at the sky to knock it off."

"...Does it work?"

The skater paused, but then gave a more serious look and nodded, "Every single time."

"I KNEW IT."

"Are we going to go or not?" Yurio interrupted, coming down the last few white-marble steps to get to the lower part of the lobby.

"Yeah, we probably sh-" Yuri's voice was cut off as he suddenly felt his free hand get yanked forward, dragging Viktor along in turn with a quick jerk as he stumbled. A second later, he heard the telltale click of a camera phone taking a picture, and Phichit was grinning at him.

"Sorry, I saw the thing there and I couldn't help myself. It's the first selfie I've taken here!" The younger skater said excitedly, the snow-bush-purple-tree display just behind him. He was thumbing around on his device to post the picture online already, "Hashtag #Sapporo, #SkateBrothers, #NHK...what else...?"

"You're getting quite the list of titles, Yuri." Viktor pointed out, regaining his posture after the unexpected pull, and moving towards the doors with a subtle urgency that only the younger figure could sense. "SkateHusband, SkateDad...SkateBrother...what's next?"

"SkateCicle, after we get back outside." He answered, following quickly after. He felt his hand getting pulled forward and into the Russian's coat pocket, finding the man only stopping just shy of the doors to try and pull his hat back on with his free hand. Yuri turned his head, looking at the small gathered group that was hopping to catch up, and then up at Minako on the banister, "We'll see you guys tomorrow."

"If we don't see you before Opening Ceremonies, we'll just meet up with you after the Short Program." She said, waving after them, "Davai, Viktor!"

Blue eyes turned towards her, as though he hadn't expected to be singled out at that moment, but he put on a smile anyway and waved back at her, "Spasibo." The hat wasn't going on as easily one-handed as he'd hoped, so he reluctantly let go of his husband and pulled it down before pushing through the doors, the cold blustering its windy way through to chill the skaters as soon as they felt it.

Yuri waved and then quickly tried to pull his beanie back on again, chasing after his partner without another word.

Minako blinked curiously, looking back as she felt Mikhail's shadow coming up behind her, "That was weird."

"Yeah, a little." He agreed, "Oh well, they're on their way. I'm sure he'll be fine once he's on the ice."
The cold snowy wind was blowing right in their faces, and the Sapporo Prince was barely a grey blob in the distance, only really visible because of the lights that were on within its exterior. Yuri could feel his hat starting to slip, and one good gust pushed it right off his head, falling into the snow-heap just behind Phichit's feet. Neither of the Russians would slow down though, continuing the forward march towards the hotel like it was just another day in St. Petersburg.

"W-Wait, Viktor!" Yuri called out, pulling on the man's hand to try and go back.

The silver skater stopped only for a moment, reaching up with his free hand to yank the dragon-tail off his head, and plopped it down on Yuri's messy black hair, "Here."

"...What about you?" The younger man asked nervously, moving his own free hand up to help pull the hat down, with Viktor doing the same on the other side until it was evenly covering both ears.

"Me?" The Russian echoed, looking at all the falling white fluff, "I'm not wearing a hat because of the cold, remember? This is nothing."

"I got it, Yuri." Phichit said behind him, holding the red and gold beanie in his gloved hands, "Let's hurry though. This weather might be nothing for those two, but it's pretty cold for me."

"Couldn't agree more."

The last few minutes of the run back to the hotel were made mostly in silence, save the sound of the snow crunching underfoot and the occasional pedestrian or car passing them by. The storm didn't seem to be getting any worse though, which was good, since it meant the shuttles to the Olympic arena hopefully wouldn't be halted.

As they made their way up the elevators and got into the room, Yuri kept the dragon-tail hat on his head, his ears enjoying the warmth. The door clicked open soon after, four sets of feet shuffling in, and then closing again with another soft click. Phichit quickly moved towards the opposite end of the room, pushing the curtains apart to check out the view that Yuri had mentioned...though seeing little more than a wall of falling snow, fog, and only the lights of distant buildings.

"...Well, I'm sure it's good when the sky's clear." The Thai figure commented, rubbing his chin, turning his head to face the rest of the room...just in time to see Yuri getting pulled behind the bathroom hall.

Yurio lifted his head from where he'd been rifling through his previously-abandoned bags, adding his other things to the pile for later.

They both heard the bathroom door thump shut, plunging the room into awkward silence thereafter. The two remaining skaters glanced at each other for lack of knowing what else to do...and Phichit just moved to sit on the end of the bed, reaching for the remote control to the television to pass the time until the second pair came back out again. Yurio went back to his things.

Within the bathroom, Viktor had his partner pinned against the door, arms around him and face buried in the man's scarf.

Yuri could hear the deep breath being drawn, held, and then let go again, "...You okay...?"

"He was at the top of the stairs." The Russian said, voice muffled by the fabric, "He was trying to stay out of sight, but I caught a glimpse of him backing up just as Phichit saw Yurio."

"Do you want to stay here then...? We can do the thing with Phichit-kun tomorrow morning instead..."
"No, I _need_ to go." Viktor answered, rubbing his face on the scarf before pulling back again, using his fingers to try and flatten the fabric out again so it wouldn't look so disheveled, "I just needed a moment first."

Yuri finally lifted his arms from where they'd gently been touching to the man's wrists, standing up on his toes a little before sliding his hands over his husband's shoulders and drawing him in closer. He felt the side of his partner's forehead through the plush felt of the hat, and closed his eyes, "Just three more days until we're on our way back to Hasetsu without him. Back to _Makkachin_, back to the _onsen_, back to _Katsuki Territory_..."

"...I want it to work..." Viktor said quietly, "I really do... I want to skate, and show him what this is all about, and _make him see_... But I just can't shake the rest. It's going to mess me up out there."

"Don't say that. You're _Vik_..." The younger skater's voice cut off immediately, eyes going small as he realized he was on the verge of making the same mistake as he had the night before their wedding party. Before he could say anything else and make it worse, Yuri occupied his mouth with a kiss so he couldn't speak, and held there for a moment. When he finally pulled back again, he pressed his forehead to his partner's, "We'll get through it. Konstantin is just one pair of eyes in a sea of millions. The only ones that should matter anyway are mine, right?"

The Russian nodded, "...Keep your eyes on me alone..."

"Skate like you do in practice...and dance like you're trying to seduce me. If you want him to see what this is really like, what we're all about...you can't hold back. Everything on the ice is love. It's one of the few places where we can really be ourselves. Don't let him take that from you."
Chapter 187

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY SEVEN

Dinner was as boring as could've been expected, but at least no one ended up face-down on a table somewhere, frothing at the mouth. Viktor barely poked at the fare in front of him, having lost his appetite entirely after the earlier encounter at the Leopalace. He put on his happy-face-mask and waved politely as other competitors, coaches, and ISU officials trickled in and out of the restaurant, but never went too far out of his way to do more than greet those who saw him.

Yuri kept a close eye on him. It was a stark situation for him to watch, and it surprised him to no end how obvious the man seemed now despite everything.

...How could I have ever been so blind to him before? He wondered to himself, I'm not even sure anyone else at the table, or passing us by, notices how different Viktor is...but to me, it's like night and day... Is it only so obvious to me because he told me how anxious he is...? Would I have even picked up on anything if he hadn't...? The question put a pit into the young skater's stomach, and he reached a nervous hand under the table to set it gently on his partner's leg, slowly stroking his thumb back and forth a few times before he felt Viktor's hand come down on it as well.

"We should soak in the onsen later." The Russian said idly, "After we get back from the rink."

Yuri did his best to put on his own happy-face-mask, and smiled as well as he could, curling his fingers where he felt his husband's doing the same around the back of his hand, "Sounds like a good idea."

Everyone made one last trip to their own hotel rooms before assembling out front to wait for the shuttle. Black sweat-pants and a black form-fitting t-shirt went under the black and red Team Russia track-suit while Yuri gathered up skates and other supplies in a duffle-bag. The silver skater clicked into his phone before pocketing it, checking the time, a little surprised how late it already was.

"It's almost 7:30. The rink will only be open for practice until 10."

"...I don't think Phichit-kun is going to be upset if you don't work a miracle over on him in one session." Yuri noted, rising back up to his full height and pulling the bag over his shoulder, "You need to focus on your own practice, too. He knows that."

"Have you watched his other event?" Viktor wondered, pulling the door open and glancing at the Russian Tiger so he'd know to start moving, "I'm not even sure which one he went to..."

"Skate America. We really briefly went over it during our first weekend in Bordeaux, while Rostelecom was underway." Yuri explained, stepping through the door after Yurio and watching as his partner followed after that, hearing it click closed. The trio stepped off towards the elevators, and the Russian reached to take his husband's ring-hand, "Admittedly, I only just watched his shows this week... He's scoring about as well as he did at this point last year."

The silver skater put his free hand on his hip as they rounded the corner to the elevators, "He's going to have to step up his game if he plans on beating Chris for that last slot. Even if he wins silver, if he doesn't score quite a bit higher, his GP points won't mean a whole lot."

"...I know..." Yuri sighed a little, looking up as he heard the ding for the elevator's arrival, and stepped over towards the opening doors, "I can still hope though."
"Your optimism is endearing." The Russian mused, leaning over to kiss the side of the man's fluffy head.

The snow hadn't let up by the time the group reunited in the hotel lobby. The lighting of the rotunda lit up the shuttle easily enough, and the headlights of that same vehicle shone out into the dark of the driveway, illuminating each clump of falling snow like fireflies. Bracing against the cold, they all moved through the sliding glass doors and piled into the passenger seats, buckling in and waiting for the vehicle to start moving off. It was a relatively slow journey, taking great care not to slide off the road where snow was packed down by prior traffic, but they made it without incident several minutes later.

Between the lack of daylight and the continuing storm, getting a good look at the Makomanai Ice Arena was difficult. The obvious part was the concrete staircase in front, and the Olympic logo above the wide front doors, but behind that, the massive circular building and the Olympic field surrounding it was hard to see.

The skaters and first coach all piled out, feet crunching on the fluff collecting on the sidewalk. Yuri held back a moment to confirm when the last shuttle would be coming back to pick them up, and then jumped out after the rest, retaking his partner's hand before they all started moving up the stairs and in through the big arena doors.

The rink-side area had been decorated in much the same manner that had been done at Cup of China, with the walls and railing covered over with long, royal blue drapes, likely to hide the age of the venue. Sponsor billboards lined the inside walls of the rink, and the stadium seating rose on all sides, expanding out into a big circle rather than the usual rectangle. Decorative boards lined the upper part of the nearest rink-side walls, mimicking the imagery of the aurora borealis on a clear blue night sky. The flags of all participating nations lined the upper part of the walls on the next level, dividing the audience viewing area from front and center to nosebleed section. In the center of the rink, the huge blue NHK Trophy logo was built into the ice, blade-scratches going over it from every direction.

That late at night, there weren't many skaters still around practicing, but there were at least 4 that Yuri could spot immediately. A skeleton crew of event organizers and staff were making last-minute adjustments before the following day's last official practice, and the beginning of the event.

"Did it ever make sense to you that they have competition before Opening Ceremonies?" Phichit wondered randomly, pulling his phone out again and attaching the selfie-stick as he spoke, "...It's like...Pairs Short, Ladies Short...oh right, yeah, hi everyone and welcome to NHK!"

Yuri nodded and smiled, "I think I've mentioned a curiosity about that once or twice." He looked over to where Viktor had let go of his hand, trying to find somewhere to set his things down and swap shoes for skates, "And then they always put Men's Short right after."

"It's because of the money and time." Viktor answered quietly, rifling through his bag, pulling one skate out and then the other as the two younger skaters looked over at him, "It's the same at the Olympics, where they start competition before the event's even officially started."

Both gave a confused expression.

The Russian sat down and pulled an ankle over one knee, reaching to undo the laces on his sneakers, "There's only three days for any given skating competition, right?"

"Yeah."

"So they have to make do with the time available and the fact that there's only one skating rink."
When people watch the event on television, the Opening Gala is during Prime Time, followed by Men's Singles, since we do the hardest jumps and draw in the most viewers because of it. Ladies are often nice to look at, but they max out at triples, and they're scored way less on the scale than we are." One shoe was off, and the skate came on to replace it, but left unlaced as the second foot was pulled over, "So Pairs go on first to get things started in the early afternoon, then Ladies, then Opening Ceremonies, then Men, then it's over for the day."

"...I always wondered about that." Yuri said, scrunching up his shoulders, "Why the women only do triples."

"Weight." Viktor answered curtly.

"...That doesn't make any sense. Men weigh more than women."

"The distribution is different though. We're heavier around the upper body, them around the hips. It's harder to jump when you're practically dragging your legs into the air, and have less upper body strength to force it through." The Russian said, eyes on his second skate, and the gold shine under the rubber guard, "The triple Axel can be hard for most Ladies, too. The first wasn't even landed in competition until 1991."

"...How do you know this stuff? You've never coached a lady skater." Phichit wondered, forcing the Russian to all but stop what he was doing for a moment. Yuri noticed the pause and gave a dubious look. The Thai skater felt the awkward tension between them, and pulled his hands close to himself, each one grasping a length of the selfie-stick in front of his chest, "...What?"

"I was doing triple Axels before my teen years, so to me, they're easy. But I pushed a lady skater I knew too hard to do the same, and she was so badly injured in the process that she had to quit the sport outright." Viktor answered simply, "That's all."

"...Oh. Well." Phichit coughed nervously to clear his throat, and looked around, spotting Celestino not far away, "Ahhhh I think I need to go get ready. Ciao Ciao will want me to get on the ice as soon as I can."

Once the younger skater was bounding off for his own gear, Yuri turned back and slid in next to his partner on the bench, "...Sophia?"

"Yeah."

"Hm..."

Before anything else could be said, the pair lifted their heads to the sound of an awkward commotion rising from further down the rink wall. Half a second later, a certain red-haired lady skater was carrying a certain blonde over her head, passing them by and laughing as the teen flailed and protested to be put down. The duo blinked as they looked over the top of the rink wall, watching curiously as the spectacle went on.

"I'm so jealous!" Mila was saying, sliding across the ice with grace, even in spite of the teen thrashing about overhead, "I wish I could've gotten to skate with Beka like that!"

"Who the fuck is Beka and put me down, Baba!" Yurio yelled angrily, limbs going in every direction as he watched the world go by upside-down.

"Otabek, duh!" She clarified, "Beka sounds cooler! I saw you and him do that pair skate thing at the China Gala!" The lithe woman turned the teen around in her hands and brought him down in front of herself, pulling him in close to see him clearly, even as she had to keep holding him up with both
arms around his back, pinning his own arms to his sides, "I should make you introduce him to me at the Final."

"Fat chance!" The blonde argued, suddenly planting his sneakers onto the frost, still sliding along but putting up enough resistance to slow Mila down, "I'd never introduce a harpy like you to Otabek! Go find another hockey player!"

"YURI PLISETSKY."

Green eyes turned, as did blue, the duo looking to the rink-wall where cherry-hazel were gawking back at them. The older Yuri was giving the younger a severe look.

"What?"

"Don't say stuff like that. It's rude." He explained, gesturing at the woman, "You should apologize."

Mila ate it up, giving the man a pleasant smile before turning slyly back to the teen still in her clutches, "He's right, you know."

Yurio just grit his teeth, "...Fine I'm sorry."

"What was that? I couldn't hear you." The woman teased, moving to skate backwards instead so the blonde couldn't put up as much of a fuss.

"I already said it! Let me go!"

She did as bid, and quickly withdrew her arms, leaving the hapless teen to slide along the ice on his shoes until he came to a disgruntled stop in the middle of the rink. Mila just skated amused circles around him as he slid and stumbled his way back to the nearest rink exit, clutching at the wall before he ended up on his arse.

Yurio muttered something between clenched teeth, but then turned his head over to the second source of his sudden irritation...only to raise an eyebrow instead of making some sarcastic remark, "Your booty-call is running off."

"Eh?" Yuri lifted his head a little higher, turning around sharply to see Viktor wandering away, skate-guards quietly thunking along the floor as he moved, "Viktor...!" He pushed to the other side of the bench and started to head after the man, but then stopped dead in his tracks as he realized where the Russian was even going; Yakov was at the corner of the rink, watching his former student approaching.

"You're not going after him?" Yurio wondered quietly, feeling more sure of his footing again now that he was on normal ground, "I thought we were going to have to find a crowbar to get you two to let go of each other so he could skate tomorrow."

"...I don't know that I should be part of that conversation." The older skater said anxiously, "Viktor told me a lot, but...he didn't really get that specific about his history with Yakov. At least not yet. I feel like I'd be butting in if I went over there."

Emerald eyes squinted at the man, but then rolled a little as Yurio moved to lean over the rink wall, "Suit yourself."

Yuri continued to watch quietly, settling to lean over the rink wall next to the teen while he waited. It was impossible to hear what the two Russians were saying to one another, but when he saw Viktor leaning down to hug the man and hold there for a while, he understood.
He just said Konstantin's here. I wonder what Yakov thinks of that...? He's not yelling a lecture like normal, so it must be pretty serious...

Viktor remained at the corner of the rink for another minute or two before it seemed like he and his former coach had come to some sort of agreement, and he finally started coming back the way he'd gone before. Slate eyes seemed to look a bit less heavy as the Russian stepped ever closer, finally coming up on the two other skaters where they were leaning on the wall.

Yuri watched him quietly, but was desperate to find out what had happened between the two men. He didn't dare ask though. Instead, he just held still as his partner came up behind him, leaned against his back, and wrapped both arms around his small frame.

The silver Russian stayed there for a little while, pressing the side of his face against the back of his husband's shoulder for a moment before lifting his head and setting his chin down in that same place instead, "...I asked Yakov to be at rink-side for me before my Free Program."

"Oh." The younger figure said nervously, "Okay."

"That way you don't have to worry about feeling like you need to get me worked up before my Rage Skate." He went on, "So you can be there when I'm done instead."

"...You don't want me to be at rink-side beforehand...?" Yuri was a little surprised...and a little hurt.

"It's hard for me to stay mad about anything when I see you." Viktor explained, letting his arms loosen a little so his partner could turn around to face him, and he set his hands on the rink-wall by his sides instead, "When I need to be angry going out there...I can't very well have someone sending me off who makes me happy, can I?"

Hazel eyes blinked, "...I get it...but...I don't..."

The silver skater just smiled, "You're my Rage Skate antidote...but I can't use you before I go out there. So I'll get my well wishes from you about 30 minutes before I start, and I'll have Yakov send me off instead, that way I have plenty of time to get my head in the right place. I want yours to be the first face I see when I come back." He nosed his partner lightly as he spoke the last words, leaning in to kiss him lightly, all the while heedless of the teen who was glowering at him from less than two feet away.

"Ugh, gross, get a room." Yurio muttered, turning to look away finally. Just as his eyes moved off, the teen suddenly felt an arm reach around his back and hook around, yanking him closer, until he was shoulder-to-chest with each of the older skaters, "Oh Christ, what now?"

"We have a room." Viktor explained in a cheeky tone, "But you're sharing it with us. Since you'll be there all night long, why not get started early on all the fun you'll have to listen to?"

"No, no...no, let me go." Yurio started to flail a little bit, but found it difficult with two sets of arms pinning him down at the same time.

"I don't know, Viktor..." Yuri chimed in, "I don't quite think he has a full appreciation for the quality and depth of our love."

"I don't either." The taller Russian agreed, "Maybe we should show him by having him experience it first-hand."

"GROSS. LET ME GO." He flailed with earnest then, kicking his legs out like he thought it would
do any good. It didn't, and he struggled and squirmed all the more, right up until the moment that he felt two pairs of lips on his cheeks, one set on each side. Yurio felt all the blood leave his face, and he went still as a corpse, hardly moving even as he felt himself finally being freed from the pair's grasp. He blinked dead eyes as he stared straight ahead, and took a few breathless steps forward,
"...I'm...I'm going...over there..."

Quiet chortling followed after the blonde, and the duo slipped an arm behind each others' backs as they watched him slowly retreating to safer territory. Once he was finally out of earshot, Viktor turned back to where he'd been before, rubbing one cheek against his husband's forehead as he held him tighter than before, "...Guess that's one way of getting him to go away without having to ask him to leave."

"Yep." Yuri agreed easily, bringing his second arm into the hug as well, then looking up into his partner's gaze, "So you told Yakov about the rest?"

"Da." The silver legend nodded.

"No lecture about what a terrible idea it was?"

"That'll come, but it's intended for Uncle Mimi, not for me. He's going to get an ear-full when Yakov sees him next." Viktor explained, "Yakov will unofficially be coaching me this weekend as well, so he'll be with you tomorrow at rink-side when I go out for my Short Program, and in the kiss and cry after both shows."

"Oh..."

"Don't worry, it's not because of anything you did or didn't do." The Russian went on, "But Yakov's been around since everything started, way back 20 years ago. You talked about things coming full circle to Ciao Ciao...I think this is the same. I don't really believe in stuff like fate or destiny...but it's certainly a strange kind of providence that Yakov ended up coming to NHK when I really needed him."

"I get it." Yuri nodded, "...And I agree. Yakov was the one that your mom entrusted you to, so it makes sense that he be here for you now."

Viktor nodded, giving his partner one last tight hug before letting him go again and reaching down for his skate-guards, "Thanks. Now...let's go show your friend how quad Loops are done."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY EIGHT

It was becoming painfully obvious that coaching someone other than Yuri would be much harder than Viktor realized. Phichit didn't lack of confidence or skill, so finding the crux of his problem was being quickly narrowed down to a combination of needing more physical conditioning and experience in general.

The Thai skater clung to the rink-wall, frost-covered legs shaking, and sweat beading on his forehead. Celestino was just on the other side, arms crossed and giving a sour expression, slowly handing the skater his water as his green eyes glowered at the Russian beyond the wall.

"...One more time...?" Viktor suggested, scratching his head, trying to think of what else he could do to keep his end of the bargain.

Phichit just let go of the wall and slid slowly to his face on the ice, "No more... I can't...skate...anymore..."

The silver skater just crossed his arms, feeling a bit defeated, This is way harder than coaching Yuri... I don't even know what to do with this guy.

The Japanese skater slowly slid out onto the ice from a nearby open gate, gold blades scratching across the frost until he got to his friend and offered a hand to help pull him back up to his skates. Once he was up, Yuri stuffed his hands back into his coat pockets, "...Sorry, I thought it would be a lot easier than this... I feel like I got your hopes up."

"It's not your fault." Phichit sighed, still keeping his spirits up despite it all, "Viktor made you really good in a big hurry... I guess his genius doesn't stick to me as easily as it does to you."

"...It's not that. Not really, anyway..." The Russian slid in closer, hands on his hips, setting a toe-pick into the ice to stop, "But you don't lack any of the things that Yuri did before. I'm not sure what I could offer you that Celestino isn't already giving you."

"You spent the better part of 7 months in Hasetsu before we all got to see the results of your coaching. What did you do back then?" The Thai skater wondered idly, rubbing his face on a towel sitting on the rink wall, "Yuri was never a bad skater, even way back in our Detroit days."

"He only really lacked confidence." Viktor answered, reaching an arm out over the aforementioned skater's shoulders, feeling Yuri slide his own arm around his lower back, "I just helped him learn to believe in himself, by believing in him first to get him started."

"It's not like no one else did." Celestino interrupted, "We all believed in Yuri. He just got stuck in his own head and dragged himself down when it mattered most."

Brown eyes looked down at the ice, avoiding the gazes of the two men in front of him.

"This was different." The silver skater went on, "He was in Detroit for 5 years training under you, building himself up to the moment he finally got into that first GP Final. He crashed in the end and felt like his only answer was to quit. He needed something else to get back in the saddle."

Phichit leaned lazily against the top of the rink wall, resting his head on his folded arms, "Yeah? What'd you give him that we couldn't?"
Viktor smiled and raised his free hand, holding it palm-up as he presented himself, "All this." He said proudly.

Celestino just quirked a brow and looked on stoically, but the youngest skater just laughed.

Yuri kept looking away, though glancing up now with his cheeks lightly flushed rather than looking down, "I'm not sure how explaining what got me here is at all helpful to Phichit-kun."

One blue eye winked at him, "It's important to be able to recognize that different people need different things to succeed. Everyone learns a little differently. What works for you wouldn't work for him." Viktor explained, "I doubt I would've had the same success with Yurio either." He glanced up at where the blonde was talking to Yakov on the other side of the rink, then raised his free hand to cup around his mouth and yelled, "RIGHT, YURI!"

The teen turned his head glibly, "WHAT?"

The silver skater laughed to himself, then looked back at the group from before, "See? Trying to coach him would've been like trying to herd cats. He'd have done whatever he wanted regardless of what I said."

"So what do you do these days, then?" Phichit wondered, "Yuri came out of last season feeling pretty good about himself. What he needs now must be entirely different than in the beginning."

"Sure." Viktor nodded, settling his hand back onto his hip, "Maintaining what he gained is as important as trying new things though, so it's not like I've stopped keeping faith with him. The way I express it has just changed a little."

"...A little?" Yuri muttered, giving his partner a knowing look.

"Huh?" The Thai skater's eyes opened a little wider, "What? What do you mean?"

The older skater's face was already going red before he noticed the devious grin shining in his husband's eyes, and he was helpless but to let him demonstrate. The arm over his shoulders quickly moved off, and Viktor moved to stand behind him, hands going around his sides to settle on his chest, nosing at his ear over his shoulder.

"Just doing this used to be enough." The Russian purred, huffing a quiet laugh as his husband's growing embarrassment, "But now..."

Celestino had already face-palmed before it got any further, but Phichit seemed naïvely confused, and watched curiously.

Those pale hands went down Yuri's front, suddenly grabbing him by his hips and pulling him back against the eager lap behind him. The younger skater had his own hands up in front of his face, trying to hide behind them as he heard his husband laughing.

"V-Viktor..."

"Oh my."

Smartphone camera clicks went off rather quickly after that, but still, Yuri refused to move, feeling somewhat paralyzed, even as he felt the man jokingly starting to roll against him, just like after the Japanese Qualifiers so long ago.

"Yuuuri~ Look like you're having more fun!" The Russian teased, sliding one gold-bladed skate
between his partner's to nudge at the inside of his heel, "You don't look like you're happy at all!"

"Jesus fucking Christ, you're humping him in public now." Yurio groaned, suddenly turning about-face on his heel, "That's what I get for coming over here to ask what the Hell you were talking about."

"I'm going to go over there...where it's less weird." Celestino sighed, moving off to sit in the stands. Phichit just kept taking pictures.

Viktor eventually let go though, turning his husband around to start dragging him across the ice, grinning the whole way. Yuri kept his hands over his face even as he felt his toe-picks dragging across the frost. They went a little while before the younger skater had the courage to uncover his eyes again, glancing at the silver legend for all of half a second before wrapping his arms around the man's shoulders and burying his face there instead.

"Wow~ Did I really embarrass you that badly just now?" The Russian mused, carrying his husband gently across the ice, "Sorry."

Yuri slowly lowered the heels of his blades, feeling them glide along the smooth surface evenly before putting weight down on them, one skate between the Russian's legs and the other just outside them, "...That's...not it..."

"Oh?" Slate eyes opened a bit wider for a moment, "What then?"

"...At f-first...yeah..." The younger figure admitted, tilting his blades a little as he felt the turn coming, "...But then..."

"Yes?" Viktor hummed, curiosity piquing quickly.

Yuri could feel his heart pounding, "...It just...really sank in that we..." His cheeks went red again, but he pulled his face away from the man's shoulder and lightly pressed their foreheads together, "...We won't get the chance to really be like that until tomorrow night...assuming Yurio actually goes back to Mikhail and Minako-sensei's room..."

"Attention skaters...the Makomanai Ice Arena will be closing in 10 minutes." A voice boomed overhead, grabbing everyone's attention at once, "Please begin to assemble your belongings and make your way to the exit. The rink will re-open for practice tomorrow morning at 7am."

The announcement repeated again in Japanese after that, but hardly anyone beyond Yuri understood it, though he wasn't really paying attention by then anyway. His focus was on the blue eyes in front of his own, "...Shimatta... You didn't get to practice any of your own stuff."

"Hard to believe I just spent 2 hours working on a quad Loop..." Viktor sighed quietly, closing his eyes as he slowed their skate, stopping close to the middle of the rink, "But I guess there's always tomorrow morning."

"Yeah..."

The cogs were still turning in the Russian's mind though. He could hear the sound of other skaters' blades leaving the ice, and the chatter of coaches and athletes as they packed it all in, but he still wouldn't move from that spot. Instead, he brought his hands up from his husband's back and slid them across the man's arms, hooking his thumbs under Yuri's wrists to pull them gently back down again. He kissed the ring on the right hand first, then nudged it back until he could touch the back of his finger to his partner's nose, "We'll figure something out."
The onsen at the hotel was a welcome respite from the cold, but unlike in traditional hot-spring resorts, the hotel version was a family bath, open to both sexes and all ages...so it was a semi-crowded place at the end of the night. Men and women came from different private washing areas, but converged at the open air deck of the wading pool. People wore the big white towels of the hotel spa right into the water, rather than needing to fold a small one and keep it on their head for safe keeping.

Yuri glanced around as he sat on a ledge near a wall of big opaque windows, finding the sight of everyone in the bath to be the weirdest thing. For him, the water barely came a few inches up his legs, most of him still barely damp from the previous shower. In front of him, Viktor was submerged up to his nose, leaning way back against the wall with his ankles crossed out in front of himself, soaking up as much of the salty heat as he could. Under the water, the Russian had his arms loosely wrapped around his partner's lower legs, wrists hovering by ankles.

The chatter around them was still barely a whisper, with the occasional giggle and wave as people recognized each other from across the room. Thankfully, most people respected the fact that the onsen was meant for relaxation, not excitable conversation, so fanfare was at a minimum.

Yurio and Phichit were in the spring as well, relaxing in their own respective places along the edge of the pool. Even Mila had joined in. Yakov was nowhere to be seen, not being the sort to want to participate in such an affair. If he were going to bother trying to enjoy a hot bath, it'd be in his hotel room, on his own.

Yuri drew in a deep breath, then leaned forward as he exhaled, hands sliding down his husband's chest as he parked his chin and nose against the wet silver-grey hair in front of him, holding there quietly for a while. Viktor peeked an eye up, but then went back to relaxing again as well, only moving as much as he needed to so as to take Yuri's hands beneath the water with his own.

"This is nice, right?" The younger skater asked quietly, eyes closed as he idly waved his forelegs forward and back again, "...Though it does kind of feel like some quasi-hybrid of the onsen back home, and the hot tub at Worlds..."

The silver Russian hadn't answered, simply staying where he was, submerged to his nose.

Finding it weird, Yuri lifted his head and looked down on the man, "Viktor?"

The older figure finally fidgeted a little and pushed to sit more upright, pulling out of his partner's grasp in the process so Yuri could only keep his hands on his shoulders by the time he was done, and then turned slightly, "We've been soaking for about 20 minutes. We should go upstairs."

"Already?"

"...I'm tired." He slowly turned those blue eyes towards his younger team-mate, "Yuri, we're going."

The teen's over-tired eyes blinked slowly in acknowledgment, and he turned under the water to start making his way, like flotsam, over to the nearest ledge that lead to the men's washroom.

Yuri nodded and rose to stand, water coming up to his thighs as he waded forward, holding quietly to his husband's hand as they moved. However, he paused, turning back to his Thai friend, "We're
Viktor corrected him quietly, "Well, not right away, but soonish. I'm starting to prune though." He looked at the wrinkles starting to form on his fingertips and smiled tiredly to himself, "I've been cooking in here long enough."

"You want to come up with us?" Yuri wondered suddenly, "It'll be a bit crowded since Yurio's going to be with us, too, but otherwise...it'll be like our old Detroit days. We can watch a movie or something."

"We should watch The Ring." Phichit teased, pushing to stand up from the water, and holding the thick, wet towel around his waist with one hand.

"WeareNOTwatchingTheRing." Yuri said emphatically, face going red, then putting his hand over it quickly as he realized he was being too loud for the onsen.

Phichit was having a hard time not choking on his quiet laughter, desperately keeping his free hand over his mouth, eyes watering already.

The older skater just turned and followed his amused partner out of the bath.

"I agree with your friend. We should watch The Ring." Viktor added, looking back over his shoulder as they pushed through the doors. Inwardly, he was cackling as much as Phichit was trying not to, remembering the story as it was told during their La Premiére flight from Canada.

"WEARENOTWATCHINGTHERINGVIKTOR." The Russian couldn't help but laugh a little at that, giving Phichit a knowing look. The younger skater's eyes went wide as he realized...and he pointed at Yuri, then back at Viktor, as though to confirm. Viktor nodded and smirked, and Phichit's mouth opened wide behind his hand as he realized Viktor knew the harrowing tale.

"Why would we want to watch The Ring this late at night...?" Yurio wondered sleepily, grabbing a bathrobe from the rack by all the onsen towels, "You'll just give yourselves nightmares or something."

The Thai skater was literally dying as he tried to stay quiet, still laughing behind his hand, "Y-yeah...nightmares...right, Y-Yuri...?"

The Japanese skater just grimaced, watching as his friend and his husband actually reached out in front of him and bumped fists with each other at his expense, "You are both awful."

By the time they'd all gotten their slippers and bath robes, and Phichit had made a side-quest to his and Celestino's room to gather a set of blankets and pillows from the second bed, as well as tell his coach where he was going, they made it to the upper level. Viktor slid his key-card into the door and pushed it open until everyone else was inside, then stepped in after them, hanging his track-suit and practice clothes as Yuri set their skate-bags against the wall.

Yurio had already laid claim to a corner of the extra-wide bed, glowering dubiously at the pair as they finished sorting out their things by the hall closet, "I'm going to assume that you guys kept your sexcapades to the center of the bed."

"Relax." Viktor huffed, still smiling from the previous teasing, "Since we knew you were coming, we asked the hotel people to bring all new sheets today while we were out. Everything's fresh."
"Still."

"Whine whine whine..." The older Russian huffed, "I'd say you could get out a black-light if you wanted, but you'd probably not like what you saw even if none of us had been in here before now. It's a hotel room. What can you do?"

"Not put that image into my head."

"I don't think you're going to win." Phichit laughed anxiously, sitting cross-legged on one of the plush chairs near the window as he looked on at the silver legend, "It's a hotel room. What can you do?"

"See, Yuri?" Viktor pointed at the teen, "Phichit gets it."

"Pfft." Yurio scowled, "He lost his shit when he realized you guys had matching rings last year. He'd probably be bringing rose petals for the bed if he had half a chance."

Slate eyes moved from the Russian Punk over to the other skater, then went wide with wonder, "...Really~? You'd do that?"

The younger man just reached a hand behind his head and smiled, "...I wouldn't go that far, but...after knowing Yuri for so long, the fact that he finally hooked up with anyone is cause for celebration. The fact that it was you, well... I'd only been listening to him go on about you for years already before you went to be his coach." He laughed again and waved his hand, "...So, well...maybe I would a little bit. Go Yuri! You won the lottery!"

"...I'm brushing my teeth." The Japanese skater said, deadpanning them all as he went in through the bathroom door and closed it behind himself.

Viktor laughed quietly, but then leaned in to knock on it, "Let me in. I want to clean up, too."

The panel clicked open half an inch, and a single brown eye looked back, only to vanish again as the door opened a little more. The Russian gave another smile before stepping in, and the door closed once again behind him.

"...Clean up?" Phichit echoed, "But we were just in the hotel hot-spring..."

Yurio gave him a look, "...You must be new to this."

The older skater blinked, but then eyes went wide as he glanced back towards the wall that hid the bathroom door, "Ahhh! Yuri! That's so dirty!"
Chapter 189

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY NINE

With the door closed, Yuri heard the lock click into place. He glanced at his reflection in the mirror for a moment before reaching both hands up to rub his tired face, his unimpressed deadpan from a moment earlier settling into the fatigue of having been awake since before dawn. He felt the tall Russian come around his side, an arm snaking around his lower back as the man moved to standing in front of him. Outside, he could hear the television turning on; Yurio was already channel-surfing.

As that second arm came around him, Yuri let his hands come away, sliding them down until his fingers touched to just to side of his jaw, settling around his neck. He lifted his sleepy eyes, and immediately felt the soft touch of his partner's lips brushing against his own. Those eyes closed as the Russian pressed in closer, and he let his hands slip down to return the hug.

Even as the kiss ended, Viktor held where he was, foreheads gently pressed together, "I didn't think you'd want to double the size of our audience like this."

"...The size of our audience?" Yuri echoed, "...You had plans to try for it even with just Yurio out there?"

The silver skater smiled to himself, eyes barely open enough to see his partner's face in front of him, "I remember how everyone reacted after they heard us at Yu-Topia." He explained, lifting his head a bit to speak the words against his husband's forehead, nosing at his damp hair, "Your friend had tissue in his nose to stop the bleeding, but he rated us a 10/10. Yurio gave us a 0 because he's Yurio. Chris gave a 1 simply because he didn't get to hear me at all throughout the whole thing."

"...You were really quiet that whole time." Yuri said, "It was really weird."

"It wasn't our usual sort of love-making." Viktor pointed out, hands slowly sliding back around, inching towards the loose knot on the front of his partner's bathrobe, "But maybe this won't be either."

The shorter figure's face went red almost immediately, though it had already started to get pink before that. He knew where his partner's mind was going, and despite his nerves and doubts, lifted his own arms out of the way, letting them hang at his sides as those pale fingers came around his front, "You...want to do it in here? Now?" He asked quietly.

"I said we'd figure something out for tonight, right?" The Russian teased, "This is still our room even if there's other people in it. I've decided I'm not going to let them stop me...stop us..." The soft length of the fabric belt came loose, hanging limp on either side of the robe's outside panels. Viktor slipped his hands into the newly parted material, tilting his head to the right to kiss his husband again as he let skin brush against skin.

Helpless to the advances of the skating legend, Yuri put up no resistance, even as he felt the butterflies in his stomach fluttering around madly, "...It was different before though..." He muttered, cool hands warming as they roamed over his chest and down his sides, "At Yu-Topia, I didn't think anyone could hear us...we were so far away from the common room... But they're literally right outside the door now..."
One hand came out of the robe, moving over towards the sink, and flicked on the faucet, filling the small room with the soft sound of running water. Viktor wasn't done though, keeping his eyes on his husband's as he slowly made him rotate where he stood, pulling away only long enough to reach for the shower knob. The heavier, louder noise of the bathtub filling reverberated like a waterfall all around them, and the Russian smiled a little wider as he retook his place, "That'll drown out most of it."

Yuri's cheeks got a little darker red after that, but the more his partner slid his hands over his skin, the harder he found it to protest. He swallowed nervously, but then in a burst of courage, he let the tips of his fingers slip into the Russian's bathrobe as well, pushing it away from his shoulders and letting it tumble off his arms, even as the rest was still tied to his waist. He felt the man's bare arms snake behind his back, pulling him in close and leaning over him into that kiss. He let his own hands come up, one going over the Russian's shoulder as the other gently pressed to his cheek.

One blue eye slowly opened behind silver bangs, and Viktor huffed a quiet laugh, "If you're still nervous about having a little fun in eat-shot of the other two, you're not being very convincing."

The younger skater just tensed up a little bit, but then forced himself to acknowledge that he'd been fully and thoroughly seduced, "...Just go get our stuff already."

Viktor grinned deviously, kissing him again quickly before pulling off to unlock the door, "That's what I thought."

Yuri sighed at himself, shrugging out of the bathrobe as his partner opened the door. As he turned to fold it over his arms and make it small, he realized the Russian had stopped where he was standing. Hazel eyes turned up and saw the man gawking at him, "...What? Go!"

Slate irises scanned the skater from head to heel, those black, figure-hugging boxer briefs being the only thing hiding the man's otherwise-naked frame from his sights. Still, seeing that much was exciting, and Viktor huffed quietly to himself, "You're such a tease." He stepped back in long enough to wrap one arm around Yuri's front, lay a few kisses on the back of the man's bare shoulders, and then left the room to find their things.

Yuri smiled nervously, seeing the man quickly trotting around the corner to where their bags were pressed up against the wall. Instead of following, he went over to the water coming out of the bathtub faucet and let the water run over his fingers, moving the knob a little to make it warmer while he waited.

Green eyes turned up in annoyance as the half-naked Russian came back into full sight, "...What, you're not gonna screw around after all?"

"Find a movie for us to watch when we're done." Viktor said nonchalantly, crouching down to rifle around in one of the smaller carry-bags, "And by 'movie' I mean 'not a wildcat documentary.'"

Phichit cast his eyes up over the top of his cellphone, glancing between the two wordlessly.

"I've been looking already. There's nothing."

"So check the pay-per-view. You're not paying for it anyway." Viktor went on, finding the small, dark-colored velvet satchel at the bottom of the bag. He rose back up to his full height and winked at the teen, "Something we can all watch."

"Find The Ring." Phichit teased.

Viktor started moving around to other bags, gathering up a change of clothes for each of them as he
"WE ARE NOT WATCHING THE RING." Yuri suddenly yelled, peering around the edge of the wall and glowering at his Thai friend dubiously.

Phichit just howled with laughter, having to pull the blanket he'd borrowed from his own room over his head to drown himself out.

"...Christ, it'd be Ringu here anyway even if it was somehow available to watch." Yurio grumbled, clicking over to the paid movie list.

"Don't make me come over there and write a list of all the creepy Japanese horror movies, or their western remakes, that we're not watching tonight." The older skater growled, fingers gripping to the corner of the thin dividing-wall, "Cuz I will."

Viktor quietly laughed to himself as he went back towards the bathroom door, snaking an arm around his husband's waist to start pulling him back.

"NOT THE RING." Yuri pleaded again as he was inched away from the edge, "PHICHIT-KUN STOP HIM."

"I'M NOT GOING TO LOOK FOR SOME STUPID JAPANESE HORROR MOVIE." Yurio barked, turning back uncomfortably towards the television. He heard the door close and lock again like before, and he grit his teeth, "...Maybe I'll play some stupid Thai horror movie instead."

Phichit peeked his head out from under the big blanket, "A Thai horror movie?"

"See? It's called Shutter." The teen gestured at the screen with the remote.

Within the bathroom, the mirror had already fogged up from the steam of the hotter water. Yuri still glanced at the door nervously, "...They're going to play something awful. I can feel it."

"Then I'll wear you out so you fall asleep before you even know what it is." Viktor offered, moving in close to start kissing at his partner's neck, fingers still holding to the small velvet bag and the small roll of clothing, behind his husband's back.

Anxious eyes were still turned towards the door, like Yuri was about to go back out through it just to be absolutely sure that there wouldn't be something terrifying on the television when they finally went to go see. Viktor grabbed his attention back though, suddenly dropping the bag to the shower-mat on the floor and sliding both hands under the elastic of his trunks, getting a palm-full on each side. The surprise made Yuri lurch forward a little, clinging with arms over his partner's shoulders to stop from falling at that awkward angle.

"Forget about them and the movie." Viktor purred, pushing his hands just so, and starting to move that black fabric down with them, "Eyes and thoughts on me alone. Let me overwhelm you. We could both use the sleep tonight."

Realizing, and agreeing, Yuri excised the thought of the night's secondary entertainment from his mind. A moment later, the kisses began anew, and he felt the thin fabric trailing down his legs until it came to stop in a heap over his feet. Two quick steps, and he cast the material aside, and let himself drown in the feeling of his husband's hands roaming over him. One slid down the side of his left leg, pulling up on it slightly to raise it up.

Viktor lifted the leg until he could let it rest on the fluff of his folded-over bathrobe, feeling it wrap around him and cling a little on its own. He let his hand slide back up again, settling it on the man's
side as he pulled back from a particularly heated kiss. Slate eyes glanced into hazel, and the Russian smirked a little as his left hand went down to give the pulling move on that second leg as well.

Nervous brown eyes realized what the Russian was trying to do, but he wouldn't let his nerves stop it. With the steam swirling around and the water rushing, Yuri stepped up onto his toes and let the man catch him against his chest after a quick hop, both legs now wrapped around him.

The silver skater turned slightly, and with an audible thump, lightly banged Yuri's back against the door, grinding up against him as well as he could through the thick folds of the bathrobe.

"CUT IT OUT." Yurio yelled, throwing a pillow at the wall between him and the bathroom door.

Phichit just laughed and shook his head...not-so-subtly putting in ear-buds under the blanket and then going back to twiddle away on Instagram.

The movie had barely started and wasn't very loud on its own yet. The sound of the shower was easier to hear.

Kisses trailed from mouth to neck, then to chest as Yuri sat more upright against the door panel, breaths already getting heavy from his partner's attention. He held quickly as he felt the man starting to back up after that, then carefully moved down to sit on the edge of the tub, dipping Yuri's feet into the swirling torrent of hot water collecting in the bottom of it. Yuri pushed his toes against the lacquered surface, moving himself back along his husband's lap just a few inches, and reached down to find the loose knot holding the robe around the man's waist.

Viktor kept on with the kisses, moving from lips to just under the man's jaw, licking and nibbling at Yuri's neck as he felt his partner's hands trying to figure out the knot while he wasn't looking. When it finally came loose, the robe fell away as well, revealing that he hadn't bothered getting re-dressed at all after getting out of the onsen. He wasted no time pulling his growing arousal against his stomach, and then reached to pull his partner right up against it, holding him tight and kissing him again. He could feel his husband's legs curling up against his sides, ankles crossing behind his back, and holding on a bit tighter as hands went down between them. Viktor drew in a quiet, hissed breath as he felt those fingers go around him, drawing him up in line with his partner's center and starting to gently squeeze and pull. His own hands gently massaged at Yuri's legs where they clamped around his waist, careful of the still-slightly-tender mark on the right.

Complete arousal finally achieved, Yuri leaned back, feeling his partner's hands by his shoulder-blades to hold him up, silver-grey bangs brushing against his skin where the man was dipping his head down to savor the feeling between them. A few more strokes, and Yuri leaned upright again, toes barely dipping in the water as he pushed to slide back along his partner's legs a bit. He saw those slate-blue eyes looking up at him half-lidded, and brushed the tip of his nose against the man's lips as he moved. One hand stayed around the silver Russian's center as one leg, then the other, came back around and knees went down to the shower-mat beneath them.

Viktor set his palms against the edge of the tub and watched quietly, shoulders scrunched up a little bit as he felt Yuri come close again, pressing in between his legs with a quick kiss before moving lower. He leaned back a bit as he felt the hand leave his center, settling on his side as lips moved down his chest. The Russian gasped quietly and leaned his head back as he felt the hot, wet tease of that mouth and tongue against one nipple, thumb gently rubbing against the other side. He couldn't help but raise and curl one leg around the man in front of him, heel grazing lightly against the back of Yuri's thigh as it moved.

After a moment, the younger figure switched sides, then continued further down, kissing and nibbling quietly at the tight muscles of the Russian's core. His arms hooked over those hard, pale,
athletic legs, and one hand finally returned to center, holding the man firmly before leaning in to kiss at it as well.

The silver Russian sighed vocally as he felt that mouth go around him, legs twitching up a little as he leaned back again, fingers clamped around the porcelain ledge of the tub. Yuri had gotten much better at the act since his half-assed-but-well-meant first attempt nearly a year before, where all he'd managed before bailing was a single hesitant lick. Now, he licked, sucked, nibbled, and bobbed on that flesh, knowing how to take care of it so that, in time, it would take care of him in turn. One hand went to Yuri's shoulder and held tightly, clamping down as the man drew in heavier breaths, closing his eyes to savor the feeling.

Not wanting to depart to go seeking, Yuri pawed his free hand around on the floor, leaning over his partner's leg as far as he could so he wouldn't have to pause to look around. He couldn't quite remember where the little black satchel had fallen though, and couldn't find it...at least not until Viktor used his foot to nudge it closer. Yuri felt the fabric against his fingers, and lifted it up, sitting up a little to pinch it between his knees and pull the thin cords loose to open it up. Without missing a beat, he found the first of three small bottles inside, grabbed the first one he could get his fingers around, and cast the rest aside. It clicked open, and the younger skater squeezed a bunch out against his leg, lathed his fingers in it, and then sat up a bit higher on his knees.

Viktor watched quietly, only one eye open, barely able to focus as it was. He saw those slick fingers come forward, gently probing at him as the other hand and mouth continued at their task. He twitched as he felt one finger go inside, then a second, and start that 'come hither' movement against him, thumb pressing close to the same spot outside. For a split second, the Russian slipped where he lost his grip, the feeling so abruptly intense that he lost his mooring, but he caught himself again with a slightly more firm clamp of his legs around his partner's frame. Breaths became more labored, and Viktor soon had to bring that hand from his husband's should to cover his mouth, hissing those sounds instead of crying out loudly like he normally would have.

When the younger man finally came up for breath a little while later, he'd already lowered the other hand to gather up more of the slick fluid he'd squeezed out against his leg, slathering it all over himself. He kissed the member lightly one last time before rising fully up onto his knees and getting in close, the fingers that had been inside withdrawing slightly to help position himself.

Slate eyes opened again slightly as Viktor felt the change, and when he felt the tip of his partner's member against him, he tilted his hips just slightly to make it easier to get in. Legs curled a bit higher after that, eventually finding their way to be perched on the skater's shoulders as he felt the man gradually ease himself in all the way. The ledge where he was perched was already precariously thin, and the second Yuri started moving again, Viktor realized he'd have to hold onto something else before he got knocked off and slipped into the tub outright, especially with the remnants of his folded bathrobe slipping around under him. With hardly any time, or capacity, to think, the Russian leaned way back until his hands felt at the lip of the tub on the other side. He turned his head slightly as he gasped with the third slow thrust, and spotted the metal safety-bar bolted to the wall just next to him, left hand coming up to curl around it.

Yuri's hands came up around the crook of his husband's legs, holding him safely in place as well as they could, hips slowly pressing in and pulling out again. Hazel eyes opened carefully, looking on at where the silver skater was leaning so far back, eyes tight against the sensation, gasps barely audible over the sound of the water gushing from the faucet. As he felt his husband starting to relax a little, Yuri picked up the pace, hips hitting against supple skin with just enough force for them alone to hear it over the water.

The Russian's grip slipped again on the edge of the tub, shoulders cramping a little anyway, and
those pale hands went down in to the wet rush beneath him. Yuri's hands held him fast, but soon moved, shoulders wedging between those legs to pin them against his sides instead. Arms came around Viktor's waist, palms under his back to help hold him up, one pale, wet hand coming up to run through raven-black hair. The silver Russian felt the light kiss against his skin, even as those arms held tighter around his core, hips still hitting against him. The hard ledge of the tub was starting to get uncomfortable against Viktor's tailbone though, even with the bathrobe acting as a cushion, and after a few more careful thrusts, pushed to sit upright, carefully clinging to his husband's head where it pressed against his chest. From that angle, he could feel the man reluctantly being forced to pull out again, but he wouldn't let the empty feeling last for long. He slid off the edge of the tub and pushed Yuri down, moving the damp bathrobe to the floor behind him and adding three towels to the pile before finally letting him lie on his back.

The room was small, but not so small that the shorter figure couldn't lie down, so long as he lifted his legs and hooked them over the space where Viktor had just been sitting. The Russian leaned in overtop of his husband, knees coming up around the man's torso as he sat back against his lap. He could feel eager hands sliding up his legs as one of his own reached back to put him back into place, feeling it against the right spot and then sitting down onto it. He could hear the younger figure drawing in a sharp breath just as he himself did, and smiled down at him as he finished the descent.

Hazel eyes opened to the Russian above him, hands on the man's waist and rising, palms against his chest as Viktor came down to kiss him again. As he felt those soft lips against his own, he began the slow, rhythmic upward push, forcing the Russian to dip his head a little to feel it. They closed their eyes as the older skater braced, Viktor's hands going to the towels under his husband's sides as he held himself up.

His back arched inward as Yuri started to go a little faster like before, one hand coming up to curl around the man's fingers where they were still pressed to his chest, bangs tousling back and forth a little to the movement of hips. Viktor grit his teeth to stop from making a sound, though each upward push made him want to cry out. He buckled a little as the intensity of the feeling shifted, and his head hung low, nearly made breathless by it.

Yuri moved his free hand from his husband's chest to set it gently against his cheek, slowing the pace a little bit as he thumbed at the skin just under those bangs.

One eye opened again as the silver skater felt it, and he turned his face slightly, just enough to catch that thumb, hooking it into his mouth. Sultry eyes looked down on the younger man, setting teeth just against skin and licking the tip of it lightly. As those hips beneath him slowed to a stop, Viktor took up the torch himself, rising and falling against it, forcing his partner to try and hold back his breaths instead. A few more moments like that, and Viktor finally let go of the thumb, rising up entirely off the man's lap, letting the member fall beneath him before sitting again. The Russian huffed a quiet laugh as he realized that they were in the exact same position as they had been in their first-ever intimacy in Yuri's room at Yu-Topia, save that their positions were reversed. Viktor slid his ringed hand to caress his husband's face, and then slowly slid against him, reaching with his free left hand to take hold of them both.

The younger figure's hands went back to his partner's waist, sliding lower until he could feel the top of each thigh against his palms and the rocking of the man's hips against his own. He closed his eyes and relished in the slick grind, opening one again only when he felt Viktor rising up again like before. This time, however, the Russian got back between his legs, pulling them around his waist and pressing against him eagerly. Letting himself fully relax, Yuri brought his arms up, wedging his hands under the towels supporting his head, and watched his husband go about his business. Kisses went from mouth to neck, nibbling an earlobe, then further down, and finally back up again. Hands groped around for the bag from earlier, found it, pulled it close so a different bottle could be used,
squeezed its contents into a palm and all over the younger skater's front, and was then clicked closed and discarded again. Viktor smeared it everywhere. Yuri's skin was shinier then than it already had been from steam and sweat, and the warming sensation that came with it slowly came to a head, making everything it had been slathered on tingle with heat. The silver Russian made sure he was slick as well before moving on, teasing his partner with those two fingers even as he pressed himself against the back of his own hand.

The left hand that Yuri had pinned under his head suddenly came up, going over his mouth as he gasped.

Viktor huffed a quiet laugh as he watched, pushing harder against his husband's hips even with just those two fingers inside him, pressing delicately against that inner flesh, feeling for that specific lump of denser tissue just beyond it. It was easy to find without those digits having to go that far in, and was even easier to provoke with just a few gentle prods. He sat back against his heels and kept rubbing at it softly, his free hand coming around front to stroke there as well, bombarding the younger man from all sides. He was bound and determined to make the man cry out, or at least whimper, loudly enough that he could hear it over the rushing water in the tub. When he felt the man's leg twitch against his side, Viktor withdrew his fingers and leaned in close, barely needing that hand to position himself before sliding in.

Those legs twitched again and clenched down around the Russian's frame, loosening only slightly as the pace picked up. Viktor's hands went down to the floor, wrists pressed tightly against his partner's waist to pin him in, and he thrust against his husband's frame eagerly. Gone was the worry that anyone would hear, and he pulled the man closer to him, leaning down to wedge his hands under Yuri's back, pressing his chin and mouth against the man's collarbone. He felt the younger man's fingers clambering over his back in turn, fingernails raking across his skin as he pushed in faster and faster.

Wet spikes of black hair were starting to press against the white tile walls, and Viktor pulled Yuri up to sitting in his lap instead, continuing the upward roll of his hips. Fingers went through the Russian's hair, leaving it more messy than it already was. Yuri clung to his partner's frame tightly, the previous long thrusts reduced to mere pushes against him, offering a brief reprieve in the intensity of the romp. After another few kisses though, Viktor pressed his hand against his husband's left leg, giving the hint to move it over and flip around. He did so without needing further suggestion, never once leaving that warmth within him, and pressed his hands to the edge of the tub. Once Viktor had found his place again, hands stroking across the smaller man's back, Yuri pulled up the forgotten bathrobe and used it to soften his grip on the porcelain.

The quick procession of pressure began anew, and the younger skater clung to that robe tightly, hardly able to hold himself up anymore if not for the Russian's hands for support. He closed his eyes and let the feeling wash entirely through him. When it became too much, and he felt himself on the edge, he bit down on his thumb to stop from crying out too loudly...though he still did. He pushed up against the edge of the bathtub just before he felt it, pale hands pressing against his abdomen to keep him close while his own went back, scrabbling for the Russian's legs. Soon after, he went all the way down to the towels heaped on the floor, gasping for loud breaths even as his partner kept slowly pushing into him. His whole frame trembled from the climax, each new press adding to the sensation, until he finally felt the silver figure pull his hips hard against his own.

Only after that moment did Viktor finally let Yuri go down, sitting on his heels in turn, though keeping the man firmly in his grasp as he did so. He pressed in a little closer and hugged his husband from behind, breathing heavily against his back. Holding for a little while, waiting for each of them to be able to catch their breath a little, he only looked up again when he felt a few splashes of water against his face. Slate eyes looked up, seeing hazel looking back at him, the man they belonged to
"Can you stand?" Yuri asked, huffing a laugh as he looked back over his shoulder.

Viktor drew a deep breath, but then went back to nuzzling the spot he'd been in a moment before, "Probably, but I don't want to. I like where I am." He added a certain emphasis to his words by rolling his hips again one last time.

"Your feet are going to go all numb and tingly soon."

"...I do like my feet." The Russian sighed contently, "I guess I could be convinced to get up."

"Only for a little while." Yuri assured, "I just want to stand in the shower for a minute."

By the time they were done, mostly dried off, changed, and ready for sleep, _Shutter_ was already 45 minutes into its runtime. It was a calm spot though, making it easy to obfuscate what the film was really about...for the moment.

Yuri came out in his usual shorts and t-shirt, rubbing his damp hair as he cleaned off the water smudges from his glasses, putting them back into place only as he felt his partner's arm come around him to guide him on top of the bed covers.

Both other skaters in the room were eyeballing them, but said nothing...having heard effectively nothing over the dull roar of the tub faucet, but knowing what happened anyway.

Viktor only had a pair of loose sweat-pants on, and they barely clung to his hips as it was. He sat on the edge of the bed before wrangling his husband overtop of himself, curling up on his side as Yuri settled for the night in front of him, and resting his ring-hand on the man's abdomen, holding his head up with the other, "What'd you end up picking?" He asked idly, seeing footage of some goateed Asian man standing in front of a pair of big wooden doors, knocking on them without an answer.

Green eyes just turned and glared from the corner of the bed where the teen had been perched, "A Thai movie." He answered simply, turning it down as he heard tension-building music starting to bubble up in the background.

Yuri blinked at the screen, trying to sit up a little, twisting a bit where he laid to settle one leg over his partner's. All he saw on the screen was that same Asian man going in through those wooden doors, looking around a ransacked apartment, a t.v. in the background showing static, "...I don't know this one. What's it called?" He asked idly, seeing footage of some goateed Asian man standing in front of a pair of big wooden doors, knocking on them without an answer.

"...It's...uh...a love story...?" Phichit tried to answer, not being particularly convincing in his own right.

The older skater tilted his head, glancing up at his husband, who was studying the screen like it was familiar somehow, "...Should we make them start it over?" He just barely missed the imagery of the main character looking at his reflection in a broken mirror, veins of fractured glass coming out from center, where a bloody dot was visible. The man continued to walk on. Yuri looked back at the television just as the scene changed to show an Asian woman sitting on a couch, looking at a black-and-white picture book. The images showed what looked like class photos, and the woman periodically turned her attention to a few loose snapshots that were stuffed into the creases between pages.
The Russian was still quiet, though his eyes squinted a little as the scenes went on.

"Viktor?" Yuri repeated.

More photos on screen, this time back in the apartment. They were in color, and looked like wedding photos. The camera panned around the back of the man who was holding one photo in particular, though it had a distorted white smudge over several of the people in it.

Viktor suddenly recognized what the movie was, and just as the camera was panning around to show some other figure standing on a balcony just out of sight of the man holding the picture, he turned to move that hand from his husband's stomach to his face, and used it to turn to towards him. "...I think it would probably ruin it to start over, don't you think?"

Yuri blinked up at him, entirely missing the part where the man on the balcony suddenly jumped off, "...Well, I guess so. It's almost half over by now, probably...I wouldn't want to impose..."

The silver skater smiled and leaned down to kiss him, keeping half an eye on the screen as he did so, watching as the man in the movie ran towards the balcony in protest, only to miss being able to save whoever had leapt. The camera moved with him, showing that the room was located on a rather high floor of some apartment building...and then rotated to look far below, showing the jumper had landed into a bloody pile on the roof of some hapless driver's car. The man called something out from the ledge, but could do nothing but watch the driver exit the vehicle and back off in horror. Viktor only finally pulled out of the kiss again when the scene changed over, and resettled his hand back on his partner's stomach, "Not more than we already have anyway." He mused, glancing back at the teen who was just eye-rolling him severely with his back turned, "Yuri, toss me the corner of the blanket, will you?" Viktor asked, pointing over at the other end of the bed and then abruptly kicking the Russian Tiger right off the end of it.

Phichit put his hand over his mouth, "Uh oh..."

"What the Hell was that for!" The blonde barked from the floor, rising up and gritting his teeth, only to spy Viktor's icy-eyed death-glare being shot right at him.

Ah shit, he knows what movie this is. He figured us out...

Yuri was super confused at their exchange, "What's going on...?" His eyes were starting to get heavy, the warmth of his partner and the blanket tempting him to sleep already.

"We'll take the top cover and you can have the ones underneath." The Russian went on, returning to his normal, cheerful affect, albeit with that eerie 'I know what you're up to and I won't let you do it' subtext to his tone.

Yurio just glared, but then moved stiffly to the other side of the bed and grabbed at the comforter with both hands, throwing it up until it landed in a heap across the cuddling skaters, "Fine, but if you two start making out again in the middle of the night...I'll boot you both out and take the entire bed for myself. I won't be evicted two nights in a row."

"Don't worry," Viktor said with a grin, raising his arm up again to position the blanket better around them, and so both could see, "You're safe until tomorrow night at least."

"Ohmygosh..." Phichit whispered to himself, wishing he could take pictures of the exchange suddenly, "This is even more R-rated than the Hot Pot restaurant last year..."

Yuri paid none of them any attention. By the time they'd settled down anyway, he'd succumbed to sleep, heedless of the lights, noise, and people moving around the room.
When Viktor noticed, he smiled and reached to pull the blue-framed glasses away, and twisted to set them on the nightstand behind him. He returned to where he was before, but settled in a little closer, moving the arm that had been holding his head up to wedge it under his partner's back and pull him against his chest, setting his head down in the pillow, "You guys can go ahead and finish the movie. I don't think we'll be watching it after all."

Chapter End Notes

Please comment/review if you like this sort of sexy-time content. People seem to refuse to do so whenever I make these kinds of updates and it's kind of depressing, so I'm going to start skipping them outright if no one appears to want me to write this stuff.
Thanks all for your feedback. I usually try to keep the smut chapters to a minimum unless there's some plot-based reason for it, but I guess it doesn't come across that way to a few readers (especially lately, cuz there's been a bunch of those scenes, and I know that.) The one from last chapter, I thought, was kind of important given the context of everything that's about to go down in the upcoming plot; as much as Viktuuri think and say they can/will do whatever they want in front of Kon, they both know deep down that they're too nervous to do so and likely won't, so they're going slightly over the top with it while they can. Mostly I just wanted to give folks a break from said Kon stuff cuz I can never be sure how well it's coming across sometimes. I generally detest the influence of OCs in stories and I don't want to be a complete hypocrite, so I wanted to get away from it for a while (even just for my own sake.) Enough people tell me they like it though so I'm also trying to put my own feelings about it aside and just tell a decent story. If you're all still here at 189 chapters, I can only assume I'm doing a good (enough) job that my OCs don't piss you off. For future smut, the overwhelming majority seem to enjoy it, so while that means I'll keep doing it, I'll also try to cater to you folks who feel that there's sometimes too much time wasted on it. You all did know what you were in for when I rated this story as M (ffnet) and tagged the shit out of it for sexual content (AO3,) but I guess I can post warnings and 'skip to...' notes for you guys who don't care about it. Also, for those still confused about the movie they put on, it was 'Shutter,' as Yurio stated at the start of the chapter (I've since repeated the name at the end of the chapter after doing my quality-control edits.) I just found it online really fast and wrote down what was happening at the 45min marker, cuz that's when the SkateDerps would've come out to watch it.

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED NINETY

The arena had been packed full since the doors opened. Though many were eager to see the Pairs and Ladies Short Programs, it was evident enough that most were there just to make sure they had seats for when the Men's event started. Seeing the wall-full of banners just for Viktor, or Viktuuri, made that plenty clear. Granted, as soon as the Pairs program started, most banners were tastefully covered up with more relevant fanfare, but since the previous imagery had gone down first, everyone saw it.

The stadium seating was unforgiving. The seats were hard, taupe-colored plastic, barely suitable for a temporary stay, never mind the Olympic events they'd been originally installed for. Many in the audience had prepared ahead of time by bringing small seat cushions with them, but not everyone knew what the stands looked like before they got there.

At best, a certain duo had only tersely contemplated the potential difficulties of seating a man who weighed in excess of 400lbs of pure Russian bear-muscle, debating what to do if the seats had immobile arm-rests. Thankfully, they didn't, so he could occupy four seats to himself, where they'd been designed for the dainty arses and narrow shoulders of normal-sized people...though at least half a seat on each side was just for the girth of his arms.
In the bear's massive hands were a few pieces of paper with Cyrillic text written in slightly-oversized font. He skimmed it, but huffed quietly to himself, glancing around the arena instead.

[His programs won't mean much to you if you don't know what his songs are saying.] Mikhail pointed out, [It'll just be incoherent noises and flailing otherwise.] He waved his hands around for emphasis.

[Mh... ] Konstantin grumbled to himself, turning slate eyes back down to the papers. The text written thereupon was a Russian translation of Viktor's songs, the first of which being 'Производитель истории'...or the equivalent of 'History Maker.' The third page is where 'Evoke' started, being listed as 'вызывать,' [I thought skaters were required to use classical music... without lyrics.]

[Back in the day, yeah.] Mikhail explained, [It changed in recent years so performers could show off a wider range of expression. Many skaters still use classical stuff though. Viktor usually produces his own music, but this year... well, it's a bit different this year.]

[Why's that?] The man wondered flatly, more out of obligation than true curiosity. The noise of the audience was a bit claustrophobic for him, and it kept most of his attention.

[He let Yuri pick his Short Program, for one.] The smaller Russian answered, [His Free Skate... well, I don't know the entire story behind where it came from, but I know it's an actual song, not one he had a musician compose for him. He's been calling it his 'Rage Skate.']

Like before, the huge man huffed to himself, and said no more. He simply scanned the enormous room, half-seriously keeping an eye out for potential escape routes. When the event finally started though, and the skaters that entered the rink for pre-program warm-ups were all in pairs, Konstantin made a note, [How long until Viktor even goes out there?]

Mikhail reached for the program book that Minako had pinched loosely between her fingers and snatched it quickly, leaning against her shoulder as he opened and looked at it. He had one arm hooked under hers as he scanned the listings, using a thumb from the other hand to keep track of where he was looking, then leaned back again, even with her arm still hooked over his elbow, [If everything stays on schedule, he'll be out there around 8pm.] When he lowered the program again, finished with it, Minako's hooked arm went hand-down onto his leg, which Mikhail thought rather clever... though that lasted all of half a second.

[EIGHT?] Konstantin barked, turning suddenly, making both smaller figures reel back like a hurricane-force wind was blowing at them, [IT'S BARELY TWO O'CLOCK. Why are we here so early! ?]

People nearby were staring; startled.

The smaller Russian just barked back, [We had to, or we wouldn't be able to get seats! Do you not understand how big a deal these events are! ? People come from all over the world to watch this stuff!]

Minako just gawked, wondering how the two proverbial elephant-seals could go at it like they were, without either of them backing down to intimidation. She scooted to the very edge of her seat, pulling her arm back in the process, leaning halfway out into the aisle by the time she was done. Unbelievable...

[So we're going to be sitting here for over six hours just to watch a single 3 minute show! ?] Kon went on.
[YES. WE HAVE TO.] Mikhail argued back, [Most of these people are here JUST BECAUSE OF VIKTOR.]

Slate eyes rolled back in severe annoyance.

[...Let me put it this way...] The silver Russian said, trying to calm down again, putting his hat back into place and adjusting where his coat had gotten disheveled, [Back in the day, when Russia last had a super-massive record-setting World Champion...he was supposed to skate at the European Championship, and I SHIT YOU NOT, when he hurt his back during pre-SP warm-ups and withdrew from competition, HALF THE AUDIENCE WALKED OUT. Everyone that's here right now, us included, is here because we know we'd never get seats if we waited until the Men's event actually started. That's the kind of star-power your boy's got. Most folks would probably leave if Viktor dropped out. Besides, this is his big come-back year after that retirement-scare when he came here to Japan to be Yuri's coach...so everyone wants to see him.]

Minako had her phone out, typing away in a text window, [Please save me.]

Most of the Men's Singles competitors were still at the event hotel, having half the afternoon to kill before actually being needed at the arena. Yuri's jacket was hanging off the back of his seat though and he failed to notice the jingle or vibration from the phone sitting in its inside pocket. He was too busy being relieved at the sight of his partner actually eating finally.

Their table seemed to be comprised entirely of Team Russia, with friends from Team Thailand on the side. Yuri was the odd-man-out, being a member of neither team, and not being a competitor at that event either. Still, as Viktor's official-yet-not-really coach, he had his place there. Yurio was slightly out of place for obvious reasons, but at least he had his Team Russia jacket, so he fit in a little better.

"Well, it's good that you seem to be in much better spirits today, Viktor." Mila was saying, sipping some apple juice through a straw, "I didn't want to say anything yesterday but you seemed really out of it, especially when you went to talk to Yakov."

"Oh, I did?" The silver Russian wondered, glancing up from the triangle of toast he'd been nibbling on, "I didn't want to say anything yesterday but you seemed really out of it, especially when you went to talk to Yakov."

"You went back? What for?" The redhead asked curiously, setting the glass down again.

"My Uncle got hurt between events, so I went back to make sure he got to NHK alright."

"Oohhhhh..." She sat back and smiled, forking a pickle on her plate, "That explains why all the reporters at Cup of China were saying you weren't there for Yuri's Exhibition. I swear, ever since you said you were coming back to competition, the RSF has been way more sensitive to any little upset to the schedule you're theoretically keeping." She held the pickle-spear up and bit a piece off the end where her fork held it, "Especially after you moved back to Hasetsu and said you were staying there for good."

Viktor shrugged, "It's not like skaters don't train abroad. Yuri and Phichit were in Detroit for years before going back to their home rinks."

"Otabek trained abroad, too." Yurio pointed out.

People stared.

"What?"

"Sure," Mila nodded, taking another bite from the pickle and returning to look at the man she'd been
speaking to originally, "But you're the guy that Russia hails as a National Hero, and yet you're not even living inside the Nation anymore. I dunno. They're a sensitive bunch. Ever since that time you met Putin, the RSF has been acting like they own a piece of you."

Yuri glanced aside, "...Oh yeah, I remember seeing pics of that. He went to watch the Sochi Olympics and spoke to you before you did your Free Skate."

"I was there, too." Yurio grumbled.

"Da..." Viktor said quietly, setting down the toast he'd been holding onto, "Publically, he lauded us as examples to the world of Russian Superiority...but he's also a good chunk of the reason I was always uneasy when we were in St. Petersburg. Joke's on him, I guess." He reached over to grasp his partner's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, "Russia's loss."

"Mila," Yakov interrupted, pulling the fabric napkin off his lap and dabbing his mouth on it, "We need to get moving. Pairs is starting and we still need to get there."

"Sure."

"We'll come, too." Viktor offered, patting Yuri's hand where he still held it and then pushing to stand, "Now's as good a time as any to get down there."

"You sure? Your event doesn't even start until 7." Mila pointed out, stepping away from her chair and pulling her winter coat off the back to sling around her shoulders, "You've probably seen all these shows already at your other events."

"We've actually been pretty bad about it this season." The silver Russian explained, pulling up his husband's jacket to slip it over his shoulders as he stood, "Normally we just go to practice in the early morning and then bail until the proverbial-roll-call halfway through Opening Ceremonies. We'll come cheer for you."

"You coming too, Phichit-kun, Celestino?" Yuri wondered, hands holding to the scarf as he pulled it over the back of his neck, "Like she said, it's early, but..."

"Not yet. Go on without us." Phichit explained, "I wanted to go sight-seeing a bit before tonight. We'll see you during the Openers, okay?"

The older skater smiled, "Don't get too carried away. There's so much stuff to see in Sapporo...it might keep you busy right through the Short Program." Yuri tossed one end of his scarf over a shoulder before tucking his hands into his pockets.

"Really!?" The Thai skater seemed suddenly rather excited, "Where should we go first!?"

"Check out Oodori Park, it's really close to the train station." He offered, "It's probably the most interesting thing you'll see this close to the hotel."

Viktor and Yurio were side-eyeing each other as the skater spoke, but neither was sure whether or not to stop him. They just glanced back at Yuri without a word, then returned to getting their cold-weather gear on before stepping away from the big table.

"See you guys later, then." He went on, waving as the group started to move off.

"Bye Yuri!"

"Ciao Ciao, Yuri."
The tall silver Russian put his arm over his partner's shoulders and pulled him close, whispering as they walked out of ear-shot, "...Oodori Park is boring though. It's just a green space for jogging with a couple statues and kids' playgrounds."

"I know. He'll figure it out." Yuri answered, looking quite pleased with himself, "Welcome to Sapporo, city of marvel and wonder."

Viktor looked on incredulously, but then laughed as they stepped out of the restaurant, their meals already paid for by the ISU, "Who knew you could be so evil?"

"I'm still working on getting him back for his pranks after The Ring incident." The younger skater explained, pulling one hand out of his pocket to snake that arm around his partner's back as they walked.

"Death by a thousand cuts." Yurio chimed in, "He must've gotten you good."

"...I'm just glad he never pranked me after The Grudge. He can make that croaking sound, you know? If he did that to me over the phone I'd probably have actually died and I wouldn't be here today."

"...Yeesh. Suddenly really glad you fell asleep last night when you did." Viktor went on, reaching out towards Yakov's shoulder to tap it, "...We need to go up to our room to grab my stuff. Will you guys wait?"

"Da. Go on."

"Spasibo."

The duo turned towards the elevators, leaving Yurio in the lobby. Green eyes watched them carefully, but he had a feeling it would be best to stay behind in that case.

Yuri was still confused though, "...What happened last night?"

As the silver Russian hit the 'Up' button for the elevator, he huffed a quiet laugh, "We walked into the middle of a horror movie called Shutter."

"WHAT!?" The shorter figure was aghast, "But I told them not to!" He suddenly broke off and went right back the way they came, rounding the corner where the team was heading through the lobby to where the shuttles were lined up outside, "YURI PLISETSKY, I TRUSTED YOU-"

The blonde suddenly gawked, seeing the older figure come stomping towards him...only to see Viktor rushing up behind him to wrangle him back the way they came. One arm around Yuri's chest, the other grabbing a leg to get him off balance, and the flailing skater was pulled back out of sight.

"Sorry, don't mind him." The silver figure mused, "Carry on."

Yurio just smiled and waved nervously, backing up towards where Yakov was standing just near the doors.

Once back at the elevators, Viktor pulled his husband in through an open door, and only then let him go again, smiling as the younger figure crossed his arms and haroomph'd to himself discontentedly, "...You told them not to look up any Japanese horror movies or their western remakes. Technically, they followed the rules."

"Technically!?!" Yuri winced, "How could-"
"It's a Thai horror film. I recognized it after a few minutes, so I tried to distract you so you wouldn't see. Then you fell asleep like I hoped you would, so it worked out." The Russian explained, leaning against a wall in the elevator and crossing an ankle over the other, "I said I'd wear you out so you'd be too tired to watch whatever they picked, right?"

"...Yeah." The raven-haired skater sighed, sulking a little as the mini-room rose up the shaft, his face getting pink again. He raised his hands up to bring his scarf over his cheeks and eyes, "I still can't believe we did all that in the bathroom. I thought you'd just drag me off somewhere during Opening Ceremonies or something."

Viktor reached a hand out and cupped it around his partner's head, bringing him close to his chest and smiling, even as Yuri continued to hide his face, "I don't think I could wait that long...but that doesn't sound like a bad idea either."

Yuri just groaned pitifully.

The entire shuttle-ride to the arena, Yuri was still scowling, boring holes into the back of the Russian Tiger's head where he sat in the row ahead of him. He kept his arms crossed and a sour look on his face, but said nothing, squished up against his partner alongside a bunch of other competitors who were heading to the rink at the same time.

Eventually, Yurio could feel the glaring, and he twisted on his seat, reached over, and flicked Yuri's forehead with a finger so fast that the skater could hardly react and pull back in time to avoid it. He just sat there in a confused stupor with a stunned look on his face.

"Quit it. You'll get stuck like that." The teen argued, "Viktor figured it out before you got terrorized by it anyway."

Cherry-hazel eyes went back to scowling, "It was a cruel trick to try and play on me."

Viktor reached up and ruffled his hair to get his mind off of it, "And I kicked him off the end of the bed for it."

"Oh..." Yuri sighed, the scowl fading, "You did that right before I passed out. I didn't realize that was part of it."

The blonde ahead of him just gave a sarcastic, smug look, resting his chin on his arm where it laid on the top of the seat, "We'll be sure to play something mild like Doraemon or Chi's Sweet Home next time."

"I don't watch kids' shows." Yuri grumbled, sinking into his coat a little indignantly.

"It sounds like something he'd watch though." Viktor laughed, thumbing at the younger skater, "Both of them feature cats as main characters!"

Yurio suddenly recoiled, regretting his choices, "W-what!? No way..."

"I thought that's why you picked them." The elder leaned towards him with a grin, "They're right up your alley. I'll buy you a souvenir of them."

"If you do, Viktor, I swe-"

"Pipe down you two." Yakov scolded, "We're here."
Eyes rose up to look out the side windows, spotting the arena in broad daylight, looming over them in a way that it hadn't the night before. Unlike before, though, they weren't being dropped off right near the stairs. They were taken a little further towards the back of the arena, where a separate entrance had been prepared for competitors, freeing up the main entrance for spectators.

The shuttle emptied out as soon as it came to a stop, with Yuri and Viktor hopping out last, looking up at the venue with new eyes.

"It's totally different when you can actually see the damn thing." Yurio commented, hearing the cheers and cries of fans not too far away.

Viktor waved at them excitedly, "Konnichiwaaaaa, minna-saaaaan~!"

Not feeling any particular pressure from the crowd behind the barricade, especially at such a distance, Yuri didn't get quite as uneasy as he'd been the day before. Still, he drew in a little closer to find his partner's hand in his pocket, and started to follow the group in through the athlete's entrance. Just as they'd gotten inside though, he heard Yakov saying something in Russian that made Viktor stop.

The man was about to go on with whatever he'd started, but Viktor shook his head.

"You can speak like normal. Yuri knows."

"...Yuri knows." The elder coach repeated flatly, a tone of disbelief in his voice.

"...About your father being here?" The shorter skater wondered, "Or something else...?"

"Everything I told you about yesterday morning."

Yakov was a bit shocked, "You actually told him...?"

"Mh." The silver skater nodded, "It took me until now to finally get the nerve to do it, but...yeah. He knows about as much as anyone could without having been there to see it himself."

"...Alright." The coach sighed a little, "In that case...what I was going to say...is that I recommend you keep your head down until you go out there. Wave to the judges, but don't look at the audience. You don't need to know where he's sitting."

"It'll be fine." Viktor shrugged, starting to walk again, "Warn me if he comes rushing out to jump onto the ice or something."

Yakov just glowered, "What good is asking me to be your coach again if you never listen!? Vitya!" He called, looking just as comically flustered as he ever had, "VITYA!"
It was easy to hear the sound of the audience through the walls. Cheering and applause met the end of the most recent Pair skaters' performance, the cacophony of sound reverberating off the stadium walls like waves. Under the stands though, the volume practically made the walls and ground vibrate, pushing into the chests of everyone walking around down there.

Yuri lifted his head as it washed over him; no matter how many times he heard or felt it, it was always a force to get his attention. He’d known it to be even more powerful on occasion though, and he glanced up and to the side, looking at Viktor walking alongside him, slate eyes forward to where they were going. For a split second, the man was just his idol again. The legend, the genius, the best skater of their generation...the untouchable one. Those blue eyes blinked though and turned towards him, the man smiling, and in half a moment, the young skater’s cheeks went pink. Without a word, Yuri just smiled back and turned his face ahead again, stepping to walk a bit closer, pressing his shoulder to the silver Russian's arm.

Not really sure what had just happened, Viktor tilted his head a little, watching quietly as Yuri brought his ring-hand up, and felt as the man kissed the gold on his finger. The raven-haired skater held a moment before letting it go back between them again as they walked, all without having said a thing. Not one to leave a kindness unreturned, Viktor leaned in quietly and kissed his partner's cheek, giving that hand a gentle squeeze as they kept moving.

By then, the thunderous roar of the audience had died down again as the performing skaters moved off to the kiss and cry for their scores, the next set lining up in the cue for their turn.

Yakov had pulled ahead of them ages ago by then, catching up with his sole actual athlete and diverging from the path to rink-side to head into the staging area instead. Yurio followed closely behind, with Viktor and Yuri pulling up the rear in their own time. It was only then that Yuri finally decided to pull out their event passes, reaching into his inside-coat-pocket to retrieve them. One lanyard caught around his phone though, pulling it out and sending it bouncing off his chest until it hit the ground with a hard plastic thwap.

Yuri half-had a heart attack as he watched the device plummet, practically in slow motion, until it landed case-side down by his feet with half a bounce. The sound it made reminded him starkly of the day Yurio had yelled at him in St. Petersburg, scaring him into dropping the thing, and it had crashed onto the ice, sending the text message that would change their lives forever. As he reached down to pick it up again, his finger grazed the 'on' button on the side, bringing up the Lock screen, and a text window that had been sitting there for nearly an hour. He clenched his eyes shut for a moment to shake the déjà vu, and then rose back to his full height, looking at the message as Viktor watched.

"Is it okay?" The Russian wondered, "Yuri."

"Yeah, it’s fine." He answered, seeing the Japanese 救ってください, 勇利 from his ballet teacher, "I think Minako-sensei needs an out."

"What'd she say?" Viktor asked, turning to see what was written on the screen, though not being able to read it either way.

"'Save me please, Yuri.' But it was almost an hour ago..."
"Let me put my stuff down real fast and we can go."

Hazel eyes blinked at the man, but followed dutifully, "You sure you want to? You could just go
straight to the participants' viewing area like we planned."

"Why wouldn't I want to go help save Minako?" The Russian wondered, glancing back over his
shoulder.

"...Because of what we'd presumably be saving her from?"

Viktor shrugged, trying not to look as nervous as he was starting to get, "I'll just stand in the hall
while you go snag her, or we'll just text her that we're waiting." He offered, "Go ahead and tell her
we're coming. She can sit with us."

Looking at the Russian's all-too-obvious team track-suit, and how the red lines of the eagle-crest
Coat of Arms popped out from the black it was printed on, Yuri sighed quietly. The nerves that he'd
finally pushed back down into submission from outside were starting to bubble up again, and he
wondered if the man had entirely forgotten what he'd said the day before already.

'...I don't even want to close my eyes anymore because you'll be out of my sight again, even just to
blink. I guess...I'm just not ready to share you with other people again yet.'

Yuri wasn't sure which aspect of his anxiety bothered him more at that point...the idea of leaving
Viktor behind to go find Minako on his own, or of bringing him with and being mobbed by the fans
who were still trying to find seats. It would be pointless to try and disguise the Russian under a hat
again, even if he'd be willing to wear the surgical mask, and he knew that Viktor had already
changed into his Short Program ensemble under the track-suit, too. He grit his teeth and resigned to
letting the man do as he wanted.

"Yakov, we're going to go rescue Yuri's ballet teacher from my fa-..." Viktor's words cut off, seeing
Mila lifting her head to listen, "...Uncle. We're going to go sit in the competitor's box until Opening
Ceremonies. I'm going to leave my skates here."

The older man just raised a brow at him, then turned to a particular blonde who was standing silently
in the wings, watching everything unfold, "Yuratchka, go with them."

"Eh? Why me?" He wondered back indignantly.

Both older skaters wondered the same thing, but said nothing as Viktor set his carry-bag down and
nudged it under a folding chair with one foot.

"Tell Mikhail to come down here."

"...We can tell him that." Viktor pointed out, a little confused.

Yakov just stood fully upright from where he'd been sorting out his own bag, and turned to face the
younger figure squarely, "I have this vexing feeling that you won't get anywhere near him."

"He's with them though...?"

"Yuratchka's going to make sure he actually gets here. There's no need for you to get in the middle
of it." The elder coach said simply, giving off the stern affect that used to thoroughly intimidate the
young Asian skater, "Just go see your friend and ignore the rest."

Yuri lifted his head to look at his partner's face, seeing the neutral expression change to one of slight
worry. He still had his phone in his hand, and turned to glance at the face-plate, seeing the text window still there.

I wonder if I could tell her to just meet us somewhere else...?

"And don't just text him." Yakov went on, seeing Yurio about to do that very thing, "Go to him and make sure he doesn't have a chance to bail."

"...Why am I suddenly an errand-boy?" The teen protested, scrunching his shoulders up a little as he stepped closer to the two older skaters.

"Because he's your sponsor and you have nothing else to do. Make yourself useful to the team." The coach said with finality, "Now go already. This meeting is official business, not just some chit chat between old men."

Viktor nervously turned on his heel, but quietly followed the Russian Punk back out of the waiting area and out into the main hall. He looked over to watch his partner attempting to thumb an answer to the ballerina, but it was a slow-going process, mistyping most letters as he tried to look and walk and touch the tiny keyboard at the same time.

Getting frustrated with it, Yuri pulled his hand out of his husband's and looped their elbows instead, freeing his fingers to type the message more efficiently than before while still maintaining his hold on the man. Viktor settled that hand into his pocket after that.

"Where are we even going?" Yurio asked, looking back over his shoulder as they came to the end of the competitors-only area, and pausing to wait for the answer.

"I'm asking." Yuri answered, seeing the three little jumping dots that indicated Minako was answering. His phone buzzed with her reply, and the skater looked up, "She's on the west end of the arena, by the northern stairwell."

"It looks like the inner part of the arena is blocked off after all." Viktor pointed out, looking around, "They must be funneling spectators straight into the seating area so they can't wander all over the place."

"Makes it easy for us to move then." Yuri said, putting his phone away, "Let's get going; Minako-sensei sounds miserable."

Moving out into the larger hall, and leaving the barricaded area behind them, the trio started making their way from the south-eastern end of the building to the western half. As they passed the stairwells that lead steeply up towards the normal access points to the rink, they could see fans standing right up against it and blocking all sight past them. None noticed the small group going by, making it easy to make progress unmolested. By the time they made it to the stairs where the ballerina had said she'd been sitting near, the next Pair skaters had finished their program, and another round of thunderous applause filled the arena with the sound of cheering and clapping. The announcer was calling the score soon after, but the audience and the echo made it hard to make out from under the stands.

The trio paused at the edge of the last corner, barely sticking their heads out to get a look. The woman wasn't there, so Yuri went back to his phone.

[We're at the bottom of the stairs. Where are you?]

[I'm coming. I thought I'd wait.] She answered quickly. Minako clicked out of her phone and slid it into her jacket, leaning over to whisper something into Mikhail's ear before pushing to stand up and move out of sight. The barrier into the lower area wasn't as crowded as some others had been, so it
wasn't too difficult to get to it. When she looked down and spotted that mess of black hair and blue-rimmed glasses, she felt a wave of relief wash over her and she quickly lifted one leg over the barricade, to the glares and judgmental stares of a few around, and then the other. She looked back only once as she went down the steep stairs, and then threw her arms over the young skater's shoulders, "Yuri!"

"Sorry it took so long to message you back earlier." He answered, returning the hug eagerly, "I didn't even realize you'd reached out until after we got here."

"I can't imagine spending all afternoon sitting around those two," The ballerina went on, holding onto the skater like she'd get sucked right back into her seat if she let go, "It's bad enough they're speaking in Russian the whole time, but that big Yeti is absolutely insufferable. Why would Mikhail think it makes any sense to bring him here when he clearly doesn't want to be?"

"I have no idea." Yuri said quietly, pulling back at least far enough to be able to see how annoyed she was, "I wasn't there when they decided to ask him."

Viktor slouched against the painted concrete wall, just out of sight, feeling even more guilty than he already did.

Green eyes turned up at him quietly, then glanced back over at the two Japanese figures, "Is Mikhail still up there?"

Minako turned her head to see the teen, "Oh, sorry Yura...I didn't expect to see you there. Is Viktor around somewhere, too?"

The Russian Tiger nodded and thumbed back behind himself as he stepped over towards the stairs, "Trying to be a fly on the wall."

The brunette let her former pupil go, and moved towards the edge of the wall, setting her hand gently against the corner before pulling around to look. Just as had been stated, the Russian was there, but he had his hands in his pockets and his eyes were staring straight at the floor. Minako wasted no time, the wedge-heels of her shoes clicking along the ground as she cautiously moved over to him, setting a hand on his shoulder to get his attention, "...I'm sorry, I would've been more careful with my words if I knew you were right here."

He simply shook his head.

"...Oh Viktor..." She hummed quietly, stepping in closer to give the man the same hug she'd given to Yuri a moment before, "This isn't your fault. I know you agreed to let your father come but it wasn't your idea. You can't make him enjoy something overnight." She rubbed his back with one hand, relieved at least to feel one of the Russian's arms lightly return the gesture, "...Mikhail said...Konstantin's mostly just annoyed about how long it's going to be until the Men's Short Program even starts. I guess Mikhail didn't warn him about how things work before we got here."

"More of my uncle's brilliance at work when it comes to my father." The silver Russian said quietly, "I should've figured there'd be a limit to his apparently vast cache of sagely wisdom."

"Everyone's stupid at a few things." Minako offered, "I just wish Mikhail's 'stupid thing' wasn't this."

"I was stupid for thinking this would turn out any differently." Viktor sighed, lowering his head even more than it already had been, "The man couldn't stand to even see skates before, but now he's supposed to sit for an entire afternoon and half an evening watching skating? What could possibly go wrong?"
"...That." Yurio said suddenly, getting everyone's attention as he pointed up the stairs, "Move it!"

[SHE LEFT. I'M LEAVING.] Konstantin barked, stepping over the metal barricade like it was barely there, descending the steps three at a time until he was on level ground again.

[You can't!] Mikhail pleaded, quickly jumping down after him and giving chase, right past the stunned group, [We'll never get our seats back!]

[I DON'T GIVE A DAMN ABOUT THE SEATS. THEY'RE TINY AND HORRIBLE ANYWAY.]

The two older Russians didn't even seem to notice who they'd just barreled past. Konstantin was making a B-line for where he knew the main exit was located, taking long, quick strides, though making it seem like a normal pace for someone his size.

"What in the Hell?" Yurio asked, watching them go.

In one last desperate bid, Mikhail lunged at the bear, grabbing him around the head and trying to steer him like a bull, losing his flat-cap in the process, [You may not even be able to get back inside once Opening Ceremonies is done! You can't leave now!]

Konstantin stopped, but only so he could try and reach around to grab the monkey on his back, [I'LL COME BACK FOR VIKTOR'S SHOW AND NOT A SECOND SOONER. I'M NOT GOING TO SIT AROUND ALL DAMN DAY WATCHING A BUNCH OF PANSY-ASS, TWINKLE-TOED FAIRIES PRANCING AROUND.]

Viktor's eyes twitched to hear it, but Yurio just scowled hatefully.

[Damnit, Kon, that's your kid you're talking about! You're not even giving it a chance!]

[I CAME, DIDN'T I!?] The bear argued, still reaching, giving the onlookers a brief scare, as it seemed like he was just about ready to ram his back against the wall to squash Mikhail enough to make him let go, only to keep turning after all, [I SAID I'D WATCH VIKTOR, NOT EVERY GODDAMN SKATER IN THE WHOLE GODDAMN COUNTRY.]

Yuri and Minako exchanged glances, turning to the Russians for clarity, "What are they saying?"

"Nothing of value." The teen said simply.

Konstantin finally managed to get his giant murder-mitts around the skinny figure clinging to his neck and shoulders, yanking him off like he was barely a child, and set him down on the floor roughly, [I'LL be back, BUT NOT ONE SECOND SOONER THAN I HAVE TO BE.] He yelled again, turning on his heel to finally leave.

The silver elder watched him go, stunned, feeling entirely defeated, but feeling one last word bubbling up in him, [WHAT WOULD TAT SAY IF SHE SAW YOU LEAVING LIKE THIS?]

[SHE'S DEAD. YOU DON'T GET TO USE HER AGAINST ME ANYMORE.] The bear said with finality, disappearing around the curve of the rounded stadium's walls, heading for the exit.

Three sets of astonished eyes stared ahead, unblinking, until the sound of fabric rustling against a hard surface caught their attention and they turned back. Viktor had slid down against the wall until he was sitting on the floor, elbow on his knees, forearms crossing over his head protectively where he bowed it low to hide his face.
"Viktor!" Yuri cried out, going to his knees beside the man, setting his hands gently on the Russian's shoulders, "Forget him, we won't even let him come back...! This isn't worth it!"
Minako was down on the silver skater's other side, one hand gently on Viktor's forearm, "I agree, this is too much..."

Grey-green eyes finally turned back, only just then realizing the group was even there. Mikhail was immediately horrified, but that quickly faded to guilt and disappointment. He stepped the few paces back to where his hat was lying on the floor and picked it up, dusting it off before setting it back on his head and cautiously walking forward. He barely made it halfway before he saw Yurio starting to come towards him instead.

"That's far enough." The teen said firmly, "You're coming with me."

"But Vivi-"

"He's not someone you have the privilege of getting to worry about right now." Yurio said, gritting his teeth, his kicking-leg twitching.

"...Minako?" The elder Russian wondered instead, looking past the blonde, but only seeing the woman shaking her head at him like it wasn't the best time to argue. He sighed and furrowed his brow, wondering how much deeper he'd just dug his own grave. Reluctantly, he bowed his head and turned to go with the teen, pausing only long enough to set his fist on the wall briefly so he didn't punch it instead.

After a few moments of tense silence, interrupted only by the music of the show and the maelstrom of cheering that followed, Viktor finally unraveled from the ball he'd made of himself. He crossed his legs and lowered his hands against them, head still bowed so his bangs shielded his eyes.

"...Viktor...?" Yuri said again, quieter than before.

"...Why do I never know how to feel about things...?" The Russian asked, his voice strained as he stubbornly refused to let himself shed tears over what had just happened, "...I don't know if I'm more angry that he left...or that I stupidly hoped that he'd stay..."
Yurio stepped lightly, heading back into the prep area where his coach was waiting. Periodically, he'd look back just to make sure Mikhail was still following, only to turn again once the man got closer and moved on. Once around that last corner, the young skater saw Yakov sitting on the benches by the team's gear, waiting patiently on his own.

"Where'd Mila go?" The teen asked, "Changing?"

"Da." The elder answered, turning his head to meet the skater, then pushing to stand up as he saw the silver man behind him.

"I brought the little idiot like you asked. The big idiot made a scene and stormed off." Yurio went on, coming to a stop and looking at the skinny Russian warily.

"Careful. This idiot writes the checks that still pay your bills." Mikhail warned dryly, pointing at himself before putting that hand back into his coat pocket.

The blonde shrugged and sat down in one of the plastic chairs against the wall, slouching into it and putting one ankle across his knee, "The way you've already turned NHK into a massive cluster-fuck for Viktor and everyone that knows him, I'll be surprised if you're still here by the end of the weekend."

"What happened to Viktor...?" Yakov asked cautiously, "Where is he now?"

Emerald eyes moved over to the coach, "In the hall by where we met with Minako. Viktor's trying not to have a melt-down over his drama-queen father."

The elder coach's eyes went wide, but then shut, lowering his head so the brim of his hat covered them over, "Who's with him now?"

"Just Minako and the Japanese Yuri. There aren't any fans wandering the lower halls over there."

"And you said Konstantin left?"

"Da. He stormed out, screaming about how all this stuff was beneath him and that he wouldn't be back until Viktor was actually about to get on the ice."

Yakov nodded, then raised his head so one eye peeked out from under the brim of his hat, staring straight at the slightly-younger Russian standing in front of him, "I wouldn't use the same words Yuri did, but you really did make a mess of things by bringing that man here."
"I've known Konstantin my entire life. I didn-"

"You've been gone for the last 25 years." The older man cut him off, bristling, but trying not to let it get the better of him, "Viktor barely remembered you as it was, even back when he was younger and was living with me. The only reason I ever bothered giving your information to his Yuri is because Viktor never had anything bad to say about you, that I could remember, at least nothing worse than the fact that you left. You seemed decent. But this...? Bringing his father here, a man who..." The gruff old Russian's words trailed, glancing down at the teen who was all-too-obviously eavesdropping.

"...What, who hit him?" Yurio finished, glancing up from under his hoodie, "I know."

"Stay here with Mila when she gets back." Yakov instructed, turning back to the other man, "You and I need to step outside."

Mikhail felt a pit in his gut, but he put up no argument, simply turning on his heel to follow the coach back out the way he came.

Yakov paused as they entered into the main hall that lead around the circumference of the arena, under the stands, and looked back at him, "Where did you leave them?"

The silver Russian simply pointed the way, and the coach followed down, rounding the curved hall until his eyes finally caught sight of the small group. He picked up his pace slightly to get there faster, seeing both Yuri and Minako lifting their heads to watch him coming, "Vitya!"

Yuri quickly jumped up to make room for the older man.

Red-touched eyes lifted slightly from where the skater was still sitting on the floor, "Yakov..."

The coach crouched down on one knee, reaching a rough hand out to cup around the athlete's head, then moving it forward to brush the bangs from his eyes, "You're not hurt?"

Viktor shook his head slightly, casting his eyes down again. With his hair moved away, he knew that whoever was looking could see his left eye twitching nervously.

Yakov let it go again to let those silver strands fall back in place, then sighed to himself, "I'm going to have that chat with your uncle now. Take the time you need and then go watch the show. Get your mind off of this so it doesn't haunt you later. There's still enough time before Opening Ceremonies and your SP for things to settle down."

The skater nodded quietly, rubbing his nose on the back of his sleeve before reaching out with both arms to hug the man around the chest. Viktor held there for a moment as he felt Yakov lightly patting his back, then let go again and reached for Yuri's hand instead, "Spasibo."

The older man touched his skater's shoulder again before pushing to stand upright, and turned side-face to look at where Mikhail had been quietly watching from several paces down the hall. Those grey-green eyes turned down and away at that point, hidden under the short brim of the flat-cap and a few strands of silver-grey hair. Yakov huffed quietly to himself, but then started moving back towards him, "Let's go out the back way. Fewer eyes out there."

Shoes clicked along the hard floor, fading out gradually until they were inaudible over the sound of the performances still taking place. Pairs was barely half over at that point, and then Ladies were up for pre-program warm-ups.

Yuri watched the pair go quietly, retaking his place just in front of his husband a moment later, still
holding to where Viktor had taken his hand. He reached his free hand forward and gently pressed his palm to the man's face, "Let's at least get you off the floor, okay?"

The Russian tilted his face into his partner's hand, holding there a moment before nodding and twisting around to do just that. He let Yuri help pull him back up to his feet, and then pulled him close to hug him tightly, drawing in a deep, shaky breath. The shorter figure quickly returned the hug, fingers pressed down into his idol's back.

Minako watched quietly, but felt relieved to see things starting to resolve...even if only a little bit. Out of nowhere though, she felt two hands come close to grab her wrists and pull her forward, adding her to the hug without a word. Stunned at first, she blinked widely at the pair, but relaxed quickly enough, settling both of her arms over the men's shoulders and pressing her long brown hair to the mess of silver and black, "You kids have gone through too much this season already. I really hope the Final is better."

Outside the arena, there was a long 'tunnel' of sorts, where a set of wide stairs connected to an upper-level outdoor observation deck that spanned a good 150ft of the drop-off driveway. Yakov ignored it. He had his eyes sets for the middle of a snow-covered field on the other side of the road, which had two massive, albeit barren trees, as well as a smaller bush-like tree in the center, with two sets of park benches nearby. Dress-shoes crunched through frosty white fluff, pressing through the small field until arriving at those same benches. Yakov kicked the snow off with a foot before using his ungloved hand to get the rest, but instead of sitting down...he pointed at the cleared-off spot and glared at the skinny silver Russian that had followed him, "Sit."

Like a child that was out of his breadth, Mikhail did as told quickly, blinking up at the man who he knew was about to rip him a new one.

Yakov took in the sight of their surroundings for a moment, looking over to where spectators were still trying to get into the arena, or were loitering around for lack of all else to do. None were close enough to really be in ear-shot though, so he drew in a sharp breath, scrunched up his shoulders, and exhaled, then turned towards the Rozovsky. Small eyes narrowed at him, "I had a mind to scream at you about how big of an idiot you were for bringing Konstantin here, but I'm guessing you won't listen to that...Viktor doesn't. So I'll try something different. ...I've known that boy since he was almost 11." He started, "I found him in a little washed-up skating rink with his mother, practicing with a pair of undersized girl's skates. They weren't able to buy proper equipment because, as I learned later, his father was such a prick about skating that he wouldn't even look at a pair of blades without setting off a seismic event over it. In all those years, Viktor never once questioned it. The man's hatred for skating was just a fact of life, as natural as the changing of the seasons and the rising and setting of the sun every day. But despite Konstantin's Biblical-level disgust for the ice, or maybe because of it, Viktor Nikiforov was...at age 10...one of the most gifted youngsters that I had ever witnessed."

Mikhail wasn't sure what the man was getting at, so he stayed quiet.

"Even after hearing his mother plead for silence, refusing to tell me where they lived, refusing to give me their phone number...claiming that if her husband found out Viktor was skating, western Russia would have a second nuclear disaster, the likes of which none had seen since Chernobyl went under in '86..." Yakov went on, "...Those two would still show up at that rink." He let the words sink in a little bit, "...Do you even know whose skates Viktor was wearing back then?"

"...No." The skinny elder answered stiffly.
"His mother's, from her own childhood, from before everything went so horribly wrong with the topic." The coach answered, still glaring.

Mikhail looked aside glibly.

"Seeing the skill that kid had, even with ill-fitting skates, without ever having been coached by anyone...pressing on solely by sheer force of will and determination, in spite of the risk of apocalyptic doom...I knew I had to help him. I bought him his first pair of legitimate skates, and I coached him pro-bono for that entire winter, going right into the last freeze of late spring before that outdoor rink could no longer sustain the ice. I managed to give Tatiyana my contact information, so she could at least reach out to me if the need came." Yakov explained, feeling the tension rising in him at the memory of those strange times, "But I didn't hear one word from those two the entire rest of that year. In fact, it wasn't even until half-way through the next winter...after going back to that rink every weekend, hoping to see Vitya again, though never getting to...that I got that first call. It was barely a message at all, actually...a meager hello on my answering machine, an apology for Viktor being missing, and a phone number to call back. I did so, only to get the cold shoulder by Tatiyana...I'm guessing Konstantin was somewhere close at the time. She treated my call like a sales pitch and hung up. Thankfully, she called back again the next day, and told me about how depressed Viktor had been since Konstantin had found his skates and burned them. Do you know about that?"

The younger figure nodded quietly.

"Tatiyana asked me to come to their home and try to explain to Konstantin how important it was that Viktor be allowed to keep skating...but the man just wouldn't listen. He saw red as soon as I walked in the house, and when he found out who I even was and what I represented...he became completely irrational. Do you know what it sounds like when a child is screaming because they've just been punched in the face by a man 10 times their size?"

Mikhail refused to answer, looking at his shoes.

"Well?"

"I have kids. I've heard them scream when they've gotten hurt."

"But nothing worse than a stubbed toe, by the sound of your tone."

"...No."

"I took Viktor to a hospital in St. Petersburg after that, and it turned out he had not one, but two fractures in his small face, and a concussion, and the bloody eye. I was obligated to tell them what happened, and they were obligated to investigate it. By the end of things, I was given guardianship over him, and Viktor never had to deal with it again." The older Russian said, "You saw Viktor get hit in the same place another two times when we were there for Tatiyana's funeral. He didn't scream then. But the sound of him when he was a child...blood running down his face, thinking he was blind, crying for his mother...that sound will stay with me until the end of my days." The coach stepped close and leaned into the other man's face, speaking darkly, quietly, "You might be his uncle by blood, but Vitya is my family. He's as much an athlete of mine as he is like a son to me. I will not tolerate what you've recently put him through, not for one second longer."

"It wasn't supposed to be this way." Mikhail finally said, lifting his head, staring straight into the man's eyes, even as close as he still was, "Kon's changed. I made him watch Viktor's skating on my tablet an-"

"In the comfort of his own home, just the two of you, where he didn't even have to look if he didn't
want to." Yakov stopped him, rising back up to his normal stature, "You've been coming to enough
events this last year to know that watching skating on television, even a live feed of it, is vastly
different than watching it in person. It's as different again to watch small clips of specific skaters,
recorded and edited in advance for the best view and least filler."

Mikhail crossed his arms tightly and grumbled through grit teeth.

"What do you even do for a living?"

"What difference does it make?"

"A big difference, maybe."

"I'm an engineer." The silver Russian answered stiffly, looking off into the distance indignantly.

Yakov nodded at that, "As far away from being a figure skater as can be." He turned to look at the
trees nearby, "You have a mind for putting mechanical parts together. People are not like machines
though. You can't just put Viktor and his father together and expect them to sync."

"I know that. It's why I was trying to work Kon up to it with the videos."

"Are you sure you didn't hit your head when you fell off that roof?" The coach asked tersely, turning
back to look at those grey-green eyes, "After everything you've seen and heard since coming back
into Viktor's life, do you still not understand that those two are like oil and water? You can't change
what a man has been for 20 or more years of his life. It doesn't matter if you think you've had some
breakthrough with Konstantin. Every encounter they've had with each other since Viktor got back
from South Korea has been traumatic. And it's not just Viktor you're putting in danger with this
insane plan of yours. Yuri has been hurt. I saw that much with my own eyes. Everyone around them
is suffering, too, feeling the collateral damage of their pain. I can see and feel it every time I see
Viktor now...he's on edge. All the time. If not for Yuri, I think Vitya might've stepped in front of a
bus by now. These guys aren't like most other men...they're artists...they can't take this constant,
reckless, deliberate abuse and keep bouncing back. I've seen Viktor break twice before...I won't let
Konstantin do it a third time."

"Kon really isn't as bad as everyone seems to th-"

"NO ONE CARES." Yakov finally yelled, sending a few birds flying from the naked trees, "What
you claim and what we've seen are incompatible. I'm NOT going to let this misguided plot of yours
continue to plague this team. For Vitya's mental and physical health, I want you to call Konstantin
right now and tell him not to come back. Put him on the earliest plane back to Russia and send him
back to the woods where he belongs."

"That's not fair. It's not as easy as th-"

"DO IT."

"He doesn't even have a car! How's he going to get back to the house on his own!? No taxi will
drive him to the middle of nowhere, not when there's no cell service to run a GPS!"

Yakov leveled at him, "If it's that much trouble, maybe you should go back with him."

Eyes widened to hear it, "...What, so you're banning me from my own nephew? You don't have that
kind of power."

"I'll do whatever it takes to protect Vitya's peace of mind. This is his life and livelihood you're
tampering with. If he has a mental collapse and can't perform, and doesn't make it to the Final? I don't even want to think about how heartbroken and angry he'd be. For now, call Konstantin. We're not done until I hear you speak the words."

"He's not going to pick up. He's as mad at me right now as anyone." Mikhail said bitterly.

"Call him anyway."

"I'd feel better if Viktor were here to give his two cents."

"I'm making an executive decision on his behalf, as his coach and guardian." The gruff man said, "Why is this such an issue for you? Who are you really trying to help with all this? Viktor? Konstantin? Maybe this is all just for your sake, trying to mend bridges where the gaps are too wide now. Stop making Viktor suffer because you think you can fix things. CALL KONSTANTIN."

The younger figure huffed an angry sigh, but then pulled his phone out and clicked through his contact list until he found the bear's name, and tapped his thumb against it to send out the message. It rang a few times, and went to a generic voicemail, just as the silver Russian guessed it would. But, Yakov was staring daggers at him, so he waited for the beep to speak, [Hey, it's me. Viktor's coach doesn't want you coming back to the competition. Call me back when you get this. We'll figure out how to get you back home.] He clicked out of the call and put the device back into his coat, then looked up at the man standing ahead of him, "There. Happy?"

"No. Never happy." Yakov retorted, starting to move off, shoes crunching in the snow again as he headed back towards the arena, "But I'm satisfied for the moment. I'm going to check on Vitya." He paused and looked over his shoulder one last time, seeing as Mikhail was rising to stand, "If you love your nephew even half as much as I do, you'll follow-up on that call and make sure that man doesn't come back. Understood?"

"...Yes."
Yakov pushed into the building far ahead of Mikhail, the doors sliding shut long before the second figure ever got close enough to see within. By the time those grey-green eyes set themselves onto the skating duo again, Yakov had already found the group and had been speaking to them for a few minutes. The coach looked up and back at him when the group seemed to shift their attention away, but made one last comment before getting a nod from Viktor and started to leave. The quiet tap of his dress-shoes on the floor echoed briefly, drowned out by the sound of the announcer reading off the previous performance's score and earning a loud applause.

The older Russian paused in front of him though, still looking ahead, "Leave them be. You've already done enough."

The pit in the silver Russian's gut grew bigger to hear the words, amplified by the new round of cheering from within the stadium as the next set of skaters went out.

_How ironic... I get a knife in the chest, and the audience cheers. I know it's not actually for me, but the timing makes it feel like it might as well be._

He listened to Yakov's shoes clicking away until they vanished entirely, leaving him in the otherwise silent hall. All the while, he kept his eyes forward, wanting desperately to say something, but frozen solid by the look on his nephew's face, those blue eyes staring right back at him, clearly saying not to come closer. The trance was broken by Minako turning to say something to the pair, getting a kiss on the cheek from Viktor and a hug from Yuri before departing. Mikhail just stood there, practically paralyzed, until the ballerina got closer and all but forced him to turn around, spinning him by his shoulders until he was facing the other way, then nudging him to start walking in that direction.

"Just give them space for now. Viktor needs to focus so he can skate later." She instructed; her voice sounded hollow at first, but then returned to normal as the listener focused on it.

"...I should apologize to him at least..." Mikhail protested, looking back over his shoulder, only to see the woman shake her head.

"They don't want your apologies right now. They want space."

"They? Yuri's mad at me, too?"

"Neither of them are mad at you." Minako clarified, stepping up beside the man instead and walking next to him, "But they are a packaged deal. That little outburst from Konstantin wounded Viktor rather deeply, and Yuri feels his pain. He'll fight to the death to protect Viktor if that's what it takes, and right now, Viktor's in a particularly vulnerable place. Yuri can sense it, and is drawing in closer to keep him safe." She said simply, stuffing her hands into her jacket pockets, "But Viktor badly wants his father's approval for his skating...or at least, that's what he says he wants. Not knowing a lot about his life outside of the sport though, I can't say for sure that's all he's looking for." She turned her eyes up at the taller figure, taking note of how he avoided her gaze just by tilting his face forward enough that his silver-grey bangs covered them over, and hopped quickly forward to get in front of him instead and make him stop in his tracks.

Mikhail paused to avoid running right into her, but kept his gaze case down, until he felt the woman's hand come up to his face to force him to look up.
"If I could put the conversation you and I had the other night onto a television and make them watch it, I would... I know you meant well when you suggested bringing Konstantin here, but the more I talk to Viktor, the more I get the impression that he was strong-armed into agreeing. How upset was he already about things in Russia when you sprung this ridiculous idea on him?"

The silver Russian grimaced, and turned his head to pull it off the woman's palm, "...Enough that he'd been crying and said he wanted Yuri." He admitted darkly, further realizing the error in his judgment, "It's not how I expected things to go."

"What did you do to him that made him that upset?" Minako asked incredulously, both hands on her hips as she interrogated the man.

"I didn't do anything to him." Mikhail protested, "Konstantin had just found out his work was shutting down, so we went to the steel mill so he could get some of his things. Viktor was already in the car at the time so we just took him with us. I had no way of knowing he'd react so badly just seeing the place, but he did."

"Did he go into that place willingly after you hijacked the car with him in it...?"

"...After a fashion...I guess?"

"Mikhail!"

"I thought it'd be good for him to see the mill! It's just a building! And it's closing down in a few weeks anyway so it's not like there was some supernatural risk of him never getting to leave again."

"How many times did you twist Viktor's arm into doing things he said he didn't want to do!?"

"I thought that making him confront his fears would be good for him! He started the whole thing by saying he wanted to go back to the town in the first place!"

"He had his own ideas about what he wanted to do there. The stuff you added wasn't good for him! It sucked all the joy and happiness out of him! Look at him!" Minako argued, pointing back down the hall, "He's all jittery and restless! That's not him. It's the NHK Trophy, he should be bouncing off the walls with excitement! But he's just a lump now!"

Mikhail refused to look.

"NHK was supposed to be their once chance at a fun event before the Final!" The ballerina continued, "Now it's turning out worse than Cup of China did! Every competition this season so far has been progressively worse than the last! It's practically a miracle that they're getting a chance to go home for a few days before going to Detroit. Who knows what's going to happen there."

"What difference does all this make anyway when I already told Kon that we're going to send him home early?" The Russian asked pointedly, looking straight at her, "As soon as he calls me back, I'll buy his plane ticket. I'll put him into cargo if I have to."

"Is that what Yakov told you to do?" Minako wondered, looking a bit disappointed, "All he told us was that it's being dealt with."

"What else can I do to fix this?"

"Viktor told us what Konstantin said while storming out of here. He's expecting that the man will show up. He seems pretty resigned to the idea that Konstantin came all the way out here to watch him skate, so by God it's going to happen. It'll be the only way all the stress of the man being here
"I knew we should've talked to Viktor first. I told Yakov as much," Mikhail said. He roughly pulled the flatcap off his head and grudgingly ruffled his hair with the other hand, squishing the hat back in place soon after. He grit his teeth and drew in a sharp breath, but then finally turned to glance behind himself to see his nephew sitting with Yuri against the wall, the two whispering between each other. The elder Russian sighed, "I guess I'll just have to wait and see how long it takes for Kon to call me back."

"Then let's go steal our seats back and see how things play out."

Two pairs of eyes watched the duo disappear around the curve of the hall, followed by two loud sighs.

Yuri leaned back and slouched in his seat, sliding down it slightly, "Well...between Minako-sensei, Coach Yakov, and Konstantin's outburst in front of everyone...I'm sure Mikhail feels at least a little guilty for all this now."

Viktor slouched and slid down a little as well, "My father better come back." He said quietly, "All this drama will be for nothing if he doesn't."

"It's weird to feel like that." Yuri commented, turning his head against the back of the chair to look at his partner, "Actually wanting the guy to be somewhere close? It's been the other way around this whole time."

"Yeah..." The silver Russian agreed, rubbing his thumb over where he held to his husband's hand between them, "I was pretty shocked when he agreed to come in the first place. He might still be an intolerant jerk on the whole, but the fact that he came here? Not just to Japan, but to NHK? We'd never have gotten him on the plane unless he wanted to be here in some way. I feel like..." His words drifted a little, but he shook his head and then leaned it over to rest it against Yuri's shoulder, "...Maybe he's got his own reasons for being here. I doubt he really cares about seeing me skate...but my mom died after they fought over her watching me skate. Maybe he's just trying to atone for that."

"Maybe." Yuri agreed.

Their thoughts were drowned out after that by the sound of the crowd again, their cheers reverberating off the walls like thunder.

Hazel eyes lifted, and the younger skater pressed his cheek to the soft silver hair lying loose over the shoulder of his coat, rubbing it against the man's head gently, "...These cheers have been loud all day... I almost wish I'd be able to see the look on Konstantin's face when he's assaulted by the sound of the applause when you go out there."

Viktor huffed a quiet laugh to himself, but nodded a little, "Same."

Yuri pulled up from where he was starting to slide off the end of his seat, sitting up on the edge of it before turning to look back at his partner, seeing him still slightly tilted where he'd been leaning. As Viktor righted himself again, the younger figure turned around outright and settled himself on his husband's legs, sitting on the middle of his thighs and folding his shoes below himself loosely. He looked into the tired, slate blue eyes in front of him, and smiled as well as he could, "Maybe we can make that Mikhail's punishment. Make him get a picture of Konstantin's reaction to you getting ready for your Short Program, so he can show us later."

The Russian watched quietly as the younger skater went on with his description, feeling where the
man had let go of his hand so he could be a bit more dramatic.

Both hands went up as Yuri went on, "The next skater to take the ice tonight...representing Russia...Viktor Nikiforov! And the crowd goes absolutely nuclear." He leaned forward and put those hands on the skater's chest, "The power of their cheering is so strong and loud that it feels like our very heartbeats are syncing with the roar. The air is vibrating with excitement...and you haven't even put skates to ice yet."

Viktor was already starting to enjoy the tale, reaching his hands up to wrap around the two over his front as he continued to listen.

"But then one gold blade glides across the frost...and then another...and the thunder of the audience kicks it up another notch. The rafters start to shake, the windows rattle...people start chanting your name, and pretty soon, it's a hundred times what it was at Rostelecom last year. Viktor! Viktor! Viktor!"

"Viktuuri. Viktuuri." He corrected, smiling a little brighter then.

Yuri felt his heart float in his chest, "Then all the banners come out. Some fly the Russian flag, others show off your name in huge print...then they start to show off the big posters that hang over the edge of the wall. The ones with big photos of you winning gold in previous competitions, or shots from your past modeling gigs, like the ones I used to have plastered all over my walls back home."

"And then the ones from our wedding photobook." Viktor added, "And all the banners with the hashtag #SkateHusbands."

"You do your rounds around the rink for a minute, fans screaming from every angle...and then you come back to rink-side for one last pep-talk from your not-really-a-coach."

"And he offers the only advice I've ever really listened to."

Yuri leaned in a little closer, pressing his forearms down against the man's abdomen as he closed the gap between them, nosing his husband fondly, "I love you. Go have fun, and skate like you're trying to seduce me."

"I will." The silver Russian hummed, tilting his head and closing his eyes as he felt warm lips on his own. He held there for a moment before moving his hands to go over his partner's back, feeling Viktor's go down around his own, wrapping around him through the gap under his shoulders. At least in that place, in that moment, everything else finally felt irrelevant, and a fraction of the weight on his heart lessened.

As long as he has his arms around me, nothing else matters.

As the kiss ended, Yuri buried his face against his husband's neck, hugging him a little tighter as he felt Viktor doing the same thing in turn. The warm, wet feeling against his skin came soon after, and Yuri pressed in a little closer, fingers clasping to the back of the man's track-suit.

"I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have you, Yuri." The Russian whispered, nuzzling a little to try and dry his eyes on the younger man's scarf, "You're my everything. I'd be lost without you."
By the time the Ladies Short Program had started, things had settled enough in Viktor's head that he could watch the show without constantly thinking about something else. That didn't entirely stop him though, but at least it was at a minimum. Plus, every time it looked like his thoughts were wandering again, Yuri would move somehow in the seat next to him, and bring his attention back to the ice.

With the seats as narrow and unaccommodating as they were, moving was a common occurrence, shifting in the hard plastic seat when feet or butts would fall asleep. When it was finally Mila's turn, it was as good an excuse as any to get up and walk around for a bit, and the duo headed down to rink-side to wish her luck alongside Yakov.

Seeing the female figure skaters was like seeing an entirely different version of figure skating. Unlike the men's side of things, it almost seemed like the women were regulated far more strictly. Creative incentives were almost-entirely restricted to performance dresses, and they were required to wear nude-colored leggings in almost every instance. Not one to buckle to norms though, Mila went her own way, adding flare to the ice with an outfit that loosely resembled some of the one-piece ensembles normally worn by the male athletes.

It was dark, with a black dress that ruffled out around her mid-thigh, slightly longer in back than in front. Black translucent leggings with skate-covers at the bottom, and sheer covers on her arms, with red accents at the wrist, and in a gradient around the edges of the skirt fringes. It had a loose black turtleneck, with a red stripe from under its folds, across one half of her chest, and met the red lining the ruffles of the skirt. On the chest and back, it sparkled with a mix of black, red, and gold crystal designed into swirl patterns. She wore her hair loose, since it was too short to tie up in the traditional bun, and had her make-up done immaculately, eye-shadow a dark red to go with her outfit.

Just as she was approaching the rink wall to get that last bit of advice and a pep-talk from Yakov, she spotted Viktor and Yuri coming up from the prep area, and her eyes lit up, leaving the old coach mid-sentence to slide off towards her former rink-mate, "Wh- Hey!"

"Thought we'd send you off properly." The silver Russian said, smiling, "It's been a long time since I did so last."

"You didn't have to. Just knowing you were going to watch was enough, but thanks!" She answered, pausing on the wall just in front of the man, then reaching across it to hug him as well as she could, "Maybe some of your essence will stick with me on the ice and I'll take gold just because I touched you."

Viktor grinned at that, "Maybe."

Mila turned her eyes over to Yuri, acting like something of a wallflower where he stood next to his partner but saying nothing. She smirked to herself while he wasn't looking, and then reached over to ruffle his hair eagerly, "Aha! I touched two gold medalists before skating! Now I have to win!"

"Mila, time to go." Yakov said gruffly, thumbing out to the center of the rink, "Better get out there."

"Yessir~"

Just before she could pull away, Viktor pulled her back with a his free hand around her waist and lower back, leaning over to kiss each cheek, "Davai~"

"Ganbatte, Mila-san." Yuri added, waving as she finally pulled off to take her position.

The crowd roared again as she raised her arms and went around in a big circle, eventually making her way to center and digging in her right toe-pick. Her right arm extended, curved, out to the side,
while the left rose up in front of her, and she dipped her head, taking what looked like a ballet-stance. A moment later, the low hum of her music started.

['If You Shout' - Era]

"Feeling better now, Vitya?" Yakov asked, keeping half an eye on his skater as he glanced back over towards the athlete who'd temporarily reinstated himself as one, "I didn't think you'd come down like this."

"We've caught grief recently for missing a certain Russian Kitten's performances, so I figured there'd be no harm in coming to see Mila off." He answered, "Besides, our butts were starting to hurt in those seats. We'll have to go buy seat-cushions for tomorrow. Neh? Yuri." Slate eyes turned fondly to the other skater.

"For sure."

"Well, it's good that you have your head back where it needs to be," The coach went on, nodding at him before turning back out to watch Mila launch into her first jump; a triple Salchow, "I was starting to think you were going to consider withdrawing from Opening Ceremonies."

"Nah. I hardly have to do anything there, so there'd be no point in dropping it even if I still felt like heck." Viktor explained, releasing his partner's hand to set his whole arm over the man's shoulders and slouch over him instead, "Where's Yurio anyway? I thought he'd stay close to you guys."

"Not sure. He wandered off sometime before the Pairs event ended."

Mila did a triple-twizzle as she slid down the edge of the rink, finishing it into the wide arc of an outside spread-Eagle, and then into the triple Axel, landing it cleanly. The audience clapped excitedly for her.

Yakov turned his gaze from his skater back to the lanky silver figure standing a few feet away. He could see that Viktor was smiling despite it all, enjoying the show being put on ahead of him, but the way he stood, the way he watched...that was still slightly counter to normal.

*That's the look he makes when he's barely keeping things together with duct-tape and a prayer, and he's never really been the praying type to begin with. It's a look I didn't think I'd ever see again, not after he finally found his smile back then ...*

The stoic old coach stepped closer and roughly pat the man on his shoulder, saying nothing but understanding all the same.

Viktor glanced back at him, initially unsure what it was for, but then realizing...and remembering...
[Thank you everyone for being good to your new team-mate.] Yakov was saying, waving at the team as he stood by the door with the 12 year old silver Russian, the rest of the skaters getting their gear together after a long day of practice, [We'll have to put together a proper birthday party for him since we just missed it.]

[...What day was it?] Georgi asked, almost defensively.

[The day before yours.]
The youngster seemed discouraged to hear it, [Great.]

Viktor blinked at him from behind the replaced eye-patch, and he turned his one good eye back up to his coach, but said nothing, clutching to the backpack in his arms. A few moments later, and the coach was guiding him out of the skating arena and into the parking lot, opening the door of an old grey Mercedes Benz to let him in, and then getting in on the other side himself.

Most of the way back to Yakov's house, Viktor was quiet, holding to his backpack for dear life. All Yakov could see from his side of the car though was that eye-patch and the painful cheek it had been taped to. The boy's bangs were far too short to do anything to hide it. He couldn't even tell if the tiny Russian was looking at anything or if he had his eyes closed. The silence was deafening, [So Vitya, what did you think?]

That one slate-blue eye turned to glance at him, then looked back out the window at the light snow falling outside, [It was nice.]

[I know you're disappointed that I made you stop jumping, but you'll thank me for it later.] Yakov insisted, [Everything you're hoping for will come in due time. You just have to be patient.]

Viktor just went quiet, biting lightly at the zipper across the top of the bag in his arms.

Night came early, as it usually did in winter. It was already the third night since arriving in St. Petersburg, but up until that moment, even with the obvious signs of time passing...the sun rising and setting...the hands moving on the clock faces...leaving and returning...time still seemed to stand still. Viktor laid on his side in the bedroom Yakov had thrown together for him, keeping the painful side of his face up to prevent anything from touching it.

He hated how dark it was though. The sounds of the city after sunset did nothing to dissuade the young Russian's mind from feeling like the blackness was just as bad as it ever was back 'home.' The only difference was that wolves howling had been replaced by cars honking.

...and the pain. It wouldn't go away.

In his head, his eye, his cheek, the spot on his back, even in his neck a little. There wasn't a position he could lie in that wasn't somehow uncomfortable. In the black of the room, he made the mistake of rolling to his left side, and the moment his cheek landed on the hard spot where he could feel his hand through the feather pillow, the tiny silver boy gasped in sudden pain and sat upright in bed.
His cheek and eyebrow were as painful as anything he could imagine. It was like knives being forced through his face. He’d heard what the doctors had told to Yakov about what happened, but the words didn’t stick. His mind had been swimming at the time, and he could hardly focus on anything for more than a few seconds. All he knew was that he was allowed to leave the same day, he’d fallen asleep in the car, and he woke up sometime during the mid morning of the following day.

The shooting pain had calmed a little, but the intense throbbing lingered, and in his frustration, the young skater peeled the patch away and let the skin breathe. He fumbled in the dark to try and find his way around, and eventually out of the room, feeling along the walls until he was certain he’d found himself in the kitchen. The light-switch was easy to find after that, and so was the bag of frozen peas in the freezer door. Viktor went over to the nearby table and sat in his ‘usual’ place, grabbing a thin dish-towel as he passed where they hung over the oven door, wrapped the bag with it, and pressed it gently to his sore face.

It only took a few minutes before he heard the sound footsteps coming down the stairs. By the time Yakov stuck his tired and confused head through the open doorway, investigating why there were lights on in his house at that hour in the first place, he saw the tiny silver figure at the table with his arms crossed, and his face resting against the cold bag, [Vitya...?]

The youngster barely managed the effort to turn his eyes at the sound of the oncoming shadow, but then blinked and looked further up once the shadow became a normal man. With the coach fully in his single-eyed sights, Viktor turned back around to staring at nothing, shifting the peas resting on the crook of his left elbow and then setting his face against it again.

[How long have you been awake like this...?]

[...I never really fell asleep to begin with.] He answered quietly, not moving, [I wish Uncle Mimi was here.]

[Who's Uncle Mimi?] Yakov wondered, pulling up the chair next to his pupil.

[Uncle Mimi is Uncle Mimi.] The boy answered, [Mama's brother. Mi...khail...? Mikhail, yeah.]

[Why do you want him? You've never mentioned him before.]

Viktor lifted his head off the ice bag, but kept his eyes low, [...He was my best friend, my only friend... He left a long time ago, though.] He sighed, [Then it was just me and Losi...but then Losi left me, too...]

[...Losi?]

[My dog. He died.]

[Did Mikhail die, too?]

[No, he just left. I don’t know why, and I haven’t seen him since.] The youth said, lowering his head, the tears of shock and pain and frustration finally starting to catch up with him...and they slowly started to roll down his face, [...I bet...he...he could've stopped this...]

Yakov saw it, and immediately went to a knee beside the boy's chair, pulling him away from the table and lifting those tiny arms over his shoulders to hold him, [Vitya, I don’t know that anyone could've stopped what happened. But it’s over now; you don’t have to be scared anymore.]

The youngster just sobbed and trembled, clinging to the man's night-robe with little fingers, [Wh-why did...why did papa do this...? Wh-why did...why did he hit me...!?] He asked through quaking
breaths.

[I don't know.]

[Why d-did he make me burn the skates you got me!?] Viktor went on, face wet with tears, stained a bit red on the left where his wounds still hadn't healed, [Why does he h-hate EVERYTHING!?] The boy's pained voice cracked a few times, squeaking a few times as he cried out in frustration.

Yakov drew in a breath and shook his head lightly, leaning into the boy just enough to get his feet under himself and stand up, taking the child up with him. He ever-so-slowly wandered through the rooms of the first floor of the house, letting Viktor cry himself out, gently rubbing his upper back as he carried the boy around, careful of the ripe bruises he knew were hidden lower down.
It took about 30 minutes for the loud sobbing to fade down to muffled whimpers and the occasional hiccupped breath, but eventually, the trembling silver boy got it all out...at least for the moment.
Yakov slowly moved towards the study that he'd converted into a make-shift bedroom, and set the youngster back into bed, clicking on the lamp on top of the nearby desk and then pulling on the office chair tucked under it.

[...Does p-papa hate me too...?] Viktor finally asked, staring straight up at the ceiling from under the heavy blankets, his voice raspy and dry.

The coach blinked at him, hands on the chair's arm-rest as he was leaning back into it to sit down next to the bed, [I don't know what your papa thinks. He seems like a very troubled and confused man.]

[...H-he's...going to c-come find me...] The boy whimpered quietly, sinking into himself enough that the blanket over his chest now rose up over his nose, [...I-I disobeyed...and...he's g-going to-]

[He's not going to find you.] Yakov said flatly, cutting off that train of thought immediately, [He doesn't know where we are. He can never hurt you again, not so long as you're with me. I'll make sure of it...I promise.]

[...B-but y-you're...upstairs...]

The coach tilted his head a little at that, but rubbed his chin in consideration, then leaned over the chair to reach a hand out to the boy's head, brushing his palm gently over silver hair, [I'll stay here with you tonight, and tomorrow, we'll move you upstairs. We can switch everything around, so anyone who comes here has to go through me first, okay?]

[...O-okay...]

[Get some sleep then, Vitya. I'm here.]

Two weeks passed, and the bruises around the young skater's eye had healed enough that he didn't need to cover it anymore. It was still sore to the touch, but at least he could touch it without feeling the blinding rush of pain shooting through his bones like before. The blood under his cornea had fully gone away as well, making him less a spectacle than he looked like originally.

He followed Yakov like a quiet silver shadow, moving through a studio, hearing soft classical music playing in the background. The sound of soft feet on wooden floors came after that, and the voice of an instructor, too.

[Lift those legs higher up ...yes, yes like that, good. Excellent form.]

The coach entered through one last doorway before Viktor could see the source of the voice; a tall, slender woman with long, braided black hair, wearing a form-fitting pair of leggings, ballet slippers, and a loose sweater that hung off her shoulders. She had warm brown eyes, and they immediately descended on him once he was fully in sight. Viktor quickly hid behind his skating mentor, like a startled squirrel avoiding the eyes of a hungry lynx.

[Oh my, who's this silver gem?] The woman wondered.

[Katya,] Yakov started, pulling his hat off as the woman paused her class to come forward and greet him, [I have another pupil for you.] They briefly held hands as the woman leaned in to kiss each cheek, then let go to look around his frame at the nervous child hiding behind him, [Vitya, come out. She's a friend.]
Vitya? Is that his real name or...?

Yakov huffed a laugh, [No, just a nickname.] He stepped aside and put a hand behind the boy's back to stop him from trying to hide again, [Introduce yourself. You'll be here a lot soon.]

[I will...?] Viktor squeaked, coughing and then looking around again, trying to see everything except the woman trying to meet him, [What is this place?]

[It's a ballet studio.] The woman answered, reaching her hand forward kindly, [Welcome.] She waited for those slate eyes to finally meet hers before smiling, [I'm Ekaterina Chudov, but you can call me Kat. If Coach Yakov brought you here, at your age, you must be quite the little skater. Normally you'd be much younger when you start here.]

[I found him a bit late, but he's absolutely brilliant.] Yakov beamed, [A bit rough around the edges, but that's why I'm bringing him here, of course. We're about to go to the airport for Euros, but I wanted him to meet you before we took off, so he'd have something to look forward to when we get back.]

Viktor looked at the woman's pale hand, fingernails painted an iridescent blue-purple. He glanced briefly back up at his coach, and then back at the woman...and finally reached out to return the gesture, [...I'm...Viktor Nikiforov.]

[He was already doing triple Axels before he was 10. He's going to be a champion one day...I can feel it.]

[Oh, he's already a champion.] Kat cooed, reaching out that same hand to lightly press her fingers to the boy's unmarred cheek, [Monday then? Or Tuesday?]

[Tuesday.] The elder Russian nodded, [Teach him everything you know, right from basics. He's a fast learner and highly motivated, so anything that can help his skating will stick immediately. Right, Vitya?]

The nervous child nodded, pinching his fingers around the sleeve of the coach's heavy winter jacket as he tried to hide again, this time from the prying eyes of the class that had been interrupted. He pulled his free hand up to cover his still-bruised eye, and sucked in an anxious breath.

[He'll come out of his shell fairly quickly.] Yakov went on, moving his hand just enough to take hold of the youngster's and hold it reassuringly, [He's already become King of the Skate Club. He's still learning to get used to being around new people.] He leaned in closer to the ballerina and whispered into her ear, [He came from one of those half-collapsed steel towns up north...I only went there the one time, but I didn't see a single other kid around that was close to his age. He's kind of like a feral cat, learning to trust people.]

[And the bruise on his eye...?]

[An accident. Keep it at that. The less people take notice of it, the faster he'll heal.] Kat nodded, and then turned her attention back to the young skater, putting her hands on her knees to better see him at his own level, [Well then, Viktor...it looks like you and I are going to become good friends fairly soon. Ballet is like skating, but off the ice...I think you'll like it quite a bit. A lot of the moves are very similar. So...Tuesday, okay?]

Viktor swallowed nervously, but nodded, [T-Tuesday...]

.
The flight from St. Petersburg to Paris was relatively short, although Aeroflot had been delayed by almost an hour. Yakov complained bitterly to the flight staff in the terminal right up to the moment their tickets were clipped and the Russian team was allowed on board.

[Get used to it, Vik.] One of the older male skaters had joked when they'd finally squeezed into Economy Class, sitting on Yakov's other side, whereas Viktor himself had been given the window seat, [Aeroflot keeps all of us waiting. It's almost a joke. They're always late.]

Slate eyes blinked at the man, but Viktor nodded, and turned his attention out through the window. By the time they landed, it was late Thursday afternoon. The lights of the city were already on full display, and the City of Love called out to the young skater. He was speechless and awe-struck, especially when he got to see the Eifel Tower all alight from the vantage of their high-floor hotel room. Every experience was new...from the airport itself, the flight, driving through the city, and even just being in the hotel room... everything was new. He could hardly keep up with what the team was doing around him...at least, until Yakov called him over specifically.

[Vitya, I have something for you. You'll like it.] The coach said, standing next to an open suitcase on the first of the two huge beds.

[What is it...?] The silver skater turned and started walking towards him.

A coat-bag unfolded, and a zipper pulled down, and when Yakov turned around again, he held in his hands a jacket of red and white, with RUSSIA displayed in bold letters on the back. Viktor knew immediately what it was, even if he couldn't read it. His blue eyes got rather wide as he saw it, and when the older man shook it open and lifted it over his head to settle it on his small shoulders, Viktor practically bounced with excitement.

[Is...is this really for me!]

[You're on the Russian team, so it makes sense for you to wear our colors, even if you're not competing this time around.] Yakov explained, watching as the boy slid his arms through the sleeves, and realizing they were still a bit too long, [You'll grow into it. This is just the first of many team jackets you'll get to wear over the years.]

[Oh wow, so he can smile.] One of the other team members commented, looking past Yakov from closer to the door.

The coach just looked back over his shoulder sharply, scolding the man with a look; the three of them that were standing there smiled nervously and left the room, running down the hall as the door clicked closed behind them. Yakov looked back at Viktor, who hadn't apparently heard or noticed, still admiring his new coat, [Vitya, the season is already more than half done for the year, so there won't be any events that you can compete in.]

[...I know.] He answered quietly, pulling up the jacket zipper close to his face with both hands, breathing in the new smell of the material.

[What I meant to say is...I brought you here so you could learn about how events work before you start competing in them. Even though you're not turning 13 until the middle of next season, and you'll be doing smaller unofficial events until you're properly of age, it's still important for you to know what everything's about and how things happen...because once you're in, I have no doubt that you'll take the Junior ISU by storm. So pay attention to the rules...learn how they apply, and watch how the other skaters go about their business. Learn from the best and the worst.] He explained, [And always look for ways to inspire people. It's not enough to just be good at what you do...you
have to surprise the people watching you, too. Be fresh and exciting, be something that the judges and audience look forward to seeing. Never be satisfied just with copying what other people do before you, okay?]

[Yessir.]

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Even being more than a thousand miles away from St. Petersburg, Viktor was still torn between the two worlds. One that desperately wanted to enjoy the European Championships...his very first time seeing a skating event of any kind, outside the magazines he’d been given so many years ago...and another that was terrified of being caught there. Interruptions in the crowd's cheering only served to give Viktor's mind the chance to let the anxious memories come flooding back.

.

[I made it clear a long time ago that skating was forbidden, and yet I find these.]

[P-Papa...please, don't...]

[No son of mine is going to be skating.]

.

[We're going to take care of this once and for all... Put them in.]

[N-No... please no...!]

[Do as your father commands. ...Heed me, boy. You will never skate again. Understand?]

.

Viktor's breath caught in his throat for a moment as the thunderous roar of the audience shook him from his torpor.

Yakov saw him flinch, looking around like a spooked cat, only to slouch back down on the seat, just on the other side of the railing. The boy seemed to be trying to hide inside the jacket, pulling the zipper right up to the top and closing it just under his eyes, even bringing his knees up inside it, and pulling his arms from the sleeves to wrap around them.

By the time the boy was done, he looked like a weird, armless and legless torso, with half his silver head sticking out through the neck-hole at the top of the coat. He peered around with suspicious eyes like he worried his father would jump out of the crowd any moment to drag him back home, kicking and screaming.

Yakov huffed to himself quietly, and thought, 'Maybe it was too soon to bring him to an event. Is it too intense, too loud for him? I wonder what I need to do to help him know he's safe here.'

.

Another week passed, and Viktor got to go to his first official ballet classes. His eye looked progressively better, healing just a little more, but still fairly red. The cuts no longer needed to be covered at least, but the little silver Russian kept himself to the far side of the room...deliberately positioning himself at the far left end of the line so no one looking in his direction would be able to see the damaged half of his face.
Yakov watched him over the top of the newspaper he held, sitting in a wooden chair near the door on the other side of the room. As he glanced down, he noticed a small advertisement.

[Poodle puppies for sale.]

He glanced back at the boy and narrowed his eyes in thought, pursing his lips a little as the words wandered through his mind, ‘...He barely speaks to anyone...he's having a hard time making friends because of it. He's definitely worried about people judging him because of his injuries, and he's putting up such a fuss to avoid being seen as damaged goods, but people still notice, even if they don't say anything.’ He looked back down at the ad blurb, 'The call from his mother the other day rattled him, too. He really needs a friend...someone, or some thing, that won't question or judge him...and he said he'd had a dog before...’ Yakov thought...folding the newspaper so just the quarter-page with the advert on it faced up, and he crossed his arms, putting one hand on his chin, ‘...I could stand to have a dog in the house if it means Viktor will smile again.’

[Vitya, it's over this way.] The elder Russian explained, guiding the blindfolded boy through the house by his shoulders, correcting his path as he wandered in the wrong direction, [Right here.]

[What's going on...?] Viktor wondered nervously. He had no idea he'd been placed in front of an open-top box, but he could feel the blindfold being pulled off his face, revealing the fully-healed eye underneath...and the tiny brown flufferbutt in the box just below him, [What...in the world...?]

[He's for you.] The coach explained, [Go ahead, pick him up.]

The silver youth blinked at the pup, seeing how it panted quietly as those dark brown eyes looked up at him. Viktor moved a little, and the puppy got up, tail wagging, which made the boy flinch and back up...but he gathered up his courage again and swallowed before reaching forward. The puppy wagged with excitement, tail wagging even more, and as Viktor lifted it out of the box, all four paws flailed until they were planted firmly on the boy's chest and shoulders, that pink tongue licking furiously at his face. The little Russian was taken aback by it at first, but the more the puppy seemed to be excited to see him, the more he let himself relax.

[Keeping a dog is a big responsibility. Do you remember how you helped take care of Losi?] Yakov asked.

Blue eyes turned back towards him, and Viktor nodded, [I think so. ...Are you sure I can have a dog...?]

[What, do you think I'd take him away after giving him to you?] The coach chuckled a little to himself, moving to sit back in one of the big chairs of the living-room, crossing one ankle over the opposite knee, [Of course you can have a dog. Most of the time, dogs are better than people anyway, right? You can talk to him and he'll never tell anyone else your secrets...or you can be completely quiet, and he'll never get mad at you for it. Dogs are good like that.]

[...Does he have a name?]

[Not yet. You're his human, so you should name him.]

Viktor looked back at the squirming puppy in his arms, and he held it out in his hands, looking at it in thought. Out of nowhere, the pup barked and sneezed at the same time, making a 'khbuh' and 'chih' noise, which immediately inspired the word that would go with it, [Kubochin.] The boy said.
[Kubochin?]

[I've decided...that's his name.] Viktor explained, pulling to wiggly pup to his shoulder again and patting him fondly, then turning to his coach again, smiling truly and happily for the first time in ages. [After the first sound he made at me, so I always remember.]

Mila's performance was coming to a close, and Yakov found himself blinking and shaking his head, realizing he'd daydreamed right through the second half. The woman took her final pose, and the music faded out, leaving only the maelstrom of applause to echo in their ears. The coach looked from his skater to the one standing next to him, and watched as Viktor pulled his arm back from over his partner's shoulders so he could clap along with the rest...but that expression on his face hadn't really changed.

Vitya... The elder Russian thought, worried, ...You came into the skating world looking like that because of your father... Please don't let that man make you leave it the same way. You have too much to be happy for and proud of to let him ruin it like this.
"The score for Mila Babicheva..." The announcer’s voice boomed overhead. Yakov and Viktor had both gone to the kiss and cry, sitting on either side of the petite female skater, looking up anxiously at the scoreboard, "...80.56. She is currently in first place."

"YES!" She cheered, jumping up and throwing her bouquet of flowers right into the air, flopping back down onto the bench as it came falling down behind her again. She quickly grabbed Yakov to hug him, tilting him off balance in surprise, and then let him go only to do the same thing to Viktor on her opposite side, "That's a new personal best for me, too! I knew that touching you guys would help me win!"

"We're good luck charms!" The silver Russian cheered in agreement, hugging her back as they squished their cheeks between them, hearing the audience roaring all around, "Now you just have to make sure no one else beats you." He grinned, side-eyeing her where they were still hugging.

Mila just gave him a look, side-eyeing him back, "Don't let other ladies touch you today. I forbid it."

"I would never." He mused, being dramatically defensive, reaching up one hand to pat her hair affectionately, "If I let too many other people steal my magic, I won't have any left to win my own gold this weekend. I can only bear to give away a little bit."

"Aww, I feel so special!"

Yakov adjusted his hat where the skater had knocked it aside, and rose up to his feet. He saw Yuri clapping a short distance away, waiting for Viktor to come back out of the kiss and cry, and then saw beyond him as the next Ladies Singles skater went out onto the ice. When he turned back, he saw the dorky duo finally letting go of each other to stand up as well, both sets of vivid blue eyes looking at him as he lead the way out of the score booth, "You did really well today, Mila. Good job."

Both skaters were a bit stunned at him, but said nothing as they watched him head towards rink-side, and subsequently, the curtained doorway to the prep area.

When he was out of ear-shot, the two looked at one another in confusion, then back at where Yakov was still walking away, "...No lecture?" They both said in time.

Realizing they'd both said the same thing together, they looked back at each other and laughed.

Viktor started pushing at the woman's back to get her moving, and then reached for his husband as they got closer, "I'm shocked. Even if you skated a perfect program, he'd still normally have something to say about it."

"Right? I wonder what I did to get on his good side." Mila wondered, still half-laughing at the absurdity of it, "Maybe he's sick."

Yuri stepped in closer as the two continued talking, sneaking his arm around his partner's back as the next skater's music started. Just as he was about to add something to the conversation though, he felt a buzz in his pocket, and pulled out his phone to see a text from Phichit.

[...So where's the part of Oodori Park that's fun, exactly?]
He entirely forgot whatever he was about to say, all but bursting out laughing instead.

"What happened?" Viktor wondered, looking down at his husband's phone.

"Phichit-kun doesn't see the thrill in Oodori Park." Yuri answered sarcastically, pulling his arm back again to thumb his reply as Viktor guided him along, pushing him back into the prep area with a hand on each shoulder, [Where are you now?] He texted.

[Well, there's these two statues...] The Thai skater answered, sending a picture of them a moment later, including himself with a 'lol I dunno' look on his face in the foreground.

[Whaaaat? Those statues are the best part!] Yuri typed, feet shuffling along as he kept his eyes on the small screen, looking rather pleased with himself.

Grey-green eyes tracked the skaters as they disappeared under the blue curtain. A certain elder sighed and slid a few inches down his chair, pulled out his phone, and looked at how there were no new calls registered. He clicked out of it again and rolled it over in his palm, slowly, repeatedly, until he finally pushed back up to sitting normally, "This is making me crazy. I need to talk to him."

Minako huffed, "Wait until after the Short Program. Viktor needs his headspace right now."

"I mostly meant Kon..." Mikhail grumbled, "I can't even be entirely sure why he hasn't called me back yet. Has he not listened to the message? Has he even looked to see that he has one? Maybe he lost or misplaced the phone I got for him...?" He tapped the side of his cheek anxiously, slouching again a little bit...until his eyes shot open and he jumped to sit at the front of his seat, "...Ah Christ, I bet he doesn't even know how to check it...! The whole menu was in English!"

"If he's as astute as you claim he is, then he'll know for a fact that he has the message, and he'll be able to figure out who it came from, even if he can't listen to it." Minako pointed out, "No one but you would have reason to call him anyway, so...if he hasn't called you back yet, even just to ask what you'd called him for, it's because he doesn't want to."

"You and your logic. Why do you have to make sense?" The Russian sighed, pushing to slide back into his seat and leaning his head against the woman's shoulder.

"You're suffering from an acute case of The Dumb." She explained, swiping his hat and putting it over her own head, "One of us has to be smart this weekend. I fear you won't get your wit back until Konstantin goes home again."

"...How horribly unattractive." Mikhail sighed again, "I like to think my wit is one of my more alluring qualities."

Minako nudged his head where it was still pressed against her, and turned to look at him. Seeing his still-somewhat-diminished expression, she huffed a quiet laugh at his expense before reaching up with the hand between them to pat his hair lightly, "Don't worry. I'm sure that by Monday, you'll be clever again."

"...I hope so." He whined sarcastically, "I may never think of a way of make this all up to Viktor if I'm not."

"Things will go back to the way they were once we're done here." The ballerina explained hopefully, "Viktor's just overwhelmed and Yuri's being protective, like I told you. Hasetsu is home. Makkachin is there, and so is the onsen, and the Ice Castle. It's the best possible place for anyone in this group of ours to go back to after all this is over. We just need to survive the rest of today, tomorrow, and half of Sunday before we're on our way there."
"...That, truly, is a depressingly long time."

"You'll make it."

Snow was falling moderately, leaving Sapporo cast in a thin veil of fog. Cars drove by with their headlights on, passing slowly to avoid sliding into the one ahead. The bridge crossing the Toyohira River was slick with frost, extending so far into the distance that the end of it could hardly be seen through the white airy soup...but Yurio didn't need to see that far.

Emerald eyes were keen on the dark shadow some 50ft ahead of him, plodding through the snow like a draft-horse on a mission. What that mission was, however, couldn't be gleaned just by the path that was being taken.

Is he trying to get back to the hotel...? That'd be stupid, even if it wasn't snowing. It's a 30 minute trip even on a bus...

Still, the teen followed, careful to keep out of ear-shot with his sneakers crunching on the freshly fallen snow. He followed until the bear made it to the other side of the bridge, following the lower level of the wide curve that connected it to the main highway going back north. They were too far away to see even just the Sapporo Prince tower, fog notwithstanding, but it seemed to the teen that the hotels were, in fact, the bear's final destination. At least...it seemed that way, in hindsight.

Caught up on a strip of black ice, a small red Mazda skidded right into the back end of an old grey Nissan truck. The crunch sounded like two big tin-cans being squashed together, and Yurio winced from even as far back as he was, still standing on the other side of the alley that separated the bridge-side walkway from the Shell gas station that sat on the intersection corner. Konstantin, however, was practically standing right next to it. To the Russian Tiger's surprise, the dark behemoth actually moved out into the road.

There were no cars to avoid from that side, since Japanese roads were like those of Britain or Australia, but that didn't stop a few other drivers from going extra-slow through the intersection to rubber-neck at the spectacle. Just as the driver of the red car stepped out, his voice caught in his throat to see the huge Russian gliding over to his side of the vehicle. The bear glanced around a little, ignoring the relatively tiny figure as he surveyed the damage quietly, and realized the bumper of the red car was squashed in underneath of the rear fender of the truck. That driver stepped out as well, initially annoyed and ready to fuss about it, but going quiet as death at the giant who'd seemingly appeared out of nowhere.

Yurio skipped forward along the sidewalk, trying to get a better view of whatever was going on, reaching up to pull his scarf a bit higher over his face. By the time he was close enough to hear the sound of the bumpers being pulled apart from one another, the teen stopped dead in his tracks, watching the huge man literally pulling the smaller car free from the truck it had collided with. Konstantin didn't stop there though, continuing to pull the car, even against the resistance of the brake being on, until it was safely within the fencing of a parking lot directly opposite the gas station. Once there, Konstantin set it down parallel to a short white railing, and then did the exact same thing to the even bigger vehicle. People on the streets, even some in their cars, watched with wide eyes as the Russian simply dusted the dirt and slush from his hands...and started walking again. The two men who'd been driving the cars watched him go, turning to each other only to wonder in tandem what kind of superhuman beast he was.

The blonde quickly trotted across the street while the going was clear, and hauled off past the two perplexed drivers to catch up to the bear, trying not to lose sight of him around the corner. Just as he
rounded it though, he saw those trademark Nikiforov eyes staring right at him unexpectedly. Yurio skidded to a graceless stop, throwing out his arms to stop from falling outright, then regained his footing and stood upright to meet the bear's gaze.

Why are you following me?

The teen huffed, Curiosity.

You're the only one in that whole group that isn't terrified or furious about my being here.

Konstantin pointed out, blue eyes cast down on the blonde from his high vantage, I'm not sure if that makes you brave or stupid.

I'm not a sheep. Yurio explained defensively, stuffing his hands back into his team jacket, I do and think what I want. Whatever inane father-son issues you have with Viktor have nothing to do with me, so what do I have to be afraid of?

...I guess that settles which of the two you are, then. The bear shrugged, then turned on his heel to start heading north along the sidewalk like he'd meant to in the first place.

Green eyes blinked at the man, but then he realized which of the two options Konstantin had decided on, and he took off running to catch up, HEY.

Slate eyes barely twitched as he felt the fly-peck against his lower back, but he did stop walking at least.

Yurio kept his foot firmly planted, twisting it slightly before pulling back to kick the man again in the same place. Quicker than the teen thought possible, the hulking shadow turned back towards him, grabbed his ankle with a hand so massive it went half-way up his calf, and hoisted him upside-down into the air. Blonde hair tumbled out of his hoodie, and all three remaining free limbs started flailing,

PUT ME DOWN.

Are all of Viktor's friends so curious about the afterlife? Konstantin grumbled, starting to walk again even as he held the teen out in front of himself.

I can't speak for Katsudon, but I didn't come after you because I have a death wish. The Russian Tiger growled back, crossing his arms when it finally seemed futile to resist.

Katsudon?

Yurio grit his teeth, The wimpy Asian kid that Viktor keeps around like a pet.

The bear rolled his eyes a little, I think he's older than you are. At least I hope so.

...Why?

I can't imagine my son being interested in children as well as other men.

I'M NOT A CHILD. Yurio started flailing again, PUT ME DOWN. I'M A SOLDIER.

Really? Konstantin huffed, almost laughing, In whose army?

MY OWN. I AM LEGION. I AM MANY AND WE ARE ONE. More flailing.

Why do I get the feeling you're a figure skater, too?

Hah? Yurio blinked strongly, an eye twitching in disbelief, ...How could you not know that
already? Mikhail sponsors me...wouldn't he have told you? Aren't you and him all buddy-buddy or something?]

[He's my brother-in-law.]

[So?]

The huge man drew in a mildly-annoyed breath, and brought up his other hand to help in turning the teen right-side-up to set him down on his feet again, [You're awfully nosy.]

[I'm just trying to figure out what your deal is.] The tiny tiger said stiffly, holding his head to stop from being so dizzy, and turning to watch the bear start plodding away again, [It's going to take you all afternoon to get back to the hotel. If you really plan on watching Viktor skate, you shouldn't wander so far away.]

[He's not up for another four hours.] Konstantin countered, continuing to walk.

[He's in the Opening Ceremonies, then there's a grand total of five guys up before him. Surely you can manage the patience for that much.]

[What difference does it make to you if I see him skate at all?] The gruff figure paused and looked back over his shoulder, the tiny circles of blue practically glowing through the black of his large frame and dark, short-cut beard.

Yurio dusted himself off a little, adjusting where his hoodie and jacket sat on his thin figure, pulling the hood back only long enough to straighten his hair out and put it back again, pulling it low over his eyes, [...I started off rather poorly with Katsudon, and yet after all the shit I put him and Viktor thought, they still stuck their necks out for me when I was in trouble. They're the ones that got Mikhail to agree to sponsor me, because if they hadn't, I might not still be skating today.] He started, letting go of where he'd pinched the front edge of the hood over his face, and stuffed both hands back into his pockets, [They're better friends to me than I could ever admit to their faces. I owe them a lot.]

[So what? That has nothing to do with me.]

[Viktor expects you to be there to see him skate.] The teen explained, [And I know first-hand how crushing it can be when the people you want to impress aren't around to watch you. You've done plenty already to pulverize Viktor into tiny little pieces...how about trying to do something to repair that damage for once instead?] Yurio grit his teeth a little, bringing his right hand back into the cold to be a bit more expressive in his grudging admission, [Viktor's...kind of a big deal around here.]

[Is that supposed to impress me?] The man-bear started walking again, fog drifting away from him with every word.

Annoyed, Yurio quickly hopped to jogging, getting around the big man and stopping right in front of him, digging in his feet as well as he could, [Yeah, actua-]

Konstantin walked right into him.

The teen refused to give ground though, sneakers sliding along the frosty ground as the bear continued pushing him along, [STOP, DAMNIT.]

[Why?]

[LISTEN.] The blonde barked, both hands and his head against the man's abdomen as he tried to
stop each step from pushing him further along the sidewalk, snow piling behind his heels, [I helped translate at the restaurant the other morning when you were all fucking confused...the least you can do is hear me out!]

The huge man sighed loudly, but stopped finally, [What then?]

Yurio dragged it out, pushing to stand upright and resettle himself before looking straight up at the hulking mountain, [I heard every word you said while Mikhail was trying to convince you not to bail from the arena. It pissed me off the way you described skating like you did. So what if it's not the manliest thing you've ever seen?]

[That's no-]

[LISTEN. DON'T INTERRUPT ME.]

[Don't waste my time then.]

The teen grit his teeth, [As I was saying. Viktor is only one kind of skater. There's a lot of us in this thing. If Viktor took more after you than he did his mom, do you think he'd really be out there?]

[He-]

[IT WAS A RHETORICAL QUESTION. NO ANSWER NECESSARY.]

More eye-rolling and grumbling.

[All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts.] The short figure recited, [Actors have to play the roles that best suit them. Viktor can't play the part of the big, angry, conceited, and all-parts selfish old man. ...He's the heart-throb.] He said through grit teeth, hating the taste of the words, [He plays that role better than anyone else in the field right now, and he takes advantage of it. Panties drop all around the world when he gets on the ice.]

The bear glowered at him, feeling his hackles rising, and every hair standing on end, [That's a crude way of saying it.]

[Yeah.] Yurio said stiffly, [But I'm not into dudes, so describing it in any other way would be even worse. It's already bad anyway cuz it's Viktor...he and Katsudon have a running joke that they're my dads. It's super annoying.]

[Would you get to the point already?] Konstantin snarled, eyes twitching slightly to hear the last description.

[You said last year that you were grudgingly going to accept Viktor's skating because the Man Upstairs made him good at it on purpose, so it couldn't possibly be all bad...and yet here you are, insulting it at every opportunity, and making a huge fucking scene while you're running away from it.] The teen pointed at the hulking figure, staring at him with the same disgusted eyes that he'd once given to a certain Japanese skater in a certain bathroom, [WHICH IS IT?] He took a step forward daringly, [If you really think GOD made Viktor good at skating, in THIS way, don't you think you're going against the Big Man's directives to keep attacking it like this?]

[God gave me Free Will. I don't have to like a thing just because He made it.]

[Then be a goddamn man and stop bitching about it.] Yurio said bitterly, [Cuz if God Himself doesn't strike you down for insulting the sport like you have, then the next time it happens...I WILL.
Viktor may let you walk all over him, but I supported my family on this sport, so the last thing I'm going to listen to is some crotchety old man talk shit about it in front of my face.] The teen backed up a step, drawing in a breath to let the adrenaline pumping through him settle down a little bit, [My grandpa back in Moscow was my biggest supporter growing up. He took me to practice, he came to my competitions...and he's just as much a manly man as you are. But the difference between a manly man and a real man is the ability for him to put aside his pride and be there for his family, no matter who they are or what they do. At least Viktor isn't a complete fuck-up. Not every father gets a chance to watch his kid become a World Champion at something.]

The bear just glowered down at the Russian Tiger, taken aback by the 'lecture'...in part because he hadn't seen it coming, but more so because of the teen's apparent fearlessness. He shifted his weight a little, and was again surprised, maybe even impressed, that the blonde hadn't flinched or shied away from it. He drew in a deep breath at that, narrowing his eyes a little for lack of knowing what to do.

[I remember every word you said back then.] Yurio went on, quieter than before, [About how you and Viktor's mom got into a fight over her watching him skate on TV. I can't entirely be sure what insanity convinced you to come to NHK like you did...but since you're here, do her ghost a favor and at least sit patiently while Viktor and his competition do their thing. No one is saying you have to like it. Watch it and forget it for all I care...but watch it, okay? Don't blink, don't breathe. Viktor's expecting you to be there...so go, sit quietly, and watch him do his work.]
Chapter 196

CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED NINETY SIX

"Ladies and Gentlemen...Welcome to the opening ceremony of ISU Grand Prix of Figure Skating...NHK Trophy."

A dozen young teenaged lady-skaters came out onto the ice, each wearing a light blue skating dress, and each carrying the flag of a competing country. Japan in front, since it was the host, then Kazakhstan, Italy, Latvia, South Korea, Poland, Finland, Russia, the USA, and a few others, all lined up back-to-back, with another dozen or so skaters on the opposite short-end of the rink; Germany, Jerusalem, Spain, and others. The second line was lead by a skater carrying the flag of the ISU itself.

The announcement overhead was spoken in Japanese first by a female presenter, then English by a male one. Once the presenting skaters were in position and ready, the next line was read.

"To kick-off the event, please enjoy Flag Skating by the local skaters of Hokkaido Skating Federation. They are the future stars from this region."

Overhead, a peaceful serenade of harps and violins began to play, signaling the skaters to begin moving forward, holding their flag-posts out ahead of them.

[The ISU used a weird remix of 'A Whole New World' from Aladdin for this OC...I'm not sure I'll use it, so pick whatever you want for now.]

Blades scratched the pristine ice, leaving long, gliding marks as each skater rounded the edge of the rink. Once they'd passed each other's opposite side, they slid forward along the long sides of the wall, stopped in place, waved their flags, and then turned towards center, moving forward to pass between one another, then paused again with a 10ft gap between their lines.

Yuri watched quietly from one of the rink-side stands with the other coaches, feeling horribly out of place and yet perfectly at ease at the same time. At least Celestino had sit down next to him, making it less awkward...and yet, that just made it more awkward.

"You look too nervous to be the not-really-a-coach for one of the world's best, Yuri. Do I need to give you the lecture about being too young to coach other skaters like I did to Viktor last year?"

The raven-haired figure squeaked out of his train of thought and glanced to the side, where he saw that particular pony-tailed instructor smirking at him in his usual way, "C-Celestino..." He managed, catching his breath in his throat awkwardly before coughing and looking back out to the ice.

The flag-bearers had gone into a double-ring maneuver, with all but 4 of them skating in a big circle in one direction, and those other 4 on the inside skating in the other. Flags whipped quietly above them, churned up by the passing cold air.

Hazel eyes scanned the audience on the opposite side of the rink, trying to catch a glimpse of where anyone familiar might be sitting, for good or bad, "I'm not nervous. I'm just-

"You're nervous." Celestino prodded, "I coached you for 5 years...you think I don't know your habits and mannerisms? You've grown more confident, that's true, but you're still the same old Yuri Katsuki I remember. What do you have to be anxious about at an event where you aren't even competing? You won gold in both of your own. This thing should just be fun for you. You get to sit
back and watch Viktor just like you used to."

"Well..." The skater grumbled a little, "The Russian Yuri disappeared a little while ago and he's not answering his phone. No one's heard from him in hours. I'm worried about what he's up to."

"Yuri Plisetsky." The coach huffed, crossing his ankles just under the front of his chair, "You've developed a weird friendship with him. After you told me what he did in Sochi, and then hearing about how he showed up in Hasetsu after Viktor...I thought you two would end up as hated rivals, especially after he usurped you on the podium at least year's Final."

"...That was true for a while." Yuri answered, "But I never hated him. At worst, I think he just resented me for being the reason Viktor left Russia. After what happened to him at Euros though, and then especially at Worlds, things kind of settled down."

"Ah, yeah, I'd heard about that. Is Viktor's uncle still sponsoring him?"

"Yeah, for the time being." The skater confirmed, satisfied with his tertiary examination of the audience that nothing would surprise him, or Viktor when he came out for his part. He drew in a breath and leaned back in his chair, trying to relax...but the nagging feeling wouldn't go away that something was up.

"*Thank you for the great performance, skaters...!*

The English announcer called. A moment passed as the clapping faded out, and the skaters all stood still in a circle together, backs to center, "*Ladies and Gentlemen...please rise for the national anthem.*"

Yuri huffed and rose back up again, standing politely with the rest of the coaches and audience. The low thrum of the voiceless orchestra resounded overhead after that, playing for less than a minute before fading out again, and the audience retook its seats.

"Arigatou gozaimashita..." The female announcer called, speaking on as the crowd started to turn around again.

"*Thank you, please be seated.*" The male announcer echoed; the skaters started to move off together in pairs towards rink-side, stepping back through the gate one at a time.

Like before, Yuri slid into the back of his seat, feeling the butterflies in his stomach.

"It would be kind of nice if these Opening Ceremonies for the GP Series were a bit more lively than they are." Celestino said suddenly, "OCs for Euros and the Final, and all the other events of the year, are always so exciting and interesting. These ones though...*meh*...hardly any effort at all."

"Yeah." The skater agreed quietly.

"...You're more of a space cadet than usual." The coach went on, crossing his arms as he glowered at the younger figure next to him, "Why are you so worried about Plisetsky anyway? He's almost 18; he can handle himself."

"It's not *just* him I'm worried about." Yuri answered, about ready to jump out of his skin to wander around and look more thoroughly. The announcements went on to introduce an ISU representative to offer greetings for the event...but that just meant another 10 minutes of boring monotonous talking that every participant had heard a thousand times before. So with that, Yuri was up on his feet, quickly scurrying along the blue-covered wall to get to the prep-area curtain, hoping not to be seen as too distracting as he went. He could hear Celestino calling for him to come back, but those butterflies had become more like ballistic missiles bouncing off the inside of his thin frame, and he couldn't sit still anymore.
Once through the curtain, the skater looked around anxiously, only to spot Viktor standing literally
less than 5 feet away from him. The man had his eyes closed, ear-buds in, and was leaning against
the wall, waiting for the moment he was supposed to go out to do his part. Yuri reached a nervous
hand out and touched it to his partner's forearm to get his attention, "Viktor."

One blue eye opened, "Hm?" Seeing Yuri there instead of some ISU official caught him off guard,
and as he jerked up a little in surprise, one ear-bud came out to fall in front of his chest, "Yuri? What
are you doing back here? Did you see him? You're su-

"I didn't." He shook his head, "I was going to go see if I can find him the old fashioned way since
he's not answering my calls or texts. I'm worried he might've gone after your f-

A finger was immediately over Yuri's mouth, and Viktor shook his head, pulling the other ear-bud
out with his free hand, "I'm sure he's around somewhere. He'll occasionally put his phone to silent
when he's at an event." The Russian suggested, "He might've even gone to sit with Uncle Mimi and
Minako."

The shorter figure's brow furrowed, and he shook his head, feeling Viktor's finger come away from
his lips, "I've texted Minako-sensei and he's not with them."

"Who are you talking about?" Mila asked, coming up alongside them, "I could see your worried face
from halfway across the hall."

"Yurio." Viktor answered, "He's been MIA since Pairs."

"...He's not missing." The woman tilted her head at them, "Coach Yakov and I saw him coming in
nearly 30 minutes ago, and it looked like some huge scary guy was following him."

"Yakov was with me and the other coaches though..." Yuri pointed out, "Yurio wasn't with him."

"Then everything must be fine." Mila shrugged, "The huge guy must've just been going the same
direction."

Viktor was bristling under his SP ensemble and team jacket, but he tried not to give it away. He tilted
back and stuck a finger through the curtain, pulling it back just enough to get a look at where the
coaches had been sitting on the opposite side of the rink from the Premium Spectator section. It was
easy enough to spot the coaches he recognized, and he saw Yakov himself sitting just one row up
and 5 seats over from Celestino, and Yuri's empty spot. Slate eyes wandered up from there, "Did you
look behind yourself when you were out there?"

"Hah?" Yuri grimaced, "Well, not directly behind...I didn't want to be that obvious... Celestino was
already interrogating me just because of the look on my face."

"Well, good thing, I guess." The Russian sighed and let the curtain go, "He was right there in your
blindspot."

A shiver went down the skater's spine, and in morbid disbelief, he gently pulled a section of the
curtain back so he could get one eye to peer through...and spotted both Yurio and the Nikiforov
Patriarch right where Viktor said they'd be, "Shimatta...!" He let the curtain go and turned back
around, careful to make sure it wouldn't open up, "They were right behind me the whole time. How
did I not feel one of them digging holes in the back of my head?"

"They?" Mila echoed, "Who else would be with him?"

It was tempting to stop the woman from looking, but that would've been futile and just made the
situation more awkward than it needed to be. Instead, Yuri just turned his head back as he felt his partner slouching against him, chin resting over one shoulder as arms came under his own to wrap around his sides, hands coming to rest around his front. He could feel the cringe even if he didn't hear or see it.

"Oh, that's the huge scary guy from before. I wonder what the heck Yuri is doing with him?" The redhead said curiously, "Coach Yakov looks pretty prickly out there. Normally he's half-asleep during this part." She finally pulled back from the curtain and let it settle in its closed position, ignoring the ongoing droning of the ISU official still giving her welcome speech...in broken English, then in Japanese. She crossed her arms as she noted the evolving expression on the pair's faces, "What's going on with you two? Why are you acting like this is the worst possible thing?"

Yuri held his tongue, not sure what to say, or whether he should even try anyway. It had taken the better part of a year for Viktor to spill the beans on his past...what business was it of his to go spilling it to someone else? He just stood stoically in the man's anxious embrace and stayed quiet.

"Viktor?"

[Apparently Yurio has become friendly with my father.] He answered in Russian, knowing the language barrier would make it safe to speak. His fingers curled a little tighter around where he'd gripped to his husband's jacket, [Much as I wish he hadn't.]

[...Your father?] Mila repeated, giving him a look like she thought he was messing with her, [You'd never mentioned your family before, at least not until that Uncle that popped up... What's going on? Why are all these guys popping up out of the wood-work suddenly?]

[My father was the one who brought Uncle Mimi to the skating rink in St. Petersburg, remember? He didn't say anything at the time, and just went off to read a newspaper, but that was him back then, too.]

Realization dawned on the woman, and she quickly peeked back through the curtain, squinting that eye to try and focus on the hulking figure a bit better, [...I don't remember him at all. I just remember your Yuri falling on the ice, freaking ou-...oh.] She pulled the curtain closed again, and stood upright, pausing for a moment before turning to look at the silver skater squarely, [I get it.]

Yuri watched her closely. He hadn't understood a word of what had been said, outside the mention of a few names, but he had a feeling the lady-skater was still piecing things together. However, like that night in Barcelona, almost a year to the day...when he had practically seen the math equations floating through Phichit's head at the mention of a particular pair of matching rings...he saw the same thing happening to Mila. That quickly changed though...the woman's expression got rather dark, and Yuri could see how her hands trembled where she clenched her fists at her side.

Without a word, and without even realizing what was happening until after it was over, Yuri felt Viktor reach out towards the woman with one arm, quick as lightning, and dragged both her and himself a few feet away from the curtain. With Mila squished to his front, and his arms flailing out to the side, Yuri was in the middle of a weird Russian sandwich. It was a mercy that he was a few inches taller than the woman squashed to his front. It would've been horrendously nerve-wracking if she had been taller than him instead.

[Don't say anything.] Viktor warned, both hands now bypassing his uncomfortably-compressed husband so he could hold them to Mila's back, making sure she didn't wiggle free and go on a hunt in front of the entire audience, [It's nothing.]

[He's the one that hit you, isn't he?] She asked darkly, [When you said you'd been in a car
accident... Her arms were heavy at her sides, and she held her face in a downward tilt, staring at the scarf where it lay folded over Yuri's shoulder, [I knew back then, without a doubt, that someone had hurt you. I warned you at the Banquet that something like this would happen, but you still refused to confirm it when we suspected.]

[Please don't make a scene.] The older Russian begged, [I can't afford to have everyone climbing into my personal life right n-]

The crowd suddenly burst into a thunderous roar; a stark contrast to the polite clapping of a few moments before. It completely drowned Viktor's words out, and his eyes went wide as he realized that was likely his cue to go out there. Without time to even think, all he could do was abruptly let both skaters go so he could reach down and pull his blade-guards off.

Yuri felt them get roughly pressed into his ill-prepared hand, losing his grip on one as Viktor vanished quickly through the curtain without a word. The ruffle of the curtain and the hard thwak of the plastic hitting the ground seemed like the crack of a whip.

Mila was still stuck close to him, but she quickly regained her senses and touched a hand to the skater's arm as she knelt down to grab the rubber skate-cover and give it over to join the pair back together. As she rose back up to her normal height, she could see the anxious look on the Japanese figure's face turning to worry, and then outright dread. The explosive cheering of the crowd certainly didn't help with the contrast of conflicting emotions. Not knowing what else to do, she reached her arms over his and hugged him, "Be strong. He'll be fine."

Yuri just swallowed nervously and let it happen, keeping his eyes low, watching the last rustle of the curtain where it was finally coming to hang motionless again.

"Konichiwaaaa~!" Viktor's voice echoed throughout the stadium, his normally cheerful affect coming across as weird in that moment, "O-genki desu kaaaa~~?"

"Genki da yoooo~!" The audience roared back, interspersed with a few people simply yelling 'Haaaaai~!' or 'Genki deeeeesu~!'

"Sou ka, sou ka!" Viktor answered back, sliding around the rink with calm and ease, pulling up his free hand to his chin, "Keikaku doori~!" He laughed, "I think that's about the limits of my Japanese right now..." He spun on his gold blade to face the big crane-mounted camera in the corner of the rink, and winked at it as he put his free hand on his hip, the other holding up the microphone, "Gomen ne?"

The audience went wild to see it, and the Russian did his best to soak up the positive energy before turning back around to face them again. Just as he kicked off with a toe-pick, he spotted Yuri and Mila sneaking behind the crane to get back to where Yuri had been sitting a few minutes prior. Unfortunately, to look at the camera and then turn in the direction of the coaches' seats, he couldn't help but look in the direction of his father, and saw those icy blue eyes following him. The image of that man sitting in the audience was like a scene from a nightmare, but Viktor knew it was real and actually happening, so all he could do was try and act natural.

I wanted this, didn't I?

He skated away from the man, blades scratching along the nearly-pristine ice, "After traveling to all these other events for the last month...Skate Canada, Trophée de France, Cup of China, and now the NHK Trophy, it's really and truly an amazing feeling to finally be back in Japan. Even though I'm still wearing this jacket..." He pulled a little on the collar of his team blazer, puffing out the chest a little where the big R and U letters were emblazoned in red and white against that field of black, "...I
feel like Japan has truly become my home now. And all this is possible because of..." He extended his hand out towards where his husband was finally retaking his seat.

All eyes turned towards where the young Asian skater had tried to sneak in, and in a heartbeat, Yuri felt them all descending on him at once.

"YURI!" The audience yelled together.

If the stunned skater had a hat on, it would've been blown off the top of his head by the energy of the crowd's enthusiasm. It was even stranger when he heard the echoes of a chant creeping up in the wake of that initial holler, until Viktor could do nothing but raise his arms up repeatedly where he slid along the ice, egging the chanting on.

"Yuri! Yuri! Yuri!"

"Oh jeeze..." He whined quietly, trying to smile as he waved back at them all, finding it thoroughly and incredibly daunting considering the closest audience to him included Konstantin. He dared not look at the man, for fear of how that probably-angry face might be looking back at him.

Mila spared him the ongoing anxiety by pulling him up from the seat he'd barely managed to get into, and pushed him forward to the rink wall just ahead of him. All around, people were clapping and cheering, many still chanting his name. Before he could even draw another breath, he felt his glasses being pulled off his face, and fingers go through his hair, holding gently to the back of his head.

"Mh, yes, Yuri." Viktor purred into the microphone, giving him the 'eyes on me alone' look, "The ISU has gotten a lot of miles out of us this season already, sending us to all but two GP Series events."

Yuri watched in thorough confusion, What's he even saying right now? He wondered, blinking as the nonsense-speaking Russian fit those blue-rimmed glasses over his own eyes...and then abruptly felt Mila pushing him up against the rink wall, "Wh-what in th...what!? Why are you guys-" Before he knew it, his feet had been shoved right over the top of the wall, and Viktor had moved in to gather him up in his arms, dropping the microphone against his chest as he started skating off towards the middle of the rink.

"Hold up the mic for me." Viktor whispered, the cool air of the rink blowing past them both as he went down the long end of the arena.

Nearly dropping it in the scramble, Yuri did as told, fumbling with all-thumbs to get his hands around the plastic device.

"Turn it around."

"Eh?" The younger skater blinked, realizing that in his haste, he'd held the thing up upside-down, and quickly spun it around, much to Viktor's amusement.

"There." The Russian spoke into the device, getting even more cheers as he started the wide curve around the short end of the rink, coming back up the other way soon after, "It wasn't part of the plan, but I like this better."

"Viktuuri! Viktuuri!" The chant began anew.

Yuri finally started to regain his senses, blinking strongly a few times and then looking around again. When he got back to looking at his partner, he realized the man had gathered him up the way he had so suddenly, as a way of cancelling out the bear's laser-focus. The gruff old man didn't even matter
anymore; the ice was their domain, and as long as they were on it together, nothing could touch them.

*Everything on the ice is love.*

With a deep breath, the hapless skater tilted the mic towards himself, "Thank you, Sapporo, for your warm welcome! And thank you, everyone in Japan, and in Hasetsu especially, for cheering us both on as we traverse the world for this Grand Prix of Figure Skating!"

The crowd screamed and clapped excitedly to hear the anxious man's voice.

"The ISU decided to show mercy on us after this last month and a half of constant globe-trotting, by letting me and now us give the closing statements of these Opening Ceremonies." Viktor spoke as well, coming to a spinning-stop in the center of the arena, standing directly over the event-logo built into the ice, "So while we've already had two fantastic Short Programs today, it gives me great pleasure to officially commemorate the start of the NHK Trophy, the last qualifying event of the Grand Prix Series before the Final next weekend!" He tilted his arms to gently set his husband's feet on the frozen flooring, and rested his arm over the man's shoulders proudly, "Let's do this thing!"

"Ikimashou!"
Translating for the bear had become something of a chore after the Flag Dancers had returned to rink-side. Yurio groaned in boredom at the whole thing, [I can barely understand that lady's English to begin with, never mind the Japanese.] He complained, [But long story short, this same kind of thing is said at every single event, so it's just a representative of the host country thanking the ISU and everyone involved for being here.] He propped his feet up against the railing in front of their seats and slouched back against his own, [The only thing people really care about is hearing that the next program is going to start.]

[And you have to sit through this shit every time?] Konstantin looked around the arena, trying to imagine the rink was surrounded by a thousand quiet skinny trees, rather than people. His eyes tracked back to the rows of seats just in front of himself and the Russian Kitten, spotting a certain not-really-a-coach trying to sneak off around the edge of the rink.

[Yeah. For some reason, the ISU doesn't put a lot of effort into the opening ceremonies of these qualifying events.] The teen explained, lacing his fingers together over his chest lazily, closing his eyes like he was going to take a nap until something more interesting happened, [If you saw the theatrics before Worlds or even Russian Nationals, it would seem like the event of the century by comparison. By the time you've seen these GP Events enough times, every OC looks the same, just in different colors. I normally skip them outright, or I stay in the prep area if it's my event. I'll only stick my head out if I'm actually part of the ceremony, like at Worlds last year.]

[Mh.]

The droning of the ISU representative finally started to come to a close a few minutes later. Konstantin had kept his eyes turned towards the well-hidden curtain that guarded the way into the waiting area under the stands, seeing it move periodically like someone was trying to peek through. He turned back again when the audience clapped politely suddenly, the JSF representative bowing towards the camera, "It is now my great pleasure," She started up again, her broken English sounding a little better by then, "...to conclude these Opening Ceremonies with a few words from one of the ISU's longest-running consecutive gold medalists, ranging from these very Grand Prix events, to the Final, European Championships, and even the World Championships...Viktor Nikiforov-san!"

The audience completely went wild for it. The fact of being done with the pleasantries was already something to be excited about, but unexpectedly getting to hear that the silver legend was coming out to do something other than skate was rather exciting in itself. The Russian skater seemed to come out from behind the curtain a bit frantic, but that melted away the second he glided out on those gold-plated blades. The rumblings of a chant for Viktor's name began at the back of the audience, but Viktor himself quickly snuffed it out by addressing them all, rounding back towards rink-side to grab a wireless microphone being held out for him.

"Konichiwaaaa~!" He called out, waving excitedly at the gathered crowd, "O-genki desu kaaaa~?"

[What's he saying?] The bear wondered.

['Good afternoon, are you well?' You know, basic crap.] Yurio answered, looking on at his former rink-mate with one opened eye. He closed it again when the cheering fans called back their answers happily, and went back to clapping again
"Sou ka, sou ka! Keikaku doori~!" Viktor laughed, facing the stands opposite his father, "I think that's about the limits of my Japanese right now..." The crane-mounted camera was in the corner between the coaches' stands and the exit curtain, which forced him to at least slightly face the man, still doing his best to put on that show, winking at the lens rising up ahead of himself, "Gomen ne?"

There was a microsecond where Konstantin caught his son's gaze, but that was gone almost as quickly as it had happened. Instead, movement along the blue wall gathered up the giant's attention again, and he spotted a redhead and 'the wimpy Asian kid Viktor keeps around as a pet' coming back to rink-side. They barely made it back to where Yuri had been sitting before when Viktor called the audience's attention to the young not-a-coach.

Hearing the crowd screaming, and then chanting Yuri's name was awkward, but not so much as the question that came with it, [Do you hate him?]

Slate eyes blinked down to the side, glowering down on the tiny blonde teen sitting next to him...albeit a few seats over for the girth of his own arms. Yurio was thumbing at the Japanese skater. The bear looked back up again and watched indifferently as Yuri waved nervously, trying to look small and insignificant, [I have no opinion of him whatsoever.]

[What about in relation to Viktor?]

Konstantin drew in a careful breath, but then shrugged, [My son gave our family name to him, without my blessing and effectively in spite of it. For that, I resent and reject him.] He answered simply, quietly, looking back at the Russian skater on the ice after that, [As for being the object of Viktor's misguided lust...I'm disgusted by him. He's small, weak, and skittish. No wonder he has to beg for affection from other men...what woman would want what he has to offer? Pathetic.]

Yurio half-sneered at the man with those vivid green eyes, but grit his teeth to stop himself from responding, then turned back to where Viktor was approaching rink-side. He could practically feel the energy around their seats change as the Russian skater started acting fondly towards his partner, especially since they were so close, [I don't get why you have such a wild thorny hair up your ass about it.] He didn't need to see the bear's expression to know the man was glowering at him dubiously, but he went on anyway, [The world isn't going to end because of what they're doing.]

[It goes against the laws of nature.]

[And that impacts you how, exactly?] The teen posed, finally turning his head up to glare right back at the man, [Their private life literally has nothing to do with you. Being so angry about them being together is like being mad at the guy in front of you at the grocery store for being able to buy donuts when you're on a diet. It doesn't make any sense. Your diet isn't that other guy's problem.] He turned back to watch Yuri getting carried off in a sudden hurry, almost like Viktor was grabbing his husband and running, [You're actually just like Yuri in that regard. Being mad on other peoples' behalf. Holding onto all these negative emotions when the people you're pissed at aren't even angry themselves.]

[They're living in sin. They're in open rebellion against God.]

[Blah blah blah...] The teen pulled both hands up and made the motions like his hands were mouths, opening and closing them several times before stuffing them into his jacket pockets, [He who is without sin should cast the first stone. It still doesn't matter. Let God sort them out.]

[We are commanded to put them to death for their crimes against God.] Konstantin pointed out bitterly, closing his eyes to avoid gawking at the unnatural spectacle taking place on the ice.
Yurio rolled his eyes, then turned to prod a finger against the massive arm just next to him, [Yeah, and how many times have you worked on the Sabbath? Are you wearing any mixed fabrics today? Do you eat pork or shellfish? You'll never be able to live up to the standards set out by the Faith. By standing up for one edict, you're failing another. Suggesting Viktor and Yuri die for being together goes against the idea that you should love your neighbors and not judge each other. Why did you have to settle on the shittiest of the possible options? Why can't you just be happy for them?]

Yuri had finally started speaking into the mic by then, his voice echoing off the rafters.

[Why are you defending them?] Konstantin growled impatiently, half-tempted to plug his ears until the 'show' was finally over, [You said their sins disgust you as well.]

[That's not what I said. At all.] Yurio rolled his eyes and tilted his head away, then looked back again, [I said that I'm not into guys, so complimenting Viktor on being a 'hot piece of ass,' as his fans would say, isn't something I would admit easily. Because him and Yuri pretend to be my SkateDads all the time, too, talking about either of them that way would be like saying those things about my actual parents. It's just fucking weird. Shit, those two dumbasses go out of their way to be super affectionate around me sometimes just to make me squirm and have a laugh about it.] He explained tersely, casting his eyes back out onto the ice, [It'd be absolutely no different if it was Viktor and that French ex-girlfriend of his, or any other person. Being around a couple can be obnoxious in general. I avoid hanging out with Mikhail and Okukawa for the same reasons sometimes.]

Viktor had set Yuri back down onto his own feet, and they were addressing the crane-camera at the corner of the rink.

[You need to learn to chill out. If the Man Upstairs was so offended about what Viktor's doing, then He'd have found a way to break his legs the second he started having the wrong thoughts about another guy. He'd have taken back all the gifts He gave to Viktor that made him Russia's skating hero up until that moment.] The teen said stiffly, going quiet for a moment as the skating duo's little presentation came to an end and the audience started cheering.

The overhead announcer's voice came back on, booming loudly, "The Men's Short Program will begin in 15 minutes. Group 1 may begin their Warm Ups now."

Viktor and Yuri watched as another seven skaters came out from the waiting area, about half of them wearing their nation's runner jackets, the rest just skating around in their SP outfits. The pair seemed to say something to one another before the Russian held his hand out for something, getting Yuri's phone set against his palm a moment later. He clicked open the camera and took a quick selfie of themselves, with the other competitors gliding around in the background, before the blade-wearing skater gathered up his not-a-coach and helped get him quickly to rink-side before someone ran him over. The audience's cheering started to fade out after that.

Yurio took the chance to finish his prior thought, [But nothing has happened. In fact, other than having to deal with you...things for them have been turning out rather well.] The Russian Tiger explained, remembering the moment he'd given that same sort of lecture at the RSF nearly a year ago, and shrugged up his shoulders a little, [So if you really believe there's some spooky, celestial Dear Leader up in the sky, let Him sort us all out. You'll give yourself a heart attack stressing over other peoples' business all the time.]
The 5th and final skater before Viktor's Short Program was still on the ice. Yuri watched his partner's final practice from a bench in the prep area, quietly admiring how many hits the picture Viktor had taken had already gained online. He smiled quietly as some commenters were still posting about overcoming the SP, or making clever quips about the Russian being a 'History Maker' for resetting the World Record in Bordeaux.

"119 is going to be hard to beat, even for you." Yuri said quietly, clicking out of his phone and glancing up where the skater in question had just spun around and thrust his hand forward, right towards him. He blinked quietly at the unexpected gesture coming so close to his face, but he dared not move otherwise, seeing how the silver Russian turned his hand around to put a finger under his chin and smile back.

"I don't aim to." Viktor explained, tapping his thumb against his husband's lip before standing up again and taking it back, going back to his choreography, skate-guards thumping on the concrete floor as he moved, "Just getting over 100 should be fine."

"Saving your energy for the Final?"

"Hai, sono touri." The Russian quipped, smiling back over his shoulder.

Yuri turned his head, spotting some sports media people recording Viktor's practice from a small distance, and commenting about how his show would be starting in a few minutes before moving off again. Hazel eyes turned back towards the skater, "You're not nervous at all...?"

"Nothing is ever written in stone." Viktor answered, lowering his arms from where they'd been dramatically extended, then spinning into another maneuver, "Injuries and mistakes can happen at any time. Never assume you'll ever win anything...and if you're ever not nervous, worry." His skate-guard thunked down lightly, and he seemed to be done for the moment, lifting his head quietly, "The music is gone. Time to go."

Hearing the cheering of the audience, the younger skater nodded and rose to stand, reaching for the Makkachin-plush tissue-box and a water bottle, and squishing the soft-toy under his arm before reaching his free hand for his husband's. Just as they were about to pass through the curtain though, he stopped dead in his tracks, forcing Viktor to pause and look back at him in confusion.

"...Yuri?"

Without a word, the younger skater took his hand back so he could grab hold of the Makkachin plush, and then reached both hands under his partner's arms, wrapping them tightly around the slightly-taller figure's torso, and held there silently.

The Russian blinked down at the top of that spiky black-haired head, but then returned the gesture in kind, both arms going over the man's shoulders.

Yuri stepped a bit closer when he felt it, one sneaker fitting between the gold blades, his small frame pressing in a little tighter.

_Don't let go until the last second._
The longer he stayed there, the easier it was to feel how every muscle in the Russian's lean frame was tight and tense. Ever-so-slowly though, they started to relax, and he felt a soft breath escape by his neck as the skater nuzzled in and held him a little closer.

"Let's go to 'Hyosetsu no Mon' tonight." Yuri suggested quietly, "Just the two of us. It's fancy, but it's not a top-10 tourist trap, so the odds of running into anyone else we know are pretty slim. We'll just turn our phones off and go spend a nice night alone. We have the room to ourselves tonight, too."

"The score for Yoshio Yamanaka...81.65."

Viktor lifted his head as he heard it, but then lowered those cool eyes back down to his partner, leaning in to nose him a little, "Perfecto." He closed those eyes as he felt his partner rising up onto his toes, kissing him quickly before he had to part and go through the curtain. Yakov was already out there waiting, looking as grim as ever, one eye perpetually cast to the left, past the camera-crane, to where Konstantin and Yurio were watching and waiting as well.

The audience went wild again at the sight of the skaters, and the competitor waved politely as his 'coach' moved over towards his spot on the rink wall. The poodle-plush and water bottle were set down gently, and Yuri turned to where rink attendants were holding open the gateway to the ice. Viktor pulled off the blade-guards one at a time, handing them off more gently than the last time, and set boots to ice as the announcer's voice boomed overhead again.

"Next to take the ice tonight...representing Russia...Viktor Nikiforov!"

More wild screaming; the banners came out, as did the flags, the signs, and the massive posters that hung over the edge of the long blue wall. It was just as Yuri had described it before. Fans started chanting the skater's name, and Viktor waved his arm happily to greet the excitement again. He dared a glance towards where he knew his father and Yurio were sitting, but his mind's eye wouldn't let him see anything other than a menacing dark cloud there. Black vapors twisted into the air above where the bear sat, making him something of a dark beacon in the stands, so Viktor turned away to go back to the rink-wall.

He shrugged out of his team jacket and handed it over carefully, reaching back towards himself after that to straighten out his outfit, and then flick a strand of hair out of his eye. His fingers didn't come down right away though, nervously touching at where he felt his left eye twitch. The excited, anxious butterflies in his stomach abruptly disappeared as well, as though the flick of skin had scared them away.

Both 'coaches' saw the subtle change, and Yuri reached to grab both of the Russian's hands to pull them down to the rink wall and get the man's attention, "Viktor...?"

The chanting in the crowd changed over to cheering their combined name, but it didn't seem to penetrate the athlete's psyche at all.

"...I stopped being nervous all of a sudden." He answered quietly, turning his left hand so he could thumb his husband's gold band a little for luck, "I don't know if that's good or not."

"Shake it off." Yakov advised, "You've performed under worse conditions before."

"This is a little different than back then..." The skater sighed, "Worrying about him showing up to drag me off the ice kicking and screaming was never half as harrowing as actually seeing him here. I'm still worried he'll just come out here and knock my block off just to stop my embarrassing him."
"He came here to watch you skate. All you have to do is what you always do." The coach went on, "You've had two days to prepare for this, even if only mentally. If that's not enough, say so and I'll ask event security to escort him out. Technically, he shouldn't even be here now anyway."

"...Why not?"

"I told your Uncle to send him home." Yakov answered simply, "So unless he conned me and didn't actually call, I heard him speak the words myself."

"I don't want him to go home." Viktor said defensively, "This will all have been for nothing if he's not here."

"Then try to get out of your head. If Mikhail follows through with what I told him to do, your father will be gone by the Free Skate."

"...Take it back..."

Yuri's brow furrowed to hear it, "Take it back? Wouldn't it be better if he goes?"

The Russian shook his head, "It's not like I really want him here. I need him here." He held tighter to his husband's hands and lowered his head briefly, "This is the closest I'll ever get to showing my mom that what she went through for me wasn't entirely in vain. I need to prove to my father that he was wrong in trying to stop me." He turned those blue eyes back to his former coach, "You have to tell Mimi to take it back."

Yakov grimaced, "...Alright. But only if you can get your head in the game." The older Russian glanced past the rim of his hat, "If you can't get it together and blow your Short Program, or even worse, if you get hurt, I'll send Konstantin back myself in pieces."

"If I get hurt out there it'll be like a fish drowning." The skater countered, "I feel more comfortable on the ice than I do on the ground."

"It's been known to happen from time to time. You're not indestructible." Yakov warned, "Be careful and take it easy out there. This isn't a normal show for you."

"Everyone else has gotten really average scores so far." The younger skater suggested, agreeing in spades, "You could drop all your quads and get a perfect score on all the other elements if you wanted, just to show them all how it's done, like you told me once."

"...Yeah..." Viktor nodded listlessly. He swallowed pensively as his eye and cheek twitched again, and he turned his head to hide it, "I'm off."

Yuri reluctantly let the man's fingers slip from his own, and watched as the silver genius slipped away without another word. No longer able to give his customary well-wishes, the young skater sighed and lifted his own ring to kiss it instead, "Davai, Viktor..."

"DAVAAAAAI, VIKTOOOOOR!" Yurio cried out from the stands, noting the awkward departure as well. He sighed and slouched back roughly into his seat, getting only the most flimsy of acknowledgements back from the Russian as he raised a hand in his direction, but didn't look. The teen huffed quietly to himself, "That idiot. He better not fuck this up."

[What's wrong? You seem less than enthused suddenly.] The bear wondered grimly, eyes watching the skater sliding across the rink, making wide arcs across the ice as he looked down on it with hands on his thin hips.
Yurio gazed up at him briefly, then looked back at Viktor, quietly making his way towards the NHK logo in the center of the arena, [Never mind. Just watch.]
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED NINETY EIGHT

The audience cheered loudly the entire time Viktor skirted the rink, trying desperately to pull his head out of that dark place his worries had taken him. No matter how hard he tried though, all he could think of was the horrid, sinking feeling he'd had as a young teen every time he took the ice in competition. In that first year, when he was still too young to join the Junior ISU and was relegated to local minor competitions...the dread was there.

Skating officially anywhere in Russia made him anxious. Like a ghost that held residence in a corner of every skating rink, that smoky, billowing aura of darkness was always there, coalescing out the corner of his left eye. Always the left.

He could feel his heart pounding in his chest, punching against the inside of his ribs, threatening to burst out for lack of room. Just as he finally got to center, and dug in a toe-pick to stop, he reached up his left hand to try and quiet the beat and calm its rhythm. However, just like before...out the corner of his left eye, all he could see was that wispy dark aura. This time though, he knew exactly where it was coming from; it wasn't just a shadow sitting on the outside edge of his line of sight...it was in the audience. Tendrils of smoke rose from that spot along the dividing wall between the rink-side area and the first row of stadium seats, and it didn't just disappear when he took a chance to get a better look.

His mind's eye couldn't shake it. He knew his father was just a man, not a demon, but the memories of those days were overriding him. Viktor clenched his eyes shut and shook his head, and dared to stare at the Russian Bear straight on just to prove to himself that the aura was a trick...but there it was, all-consuming, writhing over that entire corner of the rink, spilling into other rows of seats, darkening everything it touched. The entire arena seemed to darken, losing its color until everything was a shade of grey. He looked back around in a small panic, then down at his hands...and saw how small they'd become. The color had completely gone, and so had the years that had passed. The audience had vanished, the lights were going out all around him, and worst of all...he was 12 again.

The hand over his heart clenched down on a different outfit than the one he knew he'd worn into the rink; it was the first one he'd ever worn. It was torn up though, one sleeve hanging off his elbow by a thread, holes in the knees, decorative bits hanging off his shoulders. It was almost unrecognizable.

The dark shape to his left was still writhing at the corners of his periphery, and his tiny hands went up in a desperate bid to pull his bangs down over the eye that tormented him, but his hair was too short for that. It barely came down to just over his eyebrows, and as he clawed his fingers through it like he thought it would somehow make his bangs longer, he could feel the skin around his eye opening up all over again. Crimson vitae trickled down his face, dripped off his chin to hit the ice with a quiet tap against the cold between his feet. Two more drops, then another three in succession, falling from his face like an artery had been severed.

Yuri and Yakov watched in confusion as they saw the Russian pawing at his bangs, pulling them out of the shape he'd styled them into earlier.

"VIKTOR!" The younger skater yelled out, trying to snap the man out of it.

To his sights, it seemed to work, and the silver figure finally stopped focusing so much on his hair and eye and took his position. Viktor moved the left hand from his cheek to raise it in front of himself, the right going slightly behind, and he crossed his right skate behind his left ankle, setting
the toe-pick against the ice. It was impossible to see from so far away, but the Russian had gone even paler than normal, and his eyes were glassy. The music finally started though, and Viktor moved along with it, looking more like a puppet on strings than a world-class athlete. Yuri turned to glance at the older coach, but all he saw was a quiet, sullen dread on the man's face.

"...Did he ever tell you about his pre-ISU competition days?" Yakov wondered suddenly, stopping the younger skater from turning back out to watch his partner's caricature.

*Can you hear my heartbeat? Tired of feeling never enough.*

"...He hadn't gotten that far yet, no." Yuri answered, forcing himself to look back around again as he heard his own voice singing the lyrics, "I think he was working himself up to it."

Viktor twisted on the ice, arms to the side, moving swiftly along the short end of the rink opposite them.

"The first time he got onto the ice for a competition," Yakov explained, watching with unblinking eyes as his skater moved like a novice, "And for the entire first year or so..."

*I close my eyes and tell myself, that my dreams will come true.*

The quad Flip, Viktor's signature move, fell to a triple. He hadn't known how to do it when he was 12. His skate wobbled under him, but he kept moving, deaf to the confused applause of the audience.

*There'll be no more darkness when you believe in yourself, you are unstoppable.*

"...He was scared that his father would show up at a competition and drag him home again." Yakov continued, "But it wasn't ever that simple."

*Where your destiny lies, dancing on the blades...*

Viktor twisted over in a half-jump, and when he landed, he thrust his hand out and slid forward on the ice, lifting his arm towards the opposite end of the rink. However, unlike all the previous times he'd done it, Yuri could see that the man's arm barely came up half-way, like it was too heavy to raise up all the way, and his hand was limp at the end of his reach.

*...You set my heart on fire!*

His hand trembled, but the Russian's mind couldn't see the rink wall past the heavy chains on his arms. The last link dragged along the ice, leaving a scratch almost as deep as the worn-out, antique blades tied to his snow-boots. The music was almost inaudible in the background, sounding like it was playing from outside the run-down arena, but he knew he had to keep going.

The serpentine step-sequence was next, and Viktor did his best, dragging the chains behind him across pock-marked ice.

*Don't stop us now, the moment of truth. We were, born to make History!*

The elder Russian coach crossed his arms, seeing how tired the skater looked already, and it wasn't even a third of the way finished. Those unblinking eyes never left the man though, "Viktor had horrible nightmares all throughout those first few competitions. He could only ever sleep easy if he had Kubochin with him, but you know well enough that we're not allowed to bring pets."

Yuri listened quietly, worrying more and more as the story went on.
"He'd wake up in a cold sweat more often than not," Yakov explained, turning his eyes as Viktor went past the judges, roaming back towards the middle of the rink before tossing himself into a fling sit-spin, only to be unable to completely extend his leg, "Begging for his Uncle or his dog, or he'd just sit there in bed, trembling and terrified. He'd never remember it the next morning, or at least he claimed he didn't, but then he'd go out there and skate like he didn't know what he was doing anymore. He told me once that when he skated, he'd see a dark cloud out the corner of his eye, like it was the shadow of his father's fist coming back to hit him again, or to drag him away."

**Born to make History!**

The silver Russian had pulled out of the pancake spin by then, trying to pull his skate-blade up behind his back to rise into the full Biellmann spin, but his second hand missed the catch, and he had to grab it in a second attempt once it was already up behind his head.

**Bo-bo-born to make History!**

"He'd always try to pull his hair down in front of that eye since he wasn't allowed to cover it, and it wasn't until his bangs finally came down far enough to hide the scars on his cheek that the nightmares and hallucinations stopped." The elder continued.

Yuri crossed his arms over the rink wall, and hugged the Makkachin tissue box against his chest, watching and listening nervously, "...Come on, Viktor...this isn't you..."

**Yes, we were born to make History!**

The silver boy looked all around the rink, dizzy from the spin, seeing the ice cracking at the base of the rink-wall. Still, the hollow echo of the music outside forced him on...at least, until it seemed to fade out entirely, leaving the arena in darkness and quiet. Viktor's legs refused to move after that, the antique blades on his feet crumbling to dust, leaving him with nothing but rotted leather straps across his boots, and the jagged edges where the blades once attached to the bottoms. The chains felt ten times heavier, and the trembling figure dropped to his knees, facing the far corner of the rink, and the roiling darkness that had taken it over entirely. Tendrils of black were starting to come over the decrepit wall, shattering and evaporating the ice with its touch. All Viktor could do was lean his head down, feeling the blood trailing from his eye and across his skin, followed by tears and the crack of his tiny voice trying to scream.

*[Youuuuu did thissss...]*

That silver head quaked at the sound of the hissed whisper, and he lifted his eyes a little to see the wriggling black mass getting closer, wisps of dark smoke reaching ahead where the inky miasma followed slowly behind. Ice decayed in its path, and slate blue eyes watched in terror as the tendrils inched their way closer. He backed off his knees and tried to push away, digging the oversized antique skates into the remains of the ice to try and shove himself back, but the chains held him where he was, so heavy they might as well have been bolted to the ground. When the first coil of that darkness reached him, he tried to kick it back, but all that achieved was setting the remains of his blades on fire where he wore them. It wasn't long before they were not but ash, falling off his boots entirely and crumbling before his eyes like charred sticks.

*[Thisss issss...becauuuseee of youuuuu...]*

*[I...I didn't do anything...!] He begged in that tiny voice, seeing how the blackness completely surrounded him. Just as it seemed like it was going to pounce on him and rip him apart, it stopped in*
its tracks, only the smoke moving as it drifted in the air above itself.

[Don't youuuuu remember what you diiiidd...?]

The voice was much closer now, sounding like it was coming from straight ahead rather than all around. The tiny silver Russian lifted his head again, facing the source of the sound. From within the hulking mass of all-encompassing black, grey smoke started to rise, wavering like in a mild breeze, then condensing into a thick soup of waving silvery threads, eventually looking like hair, floating as though under water. A pale face soon emerged with it; a woman's face, with familiar grey-green eyes.

[...Mama...?] The teen wondered, his voice weak and trembling.

The figure brought its shoulders and arms out of the miasma, reaching white hands towards the young skater, only to burst into flames as well, starting at the fingertips. They turned to charcoal and ash, like the wick of a candle, burning down the length until getting to the palms. The ashes started falling away, leaving smaller and smaller stumps as it moved down the woman's hands, erasing her fingers and thumbs from existence, then going to her wrists.

[...Youuuu did thiiisss...]

[I didn't do anything!] Viktor pleaded again, horrified by the vision, [The burning was because of papa! He did this!]

[Heee burredrrned the skaaates...but yooouuu buuurneed meeeneee...] She whispered through a dry, coarse voice, sparks and puffs of smoke pouring from her mouth.

Before the tiny Russian could react, the woman's entire body was pushed down, exploding into dust and embers like the remains of a well-burnt log, vanishing into the smog all over again. He just screamed and tried to get away again, kicking his heels against the ground in a desperate attempt to push back, only for the chains to continue holding him down.

More chains seemed to echo from within the smoky mass, sparks shooting out periodically where it sounded like a hammer had struck metal. Viktor suddenly realized what the miasma was, and he kicked that much harder.

[YOU CAN'T MAKE ME GO. I WON'T. I'LL DIE BEFORE YOU MAKE ME GO THERE.] He screamed, kicking furiously as the tendrils started to grasp at his legs. He watched in even more horror as his clothing there caught fire like his skates and mother had, burning him and leaving charred holes in his skin. He watched helplessly as his fingers caught up in flames after that, turning them to ash and dust as well.

[This is your fault.] Another voice started, darker and lower than the first, [This is a Hell of your own making, and it's nothing less than you deserve.]

"...Viktor...!" A third voice...this one distant and nearly impossible to hear.

[You created this place.] The second voice continued, drowning out the other with a flurry of hammer-strikes and spark-eruptions, [It's a direct result of your disregard for the natural order of things, for your rebellion, for your lies, for your deceit...for turning your mother away from the Light...for seeking the company of those forbidden to you...and for your own insatiable avarice.]

"...Viktor!" The far-off voice cried again, this time a little closer.

The smoke condensed before the terrorized child's eyes, two blue eyes glowing in the midst of it all
like that of some dark monster, [THIS IS WHERE YOU BELONG.] It roared, rising high and looming over the tiny silver figure. The smoky black miasma seemed to get thicker, heavier as it towered over the boy...and then collapsed, rushing forward at him, smoke and fire and hatred all coming together to smother him.

[NO!]

"Viktor!"

"...Huh?" His vision was blurry for a moment, coming into focus as the roar of the crowd started creeping in. He could feel where his right toe-pick was planted in the ice just behind his left heel, and his arms were straight out to his sides. His lungs burned...from exertion, he realized, not from fire, and he panted heavily to catch his breath. The air was cold on his face, and a bead of sweat rolled down his left cheek, forcing him to bring his hand back to catch it in case it was...something else. He clenched his eyes shut and shook his head, trying to regain his focus, "...What happened?"

"ViktOOOooomrrrr!" Yuri's voice called again, this time with a little more urgency.

The Russian lifted his gaze and turned around, seeing his not-a-coach and former-coach there gawking at him like he was standing completely naked in the middle of the rink. He blinked strongly a few times, then nervously turned and started pushing back towards them, blades sliding across the ice normally again. He swallowed, and turned his eyes up to the right, looking past the camera-crane as it followed his trek back to rink-side, capturing his shaky movements as he felt his team jacket being thrown over his shoulders.

Behind the camera, the black miasma had vanished, leaving just the audience, Yurio, and...his father. The duo was clapping slowly, but Viktor wasn't sure what for.

"Are you okay?" Yuri asked, getting the skater's attention back rather suddenly, "Viktor...?

"...I don't know. I think I blacked out in the middle of it." He answered, reaching his hand back up to press it to his left eye and cheek, slipping it under his bangs, "What did I do? Did I finish at least...?"

"Yeah." The younger figure answered, holding out the first of the two skate-guards, "But you did it like you were skating 'Evoke' already. You didn't look happy at all..." His voice was a mixture of worry and guilt.

Viktor reached his shaking hand past the rubber blade-guard, and took the water bottle from the top of the rink-wall instead, pulling the nub out with his teeth and biting down on it for a moment before finally tilting his head back to actually get a drink. Unexpectedly, he felt his right leg get pulled out from under him, and he fell against the open gateway to catch himself, looking back over his shoulder to see his husband putting the guard onto the skate himself, hoisting his leg up like he was shoeing a horse. Yuri did the same thing to the left side soon after that, then gently started pushing him towards the kiss and cry. Yakov followed close behind, but said nothing, which Viktor found weird.

Waiting for the score was nerve-wracking, and the Russian stared at the toes of his skates the entire time. The big screens mounted above the rink were playing back scenes from his program, but he wouldn't look. His mind was blank, save the echoes of that waking nightmare bouncing off the inside of his skull.

"The score for Viktor Nikiforov...88.26."

Yakov looked up as they heard it, but his expression hadn't changed. He just turned his head towards
the opposite corner of the rink, staring at Konstantin like he thought he could make the man evaporate by sheer force of will.

The audience wasn't sure whether to cheer or not, and they fell into a confused quiet. A few people started to clap, and others whistled...but it was the sound of booing that really started to pick up.

Yurio lifted his head, completely stunned by both the score and the reaction of the crowd.

[So much for being a legend.] Konstantin huffed.

[The last time he skated this, he set a new world record with a score over 119.] The teen grudgingly pointed out, [He fucked up cuz you're here. Cut him a little slack.] He rose up from his seat and looked all around the arena. The booing had really gotten loud by then, and he grit his teeth, drawing in a sharp breath, "STOP BOOING THE JUDGES AND CHEER FOR HIM, YOU ASS-HATS."

Yuri lifted his head when he heard it, still numb from the score reading. He turned his eyes toward his husband, nervous for the look on his face...but Viktor's expression hadn't changed much. He still looked down at his skates, eyes half-closed where the left was hidden under his hair.

"Vitya." Yakov said quietly, "Konstantin is going home."

The Russian didn't react for a moment, but then closed his eyes and shook his head, "He's staying. If you make him leave anyway, I'll never forgive you."

"But-"

"I'm still in first place." He said stiffly, pushing up from the bench as he stuffed his hands into his pockets, "I'll make up for it in the Free Skate. I made that program because of how much I hated my father. It'll be perfect." He finished in quiet Russian, hoping not to be picked up by the microphones and translated later. His tone was grim, even considering what he was saying.

The elder coach simply held his tongue, knowing the kiss and cry wasn't the place to give that lecture. He simply rose to his feet as well, and followed behind as the skater stepped off with his partner at his side.

The audience had passively stopped the jeering and had moved on to clapping politely, though many were still muttering about the injustice of such a low score. Half the judges held their heads up in defense of their grades, but the rest hid behind their clasped hands, knowing the man normally earned better but being unable to justify those same kinds of marks for what they saw moments before.

The trio passed the rink entrance where the next skater was rotating his arms in preparation for his own performance. He, his coach, and choreographer all watched in tepid silence as the Russian team passed them by, disappearing under the curtain.

"Next on the ice...representing the United States of America...Leo de la Iglesia."
CHAPTER ONE HUNDRED NINETY NINE

"Yuri!"

Lifting his head to the sound of his name, the skater spotted Phichit coming up towards him from the prep area's entrance hall, Celestino following behind calmly. Frost still clung to their hair and jackets, and both were trying to dust themselves off before it melted all over them, "Phichit-kun...I was starting to wonder where you were."

"We just got here." The Thai skater huffed and puffed, clearly out of breath, "The snow's really coming down outside, and there was a fender bender on the road we were supposed to take to get to the back entrance. We ended up getting out of the shuttle down the street, and ran up through the courtyard at the south end of the arena. Who knew it would take so long! I thought we'd be here in time for OCs!"

"It's fine." Yuri shook his head, turning to look back at his partner, who was waiting patiently and quietly at the end of his hand. Hazel eyes turned around again though, "It was about what you'd expect. Have you seen the scores yet?"

"No, not yet." Phichit shook his head, smiling nervously, "I'm scared to see how far down Viktor buried us."

The Japanese skater was hesitant to respond to it, but his train of thought was quickly interrupted when he felt that very man let go of his hand. He reached for something in his team jacket, and withdrew his phone, which was set to silent but was vibrating for an incoming call. Cool blue eyes glanced from the faceplate and then to him, and Yuri felt the man's free hand on his back briefly before the Russian answered the phone and started walking away.

"Hey." Viktor said quietly, skate-guards thunking along the floor as he moved off, "Yeah...no, it's fine. I know."

"Who would be calling him like this...?" Phichit wondered idly, "And why does he look so glum? Didn't he just finish?"

Yuri glanced back at Yakov for a moment, getting a hat-tip before the elder coach started wandering away as well, heading back to where the Russians had left their gear. Before the man could get far though, Yuri reached out to tug on his sleeve, "Wait..."

"What is it?" The elder turned his head back briefly, seeing the skater over his shoulder.

"Spasibo. I know it was last-second, and you didn't have to...but, thank you anyway." He explained nervously, still finding the coach a bit intimidating despite knowing him so much better since their first interactions at Rostelecom the year before, "I don't know that he would've done as well if you weren't there."

"Who knows." Yakov shrugged, "Maybe he would've done better. Viktor's complicated." He turned an eye to see the Thai skater eavesdropping for lack of else to do, and started moving away again, "Until later, Yuri."

Cherry-hazel eyes watched the coach go, and Yuri quietly sighed, stuffing his hands into his pockets before turning back to his friend.
"...Why is everyone so dark around here?" Phichit asked, putting a hand on his hip, "It's unlike you guys."

The older figure drew in a breath, moving to follow after Celestino as the man moved to find a place to set down his athlete's gear, "Viktor didn't score as well as we'd hoped. I think my bad habits are rubbing off on him."

Brown eyes blinked at the man, but Phichit quickly followed after, "What do you mean? It can't be that bad."

"He didn't break 90."

"WOW."

Yuri had both hands clasped around the Thai skater's mouth in half a heartbeat, "TSST!"

Other people nearby were looking oddly at them, so those hands only came back far enough for the man to put a finger over his own mouth and shush his friend instead. Phichit was still gawking in disbelief though, whispering his surprise, "He didn't break 90!? What did he break, his legs!?"

"Hi's got some stuff going on right now and can't focus." Yuri explained vaguely, quietly, "You know how it goes when your mind isn't on the ice but the rest of you is."

"...Yeah..." The younger figure nodded anxiously, stopping where a small line of empty fold-out chairs were claimed by his coach, "Is it cuz of that huge scary guy?"

"Eh?" Yuri blinked at him, "How would you...?"

Phichit slid down to sitting, and pulled out his phone as Yuri followed suit, clicking into Instagram and sliding through his feed until he found some familiar content, "When you guys were still in France, some mega-fan of Viktor's was posting stuff about him. He's got this whole blog dedicated to what he calls 'investigative sports journalism,' figuring out what a small handful of athletes are doing between competitions, but it comes across as creepy vigilante paparazzi stuff if you ask me." He found a certain recent post and held his phone out for Yuri to look, "See?"

The older skater took the device in-hand, "...I used to follow this guy on my old account... He was one of the first to post about how Viktor had left Russia to coach me." He said quietly, "...I guess I hadn't noticed that I wasn't seeing his content anymore. After I made the new account with my married name, I didn't need this blog anymore to follow what Viktor was up to..."

"So you had no idea about this stuff?"

Yuri's eyes scanned the 'article,' seeing photos from afar of the big group's arrival from New Chitose. Mikhail and Konstantin were following at a short distance, as Yuri well remembered, but then the blog spliced in photos from the previous year, at a distance in St. Petersburg, just outside the rink. A side-by-side comparison image tried to show that the huge hulking figure in both images was the same man, confirming it with the association of Mikhail next to him, "...No, I had no idea. This is kind of eerie. To think, I used to rely on this guy for info on Viktor during the off-season...now I just want him to go away..."

"The pics are always from a distance, so it's not surprising if you've never suspected anything. I doubt this person is taking all of them himself either, but rather, using photos other fans take and then figuring out the story based on what he sees." Phichit explained, "You said that your ballet instructor somehow knew about you going back home before, even though you'd semi-officially dropped out
of skating at that point... The same people that would've known about you are the kind of people who are floating info about Viktor, too, and all of us to some degree or another." He looked to see where Yuri had made it to the bottom of the article, and hovered a finger over a link listed there, "Yeah, here, you can see the blog post from two weeks ago."

Another page loaded, showing a few of the same pictures from the St. Petersburg Skate Club, showing a string of images afterwards that included shots of Mikhail and Konstantin's initial arrival, their loitering, Mikhail wandering off somewhere, and then Konstantin going inside the rink alone. The article, called 'Viktor Nikiforov Skates on Blades of Rage: What's he REALLY mad about?' went on about the suspicious nature of Viktor's injuries back then, contesting the validity of the Russian's explanation, and even showing off photos of his undamaged car when he'd given it to Mikhail at the airport, which made Yuri glower dubiously, "Whoever this is, they're getting uncomfortably close. The pics from Viktor's old Skate Club were taken by Yuri's Angels, but the rest of them...?"

"If it's any consolation, content only seems to pop up when you guys are at competition in Europe, or when Viktor's back in Russia. It must be someone local to the area...I don't see a lot of stuff come up while you guys are in Hasetsu. Not unless you guy post it first yourselves."

"...That's a relief." Yuri huffed, reading through the article, seeing the embedded video of Mikhail's impromptu interview at Worlds, and then more pictures of Konstantin, zooming in so close that the images were distorted and blurry. The captions that went with the pictures though, suspecting who the Russian Bear was, were clear as day, "...Wow, they figured that out in a hurry."

"Which part?" Phichit looked again.

Yuri shook his head a little and sighed, finding one of the clearer pictures from the previous article, "That's Konstantin Nikiforov...Viktor's father." He pointed at it, then pulled his finger back again, "They'd been estranged for years, but he kind of came crashing back into things after Four Continents last year. You remember how I was all weird at the Banquet, and you thought Viktor and I had a fight?"

"Sure."

"It was because Viktor had just gotten news about his family. He didn't want to deal with it, and now...Konstantin's here. Uncle Mikhail got this crazy idea in his head that Viktor and his father could reconcile things by having the man watch Viktor in competition, but it's just eating him up. I don't know what to do." The skater slouched a little and handed the phone back, withdrawing under the edge of his scarf like a turtle retreating into its shell, "Way back when Mikhail first showed up, Yakov passed his contact info to me and suggested Viktor could use some positive family bonds, but he left it up to me whether I'd tell Viktor about it or not. I...wanted to, because I was stupid and didn't know what I was messing with...but in the end, I brought Mikhail into things entirely by accident. Now he's kind of invaded every aspect of our lives and is starting to override what Viktor thinks. I know he means well, and I know he's realizing that what he did was wrong, but Viktor refuses to send Konstantin home again now, even though literally everyone else wants him gone."

"Sounds bad."

"Viktor created his Rage Ska...er...his Free Skate specifically because of the negative energy that had built up while dealing with his father last year. He said he needed to do something with it. Now that Konstantin's actually here at NHK though, Viktor says he needs to make him see things with his skating. With everything that's happened..." Yuri slid down a bit further, and brought his hands up to cover the rest of his face with his scarf, "...I wish I'd never sent that first text to Mikhail at all. Viktor wouldn't be suffering so much if it weren't for me."
"I doubt he sees it that way." Phichit said, slouching sideways against his own chair so Yuri was in front of him, "Whatever mistakes Viktor's uncle has recently made, it's not because of you. The way you're talking about it, at any rate, makes it sound like you're about as miserable as Viktor is about this whole thing. But..."

Yuri pulled the scarf down a little to peer past the rim of his glasses, "But?"

"If Viktor made his Free Program because of how he felt about his father, then performing it tomorrow ought to be especially intense. With the man actually here, watching it with his own eyes, Viktor will really be able to show off exactly how he feels about things. It might be cathartic for him. He might even take back the world record you swiped from him."

"...Maybe..."

"Just hang in there. NHK is only one weekend, and then it's back to Hasetsu for some serious rest, relaxation, and decompression." Phichit made a 'free sailing' gesture with his free hand, gliding it forward easily through the air, "And then it's on to the Final. Regardless of what happens this weekend, you and him will be surrounded by friends in Detroit. I bet Chris will go even if I somehow beat him for the last spot. So...you, Viktor, Chris, me, and even Captain Yuri "Crankypants" Plisetsky. And after seeing that video of Viktor on the roof last weekend, I guess Otabek's part of the gang too?"

Yuri's face just went red, "You saw it!?"

"Everyone saw it." Phichit laughed, "But my point is...JJ notwithstanding, everyone else at the Final will be a friendly face. Once this weekend is over, things will be better. The way things seem to have panned out for you guys so far this season, I'll make sure of it. It makes me sad that you aren't smiling as much as you used to."

Viktor leaned against a wall in the empty outer ring of the stadium, holding the phone to his ear still and listening quietly. He looked down at the polished concrete floor, and idly kicked his left skate out, balancing it on the heel of the blade, rotating it to and fro mindlessly.

"Yeah, I saw the post online about it. Did someone drug you when they suggested bringing him?"

"No..." The Russian sighed, lifting his head, "Uncle Mimi suggested it, and at the time, he made some really valid points about why my father should come...I eventually caved, because I'm stupid."

"You think you can make up for it tomorrow? You haven't scored less than 90 in like 10 years. You looked dead out there.

"I felt dead out there." Viktor agreed, "I must've gone into autopilot for the second half because I don't remember doing it. I had to ask Yuri if I even finished the damn thing because my final pose is so similar to my intro. For a second, I thought I hadn't even started. All I had to go by was the burning in my chest for having pushed myself so hard, I guess."

"Yeah, your second half was really intense. It didn't look like the same show I watched in Bordeaux. You looked angry and frustrated. It was more like a fight sequence than a dance."

"Well...now you know why." The Russian huffed quietly to himself and then pushed off the wall again, meandering alone through the halls, "I feel really bad about it, too, because that's the show Yuri picked, way back after Four Continents... I think I let him down by phasing out in the middle of it, especially since I gave him so much grief last year over being too stiff doing his YoI program."
"He knows you didn't mean for it to go down like this. He probably understands better than I do. I mean, I've known for years that you can't stand your father, but you've never really said why, other than he was a prick."

"He's still a prick. He's multiple pricks all clustered together around a singular massive prick." Viktor growled, going quiet suddenly as an event staffer passed him by. He smiled politely like nothing was amiss, and watched the short figure move off, only then turning back to the conversation, "I'm not even sure why I keep saying I want him to stay. Everyone here keeps saying we should send him back, and in my gut I know we should, but I just...I need this. Going back to my hometown didn't really do anything for me. I don't know if I'm trying to prove something to him or to myself or... I just...I need him to see me...see what I am, what I've become in spite of him. I don't care if he's proud of me or any of that...I just want him to watch."

"Considering your international fame, your father's probably the only person who hasn't seen you skate, which is pretty hard considering the way the Russian media adores you." The other voice offered, "I remember seeing the papers and news bulletins when we were in Sochi, and a few Rostelecom Cups before that. You'd have to be dead or in a coma to miss it."

"My Uncle missed it. For 25 years he missed it."

"Your Uncle also said he left Russia entirely. Moved to Canada or something, right?"

"He's had a time-share in Moscow since before finding me again." Viktor explained, pausing in front of a narrow hallway that broke away from the main corridor, halogen lights glowing brightly above him, "Well...I guess maybe that wouldn't matter. He and Minako-sensei went back there during the summer. If he was never there in winter, he wouldn't have been around to see the headlines."

"You sound like you're mad at him, too."

"I am, kind of." Viktor grumbled, lightly tapping the toe of his blade-guard against a door, and blinking at it when he saw it push open.

"Well, this whole crazy farce was his idea, so I guess you're entitled to be angry."

The Russian pushed into the dim room, looking around it and realizing it must not have been used in years, at least not since the building had been put together for the Olympics. He saw some old, flat-seat office couches pushed up against the walls, a small coffee table, and another hall leading further away where there were no other lights. He closed the door behind himself, made sure it wouldn't open again, and then sat in the middle of one of the big couches, hoisting his skates onto the short table ahead of himself, "Yuri's gotten dubious of him too... I think I corrupted his opinion. I shouldn't have done that."

"Well, he's your bae." The other voice laughed, "If you're not happy with something or someone, he's going to feed off of it and feel the same way. He won't forgive your Uncle until or unless you do."

"...I don't even really want to talk to him right now, to be honest." Viktor sighed, slouching down and leaning his head against the backing, "My father made a huge scene when he stormed off earlier, and Uncle Mimi made an almost equally-huge scene trying to make him stay. Yakov was the one who originally suggested sending my father home, and told Mimi to do it when they talked alone." Cool blue eyes looked up at the off-white ceiling, and the Russian sighed a little, "Everyone here except Yuri likes making decisions on my behalf lately, and it's always the opposite of what I want. Even Yurio is starting to do it."
"Why? How?"

The Russian grit his teeth and flopped to his side, blades hanging off the end of the last couch cushion, "I guess he thinks he's doing me some favor by minding my father? I'm not entirely sure. He said he helped translate for Konstantin the other morning at breakfast, so I'm guessing he's translating stuff about the event for him, too."

"Ah... Yeah, I heard him yelling at the audience to stop booing the judges and cheer for you, so whatever he's doing, he probably thinks he's helping."

"...In my head, I agree. But in my heart...I just...I dunno, it's like he's taking sides. I feel like Uncle Mimi should be doing that stuff."

"Probably."

"...That concludes the presentation of Men's Singles Group 1. We will now take a 30 minute recess to resurface the ice, and then Group 2 will begin warm-ups. Thank you." A voice spoke over the intercom, making Viktor lift his head from where he'd come to rest it over his crossed arm.

"Well, you should probably go find Yuri again. I doubt he'll want to be away from you for too long when he knows you're down like this."

"Yeah. I need to face the media frenzy, too. Thanks for calling when you did. I really needed someone outside this craziness to vent to." The Russian dropped his head back down again, turning it only enough so his voice wouldn't be muffled speaking into the phone, "See you next weekend, Chris."

"I'm here anytime. Good luck tomorrow."

"Spasibo. Do svidanja."
Chapter Notes

Well, here we are...the big 200. I'm officially 100 chapters further on than I ever meant to be XD You did this. Thank you all.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED

With the break between groups, media outlets covering the event were seeking out athletes and coaches in full force. By the time Viktor had returned to the main prep area, Yuri had already been dragged kicking and screaming into one of the more 'official' interview spots, bombarded on all sides with flashes, cameras, and questions about the Russian's lackluster performance. The young skater was too dazzled by the bright lights to see beyond the press, and they, in turn, were too focused on him to see behind themselves, so as Viktor came sauntering up, he went entirely unnoticed. He just stood and listened for a little while.

"Do you think this is spelling out the end of his career?" One of the journalists asked.

Yuri just gave the man a look, "Why would you say something like that? He had a rough day. We all have highs and lows. He almost reset the World Record for the SP in Bordeaux two weeks ago and now you think he's finished? Give him a little more credit than that. He's the only skater who's done a quad Axel in competition, and if he hadn't taken time off last year, I'm sure his other records would still be unbroken."

"So is he sick then? Is he hurt?"

"No! He's fine!" Yuri insisted, waving his hands around defensively, "He's still in first place right now and I'm sure he's got a contingency plan for tomorrow's Free Skate. He'll be the last person to settle for anything less than Gold if he can help it, even with what happened today. The score he got is still very good, even if it's not his own personal average."

"Do you think he did it on purpose then?" Someone else asked, making Yuri turn his head to face her, "Scoring low on purpose to make people worry?"

"I don't think so. He wouldn't do that." The not-a-coach answered nervously, "He told me at Nationals that fans would get upset if he deliberately reduced the difficulty level of his programs, so he wouldn't even if he wanted to."

"Then maybe he did it because of how you yourself scored at Cup of China?"

"That's crazy." Yuri argued, "What happened to me is completely different. If Viktor wanted to score low just to make me feel better, he'd have gone lower than what I got. Going to 88 when I was below 75 would be an empty gesture. This is Viktor's own personal battle and we'll fight through it together like we have been. Expect tomorrow to be a different event entirely."

"Does it have anything to do with the big Russian man that came in with Viktor's Uncle?" Someone else asked again, "Who is he? How do you know him?"

Yuri could feel the blood draining from his face, and his teeth clenched to hear the words.
"I don't know what to say! Viktor, where are you!?"

"He's just a friend of my Uncle's." The Russian finally said, loud enough to get the group's attention. They were initially unsure who had spoken, looking back over their shoulders like someone was trying to interrupt, but upon seeing the man's silver-haired head, quickly turned around, all but abandoning Yuri behind them, "Viktor! Tell us you have a moment to speak about your Short Program!"

Yuri was still stunned, feeling like a prayer had just been answered, but shook his head as the attention fell away from him.

*How long was he standing there before he said anything?*

"There's nothing else to say about it." Viktor explained, "Yuri already said everything that I would've said myself."

"If he's a friend of your Uncle's then why is Yuri Plisetsky the only one around him now? Your Uncle seems to be avoiding him."

Viktor shrugged, smiling brightly as ever, "I wouldn't know. I've been focused on the Short Program. No time for the rest."

"But Vikto-"

"Thank you everyone; see you tomorrow at the Free Skate." He said, cutting them off outright and turning to move around them. They were still asking questions, but too many were speaking at once to hear any particular one in total. Viktor just got to the edge of the small pack and raised his arm for his partner, waiting only long enough for Yuri to slip under it before stepping off again.

The younger skater turned his head to see whether the press mob was following, but thankfully, they seemed to have politely taken the hint and were off to find the next hapless athlete to question. He drew in a breath, and sharply let it go in relief, drawing in a little closer to his husband as they kept walking, "Can I ask who called?"

"Sure." Viktor mused.

Yuri blinked at him, but quickly realized it wasn't a bad conversation, so a slight weight fell off his shoulders, "Chris?"

"The one and only." The Russian answered, spotting his former coach with the Russian team's gear not far away, "He thought I needed a proper scolding since Yakov didn't in the kiss and cry."

"...He really scolded you...?" The younger figure was a bit incredulous at the idea, thinking it impossible. He watched Viktor stopping where he stepped though, and twisted on his blade-guards to face him, pulling his outside shoulder gently to turn him inward as well. Hazel eyes looked up in confusion, but the Russian's expression gave nothing away that Viktor didn't mean to. A pale hand went through his hair a few times, ruffling the black spikes, before both hands moved down to straighten out his coat and scarf, pressing palms down against his chest once the man was satisfied, "...Viktor...?"

"Wait for me."

"*Hah?*"
The Russian touched his fingers up again, lightly sliding them down his partner's jaw until they came to rest on his chin. Those slate blue eyes, half lidded as they were, looked down on him without blinking, "When this is all over, I'll need you. But until then, be patient...and wait for me."

Yuri shook his head, the déjà vu feeling rather severe, but he nodded just like the last time those words were spoken to him...and just like then, Viktor turned and started walking away, saying something to Yakov that he couldn't hear anymore. He watched quietly, as though from behind one-way glass, as his husband gathered up his things and pulled his skates off one by one, slipping his track-suit pants on over his Short Program outfit, and replaced the matching sneakers over his feet. When it was done, Viktor grabbed his carry bag and rolling suitcase like always, and stood up to look back at his former coach, "I'll meet you outside about half an hour before the Free Skate tomorrow, okay?"

"That's fine. Just call when you want me and I'll come find you." Yakov answered, rising up to take his leave as well. He reached a hand out and pat the skater's shoulder, "Don't dwell on the Short Program too much, Vitya."

"...Are you leaving already?"

"Leaving? No, Mila's still watching the Men's event. I was just going to go find her." The coach said simply, turning on his heel, "Are you?"

Viktor shook his head, "Yuri's friend is in Group 2."

"Oh yeah, the Thai skater."

The silver Russian nodded.

"You'll make a strong come-back tomorrow, don't worry. As long as you don't break your ankles skating it, anyway."

"Try not to jinx me." Viktor huffed a nervous laugh, turning around as well to go back towards his partner, "That'd be even worse than what happened already."

.".

.".

.".

"The score for Julian Madrano...82.32."

The audience clapped and cheered for the youngest skater of the Men's Singles, and he himself was practically bouncing off the walls of the kiss and cry. Waiting in the wings though was the skater now most likely to walk away from the Short Program in 1st place.

Phichit stretched his arms nervously, but as he spotted the other skater leaving the score booth, he reached up to pull his team jacket off. Beneath, a golden, shimmering ensemble that the Thai skater had evolved since the previous year. A tight pale-gold jacket with delicate embroidery, with two gold bands crossing over his chest, and two pointed gold bangles around his mid-upper arms. The sleeves from the bangles down were striped in the same colors as the embroidery of the rest of the jacket; some a pale orange, then black, then amber gold, and back again. There was a 3/4ths skirt around his hips, which went down to his knees and was open in the front, overlaying baggy, golden-colored pants. He wore a thick sash under the skirt, tied in a knot in front, which went nearly down to his ankles. Over that was an elaborately designed, broad-faced, multi-tiered buckle, each section slightly
smaller than the one above it, ending in a point just below his knees. His skates were covered in similar colors to the pants, each with their own delicate embroidery and gem inlays, leaving the entire ensemble shimmering and sparkling like Thai royalty.

"Next on the ice tonight...representing Thailand...Phichit Chulanont."

He clicked one blade onto the frost and pushed forward, raising his arms to the cheering of the audience, breathing in their energy like it was its own life-force. His eyes brightened when he spotted Yuri in the audience, wearing the hamster-hat he'd given the man on his arrival. He twisted where he was gliding, and came to a dramatic stop, bowing in the older skater's direction before finally turning off to meet Celestino at rink-side for one final pep-talk.

Yuri drew in a breath and let himself relax a bit, leaning against his partner's arm where they'd been relegated to a small section of the stands above rink-side. There was only a small buffer between them and the audience itself, so Yuri put himself between them and the quiet silver Russian sitting against the aisle, gear bags behind his feet and leaning against the seat on the closest step.

Without an arm-rest between the seats, there weren't any places to rest their elbows on, so when the younger skater noticed his partner's attention slipping, he quietly nudged the man's knee with his own. Barely getting a blink in response, Yuri lifted that leg instead and curled it right over top of that knee, bringing the hand they'd held between them on top and set it against his thigh, gently rubbing the man's thumb with his own.

"You haven't said a word since we came out here." He pointed out.

"Haven't had much to say." The silver genius answered back, uncurling his fingers and laying his palm flat against his partner's leg, giving it a light squeeze, more for Yuri's sake than his own, "This isn't the right place for it anyway."

"Something on your mind other than the obvious?"

Viktor huffed a little, as though the idea were funny but he couldn't quite manage to laugh at the absurdity of it, "...Other than the obvious." He echoed, eyes scanning the stands a little before going back out to where Phichit was giving a final nod to Celestino, kicking off towards the middle of the rink, "My score was on the upper end of average. Normally, I watch other skaters doing their thing and I imagine myself doing their shows, at my level, with my own choreography...now, I can only imagine myself out there skating exactly the same way they do, as though their programs were mine, and the scores that went with them."

"It was a one-off, I'm sure of it." Yuri offered, "Being critical of today's SP is pointless. It'd be like criticizing a fish for not being able to climb trees. Tomorrow will be different." He let himself scan the audience as well, focusing on the complete opposite side of the rink from where they were sitting, just to the right of the camera-crane, but didn't see the big black shadow where he'd been before, "Konstantin isn't even here anymore. He must've left after you finished." He continued, this time quieter than before, leaning in a bit to say the words against the man's ear.

"I know."

"Then why are you still so anxious?"

"Because I don't know where he is now." Viktor answered critically, tilting his head to rest it against the edge of his partner's shoulder.

Yuri could see the logic in that, but it pained him to know what it meant. The big Russian Bear had
suddenly become something of a boogeyman, gone from all sights until the worst possible moment, waiting to pounce when their guard was down.

*Or maybe he just went back to the Leopalace. There's nothing else for him to see tonight. Maybe we won't even see him again until the Free Skate. We can only hope...unless no one has told Mikhail to forget what Yakov said...*

Phichit had taken his place in center, skates about 2ft apart from one another, head bowed down. The audience finally quieted their cheering, and a somber piano began overhead.

['King’ - Lauren Aquilina - It's a 4min song so edits will par it down to ~2:40]

Blades scratched quietly as the skater turned where he stood, pushing away to widen the arc around the NHK logo embedded in the ice.

*You're alone, you're on your own. So, what...have you gone blind?*

He moved his arms slowly, methodically, twisting around as he moved about the ice in a big figure-eight.

*Have you forgotten what you have,*

Blades scratched into a 3-turn, and he vaulted into a triple Flip.

*...and what is yours?*

Viktor lifted his head when he saw it, gaining a curious side-eye from the man next to him.

Phichit moved into the first spin, flying entry into a camel-spin, left hand over his chest as the other rose over top of himself.

*Glass half empty, glass half full, well either way you won't be going thirsty*

He lowered down into a pancake-spin, holding the skate over his knee while both arms went out to the side.

*Count your blessings not your flaws.*

Rising up again, he kicked his free leg out, extending one arm out in front of himself as he glided backwards in a wide arc. He picked up speed around the long-end of the rink, twisting into an outside spread-eagle and threw himself up for the triple Axel.

*You've got it all, you lost your mind in the sound*

*There's so much more, you can reclaim your crown*

The crowd clapped with the success of another jump. Viktor could already see that the skater was going to out-score him by a wide margin. The moment felt eerily similar to the previous year's Grand Prix Final, when he was watching from the audience as Yurio was skating Agape. *I knew back then that he was going to take the record from me.* He thought, sighing a little as he slouched back in his chair, *But that only stung because I didn't know I'd be coming back yet so I could claim it again. I hated thinking he could just rewrite history the very year I took off. This though... Slate eyes watched as Phichit moved around the rink, *It burns.*

Serpentine step sequence followed a wide hydroblade; the skater rose up into a sitting triple-twizzle, then rose up all the way to standing before moving off again with his arms out.
You're in control
Rid of the monsters inside your head

Phichit slowed as he neared the center of the rink, resting his hands under his cheek as he rotated in an inside spread-Eagle.

Put all your faults to bed

He stopped the rotation with a toe-pick against the ice, and raised his head up high, looking noble and proud. The first half of the program was done...now going into the second. Phichit knew he needed to up the ante.

You can be king again.

Yuri glanced over to where he noticed Viktor was watching more intently than before. The man lifted his head off his shoulder to see the performance, lips slightly parted, eyes laser-focused. He quietly wondered what about Phichit's program had caught the Russian's attention so strongly, and turned his own eyes back out to the ice.

You don't get what all this is about

Triple Lutz, half Loop, triple Salchow.

You're too wrapped up in your self-doubt

Phichit scratched to a stop with a flurry of ice shards flying away from the edge of his blade, one hand on his hip as the other rose up in front of himself. Unintentionally, he did so with the hand pointing towards Viktor and Yuri.

You've got that young blood,

He clenched his outstretch hand into a light fist, bringing it back down in front of his face as he started to rotate backward again, pivoting on the skate beneath him. Both hands came up together after that, fingers extending as his arms went far out to the side, bowing his head down as he went.

... set it free.

Viktor was taken aback by the gesture, knowing intuitively it wasn't actually meant for him, but feeling some odd connection to it anyway.

You've got it all, you lost your mind in the sound

Phichit swiveled and turned, moving back towards the far end of the rink in a serpentine path.

There's so much more
You can reclaim your crown

He twizzled into a half-spin, then arced himself back, one skate way behind him as he slid across the ice in a layback Ina Bauer.

You're in control,

Falling in line against the long-edge of the rink, the skater twisted into a four-star series, each kick-out falling on the sound of the main four words of the lyrics.

Rid of the monsters inside your head
Butterfly jump into a back-sit-spin.

*Put all your faults to bed*

He rose up, changing feet as he went, and flew into a swift back-scratch-spin, arms gliding up gracefully until he was nothing but a blur on the ice.

*You can be king again*

He stopped abruptly with his arms out to the side again, but didn't miss a beat as the lyrics started up once more.

*You've got it all*

Paying too much attention to the lyrics, Viktor lost sight of the performance that accompanied it. All he could think of was how he'd completely dropped the ball in his own Short Program, and how he felt he'd sabotaged his own efforts to prove himself by letting that pot of slow-boiling guilt overflow without his notice.

*You lost your mind in the sound, there's so much more*

Yuri felt the second hand come over, fingers wrapping around his forearm.

*You can reclaim your crown*

Viktor had somehow twisted enough in his own seat that he was practically sitting on his hip, shoulder pressed against the tiny gap between back-rests. The Russian even brought his free leg around, setting it on top of his partner's and crossing his ankles there to 'hold' it in place.

*You're in control*

The younger figure's brow furrowed, worrying all the more about his husband's state of mind. *...I have to convince him that this thing with his father watching isn't worth it... He can't even enjoy other skating shows anymore. He's superimposing himself on lesser athletes or he's reading too much into what the songs are saying.* He reached his own free hand over and settled it on where Viktor was clamping down on his arm, trying to gentle its grasp.

*Rid of the monsters inside your head*

The final move of the program; CCSp4. Phichit started with the standard entry camel spin, angling in a forward rotation, arms out for the added difficulty. Several spins in, he turned on his hips, shoulders more horizontal for the bent-leg layover camel spin.

*Put all your faults to bed*

He twisted back around and thrust himself onto the other foot with a hop, continuing the spin as he reached back for the blade of his skate, rotating in the catch-spin position with one arm raised above himself. In the final rotations, he lifted the foot above his head, still holding to the blade with one hand as his leg and torso formed something of a V-shape.

*You can be king again.*

He let go of the skate, and came to a quick stop on the ice, twisting slightly with the right hand reaching for the left shoulder, and the left arm curled behind his back. He huffed to catch his breath, dizzy from the whole endeavor. The roar of the crowd started to flow in towards him, and in his
blurred vision, could see the hamster plush-toys and bouquets of flowers starting to be thrown onto the ice. Viktor always got his plush poodles and Yuri always got plush Nigiri, but it warmed the Thai skater's heart to see people starting to toss out custom toys for him specifically. The hamsters really did it, and tears started flowing from his eyes as he moved forward to grab the one closest to him excitedly...then the second, and the third. His arms were full of soft-toys before he finally started heading back to the rink-wall, stepping out to greet his coach and get over to the kiss and cry. In his mirth, he shoved two of the toys against Celestino's chest and hopped towards the bench, trying to put on his blade-guards at the same time.

"Calm down, the judges still need a minute to figure out your score." The pony-tailed coach pointed out, looking at each of the plushies in confusion, "...Do you really want to keep all these?"

"YES. ABSOLUTELY YES. ALL OF THEM." Phichit said emphatically, "EVERY SINGLE ONE." He waved out at the event staffers who were skating around collecting other toys and flowers to clear the ice for the next skater, "DON'T TAKE THEM AWAY, I WANT THOSE."

They just glanced back at him in confusion.

By the time the duo were on the bench and ready, there were 24 hamster soft-toys in the kiss and cry with them. Phichit clutched to 5 of them alone, squishing them tighter as the seconds wore on.

"The score for Phichit Chulanont..."

"Pleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasep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CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED ONE

The hollow echo of the audience's cheering reverberated off the empty halls below the stadium. The next skater's music started soon after, bringing the feel of the event around in a complete 180 compared to Phichit's music.

Footsteps and the wheels of the rolling suitcase sounded quietly as the pair moved back towards the prep area.

Yuri felt his nerves creeping up again as he realized where his partner was going, "...You're not mad that Phichit-kun scored higher, are you?"

The Russian blinked and turned his head, "What, you think I'm going to talk down to him about it?"

"Well...you're not in the best mood right now..." The younger skater admitted anxiously, "And Phichit-kun gets ahead of himself sometimes. Remember last year when he won Cup of China, and thought that meant he was going to be in the Final already, even though it was only one event? Celestino had to remind him so he wouldn't be disappointed if he didn't make it after all."

"I know."

Yuri gave a worried look, but said no more, turning his head forward to watch where he was walking. When they rounded the last corner and passed through the last short hall before getting to the athletes-only area, Yuri could already hear the sound of a gaggle of reporters interviewing his friend. Instead of just barging in and interrupting though, Yuri could feel his partner holding back, staying behind the edge of the hall and waiting. He glanced back for a moment, seeing the slightly disappointed look on the man's face, "We can just go if you want."

"...I'll do my SP again after everyone leaves." The silver figure said quietly, keeping his eyes forward, "I'll do it how it should've been done."

"I don't know if they'll let us use the rink like that..."

"Then we'll find some other rink that will. This can't be the only one in Sapporo." Viktor shrugged, "I refuse to take off this outfit until I've performed at my normal level."

"You need to be in the right frame of mind for that though..." Yuri tried to point out, "You might not be that way again until we're done with NHK entirely...best let it go for now."

The Russian stood stoically, pulling the straps of his carry-bag a little higher on his shoulder where he felt it starting to slip, "I didn't think you were starting to doubt me, too."

"I'm not!" The younger skater said frantically, taken aback, "I just meant that I understood why you're out of it right now! I'm out of it! And I know that won't change until that man gets on a plane again... I'm just...trying my best to keep it together while he's here..."

Viktor turned his eyes slightly, but sighed and reached his arm over to pull the man close, hooking it around the back of his neck and shoulder, "...Sorry. I know this is hard for you. I just want to make it up to you in the only way I can think of right now." He let go of the rolling suitcase and brought that arm around his partner as well, "'History Maker' was the show you picked...it's personal, it means a lot to me...and I messed it up. Watching Phichit's show and listening to that song...I guess I just
realized that I didn't want my father to see this part of us. I should've just told him to wait until tomorrow before showing up here. My Free Skate is the only thing I really care about him seeing."

"So let Mikhail send him back to Russia after that. He doesn't need to stay all weekend." Yuri answered stiffly, hands barely coming up to cling to the front of the black and red team-jacket.

The silver skater stayed quietly where he was. The last thing he wanted was to make his partner even more anxious with the intent of having the bear stay for the Exhibition as well. That could wait. For the moment, he lifted his head up again, kissed his husband's forehead, and let him go, turning towards the media gaggle that had finally concluded the interview and were waiting for the next skater.

Celestino was the first to notice the Russian coming, and Phichit lifted his head a moment later, the excitement of the interview fading as quickly as the blood drained from his face. Not even seeing Yuri dissuaded the young skater from dreading the worst.

A few journalists had turned back and saw it, and a few were starting to roll cameras again to get the footage.

"I...I'm sorry...!" Phichit said in a shaky voice, "I didn't mean what I said in the kiss and cry!"

Viktor just looked on quietly, the disappointed look on his face looking like anger in the eyes of the nervous Thai figure. However, the Russian shook his head, and extended his hand, "Nothing you said was wrong, per se. You did score higher than I did. To scold you for putting on a better show would be poor sportsmanship on my part. I may aim for gold, but it's not like my name is written on it. I'm not entitled to anything that I don't earn first."

Yuri watched in silence as the whole thing unfolded in front of him, and he nudged his head towards his partner when Phichit glanced his way, like he was seeking some assurance that Viktor wouldn't just take his hand and use it to pull him forward into a gut-check. Phichit had personally witnessed the Russian kicking his own team-mate off the end of a bed, so anything was possible.

The Thai skater swallowed nervously, but then finally took the offered hand...felt the solid shake, then the release...and that was it.

"Good job." Viktor said simply, "Keep it up tomorrow. Maybe you'll win gold after all; then you can get Ciao Ciao to proudly wear the hamster hat."

The coach just grimaced, like the prospect of looking so ridiculous was a serious threat.

Phichit's eyes finally lit up again, and the happy-go-lucky skater found his smile and excitement again, "Thanks! I plan on it!"

"...Are you sure...?" Viktor asked again, a bit despondent.

"Shitureshimasu, Nikiforov-san...if we give you too much access outside of normal practice, people will think we're giving you an unfair advantage." One of the event coordinators explained, helping open the gates for the zamboni to get through as the audience was clearing out for the night, "You'll have to wait until tomorrow morning like the rest."
The Russian sighed, but nodded, turning back to where his husband was waiting a few feet away, "We'll have to find another rink. Hopefully one will be open late."

Yuri quietly accepted it and reached for his partner's hand, stepping back into the underbelly of the stadium to get to the rear exit of the building and find a shuttle back to the hotel. It wasn't long before they spotted Yurio leaning against the last door-frame, seemingly waiting for them.

"How come you're still here?" Viktor wondered, feeling a little prickly at the sight of the blonde.

"Didn't you see me in the audience?"

"...Of course I did." The Russian grumbled, "Where is my father right now?"

"Who knows?" The teen shrugged, pushing off the door to stand normally, "He ditched about an hour ago."

"So he left after I went out." Viktor said stiffly, drawing in a sharp breath.

"You sound disappointed. I figured you'd be glad to know he left. Give you some peace of mind." Yurio rose a brow at him.

Yuri shook his head, "Better to know where Konstantin is than not."

"He said he was going to take a walk. Probably likes the cold outside better than the noise inside."

"Why are you talking to him anyway?" Viktor asked with cold, accusing eyes, "You make it sound like he's friendly."

"Friendly?" The teen laughed out loud once, "He's not friendly. I don't even really understand why he agreed to be here. This whole things is like nails on a chalkboard to him."

The older Russian let go of the rolling suitcase again to pinch the bridge of his nose, "I don't know. Uncle Mimi said he'd been working on it for a while. Only he would know."

"After everything I've seen, I don't, actually." The aforementioned figure answered, getting the group to turn around suddenly to watch him coming, "When I suggested it, I was only half-sure he'd even consider it."

"Then why bother?" Viktor asked grudgingly, "And why are you still here?"

"Custody agreement says we get Yura tonight, doesn't it?" Mikhail shrugged, stopping a few paces away from the group to keep a distance between them, "We're here to pick him up. The shuttles don't go to the Leopalace, and they're not for us spectators anyway even if they did. Yura will need a ride back, so I'm here to tell him his chariot awaits."

Yuri glanced from the older Russian to Minako standing next to him, quietly wondering if she felt as conflicted as he did.

"Fine then." Viktor glowered, "He's here, you're there...go about your business." He turned and started moving off again to get away.

"Viktor," The elder sighed, "I know this is turning into a giant cluster and I am really sorry…"

"Save it." The skater turned his head as he started pushing through the doors, "Just try not to make it worse."
"Yakov told me to send him home." Mikhail pointed out, trying to get his nephew's attention before he was gone, barely managing to get Viktor to stop with a hand still on the door, but not looking back in, "I told him we should've asked you first." He went on, stepping quickly to get closer, "He made me send the message, but I don't even know if Kon's gotten it yet. He never called me back and I never got to talk to him when he was in the audience. Yura wasn't answering his phone the whole time either, so I couldn't even pass a message through him before Kon took off. Whatever you want to have happen here, I can still make sure it happens."

Viktor finally turned his head back, "You're right. You should've asked me first. Everyone should've asked me first. But you didn't." He pushed the door back open and stared through, "You acted like you were getting my permission by suggesting this whole crazy thing was up to me, but you put it to me when I wasn't mentally in a good place and didn't have the fight left in me to say what I really thought. So here we are, trying to make the best of the worst possible situation."

"I didn't realize how badly the trip to the steel mill would hurt you!" Mikhail insisted, pressing his hand to the door-frame, "I worked there myself for a few years and it's not that bad! Most of the guys who still worked there knew who you were and had nothing but good things to say! I just don't get why you had a panic attack about being there!"

"He had a panic attack…?" Yuri and Minako said in tandem.

Viktor pushed away again, walking out across the wide sidewalk behind the stadium, dragging his suitcase with him. One of the wheels caught a rock, stopping it from turning easily, and forcing the irritated skater to drag it along.

Yuri tried chasing after him, squeezing past Mikhail and Yurio before getting free and running. He glanced behind himself briefly to see the rest slowly filing out as well, and then turned back to **THUD**.

The Russian had stopped walking for some reason, leaving himself as an unexpected obstacle. Yuri had collided straight into him, arms flailing out to the side, face against the man's back. He clung to the taller skater as quickly as he could to stop from sliding back and falling, but...still ended up on his arse in the snow despite his best efforts. He didn't even have a chance to regain his bearings before he heard footsteps rushing up from behind, and then past him, seeing a black and silver blur kicking up snow as it went by.

[Now's not the time!] He heard Mikhail hollering in Russian.

Yuri lifted one hand from the snow to put his glasses back in place, and looked around his partner's legs to spot the older man reaching his pale white hands out towards a dark shape against the black of the arena courtyard.

Snow was falling lightly all around, just as it had been most of the day. A few lights dotted the arena road-way, casting most of the sidewalk in very low light. The U-turned stairwell was illuminated by a pair of big spot-lights on the upper level, pointing in towards the second floor of the arena. From the side of the stairs, and lining the edge of the road, was a 5-foot retaining wall, with a snow-covered field going far out beyond it. Trees dotted the distance, set up in a long row to edge the main road leading out again. All told, with the frost over everything, it was a peaceful scene...except for the 7ft tall Russian bear leaning on the retaining wall near the base of the stairs.

[Come on, I'll show you where the car is and we can leave…!] Mikhail was still saying, practically pleading for the man to go.

[Why are you so freaked out? I'm just standing here, waiting quietly.] Konstantin raised a brow
under the brim of his hat.

[Yura said you left an hour ago! We didn't expect you to be hanging around!] The smaller Russian argued, [And why did you never answer my message anyway!? I sent it ages back!]

[The phone you gave me is all in English.] The bear answered, [I think it was asking for a password.]

[You could've called me back! You knew the message was from me! Mine's the only name in your contact list!]

Yurio rolled his eyes at the pair, following after Minako to help Yuri back up to his feet again. Viktor was just paralyzed where he stood, the rolling suitcase finally falling from his grip to land with a clatter against the frozen concrete.

[What did you even say? Couldn't have been that important since you never tried to call again, especially since we saw each other in the audience.] Konstantin shrugged.

Mikhail cringed a little, casting his eyes back towards Viktor for a moment before looking at the giant again, [...Viktor's coach wants to send you home. He made me call you to arrange it.]

The silver skater finally snapped out of his stupor, clenching his eyes shut as he shook his head, [I already said no.]

Konstantin seemed to find the whole thing funny, [Send me back? I just got here. What would've been the point?]

[See?] Viktor argued, taking dangerous steps forward, leaving the relative safety of the arena's main lights, [He gets it.] He gestured a hand towards his father, glaring at his uncle as he did so, [If he's not here for the whole weekend then this whole stupid mess would've been for nothing. He has to stay. For the whole thing.]

[Much as I don't want to.] The bear shrugged, [This place is queer.]

[Fine. Then you stay. But somebody else better make sure Yakov knows then, cuz he won't believe it from me.] Mikhail said between grit teeth, turning around to go towards the nearby parking lot, [Let's get out of here before my ears freeze.]

[You think I waited around this weird place just so you could drive me back to the hotel?] Konstantin wondered, crossing a leg where he leaned against the short wall, [Or are you really just that eager to go?]

The back and forth was nerve-wracking the listen to, especially to the two Asians present who didn't understand a word of what was being said. Yuri turned to his Russian counterpart and gave a look like he expected some insight.

The teen shrugged, "They're just getting their shit straight about Viktor's pops staying."

"He's not my 'pops.'" Viktor argued, turning back around to glare at the blonde, "That's a title you earn and he hasn't."

Mikhail stood upright rather stiffly, practically bristling under his long coat, [Well fine then, what did you stay for?]

[You people dragged me all the way here to watch Viktor skate. Don't you want to know what I
thought?

The aforementioned skater felt a pit in his stomach, [I wasn't at my best earlier. Telling me it sucked won't be that shocking.]

[Yeah, if you're not going to say anything positive then don't bother.] Mikhail agreed, twisting on his heel so he'd be side-face towards the huge figure, [You've never been good at constructive criticism.]

[How about you let me speak to my son for once without sticking your nose in it?] Konstantin countered, tilting his head a little with a slight forward lean, [I swear, I should never have agreed to show you to the Skate Club. I knew you'd just get into everything again like you used to.]

[What's that supposed to mean?] The smaller figure retorted, marching right back along the same path he'd just made, [Well!]

Viktor took an annoyed step back, watching the bear and the wolverine going at each other, though the larger of the two seemed hardly phased.

[It means exactly what it means. You don't know how to be a part of things without somehow making yourself the center of attention.] Kon explained, still looking relatively relaxed given how tense his smaller counterpart was becoming, [You hated that Tat drifted away from you, so you fought tooth and nail to stay relevant there. When I put a stop to your terrorism, you plagued us all with your narcissistic victimhood instead. Maybe everyone else thought it was better, but for me? You always got worse.]

Mikhail just looked stunned and confused, [What are you talking about?]

"Hm." Yurio huffed, "It's about to get ugly, I think."

"What are they saying?" Yuri asked, standing a bit closer to whisper. Minako did the same thing on the teen's opposite shoulder.

"Give it a minute. I've said stuff too soon before." He answered, "I think Kon's throwing Mikhail under a bus though."

" Eh?" The duo said in tandem.

[I always took a back seat in everything that happened, because everyone always got so damn scared if I so much as blinked in annoyance at something.] The bear went on, still leaning against the wall, hands in his pockets, one ankle crossed over the other, [I let what you did go on for so long that I let you become an absolute nightmare to everyone. Back then, I thought, 'that's fine, he's only coming after me with this shit'...but then Tatiyana started feeling bad about it and that's why I'd finally had enough. You were an emotionally manipulative little cunt. That's most of why we decided to move away when we were trying to start our family.]

[That's hardly fair to say. At all.]

[She'd tell you the same thing if she was here.] The bear countered, [In fact, if she hadn't insisted so much on moving back home, we'd probably have never gone back. But she missed her big brother and didn't want to be gone anymore. So like I always did back then, I let her have her way, and we moved back. Do you even know how convinced she was that we were only able to have Viktor because she was close to you again? How many times we tried and failed while we were gone, only to succeed that one time when we moved back?]

[You can't blame me for the weird shit Tat believed.]
The silver skater was starting to feel like a weird third wheel, and backed up another few steps until he was closer to the other group. Just as Yuri went to pick up the rolling suitcase from where it had started getting covered in falling snow, Viktor seized up again, his hand barely an inch away from the grip on the telescoping handle.

[Where do you think you're going?] Both older Russians asked, staring straight at him.

Viktor looked back over his shoulder, swiping the handle to his suitcase as he went, his free hand on his partner's back in a gesture to start moving, [We're going. We have nothing to gain from listening to you two old ladies fighting with each other about stuff that happened 30 years ago.]

[You fell apart on the ice today because you knew I was there watching.] Konstantin pointed out, giving his son that same icy stare he always did, [I know you've done better because this little shit made me watch your show from France the other day.] He thumbed at Mikhail, who in-turn gave him a side-eyed sneer, [That little shit...] He pointed at Yurio, [...bragged about how high you'd scored before, so today was absolutely pathetic by comparison. I get it. Having me around makes you mad. That's why your show tomorrow is supposed to be so much better, right? Because you're pissed right now, and your other skating show is all about why you're pissed.]

The silver figure simply held his ground, not sure whether to stay or run for it.

Konstantin finally pushed off the wall, standing squarely, staring straight at him, [Because I never wanted you to skate in the first place, and then I hit you for it when that old man coach came to try and justify why I should let you.]

Yakov and Mila were quietly coming out of the arena just as the words were spoken, pausing just outside the doorway as they realized what was going on.

Viktor got an angry look on his face to hear it, [You think that's the only reason? Because you made my life a nightmare and then beat me for it? What a big strong man you were, punching a 12-year-old in the face so hard that I went flying into a shoe-stand and hurt my back, too. No. How about because you hit me in the face again? And again! And then kicked me a few times for good measure, on my mother's own freshly-dug grave, and then poured vodka on my head so the cuts would burn?] He turned completely away from the rest of the group, looking even more irate than before, taking one step forward and pointing at the bear, [How about because what you did put a strain on my relationship? Forcing me to lie to my friends and fans about what happened so they wouldn't have to worry about me!] His eyes and throat were burning already, but he refused to let it stop him, [How about because what you did gave me nightmares for almost TWO YEARS after I finally got away!? My left eye STILL twitches when I have to think about you! You think I messed up today just because you were in the audience this time!? No! I had a blackout and spent most of my program trying to fight off the memory of the MONSTER you are! Making you watch my Free Skate tomorrow is the only way I can really blow off steam about how angry you've made me this last year!]

Cold slate eyes just kept watching, listening.

[I spent NEARLY A YEAR trying to convince the man I loved to love me back, and it took you ONE WEEKEND TO RUIN EVERYTHING.] Anger was quickly turning to rage, and Viktor could no longer contain the tears burning in his eyes, [Every day since Yakov sent me that text, your shadow has been hovering over me. EVERY DAY. You say that the only reason you even bothered reaching out to tell me my mom had died was because that's what she would've wanted, and you were obligated to give me that damn care package she'd put together. MAYBE YOU SHOULD'VE JUST KEPT HATING ME ENOUGH TO STAY AWAY. YOU SAY SHE'S DEAD AND
NOTHING MATTERS ANYMORE, SO TO YOU, SHE'D NEVER KNOW THAT YOU
DIDN'T FOLLOW THROUGH. YOU COULD'VE JUST LEFT WELL ENOUGH ALONE.]

Yuri had his hands over his mouth, fear and pain rising up inside him to watch, even in spite of not
knowing what was being said. His legs were paralyzed, stuck to the ground like nails were driven
through the soles of his shoes.

The bear just kept looking, [If it were that easy, I would've.]

[Huh...?] Viktor was caught off guard, [What's are you talking about?]

[The care packages your mother put together weren't individual. They were all linked to each other.
The one she gave to your Uncle, the one she gave to you...the one she gave to me, too...they all
referenced each other. She wanted to make sure that if anything ever happened, both of you
would come back, and that you'd each know that was true. Why are you so stupid about this? How don't
you know? Didn't you read the damn thing?]

The silver Russian blinked in confusion, his whole body feeling weak where he stood. The memory
of what he saw during his blackout flashed before his eyes.

[Hee burned the skates...but you burned meee...]

Smoke and embers fell from his mother's mouth just like before, and Viktor suddenly realized what it
meant.

[...I didn't read it...] He admitted quietly.

[What?]

[I read the first two lines...and then I burned the rest.] The silver skater went on, lowering his head,
[The letter, the photos, the envelope they came in...all of it. I burned it all.]

Both Konstantin and Mikhail were stunned to hear it. The bear turned to his in-law, [How many
pages did you get?]

[Three.]

[Same.] He turned back to the skater, [You're telling me...] He took a huge step forward, [That you
read two lines out of a three page letter...] Another step...people were starting to get nervous,
[...AND YOU BURNED IT ALL WITHOUT READING THE REST?]

Viktor kept his head down, almost too scared to move, even as he heard the big man coming closer,
[...I didn't want to know what she said...]

[THOSE WERE THE LAST WORDS SHE WOULD'VE EVER SAID TO YOU.]

[Konstantin!] Yakov finally called out, rushing forward in a desperate bit to stop him from getting
closer.

Confusion, yelling, feet scratching across snow-crusted concrete...and then everything went quiet. It
felt like time stood still. No one was willing to move. People stared with eyes wide open, mouths
gaping, some with hands out, others looking like they were about to run interception, only to stop in
their tracks.

Konstantin's hand was two inches away from Viktor's chest. Viktor himself had his arms up, trying
to protect his face and head, only to feel nothing. When the eerie stillness crept in, the Russian opened one eye at a time, and glanced past his trembling wrists to see his hulking father looming over him, but with a stunned and confused look on his face.

Yuri was there between them. Somehow, he'd gained his feet again and had leapt out in front of him, latching both arms firmly around the bear's massive wrist, clinging to it with every fiber of strength in his body. The move had knocked his glasses off his face, and they lay cracked in the snow, one blue arm bent and nearly broken where someone had stepped on them unknowingly.

"...Don't touch him..." He growled quietly, tears in his eyes, a look of fear and anger on his face.

The big man tried to move, but Yuri yanked hard to make sure he didn't.

"DON'T YOU DARE TOUCH HIM." He barked again, louder and more commanding, "NEVER AGAIN."

Slate eyes were wide open, staring past the dark brim of that small hat, stunned at the gesture, [What do you think you're doing, boy?] He asked grimly, moving his arm more easily this time, dragging Yuri's feet across the snow before hoisting him up entirely off the ground.

"Yuri!" Viktor called out, completely stunned. He jumped in rather quickly after that, latching one arm around his partner's waist as the other tried to push his father's arm away.

Konstantin tried to shake the skater off, but Yuri refused to let go.

Even feeling his spouse's arm on him didn't help; he was practically rabid, completely unwilling to unclench his grip unless he was sure the arm wouldn't just recoil and try again.

Mikhail tried to move in to help as well, but the second he came around the bear's side, Viktor snarled, "DON'T YOU DARE TOUCH HIM." He barked again, louder and more commanding, "NEVER AGAIN."

Slate eyes turned back to the behemoth, [IF YOU WANT HIM TO LET GO THEN STOP MOVING.] The bear rolled his eyes and head a little, but relented, holding still, feeling as Viktor did what he could to gentle the young skater's vice-grip and finally peel him off. Yuri breathed heavily, tears flowing down his cheeks in anger and frustration, backing up against his husband's chest to make sure he'd always be between them, and kept those adrenaline-fueled hazel eyes on the man in front of him.

Mila finally let Mikhail go when she saw Minako coming over to collect him, grabbing his tie and wrapping it around her wrist tightly. He sulked nervously and watched in silence.

[I wasn't even going to touch you.] Konstantin said between grit teeth, dusting some snow off his arms before putting his hands back into his coat pockets.

[You said that once before and nearly broke my arm anyway.] Viktor pointed out, feeling Yuri pushing him back several paces, arms reaching back around him as well as they could to keep him there, [Even if you really hadn't meant to, you can't blame us for believing otherwise.]
[I was pointing at you.] The big Russian defended bitterly, pulling off his hat only long enough to shake the snow off and put it back. [But it doesn't matter. You're not sorry for what you did, so why should I be for what you thought I was going to do?]

[You've never been sorry for anything you ever did.] Viktor contested, [Maybe if you apologized for ONE THIN-]

[I'm sorry for hitting you the first time.] He said suddenly, cutting the skater off entirely, [I've asked God to forgive me for a lot of things in my life, but never that. I never thought it was worthy of it.]

The silver figure was stunned back into silence, eye twitching madly behind his bangs, almost to the point of cramping. He found his mooring again when he put his hands on his partner's shoulders; Yuri was still dug-in like a fortified Roman Legion, [Only that?]

[I prayed after we spoke in the graveyard the last time.] Konstantin went on, [I've found absolution for the things I did before that happened.]

[Not from me.] Viktor said darkly, reaching his right arm over his partner's shoulder to gently pat his chest, "Let's go. We're done here."

Yuri blinked, pulled out of his train of thought by the feeling of his husband moving away from him, a hand sliding down his arm to grab at his fingers and pull him along. He shook his head, but followed, glancing back only briefly to see the hulking shadow watching them go without protest.

The silver Russian reached down for the rolling suitcase that had ended up in the snow again, and looked silently at the group for a moment...and moved off without a word.
The evening chill seemed particularly cold after Viktor and Yuri had left. The remaining group, frozen more by the stunning turn of events than the winter wind, could hardly stand to look at one another. Minako was the first to move, letting go of Mikhail's tie only long enough to step the few paces to where Yuri's broken glasses were left forgotten in the snow. She'd seen his own foot come down on them, moving too quickly to realize they'd even fallen off, let alone hear the glass crunch under his sneaker. Lifting them off the ground with a delicate touch, she held them in the palms of her hands and looked on them quietly. It didn't take much for the last bit of strength in the blue frame to crack, and the smashed lens popped out, landing softly against her skin. She closed her fingers around them lightly, and turned back towards the elder silver Russian.

"Take Viktor's father and Yura back to the Leopalace. Message me when you're done."

Grey-green eyes nodded without question.

"Why just us?" Yurio wondered, "Don't you need to go back?"

"You three are probably the only ones here who don't want to kill each other."

"Hah, you didn't understand what they were all yelling at one another." The teen countered.

Minako gave him 'that' look, and the Russian Punk quickly took the hint, starting to follow after the cloudy man who'd already broken off. Daringly, she then turned towards Konstantin, and just pointed after the other two with a scowl on her face. He gave a meager shrug of one shoulder and followed for lack of anything else to do.

That left Yakov and Mila. They didn't require so much directing though.

The ballerina turned towards them and sighed, "I'm sorry you had to walk in on all that." She started, reaching to grab one arm with the opposite hand, and spoke a little lower, "Konstantin...caught us by surprise."

The redhead glanced at her coach briefly, but stepped forward, "That's the first time I've ever seen Viktor angry. About anything."

"Thank you for yanking Mikhail out of the middle of it when you did." Minako lifted her eyes a little, "It's slightly his fault this is all even happening."

"I don't really know him beyond the fact that he's Yuri's sponsor and Viktor's Uncle. Everything I'd heard about him from Yuri made him seem like a decent guy, but for Viktor to be this mad at him..." She turned deep blue eyes in the direction the skating duo had left in, seeing their footsteps and suitcase trail in the snow, fading under new frost-fall, "Why would he bring someone like that to a competition?" She gestured to where Konstantin was still slowly plodding along, moving under the covered driveway to avoid more snow, "I can only assume he knew what their relationship was like before."

"He had his own part in it, but he wasn't there for most of it. He's just heard stories, and I'm not even
sure he knows all of it anyway. So while I can't be sure what Viktor and his father were yelling at each other about, I can assume it's about the stuff Mikhail wasn't there for..."

Yakov lifted his head, seeing the moon glowing dimly behind a thin cloud, "Viktor's mother left a letter and photos for him, and tasked Konstantin with making sure he got it, in the event that something ever happened to her. She must've put it together a while back though, because..."

Both women looked on at him curiously.

"...I read it. Before letting Vitya have it." He admitted, looking back down again, towards Minako, "I wanted to make sure there wasn't anything particularly offensive or confrontational in it, and it didn't mention the money she'd put aside for him. It mentioned Viktor's father, and Mikhail, and it said that both of them had gotten letters as well. Tatiyana, Viktor's mother, had hoped that if she passed away before any of the rest of them, that they could put aside their differences and come back together again. I already knew it was a lost cause between Viktor and Konstantin, given how volatile they were when we met him in St. Petersburg...but I'd heard vague stories about this strange 'Uncle Mimi' from when Vitya was very young... " He turned his eyes to Mila after that, "So when he popped up at the Skate Club, and Vitya seemed willing to talk to him, I thought it meant that maybe Tatiyana was right at least about this one hope of hers. Up until now, slow as the thaw was, it seemed like they were getting along. I don't know what kind of inhuman stupidity entered into Mikhail's head when he came up with the idea of bringing Konstantin here, but it seems like Vitya is dead set on making sure he stays. Come Hell or high water, we have to make sure that happens."

"Coach Yakov..." Mila said quietly, disagreeing if only in tone.

"Like Vitya said...making Konstantin watch tomorrow's Free Skate is the only thing he can think of to get this off his chest. If he can make it through the weekend in one piece, it may be the last ordeal he needs to go through before he can go back to being the happy reckless idiot he used to be." He started moving towards the last remaining shuttles, the same direction Yuri and Viktor had gone in, and nudged his head for Mila to follow, "He started skating as a depressed, angry, and sleepless youth. I'd really rather he not end it in the same state of mind. He's come way too far to let his father...or his uncle, for that matter...bring it all crashing down around him."

"Mikhail didn't mean for this to happen." Minako pointed out, "He had no real idea how the two of them were like kerosene waiting for a match to light them up. Maybe things were calmer before, but as soon as I saw Yuri's reaction to Konstantin being there at the airport...I knew it would eventually come to this. I just didn't think it would mess up Viktor's skating on top of it all."

"Mikhail should've waited."

"Viktor won't be skating for much longer at his age."

"That's all the more reason he should've waited. Go on long enough and Konstantin would have lost his chance, and maybe things would be better for it." The coach adjusted his jacket a little, "Viktor didn't think he needed this until Mikhail forced him to."

Tracks through the snow lead out well beyond the last 2 parked shuttles, taking a sharp left around them and disappearing into the distance, even beyond the last part of the car-accessible roadway going around Makomanai stadium. Leaf-barren trees changed to frost-kissed Evergreens, planted evenly along both sides of the path in 10ft increments. What few other footprints traversed the paths in that unshoveled snow, were covered over easily enough, leaving only the two pairs of feet and the one stubborn 'hobbling' suitcase.
The tracks lead down the center of the trees, scuffed to the side a little where the suitcase looked to have been dropped, thrashed around, and then picked up entirely. A little further down...the source of the prints.

Viktor had the suitcase by the side-handle, and his carry bag on the shoulder of that same arm, free hand still clinging to the fingers of the practically-traumatized figure walking slightly behind him. The Russian finally stopped trying to walk, slow as he'd been going before anyway. He turned his eyes back, then twisted around side-face towards the younger man, rubbing his thumb gently across where he still held to those cold fingers. The suitcase dropped 15 inches to the ground, hitting the snow with a sudden but quiet thud, and the carry-bag slid down the skater's arm after it, leaning against the bigger plastic shell where it came to rest.

"...I...I should n-never...have sent that text..." Yuri quivered. He'd done his best to hold onto the numb feeling after the adrenaline had faded, but it was getting harder to ignore the clenching pain in his throat.

"It's not your fault this happened." Viktor said quietly, "I don't want to hear you blame yourself for this ever again."

"But it...it is..." He went on, voice raspy and strained, tears clinging to his eyes where he held them back by sheer force of will alone, "Things we-were going so well before... If I h-hadn't... If I hadn't..."

The Russian managed to pull his partner to his shoulder just moments before Yuri lost the fight to keep himself together. The younger man's arms went around him tightly and he screamed a barely-muffled cry against the black and red jacket, his whole body trembling. Viktor just held for dear life, pressing his eyes against the crook of his husband's neck.

"W-why does this k-keep happening to us!?" Yuri begged, "W-what did we do to deserve this!?"

"...I don't know...

"I w-wish I could go back...to Four Continents... I wish I could j-just take your phone...and chuck it off the roof of the hotel before you ever saw that message from Yakov..."

"I should've done it myself." Viktor sighed, his partner's despair becoming contagious, "I should've gone with my gut and told him I didn't care. If I hadn't convinced myself I was a horrible person for being so apathetic, it would've stopped everything before it ever began."

"Y-You couldn't have known...it would become like this..."

"I had a pretty good idea it would be bad." The silver skater answered, "I just hoped it would be quick, and then it would be over, and it would never come up again. If I had fi-finished...the letter..."

Yuri opened his eyes a little, pulling back to look at the man's pale face, "What do you mean...?"

Viktor shook his head a little, recomposing himself, "Earlier, they said the letter my mom wrote to me...the one in the envelope that we got when we met my father in the park."

"...T-The one you burned...?"

The older man nodded quietly, pulling one hand back to rub his eyes on the back of it, "They said they both got letters, too... The messages in each one apparently had written of the hope that the three of us would one day reconcile. If I knew that...if I knew... I would never have gone to the funeral at
"all..." He dipped his head low, burying his face against his partner's scarf again, cold-numb fingers clenching at the thick jacket, "...If I hadn't shown my face there, Mikhail would never have come to the Skate Club..."

The younger figure could feel his partner drawing his shakier breaths, his whole frame cringing as he spoke.

"...I should've j-just...sent him away...as soon as he showed up..."

"You s-seemed so happy to see him though." Yuri pointed out, his throat raw, "Once you realized who he w-was..."

Viktor abruptly pulled back and looked into those hazel eyes straight-on, "That was a show. I hated him."

"...Huh?"

"For leaving me. For leaving me behind. I-If I had just been honest...about how much of that pain came back the second I recognized him on the rink-wall... If I had just...said what I m-meant...all along..." Tears rolled down his face, eyes getting red, "...I would've y-yelled at him for crawling out of the h-hole he'd come out of, after all t-these years... Then Y-Yakov would never have g-given you his number..."

"It's Yakov's fault..." Yuri choked, "It's Mikhail's fault. It's your fault...it's my fault... Maybe it's no one's fault at all..." The words came heavily, reluctantly, "It was always s-so easy to...blame someone...anyone...even ourselves... Just, putting blame somewhere, trying to make sense of it all... Maybe nothing in the whole world could've ever stopped this from happening... It all just...g-goes so far back, to a time before either of us even existed... I'm tired of b-blaming people..."

Those pale blue eyes looked on at him, but then looked down slightly, the man nodding quietly, "...Me too..."

"Let's just...try to finish out this weekend...as well as we can..." Yuri went on, reaching one arm up to rub his wind-chafed nose on the back of his sleeve, and drawing in a deep breath, "When we're done here...we're going back to Hasetsu again for a while anyway. Let's just leave this place behind...and go back to being us again. You, me, Makkachin, the Ice Castle, Yu-Topia Katsuki...all the stuff that brought us together in the first place... We'll leave everything about this place behind...and go home."

"...Well..." The Russian shied from the description, much as he liked it, "...We have to take one thing with us..."

"...One thing...?" The younger skater echoed, his throat still sore, but not feeling on the verge of tears anymore, "...What?"

"The gold medal I'm going to win for you tomorrow."

Yuri blinked at him, but tried to put on a smile, "You'll break Phichit-kun's heart."

"Well...I'm tired of breaking yours. He'll just have to forgive me, I guess." The Russian purred, leaning in to touch the tip of his nose to his husband's. Instead of kissing him right there and then, however, Viktor paused, his smile fading a little as he tilted his face forward. He closed those Nikiforov eyes and held there a moment, forehead feeling the soft, spiky black hair pressed against it, "...I'm going to make a new Free Skate for the Final."
"...You'll...what...?" The younger skater wondered, thoroughly confused, "But it's barely a week and some change away..."

Slate eyes half-opened again, looking gently down into the cherry-hazel orbits in front of him, "I'm tired of tending the fires of rage inside me." He explained quietly, "Keeping the embers lit so I can throw gas on it from time to time. I made that program because my father ignited an inferno in my soul...and now my father's here to witness what his 'scorched earth' style of parenting has wrought. The only fire I want burning in me is the one you set on my heart. The fire of life, love, passion, inspiration... That's a flame I would gladly feed."

Yuri's cheeks flushed, "V-Viktor..."

The Russian's eyes seemed to warm at the sight of it, and he smiled a bit again despite the tears still clinging to his eyelashes, "Yuri..."

There was no time for hesitation anymore. Fingers went through silver hair and lips met. The shorter figure went up on his toes to make sure of it, and he felt arms get tighter around his back as it happened. One hand went lower on him as the other went up behind his shoulders, tilting him a little to the side. He partly opened his eyes as he felt the warmth pull back from him, seeing the blue he loved so much, "...For more than half my life, I've been trying to catch up to you..." He started, his own hand coming back down from behind the Russian's head, cupping his cheek, "And along the way, it's been a never-ending string of surprises. You're a genius that never ceases to amaze me."

"You're flirting with me now."

"This is the biggest surprise you've ever given me...well, second only to Barcelona last year, when you pulled that matching ring out of your coat.*" Yuri explained, closing his eyes again where he felt his partner's cheek against the side of his forehead, "I don't have a clue how you're going to pull it off...but...I can't tell you how relieved I am to hear that you're going to..."

Minako followed the path quietly. Other than herself, there wasn't another soul in the field around Makomanai. The footprints and suitcase drag-marks were easy enough to follow, but she was hesitant to come up on the end of the trail too quickly, staying behind only far enough to still see the prints as they became covered in new snowfall. She could practically see the story being told in their shapes; the initial hasty retreat, slowing to a steady pace. Just after she passed the yellow barrier-posts on the sidewalk, she saw the scuffle where the suitcase had been shaken in frustration, dropped, picked up again, and dragged along. Not much farther up, it was shaken a second time, but after that, it was carried instead, and the pace picked up again for a little while. But, inevitably, it slowed again, and she came across the spot where both suitcase and carry-bag had been dropped to the ground together. There was a circle of footprints next to the imprint of the bags; they'd been standing in that same spot for a while, it seemed, facing each other. Like before though, they had to continue on, since neither of the men were standing in their shoeprints anymore. The trail continued further up the path, all the way to a bridge crossing a much-smaller branch of the Toyohira River.

She heard the voices and a quiet laugh before she saw where the footprints lead though. When she arrived at the start of the bridge, the voices were still muffled and difficult to understand, but they were a little louder, and she saw where the shoeprints had diverged from the path.
Putting her fingers on the railing to the left, she looked around, and eventually caught sight of a certain pair of skaters lying down on a long-coat against the artificially-constructed incline of the river wall. They hadn't noticed her yet, and she wasn't about to call out to them and interrupt whatever they were doing, deciding instead to just watch and listen quietly for a while.

"There," Viktor said, pointing up to the left of a big grey cloud, "The Big Dipper."

"Looks pretty black."

"If you follow the two stars at the end of the dipper, and follow their path upward, you can find the North Star at the tail-end of the Little Dipper."

"Pretty neat." Yuri went on, "...That'll be helpful to know when I can see again and I'm lost in the woods somewhere."

The Russian just laughed quietly, pointing his free hand up at a cloud instead, "What kind of blob does that look like?"

"Like a cloud-shaped bowl of katsudon." He admitted, "Two of them. No, four of them, after tomorrow."

"You're taking my katsudon now, too?"

"I'll keep my two, and you can have your two, and we'll eat them together like always."

"But not all at once."

"No...one at a time."

"We have to pace ourselves. Can't have you getting a squishy tummy before the Final." Viktor mused, rolling onto his side, pressing their hands against his own tummy where he held them together, his free hand coming up to rest on the younger skater's chest, "There's a fifth katsudon, too."

"A fifth katsudon? You mean the one up for grabs at the Final?"

"...Six then. The fifth is you." The Russian teased, tracing a finger across the man's jaw, "A very special pork-cutlet fatale that enthralls men."

Hazel eyes looked into azure, and the dark-haired skater spoke a little quieter, "Only you."

Viktor nosed his partner's lip gently, "That's exactly the kind of thing I like to hear." He whispered, closing his eyes quickly and smiling as he felt the man rise up towards him. A cold hand snaked around the back of his neck and pulled him down after that, and the Russian responded in kind by weaving one knee between his husband's.

The first kiss became three before Yuri slid his hand back again, and Viktor laid his head down against the man's chest, keeping his eyes closed for a moment just to savor it against the quiet and peace of the night.

A wad of snow fell off the banister of the bridge, landing with a puff against the ground, and those blue eyes opened again...looking straight at the woman who'd turned her flushed face away from them. Viktor's quiet sigh caught his partner's attention, and Yuri looked aside, seeing Minako there as well, or at least he thought it was Minako. The blur was difficult to distinguish, but it seemed like the person was wearing the same colors and had the same general shape of the ballerina he knew.
"Are you alone at least?" Viktor asked, addressing her first and directly.

She jumped, quickly backing up a foot or two from the railing, "Y-Yeah...! ...It's just me. I saw where your footprints lead and I knew that if you were gone too long, the shuttles wouldn't be there when you got back, so..."

The Russian huffed a quiet sigh, but then reluctantly pushed to sitting up, resting his forearms on his up-turned knees where he and Yuri were sitting on his winter jacket; one he normally used while in coach-mode, but brought in case it got too cold or windy. Yuri sat up soon after, and Viktor extended his arm over the man's shoulders, listening to the sound of the ballerina's shoes crunching against the snow as she approached.

"I didn't mean to butt into things." She explained, crouching down on her knees in the light and fluffy frost, holding out both of her hands, "I thought you'd want these back, at any rate."

Yuri glanced at her palms, and saw the broken blue frames there. His brow furrowed, but he reached for them, and held the limp plastic in his fingers, seeing how they barely connected together anymore. He swallowed nervously, "Well...I guess it's a good thing I didn't start this Grand Prix Series meaning to wear these all the time... I still have my contact lenses in our luggage."

"I'm really sorry." Minako said solemnly, resting her hands on her lap after that, "They just flew off when you jumped in front of Vikt."

"You can share the seat, Minako." He cut her off, scooting over a little to make room for Yuri to move as well, which he did intuitively, "No sense getting your pants all wet and cold for standing on ceremony."

She nodded and twisted around, sitting against the bottom of the coat and holding her arms around her knees like the two skaters were already doing, "You guys have been through so much this season already. I really didn't want it to be like this."

Cherry-hazel eyes glanced aside for a moment, but the Russian appeared rather cerebral about it, and watched quietly as the younger man reached his own arm out to put it over his sensei's, "...It's okay."

Minako could feel Viktor's hand patting her back as well, just under where Yuri's arm was resting over her shoulders, and she dipped her head against the back of her hands where she had them cupped over her knees. She waited a moment, drawing in a shaky breath before reaching her right hand up to feel for her former student's fingers just by her neck, "I don't blame you two for taking off. I honestly didn't expect to find you like this though."

"Like this?" Viktor echoed.

She lifted her head, looking at the starry sky, "Naming constellations and cloud formations, laughing, and teasing Yuri about how he's half-blind."

The young skater looked back down at the broken frames in his free hand. For a moment, he really wasn't sure what to do with them...so he just broke the mangled side off at the nose and pulled the normal half up across his left eye, closing the right, "Now I'm half-blind."

The other two dared to find the humor in the gesture, smiling at least, if not huffing a quiet laugh, but they quickly went quiet again. The glasses wouldn't be broken at all if not for what had happened, after all.

Viktor pulled his arm back, leaning against his husband instead, and reaching for the broken frames, "That was really brave of you, by the way." He said quietly, thumbing the jagged plastic, "Crazy.
Absolutely mad. But brave.

"...I was on auto-pilot." The younger skater said simply, "I don't know what set him off, but when he took that first huge step, everything went into slow motion. I saw his hand come forward and I just... couldn't..." He pulled his arm back from Minako's shoulders and rubbed the side of his hand against his eyes, "Jeeze..." He lamented quietly, setting his palms in front of himself, "I'm shaking again just thinking about it."

"You won't have to worry about it happening again." Minako explained, reaching her left hand out to clasp over his, "We've already made arrangements so that man won't be able to surprise you guys again. Yura is staying with Konstantin tonight, since they seem to be able to tolerate each other, and Mikhail will take over watch in the morning. He'll stay with Konstantin until the end of the Free Skate, and make sure he only gets to talk to you if you want to."

"I will want to have words." Viktor said, a bit stiffly, "Maybe this time those two won't start an argument just to drag me into the middle of it."

"What did that whole thing start for anyway?" Yuri asked, turning his head to face the man.

"My father was going to say something about my Short Program, but Mikhail told him not to bother, and criticized him for never having anything nice to say. My father just turned it right back on him, saying he always sticks his nose into other peoples' business and basically tries to make it about himself."

"Downgraded from Mimi to Mikhail, huh?" Minako noticed, looking back up at the sky, "That'll wound him."

"'Mimi' is a title; he has to earn it." Viktor pointed out, "Anyway though...while they were bickering, I tried to bail, but they pulled me right back into it. Konstantin pointed out that he recognized that my program was garbage because of him being there, and I just... lost it. It was like he hadn't kept track of everything he'd done over the years. The only thing he would cop to was when he popped me as a kid. I gently reminded him of everything he's done just in the last year... At any rate, I'm sure someone recorded it." He sighed, leaning his head down, "I won't be shocked if the subtitled version is out sometime tonight. There's a smartphone around every corner, it seems."

The two Asians were quiet, knowing it was probably true.

"In the end, my father offered a half-baked apology for the first time he hit me, and went out of his way to proudly say that God had forgiven him for the rest, as though that means a damn thing to me." Viktor went on, feeling where his partner was trying to snake an arm around his leg. He leaned back a little to let him, and moved his right arm over the man's shoulder again, feeling where Yuri was slowly rubbing a thumb back and forth against where he'd perched a hand on the inside of his knee, "God was never the one who suffered for what happened. My father might as well have asked the neighbors' forgiveness, for all the good it did. I don't think he understands what any of it means. He may never understand. But at least he said the word, once, and not just colloquially."

"...What did he say?" Yuri wondered, "I didn't hear 'izvinite' in there..."

"No, he used 'prosti,' which is a level up from 'izvinite.' It's a bit more genuine, but...he kind of ruined it with the follow-up."

"Yeah..." The younger man nodded and turned his eyes forward again, "So what do we do now? Start walking back to the Prince hotel?"
Minako nudged him with a shoulder, "Mikhail's coming back to get me. He can drive you, too."

"I don't really want to deal with him right now." The Russian said flatly.

"He's sorry."

"I know."

"And he's willing to do just about anything to make it right again." The ballerina went on, "After everything he's done over the last year...taking your calls in the middle of the night, sponsoring Yura because you asked, been there for you when you needed it...can't you forgive him for this? As far as I'm aware, this is the first mistake he's made, and he's really feeling it right now. He's terrified that you're going to tell him to leave."

Viktor was quiet for a moment, but then looked up into the falling snow, "...I don't want him to leave, I just..." He paused, and shook his head, "...I don't know what I want. I wish I could put my experience into his head so he could really understand what it is that I went through. I've told him the kind of Hell it was, but...it's just a story to him. He saw what happened at the funeral, did nothing to stop it because he was too scared to step in, and then tried to pick up where he left off with me, minus the 'chasing a car while screaming for him not to go and then falling in the mud' part." He explained, raising his hands up for air-quotes for the last part, then settling back again, "The five-year-old in me that admired him is still heartbroken he left. He's said he's sorry, and told me why he did it, but I'm still salty about it."

Yuri thought on the man's words for a moment, but then leaned into his shoulder, "Mikhail will be sitting with Konstantin tomorrow. Do your Rage Skate for both of them. Gather it all up and incinerate it...and be done with it. For now though..." He looked up and considered the possibilities, "...Make him be your manservant for the night. Tell him to keep his mouth shut like back at Worlds, when you told him not to talk to anyone without your permission. Make him work for it."

"Hm..." The Russian considered it, flopping back, landing over the edge of the jacket so his arms and head were in the snow. He reached his hands up, dragging a trail through the fluff as they went, feeling the cold against his hair, "Maybe...it's not such a bad idea. ...If I hear him say sorry one more time though, I'm gonna dropkick him, I swear."

"Then I'll tell him before we even see him that he's forbidden from speaking until you tell him otherwise." Minako offered, "So...?"

Viktor looked up into the night, watching as each snowflake fluttered by him to land all around. He closed his eyes, drew in a breath, and sat back up again, looking at the ballerina opposite him, "First thing he has to do then, after that...is find me a skating rink. I have unfinished business with my Short Program."

Chapter End Notes

For those who don't know (I didn't until recently,) apparently Yuri only bought ONE ring in Barcelona. You can barely make out the numbers/pricing on the receipt when he's paying for it. One ring cost like 700EUR, and the total didn't double as though he bought two, so it means Viktor must've bought to matching ring sometime immediately after that. I'm guessing he saw the ring cushion get put back with one of the rings missing, and realized what Yuri did, so he quickly bought the other while Yuri was too
busy admiring the one he'd just gotten himself. I'll eventually go back and add this sequence to Ch2, but for now, I'll leave it be. (They also have matching snowflake engravings on the inside of the rings. This was shown at some panel or another where they showed some fun behind-the-scenes concept sketches.)
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED THREE

The fender-bender that had delayed Phichit's arrival for Single's had been cleared away long ago, but the damage left behind was still as obvious as ever. After all, the fender of one car had put a bender around a light-post erected on the median. Footprints on the sidewalk marked where the trio had passed the site by, on their way to the meeting point.

Once there though, waiting for their ride to arrive took almost as long as the previous 29 years of his existence, Viktor thought, sitting on a frosted-over barricade where the Makomanai park pathway reconnected with the main road. Every set of headlights on the other side of the road threatened to be his Uncle, and even though he presumed to be the one in control of their interactions, the idea of seeing the man still made the young Russian's hackles stand on end.

[Make no mistake...I had everything I wanted before.] Viktor remembered, thinking back on that moment from Worlds, [This is all extra...if it causes me grief, I'll put a stop to it.]

[You make it sound like I'm some secret agent working for your father, reporting back everything I see or hear.] Mikhail deadpanned him, [I haven't even talked to him since he showed me where your home rink was.]

[You're the one who keeps asking if I want Konstantin to approve of my profession and offering ideas and insight into how to make it happen. But the bottom line is...I don't want him anywhere near me. I don't want to know if or when you talk to him. It'll take me a long time to trust you just on your own. Just keep that in mind...we're walking on thin ice for a little while, you and I.]

Yuri checked the time on his phone briefly, standing closer to the edge of the road and looking at the passing cars, but then pocketed the device and started walking back again. Minako watched him, but shrugged, having no more information about the elder Russian's ETA than he himself did. The young skater nodded and moved off, shuffling up behind his husband and slouching heavily across his back, draping his arms loosely over the man's shoulders.

Viktor had put his ear-buds in sometime back, but pulled one out when he felt the weight on his back.

The younger figure had whispered something to him that Minako couldn't hear, but she could see the silver skater smile and nuzzle Yuri's cheek where it was next to his own, then showing him something on his phone. Yuri seemed to get excited about whatever it was, but just as the ballerina was about to ask about it, she saw headlights coming to a stop on the other side of the road, getting ready to pull into the arena driveway. Two other cars slowly meandered by before it was clear, and the gunmetal Kei-car finally pulled up and came to a stop in front of her.

Mikhail hopped out from the driver's side and quickly moved to the opposite, pulling open the double-doors so everyone else could get in. The back seats were pushed as far to the rear as possible.

"...Why'd you rent such an ugly little thing?" Viktor wondered, gaping at the metal box with wheels, "Normally you go all-out with sleek-looking hybrids."

Mikhail had his mouth open to answer, but spotted Minako to the side waving her hands in front of her throat and shaking her head as though pleading for him not to take the bait. So, he closed his yap again without a word, and just watched as the skater dumped the two bags at his feet and wandered...
off to get into the vehicle.

Yuri slid in next to his partner, and kicked his legs out as straight as they could go, "...Oh, I bet I know why."

"What's what?" The Russian wondered at him, pulling his seatbelt over as Minako went to take her own place in the front passenger seat.

Mikhail was stuck outside, hefting the skater's luggage in and closing doors behind them all.

"Mikhail wouldn't be caught dead driving a minivan or a people-mover, but he still has to haul Konstantin around. Regular cars probably wouldn't cut it, so he had to get this thing." Yuri explained, pulling his own seatbelt across as well, "...Kei-cars are supposed to be really light weight though. I bet Konstantin *doubled* the weight just by sitting in it!"

They all seemed to have a good laugh about that as the older silver man was getting back in behind the steering wheel. He put the car into gear and pulled back out onto the road, heading north again.

"Sapporo Prince first. Yuri needs to dig some replacement eyeballs out of their bags." Minako said factually, "Then to the skating rink."

Mikhail just turned his eyes towards her, only one visible from under the short brim of his flat-cap.

"What?" She asked innocently, leaning against her hand, elbow up against the doorframe.

He glowered silently, fingers tightening on the wheel a little.

Minako just laughed at his expense.

"What rink are we going to anyway?" Viktor asked her, "And how late are they open?"

"It's the Sapporo Tsukisamu Gymnasium." She said, turning in her seat to look back at him between the two front seats, "It's only open until 9, but if they're smart, they'll keep the doors open once they see you two."

The Prince hotel wasn't hard to spot from a distance, especially since the blizzard from the day before had settled to a whimper of its former fury. The Kei-car halted in the rotunda in front of the main doors, and the skating duo exited, but only *after* Mikhail opened the doors for them. They said nothing as they stepped within the building and disappeared for a little while, heading to the upper floors.

Minako sat quietly as they waited, lightly tapping her finger against the base of the window as music quietly played on the radio. She let the salty old Russian simmer in his silence for a while before finally addressing him again, "You can talk as long as they're not in ear-shot."

"This is ridiculous." He said quickly, "Why are you in on it?"

"Because it's either this, or Viktor puts his foot up your butt, and I can't guarantee he won't be wearing a skate at the time. If it makes you feel any better though, this was all Yuri's idea." She explained, still smirking to herself as she did so, but then turning her eyes to look at him, "Just a word of advice though...when they do let you start talking, *don't* apologize again. Viktor's tired of hearing it. He wants to *see* how sorry you are."
"I get the strange feeling you're enjoying this."

"Immensely."

Mikhail turned his gaze back out over the wheel, looking at the snowflakes as the headlights in front of the car lit them up into glowing orbs, "I thought you liked me."

"I do. Quite a bit, actually. But in spite of it all, like those boys, I'm still a bit mad at you for bringing Konstantin here. So, if this is the worst punishment either of them are going to mete out on you, I'd consider it a win. Besides, it's fun to watch you squirm." The ballerina explained, reaching over to swipe the flat-cap off his silver head again, putting it back on her own.

The Russian's hair was a bit ruffled from the snatch, but he just tilted his head a little and deadpanned the woman who'd nabbed it, "Are you sure this is going to work...?"

"Viktor said he doesn't want you to leave. He just...wants to be sure you've learned your lesson."

Minako said, adjusting where her bangs came out from under the hat's rim, checking herself in the fold-down mirror on the back of the sun-visor, "After everything I've heard, it sounds to me like Viktor kind of lost sight of himself after you popped up in St. Petersburg. He had Yuri and their skating to remind him of what he really was, but then there was you, making him feel like he was 5 again." Satisfied with how she looked, she flipped the visor up against the car ceiling, and sat back against the chair, "From what I've been told, your original separation was pretty traumatic for him, and after you were gone, things went down-hill for him. He doesn't think you really appreciate the gravity of his experience...maybe that you're even dismissing it, thinking he's not being serious, or that maybe he exaggerated what happened. A lot changed when you left, but it wasn't just because you left."

Mikhail reached up to put his hair back in place, but then sulked, leaning against his own doorframe, "I started it though."

"Don't make it about you." Minako warned calmly, "Just accept your punishment as it's doled out to you, and when they're ready, they'll welcome you back into the fold."

It was nearly 8:45 before the car finally pulled into the parking lot in front of the second skating rink. A few people were coming out of the building, looking up to admire the lightly falling snow as they headed to their own vehicles.

Like before, the skating duo waited for the doors to be opened for them before they stepped out, and Mikhail had the distinguished pleasure of getting to carry gear for the both of them inside. He followed at a distance, seeing the pair heading for the rink staff. Surprising no one, the pair were well known.

Yuri had made a concerted effort to do everything short of begging for the rink to be kept open for one more hour. All it took, in the end, to get them to agree to do so was pose for some photos and sign some rink-posters. They were getting their skates on in no time, and Minako was working on getting their music plugged into the arena's sound system, hooking up Yuri's laptop to bring up the master playlist. Once she was done, she waved to let Viktor know.
"Play 'Duetto' first!" Yuri called out, skating forward quickly towards her end of the rink, "We're gonna do it as a warm-up. Singles and doubles, nothing too complicated."

Nodding, she scrolled through the track list until she came across the requested song, then lifted her head, "Got it. Ready?"

Viktor moved back towards rink-side as his partner moved out to center, swinging his arms out a few times and twisting his core for good measure. Once he was done, he took his position, and waved out to the ballerina to hit Play.

The piano started above, muffled only by the sound of excited giggling by those who were staying behind to watch the impromptu show. Yuri lifted his head and dipped forward, following his cues as the lyrics began softly overhead.

_Sento una voce che piange lontano_  
_Anche tu, sei stato forse abbandonato?_

The quad Lutz was simplified to a double, but the meager group of spectators clapped anyway.

_Orsù finisca presto questo calice di vino_  
e _inizio a prepararmi_

A rather salty Mikhail was watching quietly from beyond the edge of the rink-wall, leaning where he had his arms crossed on top of it.

_Double Flip._

_Adesso fa' silenzio_

Viktor slid in from the side, meeting his husband's hand and cupping his own against the man's cheek, then taking that hand and skating backwards to get into formation.

_Stammi vicino, non te ne andare_

Blades scratched harmoniously on the ice, clattering with each jump, louder and quieter like a symphony.

The elder Russian could do nothing but stew in his muted state, watching the program go on like he felt he wasn't entitled to see it anymore.

_They debuted this program at the Four Continents Exhibition. ...Did Viktor already know what happened before he skated? Or did he find out about it after...?_

His thoughts went back to the moment the whole world changed for him as much as it had for his nephew, getting that phone-call from Konstantin to come home to Russia.

_I'd been sick since the previous afternoon. In my soul, I knew she was gone before I heard the words. Actually being told though... I've never known that kind of blinding pain before._

Returning to the Motherland was as hard as he'd expected it to be. Driving through St. Petersburg on his way north, and finally arriving at that little town like he'd only been gone for a few hours. Arriving though, and seeing the state of it...the way everything had fallen apart, decayed...how his own house had burned to the ground...and seeing that little graveyard on a hill next to the Nikiforov household. Konstantin had answered the door quickly enough, and held it aside to let him through. Mikhail had seen the three envelopes on the kitchen table as soon as he walked in.
[What's all that?] He'd asked, skipping the awkward formalities.

[Your Russian has gotten weak since you left. Your accent isn't quite right.] The bear pointed out, [Where were you this whole time anyway?]

[Ukraine at first, then Canada... I travel a lot for work these days.] He answered, stepping close to the table as he realized the Cyrillic on one envelope spelled out his name, [This is Tat's handwriting.]

[One for both of us. She made them about four years ago.]

[Both of us...? But there's three...] Mikhail pointed out, reaching for the third, only to get a massive finger coming down on it. It was flipped upside down to begin with, so the silver Russian couldn't even see whose name was written on it, but he had a feeling, [That's for Vi-]

[His name isn't spoken in this house.] Kon said stiffly, [As far as I'm concerned, he's dead.]

[He's not though, right?] Mikhail asked, a bit nervously, as though chancing the possibility that his nephew might actually be dead, [You're just saying that.]

[I'm going to put this letter into his corpse's hand in two days. His Undertaker is digging him up right now.]

[Let me do it then.] The smaller man offered, pulling on the envelope corner until it came out from under the finger, [He may not even show up if you go.]

[I told Tat that I would put each of these into the hands of the people they were addressed to. I always follow through on what I say I'm going to do. If he doesn't show up, then no one can say I didn't carry out my obligations.] Kon said grimly.

Mikhail wasn't convinced, but found Viktor's envelope swiped from his hand again anyway. He was left with his own, and stubbornly went with it to the couch in the main room. It was the same couch it had been 25 years before; worn out, patched and covered with a blanket on one side, but still the same couch. Unlacing the string from the loop closure, he pulled the flap open and withdrew three pieces of hand-written paper. Before reading them though, he turned his grey-green Rozovsky eyes up at the Nikiforov patriarch, [How did it happen?]

[Blizzard. She hit a tree.]

[...Did she suffer?]

[Hard to know.]

Konstantin was at the door. The priest was inside, straightening out his ritual attire. Mikhail was looking at pictures on the mantle. A third man, a local that Mikhail didn't know, was turning his hat around in his hands.

[He's here.] The bear finally said in a hushed tone, not taking his eyes off the sight he'd set them on, [Let's go.]

The silver Russian was out the door after the Orthodox priest, and spotted a thin, silver-haired man with a stocky older man in dark colors walking next to him. Time seemed to slow down for a moment, and Mikhail's eyes went wide.
'He looks exactly like I used to, before I left...' He thought in a slight panic, 'God, I hope no one holds it against him.'

[I forbid you from talking to him on my property.] Konstantin said suddenly, turning his head back slightly as they headed down the path towards the graveyard, [When this is done, he's leaving, and never coming back. Understand?]

[...Ah...er... Okay...?] Mikhail answered in confusion, too perplexed to manage anything more coherent.

'What in the fuck happened here? Why does he hate Vivi so much...?'

"VITYA!" The older, stocky man called out.

Mikhail was at the window immediately, wondering if someone was being attacked by a bear. When he pulled the curtain back, he saw Konstantin looming behind Viktor at the grave marker.

"Oh crap."

'What do I do? What do I do!?' He thought, panic creeping up inside him again, 'I don't know what to do!'

[You made us wait.] The bear's voice could be heard, but only barely.

[We were here an hour before you said to show. Whatever tardiness you're accusing me of is your own fault.] Viktor answered back, staying still where he was.

[At least you had the sense to leave your wife behind.] Konstantin chortled.

What Mikhail saw next left him gaping. The comparatively tiny silver man had risen up, spun on his heel, and planted his right fist in the middle of Konstantin's face, drawing blood.

"VIVI!" He whisper-screamed, legs trembling where he stood.

"VIKTOR!" Yakov yelled, "What are you thinking!? Get out of there be-"

The older silver Russian hid behind the wall after that. He saw Viktor being held by the neck, shoved down to his knees on the freshly-turned earth. Mikhail knew what was coming, and he couldn't stand to watch it happen. More words were spoken, too quiet and muffled by the house to hear properly...but he heard the bone-cracking punch...and the second one. The hollow sound of a kick in the chest, and the impact of a body against the gravestone echoed after.

After a brief silence, the angry yelling began. Mikhail had his hands over his ears for the start of it, but then gathered his strength and pushed to stand, reaching for his jacket and hat next to the door.

[I'm not a stripper. I'm an ATHLETE. Figure skating is an Olympic sport for fuck's sake!] Viktor yelled, cringing in agony, blood swiftly dripping down the side of his face, darkening the white snow with splatters and streaks of red.

'Figure skating ...?' Mikhail thought, standing deadly still in the doorway like the words had sucked the ghost right out of his body, 'No... There's no way, it's not possible... Of all the things ...'
"You okay?"

He twitched and blinked, looking up from where he'd buried his face against the crook of his arms on the rink wall.

Minako was looking down at him, a hand on his shoulder, "...Mikhail...?"

Grey-green eyes went out across the rink, realizing the music had stopped. His nephew and in-law were skating casually, talking quietly between each other. He shook his head and pushed to stand upright, cringing a little and dropping a hand to the rink-wall where an unexpected cramp in his back nearly winded him. Holding his free hand to the painful spot, he grumbled quietly, "Yeah...I just...zoned out I guess."

"You've been zoned out for 30 minutes."

"Ah Hell... Did I miss Viktor's SP?"

"No, he's still working himself up to start it." The ballerina explained, "They've been doing their Exhibitions and Pair Skates, and are taking a quick break right now. I think Viktor's working on something new, but I'm not sure. I'm surprised the bass from 'The Ghost' didn't bring you around though."

"Me too. That thing could wake the dead a mile away." The elder sighed, wincing as he tried to sit down on a bench behind himself.

Minako quickly stepped in to help him down, and sat next to him, "Turn sideways and take your coat off. I'll straighten you out again."

Mikhail just cringed at the thought of it, but did as told and turned to face away from her, "...Why did the gods bless you with the ability to remove pain, but curse you by making it so you'd be inflicting more first...?"

"No pain, no gain." She said simply, "Ready?"

"Absolutely not."

The skating duo slid by in confusion as they heard a quiet shriek, looking back over their shoulders to see Minako torturing the older man. Viktor seemed to recognize the technique though, "...Minako-sensei knows deep-tissue massage...?"

"Sure." Yuri answered, "Why?"

The silver skater scratched to a quick stop, glancing at his husband with an opportunistic look on his face. He smirked then and started moving back the way they came, pulling his partner along until he got to the rink-wall where the pair were sitting.

"You must be doing a good job if you're making him cry." He mused, "I should have you work on me next time."

The ballerina gawked up at the skater, seeing that irresistible playboy look on his face, "...You...want me to do...this...on you?" She stammered.

"Sure. It's horrible to go through, but it works really well." Viktor started, turning to thumb over his shoulder, "Sometimes my lower back and legs hurt after practice, an-"
"I couldn't."

"Eh?" Blue eyes blinked at her, "How come?"

"Yuri might get mad at me. If you let me put my hands on you, I might never take them off again."

"HEY." Mikhail harped, only to get two hands coming around from behind to clamp his mouth shut again. He could only sulk after that, drowning in the sorrow of everyone around him laughing. His only consolation was having his lady love pressed against his back, despite the pain still lingering from her knuckles and thumbs pressing so deeply into his skin before.

Why does everything good in life have to hurt so much...?
A mere few minutes passed before the moment seemed to come. The silver legend rounded the short end of the rink one last time, drew in one last breath, and reached for the top of the zipper to his track coat, pulling it down until it billowed opened around him. He slid along the ice gracefully, eventually coming up to where Yuri was still idling at rink-side. The jacket came off the Russian's shoulders and went over the younger skater's like a net, pulling him along rather suddenly.

Yuri yipped slightly as he felt the tug, but he found himself pulled right up against his partner's frame in an instant, and thankfully didn't slip as a result. He clung stiffly until he found his bearings, then snuck his arm through the sleeves, feeling where Viktor was slowing to a stop near the center of the rink. The ice stopped moving beneath them with the click of a toe-pick, and the shorter skater looked up the three inches to his husband's eyes, "You're ready?"

"I think so."

The over-long sleeves were pulled up so Yuri could fit his hands through properly, and set those hands on his husband's waist. He waited a moment, staring at the center of the man's chest, hazel eyes intently looking at the exposed skin where the dark-blue jacket parted just below man's sternum. His attention was caught by Viktor softly laughing though, and he lifted his head, "...What's so funny?"

"The way you're acting." The silver figure answered, "It's like you're more nervous than I am. This isn't even for a score...it's more like a dress rehearsal." He ruffled a hand through his partner's hair and settled his palm on one cheek, giving Yuri the 'tell me about yourself' look from his first day in Hasetsu, "Go start the music."

Unlike that first day though, when the Russian's fingers slid down his jaw to lift his chin, Yuri didn't just get red in the face and back up in a sudden hysterical panic...he closed his eyes and rose up onto his toe-picks, giving his partner a quick peck before turning off to do as asked.

Viktor watched him go, finally feeling some semblance of calm flowing through him that he hadn't felt since before the Grand Prix Series had even started. He reached down to play idly with the thin chains hanging off the front of his costume belt, looking up only when he heard Yuri calling for a ready check. He nodded and quickly took position, raising his arms up and putting one skate behind the other, the same way he'd done a few hours prior.

The symphony began, and the silver genius started to move, twisting around and picking up speed. His frame moved more loosely than before. The crippling sense of foreboding and dread was entirely gone as well. Most importantly...every corner of the arena was clear. Not one wisp of black, inky smoke rose from anywhere in sight.

*Can you hear my heartbeat? Tired of feeling never enough.*

Viktor slid forward, one hand over his ear and the other over the center of his chest before he twisted around with his arms out to the side. The opposite end of the rink came up quickly, and he skirted around it with ease, twisting through it with both eyes closed, knowing exactly where every inch of the ice was.

*I close my eyes and tell myself,*
He moved back into a mohawk turn, angling towards the center of the rink...

*That my dreams will come true.*

Kick-off with the toe-pick, vaulting from the left foot off an inside edge of the golden blade, spinning four times, and landing on the right.

*There'll be no more darkness when you believe in yourself, you are unstoppable.*

Arms were out to the side as the Russian twizzled and spun, core rotating over hips as skates carved tracks in the ice.

*Where your destiny lies, dancing on the blades,*

Viktor hopped into a half-loop, and on the landing, bent down to one knee and thrust his right hand out as he slid forward on the ice. Slate eyes filled with joy to see Yuri reaching back again, and the Russian quickly turned his hand back around, closing his fingers to grab the feeling right out of the air, and pressed it against his chest as though...

...*You set my heart on fire!*

He kept his hand where it was, thrusting the other around as he threw himself into a butterfly kick, landed, and kept sliding, one leg out behind him. Serpentine step sequence; footwork was expressive and intense, arms up and loose.

*Don't stop us now, the moment of truth,*
*We were, born to make History!*  
*We'll make it happen, we'll turn it around,*  
*Yes, we were born to make History!*  

He slid around the far end of the rink, moving back towards center and glancing over his shoulder as he slid in a line, pushing into a 3-turn. Right leg went out behind him, he tilted onto his left outside edge, kicked off the toe-pick, spun four times with both arms in the air, and landed the Tano Lutz with ease...immediately kicking off into a Tano triple Loop for the required combination jump.

*Born to make History!*

The silver Russian twisted back to facing forward, twizzling with an arm slowly rising up at the same time.

*Bo-bo-born to make History!*  
*Can you hear my heartbeat? I've got a feeling it's never too late.*

He kicked a leg out and thrust himself into a back-Camel spin, lower hand settled over the center of his chest as the other reached slightly above himself. He leaned for a lay-back variant, then twisted over slightly for the sideways version.

*I close my eyes and tell myself,*

Minor hop to change feet, rotating swiftly to pick up more speed. He arched himself and grabbed the blade of his up-turned skate, then grabbed just below the knee, twisting himself into a catch-foot variant.

*That my dreams will come true.*
He kicked out of the spin and moved away in reverse, rotating his hips and stepping skate over skate as he moved along the long end of the rink.

There'll be no more darkness when you believe in...

The silver legend stepped in wide arcs across the ice, dropping his back down to lean over into a layback Ina Bauer.

... yourself, you are unstoppable.

He snapped his arms out and immediately pushed into a double-twizzle, falling into an outside spread-Eagle as he came along the next short-side of the arena.

Where your destiny lies, dancing on the blades,

Like the showman he was, and with the newfound energy of all his stress leaving him, the Russian dared the quad Axel instead of the triple.

You set my heart on fire!
Don't stop us now, the moment of truth,

The Russian turned easily out of the jump, feeling that 'good' kind of hurt in his legs so he knew he'd landed it properly. The air flew past him, hair whipping as he glided backward along the rink wall.

We were born to make History!
We'll make it happen, we'll turn it around!
Yes, we were born to make History!

Viktor slid into a second step-sequence, blades clicking onto the ice with the beat of the music. His long frame flowed like water, kicking a leg out or extending his arms to further the dance.

Don't stop us now, the moment of truth,
We were born to make History!
We'll make it happen, we'll turn it around!
Yes, we were born to make History!

The final part of the Short Program was finally coming up, as well as his final required move. He slid across the frosty ground and pushed into a flying forward-entry camel-spin with his hands behind his back this time.

We were born to make History!

He reached back and grabbed his blade again for a donut-spin. When he let it go, he crossed that ankle over the other and started raising his arms up above his head, speeding up considerably as he went for the scratch spin.

We were born to make History!

Slowing down only enough to tilt his free leg out again, the Russian descended into the sit-spin formation for the combo, extending the leg out in front of himself for the shoot-the-duck variant, grabbing his calf to hold it out.

Yes, we were born to make History!

The beat of the song was rising, and so did the skater, pushing back to his feet into the final part of
the spin, grabbing his blade up behind his head for the haircutter variant, one arm towards the ceiling.

Just as the music finally cut out, Viktor stepped his toe-pick down and stopped, bringing his arms down around himself and then extending them sharply out to the sides.

The program was over. He finished it, and he remembered every second. His lungs were still on fire like after the previous attempt, but he knew what he'd done to get them that way. Sweat rolled down the side of his face, and strands of silver hair clung to his skin as he heaved. All he could do was focus on his partner clapping far ahead of him, and the Russian smiled through his winded breaths.

Viktor hadn't made it long in the car as they went back to the hotel. He started with just his head leaning against the cushion behind him, but he slowly slid off of it, until he was a heap leaning against the skater next to him. Yuri tried to finagle a way to get the man to lie on his side more straight-like than he had been, but the Russian seemed content to be bent over like the loop of a pretzel, half-hanging by the seatbelt, shoulder against his partner's leg as his head hung limp. Yuri just held him where he was, wrapping one arm under the man's head and neck to rest it against the bend of his elbow, and give it some semblance of support.

The ride was about 30 minutes back, and it was nearly 10:30 when they arrived. It was a mostly silent trek, giving the exhausted Russian a chance for quiet before making him get up again. When Yuri finally roused him though, the hazy skater practically sleep-walked inside.

Their pack-mule followed in disgruntled silence, back still slightly sore but no worse for wear. He quietly made it evident that he was going to bring the skaters' gear in himself no matter what. The elevator ride up was a welcome reprieve from the brief march, and the elder Russian leaned against the inside walls, a carry-bag on each shoulder, the broken rolling suitcase held by the hooked fingers of his left hand, and the final bag under the opposite arm.

By the time they'd all finally made it to the athletes' room, Viktor looked ready to pass out again, lightly banging his head against the door in a sleepy haze as he'd tried to slide the key-card in to unlock it. Yuri slid in under him to push him back up to standing, and finished the task of opening the door himself, holding the panel open as Viktor leaned heavily against his back.

Mikhail handed the bags off to Minako one at a time, and she slipped into the room to set them at the foot of the bed. That done, she quietly stepped back out again, whispering her goodnights before watching the pair go in themselves. The older silver Russian caught a quick glance from Yuri, but sighed to himself when the door clicked and no words had been spoken.

"They're never going to forgive me." The tired old man whispered, trying not to be heard through the doors, "They're just going to quietly tolerate me, and give me the cold shoulder forever. It's just like Viktor said it would be back at Worlds. I really fucked up."

"Maybe only until the end of NHK." Minako offered, reaching out her hand so he'd at least know someone didn't dislike him, "You only have to wait for Viktor to ease off anyway. As soon as Viktor lets up, Yuri will follow."

"It still hurts." The elder whined, "I mean, I get why he's doing it, but Yuri was the one to stick his neck out to give me a chance in the first place, talking to me before Viktor even knew about it. To
have him being all dubious of me now is really...crappy. It didn't even really start until the day after we got here. It's like something changed overnight."

They came back around the corner to the elevators, hit the button, and waited.

Mikhail fidgeted though, "Maybe encouraging Viktor to tell Yuri about the past worked against me."

"Yuri came to his own conclusions about you a long time ago. He knows who you are right now, so anything Viktor might've said about the past would just inform the way in which you became your current self." Minako pointed out, "And I doubt that Viktor said anything with the intent of turning Yuri against you anyway. I don't think he'd do that."

He still sighed in dismay.

"Anyway though..." Minako went on, refusing to linger on the topic, "It's late, but I'm not ready to turn in yet. Let's go find some drinks. I've barely gotten a taste of that fabled Rozovsky Charm and I need a pick-me-up to cheer-me-up."

"...But..."

"Tut." She shushed him, one finger over his mouth in a heartbeat.

Grey-green eyes blinked in confusion, then in thorough perplexity as both of the woman's hands went up to the hat sitting lightly on this head...and twisted it around where it was, sliding all his hair around with it until both of his eyes were covered. He felt those hands come back down again, touching the side of his neck...but he brought his own hands up and took her wrists in them gently before she could do anything else, ",...If he doesn't forgive me, I'll have to leave. I don't want to get your hopes up." He said grimly, "Sticking around with me would just cause a rift between you and th-"

"I think you should let me decide what I want to do." The ballerina interrupted, "I'm a big girl and I make my own choices."

The nerves still rose up in the man's gut, but he didn't feel much like arguing. The worry wouldn't go away until his nephew was done tormenting him. The Russian let go of those pale arms and raised his hands up to where his hat lay lopsided on his head, pulling it down to straighten out his hair again and look at the ballerina properly. He drew in a breath, squishing up the hat in his hands, wringing it around like a wet wash-cloth, and let the breath out quickly, ",...I appreciate what you're doing..."

The elevator arrived, the slight ding sound echoing in the empty waiting hall.

"...What do you mean?"

Doors opened soon after, revealing the empty chamber, and the two stepped in.

"...If this had happened earlier on, I don't know that I would've had the guts to try and wait it out." Mikhail explained anxiously, "I'm just a coward, always running from my problems, never wanting to stick around and sort them out. But you..." His fingers wrapped tighter around where he still clenched down on the hat in one hand, ",...You make me want to stay and see it through."

"And that's why Viktor's going to forgive you." Minako said, leaning casually against the inner walls of the small room, "You and him are a lot alike, you know."

He turned his head slightly to look at her past his silver bangs.
"You're both impulsive, and do things without much forethought. You get excitable when an idea crosses your mind, and you're both too stubborn to let pesky things like other people push you off it." She said, sliding indiscreetly closer, "But you also care a lot, maybe too much sometimes. You said you meant well by this whole crazy thing, and I believe you, and you clearly feel bad for how it hasn't so far. So, like any storm, just wait it out, and hope for a clearer sky tomorrow." She managed to sneak an arm behind his back, turning to rest the side of her chin against the edge of the taller man's shoulder, "Besides..."

The woman's tone suddenly shifted, and Mikhail felt rather small in a big hurry, seeing her looming over him with a comically dark look on her face, her hand holding to his black coat like she was preventing him from running.

"...Up until this weekend, you spent every day since the Viktuuri wedding party pretending like nothing happened. Don't think you're just going to get to leave, Mikhail Rozovsky."

"...Y-Yes ma'am...!" He squeaked, ears going red, "...Or would it be 'No ma'am?'" The look on her face made the Russian uneasy, "...W-Whatever you want, ma'am!"

Minako just smiled sweetly.

Yuri sat up in bed, a damp towel around his shoulders making his t-shirt a bit wet. His hair was a porcupine's nest of ruffle-dried spikes, and he lifted the fleece to dry off the side of his face, phone in his other hand. Instagram was awash with new content after the day's programs, and inevitably, the worried criticisms of fans and sports journalists alike came scrolling onto his screen.

\[HAS THE AGE OF NIKIFOROV COME TO AN END?\] One headline read, with the subtitle, 'Viktor takes home his lowest SP score in nearly a decade. Is this the Death Knell of our generation's greatest skater?'

Photos from the Short Program followed, with a few embedded videos detailing the analysis of the afternoon's event. It even posted footage of Yuri's own frantic interview after the fact. There were a few pictures of Viktor's congratulations to Phichit, but the subtext that the Russian was ceding victory to the Thai skater made Yuri's gut churn, even though he was rooting for them both. The more he read and saw, the further down he sank against the pillows and headboard, until his knees were higher up than his eyes, and he was looking up at his phone instead of down.

The sound of the shower was cut off, and the hazy silver skater stepped out a short while later, one towel flopped over his head and another barely clinging to his hips. His feet shuffled across the floor slowly, and he eventually made it over to his own side of the bed, but when he pulled the covers back and turned around to sit, he just stayed there, looking towards the window at the far end of the room.

Yuri watched him anxiously, hearing the man suck in a breath, but was perplexed to find the man rolling down onto his back. When Viktor had stopped moving, he had his head planted on his partner's stomach where he'd been scrunched up against the head of the bed, but had a smile on his face.

"I'm glad I got to skate the do-over." He said in his sleepy haze, "Thanks for convincing those folks at the rink to stay open for me."

The younger figure blinked at him, but then pushed under the blankets to sit up a bit straighter, and brought his free hand up to run his fingers through that wet platinum hair, "I don't know that I really..."
did much. All I really told them was that you wanted to skate for a little while, and asked that they keep the lights on for another hour. It probably just looked like a lot more than it was because I was being extra-special polite."

"Well, even so..." Viktor shrugged, "You managed, and I got to perform 'History Maker' the way I meant to earlier today. I'll do 'Evoke' tomorrow the same way, since my target audience will be watching...and then...I'll debut my new Free Skate at the Exhibition."

Yuri pushed up quickly when he heard it, his phone forgotten in the sheets, "Y-You've already figured it out!? But when will you even be able to practice it!? What about the outfit...or the music!?

The Russian just smiled, even while his head was squished between his partner's abdomen and legs. Yuri lowered his knees after that and gave the man room again, "Tomorrow's a long day. If I already have my show in mind now, then we can spend all the time we want, outside the Free Program, to get things ready. I intend to go back to that same rink again after FS practice in the morning. I'll need you to come, too, obviously."

"...Well, I was going to go anyway...but...why do you need me, exactly?"

Viktor rolled onto his side, curling one arm under a nearby pillow as the other reached up to push some of those black spikes from the top of his partner's eyes, "The Exhibition version of my new show will include a duet at the end. You'll need to practice with me." He sealed the deal with a wink, "There's going to be a side-by-side quad Flip, a vertical spin-throw, and a Death Spiral. Are you up for it?"

The younger skater could feel the excitement growing in him, and he nodded emphatically, the 'news' post online entirely forgotten, "Absolutely!"

Both of those pale hands came together in a happy clap, "Perfecto~!" Viktor twisted and pushed back up to sitting at the edge of the bed, and ruffled the towel over his head one more time before tossing it over the back of a nearby chair. The towel around his waist soon joined it, and he clicked the nearby light off as he pulled the blankets over his naked, squeaky-clean frame.

The room plunged half into darkness after that, with only the light on Yuri's side still on. Hazel eyes followed the Russian until he seemed to have settled in, waiting for him to join in. The younger skater nodded, found his phone again to plug it into the charger next to where Viktor's already was, and reached for the light switch near to them. With the room completely dark, the younger man pulled his t-shirt off and slid in under the covers to join his husband, scooting closer under the blankets until he could feel his shoulder pressing against the man's chest. One arm went immediately under him, wedging between his back and the blankets, while the other settled on the lower part of his ribs, and the Russian set his head down, pressing his forehead to damp black hair.

Yuri waited a moment, half expecting Viktor's hands to start wandering, but nothing happened.

"You're just...going to sleep...?" He asked, a bit surprised, "We didn't get to go out for that dinner like I suggested, but I thought, at least...since we were alone tonight..."

"...I know..." The silver genius said quietly, feeling his partner's head turning in front of him, "I don't think I can manage it right now though." He pulled his arm back under the younger skater's back, and propped himself up onto that elbow, trying to see the man's face in the dark, gently brushing his thumb against Yuri's cheek as he came into lightless focus, "I'm in a good place right now, I promise...but under all the fun I had earlier, at the back of my mind, I'm still stoking those fires for tomorrow. The next time we make love...I want it to be when all the anger is gone. I just need you to wait for me a little while longer...so I can get all my head-space back, and focus on the things that
really matter."

Yuri’s brow was furrowed a bit, but he nodded in understanding, bringing his right hand up where Viktor’s was still set against his cheek, "I’ll wait as long as it takes. I’m not going anywhere."

Viktor huffed a quiet smile, and leaned down the few inches to kiss his partner, nosing his lip a little after he pulled back again, "I love you more than I’ll ever be able to say. You truly are the one and only light in my life."

"The stars in my sky."

"The grass under my feet."

"The ice under my blades."

"Wow~!" The Russian sighed contentedly as he laid back down, wedging his arm back into place and pulling the man against his chest tightly, "I don’t know how to top that. Ice under blades...that’s practically the best thing ever."

Yuri settled his head down as well and smiled to himself, "I love you, too."
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED FIVE

It was quite the trick for a bartender to breathe fire, but he did, and the entire serving-side of the counter was engulfed in yellow-orange light, completely drowning out the blue glow that had been there a moment before. 'Flair Bar es' was an exciting place to be.

A huge television screen a few feet away was set to the local sports network, which was showing extensive coverage of the NHK Trophy given how the city was hosting the event...but also for lack of a number of other popular sports taking place in the dead-middle of winter. It was focusing primarily on Women's Singles, displaying excerpts from each of the performances, and the post-skate interviews that went with them that couldn't normally be shown while the event was playing live.

"Hey, it's your turn."

"Huh?" Mikhail turned his head back around from where he'd been grabbed by the flames before, looking to see an SNES controller being handed to him by Minako.

There was a small 15" box television sitting against the window with an SNES station in front of it, two controllers plugged in, one leading off to another couple sitting on a brown leather couch on the other side of the wooden table between them. The television was calling for P1 to hit Start for the next round of retro TETRIS.

Long-coat, tie, and blazer had long been abandoned, cast over the back of the couch to counter the warmth of the room. It was probably the most casual Mikhail had ever looked in public, the top two buttons on his dress-shirt undone, giving him a much more youthful and modern appearance than normal.

The Russian blinked to regain his bearings, but took the controller and sat side-ways on the couch to better see the itty-bitty screen. One hand went up to run his fingers through his hair and part his bangs aside his eyes, "Alright...get ready for this. I'm about to make you all look like amateurs."

[What'd he say?] The man from the other couple asked, laughing at the silver figure's sudden focus and determination.

Minako grinned and pat her teammate's head just as the round was starting, [He's an engineer. He thinks that makes him a TETRIS god.]

The game began, and blocks started to drop, which the Russian put into place along the bottom of the screen with expertise. Grey-green eyes were sharply focused, already looking at the preview-box for the next block even as the one he was already working on was still descending the walls of the playing field.

[Where did you even find this guy? He's obviously not local.] The man wondered, keenly looking at Mikhail's hair.

[He's Russian.] Minako answered simply, [We met at a skating competition last year.]

As it happened, the big-screen televisions behind the bar were starting to show footage from the Men's Singles event, and had just finished their segment on Phichit, moving on to the current 2nd-place competitor. Segments of Viktor's angry, quad-less performance were flashing across the screen.
[That guy's Russian too, isn't he?] The man wondered, pointing at the screen, and Viktor's less-than-stellar show, [They look kind of similar.]

Minako turned to glance over her shoulder, seeing the screen behind her. Newscasters Morooka and Oda were on a half-second later, commenting on how shocking the man's low score was, and discussing Viktor's 'coach's' response to it after the fact, with a small insert of the interview playing in the lower corner. She grimaced at the memory of it all and turned back, [Yeah, that's his nephew, and Viktor's coach this season is a former ballet student of mine, so we were all at last year's World Championships together.]

"Waaahh! Sugoii!" The other woman clapped, "Bikutoru Nikiforofu no oji-san da yo!"

"Thought we might make it a little while longer before Viktor's name would come up. What happened?" Mikhail asked, unblinking from his round of the game.

"We're at a bar that has sports on television all the time. Viktor's SP is on right now, and the guy over there recognized how you looked the same. His date seems to know who Viktor is, too. You'd have to dye your hair to avoid people noticing the resemblance."

"Mnnh..." The Russian grumbled, "You're not telling them how it's my fault he bombed earlier, are you?"

"It hasn't come up."

[What's he saying now?] The other couple asked again.

Minako smiled sweetly, [This is Mikhail's first Grand Prix Series. He's still surprised how popular his nephew has gotten. He had no idea before.]

[What was he doing before...? How could he have missed it?] The woman wondered skeptically, [He'd have to have been living under a rock.]

[A rock the size and shape of Canada.] The ballerina answered with a laugh, [He had no inclination towards figure skating before so he had no exposure. Now though...he's neck deep in it and can't escape!]

"You're still talking about me."

"Yes indeed."

"Kind of wish I spoke Japanese now so I could understand it." He grumbled, "This must've been how Yuri felt back in St. Petersburg."

"Or anytime you and Viktor and Kon go at it." She shrugged, "I think it's a bigger shame that more Japanese people don't speak English. It's a required language in school, and most people can read it well enough, but conversation is another challenge entirely. Hokkaido is particularly bad for some reason."

"This round is never going to end, you know." The Russian huffed, trying to get off topic, "We'll be here all night if I keep playing."

"Give it here then." Minako turned where she sat, reaching for her fancy drink on the table to take one more sip before turning to face the television, "I'll destroy your good score with my non-engineer-ness."
The silver figure hit Pause on the controller and offered it up, only to find Minako turning to lean against him to get a better view of the screen. Initially a bit surprised, he mentally shrugged and turned a bit more, leaning back against the arm-rest and flicking his shoe off to bring that leg up more comfortably. Before long, he had one knee between the woman's side and the back of the couch, and Minako was leaning against his whole front, the back of her head hovering just over his chest to see the game, controller in hand and both of her own shoe-less feet up on the arm-rest at the opposite end of the seat.

For a moment, it felt incredibly awkward, but the elder Russian settled into it, heart still beating slightly faster than before. The night wore on though, and two neon-colored drinks helped him loosen up and relax. He still held the controller above Minako's head for the first and second rounds that it came back to him, but by the third, he simply sat slightly more upright and held the controller in front of her stomach, arms around her sides, chin just over her shoulder.

Maybe Minako had a plan for him to finally see GAME OVER on his own turn, or maybe it just turned out that way, but his focus started to crash dramatically when she turned onto her side against his chest and started nosing at his neck. His face went red and his eyes were everywhere except on the screen.

Of course, when he did finally lose the round, the ballerina just laughed, "You nervous about something?"

"Only about the ways and means of how you're sabotaging my high score." He answered anxiously, setting the controller down on himself as the other couple started their own turn at the game. The Russian drew in a breath and fell back against the arm-rest again, lowering the woman's leverage on him a little, and briefly escaping the heart-pounding teases.

"I didn't think the slightest show of affection would be enough for you to lose your entire train of thought." Minako went on though, moving to wedge her arm between his side and the couch, his shoulder now too high and far away since he'd leaned back. She set her ear against his chest after that, and just heard it jackhammering away, harder than she thought it would be, "...It's kind of sad how you keep inching forward on all this, only take ten jumps back as soon as you get here. I remember that you said you'd been burned before, but you've been acting like you think I'll stab you in the back the second you let your guard down. I don't know how much longer I can empathize before I start to get offended, especially since you half-seriously asked me to marry you the other night."

The words cut deeper than most knives could, but the Russian had no easy come-back. He just reached up with his left hand and gently set it against the back of the ballerina's up-turned shoulder, "Before I hurt my back, I thought...I was finally at a point where I wouldn't have to think that way anymore." He said quietly, barely audible over the bar's music, "That Cup of China would finally be the moment where I could stop worrying, because Viktor started calling me Uncle Mimi again, and I'd finally been accepted into the group unconditionally. But then I fell off that damn roof, and Vivi came back to Russia to get me...only for me to drag Kon along with us. It's like going fishing..." He said nervously, "Vivi's sitting in that boat with his line, and he feels a catch...starts pulling me up to the water's surface, but I decide to try and get away. In the end, not only did Viktor pull me up, but a huge log, too...except that log is one that's been sitting unnoticed under the surface for 25 years and it happens to be one that nearly killed him as a kid."

"That's the...craziest, roundabout analogy I think you've ever made." Minako said, not sure how to take it, "Can't you just be glad that Viktor went fishing for you at all? Logs get thrown back, and this one is no exception."
"Maybe..." Mikhail slouched a little, moving the ballerina a half-inch higher up on his frame, close enough that he could smell her hair. He breathed it in a moment, but then turned his head away from it again, "I can't help but worry that I'm not a big enough fish to make it worthwhile to untangle me though. Maybe he'll just throw me back with the Kon-log."

"He won't. He still calls you Uncle Mimi when you're not around." She explained, avoiding the mention of how Viktor had demoted him from 'Mimi' to 'Mikhail' at the end, "Let's just do like we planned for tomorrow and see how it goes after that...one day at a time. Tonight has nothing to do with either of them anyway." She tilted her head up and reached her free hand to his silver bangs, combing her fingers through it and teasingly flipping it over by parting it over his right eye, dropping the rest over his left, "You're not Viktor, remember? You went pretty far out of your way to make yourself believe that I understood that. Just let him do his last Rage Skate and get it all out. He wants things to go back to normal after that, and normal now includes you."

"...His last Rage Skate?"

"Mh." She nodded, booping his nose as she brought her hand back down to rest on his chest, "When we were walking back around the arena to meet you, he and Yuri explained that tomorrow would be the last time he does that Free Skate. Viktor's going to show all his cards during that program, and cash out for good and all."

"...What about the Final? It's next weekend...he doesn't have anything in the wings..."

Minako just smiled, "There's still a lot about Viktor that you don't know. Don't worry, young grasshopper, you'll learn. He isn't popular just because he's a gold medalist or good looking."

Konstantin glowered at the bathroom door. Yurio had been in there for over an hour, doing god-only-knows-what. The shower had been off for 30 minutes.

[What are you even doing in there?]

Water moved around, and two feet thumped on the bathmat. The door-handle jiggled from the inside, and soon, the door itself opened. A damp blonde glared out from the steam still built up within, not even bothering with a towel...just staring. The bear seemed to block the entire view out of the little room, but those green eyes were undaunted.

[It's a bathroom. That's a bath.] The teen gestured at the tub full of water and suds, [What do you think I'm doing in here?]

The bear just stared back, unimpressed by the skater's obstinacy, [Forcing me to stay awake.] He pointed towards the main part of the room, [Out.]

Yurio just cocked a brow, [You didn't say please.]

[Out.]

[No.]

The door closed again, and the sound of feet entering water echoed soon after. The bear just stood there, dumbstruck. When the shock of being denied finally settled down, Konstantin glared at the white panel in front of him again, [Is everyone in your generation this stubborn and disobedient!?] [Only to rude people! Say please next time!]
[You're a child. I shouldn't have to ask your permission for anything.]

[AND YOU'RE NOT MY DAD. I DON'T HAVE TO LISTEN TO YOU.]

[VIKTOR DOESN'T LISTEN EITHER.]

[MAYBE YOU SHOULD TRY BEING POLITE.]

More grumbling...but then feet shuffled along the floor until Yurio was left in peace in the bathtub. He slouched into the water until it was just under his eyes, but then pushed up again and reached for where his phone was on a small stool next to the tub.

Jeeze, it's like he thinks the world is supposed to be in his service or something. Where does he get off thinking he can just order people around? He's just like Yako-

The teen's eyes went wide for a moment, then narrowed, and he set the phone back down again, sinking himself back into the steamy water.

I wonder if everyone in his generation thinks like he does. Even old man Mikhail is like that sometimes. Fuck's sake...

He blew a few bubbles in frustration.

It was nearly 3am when the buzzed duo came back from the Flair Bar. Mikhail had barely managed to get his long-coat back on straight for the cold walk back to the Leopalace Hotel, not having bothered with the blazer he normally wore under it, or the tie. He just carried them over one forearm.

It was surreal to see that Yurio wasn't in the room, as they'd been expecting him that night, right up until the last second when plans changed.

"Maybe I should go check on them." Mikhail suggested, rubbing his face a little where the alcohol was wearing off, "I haven't heard from either since we left the hotel earlier."

"Neither have I." Minako mused, twirling a little like the excitable ballerina she was, tossing her coat away as she moved. She kicked a leg out in a pose similar to a camel spin, but held still and looked at skinny figure before her, "Either that means everything is fine, or one of them is dead. But I think they're fine. Yura spent half the afternoon with Konstantin already. He'd know if he was in trouble."

She lowered the out-stretched leg before finishing in ballet's 4th position, one arm up and the other out to the side, feet crossed, "Stop worrying so much. Konstantin's only got it out for his own son, not the SkateSon."

"...Worry too much...worry not enough..." The Russian echoed, reluctantly pulling his black coat off to put it in the hall closet along with his flat-cap. His ruffled tie and blazer went over the back of a nearby chair, and he held his hands on it as the fabric settled, "I wish I knew how much was considered 'worrying just enough.'"

"You worry just enough about too many things." She explained, toeing up close behind the man, setting her hands gently on his shoulders, "For the rest of tonight, I hereby proclaim that you're only allowed to worry about me."

"Hah...?" Mikhail glanced back over his shoulder, but all he saw was the sultry look in the woman's eyes, "Uh oh...I know that look."
She smiled innocently, and leaned a little closer.

"...That's the same look you gave me when we were snowed in at your snack bar." He recalled dubiously, "And I distinctly recall how you used it against me."

"Against you?" She laughed, moving her hands to turn him around to face her, "I distinctly recall that you were all too happy to see it."

"...I was half-drunk at the time. I was happy to see everything." The silver Russian explained.

"I could tell." Minako huffed an amused laugh, hooking a finger around the opening in the dress-shirt, wiggling at it until the button came loose and that finger went down to the next one, "You should be happy to see it again now, right?"

Mikhail gave her a dubious look, but after a few silent moments, sighed, and finally gave up the struggle. Even if it was only for a single night's relief from the war going on in his head, he decided it wasn't worth it to worry anymore when he couldn't do anything about all the chaos anyway, "You're right...I should be..." He let his hands come up from where they'd been little more than dead-weight at his sides, and gently moved to set them around the woman's waist and lower back, feeling her own hands come away from his shirt to settle on his upper arms, "...Maybe I can give myself permission to stop thinking about other people for a little while."

She nodded and smiled back, "Just a little while."
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED SIX

As with most mornings, when Yuri's phone alarm started buzzing, he was the only one who responded to it. Almost by instinct, he heard that telltale jingle and started reaching for it, even with his eyes closed and his mind wanting to go back to sleep. His hands pawed for the edge of the bed, but the phone was just out of reach, and Viktor was clinging to his back enough that the younger figure couldn't wiggle free. So, in such an event, Yuri slid one of his legs out from under the covers, jerked it forward until his toes caught the edge of the night-stand, walked them forward towards his phone, and then flicked it over towards the edge. That leg slithered back into the warmth of the blankets and Yuri was able to turn the alarm off.

The Russian's grip relaxed a little when he felt his partner stop trying to wiggle away, but the man was still 2/3rds asleep as it happened, so he completely passed out again once the movements were all done and settled.

"Neh, Viktor..." Yuri attempted, speaking softly as he reached up to rub his eyes with his free hand. He rolled onto his back, turning his head towards the sleepy skater, phone resting on his chest as he decided 15 more minutes wouldn't be the end of the world. He clicked on his phone to set the Snooze timer, dropped it into the blankets, and rolled over further to face his husband. He quietly nuzzled in closer, wedging his head under the man's chin and snaking an arm over his side, squishing himself in as close to Viktor's chest as he could, raising one leg over the man's thigh for good measure.

Still, no matter what, the buzzer came on again and it always felt like it was 3 seconds later, not the 15 minutes that had been set. Viktor grumbled quietly as he rolled onto his back, dragging Yuri with him, even as the younger figure was pawing for the phone again. When the buzzing and noise was finally off again, Yuri couldn't bring himself to try falling asleep again, but dozed for a while where he'd been pulled up onto the Russian's chest.

I don't want to get up...it's so warm here...

He lifted those tired hazel eyes up to see his sleeping partner, and reached up to brush a few silver strands away to better see his husband's face.

I feel bad needing to wake him up...this might be the last time until later tonight that his mind will be at peace... Still though, he wanted to go back to that other rink after Official Practice...so we need to get moving...

"Viktor..." Yuri said again, pushing up a little to wedge his left arm under himself against the Russian's chest, the other still pawing at the man's hair, "It's almost 8. We should get up."

"...I am up..." He replied quietly, his eyes still closed though.

"Yeah me too, like every morning, but I meant the 'standing up' kind, not the 'standing at attention' kind." Yuri corrected, giving the man a look as he finally pushed to sit up and threw his legs off the edge of the bed, "I don't need you teasing me when I have to wait."

"Sorry..." Viktor mumbled, almost smirking to himself in his drowsy haze as he raised his arms up to stretch a little. One of those blue eyes finally opened though as he relaxed again, "I promise I'll make it worth your while."
"I don't doubt it." The younger skater huffed, his cheeks a bit pink at the suggestion. He leaned back on his hand to quickly kiss his husband and then rose to standing, "Come on then, the rest of you needs to be up, too. The buffet downstairs will still be fresh if we go quickly."

The Russian reluctantly started to push himself up to sitting and rubbed his eyes for a moment. As silver hair came tumbling back over the left one, he felt his skin twitch slightly, and the trepidation of what was coming later in the day started creeping back up in his gut again. When he pulled his hand back, he turned his uncovered eye towards where Yuri was walking away, then glanced around the room a bit. It was quiet until the sound of water started, but it wasn't enough to pull the skater out of his thoughts. He glanced down at the blankets still covering his lower half, observing the different warm layers—the regular sheet, the thicker fleece blanket, and the comforter on top. With an inquisitive hum to himself, Viktor wondered on something, but soon shrugged and pushed to get out of bed as well.

Yuri had a frothy toothbrush in his mouth when he caught sight of his partner coming around the corner, but was a bit surprised to find the man just leaning against the bathroom doorframe, "What is it...?" He wondered, toothbrush still in place.

"Do you think we'll come back before the Free Skate or should I just bring everything from the start...?"

The younger skater pulled the toothbrush out and shrugged, "Depends, do you really want to carry everything around all day? We couldn't get that rock out from the wheel-well under your rolling suitcase since we don't have a screwdriver, and it's kinda heavy..."

"...Yeah."

"Why?" Yuri wondered, rubbing the foam off his mouth on the back of his wrist, "You think the Exhibition practice will take a long time...? I know I'm not as quick as Yurio is to memorize new programs, but-"

"No, it's not that." The Russian shook his head, "The part you have to remember isn't even half as long as a Short Program, so I'm not worried about that at all. You'll be fine."

"What then?"

"...I think I'm going to need to bring some extra stuff, that's all. We can just come back and get my other things on the way back from shopping. I'll just bring my skates for now." He said, tapping the doorframe with one hand as he moved off beyond the corner and out of sight again.

Yuri watched him go in confusion, "...Extra stuff?" He stepped out of the bathroom and turned to lean around the edge of the hall, watching where his partner was crouched on the floor, rummaging through a suitcase for the day's choice of clothing, "What else do you need to bring...? Can it fit in my backpack?"

"Don't worry about it." Viktor waved his hand to dismiss the whole thought, "If practice runs late then we'll just shop for our outfits after the Free Skate, or tomorrow morning after Gala practice. It'll be fine."

"You already know what you want us to wear?"

"Of course." He lifted that silver head and winked at his partner, "I already knew all those details before Uncle Mimi even picked us up yesterday."

"Back to Mimi again...does that mean he'll be allowed to talk today?" Yuri wondered, leaning
against the wall and loosely crossing his arms.

"Not until after the Free Skate, \textit{at least}. He needs to stew a bit longer. Maybe I'll make it go on until after the Exhibition. I haven't decided yet."

"...But does that mean you've forgiven him already, since you've set a time for when he's out of the dog house?"

The Russian had half-pulled-on a pair of underwear by then, but paused as he was pulling it up against his hips. When he moved again, he just sat down on the floor and started reaching for some thick crew-socks out of a nearby bag, "In purely scientific terms, I think I'm about 83.7\% of the way to forgiving him."

Yuri cocked a brow, "83.7\%...?"

Viktor nodded and smiled, lifting his feet to straighten out the fabric on each side, "I have documentation to back it up. It's all very highly technical research, but it's accurate. Peer reviewed, published, and everything." He twisted slightly to get one foot under himself and kneeled over another bag to find his grey practice-pants, "If the Free Skate goes well, I \textit{might} let him buy me a beer after, but I haven't planned that far ahead yet. The day is still young, and I have a lot I want to do first that has \textit{absolutely nothing} to do with him." He opened one bag and realized none of the clothing in it was folded, "...Hm, maybe laundry will be on that list. I don't think I've bothered since we left Paris."

"That's why you brought like 80 bags of clothing though, isn't it?" Yuri huffed a laugh and pushed off the wall, heading back into the bathroom to finish brushing his teeth.

The Russian pointed at their luggage, counting, "...I think only eight of these are mine!"

"Eleven of them are yours."

Blue eyes turned back to the pile in disbelief, "Whaaat?"

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Coming out of the Tsukisamuchuo Station, the pair quietly hung a left and started heading down the street. Another left around the corner of the supermarket, and one block eastward on Suigenchi Dori, they were able to spot the tennis courts in front of the Tsukisamu Gymnasium.

It was a different group of people on staff that day than had been there the night before, and unfortunately, they had no idea who either of the skaters were. Requesting a section of the rink be cordoned off was impossible.

"Guess we'll just have to take our chances and hope people using the rink realize you need more space once they see you working," Yuri suggested, shrugging as he put his wallet away from paying their entrance fee, "I'm sure at least \textit{someone} here today will know who you are..."

"Maybe it's better that they don't." The Russian said, pulling a hand up to rub his chin as they stepped in through the doors that lead to rink-side, "If even \textit{one} person knows who either of us is, they might record what we're doing and tag us online, and the whole show will cease to be a surprise."
“Oh...” Yuri answered stiffly, a bit confused, "...Is this a bigger surprise than just the fact that it's an Exhibition you haven't premiered yet?"

Viktor pulled his backpack off as he came to a bench he liked, and started unpacking his blades before moving to pull his shoes off, "I guess you could say that. To an extent..." His words trailed a bit as he pulled the first skate on and started working at the laces. Yuri started doing the same next to him. With the laces pulled tight but untied as yet, Viktor moved over to pull the other skate on as well, "I guess this is a show just for me."

"Even though I'm in it...?"

"You're part of me." The Russian nudged his partner with an elbow, "I meant that the show is more for my sake than anyone else's. It's like a sequel to 'Evoke.' You'll understand when you hear the song."

"...Is it an angry song again...?" Yuri worried a little.

"Angry? No, far from it. 'Evoke' is the storm. This new song is the recovery effort that comes after." Viktor explained, tightening the laces so they'd be even on both sides, and then standing up to set his hands on the rink wall, "Everything on the ice is love, and every performance is a story. Being self-aware is what makes each show unique. It's a double-edged sword though." He explained, turning his head back as Yuri finished tying his own laces, "When a show is supposed to reflect your happy self, and you step onto the ice with a cloud hanging over you...it's just not going to work. We both know that from personal experience."

The younger figure pulled the bottoms of his pants over the tops of his boots and stood up, stepping forward to feel his husband's left arm come up over his shoulders. The Russian took his right hand in his own, pulling it to his lips to kiss the golden band.

"When you did your 'Yuri on Ice' program last year, part of why it was so gratifying to work on with you was because of the journey it described." Viktor went on, letting the hand go to start pulling his partner's scarf away, "Even though I was the one who coordinated the sequence of required moves, teaching you how to land the jumps better to go for higher GOE values, pushing you to the absolute limits, and coordinating how best to put your existing skills and talents to use...it was still your story. There's no one in the world who can skate that show with more appeal than you have, because no one else has walked those miles in your shoes. And when I skated 'Aria' the year before that...it was my desperate cry out to the universe that I needed someone...but until after Sochi, I didn't know who I was even calling out for. The shows I did after that, once I knew...I really had my heart in it. Maybe no one else noticed, but the whole program changed in my mind."

The scarf was gone, and Viktor was pushing the heavy winter jacket off his partner's shoulders after that, rolling it up around his arms to set the small bundle down on the bench before doing the same with his own things. Yuri had been somewhat dumbstruck by what the man had said, and was looking out to the half-dozen or so people who were on the ice already, oblivious to them even being there. When the Russian was down to just his usual grey sweatpants and black t-shirt, the younger skater slipped in and wrapped both arms around the man's thin frame, pressing his eyes to his collarbone.

"How long have you even been thinking about this new show, then...?" Yuri wondered, speaking the words against the black fabric.

The silver skater blinked down at his husband, but smiled and brought his arms up, weaving the fingers of one hand through that soft, black, spiky hair, "Since your friend's Short Program. ...It...really spoke to me." He pulled back after that, holding his palms gently to his partner's cheeks,
and leaned in to lightly peck him on the lips before moving to grab his blade guards, "That's part of why I wanted to go talk to him after it was all done. To me, it was more than just a congratulations on getting 1st after the Short Program...it was a thank you. His performance told me what I had to do to move forward and get past all this."

Yuri set his own blade-guards next to his coat on the bench and started to follow his partner, feeling everything slide away as his golden skates touched down on the ice. The sound of metal scratching across the frost was a relief. Thinking back on the Free Skate practice earlier in the morning though, the young skater had been half-on-edge, knowing that what he saw was just the calm before the storm.

Cherry-hazel eyes looked up to see the silver Russian's hair gently flicking in the breeze with their glide across the ice. Viktor quickly turned around to face him, skating backwards as they came around the short end of the rink, sliding with effortless ease. The feel of the cold air was a pleasant reprieve from the heat of his worrying, but that didn't stop Yuri's mind from wandering anyway.

When Yurio skated last year...I thought his performance completely changed after our 'training' under the waterfall. He started thinking about his grandpa, and his 'Agape' really came through. It was obvious though when he couldn't focus, and he let his greed come in the way of the love he was meant to feel.

Viktor let go of his hand for a moment and twisted around on the ice, warming up with a few easy moves in the field, stepping blade over boot like he'd been born with skates on.

The raw power that Yurio had in that program, doing all those jumps with his hands up in the air...even with that fall, he still ploughed through on just the fury of his hatred for the injustices he thought he'd been subject to. Wanting to show Viktor that he didn't need him after all, wanting to make me regret considering retirement after the Final... After all that raw emotion came out of him in that final Free Skate, even Yuri Plisetsky, the Russian Tiger, collapsed on the ice at the end and cried.

He followed at a slight distance as Viktor skirted the opposite end of the rink. Other skaters were starting to take notice, and many stopped where they were when they saw the telltale motion of a 3-turn. They all heard the toe-pick gouging into the ice, and watched as the silver Russian became a spinning blur, landing the quad Flip like he'd been carried on wings.

"Let's do that one side-by-side next, okay?" Viktor asked, leg still out from the landing, "We'll do it in the same spot I just toe-picked from. Keep the same distance between us as we have while doing that jump in 'The Ghost.'"

"Sure." Yuri nodded, falling in line to start picking up speed alongside his partner. Still, he watched the man, picturing him in his Free Skate outfit, imagining his blades really being on fire, leaving a trail of melted ice in his wake instead of scratches on the ice.

All the anger that Viktor's been holding onto since February... Getting to express all that pain in front of the man who'd inflicted it on him...the idea alone is scary. It's going to make Yurio's 'Rage Skate' look like a toddler's obnoxious temper tantrum. Hardly a serious display at all.
They came back around the small cluster of skaters and were heading back towards the clearer side of the rink. Viktor flipped backwards again, and Yuri did the same.

"One, two, three-turn, jump, okay?"

"Got it."

Slate eyes watched the ice fly by, and he nodded, "One...two...three..."

*TAK-TAK*sKASsshhhhhhh*

They glided off with ease, twisting back around to face forward again. They lifted their heads as they heard a few people starting to clap, and Viktor raised an arm to wave at them all happily as they passed by.

Yuri still felt nervous though. In a bid to calm his pounding heart, he reached to the right and took his partner's hand in his own, careful to lace their fingers together and hold tight.

*It's going to be the performance of a lifetime.*
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED SEVEN

Yurio yawned widely where he sat in the hotel lobby, his hood pulled so far over the front of his face that he almost fell asleep again without anyone noticing. He slouched over the arm-rest of the couch he'd fallen into, a bit of drool coming out the corner of his mouth...but he caught himself and sat upright again, snorting and looking around like he could convince people he'd been awake the whole time.

When he saw that no one had been paying attention anyway, he yawned a second time and dropped his head against the back-rest, groaning loudly, "WHERE THEEEEEYYYY?"

"Yura!"

The teen practically jumped out of his skin to hear it, and when he landed, he sharply whipped around on the couch to spot both Minako and Mikhail standing in the lower part of the lobby, looking straight at him.

"Let's go!" Minako called again.

"Where's Kon?" Mikhail followed up, watching the blonde jump to his feet and stretch a bit.

Yurio just turned his eyes around, and then reached behind a pillar where the huge sleepy bear was obscured from sight...and snatched the brimmed hat right off his head. Slate eyes opened instantly, but the big man was too stunned to react for a moment. By the time Konstantin got his bearings in order, the Russian Punk had already scampered off unapologetically, taking the hat with him. The couch shifted a little as the bear rose up to standing, reluctantly following in the teen's footsteps to leave the hotel...and start Day 2 of the NHK Trophy.

"So what's the plan for him anyway...?" Minako wondered, leaning in close to whisper, "I don't think you've had a chance to explain to him what today's all about."

"That was part of the plan...finding out." The silver Russian answered back, whispering as well, "Unless..." He turned to where Yurio was moving back towards the elevators, "Yura!"

"...What?" The teen looked back, groggy as ever.

"Did you tell Kon anything about today?" The taller Russian wondered, following after him as the different members of the group started to converge on the same spot, Konstantin's footsteps sounding like elephant foot-thumps rather than normal shoe-taps.

"Yeah."

"What did you say?" Minako wondered skeptically, keeping half an eye on the silent bear approaching.

"I told him the schedule, and he said he didn't want to repeat what happened yesterday, so I translated the entire program for today into Russian so he could read it." The blonde answered, pausing to yawn again, "Why am I doing all the work around here anyway? Shouldn't you be doing this stuff?"

"I would if you didn't do it before I had a chance." Mikhail shot back, "I translated both of Viktor's
"Hmph." Yurio shrugged, stepping into the elevator, the other three following soon after. When the
doors opened again to the underground parking garage, the Russian Tiger was the first to jump out
again, "Anyway though..." He went on, glancing back over his shoulder to watch where Mikhail
was going to lead them, "He says he'd rather just show up when Viktor's about to go do his show,
and stand if need be, than wait all day through the other competitors."

"...What's he going to do all day then? The Men's Singles event doesn't start till 6:30." The silver
Russian pointed out, "I'm supposed to be with him whe-"

"Not my problem." Yurio interrupted, "He said the same thing. I told him you'd both figure it out on
your own. I've done enough. My plans are entirely different from yours so it makes no difference to
me what you do."

Minako raised a brow, "You have plans?"

"I couldn't sleep. Yakov's going to give me a key to his and Mila's room so I can catch a nap before
Men's starts. I'm just going to go to the Sapporo Prince from here. Figured I'd catch a ride since you
passed right by it on the way to the arena before."

Mikhail just paused where he stood, hands in his coat pockets, giving the youth a look. Unflinching
in his expression, he withdrew the door key, pointed towards the ugly gunmetal vehicle, clicked the
unlock button, and listened as the Kei-car blinked and squeaked a few paces further away, "You're
welcome, I guess."

"At least I'm not asking for you to come back and get me." Yurio pointed out, pulling the back door
open and hopping in, taking his spot with a grimace.

"I'd rather you have asked for a lift to Sapporo Prince before assuming I'd just give you one." The
elder pointed out, getting in behind the wheel as everyone else piled in as well.

Yurio just pointed at him, about to say something, but stopped as he saw Konstantin getting in as
well, making the entire car wobble with every step. In the end, the teen was squashed against the
inside walls of the vehicle, and he was giving the silver Russian up front a dubious glare, "This is
why I didn't ask. I'm not asking for this."

Mikhail couldn't stop himself from chortling and then bursting out laughing, gripping to the steering
wheel like he thought he'd fall out of the car if he didn't.

Without a word, the bear reached over and plucked the dark hat from the moody teen's head, putting
it back on his own as well as Yurio was too squished to be able to do much other
than wriggle and flail.

"I can't believe how much I have everything right now." The blonde snarled, "JUST GO."

"What else do you need to pack...?" Yuri wondered, holding his partner's carry-bag over one
shoulder as Viktor was checking his things in a different suitcase.
The big, blue, rolling case was lying open on the floor, its contents completely removed. In its place, a certain sticker-covered silver suitcase. Viktor held up the suit-bag containing his Free Skate ensemble, looking at the fiery colors through the opaque plastic. He had a somewhat serious look on his face as he glanced at it from top to bottom, but then started to lower it into the open carrier at his feet, letting the garment fold onto itself like hand-pulled taffy. When it was in, he wedged his skates in on top of it, pushed towards the bottom, then the bag with the costume gloves, two small towels, the water-bottle, extra socks, a pair of practice gloves, the poodle-plush tissue box, and two rolls of unopened ace bandages. With that, he closed the lid, buckled the locks on the sides, and stood up again.

"I still need one more bag..." The Russian said, looking around the room for his backpack.

"This is all the stuff you usually bring. What else could you possible need...?" Yuri wondered, entirely confused, rolling his shoulder a little to open the bag hanging off of it, "Your sunglasses, phone, wallet, keys, crazy-expensive jar of lip balm, both of our event badges, those two small seat cushions we bought earlier...all that's in this one. There's even paperclips in here." He held one out as evidence.

Viktor just lifted the rolling suitcase off the ground and handed it off to the younger man, holding out the telescoping handle in offering, "Go ahead and wait by the elevators. I'll be right behind you. It'll take a minute for the lift to get to this floor at this time of day anyway."

"...You're acting weird." The skater said skeptically.

"Thanks for letting me borrow your rolling suitcase today, Yuuuuri~." The Russian mused, smiling sweetly as he leaned over the pile for the empty backpack he was looking for.

"...Mhm."

The door clicked behind him as Yuri started making his way down the hall. He barely made it three steps before it felt too weird to be walking alone and stopped to look back. Before he could even consider going right back into the room though, he felt and heard his phone buzzing with a new text message, and reached with his free hand to pull it out of his back pocket.

Phichit Chulanont:
[Did you guys already leave?]

Yuri started walking and typing with one thumb, pulling his suitcase along as he moved reluctantly down the hall on his own, [Not yet. You want us to wait for you?]

[Yeah, please! 10mins?]

[No problem. It'll probably take that long to get down the elevator anyway.]

[Kob jai!]

With his phone tucked away again, the young skater arrived at the elevator waiting area, seeing a few other competitors and coaches already waiting. He pulled the suitcase up in front of himself and started to wait. Thankfully, he only ended up missing the very first elevator that came to their floor before Viktor finally turned up again, backpack strapped around his chest and over his shoulders like he was planning on going on some camping trip right after the medaling ceremony.

Yuri glanced around the man's shoulders, seeing that the pack was practically bursting at the seams, "What in the world are you bringing...?"
"Just planning ahead for stuff." He answered innocently enough, lifting his eyes as he heard the sound of the next elevator arriving, "Let's go."

When they finally got to the lobby, waiting for Phichit and Celestino, Yuri watched his partner quietly as the man went through the paces of the 'easier' parts of his Free Program. No foot-stomp, no 'exploding ice' circle, just the basics. Still, it made him nervous. Flashes of those moves went into his mind's eye like lightning, leaving a film negative behind of the Russian lying flat on the ice with a broken ankle, writhing in agony.

_Good thing it's just Viktor with the eerie gift of prophecy._ He thought idly to himself, shaking the image from his head, _I'd put myself into an early grave if it were my gift._

The reminder of the Russian's former foretelling just made the young skater nervous for entirely different reasons after that though, recalling how the man had dubiously suggested that he felt like something was going to happen involving his Uncle. Despite everything that had _already_ happened, it didn't feel like _that_ 'happening' had taken place yet.

"What are you guys still doing here?" A voice came, pulling the skater out of his thoughts in an instant.

Brown eyes glanced up to meet green, and Yuri saw his Russian counterpart sauntering up like he owned the place, "Yuri... How come you're not already at the arena?"

Viktor stopped his footwork dance for a moment and waved, but then went right back to it. 

The teen paused, rubbing his eyes a little, "I had Mikhail drop me off earlier this morning so I could take a nap in Yakov's room, that way I could grab the shuttle from here to the arena when I woke up." He dropped a look at the taller skater prancing around, "Your old man doesn't sleep right in this country. Kept me up all night, tossing and turning like a beached whale."

"That's nice." Viktor didn't miss a beat, sneakers squeaking across the tile floor, his arms a black and white blur where his track suit moved through the air in quick strikes.

Yurio half-rolled his eyes as he glanced away, seeing where Yuri hadn't yet risen from where he'd been waiting on the lobby bench. He turned his head slightly as he saw the man going back to brooding like before, resting his chin in the palms of his hands where his elbows were propped up on his knees.

_I don't think I ever noticed how weird he looks without his glasses...at least when he has his hair down like this,_ anyway.

Instead of speaking though, the teen just stepped forward towards the older skater, crouching down directly in front of him and looking into those anxious hazel eyes. Yuri blinked at him in stunned confusion, but the Russian Tiger didn't give him time to question it, simply pulling his hands from his pockets to reach his arms up over the Russian Tiger's shoulders.

Yuri's hands came loose from under his chin, and he was too perplexed to react for a moment, eyes glancing towards the black hood just to the side, "Y-Yuri...?"

The teen angled a bit higher and gripped a bit tighter than before, _"Your face is going to get stuck like that if you don't give it a rest already."_ He whispered.

Viktor finally paused his dance practice, seeing the colored blobs over his shoulder, and looking directly at the duo just as his husband's hands came under the Russian Tiger's arms to grip around his back, clenching at the blue and white team jacket. Just as he was about to say something though, the
sound of Phichit hollering at them derailed his whole thought process, and the Russian backed down again.

"Yuri!" The Thai skater called out, rushing over from the elevator without having a chance to assess the situation. He paused in his tracks though when he saw what was going on, "Yu...Yuri...?"

The Japanese skater pulled back from where he'd set his eyes to the Russian Punk's shoulder, trying to laugh through his nerves, "Hey...Phichit-kun, sorry..." He started, pulling his hands back to pinch the bridge of his nose. The teen stood up in front of him and just stuffed his hands back into his jacket nonchalantly, and Yuri stood up soon after, ruffling his hair a little bit before looking at his friend, "It's nothing to worry about. I just had one of my anxious moments like always."

"Oh... Well...alright..." The younger skater gave a confused but happy look.

"There's a shuttle." Celestino pointed out, pulling up the rear with the rest of his athlete's things, having just missed everything. He glanced around though as he realized the group was getting bigger, "Are we all going...?"

Yuri nodded, regaining his composure quickly, "Mh. We didn't know Russian Yuri was here until just now, but there's plenty of room on the van for all of us I think."

"T-Minus 2 hours~!" Phichit said excitedly, "I can't wait to show you my FS, Yuri! I think it's even more intense than yours is."

"Oh, no contest on that one." The older skater huffed, "Mine's more serious though."

Viktor slid in to grab his things, "We should get out there before the driver leaves without us. Even if they have no passengers, they won't stick around long."

Phichit nodded back at his coach, and the two started making their way through the sliding doors; Yurio followed after them slowly, glancing back one more time before heading out into the cold.

The older Russian waited for the doors to close though before he said anything, looking from the three to his partner, "...You're this worried already? It's another hour and a half before I even have to meet Yakov."

Yuri shook his head, "I've been this worried the whole time." He drew in a breath, "Yurio just squeeze it out of me like the last drop in a damp cloth. I...thought I could manage until you had to go off on your own. The whole day so far feels like it happened in the blink of an eye. Now we're going for the Men's Singles event, and everything's hitting me all at once."

"It'll be done and over with soon. Try not to let it get under your skin anymore..." Viktor offered, kneading his fingers into his husband's shoulders to try and get him to loosen up, "It's the last time I'm doing this one, right? I won't have to put you through it ever again. When we're done with the medaling ceremony, I'll treat you to something nice, okay? ...I can't guarantee I won't just steal your idea from last night, but I'll try to come up with something original..." He smiled in spite of himself.

The younger figure just huffed an anxious laugh and pat his forehead to the Russian's shoulder, "After your Free Skate's done...I think a quiet night out would be the least that we've earned..." His hands came up towards his face, index fingers pinching the bridge of his nose where he wedged them up against his husband's chest, "Once we get back to Hasetsu, I'll need to sit in the onsen for a whole day to get rid of all this tension..."

"Not without me, you aren't." Viktor mused, giving a tight hug before pulling back again to kiss the man's forehead, "Let's get moving then. The sooner we go, the sooner we can come back. In the
meantime though..." He reached into the carry-bag hanging off his shoulder and rummaged around for his phone, pulling it out, unwrapping the ear-bud cables, and clicking through the Lock screen as they started heading for the doors, "I'll finally let you listen to the song I picked for the Exhibition. We didn't get to listen to it at the other ice skating rink like I wanted, but I think you can put the choreography we practiced in time with the music and see it in your head like I do. The part where you come in is at 2:25." He handed his phone over on the selected song, "Maybe it'll put your mind at ease, and give you something to look forward to...even if only for a little while."

Yuri took the phone in-hand and fished the ear-buds back up, putting one in as they stepped outside, "I hope so..."

"I was practicing it in my dreams all last night." Viktor assured him, "I think you'll like it."
Chapter 208

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED EIGHT

The Ladies Singles medaling ceremony was the last thing, other than a break to resurface the ice, that separated Men's Singles from everything else. Mila had managed to snag Silver for her efforts, and her place in the Grand Prix Final along with it, so she was quite pleased with herself as she stood on the middle-level podium.

As she came back off the ice, Viktor was still clapping, though Yakov was as stoic as ever.

[Well...] She started, smiling excitedly despite her slight disappointment as she looked at the glass disc with its silver-leaf inscription inside. Deep-blue eyes glanced down as she stepped off the ice, nudging the tall Russian with an elbow where he'd been leaning on the rink wall against his own. He turned those slate eyes to follow her, and smiled as well as she used his shoulder as a support to start putting on her blade-guards, [...]It's not gold, but I guess it's okay.]

[I feel like I sabotaged you.] Viktor sighed, holding still as she switched skates, turning his head where he held his chin in his palm, looking back out over the ice, [Maybe I'll make you wait until the Free Skate before I let you try to steal my thunder next time... At least then you'll know if it'll actually be worth it...]

[Don't be so hard on yourself. Knowing you, I imagine you found some other rink to go practice at, and have been drilling yourself all morning.] The lithe woman pointed out, sliding her arms through her team jacket as the lights in the stadium started coming on again.

"We will now take a 30 minute break to resurface the ice. The Men's Singles Free Skate competition will begin in 45 minutes." The announcer sounded overhead.

Viktor lowered his head once the echo vanished, [Well...yeah, that's basically true.] He huffed a quiet laugh and stood upright, stuffing his hands into his team-jacket's pockets, embarrassed at his obviousness, [Only a few people know, but this will be the last time I do this Free Skate. I'm retiring it after today.]

[Really?] She looked at him, surprised, [Why? This'll only be the second time you've done it. Did you hurt yourself with it last time?] She reached to take his elbow as they started walking.

Yakov just listened quietly as he followed the pair back into the prep area, moving through the heavy blue curtain with the others who'd been part of the ceremony.

[No, I didn't hurt myself at all.] Viktor went on, [But you saw part of that fight yesterday, and you know the truth now about what really happened last year. My program was born out of all that. As much as I like the actual show itself, the reasoning behind its existence is weighing me down. I promised Yuri that I'd drop it after today. So...that's actually what I was up to all morning...practicing my new Free Skate. I'll be debuting it tomorrow at the Exhibition.]

[Woow~!] Mila fawned excitedly, [Did you already have this show in the wings somewhere or did you just make it up since yesterday?]

[I just made it up.] He laughed, [I called in a rush-request to my tailors back in St. Petersburg, too. They're going to try and come up with something in time for the Final next weekend.]

[You're lucky that they like you as much as they do. If you were anyone else, I imagine they
would've just laughed you off the phone.]

[Maybe. They've been good to me.] He pulled his phone out to check the time, [Anyway, I should get back. I need to give Yuri a little TLC before I break off to get my head in the game. Are you staying for the next event?]

[Are you kidding? Putin himself couldn't get me out of this building before I see that Gold medal around your neck.] She grinned.

Phichit was already starting to sweat bullets as he stretched. Yuri and Celestino sat nearby, watching him quietly.

If I don't get Gold here, I probably won't have the scores to beat Chris... The Thai skater thought, reaching forward to pull himself down on top of one leg, the other stretched out straight behind himself, Ahh this is so stressful! Why couldn't I have gone to Rostelecom instead of Skate America!? Even if I couldn't beat Otabek, I could've beaten JJ for the Silver...! Maybe...!? Then getting Silver here wouldn't be a big deal cuz I'd already have one instead of a Bronze!

He was practically a puddle of wiggly, anxious Jell-O, almost crying where he was on the floor.

"Yuri!"

Phichit flailed in surprise like a fish jumping out of the water, landing on his back in a nervous heap. Celestino tilted his head at the skater, looking up from his tablet.

Yuri blinked at him, but then rose to standing as he spotted the Russian legend coming towards them all. He turned to where Phichit was trying to roll back up to sitting, "I'm off, then. I'm going to go sit in the audience with Yurio and the others since I'm not on Coach-Duty today, but I'll come back down when Viktor heads to the kiss and cry, alright?"

The Thai skater was slouching over his parted, outstretched legs, "...Okay..." He whimpered.

The older figure hesitated a moment, but then went down to crouch on one knee and put his hands on his friend's shoulders, getting him to look up, "Phichit-kun...go out there and do your best. I saw your FS from Skate America and it's really good! Chris only beat you by 3 points there."

"I know..." Phichit sighed, "It's his Trophée de France score I'm worried about. He already has me beat in the Short Program, and his Free Skate was really good, too..."

"Wasn't enough to beat Yurio for the Silver though. You still have a good shot." Yuri pointed out, then leaning forward to hug his arms around the skater's head and neck, "Ganbatte, ne? You have to make Celestino wear that hamster-hat."

Dark hazel eyes blinked up at the sound of those words, and Phichit tried to smile despite his nerves, "That's true. Thanks, Yuri...I'll see you later, then."

The older skater nodded and got back up to his feet, stepping into his partner's outstretched arm and walked off quietly with him. He sighed loudly when they were out of ear-shot, drawing in a little closer as they headed towards the empty hall around the arena. When they were around the last corner, Yuri turned on his heel and buried his face against the man's team jacket, "Why does Yakov want to meet you so much earlier than you suggested anyway? You're in Group 2 today...that's at least an hour and a half from now..."
"Because he thinks it'll take longer than 30 minutes for me to get ready." Viktor answered, loosely draping his arms over his husband's shoulders, "Maybe he's right."

"...I was really hoping you'd be able to watch Group 1 with us, and then just take off during the break..." The younger skater lamented.

"Me too." The Russian nodded, rubbing his cheek across the top of his partner's head, "But every minute that passes is a minute closer to being done."

"Please don't get hurt." Yuri finally said, fingers holding tighter to the man's jacket.

"Yuri."

He didn't want to let go, but he could feel a hand leaving his back, coming up to his shoulder again, two soft fingers gliding down the side of his jaw until he gave in and looked up. It pained him to see the Russian smiling, given what he was about to go do to himself, and he could feel the tears starting to rise at the inside corners of his eyes, "I know you can handle the rest...but please, please don't get hur-"

The Russian quieted him the only way he knew how, and pulled his left hand up to weave it through that raven hair, cupping his palm against the back of his partner's head to hold him still. He held there until he could feel the fingers clutching at his coat ease off a little, leaning aside then to whisper into the man's ear, "This is the safest place we can be outside the Ice Castle...maybe even more so, because of all the people here who can step in and help right away if something does somehow go wrong."

"I know... I'm...sorry..." Yuri said nervously, trying to rub his eyes to hide his shame, "I'm letting my anxiety about this get the better of me again."

"If it hadn't been for yesterday, I'd tell you there was nothing to worry about. Trying to convince you not to worry would just be an insult to why you're worrying at all though, so I won't." Viktor went on, "It means a lot to me that you feel this way. But please, Yuri..." He leaned his face down to touch their foreheads and nose-tips together, "...Don't let all this stuff behind the scenes ruin everything for you. Skating is what we live for, right? One man doesn't have the power to take the fun of competition from us. So...go find Yurio and Minako-sensei, and try to enjoy being just a fan today. Don't think about what you're missing, or about what's happening out of sight, and I'll see you again after the kiss and cry."

The younger man nodded quietly, closing his eyes where he could still feel his husband's bangs against his skin, drawing in a slow breath before opening them again, "I wish I could be there to see the look on Konstantin's face when you show him why they call you a legend."

"Tell Uncle Mimi to get a photo since he's babysitting tonight."

"We could add some of those hideous SnapChat filters to the picture. Like the dog-nose with the big tongue...and the ears."

Viktor couldn't help but laugh at that, though the jostle dislodged a tear from his grey lashes, falling to his partner's cheek before he could stop it, "Oh Yuri...I really hate leaving you like this..."

"You have unfinished business to contend with." The younger skater said quietly, hands coming up from the man's jacket to settle palms against pale cheeks, "Go heal yourself. I'll be waiting for you when you're done."

The Russian nodded, savoring that last kiss for everything it was worth.
"The score for Myrick Rhys Sayer...182.43."

Applause rose up from the audience for the Welsh skater. He looked disappointed though, burying his face into the petals of a bouquet of flowers in his hands as his coach tried to cheer him up.

Phichit watched nervously as he stepped towards the rink entrance with Celestino close behind. He reached up with anxious hands towards the zipper-tab near the front of his throat, and gently tugged it down so he could pull the team jacket away.

"Next on the ice tonight, representing Thailand...Phichit Chulanont."

Whistles and cheers greeted him as he pulled off his blade-guards and stepped out onto the ice, waving at the audience pleasantly before turning back towards the rink-wall. When he pulled his hands down though, all he could see was how much they were shaking.

Celestino reached out to calm his nerves by clasping his fingers lightly around his student's forearms, "Of all the skaters here, you have the best chance at gold."

"But Vikt-"

"Don't worry about him. You're playing to win...he's playing to survive. How badly do you want to get into the Final again?"

"Really bad!" Phichit insisted, lifting his head, a worried but determined look on his face.

"Do you want it bad enough to score over 205 tonight?"

"O-Over 205!? Is that how high I have to go to beat Chris for the 6th spot!?"

"Yes, but remember...tonight, you're aiming to beat Viktor, not Chris. If you go out there thinking Viktor's already beaten you, you'll just sabotage yourself, so do your best and make him fight for it, okay?" Celestino advised, pulling the skater's right hand up to clasp it between both of his, giving the back of it a quick pat before spinning him around on his shoulders to point him towards the center of the rink.

"...Okay!"

Yuri watched from the high part of the audience, sitting with the proverbial Three Musketeers from their corner-side box seats, just above the covered-over hockey scoreboard. From their vantage, they could see the entire rink unobstructed, and the only other people nearby were event staffers and people manning the bird's-eye television cameras. To the skater's left, his Russian counterpart...to the right, his former ballet instructor, and beyond her, his uncle-in-law. Both Minako and Mikhail had the presence of mind to get seat cushions after the previous day, so Yuri didn't feel bad about bringing his and Viktor's for himself and Yurio to use.

The nervous skater sat forward in his seat and cupped his hands around his mouth as he saw Phichit making his way around to center, "GANBAAAAA! PHICHIT-KUUUUUUUN!"

The ice-bound figure lifted his head, but couldn't tell where the holler had come from, so he just
waved as well as he could, hoping Yuri would know it was for him, and then finally took his spot over the NHK logo.

His outfit was a stark departure from the Thai-inspired 'King' outfit from his Short Program, though it was still elaborate in its own way. It looked more like a man's ballet costume, with a delicately embroidered jacket, pearl and crystal over a white base, with gold and silver braided ribbons sewn to the front, shoulders, back, and down the arms in elaborate twists. The sleeves were flared at the wrists, with several inch-long tear-drop crystals of clear and dark blue hanging off the ends. The leggings were plain, adding to the ballet-theme, though the skater had spared himself the unintended focus by making them only as tight as his 'Shall We Dance' ensemble, with covers that went over each of his dark boots.

The skater's starting position was similar to a ballerina's 3rd position, one heel in front of the other, left arm up in an arc, the right out to the side, but he bent himself over, as though the pose were in a bowing position.

Minako had a hand over her chin as she watched it, "...What's he doing, Yuri?"

"Both of his programs this year are based on different kinds of dances. The one from yesterday was Thai theater, this one is traditional ballet. They're both connected by the theme he describes as 'rising up and being better than you were.' After he got last year's 'The King and the Skater' out of his system, he wanted to go back to his roots and do some stuff that reminded him of his own upbringing into figure skating." The skater answered, "It's pretty different, that's for sure."

['Shatter Me' - Lindsey Stirling Feat. Lzzy Hale]

Phichit drew in one last deep breath, and the music began, echoing into the rafters of the stadium with the sound of a wind-up toy being cranked three times before a chime started. With each 'crank,' the skater rose slightly more upright, looking stiff and robotic like a wind-up toy would. As the chime began, he toe-picked forward, bringing his arms down, then twisting around backwards as he came around the first arc around the short end of the rink.

_I pirouette in the dark_

He twizzled three times, splaying his arms out on the exit.

_I see the stars through a mirror_

A violin began playing overhead, and the skater twisted and turned in time with it, skates scratching the ice as he went.

_Tired mechanical heart, beats 'til the song disappears_

The beat started rising, and Phichit's speed increased as well, footwork becoming more intense as he glided across the rink.

_Somebody shine a light, I'm frozen by the fear in me_
_Somebody make me feel alive_

Outside spread-eagle...

_And shatter me...!_

...Triple Axel, landing into another outside spread-eagle.
So cut me from the line, dizzy, spinning endlessly

A combo of twizzles, 3 forward inside followed by 3 forward outside.

Somebody make me feel alive...

He flew through the forward cross-cuts as he passed the opposite end of the rink, and twisted into an inside 3-Turn, standing on his right back outside edge with the left leg out behind himself...

...and shatter me...!

Quad toe-loop on the base-drop.

The audience cheered wildly for the quad, propelling the skater forward on the rush of excitement. He moved through another expressive arc of footwork, arms moving in wide sweeps, extending as far as they could go on the emphasis of each loud thrum of the beat. He quickly moved down the center of the rink, twisting over himself several times before finally moving into a 3-turn and...

Shatter me!

Triple Lutz, triple Toe-loop combo with a long exit, leg extended far behind. He brought it down to thrust into a tight figure-8 of inside spread-eagles, kicking out again to build up speed.

Somebody make me feel alive, and shatter me...

As the singer's voice faded slightly with the power of the background music, Phichit slid into a Spiral maneuver, left leg high out ahead of himself as he skated backwards, arms behind and stretched out, fingers extended. When the leg came down, he arced only slightly and set the skate down, throwing his right leg into the triple Axel, and descended immediately into his step sequence.

If only the clockwork could speak, I wouldn't be so alone

The program was already starting to wear him down, sweat beading on his forehead, but he knew that to get his spot in the Final, he'd have to push through with everything he had. Feet were a blur beneath him, hips twisting, arms all but flailing to the music.

We'd burn every magnet and spring, and spiral into the unknown...

At the end of the sequence, he volleyed himself into a difficult-entry sit spin, leaping as high as he could for the death-drop flying entry, and going immediately into the twist variant, one arm rising to the rafters.

Somebody shine a light

The world was a blur all around him, but he pressed on, spinning as fast as he could, No one likes a slow-spin. Those are boring. If I want to win this...I have to excite them! FASTER!

He rose up from there into a swift upright-spin, grabbing the left blade with his right hand as the left hand went above himself. The captured blade kicked out, and Phichit used the force to hop slightly for extra difficulty, using his upper body to go faster again as he dipped into the arms-out camel-spin variant.

I'm frozen by the fear in me

A quick burst of energy, and the Thai skater was off in a line again, arcing out of the spin with deep side-lunges until he could see down the long-line center of the rink.
Somebody make me feel alive

He lowered himself into a knee-slide, spinning around twice before rising up, setting up his blade on the inside-edge, and kicked off for the triple Flip, single Loop, triple Salchow combination jump, This is it... He thought nervously, legs starting to burn, This marks the start of the second half... I gambled and put most of my harder jumps towards the end of the program for bonus points, but will it be enough!? He could hardly feel his feet anymore, never mind the blades beneath them.

And shatter me
So cut me from the line; dizzy, spinning endlessly

Outside, standing all-but-alone in the snowy cold, Viktor could hear Yakov speaking... His heart was already starting to pound in frustration. News of how the skating community was reacting to his Short Program, their speculation about it being the end of his career, some even blaming Yuri's 'coaching' as his worst possible idea, and to go back to Yakov and St. Petersburg full-time. Not many seemed to understand that the position was honorary, not literal. That the fandom would blame his husband for his own failures on the ice...it was maddening. He thought, fists clenched where he held them in his jacket pockets, Yuri's the only reason I'm even skating this year and they...have the audacity to say he's dragging me down!? KONSTANTIN DID THIS. Everything the skater saw in his mind...the media mob doing the interview, himself in the kiss and cry getting his poor score...all of it, the shadow of his father loomed over everything like a dark, corrupting stain.

Somebody make me feel alive, and shatter me...!

Phichit threw himself into a quad Salchow, landing deep with the sweeping leg. He turned and flew down the ice, arms continuing to mimic the moves of ballerinas. The violin-drop coordinated each step, pausing on a few only to fault back again.

Shatter me!

He pressed into a mohawk and leapt into the triple Flip, triple Loop combo, moving out quickly again with the beat, his body thrashing like a wind-up toy trapped under glass, desperate to get out.

Somebody make me feel alive, and shatter me...

When the music shifted, the skater switched stances, pushing himself into a backwards camel-spin.

If I break the glass then I'll have to fly

He reached back for his blade, holding it firm behind his head for the donut-spin variant, raising one arm up as well. He could feel himself starting to slow down though, so as he let go of the skate, he dipped down to throw the leg out again and build momentum. Back in position, he twisted his core and faced the ceiling for the layover variant.

There's no one to catch me if I take a dive

Rotations were making the skater dizzy, but he pressed on, moving back to normal camel-spin position and hopping to change feet, and reaching back for the half-Biellmann.

I'm scared of changing, the days stay the same

He moved out backwards to regain his bearings, keeping his arms and free leg loose as he hopped into the second required step sequence.
The world is spinning but only in gray, if I break the glass then I'll have to fly
There's no one to catch me if I take a dive, I'm scared of changing, the days stay the same
The world is spinning but only in gray

Phichit slid closely along the edge of the wall, flying past the judges tables like the wind. When he came out past them, he descended into an extended hydroblade, getting as close to the ice as he could while keeping his arms up above his sides.

Somebody shine a light, I'm frozen by the fear in me
Somebody make me feel alive, and shatter me

His last jump of the program was the one he was dreading the most, but this late in the program, even if he fell or over-rotated, the single-point mandatory deduction would be eaten by the second-half point bonus. He twisted on his blades, putting himself onto a left back inside edge, feeling the cold air blow by him. The music seemed to fade out for a moment as he crossed the right skate behind the left, feeling the energy building up in his shoulders as the blade moved across the ice. He dipped low, almost so far as to look like he was sitting, and then pushed everything he had into the jump.

One...two...three...four...

...and he fell. The audience winced; the quad Loop had almost gone through, but they clapped when they saw him get up quickly to continue with the end of the program like he'd hardly noticed it.

Yuri fell back into his seat, "So close!"

So cut me from the line, dizzy, spinning endlessly
Somebody make me feel alive, and shatter me

Minako was waving her Thai flag around, "Go Phichit!"

Yurio had his feet up on the railing, and watched dutifully.

Mikhail still had no idea what he was looking at for the most part, but it was still fun. At least, as fun as it could be considering he wasn't watching half of it, keeping an eye out for other things.

Shatter me...!

The exhausted skater threw himself into his final element, vaulting as high as he could for the flying entry into the sit spin and extending his leg as he bent himself over it with his arms extended, the ice whirring away beneath him as he shifted his blade to change edges. He dipped lower, bending over the extended leg completely, grabbing it and tilting his head down. When he felt the 8th rotation, he twisted up and brought his extended leg back behind himself, grabbing it from underneath this time to hold it behind his grounded skate.

Somebody make me feel alive

He rose up for the finale, releasing the blade as he stood, and pushing himself into the final scratch-spin, both arms up above his head.

And shatter me!

On the final thrum of the beat, Phichit dug in his toe-pick and came to an abrupt stop, arms coming down and then thrust up and out, head held high.

The music was gone, and for a second, all the skater could hear was the sound of his own desperate
gasps for air, and the rush of blood in his ears, his heart pounding like a hammer in his chest.
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED NINE

Phichit sat anxiously in the kiss and cry, feet tapping on the ground in quick succession. His hands were balled into fists under his chin, and he could feel them shaking through where he'd pulled his jacket's sleeves over them, biting at the fabric. Celestino had his head held high, waiting just as nervously, but not letting it show.

"The score for Phichit Chulanont..."

Even the audience went silent as the announcer's voice echoed overhead.

Yuri was standing on the ledge, breath caught in his throat.

"...201.76. His total score is 294.30. He is currently in first place."

The crowd went wild with excitement...but Phichit was paralyzed.

"This is a new personal best score by the Thai skater! Both his Free Skate and final total are season highs for him!" Newscaster Morooka spoke to the television audience, "But it seems like Skater Phichit isn't that impressed!"

Newscaster Oda leaned closer to the microphone at their desk by rinkside, watching the kiss and cry with a finger over his thin lip, "This late in the Grand Prix Series, most skaters know what their standing is in the lists. If Skater Phichit takes Gold here at NHK, he guarantees himself a spot at the Final, but if he takes Silver, he will be losing it to Swiss skater Christophe Giacometti by a narrow margin."

"That's right." Morooka agreed, "Those in our home-viewing audience who are unfamiliar or new to figure skating...the Grand Prix Final is the penultimate competition for the figure skating season, second only to the World Championships in early Spring. Each discipline going to the Final has only 6 participants, and getting into that Final Six comes after each skater performs at two different unique international competitions leading up to it. Skater Phichit took Bronze at Skate America a few weeks ago, giving him 11 points on the Grand Prix scoreboard. Gold medalists get 15 points, and Silver medalists get 13, but in the event that two skaters going into the Final have the same GP Points, a tie-breaker is initiated."

"Yes. Sometimes the decision is easy, such as when one skater gets Silver at both events, but their competition gets Bronze and Gold, giving both of them 26 points. The Gold medalist will be awarded the win by default. If it's the same medals though, a choice is made by looking at the total of the athletes' combined performance scores at each of their events."

"Skater Christophe took Silver at Skate America and Bronze at Trophée de France, so he has a total of 24 GP points. If Skater Phichit wins Gold today, with his Bronze medal from before, he'll have a total of 26 points, but if he gets Silver, he'll be tied at 24 for the 6th slot."

"Exactly. So, looking at their performances, Skater Chris has a combined total of 581.82, and Skater Phichit now has a total of 580.83, just narrowly missing the mark to beat the tie-breaker. He'll need to take home Gold today to get into the Final, and there's still a lot of stiff competition out there, including five-time consecutive World Champion Viktor Nikiforov, who is skating in Group 2."

"Let's take a look at who's on the ice next, then. Looks like Julian Madrano from Spain. He scored
82.32 at yesterday's Short Program...

Phichit couldn't lift his eyes from the ground as he stepped out of the kiss and cry to go back into the prep area. The pit in his stomach felt like it was going right through him. All he could think about was the fall on his last jump.

That was an automatic 1.0 point deduction...and that's all I missed the mark by... A single point...

When they got back to the benches with their gear, the skater slumped heavily into his chair and pulled out his phone.

"I have the strangest sense of déjà vu right now..." Celestino noted, looking down on his nervous athlete, "Yuri looked just like this after his Free Skate in Sochi. You're not going to wander off and ignore everything I say now, are you?"

Phichit glanced up, "...No..." He turned back towards his phone and closed it down again with a heavy sigh, "...Maybe I should've tried for a quad Flip. Even with a fall, the base value after the deduction would still have gotten me over the edge..."

"And if you fell on a quad Flip, you'd feel like your guts were in your throat, and you might've been too winded to finish the program, in which case you'd have lost by even more points." The coach pointed out, "Take everything in stride. Nothing's set in stone yet. You reset two of your personal best scores today. You should be proud."

"...It's going to be hard going back to Detroit if I'm not part of the line-up."

"Oh, you're going anyway?" The older man quirked a brow, "When did that happen?"

"It was Yuri's idea after Trophée de France. He thought we should both go, no matter what. Him and Viktor said they'd pay my way so we could go together after going back to Hasetsu for the week." Phichit leaned back in the chair, slouching as he slid down the hard plastic, "Chris takes his shows so much more seriously when he's competing directly against Viktor...his SP score in Bordeaux..."

"The day isn't over yet, Phichit. Keep your head up."

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The zamboni was trailing towards the rink exit as the skaters from Group 2 were starting to gather. Leo was first up, followed by Viktor, then the lone Japanese skater, Yoshio Yamanaka, followed by the remaining 4 members of the 7-man second skate-group. Only 6 members of the group were at the rink-side curtain though, stretching their arms and chatting with each other and their coaches as they waited for the announcement to start their last practice.

The rink-wall clicked closed, and one of the event staffers waved to a box on the uppermost level of the arena.

"Skaters from Group 2 may now enter the rink for a 6-minute warm-up."

Yuri had his eyes on that curtain like a hawk waiting for a prairie-dog to stick its head up, but was apprehensive to find that his husband wasn't one of the skaters to come out, "Where is he...?"
Yurio looked up from where he was thumbing on his phone, "Yakov says they ran into Konstantin on the way back inside. They'll be out in a second."

"What!?" The older skater was almost jumping off the ledge to get out of his seat, but like once before, the blonde simply reached across with one arm and defiantly refused to let the man stand, "Yuri, I have t-"

"Stay where you are. You'll just mess Viktor up if you go down there and try to save him from nothing. Yakov says they'll be out in a minute...that means Viktor is fine." The Russian Tiger instructed flatly, turning his elbow to press it against the older figure's gut and force him down again, "You said you didn't want to be the one to get him all riled up in the first place...do you want to be the one to break his focus instead?"

"No..."

"Then sit down and stay down."

It was no use resisting. Mikhail was walking past them anyway, phone against his ear as he headed for the exit stairs.

The arena, with its circular design, inevitably lead back to the main entrance if the path was walked long enough. As such, when the silver Russian skater had finished getting changed and fluffed for the competition, that's where he found himself.

Yakov stood nearby, quietly looking between where Viktor was standing, and over to where the loose collection of spectators were returning to their seats. A few had stopped when they saw Viktor watching them, and waved excitedly from their side of the barrier, shouting their well wishes and adulation, but slowly paused and quietly slinked away when they saw that angry expression on his face. Within the group that was coming back in from outside though, a huge dark shape was easy to single out, and Viktor had his eyes set on it, unblinking, not even having noticed the fans from moments before.

The same slate-blue eyes that looked on were staring right back, and Konstantin stood perfectly still when he realized he'd been spotted. He only moved again when he felt the phone vibrating in his pocket, and withdrew it to see it was Mikhail calling.

From the 50 odd feet away that the silver skater was standing down the hall, he couldn't even hope to know what was being said on that call, but it was easy to figure out after a few more moments when Mikhail showed up. After that, those cold, icy Russian eyes were fixed on the both of them.

"Vitya, you'll completely miss the warm-up if we don't go." Yakov said simply, trying to get the athlete's attention.

"There they are." Viktor answered quietly, his tone dark and distrusting, "...The two men who ruined my childhood, and who destroyed my faith in the idea of family."

Yakov knew better than to try and contest the description in that moment, Normally I'd remind him that family is what you make, not what you're born into...but he needs to keep this energy up if he plans to go through with this skate. Vitya...

The pair of dark-clad Russians looked on quietly at their descendent, but no one tried to say anything. Instead, Mikhail shook his head and said something inaudible to his much larger counterpart, turning to go back into the arena with the bear following slowly behind. Viktor only let himself move again when the two were out of his sight, and he turned grimly on his blade-guards to
head through the back entrance to the prep area, flame-themed coat-tails fluttering and rustling behind his legs as he went.

Skaters were already on the ice when Viktor finally came through the heavy blue curtain, but they paid no attention, going around the ice for those few allotted minutes. The coaches and event staff, however, who stood between the curtain and the rink entrance...they made a hasty retreat to create a path for the dark-eyed Russian.

Whispers and quiet utterances rose all around him as he stepped through, but Viktor kept his face tilted down, looking like a predator on the hunt, left eye completely hidden under his silver-grey bangs.

People in the audience weren't even sure if they should applaud or cheer for him once those gold blades took to the ice, seeing how tightly-wound he was just by how he moved. The complete lack of greeting to them was odd enough in itself for the normally-excitable skater, but the Russian wouldn't deviate. His mind was set, and the only time he looked up was in a meager effort to find out where his uncle and father were.

Yuri watched quietly, still feeling where Yurio's elbow was just an inch away from his side where they sat together. He lifted his hands to his face and pulled down slightly as the uneasy feeling grew in him like lava bubbling at the top of a volcano.

"Simmer down." The teen grumbled, nudging him with that elbow slightly, "He isn't even doing anything y-"

A wave of ice blasted away from the Russian's skates as he stopped hard on the sides of his blades, pushing off and flying forward with all his strength only to do it again a short distance away. Other skaters were pausing to gawk at him, wondering if Viktor had confused NHK Trophy for NHL playoff championships, especially since he hadn't practiced any of his jumps to that point.

"Are you gunning for the Gold medal or the Stanley Cup, Viktor!?" One of them asked, trying to tease, but only getting a cold shoulder in response. The skater simply puffed his chest out and went on about his practice like the Russian hadn't blown him off entirely.

Yuri just sunk in his chair like a melting ice sculpture, whining pitifully, "He's even more wound-up than at Trophée de France... I feel weird saying I wish we could switch Konstantin for Sophia..."

"That concludes the warm-up period. All skaters, except the first participant, please make your way off the ice."

"Here we go..." Minako said, watching with similarly nervous eyes as the 'Living Avatar of Indignation' made his way to the exit.

Leo had slipped over to rink-side where his coach was waiting, getting his pep-talk as the last remaining skaters cleared the area. A few sweepers in light-blue skating dresses moved quickly across the ice to find and collect any last gifts that might've been thrown out there by fans, then left the rink as well.

"The first participant of the Men's Singles Free Skate, Group 2, representing the United States...Leo de la Iglasia."

Cheering followed, and the Hispanic skater pushed excitedly off the wall. His outfit looked a lot like a symphony conductor's, with a wide red sash-style belt, and knee-length coat-tails hanging off the back. When he took his stance in the center of the rink, he held his feet close together and his hands
up, as though getting ready to lead a concert.

['Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 18' - Sergei Rachmaninoff - the one on YouTube with the photo of a greyscale daisy on a black background.]

The music was too calm. When Viktor heard it, he grit his teeth and went rummaging for his phone, putting in his ear-buds before he could even get the device on long enough to load his playlists. Yakov kept a close eye between the skater and those who were curiously watching him, wondering amongst themselves why he looked so peeved. When the silver Russian finally had his Rage Skate theme playing though, it seemed to take the edge off his brief tranquility, and he stood quietly in abject fury for the peace others enjoyed in those moments.

Phichit was off to the side with his coach still, skates still on in likelihood of his needing to glide out to the podium later, but keeping his distance. Instead, he just quietly pulled his phone out and sent a message to Yuri, [Viktor looks like he's two misplaced words away from putting his fist through someone's face.]

The older skater felt the buzz in his pocket, and when he saw the text, his brow wrinkled into a worried look, but thumbed his reply, [Yeah... That's why I'm not on coach duty right now. I can't stand to see him so upset, but this is the frame of mind he needs to be in to do his FS.]

[This can't be healthy. I know you said that his program was supposed to be a way for him to release all the pent up negative energy in his system, but the way he's going about it, it's like he's feeding it into himself on purpose. Why is he doing this to himself?]

[It's his 'Rage Skate.' He wants to be furious when he does it. I told him that I couldn't stand to help him be that way anymore, so he cut me loose.]

[Wow...] Phichit was surprised at the words, [That's not a problem between you guys, is it?] [No...] Yuri answered, half an eye on Leo's performance far below, [He did it to spare me. Yakov is helping him this time...I'm supposed to swoop in at the end and save Viktor from himself, I guess. Bring him back to the surface after he's spent over an hour trying to drown himself.]

[...And this is supposed to be a good thing, right?] [Like you said yesterday...it's probably cathartic for him. ...I HOPE it is, anyway...]

[I said that without knowing he was going to do this much hurt to himself first though. I can only wonder how much he's been through to make him this mad. He always seemed like such a happy guy before.]

[He wants to be like that again. The last year has been pretty exhausting. Every time we found a moment of normalcy, something would come up that threw it all in the air again. He's washing his hands of it all once the Free Skate's done. I'm not sure what that really means to him, but I'm hopeful he's going to cut himself off from the things that did this to him. I don't want to watch him suffer anymore.]

[Srsly.]

The music for Leo's program came to a quiet close, and the skater moved over to the kiss and cry after taking his bows. That signaled the Russian's approach towards the rink-side entrance. It seemed like the entire prep area went quiet, such that everyone nearby could hear nothing but the sound of footsteps on rubber blade-guards thunking across the polished concrete floor, followed by the wispy shifting of the curtain as Yakov pulled it back. Everyone watched with nervous, quiet eyes as the
skater stepped through and vanished to rink-side, then let out those held-in breaths once he was finally out of sight. The atmosphere of the prep area changed completely once the Russian was gone from it, and they all went quickly to the televisions to watch the show.

"The score for Leo de la Iglesia...172.43. He is currently in second place."

Though knowing it wasn't enough to get him into the Final Six, the skater still seemed impressed with the possibility that he could still get on the podium. At least...until he had to pass Viktor to get back to the prep area and out of the way. The energy around the Russian skater was like that of a wraith; a circle extending about 2ft all around him was like an aura where all happiness died.

Yuri could see how Leo and his coach dodged the man like a pair of starlings avoiding the sudden lunge of an eagle. It was fitting, in that case, given that the Russian coat-of-arms embroidered into the back of Viktor's team jacket was a two-headed eagle. No one but Yakov seemed to dare to get anywhere near the maligned athlete, everyone else giving him a wide berth anywhere he went. Blade-guards and that jacket came off quickly though, and the silver legend stepped out onto the ice.

"Hopefully these idiots will fill in the gouges he's going to leave behind this time." Yurio commented snidely, "If they don't, everyone who skates after him will be tripping over the cracks."

"Worried about the performances of the competition suddenly?" Minako mused, looking over Yuri's mop of spiky black hair to glance at the teen.

Yurio just guffawed, "There won't be any competition if it's just a bunch of amateurs falling on their asses cuz their blades got caught and they tripped."

"...I guess that's why you came and filled the cracks that one time in St. Petersburg?" Yuri wondered, looking aside as well, remembering that day when he and Viktor had been practicing Duetto like it was yesterday, and he himself had 'fallen on his ass cuz his blade got caught and he tripped.'

"You had decided not to retire after all, so when my original plan of making you feel like shit about it fell through, I realized I couldn't just let you get yourself disqualified over an injury instead." The blonde shrugged, "Also I wanted to make you two idiots feel like idiots for skating on pock-marked ice. How could you not have noticed?"

"...I was still a bit salty about the RSF conference." The older skater admitted, watching his husband ignore the crowd as he skated a few circles around the rink, pulling his gloves on as he went, "Plus, I hadn't been in St. Petersburg that long yet, so I was still looking at it like it was some grand, perfect Wonderland. I hadn't noticed the imperfections in the ice yet...or the city."

"So then what is it now?" Yurio cocked a brow and turned to face the man better.

"An old place with a lot of old problems...some newer than others..." Yuri answered, an edge to his nervous voice, "Most that can't be fixed with shaved ice, a hockey puck, and a spray-bottle of water."

The Russian skater hadn't bothered getting a last word from Yakov before finding his place over the NHK logo. The last thing he did before signaling his readiness to start was look around the audience one last time for the dark blotches he was going to perform for. It took a moment, but Viktor finally settled that one slate-blue eye on the black-clad bear standing near one of the exit tunnels, the smaller one standing nearby. That one eye narrowed, the other hidden entirely behind his bangs, and he sneered quietly to himself at the both of them.

Mikhail winced to see it, and he lowered his head away to avoid the steely-eyed glare.
Konstantin had gotten used to his son's indignation though, so the death-stare didn't bother him.

Viktor finally turned away from them though and returned his focus to the ice, drawing in a deep breath. Arms came up to shoulder-level, palms down, and then converged in front of him as they went down again, thumbs nearly touching where they stopped. Eyes closed, the breath slowly exhaled again...and the music began.
"Next on the ice tonight, representing Russia...Viktor Nikiforov."

Internally, the audience was wild with excitement, but externally, they weren't sure if they were even allowed to clap. Viktor had entirely ignored them during warm-ups and while he was getting into position. Instead, they waited for a cue from the man, and then cut loose with the storm of applause once he lifted his head. From the middle of the rink though, his angry expression was hard to see by anyone watching the show from the stands. Those watching it on television, however...

*There they are*, Viktor thought to himself, spotting his father and uncle near one of the only open exit tunnels in the arena. Slightly above them and to the left, the huge screen with a close-up shot of his R.B.F. on full display. He turned away from them and tightly pulled on his second glove, flexing his fingers as he felt his blades scratch to a stop above the frosty blue NHK logo.

Hands came up and then down again in front of himself, and he closed his eyes.

A few seconds later, the music started overhead, deceptively calm at first...a quiet prelude to the Oncoming Storm. Viktor lifted his head, eyes opening slowly as he went, twisting his right leg around himself in a wide arc as he pivoted over the left. When he came full-circle, he pushed away, skating in reverse with his arms out, the sheer tassels hanging off his wrists flowing like water in a gentle stream.

Every stream has the potential to become a raging force of nature though...and on the sudden, thunderous beat, the Russian dug in the left skate to stop, sending a frosty wave of ice up behind himself as the right blade came down in a wide arc, cracking against the ice like a hammer on an anvil. Hands were balled up into fists, arms fully extended as crystalline shards rose, sparkling and dazzling, into the air in front of those burning blue eyes.
So wild, so beautiful and pure

Arms twisted to go palm-up as his fingers extended and he rose up over that right leg, hands descending again around himself as he turned on that blade, raising up the left skate in its place.

All elements divine

The second golden blade slammed down onto the ice, kicking up another flurry of ice. He quickly burst forward after that, practically running on his toe-picks for a few steps before hopping to spin around backwards, picking up speed as quickly as he could before throwing himself into a 3-turn...

The essence of all life
He vaulted off the outside edge of his left skate, kicking the right toe-pick down and throwing himself into the four spins as hard as he could, both arms above his head, and landing on the right outside edge.

The crowd went wild, and both newscasters on the side of the rink were cheering for him as well.

"Viktor Nikiforov IS BACK! Quad Rippon Lutz right off the bat, and PERFECT! If he doesn't get a 3+ GOE on that, I don't know what qualifies!"

So vast, extensive and remote

The Russian wasn't done yet; he pushed hard and fast down the center of the rink, twisting and crossing skate over skate, twizzling as though flying, arms up and fluid like wings that carried him.

Unbrided and erratic, savage but glorious

He leaned into a short arc, swerving back down the center of the rink as he skidded in circles across the ice, down on one knee, only to rise up at the end to vault off his back-right inside edge for the quad Flip, triple Loop combo, one arm up for each.

"Two quads already!" Morooka cried out, watching intently, "This isn't the same skater who performed in yesterday's Short Program!"

It bursts, its energy is stirring

Viktor leaned way over into a layback Ina Bauer, pulling up for a brief backward slide before throwing himself into a quad Salchow, triple Loop combo, extending that left leg out for the landing, but then immediately dropping it to the ice for a transition into an outside spread-eagle.

It calls, its drawing power
Will enchant us with its might

As he finished the arc, the skater twisted his blades to start the straight-line transition, picking up speed as he went in reverse in a diagonal across the ice. Feeling the cold air rushing by, whipping that silver hair against his face like hot embers, he kicked up his left leg, bringing it up behind his back like a Martial Artist preparing to kick, but holding it there for a moment by the blade.

Its massive spirit's bright...

When he let it go, he extended the golden knife-boot ahead of himself, and lowered it only to mohawk himself into what could be called his new signature move...a quad Axel.

LET IT FLOW!

"Where is he finding all the stamina for all these quads!? Skater Viktor is redefining the sport right now! SOMEONE STOP HIM!" Morooka teased, "We aren't even out of the first half of the show! We'll never see a performance like this again in our lifetimes!"

Viktor immediately threw himself into a death-drop, landing in a forward camel-spin.

Its endless beauty WILL EVOKE

He extended his arms as he changed edges, and twisted over himself into the layover variant, still spinning quickly.
A timeless sequence we **ALL SHARE**

Hands slid down the length of his frame, finding his free leg and grabbing for the blade with the right, pulling it close to his head as he straightened his core for the donut-spin. His left arm went above himself for the added difficulty.

**We cannot break through NOR CONTROL**

The silver blur finally stood upright again, exiting the slowing spin in time with the slowing tempo of the music.

**But to feel its true soul...dare to concede and to connect...!**

As the energy of the song picked up again, Viktor thrust into the first step sequence, moving along the ice diagonally from one corner to the opposite. The rink was quickly becoming a beaten ruin of its recently-resurfaced self, blades scratching across it like they were forming cracks in broken glass.

**Emerging waves and brightened skies, the sun that burns in your eyes**  
**The wind that blows and pounds**

Blades crossed over each other with perfect control, and the Russian twisted and turned along his straight-line maneuver. The burning in his lungs and legs was matched only by the flames rising up the legs of his outfit, but he ignored all of it. All he could see were the blades he'd been made to throw into that fire, and the sparks and roar of the maelstrom that consumed them for weeks on end.

Arms moved up and away as the Russian twisted his core, hips swaying to let his free leg clip the ice with a toe-pick on every other beat of the song, sending a cut of frost with each attack.

**It shines, its energy is whirling**  
**It fights, will not be interfered with people who can't feel,**  
**It is all nature's flow**

The silver legend moved in an arc around the short end of the rink, twisting slightly into a set of back crossovers, and pinning himself down on his back left inside edge, right leg out behind. A swift kick, avoiding the toe-pick on the ice, Viktor threw himself...

**LET IT FLOW !**

...up into the quad Salchow, landing on the beat and skating out backwards with it.

"That's his 5th quad! He's going to wear himself out!" Oda called, each of the pair of newscasters inching forward on their seats along with almost everyone in the audience, "Or will he go for the 6th like Canadian skater, JJ Leroy!?"

**It's endless beauty WILL EVOKE**

Another death-drop, but this time the flying entry was for a sit-spin, increasing the difficulty over the flying camel-spin. The Russian raked his toe-pick across the ice as he landed in a backwards rotation, kicking up a wall of frost and icy shards in its wake and leaving a deep gouge in the ice as well. His fury was all that made it possible to keep the spin moving after so much resistance, cutting through the cold like a hot knife, leaning his core to push the spin into a twist variant. The left arm curved behind himself as the right curved up, touching the top of his head.

A timeless sequence we **ALL SHARE**
As his arms came in and his core uncoiled, he stretched his free leg out perfectly straight, crouching overtop of it as the spin went on with one arm raised above himself. Several rotations in, the free leg bent again and Viktor rose up a little to pull it in and pin it over his knee. He threw his arms to add a bit of momentum, left arm curving up and out, right curving back and down as he spun.

**We cannot break through NOR CONTROL**

The silver skater rose back up out of the spin, body facing forward as his free leg kicked around one last time, 'dragging' the rest of his posture with it. Both arms were up ahead of himself as he started moving backwards again, turning his head to look over his shoulder as he quickened his pace around the short end of the rink.

He was officially into the second half of the program now. Fatigue was increasing, and still, he refused to acknowledge it. The fire in his body was energy, *not* pain...at least not yet.

The music calmed into a deceptively somber lull, but Viktor wasn't done yet. Blades crossed over one another, and the Russian twisted with all his strength, throwing himself into a quad Loop...and then...

**But to feel its true soul...**

Fans went quiet for a moment, not sure they could believe what they were seeing. Viktor had already moved on to his second step sequence, the battle raging on, but everyone else was still stuck on his last jump combo.

"*Did he just...pull a double-quad*?" Morooka asked.

Yuri and Yurio were literally on their feet, grabbing at the railing in front of their seats, those bars of metal being all that stood between them and the void of air ahead of them.

Minako was blinking wide eyes, arms lowering her grasp on the Russian flag in weakened disbelief, "That was..."

*Its endless beauty will evoke, a timeless sequence we all share...*

"A quad Loop, quad Toe-loop!?" Yuri said in a stunned whisper, turning to look at the blonde next to him, "...Is that even possible?"

*We cannot break through nor control, we should cherish it...*

"...That's got an easy 22 point base value...add the 10% second-half bonus...and the added difficulty of the arm being up on both..." Yurio said in disbelief, "That jump combo could be worth almost 30 points on its own."

**LET IT FLOW!**

The Russian threw himself down onto both knees, skidding across the ice in a long line, arms going higher up the further back he bent over his skates. Rising up again, he practically threw himself into a rotating kneeling spin, then rose even further up and pushing through a 3-turn to flip around, putting himself back onto the back-left inside edge of his blades...right leg extended behind himself...toe-pick...!

**LET IT FLOW!**

The world was a blur, and everything was red, but that last jump was landed with the pristine control
of a machine.

"...Absolutely unbelievable...someone call a hospital, because half this audience is having a heart-attack right now..." Morooka said quietly, "Skater Viktor just set a new record...8 quads in a single Free Skate... Getting the first interview with him after he gets off the ice is going to be like winning the lottery!"

This endless beauty WILL EVOKE

The Russian legend pushed into the final element of the program, bending smoothly into the camel-spin and immediately reaching for his blade to pull it across the crook of his abdomen and thigh for the standing donut-spin, both arms out to the sides, head tilted down.

A timeless sequence WE ALL SHARE

He lifted his head and threw the free leg to the side, vaulting onto the foot-change and continuing the spin, but lowering himself to a crouching position and holding his left blade up underneath the right, toe barely missing the ice as he rotated, the other arm up in the air. Several rotations in, he broke up again, starting to rise back to his feet, but not letting go of that blade.

We cannot break through, NOR CONTROL

His left leg came up behind his head for the Biellmann spin, and he reached his other hand up to help hold it. When he finally let it go again to kick it around, Viktor's hands came down across his chest, and he descended briefly to start the swift scratch-spin, free leg slightly out to glide across the ice, leaving a light circle of scratches in the gloss. His arms then started to rise up again, and with every inch further into the air they went, the skater spun faster.

It is not in our command...

The audience was on the edges of their seats, watching the blur starting to lower his arms again.

...NO!

The free leg went toe-pick down into the ice, digging deep and gouging a wedge out of the frost, stopping him almost instantly...but he'd made it into the final position, core slightly twisted over his blades, arms tight and fists clenched at his sides, head bent down to face the ice he'd so relentlessly abused.

He'd almost forgotten how to breathe. His ears were ringing and he could feel his legs shaking where he stood, and with each second that passed, every kilo on his frame doubled and tripled its weight. His chest was a tortured ruin of burning pain, the scorching heat of it rising steadily into his neck until he felt like he'd never be able to speak again. He couldn't even hear the audience screaming all around him, not before the blood rushing through his head started to quiet again.

Despite the anguish of every muscle threatening to burst out of him from the strain...despite the pure, unadulterated torment of every bone in his body wanting to crack and break...the Russian turned on his blades, and faced the direction he knew his 'family' had been watching from.

Heavy breaths went in and out of him like dragonfire, but when he saw those slate blue eyes looking down at him from the high vantage of the arena's exit hall...all that suffering went away. The flame in his soul was no longer a slow-burning corruption...but a cleansing elixir that he could feel pouring out from the center of his chest.
His hands unclenched from where he'd balled them at the sides of his legs, opening and relaxing, turning to face palm-up. Slowly but surely, those hands started to rise up, and with it, the sound of the audience crept into the skater's ears. He could hear the maelstrom of screaming, whistles, cheers, and cries...but there was only one sound he wanted them to make in that moment.

The higher his hands went, the easier it was to hear...buried in the volume of the symphony of adulation, but growing.

"...Viktor...Viktor...Viktor..."

Higher his hands went, now in line with his shoulders. Still, he panted heavily, drawing in air like he couldn't get enough, heart pounding like a raging bull thrashing inside his ribs.

"...VIKTOR...VIKTOR...VIKTOR..."

The bear's eyes drifted for a moment, surprised at the crowd...and in that moment...the skater knew he'd won. He was finally free.

"VIKTOR VIKTOR VIKTOR VIKTOR VIKTOR VIKTOR!"

Gloved hands were as high as they could go, bringing that personal orchestra to a crescendo.

Viktor's expression changed from exhausted fury to pained relief, and he could feel the tears rolling down his cheeks like hot lead, slowly, one after the other. He refused to let the tremble in his legs bring him down, and stared for a moment longer before he turned away, letting his arms fall back down to hang limp against his frame. It was only when he completely turned his back on Konstantin that he gave himself permission to cry out, the final embers of his rage coughed out with a loud, exhausted gasp.

He clasped his hands together and dipped his head, bringing his quivering fists up to press the sides of his thumbs to his forehead. The audience was still a mixture of screams and people chanting his name, and the tears just wouldn't stop. He could feel them falling off his chin, even feeling where a few hit the covers over his boots...and he finally dropped to his knees, utterly and completely done.

It took everything he had left to push back onto his feet and hobble over to the rink-exit, but Yakov was there waiting with his skate-guards, jacket, and water bottle. Viktor could practically hear the fires being fizzled out inside his chest as the water went down, and he bit down on the end of his left glove to free his hand and pour the cold liquid there as well, rubbing it onto his face without a care. The jacket hung off his shoulders as he put the blade-guards in place, and moved quietly over to the kiss and cry.

He was still heaving when he finally fell onto the bench, the wall of corporate logos and flowers behind him. His coach sat next to him, arms crossed, and a stoic look on his face like always.

"Vitya..." Yakov started, turning slightly to glance at him.

Cool eyes turned to side-eye the man, not sure what to expect to hear him say.

"Don't ever do that again." The older Russian finally said, "I'll be leaving the building in an ambulance if you do."

Viktor just coughed a pained laugh, feeling truly how sore his throat was only then. Another wash of the cold liquid soothed his voice, "I don't know that I'll ever be able to do this again." He huffed, "I normally feel like I have a jet engine under my butt when I'm out there...but this time, with my father and uncle watching...it was like a nuclear power plant. I'm sure I'll feel like a disaster in the
morning. I'll be up all night out of fear of going to sleep because of it."

"You pushed yourself way too hard for this." Yakov went on, "I'll be surprised if you can even walk tomorrow."

The younger Russian just laughed and slouched to the side, leaning dramatically against his unofficial coach as he continued to catch his breath. He closed his eyes and waited for his score, not even caring anymore what it was...just seeing the stunned look on his father's face when the audience started chanting his name...that made the whole thing worth it.

Yuri was rushing down to the prep area as fast as his legs could carry him, and he spotted Phichit quickly enough. The skater was huddled around one of the many televisions set up for the participants to watch, and the anxious figure threw himself into the mass and pushed his way through to the front, "Phichit-kun!"

"Yuri, get in here!"

A hand reached through the crowd and grabbed the man's jacket, yanking him slightly to the side until he was **smooshed** against his Thai friend. Each pair of arms went around them as they turned their heads to face the screen, watching anxiously as Team Russia awaited the results.

People held their breath. Hands were cupped in front of mouths, some even in front of eyes, not wanting to see. There wasn't a skater in the room who defied the knowledge of what they all felt was about to happen.

"*The score for Viktor Nikiforov...*"

Phichit and Yuri held onto each other even tighter then, fingers clamping down on jackets as eyes went wide.

"...239.05. He is currently in first place."

"**THAT'S A NEW WORLD RECORD!**" Morooka yelled into the mic; both announcers were on their feet, "*Not only did he shatter the 230 barrier, he nearly broke through to 240!*"

Everyone in the audience was standing, too. Many were stamping their shoes against the floor, adding to the tumultuous, deafening **roar** that had already erupted.

They could hear the thunder of the audience losing their collective minds, but the prep area wasn't quite so noisy. People were in stunned disbelief, choking back coughs as eyes watered, and skaters and their coaches alike stood still in refusal of the number. A few tense seconds passed before anyone was really ready to react properly...and it started with a single person clapping...then two...then several...then nearly everyone.

Yuri turned his eyes, his heart overjoyed but his head filled with new worries.

Viktor just jumped to the top of the leader-board...so that means...

Phichit's expression was a confused mess. He was smiling, and looked happy, but his eyes gave him away. He looked like he was on the verge of tears. The Thai skater hiccuped a nervous breath, but put on a brave face, and turned to glance at his friend, "...Well...that kinda sucks, but...I guess it's fine..." He reached up to rub his eyes on the back of his wrist, team jacket crinkling as it moved, "I'll just...work harder on my Short Program, and try again at Four Continents..."

"Phichit-kun..."
"...I mean...I knew it was a long-shot..." He went on, "Chris and Viktor both have so much more experience than I do... and they have all those quads..."

"You'll get there." Yuri reassured, "You're barely into your second year in the senior division. If Viktor had been in the line-up last year, I wouldn't have even been in the final... I only squeaked in because I got that one Silver over Michelle..." He tried to pat the skater's shoulders to snap him out of it, but Phichit's eyes weren't giving it up.

Rivers were comically flowing down the Thai skater's face, and he smiled in spite of himself, "I'm okay. Everything is... is okay." He said, voice cracking.

"Yuri!" The Russian's voice called.

The young skater lifted his head to glance past his friend, and saw his husband coming through the blue curtain through the parting mass of people. For a moment, Yuri was torn... he wanted to stay by Phichit, but he was desperate for his partner, too. He gave the younger figure a tight hug before finally, reluctantly pulling away, stepping quickly towards the rink-side exit. To the side, he spotted the next competitor looking rather hesitant to go out onto the ice, but his coach was forcing him through.

Viktor had been stepping forward the whole time, one deliberate thunk of his blade-guards against the floor at a time. Yuri thought for sure the man would stop to let them greet each other, but... he was quite mistaken. The Russian simply bowled into him, twisted to the side where the man had bounced off, gathered his partner up and started dragging him along to where his gear was waiting.

"V-Viktor...!?"

"No time to explain. We have to go."

The media mob had less luck than Yuri did at getting the Russian to hold still, barely getting a quick but friendly request for a rain-check from the swiftly-moving skater. One particular bag was quickly yanked up from under a chair, and Viktor was off again, dragging his fully and thoroughly confused husband with him.

Perplexed and surprised eyes followed them until the pair were out of sight.

"...What was that all about...?" One of the other competitors asked, scratching the side of his head.

"Who knows."
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED ELEVEN

Yurio leaned over the banister with a smug look on his face, watching the sweepers and other event staffers checking around the ice and filling in numerous gouges and cracks. Eventually, they had to mark off the worst of them and bring the zamboni out again to make a pass over all of it. The teen's eyes wandered down to where the next skater was still entirely reluctant to go put on his Free Skate.

"Everyone who skates after Viktor is going to pale in comparison." Minako said, verbalizing the Russian Tiger's thoughts, "But...I guess bringing Konstantin here had its silver lining after all."

"Eight quads. Viktor's not human." Yurio quipped, "He used to say that 4 quads were his limit, and that he just didn't have the stamina to put much into the second half of his program except for Loops and Toe-loops. He must've had a serious rage-boner out there to pull this off."

The ballerina's cheeks went pink to think of it, "I don't know if I'd put it like that but...well, sort of." She laughed nervously.

The media mob was easy to lose once the Russian had blown them off, insisting he'd give them all the time they wanted after the medaling ceremony. Yakov just smacked his forehead as his skater disappeared, Yuri in tow. There was nothing that could be done about it though...except for both abandoned parties to realize they were each there, and for the coach to suddenly get bombarded with all the attention.

Viktor just kept going, all but carrying his husband along until he was certain no one was following. They ducked around a corner and waited for a moment in perfect quiet, hearing only the sound of the audience in the arena, and the announcement for the poor skater who had the misfortune of performing next. The Russian unlocked his phone and stuck just the corner of it around the edge of the wall, enough to get a clear view on the camera, and pulled it back to see what it showed.

"No one's coming." He said, relieved, "Let's go."

"...Where are we going? You haven't even let me say anything about your Free Skate!" Yuri protested quietly, feeling his hand getting taken to make him follow, "V-Viktor...!"

The Russian seemed to be on a mission, pulling the hapless younger skater along until he'd finally found a certain familiar hall and the abandoned offices at the end of it. Once inside, Viktor pulled the door to, peered outside one last time just to be sure, and then finally clicked it quietly closed. He dropped his backpack to the floor, and leaned his back against the panel with a deep sigh of relief, pulling a hand up to his chest, "Whew...! It's finally over!"

Blue eyes glanced up, and the dopey-happy look on Viktor's face changed to dopey-happy-but-defensive as he spotted Yuri with his arms crossed staring straight back at him.

"What the heck is going on?" The shorter figure asked, looking around the empty space, "Why are we even back here? You just put on the greatest show this world has ever seen and now you just want to hi-"

Viktor had let Yuri talk for too long already. He listened for a few seconds, but the confused mumblings of a man who hadn't yet gotten the hint were becoming tedious. It took two and a half
steps to thump his skate-guards forward and slide his hands under the shorter skater's arms and around his lower back, pulling the man against himself as he looked down into those brown eyes.

"...Yuri..." He said quietly, thoughtfully, "You're over-thinking things. Didn't we have a deal before?"

"Eh?" The younger man blinked. He'd lightly set his hands against the silver skater's forearms, but he was entirely unsure what to do after that.

"After my Free Skate...you're supposed to help make me feel better again, right?" Viktor teased, though sounding serious, lowering his head where his skates had given him an extra few inches to tower over his husband, speaking the words against the tip of the man's nose, "I know just the thing."

"EH!?" Yuri finally caught on, and for a second, his heart threatened to leap out of his throat, his face turning a shade of deep crimson, "R-Right now!? Here!? But there's only 4 skaters before the medaling ceremony and one of them is already out there!"

"It'll be at least 45 minutes." The Russian purred, teasing the edge of a kiss without fully allowing it, "And I need my Yuri right now."

That one visible slate-blue eye was seductive enough to make resisting almost impossible.

But...being the modest young Japanese man that he was, Yuri still had some wits about him. His right hand came up, quickly putting one finger in front of his partner's lips to stop his advance.

Viktor blinked, but reluctantly let the man go, not sure if he'd done something wrong or not...but when he spotted Yuri looking at the office couches lining the wall, only to get to the end of one and shove it up against the door, he realized his premature feelings of rejection had been for nothing. But his husband wasn't done yet. Yuri grabbed the backpack from where it had been on the floor by the door and tossed it his way, proceeding then to reach for the scarf hanging loosely around his shoulders and slowly pull it off. The Russian was stunned where he stood, hugging his arms around the over-packed bag, watching with intensely curious eyes as the scarf came loose and was discarded on the end of the nearest couch. The heavy coat came off after that, then the hoodie under that, and Yuri loosely rolled them all up next to the scarf. When his arms crossed to pull at the sides of his t-shirt, the skater had already turned around, back facing his enthralled husband.

Yuri had the garment half-pulled-up when he glanced over his shoulder, wondering what the hold-up was, only to see the man's gaze watching intently at every newly-revealed inch of his skin. He paused where he was, the t-shirt slipping down a little bit as he twisted slightly to face the older skater a bit easier, "...What's wrong...?"

"Hah?" Viktor's eyes twitched a bit at the words, and he shook his head to regain his focus. The shirt finally came away, slowly going down the younger man's arms, that pale back now fully bare to his sights. He scanned every contour, every muscle, the ridge of every bone...that perfectly honed core, tight and hard from nearly 2 years of intense physical training. For reasons the Russian couldn't pin down, the sight of his partner in that moment brought tears to his eyes, and he hugged the bag even tighter then, "...Yuri, why are you so perfect...?"

The younger skater saw the look on his husband's face, and smiled sweetly despite his nerves, stepping closer to take hold of the fingers of one hand clenched around the bag, pulling on them gently to make Viktor let it go. When the hand came loose and the arm came forward, Yuri stepped in a little closer, guiding that hand around his side, only letting it go again when he felt those fingers against his waist. Both of his hands went up to the Russian's shoulders after that, settling gently so his thumbs could touch softly to the sides of the man's neck, sliding up a little to get over the collar of
his team jacket and then sliding down again into the folds of fabric. He looked up into the one visible slate-blue eye, and tilted his head just-slightly to the right as he moved in closer, "I should be asking you that."

The bag fell to the floor between them rather quickly after that, and Viktor lightly kicked it forward with one skate as he stepped into that kiss, leaving it to rest at the base of the couch that Yuri had moved in front of the door. Fingers grasped for skin, those on the left sneaking an inch down into the younger man's dark-colored jeans, the other wrapping around his shoulders to keep him close.

Yuri started walking them back, sneakers shuffling across the thin carpet until he could feel the edge of the couch against the back of his knees. His hands slid off his partner's pale neck, reaching for the half-undone zipper on the front of the black and red jacket, unclipping it at the bottom and pushing the fabric off the Russian's shoulders.

Viktor let the garment slide down his arms until it was caught at his bent elbows, and he let his husband go only long enough to let the fabric swing off his hands to join the growing pile of clothing at the other end of the couch. Fingers went back to his partner's cool skin, sliding up that bare chest and settling on the man's shoulders as Yuri started to sit. The Russian was eager to taste his husband's lips again, quickly moving in to sit on the man's thighs and cup his head in his palms to bring him forward. He could feel the younger figure's hands trailing down his own chest and sides, sliding over his legs and reaching for his skates, still pressing into the kiss all the while, but pulling on the boot covers with deliberate intent. The 'charred and burnt' fabric came up over the toes and heels on both sides, making it easier to get at the laces beneath the leggings.

Were it not for his knees pressing into the back-rest of that couch, Viktor would've already been sitting on his husband's lap, almost desperate to feel the grind...but that would have to wait for when his skates were off. Yuri was already trying for it on one side, leaning awkwardly despite not wanting to leave the warmth of the kiss, but finding his efforts meaningless when he wasn't looking at what he was doing. The Russian pulled back barely an inch, nosing his partner fondly before the both of them wordlessly agreed to suffer for a moment to get those blades off, each twisting to the right to work on opposite sides. Laces unthreaded as quickly as each skater could pull on them, both boots thumping to the floor soon after. When the pair were both upright again, Viktor wasted no more time, sitting up a bit and nudging on one shoulder to twist the younger figure lengthwise against the cushions, reclining him against the pile of clothing and coats. The silver man was immediately on him after that, mounting over ready hips and pushing into him as he leaned forward to kiss at that pale neck, weaving both arms around Yuri's sides and under his back, feeling his husband's arms going over his own shoulders in turn.

It wasn't one of their usual positions. Yuri had gotten so used to his partner being between his legs at that stage of the 'dance' that feeling the man sitting on top of him instead was rather strange. He supposed he could count on one hand the number of times it had happened while they were still clothed and fooling around...at Four Continents when he had told the man to rip his shirt open before realizing he still needed it for the Banquet; at Worlds, just after their accident with the cold water in the shower; on their La Première voyage between Skate Canada and Trophée de France, when he'd climbed on top of the man to avoid watching Sinister on the television...Yuri was sure he'd probably forgotten one or two, but by and large...still counting on one hand. The pressure was growing, and he couldn't resist starting to roll his hips.

Maybe it was the suddenness of the whole situation, but the Russian felt that slow push against him and could feel that his husband had gone from 0 to 60 already. He rose up from where he'd been kissing just under the man's ear and ran his hands all the way down that pale, cold chest, goosebumps rising up on every exposed inch. He sat back just enough to give his fingers access to the button and zipper he'd been right on top of, undoing each of them slowly, feeling his partner's
hands sliding against his legs where they parted over him. Fingers gripped tightly on his thighs when that tender flesh was brought out into the light, and the Russian took it in hand as he leaned back over his husband's chest, kissing lightly at his chin and jaw as he returned to that favorite spot on Yuri's neck, just under his ear. He licked and kissed and nibbled to his heart's content, sliding down from that spot to the man's collar-bone and back up again, teasing a bit higher as he moved to the skater's chin. He paused there for a moment, half-lidded eyes looking into the wanting hazel irises beneath him, and he watched contentedly as the expression on his partner's face changed just-slightly with each pull and stroke. It was bliss to see Yuri clench his eyes shut and gasp loudly when he started rolling his hips into the pattern of his hand's motions. Viktor's free arm came up after that, rising from where it had been parked palm-down on the younger man's chest, sliding that hand under the back of Yuri's neck to support his head.

Yuri's own right hand came up in turn, grasping at it just above the elbow as he turned his forehead into the bend, pressing harder against it as each twist and stroke forced him to vocalize. Soft, breathy whimpers and harder, reluctant gasps, each getting louder as the Russian worked magic on his flesh. Those brown eyes forced themselves to open, turning where he'd had his head sideways against his partner's arm, then looking at him straight on. He brought his left hand up from where it had still been clamped down on the man's thigh, bringing it up behind his neck to weave his fingers through silver-grey hair, "Look...at how horribly overdressed you still are..." He managed, Viktor's hand still going about its business between them.

"So are you." The Russian teased, leaning into another kiss as he pulled his arm back from under the skater's head. He reluctantly backed off his partner's hips and scooted down to the far end of the couch, reaching for the backpack whose contents he'd been hiding since earlier in the day.

Just as Yuri was sitting up to wiggle out of his jeans, he heard the zip from the backpack, and felt the sudden impact of a huge blanket being thrown at him, knocking him right back down again. As arms scrambled to get around the bedspread, he could hear more rustling, seeing past the edge of the huge fluffy mass on his chest where the Russian had neatly set his costume jacket across the short coffee-table in the middle of the room. He felt the stiff cushions shift under him a little where the man had stood up, and spotted the top of that silver head past the blanket as well. Yuri shook his head and quickly rolled back up to sitting again, doing his best to throw the thick sheet over that end of the couch before the skater could sit back down again, then briefly standing up himself as well to rustle the blanket over the pile of clothing. Just as he was about to make short work of the remains of his own clothes though, pushing them down just far enough to be able to sit down again, he felt another pile of fabric and fluff come flying at him. His arms went around it again like before, this time realizing it was a pillow...and he felt his legs get grabbed and pulled up, turning his whole body around to where he was at originally. He squished the pillow against himself so he could look past it, and saw a sultry look in his husband's pale blue eyes. A moment later, his pants were being pulled off his legs; not even his socks were spared. He lifted the pillow above his head and put it down behind himself just as he heard the click of a bottle-top being pressed open.

Viktor had his palm cupped as the clear liquid started to drip down into it, and though at first he only slathered it onto himself, a second round of the slick gel went into his palm, and the Russian reached over to smear it all over his partner as well. From root to tip, back down again with a slippery twist, all over the tender squishy bits beneath it, between his legs...everywhere it needed to go. The bottle was clicked closed again and set down on the coffee-table with a tak, and the Russian twisted where he sat to crawl back over his partner. He slipped in on hands and knees, lowering down to his elbows over his husband's chest, but spotted a strange look in the man's eyes and stopped, huffing a laugh, "What is it?"

"...How did you even...?"
The silver legend turned his head, looking at the deflated backpack on the floor, then back at his partner, "What...?"

"Is this all from the hotel?” Yuri asked differently, "How did you manage to get everything into your backpack?"

"With tremendous effort and some swearing."

"...You? Swearing?"

"Only on special occasions and usually in Russian, but not always."

"GETINTHEGODDAMNBAG. " He commanded, holding both sides of the backpack open as his foot stamped down on the pillow wedged down at the bottom. It just puffed back up again and overflowed past the edges once he pulled his foot out, "CHYORT VOZ'MI!"

"So you planned this the whole time." Yuri wondered, a brow raised as it dawned on him that it should've been obvious, "Since this morning, when you originally asked if we'd be going back to the hotel before coming here."

The Russian just smiled innocently, tilting his head where he pivoted on his chin, "It might've crossed my mind that I'd want to make good on my promise to finally take you during a competition, once I'd gotten my head clear after the Free Skate." He slipped his hands, one slippery, the other not, under his husband's back and started to kiss at where he'd stopped on his chest, pausing only to smirk at his 'genius,' "It's incredibly arousing to skate all my anger out. Once I was in the kiss and cry, it was all I could think about." He explained, knees still holding the bottom half of him up, but slowly sliding back so he could lower down, "I didn't even care what the score was...all I wanted was to get it over with so I could drag you back here and..." He pressed himself down against his partner's lithe frame, lifting his head only high enough to see the reaction on the man's face as he slid along the length of him, "...see the look in your eyes when you realized what I was going to do. You had me scared for a second there, you know."

That Viktor could still talk normally while rubbing against him was astonishing, but Yuri's mind was already a blur. He only managed to regain some sense about him when he felt the slick grind slow down a little, "...Sorry...nh..."

The Russian kissed at his partner's neck again, switching to the other side this time, "Don't be. I hadn't thought about how to keep the door closed in case someone came looking for us. Good thing you did." He teased the tip of his nose against sensitive skin, sliding up just far enough to be able to get to his partner's lips again. He breathed a contented sigh as he started another series of deep kisses, right hand coming out from under the man's back and sliding down the length of him, all the way down to just above the knee, reaching down under it to pull it up against his side, "I don't know how long we'll get away with being missing before people start looking for us."

"Quit stalling then." Yuri mumbled, "We don't have m-much time...ah...! ...anyway..."

"As you like, koibito." Viktor mused, sliding up hard one more time to reach his partner for another kiss, then pushing up to sitting, wedging his knees onto either side of his husband's hips, drawing the man's other leg against his side to join the first. He waited a moment there, gently stroking where he'd brought their members together, savoring the sight of his partner's thin but muscular frame.
arching at the sensation. It was an even more tantalizing sight when Yuri raised his arms over his head, pulling his core taut like a bow. The Russian's free hand wandered up that hard flesh, stroking from abdomen to chest, then down the man's side, holding to his waist as his other hand maneuvered him into place elsewhere.

After such a long and stressful afternoon, Yuri was rather tense, and Viktor could feel it before he'd even truly done anything. There wasn't enough time to ease his lover into the swing of things as he'd normally do, so he moved slowly. At first, just gently sliding up against him, not even attempting to slip inside yet. Viktor brought his left hand back around, sliding his palm gently along the man's inner thighs, over his core, over and around his center, touching everywhere he could to offer as a distraction. He turned his pale eyes up towards his partner's face, looking for some semblance of relaxation, waiting for eyes to be closed lightly rather than clenched shut...and only then, gently pressed forward.

Yuri's legs came up instinctively at the first sign of pressure, knees trying to pinch together in front of his partner's chest, muscles tight. As the slight discomfort faded, his legs relaxed a bit again, and Viktor slipped a little further in. Calves and quads were taut where they pressed against the Russian's ribs, but his hands came up from where they'd clenched around his partner's thighs, reaching up instead to scramble for grip on both shoulders. His right hand found mooring, so the left went back down to the cushions, and Yuri pushed up onto an elbow as he pulled the Russian down in turn, pressing their foreheads together as he braced himself. Only three inches in...several to go.

"...If it hurts, we can just finish like we do on off-nights..." Viktor offered, feeling a little bad suddenly, "I don't mind..."

"N-no...it's okay... I want to..." Yuri insisted, "It's been a long d-day...I need you... K-keep going..."

"Okay..."

Viktor paused where he was, leaning forward to set his husband back against the pillow pile, sliding both hands over the man's chest and back up again as he shifted how he sat. Angling a little differently then, he planted his palms on the blanket just next to his partner's waist on each side, withdrew slightly, pushed back in only as far as he'd been before, and then withdrew again. He didn't dare go further until he could feel his husband's body accepting him, and even then, went deeper very slowly, only a fraction of an inch on each slow push. It was only when he finally felt Yuri's legs relaxing against his sides that he felt safe to lower himself onto his elbows, kissing at the top of his partner's chest as he neared to it.

Yuri's hands held fast to the upper part of his partner's arms after that, gripping just below the shoulders and squeezing tight there when he felt the man's hips flush against him. Feeling the member fully inside him was still uncomfortable, but it wasn't as bad as initially, and the slight pain was something of a relief in itself. In its own way, it was like the pain he'd felt on his first true attempt at bringing his husband into his body. Just the fact that he'd finally been able to do that for Viktor made everything else worth it.

"You're amazing...!" The Russian whispered, nuzzling affectionately at his partner's neck.

The feeling of déjà vu was intense in that moment, hearing those same words as had been said before. Everything after that was different though. Back then, it was such an awkward and uncomfortable situation that neither of them had gotten relief in the end. Yuri had dropped from exhaustion after 20 minutes of trying, and Viktor had refused to leave his side, pulling both of their clothes back into place before gently stroking his then-fiancé's hair until he fell asleep. But after nearly a year, experience told them how to make it feel good in the end...and Viktor always found a way.
A slow, shallow withdraw, then pushing forward again, doing the opposite of what he'd done before to get that far in. A slow rolling of hips soon shifted to more purposeful thrusts, able to pull out further before going back in. Methodology changed back over to love-making, and the Russian returned to nosing his husband's lip, kissing him and nuzzling at his neck and ear as the push-and-pull went on. Eventually, he rose back onto his hands, stroking the right along his partner's leg where it was curled around his waist, and picking up speed. Content that Yuri had finally loosened up enough, Viktor twisted to the side and pulled his lover's leg around in front, moving to lie down behind him, wedging himself between the skater and the back-rest of the couch, pushing in from behind then.

Yuri let himself go limp there, spiky black hair tousled against the pillow as he could feel his partner kissing at the back of his neck and shoulders, keeping up the rhythmic roll of his hips. Kisses and nibbling on his skin soon changed to a gentle bite, and Viktor held there as he focused on moving his hands down the man's core. He pressed his cheek against a shoulder when he finally felt at center, starting to pull and stroke there while he pushed in with more force from behind. He felt Yuri's left hand coming up over his side, reaching behind himself to settle a palm against his hip, hesitantly starting to utter quiet gasps with each thrust.

Viktor hugged the man with one arm, the other still working at his partner's center. He could tell he wasn't quite hitting the mark yet though. The younger skater's voice hadn't gotten to that whimpering-gasp sound yet, so after a little while of trying to find it, he moved again. He pushed one hand against his husband's upturned left hip and rolled him onto his stomach, then mounted him again, stretching out across the man's entire back. He pressed gently kisses against his partner's shoulder as he wedged his hands under the man's sides, sliding in under Yuri's chest until he could cross his wrists around his front, then started the hip-rolling again. From that angle, it was a little better, but it still wasn't what he wanted.

Knowing better than to leave everything to someone who couldn't feel what was going on, Yuri moved his back and legs just slightly, tilting his hips slowly until the Russian's thrusts were doing what he wanted them to. Sweet-spot found, he reached for the pillow and stuffed it under his core, helping hold himself in that position without having to work too hard. That's when the needy-urgent gasps started coming out of him, like music to his partner's ears. Yuri's arms curled close to his head, helping the muffle the sounds, but the need for air soon superseded to hope to stay unheard, and he was quietly starting to cry out into the dim light of the room.

"Ohmygod..."

It was exceedingly rare for the young skater to make any kind of coherent statement in the midst of their romps. When he did, Viktor became laser-focused, not wanting to deviate his path even a micro-meter, lest he lose the hot-button that set his partner's blood alight. He did press harder though, watching the man scramble for something ahead of himself to grab and hold onto, finding the Russian team jacket just under the edge of the blanket. Yuri bit down on it as his cries and gasps got louder, eyes clenched shut against the growing intensity of the feeling.

"I'm close..." He managed to utter, "V-Viktor...!"

The silver Russian didn't miss a beat. The arms he'd crossed in front of his husband's chest came out again, hoisting the man up onto his hands and knees, then further up onto just his knees. He withdrew completely and moved around to face his lover, kissing him several times as he moved in to lie down on his back where Yuri had been face-down a moment before. Pale hands reached forward for the man's hips, guiding him back into place and drawing in a hissed breath when he descended onto his length. The younger figure's hands balled into light fists against his chest, and Viktor brought his own hands back to hold to them gently, pulling the right forward only to kiss the
ring on it before setting it the few inches back to where it was. He rolled his hips upward after that, carefully switching his glances from his husband's face to his center, wondering if he'd be able to get him over the edge without touching him in front again. He himself was close as well, but Viktor refused to let it happen before he'd pleased Yuri first.

That's when it started though...the beginning of the end. Yuri was losing the ability to hold himself up, elbows bent where he was starting to dip forward. Four more solid thrusts, and the young skater squeaked a muffled cry, gasping for breath as hot liquid dripped down from him, flowing slowly to his husband's stomach, even as the man kept rolling his hips under him. Viktor wasn't long behind, wrapping his arms around where Yuri had fully dropped down against his chest, breathing heavily and trembling against the crook of his neck and shoulder. The Russian was unapologetic when he felt release, crying out quite a bit louder than his partner had, pushing to half-sit-up again even as he kept thrusting his hips, going as deep as he could before finally letting it go and falling back down again.

Both men just lay there heaving for breaths, each of them slightly shaking from relief, though Yuri's tremble went on for quite a bit longer.

"H-How long do you...think it's been...?" Viktor wondered, gently stroking his husband's back, "30 minutes...?"

"Who kn-knows...?" The younger figure answered, trying to push himself up to sitting but failing miserably, dropping back down again twice before the Russian helped him, letting him lean back against his up-turned knees like a chair, "I didn't...check what time it was when you...when you came out of the kiss and cry..." He brought his hands up towards his face, sliding them down over his cheeks and neck until settling them there over his collarbone, still trying to catch his breath, "Too busy thinking...I'll never beat your score..."

"Really...?" The Russian said quietly, but then smiling like an idiot, "I don't even remember what I got."

Yuri nearly choked on himself, sitting forward with a stunned look on his face, "Wh-what!? But you-"

"What'd I score...?"

More stunned gawking, "Just under 240!"

Blue eyes went wide suddenly, but Viktor did the only thing he could think of... One hand came up to his mouth and he grinned behind it, "Wow~!"
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED TWELVE

It took the both of them to squash the pillow and blanket back into Viktor's backpack, making Yuri seriously question what kind of black magic the Russian had used to get it done himself the first time. Once the bag was zipped back up though, the hasty effort to get fully dressed again became first priority. They'd only managed to get their pants on again by that point and started rummaging around on the floor to sort out whose socks belong to who and which ones formed each pair.

Yuri sat back up on the edge of sofa to start pulling his on, but when he glanced aside, saw something he hadn't expected to, "...So that's what you used those ace bandages for." He commented, pointing at his husband's ankles, "I don't think you did that before."

Viktor looked at the foot he had crossed over a knee, about to cover it with one of the two thick pairs of crew socks he'd worn over them, "Oh...no, just today. I had a feeling I'd be hitting the ice a lot harder than last time, so I thought I should do something just in case. I'll have to sharpen my skates once we get back to the Ice Castle, too." He reached for one blade and squinted one eye along the length of the rocker, eyeballing the hollow through the whole skate, "We haven't had a chance since we rented the Patinoire to work on our Team Skate with Yurio."

"Me too." Yuri agreed, pausing for a moment, but then smiling, "Only a day and a half until we're sitting in the onsen."

"And only two more nights in a hotel before we can sleep in our own bed again."

"...Drinking our own coffee."

"...Eating that famous Yu-Topia Katsudon."

"I didn't realize traveling like this would be so hard at the end." Yuri sighed, falling back against the couch, "Hopefully it won't be like this again next year."

"It likely will." Viktor huffed, socks on and reaching for his skates, pulling the laces to make them easier to slip on, "Unless one of us doesn't get on the podium at the Final...or the ISU has some pity, and has us competing against each other in the Series, instead of going to all different events like this year."

"You think they'd do that?"

"There's a scheme where they're not supposed to put the top 3 ranked Finalists into the same competitions unless they absolutely have to, same with the bottom 3. I was actually surprised that Yurio was even competing against you this season. I thought they'd send him to just my events, since I wasn't in the game last year."

"I never noticed before. Guess that explains why JJ wasn't at any of our events then." Yuri commented, pushing back up again and reaching for his t-shirt, only to pause for a moment once he had his hands through it. He turned his eyes to where the Russian was pulling the laces of his second skate loose and then wedged his foot into it, leaning over his knees to pull them tight after that.

Before Viktor could really start tying them though, Yuri moved over and sat half-behind him, arms going around his still-bare chest, feeling for one last moment of skin-on-skin contact before they'd have to get all dressed up again. The silver Russian pulled his right hand back from the laces of his
boots and set it gently against his partner's forearm where it crossed over his abdomen, and tilted his head slightly to look back at him over his shoulder, "Thanks for indulging me with all this." He said quietly, looking at where the younger man slid his cheek against his pale skin to return to glance, "I won't make a habit of it."

Yuri's arms held a little tighter for a moment, moving then to settle his chin over his partner's shoulder and smiling despite his cheeks going pink again, "It's fine. I'm just glad I could help you feel better again. I'm not sure why I expected anything else to happen once you were done with your Free Skate. 'Post-conflict carnal urges' and all that...and you did tell me to wait until after you were done skating."

"You were worried about your friend, too." Viktor said, leaning up a bit further so he could snake his right arm back around his partner's side, "I came in and dragged you away right as he was realizing he wasn't going to the Final as a competitor. I should probably apologize for that..."

"The medaling ceremony will now begin. All competitors please return to the rink. Repeat...the medaling ceremony will now begin. All competitors...please return to the rink."

Both skaters looked up as the announcement echoed in the small room, and then laughed quietly as it faded out, leaning in for a last kiss before parting to get the rest of their clothes on.

"I guess that's code for 'Skater Viktor, get your arse back to the ice so we can start!'" Yuri joked, pulling the t-shirt on quickly before reaching for where his sneakers had rolled under the table.

"Probably~!"

The arena had already been prepared when they arrived, the carpet rolled out across the ice so the head ISU event coordinators could walk to the podium without slipping. Phichit and Leo were anxiously waiting by the rink-wall entrance; two gates were open, one for the shoed entry, the other for bladed entry. When Viktor finally stuck his head out through the blue curtain, people were waving at him to get over there as well, clapping for his anticipated arrival, and giving him looks like they'd been waiting just for him.

"Sorry! Sorry!" He said, smiling and waving innocently as he made his way through the throng of other skaters and coaches, "I fell asleep after my skate!"

Yuri followed close behind.

The announcements overhead wasted no time though for his explanations. The Japanese was already being spoken, even as Viktor was still pulling off his team jacket and pulling his costume gloves back on. He barely made it over to the participants' entrance when he heard the other two skaters sarcastically welcoming him to his own podium-march, and he reached down to quickly pull off his blade guards.

"ISU Grand Prix of Figure Skating, NHK trophy awards ceremony...the Men."

Yuri took the rubber bars from his partner, but then quickly wedged them under his arm and pulled the man back around, "Wait, Viktor! Your hair!"

"Hah?"

The younger skater's hands quickly went through it, trying to comb it into its normal appearance as fast as he could. It had gotten disheveled from their romp, and neither of them had apparently noticed
until that moment. It could pass for power-napping bed-head though, so there was no worry about what he’d really been up to.

"First, and winner of the Gold medal...Viktor Nikiforov...Russia!"

"Sankyuu~" Viktor purred, quickly giving his husband's hand a squeeze as he moved over to step onto the ice finally, raising a hand and greeting the audience with all the excited flair he’d entirely denied them since the start of the event.

The crowd cheered loudly for him, and the silver genius slid gracefully out into the rink, giving a theatrical bow to each of the 4 main sides of the arena before moving off to take his place on the podium. Tall as he was, he just skated up to the back of it and took one big step to get to the top-most spot. It was only then that he allowed himself to look around and see what all had been set up, seeing four women dressed colorfully like Geishas (though lacking the white make-up,) two on each end of the podium and each holding something elaborate in their hands. On his left, the woman closest to the podium had a silver tray in her hands, and the three medals to be awarded were set upon it on a velvet cushion. To her left, the Geisha held onto a rather splendid-looking glass trophy, easily 16" tall, tapered from the bottom to be wider at the top and crested in the shape of a curved V; the actual NHK Trophy itself. To the right, the nearest woman held a similar tray to the first, carrying the first two bouquets of flowers, and the last of them carried the third.

"Second, and winner of the Silver medal...Phichit Chulanont...Thailand!"

Like Viktor, the younger skater came rushing out in style, giving thanks to the audience before approaching the front-side of the podium, pausing in front of the 1st place tier and glancing up at the Russian, "I'm not sure if I should be happy for you or insanely jealous." He started, smiling in his usual way despite knowing he hadn't made the final cut, "So I guess I'll just congratulate you." He raised his hand out, and the Russian nodded and took it.

"Your SP said I could be King again, so I went with it." Viktor smiled back, "I can assure you though...if I'd won Silver instead, I'd be unbearable to travel with later."

Phichit nodded and stepped up onto the 2nd tier of the podium, listening as the announcement for Bronze came up and Leo struck out to make his own gestures at the crowd.

"I'll help you work on your quad Loop again this coming week." Viktor went on, "There won't be all the added pressure of trying to get it right in a single session, so you can take your time. Plus, we'll have the Ice Castle to ourselves."

"You and Yuri are going to compete in the Final though..." The younger skater pointed out, pausing their conversation as the Bronze medalist came up to shake each of their hands as per the norm, waiting for Leo to take his position before finishing the thought, "...I'd feel bad having either of you stop your own practice to teach me something that I have until Four Continents to work on."

"We have to take breaks some time." Viktor pointed out, hearing but not listening to the announcement about the medals being doled out by some representative of the JSF or another, "Don't you have Thai Nationals coming up sooner than that, too?"

"It's not until April."

"Oh! Wow~! That's all the way after Worlds! I wish mine were that far away!"

The conversation stopped again for a little while as each skater bowed to collect their rewards, get their handshakes, bouquets, and Viktor himself was given the heavy NHK Trophy. The flags were
raised on the opposite end of the rink, and the short, instrumental version of the Russian national anthem played. The rest of the pageantry seemed to pass like a blur; the obligatory photos, the last skate around the rink, tip-toeing across the red carpet on toe-picks, and the final address to the crowd.

When they passed by the coaches though, Phichit caught sight of Celestino...wearing the hamster hat, and the skater all but burst into tears smiling over it.

Viktor hadn't caught sight of anyone he thought might be looking. Yuri pointed out where Minako and Yurio were watching from the high corner, but the two darkly-clad Russians were nowhere to be found. Viktor could only assume they'd cut out after the Free Skate and hadn't even been there for the medaling ceremony.

Oh well, He thought, reaching for his blade guards as he came back off the ice, They saw the only part that really mattered, I guess.

"That ends the suspense for the Men's Singles Grand Prix Final line-up!" Newscaster Morooka announced, score charts coming up on the screen with the image of the Makomanai Skating Arena in the background.

Victor NIKIFOROV (RUS) - 335.75 (Gold) + 327.31 (Gold) = 30 (1st)
Yuri NIKIFOROV (JPN) - 302.46 (Gold) + 300.68 (Gold) = 30 (2nd)
Jean-Jacque LEROY (CAN) - 301.05 (Gold) + 289.24 (Silver) = 28 (3rd)
Otabek ALTIN (KAZ) - 292.54 (Gold) + 294.94 (Silver) = 28 (4th)
Yuri PLISETSKY (RUS) - 295.1 (Silver) + 314.17 (Silver) = 26 (5th)
Christophe GIACOMETTI (CHE) - 289.34 (Silver) + 292.48 (Bronze) = 24 (6th)

"Judging just by the placement though, it's never that easy to tell what the podium is going to look like at the end! Just last year, Yuri Nikiforov, then Yuri Katsuki, barely got the 6th slot in the qualifiers but still managed to take Silver, only narrowly being beaten for Gold by Yuri Plisetsky." Morooka went on, "With Russia's Viktor Nikiforov back in the line-up again, there's no telling what's going to happen! Tune in tomorrow afternoon for the final event of the NHK Trophy, the Free Dance! Until then, goodnight!"

After giving interviews for almost 45 minutes, then changing, packing everything up, and giving the ISU their all-medalists-required drug-testing sample, Viktor couldn't help but find humor in the whole thing. He slung the backpack of 'extra stuff' over his arms, took his husband's hand in his own, hefted the second carry-bag over his free shoulder, and loitered near the exit for Phichit and the rest of Team Russia.

Mila came rushing out first, dropping all her gear and lunging at her former rink-mate, "You did it! That come-back was incredible!"

Viktor lost the one carry-bag off his shoulder, but used that arm to pat the woman's back as she clung to him for as long as she could, "Spasibo~!"

When she finally slid too far down to be able to hold on anymore, she reluctantly let go, but then pawed at the man's jacket to feel for the medal, poking it with one finger, "Lemee see!"

"Alright alright..." He laughed, reaching up to pull the zipper down a little and fishing for the lanyard, pulling the whole thing out and kissing the edge before giving it over to show it off, "Here."
The red-head squeed with delight, looking at the gold-plated face with the NHK logo engraved in its center, "And the actual NHK Trophy!?!"

Viktor looked over to his partner, who nodded and set down the rolling suitcase to open it up, carefully unwrapping the glass mini-obelisk from where it had been draped in towels, giving it over gently.

"Wow! This thing is huge! How many of these badboys do you even have...?" Mila wondered, holding the trophy carefully, and admiring her crystalline reflection in its curved surface.

The Russian tilted his head back in thought, "...Thhrrreeeee?"

"That's so like you. You've gotten so many prizes over the years that you can't even keep track anymore." The woman laughed, giving the huge clear bauble back to Yuri so he could replace it in the suitcase.

"Well, we only have one room in the house to set up all our awards..." The taller Russian defended, zipping his coat back up and pressing that hand to where he felt the medal hang against his chest, leaving it on the outside to show it off a little more, "If I put out everything I'd ever won, it'd basically be my trophy room with the Yuri Trophy Corner."

The younger skater just blanched, "...That's so mean...!"

Viktor just pat the man's head affectionately, "I'm older than you. I had a head start. You still owe me 4 World Championship Gold medals though, so by the time you get there, it'll look more evenly split, I'm sure."

Yuri just had his arms crossed and a comically sour look on his face, "Still..."

The Russian snaked his arm over his partner's shoulders, "I love you, Yuri." He purred, smiling mischievously.

The younger skater just mumbled something under his breath.

"What was that? I couldn't quite hear you."

"Iloveyoutoo."

"Aww that's so sweet of you to say!" Viktor mused, kissing the man's cheek and watching that skin go pink from it before reaching down to grab the bag he'd dropped.

The group started heading out through the doors, making their way back towards the line of shuttles that would take them all back to Sapporo Prince. By then, Yakov, Phichit, and Celestino had come out as well, following them all through the exit and back out into the cold December snow.

Yuri was the first to spot the gathering of four just outside, waiting near the bottom of the curving staircase that lead to the second-floor outdoor observation deck, but instead of making a fuss, he simply stayed quiet for the moment. He didn't want to be the one to make the laughter die. Instead, he paused when Viktor did, and watched quietly as Yurio started to approach them. He let go of his borrowed suitcase long enough to stretch out his arm and greet the teen in his normal way, "How were the rest of the performances?"

"You should've seen the look on the face of the guy who had to go out after Viktor was done." The teen smirked, "It was priceless. He acted like he was being thrown into a swarm of blood-thirsty sharks. Practically wouldn't get on the ice...his coach and choreographer had to push him through the
Yuri felt a little bad for the man, "I saw him after Viktor came back to the prep area. I don't blame him one bit for being nervous. I'd probably have a total melt-down myself if I had to skate after what Viktor did."

"I'd just try to show him up."

"Eight quads though...I don't even know how many new records he set with just that one show. At least 3."

"That's the quality of Russian figure skaters." Yurio puffed out his chest a little bit, "Except Baba over there."

"WHAT WAS THAT?" She overheard, dropping all her things again and pushing one sleeve up her arm as she stomped closer.

The teen rushed around to Yuri's other side, trying to avoid the redhead by putting a warm body between them, laughing at her expense the whole time. She caught him though when he had the brass to stop and try sticking his tongue out at her, pulling an eyelid down with one finger.

...And up into the air he went.

"I'LL HAVE YOU KNOW, I MOVED UP TO RANK SECOND IN THE WORLD THIS WEEKEND." She explained, even as the teen was starting to flail and protest where she'd hefted him up above her head, "WHAT RANK ARE YOU!?"

"Fifth." Yuri answered sarcastically, waving at the Russian Tiger from where he'd been standing below, "He's ranked fifth in the world right now."

Phichit was taking a slew of photos, tagging them feverishly as Celestino looked on like everyone around him had lost their minds.

"Minako-sensei~!" Viktor called out, waving to her from where he'd been put into the center of the group, "I may need your expertise tomorrow after all!" He laughed.

"Uh oh." She answered, "You better be asking for ballet lessons."

"Nope! Even better!"

Yakov had finally convinced Mila to put her rink-mate back on the ground.

"I already warned you what would happen if you let me do that!" Minako explained nervously.

"I know! I just want to watch Uncle Mimi squirm some more!" Viktor called back.

The elder Russian huffed, stepping slightly forward to put himself somewhat between his nephew and his lady love, entirely unsure if he was even allowed to join the joke. That ignorance made him wonder if it even was a joke.

"Seriously though!" Viktor went on, stepping through the group to get a bit closer, "After my skate today, I feel like my skin's two sizes too small and everything's all weird and tingly. I have a feeling I'll be completely crippled tomorrow morning. I'll need you to help me learn how to walk again so I can do the Exhibition." He winked at her and smiled sweetly.
Minako could feel herself on the edge of a complete fangasm in that moment, almost a bit worse than when she’d put the rose crown on Chris’ head the previous year. She wiped a tear from her eye and threw both arms over the man's shoulders, "It's so good that you're back to your old happy self! I was starting to think I’d never get to see you smile like that again!"

As Viktor hugged her back, Mikhail was bristling.

Watching it reminded Yuri of the Crispino twins...and the look on Michele's face when Yuri had gone seeking victims to hug after finding out he'd made it into the Final after all, and found Sara first. Viktor moved on to unexpectedly hug his uncle as well after that. Yuri couldn't help but laugh quietly and shake his head when the déjà vu went on to include Mikhail uttering the same stunned half-shriek that JJ had given when the hug-fest went his way.

"Did you get pictures?" Viktor asked.

Mikhail just grumbled, not sure if that was just another trap.

"...I'm giving you permission to talk again, Uncle Mimi." The younger Russian explained, pulling back to look at the dubious expression on the man's face, "So?"

"...What pictures?"

Viktor just huffed a disappointed sigh, "I guess Yuri didn't tell you. I was hoping you'd get pictures of my father's reaction to my Rage Skate."

"Yuri hasn't said a single word to me since after your Short Program!" The elder said, an exasperated tone to his voice, "Of course he wouldn't tell me to take pictures!"

"Take pictures of Konstantin's face while Viktor does his Free Skate!" The younger skater called out, staying back with the main group, "Especially at the end when the crowd starts chanting his name!"

"A BIT LATE FOR THAT, DONCHA THINK?"

Yuri just smiled and shrugged naïvely, like there wasn't a problem with the request.

"I think I can safely say we're even now." Viktor said, putting his hands into his coat-pockets as he shifted his weight to just his right leg, "Just don't do anything like this to me again."

"I won't! Sheesh!" Mikhail defended, "I mean, even with all the shit happening back in Russia with your father's work, I was half-tempted to tell Kon about this newly vacated house in St. Petersburg that I'd recently come into possession of, but I knew better. Same thing with this car that's just been sitting around in a garage with no one to drive it."

Viktor just gave him a dead-faced glare, "I would've seriously murdered you if you had said anything about either of them."

"I know!"

"Cuz I didn't sell you my house and my car so you could give them both to my father."

"I know!"

"Do I need to buy them back from you so you aren't tempted to do it later anyway?"

"NO! I've been good! I'll be good!"
Slate eyes watched the older man for a moment, but Viktor soon nodded, accepting the nervous elder's answers. His attention then finally turned to the last member of the group, the one who hadn't said a word yet, and who was standing just far enough away from the stair-case that the light couldn't quite reach him, putting his huge form into shadow.

Yuri started walking forward when he saw his husband's focus shift, pulling the big rolling suitcase behind him as he went.

Viktor could hear him coming, and waited until the man was closer before looking back to reach his hand out for him to take...and the pair just stood there in front of the Nikiforov Patriarch, together, and unafraid. The rest of the group watched in quiet, but nervous curiosity.

[So what did you think?] The Gold medalist asked simply, the trinket still hanging proudly from around his neck.

The bear's eyes looked down on him calmly, [I was told you set some new records today.]

[A few.] Viktor nodded, [World record score for Men's Free Skate, highest number of quad jumps performed in a single show, and the world's first officially-recorded double-quad combo jump. Others have tried, but none had done it in competition before I did it here today. I think I might've set a record for the number of quad jumps performed in the second half of a Free Skate, too, but I'd have to check back. Plus...if I hadn't fallen apart during my Short Program, I'd also have the highest combined-total quad jumps for a single event, but...well, I only did triples yesterday, so I didn't get it.]

[You made it look easy. The other skaters were really boring by comparison.] Konstantin pointed out.

[Maybe...but it's not easy.] Viktor explained, [Most skaters can barely manage two, three tops. I was already setting records by doing four in a single Free Program before. Someone else started doing six last year, thinking that'd be the performance to finally dethrone me...but he made that show before realizing I was taking the season off, so I just made him pay for it when I got back.]

[So you've declared yourself the King again.]

The younger Russian smiled, [Yeah, in a way. I doubt even I'll be able to reset those records before I retire...maybe no one in my lifetime will pull it off, either. I had a special kind of motivation today that might not repeat itself again for a long time, for anyone.]

[Your hatred for me.] The bear stated.

[Twenty-five years of repressed anger, resentment, confusion, hurt, and...yes, hate as well...and not just for you. For him too.] Viktor explained, thumbing at his uncle, who blinked at him in stark confusion for a moment, [But, I got it all out today. I haven't forgiven you for what you've done, but I'm not going to let those feelings haunt me anymore. I've moved on.]

[All that because you did that skating show today?]

The young Russian smiled, waiting a moment before he answered, [Well...not just that. I did my Rage Skate, and I set a bunch of new World Records in the process...but then I made love to my husband, collected my Gold medal and my trophy, and now we're all here talking about it. I'd say I've gotten everything sorted out now.]

All the Russian-speakers felt their hearts jump into their throats when they heard it...all except Yurio, anyway. He simply raised his hand palm-up and nudged Minako with his fingers.
"What?" She gaped at him.

"He just admitted they did it. Pay up. I won. I told you that's why they came back late."

Minako's eyes went to Mikhail, and his red cheeks gave it away, "...He did."

Phichit glanced between all of them, suddenly realizing what they were talking about and bringing his hand up to cover his mouth in shock, "Jeeze, you guys will do it anywhere!"

Mila quietly laughed behind her own hand.

Yakov just rolled his eyes like he couldn't believe how many of his skaters were such drama queens.

Celestino was on his phone and missed everything, looking up and around when he realized something had happened.

The ballerina just stared daggers at her former pupil, "YURI."

"...What?" He answered back, confused at her sudden tension.

"You're so inappropriate!" She barked between clenched teeth, handing over the bet-money she owed. The Russian Tiger just smiled to himself and counted it to be sure it was all there.

"What'd I do!?" Yuri asked, feeling a little weird, not having paid attention to the mumbling from the peanut gallery, "I've just been standing here!"

Konstantin just stared at the silver skater in front of him, a bit taken aback by such a sudden admission. Both pairs of slate eyes peered into the other, waiting for the slightest movement...but nothing came.

[We're going to get going then.] Viktor said simply, [Yuri and I are going on a date tonight, and I intend to make the most of it before I pass out. Maybe we'll see you at the Exhibition tomorrow. It's a lot less rigid than the competition itself and generally only the winners perform, so you won't have to sit through anything too boring. Skaters are allowed to do anything they want there, so you might even get to see some illegal moves.]

[...Illegal moves?] The bear echoed, eyes following his son as the man started to walk by.

"Hey, we're going!" Viktor called back, waving to the rest of the group, "Let's all take the same shuttle!" He turned back then to his father and nodded, [Yeah...back-flips, head-banger pair spins, airplane spins...a bunch of other weird stuff. Lots of surprises. It can be pretty entertaining.] He turned his head back to face the direction he was walking, and raised his free hand up as though to wave goodbye, the other snaking around his partner's back to settle low on his hip, "Do vstrechi."

The rest of the group quickly went by to catch up; even Yurio trailed after them, despite not being a competitor.

Minako held her hand up, "Yura! Where are you going!?"

"I'm staying with Yakov tonight!" He called back, "I plan on actually getting some sleep later!"

"...That kid is a weird one." Mikhail whispered, leaning slightly towards the woman as they watched the skating teams board one of the waiting shuttles, "But I guess that frees us up again."

"It's almost starting to feel like how this weekend should've been in the first place." She mused.
The silver Russian nodded, letting out a relieved breath to signal his agreement. He turned his eyes back up to the bear after that though, [You handled that pretty well, Kon.]

The gruff figure simply watched the team continuing to load into the big van, but then shrugged and turned back, [Ever since last year, every time I saw his face...he was angry, and all I could see was you, back when you were his age.] He said quietly, [When I met him in the park...it was you. When he came to the funeral...it was you. When he hit me in the nose, and I hit him back...I was hitting you. It was like you left our town 25 years ago, and then just stepped right back into it, without having aged a day, and all those old wounds opened up again...but this time, Tat wasn't around to save you. All the hate and fury and resentment that you took with you, he just brought it back with him. I could hardly stand it.]

Mikhail wasn't sure how to answer to that, so he kept his mouth shut.

[It took a while, and the more often I saw you two together, in the same place and at the same time, the more my mind started to accept that you weren't the same person.] Konstantin went on, turning his eyes down to look at the hand that had nearly blinded his son on two separate occasions, [I hate what I did to him. He didn't deserve it, even if I disagree with some of the things he's doing with his life.]

[...What made you suddenly feel like this...?] Mikhail wondered, a bit perplexed at the confession.

[He's happy.] The bear answered quietly, putting his hand back and starting to walk to where he knew the car was parked, [I've never seen him happy before. It's like...he's a completely different person.]
Chapter 213

Chapter Notes

I know a bunch of folks were looking forward to some arts this weekend, however, my Wacom Bamboo has finally died after like 10+ years of service and 2-3+ years of having an attitude. I won't be able to draw until I replace it. I'll do the smut and 'Yuri vs Kon' pics as soon as I get the new one next week. Keep an eye on the 'Yuri on ICE - NEXT LEVEL: NAD' page on FB to see the finished images once they're done. I promise, one day, I'll remember to connect the FB page to Instagram so people can follow there, too, but...ugh, I'm so lazy XD I have to remember what my Instagram login info is so I can do it, and I just...blah...

Also...for those of you hunkering down for Irma, STAY SAFE. I follow 'Big Cat Rescue' in Tampa so I've been keeping an extra-special eye on it. Harvey turned out to be a big non-event for me but I'm doubting it'll be that easy for ya'll :|

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED THIRTEEN

It was close to midnight when the two exhausted skaters finally got back to their hotel room. Both were rosy-cheeked from a bit of drinking, and spirits were high, which was almost thought impossible after such a harrowing weekend thus far.

Coats and scarves were sliding off, barely making it into the hall closet. Shoes were kicked off lazily and just moved aside with the feet that had been wearing them. Ties, shirts, blazers, slacks...all scattered onto the tops of chairs or at the end of the bed.

Yuri busied himself getting his contact lenses out as one light after another was slowly being clicked off, until only the one near to him was left on. He could feel the bed moving behind him as his partner crawled in, barely managing to pull a blanket half-way up himself before going still.

"...I'm so tired..." Viktor mumbled into the sheet, "...But tomorrow morning is going to be awful..."

"I'm honestly surprised you've made it this long." Yuri mused, plugging his and Viktor's phones into their chargers after setting the contact lens case down, then reaching for the television remote control, "I even considered betting Yurio that you'd never come out of the hotel room when we came back to change earlier."

"Pfffbthbfhipt."

The younger figure laughed at that, "You want to take something before you pass out?"

"...Mh...probably a good idea..."

Yuri nodded and popped back off the edge of the bed, rummaging around in one of the smaller bags before returning with two tabs of pain candy and a water bottle. Handing them over, he plopped back into bed, noted the absent middle-layer of the blankets that was still packed into his partner's backpack, and scooted over closer to center.
The silver Russian waited until the younger figure settled before doing much else, barely managing to sit up to take the offered items as it was. He watched quietly as Yuri made a small pillow-pile behind himself that he could lean against, clearly not quite as ready as he himself was to fall asleep. He glanced over to what was coming up on the screen: local weather, late-night comedy, some old movie where you could see the strings on the 'special effects' props, but then he turned away from it again, putting himself between the television and his husband's eyes.

Yuri just blinked at him, "...What is it?"

Nothing was said. Viktor just let go of the water bottle and reached that hand forward to cup it gently over the side of his partner's neck, rubbing his thumb softly along the back of the man's jaw-line and cheek. Looking on in silence for a moment, the Russian leaned in to kiss him, then turned around to settle his back against the man's chest, chased the pain pills with some water, and pulled the thick covers over the both of them.

The younger skater looked on in slight confusion, but mentally shrugged and took it for what it was, sliding his left arm over his husband's shoulder to set it lightly against his chest, fingers barely touching the blanket. He channel-surfed for a little while, settling on some cheesy live-action fantasy movie before giving up and dropping the remote. After a little while, he twisted to the right to click off the last light, plunging the room into darkness, light reflecting off the walls from the television alone.

"Do you think I should offer the old house to my father...? Or the car...?"

Yuri was a bit surprised to hear the words, thinking Viktor would've fallen asleep ages ago. He stretched his legs a bit under the blankets, but then slid both hands down the Russian's chest, crossing them where they vanished under the blanket as he leaned to set his nose and chin against that silver-grey hair, "...I think you've already done enough. Let it rest. It's Mikhail's pet project anyway, so let him figure out what to do."

"...Yeah."

"What you should do is go to sleep, though." He went on, "We still have to do some prep-work for the Exhibition, and practice for it is at 10."

Viktor just brought his hands up from where they'd been limp on his stomach, sliding his fingers over his husband's forearms, "...Mh..."

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By morning, the carefully-arranged pillow pile had meant less and nothing, as Yuri had completely slid off of it, falling to his left side sometime in the night. He'd turned himself into something of a pretzel after that, half on his side, upper body trying to be more chest-down, head still turned, arms out wherever there was room. Of course, as utterly ridiculous as he looked, hair looking like a rat's nest, and drooling into the sheets...that was never the case with Viktor. When those brown eyes started to open, a minute or so before the alarm was set to sound, the first thing the young skater saw was the perfect, humble face of a silver-haired god, sleeping on his side, and using his waist like a pillow.

A thin beam of light was pouring through a slit in the curtains, giving the pale Russian an ethereal
glow, and making his hair shine like molten platinum. A strand of that hair fell slightly out of place on one breath, falling just past his eyes, and when he moved slightly, the blanket gently tumbled off of where he'd been holding it just under the edge, that gold ring now glowing like the rest of him.

For a while, Yuri didn't dare to move, simply looking at the man in wonder, having no idea what time it was or when the alarm was going to go off and disturb the serenity of the moment.

But then, those perfect blue eyes started to open a little, shimmering like the clearest waters of the sea; azure, slashes of teal, and hints of the darker, mysterious colors of the deeper ocean.

"Mmh... Yuri..." The Russian whispered, managing a hazy smile through his sleepiness.

The words were like the songs of angels, leaving the younger man to wonder silently, *How in the world did someone as boring and homely as me get the attention of someone like him?*

And then, he knew.

"...Everything is pain..." Viktor whined, unable to move, getting a stupefied look on his face like he didn't know what to do after that.

*Oh... right...* Yuri blanched, *He's completely absurd*...

A few knocks came onto the door, and the young skater cruised across the floor to get to it, pulling it open a crack to reveal a nervous Minako just on the other side.

"...Has he moved at all since you called...?" She asked pensively, not really being able to see past him while he was in the way.

Yuri stepped back to open the door further and let the woman though; Mikhail was close behind, carrying a cardboard drink-holder with several cups of coffee in it, "...Well, I managed to get him to sit up, but after that... not really."

When they were in, and the door closed quietly behind them, Minako surveyed the room, spotting the hapless Russian lying limp on his front, face turned away from her. She grimaced a little and stepped closer towards him, rounding the end of the bed and crouching down on one knee where she could see his face more evenly, "...Look what you've done to yourself, Viktor."

*I know, I know...* He answered pitifully, a whine to his tone, *I promise not to do it again.*

"Well, hopefully you won't find need to." She answered, pushing to stand up again. She moved to take her jacket off just as Mikhail was stepping behind her to set the coffee cups down on the table by the window, and handed it off to him so she could survey the damage. She noted the big puffy comforter first, barely able to see much more than the top of the skater's shoulders at that stage of things, *You're not naked under there, are you?*

The Russian laughed, but then simpered down to a pained groan when it made him move too much.

Yuri just shook his head and huffed an amused sigh, "No. He wasn't anyway, but I put his swim trunks on him too, after getting off the phone with you." He explained, moving to sit on the bed on Viktor's opposite side, "I just threw the blanket over him because he was getting cold." He then reached to pull the thing back, revealing the full length of the Russian's pale physique to the ballerina's eyes, "I wouldn't even know where to start. He says it hurts everywhere."
Minako was torn between her desire to give the lithe Russian athlete the fangirly-googly-eyes, and knowing she probably shouldn't, especially given that her own newly-officiated partner was right behind her and watching as well. Instead, she drew in a deep breath, bringing her hands into the flow of it like she were practicing Yoga, cleared her mind, exhaled, and looked again.

Still...it was the nearly-naked body of Viktor friggin Nikiforov right there before her, and every contour of his frame was as plain and obvious as the day was bright, especially with his swimming trunks being as form-fitting as they were.

She caught sight of one blue eye peering at her from the sheets, where the skater was trying to watch her, and her face just went red, "You're not helping!"

"What'd I do!?” He whined, "I'm just looking!” He quickly grunted against the pain again though, his figure clenching up slightly before he lost the will to resist, and went completely limp, "...Whyyyyy..."

Yuri set a hand against the center of his partner's back, leaning over him slightly to reach for the latte Mikhail had brought for him, "You're making her nervous. Try to be less...I dunno...exhaustingly attractive for a few minutes...?"

"I can't help iiittt...!"

The younger skater just laughed at that again, sitting back with his drink and smelling what he could through the small mouth-piece; cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves. He glanced up at the ballerina though, seeing how she was still trying hard to gain some focus, "Isn't this what you wanted before?" He teased, "Getting to know the room numbers of all the skaters I was competing against?"

"Yes." She admitted sheepishly, "But back then, you weren't married to any of them, and the likelihood of any of them asking me to give them a massage was rather...how shall we say...remote?" She gestured down at the silver legend, "Also, and this may come as a shock to both of you, but this is Viktor Nikiforov."

"Yes he is."

"Yes I am."

"Stop it!" She protested comically, "I'll never get this done if you two don't cut it out!"

Mikhail just sipped his drink, trying not to look bothered. He knew what was coming though, so no matter the teasing, if Minako treated his nephew the way she treated him, even the legendary Viktor Nikiforov was about to be in a world of pain that even he couldn't charm himself out of.

"Well, I guess we should quit messing around." Yuri suggested, looking over at where his partner's head was still turned away, "There's only 2 hours until Gala practice."

"Mh..." The Russian agreed nervously.

"You said you had lotion I could use...?" Minako wondered dubiously, "Better not be anything weird or kinky."

Yuri shook his head, then twisted over towards the night-stand where their phones were still sitting, and grabbed a fancy-looking black jar with white and red lettering, "Nah, it's just one of Viktor's fancy skin lotions."

The ballerina looked at the jar, opening the lid to see a strange yellow-colored cream inside, "...How
much did this cost...?"

"$52..." The older skater muttered, "Just keep in mind that a little bit goes a long w-"

Yuri's leg went over his head after that, and the Russian found himself too surprised to contest it, "Let her do her work or we'll never get out of here."

Viktor just whined a sigh, turning his head to face the sheet beneath him instead of gawking and delaying the inevitable.

Minako finally resigned to her fate as well, "I guess I'll start with your back then... You skaters put a lot of pressure on it when you jump, so I can only imagine how much it hurts right now after all the quads you did yesterday."

"A lot." He agreed, voice muffled from the linens.

"Alright..." The woman drew in a breath, stepping up to the edge of the bed, "...Let's get started..." She dipped her fingers in the fancy yellow cream and nervously drew a line down the center of the pained Russian's back, then pressed lightly...and then dug hard as she followed the line of the first muscle going out from his spine.

Yuri could feel how much it hurt just by feeling how much his husband tensed under his leg. The stoic figure refused to make a sound though, clenching his teeth and trying to focus on breathing instead, gasping for breath once the first line had been finished. Minako just went back up though and started to dig a little bit lower after that, going just as deep, letting her fingers slide across his skin with that strange, fancy lotion easing the way. It was only when she'd finally gotten low enough on his back that she switched directions, and had to follow the iliac crest of his hip, that he finally couldn't take it anymore. She pulled back just the edge of the swim trunks to feel along the edge of the bone, and pressed hard into it, following it all the way from center to almost under the front of him...and he cried out a muffled half-scream between clenched teeth. She gave him a moment to catch his breath, and let him move his arms to bend them up under himself a little before she did it again.

Sensing the excruciating agony of the 'therapy,' Yuri reached to take his husband's hand, feeling each dig into the man's flesh as a vice-gripping clench around his own fingers.

"Your muscles feel like concrete, Viktor..." The ballerina said with an apologetic tone, "It's going to take more than just a minute to sort all this out."

"I kn-know..." He managed, each press into his skin feeling like a knife slicing through him, though relieving a little bit with each subsequent pass, "K-Keep going..."

And she did. Despite the pained grunts, twitches, pain spasms, putting the Russian to tears on a few occasions, and everything else that the treatment entailed...she did. But in the end, by roughly 9am, an hour and a half after starting, he could finally stand up again, albeit feeling very sore.

Minako fell back into a nearby recliner, exhausted from the work, almost to the point of feeling her thumbs cramping. She watched her 'patient' fumble around the room, trying to get his bearings while Yuri acted as a buffer in case he started to fall, "...Keep moving...the more you move, the better you'll feel..." She advised, waving one hand around weakly before letting it drop again, "Whew... Normally, people take pain meds before they ask for this kind of thing... Having your whole back, shoulders, and legs done all at once...that's an undertaking most wouldn't tolerate without some."

"We didn't have anything strong enough." Yuri explained, "The stuff he took last night barely took
the edge off, so he said there was no point."

"I'd never manage to skate the Exhibition if I didn't go through the whole thing." Viktor grumbled, reaching around to rub his sore lower back, "I should be fine by tonight..."

"Thanks for coming on such short-notice, Minako-sensei." The younger figure added, "And for the coffee, Mikhail. Sorry if we ate up half your morning. I guess we'll see you later then?"

"We can wait a little bit if you want a ride over to the rink." The ballerina offered, "It'd be fun to watch a practice again."

Yuri nodded, "We'll be down in about 30 minutes then."
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED FOURTEEN

The arena was shrouded in a deep blue; the ice was illuminated by the rotating shapes of 12 giant snowflakes cast down in light from the rafters. There was an energy in the air as the audience was getting more and more excited; the last performance of the competition featured only the best of the best, and closing ceremonies were always more entertaining than opening.

Suddenly, the lights darkened, putting everything except the rink-wall itself into complete darkness. The snowflake-lights vanished, and the sound of a series of trumpets and trombones reverberated throughout the arena, building excitement with the rising tone and intensity of the growing orchestra. When it faded out, lights on the arena came on to a slightly dimmed luminescence; enough to see, but only barely.

The flag-dancers from the Opening Ceremonies were lined up along the short ends of the rink.

"To begin with, please enjoy the performance of flag skating by the local skaters of Hokkaido Skating Federation."

The ice lit-up again with a crisscross of lights and shadow, and the blue glow illuminated the entire rink. The blue-dressed skaters started moving along the rink wall, their flags still furled as music started above them.

They went about their same performance from the Opening Ceremonies, even with the same music (I've settled on ['Firework' - Katy Perry],) weaving in and out of one another with their flags unfurled and forming the big double-circle in center. They morphed into the square grid after that, each spinning their flags one-united-row at a time, then filed out again towards opposite ends of the rink. With unusual speed, they converged on center again, this time forming 4 points of a big windmill formation, skating around the NHK logo in perfect sync before filing out again to form the main big circle, spinning around backwards, and uniting as one group in the center, all flags facing out for the finale.

The music faded out a little bit, then another started overlaying on top of it, and the lady skaters moved back out to form the big, slow-moving ring.

['Make Me Move' - Culture Code feat. Karra, James Roche Remix]

"And now, Ladies and Gentlemen...please welcome all of the skaters participating in this Exhibition!"

JSF reporters were sweeping the rink-side area, catching the excited waves and jumping around that the skaters were showing off. All were dressed in something entertaining...some more formal than others, some even business-casual, others just plain weird. They started filing towards the rink-entrance, some starting to dance in place to the music, slowly shuffling their advance as the announcer started calling their names overhead.

"Leo de la Iglesia...the United States!"

The Bronze medalist flew out across the ice to the cheering of the crowd, rushing over to the 3 big mascots at the other end of the rink and extending his arm to high-five the first one; the infamous and lovable Domo-kun.
Viktor waited at the very back of the group, still feeling a bit sore, but much better than he'd been first thing in the morning. He handed off his coat and skate-guards to Yuri, standing just next to him, then leaned in close, "Do you think Konstantin came back for this?" He wondered, trying to be heard over the music.

His Exhibition outfit was difficult to see in the dark, being that it was completely black; button-down shirt with sheer, puffy sleeves that were flowing over form-fitting black sleeves underneath. A gun-metal grey vest covered that, and black pants below. His hair was immaculately styled, his bangs set into their usual fan-like shows-pony style.

More skaters were heading out onto the ice, high-fiving the mascots or dancing with them briefly, then moving to join the rotating ring around center; participants skated in the opposite direction as the flag-skaters. Mila went out fifth; the line was slowly thinning. There were only about 20 people needing their names called in the first place; 6 medalists each from Pair Skating and Ice Dance that each went out together, all 6 medalists from Men's and Ladies Singles, plus 2 who'd volunteered to pony-up the $200 fee to skate the Exhibition without having medaled in their events.

"I have no idea." Yuri answered back, wearing his skates but giving little else away under his Team Japan jacket. He didn't have his hair slicked back for once, "Should I text Mikhail? I'll probably have an answer by the time you get back, unless he's turned his phone off since it's dark."

The Russian thought on it for a moment, "...Ehhh...you can ask if you want. I was mostly just wondering in the hypothetical."

"I'll send a message and then wait to check it until the end then. Make it a surprise." The younger skater offered, pulling his phone out of his pocket and opening up the text window, "Was he was at the medaling ceremony yesterday?"

"He didn't exactly say." The Russian answered, watching Phichit get to go out next; half the group was on the ice by then, "He said the other skaters after me were boring by comparison, but I don't know if that means he stuck it out until the end or not."

"Maybe he did. It was only 4 other skaters... Mikhail would've told him that they should wait, right?"

"Normally I'd say he would, but this time I'm not sure." He shrugged, but then turned to face his partner, snaking one arm around the man's side; only 1 more set of Pair Skater name-announcements to go.

"There's a JSF camera guy right behind you." Yuri said nervously.

"I know." The Russian purred, drawing him in even closer then, "Let them watch."

The younger figure's cheeks went red, but in the low-light of rink-side, it was almost impossible to see. What could be seen though...the JSF cameras captured it all, even if unintentionally, having been focusing on the skaters taking to the ice rather than those still waiting to do so. Arms overlapping one another, palms settled on side, hip, back, and shoulder, heads tilting slightly, and the kiss that followed, both skaters knowing full-well that the footage would show up in the background of the two huge screens playing above each end of the rink. The pair-skaters who went out next had no idea that the extra-passionate cheering was actually, in part, because of the photo-bomb behind them. Still, they took it in stride, and Viktor stepped up to the rink wall after they were gone.

Spotlights shone down on him then, giving him that same ghostly-ethereal glow that Yuri had gotten to see earlier in the day.
Gold blades scratched the ice, and the skater greeted the crowd with heated enthusiasm, hearing their cries and cheers rising up even louder as he came out. When he came to the Domo-kun mascot, he grabbed it with both long arms around its rectangular-shaped body and spun it around in a dramatic hug, then moved on to dance with the other two. The Domo-kun acted embarrassed, bringing its hands up in front of its face as it rotated a few times, jumping up a few times afterward like it had just scored the jack-pot. The other two; a big grey Rabbit with glasses, and a yellow velveteen Bear wearing a pink dress and a tiara, reacted similarly, though Viktor took the 'hands' of the bear and started pulling 'her' along in an arc to go back the way he came. The Rabbit saw the duo coming and quickly jumped in excitement, taking the Bear Princess' waist to form a small skate-train. Domo-kun jumped when it saw what was going on and hustled over, not wanting to be left out. When Viktor finally joined the group of other skaters, he had all 3 mascots trailing behind him, the Bear's hands on his waist and the others doing the same in a line in turn. He held his own hands to the Bear's gloves to make sure 'she' didn't come loose.

Yuri laughed and shook his head at the whole thing, clapping along with the rest of the audience to the beat of the music.

Eventually, like always, the show had to go on...and the Mascot Train let go of the Russian Gold medalist, waving at him like they were sad to see him go, turning to console each other as he skated off with the rest of the group. He jokingly spun around and blew a kiss to the Bear Princess though, and 'she' fell to the ice, fanning herself.

"Domo-kun and friends are here again to cheer everyone up, and give high-fives to the skaters...!"

Viktor saw her go down and quickly rushed back over, feeling a little bad for it and sticking around to help pick 'her' back up again. The audience, of course, ate the whole scene up, clapping and 'aww'ing as the mascot was lifted onto 'her' skates again. Never the sort to leave something undone if it could be done though, Viktor ended the segue by rather dramatically going down on one knee and kissing the Princess Bear's hand, much to the surprise and envy of the Rabbit and Domo-kun mascots, who each pulled both of their hands up to their mouths in shock. The Russian rose back up to his feet and finally waved goodbye, heading over to the rink-exit where the night's first performer was waiting to go out.

To Viktor's surprise, the young face staring up at him was, albeit for a slightly more heart-shaped face, like a 14 year old version of Yuri. The young skater blushed terribly as the Russian looked straight at him, but then went full-steam out onto the ice like he was too embarrassed to say anything. Viktor turned slightly to watch the kid go.

"Ladies and Gentlemen...the first performance of the NHK Exhibition Gala, Japan's Novice Men's Singles, Junior Grand Prix Final qualifier...! Hayashi Kazue!"

The audience applauded, even though the lights were mostly off still. The youngster made his way quickly to the center, and four separate spotlights converged on him, sending tall shadows out from the cardinal directions all around him.

['Forever In My Dreams' - Really Slow Motion]

Viktor was still watching as the music started, but his attention was quickly grabbed by the feeling of his blade-guards being prodded against his arm. He turned his head and spotted his partner looking back at him with a somewhat perplexed look on his face.

"...What was that about?" The younger skater wondered.
"Weird feeling of déjà vu." The older answered, "He kind of looks like you, from the pictures I've seen of you at that age." He slipped each blade-guard on and then booped the skater's nose, "Baby Yuri~!"

"Well, hopefully he won't have to wait another decade to meet his idol, whoever that may be."

The Russian huffed a laugh at that, slipping an arm over his husband's shoulders as they headed slightly down the rink-wall to watch for a while. The youngster performed beautifully, gliding effortlessly over the ice. Viktor nudged at Yuri's chest where he'd slumped over the man's back, speaking quietly into his ear, "Is that how you skated back in the day?"

The youth's performance was coming to a close, and he bowed graciously to the unseen crowd, making way for the next skater.

"Our next performance of the evening is Japan's Novice Ladies Singles, Junior Grand Prix Final qualifier...! Morita Yasuko!"

"Pfft." Yuri guffawed, watching as the next teenager went out, "I wish. That kid can already do a triple Flip. I didn't manage that until I was 16 or something."

"I was able to do all the triples by the time I was 10, though the Axel was easiest since I could get a running start even without a rink. Started doing quads when I was 12. I'm sure I could've started doing those sooner, but I didn't have proper gear until Yakov got me those first real skates. Needed the air-time to get in that last rotation, and it was impossible with the skates I was using before then."

['Broken Vow' - Josh Groban]

Yuri lifted his head a bit, turning slightly to face the man standing behind him, "Really? That early?"

"Mh."

Brown eyes went back across the rink, "I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

"I still have the rest of that story to tell you, don't I?" Viktor wondered, lifting a finger to his lip, "Where did I even leave off? I've gotten bombarded on all sides with this stuff all week so I forget..."

"You got to the part where Yakov was driving you to St. Petersburg... When he gave you the Vitya nickname."

"Ah yeah." The Russian nodded, "I suppose we'll have to make room in our busy schedules for Baby Viktor Storytime at some point. Maybe when we get back home."

"Is that when the story starts to take a happy turn or is it still bad for a while...?" Yuri wondered dubiously.

"It has its ups and downs, but it gets better. The best part doesn't come for a while though."

"...Seriously? Sheesh. You really did a wonder on us all by keeping that stuff to yourself all that time."

The Russian smiled where he had his chin settled on his husband's shoulder, "I didn't exactly take the Junior ISU by storm my first year. That was the second. By then, people weren't so worried about my pre-skating years. I think that helped me get out of my slump...having people focusing on what I was doing rather than what I had done. Besides..." His eyes followed the double axel on the ice, "...There was nothing I liked talking about more than skating anyway. Realizing that I'd gotten so
good at it, and all the attention I got for it, it was pretty vindicating after everything that came before. I always craved more of it. Coming from practically nothing, and then suddenly having the whole world eating out of my hands..." He held them out in front of Yuri's chest, his arms sliding up under his partner's as they went further out. He kept raising them higher and higher until he could see the young lady-skater dancing in his palms, "...It was like I'd been a bird, trapped in a cage my whole life, and someone finally opened the door. I was scared to step out at first, because I'd seen the shadows beyond the bars...but once I got past the gate, and spread my wings...nothing was going to stop me." Hands went back to where they'd been before, one around the younger skater's chest, the other curving up to hold to Yuri's shoulder, "Well, nothing except age, I guess."

"We're both ancient in this place..."

Viktor gave a quiet laugh at that, "Yeah...it's like there's no transition. One year we're still fresh-faced babes, then the next...we're Seniors, in form, function, and title."

They both gave a loud sigh at that...though just as Yuri was about to go back to watching the performance ahead of himself, he felt a familiar buzz in his back pocket.

Having already completely forgotten about sending any messages to begin with, he initially thought it might be Phichit texting him for something, but when he saw the message preview on his lock-screen, he remembered what he'd asked before.

Mikhail Rozovsky: [Yeah, all 4 of us are here. I can't really tell where we are in the dark, but we're much closer to the rink than yesterday.]

"...Whoops." Yuri muttered with a nervous laugh, quickly closing the screen again.

"Guess that answers that question."

The phone buzzed again, [I can't talk much. People are elbowing me for having my phone on. When does Viktor go up though? Inquiring minds want to know.]

[Last.] The young skater typed.

[Figures. Aright, ttyl.]

Yuri quickly put his phone away before someone on rink-side elbowed him as well, though just as he did so, he felt another buzz. He grumbled and pulled it back again, this time waiting to answer it until he'd turned 180 in Viktor's arms, clicking the screen on with himself and the Russian acting as a barrier. He still cupped his hand around the phone as added protection, and saw the preview of a text message from Phichit.

[Yuri! Your photo-bomb is going viral! [Image Attached]]

"Eh?" He blinked at the screen and unlocked it, getting into the official chat window with his friend and seeing a screen-grab of what looked like Instagram. Details were difficult to see in a thumbnail, but when he clicked to expand it, he saw a gif-preview of the clip from earlier in the event...minutes earlier in the event. Yet, there it was...the Pair Skaters that had gone on just before Viktor did...and themselves in the background in the middle of their lip-lock, "Oh boy."

"What is it?" Viktor wondered, pulling back a bit to look at the screen from his upside-down vantage.
"Well, you said to 'let them look,' and...well, they are." He laughed nervously and flipped the phone around.

The Russian took it in-hand and examined it, one finger over his lip as he read all the text, looking at all the numbers, seeing the **thousands** of Likes and Comments already. The 4 top-most comments that were visible from the onset included tags like #SorryNotSorry, #ViktuuriPhotobomb, #SetSailOnTheHMSViktuuri, and #IWillGoDownWithThisShip while others remarked #OhYeahPairSkating, #HairDownNotSkatingSadface. He just laughed at the rest, giving his husband the phone back, "People think you're not going to be on the ice tonight."

Yuri tilted his head at him, clicking the phone off and turning back, "A photo of us making out in the background of an Exhibition roll-call and you singled out one tagline?"

"I guess it does beg the question...why **don't** you have your hair styled back? Were you going to do it later?"

The younger figure looked around, as though thinking the air around him had ears...but then looked up, finding the music too loud to make whispering an easy way to communicate. Instead, he nudged his head towards the curtain to the prep area, and they started walking towards it. Just as they were about to pull it back, Leo was coming out, so they raised where they had their hands clasped together and let the young skater pass beneath them.

He just paused and blinked with a stunned look on his face, turning around to glance back at the duo, having **entirely** not expected what just happened. They were already gone though, vanished beneath the fabric.

Once their eyes adjusted to the lights, Yuri walked them quietly over to a far side of the cue, past where other skaters were watching the show on the television. He stopped eventually, one hand in his pocket, the other still clasped to his partner's, and he looked at the floor.

"...You got really dark all of a sudden for a really simple question." Viktor pointed out, totally unsure what to do about it.

"I can only think of one time where my skating was ever mentioned to your father." He started, keeping his eyes low, "And that was when Yakov told him why I was there with you in the park in St. Petersburg. I know for sure that neither of you admitted that I was your fiancé to him back then, because he would've lost it a lot sooner if you had...so I can only guess that you guys described me as your skate-student."

"Yeah...why?"

He finally lifted his eyes, looking at his husband evenly, "That means...unless Mikhail told him all about my accomplishments, then Konstantin has no clue what I'm capable of."

"...I don't know that he has. He said he was trying to warm my father up to the idea of skating by making him watch videos, so even if he might've seen you in there somewhere, I doubt my father cares, or even remembers. What does any of this have to do with your hair though?" Viktor wondered, reaching up his free hand to ruffle it a little, "You've never done a performance with your hair down."

"Your father and I have never been able to communicate because neither of us speaks the same language. He doesn't know the first thing about me." Yuri explained, "All he knows is what he's seen, so to him, all I am is some Japanese runt that turns up in all the same places you do."
Some of the other skaters suddenly noticed them, and a bunch were waving or whistling at them in response to the viral photo.

Viktor waved back at them politely, but then turned back to Yuri, "...I don't follow."

"We're in Japan right now. I look exactly like everyone else he's seen around here." The younger skater said anxiously, "You've said that above all other things, you want him to see you. For who you are, what you've become, what you're capable of. I..." He paused, clenching his eyes shut for a moment as he shook his head, then opening them wide again with 'that' look on his face, "I want him to see me too! I want to make him see us! What we are, what we're capable of!"

"...Yuri..."

"If I put my hair up into a style he's never seen me wear before, he might not even realize it's me while I'm out there, and ignore the whole end of the program as just another gross display. How many times have you had to take my glasses and pull my hair back for people who didn't recognize me off the ice?"

"...A couple."

"And one of those times was here in Japan. Every time he and I have been in the same place together, I've always been buried under a big coat and scarf, too. I need to do everything I can to make sure he knows it's me out there."

"I don't think he'd expect anyone else to come skate with me."

"Still!" Yuri went on, "Even if it's just for my sake, I want to go out there looking like I normally do. I want to prove to him that I'm worthy of you...that I'm not just some pet you drag around. Even if my part of the skate is barely a minute and a half long...there's a lot that I can say with that time, with my skating!"

Viktor wasn't sure how to take it, so he just smiled anxiously, "...You're getting really passionate about this whole thing."

"Wasn't it your plan all along to have him watch us skate the Exhibition together?"

"Well, I planned on having him watch the Exhibition, sure...but...until after the Short Program, I was just going to be doing one of my pre-planned shows..." The Russian admitted, "The way he refused to watch other skaters, even during yesterday's Free Skate...I honestly didn't expect he'd come here today, especially since there's no real structure to the thing."

"Don't you want to show him?" Yuri wondered, "His flight back to Russia leaves tonight. If we don't show him now, we might never get the chance again."

Viktor was quiet for a moment, contemplating the whole thing, but then shrugged, "Well, he's here, at least for now...and we're going to be doing this Exhibition whether he's around or not."

"Let's make it over the top then." The younger skater offered, "The choreography is already set in stone, but we can still make it extra."

"Are you sure...?" The Russian wondered skeptically, "Other than to torment Yurio, you've always been kind of hesitant to let me do too much when people are watching. This time it would be the entire audience."

"I don't mean that much extra..." Yuri shook his free hand in protest, his cheeks pink from the very
idea of it. He shook his head and stepped closer though, emulating one of the maneuvers from the very end of the program, taking his partner's other hand and raising their arms up to shoulder level and stepping closer so that Viktor's right arm was just in front of his chest, and vice versa, their heads turned to center to see each other, "But this part...instead of doing it like this..." He stepped a bit to the right, putting his skate between the Russian's, close enough then to be able to look straight up into that blue eye, "...We're closer together, like this, and instead of the side-by-side camel spin, we could do a pair spin, too."

"...You don't think it's intimate enough as it is?" Viktor wondered, their hands lowering.

The younger skater shook his head, "I...think it's reluctant. We're skating it together, sure...but... It doesn't have that same closeness that Duetto or even The Ghost have. It's the kind of show that Yurio and Otabek would do...a Friends' Skate, not a Lovers' Skate."

The silver Russian gaped at him, "...Really?"

Again, Yuri anxiously nodded.

"...Why didn't you say anything about it before? When we still had the ice to practice on..."

Brown eyes gave a nervous look, and Yuri slightly turned his head, "After the debacle at Skate Canada, I."

"Oh."

There was a period of silence between them. All they could hear was the sound of whoever's Exhibition's music was playing at the time, and the sound of the other skaters cheering or chatting.

Eventually, Yuri stepped closer, his free hand settling on his husband's chest, sliding up slowly to gently pass over his slender neck, coming to rest on the side of his head, getting the attention of those slate eyes and speaking quietly, "I understand if you don't want your father to see this side of us. I know you're being protective over it, because of how badly he's reacted to it before. But I can also tell you really want to show it off...why else would you have kissed me on camera like before? Even if it was in the dark..." He paused a moment, gently stroking his thumb over that pale skin, "I might've been oblivious to what was being said yesterday after the Free Skate...but I know now what bet Yurio won, and I know it means you told your father what we did. I don't know why you told him...but telling him isn't the same as showing him. If we survived yesterday without Konstantin even flinching...then we can survive this, too. Everything on the ice is love, right?"

Viktor nodded quietly.

"If every solo skate we do is an effort to seduce each other...then let's go out there and show off the results of our success. Let's get on the ice and make love, where him and everyone else can see us. Let there be no question...we're not just Yuri and Viktor Nikiforov. We are Viktuuri."
Chapters 215

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED FIFTEEN

"PHICHITTO-KUUUUUUNNNNNNNNN!" Yuri yelled out, hands cupped around his mouth.

Like a desk-jockey on a cubical farm, deprived of all human contact, natural sunlight, and organic stimulation...Phichit's head popped up from within a crowd of other skaters, looking to and fro like someone had just announced that there was free pizza in the break room.

"YUUUUUURRRRRRRRIIIIIIIII!!" He called back.

"COME OVER HEEEEERRREEEEE." The older skater started waving his hand around from the far end of the room.

"...Are you sure this is a good idea?" Viktor wondered, watching the spectacle unfold before him.

Yuri looked back, entirely confident in his plan, "What better way to make sure we get back for our turn, and prevent photos going online, than to put an Instagram addict in charge of the former so as to avoid the latter?"

Blue eyes blinked at him, but the Russian just smiled, snapped his fingers, and pointed at him with that same hand, "Yes."

"Wha-what is it!?" Phichit asked as he ran up, looking worried, "Why are you yelling!??"

"Everything's fine. I need you to do something for me." Yuri said, getting a serious look on his face, "It's really important."

"Anything you need!"

"Viktor and I have to go off by ourselves to do something super private. I need you to be responsible and make sure we know when it's almost our turn to skate so we get back in time. Can you handle that?"

Dark brown eyes gaped for a moment, as though the words were rattling around in Phichit's head. For a while, the skater wasn't sure how to answer, "...Something...super private?"

"Yes." Yuri answered, reaching out to take his friend by the shoulders, "You're my point-man. Stay here in the prep area and make absolutely sure that we don't come back too late." He then reached down for the other skater's hands, seeing how Phichit still had his phone there, and brought them up to clasp them between both of his own, "You're the only one I can trust to make sure we get back for our turn." He looked at the younger man squarely in the eyes, unblinking and steadfast, "Can I count on you?"

Viktor watched quietly, utterly fascinated. He could almost see the math equations flying through Phichit's mind as he tried to process the innumerable scenarios that Yuri could've been referring to.

"Wh-" The Thai figure was finally breaking though, "You...I mean... Y-yes, of course you can! I'll text you when the last person before you goes up!"

"Perfecto~" Yuri hummed, clapping his hands against the back of his friend's where they were still clasped between them, "Remember. You have to stay here to make sure we're on time."
"I'll stay here!"

"Don't leave the prep area except for your own Exhibition."

"I won't go anywhere!"

The older skater smiled, "You're the best friend a guy could ask for. We're going to go and do that super-private stuff now, okay?"

"O-Okay!"

Yuri quickly turned and took Viktor's hand to start the skate-footed sprint, each of them thunk'ing along the polished concrete floor with each step. Viktor glanced back one last time before they rounded a corner, seeing Phichit waving one hand weakly in front of himself.

"Yuurriii...that's so dirty...!" The Thai figure whispered to himself. He looked down at his phone then, sweating bullets as the desperate need to take pictures was rising inside him. He took a step forward...then stopped...going back again two steps, but turning on his heel to second-guess himself. Frustrated, he ruffled his immaculately-styled hair, "HOW COULD YOU DO THIS TO ME."

They only went so far as the empty ring under the arena, looking around for possible spies and seeing none but a few far-off Event Security staffers standing by the main entrance and exit hall. The corridor was wide enough for dozens of people to walk, but with the event coordinators shuffling spectators into the seating area through a select few entrance-ways, half the underside of the building was unused.

Skates were quickly pulled off and set aside, socks sliding much more easily across the floor than clunky, heavy blade-guards. Yuri tested it out while Viktor was still sorting out his own skates, gliding around with a few practice moves, even managing to get in a few spins before the Russian stood up.

"I think you broke his brain." Viktor said, not sure if he was allowed to laugh, "That was probably even crueler than when you told him to go to Oodori Park."

Yuri just stopped mid-spin, standing straight up to put both hands up behind his head, smiling anxiously, "It was all I could think of..."

Viktor nodded, sliding the team jacket off of where it had been loosely sitting on his shoulders, folding it over the nearby bench where his skates had been settled. He drew in a deep breath, "...Where to begin, then?"

"From the beginning, of course." The younger skater threw his arms out to let them fall back to his sides, backing up several paces down the hall as the Russian did the same.

They stood about 10ft apart, and Viktor raised his hands, lacing his fingers loosely together before spreading his arms way out to the side and pausing. Yuri moved in from the front, looking curiously with a finger on his lip, but then lightly setting a few fingers behind his partner's forearms to pivot them forward slightly, making them stretch forward in a wide V-shape rather than simply straight out to the sides.

"There...now I can come in and take your hands much sooner than before." He explained, stepping back a few paces, only to slide forward again, holding his own arms in the same V-shape as he came in, "I practically had to collide with you before."

Viktor just watched him quietly, following the lead where it may.
"Then," Yuri went on, "Instead of just stopping here in front of you, I can do this..." He stepped into the Russian's space, putting the side of his right foot and leg right up against the taller figure's, still holding to his partner's hands. He tilted his face down and inward, and Viktor followed suit. When Yuri realized there was still too much distance, he shifted where he put his feet, setting the right just in front of the Russian's instead of next to them, then getting in closer again, looking up just enough to feel the man's skin on his own, each other's right cheek and brow against one another lightly, "There, that's better. Then, without letting go until the end, I'll turn around to put my back towards you and you can start moving us both backward for the 3-turn."

They did just that, crossing Yuri's arms over himself where he turned, and he stepped back into his partner's embrace, feeling the man's chest against his back just as their fingers released. Viktor's hands went down to Yuri's waist, but before the Russian could take a step back, Yuri reached down to move his hands, making it so the man's arms came completely around him.

"...You're making me worried for the two and a half minutes just leading into this part of the show." The silver skater commented quietly, feeling where his partner's right hand came down over his own, left coming up to gently touch the side of his face where it had come over over a shoulder, chin to forehead when Yuri dipped his face inward and closed his eyes.

"This is all stuff you do normally anyway." The younger skater pointed out, "It feels really weird that you didn't already have the show planned this way."

Viktor had no answer for that.

They moved out to continue the formation, and Viktor stepped to the left, taking his husband's hand between them as they pretended to skate backward, letting go only for the 3-turn. They twisted into a fake Flip jump, arcing and coming back in line again, moving independently for a moment before coming back together again, face to face. They stopped there though, arms supporting one another while a leg each was out behind them.

"Why did you tell him that we did stuff after your Free Skate?" Yuri asked pointedly.

The silver Russian gave something of a defensive look, but then glanced away, "I don't know; it just came out."

The younger figure didn't entirely believe it, but said nothing as the maneuver went on. They switched sides, moving on their own again in time with each other, spinning and twisting, arcing arms over hips, kicking feet out, twizziling, then coming back to one another again.

Pausing when Viktor was behind him, each of them pivoting on their right foot as the left leg lifted behind them, Yuri turned his head slightly. The Russian's hands were holding to his waist to keep them in formation, but Yuri pulled on them again to put them more intimately around him, one around his abdomen while the other went around his chest, putting Viktor's chin just next to his ear. He lifted his free hand again to set it against that silver-grey hair, and turned his head fully to look at the man more evenly, "What else were you saying? Why did it even come up?"

"I was just..." The Russian started, second-guessing everything at that point, "...Explaining the timeline of events that lead to us standing out there."

"You didn't need to sandwich our private affairs into the middle of it though..."

"Maybe not." Viktor reluctantly agreed, feeling for a hand and using it to spin the shorter figure away from himself, putting him where he'd be for the Death Spiral and letting him slowly walk around in place of being lowered to the imaginary ice, "But maybe I did..."
"...Eh?"

"I told him...that I did my Rage Skate, and that I set 3 new World Records...but then what? I waited for an hour, doing nothing?" He went on, "Sat on my hands before collecting my medal? No...That's why it just came out. It was filler, bridging the gaps in a story."

"...It's not just filler to me..."

Viktor pulled his arm up, spinning his partner closer again as he 'came up' out of the spiral, "I didn't mean it that way..." He held there for longer than the maneuver would've taken, and Yuri wound himself down from the anticipation of going into the next, simply staying still where he was, "I walked away from that show at an all-time high in my career. I turned something that's caused me nothing but pain and stress into a performance of a lifetime...and when I was done, the only thing I could think of was you. How much I loved you, how much I wanted you. If I left it out...it was like I was letting Konstantin win. He's caused us both enough suffering this last year. I wasn't going to let him take my joy for getting to be with you away by hiding it like it hadn't happened."

"...So then why are you hiding it in the Exhibition?"

Like before, the silver Russian had no answer.

"You said this show was supposed to be the recovery after the storm. What kind of recovery is it when you're only putting in half of what you normally do?"

"We're coming at this from totally different perspectives."

"I know that...but you came this whole way saying you want him to see you for who you are. Why stop now? It doesn't make any sense. I'm as much a part of you now as the skating, aren't I?"

"Konstantin drove me from home with a broken eye-socket because of the skating...not because of my unknown future romantic choices." He finally said, "What I wanted to prove to him was that nothing he did to me mattered, because I did what I wanted anyway...and not just that... I went on to pursue the thing he hated the most, and I became the best at it. He knows that now...so I can finally put that whole sad saga behind me. That's what I tried to show him yesterday...he can take me as I am, or he can leave it... But I'm not going to weaponize our relationship the same way I did my Free Skate. I can't do that to us just to prove a point."

"...So then what have you been doing with me for the last few minutes...?"

"Humoring you." Viktor sighed, drooping his head until he could feel raven hair against his face. Yuri felt it like a stab through his chest, but said nothing. Viktor went on anyway, "...Trying to make myself warm up to your way of looking at it. I really want to do it your way, but I just...feel like my father doesn't deserve to see that much."

"Then you're just letting him ruin it for you. You're letting him do exactly the thing you said he shouldn't be allowed to do."

The Russian held perfectly still for a while, the words having hit him like a brick. Eventually though, he lifted his head again, and nodded, "I know..."

"Going out there and doing this Exhibition isn't the same as what you did with your Free Skate anyway. It's just us being us. But this song..." Yuri said quietly, snaking his fingers into his husband's right hand and giving it a gentle squeeze, "...I don't know if someone pulled it straight out of your brain or if you found it by accident...but this song is your story." He pulled that hand up and held it between both of his, kissing the ring lightly, "...The whole message it's sending is to be who
"You are despite what's happened, in spite of what people think. What kind of message will it send to our fans if the song is saying 'be who you are' but we're not?"

"'Be who you are...unless being who you are gets you punched twice in the eye, kicked in the ribs, and vodka poured on your head just to make it hurt more?' Viktor said dryly, "Part of me worries he'll just start yelling profanities at the ice if we push it too far."

Yuri just gave him a look, "We need to deal with this..." He reached into his coat and pulled his phone out, turning slightly and sending out a call.

"What are you doing?"

"Something about this."

"Yuri, who are y-" Blue eyes shot open in realization, "Ahhhhh! Noooool!

In the dark of the audience, a certain Russian's phone was buzzing in the inside-chest-pocket of a certain long-coat.

"I thought you turned it off?" Minako wondered, feeling the vibration all the way down his sleeve.

Mikhail grumbled and pulled the device out, "I probably should. People are going to get m-"

"YAMETE!" Someone finally harped in the row behind him, kicking the back of his chair.

"Hikari ga..."

Mikhail paused, dead-panning into the dark as he saw the name-plate on his screen. He turned quietly to the ballerina next to him, "Would you kindly tell these people that if Yuri Nikiforov is calling me, I'm going to answer?"

She blinked at him, but then nodded, turning to the people in the row behind them, "Sore ga Yuri Nikiforov da yo! Urusai!"

Confused muttering answered her as Mikhail stood up to get into the stairwell, barely able to squeeze past the legs of the huge man sitting between him and the open isle, "Hey, what's going on?"

"Can you bring Konstantin out here?"

"Eh?" The elder Russian stopped where he was, one hand still on the bear's shoulder where he'd put it to avoid falling as he stumbled by. He turned to look at the man, "...Bring him where?"

Viktor was protesting in the background, but Yuri was unrelenting, "In the big empty hall behind the prep area."

"...Ahhhhh okay..." Mikhail answered nervously, patting the shoulder where he held to it, "Poydem so mnoy, my dolzhny idti." He turned back to the phone as the confused behemoth stood up as asked, "I hope you have a plan because I have no idea what you're thinking right now."

"Just get here as soon as you can. There's not much time left and we still have work to do."

"Alright alright...be there in a second."

"Where are you going...?" Minako wondered; Yurio looked up as well.

"Yuri asked us to go see him. He asked for Kon specifically." He shrugged, "We'll be right back, I
"What are you thinking?" Viktor panicked, "Why did you- Why are you-"

"Let me do the driving this time." The younger figure said, "You don't have to say or do anything."

The Russian just had his hands up over the sides of his face, fingers crossing over his eyes a little. He paused though and went on unsteady feet to the bench with his skates, sitting down before he fell down, "I don't feel so good..."

Yuri gave a nervous look, but swallowed to help the tingling growing in his gut. Barely a second later, he heard Mikhail's voice calling out, and he turned anxious eyes to look in his direction, seeing the hulking shadow walking next to him. The young skater drew in a deep breath, but then stepped out to start walking their way.

Just as he was about to speak though, Viktor came rushing up and started trying to pull him back, waving at the two men frantically, "You can go back! It's nothing! This was a mistake!"

"Viktor!" Yuri protested, slipping out of his partner's grasp like a slippery eel, "Let me do this!"

"I don't even know what you're doing!" He called back, halfway to hysterics already, "What are you doing!?"

"Just watch."

The pair of older Russians just gawked at the younger ones, standing still where they came to rest.

Yuri turned back towards them again, looking straight at Konstantin first, but then at Mikhail, "Translate for me."

"...Sure?" The confused elder answered, then leaning forward a little, "What's going on?"

Brown eyes went back up to slate, "Hi."

Viktor and Mikhail both gaped, but the elder coughed to clear his throat, turning to the bear, "Zdravstvuyte."

Even Konstantin was thrown by it, answering with little more than silence and a quirked eyebrow.

Yuri went on, "My name is Yuri."

"...Menya zovut Yuri."

Viktor listened in quiet horror, constantly looking between all three figures as words went on. He spotted the Russian Tiger coming up from behind though and quickly nabbed him, pulling him to a
safe distance and holding him there with a hand over his mouth to silence his complaints.

"We first met under stressful circumstances in St. Petersburg, almost a year ago." Yuri continued, hearing Mikhail quietly repeating the words in Russian as he spoke, "Back then, Yakov told you I was a student of Viktor's. That was true. He had been my skating coach for about 11 months by then. He dropped a skating career at the apex of a 5-year winning streak, and went all the way to Japan to find me. He did that because he saw a video of me replicating one of his ultra-hard programs, despite having bombed doing my own easy show at the last event we shared, 3 months prior."

"What the fuck is he doing...?" Yurio asked quietly, finally getting past Viktor's weakening grip.

"...Your guess is as good as mine right now. I have no clue." He whispered back.

Yuri's voice paused for a moment as Mikhail caught up, and drew in a breath, "I'm 4 years younger than Viktor, but I've idolized him since I was 12. All those years, all I wanted was to be like him, to skate like him, to skate on the same ice as him. Everything I did, I did because I thought, maybe...just maybe...one day, I'd be good enough to compete against him...and meet him. Now, I never had any illusions of ever being half as good as he was, or that he and I would ever even be friends, even though we shared a mutual group of them. I was always too scared or nervous to talk to him, hardly even being able to form complete sentences when he was around...so you can imagine how crazy it was when he showed up at my family's hot-spring resort, saying he was going to drop everything and be my coach."

All eyes were on him by then.

"Who was I? Some nobody, whose total score in my last event was less than the Free Skate score he got yesterday. But there he was...this guy I've practically worshiped for half of my life, standing in that hot-spring saying, 'Yuri, starting today, I'm going to be your coach. I'm going to make you win the next Grand Prix Final."

Again, he paused to let Mikhail catch up. Konstantin whispered something back at him, inaudible to the younger Russians in the rear, but the silver man shrugged and turned his eyes to let Yuri know he could keep going.

He cleared his throat and drew in another anxious breath, "I've never really been the praying type...but I pleaded with Kami-sama, God, that Viktor wouldn't leave...that if I could get anything in my life, all I wanted was some of Viktor's time. And he stayed. For 8 months, he lived with me and my family, teaching me, building me up, helping me learn to just like myself again...and in the end, at the end of that 9th month, when it came down to the wire...I managed to win silver, beat out for gold by less than a quarter of a point by him." He pointed at the blonde, though kept his eyes on the bear, "I was already worried that I'd miss the mark by a big margin before that...so I bought Viktor a gold ring, as a thank you for everything he'd done, and to give him something gold in case the medal turned out not to be it in the end. I'm not even sure why I picked a ring, of all the things...all I knew was that I wanted it to be something he could have with him that wouldn't get in the way. He had already given up so much for me...if I failed to get that gold medal at the end, or worse, if I didn't even get on the podium...it would've embarrassed him, and it terrified me. I can't tell you how many sleepless nights I had because of that fear. The eyes of the entire world were on me, and everything I did...my successes, my failures, it would all reflect on Viktor, for better or worse. So I got him that one little bit of gold, just in case I couldn't get the gold that really mattered. But you know what happened...?"

Yuri looked down, pulling his hands out of his pockets and looking at the band around his finger. He nervously held that hand up, palm towards himself.
"He bought the matching ring...and gave it to me." He could already feel the strain in his eyes and voice, "He slipped that gold around my finger and told me, quite simply, to go skate the shows that I could honestly say I liked the best. In that moment...that one, quiet moment in the Sagrada Familia...with my heart pounding so hard I thought it would explode, I realized for myself what Viktor had been thinking the entire time...I couldn't be without him." He felt the tears starting to roll down his face, and he pulled his hand back to protect the band, "I'd been nervous already about the idea of him leaving after the Final was over...I even asked him to stay with me until I retired from the sport, as though that somehow meant he'd be around longer, even though I hadn't yet decided to stay on after we got done in Spain. But Viktor just told me...that he hoped I never retired...and I started to let myself believe that he'd never leave me. I just needed to meet him half-way." He reached up to rub his eyes and catch his breath, "...I didn't know what to do. In my head, I was just wracked with guilt...this is Viktor Nikiforov, greatest skater of our generation, best skater in the world, in history...he's my idol, my hero...my best friend. I wanted him to come back to the sport as a competitor, since I'd basically stolen him from the world by having him coach me. In my heart though, I knew better. Even though I'd never had interest in guys before...I'd had a long-time crush on a girl I grew up with, after all...I still knew." He looked up then, staring straight into those slate blue eyes, "No one chooses who they fall in love with...and I had fallen completely in love with him."

Both of the men standing in front of him exchanged glances once Mikhail caught up, but beyond that, no one was really reacting...just listening.

"So I can't tell you how much it hurt me when I saw Viktor come back to St. Petersburg after going to the funeral for his mom...and I found out that my love for him got him two fists in the eye and a foot in his chest," He raised his hand and pointed at the bear, "...FROM HIS OWN FATHER."

Viktor's eye twitched a bit behind his bangs, but he stayed still and silent, holding onto Yurio still, as though the teen were the only thing he had to anchor himself to the moment instead of running.

Konstantin gave the young skater a skeptical look once he'd heard the translation, turning to whisper something to Mikhail again. They each muttered back and forth a few times, too quiet for anyone but themselves to hear, though at one point Mikhail looked like he'd been taken aback by something, looking from the bear to Yuri and then back again. He drew in a breath and stepped forward a bit, and gestured to the big man to give some response.

Silence answered for a moment, but the bear shrugged, speaking things in Russian until enough was said that Mikhail could report it back in English, "He's saying...From the moment I first set eyes on you, I thought you were weak. Too weak to be a man, to weak to be anything at all, really. When you jumped on my arm during that first meeting, I added 'idiot' to the list of things I thought you were."

Yuri just guffawed, turning his head back to Viktor and giving a look like I told you so before turning back again.

"The only reason I didn't crush you back then was because I knew it would cause more problems than it was worth." Mikhail went on reluctantly, "So I told Viktor what he should do, and threw you out like the worthless trash I thought you were. I thought he'd see the truth of it and abandon the idiocy of the game he was playing, because no son of mine would be getting into bed with another man. But then I remembered..."

The skaters all blinked in confusion.

"...This giant idiot is related to him." Mikhail said stiffly, gesturing at himself for emphasis the same
way Konstantin did, "...And he spent half his formative years pretending to be his twin sister."

Yuri raised a brow at him, "...Seriously?"

Yurio just chortled in the background, hushed quickly by Viktor.

"It's a long story." The elder grimaced, turning an ear back as the bear started up again, and waiting a moment like before to start translating, "...As much as you all probably think that I use my fists to get what I want because of my size...it's not wholly true. What is true though, is that as much as I wanted to beat the ever-living Hell out of Mikhail for the things he did growing up...I never did. Instead, the urge to do so just sat at the back of my mind, idle for decades. But Mikhail left...and then Viktor left...and all I was left with was the question...in the end, when it mattered most, did I take out all my anger for Mikhail out on my own son? All he'd really done was skate. In hindsight, it wasn't even the fact that he was skating that angered me...it was how he'd lied about it, and how his mother had lied about it. After he was gone, I was torn between the guilt of having let my anger get the better of me...and trying to justify how much I still hated the skating, and how much more angry it made me to know my son was doing it. I was worried that he would grow up just like his Uncle did, either pretending to be a woman, or simply letting himself be used like one, and that the figure skating would make him think it's okay. I railed against it...my son was a Nikiforov...and no Nikiforov was going to let himself be mounted by another man."

Nervous glances went around the hall again, but none more so than the one Mikhail was giving to himself for having to repeat the words.

It went on though, "When I saw the rings on both of your fingers, I wanted to break the both of you in half." The silver Russian said nervously, "Or at very least, break you in half, and drag Viktor back home where he belongs, and re-teach him what it means to be part of this family. To take him by the shoulders and scream STOP TRYING TO BE YOUR UNCLE. YOU'RE VIKTOR NIKIFOROV, NOT VIKTOR ROZOV." Mikhail stopped at that point, sighing in frustration, "This is nuts. It always comes back to me." He turned on his heel and gestured at Yuri, looking at the bear, [WOULD YOU JUST APOLOGIZE FOR HITTING VIKTOR AT THE FUNERAL? THAT'S ALL YURI WANTS.]

"What else did he say though? I know that wasn't the end of it." Yuri asked quietly, turning back to the two behind him.

"...He was saying that it's been 25 years, that Viktor should stop pretending to be his uncle's son, and that nothing either of them did would make it true." Yurio finished, "He was in the middle of something else but Mikhail cut him off, saying Kon should just apologize for hitting Viktor and be done with it."

Yuri turned back to the two bickering elders, "Let him finish, Mikhail."

Grey-green eyes turned back, stopping mid-sentence as he heard the words. He huffed a stiff breath and adjusted his tie to busy his hands, "Fine." He gestured then to tell the bear to keep going, waiting the anxious moment as the Russian started speaking again, and picking up the translation as he went, "...He's saying...he hit Viktor at the funeral because he thought he could beat me out of him. He thought Viktor's relationship with you was just some joke like I'd played on him when we were kids, and that if he put his foot down, he could finally stamp out my influence on Viktor's character." Mikhail growled then, "This really is all my fault."

"Whatever you did to him as kids as nothing to do with how he treated Viktor last year." Yuri said firmly, "Tell him again to apologize."
The silver Russian turned back and looked at the bear, gesturing between him and the young skater, [Yuri is flat-out demanding an apology.]

[He can demand all he wants.]

[So you won't?]

[You first.]

Mikhail blinked in confusion, [Me first...? What does that even mean?]  
[You never apologized for what you did back then. So...you apologize to me, and I'll apologize to him.]

Yuri looked between them as they exchanged words, then turned back to the other two with a curious look.

"Kon's bargaining." The Tiger explained.

The skater gave a look like that didn't make sense, and crossed his arms as he waited for them to be done.

[Haven't I done enough to prove that I feel bad for what I did?] Mikhail wondered.

[All you've done is try to weasel your way back into Viktor's life, picking up where you left off when you abandoned him in spite of me. What have you done to show that you regret what you did to the rest of us?]

"...Dang, burn." Yurio quipped.

"QUIET, YOU." Mikhail barked, turning back then, [I guess, nothing at all if that's how you feel. Admitting that I know I did wrong, regretting how it hurt everyone...watching out for you and trying to bring the family back together like Tat wanted, none of that mattered.]

[Tat was the only one who wanted it.]

[Apparently.] Mikhail grumbled, [Then fine...I'm sorry for pretending to be Tat when we were teens. I'm sorry for trying to destroy your marriage and for all the years I made everyone miserable with my woe-is-me attitude after you put me in my place.]

[And?]

[...And?]

Konstantin gestured a hand towards his son.

The silver elder ruffled his brow in confusion, not really sure what the man meant. Viktor gave him the same look back. However, that was what told Mikhail what the issue was. Everything in him seized up, and he was left feeling like he couldn't breathe. His eyes went down to the floor and he felt all the blood drain from his face...but he finally turned to look back at the huge figure just next to him, [...I'm sorry for trying to steal Viktor from you.]

"Hah?" Both younger Russians gaped.

"What? What just happened?" Yuri looked frantically between them.
[For trying?] Konstantin questioned.

[I'm sorry I stole him from you.] Mikhail corrected, [For keeping him close to me for so long that he didn't even recognize who and what you were, or what you were supposed to be. I'm sorry that in giving up trying to keep Tat to myself, that I took your son instead. I'm sorry for the fact that the only regret I had from back then is that I didn't try to dispel those stupid rumors that Viktor actually was mine, like I was proud of the scandal, even knowing it was a lie, and dragging Tat down into mud with me in the process. I'm sorry that the shame I made her feel is the whole reason why she never tried to leave that town again after the fact. I'm sorry that in giving up trying to keep Tat to myself, that I took your son instead. I'm sorry for the fact that the only regret I had from back then is that I didn't try to dispel those stupid rumors that Viktor actually was mine, like I was proud of the scandal, even knowing it was a lie, and dragging Tat down into mud with me in the process. I'm sorry that the only regret I had from back then is that I didn't try to dispel those stupid rumors that Viktor actually was mine, like I was proud of the scandal, even knowing it was a lie, and dragging Tat down into mud with me in the process. I'm sorry for the fact that the only regret I had from back then is that I didn't try to dispel those stupid rumors that Viktor actually was mine, like I was proud of the scandal, even knowing it was a lie, and dragging Tat down into mud with me in the process. I'm sorry for the fact that the only regret I had from back then is that I didn't try to dispel those stupid rumors that Viktor actually was mine, like I was proud of the scandal, even knowing it was a lie, and dragging Tat down into mud with me in the process. I'm sorry for the fact that the only regret I had from back then is that I didn't try to dispel those stupid rumors that Viktor actually was mine, like I was proud of the scandal, even knowing it was a lie, and dragging Tat down into mud with me in the process. I'm sorry for the fact that the only regret I had from back then is that I didn't try to dispel those stupid rumors that Viktor actually was mine, like I was proud of the scandal, even knowing it was a lie, and dragging Tat down into mud with me in the process. I'm sorry for the fact that the only regret I had from back then is that I didn't try to dispel those stupid rumors that Viktor actually was mine, like I was proud of the scandal, even knowing it was a lie, and dragging Tat down into mud with me in the process. I'm sorry for the fact that the only regret I had from back then is that I didn't try to dispel those stupid rumors that Vik]

Viktor was already stunned when he heard it...but when Yurio finished translating, even Yuri was shocked. Neither of the three of them spoke a word though in response, simply wondering where to go from that.

[I was never clever enough to realize that what I did to you guys would carry on after I went away.] Mikhail said, eyes still on the floor, [Maybe that's why I seem to have been so stupid all this week. Everything I ever said or did, for or because of you was stupid. I always thought I knew what I was doing...I was always so successful at everything else I did...but when it comes to my family, the people who should be able to count on and trust me, I'm the biggest idiot in the world.] He turned and stood squarely in front of the huge figure, looking rather defeated, [When I told Minako about the things I'd done, I thought that was everything... It never even occurred to me to consider anything else. But, all along, I was missing the bigger picture, and I entirely missed the point.]

[Yes you did.] The bear said simply.

[What do I even do now...?] Mikhail wondered, [Should I leave?]

[Don't you even dare.] Viktor interjected, [If you run away from this, I'll never forgive you.]

Grey-green eyes were turned towards the sound of the man's voice, but then turned back to the hulking shadow in front of him, [...Then you deserve to punish me, like you did back then...but without holding back.]

"...Uh oh." Yurio twitched.

"What!?!" Yuri questioned through clenched teeth.

"It's about to be Déjà Vu City."

True to his worry, Konstantin pulled his arm back, and the relatively tiny silver man cringed in anticipation. Like a slingshot, all three skaters jumped forward, each one yelling to stop...but the arm came around anyway. They were too far off to stop it, so all they could do was watch in horrified slow-motion as the battering-ram of a hand cut through the air like a knife.

Mikhail's hat fell to the floor with a tap. The hall was silent.

...Save for the sound of Mikhail dropping to his knees, pale-faced and stunned. Viktor quickly regained his focus and finished running forward, bending down to help pull his Uncle up off the floor. The elder could barely hold himself up though, and Yuri came under his other arm to help hold him there.

[If I actually hit you, your head would pop right off your shoulders, Mik.] The bear said, lowering
his arm and putting his hand casually back into the pocket of his coat, [But then you'd never learn.]

[W-What...does that mean, then?] The petrified Rozovski asked, his heart still stopped from the shock of feeling the wind fly past the top of his head.

The huge man simply shrugged at him, turning his attention to Mikhail's younger doppelganger, [I'm sorry I took my anger out on you.] He said quietly, [Nothing I say or do can ever undo the fact that it happened, but I to regret it. I let myself be controlled by things that had nothing to do with you, and the only person I can blame for that is myself. A man can only admit when he was wrong, and I truly was.]

Viktor was shocked to hear it, almost too stunned to even move. He shook his head though, looking to his Uncle, "Can you stand on your own?"

"...I think so."

The silver skater nodded and stepped back out from under the man's arm, leaving him to just use Yuri as a support. Before Viktor could say anything though, Mikhail felt himself huff a nervous laugh, holding a hand over his terrorized heart as he glanced up at the bear's eyes, [He really is your son. He...did the exact same thing a few weeks ago. Had us all scared.]

"Hey, he actually hit me." Yurio contested.

"He flicked your ear."

"It stung! A lot!"

Viktor rolled his eyes at them, turning his attention back to the behemoth in front of him, [Are you really sorry though? To me?] The huge Russian bear nodded quietly, [Yes.]

He hesitated for a moment, but socked-feet started to shuffle forward, and Viktor silently paused a few mere inches in front of the man, the top of his head barely coming up to the figure's collarbone. Yuri watched in wide-eyed confusion, the translations having stopped by then, his heart thumping loudly in his chest...but he saw Viktor lean slightly forward, putting his forehead to the bear's jacket.

"Spasibo."

The new group of three gaped in silence.

Konstantin was entirely unsure how to respond to the gesture. For a moment, all he could do was look down and stare at the top of Viktor's silver-haired head, and he glanced from his son to his brother-in-law and back again. The hand he'd just used to scare the ghost out of Mikhail came back up out of his pocket, and hesitantly came around, stopping for a moment...then went closer, setting gently to the skater's back.

Viktor let out a breath he'd been holding since he was a kid, hands coming up to grip at the big man's coat lapels, [I'm...sorry I lied to you back then... I was just...]

[You don't need to apologize for anything.] Konstantin said with a sigh, [You never did anything wrong. You were just doing what you were meant to...I see that now.] The other hand came up and around after that, and the bear leaned down as well, all but picking the younger figure off the floor where he held him, [Your mother would be so proud of you...for everything you've achieved, and everything you've done. You've come so far, even though none of us were there for you...and that's
all my fault.]

The young silver held on for a moment longer, but then lifted his head and moved to pull back, rubbing his eyes on the back of his sleeve before setting one foot away to turn around. He reached his hand for Yuri, pulling him forward when he took it. The Russian drew in a shaky breath, but when he felt his partner's shoulder against his own, he drew strength from it and nodded to himself, lifting his head back to his father, [Papa...this is Yuri. He's my husband, and the love of my life. You don't know how strong he is...he's the best thing that ever happened to me...] He looked back to those confused hazel eyes, having heard his name, and 'Muž' in there as well, harkening back to one of the first Russian words he'd learned after Spasibo.

Yuri swallowed hard and let go of his partner's hand to hold it out in front of himself instead. He shook a little, but felt a supportive hand against his back, and knew Viktor was there.

Konstantin just looked on at the gesture, seeing the tiny trembling hand...and nervously took it in his massive bearpaw.

Yuri felt like he'd pass out any moment, but then felt that same bearpaw go up and muss his hair, and he looked up in stellar confusion...and mild alarm.

[He seems a good kid. A bit foolish...but his heart's in the right place.] The huge Russian said, "Zdravствуйте."
Lights were bright and the audience dark, but Phichit bowed to them all the same, seeing sparkles in
the blackness beyond the rink-wall. He was still catching his breath, but he jumped up from his toe-
picks in excitement, turning quickly to finally head back to rink-side and let the next skater put on
their show. He didn't even stop to talk to Celestino as he went barreling past, simply grabbing his
blade-guards and hopping along to put them on, then disappearing through the curtain to the prep
area.

"YUURRRIIII!!" He yelled out, having entirely forgotten that the older skater had said he was going
somewhere else for a while, "YUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUURIIIIIIII!!" He called again.
Hearing nothing, the excitable figure went rummaging in his gear-bag for his phone, snapped a quick
post-skate selfie, "Hashtag #NHKGala!" And posted it before pulling up his text messenger tab.

Yuri's phone blinked and buzzed when the words came through. He sat on the bench in the back
hallway, skates on the left, Viktor on the right...practically catatonic if not for the phone getting his
attention. He twitched as it half-startled him, but reached for it in his coat pocket, and clicked on the
screen.

[YURI! I DID IT!]

Phichit squeed excitedly when the 'Delivered' footnote changed to 'Seen' and the jumping-beans on
the next line of the window popped up, indicating a reply being typed.

[Did what?]

The excited expression changed to shock and devastation, but the Thai skater was undeterred.

[THE QUAD LOOP]
[I DID THE THING AND I DIDN'T FALL]

[Oh, that's great]

More shock and devastation. Phichit was practically in tears from the lack of enthusiasm.

[I guess that means the Gala is about half done then if you just finished]

Phichit just read the message and glowered, brows up and eyes half-closed as he gave an
unimpressed look at his screen. He did the only thing he could...and took a photo of himself again,
and sent his nonplussed face to his apparently unimpressed friend.

Yuri just tilted his head at it, thumbs clicking away.

[What?]
[Sorry, we were interrupted. It got really crazy out here.]

The Thai skater's face went red. Images of a supply-closet being opened and a group of people
stumbling onto something inappropriate flooded through his mind.

"Who's that?" Viktor wondered, tilting his head a little where he'd leaned it back against the wall.

"Phichit-kun. He landed the Loop. He thinks I'm not excited enough for him." Yuri answered
quietly, "My brain is completely gone right now though."

"Mine too."

Both of them sighed heavily, slouching where they sat.

"That entirely didn't go as planned." Yuri finally said, "I feel like I can't believe it."

"What was your plan, exactly?" The Russian questioned, "Or did you even have one?"

The younger figure drew in a breath, but leaned to the side until he felt the man's shoulder come up against his own, "I just wanted your father to apologize for what happened at the funeral. I wanted to tell him what you mean to me, and try to make him see how what he did, didn't just hurt you. It hurt everyone. I was hoping he'd understand it and say he was sorry...but, if he didn't..."

Viktor tilted his head until he could feel his cheek against the mess of raven hair, "If he didn't...?"

Yuri thought for a moment, but then gave a half-shrug, "I guess I was going to unload on him about all the pain he's caused with his selfishness and sense of unaccountability. I was going to kiss you in front of him, and tell him that he caused unspeakable harm to the most beautiful person in the world, and that if your mom was watching, she'd be condemning him for it." He explained quietly, "I remembered how his iron-clad veneer cracked a little when we were all in your home-town for the lawyer thing, and thought...if I could appeal to his feelings for her, maybe he'd see that he was wrong in how he was treating you. I...had no idea it would end up coming back around to Mikhail again."

"Me neither."

They sat for a few seconds in complete silence, hearing the Exhibition going on beyond the walls around them. Viktor drew in a breath, "...I guess it explains why I have so few stand-out memories of my father when I was younger. Uncle Mimi was always around back then...I can hardly think of a time where I did anything without him, at least until he left. He told me about all the things he did when he was younger, tormenting my father like it was some big game...but made it sound like he turned a new leaf when I came into things. The way he put it made it sound like it was all a good thing...that because of me, he stopped being horrible. But the way it came out just now...it's like it only just occurred to him that his affection for me effectively tore my family apart...and all that time, I had no idea what it was doing to them."

"How could he steal you from your father though?" Yuri wondered, "It's not like he physically took you away. He had two chances and he didn't take either."

"I guess it's because of how he put himself around me all the time. He just pushed my father out as a result. I called Konstantin 'Papa' because that's what I was told to do...but it didn't really mean to me what it means to other people. ...Maybe that's why Uncle Mimi nearly ran us off the road when I jokingly called him 'Dad' on the way out there."

"Maybe."

"...If it took him all this time to realize all of it though...I really don't think he meant to alienate anyone. I think he really just wanted to be the 'Cool Uncle.'"

Yuri turned where he sat, curling is right leg under himself as the left went over his partner's thighs, and he set his cheek against the man's shoulder, "Back in Bordeaux, after you flicked Yurio's ear and took off...Mikhail showed me a bunch of pictures he'd dug out of storage, of you when you were really young. There were pictures of Losi, too."
Viktor smiled sadly at that, "All the dogs I've had and lost...I miss them..."

Yuri nodded, "I miss Vik-chan, too." He paused a moment, but then went on, "Anyway...he mentioned the rumor-mill about how people in your home-town started thinking he was your dad, but he said that he'd always rebut them by mentioning your 'Nikiforov eyes.' The way he told it a minute ago though, it's like he never actually tried to argue back at all."

"Peoples' memories get fuzzy after such a long time. If it took him until just now to realize the harm he did, maybe he remembered it all through the lens of his current self, thinking on what he would've done if he was put in that situation again now...and forgot how it really happened. I've done it before. The story I told about that first 'girlfriend' of mine...I remembered it all wrong because I'd never repeat what I did back then. It took a lot for me to recall how and why it really happened."

"...Maybe."

"I feel bad for Uncle Mimi now though..." Viktor said, looking out across the hall, "The look on his face when they left. I don't think he could've faked that. He looked like he'd just been kicked in the gut by a horse."

"I think I'm more surprised at Konstantin though." Yuri said, crossing his arms under himself, "I never even humored the idea that he'd ever be okay with me. I thought I was going to have a heart attack when he put his hand on my head."

"If there's anything I ever knew to be true about him, it's that he was never the kind of person to put on a facade or lie to people about how he feels. He hates being given the run-around by people trying to hide things or be fake." Viktor explained, "So when he put his hand on my back and told me that mom would be proud of me...I knew something big had changed in him. He may never be completely okay with us, but I think...in the same way he finally realizes I'm not just a mini-Mimi, he's also kind of gained a bit of respect for you. That was...just sheer craziness how you took him on like that."

The younger skater drew in a deep breath, but nodded, "...I may not be the bravest person out there...but..." He unwrapped his arms from around himself and put them over his partner's shoulders instead, "...No one gets to mess with our Pair Skates. I didn't stick by you all this time just to get sidelined when we should've been celebrating."

Viktor returned the hug, pulling his partner even closer, "...I should never have done that to you...I don't know what I was thinking..."

"You were just being protective. I don't know that I would've done it any differently if I were in your shoes." The younger figure drew back a little bit and nuzzled an affectionate Eskimo-kiss to his husband's nose, "We need to get back to work though. There's only about 45 minutes left before the end of the Gala."

The second-to-last performance of the Gala was coming to a close; the Ice Dance Silver medalists. They bowed regally to the darkened arena, spotlights shining brightly down on them, and started to make their way over to rink-side.

Viktor was already handing over his blade-guards when they started coming to that end of the rink,
and he drew in a deep breath as they passed by, stepping gingerly back onto normal flooring from the ice. He shrugged out of his coat as well, giving that over to Yuri as well, and looking out across the rink like he thought he could somehow see through the black beyond the wall to spot where his father and uncle were sitting. The lights shining down onto the ice went out though, and he turned to wrap his arms around his partner one last time before stepping out onto the cold frost, "I'll see you out there soon." Blades scratched to his movement in the dark, unseen and unheard over the roar of the audience.

"Ladies and Gentlemen...the last performance of the NHK Grand Prix of Figure Skating..." The announcer started, his voice all but drowned out by the erupting cheers and screams, "Grand Prix Finalist, and Men's Singles Gold Medalist...from Russia...Viktor Nikiforov!"

Lights burst to life again, beaming down hotly onto the silver skater standing in the middle of the rink. He practically glowed where he stood, and lifted his head a little just to glance around, feeling his heart pounding in his chest.

...I haven't been this nervous for a performance in a long time...least not for one that I'm not even being scored for...

He drew in one last deep breath...and exhaled slowly, lowering his eyes back to the ice.

['Stand In The Light' - Jordan Smith]

Stand in the light and be seen as we are

Viktor slowly raised his arms, starting when the lyric was half-sung, lifting them high and bringing them back down to center, extending them out to the sides as he pushed off in reverse. His slow mosey around the ice followed the harmony of the cello and violins, moving in a big figure-8 around the rink.

Didn't I tell you I hear what you say?

He moved in a wide arc around the opposite short-end of the rink, making the final loop of the figure-8 and coming back around to center again, arms moving slowly to the story of the song.

Never look back as you're walking away

He twisted into a four-spin twizzle, one hand in front and one behind himself, free leg bent up against the other as he turned. As he set the free skate down again, he leaned into the forward glide, one hand out, then quickly spinning once more to push through.

Carry the music, the memories, and keep them inside you...

Indeed, the memories were there. He could practically see them playing out all around him as he moved across the frost, as though someone had pulled down massive screens and was playing each one like a movie reel right out of his mind. Some memories were good...

Laugh every day

Arriving in Hasetsu, watching Yuri's theme reveal to the JSF, jumping at him after his Cup of China Free Skate, exchanging their rings, even the first time they'd been intimate...

Other memories were less good.

Don't stop those tears from falling down...
Yuri saying they should break things off after the Final, the aftermath of their first meeting with Konstantin, standing on the roof of the Ritz-Carlton and yelling into the night sky of Shanghai, and then leaving Yuri to go back home to Russia...

Viktor pushed through a counter-turn, gliding backwards on his left skate in an arc, pivoting suddenly to turn facing forward, and...

*This is who I am inside!*

...Threw his right leg as hard has he could to jump into the triple Axel. He pivoted on his landing blade and turned the landing into an outside spread-Eagle before bringing his arms back into play again.

*This is who I am, I'm not gonna to hide!*
*Cuz the greatest risk we'll ever take is by far...*

The Russian moved back towards the center of the rink, slowing himself down with a long, wide hydroblade, arms out in front of himself as he slid back in reverse.

*To stand in the light and be seen as we are...*

He found his blades back in the middle of the NHK logo, twisting into a slow sit-spin, then rising up fluidly into a scratch spin.

*To stand in the light and be seen as we are...*

On the last word, he clicked a toe-pick into the ice and stopped himself, raising a hand up to gesture at the audience, keeping his eyes low on the ice as it climbed.

The vocals died out again, and the cello returned. Viktor pushed forward this time, arcing and twisting in time with the rise and fall of the music. As the lyrics returned though, he leaned back into an Ina Bauer, sliding diagonally across the longest part of the ice.

*With courage and kindness hold onto your faith*

Moving out of it, he kicked a leg and swerved tightly, one arm rising overhead, then bringing both out in front of himself before spreading them wide to the sides, blades moving across the ice in a serpentine motion.

*You get what you give and it's never too late*

The imagery in the skater's mind was vivid then, even as he jumped through a simple stag jump. His arm went forward as though to grab at something in the air...

*To reach for the branch, and climb up leaving sadness behind you...*

...and he twisted to pull it back gracefully, angling around the short end of the rink. All he saw in his mind though was the graveyard of tanks behind his family home, and how he'd sit on top of one to avoid the world. He remembered the last time he dropped the backpack of antique skating blades into the pilot's hatch, and how they'd been left there for more than 20 years before finding them again. Though that time...Yuri had been there to see them.

*Fight hard for love*
*We can never give enough*
He rotated around, crossing one leg over the other until the kick...

This is who I am inside!

Quad Loop, landing into a tight circle, then jumping into a Triple Loop immediately after.

This is who I am, I'm not going to hide!

As he moved out straight from the second landing, he threw his arms out to the side again, looking up into the rafters, turning and pivoting with every other beat of the music.

Cuz the greatest risk we'll ever take is by far...

His lithe frame belted across the ice in a step-sequence, free leg kicking out as his arms arced expressively; both going out and coming in again, waving and arching with each twist and throw of his feet.

To stand in the light and be seen as we are...

One hand went up to reach for one of the four spot-lights following him, slowly pulling down again as he moved a bit faster, eyeing the center of the rink.

To stand in the light and be seen as we are...

He threw himself down onto one knee, sliding swiftly as his whole body rotated, gliding straight across the NHK logo, and as he brought one hand over his down-turned head, the other arced out to the side and slightly behind him.

Viktor pushed back up to his feet, the energy of the song changing, and so too did his rhythm and expression. The grace of the beginning was cast aside for passion and thunder, and he tore across the frosty field with intensity.

Riding the storms that come raging towards us, we dive

The silver Russian glided along the inner perimeter of the short end of the rink, sliding through in a deep cantilever, almost grazing his hair on the ice as he went, rising up again at the other end and pushing immediately into another Ina Bauer.

Holding our breath as we break through the surface

One hand was close to his face, the other way above him...but he came to a slow, gliding stop in the middle of the rink, dragging the right toe-pick behind himself as he laced his fingers together and raised them up in front of himself.

With arms open wide...

He arced his hands until his arms were in a V-shape ahead of himself, and he opened his eyes a little to see the dark shape starting to come towards him from the edge of the rink-wall.

With arms open wide...!

Yuri took his hands and came in close, and the audience went insane to see his unexpected self; his outfit was the twin to the Russian's. The two skaters could practically feel the ice vibrating beneath their blades as they moved, gently touching their brows together before spinning to start skating back.
Even as the cheering crowd continued their happy uproar, a certain pair of slate-blue eyes watched with a more reserved expression. They turned only as the man who bore them heard the sound of his smaller, leaner companion whistling loudly and clapping. The Russian Bear wasn't sure what to think.

[Can he skate even half as well as Viktor?]

[Just watch.] Mikhail answered, grinning almost like a mad-man.

Viktor held his husband's back close to his chest, even kissing the side of the younger man's neck as he started to pick up speed. The shorter skater moved out as the music geared up for the cue, holding Viktor's hand between them until forced to let go for the 3-turn...

This is who I am inside!

They kicked off at the exact same moment for the side-by-side Quad Flip, launching and landing in perfect sync with each other.

This is who I am, I'm not gonna to hide!

They arced and twisted like black and white reflections of each other, gliding across the ice in sublime unity as they came back together again. Viktor slipped his hand down against his partner's back, and Yuri flipped around, the pair of them sliding off facing each other then, right knees next to one another as each of their left skates were out behind them.

Cuz the greatest risk we'll ever take is by far...

The Russian held fast to the younger man's left hand as his right stayed where it was around Yuri's back, then spinning him around to the side again before letting go. They arced and weaved around each other, twizzling and twisting, crossing-over as they glided through the curve of the rink together.

To stand in the light and be seen as we are...

Viktor slid in behind again, hugging his partner's back to his chest with arms tightly around his thin frame, each of their left skates out behind them as they slid forward along the ice, then turning immediately into the pair-assisted camel spin. Their left hands clasped together in front, Viktor's right arm staying around Yuri's waist as Yuri's own free hand went above them as they turned.

They pulled out from it, but kept their clasped hands together. Yuri spun out for a bit of distance, and they switched hands, clasping at each other's right.

To stand in the light and be seen as we are...

Viktor held fast as Yuri started to lean, and he went low into the backward outside Death Spiral, leaning his head far back as his free leg went up above the other. The Russian slowly rotated on his toe-pick, watching carefully.

Oooohh...!

As Yuri rose back up to standing, they let go to spin out into formation again, gliding swiftly down the long end of the rink.

Cause the greatest risk we'll ever take is by far...
Viktor quickly stepped through a mohawk turn to change directions and face forward, then reached for his husband again as they slowed. He slipped in behind the younger skater and set his hands on the man’s waist; Yuri crossed his legs, left-forward, his right sliding back to follow where the Russian’s left went. He held loosely to Viktor’s wrists and waited, bending his knees deep for the spring.

*To stand in the light and be seen as we are...*

Yuri jumped, and Viktor pushed him through, landing the Throw Triple Loop with practiced ease before joining up again.

*To stand in the light and be seen as we are...*

They reached to each other as they slid out of the maneuver, clasping their hands together again as they spun towards center. Their blades scratched along the outside of the NHK logo in an inside spread-Eagle, each rotation bringing them closer together again.

*So stand in the light and be seen as we are.*

They paused a moment to look at one another as the lyrics faded out, slowly moving again in loose, serpentine slides. The final notes of the piano echoed quietly overhead, and as Yuri turned back around again to let the Russian guide his final path, he gently set his hands to the sides of the man’s face, and felt himself being leaned backward.

The last key played, and they kissed right there in the middle of the rink to the thunderous cheering of the crowd.
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED SEVENTEEN

The roar of the audience seemed to fade in slowly from silence. Viktor still had his husband bent slightly back, the light kiss for the crowd having evolved into something deeper just for themselves. Even when he finally pulled Yuri back upright again though, the Russian just went for his neck instead, going for his favorite spot just under the younger man's ear before the cheering finally got his attention. He drew in a deep breath, arms wrapped tightly around the other skater, lifting those gold blades off the ice as he spun around and set the man down again, lifting his head to look into those cherry-hazel eyes, "...None of this would have ever happened if not for you, Yuri. I don't know how I could ever thank you enough for making this possible."

"I can think of a way." The younger skater said, sliding his hands up his partner's chest and over his shoulders, lacing the fingers of one through that silver hair, "But I think I can survive on this for now."

Blue eyes sparkled in the spotlights, and the Russian genius smiled, letting himself be pulled into another kiss before quietly nuzzling at the man's forehead, only then finally turning to acknowledge the audience.

While holding hands between them, they raised the others up high above themselves, turning out from each other to wave at the fans in the darkness behind the rink wall. Save for the strobe-effect of camera flashes, twinkling like a thousand stars, their fans were impossible to see. Hearing them, however, was easy.

"Ladies and Gentlemen...Viktor Nikiforov...and Japan's Grand Prix Finalist for Men's Singles, Yuri Nikiforov!"

The cheering grew even louder after that, and the two skaters bowed and waved to each side of the arena.

Minako was entirely in tears to watch them, reaching over to snag Yurio's scarf and pull it over her eyes to sob into it, "My baby Yuri has grown up so big and strong!"

"HEY!" The teen barked, feeling the yank on his neck, "Go cry your sad story into someone else's clothes!"

"Mikhail's not wearing a scarf and his tie is too thinnnn!" She wailed.

The aforementioned Russian just smiled nervously and pat her back gently where it was slightly turned to him, holding his hand there as he turned back to the bear sitting on his opposite side, [Well? What'd you think?]

Konstantin was pinching the bridge of his nose, not even looking, [Well? What'd you think?]

Konstantin was pinching the bridge of his nose, not even looking, [So he can skate. The end was unnecessary.]

Mikhail just laughed, [That's just who and what they are. Everything they do on the ice is an attempt to seduce and surprise the audience, and each other. This is how they celebrate.] He explained, going back to clapping a little with the rest of the crowd, [I'm just sad you didn't get to see more of Yuri's skating. What he did out there isn't even what he's famous for. Jumps and choreography are Viktor's thing...Yuri's the King of spins and footwork.]
[HEY.] Yurio barked from the other side, [What the hell does that make me!? Chopped liver!?]

[It makes you an angry little bean! We've been over this!] Mikhail barked back.

The arena seemed to go dark again after that, but within a few seconds, a new song started, and the snowflake lights shone down on the ice again.

['Heroes Tonight' - Janji feat. Johnning]

The audience's cheering continued on even as the loud beat of the music roared overhead. The dark shapes of more than a dozen other skaters poured out across the rink, surrounding the pair in center. Spotlights circled around the ice again to illuminate the entire Exhibition Ensemble, and they all started to converge on center.

Mila quickly went straight for Viktor just as Phichit did the same to Yuri, jumping in to hug them both as the swarm of skaters circled around them.

I'm walking alone, streets are empty
The only thing I can see's my own silhouette
I'm getting stronger, step by step
The clock is ticking, but there's no time for regrets.

The group swiftly moved out again, veering around in two wide arcs to assemble in a line on either long-side of the rink. Viktor and Yuri had each been pulled to opposite sides, each skater aligned with another. They started clapping along with the music, getting the audience riled up in the process.

I've been flying from town to town
From London to Taiwan
I've been all around the globe trying to protect your soul.

When the cue came, they quickly started moving back towards center, each one reaching for the hands of their partners and spinning around each other. Weaving and arcing in time with the entire group, the skaters' dances formed an elaborate pattern on the ice, moving in and out and then in again before spinning and pulling apart.

We are heroes tonight,
We will fly above the sky.
We are heroes tonight...yeah!

The two groups lined up along the short ends of the rink, all the male skaters stepping forward, 5 from one side, 6 on the other including Yuri, staggering their advance into two rows each as they started moving across the ice. The first group skated swiftly, leaping into a Death Drop and descending into various sit spins.

We are heroes tonight,
We will fly above the sky.
We are heroes tonight...yeah!

The second line of skaters quickly moved through the spinners, each of them vaulting straight forward with an impressive Stag Jump as they passed over the center line together in opposing directions. They all moved off to join the lady skaters on the other sides of the rink, the spinners rising up into Scratch Spins...all except Yuri and Viktor, who came back around to center after the jumpers moved on.
'Night, yeah!

They quickly took each others' hands and rotated inward with an Inside Spread-Eagle.

**Feeling like dynamite, ready to explode**

When close enough, Yuri quickly twisted around, back facing his partner, feeling the man's hands come down on his waist just as he dipped.

**Right up in the sky**

Viktor thrust the younger skater straight upward, spinning him swiftly in tight formation, and catching him just as gracefully, setting gold blades back to the ice and skating off together.

*I need you to listen, I need you to hear*
*In your joy, and the fear.*

The Ladies came out for their turns, the first group on each side jumping Double Axels through each other and arcing off, making way for the second group to do Double Salchows right after them. The Pair Skaters and Ice Dancers formed back up with their partners, the Singles skaters weaving through them to find their spots on the walls again.

*I've been flying from town to town*
*From London to Taiwan*
*I've been all around the globe trying to protect your soul.*

Pairs and Dancers moved out into the middle of the rink, spacing out and putting on a bunch of tricks, some attempting the harrowing Headbanger spin while others did pair-assisted spins or throw-jumps. The Mens and Ladies Singles skaters moved along the rink wall towards a mutual short-side of the rink as the Pairs went about their tricks.

*We are heroes tonight,*
*We will fly above the sky.*
*We are heroes tonight...yeah!*

*We are heroes tonight,*
*We will fly above the sky.*
*We are heroes tonight...yeah!*

When they were all lined up, the Pairs in center skated off like a flock of birds, forming up with the Singles group into one large mass of blades and garish costumes. They all moved out together after that, slowly rotating and dancing to the music in their own little ways as they traversed the entire length of the rink together as one unit.

*We are heroes tonight...yeah!*

'Night...yeah!

As they started arriving on the other side, they split into two long streams, each one following the rink wall in opposite directions, waving to the audience and clapping as they glided. The event-mascots started sneaking out through the doorways as well, sliding down the center of the ice behind the last straggling skaters. At least...until the moment Domo-kun made an ill-fated bunny-hop and ended up on its back in the middle of the rink.

*We are heroes tonight,*
Yuri saw it go down, and tugged on Viktor's sleeve before pointing, and the Russian got a devious idea.

_We will fly above the sky._  
_We are heroes tonight...yeah!_

They whispered between each other, and Yuri quickly nodded and broke away, skating quickly out to the mascot. The Princess Bear and bespectacled Rabbit were moving towards Domo-kun just as the young skater snuck past them, coming to a quick halt at the brown rectangular-shaped figure's head. He looked down with a grin, "Ugokanaide kudasai." He said, grabbing the creature's corners and moving it slightly. The other two mascots played along, looking shocked and worried by putting their hands over their mouths and glancing at each other. Yuri slipped back a few feet, staying down on one knee as he turned his head to glance at his husband coming quickly towards them on a backwards trajectory.

_I've been flying from town to town  
From London to Taiwan_

The Russian glanced over his shoulder briefly, and a few feet away from the downed mascot, vaulted over in a back-flip right over top of it, landing with a clatter on the other side and laughing as he moved off again.

_I've been all around the globe trying to protect your soul._

The instrumental aspect of the music continued on repeat after that, letting the skaters finish out their last acknowledgments to the audience, many coming back to help get the downed mascot back on its skates. Viktor quickly slid back up, stepping in behind the figure to brush off some of the frost on its back, then coming around to the front, taking the critter's hands in his own, "Arigatou~!"

_"Ladies and Gentlemen...the skaters of the NHK Exhibition Gala, and the authorities of the ISU, thank you for your excitement and applause! We hope to see you all at the Grand Prix Final, and again at next year's NHK Trophy in Saitama!"

The skaters were all lined up along the middle of the rink in two big lines, back to back, hands held between each other. They raised them up and bowed deeply to each wide-side of the rink, letting one another go only long enough to turn around, skate through the other line, link up again, and bow to the other side. The crowd was cheering thunderously loud, stomping the ground and clapping, taking pictures as well as they could. The mascots all skated around the perimeter of the rink, clapping and cheering in turn.

As the music finally faded out, the participants slowly started meandering back to the rink exit, waving and stepping off one by one. Viktor and Yuri held to the back of the line with Mila and Phichit, all in good spirits despite the highs and lows of the afternoon.

_"I can't wait to see what folks are saying about this one online!" The Thai skater said excitedly, looking ready to burst while he had to wait to get to his phone, "Everyone was all sad that you weren't going to skate when they saw your hair down!" He poked at Yuri's shoulder.

The older figure nodded and laughed, ruffling his hair a bit before rubbing his forehead on the back of a sleeve, "Yeah, I saw the same posts... How could I possibly miss skating at a Japanese event though?" He offered, "That'd be like Viktor not skating in Russia."

_"He didn't skate at Rostelecom last year." Mila pointed out._
"That's because he wasn't there. He had to leave for an emergency after the Short Program, remember? Plus, I didn't make the podium that time." Yuri shot back with a grimace, "I came in 4th."

"Oh yeah..." The lady Russian put a finger on her lip as she recollected that very event, but then she shrugged, "You could've paid the fee to be in the Exhibition anyway though. You'd just found out you made it into the Final. I thought you'd be in the Exhibition for sure."

"Ehh..." The older skater sighed nervously, rubbing the back of his neck with a free hand, getting closer to the rink wall as they waited, "I made it to the Final, but I didn't medal. I'd feel like I was imposing."

"It's no use, Mila." Viktor interjected, rubbing shoulders with the anxious figure next to him, "I tried to convince him but he refused."

"Your dog almost died!" Yuri insisted, "I could barely sleep, never mind celebrate. It felt weird enough calling you to talk about the results. Being happy about making it to the Final when you were still so worried made it all feel really awkward."

"Makkachin was through the worst of it by then though."

"Still...it was after midnight in Hasetsu when we talked. You sounded like you hadn't slept since you left Moscow."

"I stayed up because I wanted to talk to you." The Russian pointed out, "Makkachin aside, it was still a big moment to find out you'd gotten into the Final."

"You were delirious."

"Maybe a little bit." Viktor laughed, "I was just happy to hear your voice after it was all said and done. Having to wait for your plane to arrive in Fukuoka after that was horrible...but worth it."

They all waved to the audience again one last time as they each stepped off the ice, and back into the darkness beyond the rink-wall. The lights only started to come back on again when the last skater was through the curtain to the prep area, and the audience slowly started getting ready to file out.

"That was fun." Mikhail clapped, "Shall we go?"

Minako had fully stolen Yurio's scarf by then, laying it right back around the hapless teen's head, moist and all, "Mhm."

Yurio was breathless from the shock of it, not even wanting to move his hands to get it off of himself because it'd mean getting her boogers all over his hands too, "W-Why? Why do you do this to me?"

"You're an easy and convenient victim." Mikhail mused, looking past where the ballerina had stood up, but reaching over to grab the wet scarf and pulled it away, "You going to the Banquet with them later?"

"I don't have a suit." Yurio answered grimly, using his coat to wipe the feeling off his skin...only to pause, and for his grossed-out expression to change to one of shock, "Ah shit, I didn't even think about that... I only meant to go to Cup of China and then go back to St. Petersburg. Coming here means I never got to go back to get my competition outfits or my suit...so they're still at your condo in Moscow." He turned a head back to the silver man, "...I gotta fly back with you guys."

"Relax." Mikhail shrugged, following the bear out of the aisle to get to the stairs, "I can just grab your stuff while I'm on layover there while taking Kon home. Go enjoy Hasetsu and we'll meet up
again in Detroit."
"...You're not coming with us?" Minako wondered, "Why didn't you say something before?"

The Russian glanced back over his shoulder while they waited for people to file through the exit, "I thought it was a given that I'd have to take Kon back myself. He can't rent a car if he never plans to return it, and no taxi will take him to the middle of nowhere. I have to give him a lift."

"...Oh..." The woman answered, quieter than before, "...I guess so."

"It'll only be a few days." He pointed out, lifting her hand where he held to it and kissing the back of it, "And I promise, I won't even fall off his roof this time."

"You'd better not even get on his roof this time."

"I won't!" He insisted nervously.

All supplies were gathered and the skaters were assembling in the main hall, making final bag-checks before moving through the doors and heading towards the waiting shuttles.

For once, spotting the waiting quartet outside didn't make anyone's guts turn to jelly, and Viktor held the door as everyone in their group moved through. When he let it go for the next people to follow, he reached for his phone from his carry-bag, clicking it on to check the time; 8:15pm. He quickly hopped forward to catch up to the others, "We'll only have 30 minutes to get ready for the Banquet by the time we get back."

"Should be plenty of time." Yuri answered, "Not like we have to go to a separate hotel for it again like in Bordeaux."

"That's true."

The big group was stepping closer to the smaller one, and all but Yuri and Viktor were starting to get nervous. Yakov reached to pull on the older skater's jacket, getting his attention suddenly and making him stop, "Vitya, is this-"

"It's fine now." The silver skater insisted with a smile, "We actually sorted everything out while the Gala was happening."

"Hah?"

The elder coach, Phichit, Celestino, and Mila were all a bit dumbstruck, watching in utter confusion as the skater went over to hand his phone to his partner and then walked quickly over to the rest of his family.

"Yuri! Take a picture of us!"

"Oh, okay." He answered, letting go of the bags he was carrying, clicking the phone to open the Lock-screen and swiping to the camera app, "Get more into center. You're all too far apart."

Viktor quickly hooked an elbow around his uncle's shoulders, yanking him in as he beckoned for his extra-tall father to lean down so he could do the same to him in turn, "Ulybnítes'~!"

Mikhail was all-in, grinning where his slightly-shorter nephew had yanked him close, but glancing over with a brief side-eye to see the bear just trying not to look like a deer in the headlights. The
camera flashed though, and the torment was over, and Viktor let them both go again so he could quickly see the results of the picture.

Yakov was stunned into silence, watching the whole thing unfold like he might as well have been witnessing an alien abduction.

"We'll have to cut it short, Vivi. The plane's leaving at midnight and we have to go do the whole song and dance with International customs." Mikhail said, drawing his nephew back, "I'll see you in Detroit next weekend."

"Oh, you're going back with him?" Viktor quirked a brow, putting his phone away.

"Have to. He has no way to get home on his own after we land in St. Petersburg. Plus, I have to get Yura's things from my condo since he left everything but his skates behind." He held his hand out as though to shake it, "So it's goodbye again for now. You'll have a fairly drama-free week without me, I imagine."

The younger man bypassed the hand and just reached his arms over his Uncle's shoulders, "There's always drama. It's part of what makes us human. But since you're going back...maybe I can help."

"Huh?"

Yuri and Yurio both blinked at him, "...Help?"

Viktor nodded and pulled back, "Give my car to my father."

"...Eh?" Mikhail was the one blinking then, "Really?"

Both younger skaters were gaping at them, but said nothing.

The younger silver drew in a quick breath, but seemed certain, turning then towards the behemoth keeping to the background, [Papa...since I moved to Japan, my car's been sitting in storage at one of Uncle Mimi's company warehouses. I don't think I'll be needing it since I won't be moving back to St. Petersburg for the foreseeable future...so...I want you to have it. There's no sense in letting it rot when you need one.]

[The horse you were riding when we came into town. Plus, I'm guessing you'll need it for things once the mill is closed for good. You won't need to live out there anymore since nothing's holding you down.] Viktor offered, [So you'll be wanting to move, right?]

The big man shook his head, [I'll die in that house.] He said grimly, [I won't leave your mother behind.]

The other Russians in attendance listened closely, though the four English-only cohorts watched the back and forth in ignorance, just waiting patiently instead.

Viktor was surprised to hear the words though, [Oh... I guess that makes sense.] He looked at the ground, almost sheepishly, but then glanced up again, [At least take the car. ...Even if you don't need to go far, it'll be warmer in winter than on horseback, and you can go farther faster. It's a long way to the nearest town with anything like a hardware store or a hospital.]

[...You'd really just give me your car?] Konstantin wondered, understandably skeptical, turning his head a little like he couldn't believe what was being said.
The younger man nodded, and turned to his Uncle, [Call whoever is watching my Audi. Get it ready for him so you guys can just pick it up when you get there. Then you won't have to drive him all the way home.]

Mikhail was still stunned, but shrugged in agreement and pulled off to the side, checking the World Clock app on his phone before finding a number in his contact list. Minako watched him quietly, and was surprised when the call was responded to in English, "Hey Benson...sorry to bug you without emailing first, especially on a weekend. ...No, everything's fine. Why? Oh, you did? I haven't checked my email since this morning. What'd I miss?"

Viktor turned back to his father, [It's done. Uncle Mimi already has the paperwork, so it should be pulled out of storage and ready to go by the time you guys get there. ...I know it's kind of small for you, so I don't mind if you sell it to get something bigger. It's yours now.] He smirked warily, [Maybe you can name-drop me and get a higher price. I know plenty of my fans would pay more-than-like-new value for a chance to own something that was mine.]

Yuri couldn't help but focus on the conversation he could understand, though it seemed to be going off the rails a little bit. Mikhail had gone quiet without getting to say whatever it was he'd meant to, just listening to whatever was being said on the other end.

Konstantin was still surprised at the whole thing, drawing in a short breath before letting it go again. He truly wasn't sure what to do or think...but Viktor stepped closer to make it easier, doing as best he could to hug his tree-thick frame.

[I know skating still bores the heck out of you, but maybe you'll come to Russian Nationals. You'll be able to understand more of what's going on because everything is spoken and written in our language. It'll be in Moscow in 3 weeks.] The young silver explained, [Yuri will be at Japanese Nationals that same weekend, so I guess you'll be more comfortable with that, too.]

[I'll think about it.]

Viktor pulled back again and smiled, turning then to see what his Uncle's status was, "Mimi...?"

Grey-green eyes turned to him, but then went away again, "One minute, Vivi."

Perplexed glanced were given all around.

"...(Yeah... No, I'll deal with it as soon as I can. For now I just need you to get Viktor's car out of storage and put all the juice back in it." Mikhail explained, "No, it's not for me. Viktor sold it to his father just now. We're on our way back to Russia on a red-eye flight so we'll get it the morning after we arrive. ...Huh? No, not Viktor...his father and I. Yeah. You'll do it now? Great. I'll email you when we're coming. Do svidanija." He clicked out of the call and lifted his head, knowing full-well that as soon as he turned back to the group, they'd all be looking at him funny.

And they were.

"What was that all about?" Viktor wondered curiously, "Your tone makes it sound like it wasn't work."

"...Not exactly...no..." The older man admitted nervously, "...Benson and I go way back. He's a family friend. Er...a Canadian family friend."

"Okay?"

"My kids called him to ask about stuff. I'll have to go back to Banff before heading to Detroit. It'll be
"Why would your kids call him and not you?" Yuri wondered, stepping up behind his partner, "You've been answering your phone when I call, so I know it wasn't off."

"Cuz it's about their mother and they didn't want me to know." Mikhail answered, putting his phone back into its usual pocket and then reaching up with that hand to lift his hat and scratch his head, flopping the cap back into place with an exasperated sigh, "You know, like a bunch of dumb teenagers who think they can handle anything."

"...Are you sure you don't want me to come?" Minako wondered, "I was there last time. Maybe I can help."

"I need to think about what I want to do with this." The Russian answered anxiously, "Let's at least get moving. We don't want to hold these guys up from their post-competition fun." He passed the group by, but turned to wave one last time, "Until next weekend, Vivi, Yuri, everyone else. Kon, Yura! Poydem."

The huge bear stepped forward as asked, reaching for his son briefly with a big hand behind Viktor's back, [I won't make any promises about your Russian competition, but maybe we'll see each other soon again anyway. Good luck at your Final.]

"Spasibo." Viktor nodded, returning the half-hug and then letting go again, turning to watch them all go.

To his surprise, his father paused and looked to Yuri, giving a slight nod and then stepping away quietly. The huge figure said and did nothing towards Yakov, however...which was less surprising.

Yuri shook his head to regain his focus from the unexpected gesture, turning towards the younger skater and older ballerina, giving them each a hug before giving a bow, "See you in Hasetsu tomorrow. Try not to enjoy the onsen too much before we get there."

"We'll see how things go." Minako answered, patting the man's shoulder lightly, "If I'm not there when you guys show up, you'll know I'm on a plane to Canada."

"It's always something," Yuri huffed, trying to smile anyway, "We'll see you when we see you, then."

The pair nodded and took their leave, following after the two men and heading for the car.

The nervous skater watched them go, waving weakly before turning that hand to take his partner's and looking up at him, "I guess that was it."

"...Yep." Viktor agreed.

"Do you think your predictions happen because you say them out loud or just because you get the feeling?" Yuri wondered.

"...Probably because of the feeling, but I think I jinx people by saying the thought out loud." The Russian suggested, "Either way...I hope it's nothing crazy. Uncle Mimi didn't look too thrilled."

"Yeah..."
Yuri and Viktor tried to keep a low profile on the shuttle-ride back to the hotel, but they could feel Yakov staring daggers into the back of their heads from the row behind. Eventually though, Mila sat forward, draping her arms over Yuri’s shoulders since he was directly in front of her, and turned to look at her former rink-mate.

"Viktor." She said sweetly, "I think Coach Yakov wants to say something."

"I know." The Russian answered warily, finding the whole thing funny but super-awkward at the same time. He twisted in his seat to look behind himself, settling an elbow over the top of it, "...I know what you're thinking."

"No you don't." The elder shot back, arms crossed, eyes barely visible past the brim of his hat.

"You think I'm crazy, right?"

"Among other things."

Yuri slid his hand over to settle on his partner's thigh, but stayed quiet, looking instead to see Phichit in front of him, scrolling through Instagram and the Gala feed that went with it.

"It's reckless to just start treating Konstantin like he's a changed man. He's spent almost your entire life being who he was," Yakov warned, "You think one weekend will make a difference?"

"I know it already has," Viktor insisted, "The fact that he was even willing to come in the first place was a huge deal." He turned a bit more to rest his head on his up-turned arm, squishing his cheek against his knuckles, "Yuri chewed him out pretty good earlier. I think my father was well on his way to this point though already. I'm not sure when things started to change for him, but-"

"You're going too fast with this, Vitya." Yakov said grimly, "Giving him your car...I could tell you were considering even giving him your old house. You barely know the man anymore. He may be your father but you don't owe him anything."

"He apologized for hitting me at the funeral." The skater whispered.

"How about for everything else he did to you?" The coach wondered, speaking lower as well so the people at the front couldn't hear as easily over the sound of the van driving, "You may have been able to grow past a lot of the traumas you faced as a young kid, but they never left you. Not entirely. That much was obvious during your Short Program."

"I know...but it'd take him days to apologize for everything he did, even if I took the time to make a list." Viktor pointed out, "He came farther this weekend than I ever thought he would in his entire life. I was content with him acknowledging that he understands how he's hurt me and the family I've made since leaving home."

Mila seemed to be the only one who smiled at that nod, but Yuri did his best despite the strangeness of having the woman still hugging his head from the back seat.

"But he actually kind-of accepts Yuri now, too. How much more could I possibly ask for?" The silver skater asked, "I feel like giving him a hand-me-down is the least I can do to show that I
appreciate his efforts."

"You can ask him to get his head examined." The coach said stiffly, "I don't trust this. I think you should take a step back and let things sit for a while."

"I plan to." Viktor nodded, "If he actually takes me up on my offer to come to Russian Nationals, it'll be a good Litmus test for how he really feels about everything."

Yuri glanced up at that, "...You invited him to Nationals? But I'm not-

"I know." The Russian cut him off, putting a finger on his lips to stop him, "You'll be at your own that weekend. That's the point."

The younger skater's brow crinkled though, giving quite the look.

"You don't trust him either?"

Yuri gave a nervous shrug, but then shook his head, pulling back so he could speak again, "I agree that Konstantin's come a long way, but both times you went to see him without me, you came back a complete wreck. It's been said that 'the more things change, the more they stay the same.' Mikhail's going to be with you guys then, too, since he's still Yurio's sponsor. The three of you together are a cauldron of trouble." He turned and sighed though, looking out the window into the clear Sapporo night sky, "Minako-sensei might be there too, now that I think about it. It'll be weird to have no one at Japanese Nationals..."

Viktor worried at that, "Then I'll drop mine and go to yours like last year. Problem solved."

"What!?" Everyone barked, Yuri included, whipping his head back around. Folks in the front seat were looking back in confusion.

"Vitya, you were lucky last year to get into Worlds without going to Nationals first." Yakov argued, his 'lecture face' already on, "But you can't go around thinking that'll happen again! You're competing this year! You HAVE to go to Nationals!"

"I can't just steal Yuri's entire cheering section!" Viktor argued back, "He'll be all by himself!"

"It's Japanese Nationals! The entire country is his cheering section!"

"I guess I'll have Minami-kun..." Yuri suggested quietly, "...Maybe Mari-nee-chan will come...?"

"I'll tell Uncle Mimi to go to your show. Minako will go with him." Viktor offered instead.

"But then it'll just be you and your father alone..." The younger skater pointed out, a bit apprehensive, "...That almost might be worse..."

"I think it'll be fine."

"You've been saying that and then it isn't fine!"

"...Should I uninvite him then?" The Russian wondered nervously.

Yuri gave him an uncertain look, but it was Yakov that ended up answering on his behalf, "You make too many choices without thinking, Vitya." The annoyed older man said stiffly, "And you often don't think about how other people will feel about it later. In that regard, you and your Uncle are very similar."
Viktor just slouched where he sat, making a disgruntled face as he listened.

"You need to reign in your impulsiveness a little bit. Let him have the car, but don't offer to have him come to Nationals again." Yakov went on; Mila was nodding in turn as he spoke, "Maybe he won't even remember it, then you won't have to feel like the bad-guy if or when he doesn't show up. By the sounds of it, he's going to have his hands full for the next little while anyway."

"...I know...that's why I want to help..." Viktor argued quietly, "He's lost everything. By the end of the month, it'll just be him and the memories, all alone in the Russian wilderness."

"Good." Yakov said, a bit coldly, "He could use the time to think about all the wrong he's done and maybe change his way of projecting it onto people. He's never once been punished for the things he did. Don't you be his 'get out of jail free' card now."

"You don't think losing his wife over me is punishment enough?" The skater shot back, "He can see her gravestone from the front door. Every day is a reminder of how his anger caused her to run away, and the fatal accident that came after."

Yakov sighed, but reached forward to pat the man's shoulder, "Vitya, it's good of you to want to help him in his time of need, but one apology shouldn't absolve him of all the things he's done and the time he stole from you and your mother. Give him the car if you must, but leave the rest alone. He's your father, not your son. You're not responsible for his life or his happiness. Let him come to you to mend those broken fences."

Viktor still looked sour, but at least he wasn't arguing back anymore. He just turned in his seat and crossed his arms, going entirely quiet for the rest of the trip back to the hotel.

Getting Konstantin checked out of the room was easy. Trying to figure out what to do with everyone else was a little more difficult.

Mikhail stared at his bank card, flipping it over in his fingers a few times as he waited for the final receipt to sign, tapping a pen against the high counter with the other hand. When the paper finally appeared, and he put his squiggle down at the bottom, he put the card away and turned to face the group waiting in the lower part of the lobby. The bag with his tablet swung behind his back lightly, having reclaimed it from Konstantin when they cleaned up before check-out.

"You can go up to the room if you want, Yura." He said to the teen, but only got a shrug in response. He looked at the bear instead, who was sitting a bit removed from the other two,

[Everything's done. We can head back to the airport now.]

[I'll go wait by the car then.]

"Da." The younger Russian nodded, stepping reluctantly up to Minako then, "...We're heading out."

"I really wish you'd tell me what was going on." She pointed out, a bit unimpressed, "If it's nothing then it's nothing, but you're acting like it's something."

Mikhail made a face like he wasn't sure how to answer, but then withdrew his wallet again and handed his bank card over to the teen, "Go buy something in the restaurant. I'll get it back in a minute."

The teen raised a brow at him, but said nothing, taking the plastic and walking off as suggested.
Grey-green eyes turned back to the ballerina, waiting for Yurio to get out of ear-shot before speaking, "My kids..." He started reluctantly, quietly, "...Having been trying to live alone for the last 2 weeks, apparently."

"...Alone? But we were just out there after Skate Canada 3 weeks ago and they weren't alone then."

"I know." The Russian answer nervously.

"Did they all move out?"

"No."

"Did your ex-wife abandon them...?"

"...No."

"What then?"

"Their mother is dead." He said pointedly, just wanting to be out with it already, "That's part of why she didn't want to come out or talk to us when we were there dropping Viktoria and Nikkita off after Sergio left on his own. I thought she was just being a drama Queen because you were there, but...apparently it was because she was too sick to come outside."

Minako wasn't sure what to say. She just looked on in quiet surprise as Mikhail explained, seeing how he himself wasn't sure what to say either.

"After I got involved with Vivi and all this skating stuff, my kids were worried I'd come back to take them away to Russia or Japan if I found out their mother's cancer came back, so they said nothing. Sergio's been telling his sisters to shut up this whole time because he thought he could handle it all on his own. In the end...Nikkita reached out to my work buddy, asking him what they should do. He explained it all in the email I missed this morning. ...The thing is, though...none of them have jobs since they're still in school, so they've been running up a dead woman's credit card instead. But envelopes of bills are piling up and...well..." He reached up to rub his eyes on the back of a sleeve, "...There it is."

The ballerina just stepped forward and put her arms over the unraveling Russian's shoulders, "We're going to have to do something."

"We?" Mikhail guffawed, pulling back suddenly, "I can't drag you into all of this. You'd either be stuck as the unexpected step-mom to three teens you barely know, or you'll be in the background watching me struggle as a single dad instead. Neither are options I could subject you to."

"I'm not asking you to subject me to anything." Minako pointed out, "I'm telling you not to shut me out because you think it's too hard. All three of your kids are old enough to be over the idea of having to call someone else their mom, and I wouldn't want that anyway. But I can be their friend. So let's just go out there and figure out what to do to pick up the pieces. Maybe it won't be as bad as you think."

"I don't even know what they did when they found out she died." Mikhail said, his voice shaky, "How did they find her? Was it a long time before they knew? Which one of them actually discovered her? I can't even call out there for another 2 hours, so I don't wake them all up in the middle of the night..."

"Hey." The ballerina poked a finger against the man's chin to turn his face back towards her, "Deep breaths. They've been dealing with the fall-out for two weeks already. By the sounds of it already,
they've all been pretty pragmatic about the whole thing anyway. Let's just both go out there and deal with it. One step at a time."

"...Are...y-you sure about this...?"

"I can't let you go out there to do this alone. Besides..." She shrugged, leaning in to hug him again, "You act like we haven't already become the unofficial pseudo-parents to three older kids already anyway. What's three more? We'll figure it out."

The anxious Russian nodded, reaching around to his carry-bag as Minako let him go again. He held the rectangular item in his hands and looked around, nudging his head over towards the seats nearby, and sitting quietly. Withdrawing his tablet, he drew in a hesitant breath and turned it on, looking at the ballerina skeptically as it booted up, "Dealing with the SkateKids is entirely different than bringing my actual kids into things." He said, trying not to let his voice quake from the stress of it all weighing on him suddenly, "It's going to change everything."

Minako just shook her head and pulled the tablet from the man's trembling hands, loading up Safari when she could see the home-screen. It took only a few swift clicks and scrolls to find a plane ticket from Fukuoka to Edmonton, "There." She said, pointing, "I'll head out of Fukuoka Airport at 9:45am on Wednesday and be there by 3pm the same day, accounting for time differences and flight duration. Find whatever flight gets you from Russia to Edmonton that arrives around the same time, that way you have all of tomorrow and Tuesday to deal with Viktor's car and getting Yura's skate-things."

"...You and Yuri's sister were supposed to fly to Detroit together though."

"She can still fly to Detroit without me. It's no different than how you've been giving up your seats to Yura lately. She just won't have anyone flying with her in my place. Mari will be fine."

"...W-We might be late to the Final... Depending on what's going on, we might not even get to go at all..." Mikhail warned, looking at the flight listings.

"We have to get to the Final. Yura's counting on you to bring him his stuff from Moscow."

The Russian heaved a breath, "...My kids are going to hate me for this..."

"They should've told you what happened sooner."

"It's g-going to be hairy... I can't think of anything else to do right now that'll make it work for everyone...but I can't j-just leave them alone over Christmas Break."

"I'm less worried about your kids being in Detroit with us than I am about how jet-lagged we're both going to be when we're done. Besides...it'll be Christmas-time in Detroit all month long. I'm sure it'll be a lot easier to find things for them to do than it would be if we had them here in Sapporo."

"I wouldn't have been able to bring them here if I knew sooner..." Mikhail said, again rubbing his nose on his sleeve, "They're supposed to be finishing Finals this coming week before Winter Holiday starts. I can't even imagine how they've been managing their studies until now, given what's happened..." He drooped his head low, "What a clusterfuck."

"We'll find out when we get there. If you said you have to wait a couple hours before calling them, then just call them from the airport later. The ballerina suggested, "It'll barely morning for them today by then, so it's not like you're stalling their school schedule. We'll go pick them up, go to Detroit together, then head to Hasetsu after that. Make it an impromptu Christmas vacation. Tell them to pack their bags while you're on the phone with them and use the weekend to decompress from all
that's happened."

Yurio watched quietly from where he slouched over the railing of the 2nd floor, having heard most of the conversation from up there. He chewed on one of his hoodie strings, grumbling quietly to himself as the thought of having to deal with The Trio again loomed overhead.
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED NINETEEN

The Banquet, being hosted by the JSF, made quite the huge deal out of Yuri being there. They cheered for his two Gold Medal wins in the qualifying competitions, and drank several toasts to his (hopefully) Gold Medal victory at the subsequent Final. By the look of things, it was almost as though Yuri himself had won the NHK Trophy rather than Viktor, since he was in there with Phichit and Leo giving the usual post-Exhibition appearances rather than the Russian.

It wasn't all that surprising though given how salty Viktor had become since their arrival. People didn't even want to ask him to join in. He just played on his phone or drew wrinkles into the cloth at the Team Russia table, and all but ignored those who tried to talk to him. Eventually, after an hour had passed that way, he just put in his ear-buds and went face-down on his crossed arms.

Yuri continuously looked over at him, each time feeling a pit in his stomach, not knowing what to do. He held onto the small bag and box that had been gifted to all the event's medalists, having to claim it on the skater's behalf.

Phichit came up from the side with a flute of champagne in each hand, giving one over like it was slightly more than a suggestion, "What's eating him?" He wondered quietly.

"Yakov scolded him in the shuttle. Viktor hasn't said a word since."

"Not even to you?"

"Not even to me."

"Yeesh. What was the scolding for? I didn't hear anything from the front." Phichit pointed out, taking a sip from his own flute.

Yuri just looked down into his, watching the bubbles rising from the bottom of the glass, "The way he handled the end of the weekend." He said simply, "Yakov thinks Viktor's trying too hard to please his father."

"Really? I thought everyone would be happy with the way things turned out. Viktor looked pretty pleased with it all in the end."

"He was, and then Yakov took him down a notch or two...or ten..." The older skater sighed, sipping a bit at the champagne as well then, and holding the rim of the flute to his lip, "Viktor normally lets Yakov's lectures roll off his back. I don't know why he's taking it so personally this time."

"Where is Yakov anyway?" The Thai figure wondered, looking around the room; the crowd was too thick to really see anything though.

"Probably wherever Mila is." Yuri said, drawing in a breath and taking a step forward towards the Team Russia table, "I'm going to try to talk to him. He's making people uncomfortable by just sitting there like that."

"Okay... Good luck, Yuri."

The older skater nodded and moved off, quietly sneaking between the different tables until he found the one he was after. Initially, Yuri just looked down at the man, wondering how he should approach
the whole situation, but eventually he moved to set the gift bag and present onto the table, and nudged it until it was close to center, in front of the skater, "Viktor...?"

No answer; maybe he didn't hear. The music from his ear-buds was loud enough that Yuri could almost make-out what was playing.

That having failed, the younger skater pulled out the chair tucked in next to his husband and sat in it sideways, facing the Russian and reaching a wary arm across his shoulders. He hesitated a moment, but then finally set his arm down. He almost regretted it though, since as soon as his palm was pressed against the dark blue fabric, Viktor jerked up, turning around and looking about ready to reach over and throw whoever had grabbed him right over the other side of the table. Their eyes met though, and the Russian quickly stopped, realizing it was Yuri and not someone else. The champagne flute rolled on the floor, the bubbly spilling out onto the carpet. Viktor quickly looked away after that, burying his face back into the crook of his folded arms again and saying nothing.

Yuri drew in a breath, feeling like his ghost had been scared away by the sudden movement, and glanced down to reach for the glass that had been knocked right out of his hand. He set it onto the table top and wiped the drops of champagne off on a nearby fabric napkin, and tried again with his partner. This time though, instead of just getting immediately close again, Yuri pulled out the ear-bud closest to him and then draped his arm over, putting the bud into his own ear to hear whatever Viktor had been listening to.

It sounded particularly ominous, with a powerful orchestra and a Gregorian-sounding choir in the background, but a few seconds in, Yuri recognized it immediately.

*Dark Eyes...*

He moved in a little closer after that, resting his chin on the Russian's arm and leaning his head until he could feel the man's ear against his cheek, "Viktor... Come join the party. Everyone's worried about you."

"I don't feel like it right now." The silver skater answered simply, not moving, "I just want to go home."

"...I know...we've been gone for a long time..." Yuri agreed, rubbing his thumb gently back and forth across the man's back, "We'll be on the short plane-ride to Fukuoka in less than 12 hours. Then it'll be nothing but Makkachin and the sea-side. Peace and quiet."

"...If we both medal at the Final..." Viktor said, turning his head slightly towards his partner, but looking down at his arm, eyes half-closed, "...I'm going to retire after Worlds for sure. I can't do this again next year."

"Eh?" Yuri lifted up a bit, giving a look of confusion, "Don't say that right now... You've been upset since we got off the shuttle. You'll feel differently later."

"No." The Russian finally lifted off the table, moving a hand over to where his phone had been lying flat just near the gifts, clicking it on only long enough to pause the music and pull out the second ear-bud, "It's different now. If we both medal...or, even worse, if Yurio does, too...we'll be going to all six events next year, not just four."

"We don't have to go to Yurio's events. We didn't last year."

"Have you already forgotten how upset he got when you missed his Free Skate the second time?"

"No, but-"
"The ISU doesn't generally put the medalists into the same events if they all return the following year. What happened this year was a fluke simply because I was back. Next year..." He shook his head lightly, then lowered it, closing his eyes, "...I won't have the energy to hop from city to city for competitions and then go straight to the Final again after that. It's 7 weeks straight. It's too much."

"So opt out of the Grand Prix and just do Nationals, Euros, and Worlds. You've already done enough this season to get your marks for next year if you wanted to be selective." Yuri suggested, "...Please don't make a decision like this when you're in a bad mood. You've barely had time to think about it."

"I've been thinking about it." The Russian reached for a napkin and rubbed his nose on it, crumpling it in his hands after, "Ever since Bordeaux...and especially since we got here to the banquet... I was so much happier just being your coach. I've had a good run and I've set a bunch of records...I'm okay with how things might end this year. But I'm tired."

"You're being impulsive aga-"

Viktor turned sharply to look at him, "Name one thing I did on the fly in the last year that didn't turn into a disaster."

Yuri blinked at him, "Eloping with me to Barcelona...?"

The Russian hesitated, but then shook his head, "Fine, two things."

"The speech you gave at our wedding party back in Hasetsu?"

"...Three things..."

"Giving up 'Evoke' and creating a new Free Skate to replace it in a single day? Getting me gold-plated skates, just like yours? Coming up with Duetto and placing the order for my matching outfit so it'd be ready when we got to St. Petersburg? Buying this matching ring without me noticing, right after I bought the one I was going to give to you? Suggesting we get the matching snowflake engravings on the inside, so we'd always have a link back to the ice even when we're both so old that we can't skate anymore?" Yuri answered again, giving his partner a worried look, "You're talking like you think you never have good ideas. That's not true. You've just...had bad luck with a few things this last year...and basically all of it has been stuff that involves your father. Make impulsive choices that have nothing to do with him and you'll be fine."

"Unless it's saying I want to retire."

"You're making that choice right after getting scolded by Yakov about your father. It's the same thing." The younger figure protested, "Please, Viktor... Let this all settle down... We'll get those bowls of katsudon for our victories and just enjoy the week, away from all this craziness. Don't take all this baggage with you into the Final. Just put it at the back of your mind for now and come back to it later, after you've had time to relax for a while."

The silver Russian lowered his head again, sliding his chin and mouth into the crook of his elbow with a sigh. He held there for a moment, but then moved his left arm up to curl over itself, and felt for his partner's fingers where they were settled on his shoulder, holding quietly.

Yuri watched him for a moment, but then leaned in closer, wrapping the other arm around the older skater as well, pressing his cheek against the back of the man's neck.

"...I really didn't think that inviting my father to Russian Nationals would turn into something like this." Viktor explained quietly, "The way Konstantin seemed to settle down and just accept
things...even accepting you... I really thought that everything was behind us now. That the fighting was done and the anger was gone...we could just move forward and start building a relationship rather than constantly finding things to yell at each other over. But the way you and Yakov reacted was a complete shock for me. Where did I go wrong...?" He tilted his face down and buried his eyes against his sleeve, "I don't understand."

The younger figure could feel his throat starting to hurt, as though his partner's pain was seeping into him. He turned his head where it lay and kissed the Russian's ear lightly, "We're still hurting from what happened to you because of him." He explained, "I can't forgive what I saw, not this easily. The image of you coming back to the Skate Club in St. Petersburg with a red eye, and blood all over your face, in your hair, and on your clothes...that'll haunt me until the day I die. Yakov probably feels the same, and he'd seen it happen once before then, too...so everything that happened last year was a trauma he had to live through again. We both had to step back and watch how much you suffered, even letting you do your Rage Skate despite how high the risk was that you'd seriously hurt yourself while performing it. But you're done with it now...and so are we. We're done seeing you agonizing over that man. We want to see you happy again."

"I thought I was happy."

"...You took a big step towards healing, that's true." Yuri said, "But you're trying to skip a bunch of steps to get to the end. You're not there yet."

Viktor lifted his head again, twisting to pull away from the table, and slid his arms under his partner's arms, around his sides and to his back, settling his eyes against the crook of the man's shoulder and neck, "...What am I missing? What else do I have to do?"

"Have patience." The younger figure answered simply, "Let time pass. Rest. It's like I told you before...what's happening with Konstantin right now is Mikhail's project. Let him figure it out. It was brave of you to give your father your car...but let that be the end of it. I'll find a way to move back into your house myself if I have to, just to keep it for us."

"But why? What do we need it for? We moved away from Russia for a reason..."

"We left Russia mostly to get away from your family. But we both said that we should go back during the summer and be tourists for a while. I fully expect to see the Summer Garden one day...in Summer."

"...Even though that's where all this started?"

Yuri shook his head, "This all started in South Korea. I'm trying to reclaim the things that were spoiled for us after that. If we go during better weather, the Summer Garden will be an entirely different experience for us anyway. We're supposed to go tour Old Japan, too, remember?"

The Russian turned his head, setting it sideways against the skater's shoulder instead, "...Yeah..."

"And next weekend, I'll be able to show you my old stomping grounds. The last time you were in Detroit for anything, we didn't know each other, so whatever you saw or did there had no history. But I lived, went to school, and trained there for 5 years. It's my second home, after Hasetsu. I wouldn't be surprised if most of the people I knew there are still there. " The younger man explained, turning as well as he could to see his partner, "...And most of them knew what a giant fan of yours I was. Won't it be funny to see the looks on all their faces when I show up with you? The way I talked about you back then, I should've been on staff as your publicist or something. I was always bragging about the things you'd accomplished or the competitions you'd won. They probably knew more about you back then because of me than they did about their own kids' friends."
Viktor couldn't help but laugh softly at the idea of it, "Wow."

"You laugh, but I'm not joking." Yuri said, "What you saw at the wedding party was just the tip of the iceberg. All those fan-clubs for you? I was the President of all of them. And now, I'm the President and CEO of the best fan-club of all."

"Which one's that?"

"The Viktor Nikiforov Husband Club. I'm the only member. I have the surname to prove it." He pulled out his wallet and flipped it open to show his Japanese ID card, "See? They even had to write it in English font for accuracy. I can only imagine how many people in the government were looking at the document change orders and wondering what happened. It must've been really confusing for them to change a man's surname for once."

The Russian huffed another quiet laugh, thumbing the card briefly through the clear-plastic window. Yuri folded it back up again and returned it to the pocket from which it came, reaching his hands forward after that to find his partner's, "Do you feel better now?"

Viktor nodded lightly, lifting his head a little higher than before, "A little."

"Only a little bit?"

Blue eyes raised to meet hazel, and the skater drew a sharp breath, nodding, "Maybe a moderate amount better."

The silver Russian could feel his partner inching closer, nosing his way past his bangs, and the light brush of soft black strands against his brow. He closed his eyes and let himself be drawn into the soft kiss, bringing one hand up to set it gently against his husband's chest, then a second kiss before Yuri pulled back to nose his lip a little.

"And now?"

"...A lot better."

The younger figure smiled, reaching both arms up over his partner's shoulders and drawing him into a hug, "That's just what I like to hear." He could feel the Russian returning the gesture, sliding his arms under his sides again like before, "Now...come with me to the rest of the party. People will be glad to know you're okay again. They were worried."

Viktor nodded lightly, but held in the hug a little while longer, "...I sometimes still get flutters in my chest when we do that."

"Mh...me too."
It was a moment of good fortune for once, that the banquet was being held in the same hotel that the participants were sleeping in...since a particular pair of skaters had become too sauced to safely leave the building unattended.

"SNAP." Yuri hollered in a haze; he'd already lost both shoes, one sock, and his blazer by then, and was still in the process of tying someone else's tie was around his head. He was red in the face and there were 8 or so empty flutes of champagne on the table near his side, as well as one empty whole bottle, and two half-drunk glasses nearby.

A group of people looked at the cards that had been smacked onto the table-top. Unfortunately, they were a Jack and a King; similar, but not the same.

Viktor pointed across the table and grinned; he'd lost his tie and one shoe, and around 7 champagne flutes littered his own side of the game, 5 more half-full, "STRIP."

"Ah jeeze." Yuri whined, looking down and pulling the second sock off.

They each reached for the deck of face-down cards to the side, pulling up their next lot. They eyeballed the card faces, then one another...raised the cards up...and slammed them down on the tabletop.

Eyes raced across to see the second card, and again, Yuri yelled, "SNAP!"

The cards were the same that time; Aces.

Yuri cheered, then pointed across at the Russian, "YOU STRIP!"

Viktor huffed, but laughed and shrugged out of his blazer, setting it over a nearby chair, "Thought yours was a 4." He straightened out his vest after that, and they both reached for the next hand of cards.

Phichit and Leo were standing back, recording every bit of it, though the American skater seemed to be finding it difficult to keep a straight face as he watched two older figures combating one another in such a strange way. He leaned over slightly and whispered, "This could get R-rated in a big hurry!"

"I know!" Phichit laughed, entirely unrepentant, "Yuri would never do this if he was sober!"

Several rounds went by that way, segregating the athletes from their coaches, who were hiding on the other side of the room.

"They're doing it again, aren't they?" Celestino wondered, avoiding the excited skaters like the plague.

Yakov had his back to them entirely, "Those idiots should be banned from drinking. Ever."

There was a sudden ruckus of cheering and a few loud girlish shrieks, catching their unwilling attention, and the coaches got a distant eye-full of Yuri unbuttoning his shirt, only to change his mind at the last second about which article of clothing he was about to lose, and threw his pants off
instead. Literally. Across the table, landing one leg across Viktor's left shoulder.

The Russian, who had only removed his vest by then, just smiled, "You're losing, Yuri."

"I haven't lost yet. Draw!"

Cards were pulled from the top of each deck again, smacked down onto the table, glanced at quickly...and skipped. They both could tell the cards were different...even in their inebriation, it wasn't hard to tell apart a numbered card from a face card. One was way more colorful.

Yuri grabbed for another glass of bubbly, drinking half of it before setting it back down again for the next draw. The two players eyeballed each other and pulled their next cards, looked at them, and dropped them back down to the table-top.

"SNAP!" Viktor yelled, sure of his call, only for the group to collectively start cat-calling for his loss.

"Take it off! Take it off! Take it off!" They chanted.

The silver skater just leaned far over the table to make sure his failure was certain, seeing the 6-card there where his own had read 9. Blue eyes glanced up into hazel, and Yuri just smiled innocently as well as he could through his alcohol-tinted haze.

"What are you waiting for? Viktor..."

Undeterred, the Russian pushed back up from the table-top, "I see how it is." He mused, suddenly looking like he was about to take the game rather seriously, "Two can play it that way." His hands reached up for the button at the top of his dress shirt, and he milked the anticipation for all it was worth, slowly undoing one at a time to the fanfare of the crowd until he had to tug the bottom from his belt. The last button still clung to its loop, the rest hanging open precariously, giving a teasing hint of that pale skin underneath. Those blue eyes just focused across the table, and the Russian gave one of his most seductive smiles, even lightly biting his lower lip, slipping the last button open and letting the silky white fabric gently tumble off his shoulders. The crowd that had gathered around to watch them was frantic with excitement.

Phichit had to stop for a moment and take another 'Oh my' selfie with Viktor's half-naked frame in the background, but next to him, Leo was starting to look around for tissues to plug his nose.

Yuri drew in a breath, crossing his arms, and gave his partner a look, "You think you can win by cheating, I see." Hands went to his hips after that, and he gave a devious huff of a laugh, then reached up to tie his 'battle bandana' on a little straighter, "Think again, Viktor. Your ultra-sleek and toned core, with those abs that could cut diamonds, can't save you."

"Is that so."

"Draw."

They pulled their cards again, and like before, Yuri smacked his down...but Viktor went more slowly, setting his card down gently on the table-top. They both still had their palms down on the card faces to conceal what was drawn, but the Russian leaned closer, holding in anticipation. Both men then finally pulled their hands back from their cards, but Viktor kept his eyes forward, giving a half-lidded glance at the figure on the other side.

He then just smiled and winked.

Yuri stammered.
"Snap."

"OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOHMMMMMMMMM!", The crowd roared.

Both cards were 2s.

"How did you even?" The younger skater's eye twitched in disbelief, "YOU DIDN'T EVEN LOOK AT THE CARDS!"

"Didn't I? What were you looking at?" The Russian purred, leaning down onto his hands where they came to rest on the edge of the table. He nodded his head at his husband and gestured a finger at him provocatively, "Strip."

The 'Super-Drunk Eros-Katsudon' didn't let the challenge go unanswered, and cocked his head aside only enough to jostle the side of his already-open shirt off of one shoulder. He licked his lips and let the fabric slide, staring straight into his partner's eyes the entire time.

"Oh my god Yuri is a sex bomb!" Phichit stammered, watching the whole thing unfold where he was recording it on his phone, "I was his friend all these years and I had no idea!" He reached to grab Leo around the shoulders with one arm and pulled him in frantically, "DO YOU KNOW WHAT THIS MEANS!?"

"N-No!?"

"Guang Hong should be here for this! He'd appreciate it!"

"Guang Hong is younger than me and barely legal! His innocent eyes couldn't handle this!"

"He's turning 20 next month!"

"HE'S A BABY."

"Phthbpthbpthbtphtphtp!"

Viktor was quite pleased with the sight before him; his husband shirtless, and one side of his own tie hanging precariously from the man's lips. He smiled and pointed at it, "Since I had a vest, I'll give you that tie as an extra piece of clothing for you to lose."

Yuri glanced at it in his drunken stupor with half-lidded eyes, "You want me to take this off?"

"It's a freebie, to make it even." The Russian seemed quite proud of his generosity.

"If you want me to untie this from my head..." Yuri started, crossing his arms again, "...You'll have to come and take it from me."

Eyes went back and forth between the two skaters, the crowd collectively gasping at the challenge. People had their hands over their mouths in surprise, and they eventually settled on waiting for the older man's reaction.

Viktor just snapped his head up, his hair flicking dramatically...and then one foot went up onto a seat. He leaned an elbow onto that upturned knee, and looked across the table, "Is that so."

Flushed and courageous, Yuri nodded, looking defiant and teasing at the same time, "It is."

The silver genius' free hand went to the table cloth then, and Viktor leaned forward over the pristine white surface, cards and champagne flutes all around, "Then it seems to me..." The elbow on his
knee came up, and that hand stretched out ahead of him, settling down on the center of the circular table,"...That I might have to..." He crawled right up onto his hands and knees after that, to the excited but breathless squee of the crowd, watching as the legendary skater slid gracefully across the pale field, getting right up into his competitor's face, barely an inch between them,"...Take it."

"I dare you to try."

"Ooooooooooooooooooooh!" The crowd hummed.

Viktor just huffed a confident chuckle, sliding up a little further to he could sit on his knees, parting them just onto either side of his husband's hips where he stood at the edge. He reached one hand up towards the hanging ends of the tie, touching them lightly with deft fingers to move them out of his partner's face,"Do you really?"

"Mh."

"Then I accept." The Russian purred, getting in tantalizingly close, able to feel the warmth just over his husband's lips. He looked into those deep brown eyes for a few seconds longer, giving Yuri one last chance to back off...but Liquid Courage makes fools of the proudest men...and the normally modest and sensible Japanese athlete was undaunted. He stayed where he was, motionless like stone...until he felt the kiss.

The crowd roared with screams and cheers, half of them yelling in disbelief at the display. They watched as Viktor's right hand went around the back of his partner's neck, holding the man still through his passion, the other hand come up to pull the tie from around his head, stopping the kiss only long enough to twirl the tie around victoriously and cast it aside before going back for seconds.

With half his blood-stream replaced by champagne, Yuri didn't care who was watching or how many phones were recording. He could feel his lover's hard and willing body against him, skin to skin, and raised his arms over the man's shoulders as he leaned in closer. Hands went around his back, and before he knew it, Viktor was pulling him forward, dragging him up on top of himself right there on the table-top for all to see. Cameras flashed all around, especially when the Russian's fingers started sliding down his back, grabbing for unseen flesh under that last vestige of black clothing clinging to his hips.

And then Viktor was gone.

"That's enough of that." Celestino said stiffly, dragging his former student away rather unceremoniously.

"Waitletmegobackw'remarrieditsokayCelebrino..." Yuri pleaded, wriggling ineffectively as the older man hefted him across the floor. He could hear Yakov yelling a lecture at Viktor, dragging him off the table by an ear and turning to sit him in a nearby chair, quickly gathering up the man's clothing and tossing it at him,"Viktoorrruuuuh..." Yuri whined, his accent slipping a little.

"Trust me, Yuri...you'll thank me later for this." The coach insisted, setting him into a chair at the Team Japan table and looking up to find a speedy but red-faced Phichit coming up with all of his friend's clothes,"What room is he in?"

"They're on the 27th floor." Phichit answered nervously, seeing how Yuri had slumped against the table, still trying to wiggle his way past the older man holding him down,"...I'll show you."

It felt like barely an instant had passed. Yuri blinked and he was in his room again, his blazer over his shoulders and the rest of his things in his arms. He looked down at everything blearily, his
attention then caught by Celestino and Yakov shoving Viktor into the room after him.

"SLEEP IT OFF." They both yelled, pulling the door closed in an embarrassed huff.

The two dazzled skaters just kept their eyes on the door for a moment, blinking in confusion as the door all-but-slammed shut, leaving them in sudden silence.

Viktor turned around to where Yuri was standing further in the room...each of them waiting half a heartbeat before they both dropped all of their things where they stood. The Russian came right up at his partner, pulling him into another series of passionate kisses, picking up right where they left off on the table-top upstairs. Hands went right back down into the younger man's figure-hugging shorts, grabbing a handful of unseen skin before they both fell into the bed together. They rolled and tussled several times, pushing clothing away in a drunk and desperate need to feel each other, eventually rolling right off the end of the bed, and landing in a heap on one another on the floor in front of the television-stand.

They paused only a moment to take in the absurdity of having forgotten where the bed ended. Yuri had landed on top when they fell, and he pushed up on his hands, looking down on his partner's face with all that silver hair in a mess around him. They only managed a second or two before they both broke out laughing at the sight of themselves.

Yuri kicked off the remnants of his clothes and sat on his partner's hips, feeling around the top of the television-stand for the small bottle he thought was there.

The Russian had risen to sit up, twisting around and reaching his arms down to his legs to try and shove his slacks away. His excitement had gotten too severe to be interested in waiting any longer, and he snaked his arms around his husband's torso, "Forget it, it was just a bottle of water."

Hazel eyes looked down into blue, but before anything else could be said, the Russian was already inside him. Yuri gasped; half in surprise, half for the sudden discomfort, but then relaxed again as it went away. Alcohol always made some things easier, and that was one of them. He could feel his husband's hips starting to rock under him, even as he was being pulled back down to the floor, the heat getting a little deeper with each push.

In the end though...none of the inconvenient little details mattered...and both of them were too blitzed to care.

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Yurio could barely open one eye at a time as he waited in the airport with Minako in the pre-dawn hours of Monday morning. She was wide-awake next to him, one arm settled over the carry-bag on her lap, the other propped up on an elbow with her palm under her cheek. She looked a bit anxious, but the bleary teen didn't need an explanation for why that might've been.

The Russian Tiger yawned loudly, but pulled his phone out. Seeing the time, 5:54am, he knew there was another 30 minutes to go before their plane might even taxi into the docking bay. He reached a hand up to rub the back of his neck, and clicked into Instagram to pass the time. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary...JJ was getting ready for the Final, showing off his new costumes...Yurio's Angels were posting their good-luck content...Georgi had commented a dramatic apology to his fans for not making it to the Final (again) and that he would work hard for Russian Nationals...Phichit had posted
a video of Yuri and Viktor making out on top of a tab-

"God-fucking-damnit." The teen grumbled, scrolling past as quickly as he could.

"What...?" Minako wondered, turning her head to glance at him.

"I'm going to need to bleach my eyes when we land. I think I saw Katsudon's ass in that picture..."

"...Haven't you seen it a thousand times already? You guys used to sit in the onsen together."

"Sure, but Viktor didn't have grabby-hands all over it back then." He shot back, realizing there was no end to the risqué photos and videos, "Jesus Christ, did everyone at the Banquet post pics of them screwing?" He stuck his tongue out in disgust, waggling it like he thought he would puke.

The ballerina leaned over slightly to see what he was looking at, and got an eye-full of the whole situation, pulling back with her cheeks reddening, "...Oh Yuri...Kyuushu born and bred..."

"Gross." Yurio gagged, going back to the top of his feed where the content was safer, "I never thought I'd say so, but if I had to pick between them and you guys, I'd rather hang out with you. At least you and Mikhail aren't obnoxiously public with yourselves."

Minako smiled nervously at that, "I guess that's a compliment...?"

A new picture posted, this time a composite of both skaters being dragged off by their respective former coaches. The Russian burst out laughing at that, and shoved the image into Minako's line of sight, "GET A LOAD OF THIS."

She blinked at the screen, unable to see anything where her nose was nearly smudged against the glass. She reached her hands up and moved the teen's arm a bit further away, finally able to see what he'd been chortling at. Yuri was wriggling like a wet cat in Celestino's arms, naked except for his underwear, and Viktor was being scolded like crazy by Yakov, while being dragged off by his ear in nothing but his fancy dress-pants. Minako wasn't sure whether she should laugh or cry, simply letting the blonde have his hand back. She huffed a nervous whisper of a whine, remembering the photos she'd seen from the previous year; Phichit's 'Oh My' photo from the Cup of China Hot Pot incident, and then in Barcelona when everyone was sharing Sochi Banquet pictures. She crossed her arms over the carry-bag on her lap and made a strange 'it can't be helped' face, "...Well, if anyone ever wondered what it would be like when those two got drunk at the same time...now we know..."
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED TWENTY ONE

Yurio clicked his phone on as they disembarked from their flight, walking down the proverbial hamster-tube to the Arrivals wing of the Fukuoka airport.

9:12am

"Great...we'll get into Hasetsu right as the old man is landing in Moscow." He commented dryly, putting the phone back again.

"It's always weird flying west." Minako replied, rubbing her eyes sleepily, "A 14 hour flight will only seem like six when the time difference catches up with you. I always thought that made the world feel kind of small."

"And then you fly east and it's like the world ate time." The blonde added, "A ten hour flight will feel like 20 by the time you get on the ground."

"Right?" The ballerina sighed dramatically, "Only two more hours to go to get to Hasetsu..." She glanced down at the teen, "Are you staying at Yu-Topia again?"

"Mh." He nodded, "Katsudon said he already warned his family about a bunch of us showing up unexpectedly. I'm gonna jump in the onsen for a bit and then catch a nap, before all Hell breaks loose when the two doofuses show up."

"...The onsen does sound pretty good right now..." Minako said longingly, "I'd probably fall asleep in it though!"

"You going straight home then?"

"Not sure yet... I haven't seen Hiroko or Mari in weeks. I should at least stop in and say hi." She answered, then reaching an arm over the teen's shoulder, "I'll walk you there and then head home for a bit. I'll just stay up until Mikhail calls and then I'll probably take a nap, too. I don't want to miss the party later."

The room was disheveled; blankets and pillows and clothing strewn everywhere. Yuri was only half-in the bed, one leg and one arm hanging off the side, the rest of him barely staying where he was but for his husband's usual overnight spooning.

His eyes twitched and he grumbled when his phone started ringing, and he reached careless hands for where he thought his alarm was ringing. The faceplate wasn't what it should've been though.

10:05 AM

[Phichit Chulanont]
[ACCEPT] [DECLINE]

"OH NO." Yuri was up with a start, flipping over where he'd been lying on his stomach, answering the call quickly...only to buckle and collapse, falling against the Russian's side with a sudden unexpected ache, "M-mushi mushi..." He managed in spite of it.
"Yuri?"

"...I don't feel good..." The skater moaned, feeling for his head and the rush of pain heading there as well.

"After everything you drank last night, I'm not surprised." Phichit said, sounding like he was smiling at his friend's expense but trying to hold it in, "I figured I'd call just to make sure you had time to finish packing before check-out. It sounds like you're still in bed."

Yuri looked around with one eye open, seeing the dim light of the room, "...Seems that way... My head is killing me..."

The Thai skater laughed, "Take some aspirin and drink plenty of water! You drank like a fish last night! You're probably super hung-over!"

Again, the older skater groaned.

"Well, anyway, since I know you're awake, we'll just go by the plan like we made before. I'll meet you in the lobby around noon. Try not to hurt yourself getting down here."

"Uhuh..."

The call ended, and Yuri dropped the phone to the blankets, trying to make the dizzy feeling in his head go away by lying still for a moment where he was still draped over his husband. The first ache was becoming something of a stinging throb, and he lifted his head gently to glance down at the sleeping Russian, "...What did we do last night...? Why do I hurt so bad...?" His back was starting to sting as well, and his thighs, and the side of his neck and shoulders...and the anxious figure started to see the extent of the 'damage.' At least, so far as he could see of his legs, which were bruised and scratched-up quite a bit. It only gave credence to the reason for his hurt everywhere else...but that first pain still seemed a marvel.

He's gone rough on me before, and I was sore the next day...but not like this...

Yuri put his hands over his face, trying to rub his temples with his fingers.

I haven't hurt this badly since the first time he went all the way on me...

He started to notice that at least Viktor had some of the same 'battle wounds' that he himself had; scratches and bruises on thighs, back, sides, and neck. He doubted the Russian felt the rest though.

Viktor was starting to rouse, twisting slightly where he'd unconsciously noted that his usual 'body pillow' had moved out of his reach. His hands swept over the sheets lightly, finding nothing where he pawed. Eventually, he twisted around, forced to silently admit that he couldn't go back to sleep that way, and slowly opened his eyes to look around. For once, the immaculate skater looked just as messed-up as everyone else did in the morning, hair everywhere and looking half-dead. When he finally saw his partner, coming into focus a little at a time, he managed a hazy, hung-over smile, "Morning."

"Hey."

"Everything hurts." Viktor mused, letting himself fall back into the pillows again, "Last night was fun."

"What did we even do...?" Yuri wondered, "I feel like I got hit by a bus..."
"Oh..." The Russian made a face, surprised but not really, "...You don't remember."

"Phichit said I drank like a fish. You let me drink too much."

"I did no such thing!" Viktor insisted, pushing back up to sit as Yuri was busy crossing his legs...with a wince, "We drank too much together!"

"Yeah?" The younger skater wondered skeptically, having to wait a moment before being able to sit somewhat comfortably, "How much did you drink?"

"...A bottle and a half?"

"And how much did you let me drink?"

"...Three?"

Yuri deadpanned him, "...Mhm. And then what?"

Viktor leaned forward and draped himself over his partner with deeply hung-over affection, "We came back here and had sexy-fun-time! I might've gotten impatient though..."

The younger man paused incredulously, "...Eh? ...Impatient...?"

Viktor pointed towards the television, "Well, we fell off the bed over there, but all our stuff was over here..." He pointed at the night-stand to his left, "...And I didn't feel like waiting..."

Yuri gaped, "...Eh?"

"...Sorry!" The Russian shrugged innocently, "You didn't seem to mind after a while..."

"I WAS DRUNK."

"SO WAS I."

"You went in dry, didn't you!?" The younger skater argued, practically sobbing from the disbelief of it all, "DRY Viktor! You have literally become a pain in my ass. YOU DON'T KNOW TRUE SUFFERING."

"I did 8 quads on Saturday!"

"YOU'RE NOT HUMAN."

The silver legend just laughed and cuddled closer, nosing adoringly at his husband's ear, "I love you, Yuri."

"You owe my backside an apology, and you're grounded from it for a week."

"What!? Nooooo! It was already going to be hard enough to stay away from it during the Final when Phichit's with us!"

The younger skater sulked comically, throwing his legs...tenderly...over the edge of the bed so he could head to the shower. He found it somewhat difficult to stand though; if not because of how much he hurt, but because his partner had wrapped both arms around his waist to pull him back down, though not without kissing one cheek first.

"Dear Yuri's butt, I'm very sorry for how I treated you last night." Viktor started, much to Yuri's
chagrin, "I offer my deepest apologies and hope that we can be friends again soon."

The younger man scoffed and crossed his arms, "...'Deepest apologies'? That didn't sound sincere at all."

"My apologies are at least 6 inches deep, so that has to count for something."

"OhmygodViktoryou'resoinappropriate." Yuri protested, trying to push the clingy Russian off his hips to try and stand again. It was impossible though; Viktor had held on even tighter as he was laughing, preventing the hapless skater from being able to get up. Eventually though, the silver genius gave in and let go, moving to stand up as well and help his poor hurt husband to the bathroom. Yuri limped along, eventually getting set back down to sit gently on the edge of the bathtub to watch Viktor turning on the hot water. He saw as the older figure tested the heat, plugged the drain, and poured in some of the hotel's complimentary bubble-bath. The soapy suds started frothing vigorously, and Viktor turned back towards him to help ease him into the warmth.

"You know I feel bad." The Russian purred, kneeling at the edge of the tub on the dry side, getting his fingers wet before reaching up to push black hair from his favorite pair of eyes, "I'll make it up to you."

"You'll let me have the Gold next weekend?"

Viktor piffle-snorted, "Yuri...you'd have better luck asking the sun not to rise." He reached his wet hand forward again and slid it around his partner's head, weaving his fingers through damp raven hair and pulled the man forward, tapping their foreheads lightly together, "But good try."

"...Does that mean you've decided not to retire this year after all?" The younger skater wondered suddenly, noting oddly that the man's eyes didn't even flinch to hear the question.

The Russian just held there for a second, listening to the sound of the water rushing. He then leaned in quickly and kissed the man before standing up again to leave the room. He was gone for several awkward minutes, returning with an arm-full of clean clothes, setting them on the vanity just as the bubbles in the tub were starting to crest the edge. Viktor leaned over the top of the bath and cut the water off, then silently squeezed his way in behind his partner, settling his back against the porcelain with both arms up against the edges.

Yuri watched him quietly, the froth of the bubble-bath rising up to his eye-level by the time the water stopped bobbing. When the man had finally gotten comfortable, a hand came over the ledge to poke at Yuri's chin, pushing to turn his face away, then came back around, and both hands slid across his back. The young skater was lost in the feeling of the warmth and the back-rubs almost immediately, drooping his head as slick fingers went up against the back of his neck, over his shoulders, and down his back and sides, pressing and kneading delicately.

The scratches from the night before were pink again from the heat of the water, revealing a number more than Viktor had seen originally. He kissed the ones he could get to near the upper part of Yuri's back, wrapped his arms around the man's small frame, and leaned back with him.

"I haven't decided one way or another." He said quietly, "I hate going into the Final bringing up the same question we had last year...but..."

"Well..." Yuri unhooked his hands from where he'd laced his fingers together over his chest, sliding them down where his partner's thighs parted around him, "...Last year, the question implied we'd be going our separate ways, too...this time it doesn't. Whatever you decide...I'll still be with you. Stammi vicino."
"...You won't...be upset with me?" Viktor asked, a bit taken aback by the words. 

"You agreed to stay in this with me for one more year." The younger man explained, sliding a bit to the left so he could turn his head to look back, "...While it would've been nice to see you compete for another after that, even just on style points...I've already asked too much of you. What kind of fan would I be if I keep pushing you, to the point where you want to quit rather than just retire? Only you could possibly know when it's time. I have to put my own feelings aside and let you make that choice on your own."

The Russian gaped for a moment, entirely not having expected to hear such sober words from someone who was still so hung-over, "...You really mean that?"

"Sure." Yuri blinked back at him, sitting up slightly and sliding his hand down to the bottom of the tub by the man's side, "...Why wouldn't I?"

Viktor couldn't think of an answer. Part of his mind went back briefly to their fight before their wedding party, but that had been about the number of quads he was planning on doing while winding down into retirement, not that he was retiring. He also couldn't help but think about their minor scuffle in Barcelona, the night they bought and exchanged rings, when Yuri had said they should end things. He shook his head and shrugged, "I guess I just thought you'd be more reluctant to hear me speak of it again."

"Sure I'm reluctant." The younger figure admitted, turning back around again to lean his head against the skater's pale chest, "I just want you to be sure that when you make that choice...it's because that's what you want, not because you were reacting to something and thought it was your only out." He paused a moment, reaching up to rest his arms over where Viktor's were folded over his chest, "...When I fell apart in Sochi, and was getting ready to leave the arena...Morooka asked if I was considering retirement, and then told me not to give up. I hadn't made up my mind yet though, and told him so, because everything was just so raw still that I didn't want to think about it. Then I heard you say my name..."

"...I did?"

"Mh. For a split second, I really thought you were talking to me...but when I saw you go by, and you didn't even look my way, I realized you were actually talking to Yurio." He explained, "In that split second though, watching you walk right past me...it was practically the closest you'd ever been. It was like you knew me, and were trying to get my attention like Morooka had. A thousand things ran through my head all at once in that tiny moment, but the thing that stuck out the most, was thinking that you would ask me not to retire, too... Then the moment passed, and all I could think of was what a failure I'd become. That I'd made it so far, accomplishing my dream, getting to compete against you and even meet you. Not just as some other nameless competitor out of the dozens of others whose names no one remembers...but as one of the Final Six. But it was mired by the fact that my final score was barely better than your Free Skate at the time. I was angry at the weight I'd gained from binge-eating, and miserable because my dog died...and that was the state I was going to be in when I finally got to meet you off the ice? I couldn't stand the shame. So I finished school, said goodbye to Phichit-kun and Celestino, and then went home to Hasetsu to try and figure things out. I knew that I shouldn't make such a big decision about my future when I knew I was really upset about a lot of stuff...because I'd lose my chance to try again. So I got bored of being depressed and sad at what had happened, and focused instead on trying to get back on the ice...trying to figure out what I needed to be inspired again."

Viktor listened quietly, leaning his head back against the tile wall, rubbing his thumb slowly back and forth against his husband's skin.
"And then you showed up..." Yuri huffed a laugh, "And now we're married and sitting in a bathtub together, on the cusp of another Grand Prix Final, and both of us are going into it having won gold at each of our events, just like everyone wanted." He turned his head and rubbed his cheek against that pale, damp skin, "...I guess, what I'm trying to say is...I don't blame you for being run down by how the last few weeks have gone. I'm tired, too. I'm exhausted. All I want to do is get back home, crawl under a big downy blanket with you, and hibernate for the rest of the winter. But the thing is...that's competition...and the season will eventually end. Wait to decide what you want to do until you've had time to decompress from all the things that've stressed you out for the last month and a half. Making a big choice like retiring should be done with a clear head. You'll regret it later if you jump the gun."

It took three bellhop carts to get everything down from the 27th floor to the lobby, and eventually two shuttles to ferry it all back to the airport, but the hotel room was clear and the keycards had been turned in. All that was left was finding Phichit, saying goodbye to Celestino, getting breakfast (or lunch, depending on what buffet was still set out,) and getting back to New Chitose Airport.

Yuri glanced around nervously at every person who passed him by, thinking they could tell he was walking funny even if he wasn't. Still though, he was tender enough to feel that his gait looked like the exaggerated bow-legged steps of cartoon cowboys.

He heard whistles from across the lobby though, and a small group of competitors were clapping as he and Viktor came fully into view. People in the restaurant seating area were glancing up, and many of them were other skaters, too, giving him winks or grins or knowing smiles.

The young figure blinked, getting nervous flutters in his stomach, and held a little tighter to his partner's hand as they walked and looked around, "...Why are people acting like this...?"

Viktor glanced around, seeing a small cluster of Czech skaters loitering just around the elevator hall. They smirked and giggled to themselves, and the Russian just raised his hand and smiled back, "Hiil~!

Someone further away whistled louder than all the others, and a man raised his hand, "GO YURI!"

The skater blanched, nearly hiding behind his partner's jacket, "W-What!? Go me!?" He looked up at Viktor in a slight panic, "What are they talking about!?"

"Yuri!" A familiar voice finally called. Phichit came running for the pair from the exit doors, "You wouldn't believe how much attention your show last night is getting online right now! People love it!"

"My show?" He repeated skeptically, "No, that was Viktor's show...I just came in at the end. I was barely on the ice for a minute and a half."

"What? No, I'm talking about your match of 'Strip Snap' last night against Viktor!"

"...'Strip...Snap'?" Viktor chortled behind his free hand, trying not to laugh too hard.
The cogs were turning in Yuri's head, and he frantically pulled out his phone, "WHAT DID YOU LET ME DO, VIKTOR?" He pulled up Instagram and glanced at the feed, probably for the first time in days. He got an eye-full of several rather explicit photos, but none caused his heart to stop quite as quickly as a close-up of Viktor's hand going down the back of his underpants to grab his backside while they were in the middle of a rather intense kiss. Yuri's face went bright red, and his hand shook where he held his phone, "...O-Oh...oh..."

"Yuri...?" Phichit asked.

His voice was far away though, like the hapless skater had been thrown under water. He could feel the blood draining from his head...and the peripheries of his vision started to darken.

"Viktor, I think he's about to-

"...Goodnight..."
Disembarking at Sheremetyevo International Airport just outside of Moscow at around 8:30am local time, Mikhail stumbled forward like a zombie. He rubbed his eyes on the back of a gloved hand and looked around the Arrivals wing for the nearest coffee stand, hearing the distinct thumping footsteps of a big ol' Russian Bear coming up behind him. He turned to the side and pulled over his tablet-bag, reaching within and withdrawing a small fold of papers, holding them up, [Here...these are your tickets for the quick flight to St. Petersburg.] He explained, feeling the tickets slip from his fingers, [The layover is 3 hours, so hang out at the next terminal while I go get Yura's things from my place. I'll be back in an hour or two.]

Blue eyes looked at the papers, and the huge man slid them into his coat's inside pocket, stepping off through the crowd quietly.

Mikhail watched him go for a few moments, but then turned on his heel to head for a coffee shop he'd spotted just a bit further down the terminal in the opposite direction. When he'd finally gotten his dose of delicious caffeine, he moved off towards the airport exit, stopping only at the car rental desk to get his favorite blue hybrid. He found the vehicle quickly enough, got in, leaned the driver's seat way back, drew in a deep breath...and let it out as more of an exhausted over-tired yell-groan than an exhale.

"Ohmygodeverythinghurts." He whined, "That flight was too long!"

His flat-cap slipped off and fell into the foot-well of the back passenger seats, and it signaled the end of the pity-party. He rummaged around in his coat for his phone, checked that it was around 2:30pm back in Japan, turned the car on so he could connect said phone to the Bluetooth system, and sent out the call.

It rang a few times as he backed out of the parking stall, and the Russian heard a welcome click just as he was pulling forward to leave.

"Hey hun."

He smiled at that, "Hey. We finally landed. How was your trip?"

"Glad to be back home. The flight was easy. Yura fell asleep almost as soon as we were seated. I tried to get some shut-eye as well buuuuuut it didn't happen."

"Sorry."

"No, it's fine." Minako answered, stretching out as far as she could where she was lying on her sofa at home, "I dropped Yura off at Yu-Topia about 2 hours ago. He's probably asleep again by now."

"Have you been waiting for me to call...?"

"I wanted to make sure you landed okay."

"That's quite touching." He mused, dramatically raising a hand up to cup his cheek, "I can happily report that we landed at Sheremetyevo without the plane having caught fire."

"I'm glad to hear it." She answered, flipping over from her back to her stomach, limbs going
everywhere, "So explain to me again why you picked a flight that was supposed to leave at dawn...?"

"Oh, in the original plan?" The Russian wondered, pulling out of the big parking lot and figuring his way out onto the snow-covered mini-highway leading off the property, "I figured the boys would sleep in late after the last Exhibition and Banquet, so I wanted to beat them back to Hasetsu. Get some time in that hot-spring before everything went crazy with the celebration. How's it all look out there?"

"I didn't go as far as the Ice Castle, but Hiroko has Yu-Topia decorated pretty nicely. The triplets have been advertising the event all over town since Yuri won gold in China. It's going to be...well, huge."

"Ahh I wish I could be there."

"I'll be sure to take lots of pictures. The Nishigoris will for sure." Minako explained, turning to her side after that, "The girls asked where you were. They were kinda disappointed to find out you couldn't come...but I didn't really go into detail about what was going on. I just said something came up and you had to go home for a while. ...We haven't discussed how we want to tell Yuri and Viktor."

"Let them enjoy the night. If they really want to know, feel free to tell them exactly what's going on. If not, leave it till tomorrow. If they both get mad at me for needing to bring my kids to Detroit then I'll figure something else out. I can't leave them alone like this though. Maybe I'll just stay in Banff with them. ...I could get you a ticket here after the Final if you want."

The ballerina waited a moment, thinking on it, staring at the coffee table in front of her. She drew in a breath and shook her head, "...I have a feeling they won't be mad at all. They might even be sympathetic to the situation."

Mikhail nodded, though that was obviously inaudible over the phone.

"Did you call them last night before your flight took off?"

"Yeah." He answered, "I spoke to my youngest, since I knew for sure she'd pick up if she saw my name pop up on her phone."

"And?"

"...Just as I worried, she was the one who found their mother. Died in her bed with a rosary and a Bible. I didn't really get into it that much with Nikki since she sounded upset, but she said it happened 2 days after I last talked to them, and that was right after you guys had gone to China without me. Nikki said she wanted to call sooner, but she was worried that it'd just make things worse if I found out what happened when I was still in the hospital."

"What about Sergio telling the girls to keep quiet?"

Mikhail huffed a laugh, "Nikkita is my baby girl. Sergio has no power over her when it comes to me, try as he might. She'd actually be with me if not for their mother insisting they all stay together."

"What about Viktoria?"

"She wanted to come live with me too from the start, but she was put-off by the idea of possibly sometimes living in Russia. She's got roots there like her brother. Didn't want to give it all up. I got the house in Edmonton for the winters, vacations, and special occasions, but I was primarily in
Moscow after that. My kids all have keys to that house though so they could go whenever they wanted.

"...You just let them have free reign unattended?"

"Oh, dearest Minako, you have yet to see the scale of things in Edmonton." Mikhail laughed, putting a hand over his chest even knowing the woman couldn't see his grand car-theatrics, "My condo in Russia is just a drop in the bucket. My business has been very successful. I can afford the house, and give my kids keys to do whatever they want in it, and have it loaded to the teeth with a top-of-the-line security system and a network of nanny-cams. And they all know about it, too. In the years I've been separated from my ex-wife, there's never been a fork or potted-plant out of place in that house that I didn't notice. Don't worry though, you'll get to see it when you get there."

"...You've never really talked about your ex that much, other than the downfall. You don't sound all that distressed that she's gone now." The ballerina pointed out, feeling a bit awkward having to do so, "Did you resent her that much?"

"She stole my family from me." Mikhail answered simply, getting serious again, "That would mark the second time in my lifetime where I had been sent away and lost everything I cared about. I miss the woman she used to be...she is the mother of my kids, after all...but the person she became after the cancer...wasn't her anymore. I hardly recognized her...physically or emotionally. Maybe if I had been a worse husband, I would've divorced her instead of her me. Then maybe I'd have been the one to stay in Banff and she'd have to move away. But I wasn't that way...I'm not that way. I wasn't going to leave her over being sick. ...I was devastated when she handed me the papers in the end. Couldn't believe it, really. I'd taken all that time from work, spent all that money for her treatments...and then she threw me out because I didn't buy into her delusions?" He drew in a sharp breath and shook his head to get rid of the feeling, "I wanted nothing more than to have my kids back. She wouldn't let me have them though. I had to fight for scraps, getting weekends here and there, and having to celebrate birthdays at her convenience rather than on the day...it was a miracle she let them go for half the summer. Those were good times, though. The four of us would travel all over the world when I had them. Kenya, Mexico, Britain, even Japan once. I was supposed to take them to Germany this last summer, but I ended up having to cancel because of all the trips we were doing at the time."

"...You didn't say anything about that! Now I feel bad!"

"I didn't want to burden you with it. They're my responsibility, not yours." Mikhail said firmly, "...I thought, the less of them you knew or heard about, the less you'd think about them, and the less you'd think badly of me for having them...especially after that disastrous introduction in Calgary."

"I'm giving you a look right now." Minako answered flatly, "You should know that. It's a very stern, unimpressed look."

"...Why?"

"Remember how I said this past weekend about the fact that you're really clever about everything except your family?"

"...Yeah."

"This is another one of those things where you're being dumb." She explained matter-of-factly, "How often do you talk to them when you're not local?"

"Once a week or more with Nikki and Viktoria. Once a month or less with Sergio, depending on
whether he felt like it or bothered picking up the phone." The Russian answered simply, "I was their math tutor, so I'd FaceTime or Skype to help with their homework. I used to do that with all three of them at the same time, but then Sergio became a big strong man and didn't need his dad anymore...so it was just me and my girls. I used to be there every day to help them in person when they were young, unless I had a job I needed to be there in-person for. I did what I could to keep it up even after I was told to go."

"...When did you even have time? I never even suspected..."

"It's a 9 hour difference between Moscow and Banff. I'd call between 2 and 3am from out here. From Japan, I'd call around 9am. It did kind of wane a little when I started travelling with you, but it's nothing they weren't used to. Sometimes when I would have to go to a job site, I wouldn't be able to talk to them for a month or two at a time. I always just made up for it with extra time when I was done. They'd text me if they really needed something."

Minako was taken aback by the whole thing, "...I had no idea. I thought you'd practically forgotten you had kids at all. So when you got all upset yesterday on that call..."

"...It was because I couldn't stand the idea of them being alone." He finished the sentence for her, and nodded quietly to himself, "I never wanted to admit it out loud, but I always kind of wished the woman would pass so I could go in and save the day. Now I just feel like shit for having ever entertained the thought."

"...Yeah."

"...Well," Mikhail stumbled, "Now that I've been a thorough buzzkill, I'll let you go take that nap. I'll probably be in St. Petersburg by the time the boys get to Hasetsu. Fill me in on all the details when the party's over."

Getting through security for a domestic flight was a simple matter. Getting nearly 20 suitcases of varying sizes to the airport and into the Checked Bags area was slightly less simple. Finding a comfortable position to sit in was the least simple thing of all.

"Are you sure you don't want to come snoop around with me, Yuri?" Phichit asked anxiously, "This airport is practically a shopping mall! It's famous! There's the movie theater, the chocolate shop, that fancy mascarpone brûlée place...lots of stuff!"

The older skater, tender and already tired, just lay on his side on one of the long fabric couches on the second floor lounge near their departure gate. He glanced up with a slight head-turn where he'd had it resting on his partner's leg, "...I still don't feel too good, Phichit-kun... Maybe we'll have a competition again here in the future..."

"Awwww!"

Yuri dropped his head down again. It wasn't a complete lie...he did still feel somewhat nauseated and headachy...but it was the soreness that made him want to stay put. Walking hurt. Sitting hurt. Everything hurt. But it felt better to lie down than it did to sit or stand, so unless he had to, Yuri Nikiforov was going to stay right where he was.
"Take pictures and show me when we're about to take off." He offered instead, "You can tell me all about what you saw, to pass the time while we're flying to the other end of the island. You'll have my undivided attention."

"I guess so..." Phichit sighed. He turned on his heel and pulled out his selfie-stick from his carry-bag, and started heading away, "I'll come running back when I hear the gate call."

"Okay. See you later then."

The older skating duo watched as the Thai figure sauntered off.

When he was out of sight, Yuri turned his head down against his husband's thigh and sighed, "...I hate doing that to him...I actually wanted to look around, too..."

Viktor slid his free hand down, settling it lightly on his partner's up-turned hip, "...Does it really hurt that badly?"

"Kind of."

"Wow~!" The Russian answered reluctantly, pulling his hand back up to fan his fingers over his mouth, a bit embarrassed, "...I really didn-."

"I'll be fine." The younger skater huffed, reaching an arm up to cross over the man's legs so he could get more comfortable, "...I kind of wish I got you back though. I don't know what I did last night."

"Who says you didn't?"

Brown eyes shot open, and Yuri pushed up on his hands, "...Eh!?"

Blue eyes hid behind a smile and a wave of silver-grey hair.

Yuri blinked at the man, entirely reluctant to believe it. But, there Viktor was, all but openly admitting it. The younger figure just gawked, "...EEEHHHHHHHH!?!"

Viktor just tilted his head, his bangs tousling slightly as he kept on smiling, "What, you think you got all those scratches on your back because of what I was doing? Yuri..."

"I don't know! I don't remember!"

The Russian just started laughing, turning his attention slightly as he felt his phone starting to ring in his hand. He glanced at the faceplate.

1:17PM
CHRIS
[ACCEPT][DECLINE]

"I was just thinking about you." Viktor mused, holding the phone to his ear.

Yuri just kept on gawking, though his eyes moved from the man's face to his knee and then the floor. He couldn't even hear the conversation, he was so stunned.

...I can't believe it... It's just like back then, when he took him self on me and then acted like he was fine...only to say way later that he wasn't.

"Oh, no, our flight doesn't leave for another 45 minutes or so." Viktor was saying, "I bet! I was wondering when you'd call!" He started laughing again, "Oh, you saw a video? Scandalous!"
All Yuri could think to do was lie back down where he'd been before, practically catatonic from the revelation.

"Of course he is. Here, I'll put you on speaker." The Russian went on, "Yuri...say hi."

"Existence is pain."

Both older men burst out laughing at that, but Chris' hollow phone-voice echoed through, "Viktor, what'd you to do the poor thing? He sounds so sad."

"Our training for the Final got extra vigorous last night." He answered, reaching up to wipe a tear from his eye as he kept laughing, "I think I might've pushed him too hard."

"...My life is a lie." Yuri went on, as though oblivious to the commentary.

"...Wow, that got deep all of a sudden." Viktor grimaced.

"...At least six inches deep, according to you." The hapless skater answered, finally acknowledging the situation, and twisting somewhat painfully to lie on his back instead, bending his knees up to avoid catching his feet on the end of the couch. Both men were laughing at him again by then, and he just sighed loudly, his cheeks already going deep crimson from the embarrassment of the conversation.

"I'm a bit mad that I wasn't invited." Chris said, "I didn't think I'd ever get to see that side of you again after Sochi, Yuri. Then when it finally comes out again, and I'm not even there to see it in person."

"Super-Deluxe Eros Yuri only makes appearances on special occasions, when lots of alcohol is involved." Viktor explained, "Then he becomes the tastiest pork-cutlet bowl in the whole world."

"Heh...the Yuri Special, Eros Katsudon."

"I'd eat that." Viktor mused, reaching his free hand down to slip his fingers through the lapels of his husband's open coat, and sliding it down until he could feel the man's stomach, "The ultra-lean SkateHusband with abs that could cut diamonds...unless it's off-season, then it's a super-squishy Kobuta-chan tummy!"

Chris could already hear Yuri protesting in a half-reluctant whiny-voice, laughing as the 'tormented' skater mumbled something about 'not doing that when there's so many other people around.'

"...I squish it!" Viktor teased, managing to get his hand under the younger man's shirt, sliding his palm all over that pale, taut core.

"Nooo Viktooorrrr..." Yuri whined again, "People are starting to watch...!"

"I don't mind." The Russian purred, holding the phone close enough that Chris could hear everything even as he spoke a bit more softly, his other hand still feeling at his partner's skin, fingers teasing at the edge of a belt, "...It's more exciting that way."

Yuri's legs were starting to kick a little where he was squirming pitifully, but even with both hands around the Russian's wrist, he made no true effort to push it away, "...We shouldn't be d-doing this right now...!"

"Well...we're going to be around a lot of other people for the next week...I won't get to touch you that much..." Viktor sighed, relishing the sight of the man wiggling under his affection, "And I
already want to touch you more..."

"...You should!"

"Hm?" The silver skater hummed, a bit confused, "But I'm touching you right now."

"...But NOT right now!"

"...This is all rather arousing..." Chris pointed out, listening intently, "...I think I'm g-going to...c-cum! Ngh!"

"Oh my, Chris..." Viktor laughed, "I didn't think we got you hard already."

The Swiss skater just huffed and puffed on the other end of the line, "...I-Just imagine...if I had gotten to be there!"

"Yuri would be running for the hills!"

"Not if I pin him down first..."

"Wow~!" The Russian laughed again, turning his attention back down to his partner, seeing the poor man caught between several conflicting emotions. The inability to truly get away because of how sore he still was, the reluctance to do so anyway by how he continued to cling to that wrist, neither stopping its roaming nor pushing it away, the intense need to continue feeling that hand on his skin despite it all, and the growing, crippling fear that they might be giving an erotic show to everyone nearby. Viktor wasn't going to stop though just because of them. Seeing his husband's flushed face, eyes closed, breathing a bit heavier than normal...and all that just from having his hand on the man's stomach...it reminded him of only one thing.

"I can't read your mind. You need to tell me what you like so I know to keep doing it." Viktor had pointed out, "Well?"

"...I like it best when you use your hands."

"Really? Why's that?"

"Your hands tell me more about how you feel than anything else, besides your eyes. When you use your hands on me, I know you actually want me."

Viktor held the phone out of ear-shot, and leaned down slightly, smiling adoringly and whispering, "...I'll use nothing but my hands on you all week, every chance I get."

Hazel eyes peeked open, "...Eh?"

"Yuri?"

"AHHH!" The skater flailed, sitting up with a start and pulling his shirt back into place, his whole head glowing red by then, "PHICHITO-KUN!" His accent slipped again from the embarrassment of being walked-in-on like that.

"Phichit's there?" Chris' voice rose from the phone, "Are you guys having an orgy without me now, too?"

"C-CHRISU!" Yuri barked, turning his head back around like a whip.

"Chris?" Phichit wondered, looking over to see where the Russian was holding his phone out.
"No orgies." Viktor defended, still amused by it all, "I'm keeping Yuri all to myself."

"Will you get Phichit to take pictures for me then?" The Swiss skater laughed, though still half-serious.

"Ohmygosh." The Thai figure blushed at the very concept of it.

"CHRIS." Yuri barked again.

"...Actually, that might be pretty exciting!" The Russian teased, leaning to the side where his partner was still sitting upright, snaking a hand between his arm and side to pull him back with a palm to his stomach again, and brushing a light kiss against the side of that pale neck.

"V-VIKTOR."

"Did you think about that just now?"

Yuri just comically sobbed into his hands.
CHAPTER TWO HUNDREDTWENTY THREE

Phichit held the camera-side corner of his phone around the edge of the last wall before the Arrivals terminal changed from the passenger-only area to one the public could access. They could already hear the sound of the mob that awaited them, but when the young skater pulled his camera back and played the short clip, he gave a nervous laugh.

"There's a barrier, at least..." He said, heading back down the hall to where Yuri and Viktor were waiting. He held the phone up to show it to the younger of the two, who immediately started to get nervous.

"Jeeze...it's even crazier than when we got back from Worlds..." Yuri sighed, "Moving back to Hasetsu has made it too easy for people to know where to expect us after competitions..."

"I don't know why you still get so nervous." The Russian mused.

"I didn't get into skating because I wanted to win popularity contests." The younger answered, "Same reason why I barely update my Instagram."

"It's a terrible irony that the guy least-interested in getting attention is married to a guy who loves it." Phichit pointed out sarcastically.

"Right?" Viktor agreed, stepping forward to start heading down the hall the Thai skater had just come back through, "In either case, let's go! The sooner we're through, the sooner we're on the train. There's a wall between us and them anyway, so you don't even have to stop to interact with anyone. Just wave and smile."

"C'mon, Yuri!" Phichit cheered, looking just as excited as the Russian

The middle skater just groaned and let them drag him around the corner. The screaming that followed was enough to make him feel like he was going to be bowled over, except for the saving grace of his partner's arm around his back. Viktor and Phichit ate up the adulation, waving happily and smiling and laughing, even as Yuri just put on a brave face and did his best not to look like he wanted to run away. He waved and gave a nervous smile, walking alongside the two other skaters as the JSF barricade held the crowd back.

While Viktor and Phichit were busy focusing on the crowd though, Yuri looked further down the walkway, seeing the media frenzy that was set-up in the next big hall, pressed up against the wall beyond a menial rope-barrier of their own. Cameras were already flashing from 30 or more different reporters and videographers, though what surprised him more than anything was seeing the RSF there in force as well. The Cyrillic on their jackets was easy to spot.

"Viktor," He started, twisting slightly while still keeping an eye on the pack, "Look. It's your people."

The Russian turned his head to face where Yuri was pointing, but smiled as though it wasn't that much of a surprise, "They must've been here already for Yurio."

"...No one but us knew he was coming here though." The younger skater pointed out, "I wonder if they even know he's here now? Maybe they missed him entirely."
"YURI! VIKTOR! PHICHIT!" Came a woman's voice.

The trio glanced up and saw Yuuko there at the front of the crowd, just opposite the corner that the press was cloistered into. Oddly, she was on her own; she didn't even have her triplets with her, but she waved excitedly as they got closer.

"Yuu-chan!" Yuri called out, looking more lively than before, and all but dragging his husband with him to get closer to her faster. He reached his free arm over the barricade to hug her, even as fans standing all around her were getting more rambunctious to see the athletes up close, "Where's everyone else? Did you really come on your own?"

"I actually didn't tell anyone except Takeshi." She answered with a sly but guilty smile, "I doubt I'll ever hear the end of it when I get back with you guys and the girls realize where I went. They've been working really hard though and I didn't want to interrupt!"

"...Working really hard?" Yuri echoed, "...What are they doing?"

"Arranging your 'welcome home' party, of course! You two have been gone for over a month, and you're coming back with four Gold Medals! How can we not celebrate? Practically everyone in Hasetsu is going to be there to congratulate you, and cheer you on for the Final! You've made it for the 3rd time in a row now, and you have a really good shot at winning!"

"...I'd like to think so, but Viktor still buried me in the preliminaries." The skater sighed, side-eyeing the man where he stood, looking innocent.

Phichit was slightly off to the side, selfie-stick out again as he took photos with fans that hadn't expected him to be there.

"That last Free Skate was something out of this world, Viktor." Yuuko pointed out, though looking and sounding more worried than happy about it, reaching a hand out to take his and pull it towards herself, "After the 5th quad, I think I spent most of my time worried you'd fall. I'm relieved you pulled through...but I hate to think about what happened that made you feel like you had to do that. You don't have to prove to anyone that you're the best...!"

The stunned Russian just looked down at her, feeling at where she moved to take his free hand in both of her own, holding it up just in front of herself. He gently folded his fingers around hers, smiled sadly, and then reached that arm around her to pull her close to his shoulder and kiss her cheek, "Don't worry about it. It's all over now. I'm doing a different Free Skate from now on."

"...You are?" She blinked up at him as she raised her head, "...But...how? Why? It's so late in the Grand Prix..."

"Come onto this side of the barrier, Yuu-chan." Yuri suggested, "We'll walk and talk."

Viktor moved his arm a bit down the lithewoman's back, and held her against himself as she hoisted her legs over, then let her go again once she was safely on their side of the wall. Yuri called back to Phichit quickly, and the four started walking down the rest of the hall, heading towards the escalators that would lead to the train station.

"Don't you have to get your luggage...?" Yuuko wondered, pointing the other way towards baggage claim.

Yuri shook his head, "We got everything to the airport in Sapporo, but right as we got to the luggage counter, we decided to just have it shipped straight home. It'll probably show up tomorrow. For now...it's just the stuff we carried onto the plane with us."
"It's for the best." Phichit laughed, recording a video of the fanfare as they walked, even turning around to go backwards and capture the scene of their departure, "They had way too many bags for the train anyway!"

Boots and shoes crunched across snow, and the dark interior of a frigid room suddenly burst into the sunlight with the shrill, machine-gun-like clacking noise of an industrial sliding door being pushed up. It clicked into a locking mechanism, and three sets of feet stepped within.

Inside the storage unit, the volcano-red 2012 Audi TT Prestige coupe sat, waiting and ready. A tiny little thing...and two sets of eyes went from it, to the massive man who was, in theory, the new owner.

"Think we have a logistical issue, boss."

"...Mmmhm." Mikhail agreed, rubbing his chin in thought, "Well, Viktor did acknowledge that his car was fun-size, so he gave his proverbial blessing to auction it off if it was too small."

[...Do I sit in it or on it?] Konstantin huffed glibly.

[...We're going to have to think of an alternative pretty quick. It's been so long since I looked at this thing that I forgot how little it was.] The thin Russian shrugged, turning to the bear, [Tell you what...I'll just buy you something else and recover the costs later. I need to send you home with something.]

The bear glanced down at him, [Why would you just offer to buy me a car like that? I've done nothing for you, practically across the whole of our lifetimes.]

[You're still my brother by law, even if Tat is gone.] Mikhail shrugged, [Besides...I've learned a lot about what family means since I left Russia the first time. I lost one family when I took off, but then I made another, only to come home and find the first again...I'm not going to let it slip through my fingers. I'm going to take care of you.]

Konstantin huffed a grumble of skepticism, [What's the catch?]

[Catch?] The lithe figure echoed, [I never said that my help came with a cost.]

[No kindness goes unpunished. There's a cost to everything.]

[Not always to the person benefiting from it. I told Viktor the same thing once.] Mikhail explained, glancing briefly over at his colleague, then back again. [Come step outside with me, Kon. Forget the car for a minute.] He turned back to the third man, "Benson, I'm taking this one back to Japan with me. Pull together an export packet and I'll fill it all out."

"...You're taking it to Japan?" The figure looked a bit surprised, scratching his head where he lifted a hard-hat up with a knuckle, "I thought you were going back to Canada."

"I'm going there first, but I'll end up in Japan at the end of things. I have a lady-friend out there who would just die to see this car. Plus, my nephew would probably be happy to see it again. I don't think he'll mind having it back." Mikhail answered, the three of them moving back out of the small storage
The train ride into Hasetsu was even shorter than the plane ride into Fukuoka, taking barely as long as a movie needed to run its course. It was impossible to see Hasetsu Castle from the rail line, but even still, crossing the river on the already-high elevated platform was exciting and nostalgic.

The rickety, old white train with its blue stripe along the outside eventually came up behind Hasetsu Station.

"I remember the very first time I pulled into Hasetsu like this." Viktor waxed, "This city by the sea that reminded me so much of St. Petersburg, in its own way. Then seeing all those posters of Yuri inside the train station from before the Final. It felt like stepping out into a whole different world."

Yuri grumbled silently and sullenly at the idea of it, a little embarrassed at how things were back then, "I could hardly believe the town had left all those posters up in the first place. It had been 3 months since I bombed in Sochi. I thought they would've taken everything down by then...but I
guess everyone got too lazy. The 'good luck at the Final' banner was still flying above the Ice Castle, too." He turned his head from looking out the window, and looked at the group sitting with him on the train instead, "It's hard to imagine that we skaters are the only thing this place really gets excited about."

The train eventually came to a slow halt, and passengers started getting up to leave, the doors clicking and hissing as they opened. Yuuko hopped out first, waiting for the other 3 to follow after, and they all quickly went inside to escape the cold of the winter winds. Even over the sound of other passengers getting off the deck and into the station, the hum of energy was tangible, feeling like a slight tingle in the air.

Yuuko was already half-way down the escalator when she turned up and waved at the skaters, pointing to the bottom where something no-doubt awaited them. The hum of energy grew more dense. Viktor closed his eyes and drew it all in, half-smirking to himself as he brought a finger to his chin in thought.

"...Oh man, half the town is probably here...!" Yuri whined quietly. His attention was quickly grabbed by the Russian, pulling him in by his shoulder and doing the same with Phichit. Whispers went between them, and Yuri could feel his face going red at the thought of it...but he was already outnumbered and knew they'd make him follow-through with the plan no matter what.

And so there they were...going down the escalator...sitting on the black rubber grip-bar with their right legs raised up dramatically. Viktor first, then Yuri, and Phichit in the back. Yuri's leg started to sag half-way down, but a sneaky hand from the Russian settled on the inside of that thigh and the leg was out and straight again, much to the young skater's chagrin.

Viktor pulled that hand back though and gave a rather charming wave as he came to the end of the railing, the decline changing to a horizontal level right before it curved back under itself to return to the top of the escalator, "Hiii~!"

The Russian quickly jumped off and made room, the previously-unseen crowd suddenly roaring to life at the sight of the trio. Banners and flags and signs were waved about, and confetti crackers popped from all angles like the cannons of a tiny army.

Yuri could hardly believe the sight of the crowd. He hadn't seen one that big since the Hot Springs on Ice event; it was even larger than the group that had gathered at Fukuoka the previous year. At least, it seemed like it, given how tightly packed the little train-station was. He was quickly pulled into a group hug between the other two skaters, and cameras flashed as brightly as ever from all sides. It was thoroughly overwhelming...and it only increased when Viktor and Phichit both grabbed for their medals, hanging hidden inside their coats, but now plain for all to see. Gold, Silver, and Bronze glinted in the lights, and Viktor nudged his shoulder to get him to do the same. Yuri swallowed nervously, but reached his hands up towards the top of his closely-buttoned dark-blue coat, moving his scarf out of the way.

_I always feel so far removed from the audience when I'm on the ice, or even the podium...but standing this close to everyone, being right in the thick of it...I still get so nervous..._

He could feel the discs under the fabric before he saw them, and he weaved his fingers through the two lanyards holding onto them. With a last sharply-drawn breath, Yuri pulled the two Gold medals over his head, and held them up for the crowd to see.
Though it was still daylight when the train arrived, by the time a certain triad of skaters made it to their taxi, the winter sun had already set, leaving Hasetsu on the precipice of twilight. The last rays of light vanished over the horizon, and streets lights twinkled on as the car left the lot and passed underneath.

The trio were squished into the back seat, their things piled up in the front passenger foot-well with Yuuko as they regained their wits about them. She glanced back at them with a worried smile, trying not to laugh, though internally she was in stitches at the sight of them.

"...I think one of them got me on the mouth..." Yuri said stiffly, mashed in the middle as usual. He repeatedly opened his mouth and made a face, as though trying to get the taste off his lips and tongue without touching them.

"What?" Viktor said in a quiet monotone, turning his head slowly towards his partner, "Say that again?"

The younger skater turned as well, but was more annoyed than anything, "...One of those crazy excited fans who mobbed us when I pulled my medals out...I think one of them...might've kissed me in the middle of the frenzy... I have this weird minty taste in my mouth that-"

The Russian's eye twitched...and suddenly he was pulling at the door handles, "STOP THE CAR AND LET ME OUT."

"V-Viktor!?" Everyone called in shock.

The cabby did as told in his stunned surprise, and the silver man practically broke the door-handle off in his efforts to get out. Yuri tried to hold him in, but a swift kick to the inside panel sent the door flying open anyway, bouncing back and needing another kick, followed by the territorial skater jumping out immediately after. He took a few angry steps back towards the train station, which was barely across the street by that point, and shook a fist at the doorway, "WHOEVER KISSED MY HUSBAND WILL RUE THIS DAY." He yelled.

"Viktorgetbackinthecar!" Yuri begged, arms around his waist from behind while Phichit and he tried to get the man back through the open passenger door.

"I WON'T STAND FOR THIS!" The Russian went on, being pulled one reluctant step backwards as he lost ground, though he still shook his fist. There were a number of fans who had poured outside Hasetsu Station to see the skaters leave, and they were all looking rather nervous as he yelled at them, "YURI IS MINE, YOU HEAR ME!?" He pointed emphatically at his wedding band, "HE GAVE THIS RING TO ME! I'M THE ONLY ONE THAT GETS TO KISS HIM! IF I EVER FIND OUT WHO PUT THAT MINTY TASTE ON HIS LIPS, I'LL-"

He continued to flail and protest as he was finally dragged back into the taxi, Yuuko hopping out to push the door closed after his feet were shoved in. She jumped back in front again and told the driver to floor it, getting the perturbed Russian as far away from his new enemy as possible.

Yuri and Phichit heaved a sigh of relief to feel the taxi moving again, but Viktor was glued to the window, watching the station disappear around the corner and out of sight, as though thinking that if
he pushed his face against the glass hard enough, he might be able to pass through it on a molecular level. He kept the annoyed look on his face until the train station was entirely too far away to see anymore, but even as he peeled himself off the door, he still looked ultra-annoyed.

"Wow!" Phichit said, holding a hand to his heart from the adrenaline rush, "Viktor went from zero to 60 in two seconds flat!"

"We need to get back to Yu-Topia in a hurry..." Yuri agreed, "There's only one thing that can calm him down now..."

"NoonekissesYuriEXCEPTME," Viktor continued to seethe, pulled back down across the legs of both younger skaters where they'd hoisted him inside. His arms were up as though he were trying to grab for the imaginary neck of the fan who'd dared get so close, "NOONEBUTME."

The moon was already bright in the sky when the taxi pulled up in front of Hasetsu's last hot-springs resort, but the lights and colors shining out from it was unlike anything Yuri had ever seen. Lanterns were hung along every awning, with smaller lanterns of different colors going in woven patterns around the big ball-lights that were already there. A few fans and photographers were waiting at the entrance, but by and large, it seemed that most of them had gone to wait at the train station. It was a relief as well to see the big 'CLOSED FOR TONIGHT' sign hanging under the main arch that lead into the resort.

Viktor was still slightly suspicious of anyone waiting around, and he made an effort to put himself between the loiterers and his husband, making sure to keep an eye out in case anyone else decided to try to lip-lock the man.

That's when he heard the barks and whines, followed by a door sliding open.

The Russian's ears perked up, and a second later, he was knocked to the ground, snow flying up all around him as a spastic poodle was jumping all over him, licking and wiggling and barking and yipping. Viktor's mood shifted immediately, his scowls turning to laughter, and he eventually managed to sit up. Makkachin was bouncing off the proverbial walls with excitement though, giving the man only a moment of relief when he bounded off to jump at Yuri several times, and even Phichit once or twice before going back to his primary human, and knocked him right back down into the snow. The poor creature was practically vibrating with excitement, tail wagging back and forth so fast that it looked a blur, and he whined and rolled pitifully like he couldn't believe his eyes. Viktor finally managed to get his arms around the wriggly woofer, hugging him tightly, "Makkachin! I missed you!"

"Okaeri, minna-san~!"

Yuri turned his head up, and saw his mom there in the doorway first. His father was next to her, then Mari, the resort staff, Minako, Takeshi Nishigori, the triplets, and finally, sauntering up in a spa robe like he'd literally just hauled-ass out of the onsen to get to the door, Yurio.

The skater drew in a relieved breath, and turned to face them properly with a relaxed smile, "Tadaima."

The door to a cozy, albeit empty Russian house, opened and closed quietly. Footsteps echoed from the front hall as the lock was set, and the sound of fabric shifting and sliding resonated as a scarf was
pulled away. The hardwood floor was colder than it used to be, felt through thin dress-socks like it was a slab of icy stone.

Grey-green eyes looked around the empty space, recalling the handful of times he'd been there when the dwelling was still occupied. Only the built-in fixtures remained then, and a few curtains, save the subtle shadows on the walls where picture frames had once been hung.

"...This place feels like a tomb now." Mikhail commented dryly to himself, raising the blinds to let some light in where the power had been turned off months ago. Through the front windows, he could see the volcano-red car he'd left parked in the drive-way, as well as a few people across the street giving it weird looks. It was impossible to hear what they were saying from inside, but the way they stopped and pointed, giving the car a ponderous expression, made the elder Russian wonder if he'd mistakenly given the impression that Viktor had finally decided to come 'home' again. He pulled away from the glass before anyone could see him, lest they mistake him for Viktor as well, and retreated to the relative safety of the kitchen at the back of the main room.

He pulled out his phone and checked the World Clock, seeing that it was round 8:30pm in Japan at that point, and supposed the skaters had finally gotten home by then as well. Their celebrations were likely well underway, and he wondered if it would be worth it to call and see how things were going without him. He thumbed over Minako's contact info for a moment...but then decided better of it, and put his phone away again.

Instead, he pulled up the email with his flight itinerary, checking the departure time for the 427th time since leaving Sapporo.

_We decided to get to Canada as soon as possible...but Minako's going to be worn out by the time she gets to Edmonton..._

His own flight was leaving out of St. Petersburg at midnight; a hellishly long time from the meager 2:30pm it was at that moment. It would still be a 14 hour flight before landing too, and it would be near 8pm when the plane touched down after the layover. On the flip side, Minako would be getting there 2 hours later, and her flight was several hours longer, and had _two_ layovers in the midst of it all.

_At least we'll be in Banff on Wednesday morning. I don't think I could stand waiting much longer to get out there. It'll be bad enough trying to sleep Tuesday night, even after Minako gets there to keep me company._

He went back to the contact list and hovered his thumb over the woman's name-plate, making a face like he was still unsure if it was appropriate to interrupt the festivities just to say hi. It seemed fate would have something else in mind though, since a sudden and loud banging at the front door sent the phone flying from his hand as he jumped in terror, landing face-down on the hardwood floor.

"Viktooool!" Someone outside was calling, then banging again, "Viktooool! Ty sejčas doma?"

"Ego zdes' net!" Mikhail yelled back in frustration, bending down to pick up the device, careful of his still-healing back, only to realize he'd clicked the call button and it was dialing out, "Shit."

"O čem ty govoriš? My možem videt' vaš avtomobil'!"

"Uhodi požalujsta!" Mikhail yelled finally, hoping the interlopers would take the hint and disappear.

"Hey hun!" The phone said, catching the perturbed Russian off-guard, "I didn't think you'd be calling again tonight. What's up?"

"Shitshitshitshit-" Mikhail whispered between clenched teeth, pulling the phone up to his ear
nervously, "Ahhhhh hey there. I juuuuuust...thought I'd...check in?"

"Why do you sound weird?"

"Viktoooor!" A different voice called this time; it sounded like a woman, "Podojti k dveri!"

"Nyet! Ja ne Viktor!"

"...Who are you yelling at?" Minako asked nervously; her cheeks were slightly pink from the fun already. The party all around her was in full-swing, though as a family affair it was less a rambunctious, excitable event as it was an evening of storytelling and congratulations. All three skaters had been given the resort's famous pork cutlet bowl for their victories, and were sipping quietly at their half-empty drinks as the triplets were fawning over all the medals on display before them. Yuri had abstained from alcohol that night, but Viktor was still nursing a beer, and raised it up at the woman where she'd tried to duck out of sight.

"Minako-senseeeeiii...you're supposed to be drinking with meee!" He called out, waving his tall, curved glass around, one arm over Yuri's shoulders as he rocked from side the side, taking his hapless husband with him.

"I'll be right back!" She answered, "Mikhail's yelling at someone on the other end!"

"Why is Uncle Mimi yelling at anyone...?" The young Russian happily wondered, his voice slightly slurred from the buzz.

"I'm trying to find out!" The ballerina turned her attention back to the phone, "Sorry hun, did you answer that question already? I was talking to Viktor."

Mikhail blanched; he'd gone to the door since then and was staring down at the same three people that had been across the street before, "Čto ty hočeš!?"

Those three sets of eyes blinked back at him, "Vy ne Viktor."

"Èto to, čto ja skazal!"

"Kto ty?"

"Mikhail Rozovsky, dyadya Viktora."

"Da neuželi."

"Da! Prošajte!" The elder grumbled, finally turning to close the door on the nosey neighbors, and planted his back against it for good measure, "Christ these people. They see Viktor's car in the drive and suddenly they think his happy ass moved back to St. Petersburg! They thought I was him, too!"

"Calm down, hun." Minako advised, waving her free hand in a downward sweep as though he could see it, "Go to your happy place. Pleasant thoughts."

"My happy place...?" He repeated, sliding down the door until he was sitting on the floor, "My happy place is like 5000 miles away."

"I appreciate that, but it's not going to help you right now to dwell on the distance." She laughed, "Where are you right now anyway that people think you're Viktor again?"

"I went to check on his old house while I was in town. Kon couldn't take Viktor's car so I-"
"Wait, hang on, let me just put you on speaker so everyone can hear you."

"Speaker? Wait, what!? No, Minako-!"

"It's Mikhail, everyone! Say hi!!!~!" The ballerina put the phone down in the center of the main table and turned up the volume, taking her place next to Yurio again like where she'd been before.

"Hi Uncle Mikhail!" Everyone answered, save the Russian Tiger, who sat silently and stoically through it all.

The elder Russian just dropped his own phone from the sheer horror of his disbelief, feeling like he might be blue in the face from being put on the spot. He reached down for it again and pulled it back up to his ear, and pinched the bridge of his nose, "...Hi everyone."

"So how'd today go? Did you get the car thing sorted out?" Minako went on, "You were about to talk about it."

"...Uhhhhhhhhh...yyyyyyyyaaaaaaaaaaaaassssssssssssss?" He answered nervously, his voice almost a squeak at the end.

"What happened, Uncle Mimi?" Viktor mused, leaning in over the table to be heard more clearly, cheeks flushed from the alcohol, "Did he take one look at it and laugh?"

"He didn't laugh, per se..." The elder Russian answered. He was sweating bullets already, Did Viktor tell them who Kon is? Should I avoid suggesting it!? Those triplets don't miss anything that happens to Viktor, especially if it's on Instagram...I doubt they'd let something like this slip! Crap! What do I say!?"

"Well? What'd he do then?" Viktor pressed on.

"...Uhmmhm..." Mikhail reached down to anxiously toy with a corner of his coat, "...Well, he didn't take your car, for a start...I still have it... I...just ended up buying him a big truck instead. Your tiny little Audi would've been like a skateboard for him."

"Right?" Viktor laughed, "Well, I guess I should've figured as much. Will you be auctioning the car to recoup the cost? You'll probably make a profit off it, considering what some fans would probably pay to buy that thing."

"No...I had plans to send it to Japan for you, actually." The elder answered, sighing and stretching his legs out straight ahead of himself, "I drove it over to your old place, just to make sure it was still in good shape before I put it on a cargo plane. I psyched your neighbors into thinking you were moving back or something. They came and pestered me like I was you."

"Oh...!" The younger Russian seemed to think it funny, "Yeah, my neighbors back then were all really proud of me being there. Yuri and I moved out so fast though that I never really got to say goodbye. Now I kind of feel bad that they went after you! I should go back at some point just to see them all...maybe in the summer like Yuri suggested. But anyway..." He took the conversation in a B-line, "When are you coming back to Hasetsu? Tomorrow? It sounds like the stuff with Papa is done and over with."

"...I won't be going back before the Final. I'll be meeting you guys in Detroit." Mikhail answered simply, "...Some stuff came up that I need to deal with."

"Is everything okay?" Yuri asked, hearing the change in the older man's voice, "Your tone went 180 just now."
"Eh...I don't want to ruin the night with more of my crap, so..."

"We're just milling about right now, Uncle Mimi." Viktor explained, "What's going on?"

The elder's knees came back up again nervously, and he wrapped his free arm around them as though he could hide from a phone conversation somehow, "...It's...well... It's my kids, back home. I...have to go back to Canada for a bit."

"Oh." Yuri spoke for them all, glancing at his partner anxiously, "...What's wrong with them? Did something happen?"

"To them specifically? Not exactly...but sort of."

"Are they okay?"

"I'll find out Wednesday morning."

"You can tell us, Grandpa Mikhail!" The triplets suddenly interrupted, surrounding the phone on all sides.

Mikhail felt like a dead man, going completely pale at the sound of those words, "G-Grandpa...?"

"Well yeah." Lutz said, as though it was the most obvious thing, "Mom and Yuri and Uncle Viktor are all around the same age...and you're old enough to be their dad...so that would make you like our Granddad!"

Minako just burst out laughing.

"And that makes you Grandma Minako!" The girls followed-up in unison, pointing at her all together, "Since you're dating!"

The ballerina just gasped loudly and went as pale as Mikhail had, and dropped to her side between the tables. Makkachin came up quickly and sniffed her hand, then licked her face and barked once in an effort to make her rise from the dead again. Minako just twitched where she was, "G-Grandma...Minako... My life is finished... This is it. I've entered into the final stage of existence and then it's all over. I'll never be young again."

Everyone else just quietly laughed behind their hands at the pair's expense, even though both of them were in the midst of a sudden midlife crisis from the whole thing. Everyone else...except Viktor and Yuri, anyway.

"Uncle Mimi...what's going on with your kids?" Viktor asked pointedly, the whole thing having suddenly been a dry buzz-kill, "Why do you have to go back to Alberta suddenly? Is it about the call you made yesterday?"

Mikhail picked himself up from the floor where he, too, had dropped after hearing the Grandma reference. He sighed and nodded to the empty house, "...My ex-wife passed away. My kids were trying to go it alone without telling me. I found out when I called my partner here at the new St. Petersburg worksite, and now I have to go back to Banff to sort those three out. Pick up the pieces and figure out what to do with them."

The room was quiet after that, everyone staring at Minako's phone like they weren't sure how to answer.

Yuri reached under the short table and set his hand on his husband's thigh to reassure him.
Viktor reached down as well and set his hand on top of it in turn, returning his attention to the phone, "I'm sorry that happened. I don't really know much about that situation, but..."

"It's fine. We'd been separated for 8 years already. I barely knew her anymore." Mikhail answered nervously, trying to get off the floor at that point and rise back up to his feet. He dusted himself off once he was upright, and sighed, "It is what it is."

Yuri's eye twitched at the mention of the timeline, "...Eight years ago...that's when..."

"...When Sophia threw me out." Viktor finished.

"...You were thrown out by someone!?!" The triplets were aghast, "Who would throw YOU out!?"

"Oh. Well." Mikhail cleared his throat, "That's kind of eerie."

"I cared too much for someone and sacrificed a lot to make her happy, and in the end..." Viktor explained briefly, "...One bad thing happened and she decided to cut me out of her life like a c-" He stopped suddenly, looking a bit guilty, "...Um..."

"...Like a cancer." Mikhail finished that time.

"Uncle Mimi, I didn't-"

"Don't worry about it." He shrugged, stepping back into the kitchen to lean against the counter-side of the island. He huffed a quiet laugh to himself, "What time of year was it?"

"What time of year?!" Viktor echoed in confusion, but thought back, "...Right on the edge of fall and winter."

"Okay, that is just creepy." Mikhail chortled, "Same here."

"No way."

"Yes way."

"Wow~!" Viktor gave an uncomfortable smile, "Maybe I should call Sophia and make sure she hasn't keeled over suddenly, too..."

"Don't you even dare." Yuri gave him a serious look.

"Just kidding! I promise!" Viktor defended awkwardly, then reaching over to hug the man tightly, stroking his hair adoringly, "I would never!"

"Mmhh..."

"Yuiriii~!" Viktor lamented, "I love youuuuu~!"

Yurio just rolled his eyes at them, even as the rest of the group found the whole display endearing, especially after Yuri had smiled again, letting himself accept that it was all a tease.

"I swear, one of these days, you're going to have to sit through an entire weekend of being jealous over me." Yuri explained, "Just so you can know what it felt like for me the whole weekend in Bordeaux."

"Nooo~!" Viktor whined, "I couldn't take it! You saw how I reacted just a couple hours ago!"
"Why don't you tell them the rest of the story, old man?" Yurio suddenly said; his first words of the whole evening.

All the smiles faded at the serious tone the teen gave, but their eyes went from him down to the phone on the table top again.

"The rest of the story?" Mikhail repeated, "What do you mean? I hardly want to get into all the annoying details of the downfall of my marriage. That's a stupid tale that even I don't want to hear."

"Not that, idiot." Yurio said bitterly, "About how you plan to take your kids to Detroit."

"...Eh?" Yuri blinked.

"...What?" Viktor added.

Minako just sat uncomfortably.

"Oh." The elder Russian coughed to clear his throat again, "It was an idea. I wasn't going to have them go to the Final or anything. They're all old enough to handle themselves. I was going to cut them loose on the fun parts of the city. You'd never even know they're there."

"...When were you planning on telling us?" Viktor asked stiffly, remembering all too clearly the first and last time they'd spoken to his cousins.

"Tomorrow." The older man answered simply, "Though I told Minako she could tell you tonight if you happened to ask about me."

The ballerina looked and felt horribly guilty, but she kept quiet, looking over briefly at Hiroko where she was coming into the room with a tray to start clearing the tables. The normally-cheerful woman blinked back at her, and paused where she stood, quietly wondering what had happened.

"I know it's a contentious issue since my son was a little shit in Calgary, but I-"

"It's fine." Viktor cut him off, "Bring them."

"...Huh?" Everyone replied, Mikhail included.

"I have this strange feeling we'll be seeing a lot more of them soon either way." The young Russian went on, resigned to the idea already. He glanced aside as Yurio pushed to stand and left the room without another word. A brief look over at Yuri, and the younger skater shrugged in confusion, giving his leg another gentle squeeze before rising up to go after the teen. Viktor watched him go, and then turned his attention back to the phone, "Your girls seemed fine, but your son needs to learn some things. Maybe the experience over the last 2 weeks has humbled him. ...We can handle it. Bring them."
Yuri had lost sight of the teen almost as soon as he'd left the common area, but there were only so many places to hide in the resort, so finding him again wouldn't take too long, assuming Yurio didn't leave entirely. The last place he thought to look though was back in the onsen, since the teen had practically just come from there when everyone had arrived.

"...Yuri?" He called, stepping through the empty shower room, seeing nothing. Finally though, he pushed the last door open that lead onto the hot-springs deck, and found the Russian Tiger there, sitting so low in the steaming water that only the top of his head, his small folded towel, and the bun he'd woven his hair into to keep it dry, could be seen past the rim of the walkway.

Cherry-hazel eyes blinked down at the blond knot, but the teen made no motion to acknowledge the figure behind him. It was too late by then to back off and take the necessary measures to be allowed to sit in the onsen with him, so Yuri did the only other thing he could think of; he just sat cross-legged on the edge of the spring and waited quietly for a moment before speaking, looking up into the clear winter night.

"Those were the first words you've said all night." He pointed out, hardly needing to speak above a whisper to be heard over the trickle of water, "I thought it was kinda weird that you were being so quiet. You sounded a bit upset when you did speak, though."

"I'm not upset." The teen argued, "I was just tired of it being a damn secret."

"...It wasn't really a secret. They just wanted to give us a break before saying something that might spoil the mood."

"Isn't it the definition of a secret that people knowingly withhold information from others?" Green eyes turned slightly, glaring past a few strands of golden hair, "Isn't that what they were doing?"

"I don't hold it against them for wanting to wait for a better time to bring it up. We all literally just got home. Mikhail knew it would sound bad t-"

"Home?" Yurio echoed, then scoffed, "Maybe for you."

It was a confusing response, and Yuri wasn't sure how to answer to it other than in the most obvious way, "...Well, yeah, I grew up here. But I meant Viktor, too."

The Russian Tiger just grumbled and sulked.

"Of all the people who were there, Viktor and I had the worst reactions to Mikhail's. I don't doubt that him and Minako-sensei just wanted to avoid a problem by waiting until tomorrow to tell us about what was going on." The older skater explained, "The way you called him on it though... Were they even aware that you knew what was happening?"

Yurio waited a moment, but then shook his head, "No... I overheard them talking in the hotel when we were getting ready to leave."

"Would it have made so much of a difference to let them wait until they were ready to tell the rest of us?" Yuri wondered, pausing to let it settle before going on again, "Forcing them to cop to it in front of everyone like that...it's like you wanted to get Mikhail in trouble. After everything that happened
in Sapporo, why would you want to do that to him? He really felt like he'd messed up so badly by bringing Viktor's father along that people would send him away. In his mind, he probably thinks he narrowly avoided disaster. I can only imagine the look on his face when he heard you calling him out on what was going to be delaying him. Even Minako-sensei looked like she'd given up the ghost for a minute, and it wasn't even her problem."

The teen grumbled again, sinking beneath the water to just above his nose. He stared daggers at the other side of the spring, but then mentally sighed and pushed to rise out of the spring entirely, leaning back against the edge of the deck, water pouring off of his pale frame, skin steaming in the cool winter air, "I don't want his kids around." He admitted scornfully, "I thought if you knew about his plans before he got to Canada, maybe you'd be able to convince him not to bring them. Having him on the phone in front of everyone...it felt like the opportunity to stop everything had been handed to me on a silver platter. I couldn't help myself."

"...Why don't you want his kids around?"

"They're annoying." He answered hotly, staring at the ripples in the water. "You barely know them."

Yurio spun around at that, the towel slipping to the side of his head as he half-crawled back onto the deck, sticking a wet finger into the older figure's face, "Says the guy who'd just met them and already felt like it was a bad idea that they were around! I thought you were on my side!"

Yuri fell back onto his elbows in surprise, but pushed up onto his hands as the teen pulled away again. "You said it yourself..." The Tiger went on.

"...You made me...re-realize why Viktor...is always so...apprehensive about meeting his relatives."

His whispers were hard to hear with the traffic nearby, but they listened closely, "...So n-now I regret...ever trying to convin...convince him to come here. ...It s-seems like...no matter what, Viktor's alw-always right. Even when he's...wrong...he's still...right..."

"That was only Sergio." Yuri explained, trying to sit normally again, "And I am on your side!"

The teen refused to acknowledge it, simply sliding his leg back into the water and turning around. "I don't really want them around either, but Viktor said to bring them, so what can I do?"

"Tell him no! He listens to you!" Green irises were staring back again angrily.

"They're his family." Yuri protested, "He just reconciled with his own father, a man he hated so much that he did 8 quads in a single show just to get it out of his system, and it quite literally crippled him by the next morning. What would it say about him if he can forgive a man that nearly blinded him on two separate occasions, but wouldn't be willing to deal with a kid who had an attitude problem one time?"

"I thought we were his family."

"We're the family he made. They're the family he was born into."
"You don't see me trying so hard to make nice with the family I was born into."

Brown eyes got a little wide at that, "...If your parents took interest in you, wouldn't you want to have them around?"

"No!" Yurio flipped around again, this time completely, hands slapping down on the deck just in front of the stunned man's crossed legs, "I'd tell them to screw off like they always have! They've been so self-absorbed for so long that I wouldn't believe it for a second if they suddenly turned up to ask what I was doing! I'd think they were just secretly broke and looking for hand-outs!"

"...That's...bleak..." Yuri stammered, still aghast at the outburst.

"My grandpa was the only one who ever gave a damn about me! Even though I was the one feeding my family back then, he was the only one who even bothered to come to my practices! The rest of them are a bunch of ungrateful pieces of shit who only think about themselves!" The teen went on, his hands curling into fists as he sank back down into the water, arms folding in front of himself as he stared angrily at his own skin, "...Even if they apologized...even if they came crawling to my feet, begging for forgiveness...I'd never let them have the satisfaction."

"...It takes a lot of courage to forgive someone for the wrongs they've done." Yuri tacitly agreed, "But it's just as important to know when someone is being sincere in their apologies. It's not like Viktor just heard the words and immediately forgot all the bad that happened. Konstantin had to prove he meant it."

"And now Viktor's going overboard with wanting everyone he shares DNA with to come out of the woodwork."

"...They're Mikhail's kids. They're not just random people who popped up out of nowhere. That...would kind of actually be Mikhail himself, technically. Gone for 25 years and then just shows up again after a tragedy." Yuri shrugged, "But really...you've got a lot invested in this... If all you're worried about is them being annoying th-

"...What happens to me when they're here?"

The older skater's brow furrowed in confusion, "...What do you mean?"

"...Ever since you and Viktor convinced him to be my sponsor last year...Mikhail's always been around." The Tiger explained bitterly, staring scornfully at the stone deck just under his elbows, "At first, it was just his way of making sure I didn't fuck up. Keeping me on the straight and narrow so I wouldn't just be a waste of his time and money. But I started to get used to him hanging out all the time. At the rink, taking me places, even bringing me with him when he came back here to see Okukawa or help you move into your new house." He unfolded his arms slowly, holding up his right hand where the obvious white scar over his middle knuckle was laid bare, "...I punched a tile wall so hard back at Worlds that I gave myself this. I was so angry back then...at you, at Viktor, at everyone and everything. But Mikhail wouldn't stand for it. He held his ground and put me in my place...this guy who barely knew me, who moved mountains for me simply because you guys asked him to. He never even told anyone about the surgery he paid for to fix my hand after we got back..."

"...Surgery...to fix your hand?" Yuri repeated, not sure he'd even heard it right.

The teen nodded, still keeping his eyes down, "I busted a tendon over my knuckle. I couldn't even stick my finger out normally... I never told anyone because I was so miserable and dependant on everyone back then...but then he dared me to flip him off, and I couldn't. He caught me in a moment of weakness, and I broke down and asked him to help fix it... He had my stupid ass in a surgeon's
"...Yuri..."

"What happens to me when his real kids are around all the time...?"

The older figure was stunned at the question.

...He always carried himself like he was too cool for Mikhail... Yuri thought, using his hands to shuffle forward on the deck until he was directly in front of the teen. Acting like one of those people who wouldn't be caught dead admitting they were travelling with someone, but rather, just happened to be going in the same direction. It's hard to imagine that they had actually gotten that close, considering how Yurio always made it seem like they were barely acquaintances when anyone else was around. He reached for the fallen towel and set it over his shoulder to keep it dry, and then lightly set his arms around the teen's head.

"...Is he just going to ditch me like he ditched Viktor...?"

"He wouldn't do that." Yuri said, hoped, "What happened back then was bigger than just him."

"It's just a different road to the same place." The blonde said quietly, cringing a little where the older figure held onto him, "In the end...he's just abandoning one family for another. Picking between which he likes better, as though pulling us off a shelf."

"...Give him a little more credit than that." Yuri pleaded, pulling up again, though keeping his hands on the teen's shoulders, "I think it'd break his heart to hear you talking like this."

Yurio wouldn't look up, keeping his eyes down to avoid the red in them being noticed.

"...Yuri." Viktor's voice came, just after the sound of the door opening behind them.

Brown eyes lifted and looked back, but then returned to the distressed teen in front of him, though Yurio was doing his best to shake it off in the presence of his former rink-mate, like nothing at all had happened. Yuri spoke quietly, "It's time for me to go home for the night. Try not to get yourself so worked up over this. Mikhail's coming to Detroit to watch the Final. If being there for you didn't matter to him, then he'd just stay in Canada and not even consider the rest."

"...He's only going because of Viktor and Okukawa...not for me..." Yurio said with a tone of finality, and turned away from the ledge to face the open water again.

The older skater was entirely unsure what to say to that, his brow crinkled with worry. He gave out a pained, quiet sigh, and pushed to stand up again, pulling the towel off his shoulder and folding it crisply before bending down to set it back on the young Russian's head, "Oyasumi, Yuri."

Viktor held his arm out to help usher his partner back through the bath house, looking from the younger skater's worried expression back to the Tiger sitting in the water. Unsure what had happened, he waited a moment in silence, but then nodded quietly, "Prijatnyh, Yuri."
When they got back inside, Minako was already getting her winter jacket and scarf back on. She glanced over at them as the group spotted movement from their end of the hall, but then turned back to Mari, "Yeah, my flight leaves in 3 hours. I'm heading out." She explained, "I'm giving my old ticket to Yura so he can fly with you in my place."

Mari just seemed ecstatic at the idea, "I'm going...to travel with Yurio!? ALONE!?" She was fangirling already. No one was quite sure where she'd kept her cheering-fans with the teen's image and name printed on them, but she had them in her hands suddenly like they'd been sewn to her palms.

"Calm yourself." The ballerina reached out and grabbed the woman's shoulders, giving her a firm but understanding smile, "He's barely more than half your age. You're going to be responsible for him. Make sure he gets to Detroit, okay? He won't be able to put on a show if you forget to get him on the plane."

"It'll be fine!" She insisted, "I can handle it!"

Minako smiled nervously, but accepted it. She turned her attention over to where the two older skaters were getting their own coats and boots on, "You guys want a ride?" She asked, holding her keys out.

"...Haven't you had too much to drink already?" Yuri grimaced, smiling anxiously at her as he buttoned the front of his jacket and swung a scarf over his shoulders.

The keys were suddenly airborne, and Viktor had to work frantically to catch them securely so he wouldn't drop them. He looked at them with a confused expression on his face, but turned slate eyes back at her, "...You want me to drive your car?"

"I was going to have a taxi pick me up to take me to the train station anyway...so, you can use it for the rest of the week if you want. Just drop me off on your way home." She started moving towards the sliding doors, and waved back to the rest of the Katsuki and Nishigori clans, "Thanks for dinner, Hiroko. See you guys after the Final."

"Oyasumi, Minako-senpai!" The slightly-younger woman waved, "Good luck in Canada!"

"Domo~."

"Night mom, dad." Yuri said, stepping up after the ballerina had gone out, "We'll be by tomorrow sometime in the afternoon, probably."

Hiroko reached forward to straighten out her son's scarf, then moved her hands up to cup around Yuri's cheeks, and she smiled, "Ah...we're both so proud of you. I was worried about you during your China event, but you really pulled through."

His cheeks flushed a bit, but he managed a smile and nodded, "Thanks. ...Oh, please make sure Yurio doesn't cook all night. He went back into the onsen."

"I'll send your father after him if he doesn't come out after you guys go. Your other friend fell asleep in the common room so we'll get him to bed as well." The short woman answered, turning then to Viktor and throwing her arms up excitedly, "Go easy on my baby at the Final!"

"We aren't even leaving yet!" He laughed, reaching his comparatively long and lanky arms around her as she stepped towards him.

"I have to start asking early so maybe you'll consider it!"
Yuri just smiled pensively, and snuck out the sliding door with Makkachin, stepping into the snow and cold evening air. He turned back briefly as he heard his husband following after, and waved at the sleepy Nishigoris before stepping off to where Minako had parked her car around the corner. He quickly felt the Russian's arm come around him, and he returned the gesture, even though the walk wasn't that far.

With Makkachin jumping into the back seat with the ballerina, and the two skaters piling into the front, the older boxy car was on and moving down the snowy Hasetsu streets. Yuri reached across and set his palm against Viktor's thigh, for a moment feeling like they were back in St. Petersburg again, and he slowly rubbed his thumb back and forth like he always used to when they drove those Russian roads.

Minako's apartment was a quick drive, even if it was a much longer walk, and they waited in the car while the woman ran upstairs to grab her things. They pulled up to Hasetsu Station not long later, and they gave their goodbyes and well wishes as she stepped out.

"Don't crash it while I'm gone!" She hollered, waving back at them from the sidewalk, the big sea-urchin-eating-squid statue just a ways behind her, "I'll know!"

"No you won't!" Viktor called back, "I'm a great driver!"

"Famous last words." The woman said quietly to herself, smiling nervously.

"Let us know how things go in Banff before you head to the US, okay?" Yuri asked pensively, "I don't want a repeat of what happened at Skate Canada."

"I'll put that boy on a short leash myself if I have to. I'll bypass putting the fear of God in him and instill the fear of me instead." She explained confidently, "Whatever happens, those three will be on their best behavior if you run into them."

They waved again and the car pulled back out onto the road, making the 10 minute trek to the other side of the Ice Castle towards home. Makkachin panted quietly in the back seat, watching the lights flicker by as they passed, whimpering and fidgeting with excitement as he recognized where they were going.

"...Hasetsu looked just like this when we were here last." Yuri commented, looking out the window as well, "...In a weird way, it almost feels like we never left."

"How am I going to account for all these grey hairs if we were here the whole time?" Viktor mused, smiling mischievously, though tired, "I must've aged a hundred years over these last few weeks."

"...Me too." The younger figure agreed with an exhausted sigh.

Makkachin was out the door in a hurry when they finally pulled up to their own house, setting fresh paw-prints into the unshoveled snow from the last few days. Unlocking the door, the air coming from inside was warm, and the big brown flufferbutt quickly ran in, claws clacking across the hardwood floor.

"Are you staying up?" Yuri wondered quietly, setting his carry-bag on the counter in the kitchen before returning to put away his winter gear.

"For a little bit. I want to mull some wine first."

"...That'll take a while, won't it? You've been up for hours doing that before."
"Nah, not this time...just the quick stuff. I'll be done in 30 minutes."

"I might be passed out by the time you come upstairs." Yuri commented, trying not to yawn, though failing.

The Russian came up quietly behind him, hands going under the man's arms and loosely around his sides, clasping in front as he nosed at his partner's ear, "Don't wait on me. If you're tired, go to sleep."

The younger figure stayed quiet a little while, just letting himself enjoy the moment. Eventually though, he turned around in that embrace and set his own hands over his husband's shoulders, looking into those azure eyes for a few seconds before leaning forward to set his forehead against the side of the man's neck. He drew in a deep breath and exhaled slowly, feeling those warm arms around him as though for the first time all over again, "...I can't believe we survived all this..."

"...It was an unforgiving 6 weeks. No doubt about it."

"We haven't even been married a single year yet and it feels like it's been 50."

"Right...?"

They both heaved a sigh where they stood, hugging a little tighter before parting a tiny bit. Yuri raised his left hand up to gently set it against his partner's cheek, stroking his thumb lightly as he looked back into those slate eyes, "...I know I don't say it enough...but I do love you."

"I don't think you'd have stayed married to me this long if you didn't." Viktor teased, "Not after everything I've put you through. A crazy long-lost uncle, a fun-hating bear of a father, a Rage Skate..."

"...Getting drunk and naked on top of a hotel and yelling off the rooftop that you'll overcome the Short Program..."

"Taking pity on an old flame and agreeing to an interview that I didn't need to do..."

"Coming home with a bloodied eye..."

"...And worst of all..." Viktor said, quieter than before, sliding both of his hands up from around his husband's waist to cup them gently on each side of his face, "...Taking my ring off, even if only for safe keeping."

Yuri felt a twinge in his chest to be reminded of it, and he reached his own hands back to set them over where the Russian's were, curling his fingers around their sides to hold them. He closed his eyes as he felt silver bangs coming closer, and then skin against his forehead, "Of all the things that've happened, I think that... Yeah...that was probably the worst..."

"I didn't want to take any chances." Viktor explained quietly, "Gold is just gold, but this ring can never be replaced. It's the ring you gave me, and I intend to go to my grave with it."

"You're going to make me cry again." Yuri huffed, trying to avoid doing just that, though feeling it creeping up his throat and behind his eyes, "I don't want to go to bed in tears on our first night back home."

"You should go before I get really sappy then." The Russian mused, kissing his husband's forehead before moving down to do the same to his lips, "Ja tebja ljublju."
"Aishiteru mo."

Viktor smiled to hear it, kissing the man one more time before letting him go, "Thirty minutes...and then, the most epic cuddle-fest ever. I'm not even going to apologize if I wake you up."

"...Oh, if that's what's happening, I'll be upset if you don't." Yuri commented back, reaching for his bag again as he passed the edge of the kitchen on his way to the stairs, "I'll be waiting."
It felt like Heaven to be able to drop face-first into sheets that smelled familiar for once. All the lights in the bedroom were off; in the dark, only the pale glow of the moon and the hall-light creeping through the partly-open door gave evidence to the furniture within.

Yuri had thrown himself across the whole length of the King-size bed, facing towards the big window with not but boxers on and a towel over his damp hair, the curtain drawn only on the left side. For a while, he just looked out into the sky, seeing the small clouds way out on the horizon over the water. Eventually though, he grabbed his phone from its spot on the night-stand just next to him, and pulled up a number. With the call going out, he set the device to Speaker and listened quietly to the dial-tone, and the click that eventually followed.

"Hey Yuri."

"Hey Uncle Mikhail." He answered, going back to crossing his arms over one another loosely and resting his chin in the center, "You busy?"

"Just chasing Vivi's neighbors off. Bunch of nosey shits started circling his car like vultures." The Russian answered, peeking through the drawn blinds like they might still be out there, "I don't think they like me."

Yuri just shook his head and laughed quietly, "I only met them a few times while mowing the front lawn or walking Makkachin. Language barrier and all. They seemed okay."

"Yeah..." Mikhail let the shades go, "So...we just spoke a little while ago. Did Vivi change his mind?"

"Huh?" The skater blinked and looked at the phone where it had been left on the blanket next to him, "Oh. No, I'm not calling about Viktor at all. It's about Yurio."

"Uh oh. Am I fired?"

"Strictly speaking, no. He thinks you're going to quit though."

The elder was stunned into silence, pulling the phone out and looking at the face-plate just to be sure he was actually on a call and not imagining it, then pulling it back again, "...He thinks what? Why would I quit? The season's barely started, and I told him last year that I'd be on for a while."

"...I don't necessarily mean just as his sponsor." Yuri explained, rolling onto his side and crossing his arms over his chest instead, "He's got it in his head that you don't care one way or another about him. That you're only hanging around still because of Viktor and Minako-sensei. He's worried that you're going to drop him off somewhere and never look back, especially since you're bringing your kids over."

"Funny that."

"Eh?" Yuri felt a pit in his gut, and turned back over onto his stomach to look at the phone like it was the man himself, "...What's that supposed to mean?"

Mikhail shrugged, "Lately, Yura's been acting like he's too good for me. I was starting to think he
was getting notions of not needing me anymore, even though I still pay all his bills. He's been all passive aggressive, especially this past weekend. I thought maybe he just let his spot in the GP Final get to his head."

"...He gets that way when he feels threatened." Yuri explained, "Or when he's being protective. Given the way things were in Sapporo, and how he kept showing up to translate for me, it was probably the latter."

"What brings all this up?"

The skater paused for a moment, trying to find the right words, "After he forced you to cop to your plans, Yurio wandered off. I went after him while you finished talking to Viktor." He explained, looking from the blanket beneath him, to the sky through the window again, "He thought that if he could get you in trouble for planning to bring your kids to Detroit, that maybe I'd do something to stop it."

"I'm not going to make him hang out with them again, if that's what he's worried about."

"It's a side-concern. His bigger issue is that he's worried you're going to forget he exists while you focus on fixing their situation, and by the sounds of it, their situation is about to become your new permanent situation."

"...Oh." The elder paused at that, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose, "I don't know what to say about that. They're my kids. I can't just leave them alone to fend for themselves because Yura feels threatened. I'm responsible for them, now more than ever."

"I know." Yuri lowered his head again, turning it towards the phone, "I'm hardly suggesting that you do anything unreasonable or unfair. This is just the way things are now and he's going to have to get used to that. I just thought you should know...you're the closest thing to a real dad he's ever had. We all may joke about Viktor and I being his SkateDads...but that's just for fun."

"...What'd I do?" That very skater's voice echoed, coming up around the stairwell banister, carrying two big mugs of the mulled wine he'd been working on, "...Heard my name as I was coming up."

Yuri tilted his head back to see the man coming, "We're talking about our SkateSon."

"Ah." The younger Russian nodded, coming into the room and handing off the second mug as he came around the foot of the bed. He looked down on the phone face-plate to check the caller-ID, "Hi again, Mimi."

"Heyo."

The smell of cinnamon and orange peel gently filled the air, and Viktor took a quick sip of his drink before sitting on the end of the bed, and leaning over to rest his side and arm over the back of Yuri's legs, using the inward curve of the man's back as something of a cup-holder.

Yuri sipped quietly at the hot liquid as well, turning as well as he could to look at his partner as he explained the situation, "I called Mikhail because of the stuff Yurio told me before we came home."

"...Yeah, I was wondering when it would come up." Viktor nodded, "He was weird all night. I figured he'd told you what was wrong just before I found you."

"Mh." The younger skater confirmed, "Other than the obvious fact that he's not a huge fan of the younger members of the Rozovsky clan, Yurio is worried that Mikhail's storied history of leaving people behind, and his own history of being left behind, will create the perfect storm."
The silver figure held the wine mug to his lip, pausing there for a moment, imagining the uncomfortable silence eating away at his Uncle on the other end of the line. "...Maybe you could do something nice for him."

"...I already do a lot of things for him..." Mikhail sighed, "What else can I do? He's worrying about the outcome of something that I haven't even thought all the way through yet."

"Were you taking him into consideration at this point?" Viktor wondered, setting the mug down again, but on the blanket in front of himself instead, "I mean, what have you thought about so far?"

The elder leaned against a nearby wall, "Bringing my kids to live in Japan, which they'd all hate, but would probably make Minako happiest. Bringing them to live in Russia where I'm already established, which they'd hate more because basically no one there speaks English, and that would probably go over like a lead balloon with Minako, too. Making the kids move to my house in Edmonton, because I refuse to move into the house my ex-wife died in, which would probably get mixed reviews from everyone. Buying a house somewhere in Banff, which would make the kids happiest but me the least happy. Et cetera..."

"...None of those options mentions Yurio." Viktor pointed out.

"Well, the Russian option put a ball in his court, but he'd be the only one even slightly happy about it. Moving my small brood to Moscow or St. Petersburg would feel like an invasion to him though, in all likelihood."

"...Yeah, probably."

"What does Minako-sensei think?" Yuri wondered, looking at his reflection in the steaming red wine just under his face, "She's leaving in the early morning to catch a flight to meet you in Canada, but that's all we know."

"She gave me Hell for thinking I would try to deal with this on my own." Mikhail answered anxiously, "So, knowing that, I have to worry about how she'll feel about whatever I do decide to do, too. She has deep roots out there in Hasetsu, so I'm leaning heavily towards her preferences...but that'd just bring up the potential conflicts with everyone that already lives there, on top of the fact that my kids would start digging a shallow grave for me as soon as we got there."

"...Someone's going to lose big-time no matter what you decide." Yuri decided, taking the mantle of Captain Obvious for the sake of saying it, "And we still haven't figured out how to make Yurio feel better about the whole thing."

"He's been playing tag-along for the last few weeks, constantly filling in the gaps of previously-made plans that had nothing to do with him." Mikhail explained, "And Minako has probably already told him that he's taking her ticket with your sister to get to Detroit. Being passed around like that probably hasn't helped his ego."

Viktor shook his head, "Only getting to go places because someone else's plans fell through, and now knowing it's going to get ten times more complicated..." He huffed quietly and sighed, taking another sip of his drink, "It's no wonder he's upset. He's literally come in second place with everything lately; skating, plane tickets, hotel rooms...now this. There's basically no one who's put him first in any of it."

"Mmhhhh..." Yuri grumbled, shoulders sagging a little, "...Well..."

"...Well?" The younger Russian echoed, looking at him a bit more seriously.
The skater turned his head again, but then twisted to lay on his side, his legs turning under where Viktor had been leaning over them, "...Back before the Hot-Springs on Ice Exhibition...Yurio made the claim that you should go back to Russia and be his coach."

"I remember. ...But what are you suggesting?" Blue eyes narrowed a bit in nervous suspicion.

"...What...if we had him move to Hasetsu? You can be his coach like he wanted, and he could help out at Yu-Topia to earn his keep. He can stay in my old room. We'll take the whole thing out of Mikhail's hands and deal with it ourselves."

"That isn't going to fix his daddy issues." Viktor said flatly, hearing his uncle starting into a coughing fit on the other end of the line, "Sorry, Mimi."

Yuri looked down again, feeling a bit dumb for having suggested it at all.

The Russian could sense it, and quickly drained the last of the hot wine from his mug before reaching over the bed to put it on the night-stand. When he moved back, he curled up slightly behind his husband instead, legs slightly woven together as he reached a pale hand for the man's side and pulled him over onto his back, and settled that same hand onto Yuri's SkaterTum. He leaned forward, pivoting on his elbow, and lightly kissed the younger figure's forehead, "What I meant was...Uncle Mimi has, to some extent, become the father figure Yurio has needed for practically his whole life. Nothing we do will change that. We're his friends and competition; family in our own way, but not that way. The idea of having to share Mimi with people he barely knows and hardly likes it a big threat to him, and yet he clearly knows he has no real business openly complaining about it because those people are Mimi's actual kids, not random strangers coming to usurp him."

"...So...whatever happens, it's on me to figure out how to make everyone happy..." Mikhail said, finishing the thought, "Yuri...did he give you any ideas on what I could do that he'd even want?"

He shook his head, "Not really. He was mostly worried about how the Final will go with your kids being around. He didn't mention anything about what would happen after."

"...Maybe you could call him." Viktor suggested, continuing his idle stroke across his husband's bare skin, "You don't even have to make it seem like it's because any of us talked."

"Yeah...he wouldn't have to know I called you at all. Make it seem like you just wanted to find out what was up with him after his outburst during your call with Minako-sensei."

"I already tried, for that exact reason." Mikhail sighed, "He wouldn't pick up."

"He might've still been in the onsen at that point. He was still sitting in it when Viktor and I left." Yuri suggested, one leg unconsciously slipping up from where it was perched over the Russian's upturned hip, settling into the curve of the man's waist instead, "Try calling again."

Slate eyes turned to where that pale limb moved, then back again to see where the younger figure's cheeks were starting to get pink. He smiled quietly to himself, hand still gently sliding back and forth, no change in its path, "I've known Yurio for a pretty long time. He can wear you down by being difficult and confrontational." Viktor explained, "Heck, the very first thing he said to me when we first met was, 'Don't confuse me for one of these other idiots. I don't care that you're famous. I'll be better than you one day.' Then he pretended I didn't exist for nearly a month. You know, just to show me who was boss." He laughed.

"Really?" The younger skater wondered, looking back at him, not noticing how his own breathing was getting heavier, "How old was he back then?"
"Twelve or something." The Russian answered, leaning slightly over the man and sliding that hand further up his chest as he went, giving that 'tell me about yourself' smile as he inched in closer to look into those brown eyes, "He'd gone to one of Yakov's summer ballet-and-skating camps and was later picked to be part of the official Russian Team, so he was in St. Petersburg taking a tour, and I happened to be at the rink at the time. I tried to say hi to him, since Yakov said he'd be on the Junior team and would be training with us by the next week." His fingers glided over star-lit skin, pausing just under Yuri's chin before going back down to his core again, "He just swatted my hand away and stood there all indignantly. He came to us as the Russian Tiger...but that day, he became the Russian Punk."

"So he's been an angry little bean for a really long time." Mikhail commented, oblivious to everything else going on at the other end of the call. He put a finger on his chin, "He wouldn't believe me if I just told him I wasn't going to just dump him somewhere. Ahhhh...this is frustrating...I have to wait until I get to Detroit to fix this..."

"Call him anyway." Yuri suggested; a hand slid up his ribs, moving up under his arms, and he instinctively raised both of them up, letting them dangle off the edge of the bed. He couldn't help but close his eyes, fully aware at that point what his husband was trying to do to him, "...I'm sure he'd appreciate it, even if you don't talk about much."

"Maybe... If he'd answer my damn calls..."

"Text him so he knows you're not mad at him. Then he'll pick up." The young skater pointed out, trying not to give himself away as his partner pressed himself against the side of his chest, hair teasing at his skin where Viktor had gone to nibble on his neck and earlobe, hand continuing to paw at his abdomen.

"...You really think it'll be that easy?"

The younger Russian pulled back at that point, sliding his free hand down from his partner's tummy to the leg that had curled over his waist, teasing a few fingers along his skin as he moved it up to settle just above the inside of his knee, "Uncle Mimi...Yurio craves affirmation. He wants someone to be proud of him. He just puts up walls and plays hard-to-get because he's terrified he'll find out that no one actually is."

"...I am proud of him. He's just been a bit of a shit lately and won't let me in long enough for me to tell him." Mikhail lamented, "You know, he called me a little idiot when he brought me to meet with Yakov? Then he shrugged at me and said he wouldn't be surprised if I was gone by the end of NHK, with a tone like it didn't matter to him. That was way before the thing with my kids even came up!"

"Text him. Call him. Do something nice for him when you see him in Detroit." Viktor said simply, finally sliding that hand down his husband's inner thigh, fingers creeping into the loose folds of fabric around the man's hips, "For now though, we have to go~."

"Eh? Just like that?" Mikhail was a bit surprised.

"I'm on the verge of getting Yuri to make some very inappropriate noises." The younger Russian mused, "Those are for my ears only."

"...Oh." The elder deadpanned the empty room ahead of him, smiling nervously, "...I swear, Vivi...if it were darker here, I think I'd be able to see a dim glow on the horizon where you'd just made his face go bright red."

Indeed, the hapless man was practically illuminated from embarrassment, especially as he felt the
Russian's tongue trail up the side of his chest, the fingers that had snuck into his boxers through the leg-hole getting precariously close to tender flesh, "...V-Viktor...!" He gasped helplessly.

"Aright aright, I'm going. Talk to you kids later." Mikhail said, flustered as he clicked the call-exit button on his phone's touch-screen. His own face was slightly pink for having been exposed to even that little amount of their foreplay, but he shook his head and drew in a breath, thinking then about his nephew's last bit of advice, putting a finger on his chin in thought, "...Do something nice for Yura... What would he even want though?"

It took a moment, but when the idea hit him, it hit like a brick, and he suddenly went rushing out of Viktor's old house. He paused only long enough to lock the place up again, but quickly went over to his nephew's Audi and hopped in, turning his phone into a temporary wifi hotspot so he could use his tablet online.

*I wonder how big those supposedly life-size tiger plush toys can get...?*
Yuri had his hands over his face, hiding behind them even as Viktor reached across to gather up his phone from the corner of the bed. He could feel the cool plastic case against his skin as the Russian looked on to confirm that the call was done, and they wouldn't be putting an unintended show on for the man's uncle. Still, Yuri could feel his heart pounding away, and lifted his head to peek through his fingers and see how the phone shook slightly with every embarrassed thump. At least, until Viktor took the device away again and twisted over to set it back on the nightstand where the charger crept up from the wall.

"Now," The Russian's soft voice purred from above, his hand coming back to settle on Yuri's chest again, inching towards the man's side and brushing deliberately over a sensitive pink nub as it went, "I believe we have some unfinished business from earlier this afternoon to deal with."

A single brown eye looked between the fingers that still covered them, having followed the man's movements, but then settled on the single slate eye glancing back down on him from behind silver bangs, "...Unfinished business?" Yuri echoed briefly, then closing that eye and letting his head fall back to the blanket it had been hovering over, "...Thatwassoembarrassing! Mikhailheardmemoaning!" He whined, mostly to himself.

Viktor huffed a quiet laugh, leaning his face down to nose at the back of the younger figure's hands, "Yes...unfinished from where I got you started back at the airport up north." His hand glided down Yuri's ribs slowly, sliding back up across his stomach and continuing on until those fingers dragged lightly over those boxers again and went right up to its previous perch just under the man's knee, only to slide back down again. Fingers gently bent around the curve of Yuri's athletic leg, descending into the hidden folds of fabric and teasing senselessly as they came within a hair's width of center.

The young skater was absolutely helpless to the man's touch, but he couldn't stop the slight cringe of worry as those fingers kept roaming down around his curves. He finally pulled his hands away from his face, one going down to touch gently against his partner's forearm, silently giving notice that he was still too sore for their usual fun, but realizing he didn't need to give it when the man came nosing up his neck.

"I didn't forget." Viktor whispered, "You got me well enough on your own to serve as its own reminder."

Hazel eyes shot open at that, remembering the mention but not having believed it at the time, "I thought you were just saying that to make me feel better."

"...Why would I lie about that?" The Russian wondered, his teases pausing for the moment as he looked on his husband with a perplexed but serious expression.

"...Because...you don't...act like you're hurting nearly as much as I am...?"

Viktor blinked at him, but did his best to soothe his partner's anxiety with a kiss, bringing this teasing-hand up to set a finger gently across the side of Yuri's jaw, "I've had a lot more practice hiding my pain than you ever needed to. It comes as second-nature to me. I don't even have to think about it. You got me good though, don't worry." Another kiss, "But it was worth it. 'Drunken super-deluxe Eros Yuri' can have me any which-way he wants, consequences be damned."
"...Only when I'm drunk...? But...I never remember what I do when I get that hammered..."

The Russian nosed his partner's lip quietly, bangs brushing softly against his skin, "It's the only time you have the confidence to take what's yours. But I do prefer that you have recall later, which is why it doesn't happen all that often. If 'Drunken super-deluxe Eros Yuri' were a common occurrence, it wouldn't be fun anymore." He explained quietly, "All crazy things in moderation, right?"

"I guess..." The younger man tacitly agreed, eyes cast away for a moment. Yuri shook his head and looked forward again though, "...I ruined the moment, didn't I?"

The silver legend just smiled and shook his head, pulling himself out from under that curved leg and coming back between them instead, using his own knees as a wedge to keep Yuri's slightly apart as he slid forward, "Never ruined. Only delayed." He slipped his hands under the man's back and shoulders, slouching a bit where he held himself up on his elbows, feeling his partner's hands come gently aside his arms, "No more stalling though. I need my Yuri."

"I need my Viktor, too."

The Russian smiled to hear it, and moved down into a long, deep kiss. Hearing his partner's quiet, whimpered breaths; feeling his fingers comb through his hair; one leg bending slightly up against him; the firmness of center, aching for his touch, hips rocking slightly despite the layers of clothing still between them...all together, it was the Symphony of Yuri, the music that man's body made that the silver legend found so irresistible. The taste of the mulled red wine on his lips made it all even better. His own knees parted a little further then, ankles crossing where he curved them back over his legs, pushing his partner's even further apart as he moved.

Clothing was becoming a torture, and Viktor pushed himself back up to sitting, pulling the light grey-brown sweater off himself and casting it aside before returning to undo the buttons of the white dress-shirt he'd worn underneath. Yuri pushed to sitting as well, legs still lightly curved around the Russian's waist, resting over the man's thighs where Viktor had sat back on parted knees. He leaned up and into another kiss, fingers going down to work at the brass belt-buckle as Viktor himself kept undoing one more button at a time. With the buckle undone, the belt moved out of the way, pants unbuttoned and unzipped, and the shirt open freely, they descended on one another again to the blanket. Viktor twisted slightly to the side, going down onto his right shoulder as his left hand slid up against his husband's bare waist, pulling him up onto his own side as well, eager for the warm feeling of skin between them.

The younger skater's hands brushed upwards against the bare chest before him, left continuing up to cup under his partner's cheek as the long, deep kisses went on, the right going back down to the man's side, pulling him in closer. He couldn't help but bring his right leg up, sliding it along his husband's outer thigh until it was set right over his hip. In return, he felt that same thigh coming up between his own, pushing up gently against his center.

Yuri pulled back from the kiss to draw in a breath, the pressure from below catching his attention and making him acutely aware of how desperate he was.

It's just like he said... I've had this sitting at the back of my mind since he was teasing me at the airport...

He wondered if the silver Russian had read his mind in that moment, since just as he'd thought it, he felt both of the man's hands go down between them to pull them from the last bits of fabric keeping them apart. Though not completely withdrawn, it was enough to feel stiff lengths of flesh rubbing up against one another, and each of them drew in a sharp breath of relief. Viktor's right hand, even as that arm was pinned under his side, did its best to rub and squeeze at their union, each of them lightly
Yuri rolled them that time, pushing up onto an elbow and sliding in on top of his partner's core, legs still woven together. He couldn't help but rub slightly against the thigh underneath of him, moving his free leg out of the way to properly sit on the Russian's hips and feel him even more. He could practically feel himself sinking back when Viktor took hold of them again, slipping down a bit into the space where the man had parted his knees. Those knees came up though, holding him where he was. Brown eyes were closed and the man exhaled a string of whimpered gasps, helpless to the strokes, twists, squeezes, and pulls beneath him. It was all he could do to hold himself up, palms down on his husband's chest, fingers unsure if they should clench into fists or splay out as far as they could go.

Eventually, he lost the fight though, his senses overwhelmed to the point of making his arms weak, and Yuri slowly but surely went down until his forehead was against his husband's collarbone, breathing heavily with each tug.

With so little room between them though, Viktor eventually had to let go, reaching around instead to sneak his hands down the back of those boxes, and get two palms full of his partner's ample SkaterButt. Kisses went back to the younger figure's neck, nibbling adoringly as palms and fingers massaged and roamed, right hand sliding under and between the man's legs.

Yuri found the strength to push up onto his hands again as he felt it, sliding forward a bit from the surprise of it, but then sliding right back into the crook of the Russian's lap. His breathing became more and more labored as the caresses went on, feeling his partner starting to push up harder and fast against him, making him wish all the more that he wasn't so sore still. He slid his hands over his husband's chest, brushing his fingertips against the Russian's abdomen until switching places with a grasp around their centers. He felt those warm palms go against his thighs after that, thumbs and pointer fingers sliding up to touch deftly to the crests of his hips and holding tight. Yuri held fast with both hands, feeling every curve of that precious skin as it slid against him, sliding over his fingers.

The day-long anticipation, even if it had largely been subconscious since boarding the plane, made Yuri feel on edge sooner than he meant, and he let himself go, curling his fingers around just his husband. He could feel the change in the Russian's movements when he withdrew, thrusting through his hands like he'd actually gotten to be inside him instead.

Viktor eventually rolled them over again, pulling his partner's legs tight against his waist as he continued the fervent slide through the man's fingers. He pulled away only when he felt himself precariously on the edge, lowering himself down from where he's held himself up on his hands and kissed at his partner's damp chest, sweat beading on his skin. The kisses and nibbles trailed lower, giving attention to each sensitive nub as they went, tongue dipping into the skater's navel, and finally coming to the flesh Yuri had himself abandoned for his sake. The Russian made quick work of those thin boxers, pulling them up and off his husband's legs and casting them away so he could give the man his full and unhindered attention. It was music to his ears to hear the gasps, and reluctant but vocal breaths as he started kissing and licking at that hypersensitive flesh. He gave every inch of it the love and affection he held for the whole man, squishy bits included, glancing up to see the look on his partner's face in response to it all. Left hand came to help hold the shaft up, but the right went down below, careful to avoid triggering any pain as he pressed and searched for the fun-button from the outside. He knew he'd found it when Yuri unexpectedly jerked his legs and arched his back, crying out as his hands clenched tight on the blanket. One probing finger became three, pressing in a circular motion several times before pausing, then going the other direction.

Yuri folded his arms over his eyes, gasping and moaning quietly, toes curling and flexing, with each passing moment bringing him closer to the edge. There was always a particular sound he made that
signaled the finale, but as soon as he uttered it, he felt the Russian's warmth leave him. Startled by the unusual abandonment, one brown eye opened from under the folded arms, and watched as the man crawled back over top of him. Those fingers kept circling though, even as the silver genius went for his neck again, pushing past his arms. Yuri clung for dear life, hands going over his husband's shoulders and clambering at his back, fingers clinging to the white fabric that still covered him there. He wanted skin though; even through the mental oblivion that Viktor had put him into by overwhelming all his senses, Yuri still wanted skin.

The shirt was pulled up towards the man's shoulders, and frantic hands felt at the Russian's back, tracing over all the faded scratches and residual bruises he'd left the last time. The feeling came on quick after that; everything in his pelvis and gut tingled and felt hot from the inside out, rushing out from center like water had been poured right into him. His legs tightened and bent inward, toes curling, and his nails raked across pale skin. He bit down on the stiff collar of the older man's dress-shirt, but still cried out between clenched teeth, feeling his whole body tighten up all at once as the powerful surge flowed through him. He threw his arms back over his husband's frame, hugging him tight as he tried to gasp for breath, being set down into the blanket gently with an arm under him.

Ragged breaths finally drew in, and cherry-hazel eyes looked up, half-closed, at azure looking back down on him. His whole body trembled, especially his legs, which gradually fell weak and limp as Yuri dragged at the air. He felt his husband sitting over his hips, knees coming up against his sides as spent flesh was gathered back up again and rubbed gently.

"I ca...can't move..." Yuri gasped, too weak to resist, barely able to keep his eyes open as it was.

Viktor just watched him intently, looking on in adoration for how his touch had turned his partner to proverbial mush. He worked at himself for a little while longer, bracing against his husband's shaking frame, fingers occasionally tracing through the sticky white fluid that had already been dripped onto the younger skater's core. He added his own a moment later, closing his eyes and feeling sweet release where he still held them both together. He rubbed a few more times before finally letting go, holding himself up on his hands to catch his breath.

He eventually held himself upright and let his arms go limp, and he tilted his head back, suddenly finding the whole thing rather funny and laughing quietly.

Yuri gave him a weird look, "...Wh...what are you...laughing for...?"

"I was just...thinking..." Viktor answered, looking back down again with quite the satisfied look on his face, still catching his breath a little, "About how a year ago...you were still too scared to kiss me...or even share the same bed with me. The twin beds we had in Barcelona...I shoved them closer together, but you still kept the sheets folded between the mattresses so I wouldn't surprise you in my sleep." He explained, shrugging out of his shirt and using it to clean them up as well as he could, "I'd been trying so hard to get closer to you since I'd first arrived the previous April, the whole time never realizing you didn't remember the Sochi Banquet. Trying to figure out if you'd even be receptive to the idea of me, or if I'd forever just be this distant idol of yours, struggling enough just to call me 'friend.' And yet, now..." He rolled the shirt up into a ball-shape and pitched it towards the empty laundry basket near the door, one sleeve unraveling and holding to the rim as the rest tumbled in. He then turned to pull the blanket and bed-sheets away from where they'd still somewhat been neatly pressed against the pillows, making an entry-point and then lifting off his husband's hips to kick off the remains of his clothes. He wedged his hand under the younger skater's back and pulled him up against his chest, dragging him into the opening in the covers before pulling the cool sheets back overtrop of them both. He nuzzled the side of the man's head, reaching up with a free hand to brush the spiky black hair from his eyes. "Now...you let me touch you in ways and places that leave you breathless and paralyzed." He purred.
Yuri could still feel his legs trembling a little, but the strength in his arms was gradually coming back, so he wiggled until he managed to turn onto his side, and tossed one arm over his husband's waist. He sagged down into the pillows, pressing his forehead to the Russian's bare chest for a moment before tilting his face to kiss the same spot instead, "...I need...to learn how to do that for you, too..."

"When you're sober, you mean?"

"...Eh?" The younger figure's eyes blinked open, and he leaned his head back to see his partner's face, and the devious-yet-innocent smile he bore upon it, "...What...do you mean? What else do I do when I'm drunk...?"

"Oh, plenty of things."

"V-Viktor!? You have to tell me!" He was starting to get nervous, "I know I can get crazy, but...!?"

"Calm." Viktor mused, wrapping his arms around the man's head and gently stroked his hair, "It's time for cuddling."

The freight service with all their suitcases arrived around 10 the next morning. For once, Viktor was the responsible one and got up on his own in expectation, leaving his 'Sleeping Beauty' to stay in bed a while longer. Makkachin panted quietly to the side as the nearly-20 suitcases and smaller bags were delivered and brought inside.

The Russian took it upon himself to go through every one of them, pulling out costumes that needed to be dry-cleaned, clothing that needed to be laundered, skates that needed sharpening, and souvenirs that needed to have a home found on a shelf or wall. He paused though when he came upon his former Free Skate outfit; the colors of fire barely visible through the glossy coat-bag it had been placed inside. He undid the zipper and folded the plastic slip away, revealing the outfit in all its smoke-and-brimstone glory.

He felt at the fabric, flattening it out a little bit to see the detail-work on the upper front, fingers tracing over the subtle glimmer of Swarovski crystal and other rhinestones within the painted 'night sky.' He sighed and smiled sadly at it.

_I had this outfit designed to be like the sunlight-twin to Yuri's moonlight Free Skate. Only getting to use it twice...it's kind of a bummer. I wonder what my tailors are going to come up with to replace it...? They know what the song is, but..._

He shook his silver-haired head and zipped the bag back up, resigning the outfit to its new fate amongst the closet-full of costumes from past seasons. As he hung the garment-bag on a free-standing clothing rack with the other used, and needing to be cleaned costumes, the urge to see their collection grew, and he quietly went to their spare room where all their skating memorabilia was stored, as well as the walk-in closet with all their old outfits. He clicked on the light and started sorting through the hanging items, going past the more recent and most-familiar costumes at the front. His Worlds Exhibition from the previous year, simple as it was, then Winter's Wish, and the heavy Short Program coat that technically cost him Gold, then a bit further back; the black-shirt Duetto version of his Aria costume, with the regular white-shirt version next to it, as well as the much darker, almost leathery-looking SP costume from that same year. He let that rack of garment-bags
swing free again to settle into their former places, and went over to Yuri's side instead, coming immediately upon the 'Dark Eyes' costume from the Worlds EX, the blue Aria costume, the black Eros outfit, and then...the jacket from 'Yuri on Ice.' He opened the bag and pushed the plastic cover away, turning the hangar so the hook would stay on the bar but that the outfit would be perpendicular to the rest of the hanging ensemble. He looked down at it fondly, thinking back on all the memories he'd made while that season was ongoing.

*I wonder if Yuri ever properly thanked that Conservatory student friend of his who composed that song...? I'm not even sure he ever spoke to her again after she sent him the mp3 in the first place.*

He put a finger over his lip in thought.

*...Going back to Detroit, a place Yuri spent the 5 years before Sochi... It hasn't really been that long since he left. I wonder how many people he knew back then are still around? Celestino won't be there, since Phichit moved his home rink to Bangkok, but what about the rest? Other skaters he'd trained with, shop-keeps he became familiar with, classmates who might still be attending school in the city...? ...That friend who went to the hospital...? And... her.*

The Russian closed his eyes and shook his head, gently patting the chest of the jacket fondly before replacing it within the garment bag and tucking it back into the line of other costumes where it had come from. He turned the light off and slid the closet door closed, looking around the rest of the trophy-room briefly before returning to start finding places for their new rewards.

The massive NHK Trophy simply took the place of the last one Viktor had won, and that one got put into the closet on the shelf above the costumes, alongside the other ones he'd won. The Grand Prix Final Silver medal that he'd swiped from the display case as a form of motivation for Yuri was put back under glass...and the four new Gold medals they'd won were placed into their own cases, then set back onto the walls. There were dress-forms all around the room, naked for lack of the current season's ensemble placed over them, but Viktor could see them superimposed over the pale figures in his mind's eye. There were framed photos around the room as well, featuring their big victories from the most recent few seasons, though mostly from the last one, since they were together in the majority of them.

Finished in there, he looked back one last time before clicking off the light and closing the door. Makkachin was quick on his heels, nails clacking on the hardwood hall-floor as he went back towards the main living area and the kitchen. His eyes glanced over the spacious area, looking on all the furnishings he'd brought there from St. Petersburg, oddly feeling like he was seeing it all for the first time again. Slate irises then turned towards the huge windows and glass sliding-door that lead into the tiny Japanese backyard. Light poured in through the thin white curtains, casting the entire area in a hazy glow. He drew in a breath slowly...held it for a moment...exhaled...and smiled.

*It's good to be home again.*
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED TWENTY EIGHT

It was nearly 1pm before the sleepy Asian skater finally forced himself out of bed, though doing so as slowly as was humanly possible. Ten minutes of just his feet sticking out from under the blanket, over the edge of the mattress, then at least 5 where he at least had his toes touching the floor. He sat up eventually, only to doze off again and flop back to the side, landing with a soft pfft into the pillow-pile again. A bark from downstairs roused him a little more, and he pushed back up to sitting, rubbing his eyes and ruffling his messy hair. Without his glasses or contact lenses in, the world was slightly blurry, so after standing, reaching up for a long and far too satisfying stretch, he hobbled his naked self towards the bathroom to put his eyes in.

A few minutes later, he looked and felt a bit more human, pulling a bathrobe over himself before wandering down the hall towards the narrow stairwell. Bare feet hardly made a sound over the carpeted steps, moving to the hardwood at the bottom, and pausing. Cherry-hazel eyes glanced around the open living-room area, seeing a mess of open, though empty bags and suitcases, as well as the rolling clothing rack with all the season's current outfits hanging from it. Baskets of dirty laundry, as well as small piles of clean laundry stacked on the blue couch, were spread around as well. Despite the chaos, it seemed somewhat organized. A closer look revealed how a few of his souvenirs had been spaced out along some shelves or on a counter dividing the living-room from the kitchen...and finally, the best souvenir of all; the very unique, one-of-a-kind Russian World Champion figure skater.

He had nestled himself into a corner near the stove, twiddling around on his phone while something brewed just behind him, "I heard you beginning your Great Struggle." Viktor said quietly, giving a wink over the top of the small device as he watched his hazy husband come shuffling closer, slowly but surely.

Yuri kept walking, not deviating from his path or even slowing down until he was physically stopped by his partner's body being in front of him. Wordlessly, the young figure slid his arms around the man's sides and lower back, resting the side of his head against a shoulder, and closed his eyes again, as though ready to fall asleep right there and then.

Viktor just smiled and rolled with it, wrapping his arms around the smaller skater and holding him close, rubbing a cheek against the man's forehead where he dozed, "Maybe I spoke to soon. It seems that The Great Struggle continues."

"Mhm."

Sensing an opportunity, and still having his phone in his hand, the silver Russian clicked open his camera and took a quick selfie, raising his arm up to take the photo from above them and giving another wink at the lens as it clicked. Yuri hardly noticed, half-asleep where he was standing anyway. Viktor moved his arms back to hold his beloved a little while longer, rocking him slowly and gently from side to side as the coffee brewer behind him finished sputtering.

"You've been busy already." Yuri finally managed, opening his eyes a little, but not moving otherwise, "When did you get up?"

"Around 9 or something." The Russian answered, sliding his right hand up to cup around his husband's head and play idly with the mess of raven hair, "I checked the shipping status on our stuff right before falling asleep last night, and it said to anticipate a 10am delivery, so I made sure to be up
for it. I figured I'd let you sleep. Considering the hour, you probably needed it."

"Mhh...I'd sleep all day if you let me..." The younger figure admitted, pulling his head up from where it had been settled and turning to look at his partner more squarely, only to find the man lean straight towards him to, for lack of better terms, plant their faces together in a lazy-but-well-meant kiss. The Russian was smiling about it the whole time though, so Yuri could only assume he'd meant for it to be that way, and let himself be drawn in.

They held a moment, but Viktor eventually pulled back again, stroking his partner's hair to unruffle it a little, "We only have three days before we're already on another plane, so I'm afraid I have to limit your all-day snooze-fest to just one of those days." He explained, though fondly, then reaching back to pull the colorful mug from the tray behind him, "Here. I made you coffee. Drink, relax, wake up...and then we go~."

"Go...?"

"To Yu-Topia and then to the Ice Castle!" Viktor explained, getting excited, "I have to make sure you don't get squishy while we're home! Plus I said I'd help your friend with the Loop still."

"Phichit-kun said he landed it at the Exhibition. Remember? He texted me about it when we were still in the hall."

The Russian's expression didn't change...except for the blinking, "...Of course. Sure he did."

"You forgot."

"Mmmhhhhhh...maybe a little bit..."

Yuri just huffed a quiet laugh against the surface of the coffee, and turned to head to the circular dining table near the wall between the kitchen and sliding glass door to the back yard. Makkachin was out in the snow, chasing a few small black birds that flitted about on the fence, "Sounds like you need coffee as much as I do."

"Oh yeah, it'll only be my 3rd cup." Viktor explained nervously, leaning back against the counter again as his partner sat at the table, gently blowing on the drink to cool it, "I'll be bouncing off the walls and I'll still be forgetful."

"Maybe it's the answer to the question of whether you can pull off an 8-quad Free Skate again, without having someone lighting another fire under your butt." The younger figure cocked his head back and gave a wry smirk, the coffee mug perched between his hands where his elbows were up on the tabletop.

"Hah...that was a once-off." The Russian insisted, setting another cup on the metal tray in front of the coffee maker, though putting in a K-cup of hot chocolate instead, "...I'll probably only do 3 quads at the Final." He said warily, waiting for the resistance.

"Oh. ...Okay."

"...Okay?" Viktor echoed, cautiously turning his head back as he clicked the Start button, then crossed his arms and leaned back against the tile counter like he'd been originally, "...Just 'okay'?"

"Should I say something else...?" Yuri wondered, setting the mug down a little as he turned in his chair.

The silver figure remained quiet, but eventually shook his head, reaching for the cocoa as the
machine buzzed and clicked that it was done. Socked feet glided across the floor, and Viktor took the other seat, setting the mug down as he reached across the table to loosely curl his fingers around his partner's hand. He thumbed at the gold a little, "Like you said, I just did an 8-quad Free Program. Reducing my line-up to 3 probably seemed drastic. I thought you'd be upset again like last time I suggested it."

"It is drastic..." Yuri agreed, "But, like you said...it's second nature for you to hide your pain, and I can't tell if you're hurting right now." He said quietly, watching his husband's thumb go slowly back and forth across his wedding band, "When we got into that fight about it before, Phichit-kun told me what I should've known since the beginning...that I should be supporting you, rather than questioning you like you don't know what you're doing. My argument back then was that...you're Viktor Nikiforov, you always do 4 quads. But...now, it's more like, you're the only one who knows your limits. If you only want to do 3 quads...then..."

Viktor listened intently, holding his thumb still.

"...I'll just have to mentally prepare myself for the epic 'JJ style' meltdown when you beat the guy who insists on going for six."

The Russian blinked, tilting his head a little, but then slouched back in his chair and laughed, "Don't jinx me. I'll be the one having a melt-down if I take it down a notch and he takes Gold because of it. He's been trying to usurp me for a few years now." He huffed, much to Yuri's amusement, and they both sipped at their drinks again. Viktor set the mug down and looked into the ripples, "You know, his 'King JJ' song last season was written specifically with defeating me in mind? He must've been furious when he found out I was taking off to coach for a bit."

"...You seem to have a low opinion of JJ. Every time I've seen you guys interact, you give him the cold shoulder, even more so than the rest of us." Yuri wondered, "Did he do something to make you mad...?"

"He's just an arrogant up-start." The Russian shrugged.

"Well well, if it isn't Viktor Nikiforov, come to grace us Continentals with his shining presence." Came a voice, one that Viktor only barely heard. He turned around cheerfully, but his expression stalled as he realized Jean-Jacque Leroy was standing there with his fiancé, "Oh, hi JJ."

"Too good for your own Championship?"

"I'm not here to compete." Viktor explained stiffly, "I hope that'll spare you more final-round jitters."

"You're not the one to beat anymore." JJ retorted.

"I suppose that's true, for now anyway. I'll be a competitor at Worlds."

“That's what I've heard.” JJ pulled his sunglasses off his nose and settled them on top of his head, "But you'll have to outdo your own record if you want to get on the podium again."

"I don't see why I won't. I'm the one that set the record in the first place. I can always do better than I did in previous seasons.” The silver Russian casually put his hands in his pockets, cocking his head to the side, "You've never been able to beat me before.”
"Not yet, but my time's come. I'm a prime contender for gold at Worlds."

"You were a prime contender for gold at the GPF, too, and you barely coasted to bronze by the grace of other peoples' shortcomings." The older skater retorted playfully, "Yuri and Yurio will be ones on the podium with me at Worlds, I guarantee it."

"We'll see, old man." JJ laughed, turning back with his dark-haired fiancé to continue their tour of the facility. He raised his hand sarcastically in a taunting wave, "Pretty soon the only gold you'll see is the gold on your finger! We'll see how long that lasts after one of you quits skating!"

Viktor grit his teeth at the memory, and shook his head, "His taunts go all the way back to his Senior debut. He was shuffled around to a bunch of different coaches and home-rinks, but each one of them told him off eventually."

"...Yeah, him and Celestino didn't get along that well when he came to Detroit for a bit."

"...Oh, wow, yeah." The silver skater touched a finger to his lip in thought, "That would've been right in the middle of when you and Phichit were there."

"JJ was only around for a week. It was pretty obvious that they didn't see on a level with each other."

"And you're still wondering why he and I don't get along?" Viktor huffed a laugh, "The guy never seems to learn, no matter how many times he's knocked down."

"Some would say that makes him strong."

"And others would say it means he has his head too far up his own backside." The silver legend shrugged, touching the rim of his mug as he leaned back in his chair, "For a guy who changed coaches more often than his underwear, and having to go back to his parents in the end...I think he should've checked his ego a long time ago. Mark my words..." He leaned forward again, holding up a finger for emphasis.

"Uh oh..."

"...Huh?"

"Here it comes. Premonition time." Yuri said nervously, crossing his own fingers and looking up, "Please don't let it be bad."

Viktor cleared his throat, wondering if he should say anything then, but then shook his head, "...Mark my words." He repeated, "One of these days, his ego is going to get someone hurt. Hopefully mostly him."

"...Ahhh it's bad...!" The younger skater threw his arms into the air, "Now something's going to happen!"

"...Oh bah, my predictions usually take at least 2 weeks to come true. The Final is in 4 days. We should be free and clear of any disasters by the time it strikes."

"...I hope you're right." Yuri whined quietly, slouching where he sat until he slid down the front of the chair, "...I just want one event this season to be disaster-free...! Just one!"
Though the flight from Fukuoka began late and ended late, by the time the plane landed, Minako felt like the many hours she'd spent inside the flying space-tube had only actually been one hour. With Japan being so far ahead on the clock compared to Edmonton, she technically only arrived shortly having left to begin with.

She walked down the long connecting tunnel between the plane and the arrivals terminal, pulling the strap of her bag a bit higher on her shoulder, stepping out of the pack of travelers that were in a much bigger hurry than she was to get a move on. Weary and anxious, she looked around the huge open space, pausing to check every row of departing passenger seats to see if her partner was waiting in any of them. Not spotting the mop of silver-grey hair anywhere, or the practically-copyrighted flat-cap that normally sat upon it, she started walking forward again.

Left and right, ahead and behind, the ballerina looked, scanning every face that passed her, but saw none that were familiar. For lack of else to do, she pulled out her phone and dialed the man's phone, stepping off to the side to avoid being a speed-bump to other travelers.

To her surprise, she heard a familiar jingle rather close to where she stood, and she lifted her head, ears practically perked up to try and find the source of the sound. Surprisingly, her own phone kept on with the dial-tone, trying to connect, and the ring-tone she followed didn't cease, making her wonder even more if she'd really managed to find the man...

...Or maybe he dropped his phone somewhere and that's why he still hasn't answered?

She rounded one last corner of the homey-feeling airport, and stuck her head inside a Tim Horton's café, spotting a hunched-over figure, passed out cold on a table in the opposite corner, back towards her. She shook her head and laughed, about to disconnect the call and just approach him, only to suddenly find the man shaking awake and frantically reacting for the ringing device in his jacket.

"H-Hey!" He called out anxiously, "Sorry! I must've fallen asleep." He looked down at the table-top to realize he'd drooled all over it, and quirked a brow in surprise at himself.

"It's fine, hun. Did you have to wait long?" Minako answered, as though having no idea where he was, and slowly backing out of the café in case he turned around. She just watched him reaching for a napkin-holder to the right, wiping up the slobber he'd left behind in his exhaustion.

"My flight landed a bit early." Mikhail answered, turning his face away from the phone as he covered a yawn, "Did you land already or are you still taxiing?"

"No, I landed." She answered, smiling deviously and trying not to laugh, "I just came into the terminal."

The Russian grabbed the long-cold coffee cup just in front of him and promptly stood up, straightening himself out and adjusting his coat and hat before stepping briskly to leave the café, "Great, stay where you are then, I'll come right over. I went to grab coffee right after I landed, but I guess my brain had a different plan."

"Yeah, I'm pretty tired, too." The ballerina agreed, watching the silver-haired figure come sauntering quickly out, pausing only to toss his expired drink away, and passed her entirely without notice, "Oh, I think I see you."

"You do?" He stopped dead in his tracks, only 10 paces in front of the woman, and entirely oblivious to her presence, "Where are you?"

"Close." She answered, tip-toeing nearer, her flats making it easy to keep her footsteps well-hidden
under the rest of the airport's ambient noise.

Mikhail was up on his toes as well, trying to see over the scant other travelers in an effort to spot the woman somewhere down the big open hall, knowing the Gate she was supposed to come through, but not seeing her, "Can you wave or something? I can't tell where you are past all these other people."

"I'm here. Can't you see me?" She said quietly.

"I don't see you at all!" Mikhail lamented, side-stepping and weaving through pedestrians, but eventually stopping and going back down on his heels, "...Should I just stand here since you can tell where I am?"

"Yes, but you'd see me better if you were facing the right direction."

"...Aren't you coming from Gate 6? I can see the sign numbers from here... How can I not see you?"

Minako pulled the phone away, and stood right behind him, "Because I'm already here."

"...Eh?" Mikhail pulled his phone away as well, wondering why it sounded different. He turned on a heel to get out of peoples' way and put the phone back in place, "I think my reception is going out. I'll just stay heEEYAHHHH!"

Travelers all around suddenly stopped and turned to look at the grown man who'd just screamed like a little boy.

Minako busted out laughing at him.

"Holy Christ how long were you standing there!?" He barked between clenched teeth, holding both hands in front of his chest like he thought his heart would claw its way out if he didn't block the way.

She was practically incapable of speech, bowled over at his expense. She fanned herself with one hand as the other held to her phone, a finger stuck out so she could wipe the tears from her eyes.

"I just about died."

The hapless Russian went on, finally clicking out of the call and putting the device away, his heart still jackhammering under his skin. He barely had time to pull his hand back out of his coat before the ballerina made good use of her dramatic skills, pirouetting in place and kicking out a leg, arms going way out to the side.

"Ta-da!" She finally managed, then standing normally again to put her bag back into place on her shoulder, and smiled innocently, "I was behind you when you originally answered your phone. You weren't at the Gate when I came in so I called to find out where you were. I didn't think you'd be passed out."

Mikhail drew in a rough breath, feeling his heart calming again, but instead of simply replying, he reached for her hands to pull them over his shoulders and wrapped his arms around her tightly, "My insomnia got the better of me. I'm absolutely wide awake now though, sheesh."

The ballerina laughed again, but returned the hug fondly, kicking one leg up again in her excitement, "I couldn't sleep much either." She pulled back from his shoulder as her free leg went down to the floor again, a thumb on each cheek as she looked at him squarely, "Let's get moving then. Tomorrow's going to be nuts, so we need all the sleep we can get."

The Russian nodded, a sense of relief washing over him as he felt his lady love lean in to kiss him. His heart managed to skip a beat for the joy of it, even if it was still strained from the previous terror-
event. When she pulled back again, he drew a deep breath and reached to take the ballerina's bag, swinging it over his own shoulder as he took her hand in the other, "Couldn't agree more."
Makkachin barked and jumped through the snow piles heaved up on the side of the entranceway, leaving poodle-sized sinkholes in the deep drift. Of course, for every leap through the cold white fluff, there was a bunch that trailed off the dog's fur when he jumped back out again, leaving frayed streaks of crystalline frost jutting inward from the two neatly-shoveled rows.

"Makkachin!" Viktor called, chasing after the woofer, though only adding to the dog's excitement and driving him even further into the piles. Almost as soon as the man had tried to corral the big brown poof though, he lost sight of the point of his task and started jumping into the ice-fluff as well, laughing and tossing snowballs across the Yu-Topia front patio area for the dog to chase after.

Yuri watched in amazement, turning his head as each little white ball went soaring, and the poodle tried jumping up to catch them in his mouth, only to fall into the hoarfrost and jump again at the next one.

"What the Hell is all the racket out here?" Came the voice of a particularly grumpy teenager, shoving the sliding doors aside to investigate.

Viktor had stopped in the middle of another snowball toss, blinking wide, surprised blue eyes at the young Russian.

Makkachin had frozen in place as well, only turning his head towards the door; he started panting softly, that big pink tongue waggling about under his nose.

"Oh. It's you people."

BARK!

"Hey Yuri." The singular Asian said, raising a hand and waving from neutral territory close to the archway, "You sleep okay?"

"...Sure?" Yurio glanced down at the two small bags and one bigger suitcase set next to the man, "...You going somewhere?"

"Huh?" Yuri looked at the items at his sides, "Oh, no, these are for Phichit-kun. We freighted his stuff with ours so it wouldn't get lost. Everything came this morning so we're just bringing it to him since we're here anyway. Where is he?"

The teen thumbed inside, "I thought I saw him heading to the onsen earlier."

"Ah, that actually sounds like a good idea." Viktor interjected, tossing the last snowball as he rose back to standing, "We didn't get to soak yesterday. Why not loosen up before heading to the Ice Castle?"

"You won't catch me arguing." Yuri nodded, reaching for the bags again to pick them up and start heading inside.

Yurio stiffly moved out of the way as the poodle came barreling in first, shaking off the excess snow all over the teen before trotting off like he owned the place, nails clicking on the hardwood floor. Aghast, the Russian Kitten just looked ahead dead-faced in surprise, arms hanging out to the side like
he might as well have just been caught in a puddle splashed up by a passing car. Viktor rushed in after the pooch, pausing only long enough to kick his shoes off before vanishing through the door to the common area, begging the animal to come back so he could dry the creature off.

Yuri shook his head and huffed a quiet laugh to himself as he followed in last, hoisting the rolling suitcase and two other bags in over the landing and set them all down near the shoe-racks. He turned to close the sliding doors, but found that the teen was way ahead of him, hearing the shuffle of wood along the floor as the frames were moved into place. With a clack, the entrance-way was closed again, and the cool air from outside was blocked, replaced with the warm air from inside the resort.

The Russian Tiger was about to step off, returning to his silent prowl around the building like he'd been doing for most of the morning already, but was stopped by the feeling of a hand around his forearm. Green eyes turned to glance back, but nothing else, "What?"

Wordlessly, Yuri pulled the unusually-quiet teen into their customary greeting-hug, arms over blonde's shoulders where he was still slightly taller. He held there for a little while, feeling only one hand come up against his ribs to return the gesture. To that, Yuri hugged a bit tighter, refusing to let go until Yurio caught the hint and gave a proper hug back, but even then, he stayed put for a few more seconds.

They could hear Viktor calling out success for having captured his dog, hefting the wiggly flufferbutt back into the common room, and Yuri finally allowed the teen his freedom again. Yurio turned his eyes up at the older skater for a moment, but couldn't think of anything to say, so he just nodded and turned to walk away as he'd originally intended.

Hazel eyes watched him go, hoping the teen had gotten something out of it. With a quiet sigh, Yuri shuffled to kick his shoes off and put his things away before moseying off to find his distracted spouse. When he got into the common room, he found the silver Russian trying to pat down the wiggly poodle; one towel over Makkachin's back, another over his head, and the man sitting on his knees in front of the creature with a third towel, holding up both of those wet front paws within it.

"You know you're not supposed to run through the resort when you're soaking wet." The Russian was lecturing calmly, dabbing the melted snow from the brown poof's fur, "Or shake inside. How do you plead?"

**BORK.**

"*Mhm, mhm...guilty. That's what I thought.* Viktor set the paws down, damp but no longer cold or soaking wet, and reached both hands forward to squish the dog's cheeks, "Are you sorry?"

**BORFF-mrrph.**

"...Okay, I forgive you. *This time.*" The Russian held up a finger and pointed it at the critter's nose for emphasis, only for the poodle to bypass it entirely and drag that big, slobbery pink tongue across his human's face, knocking the man onto his back in the process. Viktor flailed and protested, but ended up laughing anyway, and the dog's tail was a blur of wags.

Yuri smiled, clapping his hands to get the pupper's attention, "Makkachin! To me!"

Dark beady eyes lifted up, and the excitable canine came trotting over to his other human for new attention, leaning against the man's legs and twisting happily as Yuri bent forward to scratch at the dog's side. The skater knelt down and got a few licks of his own before the poodle went down onto his back, begging for some belly-rubs, and being all too happy for it when he got them.
Viktor rubbed his face on one of the drier towels, and sat cross-legged for a moment, propping his elbow onto one of the low tables and watching. It didn't take long for the pup to get the upper hand when Yuri knelt down, rolling back onto his paws and hopping over the man's back while he was down on the ground, landing perpendicular across him. The Russian just laughed, "He's too smart for his own good, that one."

"...And much heavier than Vik-chan ever was..." Yuri huffed, trying to get out from under the lazy animal's weight, but only managed to get a slobbery-wet ear where Makkachin had turned to love on him again. Yuri just flailed, and the dog barked and jumped off, sitting innocently behind him instead and quietly panting.

"I guess it's a good thing we decided to sit in the onsen for a bit." Viktor mused, scooting forward along the floor with the mostly-dry towel to get the worst of the drool off his husband's face, "Shall we?"

The steamy, hot pool was like a small chunk of Heaven, melting away stress and stiffness like nothing else could. Just as Yurio had surmised, Phichit was already there, but was sitting on the ledge with just his legs dangling into the warm mineral-water. His ears perked up when he heard the sound of the changing-room doors opening, and waved when he saw the two older skaters stepping through.

"Oh hey, so you did come here." Yuri said, waving as well, "Yurio said you might be back here."

"For sure!" The Thai skater nodded happily, "No sense staying at a hot-spring resort if you don't use the hot-spring, right? Besides, it's been forever since your wedding party, so I've been dying to get back into here since the day you suggested I tag along after NHK!"

Viktor wasted no time, stepping gingerly into the water and moving off with the heat rising half-way up his thighs, while Yuri waited and sat on the edge for a while, towel across his lap like Phichit had done already. The Thai figure's eyes caught a glimpse of something unusual on the Russian's back as he passed though, and turned briefly to watch him moving over to his usual spot on the opposite side of the mid-pool fountain. As obvious as blood on milk, four long lines ran from each shoulder-blade down to his sides. The cogs in the skater's mind were working in overdrive suddenly as the reason for the marks slowly percolated through him. Brown eyes turned to meet hazel next to him, and Phichit whispered behind a hand, "...Is your house haunted?"

"...Haunted?" Yuri repeated, thoroughly confused, "Where did you get that idea?"

Viktor had already sunk to his normal place, but slouched down to just above his shoulders, smiling contentedly and closing his eyes, ignoring the banter on the other side of the deck.

"Those marks on Viktor's back! I've seen those American ghost shows! It's a sign of an angry spirit if you get scratches or bite-marks without a known reason, and I didn't see them at the Banquet!"

"Wouldn't those be American ghosts? How did they get all the way to Japan?" Yuri deadpanned him, trying to hide the red flush growing on his cheeks by sinking into the water in front of where he'd sat on the deck, "Anyway, we brought your stuff with us when we got here. I left it with my mom. She said she'd take it up to your room."

"Oh." Phichit gave a look, thrown off his previous train of thought like the rider from the back of an angry bull, "...Thanks."
"We're heading over to the Ice Castle after this if you want to come." Yuri went on, turning on the submerged platform to rest an elbow on the deck and face the other skater, "Viktor and I have to get our blades sharpened, so it won't be a formal practice or anything, but it'll be fun anyway. There might actually be a regular class up there too by the time we get there. The locals always go crazy when we show up in the middle of things."

"Well, it's only because of you that skating's gotten so popular again, right?" Phichit pointed out.

"That's true." The older skater nodded, "Back when it first got out that Viktor had come to coach me, the Ice Castle was practically overrun with people wanting to take skating lessons or shoot documentary programs."

"I never saw any."

"That's because we wouldn't let them." Yuri laughed nervously, gawking across the water at his partner, "Though by 'we' I meant Nishigori and myself...the girls and Viktor were all for it."

"You let them have their fun with the Hot-Springs on Ice event, at any rate."

"Yeah...that's true." The older skater agreed, casually turning to rest his chin on the crook of his arm, "So what should we do when we get back to Detroit? You said it got boring after I left, but..."

"Well," Phichit turned his head up, "After you told Ciao Ciao that you were going to go back home, I was his only athlete. There was plenty to keep me busy, but skating on my own was kind of lonely."

"Did everyone else leave or something?"

Viktor peeked one eye open as he heard a few keywords in the conversation.

"Not since last I checked, but it's been a while. I'm pretty sure Ketty never left, an-"

"Ketty?" The Russian interrupted, giving something of a glare from the other side of the spring, "Who's that?"

Yuri turned his head to look back, "Ketty Abelashvili. She's the Conservatory student who did my Free Skate music last year."

Slate eyes looked on without blinking for a while, but the rising compulsive defensiveness soon faded again, and the Russian went back to soaking in peaceful quiet, "Mh."

Phichit leaned down and whispered behind his hand again, "...He's super jealous lately. What happened?"

"Nothing more than what you saw yesterday." Yuri answered back, also behind his hand. Just as he was about to pull back though, it dawned on him what the problem might've been, "Oh! I know!"

"What what!?"

"Remember when you got hurt that time and had to go to the hospital?"

"...Obviously." Phichit raised a brow at him, "I was the one who went."

"Ciao Ciao, me, and a bunch of other people from the rink followed after the ambulance and waited around until we were told you'd be fine. But you remember that one girl that was really pushy with me before that?"
"Sure. Celeste. She had a huge crush on you but you never gave her the time of day." Phichit teased, "I noticed that things got weird between you guys after that, but...since it was my accident, I didn't want to assume it was my fault something happened between you guys, too."

"No, it wasn't because of you." Yuri assured, keeping his voice down and his hand up, "She tried hugging me an-"

"WHAT!?!" The Thai skater practically jumped off the edge of the deck, "She tried hugging you!? I'm surprised she didn't end up in the emergency room alongside me!" He was practically laughing at that point, "You never let anyone touch you in those days! It was hard enough getting you to take silly pictures with me!"

Yuri was practically blown over by the sudden outburst, but managed to cling to the edge of the deck, "Keep it down!"

"Who are you talking about now?" Viktor's voice came unexpectedly from behind, and Yuri once again nearly vacated the water in shock. The Russian simply asked again, "Who tried hugging you? What Emergency room? Yuri."

The panicked skater tried to catch his breath, his heart pounding away from the sudden scare, "How did you even get behind me like that!?"

"Kotaero."

The tone made Yuri back up against Phichit's knees, waving his hands around defensively, "N-No one! Not lately! Other than Mila, anyway!" He insisted, "We were talking about the Detroit days! The girl who tried hugging me back when, and I shoved her off! I told you about this like a month after you came to Hasetsu!"

"You shoved her off?" Phichit echoed, "Wow, no wonder things got weird! You crushed her!"

"I didn't mean to!" Yuri insisted, turning back to look up at the Thai figure looming overhead, "She spooked me! I wasn't into her an-"

"Is she in Detroit right now?" Viktor asked, his voice almost monotone.

"I have no idea; I swear! If she is, it'd be no different than when Sophia popped up suddenly!"

The Russian's eyes twitched at the reminder, and he seemed to calm a little, sitting normally against the under-water bench where previously he'd been sitting sideways to face his partner, "...Fair enough."

"Oh! I read about her!" Phichit laughed, "There were all kinds of posts about it on Instagram, about how she was at Trophée de France as a newscaster for some station in Bordea-"

Both older skaters gave him a look, and the younger figure went silent, a look on his face like his laughter was turning to comical fear.

Yuri turned 180 on the stone seat and set a hand against his partner's leg under the water, "You don't have to be jealous. There's no one in this whole wide world who could ever stand a hope of replacing you."

"I'm not worried about that." Viktor answered sullenly.

"What then?"
The Russian remained silent for a moment, drawing in a breath where he stared at the surface of the water. He pushed off the submerged bench and scuttled around on his knees to face his partner, hands settling on either side of his legs. Slate eyes looked down still, but then slowly climbed up, bringing the right hand up as well to touch gently under the younger man's chin, thumbing his lip, "I don't want anyone to think they can try anyway. You've accomplished so much in the last year already, and a lot more people know you now. That one fan that managed to kiss you yesterday somehow...if I had seen it happen with my own eyes... Chernobyl would've looked like a sandcastle being kicked over by a kid on a beach somewhere by comparison."

Yuri blinked at the man in confusion, "...It's not like I wanted that to happen. It just got so hectic all of a sudden. I didn't even realize it had happened until after I could taste the mint flavor. There were so many people... I'm sure someone only meant to get my cheek or something and missed..."

Viktor still didn't seem satisfied. The very idea of it was making the hair on the back of his neck bristle like boar's quills.

The younger figure made an unsure face, but then leaned in and gave his husband a light, reassuring kiss, pushing him out from the edge of the deck and closer to the center of the pool, letting the water carry them along. In the stillness, with nothing but the sound of the fountain trickling resonating in the air, they floated quietly in front of each other. Yuri tilted forward on his knees as well as he could, sliding his hands under the silver Russian's arms and holding around his back, mooring close to the man's chest to hug him, "Even if she's there, what's she going to do? Phichit-kun wasn't the only one who knew what a huge fanboy of yours I was. Back when I was still getting ready for Sochi, practically the only thing I talked about was how I didn't want to mess up while you were there watching. I vowed that I would actually have the courage to talk to you after I froze up at that qualifying competition beforehand." He said quietly, "But I went back to Detroit completely crushed. My dog died, I'd gained a bunch of weight from binge-eating, my anxiety was through the roof...I'd finally met my idol on the ice in the Final Six of the Grand Prix, and then completely fell apart when it meant the most. Everything I'd worked so hard to avoid came true and I went back to that Skate Club utterly devastated."

Viktor listened quietly.

"Celeste wasn't even a fellow skater. She was a student going to the same school as me, and recognized me on the ice when she worked part time at the rink, using that as an excuse to spend time with or near me. I doubt she's even followed the competitions...so I can only imagine the look on her face when she learns how things turned out. I mean, how many nobodies get married to their heroes, right?"

"You were never a nobody." The Russian said simply. By then, the simple wading had rotated the pair slightly, and Viktor's back was again facing the curious Thai skater still sitting on the ledge.

Phichit's eyes went wide, seeing where Yuri's hands clung gently to that red-marked pale skin. The gears in his head were turning again, and he realized something. The four fingers on each hand, not counting thumbs...the four red streaks going down each side of the silver skater's back...and he pointed a shaky hand straight at the couple, "Y-Yuri! YOU'RE the ghost!"

Brown eyes went wide with surprise, "...Eh!?"

"Ghost?" Viktor echoed.

The Thai skater was already down, blood spurting from his nose where he'd fallen back on the deck, "...W-where's...my...phone...!?"
"P-PICHITO-KUN."
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED THIRTY

Though exhausted, seeing the sights of their target subdivision was something of a wake-up for the tired ballerina. Most every front yard had some Christmas-themed decor of some form or another, some even having a manger set-up, but the houses beyond the dazzling lights and big displays were like castles in the eyes of a woman who lived out of a tiny Japanese apartment.

"...These places are all bigger than Yu-Topia..." Minako commented nervously, "...It's hard to believe that only a few people live in each one."

"Japan doesn't have as much space to work with, especially inside cities." Mikhail shrugged, "Was starting to feel a little claustrophobic on the road. It's nice to have space again."

"...Are one of these actually yours or are you just messing with me?" The woman turned and gave him a look, thumning towards the street.

"Mine's coming up. You can tell because it's a big black void in the Winter Wonderland of Lights." He laughed dryly, pointing a finger from the steering wheel towards a dark plot of land just around the curve of the road, "Sometimes I feel like I kill the mood around here when I'm not home for the holidays."

"Why, are you the kind of guy who wears ugly Christmas sweaters and plays cheery music?"

Mihkail scoffed, "Hardly. I like the season for the gift-giving and creativity...some people really put a lot of work into their displays...but I have to put ear-buds in when I go shopping because the holiday music makes me insane after a while. I can only handle 15 different musicians singing Jingle Bells so many times before I lose it."

The ballerina huffed a laugh, "I can see that."

The rental-car pulled through the row of shoveled snow, ice and frost cracking under the wheels as it pulled onto the softer fare further up the darkened driveway. Motion-sensors caught the vehicle and lights started turning on, revealing the front of the two-door garage. Mikhail pulled his phone out of his coat and pulled something up with it while the car idled, and a moment later, more lights came on, and the second of the two garage doors started to open.

Minako's eyes were wide, "...Did you just turn your house on with a phone-app?"

"...Yes?" He blinked at her, as though it were the most obvious thing, "...Don't you?"

She deadpanned him, "I live in a tiny apartment. There are no apps for that."

"Tiny...?"

"It would fit inside the Snack Bar."

The Russian was still a bit stunned, "But that was practically a closet."

"By your standards, apparently." She pointed at him, but then turned to get out of the car, walking sideways down the driveway to get a better look at the place with all the lights on. The midnight air was biting, and each breath was a fog, but even through the crystalline mist, she could make out the
Mikhail stepped out of the vehicle once it was parked safely within the empty car-port, and followed the footsteps through the unshoveled snow to where Minako was still gawking at the obscured structure, "...It's kinda hard to see when it's so dark out. All the curtains inside are drawn, too, so you can't even see past the windows."

"How far back does it go...? Even from the front it looks like two houses squashed together into one."

The excited Russian fiddled with his phone again, finding yet another newfangled app for the house and held the device out to the ballerina, "Click and find out."

"...You're kidding." She deadpanned him again.

He just smiled and shrugged, "What's there to be worried about? That it's not actually mine?"

Minako blinked at him, but reached an ungloved hand towards the phone's touch-screen, and clicked the big sliding button at the top.

With that, it sounded like several spot-lights were bursting to life, and like many of the other houses on the block, the one before her was illuminated in a dazzling display of silver and light-blue. Two huge evergreens burst with light, the outline of the front lawn glowed, and everything around was bathed in brilliance.

The ballerina was practically star-struck at it all, looking around like she'd just stepped onto some other planet. Once it had settled that it was real, she turned back to the amused man standing next to her, "...I'm suddenly rather acutely aware of how little I really know about you."

"Hah!" Mikhail guffawed, "I'm still the same guy I've always been. Now I just...have stuff." He held out his arm, "Come on insi-"

"Rozovsky!? Is that you!?" A voice across the street called, drawing both figures' attention back behind them.

"Depends! Am I in trouble!?" Mikhail called back, looking at a husky man of similar age to himself. The door behind the figure was open where he'd come out, and the shadows of a woman held back where it was still warm.

"We thought you were dead or something, ey!" The man called again, "No one's been here in weeks! The street's looked like Hell with your dark and brooding black hole over here!"

"Someone should've called me then! I can turn the lights on from anywhere!" The Russian hollered, holding up his phone and waving it around.

"Where the Hell have you even been!? We haven't seen you since Summer!"

"Traveling all over the world! I just got in from Moscow earlier!"

Minako looked between the two as they yelled at each other from the back ends of their stupidly-huge driveways.

"Traveling!? What for!? You used to brag about how you didn't have to do that anymore!"

"Not unless I want to!" The Russian answered, "Didn't I tell you!? My nephew's famous!"
"You have a nephew!?!"

Minako chortled a laugh behind her hand, but Mikhail just looked dumbfounded, "Yeah! He's a five-time World Champion figure skater with Russia! I just found out about him last year!"

"You mean that Viktor Nikiforov kid?!"

The ballerina blanched, "Your neighbors knew about Viktor but you didn't?!"

Mikhail was again stunned, shaking his head a little, "Yeah! That's the one! How do you know about him?!?"

"We live in Canada, idiot!" The other man laughed, "It's all hockey and ice-skating up here! How did you not know about him?! You said he was your nephew!"

"I was never into that stuff before, and I lost track of him for a bunch of years! Ran into him after I made that emergency trip back to Russia last spring! I've been going to all his competitions this season!"

"People are going to start coming outside to tell you two knuckleheads to quit yelling." Minako pointed out, "Also it's like 500 degrees below out here."

"Alright alright..." Mikhail agreed hectically, turning back to the man across the street, "I gotta go! I'll be on the couch in my own house if I don't get inside!" He laughed, waving as he turned to head back into the open garage.

As they both stepped onto the concrete floor, the air warm within in spite of the cold from outside, the door started to descend again. Minako looked around, spotting a second car in the first car-port; a sleek blue hybrid of some kind or another. She blinked at it curiously as they passed, heading for a door that lead into the house itself.

"...Is that one of your kids' cars?" She wondered.

"What, that thing?" Mikhail thumbed at the 2014 Mercedes Benz S550, "Psht, no way. If I'm buying a car for my kids, they'll be getting a 10 year old Volvo first. Make them appreciate what they have so they're humble."

"Your son had a nicer car than a 10 year old Volvo..."

"Sergio got it from his mother...but I guess I did technically buy it since she used my money to do it." The silver Russian shrugged again, pushing the door open and waving his lady love through, "I stopped trying to bargain with her over how to raise the kids ages ago. But that's depressing... We already have enough to worry about, so why not just enjoy the peace while it lasts?" He waited until Minako was nervously through before closing the door again, lights already on within the dwelling.

She looked around the small inner-hallway, kicking her shoes off and setting them again a wall before moving further in. She held her hands over her elbows, taking in the sights of the massive interior, immaculately decorated and well-kept. There weren't any Christmas decorations inside though, in stark contrast to the outdoors. Either way though, the woman was speechless at the sight of it all.

"So?" Mikhail wondered, coming up behind her to take her scarf and coat.

Minako just turned back at him, as though slightly startled. She kept her arms around herself, looking nervous, "...Normally I'd be bouncing off the walls with excitement over this sort of thing...I mean,
I've seen stuff like this before when I was still actively dancing. I'm no stranger to fancy digs. But this...for some reason it feels different. I feel like I'm way out of my league here."

The Russian huffed an anxious laugh, "Well...I haven't exactly been super liberal with bragging about what I have..." He stepped up next to her, looking at the huge open space encompassing the kitchen, living-room, dining-room, and entertainment room, with the lazy-spiral staircase to the far side leaning to the second floor over an already-vaulted first-floor ceiling, "I guess it could be something of a surprise to see it all up close now. Everything else has just been rentals or temporary stuff. The limousine at Worlds, the condo in Moscow, the flights, hotels, and dinners... All transient stuff."

"How come you never said anything?" The ballerina wondered, glancing over at him.

He glanced back and shrugged, "I already had a lot to worry about with how I was introduced to everyone. Vivi was mad at me just for being around, and then Yuri's big sister introduced me as 'Vintage Viktor' without knowing how much it would piss him off. I didn't want to make it worse by seeming a braggart." He shrugged out of his coat and hung it on the tall coat-rack nearby, setting his flat-cap on one of the high hooks, then reaching a hand out towards Minako again, "I gave enough of a hint that Yuri and Vivi could feel safe asking me to sponsor Yura through my company, but I never wanted that part of my background to overshadow who I was as a person. Fighting off the image of just being an aged-up Viktor was already hard. I'm me, not him."

The ballerina felt a little embarrassed, but slipped out of her coat as well, handing it over sheepishly, "I guess it didn't help that I kept putting your hair into his style."

"It made Vivi a bit prickly, but I don't think it hurt anything in the end."

"I feel bad that I never noticed." She said quietly, holding onto her scarf around the back of her neck, "He never let on."

Mikhail nodded and breathed a quiet sigh as he hung the second coat, "I don't think even Yuri really knew. Vivi built a fortress of amnesia around himself, and the walls were fortified by a lot of repressed anger. His family, myself included, came in like an unwelcome battering ram, trying to break everything down that he'd spent his whole life trying to maintain. He was just trying to keep it to himself like he always had. Hell, he only really started telling Yuri about where he came from this past weekend."

"...Eh? Really? Why would he hide that from Yuri?" Minako was stunned, her eyes following the elder Russian as he moseyed towards the kitchen.

"He didn't want to remember anything about it in the first place. He split his life in two...the one before the ISU and the one after. The one before caused him a lot of pain. I don't blame him for wanting to keep it forgotten." He answered, pulling open the stainless-steel doors of the big refrigerator, "You want something to drink? There's eggnog, iced tea...I think there's a beer in here..." He went digging, glass bottles rattling around as he went.

The woman just cocked a brow at him, "Didn't the guy outside just say no one's been here in weeks? Wouldn't it all be bad?"

That silver-haired head popped back out again, "Huh? Oh, no. A bunch of us here share a private housekeeping service. They come in and dust the place once a week or so, and get groceries if the kids or I say we're coming home. Everything in here is fresh from yesterday."

Again, Minako deadpanned him, and slouched over the edge of the big kitchen island, holding her
face in her hands as her elbows went down on the marble countertop, "...You're too much..."

"...What'd I do?" He gave a curious look, holding the carton of eggnog in one hand.

"I guess I was just so used to us hopping from hotel to hotel that I never really thought about what it
would be like where you had roots." She answered pensively, looking at him between her fingers,
"This is just...a lot to take in. You live practically like a King here."

Mikhail just watched her for a moment, then set the carton on the counter and went to grab two glass
mugs from the cabinets; wooden panels with crisscross inlays across the window-panes and silver
knobs. When he set the two mugs on the counter and poured the thick creamy drink, he shrugged, "I
don't normally show people this stuff. This is the family home. Kids and I only sort of thing. I've had
a couple flings across the years but none of them ever graduated to getting to see this stuff." He
reached for a spice-jar of nutmeg, and another of cinnamon, dusting the top of each drink with a bit
of each, then offered one out to the anxious woman on the other side of the counter, "You're the
first."

"...Why me?" She wondered, accepting the glass and holding it up to smell the sweet aroma, "I'm
hardly special."

"You're the only one so far who never made an effort to pry." Mikhail answered simply, taking a sip,
"Even with all the costs you saw mounting, it was never your idea to spend the money."

"At least until I bullied my way into coming here." Minako huffed, giving him a look like she wasn't
sure whether it was a laughable irony or not.

"Well..." The Russian's cheeks got a little pink to think of it, "I had already half-seriously asked you
to marry me, so I don't count it against you." He took another sip to hide it, but then set the glass
down, "Besides...you didn't phrase the request to come here like you were trying to get something
out of it. You said you wanted to help me. That made a world of difference, in my opinion."

Brown eyes lifted to meet grey-green, and she smiled nervously, "Well, it honestly never occurred to
me that you should have to face this alone... I guess I kind of went into auto-pilot after that, thinking,
well...of course I have to help. Although as soon as I said it, I felt a little bad, thinking I was
practically demanding you buy this plane ticket that you hadn't expected to have to pay for..."

"And that's why you graduated." Mikhail mused, raising his glass again as though in toast.

"Seems like you have, too. In a way." The ballerina nodded, raising hers as well.

"I did?"

Minako smiled in her usual devious way, "You stopped being scared of me. After 8 months of
knowing me, and 7 of pretending you could avoid mention of what happened at my Snack Bar
during the snowstorm...you're finally willing to admit to 'us' and not just 'you and that crazy
Japanese ballerina chick that follows you around everywhere like some lost puppy.'"

Mikhail shook his head and laughed, "I guess I was a bit slow. So...then, to both of us graduating,
Kanpai."

"Za zdorov'e."

The silver man blinked at her, "...Your Russian accent is off."

"And you don't have sake." She grinned.
Yurio twiddled away on his phone in the resort common-room, idly watching some Japanese drama or another that one of the other guests had put on. Each thumb-slide across the screen moved Instagram's feed a bit higher. He saw the usual fare; Chris and JJ each posting that they were already on their way to Detroit, and on his private account, Otabek was making final arrangements as well. The last three members of the Final Six were all in Hasetsu, plus one, and had posted very little since arriving. Save one picture...Yurio thumbed his way past it, seeing Viktor winking at the camera while Yuri was practically asleep, leaning against his shoulder in their kitchen.

**v-nikiforov**

{picture}

**v-nikiforov** Finally back home in Hasetsu! The air off the water, the sound of winter seagulls, and my precious Sleeping Beauty who still won't get up! I don't mind though...he can stay there all day if he wants. ;)
#HomeIsWhereTheHubbyRests #SkateHusbands #Hasetsu #SagaPrefecture #y-nikiforov #AlsoMakkachin #CountDownToTheFinal #GPFDetroit #FinalSix #FourGoldBladesFourGoldMedals #LifeAndLove #SkateDadsToACoolKidWhosSometimesAnArsehole

"Blech..." Yurio groaned, sticking his tongue out, "He thinks he's hilarious."

His attention was grabbed by a knocking on the resort's front doors. No one seemed to answer it though, and the knocking came again.

"Oi!" The teen yelled, "Someone's at the front!"

"If they're not coming in then it's not a guest!" Mari called back from the kitchen area, sticking her head out quickly, looking like she was in the middle of something annoying, "Would you get it?"

"...I don't work here." The Russian Tiger said stiffly.

"Pleaaaaaaase!" Mari begged.

Yurio grit his teeth, but rose to stand indignantly, "Fine." He said bitterly, heading over to the panel, where a third knock came, "Hold your damn horses, I'm coming." He grabbed the two handles on the inside of the door and slid them both apart, seeing a delivery man there. Two of them, actually.

"Oh..." The first of the delivery men noticed him and looked down, "Isn't Hiroko here?"

"They sent me." Yurio crossed his arms, "What are you leaving?"

Each of them looked at their delivery clipboards, though the teen just looked past them. One of them had a small cart with a huge arrangement of flowers in it, and the other had a massive box on a small trolley.

"This is for Yuri." The first one said.

"So's mine." The other added.

Yurio's eye twitched, and he took a single step back onto the cowhide throw-rug, "KATSUDON, THERE'S SHIT AT THE DOOR FOR YOU."

"Oh wait, no..." The second corrected, looking again, "This one's for...YurA? Who's that?"

Green eyes turned back again just as it sounded like footsteps were coming over from another hall,
"Yura? ...That's...me." He said, stunned, looking from the delivery guy to the huge box behind him, "What is it...?" He wondered quietly, mostly to himself.

Yuri was there a moment later, looking through the doors and rubbing his arms where they were barely protected from the cold wind by the green resort robe over them, "What's all this? ...Flowers?"

Viktor chortled behind his hand when he realized what was there, but stayed back a little to watch it all play out.

Yurio just pushed the older skater aside and made room, looking at the two men, "Bring it all inside. We don't have shoes to go get it."

When it was done, and the two huge articles were inside the entrance-hall, the doors were slid closed again and each of the two Yuris glanced at their deliveries with confused looks on their faces. Yuri reached for what looked like a card within the big arrangement, opening it and reading it quietly to himself. When he was done, he was even more confused than he had been in the first place.

"I don't get it. Why did you buy me a giant apology bouquet?" He wondered nervously, turning his head towards his husband, "...Viktor?"

The Russian just calmly stepped forward, a deviously innocent smile on his face, leaning in close with an arm around his partner's back, and a well-placed hand sliding across the younger man's backside, giving the other side a gentle squeeze, "I'm very sorry, and I hope we can be friends again soon. Neh? Yuri..."

The younger skater's face just went beet-red, and his hands let the card slip free from the shock of it, "V-VIKTOR."

Yurio just rolled his eyes at them, even as Viktor was howling with laughter at his partner's expense. The annoyed teen went around the huge box, trying to find the best way to open it, and in the end just cut the tape with a pen he'd found on the guest check-in table. With the top folds free, he pulled the flaps back, and gazed within. He saw nothing that was a dead give-away to the box's contents, just sheets of green translucent plastic. Reaching in to start pulling it away, he threw the long bits away until there was a clear-plastic bag containing something big. It looked like faux-fur, colored orange, black, and white. The teen was stunned, but realization set in, and the banter between the two older skaters quickly died down as the Russian Kitten dismantled the box in a fury...then coming face to face with a life-size plush Siberian Tiger.

"...Whoa!" Yuri commented, distracted from his husband's teasing by the sight of the huge, regal beast, "Who got that for you?"

"Look, Yuri, there's a note." Viktor pointed out, raising a finger at a small envelope hidden just behind the big cat's neck.

The stunned teen went around to grab it, "It's probably from my annoying fanclub back home." He judged, flicking open the paper tab and pulling out the small card within. Green eyes scanned the inside, reading a simple line.

'I'm not mad at you. Please answer your phone. -Mikhail'

"...It's from the old man." Yurio said quietly, still a bit shocked to realize it, eyes moving over the paper to look over the huge tiger replica again.

"Wow~!"
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED THIRTY ONE

The more Yurio looked at the Siberian Tiger, the more his heart raced. When he realized that the creature had a rudimentary skeleton and could be posed in different ways, he was practically sobbing with excitement. There was even a discrete stand that came with it, so the creature could be posed in a more dynamic upright position, and even its jaws could be articulated.

Like the dutiful Emissary of Instagram that he was, Phichit was recording the entire spectacle on his phone. He and the two older skaters had taken to watching the teen like he was his own form of entertainment, though all three were mystified and enthralled, quietly watching him as he posed and reposed the tiger in all manner of menacing or cool stances. Makkachin snored quietly on the side, his fluffy head perched on his human's knee where he sat cross-legged.

Yuri leaned towards Viktor, hand coming up to hide his voice a little, "I think Mikhail hit a landmine with this one. I've never seen Yurio so excited before."

"Right?" The Russian agreed, "He wasn't even this crazy when he swiped the Grand Prix gold from you last year."

The younger skater felt somewhat deflated, "...Don't remind me!"

Phichit leaned in after that with a smug look on his face, "It's like how you used to be."

"Eh?"

Viktor looked over, "Do tell."

"Quit whispering, jackasses." Yurio suddenly interjected, staring at them from the front of the tiger, "I can hear you."

"Language." Yuri grimaced, sulking a bit still from Phichit's 'threat.'

The Thai skater just took it in stride, "Don't you remember?" He asked in a normal voice, sitting upright again for lack of needing to whisper, halting the recording for a bit and setting his phone-arm down, "You were bouncing off the walls that time you came back from Skate Canada, before Sochi."

"PHICHITO-KUUUUUUNNNN!" Yuri practically screamed, hyperventilating as he came running through the big halls of Detroit Metropolitan Airport, arms flailing in the air above himself.

The aforementioned then-teen lifted his head, waiting with other members of their Skate Club, "Yuri!?"

"HE TOUCHED ME." The older skater huffed, running right up to his friend and grabbing him by the head with a hand desperately clinging to each side of it, "VIKTOR NIKIFOROV SHOOK MY HAND AND TALKED TO ME."

"I saw it on tv!" Phichit answered, "Did you say anything back!?"
"NO." Yuri practically burst into tears on the spot, "I mean, n-not really!"

"What did he tell you!? WHAT DID YOU SAY BACK?"

The anxious skater took in a deep breath, the words coming out like a speeding vortex, "He said my name but thought he forgot what it was cuz it's hard to hear over the crowds when the announcers are talking so fast over the intercom and he apologized but HE SAID MY NAME and then he shook my hand and said 'see you at the final, good luck' and then he skated away it was so perfect." He still had tears running down his face from the excitement, "I WILL NEVER WASH THIS HAND AGAIN."

"BUT WHAT DID YOU SAY BACK!?" Phichit demanded, hands on his friend's shoulders, "I NEED DETAILS, YURI. DETAILS."

Celestino was barely picking up the rear by then, seeing where Yuri was still dying from the retelling.

"I said thank you!" The skater answered finally, "But then I went back to being too scared to say anything again!" He ruffled his hair frantically, "He was there the whole time at the Banquet too and I didn't say anything to him!" Yuri practically sunk down to the floor, dropping slowly to his knees as he truly realized his lost opportunity, grabbing at the sides of Phichit's khakis before finally landing his hands on the polished floor, "...He even waved at me to be nice and I just freaked out and ran away...!"

"Aw! Yuri!" Phichit knelt down and pat his back reassuringly, "You'll get another chance when you meet him on his own turf in Russia in 2 weeks! I'm sure you'll be able to recover!"

The coach raised a brow at his panicked student, and then waved dismissively at the other three figures that had gathered to meet them at the airport, "Don't mind Yuri. He's a bit star-struck right now."

They each just glanced at one another and laughed nervously.

Viktor leaned on his partner heavily, "So how long did you go before you washed your hand?" He laughed.

"...Like 3 minutes..." The younger sighed, "Celestino made me wash up because I touched the floor... It was traumatizing..."

Phichit just laughed as well, leaning back on his hands, "You managed to nail down the quad Loop in practice in those two weeks though. I don't think I ever saw someone do so many quads in such a short period of time before then."

"Yeah, he's a quad monster, this one." The silver Russian agreed, pawing at the man's hair affectionately, "If there weren't such strict rules about repeating jumps more than once, I bet he could do nothing but quads!"

"Pfft." Yuri huffed, "It's different doing them in practice. Jumping for points takes way more energy than just jumping to refine technique or whatever."

"I know." Viktor mused, "I was just saying. Doing nothing but quads would be boring anyway."

"Remember how I passed out at Worlds just for doing five of them?"
"You were dehydrated." The elder skater pointed out, "That's why you had such a raging migraine coming off the ice at the end."

"...And my amnesia."

The Russian just gently took his husband's face in his hands and turned it directly towards himself, "We will never speak of that moment again." He said eerily, the smile on his face making it even more weird.

"...S-Sumimasen..." Yuri answered anxiously.

Viktor just kept up the smile, moving only to tilt his face forward and give his husband a quick peck on the lips before letting him go again, "We should go to the Ice Castle. We've been loitering around Yu-Topia way longer than we meant to."

Phichit gasped, "You three should show me that Team Skate thing you were talking to each other about online during Trophée de France!"

Yurio glanced back at the mention of it, but turned his attention to the tiger again when he heard his Asian counterpart nixing it.

"No way." Yuri said, crossing his wrists in front of himself for emphasis, "It'll ruin the surprise if it gets online!"

"I'll be good!"

Viktor had his own phone in his hand by then, looking at Phichit's account like he knew to check, and held it out for the others to see, "He already posted Yuri's tiger-toy freakout."

"WHAT?" Yuri barked, shocked and horrified all at once.

The Thai skater waved his hands around nervously, "I couldn't help it!" He defended to the Russian Punk, finding the teen standing and looming over him suddenly.

"Take it down." Yurio demanded darkly, his voice eerily calm despite his eyes being hidden in shadow.

Viktor just gave an innocent smile, "It's already been Liked over 50 times. Cat's out of the bag now...literally." He laughed again, pointing at the teen, "Get it? Cat?" Then at the stuffed tiger, "Out of the bag? Cuz it was wrapped in plastic...?"

"...Yeah, sure, you're absolutely hysterical." Yurio deadpanned him, then turned back to Phichit, only to stare daggers for a few seconds before turning on his heel to go back to his faux feline, "If we're going to the Ice Castle then let's just go." He hugged his arms around the tiger's shoulders.

"...Are you planning on bringing that thing with you?" Yuri wondered, giving the teen a look like it was unbelievable.

"Of course not. Help me move it to my room."

"Oh...sure." The older skater agreed, rising up to his feet as the other two did so as well, "I guess we'll meet you out front."

"Okay~." Another quick kiss, and the oldest member of the group moved to take his leave, heading back down to the onsen locker-room where he'd left his things. Phichit was soon after him, hopping
gingerly to get out of the Russian Punk's crosshairs as quickly as he could, fearing the appearance of a red laser-dot on his back.

Yuri stepped over to help unhook the heavy plush from its mount, watching the teen heft it over his back as well as he could before starting to drag it out of the room as well, but heading the opposite direction that Viktor and Phichit had gone. Yuri stepped in close behind with the metal stand, following quietly to the teen's room. When they got to the small space, the same room Yurio had used during his previous brief stays, the tiger was heaved onto the bed. The older figure simply looked for a place that was out of the way to set the mount down, hoping no one would trip on it later. The walls of Yu-Topia Katsuki were paper-thin, after all, and he didn't doubt that the whole resort would hear about it if the Russian Tiger stubbed his toe.

"Did you put him up to this?"

"Huh?" Yuri turned back from where he'd started heading towards the door, "...Put who up to what?"

"The old man. Did you tell him to get this for me?" The blonde clarified stiffly, keeping his sights on the plush, back towards the door.

Cherry-hazel eyes just blinked at the younger figure, "...I don't tell Mikhail to do anything."

"...Then why did he get it?"

Yuri could hardly believe he'd heard the words, watching as the younger figure just silently stared at the tiger plush, massive as it was. He drew in a breath and leaned against the edge of the doorframe, "The thing with Mikhail sponsoring you might've started out as a favor, but he does actually care about you now, you know? He was really worried about why you weren't answering the phone."

"So you did talk to him."

"Sure." The older skater answered quietly, realizing the admission was inescapable, "I called him after Viktor and I got home. He said you wouldn't take his calls anymore, but I thought that might be because you went to sit in the onsen. ...Will you talk to him now?"

"What's there to talk about? He can't bribe me."

"I don't think he's trying to bribe you. He bought you something that he knew you'd like, because he pays attention to you and knows what you're about. If he didn't actually care about you, how would he know you have a thing for big cats? He and Minako-sensei took you to that zoo in France, too."

Yuri pointed out, "He was actually worried about how you've been treating him lately, like you don't want him around anymore."

"He needlessly stirred the shit-pot this weekend." The blonde admitted bitterly, "You were the first person to offer an olive-branch to me after things really went bad, even before Viktor... As soon as I saw Viktor's father though, I knew thing were going to go to Hell. I hated Mikhail for doing that... NHK was supposed to be fun. Unlike all these other events we've been to so far."

"Yeah, and he paid a high price for it. He got chewed out by Yakov, he got the cold shoulder from Minako-sensei, and from you...he was convinced that he was going to be sent away for it. In a backwards sort of way, you guys are really similar."

"The Hell is that supposed to mean?" Yurio grumbled, turning his head slightly.

"Mikhail's worst fear is being exiled...yours is being abandoned. He's gotten kind of attached to you,
and doesn't want to lose that." Yuri explained, pushing off the wall to step into the hallway beyond it, "I know you hate admitting when you care about people, other than your grandpa, but I really think you should talk to him. He can be something for you that Viktor and I could never be, and that even your own family never was." He watched the younger figure carefully for any sign of reaction, but Yurio was putting on a brave face and stood stoically, giving nothing away about what he was thinking, "In a way, I think he already is that person for you, and this whole thing with his kids back in Canada just made you realize it, because you feel like he might stop. But they were there long before you, and that didn't stop him from caring about you anyway...so what's happening now doesn't change anything. Cut him a bit of slack...a lot of people are depending on him all at once suddenly, and he's stretched pretty thin. ...But that doesn't mean he cares about you any less. Don't punish him by making him think he failed."

The teen remained where he was, hands in his hoodie's pockets, staring at the life-like tiger with down-cast eyes. It was a moment before he turned, realizing he'd caught his older counterpart just as he was about to start heading down the hall, "Katsudon..."

"...Huh?"

"...Yuri..." The Russian Punk corrected, raising his eyes up.

The older skater knew it was serious if Yurio was using his real name, so he gave his undivided attention, stepping back within the doorway.

No words came though, at least not immediately. The teen grit his teeth, looking aside, "...Never mind..."

"Come with us to the Ice Castle." Yuri offered, "Skating always helped me when I was feeling anxious about stuff. It's going to be pretty casual."

"...I'll catch up later or something." Yurio shook his head, "I'm going to stay here."

"...Oh. Okay." The older figure couldn't help but feel a little disappointed, his brow furrowed. He only felt reassured again when the teen took a few steps forward to close the gap between them and gave their customary departure hug. It was a bit surprising to note how long the blonde held on for though, but Yuri knew better than to call him out on it, or even mention that it had happened that way to begin with. He just returned the hug and held on as long as the teen did, letting go only when he felt Yurio pulling away again. Wordlessly, Yuri simply nodded, and took his leave.

The Russian Tiger waited for a minute before moving to sit on the edge of his bed, leaning back against the ribs of the plush tiger behind him. The 'beast' took up the entire length of the mattress, not even including its tail, which hung off the end. It felt protective, in a strange way...this life-sized replica of one of the planet's most elegant killing machines. To Yurio though, in that moment, it felt like his guardian, watching with unblinking eyes to keep him safe.

With that, he pulled his phone out of his hoodie, and dialed a number.
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED THIRTY TWO

Walking back down to the main part of the resort, Yuri couldn't help but think back on the moments prior. Yurio's words had pulled him back into the room, only to end with a 'never mind,' and it settled like curdled milk in the skater's sensitive stomach.

What was he going to say...?

It nagged at him endlessly, even as he made his way back into the onsen changing room and got back into the practice clothes he'd worn over from the house. Eventually getting to the main entryway, he couldn't help but be reminded of another time the teen had looked vulnerable.

It was just like that time in the waterfall last year, when he found his Agape. Back then it was his grandpa...I wonder if this time it was Mikhail? ...Who knows...he'll probably never tell me anyway.

The front door slid open, and Yuri caught sight of Phichit and Viktor both tossing snowballs across the resort's front patio, with Makkachin jumping up repeatedly in the middle trying to catch them. The pooch quickly caught sight of him though, and abandoned the snowballs almost immediately. With a bark, the big brown poof came charging at the hapless skater, knocking him right back inside the building like he'd done on the eve of their very first meeting nearly 2 years prior.

Sprawled and stunned, Yuri blinked down at the dog, only to get a few licks on the face before the pup's main human came to pull him off again with a laugh.

"You okay?" Viktor mused, leaning down and holding the dog up with its back to his chest, "Makkachin got you good."

Seeing the silver-haired legend looking down from above was a stark departure from Yuri's memory of that first encounter with the poodle, and his cheeks flushed lightly. He lazily dropped down all the way onto his back after that, staring at the ceiling with his arms splayed out to the side on the cowhide rug, "...Yeah, it's been a while since I got knocked over like that. Guess I wasn't paying attention."

The Russian hoisted his dog back over the threshold and set those cold front paws down in the snow, patting the animal's fluffy back leg to encourage him to go back outside, then turned to his rattled husband. Two ungloved hands went forward to pull the skater up to his feet again, but when Yuri was vertical once more, Viktor continued to pull those hands up, guiding them over his shoulders and only then let them go. His own hands went down around the man's sides and pulled him closer, "What took so long?" He purred.

Yuri gave an uncertain expression in response, lowering his voice in case the Russian Punk was somehow in earshot without his notice, "Yurio thinks we told Mikhail to get him the tiger plush."

"...Technically we did, kind of." Viktor answered, speaking quietly as well.

"You only suggested he do something nice for Yurio, in Detroit."

The older figure shrugged, "All the same."

Yuri sighed to himself, leaning his head forward to bury it into his husband's pale grey scarf, curling his arms around the back of the man's shoulders to hold a little tighter. He could feel the soft warmth
of Viktor's cheek and lips against his neck, and it was a small solace, "...He thinks it's just a bribe to convince him not to be upset about all the changes happening now. I don't know how to convince him that the world isn't out to get him. No matter what I do or say, it's like Yurio is firm in his belief that everyone is a betrayer waiting for the opportunity."

Phichit watched them quietly, but being unable to hear what they were saying, turned instead to kneel down in front of the poodle as Makkachin came trotting up to him. He reached forward and ruffled the dog's ears, playfully holding them out like they were wings. The flufferbutt just panted quietly, happy for the attention either way.

"I don't think there's anything you can do, Yuri." Viktor whispered, speaking the words against his spouse's skin, "Once he's made up his mind about someone, it's hard to make him change. Even I've had to make adjustments to how I handle him because of it."

The younger man sighed again, knowing it was too true.

...Yurio never acted like he was that close to anyone, but he still came all the way to Japan just to track Viktor down. Then he went back home to Russia with his tail between his legs, and was antagonistic towards Viktor for the rest of that entire season, climaxing at Worlds with that huge meltdown that got him kicked off the Russian team.

He pulled back a bit from the taller man's shoulder, looking into the pools of light blue that gazed back at him adoringly, but all he could do was furrow his brow in worry and cast his own eyes down again, forcing Viktor to worry a bit as well.

I don't know what more I can do to help him. Yuri thought, pulling his hands back down and clasping his fingers around the dark fleece lapels of the Russian's heavy jacket, Am I the only person he trusts...? Can I even truthfully say that about him? He keeps me at a distance even when he's trying to be open.

Viktor just held him closer, one hand coming up to weave fingers through raven hair, "Let's get going." He suggested, pulling the younger man out of his thoughts, "You need to do some footwork drills before you go crazy."

.

The call's out-going dial-tone rang on for an uncomfortably long time. The Russian Tiger was convinced it was going to go to voice-mail any second. However, just as he was pulling the phone away from his ear, he heard the click.

"...Mmmello...?" The voice answered blearily.

Yurio stayed quiet for a moment, but then closed his eyes and spoke simply, "Hey."

There was another pause, though it sounded like there was a rustling of blankets in the background. The man on the other end yawned and rose to his feet, quietly leaving the room with not but a pair of thin blue-plaid flannel pants on, "Sorry, I didn't realize it was you. Give me a second to go somewhere else." Mikhail whispered, hoping his movement and the flashing lights of his phone hadn't woken Minako up. He turned back as he was putting the door to, making sure she stayed where she was in the big bed, and tip-toed down the hall.

Feeling his way along the banister, the elder Russian slipped down the stairs, making his way down to the lower level and into his private study before turning on any lights.
The room was big. One side had a massive Belgian shrank; glass doors on the middle cabinets shielding numerous small trinkets from the dust of the open air. The uncovered shelves just under the roof of the solid wood wall-unit held rows of thick books, texts from college years gone by on one side, some with lettering in Cyrillic while others were in English, and books dedicated to the craft and art of architecture on the other. The rest of the enormous structure housed closed cabinet doors, some with small locks keeping them closed, others free to open. On the other side of the room, separated by a huge floor-to-ceiling window with wooden blinds pulled to half-tilt, was a solid wood L-desk, parked directly into the corner. The room's furnishing was completed with a casual comfort-corner; a low glass-top round table with two futons and a leather reclining-chair around it.

The walls were decorated with a few, albeit large framed pictures. The largest was a 6'x4' impressionist painting of the Moscow skyline, followed by several slightly smaller ones of varying shapes that featured the Triad of Rozovsky children, plus one with them and Mikhail all together from some trip when they were all much younger.

When the Russian sat in the leather office-chair in front of his computer and looked back towards the double-doors that lead into the room, he spotted two rather tall framed pictures. On the right side of the door, a blown up photo from his nephew's wedding photobook, featuring the world-famous couple in their 'Duetto' ensemble, Viktor behind Yuri, their hands clasped together somewhere outside the frame where their arms were raised, each of them looking towards center to see one another. On the left, one of Yurio in his 'Appassionato' outfit in the midst of a rather intense maneuver; the wide spin-kick from the very beginning of the program.

On the desk itself though, a smaller framed picture of Yurio and Minako from one of their brief visits to Moscow during the summer, and next to that, a three-unit frame with school photos of the man's kids again; more recent pictures.

"Okay, sorry about that." He said again, rubbing his eyes as they adjusted to the light, reclining back in the chair, "What's up? Got tired of me pestering you?"

"I..." Yurio started, "...Mhhhh... Thanks for the tiger."

"Oh wow, you got it already?" Mikhail mused, smiling a bit where he still had his fingers pinched at the bridge of his nose, eyes closed, "I didn't think it'd get there till Wednesday."

"You haven't called in hours."

"...It's 1am here, Yura, and I just spent 12 hours on a plane." The elder made a face, looking around in disbelief, "There's no phone service at 30,000 feet."

"...Mmh."

"You didn't call just to say thanks for a plush toy though, did you?"

"No."

Mikhail rolled the chair back a little on the thick plastic sheet beneath it, and kicked his feet up onto the edge of the desk, "Do you want to go first or should I?"

"Probably you."

"Okay." The elder Russian drew in a breath, "You don't have to feel angry or threatened by what's happening out here. I'm not going to pull my sponsorship of you and just piss-off into the sunset just because I have a few more things to handle now. I told you I'd take care of you and I'm going to."
Yurio slouched a bit further, sinking down against the side of the plush tiger. He pulled the phone from his ear though and clicked the screen to set it to Speaker, and set it down on his chest, crossing his arms behind his head.

"I've thought a little about how this whole thing is going to play out anyway... There really isn't a single thing I can do that'll work out well for everyone. The best I can think of is to move everyone to Hasetsu. You tag along with me there often enough anyway, and most people in the city speak English, so my kids won't feel like alie-"

"Your plans sound an awful lot like you think I'd be living with you."

"Not really. You were living with Lillia again after getting reinstated. Plus you still have that apartment in St. Petersburg with you mo-"

"It's basically my apartment." The teen corrected, "Well...mine and Potya's, anyway. My mother is barely around long enough to change and sleep and then leave again. I'm not even sure my father remembers the address."

"Who is taking care of your cat anyway? She's been alone for over 2 weeks now."

"I use a pet service when I'm gone. I prefer that she isn't in a kennel, so I pay for someone to stop by every other day to make sure everything is okay. The guy that goes sends me a video-text every time he's there. Cats are very adaptable." Yurio explained, hearing the sound of a car starting outside, "Potya can handle herself."

"Wouldn't you prefer to get to see her every day in person?" Mikhail said, the suggestion sounding rather abrupt.

The teen's green eyes widened, then narrowed, "What are you saying?"

"Viktor considers his dog to be like family. He once told me that he'd been really glad for the break he took from competition to coach Yuri, because it meant he got to spend a lot more time with Makkachin."

"So?"

"Isn't Potya like family to you?"

"Of course she is. Why would you suggest like she isn't?" Yurio pushed up to sitting, holding the phone aggressively in front of himself, looking a bit annoyed.

"Well, if I take the whole Fam Damily to Hasetsu, you'd be more than welcome to come with us. Bring your keekat with you." The elder explained, staying placidly still in his cushy chair, "It'd be super easy to transfer all your schooling stuff there, cuz I'd be doing all that for my kids already anyway. ...Hell, I think it'd probably be good for you to have some kids your own age to hang out with sometimes. Beka is the only person you like that's even close to your age."

"...Beka?" Yurio cocked a brow.

"That guy from little-former-Russia. The one you did that Pair Skate with at the China Exhibition."

The teen smacked his forehead, falling back to the tiger's side, phone dropping down to his chest again, "Otabek."

"Yeah, him."
"...'Beka.'" Yurio repeated incredulously, "Jesus Christ."

"Point is...he's not around a lot. You basically only see him at competition. You have no friends in St. Petersburg, and you basically think Mila is covered in cooties. Everyone else is way older than you, so you can't easily relate."

"Your son's an asshole." The blonde growled, "You couldn't convince me to hang out with him if you got me a small pride of life-size wildcat plushes."

"I know, I know, I'll be dealing with him tomorrow. I think you might have a lot in common with Viktoria though. You and her have the same style sense. She's big into wolves, and I honestly wouldn't be shocked if you could get her addicted to big cats if you tried."

The teen had no answer to that.

"Nikki is pretty laid back and easy-going, always wanting to please people; she'd be an easy friend if you gave her half a minute. ...I know you barely interacted with any of them when they popped up in Calgary, and you thought they were annoying just from that, but consider what you thought of Yuri before." Mikhail explained, switching the phone to his other ear, "You cornered him in a bathroom once and screamed at him to retire so you wouldn't have to bear the shame of sharing the same name when you got into Seniors. Now he's practically like a big brother to you. ...I remember how mad you got at me this past weekend, and all I can think of is how you were trying to protect him from my terrible ideas. You weren't even really trying to protect Viktor from it...you were there for Yuri. ...And he's still young enough that you can hang out with him and still have things to relate to one another about, so there's that, too."

"Why are you even talking about all this? What sense is there in asking me to move in with you and your family? It'd just be weird." The teen grumbled, flipping over to throw himself over the tiger's back, dropping the phone down to the blanket behind it and crossing his arms just over top of it, staring holes into the wall.

"Because you're family too, and I want to make sure you're always okay. It's easier to do that, and easier to help you out, when you're actually around."

Yurio's eyes went wide, though his brow crinkled like he didn't believe it, and was angry at the taunt.

"Ever since I reunited with Vivi, I've slowly been introduced to all the people in his life. You, Yuri, Minako...all of you have become really important to me. I was really scared this weekend that I'd fucked up so badly that I'd lose everything. It's happened to me twice already...I don't think I'd handle a third time very well." The elder Russian explained, "...But things in Sapporo actually ended up turning out really well. I got to keep my nephew, my first family...I got to keep my new, third family...and now, in a weird, fucked-up sort of way, I'm getting to take back my second family, too. To have all three together in one place would be like a dream for me. ...I can only offer it to you the same way I'll be offering it to my kids."

"And if they refuse, you won't be able to do shit." The teen said angrily, burying his face in his arms where he slouched over the wildcat's back.

"That's a possibility." Mikhail agreed with a despondent, though quiet sigh, "I have to consider what they want, too. I'm sure the possibilities have crossed their minds over the last 2 weeks. They might already be resigned to the idea that I'll be moving them out of Banff. All three of them know I don't like the place, and the decision is mine in the end. I'd just prefer that they go willingly."

"And if they don't?"
"I won't stay in Banff any longer than is necessary to let them finish out the school year. By then, Sergio will be 18, and the girls will have had all that time to get used to the idea that they'll be moving. I'll be moving to Hasetsu regardless, after that."

"Why Hasetsu though? Why not Moscow? You're Russian."

"The thing about family, Yuri...is that home is where they are." Mikhail explained quietly, "I have no personal attachments in Moscow. It was just a work outpost to me."

"Was?"

"I moved operations to St. Petersburg over the summer, because being there made it easier to watch over Vivi's things. I'll probably get rid of my time-share in Moscow once things in Banff are settled." The silver Russian said, pulling his feet off the desk and pushing to stand, switching phone-hands again and relaxing the other in the pocket of his flannel night-pants, "At this point...and I know you hate watching it, so I imagine hearing about it will make your skin crawl...but, things with Minako are getting a bit serious now. I...love her, and want to be with her. She lives in Hasetsu, and so do Vivi and his husband. Mentally, I'm already putting this house in Edmonton up for sale, and taking stock of all the stuff I'll be moving to Japan pretty soon. The only part of my family that's missing now is you..."

Yurio was in abject shock at the words he was hearing. He lifted his face from the crook of his folded arms, glaring down at the phone's faceplate like the man speaking through it was there in its place. He was almost mad that he could feel the sting in his eyes, and even more so when he could see his vision starting to blur, but he rubbed them on his sleeves before anything else could happen, and continued his rattled stare.

"...But, you're your own person, and I can't make you do anything you don't want to do." Mikhail went on, "Things with us will just stay the same as they've always been if you decide to stay in Russia. You have reason enough to stay where you are...Yakov and Lillia are there, and the St. Petersburg Skate Club isn't going anywhere, so I understand if you say no."

Still, the blonde couldn't think of what to say. His throat was hurting and he grit his teeth in a desperate bid to make it stop, but he couldn't do anything about the shaky breaths he drew in.

"Yuri?"

"...I...I don't...believe you..." He choked.

Mikhail was taken aback slightly, but he could hear the pained sound in the skater's voice. He glanced at the photos in the room, and inhaled deeply, "I'm going to text you some things. Hold the line." He said, hitting the home-button on the front of his phone and pulling up his camera app instead, taking aim at both the life-size skating frame and the smaller photo on his desk, and sent them both to the teen, then pulled the phone back to his ear. He listened to the sound of Yurio's phone receiving the messages, and Yurio himself moving around to pick it up to click over to the next window. He waited a moment to give the teen a chance to see the pictures, but then spoke softly, "I set these up over the summer. Got a big Viktuuri photo on the other side of the door, too. I promise, Yuri...I'm not screwing with you. You don't need to have my last name to be part of this. Admittedly, it might be weird at first, but we'll figure it out. That's what families do."

Tears ran down the young figure's face, even as he had his hand clawed over it, trying not to let it happen. He couldn't take his eyes off the two photos in the text window though. Before his emotions could get away from him though, Yurio dragged in a ragged breath, and spoke the only words he could think of, "...I'll think about it..." And promptly hung up the phone.
Mikhail heard the click, and pulled his own phone away from his ear, seeing the call window change back over to the text screen. The 'Delivered' footnote under his photo-messages changed to 'Seen.' Worried about the skater's state of mind, he thumbed another text, and sat on the edge of the desk to see if he'd reply.

Yurio's phone blinked, and he cast his emerald eyes over at it.

[Goodnight, Yuri. I'm proud of you. You're loved and we want you to be happy, and we'll support you in whatever you decide to do.]

His hands shook where he held the phone. He knew Mikhail could tell that he'd read the message, but his mind had gone blank, and he didn't know what to respond with. Mercifully, three of the prompts at the top of the new-message bar offered him respite from thinking, suggesting [I], [lol], and [Spasibo] so he wouldn't have to write anything himself. He tapped a finger against [Spasibo] and sent it before the phone fell from his hands, and he clung to the back of the faux tiger, trembling with every ounce of strength to not just burst out crying.

The elder looked at the text, nodded, and clicked his phone off, yawning against the back of the arm that held it. He pushed off the edge of the desk and started wandering back to bed, clicking off the lights of the study as he went through the doors. With his eyes having adjusted to the brightness, the house was pitch black when everything was dark again, and he pawed his way along the walls to get back to the stairs, and eventually, back into the master bedroom. His spot had cooled since he'd gotten up, but he crawled back in under the heavy blankets, twisted to plug his phone back in, and then went gently back to where he'd been originally.

He realized his efforts to spare Minako were lost when he felt her moving next to him, tossing an arm over his thin frame and resting her head on his chest like she'd been before, "...Sorry..." The Russian whispered.

"Must've been important if you got up to take that call." She mumbled sleepily, "What happened?"

"Yura liked the tiger." He answered, smiling to himself in the dark as one arm curled up around the woman's back, "Hopefully tomorrow will go just as well."
Chapter 233

Chapter Notes

Sorry to keep you all waiting. I had major writer's block last weekend and went back instead to start making edits to the start of the story. As of now, Ch1-11 have been updated in their Final Forms, and quite a lot of new content has been added, including a whole brand new chapter. Sorry again.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED THIRTY THREE

The Russian Punk awoke with a start, feeling the weight of an arm over his back. Somehow, the huge, heavy plush tiger had fallen slightly over him while he slept. All he remembered from beforehand was throwing the front paw over his shoulder to bury his head under the beast's frame. He glanced around the room after that, pulling himself free of the tiger's grasp and pushing to sit up on his knees.

A terse look at his phone told him it was early evening at that point, "Great...I was out for like 3 hours..."

The words of his last conversation were still echoing around in his head, and he looked down at the wrinkles in the blanket, not sure what to make of it all. Grinding his teeth for a moment, he closed his eyes, and moved to get up onto his feet. He paused briefly in the doorway and glanced back at the huge plush tiger.

Why would he make an offer like that when there's so many variables? One thing could go wrong and the whole thing would fall apart. Dumbass...

The door was pulled shut behind himself harshly, but the teen paid it no mind, heading down to the common room and then towards the doors to leave. He quickly threw on a heavy coat and grabbed for a scarf, but even then, it was jarring to feel the cold winter air on his face when he left.

The sky was clear by then, leaving the subtlest hints of the night sky to peek through the purples and oranges of dusk. The first and brightest stars were starting to glow dimly through the horizon.

Yurio turned his emerald-green eyes towards the Ice Castle's direction, and pushed through the shoveled-snow walkway to start heading there.

SsssskSHHA-...THOKskshhhhssss...

Viktor moved through the out-bound slide of his quad Loop, then kicked off again for the triple Loop to follow.

This is who I am, I'm not going to hide!

Yurio pushed the doors open that lead into the rink-side area from the skate rental desk. Yuuko was watching him from behind the counter, but he'd said little and nothing as he passed her.
Cuz the greatest risk we'll ever take is by far...

Green eyes watched as the silver Russian pushed into his step sequence, twisting about elegantly on the ice to the music as it played from the portal stereo at one end of the rink.

To stand in the light and be seen as we are...  
To stand in the light and be seen as we are...

Viktor rotated in a diagonal across the ice, down on one knee, sliding directly across the cartoonish samurai mascots embedded in the frost. He had one arm bent over his head, lifting his face to the rafters as the other arm arced out to the side. When he opened his eyes to rise back up to his feet though, he caught sight of a certain blond-haired head near the doors, and stopped the performance. The music went on without him, but the Russian waved; he was alone.

"Hey, Yuri."

"Hey."

The silver skater moved over to the rink wall and grabbed his notepad, cut the music off, and plunged the arena into near-silence, save the scratching of his blades along the ice, "You missed out on all the fun earlier." He explained, moving closer slowly, "We kind of took over the kids' class that was still here. It was complete chaos." He laughed, putting his hands on his hips casually, "One little girl was so mad about Minako being gone that we had to convince her that skating was just ballet with knife-boots. You'd have been real handy for that."

"Why?" The teen answered stiffly.

"I remember Uncle Mimi saying that you had to help with the kids' classes back in St. Petersburg over the summer. Plus, you've had all that extra ballet influence from your choreographer, so you would've been a great example of how the two are similar."

"You know ballet."

Viktor shrugged, "Sure, but it's not as obvious as it is with you lately."

"Where'd everyone go? I thought you'd all be here for a while." Yurio changed the subject, leaning over the rink-wall and setting his chin over his crossed arms.

"Yuri and his friend went out on their own. I decided to stay so I could practice my new Free Skate. We're leaving for Detroit tomorrow, so..."

"So it's just you here."

"Da."

There was silence between them again after that, but the taller skater simply nodded to himself and started moving around again. He pulled the notepad up and slid the pencil out from where it was woven into the coils at the top, glancing at the planned lineup in the list. He crossed out where it said 4T-3Lo and wrote instead 4Lz-3Lo, then tapped the eraser against his lip as he scanned the rest.

"Did they say where they were going?" Yurio asked, getting the man's attention again, and forcing him to drop a toe-pick to stop moving.

"Huh? No, they hadn't decided before they left." Viktor paused a moment, turning slightly and lowering the pencil, giving a somewhat skeptical look, "...Did you need something?"
The blond shrugged and moved to turn around, "I just wanted Katsudon's opinion on something. It's fine. I'll find him later." He started heading back towards the doors after that, pulling one hand out of his heavy jacket to reach for the handle.

"What, on the Mikhail thing?"

Yurio stopped, hand on the cold metal, turning his eyes back to look past the rim of his hood, "...Sort of."

"You should talk to Mikhail about it, not Yuri."

"I did. That's why I'm here now." The Russian Tiger said simply, turning back to the door, "The old man said something that made me think, but...I don't know."

Viktor made a face, though the teen hadn't seen it. He drew in a sharp breath and headed over to the rink wall nearest the younger skater, "What'd he say?"

"Some stupid idea about him saying he's going to move to Hasetsu to be with Okukawa, and that he'll be dragging his Hellspawn with him, but that he wants me to be here, too. It's dumb."

The silver Russian glanced to the side, almost rolling his eyes a bit, but then turned back, slouching over the wall casually, "If you moved to Hasetsu, you wouldn't be able to train under Yakov anymore. You'd need a new coach."

Yurio tried not to react, but he felt his heart clench in his chest all the same, "Yeah, I would."

"So what are you going to do about it?" Viktor asked simply, his tone unchanging.

The teen could feel the blood leave his face, and he pushed the door open to step through, "Nothing, I guess." The door clicked closed behind him, and he left the Ice Castle without another word.

Crystal-blue eyes watched him disappear, but the man they belonged to did nothing to give chase. He just pushed back up to standing and crossed his arms, tapping the pencil against his elbow as he looked around. He flinched slightly when he saw Yuuko coming in the way Yurio left.

"Is everything okay...?" She asked quietly.

"Yeah, why?" He wondered back, pushing forward to get back to the stereo and reset his music.

"Oh..." The Madonna shied away a bit, looking back out through the doors, then turning back again, "Yurio looked crushed about something. I thought-"

"It's nothing." Viktor insisted simply, setting the pencil and notepad down, "He just came looking for Yuri and Yuri wasn't here." He hit Play on the front of the stereo and kicked off swiftly towards the center of the rink, quickly took his position, and waited for the start-delay to catch up.

*Stand in the light and be seen as we are...*

"Kanpaaaai!" Yuri and Phichit cheered, clinking their glasses together as they sat at the 7-person sushi bar of the small Sushidokoro Tsukuta. They drained their tiny cups of Sake and set them down next to the bottle they shared between them.

"Ahh! This is so great!" The Thai skater said excitedly, "I didn't get to do so much last time I was here! We were all so busy with things!"
"Right?"

"So when are you coming to Bangkok?"

Yuri lowered his head in an apologetic bow, "I've been thinking about it! Honest! I just don't know yet."

"Oh! You should come before Four Continents, then we can go together like we're doing for the Final!"

The first pieces of nigiri were being set on the flat wooden tabletop, and Yuri reached for his with his white ceramic chopsticks, "That actually sounds like a really great idea. I'll tell Viktor so we can start planning."

"Maybe I'll even get onto the podium with you this time." Phichit said hopefully, grabbing for his own piece of the fancy fish display, "Now that I can land the quad Loop, I can compete at a higher level. Beating JJ and Otabek will still be hard though..."

"Considering how long it took me to get up there, I don't think there's any hurry." The other skater pointed out, reaching next for a piece of the palate-cleansing ginger, ready for the next morsel, "But there's never any guarantee any of us will be medaling anyway. Otabek really surprised everyone with his Worlds performance before he came into the Grand Prix for the first time last year. Now he's just steamrolling everyone."

"Remember when he made JJ fall apart at the Final?" The Thai skater laughed, "I've never seen someone get cold feet so fast! JJ got so flustered that he forgot to start when the music began!"

"I can't judge." Yuri sighed nervously, "A breeze could pass over the back of my neck just right and I'll turn into a worthless puddle on the ice. If another competitor got under my skin, I don't even know what I'd do. I'd be a nervous wreck."

"Yeah but you're practically the Come-Back King, Yuri." Phichit teased, "So if you're going to have a panic-attack, always do it before your Free Skate!"

The older skater just gave a nervous smile, "Don't say that, I'll end up doing the exact opposite next time."

Two more pieces of nigiri came before them, and each figure reached for his own.

"Your Free Skate in China was something else. Really." Phichit went on, "I don't think I've ever seen you fight so hard. Not to mention, before you even went onto the ice, and were talking to Viktor at rink-side..."

"Yeah..."

The memory of that afternoon was suddenly fresh. The arena, full of screaming fans chanting his name, many holding up banners telling him to 'Overcome the Short Program,' in reference to his husband's roof-top melt-down the night before, and the way Viktor himself completely broke down crying when he saw it all, too.

_That Free Skate was both our battles, not just mine. I don't know that I would've been half as motivated to try that hard if I still had Celestino as my coach. Going out there..._

He cast his cherry-hazel eyes on his ring and bent his thumb over to touch it a little.
...I wasn't just skating to get Gold, or even to get into the Final. I was skating to protect Viktor's honor and reputation. I couldn't just let my mental weakness stop us from achieving our goals.

"I hope I can skate like that one day." Phichit said, his voice trailing like he was dreaming it in his mind's eye, "Scoring over 100 in the SP, and over 210 in the FP...or even higher."

"You'll get there. I'm sure of it."

"Are you going to try to beat Viktor's FP records soon?" The Thai skater went on, reaching for the third piece of nigiri set before them, "Eight quads in a single program?"

"No way." He shook his head, "I went down on just five before."

"People keep saying it was only because you were dehydrated."

"Even still..." Yuri held the morsel in front of himself, "What Viktor did for his FP wasn't normal, even for him. After saying last year that he didn't even want to do more than 3, only to belt out 8, including the quad Axel? Maybe Yurio will be able to do it in his own time, but not me. I think I might be able to do 6 at the most, but I'd need 'Overcome the Short Program' levels of motivation to get me there."

"Why only 6? Viktor's talked about your stamina before, and you guys are always putting your hardest jumps at the end for the point bonuses. If you flipped things around and put the hard ones at the start instead, you could put the easier ones at the end."

"Maybe if it were one of my old programs." The skater explained, eating the nigiri quickly, "But the shows Viktor choreographs are really hard. I'm worn out at the end as it is, even just doing the 4 quads we already plan."

"I guess that's true. I bet Viktor gets a lot of requests from people asking him to choreograph stuff for them now!"

"...I'm...actually not sure on that." Yuri tapped his lip with the end of the chopsticks, looking up in thought, "Maybe he has and I just don't know, but I feel like he'd say something if he did. Mikhail once suggested we think about managing a skating rink when we're both retired, so I'm sure Viktor would've thought it funny if someone asked him for stuff like we already did."

"Ooohh...a skating rink? That'd be awesome! People would come from all over to learn how to skate from you guys!"

"That's what Mikhail was saying, too."

"So you're thinking about it?" Phichit seemed excited about the idea, "I'd come!"

"I actually hadn't put much thought into it yet." Yuri gave a hesitant smile, "We'd have to buy the Ice Castle, or move somewhere else, if we wanted to do that...and I'm just not sure. Someone will have to take over Yu-Topia when my parents finally decide to stop managing it."

"What about your big sister?"

"I don't think she'll want to stay in Hasetsu forever." He said, looking over at the Nori soup just to the side of his hand, "But maybe. I dunno. It's all so far in the future now, it's hard to want to worry about it. I still owe Viktor 4 World Championship victories."

"Do you think you'll get Gold at the Final this time?" Phichit wondered, "You've been outscoring
Plisetsky a lot already this season."

Yuri just huffed a laugh at that and turned slightly to look at his friend, "I like how you skipped the idea of beating Viktor and just went right to Yurio."

"I've already seen you beat Viktor when you're both at the top of your A-Game." The man winked, "But I've also seen Yurio beat Viktor's World Record. You added 50 points to your Free Skate score between Rostelecom and the Final last year, too, so it's obvious that anything's possible. Imagine Yurio putting 50 points on his own Free Skate."

"Might as well retire right then." Yuri laughed, "He already makes me nervous. He's only 16 and he's scoring as high as he does... Not even Viktor was doing that well when he was 16."

"People tend to get ahead way faster when they have Champions as rink-mates. Imagine how much better Viktor would've been back then if he had his future self as his coach. He'd have the experience and knowledge, technique and finesse...all of it. If Yurio were on his own, or if he only had rink-mates like that one creepy guy on his team..."

"Georgi?"

"Yeah him." Phichit pointed with his chopsticks, "He'd probably be way more average."

"Yurio's about the same age as one of my local fans." Yuri went on, "Kenjiro Minami-kun...you remember him from the wedding party?"

"Wasn't he that super excitable kid with the red and yellow hair?"

"That's the one. Him and Yurio were rivals in Juniors, but Minami-kun barely scores over half of what Yurio does these days."

"So you see?"

"Yeah..."

"And it's true for you, too. Ever since Viktor turned up, your own scores have shot through the roof. I bet that anyone who trains under him in the future will see the same results."

Yuri just gave a look, "I'm the only person Viktor's ever actually coached though, and the reason I got good wasn't just because he was my coach. He changed my whole mindset about competition."

"And other things!" Phichit laughed, "Mr. Nikiforov."

The older skater's cheeks went pink, and he turned back with a wry smile, "Yeah." He then looked frantic, "Ah! He was looking through your Instagram archive once, when we were on our way to St. Petersburg last year! You had this one picture of me in my bedroom back in Detroit and he saw the framed photo of himself that I kept in there as motivation!"

"Oh wow, I bet you died!"

"I DID, IT WAS HORRIBLE." The skater said, putting his chopsticks down to hold his head, "It would've been a hundred times worse if he only just saw it for the first time during that video you gave to Yuuko for the wedding party! Gaaahhh...I was so bad back then..."

"It's so funny how he turned out to like you so much." Phichit pointed out, nibbling on a piece of the Rockfish sashimi in a bowl nearby, "All those times you came back from a competition you'd had
with him and couldn't even really say hi. Now you're leaving claw-marks on his back!" He was laughing quite hard then.

Yuri could feel the blood draining from his face as he looked on, aghast, at the amused skater next to him, "Ph-Phichito-kun!"

"I feel so silly for not having thought of that when I saw the marks the first time!" He went on, getting the attention of the three other patrons who were in there with them further down the counter, "In Bangkok though, there's so many shrines to all the dozens of different famous ghosts...I guess I was just still in that mindset when I saw it!" The hilarity of the situation suddenly faded though, and Phichit's expression got rather serious. He turned on his chair and grabbed Yuri by the sides of both shoulders, "Yuri, is he hurting you!? Are those marks from you trying to get away and he won't let you!?

"W-what!? N-no!" The frantic skater answered, shaking his head emphatically.

"I know you're his biggest fan but if he's abusing you then you need to get out of there!"

"He'snotabusingmeohmygod."

"Then why are you leaving marks in his skin like that...?"

The blood returned to Yuri's face and his cheeks went bright red, "...C-Cuz...he makes me feel good..." He said quietly, mostly whispering, "And h-he...he likes it when I leave marks...on him, too..."

Even Phichit's face went red at that, and both skaters turned to sit normally after that, "...Oh." He said hesitantly, looking at the bowl of salt-grilled Iwashi sardines nearby, "...Uh...oh. Hm."

"...What?" Yuri grimaced, "You're not imagining us now are you?" He glowered dubiously. Phichit just shook his head frantically, "N-no way! That'd be weird! You're my friend!"

"YOUAREIMAGININGUS."

"NOTINTENTIONALLY. YOUPUTITINMYHEADYOURSELF. ICANTHELPITNOW. THISISYOURFAULT."

"PHICHITO-KUN."

The whole bar was looking at them with nervous expressions on their faces.
"It's going to be so weird to be at a competition like this without Ciao Ciao." Phichit lamented quietly, trying to keep his spirits up all the same, "I wonder if he'll come anyway?"

"Didn't he go back to Thailand?" Yuri wondered.

They walked along Hasetsu's streets under the light of the street lamps, making their way back north to cross the first foot-bridge over the river. They could see the stone-faced stairway that rose above the road next to the water.

"Initially. He emailed me earlier saying he'd be in Michigan after all. He said that when we realized I wasn't going to be competing, and he had to break the news to everyone out there, they made a big fuss over it and insisted he come anyway."

"...So I guess they knew you were going to be there?"

"Yeah." Phichit nodded, taking the first step up the side of the bridge, "That's part of why they said he should come. He told everyone at the Skate Club that I'd be going with you and Viktor, so folks started making a big deal out of how we should all be there together. Ciao Ciao just isn't sure if he'll be watching the Final from the audience or from the Club. It's always weird to turn up anyway when you aren't part of things, especially when you were pretty sure you would be."

"That hasn't stopped Yurio from showing up whenever he feels like it." Yuri laughed nervously, "People stopped trying to tell him he couldn't be in the prep area after a while."

"It's a little different with him." The Thai skater sighed, his usual happy demeanor starting to fade out as they started moving across the thin pedestrian-only walkway, "He turned up unexpectedly at competitions he wasn't scheduled to skate at. For Ciao Ciao and me...going to the Final as spectators rather than competitors, after having come so close to getting in..."

The older figure gave a worried look, but wasn't sure what else to say. He cast his eyes up at Hasetsu Castle, one hand set on the painted wood railing of the footbridge, then looking off to the right where the second bridge would lead them beyond the Ice Castle and towards Yu-Topia. Snow crunched under their shoes as they kept walking.

"There's been times where skaters who win Gold haven't made it to the Final in the end." Yuri offered, "Viktor and I both tempted fate on that end this season. I could only imagine the shame if one, or even if both of us hadn't managed to get ourselves together and pull through the Free Program."

"I have nothing to be ashamed of." Phichit said, "Sorry if I made it sound like that. I'm sad that I'm not competing at the Final, but I'm still proud of what I managed to do so far this season. Tying with Chris for last must've made him nervous, too. He's been competing against Viktor almost toe-to-toe every year for a long time. If he didn't make it to the Final during Viktor's come-back season, he'd probably have burned the Little Caesar's Arena down just to stop the event from happening without him."
They both found an awkward sort of humor at the idea, and laughed quietly as they moved past the mid-point of the bridge.

"Yeah... Chris is right there between Viktor and I in terms of age. This might be his last chance to beat Viktor at something before one or both of them stops competing." Yuri agreed, "It was kind of funny listening to them at Worlds last year when we were doing our victory lap; hearing Chris offer to trade Viktor for the Silver medal if he disliked it so much..."

"Wow, yeah..." Phichit nodded, turning to look at the older skater next to him, "I remember watching the kiss and cry for your score...the look on Viktor's face when he realized you'd bumped him off at the end..."

"If that hadn't been his only competition last year, I'm sure he would've beaten me by a long shot." Yuri contested, turning slightly to start heading down the steps that lead to the last alley before arriving on the next major street, "He had only spent a few weeks practicing before then. A bunch of people were giving him grief about how he'd only be at Worlds, as though it was because he'd tried and failed to join the JSF instead or something, and had to settle at the last minute to stay with the RSF just to get to go."

"I remember." The Thai skater nodded, "People were really upset about it all back then. Some die-hard fans got really mad at him for delaying his return, as though he had any control over it."

"...He had some control over it, but..." Yuri lifted his head and sighed, "He chose to put coaching first. If Japan and Russia didn't always hold their Nationals at the same time then it wouldn't have been as much of a problem...but he still only gave himself two weeks to get ready."

"Isn't that what he's doing right now?" Phichit laughed, "Changing his Free Skate a week before the Final?"

"That's a little different. He's only planning one program, not three."

"Three?"

"I was counting the Exhibition, cuz he would've skated it whether he medaled or not."

"Ah, yeah."

"I stayed off Instagram for a while after I got to St. Petersburg. After seeing the subtitled video of the RSF conference, I didn't want to know what people were saying anymore."

They turned right as they made it to the main road, passing in front of the High School as they started to circle the bottom of the hill under the castle.

"Probably a good idea." Phichit agreed, "Some folks were saying some pretty nasty things back then. It took till Four Continents for it all to really settle down again."

"Some people in Korea actually thought Viktor was competing there." Yuri reminisced, "They all forgot that he was still coaching me. Some even thought he had managed to join the JSF at that point."

"Ah, I remember how excited everyone got when you held out your hand during your Exhibition there." The younger skater mused, "The audience completely lost it when Viktor came onto the ice. Whatever fans he might've lost over his delayed come-back and all the confusion surrounding it, he gained legions more just on the Viktuuri ship." Phichit laughed and nuded his friend's arm with an elbow, "Did you see the hashtag at NHK where people thought you weren't going to skate at the
Gala just because your hair was down?"

"Yeah!" The older figure nodded, "I checked the feed a while after the show and saw everyone flipping out. The tag changed over from #HairDownNotSkating to #HairDownSTILLSKATING. It's crazy."

Coming around the east side of the hill, they could see where Minako's car was still parked in front of the Ice Castle, and decided to head across the street rather than continue down the bridge as they'd originally planned. When they came to the outside doors of the rink and found them locked, Yuri cleared a foggy patch on the glass and looked inside.

"The lights are off, but I don't think Viktor would've forgotten to drive the car back." He said, trying to spot if any lights were still on, but it was difficult to tell around corners and through a few other doors within the building. He suddenly spotted Yuuko, coming into the skate rental area from rink-side, and waved at her, "Yuu-chan! Let us in!"

She came up quickly and unlocked the entranceway, pushing the outside panel open a bit, "Sorry! I didn't know if you guys were going to be coming back this late. Glad you rattled on the doors a bit; I wouldn't have heard you otherwise. Come on in."

The duo moved through, and the Madonna locked the doors again behind them, ushering them through to rink-side before anyone else saw and wanted to be let in, too. They passed by the main counter and looked through the glass to spot a certain silver-haired blur going by further in.

"Wow, he's been practicing this whole time?" Yuri wondered quietly, hearing the music playing louder as they pushed through the last barrier.

"Pretty much." Yuuko nodded, sneaking up to the rink wall with a skater on either side, with just their heads peeking over the edge, "Oh, did you ever get hold of Yurio?"

"Yurio?" He shook his head, "I didn't know I was supposed to."

"Yeah, he came by here earlier, looking for you apparently. He looked pretty upset that you weren't around. I thought maybe he'd text you or something."

"No...haven't seen or heard a peep." Yuri looked past the woman to Phichit on her other side, but made a face like he wasn't sure what to do.

The Thai skater shrugged as well, "He probably went back to Yu-Topia then."

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"He talked to Viktor a bit, but didn't say a word to me other than hello." Yuuko sighed, "It was super weird."

"...Uh oh." Yuri lowered his head down, only his fingers visible on the rink wall after that.

"Uh oh?" The other two repeated, forgetting to whisper.

"This whole thing with Mikhail...if Yurio came here looking for me, but then talked to Viktor instead and left all upset about something..." He said, the gears in his head turning, the idea of being quiet being lost on him as well by then, "I wonder if Yurio asked Viktor about being his coach again."

"...So Viktor said no...?" Phichit wondered.
"What'd I say no to?"

"GYAAHH!"

All three launched from the wall and backed up against the glass door, each of them on the edge of a heart attack from the surprise. When they got their wits about them, they saw the silver Russian leaning against the rink wall just by where they'd been a moment before, holding his head up with a palm under his chin, resting on that elbow, smiling nervously at them.

"Sorry?" He laughed.

"V-Viktor!" Yuri fell down flat on the floor, his whole body limp after the adrenaline rush of being so spooked.

The skater turned around where he stood on the ice, and hopped up to sit on the top of the wall, then swung his legs over the edge to sit facing them in the same spot, "Did you have fun?" He wondered casually, sweat rolling down his frame, his hair disheveled and sticking to his face in places.

"Yeah, dinner was nice." Phichit answered for them, dropping down as well with an exasperated heave for breath.

Viktor leaned down to rest a finger over his chin, looking on at them all curiously. He crossed one ankle over the other knee and laughed again, "How long were you guys watching for? I really got in the zone there for a bit."

Yuri raised one hand and pointed to the ceiling, "Just a minute or so." And dropped it again, "We saw Minako-sensei's car in the parking lot and came up to see if you were still here. We were on our way back to Yu-Topia otherwise."

The silver Russian nodded, but then moved his hands down to scrape the accumulated frost off of his blades, reaching first for the one that was already up over one knee, "Where'd you go? Someplace I know?"

"That 7-seater sushi place south of here." The younger skater answered, finally picking himself up again, only to spot Yuuko's expression changing. She started pawing at his shoulder frantically, eyes gaping wide as she looked ahead, right before falling back to the floor with an explosive nosebleed.

Phichit quickly went around him to get to the woman's side, trying to see if she was okay, but Yuri just turned his head back to see what had caused it. Viktor had gone from defrosting his skates to pulling his wet t-shirt off, and rubbed his face on it as well. Yuri just blushed a bit and smirked, "Careful, Viktor. We might have to register your half-naked self as a weapon if you keep that up."

"A weapon?" The Russian chortled at that, furling the black t-shirt out and then flipping it over his shoulder like a rolled-up towel, setting his hands on his hips where he still sat and striking a minor pose, "Maybe a weapon of mass appeal."

"...So much Eros...too much Eros...!" Yuuko was muttering from the floor still, "It's not adultery if I'm only looking right?"

Phichit just smiled down on her uncertainly, "I...I don't know!"

Blades set down on the floor after that, and the skater stepped over to start helping the group back up to their feet. Of course, he helped his husband up first since he was closer, but then moved over to help get Yuuko up next, reaching both hands down to take hers and heft her up as though she were as light as air. She went up limply, like a loose-jointed mannequin, her nosebleed bursting like a dam
all over again when she found her short-statured-self staring straight at the tall man's bare physique.

"I'd give you a hug as an apology, but I'm all sweaty." He teased.

Yuuko just frantically brought both hands down over her eyes, giggling nervously.

Yuri just gave an amused-skeptical look as he helped Phichit up, and leaned into his partner's earshot, whispering behind a hand, "I think you broke her brain."

"Maybe just a little bit." He smiled, rather innocently at that.

"Let's get back to Yu-Topia then. We can all sit in the onsen for a bit." The younger skater offered, finding a bare arm coming around him suddenly, followed by the full embrace of a slightly-tacky-feeling athlete, "Ack, V-Viktor...you're-

His words were cut off with a kiss, and the fiendishly mischievous smile that followed, "I'm going to what?" The silver legend purred.

"Gah, you taste all salty. Pfeh..." The younger skater was making a face again, like when he'd noticed the minty flavor on his lips after their arrival.

Viktor just laughed, "You've never complained about that before."

And suddenly...there were two torrential nosebleeds spraying everywhere.

"Wow~! The hot-spring always feels so great after a long practice session!" Viktor called out, adjusting where his folded towel sat on his head, finding his usual place on the far end of the pool. He draped his left arm casually over his husband's shoulder, and reached forward with the right to pull a small glass of sweet-potato shochu from the wooden box it had been sitting in. Floating in the water was a barrel-bottom cut-out tray holding two smaller square wooden boxes, one empty save for the overflowing shochu still sitting in it, and the other holding a second glass, as yet untouched.

Yuri just sighed contentedly and closed his eyes, relaxing in the water with his head resting on the arm behind his neck, "This is really great."

"So what were you guys all talking about earlier, before I scared you?" Viktor laughed, sipping at his drink before setting the glass back down into its box, "Whatever it was, it was so important that none of you three heard me coming."

"Oh...Yuu-chan said Yurio had gone by the rink looking for me, but then left looking really upset when he found out I wasn't there." The smaller figure answered, opening just one eye to look at the man, "I hadn't heard from him at all since earlier today. I just thought...if he'd talked to you before he left the Ice Castle, whatever it was that upset him...might've been something that you guys talked about."

"Not much was said." Viktor shrugged.

"What was said though? Did he say what he wanted me for? I doubt he would've been upset at me not being there. Maybe annoyed, but..."

The Russian paused a moment to think, crystal-blue eyes watching as the door across from him opened and Phichit came out, holding the usual small towel in front of himself as he moved across the deck to the water's edge. The Thai skater and Yuri greeted one another as usual, though they'd
only been apart for a few minutes while the former finished the required pre-onsen shower, and then slowly moved down to sit on the edge, letting his feet adjust to the heat for a bit.

"He didn't really say." Viktor shrugged, reaching a finger forward to make sure the floating tray didn't get too far away, "Something about the thing with Uncle Mimi."

"...Oh. I wonder if he called him after I left then." Yuri said quietly, snagging his glass from the tray while it was close and taking a light sip from it, "It's probably super late in Canada right now though."

"He said they talked." The Russian reluctantly confessed, "Apparently Mimi intends to move to Hasetsu at some point."

"What? He's already decided!?" Yuri moved to sitting upright, pulling his head off the man's arm and giving a somewhat alarmed look, "...But...his kids, they...wouldn't they hate it? I mean, if he comes here, then...right? He said so himself."

"I already expected that it was a possibility from the moment he explained why he had to go back." Viktor said, looking somewhat disappointed, "And then he said yesterday that he was leaning a lot towards what Minako-sensei would want, which inevitably means he'll be coming here at some point."

"...You don't look super-thrilled about that." The younger figure noted, slouching a bit where he sat.

"I can't tell Mimi what to do with his own life, and we're well past the point of me telling him to get out of mine. I just didn't want to worry about the rest until people actually started making decisions about what was going to happen. Cross that bridge when we come to it and all that." The Russian explained simply, unhooking his finger from the tray to grab at his own glass again, "What Yurio said was a really short thing, so I'm not actually sure the extent of what they talked about. I think Mimi respects us both enough to not just decide to come here without talking to us about it first though. At this point, he probably hasn't even left home yet, so whatever ideas he might've put into Yurio's head are moot. If his kids put up a huge fight about moving to Japan, then he'd be crazy to force them over here. They already left a bad taste in my mouth just from that one brief meeting in Calgary. If they come here with an attitude even worse than then, I'll boot them all into Hasetsu Bay myself."

"...Yeah..." Yuri nodded unenthusiastically, moving to sit back where he'd been before. He slid his hand back to his husband's thigh and leaned his head against the man's arm again, looking up into the clear sky, "All the stuff we told him over the phone, I hope we didn't give him the impression that he has to do something with Yurio though. We've already asked so much from him. Maybe it'd just be easier if Yurio stays in St. Petersburg, and Mikhail just goes between all these places like he did last year."

"Da. It's not our problem until someone makes it our problem." Viktor agreed, "Let them figure it out on their own."

"If Mikhail decides to move here though, and Yurio agrees to come, too...he'll need to get a new coach." The younger skater pointed out, "I mentioned it before, but you didn't really acknowledge it."

"Da." Viktor sipped at his drink.

"Did Yurio ask you to be his coach?"
"No."

"Oh..." Yuri drew in a breath and let it out again with a huffed sigh, "Then-"

"...It was heavily implied you conceited, narcissistic asshole."

All three pairs of eyes lifted in alarm to look for the source of the voice, eventually converging on the private bathtub that had been set-up to the side of the main spring, away from the main sitting area. Yurio's golden-haired head was barely visible over the edges of the wooden basin, emerald eyes staring daggers from where they sneered, then turned away. The teen hopped out the back, wrapped a towel around his hips and started moving over towards the shower-room door.

"Y-Yuri!" The raven-haired skater called out, quickly rising and making a splash in his desperate attempt to go forward through the water...only to feel a hand around his wrist stop him in his tracks. Hazel eyes turned quickly around, only for the figure to find his husband shaking his head, "But-"

"He's not our responsibility." Viktor said firmly.

"S-So you told him no out of hand!?!" Yuri was incredulous.

"I only asked him what he was going to do about the problem, and he said nothing." The Russian clarified, "I didn't say a word in either direction."

"Would you be his coach then!?!"

"...No."

"Wh-...Why not?" The younger skater was torn, "You agreed to follow him all the way back to Russia and be his coach if he won 'Onsen on Ice' last year!"

"And I already told you that I wouldn't have." The silver man shook his head again, letting his husband's wrist go, "I came here to be your coach. The fact that he showed up to try and drag me back was just a plot-twist."

"So then what was the point of it all!?"

"To motivate the both of you to try your hardest to win, but it was more for you than it was for him." Slate eyes looked up nervously. "Don't be mad at me for this. Please."

"I don't know what to think right now! Why would you refuse to coach him!? I don't get it! I thought we were passed all this craziness after Bordeaux!"

"I don't want to be the thing he hinges all his hopes on. I won't be dragged into the middle of it." Viktor said emphatically.

"So if he moves here with Mikhail without expecting you to coach him, would you agree to it then?!"

"No."

"Wh-..."

Phichit watched the back and forth nervously, eyes darting between each of them as they spoke, but not daring to interrupt.

"...Why not...? You're his friend, aren't you...?" Yuri's voice got quieter.
"Of course I'm his friend. But that doesn't mean he's entitled to me. When he came here the first time, he acted like he owned me, trying to drag me back to St. Petersburg like he thought being part of the RSF meant I had no autonomy. That if I was going to coach anyone, it should be him-"

"He's not the same person he was back then! I thought you'd seen that by now!" The younger skater said angrily, turning to head towards the deck, and hoisted himself out of the water without looking back, "Yuri!"

Viktor was stunned to watch him go, enough so that he had no words to argue back about it. By the time the changing-room door opened and then closed again, the Russian was staring at the water's surface, alone in the onsen but for Phichit and the small towel Yuri had left behind in his rush to chase after the Russian Tiger.

Chapter End Notes

Just as a reminder since practically no one is reviewing the new content at the start that I said I was adding...but Ch11 and Ch12 are 100% entirely new chapters, not just rewritten old content. Also, Ch1 had the Banquet heavily altered, plus there's like 4-5 pages of new content in several chapters after that. I think the only thing I didn't adjust severely was Japanese Nationals (though I did expand on Yuri's SP.)
"Yuuuri! Open the door!"

Banging could be heard all the way in the common room. Viktor stood vigil at the bottom of the stairs, dressed down in resort-ware, with a loose-fitting long-robe and slippers, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed.

"Maybe I'll just go back to St. Petersburg, where I won't be such a huge fucking burden to everyone!"

"That's not what I said! Yuri! Let me in!"

Slate eyes turned slightly as the yelling went on. The silver Russian could hear the sound of angry footsteps stomping along the floor, followed by the door suddenly sliding open with a loud clatter of wood where it hit the barrier-post at the limits of its range.

"HOW ABOUT THE BOTH OF YOU DO EVERYONE A FAVOR AND JUMP INTO HASETSU BAY YOURSELVES!?"

The door slammed shut again, and an awkward silence befell the resort's halls for a good long while. Just as Viktor was about to go up and see what was going on, he could hear the sad shuffle of bare feet along the wood floor, starting to come down the stairs slowly. By the time the anxious Japanese skater remerged from the upper level of the building, even Hiroko and Mari had shown up, wondering what was going on.

Yuri came reluctantly around the corner, his eyes low as his hand trailed softly on the wall. He couldn't bear to raise them even as he recognize his spouse by the corner. Wanting to say something, the skater had parted his lips, but the words wouldn't come.

Viktor could sense it, and simply held his hand out, waiting for his partner to take it before leading him back to the common room. Phichit was in there, and Makkachin was snoozing nearby, both of them lifting their heads as the pair strode in quietly, taking a seat at one of the low tables at the back of the room. The poodle hoisted himself to his feet and walked over, only to flop back down next to where his human had sat down and fell asleep again. Viktor pat the dog's head for a bit, but his attention was still mostly on his wordless husband.

"Yuri."

Miserable brown eyes turned slightly towards him, but like before, no words came.

The Russian sighed, "This is part of why I'm saying no." He explained, giving the man's hand a gentle squeeze, "Yes, Yurio has changed...he's made a lot of progress and grown as a person...but the saying about how 'the more things change, the more they stay the same' still applies. The only difference now is who's filling the roles of the characters in his story. You've become what I used to be...and I've become what you used to be. But I know you, and that's why I know what's going to happen."

Yuri just leaned forward and crossed his arms on the table, burying his face within them.

"The trouble with all of it though is that, even though Yurio's perception of you has changed, you
"haven't." Viktor went on, reaching over to softly rub his partner's shoulders, moving across them and then sliding down the man's back before going up and starting again, "You're still the skater with a Heart of Glass, and Yurio really doesn't need to kick that hard for you to break."

"...Now you're just telling me I'm weak..."

"You're not weak. You just care too much sometimes."

"What am I suppose to do then?" Yuri wondered, turning his head so he could peek one red eye past the side of his arm, "Stop caring outright?"

"You don't have to stop caring, but I've said it before and I'll say it again...let Uncle Mimi figure this out." Viktor said quietly, leaning in to kiss at the back of the man's neck where he could get at it, and held there with one arm around him, "Yurio's got problems that you can't fix. Trying and failing anyway is just...a really long-winded way of letting him down."

The younger figure held for a while, letting the words sink in. He slowly unfolded where one of his arms crossed in front of him, and reached under his chest to where he could feel his spouse's fingers still holding to his side, grasping at them softly.

Feeling it, Viktor pulled him in closer, whispering into his ear, "I've tried to be better about how I handle you and Yurio being friends since things went south in France, but at some point I have to put your well-being ahead of that friendship. I wouldn't be living up to my vows if I didn't."

"This whole time..." Yuri said between shaky breaths, rubbing his eyes on the sleeve of his spa-jacket, "I thought you were just...being mean to him..."

"No..." The Russian pulled him from the hug and kissed the edge of his partner's shoulder, "Refusing to be Yurio's coach was less out of malice for him, and more out of being protective over you."

"Vik-chan...?" Hiroko's voice came from the nearby doorway.

Crystal-blue eyes looked up and back, seeing the woman there with a tray of food in her hands.

"Is this a bad time...?"

"No, it's fine." He answered, moving to sit upright again, his arm sliding across his partner's back as he moved.

The older woman stepped into the room and started setting things out on the table in front of her son-in-law, though when she was done, she moved aside to crouch next to her youngest child. In front of him, she placed a simple bowl of miso soup, and next to it, a bowl of plain rice. She touched a hand to her son's arm briefly and nosed the side of his forehead affectionately, and smiled when she felt the nudge of the skater's head to acknowledge it, "If you boys need anything else, just let us know, okay?"

"Mh." Yuri nodded, smiling as well as he could in spite of what had happened, "Thanks mom."

"Thanks mom~!" Viktor added.

The young skater wasn't sure how long he'd been asleep for when he woke up, but when he did, he found himself back-to-back with Makkachin on the floor of the common room, his head resting on his husband's leg. The lights were low, and the very quiet sound of the television playing on the far
wall filled the room, along with its flickering glow. Yuri pushed up slowly in a slight haze, feeling his partner's hand come off his side where it had been resting, and rose instead to stroke his hair, 
"...W-what time is it...?"

"About 1am." The Russian answered, "Everyone else went to bed."

"...Have you been awake this whole time?" The skater wondered sleepily, rubbing his eyes on a knuckle.

"Da."

Makkachin's tail started to quietly thump against the floor where it wagged, but the pup kept his head down for the moment.

"You fell asleep after you had your soup and I didn't have the heart to wake you up." The Russian explained simply, "You ready to go home?"

"I still can't believe you bought this thing." Yuri said, trying to carry the massive bouquet through their front door.

They hadn't bothered changing out of their spa robes before throwing their jackets, scarves, and boots on for the quick car-ride home. Makkachin trotted in excitedly, nails clacking on the hardwood floor, then to the tile in the kitchen.

"Why?" Viktor laughed, locking the door behind them and helping maneuver the huge thing to their dining room table.

"As an apology to my butt?"

"Sure." The chuckle went on, even as a hand slid across that very derriere. The younger figure just squeaked when he felt it, clenching up a bit from the surprise, but was grateful that the huge pot of flowers was safely set down before it happened. "Am I still grounded?" The Russian purred, his hand sliding around to pet his partner's stomach over the thick coat, nibbling affectionately at the man's ear.

It didn't take much to find out. Pale, bare legs swayed gently back and forth, ankles trying to cross but never quite managing. Wrists loosely overlapped behind a silver-haired head, forearms resting gently over shoulders. Toes splayed out, and those legs clamped down against the figure rocking between them; a quiet string of gasps becoming a few desperate cries, then panting.

The Russian descended a little, moving from a direct downward gaze into his partner's eyes to kiss at the man's neck instead. A few carefully-timed thrusts later, and the silver figure gasped out his pleasure as well, descending into his partner's embrace. He touched their brows together lightly, each of them lightly gasping for breath.

The larger athlete slowly turned to lie on his side, reluctantly pulling free of his husband's warmth, but snuggling up close next to him soon after. He huffed a quiet laugh, "I guess...that means you accepted my apology."

"GotosleepViktor."
"I love you, too."

With the late night descending on Japan, it was technically mid-morning of the previous day in the western-central part of Canada. A clerk came to the Rozovsky house to pick up the rental car, driving off with it and the transport wagon that had brought the pair there. With that done, Mikhail went back towards the garage, and closed the second car-port while simultaneously opening the first, revealing the blue Mercedes S550 hybrid to the open Edmonton air for the first time since summer. Fully charged and ready to go, the wheels crunched on compacted snow, pulling down the long drive-way and turning to go out into the wide world.

"...So are you some kind of Russian oligarch or something?"

Mikhail nearly choked from laughing, having to pull over for a moment to get air back into his lungs. They hadn't even made it out of the neighborhood yet.

Minako just gawked at him, "I'm being serious!"

"You really think this is that fancy?"

"You said this car was worth nearly $100,000!"

The elder Russian reached over and pat her knee gently, "Dearest Lady, true Russian oligarchs wouldn't be driving goat-spittle like this."

"Goat-spittle?" She echoed, quirking a brow, "What does that make the little Toyota I let Viktor borrow then?"

"Chicken-spittle?" He offered, moving the car forward again as he kept laughing under his breath, "I can get you something else if you want."

"Don't even go there, Mikhail Rozovsky. You know I could never let you do something like that for me."

"I just did it for Kon, and I happen to like you quite a bit more than him."

"Absolutely not!"

"Let me buy you a nicer, newer car!"

"Noooo!"

"Why not?" He looked almost hurt.

"I don't want to feel like I owe you something!"

"Ahh...what a dreadful world we live in... Can't even do something nice for someone anymore without everyone wondering what you're ulterior motives are." The Russian sighed, "I guess I'll just have to settle for drinks and sandwiches for now. Mark my words though..."

Minako gazed at him somewhat suspiciously.

"...One day, you'll agree to marry me, and everything will be swell!"

The ballerina would've spit her coffee out if she had one yet. She just gaped at the man, seeing how
pleased he seemed with himself over there behind the steering wheel.

But with that, and a short detour to get some fancy, overpriced coffees, they were leaving south out of Edmonton. The long trip south to Calgary, swinging west on the outskirts, and then finally for the last, comparatively short trek towards the mountains. The closer they got to Banff though, the quieter Mikhail became. Once they'd pulled off of the Trans-Canada highway and onto the main road leading into the small city proper, he was like a different person. It wasn't long before they were pulling up in front of the Banff Community High School.

The elder Russian drew in a nervous breath as he parked the car across the street, in the lot for the IGA grocery store.

Minako watched him quietly, seeing how the man's hands shook slightly where he still held to the wheel. She reached over and clasped her fingers around the nearest one and gave a gentle squeeze, "It'll be fine. I'm sure of it."

"Everything changes today." He answered anxiously, "I've been waiting for almost 10 years to get my kids back. I thought they'd age out and move on with their lives before it ever happened...and now that it's about to, it's still hard to believe."

"One step at a time."

The Russian nodded and turned the car off, and the pair stepped out on each of their sides. The Mercedes beeped to lock again as they started heading back towards the corner. As they waited there for their turn to cross, Minako glanced over; for a brief moment, with the sun shining just right, the elder looked more like his nephew than he ever had. Except, for that second, he looked like a version of Viktor that was going to war. The pedestrian lights changed to green, and Mikhail started walking, pausing right after to glance back as he felt the hesitant tug where he held her hand.

"Coming?" He wondered.

"Ah...yeah, sorry hun. Had an old-lady moment."

They hurried across the street, and found a place near the school's front doors to wait for the bells to ring. Minako gazed around the area, looking at the mountains all around, and at the three tall pine-trees that rose from the middle of the front rotunda. They were taller than the flagpole just behind them, bearing the Canadian flag, flapping gently in the breeze.

"It's beautiful out here, at least." The ballerina commented, "I wouldn't mind staying here a while if we had to."

Mikhail grumbled a little at that, "...Forgive me, but this place lost its luster to me a long time ago. I can only stand to be here for a few hours at a time before my hackles are raised so high that I start to worry if people can see them through my clothes."

"I'll just give you another deep-tissue massage." The woman offered with a knowing smile.

The Russian just stuttered, "N-No! That's okay! You can keep your torture-mitts to yourself this time!"

They moved over towards one of the long bike-racks near a chain-link fence, and as Mikhail leaned against it, he pulled out his phone and loaded up his youngest daughter's contact window. He typed in a quick message, and then hesitated, looking towards his lady love.

"...Here we go."
"Deep breaths."

The text message was sent, and it seemed like an eternity went by...when in fact, only three seconds had, when suddenly a door just to their right slammed open with urgency.

"DAD."

"Oh jeeze." Mikhail seized up, seeing Nikkita there with her silver hair waving in the wind, looking straight at him with those piercing Rozovsky eyes. He waved nervously, not even having a chance to put his phone away before he was bowled over the other side of the bike-rack by the young teen rushing at him and launching into a hug, "Back! Back! Nikki I'm old and frail!"

It didn't do any good. He ended up on the ground anyway, snow crunching and flying all over where he landed. The girl's long, wavy hair went all over the place, shimmering like polished platinum under the Canadian winter sun.

"Dad!" She started again, all but crying by then, "I wish you'd gotten here sooner! Sergie's been absolutely intolerable!"

"I've gotten that impression." Mikhail said in a daze, looking past his daughter to the woman beyond her looking down at him, "Help me up?"

Nikkita pulled off and stood on her own, but then offered a hand alongside Minako to get the man back up as well. The youngest of the three Rozovsky teens glanced at the ballerina, "...I...forgot your name, I'm sorry. ...Mina...Minako?"

The woman nodded, "You remembered."

"I'm glad you came with dad." The teen went on as Mikhail huffed and puffed behind her, rubbing his back where he'd landed on it, and trying futilely to get the flat-cap where it had been knocked off his head, "Maybe Sergio will listen to you." She stepped forward a little, holding her arms close, but then extending them, "...Can I?"

Minako was taken aback by it, but didn't even think to refuse the girl, smiling and opening her arms as well to let the teen get close. There was an almost palpable sense of relief when the little lady hugged her, and Minako just hugged her all the tighter for it, "I'm sorry you had to go through all this by yourselves. We'll do what we can to make it right, okay?"

"We're going to have to move, won't we?" Nikki asked quietly, her tone almost resigned to that fate already, and she looked to her struggling father, "...Right dad?"

Mikhail finally managed to sweep his arm low enough to grab his hat, and fluffed it out before setting it back into place again and turning towards her, a bit enamored that his daughter would be clinging to Minako the way she was. He nodded though, "You guys all know I don't like it here. But...it's a talk we all have to have together. I'm not just going to uproot you like your lives here don't matter."

The school-bell rang within the building, and the area started buzzing with activity. Students began pouring out of the various doors. Before too long, Nikkita was waving to her older sister from where she still stood in the ballerina's arms, "Hey! Viktoria! Over here! Dad came!"

The goth-but-not-quite looking teen turned her eyes up, looking from her sister, to the Japanese woman standing behind her, and then to the darkly clad, silver-haired Russian that could only be her father, "Hey, pipaw." She turned to the group of three that she'd been walking with, said something,
and departed, making her way over towards the growing group. She stopped briefly, her heavily-belted knee-boots thunking almost as loudly on the walkway as the blade-guards of skates did, and she drew in a breath. Her look of anxiety changed to happiness though, and she hopped forward to jump into her father's waiting embrace, "It's good that you're back. We really missed you."

"Sorry it took so long to get here." He answered, stroking the teen's long, multicolored hair, "I wish I knew sooner what had happened."

"Everything just happened so fast..." Viktoria explained, pulling back from the hug to set some loose strands over her ear, "We should go though. Sergio's not going to wait for the bus like we would be, and if he spots you, he'll take off."

"Is it that bad? He's not even driving you guys home anymore?" Mikhail wondered, looking from the teen to the ballerina, giving an uncertain look.

"We don't go with him." Nikki corrected, "He nearly got us all into a wreck the last time we rode together."

"We should leave, in that case." The woman agreed, "If he goes home thinking we aren't here, maybe we can catch him there."

"Yeah..." The elder Russian nodded, turning to start heading to the crosswalk again, "Do you guys have all your stuff?"

The two girls nodded.

"Alright...let's get this thing started then."
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED THIRTY SIX

The quiet of an otherwise normal cul-de-sac was broken by the sound of an ambulance siren blaring a few times through the air, the big boxy vehicle trying to turn around to leave. Lights of red and blue pierced the darkness, bouncing shadows off the nearby trees and cars, bathing every house nearby in eerie ambient color.

Clad in winter jackets, thick snow-boots, and cold-weather knit caps, Nikkita and Viktoria sat on the back bumper of a police cruiser. Neither had tears to shed, but they both had dark circles under their eyes, huddling together to keep warm under a blanket that an officer handed to them.

"Do you have any other family in the city?" The woman asked, pulling out a notepad to write their answers.

"Yeah." The older of the two answered stiffly, "Our brother. He should be home soon."

"His name?"

"Sergio Rozovsky."

"How old is he?"

"Just barely 18."

"Where's your father?"

The two girls glanced at each other, then at the officer again briefly before lowering their eyes, "Moscow. He hurt his back while he was there and had to have surgery."

The loud, distinct feeling of a car's bass reverberated around as a black Hyundai Elantra pulled up, only for the noise to cut out as the driver realized which house the police were there for. When the car was still and the headlights shut off, the eldest of the three teens stepped out, looking relieved at least that his sisters were accounted for...but then realization hit.

"...Where's mom?"

The urn was sitting on a mantle above the fireplace, nestled in amongst the sprigs of pine and decorative wreaths that had already been set-up for weeks. Candles were lit around it, burning quietly, their soft light blinking off the walls, and the big 4-member family photo. Four members...substituting a certain silver-haired Russian from which the three teens took their looks, and in his place, a pale woman with wavy black hair and piercing light-brown eyes. The kids in the image were half their current ages.

The sound of snow crunching outside caught the attention of the teen who was looking at the photo, and he hurriedly rushed to the window in the living-room, which faced out towards the front yard, "...The Hell?"

The sight of that very particular blue Mercedes made the teen's heart seize in his chest, but seeing the man who owned it stepping out, followed by his female companion and two young daughters...that
set the boy's teeth on edge. He let the blinds go and marched right up to the front door, pulled it open, and stood defiantly on the stoop with both arms crossed.

"I'm not moving."

"Hi Sergio." Mikhail waved, indifferent to the words the teen had spoken. He turned his attention back to his entourage, "Alright everyone, let's head inside." The two girls nodded and quietly snuck past their older brother, who still hadn't budged. The elder Russian stepped forward, Minako following close behind, but Mikhail wasn't content to simply walk around the teen.

"You can't make me do anything. I'm already 18."

Still, the words were ignored, and Mikhail stared at him straight on, unblinking with those same grey-green eyes. Minako watched the show-down anxiously, noting how her partner hadn't even tightened his grip on where he held her hand between them; his fingers and posture were relaxed, though his 6'2" frame still managed to look down somewhat on the 5'10" figure in front of him.

It was strange to see how the battle of wills favored the elder, and the teen scoffed indignantly before finally turning around to retreat within the house. Mikhail turned towards his lady love, and gestured in with his free hand, "After you."

"Feels a lot different from the last time we were here." She commented quietly, stepping in over the threshold with the Russian following after her, "Feels even weirder to actually go inside this time."

"We won't be here that long."

"Really? I thought you said we'd have to stay at least till your kids finished finals?" She turned back slightly and leaned down to pull one boot off at a time, setting them both neatly against the wall as Mikhail did the same with his usual business-casual shoes.

"Yes, but by 'stay,' I only meant 'in Banff,' not necessarily 'in the house my ex-wife died in.'"

"Touché."

The house held the smell of a 'different' family, as all homes did. Under that though was the smell of an apple-cinnamon candle, apparently set to try and hide the aroma of a trash bin that hadn't been taken out in a while. The sink overflowed wish unwashed dishes, and there were crumbs and lost macaroni noodles on the counters. What caught Mikhail's attention most though were the dusty shadows where crucifixes had been taken off the walls. All told, the more he looked around, the less religious iconography he saw.

"Where's all your mother's stuff?" He asked nervously, pulling his long-coat off.

The girls stopped where they were in the kitchen, trying to clean up a few bowls and spoons to make cereal for dinner, and glanced at him over the bar-counter, "...Sergie took everything down."

"...Really?"

They both nodded.

With that, the sound of a door half-slamming at the end of the hall could be heard.

The girls groaned at that. Nikkita set the bag of knock-off Frosted Flakes down and came around the counter, "Dad, you gotta get us outta here."
"Nikki!"

"I'm serious!" She turned back to her older sister, "I'm tired of this!"

"Me too but I don't want to move to God-only-knows-where!"

"Girls," Mikhail interrupted, "I haven't even told you what the options are yet, so cool your jets."

"I'M NOT MOVING ANYWHERE." Sergio called from down the hall, his voice muffled by the sound of the closed door.

"I HEARD YOU THE FIRST TIME." The elder Russian sighed to himself, but then looked at what his daughters were trying to cobble together, "What are you doing?"

"...Dinner?"

"That's breakfast."

"We can't get groceries to make stuff normally." Viktoria grumbled, chewing on a few dry flakes, "Sergio won't let me have the car keys so I can go to the IGA, and the busses leave too soon for us to get stuff before they leave school. The best we can do is go to the store at lunch and bring home whatever non-perishables we can fit into our backpacks."

"...What about this huge mess? Haven't you guys been cleaning up after yourselves?"

Nikkita crossed her arms and got a sour look on her face, "I tried to keep up with it, but certain people who won't be named made stuff dirty again faster than I could clean it." She eyeballed both her sister and the hallway where her brother had retreated.

"It's true..." The older girl agreed weakly, twirling a strand of red-dyed silver hair, "I kind of gave up after a week..."

Mikhail blinked at them, but then made a face and nodded, turning to look around the living-room again, "...Well, I guess the only thing to do is to have you guys pack up and then burn this place to the ground."

"DAD." "PIPAW."

He just laughed and raised his arms up, "I'm kidding. But, in all seriousness, put all that cereal stuff away. We'll go out. SERGIO."

"I'M NOT-"

"EATING? OKAY."

The teen burst through the door like a battering ram, shooting his gaze down the hall and straight at his father, "YOU CAN'T JUST COME IN HERE AND JUDGE US."

"Chill." Mikhail said quietly, "Just come out here and talk to me like a man, not like a child. I know that shit's been rough for you for the last 2 weeks, but now's not the time to try to act like you've got this. You don't got this. Let me help."

"You're just going to ruin everything! I don't want your help!"

"Well, you can either come sit down with us and tell your side of things, or you can let me get the whole story from your sisters. At that point, I'll be making decisions about how to move forward and
I'll be doing so without your input, which you'll probably really hate. So...what's it going to be? Will you come sit at this table, or am I going to be dragging you outside to an unknown fate, kicking and screaming?” He thumbed at the front door, "It's entirely up to you."

The teen grit his teeth, but held his ground for a moment. Minako and the two younger teens could feel the tension in the air like an electric vibration...but it cut off rather quickly as Sergio finally came out of the hallway and sat indignantly at the big debris-covered dining-room table.

*This place would look really nice if it hadn't been let go...* The ballerina thought, trying to see the beauty of it under all the trash and dust that had piled up since the Lady of the house had passed. It was only then that she caught sight of the big family photo at the other end of the room, and her first glimpse at the woman who had preceded her in her partner's life. She could hear the Rozovskys family members starting to move towards the table with the oldest teen, but she stepped off on her own to get a better look at the picture.

When Mikhail turned to watch her go, he caught sight of the urn sitting on the fireplace mantle, and all his previous plans were immediately put on the back-burner. He stepped up behind her, settling a hand lightly on the small of her back as he approached the mantle, but then moved past the woman to reach for the urn.

It was a simple-looking brass-polished vase, inlaid with laser-cut etchings along the bottom and upper rim. The top was fastened with a lid crested by a small lamb statue, curled up as though asleep on top of the whole thing.

"...Mylene..." He said quietly, sighing sadly...though not for mourning. It was more out of disappointment, "How long did she suspect she was sick?" He turned back towards the table where his kids were waiting.

"Maybe just the last 4 months." Sergio explained sullenly, his eyes downcast, arms crossed tightly over his chest; he’d lost weight since the Skate Entourage had seen him in Calgary, but he was still thickly built, "I told her to go back to see Dr. Caplan, but she just went to see Father Abram instead. I tried to press charges against him, but..." The teen's robust attitude was already crumbling, and he brought a hand up to cover his eyes, "...I was told that there was no point. You can't prosecute someone for praying."

Nikki and Viktoria just stayed quiet, looking sullen where they sat.

"...All the crosses, Bibles, and other religious stuff got thrown out the day the urn came home." The youngest explained quietly, "He blames God for mom dying."

"THERE IS NO GOD." Sergio loudly corrected, "But if there somehow is, then after everything we've gone through with this crap, He's responsible. He created cancer, and that has nothing to do with Free Will or Sin or Guilt or ANYTHING...and because of that, I consider Him an ENEMY, and I WANT HIM DEAD."

"Whoa whoa, jeeze, Sergio..." Mikhail quickly set the urn back into place and rushed back over through the debris on the carpet to get to his place at the table, "Don't take it out on your sisters. They lost their mom too."

Minako kept her distance for a while, letting the scene simmer down a bit before stepping over to take a seat next to her partner.

"...Let's just talk about other stuff for a bit." The Russian suggested, "So... If I'm not mistaken, your last Final exams are on Thursday, right?"
"My last ones are tomorrow, but Nikki's are done Thursday, yeah." Viktoria answered, slouching between where she propped her arms up on the table.

"It's in the morning, so I don't have to stay till the end." The younger teen followed, "What are you planning...?"

"There's a really big skating competition in Detroit this weekend that I'm supposed to go to. I have to bring Yuratchka his things, since he left them at my place in Moscow after we got done in France. The idea is that you guys come to Detroit for the weekend...and then at least for the winter break, I'll be taking you with me back to Hasetsu in Japan. I know you guys don't want to think of calling something a vacation after what happened, but that's all this is for right now...a trip to get you out of here so you can clear your minds, and so I can keep an eye on you."

"Cousin Viktor did really well this weekend." Nikkita chimed in.

Both Minako and Mikhail glanced from the girl in surprise, to one another, and then back again, but it was the Russian who spoke, "...You followed his events in Sapporo?"

"Well...sort of..." She nodded, "I went looking up videos cuz I was curious if I could see you in the audience, but then I ended up watching the whole Saturday event..." She lifted her head, holding her chin on the palms of her hands instead, "I remembered how you said he was kind of a big deal. I didn't really believe it after he came in 2nd on Friday, but when I saw his show the next day...wow!"

"He wasn't feeling it on Friday, that's true..." The elder Russian explained, "But he really knocked it out after that."

"Where's Hasetsu...?" Viktoria asked, "I've never heard of it."

"It's a small coastal city on the north of Kyushu. We just never went far enough south in Japan to see it. It's a nice little place though. That's where Minako and your cousin's husband come from."

"...So...Detroit...and then Hasetsu..." The middle teen repeated to herself, "What about after?"

"There's a lot of things that are involved in that decision." The silver elder explained, "I know you guys won't be happy with anything less than staying here, but-"

"No, I'm good."

"...Me too." Nikkita added quietly.

"...You're...good...?" Mikhail echoed in disbelief, "...How? Why?"

"As soon as mom died, we all kind of knew it was only a matter of time before you'd come get us." The young teen answered, stretching her arms out across the table to touch her slender fingers to her father's forearm where he sat around the corner from her, "I started telling my friends so we'd all be ready. We started a closed group on SMS so we could keep in touch."

"I like my friends, but I'm not exactly ready to take a bullet for them." Viktoria shrugged, "Transient High School friendships, I guess. I won't be surprised if I lose track of them all after a while."

All four then turned their eyes towards the odd man out. But, true to form, Sergio just buckled down, "I'm not going anywhere."

"...Why not?" Mikhail raised both brows skeptically.
"I'm 18 years old...a legal adult. If not for a few months, I'd have already graduated high school and been in university by now."

"So? You've been 18 for like 15 minutes."

"Soooooo...?" He was incredulous, but raised his hand to start listing things off on his fingers, "I'm graduating from High School this year, I'm still going to tournaments in the mean time, I have better shit to do than get thrown into a completely different country when I'm just going to come back in 6 months... What's the point of me going? It'll just be a huge pain in the ass."

"I can't just leave you here by yourself."

"I've been doing fine on my own." The teen grumbled.

Mikhail and Minako glanced at one another, then at the state of the house around them, and gave a grunt of sarcastic acknowledgment.

"Quit judging! You weren't here! You don't know anything that happened!" Sergio growled, but then pointed a finger at the ballerina, "And you don't know me!"

"I didn't even say anything!" She said defensively.

Mikhail reached across the table and stuck his own finger down against the back of the teen's hand, dropping it to the table top and holding it there, "Make gestures in her direction at your own peril, Sergio." He warned, "You won't be getting away with rude outbursts again like you did with your cousin."

"Cousin? Who...Vicar?"

"VIKTOR." The Russian pressed a little harder, "Your own sister is named after him; it should be the easiest name to remember ever."

"I don't care."

"Obviously." Mikhail pulled his hand away and pushed to stand, leaning over the table with his palms down on the top of it, "Ladies, if you'll excuse Sergio and I. I think we need to have a chat alone. Outside."

"Dad it's like a thousand degrees below zero out there!" The eldest teen argued.

"Outside." The Russian said, more firmly that time, "So get a warm coat. We're going to be out there for a while." He stepped over to where he'd hung his own coat, and fished for his wallet and keys, stepping back over to Minako to give the keys and his bank-card to her, "...If we're not back before you guys start dying of starvation, let the girls tell you where to get dinner. Just be careful driving the Benz, it's pretty quiet, so people don't always hear it coming."

"...Are you sure? I mean, you don't want us to wait?" The ballerina wondered, rising to stand, following the man back towards the front door as he started pulling on his things, "Hun?"

"I'll have my phone. Just text me when you guys are getting ready to riot. I'll let you know we're coming if I think we're at a good stopping point and can come back." He answered, doing up the buttons on the front of his coat before turning back to his lady love and reached for her hands. He brought them up between them and gave a bit of a sigh, but then leaned forward to kiss her on each cheek, and let her hands go to pat her shoulders, "Do svidaniya."
"Davai."
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED THRITY SEVEN

Minako watched for a little while from the open doorway as the two Rozovskys went down the block. She gave a worried look, rubbing her arms where she braced against the Canadian winter cold, but then stepped back and closed the doors...only to be greeted again by the weird smell of apple-cinnamon, trying and failing, to hide the odor of old trash.

Brown eyes glanced around the main room and kitchen, looking briefly at the two nervous daughters that were, in turn, watching her back and waiting.

"...Do you guys have studying to do for your last tests?" The ballerina asked.

"...Not really." Nikki answered, looking away for a moment, "Dad has had a tutor working with us since mid Fall to get us ready."

"He has?" She blinked at them curiously.

Viktoria nodded in agreement, "It's just down the block a bit. We go over there Mondays and Wednesdays, so..."

"Are you going to be our new mom soon?" Nikki followed up.

Minako nearly choked on herself, having to turn and grab a nearby counter to stop from falling as her legs felt weak under her. She couldn't hear the two girls fussing at one another over the semantics, but when she finally got her wind back again, she put one hand over her chest and looked over at the pair, "...I...I think you're a bit too old to be thinking about it like that...don't you think?" She asked nervously.

"Well, you're going to marry our dad, aren't you?"

"NikkilsweartoGOD..." Viktoria blanched again.

The ballerina pushed to standing upright, still feeling her heart racing even as the two silver daughters bickered again. She held her hands up defensively, "Calm down...you guys don't have to argue with each other like that..."

Grey-green eyes just turned to gawk at her.

"Look..." Minako drew in a breath to try and steady herself, "Whatever happens, happens... Your dad and I haven't even been officially dating until this last weekend. I've never had kids of my own, so I'm not even sure how good a 'mom' I could ever really call myself, even if I tried...but I won't stop you if that's how you want to think of me. I won't ask you to do it, though. I can be whatever you want or need me to be. A mom, a big sister, a friend, 'that old hag that dates your dad,' it doesn't matter. I'm adjusting to all this just like you guys are."

"...So does that mean you're not going to marry him?"

The ballerina smacked her forehead.
"So do you want to go first or should I?"

It was surreal for the elder silver Russian to be walking those streets again; it felt like nothing had changed, save the season. All the houses were the same, the mountains, the street-corners where trees grew, the paths that wound their way into the woods behind everything. Nothing had changed at all.

Sergio held in tightly to himself, scowling as he looked down at the half-cleared sidewalk. "I don't care."

Mikhail drew in a breath and pulled his scarf up a little higher over his chin, "Alright...me then." He shrugged, putting that hand back into his pockets, "I don't know when or why you got such a chip on your shoulder, or if I'm the only person you take it out on. I hope you don't give it all to your sisters when I'm not here to be your punching bag. But...it needs to stop. I put Yura into therapy last year as part of the agreement for me to be his skating sponsor, so I'm not opposed to doing the same with you." He explained, turning his sights to see if the teen had any reaction, though all he saw was where those sage eyes narrowed a little, so he looked ahead again, "To be honest, ever since the divorce, you've gotten more and more distant. Maybe it's just the natural way of things for boys to want to assert themselves, and get angry when they're surrounded by ladies on all sides who don't really think the same way...it's hard to know how things might've been different if I hadn't been made to go. But it's not like I disappeared. You remember that one time when your mother called the Mounties because I came to pick you guys up, and she'd forgotten it was my weekend to have you?"

"...Yeah."

"Then there was that one summer when she tried to get the judge to block my visitation outright, and almost won, because she claimed I was a Satan-worshiping atheist who was going to groom you guys to be sacrifices to the Dark Father?" He went on, saying the last bit rather sarcastically and making gestures to mock the absurdity of it, "I swear...she found religion, but she lost her mind...Atheists don't even believe in Satan...that defeats the whole point!" He threw his hands up in the air in frustration.

"You don't have to take shots at her. She's dead."

"...Sorry." Mikhail slouched a bit where he walked, but shook his head and moved on normally again after that, "...The point is, if you're being all angry just at me because I wasn't around, the-

"I'm not mad at you for being gone." Sergio interrupted stiffly, "I'm mad at mom for sending you away. I'm mad at her for a lot of things...especially that she basically let herself die. I was only 10 when this whole shit-show between you guys got started, but even back then, I was convinced that I could make her see sense one day. I tried to pick up the torch you were made to leave behind...but she never really took me that seriously. To her...no matter how old I got, I was always 10 to her. I couldn't do the things that you could. So I...could never live up to that standard..."

"Sergio..." The elder reached over to touch the teen's shoulder, but he pulled away immediately, keeping his eyes down the whole time. Mikhail sighed a little, "I know you hate to hear it, but maybe if you hear it with someone else's voice rather than in your own head, it'll make more sense. You were 10. The things I did for her, for the family, weren't things that a 10 year old could do. She didn't want that kind of help anymore anyway. Once she made up her mind about things, she couldn't be talked down from them. You just got a front-row seat to the end."

"Maybe you shouldn't have enabled her so much."

The Russian coughed, "Enabled her?" He looked on incredulously, "How did I enable her?"
"Maybe that's the wrong word..." The teen looked down even further, practically watching the toes of his boots creep in and out of his line of sight, "Showed no authority?" He offered instead.

Mikhail gawked, "Explain."

"...You could've put your foot down a thousand times over the stupid shit she was starting to believe after going to that Lymphoma support group. But you just let her keep going. She even started believing in crystal healing! She put glass rocks on her head and thought it was sucking the 'evil' out! She did that instead of going to her follow-ups with Dr. Caplan like I told her to! I bet if she'd gone, she would've known she was having a recurrence before it got bad...!"

"The way you played everything up, it was sounding like you were all aboard for that hokey mystic stuff yourself." The elder countered.

"NO!" Sergio barked, "I was trying to tell you about it so you'd see how crazy it sounded, so maybe you could talk some sense into her! But you kept brushing it off with 'that's nice' or 'well I'm sure that'll go well' like you thought it'd make ME feel better or something!"

"She wouldn't listen to me anyway. What was the point? It would just be more fights in front of you and the girls, and I didn't want that to be the only thing you guys thought about when I was around."

"Yeah, so instead of standing up to her and protecting us from the crazy bullshit she was bringing home, you just let her get away with it."

"Why didn't you ever tell me how bad it was getting? Maybe I could've filed suit to get custody or something."

"I TRIED! YOU WEREN'T LISTENING TO ME!"

They both paused, gaping at one another.

Sergio grit his teeth, "You just went off and buried yourself in your work! And when that got boring, you found yourself a brand new family that didn't have any drama! You replaced us with Viktor and Minako and that Plisetsky kid!"

The elder found himself somewhat slack-jawed at that remark, "...That's cruel to say. I didn't replace any of you guys. ...And besides that, they have plenty of drama of their own."

"What, cuz Viktor can't take a punch!? You ditched us to protect his pansy ass!?!"

Mikhail glowered, drawing in a deep breath before speaking again, "You lashed out at Minako earlier because you thought she was judging you, and you got upset because she did so without knowing you or what you've been through. But now you're lashing out at a guy you've exchanged 2 words with, and are judging his entire life because of a story I told you. Do you not see the irony in that?"

Sergio narrowed his eyes, but had no come-back.

"Viktor's 10 years older than you are, and I was with him every day of his life for his first 5 years of existence. Leaving him behind in Russia is one of my biggest regrets. You could almost say I replaced him with you." The elder said flatly, feeling his pulse hardening but trying not to let it get the better of him, "So you'll have to forgive me a tiny little bit for being exited that I finally have him back in my life again after all this time. I almost considered giving you his name when you were born, but your mother insisted against it. Maybe it's for the best that she did. You're nothing like Viktor."
"...So you do like him better than the rest of us."

"He's not perfect. He's vain, and can be petty, jealous, a bit vindictive, and at the worst of times, cruel, even to those closest to him. But that's not even what I meant by what I said. The kind of man Viktor became isn't even the kind of man I expected him to become. It's a flaw in my character more than his...and I'm only human. I can't make anyone be who they aren't meant to be...I can't turn you into him, just like how I can't make him my actual kid. And to be honest...aside from trying to figure out why you're so mad all the time, so you can stop and go back to being the fun-loving kid I remember...I like the way the both of you turned out. You're both better than me, and that's all I could ever hope for." Mikhail explained tersely, "But now, we're all at a crossroads. I've been trying to rebuild my life after your mother excised me from it...and even before all this stuff with your mother happened, I had started humoring thoughts of moving to Japan to be with Minako. It's nice out there, and she's nice. As it happens, Viktor is out there now, too, which is a huge deal for me. I'm getting the chance to rebuild the first family I lost. The trouble is figuring out what to do with my second family...I'd really like to put everything together."

"...I'm not going."

"And I'm trying to take that into consideration." The Russian grumbled, turning his head to look down the street, "What would you want to do, other than not moving to Japan? Try to be reasonable."

Sergio side-eyed the man, a bit surprised, but shook his head, "What I want...?"

"Yeah. Work with me. I'm not as much of a hard-ass as you've convinced yourself I am. I've gotten a few more wrinkles, but I'm still the same guy I was when you were younger. Remember...?" Mikhail appealed to the teen, "You're my first and oldest. I had the most time with you before I was sent away...I kind of wish you'd give me more credit than you do. We used to be best buddies. We did everything together. I'm here for you."

Sage-green eyes moved down to the icy pavement again. The teen could hardly believe the offer, or the sentiment that came with it. He looked back up again though...and began to explain.

Yurio's eyes were like those of a dead man's, staring straight ahead at nothing, only half open, and showing dark circles underneath. His phone was in front of him on the bed, black from lack of use, but when the over-tired teen clicked his finger on the Home button, it flashed the Lock screen to show 6:58am.

...Couldn't sleep all night... Now it's practically dawn...

He rolled onto his back, and then onto his other side, the arm of the plush tiger still over him. He gave a hateful stare to the interior of the room for a moment, but then shot his eyes open in surprise when he heard a buzz behind him. Flipping back over again, he saw a text message flash on the screen before it went dark again, and he quickly grabbed at it.

Old Man:
[Hey, hope this doesn't wake you up. Call me when you can.]

The blonde's heart was up in his throat already, his eyes scanning the message repeatedly like he wasn't sure his sleep-deprived mind could comprehend the words. Without even thinking, he clicked the small icon at the top right of the window and opened the messenger's contact information, hitting the Call button quickly thereafter. It rang twice before he heard the click.
"Ah heck, sorry Yura, I didn't mean t-"

"Viktor won't be my coach. It's fucking everything up!"

"...Wow, okay." Mikhail was surprised, having to pause a moment where he stood outside his kids' house. He turned to face his oldest, "Sergio, go on and head inside. Figure out with the girls what you guys want to eat. I'll be right behind you."

Yurio could hear the confirmation in the background, but only barely.

"What happened?" The elder Russian went on, turning his back to the door.

"I told Viktor that you planned on moving to Hasetsu, and that you'd offered a spot to me, too, but when he asked what I was going to do about the fact that Yakov isn't moving with me, it was fucking clear that he wasn't going to volunteer to replace him." The Russian Punk answered, setting the phone to speaker again and dropping it to the sheet just in front of his crossed arms.

"...Did you actually ask him to be your coach though? Maybe he just didn't want to assume anything."

"I overheard him and the pig talking after." He answered grudgingly, "They both think I should just stay in St. Petersburg and forget everything."

"...The pig?" Mikhail echoed, feeling a twinge for it, "Did you guys get into a fight over this...?"

"I didn't do shit. I was just minding my own business."

"Yura..." The older figure sighed, stepping back down the front walkway, "If I call one of them, what story will they tell me?"

"Who the Hell knows anymore!? I thought I knew them but apparently I don't! They're both selfish pieces of shit!"

Mikhail set his free hand against his hip, "...What a situation. When did all this happen?"

"Last night." Yurio growled, "Now there isn't even any point in the rest because everyone out here hates me."

"Let things settle down a bit. Even if Viktor doesn't coach you, it's not the end of the line."

"How can you possibly say that!?" The teen barked, pushing up onto his hands to yell down at the phone under him, "If Viktor doesn't coach me then I have no future in figure skating! He's the only one in Hasetsu with coaching experience!"

"Oh pfft." The elder huffed, "Hold the line a minute, okay?"

"...Okay?" Yurio gawked at the phone, hearing it click to put him on Hold. He sat back on his knees and leaned against the plush tiger while he waited, confused and hating it.

Mikhail finally went inside, shivering quickly as he adjusted to the heat of the indoors; cheeks, nose, and ears cherry-red from the cold winter air. The first thing he noticed was that the smell of the house was different...it smelled normal again. The apple-cinnamon candle had no longer been needed. The subtle, lingering aroma of lemon cleaners and bleach replaced it. Debris was gone, things were dusted, trash had been taken out, the sink had no dishes in it...and Minako was splayed out on the couch with a weak arm raised to wave...and Nikki had fallen asleep leaning against her.
"...Hey hun..."

"...Is this the same house...?" He asked anxiously.

"...You could say we got bored." The ballerina mused, "I didn't go into the kids' rooms, but the rest is in good shape again."

Mikhail made a face, "...The kids' rooms." He repeated, "You say that like you've claimed them already."

"...We...kind of bonded over cleaning this place. That a problem?" She whisper-laughed, tired from the whole thing.

The Russian shook his head quickly, "No way! But..." He started making his way forward, kicking his shoes off but not worrying so much about setting them tidily against the wall. He went down on one knee before the woman and set his elbows on her slightly-parted knees, "...Dearest, beloved, sweetie, my sun, my life..."

"Uh oh..." Viktoria mused, lifting up her head from where she'd been half-snoozing on the other end of the couch. She glanced over at the ballerina, "Careful. He wants something from you."

"Yes he does." She said knowingly, giving a skeptical look, "...What is it...?"

"How'd you like to break into ballet on ice?"

"...Eh?" She gaped at him.

"Figure skating! ...It's kind of the same...right? Ballet but with knife-boots instead of toe-slippers?"

"...I guess?"

"How would you like to take on a competitive student? I bet your classes would fill right up if they saw your skills on television alongside the likes of Viktor and Yuri!" He explained vaguely, "Imagine sitting in the same kiss and cry as them, instead of the audience!"

"...Whaaaaat are you suggesting...?" She was getting nervous then.

"...Well, I have this kid, right? He's been getting choreographed by a former Prima for a while, but he's in the market for a new coach in Hasetsu. Turns out, Viktor isn't taking new students...so..."

"...Are you talking about Yura...?"

Green eyes got rather big at the mention, "Would you consider it?"

"Me?" She was aghast, "Coaching Yuri Plisetsky?"

"I heard that you got Viktor's hubby back into fighting form for last year's competition. You can do this! I believe in you!"

The ballerina gave Mikhail the same face just then as she gave to that self-same 'hubby' the night he'd shown up at her door, asking to be taught how to 'move in feminine ways.' All she lacked were her glasses, a beer, and midnight, "...Uh...well..." She stammered, "I...I guess I could try my hand at it... What about his choreography? I've never done that before...not from scratch anyway..."

"Let me take care of that. I have a card up my sleeve." The Russian gave a pleased smile, and rose back up to his feet, leaning far over to kiss the woman fondly, "I love you. Please marry me."
She gaped at him again, but was still too stunned from the whole previous situation to mutter a reply. Her face went red though, and the two girls next to her were laughing quietly behind their hands. Sergio just raised an eyebrow at the spectacle.

Mikhail turned back to his phone and unclicked it from Hold, "Hey, still there?"

"...Da."

"I have a coach for you. She's a world-renowned professional dancer and an excellent teacher, so you had better treat her nice and do as she says."

"You...what? How? Who? You were gone for like 2 minu-...oh shit, wait..."

"Better get ready to work harder than you've ever worked in your life, Yura!" Minako called, finally compositing herself again, "What Lilia put you through will pale in comparison to what I'm going to do!"

"Holyshitthatreallyjusthappened." The blonde sank against the bed, trying to make himself flat, "I...I can't even..."

"Do you accept?" Mikhail asked, "The ball's in your court now, kiddo."

"...What about Viktor and Yuri? I mean, they're skating at the Ice Castle, too...I can't just..."

"They don't skate all day. We'll just block time where you go and it's separate from them, like all the other skating classes being held there now. Plus, I doubt you guys will be mad at each other forever." The elder went on, "So?"

"...They're mad at each other?" Minako repeated to herself, "What the heck...? We were only gone for like 2 days...!"

Mikhail listened and waited, feeling a bit nervous as the silence went on longer than he'd thought. But, then he got his answer, and he smiled, "Great. I'll let everyone know. Go back to sleep if you can...you sound like you were up all night. Poka-!" He pulled the phone down from his ear and closed out the call, then turned to his daughters, "Looks like you guys have another brother."
Nibbling on a piece of toast with a fried egg on top, Yuri scanned the timeline for the Final on his phone.

**EVENT SCHEDULE**

**Wednesday December 10**

All Day...............................................................Arrival of Teams
..............................................................................Registration at Event Center

**Thursday December 11**

All Day...............................................................Official Practice ALL DISCIPLINES

09:00...............................................................MEN - Technical Panel Meeting
10:00...............................................................PAIRS - Technical Panel Meeting
11:45...............................................................ICE DANCE - Technical Panel Meeting
12:45...............................................................LADIES - Technical Panel Meeting
14:00...............................................................Team Leaders Meeting
17:00...............................................................Referees and Technical Controllers

Meeting

18:00...............................................................Judges Meeting
20:30...............................................................ISU and Judges Dinner

**Friday December 12**

08:00...............................................................PAIRS - Official Short Program Practice
10:00...............................................................LADIES - Official Short Program Practice
12:00...............................................................MEN - Official Short Program Practice
14:20...............................................................PAIRS - Short Program
16:10...............................................................LADIES - Short Program

18:15...............................................................OPENING CEREMONY ON ICE
19:05...............................................................MEN - Short Program

**Saturday December 13**

06:00...............................................................ICE DANCE - Official Short Dance

Practice

07:00...............................................................LADIES - Official Free Skating Practice
09:00...............................................................MEN - Official Free Skating Practice
11:00...............................................................PAIRS - Official Free Skating Practice
13:45...............................................................ICE DANCE - Short Dance
15:35...............................................................PAIRS - Free Skating

Victory Ceremony PAIRS

16:50...............................................................LADIES - Free Skating

Victory Ceremony LADIES

19:30...............................................................MEN - Free Skating

Victory Ceremony MEN

19:30...............................................................PAIRS - Technical Panel Review
Another bite from the toast...and then a rather unexpected phone call.

"Minako-sensei?" The skater mumbled to himself, seeing the screen change over from the white of the email to the black screen with the big green and red call answer/end buttons. He clicked green and set it to Speaker, "Hey!"

"Yuuuri~!" The ballerina called from the other end, sitting in the front passenger seat of the blue hybrid Mercedes, "Please tell me all about why Yura thinks everyone in Hasetsu hates him?" She asked pleasantly.

Brown eyes blinked at the phone, "Uh...well..." He sat more upright and rubbed the crumbs from the corners of his mouth with the sleeve of his bath-robe, "The story kind of comes in chunks and I wasn't there for all of it. Long story short, Yurio got really upset at the idea that Viktor wasn't going to volunteer to coach him if he moved to Hasetsu with Mikhail, and then he overheard a conversation Viktor and I had about it in the onsen later... His big take-away was that we both thought it might be easier for him if he just stayed in St. Petersburg, and Mikhail could go between the two locations like he did over the summer, except Yurio took it all way out of context and now he's mad at us like we don't care."

"Why would you even think that though? I guess I can see why he'd be upset. You guys obviously understand the reason why Mikhail offered to have Yura come live with us...but."

"Yurio isn't going to quit competing to do that though." Yuri interrupted, "And Viktor doesn't want to be the lynch pin to the success of the whole plan. He's..." The figure sighed and crossed his arms on the table, moving a plate aside as he slid down and rested his chin on his wrists where they crossed, ",He's worried about how having Yurio around all the time will impact the rest of things. Namely me."

"Is Viktor still salty about everything that happened in Bordeaux!?" Mikhail's voice suddenly blared; Minako was in the background trying to get her phone back.

Yuri was on the floor though by then, the surprise of the sudden unexpected outburst having knocked him backward off his chair, leaving him splayed out on the tile-wood intersection between
the kitchen and the living room.

"Yuri!" Mikhail hollered again.

"Uuhhh..." The skater groaned from the floor, trying to push himself up onto his elbows, and hobble over to put his seat back upright again. Just as he was about to get himself up high enough that he could sit normally again though, he could hear the sliding glass door to the meager back yard opening, and Makkachin rushing in, as well as the silver legend who'd gone out with him. The tak tak tak of nails on the hardwood got louder, and the dog barked once excitedly, but then rushed off to his water bowl.

Viktor came up soon thereafter, swapping winter boots for slippers and quietly sneaking in behind his partner. Yuri had a hand on the back of his head, rubbing the spot where he'd bounced a moment before, but looked up when he felt a palm slide down from shoulders to lumbar, and glanced up to see the crystal blue eyes of his husband. The Russian gave him no time to speak, simply leaning in to kiss him, and again, and then move off with a smirk, "Who are you talking to?" He wondered, seeing the Kanji on the screen.

"...A small crowd, I think." The younger skater answered, pulling his hand back from where it had been in his hair to make sure there wasn't a tint of red. Seeing nothing, he just rubbed the sore spot again before turning in his chair to look at where the silver Russian had moved off into the kitchen, "...It's Mikhail and Minako-sensei at least. They're asking about Yurio."

Viktor just spewed the coffee he'd barely managed to get a sip of before hearing the words, "Blyat...!" He cursed in surprise of himself, turning then to look on at his partner incredulously, "...Mimi and Minako-sensei? What for? To give me grief?"

"...Would you explain to them at least why you don't want to coach Yurio? It would sound better coming from you."

The Russian just gawked, but tried to look a bit dignified as he stepped over to the sink to dampen a paper towel and wipe the coffee off his face and the counter, then stepped over to the phone and leaned over it to speak directly down at the faceplate, "Who exactly is listening right now?"

"Just us two." Minako answered, finally having gotten her phone back, "We're not asking because we want to try to guilt-trip you into agreeing to take Yura on anyway. We already figured out a Plan B. We just want to understand why you said no."

"Plan B?" That was something of a relief, though not entirely, "There's a lot of reasons why I said no. The long-and-short of it though is that Yurio is still volatile, and is prone to periodic emotional outbursts that deal a lot of collateral damage to the people around him. I can handle it, but Yuri can't."

The aforementioned skater just sulked at that, but made no argument.

"My first priority is and has always been Yuri's emotional well-being." Viktor went on, "Ever since Day One when I came out here to be his coach, I knew that half the battle to get him back to the Grand Prix Final was rebuilding his confidence. He's got that now, but he's still sensitive to the things people say to him, and when Yurio gets a hair up his arse about something, his traditional response is ripping people apart with his words." He pushed up to his full height and crossed his arms, "I already did my due diligence with this by refusing to be part of what brings Yurio permanently to Hasetsu. Unfortunately, Yurio did what Yurio always does when he doesn't get what he wants...and launched into a verbally abusive tirade...directed straight at Yuri, which puts me in a weird position because it is technically my fault that it came to that in the first place, given how I'm
the one who denied him."

"You don't have to worry about it anymore." Minako said nervously.

"That's what you said a minute ago. What exactly are you doing? I can't imagine you guys all packing up and moving to Russia just for Yurio." Viktor wondered skeptically, giving the phone a rather serious look.

"No..." She confirmed, "We'll be coming to Hasetsu like Mikhail said. It'll just be Yurio and the girls though. Sergio won't be coming."

"Well that's a relief in itself. Why not, pray tell?"

Even Yuri gave a sigh of hesitant satisfaction to hear the words.

"He's only got the last half of this school year to finish before he's going to college anyway. Mikhail's going to fix him up with an apartment in the mean time and sell the house they were all in before, and in a couple months, he'll be 18 and a legal adult anyway, so...there really is no point in dragging him to the other side of the planet. He did say he was sorry for the things he said in Calgary, if it makes any difference."

"Words are wind." Viktor blew it off and shrugged, "He can prove it in Detroit."

"He won't be there either." Minako said simply, "...He's too embarrassed."

The two skaters glanced at each other with looks of disbelief on their faces.

"...Say again?" The Russian asked.

"He talked big about how he thought you were weak because of the skating and the 'being married to a guy' thing...but Mikhail set him straight by showing him a subtitled version of that old RSF conference from last year. Specifically, the part where Yurio was yelling about how grappling is 'way more gay' than anything in figure skating. Guess what Sergio does for school."

"...He's not." The two gaped at each other in surprise.

"Captain of the Wrestling Team." She answered happily, her voice tinted with a chuckle, "Go Banff Bears!"

The skating pair were in stunned silence for a moment longer...but then burst out laughing. Viktor had to crouch next to the table to stop from falling over entirely. Makkachin came trotting up and draped himself over his human's back, licking at the man's face in an effort to be part of the fun, and panted quietly. The Russian just reached up to pat the one paw on his shoulder, and looked to his husband, "A joke almost a year in the making."

"Anyway though..." Minako said, trying to bring things back around, "We found a different coach for Yura, so you won't even have to worry about it."

"A different coach?" Yuri echoed, "Who? Someone we know?"

"Someone you know very well." She nodded; the car was pulling into the parking lot of the Moose Hotel, "Care to take a guess?"

"...The only coaches either of us knows 'very well' are Yakov and Celestino...if Yurio's moving to Hasetsu then Yakov is being dropped, not added." Viktor started, sitting back on the tile floor with a
finger on his lip, the dog still panting quietly over his shoulder, "...I doubt you'd inflict him on Ciao Ciao and Phichit, but..."

"Oh, no..." The ballerina laughed, "It's me!"

"YOU!?"

"I may not have experience coaching figure skating specifically, but I've been a fan of it as long as Yuri's been alive." She explained, "And coaching ballet isn't all that different."

"...But you could barely stay on your skates at the wedding party." Viktor pointed out, "I had to catch you, remember?"

"Oh boy do I." The woman mused, blushing as she said it, bringing her free hand up to cup her cheek.

Mikhail just gawked at her, but then reached over to grab the phone where it was on speaker and held the faceplate towards himself, "That's my future wife you're tempting! Quit making her lust for younger men!"

The duo just made a face at Yuri's phone, "...Future what?"

Minako blustered, "I haven't agreed to anything yet!" She yanked her phone back, pushing the man off with a hand flat against his face, "Don't listen to him, he's getting excitable! He's been saying crazy stuff since NHK!"

"It's not crazy!" He insisted, though his voice was harder to hear as the pair got out of the car.

The ballerina reset the phone from Speaker so she could speak more easily while they went inside the wooden-lodge-looking three-story hotel, "Anyway...yes, I'll be coaching him. We're kind of hoping that, between me being his new teacher, and him coming to live with Mikhail and I in Hasetsu, maybe he'll get a fresh perspective, and all the stuff that's been making him angry again lately will simmer down. He needs structure; something outside competition. He needs a family and support, something that he's been looking for in the wrong places until now. It'll give you boys some breathing room, too, since we'll coordinate his time at the Ice Castle to be when you're not there. Maybe cordon off half the rink during one of the regular classes that happens there now. You won't even know he's around unless you go there unannounced and run into him on your own time."

"I guess that's a relief then. Viktor's officially off the hook." Yuri said, "...I feel really bad that it's come to this though. When we asked Mikhail to be Yurio's sponsor at Worlds last year, we never really expected it to end up this serious."

"It's mostly Mikhail's fault." The ballerina laughed.

"What'd I do?" The elder Russian wondered as they passed through the sliding-glass doors, and into the lobby.

"You've been a dad too long. It's your instinct to want to nurture your kids, and you've been around Yura too long to count him out."

"Oh." He huffed, "Then I blame Viktor. If he hadn't flipped the switch in me, I'd probably have been childless all my life. Now, look at all these kids I have..." He held his arms out as though he were holding them, "I can't even keep track anymore."

Minako laughed, "Well, in either case...we've got this covered now. You two can go back to doing
whatever you were doing before and not have to worry about Yura. Maybe you'll even be pleasantly surprised by how he adapts. I think this change will be good for him."

"Hopefully." Yuri agreed, "Will you still be doing your regular ballet classes though?"

"Oh sure." She nodded, "I'm even kind of hoping that taking Yura on will bring in more students. Maybe it'll be like the old days when you originally learned it from me."

"What are you going to do about choreography though?" Viktor wondered suddenly, "Ballet isn't really a competitive sport. You put together pre-arranged routines that've existed for decades, even centuries in some cases. Putting together new skating routines is a different world of expertise."

Minako blanched nervously, feeling the blood drain from her face. She covered the speaker on her phone and whispered at her partner, "Hun, Viktor's asking about choreography already!"

"He would." Mikhail huffed, getting the key card for their room and raising a hand to guide the way, "Don't tell him anything yet. There's still Nationals, Euros, and Worlds to get through before Yura even has to think about new programs."

"True." She nodded, then returned her attention to the phone, lightly taking the arm that was offered to her as they walked, "We'll figure it out when the time comes. For now, we just need to get Yura to Hasetsu and settled down. We talked it over with the girls and decided to go straight to Russia after the Final, so Yura can get ready for Nationals and then pack after the competition is over. We'll probably stay for Christmas and New Year's, too, since we're there in Moscow anyway, and then be back in Japan after that."

"...Weren't we still thinking of doing New Year's in Moscow this year?" Yuri whispered, moving down to the floor as well.

"Sure...we can probably avoid them all though if we wanted." The Russian answered, "The Red Square is humongous."

"Guys?"

"Sorry, Minako-sensei." The younger skater answered, "It sounds like you two have it all sorted out. Does Yurio know yet?"

"He knows up to the part about me being his new coach, but not about the travel timeline yet. Mikhail told him to go to sleep since it sounded like he'd been awake all night seething about everything. We'll tell him later."

"...Wish we could've been more help than we were." Yuri went on, ruffling Makkachin's ear as the pupper came by for some second-human lovin's, "We probably won't even see Yurio again until we're all in Detroit. There's only about two hours left before we go grab Phichit-kun and take the train to Fukuoka, and if he's sleeping..."

"It's okay. It just gives him more time to think things through. We were planning on talking to him again before his and Mari's flight leaves anyway. Maybe we can convince him to apologize for the things he said."

"What time are you guys getting there?" Viktor wondered then, "We'll be there by around 3pm local time, and we'll be going on the grand 'Pre-Sochi Tour de Yuri' once we get our stuff in the room and collect our badges."

"Wow, that's ambitious!" Minako laughed, "Yuri will barely be half-conscious coming off the
I'm counting on getting a second-wind once we land." The younger skater admitted nervously, "Being back in Detroit after almost 2 years will be pretty crazy. Especially since I'll be there with not just Phichit-kun, but Viktor, too..." His face started to get a bit red at the thought of hearing everyone's reactions, "...It's going to be completely nuts..."

The ballerina gave a wry, knowing smile, and walked into the hotel suite in the verge of laughing, "How big of a Viktor-fanboy were you out there?"

"...Pretty big..." He lowered his head and covered his face with his hands, though the Russian just smirked, "I wasn't the only one though!" Yuri insisted, "At least half the people who trained at that Skate Club were fans, too!"

"Only one of you managed to seduce the man though!" Minako mused, sitting on the edge of the big bed and kicking her feet up as Mikhail put his coat and scarf away, "They're all gonna be super jealous!"

"I'm kind of nervous about how they're all going to react, honestly." Yuri admitted, feeling his husband's hand sliding over where his own held him up on the tile, "I bet they've been following the competitions so I doubt it'll be a surprise when we show up together, but even still...it'll be the first time they see us together in person. I'll never hear the end of it."

Viktor huffed a laugh, "I can't wait."

"Well, I fully expect Phichit will post a million pictures, so I'm looking forward to it." The ballerina said, smiling at the idea of the whole thing, "But anyway...we finally got to our hotel room and are going to decompress for a while. Today's been a lot of work. We just wanted to let you know about Yura and to tell you that only the girls are coming to the Final with us, so hopefully there won't be too much drama. We can corral them on their own if you'd rather just not deal with them."

Hazel eyes glanced up at the only person whose opinion on the issue really mattered, but Viktor shook his head, "It was only Mimi's boy that got under my skin. The girls seemed okay. I'm sure they'll be fine."

"Okay. We'll leave you to it, then. Safe travels, and we'll see you in Detroit on Friday morning."

"Oyasumi, Minako-sensei."

"Byebye~"

The phone clicked, and the screen went white again, returning to the GPF time-table email that Yuri had been looking at before. The skater locked the device and set it back onto the table before heaving a deep sigh, "Whew...well, at least they're taking us into consid-"

Viktor cut him off. A hand around the back of his head pulled the young skater forward and into an unexpected kiss. Cherry-brown eyes were wide, but slowly closed as the kiss went on, his own hands finding their places on the Russian's lithe frame. When the man finally pulled back though, Yuri felt the nuzzle against the tip of his nose.

"You know what this means?" Viktor purred.

"...Post conflict...carnal urges...?" The younger figure guessed anxiously.

The Russian had his husband in his arms bridal-style and was standing upright a few seconds later,
and started moving towards the stairs, "And awaaaaay we go~!" He laughed.
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED THIRTY NINE

It always shocked Yuri that Viktor could carry him around like he weighed next to nothing. Be it taking him to bed when he'd fallen asleep watching television, or after a long day of practice, or as the case may be, getting him to their bedroom for one of their romps...the Russian was always able to glide up those stairs like he could fly.

Though, perhaps the man's excitement that day had been augmented by the arrival of the new emergency-ordered Free Skate costume earlier in the morning.

In either case, Yuri felt himself gently placed on top of those blankets mere seconds after having been picked up off the tile floor of the kitchen. Viktor was in next to him moments later, leaning over him with a long kiss as his delicate fingers worked at the loose knot holding the front of the bathrobe closed. He could feel the cool air rush against his skin as the warm fluff of the felt material slid away, clinging only to his arms where he had them up to cup his hands over the man's shoulder and against one cheek. The only other fabric covering him beyond that were the navy-blue shorts around his hips.

The pale, slender hands that had pulled the knot away then took new positions, one holding the Russian up as the other slid within the open folds of the robe to feel at his partner's skin. He lowered down onto an elbow, never once parting far from those kisses, save to turn his head to start again or to let Yuri catch a breath, and he eventually came to rest leaning against the man's side. Yuri's left leg was bent upward, and the silver skater slid his hand down from the figure's lean side, over his waist, hip, and thigh, eventually pulling that leg over his own as he gently wedged it up as high as it could go.

As Viktor lowered down, Yuri pushed slightly up, rising only high enough to let the rest of the bathrobe slide off his shoulders. He returned quickly after that, rolling slightly over his partner's chest as he leaned back into another kiss. The feeling of his husband's hand going higher against his leg again was almost urgent.

Fingers grasped at every inch of skin, sneaking under the edge of the dark-blue fabric and feeling for places only the owner of those fingers would ever know. As the hand slid further up, fingers sneaking between the back of the younger man's legs, Viktor pulled lightly and rolled fully onto his back, getting under his husband and freeing up his other hand in the process. He put it to good use rather quickly, sliding up the length of the smaller athlete's back and then down again, both hands getting a palm-full of SkaterButt where they met evenly over those figure-hugging briefs.

Though, that's when the surprise came. Not from Yuri...but rather, because of him. Instead of using that rump-grab as a cue to sit on the silver Russian's hips, he pulled the leg back that had been placed to the outside of Viktor's thigh and wedge it under that leg instead, pulling both of the man's legs aside his hips in the process.

"Ohh?" The Russian's voice purred at the unexpected shift, "What's this? Getting bold?"

"...I was going to...get things started myself, but..."

"Wow~! Really? How so?" Viktor laughed, eagerly parting his legs for his partner, hands still on the man's backside, craning his head up to nuzzle that slender neck.
"Right before Minako-sensei said they'd gotten to their hotel room and cut the conversation short."
Yuri explained, his cheeks getting a bit darker as he really thought about his original plan, though his mind was rather-well distracted by the feeling of his partner's fingers moving down between the back of his legs again, one finger starting to rub at a certain nubbin of tender flesh at the limits of his reach, "...I was going to...nh...cut them off and say...'sorry, we have to...gaahh...go...I'm about to get Viktor to..." He had to stop speaking for a moment, his head drooping, raven-black tufts of spiky hair dragging across his husband's shirt, "...to make...some very inappropriate noises..."

"Oohhh~! That sounds familiar." The Russian was super intrigued, "Are you going to have your way with me now?" He asked quietly, seductively against his partner's ear, still rubbing that same 'button' of skin, even through the shorts.

"Now?" Yuri echoed, "...Now you're just...making me nervous..."

"Why's that? You've taken me before."

"...N-not like this." He explained, finding it more and more difficult to keep his focus.

Viktor gave that certain 'fun-button' something of a slightly-harder push, and Yuri felt the strength leave his arms, dropping face-first against the crook of his husband's neck and shoulder with a gasped cry. The Russian seemed to find endless pleasure in the sight of his partner rendered so helpless, and used his parted legs to pin him in where he was, turning his head to nibble at the man's neck where he could. He slid his free hand a bit higher against his partner's bum, but those fingers went down under the edge of the fabric, moving down into the cleft of flesh to find their second goal. Yuri tried to push up again, but found it impossible. The first group of fingers had given too much attention by then, entirely overwhelming his senses long before the second set of fingers had found their own mark a little higher up. All he could do was gasp and moan quietly with each breath, limp against his husband's chest. It was only then that Viktor started rolling his hips, too, adding friction to the front where previously there had been none.

The Russian relished in every second of his partner's ecstasy, especially when the man seemed half-dazed, and had lost coherent thought at the feeling of his touch. He dared make his partner squirm even more by trying to make him think, "...So, Yuri..." He purred, "Tell me about all the things you're going to do to me."

"Uuuuhhhh..."

"Really? How interesting...!"

Determined to at least try and fulfill his goals from before, Yuri searched himself for every ounce of strength he could muster, sliding his hands across the bed-sheets to get as well under himself as he could to push himself up. It still took considerable effort, and Viktor wasn't making it easy by any stretch. It was even harder when he'd managed to get pushed half-way up, and could feel the wet spot against his skin where his husband's attention had provoked an early release of that clear, slippery liquid from him. When he finally managed to get up high enough to bring his knees around and sit up on them, he'd also finally gotten out of the Russian's reach, and felt the return of something close to normal thought.

Viktor just reached his arms up above his head, stretching out and arching his back to await his husband's attention. Cool blue eyes watched eagerly, wondering what Yuri could do in that completely sober state, since experiencing such a thing was such a rarity...especially when he himself wasn't feeling all that vulnerable, or willing to give up control.
Yuri shook his head to clear it, and tried to remind himself about what he was planning. Hands reached forward almost autonomously, unthreading the singular button at the top of his husband's figure-hugging jeans, pulling the zipper down, and then tugging up against the wine-red button-down shirt that had been tucked into them.

The Russian helped by lifting his back again, feeling the silky material sliding against his skin until most of his core was exposed to the air. He quickly dropped it down again when the unexpected feeling of a tongue dragging across his front caught him by surprise, and he gave a quiet huff of a laugh at how it tickled, bringing his hands up to clutch at his partner's head. He unclamped his legs as he let himself relax again, silver hair tousling against the blankets and the sides of his arms where he'd stretched them out beyond the edge of the bed.

Soft, gentle kisses roamed over that pale skin, trailing over the contours of hardened muscle and the curve of ribs, moving from center to the side, then back again to go to the other. It was a considerable difference to how the Russian normally did things, if nothing else, or even in comparison to what Yuri normally did while drunk. He was slower, taking his time, being more methodical...though maybe that was just nerves.

Still, the Russian seemed to enjoy it either way, eager for his partner's touch no matter how patient or desperate it felt.

Yuri pushed up a little to rise onto his knees, moving further up his husband's chest, skipping over where the shirt was folded up onto itself around the highest part, and started to lower down. He gently teased the tip of his nose against the edge of his partner's jaw, moving down past his ear until he could kiss the side of that long, perfect neck.

Viktor leaned his head up to give him all the access he wanted, starting to lower his own arms as well, but feeling the back of them brushing up against his husband's wrists where his hands had planted to hold him up.

The younger figure rose up again briefly to let his husband get his arms out of the way, but then lowered back down to his elbows to return to the neck he'd been nibbling on.

Slender fingers gently traced along the contours of the younger man's frame, moving down Yuri's sides until they found the elastic around the man's waist again. He was still slightly up on his knees from before, and Viktor took the opportunity to finally push the offending blue material away. He barely had time to push it far enough past his partner's thighs that they could slide the rest of the way down on their own, before he felt a warm drip of liquid against his abdomen. He didn't want to just reach up and grab at its source though; he wanted something more, something that would require the use of both hands for a terrible few moments before feeling the payoff. He reached down to the edge of his own garments, sticking his thumbs under the waist-band and lifting his hips off the blanket to push them away. Getting the rest of those pants and undergarments off required Yuri getting higher up on his knees for a second, but Viktor brought his own together under the man's core for only half a heartbeat, pulling just one leg free of everything before abandoning the effort to remove the rest. Legs parted once more, and those hands held gently to the younger man's sides, guiding him back down again.

Yuri rose his face away from that spot on his partner's neck as the lower half of him was descending, and looked into those eager blue eyes, feeling their centers come together. Each of them drew in a quiet, hissed breath as they felt it, but Yuri was the first to start the slide, looking into those crystal depths the entire time. He closed his eyes only to lower down again to kiss the man beneath him, feeling the hip-rocking being returned in kind, hands sliding up his sides and down his lower back. They hadn't even paused to reach for the warming gel, but things between them were already rather
slippery anyway.

Viktor raised his knees up, pressing his thighs against his partner's hips, arms hugging around the man's chest to hold him closer, and slid his mouth down the side of the younger figure's neck, kissing at it as he rubbed a little faster. With Yuri just next to his ear, he could hear even the tiniest utterance, relishing in the sound of each gasped breath, and every quiet whimper. He let his head drop back down to the blanket, silver hair fanning out over it, and pulled his partner into another string of kisses. Each rub and slide brought with it a wave of warm, electrical pulses from center, sending a tingle to the tops of their heads and the tips of their toes.

Before long, Yuri was pulling away again, kissing his husband's chin and the side of his neck as he moved just a few inches down. He caught his breath briefly against the winkles of the man's shirt, still bundled up at the top of his chest, but moved one hand down between them to find himself.

The Russian watched him carefully, turning his head to see the small bottle on the night-stand and tried to reach for it, though finding it too far away, "Yuri, wait..."

"...I think...it's okay..." He answered, his hand almost dripping with the slippery liquid, "...I think...I made enough of my own..." The young skater's face was bright red, but he tried to hide it by keeping his face down against the fabric, using those fingers to maneuver himself and spread that clear liquid around more evenly.

True to Yuri's summation, when Viktor felt the pressure, and the penetration...it was slick. Still, he clung a little tighter with the anxiety that it might not be that way the whole time, moaning out quietly with each, deeper, slow push. He only let himself relax again a little when he could feel the front of his husband's hips against his backside; his ankles were crossed tightly behind the man's back, thighs pinching against that narrow waist. Every muscle in his body had tensed up at the worry of a dry approach...but Yuri slid partially back out again, and in once more, and it felt as wet and warm as if they'd used that favored warming liquid from the start.

It was a rather strange feeling for the Russian, who had started out their romp as the one in full control of the morning's events. Having the tables turned in actuality when he'd thought it was just meant as a tease, he couldn't quite wrap his head around it. Though, the longer it went on, even through his husband's non-drunk, slow and steady movements, the more he let go of his perceived control of the situation. Before long, he unclamped his tightly-wound legs, and his ankles uncrossed, swaying gently with each calculated push into him. He could feel his husband's arms wedging under his upper-back, holding to just behind his shoulders, a warm cheek against his own, but then sliding up to touch their foreheads together. Brown half-lidded eyes gazed down into him, and Viktor knew he was under the man's spell. Every thrust, while passive and leisurely, went deep, pressing hard and holding for a moment before pulling back again to start anew.

Yuri shifted where he sat after a while, moving his knees out from being just beside his husband's hips, to settling more behind himself, though still parted far. The change made the Russian's voice sound different as well, switching from 'getting used to being taken' to 'go faster.' The nervous young skater did his best, not having the benefit of alcohol-induced bravery to spur him on. He listened to that voice closely, hearing his husband's muffled cries as though for the first time all over again. One long kiss, and Yuri pushed up onto his hands again, moving the right over the man's pale chest, and reaching for that neglected flesh between them. A finger traced along its length from tip to base, but then continued down, turning slightly to grip a palm against the inside of the man's thigh, thumb going down low. Two gentle rubs against that sensitive skin for each slow push inside, and two more for each subsequent withdraw. He could tell he'd found the right spot by seeing how his partner clenched his eyes shut, and tilted his head just so, those silver-grey bangs swaying gently with each turn or thrust. Quiet, hesitant breaths were uttered for disbelief of the change in tide, but Yuri wanted
to hear him.

He sat a bit further up, bringing his knees back around, pressing tightly against the Russian’s sides, freeing up his remaining hand. He took hold of that previously-teased flesh, and gave the man a proverbial taste of his own medicine.

The familiar feeling, compounded with the rest, forced the silver legend to finally cry out, gasping in a breath and groaning between clenched teeth, or moaning loudly with each stroke. Hands reached out desperately to clench around the blanket, pulling the one side of it close where it had been set loosely near the pillows.

The young skater gathered up his strength again, and leaned slightly forward, pressing in a little faster than before. To his surprise, he found the Russian reaching down to find his hands, and pulled them clean away from everything else, balling them up on the center of his chest and holding them there. Realizing what it meant, Yuri pressed his palms down and let his hips do the rest. He knew he was close already, but the higher Viktor slid his knees up his sides, the more urgent he knew it was becoming.

Fairly soon after, the Russian tensed up one last time, knees practically coming around the front of Yuri's chest to stop him, though they then went back to where they'd been before and his ankles crossed to pull him in deeper. His previously loud-self had gone silent for a moment, practically losing the ability to breathe in those seconds, his whole frame tightening up. He could only draw in air again once he dropped his head back down, feeling the waves of that climax pouring through him over and over, a pulse with each frantic heartbeat.

The sudden clench was enough to put the younger figure over the edge as well, and he slowly dropped back down over his partner, setting his forehead over where they still had their hands clasped together, and panted heavily. He opened his eyes and lifted his head when he felt Viktor starting to move under him again, still quietly trembling as he went, attempting to sit up. Yuri pulled up as well and moved his hands down around the man's sides to help him, and the Russian slid his arms around his sides before collapsing against one shoulder, huffing a quiet laugh to himself.

"...Wh-where did...did you...learn that...?" He panted, holding as tight as his shaken frame could manage.

"From...some guy I know..." Yuri answered.

"...I th-think...I'll be feeling this one...for hours..."

"Careful though...Ph-Phichit-kun might think you're possessed...!"

Viktor just laughed at that, kissing his husband's collar-bone before leaning back again a little to see those cherry-hazel eyes. He could barely make out his reflection in that half-lidded gaze, but it gave him pause to smile more, and he moved closer to kiss the man lightly before sliding back down to a shoulder and holding there. It was pure bliss, to feel his husbands arms around him, one part still inside him as well, just holding still as they caught their breath.

"...It's going to take a while to top this one..."

Yuri looked at his phone to check the time as they left the house, Makkachin trotting excitedly through the snow of their meager front lawn before jumping back out onto the shovel-cleared path to get to Minako's car. Suitcases rolled along behind the skating duo, and Viktor paused just long
enough to lock the door before heading over to the vehicle and unlocking it as well. The old thing had no keychain controller, and had to be opened up manually.

"...Can't say I'm not looking forward to having my car back." The Russian mused, pushing up the trunk to heft their luggage in, "Kind of feels like a bit of a relief that Mimi didn't end up selling it to pay for papa's new truck."

"It'll be easier to drive around Japan this summer." Yuri agreed, wedging his things in next to his partner's, then reaching up to close the trunk, "We can finally do that old-timey tour, and see all the real historical stuff, not just the fake tourist traps like that thing." He thumbed over at Hasetsu Castle on its hill overlooking the bay.

"And you still really want to do the Summer Garden thing back in St. Petersburg?"

"Sure." He nodded, taking his place in the front passenger seat as Viktor let Makkachin into the back, "Why not?"

"Ah...after all the trouble we went through while living there..." The silver legend answered, closing the door and getting behind the wheel. He felt a hand slide across his leg like always, and started the car, "Why don't we go someplace else? Somewhere neither of us has been."

"Sure. Where?"

"I haven't done Germany before. You?"

"Only for a layover once."

Viktor looked excited, "Then let's go there! We missed Oktoberfest, but the beer gardens are year-round anyway! We can rent one of those campers and stay by a lake for a week or two, and go on their speed-trains to all the different big cities! Munich, Berlin, Karlsruhe, Frankfurt... We'll spend a month!"

Yuri couldn't help but feel the exuberance seeping into him, contagious as anything else Viktor ever got riled-up over, "Perfecto~!" He could feel the vehicle starting to move under them, pulling out onto the street. "We only have an hour left though before Phichit-kun is expecting us. We should probably hurry."

"Glasses first or Yu-Topia?"

"Glasses."

"Okay~"
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED FOURTY

Yuri took the small black case in his hands and opened it, seeing the brand new pair of blue-rimmed glasses sitting therein. They were slightly different in style, having two half-inch diagonal black stripes on each of the arms, but otherwise, looked exactly the same. He took a moment to pop out his contact lenses and slipped the glasses on over his nose, blinking a few times to adjust, and looking around the small optical shop to test them.

"Dou desu ka?"

Brown eyes glanced up, "Ii da yo." He clicked the small case closed and put them into a brown paper bag on the counter in front of him, slipping the small contact-lens case in after it, and the sample-size bottle of lens solution, "Domo."

The clerk bowed her head, and Yuri turned to head back towards the door, and the waiting car just outside. He piled in happily and pulled the seat-belt across.

"Ready?"

Makkachin wedged himself in between the two front seats to sniff at the new frames, licking Yuri's face before pulling back to his own seat to stick his head out the window. Yuri laughed and rubbed the slobber off his cheek, "Yeah. How do I look?"

Viktor smirked, but just lifted his husband's hand between them and kissed his fingers, "Adorable."

Phichit was already waiting by the sliding doors when the duo arrived at the resort, and waved excitedly when he saw the pair walking under the entry-way. Yuri stepped up first to reach for the closest of the suitcases.

"Yuri! You got new glasses!"

"Yeah." He nodded, tipping the frames up with a finger, "Just today. Felt kind of naked without them for a while."

"I didn't mind." Viktor mused, making the young skater's face flush. He crouched down to smooch his poodle's face, "This is it, Makkachin. Just one more weekend and then we're staying together again for a while! Remember... no sticky-buns! You remember what happened last time I left for just a weekend and you ate them anyway?"

The dog just panted quietly, tail wagging back and forth. A dribble of drool descended from that muzzle.

"Noooooo!" Viktor got dramatic suddenly, throwing himself over the dog, "Don't let another one of my premonitions come true! It happened already once before!" He held the dog by the shoulders and went nose-to-nose with him, "PROMISE ME."

Makkachin licked his face happily, knocking the impeccable silver legend onto his butt, tail wagging the whole time.
"Yuri! Vik-chan!" Hiroko's voice came, the short woman coming up to the open doorway, "Are you boys heading out already? It feels like you've been home for barely any time at all."

"Hai." Yuri nodded, pausing where he had turned with Phichit, "Wait just a second...I'm going to help Phichit-kun take his stuff to the car. We'll be right back." The two turned back towards the courtyard and moved out with the bit of luggage.

Viktor rose back up to his full height to happily herd his pup into the building, glancing around briefly before turning back to give his mother-in-law an affectionate kiss on the cheek, "Thanks for watching Makkachin for us again. He's a lot less frantic when he gets to stay here."

"No problem! He's so well-behaved!" Hiroko fawned, patting the flufferbutt on the head as he sat dutifully next to her, panting quietly like usual, "He kind of has a calming presence around here, especially on competition nights. You two have had quite the run these past few weeks. I'm almost scared for the Final! You two need to be more careful!"

"I'm sure it'll be fine. I only got one bad feeling about it and it had nothing to do with either of us."

"Well..." Hiroko went on, reaching out to take the Russian's fingers with her own, smiling up at his comparatively ultra-tall self, "They say that if you can survive your first year of marriage, it gets easier every year after that. You boys have gone through so much together already, and it's only been 9 months. If you can make it the last 3...I think it should be smooth sailing after that! You should have a long and happy life together!"

Blue eyes blinked down at the woman, and he suddenly found himself comically overwhelmed with emotion. He went down on one knee and hugged her tight, weeping exaggerated tears against her uniform, "Spasibo."

Outside, luggage was being shuffled around to make room in the trunk, though small as it was, some of the carry-bags ended up being moved to the back driver's-side passenger seat. Yuri closed the door and nodded, turning to Phichit, "Well, this is way easier than when we started the GP Series...that's for sure."

The Thai skater nodded, jokingly patting his older friend's back, "I'm sure every suitcase was necessary."

"Well, Viktor did use everything in all of them...so...I guess it was." He laughed nervously, thinking back on all of it as they started heading back towards the resort's front courtyard, "But I am glad to only have to worry about a single weekend's worth of stuff rather than nearly 6 full weeks. Trying to find a home for everything we brought back with us, too... That huge NHK trophy took over half a suitcase just on its own!"

"Viktor probably has a whole closet-full of those things by now."

"Actually..."

Phichit's expression changed and he stopped in place, an eye twitching slightly, "...Wow...he...he really has so many that he has to store them to get them out of the way, huh?"

Yuri made the same face, though he tried to smile anyway, "...Y-Yeah..."

The two sighed, "...Competing against Viktor is hard...!"

The older of the two started moving back towards the resort again, "...Oh, did you talk to Yurio at all today?"
"I haven't seen him, actually."

"Really…? At all?"

"He didn't come down for breakfast. I thought he'd come down for lunch, but…nope. He's been in his room all morning."

Yuri sighed again, "…I need to try to talk to him before we go… I hate leaving him like this."

By the time they'd gotten back inside, Viktor was seemingly already trying to do that exact same thing, standing outside the Russian Tiger's room...but waiting quietly. Listening. He cast his eyes over to that end of the hall as he heard the footsteps coming up the stairs, and held his hand out for his husband as he came around the corner.

"Have you tried to get his attention?" Yuri wondered quietly, taking the offered hand and speaking against the Russian's ear where the man had leaned down slightly to hear him.

Viktor shook his head, "I haven't heard anything inside the room. I'm not even sure he's in there."

The younger figure looked back at Phichit, and then to the door, raising his free hand and knocking quietly, "Yuri...are you in there?" No answer came, even for the good few seconds they waited, "...Yuri...we're all about to leave. I'd really rather not have to go knowing you're still mad at us. Would you come out and talk to us?"

Still nothing.

The Russian knocked as well, "Yuri...I get why you're mad about what you heard yesterday. We all want what's best for everyone, but that doesn't mean everyone's going to get the outcome they want. I didn't refuse your request because I'm trying to spite you, though."

As before...nothing came.

Viktor looked back at his partner, "Well, he's either sticking to his guns, or he's not here. Should we check the onsen real fast?"

"Yeah."

Phichit turned on his heel to head back the way they came and clear the path, and Viktor followed after, but he paused when he felt a tug on his hand where Yuri hadn't quite started to move yet. The two skaters glanced at the third, but neither knew what to say.

"Yuri..." The raven-haired figure said, a worried look on his face, "Minako-sensei told us about the plans you guys have made, and we're actually pretty happy for you. We all think the change of scenery, and being around people who care a lot about you will probably do you a lot of good. Having a real family to come home to every day...it's different than just hanging out with a couple of older skaters who joke about being your SkateDads." He explained, hoping the teen was inside, so that he wasn't just speaking to an empty room like he'd done once before, "...So we're wishing you the best in it all, okay? We're looking forward to you being in Hasetsu full time. Maybe we'll train together again like we did in St. Petersburg, just with Minako-sensei instead of Yakov. It'll be fun...right?"

Without an answer, Yuri drew in a disappointed breath and turned back to the two ahead of him, following down the stairs without another word.

Inside the room though...the Russian Tiger had indeed been present...but had been stone-cold
unconscious the entire time.

"Well...we'd better get out of here. Plane leaves in about 2 hours." Yuri explained, standing in the snowy front entranceway of the resort. Ahead of him was his father, holding onto a camera, having just taken the last few pictures of the group. Phichit was unhooking his phone from a selfie-stick, and Viktor was looking at the pictures he'd taken on his own phone as well, leaning against Yuri's back as he did so.

Mari was looking a bit nervous off to the side, "What do I do if he doesn't come out...?"

"Just barge the door down and drag him out." Viktor offered with a wink, "I don't think it'll come to that though. I'll bet he was just asleep, since we couldn't find him anywhere else. Uncle Mimi and Minako-sensei said they talked to him really early this morning. He may not be super-chatty, but he'll come downstairs to get to the airport when it's time. He does know when you plan on leaving, right?"

"...I think so...but knowing him, he might've just said 'yeah yeah' to get me to stop talking to him..."

"Did Yurio ever give you his cell number?" Yuri wondered, "You can always scare him awake by phoning him."

The older woman shook her head, and pulled her own phone out of her jacket pocket, dressed in normal clothing for the trip later that night, "No, I don't think he ever gave it to me. Text it?"

"Sure." The skater nodded and flipped through his contacts to do just that. When it was done, he put his phone away again, and then looked up at his husband, then to the family again, "We're off."

"Ganbatte, ne? Yuri! Viktor!" Hiroko cheered, Toshiya standing by her side, "Bring home another Gold medal!"

"I'm going to try." He answered nervously.

"Of course you're going to win Gold." Viktor encouraged, wrapping an arm around his partner's back and settling his hand that hip.

"What about you then?"

"I'm going to win Gold!" The Russian said proudly.

The group just gawked at him, "...This again..."

With Minako's car safely parked in front of her apartment building, everything transferred to the cab that came to pick the skaters up, and the eventual move onto the train itself, the trip to Detroit was officially underway. The first plane took off from Fukuoka and landed for the initial layover in Tokyo for a meager 1-hour break. After that, it was a full 12 hour flight to Chicago, a brief 45-minute second layover, and the final 90 minute flight to Detroit itself. It was just around 3:30pm local time when they finally got off that last plane, and though Yuri was still slightly tired, he'd managed to find the mercy of sleep for a few hours of the main flight.

Phichit had been completely enamored with Business Class, foreswearing Coach from then on, despite knowing there was no way he'd ever be able to hold to those plans. Still, he took so many
photos that it might as well have been a movie, giving him something of an anthology to look through on any later flights he'd take so he could at least fool himself by living through the images vicariously.

As they made their way out into the main part of the North Terminal, Yuri felt the second-wind he'd been hoping for. Coffee helped in that regard as well; it was Viktor's mission to go to the first cafe they found upon entering the D-Wing, and as though by providence, the first restaurant he spotted after coming off the ramp was a Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf.

Concourse-D was a massive and long terminal, completely separate from the rest of the airport, and up the road a ways to boot. It took several minutes, for lack of an indoor shuttle service, to walk from the gate to the baggage claim area. It was all becoming terribly nostalgic, though.

One thing that caught Yuri's eye as they got their things and were heading out to the road to find their shuttle, was the huge banner welcoming participants and spectators to Detroit for the Grand Prix Final. It featured a grandiose image of the Little Caesar's Arena, and the official ISU logo for the event off to the side, as well as the Top 3 qualifying participants from each of the different disciplines. Naturally, it featured himself, Viktor, and JJ, since they'd all won Gold medals, and JJ had scored just barely higher than Otabek.

Viktor gave the banner something of a smug gesture, "Are you ready for this?" He turned to his partner, who was still looking at the banner.

Yuri glanced back, "What, for this? It's-" He whipped his hands back and gave an atrociously-bad impersonation of JJ-Style-hands. He did it wrong the first several attempts though, unable to quite figure out which direction one hand was supposed to go to make the first J-sign, and getting the second backwards anyway, so he gave up, shrugged, and laughed at it nervously, "...Yuri Style, I guess?"

The Russian just made V-signs with his fingers, waving them around before thrusting them both forward, "It's Vivi Style!"

Both younger skaters just grabbed for the man's arms though and pulled them down, "Careful! Americans are super sensitive about that!"

"About what? Vivi Style?" He asked, still laughing but super confused.

"Something about some guy once saying 'I'm not a crook' or whatever." Yuri tried to explain, "I forget."

"And then there's this one-" Phichit added, making a sign with his free hand as they let the older figure go, with his pinky and index finger out, and the other fingers curled inward, "...Some people think it's supposed to be a sign of solidarity for some Texas college football team, but other people are like 'blearg it's Satan!' You can never tell which one people are going to think you're doing until they freak out about it."

"Wow~! Really?" Viktor wondered, inevitably making the sign with his own hands, "It's like little hand-puppets! See? If I do my fingers like this, it's like a snout!" He gestured at his husband, making his middle and ring fingers and thumb act like the face and jaw of some dragon he'd created, "Rawr~!"

"Viktorstopitohmygod." Yuri stammered, trying not to laugh as the Russian did everything he could to tickle him with the 'dragon-face.'
Viktor just laughed as the younger figure tried to wiggle away, snaking his dragon-headed-hands around the man's sides to hug him from behind, "Anyway though... I only came through this place once before today. I guess you must've come through here a hundred times during the 5 years you trained with Ciao Ciao."

"Mh." The skater nodded, "...It's actually kinda weird being here again now." He went on, looking back at the terminal one last time as they finally made their way through the last doors to get outside. His sudden shift from being on the edge of laughing to being serious caught his partner by surprise, and Yuri could feel the light squeeze where the man hugged him a bit tighter to get his attention back.

"Yuri?"

"Sorry, I just..."

Images flashed through his mind, past versions of himself appearing like apparitions all around them. The return from dozens of different competitions, some happy and excited, others significantly less so...and the time he'd come back from Skate Canada swearing he'd never wash his hand again.

*It all happened right here...*

"This is where I came when I got off the plane the first time, moving up to Seniors and leaving home to train. ...I was...never any particular genius at skating...I just had a lot of free time on my hands, and about a billion reasons to want to leave Hasetsu." The anxious skater explained, his eyes wandering across every wall and window, escalator and sign, "Most of all, this is where I came when I really buckled down and got serious about wanting to compete on the same ice as..."

Viktor could feel the shorter man wiggle a bit to get free, and let him go easily enough, watching quietly, but sliding one hand down the skater's arm to find his palm again.

Yuri turned to face him finally, finding the man's other hand to take it as well, lacing their fingers together though keeping his eyes low on that tan long-coat the whole time, "...All these times, I came through this place...never once did I ever think that, one day, I'd not only have gotten to actually meet you...but that I'd have gotten to skate with you... Everything that's happened since I last set foot in this building...going back to Japan with my tail between my legs, when I thought I'd given up skating for good...having never so much as told you my name with my own voice... And yet, now...I'm back again, not just as a top figure skater, but...with you...here by my side..."

The Russian could hear the subtle crack in his husband's voice, and lowered his face a bit with a sad smile, "It's all coming a bit full-circle for you here, isn't it? Even more than when you did 'Firebird' at last year's Exhibition."

The younger skater snuffled a breath, trying to rub his eyes and nose on the inside of his shoulder, but it didn't help. As soon as he looked up and saw the silver legend's face, the tears rolled down his cheeks anyway, "I needed to do 'Firebird'...to show you, to show everyone how far I'd finally come because of what you'd done... The sacrifices you made, the tremendous personal risk you took put on your own career and reputation, the time you spent trying to sort me out... I wanted everyone to see that it wasn't a waste. But now...I'm back in this place, and I'm more than what I was when I last came through here...and I can prove to this city that I finally achieved, and surpassed, my wildest dreams."

Viktor couldn't keep still after that, stepping forward to put his arms over his emotional husband's shoulders and pull him close. He felt the hug returned quickly, the younger skater's arms coming around his sides and holding tight, "Your dreams weren't the only ones that were surpassed. You did
that with mine, too...and..." He said quietly, "...We achieved it all together. I couldn't be prouder or happier."

"Me n-neither..." Yuri quaked, pressing his eyes to his husband's shoulder. He held there for a moment, until he was sure he wouldn't completely burst out crying when he pulled away again, and huffed an incredulous laugh at himself as he rubbed one wrist against his cheek, "S-Sorry...I guess...I'm a bit emotional and over-tired..."

"Maybe a little bit." The Russian mused, leaning forward again to give his partner a reassuring kiss...only for them both to suddenly realize...

...Phichit had been taking pictures the entire time.
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED FOURTY ONE

It was close to 2pm when the Russian Tiger finally awoke from his stress-relieved coma; his phone beeped next to his unused pillow. One lazy, uncoordinated arm reached over for it, fumbling over the sheets until the cold glassy surface could be found, and the noise shut off. With a long stretch and a yawn, Yurio finally rose to sitting, looking around the room with half-open eyes.

...Three hours before I have to be social...

He glowered at his backpack near the door, seeing the outline of his skates poking out the side.

...I should practice a bit while I still have time...no one else is here now...

Wandering downstairs to the more populated part of the resort, Yurio glanced around corners and snuck by like a ninja, trying to remain undetected. He made it to the sliding front doors before anyone caught sight of him...though in that case, the 'someone' was a dog. Makkachin trotted up amiably, looking the teen up and down carefully with those dark brown eyes, panting quietly like always.

Yurio just gawked back at the poodle, "...What?"

BORK!

"SHHH!" He waved his hands back and forth, "Don't make so much noise; people will know I'm down here!"

"Yuuuuriooooo..." Mari's voice came, bringing life to the teen's worries.

He hurriedly rushed through the doors, the big brown flufferbutt chasing after him too quickly to be shoved back inside. Mari barely managed to open the doors again in time to see both the skater and the pup vanish beyond the edge of the resort's snow-covered courtyard. She huffed and crossed her arms.

Viktor looked at his phone, and the shuttle vouchers that were sitting in his email inbox. He looked up and down the line of Airport-service vans that were parked along the walkway, and at the numbers on the outsides...none of them matched his vouchers. Beside him, Yuri sipped quietly at his coffee from earlier, holding the cup in one hand as he scrolled through Instagram with the other. Suddenly, the young skater started coughing violently, holding up the coffee like it were the most important thing...and Viktor took it in hand before the lid came off and burned someone.

"Yuri, what's wrong?" He asked, trying to pocket his phone, "Did you try to swallow down the wrong tube or something?"

More coughing, and Yuri's eyes were starting to water as he tried to clear it. He heaved over his knees, but when he finally recovered from it, he just looked up...and over at Phichit, who was looking quite sheepish suddenly.

"Y-You posted...the pictures of Viktor a-and L...!"? The middle skater blanched. He held up his phone and pointed at the slide-show of images emphatically, noting the curious placement of the
Thai skater's face in the foreground while the somewhat-emotionally-charged Viktuuri moment took place in the background behind him.

Phichit just smiled, "It was a really moving moment!"

Yuri just slouched and sighed.

"How about we rent a car...?" Viktor suddenly asked, getting both younger skaters' attention, "Instead of waiting for the shuttle. Then we could get around town on our own time."

The duo in front of him exchanged glances...and before they could say another word, found themselves in that very rental car, leaving the airport behind.

The Russian seemed more happy then, pulling up and merging onto eastbound I-94 as they headed towards the main part of the city. It was impossible to see anything remotely familiar of the downtown skyline from as far away as they were, but it was still closer than they'd been an hour prior.

"Kind of reminds me of St. Petersburg." Viktor commented, "All the snow, everything looking old and kind of rundown..."

Yuri grimaced, "Is that...a good thing?"

"Who knows?" The silver skater laughed, "Let's head to the hotel first and drop off our stuff. Then we'll figure out the best way to get to the arena, and then...to your old Skating Club!"

The young skater could feel the butterflies rising up in his stomach...and it didn't help that Phichit was cheering for it as well.

"Actually, it all lines up pretty perfectly." The Thai skater was commenting, twiddling around in a map app on his phone, "When we exit onto Highway 12, it's almost a straight-shot to the hotel on the river. We'll be able to see the Ambassador Bridge from there, too! And Canada!" Yuri sunk a little in his seat, "The Little Ceasar's Arena is right up the street from the Marriott...and then we can just go north on Woodward the rest of the way to the Skate Club! We'll be there in maybe 2 hours if check-in and registration are quick!"

Viktor glanced to his right, seeing his husband trying to be small, "What's the matter, Yuri?" He wondered, still feeling the excitement over the prospect of the whole adventure, "You look anxious."

"Celestino and I met under the shadow of the Ambassador Bridge when I originally proposed using the original composition I'd asked for." He admitted nervously, looking over the edge of the doorframe to see the skyline passing by through the window, "He listened to like 15 seconds of it and then shot it down."

"He didn't shoot it down." Phichit laughed, clambering over the back of the skater's seat to see him better through the gap between both, "He just asked if you thought you could win with it. Then you just smiled and suggested he pick for you after all."

The Russian huffed a laugh, "In all fairness, it sounds like he did a better job of dismissing it than I did."

Yuri groaned and pulled his scarf up over his face in shame.

Viktor just reached over to give his partner's leg a gentle squeeze, and settled his hand there, "What were you even going for with that song? The music your friend made after that was beautiful, so it's
obvious that she knows how to compose. But that first recording...sounded kind of like...mic feedback, the kind that breaks glass."

The young skater let go of the scarf, his left hand settling over the one already touching him, curling his fingers around it like he needed the mooring, "I had asked Ketty to create something that summed up my competitive skating career to that point. ...She nailed it. It was awful because I was awful."

"She was actually still in town when I put out feelers for her last year, Yuri." Phichit pointed out, "I wonder if she's still here now?"

The view from the hotel room was a breathtaking sight, looking right across the river...and straight into Windsor, Ontario, on the opposite bank. Yuri set his bags down on the end of the single King-sized bed, while Phichit set his own stuff down on the roll-away that had been set-up while they were checking in. The older of the two stepped over towards the big window, pulling the curtains fully aside to look out over the horizon.

"It's kinda nice to face this way." He commented, squinting his eyes to see into the distance along the ice and water, "There's the bridge..."

"I always thought that thing was kind of funny." Phichit said, opening his suitcase to get some of his personal effects to set up for later, "The first thing you see on the Canadian side of that bridge is Windsor University...but coming back into Detroit, the first thing you see is Mexicantown. It's like..." He waved his hands around for dramatic effect, "Welcome to America...featuring Mexico...a completely different country that's several thousand miles further away."

"This is the same hotel I stayed in the last time I competed here." Viktor commented, fishing his skates out of his own bags, "But back then, it was at the Joe Louis Arena. If you can see the bridge from here, you can see the Arena even easier."

"Don't catch the flu again, Yuri." Phichit teased, "Or you'll be stuck cuddling a framed picture of Viktor like last time!"

"Don't jinx me!" The older skater retorted, "It's the Grand Prix Final! I can't afford to get sick right now!"

"It's okay. If you can't skate, I can take your place! I'll win Gold, and you can be with me on the podium in spirit!"

Yuri just held his head and made a face, "I can't believe you'd even suggest that!" He went back over next to his partner and started rifling around in his carry-bag, "...Now I'll need one of my masks so I don't catch something..."

The Arena was massive, and entirely brand new. The crowds weren't terribly huge yet, since it was still only registration day, but there were a few loitering around looking for familiar faces. The outdoor concourse looked somewhat a 3-story brick-exterior apartment complex, but leading inside, there was a long, wide, flat gathering area leading to the southwest entrance. At the end of it, right near the doors and just in front of an elevated outdoor walkway, there was an enormous flat-panel television screen, already playing snippets from the various events that qualifying skaters had won their placements at. With the trio walking along towards it, it was easy to run through the whole play-cycle, looking up with wide eyes at footage of all the different winning performances. One of the last
things they saw before heading within was a scene from Viktor's last Free Skate...and his crowd-inciting moment at the end of it where he'd been raising his arms to make the audience's roar louder.

"I wonder how people will react to knowing you're not doing that show anymore?" Yuri thought out loud, stepping a bit closer where he'd held to his husband's hand within the man's jacket pocket, bracing his face against the blistering cold with his scarf again. Even with the white surgical mask protecting his nose, and the Calgary Flames beanie making a reappearance on his head, it was still miserably cold, "NHK was insane. No one's ever going to see anything like that again. Not in our lifetimes anyway."

Viktor nodded, watching the screen a bit more before turning towards the doors, "Nor should they. It was taxing enough to do it the one time." He shrugged and twisted on his heel, "I guess some people will be disappointed not to see that performance...but I'm hoping they'll be happy with seeing something entirely new. Assuming they didn't watch the NHK Gala, anyway."

Phichit, wearing his own custom-black mask, hesitated to follow for a moment, looking a bit despondently at the footage...and his absence from it. Seeing Chris there instead, as well as JJ, Otabek, and Yurio, never mind Yuri and Viktor...he sighed.

Moving through the next two sets of doors, the immediate interior looked much like the exterior, but with a glass roof keeping the heat in. The brick walls were lined with images of the Arena's home-hockey-team, the Detroit Redwings, and a few nods to its basketball stars as well. A huge two-story wall surrounding the inner arena was like a honeycomb of video screens, flashing images of the coming event, similar to the one outside. More people had taken refuge inside to escape the cold, and as soon as they started spotting the trio, flash photography sparkled all around and video began rolling. Thankfully, it was mostly the media and less the fans, so there wasn't much risk of being stopped. They waved politely as they found their way over to Registration to sign in and get their badges, the two younger skaters pulling down their masks as they walked.

Yuri could see where his friend was getting a bit depressed at the whole thing, and moved to hide his badge in a deep pocket before stepping closer, "You gonna be okay?"

"...Yeah, it's just really hitting home that I'm not getting to participate this time." The normally-excitable figure answered, "I'm sure I'll perk up once things get going."

"Well well, what's this?" Came a familiar, none-too-welcome voice, "A Japanese skater wearing a Canadian hockey-team's merchandise? That's sweet of you, rooting for the better country's team...but rather bold as well, especially since you're in enemy territory."

The duo looked up, spotting a very particular pair of storm-blue eyes looking right back at them. "Here we all are, reunited again in Motor City. Who'd have thought?"

"JJ." Yuri said quietly, shaking his head lightly and waving politely as he nervously pulled the beanie off his head, scrunching it up in his hands, "Hey."

Phichit waved as well, entirely pulled out of his prior thoughts, "Hi, JJ."

"It's a shame you didn't make it into the Final Six." The young Canadian mused, staring at the Thai skater as he lifted his sunglasses to set them on top of his head. He was standing alone with them, dressed in somewhat-formal attire and a heavy jacket; his usual entourage was nowhere in sight, "It would've been a perfect way to round the whole thing out, if Celestino had been here, too. Maybe next time."
Viktor quietly rolled his eyes where he was getting his things from the Coach's check-in table.

"And there he is," JJ moved right between the pair to see the silver Russian beyond them, pulling the man from his focus, "The skater I intend to defeat in his final year at the Grand Prix."

The skater-coach just kept his head down, looking through the usual paperwork, "You won't beat me and it isn't my last year."

"Eeehhhh?" The Canadian laughed, clapping his hands enthusiastically, his actions albeit dripping with sarcasm, "How do you figure that?"

"Because to beat me, you'll have to beat him first." Viktor answered, pointing at his husband without looking, then pulling it back to keep up what he was doing before, "And I plan to go again next year just for fun." He finally turned to meet those grey-blue eyes with his own lighter ones, "Out-scoring me then won't mean much, since I'm only going to be playing around."

Yuri and Phichit watched the tense back-and-forth quietly.

"Well, I'm not worrying about next year right now." JJ shrugged, a hand settling on each hip as he stoically closed his eyes, "I have a few cards up my sleeve this time that are going to secure my victory over you once and for all. I can't wait to see the look on your face when it's me in center this year, and you have to look up to see the Gold medal being hung on my shoulders."

The Russian just remained stone-faced in front of the youngest skater staring at him, but then turned away again, "Where are your wife and parents? Shouldn't they be keeping you on a short leash so you don't wander off?"

JJ just snorted at him, trying to laugh but feeling a bit of disdain at being shrugged off, "I don't need any leash."

"Funny." Viktor lifted a hand, but kept his back to the man, "The last time I saw a picture of you online, you'd styled yourself a dog with Instagram's face filters. Silly me."

Yuri leaned slightly and spoke in a whisper behind his hand, "Maybe we should just get moving. JJ doesn't know when to quit."

"Agreed."

The older figure stepped forward and around the Canadian, and slid his hand against his husband's back, "Viktor, let's skip taking the quick tour. We'll be coming back later tonight anyway. Maybe he won't be here by then and we can skate in peace."

Viktor drew in a deep breath, but nodded and handed back the signed papers he owed, getting his Coach's badge in return and a small bag of papers as well. He pulled out a few and turned, stepping right before the 'unwelcome one' without so much as a last glance, reading the pamphlets in his hand instead until they were out the doors again.

JJ just gawked, both eyebrows raised, and a smug look on his face. He shrugged and smiled to himself though, "This is my year to shine, Viktor Nikiforov. Out with the old and in the with the new."

The silver Russian drove in near-complete silence; the trip to their next destination was another 45 minutes away, even on the highway. Phichit had taken the front passenger seat that time, playing
navigator, while Yuri was in the back, tangled up in the seatbelt where he was trying to catch a quick nap. He was lying directly on his side, using his hat and scarf like a makeshift pillow, but no matter what position he took, the humps and dips of the 'contoured' modern seats made it difficult to fall asleep.

Eventually, the sleepy skater gave up and sat normally again, looking with hazy eyes out the window as more and more of the landscape was becoming uncomfortably familiar.

"Ahhh we're getting so close!" Phichit commented, knowing volume was no longer needing to be kept low since Yuri had gotten up, "There's the Rusty Bucket, and the Starbucks! And the Sushi Hana you always used to go to, Yuri!"

"Doesn't 'hana' mean 'flower' in Japanese?" Viktor wondered, speaking his first words since leaving the event arena.

"Yeah." The skater behind him confirmed, rubbing his eyes under his glasses.

"So it's like...fish-rice-flower. Tasty."

"Not when you put it like that."

"Oh, turn left up there." Phichit explained, pointing through the windshield, across the divided highway, "Then we'll go straight for a bit, and turn right onto Franklin Road."

Yuri had to hold his hands over his stomach, feeling the nerves rising even more, making his guts feel like they were rolling over one another. He watched in anxious silence as the familiar winter-worn trees passed by, going through a short section of a residential neighborhood before finding their turn a minute or so later. He spotted the Papa Romano's Pizza place, and the Mr. Pita next door, sitting on the same corner that they always had. Then there was the paint store, the consulting firm, the 4 Paws Community Center and the dance studio next to that...getting closer. They found the corner of Franklin and Denison, and the Bloomfield Gymnastics studio on the left. Yuri dropped back down to his side with a perplexing groan, drawing Phichit's attention over a shoulder, though Viktor was stuck just watching as well as he could through the rear-view mirror.

"You okay?" The Russian wondered, "Should I pull over?"

"NoI'mfine." The younger skater insisted, pulling the Flames beanie back over his head so far that it unrolled to completely cover his face. He could feel the car following the slight curve of the road as it lead to the round-about at the end, the whole vehicle practically gyrating as the tires went over pock-marked pavement, then finally pulling off to the left and into the parking lot.

"That's it over there." Phichit pointed again, "The one with the cerulean overhang. You can park anywhere you want."

The car came to a stop after a sharp turn, and Yuri could hear the engine cut out. The two front passengers exited, the doors closing behind them...and then the one just next to himself opening up again. He could feel a presence looming over him before he felt the arms wrapping around him to hoist him back up to sitting.

"Come on outside." Viktor mused, using one hand to pull up the finely-woven yellow-and-red cotton from over his husband's glasses, "It's time to show everyone how amazing you've become."

"A-Amaz-zing...?" Yuri echoed in disbelief. He saw past his partner's silver-haired head to where the Detroit Skate Club's doors were, and he fell back down again, "...I can't do this...I'm too nervous..."
"You'll be fine." The Russian laughed, wedging his hands under the skater's side to unbuckle the seatbelt and drag him out of the car. He nudged the door closed with a knee and proceeded to carry the man across the parking lot towards the entrance, "This should make heads turn." He purred.

"You're going to carry me in there bridal style aren't you?" Yuri asked in a monotone, his eye twitching slightly in horror at the idea. He could hear Phichit quietly laughing behind a hand as he walked next to them, but then terror really set in and Yuri started flailing, "Put me down! I don't want to go in yet! I'm not ready!"

"Yuri!" The Thai skater called, "Calm down, you'll be fine! Why are you so nervous anyway? We practically lived here before."

"I know! But I made a huge scene when I left because I never thought I'd be back! Don't you remember!?" He answered, finding it impossible to detach from his husband's steady grasp. The Thai skater just smiled and shrugged. Yuri could feel the shadow over them where the over-hang blocked out the sun, and heard the door open behind his feet, "Noooooo!"
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED FOURTY TWO

The return to Detroit was like a Death March. Every footstep closer was a second lost to time. Yuri looked up at the sign above the door, reading 'GOOD LUCK IN SOCHI, YURI!' in black plastic block-lettering. Celestino came up behind him after paying off the taxi, and pat his back as he walked by.

"Let's get inside; it's even colder here than it was in Russia!"

The young skater could hardly make a sound...but it was colder. Some how.

They made their way through the doors and into the Skate Club, hearing the sound of practice already underway and the thundering boom of music reverberating off the rafters. It was an old building...but it was home to numerous Champions across the years. The flags that hung down from the rafters and off the walls, with different times and events listed, were a testament to that.

Yuri kept his eyes down though, watching the back of his coach's heels as they made their way through to the commissary area.

"WELCOME HOME, YURI!" A group of people suddenly yelled all at once, catching the skater off guard and making him nearly flip-over backwards to get away.

Brown eyes glanced around the room; happy faces of a dozen or more other skaters that had all been training at the DSC; Phichit was there, too. There were other coaches, choreographers, and even past Champions helping out the younger athletes...Yuri had known many of them for all 5 years he'd been there. But that day...he could do nothing but lower his head. He couldn't look them in the eyes. The shame was too great.

"...I..." He started, voice weak, "...I'm sorry, everyone. I let you all down." He slouched where he stood.

To the side, Celestino made a worried face and crossed his arms. The other members of the club all started feeling anxious, seeing the hapless skater there on the verge of tears.

"It was your very first time to the Final, Yuri." Phichit finally said; the only one of them who dared to speak in that moment, "Don't beat yourself up over it. Coming in 6th when there's only 6 spots to begin with...that's still really good! Even Vikt-

"It doesn't matter." Yuri cut him off, shaking his head, tears falling loose as he did so, "I scored lower than most people did in the qualifying events. Everyone must hate me for taking up the slot when someone much better could've been there instead."

The Thai skater came up to him quietly, but didn't dare reach a hand forward to touch him. Instead, he looked back and saw someone tossing a poodle plush-toy in his direction, caught it, and turned back around to face his friend, "You earned your spot fair and square!" He explained, trying to put the plushie into the older figure's line of sight, though not sure if the man's eyes were even open, "Plus, you can always do better when you go to Nationals in 2 weeks. You just had first-time Final jitters, that's all, but you've been to Nationals a dozen times by now. You'll do great!"

Cherry-hazel eyes looked past the tears that had fallen to the rims of his glasses, and saw the hazy outline of the toy. It just made his throat burn to look at it, and the tears welled anew. He dropped
his bags and took the plush in his arms, and fell to his knees right there in front of everyone, sobbing into the brown fluff.

There was no 'Welcome Home' party the next time Yuri returned from competition. Like before, his eyes looked up at the sign above the door, this time reading 'KNOCK IT OUT IN JAPAN, YURI!' This time, however...his standing in the ranks had dropped nearly double compared to the Grand Prix.

Celestino held the door open for him, and Yuri stepped in quietly, dark circles under his eyes. He could hear the whispers as they started, but the words passed through him like wind in his hair.

"...There's no chance he can go to 4CC now, is there?"
"What's he going to do for the rest of the season?"
"We heard he was thinking of quitting."
"Is he going to be okay?"
"What happened to him?"

Weeks went by that way. Yuri kept his eyes to the floor anytime he went into the building, no matter how many other skaters or coaches tried to greet him. He just bowed his head a little bit lower than it already was and went back to plodding along like a zombie. Most days, he wouldn't even go to rink-side, just staying in the cafeteria area and doing his homework, snacking on the worst possible food choices, or napping. At most, he would sneak onto the rink at the very end of the night, when it was just him and Phichit left, and did the only thing that ever made him feel better.

Sento una voce che piange lontano
Anche tu, sei stato forse abbandonato?

Phichit watched quietly from behind the rink-wall, crossing his arms and resting his chin there while his depressed friend went through the motions of a superior skater’s routine. It was frustrating to see him screw up the quad Lutz and quad Flip, flopping onto the ice like a beached seal, hoarfrost clinging to his pants where he’d landed.

Yuri gave up about a third of the way through though, realizing he wasn't really feeling it that night after all, regardless of his falls. He sighed and went towards the exit, patting his thighs to be rid of the frost...only to find Phichit standing there waiting for him.

"I've seen you do that show before without fault. It's maddening to know that you can do 'Aria,' but for some reason, you can't do it in competition, when it really matters." The younger skater pointed out, looking rather serious for once, "Is it stage fright? Or was it because Viktor was there at the same event? Help us out, Yuri...we want you i-"

"Vik-chan died, back home." The older figure explained suddenly, "...I...didn't want to tell everyone and make a big deal out of it. For some reason, not many people are that understanding about pet deaths when it isn't their own...so..."

"...Vik-chan...died...? When did that happen?" Phichit was caught off guard by it.

Yuri rubbed his forehead on the back of a sleeve, but then reached for where he'd left his blade-guards on the rink-wall, and slipped them on before stepping off the ice, "The day of my Short
Program in Sochi. I found out...right after I got my score. My parents had been waiting for me to finish so they could call." He stepped past the Thai skater and went to look for his jacket and towel, and Phichit followed him with a worried gaze, "Now...all I can do...is..." Yuri's words trailed, and he shook his head, feeling at where the edges of his work-out shirt weren't even flush against the elastic of his pants anymore; his lithe skater's body was starting to erode already, 32lbs overweight and really starting to show, "...All I can do is skate 'Aria,' and pretend for 4 minutes and 30 seconds that I'm not the failure I actually am."

"You're not a failure." Phichit countered, though the older figure clearly wasn't listening anymore. "...I'm going home."

"What?" Phichit yelled, making everyone in the rink turn their heads. He got super self-conscious suddenly and whipped both hands up in front of his mouth, but then glared at the Japanese skater who'd just said the most impossible thing, "I thought you just meant you were going home last night! Like, to our apartment!"

Yuri shook his head, keeping his eyes averted, "No...I'm..." He drew in a breath, "I'm going back to Japan. I need to figure things out on my own..."

Celestino had his arms crossed, but closed his eyes and nodded reluctantly, "I understand. But..."

The skaters both looked up at the man.

"...Wouldn't it be better to just keep training for now? Even if not for anything in particular...Worlds is right around the corner, and after that, it's off-season anyway. You could go on a vacation or something and come back refreshed."

"...I feel like that's all I've been doing." Yuri grumbled, becoming acutely aware of the 'vacation weight' where he'd hidden it under a big jacket and sweat-pants, "I'm sorry, Celestino...I... I think I need to call things off...and just go home. I'm obviously not meant for this." He started pushing past, wanting nothing more than to just run away.

"What do you think Viktor would do in this situation?" The coach suddenly asked, forcing Yuri to stop where he'd stepped and look back, aghast, "Do you think he'd just give up like this?"

The skater was just gaping, eyes wide and paralyzed. Celestino wasn't giving any ground though, returning the gaze with his own, though more stoic and persistent than anything else. He wanted an answer.

"...What...would Viktor do...?" Yuri finally said, echoing the question posed to him, "...How...would I even know that? He's never been in a situation like this. He's too good for that." His brow crinkled, and it seemed like something in him snapped, tears rolling down his cheeks as his voice rose, "Viktor's a thousand times better than I ever was! He's a five-time consecutive Grand Prix Champion, and by the end of the month, I bet he'll be a five-time consecutive WORLD Champion, too! How stupid was I ever think I could be like him?! How arrogant was I to ever think I could skate at the same level as him, or even on the same ICE as him?! He's practically a God and I'm NOTHING." He ripped his jacket open, pulling his shirt up to 'show off' the results of his misery, "THIS IS ALL I AM. DEBU DEBU FATTY."

Everyone had stopped what they were doing by then, caught off guard by their former rink-mate's fit.
Yuri let his shirt and jacket go, but they didn't fall far, caught on his roundness and making him even more miserable. He just stood there angrily, clenching his fists at his sides, "I've been trying to catch up to him since I was a kid..." He said, trembling, "...All I ever wanted was for him to notice me...to see me as a competitor worth paying attention to... But all I am is a big, fat idiot who dreamed too much and accomplished too little..." He turned on his heel and started pulling his clothes back into place, zipping up the jacket to hide his shame, "...So...I'm going home now...to rethink my life..."

The sign above the doors was new again, reading 'HOME RINK, HOME RULES! THE GRAND PRIX FINAL IS OURS! GOOD LUCK SKATERS.'

The sound of the door being pulled open was like a nightmare, and Yuri went perfectly silent, feeling the air change all around him. Lights darkened compared to outside, and the sound of the rink echoed into his ears, bouncing off the inside of his skull like the murder-taunt of some terrible demon. Someone's music was playing in the arena, the bass bouncing off the walls. The petrified skater, still slung over his husband's shoulder like a sack of spuds, just put his hands over his glasses and covered his eyes, falling limp where he was and giving up the struggle.

Viktor huffed a triumphant laugh to himself, and pat his partner's back where he still held to it to keep him from sliding off, and followed after Phichit into a large, open room just outside the rink.

"Hey!" The Thai skater greeted the two people still putting their skates on at one of the many round, 4-person tables in front of the blur-rimmed, glass double-doors. Those two people saw the Russian coming and gaped, unable to form coherent thought, never mind words. Phichit wasted no time though, throwing open the doors and cupping his hands around his mouth to amplify the sound, "HEY EVERYONE! LOOK WHO I BROUGHT!"

Confused faces turned to face the exit, and even Celestino, sitting in the stands, glanced over, recognizing his student's voice. But, a moment later, Viktor stepped through those doors as well, and a garbled mess of shrieking, gasping, and whistling echoed across the ice. Blades started scratching across the white frost to get nearer to the newly-announced group.

Yuri could hear them coming, but up to that moment, no one had known he'd been the pair of legs hanging across the Russian legend's front. In a second mad panic, he flailed again, this time managing to get free and flopping to the ground like a fish that had mistakenly jumped into a boat. For lack of anywhere else to go, he clambered quickly under his husband's jacket, sitting behind the man's legs and pulling the heavy black fabric to hide his face.

Viktor just looked down behind himself and smiled nervously, but then turned back to the gathering group at the rink wall, and raised a hand, "Hiiii~!"

"I was wondering when you guys would get here." The Senior Coach said, waving as he came up, "Ciao Ciao~!"

"Celestino!" Phichit called back, waving excitedly, "Sorry it took so long! We ran into JJ at the Arena...then the roads were pretty bad..." The ponytailed man just huffed a laugh, but then turned to the lump behind the Russian's legs, "...Yuri?"

Viktor smiled innocently, but within the tails of his coat, he could feel his partner shaking.

Murmurs rose within the group that was on the ice, joined by a few people who were approaching
on rink-side. Even for the skater still hiding his face, it was becoming palpably claustrophobic.

"He got kind of nervous as we were coming inside." Phichit explained, leaning on the wall casually, "Thinks he isn't welcome anymore or something!" He said sarcastically, trying to inspire the crowd to show some support.

"Come out from under there, Yuri." Celestino suggested, picking up on it easily enough, "We're all friends here."

"Come out, Yuri!" Others started, "It's been 2 years since we last saw you in person!"

"Yuri!"

It went on like that for what felt like forever, but the anxious skater couldn't budge. The fabric of the jacket eventually slipped through his fingers though as Viktor stepped backwards over top of him, one careful leg passing a shoulder at a time, until the man was standing directly in front of him...and crouched down to one knee.

The silver legend took hold of those shaking, clenched hands, and brought them up tenderly, looking at his husband evenly, "Yuri...whatever bad you think happened in the past is forgiven and forgotten." He said quietly, giving the skater a warm smile to try and calm his nerves, "Come up and introduce me."

"Th-they know f-full well who you a-are..." The younger figure answered back, feeling a crushing sense of guilt looming over him.

"I don't mean that." Viktor pointed out, looking down slightly to where he held those trembling hands in his own, and the gold that gleamed off each of their right 4th fingers, "You said you couldn't wait to see the looks on peoples' faces when you got to tell all your old Detroit friends about what happened. Here's your chance! Let's get started!" He said excitedly.

Yuri was still somewhat perplexed, but seeing his partner looking so happy and hopeful gave him a growing feeling of calm. He nodded nervously, seeing that smile brighten as Viktor moved to stand up again, taking him up in turn by pulling on his hands. When he was finally upright again, he could hear the small crowd behind him starting to clap, and though his heart skipped a beat to hear it, a gentle hand on his shoulder helped ground him. The young skater finally turned on his heel, and raised his anxious eyes to the people ahead of him who, to his naïve surprise, looked rather pleased to see him there.

"H-Hey..." He managed, his voice a bit of a squeak compared to normal. Yuri raised his free hand and waved weakly, but then dropped it down again and held his fingers tightly together in front of himself, eyes going down again, "...T-There's a few new faces here...b-but...it seems like most everyone's here that was around wh-when I left..."

Phichit and Celestino exchanged glances, but then turned to focus on the terrified speaker again.

"I-I was...last here about 2 years ago..." Yuri went on, fidgeting slightly, as though all his old habits were trying to creep up inside him again, even with the Russian's arm around his back, "And the l-last thing...I said...or did, rather...was yell at everyone about how...I thought...I was less than nothing...especially compared to a certain legendary skater that I'd been trying to emulate..." He could feel the gentle stroke of a thumb through his coat, rubbing reassuringly against his shoulder where the rest of that hand held him close, "Two years ago...I ran home with my tail between my legs, thinking I'd never skate again, and not knowing what to do with myself. I'd been chasing the scratches left in the ice by my idol's skates, and left the sport thinking it had all been for nothing. But
now..." He unclamped his fingers from where they'd been knotted together, and let his left hand slip between himself and his partner standing close by, ",...Two years later...the very man I'd been trying to catch up to...well, he stopped for a minute and went back for me. He didn't have to, and for a long time I was worried he'd just give up and go home again...but he stuck by me. Through the best times, and the worst...through moments of incredible happiness, crippling anxiety, and self-doubt...he stuck by me. Everyone..." Yuri glanced between the crowd and his excited spouse, setting his free hand against the center of the man's chest and looking to the group again, feeling the excitement as well, ",...I want to introduce my idol... My coach...my husband...my soul-mate...Viktor Nikiforov."
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED FOURTY THREE

The cheering and hollering was deafening, even for a group as small as the one at the rink that day. Yuri could hardly believe it.

Some of the clamor started coalescing into words, but the first thing Viktor had apparently heard clearly was a request to see the rings. The Russian quickly turned where he stood, pulling his right arm out from behind his husband's back and moving that arm in front to hold up his hand, nudging the younger skater with an elbow to make him do the same. With both hands out on display, and both rings upon them, the cheering changed to include clapping again like before.

As the clapping died down, one of the other coaches leaned in next to Phichit, resting her chin on the palm of her hand, elbow on the rink-wall's blue upper ledge, "It's pretty crazy to see how things have changed since we last laid eyes on you, Katsuki. Or, I guess I should say 'Nikiforov' now." She smiled, "After storming off like you did before, only to hear that Viktor had gone to be your coach a month later...wow! I mean...wow! How in the world did that even happen?"

Yuri got a little sheepish, reaching his ringed hand back to rub the back of his neck, "...Er, well...in Sochi...I..." He huffed to himself and drew in a breath, "I got pretty drunk and apparently started flirting with him. I told him about the hot-spring resort at home and said he should come be my coach after Worlds."

Phichit pointed at him teasingly, "And then you forgot! You were so trashed that you blacked out!"

"It was a really horrible event for me!" The older skater retorted, "Celestino dragged me to that Banquet against my will!"

"All for the better that he did." Viktor laughed, settling his arm over his partner's shoulders, "Though I'm still a bit embarrassed to realize you hadn't remembered that night until it came up in Barcelona."

The elder coach stared a little, pointing at his former student, "...You didn't remember? At all?"

Yuri just made a face, "...Don't judgement..."

Celestino just burst out laughing, "You forgot about that Banquet!? You spent hours hanging out with Viktor. If I hadn't dragged you back to our room at the end, I'm certain you would've ended up in his somehow."

"...What..." The skater just gaped, wide-eyed and in disbelief, "...There was more to it...than the dance-off...?"

The older man gaped right back at him, "Well sure...the Banquet went until sometime around 2am. We were there for nearly 5 hours, and you started drinking almost as soon as we got there. After all that crazy stripping with Chris and the random dancing with the Russians, you ended up just hanging around Viktor for the rest of the event. By the time I decided to call it a night and went looking for you, I found you sitting sideways on his lap at their team table and had to drag you away, practically kicking and screaming."

The skater's wide eyes twitched a little, "...I was what...? S-sitting on Viktor's lap!?" He turned his flushed face towards the man in question, "...Why didn't you tell me about that!?"
"You were already pretty upset about finding out that you'd asked me to be your coach, so I didn't want to make it worse by saying how much time we spent together, too." The Russian mused, thinking back on the night rather fondly, one hand on his cheek as he sighed dreamily, "But...you were really beautiful that night."

Yuri was stunned, his glasses sliding slightly out of place as he looked on, "...I was black-out drunk. How was I anything less than a slobbering, dizzy mess?"

"You underestimate the power of a smitten heart." Viktor smiled, "I mean...I'd been a bit concerned over you when you collapsed during your Free Skate, but then when you did that strip-tease with Chris...and especially after that, when you did all that break-dancing in your Dance Battle against Yurio...wow~!"

The group around them was laughing, and the lady-coach from earlier spoke up again, "Didn't you once say it was in your blood to get completely trashed sometimes, Yuri?"

He just sunk a little, putting his hands on his head and looking down to the floor, "This is too much... What next, am I going to be told we were making out, too?"

Viktor sighed at that, "Unfortunately, no...we didn't. But I absolutely would've let you if you tried." He smiled deviously, leaning in close to kiss the man's cheek.

"What did we even do all that time...?" Yuri wondered, lifting his head again and giving a curious, albeit perplexed look, "If we really spent most of those hours together..."

"You spent most of it drinking and talking about skating things." The Russian explained, "Chris came by at some point and confirmed a bunch of the stories you'd told...I think it was about all the times he'd tried to introduce us? I know he joked that if he knew getting you drunk would make it that easy, he would've spiked your water years ago. I forget all the exact details of it though. I was too busy looking at you."

"...Looking...at me...?" He echoed again.

"I bet you guys have so many great stories." One of the other skaters pointed out.

"I want to hear this, too!" Phichit cheered, pointing towards the open cafeteria area, "We should sit!"

Viktor was too excited about it, raising an arm up to cheer as well as the group on the ice started sliding along the rink wall towards an exit.

All Yuri could do was think about how much it reminded him of the day 'Onsen on Ice' had been created. He was just along for the ride at that point. By the time they'd all pulled chairs together and sat around one of the round tables, Yuri felt obliged to start introducing people, pointing at them as he went around in a circle, "...Ben, Camilla, Ivan, Hitomi, Shui, Fatima, pairs Eric and Joanna, then Elijah and Kristen...Coach Gerard, Coach Lisa, Choreographers Michael and Stephan..." He explained, "I don't know those two out on the ice right now though. They're new."

"That's Antoine and Becky. They just got out of Junior Pairs and were training in Toronto before. Their coach told them to come down here so they'd be in a competitive environment, since they'd been training alone prior." Coach Gerard explained, "You'd just missed them when you left."

"Ah..."

"So start from the top!" Coach Lisa asked excitedly, "What was it like having Viktor show up? We heard all about it on SMS but you never post anything so we had to hear about it from others."
Yuri got a bit sheepish, "Yeah...I never really posted much of anything back then. Even now...I've been trying to get better, but the GP Series has been pretty stressful, so I haven't posted much since we got out of Paris..." He stretched his arms out over the table, feeling Viktor snake his own arm down as well to weave their fingers together as he spoke, "How to even describe how things started... Viktor showed up during a rare spring snow-storm..."

"I was totally naked." Viktor added.

"You were sitting in the hot spring of course you were naked." Yuri clarified quickly, his face turning red as the group laughed.

"And you barged in like you couldn't find me fast enough. Broke all the rules about not running on deck and wearing shoes and everything." The Russian nudged his partner fondly.

Flushed and flustered, Yuri went on, "So he tells me, point blank, that he's going to be my coach and that he's going to make me win the next Grand Prix Final. I showed him around tow-"

"Whoa whoa, time out." Hitomi stopped him, putting her hands together in a T-shape, "You can't just move on with the story like there isn't a whole extra story to be told here. Viktor Nikiforov showed up buck-ass naked in your house and you just showed him around town?" She turned to the Russian, "Please, good sir, tell us how it really was."

Yuri could feel his skin getting tight from how deeply crimson he was turning, but he deferred and let the man speak.

Viktor just smiled excitedly, "He thought he was dreaming for a while." He said with a chuckle, "Then he screamed, then he left outright."

"YOU DID WHAT?" Three skaters were up, slamming their hands down on the table-top and making Yuri back up almost to the point of falling off his stool.

Viktor caught him and pushed him back up, "He was so stunned that he went back into the main shower-room like a robot." He went on happily, though his expression soured dramatically, "I thought he was going to ignore me...I was so hurt! But then the door cracked a little bit and he was looking out again from inside. I made him come back out onto the deck, and splashed him with some of the water so he'd know he was awake and everything was real. So after I soaked for a bit, I ate some resort-fare, then I fell asleep on the floor I think...and when I woke up, Yuri and his ballet teacher were both there. That's when the coaching started!"

"He wanted to sleep with me on the first night." Yuri said flatly, giving a nervous smile, "Banging on my door and demanding to be let in."

The group laughed again, but Viktor was entirely unashamed, "I wanted to get to know you! How was I going to do that when the only time I ever got to talk to you was when you were around other people? I needed to get you alone sometimes!"

"In my bedroom though?"

"Sure! It's like camping!" The Russian teased, "It took until after 'Hot-Springs on Ice' for you to calm down about me being there though."

"Ah yeah, I remember hearing about that." Coach Lisa mused, loving every second of the story, "Yuri Plisetsky turned up after he found out where you'd gone." She pointed a free hand at the older skater, "I read that there was some bet going on behind the scenes, but for the most part it just looked like some random Exhibition you guys had put together for fun."
"Yeah..." Yuri nodded, "Yurio showed up demanding that Viktor go back with him to Russia and be his coach there. We did the event to decide who Viktor would stay with."

"I knew Yuri would win from the start though." Viktor said, rubbing his thumb gently across where his hand held to his partner's, "But they both took it really seriously."

"You couldn't have known I was going to win." The younger figure retorted.

"Sure I could." The Russian nodded, "We were in your home territory, we were at your home rink. It was your big return to the ice as a competitor since you'd fallen apart in Sochi and at Nationals, plus it was a big thing that I was there as your coach already anyway. You would've won that thing even if you fell on every jump."

"...He's got you there, Yuri." Phichit mused, nudging him with a shoulder as well from his own side.

"Mmmhhhhhhnnnn..."

"And I wouldn't have gone back to Russia even if Yurio had won somehow." Viktor added, "I was on a mission. And so it just went from there...half of most days we spent on the ice, fine tuning 'Eros' and putting together 'YoI,' the rest of the time playing around on the beach or in town. You were a pretty tough nut to crack though, Yuri..."

"Eh? Really?"

Half the people at the round-table snorted with laughter, but it was Hitomi again who spoke, "That's the understatement of the year, if I ever heard it!"

Yuri just blinked and looked around, "What? What are you talking about? I'm the least tough person out there!"

"Oh sure, you're a big softie, no doubt about that," She agreed, nodding sagely, "But it takes a lot of work and effort to get close to you. For the most part, you keep people at arm's length and rarely put yourself out there. I mean, the only thing anyone really knew about you was based on what your skating profile said with the JSF, and the fact that you had a major man-crush on Viktor."

"I did not have a man-crush on Viktor." He barked defensively.

The Russian and Phichit just laughed on both sides of him.

"Oh don't be modest, Yuri." Hitomi went on, laughing as well, "If the joke goes that there are only two things certain in life...death and taxes...then I would have to add a third, that being 'Yuri Katsuki is in love with Viktor Nikiforov.'"

"I had a thing for someone else back then." The apprehensive skater insisted, "Half the reason I moved all the way to Detroit in the first place was to get away from her after she married a guy who tormented me as a kid."

"You liked a girl before?" The lady-skater was surprised to hear it, "Who?"

"...A childhood friend of mine; Yuuko. The one who got me started into competitive skating and told me about Viktor. We used to practice his old Junior programs together...and she was even better at skating than I was." Yuri admitted, his tone a bit more dour than it had been, "But there was this other guy that was always around...and as far back as I can remember, he made fun of my weight and my skating ability. Yuuko was always defending me from him." He lowered his head a little, his heart aching already from the memory of it all, "But...the day I finally decided I was going to tell her..."
how I felt...was the day I found out she was dating that guy. I never stood a chance, so I just kept it all to myself. I tried to ignore it all, but everything happened so fast. Before I could blink, they were married and had triplets. I couldn't get out of Hasetsu fast enough." He lifted his head again, casting his eyes onto where Viktor held his hand on the table-top, and the thumb that slowly went back and forth along his skin, "So when I got here, and didn't have to think about it anymore...I put all my newfound energy into improving my skating. What better way to get to the top than my emulating someone who was already there? Viktor was my hero. He was everything I ever wanted and aspired to be. In a selfish, stupid kind of way...I even thought, if I was as good as Viktor, maybe Yuuko would finally see me. But when I fell apart and went back home...I realized that Yuuko hadn't even really noticed. She knew stuff about my skating, but she hadn't been actively following it, even though she'd once said she hoped to see me compete against Viktor one day. I guess she was too busy with her kids. She didn't even recognize me at first." He turned his head slightly as he felt his husband's chin rest on his shoulder, sliding down a bit to kiss there as well, "I had been practicing 'Aria' for a while, so I showed it to her the first time I got my courage up to go to the Ice Castle. I was really nervous to show her, but when I was done, she was literally in tears over it. For a second and a half, I thought it was just her and I in the world...but then her triplets popped up, and her...husband...and just like before, he was making fun of my weight, and Yuuko was having to defend me. The years I'd been away vanished into the air like smoke. Nothing had really changed. ...Unknown to me at the time though, Yuuko's girls had recorded my replica of 'Aria' and posted it online. Ten days later, the video had gone viral...and Viktor showed up."

"...I remember that video." Phichit pointed out, trying to lighten the mood, "I was actually walking in front of my rink in Bangkok when I saw it! All the times I'd seen you doing it here, in this rink...I'd have recorded it and put it online myself if I knew it would've gotten Viktor to you faster! At the time though, I was just happy to see you hadn't completely given up on skating."

"I was trying to think of ways to keep going on my own." Yuri noted, "I'd already lost a little of the weight I'd gained before going home, but I was still looking for my motivation to compete. The idea of coming back here and asking Celestino to take me on again was at the back of my mind. I really didn't know what I was going to do."

"Yeah, it took you long enough to call." The elder coach huffed, leaning against the nearby wall with his hands tucked casually into his coat pockets, "But I guess things worked out for you pretty well in the end. What Viktor has said since then was pretty true...you needed a kind of motivation that I couldn't give."

The young skater sank a bit, "...It's not like you were a bad coach...I was just a bad student."

"And I wasn't about to sleep with you to make you better."

The whole group started howling with laughter, even Viktor. Yuri's jaw would've been on the floor it could go that far. Instead, he just pulled his hands up and shook them back and forth frantically, "Th-that's not even what happened!"

The Russian sighed in agreement, "It's true...we didn't sleep together until after the Grand Prix."

"V-VIKTOR."

More laughing from the American club, though Celestino had just lowered his head and covered his eyes with one hand, shaking his head back and forth like he was hearing inappropriate stories about his own children.

"You made me wait such a long time, Yuri!" The older skater went on teasingly, "Almost a whole
"I married you almost a year to the day after you arrived!"

"Yeah but all the fun parts didn't start until practically the end of that time!"

Yuri blustered, "You kissed me in China in front of everyone!"

"Eight months after I got there! And you didn't kiss me until we were back in Hasetsu again after the Final! A full year since that fated Banquet in Sochi!" Viktor retorted, "So like I said before, you were a tough nut to crack! I've never had to work so hard at seducing someone in my whole life, especially since you started it!"

"Don't feel so bad, Viktor." Coach Lisa mused, "Yuri had plenty of opportunities while he trained here, but he refused all of them."

The Russian's expression changed, and he turned stiffly to look at his husband's nervous face, "...Plenty of opportunities? Yuri. You never told me that."

"I-It's not true, that's why!"

"Don't lie, Yuri." The lady-Coach went on, "I can think of at least seven girls and one guy who tried to get your attention, and then there was Cel-

"Ahhh noooo if you mention her she'll turn up!" Yuri protested, waving his hands around again, this time half-way rising from his chair in desperation.

"I doubt it." Lisa laughed, "Shortly after you humiliated her, she deployed with the Air Force. Why do you think she stopped coming to the rink?"

"...I...honestly thought she just..." The skater sighed and sat back down, "I don't know what I thought. She was pretty upset. I guess I just figured she stopped coming to the rink because of me."

"Who are you talking about?" Viktor asked, still flat like before.

"...We don't mention her name here...but it's the girl I told you about who tried to hug me. The one I shoved off."

"Oh. So this isn't someone else."

Yuri shook his head.

Phichit leaned across the table and not-so-quietly whispered, "Viktor gets super jealous. No one touches his Yuri."

The Russian took the moment for what it was and twisted to wrap both arms around his partner's head, pulling him close, and glancing around at the group, "...He's my cinnamon roll." More laughter, and Viktor let the man go, returning to slide his hand down an arm to take his husband's hand again. He smiled though and it was all in good fun, patting their hands with his free one, "Yuri's a better man than I am in that regard, I guess. When Sophia showed up in Bordeaux...I don't think I saw a shred of jealousy out of him that whole time."

"Sophia?" Someone in the group wondered, "An old flame?"

"Da." The Russian nodded, "From years and years ago. She was in Ladies Singles back then, but had to drop because of an injury. I lost touch with her, but she popped up as a correspondent from a
I never felt like I needed to be jealous." Yuri explained, tilting a bit where he sat to lean against the man's shoulder, "At worst, I was upset at her for upsetting you...but...I never felt like she could take you away from me. Even before you said as much when you pulled her over to the team prep area."

"...Wow, now I suddenly feel so insecure!" Viktor lamented, an awkward smile on his face like he wasn't sure what to think, "I completely lost my mind when I found out that fan got you on the mouth back home! And yet there you were, totally level-headed about someone who you knew I'd been with before...not a stranger at all..."

"Well...I feel really secure in this relationship...so..." The younger skater rationalized, "My only worry with Sophia was that she might try to put you into a compromising situation to try and force a conflict between us. But in the end, the worst that ever happened was her saying she'd be open to the idea of picking up where you guys left off, if you wanted to...but you told her you weren't interested, and that was basically the end of it. The rest was just her doing her job..."

"I guess so."

"And then...there was China." Phichit snickered, "The ultimate contrast."

A quiet murmur of laughs and whispers rumbled through the group, but the Russian just sighed, "Not my proudest moment."

"You really need to stop worrying that I might leave you." Yuri said, "There's no chance of that ever happening."

"Fanboy dreams sometimes do come true." Coach Gerard huffed, casually leaning back on his plastic chair, nudging his head towards the legendary skater, "The only way Yuri's leaving you is when they pry off his cold, dead fingers. But even then, I think he'd probably come back as a ghost and haunt you until you joined him in the Beyond."

Viktor just blinked widely at the man, a bit slack-jawed and utterly speechless. He quickly moved his arms up to wrap around Yuri's head again protectively. Even the idea of his husband dying was enough to turn on the water-works in the Russian's eyes.

Yuri just pat one arm where he could, smiling nervously from under the pretzel-knot of limbs encircling him.

Phichit just smiled anxiously as he saw the rivers cascading down the silver skater's cheeks, "Sorry! Sorry! I didn't mean to hit a soft-spot!"

"So how did this whole thing turn into a marriage anyway?" Gerard asked instead, trying to get off the topic and onto something a bit more pleasing to think about, "I mean, you guys started as coach and student...but neither of you were even friends before that. I didn't even think either of you were into dudes anyway, and by the sounds of it, you both had a thing for the ladies before."

"W-Well..." Yuri gasped, trying to pull his husband's arms away so he could breathe again. He managed to get enough space to draw in some air, but Viktor just clamped down from a different angle, so he gave up a little and just settled where he was, "It just kind of turned out this way... I sort of defaulted back to how I was before the Banquet once the alcohol wore off, so I had no idea what Viktor was thinking when he came to Hasetsu. I guess that's why it took so long for thing to...uh...well, get moving, I guess? I was so clueless. Things started to fall into place only after he knocked me onto my back after my China Free Skate. A month later, we were engaged, and 3
months after that, we were married."

"I actually thought they were married already," Phichit laughed sheepishly, scratching the side of his jaw, "A bunch of us met for drinks before the Final got started, and they both already had their rings...all I knew was that they didn't have them when we competed in Beijing. So, there I was, my dorky self congratulating them and yelling at everyone nearby that 'hey everyone, my best friend just got hitched!'"

Yuri's face was pink again, "I just wanted to get Viktor a thank-you gift for being my coach. It didn't make sense to buy him a fake Gold Medal, since I was still hoping to win one for him...so when I thought about something 'round and golden,' and saw a jeweler's shop...I just went with it. I only bought the one though. He got the other without me knowing."

The Russian finally shut off the faucets behind his eyes and let himself fondly remember the day, nuzzling his partner's head where he still had it clamped in his grasp, "I did! Yuri fought so hard to clear up the fact that Phichit was mistaken...but in the end, I said they were engagement rings and told everyone that we'd get married when he won Gold. He only won Silver in the end...but I already knew that the Final wouldn't be the end for us. Not counting the time I fell asleep on top of him...the night after the Banquet was the first time he let me hold him while we slept. And then..." He let go of Yuri's head so he could bring his hands up in front of his own face, his cheeks pink and his voice rising up excitedly, "...The next day, after we got back to Hasetsu, he finally kissed meeee!"

Laughter and clapping resonated after that, though Yuri just nodded and smiled anxiously.

"I think I've re-fallen in love with him at least a hundred times since that night." Viktor went on, "Probably around 500 times, actually."

"You should've kept the log after all." Yuri smirked.

"I should start!" The Russian laughed, moving his arms around his husband's back and side again, resting his chin on the closest shoulder, "It would be like in those scifi shows!" He pulled his phone out quickly and held it up to his mouth, "Star-date 12.10-8234...fell in love with Yuri again. He finally fell asleep on the plane, but drooled a bit onto his neck-pillow. Note: It was adorable drool. Also he was adorable. Sub-note: How did I ever deserve this perfect cinnamon roll?"

"...That was today."

"Yes, about 6 hours ago." Viktor nodded happily, "You were precious."

The group was laughing again, though Phichit had gone seeking his own phone by then, "I think I have pictures of that..." He thumbed at the screen a bit, and his eyes lit up, "Ah! Yes, I do! Look!" He held the device out over the table and showed off the picture...of both skaters unconscious in their seats, leaning against each other over the arm-rest between them. Yuri was indeed drooling...but so was Viktor...right into the man's hair.

The Russian laughed, "Whoops."

"...I guess it dried before I woke up...I didn't notice." The younger skater reached up to ruffle his black mop-top anyway.

"So who from the old crew have you run into so far?" Coach Lisa asked, "I can only imagine how people will react to you two."

"We actually came here first." Yuri answered, trying to straighten the fluff out, "We were going to make pit-stops along the way as we went back. Can you give us a heads-up on who's still around at
Subject 01: Starbucks Manager

"Yuri?" A tall, thin man said, coming out from the back of the store and onto the sale's floor, seeing that recognizable face, "Yuri Katsuki?"

"I'm back." The skater smiled, resisting the urge to correct like he normally did under such circumstances.

"Holy shit!" The figure tossed a small white towel over his shoulder and came forward, reaching a hand out to shake, "It's been ages! All the old staff has already moved on at this point. It's just me left."

"Yeah, that's what they were saying at the Skate Club. Kinda sad. So much has changed since I came here for my last latté."

"Are you here for the Grand Prix Final?"

"Yup." Yuri nodded excitedly, the butterflies rising up in his stomach, "I'm competing in it again, if you can believe it."

"Wow! That's really great! The others were saying you left in a big hurry before. Made it sound like you had decided to retire."

"I was on the edge of it."

"What brought you back?"

"I found a new coach...Celestino was good, but I needed a more personal touch."

"A personal touch, huh? What sort?" The manager gave Yuri a look, curious.

The skater just held up his hand, "The married kind of touch."

The man raised a brow, looking at his own wedding band, but realizing it was on the other hand, "...Shouldn't that be on the left if it's for marriage?" He asked, pointing at the simple gold ring on Yuri's finger.

"They go on the right in Russia."

"Russia..." He repeated, "...Russia... Oh, now I remember why that's familiar. Isn't that skater you obsessed over before from there?"

Yuri twitched slightly, but then nodded, "Yeah."

"What was his name again...? Martin...Verrik...? Something with a V..."

"Two grande Chai-tea lattés, one with 6 pumps, ready at the bar for Viktor." One of the baristas called out, "One tall pumpkin spice latte for Phichit."

"Viktor! That's the one. ...That's funny." The manager laughed, seeing the two aforementioned figures moving forward to collect their drinks. He turned back to Yuri though, "Phichit's here, too. You guys were always together back then. Is he competing?"
"...Ah, sadly no...he barely didn't make it this time. He was there last year though. But we couldn't stand to go without him, so we offered to pay for his plane ticket so he could come with us." The skater explained.

"Yuri," The silver Russian stepped up, offering him the first cup, "You ready to get moving? We need to get to practice."

The manager paused a moment.

'We need to get to practice?' He spoke with a Russian accent. Mel called for 'Viktor' to collect those drinks...and one was for Yuri himself.

The man's eyes went down to where the taller figure was holding onto his own drink, and saw a second gold band on a finger there...on the right hand.

...Wedding rings go on the right hand in Russia...

"Yeah, we probably should get going..." Yuri agreed, taking a light sip from the small mouthpiece at the top of his cup.

"...Waaait a minute." The manager started up again, pointing from the skater he knew to the one he didn't. He wasn't quite sure if he should be so bold as to assume, so he reached for his phone from his back pocket, pulling up a Google image search and typing [that famous russian figure skater victor guy] into the query window. A moment later, the webspace spat out a series of results, and a familiar silver-haired head popped up in dozens of different pictures. He clicked on one to enlarge it, and held it up to compare, looking back and forth between the photo and the man, "...Well. Hm."

The Thai skater jumped up between them, pointing at each of the other two with a finger, "Yuri and Viktor are married! Disney dreams do come true!" He laughed.

"Ph-Phichito-kun!" The older skater harped, trying to get him out of the way, "You were supposed to let him figure it out!"

"...I got it." The older man said, putting his phone away again and just staring at the pair, "...I hate to ask this, but..."

Both of their faces changed...suddenly wondering the worst.

"...How did a scrub like you manage to score a super-famous, mega-hot foreign husband like him?"

Phichit nearly died laughing. Yuri dropped to the floor. Viktor just slowly turned his face, not sure if he should be proud of the description given to him or not, and looked at where his partner was twitching incoherently...latté held straight up in the air, as though the floor would turn to lava if it fell.

Subject 02: Sushi Hana Staff

Yuri had barely made it three steps inside the restaurant with Phichit before someone recognized him and started yelling for people to come. Other guests were looking around, wondering what madness had overtaken the servers as they all rushed towards the front of the store. When all the back-and-forth excited yelling had stopped, there were four young ladies, an older couple, and one middle-aged man standing before the duo.

"Yuri! Phichit! Yuri Phichit! Phichit Yuri!" The girls were chanting happily, reaching to stack all
their hands together, "Are you guys here to watch Viktor skate!? He's here in town! He's here for the Final!"

"Oh, have you guys been watching the events?" The older of the two wondered, worried the surprise was ruined already.

"...No...!" They answered nervously, each of them making faces like they'd been caught off-guard with their mitts in the dessert pie, but then went right back to happily bobbing up and down on their toes, still holding to their hand-stack between them, "We heard from the Skate Club! They were talking about how he'd set all these crazy new World Records at his last event! But they told us ages ago that you'd gone back home and retired, so...if you're here, that must mean you're going to watch Viktor skate, right!?"

"Well...yes..."

"Eeeeeeee!" They all laughed, "We thought so! You used to talk about him all the time before! Always trying to do the same stuff!"

Yuri smiled innocently, and gently pulled his hands out of the small tower, stepping lightly to the door and pushing it open a bit. The confused group watched him as he waved at someone outside, and then pushed the door even further open to make room. When the silver-haired Russian stepped in, the three ladies froze, gaping at him...and then screamed again.

"Everyone...this is Viktor Nikiforov." The skater explained.

"WE KNOOOOW!" They screeched, doing everything in their power not to paw at him, "He's the hottest bachelor aiiiiiiive!"

"No he's not." Yuri grimaced.

The three meandered closer to the tall skater, speaking behind their hands, "Don't mind him. He doesn't know what he's talking about."

"He's right, actually." Viktor nodded and smiled, "About part of it, anyway."

"Eh?"

One long arm went around the younger skater's back, pulling him close and swinging him around in front of himself gently. With a dip, and closed eyes, the 'hottest bachelor alive' kissed his husband for all the group to see.

Eyes went wide...and the trio could do nothing more than make caught-up breathless noises.

"I can't even."

"How did you...?"

"What is air?"

Yuri just smiled innocently, looking at them from his upside-down vantage where Viktor held him up. He raised his arms up for dramatic effect, and pointed to his ring rather smugly where his hands were closest to them, "He's no bachelor."

The girls all pawed at the limb, and looked from it to where the Russian pulled his own hand up to waggle his finger, and displayed the matching ring thereupon, "I'll gladly accept the moniker of
"hottest' though."

As usual, Phichit was 'documenting' the whole thing.

For research.

Subject 03: Apartment Property Manager

"This one might be tough." Phichit warned quietly, looking at the small office-house of Fox Pointe Apartments from the safety of the car, "Mrs. Desoto was mad at you for leaving so fast."

"Really?"

"Yup." The skater nodded wisely, "She might hit you."

"If she tries-" Viktor interrupted.

Yuri just laughed nervously and pushed the door open, "Well...it wouldn't be the first time."

"Why did she hit you before...?" The Russian wondered, stepping out as well and giving the building something of a wary glare.

"Yuri, why don't you have a girlfriend!? Yuri, why haven't you done your laundry in two weeks!? Yuri, were you trying to cook again!? I see smoke! Yuri, let me set you up with one of my girls! You can pick which one you want, they're all nice! Yuri, you're on the verge of being an old man and you're still single! Yuri, don't make me come over there...!" He answered, making his best impression of the spicy Hispanic woman's voice.

They barely made it to the steps before the skater suddenly found himself getting hit in the head with not one...but two sandals.

"YURI." An angry voice barked.

"Oh no, she saw us!" Phichit yelled, trying to run off, but stopped by Viktor grabbing the back of his jacket.

"I'D HIT YOU WITH MORE BUT I ONLY HAVE TWO FEET."

"Why did you throw your sandals at me!?" Yuri whined from where he'd landed in the snow, "And why are you wearing sandals in winter anyway!? It's Detroit, not the Bahamas!"

"Sandals are easier to aim with than big winter boots!"

Viktor settled his eyes on the woman; she was no more than 4'6" tall, thickly built, and perhaps in her 50s...though the years had not been as kind to her as they had been to Minako. Standing in the snow with bare feet, she was obviously not someone to mess with, being something of a spitfire as she was. She came sauntering right up to the group and collected her footwear...and then chucked them both at Phichit's head. He went down into the snow as well, flailing like a grounded bird.

"Mrs. Desoto, show mercy!" He pleaded.

She gazed up at the nearly-6' Russian, holding a hand over her eyes to block the light of the sun so she could see him, "Do I have to hit you for some reason, too? Just to round it out?"
"...Nyet."

"Oh, he's a foreign one!" She huffed, plodding along to get her sandals a second time, but this time putting them on her feet instead of chucking them. She huffed loudly and put her hands on her hips, "You boys are something else! Picking up and leaving like you did! You didn't even say goodbye! After everything I did for you!"

The pair suddenly jumped to sitting side by side, bowing and pleading, "We're sorry! We're so sorry!"

"Why did you even go!?"

Viktor was looking on at the spectacle in complete confusion, not sure if he should step in or not.

"I had to go home!" Yuri explained, pushing up from where his nose had been to the ground, "The skating thing wasn't working out back then!"

"And it is now?"

He nodded enthusiastically, his head practically rattling from how fast he moved it.

"What about you?" She turned her eyes to the Thai skater, "What's your excuse?"

"It..." Phichit started nervously, "...It was boring without Yuri! Ciao Ciao and I went to Bangkok!"

"LA CHANCLA ATTACK!" The woman yelled, whopping the hapless skater with both sandals again and knocking him down into the snow a second time, "You abandoned me!"

"We're sooorrrrryyyyyy!" They whined, bowing deeply on their knees again.

"So who's this tall dark and brooding guy following you around?" She asked, collecting her shoes yet again and crossing her arms this time to look the Russian up and down, "New coach or something? Seems kind of young to know what he's doing. Does he speak English?"

"Yes, kind of, and of course he speaks English." Yuri answered, "But he's also m-"

"How come he doesn't talk then?" The squat woman circled around him; the sun was right behind his head, so she could only get a good look at him from behind, "Is he shy?"

"I dunno, he doesn't have anything to say...?"

Viktor stepped off from her, reaching a hand down to each of the apologetic skaters to hoist them back up to their feet. He stayed by Yuri though, helping to dust the snow off his clothes, but then refusing to leave, snaking an arm around the man to protect him from any further sandal-throws.

"What. What is this." She waved the sandals in their direction instead, "He's awful touchy-feely with you."

The young skater's face flushed a little, more nervous than before, but holding up his ring-hand, "Well, yeah...he's my husband. I tried to te-"

"Don't you make fun of me, Yuri Katsuki!" Mrs. Desoto yelled, managing to ding the man in the head with one shoe anyway, waving the other one around emphatically, "You were going to marry one of my girls!"

"I never agreed to that!" He insisted, "Your oldest was like 15 at the time anyway!"
"And she's 17 now!" The woman barked, looking on rather awkwardly as she saw the silver Russian checking for damage in his husband's hair, whispering questions to him and generally being rather meticulously attentive, "...Ay, Dios mío... Are you serious?"

Yuri blinked, but then nodded, stepping forward slightly, "You remember that Russian skater I was always saying I'd compete against?"

"How does that have anything to do with this betrayal?"

The man drew in a breath, but then presented his partner, "Well, this is him. We're married now."

"Careful, Yuri!" Phichit warned quietly, "She's about to go 'Red Wedding' on you!"

"I'M NOT WALDER FREY!" The woman yelled, chasing the youngest of the three away with a throw of her last remaining sandal, sending him running off, laughing and crying all at once. He took refuge behind the rental car. Mrs. Desoto turned back again, seeing where Viktor's right hand had come up to find his partner's, and the gold that shined on his finger, "...I guess it is true then. But why a guy...? I never thought you went that way."

"It just worked out like this." Yuri tried to explain, "I was only back home for a month when he came to be my coach. Apparently I seduced him when I had too much to drink once." He reached up to rub one of the spots where La Chancla had whopped him previously, and gave a nervous smile anyway, "But then he seduced me back. How can I say no to that face?"

Brown eyes went up to the Russian, seeing him well for the first time since they'd arrived, no longer having the sun blocking her sights. His silver hair moved gently in the breeze, his blue eyes piercing like crystalline ice, pale skin smooth and unblemished. She just glowered at them both then, her painted eyebrows raised as high as they could go, but then gave the most Hispanic of sighs, "Figure skaters."
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED FOURTY FOUR

By the time they'd finally gotten back to the event arena, they had seen 7 different locations and met with nearly 30 people. It was exhausting, and as they pulled into the Little Caesar's Arena parking lot, it was close to 8pm. Yuri was riding the adrenaline of his 4th latte and his 3rd wind, feeling the energy rising up in him as he saw the spotlights of the rink shining high into the dark sky. His hands shook a little bit, but otherwise he felt mostly normal-ish.

Mostly.

Bags were grabbed from the trunk, lanyards slipped over heads, and the trio made their way into the building, slipping in through a Participants entranceway to the side of where they'd gone in earlier in the day.

Viktor felt a buzz on his phone, and reached into his coat to pull it out, smiling as he realized it was a text message from a certain Swiss friend. He adjusted how his bag sat on his shoulder and started thumbing a reply, though he turned his eyes slightly to glance at his partner, "Chris is here. He's wondering if we're AWOL."

"After all the pictures Phichit-kun posted?"

"Well, the pictures I posted showed how we weren't here..." The Thai skater pointed out.

"Isn't that kind of the definition of AWOL?" The Russian wondered, "Absent without leave? Chris sure didn't give us permission to skip all-day practice like this." He laughed and shrugged as they stepped up towards the doors, pulling one side open and holding it as the two younger skaters went through before following after.

There wasn't much that separated the outside world from the inner workings of the ISU Grand Prix Final machine. Event staffers were running up and down the halls, coordinating last-minute adjustments or putting down the finishing touches on the event's decor. Signs along the hallways guided the skaters to the prep area, where they started to see a number of familiar faces.

Unfortunately, two of those faces belonged to the Leroy elders.

"JJ is still here." Phichit sighed and turned to look at his friend, "So much for that idea."

"He's been here for 3 hours. If he's been practicing since we left, then he's probably worn out by now and will be leaving soon." Yuri offered, "I can't imagine he would've taken it easy when any other skaters are here, just on the off-chance Viktor comes back tonight."

"He's done it before." The Russian muttered, "He assumes that if Chris is here, I won't be far behind." He turned to set his hand gently on his partner's back, stroking there gently before giving a slight nudge to usher him forward, "He's not entirely wrong. Things are a bit different now, but back in the day, Chris and I were tied at the hip once we got to events."

"...Yeah..." The younger figure nodded with a reluctant sigh, "I remember all the times he tried to get me to tag along on your shenanigans, but I'd always find a reason to leave. Those few times he managed to get us in the same room together were mostly because he stopped telling me you guys were meeting up."
Viktor shook his head and gave a quiet laugh, "I'm still surprised you made it up onto that podium in Canada, knowing all this stuff that I do now."

"...Well..." Yuri looked down at the floor a little, but then reached for his event badge and looked at his photo on the glossy front, "...When it was for skating business, it felt different. Like how I don't usually seize up when doing interviews, even if I do when meeting new people. When we were on the podium, we didn't...really have to talk to each other. We were there to get our medals, not socialize, so I could still kind of put myself apart from it all." He admitted, letting go of the badge to sneak that arm around his partner's lower back, getting under the backpack, "But I'd honestly go back and do it all again the same way if I knew it'd get to this same point."

"We need to be more efficient in the next life." The Russian suggested, settling his own arm across his partner's shoulders, "You were right under my nose for years and I had no idea."

"I'll try to avoid being born with 'soul-crushing anxiety' next go-'round."

They moved on through the restaurant-esque prep area, making their way through numerous team tables, and seeing out through a glass-lined mezzanine to the red-walled practice rink down below. The far wall had a massive painting of the Red Wings logo in white, popping out from the red it was emblazoned on. [Detroit Red Wings - Where Champions Are Made] was painted in cursive within a wide white band that went around the entire room. Hanging on the walls were numerous flags detailing different hockey victories over the decades. Surrounding the small hockey rink were a scant 300 or so spectator seats, and only on the one long-side of the ice. The rink itself was styled with protective Plexiglas dividers rising up a good 5ft from the top of the regular wall, and the ice was painted with start-markers.

"You'd almost think this place was build for a hockey team." Yuri teased.

"What gave it away?" Phichit wondered, "The 'Players Only' locker room? Or was it the life-size replica of one of the goalies we saw outside earlier today?"

"I'd say it was because the place smells like rubber hockey pucks."

They moved on through until they found an empty table, and set their gear on top of it. Viktor glanced around, looking out for that blonde-haired head, but hadn't spotted it yet. Instead, coming up the stairs, he spotted Yakov and Lilia coming up from the practice rink.

"Vitya...!"

The Russian skater waved, abandoning his gear for the moment to go over and greet his elder, "Yakov, I didn't think you'd be around until Yurio got here."

"We figured we'd take a look at the place while we wait. He won't be in until very late anyway." The gruff older man explained simply, "Things worked out somewhat poorly for him, so he won't be getting much sleep or practice before things start tomorrow."

Viktor nodded warily, "Yeah, he was shuffled around a lot between people unexpectedly. We did the best we could, but trying to buy plane tickets on such short notice can be extremely expensive." He leaned forward and cupped his hand around his mouth, "Getting that ticket for Yuri's friend was nearly $7000US, and that was with almost an entire month's notice." He leaned back upright again and spoke normally, "I'd have gotten Yurio a ticket to come with us as well if I knew he was going to need it."

"Well, don't start selling yourself on the streets to please people." Yakov asked half-seriously, "We're
just glad Yuratchka's trip didn't cost extra money for any of you. Getting the ISU to reimburse for a flight when it had already paid for one...they don't like that. They sure as borscht won't reimburse a Business class flight like the ones you insist on taking."

"Yeah..." Viktor looked back at his partner, watching quietly for a moment as he unpacked their skates, but then turned back, "At least Yurio sleeps well on planes. He should be fine."

The elder Russian nodded, patting his sometimes-on-again-sometimes-off-again pupil on the arm as he and his ex-wife moved by, "Da. Anyway...we're going to head back to the hotel. I want to try and get some sleep before he shows up. Don't stay up too late, Vitya."

"We won't. Goodnight."

Blue eyes watched the duo step away, but then lit up excitedly as he spotted Chris coming in the same way the others were leaving. The Swiss skater saw him just as quickly, but then caught a glance of Yuri and Phichit at the table somewhat in the middle between them. He gave a wink and brought a finger up over his lips, nudging his head towards the hapless skater. Viktor gave a curious smile, and watched as the man stepped over and around the other side.

Despite Chris' bright white and red Team jacket, he managed to slide up behind the unsuspecting Yuri, and gently settled a hand on his back. Phichit had his back turned by that point, looking out through the Plexiglas windows to watch the other skaters sliding around the ice. He only turned around again when he heard the telltale squeak-scream come from his older friend, finding the man nose to nose with the Swiss skater.

Chris had slid his hand up the figure's back, around the side of his neck and under his chin, lifting his face like Viktor might...and then gazed upside-down into those hazel wells with his own sultry, half-lidded eyes. His free hand came up to softly pull the blue-rimmed glasses away, and flicked them shut where he held them.

"Ch-Chris!"

"You've made me wait such a long time, Yuri. You don't write, you don't call..."

Viktor couldn't help but laugh, watching as his spooked partner clenched up in paralyzed terror like he always did when the Swiss skater caught him unawares. But, the Russian swooped in to save him...by sliding up to where Chris was still slightly leaned over, and parked right next to him. Thigh to thigh on one side, the silver skater's hand slid down the man's other leg, catching his attention rather quickly as he leaned a bit forward over the skater's side, "I believe you have my husband." He purred, snatching the glasses with his free hand while he was there, putting them onto his head for safe keeping.

"And I believe you have me." Lime-green eyes turned back, and those hands let the younger figure go as Chris rose back up to his full height. Without missing a beat, he took the hand caressing his leg and held it up, turning around to set it on his waist instead, and then reached out for the Russian's other hand to hold it up, as though they were getting ready to dance at some ball, "Viktor."

"Chris." The older skater answered.

Yuri and Phichit watched in amused but embarrassed confusion as the two senior skaters twisted around each other. At least, until the blonde had cupped a hand around the Russian's back and dipped him down in reverse. Finding his partner there a mere few inches away, but upside-down from his vantage, Yuri blinked and did the only thing he could think of while Viktor was right there...and kissed him quickly before he was pulled back up again.
Chris laughed and pulled the man close to his chest, "It's been too long."

"Right?"

The blonde's hands slid down his 'partner's' arms and took his hands, bringing them up slightly between them, "So much has happened since I last saw you in France. Yelling off a rooftop in utter despair in China, the family trouble in Japan making you jump your way back into the record books... Viktor, bae, dearest friend, beloved rival..." He closed his eyes and tried to look sincere through his smile, "Lay thine head upon my bosom and take shelter, for I am here now."

Slate eyes blinked, but the Russian comically did as bid, reaching both arms around the taller figure's frame and nuzzling the side of his face against the man's chest.

Chris just pat that silver head affectionately, soothingly, "There, there...you may cry now, if you so wish. I will protect your sorrow."

Yuri wasn't sure whether to laugh or not, so he just looked on at the spectacle with a well-meant but thoroughly confused smirk. He turned to see whether Phichit was taking pictures like he normally did, but...for once, the Thai skater was refraining. His expression changed then, worrying for his friend all over again.

*It's the first time he's seen Chris since they got the results about the GPF line-up...*

The Japanese skater pulled the bottom hem of his jeans down over the tops of his skates and pushed back up to stand, "Phichit-kun...did you want to come down to rink-side?"

"Huh?" The Thai skater jerked slightly like he'd been pulled out of a daydream, but smiled like he usually did and shook his head, "I was going to wander around for a bit while you guys practiced. I figured it would be easier to check the place out while it's still mostly empty. If I'm not back before you're finished, just text me, okay?"

Yuri nodded reluctantly, "...Sure." He reached up for the lanyard around his neck and pulled the badge off, offering it to the younger skater, "Here. Maybe it'll save you some trouble if people think you're not just some random person walking around."

"Oh...yeah, thanks." Phichit reached out for it and slipped it over his head. He held the badge in his hands for a moment, nodded, and turned slowly on his heel to head out again. He made it only a few steps before he heard Chris calling for him though and rushing up to meet him. Standing in the open mouth of the hallway, the two exchanged a few quiet words before the Swiss skater opened his arms and leaned in to hug the younger skater.

Viktor slid up next to his quiet partner, resting a hand against the man's back, "You okay? You got really still all of a sudden."

Yuri looked aside, but then shook his head and leaned into the man lightly, "I feel bad wishing that Chris had scored lower. I really wanted Phichit-kun to be here in competition with me... Seeing how he's just watching us all now, from the outside...it breaks my heart a little. This whole thing is just one big taunt to him now...we might never get a chance to compete together in this city again."

The Russian slipped both arms around his husband's lithe frame and settled his chin on one shoulder, "He'll get into the Final more consistently once some of us fossils start dropping off." He said reassuringly, "Then, it'll be the you, him, Yurio, and Otabek stealing the lime-light for years at a time, while Chris and I sit off to the side waxing poetic about days gone by like a couple of old..."
men."

The younger figure drew in a breath, watching the unheard conversation still taking place ahead of him. He turned within the encircling arms and raised his own over his partner's shoulders, holding there for a moment, feeling the slow warm breaths against his neck, "...Yeah...maybe..." He pulled out of the hug and leaned in for a quick kiss before stepping off, "I guess I'll go hit the ice."

"Mh. We'll be right behind you. I just need to get my practice clothes out so I can change."

"Okay. See you down there, then."

Another quick kiss, and skate-guards thunked along the carpeted floor towards the stairs that lead to the rink on the lower floor. Yuri could hear the sound of a backpack being unbuckled and unzipped as he moved around the corner to the stairwell, but his attention went down to the rink. There were only 2 skaters practicing by that point in the night; Otabek and JJ. They each kept to their own halves of the rink, from what Yuri could tell.

*You'd hardly know they ever trained together if you didn't know they trained together once.*

The sound of his blade-guards changed as the hollow thumping of the stairs changed to the more rigid taps on the concrete floor. He looked around the rink from that new vantage point, seeing the seating from the ground, and as he turned, a massive one-way window directly under the 'club' area where he'd just come from. On the glass was a huge image of the Stanley Cup, where it was being held up by several hands, likely those of Red Wings players. Up and to the left was a score-board, and below, a number of goalie nets that had been moved out of the way.

Just in front of him and slightly around the curve of the rink wall, Yuri saw the open gateway to get to the ice, and started making his way towards it. He heard the telltale sound of a jump being landed, and looked out through the Plexiglas wall to see that it was Otabek, sliding off backwards to the unheard sound of his Short Program. When the Kazakh caught sight of him though, he quickly twisted out of his practice and came sliding up towards the open doorway in greeting, looking stoic as always.

"Hey Yuri."

The older skater bowed his head lightly in return, "Been a busy night so far?"

"Hard to tell. I haven't been here that long." Otabek answered, taking the moment for what it was worth and letting himself have a breather, rubbing the back of an arm against his forehead, "Thought I'd come late to avoid the crowd. I guess everyone else thought the same thing."

Yuri gave a nervous smile, "Yeah...Phichit-kun and I took Viktor on the grand tour of Detroit. We used to train here, so we were meeting up with all the people we used to know."

"Where are they now?" The Kazakh wondered, looking up to the windows on the second floor but not seeing much beyond the edge of the floor.

"Phichit-kun went to go look around the arena. Viktor should be down in a minute. We ran into Chris upstai-"

"...Yuri?"

Otabek looked aside first towards the sound of the voice, but then looked back at the man across the threshold from himself. When he saw how the skater had gone wide-eyed and pale, he returned his gaze to the speaker.
"...Oh my God, it really is you. I thought I recognized your voice..." The words went on. Approaching slowly, but getting closer with each step, was the distinct sound of a shoe...and then a metal click. The voice was soft, quiet. The woman it came from tall and thin, but strong-looking, with auburn hair tied tightly into a bun behind her head. She wore light-colored blue-jeans and a black felt jacket, and over that, the neon-yellow vest of the event's medical team with its red cross emblazoned on the chest.

"...Do you know her from somewhere...?" Otabek wondered, leaning in slightly to whisper.

Yuri couldn't form words to answer, simply turning his head as slowly as possible until he caught sight of the slightly-older woman standing some 20 paces away, around the curve of the rink. She was still slightly obstructed by the raised transparent wall, but she slowly came into the open, one foot and one blade at a time.

"...It's been a long time." She said, keeping her distance, "...How...have you been?"

Cherry-hazel eyes looked the woman from top to bottom, then back again, "...I've..." He started, feeling his throat go dry. He coughed to clear it and turned a bit more to face her properly, "I've been good." He gestured his open palm towards the blade she stood on, "You...look like you've seen some rough days."

She glanced down at her artificial leg and twisted it slightly, the black carbon-fiber reflecting light on it where it curved like a C under her pant leg, "...Oh...yeah." She looked back up again though, "Lost it on year 3. Was sent home after that. It's not all bad, though... I got to swap the sandbox for the Black Forest."

"...Black Forest?"

"It's in Germany." She explained, "There's military bases out there where we stage before going to Afghanistan. I got MedEvaced there after I decided it was a good idea to step on an IED." The tall woman fidgeted a little where she stood, "But hey, I got to be an Air Force medic for a while...so...yay me? I guess?" She gave a nervous laugh, "That's why I'm here now." She thumbed at her neon yellow vest, "Got drafted from the hospital to be part of event staff, in case someone decides to be just as smart as me."

Otabek side-eyes the skater next to him, and coughed lightly to get Yuri's attention. When the man turned slightly, the Kazakh leaned in to whisper, "Who is she?"

The anxious figure resigned himself to his fate and gestured a hand between them, "...Otabek, this is Celeste. We were friends back when I used to train here full time, years ago." He turned to the medic and gestured the same in reverse, "Celeste, this is Otabek...he's competing in the Final with me."

She reached a hand out to firmly shake, but then pulled back again, keeping a safe birth between herself and Yuri, "...You're competing?" She looked at him skeptically, "I didn't see your name on the rost...wait...no way." She pointed at the skater with a nervous hand, "...You're the Yuri Nikiforov I saw on the registry? I mean, I saw that it was a Yuri representing Japan, but I didn't think that...you would've..."

He nodded after a fashion, not really sure how to respond otherwise. To his relief, he spotted Viktor and Chris coming out of the stairwell a ways behind the woman and saw the Russian wave. Yuri didn't wave back though, his arms feeling like lead weights against his sides. Viktor gave a weird look, seeing the dread-laced expression on his face, and quietly started approaching, careful not to draw attention.
"...Wow. Don't you think that's taking it a bit too far?" Celeste went on, having no clue about the men coming up behind her, "I know you're a huge fan of Viktor's, but taking his name for yourself? Don't you think that's a bit creepy?"

Otabek side-eyes the skater again, noting how he balled up his right hand and moved it slightly behind his back.

"I can't even imagine what he probably thinks about it." The woman continued, not really noticing Yuri's discomfort either, "Seeing his own last name on the roster twice, but knowing full well that your name was Katsuki before...? What were you thinking, Yuri? I know you were a big fan of his, but isn't this obsession of yours going off the rails now...?"

Viktor sneered a bit where he stood, "Who are you and why are you talking to my husband like that?"

The medic spun on her metal foot, startled into a loud gasp. She spotted that silver hair and blue eyes though and immediately recognized who it was, "V-Vik..."

"Mr. Nikiforov, if you don't mind." He pushed around her, though Chris stayed where he was, effectively sandwiching the woman in between them. The silver Russian stepped up close to his partner, whispering to him as he set a hand gently on the man's chest, "Why is this woman talking to you like this? Who does she think she is? Is she someone you know?"

Celeste just gaped at what she saw, unsure how to react given the legendary skater's tender affection for the athlete she'd known so long ago.

"She's someone I knew." Yuri corrected quietly, "It's Celeste."

Viktor's eyes went wide, and he cocked his head up in surprise, turning his gaze suddenly to look at the woman a bit more critically. He saw the prosthetic leg, and vaguely recalled mention at the Skate Club that the woman in question had gone with the military, but it didn't matter and he turned back to his partner, "Is she bothering you? You were starting to get anxious again."

"I...I don't know...she just popped up out of nowhere while I was talking to Otabek." He answered, reaching up a hand to press against his forehead, tufts of hair weaving between his fingers, "She didn't realize I was skating, and when it came up, started giving me grief about my last name like she thought I'd done it for fun on my own. As if I would just change my last name to yours for the heck of it-

"Say no more." The Russian reassured, raising his hand from where it had settled on his husband's chest to brush it gently over the skater's cheek instead, fingers curling lightly around the back of his head and neck to bring him forward into a kiss. When he let go, he turned on his heel and put himself square between Yuri and the medic now in front of him. His gaze was rather serious, which caught even Chris off guard a bit where he was watching from the background, "I understand that you knew Yuri in the past." Viktor started, eyes unblinking as he looked past his silver bangs, "But I'll ask you nicely only one time to leave him alone. I won't tolerate someone shaming him."

"I wasn't...I mean...I didn't..." She stammered, feeling appropriately cornered.

"Viktor, you don't have to scare her." Yuri attempted, but the Russian was undeterred, simply holding out his arm to keep him behind it.

"Please go." Viktor pointed back the way he assumed Celeste came, "My husband doesn't need this kind of stress before a competition. He's already been through enough."
A few tense moments passed, but the stunned woman just nodded and slinked away, heading back around the short end of the rink for the doorway she'd come through previously, on the far side of the one-way glass. All five skaters watched her go until she was out of sight.

"Way to go, Viktor! You've been out here 30 seconds and you already made someone cry!" JJ called from the far side of the ice.

The Russian rolled his eyes, but didn't respond.

Yuri drew in a nervous breath, "...Well, that's just great."

"Don't think about it." Viktor advised, turning back to pull the man close, fingers going up through his hair, "If she tries to talk to you again, just tell me and I'll deal with it."

"I think you already did."

"Then there's nothing to worry about."

The younger skater gave a skeptical look, but then nodded.

"Chin up, Yuri." Viktor said, putting a finger under it to lift the man's eyes again, "You haven't even set blades to ice for the first time since we got here. I won't let you worry about anything other than how much I'm going to make you work for the Gold." He gave a wink, "Right?"

Brown eyes blinked a few times, but the figure did his best to put the encounter to the back of his mind, "Right."

"I'm going to go change and find some snacks with Chris. We haven't really eaten since we landed. You have a craving for anything?" The Russian wondered, doing his best as well to shelve the situation and forget it, "Something salty maybe?"

"Ah...sure... Get me some nachos if you can find any."

"Done."
Watching the two senior skaters heading off again, Yuri pulled off his blade guards and perched them on the outside ledge of the rink wall, setting them in a row near where the other two athletes had done the same thing. Sliding out onto the ice, he made his way around the perimeter to loosen up. It didn't take long for his zen to be broken again though.

"So what's it like being back in Detroit after so long?" JJ asked, his tone as mocking in its fake interest as ever, "The Forsaken King finally returns home."

Yuri drew in a breath, "I'm not the King here and I was never Forsaken." He focused his attention back down to his blades, slipping across the ice more quickly than he was used to. He paused and held to the wall for a moment, dragging the edges across the ice.

"No, I suppose you wouldn't have been, not back then." The Canadian's voice went on, "You only ever made it to the Final once while you trained here, and you were what...22 at the time?"

"Not everyone's an early bloomer like you are, JJ." The older skater retorted mildly, "But I've made it three years in a row now."

"I suppose that counts for something." JJ mused, spinning around lackadaisically, looking much like he hadn't been pushing himself too hard for the few hours he'd already been on the ice, "It's a shame Phichit didn't do the same."

Yuri raised his head and paused the blade-scraping, "You know, Phichit-kun scored higher at his first Grand Prix Final than you did in Sochi...which was, what, your second? Third?"

"You know, Phichit-kun scored higher at his first Grand Prix Final than you did in Sochi...which was, what, your second? Third?"

The younger skater just clapped sarcastically, "Congrats to him then!"

Otabek slid past, hearing the teeth-grinding that Yuri no-doubt was thinking quite loudly in his own head. He toe-picked the ice and came to a scratched stop a few feet away, looking at the Canadian grimly, "Would it kill you to put a cork in it once in a while? We all aspire to win the Gold but that doesn't mean we have to be jackasses to each other."

"Jackasses?" JJ echoed, shaking his head, "It's all just a bit of harmless banter."

"I've seen harmless banter." The Kazakh went on, "You're just condescending. It's poor sportsmanship to constantly wear down the people around you."

Yuri glanced between the two, feeling his heart pounding in his throat.

The Canadian just posed somewhat dramatically, gouging a toe-pick down into the ice for flare, "I'm perfectly sportsmanlike. I taught you the quad Salchow, didn't I? I even invited you out for dinner last year, though you shot me down."

"You act like doing one nice thing gives you permission to be a snarky little cunt for a few weeks at a time." Otabek crossed his arms, giving that steely glare that had once sent the slightly-older skater into his previous GPF mental breakdown, "Has it never occurred to you why no one ever wants to have you around, or be around you?"

JJ just scoffed, sliding off somewhat arrogantly, "Peasants will always kneel before the King, just as..."
prey will always run from the predator. It's just the natural order of things."

Yuri watched the man go, sighing loudly before going back to dragging the edges of his blades across the ice, "I'll never understand him. I thought last year might've humbled him. Guess that makes me the fool."

Otabek just shrugged and turned to look back at him over his shoulder, "He's lucky he medaled at all last year. Having that breakdown and then taking Bronze anyway must've given him the impression that he could still win no matter what he did. People like that think they're immortal and untouchable...until those things are threatened somehow."

"I guess so."

The Kazakh uncrossed his arms, and looked out across the ice, watching JJ vault into an Axel jump, managing the 4th rotation but not quite getting in the next required half-spin before landing, "Look at him. He's trying for the quad Axel now."

Yuri glanced up, seeing the Canadian going for it again as well, but still only managing 4 rotations, missing the last extra half-spin that made the Axel such a hard jump to begin with, "He won't get it. I'm not even sure how Viktor does it. The one time I tried for it, I fell."

"You got all your rotations in though. If JJ lands anything less than 4 and a half rotations, even if the landing is perfect, it'll still only count as a triple."

The older skater huffed a laugh, "Yeah...and let me tell you. Falling on a quad Axel feels like all your guts are being shoved into your chest. I don't recommend it." He pulled one ankle across a knee and scraped the ice off his golden blades, "I should practice for a bit though. I need to wear these blades down a bit before tomorrow or I'll be slip'n'sliding all over the place."

"Just got them sharpened?"

"Yeah...just the other day." Yuri nodded, reaching for the second skate, "After nearly 6 weeks on the road, it almost felt like my blades were made of wood rather than metal. Viktor even had the grooves on his deepened so he could get that big ice-flurry effect in his Free Skate, so the bite on his skates was even worse." He set the boot down on the ice and tapped a toe-pick down before sliding forward, "At least he's doing something else for his Free Skate now. Watching him do the old one was wearing me out."

"Something new?"

"Yeah. After last weekend at NHK, he decided it would be a better idea to do something a bit easier for the Final. It's the show he did for that Exhibition, just without me in it." The older skater explained, standing up on his toe-picks for a moment before leaning down again onto the rockers, "Don't tell anyone though. He wants it to be a surprise for the audience."

Otabek huffed, "You and Plisetsky are the only people I really talk to anyway. Some of these other skaters are too emotionally draining to be around for more than a few minutes at a time."

Yuri made a nervous face, "...Ah...sumimasen..."

"You're not as bad as you think." The shorter figure nudged his head towards the other end of the rink after that, "I mostly meant JJ, Chris, and Viktor. Too high-energy for me."

"...Really?"
Otabek nodded, starting to slide back in a lazy half-circle, "Some people are here to compete. Other people are here for attention. I'll let you decide who falls into which category."

Viktor finally came out of the changing room in his next outfit; black sweatpants and his new black-and-red Team jacket. He slung his skates over his shoulder, tied together by their laces, and held his mostly-empty backpack by the top handle. He stepped over to where Chris was waiting and started walking through the concourse, "So when did you get here anyway? We didn't see you when we came to get our badges earlier."

"Oh, I've been here since yesterday." The Swiss skater answered simply, "Did some touristy stuff with the coach and choreographer earlier today though. I thought you and Yuri would come by later since Yuri normally needs to sleep off such long plane rides, so I waited."

The Russian huffed a laugh, "He's trying so hard to stay awake. Him and his friend were really excited to go see all the places they used to know from when they trained here before. It was actually a lot of fun to meet all the people they knew." He nudged the taller figure with an elbow, "What was really weird though was realizing how many of them didn't follow skating. Other than the folks at his old Skate Club, basically no one watched the sport. I thought more of them would've had some basic curiosity about what Yuri was up to that they'd have at least looked into it before the Final...but I guess not."

"What was up with that chick at rink-side?" Chris wondered, his brows raised slightly at the thought of it, "Making fun of him for the last name thing? I know we walked into the middle of a conversation, but it sounded a lot like she thought Yuri had lost his mind."

"Right?" Viktor sighed, getting a bit apprehensive again, looking back over his shoulder like he thought he could stare through the walls to make sure the woman in question was still hiding somewhere like he'd told her to, "She's one of those people who knew Yuri during his Detroit Arc. I've been hearing a lot about her in the last few days, but apparently she used to have a thing for him and got shot down." He turned his head back around to watch where he was going; they made their long and slow trek around the outer halls of the arena to where the main athlete's lounge was, "I hope this doesn't make Yuri lose his focus. I'd really like one event of the Grand Prix to be without a major emotional breakdown before a show."

"Well, hopefully you nipped it in the bud then. She looked pretty spooked when you made yourself known." The blonde noted, "How did things go after we spoke after your Short Program last weekend though? We haven't really talked much since then. That Free Skate was painful to watch."

"Really?" Viktor laughed nervously, "I thought you'd be more impressed!"

"I've known you over a decade now, Viktor." The younger skater pointed out, "You've never had the stamina to do more than 4 quads in a single program. You just belted out 8 though, and one was the Axel, which is technically what cost you Gold at Worlds last year."

The Russian sighed rather dramatically, "I just had a lot of pent up energy to get out. I don't think I would've been able to do it if my father hadn't been there watching." He said quietly, not wanting to be heard by anyone they passed, seen or unseen, "I know I haven't told you much about why I was estranged from my family...it was a lot of baggage, and I just didn't want to carry it around with me all the time."

"It didn't take a genius to notice that there was fire on that horizon." Chris explained, "For someone as popular and well-liked as you are, having practically zero friends outside of skating and
competition said a lot about you. I just assumed the rest and let it be. I didn't want to rock the boat by prying when you seemed to be happy with how things were."

"I was." Viktor nodded, his eyes low for a moment, "After all the drama of my previous relationships, I just wanted to put it all on the backburner for a while. 'Rise above, focus on skating' and all that."

"Yeah, it was kind of shocking how you dropped everything so fast when you decided to become Yuri's coach. Before then, you were something of a hermit when you weren't competing or training. All these public appearances you would make, and making such a big splash when you did...only to completely vanish off the radar for a while when you were done."

"I've always been that way though."

"Yeah I know." Chris poked him with an elbow, "Which is why the whole world lost its mind when you just randomly decided to go to Japan. No one saw it coming. I don't think you could've found a way to surprise people any more than you did that day."

"And what's sad about it is that I didn't even do it for the world. All that energy I spent trying to surprise people with my skating, and then it was the one non-skating thing I did that got everyone's attention in the end."

"Well...that is kind of why I asked if you were only doing it for shock-value..." The younger skater said hesitantly, "Everything about it was so random and unexpected, even for you. I knew you didn't do it to hurt Yuri, since that kind of thing has never been your M.O., but it crossed my mind that you were being a bit selfish with it."

"From my perspective, it was probably the most self-less thing I've ever done." Viktor corrected, glancing aside to look at the other man, "But I guess I can see it from your side of things."

"I thought you were like me, living for life on the ice...but then you dropped it all like a bad habit, and attached yourself to someone who had fallen so far that he almost hit rock-bottom. For a while, I was really worried you were just using Yuri to get some publicity...taking advantage of the fact that you knew he was practically your biggest fan, and using it to get him to agree to anything you said. The only thing that made me question it all was remembering how you were with him at the Sochi banquet." Chris went on, thinking back on it, "Looking back on it, you fell for him back then, didn't you?"

"Oh yeah." The Russian gave a nervous laugh, "It really is true that you find something when you stop looking for it."

"I'm not even sure you were listening to most of the stuff he was saying that night." The blonde shrugged, "I was actually a bit jealous of how you danced with him."

"Whaaaat? You were jealous? Why?" Viktor laughed.

"Because you didn't dance with me!"

The Russian quickly remedied that, reaching to take his friend's waist and free hand with his own, putting them into something of a Tango start, "Then dance with me now, Chris! Dance like it's your last night on this earth!" He said excitedly.

Lime-green eyes gave a sultry look, but returned the pose in kind, "Viktor, you're such a tease."

"Are you looking for something else then? To sit on my lap all night like he did?" The silver skater
mused, leaning his friend back a little, "Tell me."

"Don't temp me, you scoundrel. If I knew you played for our team I'd have jumped your bones years ago."

Viktor laughed and pulled the man upright again, letting him go to walk normally, the lounge door starting to come into sight around the curve of the building. "Wouldn't that have been a scandal!"

"None worse than you jumping Yuri's."

"Maybe not." The Russian shook his head, stuffing his hands into his jacket pockets and slouching a little, "I bet everyone thinks that's why Yuri got good suddenly."

"It might've crossed a few minds. What better motivation than having Viktor Nikiforov acting like a proverbial carrot on a stick?"

Laughing, they made a sharp right turn into an open door, stepping into the Comercia Player's Lounge.

"What in the actual Hell has happened in the last few years?" Celeste wondered loudly, gawking back and forth between her phone and out through the one-way glass that separated the medical team's set-up area from the practice rink. She sat with a huff, thumbing away on the internet to try and answer her own question. To her surprise, looking up 'Yuri Katsuki' turned up an entire Wikipedia page on just him, and she scrolled through it with perplexing concern, "...Didn't qualify for the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, but made it the following year for the ISU Grand Prix of Figure Skating Final, also held in Sochi, Russia. After a disastrous collapse half-way through the event, Yuri came in 6th place. He returned for competition back in his home country for Japanese Nationals 2 weeks later, but sank even further to 11th place, being utterly eclipsed by many younger and more inexperienced skaters. He did not qualify for Four Continents, or for the following World Championships in Tokyo, where his...future...coach?" She paused and cocked her head up, looking at her phone like it was lying to her, but then read on, "...Viktor Nikiforov, placed 1st for the 5th consecutive year. In a surprising turn of events, Yuri performed a replica of Viktor's Free Skate, 'Aria: Stay Close to Me' at his home rink in Hasetsu, Saga Prefecture, and after video of it went viral online, Viktor resigned from competition to become Yuri's coach. Subsequently, Yuri re-qualified for the Grand Prix Final in Barcelona, where he took Silver, and broke Viktor's long-time Free Skate World Record with a score of 221.88."

"What's gotten you all twisted up suddenly, Tess?" Someone asked, getting the red-head's attention from her phone.

She pushed to stand again and pointed out towards the rink, "That guy out there...Yuri Katuski...I knew him from our college days back when he trained here in Detroit. We shared a bunch of the same boring core classes and did homework together a lot. He had to do skating on top of it all though, so to keep up with him, I would go to his practice rink." She clicked her phone off and put it into her back pocket, stepping over to the Team Lead, and watched the skaters on the ice through the one-way glass. She sighed and looked worried, "Back then, unless it had to do with school, the only thing Yuri ever talked about was how much he hoped to be as good as Viktor one day. He'd watch videos of Viktor's jumps on his phone and then try to replicate them. He'd memorize some of Viktor's routines, sometimes practicing them more than his own. But then, one of his rink-mates got hurt, and we all piled into the Skate Club van to take him to the emergency room. Yuri was all broken up about it, pacing nervously and being really quiet, more than normal. I made the mistake of thinking I could calm his nerves by trying to give him a hug, and he just...he practically hit me, he
shoved me off so hard and fast. You'd think I'd just tried to mug him or something. I've never seen someone react so viscerally at just a hug before."

"Had he ever let anyone else hug him before?"

Celeste paused, "...I can't remember anyone touching him, actually. Not just hugs, but like...no one even pat his shoulder or anything. Maybe I hit a nerve. I was just trying to be nice." She crossed her arms and held an elbow with each hand, "I really liked him back then...thought I would make him see the rest of the world for what it was, rather than just through how Viktor influenced it. That guy was his whole world though. He even named his dog back home after Viktor, you know? It was crazy."

"Maybe that's all he could think to talk about." The older man shrugged, "If he kept everyone at arm's length physically, then it's possible he just did so with his small-talk, too. He was here to go to college and skate, right? Maybe that's all he wanted out of it."

"So you're saying I just annoyed him then?" She looked aghast at the man, "I was just trying to be his friend."

"You probably were his friend. Some folks just don't want people getting closer than that." He shrugged again, but then laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"I just remembered an episode of this show... '1000 Ways to Die.' There was a story in there called 'Ichi-boned.' It's a pun on the Japanese word 'ichiban,' which means 'number one.' It was about this Japanese couple...they were so modest, they couldn't even look one another in the eye, even while clothed, but apparently loved each other quite deeply. One night, some years after being married, they finally decided to consummate their marriage. Unfortunately..." The man sighed dryly, "They were so modest, that they both had heart attacks during the act and died from the nerves of it."

Celeste's eye twitched in disbelief, "...You're lying."

"Nope. You can look it up." The Lead medic laughed again, turning slightly away from the window, "Anyway...I guess my point was that...the story was about Japanese people being modest, and Yuri himself is Japanese...and modest. He probably got freaked out by how forward you were. It's not your fault."

"That's beside of the point now... What's gotten my goat is how he and Viktor were a minute ago. Yuri couldn't even talk to Viktor before! I remember him coming back from competition sometimes when they were at the same event, and he'd beat himself up for days because he was too scared to even say hi to the guy!" The woman protested, "But I disappear for a few years and now they're shagging each other?"

"They're married."

"Same difference!"

The man chuckled and roughly pat her on the shoulder as he stepped away, "I guess he finally got the courage to say hello. Try to be happy for him. How many of us can say we got to marry our heroes?"

Balancing a plate in both hands, Viktor followed Chris out of the players' lounge and started heading
back towards the practice rink. He nibbled lightly on a French fry hanging from his lips like a stalk of
grass, looking at the fare he'd collected, "...I guess chips and queso is close enough to nachos to
make it kind of the same?"

"Nachos lite?" Chris laughed, "I doubt it'll make a difference."

A sudden bustle of boots and yelling caught both skaters' attention, and they hopped out of the way
as a team of medics and a stretcher on wheels suddenly shot past them. Blinking in surprise and
confusion, both of them turned around to watch the hustle, seeing, and hearing, that a certain
Canadian skater was the one being transported away. Blood smothered the white sheets wrapped
around the thin rubber padding under him, and they barely caught sight of the skater's left boot being
slashed at the heel.

Viktor coughed, glancing at Chris in horror, "What in the world?"

"Looks like he's out." The Swiss figure said flatly, watching the team push the stretcher around the
last corner leading to the southeast exit, "Must've screwed up a landing and caught himself."

They both quickly turned to go the other way, heading down the last length of hallway leading
directly to the practice arena...however, the suddenly saw a second team coming right for them.
Scrambling off the ice and pushing their way through the scant few rows of arena-seats, they rushed
through the corridor in the same direction that the first group had gone. There was no yelling coming
from that group though, and as the two skaters stepped aside to let them pass...they saw Yuri,
unconscious, being wheeled away, a trickle of blood coming down the side of his face from under
his hair. One gold skate, hanging off the end of the stretcher, was striped with blood, leaving a
droplet of splatter every few feet as he was wheeled away.
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED FOURTY SIX

Yuri stuck to his side of the rink with Otabek, keeping a wary eye on the broken red half-way line that split the rink into its two sections. But, that didn't entirely stop JJ from trespassing on occasion. More often than not, the brash Canadian would do his X-path across the ice, skating around the inside of the short-side wall, and passing diagonally across the longest length of the rink, jumping at the end and sliding off to do it again elsewhere. Otabek had to move out of the way twice, narrowly avoiding being run into. Yuri, however, stuck to the rink-wall whenever he saw JJ coming.

Rolling his eyes, and seeing Otabek nearly mowed down a third time, the oldest skater on the ice finally had enough, "JJ, honestly, can you give us a bit of room here? You've had all day to practice."

"Just follow the same path I'm taking then, like in warm-ups."

"We're not even practicing jumps right now!" Yuri hollered, trying to be heard from clear across the rink. He wasn't sure JJ was listening though, see him vault into another quad at the opposite corner. With a grumble, Yuri nudged his head towards the long wall of the arena, hoping to carve out a spot of non-interference where he and Otabek could work on spins without being in the Canadian's way.

Still, hyperaware as Yuri was, his growing fatigue was starting to get the better of him. His four lattes and 3rd wind were starting to wear off, and he was starting to wonder if he could see sounds and hear colors. Whenever he turned his head or looked from one side of the rink to the other, his mind stopped processing the transition between the different spots, making him feel like he'd closed his eyes and opened them anew minutes later.

He shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose, but moved on anyway, keeping within the boundaries of his triangle of ice. He started to slide along the wall in reverse, trying to get a better feel for the perfect glide of his newly-sharpened blades, no longer needing to compensate for the worn-down bite that they'd had when he performed at NHK. He remembered the look on Yuuko's face when he and Viktor had presented their blades to her at the Ice Castle for resurfacing, and her mournful wondering at why neither of them bothered sharpening them on the road.

'We didn't want to give our skates to someone we didn't know.' Viktor had explained, 'A bad grinder or lack of skill, or even a tech looking to give their countrymen an unfair advantage, knowing they had our blades to sharpen...I'd rather deal with a dull skate than a sabotaged one.'

'You really think that would happen...?' Yuuko questioned, taking the first boot to the grinding wheel behind the counter.

'I'm Russian. Back in the day, a skater's score could be better or worse just depending on whether the judges were from a friendly or rival country as you. The Americans shafted me anytime they had a chance.' The silver legend went on, examining the cuts and broken edges on his remaining blade, 'And we're both Gold medalists now...I wouldn't want anyone handling our skates that we don't know personally somehow.'

'Do you want the groove as deep as it was before you left?' The Madonna wondered, looking at the length of the hollow with one eye as she held it up, 'Honestly, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you were trying to play hockey out there with a curve like this.'
'No, you can make it shallow again like before.' Viktor leaned over the counter casually, setting the second boot down, 'I won't be needing to gouge the ice anymore.'

Yuri looked down at the white frosted floor, feeling the cold of the arena on his exposed skin. The sound of other blades scratching along the frozen ground was like music, even if some of those blades belonged to someone that was temporarily annoying him. He lifted his head and looked to the opposite side of the rink, watching momentarily as Otabek worked on one of his sit-spins, careful to avoid the very center where JJ was still hopping by. The Canadian had landed a triple Axel in that case, and was sliding off backwards towards a rounded corner to Yuri's right.

He looked up and the arena was new to his mind again, and he shook his head to clear the weird feeling. The front of his brain felt like it was tingling from lack of sleep, and he could feel his hands shaking a little...but he pressed on. He tried to imagine his two failed performances; his sickly Free Skate in Canada, and his anxiety-broken Short Program in China. Eyes closed, and he raised his arms out to the side, seeing himself in those rinks again. He could see his husband and coach on the other side of the rink-wall, and could feel both the pain in his throat, and the fluttering in his chest from both of those days at the same time. His blades slid like razors across the ice, not even able to feel himself moving...or how he started to slip into the center of the rink. Twisting slightly, he lifted his free leg to start rotating, moving backwards in the slow spin.

He couldn't see JJ starting to building speed, going backwards as well, and coming right for him.

Otabek pulled out of his scratch-spin just seconds before seeing JJ dig in a toe-pick, and things moved in slow motion. His eyes went wide, seeing the collision before it happened, but being entirely unable to stop it.

JJ landed backwards, much like he'd started, and slid straight back along his planned route, right as Yuri was kicking his leg out to build up speed in his spin. In cruel irony, the moment the Canadian's toe-pick hit the ice, and the blade tilted back down onto the rocker, Yuri's golden-bladed-boot was 6 inches above the ice in that exact same spot, pointing in the younger figure's direction.

The hollow sound of two bodies hitting one another... the scream of one having drawn blood...the hollow CRACK of other's head hitting the ice...reverberated off the walls like a car accident.

Otabek could hear the ringing in his ears even without having been the one to get hit, "YURI!" He finally called out, seeing the older skater sprawling and sliding away, pushed by the inertia of the impact.

He was face-down, blood smeared across the frost where he'd skidded off. Red splatter went out from him in a circle where crimson vitae dripped from the edge of his razor-sharp right skate.

Ten paces further away, JJ was pushed up onto an elbow, having avoided a skull-hit on the rink floor when he fell, but seeing the blood dripping into a small puddle under his left ankle. His pant-leg and the leather of his boot were ravaged, and he could see the fibers of his sock poking out through the gash. There was light and ice visible through where he knew the edge of his Achilles' tendon should be.

Otabek was already yelling for the medics when JJ regained enough self-awareness to panic, but he just fell down onto his back and cried out in agony instead. He could hardly hear anything besides the empty, hollow ringing in his ears, making everything sound like it was happening under water.

"Yuri! Yuri, wake up!" The Kazakh was calling, reaching to move one arm closer to the skater's frame so he could roll him onto his back, but-
"DON'T TOUCH HIM!" Celeste screamed, rushing out with two others as they went grabbing for stretcher-boards and their gear. Otabek quickly pulled his hand back and moved away, watching anxiously as the first two neon-yellow vests started clambering out onto the ice towards them. Celeste was pulling on a plastic spiked-bottom 'sock' onto her carbon-fiber foot, quickly following after with better grip on the frost. She carried a cervical collar with her, and slid on her knees to Yuri's side, pausing a few inches away from him. One stretcher-board was already nearby, and a 4th medic slipped forward to join the 3 that were already there. Carefully, Celeste pulled the board around and set it on Yuri's other side, moving in on her knees to get closer, and glanced over at her new partner, "On three, hold his head. I'm going to rotate this shoulder up. We'll rotate him onto the stretcher slowly. Once he's on his back, I'll put the collar on him. Ready? One, two, three ..." They did as said, slowly moving the unconscious skater onto his back, holding his head up and in line with the rest of his frame until the auburn-haired medic could fit the plastic stabilizer under his bleeding chin and around his neck.

Behind her, JJ had already been placed and secured on his own stretcher, and the two EMTs were starting to move him towards the rink walls. On the other side of the doorway, four more techs were showing up, bringing with them the two rolling stretchers that the two skaters would be transferred to. The first was already being lowered closer to the ground, and as the groups converged, the Canadian skater was moved expertly from the temporary board to the gurney that would take him outside. Again, he was strapped in, and one EMT started packing the bleeding gouge with sterile gauze, another yelling for people to get out of the way as they pushed him swiftly down the hall.

Celeste and the second tech carried Yuri's unconscious frame to rink-side, carefully lifting him to the second gurney, and pulling it up to transport-height after buckling him in. They waited a moment though, and the former Air Force medic pulled out a small flashlight, shining it into both of the skater's eyes to check for a response. Gloved hands rifled through his hair gently, trying to find the cut that was painting the side of his face red, noting the one on the side of his chin that bled down his neck. A blood-pressure cuff was wrapped around one arm and an oxygen saturation monitor clipped to one finger. Without a second to spare, they started pushing the wheeled stretcher down the hall to follow after the one that had already gone.

"There's two ambulances already outside. They should be parking at the southeast entrance right now." One of the EMTs was saying as they moved off, "What happened?"

"Collision. The conscious one jumped right into this one while he was spinning." Celeste explained

"Names?"

"This one is Yuri Kats-...er, Yuri Nikiforov. The other one is Jean-Jacque Leroy."

Otabek watched in stunned silence as the last stretcher was moved out of sight and into the main hall. In the newfound quiet of the practice rink, he looked around at the splatters of blood left behind, and the trails where the two skaters had been moved away. He turned his head as he heard people starting to barrel down the stairs from the waiting area above the rink; JJ's parents yelling, other skaters and coaches trying to figure out what happened.

Bright red blood trickled from under Yuri's hair as he was whisked down the corridor. Celeste pulled the first wad of gauze away and was reaching for another pack when she spotted a certain silver-haired and blonde-headed pair watching them in wide-eyed shock as they passed. She retuned her focus though and set the second pack of absorbent white fluff onto her patient's head.

They moved around the corner and out of the sight of the two shocked senior athletes, but when they paused to have to open the doors to get outside, she looked back and saw them both running after
them, sans the plates they'd been carrying before. There was no time to wait for them to catch up though, and the medical group moved out into the cold Detroit night air, the flashing bright lights of the two ambulances bouncing off every wall and window and face. A few pedestrians that had been waiting outside were watching in confusion, as were the event staffers who'd seen the two stretchers go by. A few of them, wearing suits rather than vests, were speaking quietly to one another as they watched the whole thing unfold.

"What's going to happen to me!?!" JJ was yelling as his gurney was placed up near the open back doors of the first bright-yellow medical vehicle, "Is it going to be cut off!!?"

"Please remain calm, sir, we will assess you on the way to the hospital." The paramedic answered, looking to make sure that the ambulance wouldn't suddenly move again as he reached for the latch that would fold up the legs and wheels of the transport.

"WHAT DID YOU DO!??" Viktor's voice suddenly came, panicked and shrill and aimed straight at the Canadian.

JJ looked up, hectic and scared enough as it was, but even more so when he heard the Russian screaming at him, "I didn't do anything! I was just practicing like the others!"

"Viktor, we don't even know if h-

"YOU MORON." The furious silver skater barked, "WERE YOU REALLY SO DESPERATE TO SHOW OFF HOW DAMN GOOD YOU ARE THAT YOU RAN INTO HIM ON PURPOSE OR SOMETHING!??"

"I didn't do anything!" JJ insisted, feeling the gurney rock slightly as he was lifted and shoved into the back of the flashing vehicle. The ambulance's siren started blaring, and the doors were quickly pulled closed. It started to drive away from the building, blindingly-bright lights shining red and blue as it moved out towards the street.

Viktor tried to get closer to the second one, barely catching a few glimpses of his unconscious partner on the stretcher. He could see where blood was absorbing into the gauze pressed to the top right of his forehead, but with all the activity around him, it was hard to see much else. Like JJ's, Yuri's gurney was pushed up right onto the back of the ambulance, the wheels being picked up and the whole thing being shoved inside.

"Yuri!" The Russian called out desperately, trying to claw his way closer through the small group.

One paramedic tried to push him back, "Sir, this is no place for you right now, please back up."

"That's my husband in there! Let me go!"

Celeste could hear him, even as she was trying to secure the bed to the floor of the vehicle.

"YURI!" Viktor called again, more panicked than before.

"Viktor, we have to give them room t-

"Chris, I hav...Chris, let me go!"

The Swiss skater was trying to pull his terrified friend back, but Celeste finally looked up and pushed towards the doors, reaching out her hand, "Mr. Nikiforov! Come on!"

Blue eyes widened, but a path was immediately cut for him to go by, and he dropped his gear at
Chris' feet as he rushed through. He quickly took hold of the hand and let the woman pull him up into the back of the ambulance, trying to find a place to sit in the tight little space. The skater glanced back out again and saw the younger figure already leaning to pick the discarded pile of skates and the backpack up out of the snow, "I'll call you when I can! Tell Phichit what happened! I don't have his number!"

The doors were pushed shut by the other EMTs, and the back pounded with a fist twice to let the driver know to go. Chris watched in stunned silence as the second bright-yellow van pulled away, and before long, vanished around a corner, beyond his line of sight. He swallowed nervously as he could still hear the sirens barking through the cold night, and looked around at all the stunned and confused faces around him, many looking at him for answers. Having none, he just hefted the golden-bladed skates and backpack over his shoulder and started making his way back inside. He glanced up at where the Leroy elders were getting information from one of the paramedics, trying to keep it together so they could drive over to whatever hospital the ambulance was going to be driving their son to.

By the time Chris pushed back through the doors, and had his phone out looking to text Phichit about the night's unexpected events, he spotted the Thai skater running up alongside several other people...including the Canadian's panic-ridden wife. Both of them came right up to him, looking as anxious and nervous as anyone might given the lack of information, each of them asking in hurried words what had happened.

"Where are they now?" Phichit asked.

"Where's JJ!?" Isabella cried, tears in her eyes already, "I heard there was blood!"

"Whatever happened, I don't think JJ will be skating this weekend." Chris answered, "Viktor and I saw that he had a bloodied left ankle. We think he and Yuri collided somehow."

The frantic woman held her hands over her mouth, but suddenly caught sight of JJ's parents where they were still standing outside, and pushed past to get to them.

The older skater watched her go out the corner of his eye, but then turned back to Phichit, who to that point had tried to remain calm. He adjusted where the Russian's backpack sat on his shoulder, "Viktor went with Yuri in the ambulance. I don't think they're coming back tonight."

"Yuri..." The younger skater sighed worriedly, "How badly was he hurt? Did you see?"

"He got knocked out. That's about all I know." He paused a moment, wondering what sense there would be in mentioning the blood he'd seen, but decided not to, "...We should go back and get the rest of their things. There's no sense worrying until we hear back from Viktor."

"Do you think Yuri can still compete?"

"There's no telling right now."

"...Ahhhhh this is horrible...!" Phichit cried nervously, "I hope he's okay! ...JJ too...!"
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED FOURTY SEVEN

**Wednesday Night**

Minako clicked off her phone and fell back onto the bed where she sat, stretching out as far as she could go before flopping into laziness again, "That went pretty well I guess. I thought Yuri would be upset with me or jealous in some way, but he sounded pretty happy about it all."

"Why would he feel like that?" Mikhail wondered, inspecting the lodge-like hotel room, idly flapping his hat back and forth where he held it in one hand, over his crossed arms.

"Oh, only because of Viktor feeling that way." She huffed, looking over at the man, "What's the matter? Don't like the room?"

"Huh?" He glanced over at her, "Oh, no, nothing like that...I just start unconsciously deconstructing things in my head when I need to think. Tomorrow is going to be busy."

"At least Banff is small." Minako offered, pushing to sit up again, "You could probably look at every single apartment in this place and still have time to think about which one you're willing to pay for."

"Yeah..."

"Did you want to turn in early?"

The elder Russian shrugged, "I'm actually pretty wide awake. I want to get this thing done and over with. If stuff was still open at this hour, I'd already be driving around doing tours."

"So you're saying you have a whole bunch of pent-up energy and don't know what to do with it?"

Minako smirked.

Mikhail just raised a brow at her and made a face, "...Yes."

"The night is still young, my friend!" The ballerina hopped up off the bed and twirled dramatically, "Let's go do something!"

**Thursday Morning**

"Uuhhhhhhh I don't feel good..." Minako groaned, rolling onto her side to try and get more comfortable where she lay in the bed, "I think I ate something I shouldn't have..."

Mikhail sat up and crossed his legs, leaning over to rub her back, "Well...while it's possible you could've eaten something that disagreed with you...it would've been something you ate while you were still in Japan... Stomach bugs don't work that fast."

She just hazily waved a hand at him, "Stop being smart...I can't do a brain right now..."

"...Can't do a brain." He repeated with a huffed laugh.

Minako reluctantly pushed up to sitting and stumbled off the edge of the bed, crawling over to the bathroom door, feeling and looking quite sick to her stomach. In an embarrassed haze, she plopped down to begin her morning prayer to the Porcelain Gods, though nothing ever really happened. She whined loudly, "What if it's not a stomach bug? What if I'm really sick with something...? What if I
have to skip the Final!?" She sobbed comically at the dreaded thought, "I'm going to miss all the skatingggg!"

"You'd feel sick in other ways if you had something other than whatever mild food poisoning you might have." The Russian explained, leaning casually against the door frame to watch over her, "I can go real quick to the corner store and get you some Pepto or something."

"But I don't feel sick in any other way..." She went on, crossing her arms over the seat and leaning her forehead down onto them, "This doesn't feel like a regular stomach bug anymore...it just sucks...I wonder if I'm getting the flu...?"

Mikhail quirked a brow, not sure what else to do. He kicked up his foot to scratch at the other ankle through the bottom of his sweatpants, but suddenly felt a cold chill run down his back. In a flurry of panic, he started cursing in Russian and rushed back to the closet, rummaging around in his coat like he was on some insane mission.

The ballerina looked as well as she could, pulling herself along the tile floor until she could stick her head out the door and watch him, "...What's gotten you all bothered suddenly...?"

The coat fell off its hanger, and the frantic Russian went down with it, pulling it into the hall-space to keep looking. When he finally had what he was seeking, he rushed back over to where Minako was watching from, giving him the most vexed expression.

"...Hun, seriously, why are you freaking out?" She wondered in that nauseated, tired tone. She reached up with her free hand to push some of the loose strands of hair out of her face, but when she finally looked down at where the panic-stricken man was fumbling with something in his own hands, she stopped.

A little black velvet box was giving the man no-end of trouble, as though each side had been bolted closed rather than just on the one side where the tiny hinges were, "Marry..." He dropped it and it went sprawling onto the floor, tumbling from the carpeted section to the tile, "Shit!" The Russian reached for it in a shaky panic.

"...Marry shit...?" Minako echoed, her heart pounding from the confusion.

"Me!" Mikhail corrected, pulling the box back again and finally managing to open it properly, turning it around to show her, "Marry me!"

"What are you..." She went on, the whole thing happening too fast for her sleep-addled mind, "Hun, I'm just hung over or something...why are you bringing this up now? I don't even have a sense of humor this early...especially not since I feel sick..."

"I'm not trying to be funny this time!" The Russian insisted, looking a bit more desperate at that point, holding the box up a bit higher, "Look!"

"I'm sitting on the bathroom floor in a nightgown and you're sitting on the living room floor in nothing but your pants. I feel like I'm gonna puke any minute and yo-" She stopped, looking at the rather elaborate ring there suddenly before her eyes. The band was platinum and white-gold, lined with small diamonds going all the way around in 2 rows, merging into one at the opposite side. On the top, in center, was a rather large, round diamond, surrounded on six points by smaller diamonds with white-gold decorative fasteners under and between them. Minako blinked at it, like she wasn't sure it was real, but then looked back up at her partner, who at that point was right on the edge of tears, "...When did you...?"
"In St. Petersburg. I picked it up after I checked on Vivi's house. I ordered it over the weekend and was going to have it sent to Edmonton but since I was in town I just went and got it." He said quickly, his hands trembling a little, "I was going to wait a while since you seemed to still think it was kind of a joke, but I've been holding out hope that maybe you'd take it more seriously later on...but now I just..." He lifted those grey-green eyes and looked directly into hers, "Minako, will you marry me?"

She was still thoroughly taken aback, looking down again at the little velvet box with the ring on its little stand, "...How much did you...did this c-"

"Don't worry about it." He said, a bit more calmly than before, but still feeling hectic, "You'll never have to worry about money again. I'll take care of you. From now till always. You can run your studio and your snack shop, or you can close one or both of them if you want. You'll never have to deal with anything you don't want to ever again. I love you and I want to be with you."

"M-Mikhail..." She muttered, shaking her head a bit in case she was still somehow asleep. Realizing she wasn't, she nervously brought up her right hand, but then her left, "I don't...know which one it should even go on..."

The silver Russian reached to pull the ring from the box and held it carefully, moving to lift the woman's left hand, and slipped it onto the finger there, "...They say that it goes on the left...because the heart is on the left side of the chest, so it's closer to this finger than the other..." He explained nervously, "But I've known people to wear it on a necklace, too...and some places prefer the right, because it's the hand most people use first..." He cupped both hands around hers when the ring was in place, and drew in a frantic breath, trying to calm himself down. His eyes moved up again, "But you can wear it wherever you want. I'll just put it here to get it started...right?"

The ballerina nodded nervously, and looked again as the man lifted his hand back. It was still surreal to see the pale ring, especially now on her own finger, but there it was. Another wave of unhappiness in her gut caught her attention though, and she pressed her right hand against her stomach with a grumble. For a moment, that was all she could think about...but then her eyes shot open, and she lifted her head again, "...I'm not really sick, am I?"

The perplexed Russian shook his head, but then nodded, and then shrugged unknowingly, "I mean, maybe you are...but...just in case?" He smiled nervously, then dared to sneak in and give the nauseated woman a kiss.

She just kept quiet, her mind both numb and full of questions at the same time.

As the day wore on, her nausea faded, and she went about the planned To Do list like a quiet helper. An adequate apartment for the Rozovsky son was found fairly quickly, and Mikhail called for a packing group to come help evacuate the teen from his room. Groceries were bought, utilities turned on, internet and cable television enabled, and the unpacking began. All in quiet, Minako followed along. Not even the excited bouncing-around of Nikki, having found the new ring like a heat-seeking missile, could pull her out of her stupor.

"Aright guys, the flight's in 3 hours; we need to get moving. Everything's all packed up?" The Russian asked, his voice sounding hollow and distant to the ballerina, "Remember, we're going to Moscow after we're done in Detroit. Yura's competing in Nationals. We won't be back here till after the New Year."

"Relax, pipaw, we got everything." Viktoria said, putting her small suitcase into the trunk alongside
her sister's, and the duffle-bag containing the few forgotten items belonging to a certain Russian Tiger.

"Well, I guess if you forgot anything or need new stuff, we'll just get it on the fly..." Mikhail nodded, closing the trunk and taking one last look at the house. He looked over the car roof at his new fiancé, "Ready?"

She nodded and sat through the open door, pulling it closed behind her, then the seat-belt after. With all doors closed, the Mercedes hybrid started moving. The ballerina pulled out her phone to check messages and Instagram, seeing the pictures Phichit was starting to post in Detroit. She quietly smiled to herself to see that familiar backdrop of the city, and especially at the randomly tender moment taking place behind the Thai skater where they'd stopped at the exit of the airport. She held her phone up for a moment when they were at a stop-light, "Looks like the boys made it safely."

"Oh, I wanna see!" Nikki called, pawing for the phone after her father got his glance, and scrolled through the feed, "Who's this guy? Phichit-chu?"

"Phichit Chulanont, one of the other skaters that your cousin competes against."

"Oh yeah, he was the one in first place in Japan after Day 1."

"Yeah. Unfortunately, he didn't qualify for the Final this time, but he and Viktor's husband used to train together in Detroit, so they decided to go together whether they were all competing or not." Minako explained, "He seems to be in good spirits despite it all, so that's good."

"Do you know all the other skaters?" The teen wondered, seeing a flood of pictures from Phichit's account, including a number of their flight, Viktor and Yuri asleep on the plane, the three of them being in Tokyo and Fukuoka airports, and further back until they were still in Hasetsu the night before.

"I know of them, but Yuri never really introduced me to any of them." The ballerina answered, taking her phone back when she felt it against her shoulder, "I started to meet more of them personally over the last year, after he and Viktor got married. Vikt's the super-social one."

"...Really?" Viktoria wondered, a bit sarcastically, "The way he was in Calgary would say otherwise."

"Don't let that fool you." Mikhail added, "Given the stuff I've told you guys about what happened in Russia before...Yuri wasn't lying when he explained that Vikt's always apprehensive about meeting family. He's actually really excitable and fun most of the time."

"He looked like he was pretty unhappy at his last competition." Nikki pointed out, "What was wrong with him? You said he wasn't feeling it, but none of the commentators said anything about why."

"Did you ever find me in the crowd like you wanted?"

"No...why?"

"Oh...well, Vikt's father was there."

Viktoria just choked on her sucker-candy, but then laughed, "How'd you manage to get that skate-hating fiend on a plane?"

"With a lot of effort. Anyway though, I was going to say, if you found me in the audience, you might've seen him there, too. At the end of Vikt's last show though, when he raised his arms up, he
was staring at Kon the whole time."

"Oooohhhhh!" Nikkita leaned forward in her seat, holding to the shoulder-rests of Minako's chair in front of her, "Was it that huge scary guy by the exit!?"

"Ah, yeah, that's the one." Mikhail nodded, "I guess he'd be easy to spot. He took up like 4 seats on his own, one each just for his arms."

"Wow~!"

Minako's eye twitched, and she glanced back, seeing that same goofy heart-shaped smile on Nikkita's face that Viktor often had, and Mikhail himself less-often-but-still-sometimes had as well. She turned back and looked out the windshield, ...I'm really about to marry into Viktor freaking Nikiforov's extended family...Jeeeeeze...

Finding their seats on the plane, Minako looked at her phone again, getting in one last check with social media before she lost internet access. She was surprised to note that Phichit had gone onto something like radio-silence, after the 7th adventure to introduce Viktor to all the people he and Yuri used to know. She checked the time, only 4:30pm, but then pocketed the device and leaned as far back into her seat as she could while it was still upright. Closing her eyes, she drew in a breath, but opened them again when she felt a hand on her own, and glanced over to see the silver elder there looking back at her. The two teen girls were in the seats behind them.

"You've been really quiet all day." The Russian whispered, "Are you alright...?"

"Phichit's been posting about their crazy times in Detroit, but he stopped posting suddenly. I hope everything's okay with him." She explained, half-truthfully anyway, "I'm nervous he's letting the Final get to him, since he's not getting to skate."

The Russian just looked at her skeptically, "You've been quiet since way early this morning, when Vivi and the rest were still on their plane. I know their situation isn't at the core of what's bothering you."

She swallowed nervously and tilted her head back against the seat again, "I guess not."

"...Are you having regrets or something?"

Minako closed her fingers a little tighter where she could feel the man's around them, and shook her head, "I guess I just didn't think things would happen so fast. I...thought I was too old for the stuff that's really bothering me."

"Me too. Er...I mean, for me. For both of us." He cleared his throat nervously, "...Yeah."

"I don't know what to think."

"Pipaw!" Viktoria called, "What hotel are we staying at anyway, and when are we going to get there?"

"Detroit is 2 hours ahead of us right now, so we'll get there just after midnight local time. And we're staying at the Aloft."

"Is that the place you were planning on staying originally?" The younger teen asked, whipping out her phone to look it up just as her sister was, "Or did you change it?"
"No, same hotel, just a bigger suite."

"Is that where Cousin Viktor is staying?"

The Russian shook his head as he looked back through the seats to his daughters, "No, the competitors and event organizers book an entire hotel just for themselves. The rest of us peasants have to find somewhere else to stay."

The two girls laughed and went back to their research.

Mikhail went back to his anxious partner, "It'll be fine. Maybe I panicked for no reason and it's nothing."

The ballerina dozed lightly as the plane started making its circular descent towards Chicago O'Hare airport. The seat-belt light came on and seats were put back into the upright position like normal. The plane landed, taxied down the runway...and two certain phones suddenly blew-up with texts and phone messages.

Somewhat perplexed, both ballerina and engineer pulled their devices from the pockets they'd been stowed in, and looked to see what had happened. Unexpectedly, both of them were getting inundated by messages from a certain Russian skater...who had, in his panic, apparently forgotten that planes have appalling wifi reception, and that no one in their right mind would pay for a service that gives you bars, but no service.

Minako glanced over at her partner's phone, "Viktor?"

"Yeah, you?"

"He's freaking out about something."

"I'll call."

The plane was moving at a glacial pace as the dial-tone rang, but it didn't take more than two rings before the other end picked up. Mikhail could feel the hair on the back of his neck stand up to hear the tone in his grief-stricken nephew's voice, "Vivi, calm down...what happened? ...We were on the plane. We haven't had cell reception until just now, so we just got flooded with all of your messages. Thought I'd call just to get it straight."

Minako gazed over with a worried look on her face, hearing the sound of a voice through the receiver going on something of a half-angry half-agonizing rant about the night's events.

"No, we're on a layover in Chicago, we'll be another 2 hours or so. ...He's not? What are they doing right now?" Mikhail went on, brow furrowed in worry as well, "A CT of his head? Is that standard or do they think something's wrong? ...Oh, well...then don't worry unless they find something. ...Vivi, no, sit down. Is anyone there with you? ...No one is there with you? Where's Chris? What about Yuri's friend? ...Oh. Oh, okay. What hospital are you guys at?" Mikhail turned slightly and tapped his partner's hand to take a note, "DMC Receiving Hospital. Okay. Well, try not to go crazy and kill the other guy. We'll be there around 1am. ...Sure, no problem. Bye, Vivi."

"Well?"

The Russian drew in a breath, "Yuri had an accident."
It was well after midnight before things finally started to settle down. It didn't mean anything good, but at least nothing was getting worse.

Viktor stayed by his husband's bedside, arms tangled through the raised plastic gates so he could hold to the man's hand. He'd given up long ago trying to figure out how to make the gates go down. The vitals machine beeped quietly on the opposite side. Stitches had already been tied in the two big cuts across the unconscious skater's face, wraps placed around his head, a gauze bandage taped over his chin. His cleaned skates were set next to the Russian's chair, with a wastebasket nearby full of tissues and blood-streaked wet-wipes.

A gentle knock came on the ajar door, and the silver-haired man lifted his head, "Uncle Mimi...?" He saw someone else there; the auburn-haired medic he'd told off earlier in the night, but who'd put him in his place soon thereafter by taking pity and pulling him into the ambulance. He turned his tired eyes to his partner's face, but then nodded, "...You can come in if you want."

The door pushed open a little bit further, and the tap of a shoe and a rubber-covered metal plate sounded, followed by the door closing, and the noise of the rest of the hospital getting a bit more dull than before. She kept her distance, "...Any change?"

Viktor shook his head lightly, "No."

"The CT was normal?"

"...They said they could tell he hit his head, but that it wasn't serious." The Russian answered quietly, rubbing his thumb slowly across the man's limp hand, "I just want him to wake up."

Celeste stepped forward two paces, hesitated, and then stepped another few until she was close enough to set her hand on the skater's shoulder. He jerked up a bit at the unexpected touch, looking at her with those slate eyes, but found her to be just as startled as he'd been. She set her other hand on the gate, "I can lower it. I just need you to let him go for a second and pull your arms out of the slots."

Viktor blinked at her in confusion, but leaned back, reluctantly pulling his hand away so the gate could click down. When it was out of the way, he pulled his chair in closer and retook his partner's hand, lowering his face down to touch his forehead to the man's arm. A few tears came anew after that, but he'd already spent half the night crying as it was, so the new ones were short-lived. He snuffled and lifted his head again, turning slightly towards the medic still standing quietly next to him, "...Sorry I...was rude to you before."

The woman blinked in surprise at the words, but shook her head and held up her hands, "It's...fine, really. I've been told I come off kind of strong when I don't mean to. I was probably having one of those moments." She explained, "I really didn't mean to upset anyone. It was all just...super confusing and weird for me. I didn't know you guys had...well, gotten together. Last I heard from Yuri, he still hadn't had the courage to even talk to you, so this was...out of left field. My mind went down a completely different path than what was true."

"I've been a bit jealous of him lately." Viktor went on, returning his eyes to his partner's face, scanning down to his chest to watch the rise and fall of each slow breath, "I can't stand the idea of
someone else trying to be close to him, and he said...well, him and Phichit both...said that you'd once had a thing for him. I guess I got a bit overprotective."

Celeste made a skeptical face, "...I never had a thing for Yuri."

The Russian glanced up at her, "Then...why would they say so...?"

The woman shrugged lightly, "Maybe Yuri just thought I did, and Phichit just took his word for it." She looked around the space for another chair, and started walking towards where she spotted one under a window on the opposite side of the room, "He was always so reserved with most things. If anyone ever tried to get too close, or asked too many questions, he'd shut down. Phichit and I were around the longest cuz neither of us probed too deeply. They just skated and we just did homework, when I wasn't working their cafeteria concession stand anyway. He was a nice kid though."

"...Kid? How old are you...?"

"Older than you." She answered, "I'm 30."

"...You look like you're barely 20."

"Hah...I wish." She laughed, and hoisted the wood-and-fabric chair up and carried it over, setting it down just near the bottom corner of the hospital bed, "I enrolled in school a bit later than I should've, so I was always 5-7 years older than most people who jumped in right away. Took too long to think about what I wanted to do. In the end, I enlisted, and I got out of Yuri's hair in the process."

"You spooked him pretty good." Viktor said warily, "With that hug thing."

"Hmph..." Celeste flopped back into the wide chair and crossed her arms, "People used to give me such grief because they considered me antisocial, never having too many friends or wanting anyone to touch me. I just preferred to keep things a bit closer to the chest, with a small group of people that I knew really well, rather than having so many that I'd have to water down those relationships to the point where I'd have 50 acquaintances but zero actual friends. The hugging thing was never really something I paid attention to until others started saying I was weird for avoiding it. ...Then I finally learn to stop doing that, and I got grief for touching others instead. I couldn't win."

There was a girl in Detroit who was really pushy and kept talking to me. One time, a rink-mate got into an accident... I was pretty torn-up with worry. I was in the hospital waiting-room with that girl. When she hugged me to comfort me, I shoved her away without thinking about it."

'Wow...why?'

'I didn't want her to think I was feeling unsettled. I felt like she was intruding on my feelings or something, and I hated it."

"All I did..." The medic explained, bringing one knee up to wrap her arms around, "...Was try to comfort one of my only friends by giving him a hug because I thought he needed it. I didn't think he'd react as strongly as he did. If I knew how upset he'd get, I wouldn't have done it."

"He was hard to get close to." The Russian agreed, sitting up a bit onto his elbows, resting them on the edge of the mattress, "Even for me...and he was a fan of mine even before then."

"He adored you." Celeste said, "To a point where I think he was also terrified of you. He'd rather have never said a word to you in his whole life if he could just keep on thinking you were the greatest thing since sliced bread."
"I hope I haven't disappointed him then." Viktor stated simply, feeling a bit defensive again, pulling his husband's hand up to kiss the ring there.

"Well, you made it further than anyone else I've ever seen who tried. Plenty of other girls were into him back then, but most of them were flakes anyway, just looking for the human equivalent of a tea-cup poodle that they could put into their purse and show off. He was right to avoid it all." She drew in a breath and looked on at the unconscious figure, "...I think, in a way, he was mostly just scared of what you might think of him if you ever met. He was always really hard on himself. In a way...if he never said hi to you, there'd never be a chance for you to be disappointed or annoyed by him, so nothing would ever change between you. He felt safe in that space." She huffed a sad laugh, "I'm not even entirely sure why he got into performance art, since he tried so hard to be a fly on the wall in everything else."

The Russian thought on those last words. They'd crossed his mind a few times before, but it never really seemed that important, "Skaters can sometimes do the most surprising things. Sometimes...just being one is the surprise." He turned to look at the older woman, "Have you seen him lately? He's amazing."

"He made it to the Final Six. I'd bet he is." She answered, "I read that you were his coach."

"Still am." He nodded, "But in truth, he's taught me more than I could ever have taught him. He already knew everything he needed to about skating..." He could feel his throat starting to hurt again to mention it, so he sniffled and leaned back against his chair, turning to look at the woman properly for the first time since she'd come into the room, "We haven't been properly introduced." The Russian said instead, holding out his right hand, "I'm Viktor."

She set her up-turned knee down and reached back with her own, grasping firmly, "Celeste...you can call me Tess though. Most people do."

The skater nodded, "You...can call me Viktor, too."

"Mmnh...Vik..." A quiet voice grumbled.

Both figures shot their heads back around to the source, seeing the weak struggle where Yuri was trying to open his eyes.

"Yuri!" The Russian was up on his feet immediately, the chair squeaking back a few inches where his calves hit it, "Yuri! You're finally awake!"

Tess rose up as well, instinctively stepping to the other side to check on things. She pulled the pen-light out of her pocket again and moved in to check his eyes like before, finding things normal, "Pupils normoactive. That's better than how I found you."

"...Found...me...?"

Viktor was already crying again, arms going around and under the man to pull him to his shoulder, "Yuri...!"

"Ow...! Ow...ow ow...V-Viktor..."

"Sorry!" The Russian pleaded, gently setting his partner back down again and leaning down to kiss him instead, tears falling from his eyes. He tried to rub them away on the back of a sleeve, but they wouldn't stop. He set his face down on his husband's chest instead, legs all but giving out under him as he collapsed, sobbing almost incoherently for the happiness of it all, holding desperately to the younger figure's right hand.
Yuri just closed his eyes again and opened them slowly a few times, trying to adjust to the light coming in through the blinds between his room and the hall outside. His head throbbed, pounding with each heartbeat, but it wouldn't stop him from lifting his free hand and turning slightly to wrap it over his husband's head, "...What...what happened...? Where am...I?"

"You're at DMC Receiving Hospital," Tess explained on the Russian's behalf, catching a glance from those confused brown eyes, "Leroy jumped right into you, and you bounced your head off the ice when you fell."

Those eyes shot open, and Yuri jerked up to try and sit...though he fell right back down again, pulling Viktor down in the process, "How...how long!?" He cried out, panic flying through him, the beeping on his vitals machine rising as well.

Heads started popping up at the nurse's station outside, and several people started rushing for the door. Tess moved over quickly to open it for them to let them all in unhindered, and Viktor reluctantly pulled up, but stayed right next to the bed. The Attending physician checked the skater's eyes just like the medic had a moment before, looked at the vital signs coming up on the reader next to the bed, and looked at the saline line, as well as the bag it was attached to, "How do you feel?"

"My...my head hurts...how long...how long was I out for!?" He asked more frantically, fingers weakly clenched down on where he clung to his partner.

"A few hours." Viktor answered, rubbing his eyes again on the back of his free wrist, "You haven't missed anything yet. Hopefully you won't."

"Sir, you've experienced quite a knock on the head." The doctor was saying, pulling up his pen-light again but this time just holding it up, "Follow the tip with just your eyes. Don't move your head or neck." He started lifting and moving his arm, taking the stylus in several directions, watching carefully as the anxious skater followed it, "Good. Now..." He pulled a large orange marble from his pocket and held it in the palm of his left hand, "Look at it."

"...O-okay...?"

The marble was concealed in the older man's hand, and he cupped both fists together, turning them over, "Which hand is the marble in?"

"Left...?"

"Also good. What color was it?"

"Re-...no, orange."

"And its shape?"

"A circle? ...A sphere?"

"Both are appropriate."

Viktor watched in nervous, exhausted silence, keeping hold of that hand like the man might vanish if he didn't.

"Do you know what day it is?"

"...I was just told it's only been a few hours." Yuri answered, clenching his eyes shut for a moment as he sat up in the bed, "...What time is it?"
"Just after 1am." The Russian said quietly.

"Then it's...the 12th."

"Excellent." The physician stood upright again, nodding, "What's the last thing you remember before blacking out?" He asked, reaching over for the clip-board at the end of the bed, starting to document the results of his tests.

Yuri looked up at his partner, who took the hint and moved in closer, sitting on the edge of the mattress, sliding an arm over his back, "...I remember...the Skate Club, and getting to the event arena... We saw...we saw Chris, and Otabek I think..." He reached up to his head, feeling the bandages wrapped around it and the wad of gauze taped to his chin, "If JJ jumped into me...what happened to him...?" He turned to the Russian for those answers, "Did you see...?"

Viktor shook his head lightly, "No...I just saw the paramedics rushing by with you two. I thought I saw JJ's ankle bleeding, but I don't know for sure what happened. Chris and I were still coming back down the hall from the player's lounge with your nachos when it all went down." He gave a nervous smile at that, "...I...dropped the nachos. Sorry."

The younger skater was stunned, though not because of the fate of his dinner. He turned back, looking first at the lumps where his feet poked up under the thin blanket that covered his legs, then to Celeste, who'd been standing quietly since before, "...You saw it...?"

She nodded, "The medic's station was set up behind the trophy-window. I was watching you guys practice with my Team Lead when the collision happened. That third skater, Otabek...he was there, too. You introduced us before you got on the ice...do you remember that?"

Yuri closed his eyes and tried to think back, but the memory was gone, "No..."

"You've suffered a concussion." The physician started up again, "You may experience some amnesia about waking up by tomorrow, and feel continued headaches, nausea, easy agitation or other unprovoked mood swings, sensitivity to light and sound, feeling tired, sluggish, or having blurry vision. All of these things are normal. We recommend staying in bed until you've recovered...which can take anywhere from a few hours to several weeks. You should do your best to avoid activities that may cause another injury." He looked up from the clip-board papers to the athlete, "Your paperwork says you're an athlete with the ISU. I can't recommend enough that you don't participate in the competition this weekend. If you hit your head again, being unconscious for a few hours will be the least of your worries."

"...I was just...really tired anyway..." The skater insisted, already feeling the 'easy agitation' that had been mentioned, "...I want to leave."

"We'd really prefer that you stay the rest of the night for observation."

"You can't keep me here." Yuri insisted, reaching down to pull the blanket off his legs, and twisted painfully to hoist them off the edge of the bed, "I know...how this stuff works...I'm of sound mind, and I'm checking out under my own cognizance. Viktor will watch out for me." He looked down at his arm, and the IV taped into it, and waved it weakly towards one of the nearby nurses, "Please take this out."

Tess' eyes widened a little to hear it, but when she heard the sound of another group of people coming up the hall outside, she turned and tilted to see what was going on. Behind her, one of the nurses was given the ok to take the saline line out, and was reaching for some gloves and gauze from the shelf above the bed.
"Yuri, you should really try to take it easy...you got hit hard enough that you were out for 5 hours."

"I'll be...f-fine...I just...want to **sleep**...in a **bed** that isn't...in a **hospital**..."

The medic saw a small herd of silver-haired figures coming up the hallway, looking at room numbers and moving on again. Seeing the one that looked strikingly like an older Viktor, she stepped out of the hall, "...Are you looking for someone?"

"Yuri and Viktor Nikifor-" Mikhail started, though seeing through the blinds into the room where his nephew and in-law were sitting, "**Them**!"

"Uncle Mimi?"

"Viktor!"

The whole group of four pushed into the room and rushed towards their skaters, the eldest quickly moving in under his nephew's out-stretched arm while the rest held back by the door.

He hugged tightly, then let go and looked to Yuri, putting a hand on his shoulder and looking at all the bandages, "Hey, how do you feel? When did you wake up?"

"**Just a mini- ow!**" The younger figure looked aside, seeing the needle pulled out and a cotton-ball placed over the place it had been, then quickly taped down as the nurse clipped the line and moved off to make room. Yuri grumbled and rubbed the spot gently with his free hand, "**Just a m-minute ago... I just want to go. Can you bail us out?**"

"Yeah, for sure." The elder Russian looked around, "Someone bring a wheelchair at least. No sense letting him fall again walking out of here."

"Yuri...!" Minako said nervously, coming up to sit on the skater's left now that the nurse was out of the way, "Sorry we weren't here sooner. Mikhail practically ran people off the road trying to drive us here from the airport. ...The accident is all over the web. The Leroys have already made an unofficial statement that JJ won't be skating. You got him good."

"**I don't...even know what I did...**"

"You severed his Achilles' tendon. He updated his account about two hours ago, saying he was about to go into surgery...he's probably still in there right now." She explained, "I doubt he'll be skating at all for the rest of this season."

The young skater suddenly felt anxious and worried, "...I...I did that...?"

"Not on purpose, so don't go blaming yourself." The ballerina shook her head, "There's already video of what happened. To me, it looked like he was hogging the ice for some reason and you just...kind of drifted into his path while working on a spin. He landed right on top of you, and raked the back of his landing-ankle across your blade where you were holding it out. He wasn't even looking back over his shoulder before he launched."

"That giant **idiot**..." Viktor growled bitterly, "**I told** you he'd be trouble."

Yuri just sighed and reached up to hold his head, "**Can we just go...? Please...? I don't want to argue about it...I just want to go to bed... I still have a Gold medal to win and I won't **get** it if I haven't **slept** in two days...**"
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED FOURTY NINE

The longer it took to get out of the hospital, and the more people turned up, the more irritated Yuri got. Noise levels were becoming unbearable, lights were too bright, too many bodies were standing too close, too many voices were telling him things at the same time. Too many voices were talking in general. The wheelchair was taking too long to get there. Everything hurt. He wanted to scream for everyone to be quiet, but that would've caused more pain, so he stayed in grudging silence, wishing instead for the earplugs he knew he had...somewhere...he couldn't remember whether he'd packed them for practice or not.

"Where is the rest of my gear now?"

Viktor and Mikhail had been pulled aside a while ago, leaving the hapless figure sitting on the edge of the bed with nothing but his skates, and the unguarded blades that had been wrapped in towels. Minako had given up trying to talk to him, simply staying by him while they waited for someone, anyone, to come back with the Chariot to Freedom. She stroked his back gently, leaning in against one shoulder protectively...only lifting her head when she thought she saw the two silver Russians finally coming back.

The younger of the two held a small folder of papers, while the older was pushing the wheelchair in, speaking unheard words to clear a path to bedside.

Before Yuri even registered that he'd been moved, he was already looking at the opening doors of the elevator, his hand held up from the arm-rest where Viktor was holding onto it. He couldn't muster the energy to look back and see who was pushing him. Then he was outside suddenly, jackets piled onto him, recognizing both the Team Russia black-and-red jacket hanging loosely over his chest, clinging precariously to one shoulder as it slid off the other, and the warmer, heavier, thicker black-wool Russian winter coat that went over his legs.

He blinked, and Viktor was crouching in front of him, holding onto the folder of papers even as he rested his hands on his knees, looking up at him with those tired blue eyes.

"...How do you feel? You've been really quiet."

Yuri closed his eyes, lowering his head a bit, "...I feel like I'm losing time... I look one way or another, and it's like minutes have passed in a flash."

"The doctors said you'd probably have trouble with short-term memory for a little while." Viktor explained, bracing against the cold in just his practice clothes; grey sweatpants and a black t-shirt, "But I bet it's way worse than normal given everything else. You haven't eaten anything proper since before falling asleep on the plane. Coffee and breakfast buns don't count. You haven't slept normally either." He reached up with one hand and gently stroked the cheek on Yuri's unhurt side, "Wait just a bit longer. Uncle Mimi is bringing the car around."

The younger skater nodded, but when he lifted his head and opened his eyes again...he was back in the hotel room. The room was pitch black, but at least it was warm. The blankets were warm, the pillow was warm, the arm draped over his waist was, too...as was the body curled up against his back. It occurred to him how weird it was to feel clothing on that frame; normally there was little or none. Though, he realized some of those clothes were his own. He could only assume he had never changed out of the clothes he'd worn when he'd been run down on the ice.
His head *throbbled* though, especially under the bulk and tightness of the bandages wrapped around it, and it pulled him out of that warmth and comfort. He pushed up onto an elbow, feeling his brain swim behind his eyes for a moment, soon fading out and feeling mostly normal again. Wanting to take the pressure off though, he pulled himself quietly to the edge of the bed, slowly setting his feet down on the carpet, and pawed his way along the wall until he found the bathroom door. Or at least thought he had...it was the walk-in closet. He left through the open door, and on the second attempt, he found what he'd been looking for, feeling the tile under his socked feet.

The door clicked closed behind him, and Yuri drew in a breath, bracing against the expected burst of super-nova-level light about to glow down on him when he flicked the switch, but knowing there was no other way to see the damage unless he could see. Keeping his eyes closed didn't really help much though, and he winced and cried out against the intensity of the red color, beaming like the rays of the sun *itself* against his eyelids. It took all of 4 seconds before he was on his knees, clinging to the counter...and heard a knock on the door, followed by it opening.

"...Yuri, what are you doing...? Did you fall?" Viktor's tired-confused-urgent voice asked suddenly, quickly slipping in and closing the door again as his *own* eyes adjusted to the lights above them. He went down on a knee next to his partner, seeing the desperate look on the man's face, "Do you want help...?"

"Get...get this stuff off of me...!" The younger skater begged, falling back away from the counter and reaching his fingers for the wraps around his head, "It's too tight...!"

The Russian leaned forward, gently pushing his husband's clumsy fingers out of the way, and went looking for the end of the wrap. When he found it, he unclasped it, and slowly started unwrapping the whole thing, pulling 7 lengths of it off from around the pained man's skull. The last bit to fall away was the thick pack of sterile gauze that covered the long cut into his hair, and Viktor carefully pulled it away, having seen the extent of the damage before it was cleaned, sutured, and in part, stapled shut.

There were technically two lacerations there; the long one that started an inch down Yuri's forehead, stitched to the hairline, and then another two inches beyond it, held shut there with staples where no one would see. A second cut was nearby, but was small enough to close with skin glue. Under the messy spikes of raven hair, one could be forgiven for not noticing there were any cuts at all, save for the bruising that was starting to crop up in sickly yellows and greens. It was just like when he'd hit his hip on the rink-wall in China.

Yuri kept his eyes clenched shut and pointed down, rubbing his fingers across the thin layer of skin protecting them from the light.

"It's all off. Do you feel any better?"

"No..." The smaller figure said, suddenly feeling tears falling against his wrists and palms. His voice cracked like a broken dam, and he couldn't stop himself from sobbing, "...*How am I going to be able to compete like this...!* All...all that trouble, all that pain and heartache of trying to make it into the Final Six, trying to win Gold like you...and it just...*stops here!*?" He cringed tightly, "*Just like that!*?"

"It's not over yet." The Russian said, trying to console his angry and frustrated partner, "The Short Program doesn't even start until late at night. If you can make it through the morning, you'll have all day to recuperate and see how you feel."

"*You're not going to try to stop me, are you?*" Yuri wondered critically, turning his head just enough to peer through his fingers with one eye, pupils shrinking against the light, "*Viktor...?*"
"I would be a hypocrite to try." He answered simply, "After the injuries I took last year, I still insisted on skating, even before my eye was healed. ...So unless you're stumbling around like a drunk, who am I to tell you no? This is our whole life. I might as well cut your legs off at the knee to stop you." The silver legend reached to pull the door open again, moving the panel as far as it would go, "Come sit in the hall. It's darker."

Hearing the Russian's answer helped stem the flow of tears, but it still hurt. As they crawled and scooted back out through the doorway, Yuri kept his head low, not daring to open his eyes until the intensity of the glow on his eyelids waned from a bright red-orange, to the darker, cooler colors of purple and black.

Viktor pulled the door to and settled his partner back so the beam wouldn't shine directly on him, but as he faced the main part of the room, he spotted a second pair of eyes watching them, "It's okay, he's mostly fine."

Yuri lifted his head, opening one eye at a time just in case, and looked back as well, remembering at least where the roll-away bed had been put, "Phichit-kun...?"

"Sorry if we woke you up with my start." The Russian went on, sitting next to his partner.

"Oh...n-no...it's okay." The Thai figure answered, pulling the blanket off his head where he'd wrapped it over himself, "...I wasn't getting much sleep anyway."

With a quiet sigh, Yuri turned his head forward again, and crossed his legs as well where he sat, "...I don't remember getting back. Or the car ride to get here." He lowered his face into his palms, pulling the bandage off his chin when he felt it, "I'm exhausted and starving, and my head is killing me...I don't even know where to begin..."

Phichit pushed up from the roll-away bed and climbed up onto his feet, though just as he was about to join the pow-wow on the floor, he spotted Viktor pointing at the night-stand.

"Bring that bag over, would you?"

He glanced at the brown plastic, seeing a few things inside, and reached for it as he came closer, handing it over with a quiet crinkle as he sat.

"Thanks." The silver skater rummaged through the content of the bag until he found something easy, pulling apart a small cardboard holster until one of the small cups came free, and pulled the foil lid back. He grabbed for a plastic spoon from the bottom of the bag as well and handed them both over to his husband, "Here. The docs said to keep it simple for a while, so it's just boring apple sauce...but your stomach shouldn't hate you for it."

Yuri looked up at it, and reached for the offering eagerly, glancing at both other skaters briefly, "...Did I forget anything important from after we left the hospital? Just tell me everything again."

"There's going to be a press conference in the morning." Viktor started, watching with a bit of relief as the younger figure started eating a little, "The ISU brass are going to make an official announcement about the accident. It's possible they're going to let Phichit skate in JJ's place. Normally, they'd never consider replacing a skater that drops or can't perform, but since Phichit came here with all his equipment straight from NHK, they're thinking it over."

"Ciao Ciao is going to come down as well. We have to go early to talk with all of them before they make their decision at the meeting." The younger athlete corroborated, "He thinks we might really stand a chance of sneaking in after all."
"Phichit's score is a real boost." Viktor went on, leaning back against the wall, "Tying for the 6th slot was fortunate. If he scored any less, I'm not sure the ISU would even broach the subject. It'll be setting a pretty historic precedent if they allow it."

"...What about...me...?" Yuri wondered nervously, casting the empty apple sauce cup into the waste-bin behind him and reaching for the plastic bag the rest were in, "Are they thinking of dropping me...?"

"I think they're waiting to see how you feel tomorrow."

"...I...vaguely remember the doc saying I shouldn't..." Yuri said, pulling the foil lid back on a second cup, "A thousand wild horses couldn't keep me off the ice."

"That'll also depend on how you feel tomorrow." Viktor reiterated, moving to stretch his legs out straight, crossing his ankles over one another, "The ISU won't let you on the ice if you can't stay on your own two feet. Are you still dizzy? You were on your knees when I came and found you..."

"...That was just from the light." He admitted, "I was a bit light-headed when I woke up, but...it's better now." Brown eyes glanced over at the Russian, "...Why are you all the way over there, anyway?"

"Huh?"

Phichit glanced between the pair awkwardly, "...Yuri, you...told him not to touch you. I was there when it happened."

"What?! No, I couldn't have...why would I...?" He sat more upright, as though feeling a fire rising up his back, looking over at those crystal-blue eyes, realizing that they looked more hurt than tired suddenly, "Viktor..."

"Well, you told everyone to stop touching you, to be fair." The Russian explained, leaning forward to slouch a bit over his crossed arms, bringing his knees back in a little, "But you recoiled away from me when I acted like I thought I was exempt, so..."

Yuri could hardly believe what he was hearing, and quickly shoved the bag aside to get closer as quickly as he could, pulling one of the man's arm up from where they'd both been crossed together, and draped it over himself, "Don't listen to me when I'm grumpy and stupid!"

"You were a bit more than grumpy at the time." Viktor said, though feeling a bit relieved to know that the edict had been cancelled, "You weren't yourself at all. People were trying to help you out of the car when Uncle Mimi got us back to the hotel, and you yelled at everyone to leave you alone. ...The doc told us both that you might have mood swings, but it...still hurt a little to see you lash out like that."

"A little?!" The younger skater was still aghast, "I hurts me and I don't even remember it!"

"...That's for the best then. I'm sure the look on my face when I realized you meant me too was probably pitiful. I wouldn't want to be remembered that way."

"Did I say or do anything else that was horrible...?" Yuri worried, "I mean, when I woke up, you had your arm over me like you always do, so I didn't...even realize...something was wrong..."

"Oh, that's probably because I did it in my sleep." Viktor suggested, "You had your back to me when we all went to bed though. Head under a pillow and everything."
"Noooo!" The raven-haired figure was up again, this time practically crawling up onto his husband's shoulders in his desperate bid to latch onto him, getting his arms around the man's frame just before knocking him down onto his side, "I'm sorry! I didn't mean it!"

The Russian just blinked up in surprise, one arm pinned at his side, the other having gone up against the wall in his effort to keep his balance. He lowered it down though to press lightly against his partner's shoulder, pulling the other free and wiggling a bit to get onto his back, "Well..." He ran his fingers tenderly through that black hair, careful of the length of the cut, "You banged your head pretty hard. You were the only one who could've known how much it hurt. You've also been refusing pain meds all night, so..."

"I wouldn't be able to legally compete if I took hospital drugs!"

Viktor just huffed a laugh, "Yeah, that's about the only consistent thing you've said since you woke up. I got you some over-the-counter stuff though, when Mimi and I stopped to get those boring snacks for you on the way back." He twisted a little to point into the room again for the odd man out, "The other bag...would you get it? The one on the night-stand just there...?"

"Oh...yeah, sure." Phichit turned where he sat, going over on his knees to 'walk' the short distance. When he came back around, rifling through the bag for the bottle of extra-strength Tylenol, his eyes went comically wide. He found himself practically walking-in on the pair doing as couples are wont to do; kissing rather eagerly. Phichit just turned his head back and forth, not sure if he should be getting such an eye-full of the spectacle, or if he should be giving them the benefit of the doubt...thought he was somewhat trapped in the room with them in spite of it all.

Viktor had apparently opened the one eye though, and huffed a quick laugh to himself as he pushed back up to sitting, reaching for the bottle in the Thai skater's hand as he became upright again. Phichit gave a quiet sigh of relief, going back to sitting where he'd been a moment before, as the Russian pulled the new box apart to get the little bottle out, and dropped 4 of the white tablets into his palm, "Here. It's the migraine formula, so maybe it'll help with your sensitivity to light, too. I don't want to have to wait until the dark of the Exhibition Gala to see you skate. We'd have to pay extra for it anyway at that point."

Yuri sat back where his partner had settled him on his knees, accepting the tiny oblong tabs and reaching back for his half-forgotten second cup of apple sauce. About to pop the 4 bits into his mouth, he paused, "...I never asked about how everyone else was... Chris? Otabek? ...Celeste? JJ's family? JJ himself..."

"Chris was the responsible one. I went and grabbed our things from his room after we got you back here." The silver skater answered, watching as his partner finally downed the pain-relief medicine that he should've taken hours ago, "Otabek...I'm not sure. He was in the rink with you when the accident happened, but I didn't see him again after Chris and I had originally left to go nacho-hunting. Tess..."

"...Tess? That's what you're calling her now...?" Yuri was surprised.

"She came by to see how you were, and we talked a little. I remembered what you said about the 'pushy girl from Detroit,' but I don't think she's as bad as you think."

Phichit listened intently to those words as well, stunned as much as his friend had been, "...You saw Celeste here?"

The older skater shook his head, "I saw her at the hospital. For some reason...I inherently knew she was here, but I don't remember when or why I saw her. She said I introduced her and Otabek before
the accident though." Yuri explained, turning his head to look at the other skater, "She's on the medic team...I think...?"

"Da." Viktor confirmed, "She also claims she was never actually interested in you." He pointed out, setting a hand against his partner's chest and sliding up to his neck and shoulder gently, the fabric of that black practice shirt wrinkling as he moved, "Just that you were highly adverse to particular manifestations of friendship."

"...But she was so pushy before...always trying to be around me..." Yuri slouched a little, his head hurting a bit more from trying to remember it all, though it was hazy.

"She said you guys did homework together." The Russian again explained, "Were you helping her or something...?"

Brown eyes went wide, "...Ooohhhhhhhhhhh..." His expression of realization quickly changed over to nervous embarrassment though, "...Aahhhhhhhhh...yeeaaaaahhhhh." He quickly brought his hands up to cover his face, "...I can't believe it...all this time... I was so paranoid that every girl I knew would do the same thing to me that Yuuko had done...maybe I mistook her intentions..."

Viktor leaned forward and hugged him, "See?"

Yuri tilted his head against his partner's, reaching up one hand to hold at where both of the Russian's had gone around his shoulders, "...I should apologize to her..." He looked straight on into those blue eyes, "Tomorrow...after the meeting, or after SP practice if they let me go...we should find her."

"That meeting is at 10am. SP practice is at noon. But for now...I think we all need to finish sleeping. But, most importantly..." The silver legend mused, reaching his hands back down again to pull up at the lowest hem of his t-shirt, hefting the cloth over his head to toss it aside and resume the hug from a moment before, "I need my proper pre-bedtime cuddles."
The last skater arriving for the Grand Prix Final was the previous year's Gold medalist, sauntering into Chicago O'Hare International Airport with a certain anxious member of the Katsuki Clan at around 12am local time for the final layover. In usual fashion, the blonde glanced around the terminal, and pulled his hoodie down, hiding his face a bit more behind the black surgical mask he already wore, and avoiding potential recognition even by the most hardened of late-night travelers.

Mari, on the other hand, made a B-Line for the nearest smoking lounge, "Don't run off! The next plane leaves in 90 minutes!"

"I won't!" Yurio barked back, completely defeating the purpose of being inconspicuous. He glanced at the ticket in his hand and looked around for the next Gate to wait at. Pouching it again, he pulled on the straps of his leopard-print backpack and started marching onward, pausing only briefly to get a soda from one of the few late-night kiosks still taking customers.

Unscrewing the top and hearing the hiss of the dark-colored carbonated drink, he took a sip...and immediately spat it out in horror. On his phone, showing the Instagram feed for the first time since leaving Japan hours before...was the news of the Men's Singles accident.

**SKATERS YURI NIKIFOROV AND JEAN-JACQUE LEROY RUSHED TO HOSPITAL AFTER COLLISION**

**MEN'S SINGLES TAKES A HIT AS YURI AND JJ COLLIDE ON ICE**

**IS THIS THE END OF THE GRAND PRIX FOR THE MEN'S EVENT? WITH ONLY FOUR SKATERS REMAINING, CAN THEY EVEN HAVE A COMPETITION...?**

He stood there in the middle of the terminal, brows furrowed with anxiety and worry, seeing the footage of the accident as recorded on someone's camera-phone from the above-rink lounge. Another was posted from security-camera footage. A third by Otabek's coach, who had been sitting in the stands at the time.

"Holy Hell." Yurio muttered to himself, pulling the mask down with a finger as he watched the last video, seeing how Otabek stood there in lonesome silence for a while after everything had ended. He immediately went over to his contact list and dialed up his Kazakhstani friend, listening impatiently to the ring-tone as it went on.

Mercifully, there was a bleary, tired answer after 5 rings, "...Yuri?"

"Otabek!" The teen called out, louder than he meant to, and recoiling down to try and appear inconspicuous again as he started moving down the hall, "I just landed in Chicago and saw the news. What the actual fuck...? Are you okay? You just stood there."

The older skater pushed up onto an elbow where he'd been trying to sleep, blinking his dark eyes slowly as they adjusted to the dark of his room, "...I was a bit shaken up, that's all." He moved further up to sit, resting that elbow on a knee where he crossed his legs and leaned forward, "There's going to be a big meeting about the Men's Singles in the morning. I've heard rumors that the ISU is considering cancelling it outright since there'd only be 3 competitors left."

"...Three? Your mean Four."
"After what happened in China, I don't know that Viktor will be willing or able to skate if his Yuri can't. That leaves you, me, and Chris."

"...Oh. Right."

There was a slight pause, and Otabek dragged his legs out from under the blankets, letting them hang over the edge of the mattress as he faced away from the second bed where his coach was still trying to sleep, "But I've also heard that they may swap in Phichit, too...it's anyone's guess at this point."

"...Have you heard anything about the other Yuri? I saw the headlines but no one's had any new information since the ambulances left, and Viktor hasn't posted anything at all." Yurio could see the number for his Gate close at hand, stepping quietly through the terminal towards it.

"You're probably more up to date than I am then. I've been trying to sleep for..." The Kazakh pulled his phone away and looked at the time, and then moved it back again, "...2 hours."

"Oh. Sorry. Did I wake you up?"

Otabek deadpanned the dark, "...Yes."

"Oh." Yurio repeated, "...Sorry."

"Try calling Viktor. I'm sure he's still awake. He'd know more than anyone right now about what's going on." The older skater yawned, "Or you can wait and come to the conference in the morning. You should have an email about it."

"...Conference..." The blonde muttered quietly, taking a seat in one of the rows near his next departure, "Yeah, I'll be there."

"Call Viktor." Otabek said again, "I'll see you in the morning."

"Later." Yurio pulled the phone away from his ear, and tempted the idea of doing as his friend had suggested, but as he hovered his thumb over the older Russian's contact info, he wavered. Grumbling, he went instead to Yuri's section, and angrily dialed out to the number. To his surprise, the line was busy, so he hung up and slouched where he sat, "...Can't have been bad if he's talking to someone." He huffed and reached for his ear-bud cables.

What the teen didn't know was that Mari was the one hogging the line, and it wasn't even Yuri on the other end.

"...No, the last thing I saw was Viktor getting into the ambulance after they got taken outside." Chris was explaining, sitting up in bed as well like Otabek had been, though he'd been watching television instead of trying to sleep, "I texted Viktor last around midnight. Yuri was still unconscious then."

"...Oh..." Mari held the phone with both of her hands, looking nervous, "...Did you see how badly he was hurt...?"

The skater shook his head, "I saw blood on the side of his face, but that was all. By the look of the videos that've gone online since, he bounced his head off the ice when he fell."

"There's videos!?" The elder sister cried anxiously, "Our parents will go nuts if they see them! Those triplets have probably already seen them...!"

"I already talked to the Nishigoris." Chris said, ruffling his hair a little, "They called about 45 minute after the accident. I told them to call Viktor."
"Should I call him too, you think...? Or would I just be annoying...?" Mari sat on a bench just outside the smoking lounge, clenching a fist over one knee tightly.

"You're his sister-in-law...I'm sure he'd be happy to hear from you." The skater paused, pulling the phone back as he heard yet another incoming call trying to get his attention. Instead of seeing 'Yuri Plisetsky' though, he saw 'Viktor' and a custom wallpaper featuring the Russian during part of his 'History Maker' performance from Bordeaux. He pulled the phone back briefly, "Hang on, that's Viktor calling right now. I told him to call me on this phone when he had news. Hold the line."

"O-okay."

The Swiss skater clicked over, "Is he awake?"

"Hey, yeah, finally." The silver legend said, the relief palpable in his voice, "Uncle Mimi and the rest just got here, too. Mimi and I are going someplace less noisy so the doc can tell us again that Yuri shouldn't leave the hospital."

"He was out for 5 hours. He shouldn't leave the hospital."

"Yuri insists it's because he was already tired when he got knocked out. He seems completely with it right now...but..."

"Can't you tell him you're going to decide on his behalf?"

"He's not delusional." Viktor said stiffly, "If he sounded at-all crazy, the docs wouldn't let him out. But he answered all their questions and passed all the tests, and then said he wants out. They were just going to keep him until morning for observation anyway, and I think we'd both be happier if we could just go sleep in the hotel room rather than spend the rest of the night here. If he's not way better after that, I'll just...bring him back or something."

Something caught the Russian's attention, and Chris heard muffled voices for a few seconds before it cleared up.

"They just handed me the discharge papers. I need to pay attention now so I know what to look out for. I just thought I'd let you know. I'll swing by to get our stuff when we get back, if it's okay."

"For sure. I want to put my eyes on that boy before I sleep."

Viktor managed a somber laugh, "He's only 2 years younger than you are."

"You haven't completely broken him of his naïve innocence." Chris shot back with his own soft chuckle, "But I suppose I can give you a B for effort."

"Maybe I don't want to completely change that." The Russian gave a tired smile, but then lifted his head, "Anyway, I have to go. Thanks for keeping an eye on our things. We'll see you soon."

"Sure. Oh...Yuri's sister is on the other line. Do you want me to tell her what you told me? Or do you want to?"

"I'm going to be wrapped up here for a little bit. Would you mind? I can call her with Yuri after he's had some sleep. Have her text me if she wants to talk sooner."

"I'll let her know. Stay safe, Viktor."
Phichit had gathered up all his things, and was making last-second checks to make sure he wasn't forgetting anything. He felt his phone buzz in his jacket's inside pocket, and when he pulled it out, it was 8:32am, and Celestino was texting him to say he was in the hotel lobby.

[I'll meet you in the conference room] He typed back.

Yuri and Viktor were still asleep, so far as the Thai skater could tell. The room was still fairly dim; he'd gotten ready without turning the lights on or pulling the curtains open. Still though, it was light enough that he could get his first good look at the gash on his friend's forehead. It was hard to tell what anything looked like when the bandages had still been on, but even after they'd been removed, Yuri's hair, and the dark, had made anything else impossible to see. Phichit gave the sleeping skater a glance, noting that there was a light smear of blood crusting around the wound, and a few strands of black hair were stuck to it. No doubt, as Yuri moved in the night, he'd unintentionally disturbed a few of the gaps between stitches.

Drawing in a breath, Phichit moved off again, stepping quietly over to the door with his backpack slung over a shoulder. Before pulling down on the chrome handle though, he put his hands together and set them close to his forehead, saying a quiet prayer that he would be allowed to skate, and then tread lightly to leave the room.

Another 10 minutes passed before either of the remaining figures stirred. Viktor lifted an arm blindly, reaching back behind himself for where he'd left his phone charging on the night-stand on his side of the bed. When he found it and pulled it free, a half-opened eye glanced past those silver bangs to see 8:42am flash across the screen.

Grumbling, he Unlocked the device and went to turn the Alarm off, having been set to go off at 9am anyway. Letting it fall down to the pillow, Viktor rolled onto his back and rubbed his eyes, looking up hazily at the ceiling before turning back to his husband and curling up close again.

It had been a kindness that Yuri had undone his demands to be left untouched when he'd woken up in the middle of the night, giving the Russian leave to get his usual skin-to-skin slumber that he'd previously, and grievously been denied. It was already depressing enough that it had been next to impossible to enjoy their normal nightly sexy-time, given Phichit's presence...but the added insult of Yuri being too hurt and exhausted to do anything other than sleep...that was too much to bear. Still, Viktor wasn't about to push the issue. He wouldn't even let himself get his hopes up after Phichit had left the room, simply holding to his partner quietly, arms around him.

Yuri stirred a minute or two later, feeling the motion behind him. He managed to wiggle enough that he'd gotten onto his back where the silver legend held him, and turned those over-tired eyes around to meet the blue irises that had been watching him.

They looked at one another in complete silence, neither really knowing what to say, or whether to try. The Russian leaned in a little, closing his eyes and gently touching nose-tips against one another, hoping that might break the ice where words had failed. It seemed to work, but not necessarily in the way Viktor had meant for it to. When he pulled back again, he could feel his husband trying to wedge an arm under the side of his chest. As he pushed up the small distance to allow it, he felt the hand go under and around his back, elbow hooking upward just under his arm, palm going down against his shoulder-blades...pushing him forward.

Those blue eyes blinked in slight hesitation, but Viktor let the nudge move him, finding himself nearly on top of his partner by the time the pressure faded and the hand slid away, moving a bit further down his back. He felt the second hand coming up against his waist, and the side of one knee brush up against his own.
"...Yuri...?"

The hand that had slid down his back came up again, pressing down just behind his shoulder until he was low enough that he felt lips on his own. The relief of it washed over him, and he could feel himself sink down a bit further as his entire frame began to relax. One kiss became two...then four...then eight...but by ten, Viktor was reversing their positions, rolling onto his back to pull his husband over top of himself instead. The silence went on, but so did the kissing; hands kept roaming as well, feeling at the coolness of skin exposed to the air, but then moving down to where it was still warm, under the covers or cruelly contained within clothing.

As was the case every morning, certain parts of the Russian's lithe frame that had been unconsciously practicing throughout the night, were well and ready to go when he awoke, diminishing only slightly as he dozed. It took only the barest of signals to get fully ready again. As the younger figure moved to lay on top of him, hands became more eager, sliding under the edge of an elastic band to get both hands full of that supple, yet hard athletic skin, and pulled upward to force the younger man's entire body to slide up against that desperate flesh. Viktor paused almost immediately though, feeling the particular absence of the matching member.

Yuri felt the pause, but wasted no time on excuses or explanations, twisting slightly to reach for the edge of the nightstand and fishing for the small blue bottle hidden in the drawer there. He dropped it against the sheets for a moment to reach back and push clothing away, moving things aside just enough for access to be gained, and then pulled for the bottle again. Clicking it open, he drizzled some into his right palm, and immediately went to task slathering it over the necessary places. Just as he took hold of his partner though and moved a few inches further up on the man's lap to put things into position, he felt the Russian's arms slide over his legs to take himself back.

Silver hair pressed lightly to the younger figure's bare chest, but Viktor just kissed there lightly as well and looked up, "...I appreciate the gesture, but...you haven't even given me a chance to get you excited yet...why such a hurry...?"

"...I need you..."

"You have me. You'll always have me. But what's the rush...?" He asked differently, truly perplexed, "There's still more than an hour before we need to be at that meeting..."

Yuri hesitated a moment, but then pulled his hands up again, abandoning their prior task to slip them up the length of his partner's chest and over those bare shoulders instead, tilting his face to lean in for another kiss but not quite going all the way, "I need this. You need this."

"...I can't argue with that, but still...I don't understand. Don't you want me to get you into it first...?"

"...I'm...not looking for that right now..." The younger figure admitted, taunted by the feeling of his husband's hands moving a little under him, but not doing anything to him, "...I just want you to make me feel normal again..."

"Normal...?" The Russian echoed, confused, but looking up to his partner's face and seeing the same expression looking right back at him, "...I see..."

*It's just like after the SP in China. It's not about physical gratification...this is for his spirit, his peace of mind...*

Those hands finally moved for the better again, releasing the length of flesh that had been denied to the younger athlete. Yuri could feel the tip of it sliding against him, moving up, then back down again, over and over, pausing once to test but then moving on again. Slightly frustrated and
impatient, but knowing fully that he shouldn't feel that way, and normally wouldn't, he reached back with his still-slick right hand and maneuvered the member himself, putting it where it needed to be and then sitting against it.

Viktor drew in a quiet hiss, pressing his forehead to his partner's chest again, hands clinging to the man's waist. The younger figure still had a few fingers around him, holding him in place as he made his slow descent, rising up once or twice and then lowering again. When it was done, and they were flush against each other, Yuri leaned forward, pushing his partner down and balling up his fists against the man's chest. The rest of him came down soon after, until he could brush the tip of his nose against that pale skin. He only moved again after that to reach for the edge of the thick comforter that had slipped off his back, pulling it back over him until just his head could be seen poking out from under it.

Brown eyes looked down into blue for a moment, watching wordlessly as he felt a pair of hands reach for his own, pulling them up over that silver hair to settle them in the pillows. When the hands withdrew again, Yuri could feel them sliding down his sides, brushing over his ribs and settling on the curve of his waist. Thighs parted a little under him, sensing the rhythmic movement about to begin, and he closed his eyes, trying to relax, pressing his forehead down against his partner's. He felt the light kiss before he felt the slow, slick withdraw, pulling out only enough so that a push back in was worthwhile. Yuri gave out a quiet sigh and a quick inhale, legs clenching a bit where they parted over his husband's frame, but relaxed again at the next partial slide out.

It was slow, steady, almost calculated. It didn't even feel all that particularly good...in that state, it was no more sensual than feeling a hand on one's shoulder, or a pat on the back...but Yuri didn't care. That wasn't what he was looking for anyway. Even after he pushed a bit more upright, hands flat against his partner's chest as the rhythm picked up a little speed...it wasn't what he wanted. It wasn't until after the Russian had rolled them over again that he started to enjoy it in his own way, knees hooked around the man's arms, feeling that larger body over top of him. It was even better when his legs had been let go, and the silver genius wedged his arms under his back instead, pulling them each closer to one another as he kept up the gentle rolling of his hips. Yuri clasped his arms around his partner's figure, holding tight and pressing a cheek against the side of the man's neck. When the arms around him hugged a little tighter, the young skater could feel his headache and slight dizziness starting to fade. The rest of the romp, delicate and gently-paced as it was, felt like it was helping heal him. It surprised him a little to notice that the Russian had been particularly careful not to rock him too hard, never once jerking his head around like would normally happen if they'd been making love like normal. Though Yuri had never become aroused by the event, feeling his partner taking pleasure in him was just as gratifying.

*I guess this is what Viktor feels like when he jokes about re-falling in love with me at random times...* He thought, *I think I just fell in love with him all over again, too.*
"Ow."

"Sorry."

"...Ow."

"Ahhh, there's another one. How many of these things do you have up here?"

"I dunno, you were the one who watched them get put in."

"If by 'watch' you mean 'was physically present' then yes...otherwise, no."

Yuri sat anxiously on the side of the bed, Viktor in front of him with a big-tooth comb and a fine-toothed comb held up between a few fingers of the same hand; both of them were in their Team jackets by then. With great care and gentle ease, the Russian painstakingly went through the younger skater's hair and brushed it apart from where the staples were, gently easing through the black strands that had been caught in a metal loop and needed to be freed so he wouldn't look silly.

"These staples are massive~!" Viktor said, both impressed and mortified.

"And they're causing massive pain. Are you almost done?" Yuri cast his eyes towards the digital clock on the night-stand, "We need to get going. There's only 10 minutes left."

"It'll take 15 seconds to get there though." The Russian countered, flicking the big-toothed comb through from back to front one more time to comb everything into place and cover as much of the damage as he could, "But...there. I think it's as good as it's going to get until those things come out."

"How long do I have to leave them in?"

"A week and a half-ish."

"We'll be back in Japan by then..."

"Speaking of Japan." Viktor paused, leaning back on one hand to look at his handiwork, raising the other without the combs to flick some hair into its usual messy affect, "Your big sister called me last night. Do you remember anything I said about it before?"

"Mari-nee-chan..." The younger figure spoke quietly, his brow furrowed in worry, "My whole family must be worried. I haven't called home to tell them I'm okay."

"I'm sure Mari's already talked to them on your behalf by now and has explained what's going on, or at least that you needed to rest." The silver legend explained, leaning a bit forward then, "I told her that we were getting ready to come back to the hotel. But...yes...when we're done at the meeting, we should call home. I thought maybe we would before going, but..."

Yuri lifted his eyes a bit, but then turned them down, looking past his husband's knees to the pile of gear on the floor against the wall, "...I took up all the time we had..." He drew in a nervous breath and looked up again, "Sorry."

Viktor just cocked his head aside, silver-grey bangs flitting as he moved, "Why?"
"...I put you on the spot almost as soon as I knew Phichit-kun wasn't going to be coming back." The younger figure acknowledged, feeling a little guilty for it, "I know...it... ...It wasn't very good..."

Giving a dubious smile, the Russian tilted forward even further, free hand coming up loosely against his husband's shoulder as he pressed in for a kiss. After a few seconds, he pulled back, and moved that hand up further to brush some of the raven hair from the man's eyes, "Did you get what you needed from it?"

"...I think so."

"Then it was perfect." His smile was warmer that time, and Viktor stroked a pale cheek with his thumb before rising up to stand, stepping away to put the combs up.

Unsure what to say beyond that, Yuri pushed off the edge of the bed as well, fingers brushing against the wall as he stepped around to the table near the television, reaching for his blue-rimmed glasses and slipping them onto his face quietly. When he turned towards the door, he spotted an out-stretched hand angling towards him, and he looked at it briefly...but then stepped past it. Instead, he stepped right up in front of his partner and wrapped both arms around his trunk, burying his eyes against the crook of the man's neck. He felt the Russian's arms come around him in turn, and then held there a little while before he'd caught his breath and lifted his head again, "...Okay...let's go."

Stepping out of the elevator, the door to the right conference room was easy enough to spot, given the horde of press and journalists hovering near to it. If the Grand Prix Final was nothing else, a media hot-spot was it. Yuri carefully raised his unheld hand to make sure his ear-plugs were still in place, and stepped cautiously forward, drawing in a deep breath in anticipation of the clamor to come.

As he moved ever closer, he realized he could see a small gathering of other competitors loitering just outside the conference room as well, pulling water from the cooler set up on a nearby table as they waited for things to get started. He recognized a few faces pretty quickly, though was surprised to see so many non-Men's Singles people in the crowd, along with their coaches and choreographers. A few heads suddenly popped up as they started to spot him and Viktor coming, and many expressions changed from bored waiting or nervous anticipation to excited realization.

He couldn't really hear them, but he could feel the floor vibrating as many of them started to come forward. Those who came running were from the Ladies Singles event, who hadn't seen him since arrival at the event in general, including Mila, Sara Crispino and her twin, who himself hadn't made it into the Final as a competitor, and several others who'd heard what happened and were worried about a fellow athlete.

Surrounded on all sides, Yuri looked around, but the fear of his headache coming back if there was too much noise kept him from pulling the ear-plug out to hear what everyone was saying. He glanced aside to his husband, who he could see was already doing his best to quiet the crowd, a finger on his lips before moving than hand out as if to physically gesture the idea of lowering the volume. Chris and Phichit were coming up through the crowd as well, standing close by. Yuri hadn't spotted Otabek yet, though given the hour, he supposed the Kazakh might be standing aside by Yurio, who to that point hadn't made himself known.

Viktor nudged his partner's arm with an elbow, and nodded his head to let him know it was quiet enough to safely take out one of the plugs. Nervously, Yuri did so, withdrawing just the right side, and being surprised at how quiet things had gotten. All he could hear were the clicks of camera shutters, feet shuffling along on the floor to get a better vantage, and the ambiance of the hotel itself.
At least, until Mila spoke softly.

"How do you feel? Do you think you can still compete?" She wondered.

"I think so." The raven-haired figure said, nodding his head, "I feel a lot better now than I did last night."

"Still a bit sensitive to loud noises though, huh?"

Again, Yuri nodded, "It's slowly going away. I'm just being cautious for now."

"That's really good to hear, Yuri." Sara added, "When we heard what happened, we were all pretty torn up about it. No news, no updates, nothing at all...we weren't even sure if you'd gotten out of the hospital yet. Not until just a few minutes ago, when Chris told us you were here and coming to the meeting."

"Sorry to have worried all of you." The skater reluctantly pulled his hand free from where his partner held it, setting both palms flat against his legs as he bowed somewhat deeply to the group, "I'll make it up to everyone with my skating."

Mila smiled brightly, and moved in to hug the older figure, pulling him up and out of the bow, "You don't have to apologize for anything. It wasn't your fault. We're just glad you're going to keep going."

Sara joined in on the hug as well, though in doing so, making her brother's eyes twitch nervously, "Don't over-do it, Yuri! We're all rooting for you though, whatever you decide."

The hug from the two ladies became a hug from the two Men's Singles skaters who'd turned up as well, but when Michele caught sight of a certain Japanese skater's hand coming around his sister's lower back, he nearly screamed, picking frantically at the fingers like he thought he could unlatch them without being noticed. Sara just grabbed him and pulled him in to join the group, making the hapless twin flail and whine.

Watching the show of affection from just inside the doors, Yurio stood quietly, keeping an indifferent look on his face. Beyond him, waiting inside the conference room already, were JJ's parents, and the rest of the media that needed to set-up tripods for their video cameras, as well as ISU officials and a few assorted event staffers who were trying to organize the chaos.

Otabek stepped up next to the Russian Tiger when he caught sight of the teen looking curiously outside, but noted the sound of applause and went to take a look for himself. Looking towards the elevators, he spotted the sizable group, as well as the obvious-as-anything silver-grey head sticking up slightly taller than most people around them. As the crowd shifted a little, he caught sight of Yuri, trying to be polite as he tried and failed to put the second ear-bud back in as the clapping rose unexpectedly. The lady skaters near to him were apologizing for getting everyone all excited, but, Otabek surmised, Yuri was trying to assure them that it was okay. He took a step into the hall and started heading over, only to pause when he realized Yurio wasn't following, and glanced back to gawk at him, "Aren't you going to come say hi?"

The teen turned his green eyes towards him, but then twisted on his heel to go back into the meeting room, "We should find some seats before we lose them. The thing's going to start any second."

For a moment, the Kazakh considered following, but thought better of it before turning too far back into the room. He vanished beyond the edge of the doorframe to head towards the gathered mob, leaving the Russian Punk somewhat confused and feeling just a tad betrayed.
The group was already starting to open a path so the skaters could get into the room, many in the media still taking a proverbial catalogue of photos, others recording video on their smart-phones. But, just as Otábek was about to move out of the way, avoiding being half-trampled by where the press wasn't entirely watching where it as going, he heard his name being spoken, and he paused, glancing up to see Yuri looking straight at him.

"Hey." The older skater waved, "I was wondering where you were."

"I was just waiting in the meeting room." The Kazakh answered stoically, stepping a bit closer to hold out his hand, "It's good to see you back. I knew you wouldn't give up."

Yuri gave his best smile, despite the slight headache he'd already started feeling, "I'd pull myself around the ice on a little sled if I had to."

"Well, hopefully it won't come to that. Let's get inside so the ISU can tell us all what's going to happen."

Within the room, there was a high table set on top of a 2 foot high stage set against one wall, with microphones, water bottles, and a series of rather serious-looking officials waiting to get started. On the floor, there were several rows of chairs, a few in front with signs on them saying 'Reserved for Press' and the logos of various networks, particularly that of the NBC Sports Group. Other journalists were in the rows behind them, and finally, in the back row and standing in the wings, other athletes who wanted to see what was going on, and the assorted other media personnel who hadn't gotten there early enough to get a prime spot closer to the front.

Yuri was busy looking for a spot to sit in the media pit when Viktor pulled him in the other direction, forcing those brown eyes to look up at the table to see name cards in front of a few seats near the end...notably, for himself, alongside several others. He saw the Leroy elders already up there waiting, looking exhausted and disappointed. Isabella was nowhere to be seen, likely staying with her partner where he'd been kept at the hospital. Nervously, Yuri followed his husband up onto the moderate stage, and found the seat behind his card, feeling awkwardly on the spot being at the head of the room. It was like the season-end conference after Worlds all over again, but without the excitement of having won anything yet. There was an overhanging aura of worry looming over this new crowd.

"Let's go ahead and get started." One of the ISU officials said, speaking loudly to be heard over the crowd. The room started to get quiet, and cameras focused, "We'd like to, first and foremost, thank all of you for coming to this impromptu meeting this morning. NBC and its affiliates, sponsors, journalists, and participants alike. It's amazing to see such a show of support for our athletes in such times, so again, thank you." The clean-shaven older man said, looking practiced and ready, and glancing down at a few notes in front of himself, "The ISU has, unfortunately, had to break the news that there was an accident during All Day Practice last night. As you all have no-doubt already heard, Skaters Jean-Jacque Leroy and Yuri Nikiforov collided on the ice, and both were taken to hospital. Skater Yuri has recovered enough to join us here today with his coach, Mr. Viktor Nikiforov..." He gestured a hand down the table towards where the anxious figure sat, and again, Yuri bowed his head as the group applauded his presence, "...But unfortunately, Skater JJ was not so lucky. His coaches, and parents, are here today to make a statement on his behalf. If you would..."

The two anxious elders nodded and sat forward against the table, getting closer to the microphone with their notes; it was Nathalie who spoke, "Thank you, Chairman."

Yuri watched quietly, but Viktor was a bit more ambivalent, hearing them speak but not really listening.
"And thank you everyone for your thoughts and prayers for our son." The woman went on, reaching up an anxious hand to adjust her white-framed glasses. There was a quiet clapping from the audience before she started up again, "Alain and I saw JJ this morning and he is in good spirits despite his injuries. He regrets to tell his fans and supporters that he will not be able to skate at this Grand Prix Final though. His injuries were deep and he underwent diagnostic testing late last night to assess the damage; as we feared, it was a complete laceration of his Achilles tendon. He will be having surgery to repair it in a week. It's unlikely that he will be able to return to skating this late in the season, but he plans to work extra hard once he's been released by his doctors and will give a fantastic performance when he returns next season."

Hearing the description, even though he knew in his heart already, made Yuri feel a bit more anxious than before, wanting to sink into his chair and become small. He just lowered his head and clasped his hands together on the table instead, wishing he could remember more of the details, but drawing a blank. A dark, black, blank. He was pulled out of it by the room clapping again.

"For now though, JJ asks that people keep him in their thoughts while he recovers...for even in the darkest moments, it's still..." She and her husband held their hands up in customary fashion, trying to keep their spirits up, "...JJ style!"

The response from the room was courteous; a meager shadow compared to how a stadium full of the skater's fans would've applauded.

The Chairman nodded and leaned forward towards the mic again, "Thank you for your statement, Mr. and Mrs. Leroy." He turned to the audience, "Now, normal protocol with this sort of thing means that we would simply be moving on with the Men's Singles event with one less skater. However, we happen to have a particularly special competitor here at in Detroit already who is ready to fill in the gap." The man held his hand out into the audience, and Phichit stood up quietly, "Skater Phichit Chulanont of Thailand, who tied for 6th place in qualifiers and was narrowly beaten by Skater Christophe Giacometti of Switzerland, used to train here in Detroit with Skater Yuri a few years ago. We met with him earlier this morning to discuss whether he'd be interested in filling in that last space, and as luck would have it, he had all his gear with him still from NHK last weekend. We are, for the first time in ISU history, going to allow a non-qualifying competitor to take a skater's place after the unfortunate accident that forced the young Mr. Leroy to withdraw."

The applause for the Thai skater was much louder and excited than it had been for JJ, though given how it was happy news rather than sad, it was to be expected. Phichit sat back down again next to Chris and blended back into the crowd.

"To make it clear, however..." The Chairman went on, "If it hadn't been for Skater Phichit's GP score being high enough to qualify, even if his total score did not, we wouldn't be taking this into consideration. We will not be making similar concessions in future if it happens that present athletes did not score as high."

Michele scowled comically from his spot in the back, crossing his arms and making quite the pouty face.

Sara huffed a laugh and pat his shoulder, "Chin up, Mickey...maybe next year you'll get in."

"You said that last year."

"And then Viktor came back." She smiled sweetly, "Maybe next year he won't."

The taller Crispino just grumbled and folded his arms a bit tighter.
"The last item for this brief meeting is Skater Yuri Nikiforov, who was involved in the accident last night." The ISU brass started up again, making the room go quiet once more, save the soft clicking of cameras from all sides, "There was some worry about whether he would be able to continue with the competition or if he would have to withdraw as well. He is here to tell us all what he's decided to do."

Like before, the hand gestured down the table, and Yuri nodded his head, clearing his throat nervously as he leaned towards the mic in front of him, "I'm going to compete."

The room erupted into applause, even though at least half of those in attendance already knew what he was going to say.

The skater narrowed his eyes a bit against the blinding flashes from the audience, opting to bow his head again instead, "Thank you everyone for your support."

Viktor smiled anxiously on the side, but said nothing.

"Are there any questions?" The Chairman asked, opening things up to the floor.

Several hands in the press mob went up, but it was someone down in front who got the first nod.

"Skater Yuri, do you have any comments about the accident?"

The question was up-front enough, but it was still rather vague and open-ended, making Yuri wonder if he was being set-up for something. He shook his head, "I actually have no memory of it whatsoever. The last thing I remember, before waking up in the hospital was arriving at the arena, but I'm not even sure if that's a true memory or just a stand-in, since I'd been there once earlier in the day as well."

"Do you have any message to or for Skater JJ?" Someone else asked.

That one made Yuri hesitate, and he glanced aside to look at his partner before answering, "I wish him a speedy recovery."

The reporter who'd asked the question was a bit surprised by the simple and short nature of the answer, but his turn was over, and someone else was called to stand.

"Coach Viktor, do you have any comments?"

The Russian lifted his eyes, not having expected to be asked anything, but he shook his head, "None other than to give your support to Yuri so he can skate his best tonight and tomorrow. Even though he insists he's recovered enough to compete, it's a simple fact that he hit his head yesterday, and we'll all be watching him more closely when he performs. No one should have to go to competition with a handicap or an injury, same as how no one should be going into things with an unfair advantage."

The meeting didn't last much longer after that, keeping it short and sweet for the sake of keeping the rest of the event on schedule. As the media was cut loose and people started moving out of the room again, Yuri caught sight of the Russian Tiger leaning against a wall near the back, keeping close to Otabek, Yakov, and Lilia. There wasn't time to dwell on it though, since he could hear his partner calling out to a particular group of people waiting out in the hall for them. Cherry-hazel eyes turned away from the blonde and saw a trio of silver-haired heads instead, with a certain ballerina standing nearby...plus one more.

"Mari-nee-chan!"
"Yuri!" The older Katsuki cried out, rushing forward and into the doorway, and throwing her arms over her younger brother in something of a well-meant tackle-hug.

The skater just flailed, feeling his hand being pulled out of his partner's, "Ahh, my head! Don't jostle me around so much!"

"Sorry! I was just so worried!" She called back, pulling him upright like normal and holding his head between her hands like she thought she could make the jarring pain go away by doing so, "It was so weird to hear someone else's voice answer your phone last night!"

"Have you talked to mom or dad?"

"Yeah, I called them as soon as I got off the phone with Chris." The woman answered, pulling her hands back a bit to rub her eyes, relief flooding through her, "They want to hear from you as soon as you can manage."

"Yeah, Viktor and I were going to call once we were done here."

"You should've called sooner!" Mari scolded, reaching back over to wrap both arms around her brother's head and pulled him close, "They're worried sick! I bet they're still awake right now, waiting for you!"

"Maarrri...ow, Mari, Mari-nee-chan...ow! Let go! Hanase!"

Having watched to that moment in wry amusement, the silver genius finally stepped in, gently prying the woman's arms off his husband's head and pulling him back to safer territory again, "We'll call home as soon as we get someplace quiet. Yuri needed to rest as long as he could."

"Well, don't wait all day..." The elder sister suggested, "It's not like he just stubbed his toe or something."

"So what's everyone waiting around here for?" Viktor wondered then, pulling his partner over a few paces to get closer to the rest of the clan, "Obviously not for the conference since you waited outside."

"Well," Minako stepped forward, "Other than bringing Mari by so she could see her little brother, we all wanted to check in on the both of you anyway. Plus, we have a certain Russian Kitty Cat to pick up. We still have all the rest of his competition gear to give back."

"Where is he anyway?" Mikhail wondered, "I didn't see him come out."

"I saw him at the way-far back of the room a second before we came through." Yuri said, tenderly feeling at the sensitive bits of his forehead and scalp, hoping not to see blood when he pulled his hand back. Thankfully, there was none, so it just hurt because it could, "I think he's avoiding us. Otabek came to say hi earlier but not Yurio."

"Hmph..." The elder Russian took a step forward, pausing only to set a hand onto the skater's shoulder as he moved into the room, "I'll go fetch him. Good to see you feeling better, by the way. You were pretty out of sorts last night. Almost made Viktor cry."

Yuri just sighed, "That's what I heard... I hope I didn't say anything else to upset people. I don't even remember it now. All of last night is kind of a haze at this point."

"Well..."
"Oh no." The young skater seized up, "What else is there...?"

Viktor made a face, giving a nervous smile as he knew what was coming, but said nothing.

"If you don't remember, then I guess we can tell you again now and get a more honest, and less angry, reaction from you." The older figure went on, reaching his hand back from the man's shoulder towards his lady love, "We're engaged."

"Whaaaaaaaaat!" Yuri said in surprise, looking between both faces with a shocked look on his own, "W-when? How?"

"Earlier this week." The ballerina said, her cheeks a bit pink, still getting used to the idea herself. She held her left hand out to show the ring, which made Yuri's eyes widen in shock, having to blink a few times and even hold the hand to change what direction he looked onto it from, just to make sure he wasn't seeing things.

"T-This...this is crazy." He stammered, "I can't even begin to imagine how many competitions I'd have to win Gold at to afford something like this." He started to feel a little down, seeing the simple gold band on his own finger, "...I had to put Viktor's ring on a payment plan..."

Mikhail could sense the shifting mood, and moved to turn the man around, sliding an arm over a shoulder to twist him the other way and face the door, "Never build the foundation of your love for someone based on how much you spent on a bit of jewelry around a single finger." He advised, "The rings you two gave to each other are valuable because you like them, not because of the amount of gold in them, or what company forged them. I doubt Viktor would give his up for anything. The same goes for you, right?"

Yuri nodded without hesitation.

"Then that makes your rings priceless." The Russian went on, "I mean, you didn't even change them out for anything fancier even after you got married. Normally, engagement rings get replaced at that point, or fused to a second ring. But you two kept the rings you already had. There's so much more meaning to those bands than just being a sign that you got hitched."

'This ceremony will not create a relationship that does not already exist between you. It is a symbol of how far you have come. It is a symbol of the promises you will make to each other to continue growing stronger as individuals and as partners. No matter what challenges you face, you now face them together, and no matter how much you succeed, you now do so together.'

Yuri remembered that day like it had just happened, and he glanced back down at his simple gold wedding band. He flared his nostrils and lifted his head, drawing in a deep breath before fanning himself with both hands, "Okay, I need to walk, otherwise I'm going to cry. Everything is really raw right now. I can't handle it."

Mikhail and Viktor huffed a quiet laugh between them, but the older of the two stepped further towards the door, "Why don't you two come with us to breakfast? Mari, you come too."

"Hah?" The confused Katsuki twitched to hear her name, "Oh...uh, well, okay."

"We're going to have something of a family meeting, but we're all family so I guess it doesn't matter if you're there. It partly involves you boys anyway." Mikhail explained, sticking his head into the room and looking around. He spotted the Russian Punk still wall-flowering on the far side just as Yuri had described, and raised a hand to tell him to come forward, looking back out as the teen half-trotted forward.
Yuri glanced up at his partner, unsure, "...Uhh...I dunno..."

Viktor seemed to share the sentiment, "Maybe we shouldn't. We haven't talked since that fight we told you about. I'd rather we not-"

They each caught sight of the teen, who to that moment had no idea they were still in the hall, and had stopped dead in his tracks as well, giving them an even more stunned look than they'd already had. Everyone went anxiously silent.
The van was a surprise to Yuri, though Viktor had apparently been tipped off the night before about it. Still, piling into it felt more like getting into an event shuttle, filled to the brim with people, though for once, more of them didn’t know how to skate than did. Dubious about how the back of the van might jerk around more than the front, Yuri took a safer seat towards the middle, piling in just behind the driver’s seat with his partner just beside him. By the time everyone else had found their spots, Yurio was way at the back, Mari anxiously next to him, and the two Rozovsky sisters were in the middle row between them. Minako took her usual spot in the front passenger seat, and Mikhail, of course, played chauffer to them all.

The third spot in that front passenger row was occupied by the practice gear of the occupants next to it, and was seat-belted into place. One of the bags had a side-pouch unzipped where Yuri had gone fishing for his phone. It was a fool's errand though, since the device had never been unpacked after being retrieved from Chris, and thus had never been charged. It came on only long enough to report its low-battery status and then shut off again, leaving the young skater with nothing but a black screen to look at.

He huffed quietly and slouched back into his seat, tilting his head a little to look out the window and into the Detroit winter. Leaving the Marriott to go hunting for breakfast took them past Campus Martius Park, and the ridiculously elaborate Christmas decorations and outdoor skating rink that had been set up for the occasion.

"Did we drive by this place last night?" Yuri wondered, passing it by, "I remember how it used to look in the dark."

The Russian glanced out the window, seeing the huge Christmas tree that stood at the north end of the rink, "No, we came down a different road. We can come back tonight though if you want, after the Short Program. I bet a lot of folks from the Grand Prix will want to go."

"We could really take the rink over, then." The younger skater let himself get a little excited about the idea, "It'll be like last year in St. Petersburg, but with a whole bunch of us. We could turn it into our own little impromptu Exhibition. We wouldn't even have to pretend that I don't know how to skate."

"Just don't ask me to toss you." Viktor said warily, "I haven't dropped you yet...but...I'd rather we not tempt fate. The last thing I need is to have your head act like a stubbed toe, whacking against everything it possibly can just because it can."

"I won't." Yuri reassured, rubbing his thumb gently across his partner's leg where he rested his hand, "I think I'll be ready for just some easy skating after the SP today. Nothing elaborate...just some simple fun."

"Can we come?"

The two skaters looked up, then back into the row just behind them...and spotted the two sisters looking rather awkward. Viktoria had practically face-palmed, but Nikkita had brought both hands up to cover her mouth, looking rather surprised. She shook her head as her face went red.

"Sorry?" Viktor wondered, "We weren't paying attention...did you say something?"
Grey-green eyes glanced between one another, but it was Viktoria who spoke, "Tweedle-dee wants to know if she and/or we can come with you to that outdoor Christmas skating rink shindig you guys are talking about."

Nikki gave her sister a wolf-like growl from behind her hands, though at her size and demeanor, it came out more like a wolf-pup's.

The two skaters glanced at each other, then turned back to the girls, but cowed a little as they each unintentionally looked through the two to see a certain blonde gawking at them from the back row. Yuri grumbled a little and spoke quietly, "He won't say anything to us. How long are we going to have to deal with this? I hate it."

"Who knows?" Viktor answered with a shrug, "I thought he'd be a little more worried about you at least, given how you'd been friends. He's acting like nothing happened at all though."

"I don't want a pity party. I just want him to stop being mad at us about what he overheard us saying in the onsen."

"We already made our peace on that. It's up to him now."

"We don't even know if he heard us."

"No one knew where he was, so he had to be in his room. If he somehow didn't hear us when we were being as loud as we were..."

Yuri drew in a sharp breath, but nodded, "Yeah...he'd have to have had logs wedged in his ears to not have heard us... I don't get why he's still so angry... He got everything he wanted in the end. What we said is irrelevant now...and even if it's just the principle of the thing, I don't even think what we said was all that bad."

Viktor nodded, "Yeah, he's just being difficult."

Nikki and Viktoria watched the back and forth, but couldn't hear a word. The older of the two leaned towards her younger sibling, "Who knew asking a simple yes or no question could be so complicated?"

"Right?" Nikki's brow furrowed, but she cleared her throat and leaned a bit forward, setting her hands softly on her cousin's elbow where it had been perched along the head-rest, "If it's that much trouble then don't worry about it."

"Huh?" They both answered, lifting their heads again.

"Oh, you can come if you want. Neither of us is going to stop you." Viktor explained, glancing aside slightly to where the young teen was still touching his arm, "...It's a public event. Anyone can go.

"I meant that we want to go with you, not just go to the same place at the same time." Nikki clarified, hesitating a moment as she looked on at those skeptical slate-blue eyes, "...We're not like our brother." She said nervously, "Thinking back on it, it looked like you guys had a rough weekend too, so I guess we all came to that meeting a bit on edge already. I'm sorry for how it turned out. If Vikki was more comfortable driving long distances in winter, we wouldn't have even needed Sergie to drive us...he complained fiercely the entire way into Calgary."

"We only had the one car and Sergie was already bound and determined to go to Lake Louise anyway." Viktoria countered, "The only thing that made him agree to take us was the threat of pipaw
taking the car back if he didn't."

"I know. Ugh." The younger sighed and leaned sideways against the window, her head thumping against the glass lightly, "I'm kind of glad he's not coming with us. He would've made this whole trip a complete nightmare. Just sitting around the whole time, scowling, being completely unreasonable...making snide remarks whenever he thinks he needs to get in his two cents."

"It's completely unbelievable."

"Unbelievable!" Nikki echoed, hands going up into the air, and then coming back down on the Russian's elbow a second time, "Good thing you guys don't know anyone like that! Right?"

Yurio was staring daggers into the back of the younger teen's head.

"Well..." Yuri started, turning back around to look at the back of the driver's seat, "We did..."

Green eyes turned towards the older skater.

"...But he isn't skating anymore...and he didn't really have a bad attitude per se," Yuri went on, looking to his partner for a better word, "He was just...ahh..."

"Zadnica." Viktor finished.

"Language." Mikhail barked from the front, though his nephew just laughed.

"What's that even mean? Who are you talking about?" Viktoria wondered, a brow raised in confusion.

Yuri shook his head, "I can only guess. We're talking about the guy who ran into me though. JJ Leroy. He's a good skater but he's pretty cocky. At last year's Grand Prix Final, a bunch of us went to get drinks together, but then JJ burst onto the scene and everyone left because no one wanted to be around him."

"Well, we won't have to deal with that again this year at least." Viktor added, "Circumstances be as they may."

"Yeah..."

"So I guess that means that there won't be any more trouble?" Nikki wondered, scooting a little further in her seat, perching precariously on the edge again, fingers still pawing at her cousin's elbow, "If all the trouble-makers are gone, then it should be clear sailing."

Viktor kept dropping his eyes down to where the girl's fingers were still holding to his arm, but Yuri hadn't been able to see it through the head-rest, glancing over top of it to see her as she spoke. To his surprise, those grey-green eyes turned to look right at him.

"You were feeling out of sorts when we first met, too." She said, "I'd rather it not happen again when you're feeling that way a second time."

Yuri paused, but then shook his head, "Technically it's the fourth time."

"Fourth?" All three silver Russians wondered in unison, making Viktor a bit uneasy.

"You're a hot mess." Viktoria quipped.

"Yeah." The young skater nodded, then started listing off on his fingers, "First was Calgary, when I
lost my voice. Then I had the panic attack and ran right into the rink wall in China. Then it was at
NHK when my glasses were broken. Now...number four, getting mowed down by JJ." He waggled
his fingers up for all to see.

"Oh...you still have your rings on the right hand." Nikki noticed, seeing the gold bangle on one of
those very fingers.

"This is how it's done in Russia." Viktor explained, somewhat defensively, then turning back to his
partner, "I forbid you from getting hurt or upset for the rest of the Grand Prix, or at Nationals, or at
Four Continents, and especially at Worlds. Forever, actually."

"...H-Hai...Viktor-kōchi...!" Yuri comically sank a bit in his seat, both hands up frantically. He
twitched and blinked in confusion as he spotted the younger teen looking back down at him from
overhead though.

"You okay down there?" She wondered.

"Nikki, sit like normal, please."

"Sorry papa."

Viktor watched her slink back into her seat quietly, seeing his partner rise back up as well out of the
corner of his eye. All the Russian could think about was that last meeting in Calgary, and how it had
gone south so quickly...but that it all rested on the shoulders of that older teen boy who wasn't even
with them. He drew in a breath, as though putting that old conflict into another box and onto yet
another high shelf, never to be thought of again, and resolved to move forward, "Well, if you're
moving with your dad to Hasetsu, then I guess it would be for the best that we all get along. Maybe
we should try that introduction thing again."

Nikki's eyes lit up, and she nudged her sister to pay attention, "Yeah!" She scooted forward in her
seat as far as she thought her father would allow, "I'm Nikkita, though most people just call me
Nikki." She then gestured over to her elder sibling.

"Viktoria." The older teen sounded-off, pointing at her cousin, "I guess I got named after you since
pipaw couldn't actually have you."

"It was an homage, Vikki, not a replacement effort." Mikhail corrected, watching the whole thing go
down with a few glances at the rear-view mirror.

"You were just salty that mom wouldn't let you name Sergie that way!" The older teen teased, sitting
forward as well and pulling the sucker candy from her mouth, "Admit it!"

"I admit nothing!"

She just laughed and sat back again, twirling the small white stick to put the candy back in her
mouth, "Nah, it's probably true. I didn't even know you existed until pipaw had to go back to Russia
for that funeral last year. All told, we barely know anything about him from his days in the Old
Country. He kept it all pretty close to the chest. Anytime something even remotely close to Russia
came up, he got all evasive about it."

"It's hard to talk about." Viktor agreed, turning slightly to side-eye his uncle a bit.

Mikhail just pretended to ignore it, looking aside from where he knew the younger figure was giving
him 'that' look.
Viktor shook the feeling though and gestured towards his partner, "Anyway though..."

The younger figure blinked, but then reached a thin arm around the side of the head-rest as well as he could, "I'm Yuri." He could feel Nikki's fingers clapping to his, then her sister's, "Hajimemashite."

"And you're Viktor Nikiforov, greatest skater of this generation and probably the next several." Nikki said teasingly, setting her mitt on the head-rest just by her cousin's shoulder, "I watched your shows in Japan last weekend! I was really worried after the first event, but you really put on your A-game for the second! Everyone else looked so boring by comparison. All those new World Records!"

"...Yeah." The silver Russian nodded a bit reluctantly, but shrugged, "It's probably going to be my last hurrah though. I've retired that program for something easier."

"Really? Why? It was so good!"

"When you go out onto the ice, and you put your heart and soul into a program, it's not just about competition, points, or even just about skating sometimes. There's more to it than that." Viktor explained, "I know Uncle Mimi told you guys about what happened at the funeral. I created that Free Skate because of what happened. All the fury and rage I had back then, I packed it into that program so it wouldn't spill out into other parts of my life. So when Uncle Mimi managed to get my father onto a plane to NHK, and I got to do that show for him...I got all that negative energy out of me, for good and all. I don't need it anymore."

"I guess that makes sense." The young silver teen nodded, sitting back and clasping her hands loosely on her lap, "So what are you going to do instead?"

"A solo version of the Exhibition I did at NHK."

Yurio glared from the back of the van, but turned his eyes away, looking outside instead and pressing himself up against the corner of the seat. Listening to the back and forth was getting obnoxious, so he reached to pull his phone out of his pocket and slipped his ear-buds into place, listening to his music so loudly that nothing else could sneak by.

By the time they'd gotten to the restaurant that had been chosen, chatter between the four middle passengers had become rather excitable. It got even crazier when Yuri asked the inevitable question.

"So what's your brother doing then if he's not here? Must be lonely at home with everyone gone suddenly."

Viktoria crunched the last bit of the sucker candy, and toyed with the little white stick that remained, "Nah. Sergio's decided that he's a big strong man and put his foot down about staying in Canada." She started, making elaborate gestures as she described it all, just like her father would, "So pipaw got him his own apartment, and now he can wrastle his way into college like all the other jug-heads on his team."

"...Wrastle?" Yuri echoed, "Is that different from wrestling? Or is it just semantics, like soccer and football?"

"No, it's just me being sarcastic. He's a grappler. Pipaw got tired of Sergie brow-beating about two guys being married, so he turned the whole thing on Sergie's head by showing him a clip of some video that he'd been reminded him of. Something about how grappling is super-gay, so he has no right to complain about two guys being married. I dunno. It was in Russian and I didn't watch it."

Both skaters looked at each other. The same two moments were playing out in both their minds.
"...Then that's Viktor Nikiforov in front, aaaaaand Yuri Nikiforov in back, Mari's younger brother."

"Shouldn't he be Yuri Katsuki then?" Sergio asked, blunt as before.

[IDIOTS. This is figure skating.] Yurio barked on, [We dance on ice and wear flashy costumes! The only thing more gay than that is grappling in MMA, and I don't see anyone complaining about how homo that is even when one guy's got his nutsack in some other guy's face, or even worse, if they're grappling balls to balls.]

The pair were practically turning blue in their attempt not to burst out laughing, but it did no good, and eventually Yuri cracked, which just lead to Viktor losing it as well. They held onto each other and wiped tears from their eyes as they hollered at the hilarious irony of it.

Mikhail just shook his head and chuckled quietly under his breath.

"Why are they laughing so hard?" Nikki wondered, speaking out the side of her mouth towards her sister.

"I have no idea. Maybe it's a foreign thing."

"Arigh ta loons, pile out." The eldest of the group announced, the van coming to a stop just outside an IHOP, "It's no 5-star restaurant but it's got better reviews than the one that was closer to the hotel."

"Pipaw, when have you ever taken us to a 5-star restaurant?" Viktoria wondered, hopping out after the two skaters, Nikki following after, then Mari, and finally Yurio at the end, "You squirrel money away like a pack-rat."

Mikhail was drawing a blank, "...Uhh...well..."

"Maybe he's more like a dragon." Nikki joked, "Like Smaug or something." She waved her arms around theatrically, "Mikhail the Glorious, Hoarder of All the Golds!"

"Eeehhhhhh..." The elder was still thinking, not hearing the quip.

"Yeah, see?" The older teen poked a finger against the man's chest, "Notta once."

"Well, maybe there'll be occasion soon." He held out his arm for Minako, which she took quickly, feeling her shoes sliding along the black-ice under her feet already as she closed the door on her side of the van, "Right?"

"Right?" She answered curiously, keeping her eyes on the ground, hoping to spot the ice before it spotted her.

"Exactly."

Yuri and Viktor watched the group go, though it was Viktor who spoke between them, "I should get him a dragon-tail hat like mine."
"The more time goes by, the more eerie it is how similar you two are."

"Yeah, it's starting to freak me out. Hopefully he doesn't have foresight, too."
To say the least, one side of the table was quite a bit more lively than the other. The Rozovsky sisters and the Vktuuri SkateHusbands had found common ground with the basic tenants of figure skating, once the two older figures learned that the two younger ones actually did skate some.

"Well yeah, of course we skate." Viktoria said skeptically, holding a bit of sausage on the end of a fork, "We live in Canada. Not skating there would be like...I dunno, not being hot in the desert. We might not know much about all the fancy schmancy stuff you two do, but we can hold our own on the ice."

"Yeah, even papa skates." Nikki added.

Yuri and Viktor looked at one another in disbelief, then shot their glances down the table to the eldest of the clan, "You can skate!? Why didn't you ever...?"

"Whoa whoa..." Mikhail had both hands up frantically, "I know how to not fall. I can also only go forward. None of that backwards-facing craziness that you two do."

"Still though." The younger Russian was still stunned, "I mean, I knew you did as a kid, given what you said about my papa...but...these days?"

Nikki leaned over the corner of the table towards Yuri, a hand over her mouth to whisper into his ear, "He's being coy; he skates really well."

"Years ago, yeah, when I was young and limber, but not as much since the divorce." The elder shrugged, sipping at the white ceramic coffee cup in front of himself.

Minako was just gaping across the table at the man, "...I'm going to need to see proof of these claims."

"What, that I can skate kind-of?" Mikhail looked over at her.

She nodded, "You haven't set foot on the ice in the whole time we've known you."

"Well..." The elder Russian looked a bit skittish, "I guess it's not as big a deal now, but back last year when everyone was still making the joke about me being Vintage Viktor..."

The two sisters laughed, but Mari's eyes went comically wide where she sat between the ballerina and the older teen daughter, holding a glass to her mouth where she'd stopped moving.

"...I didn't want to give any other suggestion that that's all I was. Skating is Viktor's thing. I had to do everything I could to show people that I was different." Mikhail went on, sipping at the coffee again, "I bet I'd never have heard the end of it if people knew I could skate back then."

"Hockey's a bit different from figure skating though, pipaw." Viktoria pointed out, "And you skate backwards just fine."

The elder just shot her a look like he wanted her to stop giving everything away, but Viktor saw it
and nudged the man with his elbow, "Uncle Mimi, it sounds to me like you should come with us tonight, too. Show us all your moves."

"Oohhh no, no, I haven't skated in years."

Nikki leaned towards Yuri again, "It's been two years, tops."

"Oh bah, it's just like riding a bike. You'll get your ice-legs back in 30 seconds." The skating legend teased, leaning further aside to nudge with his shoulder instead, "C'moooooonnnn."

"Come skate with us, Uncle Mikhail!" Yuri added, "You too, Minako-sensei!"

The ballerina chortled, "You know I can't skate!"

"You're gonna have to learn if you want to be the best kind of coach!"

"Not even Lilia knew how to skate!"

"She was just a choreographer though! It wasn't as important!"

Yurio raised his eyes from his phone, trying to look inconspicuous despite having been plopped at the end of the table between the two 'parental units.' Despite being with the group physically, he still felt miles away from them all...at least until he could feel a certain pair of grey-green eyes looking down on him. He turned his emerald irises to the right, seeing the elder Russian looking back at him, "...What?"

"No phones at the table." Mikhail answered, giving a knowing smile and hoping the teen would put the device away on his own.

"I have nothing to contribute here." Yurio went back to the phone, poking at the screen with a finger next to his empty plate...at least, until another set of fingers clasped the top of it and pulled it right out of his sights, "Hey! What's the big idea!?"

Mikhail pocketed the phone inside his jacket where it was folded on the booth-bench between him and his nephew, "If there's ever a time where a family always comes together, consistently, every day...it's at the table. Breakfast, lunch, dinner...doesn't matter." He pat the cloth pile with one hand and turned to look at the flustered teen again, "Even if you don't think you have anything to add, this is where you at least listen to one another."

Yurio just growled under his breath and slouched, hands gripping tightly to the edge of his seat between his knees.

"Have you told Yakov and Lilia about your plans yet?" The elder Russian went on, leaving the younger end of the table to chit-chatting amongst themselves again.

"No."

"When do you plan on it?"

"Nationals."

"Why are you waiting so long?" Mikhail wondered, "Wouldn't it be better to warn him now so he can teach you whatever else he thinks you need to know? Lilia's done a lot to help you out, too. You and Yakov even lived with her for a while."

"Living with her was like living in a military boot-camp."
The older figure leaned back against the seat in thought, resting an arm lazily over his nephew's shoulder, "I faintly recall picking you up from her place once...she had really nice digs."

"...It was a super-luxurious military boot-camp." Yurio said quieter with a slight groan of annoyance. He whipped his head back around and glared, "Look, living with her and Yakov wasn't exactly this picture-perfect family setting like you think it might've been. It was all business with them. Up at dawn, work until you can't walk anymore, go to bed, do it again the next day."

"I actually never thought of it like a family setting." Mikhail mused, "If it were, I'd have thought you'd be a bit more mellow by now."

The teen scoffed and turned his eyes away. He ground his teeth as he heard the four at the other end of the table laughing about something amongst themselves.

"All told, it might've been too far removed from it." The elder went on, drawing the teen out of his distraction, "On the few occasions where I saw Lilia, she seemed nice, but was very no-nonsense and kind of...how to put it delicately..."

"...Hard-nosed?" Minako offered.

"Close enough." Mikhail nodded, leaning forward to rest his forearms against the edge of the table, "Hardly any warmth there at all. Combine that with the awkwardness of having to live with her and Yakov, a divorced couple who are trying to maintain some level of professional decorum around their prized student...and, well, it's kind of a recipe for madness. I guessed ages back that half the reason you wanted to tag along with me so badly on my trips was because it got you out of the nut-house for a little while."

Yurio said nothing, but it was obvious enough that it was close to the truth.

"And that's part of why your grandpa moved up from Moscow after the Grand Prix last year, right?" Mikhail added, "Since that's the state I found you in."

"Sure."

"Speaking of Nikolai...have you told him about your plans yet?"

"...No."

The elder Russian smiled and sighed, "Why not? You're putting all this off to the last minute. Why do you want to surprise everyone?"

The blonde just grumbled and rose from his seat, hands on the table, and forcing all the mirth to leave the air, "I don't want to surprise anyone." He said stiffly, eyes hidden behind the lengths of his hair, "I just don't want to give anyone the time to try and talk me out of it. I've already made up my mind about it all...I don't want to hear it from anyone else anymore." He pushed off and started heading for the door, pulling his hoodie up and slipping his arms into his heavier winter jacket.

Everyone at the table watched him go, giving one another awkward side-glances as the doors jangled and snapped shut again. Minako sighed as she twisted back around on her chair, glancing at the elder Katsuki next to her, "Was he like that the whole way here?"

"Worse." Mari answered dubiously, "I tried making small-talk with him sometimes but he kept saying to just shut up and let him sleep. Felt like I was traveling alone in the end."

"Sorry to do that to you..." The ballerina rubbed the woman's back with her left hand, turning her
eyes ahead towards her partner, "What should we do then? Yura's doing everything he can to fracture himself off from things."

"I thought things would get better again once we sorted out his living situation." Mikhail wondered, mostly to himself, sitting back against the booth again with a finger on his lip, "But he's even angrier now."

"He was in the conference hall earlier with Otabek, but he wouldn't come out to say hi when Viktor and I showed up." Yuri pointed out, "He's mad at us."

"What, because of the stuff he overheard you saying?"

"...You know about that?" Viktor wondered, "How?"

"We talked the morning you all left to come here." The elder silver answered, reaching to unfold his jacket and retrieve Yurio's phone before shaking the whole thing out and standing up, "He sounded like he hadn't slept at all that night."

"...You talked in the morning?" Yuri repeated, turning slightly towards his partner, "We thought you talked the night before, before he stormed off... Uh, the second time."

"Oh, no, we would've been on the road already." Mikhail said, slipping his arms into his heavy black coat, "I try not to chat on the phone while I'm driving. But, yeah...either way, we decided to have Minako be his coach specifically because of the argument you guys had about Vivi saying he wouldn't. I guess you haven't gotten over it yet."

"Us? Gotten over it?" Viktor echoed, "We tried to talk to him before we left for the airport, but he refused to answer us. We've done all we can. If he wants to act like this because he's all butt-hurt about what we said before that, I don't know what else to do."

The elder buttoned up the front of his coat and donned his flat-cap, "Well, you can start by not being smarmy about it." He huffed, "He's upset about it, not butt-hurt."

Viktor just made a face, "Sorry dad."

Mikhail rifled around in his pockets for his wallet, and pulled out one of his credit cards, handing it to his lady love, "Here, if they come bugging you for the bill before I get back."

"Verily, he doth go riding into battle once more." Minako mused dryly, holding the plastic between two fingers, "Don't be gone too long, hun. The boys all have to be at the arena by noon for practice."

"Yes dear." The Russian said endearingly, leaning down to kiss her quickly, "All in a day's work on this reality show... What's it called, 6 kids and counting?" He laughed.

"...S-six?" Minako answered in confusion, counting around the table and only seeing four candidates, plus the one that had stormed out. She felt a hot flush run through her entire body, and her heart was in her throat at the reminder of a certain possibility from earlier in the week. She could feel all the blood draining out of her head.

"We should adopt Mari next, don't you think?" Mikhail laughed, setting his hands on the unsuspecting woman's shoulders, "She's barely older than Vivi. She'd fit right in."

Viktoria and the SkateHusbands chuckled quietly at Mari's stunned expression, but Nikkita and Minako were both awkwardly silent, though the ballerina tried to muster an anxious smile, realizing he'd probably not meant that. Mikhail pushed off after that though, heading towards the doors and
pushing on the glass-paned frame to get outside. His youngest daughter was quick to follow after him, putting her jacket on as she rushed and braced against the cold despite the mild questions that trailed behind her.

"Welp..." The older teen watched the doors close after her sister, "That was awkward."

"Maybe he needs to go back to therapy." The now-oldest Russian huffed, "All the time we’ve been travelling, he hasn't been seeing anyone."

"Was he even still going as recently as before the Grand Prix?" Yuri wondered, "I'm not even sure how many sessions he had...it was all started months ago." He turned towards his former ballet instructor, though the woman still seemed a bit catatonic, "...Minako-sensei?"

"...Huh?" She twitched and turned back to see the young skater, "What?"

"...You okay?" He wondered instead, "You look pale."

"I-It's nothing!" The woman insisted, waving her hands around frantically, "I just...uh...can't believe how Mikhail thinks all of you are his and/or our kids. A week ago I didn't have any. ...Well, I guess one if we count you."

"Oh pfft." Yuri huffed, pointing a teasing finger in her direction, "The way you referred to all your ballet students as your kids, even back when I was still in your classes regularly...I'd say you probably have a couple hundred out there across hasestu and greater Kyushu."

"Kids that I could send home at the end of the day." She laughed nervously, "Now...or, well...soon...home is going to be where at least three of them will still be."

"At least we're all basically grown up." Viktoria quipped, nudging the woman with a finger as she reached around the back of Mari's seat, "You don't have to go through the horrible transition of us growing from screaming whelps, into toddler-monsters, into cootie-ridden children, and then angsty pre-teens."

The remainder of the group at the table laughed...but Minako was deathly absent from the fanfare.

"...Yeah..."

Outside, it wasn't easy to track the Russian Tiger through the compacted snow, but Mikhail eventually found him sitting on a bench near the side-entrance, staring at the front of the rental van. Before he had a chance to approach though, he could hear the sound of the bell and the door clambering open behind him, and he turned back to see Nikki come rushing up as well, taking hold of his arm.

"Papa...!" She whispered.

"Sweetie, go back inside, I gotta deal with this." He answered back quietly, leaning down to kiss the top of her head, "Go on." He put a hand on the small of her back to try and usher her back towards the front doors.

"I want to help though."

Mikhail blinked at her.

"He's supposed to be like our new brother, right? Maybe he'll have an easier time getting used to the way we are if he has someone his own age helping him along. He's only a year and a half older than
"I am."

"He can be pretty abrasive when he's upset."

"Has he ever been mean to Minako?"

The elder pursed his lips in thought, "...Come to think of it...other than calling her 'old lady' sometimes, I don't think so..."

"See?" Nikki smiled hopefully, "It'll be fine."

"Uhodi!" Yurio barked at them, having heard them just from their shoes crunching in the snow.

Mikhail huffed, "...Well, it'll be fine if he speaks in English..."

Chapter End Notes

Uhodi = Go away
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED FIFTY FOUR

[Why do you always have to come running after me like this?] Yurio said bitterly in his Mother-Tongue, knees pulled up into his jacket to keep them warm so only his head and shoes poked out.

Mikhail stepped up closer with Nikkita in tow, brushed off some of the snow from the open part of the bench, and sat down, keeping about a foot of distance between him and the Russian Tiger. The silver teen sat as well, but on her papa's knee since her coat didn't go low enough to make a good butt-protector. She looked on quietly at her father, and he looked aside to Yurio.

"I keep coming after you because you're important to me." The elder answered simply, putting his hands in his coat pockets to keep them shielded from the crisp winter air, "I only wish you'd stop running away. One day you're going to run so far that I can't find you."

Emerald eyes stayed low, one covered by pale golden hair, the other obscured enough by the hoodie that it couldn't be seen. He scowled either way, [I'm not running away. I just stepped out.]

"Why though?"

[Why's everything got to have some kind of hidden meaning to you? I just wanted some air, Christ.]

"You sure are angry for someone who just wanted some air."

[I'd still be inside if you hadn't taken my phone away.]

"Distancing yourself from the other people at the table, you mean." Mikhail shrugged, "I get that you don't want to talk to Viktor and Yuri, but that doesn't mean you have to alienate the rest of us, too." He pulled one hand out of his pocket and reached into the chest pocket of his dark-colored woolen coat, retrieving the teen's phone and handing it back towards him, "You're going to have a rough time in Hasetsu if you just try to lock yourself in your room all the time. That's not what family is about."

[What, so you're saying I won't get any time on my own? That's a load] Yurio swiped the device and pulled his arms back into his jacket like a turtle's head being retracted into its shell.

"I didn't say that." The elder returned his hand to his pocket, "We all need space and solitude once in a while...but on occasion, what we need more than that is each other. I know you've had a rough time with that sort of support system because your own parents were basically absent, and all you had were your grandpa, coach, and rink-mates...but times change and people do too. I know you still kind of hold it against Viktor for leaving St. Petersburg, b-"

"I don't care."

Nikki twitched to sitting up a bit straighter, caught off guard by the older teen's sudden English, thinking briefly that it was something in Russian that just sounded like a coherent English sentence. She turned just her eyes towards her father, but he remained calm and didn't flinch at all.

"...But as a rink-mate," The man went on, undeterred from his point, "...Even if he is nearly twice
your age, Viktor was more like a brother than a father-figure, and like all siblings, eventually you go your own way. Viktor followed his heart to Japan. Sergio left the nest to finish school and go on to college. My girls will both eventually leave, too... He reached out to stroke his daughter's long, wavy hair, "...And in time, so will you." Mikhail moved his hand aside and dared to reach across, resting his wrist on the teen's nearest shoulder, "That doesn't mean we stop caring about one another."

[Yeah, sure, whatever.] Yurio growled, sinking his face down against his knees so nothing of his face could be seen, [I'll believe shit I overheard in a hot-tub sooner than I believe some pre-thought speech.]

"Hm...that again..."

"What is it, papa?" Nikki wondered, shivering a bit against the cold; her black leggings did little to keep her warm, but she was determined to stay where she was.

The silver elder held his free arm forward, and the teen leaned a shoulder down against his chest, "He overheard Viktor and Yuri talking about him and came away from it feeling like he was under attack." He explained, turning his head slightly to look at the tightly-stretched jacket covering the SkateSon, "Yuri, I may not truly know exactly what was said, but I think I know those two well enough to say that, whatever it was, it probably wasn't meant to hurt you."

"...Maybe it'd just be easier if Yurio stays in St. Petersburg, and Mikhail just goes between all these places like he did last year."

"Da. It's not our problem until someone makes it our problem." Viktor agreed, "Let them figure it out on their own."

Yurio grit his teeth at the bitter memory of those words, feeling them cutting deep all over again, [Maybe only because they didn't expect me to be listening to them. Apparently they care so little now about what I think that Yuri wouldn't even answer me when I called to ask about his fall.]

Mikhail could feel his daughter shivering against him, and drew in a breath, patting her arm and rising to sit up as she did the same to make way. He quickly rifled through his pockets again and found the keys to the rental, clicking the Unlock button on the FOB and handing the whole thing over to his daughter, "Honey, turn the van on and crank the heat up. I'll be back in a second. You two should get warm."

"...Okay." The girl nodded and held the keys in both hands, rising up onto her feet as the elder Russian followed suit and flattened out his coat with his hands.

Yurio lifted his head just enough to see the dark shape moving back towards the diner, and then turned his eyes towards the silver-haired younger teen still nearby. He quickly looked away though when she turned to look at him in turn, and reluctantly uncoiled himself from the innards of his jacket as he heard the van's driver's side door open and the engine start. He piled into the back, going to the furthest rear seat like before, and then hunkered down, waiting for the warm air to breeze past his face.

Nikki waited in the driver's seat for a moment, holding her hands out against the vents as the heater kicked in, blowing hot air between her fingers. She looked around, her small frame feeling ill-suited
to the immensity of the front of the big vehicle. By the time she was looking into the back of the van, she could barely spy the top of Yurio’s hoodie past the edge of the second row of seats. She drew in a breath and bit lightly on her lower lip, unsure what to say to him, if anything at all. Instead, she just held to the edge of the seat-shoulder, and leaned into the chair, waiting for her papa to come back.

Within the restaurant, Mikhail walked back up towards the table, but had his eyes set on the younger of the SkateHusbands.

Yuri could practically feel the look before he realized the man was even there again, and glanced up, pointing at himself as a nod came his way. He twitched a little, feeling a flutter in his chest, "...W-What is it?"

"I know it's a stretch, but is there any chance you remember exactly what you guys said in the onsen that Yura got all mad about?"

The skater glanced towards his husband briefly, and each of them looked up in thought. Viktor put a finger on his lip, "...He let us know he was there when Yuri was asking if Yurio had directly asked me if I'd be his coach. I said no, and Yurio chimed in saying that the idea was heavily implied."

"What about before that? Like, the minute or so leading up to it." The elder wondered further.

"Uhhh..." Yuri scratched the un-injured side of his chin, "A minute was probably all we had before Yurio made himself known. Viktor and I sat in the onsen, we drank some shōchu, and talked briefly about how Yurio had gone by the Ice Castle after Phichit-kun and I had left to go have dinner. Yuuko-chan said Yurio left looking really upset after finding out I wasn't there, but Viktor still was, so I asked if he knew why Yurio was upset. I didn't think it made sense for him to be mad just because I wasn't around."

The younger silver nodded, "I explained that Yurio had come in and really vaguely referenced a conversation he and you had had," He pointed at his uncle, "But then left in a huff when I said Yuri had gone out."

"So then we talked about how you'd mentioned to Yurio that you were making plans to move to Hasetsu," Yuri continued, "...And how Viktor seemed a bit...er...well, unimpressed about the whole thing."

Mikhail quirked a brow, but Viktor wasn't looking.

"...Mostly about how things would be back home once you had your kids with you. The meeting in Calgary left us both a bit nervous."

The elder nodded in understanding.

"But then I'd said that I hoped we didn't give you the impression that we wanted you to solve the 'Yurio Problem' for us, since you'd already done so much for him over the past year."

"...Did you actually call it that? The 'Yurio Problem'?" Mikhail wondered dubiously.

"Well..." Yuri felt guilty, and a bit evasive.

Viktor shrugged and leaned back against the booth, gently stroking his hand down his partner's back where he'd been leaning forward against the table, "We thought that maybe it would be easier if Yurio just stayed in St. Petersburg, and that you go between locations like you did last year. I thought that since you'd already started trying to sort things out though, that we should just
leave you to it, and not butt in. It's not our problem until someone makes it our problem."

"That's when I pointed out that if Yurio agreed to move to Hasetsu, he would need a new coach, and you know the rest." Yuri finished, "I did try to go after him, but he just screamed at me and slammed his bedroom door in my face. Viktor and I went home after that."

Mikhail put a finger on his lip in thought, humming quietly to himself with a breath. After a moment, he reached up to adjust his hat, and looked back at them directly again, "What about when you guys said you tried to talk to him before you left for the airport?"

The younger skater leaned back as well then, the hand that had been stroking his back rising up to hang over his shoulder instead, "Viktor had already gone upstairs to see if Yurio was there, but by the time Phichit-kun and I showed up, it wasn't even certain that he was. I knocked on the door and spoke in a normal tone, saying that I didn't want us to leave on bad terms."

The Russian next to him nodded as the words were spoken, then lifted his head to continue, "I tried to explain that my reasoning for not wanting to be his coach wasn't out of spite."

"Then I said that we knew about your plans for Minako-sensei to be his coach instead anyway, and that we were happy for him. We both think the change of pace and that having a real family to go home to, rather than just Potya or us, would be great for him. Cats and SkateDads are neat but they're no substitution for parents, or stand-ins." Yuri went on, his rationale making sense even if Yurio's reactions didn't, "I even said that it would be pretty neat to train together at the Ice Castle, like we used to in St. Petersburg, when we both had different coaches even though we skated on the same ice."

"Yurio never once answered us though." Viktor finished, "But we're pretty sure he was in there since no one had seen him leave the resort."

"And that was just after you'd talked to Minako, right?" Mikhail wondered, piecing together the timeline, "Which would've only been a couple of hours after I talked to him."

"I guess so." Yuri answered simply.

"Did it occur to you guys that he was asleep?"

"Sure." The younger Russian said, tilting the edge of his hand against the table, "But we were being pretty loud, and the resort walls aren't exactly thick. He'd have to have been in a vegetative state not to wake up, even if he only heard the end of it. He need only come to the door and we'd have said it all again if we had to."

"So you guys haven't knowingly talked to one another since he overheard you in the hot-spring."

Yuri glanced aside again, but then looked back and shook his head.

Mikhail drew in a sharp breath and turned on his heel, "Aright...back into the frying pan."

"Hun," Minako stopped him, holding up her phone, "It's 11:30. We need to get moving."

"Give me 10 minutes before you all start coming to the van. I'll figure something out." He waved and kept going, pushing back through the double set of doors and out into the blustery cold...only to come bursting back in again, hands still on the edge of the door-frame. Just as he was about to speak, the wind from outside blew through and knocked his hat off the front of his head, falling to the floor with a klop. He huffed and reached down to swipe it, flopping it back onto his head, "Yuri...!"
"Y-Yessir!" The skater was stiff as a board, as though a drill-sergeant had called him out.

"Why didn't you answer Yura's phone-call when he tried to reach out about your accident?" The elder asked point-blank, as though he'd nearly forgotten to detail.

Yuri just looked at him blankly, aghast at the suggestion that he'd ever ignored anyone's call. He pulled his phone out of his coat-pile and held it up, pointing at its black screen weakly with his free hand, "My phone is dead. We forgot to plug it in after Viktor got my stuff back from Chris. I'm sure I have a ton of unanswered messages, missed calls, and texts on here that I can't and won't be able to see until I charge it."

"Call home, baka." Mari said into her empty juice glass.

"Wakatta, wakatteru yo!"

Mikhail returned the stunned look, left cheek twitching up against his eye. He looked up at the ceiling in dismay, "Ê-moë." He turned back to the young skater, "Would you come out here, please?"

Yuri just blinked those brown eyes and gave a dumbfounded look, "...Eh?"

"Idi za mnoj!"

"Idon'tspeakRussianMikhail!" He called back, flustered, but getting the point either way and grabbing his jacket. As he scooted out from his spot on the booth-bench, he spotted the black-clad silver figure disappear through the doors again, and gave a drawn out sigh. Standing up, he threaded his arms through the dark blue woolen coat, and turned to give his husband a look like he wasn't sure what to expect, "I almost long for the days when Yurio's anger was just perpetual and didn't have to make sense." He said, wrapping his scarf over his shoulders and tying it in front of his chest.

Viktor just watched in silent curiosity, "Well, if Uncle Mimi can sort this all out before tonight, then all the better. I don't want to have to pull you from the event because I anticipate you flubbing your jumps."

"Wh-What!?" Yuri nearly jumped out of his skin, "You can't mean that!"

"You drop when you're worried about stuff." The Russian pointed out, looking up through his bangs with those piercing crystal-blue eyes, "You don't have the luxury of getting to do that. If I think you're going to fall, it's my responsibility as your coach to do the right thing."

The young skater just resigned to the truth of it and sighed wearily, "...Hai...Viktor-kōchi..."

The older figure saw the worried, disappointed, nervous look on his partner's face, even as Yuri tried focusing on just doing up the buttons on the front of his coat. He reached a pale hand forward and tugged on the nearest dark-colored sleeve, pulling the man's left arm forward himself, and curled his fingers around the hand, kissing the back, "Yuri, as your coach and biggest fan, I have to do what's best for you, so you can survive this accident and live on to skate another day." He looked up into those anxious cherry-hazel eyes, "And as your husband, I'd really rather you come off the ice on your own two feet, rather than a stretcher. I already saw you leave on one once...I can't go through that again."

Yuri nodded, and curled his finger as well, holding to the Russian's fingers where they pressed against his palm, "...I know, I'm sorry... I'm being selfish again."

"I get it...don't worry." Viktor went on, pulling on that hand lightly to get the figure to lean down,
and reached up with his free hand to touch it gently to his partner's cheek, kissing him lightly, "If I end up having to pull you from the Grand Prix, I'll drop as well. I won't skate if you don't."

"V-Viktor!" The younger skater was horrified, "You can't do that! You have to skate! This is your big come-back!"

"We succeed together, and we fail together." The Russian said firmly, "In life, in love, in skating...in all of it. I won't go where I can't have you by my side."

Viktoria and Minako were practically weeping rivers at the man's sonnet of words, but Mari was just deadpanning both where she sat pinned between them.

Yuri stood upright and gave a defiant look, "Then I guess I better make sure Yurio isn't the reason you miss out on the Silver medal!" He smirked and quickly took off after that, leaving Viktor to blink in stunned confusion.

"...S-Silver...?" He echoed, "YOU MEAN GOLD!"

Chapter End Notes

Baka = Idiot/Moron/Stupid

Wakatta, wakatteru yo! = I know, I know already!

Ê-moë = (Exaspirated tone) Bloody Hell/Goddamnit/Oh brother/You gotta be kidding me

Idi za mnoj = Follow me
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED FIFTY FIVE

Mikhail was waiting at the corner when Yuri finally managed to push through the doors, and waved to get the half-laughing skater's attention. Brown eyes glanced up, and the young Asian quickly stepped to it, catching up to go around the edge of the building to where he knew the rental had been parked.

"Was starting to think you got lost in there." The Russian mused.

"Lost?" Yuri echoed, "Oh, no, Viktor just decided to spook me."

"Spook you how?"

The skater drew in a breath, "Viktor noticed a long time ago that I tend to mess up my jumps when there's something on my mind. He was just saying that he hopes we figure this all out before the Short Program, so he doesn't have to consider pulling me from competition."

"Honestly, I'm surprised he's letting you skate at all." Mikhail paused where he stepped, forcing Yuri to do the same and turn to look back at him, "You sure that's wise?"

The younger figure raised his right hand to cup it over the tender cut, "I didn't come all this way to drop out because I banged my head. The longer I go, the better I feel anyway...I'd rather go down trying than quit and never know how far I could've gone."

"But if you hit your head again-"

"It's a risk." Yuri said simply, lowering his hand.

The Russian gave him a nervous look, "I wish you wouldn't treat it like it was such a nonissue."

"I've tripped and crashed face-first into the rink wall before and continued on." The skater explained, giving a slight shrug, "If I can finish a performance even with a bloody nose, I can do one with some staples in my forehead. I'll worry about it if it causes me problems, and I will tell Viktor if I don't feel right...I promise. For now, feeling the way I do, I have to keep going like nothing has changed."

Mikhail kept on looking at him, but then gave a reluctant nod and started walking again, the van already in his sights. By the time they both arrived on the side of it, Nikkita was in the passenger area, opening the sliding door from the inside.

"Papa's back." She said, looking over her right shoulder to the back of the cabin, "...Yuri?"

"I brought company." The elder said, hunching down to hop into the toast-warm space.

Emerald eyes peeked indignantly over the back of the middle seats, and widened slightly as they spotted the Asian skater coming in after the man, then turned away again, "Great."

"Come on now, Yuratchka. You and Yuri are supposed to be friends."

The Ice Tiger just shot daggers at him, "You do realize 'Yuratchka' is a pet-name Yakov gave me, and not my real name, right? Like 'Vitya'?

"Would you rather I call you George then?" Mikhail huffed, sitting sideways against the middle set
of seats and leaning an elbow over the back-rest, "That's what Yuri means in Russian."


"Yegorik then."

"Stop it, that's even worse."

Yuri watched the back-and-forth nervously, sitting on the end of the same seats Mikhail was in, and looking around the side to where the Russian Tiger was protesting.

"Papa, quit teasing him." Nikki defended, slouching over the back of the front-row seats, "I thought you were trying to make him feel better."

"I am, I am, don't worry." The Russian raised his hands, then gestured them both at the skater directly in front of him, "Yuri was saying that him and Viktor tried talking to you before they left for the airport."

"Bullcrap."

Yuri made an annoyed face and growl-huffed under his breath.

"Aaaaanda he says he basically hasn't used his phone since before he hit his head. The battery's died since then too and he never saw that you called."

"More bullcrap, the line was busy when I called." The teen argued, pointing at the older skater, "He was talking to someone."

Yuri's annoyed expression now included a slight cross-eye where he stared at the fingertip right in his face.

Mikhail gave a nonplussed look, "He'd barely woken up when Minako and the kids and I showed up. He didn't even have his phone. When did you call anyway?"

Yurio crossed his arms and looked down, "When we were on layover in Chicago, around midnight."

"Yeah, so right around I am here, right when Yuri woke up. Chris took his and Viktor's gear back to the hotel after they went to the hospital. He was probably on Yuri's phone, trying to calm down whoever called before you did. Might've even been Mari if you both found out about the accident at the same time."

"I still haven't even called my parents yet." Yuri added, still looking a bit miffed at all the accusations, "My phone's going to blow up when I finally get a charger cable into it."

The blonde wouldn't look at him.

"And we really did come talk outside your room before we left to go to Fukuoka." The older skater went on, "You didn't answer, and we didn't open the door, so we thought you were either MIA or, more likely, ignoring us. We've basically been thinking that you heard what we said and were just holding a grudge."

"And I'd be well within my rights to."

"That's not even fair!" Yuri said a bit louder, "You were there when I said that I'd asked Viktor about the coaching thing because I knew you'd need one! I was looking out for you even before I knew Mikhail had come up with a better idea!"
"And you also said that it would be better if I just stayed in St. Petersburg!"

"I also gave Viktor crap for refusing to be your coach!" The older figure barked, "We almost got into a fight over it!"

"That's not my problem!"

"BUT IT IS YOUR FAULT." Yuri stood as well as he could, sliding forward to sit on the bench-seat next to the angry Russian Punk, pointing right at him the same way Yurio had done a moment before, "And THAT'S why Viktor won't coach you! Because I get too emotional over your well being, like I am right now! When you're angry, I'm angry, and then everyone is angry."

"THAT DOESN'T MAKE ANY SENSE." Yurio clenched his eyes shut and crossed his arms more tightly.

"OF COURSE IT DOES."

"Papa, you should stop them-"

"Nope, this is healthy."

"IF I DIDN'T CARE ABOUT YOU THEN WHY WOULD I GET ALL UPSET OVER YOU?"

"YOU CRIED IN A BATHROOM STALL."

"I CRIED AT MY WEDDING, TOO. I CRY A LOT, OKAY? IT'S A THING I DO. AND YOU GET ANGRY A LOT."

"PEOPLE AROUND ME DO A LOT OF STUPID SHIT."

"SO DO YOU."

"NOT LIKE YOU MORONS." Yurio finally opened his eyes, turning to face the unusually hostile older figure, "YOU AND VIKTOR DO APOCALYPTIC LEVELS OF STUPID SHIT."

"NO WE DON'T."

"YES YOU DO." He sat forward on the bench-seat, shoving a finger against the skater's chest to push him back a few inches, "MR. 'I'M GONNA GET DRUNK AND NAKED ON A ROOFTOP AND THREATEN TO JUMP OFF BECAUSE MY HUSBANDO SCREWED UP THE SHORT PROGRAM.' AND LET'S NOT FORGET YOU, MR. 'I ALWAYS GET SUPER JET-LAGGED AFTER REALLY LONG FLIGHTS BUT THEN DECIDED NOT TO GO SLEEP AS SOON AS WE LANDED, AND ENDED UP STRAYING RIGHT INTO THE PATH OF D-BAG LEROY'S JUMPS'...LIKE AN IDIOT."

Yuri just blinked at him in stunned surprise, "...You think that accident was my fault...?"

"OF COURSE NOT." The teen shoved off and went back into his corner, closer to the window, "But if you were smart, you never would've gotten on the ice before taking a goddamn nap. Even Viktor should've known better than to let you get your skates on. If I'd been there, I would've told you to screw off until you'd slept."

"No you wouldn't have." The older skater growled, crossing his arms and glaring with half-narrowed eyes, "You would've still been too proud to say a word to either of us."
"Fine, then I would've yelled at Leroy to quit being a rink-whore."

"JJ doesn't even take you seriously! He'd have just laughed at you and done what he wanted anyway!"

"Otabek would've backed me up!"

"I'm pretty sure Otabek tried to get him to back off and he still didn't!"

"What difference does it make anymore!?" The blonde seethed, "You still got run down in the end, and JJ got what he deserved for it."

"Wh-" Yuri started.

"That's a horrible thing to say." Nikki interrupted him, rising up where she'd been peeking over the edge of the second-row seat, "I thought I'd heard the meancrass things a person could say from Sergio already...but you've just shown me that there's a new level of viciousness people can go to."

Green eyes just blinked at her in stunned confusion. Yuri and Mikhail were surprised into silence as well.

"And what's worse is how you wrap it all up in some thinly-veiled sheet of concern, like you think it's okay to be horrible because you're supposedly doing it for a good cause." The young teen went on, fingers clenching against the head-rest, "Would you just tell him already that you're worried about how he's doing and quit trying to maintain some vapid image of apathetic toughness?"

"Nikki..." The older skater managed quietly.

"Cuz it's super annoying." She added, reaching over the seat to point at him like Yuri had, "No one wants to be around a person who hurls insults more often than he shows basic human decency! Can't you just be nice!? No one here is your enemy! Quit treating them like they are!"

The Asian was speechless, though just as he was about to crouch forward and hug her in thanks, he spotted the rest of their group coming around the corner of the building. He turned instead to the elder, "Time's up."

Mikhail lifted his head, spotting them all as well, "Seems so." He scooted forward on the seat and ushered his daughter out of the way, walking as well as he could around the first-row bench and over to the driver's seat, waving at the last four members of the entourage. Grey-green eyes lifted up to the rear-view mirror, spotting his flustered youngest child sitting back where she'd been before, but facing forward instead of looking into the last row like before, "Nikki, you okay, sweetie?"

"I'll be fine, papa." She said stiffly.

Yuri moved forward to open the sliding door again, but instead of just sitting back in the front row as everyone else got in, he hopped out and went for his husband. Arms quickly went around the confused taller figure, but all Yuri did was draw in a quick breath before turning to catch his sister by a sleeve, "Mari-nee-chan...can I use your phone to call home? Mine's out of juice."

"Oh...yeah, sure." She fished into her pocket, pulling the device out and unlocking it, "Here. Don't go digging around." She warned comically, pointing the phone at her little brother more so than anything, but he took it either way.

"I won't; I'll give it back as soon as I'm done." He answered stiffly, finding himself being turned towards the open door to follow in after her. When he finally found his seat again and Viktor was
next to him, the skater huffed and started looking around his sister's contact list. He paused a moment though, thumb hovering over the button for Yu-Topia.

"What is it?" The Russian wondered quietly, pulling his seat-belt across.

Yuri moved his thumb towards the 'Recents' button, but paused again, turning back instead to look back towards his sister, "Mari-nee-chan, did you call my phone by-chance when you were on layover in Chicago?"

"Yeah...your skater-buddy Chris answered though. Why?"

Yurio sneered, but said nothing.

Mikhail just clapped once and held both hands out, palms up by either side of the steering wheel, "Nailed it." He reached his right hand back between the seats and felt a victorious clap against it from his nephew-in-law.

"What are you guys talking about?" The confused Japanese woman deadpanned them.

"...Yeah, what she said." Minako echoed, thumbing back at Mari.

"You okay, Nikki?" Viktoria wondered, taking her seat after pushing the door closed, "You look upset."

The miffed young teen just yanked her phone out and started typing furiously, eventually sending a message that caused her older sister's phone to beep.

When the multi-colored figure grabbed for it, she saw a simple message on her screen, [I just feel like we swapped one jerk brother for another, that's all.]

[Great. What'd he do?]

Yurio just rolled his eyes, knowing full well they were texting one another instead of saying what they meant out loud. Once again, he put in his ear-buds and tuned everything out, returning to his status as pariah within the group, heart still pounding from yelling at his 'friend.'

At the front, Yuri was holding his sister's phone to his ear, leaning against his husband's side where an arm was up around his shoulders, his own heart still pounding as well. The dial-tone rang a few times, but he finally heard the click.

"...Mari?" The sleepy woman answered, "What is it? Is it about Yuri?"

"It's me, mom."

"Yuri! Toshiya, it's Yuri! Yuri! We were so worried! Why didn't you call us sooner!? It's after midnight!"

"I know, I'm sorry...I wanted to call earlier, but I realized too late that no one plugged my phone in after we got back, so it was dead before I had a chance."

Viktor gently rubbed his cheek against the top of his partner's head, careful to avoid where he knew the line of staples ended, hidden in that fluff of black hair. He stroked his thumb back and forth over where his hand held to the man's opposite shoulder.

"Yeah..." Yuri went on, the conversation half-unknown to the Russian, though he could guess, "No, I've been feeling better, I think I'll be fine. ...I know. I already promised Uncle Mikhail that I'd let
Viktor knew if I didn't think I could do it. We're heading to practice right now, so I'll know pretty soon. Huh? ...No, not till 7 tonight. The Opening Ceremonies? Oh, no, not even Viktor's in that one this time. He only did that at NHK because it was a JSF event and they have a soft spot for him. ...Yeah, because he was in my Nationals Exhibition last year."

There was a pause for a while, which caught the silver skater's attention, and he turned his head to face his husband curiously, though Yuri spoke again a moment after.

"Yes, I'll be careful. I promise. I promise! ...Okay...I'll let you go to bed. Watch me tomorrow morning, okay? G'night." He clicked out of the call and twisted around, looking at both silver sisters in the row behind him, "Can one of you hand this back?"

Viktoria took it and passed it along, but lifted her eyes to the man she'd taken it from, "How're you holding up?"

"Huh? Me?" Yuri blinked at her, not having expected the question, "I'm fine."

"No, I mean about..." She nudged her head back to the rear corner, and cleared her throat for emphasis, "You know,"

"Oh." He turned to cast his sights onto the younger sibling, and Viktor twisted to look back as well, the both of them noting how she still looked rather perturbed, "Well...I..."

"Don't worry, he can't hear if we're quiet. He put his ear-buds in. I can hear his music when the car's not moving," Viktoria explained, "Someone came into the restaurant earlier saying there was a big argument happening in the parking lot. No one was standing around though so we guessed it was you guys and started packing it in."

The young skater sighed and nodded, "Yeah...we yelled at each other pretty good. I feel really bad about it now." He shook his head a little, like he was trying to shake the memory, wishing he could will his amnesia to take it like it did most of the night before, "In the end, it was just a bunch of misunderstandings because of bad timing, and Yurio not being sure what to say about my accident."

"He said the other guy deserved what he got." Nikki interjected, looking angry all over again, "I don't like that kind of attitude. It was an accident. He didn't deserve an injury like that."

"No...I agree..." Yuri looked down at her, "...I...I think I want to go see him after practice."

"You do?" Viktor wondered, surprised.

"Yeah." He turned all the way back around to glance at his husband's confused face, "We left the car at the arena overnight...it should still be there. I know you don't care one way or another about JJ, but would you mind taking me back to that hospital?"

"Of course not." The Russian reached up to ruffle a bit of the man's hair out of his eyes, "I guess this all means that you didn't have enough time to figure things out with Yurio though."

"...Not really...it's still a bit raw." Yuri confirmed, slouching a bit where he sat, but lifting his right leg to hook it over Viktor's left, crossing his arms over his stomach, "I don't even know when we'll get a chance to finish this, or when it would even be the right time. You can't just start up again in the middle of an old argument when hours have passed."

"Let me sort it out." Mikhail said, glancing up in the rear-view mirror again, "You worry about yourself for now. I didn't mean for the whole thing to degrade into a shouting match anyway. Sorry for that."
"Oh, it's fine...it was a tiny bit cathartic, even if I didn't mean for it either."

The elder Russian huffed a laugh, "We were supposed to have the grand family meeting at breakfast this morning, but we had so many extra people tag along that we never got to it. We'll just do that after practice while you and Viktor are off on your side-quest. The ladies and I need to establish ground-rules with the newcomer."

"Aren't we both newcomers?" Minako wondered.

"Technically, but you're slightly better behaved than the other. Besides, we're all moving to your city, so it's more like we're all going to have to learn the rules of your house rather than have you having to learn the rules of ours. Japan is very different from Canada." Mikhail explained, slowing the van a bit for traffic ahead, "But the long and short of it is...he's a teenage boy coming into a house with two younger teenage girls that he's going to be getting to know rather well in a big hurry. I just need to be sure I have all my ducks in a row so there's no hanky-panky under my roof."

"DAD." Both girls argued, "Aren't we supposed to think of him like a new brother anyway!?"

"I'm just being cautious, sheesh! But yes, if that stops you, then absolutely, he's totally your brother!"

Viktor just sarcastically cleared his throat, "...I faintly recall a story about a whole village of people who ousteded one of their own cuz they-"

"Yeahthatwasareallyfunnystorywasn'titVivi."

The younger Russian just huffed a laugh, "It sure was."

The two girls just gave confused glances at them both.
Though it had only actually been a little more than half a day since Yuri had last been on the ice, it had felt like much longer. Putting skates on and tying the laces, hearing the soft but heavy *thunk* of the blade-guards on the concrete floor as he went around the edge of the practice rink, even hearing the sound of other skaters on the ice already...for some reason, it all felt like such a distant memory, brought back to the surface by *déjà vu*.

"No jumps." Viktor's voice brought him back around, and Yuri turned his head to glance up at the slightly-taller figure, "Promise me."

"No jumps? *At all?*"

Blue eyes were serious, "You're not even 12 hours out of the hospital yet. I know you feel pretty much fine right now, but let's not tempt fate. Okay?"

Sullen, the younger skater agreed, "Fine..." He glanced around the practice rink, seeing a few familiar faces on the ice already, though they hadn't apparently noticed him in turn yet. He veered right as they came down through the enclosed stairwell from the upper level prep area, and passed in front of the huge one-way glass mural of the Stanley Cup.

Viktor watched the man go for a moment, but then slowly followed after, curious as to his intentions.

*I don't remember anything from practice last night.* Yuri thought to himself, squinting his eyes as he tried to see anything at all, even shadows, through the window, *But I feel like I know where things are anyway.*

Once at the end, he turned right again, immediately finding himself at the edge of the doorway that lead behind the mural. It looked like something of a gym, though the equipment had all been moved to one side to make room for the medic station and a few empty beds for potential patients. Of the few people manning it, none of them were known to the skater.

"Oh, you're one of the guys who got hurt yesterday." A voice came, drawing the athlete's attention, "By the look of you, you're not letting it get you down though."

Yuri glanced up and over his shoulder briefly as his partner draped himself across his back, arms going around his core lazily, but then turned to look at the man who'd spoken a moment before, seeing the hand pointing at his feet and the skates thereupon, "Ah...yeah. I mean, no. I'm not dropping out." He looked around the room again one last time before asking the obvious, "Is Celeste around?"

The medic shook his head, "Not yet. We switched some shifts around since she was out late dealing with you and the other guy. She'll be at the Short Program though."

"Oh, okay..." The skater was a little disappointed. He found himself unable to linger on it though, as he felt Viktor starting to pull him backwards out the doorway and back around the corner to the front side of the mirror-mural.

"We don't have all afternoon to mess around." The Russian pointed out, continuing to drag Yuri along as they went back towards the one open rink-wall doorway, blade-guards squeaking as they were pulled backwards, "The warm-up period will be over before we even set blades down if we..."
"Yuri!" Phichit's call could be heard clear across the rink; the excited Thai skater swiftly rounded the wall, waving excitedly as he glided along on the other side of the Plexiglas to the pair, following along until they all met at the open doorway.

Chris' blades scratched along the ice to get nearer as well, pausing just inside the gate, setting a hand up against the edge of it as the duo finally arrived, "Did you forget which side of the rink wall you're supposed to skate on?" He laughed.

"Of course not." Yuri answered dryly, "I was just looking for the medic who came out and helped me last night."

"Oh, you remember what happened now?"

"No...but I saw her at the hospital after I woke up. I know her from my Detroit days." He explained, standing upright on his own where Viktor had finally planted him. He quickly reached down to start pulling off the rubber blade-guards.

"Ah, yeah, she did kind of talk to you like she knew you somehow. She was pretty upfront." Chris huffed, but then gave a wry chuckle at his Russian rival, "I haven't seen Viktor's hackles rise up so fast."

"...Eh?" Yuri blinked at him, turning then to his husband, one hand placing the rubber bars on the outside lip of the wall, "What set you off...?"

The silver legend set a hand against the man's shoulder to lean on for balance as he pulled his own blade-guards off, but then shrugged as he stood upright again, "Not that it matters now, but at least at the time, I thought she was being kind of rude and intrusive. Giving you grief about how your last name was the same as mine, and how everything about you seemed delusional because she didn't know what happened."

"Oh...yeah." The younger figure realized, "I guess it would seem kind of insane for me to change my name if she didn't know that there was a valid reason for it. What ended up happening?"

"Viktor stood behind her like some angry shadow and listened for a minute...but then he was like, 'Who are you and why are you talking to my husband like that?'" Chris explained, making gestures in reenactment, "She backed down in a big hurry."

"Yikes..."

The Russian made a face, "I didn't like her tone." He insisted, "Yuri even hid his ring-hand behind his back like he was scared to let her see it."

"I did!?!" The younger skater could hardly believe it, holding both hands against the sides of his head as he looked down in shock and shame. He hardly had time to linger on it though, as Chris snuck up behind him and pulled him out across the ice the exact same way Viktor had pulled him along in front of the mirror-mural a few moments prior, heel-picks scratching the surface as he went. The Swiss skater just laughed though, and Phichit went alongside them.

Viktor shook his head and laughed, setting his blade-guards on the wall just next to his partner's. Just as he was about to shrug out of his team jacket though, he caught sight of a pair of humanoid shapes out the corner of his eye. Turning, the coat still half-hanging to his shoulders, he spotted Yurio with Otabek coming out of the enclosed stairwell.
Yurio immediately turned his eyes away, though the Kazakh didn't immediately notice. It was only when the older Russian finally turned away, hanging his jacket up on the upper corner of the open doorway, that Otabek could feel the awkward tension between them. Viktor moved off without a word, blades scratching along the ice as he moved like smoke over water, going swiftly to 'save' his husband from the evil Swiss skater's clutches again.

"You've been acting weird." Otabek noted simply, "Did something happen after Cup of China?"

"Stuff always happens."

"You'll have to be a bit more specific. You're acting like you're not allowed to talk to them anymore." Otabek gazed over with those cool brown eyes, "Are you guys fighting again?"

"Again? What's that supposed to mean?" The younger teen shot back at him.

Blade-guards thunk'd against the floor, moving on towards the entrance, "You and Viktor were rink-mates for a long time, but you don't even hurl insults at him anymore. You act like you're strangers."

"I don't need him."

Otabek raised a brow, setting a hand on the edge of the doorway as he reached for the rubber on the bottom of his skates, "Is that the only reason you're friends with anyone? Because they can offer you something?"

Yurio was taken aback by the idea, "What? No way. I didn't mean it like that at all. I'm friends with you, aren't I? And I've never asked you for anything."

"Then how did you mean it?" The older skater stood back upright.

The Russian Punk's attention was briefly snatched by the sound of Viktor suddenly calling out to Yuri, chasing him across the ice like he was trying to grab him. The silver legend comically pleaded for the man not to try any jumps, while Yuri just kept moving away in reverse, teasing that he would anyway. A right leg went out behind him, feigning the toe-pick launch into a Flip, but Viktor just gave him a deathly 'you'd better not' glare, and Yuri set his foot down sheepishly.

Yurio blinked and shook his head, trying to regain his train of thought, "Things are just tense right now. A lot of stuff is going to be changing and not everyone is happy about it."

"Changing how?"

"I'm moving to Hasetsu full-time to train, but Viktor doesn't really want me there. He thinks I get into Katsudon's head too much."

The Kazakh gave a look, not sure what to make of the statement, "...How's that work, exactly?"

Yurio just gave a shrug, "Ask him. He's the one who gets jealous and paranoid over nothing."

Otabek just raised a brow, then turned to glance out across the ice, seeing the four skaters moving around one another like a flock of birds. For a moment, the brooding figure thought back on the few moments he'd seen either Viktor or Yuri prior to the Russian's sudden withdraw from competition, and considered the way they'd both evolved since then. It was a difficult task though, given how he'd never really interacted with anyone unless he absolutely had to. However, the poignant memory of Viktor's roof-top melt-down in Shanghai was testament to the younger teen's truth.
"What's gotten into him?" Yuri wondered quietly, leaning towards Minako, "Why's he standing on the other side of the railing like that?"

"I dunno," The woman started, turning her head and holding the cardigan up a little higher, "He was all happy-go-lucky when we started, and then he suddenly got worried about you. He started blaming himself for your Short Program and then came up with all these doomsday scenarios where he thinks you're going to leave him, and fire him as your coach. Currently he thinks you're going to divorce him to marry Yuratchka instead."

"...What?" Both Yuris asked in tandem, one more in disbelief while the other was more awkwardly embarrassed.

Otabek chortled, but then held his hand over his mouth as he coughed to try and dispel the stunned laugh, clearing his throat.

"Okay." The older skater mounted his blade-guards along the outer lip of the wall like the others had and quickly toed-off to join them on the ice, leaving a confused Yurio behind.

"Wh-what!? I didn't mean literally! OTABEK!" The blonde barked, but it was too late. Otabek was already halfway across the rink by then, and by the time the Russian Tiger had his own blade-guards off and stowed, it was pointless to try and catch up. The Kazakhstani skater was already in the midst of the flock, giving his greetings to Yuri. The teen could hardly believe it; though it was impossible to hear what any of them were really saying, he could only dread that Otabek was actually asking them all what the conflict was. The Japanese skater just seemed to gesture towards his head though, raising up his bangs a bit as Chris and Phichit came closer as well, all of them getting their first clear look at the cut that vanished beyond his hairline. Yurio just seethed, pushing out onto the ice bitterly, and keeping to his own side of the rink.

From the above-rink observation club, coaches, choreographers, and sponsors alike were mingling amongst one another while the practice took place below. Most were waiting for the 30 minute warm-up period to tick by before heading down the rink-side for their specific athlete's SP run-through. A certain pair of grey-green eyes was watching the rink intently though, separate from the rest of the crowd and standing by the floor-to-ceiling windows.

"He's going to be trouble, papa." Nikki's voice spoke softly, watching the rink as well, but sitting in one of the plush chairs nearby instead of standing, "He can't even play nice with the people he competes against."

Mikhail hummed to himself quietly in sullen agreement, "This schism between him and Viktor is making too many waves."

"Cousin Viktor wasn't the one that yelled at him in the van." The young teen pointed out.

"No, but the problem stems out from them specifically. Viktor's extremely protective of Yuri. His distrust and skepticism of Yura goes back quite a ways, and it's boiled over a couple times already this season. But...Yura's also too proud to apologize, or even to forgive, so this'll just keep going on until someone else steps in." The elder Russian shifted his weight from one foot to the other, "He's going to start getting tired of me if I keep being the one to do so."

"Were these guys ever actually friendly with each other? It sounds like Yuri's tried, but Yura keeps mucking it up somehow."
"It was Yuri's idea that I be Yura's sponsor in the first place. ...I wish I could understand why Yura keeps taking two steps forward, only to take twenty steps back. He does so well and then he just trips all over himself and causes a big scene."

Nikki gave him a flat look, "And this is the guy that's supposed to come live with us...?"

Mikhail drew in a sharp breath, but then turned and leaned down over the back of the seat, holding himself up with his hands on the head-rest, "He has the capacity to be a good kid. I've seen it. He just has this weird outlook where it seems like he thinks people abandon him all the time. First it was Viktor, when he left Russia to coach Yuri in Japan. Then Yuri became his friend, and they were pretty close, but then Yuri backed off a bit because Yura wasn't in crisis anymore. The way Yura's sticking to his own side of the rink now, I'm worried he might be thinking Beka's about to leave him behind, too."

"Beka?"

"The guy that joined the group last. Yura looks up to him, thinks he's a badass and all that. He told me once about how Beka saved him from a crazy group of fangirls at last year's Final by riding up on a motorcycle and whisking him off to safety." Mikhail explained, recalling all the stories, "He even launched himself at my car back in Moscow, begging to go to Shanghai because Beka was skating against Yuri there."

"A crazy group of fangirls, huh?" Nikki put a finger on her lip, looking down at the ice, and at the lonesome blonde keeping to himself, "The way he acts, I'm surprised he has any fans at all."

"They only see what he's like during performances. Yura tries to avoid them as much as possible when they find him at events."

The teen just gave an exasperated sigh, "Does he like anyone? It seems to me like he avoids and deflects from every kind of social situation. He's weird."

"That's one of the reasons why I suggested he come stay with us, sweetie." Mikhail pointed out, "Yura needs some kind of stability in his life, to be surrounded by people who aren't just going to give up on him because he's difficult. Even Viktor doesn't want to give up on him, but Yura has this annoying habit of treating the people he likes the same way he treats people he doesn't like."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"It does when you think everyone's two minutes away from betraying you all the time. Plus, he grew up in a really competitive environment. Every minute of his life, from the moment he could stand, has been on the ice. If he wasn't the best, he couldn't support himself or his family. If he didn't think of everyone else as the enemy, someone to be crushed and defeated, he'd never be able to motivate himself enough to climb to the top. He made history last year by winning Gold at the Final during his Senior debut. But at some point... The Russian turned his eyes back out towards the ice as well, "...He's going to have to learn that he can still be friendly with the people he's competing against. Viktor has trounced every single person in that rink, but he's still on good terms with them."

"Well, if Yura's going to be living with us, then that means he's not responsible for anyone anymore, right?" Nikki wondered, "So he can stop worrying about all the stuff he used to, because he'll be fine even if he doesn't win."

"You'd think."

The silver teen just huffed to herself in annoyance at the whole thing, "I don't think I've ever known
someone so on-edge like him. Do you think what Yuri and I said in the van had any lasting impact?"

"It's hard to know. He has this mortal fear of looking weak or admitting fault in front of people."
Mikhail said, pushing back up to stand again, "I think Yuri's the only person he's ever opened up to, really. I'm honestly worried that if those two don't make up somehow, it's never going to get better."

"So why don't we just pull them aside again later?"

"I want to...but we have to tread carefully on this one." The elder pointed out, moving off towards the stairwell that lead down to the lower level, "If Yura pushes back too hard and upsets Yuri too much, Viktor's going to put an end to it all himself. If it comes to that, I'm not sure I'll be able to stop it. Viktor has as much a right to protect his own family as anyone else does, and he's been extremely patient with all this stuff." He paused at the top of the stairs, one hand on the railing as the other came up to his lip, "...Come to think of it, all this time I've spent worrying about the two Yuris, I've yet to actually talk to my nephew about his perspective. Maybe I should talk to him first."

"...I can talk to Yura." The young teen offered, hopping up to follow after her father.

"...You want to?" Mikhail was a bit surprised, glancing back at her.

She nodded, though hesitantly, "I've played peace-maker between Vikki and Sergio. Maybe I can help."

The elder was somewhat skeptical, "...Ehhh..."

"Let me try!"

"Are you sure about that? You saw how they went at one another like cats and dogs..."

Nikki nodded again, this time more confident than before, "He didn't yell at me when I jumped in before."

"...Alright...but stay in my sights. If he tries to walk off, just let him. This is a pretty big place, and Detroit can be kind of dangerous, even without Russian Tigers skulking about."
Seats were taken on the one side of the rink that wasn't pressed up against a wall. None paid the inconspicuous silver-haired pair much attention, simply going about their warm-up as normal. At least, as normally as could be referred to given how they mostly chased one another around the ice like children. As professional figure skaters though, their antics could still be more entertaining than simply watching kids speed-skate from one side of the rink to the other...they'd weave and spin around one another at unexpected moments, looking more like the hockey players for whom the arena had been built, albeit with significantly more grace.

"That concludes the warm-up period. All skaters please depart the ice." An announcement called overhead in an almost robotic voice.

Grey-green eyes looked up the meet it, but then descended again towards the rink door, watching the Russian Punk vacate first, since he'd stayed on that side of the rink since the start. The other five came soon after, laughing and joking amongst one another as they each wondered which of them would be called to go right back out again.

"With my luck, it'll be me again." Yuri lamented sarcastically, snaking an arm around his partner's back as the Russian approached, "But maybe that's only in Japan. Minami-kun would never miss a chance to laugh at me for it."

Viktor huffed a laugh, but leaned in closer to nuzzle the side of the younger skater's head, draping one arm over his shoulders, "We can laugh in his place."

"You would."

Yurio had long-ago grabbed his blade guards and moved off before either of the remaining skaters had made it to the gate, pulling the top of his hoodie over his head and trying to leave without notice. There was only a 16-or-so-% chance that he would be called out first anyway, and the desire to stay on his own overrode the teen's potential to be the 'winner.' His skate-guards thunk'd along the steps to the second-floor prep area, making hollow thumping noises as he made each move forward. The sound of a second set of steps caught his attention rather quickly, making a pit in his stomach grow for the half-instant it took for him to realize the steps sounded like shoes, not another set of skates.

The chatter of the other skaters was fading fast behind him anyway.

"Hey, wait up." A voice came; female, young, familiar, "Yura-"

"It's Yuri." He corrected stiffly, not bothering to turn around, and kept on going up the steps.

"Will Christophe Giacometti please take position for his Short Program practice." The announcer called overhead again.

"Yatta~!" Yuri could be heard cheering, "I didn't get called first!" The rest of the group could be heard laughing again.

The Swiss skater's coach heard the call as well and broke away from the gathering in the prep area, moving down past the Russian Tiger to seek out his skater. Both teens pressed against the walls to let the man by, and Nikki got a first glance of her target's face since going after him; he was obviously irate. She drew in a nervous breath and tried to catch up, but Yurio was free to move sooner than she'd been and was out of her sights fairly quickly.
When the silver Canadian finally got to the top of the steps, she had to look around quickly to try and find where Yurio had gone. She spotted him trying to go out the back of the room, and that was only because she heard Yakov calling out for him not to run off when his turn could come at any moment. The young teen quickly moved through the thin crowd, glancing briefly down to the rink, seeing some of the other skaters taking seats near the rink door as Chris moved back out onto the ice.

The blonde pressed up against the Plexiglas barrier, looking dramatically despondent from his side, "Viktor..." He gave the most theatrical pouty-face he possibly could, hands up on the see-through wall. When the Russian answered in kind, Chris leaned forward, "Never leave me..."

"Oh Chris, how ever could I?" The Russian lifted his hands as well and placed them just aside his melancholy friend's.

"When you leave this place, and can see into the sky as a free man...think of me...when you look at the moon..." The younger skater went on.

Yuri just made a confused-yet-entertained face, leaning towards Phichit, "He acts like he's in prison or something."

"Don't worry, Chris! We'll put money on your commissary card!" The Thai figure hollered.

Viktor looked back at the duo, then glanced aside to where Otabek was still fixing his blade-guards to the bottom of his skates. He sighed dramatically then and pressed his cheek to the glass, giving a sad look like something out of one of his exaggerated recollections of some past event, "I will..." He declared quietly, feigning tears.

Phichit was trying not to crack up, holding both hands over his mouth; Yuri just kept watching in perplexed curiosity. The show was bordering delicately on 'going too far.' His legs were itching to get him up onto his feet again to drag back his husband before Viktor forgot who that actually was.

The silver Russian was just eating up the performance though, and pulled back just far enough to turn his head and kiss the glass where Chris had pressed his cheek in turn, "When next I see the lunar face, I'll think of yours, pale and glowing in the dark night."

"You'll see the man in the moon..." The Swiss skater answered coolly, finally pushing off, leaving his fingers as the last things to come off the glass before he turned around...and planted both palms on his butt, "...Or maybe I'll show you the moon in the man."

Viktor just burst out laughing. So did Phichit. Otabek walked up right then, wondering what he'd missed, glancing between the different groups and blinking in confusion.

Yuri leaned forward to set his hands against his face, holding his head up with his elbows on his knees, looking through his barely-parted fingers, "Yikes those two."

The silver Russian started moving down the first row of seats, pulling one down with a knee as he leaned forward into it, and towards his flustered partner. One hand held to the back-rest as the other reached ahead, sneaking a few pale fingers between the younger skater's wrists to press one up against his chin, and drew him down with a seductive half-lidded gaze, "What did you think of just now? Something inappropriate for a married man?"

The Japanese skater just returned the look with a skeptical glance, "Just the idea of Chris' arse floating across the sky. By morning, it gives the phrase 'crack of dawn' a whole new meaning."

Viktor cracked up laughing again, having to lower down to both elbows on the back of the chair, forehead resting on his partner's knees as Chris finally made like he was heading to the center of the
rink. Phichit was busting up as well, having to lean back just to catch his breath.

The Kazakh just took a seat stoically in the front row a few places over from the silver legend, resting one arm over the back of the seat next to him to watch the show. He glanced away briefly to look up at the glass wall of the mezzanine, quietly wondering where Yurio had run off to in such a hurry.

Yuri just huffed a quiet laugh, leaning down a bit further to kiss the back of his husband's head, hands sliding over the man's shoulders and down his back as far as they could go, "Sometimes I wonder if I should be worried about leaving you two alone together."

"Oh? Really~?" The Russian lifted his head slowly, careful to avoid banging their skulls together, but then gave a sultry look as he met his partner's gaze and settled nose-to-nose with him, "You worry about that sort of thing? Yuuuuri~"

"Maybe I just need a reminder of who I'm married to."

"I can arrange that." Viktor purred, leaning up a little higher to free his arms, and slid those pale hands down the sides of his partner's thighs, "You're married to me..." He tilted his head a little and pushed in a little closer, speaking the words quietly against his husband's lips as he closed his eyes, "...Viktor Nikiforov."

Phichit had his phone out so fast it practically broke the sound barrier, but Otabek just sat in brave/uncomfortable silence, casting his eyes away. When the excitable Thai skater pulled his screen back down and took a look at his new prizes, he saw something he hadn't expected...it wasn't just himself making a hilarious face in the foreground, or the kiss taking place just behind him...it was the photobomb of a certain older Russian who'd come down the few steps just behind them. Granted, it was basically just a pair of legs from that vantage, but they were still unexpected legs.

Mikhail cleared his throat, looking down at his nephew and in-law from where he stood at the second-row level, "Vivi."

Yuri was the only one of the occupied pair to react to the voice, his eyes shooting open in surprise in the midst of the kiss, his cheeks going bright pink. He pulled back quickly and sat all the way back in his chair, looking up uneasily at the older man as he set his hands together neatly on his lap, "O-Oh...h-hey, Mikhail. Didn't...ahem...didn't see you there." He said nervously, waving weakly.

Viktor practically still wore his kissy-face, but then deadpanned as he realized it was over before he'd meant it to, and turned his one visible eye upward as he slouched against the seat again, "...I was enjoying that."

"Didn't mean to interrupt." The elder raised his shoulders up a little, feeling a bit awkward for it all, "Can I have a minute?"

"Sorry, I only give kisses like that to Yuri." The younger Russian teased, "You'll have to find Minako-sensei."

Mikhail could feel his eyebrows going so high on his face that they practically rolled under his hat and settled on the back of his head, "...Noted." He cleared his throat again, "But no, seriously."

"Yuri or I could be called up to do our SP right after Chris. Can't it wait until we're done?"

"I can't hold everyone here hostage to wait for me after, plus I'd rather be discreet. It'll be quick; promise."
"...Quick? Discreet?" Viktor echoed in confusion. He glanced at his husband and gave an exaggerated sigh, "Put a bookmark on that. I'll be back."

Yuri just kept on smiling nervously, but nodded as the silver skater pushed back to his feet and plodded along after his uncle.

['Broken' - Lifehouse]

The Russian quickly pulled his team jacket down from where it was still hanging on the corner of the open rink doorway and slung it to hang loosely over his shoulders, stuffing his hands into his pockets as they moved past the opening to the stairs...and past the one-way mirror bearing the image of the Stanley Cup...and the hallway leading around to the medic's area...only finally stopping when they were clear across the other side of the rink. Viktor gave his uncle a strange look, glancing out across the ice where Chris was putting on his show, and then further over to where Yuri was still sitting in the stands with Phichit and Otabek. When he turned back, Mikhail had turned around and was facing him, giving something of a serious expression, "...This feels weird."

"Sorry, Vivi." The older man said, "I just wanted to get you away from influences."

"Influences?" Viktor repeated, "You mean Yuri?"

"And the quiet guy."

"...Otabek?" The skater was thoroughly perplexed then, "Why would you worry about what Otabek would do to my opinio-..." The realization was grim, and the Russian leveled his gaze, "Oh. This is about Yurio."

"One question and one request." Mikhail explained simply, "That's it."

Viktor gave a disgruntled sigh, "Fine. Out with it."

"I'll preface the question with something of a statement first." The elder said, "I know I haven't been around that long. Not even a year yet. But I did a lot of research on you guys before I ever set foot in that skating rink in St. Petersburg, so I was pretty well acquainted with a number of things that had happened up to then. Everything from how Russia lost its shit when you suddenly went to Japan to be Yuri's coach, to how you weren't able to make your come-back until Worlds. Since then, and especially because you and Yuri asked me to be Yura's sponsor, I've gotten to know that kid pretty well. Maybe I've seen a side to him that neither of you guys have and it confuses things, but I know he's not as bad as you seem to think lately."

The younger Russian just listened silently, though he gave something of an unenthused, if not bored expression with the one visible eye.

"I know that him and Yakov were the first people to find out you'd decided to go back to competition. Yura told me that you'd even hugged him at the time. He even told me about what you guys had done to help him in the midst of that crisis with his grandpa during Euros. But I've also watched as everything between you and he has completely crumbled to dust over this past year, like rocks slowly being crushed in a mortar." Mikhail went on, the music above being severely inappropriate to the tone of the discussion, "This conversation he overheard between you and Yuri, about him wanting to move to Hasetsu, has caused a rift that even I'm not sure how to fix anymore. I want to believe that this friendship between you three can be mended. I've watched you forgive your father, and he's done much worse to you than Yura ever did."

"My father only ever did things directly to me." Viktor explained, "Yurio does things that hurt Yuri,
and *that* hurts me worse than *any* punch in the eye ever did."

"I get that. I don't hold it against you to want to protect the person you love." The elder agreed, "But you're punishing Yura for crimes he's yet to commit, and he's been trying so hard to get better. I *know* you've seen how much he's progressed. He's *not* the same kid who screamed at Yuri in the bathroom in Sochi anymore."

"If he hadn't been eavesdropping on us in the onsen then this wouldn't even be an issue though." The skater pointed out, "And he's making a mountain out of a mole-hill anyway. What we said wasn't meant as an attack on him. We were just agreeing that the best thing for Yurio might be to stay on with Yakov, especially since he'd gotten so mad that I declined to be his coach. But now that he's gone off the rails about it, Yuri's getting all anxious again, and that's exactly the sort of thing I was trying to avoid *in the first place.*" He shifted his weight from one skate to the other, and slipped his arms into the sleeves of his team jacket for the warmth, "It was already enough to make me worry he might start falling on his jumps...but now he's got that head injury, too. It's too much to deal with. I'm trying to keep him distracted so he doesn't think about it."

"...Then I pose my question." Mikhail looked on squarely, "What would it take to fix this?"

"What we said wasn't offensive. He *chose* to be offended by it by creating his own context for what we meant by it and ran off without hearing anyone out. Yuri went after him, and all Yurio did was scream at him for it."

"He's more upset by how you *disregarded* him than he is by suggesting he stay in Russia." Mikhail explained, then fishing into his jacket for his phone, unlocking it and then glancing back at the man before him, "Then I'll move on to my request."

"Okay?" Viktor raised a brow behind his bangs.

The elder clicked at something on the phone's face-plate, and then held out the device for the skater to see. Viktor recognized it immediately; it was footage from the middle of the old RSF conference from just after the Barcelona Grand Prix Final. The Russian watched the old version of himself, and listened to his own words as they were spoken in his Mother Tongue.

*[Being back at my home rink will make me more accessible than ever.] The Viktor on the screen said, [I don't think there will be any problems. I'm actually hoping that both Yuris will use the opportunity to push *each other*, so maybe Yurio can score even higher in his Free Skate and try to take that record, too. I'm sure the RSF will be very happy about having a *15-year-old* who can score as well as I do at the end of my career. He's an exceptionally talented athlete, and I have no doubt that he'll be breaking records and setting trends *long after* both Yuri and I retire for good. Maybe he'll even let me choreograph something else for him in the future.]*

Mikhail pulled his phone back and clicked it off, returning it to its pocket, "Will you consider maybe choreographing for him?"

Viktor was silent for a moment, but then shrugged, "Sure."

The elder was taken aback, "...Sure? ...That's it? Not even 'let me think about it'?" He made air-
"Choreographing isn't like coaching. If I put a program together, he'll memorize it after the first or second time I show it to him. That's more-or-less what we did with 'Agape.'" The skater explained, hearing the music above finally coming to a close, and turning his eyes back out to the Swiss skater entering his final pose, "I would've said yes even if you hadn't shown me the clip. I'd forgotten all about it anyway."

"...I honestly hadn't expected you to agree right away. I was all ready to beg you just to consider it."

Slate irises turned to jade, "It'll be months before anyone has to worry about next year's programs; and like I already said...I'm not the one who's mad right now. On the other hand, I'm already Yuri's coach, and I still plan on competing to some degree next season myself. Even if I didn't have personal reasons for not wanting to be Yuri's coach...I'm already stretched thin. All three of us would suffer if I coached both of them while I'm still an active athlete, too." He turned on his blade-guards, assuming the conversation over at that point, "Besides, Yuri tried to send me home to Russia alone last year, thinking it'd be too much trouble to stay on as his coach if I decided to come back to competition. I told him he was being selfish, making that choice on his own, without even asking me first what I wanted to do. Now, he's being the complete opposite. He isn't taking himself into consideration anymore. I stopped him then, and I'll stop him again now. Maybe I'll reconsider coaching Yuri after I retire...but not before."

"...I guess that's fair." Mikhail nodded, "Thanks, Vivi."

"Don't thank me yet. It won't mean anything for me to agree to this if Yurio refuses to even talk to us."

"I'm working on that, too..." The elder explained, stepping off to catch up to his nephew again, "Actually, I take that back; Nikki is working on that."

Viktor stopped in his tracks, "Wait, what?"

She was trying, anyway. Yurio had escaped beyond her boundaries when he left out the back of the prep area...and so, she sat, waiting and wondering what to do. A few minutes passed, and Chris had finished his SP run-through. Jade eyes watched as her father and cousin came back around to the other side of the rink, the younger of the two waiting to find out who was going to get on the ice next. Mikhail glanced up and saw her, and she gave a worried look in return, shrugging to express that she'd lost the teen. When the two Russians parted ways, and the elder came back up to the mezzanine, Nikki trotted over to him and sighed, "He took off past the back door. You said not to go too far, so..."

"No, you did the right thing." The Russian set his hand behind her back and looked around, "Let's go find him. He can't have gone far since he could be called out to the ice any minute."

"Skater Otabek Altin, please enter the rink."

"...Well, that gives us a hand, too." Mikhail noted, moving off towards the rear exit with Nikkita in tow. By the time they walked to the doors, and stepped in front of them to push through, the panel was being pulled away from them by someone on the other side.

And thus, three sets of green eyes were glancing back at one another.

"Oh." Nikki looked a bit relieved, "There you are."
Yurio just looked on quietly, but then scoffed and moved around them to get by, "I just came back to watch Otabek."

"Then let's sit together." Mikhail offered, turning on his heel to go after the teen, "Yuri-"

The Russian Punk just stopped where he stood, and twisted a bit to look back over his shoulder, first staring at the lady, then at her father, "...Look, you don't have to play this game. I don't want to talk right now anyway. I just want to do my practice and then leave."

"That's fine," The elder said, "You don't have to say anything. We'll just sit with you so you're not alone."

Yurio gave a confused look, but had no answer for it. He just turned on his blades again and started walking back towards the stairs, thunk'ing down them one rubber guard at a time. Glancing around briefly, he spotted the Kazakhstani skater already on the ice, and made his way along the concrete side of the rink-wall to get back to the stands. He passed silently in front of where the other skaters were sitting in the front rows, giving Chris their compliments on his Short Program, and wondering idly why he'd gone out of his way to make a program dedicated to Viktor in the first place. Yurio paid them no attention though, simply passing them all by and waving out to Otabek when he'd seen the older skater facing his direction. To his relief, the skater waved back and gave a thumbs-up as he moved around the rink. The Russian Tiger climbed the stairs to get to the highest part of the 7-rows-tall viewing area, feeling the presence of the two figures behind him even if he didn't look back to watch them following. By the time he made it to the far corner, he ducked into the higher-level viewing box and took a spot right against the wall, putting his feet up over the edge of the short barrier and crossed his ankles.

["Requiem - Dies Irae' - specifically on YouTube channel 'fanworldmusic']

Mikhail shuffled in after and sat next to the teen, with Nikki sliding in next to her father after that. Like the elder had said, they simply sat there quietly, watching the next practice-performance without trying to start any conversation. Half of Otabek's show had gone on before any of the three did anything, though it was Mikhail raising an arm to let Nikki lean against him, and he settled it down again across her shoulder protectively. He whispered something to her that the blonde couldn't make out, but the teen looked over anyway since he could see the man leaning down to speak the words, even if he couldn't hear them.

The SP second half had barely begun, but Yurio felt like it had been forever already. He cleared his throat uncomfortably, and then mumbled a few words.

"...You say something?" Mikhail wondered, looking over at him curiously.

Yurio grumbled and grit his teeth, but then pulled his skates back over the wood railing and sat normally, "...I said thanks...for the stuffed tiger."

"Oh." The elder smiled, relieved to hear something so simple, "I'm glad you liked it. There's a white tiger version of that same plush, too, if you want it."

"...Oh. No...thanks."

"You don't want a white tiger?" Mikhail was surprised, "How come? If it's the price tag you think it has, don't worry...it's Christmas. Everyone gets a freebie this time of year."

"I don't...agree...with white tigers..." The teen said nervously, not wanting to go on a rant about it at such a time, but feeling it bubbling under the surface anyway.
"What's not to agree with?"

Yurio tossed his head back, but then twisted in his seat, "White tigers were created. Every single one of them in this world was born through the breeding of a father with a daughter tiger who carried the genes. For every 30 or so tigers born from that kind of program, only 1 of them is suited to put on display. I'll let you guess what happens to the other 29."

Mikhail was taken aback a bit, nervously looking down at his own daughter before clearing his throat, "...Uh...they don't get put on display?"

"Most are drowned, poisoned, electrocuted, or bludgeoned to death, some just for the crime of being born with orange fur instead of white. Others because they're severely deformed or sickly. The 'lucky' few who only have minor defects like crossed eyes or cleft palates might get sold to private owners. All white tigers are inbred, so even if they look cool, they shouldn't exist; they'd never survive in the wild. It's a crime against nature to breed them, especially when people lie about them being their own subspecies needing conservation. They're not, and they don't. Every one of them is a regular Bengal, and every one of them is bred for captivity." He twisted back and sat hard in his seat, pulling the front of his hoodie down a little further, his cheeks a bit pink from the embarrassment of such an outburst, "...Sorry. That was a mine-field."

"You're passionate." The silver Russian said simply, "I like it. People could learn from you."

"Wow." Nikki agreed, looking past her father, "You know a lot about tigers."

The teen just sank a bit where he sat, though that position didn't last long, making it impossible to see the ice. He pushed back up to sitting normally again soon after, as Otabek's SP was coming to a close. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the edge of the low wall, watching the older skater finish out the show, and then move back towards the rink wall for any critiques for improvement.

For a moment, Otabek was of a mind to join the Russian Tiger, but when he saw the two other figures in the viewing box with him, he thought better of it.

For a moment, Otabek was of a mind to join the Russian Tiger, but when he saw the two other figures in the viewing box with him, he thought better of it.

"Must be having a private conversation or something. I'll just find him after his own practice."

Yurio watched the man go retake his seat in the front row near the rink entrance, and waited carefully for the announcer to call the next skater. It turned out to be Viktor though, which was both an annoyance and a relief all at once. As he pushed off the top of the low wall and leaned back to slouch in his seat again, he found himself leaning right into an unexpected arm. His heart skipped a beat, but he felt the arm rise up again, settling across his shoulders instead as he tried to sit back normally.

All he could do was stare forward in stunned confusion, not quite sure whether to be angry and say something...or whether he should just stay quiet. His stupor forced the silence to last long enough for the arm to shift again, pulling back just far enough over the back of the chair so that the hand attached to the end could settle on the edge of one shoulder.

The silver skater went out onto the rink with flare, skating a few laps around it in preparation, loosening up a bit again. Before long, he finally took his place in the center of the rink and struck his introductory pose.

["History Maker' - Dean Fujioka]

Nikki peered around the front of her father's dark-colored jacket, looking at the teen for any signs of a reaction. She was sure he'd just yell or flail to get away, but was surprised to see him just sit there,
even if it *was* in wide-eyed surprise. She moved a little when she felt her father moving, too, and sat up to get out of the way.

Mikhail kept his hand softly planted on the blonde's shoulder, sitting up a bit straighter and then twisting around slowly towards him. Yurio wouldn't look back though, which wasn't all that surprising. The elder drew in a quiet breath and hedged his bets, knowing full well his next actions might leave him with claw-marks on his face if he wasn't careful. But...he leaned forward, moving his free arm in front of the tense skater, and slid the one already behind him a bit further across. Before long, Mikhail had pulled Yurio into a hug. He held there for a while wordlessly, wrapping his arms a little bit tighter when he could feel the teen holding back whatever punches he might've thrown, until he could press a cheek against the top of that blonde-haired head, the hood falling away.

"You're a good kid, Yuri." The silver Russian said, barely audible over the sound of the music, "Things are going to work out." He pulled back then, turning back in his seat to sit normally again, but kept his one arm behind the teen, resting an elbow on the back of the chair, "If nothing else...think about it all like this. When I first showed up, all Viktor wanted was for me to get hit by a bus and disappear. If the worst thing he's ever done to you is decline to be your coach, I think you got off pretty easy. I actually had to have his *permission* just to *speak* to anyone back then, especially *his* Yuri. It was all really awkward and tense. Now, I'm dropping my entire family onto his proverbial doorstep, and I didn't even ask him first. He won't admit it, but I bet he's stressed about that as much as anything."

"Viktor can be an *ass*. I've known that for a long time." The teen said stiffly, still a bit stunned by the prior hug, but finding the focus to at least move again, leaning forward to set his elbows on his knees and rest his cheeks on his balled-up fists, "But it's...not even specifically him that's gotten me all pissed off."

"What then?" Mikhail moved his hand again to set it on the teen's back, pressing gently back and forth.

Yurio drew in a sharp breath, but then turned his eyes towards the area where the other skaters were sitting, "...It...was hearing Yuri say it'd be better for me not to come at all. I could take it if it came from Viktor...*but it was Yuri...*"
Yuri watched his husband's SP with a slight hint of jealously, but tried to put it at the back of his mind. His turn was coming up soon, and it would finally be time to really put his condition to the test; not being allowed to do any jumps would be a handicap, but his spins and footwork would still be enough to push him to his limits. He had a worried look on his face as the music above entered its final few seconds.

_We were born to make history..._  
_We were born to make history..._  
_Yes! We were born to make historyyyyy..._

Viktor huffed and puffed to catch his breath, holding his arms out to the side in his last pose. He brought them both inward to fan himself with his hands though as he started making his way over to the rink exit, "Whew! That's hard to do so soon after eating."

"I hope Ciao Ciao gets here soon." Phichit commented, looking at his phone and the time-stamp for the last text message his coach had sent, "He left the Marriott 30 minutes ago but I haven't heard from him since. He might be stuck in traffic..."

"How come he's still at the Marriott?" Yuri wondered, holding out one blade-guard at a time for his partner to take.

"Oh..." The younger skater looked a bit nervous, "...The Leroys packed up so fast after JJ's accident that the ISU offered one of their vacant rooms to me and Celestino. He went to bring his stuff back and put it in the room so he wouldn't have to worry about it later."

Yuri wasn't sure which of the numerous questions that came to mind he should ask first, but he shook his head as he felt the second blade-guard pulled from his hand, "They did?" Was all he could think to say, not even specifying which 'they' he meant.

"...Yeah." Phichit nodded, "Apparently JJ's family is taking him back home later tonight."

"During the event? They don't even want to stay and watch?"

"I guess it just stings too much to know he's not participating." The Thai figure shrugged, "It's not the same as me wanting to watch when I didn't qualify before. But, now that I've taken his place, and he's too injured to even walk...maybe I can't blame him. I don't know that I'd want to be around if I were in his position."

Yuri just felt his head starting to hurt again and sighed quietly, "...Same."

"It's a wonder the ISU is even letting you skate at all, Yuri." Otabek pointed out, still sitting in his front-row seat where he'd retaken it after his own practice, leaning to rest his jaw onto the curve of his hand, "They're taking a huge risk by not contesting your wishes to participate."

The other skaters all turned to glance back at him, but none of them could really argue the point, valid as it was.

Viktor pulled his team jacket on again and set his hands over his partner's chest, sliding them up to settle on his shoulders, thumbs on either side of the man's neck, "We'll see how his SP goes. Yuri
knows I'll pull him if I'm not completely sure he can manage."

"What about you then?" The Kazakh followed-up.

The Russian held quietly for a moment, looking from Otabek to his husband's anxious face, "I won't compete either if he can't."

Otabek barely flinched, "That's what I thought."

Chris and Phichit were surprised, "What!? You can't withdraw just because of that!"

"It's not up for debate." Viktor said, proverbially putting his foot down, "If I have to force him out of the Final, then I'm not going to pour salt in the wound by competing without him. And I'm not even saying that because we're married...it's just the right thing to do. It's no different than those videos we've all seen, where track athletes will stop and go back to help carry their rivals across the finish line when they collapse. I've even seen some where they'll push their competition over the finish line first because the other person was ahead of them in the race when they fell. Besides..." He pulled his hands back and stuffed them into his coat pockets, "It would just look bad if I withdraw from the event as a coach but not as a competitor in that case. I have more responsibility than before."

"Half the people coming to watch the Final are here because of you guys, never mind your obligation to the RSF." Chris pointed out, crossing his arms, "The ISU is probably only giving Yuri a pass to try anyway because they're worried you'll do exactly what you just said you'd do. The Men's Singles event will implode on itself if a third of the competitors suddenly disappear. That'd be unfair to us, too."

"Will Skater Phichit Chulanont please enter the rink."

"Ahhhhh!" The aforementioned skater was getting nervous, "Ciao Ciao, where are you!?"

"...I'm starting to wish I went first instead..." Yuri grumbled, "Then we wouldn't even have to worry about this. I'll bet they're going to have me go last. Is the practice line-up the same as the official one for later?"

"I think so." Chris said simply, "So that means it's Phichit, Plisetsky, and then you."

"Yurio's been avoiding us as much as he can." The Japanese skater noted, looking up to the far end of the rink where he knew the younger skater had gone to hide. He could see the duo of silver-haired heads peeking slightly over the edge of the barrier wall of the viewing-box, but from his vantage on the floor, Yuri couldn't see any of the blonde, "I feel bad for yelling at him. ...I feel worse now for thinking it felt good at the time."

"I think anyone could forgive you for being testy right now." Viktor explained, reaching one hand back up to run his fingers through that black hair, careful to stroke only the unhurt side of the man's head, "I'd be cranky too if I got hurt right before an event."

"I shouldn't have done it though. I have no excuse." The younger figure lamented quietly, watching as Phichit slid out across the ice behind his husband, "That makes it twice that I've yelled at him. Some friend I am."

"Sometimes people need to hear harsh truths. You were justified both times."

"You don't even know what I said on either occasion though, Viktor."

"Maybe not...but you've yelled at me before, too. I've never held it against you."
Yuri just blinked at him, "...What? That's not true. You were mad at me after I did it before the wedding party."

The Russian just booped his nose before pulling his hand back again, "I was upset about what you said, not how you said it."

Phichit nervously shook his hands around as he meandered around the ice, looking back over his shoulder several times to see if he could spot Celestino coming through the mezzanine. He was starting to run-up the proverbial clock though, and reluctantly took his position in the center of the rink, setting a toe-pick down amidst the shallow ticks in the frost where the previous three skaters had done the same.

"Don't worry about Ciao Ciao not being here yet!" Viktor called out unexpectedly, trying to get the young skater's attention from the gap in the rink wall with a wave, "I'll watch you!"

The Thai athlete could feel his face go red; he'd frequently watched videos of Viktor and tried to emulate his jump technique, as many other skaters had, and had even gotten help with his quad Loop from the man. But actually having him offer to stand-in as a coach, even for the paltry 2 minutes and 30-or-so seconds that it was...that was uniquely different.

Then the worry set in, and Phichit's red cheeks switched over to his whole face going pale. The eager but sinister smile on the Russian's face was telling.

Oh heck! He's going to eat me alive when I get done!

['King' - Lauren Aquilina]

Yuri just fell back into one of the seats next to Otabek, slouching so far that he nearly slid right off the end of it again. He turned his head though and looked again at the viewing-box on the far side of the rink, then looked forward to where Viktor was leaning against the rink wall still, and Chris standing nearby to him.

"Don't let it bother you." Otabek said unexpectedly, watching Phichit skate, "Just go out there and do what you always do."

The older skater turned his head slightly, but then went back to center and sighed, "I feel like the success of the entire Men's Singles suddenly rests on my shoulders." He admitted reluctantly, "Chris is right. With all the pressure for Viktor and I to win Gold at all of our events, so that it'd jokingly be a competition between him and I for who takes the Gold here...if we both suddenly drop out..."

"If you two knuckleheads don't start focusing on the skating, someone else is going to come up and take the Gold from both of you." The Kazakh warned, "You're skating against three other people who've all made it to the podium, be it here or at Worlds. Your own friend is out there trying his best, too."

"I know...that's why I said it was a joke." Yuri pushed to sitting up properly, folding his hands together where they came to rest over his chest, elbows on the arm-rests between the seats, "But even the ISU made a big deal out of it. ...If Viktor pulls me, I'll have to try and convince him to compete anyway, even if it would hurt to be put on the sidelines."

"How's your head, anyway?"

The older skater glanced over at the younger, "It was bad overnight, I had a hard time sleeping...but it's gotten better throughout the day."
"You should take a nap then before our event starts."

"I was starting to think the same." Yuri nodded in agreement, "It's not like we have to be here for Opening Ceremonies."

The conversation fell quiet after that, and the music overhead played on. Yuri watched his husband carefully, knowing how the lyrics had impacted the man the last time he'd heard them. However, it seemed that the Russian was focused, eyes keenly watching the young skater on the ice. He could only wonder about the list of things Viktor would point out after the show was over...though, that seemed less important suddenly as he heard the frantic footsteps of a certain coach coming down from the second-floor prep area. He and Otabek turned their eyes to see Celestino suddenly flinging himself down onto the concrete, rushing out to rinkside as he half-panicked about getting there so late.

Viktor just turned as he heard the man coming, and clapped as he laughed about the precipitous timing, "Better late than never, I suppose. What took so long?"

Celestino heaved as he leaned forward, holding himself up with his hands on his knees, "Traffic...was bad...accident, on the snow..."

"Winter driving can be precarious." The Russian mused, resting a finger on the side of his jaw as he curled the opposite arm around himself, "But at least you're here now. I've been watching him in case you didn't get here at all."

The coach tried to catch his breath, and finally pushed to standing fully upright again, stepping past Chris and into the open gateway next to the silver skater, "Thanks for that. He's probably sweating bullets over it."

The Russian chuckled at that, "Probably."

Celestino glanced around, trying to spot the other skaters just for reference, but as he spotted Yuri sitting just to the side, he suddenly lost all focus on the ice. He put a hand on the eldest skater's shoulder and stepped off, "Keep watching."

Viktor blinked at him, and followed his path briefly before realizing what he was after.

Chris huffed a laugh, "Eyes on the prize, Mr. Coach." He grabbed the man's head from behind to swivel it back out towards the ice.

The Asian sitting in the stands just waved nervously as his former teacher came up right in front of him, hands in pockets and looking straight down at where he sat, "H-Hey, Celestino."

"I didn't get a chance to talk to you at that conference earlier this morning. How are you holding up?" The man asked casually, looking happy just that Yuri was even there.

"I'm okay. Viktor and I are going to see JJ after...Phichit-kun just told us you guys got their room."

The elder coach nodded, "Yeah, we'll have to pick up his things from your room when you have time." He took on a more serious look after that though, one hand coming out of his pocket to gesture at the skater, "How bad was the damage?"

The music was coming to a close overhead, and the Thai athlete was making his final moves.

*You can be King again...*
Yuri glanced from the ice to the man in front of him, but reached up to pull his bangs back a bit, "It looks worse than it feels right now."

Celestino eyeballed what few stitches he could see, "How far back does it go?"

The skater felt at it, fingers rubbing gently across each thin, metal clamp until he'd gone back to nearly the center-mark of his head, "About to here. Viktor spent half the morning pulling my hair out from under the staples so I wouldn't look silly coming here."

"I saw the video of the accident. Tess is probably worried sick about you right now." The coach pointed out, "I'm actually surprised anyone's letting you into the building."

Yuri shrugged, "She isn't here right now...I was told she'll be back during the Short Program though. I'm not going to let this thing get me down, at any rate. I'm still hoping for Gold."

Celestino gave one of his characteristically proud smirks, and reached down to pat the skater's shoulder, "Don't push yourself too hard. Have you done your practice skate yet?"

"No, we think I'm being put last. Yurio is the only other one who hasn-"

"GOODBYE, CRUEL WORLD..." Phichit suddenly cried out rather dramatically, arms up towards the rafters as he fell to his knees before the Russian skater-coach.

Everyone looked over at the spectacle, but Viktor just looked rather pleased with himself, "You didn't even hear the whole thing!"

The flustered skater just went down to his hands, and then further to lie flat on the ice, all but weeping, "I'M NOT MEANT FOR THIS LIFE..."

"I only meant it as a way to fine-tune things! You skate really well!" Viktor insisted, "You even snuck the quad Loop in there, which was great!"

"...It was...?" Phichit glanced up with a hopeful look in his eyes.

"You just need to position your free leg better to land it more smoothly! You wobble a lot on the exit because you don't have enough balance on the follow-through! You also need to put your landing-blade down straighter and more on the toe-pick than the rocker, so you don't lean so far down into an edge! It's supposed to be a smooth transition, not an invitation to break your ankle!"

The athlete just fell back down to the ice with a thud, "TUNNEL OF LIGHT, TAKE ME NOW..."

"Quit abusing my skater, Viktor!" Celestino teased.

"CIAO CIAO!" Phichit was immediately up on his feet, skating over to throw himself at the Plexiglas, "SAVE ME."

"Why are you clinging to the inside wall then? Come out and around." The coach deadpanned him.

"Will skater Yuri Plisetsky please enter the rink." The announcer called overhead.

Everyone by rink-side, save the coach, suddenly fell into an eerie quiet. All eyes turned up towards the viewing-box where they knew the teen had escaped to, and watched as the silver-haired figures stood up first, followed by the blonde.

"Huh, another one." Celestino commented, putting a hand on his chin, then turning to Viktor, "Is that girl a relative, too?"
The Russian blinked at him briefly, but then gave a wry nod, smiling awkwardly, "Yeah...Uncle Mimi's daughter. There's another one floating around here somewhere, and a son that stayed behind in Canada."

"You used to never have family at competition, now they're practically crawling up the walls." The elder figure mused, "Uncle since Worlds, father at NHK, cousins here...who's next? Your mother at Nationals? Grandparents at Euros?"

Yuri winced, but looked from Celestino to the man he'd been speaking to, and watched as the previously hollow-but-well-meant smile faded from the Russian's lips.

Viktor just shrugged, "I doubt it." He answered simply.

The arena sounded rather empty after that, no sound really coming from anywhere save the generators that kept the ice frozen, and the echo of the thunk noises Yurio's skates made as he plodded down the steps of the rink-side bleachers and made his way closer. By the time he'd finally made it and was shuffling past, avoiding everyone's gaze as he headed for the rink entrance, it was obvious that something had changed.

Yuri and Otabek were the first, and possibly the only ones to notice, but the Russian Punk's eyes were a bit red and he looked more exhausted than before. The two glanced at one another, but weren't sure what to say, if anything, so they just waited and watched as the blonde went to pull his blade guards off and threw himself into the rink like no one else was there. He took no time to acclimate to the ice, simply finding his place in center, swerving around to take his position, and bowed his head.
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED FIFTY NINE

Yurio lifted his eyes just long enough to spot Yakov watching him from behind the glass above the rink. Beyond the older man, and former Prima standing next to him, the teen could even see how much more crowded the mezzanine had become; it looked like a bunch of people from the press had suddenly turned up, though it wasn't entirely clear why. They were just loitering, occasionally looking out onto the ice, but otherwise just standing around like they were waiting for something.

The deep, booming echo of the start of his song reverberated through the arena, and the teen immediately withdrew his curiosity for the gathering to focus on his performance.

[‘Inner Universe’ - Origa]

Everyone at rink-side had their eyes on the blonde, watching him going through the motions for a few moments before turning back to one another. Otabek stood up though and went through them to watch from the open doorway through the wall. Yuri quietly watched him go, finding Viktor stepping into his line of sight though as he turned his head that way.

The Russian crouched down in front of him, hands coming to touch deftly to the end of his knees, rocking forward to perch on the toe of the blade-guards, "Are you ready?" The man wondered.

Yuri just blinked at him, "Sure."

"Maybe I'm more nervous than you are then."

"Ah, don't be that way." The younger figure sat up a bit straighter, sliding his fingers over the back of the Russian's hands and curled them around to hold lightly, "It'll just make me more nervous than I already am."

"No jumps."

"I know!" The skater lamented, "I'm starting to think you doubt me!"

Viktor just looked at him with that one visible eye, "I don't doubt you...but you can't stop me from worrying. What kind of husband would I be if I didn't?"

Yuri couldn't contest that, and sat back roughly against the red seat, pulling his hands back and crossing his arms over his chest as he went. The pout on his face was obvious even if he didn't know he'd put it on.

"Try not to think so much about it." The Russian advised, sliding forward to wedge himself between his partner's knees and wrap his arms around the man's back, pressing his forehead to the crinkly material of the Team Japan jacket, feeling the stark coldness of the zipper against his skin, "I just want you to play it safe. Go out there and skate like we're still just choreographing the program."

"I know..." The younger figure sighed, leaning his head back against the rear of the seat, uncrossing his arms to lay them across his partner's shoulders, "Everyone's going to be extra critical of anything and everything I do this weekend. It's hard not to think I'm going to mess up my chances just because I'm nervous about that."

"I guess that's a good problem to have though." The silver skater offered, lifting his head a bit so he
could see his spouse's face, "Being well-enough known that you have the attention of people all over the world. Everyone will be rooting for you to pull through. You can show them all how strong you are by winning Gold in spite of what happened."

Yuri glanced down at the man, sliding his left arm down enough to touch his fingers to the Russian's cheek, brushing a few loose strands of silver-grey hair over an ear, "I appreciate the sentiment...but we all know who's really going to win Gold this weekend. If I make it to the podium at all, it'll be a miracle."

"You need to believe in yourself more. Just because you've suffered a small setback doesn't mean you can't still surprise us. You only lose one point for falling on a jump, so unless you under-rotate, you can realistically still do extremely well. Remember when you tried the quad Axel at the end of Cup of China? If you only did the regular triple, it would've only been worth 8.5 points, 11 tops if you got the 3+ GOE...but you tried for the quad, got the full four and a half rotations, and even though you fell...you managed to get 14 points for your trouble. So keep trying your best. I'll stick by you. I believe you can win."

The younger figure just stewed in his anxiety for a moment, losing sight of his partner as his focus waned. The memory of all his failures through the Grand Prix Series flashed through his mind. His collapse of confidence after his Short Program in Canada, his melt-down at the late-night practice that came later, being found by his sister on the steps of the Saddledome...and being told never to throw his skates aside again unless he meant to end the relationship they symbolized. Even worse, in China, when he suffered a panic attack so sudden and unexpected that he'd collided with the rink wall, scored less than 75, and put his husband into such a depression that he'd drunkenly half-threatened to throw himself off the side of a building over it.

The cut on his forehead started to throb horribly just then, and the pain migrated down onto his right eye, but just as he was about to lift his hand to cover and soothe it, he felt a presence directly in front of him. The light behind his closed eyes dimmed, and he felt a warmth on his lips. Opening the left eye only a crack, he saw the blurry image of his husband directly in front of him, albeit too close to see much of anything except his own closed right eye.

The Russian pulled out of the kiss then and nuzzled nose-tips briefly, "Yurio's just about done. Let's stand up."

Yuri nodded, and felt those arms come away from him again, sliding down the side of his legs until they reached for his hands instead and helped him up to his feet. They shuffled across the small gap between the first-row seats and the rink-wall, moving towards the open gate, but then stopped there, listening to the last few seconds of the song as it boomed overhead. The young skater watched the ice carefully, letting himself be drawn into a hug while they waited for the end, resting his head on the front of his husband's shoulder as his arms returned the gesture.

When Yurio finally took his last pose, and the music ended, the Asian drew in a deep, nervous breath. It was almost hard to hear, over the sound of his own thundering heart, as the young Russian came off the ice and Otabek commented on the teen's handful of falls and missteps.

The blonde just grunted and hastily pulled on his team jacket again, trying so hard to get his first blade-guard on in a rush that it took longer than it would've if he'd just done it normally. When he looked up to see Yuri pulling out of the hug, anxiously waiting for the announcer to call his name, he grit his teeth and looked away again. The second blade-guard was harder to place than the first, and Yurio barked out to be left alone when Otabek dared to offer help.

The Kazakh just gave a hurt look, but then crossed his arms, "Chill out, before you hurt yourself. It was just practice. People nail stuff in competition all the time even if they flub it during warm-ups."
Yuri suddenly met the teen's gaze as he was pulling his coat off, pausing in the middle of the act while the sleeves were still half-hanging to his arms. For a moment, both skaters were paralyzed and speechless, only permitted to unfreeze again when Viktor moved to take the jacket. Yuri glanced away after that, pulling the rest off his elbows and hands, then holding to the outside lip of the rink-wall to pull the rubber bars from his golden blades. He watched the angry Russian Punk stepping away, finally having attached the guards to his own skates before loudly stomping off. Yurio passed where Mikhail and Nikkita had been waiting for him, moving towards the staircase to practically run up the length of them. Yuri drew in another nervous breath, feeling his partner's hands rubbing his shoulders a few times before sliding them down to his back to usher him closer to the door.

The Rozovksy patriarch looked from the younger Yuri to the older, and huffed a loud sigh to himself, "I don't know that this is a fixable situation with the time we have." He commented quietly, "Yura wants to get the Hell outta Dodge, and those two plan on seeing Leroy when they're finished. We won't have a chance to get them together before everyone's gone."

Nikki rubbed her arms for the warmth, but nodded, "Maybe we should let Yura calm down for a bit anyway. Everyone's so highly strung because of everything else going on already..."

"Yeah..."

"Will skater Yuri Nikiforov please enter the rink." The announcer finally called.

The nervous athlete drew in a quick breath, rubbing his hands together, "This is it..."

"Take it easy, Yuri." Mikhail called, getting the skater's attention briefly, "You aren't being scored so don't take it too seriously."

He nodded anxiously before finally stepping around the edge of the gateway, setting one blade onto the ice and then pausing. He twisted back around and looked up the two inches to his husband's one visible eye. Holding there for a second, he reached his hand forward to slide it under the man's arm, settling it on Viktor's hip before leaning in to get one last quick kiss before finally pushing out to make his few laps around the rink. It took until he was on the far end of the arena before he looked up high enough to see something he hadn't expected.

The entire length of the mezzanine above the medic's area was lined with video cameras and people holding up smartphones. Coaches, choreographers, even other skaters who had practiced earlier in the morning...and on the far end, with a hand against the glass, was Minako, with Mari and Viktoria close by. A few members of the press had started to filter down to rink-side as well, setting up cameras behind where Viktor and the others were standing.

Yuri just froze in the center of the rink, a look of horror crossing his face. Even worse, after a few seconds of stillness on his part, his music started to play overhead.

[Try Everything' - Zootopia OST]

Oh oh oh oh oohhhh...

Startled, Yuri's skates went out from under him and he went tumbling gracelessly to his backside. The impact knocked the wind out of him, and he sat there in pained silence for a few seconds before he could hear a second set of skates scratching their way along the ice towards him.

"CUT THE MUSIC!" Viktor's voice called out urgently, coming to a stop directly next to his partner, sliding down to a knee with urgency as one hand settled on the younger skater's shoulder, "Yuri!"
A few seconds passed before the audio finally stopped, and the arena was plunged back into awkward silence. Yuri could hear the far-off sound of Chris trying to shoo some of the reporters away, but it wasn't working out too well. He just felt his head swimming and a ringing noise grew in his ears, even as Viktor helped him sit forward with a hand sliding down his back for support.

"Wh-where did they all come from?" The skater wondered, holding his head as it started to hurt again, "Why are they all here suddenly?"

The Russian glanced back at the mob, seeing the flashes of cameras from the second floor, but then turned back to his spouse, "Forget about them. They're just looking for an easy story. Drumming up drama where they don't need to."

"...As if I didn't already have enough to worry about! Now I've got the media breathing down my neck just during practice!?" Yuri was already getting rather agitated, "This isn't supposed to be a spectator moment!"

"I know...but there isn't much of a chance that we can get them to leave. We'll have to press on in spite of them."

"I can't skate like this." Yuri started, feeling a tightness in his chest, "I'm going to be tripping all over myself."

Viktor gave a worried look, even more so than he had been already, "Just breathe." He rubbed that spot on his partner's back where he'd settled his hand before, but then pushed to standing, even as he was leaning far forward to stay close. Stepping gingerly on his toe-picks, he forced Yuri to turn fully around, putting their backs to the audience before finally moving directly in front of the man again and kneeling down, "Clear your mind. It's just us out here now." He reached forward to put his hands over his husband's ears, seeing the dark circles under Yuri's eyes. For a moment, the previous year's Cup of China garage-moment was flashing through the Russian's mind, and the terrified look that Yuri had given in those few seconds when he'd pulled his ear-plugs out to hear the cheering from the crowd. Viktor watched those nervous brown eyes rise to meet his own, but in that moment, instead of merely offering that kiss to console the man, he just leaned forward and gave it. He held there until he could sense the worried look on his partner's face ease up a bit, and moved instead to press their foreheads together, still holding his hands over the man's ears, uncovering them only in his own direction, "I'll skate it alongside you, okay? Just like we used to. We'll do it together."

Yuri nervously nodded, "O-Okay..."

Viktor could feel the relief in his partner's trembling frame, and moved to stand up again, trailing his fingers down the man's shoulders and arms to take his hands and pull him up as well. When Yuri was safely upright, the silver legend stroked the man's cheek and kissed him quickly one more time before stepping just to the left, "When you're ready."

Minako had a nervous look on her face, brows furrowed as she looked on through the glass to where the pair were standing with their backs towards them. She felt a hand come up against her back, and looked back quickly to spot Mikhail there coming up behind her, wedging himself into the corner where the windows met the wall. She drew in a breath and leaned back against him, "This must be overwhelming for him.

"I think Vivi's got it under control." The elder Russian offered, clasping one thumb in the palm of the opposite hand where he wrapped his arms around the woman's sides, "Yuri just needs a second to get his head in the game."

"He'd never be able to manage this on his own... His anxiety would've gotten the better of him by
now if not for Viktor."

"That's what he's there for." Mikhail agreed, thinking back on a certain interview the skaters had given at Trophée de France, "...Yuri said something recently that seems truer now than it did before."

"What's that?"

"Sometimes...there's a place you can't reach unless you have a dream too large to bear alone." The man repeated, "Everything on the ice is 'love.'"

"I think they're almost ready. Look, pipaw." Viktoria pointed, both hands on the glass where she was trying to see down, "Viktor's coming back."

The silver skater shrugged out of his team jacket a second time, skating past the rink-wall opening to toss the garment towards Chris, then rounded all the way back out to center again. Frost flew from his blades as he twisted to stop where he'd been standing before, reaching to take his partner's outstretched hand again and stepping into position.

Yuri stepped a bit further to the right, almost too far away to be able to hold his husband's hand anymore, but giving it a light squeeze before finally letting it go and stepping into his starting pose. Viktor watched him closely, giving him a few moments to catch his breath before setting his own skates into their proper place. When Yuri gave the nod, the Russian lifted his head and waved an arm to whoever was watching from the control room.

The crowd in the prep area was buzzing with excitement, cameras rolling as everyone focused on the ice. No one was speaking though; focus was like a laser. Everyone wanted to know whether the injured skater could manage to get through his program. Minako had her phone in hand, loaded up to Instagram where a post from a fan-page was linking to a LiveStream video; the caption below it read *Yuri Nikiforov GPF Short Program Official Practice: The Men's Singles event rides on his shoulders. Watch now!*

On the far end of the wall of windows, Yurio pushed his way through the press, forcing his path until he could finally see. The music started half a heartbeat later...and the two skaters started the dance.
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED SIXTY

Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh

The duo of skaters raised their right hands up, left skate twisting in an arc behind them, pulling each of them into a slow rotation as they brought their hands back down again.

Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh

Golden blades pushed into reverse, both arms each twisting and rising by their sides, sweeping low as they turned.

Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh

They kicked their left legs out, using the momentum to spin twice in a pseudo-twizzle.

Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh

The audience was eager, practically squishing themselves up against the glass or pressing in closer to the rink wall. The first jump of the program was coming, but no one knew what Viktor's rules had been...so when the pair made the entry-motion for the triple Axel, and then simply bunny-hopped through a half-rotation instead, people made incredulous looks and glanced at one another in disbelief.

I messed up tonight, I lost another fight, I still mess up but I'll just start again.

The beat of the music slowed a little, and the pair pressed into a dance element; they twisted and turned, moving hips and legs more than arms, blades swinging down to bounce off the ice and send shards of frost in every direction, hitting down with every other beat of the song.

I keep falling down, I keep on hitting the ground, I always get up now to see what's next.

They twisted out and paused close to the far end of the rink, hands moving from above themselves, down their cores to settle on their hips, swiveling their lower halves before bringing their hands up again as they rotated in place. On the last beat, they side-clapped their hands, and took off again.

Viktor glanced aside, knowing the first spin was coming up, and worrying about it nearly as much as he had the jumps he'd previously banned. His partner's body-language felt encouraging though, and Yuri stepped into the combo; camel variant, twisting into a sit-spin, switching to rotate on the other blade while pulling the first one underneath himself, then rising into a scratch spin, pushing out in preparation of what would've not-only been the program's first quad, but first combo-jump as well.

I won't give up, no I won't give in, 'til I reach the end and then I'll start again
No, I won't leave, I wanna try everything, I wanna try even though I could fail.

The quad-triple combo was, like the triple Axel, reduced to two small bunny-hops. Yuri grit his teeth, hating every second of the missed opportunity, but grudgingly following orders anyway. The closest thing to a jump that he was allowed to do was coming up in a moment.

I won't give up, no I won't give in, 'til I reach the end and then I'll start again
No, I won't leave, I wanna try everything, I wanna try even though I could fail
The duo scissor-kicked into the flying camel spin; Viktor rotated more slowly than before, watching how the other figure wobbled a bit to regain balance after the landing. Yuri's spin suffered for it, slowing down until he could transition to a different move.

Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh
Try everything
Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh
Try everything

He hopped and built up speed again on the other foot. The Russian pulled through the foot-change as well, but stayed slow on purpose to keep an eye out.

Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh
Try everything

Yuri reached back for his blade, pulling the whole leg up until he could feel the uncomfortable stretch. He'd done his best to become more flexible over the summer, but it was still a challenge for some of the more split-like maneuvers. Still, he pulled hard until the blade was up behind his head, rotating through the Biellmann spin.

Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh

Just as it had done when he first practiced it, holding his head back for the Biellmann made Yuri dizzy, and his current condition didn't make it any easier to deal with. Before he could do anything to stop it, his hand lost its grip on the blade, and the skater went spiraling down to the ice, spinning out in a dizzy haze even as the music kept on playing above.

The audience and media alike were as anxious as they'd been before the first 'jump,' hardly allowing themselves to draw breath again until the figure picked himself up again and refused to quit.

Look how far you've come, you filled your heart with love,
Baby, you've done enough, take a deep breath.

Viktor felt the relief as much as anyone, but was still nervous about the spin-out. The Ina Bauer was next; easier in every possible way, and they glided in tandem across the hoarfrost, blades scratching long white lines as they went. They twisted around and rotated out of it, moving along the rink wall to go faster again.

Don't beat yourself up, don't need to run so fast, sometimes we come last, but we did our best.

The pair suddenly came to an abrupt stop, frost breaking away from their blades; they stomped down three time with the last beats of the music, then twizzled off again towards the closer end of the rink.

I won't give up, no I won't give in, 'til I reach the end and then I'll start again
No, I won't leave, I wanna try everything, I wanna try even though I could fail

The side-by-side Charlotte spiral was next, the pair sliding along the long end of the rink as their left legs went straight up into the air, leaning forward and down until each of them was grabbing the boot on their right ankle.

Viktor pushed back up after about 20ft, getting ready for the next half bunny-hop with the backwards slide...but...

Minako flung herself at the glass, "Don't you even think it, Yuri!"
They suddenly heard the sound of a toe-pick, and the Russian barely had time to glance up before the blur of the younger skater going airborne caught his eyes. He could hardly believe it, and just kept sliding backwards as the jump practically carried out in slow motion as he went right by. He ran into the rink wall at the same time Yuri landed, and the shock of it made the legendary skater stumble, knocking him to the ground and forcing him to miss the result of the Lutz.

The sound of the crowd gasping couldn't tell him one way or another what happened, especially since half the voices that spoke were calling out each of their names. By the time he regained his focus and looked up, Yuri was already getting back up to his own feet and was skating off again.

*I'll keep on making those new mistakes, I'll keep on making them every day...*

*I can't believe he did that...* The Russian thought, almost angrily, but he quickly pushed up to his blades again and rushed out to catch up.

They both leaned back into the wide outside spread-Eagle, spinning at the end of it, then digging a toe-pick down to stop again.

*Those new mistakes*

Shoulder waggle.

The ballerina on the mezzanine was still somewhat stunned by the sight of the jump. She pulled her hands back off the windows and set them on either side of her head again as she fell back against the body waiting behind her, "...That was *so incredibly reckless!* Viktor's going to be mad!"

They descended low into the last required element of the Short Program; the 3rd spin. Flying and combo had already been knocked out, so all that was left was the sit. The shoulder-waggle pushed forward into a brief forward arc, sliding through the cross-over, and stroking into the rotation, descending evenly as one leg stuck straight out in a standard position, heel-pick narrowly gliding over the surface of the ice.

*Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh*

*Try everything*

The standard sit-spin twisted into a variant, left leg crossing in front of the right as their cores twisted over that in turn, left arm in the air, right pointing down towards the ice. The left leg then swiveled around, taking position on the ice for the foot-change, and continuing through the rotations in a broken-leg twist variant.

*Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh*

*Try everything*

The spin ended and the pair slowly rose back up to standing, twisting off with the free-leg swinging outward. They slid down the center of the rink, moving their hands up against their sides as they moved.

*Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh*

*Try everything*

Gold blades scratched and rotated the skaters, and they each lifted their left arms up behind themselves as the right arms went low in front, bowing low as they moved forward.

*Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh*
One final twist, and they stood with their backs towards the audience like at the start, but they each glanced up and past their left shoulders. The left hands came up as their skates set down for the final pose, and the music finally ended.

*Try everything.*

The audience was visibly relieved that the whole thing was over, but then something *almost* worse than that started up instead. Yuri twisted around where he stood so he could lean down and brush the frost from his pants, then paused there with his hands grabbing just above the knees so he could catch his breath. When he finally lifted up and looked towards his coach, his eyes got big and a nervous sweat beaded on his skin.

Viktor had a somewhat-unhappy look on his face, and his arms were crossed tightly over his chest, "I specifically told you not to jump. And you jumped anyway."

The younger figure pushed to standing upright, but put his hands together as though in apology, "I know! But I had to! I was going crazy!"

"You fell out of a *spin*, Yuri. What made you think attempting a quad was a good idea? You could've been hurt! There's no way to know you could've controlled that fall!" Viktor pointed out, hands going to his hips instead, "The Biellmann still makes you dizzy even when you're perfectly fine, but you have a head injury! You know you're vulnerable right now!"

"I felt like I could do it!"

*"It was a quad LUTZ!"* The Russian went on, right hand going out towards the skater as he took on an exasperated look, "You hit the rink wall the last time you did that one!"

"I know, but I had to try!"

"And you fell anyway!" Viktor wasn't sure if he was more upset than angry, but he felt a tightness in his chest. The gawking of the onlookers meant little and nothing at that moment, "You couldn't have done it on the Axel instead!? You just had to do it on the hardest jump in the latest part of your whole program!"

Yuri went down to his knees, fingers clasping together as he all but begged, "I'm sorry! I did what you wanted from the start but the Lutz was my last chance!"

A pale hand went back up to Viktor's forehead and he turned away from the defiant skater bitterly, not even sure what else to say.

*"Please* don't pull me from the Final, Viktor!"

The media and spectators were stunned into silence as they heard the lamentations go on.

"I just don't even know what to do." The silver skater said, pinching the bridge of his nose as he half-turned-away from his partner, "If you won't *listen* to me when it matters *the most*..."

"...Viktor...!" Yuri pleaded.

The Russian could hardly think straight through all the frustration buzzing in his head, but when he opened one eye, he suddenly became acutely aware of all the other eyes on him, wondering if this would be the moment the Men's Singles event would officially collapse. The other skaters who'd waited after their earlier-morning practice, the coaches, choreographers, and sponsors who'd been there for the Men's practice, even the other competitors...Chris, Otabek, Phichit...Viktor could even
see Yurio gaping at him from the far left side of the mezzanine. The Russian grit his teeth and shook his head, "I can't make a decision right now."

"That's almost worse than pulling me!" The younger figure said in disbelief.

Slate eyes turned harshly towards him, "Well, I'm angry at you! If you want me to pick one way or another right now then I'll just yank you from the line-up and be done with it! If you want to keep competing, then give me ten minutes to figure out whether you're defying me because you're being selfish again or because you want to hurt me."

"What..." Yuri was aghast, "I would never do anything to hurt you on purpose! I just want to win!"

"Well you're not going to win if you're jumping your way to the hospital again!"

Chris was already setting blades to ice by then, and Phichit wasn't far behind. They each went towards their respective friends to stop the fighting, with the Swiss skater throwing a certain black and red jacket at the Russian's head to pull him out of his cantankerous mood. By the time Phichit was sliding down to one knee towards Yuri, Chris was already pushing Viktor back towards the rink wall like the man was an obstinate penguin.

Yuri just sighed heavily and went down to his elbows on the ice, "...I messed up..."

The Thai skater pat his back gently, "He'll get over it. He's way more sensitive about your condition than he would be if he was just a regular coach that you'd hired through the ISU."

"...I know, but still..."

"YOU CAN'T MAKE ME GET OFF THE ICE UNLESS I'M READY TO GET OFF THE ICE." Viktor barked, fingers clawing to the edge of the open doorway even as Chris was still trying to push him through. The Russian was practically sideways over the younger skater's shoulder, legs kicking where they'd been tilted off the ground.

"Let go of the door, Viktor."

"I'M OLDER THAN YOU IDOWHATIWANT."

The blonde just raised a brow at him...and reached one hand forward, moving it up to Viktor's ribs and touching delicately. The Russian squeaked loudly and both hands came down as he reactively jammed his elbows down against his sides to protect them. Chris just casually hoisted him higher on that same shoulder and moved off again after that. Viktor simmered indignantly in his defeat, crossing his arms over the man's back as he watched the arena pass him by in reverse.

Otabek gawked at the duo in stunned silence.

"It's like he's done that before."

Phichit laughed nervously, but clicked into his phone, "It's only about 1:15 right now...we still have the rink for another 45 minutes. Let's just do some laps to cool-down."

Yuri sat back, pushing up onto his hands as his knees got colder through his pants, "Did I at least get all four rotations in before I fell?"

"I'm not sure." The Thai figure answered honestly, pushing to stand up and reaching his hand down to offer it. "I actually closed my eyes as soon as I realized you were gonna go for it. You shocked Viktor so much that he forgot to brake, and backed right up into the rink wall."
The older skater gawked at him in surprise, twisting his head around to where Chris had finally panted the Russian into a seat in the 6th row, behind the hockey players' rink-side waiting-box. The man still had his arms crossed and he looked particularly irritated, though by then it was more at the Swiss man than anything else.

"Are you going to calm down?" Chris wondered, sitting in a seat next to the older athlete, resting a cheek against the knuckles of one hand where he'd bent that elbow over the back-rest, "Viktor."

"I don't like you right now."

"Viktooorrrrr. You're overreacting."

The Russian just buckled down, crossing his arms even tighter and slouching a little.

Chris just smiled.

Yakov shook his head, looking out through the glass at his former prized student, "He still has so much to learn about being a coach. He has to learn how to separate himself from his emotions if he wants to be effective as a teacher."

Lilia just huffed half a laugh at that quietly.

The gruff older man turned to look for his own athlete, spotting Yurio sitting on a couch nearby with his back to him, "Yuratchka, you should use the rest of the practice period to work on your jumps."

"I'll work on them later. I just want to go." The teen answered simply, already having his skates off and stuffed into his backpack. He rose to stand, pulling the bag over a shoulder, "Mikhail...I need to get my stuff from your room."

The elder silver Russian looked up and then over, past Minako's shoulder to where he'd heard the voice calling his name. He looked then to his two girls, and back out onto the rink, spotting Yuri finally back on his feet and meandering around slowly with Phichit. All around them, the media mob was starting to disperse, many wondering whether they should wait for Viktor's decision or if it was even likely to come that quickly. With a sigh, the Russian reached up to adjust his flat-cap and pushed off the wall to stand normally, "Alright...I'm coming. Girls, ladies, let's go."
Yakov watched in confused silence as Yurio walked out of the back of the prep area without another word, and without an explanation as to his behavior. Seeing the two young teen ladies going after him was a bit confusing as well; in his mind, Yakov knew exactly who they were...the silver-grey hair made that plainly obvious. However, it made their existence no-less easy to reconcile.

Vitya spent 2/3rds of his life avoiding the very concept of family, and yet now, members of it seem to be falling from the sky like rain.

He glanced out through the glass wall to where Viktor was being 'held hostage' in the bleachers by his Swiss friend.

Everything is changing so fast for him. I wonder if he even realizes?

The elder coach tapped the front of his hat before moving towards the stairwell that lead down to rink-side, leaving Lilia to her own devices for a while. The woman's lime-green eyes watched him go, curious, but not so much to follow him. When the older man stepped down onto the polished concrete floor, he spotted Viktor's blade-guards still perched on the lip of the rink-wall, leaning against a pair he could only assume were Yuri’s. He grabbed for the rubber bars that he knew he recognized and started making his way for the bleacher stairs.

Viktor was already keen on the man's path, but most of his focus was still on the delirium of having witnessed his partner vaulting into the quad Lutz despite his promise not to jump during practice. His one uncovered eye followed the defiant young skater as he traced slow paths around the rink with Phichit. Every so often, Yuri would glance back up at him, but he’d look away again quickly for fear of the proverbial 'resting bitch-face' that the Russian bore.

Chris looked between the two quietly for a while, still half-smiling at Viktor's rather childish behavior, but then lifted his cheek off of where it had been resting against his knuckles, and reached that hand over to nudge the Russian's shoulder, "Your face is going to get stuck like that."

"He promised me he wouldn't jump." Viktor said sternly, "And he jumped anyway."

"I know."

"Doesn't he understand how important it is that he give himself as much time to recover as he can, before he doesn't have a choice anymore?" The silver skater continued, finally calm enough that he could speak in a more mature tone, "It's like he thinks this is some game."

Chris shrugged and replaced his knuckles under his cheek lazily, "So far as I'm aware, Yuri doesn't remember anything from the accident. He was just putting on his skates in one instant, and woke up in a hospital bed under an unfamiliar ceiling the next."

"He has staples in his head. He's also seen the video of the fall. How can he not act like it happened in the face of all the evidence?"

"I'm not saying he disbelieves it happened." The younger skater explained, "I'm just saying that he might be approaching it a bit differently than you are. He's experiencing the pain of the accident...you experienced the fear of it, and in a way, that's much worse. You went on for hours not knowing what was going to happen. To him, it happened in a heartbeat...a flash of black and a
change of scenery."

Viktor slouched even further in his seat, carefully setting the naked gold blades against the back-rest of the seat in front of him, "He's so difficult to read right now." He muttered in frustration, "Ever since he woke up, his mood swings like a pendulum... I know it's normal, that's what the docs said to expect, but..." His tone was even quieter then, his RBF switching to something more anxious and worried.

Chris looked over at him, "But?"

The Russian waited a moment, then drew in a breath, "I don't know what I'm doing." He admitted sullenly, "Even this morning..."

"Mhm?"

He hesitated again, but closed his eyes and just said the words, "Sometimes he just...wants to be intimate because it makes him feel better in his head. He wanted that before we went to that pseudo-press-conference. But I just...I couldn't do a thing to please him, and it's been killing me." He perched his elbows on the arm-rests and created something of a screen over his eyes where he laced his fingers together above them, pressing thumbs and the sides of his hands against his forehead, "It was so bad that even I couldn't finish... I've never had to fake it before with him, but for the sake of getting to that meeting on time..."

"Mh..."

Viktor grumbled a bit more, "He said he got what he needed out of it, but I feel like I lied to him anyway."

"Are you using condoms?" The Swiss figure asked point-blank, his expression not even changing as he spoke.

The Russian peeked out from under the veil of fingers, giving a confused look, "...No? We're exclusive. What difference does it make?"

"If you aren't, then he knows you didn't finish, and he isn't holding it against you."

"Maybe he just isn't admitting it." Viktor went back to his brooding posture.

"Or maybe what's happening on the ice right now is analogous to what happened in bed." Chris offered, "So he's trying to make it up to you by showing you that he's not completely broken."

"He's just scaring me now." The silver Russian sighed, pushing up a little as he saw Yakov getting closer out the corner of his uncovered eye, "I'm really trying to keep my shit together, but inside I'm completely freaking out at this point. I want to withdraw him but I just...I can't stand to break his heart like that... He was up in the middle of the night crying because of it. He's absolutely terrified that all the pain and struggle of the GP Series will be for nothing now."

Rubber blade-guards were handed to him by the quiet older coach, and Viktor took them just as quietly, putting them into place before setting his skates down properly to the floor. Yakov took the seat next to him.

"I want to do right by him..." The silver skater went on, "As his coach, I know I shouldn't let him skate. But as his partner, I know I can't stop him. I'm trying to find some kind of happy medium where I just do my best to make it so he doesn't get hurt again..."
"Vitya," The elder coach finally spoke, pulling the dark hat off his head and setting it on the end of one knee, "You still have so much to learn about coaching."

"I know..."

"I can tell that you've tried to forbid Yuri from doing jumps,"

"'Tried' being the operative word." Viktor confirmed bitterly.

"But you know better than anyone that telling a young and promising athlete that they're not allowed to do something isn't going to stop them." Yakov explained, "That spirit of rebellion is practically at the core of your entire being."

Slate eyes just stared forward, looking at the ice, though nothing in particular upon it.

"And if you don't have the guts to pull Yuri from the event, then you're going to have to do something almost as drastic to deal with that."

Both skaters looked over at the man, each wondering what that 'something' might be.

Yakov kept looking straight though, watching the three competitors going about their idle business on the ice, "Admit to yourself the uncomfortable truths about what this event is. We've already lost one competitor to injury, and were lucky to have the 7th place finalist in the building to pick up the slack. But Yuri is going to feel the weight of the entire Grand Prix on his shoulders. ...I overheard you talking about it earlier, that you would withdraw as well if you felt no other choice but to pull him. The Men's event will be cancelled if there are only four participants. What do you think that's going to do to that kid's head?"

"That's part of why I'm so mad at him right now." Viktor explained, "Trying that quad Lutz when I specifically told him not to do jumps... I know he just wanted to prove to himself that he could still do it, but to me, it's just one more reason why I should force him out. But then it'd just be this huge, ugly fight where Yuri blames himself for what happens after that, and I just...can't do that to him..."

"You did yourself a disservice by falling in love with your student, Vitya."

"...Other way around." The skater corrected quietly, "I fell for him long before I went to Hasetsu. Coaching him was just an excuse to be with him."

"That's a fine grave you've dug for yourself then."

"...I know..." Viktor pushed to sit further upright, but then leaned forward to set his crossed arms over his legs, staring down at the floor between his boots, "I just don't know how to be effective as both a coach and a husband now. To do the right thing as one would be to betray him as the other. I can't win..."

"You walk a fine line, that much is true." The elder agreed, "Maybe you've taken on more than you can handle."

"It was so much easier last year." The younger Russian sighed, lifting his head a bit to look down at the rink briefly, then aside to his former coach, "This whole season so far...at every single event, something has happened. It feels like it's just gotten worse and worse each passing week. If I retire after the Final, it'll be because I just can't deal with the stress anymore."

"That isn't all you've been dealing with." Yakov pointed out, clasping his fingers together above his
lap casually, "Is it?" His tone was more of an invitation to elaborate than to be inquisitive or curious.

Viktor blinked at him, and turned his head out to the rink again, watching where Yuri was practicing a few simple moves in the field; a mohawk, a 3-turn, cross-overs, and the like. He shook his head and lowered his gaze again, "No... I was already mentally and physically exhausted from the actual bad things that happened this season already, but now I just feel beyond drained. I have no energy left in my spirit to care about anything other than Yuri, and even that feels like less than it should be." He sighed and ruffled his hair with one hand, combing his bangs with his fingers idly, "I'm so depleted emotionally right now. I had a brief second-wind after my last Free Skate, but now I'm empty. I'm not even running on fumes at this point... I'm just done..."

"What else is going on?"

Viktor huffed a hollow laugh, "If I get started, I'll never shut up."

"You're a dam bursting at the edges. If you don't relieve some of the pressure, you're going to burst, and then you won't be any good to anybody." Chris pointed out, poking him in the side lightly with one finger.

The Russian turned one eye towards him, looking through the gaps in his hair, but then looked down again and shook his head lightly, "...If that's what you want." He leaned back to slouch against the chair, one hand coming up to pinch at the opening in his team jacket where he'd never bothered to zip it closed, "...Uncle Mimi plans to move to Hasetsu. Him and Minako-sensei are a serious thing now, to the point where they're engaged. On the surface, I'm happy for him, for both of them... but... way deep down, I'm just watching everything play-out exactly how I warned him that it better not."

"How do you mean?" The Swiss figure wondered.

"When Mimi first turned up, and for a really long time after that, I was worried he was trying to snake his way into my life for some nefarious, sinister reason..." Viktor started, thinking back on it like it had just happened the day before, "But the thing is, he was my hero when I was a kid. I have more memories of him than I do my own parents. But... he left me. I was barely 5 years old and he turned my entire existence upside down. It took years to pick up the pieces. I was lucky to have found skating when I did...I'm not sure I'd still be here if not for the ice. It took until the end of Trophée de France just to trust him enough to regard him as anything other than 'Uncle.'"

"...Trophée de France was 3 weeks ago." Chris pointed out, "That guy's been hovering since Worlds."

"And in 3 weeks, he's gone from being this on-again-off-again long-lost relative that I barely know... to dragging my father to NHK, and now... bringing almost his entire family to my home. He's weaving himself so deeply into my family that I can't stop it anymore, or even slow it down. I just..." He drew in a long breath and exhaled it in almost a whined tone, "... I feel like I've completely lost control of the situation. All I can do is cling to Yuri and hope that I can salvage some kind of normalcy with him so I can ignore the rest. On top of that... now Yurio is moving to Hasetsu, too, and I just..."

"What?" Yakov turned his head slowly, "Say that last part again?"

Viktor cautiously lifted his gaze, giving a confused look, "... Yurio... is moving... to Hasetsu... too?"

"When? Why? Who decided?"

The Russian side-eyed his Swiss friend worriedly, "He hasn't told you?"
"This is the first I've heard."

"Ah Hell." Viktor lamented, slouching yet again, almost sliding off the end of the seat if not for his knees brushing up against the chair in front of him, "I thought he would've told you by now. He's been cantankerous for days because of stuff relating to it."

"He's always cantankerous." Yakov pointed out, "Explain."

The young Russian skater whined quietly, "...Uncle Mimi suggested Yurio live with him and Minako, to give him the experience of a 'real family,' before he's too old to make the most of it. He agreed, and thought to ask me to be his new coach in Hasetsu...but I declined, and now it's the whole thing has turned into this giant, stressful shit-show."

The elder coach listened closely.

"Mimi's been trying to sort things out, but Yurio's furious at me for refusing him, and he's taking it out on Yuri, too, because Yuri had the gall to suggest that maybe things would be better if Yurio stayed in St. Petersburg." Viktor went on, crossing his arms over his chest, "I'm so tired from everything else that I can't muster the energy to care about what Yurio thinks of me right now...but the way he makes Yuri feel bothers me a lot. I get that Yuri means a lot to him these days, and I respect that, but for all of his gains since last year...Yurio still has a penchant for saying incredibly insensitive things when he gets a wild hair up his arse about something, and when he gets into one of those moods, he's absolutely vicious, even to Yuri. I'm not going to be the reason that the opportunity arises for it to happen on a regular basis." He tilted his head towards his former coach, "The last time the two of them talked, they screamed at each other. The time before that, Yurio did all the screaming, and Yuri came away from it in tears. Am I supposed to just sit back and let it happen because they're 'friends'??"

Yakov drew in a stiff breath, trying to take in all the information and process it. He just shook his head and reached a hand over to pat his former pupil's knee, "Yuratchka is a hand-full, that's obvious. But...and this is just a thought...that might only be when you're around."

Viktor huffed, "Mimi once said the same thing."

"When Yuri trains in Russia, you're a thousand miles away. He's calm, collected, focused even. I've even seen him smile on occasion, and laugh once in a while, too. As soon as you two are in the same room though, it's like bombs go off. It's entirely possible that him and your Yuri can be good friends...but not if you're there."

"Sounds like Yurio needs to do a Rage Skate like Viktor did." Chris suggested idly, "Just put it all out there and then let it go, for good and all."

"Hmph..." The silver skater huffed.

Yakov half-nodded, "In either case...it sounds like you have a full plate. For the remainder of the weekend, think only about the competition. That reduces your load to only two problems...yourself, and Katsuki. Nothing else matters except figuring out which of you is getting on that podium tomorrow night, and doing so in the safest possible way. You said that Mikhail is trying to sort Yuri out...so let him. I'll be having my own chat with him at some point, given light on these new circumstances."

Viktor gave a nervous look, "...Could you...maybe not mention it?"

"I can't unreact to this news, Vitya." Yakov said, pushing to stand up again, lifting his hat back to his
head.

"I know, but...maybe he had his reasons for not telling you yet. If you go to him with the knowledge you have about his plans, it'll come across like you think he was lying to you through omission. Then he'll figure out it was me who told you, and it'll be another huge problem to add to the list of reasons why he hates me." The skater explained, sitting up a bit straighter, "...I'd like to attempt to get through this weekend without having more problems arise. So if you really want me to be able to focus on getting Yuri and I through to the end of the competition...please don't tell Yurio about what you know."

Dark eyes looked down from under the brim of the black hat, but the coach drew in a loud breath, and then nodded as he exhaled, "...Fine. Then you do me a favor and go down there and help your student prepare for tonight. He's not learning how to manage his situation by doing footwork drills. He needs his coach, and you only have 30 minutes left before the rink is closed."

Crystal blue eyes opened wide, and Viktor rose up to his feet; Chris did the same soon after. The Russian stepped forward, wrapping his thin arms around the gruff older man's thick frame, "Spasibo, Yakov. You're still the best coach I've ever had." He quickly leaned to the side to kiss the man's cheek, and then swiftly moved to get between him and the lower row of seats, blade-guards thunk'ing across the floor as he moved.

Yakov watched him go in solemn quiet, humming a breath to himself.

Vitya...
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED SIXTY TWO

For lack of wanting to make Viktor even more upset, Yuri resigned to avoiding jumps for the rest of the practice period. Instead, he focused on the few things he could work on, and after clearing his head with the mindless reminder of all the different moves in the field, decided to work on the one move that had given him the most grief since the beginning...the Bielmann spin.

Slowly working his way up to it, he pushed into a quick turn, keeping it simple with a fully-upright scratch spin...and tilted his head back to look directly at the ceiling. He could feel his head starting to swim already and quickly looked down again, slowing down until he could set a toe-pick down, and held his head with both hands. The world spun more than it should, frustrating the young skater. He moved around again once the feeling cleared, crossing his blades over one another until he could move into yet another swift rotation. This time, he grabbed for his boot and hoisted the gold metal up behind his head, keeping his head level instead of trying to look up...he didn't get as dizzy, but the stretch was still uncomfortable.

"The Bielmann was never your thing."

Still spinning, the voice seemed to come from every side at once, and Yuri quickly stopped, letting the blade go like he'd be in trouble if he got caught with it. He stopped moving a few seconds later, looking at the source of the voice, and the one piercing blue eye that accompanied it.

"Maybe you should swap it for a donut spin instead."

"V-Viktor..." He said warily, "...Does that mean you're not going to pull me?"

"I haven't decided yet."

The skater slumped down over his knees, disappointed.

"I want to see you successfully land something." The Russian went on, catching Yuri a bit by surprise as he came forward, nudging him upright with a pull on one shoulder, and then unceremoniously tying the black Team Japan jacket around his head, "The quad Lutz is one of the hardest jumps, all around. I can forgive you for falling on that one. But I need to rule out that you can't land anything at all before I make any decisions."

Anxious brown eyes examined the older figure for a moment as Viktor backed up again, but Yuri eventually nodded, moving sullenly towards a more open part of the rink. The feeling of his jacket tied around his head was awkward, the ends of his sleeves fluttering in the breeze behind him, but without a true helmet, Yuri supposed this was the best that could be managed on short notice, and didn't argue it or try to take it off. He just lifted a hand and moved a few strands of hair from his eyes where the crinkly fabric had pinned them to his brow.

Phichit and Otabek had both paused their own practices to see what would happen, coming up a distance behind Viktor to watch from a safe vantage. Chris had remained by the door in the rink-wall, but even he was taking the scene somewhat seriously.

Yuri nervously moved around the rink, but then hesitated, slowing down again to idly glide by, "...What should I do?"

"Doubles." Viktor answered, arms crossed over his now-closed team jacket, "Focus on sticking the
The younger skater nodded, swallowing for the nerves of it all. He went back to gaining speed, sliding like the wind over the ice until he found his spot, and vaulted in reverse through a double Toe-loop. Phichit had covered his eyes before Yuri had gone airborne, and peeked through the fingers of one hand when he heard the inevitable sound of the skater's full-body collapse.

He skidded briefly before coming to a stop on his front, blades coming up where his knees bent...until they came down again, clicking into the ice with toe-picks flicking frost up on impact. Yuri groaned and shook his head, trying to regroup, only to hear the sound of his coach's voice again.

"Stop thinking so much. Just let your body move through the jump on muscle memory. Every fiber of your being knows what to do...trust yourself."

Yuri tried to take it to heart...but it still felt like the eyes of the world were watching; spying. He picked himself up, dusted the frost off his chest and legs, and moved away to try again. When he was far enough away from the entrance-side of the rink, he looked up for a moment to see how many people were still behind the glass on the mezzanine...thankfully, only a handful, and most of them were known to him. It seemed that the media frenzy was only really interested in his SP walk-through. A bit of weight lifted off his shoulders, and drew in a nervous breath.

His eyes then wandered over to where Viktor and the others were watching him, but all he could think of was the weird way Viktor was acting.

I don't know what him, Chris, and Yakov talked about...though I can guess that at least part of it was about me. He thought to himself, Viktor came back to the ice like he wasn't even upset anymore. I wonder if Yakov talked him down from it? I've never seen him so mad at me for going against orders before...

Yuri shook his head and switched over to skating in reverse again, looking over one shoulder as he pushed away from the rink-wall towards open part of the rink. This time, instead of listening to the clamor in his head...he focused on the sound of the ice beneath his blades.

Ssshhhhhh-THAK...Sshhhhhhh...KOOOoshhhhhhh...

Viktor lowered his head a bit and smiled, "That's more like it." He pushed off with a toe-pick and idly started sliding forward, "Do it again."

Hazel eyes opened wide, even as he was still skating backward from the landing, but Yuri felt a huge wave of relief for the whole thing. He passed through an opening in the group and came back around, getting into position a third time...and vaulting into the jump. To his surprise and amazement, he landed it again, though it still gave him a weird 'thump' feeling in his head that he wasn't used to. It was almost like an extra bit of weight pinned inside his forehead that dragged it down when his boot hit the ice.

"Triple Axel next. No fancy entry." Viktor instructed.

He landed that one as well, albeit with a slight wobble. The second attempt was much more fluid. He fell on the triple Flip, restarted triples with a Salchow instead, and repeated it until he landed it on the third try, went for the Flip again and landed it that time...

"How's your energy?" Viktor wondered.

Yuri huffed a bit, "Pretty good considering I just did my whole SP just a few minutes ago."
"Think you can try a quad?"

Frost flew where the younger skater braked on an edge, and put a hand over his chest, feeling his heart flutter a bit from the suggestion, "...Y-yeah."

"Are you sure?" The Russian looked at him evenly. Behind the man, Phichit and Otabek were transfixed. Watching the falls was difficult, but every time Yuri pulled through, prospects for the Men's event seemed a little more secure.

The Japanese skater nodded, drew a breath, and moved to start building speed along the rink wall again. He slid through a long figure-8 before finally building up the courage to step into the 3-turn, and jumped...

Yuri had his scarf over his face, leaning as far back into the passenger seat as it could go. He could tell the car was moving, but he refused to look, even though their destination had been chosen by him, and he was the only reason they were going that direction at all.

Viktor glanced over, but then raised his eyes back to the road, "I really think you set yourself up for that."

Again, Yuri just groaned.

"I don't know why you tried the quad Flip first."

"I couldn't do any quads." The younger skater finally spoke, throwing his arms up even if the scarf stayed over his face, "Not one!"

"If I tell you not to do quads for your program, will you listen?"

"...Yeah..."

The Russian gave his partner a look, and Yuri barely caught sight of it, peeking out briefly from behind the fabric wrapped around his head. He quickly retreated again and turned slightly, leaving Viktor doubting the honesty of his answer. It forced the skater-coach into an awkward silence that lasted the entire rest of the trip.

Arriving at the hospital put the Russian's teeth on edge, but he parked the car and stepped out, dutifully following his spouse into the building, much as he really didn't want to. He hung back far enough that Yuri couldn't reach for his hand.

Hazel eyes looked back a few times in nervous worry, He won't even walk next to me right now...is it cuz he's still mad, or is it because of where we are...?

The sliding door moved away to let the two pass inside, and the heat of the building washed over them like water. The inner set of sliding doors moved aside as well, and Yuri glanced around, blinking in confusion, trying to find signs to tell him where to go.

"Do you remember this place?" Viktor wondered, finally 'catching up' enough to stand close by, "This is the way we brought you out. We waited right outside these doors when Mimi brought the van around."

Reluctantly, Yuri shook his head, "...No..." It was disheartening to realize nothing was even remotely familiar, "When we were at the practice rink, I felt like I knew where stuff was, even
though I couldn't really factually remember having ever been there. It was like déjà vu."

"So what's the first thing you do remember at this point?" The Russian was a bit anxious about that, "There's so many things that've happened or that you've been told..."

"Waking up in the hotel room, and going into the bathroom." Yuri answered, "I've been good since then...at least, I think I have. There's no obvious gaps that I'm aware of. Nothing beyond the usual anyway."

"...You usually have gaps?"

"Oh...well, yeah, don't you? I don't exactly commit to memory what I was doing or looking at when I go down a hallway."

"...Oh."

"...You're looking at me like that's not normal." Yuri gaped at him a bit skeptically.

Viktor paused, but then reached up to rub a hand uneasily on the back of his neck, "No, I guess it is. ...Let's just do this thing and go."

The younger figure remained where he was for a few more seconds, but then turned reluctantly on his heel to step further inside. A little while later, with a few questions to staff and a few more-than-obvious signs that had been missed, they were making their way up to the 3rd floor. Yuri considered going by the gift-shop to buy something, but with Viktor looking like he was ready to jump out of his skin...or out a window...just to get out of the building, he thought better of it. When they finally got to the small waiting room, Yuri wasn't even sure if he should ask the man to follow him in to the visit, so he paused at the edge of the nearest old couch and cautiously looked back.

"Why don't you wait here? I know there's no love between you and JJ, so I won't bore you."

"I'm not even sure why you're here." Viktor confirmed, stepping by to find a seat that looked the least dirty, but decided to remain standing instead.

"I just feel like it's the right thing to do."

"The right thing to do?" The Russian practically scoffed, "He was being an idiot. If you hadn't clipped him with your skate, and he'd have walked away completely unhurt, while you still bonked your head on the ice? I don't even know what I woul-"

Two fingers came up to the man's lips to stop him, "...Don't dwell on it. He's paying for what happened." Yuri pulled his hand back, stuffing both into his jacket pockets awkwardly, "...I'll be back in a few minutes." He waited a moment anyway, thinking maybe Viktor would want to hug him before he left, but nothing came except an unenthused, all-but-vacant stare. Grumble-whining to himself quietly under his breath, the shorter skater turned and started heading down the appropriate hallway, vanishing around a corner a moment later.

He stopped just around the corner and leaned against the wall, half tempted to go back and just leave. Viktor's acting really weird...even worse now since we left the rink. Is this him still being mad at me for the Lutz during my SP practice? Why is he being so distant...? Other than tying my coat around my head, he hasn't touched me since talking to Chris and Yakov...

His brow furrowed, but he pushed off the wall and made his last few steps before finding the door to the room he'd been told he'd find the younger skater. When he pushed open the ajar door, he saw a
long room with curtains pulled between different beds. There were at least six other people inside, and only one of them was familiar...Isabella, sitting at the far end near a wall with a big window overlooking the parking lot, sitting in a chair with some boring hospital-provided magazine in her hands. She didn't notice the skater approaching until he was practically looking over her shoulder, rounding the edge of the curtain to spot JJ still sitting on the hospital bed with his leg in a sling, holding his foot above heart-level.

"...Yuri?" JJ was stunned, "...What are you doing here?"

He shrugged his shoulders up briefly, "Thought I'd come to see how you were doing. I heard that your family is packing you up to go home today."

"...Yeah." The nervous younger figure answered, looking away a little like it hurt just to admit it, "...You really did a number on me."

"I didn't mean to."

"I know."

The silence weighed down on the three of them like a thick fog, making the entire room heavy.

"How are you doing?" Isabella wondered, putting the magazine aside, "We heard that you were going to stay in the competition despite what happened."

"...I guess so." He nodded, "I want to. Viktor still hasn't decided yet."

"You're the one that's skating for Japan, not him." JJ pointed out stiffly, "It should be your choice."

"He's my coach, no different than your parents." Yuri pointed out, "Unlike me though, where I just jokingly put on that badge and claim to be here as Viktor's coach, he actually has power over my skating. If he says no, that's it."

"The way you've gotten so good since Sochi, if Viktor pulls you, people will think it's because he wants to make the competition easier." The Canadian crossed his arms and looked on rather seriously, "It would look pretty bad."

"Viktor plans on dropping as well if he decides it's not safe for me to skate." The Japanese skater retorted, "For exactly that sort of reason. ...Not that he would need to remove me from the event to take Gold. He did just set a Free Skate record that'll probably last a hundred years."

"Tsh..."

Yuri sighed, "I guess you're doing fine then if you can still manage to be like this." He turned on his heel and started moving like he was leaving, "I just wanted to say hi and that I hope you feel better soon."

"Wait, Yuri-"

He paused with one foot extended into the second step, but glanced back over his shoulder warily, seeing JJ looking back at him anxiously.

"...Sorry, I'm just..." The dour Canadian started, slouching back against the raised part of the bed behind him, "...I'm just mad about my situation. It's not your fault. I don't blame you. I know it's no excuse, but...I was being stupid last night."
Yuri just looked on, trying not to let an eyebrow quirk.

"It's just been a habit for so long to try and intimidate the competition... People did it to me all the time when I was still learning. Maybe I learned to do the wrong things, trying to show off...either to impress people or to scare them... Obviously, if that kind of thing just lands me a situation like this...it's not worth it." JJ confessed quietly, "For what it's worth...the whole time I was making my rounds around the ice, it was because I was trying to scare Otabek...not you."

"He spooked you last year." Yuri offered, "I guess I can understand. I've...gotten somewhat arrogant too when confronted by someone who's gotten under my skin."

The flash of Yurio's first arrival in Hasetsu came to mind then, and how confident he himself had become at the knowledge that the teen had come all the way from Russia to try and stop the plans he'd developed with Viktor. But...that just made him think about the way things were in the present moment...and he had to close his eyes and shake his head to get rid of it.

"Arrogant..." JJ echoed, looking at his toes where they peeked out from under the bulky dressings around his ankle. "...I guess what I did didn't have the desired effect then."

"I don't remember what happened." The older figure answered, "But to tell you the truth, most of us do tend to avoid you because you come on too aggressively. We're all here because we like the sport, not because we want to hurt each other. If you dialed it back a little, maybe people wouldn't run when they see you coming."

"You aren't running."

Yuri shook his head gently, "No, not right now. But that's because I came to you." He huffed a quiet laugh and looked up, stepping a bit closer again, "I remember when you came to the Detroit club, where Phichit-kun and I were already training...you tried to hire Celestino to be your coach, but you spent so much time and energy telling him how to do his job, or arguing against his advice, that he declined to take you on. I'm not sure how many coaches you tried to train with before you ended up working with your parents...but the thing is...after so many rejections, some might think you would've learned something."

"...I had always thought it was their problem." JJ said simply, "But...I guess, better late than never... When it comes right down to it, when something consistently goes wrong, one has to really look at what the common denominators are. In all those cases, the one consistent thing...was me." He lowered his head, eyes looking down so far that they looked closed, "I'm sure that people have been trying to tell me this exact sort of thing for years, but I either misunderstood or didn't listen." He looked up again, and to Yuri's surprise, extended his hand, "I'm sorry that it took nearly forcing you out of competition for me to realize it. I never meant to hurt you and I'm so sorry that I took you down with me."

Brown eyes blinked at the hand, but Yuri stepped forward gladly and took it, feeling the firm grasp as the younger figure's fingers closed around it, "We all learn in our own ways and in our own time. It's a never-ending process." He pulled his hand back, but only long enough to lift his other arm and step a foot closer to the edge of the bed, "So take care of yourself, and come back to competition when you're ready."

Even JJ was surprised when the older figure stepped in to hug him, even more so than when he'd done so at Rostelecom the year before. At least back then, Yuri had sought out any warm-body at all that he could latch onto, hugging people with the mindless joy of realizing he'd somehow managed to squeak into the Final. But in this moment, Yuri was fully in control of his faculties, still extending that kindness that next to no one had ever shown...and it was meant for him. JJ collected himself a
moment later, and returned the hug, awkward as it was, and soon after, Yuri pulled back again to pat his shoulder.

"I follow you on Instagram, so keep me updated on how you're doing." The older skater said, "I'll be looking forward to your big come-back."

The drive back to the hotel was almost as silent as the trip to the hospital, with Viktor having precious little to say, even when conversation was attempted. Yuri eventually gave up, not sure what else to do when his points were being responded to with little more than 'yeah' or 'sure.' The walk into the hotel from the parking garage, the rise up the elevator, the walk down the hall and actually going into the room...all in awkward, tense, confusing silence.

When they were finally in though, Yuri pulled his coat off, hung it, and kicked his shoes off...opened his mouth...and stopped.

"Sit." Viktor said simply, his back to his husband, setting the keys down on the nearby table with a jingle.

The younger skater was stiff as a board, feeling his back straighten so quickly that it might as well have made a whip-sound. His eyes were wide in surprise and he felt a sinking pit grow in his stomach, especially since the Russian still hadn't turned around to look at him.

"We need to talk."
Yuri hadn’t even had a chance to take three steps towards the foot of the bed before he could feel the tears welling in his eyes, and his breath caught in his chest.

Viktor heard the first huffled gasp for air, and turned quietly to watch as the younger figure made a desperate bid to act natural and plug in his phone, which took a few attempts, before he came back around and sat down.

"...Y-You're...you're pulling me from...the Final, aren't you?" Yuri managed, his throat already clenched and painful as he looked down at his knees, barely managing to catch the edge of the mattress as he lowered down, fingers clenching around the blanket next to his leg, "...Th-that's why...you haven't held my hand or h-hugged me since...we did my SP..." He reached up one hand to pull his glasses away and rub his eyes on the back of that wrist, "...Th-that's why...you've b-been so distant..."

The Russian's heart ached to see his partner in such a state already, but he drew a breath and tried to compose himself. He reached for the chair tucked into the desk and pulled it around, sitting in it sideways and resting one arm over the back of it as he crossed his knees, "I don't feel like you're listening to me."

"I went against you on the Lutz! Th-that was it!" Yuri insisted, "I know it w-was stupid, but it was the only thing! I did everything else you said!"

"...And yet, when you said you'd listen if I told you not to do quads for the SP tonight, I...don't believe you." Viktor admitted, as much as it pained him to say so, and as much as it pained Yuri to hear it, "I get where you're coming from, I really do...I went against Yakov a thousand times growing up...even back when I was still fresh off my very first injuries. When I had a concussion and a fractured eye socket, and I couldn't see out of my left eye for a few days, and I had all those bad bruises on my back from where I hit the shoe-rack...I still jumped. I get it. But this isn't likethat anymore. Yuri..." He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, reaching for his partner's hands and pulling them a bit closer, "Neither of us is in this alone anymore. When we do stupid things...we're not just hurting ourselves. The fact that you can't remember anything about last night..." Even the Russian couldn't stop the tears from forming in his eyes at that point, "...It's like you really don't understand how serious that accident was... You're treating it like it's just a cut on your head. You're reacting to the gaps in your memory like...like it's no different than walking down a boring hallway..." He held those hands a bit tighter then, the tears falling from his eyes where he drooped his head down, "You're acting like the whole incident is just a bother to you...like the consequences are annoying and unjustified." He whipped his head up then, silver-grey bangs tousling as he moved, "And every time you brush it off, you're completely ignoring my feelings about it. You don't know how scared I was when I saw you getting wheeled by on that stretcher, not knowing what had happened. I saw that brace on your neck and I had worries that you'd been paralyzed. This isn't like that brief amnesia you had when you collapsed after your Free Skate at Worlds. This is a hundred times worse than that...and you're not getting it."

The cut on Yuri's head throbbed then, and it seeped down into the rest of him, pushing against the back of his right eye. He could feel himself starting to shake, but no words came.

"I spent five hours at your side when you were unconscious, most of it completely alone, not..."
knowing when or if you'd ever wake up again. I could hear the doctors and staff talking about how weird it was that you were still out. Then when you finally did wake up, you acted so angry. Even in the moment, when you saw that I was upset, you hardly acknowledged me... And every minute since then, you've treated my pain like I'm overreacting."

Yuri lifted his head a bit, meeting his husband's one visible eye, but then looking away again for the shame of it.

"I'm not going to lie about how stressful that's been for me." Viktor went on, "When you did the Lutz during your SP...it wasn't just a refusal to follow instructions. It was a betrayal of your trust in me. I..." He felt his words catch in his throat for a moment, and had to pause just to breathe again, "...I was so shocked and horrified that you'd done the jump that I couldn't even think straight. I backed up into the rink wall and fell because I was so stunned. I was just about ready to pull you from the program then because I was so mad at you...but I stopped myself, and tried to just finish the thing with you as a coach, rather than letting my emotions get away from me as a husband."

"I didn-"

"Let me finish." Viktor said sharply, cutting Yuri off entirely.

The younger skater winced and fell silent, lowering his head even further as he clenched his eyes shut.

"I know I'll never be perfect as your coach. I'll never be able to come at you entirely objectively because I'm so emotionally invested in you. I'm...I'm doing the best that I can." The Russian tilted his face to rub his eye on one shoulder, "So when it gets to a point where I feel like you're picking and choosing what instructions you follow...it's not just a rebellion against me as your coach...it's a refusal to trust me as your husband, too...and that isn't okay...especially because you've been hurt."

Viktor paused a moment to clear his throat and let his words sink in, carefully watching his partner to make sure Yuri was actually listening. He could see the shine on a few tears as they fell, and the small dark dots they made on the younger figure's practice pants when they landed on the fabric. It made his heart sting to know he was the reason those tears were even there, but he knew the words needed to be said, and soon started up again, "Maybe it's hard for you to understand the gravity of what's going on, or even how much this whole thing weighs on me, because you don't remember most of what happened. To you, it's just a big inconvenience, waking up in the middle of the night to find out that you've lost time...it's almost no worse than if you'd skipped practice entirely because you decided to go out drinking, and that you'd woken up with a headache and a hangover, no worse for wear. But by treating it that way, and by side-lining my worry as though it means less to you than the opinion of strangers...you make me wonder if letting you compete is really such a good idea."

The tears fell even more after that, as Yuri dreaded the news that he was expecting to hear at that point.

"When Chris took me off the ice, and I talked to him and Yakov...I told them that I understood that I should pull you from the event, because that's what a good coach would do. But as your spouse, I told them that I also knew I couldn't do that to you, because I knew it would crush you. I'd seen how upset you were about the prospect of having your fight to get to the Final be for nothing." Viktor explained, remembering the early-morning shock of hearing his partner cry out against the pain of his head-wraps, and lament that the struggle of winning Gold at his two events might've turned out to be for naught, "I've just...let this go on too long. I've let you tell the world that you want to keep trying, I've let you practice your Short Program, and I've evaluated how far you can go with jumps... To say now that you can't compete would seem vindictive, not responsible... So...I'm going to give my
Yuri's frame slouched with relief, but everything else about him was still rather tightly wound. He slid off the end of the bed and went down onto his knees, moving forward to wedge himself between his partner's legs and wrap his arms around the man's waist, holding tightly. He cried different tears then...the anxiety and worry changed to true despair then, and he buried his face against the Russian's shirt.

Viktor leaned forward, resting his elbows and forearms around the back of his husband's shoulders, and kissed the top of his head. He held there for a moment as he listened to the younger man cry, moving one hand up to weave his fingers through that black hair, and cupped his palm there against the back of Yuri's head, "...I just wish that you wouldn't sideline how I feel so much. I love you more than you could ever know...when you suffer, I suffer...there's nothing that I do that doesn't take you into consideration. But I sometimes feel like you don't do that for me...and that hurts." He explained, rubbing his thumb back and forth across the man's shoulder, "I don't even know if you're aware of it when you do it. Sometimes it's just the way you try to please everyone...you're willing to sacrifice my happiness so you can make someone else slightly happier than they would be otherwise...it's like you're taking advantage of the fact that you know I'll always have your back, no matter what. Other times, it's by refusing to take my feelings seriously...doing the quad Lutz, asking Uncle Mimi to bring out my father right before the NHK Exhibition, suggesting I be Yurio's coach even though you know our relationship is strained these days... I'll grant you that there are occasions where it works out for the better...if not for what you did and said at NHK, I may never have gotten the resolution I needed with my past. Other times though, it makes things worse. I know you don't mean it, but there are times that I wonder if you have my back as much as I have yours."

Yuri squeezed his arms a little tighter and pressed his face a little closer. His whole frame trembled, but he was at a loss for words.

"Maybe it's a flaw on my part." Viktor wondered, "You and I have such drastically different histories... You come from a much healthier place than I do, and I've struggled just to be open and honest about what I think and how I feel. But...there's just...so much happening now..." Tears rolled down his cheeks again, and he could feel them falling from his chin, landing in his partner's hair just a few inches below, "I'm at a breaking point, and all I want is to go home and cry. I want to vanish and let everyone else sort things out, so I can just come back when it's all fixed and I can go back to my life without so many problems. Uncle Mimi is moving so fast with Minako, and now there's that whole unavoidable situation with his kids... He's basically doing everything that I warned him last year not to do... It's like, I started to trust him, and he's just gone crazy taking advantage of it, like the warnings I gave him about encroaching on my life aren't valid anymore. He's gone behind my back and told my father all about my life, and strong-armed me into agreeing to let him come to NHK...he's woven himself into Minako's life so much that I just have to accept everything he's doing now...and worst of all, he did end up deciding to move everyone to Hasetsu without ever asking me what I thought. It's not even that I really mind him doing it...it's just the principle of the thing... What I have in Hasetsu with you...that's supposed to be our place. But now literally everyone is trying to come there. Even this stupid situation with Yurio..."

"...This is all my fault..." Yuri started, "...If I had never suggested asking Mikhail to sponsor him...then none of the problems with either of them would have ever happened..."

Viktor just slid both hands down his partner's back, "...It's not your fault. You didn't go behind my back with anything and set that whole thing up without me. I agreed to it, too." He nosed the man's ear lightly, "We both jumped the gun on that whole thing. Maybe we should've let Yurio stew in the consequences for a little while longer. We helped him out so fast that he barely suffered 15 minutes
of having lost absolutely everything...and now he's gone so far back to his old habits that he's taking his frustrations out on you again, like he's entirely forgotten who it was who really did the most to save him. It might've been Uncle Mimi's money that solved all of Yurio's problems, but if it hadn't been for you...none of that would have ever been made available... Now look at everything. He's screaming at you, blaming you, holding grudges against you, giving you the cold shoulder...and all for what? Because you had the audacity to suggest maintaining the status quo?"

"...I told him once that I thought he was at his best when he didn't have either of us interfering with him. I thought that him staying on with Yakov in St. Petersburg would be for the best. His life wouldn't be uprooted, and he could keep on getting better in a familiar place. Maybe I just underestimated how much it meant to him to get to live with Mikhail and Minako-sensei..." Yuri lifted his head and rubbed his eyes on the side of his arm, then moved to look up at his partner's pained expression, "I mean, I knew it was a long-shot to ask you to be Yurio's coach... That's why I asked you in private, because the last thing I wanted was to suggest it to him, and then find out you weren't interested. I can't make you do something you don't want to, no matter what the reasons."

The Russian closed his eyes and leaned his head down, resting his forehead lightly against his husband's.

"I'm so sorry that I haven't been there for you." Yuri went on, "I didn't even realize how bad it had gotten... I've been so preoccupied with trying to make everyone happy...I didn't even notice that I was making you unhappy in the process... I've even gone out of my way to ask you to give me more, even though I haven't done the same in return." He sniffled and turned to rub his nose on his sleeve, turning back to replace himself where he'd been before, feeling that soft silver hair brushing against his skin, "...I...I took advantage of your loyalty and dragged you down when I should've helped lift you up. I did everything to you that I always worried I would...and I didn't even see it happening."

Cool blue eyes opened a little, looking down on the anxious figure sitting on the floor between his knees. He slid his arms back up and lifted his head, making the subtle suggestion that Yuri stand up, and then gently nudged him back towards the bed when he rose. He quietly kicked his shoes off as he followed his husband up to the pillow-pile, sat back against it, and opened his arms to let Yuri fall in against his chest, wrapping them around the younger skater's small frame when he did so.

"I don't even know what to do to make this all better..." Yuri went on, feeling one leg rise up slightly to bend at the knee and rest against him, "I have such a flawed perspective of everything..."

"You're doing the best you can. That's all any of us are doing." Viktor explained, gently rubbing one cheek against the side of his partner's head, "So much of it is out of our control at this point anyway. Even I'm only reacting to things now. I've just...gotten so exhausted from it all. Mentally, physically, spiritually... I'm just so tired..."

"I've done a lousy job helping you manage." The younger figure said quietly, "I'm not even sure where or when I started to go wrong. Looking back on it...I always felt like we had such a strong, united front...approaching everything together... Maybe I was looking at it the wrong way."

"I don't think so." The Russian leaned back a little, feeling as Yuri twisted against him to rest a shoulder against his chest to look at him more evenly, "Maybe we both just need to take a step back. There's nothing we can do about most of what's going on anyway. All we can do is worry about what we can control, and make the best of the cards we've been dealt." He moved his left arm forward and reached for his husband's right hand, lifting it to kiss the ring on the finger there, "Yakov advised that we focus on the competition. I don't think that's such a bad idea. It's already enough to deal with as it is."
"Yeah..." Yuri agreed, moving his hand forward as the Russian's lips came away from the gold band, and gently stroked the back of his fingers against his husband's skin, uncurling them to cup his palm over the man's cheek and ear, just under those silver bangs, "I don't want you to think you can't trust me. I don't... even know what I was thinking, promising you that I wouldn't jump and then doing the Lutz anyway... It was horrible of me and I'm really sorry."

Viktor just looked on, savoring the feeling of his partner's touch as he listened.

"If you tell me not to do any jumps going forward...then I won't. Specifically because I don't remember anything that happened, I really should trust you more to make the best decision. You've been watching out for me all this time...I have no reason to doubt you, or think I know better. I didn't spend half my life trying to be like you just so I could think I'm better."

"We're partners in this." The Russian said quietly, rubbing his right thumb over his partner's hip where that hand had come to rest after the man turned, "Even though I wish I didn't have to explain my decisions all the time...I should've taken into account that you were having trouble with your memory, and done a better job rationalizing why I was telling you not to jump. It must've just seemed so arbitrary to you...like I was being overbearing or something."

"I shouldn't question you so much anyway. I...think I just got too comfortable with knowing I beat you one time. Maybe I got too arrogant..." Yuri offered, his hand sliding down a little, fingers brushing against the Russian's pale neck, settling on the edge of it and the shoulder below it, "You're completely right in thinking I need to trust you more. I was starting to act like I was good enough to be my own coach. Maybe some horrible part of me even had the audacity to think you were holding me back unfairly... I don't know... I know you would never do that."

"You wouldn't be human if you didn't second guess things sometimes, even if only unconsciously. You can't read my mind anymore than I can read yours." The Russian said, leaning his face slightly forward to Eskimo-kiss the man, nuzzling nose-tips lightly before pulling back again to look into those anxious hazel eyes, "But I love you more than anything. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you."

A few tears rolled down Yuri's face again just then, but this time, it was for happiness instead of despair. He rubbed his thumb lightly against the man's skin again and smiled, "I love you too, Viktor. I should do a better job showing it sometimes..."

"...Well..." The Russian felt a flutter in his chest, especially as the younger figure leaned forward to kiss him. It was like the first time all over again, and he felt a tingle rush all the way through him, from the tips of his toes to the ends of every strand of silver-grey hair sprouting from his head. His free hand pressed against the man's chest, and he half-opened those pale blue eyes when Yuri pulled back again to draw a breath, "...It's barely 3pm. We still have a few hours to relax before we have to go."

"I think I know just the thing to do with that time, then."

"Oh?"

"Mhm." Yuri leaned forward again, and started that kiss anew.
Chapter 264

Chapter Notes

This chapter is exclusively sexy-time. Skip it if you don't care. Plot to resume in 265.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED SIXTY FOUR

The kiss was light, and Yuri slid his hand gently down his partner's chest, moving it down over the man's ribs before coming up again. Fingers moved tenderly across the edge of the Russian's practice-shirt, up the length of pale skin until they touched to the edge of his jaw, a thumb rubbing gently across that cheek. The younger figure's free arm, wedged between himself and his partner, freed itself and slid down across the older skater's lean core, around his side, and then down to the sheets beneath them both. Without even pulling from the kiss, Yuri twisted to rise onto his knees, and moved one over his partner's waist to settle it down on the opposite down, and then laid himself flat against his spouse's long frame.

Viktor turned slightly, lying flat on his back as he felt both of his husband's hands come up to cradle his face, fingers curling lightly to the contour of his neck and head. He let himself relax then, descending a few inches into the pillow-pile behind him so his hands could roam a little. Warm lips left his own and started traveling down to his neck, nibbling lightly at an earlobe as they went. The silver Russian's fingers started feeling at his partner's knees where they straddled on either side of him, slipping upward along the contours of every wrinkle in those dark blue practice-pants, until they moved up across thighs and waist, slipping under the edge of the younger man's shirt. Perhaps because his fingers were a little cold, Viktor felt his husband's frame twitch a bit as he grazed the man's skin, hands sneaking under the fabric to slide across his ribs and lower back.

Two could play at that game though, and Yuri slid his hands back down to the edge of his partner's shirt as well, sneaking his fingers under the fabric and hooking the material against the back of his wrists as his hands moved back up towards the man's chest.

The Russian twisted just enough as the material bunched up to give it slack and let it move up more freely, raising his arms up so the shirt could be pulled up over his head and set aside. He could feel that Yuri wasn't ready to let his arms go back down though, as the fingers of both hands slid into his own and held his arms up above his head. Slate-blue eyes half-lidded as he looked up onto his partner's face, then closed lightly as he lifted his face to nuzzle the tip of the man's nose.

Several light kisses came down after that, with Yuri never moving too far back before giving another, or tilting his face to do it again from the other side. He could feel the subtle undulation of his husband's frame beneath him, and the upward press against center, before slowly doing it again. Yuri closed his eyes for a moment, pressing his forehead down against the Russian's, and simply let himself savor the feeling of that long and gentle rock against his frame. When he felt a kiss rising to his lips, he gently pulled his hands free from where they were still clasped to the Russian's, and slipped his fingers down the lengths of the man's arms until they were pressed against that bare chest again. Viktor's arms came back around him then as well, his own hands sliding down the length of his back until they came around the curve of his legs, thumbs hooking into the crook of hip and thigh on both sides, pinning him down. He could feel the pressure more intensely then, with the Russian rocking higher against him, and making his growing arousal plainly obvious. Yuri started to move
his own hands down after that, fingers grazing sensitive nubs as they passed, gliding over pale skin until they could feel the edge of those grey sweatpants. The Russian quaked under him the moment his fingers pulled the man out, back arching up a little as they curled around. Yuri smiled to himself and carefully watched his husband's face; the furrow of his brow, how he'd clench his eyes shut or only lightly do so, whether he grit his teeth or gasped aloud...every pull and stroke made the man draw a tense breath. The rocking paused for only a few moments, then picked up again, thrusting gently through the grasp of those deft fingers.

The silver skater pushed up onto his elbows after a while, still trying to hold onto his breath as his husband worked on him, but eventually pushed all the way up to sitting. His hands went gently around the younger skater's waist, gripping at the edge of that navy-blue shirt, and pulling it up until it, like his own, was free and cast aside. Fingers went back to the man's bare skin, one hand sliding around to cradle against his partner's upper back as he started to ease the man down to the blankets between his outstretched, parted legs. He kissed at that pale neck a few times, before he was too far away to reach anymore, and eased the young skater's knees up loosely around his sides. Hands went back to roaming, palms sliding up the Asian's core, fingers finding their way around every contour of hardened muscle. He let his touch roam all over the younger figure's frame for a while, gently stroking every inch of uncovered skin, until the man's breaths started to get more needy and his cheeks flushed. The Russian twisted up onto his knees then, leaning over his partner to kiss at his chest briefly before reaching for the nearly-forgotten pair of blue-framed glasses that had been left on the bed-covers earlier on. Quick fingers nabbed them, and the man turned to set them gingerly on the night-stand to his right, grabbing for the small blue bottle that was there as well. He set that into the sheets for the moment though, and returned his attention to his husband.

Leaning forward and down, the Russian kissed lightly at the younger figure's core, starting over the ribs on the man's right side and moving to the middle, traveling slowly up the center of that pale, bare chest, and up towards Yuri's neck. Hands slid along as well, under the young skater's sides and slowly creeping upwards until they were under the man's shoulders. Viktor paused there though, nosing lightly at his partner's chin as he felt the younger figure's arms come up around his back. Palms went down against his skin, and the Russian looked longingly down into those hazel eyes. He could feel one hand sliding across his shoulder, tracing a single finger over the back of his neck before all five went to lace through his hair and pulled him down into another kiss.

Yuri raised a knee against his partner's side, the back of his heel grazing against the Russian's back, fingers pressing down as well to hold him there. Viktor eventually pulled from the kiss though, licking and nibbling a path down his neck and chest again, sucking lightly on each little pink nub and continuing on. Silvery-grey hair teased his skin as the man traced a path even lower, fingers eventually trailing over the crests of his hips to curl around the edge of the dark-colored material around his waist. Yuri drew in a quick gasp when he felt that mouth on him, even through two layers of fabric, teasing that heat with each breath.

The Russian took his time then, nibbling at eager flesh still hidden from his eyes, tracing lips around his partner's contour and around every curve. He backed himself away as far as he could go before his legs hit the pillow-pile and headboard, and twisted to lie down on his side with his back somewhat towards the pillows instead. As he moved, he pulled just enough of the fabric away from his husband's center that he could see the fruits of his labor, even if only half of it. He was quick to return to it once he'd settled, kissing gently at the length that was exposed to him.

The young skater drew in a quiet breath when he felt it, closing his eyes and tilting his head back, arms rising up above his head, wrists and hands dangling off the foot of the bed. The feeling of his husband's lips and tongue on his flesh was intoxicating, even if the tease was a torment. Mercifully, the Russian didn't make him wait long, pulling at those pants a little more to give the member room to move, and reached those fingers forward to grasp him. Yuri lifted his head when he felt the
warmth of his husband's mouth around him finally, and dropped it down again with a heavy sigh of pleasure. Eyes closed as he savored the feeling of that mouth bobbing up and down on him, withdrawing occasionally to lick from root to tip and continue on. The young figure tilted his head towards one shoulder, glancing down with one eye half-lidded to watch the silver legend go about his task, only to spot where the man was half-exposed himself and unattended. A thought occurred to him then...

The Russian didn't immediately notice as his husband was pushing up onto his elbows, focusing on other things. It was only when he could feel the man literally turning in his grasp that he opened his eyes to look at what was going on, and spotted the younger man pivoting on his hip, all but dragging himself across the comforter until settling against a shoulder. Black hair brushed lightly against the grey fabric of his sweatpants, and Viktor watched with intense curiosity. He was half a mind to ask out loud what his young husband was planning, but Yuri didn't give him a chance, inching forward to get closer and then taking him in-hand. The Russian dipped his head, closing his eyes and pressing the side of his forehead against his partner's half-exposed hip as he felt the same wet warmth as he'd been giving to that point. He let the feeling flow through him for a moment or two before kissing that bit of uncovered hip and going back to what he was doing before.

Yuri gasped again when he felt it, pulling his mouth away from his partner's member as he recollected his thoughts to focus again. It became something of a contest of wills then, seeing which of them could pleasure the other so much that he had to stop, only for the game to start up again and the other to take the upper hand. Eventually though, being the more experienced and adventurous of the two, Viktor 'won' and Yuri was rendered helpless against the sheets, gasping for breath as fingers clamped around the white blanket under him.

"That was evil." Yuri huffed, his face quite flushed still, trying to catch his breath.

Viktor just laughed quietly again and kissed him lightly, "You've never done that before."

"N-normally you back up straight, or you're hanging off the edge of the bed, so I can't even see you below the shoulder." The younger figure tried to explain, "But this time I c-could...so..."

The Russian's pale hand pressed against his partner's chest, feeling the heart pounding under his skin, "What you did was beautiful. I'll try to keep where I am in mind in the future." Another several kisses, and the skater-coach's hand slid from chest to side, slipping over the curve of his partner's waist to cup around his lower back and pull him closer.

Yuri went with it eagerly, both arms moving over his spouse's shoulders to wrap loosely around the man's neck and head, relishing in that long kiss as he felt fingers sliding over his leg. Before long, the pull on his thigh was beckoning his whole frame over, and he could feel his partner turning under him as they went, and he found himself right on top of the Russian's hips again like at the start. Both of the man's hands were sliding across his skin after that, thumbs getting precarious close to center before pulling away again. Yuri couldn't help himself though; every time those thumbs inched inward, he rocked his hips forward, sliding a few inches up his partner's center in the process. Before long, that became the point, whether the man's hands were rubbing up the inside of his thighs or not.

The Russian joined in the sway, staggering his own pushes up against his husband to cause as much friction as possible. Foreheads were pressed together, sweat beginning to bead on their skin, their hearts pounding, gasps and needy breaths becoming more vocal.
The smaller figure eventually pushed up onto his hands, unwrapping his arms from where they were around his partner's head, placing them palms-down on the man's chest as the Russian's own hands went to center. Yuri dipped his head as he felt those hands squish them together, stroking and pulling, squeezing lightly and rubbing a thumb over the tips, all while continuing to rhythmically rock his hips upward against him. He managed to open one eye, barely, watching the silver legend keenly, but then spotting the little blue bottle from earlier, and reached for it.

A moment later, Viktor could feel the initially-cool liquid dribbling down onto his fingers, warming quickly as he kept up the strokes with his hands. The lights dimmed above him as his partner loomed overhead, gazing at him with those deep brown eyes, and tilting his head slightly to the right. The kiss came right after, but so too did the feeling of the younger figure moving his hips, sliding through his slick fingers with purpose. Needy gasps were breathed against his lips, and the Russian tightened his grip a little.

Yuri squeaked when he felt it, but was undeterred, pausing his movements only for an instant. He continued on with another kiss, eventually rolling his hips so far forward that he slipped right out of his partner's grasp. That seemed to be the point though, as Yuri reached back to reposition the man and then sat flush against his hips. Fingers pressed that eager flesh back against him, and rubbed it gently with the flat of his palm.

The Russian still rocked his hips a little, hands clasping around his partner's thighs, his back arching a little as he felt the man position and then sit back slowly against him. Fingers stayed curled around him with each subsequent rise and fall, each time getting a little deeper, until the help was no longer needed and Yuri could sit flat against him. The Russian drew in a few whimpered gasps with each movement, feeling the heat engulfing him little by little, and both of his partner's hands went flush against his chest. One crystal-blue eye peeked open a bit, watching as the young skater started rocking against him.

Initially, he just rose and fell slowly, careful not to let the Russian slip out by mistake, but the further forward Yuri leaned, eventually settling to hold himself up on his elbows, the more he simply rolled his hips forward and back. Brown eyes half-opened to see if anything he was doing was pleasing to his partner.

...I know that this morning was really bad... Yuri thought, relieved at least to see the honesty of his husband's relaxed smile, ...I feel terrible for having asked so much of you when I should've known it was the last thing on your mind. But...thank you for indulging me anyway...even if you got nothing out of it yourself... I'll make it up to you...somehow...

Pale, slender hands came back from the Asian's legs, and slid up under the man's arms to hold around his back and pull him closer. The Russian nuzzled against his partner's ear, kissing lightly at the man's neck as one hand came up closer behind Yuri's head, the other flat against the young skater's back, holding him steady as the pace of those slow and methodical upward pushes became more like thrusts. When he could feel his husband's fingers clamping down where they held around the curve of his shoulders, and the gasps started including more vocal utterances, he knew he'd found his rhythm.

Yuri pressed his forehead down into the crook of his husband's neck and shoulder, feeling a few fingers woven through his hair. The pressure and intensity of his partner's movements were quickly overtaking him. He pushed up again onto his hands after a while, feeling his spouse's going back towards center, taking hold of him even as the silver Russian kept thrusting upward. Just as Yuri thought he was on the edge, Viktor slowed down, coming to a stop just as he pushed up onto his elbows and sat upright. The Russian's hands guided him up, and he felt the almost-unpleasant sensation of the man withdrawing from him entirely, the warmth of the man's flesh vanishing. But, it
was replaced quickly enough, as Viktor moved to kick the remains of his sweat-pants away and
twisted over to get behind him instead, and guided him to sit back against his lap.

The silver Russian sat loosely on his knees, pulling his partner in close and helping him find the right
place to descend against him. He kissed at the back of his husband's shoulders and neck, and pressed
his cheek against him, arms wrapping around him as he began to walk his hips upward again, knees
spread far outside where the smaller figure was on his own knees between them. Fingers wove
together as the older skater could feel his partner's hands overlapping his own, and they clasped
together quickly, right hands over Yuri's heart, the left lower down over his core.

The younger skater leaned his head back, pressing the side of his forehead gently into his husband's
silvery hair. He could feel his left hand being pulled down slowly, and pulled it away just as he
realized what the man was going to do. Slender fingers wrapped around his center again, adding
sensation to the front where he was already overwhelmed from behind. He couldn't help but twitch
when he felt it, and it barely took four tugs on him before he was leaning forward, left hand down
onto the sheets as he tried to get up a bit onto his knees. He felt kisses on his back as the Russian
allowed it, and followed, moving a bit slower to give him a moment to regroup. Yuri could feel the
easing-off, and let himself sit back down on his knees again, letting the Russian just work at the front
for a little while without moving in back much at all. Even that became intense in a hurry, and the
young figure's breathing became labored, moaning out quiet whimpers with each stroke. Hands went
over the man's wrists, and Yuri started to lean forward, dropping his forehead down to the blanket as
he tried to catch his breath.

Viktor pulled his hands back, feeling them pinched between his husband's thighs and core, and
rubbed that coiled back gently instead. Palms and fingers pressed into his partner's skin, working out
a bit of tension around the sides and behind the smaller man's shoulders, catching a brief glimpse of
where he actually entered his spouse when he brought his hands down over the skater's lower back.
The Russian carefully lifted himself up to sit higher on his ankles, and bared down over top of his
partner, wedging his hands under the figure's chest, just ahead of where his knees were bent, and
leaned in close to the man's back.

Yuri moved his arms back around as well and curled his fingers around his husband's where he
found them pressed up just under his collarbone. Movement and pressure started from behind again,
slow at first, then picking up speed, going at a moderate tempo. Before long, Yuri could feel his
partner trying to roll to the side, taking him with until they were both on their right sides. The
Russian's left hand went down to hold up his leg, and the pressure, in and out, continued on. Kisses
returned to his neck and shoulder, and Yuri tilted his head away to give the man as much access as
he wanted. When the moment finally came, and he felt that telltale warmth fill him up, and the
throbbing and twitching of the member still inside him, Yuri was barely on the edge. The younger
figure twisted onto his back, looking into those blue eyes desperately, even as that throbbing feeling
continued.

Moving carefully, Viktor helped his husband back into his lap, managing to get again to their starting
position without withdrawing. With both hands free, the silver Russian reached for the small blue
bottle and squeezed a bit into his palm, slathered it between the two, and then reached for his
partner's center. One hand massaged down low, the other carefully squeezing and rolling around the
tip, occasionally moving one hand away so the other could stroke up and down the entire length. All
the while, the young skater was leaning forward, offering the occasional light kiss between gasped
breaths. But, just as he could feel the man's legs firming their grip around his waist, and the rolling
clench of every muscle in the figure's lower half tightening around where he was still inside, Yuri
pushed to sitting upright and cried out.

Hot liquid dribbled down onto the Russian's pale skin, and he looked up adoringly at where his
husband was trying to catch his breath. Shoulders scrunched up, and knees came up a bit as well, and those cool blue eyes watched as pleasure overtake every inch of his partner's thin frame.

"Well...that was...certainly better than this morning, wouldn't you say?" The silver skater mused between his own breaths, rubbing and stroking at his partner's center, only slower and more delicately then.

"...Y-Yeah...absolutely..." Yuri gasped, then letting out something of a heavy, relieved sigh as he let himself drop down to the bed-sheets at his partner's side. It was too far a distance for him to retain his partner's warmth, but he nuzzled in close where he could, and draped one arm over the man's bare chest.

Viktor twisted away only to find the edge of the blanket and pull it upward, folding it over the both of them as he, too, cuddled in closer to his partner. Legs wove together, arms held tight where they could, and the both of them just panted, catching their breath in the stillness of the room.

"V-Viktor...did you...set an alarm?" Yuri wondered, his eyes already closed and ready for sleep.

No answer came though. Brown eyes reluctantly opened, and as he looked onto his partner's contented face, heard the characteristically quiet half-moan of a man who'd let himself be taken by sweet oblivion.

"...Ah. He's already asleep." The younger skater gaped, lifting his head only enough to see past his husband's shoulder, and over to where his phone was just out of reach. With a muffled groan, Yuri pushed up, leaned over his slumbering partner, walked his fingers along the edge of the nightstand and grabbed the device, pulling it free from the charging cable he'd plugged into it earlier. He leaned back as he waited for the device to turn on, closed out of the litany of texts and missed call windows that popped up, and set the alarm-timer for 5:45pm. With that, he tiredly clicked the side-button to darken the screen, dropped the phone to the sheets, and went back to curl up where he was before. That done, he could sleep as well, and not worry about being late...or entirely missing...the Short Program to come.
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED SIXTY FIVE

Following the multi-national entourage out of the events center, Yurio plugged his earbuds into his phone, and then into his ears, letting the sound of the place and the surrounding conversations vanish behind a wall of loud music. The trek towards the parking garage was short and sweet, and when they arrived, the teen tossed himself to the very last row of seats like he’d done before, and sank low to close his eyes. The sound of 'Welcome to the Madness' was playing, and just as he felt the van engine rumble to life through the chair cushions, he felt a finger poking the top of his left knee.

One bright-green but annoyed-looking eye peered open to see a pair of jade irises looking down on him from the back of the second row, "Yuri, papa's trying to talk to you."

"Hah?" Yurio grudgingly pushed himself to sitting, but only moved high enough that he could peer over the back of seat and see the front. He reached a hand up to pull out one earbud, "What is it?"

"What do you want to do when we're done getting you back to your stuff?" Mikhail wondered, letting the van warm up for a little while, before pulling out into the aisle ahead.

"I don't know? Follow you people around?"

The elder Russian grimaced a little, but then turned in his seat, looking back at the teen directly rather than through the reflection in the rear-view mirror, "Semantics Lesson #1...family and friends are not 'you people.' No one here has deserved your disrespect."

Yurio just quirked a brow and shuffled where he sat, trying to put in his earbud again,

"...Whatever..." He muttered quietly under his breath.

Minako raised both brows as she glanced to the back of the van, but then leaned slightly towards the driver's seat to whisper behind a hand, "Think we should chide him somehow…? I know he's got some stuff going on right now but I don't want him thinking he can take it out on us all afternoon."

"No, I agree." The silver Russian rubbed his chin. He glanced around at the other passengers, looking from Mari, who shook her head passionately to avoid being singled out, to Viktoria, who wasn't paying attention, then finally to Nikki, who looked like she was paying rather close attention to everything. He got a wry smirk on his face, "Sweetie, dearest, silver dawn…would you mind punishing him?"

The teen smiled nervously, but then nodded, unbuckled her seat, stood up…and planted herself firmly in the seat next to the Russian Tiger. She leaned right up against him and tried to look at whatever he was doing on his phone; it looked like he was texting someone, "Whatcha doin?" She asked, her voice dripping with sweetness.

"NOTHING." He argued back, getting really uncomfortably in a really big hurry, feeling where the younger girl was weaving her fingers around the arm nearest to her, clinging to him like she often did to her father, "W-What are YOU doing…?"

"You look lonely back here!"

The van started pulling out of its parking spot, and the teen's torment began. By the time daylight was pouring in through the windows, no longer obscured by the walls and ceilings of the multi-level car garage, Nikkita Rozovsky was listening to the Russian Tiger's music, and he'd effectively given
up trying to dislodge her. When the playlist shifted, and 'The Vengeful One' came on, the silver
teen's head picked up a bit in recognition, "Oh! I know this song!"

"...You do? From where?" Yurio asked skeptically, "...You've seen me skate to this?"

Nikki laughed nervously, but shook her head, "Ah, no...I didn't mean that I recognized it from an
event. I haven't seen any of yours yet. But my brother back home listens to stuff like this all the
time."

"Sergio..." The blonde grit his teeth at the memory of it.

"He didn't used to be so angry and confrontational." The silver Canadian explained, "A lot bad
things happened over the years and I guess he kind of internalized it. By the time he was old enough
to get taken seriously by adults, nothing could be done about what had already taken place. Then
mom died, and he had a total breakdown about it."

Yurio gave her a look out the corner of his eye, barely able to see her past his hair and the edge of his
hoodie, "...You sure seem to be taking that whole situation rather well." He said gruffly; part of him
wanted to offend her enough that she'd let him go, but another part was genuinely curious about it.

Grey-green eyes blinked at him, but Nikki just slouched a bit where she sat, still clinging to her
'brother's' arm as she looked down towards her knees, "...It's hard to explain... When someone
changes so much that you hardly recognize them anymore, and you never learn to love the person
that took their place, it's...hard to feel sad when they go away for good. I guess I've already grieved
for her, because that lady wasn't really my mom anymore after she had her first cancer scare."

"Viktor Nikiforov is dead."

"She was just someone else, wearing her skin, moving into our house, and sleeping in that bed. It's
probably worse for Vikki and Sergie though, since they knew her longer than I did, before she
changed...but I still noticed the difference." The teen went on, "When mom started to alter how she
looked and dressed...she really did become a different person. She used to have this wavy, light
blonde hair that she kept really long, nearly to her waist...but when it all fell out from the chemo and
radiation treatments, she started wearing these short black wigs. Then her hair grew back eventually,
and she styled it the same as the wigs. In a lot of ways...I kind of feel like my mom died at the
hospital, because it wasn't her who came home." She finally turned her eyes towards the Russian
Punk, "What about you? What's your mom like? Papa hasn't told us about her...just your grandpa.
He seems nice."

Yurio grit his teeth, and tried to pull his arm back again. He found that she'd actually let it go that
time, but something about the shift in his mind made him decide against pulling it back entirely.
Closing his eyes for a moment, he lifted his gaze to the window to his left, and spoke quietly, "...My
mom...is dead, too. Like yours was...the one you remembered from before."

"Wow...really? What happened to her to make her change so much?" Nikki wondered passively,
fingers curling lightly where Yurio had left his arm near her.

The blonde wasn't even sure why he was speaking, but since he'd started, there was no sense
stopping, and he turned those emerald eyes back at her, "...My mother is something of a socialite in
Russia. She's gone a lot. I don't even think she intended to become a mother...it was just something
she got stuck with because she was too lazy or busy to do anything about it when she had the chance. My existence was something that just happened to her, and she wasn't interested in dealing with it." He explained bitterly, lowering his gaze again, staring at the stitching of the seat in front of him, "She was never even married to my father, and it was her dad that I ended up spending most of my time with."

"Do you see your mom at all anymore?"

"I had heard once that she wanted to see me skate when I was in Japan last year, but she never showed." Yurio said stiffly, "She's never showed. My grandpa was the only one who ever cared about me or what I did. He was the one who made it possible for me to even get into skating to begin with...he came to my practices, and even my competitions if they were local enough."

"Is that why you got into skating? To try and get your mom's attention?"

The blonde scoffed a mocking singular laugh at that, "No." He said matter-of-factly.

"...Do you really mean that?"

Yurio snapped his head around, mouth half-open as though to ask Nikki who she thought she was to pry like that, but stopped himself, seeing her face and realizing there was no malice on it whatsoever. He turned back then and shrugged, "I don't know."

She retook his arm, more for his sake than her own at that point, "So she's never seen you skate then, huh? Not even once?"

"...I can't remember a time she ever turned up at an event. She was always too busy spending money she didn't have at parties she didn't belong at, drinking with men she didn't know, and pretending she was someone she wasn't. I mean...maybe at one point she was part of the in-crowd, but that was...a long time ago. Now...it's almost sad that she still goes. I'm sure there's folks who wonder why she bothers to turn up." The blonde half-ranted, "Hell, I'd bet that those people know more about what I'm up to than she does. Some mother."

"Sounds like she was never there for you at all."

"...Understatement of the year..."

Nikki fell silent for a moment, reaching one hand up to set gently against the Russian's shoulder, stroking her thumb back and forth a few times, "I'm sorry she did that to you. What does your grandpa think of your skating?"

Green eyes got a bit of a shine to them at the thought of Nikolai Plisetsky, and Yurio lifted his head, "I like to think he's proud."

Bursting into the hotel room, Yurio scanned the wide space at the top of the building for a recognizable bag, eventually finding the leopard-print rolling suitcase on the other side of one of the big beds. He quickly vaulted over the once-used sheets to clamber for his possessions, and rifled through the contents like he thought he'd find a bag of money at the bottom. Finding only the carefully-packed suit-bags with his competition outfits, and the change of clothes he'd had from his brief stay in Moscow, Yurio was content with what he saw, and zipped the bag back up.

"Everything where you left it?" Mikhail asked casually, leaning forward onto his knees as he glanced at the bag as well.
"I think so." The teen answered, turning the whole thing around and pulling up the telescoping handle, "Thanks."

The elder Russian smiled, "Sure." He pushed up to standing normally again and looked around the big room, "So where do we go from here? We just had a big breakfast not too long ago, and it's too early for dinner… Should we go buy those skates for later tonight?"

"Pipaw," Viktoria looked up over the edge of her phone, but then held it out, "I was actually just looking up stuff that we could do. The Campus Martius rink has skate rentals for $4 a pair...we shouldn't even need to buy skates of our own. Might even be better that way, since the skates they have will be broken-in already."

Mikhail looked at the website on display, and sure enough, the $4 rental fee was noted quite plainly. He crossed his arms and looked at everyone else, "Ideas then?"

"There's carriage rides near where the rink is set up, too!" Nikki pointed out excitedly, clapping her hands together, "Or we could go to the zoo!"

Minako made a face at that, "...We just went to a zoo when we were in France..."

"Yeah..." The Russian put a finger on his chin in thought, "We don't want to go too far away from downtown either, in case traffic picks up right before tonight. Carriage ride sounds neat though. All in favor?"

Hands went up.

"Opposed?"

None went up...but not all hands had been counted either.

"...Don't care either way?"

The final hands went up; the Russian Kitten's and the Katsuki daughter's.

"Carriage ride it is."

It was a tight fit to get everyone into the two-horse-drawn buggy, but blankets were easy to come by and the crisp Motor City air flew by them. The klip-klop sound of the pair of horses bounced around like a blacksmith's hammer on the concrete. Three adults and three teens packed in like sardines; the carriage was covered in lights that would glow once the sun went down a few hours later, and the reins were decorated in garland. There were thousands of people around, but most knew to stay off the carriage path.

Yurio looked around in fascination, but did his best not to show it, simply side-eyeing the world and avoiding turning his head. It didn't help that Nikkita was squished in between him and Mari though. Viktoria was directly in front of him, with Minako in the middle there and Mikhail in the last spot; the three of them were on the rear-facing side. Nikkita wasted no time making the most of what little space she had, linking her arms around Mari and Yurio's, even as her long, wavy silver hair whipped around.

"This is so great!" She cheered out, leaning forward to glance around on each side, "I bet Russia has nothing like this!"
Mikhail laughed, "Oh, sweet summer child…"

"There's sledges in St. Petersburg," Yurio clarified stiffly, trying to pull his arm back so he could sit normally again, but finding it futile, "And those have three horses, not just one or two."

"Wow~!" She finally leaned back, "We should go do that when we go there after the weekend!"

"We could." Her father nodded, "It's a bit of a trek to St. Petersburg from Moscow though. We'll have to take the train for a few hours. I was hoping to only have to make that trip once."

"We could just leave Moscow early and see Cousin Viktor's old house!" Nikki went on, getting too excited, "And we could go to where you and him grew up!"

Both Mikhail and Minako gave tepid looks at that, but the Russian shook his head, "I dunno, going back to that little mill-town would be boring for you guys. There's nothing out there but woods and bears. Really...big...bears." He shrugged and held his hands up in a gesture towards the city, "Besides...places like that don't hold up the same as places like this." They went back down to the blanket over his legs, "When people disappear, whole towns and cities can fall into ruin. That town fell apart a long time ago. The only people who still live there are the ones with nowhere else to go. It's not a place I'd go unless I needed something."

"Cousin Viktor's dad lives there though, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, and you already know what happened."

"But you said they reconciled last weekend."

Yurio half-rolled his eyes at his elder, "Konstantin's not that bad if you give him five seconds. He never once tried to hit me."

"You're not his disobedient son." Mikhail retorted, "But let's not dwell on it. I don't want to go all the way out there again so soon regardless. We'll be going to St. Petersburg anyway to get Yuri packed up, so we can just go a few days earlier than planned and take a look around."

Nikkita gave a sly look, then turned to whisper something to her right, "So you met Konstantin? What's he like?"

Yurio just gaped in his own way, but then shrugged, "Set in his ways, but not completely without morals. I saw him pull two cars off the road after an accident to help clear the way for traffic."

"Wow~! He must be really strong!" She was too loud for anyone's tastes, but she was too impressed not to respond that way.

Mikhail deadpanned her, a look in his eyes like the words 'didn't I just tell you not to talk about that?' were running through his mind.

The silver teen gave an innocent smile, knowing she'd been heard, and diverted her attention back to the pre-Konstantin topic, "So there's horse-and-buggy rides like this in St. Petersburg, huh? With three horses? What's it like?"

Yurio drew an uncomfortable breath, I've never been questioned like this before. Why is she so inquisitive suddenly anyway? Yeesh. He cleared his throat, "Not like this. In St. Petersburg, the sledge takes you through the woods...big open spaces near the palaces of past rulers. It's nothing like this place."
"You must go every year then, huh?" Nikki laughed, feeling a bit envious, "Now I can't wait to get there!"

"...Yeah..."

[Hurry up, Yuri!] Viktor called excitedly, rushing through the snow towards where other folks were queuing up for the sleigh rides. His big brown poof of a dog followed closely, leaping through snow-drifts like a hare. [We'll miss it if you don't run!]

[Why are we even going on this stupid thing anyway!??] The young 14 year old growled, trudging through the snow like the frost was as difficult to slosh through as mud, [Viktor!]

The last troika was waiting, and Viktor went springing up to it like he could glide over the snow as well as he did on the ice. The three horses at the front whinnied and fussed, but the silver Russian was undeterred. He gave over the necessary funds and took his spot, and watched eagerly as the teen finally came around to join him. Makkachin was in quickly as well, shaking the snow off his fur and panting excitedly.

[You won't believe how much fun this kind of thing can be, Yuri!] The silver skater exclaimed, [But it's no fun at all unless you have someone to go with.]

[Is that the only reason you asked me to come...?] The blonde kicked the snow off his boots by tapping the heels on the carriage floor, [So you wouldn't look sad and alone coming on your own?]

[Of course not! If I were on my own I wouldn't be coming at all. I did this so you could enjoy it! I mean, I could've just told you to go and then not joined you, right?] That one blue eye behind silver bangs winked, and a second later, the troika was skiing along behind those three horses, [We both won Gold at our Grand Prix Final events a few days ago. This is like a victory lap around our city! Two Gold medalists celebrating together!]

[You've never done this before, Viktor.] Yurio huffed, finally sitting back and pulling the thick plaid blanket over his legs, his ears getting a bit red under his chin-length golden-blonde hair, [It's not like this is the first time I've ever won Gold before, either.]

[I know!] The elder Russian made a face, and reached over to rub the teen's shoulders for a moment, then pat them on each side with the palms of his hands, [But I thought this would be a really great opportunity! It's your last year in Juniors, and I think you're going to do really great in Seniors! I mean, how crazy would it be to have two Russians on the podium next year? Yakov would be really proud, so work really hard, okay? Pretty soon it won't be a cake-walk anymore. Competition in my bracket isn't so easy to intimidate.]

Yurio just huffed quietly to himself, remembering a certain Senior skater he'd overheard crying in a bathroom, but then turned his head to glance at his rink-mate, [...So...you're for-sure competing again next year?] The blonde gave a skeptical look, hair whipping around as the wind rushed past, the horses' hooves on the snow like the dull rumble of an earthquake.

[Well, so far I plan to. Something really big would have to happen to stop me.] Viktor reached an arm around his dog's shoulders and hugged the woofer close, looking off into the trees; black streaks in a field of white, [There's so much stuff I want to do suddenly.] He turned his head back, those crystal-blue eyes looking into the emeralds across from himself, [I have a goal in mind, so I'm determined, you know? You should set a goal for yourself, too. Not just the Gold medal, but
something personal, something that touches your heart and soul, and sets it on fire. He reached his free hand over and poked the teen in the center of the chest. [If you don't feel it right here, you're lost. It was missing in me for a while, but I think I finally found it again. Something to fight for.]

Yurio's eyes widened a bit, waking up from a daydream and seeing the woods of St. Petersburg swapped out for the concrete jungle of Detroit. The silver-haired figure next to him wasn't Viktor anymore either...though being a close-enough relation to the man made the difference less startling than the landscape switch.

"You okay?" Nikki wondered, seeing the vacant look on the Russian' Tiger's face.

He just shook his head and tried to act normal, "...I'm fine. ...I just remembered something dumb." He lied.
Chapter 266

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED SIXTY SIX

The carriage ride eventually brought the group back around to its starting point. Even though it was only technically mid-late afternoon, the winter sky was already starting to go dark. Two more hours, and it would be pitch black, with a few scant stars visible through the bright lights of the city. That's when the night-life would stir, and all the illumination of the Christmas season would be on full display.

Blades scratched on the ice of the seasonal outdoor rink, and as the group disembarked from the coach to set foot on frozen ground again, Yurio lifted his eyes to the sight of the 60-foot Christmas tree at the far end. It loomed over the rink like a sleeping giant, a frozen King lording over the bare limbs of the deciduous court on either side, decorated in long strings of dormant lights. The teen pulled his phone out and snapped a quick photo, posting it to Instagram before swapping over to check the Grand Prix results for the morning.

Pairs skating had ended earlier on, starting almost immediately after the Men's practice session. Ladies Singles was still in progress, which would be followed by the Opening Ceremonies. Having heard the long and laborious introduction for a thousand past events already, it was no question whether any of the Men's Singles skaters would even be attending. Most would only show up when it was time to go onto the ice for the 6-minute warm-up; Yurio would be no exception. But, it would still be several hours before then, and for lack of any other plans, the teen just followed along quietly.

It occurred to him a few minutes into the walk back to the van that it had been exactly a year since the meeting that resulted in his friendship with Otabek. Thinking about that day in Barcelona, when they'd gone to the Parc Guell Winding Bench, Yurio couldn't help but smile faintly to himself at the awkward hilarity of the older skater's method.

_He treated it like a job interview, with a handshake and everything._

Inevitably though, one memory lead to another.

_Otabek came and saved me from those fangirls, even after I'd told him off and called him an asshole in the hotel. ...I wonder why he even bothered after that?_

"Yuri."

Green eyes raised up and blinked in brief confusion, looking around for the source of the voice, and seeing the tall, darkly-clad man looking back at him.

"Were you listening?"

"Huh?" The teen gawked, suddenly becoming acutely aware of his phone still in his hand, but then pocketed it away and shook his head, "No."

"We're going to skip the other touristy stuff around here for now." Mikhail was explaining, waiting for the Russian Tiger to step closer, and then turned to walk with him as they each trailed after the rest of the party. "Most of the good stuff is after dark anyway, so we might as well wait until after the Short Program. The ladies want to go to Troy for some Christmas shopping. Something about a Somerset Collection...I think it's a mall. I'm not sure." The elder put a finger on his chin as he pondered it, "Viktoria mentioned it."
"Two cities in a row with shopping venues with strange names, lending nothing to the imagination about what they really are." Yurio commented, mostly to himself.

Mikhail glanced down at him though as they made their way through the crowd towards where they'd parked, "Two?"

The teen paid more attention to his pacing after that, pulling his hands up to pinch the front of his hood to keep his nose warm, "In Sapporo. They called their mall a shopping arcade. You'd think it had video games in it or something, but there's not. This Somerset Collection you mentioned...sounds more like an assortment of kitchen utensils or bathing suits, rather than a mall."

"Right?" The taller figure laughed in agreement, "Maybe you're onto something though. Viktoria said it had palm trees."

They walked wordlessly for a little while after that. Heads would turn periodically to make sure the two males of the group hadn't gotten lost. At one point, Nikki noticed that the scarf her father had been wearing had somehow vanished, only to realize it had found its way onto her 'brother,' wrapped around so much of his face and head that it looked like he was ready to brave the Arctic, only his eyes visible through all his garb. Yurio realized she was looking at him though, and quickly averted his gaze, looking off indignantly like he didn't want to be seen. Nikki huffed a quiet laugh to herself and turned back around, hopping a few paces forward to wedge herself between Minako and Mari instead.

By the time they made it back to the rental, it was just about 4pm. Yurio piled into the back seat again like before, ear-buds in his ears, cable winding down the front of his chest and into his coat pocket to where his phone was hidden. He looked carefully to remind himself that he had all his gear and skates, but then settled back into his usual place and buckled in. Nikki hadn't followed him there, sitting in the middle row with her sister like before. The Russian Tiger quietly picked at the borrowed scarf sitting around his shoulders, pulling it down off his face since it wasn't so cold inside as it was outside. He studied the dark grey wool with keen interest, and lifted those emerald eyes to peer through the group towards the front seat.

Mikhail was starting the van's engine at that point, but a quick glance into the rear-view mirror made him pause for a second, realizing Yurio was seemingly looking right at him. When the teen's eyes moved, perhaps realizing he'd been spotted in the act, the elder Russian smiled lightly and went back to his prior task. Putting the van into reverse, he turned his head slightly, "Keep in mind that this trip is more for window-shopping than for actually buying anything. We have to leave with enough time to get Yuri to the competition, so we have to be out of there no later than six."

"We can come back though right?" Viktoria asked, a brow raised like the news was a bit of a surprise, "I mean, if we see something we want...?"

"Yeah, tomorrow though."

"Whew." The teen sat back in her chair with a look of relief on her face. She turned slightly and glanced at her younger sister, and blinked a few times when she saw the ponderous expression thereupon, "What is it?"

Nikkita looked back at her, but then slouched in her seat to match their heights, and raised a hand to muffle her quiet words, "This will be the first Christmas Yuri is with us. Maybe we should get him something special?"

"Special?" Viktoria echoed quietly, "Like what?"
"Papa said he got Yuri a big stuffed tiger. We could do something like that, but from just us." The whispering continued, "We could make it something like a 'welcome to the family' gift."

"How would we get something like that without him seeing it though?"

"I'm sure he won't be with us all the time. But...if he is, we can just order it online right? Papa sent the tiger plush to the resort that the other Yuri's family owns."

Viktoria nodded at that, getting a bit excited at the idea but not letting it show. She sat up properly after that, and a new thought came to mind, "Hey Mari...what's that resort like back in your town? We've heard it come up a lot but no one's really said what it is."

The Japanese woman turned to look back at the teen in the row behind her, and further up, Minako's attention was caught as well. Mari gave a pleasant-enough smile, "It's a hot-spring resort...the last one standing in all of Hasetsu."

"Oh wow~!" Both girls chimed together, leaning forward the cling to the back of the first-row seat, each trying to look through the same gap between headrests, "A hot-spring! That's so cool!"

"Mhm." Mari nodded, twisting where she sat, "It's especially great to sit in when it's winter, because the air outside is cold but the water itself is still hot. It's really relaxing. Hits the spot when you've been out working all day."

"You're so lucky to have something like that right where you live!" Nikki said excitedly, "I can't wait to get in!"

"Careful," Minako chimed in, giving something of a sly, knowing smirk, "It's probably nothing like you've ever experienced before. You don't wear bathing suits in the water."

"...EH?" Both teen blinked, "What do you wear then?"

The ballerina huffed a laugh, "Nothing at all."

"What-"

Mikhail just laughed, listening intently even as he focused on the road. His eyes caught sight of the sign for I-75 North, and he started moving across the different lanes to prepare for that exit.

Yurio was half-listening as well, his music settling onto something quieter than the raucous sound of previous rock or techno. He made something of an anxious expression at the abrupt reminder of the onsen.

"H-How can you just go into a public bath wearing nothing...?" Viktoria asked pensively, "That sounds weird."

"Oh it's not so bad." Mari tried to explain, "There's a men's section and a women's section, so it's not like you have to worry about guys gawking at you. The rules of the bath are very strict."

"All rules in Japan are strict." Minako added, turning back to look out the windshield, "It's very different from Canada or the USA."

"...Really?" Nikki wondered, "Like what? What rules?"

"Well...for the hot-spring, or 'onsen' as we call it back home," Mari started up, "You can't even get into the water until you've bathed thoroughly first. There's a changing room and a wash-room
that you have to go through before you can get outside onto the deck. There's a little stool that you can sit on while you wash your skin and hair, and you get a clean towel to cover yourself while you walk around, as well as one to hold your hair up if it's long." She explained, thinking of the whole process, but then pausing, "...Wait, do any of you guys have tattoos?"

"...Tattoos?" The girls echoed, "We're not even old enough to get them. Why?"

"Oh...one of the things about Japan is that basically no one with tattoos gets to use the public baths. Not even foreigners."

"That doesn't make any sense."

Minako tilted her head to look back at the passenger area again, "Sure it does, when your country's most notorious crime gang uses tattoos to set themselves apart from the normal people."

"You don't mean-" The younger teen started, only for her older sister to excitedly cut her off, squeezing her entirely out of the look-over to the front row.

"THE YAKUZA!" Viktoria squealed with delight, "They're so cool! They ride around on motorcycles and carry swords! They'll cut each other's pinky fingers off for lying, so when you lose both, you're out!"

"Not exactly." Minako laughed, "They'll take off a bit of a finger at a time, starting with the left small finger. It's called yubitsume. It happens when a member does anything wrong, so it's not uncommon for Yakuza to be missing part or all of certain fingers. The Yakuza are basically the only people in Japan who get tattoos though, and because of their habit of threatening to shame business owners, a practice they call sokaiya, they're not welcome in many places. In the onsen, even if you're a foreigner, having a tattoo means you're forbidden from entering."

"...Shaming business owners...?" Viktoria gave a confused look, "That's a thing? CEOs around here are utterly shameless to start."

"Japanese people are very different." Mari pointed out, "The worst thing you could possibly do is to shame them, especially in a public way like Minako was saying. So, with sokaiya, the Yakuza will do something like buy a bunch of shares in a company, enough to get into business meetings. They'll dig up any dirt they can on the board members or owners, and then politely suggest the company do certain things to benefit the Yakuza, or else they'll go public with some super-embarrassing thing that would dishonor the person involved. They say they do it to maintain some kind of social responsibility and accountability, but it's really about making money."

"Huh...guess I should do skin-checks on all future clients..." Mikhail said nervously, "I wouldn't want anyone digging up my dirt."

"You have dirt?" The ballerina gawked at him.

"Everyone has dirt."

"I don't!"

"I'm sure you do!"

Mari gave an amused look at them, but then turned back to the teen girls, even halfway spotting a certain curious Russian Tiger trying to look inconspicuous as he listened from the back, "It's fine though. We have private wooden tubs with water from the spring if you're not comfortable getting into the main pool area. Even Yurio used one for a while, until he got used to things."
"Yuri." The blonde interrupted suddenly, "Not Yurio."

"...Ah...er..." The elder Katsuki stammered, "...Sorry?"

Nikki sat back for a moment, twisting in her seat to look over it into the third row, "You're pretty sensitive about that. How come?"

"My name isn't Yurio!" The skater barked, making the younger teen recoil a bit. For a split second, the Russian Punk felt a pang of guilt over the attacked look on Nikki's face, and coughed lightly as he sat up a bit straighter, "...Sorry..." He mumbled, then spoke more normally, "My name isn't Yurio. It's Yuri. And yeah, I'm salty about it."

"How else were we going to tell you apart from my brother?" Mari asked anxiously.

"You could've called me Plisetsky for all I care! Just not Yurio! I've hated it since you came up with it!"

"Chill out, bro." Viktoria interjected, looking over the head-rest at the blonde as Mari sank into her own seat again, "We won't call you Yurio anymore."

"Yeah, right...as if that ever stopped people from doing it anyway." The blonde grumbled bitterly, adding another level of recollection to the already-brewing memory of his last time in the onsen, "I know people say it behind my back."

"Who would do that?" Nikki wondered, getting brave again and raising up a bit higher to get a better look, "...And do they know you don't like it?"

"Yurio!" Viktor called out, half-running to catch up. When he arrived, he put his hand on the teen's shoulder, but the blond snapped around to swat him off.

"It's YURI." He correctly bitterly, "I'M YURI. YURI PLISETSKY. NOT YURIO."

"...What..."

The blond suddenly burst into speaking Russian instead, [HE should be the one getting called Yurio!] He angrily pointed at where the aforementioned skater was pulling his shoes off, [What makes him so special that he gets to keep his name when I don't!??]

Viktor could tell what he was doing, [...It was his sister that named you this way, don't you remember? What's all this about suddenly? I thought you were going to be mad ab-]

[I don't care!] The blond snapped, ignoring the question, [I was Yuri long before you ever even KNEW him! I shouldn't be getting punished like this because your dumbass decided to drop everything to coach some Grand Prix failure that had already decided to QUIT!]

[...You're not being punished.]

"You'd think." The Tiger fumed at the memory, "Apparently it's too much trouble for some people though."

Nikki made a face, but then sighed and twisted back around to facing forward. She waited in
uncomfortable silence with the rest until the van came to stop for a moment, and then quickly unbuckled her seatbelt to switch seats and buckled in again.

Yurio was giving her an incredulous 'not this again' sort of look, but before he could do or say anything, the silver-haired teen was already leaning into him heavily, "Why do you do this-!?" He asked in a half-panic, pressing himself up against the inner wall in a basically-meaningless attempt at getting away.

Like before, Nikki latched onto her 'brother's' arm, and held fast, "You're really angry about this name thing." She started, those big jade eyes looking on as though they could peer into the older teen's soul, "I'm guessing you're talking about Cousin Viktor and his Yuri."

"Who cares who I'm talking about!?

"Be nice back there," Mikhail said suddenly, making the blonde nervous all over again.

"If they're only using your nickname when you aren't around, then it's probably because it's easier for them, given how one of them is also named Yuri. It's not like they mean it to be cruel." Nikki rationalize, "Did you use nicknames for the other Yuri?"

"I just called him Katsuki." The Russian said stiffly, "And Katsudon, cuz it's a pun on his name and his favorite thing to eat."

"...Was that it...?" The silver teen pressed, "I've heard that you and him weren't always friendly. I can tell how different things are between you guys right now, even though we only saw you once before, in Calgary."

Yurio grit his teeth, and muttered something under his breath.

"I couldn't hear what you said."

"...I called him Pig." The older teen whispered, a bit louder that time.

Nikki was stunned to hear it though, and pulled back a bit, "...Why would you say something like that...?"

"I wasn't the only one!" Yurio harped then, though still trying to keep quiet, "Viktor did too!"

"That's not what I asked."

Emerald eyes narrowed in frustration, and the Russian Punk pulled his arm back, "I don't need you looking down your nose at me over stuff that happened before we ever met!"

"I'm not looking down on you. I'm trying to understand. Why did you call him Pig?"

"It's exactly like you said. We weren't always friendly." He admitted grudgingly.

"You could've picked a thousand other names...but you picked that one. Why?"

This girl won't let up! Yurio thought anxiously, seeing the determined expression on her face, "Because he used to be fat and his favorite food has pork in it! I wanted him to retire from skating so there wouldn't be two Yuris in the Senior bracket! He almost did, but then that idiot Viktor went and brought him back into things!"

"Is that why you went to Japan later?" Nikki wondered, "Papa said you went a long time ago, right after Cousin Viktor did. So you obviously didn't go there together."
"I went to drag Viktor back to Russia." The skater said in a low tone, "It wasn't my idea to have a competition to decide who gets him as their coach."

"So then you probably spent that whole time talking down to Yuri, didn't you?" Nikki surmised, crossing her arms disappointedly, "To try and make him want to quit, so Cousin Viktor would have no reason to stick around."

Yurio's indignant silence was enough of an answer to that, but as the younger teen turned in her seat and sat more normally, the older shook his head, "Not the whole time."

Jade eyes turned skeptically to look at him.

"...By the time I got there, Viktor had already done enough to make Yuri want to skate again. There was nothing I could've done to stop him." He half-closed his eyes and looked down at his knees, "In the end, I resolved that I'd just beat him instead. And I did... Viktor said they'd get hitched when Yuri won Gold, so I made sure to win it myself...not just because I already wanted it, but because I wanted to stick it in their faces." He slid down a bit, slouching like before.

That's when he heard his music again.

...-what I was wishing for...I shot for the sky...I'm stuck on the ground...so why do I try? I know I'm gonna fall down. I thought I could fly...so why did I drown? I'll never know why, it's coming down, down, down...

My Trophée de France Exhibition... The teen's eyes closed a little more, and the memory of that skate flooded through him.

...Please stop being mad at me." Yuri said anxiously, "...I don't know what else to tell you. Your Exhibition..."

"It was about last year." The teen said stiffly, "For my grandpa back in Moscow."

"Oh..."

"What, did you think it was for you?" Yurio almost scoffed, pulling the tie from his hair and letting it tumble loose around his head and face again, obscuring his right eye like usual before pulling the black hood up over it all, "Don't be dumb."

That was a lie... Yurio thought bitterly, He saw what I wanted him to see, and then I tried to play it down like he was the stupid one. All for what...? Because he didn't watch my Free Skate? As if it's the first and only show from anyone that he's ever missed.

The unbidden memory played on.

"I never meant to make you think I didn't care. I just...thought you were strong enough to do this on your own again." Yuri explained, "You've always been stronger than me, and you gave this impression like you were ready to take the world by the horns again like you used to. Everything had fallen so well into place, and your skating had gotten so good again...I just...I thought I'd get in your way if I stuck around..." His voice was starting to crack under the pressure, the last few words
coming out half-sobbed.

Viktor gawked, "...You want me to hit you?"

"I'll accept whatever punishment you deem appropriate for what I said. Saying sorry won't cut it, not like this, not right now." Yurio said flatly, "So..."

Yuri's eyes widened when he saw his husband make good on the offer as quickly as he did, stepping side-face to extend his hand and set his fingers nail-side directly on the teen's cheek, and then bring it back to wind up the strike. Yurio clenched his eyes shut, but withdrew the hood over his head to give him a clean angle, and both Yuri and Mikhail stopped breathing as they watched, neither of them sure if they were really seeing what was happening.

Viktor wasted no time, and swung hard...

...and stopped half an inch from the teen's skin. Instead of smacking him clean in the mouth, which he felt the youth no-doubtedly deserved, he just turned his hand and flicked the top of an ear with his middle finger, and walked right past him.

"Let's go. I'm hungry."

Yurio's downward gaze lifted a little as the sting of that flick made the top of his ear hurt again, and he reached a hand up to rub it away. He sighed grudgingly to himself, "...I really need to stop going out of my way to make us all mad at each other..."

"...Hah?" Nikki blinked at him, thoroughly confused, "Where'd that come from?"

"Things aren't the way they used to be." The skater said, pushing against the seat to sit upright again, a strange feeling of peace coming over him, "I've held a grudge for so long over how fast everything changed...that I still find myself treating them badly, like I was trying to hold onto the past. I felt like I could control things when I was angry...or if I made others angry, too... But it never worked with them." He shook his head lightly, long strands of golden blonde hair swaying in turn, "Since the first day I met Viktor, my rage was just funny to him. He never really took me that seriously. With Yuri...he'd just roll over and take it. Like a dog exposing his belly to appear weak, he'd garner my pity to make me calm down. Between the both of them, I must've just been this super-annoying thorn in their sides...and when they'd ignore me or brush me off, I'd lash out even more. And yet..." He leaned his head back on the head-rest, the second ear-bud finally falling away, and he stared up at the ceiling of the van, "...Even after everything I did...they still saved me from the consequences of what my rage bought me..."

"...You mean, when you were kicked off the Russian team last year? Before papa became your sponsor?" Nikki wondered quietly, hands clasped on her lap as she looked on pensively.

"That was all Yuri's idea, too. Viktor agreed, even though he didn't have to. I'd probably be destitute if not for them...living on the streets of St. Petersburg, huffing glue to make the pain of starvation go away..."

That's a bit dramatic...! The silver teen thought apprehensively, though she smiled and nodded anyway.

"But no matter how much they both did for me, no matter how often they stuck their neck out, or
offered me a hand if I was struggling...I'd still bite at them. As if I had any right." He said. Part of his vision was starting to blur where he could feel his eyes starting to get wet, and he lowered his head again to clench them shut, "Viktor lost his patience with me weeks ago. At this point, I honestly can't blame him. I was only ever funny to him when I wasn't lashing out at people he cared about. And Yuri... Well, before this morning, he'd only ever yelled at me once before..." Emerald eyes cast down to the aux-in cable scattered across his coat and borrowed scarf, "...It might actually be too late to change things anymore. ...Maybe I had this coming."

"I think you still have a chance." Nikkita interrupted quietly, leaning to the side again to nudge the Russian Tiger with her shoulder, "Don't you remember what Yuri said this morning?"

"When you're angry, I'm angry, and then everyone is angry."

"THAT DOESN'T MAKE ANY SENSE." Yurio clenched his eyes shut and crossed his arms more tightly.

"OF COURSE IT DOES. IF I DIDN'T CARE ABOUT YOU THEN WHY WOULD I GET ALL UPSET OVER YOU?"

"I remember how he tried to defuse things between Cousin Viktor and Sergio before, too." Nikki explained, setting her hand gently on the Tiger's upper arm, "He doesn't want people to fight with each other. But I can tell that he feels like it's his fault when things don't get better, too. I may not know everyone all that well, but I like to think I'm a good judge of character...and I'll bet anything that Yuri is agonizing over how things have gone south between all of you, and desperately wants things to be better again. He just has so much extra stuff to worry about now, too...the injury, his own performances, wanting to see the skater that ran into him...it's a lot for one person to handle. I think...if you let him know that you want the same thing...it'll ease his burden, and everyone will feel better."

"I don't even know how I'd approach him. Viktor is like his Cerberus. If he thinks I'm just going to make Yuri upset again, he'll chew me out and send me back the way I came before Yuri ever knew I was even there."

"Even if you tell him you're going to make amends?"

Yurio huffed a single, quiet, sarcastic laugh, "He's seen me try that and then fuck everything up again 5 minutes later anyway, and that was before he'd had enough of me. Right now, if not for us all being in the same competition, Viktor probably wouldn't let me within a hundred miles of Yuri."

"What about when Cousin Viktor is skating?" Nikki offered, "He'll be too busy doing his show to notice what you're doing."

"...He'll notice. I've no doubt about that." The blonde turned his gaze out the window, watching the highway fly by, "It wouldn't shock me if Viktor jumped off the ice in the middle of things just to tell me to beat it, like a dog he'd caught rummaging in the trash can."

"Then you'll have to regain his trust first."

"I don't honestly know that I ever had it in the first place." He tilted the side of his head back against the cushion behind himself, "Thinking back on it...even before Viktor went to Japan...I think he basically just tolerated me. When I started training at his same rink, he was already too old for us to
really be friends, but...I never exactly gave him a reason to like me that much either." The teen sighed, "It's impossible."

The silver teen just smiled, "That's what Eurystheus said, too."

Yurio turned and gawked at her in utter confusion, "...Who?"

"Eurystheus." Nikki repeated, "The guy who told Hercules to capture Cerberus. So...if you're Hercules, and Cousin Viktor is Cerberus...it stands to reason that if you try hard enough, humble yourself, learn a trick or two, and respect Viktor for the three-headed Hell-hound that you apparently think he is...maybe you can catch him, and endear yourself to him. Walk him out of the underworld instead of dragging him out, kicking and screaming." She reached a hand up and booped her 'brother' on the nose, "Have him lead you to Yuri himself."
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED SIXTY SEVEN

The light in the room had darkened significantly with the setting of the winter sun. Perhaps the swift change from dim-ambiance of daylight to the pitch dark of early sunset was what roused the younger skater from sleep before the alarm on his phone went off, but those tired hazel eyes started to open.

Yuri blinked slowly as he realized wakefulness had taken hold of him. The next thing he noticed was how nothing was against his back; just the blanket and the cool air where his shoulders and left arm was exposed. It was a rare thing that Viktor was in front of him when he woke up rather than behind. But, there the man was, the left side of his face pressed to Yuri's chest where he'd been slightly tilted on his back, right arm draped over his side, legs lazily woven together under the sheets. Yuri pulled his arm back a bit, hand brushing against the Russian's messed-up silvery hair. His right arm was under his partner's head, not quite acting like a pillow, given the Russian's broad shoulders, but finding its place in the gap under the man's neck. He reached with that hand to fumble for the phone he knew was there somewhere. When he found it, he turned it enough to click the screen on just long enough to see the time.

5:32pm

...And the frantic text message from Phichit.

[Yuri! Can you bring my stuff for the SP? Ciao Ciao and I meant to swing by, but we didn't want to impose after what happened at practice...]

He thumbed a simple reply, [ya np]

Still about 10 minutes before my alarm is even supposed to go off...but I don't think I'll be able to fall asleep again...

He returned his attention to the silver legend in his arms, the fingers of his free hand still woven through that hair.

"I know you don't mean it, but there are times that I wonder if you have my back as much as I have yours. Maybe it's a flaw on my part. You and I have such drastically different histories... You come from a much healthier place than I do, and I've struggled just to be open and honest about what I think and how I feel. But...there's just...so much happening now..." Tears rolled down Viktor's cheeks again, "I'm at a breaking point, and all I want is to go home and cry."

Have I really been that bad...? Yuri wondered, his brows furrowed as he worried. He hugged his spouse a little tighter then, gently rubbing the side of his jaw against the man's messy fluff of hair, stopping only when he felt the sharp pain of pressure against the deep cut on his chin. He pulled back with a wince, bringing his left hand up to feel at the tender line in his skin, then moving it up to feel for the same thing on his forehead; that cut, and the smaller one right next to it, were significantly more tender than the one on the side of his chin, but Yuri only noticed when something was pressing into it. He could only wonder how bad the bruise looked. My hair covers most of this thing...but I won't be able to hide it when I'm skating. What a pain...
Viktor stirred a little at that point, mumbling a sleepy moan against his partner's skin, arms curling in a little where they went around the other skater's waist. He wasn't immediately aware that Yuri was already awake, but when he felt the hug around his head, he smiled and turned his face to kiss the center of the man's chest.

"...Sorry, did I wake you up?" Yuri wondered quietly, returning his hand to where it had been a moment before, brushing his fingers through silver hair and cupping it gently around the back of the Russian's head.

"Hm? No...I think I was just ready to." The elder skater answered, legs straightening as his whole frame tightened in a still-sleepy stretch. When he went lax again, he wiggled to make his way up the bed a little, until he was nose-to-nose with his husband and nuzzled in closer again, "I don't think I ever heard an alarm though. Are we going to be late?"

The answer came in a kiss. Yuri tilted his head a bit to the right and leaned in, holding lightly for a moment before pulling back again, only to repeat it before settling again, "No, there's still a little while before my phone's set to go off. We have some time."

"I guess that's a good thing then." The Russian purred, leaning in to steal more kisses, feeling his partner's arm slide around his own, a hand settling on the back of his shoulder, "Is it weird that after taking such a short nap, I feel more rested now than I did after last night...?" He mused quietly.

"I don't think so. I kinda feel the same." The younger figure answered, rubbing his thumb gently across his partner's skin where he held on, leaning in a bit closer to press his brow against the man's forehead, "...I'm...sorry for how I've acted towards you lately. I've been acting selfishly again. I wasn't trying to hurt you, I was just..." He paused and drew in a nervous breath, "...I guess I was just trying to prove to myself that I wasn't as hurt as I actually was. In the end I just ended up wounding the both of us."

"...Thank you."

"...So what do we do now?" Yuri wondered, looking into that blue eye just in front of himself, "I don't know that a serious talk, post-conflict carnal urges, or a nap are going to change the fact that I'm hopeless with my quads at this point."

"I had a dream about it." Viktor answered easily enough, "So I have some ideas."

"Yeah?"

"Mh." He nodded lightly, "I don't want you to do anything that'll very likely cause you to fall. So...if you want to do any quads, keep to the easy ones...Loops and Toe-loops at most. Drop the rest to triples."

Yuri made a face, and nodded reluctantly, "...Yeah..."

"Hey." Viktor nosed his partner to bring those brown eyes back up again, "Before I ever set foot in Hasetsu, you were already well-known for your high presentation scores. Your programs this season are really expressive. Go back to your roots a bit and remind everyone exactly why you made it to Sochi in the first place."

The younger figure was still a bit apprehensive, "...Yeah..." He repeated.

"Yuri."

"...Nnhhhhh..."
"Yuri."

"I knooowwww..."

"Just because you did badly in Sochi doesn't mean your scores today will be the same as back then. Everything you did at that Final suffered, not just your jumps. It won't be the same here." The Russian tried to explain.

"I just don't like thinking about Sochi in general...it was a really rough weekend."

"It's the weekend you seduced me though!"

"But I don't remember doing it!" Yuri reminded, pushing up a bit to force his partner to his back, and flopped on top of the man's chest, giving an anxious look where he parked his chin in center, "My last clear memory of Sochi is hearing you offer to take a commemorative photo with me, only for me to turn my back on you and think, 'How could I possibly meet my idol like this?'"

"Ah...yeah, I remember how weird that was." Viktor mused, reaching up to comb his fingers through that black spiky hair on the uninjured side, "All the times we'd crossed paths before then, you always got really excitable and took off running. That time though, you just stared at me blankly and turned your back, walking slowly away while Ciao Ciao wondered why you'd turned me down. ...Now that I think about it..." He pulled his hand back and settled the knuckle of his index finger on his lip, eyes turned up a bit in recollection, "...The way you walked off like you did, I think that's a big part of why I ended up falling for you at the Banquet later."

"... Eh?" One hazel eye squinted in a confused look.

"Well, think about it." The silver Russian pointed out, bringing his free arm up to curl under the back of his head while the other went back to rest over his husband's shoulder, "The demi-girlfriend I'd had before my winning-streak started was a mega-fan of mine. Even if her dog had died, and her had come in last place at the first Grand Prix Final she'd qualified for...none of that would've mattered. To her, I was just a thing she wanted. So devoid of meaning that taking a photo with me was exclusively a selfish venture. But to you..." He lightly stroked the back of his fingers against his partner's cheek, and gave an adoring look, "...Taking that picture when you felt so bad already..."

"...I felt like I would've been unloading my baggage onto you." Yuri finished the thought, "And I didn't want to do that to you in what could've been called our first true interaction. If I was going to be taking a photo with you, I wanted it to be because I'd succeeded, and earned the privilege of standing next to a World Champion."

"So you see? It was different." Viktor went on, "Shallow and empty people will take anything they can get, regardless of what it does to those around them. Going into that Banquet, I could already tell that there was nothing you ever said or did that didn't take others' feelings into consideration."

"...Unless I bang my head on something." The younger figure sighed a bit, "Then I act like a jerk who doesn't think about anyone else at all."

"And I forgive you for that." The Russian said quietly, "The way you reacted when I told you...I could tell that you hadn't meant it the way I took it. So...now that we're both on the same page again...I think you'll actually listen to me when I tell you what I think."

Yuri nodded silently, feeling guilty all over again.

Viktor slid his whole hand under those raven-black bangs, and pushed them all up into the skater's performance style, thinking about the big cut that came down on his forehead. He could see where
Yuri's eye was squinting a bit from the pain of it though, and let go quickly, "I know you don't want people to take pity on you when you're out there. Everyone and their mother will already know about the accident...and if they somehow don't, then they'll find out when Phichit goes out instead of JJ. So...let's do what we can to stop them from worrying about whether you'll mess up. I can cover the bruises well enough that these cuts will be hard to see while you're moving."

"How...?" The younger figure looked on in confusion.

"Even my skin isn't flawless all the time. I carry a bit of make-up around just in case."

"...Oh...I knew that, but..."

"I'm a bit paler than you are." Viktor nodded, "But I-"

Yuri grunted quietly and twisted to reach for his phone, silencing it, "It's 5:45."

The Russian nodded reluctantly, and pushed up onto an elbow as he moved to sitting upright. He reached his right hand forward again as the left parked in the sheets to hold his weight, "...As I was saying... I'm a bit paler than you are, but I think I can make it work anyway. After that...just focus everything on your choreography and spins..."

The younger figure bobbed his head in grudging agreement.

"In a way, it's almost like how I plan to compete next year myself." Viktor offered, sliding his hand down from his husband's shoulder to thumb the man's lip lightly, "Going mostly for style points instead of jumps."

"...I guess so."

"Don't spoil it for yourself before you've even set foot on the ice, Yuri." The Russian recommended, "Remember what I told you before? The way your body moves, it's like you're making music. Sing out to everyone that nothing can stop you."

"...There's something you're forgetting though."

"...I am?" Blue eyes blinked in confusion.

"'Skate like you're trying to seduce me.'" Yuri's dour expression changed over to a worried but hopeful smile, "At least, that's what I plan to do."

The silver skater's eyes got watery and excited all at once, and he couldn't help but lean forward to happily kiss the man in front of him, both arms going around the younger figure's frame as he pulled back again, "That's just what I like to hear."
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED SIXTY EIGHT

The water to the shower was already running when Yuri started rummaging around the room to find his friend's gear. He'd thrown on a pair of shorts at least while waiting his turn under the water, but was finding it hard to sort through Phichit's things and locate just the specifics of the Short Program, so he paused, sat on the floor where he'd been crouched on one knee, and sighed. Hands went down to the carpet as he leaned back and looked up at the ceiling, "...Even if I find his costume, I'll probably forget something he'll need that isn't super obvious."

The bathroom door, ajar already, opened wide as the silver Russian stepped out, one towel slung over his wet silver hair, and another clinging precariously to his hips, "Let's just bring him everything then."

Yuri glanced back over his shoulder, "Yeah." He leaned forward and pushed himself back up to his feet, only to keep raising his arms up as he stood, until they were high above his head in a stretch. His back arched as his thin frame tightened up, but just as the skater was about to recoil and go limp again to turn around, he felt steam-warmed hands come around his sides. His arms came down abruptly, but that only opened up his neck and shoulder, and a pair of soft lips went there next, followed by a damp chest against his back. Yuri couldn't help but smile as he leaned back into the Russian's warm and soggy embrace, finding the man's hands where they'd roamed up to lay flat against the front of his thin frame, "It's a shame we have to get dressed again so soon."

"Well, at the very least, if you decide to skate naked, I won't stop you." Viktor hummed against his husband's skin, kissing that slender neck before maneuvering the younger figure around to put him on a path to the shower. For good measure, he gave that skaterbum a gentle pat as his partner went, "Go get cleaned up. I'll sort things out here."

Huffing a quiet laugh as his cheeks went pink, Yuri nodded, but pulled that pale, slender right hand up to kiss the ring thereupon before moving off, "Yes, dear."

He was already around the corner when Viktor's stunned eyes came up in a confused 'what did you just call me?' kind of look, and the Russian blinked a few times before shaking it out. Not that Yuri saw it, but the silver legend's cheeks went a bit pink as well.

The water was still running when the younger skater put the door to behind himself, shimmied out of the one article of clothing he'd put on, and stuck one leg over the edge of the tub. The glass was fogged-up to nearly white, but a few smudges caught Yuri's attention just before he vanished behind the shower curtain, and when he turned his head to look, he spotted something of a finger-painting-like image drawn into the misted mirror.

A cartoony kissy-face image of the Russian legend himself, with a big heart next to it, and both of their names (at least he assumed as such) written within in Cyrillic.

Yuri's face went red all over again, but he just shook his head and smiled as he finally pushed past the curtain.

Sometimes I can't believe I'm actually married to that man.

With the last of Phichit's things stacked up near the door, Viktor went about the task of sorting out his own things, setting the garment bag with his Short Program outfit onto the bed, followed by his
partner's, and then the black, red, and white Team Russia tracksuit. He ruffled the towel on his head to dry it as much as he could before discarding it, and went about the arduous task of actually putting clothes on again.

Hot water cascaded down the younger skater's pale frame, taking the stress of the morning and early afternoon with it. Yuri held his eyes lightly closed as he just let the hot feeling rush and flow over his skin, fingers clasped loosely behind his neck as he dipped his head forward to let his hair get drenched as well. When he opened them again, he could see a faint red tint in the run-off as it trailed down his leg towards the drain. The slight movement of his head put the cut right in the path of a water-jet, and he winced when he felt the sudden sting of it being hit directly. Standing fully upright again, he felt at the tender spot with a finger, the staples in his hair more obvious than ever before, and he sighed, leaning a shoulder against the cold tile.

_I hate that I feel normal right now. The slightest mistake reminds me of how everything went to crap in such a big hurry. ...I can't let myself get overconfident when I'm on the ice._

He reached for the small bottle of shampoo sitting on the ledge of the tub, and squeezed a bit of the clear-green liquid into the palm of one hand.

_I have to trust Viktor's perspective...he's not reducing the difficulty of my program for selfish reasons. I think I should be more worried he'll reduce the difficulty of his _own_ shows..._

"I told you at the Grand Prix Final that even I was worried about making a full comeback. What I just did at Worlds was probably the apex of my career, flawed as it was. I'll perform next season, but...I'm thinking of limiting the quads in my programs to just three..."

"What!?" Yuri was incredulous. "You...why!? You literally just did the world's first _quad Axel_ and set a new world record score for the Short Program, and now you're backing off!?"

"I fell doing my own _signature_ move." Viktor pointed out, "Doing the quad Axel wasn't the only reason why I was tired, and I can't let you keep making excuses for my poor performance. The coat, the Axel, not practicing enough beforehand...those were all stupid, sure, but I'm 28, Yuri. I'll be 29 after the next Final. A skater with any sense would never have agreed to come back after taking off when I did. 'Winter's Wish' was supposed to be my last, and I knew that even _before_ coming here to coach you."

_He pushed himself beyond the limits of a normal human when he did his last Free Skate, Yuri thought, rinsing the froth off his head and watching quietly as the last remnants of that red tint finally washed away. He'd be well within reason to scale things way back. Would he do that now though? At the Final? He hasn't even made any kind of official statement yet that he's not doing 'Evoke' anymore. I wonder if he'll say something before tomorrow, or if he'll leave it as a surprise for the aud... He shook his head and made a face, Who am I kidding? Of course he'll leave it as a surprise. That's his shtick. The question is how many _quads_ he'll do. I never got to see him practice the competition-version of that show while we were back at home, so I have no idea what he has in mind..._

By the time he stepped out, clad again only in his black boxer-briefs, the aforementioned Russian had practically set-up a small salon on the edge of the bed. Yuri reached quickly for the practice pants and team jacket that were hanging in the closet before stepping further into the room.
Viktor was all dressed up in his track suit and was hair-spraying his bangs into show-form, and glanced up when he saw the shadow out the corner of his eye. He barely had half a second to react before Yuri had leaned down in front of him and had him locked in a light kiss. Taking it in stride though, the Russian just closed his eyes and savored it before the young figure pulled back and took his place on the corner of the bed.

"Nice fog-doodle, Mr. Nikiforov."

"Why thank you, Mr. Nikiforov." Viktor mused, bowing as well as he could, and rising up to normal again, "Moë solnyško."

"I have no idea what that means but I'll assume it's good." Yuri smiled nervously, reaching back towards the garment bag with his first costume in it, and pulling the shimmery silver pants out.

The Russian just smiled and watched, but then looked a bit forlorn, leaning aside to rest his chin in his palm, elbow on his knee where it was crossed beneath himself, "You sure you don't want to reconsider skating naked?"

"I don't think they'd let me even if I was crazy enough to try." The younger figure pointed out sarcastically, pulling one leg on at a time before standing up briefly to get them all the way up, then sitting again to fasten them, "Besides..." He reached back for the black turtleneck and tiger-striped jacket, one arm going into the sleeves of the former at a time, then going over his head, "If I don't get dressed, how will you undress me again later?"

Blue eyes blinked, and Viktor was caught in a paradox, smiling despite the glazed-over look on his face. He chuckled anyway though and sat a bit straighter as his husband started pulling the longer sleeves of the costume-jacket on, "Hm...you and your logic."

"The promise of getting naked is sometimes more enticing than being naked, right?"

"Stop making sense."

Yuri grinned sweetly, reaching for his practice pants and pulling them on over his legs to protect the light-colored outfit, "Would you ever skate naked...?"

"If you asked me to." The Russian laughed, glancing aside to gather up the things he'd need to use to style his husband's hair, "But probably only at the Ice Castle. Even I have some shame."

"Only when you're sober."

"You're one to talk!"

"...That's true." The younger figure smirked a bit, but then sighed dramatically as he finally zipped up the front of his team jacket. He looked to his partner, and then rather unceremoniously tilted back until he collapsed onto the man's lap, looking up at those blue eyes as he raised his arms up to loosely go around the Russian's waist, "...We both know what happens when we're drunk at the same time."

"Do I need to get an apology bouquet ordered and shipped home in advance?" Viktor smiled devilishly, "Žizn' moja, duša moja..."

"Are you going to spend all night whispering sweet Russian nothings into my ear, cackling to yourself about how I don't know what you're saying?"

The silver legend smiled innocently, bringing his hands over to settle on the sides of his husband's chest, "My sun, my life, my soul." He translated, "I really should've tried harder to get you to learn it
when we were in St. Petersburg."

"In my defense, I have a really hard time making those mouth-sounds. Speaking English or Japanese is way different."

"Mouth-sounds." Viktor echoed.

"Mh."

Those crystal blue eyes just looked on adoringly, and he couldn't help but laugh at that, cackling just as Yuri had guessed he would. When he slowed again, he just stroked his husband's cheek with the edge of a curled finger, "I happen to like all the things you do with your mouth...sounds and everything else. You don't need a perfect accent for that."

Yuri's face reddened, but he wasn't about to be undone by that, giving a wry grin, "Well, I guess I would sound better if I have some Russian in me."

Even Viktor's face went red when he heard that, "Oh my...Yuri..."

The younger skater finally sat upright again, blushing all the more for his words, but turning to put his back to the silver legend, "We should get moving or we'll be late." He chanced a look over his shoulder, eyes half-lidded somewhat seductively, "Do me up?"

The Russian returned the gaze with one of his own, "With great pleasure."

[('Love Comes Again' - DJ Tiësto]

Deep within me, turn all the secret stones
Forests and fields, breathing with blood and bones
Still no words we can speak, of paths to be chosen
But all trails that we trek, shall lead us back to here

Because our love comes again

Just when I've broken down I found, love can come again
You gotta believe that love comes again
Just when I've broken down I found, love can come again

Opening Ceremonies were still underway, but with the elaborate choreography of a rather large group of local talent, it was coming close to the end. The long speeches by ISU officials and USFS union representatives were already done, and the arena was low-lit in a dark ambiance, spotlights shining down and casting glittering shapes onto the rink and audience. The skaters putting on the last performance were clad in a dark ensemble to make them hard to see, unless their outfits were meant to be seen, in which case they glowed brightly with light. Men were donning sharp colors; red, purple, and green, and the ladies in pastel blue, pink, and yellow. They skated so fast and in such tight formation that it was hard to believe none of them would run into each other in the dark, especially with the confusion of different peoples' costumes suddenly bursting with light...but their show was well rehearsed, and the sight of them from the audience was a marvel.

Minako was scrunching up the corners of the flags she'd brought with her, anxiously waiting for the ceremony to end and the Men's Singles to step onto the ice. Her attention was suddenly grabbed by the feeling of a gloved hand covering both of hers, and she glanced to the left.
"You're not going to enjoy it if you spend all evening chewing on glass." Mikhail pointed out, "Relax a little. Viktor would've pulled him if he thought it was the best thing to do."

"Viktor has a conflict of interest." The ballerina retorted, going back to her flag-twisting, "He's not going to do anything that'll break Yuri's heart."

"Ehhhhh I'm not so sure of that. Vivi can be cruel at the worst of times." The elder Russian contested, lightly tapping the back of one of the woman's hands until she unraveled it from the folds of fabric and let him have it, "But...while he may have a bias towards wanting Yuri to be able to skate, I think his sense of duty would prevail if he had a real concern that letting Yuri skate would be dangerous. His bias may be for letting Yuri be happy, but he also happens to be biased towards wanting Yuri to come home on his feet, not in a wheelchair."

"...I guess so..."

"Viktor also agreed to do our Yura's choreography."

Mikhail's head popped up at that, and she whipped it around, grabbing the Russian by the front of his coat and yanking him closer suddenly, "What did you say...!?"

Mikhail coughed and wiggled to get free, but she had him tight, "...Vivi said he'd choreograph for Yura!"

"You're kidding."

"Why would I lie...!?" He asked nervously, putting his hands close to the backs of her wrists, "I didn't even have to beg; it was the craziest thing. He just said yes on the first attempt!"

"...Are you sure he didn't just agree because he was too stressed out to say no?"

"Why would he do that...!?"

"You just got him to do that last weekend!"

"That was different! I had to wear him down that time before he'd agree! This time he just said okay without argument!" Mikhail huffed.

"He's got a lot of stuff going on right now, Mikhail Rozovsky! Yuri being hurt is a way bigger deal than just being away from him!"

Ah jeeze, she only says my name like that when I'm in trouble...! I thought she'd be happy about this...!' The Russian thought nervously, only to find himself being let go all of a sudden. He cleared his throat quietly and adjusted his coat to sit it squarely on his shoulders again, then tightened his tie where it had come a bit loose. He reached a hand over to set it gently on the woman's knee and gave it a light squeeze, "...Don't worry so much about it...Viktor gave me his own reasons for why it was no big deal. I made sure he was sure this time."

"Reasons?" She repeated skeptically, wordlessly inviting the man to repeat that list.

"Vivi said that it would take next to nothing for him to put together a show for Yura." Mikhail started, "The kid learns super quickly and would need minimal help perfecting the moves after seeing it that first time. Vivi didn't sound opposed to working with Yura if he needed help fine tuning things...but from the sounds of it, he considers this kind of thing to be no different than how Yuri imitated his 'Aria' back in the day. Yura just watches and copies him. No conversation required."
Minako just grumbled quietly, but then toppled to the right, her head landing on Mari's shoulder, "...Make me stop worrying..."

The silver Russian just gave an incredulous look, but then turned, crossed his arms, and sulked.

As the music came to a close, the lights finally came on again, slowly getting brighter to let peoples' eyes adjust. The stands were still tightly packed, in spite of many likely having abandoned the event for lack of Leroy presence. The light-show skaters filed off the ice, and the curtain to the prep area pulled back to let them through. The Men's Singles competitors were already behind it, cued up to start making their way out after the last of the big group came through.

The lights were back to their normal brightness once the last figure disappeared, and finally, the six skaters and their collective ensemble pushed out. A new song started playing overhead, quiet at first with nothing but a drum-beat...but quintessentially American.

['Song 2' - Blur]

"Welcome to the ISU Grand Prix of Figure Skating Final in Detroit, Michigan, in these fabulous United States!" A newscaster spoke nearby, an NBC-logo microphone in his hand, and the athletes a mere 10ft further down the rink wall, "This is the Men's Short Program. The six gentlemen that qualified for this year's Final are about to head out into the rink for their 6-minute warm-up."

Overhead, the music quieted to half its original volume, and the sound of a woman's voice boomed throughout the stadium, "Ladies and Gentlemen, may we please introduce the skaters of the Men's Singles category!"

Phichit and Chris bolted out first, followed shortly after by the more calm and stoic Otabek, the subdued and anxious Yuri Plisetsky, and finally, hand-in-hand, the two Nikiforovs. The audience was cheering wildly as the six skaters glided effortlessly across the white frost, lining up together in the center, with about 8ft between them. Facing the judges' bench, the competitor's awaited their names to be called overhead.

"Skating for Thailand...Phichit Chulanont!" The announcer cried out, voice booming in the rafters. The audience cheered excitedly, and the young skater waved enthusiastically, giving a bow towards the judges from where he stood at the far right of the line.

The NBC Newscaster watched intently from rink-side, "Currently the only Thai skater to represent the Men's Singles, Phichit is back for his second year running in the Grand Prix Final. He was unexpectedly given the chance to skate this weekend after JJ Leroy was forced to withdraw, following a severe injury sustained during last night's practice. Phichit tied for the 6th spot, but was originally beaten out by a single point in total cumulative score."

"Representing Switzerland...Chris Giacometti!"

The blonde was at the front of the pack, but when facing the judges, he was farthest to the left. He raised a hand and blew a kiss to the audience as he turned in place.

"Skater Chris is the current Swiss National Champion, and comes back to the Grand Prix Final for one more shot at the Gold. A familiar face in the Final, Chris has consistently gotten onto the podium until just last year. It's an uphill climb for this veteran of the ice."

"Taking the ice for Russia...Yuri Plisetsky!"

Standing to Chris' right, Yurio simply held his right arm out to the side and bowed his head, then crossed a leg over the other to twist his black blades in place and face the other way, bowing his
head to the audience there ahead of himself.

"Yuri Plisetsky is the current defending Champion, after winning it last year in an unprecedented record-breaking performance. He not only became the youngest skater in Men's Singles history to take the Gold at the Grand Prix Final, being only 15 at the time, but he did so after breaking long-time Champion and fellow Russian, Viktor Nikiforov's Short Program score. He's got some stiff competition this season though. Can he hold onto the Gold?"

"Performing for the nation of Kazakhstan...Otabek Altin!"

The stoic young skater was to Phichit's left, looking older than his years and more serious than most. He raised his arm and bowed deeply towards the judges, then rotated back around as he stood back upright, waving to all sides of the arena.

"Skater Otabek is kind of an enigma, performing well enough to get on the podium at many of his events, but is still considered a dark horse competitor for lack of a robust international fan-base. His growing popularity may boost him into the mainstream after this year though, and he may soon be a hero of the world, as well as his home country."

"Competing in the rink for Japan...Yuri Nikiforov!"

The audience went absolutely riotous at the sound of his name, and the young skater was caught off guard by it, wasting his moment in the proverbial spotlight with his hands over his mouth in awe, and forgetting to wave until the last second.

"Last year's Silver medalist, Yuri returns for his third year in a row, having marched from dead last in Sochi to 2nd place in Barcelona with the help of his coach and fellow competitor, skating legend Viktor Nikiforov. Yuri is considered a top contender for Gold this season, having won Gold at both of his qualifying events in previous weeks. We almost thought we lost him from the competition last night when he and skater Leroy collided during practice, so we're glad he's here with us today."

"And finally, last but not least, Russia's Viktor Nikiforov!"

Back by popular demand, the audience kept up the prior volume with new screams and cheers for the silver legend's introduction. The skater had lightly held his hands behind his back while he waited, but let his fingers unhook to swing his arms out and up to the sides, bowing ahead to the judges where he stood between the two Yuris, then turning to do the same to the audience behind himself. He waved excitedly as he turned back to his starting place.

"Olympic Champion, five-time consecutive World, European, Russian, and Grand Prix Final Gold medalist, Viktor is back for his first full season of competition after unexpectedly taking time off to be a coach to Japan's then Yuri Katsuki last year, returning in time to take Silver at Worlds. Like his student and now-husband, Viktor won Gold at both of his qualifying events this season. We've got some heavy-hitters playing ball this year! The top spot on the podium could go to almost anyone!"

"The skaters will now begin their 6-minute warm-up period."

The line of athletes burst out towards the rink-wall like a flock of startled birds, all heading in different directions to find their feet on the ice.
The energy in the arena made the air tingle. It was palatable to every skater as they glided across the ice, twisting and turning, careful to keep a large berth between themselves. There was a surgical precision to the way they each got their practice time, each skater staying close to the inside edge of the rink wall while just moving in a relatively straight line, working on their moves in the field or step-work. Those who wanted to jump would wait until getting to one of the rink's four rounded corners, then would break off to make a tight turn towards the inner part of the ice, launch, spin, land, and rejoin the circle by the wall.

By the 3-minute mark, all but Yuri had jumped. He moved nervously around the rink, feeling the eyes of the audience bearing down on him. His heart was pounding from the nerves of it all.

*Half the audience is worried I'll jump and fall. Half the audience is hoping for it, just for the excitement of it...It's so different from how things were in Canada or China. At least there, I was nervous because of the pressure to win.*

His eyes moved over to where the NBC Newscaster was still speaking to the camera at rink-side, no doubt answering questions to news anchors elsewhere about what was going on with the competitors. The man lifted his head and glanced over a shoulder, looking straight at Yuri for a moment, and then pointing at the skater as he zipped by.

"...-kater Yuri Nikiforov hasn't jumped yet, but that might be bec-..."

It was all he could hear before he was too far away again.

*Ahh this is so nerve-wrackin-*

"Yuri."

He practically jumped out of his skin, launching some 10ft into the air from the fright of it. When he landed again, his skates threatened to slide out from under him, but mercifully, a bracing set of arms came around his sides and kept him on his feet.

"If you could get that kind of height on purpose, that'd be something else," Viktor laughed, holding firmly to his partner, "Sorry though. What were you thinking just now?"

Yuri let the Russian push him along, sagging a bit where the adrenaline rush was fading from the startle, "...Just about how different the energy is here..."

"Go do a double Lutz then. Take the edge off."

"You sure?"

"Mh. I'll stand by."

Yuri found his feet again and started moving along on his own, hand moving down to take his spouse's for the last few yards before the rink turned. Otabek's blades cracked the frost as he landed a quad Toe, and he glided off effortlessly as the older skater moved in to follow in the scratch-marks left on the ice. Viktor slid just a bit further behind and to the right, hands parked on his hips as he watched.
With some speed picked up, Yuri pushed through a 3-turn, twisting himself to skate backwards, readied his launching skate...and clapped it hard into the ice. The audience practically went silent for that span of two seconds where the young athlete was in the air, and then clapped excitedly when he landed, sliding off with only a slight wobble.

Sighing with relief, Yuri held his hand out for his partner to come up close again, feeling those fingers sliding into his own and curling them around, "Whew..."

"That looked pretty good. It was a triple though."

"Yeah, I realized halfway through that I was going too fast..." He lamented anxiously, "Couldn't do much about it in the air though. Was it really okay?"

Viktor nodded, "Maybe just -1 GOE for the wobble, but otherwise fi-"

"Will the skaters please exit the rink. The 6-minute warm-up has come to an end."

The two lifted their heads to the sound of the announcer, but nodded and started moving off. Sliding towards the center of the rink, they saw Chris and Phichit heading the same way, the four of them stopping directly on top of the ISU logo. Otabek saw and was heading that way, too, but had to stop and grab Yurio by the back of his jacket to make him join in.

When all six skaters were in the middle together, the first four almost instinctively moved to link arms behind one another's backs, Chris to Viktor, Viktor to Yuri, Yuri to Phichit. The Russian Tiger reluctantly joined in when he saw Otabek take his place next to the Swiss skater, he himself between the Kazakh and the Thai athletes.

"It's kind of weird that it's the six of us here at this Final." Viktor started, "We're all linked to each other in some form or another, and not just as skaters either."

"It's the Grand Prix Final of Friendship!" Phichit laughed, "Let's all do our best!"

The eldest competitors all smirked or smiled at that, nodding to one another. Otabek nodded in solidarity, but Yurio just glanced around in uncomfortable silence, looking briefly from the Kazakh to Yuri, but saying nothing.

"No one go easy on Yuri," Chris commented wryly, "He's got that annoying habit of busting out the big-guns when he's down to the wire."

"Right?" Viktor laughed in agreement, pulling his arm back from where it was around his friend's back and sticking it into center, "Phichit's right, too. Everyone do your best...and let's all have fun while we're at it. I, for one, am totally over the drama of the last few weeks. I just want to properly thrash the whole lot of you like old times."

More laughter, and if not, knowing smiles, save the slight side-eye from the Tiger. Hands started to stack on top of the silver legend's, with Chris putting in second, then Phichit eagerly, and Otabek's after that. Yuri brought his eyes up to glance across the pile towards the blonde, meeting those emerald irises for a split second before reaching forward and adding his hand to the tower.

"Like Viktor and Phichit-kun said...we're all friends here." The Japanese skater said, "No more hurt feelings, and no harm done. Let's all skate like we want Gold, if not because we all really actually want it, but because we all want to see the look on Viktor's face when he has to look up at someone else from the next podium down."

"Just like at Worlds." Chris winked at them both, though Viktor just gave a hesitant smile.
"Yes, just like at Worlds." He dipped his hand low to take the stack down, "May we all look up at Yuri in the end then."

"No pressure." That certain SkateHusband mused nervously.

The tower of hands was quickly brought back up again, and the flock of skaters burst out from center, with Chris moving off to the side to find his coach as the rest headed for the exit to find their blade guards.

"The first skater of the Men's Singles bracket is Christophe Giacometti of Switzerland."

"A fantastic show of sportsmanship from all the competitors this evening. But...on with the show. Normally, rank assignments are made in the reverse order of qualification," The NBC reporter was saying, the camera pointing towards the gaggle of athletes, "But today, it's coming up in order of random draw."

1 [CHE] Christophe GIACOMETTI
2 [RUS] Yuri PLISETSKY
3 [KAZ] Otabek ALTIN
4 [RUS] Viktor NIKIFOROV
5 [THA] Phichit CHULANONT
6 [JPN] Yuri NIKIFOROV

"This works out really well, and really poorly, for injured skater Yuri Nikiforov, who was involved in the accident that removed Canadian skater Jean-Jacque Leroy from the Final." The reporter went on, watching Chris as he got his final motivational talk and hug from his coach, "Going dead-last means he has the longest time to wait and get any last bit of recovery he can, after splitting his head on the ice. But it also means tension for the final Short Program placements will be highest when he goes out there, so he'll be feeling the pressure to beat everyone who skated before him. For now though, we turn our attention back to the ice, where Swiss skater Christophe Giacometti is about to kick-off the Men's Singles event. At age 27, Chris has qualified for a number of Grand Prix Finals, but never quite managed to take Gold. He's in the twilight of his skating career though, and this may well be his last chance to get to the top of the podium."

"Chris~! Davai!" Viktor called, waving an arm around where he and the rest of the skaters were heading under the blue curtain to the prep area and out of the way.

"Ganba!" Yuri added, careful this time not to let his husband whop him in the face like he'd done cheering for Yurio during the previous season.

As before, Chris' Short Program ensemble was a one-piece, dark for the most part, starting as black and rising up to chest-level where splatters of white came into play. A thickly-cut window streaked across the skater's chest, covered by lace and a starburst of red crystal over his heart, appearing the 'drip' blood down the length of his frame to waist level.

Having seen the show once before, the costume made more sense than it had the first time. Yuri thought back on the day Chris had told them in France what it was all for.

"Viktor...we've been doing this for a very long time." He started, "I think it's time I showed my appreciation for all the years we've been friends, don't you think?"

"Eh?" Blue eyes blinked in confusion.
The Swiss winked and clapped his long-time friend's shoulder, "You'll see."

"Life on the ice isn't just about winning multicolored metal discs, you know?" The taller skater said, patting Viktor's back, "You'll be surprising crowds for years to come at all the Exhibitions you'll be getting invited to. So stop talking about your retirement like it's the end for you. I think the fact that you won't be constrained by rules and regulations will be great for your muse. The competition circuit is holding you back."

Yuri watched and listened closely, rather surprised by the skater's efforts. His impartial observation was suddenly ended though when he felt Chris grab his coat and dragged him into the hug as well.

"Let your cute young husband deal with the rigid structure of these events." The taller man went on, "Look how far he's come because of you. He thrives on what you do for him. So...use him to bring home the gold, but free yourself to be the artist that everyone knows you wanted to be all along."

They made their way to one of several big-screen televisions that were set up under the stadium for skaters to watch the competition from. There were a number of other athletes still there from the Ladies and Pairs events prior to the Opening Ceremonies, and many were keen to see how the Men handled themselves. When the SkateHusbands had finished putting their team jackets on and found their place within a small crowd, Viktor took his usual spot, latched to his partner's back, right hand clinging to the waist as the left came up under an arm to hold a shoulder just under where he rested his chin.

Yuri's eyes were glued to the screen, but he let himself put his hands in his pockets, but pulled his partner's right hand with it from where it had been parked on his hip.

Chris made this show with Viktor in mind. The young skater thought, watching as the Swiss athlete made his way towards the center of the rink to take position, All the times that people had been harping at him about his age and looming retirement...and no one but Chris thought to wonder what Viktor could do to stay in skating even after competition. It's one thing to be a coach...but he did that just to be around me. Viktor's heart is on the ice. He'd never be satisfied with watching others skate without him...not for long, anyway. If he has legs to stand on, he'll have blades on his feet.

The Russian held on a little tighter as the music started.

['Broken' - Lifehouse]

Chris had his head bowed, leaning slightly forward with the left hand curled behind his back, the right gesturing forward, right leg crossed over the other. With the quiet strum of a single acoustic guitar resonating high above, he lifted his head up and looked to the horizon, twisting around and pushing off to the side. He glided effortlessly across the surface of the ice, twisting to and fro, until the lyrics began.

The broken clock is a comfort, it helps me sleep tonight,

His arms moved in wide gestures, as though telling the story of the music. Hands came down and together under the side of his chin, blades twisting under him, moving him along in a slow, sliding rotation, leaving overlapping oval scratches in the frost. When his hands went out again, he leaned forward, kicking through a few stars-maneuvers, before...

Maybe it can stop tomorrow from stealing all my time.
...the last kick vaulted him into a butterfly jump, landing upright and starting to rotate swiftly for the flying-entry camel spin.

*And I am here still waiting though I still have my doubts,*

He rotated in the normal formation at first. A hand then went back to reach for the upright blade, holding onto it for the donut variant, spinning several times before leaning back for the layover variant.

*I am damaged at best...like you've already figured out.*

The blonde backed out of the spin and rounded the end of the rink, spinning and twisting elegantly as he made his way back to the other side, picking up speed as he moved back towards a curved corner.

*I'm falling apart,*

Outside spread-eagle into a triple axel.

*I'm barely breathing.*

Step sequence; blades flew under the athlete, his whole frame bobbing slightly or arching with the beat of the music. He carved a long, serpentine path across the ice, bringing his hands up to his chest to cover the ruby-red starburst in its center.

*With a broken heart that's still beating.*

*In the pain, there is healing,*

He dipped down low, almost into a sit-spin but not quite. Hands clutched over his head while he was down, as though reeling from some hurt. But, he rose back up again, twisting to glide backwards, then around again to go forward, arms outstretched before himself.

*In your name, I find meaning.*

The Swiss skater quickly changed direction again, moving through a 3-turn to go backwards, extending his right leg out behind himself...

*I'm hangin' on...*  

...toe-pick down, and ice flew as he launched into his legendary quad Lutz, astonishing all by lifting one arm above his head in the process.

*...Another day, just to see what you throw my way.*

The silver Russian's eyes widened a bit as he saw it play out on the television, "Wow~ He didn't do that last time!"

Yuri was equally stunned, watching as Chris lowered his shoulders down as he kicked high in a single-rotation fake-out illusion spin, before lowering down for the start of his sit-spin, "...No kidding..."

The Swiss skater rotated Swiftly with a twist, left arm straight above, left leg bent over the spinning blade. Switch to the lower, tighter formation of the cannon-ball spin with the left leg moving forward until it stuck straight out, and Chris loomed over it, holding both hands to his ankle.

*And I'm hanging on to the words you say...you said that I will be okay.*
Those brown eyes watched in amazement, and Yuri felt his fingers tighten a little where he had his partner's hand in his pocket, *He's trying a lot harder this time than in Bordeaux...I wonder what's gotten into him?*

*The broken lights on the freeway left me here alone,*

Chris had risen up and was moving swiftly in reverse, bent slightly forward with his arms out for balance, eyeballing the next spot his final jump would lunch from. When he found it, he clicked his left toe-pick down for the final quad, launching off the blade of his right foot and landing on the same for the Toe-loop, and kicking off again for the triple Loop that came right after.

*I may have lost my way now, haven't forgotten...my way home.*

"Wow, he's making it look so easy this time." Phichit said, smiling nervously as he watched from close by, Celestino just behind him with his arms crossed, "He's not taking any chances like before."

*I'm falling apart, I'm barely breathing   
With a broken heart that's still beating*

"The Free Skate is where it all still counts, but giving up easy points in the Short Program is never a good idea if you can help it." The coach agreed, glancing over at the Russian and his own former student, *Not when the competition is known for holding the current World Record for the highest points. Chris can't afford to slack off when there's the potential for a 20 point gap to make-up for.*

*In the pain (in the pain) there is healing   
In your name I find meaning   
So I'm holdin' on (I'm still holdin'), I'm holdin' on (I'm still holdin'),*

The Swiss skater's final spin began; initiated with an arms-out camel spin, then arms behind the back, descending into a sit spin with both hands folded over the bent knee while still sitting mostly upright, then rising up into the final scratch-spin, arms traveling up his thin frame, knuckles barely touching the fabric of the costume until he could clasp his fingers high above his head.

*I'm holdin' on (I'm still holdin'), I'm barely holdin' on to you...*

When he pulled out of the last of the spins, his arms flared out to the side, free leg extending behind himself as he moved in a wider and wider circle. The lyrics faded out, and the soft sound of the gentle guitar filled the arena. The blonde went down to his knees on the frost, wrapped his arms around himself, and leaned back.

Viktor pulled his hands forward to clap them together in front of his husband's chest, "He's going to be setting the bar pretty high, I think."

The crowd was roaring their approval, throwing flowers to the rink as the skater bowed and made his way to the exit. Moments later, he was with his coach in the kiss and cry, and he spotted his friend and rival coming up to watch. The skater just smiled and waved the Russian over, beckoning him towards the bench in front of the cameras, "This show's for you anyway, Viktor...might as well join in, right?"

"If you want." The elder mused, hand sliding down his partner's arm as he moved away and took his place on the bench.

"Maybe we should get you contact lenses that have a print of Viktor on the curve, Chris." Coach Josef huffed, arms crossed stoically as the three waited for the skater's score, "Just like in France, you performed better when he was around."
The silver Russian just smiled innocently, leaning against the blonde's shoulder, "Let's see how the judges feel about that."

Yuri leaned against the rink wall and smiled anxiously, holding his head up with a palm under the side of his jaw.

"The score for Christophe Giacometti..."

Everyone quieted down and looked up, waiting for the number.

"...97.81."

"...Hm." Chris put a finger on his chin as he crossed the other arm over his chest, "...I was hoping for better."

The audience started cheering and clapping excitedly. No matter what, scoring so close to 100 was still something worth celebrating.

Yuri clapped quietly from where he was standing, It's barely higher than what I scored at last year's Short Program...but I still managed to get Silver back then. He's going to be hard to beat, especially now...

"It's still higher than what Yuri and I got at both of our most recent events." Viktor offered, leaning inward a bit where he still had his forearm over the man's closest shoulder, "Anything can happen between now and tomorrow night."

"You're right." Chris nodded, rising to stand and make his way back to the prep area to watch the rest of the event, and passing where Yakov, Lilia, and Yurio were standing by waiting their own turns, "Scoring almost 100 is still pretty decent."

The silver Russian reached an arm out for his partner as they came by with Josef, and the young skater quickly trotted around to find his place in his partner's reach. They all chattered back and forth as they headed back towards the blue curtain, but Yuri glanced up and back the way they came, over Viktor's arm where it was draped over his shoulders. He caught a brief glimpse of Yurio looking back at him, and started to open his mouth to wish the teen good luck, but those emerald eyes swiftly shot back around to look away, and Yuri lost his chance. He sighed quietly to himself and turned back to watch where he was stepping, three sets of blade guards and one pair of shoes sounding the last of their retreat.

"Next on the ice...representing Russia...Yuri...Plisetsky."

Yuri's Angels went wild with excitement, heard clearly over the rest of the audience as the Russian Tiger took to the competition floor.
He could still hear the laughter and banter of the oldest two skaters as they headed under the blue
curtain to the Players' Club; the huge lounge-like area where normally were just benches and halls at
other venues. The look on Yuri's face though, that bothered him more than anything else. Yurio grit
his teeth and sighed to himself as he pulled his team jacket off, hearing his name called out high
above. His heart was still pounding from the chance meeting between their eyes, and he regretted
having looked at all...rather, that he'd been caught looking.

I don't even know how I'm going to manage fixing this. I didn't just burn bridges with Viktor...I
incinerated them, and salted the earth all around for miles. I don't doubt that Katsudon wants things
done and over with...he all but said so just a few minutes ago. But...

"Yuri," Yakov's voice spoke, drawing the Russian Tiger from his thoughts, "You're wasting time.
They called your name half a minute ago."

Green eyes lifted in sudden panic, and the teen burst out onto the ice, kicking his blade guards off
and throwing his jacket glibly. Blades carved a few long lines into the frost as he quickly made his
way out to the center of the rink. He barely had a few seconds to reacquaint himself with the rink
before he took his position, digging in the right toe-pick where he had both skates slightly parted
beneath himself.

"YUUUURIIIIIII~!" Nikkita called loudly and unexpectedly, "DAVAAAAAAAAAI~!"

The teen lifted his head a little, surprised to have been able to hear it over the sound of the rest of the
crowd. Even his fanclub's membership had quieted some when the silver youth's voice rang out,
piercing the air like a warning siren.

['Inner Universe' - Origa - Long version opening 0:00-0:11, then 0:23-1:55, then 2:06-2:42, then
4:25-4:48 for a total of about 2mins 50sec]

The arena boomed with the start of the music, startling half the audience out of their stupor, and the
blonde burst out to the side, kicking off hard enough that flakes of ice followed in his wake.

Nikki sat back in her seat, quite proud of herself, and looked over the line of people between herself
and her father with a smug look on her face, "See, papa? I told you he'd hear me."

Mikhail had a finger in his ear, as though trying to soothe his broken eardrum, "...I think the
dead could hear you, sweetie."

"Did the music start?" Viktoria asked sarcastically, cringing still where she sat between her sister and
Yuri's, "I can't hear it over the ringing in my ears."

Yurio swiftly pushed into a backward-entry camel-spin, spinning a few times before reaching back to
grab one black blade as the song's lyrics began.

Angely i demony krujili nado mnoy
Rassekali ternii i mlechnye puti
The rotations went on with the full Biellmann, both hands on the skate being held above the teen's head. When he let it go, he used the momentum of his foot coming back down again to dip a bit, followed by an immediate hop upward to change feet, and then swung his head down low for an illusion spin before continuing.

Ne znaet schast'ya tol'ko tot,

He rose back up to normal, keeping the free leg up as he started moving backwards into wider arcs.

Kto ego zova ponyat' ne smog...

He stepped into a backward-entry clockwise twizzle, twisting several times as he moved across the ice, pausing to kick his free leg out briefly before setting it down onto the cold to rotate yet again. By the third twist, the blonde set his left leg down, but instead of spinning again, he twisted himself over to turn the twizzle into an outside spread-eagle. At the end, he vaulted into the triple Axel...and stumbled.

Mana du vortes, mana du vortes
Aeria gloris, aeria gloris

"Skater Yuri barely manages to hold onto that landing, but his hand touched down!" Newscaster Morooka called, "No doubt he'll lose points for the exit! Up next is an even harder jump...his first quad!"

Yurio grit his teeth, moving forward swiftly along the long-side of the rink-wall, arms spread wide out to the side as the music grew calmer over head.

Mana du vortes, mana du vortes
Aeria gloris, aeria gloris

He closed his eyes, lifted his right foot forward, toed through a 3-turn, kicked that same foot back...and picked.

The music for everyone seemed to stop in that heartbeat.

Brown eyes were wide open at the television screen behind the first of two bar areas, and time seemed to stand still. The Russian Tiger was stopped in the middle of that jump for what seemed like an eternity. Yuri could feel his breath caught up in his chest, trying to look up and over his spouse's shoulder to where the nearest screen was. Viktor and Chris were still chatting while the younger was getting his skates off.

I am...CLAK...Calling,
Calling out!
Spirits, I am calling!

The audience was mad with cheers, and the teen stuck the landing for the quad Flip without the same mistake of the Axel. Even Yuri twitched a bit as he saw it, finally able to draw breath again as the music and performance went on.

Soboy ostat'sya dol'she...

Like Chris in the prior performance, Yurio too had a stars maneuver, kicking through a camel-spin like rotation as he moved diagonally across the ice with each upward thrust of his free leg, until he culminated the maneuver with a scissor-kick into a sit-spin.
Calling, Calling, in the depths of longing!

Right-leg landing, left slightly curved around. Yurio reached down to grab the dragging blade, raising up his left arm at the same time for added difficulty. Soon after, both arms were up, behind his back, and he kept on spinning. Arms came back down under the skater, and he crouched briefly to change feet, continuing on with the twist variant, right leg sticking out straight to the side as the skater sat mostly upright, arms out and then coming back to center to speed himself up.

* Soboy ostat'ya dol'she... *

He rose back to his full height with his arms still close, breaking out of it before it could be called a scratch-spin and count sloppily towards an unintended combination spin. Yurio made two deliberate rotations, kicking the ice with each pass before heading off straight down the middle of the rink.

* Mana du vortes, mana du vortes  
Aeria gloris, Aeria gloris... *

Finding himself at in the center of the ice, closest to the short end that was in front of him, the teen dropped down to one knee, the right leg dragging behind him, both hands up towards the rafters and being brought down towards his chest as he dipped his head down over them.

* Mana du vortes, mana du vortes  
Aeria gloris, Aeria gloris... *

Yurio, and the music, seemed to hold still for an instant, even as the final S-sound of the previous lyric morphed into the first word of the next.

* Stand alone, where was life when it had meaning? *

The Russian Tiger rose back up the standing, one hand up in a gesture towards the audience, bringing it close again as his right blade went around him in an arc, turning him a full 540 before he paused again, looking out towards the entirety of the rink again. A toe-pick went into the ice, and he pushed forward into the start of his step sequence.

* Stand alone, nothing's real anymore, and...  
Beskonechnyj beg... *

Each syllable of the line was another arcing twist of the skater's thin frame, almost drunkenly traversing the white frost in a repeated S-formation. Fully in control, his blades were moving expertly, until the sound above changed again.

* Poka zhiva... *

Arriving at the opposite short-side of the rink, the teen moved backwards into his last jump element. He kicked off and raised one arm for the tano quad Salchow, landed, and launched again for the triple Loop.

* ...Ya mogu starat'lya na letu ne upast' *

Almost immediately after landing, the Russian Tiger maneuvered into his final required element, the combination spin, starting with the backward-entry camel spin.

* Mana du vortes, mana du vortes *

He held his arms out to the sides, then leaned back a bit for the layover variant.
Yuri had fully turned around by then, entirely captured by the performance, and having no clue what was going on in the conversation behind him. It wasn't until Viktor tried to move him, and he refused, that either of the two older skaters had noticed he hadn't been paying attention to them. Eyes were wide, and as the blonde twisted down low for a broken-leg sit-spin, Yuri's brow furrowed with worry.

The Russian glanced down at him for a moment, then at the television that had transfixed him.

Yurio pulled out of the last spin of the combo, rising up to his full height only long enough to push forward and drop down to his knees, sliding into the last position, arms raised up towards the ceiling.

*Aeria gloris, Aeria gloris...*

Sweat rolled down the side of the teen's face and neck, leaving long cold streaks where they passed. He panted heavily as the audience around started to cheer, tossing their gifts towards him from all sides. Slowly, he rose back up to his feet, holding onto his knees for a moment as he tried to find air, and then gradually raised back to standing, and bowed his head. Right arm went up to acknowledge the crowd, and Russia's youngest Champion let the wave of excitement rush over him.

"Do you want to go somewhere else?" Viktor wondered, looking curiously at his partner's anxious expression, "Yuri?"

No answer came, and the silver legend worried it might mean his partner was starting to let things get the better of him again. So, like in China the previous year, Viktor abruptly started dragging the skater off somewhere less populated. Yuri flailed in surprise initially, but sighed and accepted his fate as he spotted Chris waving goodbye at him with a knowing but amused look on his face. Even Phichit glanced back, looking past Celestino's shoulder where they were both sitting on bar-stools at the counter, wondering what was going on...but Yuri was out the doors and behind the glass wall rather quickly, and no one gave chase.

Perhaps it was a mercy that the young skater was too far away to clearly hear the results of the teen's program, but it didn't do much to assuage his guilt over everything else. By the time Viktor had stopped walking and let them both stand normally near a wall just inside an open-space that looked something like a receiving area, the booming echo of the audience roared its approval for the last skater's score, filling the back-halls behind the Players' Club. Those brown eyes just stayed low though.

Viktor was rummaging around in his jacket pockets, "Do you have your ear plugs with you? I have my buds if you want..."

"No..."

"No? No to having your ear-plugs or no to borrowing mine?" Blue eyes looked nervous.

"...Neither."

At rink-side, Yurio was stepping out of the kiss and cry with Yakov and Lilia, and held his hand out for a low clap with Otabek to wish him luck on his own performance.

The Khazakh slightly raised a brow at his younger friend though, "What's wrong? You got over 100. Shouldn't you be happier?"

"I've scored much higher before. This is my lowest score of the season so far, too."

"Still higher than Chris got."
"I guess so."

He tilted his head a bit, but reached for his blade-guards as the younger teen stepped off, himself unsure what else to say.

"Davai, Otabek." Yurio paused and turned back, standing side-face to the older skater, "I don't think I'll mind so much if I lose to you."

"You'll never be satisfied with anything if you're already settling for second when only one other competitor has hit the ice so far." The dark-horse warned, "You need to sort out your business with Yuri and Viktor before you skate tomorrow. You'll lose your competitive edge otherwise. This brooding, hostile animosity is holding you down like lead weights."

Those green eyes just blinked back at him in confusion, but the Russian Punk nodded anyway.

"I'm off. I'm not going to go easy on you."

"I'll be mad if you do."

"The next competitor of the Men's Singles event...representing Kazakhstan, Otabek Altin!"

Yuri slouched a bit where he stood, rocking slightly on his blade-guards, "I'm not worried right now over the scores. ...I've kind of come to accept that I'll probably score lower than everyone else. I can't trust myself to do quads without falling, and I don't want to have you biting your nails the entire time I'm out there. I'm going to lose a lot of points because of it."

"...I thought we sorted this out. You were going to go for sty-"

"I know...that's not what I'm nervous about though. I'm over it, like you are for everything else." He interrupted, leaning back against a concrete pillar just behind himself.

"What then?"

The younger skater drew in a breath, "I've been throwing life-lines at Yurio since we got here, but every time he realizes I'm looking at him, he quickly looks away."

"I've noticed."

"He looks more scared than angry now." Yuri explained, "I want things to be like they were before."

"That's up to him." The Russian shrugged.

Otabek's music was starting, though it sounded more like a creepy echo than the orchestra the two skaters knew it to be.

[\'Requiem - Dies Irae\' specifically on YouTube channel 'fanworldmusic']

Viktor put his hands into his pockets, tilting his head slightly to the side, "Would it make you feel better if I told you I'd agreed to be his choreographer?"

Those hazel eyes opened wide, but then narrowed a bit in confusion, "You did...? When?"

_Dies irae, Dies illa_

"Earlier this morning. When Mimi pulled me aside. That's when he asked me, and I agreed."
Yuri just looked skeptical at that, "...Why...would you agree to be his choreographer if not his coach...?"

"He took 'Agape' home with him, didn't he?" The Russian offered.

_Solvet saeclum in favilla_  
_Testa David cum Sibylla_

Otabek was already finishing the first required element of the Short Program; his step sequence. It ended with the seemingly-traditional outside spread-eagle into the triple Axel, which he landed easily enough and skated off backwards to applause.

_Quantus tremor est futurus_

"Putting together a program for him won't cause me nearly as much grief as coaching him would."

The silver legend continued, "He'll have it forged into his brain the first time he sees me demonstrate it."

Yuri was still stunned, and reached a hand up to scratch the unhurt side of his forehead, "You've been so adamant about wanting to keep your distance from him though...what did Mikhail promise you in return?"

"Nothing."

"...You can't mean that."

_Quando judex est venturus_

The performing skater was crouched low in a catch-foot sit-spin, holding his left blade under his right leg where it was folded beneath himself.

_Quando judex est venturus_

"I'm serious." Viktor explained, "He only spoke as many words as it took to actually ask me if I'd do it. I told him yes, and he lamented how he was getting himself worked up to beg me, only to feel all deflated because he didn't have to."

_Cuncta stricte discussurus_

His partner could do little but feel his own brain starting to short circuit from the revelation, "...I guess I still don't understand. I didn't think you'd be willing to help him at all anymore."

"I'm not marrying him just because I'm putting a program or two together for him." The Russian slouched a bit as well, but shook his head and stood straighter, "You sound like you don't want me to do it though."

_Dies irae, Dies illa_  
_Solvet saeclum in favilla_

The Khazakh launched into his quad Salchow, triple Toe-loop combination jump, stepping through it cleanly.

_Testa David cum Sibylla_

"That's not it at all!" Yuri insisted, bringing his hands up defensively, "It's just a bit surprising!...A lot surprising, actually..." His hands went down again, "Does he know?"
"Not that *I'm* aware of. I'm not actually sure *who* knows, other than Mimi, myself, and you now. I figured I'd let Mimi tell him, in case he rejects it, then he doesn't have to do so to my face."

Hazel eyes lowered again, but the young skater nodded, "Now we just have to get him to be willing to stay in the same room as us."

"I think he's working himself up to that." Viktor said, turning his head to look down the hall they'd come down, seeing the lights and glass walls leading to the Players' Club, making sure no one was coming their way, "He isn't yelling at anyone anymore, at least."

Otabek was rising up from his Cantilever, fingertips dragging across the ice as he leaned way back in the long curve. It was nearing the moment for his last major jump, and his heart was pounding as heavily as the drums of the music had been.

*Quantus tremor est futurus*

When he rose up again, his left boot immediately went back, and he toe-picked down as hard as he could, launching, and like in China...fell again. This time, he got up much more quickly.

*A -3 on a quad Lutz is still worth more points than a +3 on a triple Lutz...even if the fall hurts a lot more...*

*Quando judex est venturus*

*Cuncta stricte discus surus*

He clenched his eyes shut, and when they opened again, he was refocused and able to ignore the pain. He only had two required moves left, and both were spins, so he threw himself into the Death Drop for the camel spin as well as he could. Right arm extended ahead of himself as the left wrapped around, in part because it made his guts feel better, and in part because that's what he'd choreographed it to look like. When he twisted around, he switched feet gracefully, and spun even faster when he pulled into himself tightly, reaching for his free skate to pull it back behind his head for the catch-foot variant.

*Quantus tre-e-mo-or e-est fu-you-turus*

*Dies irae, Dies illa*

Yuri had been staring at the toes of his skates, but drew in a breath and pushed off the pillar he'd been leaning against, walking forward until he bumped his forehead into his spouse's shoulder, "Let's just go back. Otabek's going to be done soon and then you're up anyway. I'll feel better when I get to watch you skate."

*Quantus tre-e-mo-or e-est fu-you-turus*

*Quando judex est venturus*

Viktor pulled an arm over his husband's shoulders, "You let yourself get worn down too thin over other peoples' issues. It's not your fault he's mad to begin with."

*Cuncta stricte discus surus*

"I keep hearing that but I don't entirely believe it. If nothing I said was worth getting mad about then Yurio wouldn't have gotten mad. But he did, so I feel bad about it. If he'd let me talk to him..."

"Not until after you skate."

Yuri blanched slightly, "...If you'd let me talk to him, then."
They passed beside the glass walls again, able to look inside the Players' Club and all the different skaters and coaches therein, most watching the Kazakh winding down towards the end of his program with his combination spin.

*Cuncta stricte, Stricte discus surus*

Emerald eyes lifted slightly where Yurio had been sitting on one of the lounge's huge leather couches, keeping a keen eye on the performance on one of the many big-screen televisions against the walls. His attention was grabbed slightly by the sight of motion just to his right, but when he spotted the unfortunate sight of Yuri and Viktor coming in his direction on the other side of the glass, he practically gaped. If not for the fact that they were right there, then because in his mind's eye, Yuri wasn't just walking next to his coach...he was walking between two of the three heads of Cerberus, the HellHound's massive jaws resting across his shoulders as the third head watched where they were walking. The eyes on the center head spotted the Russian Kitten, and he scrambled to get out of sight before Yuri had seen him.

*Cuncta stricte, Stricte discus surus*

"It's not that I don't want you to talk to him." Viktor corrected, "I'd just rather you do so later. You've got enough to worry about...let that be a battle for another time. There's no telling what will happen or be said, and I'd really rather you don't go out onto the ice after what might and probably will devolve into yelling."

"So you're saying you'll let me find him after we're done here?" The younger skater wondered, stepping out in front of his husband to stop him where he stood, "Promise me."

"Why should I promise? It's not like you'll be alone." Otabek was panting heavily where he stood, one toe-pick gouged down into the ice, right arm arced low before himself, the left behind pointing slightly up where he leaned forward. The audience was wild with excitement, clapping happily and tossing their gifts to the rink; flowers, and best of all, a certain teddy bear plush, each one wearing a different silly outfit than the last.

Yuri lifted his eyes when he heard the applause. He couldn't help but look back at his partner though with a bit of skepticism, "You've been putting yourself between him and I all day. I know you mean well, but when I ask you to promise to let me talk to him, I mean that you'll give him a bit of breathing room." He hesitated. Viktor blinked at him, confused and concerned all at once, "...Like...?"

The younger figure gathered his courage, "Like how you thought of your father before. This shadow that loomed over you, threatening to jump out at any moment to destroy everything you ever loved."

The Russian was taken aback by that, and could do nothing but exhale quietly where the mention of Konstantin had made him unconsciously hold his breath.

"I may still not really know a whole lot about how you and Yurio were before you came to Hasetsu, but since then, I'd like to think he and I have become friends." Yuri went on, knowing his time was shrinking quickly, "I want him to think he can come to me without the worry that he might be walking into an ambush."

"I can only do my best to shield you from something that I know has caused you pain before." The silver skater explained, lifting his eyes back up again to look at his partner evenly, "That's the
difference between me and my father. He wasn't protecting anyone."

The younger skater nodded, and stepped closer to thread his arms through where Viktor had put his hands back into his jacket's pockets, pressing his forehead to the man's neck, "I know...and I appreciate it. I really do. But I want to face this soon. He's going to be coming to live in Hasetsu after Russian Nationals. I feel like I won't have a chance to make this better if I don't do something about it before the end of the weekend. It's like you said though...Hasetsu is supposed to be our place. I told off the JSF people about it at our wedding party, and I'll say it again now...I won't hide, and I won't walk on eggshells...not there, not on what has always been my turf...our turf now." He explained, holding tightly for a moment before pulling back to look up the few inches of his husband's added height, "Having him be constantly mad at us will make the whole point of him being in Hasetsu moot."

"So you'd be willing to send him back to Russia if it doesn't work out?" Viktor wondered anxiously, "The idea of that makes me nervous. It wouldn't be like you. Not at all."

The younger skater shook his head, "It wasn't something that had occurred to me. I only meant that it would suck for him. Being there so he can live with a real family, only to spend most of his time hiding or running away because of us... This whole argument between us has had enough of an impact on everyone already. He's not himself right now. He's only this calm and introspective when he's really thinking deeply about stuff. I..." He hesitated a moment, and dropped his face back down to his spouse's shoulder, "...I saw him like this once before, when you were making us do that 'self-awareness' training back before 'Onsen on Ice.' He's vulnerable right now, and I jus-"

Viktor had put a finger on the man's lips, stopping him in the midst of that last thought. The Russian shook his head when he saw those confused hazel eyes looking up at him again, "Wakatta."

Yuri blinked at him, as though not really sure what the Russian had said at first, but then understanding, "...Hontou ni?"

"Sou da yo."

Those eyes practically shone with relief, and the young skater practically felt weak in the knees over it, holding tighter to his partner even as Viktor was helping keep him upright, smiling nervously.

"The score for Otabek Altin...108.37."

Yuri lost what strength he had left and fell to the ground in a puddle, "It's so high!"

"Don't give up yet, Yuri!" Viktor tried to reassure, looking up to see the scores in the chart-graphic on the television, "Everyone's still basically within 10 points!"

Chapter End Notes

Wakatta = I know/understand  
Hontou ni? = Really?  
Sou da yo = It's true
Yurio made sure to keep out of sight, but was still close enough to the rink-side doorway that he could keep an eye on who was coming and going. He'd avoided leaving the participants' area to go do his post-SP interviews for wanting to watch Otabek's show, and was waiting for the Kazakh to stick his head into the Player's Club since after his own performance. His ears were caught though, as people were starting to clap and cheer as the next competitor was making his way to that same doorway.

Viktor made quick work of his track-suit jacket, handing it to his partner as they quickly went through the club to get out to rink-side. Blade-guards thunk'd along the wood flooring as they made their way past the other skaters and coaches. They could already hear the sound of the crowd calling the Russian's name as the cozy-closeness of the lounge area morphed into the open, airy expanse of the coliseum-like arena.

"Up next, skating for Russia...Viktor Nikiforov!"

The audience went wild with cheers and applause, and the silver legend hopped on one foot towards the rink entrance, all while simultaneously trying to get the rubber bar off the blade on the other, and waving at the fans at the same time. By the time he stumbled past where Yakov had been standing, waiting for him to make an appearance, Viktor was clinging to the rink wall with one arm as he tried to figure out why the second blade-guard wasn't coming off.

Yuri had briefly been congratulating Otabek on his score as the two skaters passed each other, but when he looked back towards his idol, quirked a brow at the man's awkward struggle. He shook his head and smiled as he leaned in to push his husband's hand out of the way and unlatch the metal hook that had gotten flipped back over the extended blade of the heel. Flicking the rubber guard down with a finger afterwards, the skater stood back upright, only to spot an amused look on the Russian's face, "...Nani?"

"Nandemonai." The silver figure smirked, though his eyes looked on adoringly as he stood fully upright and launched himself out onto the ice.

Screams and cheers made the arena shake with excitement, and the chant of a few people calling out the Russian's name bubbled under the thunderous wave of applause. It was almost as urgent as the name-chanting that rose up at the end of the skater's previous Free Program, where the volume had increased in tandem with the Russian's slowly-rising hands. It was a cacophony that even made a certain bear think twice and look aside.

Viktor made a long arc, almost to the middle of the rink before turning around to come back to the rink wall. He quickly reached for the lanyard and badge still hanging around his neck, and pulled it over his head, leaning forward to put it over his spouse's instead, but then held there a moment, hands still on the ribbon.

The pause was strange, and the younger figure blinked in confusion, "...Viktor?"

Slate eyes stayed low where the Russian's fingers still grasped at the lanyard, but he closed those
eyes and huffed a laugh as he shook his head, "Just some déjà vu. It was like before, when I put the Silver around your shoulders, and you convinced me to stay on for another year." He let the ribbon go then, letting the badge drift down to dangle overtop of Yuri's own, and reached instead for his husband's right hand. Weaving their fingers together, he curled that arm up and around, and leaned his face down to touch his lips to the gold ring, "Hanarezu ni soba ni ite yo, Yuri."

"...Are you trying to arouse me or something with all this Japanese?" The younger figure asked nervously, "Cuz you're getting there."

Viktor just laughed, and leaned forward to kiss the man quickly, nuzzling his forehead fondly for a moment, "Tabun."

"Sō ko nakuccha."

"...Aaaand you lost me."

"AHEM." Yakov chortled, "Vitya, get out there before they start the music without you."

Yuri was stiff as a board at the sound of the elder Russian's gruff voice, and he could swear he'd found a way to look even more pale than he already did given his partner's make-up handiwork. But Viktor just laughed again, stole a brief kiss, and finally took off, blades scratching at the ice as he quickly made his way towards center, waving one last time before taking his spot.

A fog of frost kicked up where the Russian braked, and he raised his right hand to touch his lips to the gold on his finger before moving that arm out behind himself, the left rising up in front. The right toe-pick went into the ice to hold him still, and a second or two later, the music roared out above him.

['History Maker' - Dean Fujioka]

Yurio turned his eyes from the screen as he spotted Otabek finally coming through the doors, even as Viktor was flying across the ice behind him.

*Can you hear my heartbeat?*
*Tired of feeling never enough.*

"That was really good. Everyone's going to have a hard time beating that score." The blonde commented.

*I close my eyes and tell myself,*
*That my dreams will come true.*

The crowd was cheering for what was likely a top-scoring quad Flip.

*There'll be no more darkness when you believe in yourself, you are unstoppable.*
*Where your destiny lies, dancing on the blades...*

"Oh, you watched the whole thing? I thought you might've gone to do your post-skate interviews or something." The dark-eyed Kazakh commented, wiping the side of his neck on a small towel slung over his shoulder.

Viktor twisted over himself before sliding down onto one knee, thrusting his right hand forward, reaching for where Yuri was watching nearby to Yakov at the coach's side of the rink.

*You set my heart on fire!*
Yurio shrugged, "Nah. I figured they could wait until after you were done, so I just came back here and watched on the big screens."

The silver Russian twisted around before getting too close, and veered off for the nearest corner of the rink, starting into his serpentine step sequence.

*Don't stop us now, the moment of truth,*
*We were, born to make History!*

"You're not going to try to talk to Yuri while Viktor's busy?" Otabek wondered, stepping closer as he was intending to go on towards the den of reporters waiting outside, "It'll be your only shot to get him alone."

The teen cringed a little, but tried not to show it, "Katsudon isn't the problem." He turned his eyes towards the nearest wall bearing a television, and watched his fellow Russian tearing up the rink with his impeccable footwork; twists, turns, drags, half-revolution fake-out jumps...the man's figure moved like the living embodiment of calligraphy on the ice.

*We'll make it happen, we'll turn it around,*
*Yes, we were born to make History!*

Otabek was looking up at the screen as well, but then turned back to his younger friend, "I'll watch these later tonight."

Yurio turned back, nodded, and skipped off to tag along, hands stuffed into his pockets and hood pulled over his head as he practically skulked out of the Player's Club. Phichit watched them both go from where he was stretching out near the bar counter, Celestino sitting close by. He just smiled nervously as the pair stepped out through the glass doors and made a quick right-turn, heading out towards the larger hall where most of the press had set up. Those dark brown eyes went back up towards the screen, watching Viktor's Short Program progressing into the next phase.

*Born to make History!*

The step sequence had transitioned into the Russian's first required rotational move; the sit spin, with flying entry. He was already halfway through it by then, switching from a twist variant with an arm up to a catch-foot, holding onto his left skate where that leg was bent under the right.

*B-b-born to make History!*

"It's completely different from how he was at NHK." The Thai skater sighed dramatically, trying to keep his spirits up despite the pressure, "I mean, even back then it was still good, even if it looked like he was super distracted and missed all his quads..."

"Don't focus so much on the others, Phichit." Celestino advised, "You'll get yourself all psyched out like Yuri used to."

"It's the first time either of us has competed in Detroit since Yuri nearly retired before." Phichit said, leaning forward against the counter as he continued to watch, "I told him once, back in the day, that I'd do 'Shall We Skate' at some big event, and he'd be there, too... It seems like so long ago now."

"That was last year." Ciao Ciao leveled him a deadpanned expression, "It wasn't *that* long ago."

"Long enough ago that both of those big things are just memories now, not goals." The skater answered, "I have a reputation to uphold now. I managed to get into the Final because of JJ's mistake, so I feel like the pressure is on even more than normal, just so people don't think it was a
waste of time to let me in when the ISU could've just as easily said no, and left the Men's event at 5 participants."

_Can you hear my heartbeat?_

Viktor twisted, the eyes of the entire arena watching every tiny movement. His arms were up and expressive, wide open where they touched to the center of his chest and expanded away.

_I've got a feeling, it's never too late._

His right leg came back behind himself, and he arched over as far as he could go, arms still up above his head even as his frame tilted through the layback Ina Bauer. Gliding across the ice like mist, Viktor leaned back up, twisted his feet to face forward, crouched lightly…and vaulted high, soaring through a double-tano triple Axel and landing with the grace of the event's most experienced legs. The audience applauded excitedly, no doubt appreciating the difficult entry.

_I close my eyes and see myself,_

_How my dreams will come true._

The silver legend dipped low, skating backwards into a long hydro-blade, arms out to either side like wings.

_There'll be no more darkness when you believe in yourself, you are unstoppable._

The free blade came down at the end of it, forcing the reverse-course into a tighter formation, and settling the skater into a broken-leg sit spin, left arm straight up into the air above himself as he spun like a top. The sit-spin changed as the Russian started to rise up, arms coming around himself with the increasing speed of the scratch-spin variant.

_Where your destiny lies, dancing on the blades,_

Having started the spin on his left skate, the silver-and-blue blur used the upright position as an excuse to switch feet, reaching down for that self-same blade to pull it up behind his head for the Biellmann spin. He held onto it with the left hand, right going towards the center of his chest.

_You set my heart on fire!_

His right hand went out, and he let go of the blade, descending that skate back to the ice to finish the spin in a tight inside spread-eagle, both arms rising up to the rafters.

_Don't stop us now, the moment of truth,_

_We were, born to make History!_

"Phichit...?"

The enthralled athlete quickly jerked his head around, surprised at the unexpected voice, and spotting a certain former soldier there behind where he'd been standing. The woman, petite as she was, was easily 10x more intimidating than any of the men's singles skaters, and Phichit was immediately nervous again, "...C-Celeste...!"

Viktor continued his program on the televisions behind the anxious Thai skater's head.

_We'll make it happen, we'll turn it around,_

_Yes, we were born to make History!_
"Oh hey, there's a face I haven't seen in ages." Celestino mused, swiveling on his bar stood slightly.

"It's good to see the both of you." The medic smiled and waved at the older man, then turning to the younger, "I somehow missed you in all the craziness of yesterday night. It's good to see you again, Phichit. Congrats as well on making it to the Final, strange as the circumstances may be."

*Born to make History!*

*B-b-born to make History!*

The skater nodded and bowed his head politely, "Same, and thanks."

"I'm sorry to admit, but I thought you'd already be out at rink-side." Tess said pensively, arms held loosely behind her back, "I came down thinking I could wish Yuri good luck before he goes out at the end...but I'm not sure how much of last night he remembers, if anything. I don't want to give him another heart-attack like when I ran into him before his accident."

*Don't stop us now, the moment of truth,*

*We were, born to make History!*

The skater before her nodded restlessly, "He...kind of remembers." He tried to explain, his voice suddenly cut off by the explosion of cheers just outside, where Viktor had just landed his quad Lutz, triple Toe-loop combo. Phichit regained his focus and tried to calm his frantic heart, "What I mean is...Yuri knows you're around. He doesn't remember exactly how or why, or what happened, but he knows for sure that you're here."

*We'll make it happen, we'll turn it around,*

*Yes, we were born to make History!*

"Is he here in the Player's Club and I'm just blind?" The woman looked around a bit, not seeing the Asian.

"He's out at rink-side." The Thai athlete explained, "He's Viktor's 'not-really-a-coach,' so he hangs out where the real coaches would stand." He turned and pointed at the television, holding for a moment before the camera panned enough that the two dark figures could be seen against the royal blue backdrop, in the background behind the current performer. Viktor was in the midst of his final required element, the camel spin.

*Don't stop us now, the moment of truth,*

"Ah, there...you can see him near Yakov." Phichit said, pointing at the dot leaning against the rink-wall.

*We were, born to make History!*

*We'll make it happen, we'll turn it around,*

Tess looked on, but then nodded nervously and twisted on her curved metal leg to step towards the exit, "Thanks...I'll be right back."

The Thai athlete waved weakly as the former soldier moved off, feeling his heart finally starting to go back to a normal pace as she left ear-shot and he could breathe again. He slouched against the counter and heaved a deep sigh, "...*Such...an intense aura...*"

"You going to be okay?" Celestino laughed.

*Yes, we were born to make History!*
The medic looked around at the awe-inspiring view of the packed stadium, but then glanced lower at the ice, where the oft-spoken-of legendary Russian skater was finishing his Short Program.

_We were born to make History!_

The camel spin had ended, and Viktor was making wide arcs around the rink again. Moving backwards, he'd move his hands in forward wave-like gestures, as though his arms were guiding his path along the ice, bringing them up and down or out to the sides of himself.

_We were born to make History!_

Tess could tell it was almost the end of the performance just by the way the music sounded, and she paused where she stood near the Player's Club gateway, holding back for the moment. She looked slightly to the right where she knew Yuri would've been standing from the television, and spotted him looking on at the ice intently. The gruff Russian coach standing nearby was just as fixated, but for entirely different reasons.

_Yes, we were born to make History!_

As the last few lines of the song rang out, Viktor twizzled, and then clapped his toe-pick down into the ice, stopping abruptly and thrusting both arms out to the side. He lifted his head towards the audience, silver hair tousling above his eye, barely holding to their show-style from before the performance.

When the crowd rose out of their seats and cheered, no doubt many of them having watched the NHK performance that came the weekend before, the volume in the auditorium rose to a roar. Viktor held his position for a few more seconds, then bent his right arm forward towards his chest and bowed, the left still outstretched. Poodle plush toys, flowers, even the odd nigiri pillows were all thrown out as gifts to the Russian, and the young local skaters started flocking out again to gather everything up.

Yuri was still clapping when the skater started making his way back towards the rink exit, and had the man's blade guards in-hand to pass over. Yakov slowly meandered that way as well, watching his former student get close and start slipping the rubber bars onto his blades, then his arms into his dark-colored team jacket.

"You looked way more relaxed this time around." The younger skater commented, reaching for his husband's hand as the man stepped off the ice.

"Da, it was _way_ different than NHK, that's for certain," Viktor agreed, "I'll never question the impact of a mid-performance panic attack again after what happened to me there."

"Did you at least have fun this time?"

"Of course." He pulled his partner's hand up and kissed the ring, then pointed towards the kiss and cry area, "Let's head over. I might've enjoyed myself out there but it was still exhausting."

Yuri nodded and reached for the Russian's water bottle as well, snatching it from the rink wall before moving off.

"Cousin Viktor skated way better this time," Nikkita commented idly, setting her hands down into her lap as the audience simmered down to wait for the scores, "He's going to win, right?" She leaned forward a bit to glance past the people who were sitting between herself and those with more skating-viewing experience.
Minako looked on at the ice anxiously, but smiling, "Everyone skating tonight so far is in top form...it's hard to rule anyone out, even with Viktor in the roster." She commented, though her smile faded as she looked on to where Yuri was taking his place on the bench.

"He looks nervous." Mari commented suddenly, though quietly, "Everyone who's gone out already has scored higher than the person who went before."

"I doubt anyone else will score higher than Viktor now." Minako added.

"Yuri will expect that, too. He's still gonna take it hard." The elder Katsuki pointed out, turning her head slightly to look at the woman next to her more evenly, "You know him as well as I do. He won't let himself accept that any shortcomings are from how he's hurt. He'll take the blame for it personally."

"Maybe not..." The ballerina hoped, "You could tell from the warm-up that he's taking Viktor's instructions more seriously than he did earlier this morning. If he scores low, he may just accept that as the consequence of his coach's orders to tone things down a bit."

"It's crazy that Viktor is letting him skate at all right now." Mari sighed, "Mom and dad are going to be watching this thing live just to make sure they know right away if he got hurt again or not."

"Well, at least it's not some crazy-early time in the middle of the night." Minako offered.

Phichit and Celestino were making their way out towards rink-side by then, everyone waiting on the judges and technical review panel to come back with their final score for the Russian's performance. The Thai skater shrugged out of his team jacket, rubbing the sleeves on his arms where the cold of the ice was creeping in, and glanced over to the kiss and cry.

Yuri could feel his heart pounding in his chest, every second making it harder and harder to stay patient. He drew in a deep but nervous breath, settling his left hand onto his husband's thigh to try and ground himself, even as the Russian had an arm over his shoulders while they waited.

"You're more nervous for the score than I am." Viktor mused, "Don't worry so much."

"I can't help it. Worrying is in my genes." The younger figure answered, looking down at where his ankles were crossed, legs straight out in front of him where he sat. He tried to find the humor in it though, and sat up a little bit straighter, turning to look at his partner and smirking wryly, "Just like how apparently stripping while drunk is, too."

"I've heard these legends about your father's drunken exploits, but I've yet to see them with my own eyes."

"He's gotten better with age." Yuri agreed, "Though I wouldn't recommend putting the idea in his head when we get back home."

"Maybe I should anyway, just to see how you react." Viktor laughed, pulling his partner a little closer in jest.

Yakov, meanwhile, sat with his arms crossed, looking entirely unimpressed where he waited on the skater's opposite side.

"The score for Viktor Nikiforov..."

Yuri suddenly brought both hands up towards his mouth, curling his fingers over into fists, peeking over the edge of them with baited breath.
"...111.46."

"Eh...not bad." Viktor huffed, "I'll take it."

"Everyone keeps scoring higher and higher..." The younger figure said hesitantly, "If it keeps up like this, Phichit-kun is gonna get 115, but then I'll..."

"You'll score over 122, and break my World record again." The silver Russian cut him off.

"...With all my triple jumps? Pssht..."

"If you don't score over 122 here, then I'll just make sure you do at Nationals." Viktor said as he stood up, pulling his husband along as he went, "Take the hit today and come back stronger next time."

"Next to take the ice tonight, representing Thailand...Phichit...Chulanont!"

The audience cheered excitedly for the unexpected contender, and watched happily as he flung himself out onto the white stage, making a few rounds around center as he waved.

"You're not going to be at my Nationals though..." Yuri pointed out, looking from his friend to his husband again, "Or did you suddenly change your mind about your own?"

"Well, no. It's like Yakov said last year...if I want to go to Euros, I need to go to Nationals, so I can't just skip out again. I don't really have an excuse this time." The silver skater retorted, the three of them making their way back towards the doorway to the under-arena lounge area, coming up to where Celestino was waiting for Phichit to come back around, "Wouldn't you like that though? To go to Euros? It's in Austria this year, so it'd be a great place to get our feet wet if we still want to go to Germany over the summer. It would be a whole new experience, getting to sit and watch the other skaters and never having to worry about how you would've compared because you're not part of the European bloc."

"Isn't that how it's been when I go to your Grand Prix qualifiers?"

"Not really. It's just different locations for the same basic event. When I went to Four Continents with you, it was a completely new experience for me. Being so utterly and completely separate from the Asian bloc made the whole event feel different!" Viktor explained excitedly, "It was like going to a different planet!"

"...That's so dramatic..." Yuri muttered, a sarcastic smile on his face, though pausing where he stood and coming out from under the Russian's arm, "Are you going straight to the media frenzy?"

"Sure."

"I'm going to stay and watch Phichit-kun then. I'll see you back when I'm about to go out?"

"Of course." Viktor stepped closer then, reaching his right hand up to touch his curved fingers to the side of his partner's cheek, "Don't get into trouble while I'm gone. It'll only be a few minutes."

"I won't! I'll stay right here until it's my turn."

Those slate eyes looked on, but the Russian huffed a quiet laugh and nodded, leaning forward to steal yet another quick kiss before moving off, "Just a few minutes."

"Nothing is going to happen!"
"What's going to happen?" Phichit suddenly asked, appearing almost from thin air as he came up on the icy side of the rink wall.

"Nothing is going to happen!" Yuri insisted, then twisting back to his spouse, "Now go before you start those interviews so late that you can't get back in time!" He started making 'shoo' gestures with his hands.

"Okay okay." The Russian laughed, taking a few steps away.

The younger figure finally turned around to face his Thai friend, "You'd think the stadium roof was going to collapse right on top of me or something if he leaves for five seconds!"

The silver legend was back again, sneaking up behind the tense Japanese skater with both arms around his thin frame, managing to get three or four kisses on that pale neck before Yuri's arms were up too high in his surprised flailing to continue. Just as quickly as he'd come though, the Russian was laughing and skipping off again, leaving Yuri in a stunned disheveled mess at rink-side with both Phichit and Celestino smirking at his expense.

"V-Viktor." The skater stammered, watching his quite-pleased-with-himself spouse trotting off towards the lounge doorway a second time. He reached a hand up to rub at the wet spots the man had left on his skin, and felt the heat on his face where he knew his cheeks had gone red.

"I love you, Yuri!" The Russian was waving, half-through the doorway.

"I...I love you too, Viktor..." Yuri said, though much more quietly than his partner had hollered. He turned a third time towards the competitor on the ice, "Sorry...I wanted to say good luck before you went out. I wasted all your wall time."

"It was fun to watch. I wish I could've taken pictures."

"Yeah..." The older figure reached a hand up behind his head nervously, "Well, you should get out there before they start the music without you like they almost did with him." He nudged a head towards where Viktor was still loitering in the doorway for some reason, "Ganbatte, ne?"

Phichit nodded his head, looking between both the men on the other side of the wall, "Khob khun kраб."

Chapter End Notes

Nani? = What?
Nandemonai = Nothing
Hanarezu ni soba ni ite yo = Don't leave my side/Stay close to me
Tabun = Probably/Maybe
Sou ko nakuccha = That's what I thought/As expected
Ganbatte, ne? = Good luck, okay?
Khob khun krab = Thank you
Chapter 272

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED SEVENTY TWO

Crystal blue eyes blinked in surprise at the unexpected figure having stopped him in his tracks. But, the look of shock morphed into one of recognition, "Ah...I was wondering when you'd turn up."

"Sorry..." Tess said meekly, trying to back up into the Players' Club again, "Is it a bad time...?"

"Huh? To do what, talk to Yuri?" Viktor tilted his head back around to watch where Yuri was staying close to Celestino, "I don't think so. It's not his turn just yet."

The medic drew in a relieved breath, but then tried to stand up tall again, years of training having become habit as she looked on intently at the Russian towering over her, "Yeah, I was meaning to catch him before he skates... He'll need all the well wishes he can get, it seems."

The silver skater shrugged and popped the top of his water bottle, stepping past, "He's more resilient than he appears." He took a quick sip and closed the bottle again, "Anyway, I need to go or I won't make it back in time. He'll be upset if I'm not here to see him off."

Tess waved her fingers up and down as the skater stepped off, blade-guards clack'ing and then thunk'ing as they moved from the concrete of rink-side to the wood of the lounge area. Nervously, she turned back towards where she'd seen her old friend, and drew in a deep breath before taking a few hesitant steps out into the open.

By then, Phichit was making his last few re-warm-up maneuvers in the middle of the rink, and had taken position. The royal raiment that clung to his thin frame shimmered in the spotlights, golden and ghostly all at once, with the unique call-back to Thai theatrical costumes with its pointed shoulders and skate-covers, and the wide sash wrapped around his waist.

Skates were set about 2ft apart, and the Thai skater's head was bowed down, staring at the ice. He drew in one last breath, and waited for the soft sound of his music's piano could be heard faintly over the cheering crowd.

[‘King’ - Lauren Aquilina]

Silver blades moved back along the ice, slowly, veering slightly to the left as the Thai skater's frame swayed with the 'beat' of the notes. His path traced a wide arc around the ISU logo painted into the frost.

You're alone, you're on your own. So, what...have you gone blind?

Yuri watched his friend gracefully moving through a big figure-eight, using the entire rink to tell the story. He leaned onto his elbows against the upper rim of the rink wall, butterflies fluttering in his stomach.

Have you forgotten what you have,

Phichit had launched into the first quad of his program, the Toe-loop, and landed it with ease, veering off backwards.
...and what is yours?

The older skater was clapping along with the rest of the crowd, but then crossed his arms as he kept watching.

"You don't look so enthusiastic all of a sudden, Yuri." Celestino commented, thumbs hooked into his pockets where he stood a few steps to the skater's left, "What's the matter?"

The flying-entry camel spin was up next, and Phichit spun swiftly after landing into it, left hand over his chest. The level-4 spin started with the simple task of landing on the same blade as he'd jumped from, spinning in the level T-position.

*Glass half empty, glass half full, well either way you won't be going thirsty*

Brown eyes glanced aside, but Yuri couldn't look for long, turning his gaze out over the ice to watch the spin continue, "The closer it gets to my turn, the more nervous I get, that's all. The usual."

"I'm starting to wonder if you're cursed this season or something, honestly."

"...Eh?"

*Count your blessings not your flaws.*

"At Skate Canada...you lost your voice, and skipped the Exhibition despite winning Gold, having to post that apology video online. At Cup of China, you collided so hard into the rink wall that I think *everyone* felt it. Now that you're at the Final, you were slammed into and got knocked out."

Phichit stumbled on the landing of his triple Axel, but rose up through the fall's momentum and continued on normally.

"Damn..." The coach muttered, but shook his head, "Anyway...I applaud you for wanting to keep going despite it all, but I think it proves a certain naivety on Viktor's part to let you skate. He's a better skater than he is a coach."

"I know." Yuri sighed, his brow furrowing a little, "You wouldn't even let me *look* at the ice if I'd gotten hurt on your watch."

*You've got it all, you lost your mind in the sound*

*There's so much more, you can reclaim your crown*

The step sequence was beginning, and Phichit started moving into the serpentine formation from the far side of the rink.

"Sometimes it's harder to make the right choice. Viktor's problem is that he's competing, too, and it would be hard for him to tell you not to when he still is."

*You're in control*

*Rid of the monsters inside your head*

"He actually said he'd be dropping out as well if he pulled me." The skater corrected, watching the tight inside spread-Eagle where the performer had his hands folded under one cheek.

*Put all your faults to bed*

Phichit dug in a toe-pick, and raised his head up, proud like the King described in the song.
You can be king again.

"But the entire event would fall apart if that happened. Even if the ISU brought Phichit-kun in regardless, the point of the Final is to see who gets on the podium, not to see which unlucky skater fails to get one. There would only be 4 competitors at that point. Hardly a 30-minute affair."

"So you're both willing to put your health and safety on the line?" Celestino asked bluntly, "I know I'm not your coach anymore, and I feel bad stepping on Viktor's toes in this...but if something happens to you out there, I'll be there telling you I told you so. You shouldn't be skating."

You don't get what all this is about

The crowd roared with approval as the competitor vaulted through the quad Loop, triple Toe-loop, and moved off backwards in perfect form, easily making up for the fall on the previous jump. Both Yuri and Celestino clapped along with them, even as the coach's eyes were watching, and the skater's went down in worry.

You're too wrapped up in your self-doubt

"Viktor and I talked about it. He basically feels the same as you. But..."

You've got that young blood,

He shook his head and crossed his arms more tightly over himself, grabbing each elbow with the opposite hand, "...By the time he was ready to make the decision, too much time had passed..."

... set it free.

"...And everyone was already expecting that I'd compete anyway. As long as I feel okay, I can't just pull out." He looked over at the ponytailed man, "And I do feel okay."

"For now."

You've got it all, you lost your mind in the sound

Phichit twisted and turned, moving closer again until he was in position for the twizzle-entry half-jump that started off his Ina Bauer.

There's so much more
You can reclaim your crown

Yuri wasn't sure how to respond, and looked back out over the ice, "...All I can do is my best. Viktor's already done his part by making me swear I would follow his instructions, no matter how confident I feel that I can push myself. Falling on a triple isn't as bad as falling on a quad."

You're in control,

"A fall is a fall. Your skull's not going to care how many times you rotated if you whack it against the ice again." The coach countered, "You're taking a big risk."

Rid of the monsters inside your head

"So what would you have me do then?" The skater wondered, feeling a little impatient suddenly, "Drop out 60 seconds before my turn?"

"I can't make that choice for you, Yuri." Celestino said simply, watching his athlete descend
backwards into the second required spin-component of the Short Program, starting off with a twisted-over variant, right leg curved out to the side, right arm curled up to where the palm was barely touching the skater's forehead, rotating on the left blade, and the left arm bent out behind himself, "All I can do is ask that you be at peace with the choices you make for yourself. You're the one who's going to be dealing with the consequences...or rewards, as the case may be...for whatever happens out there."

**Put all your faults to bed**

Yuri could already feel the edge of a headache coming on, and he leaned over the edge of the rink-wall to prop his elbows up and rub his temples.

From a distance away, still standing in the opening to the Players' Club, Tess could see the frustration on her old friend's face.

It wasn't far to find the media, and Viktor sauntered up casually, looking through the throng to where Yurio and Otabek were finishing up their own post-skate interviews. His eyes moved back around, looking for others.

*I haven't seen Chris since he finished his show. I wonder where he ran off to?*

He turned to look back over his shoulder.

**Maybe I walked right by him in the bar.**

"Viktor! A moment!" One of the reporters finally noticed the silver Russian as he came close to the press. The rest that were available turned towards him as well. Those who were still over with the younger two skaters stayed a few moments longer before thanking them both for their time and moving on to join the others.

Yurio stood stiffly where he was, watching in brooding silence as the mass of people went over to the older Russian.

"Hard to imagine that Viktor's the one making you all weird, given how he's acting," Otabek commented dryly, almost side-eyeing the man from where he stood as well, "He's as much a giant derp as ever."

"If he put his mind to it, Viktor could pretend to be best friends with someone he passionately hates."

The Tiger shrugged, "I've learned that he's the kind of person who only ever tells you exactly what he wants you to know, and nothing more."

"So you think he's faking it right now?"

"Right now?" Yurio glanced up at the taller figure, but then shrugged, "Nah. That's real. But look at where he chose to stand."

"...In the middle of the hall?" The Kazakh quirked a brow slightly.

"In the middle of the hall leading to the Players' Club. He's blocking the way."

"You're reading too much into it. That's just where the press decided to meet him."

"Is that so?" The teen huffed, "Watch."
Otabek squinted his eyes skeptically, but stayed put where he was, slouching a bit to put his weight on one leg as he watched the younger skater step closer to the mob. Nothing was happening though, and the dark-eyed man was half a mind to tell Yurio that he should give it up, but then something strange took place.

All smiles and charm, the silver Russian idly twisted on one blade-guard, and rotated his frame about 35 degrees to his right. Within seconds, reporters and cameramen were carefully side-stepping to get back in front of the man. The only needed to move a few inches each, but by the time they were all facing Viktor again, most of the mass of people had collected right in front of Yurio, effectively blocking his way with their bodies. Even though the door to the Players' Club was only a few meters further back, the press had squished themselves right up against the wall, barely having enough room to stand without getting into each others' shots. Viktor took a step back to make it a little easier for them to capture him, but the point had still been made.

Green eyes peered past the rim of the black hoodie, and Yurio gestured his hands out towards the group without saying a word.

Otabek just snorted quietly to himself, "Whatever. He just shifted his weight a little." He commented quietly, "That means nothing."

"What, so you think I'm making this up?" The teen questioned, feeling a bit hurt for the denial and stepping back the way he came. The media group behind him fanned out a little bit again as he moved off, and Yurio could see the strange look on Otabek's face as it happened behind him. When he turned his head back to look at what had occurred, he saw how Viktor had moved to face center again like before, and unconsciously, the reporters and cameramen had once again dispersed to give each other a bit more room. The teen twisted back and stepped right up into the Kazakh's space, practically rocking forward onto the toe-picks of his blade-guards for the emphasis of added height, "What now, huh?"

"I think you're taking this a bit too seriously." The man shrugged, taking a step back, "I've seen the both of them have colossal melt-downs before. If the worst Viktor does to try and stop it from happening again is prevent you from getting in the middle of things, then maybe it's better for everyone involved. Just take the high road and let him do what he wants. That way, he gets to think he's doing the right thing, and if Yuri freaks out anyway, it won't be your fault."

"That's easy for you to say." The Tiger rocked back down to his normal height again, pulling a hand out of his pocket to hold it out to the side slightly, "You keep everyone at a distance. It's no skin off your nose to just walk away."

"Sometimes the high road is a lonely one; but I'll bet if I try to get by, Viktor would let me." Otabek countered, taking a step forward to get by the teen and start making for the crowd to test his theory, "Want me to?"

"Of course no-"

"The score for Phichit Chulanont..."

Everyone went silent for a moment when they heard the far-off echo of the announcer's voice. The sound of Viktor's polite laugh grabbed the mob's attention again, "Sorry, I have to go now. Time to go be a coach again. Rain check?"

Emerald eyes looked up towards the crowd, and to the teen's surprise, found them locked-in with the slate-blue irises that had become trained on him in turn. He felt paralyzed where he was for a moment, the elder Russian staring on, unblinking.
"Everyone wish Yuri good luck." Viktor said calmly, "The eyes of the world are on him now."

The paralysis of surprise faded, and the Russian Punk relaxed his gaze a little, watching quietly as the silver skater turned on his heel and started walking back into the lounge area. When he was out of sight, and the media moved off to watch the show on the televisions out in the common area, Yurio felt his hackles rise up a little bit.

Otabek seemed to have noticed as well, looking back on the blonde curiously, "Did you catch that?"

"...Catch what?" The teen bristled, "He just stared like he was taunting me or something."

"The opposite, actually." The Kazakh said, turning to follow after the Russian champion, "He just opened a door for you."

"...What door? He just stared at me and said some words!"

"I guess you only heard him, then. Next time, maybe listen."

"...It's lining up kind of weird, don't you think?" Phichit said, a strange look on his face as he continued staring forward at the score box, as though he wasn't sure whether to be happy or not, "Our scores are putting us all in the same order as our qualifying ranks. Viktor, Otabek, the Russian Yuri, Chris, and me at the back..."

Celestino uncrossed his arms and rubbed his chin with one hand, "It is a bit weird." He turned towards his student, "Don't get all superstitious on me though. Everyone's still within 15 points of one another. That's a really small margin that can be blown wide open with the Free Skate tomorrow. You still have a great chance of getting Gold."

"It's true." Chris mused, leaning against the rink wall near where Yuri had been waiting, "The Free Program is where it really counts."

"You're right..." The Thai skater sighed, then pushing up suddenly to stand, looking more determined than ever, "Even if I don't make the podium, I can still score a new personal best!"

"That's the spirit." Chris clapped his hands together as he stood upright again, only to turn slightly and rest an elbow on Yuri's shoulder, "It's up to you then to break the scoreboard up a little. Try not to come in second, okay?"

"Second?" That nervous voice echoed, "But-"

"He'll come in first." Viktor purred, sliding in from behind, entirely unnoticed to that point. Arms went loosely around his partner's thin frame, and his chin came down to rest on the shoulder opposite Chris' elbow, "Right? Yuri."

He'd just gone stiff though, his face pale, "...No pressure..."

"The final skater of the Men's Singles event, skating for Japan...Yuri Nikiforov!"

The skater could feel his mouth go dry, and he reached his shaky hands up towards the zipper of his team jacket. He could feel his heart pounding in his head so hard that he wondered if the veins in his temples could be seen thrumming under his skin. Viktor was still holding onto him though, and though it calmed his nerves a bit, the man's arms prevented him from pulling the zipper all the way down.
"Ochitsuke." The Russian said quietly, barely audible over the audience cheering and clapping, "Daijoubu?"

"Toki doki...toki doki..." Yuri answered, confusing his partner entirely. When he felt the man's arms go a bit lax around him, he turned in place to face him, looking down only to finish pulling the zipper away and finally shrugging out of the jacket. He casually lifted it up with both hands, setting it gently on his husband's shoulder, but then reaching down for the man's hand and bringing it up to set it palm-down against the center of his chest, "Shinzou no koudou o kikoeru ka? Toki doki...toki doki..."

Viktor blinked at him, but when he could feel the pounding of his spouse's heart through the thin black fabric under those shimmering silver lapels, he nodded in understanding, "Dekiru."

Brown eyes lifted up then, surprised to have heard the answer in his mother tongue, on top of everything else. He didn't question it though, and just raised his arms up over the Russian's shoulders to hug him. When he felt the man's arms wrap around his frame in return, a cool wave of relief passed over him, calming his nerves a bit more and taking the edge off the pain in his head. He pulled back again, claimed those few seconds of his last kiss before taking the ice, and drew in a deep breath. Opening his eyes again, but only half way, he set his forehead against his partner's and spoke quietly, "Koishiteru."

The Russian wasn't familiar with the word, and wasn't sure how to answer, but he wasn't given much time to linger on it anyway as Yuri pulled from his embrace to step over to the rink entrance and started pulling the guards off his gold-plated blades. Taking the two bars into his hands, he felt his husband's come up one more time to touch the side of his face, and then he was off.

No more words, no more delays...Yuri shot out across the ice in spite of the migraine. As soon as his blades touched the frost though, the audience was a cacophony of cheers and cries, the volume rising even higher than it already had been, and was clearly distinct from the cheers other skaters had gotten earlier in the night. When the figure lifted his head, meandering around center to get his bearings and meaning to wave to the judges and fans, those cherry-hazel eyes caught sight of a few 'OVERCOME' signs amidst the sea of Japanese flags and Viktuuri banners. The formless adulation started to coalesce into a more coherent chant, and Yuri could hear the unmistakable sound of the entire stadium calling out his name.

Chris huffed a laugh at the perplexed Russian standing next to him, watching Viktor carefully, and the dumbfounded expression on his face, "I wonder what th-hrmphmphrmr..."

"SHHHT." Viktor hushed, not even looking the man's way as both hands went up around Chris' head to hold his mouth closed. Blue eyes were set on the skater in the field and would not budge for any distraction, "This is going to be special."

The blonde just blinked in stunned confusion.

"Yuri, davai!" Otabek called out, barely heard over the rest of the audience. He clapped along with the rest though, earnestly showing his support for the injured skater before leaning a bit to elbow the Russian Tiger standing nearby, "This is your chance."

Yurio gawked at him, but turned to face the rink again, clapping meekly so as not to look like a stick in the mud to those around them. He drew in a nervous breath though, and then called out as loudly as he could between his hands, "DAVAAAAAAI! YUURRRRII!"

The skater on the ice could hardly believe the sound of it all, and had to bring his hands up over his mouth to hide his shock. His eyes darted to every corner of the stadium though, and the energy of it all flowed through him. He pulled his hands back down again, bowed towards the judges, rose back
up to his full height, and drew in a breath. Skates parted a bit beneath him, and Yuri extended his arms forward, palms facing outward. The audience quickly went silent...and the music began.

Chapter End Notes

Ochitsuke = Calm down
Daijoubu? = Are you okay?
Toki doki = Sound effect/ Onomatopoeia for a heart beating, like thump thump
Shinzou no koudou o kikoeru ka? = Can you hear my heartbeat?
Dekiru = I can
Koishiteru = I love you (a level higher than 'aishiteru,' which is a general proclamation of love, 'koishiteru' is what you say to someone with whom you want to spend all the days of your life)
Chapter 273

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED SEVENTY THREE

The heartbeat of the audience could be felt in the air almost as clearly as Viktor had felt it through his partner's skin, and the energy in the room changed when the final skater took to the ice. It wasn't pity or anticipation of the worst, or even expectation that Yuri would once again surprise the world with a performance that would completely eclipse his prior shows, as he had at the previous year's Grand Prix Final. It was a reserved nervousness, as though every person in the arena had the same stage fright that the performer did, and each one of them was ready to jump out into the rink in case he fell.

"Skater Yuri has had something of a rough go so far this season." Newscaster Morooka was saying, sitting just off of rink-side with his co-host, Oda, as they broadcasted for the JSF, "At his first qualifying competition in Canada, he got sick in the middle of the event and lost his voice, barely managing to snag Gold there for his efforts. At the second, in China, he misjudged his distance from the rink wall during the last jump of his Short Program and collided with it. He starts the Final with a handicap already, as many will already be aware that he'd suffered an unfortunate accident late yesterday night."

"It seems the hopes and prayers of the world are reaching out to him tonight though." Oda added, the pair watching as Yuri looked on in awe at the crowd, and all the support it was showing, "Skater Yuri has decided he's going to compete in spite of the head injury he sustained yesterday. All the other competitors are close to rink-side to show their support."

The skater took note of all the familiar faces surrounding him. Viktor, Chris, and Phichit at the edge of the rink, Celestino and Yakov nearby as well. He could barely see the familiar flag that Minako held up to cheer him on, as well as his sister sitting next to her, holding up her own sign to show support. It wasn't hard to spot the silver-haired extended family flanking them both. Yurio and Otabek were in the stands just above the doorway to the Players' Club...and to his surprise, Celeste was standing there within it.

*How long has she been there...? I must've walked right by her and never noticed.*

The medic seemed to realize she'd been spotted, and perked up a bit to stand straighter than before. She raised one hand, and tapped the spot on her forehead where Yuri's had been split open the night before, but then moved her hand down, curling her fingers so only the index and pinky were still extended...pointed them at her eyes, and then turned her hand to point them at the skater in turn.

*...She's watching out for me...*

She lifted both hands to give him a quick thumbs up for good luck before Yuri nodded in gratitude and finally turned his attention to the ice.

Time seemed to stand still for everyone once the figure kissed his ring and took position, silvery vestments shimmering under the lights from high above.

Viktor had finally let go of Chris' head, but his hands were clasped on top of one another just under his chin, protective of his own ring. *You can do this, Yuri...just take it easy and focus on the things we talked about...I'm out there on the ice with you. We'll do this together, like always.*
Chris himself had folded his arms across his chest loosely, lime-green eyes watching the ice intently. You were always known for your footwork and spins. Remind everyone that you can shine even without the toughest jumps.

Phichit had his fingers woven together, one resting against the edge of his upper lip, eyes fixated on his friend. You've always hated being the center of attention, but you've always been really competitive...the only thing you hate more than that is losing. Do your best, but be careful...!

Even Celestino was captivated, though from a coach's perspective, it was different. He looked on cautiously, pursing his lips as he drew an anxious breath, remembering his former student's worst habits. When you're on the precipice of losing it all, but haven't yet given up...you take reckless risks. For once, listen to your coach. He has more reason than anyone to want you to come off the ice under your own power, rather than someone else's. Don't do anything if you aren't absolutely sure you can pull off.

Otabek had retaken his seat, and crossed one leg over the other in relaxed curiosity. I saw that collision first-hand, and was probably more surprised than anyone that Viktor let you skate anyway. I can't tell if you actually feel fine or not...but whatever you do, don't be stupid out there. Survive this and come back stronger at Four Continents.

Yurio was still standing though, leaning against the railing and clutching one hand to it tightly. I know I've been an asshole to you. I don't know why I'm worse to you, someone who's been nothing but kind to me, than I am to total strangers. I'm sorry for that. If you make it through this thing...I swear never to blow up at you again. Do you hear that, Katsudon? Show me that you can...skate with no mistakes... Even if you come in last, do so perfectly...

The arena seemed to go deathly quiet as everyone waited for the music to start. The seconds ticked on like hours. People could hear their hearts beating in their heads, and the uncomfortable sound of their own nervous swallows. But then time went back to normal, and the stadium filled with sound.

Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh

Yuri's extended right hand lifted higher, and he dipped his face low as the left skate twisted in an arc behind him, pulling him through a slow rotation as both hands came into mutual position at his sides.

Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh

He slid backward, both arms rising up from waist-level until they were parallel with his shoulders, then swept down again as he curved in-line with the rink wall.

Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh

Speed increased, and Yuri moved out from the corner of the rink, kicking his left leg out behind himself and using the momentum to spin through two backwards twizzles.

Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh

Setting the left blade down as he came out of the last of the double-sliding-spins, Yuri leaned slightly forward, glided for a second, and then vaulted into his first jump.

Hands gripped tightly to the edges of seats and sections of the rink wall, and all eyes were open.

Ssskah! Three and a half rotations... SKO-Shhhhhh...

Wild applause, and Yuri maneuvered on in reverse, the only thing hobbling him being the shock of
pain in his head as his foot hit the ice. But he carried on...15 seconds down, 130 or so to go. Clapping and cheering told Yuri all he needed to know about how his jump looked to others, rather than how it felt to himself.

*I messed up tonight, I lost another fight, I still mess up but I'll just start again.*

Twisting and gliding across the white stage, hips and legs singing through the pseudo-step-sequence easily, the skater let his head calm from the drum-beat of that unfortunate headache. Blades cuffed the ice on every other beat of the song, but in spite of the pain, Yuri tried to let himself start to have fun with the program.

*I keep falling down, I keep on hitting the ground, I always get up now to see what's next.*

He swiveled and paused close to the short end of the rink, far on the opposite side from where the coaches were watching. His hands went above himself as he twisted and turned, slowly moving down towards his hips and settling there as his hips turned. On the last beat, his hands went out to side-clap against one another, left hand bouncing down and away as the right moved up instead before he took off again.

The most intense of the required spins was coming up, and Yuri gained the first level of difficulty for thrusting himself into its first position from a backwards entry, rotating head behind foot in the camel spin.

*I won't give up, no I won't give in, 'til I reach the end and then I'll start again*.

He lowered down into the broken-leg sit spin, level 2, holding his core into it tightly to rotate faster. As he brought the extended leg in under himself to switch feet, gaining level 3, he rose up into the scratch spin, and attained the highest rank for spins possible, level 4, before breaking out of the blur and reorienting himself to the ice in preparation for his second jump.

*No, I won't leave, I wanna try everything, I wanna try even though I could fail.*

His skates lined up with one another, left in front of right as he flew backwards. Arms were stretched out for balance, but then lowered a bit...

"Skater Yuri's second jump of the program, and the required combination-jump...here he goes..." Morooka was saying, leaning forward in anticipation.

The figure's body dipped a little, and the left skate left the ice, knee and both hands rising up as he spun thrice, landed, glided for half a second as the blade touched down again, and he launched a second time. Three rotations and both hands in the air, and Yuri came back down again.

"Double-tano on both jumps! That'll help get him extra points to make-up for that first jump being a triple instead of a quad!"

*I won't give up, no I won't give in, 'til I reach the end and then I'll start again*.

"You weren't kidding about this song being like the spiritual successor to your 'Yuri on Ice' program." Viktor laughed, clicking the 'pause' button on his little hand-held controller. He glanced over to where Yuri was braking on the ice, "It really does speak to the definition of your journey."

"So you think it'll work?" The younger figure wondered, pushing forward on a toe-pick to get closer, hands settling loosely on his hips as he glided in, "Ketty has already agreed to pare it down. I told
her which bits I thought would be fine to remove. She should have it done in a day or two."

"It'll be perfect." Viktor nodded, then looking up to all the banners that were still hanging from the rafters, "We'll have to change a few of those out once we're done with the Grand Prix."

Yuri crossed his arms loosely, but lifted his head and looked around, seeing the various images from the previous year. He looked back when he felt an arm come around him, and he returned the gesture, settling a hand on the Russian's hip before looking up again, "It's still half a year away, but it seems like it's right around the corner, too. I can feel the butterflies in my stomach already."

"Really?" Viktor huffed a laugh, "Why?"

"Other than it being your come-back season?" Yuri wondered idly, "There'll be a lot more pressure, I think. After winning Gold at Worlds...I won't have any excuse to score under 100 in the Short Program, or under 200 in the Free Skate. Gone are the days of hard-fought 90s and 170s. It feels...weird."

"It's a different tier, that's for sure." The silver legend agreed, "Once you're in that bracket, it's hard to be satisfied with any performance less than that. The audience expects so much more from you, too."

"That's half of what I'm nervous about."

"You've never really cared what the audience thought before." Viktor said, turning his head to look at his partner, "Why do you care now?"

Yuri lowered his gaze in thought, "It's like I told you in China...my performance doesn't just reflect on me anymore. It reflects on you, too. If I do well or badly...no matter what..."

"We rise together and fall together." The Russian finished, "Just like the Mayor said for us in Barcelona." He saw those brown eyes turning up towards him, and Viktor reached his free hand up to stroke the side of his fingers against the man's cheek, "So let's get on the podium together, too, for as long as we can."

No, I won't leave, I wanna try everything, I wanna try even though I could fail

Viktor didn't just teach me how to skate like a Champion...he said I had it in me somewhere all along. Yuri thought, He just gave me the confidence in myself to bring that skill out into the open. **He made me trust myself, even like myself...**

He leaned forward, dipped down slightly, and then vaulted into the flying camel-spin, hands clasped behind his back as he rotated.

**Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh**

**Try everything**

...He showed me the value of being able to learn from my mistakes and grow from them, rather than regretting them, and letting them hold me down like weights. This song is as much a reflection of my growth as it is the story of how Viktor got me to think differently, too. I'm not in this thing alone.

He came out of the T-shaped spin, descended slightly on a bent knee, and hopped to switch feet and change edges, continuing the spin as he leaned to the side for the next component, reaching back for the blade of one skate as he went. As his rotating leg lifted him up and straightened out again, he
pulled on his free leg until that boot was nearly behind his head.

Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh
Try everything

"Your flexibility is still something that begs attention." Viktor pointed out, watching as his husband slouched through the end of the spin he’d been working on, "You could get a lot more out of those moves if you could bend more."

"...Bend...more? How so...?"

"Well, you can do a split at this point, but only if you've got something propping your legs apart." The Russian mused idly, skating a wide circle around the younger figure, a finger on his lip in thought, "But there's a whole new world of moves that you could do if you could bend more without that kind of help. Split jumps, connecting elements like the Charlotte spiral, or even Biellmann spins."

"...Those are mostly moves that the Ladies use though."

"Psst." Viktor scoffed, pulling his hand down and building up speed before twisting tightly into a circle and demonstrating his own Biellmann. He only spun a few times before letting the blade go and returning to slide normally, "It's fun when the guys do it, too. People often think the women do those moves mostly because the men can't. So...surprise everyone. Yurio can't be the only competitor on our circuit who attempts these."

"Surprising the audience is your thing." Yuri gave him a look, "But...I guess so."

The full Biellmann spin still made him a bit dizzier than he'd like, but the skater did his best, keeping his eyes open to watch the horizon as he felt the burn in his stretched legs.

Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh

He let go of his foot, and the rotation gave him the momentum to move out of the maneuver, his head spinning somewhat, though only as much as he’d expected. The headache made it a bit worse than he’d liked, but it faded slightly when he started moving forward normally again...and entered into his step sequence.

Don't beat yourself up, don't need to run so fast, sometimes we come last, but we did our best.

He suddenly came to a stop, frost flying from his blades. He stomped the ice three times with the last three beats of the stanza, then forward-inside twizzled to start moving ahead again, heading towards the closest side of the rink-wall as the step sequence continued.
I won't give up, no I won't give in, 'til I reach the end and then I'll start again
No, I won't leave, I wanna try everything, I wanna try even though I could fail

The final move also brought Yuri to the final jump of his Short Program, and everyone knew it. Viktor had both hands clutching to the upper lip of the wall, his fingers all but digging into the fiberglass as he watched.

Yuri slid directly down the center of the rink length-wise, and spread his arms out wide before starting to lean down. His left leg went straight into the air above himself, both hands reaching down to grab the ankle on the right.

"I don't know if the Charlotte Spiral is such a good idea..." Yuri half-whined, barely able to get his free leg higher than 125° as compared to the leg holding him up at rink-side.

"Your legs have to be at 180 or it won't count." Viktor pointed out, "Try again."

"...Can't I just do a 3-turn like normal...?" The younger figure wondered as he reluctantly started the lean his shoulder forward again, the free leg sticking out at barely a 45° angle behind him.

"Concentrate." The Russian instructed, patting one hand on the top of the wall and ignoring that last comment, "Lift your free leg as high as it can go."

Doing as such, said leg went up to around 165°...and Viktor used a finger against the toe of that sock to push it the last little bit of the way before Yuri was in a complete split...but that just made the skater grunt.

"...Hm, you're still not able to complete the split without help." The Russian huffed, letting the leg down so Yuri could stand normally again. He tilted slightly to the left and leaned against the wall casually, "You need to be more flexible."

"I know!" Yuri whined, all but going down onto his knees.

"You need some kind of motivation. Oh! I know...I can do it. I'll show you."

"I know you can do it!"

The silver Russian was already putting the move on display though and looked rather proud of it as he turned his head to look at his partner, "Chris can do it, too!"

"I know! He's got bones like greenstick branches!"

"Yuri used to do these just while standing around with his phone in St. Petersburg." Viktor offered, though still standing in that split position, curling his arms over the top of the wall and leaning the side of one cheek against them, "Doing a standing split should be nothing to a skater, especially the front-split variety."

"Not everyone’s as flexible as you guys!"

"...JJ can do it."

Those brown eyes just went small as Yuri blanched, but the idea of being outdone by the Canadian (on top of everyone else) drove him to try again. He held there with his leg up at 170°, but was getting flustered at the fact that he couldn't get the last few centimeters to get the full 180°. Just as he
was about to let it go though, he could see Viktor turning his head out the corner of his eye, and half a second later, felt something being tied around his up-turned ankle. When he glanced behind himself, he could see Yuuko there tightening a resistance band around his foot, and then ponied it over his back and head, handing the opposite end to him.

"Pull until it's tight." She said, "You need to feel like your muscles are loose in this position, if you ever want to be able to hold the split in the air without help." She stepped off a couple feet further down, but then joined in with the split as well, smirking at her childhood friend and resting her chin on her crossed arms like Viktor was doing on his other side, "So you'll need to pull your leg until you can easily go to 190° or so."

"...That's so far...!" Yuri whined, barely pulling any tension yet on the band.

"You can do it, Yuri." Yuuko winked at him.

That golden left blade was straight up above him, and he glided gracefully in that backwards line, watching dozens of scratches in the ice flying by just under his nose. Just as he lifted up though and readied himself for the toe-pick launch, he let himself drift into muscle-memory. The left leg came down right next to the right for half a heartbeat, and leaned his frame just enough to put his left blade on its outside edge. The right leg stuck out behind himself, the right arm with it...and he picked that golden blade down as hard as he could.

Viktor had clasped his hands together over his mouth and nose, eyes wide as he watched. He was practically on his own toes as the jump carried out in slow motion before him. He could hardly believe watching the four rotations, and dreaded the fall that would no-doubt come.

To his shock though, and likely the shock of many others, Yuri didn't fall. His right blade caught the ice, and he started the backwards outside-edge glide...leaning forward for balance...and even more forward...and more forward. His nose was practically scraping the ice again, left leg bending inward and arms flailing out to the side.

Don't fall don't fall DON'T FALL...! UP, DAMNIT!

Yuri forced his way back to standing though, pulling himself up from the near-fall in absolute desperation to keep on his feet. When he felt the world upright again, he breathed a sigh of half-relief.

...I didn't fall, but I might as well have with that landing...chikusho! Wait...how many times did I spin...? Oh no...

I'll keep on making those new mistakes, I'll keep on making them every day...

Viktor was practically a puddle, melting over the edge of the rink-wall where he slouched over it, "...He's going to be the end of me..."

"...I don't think he meant to do that." Chris offered, patting the Russian's back reassuringly, "The quad-part, I mean."

"I know. That's why he flubbed the landing." Viktor pushed up on his hands, though still held to the wall anxiously, "Damnit, Yuri..."

The flustered skater pushed through the wide outside spread-Eagle, twizzling a bit at the end before digging a toe-pick down to stop himself in the center of the ISU logo.
Those new mistakes

Shoulder waggle.

He moved backward with a few cross-overs, picking up a bit of speed before backing up into the last required element and final spin of the Short Program. The end was finally in sight. If he fell now, there was little risk of him banging his head on the ice, so the worst of it was finally behind him. Yuri lowered down for the backward-entry into the standard sit-spin, one leg extended out for the shoot-the-duck maneuver.

Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh
Try everything

That variant quickly evolved into a twist, right leg moving out from being held straight and directly forward, out to the side instead, with his left arm bent behind his back and the right curved up over his head. Both legs quickly switched position, and Yuri changed feet beneath himself, moving to fold his left leg under the right and take that ankle in-hand, the left arm staying up high and curving slightly back.

Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh
Try everything

He rose back up to both feet, and slowly twisted away, free leg swinging outward as he headed back towards the center of the rink. His hands slowly traverse the upper length of his frame as he moved.

Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh
Try everything

Yuri rotated and twisted, swiftly moving across the frosty white stage, left arm up in the back as the right went down low in front, bowing himself slightly forward as he scratched his way through.

Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh

One last twist, and he stood upright, planting a toe-pick into the ice as he finally made it back to his starting place above the ISU logo. He glanced up over his left shoulder, that arm coming up as well, curling in to gently swipe the back of his hand and fingers close to his cheek, then extending out to the limits of its range, and finally dragging the skater into a low bow before finally ending up on his hip again.

Try everything.

The music cut out, and for a few micro-seconds, all Yuri could hear was the sound of his own ragged breaths. His head pounded, and the lights all around him made his eyes hurt. He squinted a little, closing his eyes for a brief moment as he let his frame relax, letting his slouching posture turn him on his blades until he was facing the short end of the rink just behind himself. He couldn't bring himself to look at his coach, even as the excited cheers of the crowd started washing in like tidal waves crashing in on the rocks of his shores...instead, just dipping his head down as he lowered onto his right knee, then the left. Both hands went palms-down on the ice, all fingers together, the sides of his index fingers touching where they came together in a point. Back straight, Yuri leaned forward.

"...A great effort by Skater Yuri...but he seems to be putting himself into ‘za rei’ position...? I wonder who he feels the need to apologize to...? Ah, his coach...?” Morooka pondered.

"More importantly...why? He did amazingly well, all things considered.” Oda added.
Viktor was still rubbing his temples with his fingers in frustration, but soon turned towards the exit. He didn't look up as he moved.

"Don't be so hard on him, Viktor." Chris recommended, "He tried his best."

The Russian paused only long enough to pull the Team Japan jacket off of where it had been slung across his shoulder, and then started walking again.

The audience was still cheering, save the handful of Japanese people in attendance (or those cultured therein) who could read into what was going on. Minako and Mari were anxious especially. They watched in cautious silence as Yuri slowly pulled up from the bow, pulling both hands to his lap before finally rising up on his toe-picks. He still kept his eyes on the ice as he stood there, unmoving, unsure what was to come.

...I didn't fall, but it won't matter...I still did the quad, even if I didn't mean to. All that Charlotte spiral connecting-element training...I did it that way so often that I couldn't make myself do it any differently, even with my head hurting so bad...

One hand came up to cover his right eye, the pounding directly behind it making the skater feel like the thing would pop out of his skull at any moment. Reluctantly, he started making his way for the rink exit, seeing the shadows of the rink attendants moving out past him to collect the assorted gifts that had been thrown out. The crowd's cheering and applause seemed miles away by the time Yuri made it to the edge of the ice and spotted the toes of his partner's own dark-colored, golden-bladed boots there waiting for him. Even if someone else had those exact same boots as Viktor, no one else but him had the little Russian flag insignias on the inside heel. It was definitely him.

"...I went through the Charlotte spiral too fast..." He tried to explain, hand sliding up against his face a little, feeling the edge of his gelled hair at his fingertips, "...I think I went into auto-pilot halfway through... I didn't...mean to do the quad Lutz..."

"You did what you could." The Russian answered quietly, "If you'd tried to do anything to change it at the last second, you'd have fallen for sure. Your body knew how to control the speed even if your head was arguing about it." He held out his left hand, and the blade guards therein, "Here."

Each guard went on one at a time, and Yuri hesitantly stepped off the ice, feeling his jacket being slipped over his shoulders soon after. The Russian kept his hands there on his shoulders though and started guiding him over towards the kiss and cry.

"Why are you holding your face like that?" Viktor wondered as they sat on the bench, "You okay, or do you just not want to look at me?"

"I had a headache starting up right before I went out. Now it's a full-on migraine, right behind my eye..." The younger skater explained, "I think that's part of what messed me up out there... I thought I'd have to put everything I had into that last jump just to make it through a triple at all..."

"We'll get you something as soon as we're done out here."

Chris suddenly appeared behind them where they sat, surprising them both with a hand on each shoulder, but looking down on his younger friend with a smile, "He's not giving you the gears, is he? Yuri." He asked sweetly.

"Ch-Chris...!"

Phichit came up next, but he slid in onto the bench at the skater's left side, "You did pretty well for a guy who was in the hospital for 5 hours last night." He teased.
"Ph-Phichito-kun...!"

"Ah, his accent is slipping again. How adorable." Chris laughed.

"What are you guys-"

"The score for Yuri Nikiforov..."

All eyes lifted, and protestations immediately ceased. The score-board was the focus of everyone’s attention. The competitor in question pulled his hand down from his eye, though it was still squinted by comparison to the other.

"...96.57."

The audience went wild with cheers.

"...I...I scored in the 90s?" The skater was in stunned disbelief; as were the others, it seemed,

"...A...Arienaihodo..."

"Skater Yuri pulls through! He may be in 6th place, but he's still within a point of the next 2 competitors!"

Back in Hasetsu, Hiroko was holding tight to Makkachin as the score flashed across the screen. The kiss and cry scene was split horizontally down the middle to show a replay of her son's last jump...as well as his brush with that face-first crash into the ice. She heaved a breath, and leaned back to holler towards the main entrance area, "TOSHIYO...HE MADE IT."

The others who had gathered for the Grand Prix Final Cheering Party were relieved as well, with the triplets and Minami collapsing to the floor in tense exhaustion. Yuuko fared little better, splayed out on top of the table in front of herself, arms hanging off the edge of it where she sat, all but frothing at the mouth.

Chris and Phichit had quickly leaned in to bury their friend in congratulatory hugs, practically shoving Viktor out of the way in the process. Yuri just flailed desperately, arms waggling about where they were pinned in awkward directions.

The Russian recollected himself and twisted where he sat, crossing his arms and giving something of a death-glare to both the skaters smothering his husband. Phichit noticed first, eyes going wide as he maintained that nervous smile...and unlatched his hands before squeaking back a few inches on the shared bench. The blonde, however, needed a proverbial gun at his head to make him notice, feeling a particular fingertip press up against his cheek. Those lime-green eyes turned to the side and spotted the cantankerous Russian getting uncomfortably close, his hand in a gun-shape with the three last fingers curled over, the index pointing out, and the thumb up.

"...Bang..."

Chris instantly let the young Asian go with a nervous smile, and Yuri collapsed back to his prior position in a heap.

The young figure reached up to adjust where his jacket was still barely clinging to his shoulders, but soon felt a different set of hands brushing up against him to do the same thing. He nervously looked aside to whom he knew was doing it, and finally caught sight of those blue eyes, only to look down and away again anyway.

"You did a good job." Viktor finally said, rubbing his partner's back with his left hand as he pulled
back, "Let's go find you some headache relief."

The crowd was still cheering as the two finally rose to stand, and began making their way over to the Players' Club with an arm each behind the others' back.

Yurio and Otabek were still clapping as well as they watched the group getting closer.

Yuri had half-expected to see Tess there by the doorway waiting for him, but realized she was nowhere to be seen. Instead, he looked up at the Russian Punk, and paused where he stood. He smiled nervously, "...I didn't think you'd stay to watch."

"I had to be sure you walked off the ice yourself." The teen answered, hesitating a moment before leaning forward and reaching down over the curved grey barrier post, "You weren't half bad out there either."

Hazel eyes blinked up at him, looking carefully at the outstretched hand, and glancing aside to the silver Russian standing just next to him. Viktor gave no sign of objection though, and Yuri took the step or two closer and reached up to grasp at the hand, "Thanks. We'll see you at the outdoor arena then in a bit, right?"

Yurio was a bit surprised to hear the invitation, but then nodded, giving his own anxious smile in response, "Yeah. I'll be there."

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Chapter End Notes

Arienaihodo = Unbelievable
The sound of the audience's cheering was slowly fading into the background, but the outpouring of support in spite of his 6th place finish was enough to make Yuri feel as though he'd come in 1st. Fans were quickly pouring out of the stadium and into the main hallways to catch a glimpse of him while he was doing his post-skate interview. They massed and swelled like high tide, smartphones and cameras up in the air to get as many videos and pictures as they could while he was relatively close by. The flashes of light and cheering were enough to make the hapless young skater think they were really just there for Viktor...but as he looked around, he realized the man wasn't even near to him, so the congregation really was for him.

...Where did he go...?

The Russian was behind the crowd, standing just within the doorway to the Players' Club, watching quietly with some of the other skaters and coaches. The others seemed fairly happy about what had gone down in spite of the risk, but Viktor was more reserved, eyes practically unblinking as he watched, arms crossed where everyone else was still clapping or holding up their signs.

"Vitya."

Those eyes turned at the sound of the older man's voice, and Viktor caught sight of his own former coach not too far within the lounge. The elder nudged his head towards the interior and then turned away, expecting the skater-coach to follow. Viktor turned his head to glance over at his media-surrounded husband, but then twisted on a heel and gave wordless, slow chase.

Chris and Phichit had watched him go, stepping off to give him a path, and turned their curious gazed after him. They glanced back at one another then and shrugged unknowingly.

Yakov hadn't stopped walking until he was standing in the doorway that lead back out to the arena, tilting his head up a bit to watch the other half of the audience starting to vacate the stands. He held there, motionless, until he could see the shadow of his former superstar coming up next to him, and then both of them stood alone in the mouth of that doorway.

[Thanks for sitting in with me earlier.] Viktor said, keeping to Russian so the conversation could be somewhat private, [In the kiss and cry, I mean.]

[I'm surprised you're not out there meeting the press with your Yuri.] The coach answered, looking high up above the ice to the 4-sided big-screen that was showing replays of all the highlights of the Men's event, [You look utterly morose.]

[Do I?] The silver Russian wondered, pocketing his hands and leaning a shoulder against the closest wall.

[Last year, you could hardly stand to be in the background of his shots. You'd always jump in excitedly like you thought you'd be ignored if you didn't. Now...] Yakov tilted a bit to look at the skater, [You just look exhausted. He did the quad Lutz again.]

Viktor reached one hand up to pinch the bridge of his nose, [Yeah...] He rubbed his face a bit with that same hand before looking out at the dwindling audience again, [Is it always going to be like this...? Where you're furious that your student did something you told them not to, but you're happy enough that they did it and pulled it off, sort of, that you can't express the anger?]
Anger and pride mix together, and in the end, you just feel frustrated. Yakov said simply, [It's not an easy situation to reconcile, but you learn to deal with it.]

[How did you do it?]

[I took on more students. Each different one comes with their own strengths and weaknesses, so when you're full to the top on problems caused by one, you go to the next and let yourself recover a bit while dealing with something entirely different.] The elder answered, [Not that I'd recommend you do it. You look like you can barely handle the one as it is.]

[Heh...that's exactly why I said no to Yurio.] He flicked at his hair a bit with one finger, but then returned that hand to its pocket, [My wonder now makes me worry for tomorrow. He's going to be the very first person on the ice, and that means I have less than 24 hours to figure out what to do.] Viktor looked up and around the stadium idly, [After Rostelecom last year...Yuri said he wanted to dedicate all the time he had left before the Final to work on quads. He asked me...wouldn't it be great if he landed a quad Flip with a +3 GOE? But then he touched his hand on the ice doing it in his Short Program, and overall scored significantly less than he did in Moscow or Beijing before that. It ate him up for months. He watched replays of his performance over and over, trying to find every little thing he did wrong to lose points like he had... I mean, he was still happy with his Silver back then, but he missed the Gold by such a tiny margin...and he blames his flubbed quad Flip for it. That single-point automatic deduction for falling just killed him. And now...I'm telling him not to do any quads at all...] The silver legend glanced back over his shoulder, as though worried Yuri would turn up and know what was being said, but then turned back, casting those slate eyes on his former coach, [He knows I'm not trying to sabotage his chances, but I still feel like I am.]

[You are sabotaging him though.] Yakov pointed out, [That's just the nature of it. The way the sport is now, if you don't do quads, you might as well not skate. So much more emphasis is placed on technical skill now that it leaves more artistic skaters in the dust. You were barely 20 when the old system was replaced with the one we have now...but I'm sure even you remember what it was like to skate for it.]

[Well, I did score perfect 6.0s that one time.] Viktor huffed, [I used to joke that they got rid of the system specifically because I'd hit the limit and the ISU was freaking out about it.]

The older man's glassy-eyed thousand-yard-stare seemed to reflect his recollection as well, [You were insufferable.]

The silver skater just laughed, [Yakov~ You look like you were just having war flash-backs.]

[I practically was.]

[Hmm...] Viktor smiled, eyes looking out across the ice then, [St. Petersburg must be so dull without me there.]

[Yuri has done his best to fill the void, but once he's gone, too...and with Georgi retiring...it'll basically just be Mila left.] The younger figure had nothing to say to follow that, simply lowering his gaze as though he'd felt personally responsible for the situation. His attention was grabbed soon after by the sound of familiar voices behind him, and he looked up just far enough to catch the sight of his extended family turning up with Yurio. They'd caught Yuri as he was trying to get back into the Players' Club; he'd found himself surrounded on all sides by people he had no hope of escaping, and every one of them was laying on yet another layer of congratulations, or scolding, as the case may be.
Yakov had noticed them all as well and was looking back, leaning against the wall as he shook his head, [Pretty soon, minus Christophe, it's just going to be those 4 young kids out on the ice competing against each other. A whole new generation of skaters is going to have to play catch-up if they ever want to be in the same league. Most of them are still very young...teens, barely 20s...but they're already scoring as high as the older veterans.] He looked back at his former student, [Considering what you've done for your Yuri, I'd be curious what Yuratchka would be capable of if you'd been his coach for Seniors instead of me. It's always easier for athletes to go farther, faster, when their mentors are already Champions, and still young enough to lead by example.]

Viktor held still for a moment, watching them quietly, but then nodded solemnly, [I've wondered that myself, even for myself. How much further I could've gone if I hadn't started so late. Or...how far someone could go if I could give all of my knowledge and experience to someone barely on the verge of learning to walk.]

[If you ever got your paws on a toddler with the drive and interest in competition that you did when I found you...] The elder Russian huffed, [...That's a dread beast I dare not think of.]

[Well...] The skater huffed a sigh to himself and pushed off the wall to stand normally, [Given that it's just Yuri and I, I doubt that'll ever happen.]

[Neither you nor Yuri can skate forever, Vitya.] The gruff older coach said, stepping forward to set a hand on the man's shoulder, [If you ever get a handle on how to be a coach, maybe you'll consider doing so for a living later on. For now though...it seems you still have plenty to work on.]

[All told, most of my shortcomings stem from the fact that I'm married to my student. I doubt that'll be a problem again.] Viktor offered, trying to find some sad humor in it all.

Yakov just shook his head, [We'll see.] He pat that shoulder again and started moving away.

[Wh...What's that supposed to mean?] The younger figure was stunned, [Yakov...!]

Those steely blue eyes just turned back to look over one more time, [You thanked me earlier for sitting in with you in the kiss and cry, even though I had no reason for it since I'm not your coach anymore, and you hadn't asked me to like you did at NHK. You also told me this morning that you were getting anxious because of all these big changes that will be happening. In the last month, you've barely gotten to the point where you half-way trust your Uncle, but I can tell you still hold something of a grudge against him, which I understand. So while all these things are happening to you, stripping you of whatever control you thought you had before, any agency over your own life, you recoil into yourself and focus only on the things you think you can control. Now, I've known you for most of your life, Vitya. You think that just because I'm not officially your coach anymore, that I don't know what you're doing or how you think?]

[...] The silver Russian stammered in confusion, [I didn't...]

[I'm bulldozing my way in to help hold you up, while you build walls again. You may be building them around Yuri as well as yourself this time, but they're still walls, trying to keep everyone else out.] Yakov turned fully around again, though he kept his arms at his sides, [Refusing to be Yuratchka's coach, resenting your Uncle for wanting to move to Hasetsu, even for being involved with that ballerina, saying you'll withdraw from the Final if you decide to pull Yuri out of it... Maybe it's just because you're exhausted, like you said earlier, but I'm worried you're just getting ready to repeat history.]

Viktor just blinked at him in stunned confusion.
[When I took you away from home, you rebuilt your entire life around figure skating. You had no friends. You saw your teammates as people you had to tolerate, and never counted on anyone but yourself for anything. That's why you found it so easy to drop everything and go to Japan. You had nothing to lose by leaving St. Petersburg. You're trying to rebuild your entire life around Yuri now though. How long before this cycle begins anew?]

[I never planned on anything I did to be cyclical in the first place. I'm sad you think this is just a phase I'm going through.]

[This isn't the first time I've seen you drop everything to do something crazy.]

Viktor could see Yuri trying to get his attention over Yakov's shoulder, waving as though begging for salvation from the family mob.

[You did it for that French girl, you did it for Katsuki, and you did it again with your father last weekend. All these impulsive things you've done to try to fill the holes inside yourself, barely thinking of the long-term consequences of your choices because you're too overwhelmed by the here and now. The only constant you've had for the last 20 years, Vitya, has been me. All these long years, I've tried to teach you patience, and get you to think about what will happen in the future based on what you do now. Most of the time though, you only ever applied that to your skating. You never wanted to think about what comes after. You're slowly starting to open your eyes to it though, given how close you are to that ledge...but you're still scared to really examine the horizon.]

[...I don't really understand what you're trying to say with all this.]

[Stop focusing on a single, tiny part of your life, while the rest surrounds you, and pushes you around. If what you really want is a life with Katsuki that will last until the end of your days, then he can't be the only thing you focus on. He's a person, not a sport, and people have families, friends, and interests that go beyond just you.] Yakov explained, giving the skater a moment to catch up, [He has more practice than you do at managing other people in his life, whereas you've spent all your time trying to make it so you're the only person in your own. Learn from him. And learn how to put your foot down on things that matter. I'm not going to be there in Hasetsu to be your backbone while everything else happens around you. I've seen you stand your ground before...I know you can do it.]

[...I'm not even sure what I need to stand my ground for. I can't just tell other people what to do.]

Viktor crossed his arms, again distracted by the sight of his partner trying to get his attention, but unsure what to do to help him in that moment.

[I know of at least 3 things that are bothering the everliving Hell out of you right now.] The older figure said, holding up a hand, and the last three fingers on it, [The situation with Yuri being mad at you and Katsuki over the coaching thing.] He lowered the middle finger, [Your Uncle saying he plans to move himself and his whole clan to Hasetsu, your opinion be damned.] He lowered the ring finger, [And lastly...managing Katsuki's skating, given his accident.] The small finger came down after that, and Yakov turned the whole hand around, pointing at his former student instead, then stepping up close to poke that finger against the skater's chest, [You can't decide what other people do with their own lives, but you can make certain they know your position, and you do have the power to change things if you want to. The people around you have completely lost sight of your boundaries though, and it's because you let those boundaries become hazy.]

[You were just giving me grief about building walls though.] The younger Russian countered, [I don't know what I'm supposed to do, if not that.]

[You need armor, not walls.] Yakov explained, putting both hands into his jacket pockets then, and turning side-face away from the skater, [And maybe a big stick, too. Otherwise, you might as well]
save yourself the trouble of building walls and just dig a hole instead. So...what are you going to do now?

"Gyah! Viktor!" Yuri yelled out, breaking free finally from the mob and rushing at him, arms flying around his core as the younger figure vaulted behind him, "Tell them you're not mad at me for the quad Lutz so they'll leave me alone about it!"

The Russian just blinked down at him in utter confusion, arms up like he wasn't sure what to do with them. When he looked ahead again though, he could see the group of 10 getting closer, like waves crashing around a Yakov-shaped rock.

"You told him 'no quads' and then he does one anyway!"

"He has a raging migraine now! He's saying he might not even go to the after-skate thing!"

"That was the exact move that you got all mad at him for pulling during practice earlier. I'm surprised you didn't go out onto the ice yourself and drag him off when you saw it."

"You're acting more like a choreographer than a coach with this one."

More criticisms from all sides, bombarding the Russian like bricks. He wasn't even sure who was speaking the words anymore. They all morphed into a singular voice, spoken by many. His eyes darted back and forth between everyone ahead of him, but then spotted Yakov again somewhere in the middle of it, stoic and motionless...and Viktor clenched his fists at his sides.

"ENOUGH." He barked.

The bombardment halted...but it felt more like it had just frozen in a moment of time...the next round of bricks still flying his way, but stopped in mid air for the moment. He sucked in a breath, like he hadn't been able to in ages...grabbed at where Yuri's arms were still clinging around his chest, and pulled them free to move the skater out from behind him.

Hazel eyes blinked back at him, a mixture of confusion, dread, fear, and uncertainty, "V-Viktor...?"

The Russian just stared on, but then lowered his head, closed his eyes, and sighed, turning back towards the crowd in front of him. He could see that his earlier bark had gotten the attention of others still in the Players' Club, but he paid them no attention. Instead, with hands still on the skater's shoulders, Viktor made his intentions known, "Yuri is MY student. If you don't like what he's doing out there, then tell ME about it, NOT HIM. I don't need a bunch of nosey busy-bodies coming into the middle of this, muddying the waters so he doesn't know who to take orders from. You all KNOW he has a bad habit of trying to please everyone, so the fewer people are involved telling him what to do, THE BETTER." He gestured a hand at the group of skaters slightly to his right, "You guys are supposed to be his competition, not his minders. Challenge him, make him want to fight for the podium. Just because you think you know better, your place is not to question my coaching methods, unorthodox as they may seem to you." He gestured then to the peanut gallery to his left, "You guys are family, not ISU judges. Support him, cheer for him, congratulate him on a job well done no matter how well or badly he does. Half of you couldn't tell the difference between a Lutz and a Flip on your own anyway, so what makes you experts? Who amongst us has the most experience as a World Champion figure skater, huh?"

The group blinked at him, all side-eyeing one another like they weren't sure what to say.

"Well?"

"...You do..."
"Who took Yuri from an abysmal, last-place, 235-point finish at Sochi to GOLD at last year's World Champions, with a new World Record that probably no one will be able to beat in our lifetimes?"

"...You did..."

"That's right. I did." He lifted a thumb to the center of his chest. Viktor could feel his skin tingling all over, like he'd just been dipped in a vat of menthol, cold and icy but powerful, "So which one of you still thinks you can coach him to Gold now? Which one of you thinks you know better?"

Yuri could feel the blood draining from his face in the empty void of that uncomfortable silence. The Russian just eyeballed everyone, glancing every one of the people around them in the eyes before moving on to the next, and finally drawing in a breath, speaking more quietly than before, "I know I'm not perfect. I'm stretched pretty thin right now, trying to coach him and be a competitor. I agreed to be Plisetsky's choreographer only because that's easy for me."

The blonde's eyes went wide with surprise, but he stayed silent.

"I refused to be his coach because, right now especially, that's too hard. I can't be effective as all of these things for everyone, all the time. I have to pick who I can help by deciding who I can be the most helpful to, and right now, that means the only person I'm coaching is Yuri. That's not a judgment about anyone else. It's my way of balancing the things I need to do for myself without any one of those things eating up more of my mental resources than I'm willing to give. Maybe that'll change after next season, when I'm retired from competition, but not sooner, so stop holding it against me. I'm tired of being judged for putting myself and Yuri first. And speaking of that..." Those crystal blue eyes went back to the skater's direct relation, a finger pointing at the elder silver Russian to single him out, "You need to back off a little bit. I gave you an inch and you took a thousand miles from me. You've basically done everything that I told you last year not to do."

"Vivi-"

"No..." The silver legend shook his head, "No more. Vivi is the child you left behind. He's gone. I was stupid and naïve to think that we could pick things up again where we left off, but neither of us is the person we were back then. I need you to stop treating the weight of my opinion as though I'm still 5 years old, when I was to be seen but not heard. I'm turning 29 in 2 weeks and I'm going to be heard. You don't just get to decide to move to Hasetsu without talking to anyone else about it first! Just because you and Minako-sensei are engaged doesn't mean the rest of us don't count! Hasetsu is our place. You don't just get to force your way there! Did you even ask her what she thought!?"

His hand gestured towards the ballerina, making her hyperaware of herself suddenly.

Mikhail looked on steadily, giving that same steely-eyed gaze that he'd done when the two of them were in Russia and Viktor had been obstinate about sleeping under his father's roof. He just shrugged and shook his head, "No."

"Then maybe she should be the first person you have that conversation with. I may ask you to seek mine and Yuri's approval before you move, but it's her consent that you should probably have first." Viktor explained stiffly, then finally turning towards a certain Russian Tiger that had already been half-blasted since the ambush began, "And one other thing..." He pointed at the teen, "...Yuri Plisetsky."

He swallowed nervously, but the blonde held his ground.

"The people around you are not resources for you to use and discard. You need to learn how to handle rejection better, because it comes in different shades and most of time, it's not meant as an
offense against you."

"I know th-"

"STOP TALKING AND LISTEN." Viktor barked again, forcing the Tiger to become a kitten, "I chose to decline being your coach right now because I can't do it. But the magnitude of your resentment and anger over my choice has become a force that everyone had to deal with. This isn't the first time I've had to tell you that I don't like how you treat Yuri when you're pissed off! And this isn't the first time I've resorted to yelling at you over it! But I'm tired of it! You're turning 17 in 3 months, but you're acting like you're still 13! GROW UP. Your shitty attitude and foul mouth were something I could just laugh at and brush off, back when I was still full-time in St. Petersburg, but that's not how it works anymore! Taking shots at Yuri just to try and hurt me, when you're angry at something I said or did, is unacceptable. I'm going to give you one last chance at this, because I know you can be a good person. I saw how much progress you made over the summer with Mikhail's help. Figure out how to be that person again, because I like that person, and I want him around."

Yurio drew in a shaky breath, looking up at those slate eyes before lowering his gaze in shame, nodding, and answering in a whisper, "...Okay..."

The Russian then finally turned his eyes back to his husband, surprising him into taking a nervous step back, "...And finally...Yuri Nikiforov."

Oh I'm in trouble again.

Viktor had his back to the group, and pointed at them without turning, "Stop listening to anything these knuckleheads say about your skating. There's only ONE person you're supposed to be seducing when you're on the ice. This is love, not an orgy."

Yuri's face went from white to red.

"I've failed you miserably as a coach this weekend. I know that. I know that better than anyone. But this situation, with your accident and the head injury...I've had trouble dealing with that as your spouse, never mind as your coach. Fixing this is way more difficult for me right now than it ever was after your Short Programs in Calgary and Shanghai. But I need more than the joke of last night's attempt at sleep, and a nap after, to get my head together. So just...give me a little more time. By morning, I promise, I'll have a better plan...okay?"

Hesitantly, Yuri nodded his head, though keeping his nervous eyes down.

"Are you done now?" Chris asked suddenly, breaking the awkward, tense silence with a stalwart tone.

Viktor seemed to deflate a little bit, "...Yeah I think so..."

"Did you get it all out?"

"...I hope so."

"And you feel better?"

"A little bit."

"Mh..." The blonde took a step forward, coming up behind his silver friend and rubbed his shoulders for a moment, "Then go get all your shit together and let's go. You'll be useless tomorrow if you
don’t have at least a little fun before the end of the night. It's your one-year anniversary, after all. Can’t have you in a bad mood for it."

"It's...my...what?" The Russian echoed, looking sharply back over his shoulder to where Chris was giving him something of a doe-eyed nod. He turned back to Yuri, confused as much as anyone, only to spot the figure holding up his ringed hand.

"...It's...it's been a year since we exchanged these..." The younger skater explained anxiously, "...I...had planned to do something nice for you, but everything got all messed up...because of me..."

Viktor's brain had already shut off by then, and all he could do was give a vacant, disbelieving stare. He blinked once...twice...

...and went face-first to the floor with the sigh of a quiet, incoherent scream on his lips.
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED SEVENTY FIVE

It took the combined efforts of Chris and Yuri to get Viktor up off the floor, dragging him over to the corner of the lounge where his gear bags had been left. They settled him backward to sit him on the couch, propping him up against the plush arm-rest until he regained some of his faculties. It wasn’t as though the Russian had been rendered unconscious; rather, he was so blindsided by embarrassment for having forgotten the 1-year anniversary of their ring-exchange that he couldn't form coherent thought. Even after being set against the couch, all the silver legend could do was stare off into space and wait for his brain to start working normally again.

Yuri busied himself with getting his skates off and packing his things away, getting his sneakers back on, and pulling the matching Team Japan track-suit pants over the bottom half of his outfit. He paused a moment and sat on the edge of the couch, reaching over to where his partner was still leaning, still staring away, and brushing a few strands of hair from the man's eyes. He drew in a reluctant breath, but then moved down to the floor, shuffling a few inches on his knees until he could get at the gold-bladed skates still worn on the lanky skater's feet. He sat on the floor and crossed his legs, pulling the left blade lightly into his lap and started working at the laces; untying the knot just under the edge of those red-trimmed, black track pants, undoing where the laces crossed over and looped around each successive hook, and down until the vertical plunge of the boot became more horizontal to go out over the wearer's arch. Pulling the laces loose through the few eyelets that held the boot in place, Yuri carefully pulled it off his partner's foot, and set both carefully aside before reaching for the second and starting the process over again.

Just as he was about to pull the last of the laces up, he could feel the Russian's leg tense up a little where he’d roused and tried to sit up straighter. Yuri lifted his face to look at the man, those blue eyes still looking down, but seeming a bit clearer now than before, "You okay?" He asked quietly, finally pulling the boot away and setting it aside, only to lean forward against that leg, resting his chin over the knee, hands carefully cupped behind the heel and calf.

Viktor still looked rather forlorn, but he managed a subtle nod, reaching his right hand up to rub the back of his wrist against his eyes. He held there a moment, covering his mouth and nose with the palm of his hand, and drawing in a shaky breath before slouching forward a bit to set that hand against the top of his partner's head.

He pet the gelled-back black hair once or twice before Yuri started moving again, uncrossing his legs and twisting them around underneath of himself to sit up on his knees and move in a bit closer. He wedged himself in between his partner's loosely parted knees, and weaved his hands under his spouse's arms, pulling the somber silver legend to his shoulder, "You're too stressed out."

Still, Viktor wouldn't say anything to answer it. He just nuzzled in close to the younger man's neck, and hinged his arms so he could get his hands in to find the zipper of the Team Japan jacket. His fingers found the little metal nubbin, and he pulled it all the way down until it unhooked and he could slide his arms inside, pulling his partner closer as he held to his small frame tightly, forcing Yuri's arms over his shoulders in the process. The shimmering silver show-jacket had been taken off long ago, leaving only the sleeveless black turtleneck between him and the pale skin beneath it.

Without a verbal cue to answer to, Yuri just embraced the silence as much as he did the man in his arms, holding there for as long as the Russian wanted. He threaded his fingers through that silver hair, turning his head inward just enough to find a sliver of skin at the side of his partner's neck, kissing at it gently. He felt a heavy breath against his own neck then, and Viktor finally pulled back,
eyes red like he'd been crying for hours, but not a drop clinging to those grey lashes. Yuri sighed quietly and pressed his forehead to the Russian's brow, "I can't un-injure myself...but tell me what I can do to help...?"

"You're with me, right?" Viktor asked quietly, eyes heavy despite his best efforts to keep them open, "On all the things I said before."

"Of course I am. 100%. There wasn't a thing you said that I disagreed with."

"Then why do I feel like I just made a huge mistake?"

Yuri was stunned to hear those words, eyes wide, but then narrowing a bit in worry as his brow furrowed, "You can't control how people react anymore than you can control what direction the wind blows. Mikhail's just going to have to get over it."

"...Oh...did he react badly...?"

"Mmhmmhh... Well...he could've been a little more dignified." The younger figure explained hesitantly, "You must've been pretty catatonic not to have registered it."

The silver Russian just looked down again, slouching back and to the side where he'd previously been leaning against the big plush arm-rest, "...How could I not be?" He asked quietly, "With all the things I'm stressing over, I forgot something as important as the one-year anniversary of our engagement."

"You're being too hard on yourself. To me, it was technically yesterday."

"...Yesterday? Why?" He lifted his head a bit, curiously.

"Because we exchanged rings the night before the Short Program. The context is important to me, too, not just the number on the calendar, since that moves forward a day every year. But, we missed it yesterday because of me, so tonight was going to be the Plan B night."

"...That just means I forgot it twice...!" The Russian set his head back down, his eyes a bit glassy, "...I'm the worst..."

"Viktor..." Yuri shuffled to the left a few inches, trying to get back in front of his partner, only to find the older skater pulling his hands up over his own face, "...Viktor..." He said again, this time gently setting one hand over one of the Russian's wrists, "You're not the worst. Anyone could be forgiven for forgetting something as trivial as this, given what you've gone through these last few weeks."

"...It's not trivial to me..."

"So we'll do something for it when the Final is over. There's no law that says we have to celebrate on the day. We can celebrate when we both have time. Now..." He leaned down, lightly brushing the tip of his nose against the older skater's fingers, "Are you going to come with us to the outdoor skating thing?"

"...I don't know if I can manage it anymore... If Mikhail had a fit about what I said then I don't want to see him right now."

"Viktor."

"...I don't...!"
"Viktor, I'm trying to kiss you, move your hands."

Slate eyes just peered through the gaps between those fingers, and the Russian looked out like he wasn't sure what to do despite how obvious it was.

Yuri just slid his hand up from the wrist he'd been holding, to the side of the man's neck, stroking his thumb against his partner's jaw and the bottom of one ear, "He didn't throw a fit. He's just being sourpuss. Now are you going to let me in or not?"

"...A sourpuss?"

"Viktor. I never thought I'd have to beg you to let me kiss you."

The skater just looked on through his fingers, but the shine in his eyes changed a little, as did the arch of his brow, looking a little more relaxed than before, "...Maybe I want you to. I faintly recall saying you would one day."

Yuri could faintly recall the taunt as well, but he took it in stride, and leaned a little closer, kissing at the back of the man's hands like he'd once done to him, in the early days of their engagement, "Let me kiss you." Again, he touched to the back of those hands, each time on a different finger, "I want to feel your lips. I want to taste you..."

"Wow~ That got pretty steamy." The silver legend felt a flutter in his chest to hear those sorts of words from his husband, "Keep that up and it's going to get R-rated in here despite the lingering audience."

"You'll have to spend the rest of the night seducing me. Make that your penance if you think it's so horrid that you forgot what today was."

"Maybe it should be you trying to seduce me. Every time you blame yourself for JJ plowing through you, I should withhold sexy-time another day."

"You'd never last." Yuri teased, seeing the fingers starting to loosen a little, "You'd be stir-crazy within 12 hours of a missed session."

"Probably less..." Viktor huffed, finally relaxing enough to let his head drop down to the arm-rest rather than holding it up, and reaching his left hand forward to brush the back of his fingers against his husband's cheek, "I can't get enough of you."

The younger figure leaned into the newly opened space, but held himself back somewhat, teasing the kiss by gently nosing his partner's lip, "I love you, Viktor Nikiforov. More than I can ever say, more than you could ever know."

"And I'd still love you more."

"Come here already...!"

The Russian finally cleared his other hand away, and welcomed that kiss like it was more precious than air itself. Hands cupped his partner's face to hold him close, but then roamed over the man's shoulders and back, trying to draw him up on top of himself, at least a little, as he twisted where he lay and moved more onto his back.

Yuri went with it as far as he could go, given that he was still standing on his knees in front of the couch. He let his right hand wander instead, as one kiss evolved into twenty, trailing his palm and fingers down the Russian's hard, toned frame, over the dip of his thin waist, and the curve of his hip,
down around the firm muscle that rounded out where the man's leg had curled up against his shoulder.

Viktor paused the kisses then, barely opening his eyes as he felt that hand taking hold of as much of that SkaterBum as it could grasp, and smirked, "The next time we make love, I want you to do to me what you did on the La Première flight."

"Just the next time? Or every time?" The younger figure wondered, mostly out of amusement.

"All the time. Every minute of every day."

"There'd be no time for skating then."

"We'll do it on the ice, too, if that's what it takes."

"Chris would love that."

"Yes I would."

Both sets of eyes slowly turned towards the source of that voice, and saw the Swiss skater getting quite the eye-full as it was, standing barely 6 feet away with a certain set of car keys dangling on his finger. Beside him on his left was Phichit, who had only just barely gotten his phone out to start recording when the jig was up and the two had stopped what they were doing. On Chris' right, however, was someone none of them expected...Tess, who was 8 parts confused and 2 parts impressed by what she saw. There wasn't a hint of rouge on her cheeks thought.

"La Première, huh?" Chris went on, "That's fancy. I'd love to have been a fly on that wall. Maybe you'll tell us the harrowing tale though, Yuri, of what exactly you did on that flight that would make Viktor beg."

"Not on your life." The younger skater huffed, sliding his hand down a bit to clasp at a back of his husband's thigh. He kept those unblinking eyes directly on Chris' as he moved, hand then sliding back the way it came, fingers coming precariously close to center as they moved around to the Russian's back again, "You'll just have to imagine it."

It didn't help that Viktor was playing along, being rather vocal with his needy breaths as he felt that hand moving, "...Y-Yuri...nh...ahhh!"

"...Oh my, Yuri...you're about to do the thing again, like at the NHK banquet...!" Phichit said nervously, only to suddenly realize his phone's battery was at 2%, "Ah! No! Not now!" He twisted away and tapped the device, but the screen went black a second later anyway despite his efforts, "NOOOOOOOOOOOO!" He fell to his knees and raised both hands into fists, "A POX ON THE SMARTPHONE GODS FOR MAKING BATTERIES SO MEDIOCRE!"

"Who needs cameras? I'll have this image seared into my mind for all time." Chris said, giving something of a sultry slow-blink at the Japanese skater, their eyes locked, "...And I still came."

Phichit and Tess both gawked at the man and took a step away from him each, though Chris just stood there, arms crossed over his chest, and rather proud of himself. His cheeks were red and he was quietly puffing a few extra breaths, as he had so many times after the end of a particularly strenuous Short Program.

"...Wait, are those my keys?" Viktor suddenly asked, finally pushing up onto an elbow, and reaching towards the Swiss skater with his free hand, "Ah! Those are my keys!"
"I'm commandeering this ship until further notice." The blonde explained unapologetically, "And we're going to Campus Martius Park."

"All aboard the SS Viktuuri!" Phichit chimed in, eyes still wet with the tears of sorrow for his dead phone.

"...Do all of you imagine us?" Yuri wondered then, still half-draped of his husband.

"Who needs to imagine when we can just watch you do it in person?" Chris laughed, twirling the keys around that finger and turning, "Let's go then. I don't personally mind spending all night having eye-sex with the both of you, but others are sadly waiting for us."

The Russian sighed dramatically, but cocked his head to the side to glance at his partner again, snagging one more kiss, and a quick groove on the younger man's own ample SkaterButt, before finally twisting to sitting up normally and getting up off the couch. He turned and reached both hands down to help his husband up to his own feet, only to put those arms around the man once he was up, holding him close for a moment longer, "Yuri, my dearest and truest love, it seems you should probably have some words with your old friend."

The shorter skater returned the hug eagerly, glancing up only when he felt Viktor pulling back again, gazing into those crystal eyes, "I suppose so."

"Go on then. I'll finish getting my shit together, as Chris so eloquently put it before. Meet you again in five?"

"Sure." Yuri nodded, smiling in equal parts adoration and relief, pulling his hands back to cup the Russian's face between them and steal yet one more kiss before finally moving off, "Five minutes."

Reluctantly, he pulled from the embrace, hands trailing down one another's arms before letting go from the tips of their fingers. They watched each other for a moment, before Yuri became hyperaware of Chris' keen eye as he passed the man, and quickly trotted away before the Swiss skater could try to cop another butt-feel of him like he'd done a few times before.

Viktor already seemed to have the same idea, and practically ninja'd his grip around two of the blonde's grabby fingers before they could find their mark, "So how long were you all standing there watching anyway?" He wondered, his voice fading into the background as Yuri hustled further away.

"Only since I heard you mention that flight to Paris." Chris laughed, his voice, too, getting quieter.

Tess smiled nervously, but followed after, spring-steel foot tapping along the floor until they were out of sight.

Phichit just sat on the couch, a confused-happy look on his face, not sure what else to do but patiently wait and silently mourn the loss of his only camera.

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[R.I.P. Phichit's Phone Battery]
Tess followed quickly after her old friend, but was still glancing back at the other skaters as she walked, giving a strange sort of ‘well that was unexpected’ smile, slowly turning forward to face Yuri, "I'm really surprised at you. Compared to how you used to be, seeing you feeling-up Viktor like th-" She practically tripped all over the skater, finding him stopped in the middle of the hall right as she caught up. The medic scrambled to stay on her feet, but ended up on her arse anyway, while Yuri looked down at her in surprise. When her eyes turned up to see him and ask why he'd stopped, Tess could see how the man's face was bright red.

"G-gomen!" He said, practically yipping the word and quickly twisting around to bow in apology, then reaching a hand out to help her back up, "I just got caught-up in how embarrassing that was...! I wasn't watching where I was going..."

"...Or where you'd stopped going..." She half-corrected, taking the offered hand and rubbing her thigh where she'd stumbled as she got back up onto her feet, "...As I was saying though. The way you were just then...it's like some alien took over your brain. I know it's you in there, but..."

"...It's different with him." Yuri tried to explain, moving aside so the woman could walk next to him rather than behind, and stepping forward again.

"...How? I mean, last I remember, you were too terrified to even be in the same room with him. But 30 seconds ago..." She held her hands out towards him as though putting him on display as some weird specimen she'd found, "...You looked about ready to start fingering him right there in front of everyone."

The skater just brought both hands up to cover his face, sweating bullets where he stood, his face practically glowing from how red it was, "...I know...! He'd just reminded me of this other time though, and I went with it..."

"...Other time?" She quirked a brow at him, "Yuri, were you making out in public somewhere else?" Her voice was teasing.

He flailed his arms around in an embarrassed panic, but then held one hand to the medic's shoulder as the other came up to his lips to shush her, "Tsst! Not so loud!"

"Sorry, friend...I think you're a bit beyond getting to feign modesty."

"I'm not feigning!" Yuri insisted desperately, "The only reason I'm not passed-out-cold from the humiliation is because it was you three that walked up! If it was basically anyone else, I'd be on the floor, frothing at the mouth!"

Pale eyes examined the skater, but Tess eventually just smiled and huffed a quiet laugh, "Yeah, that sounds like the old you." She started walking again, and Yuri followed, "I wish there was more time for you to regale the story of how it came to this. I can only imagine."

"Would it help if I said that it all started when I got drunk one time?"

The medic stopped in her tracks again, gaping at the man, and pointing at him, "You're not saying..." She pointed back the way she came, "...All it took for you to talk to him was a bit of booze?"
"...Basically..." Yuri answered shyly.

"And you had that Code of Conduct all those years that you'd never drink during an event cuz of how crazy you get!" She was still in stunned disbelief, but was starting to find the hilarity in it, "Why'd you go against it?"

"It was a while after you left, but..." He started, his anxiety changing over to a more somber mood, "...I made it to the Grand Prix Final for the first time three years ago. The pressure was already a bit too much for me to handle, and I started binge eating to calm down...and then I found out my dog back in Japan died..."

"...Vic-chan?"

Yuri nodded quietly, the memory of the pup still heavy on his heart, "I completely fell apart after that. By the end of the event, I'd scored some 100 points less than Viktor did, and then Celestino dragged me to the banquet after... I couldn't stand to talk to anyone, so I just ended up drinking to pass the time, and tried to forget. In the end, I drank so much that I did forget...and found out a whole year later that I'd actually propositioned Viktor to come to Hasetsu and be my coach after Worlds. That's the whole reason why he turned up." He perked his head up and shook it, then defensively waved his hands as well, "I mean, not that I think he had ever seriously considered it at the time, since I was just some nobody that had been running away from him for years already... But he explained that he'd been in something of a slump at the time, and was trying to find his motivation, so when he saw a video of me that had gone viral, replicating his Free Skate from that season...he said it inspired him, and he remembered what I'd said in Sochi. Not knowing I'd forgotten, he turned up at my family's hot-spring resort, and said that he was going to be my coach, and make me win the next Grand Prix Final."

"It must've been crazy to just see him turn up then, if you'd completely forgotten what you'd said before." Tess assumed, putting her hands into her jacket pockets as they started walking again, leaving the safety of the competitors-only lounge area and heading out into the main hall that circled around most of the stadium.

"Oh man..." Yuri put his hands up on his face again, pulling down on his cheeks a bit so the pink under his eyes showed, "I think half of Hasetsu probably heard me scream."

"I believe it." She laughed.

"But he made good on his word." The skate went on, lowering his hands down to cup around his elbows, even as he looked down slightly in residual shame, "If not for one stupid mistake I made last year, I would've won Gold at that Final. I missed it by like a tenth of a point to Yuri Plisetsky." "Ouch."

"Yeah... When I brought the Silver back to rink-side, Viktor got all weird about it, saying that he only wanted to kiss it if it was Gold, since that was a thing he did with his own medals. He said that he'd have to figure out something else to do then since I didn't get one." He looked up then, remembering the after-events rather fondly, "Up to that point, we'd been forging ahead with the idea that he'd go back home to St. Petersburg after the Final. Getting me there had been our only real goal. I hadn't even thought I'd still be skating after that...but I'd been bugging him to come back to competition, and at the end, decided that I wanted to keep going, and asked him to stay on for another year with me. I never expected that he'd keep on as my coach though, but he said right away that it would be hard for him to make a come-back if he was coaching, too, like the idea of resigning wasn't even an option he'd considered. I think he would've tried to convince me to keep going even if I had thought to retire after the Final."
"That's all fine and well, but..." Tess explained, gesturing one hand out towards him, "...How did you two go from coach and student to married...?"

"Kind of by accident, actually..." Yuri answered with a nervous smile, his cheeks a bit pink, "When we were in Barcelona for the Final, I started to worry about whether I could really win Gold, and thought that there was no way I could send Viktor back to Russia without something gold, especially since it wasn't guaranteed to be the medal. So I bought him this gold ring, as a thank-you gift, for being my coach, for helping me be a better person, for all of it...and when I gave it to him, I learned that he'd bought the matching one to give to me. At the time, he told me that he just wanted me to show him the skating that I honestly liked the best...but maybe an hour later, we met up with friends, and Phichit-kun confused the rings for being wedding bands, and started freaking out about it in front of everyone...!"

The medic just burst out laughing, "That sounds like him!"

"Congratulations on your marriage!" he was yelling. I was desperately trying to calm him down and explain that he had it all wrong, that the rings were just a thank-you gift, but then Viktor..." He stopped mid-sentence, his eyes watering suddenly at the memory of it. He drew in a shaky breath and tried to move on, smiling at it all, "...Viktor said something like, 'That's right, they're not wedding rings...they're engagement rings,' and that 'we'll get married after Yuri wins Gold.'" He held up his hands to emphasize the words with air-quotes, "And of course, I was just so taken aback by it that I couldn't even really question it. Everyone got really competitive after that...half of them wanting to see how badly I really wanted it, the other half just mad that Viktor said it like the Gold was mine no matter what. But the moment was ruined when JJ popped up suddenly, saying the only one who was getting married after the Final was him and his fiancé, Isabella."

"What a buzz-kill..."

"Yeah...we all left after that... Viktor already disliked JJ and didn't want to spend a second longer around him than he had to. By then though, the way I thought of Viktor had started to change already. The ring already meant a lot to me, even before I knew he'd secretly bought the other one when I had my back turned. After he gave it to me, and especially after he so excitedly suggested we were engaged...everything seemed so different. Up until then, everything he ever did to try and get close, I think I tried to explain away as just him being flirtatious anyway. The way he waited until I was used to him before he tried to hug me, then using that as a way to manage my anxiety... The way he'd touch my hands or face, like it was just the normal thing he always did... Even when he lunged out and kissed me after my last skate in China...somewhere in my head, I tried to rationalize it as just his normal way of doing things. That nothing was really special about it. I've seen total strangers kiss each other after they've just witnessed some incredible thing, and we were both really happy with my Free Skate at the time. ...Turns out, as he explained when we got back to Hasetsu after the Final...he had fallen for me way back at that banquet in Sochi, when I'd drunkenly asked him to be my coach. And all that time, he'd been trying to get me to fall for him, too. The hugging, the touching, the kiss...the rings...the accidental engagement... Everything... It was how he was trying to tell me how he felt. But I was too blind to notice, or believe it. I mean, why in the world would a super-star like him fall in love with a scrub like me, right?"

"I can see that." Tess agreed, "You were always the kind of person who kept others at a distance. Like you didn't think you were worthy of peoples' notice. I guess that's half of why I tried to hug you when Phichit got hurt. I thought you needed to know that you were worth it. That you didn't have to suffer the worry on your own."

"...Yeah... I told Viktor about that incident some weeks after he'd shown up. He was pretty surprised at my reaction, too." Yuri sighed, "Even though, the first time he had tried to touch me, I threw
myself out of the room trying to get away." He slowly came to a stop again, parked in front of the huge moving projection screen in the Via Concourse, prompting the older woman to stop as well and turn back for him. He lifted his head, "...I'm sorry for how I treated you back then."

"I'm sorry for violating your space. I should've known better."

"Think it's too late for a do-over?" He wondered, gesturing his arms up a bit in a bid to look welcoming.

Tess was surprised at him, blinking in confusion for a moment as those arms kept rising, until they were practically beckoning her forward. When it finally settled in her mind that she wasn't seeing things, the lanky woman nodded and stepped forward, putting her own arms over the skater's shoulders as he went around her sides. She held tight, but not too tight, facing away from him where she pressed a cheek against his shoulder, "I'm glad that things worked out with Viktor the way they did. It's good that you finally found someone that you can trust enough to let into your space." She said, pulling back again and patting the sides of both shoulders before eventually letting go, "From everything I've seen, he absolutely adores you."

"And I him." The skater answered, reaching up with one hand to rub the moisture from his eyes, "Even though it took me longer than it probably should've to let myself believe it."

"Habits are easier to form than they are to break."

"...We're...going to go to that outdoor skating rink at Campus Martius. If you want to come..."

Tess just held up a hand and smiled, but shook her head, "Can't."

"Eh?"

"My boss is being generous tonight, letting me take a long break so I could finally say hi, since I couldn't before your skate." She explained, "I'm still on shift though, and will be till midnight. When we're done packing things up here, I'll be hopping on an ambulance to patrol the city and wait for calls. Thanks though."

Yuri gave a reluctant but understanding nod, "Mh..."

The medic looked on at him curiously for a moment longer, "I'm off tomorrow though. I'll be sure to swing by and cheer for you and Viktor properly." She reached a hand up and nudged the athlete's arm with a finger, "Assuming you don't somehow end up in the back of my wagon against tonight, anyway."

"No offense, but...if I never find myself in the back of an ambulance again, it'll be too soon."

"Agreed." She laughed, twisting a bit on her carbon-fiber leg, "I better get back though... See you around?"

Hazel eyes smiled, and he nodded, "Yeah...!"

By the time Yuri got back, Viktor had finally gotten his sneakers on, and was struggling with Chris for possession of the car keys. Nothing the Russian did could change the fact that the Swiss skater was an inch taller than he was...except, perhaps, a well-laid plan.

Viktor caught sight of his husband over Chris' shoulder, and briefly thought to call out to him in an
effort to garner sympathy, or perhaps distract the man enough that he could snatch the keys with a quick swipe. But, he thought better of it...and hoped Yuri would play along.

The young skater just looked around at the scene; his partner and Chris practically dancing around one another in the middle of where he'd last seen them, with the blonde's back to him. Phichit had wandered back towards the bar area, tethered to the counter almost as much as his phone was, having found someone to take pity on him and offer a charging cable. He just watched whatever was playing on the televisions while he waited.

True to instinct though, Yuri quietly snuck in behind his much taller friend, getting by without being seen easily enough. He tip-toed towards the couch where they'd previously left Viktor, and stepped on top of the seats...waiting for the right moment.

"Give me the keys!"

"But I'm driving."

"It's my rental!"

"And you'll be in sitting in it...while I drive it."

"Chris! Dajte mne ključi!"

"Nyet."

"Telling me 'no' in Russian won't endear you to my noble sensibilities!"

_Swipe._

Lime-green eyes lifted to the feeling of those jangly metal bits being yanked from his fingers like sand, and he glanced back in time to see Yuri hopping back down off the couch, rather proudly holding onto them. The younger skater quickly trotted out of arm's reach though, and tossed the two-key chain to his partner, who caught them with a grin.

"I thought we were friends, Yuri." Chris pouted.

"We are," He laughed in response, feeling the Russian's arm come around him and pull him closer. He returned the gesture, one arm around the man's back as the other settled a hand on his chest, "But I sleep with this one, so he's slightly more favorite than you."

"I'll sleep with you."

"Over my dead body." Viktor defended, _both_ arms around the younger man then.

"I'll sleep with you too, then." Chris huffed, extending his arms out and stepping closer to the duo, only for them _both_ to feign panic and try to get away.

The commotion finally caught Phichit's attention, and he lifted his gaze away from the television long enough to spot Chris chasing the two other skaters around the lounge. He reluctantly unhooked his phone from its borrowed power cable, seeing it's sad 9% charge, and put it away.

"Quick! Yuri, run and save yourself! I'll hold him off!" Viktor teased, gesturing for his husband to flee through the open doors.

"He's after you, idiot!"
"Oh, you're right! Take these and go!" The Russian stuck the keys into the younger man's hands and again pushed him towards the door.

Chris was quickly onto them though, and snaked past Viktor like vapor, making Yuri half-scream for the surprise of it.

The keys went flying after that, "Viktor! Get them!"

**K-kaSShhh**

Phichit looked down at where they landed between his sneakers...reached down, and picked them up. When he stood upright again, all he saw were three people coming running at him, each one eagerly reaching their grabby-hands straight for him, each one calling out his name...some sweetly taunting him to stay, others barking for him to run. Eyes went wide, and the Thai skater flipped around on his heel, taking off faster than any of them anticipated, "YOU'LL NEVER TAKE ME ALLIIIVVVEEEE."

"Ph-Phichito-kun! **RUN!**"

"**PHICHIT GET BACK HERE.**"

"Fly like the wind, hamster-man!"

"AAAAAAAAAAIxxxxxxxxxxxxxEEEAAAAAAA!" His shriek faded as he ran out of the room and around the corner to the main concourse.

Viktor and Yuri huffed and puffed, but laughed and boasted proudly of their evasive maneuvers.

The blonde just glowered at them, but then stood upright, closing his eyes and chuckling quietly to himself, "...Well, **that's** just great. Does he even know where you __parked?__"

"...Ah..." The pair looked at one another, then at Chris, then out to the hall, "...Well. Damnit. **PHICHIT COME BACK.**"
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED SEVENTY SEVEN

It took laying a trap for Phichit before any of them managed to get the keys back from him; they all knew he'd eventually have to come back for his gear-bags. Chris snapped a photo of the small pile where it had been so nicely set up on top of a low-sitting table, sending it to the skater as a text with the simple caption, [Aren't you forgetting something?]

Phichit still tried to be sneaky about his return though, peeping around corners before trying to tip-toe into the mostly-empty Players' Club, and halfway grabbing up his things before anyone managed to snag him. Yuri snuck up behind his younger friend, completely unnoticed...and drew in a quiet, but deep breath.

"HE'S OVER HERE!"

The Thai athlete nearly jumped out of his clothing, skin, and bones as the shrill cry sounded out directly behind his head, and he landed in an unflattering pile on the floor, his ghost trying to leave him as well. He was practically in tears when he looked up to see Yuri smiling innocently back down at him, "Y-YURI, HOW COULD Y-"

"That's payback for pranking me with the water under my door after we watched The Ring that one time."

Phichit's brown eyes went wide, but then blank, and he looked on with the blood draining from his face, "...You remembered that...?"

Yuri's expression was dire, as though a flashlight had been lit under his chin and he were telling the most terrifying of horror stories, "...I remember everything..."

"...Except that time you stripped and pole-danced with Chris." The younger figure shot back, giving a wry smirk.

Cherry-hazel eyes became beady little things on Yuri's face at the mention of it, and he stood paralyzed as Viktor and the aforementioned Swiss skater finally came out of hiding, clapping and laughing as they came up on either side. The Russian draped an arm over his partner's stiff shoulder, "It's such a shame, too. I've often wondered when or where you learned those moves."

"Me too." Chris mused, "You were very good."

"I suppose I should keep that to myself." Yuri finally spoke, slouching a little where his cheeks went a bit pink, "Let there be a little mystery about me."

"He learned it here in Detroit." Phichit spoiled, still on the floor, "There was a work-shop at the university campus, way-back-when, that advertized pole-dancing as a way of getting into shape and building strength. He'd already learned break-dancing, and thought pole-dancing would be a fun way to break up the monotony of going to a gym like normal."

"Ph-Phichito-kun...I swear..."

"That's for making me go with you."

"Ooohhh...!" Chris and Viktor both cooed, bringing a hand up in front of their mouths,
"Scandalous!"

"...It would be, but it's not like he had the guts to learn it with me." Yuri countered, "He just sat on the sidelines and watched."

"You didn't even tell me what it was until we got there! Then it was just you and like 15 women, and there's no way I was going to jump on a pole when I'd only been in the states for like 3 months!" The youngest athlete protested, finally picking himself back up to his feet and started gathering his equipment.

"Half the reason I didn't tell you was because I didn't want to be at the thing alone, and I knew you'd ditch if you found out!"

"And you weren't alone! I went every time!"

"I meant doing it alone!"

Phichit just huffed a laugh as he dusted off the back of his jacket, but then turned his half-lidded, secret-knowing eyes over to the older two figures, "Yuri was very popular in that class, especially when the rest of the students found out he knew ballet."

"That's because you told them everything."

Chris was beyond amused at the whole thing, patting Yuri's head before stepping towards Phichit and draping his arm over the shorter figure's shoulders, leading him back out to the exit, "You must know all sorts of interesting stories about him. Tell me about that Ring prank though."

"Oh, well, you see..."

"Don't even go there, Phichit-kun!" The older figure protested, trying to hoist the straps of his backpack over his arms at the same time.

The Thai man just stopped, Chris with him, and they both looked back curiously. Phichit smiled innocently though, "...Then I'll just tell him about the time I called you after you had just seen Ju-On, and I did that croaking sound that the ghost made, and you screamed so loud I thought you wet yourself."

"VIKTORMAKEHIMSTOP."

"But did you wet yourself?"

"OF COURSE NOT."

"Are you sure?"

Yuri turned his head to look incredulously at the Russian clinging to his shoulder, "Why would you even ask that!?"

Viktor just held for a moment and smiled, but then quickly moved forward through that meager inch or two between them and stole a kiss.

Cheeks went red and eyes white, and the younger figure stood there, utterly stupefied, even as he could hear his partner (and the others) laughing at his expense.

The silver legend just leaned away to grab his own bag and reach for the rolling suitcase with their shared equipment, and nudged his husband with an elbow, "Let's get going."
The ride back to the hotel was no-less harrowing for the young skater, having to listen to more stories being told by Phichit the Betrayer in the back seat. Chris made it worse by continuously asking for more.

"...Everyone's going to think I'm a complete basket-case if you keep this up..." Yuri complained, slouching where he sat in his usual seat up front, left hand reaching across the center-console to rest on his husband's thigh.

"I could tell stories about you for days." The Thai figure laughed, clearly entertained by it all, "You just make it too easy."

"I could tell stories about you, too!" The older skater twisted a bit in his seat to look into the passenger area, "Try me!"

"If you tried telling stories about me, Yuri...you'd just end up outing yourself on something I haven't told about yet." Phichit winked and smiled brightly, "But, if you want to..."

"You used to tease me relentlessly for being the Captain of Viktor's Fanclub." Yuri started.

"...Aw, that's not much of a story...everyone already knows that." Chris pouted again, "I was hoping for something more juicy."

"For days and weeks and months, he'd threaten to out me to Celestino...to phrase it like I'd learned more about skating from watching videos of Viktor than from anything Celestino ever taught me."

"He probably did." Phichit whispered behind a hand, leaning slightly towards the blonde.

"But then one day, you left your phone unlocked on the rink-wall while practicing your triples, and I found a video paused on it...of Viktor." The Japanese skater explained emphatically, "And suddenly the tables were turned! I told everyone at the rink what you were doing!"

Chris raised a brow as he gazed on skeptically, crossing his arms and looking rather unimpressed. He glanced over towards the Russian being spoken of, and just saw a dumb-happy smile on his face.

"What Yuri fails to mention is that I wasn't embarrassed by that at all, and in fact, most people at the rink would pull up videos of Viktor's jumps to use as a quick example during practice. I still do sometimes." Phichit shot back, "Not to mention...when people stuck their heads out back then, wondering what was going on, it was mostly because none of them had ever heard Yuri raise his voice before. None of them knew about the back-and-forth he and I had had about his obsession with Viktor, so outing me to others over an inside joke went over everyone's head. Plus...since he'd yelled something so strange...I had to up the ante...and I yelled that Yuri had a framed picture of Viktor in his bedroom."

"What? That didn't happen." Yuri said under his breath.

"Oh, the picture we saw in that video from the wedding party? When Yuri was sick with the flu during Viktor's Skate America in Detroit?" Chris wondered, starting to see where it was about to get entertaining, "And he was all upset about Viktor being right down the road, so you shoved that picture into his arms and told him to hug it while he watched on TV?"

"The very same."

"That can't be true. I don't remember that at all." Yuri huffed, speaking a bit louder.
"That's not surprising." Phichit mused, "As soon as I said it, people started laughing, and you passed-out where you stood."

The older skater just guffawed and turned back to face forward in his seat.

"So you see? There are no stories you can tell about me that don't somehow come back as being stories about you."

Yuri just brooded where he sat, as it seemed like the entire car was laughing at his expense again. Phichit could at least tell by then that he'd had enough of 'story time,' and went instead to telling embarrassing tales about Celestino. Yuri sighed and slouched a bit in relief to hear the 'conversation' moving away from him, and returned his hand back to its perch on his partner's leg.

He looked up through the windshield, seeing the side of the hotel just up the road from where they were. It wasn't a long drive from the arena, but it took a while anyway just because of the weather and all the traffic cutting through Detroit's downtown. They'd passed the outdoor rink at Campus Martius Park earlier on, then the Joe Louis monument; a giant hanging ebony-black battering-ram-like arm at the intersection before the river, followed by the twisted concrete obelisk on the other side of the road at the front of Hart Plaza, and the Labor Legacy Monument far to its right; a metallic ring that stood some 30ft tall. The hotel itself looked like a monument as well, the many pillars of the complex rising into the sky like a modern castle.

Even in the dark of the Michigan night, the city still looked a marvel, with everything decked with Christmas lights, and spotlights shining against the bottoms of the clouds.

Yuri idly rubbed his fingers against his husband's leg, getting the Russian's attention. Viktor glanced aside to look at the man, and was enamored all over again to see that 'seeking' look in those eyes, just like he'd had that night a year ago in Barcelona. As he turned the car to the left, passing the giant black arm, he reached his free hand down and clasped his fingers around his husband's, holding there reassuringly.

Even if we don't make conversation, I'll watch over him, just like back then.

Carrying their gear-bags into the hotel room, and quickly putting half of it away along with his Team Japan jacket, Yuri rummaged through the closet for the long-coat and scarf he sought to wear to the outdoor rink. Finding the dark-blue garment, he pulled it from the hanger, and slung it over his arm before moving off to find where he'd left his glasses on the bathroom vanity. Looking at himself briefly in the mirror, he poked at his gelled-back hair, pondering quickly whether it was worthwhile to try and fluff it into its normal affect...but then decided against it. He clicked the light and stepped back into the main part of the room, spotting his partner peeling out of his team jacket.

Still wearing his Short Program outfit underneath it, Viktor had started working at the sash around his waist, where he'd looped it through itself to prevent it from hanging low and making his pants look weird. He stopped though when he felt a hand press lightly against his back, and twisted slightly to see his soulmate standing just behind him, leaning aside to set the heavy winter coat onto the bed.

Yuri lifted his eyes, and wordlessly took hold of the sash, looking up into those cool blue pools a few inches above him, the left barely visible through those platinum strands. His fingers went to work unlooping the sash-belt, the rustling sound of fabric being the only sound between them. The thin chains that looped down under the sash jangled quietly together as the belt came away, and Yuri held it out with one hand, letting it slip gently through his fingers as it went down on top of his coat.
Viktor had entirely turned around to face him by then, and was just watching quietly, curious as to what would happen. He just sought for the 'hidden buttons' on the front of the show-jacket, unsnapping them and letting the two folds of lavender-blue material fall away a little, exposing the rest of the bare chest, and the chiseled core, that had been hidden under it. Fingers slipped into it soon after, feeling at that pale skin, rising up from abdomen to chest and further under the fabric as it went over the Russian's shoulders, pushing the garment off of them to let it slide down the man's arms, leaving him bare from the waist up.

"Yuri?"

Eyes lowered a little, but then came back up again for a moment before closing outright, and leaned inward, left hand sliding over the Russian's right shoulder, fingers tracing the back of the man's neck, right hand curving lightly around the left side of the taller skater's waist. The kiss that followed was light as a whisper.

Viktor savored that wordless answer, letting his own hands go forward, the right curving around his partner's black-clad ribs, the left holding to the bare shoulder ahead of it, both drawing the man closer. He could feel where the hand that had settled on his waist was sliding around his front, palm flat against his skin, going up a few inches, pausing with fingertips just under his chest, and then going down again. Slate eyes opened a crack when he felt those fingertips brushing the edge of his remaining clothes. He closed his eyes again, smiled in the midst of another light kiss, and eagerly awaited his emboldened young husband's next move.

The hand Yuri had rested on the back of his partner's shoulder and neck slid a bit further up, weaving his fingers into that short silver hair, pulling gently on the Russian's head to deepen the kiss. He felt his partner's hand rise up from where it had been sitting against his side, coming against the inside of his arm and cupped the side of his head instead, thumb gently brushing against his cheek there. The width of his partner's shoulders pushed his hand slightly away, combing it free from where he'd still had his fingers in the man's hair, but he slid it away willingly, letting his palm lightly trace over the side of the Russian's arm, down against his ribs, and settled on the right side of his waist, holding there as he let his right hand slide a bit further down.

Viktor barely twitched, instead pressing his hips slightly forward when he felt those warm fingers come against him. The perhaps-unintentional tease in the car had already set his blood on fire, and the heat of him was as obvious as the hopeful flesh being teased against then. That soft, squishy skin, surrounded by immaculately-groomed but still-course hair, was already tense and keenly interested in what was to come. The Russian drew in a quiet but vocal gasp of a breath when he felt the whole of his husband's hand cup against him.

The young skater paused the kisses there for a moment, half-lidded eyes opening so he could watch the look on his partner's face as he continued at his task. Gently and slowly, he rubbed and kneaded at the man's center, feeling it come to life with every delicate squeeze. Yuri turned a bit where he stood to make it easier for his arm to bend, touching his brow and nose against the silver legend's cheek, listening to every intentional breath as each one grew more ragged, with the occasional subtle whimper hiding underneath. Within moments, he'd done enough to reposition the member upward, letting it be pinned between the man's abdomen and the dark-blue rim of his show pants. His hands instead went to the elastic of the black track pants that had covered them, and pushed them down to just above the man's legs. A subtle push where he still had his left hand against his partner's hip, and Viktor backed up, feeling the edge of the bed against the back of his knees and taking it as a cue to sit. Yuri was soon to follow, leaning forward to start another kiss as the silver genius pressed his hands to the comforter to hoist himself further back, then slowly leaning away until he was lying down.
The younger figure came up and sat against his hips, one knee at a time rising next to his waist as he crawled up on top of the bed as well. Viktor let his hands come back up, settling them on the bare shoulders above himself, and drawing in a hissed breath as he felt fingers curl around center again. The first stroke pulled him a bit further out from the fabric, but Yuri let him go almost as quickly, hands instead finding the button and zipper that held him contained and undoing them both. The black elastic fabric beneath that was easily pushed away, and the young skater took him back in-hand again, that flesh completely free and begging attention. Viktor let himself become hyperaware of everything his partner did, every inch of skin he touched and stroked, even as he'd left the kiss to trail those lips down the side of his neck, down to his chest. All the while, that warm hand stroked and squeezed gently, not going too fast, twisting a little at the tip as the heat and hardness grew. He slid his hands down the edges of his partner's arms, until Viktor could feel the curve of the man's elbows, relenting then to raise his arms out to the side, curving slightly above his head.

Yuri made good use of the added room, kissing still at the upper part of his husband's chest and collar bone, his free hand sliding up against the man's right side. Lips trailed down a little further, tracing lightly against pale skin, his own cheeks showing a hint of rouge just before he found that first pink nub. He kissed it at first, thumb finding the other one on the opposite side at the same time, then licking a little, tracing his tongue around the nub until it grew and became hard. He glanced up a bit when he heard his husband's more-vocal gasps, and smiled to himself as he continued on, latching on briefly and sucking on that nub until Viktor cried out. He circled his tongue around it again once more before switching over to the other side and giving that one the attention of his mouth as well. If the Russian's gasps and moans weren't tell enough, the way he arched his back or tried to lift his legs up onto his toes helped Yuri know he was doing a good job. He switched sides again one more time before moving back to the center of his partner's chest, kissing and licking his way back up to the man's neck. As he came further up, nosing his husband's lip, and the tip of his nose, Yuri opened his eyes a little to look down into those crystal blue hues, seeing the man's cheeks touched with red. He smiled at that, closed his eyes again, kissed him, and started traveling down once more.

The Russian watched his partner as long as he could, but soon just dropped his head back to the sheets, silver hair springing away from his face. He closed his eyes and savored the feeling of each kiss as it went lower against his frame, touching a few ribs, abdominal muscles, naval, and lower. When he felt those warm lips against the tip of his member, he drew in a quick breath, arms curling in more tightly above his head. His fingers curved around the edges of his elbows, and he arched his back to the feeling of a few kisses being dragged down the length of that eager flesh, bringing his crossed arms up over his eyes. When lips found the edge of fabric, a hot, wet tongue replaced it, traveling all the way back up the length to the tip. He lifted his arm off one eye just in time to glance down and see the younger figure nibbling a bit at the head, teasing that skin gently before taking it wholly into his mouth.

Hearing his partner gasp out, Yuri set to slowly bobbing up and down against that length flesh, carefully turning his head with each descent. Hands came in to help massage the base, rubbing and holding the member in place as he continued the rhythmic suck, kiss, and lick. After a while, feeling every convulsed twitch of his husband's frame underneath of himself; legs trying to kick while still holding him up, upper body arching and twisting under the pressure of every sensation, Yuri took a moment and just watched the man. He kept on stroking with his hands, left kneading at the base while the right rubbed and twisted gently at the tip, then switching. He turned his eyes down to the flesh in his grasp, seeing it red, shiny from his attention, and throbbing. The silver Russian's heavy breathing and gasped moans helped to tell him how close the man was to the edge. He lowered down a bit again, left hand sliding up his partner's front, fingers splayed out as far as they could go, and took the member back into his mouth again. He rubbed his tongue against the base of the tip, turned his head, kissed the same spot, and plunged down over it again, drawing quite the needy cry as reward.
Viktor had raised both of his arms up over his head, elbows together where his wrists pressed against each temple, back quirking into that upward arch with each strong pulse from center. Right hand went down urgently to find where his partner's had parked on the lower part of his chest, clasping his fingers around it tightly as he felt himself drawing ever-closer to the end, "Y-Yuri...!" He arched so far as the wave rushed over him that he was holding himself up on the crown of his head, crying out loudly, legs clenching and buckling under where his partner still perched over him. He could feel the release into the back of his husband's mouth and throat, a few pulses of hot white liquid escaping him with each convulsive rush of pleasure through his whole body. The electrical storm of that much-needed climax pierced through his core, traveling halfway down his legs, jolting him over and over again as Yuri practically milked that member until he fell limp again. Heavy, vocal breaths went into and out of the Russian's lungs, with almost the same intensity as the end of a powerful Free Skate. There was nothing else in the world that could get him to pant so heavily for having basically done nothing.

The younger figure gentled his attention, letting that trembling flesh rest against his spouse's abdomen, kissing lightly at the end of it to keep it clean. Soon though, he could feel the silver legend wiggling under him a little, wordlessly trying to get him to scoot up a ways to face him. Yuri acquiesced to that need, and lay flat against his husband's rising and falling chest, both hands trailing the length of the man's arms until he found his hands, and was able to lace their fingers together up above the Russian's head. Viktor was still trying to catch his breath when they came face to face, but Yuri continued in his strange silence, nosing the pale chin under him.

"...I don't know why you decided to do that just now...but...thank you." The Russian puffed, squeezing his hands where he felt his husband's.

"I just wanted to make you feel good." The younger figure answered quietly, looking into those crystal blue eyes.

"What about you though? I didn't stand a chance..."

"I'd hoped you wouldn't. I didn't want you to do anything." He answered simply, "You've already done enough in so many other ways."

Viktor continued his heavy breaths, but soon closed his eyes and smiled, using what little strength he had left to twist over and force Yuri to his own back, leaning over his chest where he could and looking down adoringly at him. Never once letting go of his partner's hands, he wiggled himself until he could loom over and touch their brows together. He held there a moment, nuzzling his husband fondly before finally leaning down to kiss him, the taste of himself on the younger skater's lips be damned. He gently nosed those lips after, feeling where his spent member had flopped against the man's front between them, "You always know how to take care of me. ...But now I just want to take a nap...!" He laughed.

"Maybe you'll let Chris drive this time then." Yuri mused, one leg rising up against his partner's hip, "You can nap with me in the back seat until we get there and find a place to park."

"I think I can agree to that."
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED SEVENTY EIGHT

With appropriate winter gear assembled and put on, all four skaters reunited in the hotel lobby, looking out into the cold Detroit evening and the snow blanketing it. Phichit was practically squishing his face to the inside of the glass, looking out, trying to see if there was any sign that snow would start to fall before they left. Chris, on the other hand, reached a hand up to adjust his thin, circular glasses just as he spotted the second half of their party finally coming out to meet them.

"That took a long time. Did you get lost?" He joked, "We've been waiting."

Viktor answered by tossing the car keys at him and giving a wry smile.

The Swiss skater fumbled to catch the little jangle of metal, feeling the cluster bump off his chest before his hands could come up and secure them. When he looked up again, the smile on that pale face was even more obvious, "...You sure look happy."

"I like to think I'm happy most of the time."

Phichit heard the voices and lifted his head, turning to look at the trio over his shoulder. Abandoning his inspection of the sky, he went over to where he and Chris had left their backpacks on a table near a wall, and his phone charging alongside them, checking quickly to see what his battery status was; 57%. He unplugged it and slung his pack over a shoulder, grabbing the second to hand to its owner as he got closer, "It's been like 30 minutes. We were starting to think we'd have to go find you."

Yuri just shook his head sheepishly, "It's my fault. I just wanted a minute of quiet before we went out into the world again."

"Seems you used the time to cheer Viktor up." Chris huffed, twirling the keychain on a finger before clasping the bunch into his palm, "What did you do?"

"Yuri? Cheering me up?" The Russian mused, that dumb-happy smile creeping across his face again, "He sucks at that."

Phichit and Yuri both gave the same horrified expressions, looking from one another to the silver legend incredulously, but Chris gave a knowing smile, "He sure does."

"V-Viktor...I th-..." The Japanese skater started, only to get a wink from the man.

"He really sucks at cheering me up, right? Yuri~"

The horrified expression suddenly became embarrassed, and the young figure could feel the strength in his legs give out. The last thing he heard as he descended towards the floor was the sound of Chris laughing and Phichit telling him he should try harder; then everything went to black.

When he finally roused again, he could feel the vibration of the car under him, and the weight of another body leaning against him. He blinked his eyes and pushed up a little, finding himself propped up against the inside panel of a car door in the back passenger area, with Viktor, presumably asleep for the nap he wanted, twisted around to lay backward against his side. He squished his eyes closed for a moment and shook his head, reaching a hand up to adjust his glasses and get a better look around, seeing Chris driving and Phichit in the front passenger seat; the car was moving slowly, pedestrians not too far outside, walking a bit slower than they themselves were going, lights hanging
above the road were bright and festive, the moorings around lamp posts decked with garland and wreaths as well. As he sat further up, Yuri could spot the top of the massive Christmas tree at the far end of what he knew would be the outdoor skating rink. He drew his sights back into the car again though, "...How long have we been driving around...?"

"Oh, just 10 minutes...long enough to get here but not long enough to park." Chris answered, looking up to the rearview mirror, "The way things are out here though, I may just have to drop everyone off and walk back when I find somewhere to park."

"...Maybe we should've walked here." Yuri leaned back again.

"If I end up parking at the hotel, I won't be hard-pressed to agree."

"Oh!" Phichit was practically clambering over the blonde as he pointed excitedly, "Go there! Someone's leaving!"

"Good eye."

The car practically stopped in the middle of the road, and Chris 'bullied' his way through other hopeful vehicles to get the spot, pulling out and backing in multiple times as he parallel-parked from the U-turn. But, eventually, they were stopped, and the rest of traffic finally started moving by them normally again.

Yuri turned his head aside lazily where it was resting against the back of his seat, pulling up his arm a bit where it had been draped over his partner's shoulder. He rubbed his tired face with his free hand as the other went to gently rubbing his husband's chest, "Viktor...we're here..."

The Russian just mumbled something and turned his head, clinging to his dreams a little longer.

"Viktor..."

Both front doors opened as the other skaters got out, and were pushed shut, causing a loud enough noise that the hapless silver genius was forced to crack his eyes open in mortified shock. He rose where he sat like Frankenstein's monster and deadpanned the whole world in front of him.

Yuri blinked at him wordlessly, but the Russian soon turned, and spoke only one word.

"...Hungry..."

"...What...do you...want to eat?"

The feeling of déjà vu was overpowering, but thankfully, it didn't last long. Just as Viktor was about to say something, the door ahead of him opened, and his legs went spilling out.

"Come on, Viktor...rise and shine." Chris mused, looking down through the open door to those confused slate eyes, "There's the whole rest of the evening to enjoy."

"Ah, I can see the other Yuri and Otabek on the ice already." Phichit pointed out, holding a finger up close to his chest where he gestured to the other side of the street, "They must've gone with Viktor's uncle or something."

"Chris...help..." Viktor whined, lazily holding his arms out even as he stayed sitting inside the car.

The Swiss skater looked on and smiled warmly, "Oh, my dearest, my sweet..."

Yuri's brows were so high up on his brow that they threatened to get lost over the top of his head, but
he watched in amused confusion as Chris leaned further in, wrapped his arms under the Russian's, hugged him for balance and pulled him out of the car, letting the weary man hang from his grasp for a moment before setting him down onto his feet in the road-worn snow. Yuri himself soon followed, scoothing over the seats towards the open door, and stepping out in time to find that Chris was still holding the older skater up. He huffed a laugh and pat his husband's head as he shook his own, but then wedged his way between the two to pull Viktor free and hoisted him up against his hip, one arm around the man's back, "Come along..."

"Oh, he's strong!" The Russian mused, even though his toes dragged on the ground as Yuri hobbled towards the back of the car.

"Not for long though." The Swiss man joked, pointing to the younger figure's quickly reddening face.

Viktor finally took pity and set his feet on the ground normally, holding up his own weight even as he tried to stay where his partner had held him up, "He gets an A for effort." He mused, nosing the man's cheek affectionately as Chris clicked the key-fob to open the trunk and reveal all the gear they'd brought.

"Buh...you're heavy..." Yuri puffed a few breaths to catch his wind again, leaning against the Russian instead, "I don't know how you manage to carry me around so easily...3 inches isn't that big a difference between us."

"How much do you weigh, like 65 kilos? Tops?"

"...Maybe."

"And I'm just over 80."

"Phichit must be 55 at best." Chris offered, "We'd better tie a rock around one ankle so he doesn't float away in the breeze."

Yuri lifted his head a bit to look around his husband's back to where the other two were cued up, "Minami-kun is even smaller than Phichit-kun. I think Makkachin probably weighs more than he does."

Viktor lifted his head at the sound of his dog's name, "Makkachin..." He reached his arms out around his partner's head and held tight, tears comically dripping from his eyes like rivers, "I miss Makkachin so much! He must be devastated! We were gone for nearly 2 months and then we were only home for like 3 days before we left again! I'm a bad pet-parent!"

The younger figure flailed slightly, "I'm sure Makkachin is fine!"

The woofer sneezed where he sat in the Yu-topia common room, lifted his head, looked around...and fell back asleep.

Yuri was stuck dragging his husband across the street, the Russian's heels slogging through the snow where he was pulled along. Still, those crystal blue eyes sobbed distressed tears, even as the younger figure struggled with his weight, the distance, and all of their gear on his back at the same time.

"V-Viktor...walk on your own...! It's too far...!"
"...Makkachin must hate me...!"

"He doesn't hate you! He'll be bouncing off the walls when we get home again on Monday!"

Neither of them had noticed that a small crowd had begun to gather, revelers already recognizing the rest of the Men's skaters as they came across the street.

Many were fawning over Chris and Phichit, but others were watching or recording the antics of the final two athletes, laughing quietly so as not to draw attention to themselves. Yuri eventually found his sneakers giving out under him, catching some ice as he tried to drag the Russian's ankles over the last ledge of the sidewalk, and the both of them tumbled to the snowy ground in a heap. The pictures and gawking finally caught their attention then, finding themselves looking up into the eyes of a dozen or more stick-mounted & hand-held smartphones and GoPros. Viktor's eyes went wide for a moment in surprise, but he was suddenly launching up onto his feet, looking like quite the 'Knight in Shining Armor' as he knelt back down to amorously help his husband back up as well. All the while, every device in the immediate area recorded his every move, and as they both stood back up again, Viktor was sure to tousle his bangs a bit, glance over a shoulder, and wink at everyone on that side. Hearts exploded out of peoples' chests to see it, men and women alike.

Otabek lifted his head as the commotion caught his attention, spotting the growing crowd just on the other side of the make-shift rink wall. It wasn't hard to spot Viktor's silver-haired head in the mass, but he noted the others quickly after that, and nudged Yurio's arm to get his attention as well, "Looks like Yuri and the rest finally got here."

Green eyes lifted to look past the rim of the teen's hoodie, and he spotted the group just as easily, "Hm...was starting to think they got lost or something."

"Maybe they couldn't find parking. Even your pseudo-dad hasn't come back yet since dropping everyone off to put up that giant van."

"Tsh...honestly, there could be a bunch of reasons why he hasn't come back yet." Yurio shrugged. He toed-off again to stop from blocking the path of other skaters, with the Kazakh following quickly behind. Within mere seconds of passing the popular end of the rink though, the Russian Tiger heard something he hadn't expected...people shrieking his own name.

"There he is!"

"You were right! Following Viktor made finding Yuri easy!"

"Yurrrriiitt!"

"Oh jeeze..." The blonde stammered and nearly fell, spotting the entire Yuri's Angels Fanclub suddenly making a B-Line for the rink where they'd been coming up along the sidewalk. He latched on desperately to Otabek's arm, "You gotta get me outta here! Do like last year and save me!"

"...I was on a motorcycle last year when I found you...what am I supposed to do right n-"

"NIKKITA."

Otabek gave a blank stare, utterly stunned by the teen's suddenly shriek. However, when he heard the telltale sound of a mob of skaters being shoved aside at the whim of a petite, silver-haired teenage girl, he was more perplexed than surprised. She quickly made her way across the middle of the rink to where they both were, looking like the pre-green version of some scary She-Hulk, looking around like she were getting ready to hurt someone.
"Who's bothering you!? What's going on!?” Nikki barked, trying to push up the sleeve on one arm, though the bulky coat didn't allow for much of that, "Lemme at 'em...!"

"No need for that, just do the thing you did before...!” Yurio said frantically, the mob getting closer and looking more and more excited with every step. He flailed an arm out in front of the teen, "Nikki!"

"Do what thing?"

"The thing where you cling to my arm like some koala-bear!"

Her cheeks just went bright red, "...Wh...why are you asking me to do that? I was just doing it to annoy you bef-"

"No time to explain! Just do it!"

Mittened-hands went out, and the silver teen awkwardly did as asked, sliding up on rented silver skates to take the blonde's arm. She stood there with a painfully artless smile on her face, like she was being told to smile for some picture after having gotten bad news, and Yurio did much the same...though he was facing the oncoming Fan Club.

Otabek watched in rapt fascination, his eyes going from the two painfully bumbling younger teenagers to the hoard that had suddenly stopped on the rink wall, each of them looking progressively more confused and/or horrified as they approached and saw what was going on.

"Who's that girl?"

"Is she a fan of Yuri's?"

"Where'd she come from?"

"I've never seen her before. What does she think she's doing latching onto our Angel!?"

Yurio was on the edge of cackling for his victory, but he held that breath in and started skating again instead. He pulled Nikki along until she pivoted on her own blades to move with her own power, and Otabek glided along on the blonde's opposite side.

"I guess that works."

"Just act natural." Yurio said quietly, the three of them passing the confused mob, "They must've lost sight of me leaving the LCA. I heard them saying they followed Viktor's rental car instead."

"Yuri, this is super weird." Nikki mumbled, "I think they think I'm your girlfriend or something."

"That's the point. Just go with it until they disperse."

"But I'm not your girlfriend."

"I know that; this is just a trick. Do me this favor and I'll owe you." He all-but-begged, looking over like he dreaded that she might let go and abandon him to the whim of the perturbed mass.

"Who are they anyway?" Nikki wondered, staying at least for the moment, "Fans?"

"...They call themselves Yuri's Angels." Otabek explained in the teen's place, "I saved him from them last year."
"The follow me to all my Russian events, and usually the Grand Prix Final and Worlds. If Euros is held in Russia then they'll go there, too." Yurio added, "They've been after me since my days in Juniors."

"Didn't you just join Seniors last year?" The silver teen wondered, "And you're only 16 right now."

"Yeah, why?"

So you joined Seniors when you were 15...which means that Fan Club has been following after you since before that, when you were 14 or younger." She surmised, "...They all look like they're in love with you. That's a little creepy."

"And thus, the reason for the situation as it is." He lightly nudged her in the ribs with the elbow she was holding onto, "You'd be amazed the lengths they'd go to to try and find me though. They almost had me last year...I think I heard one of them saying they could track me by scent..."

"That's definitely creepy." Otabek and Nikki said in tandem.

"I'll bet they have little Yuri-shaped dolls at home, with little strands of Yuri's hair on them." The silver girl mused, looking past her 'brother' to the older skater on the other side of him, "Like little voodoo dolls."

"Well, they're all Russians, so they probably have little Matryoshka doll-sets with the lock inside the smallest one." The Kazakh added instead.

"Don't give them any ideas! They'll find out what room I'm in and cut all my hair off while I sleep!"

Nikkita suddenly gasped loudly, her blades scratching the ice as she abruptly let go of the Russian Tiger's arm to get in front of him, mittened-hands going up to his shoulders, "I should braid it!"

"Wh-what...? Why?" He stammered.

"Let that Fan Club watch me do it. It'll mess with them all so bad."

"But why braid it?" He asked instead.

"Didn't your choreographer braid your hair for your Free Skates last year?" The Kazakh wondered, remembering it vaguely.

"I could braid it, or I could play with it while we skate." Nikkita mused, moving one hand up to push the hood off that mess of blonde hair, "Now that I know what's at stake..."

"...I was just wanting to keep them at bay...now you're wanting to actively screw with their heads...? You're evil." The middle teen gasped, one eye twitching slightly in surprise, but seeing the girl in front of him smile sweetly. He drew in a breath and reached up one hand, pushing a few strands of hair out of his covered right eye, and giving the girl the same confident look he'd once given to the aforementioned choreographer on the day they'd first met, "...Let's do it."

"This is going to be glorious." She laughed, pulling the Russian Tiger along towards the rink exit nearest to them, the Kazakh following dubiously after them.
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED SEVENTY NINE

It had taken quite a while longer to get out of the mass of people than anyone expected, but eventually, the sound of the dragon's roar inside a certain Russian's gut told them they'd better move along. So, they gathered up their skate-bags and started moving around the side of the rink, heading to a temporary rink-side cabana. Heated within, the walls made of transparent plastic, The Winter Fountain was a food-truck-like mini restaurant constructed right up against the ice, the walls of the two so close together that patrons could use the rink-wall as a footboard.

As late as it was, the overwhelming press of the biggest crowds had already dwindled, but there were still a significant number of people in attendance, most doing so on the hope of spotting the skaters who were there for the Grand Prix. But, such as it may, the mini-restaurant was still fairly packed, mostly with patrons just looking for something hot to drink after a few hours in the cold. No one paid the small group any attention as they pulled back the plastic curtain to get inside and look around, hoping beyond hope that something would be available rather soon.

Seeing not one singular open seat, Viktor's heart sank past his stomach, and he whined loudly as he and Chris pulled back out of the plastic tent-fortress, "There's nothing." The Swiss skater explained, "Every seat has an ass in it."

"Can I help you?" An unknown voice asked; a dressed-down waitress who'd barely missed them coming inside.

"What's the wait time?" Chris wondered.

"About 30 minutes for a party of two."

"There's four of us, actually."

"Oh...uhhh..." She pulled back inside and glanced around, then at the dry-erase card on her small podium, "Probably 45."

"Wow~ Even this late at night..." The Russian lamented.

"Viktor...?" Another woman's voice called, this one more familiar.

Two heads snapped around to see a certain ballerina pulling back the plastic curtain that time, "Minako-sensei!"

"It is you guys!" She ventured out into the cold, quickly wrapping her arms around herself to ward off the chill, "You got here so late! Everyone else has been here for ages already!"

"The Men's event only ended an hour ago." Viktor pointed out, quickly grasping the woman by the shoulders to turn her around and push her back inside where it was warm, "We went back to the hotel to change and grab our coats. We can't get away with skating in our competition gear outdoors."

"Guess that's true." She nodded, turning around again slightly, "At any rate, we've all been in here for a while. You can have our seats if you want."

"Really?"
Nodding again and looking rather proud of her idea, Minako turned her attention to the waitress who'd stopped them at the door earlier, "Can we give them our table? It's four for four."

"...Well, there are other people waiting..." The lithe woman answered nervously, "I can't just skip them..."

"Oh...what if we put these guys on our tab? Then it's like we never left."

"Four...?" Yuri echoed, trying to look around and spot the unseen three. At the far back of the tent, he spotted two heads that he recognized, one silver with a black flatcap and another brown with headbands wrapped all around it, "Oh, there's Mari-nee-san and Mikhail..." He couldn't see who the last person was though.

"I'd need a credit card to attach to your order if you original four are going to be leaving." The waitress bargained, "Then I could..."

"MIKHAIL, MARI, VIKTORIA." Minako hollered, "WE'RE LEAVING."

Viktor made a strange face, but Yuri drew in closer when he saw it, snaking an arm around his back. When he spotted the reluctant group on the other side of the mini-restaurant getting up and grabbing their coats, he grumbled quietly under his breath, seeing the equally uncomfortable and unimpressed look on his uncle's face. However, he watched in silence as Minako retrieved her purse and coat from Mari, and proceeded to pull out her wallet to give to the waitress as collateral for the exchange.

"Hun, you don't have to do that, I have it covered..." Mikhail started, keeping his voice down as he slid his arms into his heavy black woolen jacket.

"I'm getting their drinks too. Don't worry." The ballerina answered, undeterred, pulling out the slim plastic card from her wallet and handing it over, "Let me pay for something once in a while. My tab with you is already astronomical."

"You don't have a tab with me." The elder Russian insisted, reaching to pull his own wallet out of his coat, "And pretty soon 'you' paying for something is going to be 'us' paying for something anyway."

Yuri could see the look on his former teacher's face change, but only slightly, perhaps only noticeable to himself.

Mikhail was already trying to reach his arm around the woman with the other card between his fingers, "Run the bill on this..."

The waitress just deadpanned him, giving the 'this happens way too often already and I don't have time for it' kind of look that anyone with 2 weeks experience in retail and food service might give, and ran the card already in her hand without even looking at the card-reader. She turned her eyes down to the touch-screen just next to it and ignored the incredulous expression on the man's face. A receipt came up on the screen soon after though and she turned her attention back to Minako, "If you can sign here, ma'am."

The ballerina turned where she stood and used a fingernail to scribble her name at the bottom, and took her card back, putting everything back into place before pulling her coat on. She slid her hands behind the back of her neck and pulled her hair out from under the edge of the jacket, letting the brown locks tumble behind her, and looked back at the skaters, "You boys enjoy yourselves. Get whatever you want. You all deserve it after today's show!" She threw her arms up then, and dropped them over Yuri's shoulders, "Especially you! Had me scared there a few times, especially after the Lutz at the end! You nearly rubbed your nose on the ice!"
"Deshou?" He answered, a tint of anxiety on his voice, but smiling as she pulled back again, "If you were any closer to rink-side, you would've been able to hear the voice screaming in my head...!"

"Nah, that would've just been me screaming." Viktor mused.

"It's not a competition!" Yuri huffed, though the Russian just sweetly smiled back at him, deflating the moment entirely.

"Anyway, we'll get out of your hair. I'm sure Nikki's ready to stop babysitting the boys on her own by now." Minako said, thumbing a gloved hand out towards the rink, "We'll talk more later."

Viktor nodded and leaned in, kissing the ballerina's cheek as he leaned in to hug her, "Spasibo, Minako-sensei." She nodded and waved, taking her leave through the plastic doors with a slightly-disgruntled Mikhail following after, as well as his oldest daughter. Mari lagged behind, and Viktor caught her, trying to kiss her on the cheek as well, though she flailed somewhat in protest.

"No kissing! No kissing!" She insisted, trying to escape his grasp.

"...Just on the cheek though, Mari-nee-chan!"

"You kiss my brother with that mouth!"

Yuri just made a face at that.

"I've been doing that for more than a year already though!" Viktor went on, his kissy-face trying to lock onto the woman's cheek, "What difference does it make now?"

"You kiss him everywhere now!" She still flailed.

Yuri could feel his ghost trying to leave him, but Chris seemed to catch on and put both hands on the back of his shoulders to keep it from escaping.

Viktor just gave Mari a sly look, "Not everywhere. Just most places." He laughed, finally managing to land his lips on her forehead, then smiling triumphantly, "And now I've gotten you, too."

"Augh!" Mari whined, defeatedly following after Minako, rubbing the spot on her forehead with the back of her sleeve as she went.

The silver Russian waved pleasantly, finding himself being pushed along by everyone standing behind him, and he let himself be shuffled forward until they found the seats that the earlier four had been sitting in. The small, but high metal table was quickly cleaned off by the same waitress that had greeted them at the front. She passed out several tall plastic cards with the venue's choices on it, and said she'd come right back to take their first orders. Viktor nodded happily, "Sankyu~"

"I haven't seen her get all frantic about getting a kiss on the cheek from you before." Chris chuckled, "I think that probably makes her the only woman on earth who would refuse it."

"Right?" The silver legend laughed, starting to pull off his scarf, "It's like she thinks I went straight from going do-"

Yuri's hands were out and over the man's mouth so fast, it was like to have broken the sound barrier, and he pulled Viktor back down to speak firmly but quietly into his ear, "Enough."

A muffled mumble came from behind the younger skater's hand, but it was just a grunt of confusion.

"I've been letting it slide since Phichit-kun posted that embarrassing picture of us at the hot-pot
restaurant in Beijing last year. I think I've been rather patient. But no more." Yuri said, unheard by anyone but the intended listener, "No more jokes about our intimate moments. Those are supposed to be private, not fodder for laughs."

Chris and Phichit didn't need to hear what was said to notice the Russian's expression change. The man knew he was in trouble and his eyes told the whole story.

"Wakarimasu ka?"

Viktor nodded emphatically...and Yuri let him go again, moving his hands instead of pull his scarf and coat off like nothing had happened. Awkward glances went across the table as everyone sat down, though the Russian just stared blankly ahead like he wasn't sure what else to do. Once Yuri had finished hanging his coat on the back of his chair and sat as well, he suddenly became acutely aware of the strange looks being given his way. He sighed quietly to himself and reached his left hand for his husband's right where it was perched on the edge of the table, weaving their fingers together, "So what are we getting?"

Chris and Phichit side-eyed each other, but said nothing yet, watching instead as Viktor tilted to lean his head against the younger skater's shoulder, unblinking and still looking quite stunned.

Yuri's right hand came up then, cupping around the silver skater's cheek and rubbing his thumb there gently, "You're okay."

Still, the waterworks began anew anyway, practically in continuum from Viktor's earlier lament about Makkachin. Beady white eyes continued to stare forward, as though into the next world, looking at nothing in particular.

"I don't think he can handle criticism right now, Yuri." Chris mused, leaning against the palm of one hand as he skimmed the menu, "Go easy on him."

"Dang Yuri, you scary." Phichit added, looking at the scene through the view-finder on his phone, waiting for the image to come into focus before he could click the button. He blinked in surprise as he saw Yuri reaching out across the table, swiping his phone right out of his hands and clicking the side button to shut it down, "...Super scary..."

"No cameras at the table." The older skater said simply, putting the device into one of the pockets of his hanging jacket.

Phichit just slouched and looked forlorn, "...I feel so naked without my phone..."

"You'll live."

Chris reached into his own jacket and handed his phone over as well, "I offer it freely, to stand in solidarity with my naked friend here." He nudged his head at the Thai skater sitting next to him.

Yuri took it with a wry smile and added it to his collection, then held his palm out to Viktor, "You too, lyubov moya."

The silver legend reluctantly lifted his head from its perch on the man's shoulder, and pulled the phone from his jacket, handing it over without question. It, too, went into Yuri's coat for safe keeping, and just as the younger figure twisted back to sit straight, Viktor leaned back in to rest the edge of his jaw against that shoulder again, both hands reaching to take gentle hold of the arm under it.

"Okay, sorry about that...what can I get for y-" The waitress came back, but her words stopped in
her throat when she saw the sight of the previously-cheerful Russian skater looking suddenly so dour. "...you...?"

"He needs a mulled cider." Yuri answered on the man's behalf, "We'll both have those grilled Polish sausages."

"Kraut and all?"

"Kraut and all."

"A drink for you?"

"Just water." Yuri answered matter-of-factly, putting the two menu cards together and handing them back.

The woman set the cards under an arm and turned to the other two skaters, "And what about you two?"

"Chicken tendies." Phichit answered happily, "And one of those Peppermint Mocha Smugglers!"

"I'll need your ID for that one."

Chris chortled a laugh under his breath as the youngest member of the table rifled around for a card with English lettering on it, but reached around him to hand his menu card back, "I'll have that turkey Panini and the caramel crème."

"Ahhh nooo I can only find my Thai ID..." Phichit lamented, looking at it, "Oh wait, half of it is in English." He handed it over sheepishly, "I forgot. I don't get asked for ID often."

"Sorry, but you look like the baby of the group." The waitress huffed, looking the card over and spotting the April birth-date in English text beneath Phichit's English-printed name, the rest scrawled in Thai lettering that she couldn't comprehend. She nodded though and handed it back, trading it for the last menu card, and then looked over the rest of the faces at the table, "I'll be right back with the drinks then."

"Thank you." A few answered back, turning their attention back to just themselves after that.

"Man, Viktor's uncle still looks pretty salty from earlier." Phichit mused, "I wonder why he's so particularly upset. He probably got off easiest compared to everyone else that got called out. Well, other than you, Yuri, since you weren't really in trouble."

The aforementioned skater lifted his head from where he'd been rubbing his cheek against his partner's imaginary bald-spot, "I guess so.

"What did you tell him before that he shouldn't do? And when?" Chris wondered, eyeballing the still-somewhat-vacant Russian, "Viktor."

Crystal blue eyes finally came back into focus, but the skater held where he was, "...It was way back at Worlds." He started, letting his right hand go from his husband's arm to reach instead for where the man's hand was resting on his lap, taking it for himself and weaving their fingers together again, "...For Yuri's sake, I was trying to give Mikhail the benefit of the doubt. That he wasn't just trying to weasel his way back into my life like some long-lost relative who'd just found out I'd won the lottery and he wanted to be buddy-buddy so he could ask me for some of it."

"...Well, as far as figure skating goes, you kind of did win the lottery." Chris pointed out, "But I see
your point."

"But I didn't trust him at all. From the first moment he turned up at the skating rink in St. Petersburg, after I'd gone back to my original hometown for my mama's funeral, I held a pretty big grudge against him. Nothing he said, no matter how rational, would satisfy me, or change my mind about him." He drew in a breath and turned his head, closing his eyes for a moment where he parked his lips and nose against his husband's shoulder, then finally lifted his head to hold it up on his own, "I didn't want him back in my life because of how badly he hurt me before."

"...What did he do?" Chris wondered pensively.

"I loved him too much as a kid...and then he left me." The Russian explained quietly, "And I only just learned 2 weeks ago why he left. It happened more than 20 years ago...and I only just found out what made him take off like he had."

"You don't have to say it if you don't want to." Yuri said quietly, "It took you long enough just to start telling me stuff."

Viktor lightly shook his head, "Maybe it's time I told more than just you and Yakov." He answered, giving his partner's hand a gentle squeeze where he held to it. His eyes rose and crossed the table diagonally, looking at Phichit, "You saw my father at NHK. You know what he's like."

The Thai skater nodded wordlessly.

"And probably everyone here knows how people on SMS suspected Mikhail of being my father after he first popped up."

More nodding.

"Well, back when I was really young, people suspected that he actually was. Him and his sister, my mother, were twins...and there's plenty of stories out there about twins having weird relationships, sometimes having their own language that only makes sense to themselves." Viktor went on, turning his eyes back down to the table and resting his head against Yuri's shoulder again, "Well, back then, because of how I latched onto him, people started to wonder if I was actually his kid with his sister. It caused a lot of problems, even though I have my real father's eyes. Eventually though, it was enough that he left. Until he showed up at the rink last year...I didn't see or hear from him again. I don't even remember seeing him at the funeral, though he says he saw me, getting the Hell kicked out of me by my father."

Both figures on the other side of the table snapped their heads up, "...So that's what happened..."

Phichit lowered his voice, "No wonder you were so unhappy at NHK."

"Your last Rage Skate suddenly makes a lot of sense, too. I guess anyone would find the energy for 8 quads if they had someone like your father watching." Chris added.

Viktor nodded, pausing his tale only long enough for the drinks to be distributed when the waitress came back. He drained half of his hot mulled cider before continuing, "I tried not to make a big deal out of how much I hated Mikhail, because I was the only one who seemed to feel that way. Everyone else he met liked him immediately...I felt kind of trapped."

Yuri sipped at his water apprehensively, but said nothing to interrupt.

"So I told him at Worlds that he had better watch his step, because the first time he messes up, I'll send him away. I made him put his phone number into my contact list, saying I'd reach out to him in
my own time if and when I felt like it, and forbade him from messaging Yuri again. I told him that I
didn't want him telling my father all about my life. I told him not to get too comfortable with people,
because it was me he should've been trying to impress, not them."

"And then I had the great idea of suggesting he be Yurio's mentor and sponsor right after he got
booted from the Russian team." Yuri finally said, sighing as he did so and setting the water-glass
down, "I wish I understood how angry you were about it back then. I never would've suggested it if
I did."

"It worked out well for Yurio though so I guess it wasn't all bad." Viktor shrugged, "And it's not like
Mikhail did anything wrong, at least not until much more recently. He did everything I asked, and
never once over-stepped. ...He was perfect, just like I remembered." He took another swig of his
mulled cider, "It wasn't until after Trophée de France that he really started taking liberties."

"What happened at Trophée de France...?" Chris wondered, quirking a brow behind those circular
rims.

"I started calling him Uncle Mimi again, like I did when I was a kid." The Russian sighed into his
drink, "That was my mistake. I got too familiar with him and took all my walls down to let him back
in. I guess he just did what came naturally after that; doing all the things he'd wanted to do, but
couldn't, because he was on his best behavior before. Now he's got his tentacles wrapped so tightly
around everything and everyone I know and care about, that I can't just tell him to go away."

"...Would you? If you could..." Yuri wondered.

"Not necessarily." The silver legend lowered his head for a moment, lifting it only to look at his
partner, "I just..." He hesitated, looking away again, "I don't even know. ...Part of me just wants
things to stay the same as they have been...where it's just you, and me, and our dog...living together
in our little house, in our castle-town by the sea."

"Now you're just making me wish he wasn't coming." The younger skater lamented.

"It's not really up to us at this point." Viktor explained, "Mostly it's up to Minako. Yurio would also
lose out if the plan changed."

"You kind of made everyone aware of the fact that Mikhail hadn't talked to her about anything
though." Yuri pointed out, "And by the look on her face earlier, I think you might've planted a seed
about things. It might not be so clear-cut as it seems."

"...What? Really? I didn't see anything..."

The conversation was suddenly cut off though as the waitress came back with their food, setting each
plate down accordingly, asking for next requests, and then moving off again. The momentum of the
previous topic seemed to be lost though, and the group was entranced by the proverbial King's Meal
set before them all; starving eyes looked on the dishes with ravenous abandon.

"Why Polish sausage though?" Chris asked, amused by the sight of them, "I thought you'd go for
something more...Detroit-ish."

"Viktor and I are thinking about vacationing in Germany over the summer." Yuri answered, "So, I
figured we should get a head start."

"Germany, huh?" The blonde echoed, "Well, if you decide to go, you should take the train to
Switzerland for a few days. I'll show you around my little chunk of Europe."
The two seemed quite pleased with the idea, glancing at one another before turning their eyes back to the Swiss skater and nodding excitedly, "We'll let you know."

"Ah I'm so jealous!" Phichit whined.
The sight that Minako and the others walked in on was strange, to say the least. At the far end of the rink, where the massive Christmas tree had been erected on the square, frozen-over platform at the center of the Campus Martius Park fountain, Yurio was getting his hair done. Sitting sideways against the fountain's outer ledge with Nikkita propped up on one knee to get a bit higher than himself, the blonde was practically lounging in his wintery-cold pampering. Even more strangely, while Nikki was busy with her elaborate braiding technique, Otabek was looking over her shoulder with keen interest, learning the method from her.

"And what's this one called?" He asked.

"The ones like this, where you do 'knots' around the side in multiple strands and let them hang down, are waterfall types." She explained, pointing a finger around the side of the teen's head where she'd done so, "But this one, where I braid all the horizontal knots together and then turn the last strands into a braid of its own at the back...that's a Waterfall Dutch Braid Crown."

"...What on earth did you do to his head...?" Minako asked skeptically.

Yurio cracked one eye open to gawk at her, but then simply closed it again.

"Oh, Minako! Papa! Mari! Viktoria!" Nikki waved, "We were taking a break from the ice." She looked behind herself to the crowd of on-looking teen girls, many of whom were wearing cat-ear headbands across their heads and holding to their signs protectively, "Watch this." The teen gave a knowing look to the adults and slightly-older-teen ahead of herself. She abandoned the braid suddenly and slid both arms over the blonde's shoulders, literally clinging to his back and nuzzling his hair.

The fanclub's collective eyes went wide open, some of them dropping their signs and running away while the others were too stunned to do anything but weep where they stood.

After a few tortured seconds, Nikki finally pulled back, and all three teens glanced back to see who was left; maybe half. Nikki and Yurio burst out laughing at it, though Otabek was more reserved...internally, he still thought it was funny though.

"Be careful that they don't find you alone somewhere." Viktoria huffed, rubbing her arms where she was still getting used to the cold again, "Fangirls be crazy."

"I'm just teasing." Nikki said, quietly cackling as she sat back down normally on the edge of the fountain, "It was easier than trying to run away."

"...Run away?" The four echoed.

"They chased me around in Barcelona last year." Yurio explained, "If Otabek hadn't shown up when he did, who knows what would've happened. They had me cornered in an alley. I think the only reason they didn't mind him running off with me was cuz he's a guy."

"That didn't stop you from putting your fingers in his mouth for your Exhibition that time." Minako gave him a skeptical look, pointing at the both of them with two fingers, "It was quite exhibitionist of you."
"I put that show together the night before the Gala." Yurio shrugged, "The whole point of it was supposed to be raw sex appeal for the audience. It was a performance. The more scandalous, the better, so why not? I chucked my sunglasses at the crowd, too. Not sure if I hit anyone..."

"You put his fingers in your mouth...?" Nikki echoed, looking at the Kazakh, "...Why?"

"To take one of his gloves off." Otabek explained, "His idea. I thought it was kinda weird. He met me half way at least by letting me grab the other one with my hand rather than my teeth again."

"Kinda weird?" The silver teen repeated, "If you guys had just become friends at that event, you must've barely known each other for a couple day before the Gala, right?"

"Yeah, why?" They both answered.

"Did you at least buy him a drink first...?"

Mikhail was the only one who thought it was funny, and the three ladies just stared at him until he quit chuckling.

"Don't even get me started." The Russian Tiger pushed up to stand on his blade guards, stuffing his hands into his coat pockets, "I found out he DJ's rock music and tried to listen to one of his shows, but because I'm..." He pulled his hands out again only long enough to air-quote the older skater, "'...Underage'...he wouldn't let me come. So I had to sneak in."

"When you're 18 you can come." Otabek shrugged, "House rules more so than mine."

"It's ridiculous." The blonde lamented, mostly to himself, "They're not going to give me alcohol until I'm 21 anyway, so why be stingy about the age of admission?"

"Cuz people do inappropriate things in clubs." Minako explained, stepping closer to better inspect the braids, "And lots of people smoke. Gotta save you kids from yourselves sometimes."

"Your birthday is right around Worlds. I'll DJ if you have a party there or something."

"Really!?" The teen was practically on his toe-picks with excitement, "You'd do that!?"

"Sure. Why not? If it's your show then there's no age restriction."

"Badass!" Yurio whipped his head around towards the elder Russian, "We can do that, right!?"

"Where is Worlds being held this year?" Mikhail wondered.

"Milan!"

"Ehh...I don't have any connections in Italy. I'll have to think about it."

"...Why do you need connections? It's just a birthday party." The teen deadpanned him.

"Looks like the fans have dispersed." Nikki said suddenly, getting their attention again, "I think we can get back on the ice without having them screaming and chasing after you."

Yurio tilted to look back and see for himself, but then reached for his phone, pulling open the camera and handing it to the silver teen, "Here, take a pic of your handiwork before the wind messes it all up. I want to see what it looks like."

"Oh...sure." She answered, holding her mittens out to take the device, and pulling one off with her
teeth quickly. She looked then to Otabek, "Help me up?"

The older skater looked to see that the girl had no guards on her rented skates, and seemed to be wanting to step up onto the edge of the fountain...and it's icy, polished marble ledge. He gave a nervous look before shaking his head, "Better not." He reached down instead to hoist the tiny teen up with one arm, letting her hold to his shoulder with one hand while the other snapped the picture, then set her down again, "Got it?"

She examined the screen for a moment, but then nodded, giving a satisfied smile before handing the phone back to its owner, "I think it'll do. What say you, good sir?"

"We're going to go get our rental skates then." Minako said, patting her two 'step-kids' shoulders as she and the rest of the 'grown ups' moved past, "Try not to break anymore hearts while we're gone."

Yurio was too busy looking at the photo to give a concerted answer, but waved a hand and made a noise to acknowledge he heard her. He pulled that hand back then and set a finger against his chin, "...This is actually pretty good. It's a shame my Free Skate is all rough-and-tumble this year."

"Oh, you'd want me to braid it for that, too?" She clapped her hands together excitedly, "That'd be neat!"

"...Yeah, but my ensemble doesn't really lend to braided hair making any thematic sense. Maybe for an Exhibition."

"Pssht, I bet I could think of something manly enough for anything." Nikki taunted, "Try me. What's the song?"

Green eyes glanced to brown, but the Russian Tiger relented and dug up his phone's Music app, scrolling through it a bit before finding the song in question. He pulled his ear-bud cables out after that and clicked them together, offering it to her, "There's an intro...wait till the actual music starts."

"Okay." She answered, making a face as she waited. When it finally started, she nodded her head along with the intro's beat; the sound of violins and a speech. However, at the end of it, she heard a sudden heavy drumbeat, and a choir took over for a few seconds before another set of drums came in, and finally, the electric guitar and bass, "Oh...this is pretty good. I like it! How come you picked this?"

"Back last year, I had a falling out with my team and got kicked off for it. The other Yuri helped me get back into things by asking your dad if he'd sponsor me, until I could get back on my feet, and hopefully, back onto Team Russia. This song kind of reminded me of that journey, so..."

"Aww!" The silver teen fawned, "That's adorable! Has he seen you skate this yet?"

"...No." Yurio said stiffly, turning his eyes a bit as he tried desperately not to look like he was pouting over it.

"Whaat? How come? Does he know that's what this show is for?"

"...Also no. He was...busy."

"What, with Cousin Viktor?" Nikki made a face like she thought that would've been...excessive.

"He was on his phone the first time. The second time, he got stuck babysitting Viktor during some interview."
"Oh...well, he should see it! You should tell him to watch you!"

"We..." Yurio paused and drew a breath, but then shook his head and huffed a disgruntled sigh, "We got into an argument about it last time he missed it, in France. He promised he'd watch it this time. We'll see."

"I'm sure he will. I'd bet on it." She smiled brightly, and then turned about-face where she stood, grabbing both skaters by the elbows and started dragging them back towards the nearest rink entrance, "Let's get back on the ice! I'm having too much fun out here!"

Mila and Sara watched inconspicuously from a small distance, practically hiding behind the rink wall to avoid being seen. The red-head sighed, ".The girl got closer to Otabek in like 10 seconds than I have since last year..."

"Have you ever actually tried talking to him...?" The Italian wondered.

"I told Yuri he should introduce us."

"That's like asking him to milk a cow for you."

"...I thought it was worth a shot. What about you and Seung-gil?"

"He never answered my calls. I gave up ages ago."

"That Czech guy seems interested in you." Mila offered, pushing to stand upright then, and dragging her lady-friend off the wall with her, "What's his name...?"

"Emil." Sara sighed, "I think he pretends to like me because he likes getting a rise out of Micky."

"It's better than being a stiff like Seung-gil at least. He's never been nice to you. I don't know what you see in him."

"...His dog is cute...?" The brunette said curiously, "I like dogs."

"...You wouldn't be dating his dog."

"Dog-people are usually so outgoing though!"

"You still have my phone!" They suddenly heard Yurio yelling, turning just in time to see a certain silver teen come flying their way and skate past. The blonde was still struggling to get his skate-guards off and chase after her, tossing them at Otabek before flying out on black blades, "Nikki!"

"The song isn't done yet!" She hollered back, swiftly twisting on one skate to turn around and slide backwards, watching him trying to catch up.

Half a second before Yurio was about to barrel by, Mila felt instinct take over...and just as he got close, she lowered her arms and caught him. Another half second, and the teen was up in the air, calm and motionless but for his confusion at the change in perspective, "Wh-..."

The Kazakh skater finally managed to get nearby, pausing behind the trio and looking up, "...I feel like I've seen this before."

"Baba, put me down!" The Russian Kitten started flailing.

"Oh...h-hi, Otabek." Mila said nervously, suddenly losing all track of Yurio above herself, even as he kept thrashing his arms and legs around.
"Hey." The Kazakh said stoically, eyes trained ahead, but he pointed upward, "...Can you put him down, please?"

"Put him down?" She repeated nervously, looking above herself to see the angry bean up there looking back down at her, "Oh! Yuri! When did you get there?"

"BABA YAGA, PUT ME DOWN."

"Wow~ I'm so full...!" Viktor said happily, the group of them coming out of the tent-restaurant with their hungers sated, "I don't even know if I can skate right now...!"

"What in the world...?" Yuri paused where they walked, looking out at the rink curiously, and the unusual situation taking place thereupon, "...Why is Yurio in the air again?"

"It's a thing Mila does." The silver Russian mused, "Come on, let's get our skates on."

"You just said you were too full though..."

Minako looked at the handiwork of her lace-tying nervously, but stood up and started making her shaky-way over towards the outer side of the rink-wall.

Mari was already in the doorway, and glanced back to see the older woman coming, "...How are you gonna be Yurio's coach if you can't skate?"

"...One thing about being a teacher is that I can get away with telling people to do as I say, not as I do." She answered, reaching for the elder Katsuki's arm for balance, "So I can tell Yurio what to do all day long. I don't have to follow him around on the ice to make him do it."

"I guess so. What about your ballet studio?"

Minako drew in a breath and tried to stand up straighter, "What about it?"

"Will you have time for it...?"

"Sure. Yuri won't take up all my time...plus, he'll be in the studio sometimes, too." She answered, following carefully as Mari started to toe-pick onto the frost, "...Maybe I should learn to skate though..."

"Yeah...I mean, not all skating coaches were ever good enough to be in the Grand Prix back in their heyday, but most can at least hold their own on the ice." Mari suggested, turning around slightly to watch the ballerina, holding onto the woman's arms to hold her steady, "Just get used to how the ice feels. Worry about moving on it later."

"How ironic...a skating coach who needs a skating coach..." Minako laughed nervously at the irony, but let herself get pulled along, slowly passing the antics of more professional athletes as they went.

Yurio was at least lowered to Mila's shoulder by then, but she got nervous again and kept him there, so the flustered teen could do little more than wait there until she finished putting him down again. When he spotted Mari and Minako scuttling past at a glacial pace though, he pushed up against the red-head's lower back and reached a hand out to them, "Minako! Save me!"

"Isn't that Otabek or Nikki's job?" She asked back, blades slipping under her, forcing her to reach out and grab for leverage, only to take the Katsuki daughter down with her.

Yurio slapped a hand against his face, fingers pulling a bit on his lower eyelids, "...Oh boy..."
"Who's that?" Mila wondered suddenly, turning entirely where she stood, and twisting the Russian Punk's vantage away from the cluster he'd been looking at, able to see the Kazakh instead.

"...That's my future skating coa-" He stopped mid-sentence, suddenly realizing he shouldn't have said that and flailing again, "She's a ballerina from Katsudon's hometown!" He backtracked, "She runs a ballet studio, that's it!"

"Really? For a second there it sounded like you were about to say that she was going to be your future skating coach." The older woman said sarcastically, side-eyeing him as well as she could given that he was basically behind her, legs kicking out in front.

"Otabek! Get me down!" Yurio reached out desperately.

The dark-horse sighed to himself and pushed forward with a toe-pick against the ice, reaching his hands out to grab the blonde under the arms and roll him off the red-head's shoulder. He just held him up then, like he was examining a puppy, "How is it that you're basically the same height as me but weigh barely more than half of me?"

"...Am I going to have to beg you to put me down now?" Yurio wondered callously, toe-picks scrabbling at the ice.

Otabek just dropped him then, and watched the blonde's skates fly right out from under him, until he was on his arse like the ladies nearby, "...Oops." He said dryly, his expression unchanging.

"What was that for!?"

"I thought you were ready."

Yurio simply fell to his back after that, arms and legs splaying out like he were making a snow-angel on the rink, "...Everyone's an asshole right now..."

Mila just looked down at him, hands on her hips as she gave a disappointed huff in his direction, "Does Yakov know you're leaving?"

"Don't say it so loud, Christ! I was going to tell him after Nationals!" He threw his arms up to get himself to a sitting position, looking back at her over his shoulder then, "I don't want him all mad at me while I'm in Russia for the next two weeks!"

"There's like...a zero-percent chance he won't find out about this by the end of the Final." The redhead scolded, "You should tell him before he finds out from someone else."

"Huh...she can skate, too." Otabek's voice said quietly, his attention entirely not on the Russian conversation.

"Who can what?" Yurio wondered indignantly, the scolding being too true for him to want to acknowledge, and he turned his head to spot Nikki slowly turning through a novice camel-spin, ",...Oh."

Mari and Minako finally managed to get themselves back up, though they had to shimmy their way over the ice towards the rink wall before they could do so, and both clung to it to stay upright. They barely had a moment to acknowledge the spin before they could hear the sound of two more sets of skates coming their way, and spotted Mikhail and Viktoria finally getting up to them.

"Having trouble?" The elder wondered, looking at the plight of them, "You're all covered in frost. Did you fall?"
"...I wasn't paying attention to where I was going." Minako explained, "...Can't look to the left and skate straight at the same time, apparently. What took you so long?"

"Viktoria's rentals were poorly fit so we had to go back and switch them out. Twice."

"The first one had a nail poking through the heel, pipaw. I'd rather not need a Tetanus shot before bed." The older teen deadpanned him, "And the second pair weren't the same size."

"Yuri just accidentally told everyone I'm going to be his coach." Minako sighed, trying to stand a bit straighter despite her skates sliding around under her. She managed to dig in her toe-picks and got some ground, and then tip-toed over to the silver man standing a few paces away, latching onto one arm before she lost her footing, "It might turn into a cluster."

"...Hm." The Russian lifted his free hand to rub his chin in thought, watching as the aforementioned teen had gone over to his youngest daughter to apparently try and tell her how to spin better...and swipe his phone back finally. Mikhail looked around then, "I don't see Yakov nearby."

"He said he was going to relax tonight." Mila explained, crossing her arms and looking back at the pair, "Something about his ex-wife...I think they might be getting back together or something."

"...Oh?" They both answered.

"Nothing for sure...just my observation. I think I spend more time with them than Yuri does." She turned back to face the teen, then towards Otabek, who was starting to move out again as well, "...Damn..."

"Nice going, Mila." Sara teased, "Nothing quite says 'well hello there, hot stuff,' like overhead-pressing his friend out of nowhere."

The Russian just sighed, "Yuri caught me off guard! I felt like a wind-up toy...he just got in the right spot and boop!...he was above my head."

The last four skaters were finally getting to the rink entrance by then, with Viktor and Yuri stepping out first, followed by Phichit, and finally Chris, joining the dwindling flock of non-professional skaters as they made their slow laps around the ice.

"It's so different skating outside." Yuri commented idly, "I wanted to when we were back in St. Petersburg, but..."

"We had no time." Viktor defended, patting his partner's hand where the younger skater had taken his arm, "Practicing 'Duetto' and everything else..."

"Yeah..." He reluctantly agreed, soon seeing his sister still clinging to the rink wall and making a B-line for her, pulling the Russian alongside, "Mari-nee-san...?"

"Did you fall already?" The silver genius mused, pointing at the frost on her thigh and coat, "I don't think I've ever seen you skate."

"...I'm not horrible, but Minako pulled me down." The forlorn Katsuki explained, realizing she was no longer at risk of the same thing happening again, and pushing off to follow the pair, taking her brother's arm since he was closest, "It's been a few years, so maybe I'm rusty."

"How long has it been?" Viktor wondered, "It comes back, like riding a bike."

"Mari-nee-san and I used to skate at the Ice Castle together, along with Yuu-chan and Nishigori."
Yuri said, "She didn't stick with it though."

"I'm 6 years older than you are. Before you ever started oogling Viktor on the television, I was working on highschool entrance exams."

"I guess so." He made a face like that was awkward to recall, and they made their way around the curve of the short side of the rink. He spotted Nikkita trying a second attempt at her camel-spin, with Yurio looking on like he were a coach himself, "Looks like she's got it down though."

"Oh...yeah, apparently Canadians skate a lot." Mari huffed, "At least that one does. Something about how their brother did a lot of hockey growing up, so the girls did figure skating lessons. I'm not surprised that she knows a few tricks. She seems like someone who would."

They passed the small group by, watching as Yurio tried to demonstrate a proper camel spin, pointing out how his leg and torso were level, but then got too far away to hear the rest. By the time they came back around from the second short-end of the rink, they spotted Minako waving to get their attention instead. She let go of Mikhail and shuffled extremely awkwardly along the ice, skates feeling entirely alien to her, but getting scooped up by the younger Russian just before she lost her balance and tumbled down again.

"Whooaaaaa sugoi! Good catch!" She huffed, clinging to the man's arm for dear life, even as they all pulled her along much more quickly than she'd ever gone before, "Wah! I can't turn!"

"Just focus on standing." Viktor mused, pulling his arm free just long enough to snake it around her back instead, "I'll turn for you."

"Ahhh this is terrible! This is terrible!" She lamented, feeling the ice twisting under her skates as they curved...but soon, they were straight again, and the trio slowed down for her, "...This is less terrible..."

"Sorry." Yuri smiled at her nervously, "We won't go so fast."

"Okay, this is good." The ballerina heaved a breath of relief, snaking her own arm behind the Russian's back in turn and starting to poke at the younger skater's shoulder, "This is fine, you can go now."

"...Eh?" All three gawked at her.

"BEAT IT, YURI."

The younger man's eyes were beady and small behind his blue frames, and he looked up at his partner in shock and confusion, "But..."

Viktor just dragged one toe-pick behind himself until the four of them were completely stopped, and looked from the rather-serious expression on Minako's face to the perplexed one on his husband's. He sighed a breath, leaned aside to give his partner a quick kiss, and leaned back, letting him go, "It's fine. I'll catch up with you later."

"Shoo!" Minako waved her free arm at the two Katsukis, "Be gone!"

"Okay okay!" Yuri whined, pushing off and dragging his older sister with him. He looked back helplessly over his shoulder and saw much the same look on his partner's face, but both knew there was little that could be done about it, and he turned back to face forward to watch where he was going.
Mari eventually found her own footing and skated for herself, patting her brother on the back, "It'll be fine. You can survive without him."

"I know that." He blanched, "I'm more worried about why Minako-sensei bullied me off."

"I'm sure it's fine." The elder shrugged, moving out of the flock and towards the more open part of the center of the rink, where Yurio had moved on to watching Nikki try to emulate his previous display.

Yuri followed after, coming to a stop between the teen and Otabek, "Guess I'll hang out with you guys for a bit."

"What's up?" Otabek wondered, arms crossed where he stood observantly.

"You guys are less scary than Minako-sensei right now. She just commandeered Viktor from me."

The group looked over their collective shoulders to confirm that it had indeed happened, and sure enough, the two were sliding along slowly, close to the rink wall, on the other side of the path of skating revelers. Whatever the occasion was, it had forced Viktor to look rather serious for it.
Chapter 281

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED EIGHTY ONE

Viktor could feel the small pit in his gut starting to grow, getting bigger the further away Yuri moved. He hummed a soft, nervous grumble to himself, and slowly looked away, glancing down at the woman still clinging to his side, "Must be important if you're telling Yuri to take a hike."

"I'm old enough to be his mum." She answered simply, watching the younger skater veer around to go towards center, joining Otabek and Yurio with the rest, "And I've been around since before he was born. So in a lot of ways, watching him grow up, encouraging him to get into skating, and being a part of so many important milestones in his life...I kind of feel like he's mine, too. The way I see Yuri isn't all that different from how Mikhail sees you."

"Ah." The Russian felt his whole frame stiffening up under his coat, "So what's this is about. I'm in trouble."

Minako said nothing to that, letting the skater simmer in his brooding discomfort for a while. She let him guide her slowly around the curve of the rink, keeping him between herself and the eyes watching them go by from the middle, "...This isn't about you, Viktor."

"That just makes me worry even more for some reason." He said, keeping his eyes forward, golden blades leaving light scratches in the ice as he meandered on his path, "Who is this about, then?"

"Me."

The pit became a chasm to hear that singular word, and Viktor raised his free hand up to pull at his already-loose scarf, the bare skin of his gloveless fingers touching at his throat nervously, "I see." He tried to swallow, but he could feel a cramp there stopping him, so he just coughed quietly and then went silent, waiting for the ballerina to continue.

"Sorry." Was all she managed in short order, her eyes having been captured for a moment when she heard Nikki suddenly shriek for no reason. Looking past the Russian's shoulder, she spotted where the silver teen's up-turned leg had been grabbed and pulled slightly higher up, while a second hand had gone down on her back, forcing her head a little further down.

"It should feel like this when you're level!" Yurio was telling her, "Can't you tell the difference?"

"You could've warned me you were gonna grab me!" She harped back, "I about had a heart attack!"

"This is how my coaches always used to do it to me!"

"The abused becomes the abuser! I see how it is!" Nikki huffed, suddenly reaching to the side to grab one of Yurio's own legs and pulling it up unexpectedly, "See how you like it!"

The older teen wasn't about to be put on his arse a second time in less than 5 minutes, and he clung to the silver lady's leg like it was all that held him up, and sneered at her as well as he could, "This is a Pair spin, dummy! I was teaching you a camel spin!"

"I know that! I saw Yuri and Cousin Viktor doing this at their Exhibition last weekend!" She argued, "That's how I know it at all!"

"Hasetsu is going to be a noisy place pretty soon." Minako huffed, pulling her mind back from the
boisterous distraction, "Nikkita is taking her sister-duties pretty seriously."

Viktor wordlessly agreed, wishing he could find the humor in watching his partner skating around the duo, pushing them around in a frantic circle by the boot of the blonde's outstretched leg. He, too, eventually turned his eyes away from it though, "I don't think I've ever seen Yurio teach anyone anything in his whole life. I'd heard legends of his doing so to get his spot back on the Russian team, but..."

"He's caught in a weird place...desperately wanting to be a kid, but being surrounded by adults and all their problems. Coming up from such a young age and having as much responsibility as he did..." The ballerina explained quietly, "...I think half his issue was about how much he resented having to take on so much by himself. He got so used to doing everything alone that it was hard for him to consider asking for help when things got away from him. Having Yuri jump in to save him when he was about to lose everything, and not really giving him a choice about it, made him really uncomfortable. So as grateful as he was for what Yuri did, and by extension, you and Mikhail, it just forced him to question his self-worth and his capabilities. At the edge of turning 16, he was too young to handle what most 30-year-olds can't even deal with."

"For a conversation that's supposed to be about you, that's an awful lot of stuff about someone who isn't you." The Russian pointed out.

"I'm trying to work my way up to it." The woman sighed, "Mikhail told me during Opening Ceremonies that you'd agreed to be Yura's choreographer, but no one had told him that yet. I guess everyone was just waiting for you all to cool down before saying anything. But then, when you were on your rampage earlier, you told everyone that you'd agreed...and yet, at this point, I doubt either of you have exchanged words to one another. About that, or anything else."

"...And you'd be correct. What's your point though?"

"It wasn't just him that you surprised with that rant." Minako explained, "When you singled out Mikhail after that, you put me on the spot, too."

"...Sorry." The Russian sighed, "I got a bit carried away."

"It's fine. I think...I'm leaning towards thanking you for it rather than condemning you."

"... Eh?"

"I know it hasn't been long since you called him on it, but telling Mikhail that he's basically doing all these things that you specifically told him not to...I guess it just...made the wheels turn in my head a bit." The ballerina said hesitantly, "While everyone was figuring out how to get you to wake up again after Yuri made you drop, I kind of started thinking about things. I have to ask...what did you warn Mikhail not to do?"

Viktor drew in a breath, and started listing things off on his fingers, "Don't contact Yuri behind my back, don't tell my father about my life, don't get too comfortable around the people I know, be on your best behavior...that sort of thing."

"...I see."

"Don't get me wrong." The silver legend tried to walk back his words, "Mikhail did exactly what I told him to, for a really long time. Right up until the end of the Trophée de France, I didn't have a single thing to complain about. So while I spent all last year looking for reasons to send him away, I could never justify if. My grudge from childhood eventually just...evaporated, and I was left with this
uncomfortable realization that I had to take him for who he really was...as my Uncle Mimi, not as this boogeyman that was going to hurt me again. I think..." He looked up into the clear sky, barely a few puffs of clouds hovering above the tallest buildings, "...I was just happier blaming him for the things that happened after he left. I hated him enough for the fact that he left at all...so I just kept heaping up the rest onto him, too."

"I'm afraid that, of all the stories Mikhail has told me, the things that happened to you while he was gone were not among them." Minako pointed out, feeling the ice curving under them again where Viktor leaned them into the turn, "I'm not even sure he knows what you're blaming him for."

"Nothing that was actually his fault, in the end." The Russian shrugged, "It was just easier than blaming myself. But then I finally let it all go, and dropped my guard around him...and it seemed like as soon as I did, Mikhail really did start doing things. I tried to ignore it all, or justify it as normal behavior...or at least, as something that I had no right to be mad at him for, like everything I'd smeared onto him before. But then he said he was going to move to Hasetsu...and I just kind of hit a wall with it all. It was my last straw...and I had to sit there and suffer in silence, because really, what right did I have to complain? I even told Yuri at one point...I had no business contesting his plans, because they were about the life he wanted with you, not me."

"He wouldn't even know I existed if not for you."

Viktor nodded and sighed, cold vapor escaping him like dragon's breath into the frigid night, "That's part of why I'm still mad at him." He confessed bitterly, "I feel like he owes me something, somehow, for what he has with you now...and yet I'm such a non-participant in everything. He's just walking all over me. I was naive enough to think he'd actually talk to Yuri and I before deciding to move to Hasetsu, back when it was still just an idea...but then he made that choice without us, and invited his kids, and then invited Yurio. I know he means well and he's doing all of this with the hope that everyone will be happy in the end, but...it still feels like he's just some-"

"...Benevolent dictator." Minako finished, "I know."

The silver Russian just looked at her in confusion.

"That's some of the stuff I started to realize...or rather, allowed myself to become aware of...after you laid into him earlier." She explained, "I didn't really think anything of it in the beginning. All these choices he made worked out for me, and I was basically happy with it all, so I didn't question the fact that he never actually asked for my opinion on much. I think, the first time he did, it was when he sweet-talked me into agreeing to be Yura's coach."

"He made it sound like a brilliant idea, didn't he?" Viktor wondered dryly.

"Mh."

"That's what he did to me when he suggested dragging my father to NHK. He made it sound like such a grand thing, that if I disagreed or argued, I was being needlessly unreasonable." He sighed again, carefully watching the aforementioned elder as they moved along, "Even after everything my father had done...to me, to him, to Yuri even...to the entire family...I was still the badguy."

"It's like he carries himself in permanent-dad-mode, for everyone, not just the people he's actually a dad to." Minako added, "He gives you the illusion of democracy by making you think you're part of the process, but really...he's just letting you say whatever you want, so you feel better about the choice he makes for you. Like you had some role to play, or that your opinion mattered."

"Or that you were wrong to disagree."
"If you did." She huffed a grumble under her breath, "I was so agreeable for so long that I forgot how much I liked making decisions for myself. He just made it so easy not to worry about it. He'd take care of everything and it would all work out in the end."

Viktor silently agreed, unsure what else to say after that. He could feel the ballerina starting to drift though, and when he moved to try and correct it, realized that her drift was purposeful, and he let her move them towards the rink-wall, setting a hand against it so she could hold herself up. He dug in the heel of his right blade and stood casually in front of the woman, waiting for her next move.

She took a moment, but then reached up for the mitten covering her left hand, and pulled it off, looking at the white gold and cluster of diamonds across the entire band of her engagement ring. She kept her eyes on it, seeing how the light shimmered in the clear facets, glimmering like a thousand stars on her finger, "I think the first, and last, decision I ever made about him...was choosing to get close to him. When Mari joked about him being a vintage version of you...I think, part of me kind of loved the novelty of it. But the more time I spent with him, the less the joke mattered, because I liked him for who he was, not for who he was related to or who he resembled."

The silver Russian listened closely, but said nothing.

"I saw how much he took to Yura, and how much that kid mattered to him. I thought it was really endearing, that he would go so far out of his way to help someone who he only knew because he'd been asked a favor. I liked that he never tried to define our situationship by any kind of normal social construct...it was just us, hanging out, enjoying each other's company, without any kind of baggage or expectation. I never once felt pressured to pay him back somehow, or that I owed him anything. Then I finally met his kids, and I started to really understand where most of his personality came from. He wants so badly for people to be able to count on him, and never to let them down...it all makes sense now, knowing that it's because of how badly he failed you. The ballerina said quietly, the quiet scratch of a dozen skates passing them by like an icy river, "I won't make excuses for how that trait can come across as controlling. I see that myself now, more clearly than ever...because like you...in a way, I kind of feel like I've lost my own agency."

Cool blue eyes watched in nervous surprise as the older woman fingered at the ring...and then slowly pulled it off, cupping it in her hand before curling her fingers around it, "...Minako-sensei...?"

She shook her head lightly, turning where she stood to look back at the skater, "Don't get the wrong idea... I don't feel differently about him. I enjoy him quite a lot. But...the both of us have kind of let him take too much control away. I think, if we support each other, maybe we can get some of it back." She lifted her still-mitten right hand and pressed it to the Russian legend's chest, "He's a good man, and he thinks the world of you. Give him a chance to make this right. I think one of his greatest fears is feeling like he let you down a second time. He's just...human, like the rest of us, and needs to learn what the rules are with every new relationship. Sometimes we have to learn the rules for ourselves, too, so we can let others know how we want to be treated."

"...So you're going to call off your engagement?" Viktor wondered, looking to the hand that had the ring in it, "It's only been a few days since you agreed to it in the first place."

Minako's brow ruffled slightly, but she closed her eyes and shook her head, "...I wasn't feeling good when he asked me. I think I...might've agreed to it because I got scared, not...because I wanted to say yes."

"...Scared? You?" The Russian was perplexed, "You always came across as fearless to me."

"Mmmnhh..." She mumbled in reply, eyes shifting aside even more.
Viktor felt unsure at that answer, and gave a worried look, "...Minako?"

"Mmmnnnnhhhh...!" She hesitated more urgently, the look on her face changing like she knew she didn't want to mention anything. When she felt Viktor's hand on her shoulder though, it was like an eggshell cracked and she could do nothing to stop the yolk from oozing out, "...Mikhail's the only other person who knows this is even a thing, so you had better not say a single word when I finish telling you. Not to anyone." Minako started, keeping her eyes on the rink wall for the nerve of it, "Finding out was the entire reason why Mikhail's joking request for me to marry him suddenly turned serious. Even he was half-upset about it, when it dawned on him what might be going on."

Viktor looked on in nervous confusion, but slid his hand up the woman's shoulder to settle his whole arm over both, drawing her closer to reassure, and rubbing one thumb against her where he held it.

"I think he's probably more freaked out than I am right now." Minako said, her voice quieter than before, "I'm just...more in shock, trying to wrap my brain around it. He's trying to do the right thing in light of the circumstances." She paused a moment though, and pulled back from the younger man's offered comfort, glancing up at him with a look of worry and concern crossing her face, "I didn't even want to mention it. Really...all I wanted by this conversation was to tell you what my plans were for this engagement situation, because I thought it might relieve some of the stress on you. Saying the rest might just make things ten times worse."

"...I appreciate that, but now you're just worrying me by not saying what's going on." Viktor explained, feeling the nerves rattling around in his gut, "Whatever it is, I'm sure it'll be okay in the end."

"I hadn't expected you to be this inquisitive about things...but..." Minako grumbled under her breath a little, "If that's what you want..." She lowered her head for a moment, but then lifted it half-way again, like she was trying to work up the nerve to give it, "Just to preface this...we were only ever like that on two occasions, this whole time. Two. And both times, I kind of pressured him into it. The first time, we were both drunk and flirty, and for a long time he thought I didn't even remember it. Then, the next time, was to relieve a bit of the stress at NHK. For whatever reason, Mikhail never really wanted to let me get that close, so he was always really careful to keep me at arm's length on some things. He'd use Plisetsky being around, or the timing, as an excuse to keep things between us kind of...low key. If there's one thing I know about your Uncle after this past year, it's that he's extremely guarded. He doesn't like people getting too close to him, knowing too much about him, or letting anyone take advantage of him, but if you manage to get past all those hurdles, he's the kind of person who would take a bullet for you, without questions asked. I think all of that is part of why he also happens to be the kind of person who likes to be in control of everything...not because he doesn't trust anyone to do what he considers the right thing, but because it means there won't be any surprises. He...kind of hates surprises. So...this thing I'm trying to explain...he's trying to do right by me in the only way he knows how, given how he's entirely not in control of it."

Viktor gave her a dubious look, I really don't want to think about this...but the more she says, the less likely it could be anything else... His eyes rose out towards the middle of the rink, first giving something of a longing expression to his unsuspecting husband, ...Ah, Yuri...save me... But then this eyes roamed over towards his Uncle, Mikhail, you stupid idiot...if this is what she's making it sound like, you should've been more careful.

"...It's not for sure..." Minako said, getting the Russian's attention back again, "...And that's why I didn't want to say anything about it. I don't want everyone getting all freaked out about it when it might be nothing."

"It can't be nothing if you agreed to marry my uncle over it." Viktor said nervously, dreading the
answer to come, and hoping beyond hope that it was somehow, some way, something else, "...What is it?"

The apprehensive ballerina had no more words to say about it, simply lifting her hands and gently putting them palms-down against her abdomen. She clenched her eyes shut and waited for the scolding, screaming, fussing, crying...anything...but nothing came. She cracked one eye open, and then the other, seeing the silver legend just staring at her with his eyes glazed over, "...V-Viktor...?"

Still nothing.

The older woman carefully tip-toed a step closer, holding steady to the rink wall as she moved, and waved a hand in front of the man's vacant face.

*Viktor_Nikiforov.exe has stopped working*

"YURI." She yelled, "YURI, I BROKE YOUR HUSBAND. SORRY."

"...Eh?" The younger skater lifted his head, attention pulled away from where Yurio had moved on from the camel spin to teaching basic moves in the field. He could see where the tall Russian had gone stiff where he stood, and started moving off to get closer. Viktor hadn't responded even as he got closer, or set a hand against the man's arm, "Viktor...?"

The slight nudge was all it took, and the five-time consecutive World Champion went face-first to the ice without a word.

"V-Viktor...!"
"How long has he been like this?"

"Just a few minutes."

"You're not worried?"

"Sure I'm worried, but he's not physically hurt, so what am I supposed to do?"

"Oh! Look! His eye twitched!"

"Viktor?"

Voices sounded like they were speaking under water, behind glass, but even then, there was a glimmer of familiarity about them.

"Viktor, blink twice if you can hear me."

Fingers snapping next to his ear sounded like hollow knocks on a thick, wooden door. The darkness behind his eyelids started to gain color; dark browns and reds, then yellows, and finally blinding white light as they opened.

"Viktor!"

The light receded behind the outline of darker shapes, and he could start to make out the geography around himself; the rink wall, the sidewalk, the shadows of buildings further back, and the people who were standing much closer. Things were still blurry though, like water was in his eyes, and he blinked slowly, heavily to clear it. There was a ringing in his ears that slowly faded away, replaced by the ambient sound of the park, and the few revelers who still took to the ice.

But then the pain crept in, and Viktor became acutely aware of the scuff on his forehead where he'd hit that ice with his face. He cringed and raised one hand up to rub the sore spot.

"...Viktor...?"

"...Yu...ri..."

"Take it easy." That welcome voice said quietly, "You're starting to run a bit of a fever."

"A fever?" Mari echoed, standing off to the side near her older counterpart, and turned her head to look at the nervous woman, "You really did break him, Minako. What'd you say to him?"

"...I didn't actually say anything." She explained, her voice barely above a whisper as she looked on at the young legend where he struggled to try and sit up straighter on the bench he'd been set upon, "Not exactly, anyway."

"I'm honestly surprised he didn't start one earlier." Yuri sighed, rising up from where he'd been crouching in front of his spouse, and setting a knee onto the bench next to the man, holding him steady where he sat, "It's been two months of nonstop stress for him. If it was just the rigor of competition then he'd be fine, but between me and all the other craziness that's happened, it's just piling up. The way he holds onto stuff and internalizes it really doesn't make it better. ...I don't know
"what to do to help him let it all go."

"He just needs to go home and stay home for a while." Chris pointed out, "No travel, no hotels...although, staying at Yu-Topia would probably would be right up his alley." He stroked his bristly chin, "A dip in that hot-spring sounds great right about now."

Conversation ceased at that point, and the cloudy-headed, feverish man slowly rose to his feet, holding to his partner's shoulder as he went. Slate eyes had locked onto a certain older member of his bloodline, and he started taking a few steps forward on those naked golden blades.

"Viktor, what are you trying to...?" Yuri questioned anxiously, "You don't have your blade-guards on...and you're stepping on concrete here. You'll ruin your skates."

Mikhail watched nervously as his nephew stepped closer. His two daughters stood close by, Yurio and Otabek behind them in turn. Minako watched for all of three more seconds before she stepped between the two men, putting her arms out to block Viktor's way, but realizing he'd managed to grab a handful of the elder's black woolen jacket anyway, "Viktor...ease off...!" She pleaded.

Those light blue eyes just stared, a look of anger and betrayal in them, but the man said nothing to explain it.

"I feel like you want to take a swing at me," Mikhail said quietly, his own steely jade eyes looking on without blinking, "What'd I do now?"

Minako turned her head back to look at him over a shoulder, giving an awkward glance before turning back around and setting her hands on the Russian skater's arm where it passed her, "Viktor...he did the right thing. It's not his fault anyway; I basically pressured him into it. He's doing more than I could've ever expected from anyone. Please..."

"What are you guys talking about...?" Yuri asked, looking between the three in complete disarray, but settled on his former teacher, "Minako-sensei...?"

"I'm not ready to talk about it with anyone else." She answered stiffly, her fingers gently trying to get between Viktor's and the black coat he'd clamped down onto, "Viktor...let him go."

"...This whole thing you have with Yuri was just the cherry on top for him." Mikhail explained.

"He still didn't have to hit me over it." Viktor growled.

"He learned that from his own father. It's a cycle. I hope you break it."

"Viktor's never hit anyone or anything in his life." Yuri defended, barging into the middle of the conversation.

"Is that what he's told you?"

Yuri clenched his eyes and shook his head, but turned his attention back to his partner, threading his arms around the taller man's chest and stepping up onto his own bare toe-picks to whisper into his husband's ear, "Viktor...twice before, Kon's had you by the front of your coat, and both times, I stepped in to defend you. But now you're doing it to your own Uncle, and Minako-sensei is having to defend him from you. I know you're mad about whatever it was you learned, but don't do this."
Those eyes trembled as they looked on, but soon, the angry shake relaxed a bit, and Viktor unclenched his hand, laying it flat against his uncle's chest instead before pulling it back again. Both his arms went over his partner's shoulders after that, bare fingers clenching down on the back of that dark blue winter coat. He pressed his eyes to the scarf around Yuri's neck, holding for a moment to regain himself, feeling the gentle stroke of a hand against his back before he lifted his face again to look at the woman who'd helped block him, "...I don't...know what to do. How to react." He said quietly, eyes starting to redden from the duress, "...I've got a hundred different feelings inside me and the only ones getting to the surface are the ones that hurt people. Thoughts in my head are going so fast that it feels like it's vibrating, like there's bees inside instead of a brain. ...Tell me how to react..." He pleaded, "...I don't know...how to react...

"Don't, for now." She told him simply, "Let me figure out my own stake in this before you get angry on my behalf. Maybe it's nothing to even get angry about in the first place. You'll regret it if you get carried away now and then it turns out to be a non-issue."

"Then why did you even tell me...? Knowing how I feel about everything else..." Viktor asked, as though the knowledge he'd been given was poison.

"Because I needed someone to know, and you were the only one I could tell."

Yuri just gave her a hurt look, "...The only one...?"

"Because I needed someone to know, and you were the only one I could tell."

Mikhail gave something of a similar look, but standing behind her, Minako couldn't see it.

"Sorry, Yuri..." She reached a hand out to stroke her mittened fingers against his cheek, "I'm sure there's things you'd never be willing to talk to your family about."

The younger figure nodded reluctantly, recalling how he'd just shot down a certain topic only 30 minutes prior. He sighed under his breath and turned his attention over to Chris, "Can you drive us back? I think...we're done for the night."

"Sure."

"Could you please grab mine and Viktor's bags real fast?" Yuri followed, turning his head to glance up at his younger friend.

The Thai skater nodded and moved off from where he'd been hanging onto the inside of the rink wall, and slid across the ice toward the opposite side. He raised a hand when he heard Chris calling for him to grab his own bag as well.

Minako took a step back to make room, feeling the elder Russian's hand coming up over her shoulder. She glanced back briefly before reaching her own hand up to touch to his fingers, and watched as Yuri set his partner down onto the bench again, kneeling down to start unlacing those unprotected skates. She could hear the subtle whispering between the two; Viktor's lament for having ruined the night again, Yuri reassuring that no one was holding it against him, and so on until the blades were replaced with shoes.

Chris was swapping his footwear out nearby as well, lifting his head as he heard blades coming up to the wall again, and held his hands out to start catching the backpacks as Phichit tossed them over, "The night's still young. I'll just walk back once I'm done." He said, standing up again as he packed his blades into his backpack and slung it over a shoulder, "Unless you want to call it a night, too."

"No sense in everyone leaving just because we are." Yuri pointed out, trying to prevent any
unwanted early retirements for the night, "Viktor wanted to sleep...I kinda feel bad now for dragging him out here anyway. I even promised him a nap on the way and then we found parking almost as soon as we arrived, so it was barely a 10 minute trip."

"So we'll see you two at morning practice then?" Phichit asked.

The older figure nodded once as he rose back up to standing, not having bothered to pull his own blades off, simply slipping the colored rubber bars over them and slinging his backpack around his shoulders, carrying his partner's in his free hand as Viktor tiredly stood up again. Yuri glanced around briefly to all the remaining faces, "Have fun, guys. I'm putting this one to bed." He nudged his head slightly towards the man in question.

"Wait-" Yurio said, rather unexpectedly. Both older skaters looked at the teen in confusion, but he came up close and stood directly in front of his former rink-mate. He hesitated a moment, but then looked up, meeting Viktor's gaze directly, hazy as it was in that moment, "You said earlier tonight that you'd agreed to be my choreographer. I was so mad before, about how I thought you were blowing me off because of how you'd turned down the coaching thing...and I was too proud to even think about the reasons why." The young Russian prodigy admitted hesitantly, "I don't know what Mikhail said or did to convince you to agree...but, I'm grateful anyway. Spasibo, Viktor. I won't let you down anymore. You have my word on that."

Exhausted eyes looked back down on the much shorter figure, almost vacantly, but the silver Russian nodded in understanding. Too tired to say or think about much else, Viktor reached his free arm forward to lift it over Yurio's shoulder, pulling him into a weak but well-meant hug against his chest, "We'll talk later." Was all he could manage to say, patting the teen's back lightly before letting him go again.

Yuri reached an arm out for his own departure hug as well, the first in nearly a week. It was a relief to him to finally receive it again, and he held a little longer to the Russian Tiger, and a bit tighter, than Viktor had, "Goodnight, Yuri." He pulled back then and waved to the rest, skate-bag still in hand, "Goodnight everyone."

Just as they were starting to step off, Viktor whispered to wait, and stopped where he stood, lifting his head up to glance back over his shoulder to look at the woman who'd dropped such unexpected info-grenades in his lap, "...When are you going to do it?" He asked, a tired but knowing look on his face.

She shook her head, "Not right now, obviously. But soon."

"Promise you'll call me if you need help."

Minako huffed and crossed her arms, smiling despite the implications, "Go to bed, Viktor. I don't need a kid half my age worrying about my choices."

"It's not your choices I'm worried about."

"I'll be fine. But thank you."

Viktor gave her a look for a moment, but then drew a breath, nodded, and turned back around. The group quietly watched the three men starting to leave, each of them equally as surprised and confused as the next, but none wanting to say anything.

In the end, it was Yurio who broke the silence, "I hope he doesn't get sick tonight. Viktor would be mortified if he had to forfeit because of a fever."
"He'd probably still try to compete." Otabek added quietly, "Unless he has the flu and can't move or something."

"...I think this is just stress. Having to go to 4 nearly back-to-back events, and all the crazy shit that's happened at every one of them...then with what happened to Yuri yesterday night, I'm shocked he isn't already in a coma." The teen turned towards his older friend, "I wouldn't be surprised if they don't show to practice tomorrow...or even to Nationals in 2 weeks."

Phichit listened to them keenly, a finger coming up against his lower lip as he thought on those words.

"So what was all that about?" Mikhail finally asked, keeping his voice low just for Minako to hear, "Why would Viktor want to clock me like that? I thought he got it all out earlier."

"He did, but raw and open wounds don't close just because you cover them." She answered vaguely, "The thing he reacted to had nothing to do with that specifically, though."

"That literally makes no sense."

She turned where she stood, and reached a hand forward to twice-pat the front of the man's chest lightly, "It will when I'm ready to tell you what I told him."

"I can't think of a single thing you could tell him that would make him want to kill me."

"He doesn't want to kill you...and it wasn't a single thing, either." Minako explained, giving a dubious look, "If he wasn't already so worn down then he probably would've reacted completely differently."

"It couldn't have waited until after the event then?"

"No, because we're going to different places after the Final. Plus, one or both of those boys is getting on the podium tomorrow, hopefully both, and then the Exhibition is on Sunday. The last thing I want to do is tell Viktor then what I told him a minute ago." She said simply, shrugging then as she started making her way back towards the rink entrance, naked blades klak'ing over frozen concrete with each step.

Mikhail watched as the rest of the group went on towards a different rink entrance, spotting Mari waving at him briefly to get his attention.

"Viktoria and I are going on that carriage ride thing again." She said, "We'll be back after."

"Okay." He answered, agreeing even though he was mentally rather distracted. He turned back towards Minako then, hockey-skates thuck'ing the ground as he caught up, watching as she delicately rounded the edge of the doorway to get a toe-pick on the ice. He sighed and went around her, offering a hand from where he stood on the frost, "So when do I get to know what you told him? Cuz I have this nagging suspicion it was about me."

"It was less about you than it was about me." She said warily, more nervous about her skates sliding out from under her by then, "But like I tried to tell him, the thing he's mad about was my choice, not yours."

"This is all rather confusing. I don't like it."

Minako lifted her head, looking the elder Russian over and seeing how stiff he'd become...it was a different kind of wooden posture than he'd had from being cold...it was mental discomfort. She
huffed a sigh and took the hand still extended towards her, letting the man balance her as she let go of the wall, "That feeling that you have right now is the realization that you can't know or control everything. I'd recommend getting used to that, hun...because there's going to be a lot of things happening soon that you can't control."

"Now you're just trying to freak me out. What's going on?" He asked, more urgency in his voice.

"Mama Bear Minako is coming out of hibernation, that's all." She shrugged and smiled, awkward as it felt to do so, "And Mama Bear Minako makes her own choices sometimes."

"...Do I get a say in any of those choices?"

"Have I had a say in most of yours?"

Mikhail was dumbstruck for a moment, his mind going blank, but he shook his head to get rid of the feeling, "...I guess I thought most of the choices I made didn't really need to be debated. How many people really need to be involved in picking hotel rooms and flights? It's not like trying to figure out where a group of 10 can agree on having dinner together."

"I guess not." She tacitly agreed, "Which is why you're not in trouble at all, at least not with me." She slowly inched her way across the ice, feeling more and more comfortable as she moved, "But the things I'm thinking about right now...the things I told Viktor about...those are very personal to me, and I already know what you think about them anyway. So, in a sense...you can say your piece about them, but in the end, the decision is mine, and it's final."

The silver Russian grumbled a bit under his breath, "When can I expect to find out what's on your mind?" He wondered again.

She pat his arm lightly where she held to it, "Later tonight, after the kids are squared away. I don't want to be cold and out of my element when I sit you down." She lifted her head to look at him, "I won't insult you by asking you not to worry."

"Good, cuz I'm already offended and I don't even know what's going on."

"...Okay, then try not to get so worked up about it instead? If you speculate too much, then when I finally tell you, you'll just be mad that it wasn't as serious as you thought."

"Is it about us moving to Hasetsu?" He asked pointedly.

"That depends on you."

"...Then the Yura situation?"

"Also depends on you. I already agreed to my part."

He was practically squirming in his skates, "...Is it about the...the other thing?"

"Huh?" She gawked at him, "There's lots of 'other things.'"

"You know...the thing...that made you sick."

"Mattaku!" Minako whined loudly, dragging a toe-pick behind herself to slow down so she could face the man properly, "...Mikhail...that thing isn't even a thing to me right now. It's just a possibility. I haven't been sick since that morning, and I don't intend on losing sleep over it until I know for sure anyway, which could take another week. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, okay? At the
rate you're going, it will be nothing, and you'll have given yourself a stomach ulcer for no reason. So for now... ochitsuite."

"I don't even know what that means!" He lamented.

"Anshinshite! Murishinaide! Kimi nara dekiru!"

"I don't know what any of that means!"

"It means you have no chill! Find some Zen!"

"If Zen comes in a bottle of 40-proof..."

"Ara ma..."

.

The walk and the elevator from the car to the room was quiet, but Yuri still felt a little awkward walking the distance with his skates on. He hadn't wanted to waste time though, seeing the fatigue weigh on his husband's face, and wanting nothing less than to see the man asleep as soon as possible. Chris held the door as the key-card went in to unlock it, and quickly helped to get the Russian onto the edge of the bed.

"Thanks for the help, Chris." Yuri said quietly, brushing some of the hair from his partner's face before turning and standing fully upright again, "And sorry for the trouble. I never bothered learning to drive, so..."

"It's all good." He answered, stepping forward to put his arms around his younger friend.

Yuri returned the hug eagerly, "I'm surprised you really plan on walking back on your own."

"It's really not that far. If not for the buildings, we could see the park from here."

"We could see the Rockies from Calgary, too...doesn't mean they're that close."

"Touché." Chris winked, "But I'll be fine." He pat the man's shoulder before stepping around him to lean down towards Viktor, reaching his arms forward to hug him as well, "Get some rest, old friend. You promised to thrash us all properly this weekend...I can't very well take Gold from you when you're not at your best."

The hazy Russian nodded, raising one hand up to return the hug before Chris pulled back again and took his leave quietly. Viktor slouched back until he fell against the bed with a quiet puff, and let out a sigh of breath, "...I don't know if I can handle anything else..."

"What was all that about anyway?" Yuri wondered, sitting on the edge of the bed next to his partner and finally getting his skates off, "I've never seen you go so proverbially brain-dead before."

"I don't know if she'd want me to say...even to you..." Viktor sighed, turning his head a bit and reaching his left hand out to touch his fingers to his partner's lower back, "That's probably what's worst about this...I have to bear it alone..."

"You looked like you really wanted to hurt Mikhail." One skate went to the floor as the laces of the second were coming undone over the athlete's knee, "If it weren't Minako-sensei, I'd start to wonder if he was being cruel to her...but she'd kick him off a bridge herself in that case, so I really don't know why you got so mad."
Blue eyes stared up at the ceiling in a moment of quiet, and Viktor heard the second skate land on the floor at the edge of the bed, "He didn't do anything wrong. Not...really. Not for sure."

"You're not making much sense."

"I know..."

Yuri rose to standing and shrugged out of his scarf and coat, putting them up before returning to undress his spouse of his own winter gear. The exhausted Russian's regular clothing came soon after, and Yuri pulled at the blankets and sheets to shuffle his partner in under them, pulling them up to just under the man's chin. A moment later, and he came back with a cool damp wash-cloth, folding it and setting it over Viktor's forehead before sitting on the bedside again, "You're really burning up. Hopefully it'll go away overnight and you can get some sleep. You've barely gotten any since we landed."

"Neither have you."

"...Yeah...look what that did." He sighed, reaching up his left hand to touch at the lines in his skin, "It's hard to imagine how things can change so quickly until you go through it." His right hand went forward, brushing the back of his fingers against his partner's clammy pale skin, "I'm going to take a quick shower and get the gel out of my hair. Don't wait up for me...if you're about to pass out, just go for it."

"...What about practice in the morning?"

"Wouldn't be the first time we've missed it."

"But...your Free Skate...I promised I would."

Yuri put a finger on the man's lips and silenced him gently, "And you will. Tomorrow. For now...sleep."

The silver legend blinked at him in tired confusion, and watched as the man pulled his phone out, waggling it in the air a bit and looking quite pleased with himself.

"Phichit-kun called out to Coach Gerard and Lisa after we left Campus Martius Park. They've given their blessing for us to use the Skate Club rink tomorrow. Apparently they'd all been worried sick since hearing about the accident I was in, so they're more than happy to let us use their ice, where it's safe. Now..." Yuri leaned down then, his phone-hand going lightly down onto the thick blanket over his husband's chest, and gave him a quick kiss, "I love you. Go to sleep. I'll be back with you in a minute."

Those heavy eyelids weighed down the urge for sleep, but Viktor resisted for a moment longer, letting himself be filled with the breath of relief for hearing those words. Between Yurio's promise, and knowing they could use a different rink if they missed their chance for the 9am Official Practice, it was enough to let the man drift into sweet oblivion before he could even see Yuri stand up to walk away.
Chapter 283

Chapter Notes

Everyone seems to have gotten the wrong idea about why Minako talked to Viktor, so I added a bunch of new content to the end of 281 (after Viktor says he thought Minako was fearless) to clarify what she was trying to do. Hopefully people will cut her some slack now, since it was -my- fault it was unclear, not hers.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED EIGHTY THREE

Water dripped and flowed as the steaming hot deluge was cut off, and Yuri reached one hand out from behind the curtain to grab for the nearest big towel. By the time he stepped out and had finished ruffling it over his head, a hand-smear on the foggy mirror revealed a proverbial cactus of black hair sticking up in every direction. The remnants of Viktor's fog-doodle could still be faintly seen to the side, and Yuri smiled at it before finally patting the rest of himself dry, and tossing on a pair of light sweat-pants over his legs.

The light was clicked off before the door was cracked open, making sure not to risk anything potentially waking up his feverish partner. Yuri slid his hands quietly along the wall to find his way back around the front of the bed, and over to his side. A quick check at the time on his phone on the nightstand, charger cable plugged in, revealed that it was just after 11pm, and he pulled up the Time Clock app on his home screen. For a moment, he hesitated on the 7:30am wake-up timer, glancing over towards his exhausted partner just behind himself, and set it instead to 10:30am before clicking the screen off again.

We're lucky to be in Detroit. Having access to my old Skate Club means we won't have to worry about finding a public rink if we miss Official Practice...and I can't stand the thought of waking him up when he needs the sleep.

Five cold dots pressed against his lower back unexpectedly, and Yuri squeaked in surprise, phone flopping out of his hands to dangle against the front of the night-stand. He scrambled to lean forward and catch it before it hit the solid wood a second time, and set it face-down on top of the stand. Catching his breath from the fright, Yuri twisted where he sat on the edge of the bed and realized the five cold dots were his husband's five fingers reaching for him. With a guilty sigh, he pulled the blankets back and made his way under, scooting over towards center until he could feel the man's warmth next to himself.

"...Sorry, did I wake you up...?" He wondered, his voice barely a whisper.

"...No...I was still awake... I just...couldn't...fall asleep..."

Yuri could feel where his partner was weakly trying to turn over onto his side, pulling the left arm under himself as the right went over his chest. Legs found their way around his own before Viktor finally settled the side of his head against his chest, directly over his heart. Yuri felt the man's body go limp against him with a final exhale against his skin, in final surrender to sleep. He reached his free hand up to run his fingers through that silver hair, and settled both arms around him...though he himself was still wide awake.
Whatever Minako-sensei told him...it really blind-sided him. I wonder what it was...? She told me to get lost, so she obviously only wanted Viktor to know...but I wonder if she realizes how much pressure he was already under. It was really kind of cruel to do this to him after everything else that she knows has happened.

He reached for where the damp cloth had folded against his chest, and pulled it away to re-fold it and place it on the back of his husband's neck instead. Replacing his fingers through that mess of silver hair, Yuri lifted his head to kiss at the imaginary bald-spot, and finally resigned himself to trying to sleep in spite of his wakefulness.

Yurio clicked his phone on for a second, looking at the time before yawning and clicking it off again. The big van pulled up in front of the hotel, coming to a stop a few seconds later. It was packed almost full with everyone that had piled in at the end of the night; Yurio in his usual corner at the very back, with Otabek next to him, and Nikkita in the 3rd spot, Mari and Viktoria in the middle 2 seats, Chris and Phichit in the front set of 3, then the two eldest members of the troupe in front. Phichit pulled the side door open and quickly hopped out, followed by the rest of the skaters, and they all bid their thanks and goodnights before pushing the door closed again and turning to get inside before the cold could creep into them again. The van pulled off quietly after that, disappearing into midnight on its trek back to the MGM.

Everyone slowly started departing on their various floors, until Yurio stepped out second to last, turning only to tiredly give Otabek a side-clap of his hand as he watched the doors open, "See you tomorrow."

"Laters."

He yawned again and moved down the hall, looking for the first of two doors that the Russian team had been assigned by the ISU. Pulling out his key-card, he slid it into the slot quietly and pushed the door open after the click, careful to watch out for the darkness he expected within.

*Since it's just Yakov in here, it should be lights-out already...*

Except that there was a dim, unexpected glow that he saw through the door crack, and Yurio scrunched his brow in confusion to spot the elder coach still awake. Sitting at the room's desk with a pair of reading glasses on, looking rather nonchalant as he looked down at some papers, Yakov raised his eyes to spot the teen entering.

[Was wondering how long I'd have to wait up for you to come back.]

[Hah? What for?] Yurio wondered, a pang of anxiety shooting through him, [Normally you're asleep already. This is really late for you.]

Yakov pulled the glasses off and folded them before setting them into the small black case nearby, [It is, but I had faith you'd return here tonight rather than going back with Mikhail to his hotel. I guess you all had fun at the outdoor rink since you were gone so long.]

[...Yes?] The teen cautiously stepped further into the room, setting his backpack on the end of his twin bed, [...What's this about?]

The stoic coach just wove his fingers together and looked over them towards his skater, [When were you going to tell me that you planned to leave Russia?]

*Shit, Baba was right...how did he find out though!?
Yurio could feel a panic rising inside his chest, but he tried to play it cool, unzipping the front of his jacket as he spoke, [I leave Russia all the time.]

[I'd rather avoid the pointless banter of me clarifying exactly what you already know I'm talking about, Yuri.]

[After Nationals, then.] He answered simply, shrugging out of his jacket, [Mikhail made me an offer I couldn't refuse, but it means moving to Hasetsu.] He set his jacket down next to his skate-bag and lifted his eyes towards the older man studying him, [My skating may suffer some for it, but I'm prepared to accept that.]

[Having a ballerina with no skating experience as your coach...that's quite the risk you're willing to take.] Yakov lowered his hands, but kept his fingers together where they were, [Is Russia really such a toxic place for everyone now that half of my All-Star team has abandoned it for Japan?]

[I can't speak to Viktor's reasons, but I need this.] Yurio explained, [Even if it hadn't been hammered into me by basically everyone I know...the thing Mikhail can give me is something I've never had before. Something everyone else takes for granted.]

[You act like you think I wouldn't understand.] Yakov huffed, [But given how much you adapted, and even thrived, while the both of us were conscripted to live with Lilia last year...this is no surprise.]

Green eyes watched the older man carefully, [Mila said she thought you and Lilia might be getting back together.]

Yakov coughed and chortled at the idea, his face going red, half from embarrassment and half from anger, and he stood up with his hands flat down on the tabletop, [That never even crossed my mind!]

[...I'm not judging. You do you.] Yurio said quietly, deadpanning the man like he was overreacting.

The elder coach cleared his throat, crossing his arms and looking down like he was trying not to be bothered still, [That Mila...always speculating...] He muttered, mostly to himself, but then raising his eyes back up to the skater in front of himself, [It doesn't matter. I'm just curious why you thought it was necessary to hide this from me. You've already known for a little while, but you weren't planning on saying anything to me until you were practically on the plane to leave St. Petersburg. Springing this on me at the last second like this is more Viktor's style...but at least in his case, it's because he literally just thought of doing it 5 minutes before going through with it. You though...you're not half as impulsive as him. I'm surprised at you.]

Yurio just closed his eyes and tried to look stubborn, [I wasn't sure how you'd react. I didn't want to deal with it if you were just going to be mad at me. With Viktor already gone, and Georgi retiring after Worlds...I'm the last member of the Men's event under your wing.]

[Even so. I thought you trusted me more than this. I've been your coach for years already, not months.] Yakov finally sat down again, leaning back in the office-style chair and picking at a bit of lint on one of his sleeves, [But I suppose you've never been the sort to want people to know you count on them. No matter what you learn or who you learn it from, you always act like you could've done it yourself, given enough time.]

[Until now...] The teen twisted on one heel and threw himself onto his back on the top of the bed, braided hair spreading out across the sheets, [It's more obvious than ever that I need a life off the ice, so that I can be better on it.]
[I understand that better than you think.] The coach answered, [You and Viktor are rather similar to that end...even if you're very different, too.]

Yurio turned his head to gape at the man quietly.

[You both came to me from very different places, but in a way, you were both orphans, in your heads at least. You both dedicated every ounce of your time and energy to your art, abandoning your need for close bonds with the people around you, thinking yourselves too strong and capable to need it, but craving it all the same. Viktor just became the class-clown after everything finally settled down, while you became...]

[...Yes...] The teen looked on skeptically.

[...You became the angry bully. You resented the world and acted like it owed you something for your trouble, and when you didn't get it freely or quickly enough, you beat it into submission until it gave you what you wanted. That's why it was so obvious how much had changed in you while we were stuck living together.] Yakov explained quietly, [Because when we were between competitions, you were happy, lively, and willing to engage. You remember how you made that pirozhki for us?]

[...Sure.]

[And how you had your grandpa make the pork-cutlet flavor for Katsuki's birthday during Rostelecom, after trying and failing to make it yourself?]

[...Yeah.]

[I doubt doing so would have ever crossed your mind if it hadn't been for Lilia.]

Yurio stared up at the ceiling again, saying nothing even if he knew it was true.

[My point is...] Yakov started again, [Although I'm angry that I'm losing my remaining prized athlete, I'm happier for you than I am disappointed in you.]

The teen tilted his head again to look at his soon-to-be-former coach, [...Really?]  

[Even if you have setbacks in your skating for a short while, I know that this is better for you in the long run.] The elder went on, leaning forward against the desk again to rest against his elbows, [And who knows. In a few years, after you've gotten what you need from this, maybe you'll come back to Russia. Even someone as impulsive and reckless as Viktor eventually came back. You'll always have a spot at the St. Petersburg Skate Club.]

The silence of the drive back was worse than the road conditions, and the closer they got to the MGM Grand, the more Mikhail could feel his heart pounding in his chest. Glancing back to everyone in the van, he realized he wasn't trying to sleep by then, so that alleviated some of his nerves...who talks when they're snoozing anyway?...but knowing that Minako still had plans for later left his stomach a bit unsettled.

When they finally got up to the room though, the sleepy woman almost looked ready to call it a night in spite of what she'd said. The silver Russian stayed standing though, and kept his shoes and jacket on, as though giving the subtle hint that he wasn't going to let it go so easily. Minako seemed to fluidly realize it though, never once giving the suggestion that she had changed her mind about their planned conversation even if she was tired before it began.
"...We're going...to be back in a while." She said through a yawn, looking at the two girls as they started rifling through their bags for their overnight effects, and at Mari where she'd face-planted into the roll-away in front of the entertainment stand and television, "Don't wait up for us."

"We don't plan on it." Viktoria answered for the three of them, rubbing one hand over her eyes as she pulled the tie out from the end of her bulky, multi-colored braid, "Don't make a bunch of noise when you get back, okay? We'll all be out cold, but at least Nikki and I are light sleepers in hotels. I dunno about Mari."

The woman in question raised her hand from where she'd dropped, and mumbled something into her pillow, but was too tired to turn over and clarify, letting her hand drop back down again in exhausted defeat.

"No worries. We'll be quiet."

Nikki nodded solemnly in agreement, sitting on the edge of their Queen bed, taking a break from the rigor of getting ready for bed. She raised one hand into a hazy wave as she blearily watched the two adults make their way to the door again, "Night night."

Mikhail paused where he had the door by the handle and stepped back into the room, giving each of his two daughters a quick kiss on the top of their heads before going back, "Prijatnyh."

"Sladkih." They both answered sleepily.

As the door quietly clicked closed, and the duo of adults set their way back towards the elevators, Minako mused to herself, "I thought they didn't know Russian."

"They don't." Mikhail answered with a sigh, "One of my failings. I didn't think they'd need it, growing up in Canada."

"So what'd they speak just a minute ago?"

"Oh...the words were Russian, sure...but, we've said it that way for so long that it's practically English to them, too."

"Do they say it that way to their friends?"

Mikhail shrugged, "Not sure, actually, but I wouldn't be surprised if they did."

"You're speaking kinda fast." Minako pointed out, "Sorry you're having to wait for so long."

"Can't you just tell me here, now?" He asked, turning to face the shorter woman right there in the hall, ten feet away from the elevator space, "Or give me some hint? I'm literally dying right now."

She could almost see the man sweating bullets under his heavy clothes, and simply lifted her right hand to flick his hat off center, "You're not dying."

"MinakoIsweartoGod..." He raised both of his own hands and pulled down on the flat-cap on both sides, desperation on his face, "Please!"

She just stared at him for a moment longer, huffed a final breath, and reached to grab one of his hands, "Open."

Confused, the Russian did so, though his fingers curled away like rigid claws. He watched carefully as the ballerina's left hand came out of her jacket pocket and dropped something into his palm. A
second later, though it felt like forever, she pulled both hands away, leaving the sparkly ring there in his grasp. He blinked at it like he wasn't sure what he was seeing, and raised those jade eyes towards her.

"You asked me because you got scared, and I agreed because I got scared." She explained simply, "But I'm not ready to go there and I don't think you are either. So I want to take a few steps back, so the both of us can get our heads straight and we can take a minute to breathe a little."

Still stunned, Mikhail could do nothing but stand there, stiff as a board. He hadn't even closed his fingers around the ring yet. He couldn't react either when he felt the woman's hand touch to the side of his arm.

"Hun, we went from zero to sixty in like a week." She went on, trying to speak as few words as were necessary to get the point across, "You only got used to holding my hand a month ago, and before that, we were both so ambiguous about things that Yura yelled at us about it. It was funny over the summer, keeping everyone confused about whether we were dating or not, but looking back on everything...I don't think we actually were until that first time you jokingly asked me to marry you in Sapporo. That was last weekend."

"...I know, but..." The Russian finally managed.

"But nothing." Minako stuffed both hands into her coat pockets, shifting her weight to one leg where she stood, "We need to figure out what we are to one another, for a while, before we should even think about any next steps." She leaned forward a little, trying to look up into the man's eyes where his gaze had sunk a little, "You and I aren't like Yuri and Viktor. We can't go from being friends to being engaged by accident and have it work out."

"...I thought it was working out..." He said quietly, his voice sounding dry in spite of his best efforts.

The younger woman gave a worried look, "Maybe for you, but...not really for me. You've done the 'married and having kids' thing before. I haven't. This is all a bit much for me to take in, and I don't want to feel trapped on top of it all."

"Why do you feel trapped though...?" Mikhail asked, the shine in his eyes giving away the heartbreak he was trying to hold in, "I could give you anything you ever wanted..."

"If you catch a bird right out of the sky and put it in a cage, even if that cage is made of gold and diamonds, it's still a cage." She tried to explain, "This scare we had in the bathroom that one morning in Banff...that's already something that's grounded me for the moment. The ring...even if, to you, it seems like the right thing to do...to me, it just feels like a lead weight, keeping me from getting on with things. I need some room right now. The meaning behind that ring was suffocating me."

She reached both of her hands forward to close the man's fingers overtop of the item in question, "So for now, just hold onto it...like you did before. In a year or two...after everything in Hasetsu has settled down...maybe we can revisit this again."

"Hell with Hasetsu. In a year or two you will have already-"

Hands went up to cover the exasperated man's mouth, and Minako gave him the same look she'd given to Yuri the first day he'd been back home from Detroit, confronting him with his rude behavior towards others, "Mikhail...this is my choice. I'm not rejecting you; I want things between us to continue as they had been before that morning. In fact, I'm not even saying that I'm not open to the idea of marrying you later. But right here and now, I'm not ready to say yes. I'm sorry that I didn't have the courage to tell you that before."
The flat-cap finally fell off its tilted perch on the silver Russian's head, dropping with a light tap at their feet on the floor. Mikhail couldn't even look at it; finding the mental wherewithal to remember breathing was hard enough. He just stood there in uncomfortable silence until he felt like he could function again, and nodded behind the silver frame of his bangs.

Minako pulled her hands back then, lightly touching one thumb to the edge of his chin as she did so, and then crouched down to grab his hat, settling it back into its proper place on his head.

"...Is this what you told Viktor about?" The Russian managed to ask, reaching up to pinch his fingers over the bridge of his nose.

"It's the only thing I meant to tell him, but yes. I wanted to say the words out loud to someone who I thought would understand, and Viktor was the only one who knew you well enough, so..."

"I thought he'd be happy to know we were calling it off, given what he said before."

"He seemed fine with it either way."

"Except for how he basically said he was worried that I might react physically towards you when you told me."

Minako shook her head, "From what I can tell, his issue was that you hadn't talked to him and Yuri about your plans to go ahead and move everyone to Hasetsu. Maybe he thought you would dismiss me like he felt you'd dismissed him."

"Then why did he want to throttle me?" Mikhail asked, retracting both hands into his coat pockets.

"He got a bit too curious about why I had agreed to the engagement in the first place, if I was backing out of it so quickly." She explained, turning slightly on one raised heel and taking the man's elbow before restarting their trek towards the elevators, and clicking the Down button when they got there, then waiting, "I didn't even want to tell him that much. But, I ended up explaining the scare we had, and that's when he basically shut down."

"Does he really hate me so much that the idea of us starting a family would infuriate him?"

"I think he sees it differently than that right now." Minako said, shrugging in contemplation, "Even though I tried to make it clear that it was always my idea, the way he is right now, Viktor must've assumed you had intended for this to happen, like you'd done it on purpose as a way to secure your permanent stay in my and, in a way, his life."

"He really doesn't know me very well, does he?" The Russian sighed, still fighting back his tears, even as his throat started to cramp from the effort, "I don't even know what to do anymore."

"Hun, just...take a step back, and breathe." Minako told him, patting the arm where she held to it, and turning her head when she heard the ding of the arriving elevator, "Viktor is incredibly stressed out right now. I wouldn't be surprised if he comes to regret the way he singled everyone out earlier, once he's had a chance to sleep and recover. He even said it himself...he wasn't sure how to react to what I told him. Of all the emotions he had flooding through him in that moment, the only ones that he could act on were the ones that had been simmering under the surface already anyway. The frustration, the anxiety...he's made himself sick over all of it now, too." She reached over the click a button for their destination, and the elevator doors began to slide closed, "For now, just leave it to Yuri to keep him focused, and let them both just worry about the competition. The only thing they should be thinking about is trying to beat each other to the top of the podium. We can talk to them again once the medaling ceremony is over tomorrow."
Mikhail nodded quietly, lifting his free hand to pull the flat-cap off his head and ruffle his hair into a silver-white mess before putting it back again, "...I guess so."

"You look like you're going to stroke out anyway." Minako gave him a nervous look.

"I think I need a drink."
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED EIGHTY FOUR

To call it a 'cuddle puddle' would be an understatement. Blankets were piled high and tangled all around, pillows as well, with a few feet poking out from the bottom of the whole thing. The whole mass twitched slightly when a phone started beeping on the side table, and one long, lanky arm came slithering out from under the sheets to find it. Pulling on the device, with its sky-blue case emblazoned with poodle puppy pictures, it eventually came free of the charging cable and was drawn into the heap, the chirping alarm cutting off a moment later.

Yuri let his phone fall somewhere just above his head as he stretched out as far as he could go, toes and fingers splayed out before he finally went limp again. He pulled his arms down again and tried to find some path around where Viktor was wrapped around him to scratch an itch on his side, but found it impossible...so he just wiggled a bit until it went away on its own. So far as he could tell, the proverbial pretzel they'd made out of each other was well-wound, and it was even a bit difficult to tell who went where and what was wrapped around which. All Yuri could feel was that one of his legs was pinned down, while the other had been laid down overtop of something...he assumed it was Viktor's waist somewhere...but the way the blankets and sheets twisted around the both of them made that assumption hard to quantify.

And so...the Great Untanglement began.

...Reluctantly.

The big blanket was easy enough to figure out; it was mostly on top of them both, albeit for where one of Yuri's legs stuck out from under it from the knee down, the tip of his toes, and both of Viktor's feet. One side was pinned under his back where he supposed he'd rolled on top of it at some point, and then pulled the whole thing back over the both of them. The second layer, a thick but flat thermal blanket, was a bit more difficult, coiled up on itself like a cinnamon-twist and wrapped around limbs and waists like a big snake. Lastly, the thin white sheet that matched the fitted-sheet and pillow-cases, was the easiest of all to find and discard, since it had somehow become dislodged entirely and was only wrapped once around Viktor's chest and shoulder like a Roman sash. Yuri eventually found the dried out remains of the once-damp wash-cloth he'd gotten the night before and tossed it out like an unexpected sock.

When he was finally able to push up onto an elbow normally, and not feel himself get pulled back down by the loop of some fabric, Yuri turned his attention back to his still-sleeping husband. The front of his wrist went to the man's forehead, and was relieved to feel that the man's skin was no longer hot to the touch, and didn't look clammy either.

"Viktor." He said quietly, moving that hand up to brush some of the hair from the Russian's face, then slid it down to hold onto the upturned right shoulder, "Time to get up."

"...Mmmnnhh..."

Yuri huffed a laugh to himself and leaned in closer, nibbling at one ear to get his partner's attention, "C'moonnn..."

Viktor finally started moving, but only in half-serious protest, "That tickles...!" He sleepily whined, though couldn't help but softly laugh anyway as he tried to tilt onto his back, getting his hands in between himself and his partner's chest, but not having the heart or willpower to push him away.
Instead, he just turned his head up a little and let those soft lips trail down from his ear to his neck.

"You look better." Yuri commented idly, moving from neck to chin, then flopping to his own side next to his spouse, a hand trailing lightly over the Russian's pale frame, eventually settling on the far hip.

"I feel better." Viktor answered, "How long did we sleep...? What time is it...?" He wondered further, his right hand reaching out to find where he recalled leaving his phone...only for Yuri to pull up and roll over him to get his hand back before returning to where he'd been before.

The younger figure quickly kissed at the ring on the one finger and held the hand there between them, "It's exactly the time I meant for it to be."

"...And that is...?" The Russian asked curiously, turning onto his own side to face his partner more easily. He felt where his hand was then gently released, fingers moving up to touch against his cheek and chin instead.

"My time."

"I see." He purred, letting himself be guided forward into a proper kiss. His free right hand clasped lightly to the back of his husband's shoulder for a moment before trailing down the man's side and waist, curving over hip and bum before pulling on that leg to get it over himself. He weaved his own leg between Yuri's then, and brought his hand back up to gently coax his lover closer. When he came, Viktor let his fingers slip under the light elastic band holding the sweat-pants up around his spouse's waist, and reached within, finding no other fabric to hinder him. He smiled against the lips still kissing him, "Were you planning on this?"

"Less talking. More touching."

Viktor smirked and went with it wordlessly, feeling as his husband's warm hand slid down past his waist again, and that whole thin frame came rolling over top of himself.

Like a reversal of the first time they'd ever kissed, Yuri settled his elbows down above his partner's shoulders and cradled the man's head in his arms, both of their legs straight out behind them, slightly woven through one another, with Viktor's hands gently curved around his sides. Instead of being shocked at the moment though, and pulling up to look at one another, the kiss just went on, and the hands against his ribs softly moved downward.

To the Russian's surprise, even as both of his hands went under the sweatpants again to grab a handful of his partner's hidden skin, Yuri didn't just open his legs to it, or rise up to sit on his hips. Instead, he could feel where his love's knees came together to楔 between his own to gently push his legs apart. Before the man could lower down though, Viktor's hands went around to the sides of those hips and hooked his thumbs around the edge of the elastic, pushing a few inches of that fabric away. Half a heartbeat later, he could feel the stiff, hot tip of his partner's eagerness fall against him, followed by the rest as Yuri laid back down again. One soft push was all it took for the impatient Russian to pull himself free of his own meager confines, and raise his hips up, curling his legs around his partner's waist to hold him tightly close.

The slightly different angle of their bodies gave Yuri the sense to sit back on his knees, pulling each up to wedge under his husband's sides and lower back. He was helpless to the feeling of the man's fingers where he had them both together, and dipped his head low for a moment, trying to catch his breath. As he regained himself, Yuri leaned even further forward, hands descending to hold himself up with a palm resting next to his partner's chest on either side, forcing the Russian's back to curl a bit under him in response. He could feel the warmth of Viktor's middle-back resting against the top
of his parted legs as he rose, and finally opened his eyes to see his somewhat surprised husband looking back up at him. Those hands, though, continued at their task the entire time. Yuri started to gently rock his hips forward, sliding himself through the tight pinch of his husband's grasp, and relished in the heat and friction where their members rubbed together. The sound of Viktor's breathy gasps were music, playing out in time to each slow, deliberate push. He paid such close attention to each that he didn't even notice as the Russian had pulled one hand away, reaching somewhere unseen, and returning seconds later with something cold and unexpected.

Yuri jerked back with a surprised yip, eyes opening wide to see the little blue bottle in his husband's hand and an amused smirk on his face, "...Yeesh...you couldn't warn me first?"

"You said less talking, more touching." Viktor quipped, squeezing his legs together a bit to pull his partner forward again, "Come back here though. I'm not done with you yet."

"Maybe I'm not done with you."

"Wow~!"

Yuri pushed in close again, leaning down to curl one hand under the back of his husband's neck and head, tilting him a bit to the side to kiss him again more easily. The cold liquid against their skin wasn't quite so jarring anymore, and it quickly warmed as it was spread to slicken their fun. Yuri pulled back from the kiss then, leaning slightly up to tap his lips against his husband's forehead before sitting fully upright on his knees again. He took in the full sight of where Viktor's hands created ecstasy between them, every inch of them shiny and slick from the liquid, pale fingers in stark contrast to the pink and red hues they so expertly teased. Yuri shifted a bit where he sat, and withdrew a bit from his partner's grasp, sliding right back up into it again and even further than he'd been before, then back down again. Soon, he hooked his own hands behind his spouse's knees to push those hips up a bit further, letting the left go to take hold of himself and guide it into position...and slipped halfway inside on the first go.

The Russian immediately let go of where he still had hold of himself, fingers clamping down around what remained nearby of the blankets from before, gasping out loudly and tilting his head back against a pillow. Eyes were clenched shut against the sudden new feeling, but just as he'd felt every inch get inside him, he felt a few withdraw again, only to push back in, this time all the way, until his partner's hips were flush against him and could go no further.

"...Sorry, you okay?" Yuri wondered nervously.

"...L-less talking...more t-touching..." The Russian gasped.

Doing just so, the younger figure smiled and leaned forward, the Russian's pale legs hooked around his arms as he began the slow dance. He waited until he could see his husband's expression relax a bit, and only then started to pick up speed.

_He said he wanted our next romp to be like on the plane... I hope I didn't start too fast...?_

The way his inamorato had relaxed though; eyes closed to savor every inch of that slick friction, and each gasp and quiet moan that followed, told him that he was at least doing well in the moment. Yuri eventually unhooked his arms from behind his husband's legs and let them clench lightly around his waist instead, and leaned further over the man, lowering down until he could kiss the front of that exposed chest. The pressure of his hips slowed down a bit as he wedged his hands between the sheets and the back of his partner's ribs, kisses trailing down from chest to stomach.

On the edge of feeling his partner withdraw, Viktor pushed up onto an elbow and clamped his legs
down a bit tighter than before, sliding his free right hand behind his husband's ear and through that black hair. As he pushed higher to hold himself up on the palm of his hand, he felt Yuri's coming up around his sides, hugging him close and holding him up enough that he could let the other hand go. All the while, he kept their eyes locked, brow-to-brow, heads tilted just slightly to make room for each other's nose. Both arms were over his husband's shoulders then, elbows perched there, hands sliding against the skin of the younger man's back. The heat and pressure inside him started moving again after that, eyes still forward and partly open.

...Look into me... feel me...

Viktor was the first to flinch though and close his eyes, gasping as he felt his partner reach a depth he hadn't before. Ankles crossed behind the man's back as knees pressed in against Yuri's ribs. Those hazel eyes were still watching him though when his own opened again, and he became completely entranced. Arms held tightly around one another and the rocking began anew, with a long kiss that trailed down beneath one ear before Viktor lifted his head away and Yuri nibbled under his jaw.

With that, Yuri rocked his partner down onto his back again, never once releasing from the hug. He could feel where his beloved pressed his brow against a shoulder, fingers starting to dig a bit against the skin of his back. It wasn't long before that subtle encouragement made him go faster, hips beating against his husband's frame until the Russian's cries put him too close to the edge, and he slowed down again.

Each of them puffed to catch their breath for a moment, and the silver legend looked up adoringly at his partner, holding him close with a hand cupping each side of his head, fingers weaving through raven hair. The short break didn't go on for too long; a few kisses and lip-nibbles before Viktor pulled his right leg over, getting his knee just in front of Yuri's chest before he felt the withdraw. Everything that had been so exquisitely warm before felt cool suddenly, and Viktor impatiently finished the maneuver, using the opportunity to at least slide the black fabric of that singular garment further down his legs, now that they were together again. Yuri barely gave him that moment, hands coming around his hips to pull him up onto his knees, and mounted over his back. The Russian just folded his arms under his head after that, feeling the warmth of his husband's fingers tracing all over him, groping for every inch of skin as he rubbed slowly from behind. The tease was almost unbearable, but the younger man at least paid his front some attention, one hand reaching around his waist to massage a bit at center as the other continued the sensual stroke from chest to ribs to back, and returning to do it again following a different path.

Breaths became more ragged as Viktor felt himself being brought so close to the edge again, only to be denied. He glanced one eye back over his shoulder to see his partner, sweat starting to bead on their skin. He watched for a moment as the younger man kissed at his lower back and sides, hands sliding up and down his thighs, turning inward for the more sensitive skin close to center. Still, the man only rubbed those hips against him, teasing that length of flesh without penetrating.

"Ah...Y-Yuri...put it in..." The Russian whined quietly, rocking his hips back slightly, even reaching back with one hand like he thought he could place the man into position himself, only to find himself nudged away with a few fingers.

"What was that...?" Yuri asked, smirking and surprised in spite of it, "Viktor...?"

"...Put it in...!" He cried again, this time slightly more urgently, and a hair louder than before.

"Put what in?" The younger man teased, tormenting his husband further by pressing his hips hard, wrapping both arms around the larger frame beneath his shoulders.

Viktor wasn't sure what to do, twisting slightly onto the edge of an arm as both came up ahead of
himself again, lightly folding over one another as he rocked his legs a few inches side to side, though not really able to go very far, "...Y-Yuuuriiii..." He felt the puff of air against his skin again where Yuri had quietly laughed at his antics, but the warmth of top of the man's thighs against the back of his own then faded.

Yuri had pulled back a little bit, and teased the tip of himself, "You mean this?"

"Mmhmm..."

He could feel where the Russian was trying to back up against him, and withdrew another few inches out of reach, much to his amusement even if to Viktor's frustration. Once the man was forward to his original position, Yuri loomed over that pale back again, sliding the palms of both hands and all ten fingers down the length of his husband's sides, feeling the ridge of every rib and muscle as they trailed down and under to the man's chest.

Just as Viktor had resigned himself to the horrid teasing, eyes closed at least to enjoy the rub-down on the rest of himself, he felt the sudden pressure from behind again, and before he could gasp or clench his fingers down on a blanket, Yuri was inside him. Hands pulled back on his hips, wedging into the crook of his thighs to pull him back with each push forward. He could feel lips and the tip of a nose against the back of his shoulders, lightly tracing a line with each subsequent thrust before they were replaced by the soft tease of hair and the flat of a forehead. Arms held around his waist tighter, and the pushing became more eager. Viktor slowly forced himself up onto his elbows one at a time, then further up onto his hands, even as his husband's needy flesh coursed into and out of him in rhythmic bursts.

Yuri could feel where his partner was slowly changing the angle again; where previously the silver legend was down at the front and up in the back, it was now the opposite and getting lower against him, forcing him back down to sitting on his knees like before. Thrusts became more like rolling upward pushes, and he was more easily able to cling to his partner's back, palms flat against the front of the Russian's damp chest. After a few moments, Viktor twisted where he sat backwards against his lap, weaving an arm over his shoulder, and dragged him back down to the blankets. When they were still again, he felt himself on his right side, and Viktor was on his back before him, looking him right in the eyes. The Russian's free hand came up to lightly caress a few fingers against his cheek and chin, tilting his head just enough to make the kiss easier, and leaned in toward him for it.

That larger, but still lithe and slender frame shifted a little when the smaller wiggled a bit to get more comfortable, and the slow pressure started up again. Viktor let his head fall back, silver hair tousling against the white sheets, and he turned it inwards towards his partner's face, nuzzling him affectionately between needy gasps. He felt where one arm hooked around the back of his left leg, pulling it up and making more room. When it became clear that Yuri couldn't hold that leg up and try to use that hand for other things, Viktor opted to holding it up under his own power, and let those fingers roam where they will. They quickly found their way around his center again, stroking and pulling as well as they could from the awkward angle.

Even more than that, Yuri tried to triple-task, kissing the side of his husband's chest at the same time as all the rest, and finding a nipple where he could. It wasn't long before he could feel his partner getting to the edge for the third time, the Russian's whole frame starting to tighten and clench from top to toes. This time though, Yuri let him have that peak, hearing his lover's desperate urges for him to go faster or deeper because of how close he was, and the tight cling of both arms around his head, holding for dear life as waves of pleasure shot through his whole frame. Yuri watched, stroked, and pushed, until he was certain that every drop of that white climax had spilt out onto his husband's skin. He himself wasn't long after, hot liquid spurting inside his husband's body before the last vestiges of Viktor's tight, physical epiphany waned into relaxed torpor. He hugged his soulmate.
tightly as he felt the pleasure cutting through him, echoing out from center like aftershocks of an earthquake. He clung for as long as he could, staying inside as long as he could, as they both caught their breath.

Eventually though, the exhaustion of the romp forced Yuri to let go and roll onto his back, still heaving for air as the heat of his husband's body came away from him. He felt the subtle tension of the muscles holding his head up, where Viktor's arm was still outstretched under the back of his neck, and soon saw the man turning onto his side to look at him adoringly. It was an exhaustive move though, and the Russian flopped against him rather quickly, head resting on his chest as the man's free arm draped over to his other side. Warm, heavy puffs of breath drifted over his damp skin, but Yuri eventually opened one eye again to peek at the man, "...What is it?" He wondered between drags on the air, "It seems to me like you're halfway trying to laugh."

"I am..." Viktor answered, twisting his head to look directly down and kissing at the skin in front of him lightly before huffing that silent chuckle again, "I was just thinking about how I used to have to get you buzzed for this."

"I recall you saying I would be the one begging, too."

"Ah, how the tables have turned..." The Russian purred, sliding his hand from chest to stomach to waist and back up again, "But you've gotten so good at this, how can I not?"

Yuri pushed up a bit, and Viktor let him come, the both of them turning onto their sides to face one another more evenly, legs going between one another like before. He just looked into those crystal blue eyes for a moment before closing his own and leaning forward, kissing his love lightly as each of them draped an arm across the other's waist, "...Well, I learned from example." He said quietly, then nudging his head under his spouse's chin.

"Hmm..."

They held there for a little while, each savoring the warmth of the other as the seconds of silence ticked by. Eventually though, they each knew without saying so that it was probably time to get up and on with the day, and sighed a reluctant breath as they started to do so. Yuri sat up first, trying to comb his hair back with his fingers as Viktor slowly followed. They each gave a loud sigh before glancing back at one another and giving a knowing look.

Yuri twisted slightly where he sat though, looking a bit more energized then, "We should take a long shower...maybe sit in the bath for a while." He suggested, "Then we can go have a nice breakfast, get a fancy coffee somewhere...and then slowly make our way to the Skate Club."

The Russian smiled and nodded, "Perfecto~"

And so...that's exactly what they did. Water was made hot for the bubble bath to start, and they made the best of the rather small space, making foamy-bubble hats on one another's heads, or spiking each others' hair in gravity-defying ways, then just relaxing as the suds started to fade. Yuri leaned back against Viktor's chest while they simply lounged, the Russian's knees poking up against his sides as his own legs were stuck going nearly vertical, ankles crossed where they leaned against the corner of the tile wall. It would've been easy to fall asleep there in the warmth of the water, like they almost had in China, but the both of them had slept so well that they could keep to their rudimentary schedule.

The shower was next, and they each did their best to emulate the pre-Onsen bathing area at Yutopia, with one sitting while the other washed their hair. It wasn't quite as easy without the space of the open-floor design, or a stool, but they made the most of things. One sat on the bottom of the tub,
either with their legs crossed, or hugging them close to their chest, while the other sat on the edge of it and worked the shampoo and conditioner through, rinsing thoroughly after. That done, they both moved to standing, and set the shower-head back into its holster to let the water fall all around them.

Yuri took a moment to just stand there in the heat, facing his husband with the water spraying from behind. He slipped his arms over the Russian's shoulders and drew close, teasing a few kisses before letting them both just luxuriate in the moment. Viktor easily enjoyed every second of it, hugging his partner back all the while, neither one of them caring for the time or what they were missing.

"It's kind of like that time on the beach in Hasetsu, isn't it?" Yuri wondered idly as Viktor rubbed the soap-frothed loofah over his back, "That first summer you were around."

"How do you suppose?"

"With those outdoor showers that we messed around in. Makkachin got soaking wet and would chase us around, threatening to shake right as we thought we were safe."

Viktor laughed at the memory, "Ah yeah. We didn't do that this past summer for some reason. I guess we were too busy finding the house and working on all 10,000 of our new Exhibitions..."

"We'll do it again when the weather's better. I never thought I'd say it, but I kind of miss the smell of wet dog."

Another laugh, and the Russian leaned forward, wrapping his arms around his skinny husband, "Careful what you wish for."

"Isn't it one of those familiar smells, though?" The younger figure wondered, nuzzling the side of his partner's head where it came over his shoulder, "It reminds me of home, like freshly cut grass, or the smell of the sea."

"Mud after the rain."

"Even skating rinks kind of smell the same, in a way."

"...The smell of you, too."

"Me? Are you saying I stink?" Yuri huffed.

"Not at all. But it's an obvious, familiar smell now. Sleeping in a bed that doesn't smell like you is torture to me."

"What do you do about fresh linen then...?" The younger figure gawked.

"I throw you in it." Viktor laughed, hugging a bit tighter again, "Ah, I should've stolen one of your jackets or something when I went to Russia after China. Did I tell you that I slept in the back of the Prius there?"

"...You slept where?" Yuri flipped around then, surprised and horrified all at once, "You didn't..."

"The smell of my father's house sent shivers down my spine that time we were there together."

"Hm... Do you think it would still do that if you went back now...?"

"Can't say for sure. I think it would feel like a bad memory, but something I can live with. Why? Are you saying you want to go...?" He was a bit surprised, and pulled back from the hug as he looked on in confusion.
Yuri shook his head after a moment, "I'd only suggest we go if you wanted to go for some reason. Now that things are better with Konstantin, maybe it wouldn't be so bad to spend some time with him."

"Hm." The Russian toyed with the thought for a few seconds, but then shrugged, "A consideration for another day, I suppose. Right now, I just want to enjoy the company of the love of my life."

Cheeks went pink to hear the words, but Yuri lifted his head and smiled, "And I mine."

"Ahhh now this is familiar." Viktor mused, much to the younger man's confusion, "The look on your face. It's the same one you had last year, at the Sagrada Familia." He took a half step back and reached down for his husband's right hand, thumbing the ring there and smiling as well, "I told you last year...that in the Final, I want you to show me the skating that you can honestly say you liked the most. Do you think you can do that again?"

Hazel eyes looked on at the way Viktor touched his hand and ring, and he nodded, clasping his fingers around his partner's, and raising his left foot to push back on the water nozzle, shutting it off. He smiled and lifted his head again, "I kind of wish we were outside suddenly, and you had your jacket on."

"...Eh? Why?"

"Because I always imagined, if I had been braver and done what I wanted back then, that I would've grabbed the lapels..." Yuri answered, sliding his hands up his spouse's wet skin, until he could rest his hands just under the man's collar bones, "Not hard, or going too quickly... I think, I would've just...reached up like this, and held onto them, and stepped a few inches closer..." He was already rather close, but Yuri still made a bit of a movement, trying to imagine himself back in that moment, hearing the sound of the carolers not too far away, remembering the smell of the old church, and the warm glow of the candlelight, "...And I would've just..."

... ...

...Chu~

It was probably the lightest kiss Viktor had known from his husband, even counting the very first one he'd gotten when they were sitting in the Onsen after returning from Barcelona. Still, thinking that Yuri had wanted to do such a thing back then made the Russian's cheeks flush. Even Viktor couldn't stop himself from imagining himself stepping back into that moment though, and how he would've reacted if Yuri had done what he described. He drew in a breath and closed his eyes, smiling like it was that night again and that whisper of a kiss had really happened. His then-only-a-friend still had his hands up against him, holding nervous, shaky fingers around the dark heavy fabric of his jacket...and Viktor raised his left hand, cupping it gently over that anxious young man's cheek. The right, newly adorned with that gold band, snaked around the side of Yuri's back. He gently tilted his head to the right, looking into those cherry-hazel eyes as he got closer, closed his own...and kissed him back.

They held close in the comfort of that memory, even if it was a year in the making, but Viktor then just sighed, surprising his partner, "Maybe I should've kissed you anyway..." The Russian lamented, standing up straight again, "But I was so hung-up on the idea that I wouldn't do it again until after you'd kissed me back, on your own... You had me worried after I did it in China because you went right back to how we already were."
"Yeah I was kind of hoping you would do it..." Yuri admitted sheepishly, "After you surprised me with the ring, I thought for sure that you were going to...but then you didn't. I was way too nervous at the time."

"...We never did figure out what happened to that bag of nuts, either."

"V-Viktor...!"

The 'nice breakfast' was rather ordinary, by both their standards, and they looked at the 'help yourself' buffet that the hotel had set up. It was scantily stocked, and the wait-staff all around looked like they were counting down the seconds before they could take it down for the few hours before the dinner version would get set up.

Yuri sighed where they stood, shoulder to shoulder, and hand in hand, "I guess we slept in too late."

"That's okay. Fancy coffee is an all-day affair." Viktor shrugged, "Where did you used to go for breakfast when you were training here?"

"Oh. It's another IHOP." He said stiffly, as they stood outside that very venue.

Yuri smiled anxiously, "Well, you asked... It's the only place within walking distance of my old apartment that has breakfast food."

"Do you think anyone who works here would recognize you like at the other places?"

"Ehh...who knows, honestly." The younger figure started stepping forward, pulling his studious husband along, "Turnover in places like this is pretty high. Even I don't think I saw the same person more than 3 or 4 times before they just kind of disappeared. It's not like the sushi place that was run by a family." He reached for the door handles and pulled the glass pane open, and seeing the line of some 15 other people waiting for a table, "...Ahhhh shimatta..."

Viktor squeezed through the throng of people, none of whom seemed to have a clue who he or Yuri was...which was okay for once...and stepped up to the Host's podium, looking around quietly. A few seconds later, a hulking behemoth of an African-American man stepped out from the back, forcing the Russian to lean way back in concern, his eyes glazing over like he was having flashbacks to Vietnam to see the man's size.

"...Party of one?" He asked pleasantly enough. From the suit and the clean-cut hair and neatly-trimmed beard, the large figure was clearly the one responsible for the establishment.

"Party of two!" Yuri hollered, trying to be seen as he jumped up from where he'd stayed behind the crowd, "Twoooo!"

"Whodat voice?" The huge man asked, looking around, and finally spotting where the comparatively-tiny skater was trying to squeeze through to the front. When Yuri finally managed to get there, stiff brown eyes were looking down on him skeptically.

"You're back!" The skater said, "But so am I, I guess..."

"...Do I know you?" The man answered...asked...a thick Detroitian tone in his voice.

"Maybe you're easier to remember than I am." Yuri explained nervously, both hands going around his partner's arm to try and remind him to breathe at least, "I used to come here once a week or so
with another small guy like me. We were from the Skating Club around the corner. You were the general manager for a year or something, but then you told us you were being moved to a different restaurant."

One big hand went up to rub a big scruffy chin, but there seemed to be a dawning of understanding coming over the man, "...I think I rec'nize you."

"Really?" Yuri was hopeful.

"...Yeah a li'l bit. I can't remember your names though."

"Yuri! Katsuki Yuri! And Phichit was the other guy." He pointed to the big man's nametag, "Your real name is Joaquin, but you always told us to call you JJ."

Viktor snorted and coughed suddenly, and had to twist away a little, though Yuri pat his back as he caught his breath.

"What's his thing?" Joaquin thumbed at the heaving Russian, then moving down to check the table schedule for the next 2-seater to come available.

"There's another guy we know named JJ." The younger figure explained, glancing at his partner briefly, "He has a reputation." He returned his eyes forward, "So what's the damage?"

"'Bout 25 minutes. I can't skip you ahead on account 'a my half recollectin' you from ages ago, though. Sorry, li'l dude."

"You do remember!" Yuri was suddenly happier then, "That's okay though. We have time." He reached one hand forward to take the table-pager, and stuck it into his pocket, "We'll wait outside until this beeps."

Joaquin nodded, and watched as Yuri pushed the stunned-silent silver-haired ghost back out through the crowd and the doors beyond them. Once they were safely outside, he huffed a quiet grunt to himself, "...Them skaters were a'ways strange."

Viktor finally regained his senses once they were in the cold, and he rifled around in his coat for the car keys, clicking the fob to unlock all the doors and watching as his partner piled into the back seats, "Why the back?"

"If we're going to be sitting around for half an hour, might as well keep each other warm, right?"

The Russian just blinked at him, like that didn't make sense, "...But the car has a hea-...oh...wait."

Yuri just laughed and shook his head, "Go ahead and turn on the engine. Not like we're fighting for space on a door while floating in frigid water. We can be comfortable."

Viktor stepped over to the driver's side and turned the vehicle on, then hopped into the back to join his spouse, "There was room for the both of them, you know."

Hazel eyes looked up at him in momentary confusion, but Yuri just wedged himself between the two front seats to fumble at the fob for a second, "That's what I always said!" He made sure to lock the doors before wiggling back to where he was before, "And then she threw the damn blue rock into the ocean at the end!"

"SHE DID." The Russian agreed passionately, "I was yelling at my TV for like 20 minutes after it happened!"
"Me too!"

They both gawked at one another, like it had only just occurred to them to talk about movies they might've both seen...and burst out laughing.
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED EIGHTY FIVE

Since the car had been on and driving only minutes prior, the warmth within was quick to return. Jackets and scarves were removed while the two waited, the musings of their prior laughter still light on their lips.

Yuri pulled the table-pager from his coat pocket and set it on the skinny plastic divider between the two front seats, then plopped back to where he'd been sitting before, and kicked his sneakers off, letting them fall to the footwell behind the front passenger seat. He felt where Viktor had done the same with his dress shoes, and the both of them turned to sit lengthwise against the back seats.

The Russian sat with his back against the door, and waited for his partner to lean back against him. "So what do you want to do until the thing beeps?"

"Do we have to do anything?" Yuri wondered pointedly, still facing forward normally as he fished around for his phone.

"...Well, we're going to be stuck waiting for the next half hour, aren't we?"

With phone in hand, the younger man just turned his head to glance at his husband, and the almost antsy look on that pale face. He quietly drew in a breath as he turned where he sat, and leaned aside to rest his folded arms over his knee, and just...looked.

Viktor blinked back in him in utter confusion, "...What?"

"Shh."

Anxious and impatient, he didn't last 7 seconds before the silence became deafening, "I don't know what you're trying to say."

Yuri glanced downward, shook his head, and huffed a laugh to himself before looking up again and reaching a hand out to gently stroke a thumb against his husband's cheek, "You're so amped up. I think you've forgotten how to relax." He finally twisted around though and leaned back against the man's chest, bringing his knees up as he set his socked feet against the opposite door panel, "When was the last time you didn't think we were in a hurry to get somewhere?"

Viktor was stumped at that, "...I guess...over the summer maybe?" He offered, weaving his hands through the space between his partner's arms and sides, pulling him up just a bit higher so he could more comfortably rest

"You were pretty much on the go most of then, too."

"...You think so?"

"I watched you." Yuri explained, pulling up Instagram on his phone, "Up until I finally convinced you to hire a professional, you had us biking up and down Hasetsu for weeks trying to find the house. When we weren't doing that, we were at the Ice Castle practicing the new routines and Exhibitions. You were practically berserk for creating new content after your break from competition. Getting you into the onsen was more like putting the pause-button on you for a little while, but you never actually settled down at all. ...I feel partly responsible for that, because it seems like you've been this way since the minute I asked you to stay in competition with me for another
"I haven't been *that* bad..." Viktor complained quietly, lowering his head to lightly nibble on his husband's sweater.

Yuri just set the phone down against his stomach, and started listing things off on his fingers, "As soon as we got back from Barcelona, we were busy getting ready for Japanese Nationals at the last second. If we weren't on the ice, you focused all your energy on the fact that you could finally be as physical and flirtatious as you'd wanted to be for months already. Then the whole trip to Nationals was basically just one big game of 'hurry up and wait,' even though you were bursting at the seams with energy. Straight out of Nagano, we were on our way to St. Petersburg, and we arrived in the middle of Orthodox Christmas and New Year's week. We spent that whole time running around the city to see and do all these things that you wanted me to experience, meeting all these people that you hadn't seen or talked to since suddenly moving to Hasetsu in April before that, and working on 'Duetto' in time for Four Continents. I didn't adjust to the idea of Pair Skating moves as quickly as you did, so you put a lot of energy into helping me trust you with lifts and such, on top of all the early anxieties of us living alone together finally. I can only imagine that it must've been secretly stressful for you to have me constantly asking about your family and history during that time, because you put an awful lot of effort into completely avoiding the topic. Then that whole thing with Yurio's grandpa happened the day before he was supposed to fly out for Euros, and somehow, in the middle of all that, you got the genius idea of asking me to take you for the first time."

"You didn't though." Viktor pouted, "I had to take myself *on* you."

"Yeah, so you did *that* to yourself." Yuri agreed, realizing he'd already extended all 10 fingers for his prior examples, and moved instead to pull his partner's hand out to continue counting on *those* fingers, "Oh, and how can I forget how stressed everyone was after the RSF conference? Because after that, whenever we were out in public, you avoided your usual flirtations like the plague. I don't think I noticed at first because Japan has a big thing against public displays of affection anyway, but I still thought it was weird as a personal behavior of *yours* that wasn't normal. You were at least willing to be flirty in public in Hasetsu, short-lived as it was."

"I don't think *I* noticed. It was probably subconscious."

"In either case...you stressed about *that*." He continued on with the finger-counting, grabbing the second hand to start there, "So after the Yurio kerfuffle, you spent an *awful* lot of mental energy on basically training me to get used to the idea that you were going to take *me* eventually, and--"

"...You make it sound like you didn't like it *at all*..." Viktor whined, getting worried suddenly and pulling his hands back, curling his fingers around so they couldn't be counted anymore.

Yuri could feel the slight cringe his words had elicited, and tilted his head up against his husband's shoulder to look at the anxious man, who by then was avoiding his gaze, "I promise, I liked it, it was just still really awkward for me." He raised his right hand to cup his palm against his partner's cheek, slowly stroking his thumb against the edge of that soft jaw and under an ear, "It didn't *stop* being awkward for me until Four Continents was actually happening. I felt like I'd won the lottery twice in one year...cut me a little slack."

"...The lottery?" The Russian finally let his eyes turn, though in confusion.

"Well, the first time was when you'd actually showed up to be my coach unexpectedly. Then the second time was realizing you were in love with me, too, and that it was okay for me to admit I was in love with you *back.*" Yuri explained, leaning slightly forward to quietly speak the words against his partner's skin, then kissing that cheek as he finished and paused. He waited until Viktor gently
nuzzled him back before continuing, moving his hands down to weave their fingers together where they rested over his stomach. "Since I'd never felt that kind of love for anyone else before, it was hard to pinpoint where my love for you as my skating hero ended, and my love for you as my koibito began." He huffed a laugh at his awkward choice of words, "I think part of it hit me when I decided that I was going to cut you loose."

"You absolutely traumatized me with that bit. You should know."

"I know."

Viktor pulled his right hand free, only to curve it around to pull Yuri's up as well, making it so both of their rings were visible, "Saying 'we should end this' right after we exchanged these... I don't think anyone has ever made me cry so fast and hard before."

"...Well, as the saying goes... When you love something, let it go...if it comes back to you, it's yours forever. If it doesn't, it was never meant to be." He answered, looking at the shine on their wedding bands, even spotting their faint, difficulty-to-see reflections in the metal, "I didn't want you to think you were trapped. If you chose to stay, you did so on your own, especially since I was still of the mindset that I wasn't going to keep skating after that Final, and I knew that it was important to you. You came to Hasetsu to be my skating coach after all, even though publicly I had already made up my mind about retiring. You didn't know I was looking for a reason to get back into it. Plus, it's not like it would've been particularly strange for a guest at the resort to stay for a few weeks, without any other reason for being there other than to enjoy the sea and the onsen."

The Russian could only manage a lengthy exhale after that, unable to think of the words to respond with. He hugged his arms a little tighter instead of speaking.

"You've told me a few times that I'm more important to you than the skating, but it's not really my place to define what I mean to you, or decide where I rank. That's entirely up to you. But one thing I know for a fact, is that you love skating...you went through literal Hell for it; it's a part of who you are. Who was I to stand between you and the ice?" Yuri went on, lightly rubbing the side of his head against his spouse's neck, "You said back then that even you couldn't make a full come-back if you were coaching me at the same time... If this season so far is any indication, the toll everything has taken on you is astronomical. You're incredibly strong for having lasted as long as you did, but I don't think anyone was surprised that you had that mental breakdown like you did yesterday."

"If skating and coaching were all I had to worry about, then this wouldn't be a problem."

"And that was going to be the next thing on the grand 'List of things that have been stressing out Viktor Nikiforov lately.'" Yuri said simply, "Four Continents was the last time 'skating and coaching at the same time' were all you really had to deal with. I wish I could undo what happened after that... I feel like those few minutes of us skating 'Duetto' at the Exhibition were the last time you were truly happy."

The words felt like daggers. Only a few heartbeats passed before Viktor could see the build-up on his eyes, and felt the first tear fall from them, "...I didn't realize I've been so miserable..." He raised his left hand up to pinch at the bridge of his nose, even as more drops fell past his fingers, "...I'm sorry..."

Yuri furrowed his brow a bit, but turned where he lay against his husband's frame to look at him more easily, half-wedging himself between the man's side and the back of the seat. He lifted his right hand and gently stroked it against the side of his partner's neck, "You're weighed down by other people. If it wasn't your family crawling out of the backwoods of Russia, then it was me with my anxiety issues. It's been a rough year, with only a handful of breakthrough moments where nothing
else mattered... The trip we took back to Barcelona, when we basically eloped...then the wedding party in Hasetsu... Maybe our Pair Skate at Trophée de France, and your last-second new show at NHK. This is all the opposite of how it should be though..." He said, waiting a moment before moving his hand out from where it had settled, and used the side of his wrist to push away his partner's arm, where it was still up and trying to hide the pain evident in his eyes, "Viktor... I don't want your life to be a constant dark cloud, with little moments of sunshine here and there. It should be clear skies most of the time. I know it's hard to think that's even possible, given how long it's been like this for you...but I want to make it better."

"Short of us locking ourselves inside the Ice Castle, I don't know what can be done." The Russian sighed, snuffling a bit against the edge of his sorrow, "There's so much happening now that's so messed up..."

"Well," Yuri started, pulling up again from where he was leaning, and turning fully around to face his soulmate. He settled himself a little bit closer, the Russian's legs still parted around him from where he'd been a moment before. Left arm rested on the man's upturned right knee, right hand reaching up gently to brush away a few strands of silver-grey hair, and wipe a few of those tears away, "...Unburden yourself of the things weighing most heavily on your heart right now. I know the basic list of bullet-points, but put it all into your own words. ...And you can start with those cruel things Minako-sensei told you not to tell me."

Slate eyes blinked through the remnants of a few tears, and Viktor gave something of a startled look. He swallowed nervously, but then nodded, "She's breaking off her engagement to my uncle and she might be pregnant."

To the Russian's surprise, Yuri almost didn't look surprised to hear those words, though maybe he was just holding back his reaction for the moment, "Tell me how that makes you feel." Yuri asked simply, leaning slightly to rest his shoulder against the back-rest of the seat, and resting his free hand on his husband's chest, gently rubbing his thumb back and forth.

Viktor cleared his throat nervously, but could feel a wave of relief washing over him in spite of the guilt for having said anything when asked not to, "The engagement..." He started, pausing a moment, looking down a little, "I thought it was sudden and excessive. I originally resented how much time those two spent together anyway because I wasn't sure I wanted Mikhail around...but how could I justify saying anything when no one but me knew what he'd done before? How could I even hold that against him after all these years? Now that I do know why he took off, I understand it, and I kind of forgive him for it... But he's just going too fast with how he's trying to be involved in things. Sponsoring Yurio was enough." He explained, drawing his arms in around himself protectively, "I didn't want to tell Mikhail himself that I wasn't comfortable with how often he was turning up, not when he was trying so hard to make up for being gone. Taking on Yurio, buying the house and car so I wouldn't have to worry about selling them later, freighting all my stuff to Hasetsu...never once asking anything in return. Every day, I'd wonder what the catch was...but none ever seemed to present itself. He never asked for a thing. Being friendly with Minako never really felt like a consequence like it does now." He lifted his head, and glanced around like he was incredulous suddenly, "And how could I ever tell Minako not to like him? Who am I to tell people who they can and can't be friends with? They were only in Hasetsu together a handful of times, so more often than not, they were in Russia together with Yurio, or Mikhail was just gone, doing his own thing anyway. But they've spent practically every waking minute of the skating season together. And now they're engaged!?! 'Were' engaged...rather..." He brought his arms back in, crossing them more tightly than before, "And this insane idea that Minako might be pregnant...I just...can't even begin..."

Yuri curled his fingers over where his partner's wrists crossed, "Why does that bother you so much?"
"You should know!" Viktor half-barked.

"Of course I know why. I'm just asking you to say it out loud. You'll feel better."

The silver Russian felt guilty then, lowering his gaze again, "...You're right... Sorry." He unfolded his arms and took his spouse's hand where it was still close to him, "I just..." Viktor started, pausing to snap in a breath, his whole body tensing up, "Who the Hell does Mikhail think he is!? He can't just walk into my life after being gone for 25 years and then knock-up one of my closest friends." He practically snarled to himself, "...I wanted to take his head off for it."

"So you think he did that on purpose?"

Viktor rubbed one temple with his free hand, "I know it's absurd to think he did... Rationally, I know he didn't... Minako even said as much... Mikhail is guarded and distant with her, even if he really seems to like her. She said they've only been intimate on two occasions since they first met and that she basically had to pressure him into it both times. If that's really true, and I don't have reason to doubt what Minako said...then I can't really say Mikhail was as stupid and reckless as I accused him of being when I first found out about this. But in my head...in my heart...I'm holding him accountable anyway. It's easier to blame him for this than it is to say Minako should've been more careful."

"Did she tell you what she thinks of it?" Yuri asked, himself curious about it.

"Just that she doesn't want me to react right now, because she doesn't know for sure if it's true yet. Apparently she just felt sick one morning when they were in Canada, and Mikhail proposed to her on the spot; I guess cuz that's where his mind went, probably from seeing his late ex-wife go through the same thing. Minako said he was trying to do right by her."

"But now she's called the whole thing off."

"Mh."

"So the idea of being married to him was worse than the idea that she might have a bun in the oven because of him."

"Maybe just the idea of being married in general." Viktor sighed, "She said that my meltdown after the Short Program made her think about how much command she'd given over to Mikhail, too. It was never a malicious thing; he just likes to be the one responsible for everything because it means there's no surprises. Minako told me that she never thought much of it because it was never anything serious. But the engagement...made her feel like she wasn't going to have the freedom to make her own choices anymore even if she wanted to, and that she'd be forced to negotiate things she never had to before." He drew in another deep breath, folding one arm across himself and perching his chin in the palm of the other, "Agreeing to marry him was like agreeing to have that kid, if it turns out to be a reality...and I guess she just wasn't ready to make that choice. Calling off the engagement gives her room to think again."

Yuri nodded, and raised his free hand to set a finger against his lip, "That seems like her." He shrugged then, and turned right back around, retaking his place from before and reaching for his partner's hands to pull them back around himself, "As long as I've known her, she's never really been willing to settle for or with anyone. I mean, I never really paid that much attention when I was younger...but I recall seeing guys floating around now and then. I just thought they were friends, but I guess not, since they all disappeared eventually. Minako-sensei does what she wants, when she wants to...not many partners could keep up with her for long. I think Mikhail's probably lasted the longest...the rest were gone within 6 months."
Viktor listened, but his focus was already waning a little. He just turned his face a bit where he was parked over one shoulder again, touching the outer corner of his lips to the skin of his partner's neck. The familiarity of his husband's scent was soothing, even if hard to notice so soon after a shower.

Yuri hadn't seemed to realize that's what the Russian was doing though, and turned his head back to look at him a bit more easily, "Was there anything else bugging you?"

"Other than figuring out how to deal with that stuff...not specifically. Just the usual competition worries." He answered, following after that spot under his husband's ear that he'd been parked in a moment before, and being slightly more obvious about his intentions there.

"Let me deal with Minako-sensei and Mikhail." The younger figure offered, leaning his head back then and opening up more space around his neck, smiling to himself as he felt the light kisses there, "You just think about the skating...and what you're doing right now."

"It's been a while since we spent a whole day seducing each other." Viktor mused, half the words spoken while nibbling on an earlobe, "Teasing and touching, flirting, and speaking sweet nothings into one another's ear."

"Making love from sunup to sundown."

"And well into the night." Kisses trailed a few inches down that exposed neck, followed by a warm, wet tongue tracing all the way back up, and an even wetter kiss, making Yuri wiggle a bit and laugh at the tickle. Viktor just hugged a bit tighter, continuing the tease of his lips as he smiled against that skin, "The first time I did this to you, I think it was probably the first time you let yourself be aroused by me, too."

"I think you're right. You're very good at that."

"I still think you should've let me help you with it." The Russian teased, nosing at his partner's ear a bit, hands roaming a bit lower against the hem of the thin sweater, "I would've been more than happy to."

"Yeah...I probably should've..." Yuri agreed, feeling the telltale heat of a few fingers creeping into his clothing, pulling at the edge of his under-shirt before going right in to cup around his side and hold there. The kisses had paused there though, and he felt a deep drag of air brush against the crook of his neck and shoulder where his husband had stopped. It was only then that he opened his eyes and spotted the table-pager coming to life; several dots of red light coming on along the edges of the square-shaped piece of plastic. He reached for it and waggled it in his hand, turning slightly to look at his very disappointed lover, "Hindsight is always 20/20, but other than the immediate future, you can touch me all over the place, anytime you want, right?"

"...I guess so..." Viktor sighed, "I was really starting to enjoy this though..."

"Mh...me too." The younger figure agreed, reluctantly sitting up to reach for his sneakers, pulling each one onto his feet before turning back around to look at where his husband was sulking. He huffed a quiet laugh to himself and leaned in close again, raising a finger under the man's chin to lift his face and kiss him, "...For the rest of the day, I forbid you from worrying about anything other than me. If anything else starts to bother you, just say avocado or something, and I'll whip out my knife-boots."

Viktor blinked at him in confusion for a moment, but then recalled the first time his partner had made such an offer, and smiled then like he had back then, "I can't believe how much I love you right now, Yuri."
"I love you, too." He leaned in for an Eskimo kiss before finally reaching for his jacket, "Let's get moving though. I'm absolutely *famished.*"
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED EIGHTY SIX

With breakfast had, and fancy coffees procured, it was finally time to get to the Skate Club. Pulling into the familiar parking lot still sent butterflies fluttering in Yuri's stomach, but it wasn't the terrifying, harrowing experience it had been in days prior, so he didn't need to be carried inside a second time. He just sipped at his white-chocolate mocha with its cinnamon and nutmeg stirred in, looking at the sign above the blue-framed doors, and reached for the backpack handed to him by his spouse. A few seconds later, with the bag safely hanging from his shoulders, his hand went out again, this time reaching for his partner's. Cold fingers were woven together, and Viktor quickly reached for his double-spice Chai tea latté from where he'd set it on the roof of the small rental-car, a pack hanging from his own shoulder as well.

"Ready?"

"Mh."

The facility was relatively quiet, which was a strange thing, but the doors weren't locked and it smelled like someone had recently had lunch, so someone was around. It turned out to be Coach Gerard, and he gave himself away with the sound of his iPhone's camera sound-effect.

"I was wondering when you'd get here." He mused, looking at the picture he'd snapped of the pair walking through the cafeteria area in front of the rink, "I thought you'd come right after Official Practice."

"We never went." Yuri explained, waving as they turned to face him, "I set my alarm for way after it started. Sleep was slightly more important by then."

"I bet." The tall man stepped closer, nodding his head to the Russian legend as he passed in front of them, "You look to be in pretty good shape, all thing considered. Your SP yesterday was really good, too! I'll be using footage of the Lutz landing for years." He laughed and held his hands up, as though presenting it to some future class, "Behold...how not to land."

"Give me a little credit..." Yuri sighed, smiling in spite of his meager attempt at a defense, "Yesterday was really crazy. I had a migraine going into my turn and then did the quad instead of the triple like I'd meant to. I thought Viktor was going to come out onto the ice and eat me alive."

"Ah, so that's why you went down like you did. Pleading for your life, huh?" Gerard mused, turning towards the Russian skater, "He means well but he doesn't always listen."

"If only that were the worst thing to happen this weekend." Viktor nudged his partner with an elbow, "He's not out of the race yet though...we both appreciate you letting us use the rink before tonight's Free Skate." He bowed his head slightly.

The older man nodded, "Since most of the skaters are at the event, or know people who are competing, they're taking the day off. I was told by Lisa that the only condition for letting either of you on the ice here would be to get pictures of Yuri's injuries. It's impossible to tell what happened by the grainy footage we saw, so they were all pretty worried, having to hear rumors afterwards. Do you mind?" Gerard nudged his phone into sight again, "Or is your chin the only thing to really write home about?"

Yuri shook his head, "No...I wish that was the only thing." He set his paper cup down on a nearby
table and used that hand to pull up his bangs, "This is where the real damage was..."

"Yikes..."

The silver legend watched quietly as his husband was practically catalogued, even reluctantly letting go of his hand when the skater sat down to try and let the older coach get a better shot from above.

"Viktor did his best to hide the bruising for my show yesterday with some stage make-up. From a distance, it probably wouldn't look like much." Yuri went on, hearing a few camera-click sound effects from above, "I didn't want the judges to feel sorry for me, so I tried my best to hide the fact that I was hurt at all."

"Well, even though you're in 6th place, you're still basically neck-and-neck with the rest of the pack, so I'd say you did a pretty good job." Gerard commented, "At least there was a good reason why you only scored in the 90s at the Final this time. Last year..."

Yuri grit his teeth, "Don't get me started..."

"So how are you feeling at this point?" Gerard asked, trying to get his camera to focus on the stapled cut hidden in the forest of thick black hair, "Better every day, I hope?"

"For sure." Yuri answered, trying to hold still as he held his hair apart, "Most of yesterday morning, and the whole night before that, is a blank for me at this point. I sometimes get a feeling of déjà vu about stuff, but I can't recall anything specific about what happened. Phichit-kun and I ran into Celeste."

"Yeah, we saw her on the footage. She's missing a leg since last we saw her though. What's up with that?" Gerard wondered, patting the skater's shoulder as he stepped back to let the younger man know he could stand again, and did so.

Yuri opened his mouth like he was going to explain it...but then stopped and closed it again, realizing he was stumped, "...I feel like she told me but I can't remember what she said. It wasn't a surprise to me when she tracked me down after the SP."

"You must've asked about it when she popped up at practice on Thursday night, right before I interrupted things." Viktor suggested, "Since it wasn't mentioned when I was around, and you would've remembered if she explained it again after the SP."

"Yeah, you're right."

"How's the other guy?" Gerard wondered, sticking his phone into his back pants pocket and crossing his arms, "Otabek Altin."

"...Otabek?" Yuri was surprised, "He didn't get hurt."

"He saw the whole thing though. Must've left him pretty rattled."

"Ehhh..." The skater shrugged dubiously, "He's probably the strongest emotionally out of the bunch of us. He's fine."

"And Leroy?"

Yuri glanced up at his husband.

Viktor just grumbled quietly, "...Avocado..."
"Huh?"

"JJ went home." The younger skater said simply, "That's all."

"Ah. I see." The coach nodded, but then shrugged, "Well, I guess you two will want to hit the ice before long." He twisted on a heel and presented the rink through the glass wall, "The place is basically yours."

"This is perfect." Yuri nodded, feeling the relief of knowing they wouldn't have to share the rink at any point, but then turning to the older man, "Actually...before you run off, would you mind taking the one stitch out of my chin? Every time I brush it against something, I feel like I'm growing a screwy beard."

The skate-coach laughed, but then nodded, "Sure...hang out here a second. I'll get the kit."

"Mh."

Footsteps echoed on the polished concrete floor as the man left the big room, leaving the pair to stand in the quiet until he returned. Viktor took the time to pull his backpack off and set it on top of the table Yuri had sat down at, then moved to help pull the bag off his partner's shoulders as well.

"I hope he's not here just because of us." The Russian wondered quietly, "I'd feel bad if that were the case."

"He's the owner of this Club as well as a coach. I'm sure he's got other things to catch up on since everyone else is gone." Yuri offered, taking a sip from his drink, only to spot his husband coming around to sit in the seat ahead of himself at the small round table. He still had his lips on the mouthpiece of the cup as he watched curiously, but he lowered it down when he saw one hand coming towards the mark on his chin.

Fingers gently touched around the mark, then went up to push dark strands of hair away, slate eyes inspecting the two cuts hidden there, "These look way better than when we got you out of the hospital."

"I'll have to take your word for it. I've tried not to look."

"It was all crusted over...big chunks of clots stuck in your hair. When the nurse came in and started jabbing needles into your head to numb it and clean it all up, I had to look away." Viktor explained, "I guess she thought I was going to go down, too, because she kept asking if I was okay. She joked that sometimes the families of injured people end up needing treatment too, just because they pass out and hurt themselves watching treatment."

"I wouldn't have expected you to watch..."

"I tried to..." The Russian combed his fingers through that raven hair a few times, before settling to pull the coffee cup away and take his husband's hands into his own instead, "Even though you were out cold, I thought I could take some of your pain away if I looked long enough. Turns out, that's not how it works."

"I guess it's the thought that counts, right?" Yuri huffed a sad laugh, leaning forward to steal a quick peck from his partner's lips, "So, thank you for that."

Viktor looked on for a moment, still appearing quite serious...perhaps seeing the memory of those moments passing through his mind's eye again. But he shook the images away, and his eyes warmed a little, leaning forward to snake his arms around his spouse's thin frame. He pressed his face through
the open front of the winter coat and up against Yuri's chest, taking a deep breath from there once he settled.

Arms went up to curve around the Russian's shoulders soon after, and the younger of the pair held quietly until he could hear the sound of sneakers coming back up the hall again. When he glanced behind himself, he spotted Gerard returning, rifling through the contents of a First-Aid box. Yuri pat his husband's back lightly with one hand, and the two of them sat upright again, while Yuri turned 180 on his seat to face the older coach. Viktor leaned in close against his back, watching quietly from behind one shoulder as he held himself up with the base of each palm hooked to the edge of the circular seat, just aside his partner's legs.

"Aright, let's see..." Gerard started, grabbing up a square paper sachet, and tore it open to pull out the alcohol pad within, using it to cleanse the area first, then grabbing for a rudimentary suture-removal kit and breaking the seal on the sterile pouch, "Looks like a Halsted suture." He commented, "Whoever stitched you up must've thought you were cute."

"...Why?" Yuri gaped, his cheeks flushing a bit as the elder coach leaned in close to get a better look.

"It's the kind of stitch you do when you want to reduce scarring." Gerard explained, grabbing one tail of the stitch with a pair of fine-tipped tweezers, and pulling on it to find the loop that went under the knot, "Normally, the stitches I see coming out of emergency rooms are just meant to hold someone together, like a doll or a cadaver. They're not worried about whether you're still beautiful at the end...just that you're alive." He clipped one of the two threads and pulled the thin filament through, then inspecting his work, "But...it looks like my surgery was a success. You're still adorable. Hardly maimed at all."

"...Oh good." Yuri huffed a nervous laugh, "I was worried Viktor might leave me if I wasn't."

The Russian just guffawed against his back and leaned even more heavily against him, "You'll always be my cinnamon roll."

The older coach just shook his head and laughed, closing up the kit again and pushing back up to standing, "Welp, I'd still put a small bandage over that for when you go to bed. The cut was deep enough to need a stitch in the first place and it should've stayed in like the rest...but it's closed for the moment. No guarantees if you bump your face into things though."

"I'll make sure he doesn't." Viktor teased, "I won't allow a repeat of Regionals."

"...What happened at Regionals?"

Yuri felt a tightness under the bridge of his nose to recall it, "...I might've...run my face into the rink wall by mistake."

"Ah. Well done, Dunderfutz."

"...Dunderwho?" Viktor echoed in confusion.

"It's a thing he calls people who do stupid things." The young skater answered sheepishly, "Like a dunderhead but more endearing."

"What's a dunderhead...?" The Russian blinked.

"A stupid person." Yuri blinked back, answering almost in a monotone as he deadpanned.

"Oh...so like baka."
"...Hai."

"Suki da!" Viktor hugged his husband's back excitedly, practically repeating the same gyrating post-face-smash hug he'd given at that very Regionals event, "Let's go skate now!"

"Aright, I'll leave you kids to it." The American laughed as he stepped off.

"Thanks a bunch, Coach Gerard." Yuri called to him, raising an arm up to wave, "We'll try to get out of your hair in a few hours."

"What's the rush?" The man wondered, looking back over a shoulder as he started heading for the offices at the front of the building, "I'll be watching the event from here. I'm in no hurry. Take your time."

"Domo!"

"Spasibo."

The two watched him go, before turning back towards one another, each looking rather excited suddenly, and hurrying off to change and get their blades on. Within minutes, Yuri was tossing his blade-guards off and was blasting his way out across the frost, though Viktor was a bit slower to follow. Just as he put a hand on the rink-wall and reached down for the first rubber bar on his gold skates, he heard Yuri commanding him to stop what he was doing. The Russian blinked beady-white eyes in confusion, and was still as a statue, moving only those eyes towards his partner.

"I call first dibs on the rink." The younger man answered playfully, taking a very particular starting position where he stood in the middle of the rink. One leg was straight, the other bent, and Yuri dipped his right shoulder back.

"Wait...that stance..." Viktor gaped, suddenly letting go of the skate he'd been trying to manage.

"Just wait there, and never take your eyes off me." The younger man ordered, smiling from the ice, "I'm about to become a tasty pork-cutlet bowl that seduces hot, silver-haired Russian figure-skating legends."

That certain silver-haired Russian figure-skating legend was suddenly white-knuckling the rink-wall where he grabbed it, all but jumping over it as he watched, wide-eyed and surprised. The sound of a spicy Spanish guitar suddenly echoed from all around, and those blue eyes watched in abject fascination as Yuri licked his lips and raised his arms up, and then down, for the introductory move.

Those arms came up a second time, twisting over the skater's thin frame, and he dug in a toe-pick as he brought one hand up towards his lips...and blew a kiss.

Viktor looked a bit surprised, but caught it with two fingers on his lips.

The melody of 'On Love: Eros' kicked into high gear then, and Yuri flew across the ice. It was enough to make the Russian forget about everything else, the déjà vu of the previous year descended over him like a warm blanket. At least, until the outside spread-Eagle...and the triple Axel that followed. The blanket fell off a shoulder for a moment, but Yuri stuck the landing, and Viktor sunk back into his bliss.

For a show he hasn't done since April...he's doing a really good job of it.

The twists and turn, the spins, the playful dance of the step sequence...the perfect execution of the quad Salchow, triple Toel-loop combo. It was all a much needed escape from the true day and place.
Yuri descended to one knee, sliding across the frost towards one short end of the rink, rose up, twisted through a mohawk turn...and clicked his toe-pick into the ice.

This time...Viktor let himself trust his husband's wishes, and gave himself permission to watch the jump without the dread of 'what if, what if, what if?'

True to his relief...the quad Flip was executed flawlessly. The rest of Yuri's seduction-dance went on without a hitch, and he began the final spin to round out the end of the program. The Russian rested his elbows on the top of the rink wall, letting his wrists cross beneath his chest casually. He watched with love and admiration, his heart racing with the climactic finale of the music.

*He's gotten so strong, despite everything that's happened...or maybe it's in spite of it.*

Yuri stuck his final pose, cheeks pink and sweat beading on his skin. He panted quickly to catch his breath, and then threw up his arms dramatically in a rather lazy wave, descending to hold himself up with his hands over his knees, "Whew!" He hollered, "Maybe I should've warmed-up first..."

Viktor clapped anyway, "*Yuri! That was perfect!*"

The young skater looked up then, and smiled at his applause, bowing dramatically before pushing off a toe-pick to glide closer. He gently weaved his hands over the plastic rim of the rink-wall's upper edge, setting his fingers against his husband's sides, "I felt good enough to go for the quads... I think my head would probably hurt no matter how many times I spin, so I thought I should just go for it. Aside from that one time at Regionals, I've never landed on my head when I've fallen anyhow. I hope you don't mind..."

The silver legend shook his head back and forth, leaning down to rest his forearms on the rink wall again like before, and bringing his hands to just aside his partner's, brushing his thumbs against that cool bare skin, "Only you know how you feel. If your instincts tell you that you can safely do quads...then I'll put my faith in them, too. Just don't make me regret it."

"My instincts will be sleeping on the couch tonight if they let me down."

"Yes indeed." Viktor agreed with a smile, sliding in closer to nose his partner lightly, "But now you have to tell me how you got 'Eros' to play here. Have you been scheming?"

"Maybe a tiny bit." Yuri smiled, raising one hand to pinch his fingers together in a gesture to animate his statement, "I was texting Coach Gerard while you were driving, and emailed him mp3s of a few songs. He said he was willing to keep it on the down-low if I wanted him to play stuff without telling you."

"What else did you send?" The silver legend wondered, moving over towards the door cut-through, and finally taking his blade-guards off like he'd meant to earlier, "'Duetto' maybe?"

"...Ah, no actually. Now I think I should've..." The younger figure crossed his arms, listening to the melodic sound of the Russian Champion's blades touching to the ice and coming back around towards him.

"Well, if skating on your own is still giving you headaches, then some of the Pair stuff probably won't be much easier on you." Viktor suggested, "I don't know that I'd be comfortable lifting or throwing you right now. Even the spirals kind of make me nervous...you always go so low to the ice. If I somehow lost my grip on you, the first thing to hit would be the top of your head..."

"Yeah... Well, at least it would only be a *short* fall." Yuri shrugged, feeling a hand coming up against his waist as his partner slid around him in a tight circle. He put his own hand over it, and
curled his fingers around it to hold it out between them, "You should do your own chapter of 'On Love' next. I know you only did it once, but...you remember how it goes, right?"

"'Philia?'" Viktor asked curiously, "...Sure, I think I remember. Is that what you have next on our afternoon playlist?"

"Mh." The younger skater nodded, pulling his hands up to set them against the Russian's lower back and gently ease him out towards the middle of the rink, "It's a good song to be uplifted by. I think it'd be good for you to skate it again."

Blue eyes lifted, looking back over his shoulder, somewhat in surprise more than anything, feeling himself gliding forward where Yuri had tenderly nudged him. He watched quietly where the man was hoisting himself up to sit on the rink wall where he'd previously been standing, and slowly slid to a stop, like he wasn't sure what else to do.

"Don't you?" Yuri finished.

"...Did I just become the beta in this relationship...?"

Viktor wondered to himself suddenly, almost stunned by the idea. He turned back to face forward, and moved his legs just enough to push onward again, but then just shook his head and huffed a silent laugh to himself.

The way he's taken everything on suddenly...no, taken the lead on everything... I've seen moments of this shining through from him since we first met... These brief spasms of confidence, where he bears his true heart, even if he recoils afterward like he was embarrassed. Deciding to use katsudon as the inspiration for his Eros, poking at the top of my head before his Free Skate in Beijing last year, and the way he suddenly threaded our fingers and put his forehead to mine at Rostelecom after that...

He idly meandered around the large faded logo in the middle of the rink, taking his time getting into position.

Getting between my father and I when we first met in St. Petersburg. Then calling Yurio out at Worlds for being insufferable... It was a while before I saw it again after that though... When he told Yurio to apologize to me at Trophée de France? Or the way he handled Sophia? He's gotten so brave, even if his anxiety still gets the better of him sometimes.

The silver legend brought his arms up around himself, moving even slower then as he looked down at the scratches he'd left in the ice, tracing around that circle a second time.

Now that I think about it...he's kind of been like this since he confronted my father those two times at NHK.

He looked up again, observing his spouse there on the rink wall, like some researcher evaluating a specimen.

When did those momentary bursts of fortitude evolve into the permanent sort of commanding fearlessness that it is now...?

Yuri looked back at him in confusion, "...What are you waiting for? ...Do you need a warm-up period? Gerard won't start the music unless you stay still for a few seconds, but I can wave for him to wait if you want."

Viktor finally stopped, twisting around and setting a toe-pick down behind himself, and shook his head, "No, this is fine." He lowered his hands down to park on his hips, and tapped each toe-pick
down a few times restlessly.

*Why do I feel like I'm suddenly under his wings?*

"Ganbatte ne, Viktor!"

The Russian quietly smiled to himself, and finally took his position, descending to one knee and placing his hands together on the up-turned side.

...I guess I don't mind... *Even if this doesn't last forever, it feels kind of nice to be able to fall back a little, and know that Yuri can handle things for a while...*

...

...Yuri...

...

...*My Yuri...*
Yuri watched excitedly as the once-seen dance began, and his legendary Champion of a husband rose up to his feet, gliding around to the quiet tempo of the music's introduction. The power of it grew with every second, and Viktor's performance became more and more energized as it went.

The first jump of that Short Program was some 30 seconds in; the quad Salchow, triple Toe-loop, and Viktor pushed through them like they were the easiest thing in the world. The deep bass of horns joined the rising crescendo of the music, and Viktor twizzled his way into a Death-drop sit-spin. Standard 'shoot the duck,' position first, with one leg stretched straight out in front, then the broken-leg twist variant. He shifted his feet beneath himself, grabbing the curve of a frost-covered golden blade and pulling it up underneath himself as he curled the rest of his body over top.

Viktor rose up from there to finish it out with a stretch, careful not to let it look like a scratch-spin as he slowed down, arms slowly rising up the length of his strong frame, up above his head. When he glided out of it, the strings joined the chorus, and a new level of drum-beats reverberated through the small arena, making the white-painted metal rafters vibrate with the beat. But it all suddenly cut off; the power of the music culminating into an abrupt silence, and the silver genius slid backwards on one blade. Legs were somewhat crossed and arms out...and the Russian suddenly and dramatically vaulted into the air with the bursting reintroduction of the orchestra. His right leg sprung out behind himself at the last second, and crushed down onto the ice to help him rise up. Both arms went up above his head in turn, and he rotated four times, landing on that same right blade before arcing around to continue on.

_He still calls the quad Flip his signature move...but he's really kind of branded the quad Axel, too..._

That very move came up next, topping the end of a serpentine step-sequence...but in that case, Viktor had only done the regular triple Axel before moving off again.

Yuri huffed a quiet laugh to himself, resting forward with his palms on the rink-wall next to his legs.

_I guess that's why...a quad Axel is sheer madness, even for a Short Program. I remember how disappointed he was when he did it again in his Free Skate the next day, and it wore him down so much that he fell on his quad Flip after._

The backward-entry camel spin was already underway, twisting backward for the sideways variant, then straightening out slightly to hop and switch feet. One pale hand went reaching down for that newly-upturned blade and morphed the entire thing into a half-Biellmann spin to finish out the second level-4 spin.

The memory of those scores they'd left Worlds with were fresh in the younger skater's mind then.

_346.04 and 345.96...Viktor broke the World Record for all of 5 minutes before I stole it out from under him. The margin between our two final scores was even closer than it was between Yurio and I at the GP Final before that...and yet...I never heard him complain._

He suddenly felt a little guilty to recall it, and the big kiss he'd gotten while in front of all those cameras when everyone realized he'd beaten the Russian Legend and ended that World Championship winning streak. Still, those brown eyes looked on adoringly as Viktor pushed into the
final spin of the program; the combination.

I remember seeing the stunned look on his face when my score was called out, like he couldn't really believe it, even though he'd been cheering me on to get it. All the times he'd joked about how we'd both somehow win Gold, and it had suddenly hit him that he'd gotten Silver for the first time in six years. Maybe it didn't bother him because it was me who won the Gold, so it was a victory for the both of us given that he'd coached me.

The spin ended, and the music seemed to as well, but the quiet echo of those final few drum-beats pushed the silver legend through a few final dance maneuvers before he finally came to a stop.

Viktor wasn't quite as winded as he had been at the World Championships prior, but he had still worked up a good sweat, and he huffed and puffed dramatically as he meandered back towards the rink wall. He was happy and excited though, a big smile on his face, clearly pleased with himself, "That's how I wished I did that show before...but I guess I still technically scored higher, even if I missed the landing on the quad Axel, than I would've if I got a 3+ GOE on a triple." He said, hands perched on his hips as he glided closer.

"You think you might reprise this one for competing at the Olympics?" Yuri wondered, lifting his arms up to hold them out in offering, "We should start hearing the rumbles of team selections after we both get back from Nationals."
The Russian shrugged and slipped under those out-stretched arms, feeling them come down over his shoulders and hug around his back, pulling him in tighter as he returned the gesture with his own arms around his husband’s waist. He turned to face inward, barely touching his forehead to the side of his partner’s neck, and closed his eyes, “I haven’t thought too much about the Olympics.”

“Really? You were all excited about the idea when we were in Pyeongchan for Four Continents last year.”

“Yeah, but that was way back before I had actually come back to competition, and I was still acting as just a coach.” Viktor answered, feeling himself drawn even closer as Yuri lightly wrapped his legs around the back of his thighs, loosely crossing ankles over one another there, “The more I think about it, the less I really want to go.”

“...Eh?”

Viktor lifted his head and turned his face to look up at his partner's eyes, sighing a bit before setting the tip of his nose against Yuri's chin, "As a competitor, I mean. Like I told you before, I wouldn't be able to coach you if I'm competing, too. It would seem like a huge conflict of interest, given that we'd be from rival countries. It's not like competing here at regular ISU events, where coaches and athletes can be mismatched and no one bats an eye. But the Olympics..."

“I guess so.” The younger skater nodded, lifting his head to set that chin on top of his husband's head, thinking quietly, “Well...”

“...Hm?”

Yuri hesitated a moment, but then pulled back to look down at his spouse from his higher vantage, "Do you think, maybe...the whole idea of Pyeongchang was spoiled for you, because that's where we were then your family drama started?"

Viktor failed to hold in his surprise, but then drew in a breath and shook his head, "I suppose it's possible. But, maybe not as much as it might. You've never competed as an Olympian, so I'm not sure you know what it's like to be one while things are happening. At events like this, we athletes can all fit into a single hotel, since there's maybe...what, 150 total competitors at the most, for the biggest competition of the year?"
"...Sure?"

"The Olympics has some 700 or more athletes, and the venues aren't always ready when we get there, since they get built brand-new almost every time a host nation gets picked. It was especially bad at the last Summer Olympics...I remember people posting photos of broken sinks, half-assembled furniture, and teams trying to put up shower curtains because there were none. The Sochi Olympics weren't all that much better...and that doesn't even account for the scandal of Russian officials rounding up all the stray dogs and sho-"

"Nope." Yuri put both hands on his husband's mouth to stop him.

The Russian just blinked from behind the man's fingers, but nodded in silent agreement not to continue that train of thought, and the hands were pulled away, retaking their place behind his shoulders, "In any case...all the different teams stay together, in isolation to the rest. We likely wouldn't be able to get accommodations together, on top of the fact that I couldn't coach you."

"Well that's just depressing." The younger skater huffed, "...Though I guess it wouldn't be a whole lot different if we were competing for the same team somehow."

"How do you mean?"

"If teams are shacking up together, it'd be us and a whole group of other people. Not a whole lot of privacy. Although..." Yuri set a finger on his lip. "Since it is in Pyeongchang, it's a super short flight out of Fukuoka, so we wouldn't have to stay as long."

"... Eh, it doesn't really matter." Viktor shrugged, and leaned back to pull his partner off the wall, skates clattering on the ice where he landed, "I'd rather go as your coach and not compete at all. I've won enough Gold medals for Russia as it is. They have Yurio now."

"... You'd really give up your Olympic spot because of me...?" Yuri was stunned, letting the Russian pull him along gently by his hands, "Viktor..."

"It's not like we could ever compete together. Neither of us can just whip a citizenship out of thin air. This close to the Olympics, even if we could, one of us would be kicking someone off the existing list of considerations, and that would just make the original athletes a bit mad. " He explained, twisting around to skate forward, and letting go of one hand in the process, keeping the other held between them, "Like with the weird idea that the Koreans have to sport a unified hockey team. The South is mad about having to give up spots belonging to their known and trusted teammates, and the North sucks." They moved quietly along the rink wall, looking up and around at the scenery; the multitude of yellow-orange banners hanging from the ceiling for prior awards won by athletes who trained there, and both the American and Canadian flags held aloft as well, "And in another four years...well, I won't be competing at all anymore, so there's no point thinking about 'next time.'"

"In another four years, I'll be retiring."

"Worlds of that year would still be after those Olympics."

"I know... I was just pointing it out. You're not alone."

Viktor wasn't sure he was happy about that, and just grimaced quietly as he kept his eyes forward.

Yuri spotted it and hopped a step to go faster, flicking his blades to spin himself around and go backwards before his partner. Still holding to the Russian's right hand like before, he let himself slide in closer, and pulled Viktor's free hand to his waist, while settling his own over the anxious older skater's shoulder, "Don't look so glum. By then, I'll be a consecutive five-time World Champion, just
like you, and the both of us will be getting invitations to skate Exhibitions at all these fancy non-
competitive events, like Art on Ice or something."

The silver legend held quietly for a moment. It wasn't the first time he'd heard those ideas before...but it didn't make the idea of the both of them being retired from competition any easier. He felt as his skates scratched over the ice for a few silent seconds longer, only to suddenly shrug off the hand sitting on his shoulder, reaching to set it on his waist instead, and placed his own over his partner's shoulder instead, much to Yuri's confusion.

"He wants me to lead...? Since when...?"

"I'll follow wherever you go." Viktor said simply, "You need only show me the way."

Yuri was still perplexed, but the approach of the rink wall forced him to start moving to curve them away, and he tilted his thin frame to lean into a curve, noticing his partner doing the same in turn.

 этого... He thought to himself, *Even when I lead in our Pair Skates, it's still technically his program, so I'm just leading him where he tells me to...but now I'm actually the one deciding where we go, on my own? I haven't done that since I learned Ballroom dancing years back..."

Still, that instinct helped him adapt to the situation, and he did his best to glide them through some rudimentary maneuvers, "Sorry...I'm not used to doing this kind of thing on skates..."

"You're doing fine." Viktor reassured, "Just like when you made those changes to our Pair Exhibition at NHK last weekend."

"Oh!" The younger skater had practically forgotten, his cheeks flushing a bit, "Wow, yeah... I was so worked up about everything else..." He glanced down at that memory, but then shook his head and raised his eyes again, nodding, more assured than before, "...Do you know the moves to a Waltz?"

The Russian huffed a laugh, his eyes smiling, "Do I know a Waltz?"

"Ah..." The younger spouse's face went redder than before, "You're right. Stupid question. We've just never done a regular dance like that before."

"Maybe we should start." Viktor suggested excitedly, perking up a bit from his glumness from before, and standing up a bit straighter, "Show me what you've got, Yuri." He said, holding their upturned hands a bit higher and bringing his boots together where they had paused, "I feel like I've only seen the tip of the iceberg with some of your moves."

"Okay then..." He answered nervously, brushing his hand up from his husband's waist to just behind a shoulder-blade, and setting his feet together as well, effectively putting them toe-to-toe with each other. He swallowed and looked up into those crystal eyes, but then let instinct take over, pushing forward on a toe-pick to make the man step back...and twist slightly to the right, each extending their foot in that direction before setting it down. They moved through fluidly, their feet apart; at the same time, Yuri clicked his right foot to bring it back towards the left, and Viktor did the same with the opposite feet, putting them both toe-to-toe again.

"One two three...forward, side, together..."

Yuri stepped back wide then, arcing his right foot towards the inside aspect of their little stepping-box, and pulled his husband along. They were back in their starting places, feet apart...and brought the farther one back to center.

"Four five six...back, side, together..."
And again, Yuri pushed forward.

One two three...forward, side, together...

And once more, he pulled back.

Four five six...back, side, together...

As they repeated it a few times on their toe-picks, getting used to the feel of the steps, they started to lean back on their rockers, swaying their stepping-feet further away and holding it out instead of setting it down right away. When they changed feet, it was fluid, and the box suddenly became the entire rink.

Eventually though, Yuri couldn't help but slow it down and shake his head, highly entertained by the whole thing, "Gerard is probably wondering if we're on drugs or something."

"Why? I was having fun...!"

"Me too." The younger nodded, keeping their hands together as he started moving them back towards center, "But I originally had something else in mind. Maybe you'll be interested...you probably know a few steps."

"Sounds like more scheming." Viktor laughed, letting go to skate a wide circle around his partner where Yuri was taking position in center. He watched as his spouse took a rather familiar stance; weight on the left blade, right slightly behind it with the toe-pick down to hold him still, and a lowered head, "Ah...an old favorite."

"I think so." Yuri mused, holding for a few seconds and hoping Gerard was still watching.

To Viktor's surprise though...it wasn't the hum of 'Aria' that started to play high above. It was the piano of a much more recent venture, "'Yuri on Ice!'" He exclaimed, whipping his head around to watch as the skater started to raise his hands up in front of himself, right slightly closer to himself than the left, then looking up slightly as he spread his arms out to the side.

Yuri pushed away then, skating a wider circle as the melody above continued, "You going to join in or just watch?"

"Oh!" The Russian could hardly believe he'd just been standing there gawking, and quickly fell in line close by. The movement pattern came back to him rather quickly, even though it had been a while since he'd last seen or helped practice it.

They slid through the increasing tempo of the piano, the pause, and the new beginning with the deep, bass-like pull on the lower-toned keys. The dance steps, the jumps, the spins, the addition of the violins...and then the music got quiet again.
They glided across the ice, arms outstretched, before pulling them in again and dipping low together, right leg trailing behind. Rising up, twisting around...the long Ina Bauer, and the triumphant bursting out again.

_Every time I hear this song, it means a little something different to me._

They could almost hear that crowd again from the end of both the Barcelona Final, and the Helsinki Worlds event. The roar was powerful...and then went silent, as the pair vaulted through their side-by-side quad Flip. The final combination spin was all that remained, and when all was said and done...the sit-spin rising into an upright scratch spin...they raised their hands out towards one another, and puffed a few breaths as they smiled for the end of the performance.

Viktor was the first to move, reaching his extended hand out for his husband's and curling his fingers around the others, pulling the man closer, "That was a lot of fun, too. What other songs did you send?"

"The ones we're supposed to be practicing." Yuri laughed, still trying to catch his breath, "For the next few hours...we should probably focus on what we came here to do."

"...Probably." The Russian agreed, raising a hand to scratch at the back of his head, the other settling on his hip. He then crossed his arms though, and gave that certain look on his face that he got when he was ready and confident, "...Saaaa~ Ikuzo!"
Chapter 288

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED EIGHTY EIGHT

The hours seemed to fly by, each skater taking their turn to go through their Free Program, and then back up to make improvements or changes. By the time Viktor's stamina ran dry, he collapsed from his final pose and just went down to his back in the middle of the rink, heaving for breath.

Yuri clapped and glided over, descending to one knee as he got closer, "You look like you're about done."

"Haah...yeah...hahhh...very done..."

He stretched a hand down to press against his husband's chest, and the figure-hugging black workout shirt he'd been wearing, with its Russian-flag-colored lineart of the double-headed eagle crest emblazoned on the back, the wings curving around to the front. The thin elastic material was cold and damp though, and Yuri made a face, "You're all cold and sweaty. We should shower before leaving."

"What? You...haahh...don't want me all gross and wet for tonight...?" Viktor laughed in spite of his urgent need for wind. Just as he took that hand from his chest, feeling where his partner was moving to help hoist him up, he pulled down just hard enough to put Yuri off balance, and pulled him right down on top of himself. Half a second later, their positions reversed, and the victorious Russian was looking down on his flustered and surprised spouse, "How do you like me now...?"

"You're still cold and sweaty." Yuri answered, though he played along anyway, pulling his one hand free to raise them both up around his partner's sides and hugged him there around his lower back, "But I guess that's okay for now."

Cool blue eyes looked on, and the Russian smiled, "That's good."

"Sou ka?"

"Mh." He nodded lightly, closing his eyes then and lowering himself down, setting the full length of his cold and sweaty self over his husband's frame, and kissed him. He could feel the sharp inhalation from his partner as their lips touched, and the tighter squeeze of those arms around his core, and it just made the silver Russian smile all the more. When he finally pulled back, it wasn't very far, nuzzling his partner's nose adoringly, "Hmm... Did that count as a do-over?"

"Of Beijing?" Yuri huffed a single quiet laugh, "I'd call it the sequel."

"A sequel?" Viktor echoed, "Aren't sequels usually worse though?"

"...Okay, maybe the second in a trilogy then." The younger skater corrected sheepishly, raising up his outside leg, bent at the knee, "I'll be anxiously awaiting the next time you knock me onto my back on the ice. To finish out the series."

"Why only three?" The Russian mused, pushing up to his hands, and then his knees, to start rising back to his feet again. Once sitting on his haunches, he set his left hand on his thigh and offered the right to his partner, "I'll bowl you over onto the ice as many times as you like."
"All things in moderation." Yuri explained, taking the hand and letting his partner hoist him back up to his feet, then snaking that same arm behind the man's hips, "Sometimes the absence of something is more tantalizing than the something itself."

They started making their way towards the cut-out for the rink doorway, when Viktor suddenly dug in a toe-pick and stopped in his tracks, "...Wait...are you saying my kisses aren't exciting anymore...?" His voice all-but cracked at the end, rivers of tears comically trailing down his face suddenly in panic, "Yuri...!" He whined, looking rather heartbroken.

"V-Viktor!?!" The younger figure spun around suddenly, waving his hands around frantically, "That's not what I meant at all!"

The Russian still slid back down to the ice, practically curling up into the fetal position on his side, "My husband thinks my kisses are boring!"

"I didn't say that!" Yuri was on his knees then, rising and falling in dramatic and apologetic bows, "That's not even close to what I meant!"

"...I can't recover from this..."

Yuri set his hands palms-down onto the ice, glowering down at his weeping spouse, "All I meant was that if you do it too often, it won't be a surprise anymore! I mean, you're all about surprises! If bowling me over becomes too routine then I'll start to expect it!"

Viktor at least rolled onto his back, his shoulders lightly splashing into the puddle of his own making, looking up with those tear-filled eyes to his upside-down husband, "...So you don't think...my kisses...are boring...?"

"Tondemonai!" Yuri insisted, "How could kisses from you ever be boring!? I still get flutters in my gut when you do it!"

"...H onto...ni...?"

"Mochiron desu!"

Crystal eyes kept on looking, only to suddenly fill with a brand new deluge of tears, and the Russian reached up both arms to grab his husband's head, pulling him down to squish the man's face against his chest, "Yuri doesn't think my kisses are boring!" He brought his knees up together for good measure, skates kicking up and down, slowly back and forth.

The younger man flailed at the unexpected gesture, but could do nothing more than ask 'who are you even talking to!?' in muffled words where his face was mashed against cold-and-wet fabric.

By the time they'd finally made it into the locker-room to change and clean up, Viktor had finally stopped crying, but he was clinging to his partner's back with his forehead on one shoulder like he wouldn't know where to go if not guided. Yuri eventually sat him down on one of the benches, taking his own place next to him to start pulling his skates off. The Russian went the opposite way, trying to peel out of his cold-and-cooling clothing...but Yuri could see that he'd stopped in the middle of things out the corner of his eye.

"...Yuri..."

"Huh?" He glanced up, only to spot his husband in a tangle of dark fabric and limbs, "...Ussou...!"

Viktor's eyes were still visible through the neck-hole in the top, but the sleeves and trunk of the shirt
were all tangled around him, "...I'm stuck."

"How did you even manage to get like this...?" Yuri asked, still gaping at the man as he stood up with only one skate off, leaning forward to examine him, "Oh, no wonder, you stuck your hand through the neck-hole. Why would you even do that?"

"...I think I slipped. The whole thing is stuck to me like glue," Viktor lamented, "My fingers are starting to tingle though. Help a guy out?"

"You're hopeless." Yuri shook his head and laughed to himself, but went to the task of untangling his knotted-up husband from his confines. With a few clever tugs, the man was at least in normal anatomical position again, and Yuri could pull on the base of the shirt to literally peel it off the Russian's trunk and arms. The vestment practically snapped like an elastic once it was finally unraveled and came off the end of Viktor's hands, "There. You're free."

"...Yatta~!"

"Hm..." The younger figure pulled the sleeves through so the garment was right-side-out again, looking at the design carefully, but then asked something entirely unrelated, "You've been speaking a lot of Japanese this weekend."

"Am I wrong to?" The silver Russian wondered, reaching for the soggy practice shirt and setting it aside before pulling one leg over the other to start working on the laces of his skate, "I live in Japan now..."

"I suppose that is a fact." Yuri nodded, retaking his seat to finish with his own skates, "I guess it just makes me a bit self-conscious that I never picked up that much Russian when we were living in St. Petersburg."

"We were only there for just over two months. I've been in Japan for almost two years. If not for most people speaking English in Hasetsu for my sake, I'd probably be fluent by now."

"I guess that's true, too." The second skate came off, and Yuri moved to peeling his loose, light-grey t-shirt off, "Do you need me to practice with you more? I could ask my family to speak in Japanese more often around you, too, if you want."

"...Maji de?"

"Sono tori."

"It's not too much trouble?"

"How else will you learn?"

"What about the writing...?"

Yuri blinked at him, "Er...well, I could teach you the basics, but I don't know that I'd be so good at explaining Kanji." He admitted nervously.

"Why would it be so hard? They're basically just pictograms, right? Like, each one means a specific concept."

"Eh...generally speaking, sure... Most Kanji denote a certain sound that you make, and it can change depending on where you see it in a sentence." He tried to explain, thinking of some way to make it sound coherent, "For example...the character 'yama.' On its own, it means 'mountain,' and usually
that's how you pronounce it, like the name 'Yamaguchi.' But if you put 'yama' at the end, it can be pronounced as 'zun,' as in the word for volcano...'kazun,' or 'fire mountain.' If you were actually talking about a volcano and said 'kayama' instead, because of the characters used to write it, people would look at you funny, since it means nothing on its own. Usually 'kayama' is a surname."

"...That sounds easy enough."

"Do that with some 2,000 commonly-used Kanji." Yuri deadpanned him, "That's the level for people coming out of high-school."

The Russian just blinked back, turning to look ahead of himself a moment later, "...Wow...2,000..."

"That's the bare-bones basics. Most people know more than that, depending on what they're interested or specialize in."

"How many do you know...?" Viktor wondered, pulling off the first skate and reaching for the second.

"Probably not as many as I used to, since moving to here before and staying for so long." The younger figure answered, packing his blades safely away in his backpack, "If you don't use it, you lose it. I had zero need for my Japanese while I was living state-side, so I lost most of my accent and probably half my Kanji-fluency in the process. I'm sure I've picked a bunch of it back up since moving back to Hasetsu though, but I know I'm still lacking in places."

"...Cyrillic is much easier." The Russian said proudly, "Only 33 characters and each word is clustered together, so all you have to do is say the cluster out loud to know what word it is."

"If you can pronounce the cluster." Yuri teased, "That whole time we were in St. Petersburg, every time we passed a stop-sign, I'd look at the Cyrillic (стоп) and read it in my head like the letters were English, so it would come out like 'ki-ton' or 'see-ton.'"

Viktor tried to hold in a laugh, but was failing miserably at it, "...The Russian word for 'stop' is also 'stop.' That's literally what the signs were saying. Those four Cyrillic letters correspond with S, T, O, and P."

The younger skater's cheeks went pink to hear it, "...The whole time, huh?"

"Mhm."

"Hm."

Viktor couldn't hold it in anymore and just burst out laughing, reaching an arm over his husband's shoulders to pull him into it, though Yuri just gave a nervous and embarrassed smile, "Ki-ton, Yuri."

"Stop it."

"Ki-ton!"

"Yameteeeeee!"

In spite of the relentless teasing, something Yuri knew he'd probably never live down, the duo eventually made it over to the showers to hose-off the afternoon's sweat and sock-lint.

"Careful," Yuri warned, standing back a bit with his arms crossed, "The water that comes out of those shower-heads is more like a dagger-spray."
"Hm...sou ka." The inquisitive Russian noted, side-stepping a bit to avoid the initial blast and pulled on the wall-faucet to start the torrent. He held his hand into the watery hiss, "It feels okay."

"You have your hand way down here though." The younger man pointed out, imitating where his partner had just tested the spray, "It has a chance to soften by the-...Viktor."

"Everything is okay." He explained stiffly, stepping right into the rush, and smiling nervously, "This is fine."

Yuri raised an eyebrow and stepped closer, holding his hand out, "...This is freezing cold!"

"I substitute your reality and replace it with my own." The frozen skater answered.

"How are you even standing under that!?"

Viktor answered that by reaching forward suddenly and pulling his spouse into the cold spray, "It's like Epiphany in St. Petersburg!"

"Idon'tknowwhatthatisohmygodit'scoldit'slikeneedlesinmyskin."

The Russian just kept grinning, holding his squirming husband in place, "They cut holes into the ice over the River Neva and people jump in to celebrate the Baptism!"

Yuri finally wiggled free and scrambled towards the nearest tile-covered wall, shivering terribly and gaping at the silver legend still standing in the frozen-cold water, "Th-th-tha-a-a-a-t's...cr-crazy! Wh-who w-w-would j-jump into a f-f-frozen riv-ver!?

Viktor smiled and pointed at himself. "Oh...of-of c-course y-you've d-done it-t-t-t..."

"Plenty of people in St. Petersburg do! Some just for novelty's sake!" He explained, though finally turning around and twisting the nozzle to make the water warm up some, and then waiting a moment before reaching his hand out, "It's hot now, I promise."

The younger figure was still somewhat skeptical, giving his partner a look. But, he could soon feel the water warming at his toes, and the frozen fog changed over to heated steam. The chill of not being under the water was suddenly worse than being out in the open, and he finally accepted the invitation.

With the spray-down being a swift venture, the pair weren't long in getting dried and dressed again after that. However, even though they'd styled their hair for competition, they weren't leaving in their team track-suits.

Yuri clicked into his phone and looked at the numbers that appeared on the screen, "It's about 4:30 now. Plenty of time."

"It's handy that the place we're going is right next to the hotel." Viktor agreed, sliding his arms into his winter long-coat, a dark-grey suit concealed beneath it, "There won't be any surprises getting to the Free Skate afterwards."

"This place even offers shuttles straight from their venue to the arena." The younger man went on, slinging a scarf around his neck and shoulders over his own buttoned-up jacket, "It's practically designed for people who are here just for events."
"That's handy."

Coach Gerard was waiting at the exit for them, hands on his hips, reaching the right forward towards Yuri, "Good luck tonight, kid. The competition is pretty stiff, but I think you stand a good chance at getting Gold anyway, given what I saw earlier."

He nodded and accepted the hand, shaking it once, "Domo."

The older man then reached that same hand towards Viktor, "Good luck to you as well, and thank you for helping him get this far. Celestino did his best, but it's clear Yuri needed a special touch to really motivate him."

The Russian smiled and nodded, knowing better now than to make a wry joke out of those chosen words, and shook the hand, "It was always my pleasure. Thank you again for letting us skate here this afternoon. I got to experience a little bit of Yuri's past that I might never have otherwise."

"Maybe it'll be me thanking you soon. Not every Skate Club can brag about having two World Champions skating on its ice, never mind the blades of Viktor Nikiforov. Now, we can. It might inspire more aspiring skaters to come and train at our rink, knowing you were here with Yuri."

The younger skater was beaming with pride, setting a hand against the lower part of his husband's back, "We'll come back tomorrow and say hi to the rest, before the Exhibition."

Gerard nodded, "I'll tell everyone. See you both then."

The pair nodded, and waved one last time as they pushed through the doors towards the outside, reaching an arm around one another as they walked out into the winter winds.

Watching from inside, the older Coach clicked the doors locked, and stood by until he spotted the skaters get into their car. He couldn't help but reminisce about all those past days where he'd spotted Yuri fawning over the Russian's skating; watching videos of jumps to learn by, reading magazine articles that featured the legendary genius' exploits, and all the times he'd been so excited to depart from the Skate Club to some event where they would share the ice.

All those years you idolized Viktor, and wanted to be just like him. I don't think it ever crossed your mind though that you'd ever be his peer, never mind his equal one day. But, the distance you've come since that last time you were training here...how you left this place utterly heartbroken and devastated. It just goes to show, no matter how much potential you have...

The pair had paused behind the car, putting their gear into the back alongside the rest of the things they'd brought. They exchanged some words, unheard by the man inside the building, then parted to go to their respective sides of the vehicle before getting in. The brake lights came on soon after, followed by the white 'reverse' lights as the car pulled out of its spot and started to arc around.

...If you don't have the right kind of support system to back you up, and help keep you in the fight, you'll always be limited in what you can accomplish. No one can make it alone.

PULLING UP TO THE FAMILIAR SIGHT OF THE GM RENAISSANCE CENTER, AND THEIR HOTEL LOOMING HIGH ABOVE, IT WAS EASY TO SPOT THE FRONT OF THEIR TARGET RESTAURANT. THEY'D PASSED IT A NUMBER OF TIMES IN THEIR COMINGS AND GOINGS SINCE ARRIVING IN THE CITY. AFTER ALL, THE ENTRANCE TO THE VENUE WAS MAYBE 50FT UP THE ROAD FROM THE MARRIOTT'S MAIN ENTRANCE.

The signs for the Joe Muer Seafood Valet Parking placed the rental vehicle directly under the
covered bridge that connected the hotel with the Public Parking Garage across the street. They each stepped out, got their Valet ticket, and made their way under the distinct red arch above the doors. Within was a large lobby with a checker-board-styled tile floor directly in front of the restaurant front, and a big spiral stair-case that lead to an upper level.

With the indoors being much warmer than the out, the duo helped one another out of their jackets, each holding their own over an arm before making their way towards the final set of doors. Those were pulled open by waiting staff, who held their hands towards the interior.

"Welcome, Mr. and Mr. Nikiforov."

"Oh! They know us!" Viktor fawned in a whisper, drawing nearer to his husband as their jackets and scarves were taken, "Are these people skating fans?"

"I imagine they're fans of anything that brings them revenue." Yuri whispered back, "This weekend, it happens to be us."

Within, the wide checker pattern on the tile floor became smaller, with each tile a different color rather than grouped into clusters. The walls to the right were like wood-grain, and to the left, glass walls with half-high interior curtains that cordoned off private dining rooms for larger groups.

"Welcome to Joe Muer's." A host on the other side of a podium asked, getting their attention, "We already have your table ready. Please, follow me."

"Wow~!" Viktor fawned again, "When you said you'd made a reservation, I thought it would just be the normal fare...this is actually pretty impressive so far."

"What, do you think I just made this reservation today?" Yuri wondered, leading his partner along through the corridors that lead past a small waiting area, and an odd drift-wood sculpture. On the wood-grain walls were a number of old black-and-white photos, and paintings of fishing boats. They veered to the left, passing a large sports-type bar with television sets above the serving area, and a long buffet-style display case filled with ice and different seafood options; mussels, lobster, crab, oysters, shrimp, and the like. Walls were replaced with the high backs of booth-style seating, with another level of glass wall above them, and small curtains along their length. The boots were black at first, then red along the far wall, past an open space where a duo of musicians, a cellist and a pianist, had been set up. At the start of the red-backed booths, a single table had been set up, with a moderate distance between it and the next nearest tables. To Viktor's delight and surprise, the pianist started playing a familiar tune.

[Stay Close To Me/Stammi Vicino (DUETTO) ~ YURI ON ICE EP 12 / Piano ver. - Rui Ruii the Seal Pianist]

They hadn't even been seated yet before the ecstatic Russian was frantically tapping his partner's shoulder, trying to get his attention, "Yuri! Yuri he's playing Duetto! Yuri~!"

Other patrons had started to take notice, first to the music change, and then to the silver-haired man who was all-but bouncing off the walls with excitement. Many of them started clapping as they noticed the pair finally getting to their little table.

Viktor suddenly grabbed Yuri's head in surprise, hugging it close to his chest and gawking in all directions, "What in the world is going on? This isn't a regular reservation! Yuri!"

"Mphrpmphr!"

Blue eyes turned to look at the hapless younger man, seeing arms up and initially flailing, only to
droop low in surrender, "...Oh! Sorry!" He let go quickly and straightened out his husband's disheveled hair and suit jacket.

"I made this reservations months ago." Yuri finally managed to explain, pulling his tie a bit tighter to put it back into its prior place, then taking his seat, putting his back towards the musicians. He watched his anxious and excitable husband take the seat across from him, in the booth portion, facing both him and the duet of instrumentalists, "As soon as the triplets announced that the Final was being held here, I started getting ideas about what to do. It just kind of snowballed from there." He smiled, his cheeks flushing a bit as they each took menus from the host, "I made sure to call when it was the middle of the night back home, so there was less of a chance of you overhearing...and when I told the person who picked up that we were competitors for the Final, I was handed off to someone in management. The next thing I know, I'm being asked if we want live music, and if it would be okay that the musicians learn some of our old songs. Naturally, I said that was fine, and I gave them a few of the new ones, too." He looked back over his shoulders, spotting the other diners who were, in turn, looking back at them. He turned towards his partner again, "I bet a big number of people here this weekend are also here for the Final...so they were clapping because they recognize us."

A few seconds later, short red-chestnut box was placed in front of each of them, followed by a 6in high flute. Much to Viktor's shock, alcohol was poured into each of them, "...I thought...you didn't want to drink before competition?"

"I asked them to bring us one glass each, and not to take any other requests from either of us." Yuri explained, "And I know that sweet-potato shōchū is your favorite thing from back home...so...I asked them to make sure they had a bottle for us."

"Wow~!" The silver legend reached for the glass, "You really thought of everything." He paused though and looked over-top of it, "...Weren't you originally planning for this stuff to happen yesterday though?"

"I thought we'd do stuff with friends yesterday. We kind of did...it just wasn't what I had had in mind. For obvious reasons."

"Oh..."

Yuri saw the expression on his husband's face change, and leaned his hand across the table to get the man to look up again, even if only slightly, "What happened isn't your fault. There was nothing you could've done to change it."

"...I could've at least remembered our engagement anniversary..." Viktor sighed, setting the glass down again in its little wooden box.

"It's okay! Really!" The younger man tried to reassure, finding his spouse's fingers as they left the shōchū flute, "There were a lot of things going on all summer and fall. You had a full plate."

"...I'm sure I thought about it even then. It just...after things started happening...all I could do was just think about things one day at a time...and I got lost in it all..."

The music around them changed after the piano solo of Duetto ended. This time, the cellist took part.

[Tribute to 'Yuri! on ICE' (Yuri! on Ice Theme Song) - Retrospective]

The instantly-recognizable melody of 'History Maker' started up between the two musicians, and Viktor was caught between his melancholy and wanting to be happy.

"Viktor...this is something I wanted to do for us." Yuri started again, trying to get the man's mind
back to where it had been a few moments prior, "I actually had spies all over Hasetsu keeping an ear out in case anyone overheard you trying to make your own plans. The longer things went without any news, the more I thought you might try to do something spontaneous once we were here, like you usually do. Then crap started hitting the proverbial fan, over and over again, and the anniversary got pushed out of both of our minds. If not for the fact that I'd gotten an email back home confirming that we were still coming, it might've slipped my mind, too, especially after I was such a dingus on Thursday and got run over."

The melody of 'History Maker' fluidly morphed into 'Eros' suddenly, which made the Russian give off a reluctant smile.

"We'll have a little time at home to decompress once we're done here tomorrow." Yuri offered, "You can take the lead on planning for our wedding anniversary before Worlds if you want. March 16th. I think that one's a slightly bigger deal anyway, right?"

'Eros' quickly changed over into 'Aria' briefly...and the piano introduction from 'Yuri on Ice' started to play within it, fusing the two songs together.

Viktor raised up his other hand, covering his mouth with it as he heard the song go on. When the cello faded down to just the piano, tears fell from his eyes, and he choked a reluctant breath, lowering his face down to avoid being seen.

Not that it did anything to stop Yuri from noticing, and he quickly rose from his seat, moving around to put his arms over his husband's shoulders, pulling his brow to one shoulder, "...Viktor..."

"...I don't...know how much more of an emotional wreck I can be at this point. I'm reduced to tears over music now..." He answered against shaky breaths, fingers reaching up to curl lightly around his partner's sides, "I'm sorry...that I'm not stronger..."

"I've told you once before that you're the strongest person I know." Yuri explained, rubbing one hand across his husband's back, "But you've been strong for so long now. Every little thing that's happened so far this season has been whittling away at you. 'Death by a thousand cuts' is still death in the end though...and you, of all people, need time to rest and recover. So let down and take it easy for a bit. It's just us now. We'll tear up the ice at tonight's Free Program, and we'll get up on that podium after that with our SkateSon...and tomorrow at the Exhibition, we'll do that Team Skate we've been planning since France. Then we can go home, curl up with our dog, and sleep for a whole week."

The Russian snuffled a bit, but pulled back and nodded weakly, "...That actually sounds really good right about now..." He leaned back against the booth and slouched a bit, reaching his hands for his partner's where Yuri had sat next to him, hands in his lap, "It'll be nice for all three of us to be on the podium together."

"Mh. The Podium Fam." Yuri mused, rubbing his thumb reassuringly over a paler one in his grasp, "We did say that we'd only do the Team Skate if all three of us medaled. Naturally, I'll take the Gold...and you can fight with Yurio for Silver."

"Oh, he's taking Bronze, no question." Viktor answered, huffing a pained laugh, "If he ever medals higher than I do while I'm still competing, I'll throw him off the podium myself."

"That's just what I like to hear."

The Russian smiled to hear those words, an echo of his own from what felt like eons ago. He lifted his head finally, seeing the warm look on his husband's face, "You're too good for me. I don't know
how I ever deserved you."

"Showing up naked in my hot-spring probably helped."

Viktor finally cracked, and laughed, "Did it really?"

"Maybe a little bit." Yuri answered, leaning forward and tilting his head slightly, "I just didn't know it at the time."

"Hmm..."

The kiss was wet and a bit salty, but it was still soft and warm, and the younger husband followed it with a kiss to his partner's forehead, "Now, are you ready to enjoy yourself for a while?"

The Russian nodded, grabbing the folded fabric napkin from the table and used it to dry his face, then unfurled it over his lap and nodded as Yuri retook his seat, "Absolutely."

Chapter End Notes

Tondemonai = Absolutely not/No way  
Honto ni? = Really? (Informal)  
Mochiron desu = For sure! (Formal agreement with whatever's been said)  
Ussou! = Generic equivalent to 'what in the world?' where you're expressing disbelief at something  
Maji de? = Seriously?/Really? (Slang)  
Sono tori = That's right/Naturally
Arriving in the midst of the Ladies Medaling ceremony, Yuri and Viktor found it almost too easy to get by unnoticed. Most of the media was still covering the ice, and the 4th-through-6th place Ladies skaters were getting their gear together in the Players Lounge.

Not everyone was too busy to notice the Men's event's top contenders, though.

"Nikiforov-san!"

Both heads popped up to hear their names, and looked back the way they came to see a certain familiar excitable Japanese face coming after them with two camera crews trailing close behind.

"Gospodin Nikiforov!"

The duo turned again, this time in the other direction, seeing a group of RSF reporters coming from closer to the rink entrance. They'd been covering Mila's Silver medal victory, and were just finishing up their coverage of the victory lap when they'd heard the cry rise up.

Yuri turned first towards the more hurried group, "Morooka-san!" He said excitedly, raising one hand to wave as he set his bags down, "You look like you just ran a marathon."

"We'd heard rumors that you two had finally arrived, so we've been searching!" The newscaster puffed, leaning over one knee as the other hand held the microphone, "...Chotto matte kudasai..."

"Hai." The skater nodded, reaching up instead to pull his scarf off as he waited for the reporter to catch his breath. He turned to where he could hear the unmistakable sound of Russian being spoken close by, and looked to spot the RSF reporter speaking to his husband. As per usual, he had no clue what was being said, but judging by the look on Viktor's face, it was easily a much more pleasant interview than the somewhat-infamous confrontation in St. Petersburg nearly a year prior. It didn't take terribly long for Yakov to show up either, and though Viktor had never let go of his hand, Yuri noticed rather quickly that the conversation would have nothing to do with him. Instead, he turned back towards the one group that did seem to care about him, and was pleased to see that the eccentric sports reporter had caught his wind again.

"Moushiwake arimasen." Morooka started, bowing quickly, "Nikiforov-san, you had quite a number of your former fans worried about you this morning when you didn't come to Official Practice. You look to be in high spirits though. How do you feel about tonight's event?"

"Sou da yo! You used to train here in Detroit, ne?"

"Sou desu. We went to the Detroit Skate Club, my former training facility when I still skated under Celestino's guidance."

"If sure all of your former rink-mates were quite worried about you. How did they handle the news?"
Morooka wondered, holding out the microphone.

Yuri smiled nervously, "We actually only saw one person earlier; Coach Gerard. Everyone else is around here, I imagine." He gestured and looked out towards the stadium through the door near the rink, "Viktor, Phichit-kun and I went to go say hi to everyone shortly after arriving in the city though, so we at least got to see them all before things got hairy."

"Do you have a message for them if they could hear you now?"

"Just that I'm okay and I think things will work out. Viktor really pushed me hard earlier. We're both still concerned about potential reinjury during my turn, but I landed most of my quads during practice, and I'm not nearly as dizzy now as I was yesterday." He answered, turning slightly again to check the status of his partner's interview. They seemed to be focusing on Yakov for the moment, so Yuri took the chance to lean in and whisper, "Viktor, do you want to add anything to my interview?"

When the Russian turned his head to glance back, the cameras actually turned away from him, which he thought strange, but shrugged and ignored, "Hold on just one second."

They did, and Yuri held up a finger apologetically, only to find the entire group shift away from his partner a few seconds later. Even Viktor was a bit surprised, looking away to spot Mila coming in from rink-side. Yuri squeezed his hand to get his attention back, "Are they done already?"

"...I...guess so?" The silver athlete answered, giving a weird look before finally turning on his heels to join the JSF interview instead, "What'd I miss?"

"We were just talking about our practice at the Skate Club earlier."

Morooka was more than excited to get his chance at the Russian skating legend, "Skater Yuri was explaining that you were working him over earlier today. His fans are no-doubt curious if that means you've given your blessing for him to return to his normal difficulty level?"

"Not entirely." Viktor answered with an anxious smile, stepping in closer to snake his arm around his husband's back, "He's capable of skating a perfect program. I watched him do it twice earlier this afternoon. But...I'm still biting my nails when he stumbles!"

Yuri gave a nervous look, but turned back to the cameras, "We actually spent a lot of time specifically working on falling safely. We'll never be able to prepare for everything, but we've done our best to manage what we can."

The newscaster nodded emphatically, "That's good to hear. Everyone back home in Japan is sending you their well-wishes!"

The skater pulled his arm free from around his husband's back and set both hands to his sides, bowing forward respectfully, "Arigatou gozaimashita."

"I think a question on everyone's minds though now is...you two look extremely fancy." Morooka mused, gesturing at their formal attire under their coats, "Is there some special occasion you were celebrating?"

Viktor was quick to pull his partner into an excited hug, "It's the one-year anniversary of our engagement! Yuri arranged a really special dinner out, so we just got back from there!"

"Ah, hai, hai! We remember when you two first debuted those golden rings at last year's Final!" The newscaster recollected happily, "It was quite the surprise to find out they weren't just matching charms for luck like everyone was speculating! You two were married right before Worlds, too!"
Yuri couldn't get free of the amorous hug, so he just settled his arms over his husband's shoulders and turned to look at the older man speaking to them, "That's right."

"We went back to Barcelona for it, too!" Viktor explained happily, "And then we had a big wedding party back in Hasetsu when we got home! Yuri's parents arranged a Japanese wedding ceremony for us, too! So we were married twice!"

"I'm still upset that I missed the party at the Ice Castle!" Morooka lamented, turning his attention back to Yuri, "It was like déjà vu all over again for me! Like when I first caught wind of your 'Aria' video going viral before Viktor-san showed up! I was stuck at the office in Tokyo back then, too, and the JSF sent a different team to cover it!"

"We would've been honored if you could've come." The younger skater explained, feeling himself being let down to stand on his own power again, "I think things would've gone a lot smoother if it had been you there."

Viktor slid one arm over his husband's shoulders and gave something of a wry grin as he leaned close, "Well, you wanted it to be kept small and personal, so no one told the big wigs what was going on. It was only after our friends started showing up that people realized something was going on. So many skaters in one place..."

"Yeah..." Yuri had the same wry smirk then, "I remember when Minami-kun showed up at the last second..."

In Hasetsu, the cheering party was already in full swing despite it only being around 10am. That certain petite skater heard his idol say his name, and those big brown eyes started getting watery with tears. Much to the chagrin of other patrons, Minami lunged forward to wrap his tiny arms around the television, "SENPAI MENTIONED ME."

"Kenjirou Minami-kun," Morooka said, mostly for the audience, "He's finally going to be coming to Four Continents this year. Are you excited to see a familiar face at a big event?"

"I've been excited!" Yuri confirmed, "Viktor and I went to go cheer for him at Regionals earlier in the fall. He's been ready for the bigger competitions for a while. Even though he's been in Seniors since last year, for some reason, he's been nervous about trying to compete in the GP Series and similar events. He came to visit at Four Continents last year though so maybe he's gotten over his nerves about flying overseas for competition."

"Speaking of Four Continents last year...it was held in Pyeongchang, South Korea, where the Olympics are going to be held in February. Do you have aspirations to go represent Japan?" The newscaster wondered, "As one of Japan's top figure skaters, you've been offered a spot before, but you turned it down."

Viktor's eyes twitched, and he turned slightly to gawk at his husband, "...You never said you were offered a spot."

"I never went, so what's the difference?" Yuri gawked back.

"Mmmmmnnnnnnn..."

Uh oh... He could feel the sweat on the back of his neck to see 'that' look on the Russian's face.
"Do you think you'll accept this year if you're invited?" Morooka asked again.

"Viktor and I are talking about it." He answered anxiously, "There are a lot of weird logistics we have to consider, since he's likely to get an invitation to represent Russia again as well. He won't be able to compete and coach at the same time, especially not across nationalities."

"Viktor-san, you've been an Olympian a number of times," The announcer explained, "Almost since the day you joined Seniors. You'd already taken the world by storm with your popularity and skill in Juniors, so it was only natural to send you off to represent Russia as soon as you were eligible. What are your thoughts on this complication?"

The Russian hummed a quiet breath to himself, putting a finger on his chin as he considered it. His attention was grabbed briefly by the sound of the RSF reporters spotting Yurio and Otabek arriving, and pulling them aside for interviews. He grit his teeth silently, but then simply slouched across his partner's back, right arm around Yurio's side as the left came up to curl under that shoulder before himself, "Naturally, I'd like to go as both coach and competitor...but like Yuri said, that wouldn't be feasible. It would present a conflict of interest to skate under the Russian flag only to coach and athlete skating for Japan. It's something I have to think about."

"Then let's consider something more pressing," Morooka smirked devilishly, "There's four Gold medals between the both of you in your run-up to the Final. Despite some hiccups, you both swept your pair of qualifying events in the Series and took 1st place at each event. How does it feel to be competing against one another now? As coach and student, as rivals, and as a married couple...it must make things rather complicated for you, ne?"

The duo of skaters side-glanced at one another, but then each smiled and shook their heads lightly, with Yuri speaking first, "Viktor has often said that he didn't really teach me to skate, so much as he helped me believe in myself, so I could bring out my full potential. To that end, he's more like my life-coach than my skating-coach. Being rivals means we push each other to be our best, and we're always trying to one-up one another in the process. Being spouses means that, after a hard day of training, we can pad each other's bruised egos and blistered feet. Even if only one of us, or maybe even if neither of us gets on the podium tonight...the fact that we got here and competed together means a lot."

"We share in each other's victories and losses, whatever they may be." Viktor added, "It's been a long and hard road to get to the Final...much more challenging than it was last year, when it was only Yurio competing. To go to four nearly-consecutive competitions, and being away from home for weeks on end, has been pretty hard on the both of us. But I think the difficulties we've faced have made us stronger, both as competitors and as a couple."

"And it seems that sort of thing will be continuing on into the foreseeable future, right?" Morooka wondered, "With both Japan and Russia hosting Nationals at the same time in 2 weeks, and the Olympics in February pushing Four Continents and Euros back to consecutive weekends in January...then Worlds like usual in March after that..."

Both skaters sighed dramatically, "We've been trying not to think about that too much."

"I bet!" The announcer laughed, "Well, it looks like the zamboni is making its rounds on the rink, so you two had best get ready for the warm-up period. Do you have any last statements before your Free Skates tonight?"

Yuri nodded, "For mine...I hope everyone can enjoy the program for what it is and not worry so much about my accident. I may be in 6th place right now, but I'm pretty tight to the bottom of the scoreboard...I'm still hoping for Gold tonight."
"And Skater Viktor-san..." Morooka turned the microphone slightly to the man where he was resting a chin on his partner's shoulder, "After your record-shattering Free Skate at NHK last weekend...do you think you can pull that off again to take back your title?"

The Russian just lifted his head and laughed, "No way! That was a once-in-a-lifetime performance! I'll be doing something a little different tonight. If I can at least beat Yuri somehow, I'll be happy."

"You say that like you wouldn't bury me anyway." The younger skater whispered.

"Of course, Yuri's still going to win Gold tonight." Viktor went on, his dumb-happy smile remaining.

"Are you saying you're going to let him have it?" Morooka was surprised.

"No way! I'm winning Gold for sure!" The Russian laughed, but then winked at the camera, "Honestly, Yuri would never forgive me if I pulled punches. Since he's up first tonight, his score sets the bar for the rest of us...and if I went out of my way to score lower, I'd have much more to worry about than just sleeping on the couch for a month. Yuri would probably steal Makkachin from me, too."

The younger skater just smiled and nodded like it was all true.

"Makkachin?" The reporter wondered, "Your poodle?"

"Yes!" Viktor suddenly lunged forward, whipping his phone out, "I have pictures! You want to see!? He's adorable!"

Yuri just grabbed his partner by the back of his coat and started ushering him away, pulling their rolling suitcase behind them, "Come along, husband. We'll be here all night if you get started." He lifted his head to look back over his shoulder, "Thank you, Morooka-san! I'll talk to you again after my Free Skate!"

"Ganbatte ne! Nikiforov-san!"

"Domo!"

"Spasibo~!" Viktor waved as he was dragged through the Players Lounge, passing where the RSF crew was still talking to Yurio and Otabek. Only a little further down, and they found the restrooms that were being used as a make-shift changing room, and Yuri finally let the man walk on his own. Viktor turned around, still looking at the one photo of the big brown boof that he'd managed to pull up before being dragged away. He smiled, but sighed, and put the phone away then, seeing Yuri holding up the pitch-black garment bag that came first out of the rolling suitcase.

"It's a crime that you're making me wait until your turn before I can see your new outfit." He commented, "You know what it looks like at least, right? So it won't be some horrid surprise if it's not quite what you wanted?"

"Da. I learned my lesson at Worlds." Viktor insisted, folding the bag over one arm, "And I think my tailors did, too. There's nothing heavy about this one."

"Can I at least know what color it is, mostly?" Yuri handed off the folded black-and-red track suit set after that.

"It won't be a surprise if I let up now!"
Those brown eyes just looked on.

"I tried it on the night it arrived!" The Russian insisted, stepping past to open the heavy solid-wood door to the large single-person stall, "You'll like it!"

"I'll just wait out here until you're done." Yuri said, pulling the suitcase over a little bit to take a seat on a short couch nearby.

The silver genius held to the doorframe for a moment, watching his partner take that seat and pull his phone out. He drew in a breath, and looked back out into the Players Lounge for any sight of the remaining two members of the Men's event, though not spotting either. He did see the RSF crew depart from their latest interview, and the two younger skaters glanced up to each raise a hand in greeting in his direction. He nodded his head back at them, and then nudged it down towards the unsuspecting Japanese athlete sitting nearby, "Alright...I'll be done in a minute. I think you're about to have company though."

Yuri looked up, hearing the click to the door lock just as he spotted the Russian Tiger and the Hero of Kazakhstan walking up, "Oh, hey guys."

"Missed you at morning practice." Yurio commented, pulling his arms up as the older skater rose back to his feet and offered that finally-resumed greeting hug, "Everything good?"

"Mh." He answered easily enough, "Viktor and I slept in, that's all."

"You probably needed it." Otabek commented, "How's your head?"

"Better every day."

"That's good."

"How was the rest of the night at Campus Martius?" Yuri wondered idly, "I know Viktor and I kind of left rather suddenly...he was out like a light as soon as his head hit the pillow."

"Mikhail was tense, but everyone else had a good time." Yurio answered, "Nikki wanted to do my hair for today."

"Oh?"

The teen pulled the hood off his head, revealing the nest of loosely-tied braids, pulling his hair back into a rope-like cord at the back of his head, where thinner braids were looped around to act as ties and looped around. A few strands were deliberately pulled out to make the whole thing look messy and 'used,' "Took like 30 minutes. I'm still not sure it fits with my program...but she seemed happy enough to do it, so I let her."

"...That's different for you." Yuri quipped.

"I guess I got used to it because of Lilia." He kicked the ground with his sneaker absentmindedly, "She spent a long time trying out different styles last year before settling on what I had for Rostelecom and the Final."

The older figure nodded, not sure what else to say on the matter. He didn't languish in that uncertainty for long though, since the Russian Tiger reached around to hug him a second time, that time holding on a bit longer than before. Yuri blinked down in surprise at the top of the blonde's head, but then just lowered his arms down over those thin shoulders.
"...I don't know what changed, or why..." Yurio started quietly, "But I'm glad it's finally over. I'm...sorry for all the shit I started. I overreacted and never gave you a chance to set me straight."

"...I...guess we could've chosen better words in the first place." The older skater admitted, "But you know me...I'd never try to sabotage you."

"I know." The young Russian nodded where he still had his forehead to Yuri's right shoulder, "I think...part of me just...wanted to think you had... I was already feeling pretty sorry for myself. I'm not used to having to let other people sort things out for me, and with all this new stuff happening that was out of my hands...I didn't stop to think that things might work out some other way, even if it wasn't 100% how I wanted it."

"It happens to us all. ...I'm still helping Viktor learn to tell me about things as they happen, rather than bottling it all up. It's a process though. Sometimes you don't even realize something's bothering you until something else sets you off." Yuri rubbed the back of the teen's jacket, and Yurio finally let go, standing normally again and looking up, "But now that the three of us are talking again..." Hazel eyes glanced at the heavy wooden door, "Well, sort of..." He glanced back at the teenager, "Things will probably be better. We're still wanting to do that Team Skate we sorted out in Bordeaux, if you're interested."

"Really?"

"Mh."

"Didn't you say we all have to get on the podium...?" Yurio wondered skeptically, "Or was that just a challenge to make it fun?"

"A bit of both, I think. We're all defending Champions in some form or fashion. You're defending your title from the last Grand Prix Final, after all. I think you'll be up there somewhere."

The door suddenly cracked a bit, and Viktor pulled the heavy panel inward, clad once more in his team track-suit, and not a shred of his Free Skate outfit visible from anywhere, "Okay~! I'm done. You can come in."

Yuri nodded and reached for the rolling suitcase, careful none of the contents spilt out given the cover being undone, "Well, I'm going to get ready. We'll see you during the warm-up, okay?"

"Mh." The Russian Tiger reached his arm out again, and Yuri paused to reach back, giving a half-hug of departure, "See you in a few then."
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED NINETY

Yurio watched the door quietly and listened for the click before turning away, looking first at Otabek, and then to the rest of the Players Lounge. He clicked his phone on for a moment and checked the time, "The intermission will only last another 20 minutes or so..."

"We should go stretch or something while we still have time."

"Da."

The duo turned on their heels, looking around briefly before moving back towards where they'd left their gear earlier on, and each rifled around for their work-out mats. By the time they'd found an open section of the outer hallway to roll the mats out, Yurio was partly laughing to himself under his breath.

Otabek half-raised a brow at the teen, "What's so funny?"

"I just had a thought." He answered, pulling out his phone again. After a few thumb clicks to unlock the device, both hands were twiddling at the screen, sending a text message, then putting the device away.

"...What was that all about?"

The blonde had a mischievous look on his face, "You'll see."

In the stands, the cellphone in the pocket of a certain silver-haired teen suddenly vibrated, and upon withdrawal, a few curious words appeared on its dark screen.

[Come into the Players Club. I have a project for you.]

Nikki rubbed her chin, intrigued, but then suddenly looked rather impish, and she quietly rose up from her scarlet-red seat. She shuffled past the knees of a few people, heading towards the stairwell nearby, only to find a tug on her coat. Glancing down, she spotted a finger hooked into her pocket, and she turned those bright jade eyes up to her father's skeptical face.

"Where are you off to, looking so devious?"

"Big brother needs me." She answered sweetly.

"Big broth-..." Mikhail looked incredulous, "Yuri? He's barely a year older than you are..."

"He's still older!" Nikki pointed out, twisting to try unhooking that fatherly claw from her coat.

The exasperated elder just reached up with his free hand to pinch at the bridge of his nose, "I'm starting to think you like him better than your actual older brother."

"Yuri's nicer to me than Sergio." The teen explained, twisting around yet again, but finding Mikhail's grip on her pocket strong enough to prevent her from getting loose, "Why aren't you letting me go?"
"I'll go with her, pipaw." Viktoria offered unexpectedly, pushing up from her seat next to Mari, and rolling the sucker in her mouth from one side to the other, "I'm sure we'll be back before the warm-up."

The dubious elder glanced aside to Minako and Mari, both of whom seemed to find nothing wrong with the situation and shrugged at him. Feeling somewhat outnumbered and unsupported, Mikhail closed his eyes and huffed a sigh, retreating back into his seat and pulling his hooked finger back, "Alright... I know when I'm at a loss." He leaned away some as the older daughter squeezed past, and looked up at her, "You're in charge, Vikki."

"Mhm."

The two girls practically giggled as they escaped, making their way swiftly down the stairs towards the front of their section, and making a hard right towards the doorway into the sub-stadium Players Club.

Mikhail sighed grudgingly to watch them trying to figure out how to get around the barriers, and further as Nikkita pulled her phone out again to thumb her plea at the Russian Punk. The grumpy older man practically sank a few inches into his black woolen jacket, his flatcap tilting off center as the collar pushed up into his hair.

"How come you're worried about Nikki spending time with Yura...?" Minako wondered quietly, "Isn't that what you wanted? For the girls and him to get along?"

"Maybe." He answered stiffly, keeping his eyes absently on the ice.

"They seem to be on pretty good terms to me." The ballerina offered, "Better than them fighting, isn't it?"

"...Maybe."

"I really doubt anything else is going on." She said, finding the man's reservations somewhat amusing, "The fact that she got called on by Yura is probably a great thing...at least, in my opinion it is."

Mikhail just grumbled his answer that time.

Minako sighed, *He's deflecting. I feel bad that my relief is making him so uncomfortable...*

"Oh look, Yurio and Otabek came out to meet them." Mari pointed, the two aforementioned skaters' heads barely visible through the curved barrier.

A few seconds later, Viktoria had climbed over the railing with a hand on the meager bent-metal barricade, and hopped the 6ft down to the floor below. Nikkita was a bit more reserved, fearing the distance, opting instead to climb over, close her eyes, and fall forward into the only pair of strong arms that could hope to catch her without toppling *him* over in the process. Otabek easily set her down, and a few swift seconds later, the group was gone from sight.

"Great...he's already teaching my kids about breaking and entering..." Mikhail whispered bitterly.

"Seems to me like he's just letting them in through the back door to a place he has permission to be in." Minako said confidently, taking the damaged man's arm and patting it to reassure him, "Better for *us* to see them get safely into the Club from here, than for them to leave the arena and wander the halls to get to the regular entrance. We know they'll be fine in there."
More grumbling.

The increasingly-frustrated woman reached up to swipe the Russian's hat, setting it onto her own head instead, "It wouldn't be such a good idea to get upset at Yura just because you're upset at me." She said quietly, leaning closer so only her intended target would able to hear, her words otherwise lost in the noise of the crowd, "Considering how you invited him into your family, and even told Nikki to pester him into being more open...what's happening here is actually the best possible thing that could happen. He likes the two of them and wants them to be a part of things. In a way, he's integrating more than even I thought he would." She said simply, looking out to the ice as well, though turning her eyes slightly to watch the man's reaction, even if he kept looking on with a steely, resistant look on his face, "In my eyes, they're really starting to act like a gang of siblings...being a clique unto themselves and getting into mischief together. And you've gotten to know Yura pretty well over the last nine months, too...you know that he's affection-starved, lonely, and desperately seeking approval from what few peers he lets get close to him. Nikki's made it farther with him in the last two days than any of the rest of us have gotten since we first met him...she almost entirely bypassed the resentful-angry-testy phase! Even you thought she would, telling Yura that she'd be a fast friend if he wanted her to be. I think Yuuko back in Hasetsu is the only other person that he likes all that much...so maybe that's just how he is with girls. The rest of us are all old farts by comparison, or men...or both. ...Or they're rabid fangirls that he can't really get to know individually." She nudged the elder Russian with an elbow, "So give him a break. It'll confuse the crap out of him if you act angrily when he's doing and becoming exactly what you wanted."

Mikhail just looked on quietly for a few moments...but then drew in a sharp breath and rocked forward in his seat to stand up, "I need to take a walk. I'll be back."

Minako made no intimation to resist his pulling away, and silently watched him go, making his way down the stairs but going left towards the main exit, instead of right to follow after his girls. She groaned dramatically and slouched in her seat, feeling the flatcap slide forward as it brushed the top of the red plastic panel behind her head.

Uncomfortable with the whole thing, Mari gawked at the woman, "You guys are making me the most obvious third-wheel ever, I swear."

The ballerina glanced up at her, only one eye visible under the visor of the hat. She sighed again and pushed to sitting up normally, "Gomen."

"Why are you guys acting all weird now?"

Minako reluctantly pulled her left hand from her pocket and showed her bare finger, "He's having an existential crisis because I called off the engagement."

"Naaaniii!!?" Mari was stunned, "But I thought..."

"I told him that I would consider revisiting the idea later on, but that right now I wasn't sure it was such a good idea to take such a big step." The ballerina explained, looking a bit more serious then, "So many other things are already happening...the death of his ex-wife, the mother of his kids...bringing his kids permanently back into his life...moving everyone to Hasetsu...bringing Yura into the middle of it all...and then having Viktor yell at him last night... For a guy who likes to be the Oyabun, he's finding himself being resisted on multiple sides suddenly."

"...You think he's gonna be okay...?"

Minako nodded, "...I can only hope that this will get better with time." She turned slightly to lower her head, looking at her knees, "I'm thinking about letting him and the kids go on to Russia on their
own for Nationals. Give Mikhail some time to process everything without me so it isn't weird."

"Wouldn't that just make it worse? I mean...he's planning on moving to Hasetsu because of you...but if you don't even go to Russia with him, then he may not think he's even allowed to come back to Japan."

"...I know...that's why I'm only thinking about it. I still want him to come, and I'm excited about everything we have planned...but he's keeping me at arm's length right now. If Mikhail decides not to move after all because he's too embarrassed...Yura will be crushed...unless I can think of something else to do."

"Why not come home for the time between competitions and then go to Moscow to meet them?" Mari suggested, "That way you both get time on your own, and you're still there with him when they all get to Hasetsu after?"

The older woman put a finger on her chin in thought, "...That may actually not be such a bad idea. Although..."

"Although?"

"The whole reason I'm at these competitions is to support your brother. Up until this past week, when I agreed to be Yura's coach...I was still of the mindset that I would go with Yuri to Japanese Nationals. ...And the thing of it is, I still want to go to Japanese Nationals..." She slouched where she sat, "...Taihen desu...! I don't want to feel like I have to pick between Yuri and Mikhail! You and I booked our flights in and out of here months ago, and I've already bailed on half of it...I don't know what to do!"

"Has he already booked all of your flights to Russia?"

"...I don't doubt it. He probably arranged for all that before we left Banff...maybe even sooner than that."

Mari nodded, leaning forward slightly to idly check her bag of flags, counting them again to make sure all 5 were there, "Might be something you have to sit down with him about, maybe even drag Yuri into it to see what he thinks. You've been following him to competitions since he started going to them."

"Exactly, which is why I don't want to suddenly stop. It's one thing to stay home because I can't afford to go to every event, but to just suddenly decide to go to a different event..."

"I think you're reading too much into it. I doubt my baby brother would be that bothered if you decided to go to Russian Nationals instead of his. Viktor's going to be competing in Moscow, too, so it's not like Yurio would be the only person you're there...for...and..." Mari paused mid-thought, her eyes squinting as a thought dawned on her, "...Wait..."

"Yeah. Viktor's going to be in Russia, Yura's going to be in Russia...Mikhail, Nikki, and Viktoria are going to be in Russia. Who's going to be in Japan for Yuri, if not me?" Minako deadpanned the woman next to her, "Your parents aren't going to let you take another weekend off so soon, even for your brother."

"Well then just frame it like that to Mikhail." The younger woman pointed out, "You need to come home so you can go support Yuri. If Mikhail didn't talk to you about the plane tickets to Russia, then Viktor was right about how Mikhail doesn't involve other people enough in the decisions he makes. You would've been able to mention it right there and then that you had other plans already."
"...I guess so..." Minako sighed again, looking at her watch briefly for the time, "Why are men so needy and complicated?"

"No." The stoic Kazakh crossed his arms as soon as he heard the words, "Absolutely not."

"Do it, Otabek." Yurio tried again.

"You have plenty of hair." Nikki explained, "Plus, it'd only be two..."

"I don't need my hair braided."

"But Vikings were known to braid their hair." The young Russian pointed out, "It'd be more authentic this way."

They stood in the same hall where the two skaters had set out their stretching mats, and the eldest of them was already down on his, trying to get ready for the on-ice warm-up. Yurio and the Rozovsky sisters were practically surrounding him.

"I think you'd look good with a couple well-placed braids..." The youngest of the silver teens pointed out, thumbing-away on her phone as she spoke, "Just one on each side, then pulled together in the back for a short ponytail. Like this..." She flipped the device around and showed the skater a reference image of what she was referring to, but Otabek didn't seem convinced.

"We should dye Yuri's hair for tomorrow." Viktoria suddenly pointed out, "It'd go well with the outfit he picked."

"Ohhh! Yeah!" Nikki agreed excitedly, "Just the tips, like yours! Make it alternating colors to the hat so it all matches!" She went for those blonde locks, and started petting a few of the longer strands that were braided towards the back, "Purple and black, maybe with some neon green highlights."

"You guys are too into this." Otabek huffed, curling one knee to pull an ankle up against the opposite thigh, and reached far to grab the foot straight out ahead of himself, "And you're an enabler, Yuri."

The blonde pulled free of the attention and crouched down, gawking at the older man, "Are ya too manly for braids?"

The Kazakh just stopped in the middle of what he was doing and stared, his expression barely changing from neutral, "It's not a question of manliness."

"Then let her do some for you."

"Are you worried about losing your man-card if I refuse to match you out there somehow?" Otabek shot back, making the teen fall off balance and land on his arse.

"WHAT? NO."

"Me thinks the lad dost protest too much." Viktoria quipped.

"I had braids last year." Yurio argued, getting back up to crouch on the haunch of one leg, the other held with the knee up, both hands firmly in his jacket pockets, "And I was all pink and fluffy, too. I'm perfectly at peace with myself."

"...Pink and fluffy?" Viktoria echoed skeptically.
"The big photo papa has in his office in Edmonton."

"Oh right."

Yurio blinked at them, but shook his head and turned back to Otabek, "I just thought-"

"Fine...fine...go ahead." The Kazakh suddenly said, surrendering and pulling his straight leg to cross them both together, "Just don't make me look ridiculous."

"Squee!" Nikkita's eyes got huge from the excitement, and she quickly pulled a comb from her coat, handing the big and bulky garment to her sister before crouching down behind the dark-haired skater. She flexed her arms dramatically and then motioned her comb-hand towards her 'brother,' "Maestro, if you'll be so kind."

Yurio rifled through his music playlist briefly, but then clicked down on a certain song to set the mood. The gentle hum of a Norwegian vocalist rose up from the speaker, followed by the drumbeat, and the escalating thrum of Otabek's Free Skate filled the hall with war-chants.

Yuri zipped up the front of his black and blue team jacket, then reached up one hand to pull his glasses free. He could hear the sound of screeching just beyond the door, followed by seeing the panel pull open again, with Viktor backing in, dragging a heavy chair along with him. It was a cumbersome thing to pull into the bathroom stall, but the Russian would hear no argument...though Yuri did protest.

"I was just going to sit on the edge of the toilet seat..."

"No husband of mine is sitting on the edge of a toilet seat while I do his powder." Viktor insisted, locking the door behind himself and twisting the big cushioned behemoth around, "Here. This is the only kind of throne I will allow you."

"People who watched you pull this thing in here are probably wondering if you're on drugs or something." Yuri huffed, shaking his head lightly as he took the offered seat, crossing one leg over the other and looking rather dramatic about it as he leaned back on his hands, "But if you insist..."

"I do. Vehemently."

"Did you see Chris or Phichit-kun out there? Maybe they've been here the whole time and we just missed them." Yuri wondered, relaxing again and watching as his partner started rifling through his toiletries bag for the make-up he'd used the day before, setting down a small pouch of skin-cleansing towelettes, a light moisturizer, some fancy lip balm, a small bottle of pale foundation, then a concealer, and some q-tips to clean up those natural, dark features at the end.

"Actually, yeah. Chris was being talked to by the RSF folks, and Phichit by the Americans. I think him and Celestino just showed up a few minutes ago." Viktor explained, putting the bag down and grabbing for the moist towelettes, using his free hand to hold up his husband's face with a few fingers under the chin, "The RSF people are being weird today."

"Oh?"

"They walked out in the middle of the interview with me." The Russian explained, being careful around the cuts as he finished, "No joke, either. One minute, they're asking about my Free Skate from NHK and asking if Yakov was, as they put it, 'rightfully' retaking his place as my coach...and the next, they're wandering off. Yakov was still talking!"
"...So I wasn't seeing things." Yuri commented quietly, closing his eyes as his spouse's fingers massaged in the light moisturizer, all the way down his neck to just within the collar of his costume, "I thought maybe they were just killing time before Mila came off the ice, but I could've sworn they started turning the cameras while they were still technically talking to you. At least, at the time..."

"Well, they did end up going to chat with Mila. I guess they thought to use it as an excuse. They've never done that to me before though." The silver legend finished with the lip balm, and then reached for a foam make-up blotter. He started dabbing the liquid foundation around, "That conference back in St. Petersburg was the one and only time they've ever been rude to me in any way, and that was just the one guy."

"Maybe it was nothing." Yuri suggested, "We had a good interview with Morooka."

"...Yeah..."

"Don't let it bother you. We've had a really great day so far and I don't want to spoil it with speculation."

Viktor stood a bit straighter then, the words being rather direct for his Yuri. He blinked in confusion, holding the little foam wedge and foundation bottle close to his chest like he wasn't sure what to do for a moment.

Yuri cracked one eye open, "Doshita?"

The Russian regained his bearings and shook his head, "Mnh... Nandemonai." He leaned forward again and went back to his task, and the younger skater closed his eye, "Maybe I'm just hypersensitive to everything still."

"Well...you were worn down to your last nerve. That's part of why I didn't want to bother you with Official Practice. I figured it would just be easier on your psyche to avoid everyone for a while."

"...I did appreciate all the extra sleep. I was in a coma, I swear..." Viktor agreed, satisfied with the blending and reaching for the powder concealer to finish it all off, "I'll probably do the same thing again tonight."

"We won't even miss anything tomorrow morning since it's just the tech panels and the last of the Ice Dance stuff. Exhibition practice won't be until the afternoon."

The silver Russian dusted the powder gently with a fluffy brush, "You did say you wanted to go back to the Skate Club before the Gala, too."

"Yeah, but that won't take long. Maybe two hours, tops, counting travel. Just long enough to get there, brag about our medals, tell everyone I'm fine, and then say goodbye."

"...We should probably drag Yurio with us if we're really planning on doing the Team Skate again." Viktor pointed out, tapping his husband's nose with the brush-head to signal that he was done, and moving to collect his thing back into the travel bag, "It's been a few weeks since any of us performed it."

"...I was actually going to ask..." Yuri started, turning slightly to look at his pale face in the mirror, then sliding his glasses back into place over it all, "You just...suddenly let everything go. What happened?"

The silver legend paused for a second, but then cinched the draw-strings on the bag and tossed the whole thing gently into the rolling suitcase, "I didn't want him around you before your Short
Program yesterday, because you'd already had enough complications with it this season. Being so disappointed at your score in Calgary," He started.

"Only because I was being arrogant."

"...And then having that fit right as you took the ice in China." Viktor closed the suitcase and stood up with it, pulling the telescoping handle out and moving the container towards the door, "I wanted you to have every chance to skate the way you wanted to, given everything else. I told Yurio that he should cheer for you if he wanted back into your...rather, my good graces. He did, so I let him give his congratulations to you after, because he could do no harm then. He seems to be okay at this point. ...I need to have a chat with him about the choreography thing."

"Then it sounds like a good plan. We'll all get on the podium tonight, and then go do the Gala practice together at my old Skate Club." Yuri nodded, rising to stand, and pushed the door open to start shoving the big chair out again, "Even if we don't all medal, I think it would be good to skate that show together."

"I hope you didn't just try to give yourself permission to slack off, Yuri." The Russian skater-coach huffed, using his foot to help push the chair through, "We didn't spend half the day practicing just so you could take 6th on purpose."

"No way." The younger athlete guided the big seat past the door panel and out towards where it looked like it had come from, then stood upright again and clapped his hands together to dust them off. He set those hands on his hips and glanced at his husband, giving a wink, "There are four gold medals between us...and I intend to take the fifth."

Viktor gaped at the man, but then smirked, sliding in and pulling Yuri closer with a hand behind his soulmate's lower back, "You do, huh?"

"That's right." He grinned back deviously, a little bit of Eros shining through with those half-lidded eyes, "And no one's going to stop me."

"I will."

"Oh? And who are you to try?" Yuri teased, hands sliding loosely over his partner's shoulders, arms straightening there as he loosely weaved his fingers together, "Who dares get between me and my Gold?"

"Viktor the Marvelous, Viktor the Magnificent...Viktor the Chiefest and Greatest of Calamities."

"That changed tone suddenly."

"Well, you did say that I was going to bury you...I can't be marvelous and magnificent while I do so?"

"Bury me under Gold medals then."

"Hmmmm..." The Russian hummed, stealing a quick kiss while he could, "If I must."
Gomen = Sorry
Nani? = What?
Taihen desu = This is terrible
Doshita? = What's wrong?
Nandemonai = Nothing
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED NINETEEN

The stadium was filling quickly; the halls were swarming with spectators and event officials, running to and fro to find their places before the next competition could start. There was one rather brooding figure who didn't seem to be in much of a hurry though, leaning against one of the support pillars in the main concourse as everyone else hustled by.

Without his hat, Mikhail's silver-haired head stuck out from the dark of his black coat like a sore and glowing thumb. A few people paused and gawked at him, several mistaking him for his nephew before realizing he was 'just some old man' and moving along again, hoping to not have been heard. He could hardly manage the energy to be offended by it all though. His focus was on the ring held in his fingers.

...$45,000 and she just gave it back like it was nothing.

He sighed quietly and put the ring back into a buttoned pocket inside the breast of his jacket, and pulled out his phone instead. A few clicks in, and the elder Russian was swiping through photos he'd taken. He hadn't snapped too many shots since leaving Bordeaux to go back to his home town though, but the reminder of that place made him backtrack and find a different folder. The grainy scans of old Polaroids came into view then...a few of the same pictures he'd shown to Yuri at Trophée de France, and then others that he hadn't shown to anyone.

The images were so old that they had a sepia overtone, and the original colors were rather faded. But the content of those photos was still otherwise as clear as they'd always been. A teen with long silver hair, sitting on top of a tank, in the middle of a lush, summer Russian forest. She had on a thin dress...Mikhail remembered it as sky-blue, even if it was grey in the image. The memory of taking that picture was clear in his head.

[I don't know why you like hanging out here so much, Tat.]

Jade eyes glanced down from the higher vantage, but the teen smiled sweetly anyway, [Aside from the seasons, nothing out here ever changes.] She answered, looking up, and raising a hand to shield her eyes from the rays of light peeking through the tree branches high above, [I feel like I could come back here again in 200 years and it'll all still be the same.]

Mikhail looked down at his boxy black-and-silver VILIA camera, but then around to the rest of the clearing, his own hair just as long as his twin's, swaying behind his back in the light breeze, [Maybe.]

[Isn't that why you take so many pictures?] Tatiyana wondered, suddenly leaping down from the tank, her heavy workbooks thumping against the grass like rocks, [So you can capture a moment on film, and be able to remember it exactly as it happened, without it ever changing?]

[Maybe.]

The lady teen twisted on her heel and looked around again, spotting the assortment of crippled tanks hidden in the brush. Paths cut through the woods were the only evidence that suggested the metal machinations hadn't just been dropped there from the sky somehow, though those paths were grown over with shrubs, grass, and the odd sapling. Tatiyana held the finger of one hand behind her back and started stepping back through the footpath they'd both taken to get there in the first place, but
turned back to see her brother still looking at the camera, [You look so sullen, Mik. How come?]

[Haven't I been sullen?] He answered back, finally letting the device go to let it dangle on its belt over his shoulder, [You don't seem all that bothered at all.]

[Why should I be?]

[Oh come on...don't make me spell it out...] Mikhail whined, slouching as he stepped onward.

[For every moment in the here and now that you want to capture on your camera...the elders have done the same in their own minds. They want to keep things the way they were 40 years ago. Plus, I happen to already like Kon, so it's no big deal to me.]

[I hate it.]

[I know.]

[I hate the Nikiforovs.]

[That's not going to change anything.]

Mikhail grumbled under his breath, turning his head to look away for a moment. A few paces later, he grit his teeth and reached forward, taking one of sister's wrists in his hand to stop her and force her to look back at him, [Let's just leave this place. You only like Kon cuz we've been friends since we were tadpoles anyway. You can always find someone else. ...We'll take papa's car an-]

[Mikhail...] Tat just gaped at him, and crossed her arms, [You're being dumb. Kon's been there for you as much as he's been there for me. Don't just lump him in with the rest like you think this was his idea.]

[It's not like he's contesti-]

The girl's hands were on her brother's mouth in a hot second, cutting off those last words. She looked into those identical grey-green eyes, but said nothing for a while. Unbeknownst to her brother, Tatiyana pulled her slender feet from the loosely-tied heavy boots, keeping her eyes looking into his, [...I know you like to think you can control everything. But...you can't. There are going to be times where you have to do things you don't want to, and accept things you hate. We aren't going to be kids forever anyway. You should try to make the most of the match they made for you.]

With palms still flat against the lower half of his face, Mikhail couldn't argue. He just stood there in bitter silence. Unexpectedly, he felt the strap of his camera suddenly lifted from his shoulders, and his sister was practically flying away from him, running at top speed in the direction they were walking before. Trying to regain his bearings, Mikhail drew a breath and made to give chase, hollering something about giving the device back before he tripped over the big work-boots his sister had left behind. Stumbling over his own feet rather unceremoniously, the teen picked himself up from the grass and dirt, looking thoroughly unimpressed as bits of each fell from his face and hair, [TATIYANA IVANOVA ROZOVSKY, BEFORE I LEAVE THIS WORLD...I WILL HAVE MY VENGEANCE.]

[Not if you can't catch me first!] She called back at him from far ahead.

Mikhail shook his head and huffed a sad laugh, swiping through another few photos before there was a noticeable gap in the ages of everyone in the shot. The image he finally stopped on was one that mostly featured his sister, standing in the doorway to her home and looking back at him over a
shoulder like she was surprised he was even there, never mind with a camera. From the side-angle she was standing at, it was clear that she was heavily pregnant with the one child she would ever have; the tiny light of her strange life. The next photo after that showed her with her sleepy newborn.

...I wish you were still here...

He reached up to rub his eyes on the side of one wrist.

You always seemed to know how to handle things. I guess I was just a pretender most of the time...
Even Minako says I'm kind of an idiot when it comes to this family stuff...and now I'm even mucking things up with her...

"The Men's Free Skate will begin in five minutes." The announcer echoed overhead, forcing the elder Russian to lift his head, "Repeat...the Men's Free Skate will begin in five minutes."

He turned back around to look at his phone screen, glancing for a few more seconds at that last picture before finally clicking it off and standing up.

I guess I should head back. ...I don't know if I'll make it all the way through without falling asleep, given how I couldn't last night...but hopefully...

.

Under the stands, the full group of six skaters were giving a big mutual interview to the NBC reporters covering the Final for America. They were making their last gestures of thanks and farewell before the cameras turned off and moved away, leaving them all with their focus on the coming event. Skate-guards thunk'd along the wooden floors of the Players Lounge as they each made their way over towards the doorway that lead out to rink-side, breathing in their last moments of non-competitive air.

Yuri leaned back against the edge of the wall nervously, pulling down the zipper on the front of his team jacket and leaving the chest open until his name was called. He shook his hands in front of himself and shifted his weight from one skate to the other before finally reaching down to pull the guards off. Looking back, expecting to see his partner doing much the same thing, he instead saw Viktor eyeballing the RSF group that was cloistered off in a corner at the far end of the clubhouse. Yuri huffed a sigh to himself and shrugged an elbow to get his husband's attention, "Never mind them."

"I know." The Russian answered stiffly, giving the group a stern look, though knowing they weren't paying him any concern, "But that's two interviews they've stiffed now."

"It's not like they've ever gone out of their way to interview me before." Yuri offered, "Why would they start now?"

Viktor whipped his head around, all but snorting in disbelief at him, "...Four gold medals between us...?"

Brown eyes just looked on.

"Bah fine..." The Russian grumbled and reached for his blade-guards, "It's not like they interviewed everyone else that's here."

Phichit leaned forward to whisper behind a hand, "Isn't he supposed to make sure you don't find things to get anxious about?"
"Usually..."

"Then what's he doing?"

"The RSF walked out in the middle of his interview. He's got ants in his pants no-"

"WOW!" The Thai skater said, much louder than he meant, and brought both hands up to cover his mouth...nearly cracking himself in the face with the rubber bars he was holding, "Er...I mean...wow...!" He whispered instead, in spite of the looks he was getting.

Yurio and Otabek side-eyed one another to hear the whispers, then looked back over their shoulders to the media group again, as though they weren't sure they'd believe what had been said.

"...The radio people were still calling Viktor 'Russia's Hero' back in Moscow last year, even though he'd left home to coach Katsudson." The blonde commented quietly, "Things have only gotten worse since then. I wonder what their big problem is now?"

"Probably more of the same." The Kazakh shrugged.

"And here I thought I put an end to that crap." The teen huffed, turning back towards Yuri, "I'll go yell at them again if you want."

"W-what!? No way!" He protested, hands flailing, "I don't want to start anything! Forget about the fact that they didn't interview me! It'll be worse if someone tries to force them."

"Ladies and Gentlemen..." The announcer overhead started up again, and the audience started clapping and hollering, the energy in the building growing to make the air vibrate.

The skaters were all laser-focused after that, looking out onto the ice and readying themselves.

"The International Skating Union, along with the United States Skating Federation, formally welcomes you to the Grand Prix of Figure Skating Final...Men's Singles Free Skate!"

Cheers and clapping rose to a fever-pitch, with many fans already starting to scream their adulations.

"In order of performance...let us welcome our Men's competitors to the ice! Representing Japan-"

The volume rose too high to coherently understand the rest of what was said, but Yuri knew it was his turn anyway, and launched himself out onto the ice, open coat fluttering behind him. He threw his arms out to the side in presentation, gliding around on the edge of one blade, the second tucked in just behind it. He made a wide circle before pausing in the center, bowing towards the audience with one arm under his chest, then rising up to extend it out in an arc as he rotated, then pushed to the left to take his place at the end of the soon-to-be-formed line.

"For the nation of Thailand...Phichit Chulanont!"

Another roar from the crowd, and the younger skater went out next, spinning and bowing much the same before taking his place close to his friend.

"From Russia, please welcome...Viktor Nikiforov!"

The cheering rattled the rafters, and the silver legend whipped out across the ice, raising one arm up as he paused in center, and twisted in a circle before pushing off backwards to lazily find his place. He glided in a figure-8 to the side, standing next to Phichit, and dug in a toe-pick before turning to look back over his shoulder for the next to be called.
"Skating for Kazakhstan...Otabek Altin!"

The dark-horse competitor was more easy-going as he came onto the rink's surface, feeling a little silly for the braids tied around the sides of his head, weaving the meager lengths of hair that he had to create a border between the longer lengths on the top of his head and the closer-shaved part around the base. Not that he entirely agreed, but the consensus from the peanut gallery was that it suited his Viking theme rather well. He took his place to the right of center, just after the most senior member of the group.

"Also performing for Russia...Yuri Plisetsky!"

He tossed his team jacket onto the edge of the rink wall as he moved off of the hardwood floor and onto the frost, wearing something like a gothic punk-rock outfit, his eyes darkened by black powder, reminisce of his 'Welcome to the Madness' show. He dug a toe-pick down when he reached the center marker, extended his arms, and bowed forward, veering off backwards as he rose back up again to skirt around the Khazak and take his place one-spot-further to the left.

"And last on the ice, but not least...representing Switzerland...Christophe Giacometti!"

Minako shrieked to see her favorite blonde taking the ice, waving her red flag around like the man was already doing his Free Skate. Chris came out to center and blew a wide kiss to the audience in front of him, though missing the hapless Japanese ballerina, and then turning to take his place at the far end of the line.

"Ladies and Gentlemen...your Men's Singles competitors! We wish them all good luck, and hope they all have fun tonight! Let the 6-minute warm-up period...begin!"

The athletes all broke off like a flock of birds, pressing close to the rink wall and dividing up the space between them to make enough room. Yuri twisted around backwards though and waited for his husband to glide close, turning forward again once he was near enough, "...Did you hear that?"

He asked, still stunned, "You couldn't even make out my name!"

"It's the third GPFinal in a row where you've kind of been the unsung underdog." Viktor pointed out, "...Though this time, it was entirely not your fault."

Phichit tried for a quad Loop in the center of the rink, but fell flat and had to pick himself up at the end, dusting off his show-pants quickly to prevent the frost from melting, and leaving dark wet spots in their wake.

"I guess so." Yuri agreed quietly, though suddenly finding himself energized again, "I'm still pretty stoked from practice earlier. I'm kind of glad I go out first for once...I can use this adrenaline rush to power through."

Yurio was next in the middle to try for a quad, and much like Phichit, it resulted in a fall...though his was slightly more liquid and he was able to pick himself up in one fluid motion when he hit the ice. The Flip landed on the wrong edge and pulled him in an unexpected direction.

Viktor winced, "He's still trying for that..."

"Go show him how it's done then." The younger skater laughed, nudging a finger against his partner's shoulder.

"Da, dorogaja." The Russian legend spun away, building up speed and drawing the attention of the crowd for it. When he pushed into the middle of the rink and clicked off a toe-pick, the audience cheered, and for added flair, Viktor raised both arms as he flew. The landing was smooth as well,
and he reaffirmed why he was a 5-time consecutive World Champion...even if his own student had bumped him off his record the previous year.

When the skater rejoined the circle around the rink wall, he and Yuri both sought for Yurio's attention, waving at him dramatically and then winking.

The teen just gawked at them, sticking his tongue out and pulling an eyelid down in their direction. The two older skaters just laughed and went on.

"Hm... The air definitely feels lighter now that those three are on speaking terms again." Chris commented idly to himself, moving out towards center, "But...I think it's time to show them all who's winning tonight in spite of their mended friendships."

"Uh oh..." Viktor watched, smiling with intrigue as he held one hand behind his spouse's shoulders, "Chris thinks he can one-up us."

"But I haven't even jumped ye-" Yuri started.

The quad Lutz was landed expertly, and the Swiss skater moved off, holding up one of his fingers. He dramatically set it down on his backside, like he was putting out a fire on the tip, and finished it out with a wink and a *Tssss.*

"Now he's done it." The Russian went on, "He's taunting us." He turned to look at the younger man next to him, "Quick, go out there and do something."

"But the only thing harder than a quad Lutz is an Axel!" Yuri protested, "There's no way...!"

"Ah...right." Viktor's expression was blank, but then he got an idea, "I'll do it!"

"Oh here we go..." The younger figure sighed, smiling nervously as he watched his husband flying down the ice in a forward stance, "...Watch him be too tired or weighed-down do pull it off..."

True to Yuri's guess, Viktor ended up sprawled out completely on his back, swirling around in a circle as he skidded down the ice with an unimpressed look on his face. When Chris pulled around and looked down on him sweetly, the Russian could do nothing but complain, "...Don't say anything...!"

"You look like a dog that just walked into a glass door, and is trying to pass it off like it meant to do that." The Swiss skater laughed, reaching a hand down to help the nonplussed silver genius up again.

Viktor whined to himself, but took the hand and got back up onto his blades, clinging to the back of the taller man's team jacket as he was pulled along like a stunned child. When they finally got to where Yuri had slowed down, Chris pretended to have a clip-board in-hand and furled an imaginary paper over the top of it.

"I have a delivery for aaaaaahhh...Yuri Nikiforov? Is that you?"

"Yeah...that's me." He answered, twisting around to lean forward into a wide inside spread-Eagle as they curved the short end of the rink.

"I have one fresh but sad Russian for you." Chris mused, moving further ahead so Yuri could unhook the man's hands from his coat, "Maybe next time he won't try a quad Axel when he's wearing two sets of clothes."

Viktor could do nothing but watch in comical indignation as the two had their laugh at him, and...
crossed his arms as he took on a sour expression.

"So far, I'm the only one who hasn't fallen on a jump." Chris started again, moving on idly, "It's up to you and Otabek now, Yuri."

"I'm saving my energy." The younger figure explained reasonably, "We were doing quads all afternoon."

The rest of the warm-up period went uneventfully, with the Kazakh clearing one of his quad-triple combos and Yuri sticking with the spins he was 'famous' for. When the time finally came though, and the announcer called for the rest of the skaters to leave the ice, Yuri pulled up to the rink wall close to the door cut-through, and waited for a moment for Viktor to come around with a water-bottle and their Makkachin plush-toy tissue box.

He reached for the former and then the latter, handing the crumbled tissue back like usual, and then setting his hands on the upper lip of the wall. He looked down and closed his eyes, taking in a breath to clear his head.

"...Well...all joking aside then...this is the moment, Yuri." Viktor's voice spoke, drawing up the younger skater's attention again, looking into him with those crystal eyes, "You've spent all day in warm-up mode. Now it's time to take the gloves off."

Nodding, Yuri stood up straight and slid a bit closer in, feeling his husband's arms go over his shoulders as his own reached forward to hug around the man's core.

"Tonight's Free Skate begins with Japan's Yuri Nikiforov...!" The announcer called, this time able to get through the whole thing without being drowned out by the crowd.

The skater smiled and held onto that hug for a few seconds longer, feeling a kiss against the side of his neck as he pulled back to shrug the team jacket off his shoulders. Folding it loosely over his forearms, he gently handed it over, and leaned in and under to get his send-off kiss, "You said earlier that my score sets the bar for the rest of the night... I plan to set it high."

"Perfect."
I'll be changing the presentation line-up since it's come to my attention that the FS sometimes goes in reverse order of the SP's rankings, and since it serves my interests for Viktor to go last...I'll be doing that. Performance order is now Yuri, Phichit, Chris, Yurio, Otabek, and then Viktor. Thxu~
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED NINETY TWO

The number of flags and banners was rising as fans settled in and started to show their support. A small chunk of people even brought out the OVERCOME standards again, which made Yuri wonder just how many people were following him to every event...or perhaps just followed that closely on SMS. It reminded him rather suddenly that a goodly number people in the stadium that night had probably seen him buck-arse nekkid on top of a skyscraper, pleading with his drunk husband to come back over the railing. Sad as it was at the time...in hindsight, it was kind of funny, and he couldn't help but close his eyes and huff a quiet laugh to himself.

He felt his partner's arms come back around him again, pulling him up lightly against the rink wall.
The warmth of his husband's cheek came up to brush against his neck soon after, pressing against his skin gently before kissing there and holding.

'Show me the skating you can honestly say you liked the best.'

It was like a meditation then...and Yuri listened closely to the sound of the cheers and cries. Before long, the noise seemed to fade away a little, replaced by the familiar and calming cascade of waves against Hasetsu's rocky beach. He could smell the salt on the air, and hear the gulls overhead.

"Yuri."

He opened those cherry-hazel eyes and glanced over his free shoulder, feeling Viktor pull away from his back to let him turn around again. To his surprise, the beach hadn't vanished. He still saw the expanse of stone and sand there before himself, and he could feel the gentle lick of water against his heels. Ahead of himself though, he saw not only his spouse...but his friends.

_Yurio...Chris...Phichit-kun...even Otabek..._

"Davai, Yuri." The Russian Tiger offered simply, with the Hero of Kazakhstan nodding in agreement.

"Davai."

"Chokh dī." Thailand's living ray of sunshine was giving a thumbs up.

"Bonne chance." Tall blonde bae added, winking as well.

Yuri could feel the butterflies swirling around inside him even more strongly then, wading in that cold, ankle-deep water, in front of so many people that he knew. Tears threatened to well in his eyes.

_These are all the same people who were at our wedding party last spring. Now, look at us...standing here again together._

"You're going to run out of time, koibito." Viktor commented, his fanned bangs tousling a bit as he nudged his head out towards the ice, "Better get going before they start without you."

Yuri nodded, stifling a laugh as he lowered his head suddenly to choke off the tears that fell from his lashes, "I know...I'm going..." He raised his face again to look at the group, "You guys didn't all have to stick around here to wish me good luck...but I'm really happy that you did."

The silver Russian was the first to raise his arms back over the hopeless skater's shoulders, pulling him into a hug as the entire rest of the group came forward to join in.

"Skater Yuri is surrounded by the other competitors!" Morooka commented excitedly, "What a moving gesture from them! It's clear that Yuri's rather touched by the outpouring of support. Coming at this event with an injury as severe as the one he had...let's all give a piece of our hearts, and hope to carry him through to the end."

Even the other coaches were looking on with smiles on their faces, wry as some were from the more stoic members. But, like all things, even the big SkaterHug had to eventually come to an end, and Yuri pulled back from the group, tears rolling down his face despite his smile. He reached one hand up to try and clear his cheeks, and grabbed for another tissue where his husband held out the Makkachin plush-toy tissue box, "I'm going to be too emotional to skate now...I see what you guys are doing..."
"We have to handicap you somehow." Chris mused, "Otherwise it wouldn't be fair."

"Okay now seriously you need to get out there!" Viktor insisted, spinning his partner around by his shoulders and lightly smacking both hands against the skater's rump to get him to move.

The beach was gone in that moment, and the rink returned...but the feeling remained.

"Wakatta, wakatteru yo!" Yuri was flustered and flushed at the gesture, but finally made his way forward, shaking his head and laughing anyway. The audience saw the move as well and laughed in turn, gradually falling to a hushed silence as the first athlete of the Men's event finally got to his spot. He didn't worry about skating through anymore idle circles before finding the middle of the ISU logo, and kissed his ring as he glided into place, tilting his head down into his starting pose.

He drew a last deep breath; in through the nose, out through the mouth...and the music began.

['Heroes' - Generdyn Music]

The low, rumbling, rising bass echoed high in the rafters, and Yuri pushed off on one toe-pick, slowly raising his arms up in time with the pressure.

I can hear the lost crying,

Arms curled around and forward, fingers reaching down and nearly touching the skater's hair, and Yuri went down to one knee, crouching down low as his arms went out on either side.

I can hear the truth hiding, hiding.

He rose back up quickly, gliding lightly forward like a ghost, bringing both hands up to either side of his head before extending them out to the sides again, the right slightly higher than the left, guiding the direction of his blades as he increased his speed.

Yeah the shadows are calling us out,

He twisted around on one heel and dipped low, hydroplaning backwards with his face down, left leg carefully extended outward as the right propelled him over the ice. The angle of his curve moved along the drag of a single finger, and he rose back up to his full height on the beat of the last word of the lyric.

I see the fear rising.

Still sliding along the frost, the skater twizzled thrice, raising up his arms as he spun on that diagonal line before spreading them out far as he straightened his path on the next boom.

Yeah when hope is burning, the shadows are calling us out.

Viktor watched anxiously as his partner moved through the 3-turn, amping up the speed for the first planned jump of the program.

It's feeling like the sun's hiding,

The heavy thunder of the lyric sent the skater spinning into the air, vaulting from a low crouch with his left leg crossed in front of the right, arms thrust high to help propel the lift. Everyone's eyes were staring in unblinking awe and trepidation, half the audience practically clambering out of their seats. Even Minako was nearly on her feet by then, biting the edge of her SkateSon's banner and waiting, as though the whole thing were happening in slow motion.
"HE LANDED IT!" She cheered, jumping and landing back into her seat excitedly...only to shuffle forward again and gape. Mari was peeking through her fingers to the side, only daring to look once she'd heard that her brother hadn't ended up crumbled in a heap.

*But we're gonna keep moving, surviving...*

It wouldn't last, though. Yuri had tilted too far as he slid backwards, moving out of the tail end of the double-tano quad Loop before the dizziness was too severe to manage.

Viktor's eyes were wide, and he all-but-scrambled over the rink-wall, holding it tightly as his partner gradually slipped right off his skates and went spiraling down to the ice, spinning out on a thigh before finally getting back up again to carry on.

*No we won't go quiet tonight, stand up and shout louder.*

*Blyat!* The Russian thought hastily, *He missed his cue for the combo jump! ...Get it together, Yuri...organize yourself...!*

The step-sequence was already in full-swing, and Yuri wasted no time, quietly cursing himself as he moved through the serpentine formation. Twists and turns, choctaws, mohawk turns, twizzles and rockers, arms up and expressive to carry the sequence forward, rotating on his blades to frequently change his face of direction.

*Oh no, no, we won't be silent, the shadows are calling us out...*

The element ended on a double-twizzle, both arms out as he slid back towards the middle of the opposite side of the rink. As the music faded out for a moment, Yuri held still, eyes lowered to the ice and feeling the cold seeping in against his leg where the clinging frost was melting.

*We are heroes*

Death-drop into a reverse-entry camel-spin

*He roes in the darkest times, when there is no light, Oooh...*

Arms were behind himself at first, then out to the side. Curling inward just enough to splay out again and hop for the foot-change and continue rotating. He reached back for his up-turned golden blade, pulling it close to behind his head for a donut spin. Keeping hold of the skate, he pulled inward again to change position, this time standing more upright with the boot pulled behind his back. Inching it up, he was able to grab his foreleg with the other hand, and helped hold that leg up behind himself as he finished out the spin, kicking out and moving backwards across the ice.

*We are heroes, heroes in the darkest times, but we'll rise above, Oooh...*

A brief pick-up in speed, and the young skater convinced himself to try and get his jump-count back up. He knew he had time now, abandoning a few choreographic moves for the sake of this attempt. He twisted through a forward-outside 3-turn, catching a brief glimpse of his coach watching him anxiously...and dipped to the left back inside edge of his blade...and thrust his right leg forward, throwing himself through the triple Salchow, single Loop, and triple Loop to round it out.

That time, he managed to stay on his feet, and even though he over-rotated the final landing and nearly tripped over his skates, he regained some semblance of his confidence.
"I can do this...!

We are heroes...

He went directly into the flying sit-spin then, feeling more in his element despite his swimming head. After the initial pose for the spin, with his left leg out, he curled it inward and crossed it directly in front of the right leg. The skater's left arm went gracefully above himself as he went on in a blur of dark-blue and star-like sequins.

When the night is starless,

With the boom, Yuri let go of the skate blade and reached that newly-freed hand up behind himself to join the first, legs staying crossed over one another as that taut frame pivoted over them.

Only we can spark it...

A few more rotations, and he ended the spin gracefully, wheeling his arms from behind his back to rising up in front of himself as he rose, digging in a toe-pick to stop his revolutions. He spread his hands out wide as they lifted towards the ceiling, then arched his arms out and away, and finally downward to his sides.

Light it up in the darkness, Oooh...

He kicked off to slide away again, hands pulling up his thighs, waist, and sides as he moved and picked up speed.

Viktor's eyes were staring on, almost unblinking.

He wanted to put all his toughest jumps in the second half, so he'd still get the bigger bonus even if he fell... Realistically, it's his best chance at making the podium...but it also carries the bigger risk...

The Russian curled one arm around himself as the other rested with a finger over his chin and mouth, looking out over the ice nervously. The second half of the Free Program had just started...Yuri still had 2 minutes and 20 seconds left...almost the length of an entire Short Program.

When the night is starless,

The first of the harder jumps was up, and Yuri twisted through a mohawk-turn, leaning down onto the outside edge of his left blade. Right leg went back, and he kicked the toe-pick down, launching himself up again...three rotations, land on the right blade for the triple Lutz, immediately dipping low with the left blade folding in front...vault again, three rotations...land again after the triple Loop...

...and his hand touched down on the ice.

Only we can spark it...

His anxious coach was practically biting his nails to see it, It's just like earlier...he can physically do the jumps, but he can't recover quickly enough from the rotations to keep his balance on the out-bound slide...

Light it up in the darkness, Oooh...

"...If I do all my hardest jumps at the end, then the automatic deductions won't hurt as badly because
I'll be getting the 1.1 bonus on a higher base-score..." Yuri rationalized, looking at the notepad where his partner had listed all his program's components.

"You've only been able to manage your quads if you don't follow them up with spins or even more jumps right after though." Viktor pointed out, tapping a pen against the side of his jaw, "It wasn't so obvious during the Short Program, but you had a limit of 3 jump elements there...now you can do 8, and you pack most of them into the second half, which basically means you'll be spending half the program feeling like your brain is swimming around in here." He tapped the pen against the side of Yuri's head for emphasis, "Never mind the fact that you've been running out of steam faster since you're having to compensate so much just to stay upright."

The younger skater nodded reluctantly, crossing his arms with a huffed sigh, "This is such a pain... After everything we went through so far this season...I feel like the universe is trying to sabotage me with this. Maybe I was never meant to win Gold at the Final...any Final."

"Maybe just take it down a notch?" Viktor suggested, "You already do more jump elements than basically anyone else."

"...I'm still trying to beat you though, too, remember?"

The Russian made a face, "There's a saying about how to avoid being eaten by bears...you don't actually have to out-run the bear...you just need to out-run the guy running next to you. Would it be so terrible to go for Silver instead? For the sake of your health? It would be much easier to overtake 3rd place than to gun for 1st..."

"So says the Silver medalist who moped through the entire victor lap at Worlds." Yuri made a face of his own, looking over at his spouse, "You've given me Gold Fever. Now that I know what it's like...nothing less tastes as sweet. Besides..." He slid the few inches between them to get closer and snaked an arm around his husband's lower back, pulling up the notepad with his free hand and pressing it to the man's chest lightly, "When you showed up in Hasetsu that first time...you said you'd make me win Gold at the Grand Prix Final. Not Silver."

Yuri landed the triple Toe-loop, and launched again for a second triple Toe-loop to follow. Like his other jumps, he flubbed the landing, but managed to stay on his feet, sliding backwards like his blades were half-drunk for a few seconds before leveling out again.

*We are heroes... He roes in the darkest times*

The next jump would be significantly easier at any rate, and the skater pushed through a few choreographed moves before facing forward and throwing himself upward for his favorite jump; the triple Axel. With one arm up, he was pleased to feel that his blade hit the ice and, for once, didn't wobble under him, allowing him the reprieve of a perfect landing for the first time since the quad Loop at the start.

*...When there is no light, Oooh...*

It felt even better when he didn't lose his balance after the fact either, and was able to twist himself over for the Ina Bauer, granting a moment of simple elegance before the powerhouse of the program really began.

*We are heroes...*
He sunk down onto one knee, both hands coming around in front of himself, then rotating around twice quickly to either side.

*He roes in the darkest times,*

A mohawk turn spun him backwards again and he pushed through several cross-overs to get around the short end of the rink. Spotting a billboard to set as his mark, he glided for those few microseconds before the next boom in the music...

...*But we'll rise above, Oooh*...

Left blade on its inside edge, the right went out to toe-pick, kicking the skater up into the air for his first and only Flip of the entire show. He spun four times, and landed on the right blade, sliding away in reverse on the outside edge. His confidence grew again, unsure why he wasn't as dizzy as before but supposing it was because he hadn't done a major spin since the first half...though that was about the change, and he braced himself.

*We are heroes*...

Yuri leaned forward, dipped, and threw his weight to the side, forcing his body to twist into a harsh forward-facing circle. He dipped his head down low again for an illusion-spin before using the momentum of the free leg to rock his shoulders upright again and spin faster. He immediately went into a scratch spin, and the song entered into its first climax, with the thunder of drums and growing intensity of the background orchestra. Each new peak made Yuri feel like he was spinning even faster. With both arms up, he spread them out to the side to slow down slightly and slipped into the corkscrew spin variant, left leg folded behind the right as that blade dragged like a whisper over the ice. He lowered down in that same position, bringing his arms around himself as his frame became a dark blur on the bright frost. His free leg came in after that, and the skater held it close with a hand reaching under himself to snag the blade, his whole frame curling over itself into a tight ball for a few spins.

The peak of the song had been hit, and it flew back down into a valley, just as Yuri rose out of the combination spin and steeled himself for the last 2 components and 45 seconds of the program.

*I have enough of a break after this spin to regain my head for the next jump... Please, Kami-sama, let me land these last two moves...!*

Choreography dominated the next ascent of the song's rhythm, allowing Yuri a reprieve from spins and rotations to show off his other skills. Exquisite footwork and expressive arms moved him from one end of the rink to the other, his frame twisting to the heavy beats of the drums.

He pivoted on his left blade again, bending it just onto its outside edge, and kicked his right leg back again like before. The silence was deafening for that brief moment...

*We are heroes*...

*-BOOM-*

Yuri was airborne again, spinning quickly with both hands over his head, fingers clasped together tightly. The audience was breathless for the four rotations, and half of the onlookers probably flinched when he landed, gliding off on the outside edge of his right skate. They cheered wildly for his success; Minako and Mari were practically in tears for it. The other skaters watching from rink-side were captivated...some even slightly intimidated.
The music was growing in intensity, thunder-claps powering through the drums, making the entire arena feel electrified. Yuri moved like he was on a battlefield, leading the charge towards some unknown enemy. The beats became faster, and then faster still, clamoring like a dozen hammers slamming on an anvil.

But then the silence came...and he was facing backward, gliding down the length of the rink with his arms outstretched to the sides, and leaning slightly as he came up around the curve.

Chris turned his eyes for a moment to watch Viktor, and the predator-like laser focus the man had with that stare. Yuri was sliding right towards them. Whatever happened, it would be right in their faces. As they all looked up, they suddenly saw those red-tinted cherry-hazel eyes looking right back at them. For a split second, as Yuri moved angled his glide from the back right outside edge to the forward-facing left outside edge, the right blade kicking up high behind him for the wind-up...it felt like time stopped.

_Don't ever take your eyes off me._

The last of the fast hammer-beats crushed its way through the arena, and Yuri threw himself as high and as far as he could, swinging that free right leg forward and kicking it up with every _molecule_ of strength left in him.

**KLICK**

"You've _literally_ never landed that jump." Viktor chastised, finding his partner where Yuri had flopped onto his back after falling again, "And you give me dirty looks every time _I_ do it."

"...But it's worth so many points..." The younger figure whined, "Even if I can't stick the landing, one point less than 15 is _still_ better than a perfect triple...and if I do it at the end..."

The silver Russian wasn't convinced, crouching down to sit on the rockers of both his blades, lightly pinching his hand around his chin as he raised a brow as his spouse, "What's the word for 'hypocrite' in Japanese again...?"

Yuri gaped at him incredulously, but then smugly turned his face to avoid the man's judgmental looks, "...Gizensha."

"And the word for 'crazy person with head injury who insists on doing something dangerous even when everyone else will tell him not to'?

"...I don't think there's a single word for that, Viktor."

"I'll bet there is in German."

"That's cuz German is weird."

The Russian huffed a laugh, pushing to straighten his legs out even as he leaned far over to offer his hands, "Tell someone you love them every day, because life is fleeting...but yell it at them in German, because life is also terrifying."

Dark eyes blinked at that, but as Yuri was pulled up to his feet, and embraced from behind in a fluid sweep of arms folding over his head, he couldn't help but laugh, "Živěm odin raz."

Viktor stopped dead in his tracks then, unsure he'd heard correctly, "...Was that an attempt at..."
"Russian or did I just mishear you?"

"Yes and no." Yuri laughed again, turning his head to nose his husband's neck, "It's a lyric from that show you did at Worlds. You said just now that life is terrifying...so I said..."

"...You only live once." They said together.

"You do a really fine job of twisting my arm without me realizing it." Viktor sighed, "If we weren't already married and sharing a bank account, I'd think you could rob me blind, and I wouldn't be the wiser."

"I promise I won't do it if I'm dizzy." The younger figure offered, "And if I do, I won't add anything fancy, like raise up my arms or go for a difficult entry. I'll just go purely for the jump."

"And if you fall like you usually do, and I have to suffer a small stroke watching it?"

"I dunno...I won't give you a dirty look if you do it in your own Free Skate?"

Viktor quirked a brow again, letting his partner go so he could turn around to face him, "That hardly seems like a fair trade."

"Then what do you want...?" Yuri tilted his head curiously, hands sliding past his partner's waist to hook a few fingers loosely behind the man's back, Viktor's own arms coming up to rest on his shoulders.

"A good question, indeed." The silver genius hummed, "What do you get a guy who already has everything he could possibly ever want?"

"...Well that just makes you especially hard to shop for." The younger figure pointed out anxiously, his voice half a whine, half a groan...and half a laugh, somehow, "Seriously though."

"Mmmmm..." The Russian hummed, only for his eyes to suddenly go wide open as an idea dawned, "Oh, I know...!"

Even if I mess this up and fall... Yuri thought, spinning through the air in what felt like slow motion, ...I'll lose one point on the deduction...but I'll still have gained half a point for the second-half point bonus... If I manage to land it though...Viktor will...

The arena was deadly silent as his blades hit the ice, the music entering a lull just as he'd jumped. Eyes were wide from all sides, breath was held, and everyone watched...Viktor most closely of all.

Yuri landed like a meteor on skates, and the intensity of the screams that chased after him was like the tsunami and earthquakes that followed impact. He dared not open his eyes, his entire body numb...but when he finally allowed himself to look, he realized...he was still moving...and he wasn't sliding towards the rink-wall on his backside.

The roar of the audience was cheering, not terror, and those mystified eyes looked over to spot a certain World Champion all-but-collapsing in relief on the rink-wall.

That was it...! Viktor, I did it! That was the last jump; I'm almost done!

Yuri could hardly believe it. He couldn't hear the rest of his song over the sound of the audience's adulations. In his stunned shock, he completely blanked on the rest of the program anyway, coming
to again a minute or so later as he was bowing towards the crowd. He scanned the wall near the kiss
and cry, and spotted the entire gaggle of competitors shuffling over towards that exit rather quickly.
Plush toys and flower bouquets would have to wait. He pushed off on a toe-pick and glided across
the ice, feeling the fire in his throat and all throughout his thin, lean frame, like the slow-burning fuse
of a firecracker. When he was close to the edge though, he shook his head to get his bearings again,
and looked up to spot the entire group giving him dirty looks.

*Oh heck...now I'm gonna get it...*

Viktor had the 'damn right, you're never going to hear the end of it' look on his face...but in short
order, as the young athlete skimmed closer to the edge of the rink, the dire expression softened, and
pale hands reached forward.

Yuri felt the pull where those fingers clasped around the back of his head and neck, pulling him
forward and tilting the angle just slightly. He heard the entire audience go nuts again, cheering for
that well-deserved kiss...but the cheers turned to excited fangirl screams as the hands moved
elsewhere. Hazel eyes opened wide and Yuri found himself up on his tiptoes as his dastardly
husband got two palms full of his lycra-covered SkaterButt right there in front of everyone, still
standing with his back to the rink, in full sight of every camera and smartphone, professionally
broadcasting or otherwise. He half-yipped despite the continued kiss, and was only half-surprised
when Viktor hadn't let go even after it ended. The young skater's face was as brightly flushed in that
moment as it had been as Nationals the year before, when the words 'do you want to get inside me?'
were spoken abruptly the first time.

One could be forgiven for thinking Yuri's head had been replaced by a red giant red Christmas light-
bulb.

"I thought you were only going to do that if I fell!" He stammered, finally able to roll back on his rockers a
little, though the Russian still hadn't let go.

Viktor just smiled rather triumphantly, "You fell a bunch of times. So I get to grab a bunch of your
butt."

The peanut gallery was a mix of laughter and embarrassed wayward glances, trying not to look too
long.

The audience was still cheering, and Yuri could do little but bring his own hands up to cover his face
as he leaned forward against his partner's shoulder. It didn't help that Viktor used that 'grip' to hoist
him forward and, finally, off the ice. The young skater's face was still rather rosy even after they'd
finally managed to get themselves situated in the kiss and cry, and though the silver legend had
finally let go, still looked rather pleased with himself.

"...I don't think I'll ever do that again..." Yuri sighed anxiously, leaning back on his hands, idly
rocking a skate back and forth on the heel-guard, "Triple Axels are already hard enough."

"You have the gift of unearthly stamina, Yuri." Viktor quipped, his left hand loosely set over his
partner's where it was set between them, "I could be convinced that the quad Axel was made
for you."

"...I actually meant that I wouldn't ever agree to let you grab my butt on international television
again." He huffed in response, "My face still hurts from where I was grimacing so hard..."

"Ahh...poor naïve Yuri... So forward in private, yet still so modest in public." The Russian teased,
leaning slightly to nudge his partner with a shoulder, "It's endearing that I can still make you blush
"...Well...I guess if agreeing to let you grope me if I fell on the Axel is the alternative to letting you be all upset about my jump line-up..." Yuri nodded, leaning forward slightly and clasping his fingers around his husband's, "Then it's not all bad."

"I suppose that makes me naïve too then, in a way."

"How's that?"

"Thinking I could hold you back, even if it made sense to, and every fiber of my being was saying I should." He answered, "My 'Inner Yakov' was lecturing me to be a firmer coach every time I saw you get onto the ice...but no matter what, the little devil on my shoulder always prevailed, and the little angel on the other would rationalize it after the fact." He shook his head and laughed quietly, "I once noticed a bit of a rebellious streak in you that reminded me a lot of myself. I can't be all that surprised that you would be this hard-headed about things...pardon the pun."

"Maybe 'soft-headed' would make more sense." Yuri shrugged, "In either case...even though I know it was hard for you, I'm grateful that you trusted my instinct and let me do what I thought I was able to."

"It was hard to argue after a while." The Russian said, his tone a bit more somber than before, and he leaned aside to rest the side of his head on the edge of his spouse's shoulder, "From the minute you demanded those wraps come off your head, you've been adamant about wanting to keep going. ...This entire season, no matter what happened, no matter what got in your way...you always came back ready for more. I don't think I've ever seen someone fight this hard before. Yuuko and Nishigori were right about you..."

Yuri turned his head in curiosity, looking more at the top of his partner's head than anything, given his vantage.

"Even if you're not used to winning...more than anything, you really do hate losing."

"The score for Yuri Nikiforov..."

No matter what...no one can say I didn't try my hardest...

"...209.05. His total score is 305.62. He is currently in first place."
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<th></th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Score</th>
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<tr>
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Chapter 293

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the late update. I've been spending the last week getting ready to move, and I finished up with all that just yesterday. Updates should be regular again.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED NINETY THREE

"Wow~!" Viktor cried out excitedly, clapping his hands together before reaching them over to pull his partner into a tight hug, "You scored even higher than at your last two events! That's amazing!"

Yuri felt a wave of relief wash over him, and he dropped his head forward, "...Okay then...I'm done...time for a nap..."

"Not so fast." The Russian laughed, "Your friend Phichit is up next."

The younger skater flopped anyway, stretching his arms up over his head as he draped himself sideways and over his spouse's lap rather dramatically, "...I'm sure Phichit-kun will do great..." He said, his voice comically strained as his exhausted self finally let go of all the tension and apprehension he'd felt prior to his turn. He felt a hand patting his side, and heard a quiet chuckle of a laugh through the roar of the cheering audience.

"I've heard it said that cats are actually liquid, because they take the shape of whatever crazy thing they sit in...but I can feel you turning to liquid yourself." Viktor mused, "Are you actually a cat?"

"I guess it would explain why Yurio likes me so much."

The Russian guffawed a laugh, shaking his head as he turned to wrap his arms around his husband's frame, twist, stand, and hoist the man upwards. A gentle upward toss to get a better grip, and Viktor had one arm under the fatigued athlete's bum to hold him up, feeling Yuri slump against his shoulder like a sack of spuds. He pat the skater's side with his free hand and carried the poor man out of the kiss and cry, "That would answer so many questions."

"Securing a strong lead, Skater Yuri can finally relax. Seems his coach feels the same way!"

Thinking the Russian was going to carry him through the doors back into the Players Lounge, Yuri let himself relax even further, going so far as to close his eyes where he slouched against the tall man's broad shoulder. Just as he was settling in though, he felt Viktor spin around suddenly and stop moving, and cracked his eyes open to spot Phichit and Celestino there in front of him instead of the bar area.

The anxious Thai skater was pulling his blade-guards off, standing just inside the gap in the rink wall, and handed them over to his coach. Phichit had a nervous look on his face, but that quickly changed over to surprise when he realized a certain pair of hazel eyes were staring back at him...equally surprised, "Yuri!"

"G-Ganbatte!" The startled older skater said instinctively, feeling the slight tilt of his husband's head where Viktor was glancing back over the other shoulder to see what was going on.
"...Well, I've never scored over 300 before..." The Thai skater sighed, trying to look a bit more cheerful then, "But I'll do my best."

Yuri grimaced slightly, unsure how to answer to that. He then wiggled a bit where he was being held, pulling his right arm up from where he'd had it curled over his partner's chest, and leaned his whole frame forward with both hands reaching out over the wall.

Viktor could tell what his spouse was trying to do, and backed up a pace or two to accommodate him, keeping the younger man balanced while he reached over the rink wall to pull his friend into a hug. His right hand braced the lithe younger man's waist, the other holding to the back of one thigh.

"This is only your second time at the Final." Yuri started, pausing there with his arms over Phichit's shoulders, "And you already score way higher than most average skaters, and you keep setting new personal bests. You'll score over 300."

Celestino smirked at that, crossing his arms as he watched.

The youngest skater blinked at that, but the realization was stark, and he finally cracked a smile and returned the hug, "Thanks, Yuri."

"Mh." They pulled back again, and Yuri moved to hold himself up by settling his hands on his partner's lower back, "Go out there and show them who Thailand's best-ever skater i-YAA!"

"...Y-Yuri...?" Phichit blanched, seeing the suddenly-horrified look on his friend's face, only to look aside and see a rather scheming smirk on the silver Russian's.

"He's going to make you late." Viktor mused, spinning around on the heel of one blade-guard, looking rather proud of himself, the hand that had previously been on the back of one leg now clasped slightly higher, against the subtle inward curve of his husband's derriere and the back of one thigh, "I don't know that the ISU folks will give everyone a few extra minutes to wish each other good luck. So...Phichit... Davai~!"

"Thanks!" The younger skater clapped his hands together and bowed his head behind them, and quickly turned, getting a nod from his coach before flying out across the ice.

Yuri was still red-faced from the unexpected grab, but all he could do was sigh and hang limp over that shoulder, watching the floor go by, past the end of his fingers.

"Now on the ice...representing Thailand...Phichit Chulanont!"

"It's just like that time you wouldn't let me help you." Viktor mused, "And I carried you to bed after."

"...Please try not to run by face into another wall...?" The young skater protested, careful then to avoid putting his head in the way of one himself.

"Oh, did I bump you back then?" The Russian laughed, carrying his 'trophy' into the Players Lounge finally, "Gomen?"

"It's fine..." Yuri sighed, reaching one hand up to rub his face, the phantom pain creeping in briefly, "How long are you going to hold me up by the backside though?"

"You'll slide off, or my shoulder will cramp, if I hold you up any other way." Viktor answered coyly, leaning his head back slightly in an attempt to see his partner out the corner of one eye, "I honestly didn't mean to surprise you like that...but I could feel you slipping. It was just my good
fortune that it turned out this way."

"Mhm..." The younger figure huffed, resigning to his fate as he heard the sound of Phichit's performance begin. He could only wonder if his coach would continue toting him around that way when their friends would come up to talk about the show.

['Shatter Me' - Lindsey Stirling feat. Lzzy Hale]

"I can hardly believe them..." Minako sighed, finally falling back into her chair to relax. "The way Viktor reacted when Yuri came off the ice though...he had to have known Yuri's plan..."

"Yuri said they were practicing all day at his old Skate Club." Mari pointed out.

"Oh, you've talked to him?"

\[I\text{ pirouette in the dark}\]
\[I\text{ see the stars through a mirror}\]

"Well, texted." She answered, "When I heard that him and Viktor hadn't gone to Official Practice, I messaged him to ask what happened. Turns out, they had sort-of already planned on it this way, so they decided to sleep in instead." Mari pulled her eyes up from the ice to glance at the woman next to her, "Haven't you talked to him?"

\[Tired mechanical heart, beats 'til the song disappears\]

"After ruining his night yesterday? No..." The ballerina sighed, eyes out on the rink again. Phichit was gliding across the ice, footwork teasing a pseudo-step-sequence as the tone of the music intensified, "I feel like I should keep my head down for a while."

"Oh, cuz of your chat with Viktor?"

\[Somebody shine a light, I'm frozen by the fear in me\]
\[Somebody make me feel alive\]

"The talk itself? No... The way Viktor reacted though?" Minako was sinking into her jacket, "I don't think I could've upset him more without hitting Makkachin with my car."

"...Yikes..."

Outside spread-eagle...

\[And shatter me...!\]

Triple Axel...clean landing. Phichit twisted himself over again to carry-through the end of the glide with another outside spread-eagle for added difficulty.

\[So cut me from the line, dizzy, spinning endlessly\]

"What'd you tell him to make him so angry anyway? He was way more intense than the time he went after Mikhail's son." Mari wondered idly, "Is he just being dramatic over nothing again?"

\[Somebody make me feel alive...\]

"...I wouldn't say it's nothing."

Phichit pushed through a 3-turn, putting himself onto his back-right outside edge, left leg behind it...
...and shatter me...!

...He struck the ice with his toe-pick, spun four times, and landed on the same foot and edge gracefully.

...I need to be able to turn that quad Toe-loop into a Flip or a Lutz by Worlds, or I'll never catch up to Yuri...!

Shatter me!

Another 3-turn, and the Thai skater vaulted into the triple Lutz, triple Toe-loop combo, sweeping through with ease and gliding away for the figure-8 of outside-to-inside spread-eagles.

"Well, Viktor seems to be fine again, given how he's back to molesting my brother in public again." The Katsuki daughter shrugged, "Whatever it was, I'm sure he's over it."

"Mmhh..." Minako sunk a little bit further, her eyes barely peeking over the edge of her scarf.

Somebody make me feel alive, and shatter me...

Phichit glided at an angle, leaning back as his left leg went up high for the Spiral-entry triple Axel, landing flawlessly to begin his step sequence.

If only the clockwork could speak, I wouldn't be so alone

"But speaking of Elder Doofus, where is Mikhail anyway? He sure it taking a long walk. He's missing everything."

"He never came to these events in the first place because he had a passion for figure skating," The ballerina pointed out, "If he did, it wouldn't have taken him so long to figure out what happened to Viktor when they were estranged."

We'd burn every magnet and spring, and spiral into the unknown...

Death-drop entry into a combination-spin, bending immediately into a sitting-twist variant with one arm raised up towards the rafters.

Somebody shine a light
I'm frozen by the fear in me

"Maybe he went to go find his kids then." Mari surmised, "I'm sure he'll be back in time for Yurio."

Eyes were fixed on the televisions behind the lounge counter. Yuri had finally been allowed to walk on his own again by then and had chosen to sit at the bar, watching Phichit's performance from the warmth and relaxed atmosphere of the Players Club. A tall glass of clear bubbly soda was fizzing in front of him, ice cubes rattling within as he tilted the drink around in a circle where he held it in his hands.

Chris was leaning against the counter next to him, idly holding the nib of a water-bottle to his lip, practically dissecting the show like he could see the points adding up in his mind's eye, numbers scrolling over the television screen like Stock Market trends. The numbers for the TES and PCS were listed in the top left, but Chris' brain was dissecting every new tally, thinking on the full breakdown of Phichit's scorecard.

"Shouldn't you be stretching already?" Yuri's voice spoke, making both the Russian, who was
leaning against his partner's back while standing behind the tall chair, and Chris, look up.

"I will in a bit." Viktor answered, sliding in a bit closer, "I'm cozy right now."

"Shouldn't you be doing your post-skate interview? Yuri." The Swiss skater wondered, pulling up from the water bottle, "I'm sure they're antsy for you." He pointed towards the hall beyond the glass walls.

"I'll go once Phichit-kun is done. I want to be back in time to watch Yurio." The younger figure answered, "I promised I would, and he'll kill me if I miss it again."

Chris huffed a laugh, spotting that very Russian Punk coming sauntering their way with his small entourage, "Then I suppose I'd better finish stretching out, since I'm up next."

"I'll come find you before you go up."

The older skater nodded and pushed off the counter, patting Yuri's shoulder as he moved off.

Viktor waved pleasantly before returning his arm to its warm place around his husband's thin frame. When he turned back though to look at the television screens again, he caught sight of the group coming up on his other side, and while initially lifted his head at them, soon lowered it back down to rest his chin on his spouse's shoulder like before, "You guys are quite the little gang now." He mused.

"Otabek and I made them come down here,"

"He made them come down here." The Kazakh was quick to correct.

"...So it's on us to make sure they don't get kicked out again." Yurio explained, ignoring the previous comment, and nudged his head towards his silver-haired 'sisters,' "Their dad would probably turn me into minced-meat if they got tossed into the concourse alone."

"He's your dad now, too." Nikki pointed out, nudging him with one elbow.

The blonde just made a face, like he wasn't sure how to answer to that, but then shrugged and gave a smug look, "It's a formality."

The younger teen reached a hand up and pat the Russian Tiger's braided head, "Pretty soon you'll be calling him that instead of 'old man' or his name. I'm sure of it."

Yurio just shrugged and looked aside like the thought was embarrassing.

Nikki turned her attention towards the two much-older skaters, then more specifically at the younger of the pair, "You did really great out there! The audience went totally nutty with that last jump!"

Yuri smiled nervously and reached a hand up to scratch the side of his chin, "Thanks."

"It was a quad Axel, the hardest jump there is!" Viktor explained proudly, rubbing his cheek against the side of his partner's head like a cat claiming territory, "It's going to be his new signature move!"

"...Eh?"

The Russian turned his head to look at his partner, "What? It will be! Forget the quad Flip! And the Lutz, since it's Chris'! The Axel has to be yours!"

"...What's mine then...?" Yurio wondered anxiously.
"The Salchow." The two older figures answered in tandem.

"W-Why the Salchow!? That's the easiest jump!"

"Cuz you taught Yuri how to do it." Viktor answered that time, giving a dumb-happy smile as he said so, "You can have the Flip or the Lutz once Chris and I are retired though."

"I did the Flip in Bordeaux!"

"You did? I don't recall."

"V-Viktor...! It was during my Short Program! I'm certain you two were watching!"

"He's right." Yuri explained, leaning his head back a bit, "We both commented on it. It's why you asked me to tell you what score you should get afterwards."

Yurio gaped at the older skater, "...You told him to get 119!?"

Yuri turned back, his cheeks a bit pink as he raised his hands up to wave them back and forth defensively, "I wasn't being serious when I said it though! I didn't even think he would score that high, never mind because I told him to!"

"Well then tell him to score less than 200 when he goes up." The Russian Tiger thumbed at his older counterpart, but found Viktor snorting a laugh at him.

"Under 200? Yuri, that's impossible." Viktor explained, "I haven't scored under 200 in the Free Skate in years."

"It's never too late to set a new trend."

"If he's doing a thousand quads again then it probably would be impossible to score under 200." Nikkita pointed out, "He set a new World Record with his show last weekend, too."

"When did you become a scholar of figure skating...?" Yurio deadpanned her.

"I'm just sayin!" She answered, giving the same look right back at him, but crossing her eyes outward to make the expression even more absurd.

"I'm actually only doing three quads this time." The elder Russian explained, much to the surprise of nearly everyone in earshot. All eyes were on him then, "Last weekend was a once-in-a-lifetime kind of performance. I never meant for it to be that way."

"...Your Yuri did four though...?" The young silver teen said dubiously, "Shouldn't you be trying to beat him?"

"Sure." Viktor nodded, "But the show I'm going to be doing tonight is the kind of show I'd meant to do this whole season. If I hadn't gotten so side-tracked with everything else...I never would've done 'Evoke' in the first place."

"Side-tracked...?" Nikki echoed, "You mean with all the stuff about our papa?"

"Mmmhhhhhh...not necessarily." The lanky skater pulled one arm away from where it was wrapped around his husband's torso, and settled a finger on his chin, "He was a part of everything, but that skate wasn't because of him." He then pointed at himself briefly, "I meant my papa."

The two silver teens looked a bit uncomfortable at the mention.
"It's fine now." Viktor explained, "Things are better."

Not that it made any difference...but both of the Rozovsky daughters zoom'ed forward unexpectedly, latching all four arms around their cousin. Viktor's eye twitched nervously at the entirely unexpected gesture, "Ah...uhm..."

"We're sorry those things happened to you and that our older brother was such a huge butt to you about it back in Calgary!" They both said.

"...Er...thanks?"

Yuri gave a nervous smile at the sight of the two clinging to his partner, but said nothing, hoping the issue would go away if no one else expanded on it. When it looked like the duo might not soon let the man go though, Yuri tapped their shoulders to get their attention, and flicked his head in a 'please let go' sort of gesture. They both immediately pulled their hands back, and went to retake their places just behind Yurio, giving awkward smiles as they did so.

The blonde turned his head to watch them, only to catch sight of a dark blur out the corner of his eye. As he turned on the heel of one black blade, he saw the blur take the shape of a familiar figure. Words need not be spoken between them for Yurio to know what the man was there for, and turned back to the teens in front of him, "Time's up."

"Huh?"

Both pairs of jade eyes turned to spot their father standing in the glass double-doorway, members of the media crowding around behind him, practically lying in wait for any hapless athlete that dared wander their way. A generic event pass hung out of his right pocket, the word 'Sponsor' written across it, and a company logo in place of the membership photo.

The awkward silence was palpable, and the two girls turned back to their 'brother' briefly, whispering 'good luck' and 'davai' before offering their hugs and stepping off.

Yuri leaned back to get a better look past Yurio's hooded head, and spotted the dour look on Mikhail's face as he collected his kids. Their eyes met for an instant, and Yuri blinked, opening his eyes again just in time to see the elder Russian starting to move off again. He then turned back towards his spouse, who had been watching the entire thing as well.

"...Damn... I hope I didn't get them in trouble." Yurio sighed, "That'd leave a bad impression."

"I don't think it's you." Viktor answered, "Or them."

"...What then?"

Yuri reached an arm forward to clasp his fingers lightly around the teen's arm, getting his attention and pulling him back, "Come watch Phichit and Chris with me. Otabek, you too."

The awkwardness of the whole scenario made everyone act on auto-pilot, with the two younger skaters hopping up onto bar-stools in a row next to the Japanese athlete. The two teen girls looked back briefly as they made it to the door, waving just their fingers nervously as though they thought they were in trouble as well.

Viktor sighed and slouched a little where he still held to his partner's back, pressing his forehead down on the shoulder in front of himself before finally drawing in a breath and rising up to his full height. He moved around to his husband's side, whispered something in his ear, looked on longingly for half a second before stealing a kiss, and finally moved off. All three remaining skaters fanned
forward to lean against the counter, each trying to look on at what was happening, watching as the silver legend followed in his cousins' footsteps. Most of the media was quick to try and get the man's attention, but Viktor held one hand up and told them all to wait until later.

"...I'm so confused right now..." Yurio grumbled, "If this is what having parents feels like, it kinda sucks sometimes. They don't even have to say anything for you to know something's wrong."

"This doesn't have to do with any of you guys." Yuri said, turning his head once his partner was out of sight, looking instead to the two younger skaters sitting next to him, "It's about yesterday night."

"Oh."

"...So, how about that quad Loop huh?" Otabek said stiffly, trying to divert the topic to the television instead.

"Did he land it?" Yuri asked, following along.

*So cut me from the line, dizzy, spinning endlessly*
*Somebody make me feel alive, and shatter me...*

"Uncle," Viktor called, half-walking-half-skipping to catch up, "Wait."

"Haven't you said enough already?" Mikhail said stiffly, pausing only long enough to look back over one shoulder before moving off again, "If you don't want me involved in things then quit coming after me."

"I never said that. Don't put words in my mouth." The younger figure said simply, stuffing his hands into his team jacket's pockets, "All I meant was that you're doing too much at once. If you still plan on moving everyone to Hasetsu, th-"

"Minako called off the engagement because of you." The elder said bitterly, stopping where he was, but not looking back. Both of his daughters were stunned to hear the words, and Nikki put her hands over her mouth, both pairs of eyes looking from their father to their cousin. Mikhail held his ground though, "Because of what you said."

"I can't make choices for her." Viktor explained, only then switching up his language preferences to something the girls wouldn't understand, for their sake, *[But taking it out on your kids by playing keep-away from Yurio, like you don't want them getting too attached while you scheme your way out of moving to Japan, is childish.]*

*[Says the guy who slept in the car because he was too proud to sleep in his father's house...when it was your idea to go out there in the first place.]* Mikhail retorted, *[I did everything you asked of me and you still threw me under the bus in the end. I knew you'd be different from the kid I left behind 20 years ago, but I didn't think you'd grown up into an ungrateful jackass.]*

Viktoria gave the two older figures a stern look, but then snuck behind her father and swiped the event pass from his pocket, dragging her younger sister back towards the Players Club, "If you two old farts are going to bicker, we're going back."

"Viktoria, come back with that, we're going to sit in the audi-" Mikhail started, taking a step towards her with an eye on the badge.

"No!" She barked, keeping it behind herself, and stared rather seriously, "You may be right that we don't speak Russian, and we're sorry for that, but if he's going to show up," She pointed at her namesake, "...and then you name-drop Yurio like you think we won't get the jist of it
anyway...maybe you have been gone too long. We're not stupid. Come on, Nikki...we're going to hang out with people who don't suck."

The duo walked past Viktor, with Nikki giving one last look back over her shoulder before being dragged back into the Players Club.

Mikhail watched, completely dumbfounded, as his daughters chose Yurio over himself. Once they were out of sight, he raised his eyes to his nephew, [Well that's just great.]

[She spoke for herself. I had nothing to do with it.] Viktor said simply, staying put where he stood.

[Nothing to do with it?] Mikhail guffawed, huffing a mockery of a laugh at the unbelievable turn of events, [If you hadn't come after me just now, the three of us would still be going up to the stands together.]

So this is what it feels like to be blamed for everything, even when it's not your fault, Viktor thought, eyes narrowing just slightly, [Look, I've said and done things that I regret...how I behaved yesterday wasn't among my proudest moments.]

[What part, calling me out in front of everyone, or trying to hit me later?]

[All of it. Even for how I handled your son before. If I knew coming back to competition would be this stressful, I would've turned Yuri down and stayed as just his coach.]

The older figure was still incredulous, [Well that just makes it all better then, doesn't it?]" 

[Would you quit trying to be right for five minutes and just listen?] Viktor growled, [What I said yesterday wasn't right. When we were still at home, I told Yuri that I was sure you'd talk to us about your plans before you finalized them. When it turned out that you didn't, I got a bit angry about it. With everything that's happened since we got here...Yuri getting hurt, not being able to sleep because of it, and all the re-]"

[BEAT IT!] Mikhail suddenly yelled, catching Viktor extremely off guard.

Just as the skater was about ready to raise things to the next level, feeling his heart pounding in his chest as his uncle started walking swiftly towards him...everything seemed to stop.

[GET OUT OF HERE.] Mikhail barked again, waving one arm in an arc like he was trying to scare off a pack of feral dogs, [YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE SPORTS JOURNALISTS, NOT TABLOID REPORTERS. SCREW OFF. THIS IS NONE OF YOUR DAMN BUSINESS.]" 

Viktor lifted his head and glanced behind himself, spotting where his uncle had just spooked the cluster of RSF reporters who were trying to film them. With the cameras gone and the audio booms hidden, he glanced aside again, looking to the man who'd sent the group packing.

Mikhail just kept his eyes on them, careful not to let them start creeping in again, [Bunch of goddamn vultures, looking for scraps of meat where they aren't entitled to any.]

[...They've been acting weird. They walked out of an interview with me, and won't interview Yuri at all.]

The elder wouldn't answer to that, simply staring down the hall with an angry look on his face.

Viktor sighed, [...What I was trying to say before...] He started, feeling his heart calming some, [...I wasn't in the right frame of mind to be talking about anything yesterday. When the whole group
came up, I had just gotten an earful from Yakov about a bunch of things...so I was already slightly irritable. What I said came out sounding worse than it is.]

[They say people speak more truthfully when angry or drunk, so I'd wager you meant exactly what you said.] Mikhail said stiffly, turning on a heel and going back the way he came, [Don't bother trying to walk it back. It doesn't matter anymore anyway.]

[Why, because you've already decided to run back to Canada with your tail between your legs? Your girls have already adapted to the idea of Yurio being their new sibling. You'll break their hearts to just call it off.]

The older man stopped dead in his tracks, twisting on one heel and giving quite the disdainful look, [Is this some kind of petty revenge of yours? Getting back at me for tearing apart your family 25 years ago by tearing mine apart now?]

[What?] Viktor shook his head, looking on in confusion, [That's not what I meant at all.]

"...The score for Phichit Chulanont...203.23... He is currently in second place."

The roar of the audience was enough to make it difficult to be heard in that hall, and all the two men could do was stare at one another. Mikhail eventually turned on his heel again and started walking, leaving Viktor to just watch in stunned, hurt confusion.
To the folks who don't watch the FB page...and who are not liking Mikhail, his plot, or think whatever minimal amount of screen-time I give him is still far too much...please just stop. There's a way of disagreeing with a character's choices/actions without low-key telling me how to write my story. There is nothing about his sub-plot that is getting out of control. Let me do my thing, and trust that I know what the Hell I'm doing. In other words...quitcherbitchin. Mikhail isn't going anywhere, and I'll resolve his situation how I see fit; with the same care and attention I give to any other character that's struggling. And don't be so quick to judge him, goddamn. Just because it's Viktor guessing at Mikhail's motives doesn't mean he's right.

CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED NINETY FOUR

It was awkward enough that the two silver teens had been pulled out of the Players Club when they had, but to see them coming back again right away was...perplexing.

Yurio hopped off his bar stool before any of the rest, "What's going on? Why do you look so mad...?" He wondered, looking up at Viktoria.

"Our dad is a giant butt, just like Sergio. The apple didn't fall far from the tree." She answered stiffly.

Yuri and Otabek listened quietly, neither of them particularly sure if they should say anything, so they stayed silent for a moment. With only the two girls coming back though, Yuri started to get worried, "Why did you come back alone? Where's Viktor?"

"...He stayed with papa..." Nikki answered, her voice cracking a little, "...I think they...they're fighting..."

"Oh no..." Yuri groaned.

"Ahhh Nikki don't cry-" Viktoria started, crouching down a bit to match her shorter sister's height, hands on the front of her shoulders, "This isn't your fault."

"What could the old man have possibly said in 30 seconds to make you both come back, and give Nikki reason to cry?" Yurio wondered anxiously, "I thought the problem was just between him and Viktor."

The older sister pulled the younger into a hug and pet her hair, "Shh..." She turned her eyes towards the Russian Tiger, "Apparently Minako cancelled their engagement. We just found out. Pipaw's blaming Viktor. They started talking in Russian after that..."

Yurio was gaping in shock to hear the words, "But...what will that mean for...everything?"

Yuri grimaced, "Mikhail's blaming Viktor for that?"

"...Why don't you sound surprised?" The blonde wondered, turning his head to face the man as he came down off his stool.
"Because they're both good at blaming each other for problems that they have no control over?"

"No, about the fact that the engagement is off."

"Because I already knew it was going to happen."

"Then why didn't you say something?"

"She told Viktor what she planned to do and she told him not to tell me. I shouldn't know. Plus, she might've gotten cold feet and not gone through with it in the end...so I wasn't going to say squat until she did herself." Yuri answered, pensively stepping towards the open double-doors, only to hesitate as he saw the NBC crew anxiously waiting there for him, paying close attention since it looked like he might speak with them, "Shimatta..." He watched curiously though as the RSF media team started to sneak through, walking right by the doors and over towards where he knew Viktor and Mikhail were, "...What are they up to...?"

"What if he decides not to move to Japan after all!?" Nikki sobbed, "We just spent the last 2 weeks sorting things out because we thought he would!"

"...I don't know..." Viktoria answered, "I guess we'll just have to go back and tell everyone we were just kidding."

Yuri glanced back over one shoulder, spotting the utterly devastated look on Yurio's face at the prospect of everything coming crashing down. Just as he was about to say something though, his attention was grabbed again by the sound of someone shouting beyond the doors, and saw the RSF media group go rushing back the way they'd previously come.

I need to get out there!

"Those guys have a weird love-hate relationship with Viktor right now, don't they?" Otabek wondered idly, watching the group retreating from his vantage on his bar stool, "One minute they want him, then they don't. Like a dog that doesn't know if it wants in or out..."

"I guess it depends on why they want him." Yuri sighed, "...And why they stop wanting him."

"...The score for Phichit Chulanont...203.23... He is currently in second place."

Yuri lifted his head to the sound of the announcement, and turned his head to look at the nearest television screen.

Phichit was half-way to hyperventilating where he sat in the kiss and cry, his score visible on the big monitors.

THA - Phichit CHULANONT - 203.23 [NPB] - 300.21 [2nd]

"CIAO CIAO-" He cried out, practically climbing onto the man's head and shoulders, "I GOT OVER 300. YURI!" He started running then, straight out of the score booth and over towards the doorway to the Players Club, "YUUURRRIIIIII!"

"Phichit-kun!"

"DIDYOUSEE!?" The Thai skater pointed out towards the rink, "IGOTOVER300JUSTLIKEYOUUSAID!"

"I saw! That's amazing!" He answered, finding his hands being taken by his friend, who in turn
started hopping around in a circle around him. It was a complete 180 from the feeling he'd had just a moment ago.

*I feel like I'm betraying my worry for Viktor by being excited for Phichit-kun...but I don't know what else to do since I'm trapped here for now...*

"THISISTHEGREATESTDAYOFMYLIFE." Phichit went on, crying for joy as he spun Yuri on his blade-guards. Soon though, the sound of excited tears gave way to the gentler, quiet sobs of someone a small distance away, and Phichit halted in the midst of his celebratory dance to see what was happening. On one of the couches, he spotted Nikki being sat down by her sister, and she held her hands to her face, looking rather upset, "...What...happened...?"

"They think their dad is going to cancel the move to Hasetsu cuz of stuff happening with Minako." Yuri answered simply, unsure how else to put it, "Viktor hasn't come back yet either. Apparently Mikhail blames him for what happened."

"Oh...cuz of what Viktor said yesterday?"

"I guess so. I don't know if that's all though." Yuri turned towards the glass doors, "If I could get past the media...I could find Viktor and ask what happened."

"Hm..." Phichit rubbed his chin with two fingers, but then abruptly started moving away, leaving Yuri somewhat perplexed.

Where's he going so suddenly...?

A moment later, the Thai skater was rummaging around in his bag, marched right over to the small group by the couch...and plopped his own hamster-hat on Nikkita's head. Yurio and Viktoria looked on incredulously from the hat, to Nikki, and then finally to Phichit, who looked rather pleased with himself.

The young silver teen's tears slowed, perhaps more from confusion than anything, but when she pulled her hands away from her eyes and saw that perfect sunshine-smile beaming back at her, her sadness seemed entirely forgotten. She reached her hands up, feeling at the felt hat, unsure what to make of it, "What's...this...?"

"It's a bit of my happiness." Phichit answered resolutely, "And what good is happiness when you can't share it with others?"

Nikki blinked at him through tear-dampened eyelashes, but then pulled the hat off, turning it around and holding it in front of herself to see the hamster-face in the front of it. Confused for a moment, she then cracked a strained smile, and hiccupped a laugh through the lingering sadness, "It...it's really cute!"

"This one is mine, but I want you to have it." Phichit explained, "And maybe one day you'll come see the Ice Show I plan on putting together in Thailand! Yuri and Chris and Otabek and a bunch of other people are going to be in it, too!"

Otabek deadpanned the skater at the mention of it, imagining himself in a hamster-hat just like the one in the teen's hands...and coughed, "...Why me?"

Phichit flipped around and gave him a thumbs up and a wink, "Non-European bloc! Leo and Guang Hong and Seung-gil will be there, too!"

"...But Chris is on the Euro bloc."
"He's special!"

"Next on the ice, representing Switzerland...Christophe Giacometti!"

"Uso!" Yuri lamented, jerking his head around to look through the rink-side exit.

"AND HE'S GOING OUT ALREADY! WE MISSED IT!" Phichit flailed in a semi-panic, getting back up to his feet, only to spot a certain Russian coming back into the Player's Club finally...and he stopped mid-thought.

Yuri glanced back just as Nikki was pulling the felt hat back onto her head, and all eyes were on Viktor, "...What happened...?"

The silver legend just sighed and stepped closer, "I always knew I was bad at dealing with people who are upset...but I didn't think I was this bad." He answered anxiously, "Or maybe he's just that upset...hard to tell right now."

"What'd he say...?" Yuri asked, reaching out a hand for his partner to take, "They're worried he's going to call off the move to Japan."

"I asked, but he wouldn't say one way or another." Viktor answered, lacing their fingers together as he stepped up to his partner's side. He leaned his face down towards his husband's ear, "He's not handling the thing with Minako well at all. I don't think he really understands what happened. She told me that she just wanted to take things back to before he gave her the ring, but the way he's acting, it's like he thinks she dumped him outright."

"Maybe we're the ones who don't understand." Yuri offered, "She told you what she planned to do, but that doesn't necessarily mean that's what actually happened."

"Mh..."

"Well... Since there's nothing that can be done until later anyway, let's all just go find seats and cheer for Chris. I'm sure he's wondering why none of us wished him good luck before he went out there." Yuri said, speaking normally again and looking at the group, "Okay?"

For lack of any other ideas, the others nodded quietly, and those who were sitting down rose back up to their feet. Unsure if they were supposed to follow, given that they weren't competitors, Viktoria and Nikki held back a few seconds while the rest of them started moving off. The rest...except for Yurio, and moment later, even Otabek hesitated. Yuri caught the sight out the corner of his eye and paused mid-step as well, turning his head back, and Viktor stopped shortly after, looking back at the rather despondent trio. The two skaters glanced at one another for a moment before each of them twisted around to look the other way, backs to one another as they reached an arm out, Yuri to Yurio and Viktor to his cousins.

"Don't worry so much about it just yet." The elder Russian suggested, "Your papa's just feeling really down right now. He needs time and space to cool off."

Nikki looked up at her sister briefly, but then nodded limply, snuffling a strained breath before sullenly stepping closer. She clasped one pale hand to the back of her older cousin's team jacket, leaning against his side where his arm pulled her closer, and Viktoria followed closely after.

"Viktor's right," Yuri agreed, stepping out to put his arm over the Russian Tiger's shoulders and make him follow as well, "Mikhail knows how much all this stuff means to you. He's gone pretty far out of his way to make sure the stars align for all this...it would be nuts for him to wash his hands of..."
"But then why wouldn't he say anything when Viktor asked him if he was calling it all off?" The teen asked nervously, "He could've blustered that he wasn't going to, like it was a stupid thing to suggest."

"People do stupid things when they're angry...and say things they don't mean, just to make others feel worse than they would normally." Yuri answered, forcing the young Russian to confront the fact that he'd often done exactly the same thing, "But Mikhail's style is to keep his cards close to his chest. If he doesn't answer one way or another, no one can hold it against him."

Chris was still circling the rink-center when the group made it out onto the wall, just outside the Comerica lounge doorway. Phichit started the rallying cry, and the rest quickly joined in, adding their voice to the chorus of cheers already raised by the audience. The Swiss skater recognized those particular voices though, and lifted his head as he took his position, the slightly-miffed look on his face changing over to surprise, and then finally to a smile.

"I was starting to worry I'd be the only one without a send-off." He said, mostly to himself, and raised his hand to acknowledge the gang of skaters.

Chris' Free Skate outfit was dark and glossy, trimmed with exaggerated silver stitch-work. Black faux-leather pants, long black tank-top tucked into them, form-fitting fish-net sleeves with silver inlays, and a loose black vest over top. Streaks of neon; blue, pink, and orange, were splattered across his legs from every angle like paint had been thrown on him. It was a extravagant but colorful mess, and it was accented by a glitter purple star painted over his left eye, trimmed by silver and black, as well as one black and one fuchsia feather woven into his hair.

His arms came up and extended forward, raised to acknowledge the fanfare coming at him from all sides, and he lowered his head, closing his eyes to wait for the start of the music.

["Courtesty Call" - Thousand Foot Krutch (Nightcore remix)]

*Hey-o, here comes a danger up in this club*

Chris flicked his hands out and raised his head, arms coming down by his sides.

*When we get started, and we ain't gonna stop*

He stepped forward with his right skate, digging the toe-pick down as he waggled his right hand and shook his head.

*We gonna turn it out till it gets too hot*

He pivoted on his blades, dipping his hips a bit, left hand on his waist as the right came back to fan himself.

*Everybody sing, hey-o*

"Whew...there he goes..." Yuri mused, looking on with a nervous smile, "Melting the ice again with his mature Eros."

Even Minako had to sit back and fan herself for a moment, watching from her place in the gallery.

*Tell 'em, "Turn it up till they can't no more,"*
Chris started moving away from center, crossing over his blades as he picked up speed, pumping his finger into the air to personify the lyrics.

*Let's get this thing shakin' like a disco ball*

He twizzled on in right blade, arms held in a circle above his head as he twisted and turned, the glittery silver shine of his sleeves imitating the aforementioned rave-sphere.

*This is your last warning, a courtesy call*

Blades switched on the ice, and he glided back on the left skate, watching carefully for his mark as he lifted the right foot out behind himself and dipped down onto his outside edge...

*Hey-o,*

...Toe-pick, four revolutions, landing on the right skate...

*...Here comes a danger up in this club*

"Skater Chris with a quad Lutz right out of the gate. He's getting the crowd going!"

*When we get started, and we ain't gonna stop*

"...This is pretty exciting!" Viktor added, multitasking with his affections; leaning to kiss the side of his spouse's head while his free hand held his youngest cousin's shoulder, "Now I wish we hadn't cut out when we did in Bordeaux. Between Chris and Yuri, we missed a lot of the good stuff."

Yuri nodded in agreement, releasing where he held to his husband's fingers between them and wrapping that arm around Viktor's back instead, feeling the same gesture returned with an arm settling across his shoulders, "Yeah, it was stupid of us to walk out on them to talk to Sophia. We should've made her wait till the very end of the event."

*We gonna turn it out till it gets too hot*

*Everybody sing, hey-o*

Chris threw himself into a flying camel-spin, spinning several times in standard form.

*Tell 'em, "Turn it up till they can't no more,"*

Soon, he twisting around to grab his upward blade with one hand, pulling it up behind his head while his free hand extended forward for several spins. With skate released, the athlete dipped down to touch both blades on the ice, switching feet and pushing off for another formation, curling in over himself with his upturned leg pulled inward in cannonball style.

*Let's get this thing shakin' like a disco ball*

He quickly ripped out of the spin, jabbing the ice with a toe-pick to stop moving, feet apart, and raised his right hand up above his head.

*This is your last warning, a courtesy call*

He swiftly brought that arm down again, and daringly pointed at the gaggle of skaters watching from rink-side, winking as he pulled the trigger on his finger-gun.

*I am not afraid of the storm that comes my way*

*When it hits, it shakes me to the core*
The music pounded through the halls of the arena like thunder. There were hardly any people there to feel it though, save the few event officials and security staffers who were wandering the grounds...and Mikhail.

Still practically reeling from the unsavory confrontation with his nephew, the hot-headed older man pushed past a small crowd that was watching the snow from the inside of the huge glass doors, and escaped into the blustery cold of the Detroit night. He quickly pulled up the lapels of his thick woolen coat, bracing against the wind, one hand going further up to keep his hat from flying away.

The outside of the arena was deserted but for the cars and busses driving by, no one in their right mind wanting to stand in such conditions. For the Russian though, even with the years he'd spent in the north of Canada, the winter chill wasn't intolerable. The sharp, cutting air was a relief, he found, offering the bite of ice that could take his mind off of everything, even if only for a moment.

He plodded along in the inches of newly-fallen snow until he was halfway around the other side of the complex, finally feeling like he was far enough away to stop, and leaned his back up against the nearest wall. His feet were already getting cold and damp through his thin dress-shoes, but supposed he probably deserved it.

_I've never been able to hold onto anything for very long. Why did I ever think this would be different?_

Grey-green eyes lowered down to look at the snow surrounding his feet, creeping up in small drifts around his ankles.

_From the minute I came into this world, it's been a struggle. I was never as clever as Tatiyana, and everything I did to keep those fossilized wretches from taking her away did nothing more than get me thrown out._

The memory of that soggy day was still vivid...stepping out of that house for the last time, getting into the car, and hearing the desperate, pleading screams of that 5-year-old for him not to go.

... _If only he still wanted me around now like he did back then..._

Everything travelled back from there, then forward again, scattered memories of all the times the pariah had found himself rejected and cast aside.

Konstantin dragging him through the town square and hacking his long silver hair off in front of everyone.

Sergio putting his foot down and refusing to leave home even before managing to say hello.

Tatiyana telling him to man-up and accept the decision of the elders to marry into different clans like she was being told to do.

Showing Minako his home and hearth in Edmonton, only to find her giving the ring back days later.

Viktoria all-but-shouting that she and her sister would be going to hang out with people who 'didn't suck.'

His former-wife officially becoming his ex-wife, serving those papers he dreaded.

The look on Viktor's face when he first showed up at the St. Petersburg Skate Club...and the rage that was so perfectly masked that no one suspected anything. Not even Yuri. Not even Yakov. Being told later not to talk to anyone without his nephew's permission. Then, getting singled out in front of
everyone, and nearly being sucker-punched not long after...

...Is Yura the only person I haven't somehow pissed off this weekend?

The beleaguered man slid down the wall until he felt the crunch of snow under him, and buried his face into the inside of his hat.

There's a rumble in the floor, so get prepared for war

Chris slid out of the end of his step-sequence, twisting over himself in a quick mohawk turn to put himself back in line with the center of the ice.

When it hits, it'll knock you to the ground

He descended into a long single-knee slide...

When it shakes up everything around

...rose up again, and immediately kicked off into his triple Axel.

But survival is a must, so will you stand with us?

The audience was clapping for the success of the jump, and though the group of skaters was largely distracted by Chris' show, a few eyes were scanning the crowd.

Can you feel it, make it real
(Make me feel it)

Unable to appreciate the ice-melting performance, Nikki was too busy worrying about how much trouble she and her sister would be in later, and kept looking up and past her cousin's arm to see if her father was somewhere nearby in the audience. She could see Minako and Mari in the stand where she and Viktoria had left them earlier, but the rest of those seats were still empty.

I think it might wash away tonight,
Awaken from this never ending fight

Chris was in the midst of his combination spin, starting with the shoot-the-duck position sit-spin, and rising up a bit from that with an arm extended above himself.

It takes more than meets the eye
This war we're fighting, it's not just rotting

"You're going to miss the whole second half if you keep looking the other way." Viktor said quietly, leaning down so he'd be easier to hear at Nikki's short stature, "What's gotten you so preoccupied?"

Hey-o, here comes a danger up in this club

The blinked those big eyes at the man, but then cringed a little and drew in closer, clinging with both hands to his jacket, "Our seats with papa and Minako and Yuri's big sister are just up and behind the top of the doorway. Papa already didn't want Vikki and I to come down here in the first place...but now..."

When we get started, and we ain't gonna stop
We gonna turn it out till it gets too hot

"He's going to have to learn to let things go a little." Viktor explained, brushing some of that hair off
a shoulder idly, "But he's still your dad and he's protective, like any parent would be."

Chris leapt through a quad Loop, single Loop, triple Toe-loop combo, moving off gracefully with a sassy swing of his hips to go in time with the beat of the music.

\[
\text{Everybody sing, hey-o} \\
\text{Tell 'em, "Turn it up till they can't no more,"} \\
\text{"How old are you again...? Fourteen, fifteen?" The Russian wondered.} \\
\text{"Almost fifteen." She answered, confused but curious.} \\
\text{"I'll bet you're the spitting image of his sister, my mom, when she was that same age." He said,} \\
\text{"After losing her so suddenly last year, maybe your papa's gotten even more protective over you guys. I said and did some things last night that I'm not especially happy about..."} \\
\text{Let's get this thing shakin' like a disco ball} \\
\text{This is your last warning, a courtesy call} \\
\text{"...So Mikhail's probably feeling a bit backed-up into a corner right now. I tried to explain it to him earlier, but..." Viktor drew in a sigh of a breath, "...Well, he didn't take it very well. I've never been the best at explaining myself."} \\
\text{"Understatement of the year." Yuri chimed in.} \\
\text{\textit{Hey-o, here comes a danger up in this club}} \\
\text{\textit{When we get started, and we ain't gonna stop}} \\
\text{Ina Bauer into a series of connecting steps and elaborate footwork, Chris' silver blades carving a path through the ice.} \\
\text{Viktor smiled nervously, ruffling his husband's hair with the hand slung across that shoulder as he pulled it back and turned to kneel down, looking slightly up towards his petite cousin, "I think half the reason we bicker is because we're so alike, but neither of us really wants to admit it."} \\
\text{\textit{We gonna turn it out till it gets too hot}} \\
\text{\textit{Everybody sing, hey-o}} \\
\text{Chris threw himself into the last jump of his program, a quad Salchow, sweat flying from his brow as his blade hit the ice for the landing.} \\
\text{"Your papa, like me, has spent so long doing everything on our own, never asking for or wanting help, never really believing anyone \textit{could} help...it's just second nature to want to control everything around us." Viktor went on, his fingers curled around the little pale hands before him, "But I'm hoping that once he realizes Minako still wants him, he'll be able to simmer down and take a step back...and realize that being the big controlling alpha-male all the time isn't necessary. It's not so bad being beta sometimes, and let the angels of our better natures call the shots for a while."} \\
\text{Yuri couldn't help but over-hear, and smiled to himself as he reached his now-free hand aside to squeeze the back of one of his husband's shoulders. Next to him, Yurio glanced back as well, seeing where Viktor was crouched on one knee before his 'sister,' and wondered what the man could possibly be saying to her that apparently fascinated her so much.} \\
\text{\textit{Tell 'em, "Turn it up till they can't no more,"}} \\
\text{Let's get this thing shakin' like a disco ball}
This is your last warning, a courtesy call

With the last pose, Chris had his feet apart, one toe-pick stuck into the ice, right arm out to the side and head bowed. The music finally cut out, and the screams of the excited crowd replaced it, their cheers a cacophony of sound.

Both Nikki and Viktor looked up then, realizing they’d missed the end of things, but before the older cousin could rise back up to his normal height, the younger latched her arms around his neck and head.

"Don't let him change his mind." She begged, "Whatever it takes..."

Viktor was surprised by her words, but smiled as she pulled off him again, giving his confident, characteristic wink, "I'll do my best. I'm kind of getting used to you guys being around."

"The score for Christophe Giacometti...201.78. He is currently in third place."

**CHE - Christophe GIACOMETTI - 201.78 - 299.59 [3rd]**

Phichit's eyes were wide in disbelief...and so were Chris', though for slightly different reasons.

"Wow..." Viktor hummed, a nervous smile creeping across his face, "You just missed it!"

"No comment." The blonde said stiffly, squeezing at the bottom of a bouquet of flowers in his hands even as he tried his best to maintain his smile while he was still on camera.
Chris practically sulked as he went back into the Players Lounge, despite the fanfare around him for a job well done. He sighed dramatically and waved farewell to his coach before taking a high seat at the bar counter.

"You're only the third person to go out there." Viktor pointed out, leaning against the counter next to where his friend sat, "But you're reacting like you already think you're in last place. 299 isn't bad at all!"

"Including Phichit now, everyone in this room has scored over 300." The blonde pointed out, "I wouldn't feel so bad about coming in last with 299 if I wasn't the only one who didn't hit 300, too."

"There's no guarantee everyone will get over 300 anyway. Otabek's only done it once that I know of."

Chris still pouted, which only served to make the excitable Russian all that much more adamant to cheer him up...at least, until...

"The next competitor on the ice tonight...representing Russia...Yuri...Plisetsky!"

With his darkened eyes and braided blonde hair, the Tiger took to the ice with flare, making a long arc before coming back towards the rink wall where Yakov, Lilia, Yuri, and the two silver teens had been waiting.

Yuri had his eyes up towards the audience when he heard those black blades scratch their way close by, spying those three empty seats where he'd found out Minako and Mari had been watching from. They were waving back at him as Minako swapped her Swiss flag out for the Russian one, though Mari was still looking a bit apprehensive.

Mari-nee-chan doesn't look as excited as she normally does for Yurio... I wonder if I forgot something that happened in the past few days? And why isn't Mikhail back with them...?

The blonde dug in a toe-pick and held his fingers to the rink wall, getting his last bits of advice from his coach and choreographer, though his attention was mostly fixed on his fellow competitor. When it seemed like the mini-pep-talk was over, he nodded graciously towards them, and tip-toed slightly to the side, "Katsudon..."

"Eh?" The older skater turned his head, "Oh...all set?"

"I think so." He nodded, looking over to where Nikki could barely see over the top of the wall, fingers curled over the lip of it while she waited, "I think this is the most people I've ever had see me off from rink-side in my whole life."

Those jade eyes closed as the petite teen smiled, "Then we'll do it more often!" She reached her thin arms up then, like a child seeking for an adult to pick her up, "Hug!"

A bit embarrassed, Yurio moved closer as asked, reaching his hands over the barrier and slipping his head between the upturned arms, feeling those small arms curl around his head and neck.

"Skate the best!" Nikki encouraged, "Protect your Gold!"
He nodded, and the two pulled apart again, with those bright emerald eyes turning briefly towards where Viktoria had a fist up casually. He brought his fingerless-gloved hand up and bumped their knuckles.

"Do good, little bro." The older teen said.

Again, Yurio nodded, and finally turned towards Yuri again, his face getting a bit pinker than it already was when he spotted the smile on the older skater's face.

"Having sisters suits you." Yuri mused, "But Yuu-chan might get jealous."

"Jealous over a bunch of girls half her age?" The teen huffed, trying to blow it off, seeing the pair looking out across the ice and then back at him, getting more excited as the seconds ticked by, "Well, maybe."

"Anyway though, time to fly." Yuri went on, offering his own hug to the Russian Tiger, "I'll stay right here and watch the whole thing this time."

"Tell Mari I'm sorry for how I treated her on the way out here." The teen said suddenly, just before pulling back from the embrace, "She was always a big fan of mine, but I treated her no differently than I did you and Viktor these last few days..."

"Wow...no wonder she's so down." The older skater gaped, turning his eyes back up to his older sister, "I'll text her for you. Now get out there and defend your title!"

"Da." The Russian turned on a toe-pick, about to finally go, but then hesitated, glancing back over a shoulder just as his older friend was fishing out his cell phone, "...A shame that Mikhail's decided he's too good to watch now. Makes me nervous that he's still missing."

"I'll message him, too. Maybe he's just watching from somewhere else." Yuri suggested, tapping away with his thumbs quickly before sending the first text.

"Davai~! Yuri~!" Viktor suddenly called from within the club doorway, waving excitedly where he had Chris in half a headlock with the other arm.

The whole display utterly nuked Otabek's stoic presence, since he'd been standing in the doorway as well...and he just gave a nervous thumbs up as he leaned slightly away from the two huge dorks.

The two rink-side skaters gaped at the sight, but then turned back toward one another, with Yuri nodding, "He's right. Davai."

"Spasibo."

The youngest athlete of the Men's Event finally took off, blades sliding across the ice with ease. The crowd roared with excitement again; even Yuri's Angels were there in force, none too traumatized from the sights of Campus Martius Park to give up their fandom. Yurio just huffed a laugh at them, somewhat impressed by their resilience, and offered them his gratitude with a wave in their direction. Their fever pitch went through the roof after that, jumping up with excitement and hugging one another for the joy of their idol having noticed them.

On the opposite side of the arena, Mari flinched as she felt the buzz in her pocket, and pulled her phone out rather quickly, seeing a few letters from her brother scrawled across the dark faceplate, [Yurio asked me to tell you that he's sorry for how he treated you on the way to Detroit.] When she looked back down at the rink, Yurio gave a slight wave, and Mari suddenly got that spark of excitement back. Her phone went away, and her fan-signs came out, waving them around proudly
alongside Minako's flag, "Ahh! Yurio! Davai!"

As the Russian Tiger took his position, crouching down on the left knee with the blade of his right skate pointed out to the side and away from himself, Yuri did as he said he would, and twiddled on his phone a little bit longer, with the intent of finding out where the oldest member of their strange little SkateFamily had gotten off to.

[Mikhail, where are you? Yuri's on the ice already. You're going to miss him.]

The phone jingled in the elder Russian's pocket, but his darkened, red eyes barely blinked in response. They lowered slowly, snow falling off the top of his hat as he moved.

['In The End' - Black Veil Brides (look for the one used in the Assassin's Creed music video, since it has an extended intro)]

Violins burst to life through the rafters, and Yurio slowly lifted his head.

...As war fades into the distant memory of enlightened pigs, and open wounds,

He rose up to his feet, gliding forward glacially, bringing one hand up to his head in a gesture of disgust before waving it out, and bringing it back to make a motion with his thumb across his throat.

The rebels will begin to perish.

He waved his left arm out towards the audience before bringing it in to rake that thumb across his neck as well, but this time pretending to jerk upward as though a noose had been yanked over it.

One by one...they should.

One finger on each hand came up aside the teen's frame, and he threw both out to the side, propelling himself forward to pick up speed.

Feel the fear...of dying young.

Moving more swiftly towards the short end of the rink, the blonde lowered down into a cantilever to arc around it.

Not ignore the chance to scream.

He brought his hands up to his face, displaying the agony of the lyric.

Lie awake at night in terror, admitting, fear will return to glory.

Twisting back upright, he moved back to line up with the center of the rink.

And the story of rebels, who set out to conquer...will finish.

A long glide forward, descending to one knee...rising up at the end...twisting around a full 180 degrees before setting up on the left outside edge, amping up the right leg for the triple Axel...

...In blood.

(BOOM)

In the end, as you fade into the night (Oh whoa oh oh)
Yuri looked down at the phone in his hand, disappointed to see that his message still hadn't been answered to. The little 'Delivered' message was all that he could see. He looked out across the ice then, watching as the Russian Punk moved out of the Axel jump and slid his way down one long side of the rink, twisting from forward to backward before finally circling towards the middle again.

_Who will tell the story of your life?_

The teen leapt into a flying camel-spin, throwing his legs out and putting his hands behind his back as he spun in reverse on the landing. Hands went further back then, reaching for the blade of his skate and pulling it behind his head.

_In the end, as my soul's laid to rest, what is left of my body?_
_Or am I just a shell?_

As the spin morphed from one position to another, finally breaking away and moving off for a few choreographic moves, leading into a triple Salchow, triple Toe-loop combo, Yuri felt a hand sliding across his outer thigh. Another hip came up aside his own on the opposite side, and hazel eyes glanced back to find one certain husband finally making his presence known at rink-side.

_And I have fought, and with flesh and blood I commanded an army,_
_Through it all, I have given my heart for a moment of glory..._

"Is Chris still sulking?" Yuri wondered, half-amused by the prior spectacle, "He normally scores around 290...299 is actually pretty good for him."

"I think he's mad that he hasn't scored over 300 since the Sochi Final." Viktor answered, fingers sliding under the shimmering fabric panel covering his spouse's left hip as he leaned in closer against the right, "Everyone here but me is younger than him, so it burns a bit that you're all probably going to score higher."

"He can always do better at the next event, right?"

"The next event isn't as big a deal as the Grand Prix of Figure Skating Final." Viktor huffed a laugh, looking down then to spot the cell-phone in his partner's hands, screen still on to the last text window he'd typed into, "...He isn't here?"

_In the end, as you fade into the night (Oh whoa oh oh) Who will tell the story of your life? (Oh whoa oh oh)_

Yurio was getting the audience into the performance, pointing out at them as though the lyrics of the song were his interrogation of them; twisting and turning, focusing on different ends of the arena as his dance embodied the tale.

"Whatever you guys said to each other," Yuri said quietly, barely audible over the cheers of the crowd, "...It's making him not even want to check his phone." He pulled up from where he'd been resting against his elbows on the rink-wall, and put his phone away, just barely missing where 'Delivered' changed over to 'Seen,' leaning back against his partner's chest. He felt warm arms come around his sides, clasping one hand over the opposite wrist, and Yuri let his head tilt back against the Russian's shoulder, his own hands settling on the man's forearms, "At least we all have until Monday for this to get sorted out. Yurio's handling this a lot better than I would've if I were in his shoes."

_And who will remember your last goodbye? (Oh whoa oh oh) Cuz it's the end, and I'm not afraid...I'm not afraid to die. (I'm not afraid...I'm not afraid to die.)_
Quad Loop, single Loop, triple Toe-loop with a stumble, but Yurio managed to keep upright, continuing on without letting it bother him.

Viktor nuzzled against the side of his partner's neck, kissing just beneath one ear before turning his attention back to the show ahead of him, "Maybe. But...maybe not."

"Maybe not?" Yuri repeated, rolling his head a bit on that shoulder to look at the man, "What do you mean?"

_Born a Saint, but with every sin I still wanna be holy._
_I will live again._

Yurio moved along in a backwards tilt, making the sign of the cross over his chest before hydroplaning around the curve of the far end of the rink. As he rose, he lifted his arms and hands high, twizzling and twisting elaborately.

_Who we are, isn't how we live, we are more than our bodies._

He pounded his chest with one hand, gesturing with both at his lithe frame, then suddenly stopping in the middle of the rink, sinking the right toe-pick down into the ice.

_If I fall, I will rise back up and relive my glory._

He lowered his head slightly to the side, right arm out and away from himself, but then arcing it up above his head with his fingers splayed. He stomped the right skate hard on the thunderous crack of the drums, and powered forward in a two-pace sprint-like run before sliding along on his blades again.

_In the end, as you fade into the night (Oh whoa oh oh)_
_Who will tell the story of your life? (Oh whoa oh oh)_

"I don't know if it's because you bounced your head off the ice, but I've noticed at least since this morning that...you're a little different." Viktor explained resolutely, crystal blue eyes focused on the performance, even as he could feel Yuri looking at him skeptically, "I know, I know...I probably sound insane saying that."

"...Not really, but...explain?"

Yurio skidded into a reverse-rotation sit-spin, crouching low over his extended leg as he pivoted on the other. With both arms crossed over his chest in the first form, he twisted over himself for the second, extended leg bending slightly around him as one arm curved forward and the other back for the twist variant. The free leg came in for the end, and Yurio bend slightly over his spinning blade, switching edges as he grabbed his other skate behind himself for the final move.

_And who will remember your last goodbye? (Oh whoa oh oh)_
_Cuz it's the end, and I'm not afraid...I'm not afraid to die._

He rose up dramatically, hair flying like a punk-rocker's as the guitar solo began and the teen threw his head back. He immediately moved off to begin the step sequence, spiraling in a diagonal across the ice to find his place and begin the serpentine path.

Viktor pursed his lips in thought for a moment, but then leaned his hips back a bit to more easily rest his chin on his husband's shoulder, arms still snugly clasped around the man's core, "You lamented in Calgary that you thought you had become more confident, only to be shot down when people reacted to you like you'd come across as arrogant instead. It killed you for a good while, and I feel
like your pride was trampled through most of Trophée de France and even half of Cup of China, with moments of exception."

Yuri listened quietly, eyes on Yurio again as the words went on.

"But then...after I had my drunken melt-down on top of the Ritz Carlton, and with everything that happened at NHK...you rebuilt yourself, even facing down my father like a crazy-person." The Russian went on, "I think I told you before that the confidence you showed in those select moments...was the kind of confidence you normally only show when you're completely blitzed." He laughed, hugging a little tighter as he spied his partner's cheeks getting pink at the mention of that rather lively Kyushu heritage, "But in a way...that excited, thrill-seeking, proud and determined nature is exactly the thing about you that made me fall for you in the first place. I guess what I'm trying to say is..."

A finger suddenly came up to the silver legend's lips, and Yuri's frame tensed up slightly, "...Wait, watch..."

Blue eyes blinked in confusion, but the Russian looked out across the ice and saw the blonde teen backing up on his left inside edge, right leg sticking out behind himself...

_In the end..._

Toe-pick, four revolutions, landing on the right skate and sliding out...

...As you fade into the night (Oh whoa oh oh)

"He did the quad Flip again." Yuri huffed, impressed but concerned, "Before long, the Axel might be the only thing I can use as my trump card to beat him..." He shook his head though and nosed at his partner's jawline, "Sorry, you were saying...?"

*Who will tell the story of your life? (Oh whoa oh oh)  
And who will remember your last goodbye? (Oh whoa oh oh)*

Quad Toe-loop, double Toe-loop.

"Ehm..." Viktor tried to recollect his thoughts after the interruption, "I guess...what you just did...is a good example." He started, "You've almost always let me call the shots on everything, but lately, and especially these last two days...you've started doing that more yourself."

"...You think so?" Yuri wondered, a bit surprised to have it put that way, "What makes you say that?"

"Because I know I'm not." He answered, drawing in a bit closer again, "You heard me earlier telling my cousin that it's not always such a bad thing to take a back seat in a relationship...to be the beta for a while...I kind of had that epiphany about things this morning. Strange as it sounds, after Minako cracked my brain in half last night and you carted me back to the hotel...I really haven't been that interested in retaking the wheel again."

_Cuz it's the end, and I'm not afraid...I'm not afraid to die._

Another guitar-solo, and another step sequence. Yurio was starting to feel the burn, and sweat was beading on his skin, but he pushed through the second intense footwork formation with all his power.

Yuri watched the teen carefully, but half his mind was focused on what his spouse had said. He
shifted his weight from one blade-guard to the other, and drew in a quiet breath, "I guess I've noticed that. I think I just attributed it to the fact that I was saying you should relax and not think about things while we were away from it all."

"Exactly. You were telling me to." Viktor affirmed, "And I...think I've realized... I like it better this way."

The younger figure couldn't help but furrow his brow at that, and turned his head from the ice to gawk at his husband, "...You like me being in control of things...?"

The Russian looked back at him rather seriously, "Yes."

"O...Oh." Yuri was stunned, looking down and away again, then back to the Tiger in the rink, who was vaulting through a tano triple Lutz, "...But why?"

"...I feel steadier this way." Viktor answered simply.

Who will remember this last goodbye? (Oh whoa oh oh)
Cuz it's the end, and I'm not afraid...I'm not afraid to die.

Yurio threw himself into the program's final required element; the combination spin, with flying entry, landing in the standard camel and morphing it into a sitting twist-variant, rising up into a scratch spin, one arm rising up above his head as the other grasped the blade of one skate, holding it low for a few rotations before finally lifting it high behind his head for the full Biellmann spin.

Not afraid...(I'm not afraid to die)

The Russian Punk jerked out of the spin and twisted a few times, moving backwards through the last few paces and beats of the song.

No, not afraid...

He stabbed the right toe-pick down into the ice, feet apart, arms swinging out loosely, bringing them in, and then finally out again for the final thunderous crack of the song.

(I'm not afraid to die)

Nikki and Viktoria were wild with their cheers, right alongside the rest of the audience, watching as Yurio finally let himself relax a bit as he fell to his butt and then his back on the ice, heaving for breath.

Viktor smiled and laughed to himself at the sight, clapping his hands in front of his spouse's core as Yuri did much the same. After a few moments though, he returned his hands to holding onto the man, only to find him turning in his grasp to look at him more evenly.

"Are you sure you're not just depressed?" Yuri wondered comically, pressing the front of his wrist to his husband's forehead, "Maybe you're still running a fever. I never thought you'd say you want someone else to lead you around."

"Most people never thought I'd quit skating cold-turkey to go play coach to some random guy in Japan, either." He retorted, "But here we are."

"You're not trying to surprise me somehow...are you?"

Viktor shook his head, "No, I'm being serious...for once."
Yuri choked a disbelieving laugh, "You've been serious most of this weekend!"

"And I want to relax. Permanently." The silver legend explained, a look in his eyes like he wasn't just saying it out of stress and panic, "Maybe I've just been waiting all this time for you to be ready... And maybe it never would've turned out this way if you'd never insisted on making me deal with my past. But I have, and I've finally been able to put it behind me..." He lowered his face and pressed his forehead to his soulmate's, "So in a weird kind of way...with you stepping up after I broke down...I realize that I'm truly, and finally, safe. I don't have to be hyper-vigilant anymore. I can let go...and finally just sit back and be me, without all the baggage."

"Sounds like you're saying you want to settle down." The younger figure wondered, bringing his arms up over his husband's shoulders, fingers laced together loosely behind the man's neck, "Does that sound about right?"

Viktor thought on it a moment, but then nodded, gently lowering his forehead against his partner's nose and then back up again, "...I think so. And I think...I've been desperately wanting to...for a really long time. I just didn't realize how badly I needed to until it seemed like I could."

Yuri looked on for a moment in solemn quiet, the roar of the audience all around them seeming miles away. The way his husband felt under his arms, the look on his face, in those blue eyes...Yuri could feel a sense of surrender.

...It's not like he's giving up, per se... He thought, It's more like...the master becomes the student? All the times I've given him grief about being so impulsive and never thinking ahead, maybe he's actually been testing me, in a way...He says he fell in love with me because of how I was at the Sochi Banquet...then all this time, since finding out what I'm really like when I'm not drowning in champagne, he's been trying to build me back up to being that same person again, without the need for liquid courage.

Viktor was staring right back, equally quiet, waiting for some kind of answer...worrying he'd said too much, or the wrong thing. For a split second, he felt a pang of guilt shoot through him, and he grimaced much the same way he had the night he'd utterly shattered his then-not-even-fiancé's glass heart by suggesting he'd resign and leave.

Yuri turned his head a bit, looking out across the ice to where Yurio had finally gotten back up again and had picked up a cat-ear head-band, thrown out to him like so many bouquets of flowers and plush cats. This band was styled in orange and black though, striped like tiger's ears, and he gladly set it on his head, much to the delighted screams of his fangirls. Hazel eyes turned back though, looking on into those anxious crystal hues, yearning for some kind of answer.

...All these years, I've been chasing after him, trying to catch up on the ice. Who could've guessed that he was looking for something to chase, too? But...he's brought me this far. I hope I'm ready to be what he needs, the same way he's been what I needed.

He rocked forward a bit on his blade-guards and gave that wordless answer that he knew his partner would understand, one hand sliding up the back of the man's neck to weave fingers into that silver hair. He could feel Viktor's frame relax under his touch, the last bit of tension that had built back up melting away with that kiss. When he pulled back again though, eyes still closed, Yuri smiled, "...We're going to be flying in Economy a lot more often."

"W-What!? That's not what I meant! Yuri!" The Russian panicked, "You can't mean that! I'll die."

He just laughed though, holding onto one shoulder as he turned to face the rink again and held up a finger, tapping his partner's nose affectionately, "Economy Plus then, for your precious leg space."
Viktor blinked at him, a concerned-and-confused but nonetheless happy smile on his face, and he leaned in closer again to nuzzle one cheek against the other, "Love you."

"Love you, too."

"The score for Yuri Plisetsky..."

Everyone in the Players Club was glued to the television, especially Chris, who was barely clinging to the podium by that point in 3rd place.

"...202.15. He is currently in 2nd place."

"AHHH!" Phichit cried dramatically, "NOOOO!"

Chris slouched in his seat, grumbling quietly to himself. His coach pat one shoulder.

Yurio stood up calmly from the bench in the kiss and cry, Yakov and Lilia rising with him to make way for the next skater. He felt numb despite his score. Phichit had gotten higher than him; better presentation score even if the jumps weren't worth as much. He'd barely out-scored Chris' Free Skate and final total; Chris was more experienced, but age was starting to hold him back.

Viktor's more than likely to put me into 3rd. I can only stay on the podium if Otabek somehow messes up. Damnit ...

He looked from Nikki and Viktoria's excited faces and congratulations to Otabek standing behind the crowd, getting a smile and an applause just like he had at the previous year's Final. Viktor and Yuri were there as well, practically clinging to one another to the teen's perception, but looking straight at him in spite of it. He could see their mouths moving in adulation like all the others, but none of the words reached him.
Yuri saw how the teen's expression hadn't changed since standing up. It made him a bit nervous, and he let his partner go to step closer. "Yuri...you okay? You just set a new personal best...why aren't you happy?"

"I could've done better." He answered quietly, stuffing his hands into his jacket's pockets, "That fucker Mikhail is messing with my head." The teen lowered his gaze, "I couldn't focus; his stupid attitude is freaking me out."

"Mmhh..." Yuri hummed, "...I know it probably doesn't help now, but..." He pointed to the top edge of the first ring of seating around the arena, and a level strip of a hallway that divided the front row area from the second.

Emerald eyes glanced up in that direction, and spotted the ghost of a darkly-clad silver-haired man there looking back at him.

"I don't know how long he's been there, but at least he came in the end." The older skater explained, perching his arm on the edge of one of the teen's shoulders.

Yurio glowered at the elder Russian, but he felt a sudden nudge, and his condemnation faded to confusion, looking back at his friend, "What?"

"You're glaring at him like you're mad." Yuri explained, "But he wasn't even here for my show. He came back for yours. It took a lot of courage to come back into the arena, given how he obviously feels about other things right now, and halfway getting into a fight about it with Viktor a few minutes ago. I know it wasn't ideal...but be grateful anyway, okay? For you, he swallowed his pride and turned up."

The small Russian made a face at that, like he was both annoyed and confused at the fact that those words made sense. He closed his eyes and shook his head, and turned his gaze back to the place he'd seen the older man a moment before.

Mikhail was still looking down from the higher vantage, and Yurio nodded at him.

To the Russian Tiger's great relief...Mikhail nodded back.
"Russian Skater Yuri Plisetsky is looking rather dour since getting his score. Despite setting a new personal best in the Free Skate, Japan's Yuri Nikiforov still holds the lead by a slim margin, and Kazakhstan's Otabek Altin and Russian team-mate Viktor Nikiforov have yet to take the ice. It's coming down to the wire for the Men's Event...!"

With Otabek pulling his blade-guards off, standing next to the rink door, the reality of the competition's ultimate conclusion was drawing near, and weighed heavily. Waiting by the door to the Players Club, Yurio watched nervously. The scoreboard was etched into his mind...and the likely final outcome was certain...yet uncertain at the same time.

The final rankings will be decided by single-digits. Even if Otabek scores as well as he did at Cup of China, it wouldn't be enough to knock me off 2nd place, but Viktor is still yet to skate. My best shot is for Bronze right now, even counting for the possibility that Viktor does poorly.

He brought one hand up, fingers curling over his mouth and just under his nose as he thought on.

Bronze isn't really so bad... It's only my second year in Seniors, at any rate. Even Viktor didn't start his all-events winning streak until he was in his 20s.

"On the ice, representing Kazakhstan...Otabek...Altin!"

The dark-horse skater moved into the rink to quite the respectable fanfare, though it was obvious that the crowd was still getting used to the athlete. Yurio stepped closer to the rink at that point, waiting in the same place where Yuri had done for himself prior to his own show. He looked back over his shoulder to where he knew Mari and Minako were sitting just above and beyond the Club doorway, but Mikhail hadn't rejoined them there yet either.

That guy's got maybe 30 minutes left before the end of the medaling ceremony to get over himself and come back. I get that he's salty about Okukawa calling things off, but for all intents and purposes, all she really did was give a ring back. You'd think she said she wasn't coming back with us to Russia, too, and for Mikhail not to come back to Japan at all.

"It's all so tightly packed." The teen heard Yuri saying, coming up behind him suddenly, "Assuming Viktor scores as well as he has so far this season...the way things are going, the rest of us will be lining up within less than 10 points. It's really hard to know who's going to be on the podium tonight."

"Other than him and you." Yurio corrected, "Your spot on the podium is guaranteed now."

"Would I be horrible for saying I hope Otabek scores less than you?" The older skater gave a nervous smile, "That challenge Viktor made way back in Bordeaux...all three of us need to be on the podium at the end so we can do the Team Skate in the Exhibition tomorrow."

"I doubt he'd really hold to that." The teen shrugged, setting his fingers on the rink wall as he spotted the Khazak starting to come back around, "It's only $300 to get into the Exhibition if you don't
medal. If Otabek managed to bump me off, Viktor would sooner pay my fee than let a Team Exhibition opportunity go by, especially given how people are talking about it on SMS again now."

"Yeah..." Yuri agreed, leaning onto his elbows next to the Tiger, "Wouldn't that be a trick if Otabek managed to squeak into that 2-point gap between you and I though?" Yuri laughed, " Barely managing to steal Bronze from you by a single point."

"Keep talking like that and I'll ask my fanclub to start throwing things onto the rink before he's done."

The older skater just smirked sweetly at that, and turned his head to the sound of skates coming up on the ice.

Otabek's fluffy faux-fur trim bristled in the crisp air, and the man himself looked as stony as ever. He listened to a few barely-audible words from the slender, older, darker-skinned man who claimed to be his coach, nodded, and then turned to the pair of competitors waiting nearby.

"Nervous?" Yurio wondered smugly, trying not to look anxious himself.

"No."

The Russian Punk looked somewhat deflated at the rather-direct answer.

Yuri just smiled on, "I think he plans on joining the 300-club."

"Quiet, you."

"He's right." Otabek explained, "I've analyzed the other programs and made adjustments to my own. If I want to get on the podium, I have to do as well as I did at Four Continents, at least. Harder jumps, no mistakes."

Despite his best efforts, the teen was already starting to sweat bullets, and he side-eyed the man next to him, noting awkwardly how calm he was, "You look particularly zen for once."

"I don't think I could've done better, considering the circumstances." Yuri answered simply, "No matter what happens, I'm happy with how things turned out. I can do better next year. I won't let my guard down again and get hurt." He turned his gaze towards the competitor in the rink, and reached a hand out, fingers curled under his palm, "Davai, Otabek."

"Davai." Yurio agreed, holding a loose fist up as well.

The Khazak nodded and bumped his own knuckles against the both of theirs before finally turning to move into the center of the arena, settling his hands onto his hips. He closed his eyes for a moment and sought for the same zen the young Russian had just mentioned, taking in the smell of the air, the feel of the breeze as he moved across the ice, the sound of his blades scratching at it as he slid along. When he found himself in his zone, he side-braked and set a toe-pick down...and waited for his music to begin.

[‘Völuspá’ - Wardruna]

The hum-chant of a man's voice echoed overhead in harmony with the strings of a Klaviklyre, and Otabek slowly raised one arm up, moving backwards on his blades in a half-figure-8. He twisted and turned, moving swiftly around the short end of the rink, gliding with the smooth ease of a Nordic wind. When the voice of the chant quieted, replaced by the chorus of background vocalists and some drums, he brought his second arm up to join the first, swaying them like blades of grass and starting
his program's first required element.

"Not many skaters open their programs with a step sequence, but this music is a slow-burn, which lends itself to a gradual increase in difficulty as it progresses." Morooka was commenting.

"Kind of reminds me of Skater Viktor's Short Program from Worlds last season." Oda added, "It was a full minute into that show before we saw the first jump."

When the main voice returned to the chant, turning the song from a high-mountain hymn to a full-blown war-chant, Otabek slid backward and to the side, moving through an outside spread-eagle to set up for his first vault. On the end of the curve, he shifted his weight to the outside of his left skate, kicked the right back...and thrust it forward. Three and a half revolutions, and he landed the triple Axel, gliding off for the next move.

**BOOM...BOOM...BOOM-BOOM-BOOM**

"This is such a departure from the usual kind of music we hear at events." Yuri commented, watching closely, "I wonder why he picked it?"

"He was never able to figure out ballet," Yurio answered, "So he considers competitions like this to be a battlefield."

Quad Loop, single Loop, triple Salchow.

"...Oh, well, there's the first sign that he's taking this war seriously." The older skater mused, "That started as a Toe-loop last time. He's definitely gunning it for higher points. He just gained 2 for switching up that jump."

Otabek threw himself into a death-drop for the start of his combination-spin; standard sit formation at first with one leg extended and his arms close to his chest, but then morphed as he reached for one blade to pull it inward for the donut variant. He rose up then, moving his grip on the blade from the front to behind himself, holding it up as he lifted his free arm for the camel-spin-like half-Biellmann, then letting it go to finish out the maneuver with a fast scratch-spin.

"Yuuurriii-kōōchiitii~!" Viktor's voice suddenly called, barely audible over the song from inside the Players Club, "Koko ni kite kudasaaaaai~!"

Yurio gawked back behind them to stare at the older Russian, and the two silver teens who'd been following him since his own skate, "What'd he say?"

"'Come over here, please.'" Yuri laughed, "Though his inflection was weird." He pushed up off his elbows and straightened the bottom of his team jacket, "Wish I could watch the rest, but I guess I should pretend I'm a coach for a bit."

Triple Lutz, triple Toe-loop.

"...Do you really teach him anything?" The blonde wondered dubiously, twisting his shoulders to face the ice even if he still had his head turned.

"Nah...it's an honorary thing." The older skater answered, patting the teen's back twice lightly as he stepped off, "But he likes it when I play along. Jaa, mata." He raised that same hand in a half-wave as he moved off, skate-guards klunk'ing along from the concrete of rink-side to the hardwood of the lounge.
Yurio turned his eyes back to the ice just in time for the solitary quad Loop, and again looked as nervous as before.

Another quad Loop... Is the Flip really the only thing I can do now that Otabek can't? He only just barely started doing the Loop this season and now he's probably getting 2+ GOE on it... No wonder he was able to score Silver at Worlds 3 years back...

The older skater pushed into a second step-sequence, giving himself half a moment to regain some of his jump-stamina.

Yuri finally returned to his partner's side, "Nan de? Subete daijoubu desu ka?"

"Genki da yo~!" Viktor answered, moving quickly around to stand behind the man and slouch over Yuri's shoulders, pawing at the three different badges hanging around his neck. Lifting one to look at its upside-down face, he discarded it and found another, "No...no...this one's mine...oh, here it is."

"Nani shiteru no...?" The younger skater wondered nervously.

The silver legend held up one of the badges with his husband's photo on it, but then turned it to hold it at the length of its lanyard towards his two cousins, "See? Coach!"

The two pairs of grey-green eyes examined it, "But he's younger than you are." They both pointed out, "How is he your coach? Plus, you're already his coach!"

Yuri just grimaced, even as his spouse still clung to his back like Velcro.

"It's more like a ceremonial position." Vikto answered, letting the badge go to rejoin the others, and curled his arms around his husband's small frame, "Yakov was always my coach before, but since I live in Japan now, I had to change things over."

"Oh, the guy that's our Yuri's coach?" Viktoria wondered, reaching up for the white stick of her sucker candy and biting the last sliver of blue from the end of it, "He was yours, too?"

"Da. He sometimes steps in to help me out still, like at NHK, but mostly it's my Yuri now." The Russian rubbed his cheek affectionately against his partner's head, "For the paperwork and moral support, mostly."

They all turned their heads when the audience started roaring again, looking at the televisions for what was being announced as a quad Salchow. Otabek's show was nearly done.

"...It's almost time, Viktor." Yuri commented, quieter than the regular conversation, "Junbi dekita?"

"Mh."

"Everyone around here speaks languages we don't understand." Nikki lamented with a heavy sigh, "Half the stuff the announcers say about the skating itself sounds like a foreign language, too."

"You get used to it." Yuri explained, reaching up his left hand to settle it gently over the side of his husband's neck where the man was still nuzzling the side of his head, "Most of the jumps are named after people who pioneered them, though, so that's why they have weird-sounding labels." He turned towards his partner and spoke quietly into his ear, "You should get out of your track suit. You never took your skates off after the warm-up so it'll take longer than normal."

"Haaaaai~"
The two young teens watched as their cousin reluctantly pulled off his not-really-a-coach, leaving him with a peck of a kiss in his favorite place under one ear, and stepped back a few paces to flop down into a nearby couch. One boot came over a knee and he started pulling at the laces.

Otabek was going into the last element of his program, the flying sit spin. Yuri's eyes were on the television, a neutral look on his face.

"What do you think he's going to score?" Nikki wondered, "Is it going to be high?"

"Otabek is always surprising people with how well he does." He answered, turning away from it to go down on a knee before his spouse and help speed things up by undoing the laces on the other skate, "If he doesn't break 300, he'll get close."

"Is that pretty normal? To score around 300?"

Yuri smiled, but looked back at her and shook his head, "No...far from it. This is pretty unusual. But...with the way the Grand Prix works, you're only seeing the top 6 skaters from the entire season so far, so you'll usually see scores at least higher than 270."

"Unless someone does shockingly bad." Viktor mused, pulling his ankle off his knee and setting it down next to his other boot, leaning down with a sultry look on his face. One finger came under his partner's chin as he looked into those hazel eyes, "Then they might score as low as 235."

"...But...you scored higher than that in just your Free Skate last weekend..." Nikki pointed out, a look on her face like she didn't think that total score was possible, "...If I remember right anyway."

Yuri just looked anxious, but didn't move from where he knelt, "...No, you're right." He said, speaking to the youngest teen even as he looked straight into those crystal hues before him, "But that's why that score was a World record. Most skaters are lucky to see the 250s as it is."

"Was Viktor referring to you just now?" Viktoria asked, a sly look on her face.

Before Yuri could answer though, the audience started howling for Otabek's finale, the air vibrating with excitement.

"Skater Otabek shows us all once again why he's the Hero of Khazakhstan! What an outstanding performance!" Morooka's voice could be heard from the televisions.

The young skater was still waiting for his partner to make a move, but it seemed like the man was waiting for something. Those blue eyes looked on, speaking in place of actual words.

*Do you think he beat you just now?*

*No way. I have the best coach and choreographer in the world.*

*Will you be upset if I beat you?*

Yuri hesitated for a moment, but a certain phrase filtered up from his memory, and he leaned in a bit closer with his eyes half-closed, "...I don't mind losing, if you're the one that wins...because you're the only person in the world that I like being under."

"Wow-~!" Viktor chimed excitedly, savoring his quick kiss happily as his husband stood up. Hands quickly went to pulling boots off after that, and with each skate removed, Viktor thumbed at the waistband of his track-suit, pushing them down his legs and away from the yet-unseen-by-everyone costume pants. What became revealed from beneath the black and white team-slacks
was a gradient of black to silver, getting lighter above the knees and at the side of each thigh. A few specks of white crystal glimmered just under the edge of the Russian's jacket where the silver was brightest. He quickly rolled the track-suit pants up over his arms though and handed them off to his partner before reaching to get his blades back on again.

The televisions already showed Otabek in the kiss and cry with two different Ted Bear soft-toys in his arms, along with a bouquet of flowers for good measure. Yurio was watching on the toes of his blade-guards, all but chewing on his fingers as his heart raced.

"The score for Otabek Altin..."

Everyone in the Players Club was silent, eyes unblinking as they watched the screens.

"...195.91. He is currently in 2nd place."

"...What." Yuri gaped at the screen, one eye pinched half-closed in a disbelieving grimace. Half a second later, he felt a jab against his ribs, but when he looked down, thinking someone had poked him from behind...he saw a whole leg, with a blade-guard pressed against him. That leg was attached to a certain angry bean.

"YOU DON'T GET TO TALK ABOUT SCORES BEFORE A SHOW EVER AGAIN." Yurio barked, "EVER."

Viktor glanced up mid-lace-tying with a confused look on his face, mostly for the fact that the Russian Punk's flying-spinning-jump-kick from across the room hadn't budged his husband even slightly. Save for the slight kink in the man's posture where the assault had pushed his hip out and tilted his upper body some, Yuri hadn't moved. Viktor smiled then though, "Oh, did Yuri tell Otabek what to score, too?"

Yurio was incensed, "HE JOKED THAT OTABEK WOULD SCORE BETWEEN HIM AND ME AND I'D GET BUMPED OFF THE PODIUM BY LESS THAN A POINT WHILE HE KEEPS HIS OWN SPOT."

"But you're still in 3rd place..."

"YOU STILL HAVEN'T SKATED YET, IDI- mphfr!"

Yuri reached out over that leg and had a hand over the teen's mouth so fast.

"Wow~!"
The audience was cheering with excitement still, but the mood in the Players Club was a mix of apprehension and disappointment, save for the two Nikiforovs. They stood in somber, confident silence with one another as Viktor rose back up to his full height, looking at one another for a moment before lacing their fingers together as they turned and started heading for rink-side.

"Skater Otabek lands a new personal best for both the Free Skate and his final score! He's going home a legend in his own right this year! But we still have our last skater for the Men's Singles event...five-time World Champion, Russian skater, Viktor Nikiforov. He took last year's Grand Prix off to play coach to then-Yuri Katsuki, that event's Silver medalist. Can Skater Yuri hold onto his Gold or will it get swiped right out from under him again like last year? Skater Viktor is not one to pull punches! The eyes of all of Russia, and the World, are on him tonight!"

The adulation hit a different tone once the pair stepped into the light of the arena. Otabek was already walking their way, and gave a nod before passing through to the lounge area, leaving the duo at rink-side alone.

Yuri drew in a breath, "...This is it. The end of this crazy Grand Prix."

"Five weeks straight of competition...the ups and downs..."

"The laughs and the tears." Yuri added, "Feels like forever, really." He swallowed nervously, but then gave his husband's hand a gentle squeeze before turning to face him again, "I can't wait to see the look on everyone's faces when they realize you're doing something new for tonight. I bet they're all expecting a repeat of last weekend."

"They can play reruns." Viktor answered, "I never want to feel that way again."

The younger skater nodded in easy agreement, and moved to take his partner's other hand, weaving them both together as he brought both pairs up between them. He looked at their fingers for a moment, quietly drawing in another anxious breath as he lifted his face.

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<thead>
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<th>Rank</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Otabek ALTIN</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Viktor NIKIFOROV</td>
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"...Ah, Yuri...nakanaide..."

"Eh?" He blinked in confusion, only to realize he had tears on his lashes. He looked concerned for a moment, but rubbed his eyes on the side of his shoulder, "I don't...know why I'm crying..."

Viktor breathed a quiet laugh, smiling fondly at his partner, "It's been a long road. Whatever happens, this skate is for us...we win Gold together with it."

The younger man snuffled through a sad-happy laugh, and leaned his face down to kiss his husband's ring, glancing back just in time to see the Russian doing the same thing with his own on the other hand. Yuri couldn't help himself then, bursting into tears and laughter all at once, pulling his hands free to reach them over his spouse's shoulders and hug him, sobbing against the man's neck as arms went around him as well. He felt warmth and wet against his own neck where Viktor was crying, too. They held there for a while, the cheers of the audience roaring all around them like waves breaking against shore.

"Vitya-"

The pair finally looked up and behind themselves, seeing Yakov there, nudging his head out towards the ice like they were taking up too much time.

Viktor smiled though and turned back, nosing his husband adoringly before leaning in closer to steal his last kiss, much to the excitement of the crowd. Blue eyes slowly opened as he pulled away, "Stammi vicino."

"Ora sono pronto."

The team-jacket finally came away, and Yuri took it, throwing it over his own shoulders as he watched his husband go out onto the ice for the final skate of the event.

Chapter End Notes

Yuri-kōchi, koko ni kite kudasai = Coach Yuri, please come here.
Jaa, mata = See you later
Nan de? Subete daijobu desu ka? = What is it? Everything okay?
Genki da yo! = It's fine!
Nani shiteru no? = What are you doing?
Junbi dekita? = Are you ready?
Hai = Yes
Nakanaide = Don't cry
Stammi vicino = Stay close to me
Ora sono pronto = I'm ready
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED NINETY SEVEN

The audience was confused at first, seeing such an unexpected costume on that final athlete. Gone was the black with its flames from foot to hip, the glacial hands, and the starry sky on those shoulders...replaced instead by an almost monochromatic gradient of black to silver to white. It shimmered like sunlight on a lake, ripples of light glinting from the brighter parts of the outfit, starting at the outside of each thigh where darker colors gave way to silver, and on up until it was pure white at the shoulders and arms. There was a texture that rose from the lightest areas, like flecks of crunchy, newly fallen snow. The sleeves were in one part form-fitting, with a helix of white stripes that wove down each arm, the open panels between the intersecting ribbons revealing the skin beneath, yet from shoulder to wrist, there was a thin, transparent layer of a bigger, puffy sleeve going over top of it all. The wrists were clasped in white bands, with silver embroidery and a delicate assortment of white, gold-yellow, and light blue crystal. The chest opened up from just above the navel, covered by a panel of material that matched the Russian's pale tone, and rose up in a ragged V-shape towards the man's neck, where it opened up into a small, puffed-up rim of feather-like fluff, making a half-ring around the back of the skater's head like the collar of a shirt. The same fluffy rim adorned the end of each arm, coming out from under the elaborate cuffs to partially cover the tops of the man's hands.

Viktor raised those hands up to ruffle the puffs, exaggerating the volume where it had been pressed down while hidden under his team jacket. He made his lazy circles around the rink, presenting himself to the audience and the judges along one side of the wall.

Once the crowd had gotten used to the idea that 'Evoke' had been replaced, the excitement grew again, and they eagerly anticipated what new show the man had made just for the Final.

"In a written statement, Skater Viktor tells us that he hopes everyone is excited to see this new program that he's created. Unlike his former Free Skate, which embodied all his frustrations and anger, this one evolved naturally from it, and expresses all his love and adoration." Morooka explained, holding a newly-opened letter, "And while he debuted this program as a duet with his husband at last weekend's Exhibition in Sapporo, the solo Free Skate version is an entirely new composition." The newscaster set the letter down, looking anxious, turning to glance at Oda briefly in the media box, but then out onto the ice, anxiety changing over to hopeful excitement, "Skater Viktor is taking a big risk tonight by skating to a program that he hasn't refined and tested in competition yet. Still, I can't wait to see what he has in store for us. Viktor never disappoints."

Yuri leaned on the rink wall again like before, looking all around the stadium and taking in the sound and energy of the audience.

It always feels a little different when Viktor's on the ice.

He turned his eyes towards his partner, beholding that new outfit for the first time like everyone else had.

Those tailors of his back in Russia really busted their butts to get that done in time. I wonder how many people worked on this outfit before they finished it?

The audience's cheering starting morphing over to a wave of chants, more people joining in as the seconds ticked on. Before long, they were all crying out the Russian's name. Viktor lifted his head from where he'd been watching the ice, and paused in the center of the ISU logo, looking all around
and rotating slowly in that space. Soon, he turned his head towards his partner, and extended an arm out towards him.

_They're cheering my name, but I wouldn't be here if you hadn't asked me to come back._

The chanting seemed to evolve with the Russian's gesture, and Yuri started to hear the telltale sound of 'Viktuuri' coming out of what was originally just 'Viktor.' He lifted up off his elbows and looked around, eventually settling his eyes on his spouse, and just as he was about to lift his hands up to cup around his mouth, he could feel the presence of half the Players Club coming out to rink-side behind him.

"GANBAAAAAA!"

Viktor lowered his arm, looking on in surprise, but then smiled and bowed towards the group with his usual dramatic flair. When he rose back up though, he brought one hand in and blew one last kiss to his partner before finally taking his position.

He checked his position on the ice and turned slightly away, lowering down onto one knee at a time, and sat back on the heels of his boots. He drew in one last quick breath, and waited for the audience to quiet down, thumbing at his ring until the music started.

['Stand In The Light' - Jordan Smith]

The intro had been altered a little, with the quiet hum of violins sighing in, and then out, before the lyrics began. Viktor slowly lifted his head, looking up into the rafters high above as the first words were spoken.

_Stand in the light and be seen as we are_

One arm rose up towards the ceiling, and the Russian legend glided to his feet, as though lifted by the air around him rather than his own strength. When the line ended, that arm was pulled in again, and Viktor moved away in reverse, bobbing and twisting around to the short end of the rink, moving like mist over water to the flow of the new violins.

_Didn't I tell you I hear what you say?_

Four-spin left outside twizzle, with the outbound glide bringing his arms up again, one hand up near his ear.

_Never look back as you're walking away_

He twisted over into a long Ina Bauer, moving diagonally across the ice, one arm gracefully held vertically above himself.

_Carry the music, the memories, and keep them inside you..._

Arms came back around himself, hands holding to shoulders before sliding up around his head, then back down to overlap above his heart.

_Laugh every day_

A backward slide, left leg held slightly out behind himself as he moved long on that right golden blade, right hand extending out into the wake of his path. Then a twist...

_Don't stop those tears from falling down..._
...He descended down into something of a sit-spin, but rose back up again quickly, one hand spinning and rising along with the rest of him until it was reaching high into the air. With the momentum, he threw himself into a flying camel spin...

This is who I am inside!

...Landing into a forward rotation on the right foot, arms out to the sides.

This is who I am, I'm not gonna to hide!

He moved from his forward inside edge to the outside edge, and twisted his core, left arm out behind him as the right came up in front.

Cuz the greatest risk we'll ever take is by far...

Viktor reached back to grab the up-raised boot by the blade, twisting over and reaching out with his free hand for the catch-foot variant.

To stand in the light and be seen as we are...

When he let the blade go, he started making wider arcs, circling out of the spin and rising up until he could switch feet with a mohawk-turn. Gliding forward on the left blade now, he kicked the right back...and threw himself.

To stand in the light and be seen as we are...

"Triple Axel with both hands in the air!"

"Very clean!"

The cold air of the rink whipped through the Russian's hair, refreshing in contrast to the heat already building in his legs.

...When I first picked this song for the NHK Exhibition, my only thought was wanting to send a message to my father. He thought quietly, moving elegantly as the violins played high above, That I would be who I wanted to be in spite of him, and that nothing he did could change me. I'd been fighting off the ghost of his legacy for most of my life, but until recently...it was really just a coordinated retreat.

He paused in the midst of some choreographic elements, spinning through a pseudo-twizzle as the lyrics came back in again.

With courage and kindness hold onto your faith

In a backward glide, the Russian hopped and spun over himself, landing on the opposite skate and descending to one knee, But you...Yuri... You became the courage I always lacked, and you stood your ground when I couldn't, forcing me to face the things I'd been running from all these years.

...Hand reached out before him, clasping for something in the air, head bent down.

You get what you give and it's never too late

He rose up, slid through a 3-turn, and launched off his left back outside edge.

To reach for the branch, and climb up leaving sadness behind you...
"Tano triple Lutz!"

That upturned arm stayed out as the silver legend landed on the right outside edge, and quickly stuck his left leg out, toe-picking a second time.

"With a triple Toe-loop right behind! Beautiful execution!"

Arms extended out, and Viktor twisted his hips, spinning around as one arm went up overhead.

*Fight hard for love*

Cross-overs as he moved around the short end of the rink, then straightening out and raising his left leg high for the added spiral-entry difficulty of his next jump.

*We can never give enough*

The left leg came down, and airborne blades switched places, the right going out behind him as the left glided backward along an inside edge. In quick succession, the toe-pick came down, and the Russian vaulted on the emphasis for the first quad of his program.

*This is who I am inside!*

Clean landing on the right back outside edge.

"There it is, ladies and gentlemen, Skater Viktor's signature move! The quad Flip!"

He quickly twisted over to face forward again, pushing his chest out as arms went back and face tilted up.

*This is who I am, I'm not gonna hide!*

Moving swiftly, he angled himself for the combination spin, arcing on his blades until he could thrust his leg for the backward-entry camel spin, both hands clasped behind his back.

*Cuz the greatest risk we'll ever take is by far...*

Hands reached back to grab the blade again, this time pulling that leg right up behind his head as he pivoted his frame upward for the full Biellmann.

*To stand in the light and be seen as we are...*

He let it go and descended low, his free leg extended as he lowered down to pick up speed, only to tuck in for the foot-change. When he rose back up again, he grabbed for his left blade, and pulled that leg straight up for the Y-spin, clasping his ankle with the opposite hand and holding the free hand out in an open gesture as he slowed down.

*To stand in the light and be seen as we are...*

Time seemed to slow down for the skater as he arced out of the last bit of that spin, cruising towards the corner of the arena where his step sequence would start. He couldn't help but rekindle that last thought. Memories from the past year circulated through his mind, just like they had the first time he’d done the program. These memories were different though. No longer did he think back on the torments of his own family on himself, or that troubled early upbringing...these memories were fresher, newer...much more recent.
"You let the opinions of others, spoken and unspoken, scare you as much as other skaters' scores do in competition." Viktor whispered, their lips so close that they could feel words as they were spoken, "Don't. I'll protect you from all of it. You trust me to do that, right?"

"Of course, but..." Yuri muttered, feeling the man's hands going slowly up and down his sore thighs, kneading them as he went to rub out the pain, "When it's just us, I feel okay...but around others... I'm just...still so weak...even after everything you've done..."

"You were never weak, Yuri. I told you that once before." Viktor answered softly, "You don't always listen to me, but at least believe me."

[Don't you feel any shame for taking on a foreign athlete when your own team could use your experience?] ... [And the fact that you're engaged to marry your own student won't be a problem, either?] ... [How can you even maintain credibility when you're going to marry a man? You can try to hide his ring with cups and water bottles all you want, but we all knew about it long before either of you ever sat at that table.] ... [You've embarrassed the Russian team, and Russia itself.]

Yuri pulled his hand back immediately, watching nervously as his fiancé loomed over their audience-neighbor darkly.

"Dlja čega èto!?” Viktor asked, quietly, but with a tone like he was ready to yell it for all the audience to hear if the answer he got wasn't good enough.

"SHH."

Blue eyes blinked, seeing a well-dressed elderly woman gesture with both hands towards the stage, then held one finger in front of her mouth, an incredulous look on her face like she couldn't believe he'd still be talking. The silver Russian sat back down after that, feeling a bit sheepish, and coughed to clear his throat, "Prosti, požalujsta..."

"...Sorry, I'll shut up..." Yuri whispered nervously, balling his hands together on his lap, a nervous bead of sweat rolling down the side of his face.

Viktor just tugged lightly on the man's thin wrist and got those fists to unravel, then pulled the one hand out again and set it on his leg where it'd been before, "Don't worry. I thought someone was going to give us grief again like at the conference. Was about to take them outside."

"I'll expect an apology for that one day."

"From me? Fat chance." Yurio huffed, turning to move away again, "The only apologizing around here should be you to me and Katsudon." He showed his back to them as he moved on, "I'll see you on the podium, idiot. Then you can shove that Gold medal up your ass, along with all the other stuff you're putting up there lately, including your head."

Viktor could feel every crystal of ice as his blades scratched over them, and the sway of every silver hair in the breeze with his movements. Still, seeing those memories flash in front of his mind's eye
made his heart hurt.

_We never did anything but love each other. Yet, the world...even some of our own friends...used it as an attack against us, like we were somehow less for being together than we were on our own. I could take it when it was my father's words...I expected it...but the rest still cut a bit too deeply._

Cool slate eyes looked up as he passed along the side of the rink wall, and caught the hazel irises of his partner as he flew past, still feeling the micro-seconds passing like they were minutes.

_Yuri... There isn't a force in this world or the next that could keep me from your side. You've done what nothing and no one else was ever able to..._

The rink corner finally came up, and the silver legend twisted to begin that step sequence, feet and arms moving in a blur of expert control and power.

_Riding the storms that come raging towards us, we dive_  
_Holding our breath as we break through the surface_  
_With arms open wide..._

The Russian descended low for a sweep, mimicking the final rotations of a sit-spin, rising up into a 2-rotation scratch-spin, and brought his hands up in a characteristic and rather familiar way.

_With arms open wide...!_

Yuri blinked, but there was no mistaking it. His partner had his right hand over his heart, one skate behind the other, left hand reaching out towards him, "...Viktor..."

_This is who I am inside!_

The resting skate came up and around, and the silver skater took a sliding-step forward, arm still reaching for a moment as he gave his husband a wink before moving on again.

..._You set me free..._

Viktor twisted around gracefully, stepping through a 3-turn as he built up his speed again, ducking onto the left outside edge as his right leg kicked out behind.

_This is who I am, I'm not gonna to hide!_

Toe-pick, four revolutions with both hands on his hips, landing on the right outside edge and gliding off with ease.

_"Quad Lutz!"_

_Cuz the greatest risk we'll ever take is by far..._

Hands extended out together as the silver legend curved back around, twisting and pulling his hands in only to arc on his blades and gesture to the side again.

_To stand in the light and be seen as we are..._

He curved around the short end of the rink, leaning into a forward split with one hand extended outward, twisting around then and backward-hopping to change direction and go straight down the long-line of the rink.

_To stand in the light and be seen as we are..._
He went down on one knee again, but this time bent backwards, both arms rising up as he glided, barely feeling the cold of the ice under the back of his head.

The song changed then, the finale switching over to a duet version of the previous stanza. Viktor curled his arms back and then thrust them forward to help hoist himself back up onto his feet as the emphasis of the line boomed overhead.

*This is who I am inside!*

He pushed through a few cross-overs as he rounded the short curve of the opposite end of the rink, and twisted over several times before finally ending on a 3-turn and dipping onto the outside edge of his left skate. The right blade came down behind it, and the Russian waited for his cue...

*This is who I am, I'm not gonna hide!*

"Quad Loop! ...Triple Loop combo! ...TRIPLE LOOP! Viktor cleared his last quad with a 4-3-3-combo!"

The skater could feel the burn in his legs, but he pushed on.

*Cuz the greatest risk we'll ever take is by far...*

A few more choreographic elements as he slid down the length of the rink.

*To stand in the light and be seen as we are...*

As he came back towards the center, he thrust his leg up into a series of star maneuvers, kicking up into another rotation to the beat of the music until...

*To stand in the light and be seen as we...*

...He kicked off for the leap into the Death Drop on the last lyric.

...are ...

The music returned to just the solitary singer again, and Viktor began his last required spin, starting with the easy shoot-the-duck position, right leg extended as he pivoted over the left.

*Oooohhh ...!*

The free leg bent forward slightly as Viktor straightened out his posture, raising up one hand above himself as he kept spinning, then bent down again as feet switched positions beneath him. One hand reached down for the newly-freed blade and pulled it under himself for the cannon-ball spin.

*Cause the greatest risk we'll ever take is by far...*

He rose back up to standing again and sped off in reverse, sliding along in a wide curve until he twizzled into the start of a layback Ina Bauer.

*To stand in the light and be seen as we are...*

Pulling himself back to normal, he twisted and wove his feet over one another to turn, and veered off towards center again, mohawking his way into a forward glide.

*To stand in the light and be seen as we are...*
He threw himself for the last jump of the program, throwing his arms up for the triple Axel, and again for the triple Loop that followed.

The song reunited the duet of singers for the final line.

*So stand in the light and be seen as we...*

Viktor calmly skated the length of the rink, gliding along softly as he reached a hand for the lights shining down from high above.

*...are.*

Both hands crossed over his chest, clasping at the opposite shoulder by the sides of his neck, and he bowed his head. As the violins returned without the voices, the Russian quietly moved in long arcs, switching from wide inside spread-eagles, and rotating on the apexes, to solemn slides with open gestures of his arms. By the time the music faded out, the silver legend was down on one knee, right hand on it while the left was stretched out to the side, face tilted up to look towards the spotlights.

The audience went mad with excitement, and after a moment of trying to catch his breath, Viktor rose back up to his feet, bowing tiredly as he began to slide forward again. Flowers and poodle soft-toys were being thrown out onto the ice, as well as the odd nigiri pillow. He skirted around to pick up one of the poodle toys as the rink assistants started skating all around him, collecting the gifts to make way for the next part of the event.

Viktor slowly made his way back to rink-side then, and fanned himself excitedly as he got close to the doorway where everyone was waiting, "*Whew~!* I didn't even do as much as I normally do and I'm *still* exhausted."

Yuri handed off the blade-guards as his partner came off the ice, and snaked an arm around the man's back once he was on the concrete, "*It was still really good.* He said, looking hopeful for the soon-to-be-known scores, "*I was really surprised by the nod to my old program. That was a really nice touch.*"

The Russian leaned slightly to kiss his spouse's forehead, "*It fit the tone of the story, so I wanted to include it. I wonder how many other people noticed?*

"*Probably everyone.*" Yuri laughed, guiding his partner over to the kiss and cry.

Nerves ran high as the two sat on that bench. Viktor had his arm over his spouse's shoulders, and Yuri held that remaining hand with both of his own on the Russian's lap.

He drew in a deep breath, "*They sure are taking their time with this one.*"

Viktor nodded, rubbing the edge of the far shoulder with his thumb, "*Hopefully they won't keep us waiting all night. The event staffers are almost done setting up the podium already.*"

They both looked up and over the edge of the score-display screen and the rink-wall behind it, watching as that red carpet was rolled into place and the wide steps of the awards stand was lined up next to it. ISU brass were already filtering down to rink-side as well, though were hanging back just inside the edge of the door to the Players Club.

"*The score for Viktor Nikiforov...*"

All heads went up in anticipation, hearts pounding in chests from one side of the arena to the other. Yuri's grip on his husband's hand got tighter then, but like before, Viktor just gently rubbed that spot
on his partner's shoulder to try and soothe him.

"...204.19. He is currently in 1st place."

"...O-Oh...!" Yuri stammered, "You scored lower than I did!" He turned his eyes as the arena burst into cheers and exuberance, "But I guess that makes sense...considering..."

"It was only by 5 points." Viktor huffed, making a face like it wasn't that big of a deal, "You lost a lot because of how you looked drunk out there half the time...but I only did 3 quads, and knocked out 2 whole jump-elements from the program. Even flawlessly executed, it would've been hard to catch up with you."

"Yeah, you gave up a good 20 points just by not doing those last potential jumps..." The younger skater nodded. He then let go of the man's hand and pat a leg instead, "Shall we?"

The Russian smiled and pulled his partner closer for a kiss, holding for a moment before letting go again, "Da. Ikuzo."

Yurio looked salty as ever as the 3 Finalists lined up near the rink entrance again, team jackets held only to shoulders as they each waited for their names to be called. The audience was humming with excitement, and when the voice boomed overhead, the cheers burst into a fever pitch again.

"Ladies and Gentlemen...your Grand Prix of Figure Skating Final, Men's Singles winners... In 1st place, winning the Gold medal...Russia's Viktor Nikiforov!"

The slender figure shrugged his jacket off, set it on the rink wall, and stepped back onto the ice, gliding around and waving as he made his way around the back of the podium and out towards the front. When he finally arrived, he gingerly stepped on his toe-picks across the carpet, and stepped from the 3rd tier on the right up to the 1st in the middle. He turned around and waited quietly,
smiling as he looked back to the rink wall where his husband was getting ready to come out next.

"In 2nd place, winning the Silver medal...Japan's Yuri Nikiforov!"

More unrepentant cheering, and Yuri added his jacket to the wall before he threw himself across the ice, happy to have defended his title from the previous year and even happier to share the podium with his idol. He followed the same path, twisting around backwards for fun, and let the Russian offer a hand down to help hoist him up onto the left-most platform.

"And in 3rd place, winning the Bronze medal...Khazakstan's Otabek Altin!"

Like the two men before him, Otabek set his coat over the wall and rushed out into the frost, waving to the audience as he made his big circle around the tiered platform before he stepped up into place. He turned around to face forward, and dutifully clasped his hands behind his back, waiting for the pomp and ceremony to get underway.

As the small pack of ISU officials came out, the medals were brought out behind them, carried by a row of fancy ladies in matching dresses, three carrying the trays with the metal discs and lanyards, three more with bouquets of flowers. The same man that had put the medals around the necks of the previous year's winners was there again before them, looking pleased with everything, and stepped firstly in front of the highest tier.

The Gold medal was placed over Viktor's head, and his flowers were handed to him. He gratefully accepted them both, and the handshake that followed, and rose back up to his full height, turning to the right to watch his partner get the next reward in the line, and finally, Otabek on his left.

Yurio clapped along with the rest of the audience, even if he still felt a bit burned by the results. 

At least it was because of Viktor this year. Katsudon might've won if JJ hadn't mowed him down, but Otabek finally got the medal JJ robbed from him last year.

The audience clapped all the more excitedly as the three stood there together with their prizes, each of them looking proudly on at all the flickers of camera flashes, and the waving of various banners.

All but Viktor, anyway.

His smile faded about halfway through, vanishing entirely when his husband stood back upright. Viktor watched quietly as the younger man reached his free hand up to clasp the Silver medal hanging in front of his chest, looking at his reflection in its chrome-like shine.

Yuri felt eyes on him though, looked up at his partner. For a brief moment, he hadn't noticed that his husband's expression wasn't as eager as his own was, and he turned how he held the medal in his hand, giving that knowing smile. But, the Russian's brow furrowed just slightly, and Yuri suddenly noticed that something wasn't quite right, "What's wrong?" He wondered, the silver disc lowering where he pinched at the lanyard just above the clasp.

Viktor couldn't answer, simply looking from those confused brown eyes, to the Gold disc hanging from his own neck. He turned his gaze out towards the rest of the arena...a feeling coming over him that he hadn't known before...

...and he stepped off the podium.
CHAPTER TWO HUNDRED NINETY EIGHT

"This is where I came when I got off the plane the first time," Yuri explained, "...Moving up to Seniors and leaving home to train. ...I was...never any particular genius at skating...I just had a lot of free time on my hands, and about a billion reasons to want to leave Hasetsu." Those hazel eyes wandered across every wall and window of that airport wing, every escalator and sign. "Most of all, this is where I came when I really buckled down and got serious about wanting to compete on the same ice as you..."

Viktor could feel the shorter man wiggle a bit to get free, and let him go easily enough, watching quietly, but sliding one hand down the skater's arm to find his palm again.

Yuri turned to face him finally, finding the man's other hand to take it as well, lacing their fingers together though keeping his eyes low on that tan long-coat the whole time, "...All these times, I came through this place...never once did I ever think that, one day, I'd not only have gotten to actually meet you...but that I'd have gotten to skate with you... Everything that's happened since I last set foot in this building...going back to Japan with my tail between my legs, when I thought I'd given up skating for good...having never so much as told you my name with my own voice... And yet, now...I'm back again, not just as a top figure skater, but...with you...here by my side..."

.  

Barely dozing, Viktor suddenly became acutely aware of the absence before him on the large bed. In a worried panic, he quickly pushed up onto an elbow, seeking the space with his free hand in a desperate bit to find his injured husband. His breath caught in his throat when he couldn't find the man, but he paused when he heard a rustle in the closed space behind him, through the closed doors. The blankets were thrown off his legs after that, and he made a mad dash for the bathroom door, silently praying that the latch hadn't been put to and he could open it. Mercifully, it wasn't locked, and the panel pushed inward, revealing the sad sight before his eyes, "...Yuri, what are you
"Viktor's tired-confused-urgent voice asked suddenly, quickly slipping in and closing the door again as his own eyes adjusted to the lights above them. He went down on a knee next to his partner, seeing the desperate look on the man's face, "Do you want help...?"

"Get...get this stuff off of me!" The younger skater begged, falling back away from the counter and reaching his fingers for the wraps around his head, "It's too tight...!"

The Russian watched as his despairing spouse noticed the tears falling against his wrists and palms. Yuri's voice cracked like a broken dam, and he couldn't stop himself from sobbing, "...How am I going to be able to compete like this...!? All...all that trouble, all that pain and heartache of trying to make it into the Final Six, trying to win Gold like you...and it just... stops here!?" He cringed tightly, "Just like that!?"

"You fell out of a spin, Yuri. What made you think attempting a quad was a good idea? You could've been hurt! There's no way to know you could've controlled that fall!" Viktor pointed out, hands going to his hips instead, "The Biellmann still makes you dizzy even when you're perfectly fine, but you have a head injury! You know you're vulnerable right now!"

"I felt like I could do it!"

"It was a quad LUTZ!" The Russian went on, right hand going out towards the skater as he took on an exasperated look, "You hit the rink wall the last time you did that one!"

"I know, but I had to try!"

"And you fell anyway!" Viktor wasn't sure if he was more upset than angry, but he felt a tightness in his chest. The gawking of the onlookers meant little and nothing at that moment, "You couldn't have done it on the Axel instead!? You just had to do it on the hardest jump in the latest part of your whole program!"

Yuri went down to his knees, fingers clasping together as he all but begged, "I'm sorry! I did what you wanted from the start but the Lutz was my last chance!"

A pale hand went back up to Viktor's forehead and he turned away from the defiant skater bitterly, not even sure what else to say.

"Please don't pull me from the Final, Viktor!"

The media and spectators were stunned into silence as they heard the lamentations go on.

"I just don't even know what to do." The silver skater said, pinching the bridge of his nose as he half-turned-away from his partner, "If you won't listen to me when it matters the most..."

"...Viktor...!" Yuri pleaded.

"...Y-You're...you're pulling me from...the Final, aren't you?" Yuri managed, his throat already clenched and painful as he looked down at his knees, barely managing to catch the edge of the mattress as he lowered down, fingers clenching around the blanket next to his leg, "...Th-that's
why...you haven't held my hand or h-hugged me since...we did my SP..." He reached up one hand to
pull his glasses away and rub his eyes on the back of that wrist. "...Th-that's why...you've b-been so
distant..."

The Russian's heart ached to see his partner in such a state already, but he drew a breath and tried
to compose himself. He reached for the chair tucked into the desk and pulled it around, sitting in it
sideways and resting one arm over the back of it as he crossed his knees, "I don't feel like you're
listening to me."

"I went against you on the Lutz! Th-that was it!" Yuri insisted, "I know it w-was stupid, but it was
the only thing! I did everything else you said!"

"...And yet, when you said you'd listen if I told you not to do quads for the SP tonight, I...don't
believe you." Viktor admitted, as much as it pained him to say so, and as much as it pained Yuri to
hear it, "I get where you're coming from, I really do...I went against Yakov a thousand
times growing up...even back when I was still fresh off my very first injuries. When I had a
concussion and a fractured eye socket, and I couldn't see out of my left eye for a few days, and I had
all those bad bruises on my back from where I hit the shoe-rack...I still jumped. I get it. But this isn't
like that anymore. Yuri..." He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, reaching for his partner's
hands and pulling them a bit closer, "Neither of us is in this alone anymore. When we do stupid things...we're not just hurting ourselves.

Yuri set those hands on his hips and glanced at his husband, giving a wink, "There are four gold
medals between us...and I intend to take the fifth."

Viktor gaped at the man, but then smirked, sliding in and pulling Yuri closer with a hand behind his
soulmate's lower back, "You do, huh?"

"That's right." He grinned back deviously, a little bit of Eros shining through with those half-lidded
eyes, "And no one's going to stop me."

"I will."

"Oh? And who are you to try?" Yuri teased, hands sliding loosely over his partner's shoulders, arms
straightening there as he loosely weaved his fingers together, "Who dares get between me and my
Gold?"

"Viktor the Marvelous, Viktor the Magnificent...Viktor the Chiegest and Greatest of Calamities."

"That changed tone suddenly."

"Well, you did say that I was going to bury you...I can't be marvelous and magnificent while I do
so?"

"Bury me under Gold medals then."

"Hmmmnn..." The Russian hummed, stealing a quick kiss while he could, "If I must."

"This is such a pain... " Yuri complained, "After everything we went through so far this season...I
feel like the universe is trying to sabotage me with this. Maybe I was never meant to win Gold at the
"Maybe just take it down a notch?" Viktor suggested, "You already do more jump elements than basically anyone else."

"...I'm still trying to beat you though, too, remember?"

The Russian made a face, "There's a saying about how to avoid being eaten by bears...you don't actually have to out-run the bear...you just need to out-run the guy running next to you. Would it be so terrible to go for Silver instead? For the sake of your health? It would be much easier to overtake 3rd place than to gun for 1st..."

"So says the Silver medalist who moped through the entire victor lap at Worlds." Yuri made a face of his own, looking over at his spouse, "You've given me Gold Fever. Now that I know what it's like...nothing less tastes as sweet. Besides..." He slid the few inches between them to get closer and snaked an arm around his husband's lower back, pulling up the notepad with his free hand and pressing it to the man's chest lightly, "When you showed up in Hasetsu that first time...you said you'd make me win Gold at the Grand Prix Final. Not Silver."

"Yuri..." The naked silver legend said, extending an arm out towards the terrified and confused retired skater, "Starting today...I'm your coach. I'm going to make you win the Grand Prix Final." The extended hand came back, and both went to the man's damp hips. The wink behind those silver bangs was enough to break hearts, but in this case...it broke the younger man's brain.

All Yuri could do was scream.

The audience's cries died down to a whisper in the Russian's mind, replaced by the quiet beating of his own heart. He could hear every pulse rushing through his ears, feel the flutter of the vessels in his neck and arms, even in his legs. Everything was telling him to move, but he felt paralyzed at the same time.

"What's wrong?"

He found control over himself again, and Viktor took a step forward, lowering his gaze to watch his gait. One gold skate landed on the red carpet in front of the podium, followed by the second.

"V-Viktor!? What are you doing!?!" Yuri whisper-yelled, following to the edge of his own podium and reaching, but unable to get his hand far enough. When he took a step down himself, Viktor turned his head back and gave a look that put the young skater back where he'd been a moment before, looking somewhat sheepish in spite of his mounting worry.

The audience's cheering died down to nothing as everyone looked on in horrified confusion. Even the other skaters and coaches watching from rink-side were mired with uncertainty at the Gold medalist's behavior.

The Russian went over to the stunned ISU officials, whispering something to the small group that neither Yuri nor Otabek could hear. But what he did next made the dialogue irrelevant. Viktor reached up to grip the lanyard around his neck and shoulders, and pulled it up and over his head, holding it in his hands before himself. The man who'd placed it there was still shocked, but then nodded, and pat the Russian's shoulder with one hand before turning and snapping his fingers at a
few other officials. They were quick to scramble and rushed away to some unknown task. Viktor finally turned back and started moving towards the podium.

"Viktor, what are you doing!?
Yuri repeated, "Get back on the podium before you get in trouble."

"Yamete, Yuri... You're embarrassing me." Viktor answered simply, looking up with those nervous but resolute eyes, and reaching one hand forward to clasp for his husband's.

In a thoroughly stunned and perplexed manner, Yuri allowed the silver legend to guide him to his left, stepping up onto the center tier, and then pulling down gently to make him bow forward. Yuri felt his chest tighten as he leaned, and felt his partner's hands coming up to pull the lanyard from his neck.

Without hesitation, as soon as he realized what was going on, Otabek sprung across the back of the top of the podium and quickly moved to the second level where the Japanese skater had been a moment before.

Yuri turned his eyes as the vibration in the platform and sound of movement caught his attention, but Viktor pulled his focus back onto himself right away.

"Don't ever take your eyes off me." The Russian echoed those hallowed words. He let the medals hang from one arm each, the lanyards sliding down to the crook of his elbows as he bent his arms and reached up to cup his hands onto either side of his husband's head, leaning his own forward to press their foreheads together lightly. He held there a moment wordlessly, but eventually pulled away, turning his head slightly, "YURI PLISETSKY, GET ON THE PODIUM."

The blonde nearly jumped out of his skin to hear his name called suddenly, but quickly pulled his jacket off and threw it against the wall with the rest before hopping along the red carpet on his blade-guards. He paused in front of the Bronze tier, and looked at his older counterpart in nervous worry, "You're a crazy person, Viktor Nikiforov."

"Take advantage while it lasts, then."

"Mh..."

The silver legend took a step back, and reached for the Gold medal that was hanging from his right elbow. Straightening out the lanyard, he looked up again to his concerned spouse, "Yuri Nikiforov..." He started, pulling the ribbon over his thumbs to widen the loop.

The audience was starting to murmur again, making the Japanese skater a bit nervous, but Yuri eventually bowed his head down to avoid making his partner look more insane than he already did. He felt the strange sensation of a new lanyard coming over his head, and lifted his eyes to see the smile finally return to his soulmate's face, "...Viktor..."

"Almost two years ago, I came to your family's hot-spring resort, and made a promise that I would make you win the Grand Prix Final."

The steadfast skater-coach started, "Tonight...it gives me great pleasure, and fills me with pride, to be able to present it to you now...the Gold medal."

Yuri was almost paralyzed where he stood, unsure if he was daydreaming or if it was all real. The weight of the medal felt heavy enough, but it didn't seem convincing enough. It wasn't until he felt those hands come back to curl around the back of his head, and pull him forward, feeling those warm lips on his own, that he finally accepted the reality of what was happening. He dropped down onto one knee on the podium, fingers lightly curling around his husband's upper arms where he could. He felt the Russian's hands come away from his head and go around his ribs instead, pulling him closer.
His own arms went over the man's shoulders then, disbelief melting into gratitude as he clung harder than before. Tears rolled down his cheeks as the realization really set in, the kiss changing to a tight hug, the roar of the audience washing over them from all sides.

As they pulled apart again, Yuri shook his head and huffed a laugh, "I hope you didn't plan it this way... Winning the Gold just to forfeit it to me..."

Viktor shook his head, smiling through his own tears, "It honestly just hit me when I was standing on the podium. Sorry, Yuri... I'm being impulsive again..."

"I guess I can't curtail all your bad habits..."

The Russian shook his head, "Afraid not." He slid his hands down his partner's arms and let the man stand back up again, but then moved to his left, standing before Otabek instead, and gestured with one hand for the younger skater to lean forward.

"You're not going to kiss me, are you?" The Khazak asked skeptically.

"Pfft." Viktor guffawed, "No."

Drawing a breath, the dark horse leaned down, and let the silver legend pull the Bronze medal from his shoulders, replacing it soon after with the Silver.

"Last year, in Barcelona, you were robbed." Viktor explained, "We've shared the podium before...and I thought you deserved to medal again then, but it was taken from you by a skater whose arrogance nearly cost Yuri his place in this year's event outright. I'm not sad that he's not here tonight..." He went on, pausing a moment as Otabek stood upright again, "I don't think I ever thanked you for staying by Yuri when that accident happened. I heard you'd told JJ off before his stupidity hurt my husband."

"...I tried to, anyway. I had some choice words for him when he collided with Yuri, but I never did get to say them..."

"What were those?"

"Cyka blyat."

Viktor chortled a laugh, reaching up with one hand to rub a few lingering tears from his lashes while the other went forward to shake the skater's hand, "Da...cyka blyat."

"...What...does that even mean...?" Yuri wondered, one brow cocked in wonder. The Russian pat his leg as he passed in front of his tier, moving towards the 3rd.

"Every bad word you can think of, as both an insult and an exclamation."

Yurio watched quietly as his older team-mate finally stood before him, though it was odd to realize he was still shorter than Viktor even while standing on a podium with his skates on. He looked up those few inches, and watched as the older man pulled the Bronze lanyard off of the arm it was hanging from.

"This season so far has been pretty challenging..." Viktor started, holding the medal with both hands, looking at its glossy surface, "There have been moments where I've wondered about you. You've said and done a lot of pretty hurtful things...even if you meant well by some of it."

The teen felt a tightness in his stomach to hear the words, but he dared not interrupt.
"...A lot of things are going to be changing soon, and it may be stressful to a lot of us. You've come a long way in just the last couple of days though, and I have hopes that many of these changes will benefit you. Your new sisters...your whole new family...even though one of them is being a 'khu i right now...they're all going to help you, and support you, like you should've been from the beginning." Viktor went on, then raising his hands up to hold the medal before the teen, "And though I've been a hard-ass to you lately...I'll be there for you, too."

Emerald eyes blinked at the man, but Yurio nodded, and leaned his head down as those hands came closer with the lanyard.

He's not apologizing, and I understand why... I've taken out a lot of my anger on him and Katsudon...

He felt the fabric ribbon go over his braided hair, settling around the back of his neck, followed by a pair of hands resting on his shoulders. Looking up again, he saw those blue eyes looking back at him.

"Since you made it on the podium after all, it seems like the Team Skate is officially a Go." Viktor said, smiling in his own relaxed way, "Yuri and I were going to ask you to come with us to the Skate Club tomorrow to practice. You game?"

Yurio swallowed nervously, but nodded once, and felt the pat against one shoulder before rising to stand up.

"Good. We'll go over the details later then." The older Russian said, backing off and starting to clap along with the rising cheers of the audience. ISU officials clapped as well, and the results of the President's earlier orders came to fruition; the Japanese anthem played instead of the Russian, and the flags that rose up in celebration were switched out to reflect the new winners.

In disbelief, but grateful anyway, Yuri watched his country's banner rise up in the center of the group, the sound of that easily-recognized music playing over the roar of the crowd. He turned his eyes down towards his partner, seeing Viktor backing up towards the rest of the ISU brass, relieved that Viktor looked happier now than he did when he was still standing on the podium with them.

...Ever since I can remember, Viktor has always been full of surprises... But I think...other than showing up in Hasetsu in the first place... this one really takes the cake...
While the audience cheered and hollered for the unexpected turn of events, the Japanese anthem playing through the arena, minds more familiar with the athletes involved were brooding.

*It was an easy thing for Viktor to give up the Gold, but he really didn't think this through.*

*He couldn't have just offered the gesture to Yuri in private and not put his career at risk?*

Typical Viktor...always doing the unexpected...

*Would he have done this if Yuri *hadn't* won Silver on his own?*

*THAT *$% VIKTOR, WHAT THE & #$ WERE YOU ^&#$ ING THINKING!?*

*Yuri's not going to be happy with this once he's had a chance to process it.*

With the anthem coming to an end, the three skaters on the podium came down, sliding across the arena to collect the flags as they lowered down again from on high, slinging them over their shoulders like a cape or just carrying them, as they began their victory lap around the rink. Yuri had the Japanese flag over his shoulders, trying to hold onto it as well as he could while still holding the bouquet of flowers in one arm. The Gold hanging in front of his chest was still a difficult sight for him to accept as he made his trip around the ice, pausing now and again to bow or nod. By the time he made the full circuit, he tiptoed over the red carpet still strewn out over the frost, but paused there, looking at where Viktor was still clapping happily at the whole sight.

*There's no way this thing will go over without consequences. Viktor... Was this because of all the*
Yuri sighed and shook his head, but then swapped arms for the bouquet and extended the other out for his partner, offering half the width of the flag to the Russian, "Come do the victory lap with me."

"...Are you sure?" Viktor wondered hesitantly, "I don't have a medal."

"As though technicalities ever stopped you from doing what you want. Come on." Yuri nudged his arm again, "You said we won this thing together, so we'll celebrate together, too. No half-measures."

The legend smiled, but shook his head as he stepped forward, pulling his half of the flag over his shoulders as he snaked one arm behind his partner's back, "I guess you're right. I never did follow the rules completely."

The Players Club was awash with whispers and clapping still, many mystified at the circumstances...but none more so than the RSF reporters. While their cameras didn't entirely pull off of the 'co-Gold-medalists' when the duo passed, they focused instead on their Bronze winner, lenses following Yurio around the rink. When a certain despondent elder finally tried coming back down to the lounge like before, having had his few minutes of sitting in the snow to feel sorry for himself and reflect, he paused in the doorway, none too far away from the reporters who had held back to wait for the interview segment, gossiping amongst themselves. He didn't hear the whole conversation, but he heard enough to give the three closest to him dirty looks before stepping through the doorway. The other two were at rink-side with the rest of the media, recording the event.

It wasn't hard to find his two silver daughters, as they'd been pushed back inside the Club by the sportscasting gaggle, and they'd settled to watch the rest of things from the bar area, looking on at the televisions. Mikhail stepped up behind their two chairs at the counter, and brought an arm up against the back of each, leaning into the chair on the left and catching the two teens' attention in the process.

"Sorry for earlier." He said simply, "I'm dealing with some things."

Nikki was reserved, looking to her older sister to ask the one question they wanted an answer to.

Viktoria nodded and leaned back in her seat, "Just say if you're really going to call off the move to Japan or not."

The elder shook his head, "Nothing has changed, except maybe in how involved Minako is. That's up to her though."

"Then why didn't you just say so to Cousin Viktor earlier?" Nikki finally spoke up, "You've had Yura freaking out about it. He thinks you're going to ditch him."

Mikhail drew a breath, "I didn't say anything because I wasn't thinking about it. It never occurred to me to walk back my promises to anyone."

"You should probably tell him then."

"I will, as soon as he's off the ice and done with things."

Viktoria crossed her arms and gave a stern look, "As soon as he comes off the ice. If you make him wait till the end of the interviews, when he has to walk by you to get there, he's just going to worry even more."

"Alright alright...! I'll tell him as soon as I see him!"
The lights in the arena dimmed to near-total darkness after the victory lap, and Viktor pulled back again to let Yuri skate on his own for the group-photos. The media and ISU press were lined up along the red rolled-out carpet, waiting for the skaters to approach with their flags and flowers and medals. The silver Russian branched off to slide along the rink wall, finding his phone being tossed out to him by the ever-faithful Chris, and quickly went down to join the end of the line like the giant Yuri Fanboy that he was. As the official victory photos were taken by the sports press, the excitable Russian took a slew of his own, even as the other photographers found his antics somewhat distracting. Having a figure skater in their own midst was...not something that generally happened.

It wasn't long before the skaters started coming back into the Players Club, still carrying their rewards and looking rather happy despite the rest. The media and all the fellow skaters and coaches were applauding them as they stepped from frost to concrete, blade guards put back into place and arms slipping into jacket sleeves. Without hesitation, Yuri pulled his husband along by the hand towards the waiting frenzy beyond the further set of doors, bypassing the Rozovsky trio as though he hadn't noticed them sitting there. Yurio followed after with Otabek, though they held back a bit, knowing they had to wait their turn and choosing to wait in the lounge until it was their time. Unlike the Nikiforovs, Yurio and Otabek both spotted the silver triumvirate almost immediately, and made their way closer without a word.

Mikhail saw the look in the teen's eyes, and immediately put those anxieties to rest, "We're still going. Don't worry."

The relief was palpable, and Yurio could sense his knees threatening to give out, but he caught himself, and his breath, "You need to manage your shit better so you don't make everyone else worried, too."

"Well, if Viktor hadn't come af-mphfmphr-

"NO." All three teens were on him, hands wrapped around his face and head, "THIS WAS ALL YOU."

Beady white eyes blinked in shock through the mass of arms and teen angst, Mikhail eventually just grumbled and relented.

Interviewers were throwing questions from all sides, making it hard to hear them all, or even answer half of them. The biggest and most important question, though...that was obvious.

"Viktor Nikiforov...what were you thinking?"

The silver legend just laughed nervously, all but hiding behind his partner where he hugged the man from behind in his usual way, one arm clinging to the skater's side while the other curled up under an arm to latch onto the front of one shoulder, "Yuri deserved the Gold more than I did, that's all." He tried to explain, "I came into this season thinking I'd be scaling back the difficulty level of my programs, and then I belted out a new World Record for the Free Skate... I just skated the program that I meant to from the beginning. If not for Yuri's injury, he would've easily scored higher than I did."

"So was this forfeiture of the Gold to him your way of officially announcing your retirement?"

"No way. I'm going through the rest of the season like normal." He answered, trying to look towards each of the cameras pointed at him for at least a few seconds before moving on to the next, even catching sight of the RSF camera from slightly behind the group, with the commentator speaking in front of it, but neither making any particular move to get closer, "I've even toyed with the idea of going again next season just for the fun of it, and see how far I can make it on mostly artistic merit,
rather than stacking my programs with difficult jumps."

"Yuri, how do you feel about this turn of events? Not just regarding the obvious fact of the matter...but since you two live together, Viktor just gave up a hefty sum of prize money that you both would've shared."

The younger skater smiled, and had his mouth moving to open...only to suddenly feel his spouse's jaw hit his shoulder in stunned horror.

"OH NO." Viktor gaped, eyes wide in realization. Hands clenched to the crinkly fabric of the Team Japan jacket, and he buried his face against his partner's back, as though trying to hide.

Yuri just shook his head and drew in a sighed breath, reaching up with one hand to pat the one that was up near his left shoulder, "We don't plan our finances around the expectation that we'll both bring home a certain amount of prize money. If we did, then sure, this would be a pretty big hit...but we've both done pretty well so far this season, and there's still Four Continents, Euros, Worlds...and the Olympics coming up. We'll skate as well as we know how and try again."

"I'm sure the JSF will be happy to see that you're bringing home Gold after all, Yuri. But what do you think the RSF will think about your bold move tonight, Viktor?"

The silver legend lifted his head from where he'd hidden it behind his spouse's neck, and glanced over that shoulder, spotting those very Russian representatives from a moment before, pulling their camera away and moving off. He grimaced slightly, but ignored it, "I've brought home dozens of medals over the course of my career. Before I took some time to be a coach, I had just won my...what...25th-or-so straight Gold medal from major international competitions? And I've been winning at Russian Nationals for as long as I can remember, plus several smaller competitions. Considering it was never certain that I was even going to be competing this year...they're still gaining 2 new Gold medals and a handful of new World Records. I think they can forgive me for this one. These were extenuating circumstances."

Those last words rattled around in Yuri's head like a marble, making most of the rest of the interview pass in a fog. Even the 30-odd minutes they spent taking pictures with fans or signing autographs was a haze. But, things eventually started to phase down, and the skaters filtered back into the Players Club to change and pack up their things for the ride back to the hotel.

Yuri clicked down the last buckle on the side of their big shared rolling suitcase, and lifted up the telescoping handle. One last check on his jacket and scarf to make sure they were both fastened and smartly in place, and he set a hand on the top of the grip, turning to see if his partner was ready.

"Do you want to try for Campus Martius again tonight?" Viktor wondered, looping the last button through on the front of his long coat, "Since I kind of ruined it yesterday."

"Do you want to?"

"Mmhh..."

"There's nothing wrong with a quiet end to the night. We've done a lot today."

"That actually sounds like a good idea." Viktor agreed, pulling one of his gear bags up onto a shoulder to free up that hand, thumbing at his phone while his other arm went over his partner's shoulders, "I wonder if Yuri's still around? We haven't had a chance to talk to him about the Exhibition thing."

"Oh, he's over there." Yuri lifted one hand and pointed, catching sight of the teen amidst most of the
rest of the crew by the doors leading to the great outdoors, sans Minako and Mari, "I guess they're waiting."

Viktor grit his teeth a bit, spotting his uncle in the midst, but supposed that, for better or worse, the rest of the group seemed to be in decent spirits again, "I wonder if he's set things straight."

"...Eh?"

"Mikhail."

"...Oh." Hazel eyes turned again to look at the aforementioned elder, "He doesn't seem to be talking a lot."

"Maybe he's already said enough."

The two looked at one another for a moment, trying to decide what to do...but it seemed that would be decided for them, when through the calmer simmer of what few fans and event staffers were still loitering around the building, a familiar voice cut through the noise, "Yuuuri~!"

The entire wing seemed to lift their collective heads, only to turn them towards center where the pair of inconspicuous athletes had paused in their walk. Yuri's eye twitched with his nervous smile as he realized everyone was staring, and he quickly spun around on one foot to look at the ballerina who'd hollered at him, "Minako-sensei!"

She twirled and held out her banner, oddly reminiscent of their first reunion after the skater's unsung return home. This banner had been specially made in the event that he'd won Gold though, "I was worried I wouldn't get to show this one off! I've been toting it around since your very first event!"

"...Even though Viktor was competing...?"

Minako threw the banner overtop of Mari suddenly and went rummaging around in her purse, digging out a second banner and unfurling it, "I had one for him, too!" She lowered it down a bit and made a face, "Not that I got to wave it around for long."

The Russian just smiled sweetly, "In the end, you got to wave around both, though...I bet you didn't expect that."

"That was some parlor trick you pulled out there, Viktor." The older woman half-chided, folding the banner back up to put it away, and pulling the remaining banner off Mari's head like a drape from an old lamp, leaving the woman's hair ruffled and half-electrified with static, never mind the nonplussed look on her face, "I'd scold you myself for it but I feel like Yuri probably will himself, so I'll spare you hearing the same lecture twice...or three times, if Yakov got you already."

The Russian just smiled blankly and said nothing in response...but then turned his head to look behind himself and focused his attention on the young Tiger instead, "Yuri...come aside for a minute."

The teen gave a curious look, but nodded and moved away from the group, thumbs curled into the straps of his backpack. Viktor moved away from his Yuri as well, stepping past a few onlookers to pull his former rink-mate to the base of a nearby wall. They spoke quietly, and in Russian, so the fewest people would be able to eavesdrop on their conversation as possible.

With Yurio and Viktor off on their own, Yuri turned his attention back to Minako, watching as she folded up the second banner and slid it into her purse to join the first. He turned on his heels and started moving towards her.
"Congrats on your Gold, I guess?" Mari said, a look on her face like she suddenly thought she'd forgotten she owed her mother money, "I dunno how you feel about this one."

"It was Viktor's choice." He answered, pausing a few paces in front of the two women, "He did what he thought was the right thing. He also asked me not to give him a hard time about it, so I'm not going to."

"If someone had told me 5 years ago that Viktor Nikiforov would give up the Gold for our Yuri, I'd wonder what planet they came from." Minako mused, "I'm still just...really shocked. I hope he didn't do this because of everything else going on. He's had a hard time, too...it just didn't have physical wounds."

"No..." Yuri shook his head lightly, ready to say a thousand other things, but holding them in. Instead, he drew in a breath, and remembered the promise he made to his husband.

*Leave Minako and Mikhail to me.*

He closed the gap between them and reached his arms forward, pulling the stunned ballerina into a hug. He held a moment quietly before lifting his face to lean closer to her ear, whispering softly,

"...*Don't ask Viktor to keep secrets from me again.*"

Minako went pale as a sheet in an instant, and looked down into those cherry-tinted brown eyes as Yuri pulled away again.

...*Viktor told him...everything...*  
Mari got an awkward vibe from the both of them, and looked around nervously, "*Well if everyone's done being super tense, can we go?*

"Y-Yeah..." Minako agreed, watching as her pseudo-kid moved off again without another word, heading over towards the two Russian skaters.

Half a heartbeat later, Viktor raised his hand, "*We're going to drive back together. We'll see you at the Exhibition tomorrow.* Ja ne." He waved then and started moving off towards the doors, leaving the other half of the group to wave back in quiet confusion.

A cold rush of winter wind blew through as the trio of athletes left, heading off to find the little rental car buried somewhere in the parking lot's snowdrift. The five that remained just looked at one another in stunned silence.

Except for Nikki, "...I guess we're not dying his hair then?"

"I don't think he would've let you go through with it anyway, sweetie." Mikhail offered, "*The color would've lingered into Nationals.*"

The drive back to the Marriott was much more relaxed than the arena had been, and all three seemed to be in much better spirits after their daring escape from the awkwardness of what they'd left behind.

"It's kinda nice that it's just us again." Yuri commented, left hand reaching across the center console to rest over his partner's leg like usual, "*I missed this kind of thing.*"

"Me too." Viktor agreed, eyes careful to every other car, as though each was as bad as they were back in Russia.
"Seems you're getting along pretty well with Viktor's cousins." Yuri added, sitting up a bit higher to look over the shoulder of his chair and into the back seat, "I guess you like them?"

"They're aright." The teen answered simply, "I don't think things would've gone half this fast if the old man hadn't sicked Nikki on me like he did. I think he's halfway regretting it now."

"Why's that?"

"Cuz she originally threw herself all over me to **annoy** me, but now we actually get along."

"She's pretty brave." Yuri mused, turning back to sit properly and face forward, "I'm still floored by how she yelled at you the other morning."

"...**That**..." Yurio grumbled, and he hugged his backpack a bit tighter where he kept it on his lap, "...**Well**..."

"She yelled at you?" Viktor wondered, glancing back through the rearview mirror, "What'd she do **that** for?"

"...I deserved it."

"Wow~! What'd she say?"

"Some stuff that **doesn't** deserve repeating." Yuri explained, "All that's in the past now. Right?"

Yurio hesitated, but then nodded, "Yeah. It's in the past."

The car came to a stop at the last red light, and they could see the five towers of the hotel looming to the left. The trio were quiet for a moment, but when the light turned green, and Viktor motioned the car to move again, the teen couldn't contain his wonder anymore.

"...Viktor...why...did you agree to be my choreographer?" He asked, "...But not my coach."

"Choreography is easy. I plan for a week, show it to you once or twice, and then I'm done unless you have questions."

The Tiger grumbled quietly, "That's not what I meant."

"Say what you mean, then."

Yuri glanced aside to listen quietly.

"You weren't even all that interested in **looking** at me for a few days." Yuri explained, "None of us were on speaking terms until after the Short Program. You did everything in your power to make sure I couldn't talk to Yuri, even while you yourself refused to talk to me, too. Yet somehow, in the middle of all that, you still said you'd be my choreographer. **Why?**"

"**Hmm**... That's a better question." Viktor acknowledged, resting one elbow on the window sill while the right stayed on the steering wheel, turning it to round the corner and head east, "I guess because of expectation. When I heard the very first rumblings of the idea that you'd be moving to Hasetsu, I had a feeling you'd be asking me to be involved in things somehow. Maybe in the way that I coached the both of you before the 'Onsen on Ice' Exhibition. So I had those ideas in my head already, even before everything hit the fan." He paused for a moment, slowing down to let another car merge into the lane ahead of them, "...But then you got so mad at the both of us because of some mindless chatter we were having."
Yurio wanted to justify himself, ready to unleash a torrent of choice words...but stopped himself, turning to look out through the side window again.

Viktor spotted it in the rearview mirror, "It was poor planning on Mikhail's part." He explained, looking forward again, "He was too busy with the logistics of getting everyone to Hasetsu that he never considered what to do with you once you were there. People normally move across the planet to go to their coaches. Coaches don't generally come to them. If Mikhail had talked to me about the move before he'd finalized it all, he would've known you had no coach in Hasetsu waiting for you. As long as I'm still competing, I can't play coach to two people and myself, and do all the other stuff I already do."

"...Can I...make a point about something?" Yurio asked hesitantly.

"Sure."

"...Yakov coaches upwards of 8 people at a time. Why can't you?"

"I'm not Yakov. I'm Viktor." He answered pointedly, "And I'm still learning all this stuff about how to be a coach in the first place. Right now, my biggest success story is teaching a guy who already knew how to skate." He switched hands on the wheel, freeing up the right to go down and settle gently over the hand resting on his thigh, "So in that case, I was more of a life-coach than a skate-coach. You need some life-coaching, too, Yuri...but it's something that I can't do for you. You need a different teacher. By the time you get that from your new situation...maybe I'll be retired from competition, and I'll have more experience as the kind of coach you'd actually learn something from." He turned the car to the right, heading down the path to where the hotel garage entrance opened to the street, "So in a way, we both have to learn some things before we can work together."

The teen was quiet, trying to absorb the answer...and eventually accepted it, "So maybe in a year or two."

"Sounds about right." The older skater agreed, moving the car through the garage until he found a spot he liked, and parked, "But you'll always know where to find me if you need help. I can be something like...the back-up assistant coach to Minako."

With the car stopped, put into gear, and the key withdrawn, the trio hobbled their way out, gathered up all of their things and started moving up towards the nearest elevator. Yurio hefted his backpack onto one shoulder, watching the ground as they walked. They made it all the way into the main lobby before anyone spoke again.

"Do you want a ride to Gala Practice in the morning?" Yuri asked, "The Official one, I mean. We'll obviously drive you for the rest of it."

"Sure." The teen answered, shifting his weight a bit, but eventually looking up at his former rink-mate, "Viktor..."

"Hm?"

"...Spasibo."

Blue eyes blinked down at the Russian Kitten, but Viktor eventually huffed a quiet laugh and set his hand on top of the teen's head, "I'll make you the best skater in the world one day, Yuri. But for now, I'm doing that for my Yuri. He owes me another four World Championship Gold medals. I'll get my five from you eventually, too."
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED

Viktor held the door open as Yuri dragged in the rolling suitcase, and followed in just after, letting the door latch and putting the bolt over for the night. Luggage was put away and winter gear discarded, and the two sat on the edge of the big Queen-sized bed, untying shoelaces from sneakers.

"You want to find something for us to watch?" Viktor wondered idly, hooking his fingers into each pair of shoes as he stood up.

"Sure. Any genre in mind?"

"I challenge you to find something I haven't seen."

"So...anything that was made in the last 5 or 6 years?" Yuri mused.

"Yeah, probably." The Russian laughed, standing upright again after putting the shoes into the bottom of the closet, "I'm gonna go clean up."

"I was thinking of getting some room service. You want anything?" The younger man wondered, rolling over the bed-top to find the leather-bound menu on the night-stand on its opposite side.

"If they had some of that shochu from the restaurant earlier..."

"I doubt it."

"Then nah."

"M'kay."

"I'll be quick." Viktor finalized, pushing the bathroom door open with a finger.

"Mhm."

The Russian watched for a moment longer, observing how his partner looked through that thick room-service menu like it were the text of some arcane and ancient tome.

...He's already starting to think about things... I'm in for a lecture...

He sighed and moved through the open doorway, putting it to before finding the nozzle to the hot water.

Yuri put the menu away a moment later, unable to see the print for the words, and reached instead for the remote control to the television, surfing through the local channels.

"...Get your new Ford Avalanche, and show Detroit that the weather isn't the only force of nature it should content with...!"

"...where an ATM was broken into and all cash inside stolen. Police are asking for help identifying the man pictured on the ATM's camera..."

"...TONIGHT...WE CELEBRATE...OUR INDEPENDENCE DAY..."
"...There's nothing you could've done, Joel. She just...left."

More clicking, more clicking.

"...things at the Little Caesar's Arena are starting to wind down with the end of the Grand Prix Final's Men's Singles event." Yuri paused there, the remote hanging from his hand lazily, "It's been a really crazy weekend for those guys. Starting off with that accident on Thursday night that cost one of the competitor's his spot in the running, taking the roster down to five athletes, then gaining the 6th man back with a surprising decision from the ISU to allow the 7th place skater to fill that vacancy, only to once again lose their 6th athlete when Russian skater, Viktor Nikiforov, decided at the last second to give up his Gold. With his withdrawal from the line-up, Japanese skater Yuri Nikiforov got upgraded from Silver, Kazakhstan's Otabek Altin moved up from Bronze, and Russia's Yuri Plisetsky managed to take a spot on the podium after failing to defend his title from last year."

"I wonder why he gave up the Gold medal like that?"

"Given the doping controversy after the Sochi Olympics a few years ago, maybe he had something to hide?"

Yuri was immediately incensed, "Viktor would never cheat. Why is that the first thing these Americans think of when something like this happens? Is good sportsmanship really such a foreign concept here that no one can offer a gesture without people thinking there's some catch?"

"Viktor is practically a legend. I doubt he ever considered doing something like that...he doesn't need to. But, that Japanese skater doesn't share the same last name as Viktor for no reason. Did you know that they're married?"

"Married...? Heh, well...that's ironic."

"Ironic? How?"

"Two guys, each hailing from some of the world's most conservative nations, finding each other. But I guess that explains why the Russians were focusing their media coverage on their youngest up-and-coming skater, Yuri Plisetsky, who is thus far free from such scandal."

"After this weekend, I guess Viktor's going to have bigger problems than he probably already did with his being married to another man. The Russians are going to be livid that he threw away their Gold medal."

Yuri grumbled a bit, "Their Gold medal...?" He just turned the television off again, having entirely lost interest in finding something else to watch. For a moment, he just sat there in the silence of the room, barely able to hear the sound of the shower through the open bathroom door, staring at the black screen before him. He tapped the remote on a knee before moving to the edge of the bed and getting up, moving over to where he'd put the square box with the Gold away. He opened it and held the metal disc in his hands, seeing his own reflection in it, "...Funny...I don't see the RSF's name on this."

More grumbling, and Yuri took the medal to the bed, flopping onto his stomach where he faced towards the window. Unlike in Barcelona, when he held the disc up in front of himself, there was no dying light from the setting sun to come into the room and bathe the medal in yellow light, giving that old Silver the illusion of being Gold instead. It was just the snowy, foggy night of Detroit, and the black sky that extended far beyond it, giving the Gold something of a white gloss instead, making it look Silver.
He sighed and dropped his face down to the sheets, the medal coming down where he extended his arms out in front of himself.

...Viktor...Silver was **good enough**... You **won the Gold fair and square**...

A rustle came behind him, and the bed shifted a bit, but before the surprised skater could react, he felt a warm, albeit *damp* body pressing down against him from above. He was able to pick himself up onto his elbows, but that only made room for a pair of hands to come up between them and curl under his chest, fingers clasping over his collar-bones as a face came down next to the side of his head.

"V-Viktor..."

"Either you didn't look, or there was nothing to watch." The Russian surmised, "I can guess which it was."

"...Technically both." Yuri answered reluctantly, "I caught the end of a news segment about the Final, but I've been thinking about it since the interviews we did."

Viktor stayed quiet.

*Here it comes...*

"...There's no way the RSF is going to let you get away with what you did." The younger man went on, turning his head a bit to nuzzle a cheek where he could feel one, "And it's true, they were avoiding interviews with us because of *me*."

"That's their loss, then." The silver legend said easily, "At the end of the day, I go home with *you*, not them. You'd think they'd be used to this arrangement by now."

Yuri had no answer to that.

"Are *you* mad at me for what I did...?"

Again, Yuri stayed silent, but only because of all the things he *wanted* to say rattling around in his head. For better or worse, he shook his head, and pulled his right hand back to find the fingers pressed in front of his left shoulder, "No. I think what you did took a lot of courage."

"Courage?" Viktor huffed the echo of those words, "All I did was follow through with what I told you when I first showed up. I made you win the Grand Prix Final."

"...You **won the Grand Prix Final.**"

"I won a competition that I shouldn't have even been competing in." The Russian corrected, "You asked me to come back, but I never wanted to steal the Gold from you in the process." Viktor said, reaching his own right hand forward to find the medal where it had been forgotten in the sheets, "This belongs to *you*."

Yuri looked at it, his reflection glinting back at him in the smooth yellow surface. Like before, a thousand different things ricocheted in his mind, things he wanted to say, excuses he wanted to make...but he didn't speak a word of them.

*Nothing I say will undo his decision, and reinstate him as the Final's winner. By this point, it would probably break his heart if I tried anyway.*
Instead, he reached for the medal, and felt his spouse slide off his back in the process, lying on his side next to him instead. One leg was still bent over the back of his thighs though, and he felt a hand slowly stroking at his lower back...just like the previous year. However, when he turned his head to look at the man, and leaned in closer to brush the edge of a shoulder against Viktor's chest...he didn't hesitate again.

Viktor Nikiforov... My hero, my idol...my best friend...my coach...my rival...and my simple, beautiful, air-headed husband...

What was once a naïve, embarrassed wish for a kiss...became a kiss...and he held there for a moment before pulling back again to nose the man's lips, "...Thank you."

The duo Russian leaned in for another kiss, "It was my pleasure."

The silver Russian bent his knees up and tilted both legs against his partner's frame, extending his left arm up above his head as the right snaked its way closer to touch fingers to Yuri's chin, "To distract you."

"...Viktor..." Yuri's tone was like that of a parent who was upset, but didn't want to be.

The older figure tried to lift his head up a bit, aiming for another kiss, though finding it returned with obligation rather than affection, and he flopped back down again, looking anxious, "...So you'll stop worrying so much about what I did and worry more about what we should do!

Hazel eyes watched quietly, seeing the desperate look on that man's face, but Yuri just sagged against where his elbows still held him up, "Just...promise me you don't do this again. You can't just walk into competitions, win the Gold, and then give it up."

"...So you don't like that you won it..."

"I didn't win it, Viktor! That's the thing! I appreciate the gesture...it was really sweet, and I love you for it." He reached an arm across his husband's chest and pulled himself partially over the man, trying to look small even while looking down from above, hiding behind the knuckles of his balled-up hands, "I know it meant a lot to you to be able to do that for me...but... This is our livelihood, too. At least for the time being."

Viktor looked away, feeling even more guilty than before.

"...I know it's no skin off your nose to give up a medal...you probably don't care what the RSF or
anyone else thinks about what you did...and I'll wear it proudly. But please don't do this again..."
Yuri pleaded quietly, "I don't want your legacy to go down in flames because your incredibly selfless
and beautiful gesture rubbed the wrong people the wrong way. I mean, we may joke about being
each other's coaches...and it may be true to some level...but we aren't entirely unaccountable. We still
have some people to answer to."

"You think I might as well have turned in my resignation."

"Of course not. Remember that time I said we'd still be out on the ice even if we had to carry
ourselves on walkers?"

Viktor hesitated, but nodded, "You said you'd still do quads by turning around 4 times with yours."

Yuri huffed a laugh, hopeful that the tone of the conversation would finally turn, "Yeah." He said
quietly, looking on as his partner pulled that still-upturned left arm down to prop his silver-haired
head up on it like a pillow. The right came back around, one knuckle gently brushing against his
cheek as those blue eyes looked up at him curiously. The knuckle pulled away, replaced by a palm,
and Yuri leaned his cheek into it, drawing in a sharp breath of relief, "...I just...want you to be more
careful."

"Yes, Mr. Responsible One." The Russian said stiffly, suddenly reaching down with both hands to
hook under his husband's arms and quite literally hoist him further up, setting the man down again
only when they were nose-to-nose, "Now...can we proceed with tonight's main event, or is it
cancelled due to inclement weather, too?"

The younger man fidgeted a little where he lay, but wiggled to put himself more evenly in place,
squaring his hips towards his partner rather than away like they had been, and brought one leg over
the Russian's, hooking to upper part of one ankle over the curve of one thigh, "Does this count
towards post-conflict urges or just regular urges?"

"Yes."

"That's not really an ans-"

Viktor wouldn't let him finish, right hand quickly up behind the man's head, pulling him closer, while
the left traveled down Yuri's side, groping firmly at that round of flesh before continuing down to
pull that leg higher across himself. Strands of black hair came loose from their moorings where the
younger man still had it slicked back from the event, tracing gentle lines across the Russian's skin.
The hand behind his partner's head slid down and away, following the upward curve of neck and
upper back, between shoulder blades, and further towards the curve of lower back. Fingers moved
under fabric there, teasing the first feeling of skin hidden beneath it. The younger man's twitch
against the sensation of cold fingers brought a smile to the Russian's face, and both hands went into
the man's clothing after that, roaming all across Yuri's back and sides as far as the pull of fabric
would allow.

Yuri's arms remained somewhat pegged to his sides, hands cupped gently over the curve of his
partner's chest. When he felt his sweater and undershirt being pushed up though, he moved his arms
out of the way, and quickly found the two garments being pulled right over his head. Gelled hair was
in utter disarray when the two shirts came off. He could feel a breath of relief against his chest when
his arms came down, his partner having craved skin all day, but denied it through some garment or
another. Viktor was quick to hug him and tilt them both to the side though, giving him little time to
worry about how silly his hair looked. He felt the pillow pile against his back, and the kisses
returned, trailing from lips to neck, and hands moved between them to unbutton and unzip those
figure-hugging black jeans. They came loose around his hips, but Viktor didn't immediately push
them away, simply wedging one knee between his own to part his legs some, and moved his fingers
down the loosened upper rim of the thick garment.

Not wanting to go too quickly, the Russian savored every inch of newly gained territory, edging his
fingers into the space between fabric and skin a little bit further with each stroking pass. Sensing his
partner already feeling overwhelmed by need, Viktor slipped the entirety of one hand into those jeans
and under the elastic black material underneath that clung to his partner's bare frame. Yuri's figure
went limp to his touch, clinging to him urgently but moving just slightly to open himself up and fully
experience every new touch. Fingers slid further down and behind, over the ample curve of flesh,
until they curved inward and between those hard athletic legs, teasing at certain skin but unable to go
further. His hand came back again then, sliding gratefully the way it came, and going down again,
but this time in the front. The Russian smirked to himself as his husband gasped, hips jerking back
against the pillows as he felt himself taken hold of.

Knees bent a bit more and ankles crossed behind himself, and Yuri pressed his forehead to his
partner's bare chest, fingers clawing for grip on the silver legend's shoulders. The hand that massaged
and teased between his legs was drawing up a desperation that Yuri hadn't entirely been keen to
before that moment...but the more the Russian kneaded, the more obvious it became. His up-turned
knee slid further up his spouse's leg, and he found himself starting to roll his hips with each squish of
fingers against his hardening flesh. It quickly became unbearable, and when he felt how slick his
husband's hand became where it stroked him, he pushed up. First onto an elbow, then high enough
to force his partner onto his back, and he himself quickly went to sitting on the man's hips. With the
changing position, the angle of the Russian's hand and arm changed as well, and he found himself
fully withdrawn from his clothing, fingers curled entirely around him where before they merely
pressed against one side.

Viktor quickly rose up onto one hand as well, knees bending up behind his spouse as he leaned in
closer to tease his nose against the pale neck before him, occupied-hand still offering that needed
attention, "For a minute there, I was worried you wouldn't want to partake...but it seems you
were more eager than I gave you credit for." He spoke quietly, teasing the words against that soft
skin.

The younger man could hardly focus, his vocabulary reduced to needy whines and gasps, as well as
the occasionally urgent but quiet moan. Still, Yuri had enough sense about him to know where things
should go next, and even as he gently rocked his hips through his husband's grasp, he reached his
own hand back down between the man's legs to find his own target. Unfortunately...and as a
sobering surprise...there wasn't much to find.

"...What..." Yuri managed to utter, his attention still half-dominated by the squeezes and strokes
before him, but through one clenched-shut eye, he looked at the silver legend before him, "...Y-you
were the one...who started this... But why can't...I excite you...?"

"...Hah?"

Yuri reluctantly allowed a pause so he could rise up a bit on his knees, giving the Russian a good
look at how not-aroused he was. The younger man sat back down again, but unhappily started
sliding to the side, eventually putting his back to the pillow-pile even as his left leg stayed perched
over his husband's waist, "...Y-you're worried about the medal thing, and the RSF... I kn-know you
are..."

"Maybe a little bit, but-

The leg was pulled back, and Yuri grew more frustrated, bending both knees upward and pinching
his legs together as though forming a wall between him and everything else. He saw fingers curl over
the top of one though, and Viktor twisted where he sat to look at him.

"It's fine...you can just take me again like you did this morning..."

"I c-can't..." The younger man answered, face still red and flushed, center still throbbing despite having been abandoned, "If you're not...into it...I can't..." His voice was laced with the whine of desperation, reminding Viktor of the urgent drunken slur from the Banquet in Bordeaux, and their flight to find some kind of privacy to address it, "...Plus...I w-wanted you to...to do it this time..."

"Well, then at least let me finish what I started...?" The Russian hoped, "I won't leave you like this."

He hesitated, but Yuri nodded, and tried to relax his legs as he felt his husband starting to pull at the ankle-hems of his jeans. They were gone a few seconds later, along with his socks and undershorts, and Viktor went to pushing the blankets away after that. Watching quietly, Yuri waited half-impatiently for the Russian to settle down again, legs going under the blankets and hands eventually reaching out to pull him closer again. Blankets came up over his own legs then, and Viktor settled him against his chest, left leg curled around him as the right was propped up against his side. Arms came around him quickly thereafter, palms flat against his chest as lips returned to the side of his neck.

The silver legend could still feel the tension in his partner's frame, every muscle tight from the anxiety of the realization, but he did his best to ease it away. Left hand stayed on Yuri's chest, gently stroking and rubbing across him as the right started moving down again. Not wanting to immediately grab the man though, Viktor eased his way back into the pace, his palm and fingers gently teasing around center, and stroking at the inside of the younger skater's upturned right thigh where it leaned against his own. Tension slowly started to ease off, and the younger man became like putty in his hands, pliable to every touch.

Slowly sliding down, Yuri slid off his partner's chest and down into the pillows, feeling his husband come up against his side instead, still reaching precariously with that right hand even as the left had to move off to hold the man up. But that just made it easier for the kisses to start again, and Yuri accepted those gladly, his own hands roaming to cup around his spouse's cheek and neck. He felt the warmth of a tongue against his lips, and whimpered quietly as he let it in, feeling that hand finally reach for center again. It grabbed and massaged at everything, getting slick again on that clear fluid he found himself sometimes making, and then went lower. Fingers pressed gently, then harder, against that wide nubbin of skin on the way to the final goal. Yuri was helpless against it, his own fingers clamping down harder where they curled around his husband's shoulder.

Viktor massaged there for a little while, but his husband had told him he wanted to be taken, and he wasn't going to disappoint him anymore than he already had. One last wet, deep kiss, and he started trailing his lips down the younger man's neck and chest. His whole frame twisted over as he moved lower, until he was lying sideways with his left arm draped over the man's abdomen to hold himself up, the whole of his upper body blocking Yuri from seeing anything else he did. He felt hands against the back of his shoulders, and looked back briefly to see his husband's face, expressive and relishing in his attention. He turned back then, finger still pressing that sensitive spot in rhythmic nudges, but then moved to tease a little bit further down from there. With fingers adequately slick, the Russian started applying that specific pressure, and drew the man into his mouth just as he pressed his middle finger inside. The younger man cried out at the unexpected prod, but the surprise quickly gave way to pleasure, and he dropped back down to the pillow he'd half-attempted to jump up from.

Each suck was accompanied by the come-hither motion of that finger, and even that was soon joined by the assistance of one thumb pressing from outside as well. Yuri quickly found himself squirming under the intensity of his husband's attention, and just as he thought he was about to be pushed over
the edge...found the finger coming out again, then the thumb, and the hot, wet warmth of that mouth as well. A short-lived internal panic was replaced by the loud gasp of a man who suddenly found himself penetrated by something more substantial than a single digit, and after finding his entire frame tensing up from the surprise, went entirely limp again with a vocal exhale.

Viktor just huffed a nervous laugh, coming up against his husband's back, arms wrapping around his waist, "Sorry... I guess I just needed to listen to you for a little while longer. I hope you don't mind."

Yuri had no words for him though. He just clapsed his hands together and clenched his eyes shut, muttering something along the lines of thankyougod in a voice he could barely hear. Still, the Russian wasn't all the way in though, and Yuri hadn't expressed enough of that home-made lube to go around, so he reached for the night-stand just ahead of himself and rummaged for their bottle of the store-bought stuff. He quickly squeezed a dollop into his hand and reached back behind himself to put it everywhere it needed to go. Once settled back into place though, he found Viktor hugging him even tighter, and he turned his small frame in the man's arms to look back at him over a shoulder. Wordlessly, he pressed the side of his forehead against his lover's cheek as he felt the length of that thick flesh sliding the rest of the way inside him. It was as tight a fit as ever, and Yuri was loudly voicing his approval of it.

The outward slide was as gentle and slow as the inward, but with each pass, things picked up speed, until the only thing keeping the younger man from being pushed right off the edge of the bed was the tight embrace from the man thrusting him forward.

Wanting to make-up for the scare of his earlier underwhelming response to their romp, Viktor put all of his energy into his new efforts. From the position they were in, he eventually rolled a bit further, putting his husband belly-down on the sheets, and move in to straddle over the back of his thighs. He thrust in a few times while holding himself up with a hand on either side of his lover's waist, but was soon pressed against the man's back again, hands clenching to Yuri's ribs as he rolled his hips; Yuri himself had his hands clenched in a vice around one of the pillows. The position changed again, and Viktor slid his hands down from ribs to waist, and pulled the younger man up onto his knees, wedging his own between them from behind to part those legs. Yuri could barely hold himself up, supporting himself on his hands as long as he could before the strength in his arms gave out and he descended in the front again. One arm held him up around the waist, and he could feel the occasional kiss against his back between thrusts. Position change again, and Yuri found himself on his back. The Russian came in hot and heavy with kisses, pushing in as deeply as he could go. Legs swayed on either side of that larger pale frame, sweat beading on both of them.

Yuri could hardly hold on anymore, the added friction of his husband's hand pumping against center in the midst of everything else was putting him fast towards the edge. He nearly found himself actually trying to pull out and away, but collapsed from his elbows into the pillows again, crying out with each new push until he finally felt release.

The silver Russian slowed down immediately, the forceful thrusts reduced to easy glides, hand still working at center until the last of that white fluid had dripped out, and he'd effectively reduced his spouse to trembling fits and gasps for breath. He lowered himself down though and kissed at the younger man's chest, finding him too weak to even raise his arms up in response, and quietly huffed a laugh as he leaned in closer, "Was it okay...?" He wondered between his own breaths, having found release as well just moments later.

"Was...was it okay' he asks..." Yuri echoed, heaving for breaths between words.
Two more romps, a hot bath, a clean change of clothes, and four hours later, there were empty plates, and a half-empty bottle of Chardonnay stacked neatly on the computer desk. The television was on to the 1998 classic, *The Mask of Zorro*, and a certain duo of world-class figure skaters were engaged in something of a cuddle pile, each with a wine-glass in hand.

The above-ground section of a large mine was on fire, and dramatic music played. A blonde, bearded young man with a sword ducked into the edge of a shaft, and suddenly burst back out onto the landing, expecting his nemesis but seeing nothing. Suddenly, the masked hero swooped in behind him, and asked a simple question.

"Did you miss me?"

A sword-dance began, the blaze raging all around them.

Yuri lifted the glass he was nursing, and sipped lightly at the golden bubbly in it, watching the battle on the TV just past the blanket-covered crest of his knees, where they were neatly stacked with the legs of his partner. He felt the silver Russian turn slightly where he leaned against the side of the man's chest, and turned his eyes briefly to watch Viktor set his own wine glass down on the nearby nightstand before settling back in again, leaning his head back against a pillow propped on the headboard. Those blue eyes were starting to lid though, and Yuri leaned his head back, "Getting tired?"

"Mhmmm..."

"Don't think you'll make it to the end of the movie?" The younger man mused, twisting a bit to nuzzle the tip of his husband's nose fondly.

"...Mnh...the hero wins...and the bad-guys don't."

"Hm. Spoilers."

Viktor huffed a quiet laugh as he turned inward and onto his side, closing his eyes as he finally surrendered to the idea of sleep, "Shitsurei."

The younger figure smiled and kissed his spouse's cheek, moving to sit up, and drained the last of his Chardonnay before setting the now-empty wine-glass on the opposite night-stand, "I'll forgive you this time." He said quietly, turning back to nose the side of his partner's forehead and speaking a hushed whisper, "I'll go turn everything off. Don't wait up for me."

"You know I will."

"Alright, I'll be quick."

Yuri kicked his feet out from under the blankets and moved to stand up, finding where the remote control had been discarded in the blankets near the end and clicking the tele off. He moved then to click off the hall-light, followed by the lamp on Viktor's side of the bed. All that done, Yuri returned to the warm spot he'd just left, pulled off his glasses, and cozied his way back in, reaching for the pull-chain on his own lamp and plunging the room into darkness. He finagled his way back into his partner's arms by feel alone, and got himself good and tangled-up again within that warm embrace.
And then there came a knock on the door.

Yuri's eyes were wide open despite the dark, and he lifted his head, "...Did I just...?"

"Ignore it..." Viktor recommended, "It's nothing." He lifted the arm going over his husband's waist and used that hand to nudge the younger man's head back down, kissing him once he was in place for good measure, "It's probably some drunk fans looking for a good time."

Another knock, this time heavier than before.

Yuri grumbled, "I don't think it's fans."

"I don't care who it is..."

They waited a moment, listening for any other knocks, but heard nothing for several seconds. Eventually, there was a rough thump, and a strange sliding noise, followed by silence again.

"...Whoever it is, they're sitting against the door now." Yuri said irritably, "I can't sleep if someone's right there like that."

Viktor drew in a breath, but then pat his husband's athletic tummy and pushed up onto an elbow, "I'll get this one."

"Okay..."

The Russian bitterly got up from his warm spot and rose from the bed, moving his barely-clad frame towards the hall and around the corner, feeling at the wall as he went. When he got to the door, he peered first through the spyhole, in case there was more than just the one noisy interloper. He could see the edge of a shadow on the right, but whatever or whoever it was, was too far away to identify.

"You're not just going to sit here all night until they come back, are you?" A voice outside whispered, nearly inaudible through the thick wooden panel.

"Of course not." A second voice answered, just as quietly, "We're going sit here all night until they come back."

There was a slight groan of annoyance, but then the sound of a lighter thump against the base of the door where the shadow moved under the spyhole's line-of-sight and apparently sat next to the original noise-maker. Viktor grit his teeth in annoyance, and reached to pull out the sliding lock, hoping not to make a sound. With the chain down, the deadbolt was next, and after a sharp inhalation, the irate Russian pulled the door open as quickly as he could, "Who do you people think you are-"

"AHH!" The two women yelped, rolling straight into the room with the door pulling away behind them, staring up at that pale physique with stunned looks on their faces as they sprawled out onto their backs.

Viktor had to hop back, his simmering aggravation suddenly changing to utter confusion, then back to being irritated, "What in the Hell are you two doing here this late at night?"

"O-Oh!" Minako waved nervously from where she was still on the floor, "V-Viktor! S-Sorry to bother!"

"It's nearly 2am!"
Yuri had moved to sitting cross-legged in the bed, rolling his eyes, but was somehow not all that surprised. He finally walked himself forward on his hands and knees and hopped off the end of the bed, spying his former ballet teacher and older sister still sprawled out at his husband's feet, "Minako-sensei, Mari-nee-chan..."

"YURI!" They both hollered, flipping over onto their own hands and knees in the doorway, keeping their heads down, "Moushiwake arimasen!"

He clicked the hall light on as he approached, and rubbed his eyes as the brightness beamed down, "What are you two doing here this late at night? Shouldn't you be at the other hotel?"

"Th-things got awkward there, so...we called a taxi." Mari explained, "We tried to get our own room first though."

"...Awkward?" The man echoed, "Awkward how?"

"Oh just come in already." Viktor interrupted, getting tired of holding the heavy door open, pinching the bridge of his nose. The two women scrambled forward to give the pane clearance, and the Russian let it go, bolting it like before and moving to get back into bed with a huff.

Yuri brushed his hand reassuringly against the man's bare chest as he went by, but then sat back down again as the two ladies practically stood at attention just within the hall. He turned his eyes from his perturbed husband to the pair of new arrivals, "Well...?"

"We're so sorry!" They said again, with Minako looking more sheepish than her younger counterpart, "I tried to make small-talk with Mikhail about the Free Program, but he didn't see most of it so the conversation didn't really go far. He didn't want to talk about the medaling ceremony either. So then I tried talking about Nationals, and eventually it got around to how Mari and I had planned on going together back to Hasetsu after the Final, and that I still planned on making up for not being able to go to Nagano last year...and..."

"...You're going to give that man a coronary." Yuri said, hand rolling down his face, "Why did you bring that up now?"

"I didn't mean to, it just...happened, because of the topic." Minako insisted, "I couldn't just walk it back once I'd said it."

"How did you say it?"

"Something like...since everyone else seems to be going to Moscow for Russian Nationals, even Viktor, that means Yuri's going to be alone in Japan. I've gone to support him during competitions since he was a kid, so I should probably go, since I'll be the only one available. I'd hate for him to be there on his own, especially since Viktor won't be around."

"...And?"

"...Aaaannnnndddd..." Minako fidgeted where she stood, "...I told him that Mari and I had bought our plane tickets to and from the Final months ago, so I should go back with her to Hasetsu as we'd planned, instead of...going there from Moscow."

Yuri rubbed one temple with a finger.

"We've been fixing the plane arrangements for Yurio since after Bordeaux!" The ballerina went on, trying to justify it, "We got lucky after Mikhail fell off that damn roof and Yurio could take his place on the ride to Cup of China, and then from there to Sapporo since Mikhail wasn't around for that
trip…but he never really asked about my plans with Mari. It's like he forgot our original idea was for her and I to come to Detroit together, and that it all got messed up because of everything else, but that I still felt like I should honor my plans and not make Mari spend 14 hours on a plane ride back to Japan on her own. I didn't want to buy another plane ticket to go from Moscow to Osaka, either, because it's probably getting crazy-expensive, and with both his kids here now, too-

"Okay, okay..." The young skater held his hands up, "So he's mad you're ditching him to come with me."

"...I don't think he's mad, but...probably upset, for sure." She corrected nervously, "I thought he'd stopped listening to me after that, so Mari and I said we were going to take a walk...then I got a text from Yurio asking why Nikki was texting him about how Mikhail was making them go to bed at like 9pm on a Saturday...and that's when we decided to avoid going back for the moment..."

"So you spent all night figuring out where to stay, and eventually ended up here."

"...H-hai..."

"Does he know you're here?"

"I haven't talked to him."

"How long have you been in the Marriott?"

"We came up as soon as we arrived, so only a few minutes. It was our choice of last resort." The woman went down on her knees, fingers clasped together, "Believe me, we didn't want to bother you two! But Yurio is staying with the Russian Team, and..."

"No, it's fine, I get it." The skater sighed, looking back at his angry lump of a husband, then again at the ballerina, "The roll-away that Phichit-kun used is still here. You can put it on the floor and sleep across it diagonally so you get the most use out of it." He rose back up to standing and moved to the head of the bed, grabbing for one of the many pillows and handing it over, "There's a pillow and blanket on the other bed already, but here's another, since there's two of you." He pulled back the big comforter and peeled the thermal-blanket out from between the layers, much to a now-wide-awake Viktor's disapproval, though the man made no verbal protestations. With the fleece pulled clear, Yuri handed that over as well, and replaced the thicker comforter back into place over the thinner sheet that remained, "We'll deal with this thing with Mikhail later. For now, we're sleeping. Viktor and I had already turned in for the night when you guys came, so we're not going to stay up all night talking about things. Drama-time is later. Sleep-time is now."

The two women nodded, quickly pushing a few chairs out of the way to pull down the roll-away where it had been put up against a wall, and set the squishy mattress onto the floor as instructed. They kicked off their winter boots and peeled their other cold-weather gear off, and settled back-to-back diagonally across the make-shift bed like Yuri had told them, pillows and blankets in place quickly after.

Yuri went back towards the hall and had his finger on the switch, watching the pair and waiting for them to nod that they were ready...and flicked the switch to plunge the room back into the darkness it had so rudely been pulled from. He crawled his way across the top of the bed again and found, for the second time, his warm place there under the blankets and within his husband's embrace. He took a moment to quietly stroke the silver hair in front of him, nuzzling in close reassuringly, "Don't be mad..."

"I'm not mad. I'm cranky. I should already be asleep."
"I know...I know..." The younger man agreed, "If anyone else comes to the door, I'm getting out my knife-boots."

Viktor sighed a quiet breath, but nodded, and finally let the tension evaporate from his anxious frame. He wiggled a bit to get more comfortable and repositioned where his arms draped around his husband's sides, "At this rate, I'll need to reprise 'Evoke' just for the Exhibition."

"We left that outfit at home on purpose."

"I know. I'm just saying."

"Say less." Yuri advised, finding the man's lips to kiss him quickly, "Nothing about this is urgent, so don't lose sleep over it. We'll do Exhibition practice like we planned and go with Yurio after that. The rest can wait."

Again, Viktor nodded, trying to find his zen and the pathway back to blissful oblivion. However, it was coming slowly. Instead of being mad about it though, the silver legend couldn't help but smile, and he nuzzled his husband's forehead, "You're really hot when you take command like that."

Yuri couldn't help but smirk to himself at those words, and moved to drape a leg over the Russian's thigh, "Domo."
By the morning, and with the sound of Yuri's phone going off to the alarm he'd set, nerves had settled a little and it wasn't as difficult a chore to wake up as one might have worried. Yuri rolled to the right to fumble for the device, pulling it from the charger and looking blearily at the time before clicking out of the beeping window and setting it down again to yawn and stretch. By the time his taut frame relaxed again, a pale hand was already roaming over him, and silver hair was tickling his skin where a pair of lips was trying to get at his neck. The prod from behind was as obvious as it had ever been, with each of their frames' nightly unconscious 'practice' leaving them both standing at attention...but Yuri still had a clearer head.

"...Viktor...we can't right now..."

The Russian practically snorted in stunned horror, eyes wide open as he pushed up onto an elbow like he could hardly believe those words had been uttered, about to demand a cranky explanation...but from that risen vantage, he spotted the slow rousing of the two late-night ladies on the floor just behind his husband's side of the bed.

He narrowed his eyes behind those silver bangs and collapsed with grit teeth to his spot in the sheets again, pressing his face tightly to his husband's upper back, "...If one person says 'good morning' to me today after it's started like this..."

"Try not to get so worked up. You've only been awake for like 15 seconds."

"And that's all it took to remind me of how cranky I was last night."

"Shh." Yuri twisted in his partner's grasp, wedging his left arm under the man's neck while the other went over the other side, and kissed that pale forehead before hugging the Russian close. He could feel his partner bristling even in that hug, and it took a good few seconds before he felt the reluctant exhale and that tight frame start to relax again, but eventually it did, and Yuri just held on, rubbing his thumb back and forth where it brushed against his spouse's hair.

Just before he had turned over, Yuri had spotted the two older women quietly getting their things together, and by the time his attempt to soothe his husband had started to show results, he caught sight of the duo walking past the end of the bed. He turned his face slightly, keeping the Russian's wedged firmly against his left shoulder where the man wouldn't see what was going on, and waved the two by, saying nothing, but nudging his head towards his phone as though to say he'd text them later.

Minako mouthed the words that they'd just go downstairs, and Yuri nodded. The pair left quickly after that, their blankets folded neatly and set with their borrowed pillows on top of the mattress, and the door unlocked, opened, and closed as silently as was humanly possible.

When it clicked shut, Yuri released his partner's head, "There, now we can if you want...?"

The Russian just grumbled, "...I lost it."

.

The tray of empty plates and wine glasses was set outside the door on the hallway floor, and Yuri
dusted his hands as he rose back up to his normal height. He looked up as Viktor came out, dragging their shared rolling suitcase along, with all its poodle stickers, past travel bands, and [I HEART HASETSU] labels, and reached to make sure the door latched properly. He reached forward to help unburden the silver legend of the jackets that he had tucked under an arm, as well as the scarves draped around his neck, and put them both around his own as they began to step down the hall towards the elevators.

A few other competitors and coaches were in the hall as well, but none from the Men's Singles event were on their same floor, so most were unfamiliar faces from different disciplines. Viktor kept his crankiness in check as well as he could, burying his attention into his phone and taking the chance that Instagram would have good news to help cheer him up. As they waited for the elevators to come up though, he saw the small window of a text message coming down from the top of his phone's screen. Cyrillic text greeted him, and he quietly nudged his husband's shoulder, clicking into that message pane and showing it to his partner.

"It's Yurio. He wants to know if Otabek can come with us for the drive to the arena." He whispered.

Yuri pulled his own phone out of his back pocket, and thumbed through the security screen to get to his own last message he'd had with the teen, "It's fine with me if it's fine with you."

"If it's fine with you then it's fine with me."

"Hai." The younger skater quickly typed a short message, [If you guys want to meet us in the restaurant, we were going to hit the buffet before we leave. We can all leave together from there.]

[...Oh, hey Yuri. Was I...supposed to message YOU about this?] The Russian Tiger answered, clearly confused.

He showed the reply to Viktor, who quickly typed a message of his own in Cyrillic again, [Ыури отвечает]

There was a palpable pause in the reply to that, as the 'Seen' notification on Viktor's screen was present for a good few seconds before anything else happened. Eventually though, the three jumping dots arose and Yuri waited for the answer on his own phone, [So I have to message you about everything now?]

[If you need something from US, yeah. If you need something from HIM, it depends.] Yuri typed, [Best to just send everything to me for the time being. Viktor's kind of cranky.]

[How come?]
[I mean, why is he cranky, not why do I have to go through you to get to him...I got that]

[Minako and my sister showed up late last night when we were trying to sleep...I got that]

The elevator arrival ding'd through the small hall, and the six-or-so people who were waiting to board shuffled forward, waiting for the two who were already in the carriage to depart before piling in. Yuri pressed himself into the corner, and Viktor leaned against him.

[WOW they came all the way HERE?] Yurio answered quickly, [Nikki was texting me about how the old man wanted to call it an early night, but I didn't think anyone had actually LEFT]

[They're both still here. I messaged them just before we came out of the room so they'll be eating with us, too, but after that they're on their own]
Yuri quirked a brow at that, and showed the message to his partner, "What is this?"

Viktor turned his eyes and looked at it, "Oh... 'Vas ponjal.' It's like the Russian version of 'Roger that.'"

The younger figure went back to typing. [Ok, we'll see you two in a few minutes then] He closed the screen down and put his phone into his back pocket again, reaching to take his partner's hand as the doors opened and people starting moving out. The duo held back though, not meaning to get out on that level, and waited for the doors to close again. When the glossy panels moved aside a second time, the parking garage was ahead of them, and they stepped through, moving off to find their rental.

Yuri rubbed a thumb across his partner's loosely-held fingers, "You going to be alright...?"

"We'll need to stop at a bank or something so I can get money out." The Russian answered oddly, "I need to pay my way into the Exhibition again."

"Ah, yeah, that's fine." The younger man answered, spotting the vehicle just up the tilted roadway of the parking garage.

Viktor paused a moment to fish the key fob from his pocket, and clicked on it to turn off the alarm and pop the trunk before putting it away again, and reached for the telescoping handle of the rolling suitcase. The sound of the wheels echoed through the concrete halls, barely heard over the sound of traffic outside, and a few cars elsewhere in the building. They stepped up to the car and put their gear within, and with the trunk closed, Yuri offered the man his jacket.

When Viktor took it though, expecting the scarf to come next, he found it looped over the top of his head and pulled gently tight around the back of his neck. Yuri pulled him closer as he himself took a step forward as well, letting the scarf go then to wrap arms around his sides.

"I'm going to keep doing this until you cheer up a little." The shorter man said, hands flat around his husband's back.

"That'll just encourage me to pretend to be cranky even when you've succeeded." The silver legend answered, sliding his own arms over his partner's shoulders to return the hug.

"But you know just as well as I do that as soon as you see Minako-sensei and Mari-nee-san again, you're going to get irritable."

"They ruined our morning ritual."

"We don't even do that every morning though." "When don't we make love in the morning?" The Russian retorted, pulling back a bit to look at his husband squarely, though keeping his arms where they were over those shoulders.

"When one of us is up way earlier than the other, among other times."

"Usually those 'other times' have reasons. When we're just in bed and the alarm wakes us up at the same time though..."

"We made love four times yesterday."
"...I think you meant to say that we made love only four times yesterday." Viktor pouted.

Yuri huffed a laugh, but lifted up a bit onto the toes of his sneakers and offered what he could, closing his eyes as he pressed his lips to his partner's. After a few seconds, he pulled back a little...not far enough to lose contact though, and gave a second kiss for good measure, "I'll make it up to you after the Exhibition."

"Really~!?"

"...If you can make it through breakfast without throwing shade at Minako-sensei and my sister."

"I have nothing against your sister."

"They sit together and I don't know if Mari-nee-chan is aware of why you're irritated."

"Showing up at our door at 2am wasn't enough...?"

"Do you really think you'd have been so upset if there wasn't a familiar reason for it though? One that you nearly clocked your uncle for on Friday?"

The Russian paused, but then made a comical face, "I guess not." He shrugged and pulled out of the hug, reaching to find his spouse's hand again like before and started moving towards the elevators, "If the only option I had was sleeping in the same bed as Mikhail, given the mood he's in, I wouldn't want to either. I tried before. Even when he's in a good mood, it's precarious at best."

Yuri blinked, but then gave his husband quite the look, "When and why were you ever trying to sleep with Mikhail...?"

Viktor managed a laugh, "It was when I went back to get him before NHK. I haven't slept alone in years...if I'm not with you then I'm with Makkachin. But I had neither at Mikhail's condo in Moscow, and given that I was catching a fever and having screwy nightmares...I was desperate for something. I was hopelessly unable to fall asleep, being in that huge bed all alone. I needed some warm body nearby." He offered.

"That just sounds weird."

"It's not like I tried to cuddle him." The Russian huffed, "I tried to at least be close enough that I could tell he was there, but I had my back to him. He kicked me off the bed a bunch of times anyway so it wasn't exactly easy for me."

"...How much sleep did you actually get while you were back in Russia?"

The two waited for the elevator to come down and get them.

"Not a whole lot." Viktor answered, "Between my fevers and everything else that happened, I think I was getting by on a couple naps."

"No wonder you were so squirrely when you got to Sapporo."

"Oh if only you could've seen me while I was still in my hometown... You'd never let me go anywhere alone again."

"You're starting to give me palpitations about letting you go to Nationals."

The chrome-plated doors started to open, and after three people came out, the pair went in, hitting the button to go up to the main level.
"I'm sure Nationals will be fine." Viktor insisted.

"That's what we've both thought about every event we were going to, and then each event got progressively worse. The idea that Nationals somehow won't follow this same pattern is unlikely."

"What else could go wrong though?" The Russian wondered, "We've sorted things out with Yurio, so he's fine. It's just the Russian crowd back home, too, and I'm pretty popular there."

"Given how the RSF has treated us this weekend, and the fact that Minako-sensei has bailed on being there with Mikhail...? And what if your father decides he wants to watch a home-game and turns up?"

Viktor had his mouth open and a finger up as though he were about to respond...but then closed one and lowered the other, leaning against the glossy metal wall, "...Touché." He then threw his arms over his partner's shoulders from behind and nuzzled in close adoringly, "Whoever thought in a million years that I'd say I prefer the company of my papa over everyone else around at the time?"

"You think you'd actually want him to be there...?" Yuri was stunned.

The elevators opened again and the pair spilled out into the lobby area, looking around for the signs to the restaurant.

"Well, I told him he should come." The Russian explained, "Back at NHK after everything started working out. He said he'd consider it. If he actually did come, it might actually be good for us. I mean, he'd be in familiar territory, people would all speak and read the same language as him, plus he's on good terms with Mikhail..."

"...And I won't be there." The younger man sighed.

"I think my papa likes you. Kind of."

"I wouldn't push it that far." Yuri huffed, spotting Yurio and Otabek with the two anxious ladies in the restaurant reception area, and he raised a hand to wave at them all, "I think I might've gained a slight bit of his respect, but I doubt he'd ever ask about me or invite me around."

Viktor paused, using the younger man's hand where he held it to pull him back and make those brown eyes face him, "Care to make a bet out of that?"

"...Eh?" Yuri choked, a confused look behind those blue-rimmed glasses, "A bet? That your father will ask about me...?"

"Yeah. If he turns up at Nationals. I'll stop whatever I'm doing and text you as soon as he does, whatever the hour."

"...If he turns up."

Viktor nodded, a smirk on his face like the challenge was far too exciting to be real. He let go of the hand he held between them and held it up in expectation of a hand-shake, "If he does, and he asks, you'll owe me $5."

"We share a bank account."

"Five untraced bucks that I can do whatever I want with."

"You're just going to buy sake or something. That's not even worth being all secretive."
"Fifty then. You've given me dirty looks a bunch of times when we were in the department store and I was looking at something interesting."

"That's because you've wanted to spend that much on single-color t-shirts and beer steins."

"Okay, the shirt was made of cashmere and the beer steins were imported from Germany. There were reasons!"

"Fifty on any single shirt is outrageous and imported German beer steins don't hold drinks any differently than regular glasses."

"Yuuuriiiii~ Fifty bucks. If he comes and asks about you." Viktor held the hand a bit higher for emphasis.

"Ah fine." Yuri reached back and they shook on it, much to the Russian's delight, "Now let's get food before I wither away."

"Haaaai~!" The silver legend turned on a heel and started making for the group, only to find himself getting pulled back again, and he looked on curiously, "...Nani?"

"No shade. Best behavior. Sexy-time later tonight is counting on it."

"...Oh! Yes!" Viktor nodded, "...You'll hold to that only about as long as you did when you grounded me after NHK." He laughed, giving a knowing look.

Yuri's face went red, but he allowed the man to start walking them the rest of the way to the waiting area, "...I wonder if your apology bouquet will still be alive when we get home?"
Chapter 303

CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED THREE

Though Viktor had done his absolute best to honor his promise not to continue on as Captain Crankypants, it truly didn't take longer than 3 minutes before someone hit a button and put the Russian back into the shade.

"Good morning!" The hostess at the entrance chimed, her tone overly cheerful for it being barely 9am, "Party of six?"

"Yes," Yuri answered on the group's behalf, spinning his husband around by his shoulders so his 'I literally cannot even right now' face wouldn't be seen, "Us four are skaters," He made a circular gesture at the males of the assembly, and everyone started pulling out their event passes to prove as such, offering up their food-voucher stamps, though Viktor did so with his back still turned, "And those two are paying for themselves." He pointed at Minako and Mari, who waved sheepishly, as though they'd just been declared 'outsiders.'

The hostess nodded, entirely oblivious to Viktor's grumpitude, and showed them all back to the large circular table that she had just assigned to them. By the time all was said and done, food was procured, and everyone was sitting back at said table, Viktor could do little more than stab at the bits of breakfast that had been put in front of him, never really eating any of it. Or, if he did, he did so grudgingly.

The table was awkwardly silent despite the number of people sitting at it, everyone casting the occasional glance over at the tense Russian. When the minutes went by, and nothing seemed to change, eyes started wandering towards Yuri instead...and he could feel it like a weight on his shoulders.

...Leave Mikhail and Minako-sensei to me...

The words were beginning to haunt him, but Yuri drew in a breath, holding a piece of toast in his lips as he rifled around his back pocket for his phone. He checked the World Clock on his timer app and grimaced, but switched over to his contact list anyway and sent out a FaceTime request to someone very far away. Eyeballs were on him even more intently after that, with a bit of whispering joining it, but soon, the fruit of his efforts was laid bare.

"...Yuri?" A woman's voice answered, bleary and tired.

Viktor's head perked up.

"...Hi mom, I'm so sorry to bug you guys so late at night, but I have a huge favor to ask..."

"Oh! ...Oh good, just a favor." Hiroko breathed a sigh of relief, "You gave me a scare there for a minute. Is everything okay?"

"Yes, yes...everything's okay." He nodded, "Could you find Makkachin though?"

If the Russian had the ears of a dog, they'd be fully upright and facing forward, his attention thoroughly captured even if his brain was confused.
"...Makkachin?" Hiroko echoed, only for the sleepy bark of the poodle to sound in the background. Within seconds, the aging woofer was on the screen, sniffing at it as though he could recognize the voice coming out of it. The Katsuki matriarch was too busy laughing in her effort to get the dog out of the way to say much else, but eventually she dropped the phone to the bed and Makkachin looked down on it from above, pawing at the sheets and whimpering.

"Viktor, look." Yuri turned the phone where he held his own in his hand, and the Russian quickly glanced over at it, spotting the big black nose snuffling close to the camera on the other end of the line.

"Makkachin...~!"

Woof!

"Maaaakkaaaaachiiiiin~!" The silver legend was already rolling around on his back on the floor, much to the chagrin of those still sitting at the table, holding the phone out at the end of his arms as though he were rough-housing with the dog in person.

For the time being...the Grump had been defused.

Finally on the road, with the two passengers in the back seat, the quest to find an ATM was on. The first order of business, even before that, however, was finding a Starbucks for the hapless Russian, who had decided to eat so little that he left with an empty stomach. It growled incessantly, though his eyes lit up when he spotted that green and white Siren sign.

With only two cars ahead of theirs in the drive-thru line, it wasn't long before Viktor was pulling up to the order panel. The window scrolled down to the quiet hum of the electric motors in the door, and the silver legend hung an elbow out through the open panel, waiting for the prompt.

"Welcome to Starbuuuuucks, how can I help YOU today?" The voice asked.

If not for the fact that it was a male voice, the 'Valley Girl' tone he'd spoken in would've put the image of a sun-kissed but empty-headed 'dumb blonde' image into the minds of all four skaters in a big hurry. But, since it was a male...that left only one other unfortunate stereotype, one that brought the image of Chris (x100) into their collective imaginations.

"...Uhh..." Viktor started, a bit thrown off, recoiling into the car briefly, "...It's too much, these people are too excitable for this early in the morning..."

"It's 10am. The morning crew at these places usually gets here around 4:30, so they've almost finished for the day already." Yuri pointed out, giving his partner's leg a gentle squeeze, "Forgive him, koibito, he knows not what he does."

The Russian grumbled and leaned into the window again, "Can I just get a Venti 8-pump Chai latte?"

"...Sorry?"

"A Venti 8-pump Chai latte." He repeated indignantly.

Yurio and Otabek side-eyed one another from the safety of the back seat.

"Sorry sir! I can't understand you."
"VENTI...CHAI TEA LATTE...EIGHT PUMPS." Viktor barked.

"You have a very thick accent! I'm sorry, I'm having a very hard time understanding what you're saying!"

"I DO NOT HAVE A THICK ACCENT."

"Vikto-"

"I don't have a thick accent!" He spun around in his seat, fingers white-knuckling the steering wheel, turning those blue eyes a bit further to the right to look at the man sitting next to him, "...Do I?"

"No." Yuri shook his head, "Let me try." He unbuckled his belt and shuffled towards the ruffled Russian, balancing one hand on a thigh as he leaned against the door, "We need a Venti Chai latte with 8 pumps."

"Thank you, yes sir...~! Anything else for you?"

Viktor was incensed, but said nothing, rubbing the bridge of his nose with a few fingers in frustration.

Yuri looked around the cab, but no one else piped up with requests, so he turned back to the order-panel just outside the window, "A grande White Mocha with cinnamon and nutmeg stirred in, whip on top."

"Yes sir, absolutely~! Will that complete your order?"

"I think so."

"I'll have your total at the window, thank youuuuu~!"

The young skater pulled back to sit properly again, buckling his seatbelt like before, and replaced his hand on his husband's thigh as he felt the car starting to pull forward. When they passed around the corner of the building though, he reached instead for where Viktor's hand had migrated to the gear-shifter, prying it away one finger at a time. When he finally had it unclenched from the knob at the top of the stick, Yuri pulled it up to his lips and kissed the ring, "You aren't going to be in any mood to skate later if you keep this up." He teased.

"...Idon't haveathickaccent."

"Why would it matter if you did?"

The Russian grumbled a bit more, "I didn't spend the last 15 years learning English and French to be told by some pridürok barista that he can't understand me, like I just stepped off a plane from the Motherland for the first time."

The last car ahead of them was pulling away from the window, and Viktor took his foot off the brake to coast forward.

"It's just a one-off." Yuri offered, letting the man have his hand back again so Viktor could move to fish for his wallet.

As they finally pulled up to the sliding glass panels, the Russian had his eyes out the window, looking on in a steely, unblinking, dark-eyed glare at the barista who was waiting there with the two cups just within.
Standing behind the window, a gangly 18-year-old with bars in one eyebrow and gages in both earlobes was looking right back at him, looking oblivious, "Good mooorning sir~ Your total issssss...$9.26."

A card was held up between two fingers, but Viktor made no particular effort to tilt his arm out of the car window, beyond where it already was where he had his elbow propped up against it. He simply stared, "Ja ne mogu ponjatʹ, čto ty govorišʹ."

"...Sorry?"

Yurio chortled under his breath, trying not to be too obviously entertained by the spectacle.

"Po anglijski govori, ja ne ponimaju." Viktor went on, still in Russian, still teasing the card in his fingers without ever handing it over, "Čego ty hočešʹ? Deneg?"

"Viktor, I think you're freaking him out." Yuri tried to reason with his partner, leaning down and over slightly to gently stroke at the closest leg, "Just give him your card so we can go."

"Oh!" The barista heard the whispers, and leaned down, a somewhat-desperate look on his face, "You're the one who put in the order for him?"

"...Y-Yeah?" He answered nervously, not having expected to be singled out.

"Mh...you're cute."

Yuri, for once, went pale instead of red.

Viktor's head spun around so fast, but not fast enough to avoid the teen finally swiping the plastic card from his grip while he was distracted. He just gaped at his now-empty fingers, and then snorted like an angry horse, turning to look back into the café.

Both back-seat passengers looked up nervously from their patience, gawking out the window with a look of 'oh now you've done it' on their faces.

The fuming Russian in the front seat was staring daggers through the open window, waiting for the barista to come back. Still, his husband was desperate to defuse the situation before it got worse, and just as he saw the shadow of a figure coming back from behind the glass, Yuri quickly shuffled forward and blocked his forward view. He felt a knee wedge between his thighs where the younger man planted it to hold himself up, for lack of space between him and the steering wheel.

Yuri had done his best to get as much of the transaction over-with as quickly as possible, leaning out through the window to reach for the drinks and pull them back so they wouldn't have to wait for them to be handed off. That's where he made his biggest mistake though...and as he lost his balance, positioned as awkwardly as he was with his arms and head outside the window but the rest of him trying to lean over the driver's seat...he felt two hands on his own, catching the paper cups before he lost them.

"Careful. These drinks are...hot."

Hazel eyes looked up in stunned horror, but then turned aside, looking at the insofar-silent man blocked into his seat. Through the shadow of the Russian's down-tilted face, Yuri couldn't see his partner's blue irises, and rather nervously pulled back inside the car, finding his seat quietly with both drinks still in-hand. His skin still tingled where the barista had caught him moments before, but that mattered rather little.
"V-Viktor...?"

Tha-thump...tha-thump...tha-thump...tha...thump...

Yurio threw himself between the two front seats and had both arms wrapped around his older counterpart just as Viktor half-way launched himself out through the car window, seat-belt be damned. Yuri barely had time to pull back into the corner before regaining his wits about him, hearing his spouse yelling things in Russian and trying to crawl into the café through the drive-thru hutch, flailing and kicking all the while. He leaned forward to set the two cups in the holders and moved to aid the teen in pulling his husband back into the car...and failed to notice the vehicle starting to roll forward where Viktor's foot had eased off the brake.

Both Yuris were too busy trying to get the silver genius to calm himself and sit back down that they couldn't feel the car moving...at least not until they felt it suddenly stop moving, and Yuri was flung aside by a few inches where his back hit the car horn, making it squeak like a kicked dog. The window was about 3 feet away by then and three employees inside were within the square frame, trying to figure out what was going on, when Viktor was finally yanked back inside the vehicle, arms still reaching and Russian words still flying.

Otabek sighed and sat back from where he'd reached between the front seats and under the Russian Tiger to pull the e-brake, saying nothing, but giving an unimpressed look like everyone in the car was acting like they were 8 years old.

Viktor was still fuming, but finally settled down as Yuri hit the button for the power window to close it. Yurio retreated to the back seat again, only to spot the sight of a different barista leaning out the drive-thru window, waving a certain bank card towards them. He grit his teeth and kicked the door open, rushing out quickly to swipe it and return before they drove off without him.

Within a few moments, calm seemed to settle in the vehicle again, and Yuri chanced a whiff at the scent of his drink. He was oblivious to the fact that the car was sneaking its way into a parking space, rather than finding its way back out onto the main road towards their next destination. When opened his eyes again though, he saw the fact of the matter a mere half second before he could feel the car stop. Hazel eyes turned to the left to look at the man, "...Doushita? We still have to hit the bank."

Viktor held the wheel for a moment, staring at it, but then closed his eyes and shook his head, "I'm really having a day." He answered stiffly, leaning forward to set his forehead against the backs of his hands, "First, he can't understand me. Then he hits on you, right in front of me. The world is conspiring against me." He reached for the drink in the cup-holder under the dash, and set the mouthpiece just in front of his chin, "As if having Mari and Minako show up last night wasn't bad enough, but everything since then has just been one insult after another. I just want one minute where something or someone doesn't try to make me mad."

"Well..." The younger man pulled the drink from where he'd sipped at it a little, licking the tiny fleck of whipped cream where it stuck to his lip, "For what it's worth, I think your accent is sexy."

"Really?" The silver legend's eyes shone a little with tame excitement, lifting him up slightly from the dour feeling he'd been in a moment before.

"Absolutely." Yuri nodded, then smiled in his usual sweet way, "You could read the dictionary to me and I'd listen."

"...REALLY?" Viktor was astonished, those blue eyes wet with excited tears.

"Mh."
Impressed and flattered, the anxious Russian turned back to his drink, and took a happy sip, "Vkusno~!"

"Deshou? Let me try." Yuri reached his hand over, as though to grab for the cup, but lightly curved his fingers under the man's chin instead and gently pulled him aside. He immediately went for the kiss, tasting the spicy black tea on the man's lips, and...

...Heard the annoyed cough from the back seat.

"AHEM."

The two front-seat skaters turned their eyes to the two in back, and just looked on innocently with an expression of calm surprise on their faces, as though saying 'oh...you guys are still here?'

Yurio deadpanned them severely from where he'd pulled his hoodie down over the top of his face. Otabek just looked at his phone.

Finally getting to the Little Caesar's Arena for Exhibition run-through, the quartet filtered their way into the Players' Only area and headed for the secluded practice rink. It set Viktor's hackles on end to be going down there again, just as it had every time he went through those halls and saw those walls since Thursday. Seeing the rink from the mezzanine only made the Russian remember the vantage of some of the videos he'd seen of that ill-fated accident, realizing he was standing in the very same place as whoever had recorded the film.

The three medalists from the Ladies' Singles group, and the six from the Pairs competition, were already in the prep area getting their gear on. The Ice Dancers doing their Free Programs would have to catch up later, once they knew who'd won.

The silver Russian passed through the smattering of athletes and coaches, looking for an open space on one of the many couches strewn throughout the area. When he finally found a spot, he looked back to find his husband and nudged his head towards the opening. Yurio and Otabek went a different direction to find their own.

"Gone back to coach-mode, eh Viktor?" A voice asked suddenly, catching the Russian's attention. When he looked to find the source, he spotted Mila there with Sara close behind, the both of them putting their hair up for the practice.

"Coach-mode?" He echoed, "What makes you think that...?"

"Well...you..." Mila gave a confused look, "...You pulled out of the competition. It's like you were never here. Can you even participate in the Gala now?"

"I don't see why not," Viktor answered, giving a look, "Yuri and I have both jumped into the Exhibitions of events we didn't compete in."

"Well, sure, but you did so with duet programs, so technically you were just piggy-backing on the other's solo show." The redhead pointed out, "Unless that's what you planned on doing."

Yuri glanced from Mila to his spouse, then back to Mila, "Well...we're doing that Team Skate with Yurio..."

"I was going to do a solo show, too." Viktor explained, "I'm just paying my way in like I usually do when I want to do a Gala performance at an event I didn't participate in. You think they'd
tell me no?"

"You don't have to remind me who you are," The younger Russian laughed, waving her hands up nervously, "I was just curious. Have you talked to the event coordinators yet?"

"I was going to when I checked Yuri and I in." Viktor said with a shrug, "I guess I'll go now." He turned back to his partner and rubbed the closest shoulder with one hand, "I'll be right back."

"Hai."

The trio of skaters watched as the silver legend moved back through the crowd, following the laminated signs taped to the walls to get to the Exhibition registration table.

"He seems off today." Sara commented, "Don't you think?"

"Yeah..." Mila agreed, "I hope the yell-lecture he got from Yakov yesterday didn't get to his head. It'd be the first time it has."

"It's the first time he's ever disqualified himself from a competition after he won though." The young Italian pointed out, "...Heck, it's the first time he's dropped from a competition period."

Yuri turned towards them and looked briefly between the pair, but turned his attention to the carry-bag he'd brought his skates in with, and turned to sit down on the couch it had been set on, "Yakov made some good points..."

"DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT YOU JUST DID? YOU MIGHT AS WELL HAVE THROWN YOUR WHOLE CAREER AWAY. IS THIS HOW YOU PLANNED ON RETIRING, VITYA? YOU SKATED JUST AS HARD AS ANYONE ELSE AND YOU WON. YOU SHOULD BE TAKING THE GOLD MEDAL. HOW COULD YOU HAVE EVER THOUGHT THIS WAS A GOOD IDEA? YOU DON'T SPEND A WHOLE WEEKEND COMPETING ONLY TO FORFEIT AT THE END BECAUSE YOU THOUGHT IT WAS A NEAT IDEA."

Viktor could practically feel his body tilting backward against the force of his former coach's barrage.

"I DIDN'T TEACH YOU TO BE A QUITTER. YOU DIDN'T BUST YOUR ARSE FOR 25 YEARS SO YOU COULD WIN TITLES FOR OTHER PEOPLE. YOU SHOULD'VE JUST SYMBOLICALLY GIVEN IT TO YURI AFTER YOU GOT HOME. NOW YOU'VE JUST CREATED A GIANT CLUSTER."

"Ah...yeah..." Mila agreed with a nervous smile, but then leaned over the back of the couch and crossed her arms against the back of it, "I can't imagine how that whole thing made you feel."

"I won Silver." Yuri answered simply, "While I'm worried about how this might hurt Viktor later on, I'm trying to be positive for him. What he did was one of the most self-less things I've ever seen in the sport. Giving up the Gold couldn't have been easy...especially given how competitive it got between us right up till the end." He pulled his sneakers off as he spoke, and reached for the first skate, wedging his foot into it, "But maybe it was easier than I give him credit for. He never came back to competition because he decided he was done with me and wanted to start winning medals again. He came back because I asked him to, so we could face-off against each other after everything I learned from him. Hell..." He pulled the laces tight, but then looked up to where Viktor
would've been beyond the crowd, "...Half the reason I came back was because I wanted to skate the same ice as him again. I'd been looking for a way to keep going on my own after I went back home. After Viktor did so much to build me up...I couldn't bear the idea that I'd never get to compete against him again, especially now that I'm at this level."

"...Well, I've heard coaches say that their greatest pride is seeing their students surpass them." Sara agreed.

"...Yeah...that's kind of what Viktor said after I broke his World Record at last year's Free Skate." Yuri nodded, pulling on the second skate.

"Kind of?"

"Well," He huffed an innocent laugh, "He said that, as my coach, it was his proudest moment...but as a competitor, it was the biggest diss. It was his way of saying he'd decided to come back."

"Awwww!" The two lady skaters cooed, "That's adorable!"

Viktor's ears would've been on fire for the amount of time people had spent talking to him...if he wasn't focusing so hard on the man sitting at the registration table in front of him.

"Sorry, Mr. Nikiforov. You can't be in the Exhibition when you withdraw from the competition."

"...But..."

"These smaller-scale events aren't the kind where we're inviting famous retired skaters to put on a good-faith show." The man went on, as though it were a done-deal, "This is just a celebration of the winners and active competitors."

"I'm not retired though."

"Your name has been stricken from the record of this competition, by your own request." The Russian argued, "The big-wigs on the red carpet agreed with me."

"I'm afraid it's not up to me."

"I asked if it would be okay that I forfeit the Gold medal, not be erased from the competition as though I was never here." The Russian argued, "The big-wigs on the red carpet agreed with me."

"I'm afraid it's not up to me."

"Well call someone who it is up to!" Viktor barked, "How many people do you think paid to come watch the Final because they knew I was here!? How many people do you think would've left if I thought Yuri was unfit to compete after his accident and then decided not to compete without him? Why do you think the ISU let Phichit compete in Leroy's place?"

The registrar seemed unmoved.

"I hate talking about myself like this, but I know who I am and I know what my legacy is." The angry Russian went on, looking at the man indignantly, "What do you think the fans are going to say when they find out you're refusing to let me on the ice?"

"What's going on...?" Yuri's voice wondered suddenly, the younger skater coming up from behind. He spotted the dubious look on his husband's face and was immediately worried, "They're not saying no, are they?"

"Apparently they are." Viktor answered.

"What? Why?" He questioned, standing next to his partner as he came to the front of the desk and
"I've said it to him and I'll say it to you. He willingly and purposefully withdrew from the competition. It doesn't matter that he did so after winning Gold. As far as the record is concerned, he was never here, and only those who competed can be in this Exhibition."

"Even if he pays the fee?" Yuri wondered nervously.

Viktor just held up his hand where his arms had been crossed, showing off the small wad of money he'd withdrawn earlier where he held it in his fingers, "I came to the table ready to pay it. He's been looking at me like he considers it no better than a bribe."

"His words, not mine." The registrar insisted, holding his hands up defensively, but then lowering them and weaving his fingers together, "Look...I'll holler at the top brass, and see if they'll make an exception...but I can't make any guarantees. So just sit tight for a bit, okay?"

"We'll take whatever we can get." Yuri answered for them, moving quickly to usher his perturbed husband away from the table as the older man stood up to find his phone. Pulling his partner aside so they wouldn't be so obvious, Yuri reached up with both hands to caress that pale, angry-looking face, "Ochitsuke, Viktor."

The Russian was half-ready to make an obscene gesture, but stopped and planted his hands on his hips instead, looking down bitterly, "It's just one thing after another. This is starting to make me really mad. What else is going to happen? The RSF kicks me o-"

Yuri's hands were over his mouth in a split-second flat, and he gave that look, "Don't you even say it."

"Mmmhhhhhhhh..." Viktor growled to himself. His eyes turned when he heard the sound of the registrar's voice speaking a small distance away, but couldn't make-out what was being said.

"Not one more word. It's going to be fine." Yuri said firmly, "Whatever happens, it's going to be fine."

"Mphbophmeaknphskphp?"

The younger figure moved his hands aside and quirked a brow, "...Eh?"

"...But what if they don't let me skate?"

"What are you going to do with all your worry when they do and you realize you got all worked up again for nothing?"

"...The same thing you usually do when that happens...?"

"N-nani...!?"

Viktor slid in closer and hugged the man nervously, "Have a cry and ask you to make me feel better."

Yuri grimaced at that, but realized it was entirely true, and raised his arms over his anxious husband's shoulders, "I'm getting too predictable."

"I really like making you feel better though." The Russian mused, letting the soothing feeling of that embrace attempt to cleanse him of his nerves, "Almost as much as I like morning sexy-time."
"...Almost?"

Viktor pulled back and nosed his husband adoringly, "It usually doesn't start with you being upset about anything. But it is nice to know that I'm the one who helped you stop feeling that way."

"Okay..." The registrar called, waving the two skaters back over for the verdict, "They're going to let you in. Something about celebrating good sportsmanship. I can take your payment now."

Yuri side-eyed his partner, but then gave a sly, wordless 'I told you so' sort of look.

Viktor snorted an unimpressed exhale, the whole thing having been too much of a hassle already for him to be able to show any kind of appreciation. He simply pulled his hands free and held up the small wad of money again, licked the tip of his right middle finger...and counted out a single $20 bill. Then the second. Then, slowly, a third. The look on the irritable Russian's face said it all...he would count out those bills at a glacial pace as punishment for making him go through the ordeal in the first place.

"Viktor."

A sixth bill was counted into the second stack; $120. Not even halfway there.

"...Viktor seriously just give him the money we can get downstairs."

The silver legend kept moving along slowly, only to suddenly find Yuri getting in front of him in an attempt to swipe the cash. Instinctively, Viktor raised his arms up and flailed, even as the younger figure kept reaching.

Unable to secure the money, Yuri simply started pushing the Russian away, muttering something about how he'll take care of it if Viktor couldn't. Viktor, however...wasn't one to be undone once he had his mind set to something. As he was being shoved off, he started throwing individual $20 bills at the desk, leaving a small rain of green and grey paper fluttering down to the cover-cloth. He even gained ground against his partner and managed to stomp a few steps closer again rather suddenly, tossing every bill in his hands into the air. Rubber blade-guards on Yuri's skates had no traction to stop the man.

All 15 notes had scattered around the unimpressed event staffer...who simply watched as Yuri pushed the exasperated, medal-less World Champion over towards their gear, and the last of the currency landed on his table.

"...Figure skaters can be so dramatic..."

Chapter End Notes

Ja ne mogu ponjać, čto ty govoriš. = I can't understand what you're saying.
Po anglijski govori, ja ne ponimaju. = In English. I can't understand you.
Čego ty hočeš'? Deneg? = What do you want? Money?
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED FOUR

Viktor was still acting like a sourpuss as he grudgingly pulled his sneakers off and replaced them with his skates. He muttered quiet words under his breath that none could hear, even Yuri, where he stood close by watching and waiting. When all was done though, and the tense Russian extended his legs out before leaning back against the couch, the nonsense-whispering ended and all the skater could do was stare up at the ceiling indignantly.

"If you keep making a face like that, it's going to be stuck that way." Yuri commented, drawing those blue eyes down again.

There was hardly time to even process an appropriate response before Viktor felt the weight of his partner's body sitting on the end of his knees, hands pressing down against his thighs as the younger man looked straight at him. The Russian sighed, but instead of answering to the jest, stretched his arms and legs out as far as they could go before flopping to sag against his seat.

"All this because we missed the morning romp." Yuri quipped, then looking a bit more serious, "Can I do anything make you feel better until later...?"

"Not likely..." Viktor sighed, his expression and demeanor becoming more haggard than before, like he was on the edge of surrender, "...I'll just have to sit and stew in my discontent, mourning the loss of opportunities..."

Hazel eyes looked aside briefly, then to the other direction, and finally settled forward again as Yuri walked his hands up his partner's thighs, settling them against his spouse's chest as he leaned in a bit closer. His cheeks were flushed red before he even had a chance to say anything, which caught Viktor's attention more than anything, "...What if I... ahh... helped you...?"

"...Mh?"

"You know..." Yuri started again, looking almost as innocent as he had the night he'd offered that gold ring, "...Like how you helped me during the Banquet in Bordeaux."

"...Oh." Viktor blinked at him in momentary confusion, only for realization to dawn shortly after, "OH. THAT."

A nervous nod answered.

"...You'd really do that...?"

Another nod, this time more assured, "With the time we have left before the practice is supposed to start... I know I'm not that good at it, but...I could help take the edge off...? I don't want you to feel cranky all day..."

All the silver Russian could do was stare adoringly at the man sitting on his knees, his eyes getting huge and watery the longer it went on. Yuri took that as an acceptance though and moved to stand up before the dam burst and the water-works began, offering his hands to help pull the man to his feet. Once Viktor was up, Yuri reached for the small satchel of the Russian's theatrical make-up to use as an excuse in case anyone got too inquisitive, and guided his hapless husband back towards the big individual-use restroom.
There was mayhem and chaos as blankets, pillows, and teenagers flew around the room. But there was no doubt that Mikhail was awake then, even if he was only staring wide-eyed at the ceiling on the edge of having a heart attack.

"IT'S NEARLY ONE. WE'RE STARVING. GET OUT OF BED ALREADY."

The stunned elder Russian turned his head slightly, looking over at the emaciated faces of his two irritable daughters, "...Just...order room service or something...?"

"NO. GET OUT OF BED. WE'RE GOING OUT."

"Are we." He answered flatly, more as a statement than a question.

"DAD!"

"...Fine...!" The elder relented, rolling onto his side to face away from the two. He just went limp there though, staring at the wall with half-dead eyes.

I didn't sleep at all last night. I'm going to be a zombie all damn day.

He felt the bed moving behind himself, and was ready for almost anything...except the feeling of cold fingers against the skin of his lower back, which made him twitch suddenly and recoil. He twisted to sitting upright and gawked at whoever had gotten behind him; Nikkita.

"You shouldn't move around like that." She warned, "I'd almost forgotten that you hurt yourself, until just now, when I saw the marks..."

Mikhail grimaced, "...Yeah."

"Cousin Viktor went all the way back to Russia so you wouldn't have to fly to Japan by yourself."

"He did."

"So why is he so mad at you now? It's only been a week since then."

Viktoria crossed her arms and gave a strange look, "The way he is with his Yuri, if I didn't know it happened, I'd think it impossible for him to actually leave somewhere on his own. But he did, for you, and now you're at each other's necks...almost literally."

"I don't need you two lecturing me about my relationship with my nephew." Mikhail grumbled, throwing the sheets back to stand up, though feeling a slight twinge where he'd once cracked a vertebra, and paused to grope for it. When the sore spot faded, he stood upright again, the heels of his night-pants dragging along the floor as he shuffled along to find his travel bag, "Things with him are complicated and confusing at the best of times."

"You need to sort it out with him, whatever it is." Nikki said, pushing back from where she'd sat on her knees on the mattress, "We need to sort everything out, with everyone. If we go on to Russia with Yuri but there's still tension between you and Minako and Viktor...it's just going to make it all awkward and annoying. Maybe you could have Viktor's Yuri help sort things out since he's close to the both of the-"
Mikhail whipped his head around and stared at the youngest of his children, "I don't need a kid less than half my age being a mediator between me and anyone else."

Nikki crossed her arms defiantly, "...You were sure happy to use him to talk to Yura before."

"That's because the problem was between them." He turned back around and rifled through his things, finding something to wear...or at least making the motions like he was.

"And he's between Cousin Viktor and Minako."

Mikhail gave an exasperated sigh and dropped the charcoal-grey slacks he'd found, pushing back to his feet and turning around to look at the two teens, "Why are you two so invested in this anyway? You've barely been around any of these people for more than 3 days, total."

"Because we want things to work out." Viktoria answered for them, "You've been different since you found Viktor again, and maybe even a bit happy since you met Minako. But you've gone back to being the 'stereotypical angry Russian' you used to be and we kind of hate it."

The bluntness of the girl's words hit the elder hard, and he had no answer for it.

"So Minako gave you the ring back. I get that it wounded your pride, but...it's not like she said she was leaving you." Viktoria went on, crossing her arms across her chest, "And Viktor even tried to make amends yesterday, but you blew up at him instead. You're not doing anyone any favors by pushing everyone away."

"I'm just trying to have some space." Mikhail huffed, turning and kneeling in front of his bag again to find the rest of his things, "Minako told me that I'm an idiot when it comes to solving family problems so maybe it's for the best that I don't try to make things work by doing anything."

"Pipaw...you're the smartest person we know." Viktoria sighed, sitting on the edge of the bed just behind the man, "You can fix this."

"Relationships aren't like trucks, tanks, or lawnmowers, Vikki." Mikhail said quietly, finally finding the assortment of dark-colored clothes he wanted, "All the stuff I know how to fix is inanimate and has no choice in whether or not my repairs take. Either it works, or it doesn't...and it's only on me, no matter what the outcome. But other people do have a choice."

"...And you're trying to make it for them by making it difficult for them to get close to you. You're not even giving them a chance. You might as well be slamming a door in their faces."

The elder Russian paused where he was, looking into the bottom of the carry-bag like it was an unyielding pit. He shook his head and sighed as he rose back up to his feet, "...Maybe."

"We should figure out where Minako and Mari spent the night and see if they want to come do stuff with us before the Gala." Nikki suggested, "I'll bet they only took off because they didn't want to make you feel bad by hovering when it was already pretty tense."

"...Am I really such bad company?" Mikhail sighed.

"Ahhhhhhhhh...that's a loaded question." Viktoria answered, side-eyeing her sister, "Let's just say that you were a walking-cane away from going into 'cantankerous old man' mode. You know, the whole get off my lawn, turn down that music thing, waving the cane around like you mean to beat someone with it if you catch them."

"I was actually given a cane by the hospital in Moscow...but I refused to take it with me." The elder
huffed a laugh at the thought, but then shook his head, yawned, and slouched a little, "...I might be too tired to chase after anyone today, cane or not." He admitted, "I don't think I ever fell asleep."

"Sounds like you're not going to be driving today, then." Viktoria pointed out.

Mikhail reached a hand up to rub his chin in thought, "...I think...I might have a better idea."

The crowd of participating Gala skaters all clapped for a practice well-done as things finally started winding down. Pulling a complete 180 from the morning, one certain Viktor Nikiforov was finally all smiles again, having fun and being a giant dork as per his normal custom...at least partially, given how his Partner in Dorkdom wasn't around. That didn't stop him from being excitable though.

"Neh neh, Yuri...!" He called out, sliding across the ice to where his partner was waiting against the rink wall, "I just remembered...there's a lift we could do that's named after this city! We should do it during the Team Skate!"

"There's a lift called Detroit...?" Yuri answered curiously, "As long as it's not a throw, I guess."

"Nope! Just a lift! It's called 'The Detroiter!' Come out here and I'll show you!" The Russian said, hardly giving his husband a chance to answer before finding himself getting dragged out towards the center of the rink anyway, "Okay...okay! Here...we start like this...and you come around here and put your left leg out."

The younger skater quirked a brow but did as told, only to find Viktor putting one hand under it and motioning to lift.

"I'll hoist you up onto my left shoulder by pulling up on your leg here, and you'll twist across both of my shoulders with your legs out the other way while on your back."

Feeling the butterflies in his stomach, Yuri nodded, and in a half-second, he was up in the air, with one of his spouse's hands now between his legs to hold him steady while the other hand came up towards his arm.

"Now, straighten out as much as you can, cross your ankles, and hold your fingers together. I'll start rotating in place, but I'll go slow."

Yuri nervously did as told, cautious of when his head would start to spin, but keeping a keen eye everything to try and avoid it. He felt the hand near his shoulder moving towards the back of his neck as he stretched out like he'd been told.

"Then, I lift you from here...ready?"

"H-hai."

"Hup!"

Viktor bent his knees a bit and used the upward momentum to toss his husband above his head, straightening his arms out and rotating a bit faster.

Yurio huffed and shook his head from his vantage near the rink wall, a lip on the nub of his water bottle. About to turn away to find his blade-guards though, he suddenly heard a familiar voice rising up and getting enthusiastic.
"Oh! Are we lifting the guys now!?” Mila cried, grabbing the Russian Punk rather unexpectedly and hoisting him into the air as well before skating out to join the original duo, laughing all the way.

"BABA, PUT ME DOWN."
Despite the Russian Tiger's best efforts, being foisted into the air by Mila quickly devolved into something much worse; a lifts competition. The first time the redhead had gone past Viktor and Yuri, the duo seemed to get the same idea, and gave a wry look at one another before following after towards the center of the rink.

Yuri hadn't even set blades to ice before going through three different lifts, rotating around his partner's frame with grace; hand-to-hand vertical position, feet spread out to the side with legs coming forward in a V-shape as the two faced the same direction; lower then as Viktor glided on his left blade, right leg held up behind himself as his torso bent forward, cradling his left hand behind his partner's neck and upper back as Yuri practically laid down in the air, arms out to the side as his crossed legs folded over Viktor's outstretched right leg; then even lower still as Viktor went down to a shoot-the-duck spin position, right leg bent under himself as the left was straight and out to the side, and Yuri was in full-Biellmann in his arms, torso facing the ice as he held the blade of his right skate above his back with his left hand, the right hand and free left leg straight out in front and behind himself.

Mila watched in surprise and awe, but it only spurred her excitement and she immediately dragged the hapless kitten into an array of their own moves. Yurio could do little more than go along with it, at least insofar as he needed to maintain his balance and not be thrown to the ice unintentionally, and so...he found himself lifted up again, this time with one hand on the side of his waist. For a split second, he was acutely aware of all the people on the rink-wall who were watching suddenly, and his mind went into 'gotta make this look good' mode. Legs spread into a near-full split, arms out above his head as he made the best of it. Mila noted his willingness immediately, and smirked devilishly, rotating as she moved across the ice beneath the Russian Punk-turned-Prima. They breezed past the Nikiforovs and quickly changed position, going from the one-hand lift to a curved lift, with Mila sliding sideways in something of an outside spread-eagle, and Yurio was bent over backwards in front of her, left leg bent against one side, hand holding to that blade as the right leg went straight out by the other, with the woman's arm under the teen's back to hold him up. The blonde then went fully upside-down, left arm wrapped around Mila's bent left leg as the right dragged behind her in a lunge-like Ina Bauer, with the teen's legs up vertically before her. His left leg bent to put his black blade just above his head as he looked forward, his right hand gripping to the white boot just beneath him, feeling where Mila grabbed his left leg to hold him steady as they slid across the ice.

All seemed to be going well until someone cried out embarrassingly that the two should try Pair Skating for real, and Mila lost her grip when she laughed and whipped her head around. Unfortunately, that left Yurio with nowhere to go but face-first into the frost, and he skidded forward comically before finally coming to a stop with his arse in the air and knees down on the ice.

"Ahh! Sorry sorry sorry!" The flustered redhead called, going down on a knee to slide in next to him, trying to help the teen back up again.

He just turned his head where he was still face-down on the rink and glowered at her with frost clinging to his skin, "...*You dropped me*..." He grumbled between grit teeth, a red skid-mark throbbing on his forehead.

"You slipped!"
Viktor and Yuri just smiled innocently as they glided by, Yuri giving something of a nervous clap as he sat sideways against his partner's bent leg, "Heh...you okay?"

The Russian teen pushed up onto his hands and knees, lifting one to rub the frost off his face on the back of a wrist, "...My pride's hurt more than the rest of me is."

"Well that's good."

The silver skater twisted his back-facing leg and dug a toe-pick into the ice, bringing them both to a stop, "That was fun~! But we should probably get going." He suggested, leaning forward slightly to rock upward and get back to his full height, draping an arm over his spouse's shoulders when he got there, "I want to have enough time to eat before the Gala tonight, too."

"Ah, yeah, good point..." Yuri agreed, "Oh, we should try that Mongolian place we saw on the way there on Thursday. The one near the zoo."

"I'm game." Viktor nodded, then looking to the Russian Tiger as he was finally getting back up to his own feet, "You?"

Yurio was busy rubbing his face on his sleeves still, but at least he was upright, and glanced over one hand towards the pair. He drew in a breath and shrugged, "Can Otabek come?"

The Kazakh's ears perked up to hear his name, and glanced over the edge of the rink wall where he was gathering up his gear.

The duo looked at one another, and then back at the teen, "Sure. If he wants."

Before he could even mount an argument about having other things to do, Otabek found himself piled once again into the rental car's back seat, deadpanning the back of Viktor's headrest where he was stuck on the driver's side, "...So...where are we going? I thought it was the Detroit Skate Club."

"It is..." Yuri explained shyly, turning to look at the younger skater, "But it's kind of in the suburbs outside the city."

"Where is it?"

"In Bloomfield Hills, just south of Pontiac. The whole drive is about 45 minutes."

Otabek stared, unmoving, but eventually relented and turned to look out the window instead, "...Fine."

"...We can turn around if you'd rather not come." Yuri suggested, "We're not that far."

"No, it's fine."

"Wouldn't you rather practice more than be stuck in the hotel until tonight?" Yurio huffed, slouching in his own seat, one knee wedged up into the space between Yuri's seat and the interior panel of the door, "Or did you actually have plans?"

"No. This is fine." Otabek repeated, "I was just reminded earlier of a similar thing that happened before."

"...Eh?" Yuri quirked a brow, "What thing?"
"Last year." The younger man answered, "I was getting ready to leave the hotel and meander around Barcelona when JJ asked if I wanted to go out to eat with him and Isabella. I'd just passed Yuri and his rabid fangirls, and overheard him yelling about how 'people who wear sunglasses on their heads are scum.' He explained, giving air-quotes for the end.

"I don't remember that." Yurio shrugged.

"You called me an asshole cuz I looked at you."

Viktor nearly choked on himself laughing.

"Wh-" The Russian teen was aghast, "I don't remember that!"

"Then I saved you later from those same fangirls despite it."

"...I remember that..." The blonde tilted his head back against the seat, "I never did ask where you got the motorcycle from. I doubt you drove it all the way from Kazakhstan."

"No. That would be crazy." Otabek seemed to agree, "I borrowed it from a friend who lives in the city."

"...You have friends in Barcelona?" Yurio tilted his head to look at the dark horse skeptically.

"Believe it or not." He answered, "How else do you think I was able to DJ in the club that you followed me to? You can't just walk up and get the gig out of nowhere."

"I guess that's true."

"So you must know someone who works at that club?" Yuri wondered curiously.

"Mh. The barkeep. I had just finished checking in at the hotel and was going to meet him for lunch before borrowing the bike. I found him hiding in an alley a while later, with those fangirls trying to track him down." Otabek nudged his head towards Yurio, "So I offered him a lift. After a while, we ended up at that outdoor restaurant that everyone else showed up to eventually."

"Oh right, Mari-nee-chan and Minako-sensei begged me to introduce them so they could sit with you guys." Yuri mused at the memory of it, "Viktor and I had been shopping around all day and were tired, so it was as good an excuse as any to sit down for a little while."

"If they wanted to sit with us then why were they crying?" Otabek recalled.

"Overcome with joy, I guess?" The older skater gave a nervous laugh, "My big sister is a huge fan of Yuri's, and Minako had always meant to use me as a way to meet other skaters. Phichit-kun and Chris had turned up by then, too, so she got to sit with the entire Men's group. At least she didn't ask me to give out hotel room numbers that time. When it comes to skating, she has no shame."

"JJ wasn't there, so it wasn't the entire group."

"Oh..." Yuri turned to face forward again and looked out through the windshield, "...Truth be told, JJ is the only skater she doesn't cheer for. To her, Viktor was the 6th competitor, even if he wasn't competing." He reached his hand across the center console and settled it against the aforementioned man's thigh, rubbing his thumb there back and forth slowly, "I'm actually not sure why she doesn't like JJ that much, but I noticed it a long time ago. She never has a Canadian flag in her cache...at least not because of him. I've seen her cheer for other Canadian skaters before, like at Worlds or something."
"Speaking of other competitions..." Otabek looked more towards Viktor then, "Are you guys competing at the Olympics?"

"Yuri is." Viktor answered quickly.

"I am...? But we just had that big talk about how complicated it would be for us."

"I insist." The Russian went on, lowering his right hand from the wheel to settle it on top of the hand resting against his leg, "It's your time to shine for the whole world, not just for skating fans. The Olympics are a big deal. Putin gifted that little red Audi to me after I won in the Sochi Olympics."

"You got a car from Putin?" The backseat entourage asked in tandem.

"Sure." Viktor nodded, "He also gave me the 'Order of Friendship' medal since it was a friendly competition with the whole world. The Olympics are always treated a little differently than any regular international event the ISU puts together. I can't remember what I got after winning in Vancouver though..." He laughed, "Oh well."

"Sounds like you're not competing this time though." Otabek said, bringing things back around to his original question, "I guess you'll be there only as a coach?"

"I haven't entirely thought it through yet." The Russian answered simply, "I probably should."

"No kidding." Yuri huffed, still a bit surprised, "It's a lot of logistical work to go through and we only have until Nationals to figure it out. Euros, Four Continents, and the Worlds after it all...the next three months are going to be almost as crazy as the last two."

"Maybe then I should just go ahead and say no." Viktor shrugged and smiled, "There's plenty of other Russian skaters who can compete instead of me."

Yurio examined his older counterpart carefully for a moment, green eyes moving over to Yuri after, seeing the anxious look on his face. He decided not to say anything though, turning his eyes out the window instead to watch the world go by...and seeing the billboard for that Mongolian restaurant that had been mentioned earlier.

Arriving at the Skate Club for the 3rd time felt different than it did the previous two, as there were far more cars there than had been there before. Yuri go a bit nervous, but not for the obvious reasons.

"...I wonder if the rink will even be available?" Viktor wondered on all their behalf, looking around as he got out of the car, "There's a lot of people here now."

"If it's anything like it used to be," Yuri started, moving towards the doors, but pausing as he waited for the others, "Hardly anyone will be on the ice. Folks usually take the weekend off when there's a competition. Everyone usually wants to see the event...or avoid all mention of it, if they didn't make the cut for some reason."

Yurio and Otabek came up on either side of him, looking at the blue awning over the doors, "Looks kind of old." The blonde noted, "This is where you trained before?"

"Mh. I was here for five years." The older skater answered, keeping his eyes fixed on it, "...Though honestly, standing in front of it the few times I have this weekend, it feels a lot like I never left."

"Why'd you leave?"
Yuri turned his eyes, though they were somewhat hidden behind the glare from the sun on his glasses, and he made a face, "Oh you know...something about being screamed at by some other skater to retire after my disastrous performance at the Sochi Final."

Yurio’s eyes got small, and his face went pale, but he said nothing. Otabek gave him a silent, skeptical look, quirking an eyebrow.

The older skater turned back towards the doors though, and as he felt Viktor’s fingers lace through his own, started stepping forward, "I had other reasons for half-quitting when I did. I didn't qualify for Four Continents or Worlds, but part of me was trying to figure out how to keep moving forward anyway. I just wanted to go home for a while and get my head together after everything else that happened. Coming back here now just gives me a weird sense of déjà vu."

They pushed through the side doors and made their way in past the check-in counter, heading through to the small cafeteria-like area before spotting the rink behind it...and about two dozen people hanging around it, both on and off the ice.

Yuri examined each face as well as he could, but didn't recognize many...at least not until he spotted the wavy, shoulder-length black hair and dark olive skin of someone he hadn't seen in years. His jaw dropped and he paused, forcing the other three to stop as well, each of them glancing from his stunned expression to where he was looking, though none were able to figure out which of the many people he was focused on. He practically choked a gasp, but then started sprinting forward, dragging Viktor along quickly until he roughly pushed through the doors. The noise of the outward slam of hands on the frame caught many peoples' attention, and the woman he’d been so surprised to see spun her head around suddenly.

It seemed like slow motion then, but Yuri couldn't take his eyes off of her, "I...I don't believe it...it's you..."

"Hey, Yuri!" Another voice called, that time more recently familiar.

Viktor looked from where Tess was waving, and made a face as he glanced to the woman who’d been sitting nearby, suddenly realizing why his husband was acting so strangely, "...Yuri?"

"Why'd you freak out like that?" Yurio asked, somewhat impatiently, looking up and around as others were quickly coming to the rink wall near where they were standing, the whole group of them recognized by literally everyone, "Katsudon!"

"I can't..." Yuri started, feeling a knot in his chest. He raised up his free hand to press against the tight feeling, but despite the anxiety welling up inside him, he couldn't help but let the tears run freely down his smiling face, and he jumped forward, "It's really you! I never thought I'd see you again!"

"Yuri-" Viktor started, thoroughly confused as he was dragged along.

"It's been a really long time, hasn't it?" The unknown woman said, rising to stand, towering over the shorter medic standing next to her, "It's good to see you, Yuri."

He quickly took her hand, getting a flustered look from his increasingly jealous-and-confused partner, "It's good to see you, too! I didn't think you'd still be in Detroit!"

"I wasn't." She smiled sweetly, "But Phichit told me you were here, and that you planned on coming back to the Skate Club for Gala practice. I couldn't pass up the chance to see you again before you left."

"Absolutely!" He agreed, suddenly lurching forward to pull the woman into an unexpected hug.
She blinked at him in absolute astonishment...and Viktor gaped in perplexed horror. Yurio and Otabek just watched quietly, neither really passing judgment, but waiting patiently for their cue to get onto the ice.

"Yuri-" The older Russian said more stiffly, squeezing his hand in an effort to get his husband's attention back.

"Sorry!" He answered, pulling back from the unexpected advance, "I can hardly believe I actually get the chance to introduce you two." Yuri turned to face his partner, lifting his free hand to gesture between the two, "Ketty, this is my husband and coach, Viktor Nikiforov." He explained proudly, looking back and forth between each of them, "Viktor...this is Ketty! She's the one who composed 'Yuri on Ice' for me last year!"
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED SIX

Realizing the identity of the dark-haired woman before him, Viktor could do little more than stare quietly, small eyes blinking nervously as the vestiges of his anxious jealousy withered under the burning light of his misunderstanding. Still, the words his partner had said were echoing back through his mind, keeping him from responding as the expected back-and-forth of the last year's happenings bounced between the two former Detroiter. He could see that they were talking, but what they said escaped him.

"Viktor...?"

He closed his eyes quickly and shook his head to bring himself back to Earth, and looked at the woman with new sight, "...Ah, I...think I misjudged."

"...Who did you think she was...?" Yuri asked, a brow quirked in wonder, "Tess 2.0?"

The medic snorted in laughter, but stymied herself with a hand over her mouth and turned slightly away.

"It crossed my mind." The Russian said flatly, trying to unclench his fingers from where they'd gone stiff around his partner's hand. He turned his attention to the dark brown, almost black eyes looking back at him, framed by that dark, wavy hair, "It seems I owe you some thanks."

Ketty just gave a nervous smile, "Oh, for the music...? It was really no trouble...I was glad to finally make something that Yuri could actually use..."

"It's not your fault the first one went over like a lead balloon..." Yuri tried to defend, "All told, you did exactly what I asked you to do...and that music perfectly embodied what my skating career was really like back then..."

"Yeah, I was really nervous when you reached out to ask for something new..." The lithe woman answered, clasping her fingers together and idly rubbing her thumbs around one another, "But when you told me about everything that happened, and the way you were so excited about it...I knew I had to try again, and give you something better." She turned her eyes then back to the Russian, "You've done a wonderful job of bringing him out of the slump he was in before. When I heard last year that he'd broken the World Record, and beat you for the Gold..."

Viktor just gave an awkward smile, "...Yes...he did..."

Yuri gave an equally nervous smile.

"He won Gold yesterday, too." Tess suddenly said, giving a wry smile at the two skaters, "Didn't you."

"Ahhhhhhhh...t-tech...nically..." The younger skater answered hesitantly, "But only bec-"

His words were cut off by the sudden cheering and clapping of all the other spectators who'd been patiently listening until then. He clung to his husband's arm from the surprise of it, looking around to all sides before eventually settling into the adulations. He glanced behind himself then to Yurio, then back up to his spouse, and finally at the people around them all.
"Well...we came out here so we could practice our Team Skate for the Exhibition..." He explained, "We didn't think so many people would be here today, but-

"We know." Tess cut him off then, and gave a wink, "That's why everyone's here."

"Sounds like we should get ready to put on a show, then." Viktor huffed, grateful that no one bothered to drag the whole conversation around to questioning him about giving up the Gold again, "Shall we?"

"Whew! Now I feel better."

"Me too."

The two silver teens practically had to roll one another out of the hotel lobby, stuffed to the gills from lunch. Behind them, following like something out of a zombie movie, was their catatonic father. Nikki turned around as they made it to the sidewalk in the car rotunda, seeing how the man was walking with his eyes practically closed. She held her arm out to stop him from walking into traffic, "Hm...who needs smartphones to distract you when you just need to lie awake all night?"

A strained yawn answered her, the man's eyes watering under the shadow of his hat, "...There isn't enough coffee in the world..."

"You need a Starbucks IV drip, pipaw." Viktoria mused, "Or maybe a nap."

"Why are we standing out here anyway?" Nikki wondered then, looking around at all the different cars and vans that were coming up to load or drop-off their human cargo, "It's cold."

"Wait for it." Mikhail mumbled, lifting his head to blearily look towards the rotunda entrance. Within a few seconds, the sight of a long, white stretch limousine was pulling in, and stopped just a few feet away. The two teens blinked at it, then at one another, then at their father, who just stared ahead as the driver got out and proceeded to move towards the rear passenger side to open the doors. It dawned on the teens then that the limo was for them, and much to Mikhail's chagrin, they started jumping around him in an excited circle, cheering their good fortune.

"Okay..." He started, though the teens didn't listen, continuing their ritual for a few moments longer...until two gangly arms came out to corral them each by their heads to pull them closed, "Okay."

"Okay?" They both answered, finding them all squished cheek-to-cheek together.

"Dad isn't driving today." Mikhail said stiffly, "There's some five hours left until the Gala tonight, and then Yuri's coming back to stay with us before we all head to Moscow tomorrow afternoon."

"O-Okay...?" They answered again, confused more than anything, "What about Minako?"

"She said she isn't coming back with us." He told them, "It's just us and Yuri."

That just made them dubious and even more confused.

"I already said I'm not breaking any of the deals I've made." Mikhail went on, finally letting the two girls go and standing back up to his full height before pinching the bridge of his nose, "But I'm dead on my feet and can't think straight. The limo is yours to guide. It'll take you almost wherever you
want to go, with the adage that we're at the Arena for the Exhibition."

"...What about you?" They wondered.

Mikhail just started walking towards the now-open passenger side door, holding his hand out towards it to usher his girls within, "I'm going to try to sleep. Sometimes it's easier in a car than it is in a bed, at least for me."

Two pairs of jade eyes looked at one another before heading towards the open door, and the two piled in, followed soon after by their elder, with the door being closed behind them. Within the limo were all the luxurious amenities that one could expect, and most welcome of them was the heat. They were quickly able to remove their scarves, hats, mittens, and coats, casting them aside and finding their spots to sit.

"So...what...do we do?" Nikki wondered, "We've never been in a limo before."

Mikhail cast his long-coat off, folding it neatly as he moved to the bench-like seat along the wide interior wall, and setting it down to use as a rudimentary pillow. He pointed towards the front of the vehicle, and the rear-facing pair of seats that were set just beneath a small sliding glass window, "Slide that panel across and tell the driver where you want him to take you."

"We don't know the first thing about Detroit, pipaw. Where would we even know to go on short notice like this?" Viktoria pointed out awkwardly.

"You two are pretty resourceful." He answered, sitting sideways against the edge of the bench and pulling the front of his flat-cap over his forehead, then over his eyes as he laid down against his jacket, "You'll figure it out."

The two girls looked at one another, then at their father, then at the small sliding window at the front of the limo. Nikki shuffled forward first, and sat down in one of the seats just under it, reaching a small hand up to move the panel over and open the barrier, "What's good in this city for killing time?"

"The Riverfront area is fairly popular, Miss." The chauffer answered, "However, in the winter, there isn't much going on. It's still a nice place to look though."

Nikki rubbed her chin in thought, "The Riverfront..."

The river passes right in front of the Renaissance Center where all the skaters are staying...

"Yeah, let's start there." She agreed, plopping down properly into the seat and pulling the belt across as her sister came to join her in the seat beside. Pulling her phone out, Nikki opened a text window, thumbing away at the screen.

Viktoria gave her a strange look as she pulled her own seatbelt across herself, feeling the limo starting to move under them, "You look determined suddenly."

"I have an idea," The younger answered, "But I need to double-check with someone first."

It was déjà vu to Yurio for himself and Viktor to be heaving for breath and drowning in sweat where they’d collapsed on the rink wall, while Yuri looked down on them like they were both doing something they shouldn't be.
"Really, you guys are that tired already?" The middle skater crossed his arms, "We've only gone through it four times."

"We did it with...with all the jumps though..." Yurio puffed, one hand pressed against the center of his chest as the other held to the wall, "Don't you know...how to practice with...without the jumps?"

"Sure I do, but-"

"No butts." The teen barks through his breaths, "I'm taking a break." He said matter-of-factly, heading off towards the nearest exit to rink-side.

Viktor just laughed quietly through his own panting, but slid down until he was sitting on the ice, legs stretched out before himself, "A break...sounds nice..."

"You're giving up already, too?" Yuri whined, "We don't have that long to polish this one up before tonight."

"I think we've got it." The Russian offered, leaning his head back against the white panels and closing his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again though, Yuri was mere inches from his face, having crawled in on hands and knees to gawk at him, "...What...?"

"You guys might got it but I don't think I've got it." The younger man answered, sitting back onto the heels of his boots, "I'm worried I'll mess it up."

"You didn't mess up...the NHK Exhibition."

"I was only in it for like 30 seconds." Yuri explained, "This time, I'm in it through the whole thing. I'm not a genius like you or even Yurio... You know that him and Otabek coordinated their whole pair skate for Cup of China online and then put it together in person in a day, without even being on the ice for it?"

"That's neat." Viktor said, still trying to catch his breath a little.

"But Otabek had to practice it for weeks beforehand, sending video to Yurio after memorizing every new segment. They were going to do it for the Final if they both got in, but decided to do it early cuz Yurio was worried he wouldn't make it."

"He got Silver at both...of his events. He...he would've made it regardless of how...the rest of the events turned out."

"Viktor...!" Yuri whined, "I'm gonna mess it up!" He reached for the man's knees where they parted on either side of him, trying to get them to move, "Come practice some more with me!"

The Russian just sat still, looking at his spouse's nervous face. For a moment, he just stayed where he was, but then raised his right hand and waggled a finger in a 'come hither' motion. Yuri blinked at him, but sighed dramatically and scooted a bit closer. As he rubbed the frost from his hands off against his pants, he felt a pair of arms come across his shoulders, resting there as fingers wove together just behind his head. Hazel eyes looked forward then in confusion.

"You're worrying too much." Viktor said quietly, leaning back again to pull his partner closer before pressing their foreheads together lightly, "Remember what I told you before...about letting your body create the music. You once thought 'Eros' would be too hard, right?"

"...Yeah..."
"But you managed to memorize that one in time for 'Onsen on Ice.' You said it was the hardest Short Program you'd ever learned... but you embodied that piece and made it yours. You pushed yourself to learn how to move in ways you'd never known before, and created a story out of the dance."

Yuri looked down to where he'd parked his hands on the ice again, this time behind where those legs parted around him, on either side of the man's hips.

"Stop thinking so much."

He lowered his eyes then, and relaxed his posture, "I can't help it."

"Hm..." Viktor hummed, "I get the feeling you're not just worried about the Team Skate."

"I..." Yuri started, only to catch himself and pull away, hands sliding over the top of his partner's thighs until they came to rest over his own where he sat back, "I wish it was just the Team Skate."

The silver legend looked on, but then moved to push back up to his feet, hoisting himself up with a hand on the wall before offering them both down to help his partner up after. With Yuri now vertical as well, the Russian used his grip on those hands to spin his spouse around to make him face the other way, and pressed in close against the man's back, arms wrapping around protectively, "Tell me."

Yuri just sighed, tilting his head where he felt his husband nosing at the side of his neck, and rubbed his cheek lightly against that silver hair, "I feel like nothing is sticking. The muscle memory is there from when we practiced in Bordeaux, but it's like I can't add new information. This whole kerfuffle with Minako-sensei and your uncle... I don't know the first thing to do to help fix it, especially not before we all go our separate ways after tonight."

"It's not your problem to fix, koibito." Viktor said quietly.

"I know, but if it isn't fixed by someone then what'll it do to Yurio?"

"Mikhail said he wasn't going to change his plans just because of what's going on. His promises were to Yurio, not Minako." The silver Russian explained.

"This is all just so awkward." Yuri grumbled, looking over to where the blonde had sat with his gear and was twiddling away on his phone, while Otabek was on the other side of the rink going through his own Exhibition choreography. There were others on the ice as well, but each group made sure to give the others space, so no one was too close to anyone else, "Just as soon as we think we've finally figured it all out, something else comes up."

"I think you're digging too deeply into this," Viktor offered, "If my uncle and Minako don't work it out between each other, what difference does it make in the grand scheme of things? Mikhail's still moving to Hasetsu, Yurio's still going to be training at the Ice Castle under Minako, and I'm still going to be choreographing for him like I said I would."

"Yurio wasn't moving to Hasetsu to train though." Yuri pointed out.

"I know."

"You don't think it'll become a problem if Minako-sensei backs out of everything except the coaching part?"

"Nope."
"Wh...really? Why?"

Viktor unwrapped his arms from his partner’s thin frame and set his hands on the man’s waist instead, pushing against one side to make Yuri turn around to face him before settling them again, "Minako never came across as the motherly type to me. Not like how Hiroko does." He started, feeling where his husband’s arms came to reach over his shoulders in turn and rest there, "She’d take a bullet for a kid she knows, but I just never really pictured her as being all that doting. Even if everything works out between her and my uncle, there’s nothing that suggests to me that she would act like anything more than an older, wiser friend to Yurio. Or his mentor, as the case may be."

"...I guess so..."

"Besides," Viktor went on, leaning in closer to nuzzle his partner affectionately, "I think he’s going to get more out of being around my cousins than anything else. He came pretty far just by being around my uncle for the last year...so this is already another big step. In the grand scheme of things...Yurio is still gaining a lot, even if he might lose one small aspect of the situation that wasn’t guaranteed to be true anyway."

"...Then there’s really only one other thing..." Yuri said quietly, leaning into his partner and letting Viktor hold him up for the moment.

"What’s that?"

"Fixing the rift between you and Mikhail."

The Russian paused where he’d started nibbling at his spouse’s neck again, and pulled back to look the man in the eyes. He made a skeptical face, "That’s a work in progress, and it’s nothing that’ll get solved overnight...not even by you, Dr. Nikiforov."

Yuri’s face went red at the mention, but he was given no chance to retort the statement, finding himself lip-locked with his husband half a second later, and feeling the ice moving under his feet again. Viktor had pushed off the wall to start that kiss, and used the momentum to push them back towards the middle part of their chunk of the rink.

From further down the wall, a number of eyes were watching as the playful antics of the SkateHusbands returned to the business of the Exhibition. Tess gave a reluctant, nervous smile at them, but Ketty watched in fascination.

"Yuri used to admire Viktor so much, he was scared of the guy." She started quietly, "I remember what a surprise it was to get that email from him last year, saying Viktor was his coach in Hasetsu, and needing music for his Free Program."

"Huh..." Tess leaned down against the wall, resting a cheek against the palm of her hand, "You should’ve seen the look on my face when I found out about them."

"When was that?"

"Two days ago."

"...Oh."

"Yeah." The medic shook her head and laughed quietly at herself, "I hadn't talked to him since way back when...so when the name *Yuri Nikiforov* popped up on the Men’s roster, and I saw *him* there...I thought his admiration had taken a creepy twist somewhere along the way. The idea that Yuri had gone from *entirely incapable of talking to Viktor* to *married to Viktor* didn’t even *occur* to me. Not
just because of how I knew Yuri used to be, but because...well, I guess I just didn't expect Viktor to get that involved. Hell, I didn't even anticipate that Viktor would've ever been single long enough to even consider someone else...never mind a guy...never mind Yuri."

"...In east Asia, and in Japan..." Ketty said, eyes still fixed on the pair as they went through the motions of their practice, "...It's said that two people who are destined to come together are tied together with an invisible red thread of fate. That it may get tangled, stretched, and worn thin...but it would never break...and no matter how often the two people may nearly cross paths, in the end, that's all just the plot through which the string takes them until they meet each other."

Tess quirked a brow, "...If the thread is invisible then how do you know it's red?"

The musician just stood stoically for a moment, unsure how to answer, but then shook her head to clear the conundrum, "That's not the point!" She huffed, making a face at the woman next to her, but then leaning to rest her elbows on the rink wall, "I just meant...Yuri was chasing Viktor for years and years, even long before he ever came to Detroit. He'd get so close and then run away, over and over again. But...it's like there was a string between them, making them come back to one another, until one day..."

"...Yuri got drunk and seduced him?" Tess laughed, "Or so he tells it."

"I guess that's one way of going about it."

"Phichit sent me pictures."

"Ohmygoshyouhavetoshowme."
Yurio had barely had his phone in his hand for four seconds when he saw the notification of a new text message on his screen. Reading it, he quirked a brow and clicked into the window to read the rest.

[Yuri!] It started, [Did you see Minako at all this morning? She never came back to the hotel last night and we're not sure where she ended up overnight.]

The teen huffed, but started typing away with his thumbs, [I saw her at breakfast with Mari, but then we all went our separate ways.]

[Oh...]

[So where are you guys now?]

[The skating rink that Katsudon used to train at before he moved back to Japan last year.]

[And you don't know where Minako's at now?]

[We left her at the hotel. Unless she decided to go somewhere else with Mari, she's probably still there. Why?]

[Dad rented a limo so he could sleep while we wandered around town. I think he's calmed down a bit about everything so I want to find Minako and see if we can't sort this all out before we go to Moscow tomorrow. We just found out she's not coming with us.]

[...She's not? Why?] Yurio made a face at that, like he didn't appreciate being the last person to find out about it.

[We don't know. Dad just said she wasn't coming.]

The teen felt his heart sink, his brow furrowed as it felt like a knife was driven through him. However, he lifted his head and stood back up onto those naked blades, walking the few steps forward to the rink wall and leaned over it. He skimmed through the different groups on the ice until he spotted the SkateHusbands on the far side.

[You have her number, don't you?] Another message read, making the phone beep and vibrate.

[Da] He answered, closing down the window to go into his contacts list, and clicked into the ballerina's. He tapped the small "i" icon on the right, and hit the 'send Contact as message' button after that. A moment later, a block-bubble appeared in the text window, reading [Минако Окукава]

[What's that?] Nikki wondered.

[Minako's number. Knowing her, she's probably hanging around the Marriot, trying to catch a glimpse of all the other skaters.]

[She stayed with Katusdon and Viktor overnight. I'm going to see if they know anything.]

[Later]

[Cya]

Yurio clicked the phone off after that, and slipped the device into his back pocket. He waited a
moment before moving back towards the rink entrance, and moved one blade at a time to slide across
the ice, heading for the Nikiforovs. They each noticed his B-line for them, and paused in what they
were doing to focus on him.

"What's wrong?" Yuri wondered, seeing the dour look on the teen's face, "Did something happen?"

The Russian Kitten just looked down to the ice for a moment, lifting his head but not really looking
at anything in particular, "Nikki was messaging me. She said that they just found out Minako isn't
coming to Moscow with us tomorrow. Did you know?"

Two pair glanced at one another, and Yuri nodded, "She mentioned it when she turned up last night.
Her and my sister made plans way back during the summer that they would come to the Final
together, and already had their return trip boo-"

"I know that." Yurio said impatiently, "She gave me her ticket to come here, remember?"

"Sure, but-"

"She should've said something as soon as she realized Mikhail was planning on taking everyone to
Moscow! As if this whole stupid situation wasn't annoying enough already..."

"Yuri." Viktor interjected, setting his hand on the teen's closest shoulder, and nudging him until one
green eye peered back up at him, "Considering everything that's happened in the last week, even in
just the last few days, the plans Minako made before probably got sidelined for a bit. It would hardly
be the first time someone made arrangements for something, only for it to slip their mind later
because they got caught up in something else."

"She could've picked a better time to remember..." Yurio grumbled, "If Mikhail spends the next two
weeks acting like the way he's been the last two days, it's going to be a total nightmare."

The two older skaters glanced at one another, then back at the anxious teen in front of them.

The elder Russian just pulled the teen closer where he still had a hand on one shoulder, "If it weren't
for the fact that going to Japanese Nationals with Yuri was her original plan, it probably wouldn't be
that big of a deal for her to forego those plans and just go to Moscow with the rest of you guys. But
since it is, and Minako realized Yuri would be there by himself if she didn't go, she decided to stick
by it."

Yurio's eyes got white and beady suddenly, and the jerky turning of his head to look at the pair
sounded like the hinge of an old wooden door, "...Oh."

Yuri gave a nervous smile, "Except for last year, when I only just decided to go at the last second,
Minako-sensei has always been at my local competitions. With Viktor going to Russian Nationals
though...practically everyone we know is going to be in Moscow. My parents don't have the option
of shutting down Yu-Topia for a whole weekend, Mari-nee-chan has to go back to work, too...and
the rest, well...only Nishigori has co-"

"...I get it," The teen shook his head, "Now I just feel like an idiot for making such a fuss."

"Ehh..." The older skater bobbed his head back and forth a bit in consideration, "...I don't blame you
for it. Mikhail's being stand-off-ish and distant. I don't think he's been his usual self since...ah...Skate
Canada? Maybe Trophée de France..." Yuri reached up one hand to scratch the side of his head,
"He's for sure been different since NHK, since everyone took a pound of flesh out of his hide for
bringing Konstantin...then it's just been one thing after another for him. Unlike the rest of us, he
doesn't really have anyone higher on the social totem-pole to defer to when he's tired or runs out of
answers. He must be feeling pretty helpless right now, so he's avoiding everyone so no one sees it."

"Maybe you can be part of what helps him settle down again." Viktor suggested, "You're the lynch pin for all of this stuff anyway."

"Minako was the reason we were going to set up camp in Hasetsu though." Yurio sighed, "If not for her, there would basically be no reason to leave Moscow once we get there. I mean, other than disappointing Nikki and Viktoria with yet another change of plans, what's to stop him from just moving us all into your old house in St. Petersburg?"

"Because he's mad at me and it is my old house?" Viktor huffed.

Yurio deadpanned the silver legend, "...Oh...right." He shook his head, "Can I room with you at Nationals...?"

The elder Russian just laughed, "It'll be like old times."

"With Yakov yelling at the both of us."

"Yeesh, try not to have too much fun without me..." Yuri grumbled.

Viktor suddenly hugged him tight, rather dramatically laying on the affection, "I love you~!"

"Ugh, you guys, gross."

"There they are." Nikki said quietly, sitting in the front seat of the limo and spying through the windshield with a pair of binoculars.

The driver had a pair as well, "Which ones are they?"

"Them." She pointed to the pair of ladies leaning against the railing, looking out across the frozen river, "The one with long, dark brown hair, and the long tan coat, and next to her, the brown hair with highlights in the bandana and with the long grey coat."

"And which one is the one that your dad's trying to impress?"

"Minako. Tan coat."

"So if they know you're coming, why are we spying on them from a distance like this?"

The sliding-glass panel behind them pushed open, and Viktoria gawked at them from behind it, "Where did you even find those things?"

"Shhht!" Nikki shushed, putting a finger over her mouth, "If dad wakes up right now then it's all ruined!"

"Relax, he's out cold." The older sister pointed behind herself, and Nikki spotted where Mikhail had settled into what likely would've been a rather uncomfortable position, had it not been for the fact that he was asleep and didn't notice, "He only gets like that when he's in a coma."

"Okay." The younger nodded and put the binoculars away in the glove-box, then looked over to the driver, "Let's pull up right behind them."

The limo started creeping forward, moving slowly along the road that followed parallel to the
walkway. It passed the corner of the RenCen complex were Joe Muer Seafood gave way to the Andiamo restaurant, and then finally to the front of the General Motors building. Across from the metroplex of five tall towers, one of them being for the Marriot, was the Riverfront promenade, and well across the frozen-over river, the Canadian border and the city of Windsor. The limo came to a quiet halt on the shoulder of the road; though technically it was a bike lane, there weren't any cyclists testing the winter roads.

Nikki quickly hopped out as the chauffer opened the door, bundling herself loosely in all her cold-weather gear. Viktoria stayed back to make sure nothing dared awaken the sleeping Russian Dragon. As the younger of the two sisters made her way down the walkway, she set her feet down carefully onto the ledge of the long stone stairway, which lined the riverfront area from the front of the GM building to where the road was forced to turn at the far corner. Snow and ice made the polished stone precarious to walk on, but the teen managed to get to the bottom without slipping, and there, slowed her pace a little.

Mari was the first to notice, lifting her head where she had been dragging on a half-spent cigarette, "Oh, you're here already."

Minako lifted her head after, and twisted around to spot the girl right behind them both, "Nikki!" She was stunned to realize that, as bundled-up as the teen was from the hips up, her legs were nearly bare but for the pleated knee-length black skirt, dark nylon stockings, and knee-high boots, "You'll catch your death out here!"

"We got as close as we could-" She tried to explain, pointing back up towards the road, "But the parking lot is way back there-" She pointed then to the north, "Past the stage area and the tree field."

"I don't see the van...where did you park...?" The ballerina asked, lifting a hand to get the hair out of her face as it whipped around with the wind.

"Dad's not driving. He got a limo for us and told us to do whatever we wanted till the Gala tonight." The teen explained, point back to the vehicle she'd singled out before, "That one."

"Wh-" Minako was thrown off, "...Is he not with you?"

"What? Yes, he's in there, he's just sleeping." Nikki explained, her own hair flapping about like a wavy silver cape, "He's really broken down about all this. He only just told us that you weren't even coming to Moscow with us tomorrow... We really don't know what's going on."

The ballerina gave an exasperated sigh, "That man, I swear..." She took a few steps forward and hugged the bundle of winter clothes, "Alright... Lead the way..."

"Please don't be mad at him." The teen pleaded, "I know he's thicker than a brick wall sometimes but..."

Minako pet the teen's head reassuringly, "He's really good at helping other people sort things out, but he's really bad at doing that for himself."

"Oh we know...believe me we know..." Nikki answered, letting the older woman turn her around and start ushering her back up the stairs, "Vikki and I suggested asking Viktor's Yuri to help out but he got all snarky about not wanting someone half his age giving him advice."

"Maybe he has about point about it regarding me at least." The woman agreed, "But if he wants to iron things out with Viktor at some point, he's going to have to get over himself a little."

"...No kidding, especially after the fight they had yesterday..."
"Wait..." Minako paused where they were, barely half-way to the upper ledge, "What fight yesterday?"

Nikki blinked through where she'd wrapped the scarf around her head, "...Uh...I..."

"Nikki!"

The teen cringed, "I thought you'd have known about it..." She said nervously, "A while after Yuri called us down to the Players’ Club, dad came looking for us and wanted to bring us back up to the stands. We'd barely left the room when Cousin Viktor came running up behind us. I'm...not even really sure what he wanted, since dad immediately went on the attack."

"Attack...?" Minako echoed nervously.

The teen nodded, "Dad thinks that you called off the engagement because of the stuff Viktor yelled at him about the day before that. Viktoria tried to explain, but dad cut him off...then they started talking in Russian so Vikki and I left."

The ballerina all-but snorted in irritation at the revelation of this new argument, and she started marching up the stairs, supremely irritated. The driver of the limo didn't even have a chance to get around the back of the vehicle before Minako reached for the door handle, "MIKHAIL ROZOFSKY."

"M-Minako!" Nikki called after her, lunging at the woman's back and stopping her, for the moment, from opening the door, "He's still asleep! If he wakes up and you're already mad at him then he might not listen to anything you say!"

"How can I not be mad at him!? He's misunderstanding everything!"

"We know! He's the dumbest smart-person in the world!" The silver teen agreed, still clinging, keeping the woman's arms pinned to her sides, "Where do you think Sergio got it from!?"

Mari just shook her head at the both of them, "Are we going to get in or are we going to stand out here until the cops come and tow the limo away?"

"Ugh let's just get in. If he doesn't wake up right away, then I'll just stay quiet until I get my head together." Minako growled, "I'll try not to clobber him on sight."

The chauffer nervously opened the door for the trio, and Nikki stuck her head in first to scope things out, seeing her rather-unimpressed sister gawking back at her, and thankfully, Mikhail still comatose.

"I was wondering how long you guys would stand out there." Viktoria huffed, "Driver-guy was starting to get worried he'd get a ticket for being parked here."

Minako was the last to get in, waiting to catch her breath in the cold winter air for a moment longer before finally letting the door be closed behind her. The limo started moving a few seconds later, pulling away from the Riverfront and taking the next corner around the RenCenter. Being inside the stretched-out vehicle though gave the woman an odd sense of déjà vu, and the irritated look on her face slowly melted away.

"It's just like at Worlds last year, huh?" Mari mused, heedless of the tension, "Except this time we've got Viktor's cousins instead of Viktor and my little brother."

"Yeah."
"Oh, dad this for you guys too?" Nikki wondered, "This is the first time we've gotten to be in one."

"Really...?" Minako was a bit surprised, "He had that whole house set up for you guys in Edmonton though."

"We had access to it, but it was still his house." The older teen answered, "Always said that he didn't want to spoil us too much, especially if he wasn't around. I guess he gave in this time. I don't think he's slept since...well, all this went down." She gestured between the two oldest members of their little group, even if one was still unconscious and unaware, "I don't think I've seen him this stressed out since mom got cancer the first time. Not...that I want you to feel like this is y-"

"No," The ballerina held a hand up to stop the words, "I own a piece of this." She drew in a breath and shrugged out of her jacket, "I've tried to explain to him twice already that this isn't as bad as he seems to think it is, but it's like he didn't hear a word I said. At least right now, if I have to go through the whole thing again, I've got witnesses this time."

Nikki unburdened herself from her own winter clothes, settling everything into a pile in a corner near the front of the cabin, and watched quietly with her sister as Minako shuffled across the floor towards the still-catatonic Mikhail. The ballerina sat on her knees and crossed her arms, looking down on the man like she still wasn't sure how to start things...but eventually reached over to at least pull the flat-cap off of its perch covering the man's face.

Beneath it, eyes were closed, lips slightly parted. A few silver strands shifted as the hat moved away, settling over the elder Russian's pale skin.

Minako made a face at him, and set the hat away, "Mikhail."

Nothing.

She grit her teeth and repeated herself, this time a bit louder, but again...nothing. The woman crossed her arms and sat back upright again, "What's it going to take to wake this guy up?"

"Pinch his nose." Viktoria suggested, "Can't sleep when you can't breathe."

"...Isn't that rude...?"

"Gotta wake him up somehow."

Minako sighed and nodded, but then reached out...and closed her pointer finger and thumb around the man's nose as she'd been told. Within seconds, the elder Russian seemed to be snorting and coughing instead of breathing normally, and one jade eye crept open...then both shot open.

Mikhail was up so fast and in such a panic that he cracked his head against the roof of the car, coming down again and cringing as he held his head over his knees with both hands, all but weeping from both the pain and the surprise, "...Wh-what the Hell is going on!?

"Give it over." Minako said flatly, holding her cupped hand out.

The pained older man gaped at her, one eye twitching in confusion, "Gi..wh...huh?"

"The ring, dummy. Give it over." She repeated, moving her hand even closer, all but poking his closest arm.

The two teens side-eyed each other in wonder, but dared not interrupt. Mari just deadpanned the whole lot of them.
In utter panic and perplexed hysteria, Mikhail reached for his coat and rummaged around in it until he found the demanded item. He barely had a moment to bring it into sight before Minako literally swiped it from his grasp.

"If being in possession of this thing is the only way you'll open your ears, then fine." She said stiffly, keeping hold of the little trinket in her fingers as she slid the thin chain of a necklace around so she could find the clasp. Once it was unhooked, she threaded the delicate metal links through the ring until the glimmering bauble joined to the necklace's existing small centerpiece, and anchored them together such that the main stone of the ring was visible on top. That done, the ballerina replaced the necklace around her thin neck, and combed her fingers through her hair, "There. Now will you listen?"

"But...I... Uh..." Was all the stunned man managed.

"No buts." She cut him off, "You've been dragging your feet and miserable for days. Maybe that's my fault, giving the ring back first and explaining myself after...so I'll try it this way instead." She clasped her hand over the ring, "I like you a lot, and I'm really flattered that you want to take this next step...but I'm not ready for it. I want to keep going the way we've been going for the last few months. Traveling and having fun and tormenting Yura every chance we get. Things were already going to be changing enough with the addition of all your existing kids, and I need a minute to get used to that before you start getting all worked up about anything else."

"...Existing kids...?" Viktoria echoed, "That's a weird way to describe us."

"Isn't this really the best time or place to be discussing this!?" Mikhail argued between clenched teeth, finally grabbing his lost hat and putting it onto his head, as though in part, trying to hide the goose-egg he knew would be growing there.

Minako just stared at him with her steely eyes, "Viktor told Yuri everything. Everyone else is just suffering from the fallout of not knowing what's going on. I'm getting to a point where the attempt to keep this a secret is more annoying than it'll probably be when everyone finds out."

"Find out what...?" Mari asked tepidly.

Minako furrowed her brow, but kept her eyes on Mikhail, who was giving her a nervous and terrified look in return. She closed her eyes then and lowered her head, and turned back to look at her companion, "...There may be another silver-haired kid running around in a year."

"...Eh?" Mari's eye twitched, "What...?"

The ballerina pinched the bridge of her nose, not wanting to see the reactions on anyone else's faces even as she explained herself, "That's the whole reason why he popped the question so suddenly, when a week ago he was still mostly kidding about it. I got sick one morning while in Banff and the next thing I know, I've got this ring on my finger and he's acting like this is already a done deal." She gestured towards the Russian before herself, "I've just been trying to wrap my brain around half of the things that've happened in the last week and I just...want to put the brakes on as much as I can until I've dealt with this."

"I didn't-" Mikhail tried to interject, but Minako cut him off, moving her hand up to cover his mouth.

She looked at him with pleading eyes, "Let me adjust to one thing at a time. I need space and room to think. I want you by my side but I don't need you smothering me."

He just furrowed his brow and looked over the ballerina's hand, giving a tired expression like he
wasn't sure what else to do anymore.

"And for the sake of all that's good and holy in this world, Mikhail, I'm not ditching you just because I'm going with Mari back to Hasetsu tomorrow." Minako went on, "My plan from the beginning was to go with Yuri to the All Japan Championships...I just got so caught up in all these bombs that've been dropping around me that it slipped my mind for a minute."

"...Bombs...?" The Russian repeated, "...You sound like all these things are the worst things ever."

"I don't mean it in a bad way, hun." Minako shook her head, pulling her hand back to rest that elbow on the front of the seat she'd knelt beside, "I just mean that these things are all big and drastic and...kind of explosive..." She drew in a breath, "You've been through all these things a few times before but this is all new to me. I've only ever lived this live vicariously through Hiroko...but Yuri and Mari aren't my kids." Arms crossed loosely in front of herself, and she looked down, "If this whole thing isn't just some false alarm...and I really...am..." She refused to say the word, "...Then I need to make a lot of adjustments in my way of thinking pretty soon."

"...Why do you think I was so quick to propose...?" Mikhail finally spoke, daring to reach for one hand where he could find it, "I don't want you to think this is your burden to bear alone."

"I don't need a ring to know that!" Minako harped.

"...Giving it back makes me feel like you don't want me around though." He added, "Rejecting the ring, the engagement...everything that goes with it...maybe even so far as rejecting me as a father. Like you want to do all of this on your own."

"...I've always done things on my own..." The woman rubbed her nose on the back of a wrist, "It's the only way I know how to handle things. I mean..." She snuffled a little, and leaned back on her free hand, "...I was having a lot of fun before, when you'd be around for a little while and then I'd go back to my life... But suddenly I feel like I'm having to give up everything, and this ring..." She clasped it again within her fingers, "It feels more like a ball and chain...tying me to you...and that I don't have my own voice anymore... I don't want to lose myself in you by becoming us..."

It felt like a knife in his chest, and Mikhail found himself without words.

"But..." Minako started again, her voice quieter than before, "...I can't expect anyone else to think or feel like I do...and if the only way I can assure you that I don't want you to leave, is by keeping this trinket...then I will..." She looked at the sparkling item where she held it in the palm of her hand, attached to that thin silver chain, "But...I can't wear it on my finger. Not yet." She turned her brown eyes up to the grey-green ones looking back at her, "I'm trying to meet you half-way on this..."

Nikki had both hands over her mouth as she gaped between the pair, eyes wide as she watched...and waited. Viktoria was anxious as well, but she was less emotive about it, simply watching the spectacle unfold rather seriously.

Mari was just ready for it to be over.

Mikhail stewed where he sat, worriedly thinking about everything that had been said, and trying to make sense of it. Eventually, he closed his eyes and drew a breath, and let himself sit back against his seat before he let the breath out again, "...Maybe I overstepped..."

The ballerina blinked at him.

"All my life, practically since birth, it was hammered into my head that I would always have to be the one in charge... To be the provider, the protector, the leader... It worked in so many ways and
places, and for so long...maybe I just settled into that mindset too quickly when it seemed like the old scenarios were playing up again. I just wanted to do the right thing in the only way I'd ever known how."

"You don't have to do that with me." Minako said, her voice barely above a whisper, "Especially since I'm not ready to give up being who I am just because a few things might be changing soon...and I don't want you to change, either." She pushed up from where she sat on the floor of the cabin and sat on the edge of the side-facing leather-clad bench, "I like you just the way you are. Neither of us spent our whole lives figuring out what kind of people we want to be, just for circumstances to force us to be something we're not."

Mikhail just huffed a nervous laugh, reaching up to rub his eyes before anyone could see that he was getting emotional, "...My teenaged self would've started a revolution if only to get others to hear me say those same words." He lowered his gaze as he felt cool fingers reach forward to clasp his right hand, and he dared to let himself return the gesture, curling his fingers as well, "I've changed enough for the sake of my kids...even for my not-kids like Viktor, even Yura... It's...actually kind of a relief that you don't want or expect me to be more than what I already am, given what might become of us soon."

"It's like I told you before any of this stuff even came up... I like you for who you are, not for what you have." Minako told him straightforwardly, "If you want to share all of that stuff, then you're welcome to, but more than anything, I just want you to be there. You're enough for me."

Nikki was practically sobbing rivers by then, and she looked desperately to her father for that final resolution.

"Jeeze..." Minako huffed, leaning her shoulder against the backrest of the seat, "...It's getting to a point where we've gotten so worked up about this whole thing, that we'd better have a kid just to make all the trouble worthwhile."

The exhausted Russian just sagged in his seat, and tilted his head slightly to face the woman sitting next to him, "You think so?"

"Wouldn't it be kind of cruel to meet back up after Nationals, only to say 'just kidding' about the whole thing?"

"...I guess it'll take till then just to be sure..."

"Maybe if I'd been through this before, I could know better by now..." Minako added, sliding one arm behind the man's neck and the other in front, and rested her chin on the top of his head, "But the way you reacted...I think I'd be a fool not to trust your instincts. If I had to go through this with anyone, though...I'm glad it's you."

"...That's...oddly reassuring?" The Russian mused nervously, "I guess it's kind of neat to be able to say that I'm fluent in Russian, English, and morning sickness."

"And food-mumble." Viktoria added, "You have a knack for knowing what people are saying when their mouths are full."

"...Ah, yes, that's true."

"Speaking of food..." Mari interrupted, "If no one's too busy...I'm starving. I didn't have much of an appetite this morning with all the tension at the table."

Mikhail twisted his head to look up at his newly-reinstated lady love, "...Did you eat?"
She just looked back at him, pulling one hand back to trace a finger along his jaw, "I could eat."

The silver Russian, with his wisps of white, just looked on for a moment...and dared to steal the briefest kiss.

Minako didn't seem all that surprised, and smiled when he pulled back again, hugging him tightly, "There's still a few hours left till the Exhibition. Let's all go do something fun."
Six different piles of meat, vegetables, and sauces were tossed and sizzling on a huge circular griddle, and six pairs of eyes watched them intently. Yuri could practically feel the drool dripping down his chin, being overtaken by the smell of the much-needed food almost as easily as katsudon did. His starving focus was soon broken though by the feeling of a nudge against his cheek, and he blinked a few times to regain himself.

"You look hungry." Viktor mused, clinging to the younger man's back in his usual fashion, "Are you about to find your eros again?"

"I feel like my stomach's about to start eating itself." Yuri answered, "I'm totally famished..."

"You did hit the ice pretty hard earlier..." The Russian pointed out, "It's a wonder you still somehow think you're not ready."

The duo whispered between one another as their much-anticipated dinners were finished, watched by the other four members of the entourage. None could hear what the duo were saying to each other, but Yuri's nervous laugh was easy to see on his face. Viktor ceased his teasing only when the griddle-cook had his plate on offer, and the Russian peeled off his partner's back to reach for it.

By the time the whole group made it to their chosen table, one could easily be forgiven for mistaking the skaters for ravenous wolves. Ketty and Tess just watched them in awe, careful not to get their hands too close for fear of losing fingers to the frenzy.

Yurio eventually paused as he felt a buzz in his back pocket, and set his fork aside only long enough to grab the offending phone and see what and who dared interrupt. Seeing Nikki's name-plate there, his half-irritated expression changed to dubious wonder.

[Crisis averted.]

[...Eh?] He answered back, setting the phone face-down on the table to go back to shoveling food. It only took a few seconds for it to buzz again though, and Yurio flipped it over to look.

[Dad and Minako sorted things out.]

Blinking those emerald eyes a few times like he couldn't believe what was written, the Russian lifted his head and stared ahead almost vacantly.

Otabek gawked at him, "You look like you just saw a ghost or something."

Yuri shifted his attention when he heard the words, and suddenly was just as curious, "What's wrong?"

"...Nothing is wrong." He answered, "...It's...actually better now, I think."

"...Eh?"

"I think Nikki figured out a way to get Okukawa and the old man to have a sit-down." Yurio started, "She just messaged me to say they were back together again."

"Hmph..." Viktor huffed, bits of rice stuck to his face, though he didn't bother picking them off with
a finger like he normally did, "Maybe now that my uncle's pulled his head out of his arse, he'll be able to manage an apology."

"Viktor..." Yuri gave him a look.

"What?" The Russian shrugged, trying to look innocent, "I made an effort to reach out to him yesterday and apologize for what I'd said after the Short Program, but he cut me off and threw the whole thing back on me."

"He was stressed out. Cut him a little slack."

Viktor shrugged again and went back to his plate.

Yuri grumbled a bit under his breath, "The more time goes by, the more similar you two become."

"What? How?"

"Don't you find it a little bit ironic that you're holding it against him for cutting you off and going into a tirade about all the stuff he's blaming you for, when in doing so, he was stopping you from apologizing for going into a tirade about all the stuff he's doing that you don't like?"

Viktor blinked at him, but remained quiet for a few seconds, before finally saying 'nope' and going back to his dinner. He could feel the exasperated look on his husband's face, staring at him, and paused what he was doing, setting the fork down neatly, "He blamed me for what Minako did as though it was my idea, when I had no active part in it. I, on the other hand, got mad at him for something he actually did."

"We don't even know if that's true yet though. You got mad at him over a hypothetical."

"What the Hell are you two talking about?" Yurio asked distantly, "What did the old man do?"

The two skaters paused in their minor argument, side-eyeing one another like neither was sure they should say anything. Yuri, however, answered for them both, "Nothing for now."

"That's a horrible cliff-hanger to leave on me. I literally just got a bit of relief on the one hand and now you're taking a big crap in the other." The teen grumbled, then gesturing across the table, "I'm going to be just as gray as Viktor by the end of all of this."

"Hey." The older Russian pointed at his hair, "It's silver. Not grey."

"Sorry..." Yuri sighed, "I don't want to leave you hanging, but I have a feeling they would both prefer we not discuss it until we know for sure one way or another."

"Do Nikki or Viktoria know?"

Yuri shrugged, "No clue."

The teen had his phone out again and was tapping away at the screen madly.

"If they don't, then you'll just be making them nervous, too." The older skater pointed out.

"And if they do, then there'll be no reason for me to be the only person who doesn't know." Yurio answered stoically, sending his message to his younger 'sister.' He set his phone face-up on the table then and eyeballed it for the reply he hoped would come soon.

"If it makes you feel better, I'm not supposed to know either." Yuri explained, "The only reason I do
"...What'd she say?" Viktor asked, reaching for his drink and pulling it up to take a sip.

"Her dad is a prolific breeder, apparently." The Russian Punk answered, as though it didn't matter.

"PFFFT."

"Whatever." Yurio slouched back in his seat indignantly, and typed his answer, [Aren't people normally excited about this kind of thing? Why is everyone acting all ass-backwards about it?]

[I'm pretty sure that papa is, but Minako isn't, so he isn't letting it show.]

[When did you guys find out about this?]

[Like...5 minutes ago?]

[Was anyone going to tell ME about it?]

[Yeah, but they wanted to tell you in person.]

[Papa says he wanted to wait until we all met up again at the LCA, so he could buffer the news about Minako with the good news that everything ELSE was okay again]

[In case you didn't take it well]

[oh]

[Why wouldn't I take it well?]

[Cuz...Minako...was gonna be your...coach?]

[And she's gonna be pretty busy, if this isn't a false alarm]

Yurio lifted his head, and stared across the table at his older counterpart, who again had his drink up.

Viktor swallowed quickly and lowered the drink, giving a nervous look, "...What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Be my coach."

The silver legend just coughed and hacked instead, his breath caught in his throat uncomfortably. Yuri frantically pat his back, hoping he wasn't choking. When Viktor finally stopped, he still held to the front of his neck with one hand, resting the other on his husband's leg to reassure him that he was fine, "...Be your coach? Where'd that come from? I thought Minako was going to do that for now."

"If she ends up having a kid, she'll be too busy for me." Yurio said stiffly, "Maybe just do like when you asked Yakov to be Katsudon's coach at Rostelecom last year. Nine months from now puts us right at the start of next year's Grand Prix Series. If she can't come, then I'll just need someone to fill in for her, and if you're going to be my choreographer anyway..."

"Mnnnhhhh..." Viktor grumbled a little, looking dubious and unsure, "The way the Final turned out this year, there's no telling how the Series line-up will look next year. It's possible they may schedule us to be at all 6 events so we don't compete against each other again... I'm exhausted after just going
to four of them this season..."

"You technically withdrew." Otabek pointed out, "Worst case scenario, you get put at all 6 events, but since the record shows you didn't take a medal home, there's no stipulation that says you can't be placed at the same events as this season's medalists." Yuri nodded in agreement, "And they put me and Yuri at one event together this season anyway, despite the fact that we both medaled last year. We know what to expect now, too...so if we have to go to every GP event before the Final, we'll be better prepared.

Viktor didn't look convinced, and moved his hand up from his throat to put a finger against his lip, pulling his free hand back to wrap around himself as he thought about it all with a worried look on his face.

"Let me be the speed-bump for everything that's to come." Yuri went on, pressing his chin against the edge of his husband's shoulder, wrapping both arms around the man soothingly, "If everything's going through me from now on anyway, then I'll do all the paperwork and make all the necessary phone calls, too. No one can get to you unless they go through me first. You can focus all your attention on just the fun part of being a skater and coach, like back when you organized 'Onsen on Ice' with the triplets."

The silver legend drew in a breath, and lowered the finger from his lip, tilting his head to rest the side of it against the front of his spouse's, "'Onsen on Ice' was pretty fun..."

Yuri smiled as he felt the relief of the Russian's agreement, and tilted his face up to kiss the exposed part of the man's forehead, "And who knows, maybe we just jinxed ourselves. This was your big official come-back season, and everyone was making a huge fuss out of us competing against each other because of how things turned out at Worlds. Next year should be a lot calmer."

"...Yeah..." Viktor nodded, his frame palpably starting to relax again, "Even if something does happen, after what we went through over these last few weeks, it would probably be a breeze to deal with."

"Exactly."

"Awww Yuri look at you," Tess mused, "All grow'd up and being responsible. Who would've thought that the anxious kid I used to know would eventually be managing both of Russia's reigning champions?"

The young skater's face went pink at the mention of it, but he managed a nervous laugh, "I'm still getting used to the fact that I'm married to one."

"Let's not forget that you're Japan's reigning champion," Viktor added, "Quite the upgrade from how you used to call yourself a 'dime-a-dozen skater with the JSF.'"

Yuri's face just turned a darker shade, especially as he felt his partner nuzzling at the side of his neck affectionately, "I learned from the best."

.

The audience swelled as it made its way through the arena, everyone trying to find the best vantage to watch the ice. Lights were down, and spotlights of snowflake shapes danced across the rink. Beneath the stands, a hum of energy was felt in the air within the Players' Club, the lights there darkened as well as skaters lined up close to the doorway.
The trio of Men's Singles winners stood closest to the exit, looking out into the near-darkness of the arena as they waited for things to get started. Yurio looked particularly excited for once, his thin frame covered by tattered and ragged-looking vestments. In his hands, he carried a full-head-covering mask and hat, which looked rather eerie with its pointed ears and demonic-looking face.

"This is going to be so badass." He said, bouncing up onto his toes and down again repeatedly, "I never thought I'd be this excited for a Christmas thing."

"If you're going to do something once, it's worth doing right the first time." Otabek agreed, himself dressed rather 'normally' by comparison in a black suit, the jacket unbuttoned, a navy blue button-down shirt beneath it, and a dark tie hanging from his neck, "I don't think I'll be able to listen to regular Christmas music again after this."

"Me neither."

"Only in America." Yuri laughed, looking back over his shoulder to see familiar and excited faces behind himself, "Shouldn't be long now."

Just as he finished, the sound of an orchestra began to play, trumpets and other horns blasting an official proclamation for all to hear. The snowflake shapes on the ice morphed into standard circles, and the ISU logo appeared in the center of the purple-shadowed rink.

"Ladies...and Gentlemen," The announcer could be heard overhead suddenly.

"Nice call." Yurio huffed, lifting the mask to put over his head then and tucking the 'neck' edges into his costume mantle, "I'll see you guys out there in a minute." He finished, disappearing to the back of the group, where about 5 others were putting together similar outfits to his own.

"Welcome...to the Gala...!"

The crowd was starting to cheer, and the spotlights on the ice faded out, leaving only a line of light along the bottom inside edge of the rink-wall. That was the cue for the first wave of skaters to get onto the ice, and Otabek lead the way with Yuri close behind, and the rest of the non-demonoid ensemble. In the dark, they went out to take their positions, standing in something of a grid formation in two groups, one at each end of the rink. Once they were still, a single bright spotlight descended towards the Players' Club doors, and an announcer in a fancy tuxedo stepped out carrying a wireless microphone. The light shone down over him, and followed him out onto the ice.

"We have witnessed these last few days of absolutely incredible skating, and celebrated together the achievements of the winners of this Grand Prix Final of Figure Skating." He said excitedly, gliding around the ice, weaving through the 'grid' of darkened athletes, "We have come together to witness the highest level of skill and talent that the sport has to offer, and reveled in the beauty of this beloved art. Tonight, however...we would like to add another chapter to this story, and show the world what else figure skating can be. It's emotive elegance, fun, charisma, and style...but more than that, beyond the high stakes of competition...how it can be entertainment! Tonight...let us bear witness to the Exhibition of Champions!"

The audience went wild with excitement, and the announcer bowed out to leave the rink again. The lights seemed to get even darker then; even the red ribbons of light in the stands where the electronic banners glowed were dimmed, leaving only the line of light within the rink wall. The skaters looked like shadows where they stood, still as clear water, waiting for their cues.

['Carols of Chaos - Metal Christmas Album' - Start at 22:33 for 'What Child is This']
As the music gently began, the line of skaters closest to center slowly rotated in place, gesturing one arm up and then out across the rink to their counterparts on the opposite side. The lights slowly faded on, casting a blue-purple hue over the rink. The second row of skaters then followed suit, rotating in place and making the same gesture. They then all rotated together, one skater from each row reaching back to take the hand of the one behind them, and moving into a larger circle before breaking off in wide arcs and heading towards center.

In six lines, the rows moved through one another, gliding forward on their right blades, left held out behind them as they reached forward with their right hands, merging and emerging again with the group from the opposite side of the rink, then circling around again to 'face off' in place. They seemed to turn where they stood, pirouetting like ballerinas on the ice, each in their own style...some lowering down to slowly rotate in a sit-spin, others reaching high for the roof, but eventually coming to pause in their starting positions again.

One group broke away to their left, the other to the right, arching along the longest edge of the rink into halves of a big circle and merging into two smaller circles. The inner group moved clockwise, the outer counter-clockwise, each gracefully waving their arms in slow, billowy undulations. Four skaters from the inner group withdrew to the center of the circle, taking one another's' hands and facing out as they leaned back.

[End 'What Child is This' at 23:16 and go to 'Carol of the Bells' starting at 0:35]

The music suddenly became more intense then, and six impish-looking creatures came rushing out from rink-side, scattering the elegant circles like hawks chasing after lesser birds. They morphed into six smaller groups, each one being 'lead' by the demonic figure, weaving and gliding over the ice and through one another until...

[0:52]

...Smoke started rising dramatically in huge billowing torrents from the Players' Club doorway, enveloping half the ramp to the ice in a veil of blue and grey. A few seconds later, the groups were made to stop in an arc facing the rink door, the imps out in front and their hapless hostages behind. Eyes went wide as a burst of flame rose up on each side of the door, and a huge, hulking shadow emerged from behind.

Two enormous, forward facing and backward-curving horns that poked through tattered holes in a dirty, grey-trimmed hat, a long dirty beard under a distorted mouth full of long fangs, a massive hunched-over body, and dragging behind it in one clawed hand, a huge empty sack. The creature paused at the edge of the ice, and the imps jumped around excitedly, crouching down on toe-picks and jumping up again in celebration.

[1:08]

The Demon of Christmas, Krampus, stepped forward onto the ice, gliding along as though floating, and the skaters flocked away, leaving their captors stunned and surprised. The smaller demons suddenly gave chase after them, and the hulking behemoth stalked around center, threatening each of them with the sack at the end of its long, thin arm.

The normal-looking skaters clung to the rink wall at each end of the arena, while the impish creatures found themselves bathed in spotlights, each one leaping into various flying spins while Krampus hazed them all from center. The six then moved to form a big circle around the larger creature, twizzling and twisting until suddenly stopping.

[1:47]
The music changed again, quieter than before but still intimidating. The imps turned to face away from Krampus, gesturing at the skaters still huddling on the walls, daring them to come forward and put on some display.

They took the taunt for what it was, and burst forward. Pairs gathered up together and were bathed under spotlights as they began lifting one another into the air, spinning in place or doing Death Spirals. The solo skaters got closer to the ring of imps, each one putting on a display of combination spins of their own, some even rounding to the sides and vaulting into different jumps. Before long, it seemed to become a battle, with the six smaller demons joining the larger group, and Krampus skulked around the rink's edge, moving into center and circling through different groups as though in judgment.

Eventually though, they all formed up together, facing the same direction with their hulking leader-demon out in front. It turned around to face them...and knelted.

[4:06]

The skaters all faced the defeated creature, looking at its bowed, horned head. The six lesser creatures knelted towards it in turn, hands and knees on the ice. The chime of sleigh-bells echoed throughout the arena, and eventually, the music faded out entirely, and the lights died down all around again.

With the audience's loud cheering, the athletes took a moment to catch their breath.

"Ladies and Gentlemen...ISU International Skating Union is proud to present your Champions for the evening..."

Even in the dark, it was easy to find their way in front of the Krampus demon, a spotlight suddenly shining down just in front of it. Various athletes were called out by nationality, award status, and name, each one passing through the light and being followed by another for a few seconds before they moved back towards the exit to rink-side. As the names of the imps were called, they cast off their mask-hats and tossed them towards the wall to be picked up by event staff, emerging under the light and waving to the crowds.

The Men's winners regrouped at the mouth of the Players's Club, looking out onto the ice, and towards the face of the still-kneeling Krampus. The last of the other skaters had finally come off the frost a few moments later, leaving none on the ice but the motionless demon.

"...And...last but not least...representing Russia..."

The crowd went wild with expectation...there was only one skater who hadn't been seen or called.

"...Viktor...Nikiforov!"

Coming out from under the ragged coat and rags of the behemoth, the silver legend emerged, leaving the standing husk of his previous 'outfit' on its own. The light, and the cacophony of excited howls and cheers, came over him like waves, and he bowed rather dramatically in all directions before finally 'stepping' back inside the Krampus hollow. Like clockwork, he made the thing rise back up from kneeling, and spun around the ice a few more times before heading to the rink wall after the others.

Just as Viktor got the hulking ensemble out of the way, Yurio slipped by and stepped back onto the frost, changed completely into a different outfit from the dingy one he'd worn for the opening performance. However, in the dark, it was impossible to see what it was. He found his way towards
center and took position.

"The first performance of the Gala...your Men's Singles Bronze Medalist...Yuri...Plisetsky!"
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED NINE

When Yurio heard his name being called for the first time, it was a mad dash from nearly behind the Krampus costume to get to the light shining down in front of it. But, he cast off his hat-mask and rushed forward, hoping he didn't look too obviously sweaty as he greeted the audience, turned around, and made his way back to rink-side. His count-down had begun, and he knew he had roughly four minutes before the rest of the Gala ensemble had been introduced before he'd be expected back on the ice for the night's first solo performance.

While the lights in the Players' Club were lowered, he could still see enough to make his way through the open doorway without tripping over himself or running into anyone. Yakov had been waiting anyway, and handed him his garment bag as he hurried by, like a relay racer taking the baton from the previous runner.

He hurriedly locked himself into the solitary bathroom and threw off the grubby-looking costume he'd worn over most of his own, revealing an ensemble that was its polar opposite; an entirely white and rather form-fitting one-piece. Rummaging into the garment bag though, he pulled out a few ancillary accessories. Over his skates, and pulled up to nearly his knees, were a pair of red padded boot-covers, darker burgundy red at the base and rising up into a flame pattern that moved into a lighter, more crimson red, with black at the top. He pulled over his head a black raiment that clung to his torso, sleeveless, looking like woven, overlapping straps. Over that came a red vest-like mantle, thick like armor where it came in front of his chest, adorned with a large, circular, red-purple gem in the center to unite the two panels. Above that, a black feather mantle with a purple, Victorian-style frilled collar. Forearm and hip pads to match the vest went on next, attached to golden belts, and a two-pronged jester's hat to sit atop his golden hair. The long tails of the hat went down past his waist, with thick rings of the same crimson and burgundy red as the boots. A golden, metallic, masquerade-style half-mask was placed over his eyes and cheeks, with feathers at the pointed ends, and a purple-red gem set between them, just above the bridge of his nose. Finally, he pulled on what looked like gold-plated gloves, each finger articulated and tapered into pointed claw-like projections.

He caught a quick glance of himself in the mirror as he moved away to leave the room, and noted how vivid the green hue of his eyes seemed, standing out from the gold and red. There wasn't much time to admire himself though, so he just smirked and came rushing back outside again, heading over to hand the empty garment bag to Yakov and sneak back towards the doorway.

Yuri and Otabek had already had their names called and were waiting nearby, though Yuri looked on with zeal as he waited for the shocked response of the audience to the big reveal at the end. He caught sight of movement out the corner of his eye and spotted the Russian teen coming up towards them, "Oh wow! That looks really great, Yuri!"

"Spasibo." He answered, "How many are left?"

"Three and then Viktor."

"I would have to draw first when I have to do a costume change..." Yurio huffed, "Oh well."

"Normally I draw first." The older skater pointed out as a duo of Pair Skaters shuffled by, "Minamikun would laugh every time it happened."

"Who?"
"Ah...the... Uh..." Yuri stammered, surprised that the teen would've forgotten, "Well, he was a rival of yours in Juniors. He was at the wedding party, too. The real small kid with the blonde and red hair."

"Oh... I think I remember." Yurio looked up a bit, as though trying to picture the skater, "...Well, maybe not."

"...Maybe he'll turn up in a big event soon." Yuri smiled and shrugged, looking out onto the ice again as his husband's name was finally called out overhead, and the audience went wild. They all watched quietly as Viktor made his presence known, waving and bowing before ducking back inside the big Krampus ensemble to haul it off towards the Player's Club.

The younger Russian waved as he slipped out through the doors, avoiding notice as he moved through the dark to get back onto the ice in the dark.

Viktor came to replace him soon after, wheeling the monstrous 'costume' into the lounge area. Unable to really see much by then, he stuck his silver-haired head out from within the creature's robes, pushing the beard aside, looking around to get his bearings.

"You really had way too much fun in that thing." Yuri commented, coming up alongside it as the lights started slowly getting brighter finally, though only coming on enough for people to be able to see where they were going, and not distract from the darkness in the arena. Curtains were pulled down to block the doorway, and the lights got brighter after that.

The Russian just smirked though, "How many people get to run around wearing one of these things?" He nudged his head up at the demon, "You should see the inside."

"How do you even see while in there?" The younger skater wondered, taking an extended hand to pull him within the massive 'costume.' Viktor stepped back a bit to give him room, and Yuri turned around to face forward, realizing the entire slack-jawed mouth was just one big hole, giving him an easy view outside, "...Oh."

"They made the frame from aluminum I think. It's pretty easy to cart around."

"The first performance of the Gala...your Men's Singles Bronze Medalist...Yuri...Plisetsky!"

The audience was cheering again, and Yuri was about to step outside the proverbial 'hut' to find a place to watch from, but he paused when he felt hands settle on his hips. Fingers curled around and pulled him backward, until he was flush against the Russian's front, and he felt lips on the side of his neck. That just made him smile though, "Viktor..."

"It won't be much longer..." The silver legend whispered, nibbling on an ear while he was there, "You managed to slack my hunger earlier, but..."

"Your appetite for me is insatiable."

"You did become the tastiest pork cutlet bowl in the world last year." His hands roamed forward and up, pressing flat against the man's chest to pull him closer, "I can't resist a good katsudon."

"Mh..." Yuri drew in a reluctant breath, but reached up to take hold of his partner's fingers before they could go much further, "People are going to start to wonder what we're doing in here."

"Let them."

"You would say that..." The younger man answered, finding himself being turned around where he
stood, one arm curling around his right side as a finger from the other traced his jawline, "But..."

"But?"

Yuri rolled forward on his blade-guards and allowed the man one kiss, even if it went on for a while.

_Everyone...please stay in your seats...the show will begin momentarily..._

Eyes opened just enough to see, but Yuri rolled back again, "Come along, _Viktor-kōchi_..."

The Russian sighed, rubbing the back of his head as his free hand was taken and he found himself being lead back out of the darkened space, "You know just what to say to spoil the mood."

Brown eyes turned back to look at the man, but Yuri smiled anyway as he made their way over to the curtained exit to rink-side, "I need you to settle down so we can do our skate later. I _did_ promise to make it up to you later though..."

"_Later_ is so far from _now_ though..." The silver legend comically whined.

['Left Behind' - DA Games (Nightcore remix) - You can also play the original at 1.25x speed on Google Chrome, but it sounds kinda weird. Un-altered, the song is way too slow.]

The Russian Tiger had his face lowered, his shadow creeping out in five different directions from the lights above. Just as the first lyrics began though, he whipped his head up, took a step forward with the right foot, and extended that same hand out in an arc.

_Behold the horrors, they lurk beneath the shadows of remorse_

_You wouldn't know, of course_

He shook his finger and his head, sliding his left blade out around himself to turn around and start moving away from his starting place.

_But I force a new Judgment Day_  
_On this day you will repay,_  
_Your respects to all that may,_

He kicked out and twizzled a few times, his feet clicking against the ice and moving his frame to the 'bounce' of the funhouse beat.

_Lurk in between your mind, and mankind._

A finger came up to his head as he glided backward towards one corner of the rink, moving that hand out to point at the audience as he slid through the curve in an outside spread-Eagle.

_So have a seat and be afraid,_  
_Fear's about to commence the final ritual_

He kicked off into a triple Axel, followed by a single Toe-Loop, using the momentum to continue backward as he landed. He lowered down and brought his free leg slightly forward for balance as he hydroplaned, extending his arms out to the side.

_One body's all we need for this to be complete._

He leaned to the side then, one hand touching down to the ice to bring his glide into a tighter formation.
And when the day, begins to take form
The free leg bent and a toe-pick grinded into the ice, frost shards breaking away as the colorful teen came to a sudden stop, and he settled on one knee.

You won’t be leaving those doors
You’ll only live with us, inside the darkness as we tear you up inside!

He pointed into the darkness, then pulled his fist back, roughly patting his chest as he rose back up onto his toe-picks, legs crossed beneath himself. He then jumped up in place...

I WAS LEFT BEHIND!

...uncrossed his legs, landing with his feet apart, and his right arm up and extended in front of himself.

All this torture will unwind
I was never all that kind
If you were to rewind, then you’d find

He twisted and lowered down as he started sliding out of place again, picking up speed as he turned and pivoted. By the end of the stanza, he’d flipped around backwards again with a mohawk turn and was getting ready to...

I was left behind!

Toe-pick into a triple Flip.

Take your turn to run and hide, I will catch you all the time.
This night no longer shines, your tears divine, you’ll now be mine!

Finding a less-crowded spot along the narrow wall to either side of the Club’ main entrance, a wall where there would normally be benches for idling hockey players, Yuri finally ended his march. He glanced aside as the blonde was still flying across the ice, gesturing out possessively at the audience with both hands, but then turned back to where Viktor was finally catching up to him, fidgeting with the blade-guards he’d only finally found.

Behold the terrors,
You won’t believe what I have done to you.
I’ve made it look brand new, oh how cute!

Yurio set a finger on his chin and bobbed his head before twisting off on black blades again, weaving in wide arcs as he picked up speed.

But don’t digress, I’m the ringmaster you see,

Once Viktor had finally settled his blade-guards, he reached a hand out to re-find his partner in the dark, feeling fingers take hold of his own to pull him along. He found himself pressed up against the wall, just beneath a guard-rail, behind which, spectators were sitting only a few feet away. It was hard to see anything but what was happening on the ice though, which served him just as well to not be bothered for the moment.

In this horror game you flee.
I take up every shadow, believe me.
The silver Russian soon felt as his slightly-shorter husband came up in front of him, leaning back against his chest as his arms were pulled around that smaller frame, hands neatly folded over his own where they came to rest on the skater's stomach.

*Now have a seat, and grab your light.*
*Tears begin to run you dry, but darkened thoughts are the common ground I give myself to be complete.*

Yurio vaulted through a two triple-Axel jump sequence, pausing at the opposite end of the rink and digging a toe-pick in.

*Be as it may, our courtesy remains.*

Left hand went to his hip as the right gestured up and arced over to his chest as he bowed his head.

*So we offer you our darkest passion,*

He pushed forward, gliding along on the right blade as both hands came in front of himself, cupped together before extending forward, fingers splaying out as he picked up speed.

*Take off that blindfold that heals*
*And reveal your soul that dies!* 

The Russian gestured more aggressively then, his body moving through a 3-turn to flip backwards, legs crossing over one another as he readied for...

*I WAS LEFT BEHIND!*

Quad Loop, triple Loop, triple Toe-loop.

*All this torture will unwind*
*I was never all that kind*
*If you were to rewind, then you'd find*

After a brief glide, Yurio threw himself into a flying camel spin, arms held out to the side as the two long tails of his hat flew behind him.

*I was left behind!*
*Take your turn to run and hide,*

He pulled his frame in close for a cannon-ball variant, then grabbed hold of his blade as that leg swing down to clear himself and position itself behind him instead, torso angling upward as a free hand rose up for the half-Biellmann.

*I will catch you all the time.*
*This night no longer shines,*

The blade was let go, and Yurio pulled his arms in close to his frame, spinning faster through the scratch spin.

*Your tears divine, you'll now be mine!*

He stopped suddenly, digging in a toe-pick as the rest of his thin body continued to twist a little.

YOU DARE BRING YOUR FILTH INTO MY LAIR?
One hand went up to point accusingly at the unseen audience in the dark before himself, then coming back as both hands gestured to present the rink.

**WELL THEN, LET US DESCEND!**
*Reborn again!*

He suddenly started moving backwards again, lowering himself half-way to hydroblading again as both hands were open and gesturing for those in front of him to follow.

*Our suits are now refined.*

Yuri tapped his thumb idly against his spouse's hand to follow the beat of the music, eyes following the teen intently. He suddenly remembered something Yurio had told him earlier in the day though, and tilted his head where he'd been resting it against the front of Viktor's shoulder, "Yurio said there was some surprise that he'd worked out at the last second, close to the end of his program. I think it's coming up soon..."

"Surprise?" The Russian echoed, "I wonder what he's planning...?"

*Breathing new life, inside our tombs at night!*

Triple Lutz, swivel, triple Flip, followed by a long backwards glide down the center of the rink.

*You have no idea what we've been through,*
*Time and time again, don't hold it onto our deadliest demise,*

As the teen moved, like before, he gestured out at the audience, drawing them into the performance more and more.

*We can't keep you alive!*

He hopped through a half-Loop and then suddenly paused though, bowling slightly and holding out one hand towards the darkened rink wall...and someone sitting on it. A spotlight that had been following the blonde kept moving even as he stopped, pausing only as it shone down on that spot, revealing none other than the Russian Punk's latest partner in crime; Nikki. She wore a purple and black variant of the same two-pronged hat that Yurio had for himself, and a microphone in her hand.

Yuri and Viktor both perked their heads up to spot her, "...Oh!"

"*All this torture will unwind, take it from our broken crimes, we have no place to go...*" She sang, legs crossed casually where she perched on the upper lip of the wall, "*Take your turn to run and flee, but death's your destiny!*" She leaned forward then as Yurio started easing closer on the ice, and one delicate finger from the girl's free hand came to rest under his chin, "*Stop holding back from me...*"

He suddenly flipped around, his back to her.

**THEY BURNED IT ALL DOWN!**

Moving forward again, the spotlights all followed him like before, converging on him as he glided through a layback Ina Bauer.

*They burned us alive!*
*THEY MADE US LOOK LIKE CLOWNS!*

His hands were on his head, as though in a gesture of anguish, the tails of his hat dragging along the
ice as he moved around the curve of the rink in a cantilever.

*Our souls arise!*

Arms reached high before he swung them around in a circle to help thrust himself back upright, twisting over himself to descend into a kneeling position on one knee, rotating slightly as he moved along.

*But like the Jester said to the King,*

*There is bad news that I bring!*

He pointed to himself before throwing both arms into the air and falling to his back on the ice.

*NOW LET THE NIGHT BEGIN!*

*(I was left behind!)*

*All this torture will unwind*

Yurio was quickly back up onto his feet, twisting his hips and swiveling his way across the rink.

*I was never all that kind*

*If you were to rewind, then you'd find*

*I was left behind!*

He vaulted into a quad Salchow, then pushed into something of a step-sequence, feet a blur on the frost as he twisted and turned from one end of the rink to the other.

*Take your turn to run and hide,*

*I will catch you all the time.*

*This night no longer shines,*

*Your tears divine, you'll now be mine!*

He paused then, returning to center, with all spotlights shining down on him from all different directions.

*We hope you enjoyed the show...*  
*...Within your GRAVE down below!*

The teen gestured up, and then down, rotating in place as he lowered to sitting. As the chimes of a child's toybox filled the arena, the blonde laid down on his back. He crossed his ankles, then his arms over his chest, and remained still there until the music came to an end.

The audience cheered mightily for a few seconds before Yurio allowed himself to splay out, waving his arms and legs as though making a snow-angel on the ice before finally pushing to sit up again and waved.

Viktor was clapping his hands in front of his husband's tummy, "That was different." He mused.

Yuri clapped as well, "I really wasn't expecting Nikkita to be part of it...but I guess there's precedent with him." He supposed, leaning back against his partner again as the teen rose up to his feet and made his grateful bows before starting to come back to rink-side, "Otabek jumped into his Exhibition at the last second last year, too."

"Otabek didn't sing though."

"True..." Yuri huffed a laugh, "I wonder what her dad thinks."
"...She said she was just going to the Players' Club to watch..." Mikhail lamented from the stands, slouching deeply in his seats, "Those two have barely known each other for a few days and they're already scheming like this."

Minako pat his head reassuringly, "I actually think it's kind of fun. I wish my Yuri had friends like that when he was younger. Yura's really coming out of his shell to have people his own age around."

"I've created a monster."
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED TEN

Finding her way through the darkness and the crowd was a feat, but Nikki eventually found the final guard-rail that separated the audience from the rink-side holding area where event staffers and a few competitors were waiting. She squinted her eyes through the dark, hoping to recognize someone's silhouette against what dim light was coming out from the Players' Club, but that seemed unlikely. There were too many people. Her fingers clasped the bar in front of her, and she looked past it, thinking she could just hop down...but found herself balking at that idea, as the space below the ledge was pitch black and she couldn't tell how far down it went.

Attention was already focusing on the pair of Ice Dancers that had gone into the rink, spotlights shining all around, but never quite coming off the frost. It was an incredible tease, for light to be so close, yet so far away.

"Nikki?"

She blinked in surprise and cast her eyes in the direction of the voice, seeing a figure coming towards her, but not knowing who it was.

"Your dad's gonna be worried if he finds out you're running around the stadium in the dark by yourself." The voice went on.

"Who's there? I can't tell over the crowd..."

No answer came immediately, but within a few moments, a bright light suddenly shot on, tiny at its source bit as luminescent as the sun itself, for one whose eyes had acclimated to the dark. The light angled to the floor quickly though.

"Whoops, sorry, should've thought to lower it first."

"Who are you talking to?" Another voice asked, "Yurio's waiting."

"My youngest cousin decided to come this way." Viktor answered, turning his phone up to shine the light towards himself from below, "Fourteen is a bit young to be running around alone."

"Oh! Cousin Viktor!" Nikki suddenly realized, "I couldn't recognize your voice! Sorry!"

"It's fine. It's pretty loud in here." He answered, stepping closer, even as nearby fans heard the teen and were starting to gawk, trying to get a look at the legendary skater, "I guess you want over the railing or something."

"That was the idea...I'm stuck though." Nikki admitted nervously, fingers still clinging to the metal bar.

"Stuck?"

"I can't tell how high the level is compared to the floor you're on."

"About three feet."

Silence answered.
"What's the problem? You need a hand?"

"Y...Yeah..." She answered meekly, managing to get over the railing easily enough on her own, but not getting much farther than that, "...Otabek caught me last time, but I could at least see how far the fall was before I let go of the bar."

Viktor stepped the last few paces between himself and the girl, using the flashlight on his phone to find her waist and snuck his arm behind it, pulling her off the wall by leaning the teen against himself and set her down, "Sounds like you're scared of heights...or heights in the dark."

"Both." Nikki answered quickly, clinging to the much taller figure, "Anything higher than my knees is too high, especially when I can't see where I'm going."

"Wow~" The Russian laughed, "You would've hated the Calgary Tower then."

"I did." The younger figure stated nervously, following along as Viktor turned where he stood and started walking towards the Lounge entrance, both of her arms still clinging around his waist, "A thousand wild horses couldn't get me out of the elevator once we got to the top. Just seeing the cityscape from that high up...oh I'm getting dizzy thinking about it..." She turned her face against the man's hip, forcing him to stop for a moment, and clenched her eyes shut.

Yuri quirked a brow, but stepped to their other side, "That was a big surprise to see you get to be part of Yuri's exhibition earlier." He said, trying to get the girl's mind off her nausea, "How long have you guys been planning that?"

"Ahhh..." She started, lifting her grey-green eyes, and seeing that they were right next to the curtained entrance, "Since yesterday? I complained about papa wanting to call it an early night, and Yura tried to cheer me up by telling me what his song was. It was really late before he got the idea to have me sit in at the end though. He said that he had Otabek do the same thing last year, where Otabek kind of stood at the edge of the rink for a bit role in that show. I don't even have skates here though, so..."

Viktor pushed the curtain aside, and the trio slipped within, leaving the rink and the chill behind them. Scanning the area, they spotted the Russian Tiger not too far away, putting blade-guards onto his skates, and started heading for him. Yakov was nearby as well, and caught sight of them approaching.

"Where'd you find time to get a hat just like his though?" Yuri wondered, "Did you just happen to find one?"

The teen girl shook her head, the long tails of her purple and black jester's hat waggling behind her, "Nope! I made it!"

"...Eh?"

"Papa rented a limo for the day, so after I sorted him and Minako out, I told the driver to take us to a craft store. This thing took maybe an hour to throw together." She pulled it off her head, despite her hair getting messed up in the process, and turned it inside-out, pointing to the hand-stitched seams, "See?"

"Wow!" Yuri said excitedly, reaching for the hat to get a better look, "This is really good for such short notice. Viktor said we should get a dragon-tail hat for your dad. Maybe you could make one."

"Why a dragon-tail?" Nikki wondered, putting the hat back into place, pulling it down to just above her ears.
"Viktor already has one. We joked at NHK that him and Mikhail are like dragons...Viktor hoarding gold medals, and your dad hoarding cash."

The teen girl's eyes lit up excitedly, "That's a great idea! I could make a whole bunch and sell them on Etsy!"

"...How much would you charge for something like that?" Yuri wondered.

"...Maybe $35...?"

"If I wanted one, do I get a family discount?"

Nikki just gawked at the skater, fingers still holding to the rim of the felt hat.

Yuri was too deep in thought suddenly to notice, "...What am I to you anyway...? Cousin-in-law...?"

He put a finger on his chin as he wondered on...and felt a tight, albeit wet hug wrap around him.

Blinking in confusion, he looked aside to see the silver-haired teen latched to him, "...Nikki...? Why are you crying...?"

"I always wanted a big family...this is the greatest day of my life."

"He's turning blue." Yurio commented, pulling the feather-tipped golden mask from his face, "He can't breathe."

"What?" Nikki asked, whipping her head around to look at him, oblivious to what he'd said as comical tears ran down her face like rivers from her eyes.

"I can't breathe."

Yuri stuttered, "V-Vik..."

The elder Russian had a devious look on his face as he leaned closer, fingers primed and ready to-

Mikhail sat upright in his seat, looking left and right, and feeling at the back of his jacket, "...That was weird..."

"What was weird?" Minako wondered. Mari and Viktoria leaned forward to gape at him in confusion.

"Did something bite you, pipaw?" The silver teen wondered, pulling a blue sucker-pop out of her mouth long enough to look the man over.

"I felt a prickle down my spine just now. Like a million voices cried out in terror and were suddenly silenced." He answered.

"Uh oh..."

"What?" Minako twisted around to look back at the girl, "What happened? That sounds like a movie quote."

"It is. It's also his 'dad radar' going off." Viktoria answered, "Like when you sneeze if someone is talking about you behind your back. Something happened to Nikki. I'll text the skater boys."

"...Skater boys?" Minako and Mari repeated in tandem, turning to look at one another at the absurdity of it.

"Yeah." Viktoria mused to herself, pulling her phone out, "They all skate and they're guys. So...they're all skater boys...we said cya later boys." She said in a sing-song voice, laughing at her
In the Comerica Lounge, Viktor and Yuri were on their arses on the floor, looking up in stunned horror. Before them, Yurio was trying to calm a red-faced Nikki down. Her big green eyes were watery from the tears.

"Good lord, what'd you do to her?" Yurio wondered skeptically, "The way she screamed, you might as well have gotten her in both kidneys."

"I just tickled her." Viktor answered nervously, "Maybe that was the wrong thing to do?"

"My ears are ringing..." Yuri said quietly, mostly to himself.

"I'm so sorry I'm so sorryyy!" The silver teen lamented, practically crawling all over the two downed skaters, patting one of their heads before slithering off to do the same thing to the other, "I'm really ultraticklish!"

"I've learned that." Viktor huffed, looking at where the teen had draped herself like a wet rag across his back and shoulders. Just as he was about to say something else though, he caught sight of a flash out the corner of his eyes, and turned to spot Yurio having taken a picture of them, "...What was that for...?" He wondered nervously.

"The peanut gallery is wondering if Nikki is okay. Apparently the old man's got a sense about her being in trouble." The blonde answered, the whole of his normally intimidating aura being squelched by the fact that he was still in his jester-like gala costume, sans the mask, "I was just gonna send a pic showing the devastation you've wrought."

"She kinda reminds me of Makkachin." Yuri commented idly, pointing at the girl, "The way she's leaning over your back like how he does sometimes."

"...Who's Makkachin...?" Nikki wondered, straightening out a bit, but staying where she was with her small arms clinging over the Russian's shoulders.

Viktor's eyes lit up, and suddenly he had his phone out, "Who's Makkachin!? That's a great question! He's only the goodest boy in the whole world!"

"Would all of you get off the floor already?" Yakov grumbled.

Otabek finally came back by then, sipping at a straw sitting in the mouthpiece of a 7-Up can, with another one in his other hand, "...I feel like I missed something..."

"You didn't hear the shriek?" Yurio wondered, idly looking over a shoulder at the older skater and quickly swiping the second soda, "It was loud enough to wake the dead."

"I really missed something. Who shrieked and why?"

"She did." The teen pointed at his younger 'sister,' "Viktor tried to tickle her so she'd stop squeezing the life out of Katsudon."

Otabek knew there was more to the story, but he just shook his head, "You've gotten yourself all wrapped up in a weird family."

"I know." Yurio answered...pausing...and then smirking, "Innit great?" He laughed, "Hasetsu is going to be way more fun now that it's not just those two old farts floating around."
"...Old farts...!?" Yuri and Viktor both said in disbelief, "Who're you calling old!?!"

"You two, obviously."

"Wait..." Viktor paused, putting a finger on his lip, holding himself up on his knees and free elbow where he'd eventually found his way to a nearby couch. Nikki was behind him, wedged in the far corner, and Yuri was...well, beneath him, squished down in the other corner, but with Viktor looming overhead. The Russian's voice got quieter then, and he cupped his hand over his mouth, peeking back at Yakov over his fingers, "If you're talking about that openly...does that mean Yakov already knows about your plans?"

"Da." Yurio nodded, "He found out when we were all at the outdoor ice rink."

"You're all terrible at keeping secrets." Yakov said, coughing slightly to remind the skaters that he was still standing there, "You should all know by now that I eventually find out everything."

Viktor suddenly looked a bit sheepish, "...Everything...?"

"Everything." The elder coach nodded.

"V-Viktor..." Yuri huffed from where he was still squished down into the corner of the couch, his partner pressing him down even further into it.

"I dunno... I think I can keep a secret pretty well if I want to." The Russian went on, taunting his former coach to try him out.

"When you were 17, you once tried to change the part in your hair so your right eye would be covered instead of your left." The older man started.

Viktor was unconvinced, "My hair isn't really a secret."

"No, but the fact that you ran your face into a door and gave yourself a black eye, so you tried for a week to cover it with your hair, was."

The skater's eyes got small and white in horror, "H-How did you know that!? No one knew that!"

"And you gave Katsudon such a hard time after he collided with the rink wall before." Yurio huffed, sipping at his can of soda loudly.

Blue eyes shot up at him, "That was different!"

The teen just pointed at him with a finger extending away from the can, "For a guy who ran to Japan like his ass was on fire, you wouldn't even hug him after it happened. Even I've seen the pictures of him jumping at you."

"Despite the blood trickling down Yuri's face, seeing his coach's arms extended towards him was an even bigger reward than whatever score he might've gotten. Silver blades scratched across the ice as he tried to get to the man as quickly as skates could carry him, and he lunged, "Viktoooooorr!"

"Oh! Watch the nose-bleed!" The silver legend was out of the way in a blur, leaving nothing but open air where he once stood.

Unable to stop in time, Yuri crashed face-first to the floor, feet in the air as people gawked and gaped at his folly.
"Oh...I remember." Viktor mused, smiling innocently, and not noticing where his partner's legs were kicking and flailing.

"You forgot." Yurio pressed his free hand to his face in dismay. He peeked between his fingers to where Otabek was just quietly watching, "Aren't you up next?"

"After Sara." The Kazakh answered, leaning back to see on the televisions who was on the ice at that moment, "She's up after these Pair Skaters."

The younger skater nodded and went to reach for where his team jacket had been slung against the back of the nearby couch, pulling it up from where Viktor had halfway been leaning against it, "Let's go then. I want a decent seat."

"Oh! I wanna come!" Nikki hollered, raising a hand before clambering over the pile of skaters to get off the couch and follow.

"...But I was gonna show you pictures of Makkachin!" Viktor lamented, looking halfway heartbroken where he peeked over the armrest, hiding behind the fingers of one hand as the other held his phone up.

"You can show me later! I think you need to let Yuri come up for air for now though!" She laughed, pointing back at him and going with the two younger skaters through the curtain.

"...Eh? Yuri?" The Russian repeated, lifting himself up a bit, and looking down to spot his breathless husband squashed into the corner of the seat with a rather comical, albeit unimpressed look on that pale face, "Yuri! How long have you been there?"

"I-I...t-trusted you..."

Viktor smiled sweetly, "I love you."

Yuri just grumbled.
Chapter 311

Chapter Notes

AO3 has gotten its coding weird. When I updated tonight, it posted Ch312 in the place of Ch311 and moved Ch311 to the spot Ch312 should've been in. The comments aren't corresponding to the updates they were meant for either. I've fixed it for now, but if AO3 undoes whatever they did before and the chapters are showing up in the wrong order again, please just let me know.

CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED ELEVEN

Going from the bright lights of the Comerica Lounge to the darkened arena was like walking into a black hole. The Pair Skaters on the ice were doing their final bows before heading off, and the Ladies Bronze medalist, Sara Crispino, was getting ready to take their place. Her twin loitered nearby, looking as salty as ever that he, once again, and for the second year in a row, hadn't made it to the Grand Prix Final as a competitor.

The trio slipped by quietly, making their way to the opposite end of the waiting area on the edge of the rink wall from where Yuri and Viktor had been watching previously. From that side, there was a second doorway leading under the stadium, but it went behind the Players' Club rather than into it. From that side, there was no barrier wall preventing access to the seating area.

"There's a spot." Yurio said suddenly, pointing to a second row of seats just past the first set of stairs, just before the rink turned a corner. The trio made their way past the first row seats right up against the rink wall, many spectators barely realizing who was going by until they could see the outline of two sets of long-tailed jester hats flopping by, and suddenly everyone was raising their knees to make way, like the parting of the Red Sea. When they finally got to the seats the teen had spotted, Otabek waited to sit last, keeping to the aisle so he could leave more easily once Sara was done. She herself was setting blades to ice then, the spotlights shining down on her.

"Ladies and Gentlemen...your Women's Singles Bronze medalist, Italy's Sara Crispino...!"

Yurio took the inside-most spot, putting himself between the audience and his 'little sister,' and Otabek closed the gap on her other side, "This isn't too bad."

"Oh, that's one of the people that we saw at the outdoor rink the other day." Nikki pointed out, looking at the skater making loops on the ice, "She was with that other lady, the one that hefted you into the air." She teased, nudging Yurio with an elbow.

"Mila..." He grumbled.

"How do you know them?"

"Mila Babicheva is on the Russian team. We trained at the same rink together under Yakov." He answered simply, "That chick out there is Sara, and the two of them are friends."

"How come Mila lifts you up like a barbell?" The younger teen mused.

"Habit, I guess. She used to date a hockey player so she'd always want to show off that figure skaters
could be strong, too."

Sara stopped in the middle of the rink and took her position.

[The Judicator’ - Krale]

Yurio leaned forward slightly and gave the Kazakh a knowing, arrogant sort of smirk, "Mila also has a thing for Otabek."

The dark-eyed skater barely glanced over at him, the music playing loudly overhead, "I know."

That just deflated the teen's tease, "...Oh." He leaned back in his seat with a huff.

Nikki glanced between the two, but settled on the man to her left, "So I guess you're already with someone then if you're not interested in Mila?"

"Never said so." The Kazakh answered simply, eyes fixed on the ice, "It's just not something I'm thinking about right now. I'm focused on the sport."

"Yeah..." Yurio agreed, getting Nikki's attention back, "Figure skaters are only active for a short period of time. The jumps and twists are hard on our bodies so we wear down faster than other sports, even contact sports like hockey. If we don't focus all of our attention on what we're doing, we might not reach our potential before we have to retire."

"...Cousin Viktor's pretty old though and he still competes."

"Skaters don't really go past 30. He's turning 29 in a week and a half." The older teen explained, watching as Sara vaulted through a triple Toe-loop, triple Loop combo, "Viktor's said he wants to compete for one more year, but on style points rather than a strictly competitive lineup. He just wants to have fun, and see how far he can go."

"Is he competing in the Olympics?"

Yurio shrugged, "It would be a logistical nightmare for him. The Olympics are way different than these regular ISU events. If he goes to PyeongChang to compete, then he can't be Katsudon's coach. So, he has to pick between the two."

"How come you call him Katsudon anyway?" Nikki wondered then, jade eyes examining the blonde to her right, "You got all mad about me calling you Yura."

He grit his teeth, but then closed his eyes and sighed as he slouched a bit in his seat, "It's a pun on his favorite food and his old last name, from before him and Viktor got hitched; Katsuki."

In the Players' Club, the pair of skaters were going through the motions of some last-second choreography practice. Yuri had to stop though, sneezing unexpectedly. He snuffled and shrugged though, then looked back over at his spouse and motioned that they continue.

Yurio pulled his right leg up, hooking the heel of his blade-guard onto the front of the plastic seat to hold it up, "Back when we all first started being around each other, it got confusing that him and I had the same first name. His sister decided to call me Yurio, and it stuck, but I hated it. Back then, I hated him too, and I'd even told him that he should retire since there wasn't room for two Yuris in the Senior bracket. That was before Viktor became his coach though...he was garbage back then."

"That's not nice..."
"You said you saw Viktor's shows at NHK last weekend." The Russian Punk stated flatly, tilting his head back against his seat and training his own green eyes on the silver-haired girl next to him, "Viktor's Free Skate score alone was higher than Katsudon's final total at the Grand Prix in Sochi."

"Oh..." Nikki looked down at where her small hands were bunched up on her lap, but then looked back the way she had before, "Still, there's ways of saying he did badly without saying he was 'garbage.'"

Yurio had no answer and just looked back out at Sara's show.

"So I guess you just started calling him Katsudon instead of by his real name because you didn't want to be the only one subject to a nickname?" The girl went on, "That way there wouldn't be any Yuris in the bracket."

"I guess." He said simply, leaning his upturned knee aside, "Plus it's weird to say your own name when you're referring to someone else. Calling him 'Katsudon' is better than what I used to call him, at any rate."

"...What did you used to call him?" Nikki raised a brow skeptically.

"Something I dare not repeat, given how I can feel the slap coming..." He leaned slightly away from the girl then, keeping half an eye on her.

"Tell me. If you haven't called him that in a while then I won't be mad at you."

"...Viktor and I both called him a version of 'piggy.' Cuz he was fat when we got the Hasetsu the first time."

Nikki made a face, but it was a mix of confusion and disgust, "...Viktor called him 'piggy'?"

"Well, 'little piggy,' at any rate. He thought he was being funny. He wanted to motivate Yuri to lose the weight and get back into competition. He stopped when Yuri made it, so far as I'm aware."

Otabek suddenly pushed forward and rose up to standing, looking down at the two, "I'm gonna go. I'll come back after."

Yurio lifted his right hand and reached over Nikki's lap with his fingers curled into a fist, "We'll stay here then. Davai."

The Kazakh nodded and bumped his own knuckles against the younger skater's, "Thanks."

"Good luck!" The silver teen chirped, watching the older skater descend the stairs in the dark and head back the way they came. She turned back to Yurio after that though, the music above carrying on, "I'm glad you both stopped calling Yuri such mean names. It must've really hurt him, knowing what a softy he is even just from the few interactions I've had with him so far."

"I regret it." The blonde said flatly.

"Did you ever apologize?"

Yurio balked at that question, leaning away from her again to give a critical look, but then settled and roughly set his chin into the palm of his hand, holding it up with an elbow against the arm-rest away from her, "I've apologized for other things, but not that specifically."

The song above finally came to an end, and the audience raised applause, clapping and cheering as
the Ladies skater bowed and waved. She gracefully slid towards the rink exit, stepping past Otabek as she grabbed for blade-guards and a jacket.

"Next on the ice, your Men's Singles Silver Medalist...Kazakhstan's Otabek Altin!"

The congratulatory applause changed to a welcoming cheer, and the dark-horse moved out onto the ice, gliding around for a bit to get used to skating in the dim lighting before taking his place in center. Moments later, his music began playing overhead.

[The Spectre' - Alan Walker]

A techno-like ambiance filled the arena, rising and falling, then rising again. Otabek glided backwards and left, then broke away again in front of the rink-wall, making for center again. He arced around to line up with the center of the rink, and suddenly paused. With the deep boom in the music, his legs crossed, perched on toe-picks, right hand on the front of his hip as the left extended forward, palm up.

Hello, hello...
Can you hear me, as I scream your name?

The forward hand came back again, cupping behind his ear as he rotated in place, then moving backwards again as both arms came forward, spreading out to each side as he lowered his head.

Hello, hello...
Do you need me, before I fade away?

Coming up to the rounded corner of the rink, Otabek twisted over into an outside spread-Eagle, arms still outstretched as he passed through the arch.

Is this the place that I call home?

Forward-facing lean, and the skater threw himself into a triple Axel, landing with a metallic thunk against the ice and carrying on.

To find what I've become
Walk along the path unknown
We live, we love, we lie...

Yurio side-eyed the teen next to him, painfully aware of how she'd gone silent since his last words. It almost startled him when she moved slightly, reaching both hands up to pull the tails of her hat over the front of her shoulders, holding onto the tip of one and playing with it idly, eyes on the ice.

Deep in the dark, I don't need the light.
There's a ghost inside me.

Otabek had gone from a single-knee slide to rising back up again, hand reaching up towards the lights high above. He flipped around backwards, both hands folded over one another against his chest, body weaving to and fro as blades moved through cross-overs.

It all belongs to the other side...
We live, we love, we lie...

The music switched gears, the lyrics fading out as an electric chorus rose up in their place, energizing the entire arena. Otabek started moving a bit faster, the music demanding it, moving through a step sequence as the beat returned. By the end of it, the skater was gliding in reverse along the long
center-line of the rink, and clapped a toe-pick down in time with the new beat-sequence before throwing himself into a backwards-entry camel spin. The energy of the music carried him on like wind in the sails of a ship, desperate for more speed. The audience was wild with excitement, watching the athlete phase from the camel spin to a cannon-ball position, then out into something of a quarter-Biellann, holding the blade of one skate as his free hand rose up, but only lifting the raised leg to set his ankle behind a thigh before letting it go again and switching to a scratch spin.

The chorus begun again, and Otabek burst out of the spin quickly, gliding across the ice like he could fly.

"You got quiet on me," Yurio commented nervously, feeling like he was being judged even if Nikki wasn't looking at him, "Why?"

"Huh?" She turned, the tip of the hat-tail falling from her fingers, "I just didn't want to interrupt Beka's show."

The older teen deadpanned her, "...You're calling him that now too?"

"Who else calls him that?"

Hello, hello...
Nice to meet you, voice inside my head.

"...Your dad!" He argued, "Mila did too once!"

"Oh." Nikki laughed, "I actually learned if from papa. I just wasn't sure how Otabek would react to a nickname so I haven't said it when he's around."

Hello, hello...
I believe you, how can I forget?

"That's just like how people still call me 'Yurio' when they think I'm not in ear-shot." The blonde huffed.

"I think it's just easier for them, same as how you stick with 'Katsudon.'" Nikki shrugged, picking up the tail-tip of her hat again, "And how you refer to papa as 'old man' half the time. He's not that old."

Is this the place that I call home?
To find what I've become
Walk along the path unknown
We live, we love, we lie...

"Well, I'm not about to start calling him dad if that's what you're getting at." The blonde crossed his arms over his chest, finally lowering his leg back down so he could sit normally.

"None of us do, unless we're arguing with him. He'd probably choke if someone started referring to him as 'dad' normally." Nikki mused.

Yurio furrowed his brow, suddenly recalling an incident of just such a description.

...

"The world conspires against me." Viktor complained, putting his no-service phone away again, looking out the window as the Russian wilderness passed them by.
"It'll be maybe 20 minutes." Mikhail said from the driver's seat, Yurio in the front passenger seat beside him.

"Remind me again why I agreed to this?" The younger silver asked bitterly.

"Because the voice of reason prevailed." Mikhail answered, "And also because I said so."

"Yes, dad."

The car swerved slightly as the elder Russian felt a cringe in his throat and he coughed, clenching his fingers around the wheel as he tried to realign the car with the lane lines. He cleared his throat once the vehicle was finally back where it should be, and glowered at his nephew in the rear-view mirror.

Viktor found the whole thing oddly funny, and had a devious smile on his face where he leaned his head back against the seat.

"Huh...here I thought he only did that cuz it was Viktor who said it..." Yurio shrugged, eyes back on the ice, "Oh well."

Nikki huffled a quiet laugh to herself.

Deep in the dark, I don't need the light.
There's a ghost inside me.

Otabek hydrobladed in a wide arc, and swung his rudder-like extended right leg out to the side to bring himself to a stop, ending on his knees with both hands up in front of his face. One knee then came up, and he rose back up to his feet in a twisting motion, dipping slightly as he pushed backwards, glancing over his shoulder as he approached the curve.

It all belongs to the other side...
We live, we love, we lie...

A toe-pick went down to clip the ice, and the skater launched into a quad Toe-loop, landing, and launching again for a triple Loop.

Nikki clapped excitedly to see it, along with the rest of the audience, the music increasing the arena's energy again like before. As Otabek moved on though, she turned back to the blonde beside her, "You'll find your own word for papa. 'Pops' is already taken by Sergio, and 'pipaw' by Vikki, but you'll figure something out, if you want to anyway."

We live, we love, we lie...

Yurio found himself lost in the thought of it, though his eyes remained fixed on the show before him. Otabek was dancing through another step sequence, his blades a blur on the glowing frost. The tempo of the music changed, and the Kazakh flung himself through a few stars maneuvers before vaulting into another flying spin, this time landing lower for a sit variant, and continuing through as the music's pressure rose.

The skater slowly rose up with each transition, going from shoot-the-duck on the landing to a twist variant, then switching feet and rising further up to a camel spin with his hands clasped behind his back, and finally to another scratch spin before moving on again. He stood still for a moment, but clapped his hands with the double-beat of the music, and pushed forward. He threw himself for a
quad Loop, single Loop, triple Toe-loop, pushing the boundaries of his stamina.

Yurio’s eyes roamed over to where he spotted the next set of skaters coming out to rink-side; a pair of Ice Dancers, and their discipline's Silver medalists. By the time Yuri’s turn came up, it would be the start of the Gold-ranked show, and then at the very end...the surprise Team Skate. Thinking about it, and all the excitement that had been generated about it...the SMS posts from fans wondering if the conditions of Viktor's challenge from Bordeaux had technically been met, since he'd given up his own spot on the podium to allow Yurio to gain it, and the speculation over whether the Team Skate would even happen...made the teen turn his eyes slightly towards the girl on his left again.

"Thanks for hopping into my show there at the end." He said simply, "I didn't say so before, but you did pretty good for having no opportunity to practice it first."

Nikki blinked at him initially, but then smiled sweetly, "It was a pleasure."

"After how much we tormented my fanclub on Friday, I'll bet they're probably wetting themselves over this one." He mused, the music overhead coming to a sudden end, Otabek holding still in the center of the rink where he’d gone down to one knee, right hand holding him up on the ice. The audience roared their approval, and the two teens clapped along with them. Yurio smirked devilishly though, "I can't wait to see how people react. It was one thing for us to mess with people off the ice, but this was technically on it. I'll bet social media's gonna lose it, wondering who you are and where you came from."

"Well, if my hair doesn't give me away..." Nikki teased, pulling at a few strands of it, "Papa told us how the media went crazy at the World Championship last year. They pulled him out of the audience and everything."

"Oh, did they?" Yurio thought back, "It must've been early on. I wasn't paying any attention then."

"Papa has kept us away from the reporters so far. Maybe he'll change his mind."

"Maybe." The older teen agreed, watching as Otabek came off the ice and was reaching for blade-guards and water, "Are you guys coming to the Banquet after?"

"Banquet?"
AO3 has gotten its coding weird. When I updated tonight, it posted Ch312 in the place of Ch311 and moved Ch311 to the spot Ch312 should've been in. The comments aren't corresponding to the updates they were meant for either. I've fixed it for now, but if AO3 undoes whatever they did before and the chapters are showing up in the wrong order again, please just let me know.

CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED TWELVE

"Ladies and Gentlemen, your Pairs Silver medalists..."

Otabek was quickly replaced on the ice by the next set of skaters, and he disappeared from sight momentarily at rink-side, looking for his water and jacket. Without the heat of the performance, and sweat on his skin, the cold of the rink quickly set in. He couldn't escape quickly enough though to return to the seat that was waiting for him, and was caught by both the Russian and Italian Ladies' singles winners.

Completely unsure what to say to either of them beyond the obligatory thank you and nodding his head, he slowly tried to peel away from the Players' Club doorway to get back to the audience. By the end of it, Mila and Sara both wondered if he was fleeing rather than just turning to leave.

Mila, of course, could do nothing but sigh dramatically as the Kazakh disappeared into the dark, "Maybe I'm coming on too strong?"

"You do have a pretty tough personality." Sara mused, "Maybe he's one of those guys who prefers one of those quiet, meek, and mild ladies."

"Well, that's pretty boring." The Russian set her hands on her hips and made a face, "What difference is there between that and a robot?"

"I think that's the point."

"That can't be right. If he wanted someone with no personality, he wouldn't be hanging out with Yuri so much. He's the complete opposite."

"I don't know that the same standards apply to other guys."

"...Ahhhh men are so complicated...!"

Otabek finally made it back to his seat and fell into it, slouching down immediately until he could lean the back of his head against the top of the seat. He drew in a breath and let it out just as quickly before finally opening his eyes to look down at the ice.

"Your show was really great!" Nikki said to his right.

Dark brown eyes tilted slightly towards the young teen, but then turned them forward again and closed them, "Thanks."
"You hardly sound happy about it." She said after, deadpanning the older skater.

"He's always kind of like that." Yurio pointed out, leaning forward against his knees to see past her, "Right?"

Otabek shrugged, "I just wanted to sit down. Even though it's not competitive," He raised a hand to gesture at the ice, "Being out there for the Exhibition can be tiring. You're still putting so much effort into making sure you don't mess up. You lose points when you do in competition, but it's just plain embarrassing to mess up when you're supposed to be doing it for fun."

"That was a pretty up-beat song you chose, too." Nikki pointed out, poking one finger against the Kazakh's shoulder, "Hard to believe someone as stoic as you would pick it." She teased.

"I want to shake this 'dark horse' label I've been saddled with." He answered simply, the music of the next show beginning to play overhead; a cut of Vivaldi's 'Winter,' "Even though I've been winning a place on the podium for a few years already, people still hear my name and wonder who I am. It's like they forget about me as soon as the events are done. I'm overshadowed by other competitors, even those who don't do as well."

Both Nikki and Yurio gave nervous looks, but the older of the two spoke, "That's because you never say anything."

Otabek kept his forward gaze fixed, "I guess."

"If you're looking for notoriety, people need to know who you are, not just what you look like." Yurio went on, "Hell, even Katsudon would be largely unknown if not for Viktor being such a loud-mouth about him."

Nikki elbowed him and gave him 'the look,' all but snorting at him like an angry bull.

The blonde coughed and cleared his throat, "Ah...er... I mean, if not for Viktor being his spokesperson." He looked at the silver teen again, and was relieved to see an expression of approval on her face as she returned her gaze to the show, "You just need to put yourself out there more. When you medal and do those post-event interviews, don't just sit there quietly, with a look on your face like you're wondering about whether you left the lights on at home, rather than about what you've just achieved. Or when people talk to you, don't duck out like you have something more important to do."

"Yuri's right." Nikki agreed, "Easiest way for people to remember you is for them to see and hear from you more."

Otabek sat in his uncomfortable silence for a while, the Pair skate Exhibition going on ahead of him. The two teens to his right watched him quietly for a moment before letting him be. When the music finally ended though, and the skaters were making their way to rink-side, Otabek stood as well, and moved off without a word, heading back the way he'd previously come.

Yurio and Nikki watched him go in confusion, then glanced at one another before wordlessly agreeing to go after him, and gave chase in the dark. By the time they caught up, and pushed the curtain aside to get into the Players' Club, they spotted the Kazakh standing just inside, as though second guessing his earlier plan.

"Why'd you run off like that?" Yurio wondered, "When we said you should put yourself out there more, we didn't mean literally right this second."

"I know." He answered simply, "Every journey begins with a first step though, right...?"
"...Yes...?" The teen replied anxiously, "But the first step might take you off the edge of a cliff if you're not careful and watch where you're going."

"It's not quite walking off the edge of a cliff." Otabek huffed, an uncomfortable expression creeping across his usually-neutral face, "Call it a leap of faith, if nothing else..."

"...What are you planning?"

"Walking back a mistake I made? I'm not really sure." He said simply, drawing in a breath and stuffing his hands into the pockets of his team jacket, then stepping off into the lounge.

Nikki peeked around Yurio's shoulder to watch the man go, "What is he doing?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"Yuri! Nikki!" Someone else called, dragging the pair's attention away from where Otabek was going. Off to the left, opposite to where the Kazakh had gone, they spotted Yuri and Viktor waving at them, apparently having just finished some brief pre-show interview. With nothing else to do, the young duo went off towards them.

"You guys sure came back in a hurry." Viktor pointed out, noticing the pair still looking to the side, trying to see through the crowd, "What's wrong?"

"Otabek said he wants to be noticed more, and took off like he had some specific mission in mind. We can't see where he went though." Yurio answered.

The older Russian blinked at them, but then stood up on the toes of his blade-guards, trying to use his height to look for them. He spotted the Kazakh in a far corner, clear across the lounge, "Oh, he's talking to Mila."

The blonde suddenly looked pale, "Leap of faith! My ass!"

"Eh?" Yuri gaped at him, "What are you talking about?"

"We told him to talk to people more. I feel like he took us way too literally." Nikki answered, "Yuri said Mila has a thing for Beka though...but Beka said he didn't have time for that kind of thing."

"Talking to someone doesn't mean you're dating them." Yuri pointed out, snaking an arm around his spouse's back, "If that's all it took to be considered in a relationship, then I've been dating Chris for years."

Viktor chortled, "Me too."

"Maybe I've been dating Phichit-kun, too." Yuri added, "Since we lived together for so long."

"I'm actually dating Makkachin." The Russian added, "Sorry, Yuri...I should've told you a long time ago."

The younger skater gasped dramatically, free hand on his chest and a joking look of disbelief on his face, "Viktor! I always knew there was someone else!"

"He's just got such a cute, squishable face!"

"Alright alright, enough already." Yurio barked, "We get it."

The older skaters just laughed to themselves, grabbing their team jackets from their pile of gear, and
waved as they started heading past them towards the curtain, "Don't read into things so much." Yuri suggested, "If Mila's the only other person who's tried to get Otabek out of his shell, then it makes sense that he'd go to her first. And if they end up dating, then they end up dating."

They paused just before the throw though, and Viktor turned his head back with a mischievous look on his face, "Girls do you a lot of good, too, Yuri!" He commented, "Maybe you should think about hooking up!"

"What." The blonde deadpanned the pair, but they were too busy smirking and glibly cackling under their breath to take notice of him, "What a bunch of dweebs."

"Right?" Nikki agreed, crossing her arms and making a face, "Who would you even go out with? You barely know anyone. Maybe someone from your fan club...?" She suggested dryly.

"Don't tempt it. If I ever talked to one of them alone, it'd be a blood-bath. I'd have to date all of them at the same time just to keep the peace."

"Yeah... Weirdos."

By then, the Ladies' Silver medalist was on the ice, finishing a performance and getting ready to take her exit. The Gold group would be starting after her. Yuri and Viktor were waiting just to the side of the rink entrance, blade-guards already off and jackets stowed nearby. As the music came to an end and the audience cheered, butterflies began rising in both of their stomachs.

"Ah I'm getting nervous..." Yuri mumbled, lips pressed to the back of his partner's shoulder as he clung to the man's back, "Feels like it took an eternity to get to this point."

Viktor turned his head back and kissed the younger skater's forehead, patting those hands where they held to his front, "But we're finally here. Let's have some fun."

Brown eyes shone, and Yuri nodded, letting go to come around the Russian's side. As the Ladies' skater stepped off the ice, they stepped up to it, and waited a moment for the lights to change. The arena darkened as the cheering and applause slowly died down, until nothing was left but the excited hum of the crowd in the dark. The single line of light around the rink's inner baseboard glowed brightly, creating the illusion of a pit with a mirror-like panel across the top, scratches in the ice like cracks in glass where the light caught them just right.

"Ladies and Gentlemen..." The announcer's voice called overhead.

The pair took a step through the door, fingers laced together between them as they glided forward into the dark.

"...Your Men's Singles Gold Medalists..."

Yuri lifted his head to hear that word, "Medalists..." He echoed, looking over at the silver legend sliding along next to him.

Viktor tilted his head slightly towards his partner and smiled, "That was nice of them."

Spotlights burst to life above them, shining down brightly as they came to stop in the center of the rink.

"Yuri...and Viktor...Nikiforov...!"

The audience was wild with excitement, and the pair raised their free hands to wave, twisting around
one another to greet the audience on all sides. They raised both their arms and bowed deeply, looking at one another quickly before separating and moving off to opposite ends of the rink to drum up more excitement. As though planned, they paused in the center of their own halves of the ice, doing their own individual greetings before returning to center, gliding around one another casually. Viktor was always ready to start a show, but Yuri needed half a moment longer, trying to catch his breath long before he'd ever worn himself down. He drew in a deep breath, paying more attention to the ice for those few seconds than anything else, and lifted his head again only when he felt arms come up around his shoulders and a kiss against the back of his neck.

"Don't get too worked up." Viktor mused, letting the man go so he could turn in place to face him. Hands went down the younger skater's arms until both hands could be taken by his fingers, "You still won Gold even though you'd been hurt before."

"Actually...I wasn't even thinking about that." Yuri answered, "I just realized...this is technically the first Pair Exhibition we've done together at an event that's technically mine. I was too sick in Calgary, and then you took off to go back to Russia during the Cup of China Exhibition..."

Viktor blinked at him with an awkward smile, as though he hadn't noticed at all, "...So...we only did Pair Exhibitions at my events?"

"Mh. Technically."

"Oh." The Russian just smirked even more then, "We'll have to make it extra then, to make up for the missed opportunity."

"It's already pretty extra."

"Extra extra." Viktor said, pulling his hands back to draw Yuri in closer. Setting the younger man's hands to wrap around his back, he pulled his own back again and set them gently on either side of Yuri's face, thumbs gently on cheeks as fingers curved around the back of his neck. The Russian then tilted his face down, setting their foreheads together, stealing a moment between just them despite being the center of the attention in the middle of the rink, spotlights beaming down from all sides, "I love you. I wish I could skate with you forever." He said quietly, "As much as I adore these moments before a show...it's always the saddest moment for me, too, because it's one day closer to the end."

Yuri was taken slightly aback by those words, feeling tears forming in his eyes as quickly as they had in one other particular moment, just over a year before.

"Viktor...be mine until I retire...!" He declared.

_The Russian looked on at him in surprise, but reached to pull up one of his student's hands, "It's like a marriage proposal." He said, and kissed that bare ring finger before pulling the young skater back into another hug, "I hope you never retire."_

Yuri pulled one hand back and rubbed his eyes, "Even if it all comes to an end one day...it also means we got the chance to start something. That makes everything worthwhile."

The silver legend nodded, reaching to take that hand in his own, and kissed the ring upon that finger, _Hajimemashou ka?_ (Shall we begin?)
"Hai."
The energy of the arena changed the moment the audience could see the two skaters parting from one another, turning their backs to one another, and taking position. Viktor lowered his gaze slightly, and Yuri raised his, each drawing a short breath as they waited for the music to begin.

The younger skater wore dark colors, with gunmetal-grey jeans and a lighter ash-grey sweater overtop. The older wore nearly all black, with a vest emblazoned by iridescent purple patterns and a silver-grey tie. They each stuck out against the bright spot-lights on the ice, like the shadows they cast past their golden blades.

['Please Don't Go' - Joel Adams]

Hmmhmm...hmm...

The skaters snapped their fingers in time with the music.

Hmmhmmm...hmm...

They flipped around where they stood, still snapping their fingers as they faced each other.
Pushing off against their left blades, they moved to replace one another in their previous spots, but then continued on, breaking away until they were half a rink apart from one another, fingers still clicking.

They came to a pause there, and on the last beat, dug a toe-pick down.

Nobody ever knows...

Inside spread-eagle to turn in place, right blade coming up slightly to tap down on the beat, hands coming up in front of themselves.

Nobody ever sees

They started moving forward again, gliding and twisting in short arcs, then flipping to move backwards. They slid like reflections of one another, arcing around the center logo within the ice until they faced each other again, and came even closer.

I left my soul

Reaching their hands up loosely, fingers laced together, blades still gliding over the ice as they slowly rotated around one another.

Back there now I'm too weak

Yuri flipped around in place, right hand crossing over himself to grab at his left shoulder, the left hand wrapping lower, and he turned his head down. Viktor came over him from behind, both arms around him, pressing a cheek against the back of his neck as they continued to turn.

Most nights I've pray for you to come home

Again Yuri turned around, both hands coming up to the Russian's face, feeling how the man guided his skates backwards then in a curving line away from center. Viktor's hands help gently to his hips, pushing him along until he dug the right toe-pick down and stopped them both.

Praying to the Lord

They clasped their hands together, coming closer again to look into one another's eyes.

Praying for my soul

Viktor's right hand stayed, holding to Yuri's left, as they each pulled their free hands back and turned to face away from each other again.

Now please don't go

They abruptly let go completely, arms arcing up as they twisted around and spun away. They swerved and twisted in their respective halves of the rink, perfect reflections of one another's movements.

Most nights I hardly sleep when I'm alone

Yuri stepped through a few forward inside twizzles, Viktor doing the same but starting with the
opposite foot, each pausing at the end, arms wrapped around themselves.

*Now please don't go, oh no...*

One hand reached up and out to the skater across the rink, fingers splayed, then flipping their palms up before bringing their hands back and turning around in place before sliding off again.

*I think of you whenever I'm alone...*

They moved in a wide figure-eight pattern towards center, twisting and turning gracefully until they were in arm's reach again.

*So please, don't go...!*

They passed by each other moving in reverse, right blade on the ice and the left elevated behind themselves, right hands barely touching, and then parting again.

Hmmhmm...hmm...

Hmmhmm...hmm...

Arcing swiftly, they came to skate in tandem to one another, gold skates scratching at the ice a mere few feet apart from each other. At the end of the second hummed lyric, they vaulted through a side-by-side quad Flip, much to the delight of the audience, who normally only saw that performed as a triple at best.

*'Cause I don't ever want to know*

Coming out of the landing, the second act of the show began with Viktor pulling ahead, Yuri close behind.

*Don't ever want to see things change*

As though practicing a Singles performance together, they shadowed one another; every gesture, foot-drop, hip swing and leg kick in perfect symmetry. No matter what though, they were careful not to face one another, one of them always facing away from the other.

*'Cause when I'm living on my own*

They paused abruptly, spinning once in place, dragging their toe-picks along until stopped, and Viktor turned his head towards his partner. Yuri lifted his, but didn't look back, simply pushing off to glide away while the Russian reached out for him.

*I'll wanna take it back and start again*

Just as Yuri looked back over his shoulder though...Viktor turned around instead, eyes down on the ice as the slid off. They both arced around through an outside spread-Eagle, coming back towards one another until they were shoulder-to-shoulder, each of them staring ahead though, not at each other.

*Most nights I pray for you to come home*

Twisting around to be back-to-back, Yuri lifted his right hand in the direction they were gliding, and Viktor reached up his left to take it. Yuri quickly spun around under it, putting his back to the Russian's front as those arms came around him again.

*I'm praying to the Lord*
Hazel eyes lifted up, face turning to the ceiling as though the hug were merely imagined and he were pleading with an unseen Other for it to be real.

*Praying for my soul*

His hands came up then, palms pressed together as Viktor's went down to his waist. They both dipped down, knees slightly bent...

*Now please don't go*

Viktor launched his husband up into the air, and Yuri spun several times for the triple twist lift before coming back down to waiting arms. The Russian kept him close though, nose to nose, chest to chest. Yuri's arms came over the man's shoulders, one hand weaving through that silver hair as they glided along, eyes closed.

*Most nights I hardly sleep when I'm alone*

They arced through a curve at the short end of the rink, legs carefully woven through one another as they stayed precariously close.

*Now please don't go, oh no*

Viktor slowed down slightly and Yuri started moving away, fingers trailing down each others' arms as they grew further apart, until the silver legend could only touch to his partner's chin with his fingertips.

*I think of you whenever I'm alone*

Moving backwards, Yuri spread his arms out, watching the Russian slide down to one knee and fade further into the background. He kicked his right leg back, and dipped down to the outside edge of his grounded blade...

*So please don't go (Oh oh...)*

Yuri toe-picked and vaulted into the air, spun four times, and landed on the right back outside edge for the Lutz.

*I send so many messages you don't reply (Oh oh...)*

Viktor quickly caught up, and they started mirroring each other again, even as they followed through a step sequence along a serpentine path. Twisting and turning, arms and hips swaying to the newly-energized rhythm of the music.

*I gotta figure out; what am I missing, babe?*

The Russian bent his path around a corner of the rink, and Yuri folded into him like the gears of a Swiss clock, the two of them facing one another as they clasped their left hands together between them, blades stopped on the ice.

*Singing now oh oh oh*

They pushed off on a toe-pick and spun around one another, picking up a bit of speed as they each bent forward, releasing to pull one another into the pair camel spin; right hands reaching over the other's back to hold at the waist, left holding to the upturned leg.

*And I need you now, I need your love (Oh oh oh...)*
Letting one another go, they spun in place before reaching for their left hands again and pulling each other inward. Right arms went over their partner's back as they both ducked down for a reverse-entry pair sit-spin, holding themselves up on their right blades, the left jutting out behind them as they spun together.

As the lyric faded out, they let one another go, gliding backward and away from one another in a slow hydroblade. The music paused briefly, and they did as well, knee coming down against the frost to stop their glide as they brought their hands inward against their chests.

Now please don't go...

Hands were thrown forward towards one another, and they rose up to their feet again, pushing off to move backwards.

I said, well...most nights I hardly sleep when I'm alone

They arced away from each other, then swerved inward, coming close again as they moved over the center logo. They moved in tandem again, hopping through a mohawk turn to face themselves forward, and kicked their right legs back...

Now please don't go (Oh no...)

Launching off their left blades, they flew through the side-by-side triple Axel, landed, immediately hopped through a single Loop to face forward again, and launched a second time for the double triple-Axel sequence.

I think of you whenever I'm alone

Outstretched hands sought for one another, clasped, and pulled to bring them together, back to back in a tight outside spread-Eagle.

So please don't

They let go just enough to spin around and face each other again.

Please don't go (So Please)

Knees bent in a half-curtsey before they broke off once more, skating quickly away from each other, leaving elaborate winding scratches on the ice as they went.

Please don't go (Oh no...)

They threw themselves for a flying-entry sit-spin, landing and moving into a twist variant, one hand high above themselves.

Please don't go, oh no...

They each rose into a scratch spin, bringing their arms in to rotate faster.

I think of you whenever I'm alone

An abrupt stop, sliding out of the rotations in reverse, and curving around until they spotted one another again.

So please don't go...!
They pivoted to glide forward, right hands coming up over their hearts as the left reached out to the other, slowly coming together again.

_Hmmhmm...hmm..._

They twisted and swayed as they closed the distance, and on the last hum, pivoted one last time, coming to a stop next to one another, one arm reaching across the other's front, hand perched on the opposite hip.

The arena fell silent for a few seconds before the roar rushed back in like a tidal wave, and the two skaters slouched and relaxed, the performance over. They let themselves finally catch their breaths and fell into one another, laughing and waving as well as they could. Cameras flashed and twinkled from all sides, and when they finally found their legs again, the two held their hands between them and bowed.

"Whew... That was great!" Yuri huffed and puffed, lowering his free arm as he felt his spouse pull him closer to kiss his forehead, "Now we only have about 15 minutes before the Team Skate." Another few kisses, those against his neck.

"Less talking, more kissing." Viktor said simply, bringing a finger up under his partner's chin to focus the man's attention on him alone.

Yuri breathed a quiet laugh, and gladly let the Russian have what he wanted, pulling his clasped hand free to rest them both over the man's shoulders. The audience cheered all the more to see it, especially since Viktor turned it into something of a show in itself as he turned the both of them around where they stood so everyone could get a good look. By the time it ended, and Yuri was certain it was time to vacate the ice, he found himself suddenly pulled back and hoisted up into his husband's arms. Surprised that Viktor still had the energy for it, Yuri held tight and let the man carry him off towards the rink exit, the chant of Viktuuri, Viktuuri on the lips of at least half the audience.
Refusing to let Yuri walk on his own, Viktor carried his husband through the gap in the rink wall proudly, pausing and leaning only to let the man grab for their jackets and blade-guards before walking back into the Players' Club proper. Onlookers smiled and shook their heads at the pair, many musing about how much things had changed in the last year, watching the once-social-butterfly and the once-fly-on-a-wall focus so much on each other. By the time the pair found their way back to the couch they'd claimed with the rest of their things, Yuri had tossed his team jacket over both of their heads, creating a sort of flimsy wall between them and everyone else, and it was all too easy to guess what they were doing behind it. Viktor at least managed to sit them down again so they wouldn't run into anyone, wedging themselves into a corner of the couch with the jacket draped over top.

Yuri still held onto the black and red Russian team jacket, but as he felt the cushions come up under his back, he lost his grip on the four rubber bars he tried to hold in one hand, and all of them went tumbling to the floor at the silver legend's feet. He let go of the coat soon after, hands clinging to the man's back instead. His legs were still together where he'd been carried before, curving up against his spouse's side, careful not to move them anywhere and risk bumping naked blades against something or someone unsuspecting. He felt an eager hand coming down his ribs though, sliding past his hip and down the underside of one thigh, only to stop there, the passion of those hidden kisses coming to a halt as well.

"What's the matter...?" Yuri wondered nervously, feeling that the moment had been ruined by something he wasn't aware of yet, like Viktor was going to break some kind of devastating news. He could feel the warmth of the man's breath on his lips, but Viktor had effectively become paralyzed...at least, until he started moving again, lifting up onto his hands and pushing away from him. The jacket slipped off the Russian's silver-haired head, leaving it slightly messy as those blue eyes stared intently forward.

"...What?" Viktor asked stiffly, giving a smile that could kill.

"There's literally three performances left before we all go out there and you picked now to start making out?" Yurio asked defensively, standing about four paces away, staring at the both of them. He'd changed while the duo were on the ice, and stood before them in black pants, a white shirt open to mid-chest, a black t-shirt under it, and black suspenders. "Go get ready!"

Yuri pulled the jacket off of where it had landed half-covering his face, tilting his head back to spot the blonde. The unimpressed visage on the teen's face was obvious even if he was upside-down from Yuri's vantage, "...Sorry...

"Where's your shadow?" The elder Russian asked, speaking the words in a tone like Yurio had better go find her (but more importantly, to go away,) and went to pull the dark colored jacket up again to sneak his head under it.

The blonde just deadpanned the both of them, giving a mental countdown from three before stepping forward and grabbing Yuri by one of his upturned legs...and pulled him down the length of the couch, right out from under the jacket-shroud and Viktor's affections. Yuri, to his horror, could only make a face and let it happen, going limp as his leg was tossed over the opposite arm-rest. Emerald eyes hawkishly looked down at the both of them again, and the teen crossed his arms, spying one of Viktor's eyes peering, unimpressed, through a gap in the jacket, "As slow as you two go, we'll never
make it out onto the ice. You'll end up doing the Team Skate in the same outfits you're wearing now."

"Would that really be so horrible...?" Yuri asked nervously, still lying limp on his back, hands up on either side of his face, "It's just a different shirt for me, and him not wearing that vest." He pointed a finger at his husband, who by that point had resigned himself to his fate and had propped his wrist up under his chin.

"Go get changed already!" Yurio insisted again, pointing at the big restroom door not too far away, "You can do whatever you want to each other when we're done!"

Viktor was pouting, about to mutter something under his breath as he heard the familiar pitter-patter of small feet coming up behind him. Without moving where his elbow was perched on the arm-rest, he pivoted his head and looked at his cousin flatly, "Young lady, your charge has escaped from your authority."

"My what's done who?" Nikki asked with a squeak, "I'm not responsible for him!"

"She's younger than me." Yurio added, "I'm 16. I don't need a 14 year old watching me everywhere I go or telling me what to do."

"I'm turning 15 next month, thankyouverymuch."

Viktor turned his gaze back to the blonde behind him, "If there's anything or anyone who can tell you what to do, it's girls. Yuuko did it, Lilia did it after her...Minako's gonna be doing it soon, and that leaves..." He lifted both hands and presented the silver teen, "Nikkita Mikhailovna Rozovsky."

She just stood there quietly with an awkward smile on her face, cheeks a bit pink for being singled out, "...Mikhailovna...?"

"The music from the Pair Skaters is cutting off already! You have two shows left! That's like 10 minutes!" Yurio barked, hands gesturing towards the curtain.

"Why are you so worried about it?" Yuri wondered, twisting over a bit to fumble for the blade-guards scattered on the floor, "You haven't been this adamant towards us since you kicked Viktor and I out of the kiss and cry at Rostelecom last year."

They could practically see the smoke rising from the Russian Tiger's ears as his brain started to short-circuit from frustration.

Yuri just rolled over and dropped off the couch though, lazily 'standing' on his knees before crawling forward a bit to reach for that last blade-guard. He gathered the two up into one hand and turned again, sitting with his back against the seat of the couch and one elbow over his husband's knee, "Alright, alright...we'll go. But you should know..." He held up the two rubber guards in his free hand, pointing them directly at the perturbed teen, "...One day, when you've found someone, and you're in the middle of loving on them...one of us is going to come up and interrupt the heck out of it in the most embarrassing possible way."

Unsure how to answer to that, Yurio just pointed a tense finger at the bathroom doors again, snapping his arm out so fast it almost broke the sound barrier, and then abruptly started moving off again. Skates thunk'd along the wood-plank flooring as he headed back towards the curtain that lead to rink-side, leaving Nikki behind in his haste.

Viktor let out a dramatic sigh and leaned forward, his elbow sliding along the arm-rest until he was able to reach his free hand for the blade-guards still held by his partner. He slid them onto his skates,
and sat back to unbutton the front of his vest, "I dunno what's gotten into him. He's never nervous before a show, but he's *super* nervous right now."

Yuri nodded and pushed up off the floor, sitting sideways against the front of the couch, about to say something but seeing the nervous look on Nikki's face just past Viktor, and paused, looking at her curiously. Viktor saw it and glanced up at the young teen as well.

She could feel the eyes on her though and turned to look back at them curiously, "I'll go after him in a minute. I'm curious though...why did you call me by the name *Mikhailovna*? That's not my middle name."

The Russian huffed a laugh, the last button undone, and he leaned forward just enough to shrug out of it, then sat back again, "Because that's what a Russian daughter would be called when her father's name is Mikhail. Sons do the same, but it's -vich at the end instead."

"So your full name...?"

"*Viktor Konstantinovich Nikiforov.*" He answered, "I guess your dad hasn't told you anything about Russia."

"Aside from saying that's where his accent came from...not really." Nikki answered, as though suddenly that became a point of shame for her, "Anyway we asked, he always got really evasive, so we never asked for long. I'm kind of nervous for how it's going to be when we're all there in Moscow together tomorrow, especially since Minako's not coming."

"Given how thoroughly we've both faced the past there, it's probably not going to be as bad as you think." Viktor answered, "A lot of the issues that probably made him anxious about it have recently been resolved. The fact of my existence notwithstanding."

"So you had a rough time in Russia, too? You would've been right there in the middle of things as the Soviet Union collapsed."

Yuri leaned back against the seat, pressing his shoulder against the cushion as a hand went forward to settle on his partner's leg. So soon after NHK, I'm not really sure how he's processed how it all turned out. He's still coming off of 27 years of hiding how he really thinks and feels about things, and there's been so much else to think about lately... He gave a reassuringly gentle squeeze, one that the Russian watched before turning his attention back to his cousin.

"I was sheltered from a lot of the worst that went on." Viktor explained, "I know the facts of it all, but I can safely say that the worst of what happened was far away from where my family lived. My little town fell apart over the years, but no one was starving to death in the streets there. My papa did everything he could to maintain what we had even as things changed."

"That's probably the only real thing my papa ever really said about Russia. How worried he was for the people he left behind while everything fell apart, and he was safe and far away. He said once that it felt like lightning struck twice for his luck in avoiding catastrophes, but not for everyone else."

"...Twice?" Yuri echoed, "What was the other thing?"

"The Chernobyl disaster in 1986." She said grimly, then thinking, "...Cousin Viktor's almost 29...so that means..." She pointed at him, "You would've been born probably within *months* of it."

"Da."

Yuri gave a nervous look, "...I know a bit about that. Should we be worried...? All the stuff they've
said just about Fukushi—"

"Worries for another day." Viktor cut him off and set a hand on his partner's where it was still on his thigh, feeling those fingers clenching a bit, perhaps without realizing, "The area I grew up in wasn't contaminated that badly."

"But it was still contaminated...!?”

The Russian reached his arms around his husband and tried to soothe him, stroking the side of his head, "Don't get so worked up. Nothing about me has changed. There were places in Sweden and Finland that got hit harder than my area. Besides..." He turned to face his nervous spouse and kissed the tip of his nose, "If Mikhail's not worried about it, then neither will I. The experience he had with his late ex-wife would give him more reason than any of us to be extra cautious about that sort of thing."

The worried look on Yuri's face wouldn't go away though, and his eyes drifted a little. He suddenly closed his eyes though and shook his head, looking past Viktor towards the young lady still standing nearby, "Nikki, I...we didn't mean to—"

"It's fine, really-" She waved her hands back and forth, "It'd be more worried about forgetting to change before your Team Skate."

"Oh!" Panic settled in even faster after that, and Yuri was up like a whirlwind, flinging his clothes off right there in the middle of the Lounge. Mercifully, it was just a required shirt-change, but being half-naked was still half-naked.

Viktor reclined back against the corner of the couch and watched adoringly, settling an elbow back into place and resting the edge of his jaw against the palm of his hand, crossing one leg over the other casually. It was fun to observe the hapless skater rifling through bags to find the garments he needed, having no clue how much or little time he had left. Still, Viktor smiled, "Behold, a more perfect man can't be found." He said quietly, gesturing out to his husband with a free hand, slate eyes turning slightly towards his cousin, "I found and claimed the best one."

Yuri suddenly lifted his head, realizing he was being gawked at, arms halfway through the white undershirt he was trying to get over his head, "...W-what...?” He asked pensively, feeling like a lab specimen under glass.

"Keep going." Viktor urged happily; Nikki was looking, too, but she was giving a nervous, uncertain look, unsure whether her older cousin was giving her permission to oogle or if she should just nod and smile at his descriptions, "Or you can take more off. I warn you though, if you do, we might not get onto the ice at all..."

The younger skater's face just went red, "Try to keep it PG13? There's minors around." He pleaded, finally getting his arms through the shirt and pulling it down over his athletic frame.

"No worries. I'll take great pleasure in undressing you myself later."

"I'm starting to wonder if you have a count-down going somewhere." Yuri huffed, a hand on his chest as he hunched over a backpack.

"That's not a bad idea." Viktor laughed, sitting forward to find the backpack with his phone, "How long do you think we'll be here? Thirty more minutes? Then ten back to the hotel..."

"You're about to get put on the naughty-list."
"There's a naughty-list?"

"There will be!"

The camera-flash half-blinded the young skater for a moment, and Yuri abruptly realized Viktor had taken a photo.

"LET'S GO!" Yurio's frantic voice suddenly yelled at them, "THE ICE DANCERS ARE ALMOST DONE."

"Shimatta...!" Yuri went back to panicking, pulling out the white button-down and frantically threading his hands through the sleeves. Buttons became impossible to do-up with his hands moving so fast, but mercifully, pale fingers came forward to stop him. Breath caught in his throat and he looked up to see those sea-foam blue eyes looking back at him, taking the task of those buttons from him and calmly threading each one through its respective hole.

"Calm." Viktor said quietly, "They aren't calling us up yet." Another few buttons, moving down gradually from neck to naval, "Deep breaths. I'm denying you permission to worry about things you shouldn't be worrying about anyway."

"But-"

Viktor leaned forward, the last button threaded, hands settling on his partner's chest as he moved in closer to one ear, "The only thing you should be worried about is how much I'm going to mess you up later."

"...Why do I get the feeling you're going to be buying me apology flowers again...?"

The Russian smiled innocently and kissed him, then reached for his hands, finding them just as Yuri had finished stuffing the hem of his shirt into his jeans, "Let's go show everyone what we've been planning since Bordeaux."

Nikki blinked at them as the pair headed for the curtain, "...Oh boy..."
Author's Note: I've been planning to use this song for months, but I didn't look up the real lyrics until just now. I thought some parts said something entirely different from what I've learned was actually said. As such, because the meaning would change a lot if I used the real lyrics, I've decided to change them to be in concordance with what I heard phonetically. Sorry to those who know the song by the real lyrics. It's only a handful of lines though.

CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED FIFTEEN

Bowing out at the end of their performance, the ice Dancer Gold medalists started making their way towards the rink exit. Lights on the ice changed, and the tenor of the audience shifted in anticipation of the event's Closing Ceremonies.

Mari and Minako grinned and clapped quietly to themselves, giddy more for knowing about the surprise to come than anything else.
"It's going to be like in France." The ballerina mused, keeping her hands together at the end of one clap, and looking down at the rink past the tips of her fingers, "The audience didn't know about the extra show then either. Skating fans all over the internet were blowing up social media for days afterwards."

"They're already blowing up social media." Mari noted, "Ever since Viktor and my brother posted that challenge to Yurio, there's been a hum about tonight. They're all freaking out right now about whether the criteria were met, since Viktor gave up the Gold, and Yurio only made it onto the podium because of it."

"Ladies and Gentlemen..." The announcer called overhead, the lights on the ice morphing from standard spot-lights to snowflake shapes again. The colors changed from dull, cool blue, to include green, purple, and red.

The energy of the audience changed with it, and both Mari and Minako glomped one another and shrieked with excitement.

"You two are such weebs." Mikhail huffed to the side, finding it amusing either way.

"...The ISU would like to thank the fans and the athletes for putting on such an amazing show tonight. The Exhibition Gala Closing Ceremonies will begin shortly...but first..."
The aberration seemed to take parts of the audience by surprise, and many were already starting to suspect that there was more to come than anticipated.

The skating trio were already lined up along the rink-wall, waiting for the right moment to step out. Blade guards were removed and set aside, eyes glistening with the colored lights changing all around them. Nikki caught up with them soon after, fingers clinging to the upper lip of the wall as she wedged herself between the two Yuris.

"...We would like to welcome back to the ice, for a special presentation, three of the Men's Singles event participants..."

That set off a firestorm of excitement; cheers, screams, whistles, and howls rising from every corner of the rink. The clamor forced the announcer to hold back on the rest of his lines, giving the crowd a moment to settle down again.

Viktor stepped back a little to approach the open doorway, passing behind the two youngest members of their small group, Yuri following close behind. They took one another's hands and set a toe-pick each on the edge of the ice, butterflies in their guts. Yurio was about to turn to join them, but he felt hands take his arm, and he turned his head back around to look at the teen who'd held onto him.
"Don't be nervous." Nikki said, barely audible over the audience.

Yurio just deadpanned her though, "I'm not nervous."

"Quit trying to be tough and let me say nice things!" The younger teen deadpanned back at him, "It's my solemn duty as your little sister to be overly enthusiastic about everything you do."

One eye twitched at her, but Yurio nervously relented. He had the oddest feeling of déjà vu, like Nikki was standing in Yuuko's place just moments before 'Onsen on Ice' was to begin, with exception to the fact that Nikki wasn't leaking red fluid from her face. He shook his head and tried to look at the girl normally, "Alright...fine, I'm a bit nervous."

"You'll do great." The silver answered with a smile, "Hug!" She said, and like the last time she'd said that word, her arms went up in expectation.

Yurio looked vaguely uncomfortable, and stiffly stepped forward, letting arms go over him again like before. Without the rink-wall between them though, it was even more awkward, and he looked at his hands like he half-expected them to be ball-jointed doll's hands given how stiff and wooden they suddenly felt. But, he returned the hug dutifully, nodded to the girl, and then stepped up to join his older counterparts at the entryway.
Yuri looked at him curiously as he reached one hand up to touch the flat upper edge of the wall, "What's the matter? You don't look excited at all anymore."

"Overload of affection. My brain can't process it." Yurio answered rigidly.

Hazel eyes glanced past the teen's blonde-haired head, and saw Nikki waving at them all. He winked at her and then settled his free arm over Yurio's shoulder, "You're handling it better than I used to. Viktor could tell you about all the times I used to flat-out run away from him to avoid his attention."

"Hm...and now you can't get enough of it." The elder Russian mused, leaning in closer to tease the tip of his nose against his spouse's ear.

Yurio gave a wooden nod, but then felt a slight unease, glancing back at the silver teen before turning 180 and rushing away. All three figures turned in horror and confusion to watch him go.

"...Ladies and Gentlemen, please help us offer a warm re-welcome to Yuri Nikiforov, Yuri Plisetsky, and Viktor Nikiforov!" The announcer finally called.

Yuri and Viktor looked at Nikki in a panic, "Go get him back! We can't!"

"AHHHHH!"

Just as the older pair reluctantly stepped out, spotlights finding them even as they looked back anxiously, Yurio finally returned to rink-side, the curtain parting around him. Dragged by the back of his jacket, Otabek found himself deposited at rink-side, blinking in confusion.

"Stay here and watch her until I get back!" Yurio ordered, gesturing at Nikki as he rushed to the rink doorway, "You can continue cavorting with the enemy later!"

"...Enemy...?" The Kazakh echoed, looking back through the curtain to spot the group of people he'd been dragged away from so abruptly. Mila among them gave Yurio a dirty look, but he quickly shot back at her, gesturing two fingers at his own eyes and then turning his hand back to point those fingers at her, not-so-subtly saying he was watching her.

As the third member of the group finally went out to the ice though, a spotlight catching his rush forward, the audience burst into another wave of excitement. He quickly hustled to catch up to the other two, crossing his arms and shaking his head in mild irritation before coming to a stop.

"What was that all about?" Yuri asked, turning towards him.

"Stupid-me realized at the last second that Nikki would be alone at rink-side when we come out here. I dragged Otabek out of the Player's Club to make him watch her." The teen answered stiffly, watching the two older skaters circling around him.

"That's so kawaii~!" Viktor cooed, letting his husband's hand go long enough to reach forward and pinch Yurio's cheek with it, holding himself up with the other hand on his knee as he bent over, "You're so responsible~! What a good big brother!"

"Cut it out!" Yurio lamented, waving his arms around to get the man off of him, only to bring them in defensively again and give a dirty look.

Viktor just laughed and let him be, settling his hands on his hips instead, and turning his attention back to Yuri.

"It's all so weird." The younger skater started, looking out into the dark, past the spotlights, to the
unseen audience hidden behind the rink wall, "Two years ago, I was convinced I'd never skate again. I'd left the sport in shame, and gone home like a dog with my tail between my legs." He half-turned back towards the other two, "We've all changed so much since back then. It kind of feels like these last two seasons have come down to just this one moment, with all three of us on the ice together."

The elder Russian nodded, and lifted his right hand off its perch, setting it ahead of himself and into the center of their small group, "It's been a rough road, but we made it. Let's make it something to remember."

Yuri pushed off a toe-pick to get closer and added his own hand over his partner's, "For centuries." He paused and crinkled his brow, "...Ah, no pun intended."

"Hah hah..." Yurio puffed, shaking a few strands of hair from his one-uncovered eye. But, like the others, he turned side-face and added his hand to the pile, "Forever."

"I think we can all agree to that." Viktor laughed, "Hajimaru!"

"Hajimeru." Yuri corrected with a wry grin.

"HAJIMERU!"
They all lifted their hands high after that, and pushed back to find their places on the outer ring of the center ISU logo. The spotlights changed again and the colors vanished, leaving only the bright white lights over the trio of skaters. The line-light around the bottom of the rink wall faded down as well. The audience's clamor diminished as they anticipated the start of the music...and they waited.

['Centuries' - Fall Out Boy]

Do do dodo do dododo do do do do dodo do...
Some legends are told, some turn to dust or to gold...

Standing still for the first part, heads bent forward and eyes closed, they each then raised their right arms into center, curled their hands into fists, threw them out to the side, and then raised both hands up to just above shoulder-height.

But you will remember me

Slowly rotating in place, they bent their arms in at the elbows, lowering them slightly as they overlapped their hands over their hearts.

Remember me, for centuries
They lifted their faces and opened their eyes, extending their right hands forward again, this time out towards the darkened arena, palms up.

*And just one mistake, is all it will take*

Pushing forward with a nudge from one toe-pick, they glided out from one another; Yuri and Viktor to the left side of the rink and Yurio toward the right, jerking the forward-reaching hand back towards themselves as they held one finger up. Blades leaned and each of them started arcing around their respective short-ends of the rink, and then back towards center.

*We'll go down in history!*

Facing forward, they flipped backward with a choctaw-turn, lining themselves up as they slid towards one another.

*Remember me for centuries!*

Right legs extended back, and left blades dipped onto their inside edges.

*Heeeyo!*

Toe-picks gouged down, and the three skaters vaulted into the air, spinning through one another for a Yuri-Viktor side-by-side quad Flip, and Yurio going the opposite direction between them with a triple.
Oh, hey! Heeeeyo!
Remember me for centuries!

They each landed and spiraled off, twisting and raising their arms as they wove and pivoted across the brightly-lit frost. They then gathered up at one short end of the rink and lined up with the whole of it before them; Yuri and Viktor together in the back as Yurio took center-stage, sliding out well in front of them as they all glided together down the long-side of the ice.

Mummified my teenage dreams

With the two older skaters effectively acting like background dancers, the blonde stepped up expressively, one arm raised as he twizzled.

No, there's nothing wrong with me

Left hand went to his hip as the right extended forward, shaking a finger as he gave a condescending lift of his face.

The kids are all wrong, the stories are long

Arms extended as he twisted around, boots and blades folding over one another in quick succession.
He suddenly hopped and stopped though, legs crossed, rear toe-pick down in the ice. He looked to one side...

**Heavy metal broke my...heart!**

...He pat his chest twice on the beat of the music, circling his arms up and around to 'bring' them to the fore. They arced in opposite directions as they arrived at the next wall, coming back together to make the trek back. Yurio quickly spun around to take his place as one of the background people with Viktor then, Yuri stepping out in front of them as they went back the way they came.

**Come on, come on and let me in**

Yuri waved to the audience as he stepped on his toe-picks out to center, hand and hops going to the two beats of the music.

**The bruises on your thighs, like my fingerprints**

Moving down from toe-picks to rockers, he glided forward, bending down slightly as he ran his hands down the top of his legs.

**And this is for tonight, I thought that you would feel**

He stood back fully upright, legs crossed as he slid onward, one hand coming up over the center of his chest. He suddenly twisted side-face though and dug his right blade down against the frost, kicking up a white hazy wave as he came to a stop.

**I never meant for you to fix yourself**

He pointed out with the hand that had been over his heart, moving quickly like a whip, then raised it up above himself as he quickly rotated in place. Yurio and Viktor moved by him swiftly on either side.
The three of them circled around the rink, making wide spirals in the ice as they found their way to their next spots. On the final mark, they each vaulted into a flying sit spin.

*Some legends are told*

Yuri and Yurio were on the edges, starting in a shoot-the-duck spin while Viktor, in center, was in canno-ball form.

*Some turn to dust or to gold*

The two younger skaters morphed themselves into a twist variant, each raising a hand up above themselves. The elder slowed down as he lifted his head, hands settling on the thigh of his outstretched leg.

*But you will remember me*

Viktor rose up into a scratch spin, one arm coming up his front until it was raised up above his head, the other two continuing their sit-spins 20ft to either side.

*Remember me, for centuries*
The Russian dug in a toe-pick to come to a sudden stop, lowering the up-turned arm behind himself as the left came up in front of himself, gesturing at the audience.

*And just one mistake, is all it will take*

A finger came up as he brought his hand back in, right blade tapping with the beat on the frost, as it went from toe-pick to rocker and back again. Yuri and Yurio rose up to standing, ending their spin with a slower inside-spread eagle before coming to a stop in the same position Viktor was in, each with a finger up.

*We'll go down in history*

Viktor threw both arms out to the side, and the two younger skaters swiftly arced in closer to him, each clapping a hand against his own as they went past.

*Remember me for centuries*

He rotated in place once, pausing a moment, and then thrust himself forward.

*Heeeyo! Oh, hey! Heeeeyo!*

*Remember me for centuries!*

The trio rushed around the rink, taking it a little bit easy with crossovers and a few twizzles, having a bit of fun with the music as the each added their own choice of moves to the mix. They all came back together again though, Viktor in center like before, and moved from one corner of rink to the next along the long diagonal.

*I can't stop till the whole world knows my name*

The Russian kicked out one leg as they began, twisting over himself and then gesturing wide with both hands.

*’Cause I was only born inside my dreams*

One hand came up to tap the side of his head, and he paused in the center of the rink over the big ISU logo, the two others gliding by him and slowly turning away from the corner to come back.

*Until you die for me, as long as there's a light*

The hand that tapped Viktor's head changed to a gun pointed at it instead, and the Russian fake-pulled the trigger, jerking his head away as that hand went up to point at the spotlights high above.

*My shadow's over you 'cause I-I am the opposite of amnesia*

Yuri and Yurio returned to the elder Russian's sides, arching and looping into their places as he started slowly moving forward again. They mimicked his movements as he twice-bounced his arms up to the beat, only to pause in place in one corner of the rink and turn through an inside-spread eagle, then simply turning in place, all three of them then facing the enormity of the open ice. On the final note of the lyric though, and unseen by the two skaters in front...Viktor ripped the front of his shirt open, smirking devilishly to himself as the roar got louder.
And you’re a cherry blossom, you’re about to bloom

Having no clue why the audience was suddenly so excitable, the two confused younger skaters continued on, moving out into the open rink again as planned. Just as the two twisted over themselves to skate backward along the rink wall, Yuri finally caught sight of his partner and all but tripped over his own feet to see that bare chest coming right for him. He couldn't help but pause in place, a stunned look on his face, and Viktor slid in closer, trailing a finger along the edge of his jaw.

You look so pretty, but you’re gone so soon

Yurio just gave an annoyed-but-well-meant eyeroll as he made a circle around them.
Viktor continued the unexpected tease to his spouse, stealing a quick kiss before tapping the end of Yuri's nose with a finger and backing up, beckoning the man forward as the song almost continued without them.

_Do do dodo do dododo do do do do do dodo do..._

Yuri shook his head in disbelief, but regained himself to move on with the show, giving chase after the two Russian skaters and retaking his place in the choreography. He could feel the pink on his cheeks like it made his skin hot, and the audience just kept on cheering.

_Some legends are told, some turn to dust or to gold_
_But you will remember me_
_Remember me, for centuries_

The three flocked together again, slowly making their way across the ice, Viktor taking point slightly ahead of the other two. They arced and twisted like a well-oiled machine, moving through something of a step-sequence, traversing from one corner of the rink to another and then back again.

_And just one mistake, is all it will take_
_We'll go down in history_
Spreading out into a line, they moved in tandem along the length of the ice, weaving through one another as the rink-wall turned and forced them inward.

*Remember me for centuries*

Like before, on the last beat, they threw themselves into another jump, this time the triple Axel.

*Heeeeyo! Oh, hey! Heeeeyo!*

Yurio went immediately into a camel-spin in his third of the rink. Yuri paused in the center with an illusion spin as they both waited for Viktor to arrive in the final third.

*Remember me for centuries!*

They paused together, toe-picks digging down as they bowed their heads.

*We've been here forever, and here's the frozen proof*

As they raised their eyes again, one hand extended palm-up to the audience. They rotated on their dug-in toe-picks, dragging the other in a circle around themselves.

*I could scream forever, we are the poisoned youth*
Pushing off to glide slowly backward, reaching the opposite hand out as they moved away, they then hopped through a half-jump to change directions and bolted off just before hitting the rink-wall behind themselves.

*Do do dodo do dododo do do do do dododo do do...*

As Yurio went to one side, Yuri and Viktor went to the other, curving the short-end of the rink with a Kerrigan Spiral; a long Ina Bauer, but in a curve rather than a straight line. They twizzled out of it and skated forward then, clapping their hands, and gesturing at the audience again to get them to join.

*Do dodo do dododo do do do do do*

The dark was alive with clapping and cheering, and the trio of skaters started converging around center again. When they found their places, Yurio this time in center, they paused with their blades apart...

*Do dodo do...*

...and hopped in place to turn around, stomping their blades down on the landing and swaying their arms up with the momentum before suddenly breaking up again.

*Some legends are told, some turn to dust or to gold*

Yurio hopped forward for a twizzle as Yuri and Viktor turned away, bringing their arms up and then down against the front of their bodies as they arced towards their own respective ends of the rink.

*But you will remember me, remember me for centuries*

The audience was still clapping along with the beat, and the three skaters twisted back around, weaving through each other in a serpentine path, twizzling and kicking a skate out with each turn.

*And just one mistake, is all it will take*

Yuri reached his hands out behind himself and felt for his partner's fingers, twisting around to face forward again only once he did. Viktor grasped tightly as Yuri came in close, then started rotating in place they skated out to the limits of their reach, with Yuri letting his feet go out ahead of himself. He started lowering down into the Death Spiral, seeing a flash of blonde as Yurio skated around them in a bug circle, moving the opposite direction to his own rotation.

*We'll go down in history, remember me for centuries*

The dark-haired skater could feel the top of his head grazing the ice as he was turned around, and closed his eyes for a moment, the cool breeze rushing against his skin for the few seconds before he was pulled vertically again.

*Heeeyo! Oh, hey!*

Yurio was ahead of them, but when Yuri was back upright, he felt his partner close behind, ushering him forward. They moved as a unit as Viktor moved his hands down around his waist, and Yuri flipped around to face him for the half-second before he felt himself lifted up.

*We'll go down in history! (Heeeeyo!) Heeeyo!*

Yuri was perched in the air above his husband's shoulders for the Axel lift, hands holding to hands as
legs went out for balance; Viktor glided along swiftly, rotating them both as he went. Soon after, Yuri was held up with a hand on the side of his waist, his own left hand down against Viktor's shoulder for support, the right reaching up and behind to grab his blade...still more rotating. By the time Yuri felt himself being spun back down to the ice again, there were only a few seconds left of the show. Blades hit the frost as Yuri landed facing his partner, and in fluid movement, lowered down to slide straight between the Russian's legs, grabbing a hand that was ready for him behind Viktor's right thigh, and pulled him back up to standing again. Yuri flipped around to glide backwards, free leg up behind himself, watching his husband twist around to face him.

**Remember me for centuries!**

They all came back together in center then, frost flying from their blades as they twisted around, back to back in a tight circle in the center of the rink. The song was over; they heaved for breath, and let the rush of the audience's excitement wash over them like waves.
Heaving for breath, the trio locked hands and stood in a line, raising them up and then bowing down to each side of the arena. The lights shining from above slowly began to change, switching over from standard spot-lights to the snowflake-patterned colored versions, flying across ice and audience alike as the main lights dimmed again. The crowd was still cheering when the music from the event's Opening Ceremonies started playing as well, and the arena darkened to nearly black.

['Love Comes Again' - DJ Tiësto]

The luminous costumes of the synchronized skaters dazzled all around them, whole figures appearing and disappearing in a dizzying display all around them. Yuri was still catching his breath when he felt the two hands holding to him started moving back towards the rink exit, weaving them through the faceless skaters and getting out of the way until it was their turn to return. Stepping off the frost on their toe-picks, hands let one another go, and Yuri watched as his younger counterpart tip-toed off into the dark to rejoin his new little gang. For the moment, he himself turned back towards his partner, and gave the Russian a look that could barely be seen as their eyes still adjusted to the low light.

"You just can't help it, can you?" Yuri wondered, his voice giving away his amused smile, "You're allergic to staying on script, it seems."

"I just wanted to see the look on your face." Viktor answered, finding Yuri's shoulders, gripping them with each hand, and turning the man around so he could lean against his back, "You were so worried before about messing up by accident that I figured I'd show you it wouldn't matter, by messing things up on purpose."

"I bet Tess and Ketty are still trying to wipe the blood off their faces, just like Yuu-chan back in the day."

"And your sister, and Minako-sensei, and probably half of the arena." Viktor mused, lowering his head against Yuri's left shoulder, and kissing the trapezius there through the damp white dress-shirt, "Chris probably got a kick out of it, too."

"I think Mari-nee-chan is probably the only person on this earth that's immune to you." Yuri huffed, leaning his head slightly back and aside to rest it against the mess of silver hair beside himself, "I could only imagine the look on her face at last year's Exhibition though when Yurio threw his jacket off."

Viktor snorted half a laugh, "She likes 'em young, it seems."

"He just reminds her of someone in her favorite band." Yuri pointed out, reaching a hand up to pat the Russian's head before turning around in his arms, "You should probably button up again though. You'll catch a cold."

"I think half my buttons are out there." Viktor pointed one finger out to the rink, a smug look on his face, barely visible with the glow of differently colored lights moving all around them. He could feel as his husband was starting to feel at the hem of his shirt though, seeking out any remaining buttons that there might be, even if only one, to keep the garment closed around him. Yuri eventually found two, close to the bottom, and looped them through before stepping forward to start pushing the dark
fabric back into the top of his dress pants.

"There." The younger man said, looking rather proud of himself, "Now it's only as open as your old 'Aria' costume-shirt."

"Never thought you'd be happy to see me covered up." Viktor huffed, almost pouting.

"Sometimes it's more exciting to leave things to the imagination." Yuri answered, taking his partner by one hand to start making their way back to the rink door. Other skaters were starting to gather again, ready to take the ice as a full group when the time came. Yuri paused on the wall though, leaning against it as he cast his eyes out onto the display, watching as different outfits lit up in different colors and went dark again, becoming almost invisible but for how their bodies were blacker than their shadows. He couldn't help but lift a hand up to his chin then, touching at the line of the cut where his skin had been broken days before. He moved that same hand up to feel at his forehead, though he masked his curiosity by quickly pushing a few loose strands of hair back into place.

Those movements hadn't been lost by Viktor's eyes though. If nothing else could be said about him; if he didn't have his hands on his husband, he had his eyes on him at very least. He stepped closer, and then tilted forward to get into the man's line of sight, giving a kiss on those lips before moving down to place a lighter one on the first cut, and then another on the two on Yuri's forehead. An arm went around the younger man's back right after, and Viktor drew in a breath, "Only the Banquet and tomorrow's post-event press conference left, and then we can go home."

Yuri knew he'd been caught out, and drew in closer, feeling both arms go around him in their usual way as the silver legend curled over his back, "I can feel the onsen already."

The music above faded out to completion after another minute or so, and the synchronized skaters on the ice filtered off to the inner edge of the walls, moving in long lines towards the rink doors as the competitive skaters started heading through them. The SkateHusbands gradually made their way through as well, stepping back onto the ice, hand in hand, for the last skate of Detroit's Grand Prix Final.

Fully changing out of their damp skating outfits, the drive back to the hotel was pleasantly dry and warm despite the wintery weather outside. Yuri caught his last glimpse of the Campus Martius Park Christmas display as they went by, realizing quietly that it may well be the last time he ever sees it. All the things that had become as familiar as home were being reorganized in his mind, to the point where it was less a place he'd truly known, and more a feeling of déjà vu. In the driver's seat, Viktor's presence was like an anchor, keeping Yuri's mind in the present.

They parked, grabbed their things, and made their way tiredly back to their hotel room. There was still an hour to go before the Banquet would begin in earnest, though they both knew they could arrive whenever they wanted to. As their door-lock beeped and clicked open, Viktor pushed it in, letting Yuri sneak under his arm to get inside before slipping in behind him and letting the panel close.

Yuri dropped their things at the foot of the bed before flopping with a heap onto his back at the foot of it, stretching out and pushing his sneakers off with his toes before relaxing again. When he tilted his head around, wondering what was taking Viktor so long, he saw the man peaking through the small peep-hole, left hand going to both door locks. He turned his eyes back then, glancing at the ceiling for a moment before reaching his hands down to open the front of his thick winter coat, letting the Calgary Flames beanie fall off the fluff of black hair on his head as he sat back up again.
He rose like Bram Stoker's Dracula after that, and then slouched, drawing in a quick breath before
once more turning his eyes towards the door. Thinking Viktor was still spying through the peep-hole,
Yuri had his mouth open to speak, about to ask if the man really thought someone would bother
them again when they were all about to be at the Banquet together anyway...but instead, found the
Russian looking over his own shoulder with a certain lusty visage. Yuri just squeaked nervously and
waved.

\textit{Uh oh...Viktor's gonna finish what he couldn't even start this morning...!}

The silver legend crept forward, a glint in his eyes...but just as it seemed like he was about to bowl
his husband over, he flopped face-first into the bed beside him instead, legs hanging off the end it at
knee-level. He let out an exhausted moan into the blankets, and remained still.

Yuri blinked at him in stunned confusion, but regained his senses with a quick shake of his head, and
moved to gently knock the shoes off Viktor's feet before pushing him over onto his back. The heavy
winter jacket was quickly unbuttoned and unzipped, and the Russian was pulled back onto his front
where Yuri maneuvered the garment off the man's arms, casting it aside where his own coat had
fallen next to the bed. Without a second thought, Yuri then settled to mount his husband's back,
stretching out against the full length of him, and maneuvering his hands to wedge them under the
skating legend's chest.

Viktor finally moved then, bringing his arms up ahead of himself to pick himself slightly-up onto his
elbows, giving Yuri more freedom to put his hands where he'd wanted, and felt them both cup
around his front. As he turned his head slightly to the left to try looking at the man behind him, Yuri
settled his chin on his shoulder, hugging a bit tighter.

"Tired?" Yuri wondered quietly, nosing his partner's hair a bit behind an ear.

"I don't think I've needed so many naps in my whole life, but if I don't rest for a bit, I won't make it
through the Banquet." The Russian answered, his right hand slipping down a little to follow his
partner's right arm, finding the corresponding hand where it curled just under his ribs, "I really am an
\textit{old people}."
Yuri waited a moment before answering, "How did you say it before? You're turning 29, not 60."

Viktor just slid back down to the blankets and closed his eyes, arms pinned around himself, "I feel like the undead."

"We'll take the next two weeks off completely." Yuri suggested, "We've skated so much over the Grand Prix series that we could do our programs in our sleep if we wanted. We need a chance to really recover from this before Nationals."

The silver legend didn't want to answer that, staying still, eyes remaining closed.

For a moment, Yuri thought the man had already fallen asleep there, and he leaned a bit forward over
a shoulder, "Viktor?"

"...I don't know that I want to go to Nationals anymore." He answered quietly, eyes creeping open a little bit; enough to see the texture of the blanket but not much else, "...I've...technically fulfilled what I agreed to before. About staying in this thing with you for one more year. But I just..." His words trailed for a moment, and he stroked his right thumb against where he felt Yuri's wrist, "...By the time I finish hibernating, the last thing I want is to leave you, even if it's just for a weekend."

"I don't want you to go either, but if you don't skate at Russian Nationals, you won't get to go to Euros, the Olympics, or Worlds." Yuri explained quietly against his partner's shoulder, "You were lucky to get picked for Worlds last year as it was. I don't know that the RSF would pick you again if you bail on a home-turf competition two years in a row."

"...Mhhh..."

Yuri could hear the argument in his husband's groan, and he hugged a bit tighter again before pulling his arms completely free and sitting up against the Russian's legs. He scooted forward on his knees until he was right up against the curve of the man's nearly-trademarked SkaterButt, and settled there, moving his hands under the edge of that grey turtleneck sweater. Fingers found skin in short order, and he slowly kneaded circles into tense flesh, pushing fabric up and away as he inched his way upward. He continued that way for a few quiet moments, contemplating what Viktor had said, and only spoke again himself once he'd made it to the man's shoulder-blades, "...I know it's been said half a hundred times by now...but you're just tired. Give it a few days back home, after you've had some time to relax and cuddle with Makkachin, before you make any choices about future competitions."

"...Mhmm..."

"You weren't listening to a word I said, were you?" Yuri made a face.

"M'mm..."

The younger man huffed, a memory of Worlds Helsinki going through his mind then, but he shook it away and continued kneading at his husband's skin. By the time he'd made it to the Russian's pale shoulders, the shirt would go no further, pinned at the edge of his arms where they were still curled under himself. The fact that Viktor hadn't moved, or even spoken a coherent word for a few minutes, left Yuri wondering if now the man had fallen asleep, but like before, Viktor made it plain that he wasn't, peeking open one eye where Yuri could see it. Yuri rose up onto his knees then, sliding his hands down his spouse's bare back and gently pat one side, "Flip over."

The hazy Russian lifted his head, but then wiggled in place until he managed to do as asked, lazily raising his arms up in the process as Yuri moved to pull the shirt off of him. As he settled, he let his arms drop down to the blanket above his head, and he stayed there, motionless, feeling his husband sitting against the front of his hips. Eyes cracked open slightly, looking through tousled silver bangs at the man looming over him, only to close them again as he managed an exhausted smile, "...I never thought I'd live to see the day when I'd find myself so badly wanting to make love to you, only to be too tired to move..."

"Leave it all to me, koibito."

"Hm?" Viktor answered, one eye opening again in curiosity. He felt Yuri moving off of his legs then, and entirely off the bed, disappearing beyond his line of sight for a moment. The lights dimmed down to a quarter of their original brightness, and he heard rummaging in a drawer, the quiet click of Yuri's glasses on the nightstand, and then felt the bed moving under him again as Yuri climbed back on top of him. The quiet rustle of a shirt being pulled off came to the man's ears next, and the subtle
sway of the body above him as the motions were made to cast the garment aside somewhere. Viktor relished in simply sensing it all, rather than watching, letting every minor tactile sensation tell his mind's eye what was going on. He soon felt the blankets dip near each side of his chest, and the subtle push against his hips as Yuri leaned over top of him, warm lips against the side of his neck, just below one ear. The Russian tilted his head away to give his partner ample room, and savored the feeling of every slow kiss. The touch of deft fingers slid down the lengths of his arms, until they wove through his own fingers, and brought his hands to just above the top of his head. The added heat of a tongue against his neck made the Russian's legs twitch, and he brought one up completely, hooking his heel against the edge of the bed. Lips returned to his own soon after that, and a gentle poke against his mouth signaled to make him open wider, followed by a long, deep kiss.

Yuri could feel his husband's excitement growing despite his exhaustion, and helped to welcome it along with the start of a slow, rhythmic roll of his hips. The sound of a quiet gasp in the midst of the kiss, followed by a few whined moans, was like music. A few more kisses, and Yuri started to lift up, offering one last suck on the tip of this Russian's tongue as he moved away. Still holding to the man's hands, Yuri held himself a few inches above his partner, and quietly watched the look on his husband's face with each subsequent press of his hips against his front. He could feel his own arousal starting to answer the call then, too, and pushed in a bit harder as he lowered down for one more light kiss before trailing down that pale neck towards Viktor's chest. Hands slipped free soon after, fingers tracing against white skin until they slid against the Russian's ribs and sides, holding there tenderly as hot, wet attention was paid to one nipple.

Viktor's breaths became more vocal and needy, that pink nubbin of flesh getting hard with each pass of a tongue against and around it. One last gentle suck, and attention was turned to the other side, leaving the first wet and getting cold. He soon felt the subtle jolts of pleasure starting anew though, and the anguish of being abandoned was soon forgotten. Yuri soon moved to the center of his chest though, the tips of his hair dragging across his skin as he went, kissing at each curve of muscle as he went lower, and lower, sliding down his legs as he went. The heel that Viktor had hooked over the edge of the bed gave way, and Yuri moved to the end of his knees, giving a gentle but obvious bite to the bulge in the fabric clinging to his hips. Viktor's whole body twitched slightly at the pinch, but his surprised look changed to a smile, and he closed his eyes again. He let his imagination paint the picture as he felt his partner sliding off the end of his bent knees, fingers undoing the front of his clothes as his knees were gently pushed apart, with the younger man kneeling between them. He felt where that hot mouth teased at his arousal, now hidden only behind a single garment, the heavier material of his slacks being pulled away. Arms pressed against the outside of his thighs, and nibbled kisses traced the contour of his center, moving up to find the tip where it had been forced to the left, then down again, then vanishing entirely for the briefest of moments before teeth went for the elastic that went around his waist. The fabric was pulled back only as far as was necessary to expose that eager flesh, and for the second time that day, Viktor savored the heat of his husband's mouth around him.

This time, however, there was no need to rush, and Yuri took his sweet time, using everything he'd learned over the last year to tease his partner. His cheeks were still pink to go through with it, but he slowly worked his way from top to bottom, gently nibbling on that sensitive skin and kissing it as he traversed its length. When he got to the base of the shaft, he lathed his tongue from root to tip, kissed the head, and brought his right hand forward to help lift it, taking it wholly into his mouth. The gasp he heard from his husband made his heart flutter, and he started to lower down, taking as much of the rod into his mouth as he could before he turned slightly and came back up again, rubbing his tongue against a slightly different side. Down, turn, up, pause, down, turn, up again, pause, withdraw, kiss, lick, suck, then down again. When he came up that time, he nibbled on the skin at the base of the head, and trailed his lips all the way down, bringing his left hand in to massage at the tip while the heat of his mouth was away. The right hand helped to pull the fabric down a little more, and the
thumb went down to hook underneath of a pair of squishy tender bits, bringing them up for attention as well.

When Viktor felt the hot and wet sensation around one, his legs twitched, and his back arched, bringing his arms down to hug around himself. Loud, breathy gasps filled the air, and Yuri gave every inch of skin his love before finally heading north again some time later. The Russian watched with one eye, peeking out from under where he'd crossed his arms over his face, as Yuri pulled the remnants of his clothing away and then undid his own, letting the fabric tumble down his legs. Arms slid across Viktor's forehead as he dropped them behind his fluff of silver hair, and gave an endearing whistle to his exposed partner.

Yuri paused a moment, but gave a slightly-embarrassed huff of a laugh before stepping out of his clothes completely and mounted his husband a second time. He sat first on the top of the Russian's thighs, and slid himself forward until ready centers squished together, and he lowered down to tease a kiss, hands cupped over the man's chest, "It's been a while since you've whistled at me." He said quietly, nosing his partner's lips a bit.

"A token of my appreciation for tonight, koibito." Viktor answered, tilting his face to the right slightly and smirking as he brought his arms up over his husband's shoulders. The right hand slid down Yuri's upper back as the left wove fingers through raven hair, and he pushed his hips up against his partner's frame, eager to feel him now that all the fabric had been pulled away.

A few rubs and a few kisses, and Yuri had them both in his hands, rocking his hips forward against his partner's length, fingers squeezing and twisting. He could feel how slick things were getting, seeing how his body was trying to create that natural lube, dripping down from the tip of his own member to the one sliding beneath it, but there wasn't quite enough for them both. He turned to find the bottle he'd set aside earlier, but when he returned to sitting normally on his husband's lap, found Viktor putting his fingers up to the cap. Without needing to ask, Yuri squeezed some of the clear liquid onto the man's digits, then down onto their centers, and capped the bottle again just in time to feel the Russian buck under him a little. Confused, Yuri made a face, but rose up slightly on his knees, and no sooner had he done so, he felt his partner's hand go between his legs, slick fingers sliding up through the cleft of flesh on the other side. He squeaked in surprise and dropped his hands down above the Russian's shoulders, catching his breath just as he felt those same fingers rubbing up and down. They pressed in slightly as they slid up, and relaxed, then pressed in again as they slid back down, and Yuri was painfully aware of how heavy his breathing had suddenly become. A few seconds more of that pressure, and then one finger went inside him, probing a bit to test him, then the second followed it. He gasped with each 'come hither' movement of those digits, and felt his arms getting weak as the thumb joined in, pressing against that same spot from outside every time the fingers partially withdrew. He couldn't help but cry out a breathy gasp when he felt the second hand come up to take hold of him, squeezing and sliding up and down to spread around that liquid that had been poured and then half-forgotten.

Viktor relished the sight of his spouse losing all trace of himself, lost in the feeling he bestowed onto his flesh. Every time his fingers rubbed against that walnut-sized bump inside the younger man's body, he could feel a physical push-back, Yuri's frame tightening around him. Strands of ebony hair teased over his face, and he slowly withdrew his fingers, his other hand releasing his partner's aroused exterior to move down towards his own, quickly spreading the clear liquid around until his skin was slick and shining. It was Yuri who reached down for it though, almost flicking his hand out of the way, and positioned himself above it. Half a moment later, Viktor lead his head drop, closing his eyes in ecstasy as the heat of his husband's body enveloped him, descending slowly once, rising up, and then taking him entirely inside. They both grit their teeth as they felt it, and relaxed again only once Yuri was sitting flush against the Russian's lap.
Yuri took a moment to catch his breath, but managed a tired smile as he lifted his head again and opened his eyes, "...I've...been waiting to feel this...all day..."

"I don't think I've gotten completely inside you this quickly before." Viktor pointed out, sliding his hands up the length of his partner's thighs, hooking his thumbs around the crook of leg and hip as the remaining fingers cupped around the outside. He rocked his own hips upward then, pushing in just a little bit further.

Exhaling a quiet moan, Yuri pushed up on his hands, arcing his back slightly and forcing Viktor's frame back down again. Hazel eyes half-opened, looking down on the Russian, catching the man's gaze and trapping him there before slowly rising up on his knees, pausing there, and descending again. Looks were locked, and Yuri began the wordless dance, tilting his hips forward as he rose, then tilting them back as he descended, repeating slowly and deliberately. He could see the pleasure of every movement in his husband's eyes, and felt the man's heart pounding in his chest, mere inches below the palms of his hands. Where his knees where pinched up against the silver legend's sides, he spread them a bit further out, and started moving a bit faster. He went on that way as long as he could, but when he felt where Viktor was starting to move his legs behind him, he knew it would only be seconds before his husband took over.

Both heels hooked to the edge of the bed, and Viktor pushed upward, sliding himself a little bit further up the bed as well as deeper into his spouse. The heat of him beckoned. When he settled back down again, better positioned, both knees were up and spread wide, and he began his own different dance. Able to move faster and harder from his back, Viktor was quickly able to overwhelm his husband's senses, and watched happily as the man slowly leaned further and further down over his chest, until he felt the younger man's forehead touch down to the side of his shoulder. Hot breath was gasped against his skin, fingers curling inward as hands balled into fists. Viktor moved his right hand up over Yuri's bare back, and soon after, his favorite brown eyes were open and looking down on him from above again. Without missing a beat or hesitating, his hips continued to roll, thrusting deeply into his husband's warmth, their eyes locked. He could tell Yuri was starting to lose himself when the look in his eyes became unfocused, and he seemed to stare into space even if he was looking straight at him still. The younger man's hands slid up his chest until they curled around the top of his head, elbows just above his shoulders as fingers wove through silver hair. All the while, the sound of his hips slapping against his husband's backside filled the air, in harmony with each gasp and moan. Viktor tilted his head back against the blanket to lift his face, and found his husband's lips with his own, teasing a light kiss and bringing the man back to the moment.

Yuri sucked in a much-needed breath, and pushed up a bit, pressing his hands to the blankets on either side of his partner's head, even as his own dipped down again, tracing the tips of his hair against the Russian's skin. He pushed himself a bit higher, feeling every inch of his husband's member thrusting up inside him, every contour of the man's hips pressing flush against him, only to slide out and away again. He finally managed to lift his head, gasping aloud with each inward push until he was sitting high enough that he didn't need both hands to support his weight. Right hand came up and took hold of himself. He only managed a few strokes before he noticed Viktor had stopped moving, and he peered down at the man in confusion, "...W-Why did you quit...?"

Slate eyes answered him and the man smirked, "I don't think I've seen you play with yourself before."

Yuri gaped at him, face thoroughly flushed red as he pulled his hand away with a snap.

"Oh, don't stop." Viktor beckoned, "It's really hot."

Something clicked in the younger man's mind, and the temporary take-over of modest Agape-Yuri
gave way to confident Eros-Yuri. Eyes half-lidded in a sultry gaze, and he lowered his head a little, returning his right hand to where it had been a moment before. Fingers circled around his red and throbbing member, slick with clear liquid, some from the bottle but most from himself. To the Russian's surprise, he even started rising up on his knees again, sliding up on that length of hard flesh and descending again, eyes still on him. Yuri leaned forward slightly, even as he continued to roll his hips and stroke himself, and slid his left hand upwards against his husband's chest, until he set one finger under the man's chin and a thumb over it. He held there a moment, looking deep into those slate eyes, but then smirked quietly to himself and thumbed the Russian's lower lip, "...You...feel amazing..." He said, managing one more rise from the man's lap before his own eyes widened slightly, taking in the unexpected sight of his husband lightly biting the end of his thumb. He held there for a moment, unsure what to do, hyperaware of the feeling of the man's teeth against his nail.

Viktor took delight in stumping his partner, and brought one hand back to turn the man's wrist, and drew the whole thumb into his mouth. He kept his eyes on Yuri's confused but curious expression, sucking on that thumb a little before letting it go and running the tip of his tongue from the base of it to the tip. The not-so-subtle suggestion that Viktor was eager to do that same thing to other parts of his husband seemed to be noted, and Yuri rose up and off of him. Just as Viktor was about to make good on his hint though, Yuri had grabbed his right leg and pulled him onto his side with it. One hand settled on the blanket behind his back, the other in front of his chest, his leg hooked around that wrist by his knee. Though confused, Viktor let it happen, and watched as his eager partner moved in overtrop of him again. The needy prod came immediately after, and Viktor drew in a gasp of breath as he felt the prod become penetration, dropping his head down to the blanket and clenching his eyes shut. Four purposeful but slow thrusts, and he felt the younger man's hips flush against him. By then, he'd gathered himself up again and looked up at his spouse, "...I...didn't expect that..."

"Always do the opposite of what people expect. That's your motto, right?" Yuri answered, pushing harder and going deeper, "Viktor..."

An urgent and needy whimper of a gasp answered that question, and the Russian's fingers clenched down on the blanket. A drag of breath wordlessly begged for more, and Yuri was more than willing to provide.

He slowly built up the motion, withdrawing half way before pushing back in again, pressing hard and far inside. He kept his eyes on the Russian's response as he started building up speed, taking as much pleasure just from watching him as he did from physically feeling the man's heat. It wasn't long before the tense squeeze around him relaxed, and Viktor's initial discomfort gave way to intoxicating pleasure. Hearing every gasped moan with every thrust, and watching how Viktor contorted and twisted under him, was a wonder to him. Yuri lost himself in the sight of his husband's reactions, not even noticing as he lowered himself down to his elbows, left forearm wedging its way under Viktor's side until he could clasp that wrist with his other hand. He hugged his husband tight and pressed on, harder and faster, and suddenly...it was over. Practically caught off guard, Yuri felt his frame push as deep as it could go before giving out that hot release. It was like something otherworldly had taken hold of him, and he'd finished without having the presence of mind to slow down or stop himself. A worried look came over his face even as the rest of him trembled, his lungs gasping for breath.

Viktor was heaving as well, but he was far from satisfied, eyes opening and turning to see Yuri trying to hold himself up. His initial worry gave way to a huffed laugh, and he twisted his upper body as well as he could, caressing his partner's head in his hands, "...Here I was the one being cranky all day... It seems to me like you needed this more than I did though."

"...Maybe I just...hid is better than you did." Yuri offered through quick breaths, "...I'm sorry I couldn't...stop myself;"
The Russian huffed and kissed the top of his husband's head, feeling the man withdraw as he pulled back. Yuri's hands fumbling for him in a weak attempt to continue on despite being spent already. Viktor just held to one wrist though and smiled at him, pushing up onto one elbow and then sitting up fully. He shook his head, "Don't exert yourself. Just relax." He suggested, moving around his partner and easing the man down to his back, "I'll return the favor."

Hazy brown eyes watched as Viktor got between his legs, looming over him protectively and easing back inside him. He felt arms come around the sides of his chest, hands wedging under his back to cross underneath him and hold him close. Lips touched to the side of his neck, and the Russian picked up the dance where he'd left off before, building up his speed rather quickly. The pressure within his post-climax body was intense, and Yuri found himself clenching his legs around his husband's thicker frame in a desperate, but otherwise futile attempt to hold the man still. He was too spent and overwhelmed, jolts of pleasure shooting through him still, watching blearily as Viktor jostled just below his line of sight. His own hands went under the Russian's arms and curved around both sides, fingers clinging to that pale, clammy back, and looked up into those blue eyes as the man moved above him. Those eyes were calm but needy, and Yuri lifted his head up to kiss him before dropping down again, moments before feeling the hot release deep inside.

Viktor cried out, dipping his own head to the side, biting down slightly on his husband's right shoulder, enough to leave a mark but not enough to really hurt. Still, once he felt like he could move again, he unclamped from that muscle, licked the mark gently, and then kissed it before letting his weight down on his husband's smaller frame.

They caught their breath for a moment, but eventually Viktor pushed back upright onto his hands. He looked on at his exhausted partner adoringly, reached for his right leg and pulled the man over onto his side like Yuri had just done to him a few minutes prior, and then dropped down to his own side behind him, never once withdrawing in the process. He draped an arm over Yuri's side and finally let himself start to relax there, sleep starting to encroach in his head. His eyes opened again though as he felt his husband moving in his embrace, twisting to be on his back again and lifting both legs to bend over his own upturned right hip. Unsure what to make of it, Viktor looked on and waited for Yuri to settle in.

It didn't take long.

By the time Yuri's legs were down, and he'd set his arm behind the Russian's back, he was asleep. A serene expression crossed his face, and his whole frame relaxed.

Viktor smiled sleepily, and rubbed the center of his husband's chest a few times before settling his head there in its place, and nodded off as well.

The Banquet seemed entirely forgotten.
It was impossible to know how much time had passed when Viktor found himself starting to wake up again. To the best of his knowledge, it was at least night-time, since there was no dim glow hiding behind their room's curtains, but whether it was midnight or 5am was anyone's guess. He blinked and looked around hazily, knowing his phone was in his jacket somewhere on the floor, but he didn't want to move to go find it. Instead, he drew in closer to the warm body next to him, trying to remember where he'd had his head before, finding it only because of cold drool-patch he'd left behind on his husband's skin. He huffed a quietly embarrassed laugh at himself and tried to wipe the spot away with his wrist, kissed it, and then set his head down again, draping his right arm across the man's thin athletic frame.

Trying to go back to sleep was an impossible goal though. His internal Skating Event Clock was ticking, and though he knew he'd managed to Snooze it a few times, the bells were ringing uncontrollably, and he was certain he'd have to get up and walk around before it would silence again. In the quiet of their hotel room though, those bells in his head were deafening.

Reluctantly, crystal blue eyes peeked open again, and Viktor turned his head, setting his chin down on Yuri's chest where his cheek had been, and looking quietly on at his sleepy partner. It had been what felt like years since he'd had a peaceful moment to just watch him. He put all thought of the Banquet they'd likely missed out of his mind and thought only of the moment, listening to Yuri's slow, humble breaths, looking at how his lips were gently parted in relaxation, at his softly closed eyes. But when Viktor saw the still-healing cut on Yuri's chin, his worries crept in again like before...at least, until they were stopped in their tracks by the quiet mumble of Yuri speaking in his sleep.

"...Mnhh...Viktorrr..."

Hearing it banished Viktor's nerves, and he let himself smile. He gently eased himself up onto his elbow and leaned forward, ever-so-softly touching his lips to those that had whispered his name. He couldn't help but do it again a moment later, holding in place a little while longer than the first time. It didn't occur to him to stop even as he felt unseen fingers weaving through his hair. He just lowered his face a few seconds later, kissing the edge of Yuri's chin instead before settling there. The gentle stroke against the back of his head went slowly up and down, until he felt fingertips brushing the edge of one ear.

"Sorry." The Russian said quietly, "I hope I didn't wake you up."

"You didn't." Yuri answered, his voice barely a whisper, continuing the gentle touch through soft silver strands, "Well, maybe a little bit."

Blue eyes lifted, and Viktor rose up again so the younger man could see him more easily, and leaned in a bit closer to give him a soft Eskimo kiss, "How rude of me."

Yuri could sense the sarcasm, but it was laced with an air of uncomfortable honesty. He lifted his free left hand and lightly brushed his fingers against the man's cheek, drawing those eyes back up, "Did your internal alarm go off again?"
"Unfortunately." Viktor answered, bringing up his arm where he'd still had it draped across Yuri's chest, gently grasping the hand that was touching his face, and turned it to kiss those fingers. He closed his eyes and drew in a breath, feeling the hand opening up and pressing to his cheek. He couldn't help but lean into it, and set his own hand behind it, looking on at his partner, "I wouldn't mind staying put though."

"You won't catch me arguing."

Viktor huffed a quiet laugh, smiling at the thought. He slowly slid away from the hand and started placing light kisses on his husband's chest, moving slowly from one side to the other as Yuri quietly watched, moving his own hand down from silver hair to stroke at Viktor's upper back instead. By the time the Russian had made it to the other side, he'd slowed to a crawl, returning to kiss the center of his partner's chest one more time before turning his head to set it down there, trying to close his eyes again. The feeling of the gentle back-and-forth of a thumb against his skin was soothing, and Viktor dared to let himself believe he might be able to fall back asleep.

Yuri gradually moved his hand back up into his partner's hair, playing with it idly as the man dozed against him. The feeling of each soft, warm breath grazed his skin, a contrast to the cool air surrounding them both. The peace of the night seemed to linger for once, leaving them with not but the sounds of their own making, and the occasional noise of someone far down the hall.

But, even that was short-lived. Footsteps bounding up the hallway were coming closer. For the moment, neither exhausted skater bothered giving it the benefit of the doubt, assuming the thumping would come and go as whoever was running by would pass their door entirely to find their own. But, when they stopped right outside their own...both men's eyes were open, staring straight ahead, waiting for the next noise to come.

**BANG BANG BANG**

"...This is why we can't have nice things..." Viktor grumbled, defiantly staying where he was for the moment.

Yuri wasn't ready to move either, and stayed quiet, listening to any sign of familiarity to the people who were outside, banging on their door at whatever ungodly hour it was. Eventually though, their intruders made themselves known...Phichit first, then Chris, loudly demanding that the two of them come to the door.

"Are you sure this is their room?" Chris asked, quieter than before.

"Of course I'm sure. I stayed here with them on Thursday night, remember?" Phichit answered, "I even have my key-card still."

Yuri's eyes shot open wide as he heard those words, and his frame twitched in an effort to sit up, but Viktor pinned him down.

"I turned the deadbolt and the sliding chain lock." He explained, "Even if he uses the key-card, they're not getting in."

"Viktor! Yuri! If you don't come out, we're coming in!" Chris hollered, pounding on the door again.

"Maybe they aren't even here." Phichit suggested, "I mean, wouldn't they put the DND sign on the door handle if they were in and wanted to be left alone?"

"Where else could they be? No one's seen them at the Banquet and they all confirmed they'd heard
no plans that these two would be skipping out." Chris went on, "VIKTOR! YURI! If I have to take your victory gifts back to my room, they're not coming out again!"

Yuri just made a face at the ceiling, "...As if I'm worried about a box of chocolates and some gift cards."

"I have your Prize money, too!"

And he was upright. Viktor buried his head under a few pillows and Yuri threw his legs off the edge of the bed, rummaging for his underwear before marching towards the door. A few clicks of the different locks, and the door swung open, with a rather disgruntled and disheveled Yuri standing within it.

Chris, decked out in a full suit, just smiled pleasantly behind the circular frames of his thin glasses, nothing in his hands, "Hey."

Phichit's face was red, but he waved anyway, "H-hi Yuri. Chris is a liar. He doesn't have your stuff."

"...I can see that." Yuri answered grudgingly, "I don't know why I believed he did. Maybe it's because we were sleeping."

"Oh, so Viktor is in there with you." Chris nodded.

"OF COURSE HE'S IN HERE WITH ME. WHERE ELSE WOULD HE GO?" Yuri argued; he was getting more irritated by the second.

"Hurry up and get ready. It's almost midnight. You'll miss everything." The blonde instructed, pointing into the room, "You guys don't have the luxury of getting to make a big scene at the medaling ceremony, and ask to do a second Exhibition performance, only to bail on the Banquet."

Phichit was already rummaging around in the closet by the bathroom, knowing that all of their clothing had been hung in there on the first night, "Yuri, come on and help me find the suits you guys planned on wearing-"

"Alright! Alright, enough! Get out and we'll come!" The older skater barked, stepping forward again and trying to make the two intruders leave.

They just stayed where defiantly where they were though, and the dim lights of the hall glinted on Chris' frames, "If you kick us out, we know full-well you'll lock the door and you won't answer it for anyone for the rest of the night. Then you might even bail on the press conference because you know about all the dirty looks you'll get for how things turned out tonight."
"We're not going to bail on the press conference!" Yuri insisted, "That whole thing is going to be on ISU TV! We'd have to be dead or crippled to miss it!"

"Viktor!" Chris hollered, trying to get his voice around the man in front of him, "Let's get a move on! I can see your feet from here!"

Up to that point, the Russian had tried to stay in bed. But, upon hearing his name in that moment, grudgingly started to move. What came next was entirely unexpected though. Yuri was quick to notice what was coming and ducked.

Phichit dodged as the first rolled-up sock came hurtling towards Chris, who was standing just behind him. He got beamed in the face with the next one though. A third sock-roll came flying at him then, bouncing off his head and hitting Chris as well. The fourth sock was dodged by both. Viktor then threw his pants, then Yuri's coat, then their shoes, his underwear, Yuri's shirt, his own coat, and by then, the bare-arsed Russian had made it to where Yuri had dropped their gear bags.

"IF YOU TWO DON'T GET OUT, I'M THROWING KNIFE-BOOTS NEXT."

Chris looked up from where he'd raised his hands to protect himself, and suddenly saw the glint off a smartphone that had tumbled onto the floor. He glanced down at it and spotted the device, grabbing for it and seeing the wine & blue Aria motif on the phone-case. He waggled it in his hand, "I'm taking this as collateral. I'm not giving it back until you two get ready."

"UBIRAJSHA!" Viktor barked, holding up one of his own skates by then, ready to pull off the blade guard if the two didn't move it.

Phichit took the man at his word and bailed, though Chris was slower to follow. He gave the naked Russian a good look-over before winking, and then leaving, "We'll be waiting in the hall for you."

The door clicked behind them, and the two men left behind sighed angrily. Yuri crossed his arms and glanced back at his infuriated husband, watching as Viktor finally put the skate back into the bag it had been pulled from, "Guess we're stuck now."

"That's four straight nights in a row where everything goes to Hell!" The Russian lamented, crouching down to zip the bag up, "I just want one night where my sleep isn't interrupted by blood, drama, other peoples' drama, or THEM!" He pointed at the door and then sat roughly backward, all but sobbing by that point.

Yuri sighed, but looked away a bit sheepishly, feeling bad that his blood had been the first reason his partner had listed. Instead of lingering on it though, he went to the closet where Phichit had been trying to find their things, and finished the task himself, pulling out the two suits that had been selected days ago specifically brought for the Banquet. He set the two garment bags across the bed before kneeling down next to his partner, and settled his hands on the man's shoulders, speaking quietly, "We don't have to stay long. Let's just go make an appearance, satisfy the higher ups, and then come back to bed."

"Maybe if neither of us had gotten on the podium...but you know full well we'd never get away with that." Viktor sighed, "Chris said it was midnight. We'll be there till 3am at the least."

"Probably." Yuri agreed, rubbing his thumb back and forth, "Well, let's get a move on. We can still have a little fun even if we didn't technically want to go. We're technically on the clock, so to speak, as long as we're at a competition. We won't be completely free until we leave the hotel tomorrow morning."
"...Maybe if we play Drunk Snap again, they'll kick us out like at NHK." Viktor suggested, bringing one hand up to rub his chin, "Remember?"

"No, but we should totally do that anyway." Yuri mused, pushing to stand up again, and offering his hands to help his husband up as well, "Just don't let me get so drunk that I can't recall what happened again."

"I make no promises." The Russian answered as he rose, holding onto those hands for a few moments longer, "Mostly because I don't know how much I'm going to drink."

"Maybe we should both abstain then."

"...There you go making sense again." Viktor lamented with a smile.

"I know...it's a problem I have..." The younger man nodded, stepping up onto his toes briefly to kiss his husband's forehead before turning away to unzip the first garment bag, "Let's do it then..."

Chapter End Notes

Ubirajsja = Get out!
Chapter 318

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: Sorry for taking so long to update. I got on a sudden Hannibal kick and spent most of the week watching all 3 seasons (for like the 8th time, but it's only the first time since seeing YoI last year.) It occurs to me that Hannigram (which is cannon according to show runner Bryan Fuller) is so similar to Viktuuri. Handsome genius foreigner (with similar hair! XD) comes in and completely uproots the mild-mannered sometimes-glasses-wearing dark-haired undiscovered prodigy, takes him under his wing, and teaches him everything he needs to know for them to be equals. At the end, they're so into one another that the younger even starts to emulate the elder's sense of clothing style. Fun NAD Fact: "SkateHusbands" was actually borrowed from Hannibal, when Freddy Lounds referred to Hannigram as "MurderHusbands" lol

CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED EIGHTEEN

Getting ready, from bed to business-suits, had taken far longer than either Phichit or Chris had expected. By 15 minutes, they were putting their ears to the door to listen for any sound of movement within the room, only to be put back in their place to wait some more. It was 30 minutes before the door opened again.

The sleepy duo had finally finished getting ready. Yuri stepped out first, wearing a dark-navy suit with a lighter-blue striped tie, his hair slicked back, and glasses on. He adjusted where they sat on his nose as he stepped forward, glancing back momentarily for his partner, who was grabbing the DND door-knob sign to hang on the outside handle. Viktor wore a dark gunmetal-grey suit, which bore a certain glossy shine, and a black tie. He'd made a dubious effort to style his hair, but it mostly just looked like he ran his fingers through it a few times and called it 'good enough.' The pair reached a hand between them, lacing their fingers together, and started walking for the elevators without a word or nod of acknowledgment to the 'besties' who had come to fetch them.

At least, until Viktor remembered that Chris had his phone. He paused dead in the hall, turned on a heel, and held his free hand out, palm up. Chris placed the device there wordlessly, and waited for Viktor to put it away before following after them again. Oddly though, Viktor had kept his eyes straight on the Swiss skater even as his hand sought after a pocket. Those eyes didn't turn again until the phone was stowed and Viktor was satisfied that no one would say anything.

Not that it was true once he did turn around.

"You might want to brace yourselves." Chris warned, pocketing his hands into his blazer, "After all the hubbub leading into the Final, you two are practically the Guests of Honor."

The pair in front side-glanced one another; the bags under their eyes was more telling than anything else though.

"Chris is right," Phichit added, though sounding a bit more nervous suddenly, "Everyone is really excited about having you two turn up at the Banquet. Since you tried to bail, it's going to be an even bigger deal when you do turn up. If you guys just give them all looks like you want them to drop dead though..."
They walked a few more steps, those words sinking in. Yuri finally dipped his head and sighed, pausing just around the corner from the elevator lobby. He pulled his partner aside and let the other two by to summon a carriage, whispering into the man's ear, "...They're right. We can't just go up there, get our stuff, and go-

"Your stuff." Viktor corrected.

"...-back to bed." Yuri went on, trying not to let the technicality upset his train of thought. He glanced back at where Chris was looking at his phone for the time, and then back to Viktor, seeing the dark circled under the man's eyes, ",...I know you're exhausted. Believe me. I am, too. The longer we're walking around, the more my head swims and I just want to sit down. But we can't take it out on others. You already spent most of today being cranky because of our morning upset, but..."

"But?"

"...But...technically you did wake up on your own in the first place."

The ding of the elevator cut through the air like a hot knife, and the two more-alert skaters stepped within, holding the door until their zombie-like friends joined them. When the doors opened a second time, leading the way to where the Banquet was in full-swing, the music emanating from within the huge conference rooms was louder than either hazy Nikiforov anticipated.

Of course, as soon as they managed to get within the last doorway that separated them from the party, the music suddenly got quieter. Viktor started dragging his feet, staring straight ahead with glossy eyes, even as Chris and Phichit were getting further and further ahead.

Yuri eventually had to pause, feeling the Russian languishing at the end of his reach. He saw the unhappy-neutral look on his husband's face and sighed where he stood, "...Come on, Viktor...the sooner we get there, the sooner we can leave."

"I really don't want to. Not...not this time." He answered sullenly, eyes slowly sinking towards the floor, feeling as though he might nod-off where he was, standing or not, "I can't keep doing this."

Hesitating, Yuri recoiled the distance between them and slid an arm behind the man's back, "You left your head on the pillow downstairs."

"Would you hate me if I asked to stay in the hall while you go ahead?"

Yuri could only make a subtle face at that, but glanced around, seeing a few small plush benches lining the walls, and motioned for his spouse to go towards the nearest one, "I'd only hate to leave you here on your own while I go ahead without you." He explained, turning to help Viktor sit, and then crouched before him, hands on the man's knees as he looked up past those silver bangs, "Normally, you can hardly stand to keep in the background of things. You always want to jump into the forefront and make grand declarations."

"...Normally I don't feel like I have a fish-bowl for a head." Viktor answered quietly, "Maybe if Chris and Phichit hadn't gone banging on the door, I'd be more awake now...but at this point, the adrenalin-rush of having them trying to break the door down to get us up here has worn off, and I'm feeling even more tired than I did when I woke up on my own in the first place."

Yuri paused for a moment, hinged on the edge of those words, not quite sure how to answer. The changing narrative in the main room of the Banquet could be felt in the hall already, and it seemed like the anticipation of the event's 1st and 2nd Gold medalists was growing. Yuri looked to the side, towards the doors where Chris and Phichit had disappeared, and then back to his worn-out husband.
Seeing the slow blink, those eyes closed for so long that Yuri wondered if the man had fallen asleep where he sat, only to blearily open them again, made up his mind. He stood up, and reached for Viktor's hands, pulling on them to get him to stand up as well, "...Viktor, koibito...go back to bed."

"...Eh?" The Russian gaped with a half-conscious haze, shaking his head like he thought he hadn't heard correctly, "...Say what?"

"Go back to bed." Yuri repeated, bringing his hands up to gently press against each cheek, "I'll follow after you as soon as I can, but I won't torture you with this. You're just going to get bombarded and that's not fair to you right now."

Viktor was still stunned, but the very idea that he had been given permission to go back to sleep was enough to make his brain go into overdrive to make it happen. He gave a weak nod, pressing his face against the warm palms still cupped over his skin, felt the kiss, and lifted his head again, "...Make sure you wake me up, okay? I want to know that you got back safely, otherwise I won't really sleep at all."

"I will." The younger man agreed easily enough, pulling his hands back to make way for Viktor to turn away, "Don't wait up for me though."

"Yuri! Viktor!" Phichit called, looking nervous, as though the rest of the attendees were doubting his and Chris' account that the two skaters had actually come with them.

Yuri waved at his friend, but then turned back to his spouse, giving one last quick rub against the man's back before sending him on his way towards the elevators, "Love you. I won't be long."

The Russian gave a weak smile to acknowledge the words, but a yawn interrupted his attempt to reply. He felt the final pat on his rump to make him leave, and he started heading back the way they'd come.

"Yuri!" Phichit called again, coming entirely through the doors to grab the man's arm, only to spot Viktor walking away, "Whatishedoing!? Whereishegoing!?"

"I told him to go back to bed." Yuri answered matter-of-factly, "He's in no frame of mind to be here. Since he dropped from the competition at the end, he would only really be up here on my behalf as a coach anyway. I can't ask him to force himself to stay awake for the next two or three hours just to sit at a table in the background."

Phichit had no rebuttal to that. Three seconds later, he wouldn't need one anyway, as he felt a hand take hold of both him and Yuri, dragging them both into the conference hall.

Viktor finally found himself on the precipice of the hotel room door, and slid the key-card into the slot, pushed the panel in, and stepped inside. He didn't even bother with turning any of the lights on as he fumbled his way over the threshold, simply casting his finery onto the floor, sloughing his shoes off, and using his hands to find his way to the edge of the bed. When he managed to fall into it and crawled under the covers, the silence that greeted him was deafening.

"This is almost worse than sleeping in the car two weeks ago. At least then, Yuri was a thousand miles away and unreachable...but here, he's just upstairs, and it's only circumstance that he's away from me."

He drew in a breath, and reached for the pillow that his partner had slept on, squishing his face into the middle of it as he hugged it close to his chest.
...I'm sorry I can't be there with you right now, Yuri. I just can't keep...my eyes...open...

To say that Viktor had fallen asleep in that moment would be an understatement. More truly, he'd fallen into a coma. Though he'd been fully aware of how fast he'd faded, the speed to which his mind shut down was a surprise even in those waning seconds before the void took him. An eternity could've passed and he wouldn't have noticed it. It was the kind of sleep that felt like the null-existence of the time that went by before one was born; 13.7 billion years, and not a second of it noted. The abrupt hyper-awareness of reality as the light-switch of life was turned on though...that couldn't be missed.

"Viktor...Viktor, wake up."

Eyelids felt like lead, but he managed to open them anyway, even if only a crack.

"Make a noise or something and I'll let you be."

"...Y-Yuri..." Viktor mumbled in a haze, seeing the blurry outline against the dark, recognizing only the voice that accompanied it. He felt the movement in front of him; the sudden swoosh of a cool draft against his bare skin as the blankets were pulled up, then the warm slide of another body pressing in against his own. He could feel his right arm being pulled over, and his shoulder being wedged between the side of the other body's chest and another arm. His cheek settled flush against that rising and falling frame, and he closed his eyes again, letting himself go limp against it.

He didn't manage to fall asleep again right away though. He listened to the rhythmic beat of that heart for a few seconds as Yuri settled in, but then slid his left arm under his partner's back and squished his face against that chest as tightly as he'd done to the pillow (in what felt like) seconds before, "You're back."

"Tadaima." Yuri answered quietly, turning slightly in the Russian's embrace, moving his own arms around the man's head to return the hug, "Go back to sleep..." He whispered against that silver hair.

"How long were you gone?"

"Four hours."

"...Must've been...one heck of a party without me."

Yuri huffed a laugh, "Don't say that. I caught a second wind and then no one would let me leave. I've been trying to come back down for three of those hours. I only managed to get away because I said I had to pee. I bet they're all wondering where I am now."

"Hmm...not for long." Viktor mused, kissing the spot he'd mashed his face against before turning his head and lying it down again, "Is the sign still on the doorknob outside?"

"Mh."

"Then...let's pick up where we left off before we were so rudely interrupted."

Nodding, Yuri kissed the crown of his husband's head and let himself relax, "I'll tell you what happened in the morning." He said quietly, feeling as his right leg was caught by and pulled between Viktor's, holding it there like a knee-pillow. The silver legend was out like a light after that, the squeeze of his arms relaxing a little. Yuri just held to the man's head for a little while, smiling to himself as he rubbed his thumb slowly back and forth just behind one ear.

""
The room was still pleasantly dark when the 10:30am alarm rang from Yuri's phone. It was a quiet, gradually increasing chime that was easy to rouse to, which was a mercy in itself. Yuri eventually reached behind himself to find the device and quiet it, and pulled it from the charging cable, noting the time before he set a 30 minute snooze and let the phone fall to the sheets. He returned to his husband's back after that, nuzzling in closer to enjoy the contrast of the warmth to the cool room-air where his arm was now on top of the covers. He idly kissed at the back of his partner's neck for a little while, trailing to the edge of the upturned shoulder, and then back down again.

Before making it half-way though, Viktor seemed to rouse a little, and turned his face up just a moment before turning the rest of himself onto his back. He felt thin fingers come up against his jaw as lips moved from shoulder to chin, then a short ways up from there. The kiss was light, but lasted a while, as though Yuri had fallen asleep in the midst of it and simply stayed where he was with their lips together. The feeling of the younger man's left leg coming up over his thighs made it clear that Yuri hadn't drifted back to sleep though, and the hand that traced his jaw started moving down, tracing a line down his neck, and over his chest. It settled against his ribs there, anchoring softly as Yuri's leg continued its slow journey upward, bent at the knee and brushing lightly against every contour and muscle. It seemed to park quite deliberately just above a certain morning sensitivity, pressing in a little more firmly then as Yuri's own slid closer, effectively sandwiching that length of needy flesh between stomach and waist.

The gentle roll of Yuri's hips against the Russian's side was a welcome gesture after the previous morning's interruption, and Viktor answered it happily, feeling a gasp against his lips as his hand reached across to take hold of his partner's member. He felt fingers pressing hard against his ribs as Yuri tried to grasp him, drawing in a hissed breath as own fingers went around to clasp and grip. The slow and gentle twists and tugs were received gratefully as quiet, whimpered breaths were dragged across Viktor's skin, and breathed against his lips. He managed to slip his free left arm under his partner's thin waist, and rolled his hips just once against the leg over him before turning fully to more easily see that flushed face.

Yuri moved his hand from ribs to shoulder, his right arm pinned under his husband's neck where he stretched it out, breathing a bit heavier than before. He could feel a palm pressing against the small of his back, sliding upward between his skin and the sheet beneath him. It cupped around the curve of his side and pulled him closer, the right hand still working at his center. The leg he'd draped over the Russian's side pinched inward a little, and Yuri felt the telltale rub of a second member joining his, sliding up and rubbing down between the curve of encircling fingers. Yuri's breaths became more vocal, each exhale like a quiet but desperate whine. That wasn't the only growing sound though; the slide of dry skin was more-and-more becoming slick and wet. Yuri could feel himself losing the battle for composure against the sensation, and he almost entirely missed it when Viktor made him turn around, facing him away and pressing in against his back. Both arms were around him again, the left still under his waist, that hand moving down deep between his legs, the right curving over the other side to continue the slippery tugging and twisting in front. The feeling of the thick, slickened length of flesh rubbing up behind him was of no consequence; Yuri's mind was entirely elsewhere in that moment. He was pliable in the Russian's embrace, kisses felt on the back of one shoulder before trailing down to the center of the back of his neck. He felt the tease of silver hair brushing against his skin, then the press of a cheek as pressure began to build further down.

Viktor slid through that cleft of skin as his hands continued at their task, fingers and palm of the right kneading the slickened head of his husband's morning urge, the left fondling and pressing further down. He knew he was pleasantly overwhelming the younger man's senses when Yuri could hardly move, falling limp like a ragdoll. That body accepted him eagerly, the wet heat of the inside wrapping around like a glove that fit only him. He pressed his hips hard and firm against the curve of that limp frame, pushing in as deeply as he could before gently pulling his hips back again. The slow but purposeful roll, in and out, in and out, was nothing like the fevered pitch of the night before.
Viktor felt a hand reaching back, weaving through his hair as Yuri grasped for anything he could find. He withdrew his left hand from service then, moving up to wrap that arm around Yuri's core, holding him firmly as his hips pressed in a little faster.

The pressure of the Russian's body, practically form-fit against Yuri's back and legs, was titillating enough on its own. The added pressure within him was intoxicating. Nothing was out of place; everything felt good. There was always something uniquely sensual about feeling Viktor's hips pressed flush against the back of his own, moving only enough to withdraw slightly and then press in again. The added attention in front made it all the more exciting. The morning romp was, altogether, a different experience than the nightly one. The morning was more personal; more like a sublimely erotic cuddle than the desperate breeding of the evening. Yuri could never decide which he liked more...though often, it would simply be whichever he was experiencing at the time.

"...You're so sensitive in the morning." Viktor suddenly whispered, drawing Yuri's mind from the prior thought, "You can hardly move."

"...I need you..." Yuri whispered back, letting his head drop a little where he'd lifted it to listen, his frame going limp again, "...I need you deeper..."

Viktor was all-too-happy to oblige, using his arms to hold that thin body still as he pressed in further, drawing an exquisite song from his husband's lips. He repeated himself two more times before slowing down again, and freed his right hand to roam all up and down the front of his partner's body, the left clutching behind one hip where it could.

Being on their sides was too restrictive, to Yuri's mind. He wanted to feel more. One hand being perpetually pinned under him meant that was one hand less that could feel him. He forced himself to move then, pushing back against his partner's frame, and forced him to roll onto his back. Yuri laid out on top of him, back to the Russian's chest like before, but facing the ceiling then, knees bending up as toes perched on top of the man's thighs, blankets falling away from them. He leaned his head back, pressing it into the space above his partner's shoulder, and tilted his head away as he felt lips seeking for his neck. Hands moved more freely over him then, just as he'd wanted, even as the rhythmic pressure rolled into and out of him from below.

When Yuri's back started to arch, pulling away from his chest, Viktor knew he'd gotten the man close to the edge. He noted how Yuri's feet couldn't keep to their perches on his legs, sliding to the sheets between or beside them as his core tightened with each subsequent breath. He let his right hand roam south again, reaching for the throbbing member that had been neglected for a while. The touch of those fingers alone seemed to be enough, and Yuri suddenly cried out, body clenching tightly. Viktor wrapped his arms around his partner, the twitch and spasm of Yuri's release putting him over the edge soon after. It wasn't too long before Viktor let his partner slide down to the sheets again, heaving for breath even as they both felt the aftershocks of their finales.

Their skin tingled, and electricity prickled from within. Yuri was a bit surprised to hear the Russian whispering a laugh against the back of his shoulder, and he twisted onto his back to feel that warm breath against his chest instead. A few kisses trailed over it before those blue eyes found hazel, and Viktor settled his chin down against a collar-bone, "Today is going to be a good day. I can feel it."

"Well, you have no cause to be cranky anymore...so I hope it's a good day..." Yuri agreed quietly, threading his fingers through those silver bangs, brushing them out of his partner's eyes, "We can take our time getting to that press conference and then meander to the airport."

"I've never been so happy to go home after a competition before." Viktor mumbled, the words half-obscured by where he had his lips pressed to skin again, looking down, "Forgive me for last night. I wasn't going to make it though."
"Don't worry about it. Nothing out of the ordinary happened."

"Ordinary by our standards is somewhat extraordinary on occasion." The Russian refuted.

"True..." Yuri agreed, his voice barely a whisper. He lifted his head a bit to look at his partner more evenly, "I mean it though. It was fairly ho-hum. No drunken strip-tease or Snap. No dance-off. It was fairly placid and subdued."

"It took you four hours to come back to me though."

Yuri pushed up onto an elbow, "Trust me, it's not because I was having too much fun. Every time I got out from under someone's thumb and thought I could make a clean get-away, someone else would want to talk to me. All the attention that had been on the both of us in the running to the Final was heaped onto just me at the conclusion of everything. We had missed the Banquet at Worlds last year, too, so a lot of people who'd found out about us being married were only just now getting to comment about it. All things considered, last night was the first time most of these people had ever really talked to me, too, since I was always too shy before. Without you there, it was like everyone was meeting me for the first time all over again. It was a bit strange."

"Really?" Viktor hummed, "Have I changed you that much?"

"You say that like you think it's a bad thing." Yuri lowered back down to the pillows again, settling one hand against the back of the silver legend's shoulders, rubbing his thumb there slowly, "I don't think I've changed... I've just... gotten to a point where I can be myself with more people than before. It used to be a really small circle of friends that I'd known for years. Now I can talk to just about anyone." He lowered his gaze to look at the top of his partner's head, and smiled, "People are already starting to ask when you're going to be accepting new students. Seems everyone wants a piece of the Nikiforov Magic that you gave to me."

Viktor chortled, and drew his arms in a bit to hug his spouse, "That magic is purely for you, and you alone."

"Oh, if we're talking about that magic, then yes, I should hope so." Yuri huffed and amused laugh, but then shook his head, "I meant the kind that you're willing to offer to others though. You'd be pretty in-demand if you opened yourself up to teaching more people."

"I'm still competing. I don't have the luxury of that much time on offer." The Russian explained, "Plus, we're borrowing time from the Ice Castle just for ourselves. It would be meaningless to offer coaching to others if I can't get more than a few hours a week on the ice."

"So we'll buy the Ice Castle."

Viktor stumbled in his thoughts to hear it, and drew in a sighed breath as he folded his arms over his husband's chest, and rested his chin on them as he looked forward, "You were talking to Mikhail again last night."

"I couldn't avoid him the entire time."

"He's the only one crazy enough to suggest buying a skating arena like it's no big deal." Viktor went on, "He needs to stop assuming everyone has as much money as he apparently does."

"He has way more than you think. Maybe it was the champagne talking, but he offered to buy the Ice Castle on our behalf, and then either sell it to us for less, or let us lease it from him."

Viktor just made an annoyed face at the idea.
Yuri could feel the tension, and abruptly dropped the issue, rising up onto both of his elbows then as he was saved by the loud rumble of his stomach. He could see those blue eyes still staring at him intently though, and he found himself brought right back around to the topic he'd mentally walked away from just seconds earlier, "...Well, it's something to put on a back-burner somewhere. Revisit it another day, a few years from now."

"Mikhail can't buy my forgiveness." Viktor said abruptly.

"...I don't think that's why he suggested it." Yuri explained, "At any rate, it's not like I signed or agreed to anything. I was just kind of...noodling and smiling...while I looked for an escape opportunity. Odds are, we'll run into him at the press conference just because Yurio ended up taking Bronze home. After that, you won't have to deal with him again until after Christmas."

"...Two weeks of just us...before everything goes crazy."

"Don't spoil it for yourself before it happens." Yuri offered, pushing to sit up all the way, and watched as Viktor did the same next to him, even as the man leaned forward to wrap his arms around his knees. Yuri settled an arm across the man's back and leaned against him, "If you convince yourself ahead of time that it's going to be miserable, then you're just setting yourself up. Don't let Mikhail have that much power of you. Hasetsu is still our place."

Viktor leaned his head slightly, touching it to the side of his husband's forehead, "I'm trying not to think about that at all right now. I'm actually more worried about doing Nationals on my own. I could tolerate it if you were there, but you can't be, and as popular as I am back home...I don't really have any friends there, least not in Moscow. It's just Yakov and Yurio, and Mila I guess. Professional associations, some just longer standing than others."

"Don't think about it for now. We're still at the Grand Prix Final for the moment. There's lots that can happen over the next two weeks...so don't borrow trouble. Maybe it'll work out, and you'll be able to mend the wounds between you and your uncle, so being around him in Moscow will be a good thing."

"Mhnn..."

Yuri's stomach growled again, and he gave an anxious laugh to hide it, "...I can't offer anymore pearls of wisdom until I've filled this abyssal maw in my gut. Let's get something to eat. We'll both feel better."
Chapter 319

CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED NINETEEN

Packing up the hotel room took almost no time at all, at least compared to when they were packing up after their earlier events. Only needing enough gear for the weekend made it easy. With the room empty, they made their way down the concierge, turned in their key-cards, and stowed their luggage until it was truly time to leave.

They made their way over to where the last of the breakfast buffet was still set out, set their coats over the seats at the table they were assigned to, and made their way over to what was left of the buffet line.

Yuri poked at a few of the shriveled pancakes that were stashed at the back of a tray, "Hm...maybe we should've come down earlier. You can tell they stop caring when they're about to switch over to the lunch menu."

"We could always come back when they've changed it out." Viktor suggested, looking at the fare but not picking anything, "None of this looks particularly appetizing anyway."

The gurgle of a piteously empty stomach answered that, and Yuri could do little more than whine, "I need food now, or I'll die."

"...I'm going to go sit then." The Russian said simply, taking a half-step closer to put a hand against the small of his partner's back, and leaned over a shoulder to kiss one cheek. He stepped off without another word, making his way through the arrangement of occupied tables to find their own again.

Yuri watched the man go quietly, holding his near-empty plate in his hands. The table wasn't that far off, and he could see clearly how Viktor sat, half-glanced at a menu, and then set it down again to slouch in his chair. The sight of it gave Yuri a cold chill behind his neck.

This is exactly the sort of thing I was worried about last year, when I told him we should end things. Having him stay on as my coach, even though I asked him to come back to competition, too...it's just strangling him.

Viktor had closed his eyes by then, and looked as though he'd nodded off at the table. Yuri's brow furrowed at the sight of it. He turned his head briefly to look back at the remnants of the banquet, and despite the gurgling ache in his stomach, he abandoned the line and started wandering back to the table as well.

We're barely a third of the way through the season and he's completely wiped out. The rat-race won't end for another 3 months, and the Olympics in the middle of it just makes it even worse than normal.

He set his barely-stacked plate on another table as he passed, hiding it within the mess of the previous patrons that hadn't been cleaned up yet, and stepped up quietly behind his partner. So far as Yuri could tell, Viktor had no idea he was there.

I wish there was something I could do to ease the burden. He's just so weighed down by all this other unrelated garbage...

Yuri leaned down and slid his arms over his husband's shoulders, crossing them over the man's chest as he pressed his cheek to the side of Viktor's neck.
Viktor himself was a bit surprised by it, quietly muttering Yuri's name as he half-rose from his dozing. He settled again though a second after, and reached his right hand up to gently clasp around one arm resting against him, "...You didn't bring anything back. I thought you were starving?"

"I'll just order something from here." Yuri answered quietly, turning his face to kiss the spot on Viktor's neck instead, then hugging a bit tighter, "When we finally get home tomorrow, I'm going to dig a moat around the house, and put up signs warning people to stay away for at least a week. I'm not going to let anyone near you."

"That's really sweet of you, but...the only person I'd want to avoid isn't going to be there anyway. We'll all be half a planet apart."

"I wish I could understand better why you guys are butting heads like this." Yuri answered, sliding to the side to find a seat, and pulling it around the curve of the table to sit closer, setting his hand on his partner's leg like he often did when they drove, "Or maybe I just wish I could read you better. You're so good at hiding when you're really upset about something. If I didn't already know that you and Mikhail had gotten into it the other night, I don't know that I'd be able to figure it out."

"It's not your fault," The Russian reassured, curling his fingers around the hand on his thigh, "I'm not so sure I'm even consciously aware of how I suppress things. I've done my best to give my uncle the benefit of the doubt since he popped up after Four Continents last year. When I found out he'd been hurt, I really wanted things to work out. Since then though, I..." His words trailed, and he clasped the hand a little tighter, "I'm not sure it's meant to be between him and I. I've spent most of my life trying to put the first 12 years of it behind me. Mikhail is just a walking reminder of how everything went wrong before...and especially since learning about how he was most of the reason why it happened..." Viktor slouched a little in his seat, drawing in a reluctant sigh of a breath, "Maybe it'll get better over time. Right now though...I just feel really sensitive regarding everything about him. I need the time away from him before Nationals to get my head together again. I'm not even sure I'd care if he apologized before we left today."

"You both wounded each other pretty deeply this weekend." Yuri agreed quietly, leaning against the man's shoulder and bringing his free hand up to hold to the arm below it, "I thought I could mediate this better, but maybe the best thing I can do is just let it go for now."

"...Were you trying to mediate last night?"

Yuri drew a nervous breath, but nodded, "I said to leave it all to me, so I gave it my best effort when I had the chance, even though I was dog-tired. He's not mad at you because of what you said. He's mad that you said it all in front of everyone we know."

"I did that to all the people I called out though...even you."

"I know, but what you said to me wasn't half as damning as what you said to him. Plus..."

"Plus?"

Yuri lifted his head and set his chin against the shoulder he'd been leaning on, "Basically everyone else that you called out already knew the mistakes they'd made, and you were telling them to get over it. Him though...you were pointing out his errors for the first time, shaming him for things he didn't even realize he'd done wrong until that moment, in front of a crowd...in front of his kids, someone he loves, and someone he's trying to be a good role-model for. The last three weekends in a row for him have been nothing short of a disaster, and he was already getting the gears from Minako-sensei about it. Then you threw him under the bus, too...and you're the main reason he's even around."
"If he hadn't let the fact that I started calling him Mimi again get to his head, maybe he wouldn't have tripped over his own feet so much." Viktor pointed out, "When I told him at Worlds that there were rules for staying in my good graces, he seemed to take it seriously...right up to the second I started to trust him. The moment I called him Uncle Mimi, he basically went straight to my father and started planting seeds, making plans to bring him into my life again, even though I had explicitly told him not to. Then he falls off that damn roof right before Cup of China, and I, in my naïvety, fell straight into the pity-trap to go back and get him for NHK."

"...Things with your father worked out in the end though."

"Yuri, my love..." Viktor started, turning his face to nose his partner's cheek, "Things worked out with my father because of you."

Hazel eyes looked down a bit; he wasn't so sure if the circumstances were a good thing or not anymore.

"You were the one who picked up the shattered pieces of my reality and put them back together again." Viktor went on, "You were the only reason I made it through that ordeal intact. If everything that happened at NHK happened at Russian Nationals instead, when you can't be there? I don't...know that I'd still be here."

"Don't say stuff like that."

"I can't lie to you about how that whole thing made me feel. There were some places so dark and deep though...if it had been anyone else...Sophia, that Ice Dancer from ages back, the rabid fan...I'd have felt completely alone." Viktor explained, "When I'm in those bad places, you're the only person I can really hold on to. You are my North Star. So when I go to Nationals on my own, the things you've already done will be what keeps the ground steady under my feet. I've even thought about even asking my papa to come to Moscow for it, because of you. You've turned all that sand into bedrock, and I'm not scared anymore."

"I'm still not sure what to do about Mikhail though." Yuri admitted sullenly.

"It's not so straightforward with him." The Russian shrugged lightly, and reached his free hand across the table to bring the laminated single-sheet breakfast menu forward, "Forget about it for now though. The wounds are too fresh and I don't want to deal with it anyway. I'll feel better when we're on the plane. Maybe then I'll finally be able to relax a little."

It was impossible to want to drag the conversation back when it was so clear that Viktor was done with it, so Yuri nodded quietly to himself and lifted his head, looking over at the menu as well. His eyes saw the words but his brain wouldn't read them.

"You don't like it." Viktor said suddenly, drawing Yuri's attention back, "How I'm saying I want to deal with things."

"It's not my call." The younger man answered, "There's nothing of value for me to contribute right now, so the best I can do is support you. If letting it go and giving yourself some time and space away from Mikhail is what you want, I can't say you're wrong. Maybe we all need it."

"Distance makes the heart grow fonder." The Russian added, leaning against the table while he read, "...In some cases."

"Agreed."

A few seconds passed before Viktor turned his eyes again, only to lean to the side and bump his
Yuri could feel his face flushing, but before he could answer, his stomach made a terrible growling noise that he worried could be heard as far away as the next table. He lurched and wrapped his arms around himself to contain the beast within, trying not to look too conspicuous, but Viktor laughed anyway. He felt the Russian leaning in to nibble on his ear affectionately.

"You're adorable." Viktor mused, "And I think I just fell in love with you again."

The Press Conference for the end of the Grand Prix Final was as standard as it could get. Yuri sat in the middle, with Otabek on his right and Yurio on his left, a long table stretching across 30ft of stage, and a huge white billboard behind them with all the different sponsor logos spackled across its surface.

The questions were run-of-the-mill; How did you feel about your Free Skate? What do you think you can improve for next time? Do you have plans to go to the Olympics? Will you bring the same programming there or create something unique? The only question that stumped any of the skaters was the inevitable one about their reactions to Viktor's recusal from the podium.

"I thought he was pulling my chain when I found out why he'd done it." Yuri answered, leaning against the table on his elbows, "When I saw him step down from the podium, it felt like the whole world suddenly went to slow motion. It was hard to believe. For a split second, I thought maybe he was falling, not walking, so I think my heart skipped a beat before I got a good look at him. I even tried to convince him to step back up again, but he told me to shuush." The audience and media laughed, "Otabek seemed to understand what was going on before I did, since he hopped right over the level behind me to take his spot on Silver. I think Yuri nearly wet himself when Viktor yelled at him to get out there."

More laughter, but Yurio quirked a brow, "I was surprised, but not that surprised. Viktor's always doing stupid things."

"Remind us all who's still asking me to be his coach." Viktor hollered from the 3rd row.

The press corps turned to photograph the Russian as he smiled rather smugly, then turned their attention back to the skaters on the stage. Yuri smirked, but Yurio just half-rolled his eyes. Otabek was as stoic as ever, side-eyeing them but saying nothing.

"Speaking of Viktor being a coach though...since he's also competing, how are you going to handle him being in Moscow while you're at your own Nationals?" One of the sports reporters asked.

"It'll be hard without him," Yuri answered, looking down at the table for a moment before looking up again, "Other than for my Free Skate at Rostelecom last year, Viktor's been there for me at every event. Being on my own for a whole weekend though... At least in Russia, Viktor still has Yakov around to stand in as his coach while I'm away, but I'll be on my own entirely. Celestino won't be there either."

Viktor was practically blue in the face from the dread-embarrassment of Yuri's words. A dark cloud spiraled over him in the audience, but he stayed quiet.

"I think it'll be okay though. We'll just FaceTime before my turn or something." Yuri went on.

"Are you concerned about having another anxiety attack like you did at Skate Canada and Cup of
China?” Someone else asked.

Viktor's shadow could've been vantablack with how dark it suddenly became under him. The cloud swirled more fiercely.

"Nationals isn't nearly as harrowing as the Grand Prix Series..." Yuri tried to explain, "All the chatter about Viktor and I competing against one another after our battle at Worlds...I was really scared this whole season that I'd let everyone down, or make Viktor look bad, if I didn't score Gold at both of my events. We aren't competing against each other for Nationals though so it's not really on my mind. It's a pretty laid-back event for me. I just wish Russia wasn't holding theirs at the same time, because other than Sochi, I've never actually been at an event in Russia when Viktor competed, so it would've been nice to go."

"Especially now, right?"

"Well..." Yuri gave a nervous smile, hiding the myriad events that had happened in Russia behind his eyes, "It would be interesting to go now."

"Be glad you get to take it easy at Nationals," Yurio suddenly commented, "When Viktor and I go head to head in Moscow, I'm going to beat him. I won't be giving up my Gold either."

Clamor in the audience grew, and many were cheering on the challenge. Viktor's dubious expression eased up a little as well, and the cloud above him seemed to finally dissipate.

With the last few group photos being taken of the winning trio, the conference came to an end, and the Grand Prix of Figure Skating Final in Detroit was officially over for the Men's Singles. Yuri bid his farewells to Otabek, and turned to walk with Yurio down to the audience where Viktor was coming out to meet them.

"So you guys aren't going straight to Moscow anymore?"

"Nah." Yurio shook his head, "The old man decided he wanted to go back to Edmonton for a few days first."

"And someone's still watching Potya for you until then?"

"Da."

"It's going to be fun to have her in Hastesu." Yuri commented, "I only got to see her that one time, when we went to your place and Mikhail was first setting up as your sponsor."

"When are you guys leaving?" The teen wondered, stopping in the middle aisle as his older counterpart got to them.

"We have to be at the airport in 2 hours. The flight is 27 hours and has 2 layovers..." Yuri answered with a nervous twitch, "We'll be in LA for part of tonight, then in Tokyo, then to Fukuoka...and then finally home."

"It'll be worth the wait." Viktor chimed in, snaking an arm behind his spouse's back, and feeling one of Yuri's come around him as well, "Plus, it'll be in first class, so we won't be cramped into tiny sardine-can seats."

"Why wouldn't it be in first class...?" Yurio dared to ask, "You refuse to fly any other way."

Yuri just raised his hand, "I'm in charge of booking flights after the ones Viktor's already picked run
their course."

The teen just deadpanned him, "...Why?"

"Cuz I said so."

"Cuz he said so." Viktor nodded in agreement.

Green eyes moved slowly between the duo, but Yurio was still skeptical, "...You guys are weird."

"Only as much as we need to be." Yuri smiled in agreement, "We need to get going though. We have to take back Viktor's rental and get through the TSA." He reached his free arm forward towards the Russian Tiger, "I'll see you after Nationals. Ganbatte, ne?"

"Spasibo. Davai." Yurio slipped in under the arm and returned the hug with his own, then turned his eyes towards the room exit, spotting the entourage of silver-haired folk there waiting for him. He turned back to Viktor though, "It's weird, seeing you around, but that it's me being the one to leave with your family."

"Family is what you make, not what you're born into," The silver legend answered, pulling Yuri just a bit closer, "You're leaving with people I'm related to, that's all."

"So it's still like that." Yurio shook his head, "Oh well. See you in Moscow. Da svidaniya."

"Ja ne." The two said together, waving lightly as the blonde turned away.
A few final words to event staffers and farewells to known members of the press, and the room was growing empty. Yuri pulled his arms out of his team jacket and cast it over one arm as they stepped through the doors to follow after where Yurio and Otabek had both gone minutes before. He noticed, awkwardly, that Viktor kept to his right side as they left the room, putting him between himself and the Rozovskys standing a short ways down the hall. He couldn't help but catch a glimpse of Nikki waving at them as they came out, and gave a half-wave back at her quietly.

"I know you don't want to talk to your Uncle, but your cousins would probably want to say bye at least." Yuri commented, slowing his walk to a crawl.

Viktor glanced up and over, making unexpected eye-contact with the young teen, and found her practically galloping over to them before he had a chance to look away again. Viktoria wasn't far behind. Yurio stayed where he was though; saying goodbye twice would be weird.

"Cousin Viktooooorrrrr!!" Nikkita hollered, waving her arms excitedly as she got closer. Much like she'd done to her father upon their reunion outside her school, the excitable youngster leapt like a winter deer, straight at the wide-eyed Russian. Unlike Mikhail though, Viktor caught the girl and stayed upright, though he did have to let his spouse go in the process.

Through disheveled hair and a stunned expression, Viktor turned his eyes towards the girl who'd mashed their cheeks together affectionately. He haphazardly turned his gaze towards Yuri instead, unsure what to say or do.

"It's going to be two whole weeks before we see you again!" Nikki started, glomping onto the Russian treasure like a cat on a catnip banana, "I already miss you and you're not even gone!"

"Two weeks will pass like nothing for you guys, I'm sure." Viktor finally managed, "You'll have to forgive me if I wish mine lasts forever."

"I don't blame you." She mused, giving one last hug before squirming to be let back down again, "I've been meaning to say since we met up, even though it wasn't under the best circumstances..." She started, keeping hold of one of Viktor's hands as she spoke, "Thank you for giving us another chance. We kind of caught papa by surprise when we turned up in Calgary before, so we tried to keep our heads down, especially after Sergio rubbed everyone against the grain. We were worried you'd be mad to see us again...so...thanks for not being mad...or at least hiding it well if you were."

"I wasn't mad." The silver Russian answered, his expression a bit softer then, "Maybe if your brother had been with you, but you and your sister did nothing wrong. You've done a lot to help Yurio, too, which is something I failed at for a long time." He leaned down and set his hands above his knees, coming down to eye-level with the young girl, "You've helped put off a lot of the worries I had about Yurio wanting to live in our same city, so thank you for that."

"Yeah, he seemed pretty cantankerous in Canada." Nikki agreed, "Like he was too good for us."

"He can get that way with people outside the skating universe." Viktor noted, about to rise back up to his full height, but finding himself stuck in place when his cousin put her hands on his cheeks. Blue eyes blinked in confusion at her.

"I know you and papa are mad at each other right now, but please don't hold so much against him."
She started quietly, a worried look on her face, "The mistakes he's making aren't something he's doing on purpose. He just...gets excitable, and stops thinking things all the way through. We've told him before that he's the dumbest smart-person we know."

"...Sounds apt." Viktor agreed, pulling free again as he reclaimed his height, and spotting his namesake as she finally caught up to them.

"Thirty hours to get back home." Viktoria started, "I feel sorry for you two. That's a long ride for anyone."

"It's a lot of hurrying up and waiting." Yuri answered, "We'll be spending 7 of those hours sitting around at layovers."

"At least it'll be some quiet time for you." She retorted, "After this weekend, I'm not sure that's all bad."

"Nah, it should be okay. Might even be like when we moved to St. Petersburg last year, right? Viktor." Yuri glanced up at his partner.

"Maybe. I just want to see Makkachin and get into that hot-spring." He answered simply, closing his eyes and smiling at the memory of his last soak, "I can't wait~! Depending on how I feel when we actually roll into Hasetsu, we should probably just go straight to Yu-Topia."

"If we go to Yu-Topia first, then I'm getting over my jet-lag there, too." Yuri laughed weakly, "We'll just have to camp out until we're rested enough to actually get all our stuff to our house."

The two beleaguered skaters sighed deeply in longing for the end of their journey.

"Safe travels then." Viktoria mused, patting them each on a shoulder, "We'll keep our Yuri out of trouble so you can look down on him on the Silver podium in Moscow."

Viktor just laughed at that, and gave the older teen a nod, "It's the natural order of things." He raised his hand then and gave a casual wave at the two girls, "À la prochaine."

"Au revoir." They both said together.

Viktor huffed a smile at that, and winked at them, "I almost forgot you were Canadians. Nous devrions parler plus souvent en français."

"Oui."

"I have no idea what you guys are saying but I'm sure it's important." Yuri grumbled.

Viktor just smirked and slid his arms around the younger man's thin frame, "We're just saying we should speak to each other in French more often, since French is a common second language in Canada."

"Starting to wish I was more than bi-lingual." Yuri pouted anyway, though only half-seriously, leaning his head back against the Russian's shoulder while the man was there.

"Maybe we'll teach you French while you're teaching me Japanese." Viktor offered, kissing a cheek quickly before looking back at his cousins, "We really should be going though. Be safe. See you in Moscow."

"Byyyyyee~!"
Yuri looked beyond the two girls to where Mikhail and Yurio had been waiting in the far background. He offered a wave, and received one in turn, but the awkward feeling of knowing Viktor was avoiding the older of the two made the whole thing hard to linger on, so he turned around soon after that. As they waited for the elevator that would take them back down to the lobby level, Yuri found his husband's hand, leaning against that shoulder, "Minako-sensei and Mari-nee-san should be in the air again by now. I'm kind of envious that they got such a big head start."

"Sou da ne..."

The elevator dinged and a set of doors opened, and the duo stepped within, finding their corner to wait for the descent.

"Their first big layover was just across the border in Toronto," Yuri continued, "But they got on their connecting flight while we were in the conference. Then they land in Haneda rather than Tokyo, then to Fukuoka. If they get there on schedule, it'll probably be dinner-time in Hasetsu when the train gets there."

"And we won't get there until the next morning." Viktor sighed dramatically, pushing off the wall as the doors opened to the lobby.

The concierge desk wasn't too far off, and Viktor reached for the luggage ticket in his long-coat, needing to wait only a minute or two before getting to the front of the line. Yuri looked at his phone while their things were brought up from storage behind the counter, checking Instagram for the first time since the weekend got off to its stormy start.

"Anything good?" Viktor wondered, looking back at him even as he was grabbing their three rolling suitcases.

"All of it's pretty good." Yuri answered, "It'll take hours to get through all of th-"

"...What happened?"

"...JJ DMed me." He said quietly, clicking into the message curiously, "A few times. First was to congratulate me on Silver, then he sent another one a few minutes later to say Gold instead. He...also says to tell you he's sorry."

Viktor quirked a brow, pausing at his task briefly before returning to it, "If he thinks he gets to take responsibility for how things turned out, he's dead wrong."

Yuri kept reading, "I think he's just apologizing for putting you through the trouble of what happened to me, not necessarily that he thinks he's the reason you stepped down at the end." Eyes continued tracking back and forth across the screen, "...He says he meant to say something when I went to see him in the hospital, because he knew why you weren't there with me, despite almost never leaving my side otherwise. It just took him all weekend to get the nerve to do it because he also knew I'd tell you what he said."

The Russian just huffed contemptuously at that.

"What was that for...?"

Viktor side-glanced before pulling up the telescoping handle of each rolling bag, handing one off before moving back towards the elevators with the other two dragging behind him, "The way he tells it, it's like he thinks he can't trust you, or that he would've expected you to keep his messages from me under different circumstances."
"...He didn't actually say that was why." Yuri made a face, "He said it took him all weekend to get the courage to figure out how he wanted to word his apology. I figured it was because he knew I'd tell you what he said." He put his phone away and hopped a few steps to catch up to his partner's longer stride, "Sorry to mention it."

The Russian stayed quiet after that, simply pulling the luggage along to take the elevator down for the parking garage. It took until all their luggage was stowed in the car and the two to get into their seats before he spoke again. He pulled the seat-belt across and clicked it into place, and then paused, hands on his lap rather than the wheel in front of him, though he did stare at it rather intently.

Yuri clicked his belt as well, and sat back, face turned slightly towards his sullen partner. He wasn't sure what to say or do, so he stayed as he was and waited nervously, hands lightly cupped together.

Viktor drew a long breath, eyes straight ahead still, "...You know what's happened to me over the course of my life." He started, lowering his gaze a little, "You've met the men who caused me so much trouble, and the man who put me in the hospital once for it. I'm the last person to brag about the kind of abuses I dealt with...but I think I would be justified in saying that those things were significant. Being so scared of what was happening that I completely blacked out during my NHK Short Program. But...of all the things I've gone through, of all the things that have happened to give me nightmares and flash-backs...nothing compared to how scared I was when I saw you hurt. I would rather relive all those past years a hundred times over again than...go through those ambulance doors and not know when or if you'd wake up. Not knowing if you'd even remember me, especially after you had that moment of amnesia back at Worlds..." He raised one hand and pinched the bridge of his nose, trying not to let the tears escape his eyes, "I can handle a lot of things. But the one thing I can't do is lose you. If JJ thinks he can just DM you and say sorry like he thinks it will make everything okay again..."

Yuri reached across the center console and slid his fingers around the upturned right hand, pulling it closer to kiss the ring upon one finger, "I don't think he's that naïve. I do think it's a nice gesture that he was willing to apologize to you though."

Slate eyes glanced aside, but then turned forward again as Viktor curled his fingers around the thumb in his palm.

"What's done is done. He can't undo the past anymore than we can. Recognizing the mistake he made and telling you he's sorry is more than I expected, especially from him." Yuri went on, "All things considered, at this point, he's suffering worse than I am. He had to leave the competition, and he won't be back this entire season. He's losing out on the Olympics, too, and that opportunity will be lost for the next 4 years. He was too young to go to the last one. This is costing him."

"Rightly so."

"...Rightly so..." Yuri echoed quietly, lowering the hand in his grasp. He drew a deep breath and shook his head, "I don't want you to be mad because of this. We're about to leave. We should be relaxing, not brooding."

"...Sorry."

"Hey."

Viktor turned his head slightly, looking in Yuri's direction, but almost too ashamed to actually look at him. He felt fingers on his chin though, and he let them guide him around to the kiss that followed. He lingered in it as long as Yuri allowed, and opened his eyes again only after his husband pulled back.
"I'm okay." Yuri said, hand still cupped around his partner's cheek, "We are okay...and everything is going to be okay." He reassured, tilting for another kiss before returning to sit in his seat normally, and lowering his hand to its rightful perch on his husband's leg, "So let's go home."

The anxious Russian nodded, quietly drawing another breath before finally putting the key into the ignition and turning the car on.

31 hours, 27 minutes later...
Location: Fukuoka, Kyushu, Japan
Local time: 9:42am

Hazy and travel-weary, the beleaguered skating duo finally disembarked from their last plane. They strode up the proverbial hamster-tube that connected the passenger area to the arrivals terminal, and immediately darted to the side as soon as they could, stretching arms and legs and backs and butts and shoulders.

Yuri rubbed his eyes, pushing his glasses up in the process, yawned, and reached for his phone, "I'm sure Yuu-chan and the rest are going to be here to meet us like before." He said, still yawning, eyes watering from how tired he was.

"And the entire JSF welcome home brigade." Viktor added, smiling despite his own fatigue. He looked out through the big windows that lined the exterior wall, the sun shining in over the plane and onto his face, giving his skin something of a morning glow, "I'm sure the crowd will be as big as it was when we came back from Worlds. Maybe even bigger."

"It's too early for that kind of attention." Yuri half-whined, slouching as he started walking forward, phone finally connecting to everything again after having been out of service while in the air. Unsurprisingly, he had missed calls and texts.

Surprisingly though...there were dozens of them.

"What in the world?"

"What is it?" Viktor wondered, pausing where he stepped, "Are the Nishigoris not coming after all? Or did we somehow beat Minako and Mari here?" He mused.

Yuri lifted the phone to his ear and listened to one voicemail in particular, a nervous look coming over his face, like all the blood was draining from it. He ignored all the other calls, and looked straight at his husband, "That was Yakov. He told me to make sure you call him before you do absolutely anything else."

"Yakov...?" Viktor was incredulous, "But it's..." He checked the time on his own phone as it booted up, only for him to be inundated by messages, too, "...Nearly 4am back in Moscow right now."

"He said to call as soon as we landed, no matter what time it was. It sounded pretty urgent."

"Yeah, he called me, too. I'll just ring him and find out what's going on." The Russian signed and grumbled a little, getting past all the clutter on his screen and ringing up his former coach. A flutter in his gut overwhelmed the hunger he felt, and the dial-tone played four times before it finally clicked
and he heard the gruff older man's voice, "Yakov, it's me. What's going on? Why are you having to call Yuri to get me on the line?"

Yuri waited patiently, but anxiously. The butterflies in Viktor's stomach were nothing compared to the tornado of ICBMs flying around in his own.

"...Oh." Viktor said simply, "Why did they call you about it? They should've tried to call Yuri, technically."

The younger man quirked a brow, but then rifled through his voicemail inbox, looking for unknown numbers, but not seeing any. They were all from family, friends, Yakov, and numbers he knew were from the JSF. That just made him worry more though.

"I see." Viktor went on, "...Thanks. Yes, I'll be fine. Yes, it's fine. We just have the train left before we get home." His tone shifted from normal to irate, then normal again, "Of course not. This is Yuri's big shindig. I'm just his coach again."

Yuri swallowed nervously. The 'not knowing' was killing him.

_I'm sure half of my unread and unheard messages are about whatever Yakov is calling about, but I want to hear it from Viktor, whatever it is..._

"Of course I will. I...yes, obviously. Thanks. Bye." Viktor ended, finally clicking the phone off and putting it in his pocket.

"What was that all about?"

The silver legend shrugged, "The RSF kicked me off the team."

Yuri felt his heart drop through his stomach, "...What?"

"Or rather, they're sanctioning me for the rest of the season, and expect I'll retire at the end of it. I won't be competing at Nationals, or Euros, or Worlds...and I'm definitely not getting picked to compete for Russia in PyeongChang." He went on, explaining it matter of factly. He drew in a sharp breath through his nose and shrugged again before turning to find his husband's hand, "I guess that just solved all our problems."

"...But..." Yuri stammered, his voice barely a whisper. He felt a tingle in his head, and his hands went numb, such that when Viktor took one in his own, he couldn't even feel it to move his own fingers. "...I don't...understand..."
Chapter 321

CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED TWENTY ONE

Viktor's words were like echoes underwater; Yuri could barely hear them, and he definitely couldn't understand them. He felt separated from himself, like his limbs were controlled by strings. He watched his hands come up to either side of his face, but couldn't tell if he was the one moving them or if someone else had. The peripheries of his sight were starting to darken, too, and he crouched down on the ground before he dropped to it. The ringing in his ears followed. He could see the shadow of his partner just outside his line of sight, and hear the low vibration of his voice, but still couldn't understand him. Yuri closed his eyes for a moment, feeling a whirl of dizziness wash over him, but when he opened them again, Viktor was putting him down on a seat nearby, and had started fluttering the front of his shirt to move the air around him in an attempt to cool him off.

"...They...fired you..." Yuri finally managed, his skin feeling clammy and cold despite the heat in his chest, "...But...why...? When?" His body felt limp, but Viktor pulled him over to one shoulder to hold him steady.

"Are you sure you want to hear this right now?" The Russian asked, his voice still somewhat muffled, "You're 2 minutes from making your victory walk."

"It's not going to be much of a victory walk anymore, now is it!?"

Viktor was taken aback by the outburst, and confused, "...I'm not sure what the problem is. If the RSF doesn't want me anymore, then it frees me up from all the prior obligations I had; the very ones that we spent all weekend worrying about. I don't have to go away for Nationals anymore...I can come to yours like I wanted to anyway. I don't have to forsake you during the Olympics. We don't even have to go to Euros anymore, so it gives us more time before Worl-

"How can you be so calm about this!?" Yuri barked, "You gave the RSF the last 15 years of your life! You basically ran away from home to join them! You're a living legend! The greatest skater of our generation! And at the end, they just threw you under a bus like a piece of trash!?!"

"I won and rejected a Gold medal." Viktor corrected, "What good am I to Russia if I'm giving up my trophies?"

Yuri just dropped forward, hands covering his face, elbows on his knees. He tried to regain his focus, letting the fuzzy feeling in his head pass as he tried to slow his breathing. The whole while, he could feel his partner's hand rubbing slowly up and down his back, but Viktor himself seemed at a loss for words. It was even worse when the Russian spotted the tears trailing down the side of that pale face, dripping down against Yuri's palms and wrists, into the sleeves of his jacket, "...This is...this is my fault... I...I could've let you...retire with dignity...on your own t-terms... But I dragged you back into things anyway..." He started quietly, "I made the wh-whole world mad by taking you off the ice to be my coach... And even though I tried to cut you loose, and give you back...in the end, I asked you to come back for selfish reasons, too..." He tried to rub his eyes on his coat sleeves, pulling his glasses away with his free hand, "...If I kn-knew what this season was going to be like...I would've never a-asked... This has all just been...s-so hard... And now y-you're paying the p-price..."

"...I didn't let you quit either though." Viktor pointed out, "You had all but announced your retirement from skating when I showed up. You cut off ties with Celestino, and went back to Hasetsu without a plan. I wasn't even sure what my plan was going to be after Worlds that season. We both wanted to stick with it, but couldn't find the way on our own."
"...But now, your way has been cut down..."

"That's not true." The Russian leaned against his husband's back, and snaked his hands through the space under Yuri's chest, resting his chin over one shoulder, "I still have you. I can still coach. I don't need to be part of the RSF, or any skating league, to do that. ...Unless...you plan on quitting now, too." His voice tapered off to a quiet, disappointed tone.

"...I can't think... I'm just...getting a headache..."

Viktor lifted his head and looked around, then nudged his partner, "There's a café just over behind us. We can sit there for a bit if you want."

Regardless of knowing that there would be a crowd waiting for them on the other side of the terminal, Viktor wouldn't let Yuri through to it in the condition he was in. He sat the man down at a small circular table, bought them both something to drink, and returned to take a seat opposite the weary skater with a packet of Excedrin.

"Take these before your headache sets in." The Russian instructed quietly, tearing the small paper sachet open and dropping the two white tablets into his husband's hand, "Let's just try to forget about the phone call for now. Nothing about the next week and a half will change because of it." He went on, watching as Yuri slipped the tablets into his mouth and washed them down with a sip of the hot chocolate that had been put in front of him.

A few minutes went by in awkward silence. Yuri kept his eyes down on his drink, fingers curved around the paper cup. A thousand things went through his mind, and yet there was silence, too. Thoughts from the voices of a crowd coalesced to the singular hum of a bee hive in his skull. It only faded when he felt a buzz in his pocket, and reached to pull his phone out, seeing a text from Yuuko there.

[どこにいるの？]

Dark eyes looked at the kana, but Yuri's brain was too numb to think of what to say in response. He simply unlocked the device, set it on the table, turned it, and slid it across towards his spouse, "Please talk to her. I can't."

Viktor blinked at it, "...Do...do-ko...ni... I don't know what this is."

"Doko ni iru no." Yuri stated, lowering down to bury his face in his folded arms on the table-top, "She's asking where we are." His voice was muffled against his jacket sleeves.

The anxious Russian let his drink go to pick the phone up in one hand. Given the Japanese text of the previous message, the standard QWERTY keyboard had been replaced by one that looked more like a calculator than anything: 3 rows of 4 columns in center with basic kana characters, arrow buttons on the top left, backspace on the top right, and a small globe-like icon next to the microphone for voice messages on the bottom left. Above it was a button with ABC written in English text. He clicked it, and the keypad changed over to what looked like the texting pad of an old flip-phone, with three letters on each button and punctuation on the bottom row. He made a face and clicked the globe button instead, finally finding his way back to a keyboard he could actually use. Oddly, while the keyboard was in English, the function buttons were still in Japanese, and as soon as he started typing, the word recommendations bar came up with a slew of Japanese words he might've been seeking; it was a Romaji-to-Kana keyboard, he realized, not English. His brow furrowed, but when he clicked the globe button again, everything finally switched to actual English.

[This is Viktor. We just got the news. Yuri needed a moment.]
Yuuko was quick to answer, and Viktor saw the jumping dots on her side of the screen as she typed.

[What news? Did the JSF already tell him he's been picked to go to PyeongChang?]

[...No. Did they?]

[I don't know! Ōu Ō;;]

[What did you find out? Is Yuri upset or happy?]

Viktor gaped at the screen quietly, one brow quirked, but then half-shrugged to himself and thumbed his answer.

[The RSF basically fired me. I can't compete for the rest of the season and they expect I'll retire after that.]

[何]

[Sorry...what?]

[They're mad that I gave up my medal and sanctioned me as punishment. We only just found out when our phones reconnected and we got off the plane.]

[If you didn't know already then I guess the RSF hasn't made it public knowledge yet. Maybe they were waiting to post an announcement until after I was told.]

[Yeah, that would be kind of mean of them to make you find out about it on social media instead of a direct phone-call.]

[Well, take your time I guess. It's just me here today. Everyone else is waiting for you guys at YuTopia.]

Viktor eyeballed the screen for a few moments, but then shut the phone off and slid it back across the table. He pulled out his own after that, opening a new text window with Yuuko and replying from there,

[I'm trying to figure out how to get Yuri's chin up so we can get to the trains. If he does this walk looking like he does now...]

[Yeah. I can imagine he's taking this pretty hard. You gave up your gold so he could have it, so he probably thinks this is his fault.]

The Russian sighed, brows furrowed, [I made a point to explain to Yuri that it was my decision alone, and that I didn't want him feeling responsible for what I did. So far, he hasn't said anything about the podium. He's blaming himself for other things. That the RSF would've never had reason to fire me if he hadn't asked me to come back to competition in the first place.]

[...Sounds like him. You don't sound all that bothered though.]

[I'm trying to be pragmatic about things. For his sake, I have to consider the way this works to our advantage.] Viktor explained, looking up over the top of his phone towards his despondent spouse. Not knowing what to say to make Yuri feel better, Viktor instead moved his chair around the circular table until he was right up against the man, and leaned forward against the table just like he was, pressing the side of himself against his partner, from elbow to leg. It took a moment, but Yuri eventually lifted up from the table, and wrapped his arms around Viktor's trunk, hiding his face against the man's back instead of within his folded arms like before. It was progress, even if it was still a full-blown melancholy. Viktor went back to his phone, [After the drama of Yuri's accident settled down, we spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to deal with the hectic time-table coming up. Splitting up for Nationals was a big worry. The Olympics were going to be worse, because we'd be TOGETHER but we couldn't BE together, if that makes sense.]
[Sure it does.]
[If you're not competing, then you don't have conflicting schedules anymore.]

Viktor could see that more was being typed, but he had to abandon the sight of his screen as he noticed his partner moving again. Feeling the man trying to wedge his head under his arm, Viktor sat upright, and watched as Yuri settled in the space he himself once occupied. Realizing the rationale behind the move, the Russian leaned over his husband's shoulders and back instead, threading his right arm through the crook of Yuri's shoulder and neck, and out under the opposite arm, his left going around Yuri's back. He felt his husband move again then, folding his arms around the one pressed to his shoulder, practically hugging it as he lowered his face again to hide his pain.
Viktor waited a moment, letting Yuri settle in before he lowered his chin to the back of the man's jacket, and checked his phone again.

[I was thinking about that while you guys were gone. I don't know that you'd be able to be each others' coaches for the Olympics since you compete for different countries. You would've also been told to house with your teams. For a while, you'd almost have to pretend you don't even know each other.]

[Yeah.]

[It's still a pretty big insult to you though. You've been the reigning champion in Russia and abroad for years. You'd think the RSF would be a bit more grateful.]

[I'm trying not to let them spoil things. I'm no good to Yuri if I'm upset, too.]

There was a brief pause in the chatter. Viktor could see that his last message had been seen, but there was no reply immediately forthcoming. He clicked the phone off and moved instead to squeeze his arms around his partner a little tighter, feeling the twitching of a few ragged breaths, as though Yuri had been sobbing violently for hours. He drew in closer, nosing the back of his husband's head, kissing through raven black hair before opting to hold still there for a little while.

Yuuko had managed to pull herself out of the crowd lining the hall just beyond the luggage carousel area. Airport staff had cordoned off the area to prevent other passengers from being bothered by the landing of a few local celebrities. She could see through the last barricade towards where the pair would eventually come through, but couldn't see them just yet. A few JSF officials were standing nearby as well. In the opposite direction, a small delegation of local politicians had gathered as well, including the entourage of Saga Prefecture's Governor, surrounding the man himself. Worried that the bad news would cause problems for appearances, Yuuko approached the officials who were blocking the way through the terminal.

"Moushiwake arimasen..." She started, bowing to the three who were there, [Yuri and Viktor are still in the arrivals terminal. Something has happened and I'm trying to get to them.]

[If we let you through then we have to let everyone through.] One of the officials answered, extending an arm as a gesture that she couldn't go by.

Yuuko frowned nervously, but bowed her head again, [I understand, I am sorry... I've been talking to Viktor though.] She spoke a little more quietly then, [Viktor just found out he was sanctioned by Russia and isn't being allowed to compete for the rest of the year, and Yuri is really upset about it. They're trying to figure out what to do so they can come through here and go home without making everyone worry.] She held out her phone, displaying a group photo with her family and the two skaters, as though in evidence that she knew them, [I've been friends with Yuri since we were kids, and I work at the skating rink he and Viktor practice at in Hasetsu. Please let me through.]

Anxious expressions answered her, then went to one another. A few whispers were exchanged, but then Yuuko suddenly found herself being let through. Her eyes went wide, but she quickly darted forward, flipping back around on her heel for a deep bow, "Arigatou gozaimasu!" Rising back to her full height, she rushed for the luggage carousel, grabbing one of the trolleys and hoisting their three suitcases onto it before moving off to the side and out of the way. She pulled out her phone again and started typing, [Viktor...bring Yuri to luggage collection. Staff let me through so I got your stuff. We need to get Yuri's head in the game so we can get out of the airport without making a scene.]

The Russian felt the buzz in his hand, and lifted his head to see a preview of the text as it appeared on his lock-screen. Drawing a breath, he nodded to himself and lifted up off his husband's shoulder,
speaking quietly to one ear, "Yuri, we should go. People are going to think we're rude if we keep them all waiting much longer."

Reluctantly, and waiting a moment longer before moving, Yuri eventually pushed up to sitting as well. His glasses were mottled with tears, the wet and the dried, making the lenses foggy and difficult to see through. Viktor pulled them off before he could, and started rubbing the glass with his scarf.

"Yuuko is waiting with our stuff. Staff let her through to help us out. We should go to her." Viktor explained, "Are you going to be okay for this?"

He snuffled, but Yuri gave a weak nod, lifting his eyes a little as he felt the glasses being placed back over his nose and ears. His throat was sore and his eyes were red, but there was little he could do about it. Viktor grabbed for the small cup of hot chocolate and slid it gently towards the edge of the table, offering its comfort where his own had apparently failed.

"I know this whole thing with the RSF is upsetting for you, my love," He started, "But it's really not as bad as all that. There's good that will come from it as well. Put it at the back of your mind for now and let's go home. ...No one else even knows this happened."

"...N-No one?" Yuri echoed, hiccups in his voice, "But...how? A-all the messages I got... N-none of them...are about this?"

"Yuuko says there hasn't been any announcement about it yet. So far as the world knows, right now, nothing has happened." Viktor explained, "The messages are probably just from people congratulating you on your Gold, or well wishes for Nationals. I get those calls all the time. My phone is loaded right now. We probably have thousands of messages on Instagram right now, too, and many more waiting to be posted once fans see us coming through the terminal." He offered what smile he could, trying to be reassuring and positive, "You're Japan's hero, Yuri. A hero's welcome is waiting for you. Please don't be sad or angry on my account, especially since I'm not."

Yuri lowered his head, but nodded anyway. He felt the hug before he saw it, and clung tightly to the dark wool of his husband's coat, burying his face in the scarf wrapped over his shoulders. They held there for a moment, but eventually, knowing they had to leave, let go and slowly stood up.

Viktor wove his fingers through his husband's free hand, "The cocoa will soothe your throat, and we'll take our time. We'll figure out a way to help you through the crowd so you don't need to interact with people unless you have to. Just the officials and the other suits. Then we'll have time to think about how to move forward. Hopefully we'll be in the onsen long before the rest of the world hears about what happened." He leaned down and kissed a cheek, "Okay?"

Lifting his free hand, Yuri rubbed his wrist against his eyes again, careful not to spill his drink or lose his glasses in the process. He drew a deep breath, feeling the sting in his chest, but then nodded sullenly, "Okay."
Chapter 322

CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED TWENTY TWO

Yuri kept his eyes towards the floor as they left the café and headed for baggage claim area. Viktor kept a protective arm over his shoulders, but he found it difficult to shake the worries that had so deeply settled in. The Excedrin he'd been given hadn't kicked in yet either, so the throbbing under the cuts on his forehead was still pounding away, like someone was repeatedly thwopping him in the face with a hammer. By the time they found Yuuko, the pressure was so great, Yuri thought his eye would pop right out. He closed it and brought his right hand up, pressing the side of his wrist to his forehead just above it, drawing in a hissed, pained breath.

"Is walking making it worse?" Viktor wondered quietly, seeing the agonized look on his husband's face, "Do you need to sit down again?"

"That, or 15 minutes so these pain pills can work..." He answered anxiously, "It's throbbing so much under these cuts right now..."

The Russian gave a worried look, but then turned his head up as he spotted Yuuko just ahead with their things. He diverted their path and headed for her, "Sorry we kept you waiting."

"It's okay." She answered, stepping around the cart with the three suitcases, bending down a bit to try and see her childhood friend's face, "Yuri..."

"It's like we just can't catch a break." He sighed, pulling his arm down again, though knowing his eyelid was partly down...or at least feeling like it was, "I had such high hopes that the Final would be the payoff after everything that happened before, but it was just hit after hit this weekend. I can barely think straight...I'm just so mad about everything...!"

"Take it easy for now." Yuuko recommended, curious but not daring to reach forward in that moment to examine the cuts she knew were hidden under that hair, "You're always majorly jetlagged after the shortest flights. The one you just came off was longer than a whole day. I don't know what Viktor's suggested so far, but if he hasn't said it, you should probably try not to react too much to the news until after you've had a chance to get a nap in. You'll think more clearly when you aren't so over-tired."

"I know..." Yuri answered, drawing in a breath, closing his eyes as he exhaled, "I just can't help it. It's like there's a brick in place of my brain and every question makes it harder to think. Why would the RSF do this to him? When did they even make this decision? Why couldn't they have waited until tomorrow to tell us? I'm tired of feeling like this...!"

"Shh." Viktor whispered, "You're only getting yourself worked up. Yuuko's right though. You'll have a clearer, and hopefully less painful head, once you've had a chance to sleep. You can never manage anything but to close your eyes for a long time when you try while we're still traveling."

"I know...that's why this is all so hard to box up." Yuri remarked, "Stress sticks to me like duct tape when I'm exhausted." He sighed and turned where he stood, wrapping his arms around his spouse and burying his face against the man's chest, and whined loudly against it.

"I hate to say it, but you're going to have to put on a show for the next few minutes." Yuuko explained, crossing her arms over her chest, "Not only is the JSF out there, but Saga Prefecture's leadership is, too. Ever since Viktor came, you've skyrocketed to fame. You're not just one
of Japan’s best skaters anymore...you're one of the best in the world. People who normally don't pay attention to figure skating are starting to. They brought you gifts, too..."

"Gifts?" Yuri repeated, turning his face out from his husband's jacket, "...Like what?"

"...Ah, well...I didn't see clearly, but I think...you might actually be happy with some of it." She explained nervously, "Makkachin might get jealous though."

"Makkachin?" Both skaters echoed, looking at one another in confusion, then back at Yuuko, "Why would Makkachin be jealous of my/his gifts?"

"Just come see." She suggested, moving back to the handle-bar end of the trolley, "It might get your mind off of all the negative you just went through."

The confusion and anticipation was enough to shock Yuri's brain into something of a reboot, and the worry and anger dissolved to allow for some semblance of relief, transient as it may be. Viktor got the brilliant idea to sit him on the suitcases like something of a parade float, too, making it so he wouldn't have to even walk...and so, Yuri finally made his 'triumphant' return, entering the hall lined on one side with a wall and the other with a dense thicket of fans and photographers. The screams of the fans who finally saw their idol was almost enough to knock Yuri off his mock throne, pushed by both Viktor and Yuuko. He smiled and waved as pleasantly as he could, going down the corridor for what felt like days.

His mind felt wiped clean by the flash photography used when he greeted the JSF leadership, eyes dazzled and swirling by so many blinding explosions of light. He couldn't remember what had been said when he moved on to the next group, though he assumed it was the usual congratulations and excited anticipation of his attendance at the All Japan Championships two weeks hence.

For once, Viktor stayed in the background, clapping politely as Yuri was nearly drowned in attention. At least, until the JSF officials dragged him into a few photos, recognizing the man's influence on their star skater and wanting him to be part of things.

The Governor and his entourage made Yuri really nervous. He'd never seen them in person before, and was stunned that any of them would bother coming to a welcome-home party for athletes. The meet-and-greet went by in a flash, just like the JSF one did, but when it came time for the gifts Yuuko had mentioned...Yuri's attention was focused. The traumatic revelations of a few minutes prior were properly shunted to the back of his head.

In the hands of one of the Governor's secretaries came with squirmy, wiggly form of a Silver Brindle Akita Inu puppy.
When Viktor saw it, his eyes went wide, and suddenly he looked really worried. He was behind Yuri though so Yuri didn't see it. Yuuko, on the other hand...

"What's with the look?" She wondered quietly.

Viktor leaned close and held a hand up to hide his voice, "I promised Yuri I'd get him a gift. I was going to get him a Shiba Inu puppy. Akitas are like...four times the size though, so it's like they just gave him four times the gift."

"Then just think of something else."

"That was hard enough to think of!" Viktor protested, "What could be better than a puppy!?"

"When it comes to buying gifts, it's less about what it is and more about what it means to you." Yuuko explained, "That's why garbage-gifts from little kids are so good, because to them it means everything even if to you it's just macaroni pasted to colored paper."

Viktor still half-whined to himself, putting on a smile and clapping as Yuri gaped at the pup, not sure what to make of it.

There were other gifts, but none quite so intriguing as the dog. When everything was finally over and
Yuri was allowed to return to his family, carrying the pup with him, he wasn't sure what to say. He couldn't help but laugh a little though as the tiny flufferbutt whined and licked the side of his jaw, muffling damp breaths into his ear.

*This was really great timing,* Viktor thought, sliding an arm over his husband's shoulder and meeting the puppy for himself, giving it a gentle rub behind one ear and down its back, seeing the curled tail whipping back and forth excitedly, *It was just the sort of thing Yuri needed to get his mind off of what happened.*

"What are you going to call him?" Yuuko asked, watching as the puppy licked her fingers and nosed her hand.

"I'm not sure." He answered, "I wasn't expecting to get another dog, so I hadn't thought about names I might someday give to one."

"We'll think of something once we get to know him," Viktor suggested, "Right? The dog Yakov gave me was named Kubochin, because that's the first sound he made after I met him. The dog I had when I was a kid was named Losi, which is Russian for 'moose,' because he was a big ol' thing."

"That's so cute!" Yuuko fawned, "But...what do you mean 'Kubochin'? I thought it was always Makkachin. You had that magazine photo-op with a dog that looks just like him."

"Makkachin is only about 6 years old, but 12 years ago, the dog I had when I was 16 for that photo was Kubochin. He was about 4 years old in that photo. They only live for 12-15 years anyway, but Kubochin died kind of young," Viktor explained, letting Yuri hand him the Akita puppy, "That's one of the reasons why I didn't mind taking time off so suddenly last year. Makkachin is middle-aged, but because Kubochin wasn't much older when he passed, I worried about how often Makkachin was left alone by me constantly being away for competition, and I wanted to be around more."

Yuri grimaced, "...That doesn't make me feel better at all!"

"It's okay!" The Russian assured, "Since Makkachin stays at YuTopia when we're gone, it's no problem. Back in Russia, he'd be put into a boarding kennel. Staying with your parents is much better."

"Vic-chan was kind of young when he passed, too." Yuuko commented, "Yuri got him when he was 13, so Vic-chan was only 10 at the end."

"Yeah..." Yuri sighed and nodded, "I was pretty torn up about it when I found out that he died. I shouldn't have stayed away for so long, but I couldn't take him to Detroit with me, either. I got him for myself, but he ended up being my parents' dog in the end, really, since I was away for the last 5 years of his life."

No one really knew what to say after that, so there was something of an awkward pause in the conversation. They just started moving towards the train terminal instead. Yuri pushed the luggage cart while Viktor carried the puppy, and Yuuko walked alongside. By the time they got their tickets and were waiting for their train to pull into the station, the air around them seemed less sad.

"Everyone at YuTopia is pretty excited about you coming home with Gold." Yuuko started, "It's basically going to be a big katsudon party."

"Wow~!" Viktor mused.

"Oh good," Yuri smiled and sighed, holding a hand against his stomach, "We'll have just enough time to sit in the onsen for a few minutes before it's finished cooking...then I can fall into a katsudon-
coma for a few hours..."

"And it'll probably be dark by the time you wake up again," Yuuko added, "So you'll be able to watch the fireworks being launched from Hasestu Castle."

"They're launching fireworks?" The two skaters asked in unison.

Their train was pulling up just behind them.

Yuuko nodded happily, "They started setting things up after you left last week." She explained, "Everyone had a feeling that one or both of you would be medaling at the Final."

"Sounds like it's going to be a lot of fun~!"

At just under two hours, the train ride from Fukuoka to Hasetsu was a fairly quiet one. They sat in the last train-car, at the very back, and Yuri stretched out on the long bench-seat, the Akita pup having fallen asleep in his arms, wrapped within the jacket-cocoon that had been made for it. Viktor dozed a little as well once their travels were well underway, twisting so his back was against the wall and window, letting Yuri rest against his chest, tilted in towards the back of the seat so the pup-burrito wouldn't fall out of his arms.

Yuuko could tell the Russian was only closing his eyes for the sake of it though, sitting just ahead of them in a reverse-facing seat. Yuri was out cold, for once. Perhaps it was the familiarity of the train, and the quiet hum of the tracks; every plane felt different, but the train was always the same. Viktor drew a deep breath and shifted a little where he sat, trying to get comfortable, and hoping not to wake his spouse in the process.

"...I'm not sure if it's strange or admirable that you're taking this whole thing in stride like you are." The young woman commented quietly, keeping her voice down so as not to rouse Yuri either, "I figured you'd be a little more outraged that the RSF is ending your legacy this way."

Viktor just gave a sad and tired smile back at her, "Maybe I'm just not that surprised." He answered, "The RSF media was giving me the cold shoulder all weekend, focusing on Yurio instead or cutting my interviews short if I tried to get Yuri involved in them."

"Really?" She was surprised, "But you're...the darling of Russia..."

"Not anymore, I guess." He shrugged, "The RSF never really tried that hard to get me to come home after I came to Japan originally, either. They gave up entirely after Yurio came and left again without me. They hounded Yakov a little bit about me being in Japan and coaching a non-Russian skater, but that slowly faded to nothing, too."

"Were they that certain you were retiring?"

"Maybe." Viktor lifted his head a bit, resting his chin on the back of one hand where he'd folded his arm over the back-rest of their bench, "Though I'd never made any specific announcement that I never intended to compete again, even after taking a break to be Yuri's coach."

"It's still weird how calm you are." Yuuko said, giving the man a look.

Viktor could do nothing but offer a simple shrug and another smile, looking down fondly at his husband, resting against the crook of one arm and his chest, "After how Yuri handled this past weekend, the way he stepped up for me even after everything he had been through, maybe I just feel..."
like it's my turn to be strong for him instead." He suggested, "Who knows how I'll feel later...but right now, I'm not bothered. It's kind of a relief, honestly. I truly and desperately did not want to go to Moscow without him. He was handling the idea a lot better than I was."

"He's felt like he's dealt with things on his own for most of his life," Yuuko explained, "Even when there were other people around to support him, he always thought he was on his own. You heard him say as much when he did his theme-announcement last year on television..."

"...Oh, is that was he said?" Viktor laughed, "He was talking in Japanese. There weren't any subtitles, so I couldn't understand him. I focused on how much I hated his outfit instead."

"OH." Yuuko blurted, then covering her mouth quickly like she thought she could take back her volume. The puppy squirmed and whimpered, stretching its tiny pink nubbins into Yuri's face before settling back down again. Yuri didn't seem to notice though, and she heaved a breath of relief, giving a nervous laugh thereafter, "...I guess I remember it differently because I understood it. I always wondered why you said you wanted to burn his tie though."

The Russian smiled innocently, "He told me what his theme was going to be, but I never knew what he said during that conference. I heard him say my name at the time. What was he talking about, I wonder?"

The Madonna blushed a bit, "He was explaining that his theme was 'love.' He mentioned your name because he used you as an example of a person he wanted to hold onto, though at the time he said that it wasn't romantic love...it was something more abstract than that. The love he had for everyone around him; friends, family, and you."

"Ah, I see. So that's why you guys complained."

"Hai, hai..."

"A lot of things have changed since then." Viktor went on, pulling his free arm down from the back-rest, and gently combed his fingers through his husband's hair, "Especially over the last few days, not even counting what happened earlier. I suppose he'll always have moments where his anxious heart will get the better of him, but more and more, I see him evolving into this powerful and confident person. He's so strong now. It makes me happy that I can still be a support for him, even though he's the one that's taken the lead at this point."

"...Really? He has?" Yuuko was surprised to hear it, "When did that happen...?"

"Just the other day." The Russian quipped, "We were practicing at his old rink, and it just kind of hit me that he'd become something akin to the alpha between us. For a minute, it was hard to believe, but once I accepted the truth of it, I started to like it. I wonder if that's what I was hoping he'd be all along, because I feel more relaxed knowing that he's in control of things now...It's probably the biggest reason why he was so upset about the phone-call earlier."

"I don't understand."

Viktor paused, thinking about his choice of words carefully, but then looking aside, watching the Japanese snow-covered countryside pass by through the window. He leaned his head back against the glass, "Before the season started, Yuri and I filed papers that he would be classified as my coach. Since I wasn't training under Yakov anymore, I needed a name to register with, so we agreed to put his. That means...anyone in the ISU or its subsidiaries who needed to contact me in my capacity as an athlete should've technically gone through him...but the RSF went to Yakov. I asked him why, and...he said the RSF doesn't recognize Yuri as anything but a Japanese skater. They were insulted
by the idea of calling him about anything. He's younger than I am, and I was technically his coach first, never mind the disparity of our skating achievements..."

"Oh." Yuuko lowered her head, though raised her eyes to Yuri, hoping beyond hope that he wasn't just faking being asleep, and was actually listening to every word.

"It's done and over with now though, so there's no point complaining or arguing. The RSF made this decision to cut me off after NHK apparently." Viktor went on, "They were pretty offended by my Exhibition."

"Offended?" She echoed, aghast and surprised, "How could they have been offended by it?"

"I put that program together to send my father a message. He was very opposed to my relationship with Yuri. I wanted to tell him that I didn't care what he thought...that I was going to follow my heart wherever it lead, and stay true to myself no matter what." The Russian explained quietly, gently stroking his spouse's hair, "Apparently the RSF heard the message, too. They were already on edge about Yuri, ever since I brought him back to St. Petersburg last year. We were called out and condemned by part of the press corps during an interview there..."

"I saw. Even Yurio stood up for you guys."

"Yeah." He agreed, "The tension never quite went away though. That's a big reason why we ended up moving back to Hasetsu. It's safer here for us. I guess the RSF was just tacitly putting up with me since then. They were willing to tolerate my relationship so long as I kept winning for Russia like before. But then I ruffled feathers with my Exhibition...and then I gave my Gold away at the Final. That was the last straw for them. Yakov said they were originally going to let me finish out the year with them, but they wouldn't sign me on again for next season...announcing for me that I had officially retired, even if I had no plans for it just yet. I've been saying for a little while that I was considering going again next year with less difficult programs, just to see how far I could go on style points."

"Would they really do that though? Tell the world you're done on your behalf?"

"They have Yurio now." Viktor said, expression unchanging, "They don't need an old dog like me anymore. Retiring me would be the nice way of doing things." His voice tapered off there, and quiet filled the train car for a few moments. He huffed a sad laugh though, "It's fine though...really. If I'm not competing then I can focus on coaching more. It...it works out, in the end."

Yuuko watched the man's face quietly for signs of...anything. Deception, to himself or otherwise...sadness, anger...he was stony though. For the moment, Viktor Nikiforov was calmly accepting of his fate. She could only wonder how long it would take before the man would let himself react the way everyone else thought he ought to. *Maybe he never will, though, Yuuko thought, letting the conversation fade to nothing, Or maybe he'll keep it private, and we'll never know.*
Yuri was only allowed to doze for as long as his new puppy, and that new puppy would only nap for about an hour before he woke up again and started wanting to move around. Yuri rubbed his eyes and sat up with the squirming bundle in his arms, looking over his shoulder to see his husband quietly watching him.

"Morning again." Viktor said, stretching his arms and legs forward as far as they could go, "Did you get a good nap?"

"Mnnn...I'm not sure..." He answered hazily, "I had a really weird dream...but I'm forgetting what it was already... Something about how the RSF fired you because they actually wanted to get rid of me...somehow...I don't know how that makes sense..."

"Sounds more like a nightmare then."

"I thought of a name for our new puppy though." Yuri went on, the dreamscapes already dissolved from his mind, "二郎 Jiro."

"Jiro?" Viktor repeated, yawning slightly, "Does it mean something?"

"Second son." Yuri explained, rubbing the pup's head, "To mark the second dog we've had together." He glanced back over his shoulder to look for the Russian's reaction, but Viktor just gave the same sleepy smile he had before, and raised a hand to rub the back of his shoulder.

"It's a perfect name."

For the moment, it was enough to allow Yuri to feel better than he had been since arriving in Kyushu. He twisted in his seat and reached for one of the many bags of gifts that had been given to him, pulling one in particular and rummaging around in it. Jiro was already wiggling out of the jacket Yuri had wrapped him in, but before he could flop to the train-car floor, Yuri grabbed him up again, and backed up in his seat so he could cross his legs.

"Governor Yamaguchi gave me all the supplies Jiro would need for the first few weeks," He started, pulling up a harness and leash from the bag before setting the rest aside, "He'll outgrow this in a month or two, but it'll work for now. Until Makkachin teaches him the ropes and he walks with us and doesn't wander away."

Viktor glanced over towards Yuuko, who was waving a finger at the puppy, but then looked back to his partner. The harness went onto the pup easily enough, and Yuri clipped the leash to the small triangular loop of metal on the back of it before setting the tiny Akita on the ground to walk a bit. He seemed a bit skittish though, and for every two waddles forward, he took three back, until he was under the bench and behind Yuri's legs.

Yuri just laughed quietly, leaning back against his husband's arm, and glancing out through the windows just past him, "Looks like we're just about home."

"There's still nothing on social media or the RSF main-page about their decision to sanction Viktor." Yuuko explained, looking down at her phone, "I wonder what's taking them so long?"

"The time difference." Viktor explained, "It's only just about 6am in Moscow right now. We may
have another 2-3 hours of peace before people start finding out, unless we tell them ourselves."

"Do you want to...?"

Yuri looked down at his knees, and the leash where it moved back and forth. The top of Jiro's ears poked out from the edge of the bench, looping the length of cord around Yuri's legs.

"No." Viktor answered, "I expect that the triplets will be the first people to find out about what happened. If we can keep them off their phones, maybe we can last the rest of the day before everyone else finds out. This is supposed to be a fun time, for celebration and enjoying ourselves. I don't want to ruin things."

"It's not your fault." Yuuko pointed out.

"Maybe not, but I can't help that it's about me." He went on, weaving his left arm under his husband's right and finding his hand, "Today should be all about Yuri's achievement, not my punishment. The longer we can go before everyone finds out what happened, the better. Preferably after we go home, because then I can stay inside and build a fort so no one can bother me until everything finally blows over."

"Can I come into the fort?" Yuri quipped, an eyebrow raised skeptically.

"You're the only person who can come in!" Viktor mused, giving a dramatic kiss to the man's cheek, "It'll be our love-cave."

Yuri's face went red. Yuuko's nose was threatening to explode with the same color.

When the train finally pulled into the station in the middle of Hasetsu, Yuri could feel himself starting to get nervous. The last time they'd come through for a victory walk was just after NHK only a week before, and he recalled rather clearly how that went.

"STOP THE CAR AND LET ME OUT."

"V-Viktor!?! Everyone called in shock.

The cabby did as told in his stunned surprise, and the silver man practically broke the door-handle off in his efforts to get out. Yuri tried to hold him in, but a swift kick to the inside panel sent the door flying open anyway, bouncing back and needing another kick, followed by the territorial skater jumping out immediately after. He took a few angry steps back towards the train station, which was barely across the street by that point, and shook a fist at the doorway, "WHOEVER KISSED MY HUSBAND WILL RUE THIS DAY." He yelled.

"Viktor get back in the car!" Yuri begged, arms around his waist from behind while Phichit and he tried to get the man back through the open passenger door.

"I WON'T STAND FOR THIS!" The Russian went on, being pulled one reluctant step backwards as he lost ground, though he still shook his fist. There were a number of fans who had poured outside Hasetsu Station to see the skaters leave, and they were all looking rather nervous as he yelled at them, "YURI IS MINE, YOU HEAR ME?!?" He pointed emphatically at his wedding band, "HE GAVE THIS RING TO ME! I'M THE ONLY ONE THAT GETS TO KISS HIM! IF I EVER FIND OUT WHO PUT THAT MINTY TASTE ON HIS LIPS, I'LL-"

The memory of it left Yuri with a nervous smile. He regained his focus as he felt Viktor nudging him
along from behind, trying to get to the exit doors before the train took off again with them still on
board. Yuri carried the puppy that time though, while Viktor and Yuuko worked on getting all their
luggage out as quickly as possible. They managed to get the last bag off the car just as the doors
were starting to close.

Viktor heaved a breath and sat on one of the suitcases, fanning himself in spite of the cold winter air,
"Whew! Almost had to make that one a round-trip!"

"Maybe you should've had it all shipped again like last time." Yuuko mused, "Though I guess you
did travel pretty lightly on your own...all those gifts practically doubled your load."

"It's going to take a while to sort through it all." Yuri added, looking around and taking in all the
familiar sights. He closed his eyes for a moment and drew in a breath, holding it for a moment before
opening his eyes and exhaling again, "Kind of gives me a sense of déjà vu, being here again after
coming here from Detroit. The last time I did this trip...Minako-sensei was the only one who was
here to greet me, and I was a sore sight to behold."

"You didn't really warn anyone you were coming." Yuuko pointed out, "I didn't realize you were
here until you were standing in front of me at the Ice Castle."

"Sorry..." He mumbled reluctantly, pressing his nose to the back of Jiro's fluffy head, "I actually only
told my parents, and they told Minako-sensei. I didn't want anyone to make a big deal out of me
coming home after so long. Thankfully, no one did, even after people started seeing me around town
again."

"And then I came." Viktor chimed in, giving one of his characteristic winks, "And half the
countryside descended on this poor little town."

"They'll all be here ahead of time now, too." Yuri added, looking around a moment longer before
moving to hand Jiro to Yuuko instead, "Here, hang onto him for just a second."

"Oh, sure." She nodded, quickly taking the pup-burrito in her arms. She could feel that little curly tail
trying to wag through Yuri's jacket, but she turned her attention to her friend as he stepped off. She
watched as he shuffled across the snowy outdoor deck, moving the few paces to where Viktor was
still sitting on the edge one of their suitcases.

The Russian seemed perplexed by it, eyes following the man until Yuri was standing directly in front
of him. Nothing else happened though, which made Viktor nervous, "...Why do I feel like I'm in
trouble suddenly?"

"You're not." Yuri grimaced, "I'm just doing what I do. Worry is what I'm made of, and anxiety is
my natural habitat. I see you consciously refusing to react to what happened and I wonder what'll
happen when you finally do. Just..." He drew in another breath and sighed its release, leaning down
and putting his hands on each of the Russian's cheeks, "When it finally hits you, and I know it's
going to...please find me first."

Viktor just gave a nervous smile, even though where his cheeks were squished together, making him
look somewhat silly, "...But Yuri, I barely ever leave you alone in the first place... I mean, I'd drag
you into the bathroom if I could..."

"That would be weird."

"I know." The Russian huffed, bringing his hands up to gently touch to his partner's wrists, "You're
getting cold without your coat." He pulled his hands back and started wiggling out of his own, "I'll
"You're avoiding the subject." Yuri pointed out, unable to do anything to stop his spouse from rising up and sliding the long coat off his arms, and throw it like a cape over his own a moment later. He kept his eyes on those slate irises before him, "Viktor..."

"You're prodding me about something I don't want to deal with right now." He answered, pulling the jacket more snug over his partner's frame, "It's not important enough. Sometimes...there's a place you can't reach unless you have a dream too large to bear alone, right? We are bigger than me and I'm not going to let something that's entirely beyond my control ruin your victory party. It's bad enough that I've been so worked up about everything that I never kissed your Gold medal."

Yuri just gave a worried look, My medal is sitting on Otabek's shoulders right now...the Gold is yours...

"...If I have a meltdown about this later, you'll be there to see it..." Viktor went on, "But we're basically running down the clock right now. Let's please just try to enjoy today before everyone else finds out what happened, okay? I'm not above begging you to have a little fun while you can."

Yuri sighed and shook his head, "You don't have to beg me. The initial shock of it has passed through me finally... But the more I think about it, and process it, the more I realize how much is going to be impacted by this than just us. Minako-sensei pulled that whole thing with Mikhail because she thought I was going to Nationals alone, but now you can come so it's like that whole argument was for nothing. And the-

Viktor put his hands over Yuri's mouth to make him stop, and gave a rather serious look, "That's enough for now." He said quietly, watching the confused expression he got back from those hazel eyes over his fingers, "I accept and delight in the fact that you're in charge of things now, but I can still put my foot down once in a while. I'm exercising that privilege right now. I forbid you from worrying about this entire topic for the rest of today. Not one more peep about it. You've already gotten yourself worked up about it enough for the both of us. Okay?"

Yuri's brow furrowed in what could only be described as his wordless way of saying, But-

"But nothing," Viktor went on, "We can talk about it later. I just want to have fun for now. Yu-Topia Katsuki is calling my name and I intend to be in that onsen in 45 minutes or less. Anyone who gets in my way will wish they hadn't."

"Migder..." Yuri mumbled into the hands still over his mouth. He stared intently into those blue eyes for a moment longer, not really sure what he was looking for. All he could see was the desperate pleading of a man making his case for temporary relief from the inevitable. He half-whined to himself, and nodded his head, feeling the Russian's hands finally come away again.

"As your coach, I'm ordering you to enjoy yourself." Viktor started again, stepping forward as he slid his arms over his partner's shoulders, pressing in close, "If anyone deserves to celebrate, it's you. You worked so hard to get your Gold medals in the Series, and whether or not you agree with what I did, you deserved the Gold at the Final, too. In my opinion, you're the rightful winner." He gave a half-smile, "You fought me every step of the way to make sure you got to stay in the competition, so..."

I lost my chance to beat you fair and square because I was hurt. Giving me the Gold medal anyway felt like a pity trophy.

"...It felt wrong to get on the podium at the end." Viktor explained, "By stepping down, I righted the
wrongs that were done not just to you, but to Otabek, too. In my eyes, everything that happened at the medaling ceremony was a correction. In a way, it's even kind of fitting that I got to be the one to make that call..."

"I don't understand." Yuri sighed, hands finding their way forward to perch on his partner's hips.

"Because JJ was the one who screwed it up on both occasions." Viktor said simply, "He cost Otabek the podium last year, and took a Bronze medal he didn't deserve. He nearly cost you the entire event this year. With me stepping down, I basically got to give JJ the one-finger salute. I won't let anyone steal that satisfaction from me." Viktor laughed, bangs tousling a bit as he lifted his head, "Not even you, my love." He leaned forward for a kiss, cutting off whatever come-back Yuri might've offered in that moment, and he held there for a few precious seconds.

The snappy cold air was starting to make everyone's ears and noses pink though, and Yuuko could feel herself starting to shiver where she stood. Jiro hid his nose inside the jacket, but his tiny puppy barks and whimpers were enough to get the two skaters' attention finally, and they pulled apart before they got frozen together that way. Without offering any argument, Yuri lowered his gaze to find the suitcases he could carry. He waited for his husband to grab up the rest, and they all started making their way into the train station.

I guess he's right, Yuri thought, hearing the sound of his shoes crunching on the snow even more clearly than he normally would. Colors all around seemed more vibrant; even the snow seemed to shine the sunlight more brightly, I'm so over-tired that everything seems super exaggerated. I should just keep my big mouth shut until after I've had some real sleep in an actual bed. These half-naps I take on planes and trains...I just feel like a phone that was turned off overnight but wasn't plugged in. I'm in no better condition now than I was when we got off that first plane in LA.

Coming down the escalators was less ridiculous than when he'd done so with Phichit the week prior, since Viktor didn't insist on making a dramatic entrance again. The crowd that greeted them was just as big as he'd expected though. Banners and flags were shaken out excitedly from one end of the terminal to the other. The odd 'overcome' sign was being waved about as well. Yuri was grateful then that the Excedrin he'd been given earlier had finally started working, since he could only imagine how bad it would feel to have all that noise reverberating around in such a closed space. At least at the airport, it was open and airy, so the sound of all the cheering and applause had somewhere to go but straight into his head.

With their hands full, it was easy enough to get through the mob without having to spend too much time acknowledging it. Yuri bowed his head politely to as many people as he could as he dragged the suitcases behind him, occasionally glancing back over his shoulder to spy Viktor and Yuuko pulling up the rear with Jiro and the rest of their things.

To his and Viktor's surprise though, a certain volcano-red Audi was parked out front and waiting for them. So was the ballerina that had driven it there for them. Minako stepped out of the car and twirled the key-ring on a finger before stepping towards them, making a B-line to Viktor to give him his keys back.

"Welcome home, kids." She said excitedly, gesturing then towards the car, "He-who-shall-not-be-named made sure this thing was shipped here as soon as he realized the bear would get no use from it. Hopefully it'll be enough to get all your things inside without one of you having to sit on the roof, too."

"This is great!" Yuri chirped, "Hopefully it wasn't too much trouble for you to get it here." He looked towards the woman, and she shook her head.
"No trouble at all. How many people get to say they got to drive around in Viktor Nikiforov's car?"
She laughed, dropping the key-ring into the Russian's expecting palm, and then bowed dramatically
as she took a step back, "In either case, your chariot awaits. Yuuko and I will walk back to Yu-
Topia."

"Let's get everything packed in and get moving." Viktor added, "There's a bottle of sweet-potato
shochu with my name on it back at the resort."

Minako glanced over towards Yuuko then as the two skaters started opening all the doors and
moving seats around to get access to the tiny back seat and trunk, playing proverbial TETRIS with
their things to get everything to fit. That's when she first noticed the fuzzy lump in the woman's arms,
and she jumped in shock, "Is that a new dog!?"

The Madonna smiled excitedly, reaching up one hand to pull back a layer of the jacket to help
expose the puppy's head a bit more, "This is Jiro ~! The newest addition to the Nikiforov household.
The Governor gifted him to Yuri for a job well done at the Final."

The ballerina fawned over the puppy for as long as she could before Yuri hollered that they were
ready to go. Yuuko leaned down to hand the pup over to him, and Yuri cradled the bundle on his lap
while Minako pushed the door closed.

"He's adorable." She commented, leaning down to the open window briefly, "Welcome home, little
buddy." She boop'd the Akita's nose and pulled back to stand upright again, "Drive save on these
snowy roads, Viktor. It's only a 5 minute drive."

"These roads are nothing compared to the ones in Russia." He answered back, "I could drive
on them with one eye closed."

"Don't tempt fate," Yuri muttered nervously, recalling how Viktor had done just that very thing once
before. He turned his head back towards the two women standing outside, and set his finger on the
button to roll the window up, "Arigatou, Minako-sensei. We're probably going to jump straight into
the onsen once we get there."

"I expect it! Don't stand on ceremony just for us." The ballerina answered, stepping back and
wagging her fingers as the window slid up and closed. The crowd behind her swelled as the crowd
of fans got their last photos, and the little red car pulled out of the train-station parking lot.

"We're so close..." Yuri sighed happily, leaning back into his seat, and reaching his free hand across
the center console to find its usual perch on his husband's thigh, "I can almost smell the mineral
water."

"Me too. It's tempting to blow every red light and stop sign just to get there faster." Viktor agreed,
"And the Victory Katsudon~! Food of the Gods!"

"Raooww raowrowr...!" Jiro tried his best to join the excitement, though his howl turned into more
like something of a whisper-grumble.

The two skaters laughed at it. For the moment, at least...in the humble presence of the puppy, they
gave themselves permission to relax.
Half the resort had already shambled into the main entry-way when Lutz hollered that she could see the car pulling up. To the (albeit forgiving) chagrin of the resort owners, Viktor pulled right into the main courtyard in front of the doors, too excited to go around the back and park like other guests, especially since when he and Yuri got out, the resort's front doors were open and people were half-way spilling out into the snow to greet them.

Makkachin was as excitable as ever, jumping and whimpering, barking and wiggling, his tail-wagging so hard and fast that his back end might've come off if he wasn't careful. Viktor was quick to corral his fluffy buddy, nudging the driver's side door closed with a knee as Yuri closed his side as well, coming around the front with a nervous smile on his face and Jiro in his arms.

"I told you we shouldn't be parked right here." He whispered anxiously, trying to play along anyway.

"You did?" Viktor laughed, the dumb-happy look on his face concealing whether or not he'd actually heard the warning previously, "I forget."

"I said it less than 10 seconds ago, Viktor!"

"...I guess it's okay if it's just this one time..." Hiroko reassured, though staying well within the warmth of the inner part of the doorway, "Okaeri~!"

Mari waved politely, wearing regular clothes instead of her YuTopia uniform, still looking a bit rough around the edges from her own flight.

The triplets were more eager to get outside than she, and they practically tumbled out on all sides. They, of course, noticed the new little fuzzy bundle almost immediately, and were practically hovering around Yuri with their smartphones flashing and recording, "Yuri has a puppy!"

They chanted excitedly.

"This is Jiro." He introduced, looking down happily at the pup, "Saga Prefecture's Governor gave him to my at the airport. I hope it's okay that we brought him here. I...honestly don't know how house-trained he is, if at all."

"Just keep an eye on him." Toshiya suggested, backing up to make a path from the outside, "Let's all get back inside before all the heat gets out."

"You boys must be exhausted." Hiroko added, following the much-taller duo towards the sliding doors and onto the cow-hide rug that lined the first part of the entry-way, "I'll bet you want to soak for a bit. Or do you want to eat first? Minako-senpai was supposed to call when you two were on your way here from the train station, but she didn't."

"She left her phone in the car." Yuri grinned, holding the device in his hand before stuffing it back into his borrowed jacket, "We'll go soak, but I want to do something else first." He nudged his sneakers off with the toe of each opposite foot, bending down to grab them and stow them in the nearby cubbies as his partner did much the same.
"Something else?" Viktor wondered, having to practically dance around the foyer with Makkachin weaving in and out between his legs, "You haven't mentioned anything else until just now."

"It won't take long." Yuri nudged his head in a gesture for them to go, and Viktor followed.

Within a few moments, the rush of excitement for their homecoming was chilled to the calm of a certain solemn room. Jiro glanced around, looking out through the floor-to-ceiling windows to the trees outside. He whimpered quietly as Yuri put him onto the floor, the jacket sliding off of him, though the pup stayed in its warmth a little while longer anyway.

Yuri pulled out two cushions, setting them side by side in front of a certain shrine before kneeling on one and lighting some incense, putting the stick of lightly-smoking scent into the jar just ahead of him. He glanced back to see Viktor still standing in the doorway, unsure whether to follow or to stay behind, but he pat the second mat and then turned back to the shrine.

The framed photo of Vik-chan was in its usual place, the gentle stream of incense smoke rising like a ribbon in front of it. Viktor took a nervous seat on the right, with a much-calmer but still excited Makkachin padding alongside, hopping up against the man's back to drape both front paws over the Russian's shoulders. Everything seemed rather quiet for a few moments.

Yuri had his head bent down, hands pressed together just in front of his nose, "Vik-chan..." He eventually said, his voice barely above a whisper, "This is Jiro."

Fuzzy triangular ears twitched, and the puppy looked up, perhaps more from listening to the only noise in the room, but Yuri let himself think it was because the pup was starting to recognize his name.

It was quiet again for a few seconds. Viktor watched in nervous silence, looking from his partner to the framed picture of the man's much-younger self, posing with the toy-poodle that bore his name. Makkachin panted softly next to one ear, distracting him enough that he didn't notice Yuri moving before his hand was taken and gently pulled closer.

"I never really considered getting another dog after I failed Vik-chan before." Yuri admitted sullenly, "When you said at the airport that you didn't mind taking time off to coach me because it also meant you got to spend more time with Makkachin...Vik-chan was all I could really think about. I always thought I'd have more time."

The poodle pulled off his human's back and came around in front of the two men, curiously starting to sniff at the bundle in front of Yuri's knees. Jiro seemed reluctant, staying put where he was, though his tail swayed a little bit, signaling his willingness to participate in the meeting. The much larger dog slowly wiggled closer, until he could stretch his neck out and get the tip of his wet nose as close to the Akita as he was willing to get for the moment. Jiro was suddenly much more curious, getting up from the bundle made from Yuri's coat and started to wobble closer. Makkachin immediately pulled up and back, sitting on his haunches in surprise, but lowering again as the smol pupper got between his front paws...and flopped there. The poodle lowered his head again, smelling at the lil' dude curiously.

"Makkachin, this is Jiro. Jiro, this is your new big brother, Makkachin." Viktor explained, trying to break up the awkward silence. He reached his free hand forward to rub the puppy's fuzzy back, and found the small creature rolling onto its back for his first official belly-rub.

Yuri smiled to see it, "Looks like those two will get along. Hopefully they'll be friends soon."

The big brown poodle was suddenly a ball of energy all over again, leaping up and practically
flipping around in the air as he darted around the room, tail a'blur behind him. He was down on his front paws, panting excitedly, butt up in the air with that tail flailing back and forth. Jiro seemed receptive to the idea and started plodding forward, as graceful as only a puppy could manage, and went after the big fluffer, whine-barking as he scuttled onward and dragging the long leash behind him. When he got close enough though, Makkachin leapt again, darting around the room like a cat with something stuck to its backside, only to lower down to his chest again somewhere else and start the whole thing over again.

Viktor watched them for a moment longer, turning his attention only when he felt Yuri letting go of his hand to lean against his side instead. He returned the gesture with an arm wrapped over and behind his husband’s shoulder, resting his hand on the inward curve of Yuri's waist, "You have time again, to do the things you couldn't with Vik-chan."

"...I'll do things right this time..."

With the two canines settled in the common area, minded by the triplets, the two tired skaters made their way through the hot-springs changing room and wash area. It was only just after the lunch hour by then, so there were no other patrons in the spring, which was just fine by them. They stepped quietly over the stonework deck and carefully dipped one toe at a time into the bath, until they were up to their ears in mineral-water and steam.

Listening to just the quiet rippling of the pool all around them, the silence was a welcome reprieve from the noise of travel and competition. They each closed their eyes to savor it, towels perched precariously on the tops of their heads as they half-floated next to each other, the back of their heads anchored to the lip of the deck.

"It feels like it's been so long." Viktor commented, opening one eye and looking up into the sky for a moment, then turning it towards his partner on his right, "Hard to believe it's only been...what...5 days? Since we were here last."

"Something like that." Yuri agreed, cracking his eyes open to a slit as well.

The Russian tilted his head a bit, "Can you believe it's been a year since you kissed me that first time, right here in this hot-spring?"

That got a smile from the exhausted younger man, "It was more like a peck, if we're going to be technical. Our first real kiss was at Cup of China."

Viktor settled back to where he was and closed his eyes again, smirking to himself at the memory of it all, "You were so nervous back then. Still such an innocent, even after we came back from Barcelona." He huffed a quiet laugh at that.

Yuri cocked a brow at his spouse, "I didn't really know what was going on still. I saw all the signs and somehow didn't realize what it all meant."

"It's okay. I forgive you." The Russian mused, "I was willing to wait. You were worth it." He twisted over slightly and gave a nibble to his husband's neck, "The days I spent training you to open up to me are some of my fondest memories."

That just made Yuri’s cheeks go pink, and he pulled his legs back from where they floated and settled on the under-water bench, "You were a good teacher."

Viktor pulled his legs back as well, joining his partner on the stone ledge and turning side-face to
look at him, one elbow going up onto the deck to hold him still, "There's still a lot of things I could teach you...things we could learn together..."

"Really...?" Yuri gave a strange look, "Like what?"

A sly grin crossed his face, and Viktor shimmied closer, sliding his free hand under the water from his husband's stomach to chest, lifting one finger above the water's surface to nudge the man's chin towards him. He looked closely into those hazel eyes he adored so much, and nosed at those soft lips before gently pressing his own to them. He could almost taste the laugh that was about to spring from him, and he whispered the word, "Toys."

Yuri chortled, his face going bright red, "V-Viktor...!

The Russian couldn't help himself, almost howling as he turned where he sat and pressed one shoulder against the side of his partner's chest, bringing his hands up above the water and placing both index fingers next to one another, "You see, we could both be lined up like this, and then one of us puts a Fleshlight overtop...it'd be like a threesome, but without the trouble of actually having to share each other with someone else."

The water was already rather steamy, but the heat from Yuri's embarrassment might've been enough to evaporate at least an inch of water all around him. He shook his head to regain his focus though, even as Viktor was still grinning rather proudly, and then reached his hands forward.

To the Russian's surprise, Yuri didn't grab his hands to push them back under water again and out of sight...he just nudged one down, so the tip of one finger was at the level of the other's last joint.

"...A more accurate representation."

Viktor smirked and sat a bit more upright, hands going under the water and out of sight, "I love you exactly as you are. I would never wish to change a thing about you."

A glimmer of that innocence was still there in Yuri's eyes, hidden behind the glow of his reddened cheeks, "I could never bear to share you with anyone, even for the novelty of doing something new."

"That's okay." The Russian whispered easily, "I'm very territorial over my Katsudon. The only one who ever gets to eat you is me."

Yuri's face was starting to hurt from the tension of his embarrassment, and he shook it to regain himself. It helped that he felt Viktor's hand starting to slide up the outside of one of his legs, hooking under both knees and pulling them over his own to draw him closer. Water rushed back up to his neck as Viktor loomed, but as soon as the ripples leveled out again, Yuri let himself relax. Those blue eyes were hypnotizing, and all he wanted was to be lost in them. He felt his husband moving again, his free arm coming around his other side, curving under his back to help hold him up. Knowing he wouldn't sink, Yuri brought his own hands up then, each one pressing lightly to his partner's face as he tipped his head forward, gently touching their foreheads together and closing his eyes. He held there for a moment in silence, listening to the water and the afternoon sky, but then smiled and cracked his eyes open again, "And I you."

The Gold medal went on display as the last bits of katsudon were being prepared in the kitchen. Minako and Yuuko finally arrived back as well, with the ballerina frantically seeking after her phone, apologizing rather enthusiastically to Hiroko for not making the call she'd promised. Yuri just huffed a laugh at the woman's expense and pointed to where Viktor's long grey-blue coat was hanging.
Makkachin fell asleep next to his human, resting his head on the man's leg, the rest of his fluffy brown body vanishing under the low table as they ate. Jiro wasn't far off, squished into the small space between the two skaters legs.

When the famed 900 calorie 'Yuri's Pork Cutlet Bowl' was finally put away, and half a bottle of shochu was drunk, mostly by Viktor though, Yuri could feel the weight of his eyelids settling in more than ever before. The adrenaline of returning home and the fanfare of his victory was enough to wake him up for a little while, but not forever.

"You ready for your nap?" Viktor teased, draining the last of his second small glass.

"I think so." The younger man agreed hazily, "The shochu reminded me I was still tired."

"Go take a break, Yuri." Hiroko offered, "If you wait much longer, you'll just end up sleeping through the night and miss all the fun later."

"...Hai..."

Viktor was quick to offer his services and hoisted his husband up into his arms, picking him up off the floor, though careful not to step on the pupper that had suddenly been so rudely awoken, "Gomen, Jiro. I need to take Yuri to bed though."

Yuuko started coaxing the young dog under the table, getting not only Jiro but Makkachin as well, both fluffbeasts flopping against her to snooze some more.

The Russian smiled at her, but quietly made his exit, heading to the stairs that lead to the second floor, and the long hall that went towards his old banquet-hall-turned-bedroom, and Yuri's own former room. Passing the banquet hall first though, Viktor paused and used a foot to slide the doors open, seeing that the bed had been made-up, likely in anticipation of an overnight stay before going back to their own house.

Yuri wondered about the pause though, lifting his head and opening his eyes where he'd leaned against his partner's shoulder, "How come you stopped?"

"I was just trying to think of where I want to take you." The silver legend answered, "My room, since it's right here, or down the hall to yours. That's where we were when we made love for the first time."

"Two weeks later." Yuri pointed out, cheeks still pink in spite of himself.

"We did it in your room again later, when everyone gave us scores." Viktor teased, "Seems that's where we should go, then."

Hazel eyes widened in surprise suddenly, but he could already hear his door being nudged in before he could manage a retort. The door was then pushed closed again, and the two were left in the relative dark of his bedroom, the curtains pulled mostly across his windows, giving only a crack of light for them to see by. Yuri felt his feet turned down to touch the ground, though Viktor kept his arms around him, hands sliding down his back to rest gently on his waist. Silver hair brushed against his face as the Russian leaned in closer, tilting his face slightly to the right, pressing their lips together moments after. It didn't take much convincing to get Yuri to enjoy it, sliding his hands over the green fabric of the spa jacket and over his husband's shoulders, arms sliding against the man's soft skin where the robe slid off one side.

"I'll come wake you up again when it's time." Viktor whispered, "For now...let me help you sleep."
"I don't know... There's no locks on these doors and anyone in the resort could come up here at any time..."

"I'll be quick. Just something for you." The Russian bargained, "I can ask you to stop speaking about certain things for a while, but I can't make you stop thinking about them. At least let me overwhelm you for just a little while. Maybe I can take your mind off of these new troubles, even if only for a few hours."

Tired eyes looked on, but Yuri answered without a word, stepping into a kiss of his own making.

Viktor was eager to feel it, holding his partner a little tighter then. He slowly shuffled his husband back towards the bed, hands roaming from back to backside and up again, feeling every contour through the thin green fabric covering that thin athletic frame. Eventually, he pulled his hands around Yuri's sides and brought them up to the man's chest, gently rubbing there as well before fingers found the laces to the robe, letting the folded panels fall away from one another and reveal pristine skin to his eyes. Pristine, except for that one red mark on the top of one shoulder, where he distinctly remembered giving his spouse a small love-bite during one of their last romps in Detroit.

He went down to that shoulder to nibble on that same spot again, hands working their way into the confines of the spa robe, feeling at every inch of skin. He kissed his way back up his husband's neck as one hand went down the back of the loose green pants. Yuri twitched forward a bit as he felt it, but Viktor relished every second, and continued his explorations as kisses resumed. Two fingers pressed between the younger man's legs, feeling at a nubbin of sensitive skin, and gently coaxing that arousal. When he felt the beginnings of a prod in front, he gave one more long kiss, and withdrew his hands to maneuver the man to turn around.

Yuri leaned his back against his husband's chest, letting the robe fall from his shoulders, and tumble lightly off his arms. It fell to the floor at their feet without a sound. The Russian's hands went around his sides again, coming towards the front to explore through the green fabric, feeling at the inside of his thighs and sliding up. Yuri tilted his head back, feeling lips against his neck, and fingers sneaking into what remained of his clothes, teasing all around him without ever really touching. When Viktor did take hold of him, Yuri couldn't help but jerk his hips back, pressing himself firmly against his husband's core. Every stroke and tug made his breaths more needy and urgent. The feeling of each hand roaming over him, one drawing up such exquisite pleasure in him, the other slowly moving up and down the front of his body, was paradise. Just as Viktor had promised, those hands drove the worries from Yuri's mind.

Soon, those hands were also making Yuri's legs too weak to hold himself up anymore, and he gradually sank down until he was on his knees, leaning forward against the edge of his bed. Kisses trailed across his back, and both hands went down between his legs to please him, each one expertly finding their way to his most secret, sensitive places. The added pressure of Viktor pressing his hips against him made it even better.

"...Nh...V-Viktor...I'm cl-close..."

A puff of hot breath passed against his skin, but Yuri found the Russian pulling off of him. He turned his head, cheek pressed to the sheets, looking back at the silver legend as he rose up to stand on his own knees. Eyes met, even as Yuri tried to catch his breath, feeling hands cupped over his hips, pulling him gently back against his husband's lap. Half-lidded slate eyes watched him carefully, savoring every reaction. He unfolded where his arms had bent against the mattress, going slightly limp under the Russian's gaze, and Viktor used the moment to turn him onto his back, and push him further onto the bed.

Viktor moved in closer after that, wedging between his partner's legs and rising up as far as he could
go against that pale, bare chest.

Yuri tilted his head back, relaxing under the man's advances, and savoring every kiss that trailed down the front of his frame. Kisses soon morphed to licks, and then sucks, moving up and down on him. Sweet release came soon after, and his whole body trembled from the pleasure of it, waves and pulses of electricity moving through him. Viktor continued on with a few more passes, but then released him, leaving him stretched out on his bed and trying to catch his breath.

"Sleep like a lion, my love." The silver legend whispered, rising to stand and moving the younger man's frame better into the bed, pulling the blankets over him soon after and patting one hip when he was done.

"...You've been...saying that in English recently." Yuri huffed, pulling in deep breaths as he watched in his half-asleep torpor, "...I wonder why...? Don't like 'koibito' anymore?"

"It was fun for a while, but I'm being a little more serious now." The Russian answered, crouching down next to the bed to look on at his partner at a more even level, reaching a hand up to brush a few strands of raven hair away, "I want to be completely sure that what I say is what I actually mean." He explained, then moving his hand down to grasp at the one resting on the sheets, pulling it up to kiss those fingers, "And my understanding of 'koibito' has evolved. It's okay as a tease, but..." He leaned forward then and kissed his husband's forehead, "You mean much more to me than just a lover, but I don't know the Japanese word for 'soul mate,' 'love of my life,' or 'my other half.'"

"Unmei no hito..." Yuri suggested sleepily, "A fated person..."

"Hm...sounds ominous."

"Tamashii no...hanryo..." He went on, even as he was starting to fade, "Other half...of my...soul..."

Viktor waited a few minutes, gently stroking his partner's chest through the thick blanket pulled over him. Once he was certain that Yuri wouldn't wake up anytime soon, he quietly rose up, kissed the man's forehead, and pulled the rest of the curtains to, making certain that the room was as dark as it could be. He grabbed up the discarded spa jacket and folded it quietly, setting it just next to the younger man's pillow before finding his way out of the room.

*I wish I could sleep now, too...but I'm just so hopelessly wide awake... I'm afraid I'd just spoil it for you if I stayed here with you.*

The door clicked shut. Viktor set his palm against it, holding there for a moment before finally turning away to head back down to the common room.
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED TWENTY FIVE

The sky seemed almost a sickly color; greens and muted yellows that had no place being where they were. Streaks of it ripped through the air in place of clouds, leaving long, jagged, claw-mark-like trails that reached from horizon to horizon.

It cracked then; massive rifts of darker-than-black creeping and fissuring through the heavens. Red bled down through them, dripping at the edges, and painting that sickly sky an unnatural pink.

In the midst of it all, the Shanghai skyline rose up, buildings growing upwards like stalagmites.

"What's gotten into him?" Yuri's voice echoed on the wind, "Why's he standing on the other side of the railing like that?"

"I don't deserve to be warm." Viktor's voice answered; distant and cold, "I'm a...a failure at being a coach and a spouse. If you want to fire me, just tell me...I'll understand..."

"I had a panic attack! You couldn't have done anything! NO ONE could have!"

"If I hadn't agreed to come back to competition, no one would've said the things they had about us both winning Gold going into the Final!"

The wind changed, and the sky's red tint changed to blue, as though the entire thing had been dropped into dye suddenly. The Shanghai city-scape merged into itself like folding origami, reshaping until Hasetsu Castle burst from the dusty rubble.

"You were the one who picked up the shattered pieces of my reality and put them back together again. You were the only reason I made it through that ordeal intact. If everything that happened at NHK happened at Russian Nationals instead, when you can't be there? I don't...know that I'd still be here."

I don't...know that I'd still be here...

...that I'd still be here...

The words echoed into the distance, eventually fading to nothing. An eerie silence followed...and then the loudest thunder-clap Yuri had ever heard.

A flash of black, and Yuri lurched upward, the cold air of his bedroom replacing the balmy, humid, acrid atmosphere of the dreamscape he'd just left. His skin felt clammy, sticky with sweat...the blankets around him cool and damp. His heart raced in his chest, but the longer he sat there catching his breath, the more calm it became. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

I feel like I was out for days... What time is it...?

Looking around the room, even with the curtains pulled completely shut, he could tell that it was after sundown. Without his phone nearby though, it was impossible to know exactly what the hour was. That left him with nothing to think about but the nauseated feeling he had in his stomach, waking up from a nightmare that made no sense, but made him uneasy anyway.

...I've heard about how, sometimes, even really famous and well-liked people can actually be so
lonely and depressed that they end it all. They're so popular that they're desperately alone, even in a crowd.

Yuri crossed his legs under the blanket, and looked through the dark to where he knew his ring was on his finger.

"There are times where I don't even want to go to Nationals back home because I can see others giving up when they see me go by." He recalled Viktor saying, nearly an entire year prior, "At least here, people still get excited about their scores, even if they're far below yours. You haven't been burying them for so long that only the fans are happy to see you. But that's part of what makes what we have now so special."

"...What do you mean?"

"It's lonely at the top." Viktor had explained, "So I'm glad you're here with me. You can see everything with the same eyes that I do, looking out from the same vantage point, rather than from somewhere beneath it."

Yuri drew a nervous breath and turned in place, putting his legs over the edge of the mattress, feeling his toes grace the edge of the floor. His hand went down onto where his spa jacket had been folded, and he turned his head, realizing what it was, and pulling it in front of himself.

Viktor sometimes gets into some really dark moods... I hate feeling like he might actually do something one day...

He pulled the jacket up to his face, breathing in the smell of it as though he might find traces of the sad Russian on it, but then quickly unfurled it and slipped his arms through.

But...even though I'm here for him...would that be enough to stop him...?

A nervous sigh escaped him, and he moved his hands to tie the jacket closed at his side. He shuffled a few paces forward pulled the door open, stepping out into the dimly lit hallway. To the left, windows to the courtyard, and the barren trees, lightly frosted with snow. On the right, a plain wall, followed by the sliding doors that lead to the formerly-repurposed banquet hall. Yuri pushed one panel aside and glanced within, seeing how it was still packed up and strangely empty...like a tomb. It put a chill down his spine and he closed it again, making his way towards the stairs.

The public area of the resort was bustling with the sound of business; plates and bowls, cutlery being set out or picked up, the television playing some program or another, and quiet words spoken between the different patrons. When Yuri stepped into the common room, he saw the Nishigoris towards the front with their girls, Makkachin and Jiro snoozing in the space between their table and the one Minako was sitting at with Viktor. The ballerina had a tall glass of beer, half-empty by that point, and Viktor still had the shochu from earlier, but it looked like he hadn't poured any since Yuri last saw it. To his eyes, Viktor was hunched over the low table, propped up on his elbows so his shoulders were scrunched up, head bowed like he was looking at or reading something.

It was easy enough to sneak up to the bunch; everyone's eyes were facing away. Even the handful of patrons that Yuri didn't know only did so much as turn their heads briefly to watch him go by, as though only glancing his way because of the natural instinct to look at movement seen out the corner of one's eye. When he was within a few feet, he could tell that Viktor was looking at his phone; reading something, though he didn't know what. Just as Makkachin lifted his head, sensing his approach, Yuri crouched down behind his husband and threaded his arms around the Russian's core, pressing in against the man's back.
"Oh!" Viktor almost yipped, completely surprised by the sudden touch, but quickly realized who'd done it and smiled his relief, "Ah, you're up sooner than I thought. I was going to give you another 30 minutes."

"Is it really still that early?" Yuri mumbled against the back of his partner's shoulder, then lifted his head and set his chin there instead, nosing the ear just ahead of him, "I feel like I slept for a hundred years."

"Since the sun goes down so early in winter, that's not surprising." Yuuko commented, "But it's only 5:30."

"Wow."

"You guys should change into something warm so we can go outside." Minako pointed out, taking a sip from her beer, "The fireworks thing is supposed to start in about an hour."

"Okay." Viktor nodded, grabbing up his phone and shifting where he sat so he could get his knees out from under the table. Yuri moved with him, keeping one arm on the man's frame as they rose, pushing up on the table behind him with the other, "We'll be right back then. Keep an eye on the kids for us."

The ballerina reached to her left and gently scritched Jiro's head as he snoozed there, half-lying on Makkachin's plushy tail, "I think we can handle them for a little while."

The two skaters smiled at the fluff-pile and turned to move off, heading back the way Yuri had come. The journey into the onsen changing room was made in relative silence, each of them moving at-pace with the other, an arm around each other's backs. When they finally came to standing in front of the small lockers where their travel clothes had been stowed, Yuri paused, turning to face the confused Russian instead of reaching for the handle to the small locker.

"Didn't sleep well...?" Viktor wondered hesitantly, "I guess my efforts weren't much help." He sighed, but smiled, "I'll try harder next time to wear you out more thoroughly."

"That...wasn't it." Yuri answered, turning on his heels and stepping in closer, both arms going around his partner's chest, hands clinging tightly to the green fabric covering Viktor's back. It was a relief to feel arms coming up over his shoulders, hugging him closely in return, "I'm just worried about you." He explained, burying his brow against the crook of his husband's shoulder and neck, "I keep having this bad dream...the same one... It feels so real that it wakes me up."

"What do you see...?"

"A sickly green sky, like the heavens are rotting. Then it fractures, and these big cuts tear across it, and they bleed red rain all around." Yuri described, "I can see the Shanghai skyline, the buildings rising up like talons, and then...I hear your voice, repeating some of the things I heard you say when you were all drunk and upset. It carries on the wind like a scent from far away, and I feel the pain in my chest that you must've felt while standing on that ledge... Then everything turns blue, like ice instead of decay, and the skyscrapers are replaced by Hasetsu Castle. The wind changes direction, and I hear the echoes of the things you said at the airport. About how you didn't think you'd still be here if not for...me..." He nuzzled in closer and held tighter, "You told me earlier that you can't make me stop thinking about things, but you could ask me to at least stop talking about it for a little while." He lifted his head and looked straight into those cobalt eyes, "...Can I at least ask you to promise me...that no matter how bad it gets, you won't hurt yourself?"

Viktor was taken aback by those words, and his brow furrowed. He forced himself to blink and
shake the pit that was trying to grow in his gut, "You don't have to worry about that sort of thing, Yuri..." He started, gently stroking the younger figure's hair, "I have too much to live for now. So...while it will never be my place to tell you how you feel about me, or how you might feel later...I know how I feel about you, and the only place I want to be is by your side, for as long as I can. I can't stand to think about shortening that time for any reason, never mind on purpose..."

Yuri could feel the relief washing over him like warm water, and he clung a little tighter, drawing in a deep breath. His throat hurt, but he swallowed his tears and lifted his head, smiling instead, "Same."

The silver Russian stole a quick kiss, and reached one hand up to tap the end of his husband's nose with one finger, "We still have many years of life and love together, you and I. For tonight though, let's get changed, grab our two goodest boys, and go enjoy the fireworks with everyone." He moved that arm away then, reaching for the small latch to the locker they'd stored their clothes in earlier, "And at least for now, no one's talked about what happened. They didn't even give me the gears about my charade at the medaling ceremony."

"Really?" Yuri wondered, turning as well to sort his things from his partner's, setting them on the small bench behind his knees, and moved to untie the loose knot on his right hip, "I'm not sure if that's good or weird."

"Right?" Viktor mused, doing much the same, "It's like I didn't skate at all. No one seems to want to talk about my shows."

"Maybe they're following your same mind-set and just want to keep things positive for tonight." Yuri suggested, casting off the robe from his shoulders and moving instead to untie the front of the spa pants, "Talking about your programs would inevitably lead to talking about how you did better than the rest of us, like usual." He teased, "And you did say at the start of things that you just wanted to thrash us all properly like old times."

"I did." The Russian laughed quietly, spa trousers falling to his ankles, and he sat back on the bench as he grabbed for one dark blue sock, "Honestly speaking though..." He started ominously, pulling the sock on and reaching for the other as Yuri found his underpants, "Having to wait until the end to go out and do my Free Program...getting to feel nervous over it was actually kind of exhilarating. I think one of the best parts of coming back to competition has been getting to feel like I actually have to fight for Gold. It's been a long time since I had to take anyone all that seriously as competition."

Yuri could feel his cheeks redden as he paused pulling his underwear on, but then finished the task and sat back with an amused grin, "You did train up your biggest threat."

"Threat? No..." The Russian shook his head, finding his own undergarments then, and lifting one leg after another to slip them on, "My greatest and most noble challenge. All else aside, it was a lot of fun, while it lasted."

Yuri paused again when he heard the words, sitting there with his pants only pulled up to his knees. His brow furrowed a little, betraying his improving mental state, "...Yeah."

"I wonder if either of them knows...?"

"Should we say something?"

"No way...let's just leave them alone for now. No sense ruining their night with this. Best leave it for..."
"We're ready." Yuri announced, stepping back into the common room, and spotting their group of friends huddled over their dogs awkwardly, "...What's going on?"

"Nothing!" Minako pulled back immediately, a nervous smile on her face as she looked at the two confused skaters. She turned back to the group, "Let's get our coats on! It's time to go!"

The rest of them were quick to hop up and rush towards the entrance hall, ready to find their things and brace for the great cold outdoors. Watching them go by, Yuri and Viktor blinked in confusion, but then looked at one another and shrugged. They stepped into the common room and gathered up their furry sons. Yuri bundled Jiro up in a towel as he picked the sleepy puppy up, folding it around the pup's little fuzzy limbs and protecting those soft pink toe-beans. He got a lick on the chin for his efforts, and he huffed a quiet laugh at it before turning to his husband. As he felt a hand gently press to his lower back, he knew Viktor and Makkachin were ready, and started making his way after the others.

Once Viktor had his scarf and coat on, he helped Yuri with his own, using one scarf to help create something of a sling for Jiro. It was tied and looped over Yuri's head, then under the bundle that the pup had been gathered into, and finally, Yuri's multi-pocketed brown jacket, zipped up in the front to just under Jiro's front paws and head. That done, Yuri's hands were freed up, and he teased the small Akita's toe-beans with one finger as Viktor claimed the fingers of his free hand, pulling the whole thing into his coat pocket as they stepped outside.

Taking their time, the group walked together from the resort to the bridge across the Matsuura river. Snow crunched beneath their feet, and their breaths drifted off like small clouds in the cold air.

Yuuko slowed her walk to step by Yuri's side, pointing at the Ice Castle just beneath the 'ninja house' on the hill, "It's hard to see from this far away, but they've got banners hanging from the building congratulating you on Gold, Yuri."

"We'll stop about halfway across." Nishigori commented, looking back over his shoulder, "This'll be the best seat in town."

The triplets clapped excitedly, "Yuri's practically the town mascot now!"

"I'm not a mascot...!" He protested, making a face at the girls, "We can make Makkachin the mascot!"

The poodle gave him a look as well, hearing his name but not sure why. Viktor leaned down to pat his head and reassure him.

"Maybe Jiro should be." Minako suggested, "Makkachin is more a Russian dog than anything, but Jiro's Japanese, and he's going to be growing up here. Plus, he's the first dog you two got together, since Viktor and Makka came together as a package."

"Jiro...a dog of Hasetsu." Yuri said quietly, "I guess there's a ring to it."

As they arrived at their choice spot, Viktor mused about where the fisherman had gone to, who normally cast his line from that same spot. He needed to be reminded that it was winter, and he just scoffed at that, "Winter never stopped anyone in Russia from fishing!"

"Maybe he just comes out in the daytime. Hard to fish at night, I bet." Yuri suggested, deflating the tease.
With nearly 30 minutes to go before the show would start, the group opted to loiter around and wait. Viktor convinced his partner to let Jiro walk on his own despite the cold, and the puppy seemed to enjoy the freedom...for all of 30 seconds. One step from the cold concrete of the swept sidewalk onto the snowy pile that collected on the bridge's edge, and he was done. A single paw-print in the frosty white fluff was all that told that Jiro had been there.

Viktor picked him up then and booped the pup's nose, "I think that was the cutest nope in history."

"I told you it was too cold." Yuri huffed triumphantly, looking up from where he sat on one of the concrete blocks in the bridge-cubby, one arm draped over Makkachin, "Maybe next year, when his paws aren't so new. He'll be nearly full size by summer."

"Ve'll mehk you beeg and strohng, laik Russian." Viktor teased, forcing an even thicker version of his existing accent. Jiro just bark-yipped once, small curly tail going back and forth excitedly as Viktor held him out, "Det's rait. In Jehpan, vinter mehk you cold, but in Soviet Russia...you mehk vinter cold."

Yuri smacked his forehead. He couldn't help but laugh at that.

Music started playing over the town's loudspeakers; the sassy guitars from the start of Eros. Having captured everyone's attention rather quickly, the music tapered off before the violins kicked in, replaced by a woman's voice; the same one that originally announced their plans for 'Onsen on Ice' the year before.

[Residents of Hasetsu! It is the honor and privilege of the Ice Castle, in association with Hasetsu Castle, to present to you tonight a dazzling display of congratulations to our town's heroes, Yuri Nikiforov, and his coach, Viktor Nikiforov!]

"What's she saying?" Viktor wondered, the dumb-happy heart-shaped smile creeping across his face again, "I really need to learn more Japanese."

"It's just a thing saying that the fireworks are for us because of the Final." Yuri explained, rising to stand and stepping closer to take his husband's arm.

[So let's celebrate with the Nikiforovs and YuTopia Katsuki for the new Gold medal they brought home to Hasetsu and for Japan, and to wish them luck in the coming All Japan Championships next weekend! Thank you very much!]

The loudspeakers switched to music again, playing Yuri's former Free Skate, Yuri on Ice. The piano was quick, tones rising and descending. With the first deep boom of the low notes, the group watched three massive fireworks blooms bursting in the sky above the castle. They were all rather impressed, watching the sparks fizzle out as they fell. With each new keynote and beat of the music, more fireworks rose, perfectly timed to the song. The background piano was accented with a flurry of smaller starbursts, while the larger ones were crested by the boom of the bigger ones, all wildly colorful and dazzling in their different burst compositions.

Jiro wiggled in scared confusion, trying to burrow his way into Viktor's jacket like he'd been in Yuri's earlier. In trying to keep the pup from wiggling right out of his hands though, Viktor moved down to take the stone seat that his spouse had occupied, plopping the Akita onto his lap and undoing his jacket quickly to pull the cold fuzzball inside. He cast his eyes up to the sky again, colors twinkling across the entire heavens, reflecting off the waters far below.

Yuri stepped up behind him, leaning against the Russian's back and draping his arms over his shoulders lazily, feeling at the quivering bundle barely-covered by the form-fitting coat. When Jiro
stopped squirming, the two allowed themselves to focus on the fireworks, awestruck by the perfect timing and choreography.

"I want to skate to this again," Yuri commented quietly, "For my Free Skate at the Olympics."

"Really? How come?" Viktor wondered, gently caressing his partner's cheek with his own, "I thought you'd just keep doing your programs from this season."

"This song means more to me. I want the whole world to see what we created together." The younger man answered, "Plus, it's not just my story; it's ours."

The silver legend listened closely, but couldn't find words to answer. He turned his eyes aside to see the 'seeking' look in his husband's, and then turned them forward again to watch the brilliance above them.

The music quieted then, moving into the sad, melancholy part of the melody. Viktor could see the show in his mind's eye even as the fireworks went down a notch; Yuri's arms out to the side, gliding forward with his eyes closed before dipping down low. As it played on, several V-shaped lines of color shot into the sky in all directions away from the castle, each new bolt blazing forward to each key of the piano. Something about it struck the Russian, and he was a bit surprised to feel tears in his eyes. He tried to blink them away, but his movements only caught Yuri's attention.

"...You okay?" He whispered nervously, hugging the silver legend a bit tighter out of worry.

"Y-yes...I'm just..." Viktor tried to explain, but found it impossible. Emotion was welling inside him; his adoration for the program, the story it told, and it's melody, suddenly changed over to devastation and a sense of being betrayed. He couldn't stop the tears then. The first few were just the warning, and a dam was quickly breaking apart behind the man's eyes.

Yuri hugged him tighter, seeing the droplets fall from under those silver bangs.

"...Why did they do this to me...?" Viktor finally asked, "...I did everything they ever wanted... I worked so hard..."

"Viktor..."

Their words were heard by the rest of the group, and slowly, they each started looking back. It was becoming apparent rather quickly that Viktor had known about the bad news long before any of the rest of them had. None knew what to say...and they quietly watched as Viktor's heartbreak poured out for all to hear.
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED TWENTY SIX

Виктор Никифоров, санкционированный
[Viktor Nikiforov Sanctioned By]
Федерация фигурного катания на коньках России.
[Figure Skating Federation of Russia.]
Он дисквалифицирован на Чемпионат России по фигурному катанию.
[He is disqualified from Russian Figure Skating Championships.]

The headline was like a knife, straight to the jugular, but the part that was more wounding than even that, was the fact that the headline was printed in small font at the bottom of the RSF main page, as though only a minor footnote about some small-fry unknown athlete. Seeing only one article at a time as the page scrolled by on his phone though, Yurio's brow furrowed in confusion when it came up.

Green eyes roamed back and forth across the bright little screen, surrounded by dark. It was 3:45am in Edmonton, and even though the meager time-change from Detroit was only 2 hours, the teen was too restless to sleep. The more Yurio read though, the more upright he sat on the couch that had been turned into a bed for him, and the less likely it seemed that he would be getting any sleep that night.

"A joint resolution was found by the governing board of the RSF to remove Men's Singles figure skater Viktor Nikiforov from the pool of candidates for remaining events of the season, after he won and then forfeited, the Grand Prix Final gold medal to second place winner, Yuri Katsuki of Japan."
Yurio read aloud, though quietly to himself, "It is with a heavy heart that we must come to this decision, but we fear that skater Viktor's association as coach to Yuri Katsuki may inspire him to give up more medals in the future." General Director Alexei Kogen stated at a press conference early this morning in Moscow, 'In light of his looming retirement, we are in agreement to disqualify him from competing at Russian Nationals in 2 weeks time, and thus he will not be chosen to represent the RSF at the European Championships, the Olympics, or at the World Figure Skating Championships. We thank him for his many years of participation and congratulate him for his many victories. He retires with the respect and admiration of his many fans and supporters across the globe.' The blond scoffed, "What complete horseshit. Anyone who knows the first thing about Viktor outside the rink will know this is just lip-service to make their petty revenge seem like an honorable discharge."

He clicked over to his World Clock app and checked the time in Tokyo, seeing it was 6:45pm.
Should I text him? ...Would he even be aware of this yet? I don't want to be the one who tells him this happened if he isn't... Shit...

Rubbing his chin for a moment, he clicked into Instagram to check his older counterpart's account. The most recent post had been from around 4 hours earlier; a photo of the man himself with a group at YuTopia Katsuki.

v-nikiforov My precious sleeping beauty @y-nikiforov is getting over his jet-lag, but I'm still wide awake! So glad to be back at home in #Hasetsu #Japan. Nothing hits the spot after a long 30 hour trip like a dip in the #onsen, a bowl of #katsudon, and a glass of my favorite #sweetpotato #shochu with #family. Hopefully I'll be all rested up for #Nationals in 2 weeks.

Yurio's brow furrowed again, but this time he wasn't sure what to make of the post.
If he already knew he’d been fired by the RSF when he posted this, then he sure is being shrewd about it. ‘Nationals’ could mean anything, and he isn’t saying whether he’s skating or just attending...

He looked more closely at the Russian’s expression, trying to see if even the slightest pixel gave away the man’s true feelings.

He seems to look normal, just tired, but after a trip that long, who wouldn’t expect that?

Yurio flopped back against the plush leather arm-rest of the couch, the phone dropping screen-up on his chest. He made a face as he looked up into the dark.

The RSF announcement only just happened about an hour ago. If Viktor’s checked Instagram since then, he’s sure to have seen all the comments on his last post about it. But how can I find out...?

Eyes shot wide open, and he sat upright again, launching his phone a few feet in front of himself. He rummaged for it in the blankets and then pulled it close again, hastily texting the one other person whose night he might not ruin with his questions.

It felt strange for the fireworks show to continue on as it did, but it’s not as though the technicians who were orchestrating it had any idea what was happening on the bridge leading up to Hasetsu Castle.

Minako had taken hold of Jiro by then, keeping the pup warm in the towel he’d been carried in. She stood next to Yuuko, with Nishigori next to her in turn, looking back over her shoulder to glance at where the two young skaters were sitting. Yuri had since taken Viktor's place on the stone block, and Viktor had moved forward, sitting on the ground between Yuri's knees, holding his arms around his own, face buried against them. Yuri had both arms protectively around the man, one hand gently stroking at that silver hair. Makkachin was curled up at his human's feet, one paw going into the space beneath the up-turned knees, the other going in front of Viktor's shoes, and was leaning his brown fluffy head against the Russian's shins. The triplets were there with them as well, offering quiet solidarity as they continued to watch the sky.

"I wonder when he found out?" Minako wondered quietly, breathing a sigh into Jiro's fur, "He was fine all night, but hasn’t looked at his phone since Yuri woke up."

"He's known longer than everyone." Yuuko answered, voice barely heard over the music and fireworks, "Yakov told him as soon as they got off the plane at Fukuoka."

"So you knew this whole time?"

"Yuri had a melt-down about it in the arrivals terminal. Viktor told me what happened because they were taking a long time to come get their things." She explained, feeling a buzz in her pocket, and moved to withdraw her phone, "I agreed not to say anything, because Viktor didn’t want to ruin the night for Yuri more than the news already had."

"So this whole time, Viktor’s been putting on a brave face like nothing was wrong, for our sake.” Minako went on, sighing and turning her eyes back up to the luminous sky, "Here I thought we were the ones doing the protecting, by not saying anything about it after we found out. I feel guilty for having had fun at all now."

"Neither of them would want that." Yuuko added, looking then at her phone’s screen, "Oh, it’s the Russian Yuri. He just found out. He saw it on the RSF website and then saw social media blowing a
Minako glanced over the shorter woman's shoulder to see the teen's writing. "What time is it for him right now? Isn't it half a day earlier than us? He should be asleep."

The Madonna started typing without answering the inquiry, [Yes, Viktor knows. He was the first person Yakov told, so he's known since they got back this morning.]

[He sure is taking the news rather well given his Instagram post earlier.]

Yuuko made a face, smiling nervously, [He was trying his best not to let it get to him. He...only actually just started to get upset about it a minute ago. He told me earlier that he was hoping to last until him and Yuri got home and away from everyone, so he could deal with it tomorrow, but I guess the shock of it hit him early. We're all giving him some space right now.]

"Viktor...?"

The three standing adults glanced back at the sound of Yuri's voice, seeing him lift his head up a bit, just as the Russian had done suddenly. Viktor's eyes were red, but he maintained a stoic look, as though he'd spent the last 15 minutes trying to force his upset back behind the dam he'd erected in his heart. After a deep breath, and a long exhale, Viktor unfurled himself and rose to standing, leaning down to rub his knees and dust some snow off the back of his coat.

Yuri rose up as well then, as did Makkachin and the girls. He stepped closer, putting one hand on the small of his spouse's back, and whispered something to him.

"I'm fine." Viktor answered simply, "I always get emotional listening to Yuri on Ice. I just got carried away."

Everyone side-eyed each other, then looked back at the silver legend. It was plain to them that Viktor wasn't fine, but none of them were willing to argue the point with him. Viktor simply stepped forward a few paces and eased Yuri to stand in front of him, leaning against his husband's back in his usual way to watch the rest of the fireworks show.

'Russia's Skating Federation Sanctions All-Star Viktor Nikiforov: Have they officially lost their minds?'

'A Drama-Filled Grand Prix Season for Five-Time World Champion, Russia's Viktor Nikiforov: From a roof-top break-down to witnessing a devastating injury...the RSF's latest move is salt in an open wound.'

'It's the end of an era in Russian figure skating with the firing of legendary Viktor Nikiforov.'

Social media was on fire with content in response to the news. From flashy headlines on sports-news sites to emotional 'reaction' videos from fans, outcry was severe. Comment numbers on Viktor's last Instagram post shot through the roof with people saying their piece on the news; most in overwhelming support, though with a few saying he should've known better.

Reactions from the skaters themselves, however...

Phichit looked on nervously at his phone, sitting in the stands of his practice rink. He leaned onto his knees, holding himself up with his elbows perched there, one hand over his mouth as he stared at the screen in shock.
Yurio continued to glare in the dark, face illuminated by the bright light from his phone. He looked on with a stony expression at the last text Yuuko had sent him, but then clicked over to his Instagram profile and hit the button to make a new post.

Yuri Plisetsky
Нравится
yuri-plisetsky: Кто-то встал не с той ноги. @v-nikiforov @y-nikiforov This is bullshit. You didn't deserve this.

It was barely noon in Switzerland, but Chris was still sitting in bed, fluffy white cat snoozing next to him as he looked at the internet outrage. He, too, went to post on Instagram.

Christophe Giacometti
Likes
christophe-gc: I woke up after a long trip back home and the first thing I realized is that my favorite song is "Fuck You" by Lilly Allen. #coolstoryrussia #seerightthroughyourbullcrap #yourloss @v-nikiforov @y-nikiforov

Born to Ship Viktuuri
[photo: Viktor gives Yuri gold medal]
17,346 likes
viktuuri: Sad way to end the GPFinal. Keep your heads up @v-nikiforov and @y-nikiforov, the world is on your side, even if the RSF isn't.
#NotGoingDownWithoutAFight #SkateHusbands #SucksToBeRussia #StayStrong #StrongTogether
Load more comments
phichit-chu absolutely unbelievable
otabek-altin Only -slightly- shady behavior from RSF. This is going to bite them.
christophe-gc Keep an eye on those two for us, young ladies. Only 2 weeks to Nationals for Yuri and this is some pretty hard news to take.

Thousands and thousands of comments were pouring in. By the time the SkateHusbands even arrived home for the night and got their coats off, their phones were loaded with pending messages. After setting a suitcase and several bags down, Yuri loaded Instagram on his own device and saw the countless alerts on the bottom of the screen, but just shut it down and put it back inside his coat.

I don't want to think about it right now. I'll answer people tomorrow.

He crouched down to one knee next to Jiro and undid the harness and leash, letting the pup wander around after Makkachin and learn the layout of his new home. Rising back up again, Yuri stood back to let Viktor come through with the last of their luggage, and closed the door behind him, "You getting tired yet?"

"Hm?" The Russian looked back briefly, but then returned his attention to the suitcases, setting them against a nearby wall, "...I'm physically tired, but mentally I'm just...what's the phrase...wired for sound? Everything in here is buzzing." He waved a hand around the side of his head, wiggling his fingers for emphasis, and then moved to undo the front of his coat, "...I'm going to mull some wine."

Yuri watched quietly as his partner shuffled by.

Those slate blue eyes were looking forward, but were absent, as though the Russian was only barely
aware of his surroundings. With both coats and scarves hung, the front closet door was closed, and Viktor rubbed his arms as he stepped off towards the kitchen, only to find himself hooked by one elbow. Pausing in his tracks, Viktor looked back, and saw a shock of black hair coming up under his nose as arms went around his chest, hands pressing to his back.

"I love you, Viktor."

It was easy to return the hug, arms going over Yuri's shoulders, one hand clinging to the back of one while the other wove finger through raven hair. Viktor held tight, but was careful not to let his guard down.

"You don't have to talk about what happened if you don't want to." Yuri went on, rubbing a thumb gently back and forth, "We'll get through this together, like with everything else. I have your back."

They held a moment longer, Viktor staring at the base of the front door. He drew a quick breath, kissed the side of the pale neck he'd pressed his cheek against, and nodded, pulling away then to go to the kitchen like he'd planned.

Yuri watched the man go, but said nothing more. He breathed a nervous sigh and turned his attention to the gift bags just behind his feet, reaching to grab a few and pulled them over to the dining room table, and the massive but wilting apology bouquet still sitting in the middle of it. Flower petals and a few leaves had fallen to the table-top, and were brushed away as Yuri started putting the bags down there, reaching within to grab their contents.

They each worked in the silence of the house, Viktor finding his spices and orange peel, and Yuri setting up the fancy food and water bowl stands for Jiro. He glanced over the island and watched all the different ingredients going into the slow-cooker.

_All I can do for now is give him space, I guess,_ Yuri thought, pouring a little bit of puppy kibble into the first dish, and grabbing the second to take it to the fridge for water. _The fireworks thing unsettled him a bit, and he spent most of the show trying to patch his ego after my song dug its claws into his heart. That wasn't how he wanted to unburden...but once those tears started, even though they were for a different reason entirely...the rest just tried to burst out of him. He did his best to keep it all in, even though a little bit of that upset managed to squeak through._

Jiro came rushing over, little claws tapping the tile and hardwood as he hurried. He went nose-first into the kibble bowl, even though it was held several inches in the air on a black metal stand. He was able to sneak a few bits though before Yuri came back to set the water bowl into the corresponding bowl-slot next to it. Yuri gave the pup a scratch on the head before standing up and moving off to give Makkachin his own dinner on the other side of the dining room. The big brown fluffer just sat patiently by his own set of bowls, empty as they were from being away for 5 days, tail wagging back and forth, and that big pink tongue panting away.

With all chores done, but none of the suitcases put away, Yuri plopped onto the couch and turned the television on, hoping to fill the house with _some_ sound even if it was only ambient noise. Jiro and Makkachin were quick to follow him there once they were done eating. The poodle made it up to his corner easily enough, but Yuri had to reach down and lift the Akita up, reclining back into his own corner, and set the puppy down against his chest. It didn't take more than a few strokes on the tiny creature's back for him to fall asleep there.

By the time Viktor was done mulling his wine, and came around the front of the couch with two ceramic mugs, Yuri had fallen asleep again too, with both dogs draped over him. Makkachin was only dozing it seemed, since he lifted his head as Viktor went by, and hopped down quickly thereafter, going back to his water dish for a drink. Jiro was out cold, tucked neatly into the cubby-
space between Yuri's neck and shoulder, and the corner of the couch and armrest, tiny fluffy arms sticking out over the top of Yuri's head.

The two mugs were set down on coasters atop the glass-top coffee table, between the couch and entertainment stand with the television, and Viktor moved back towards his partner, sitting on the very edge of the couch just near the man's waist. He looked on at that slumbering face, leaning over to gently brush the tops of his fingers against one cheek. Yuri turned his head slightly, drew in a deeper breath, and then settled again. Viktor waited a moment, but then leaned closer, daring to steal at least one kiss before the man woke up again. That just made him want more, an instinct deep inside him switching the intent for one, soft, short kiss, to a second, longer, and more passionate one.

It was enough to draw Yuri from his sleep, confused at first but then realizing what was happening, and relaxing into it, sliding his hands up and around his husband's ribs, pressing to the man's back to pull him closer.

*Thank God, he still wants me... I was worried...*

It didn't last long though, Viktor managed to rise up from where he was sitting, and pressed in between those welcoming legs that spread around his waist, but after a few seconds of intent, the flame went out, and the Russian stopped. He hovered over those lips for a moment, gave one last kiss, and then pulled away to sit normally again, twirling around and pulling Yuri's left leg from where it had become pinned behind his back, setting them both together on his lap.

Yuri practically gaped, confused and concerned, watching as his spouse leaned over his legs and reached for the first of the two mulled wine mugs on the table in front of them. All the man could offer was a quiet apology for waking him up, which just worried him even more, "...It's...okay, really..." Yuri muttered, pushing to sit up in his corner, and glancing back as he felt the fluff and heard the quiet whimper of a puppy that was trying to stay asleep, "Oh, sorry Jiro...didn't realize that's where you went." He carefully maneuvered the pup more firmly into the corner, trying to recover the warm spot the puppy had slid from, and was relieved to see those eyes stay closed.

Viktor blew on the hot and steaming red liquid in his mug and sipped at it carefully, looking at the television without seeing what was playing. He had the same stony look on his face as he'd bore for the entire walk back from the fireworks show; on the verge of cracking and doing absolutely everything, finding every ounce of strength, to avoid letting it happen.

"...Do...you want to change the channel? I don't even recognize this show...it was something else before." Yuri offered, trying to get some response.

"Meh."

"Oh..." He uttered quietly, looking off anxiously. Another moment of awkward silence passed, and Yuri looked around the room, eventually settling on the second mug sitting on the coaster ahead of him. He pulled his legs back off his husband's lap to balance so he could reach for it, and then pulled it close, smelling his partner's efforts in the citrus, raspberry, and cinnamon notes coming from the cup. A small sip, and it filled him with a warmth that Viktor had, at least for the moment, lost. He grabbed quickly for the remote control and wiggled in closer, pressing himself right up against the sullen Russian's side. He pulled his knees up and tilted them against Viktor's lap, and waved his left arm under the man's right, dropping the remote to his lap for a moment so he could take his mug in that hand and free up the other. That done, he threaded his fingers through Viktor's right hand, and gave it a gentle squeeze, "The mulled wine is really good. You put more berries in than usual."

Slate eyes turned slightly, "...Yeah..."
Yuri gave a worried look again, unsure what to say in follow-up. He glanced away, looking instead to the television, thinking on what to do about it, if anything.

"I'm going to be terrible company, I think." Viktor added unexpectedly, leaning his head back against the couch, and slowly tilting it towards his spouse, "I'm sorry."

"I'd rather you be terrible company with me, than go off by yourself somewhere." Yuri replied, rubbing his thumb against his partner's, "This is just fine."

Blue eyes lowered, looking at where he felt their hands together, and managed to give a light squeeze back in silent thanks. He lifted their hands off his lap then and settled their forearms against Yuri's tilted knees instead, "I wish I could say something else...I know you want to help me, and I want you to...but I'm just...so numb right now."

"What happened will take a while to process. I don't expect you to bounce back. This is grief. We all go through it in our own ways." Yuri answered reassuringly, "However long it takes...whatever you need...I'll be here."

Viktor gave his best effort towards a small smile, and leaned in a bit closer to kiss the side of his partner's forehead before pulling back again, "Thanks."
Despite the long nap from the afternoon before, the sleep debt accrued over the previous weeks made it easy to stay in bed until well past noon. Especially since he was finally under his own blankets, in his own bed, in his own house...Yuri was practically in a vegetative state. When he'd made enough of a payment towards that debt, and his eyes started to crack open, he managed to roll over into a slightly different position and fell asleep for another half hour.

But, then his eyes shot open.

Staring straight at the far wall with the window, and the bright, sunny winter day outside, Yuri realized...he wasn't touching anyone. For a brief moment, panic set in, and he pushed himself up onto his elbow, only to look behind himself and realize Viktor had been there all along. The man was lying flat on his back, ankles crossed near the foot of the bed, but he was above the covers instead of within them. Yuri turned onto his other side and let himself lie down again, reaching up with his free hand to rub his eyes and then out to slide his fingers across his partner's bare chest. He drew in close, like always did, and kissed the edge of the man's shoulder.

"Texting with Chris or something?" He wondered quietly, closing his eyes again, and ignoring the display on the Russian's phone where Viktor held it up a few inches in front of his face.

"I'm not texting anyone." Viktor answered simply, thumbing the screen to move the images displayed on it, "I'm reading."

"What about?"

"Internet outrage."

One eye peeked open again, and Yuri turned his head, looking at the blurry screen with his naked eyes, "Is that healthy to look at right after waking up?" He wondered idly, able to discern the images, but not the tiny font that appeared with them.

Viktor had no answer for that. The only sound that came from him was the tap of his finger on his phone as he scrolled more.

Viktor had no answer for that. The only sound that came from him was the tap of his finger on his phone as he scrolled more.

Yuri turned his eyes from the phone to his husband's face, and saw the haggard, tired expression thereupon, "Viktor...?"

More silence. All he got was the slow blink of someone who hadn't slept, but those blue eyes were still fixed on the screen. Feeling a little frustrated, Yuri pulled the blankets off himself and shuffled to get on top of them instead, then crawled over on his hands and knees until he could sit over his spouse's lap. One finger went forward and hooked over the upper lip of the phone, pulling back on it until it slipped out of the Russian's hands, and Yuri got an unobstructed look at his partner's face.

Dark circles were under those blue eyes, and Viktor looked even paler than he normally did. His hair looked strange as well, as though it were made damp some hours before, and dried in clumps and strands; it was duller than normal, too. It looked more like glossy grey plastic than the luminous platinum it normally did.

Yuri sat up straighter in surprise at the Russian's disheveled look, a worried expression crossing his own face. He reached forward then, brushing a few strands of that hair out of his partner's eye before
turning his wrist to press it to the man's forehead, "You're really hot. Are you feeling sick...?"

"I feel cold." Viktor answered, his voice barely over a whisper, "But I'm burning."

"You feel clammy. Did you sleep at all?"

"...No."

Yuri rose off the Russian's hips immediately, moving to sit next to him instead, and scooted a few inches forward against the edge of the bed, "So you've just been lying here all night on your phone...?"

"...It was the only way I could make it stop."

"Make what stop?"

"Everything." Viktor said simply, his eyes drifting away, staring up at the ceiling instead, "My heart was racing almost all night long. I think I was calm for...maybe an hour...trying to fall asleep, but the longer it went, the more I could feel everything changing. I was burning up, and I could feel my heartbeat in my throat and head. Every muscle in my body was tight. I felt like I couldn't catch my breath. I couldn't even bear to touch you, to hold you like I always do...you were too hot."

It was all hard to hear, but the last bit made Yuri's heart sink.

"I got out from under the covers and stood on the balcony for a little while, hoping the winter night would cool me off, but it only made my skin freeze while the rest of me smoldered from within."

Viktor went on, every word taking so much more effort than normal, "So I just came back to bed and tried to fall asleep again... All I managed was to cry for a while. I got a massive headache. I thought about calling 119 but realized I wouldn't be able to tell them what's wrong anyway because I don't speak enough Japanese."

"Why didn't you wake me up? I would've-"

"This is grief, like you said..." The Russian answered simply, "That's not a medical problem."

"No, but having your blood pressure so high that you can feel it in your head, and burning up with a fever, is a medical problem..."

"...This is in my head. I just...need to get through it." Viktor rationalized, even if poorly. He reached for where his phone had come to rest on the sheets next to his left him, "I started to feel a little better after I started reading peoples' reactions to what happened." He managed something of a sarcastic half-smile, "The RSF page has their announcement about my sanction way at the bottom, in small text...easy to miss if you're only interested in headlines. It's like they only posted it because they had to. There was even a petition started by one of my fan-groups back in Russia, hoping to get the sanctions lifted...but the RSF won't budge. Their pride is on the line. The ISU itself could threaten to revoke Russia's status in the organization, and remove all future competitions from Russian rinks, and they still won't let me back in. It would look...weak."

Yuri pressed his hand to his husband's chest again and rubbed there gently, reassuringly, "Did they go into any detail about why they did this?"

"No more than Yakov said." Viktor said, his head tilting slightly against the pillow like he was attempting to shake it 'no,' but gave up in the middle of it, "Less than Yakov said, actually... They only referenced the medaling ceremony, but we know they've been planning this since NHK."
"...Now I feel terrible..." Yuri sighed, lowering his head and clenching his eyes shut, looking up again only when he felt Viktor's hand come up to clasp over where his own was still settled on the man's chest, "All night you were feeling so bad, and I was sleeping soundly right next to you, with no idea what was going on. I couldn't hold you or comfort you or anything..."

"I wouldn't have let you." The silver legend explained, "I would've been wrapped around you anyway if I could, but...you were hot like a furnace. Even through the blankets, when I tried to just rest my arm against you..."

The younger figure raised his wrist to his own forehead, wondering if he'd come down with something to make him feel so strange to his partner, but found his skin feeling as normal as ever. He's all out of sync with himself because of this awful news, and there's nothing I can do to help him.

"I started reading online since I couldn't sleep..." Viktor went on, "And all the people who'd made comments of support helped my heart stop racing so much, so I just kept reading... People would comment so fast that by the time I reached the end of the archive, I'd refresh and the archive would've doubled in size. I guess it made me feel better because it isn't just us...everyone is angry."

"...Have you been answering?" Yuri asked pensively.

Tiredly, Viktor managed to shake his head once, "I haven't said anything to anyone. That's kind of making everyone mad, too, actually...but I just don't have the energy..."

It was odd to feel relief over that answer, but that's what it was like, and Yuri felt his heart ease off its anxious pace. He leaned forward and kissed his husband's forehead, "Let me help you get cleaned up then. I can help you make a post of some sort just so everyone knows you haven't fallen off the edge of the world somehow, just like how you helped me with one after Skate Canada."

Slightly-red eyes looked on, but Viktor seemed to recognize the sense in those words, even if he was too exhausted to want to go through with them. With Yuri's help, he managed to sit up, and slowly hobble towards the shower room, slowly lowering down to the short stool that Yuri moved out for him. The tub next to him began filling up as he let himself relax into the feeling of steam and the smell of soap, then the gentle cascade of the shower-head pouring tepid water over his back. It helped more than the outdoor air did in making him feel cooler, and the tense feeling in his chest started melting away as well. Yuri's doting attention and the massage-like quality of the wash was everything Viktor could've hoped for. Feeling clean after the fever-sweat overnight was special, too, and he sank low in the tub after Yuri finished rinsing him off. The water there was lukewarm as well, and he let himself close his eyes.

Yuri took his turn on the stool for his own pre-soak wash-up, carefully watching his partner in case he actually fell asleep somehow and sank too far.

Eventually, they were dressed and heading down the stairs to the main areas below. That's when something struck Yuri that he'd had floating at the back of his mind as an odd concern.

"Where are the dogs?"

Viktor looked around while Yuri helped him balance, and managed a wry huff, "Guess that explains why Makkachin wasn't bringing us his food bowl, begging for breakfast."

"Eh?" Yuri looked up, but then over at where the Russian was pointing, and his eyes went wide. The kitchen had exploded.
Somehow, Makkachin had gotten into the pantry, and there was puppy and adult dog kibble strewn all over the floor. In the middle of it all, both Makkachin and Jiro were sitting pretty, tails wagging, each of them looking rather pleased with themselves.

Yuri groaned dramatically at the sight of them, but his first task was getting his husband to the couch. Spending all night shivering, sweating, and feeling like his heart would burst had left him rather lethargic. So, once the silver Russian was settled in with a blanket, the television remote, and his phone, Yuri went about his task of cleaning up after their desperate furry children.

"I hope you two are satisfied." He commented at them, "I have to clean all this up before I can make Viktor something to eat."

They blinked and tilted their heads at him.

"Oh my god stop it." Yuri lamented dryly, then pointing out to the livingroom, "Go sit with Viktor."

Makkachin was quick to go, happy to snuggle with anyone who gave him the time, but Jiro was still confused. He watched the poodle vanish around the island counter, but then turned his small dark eyes back up to Yuri, and gave something of a whimper-bark like he didn't know what to do.

"Ahhhhhhhhhh." Yuri whined back, stepping forward, and carefully, through the mine-field of kibble on the tile, and scooped the puppy up. He waddled back towards the livingroom and hoisted the pup over the back of the blue couch, setting Jiro down on Viktor's lap, just behind where he'd been holding his phone up. Jiro was immediately trying to wiggle under the man's wrists and get some attention. Viktor was focused though.

"Yuri," He said suddenly, getting the younger man's attention, "Look!"

"What is it?"

"My fans are calling for a boycott of Russian Nationals, now that I won't be there." Viktor explained, pointing to a Russian blog, "See?"

"I can't read Cyrillic. CTON, remember?"

Blue eyes blinked at him, but he laughed then, weakly as it was, "Yeah...CTON." He pulled his phone back then, resting it on Jiro's back as the pup wagged his tail, "Well...they're boycotting. That's sweet, I guess."

"That's pretty crazy. The RSF really messed up with this one." Yuri added, heading back to the kitchen to find the broom and dust pan, starting to gather up all the dusty food that would have to be thrown out and replaced, "I kind of feel bad for Yurio now though. If the fans boycott Russian Nationals because you're not skating, who will be there to watch him? Mila too...heck, even Georgi...and Yakov did say Georgi's probably only holding out this last year because of the Olympics anyway."

"Maybe." Viktor whispered back.

"Do you want to talk about how our plans are changing now...?" Yuri wondered, dumping the first pan of spoiled kibble away, "Or would you rather eat first?"

"A lot more than just our plans are changing." Viktor commented, looking up slightly from the screen, "I'd rather eat and maybe try to take a nap first...not all of it is a good change."

"What do you mean?"
Viktor tilted his head back so he could see over the back of the couch, "Without me competing, it's just you earning an income now. I won't be able to bring home competition prizes anymore."

"Oh." Yuri answered, almost blankly. It didn't seem to bother him, which made the Russian rather confused.

"You don't seem...that surprised or upset by that."

"Well..." He turned back to his task, sweeping under the bottom lip of the counter cabinets to get all the brown balls that scattered to the base of the walls, "One of the first things I thought about was the loss of the prize money after you gave the Gold to me. I guess I've just been figuring out how to manage that ever since, because we were originally counting on it. But..."

"...But...?"

"Our situation is special. We don't have to worry about most of the same fees that we did before you came here, like paying for a coach, ice time at the rink, dancing lessons, physical therapy when we wear ourselves down...all that." Yuri explained, working his way around the baseboards as he talked, "We just give the skating unions their share for sending us to these events, buy our costumes and skates, and we basically get to keep the rest, because our friends and family help us out for free. You also kind of helped put Hasetsu on the map as a big deal for tourists, so we get a bit of money from that... You made me learn how to set up a GoFundme last year, when you learned that YuTopia Katsuki had been paying for all my stuff to that point, so the both of us have been getting cash from fans, basically. You also still have that inheritance chunk squirreled away somewhere." He put the last of the kibble in the waste bin, and looked around at the floor in case he missed something before putting the broom and dust pan away, "All told, we're really not in bad shape. We both got Gold at our 2 events so, minus the RSF and JSF fees, we're getting something like...US$12,000 for each of those 4 events. I got to keep some US$20,000 from the Final, and I still have Nationals, Four Continents, Worlds, and whatever I might get from the Olympics if I medal."

"You'll medal."

"Point is, barring some other injury on me...we'll be okay."

"Now you're just tempting fate." Viktor commented dubiously.

"You're the one with the gift of foresight." Yuri answered dryly over the island counter, "Remember how you predicted my collision with JJ at the Final?"

"Uh oh..."

"...Huh?"

"Here it comes. Premonition time." Yuri said nervously, crossing his own fingers and looking up, "Please don't let it be bad."

Viktor cleared his throat, wondering if he should say anything then, but then shook his head, "...Mark my words." He repeated, "One of these days, his ego is going to get someone hurt. Hopefully mostly him."

"...Ahhh it's bad...!" The younger skater threw his arms into the air, "Now something's going to happen!"
Jiro was chewing on his nails where he still laid on Viktor's chest, and the Russian watched him with a strange look on his face, "...Maybe I just know him better than I want to admit. I only go where the evidence leads me, my love, and history always repeats itself."

"Only if we don't learn from it." Yuri answered, moving over to the sink to wash his hands, "Now...what do you want to eat? I'll even try to not to burn the house down this time."
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED TWENTY EIGHT

v-nikiforov
[picture - ring hands holding to one another on a table-top]
17,365 Нравится
v-nikiforov Спасибо всем Thank you everyone for your kind words and support after the news from yesterday. @y-nikiforov and I are taking some time to ourselves, and to think about moving forward. There's still a lot of work to be done and we want to be ready and recovered for #JapaneseNationals. Wishing good luck to all my friends and colleagues competing at #RussianNationals in a week and a half, and sorry to all my fans who were hoping to see me compete there. Please show your support for @yuri-plisetsky and all the other skaters on #TeamYakov.

Загрузить больше комментариев
y-nikiforov みなさんありがとうございます We're both doing okay for now. Trying to focus on the positive. We'll be back and ready to go once we've had some time to adjust. We also have a new #puppy to distract us and keep #Makkachin on his toes.
yuri-plisetsky @y-nikiforov don't let him get drunk, I think we've seen enough of his bare arse on top of a tall building to last a lifetime. We don't need to see him getting up on top of Hasetsu Castle, too.
christophe-gc Always taking the high road, Viktor. I envy your ability to hold back from throwing shade over this. I'd be telling the RSF to kick rocks.
mila-babi Aww Viktor! At least you can still be a coach! You'll be with Yuri at the Olympics and Worlds right?
phichit-chu PUPPY?
2 hours ago

y-nikiforov
[picture - Jiro being adorable]
9,217 Likes
y-nikiforov @phichit-chu Jiro
Load more comments
phichit-chu OH MY GOD HE'S SO FLUFFY AND LITTLE
1 hour ago

Making the posts on each of their accounts had been something of a relief to Viktor, enough so that he'd been able to relax and get a little sleep. Refusing to leave his husband's side though, he opted to sleep on the couch, curled around the man much like Makkachin had done to him on the eve of seeing Yuri's viral video, skating to his 'Aria.' With a blanket over the both of them, and Viktor no longer so stressed that he was feverish, he latched himself to his partner's thin frame, and dozed to the gentle beating of that calming heart.

Yuri could handle a little husband-related paralysis though, so staying put and letting the Russian sleep was an easy thing to do. It was easily after dark again already before Viktor stirred. Sleeping in so late to begin with, and the early setting of the winter sun, meant it was black as night outside before 5:30pm.

The Russian's silver-haired head lifted slightly, turned, and settled down again. Viktor moved his left arm after that, sliding it closer from where it had been draped over Yuri's stomach, curling his fingers
slightly and settling it just next to his cheek on Yuri's chest instead. For a few moments, it seemed like he had fallen asleep again, but just as Yuri pulled his own left hand up to comb it through the Russian's hair, Viktor lifted his head and turned it to cast those blue eyes on the younger man's face.

"Oh...hey."

The Russian blinked hazily, "...What time is it...? It's night... You didn't let me sleep all day, did you?"

"It's only been 3 hours." Yuri answered, finally petting that head, "I'd rather you keep sleeping though if you're still tired."

"...I...think I'm okay for now." Viktor answered, pushing up with his right arm and leaning to sit, setting his hands down where he could feel his husband's knees under the blanket, settled over his lap still. He yawned and rubbed his eyes on the back of one wrist.

"How do you feel now?" Yuri wondered, watching his partner carefully.

"Better." The Russian explained, though still feeling a little out of sorts. He dropped his hand back down and stared for a minute at the television, "...Hungry..."

"Already...?" Yuri was a bit surprised, but supposed it made sense anyway, since Viktor often woke up feeling peckish, "Let me see if there's anything left to make...we haven't gone shopping yet since coming home so all we really have is rice..." He moved to throw the blanket off himself and pull his legs back so he could stand, but felt a hand come down on one, making him pause in place. His right leg still hung off the edge of the couch, but he lifted it again slightly when he felt both of the Russian's hands come down on either side of his waist.

Viktor stared into those hazel eyes he adored, waiting a moment though, like the cogs in his mind were trying to turn. When he finally moved, he leaned forward, finding a kiss waiting for him when he arrived. He felt hands going over his shoulders to keep him close, but after a few seconds, Viktor could practically feel that he was going through the motions and didn't have his heart in it. Even as he found himself sitting upright again with his husband straddled over his lap, and his fingers teasing just under the edge of the man's shirt...

"...Viktor...?"

"...I'm...sorry... I just can't...

The look on Yuri's face was a confused mess of disappointment and worry. He slouched a little, realizing there would be no romp still, but then raised his right hand and settled his palm against the Russian's chest, just over his heart, "You don't have to force yourself."

"...We haven't made love since we left Detroit...and I'm so hyperaware of it...because of how you pointed out that I neglected you in France..." The Russian sighed, lowering his face from the shame of it, "I don't want to do that again to you..."

"I'm happy you're thinking about it, but..." Yuri started, sliding his hand up from chest to chin, and lifting his husband's face, "It's obvious that you're making yourself go through the motions even though you have no interest right now. I'd rather wait than feel like you're only doing this for my sake. It's no fun for me if you're not getting anything out of it, too." Viktor lifted his eyes, his brow furrowed in worry, then dropped his head back against the couch and slid down a few inches, "...This is so bad..." He whined, bringing his hands up to ruffle his hair in frustration, "Everything inside my skull is just messing me up so much and I hate it."
"Don't stress over it." Yuri reassured, sliding back off the man's knees and rising to stand, reaching his hands down in offering, "Back in France, I didn't actually know why your ample libido disappeared. Right now, I know exactly why, so I understand it's not because of me."

Still, the Russian just whined even louder that time, even as he took those offered hands and let Yuri pull him up to his feet.

"Let's just go out to dinner for now." The younger man suggested instead, pulling his clothing back into place again as he stepped out from the small space between couch and coffee table, "We'll swing by the grocery store on the way back to buy the kids more food, since I had to throw most of it away earlier. Going out and getting some fresh air will do you some good."

Viktor grumbled quietly under his breath, but then nodded, "...Okay...let me just...fix myself up a little. I'm sure I look a bit rough around the edges. I should at least try to look presentable, rather than homeless."

With a car that was designed to be driven on the right side of the road, it took some getting used to to drive on the left instead, as was the case in Japan. But, with his International Driving permit, Viktor adapted as well as anyone could, and was extra careful now that he had his own little car back.

They pulled into the small parking lot of a nondescript brown and tan building just off the edge of the Matsuura river, a block or so down the road from YuTopia Katsuki. The Dondon-tei Hasetsu. It was a place they'd been to on a number of occasions, so it wasn't awkward to go inside, and were greeted like familiar faces rather than local celebrities. Staff treaded carefully, however, guiding them over to their usual seat in the corner with the window that overlooked the river. They took off their coats and hung them on the back of their chairs before sitting down.

[We'll just get the squid, pork, and chicken teppanyaki, like always.] Yuri said, seeing the hostess scamper off, and turned his attention across the table to his partner, "I asked for the usual, if that's okay."

"Mh."

He reached one hand across and set it over Viktor's, "You want to go to YuTopia after? I can go to the store on my own if you'd rather just soak in the onsen for a while."

Viktor turned his head from the window and gave the man a look, like he thought Yuri was crazy for suggesting anything like what he just had, "I go where you go. I'm not letting you out of my sight."

The younger man quirked a brow, "Would you go to YuTopia even if I went?"

The Russian stared for a moment, but then lowered his face, giving a nervous and hesitant look as he raised it again, "I'd rather not talk to people today if I can help it. It was already enough of a relief that no one came banging on our door asking for interviews today." He admitted sullenly, leaning back momentarily as the hostess came back to turn on the teppanyaki grill embedded within the table, and started setting appetizer dishes all around the edges. The two skaters nodded their heads at her politely as she went back for the prepared raw meats, and Viktor glanced back at his partner as he reached for chop-sticks.

"Oh, they were trying." Yuri explained hesitantly, grabbing up his own chop-sticks from his side, and reaching for one small dish of pickled daikon, "I think I must've gotten some 30 emails today from different groups wanting to talk to you."
"...What did you say?" Viktor wondered anxiously, picking up a bit of agedashi tofu from a small white bowl.

"I just copied and pasted the same answer to all of them. 'Sorry, my husband isn't available for interviews right now. Please inquire again next week, once he's had a chance to rest. We thank you for our privacy at this time.'" Yuri answered. He chewed on the bit of crunchy morsel, then reached for the bowl of edamame, grabbing up one of the salty bean pods, "Most were fairly agreeable, but a handful of them wanted to schedule appointments next week, like your grief period was on a schedule and you'd be over it by 1pm on Monday or something."

"It may take until we get to Osaka before I start to feel like myself again." The Russian admitted sullenly, "Even though I'll still be aware of how I should be in Moscow, it'll feel enough like last year that it won't matter. I can just try to convince myself that Russian Nationals aren't being held at the same time, and I wouldn't be expected to skate at your event anyway, so just being there as a coach would feel like it always has."

"Do you want to skate one of our pair Exhibitions again?" Yuri wondered, "Maybe we'll reprise 'The Ghost.' People really liked that one."

"I guess we could."

"...Will you even be up for skating by then?" Yuri asked, leaning back again as the plates of thinly sliced meat and cabbage, along with their small dipping-sauce dishes, were set down. He grabbed a few piece of each and arranged them on the grill, listening to them sizzle for a moment before continuing, "I don't want to make you feel like you have to just because you're there. I kind of did it to you last year since you had your 'Aria' outfit with you anyway...but I'm sure everyone would understand if you didn't feel like it so soon after all this stuff with the RSF happened."

"It's too soon for me to know, my love." The Russian answered simply, arranging his own assortment on the grill as well, mostly the chicken at that moment, "We can take our outfits and play it by ear. You already had a solo Exhibition planned for Nationals, though. I don't want you to think you have to change all your plans just because I'm there unexpectedly."

"It's not like I'll never have another opportunity to skate the solo show." Yuri pointed out, flipping over his first round to cook on the opposite side, "I take a lot of pride in doing our duets. Skating on the same ice as you was always something I dreamed about...so how much better is it that I actually get to skate with you rather than just in the same building? All of our fans love it, too. I don't think they'd turn down an opportunity to see you skate."

"Maybe."

The younger man looked on, seeing how Viktor's eyes stayed low, watching the meat on the grill even as they spoke. It took until Viktor had slowly nibbled on the chicken he'd grilled before another word was spoken though.

"Would they even let me?" He asked quietly, setting down some squid next, "Since the RSF cut me off, I'm technically not part of the ISU anymore either. I've never heard of a non-member being allowed on the ice."

"Nikki got to be part of Yurio's last Exhibition."

"She wasn't skating."

"So I'll call and ask tomorrow." Yuri offered, "No concrete plans, just...to see if they'd be okay with
it, given the circumstances. I can't imagine they'd say no to Viktor freaking Nikiforov." He mused, his tone reassuring, "The JSF jumped on the opportunity last year, even though they had to set your show up completely from scratch. Normally they require everything be turned in way in advance. Heck, we were lucky even I got to skate last year, since we should've had my music and application in before the Final in Barcelona ever even started."

Viktor nodded, his shoulders sinking a little bit despite his partner's attempt at being positive. He tried to reach for the squid slices to flip them over, but found his hand starting to shake as he moved it, and pulled it back suddenly, dropping the chop-sticks before he could set them down properly; one fell to the floor. He could feel the twinge at the back of his throat, and he knew what was coming, "I...I guess. You kn-know what's...best..." He choked, bringing the back of his wrist to just under his nose as he leaned back again.

Oh crap...what'd I say!? Yuri wondered, panicking at the sight of his husband starting to crack again. He quickly moved to salvage the squid before it could burn, flipping them over and then hurriedly hopping out of his chair to kneel down next to the man, pulling him down to his shoulder as those tears started falling, "Shh...Viktor, it's okay. I'm sorry. I didn't...mean it..."

"Your people treat me better than my own do..." Viktor lamented, desperately trying to keep his sobbing quiet, "I worked so hard to win for Russia and they just threw me under a bus...and I don't...even think they're...saying the whole truth about why."

"You said they were offended by your NHK Exhibition..." The younger figure started, "It's obvious that the RSF feels the same way about us that your father did before. Maybe we were just lucky to get away with our pair skates for as long as we did, because of how good you are."

"...Appar-ently...not g-good...enough...anym-more..."

"Viktor...!" Yuri pulled back, insisting he be able to look into his husband's eyes, "You're still a living legend in every skater's eyes. The RSF just shot their gift-horse in the mouth. We'll..." His words drifted, unsure if anything else he might say would be taken for how he meant it or if it would feel like salt in the wound. He closed his eyes quickly and shook his head, trying to regain his focus, "I already promised you 5 World Championship wins. Viktor...I promise...I'll win Gold at the Olympics, too, and every International event from now on. No other Russian will ever take the top of the podium again so long as I'm there. That can be our revenge."

Darkened slate eyes glanced up, but even in the messy state Viktor was in, his cheeks gained something of a pink hue to hear those words. It hurt for him to smile, but he managed, "...I...th-think I just...fell in love with you again..."

The trip to the grocery store afterward was a lot calmer. With only a few things to grab, Viktor tried to make himself useful by carrying the basket on his left arm while Yuri looked around picking things. His right arm and hand stayed firmly attached to Yuri's, clamped down into the man's coat pocket like a bear-trap that wouldn't open again. Yuri didn't mind though. He'd rather the Russian follow him like a sad and confused duckling than sit at home alone with nothing but the dogs and his darkened thoughts to keep him company.

"It's a shame it's still the dead-middle of winter," Yuri commented idly as they walked down the pet food aisle, and he grabbed up their last two items; puppy and adult dog food. He let go of the Russian's hand so he could carry a bag under each arm, "It would've been nice to take some time on the beach and go running around in the sur-" He paused mid-word, seeing Viktor looking at him oddly, like he was half-angry about something, "...What's wrong?"
The silver Russian held up his now-unheld hand, moving his fingers a little for wordless emphasis.

"Oh!" Yuri realized abruptly, "Ahh..." He tried to figure out a way of being able to carry both bags of dog food under one arm, but they were too heavy and he dropped one. He quickly picked it up again and looked around nervously, "Shimatta..."

"Just put the smaller one under my other arm." Viktor suggested, opening the space up a little to make room.

Yuri did as told, sliding the puppy food bag in and letting the man clamp his arm down around it, even though it made the burden on that arm twice as heavy now with the basket held in the same hand just below. But, Viktor seemed happy either way, able to re-take the hand he'd been holding a moment before, letting it warm back up in the coat pocket.

Getting to the cashier at the front and paying was slightly challenging though. Even with his right hand free, trying to open his wallet and get his bank card out one-handed was harder than he thought it would be. Eventually he managed though, and they got their things to the car without much more trouble after that.

And, of course, the two dogs were more than happy to see them when they got back home, each one rushing to the front door when they heard the lock being turned. Jiro struggled slightly with the hardwood floor, sliding around with his paws going out from under him, but was too excited to be frustrated. Yuri picked him up and made his way over to the livingroom, setting the pup down on the couch and waggling a finger at the small Akita, "Jiro, stay. I don't want to be tripping all over you while carrying things into the house."

"Yawr!"

"Good boy."

Tiny black eyes watched excitedly as that small, curly tail wagged, watching as the two humans brought things in from the snowy outdoors. Once everything was in, sorted, stowed, and settled, the two dogs’ dinners were set down, and Jiro plopped down from the couch to run over to his own. Yuri pat the puppy's back and then stood back upright again, finding Viktor looking at his phone strangely, "...What's with the look?"

"...I...have a message." The Russian explained flatly, "...From the RSF."

"Eh?" The younger figure hopped over quickly, but was greeted with the usual Cyrillic on his husband's screen, "Listen?"

Reluctantly, Viktor lifted the phone to his ear and listened to the recording. The expression on his face changed several times, from irritation to frustration, then to confused anxiety. By the time it ended, Viktor looked shocked and unsure of things.

"Well?" Yuri wondered nervously, "What did they say?"

"...I never asked Yakov...or told the RSF myself...to undo the ban on family members trying to contact me through them." Viktor answered slowly, "But they decided to let one try anyway."

"Who?"

"My papa." He explained, "They didn't say what he wants, but they left his phone number so I can call him back if I want."
Confused as he was, Yuri had no words. Plenty were going through his mind though.

*The RSF would have no clue that Viktor and his father patched things up at NHK. As far as they're concerned, things are just as bad now as they always were, and Viktor would have no reason to want to be contacted by him. For them to pass along this message despite the ban...it's like they're actively trying to punish him now.*

The thought just made Yuri angry.

"I'm going to call him." Viktor said, drawing his husband out of his sudden frustration.

"Are...are you sure you want to? What if he...

"Things are okay now, aren't they?" The Russian went on, looking at his phone again, and the transcribed numbers that appeared listed in the voice-to-text version of the message, "I mean, if not to talk about what happened, why else would papa call me?"

"How would he even know about it though? If the RSF made such a tiny foot-note about it on their own website, why would anyone else even report on it? Your father doesn't even get cell-service where he lives...I didn't see a computer there either. He would've had to read about it in a newspaper and I don't know that anyo-

"Maybe they did." Viktor cut him off, looking slightly desperate for his hopes to be true, "Maybe the newspaper he reads did an article about how I was cut from the team because they're angry about it, like all my other Russian fans are."

"...Maybe... I'm still nervous about you talking to him though... We have no idea what he wants to say. You guys have had one conversation that didn't end in tears."

"And it was the most recent one we had. The one you started. I...I want to talk to him...

Yuri couldn't hide his anxious sentiment, since it was as plain on his face as anything else. He drew a nervous breath and swallowed, but then nodded, "Well, let's call then. Put him on speaker so I can hear him, too."

"You don't understand Russian though...what would be the point?"

"So I can hear the tone in his voice." He explained, "So I can be sure he's not trying to talk bad to you. He doesn't even need to know I'm listening."

"I think he would anticipate it."

"Then maybe he'll be better behaved to think I'm here even if I don't say anything."

"...Okay..." Viktor nodded, reaching to take his husband's hand again, and lead him around to the couch. They both sat down, and he placed the phone on the coffee table, pulling the stand closer so he wouldn't have to raise his voice just to be heard. With a nervous breath, he clicked the linked digits, seeing the pop-up message to confirm that he wanted to dial out to that number. One last look to Yuri, getting a hesitant nod, and Viktor clicked 'да.'

The dial-tone filled the room.
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED TWENTY NINE

It was just after noon in St. Petersburg, and the sun was shining despite the winter snow, but it still felt like a war zone that had been active for months. A phone in a small office started to ring, and a mousy little woman picked it up, looking pale and somewhat scared, "Privet?"

"Èto ja, Viktor Nikiforov. Mne pozvonili około časa noči."

The woman was up out of her seat, the wheeled office chair flying away from her, "Spasibo, čto v konce koncov perezvonil mne! YAKOV!"

"...Yakov...?" Viktor echoed, chancing a look back at his husband, "...Whose phone number did the RSF give to me?"

"You don't recognize it?" Yuri wondered, "I thought it was going to be the landline he had in the country."

"...Same...maybe it went somewhere else."

"Vitya!"

"Yakov! What in the world is going on? Why are you there? Why am I calling this number?" The skater asked nervously, "What is this number even?"

"It's the skating rink, idiot!" The coach barked, "The one you skated at for years! I work here."

Both men were blown back by the bark, but Viktor made a face and shook his head, "I guess that explains some part of this craziness."

"You didn't know the phone number to the rink you skated at?" Yuri whispered, stunned.

"I never needed to call the rink that I skated at! I always had the cell numbers to people I needed to talk to!" He explained anxiously, turning back to the phone, "Is my father there...?" He wondered, leaning forward over the phone, "The RSF called and said he was trying to get hold of me despite the ban we put in place last year."

"He had choice words for whoever was going to tell him no." The gruff elder explained, "He came barging in here around 11am demanding someone call you to get you to the rink. I told him you don't live in Russia anymore and it would be impossible for you to just show up. Then he said you'd mentioned Nationals and he thought you would already be here and that if he found out you were in Moscow he'd just drive down there next... Vitya, it's all crazy here. He's got the entire building terrified."

"...I bet. What does he want? What did you tell him?"

"I didn't tell him anything! I just told him to call the RSF mainline and try to get to you the regular way. I wasn't going to call you for him and I figured the RSF would tell him no, too, and he'd either leave or we'd make him leave." Yakov went on, "I didn't want to put you in a position where you felt like you had to talk to him unless you actually wanted to. If I called you on his behalf you might feel obligated, so I left it to chance. I guess he scared them enough to call you despite the rest."
"So where is he now...?"

Yakov stuck his head out of the office and looked across the rink, through the doors that lead to the waiting area, "He's in the main hall. He's been stalking that area like a goddamn poltergeist since the message went out, and everyone that was already here for practice is scared to go by him so they can leave. Do you want to talk to him or should I tell him to get lost?"

"No, don't tell him to leave!" Viktor panicked, "I called because I wanted to! Put him on!"

Yakov waited a moment, "How are you doing right now, Vitya? Are you holding up?"

The silver legend hesitated, but then grabbed the phone and leaned back against the couch, and Yuri, and set the phone to perch on the side of his knee where he'd brought it up, "I'm doing as well as I can. It's been up and down."

"...Are you prepared to talk to Konstantin? I know you said things are better, but..."

"I'm okay. If it hadn't been for this turn of events, I was considering inviting him to Nationals outright." Viktor explained, adjusting where he sat as Yuri wiggled in closer as well, and reset the phone back down on the knee it had been on once the both of them had stopped moving, "Please put him on the line."

Yakov was still reluctant, but acquiesced, "Alright...hang on a minute. I'll get him."

They could hear the sound of shuffling as the older man started walking with the phone, followed by the click of a door, and finally, the washed-out sound of Russian words being spoken. A few tense seconds later, a clearer voice spoke.

"Viktor."

Yuri could feel the slight jump from his spouse, and reached for the man's hand to hold it steady.

"Papa."

"Ja uže zasomnevalsja, polučil li ty moe soobšenie." Konstantin's voice was level but calm, at least for the moment.

"Nyet, ja polučil vaše soobšenie." Viktor answered, "Tak počemu ty pozvonila?"

Yuri listened to the back and forth for a while, reassured in the tone of each speaker even if he had no clue what was being said between them. At one point though, Viktor had started nodding about something, making Yuri furrow his brow in confusion. He wanted to ask what was going on, but wasn't quite ready to reveal himself yet. He knew it was inevitable though once he heard his name from the other line.

"Gde Yuri?"

Viktor pulled his head back a little in surprise, but then settled again and smiled, giving his husband's hand a squeeze, "On zdes' so mnoj." He explained, then turned his face and held out his free hand, "I win. Pay up."

"W-what!?" Yuri blanched, "What are you talking about!?"

"We had a bet that you'd give me an allowance of cash if my father asked about you at Nationals. Since I'm not going, this technically counts. So?"
Yuri's face was bright red, mostly out of confusion than anything, but then shook his head and regained his composure. He clapped his hand against his husband's for a shake of concession, "Fine...fine... We'll go to the department store tomorrow and you can buy anything you want."

"Yatta~!"

"Ja ne znaju, čto ty skazal." Konstantin's voice echoed again between them, but Viktor was far too pleased with himself to be startled again.

"Izvini, papa, ja vyigral spor."

Yuri continued to listen closely, wishing he could understand even the smallest thing about what was being said. But, he was content to watch his spouse for reactions given that he couldn't, and for the next half hour, their back and forth was cordial enough, so far as Yuri could tell. At one point, Viktor had started crying again, but it was clearly not because of anything Konstantin had said, and even as Viktor drew in closer for the comfort of his partner's touch, Konstantin's replies seemed neutral and even humbling. Yuri was really surprised at it all. Even when the conversation finally ended, and Viktor draped himself across his husband's lap with an exhausted heave, Yuri was still perplexed. 

"...So...?" He asked aloud, looking down on the silver legend, "I could tell he was talking about what happened to you, but I didn't understand if he explained how he found out about it."

Viktor smiled, "The phone Mikhail got him at NHK. He still had it, so he dialed up my uncle to ask how I did at the Final. Apparently the paper he reads hadn't mention the results all week for some reason."

"...For some reason." Yuri echoed, an eyebrow quirked.

"Right?" Viktor agreed, "So Mikhail told him what happened, and then apparently Yurio swiped the phone and they bantered back and forth about what the RSF had done. Next thing my papa knows, he's hopped into the truck my uncle bought for him after NHK, and he drove all the way back to St. Petersburg, thinking he'd give the RSF a piece of his mind." He explained, thinking on the idea fondly as he turned to lie on his back instead, head on his husband's lap, looking up at him as he continued, "All he could get to was my old rink, where him and Mikhail showed up last year. There's no RSF office in St. Petersburg though, so Yakov gave him the number to call. Papa says they tried to blow him off, so he told them...'If you don't put a message through to my son, I'm going to come to Moscow and make you wish you had.' Or something along those lines...it was funnier in Russian."

"Wow..."

"It gets even better though." Viktor said, feeling in better spirits than he had all day, "He suggested the same thing you did."

"...Eh?"

"To make the RSF feel really stupid for what they did to me...Papa suggested you be the instrument of my vengeance. To make sure the RSF never sees another Gold medal or hears the Russian anthem play, he wants you to win Gold from now on, no matter what it takes." Viktor said, looking almost giddy about it, "I don't know if I'd let you go that far, doing anything to win Gold...but, as long as you can manage it fair and square, you absolutely should."

"I plan to!" Yuri answered easily enough, "...But...what were you guys saying that made you upset enough to cry...?"
"Oh..." Viktor's eyes turned, and he reached to take hold of the hand that had settled on his chest, "He asked me why I ever thought to give up the Gold to you in the first place, and I told him about how you'd gotten hurt...it upset me to think about seeing you in the hospital again."

"...Sorry..."

The silver legend's expression seemed hopeful though, and Viktor reached up to touch his fingers to his partner's cheek, "Papa said you're a force to be reckoned with, if you still managed to beat everyone else for Silver despite how badly you'd been hurt. He even said he felt a little embarrassed for thinking you were weak before."

"...Well, I...kind of was, at least back then..." Yuri admitted, his cheeks reddening again, "I was still so unsure of myself, and I was still so new in Russia...I must've looked like a scared little mouse back then."

"Hm...maybe a little bit." Viktor mused, "A scared little mouse with the heart of a lion."

"...Maybe just a tanuki."

"Tanuki?" The Russian sat up and twisted around, resting his chin on his husband's shoulder, "Why a tanuki?"

"...Tanuki are basically Japanese raccoon-dogs. Not very intimidating to think about or look at, but...they're mythicized for having huge balls."

Viktor burst out laughing, looking like quite the conundrum given the dark circles still under his eyes, "And here you're always trying to downplay your prowess by pointing out how you're smaller than I am. Just goes to show that it doesn't matter, because it's how you use them that matters."

"I guess so." Yuri allowed, rubbing his cheek against the top of his husband's head where the man still clung to one arm. I'm just glad to hear him laugh again...

"...Ah...there's been so much happening today...I'm exhausted again..." Viktor commented, "I hope you won't think poorly of me if I say I think I need to go to bed early..."

"Of course not." The younger figure reassured, turning to kiss the Russian's crown before moving to stand up and help the man up with him, "I'll just turn the boys out for a pee and give them dinner, and I'll join you, okay?"

"You sure...?" Viktor wondered, looking hazy already, "You slept most of the day."

"You don't sleep well unless I'm there, and I'm more than happy to turn in early anyway. Even before all this stuff with the RSF started, we talked about hibernating for a week once we got home...I still plan to make good on that." Yuri explained, stepping closer to set a hand on his spouse's hip and rise up on his toes a bit to steal a quick kiss, "I'll be after you in just a minute. Go on ahead."

The exhausted man nodded, stealing a kiss of his own before moving by to get to the stairs. He turned back briefly to watch Yuri calling the dogs to the back door and sliding the glass pane across to let them through. Their back yard was more like a porch that had grass on it, but it was enough for the purpose it was tasked with. Yuri stood just inside, wrapping his arms around himself as he waited for the two poofs to get back inside, quickly grabbing a towel from near the door to wipe their paws down before letting them run amok again. Viktor made it to the top of the stairs before seeing it though, finding his way to the bedroom by feeling at the walls.
By the time Yuri had finished putting kibble and fresh water down, and clicked off most of the lights, leaving a few proverbial night-lights on for the pups, Viktor had made it to the edge of their big bed. He had the blankets pulled back from his corner, ready to slip within and pull them over himself, but was sitting in place. Yuri paused in the doorway, perplexed at the sight, "Something the matter...? Why are you sitting there in the dark like that?"

"I thought my better mood might make it easier for me...to try and have a little fun with you before going to sleep..." He answered, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose, "But I think I still have this mind-body disconnect, and nothing is happening even though, in my head, I really want to..."

Yuri made a face as he came in and put the door to, pulling his glasses off as he came around the other side of the bed, "I don't think I've ever seen you just sit there staring at yourself like you could just will yourself into arousal."

"Normally I don't even have to just sit here either...I just think I'm about to get Yuri naked and everything just works." The Russian sighed, flopping back to lie down, looking at his partner from the upside-down vantage, "Is this what getting old is like? I don't respond the same way as I used to...?" He started to panic, bringing his hands up to the side of his head, "I'm not ready to be an old people! I was forced into early retirement against my will! I didn't sign up for this!" He whined.

Plugging his phone in and setting an alarm, Yuri stood near his side of the bed, peeling out of his clothes until he was in nothing but the usual form-fitting black underpants. It was still more than Viktor usually wore to sleep, at any rate, and more than the man was wearing in that moment, too. Yuri moved with purpose, lifting the blankets in the middle of the bed, folded over as they were from earlier, and nudged his head to wordlessly tell his husband to get his feet in.

Confused, Viktor did as he'd been 'told,' lying straight with his head against the pillows. He watched wordlessly as his partner reached to grab for the corner of the blanket pile and pulled it over, then crawled on top of his lap, and pulled the blankets right up behind himself, letting them rest against the small of his back. Yuri found his hands after that, clasping them over his stomach, then leaning forward and pulling them above his head to the pillows and the headboard.

"You're turning 29 in a week and a half, not 60. You're nowhere close to being an old people." Yuri explained quietly, looming so closely that Viktor could feel the tips of raven hair brushing against his skin. He moved closer to rub the tips of their noses, softly and carefully, then paused and looked into those slate eyes again, "But you're going through something of a trauma right now and you can't expect everything will work like it should when you're so conflicted about so many issues. The RSF, a group that was once your foundation, your bedrock, your constant...it abandoned you. Your father, someone who was always gone, antagonistic, threatening...now he's got your back and is defending you. Everything is flipped over and turned backwards, and in the grand scheme of things, I'm fairly new in your life, too."

"Maybe..." Viktor sighed.

"So...let me try instead." Yuri offered, tilting his head a bit and moving in closer to speak the words against his partner's lips, "If your head is getting in the way then I'll just bypass it. Don't think...just feel me."

"But what if nothing happens and you put in all that work for noth-"

Yuri wouldn't hear it, stopping the words with a kiss. He could feel his partner tensing under him, fingers clenching a little tighter where he held them.

Don't worry about me. If I get myself all worked up in the attempt to excite you then I'll just finish on
He pressed his hips forward, slowly but firmly, then rolled them back again. The kiss continued, pausing only for breath before starting again. A while after, he started rotating his hips in a small circle, moving over every inch. Unsure if his touch was having any response, Yuri pulled one hand free, sliding it down the length of his husband's chest and stomach, pausing briefly against his waist before reaching into center. Though he could only grasp at part of the man's member, since he was sitting on the rest, Yuri was still pleased to find that there had been some progress made. What he found was at least straight and resistant to changing, even if it was still a little soft, and he curled his fingers around it to help it along, "There, see?" He mused, drawing a hissed breath from his partner.

Viktor was lost in the feeling, eyes closed and attention focused.

Yuri watched the man's face as he continued the strokes, feeling the man's body responding more and more with every passing minute. When enough had been done, he reached to Viktor's nightstand and pulled out that small blue bottle, secreting a squeeze of the liquid into his hand and warming it there before applying it to his husband's own skin. It didn't take much more time for him to feel that his partner was finally ready, and he rose off the Russian's hips just far enough to slide the man between his legs and up behind himself. He pressed in for another kiss as his thumbs worked to pull the black fabric away, just enough to make access possible, and then used the fingers of one hand to help guide. A few slides to feel where things were, and Yuri sat back against the length of stiffened flesh, letting it into himself. He heard Viktor hiss another breath, and he sat straighter, lifting his face up as he felt every inch going deeper, until they were nearly flush against one another.

The Russian was already out of breath just from that effort, but he cracked an eye open to look up at his partner. He slid his hands up the pale thighs straddled against his sides, then up the man's front, until he could reach no further without sitting up, and then did that as well. His own knees parted, and Yuri sank between them, back curved as he leaned in closer, arms going around him to keep him near, "...You're...amazing..."

"When I want my Viktor, I get him." Yuri whispered, smiling at his achievement and feeling rather proud of himself. He started the slow roll of his hips again, sliding a few inches up that shaft, and then down again, hands holding tight to the man's shoulders, "And I want you..."

"I'm yours."

The 10am alarm was prematurely raised by Makkachin, bringing his bowl to their bedroom and setting it on the floor before starting the quiet whine. Jiro scampered in soon after, the stairs being something of an obstacle to his stubby legs, but he eventually made it and sat next to his poodle elder.

The pile of blankets and pillows and limbs as slow to respond.

Makkachin whine-barked a little louder. Jiro joined in with his little yips.

One pale arm lifted in an arc, pulling the blankets away from a pair of blue eyes in the process, and Viktor squinted at the both of them, "...It better not be early..."

"...Beee beee BEEE BEEE BEEE BEEE..."

"...Mnnhhh...no...just on time..." He grumbled, rolling as well as he could to paw for the phone on the other side of the bed. He found Yuri stretching under him, hands and legs splaying out as far as
they could, even though half were still trapped within the knot of blankets. When he finally got hold of the phone and pulled it free from its charger, he clicked off the alarm and let the phone fall to the sheets, "Five more minutes..."

"If you didn't set it then we'll just fall asleep for however long we feel like." Yuri pointed out, halfway through a yawn. He brought one hand up to his face and rubbed there tiredly.

"I see no problems here." Viktor mused, flopping back to where he'd been before.

After a few seconds, and a louder whine-bark from Makkachin, Yuri rolled and forced himself to sit up, staring blearily at the two dogs who gave him such soulful looks back. Even without his glasses, he knew what they were doing, and pity-gage was quickly rising to breaking point. When Jiro yipped, the needle went into the red, and Yuri relented, "Okay okay, I'm coming..."

The poodle was up on all fours again with his poof of a tail flailing back and forth.

"Go take your bowl downstairs...I'll be there in a minute..."

Oddly, Makkachin seemed to know what the words meant, and he picked his bowl up as told and went back down to the kitchen with it. Jiro stayed behind though...going down the stairs was much more of a trick than coming up and he wasn't ready to tempt fate yet. So, he sat, and watched as Yuri went for a bathrobe to warm his naked frame, and only stood up as it looked like the man was bending down to lift him up.

"We should go out today." Yuri commented idly, "Take in some of the sun before it goes down again and we lose the chance, like yesterday."

"Mhm..."

"Viktor..." He went on, stepping towards the bed again and sitting on one knee at its edge, "You'll fall asleep again."

"That's the plan..."

"Let's go!" Yuri said, more excitedly than as an order, "Makka hasn't gone on a walk with us since before the Final, and Jiro's never been."

Hearing that certain four-letter word, a very specific poodle on the first floor could be heard barreling up the stairs and into the doorway of the bedroom, eyes wide and tail wagging even more fiercely than before.

"See? Now you've gone and gotten him all excited." Viktor lamented despite his amusement at the sight, peeking his head out from under the blankets then to look at the woofer, "See how he likes this one then..." He rolled to his side and pulled himself over to just in front of his partner's knees, just as Makkachin came trotting further into the room, like they were going too slow and he needed to encourage the lazy humans to move faster, "V-E-T...that spells WALK." Viktor teased.

Makkachin just spun in a circle and barked again.

"Now you're just taunting him." Yuri chided, patting that silver haired head, "Come along, husband...let's get moving."

"Yes dear..."

Yuri stood back up again and shook his head with a quiet laugh, "I'll go ahead and make coffee.
Don't take too long." He said, stepping off through the doorway with the Akita puppy happily in his arms.

Blue eyes watched them go and then come around to make their way downstairs, and soon after, Viktor finally managed to get himself out of bed, too. By the time he made it down to join the rest of the family, the smell of a rich medium Arabica was in the air. He cast his eyes towards the front doorway as he passed and realized their suitcases were still there, "We should probably put our things away before they start to stink."

"Who says they don't already?" Yuri mused, grabbing the creamer from the refrigerator door and setting it on the counter before moving off to find the kibble scoop, "If someone other than us walked in through the door right now, they'd probably complain about the smell."

"...Hm...maybe. If they aren't distracted by the coffee like I am. Or by other things." The Russian added, leaning on the counter against an elbow as Yuri bent down to pull kibble from the first bag, back end sticking out of the pantry.

"What other things?" He asked, oblivious.

"Oh, you know...certain assets." Viktor mused, rather proud of his pun.

Yuri didn't notice, and just stood upright to walk the kibble scoop to Jiro's bowl, half-dancing around to avoid the puppy getting under his feet. "Well, I can only smell the coffee and kibble-powder. Maybe you're smelling the mummified remains of the apology bouquet." He gestured at it as he rose back up again from dropping the half cup of puppy chow, then returned to close the pantry door.

"Maybe." Viktor sighed, the pun lost of his spouse's morning-brain. He reached then for his phone, finding it set on the island counter where he'd abandoned it at some point the day before. It barely had a 6% battery by then, and he sullenly set the device back down again.

"Let's just leave our phones behind for a while." Yuri suggested, stepping towards the coffee maker to start pouring the dark amber liquid into the two mugs that were set there, "Enough people have been trying to get hold of us since we got home. I want to take a break for a little while."

"I don't think I have a choice. Mine's basically dead anyway."

"Good, then I won't have to try to convince you." He added, stirring in cream and sugar as they both liked it, and then handing off the first mug to his husband, "I was worried I might have to try prying yours from your hands with a crowbar or something."

Viktor took a sip, but then just smiled, "Vkusno~"

The air outside was cool, but it wasn't as bad as either had worried it would be. It was even possible to walk on the beach; enough of the snow had been able to melt that the sand was exposed. Jiro followed along after Makkachin's paw-prints, but was kept on a long tether by his harness in case he found trouble.

Ears and noses were quick to get a rosy tint to them in the breeze, but it wasn't enough to warrant wrapping hats and scarves around, so the pair just walked idly through it, thinking no more of it than they did the cold of a skating rink.

"I think I recognize this spot." Viktor said quietly, looking around, "Yeah...this is where we were when I first suggested being your boyfriend."
Yuri huffed and shook his head, pressing in a little closer where Viktor had their hands in his coat pocket, "Might be. Is that how you actually thought about it that whole year?"

"Of course. Look where it got me." The Russian smirked, leaning down a bit to nudge his partner's cheek with his nose, "I think it worked."

Yuri took the hint and gave the man the kiss he was after, taking another just for himself as well, "It might've helped."

A few more paces, and they'd caught up to the puppy, who had plopped himself down on a dry embankment and wasn't moving anymore. Viktor stepped up behind the pup and reached down to scoop him up, pulling his other hand free only long enough to dust off those cold, sandy paws, "Poor baby, are your nubbins all cold?"

"He'll own his beach next winter," Yuri commented, retaking that hand and finding its warm place back in the Russian's coat, "He'll be chasing Makkachin from one end to the other."

"Makkachin got way ahead of us, I think..." Viktor wondered, looking around, "I don't see him."

"Must've found something interesting to smell. We'll catch up."

It took another fifteen minutes just to get back to where the beach-side forest gave way to the handful of small resorts that dotted the tree-line. Hasetsu Castle was straight ahead, but in the distance. When they finally spotted the brown woofer again, he wasn't alone.

"Yuri! Vik-chan!"

"Mom...?"

Hiroko was standing in the sandy parking lot of the Niji no Matsubara Hotel, having followed the poodle to the edge of the beach, "I've been trying to call you for over an hour! Why won't you pick up?"

"We left our phones at home. What's wrong?" Yuri wondered, the pair of them stepping into a light jog to get closer, "We would've been back soon...there's no sense in you looking all around town for us."

"I went by your house first, but you weren't there...I know only a handful of other places that you two might go, and when you weren't at the Ice Castle, I came here. I spotted your car so I got out and found Makkachin!" She explained, "I'm glad I finally caught up with you, even if it took a while! I'll tell Minako-senpai and your sister that they can come back."

Both skaters gave each other a strange look, and asked in unison, "Why are you looking for us so urgently?"

"You have to come to the resort." She explained, already turning back to the supply van she'd driven there, "Come on! Hurry up!"

More side-eyeing and confusion, but the pair shrugged and started following after her, Akita in Viktor's arm and poodle at their heels. They turned only to get to the little red Audi that they'd arrived in, and pulled out of the lot to follow the van back to YuTopia.
Chapter Three Hundred Thirty

Following the supply van back to the resort took less than a minute from where they were at the beach, but it still felt like ages given how their anxiety had shot through the roof over Hiroko's words.

"What could possibly be so important that my mom would drive all over town looking for us like this?" Yuri wondered nervously, "Or that any of them have been trying to get hold of us for an hour already."

"She must've just missed us leaving the house to come here." Viktor pointed out, "What a day for us to decide not to carry our phones around with us."

"Right? Yeesh..."

Viktor turned the car to park, but found it impossible to find a space. The entire, albeit small, parking lot for the resort was completely full.

"I wonder where all these people came from?" Yuri asked aloud, "Is there some holiday I don't know about?"

"Maybe abroad." The Russian offered, then suddenly feeling a pit in his stomach, "I hope Hiroko isn't asking us to come because of a bunch of fans. You'd think she'd know we want to be on our own for a little while."

"I think she knows that... I really doubt she'd let herself get convinced by anyone to actually leave YuTopia to go hunting us down. Maybe a phone call, but she'd give up if we didn't pick up."

"...Maybe the people you told off decided to quit messing around and just decided to show up, and your mom doesn't know they shouldn't be here?" Viktor worried, "We should just leave. She can call us at home and tell us what this is about, and then we can decide if we want to show up or not."

"Mnnnnhhhhhh..." Yuri grumbled anxiously, "We've already come here...it'd be really rude to just bail. Mom sent Minako-sensei and Mari-nee-chan out to help look for us. She'd never do that for something trivial like fans showing up. This has to be a really big deal, cuz otherwise she'd just schmooze the guests into staying overnight and get their hopes up to meet us when we stumble in on our own."

"I hope you're right."

"Do you want me to go in myself and scope the place out?" He offered, "I wouldn't be lying if I told them you couldn't find parking and that's why you're not with me. Then, if it's stupid, I can just come back outside and we'll leave."

Viktor nodded, and turned the car to pull onto the main street again, "I like that plan. I'll let you out in front of the resort."

Hiroko was standing outside waiting for them when the Audi pulled up, "What are you two waiting for!? Just park and get inside!"

"There's nowhere to park." Yuri protested, getting out and waving the car off to avoid blocking the
road, "Viktor's sending me in to see what's up while he keeps looking."

"Oh just go in, there's a lot of suits wanting to talk to you boys." She followed, pushing her son through the main doorway, "Mostly to him! I'll wave him down the next time I see him stick his head out and just have him park here in the courtyard again."

"...Suits?" Yuri echoed, looking around. He stopped where he landed on the cow-hide throw rug, "Mom, who is here?"

Viktor made the same loop through the off-streets as before, pulling in to the parking lot of a pottery store just up the way from YuTopia. He clamped his fingers down over the steering wheel and glowered over his knuckles, looking as far down the road as he could. His eyes squinted against the morning light, "C'mon Yuri, come outside..."

"VIKTOR!"

"Čert!" He yelped in horrified surprise, banging his head on the roof of the car from the fright of it. As he reached up to rub his head, he spotted Minako and Mari there gaping at him, "...What in the world...? YOU SCARED THE HELL OUT OF ME."

"Gomen gomen!" Minako mused, waving her hand, "Why does it look like you're hiding down here?"

"Might be because I am."

Makkachin and Jiro seemed happy to see the ladies, at any rate, trying to wiggle over the seats to get in front.

"Yuri went in ahead of me to see what was going on since mom decided not to really say anything." He explained, "If it's nothing, he was going to come back out and we were going to leave. He said he's been telling off the media for me, since I don't really want to talk to anyone about what happened. I just want to be left alone for a little while."

"Not right now, you don't." Minako said, looking rather devious, "I think you'll like who's here to see you."

"...Is that the singular 'you' or the plural?"

Minako blinked at him, but then smiled innocently, "Yes."

"Uuggghh..." He banged his forehead against the back of his hands, still on the wheel.

"Viktoooorrrrr!" Yuri was suddenly yelling from down the road, running right out into the middle of it, heedless of traffic while he sought for the volcano-red car, "Viktoooorrrrr!"

"Oh, looks like Yuri just saw who it is." Mari pointed at her brother, "Better save him before he gets himself run over."

The Russian gaped, confused as all get-out. He turned the car off then and opened the driver's side door to exit. Makkachin hobbled out as gracelessly as an excited dog could, but Jiro waited patiently for Viktor to lean back inside and hoist him out. The door closed right after, and Viktor gave the two women something of a stern look, "This better be good. I'm really not in the mood for games."

"Just go see!" The ballerina shooed him off.
Viktor trotted across the main road with Jiro in his arms, Makkachin hopping along alongside him. Yuri spotted him and moved off to the side-walk as well, and the two hurried for each other. When they were finally close enough to talk again, Viktor was almost fit to be tied from the previous upset, but was trying to look calm, "What did you see?"

Yuri immediately put a hand onto each of his husband's shoulders and stared at him squarely, "Remember when I came out onto the onsen in a big hurry and screamed when I realized it was you there?"

"Of course."

"Well it happened again, just not in the onsen, and...uh, well, not you, but someone similarly important."

"Please start making sense." Viktor pleaded, "Who is here?"

"The same people who let you do the opening ceremonies at NHK."

That caught Viktor by surprise, and his brow furrowed, more from anxious concern than anything else, "Show me."

Shoes and coats were put away, and socks slid silently along the hardwood floors of the resort. There was a strange sort of hush that had descended on YuTopia Katsuki, and it made Viktor a little nervous. He held Jiro close to his chest as they all moved towards the common room, but for once, the doors were closed, and they paused just outside.

"Here, let me have Jiro," Yuri offered, moving to take the pup, "You'll squish him otherwise."

"Why do I feel like I'm in trouble again?" Viktor sighed.

"I don't really know what they want, but I can guess." Yuri added, "Let's just go in. It's not a media trap."

"Promise?"

Yuri stood straighter, "I swear on my life, there isn't a single camera in the room...that I know of."

The anxious silver legend made a face at him, but there wasn't much else that could be done. He drew a breath, and reached for the handle to the door, sliding the panel across. What he saw within made his heart leap into his throat; a group of nearly fifteen different people, all wearing business attire and looking rather professional. Many he recognized, some he thought he did but wasn't sure...a handful he could've sworn he'd seen rather recently.

"Viktor Nikiforov-san." The group leader said, bowing, with the rest doing the same thing immediately after.

The Russian wasn't sure if he was even breathing, so he half-choked as he forced himself to draw air. He pat his chest in embarrassment, but finally stepped into the room, Yuri following just beside him. Yuri bowed despite the puppy in his grasp, and Viktor felt obligated to do the same, though he felt a bit awkward doing it.

"Please, come sit." The leader said, gesturing her hand to a pair of kneeling cushions on the other side of one of the common room's tables.
The entire room had been rearranged, Viktor realized. Where there used to be several tables lines up in front of the television, there was now only one, and all the sitting spots had been moved around to accommodate the fifteen people who were sitting at the head of the room, with the one table in the middle before them, and the two cushions to face them. Swallowing nervously, Viktor took the few steps forward, and went down to his knees on the place set for him, with Yuri joining him on his left.

"We apologize for coming so abruptly." The woman continued, "And I am sorry to not have met you personally before. I am Keiko Hashimoto. I serve as part of the House of Councilors for the Liberal Democratic Party and am the presiding President of the Japanese Skating Federation." She bowed her head as she said so, and Viktor felt obliged to return it, "I did the Japanese pronouncement at the NHK opening ceremonies. You may remember me from there."

Viktor chanced a glance to his side, but Yuri had his attention focused forward, so he looked back again as well.

"It came to our attention rather suddenly, that you have recently been released from your obligations to our counterparts in Moscow."

It hurt to hear the words, but Viktor nodded, "It's true, Madame President."

"We understand that this was an unexpected situation for you." She continued, "We apologize for taking so long to reach out to you. We had to confirm that what happened was correct before we could pursue this avenue. It would be insincere if we were to approach you while you were still skating for the RSF."

Hurt changed to confusion, but Viktor didn't dare interrupt.

"But we are all very well aware of your athletic history and your decorated status. It's been quite the treat for you to come all the way here to Hasetsu, to offer your experience and significant talents to one of our own." The President gestured across the table to Yuri, and Jiro yipped like he thought the attention was for him, which made her smile, "Katsuki Yuri..." She started, "And now, Yuri Nikiforov. It's been quite the pleasure to watch you rise so high."

"Arigatou gozaimasu." He bowed his head deeply, nearly whacking his forehead against the table in the process.

"Tell me, Nikiforov-san." The President continued, turning her eyes back to the Russian, "If not for this turn of events, how long had you planned to continue skating?"

"...I...thought about going again next year." He answered simply.

"So the Olympics were on your radar then."

"Sort of." Viktor explained, "I was conflicted. I wanted to compete, but I knew that if I did, I would be apart from Yuri and I wouldn't be able to support him as his coach, since I would be competing for Russia, a rival nation. Because of that, I had considered declining any invitation I might've gotten to represent Russia at the Winter Games, so I could be by Yuri's side."

"That's quite the thing to have to think about," The President supposed, "Turning down the chance to defend your titles as an Olympic Champion so you could help someone else become an Olympian for the first time."

"Someone from another country, too." Viktor added, "I imagine the RSF wasn't happy about the idea. I'm sure they would've preferred that I be coach to Yuri Plisetsky instead."
"Indeed. Well..." The President turned to the side, and reached her hands for a bundle that was offered by one of her large entourage. It was white, and wrapped in plastic, but Viktor couldn't tell what it was. Keiko held it in both of her hands, and looked straight at the Russian, "What if you could compete at your husband's side instead of against him?"

"...Eh?" Yuri couldn't help but utter, bringing his hands up to his mouth rather quickly. Jiro slipped from his grasp for only a second before Yuri wrangled him up again.

Viktor lifted his head in surprise, "I don't...understand. I'm sorry."

The package was raised across the table, and presented to the stunned coach, "Nikiforov-san, I would like to formally invite you to represent the Japan at the Winter Olympics, and to participate as a member of the Japanese Skating Federation to any and all future figure skating competitions, both domestic and abroad, that you see fit to attend."

He was completely stunned, eyes going from the immaculately professional woman sitting across from him to the plastic-wrapped package she was offering. He lifted his shaking hands, and took the item into his grasp, bowing his head as he saw her doing the same, and then pulled the item closer to his side of the table. Slate eyes looked aside to Yuri again, seeking some kind of explanation, like he couldn't believe the words at face value. He moved his hands then to undo the packaging, and pulled out the garment within, peeling away the protective paper that was wrapped around it. What appeared beneath it was a white mottled runner jacket, with a black zipper down the middle, a small crest for the Mizuno logo on the left, and on the right...vertically-aligned letters spelling out JAPAN in black text, next to a line gradient of red to white, with a small Japanese flag emblem to the right of that.

Viktor stared at it like it was something entirely unseen before, and he was entirely unsure what to say. Mercifully, a distraction was offered to help him take a moment to organize his chaotic thoughts.

"Yuri Nikiforov-san," The President's voice started again, "It's my privilege to offer you this invitation as well." She held a second package in her hand, and offered it across the top of the table.

Yuri was taken aback, and he looked around frantically for a pair of hands to put the puppy into. Minako was quick to notice and crouched down behind him, nabbing the pup before he had to ask. Relieved, he went back to the package, and gratefully took it with a bow of his head, "It would be my honor to represent Japan at the Winter Olympics, Madame President." He turned his eyes to where his partner was still staring at his own jacket, "Viktor?"

"...Our honor." He said, finally lifting his gaze. The reality of what was happening had finally dawned on him, "It...would be our honor to represent Japan."

Clapping immediately answered him, and the entire common room was filled with excitement.

Viktor turned his face to look at his spouse, and let go of the jacket only long enough to reach for Yuri's hand instead. To his shock, and delight, Yuri bowled him over in an excited hug, and kissed him right there in front of everyone. That just got the dogs and family going, and they cheered even louder from where they'd all been watching from the background. When Yuri finally relented and let his husband back up again, Viktor was still shocked, needing help just to sit up straight again. His face was flushed in rare shade of pink, but he managed to unfurl the jacket and slipped his arms inside it to see how it felt. He looked to Yuri again then, just to ground himself, but his eyes started to fill with tears anyway, especially since Yuri was now wearing his own jacket as well. For the first time in days though, they were happy tears, and he pulled his partner close again before they got away from him, "We're going to the Olympics...!"
Yuri put his arms over the Russian's shoulders again eagerly, holding him near, "And we're competing for the same team!"

"This is like some kind of dream..." Viktor added, lifting his head from where he'd pressed his brow to his husband's neck and shoulder, looking into those thrilled cherry-hazel eyes, "I don't know what to say..."

"Welcome to Team Japan." The President said in his place, getting the room to start quieting down again. She bowed forward again, and the entourage behind her did the same.

The two skaters pulled apart to sit properly next to each other, and they bowed in response, "Arigatou."
v-nikiforov
Viktor Nikiforov

v-nikiforov So this just happened. @y-nikiforov

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Yurio chewed idly on the end of an apple slice, scrolling through endless new comments from both skaters and fans alike. The more he read, the more unbelievable it seemed. He huffed a quiet sigh to himself and shook his head.

"Yuri, ser'ezno, čto slučilos?'"

Green eyes lifted past the edge of the phone, spotting Mikhail coming into the kitchen where Yurio was still loitering. He pulled the fork-skewered bit of apple away and gestured with that hand to the device in the other, "Viktor was offered a spot on Team Japan."

"Huh..." The elder mused to himself, reaching for the handle to the refrigerator to pull it open, "Guess he made good on his threat from last year."

"Seems so." Yurio agreed, "Maybe it was just a matter of time."

"You seem disappointed." Mikhail added, pulling out an eggnog carton...or what was left of it. He made a face at the thin line of pale yellow liquid barely clinging to the bottom, and muttered to himself about how Just because there's some left doesn't mean it's worth putting back.

"Viktor was going to be my only real competition at Nationals. It's going to be just as easy as last year, when he wasn't there either."

With aught else to do, Mikhail committed the cardinal sin of drinking from the carton; though that could be contested, considering there was only an ounce to sip from it. He stepped over towards the sink in the midst of the massive island counter, just next to where Yurio was leaning with his half-empty plate of sliced apples, "I think Viktor's Yuri is rubbing off on you. Only he would complain about something like that."

"Why would he? It's only recently he started winning Gold at all."

"He'd feel bad crushing everyone else," The elder pointed out, rinsing the plastic carton before casting it into the recycle bin, "When I was researching my nephew’s exploits before, I looked into Yuri's as well, just to see what came of Viktor's coaching methods. Yuri set a new personal best, and outclassed his competition by miles, even against a kid who beat him at Nationals by a similar berth before that. The spastic kid with the yellow and red hair from the wedding party."

"I know who you mean."

"At any rate... You may come with different mind-sets, him for guilt and you for disappointment, but you both feel the same way about these local competitions. It's too easy to win. It's an obligation, so you can go on to the competitions that matter." Mikhail went back to the fridge and started seeking
again, now that the eggnog was a lost cause, "I'd say it's a good problem to have, because it's free money in your pocket."

"I guess so." Yurio shrugged, putting his phone into his back pocket and picking up the plate with the rest of his fruit, "Still, it would've been nice to have someone around to really challenge me. I'll have to wait till Euros."

"Are you guys coming back or not?" Nikki suddenly complained, sticking her head into the kitchen from the living-room, "Or can we start it?"

"We're coming; hold your horses." Mikhail affirmed, casting his eyes back into the cold, "Damn, I really had a hankering for the nog... I dunno what to get now..." He rubbed his chin anxiously, but then waggled his fingers at the two teens, "Go on ahead...I'll be there before the title pops on the screen."

"If I hit play, we're not going back," The silver teen warned, a smug but dubious look on her face where she peered around the corner of the wall.

"Go! Play the movie! I can't pick when you're hovering!"

"I'm not even in the kitchen." Nikki teased, though finding herself corralled by the Russian Tiger as he moved out. She felt a single finger against the small of her back to push her forward, and she skipped out of its reach once she found her footing, all but dancing to her spot on the long L-couch. The spot she'd just gotten up from, with the remote and pillows and blanket, was closest to the hall, and had an extended footrest area that stuck out partly into the middle of the room. About ten feet away, at the corner of the big couch, Viktoria was already hunkered down in her own movie-watching cocoon.

Yurio parked himself directly in the middle of the two, crossing his legs as he sat back against his cushion, and pulled a blanket over his head that had been waiting for him. He pulled a big, though stiff pillow onto his lap to use like something of a table, and set his plate there to continue his slow nibble, "What are we watching anyway?"

"'Frozen.'"

The Russian Punk whipped his head around so fast that the blanket-hood fell away, and he stared at the younger girl incredulously, "You can't be serious."

Nikki was nearly dying already, unable to hold in the laughter as she burst with mirth and rolled off the end of the couch, falling to the floor with a squeak. Still, she kept laughing, even as she tried to get back into her place, "Oh my god...that...was so worth it..."

Yurio just glowered at her, "So...we're not?"

"Oh gods no," She answered, flopping back into her spot like a drunk seal, "I just wanted to see the look on your face."

"We're watching a horror thing called 'Dead Silence.'" Viktoria explained, quelling the Russian's fear of being punked a second time with the opening of some other Disney film, "I saw a trailer on YouTube and it looks pretty good."

"PAPA WE'RE STARTING." Nikki yelled, waving the remote around, "3...2...1..."

"Okay okay okay I'm here jeeze!" Mikhail rushed in, then rushed back out, hit the lights in the kitchen, came back, and finally collapsed into his section of the couch; a pair-end like the spot Nikki
was occupying, but at the end of Viktoria's side, closer to the television than the rest.

The younger teen leaned slightly towards Yurio, whispering behind her hand as the screen went dark and the 'do not duplicate' warning faded in, "One way or another, he'd make us start over if we started without him."

"But he said he wouldn't."

"That's your first mistake...believing him. At least, when it comes to movies. He says he won't make us rewind, but if we don't, he'll spend the whole movie asking questions, and we end up rewinding it to the start again anyway." She explained, "He did it to us once when we were watching one of the 'Star Wars' movies, even though he'd seen it already."

"Why would he ask questions about a movie he's already seen?"

"To make us go back to the start." Nikki snickered, then sighed, rolling her head back against the pillow behind herself, "If the first rule of Fight Club is 'never talk about Fight Club,' then the first rule of watching movies with that guy," She pointed the remote at her father, "...is never start without him."

"So what happens if you go to a theater and he steps out at the beginning?"

"We don't let him leave." Nikki huffed a quiet laugh.

"Are you two talking about me behind my back while we're all in the same room?" Mikhail wondered suddenly, glaring at the two.

"Sure are, papa."

"Yup."

Mikhail narrowed his eyes at them, but just brought up the lip of a bottle of hard apple cider he'd found, "...Proceed."

"Bože moj!" Viktor whined dramatically, throwing his arms up into the air and flopping to his back. Stretching them way above his head, he held, and then relaxed, looking up at the ceiling.

Yuri glanced over, spotting the colorful kotatsu in place of the coffee table from where he was in the kitchen, "Trouble already?"

"...All this stuff they want me to fill out..." Viktor sighed, "I've never had to fill in so much paperwork in my life. They want me to put together a resume, too...I don't even know what to put!"

"Have you ever made one before?" Yuri wondered, pouring boiling water into a ceramic teapot with two bags of oolong floating within.

"Never needed to." Viktor sulked, throwing his arms up in an arc to thrust himself back up to sitting. He stretched his right leg out, foot poking out from under the blanket that kept the heat in, "What kind of resume does an athlete even make? Especially since the JSF already knows everything about my history...it's not like I really need to impress them. I already passed their tests. I'm just doing this as a formality..." He looked down on the stack of papers just to his right, then to the MacBook Air he'd borrowed from his spouse, "It's still a hassle though."
Yuri came around the big kitchen island, carrying the ceramic teapot and two small ceramic cups. He set them down on top of the kotatsu, glancing to the left where Makkachin was lying on his back, whole body save his head under the blanket, "Where's Jiro?"

"Here." Viktor answered simply, moving a pen up to his lips and chewing the tip of it idly, eyes still on the bright screen.

Bending down, Yuri lifted the blanket, and glanced within to spot Viktor's left leg, bent at the knee, with Jiro nestled comfortably against the crook of it. One ear twitched, but the pup didn't wake up, so Yuri smiled and set the blanket down again before more heat could escape. He took his place in that same spot, wrapping the blanket over his crossed legs and around the small of his back as far as it could go, "What do you have so far?"

"The honest truth." Viktor answered, pulling back off his elbows and gesturing at the laptop so his husband could pull it around. The look on Yuri's face when he read it was enough to make the Russian self-conscious, "Perhaps it's too blunt...?"

"Maybe if you enlarge the font size, it'll take up more of the page space, and you can trick the reader into thinking there's more than there really is." Yuri answered.

Viktor Konstantinovich Nikiforov
5-78 Shounanchou, Hasetsu-shi, Saga-ken, 847-0021, Japan

Summary of Qualifications:
- Figure skater

Pertinent Experience:
- Figure skater

"You've been working on this for the last 45 minutes." Yuri went on, "I thought you'd have a little more...ahh...substance than this."

"Like I said...I've never done a resume before." The Russian whined, leaning forward and thumping his head on the hard-top of the kotatsu table. He suddenly jumped up though in revelation, nearly slamming his hands down, and scaring both woofers in the process. Makkachin was across the room in a fright, looking like he'd put his paw in a power-outlet for how frizzed he was. Jiro yelped and tumbled under the table, frantically trying to get under Yuri's side, "Ahhh I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Viktor lamented, getting up from his seat to find his own pupper while his husband calmed the one next to himself.

"Easy," Yuri whispered, lifting the heavy blanket up enough for the Akita to wiggle his head out. He lifted the pup in his hands and moved him into his lap, setting the small dog to lean his back against his stomach, paws up on the edge of the table as he looked on at the Mac, "I can tweak it for you if you want, Viktor."

"Would you? I was about to beg for the favor when I scared the ghosts out of the kids." The man answered, sticking his head up from where he'd ended up under the kitchen table with his poodle. He turned back again, patting Makkachin's head, "Will you come out now?"

Dark brown eyes gave a look like 'I will not soon forget this betrayal,' but the dog eased out from his hiding place, and Viktor followed, scooting across the hardwood floor until it changed back to carpet, and he wiggled in behind his spouse. Yuri was already typing rather quickly, and more information had been added than the Russian had ever considered mentionable in such a document.
Summary of Qualifications and Achievements:
- Internationally acclaimed Figure Skater with 16 years professional experience
- Five-Time Consecutive Gold Medalist at the World Championships, Grand Prix Final, and European Championship, with more than 50 Gold medals and 12 Silver medals at assorted (Junior and Senior level) Domestic and International ISU-recognized competitions
- Undefeated Russian National Champion for 12 straight years, 2-time consecutive Russian Junior National Champion
- Holder of 22 World Records (8 in SP, 9 in FS, 5 in Combined Total) including highest number of quadruple jumps in a single program (8) and highest score in the Short Program (122.43)
- At age 16, became the youngest male skater to ever score a perfect 6.0, with a total of 71 scores of 6.0, before the new Code of Points judging system was implemented
- Six years experience as a Choreographer with medal-winning performances to several athletes
- More than one year experience as a Coach, with credit to 6 Gold medals and 2 Silver medals

Viktor's eyes moved back and forth across the screen, widening a little more with each pass, until eventually reaching the bottom, "...It took me so long just to get 4 lines of text...4 lines I agonized over...and it took you all of 2 minutes to write all this." He said starkly, cozying up behind his partner and wrapping both arms around his sides, clasping his hands lazily in front before setting his chin on one shoulder, "You should get a Gold medal for resume writing." He teased.

Yuri huffed and shook his head, leaning back a little, "This is everything I could think of off the top of my head," He explained, resting his hands over his spouse's forearms, "I'll have to go digging into the books to find all the specifics of your timeline, so I can put it into the Experience and Training section. Even if no one ever really reads it, it should look impressive."

"It's almost as impressive as the trophy room."

"Maybe we should just tape a picture of it to a letterhead." Yuri laughed, leaning his head back, "Write in sharpie above it 'Behold My Works, Ye Mighty, and Despair.'" He suggested, moving his hands up and out in a slight arc in the air for dramatic emphasis.

"We should do that anyway." Viktor added, hugging a little tighter and nosing the side of his partner's neck.

Jiro slumped back as Yuri leaned away, and the pup flipped over in his lap, stepping up to bark once in his tiny little puppy voice to get their attention before nosing at Viktor's hands. The Russian acquiesced and ruffled the dog's ears affectionately, satisfying the pup into lying down again where he stood.

Yuri brought his hands back around, one settling on Viktor's and the other on Jiro's back, "It's been two days since the JSF signed you on and I can hardly believe it."

"Same." The silver genius nodded, pressing his nose to the shoulder in front of him, "Those few days after we got back, and I couldn't sleep because of how upset I was...and then I couldn't sleep because of how excited I became. I never realized how badly I needed something like this until it happened."

"Yeah?" Yuri turned his head slightly, rubbing one ear against his partner's hair.
"Mh." Viktor answered simply, "I told you once before that I wished I could skate forever. Now I feel like everything's been reset somehow...like I have a second chance."

Brown eyes squinted in confusion, and Yuri twisted to look at his partner more directly, "It's not like you messed things up before. Your career is legendary. Most other skaters look up to you, and watch videos of your shows like they're instructional."

"Sure, but..." The Russian's words trailed a little, and he sat upright, then back, pulling Yuri with him until he was tilted against the couch just behind himself. Blue eyes closed for a moment, then opened again and looked towards the ceiling, "I was doing all that on my own. Now I can actually share it with someone. It's not just my achievements and your achievements anymore...it's both of ours."

"I thought we were in this together already." Yuri wondered, turning his head up against his husband's chest to see him better, "Like you said last year, about being able to see the playing field from your same level, instead of from somewhere far below yours, like how I used to be."

Viktor looked down to meet that confused face, and he lifted his left hand to gently pat that raven hair, "Da, ljubovʹ moja...and I still feel that way. But now it's a little different...it's even better. We're not just standing on the podium together anymore; we're representing the same team. More than that, though...unlike in Russia, we're free to be ourselves here. When you bowled me over in front of the JSF President, I was half a second away from having a heart attack, because of how things went down with the RSF press corps. But then I remembered, she'd actually referred to you as my husband before that...and it was okay." He explained, half-inspecting the three thin pink lines on his husband's face and forehead; all that now remained of his devastation from the Final, "Up until just 2 weeks ago, I'd spent my whole life with a thorn in my side...one that my father had placed when I was just a kid. A thorn that made me scared of skating, and then scared of being good at it...and when I finally got over that, a thorn that made me nervous to love you openly when we were in St. Petersburg. I was so scared, I wasn't even aware of it...avoiding you in public was just an instinct I couldn't control. A reflex almost. But I don't have to worry about it anymore. Who cares if the RSF press doesn't want to talk to me? I'm not trying to impress them anymore."

"...That's true." Yuri agreed, relaxing and closing his eyes under his partner's soothing touch, long perfect fingers weaving through his hair like a wide-toothed comb, "The worst we ever experienced in Japan was the big misunderstanding at our wedding party, when the JSF media turned up and made it all weird for a little while."

"Misunderstanding at our wedding party...?" The Russian echoed in confusion, "What do you mean?"

"The way I went out into the rink and had Yurio yell at everyone to be quiet so I could speak...and then told everyone what the occasion was, and that they could stay or go, but that I wouldn't tolerate any criticism. Not here; not in my rink, not in my city."

"...Mhmm?"

"I realized...around the moment when I jumped on you...that the JSF media wasn't being weird about us because we'd gotten married. It was because of something so much simpler than that. Something I should've known all along...but maybe I was away from Japan too long to have that same mind-set."

"You're confusing me." Viktor said, that heart-shaped smile hiding his perplexity.

Yuri gently waved his head from side to side, then twisted his entire frame, until he was resting his side and shoulder against his partner's front, "It was typical Japanese modesty."
"Yuri."

"I'm serious!" He huffed, "They weren't reluctant to film us because of our wedding...they were reluctant to film us because they thought they were being rude to us!" He paused only for a moment as he felt Makkachin thump against his back, lying down with a haroomph just behind him suddenly. Yuri glanced over a shoulder to spot the woofer, but then looked back into his husband's bewildered face, "They showed up because of all the skaters that were around, and thought that we were setting up another impromptu skating competition, like 'Onsen on Ice,' only without the pronouncements ahead of time." He paused, thinking, "Well...maybe just not from us. By the number of people who turned up, I guess rumors spread enough to count for something. But anyway, they turned up thinking it was a public event, and then it turned out not to be. They got all gun-shy because they didn't want to intrude on our special occasion, since they hadn't been specifically invited. But when I went out there and yelled that people could stay or go, but they'd have to be nice if they stayed...the JSF media realized they could stay and were suddenly really excited about things. It was less about me telling people to not be jerks as it was the JSF realizing they had our permission to be there at all."

"...I guess we could've avoided the whole problem by inviting them in the first place." Viktor added ponderously.

"Well, it wasn't our event to invite people to. We didn't even know what was really going on until they let us into the Ice Castle. ...But, yeah...if the triplets and the rest had sent for them on purpose, it may have spared us the awkward interactions, and my jumping to conclusions unfairly."

"That's my fault." The Russian sighed, "The trouble we went through in St. Petersburg rubbed off on you a little."

"It's fine. It's how we learn." Yuri reassured, reaching up his right hand to brush the back of his fingers against the edge of his partner's chin, "And we got some really great footage from them out of the deal, so it turned out well in the end."

"We should do another photobook!" Viktor suggested, suddenly getting excited again, "Now that we're both on Team Japan, we could put together a Japanese themed gallery! I used to do photoshoots with sports and fashion media in Russia all the time, but it's been ages! You could do one too! I've no doubt that there are agencies out there just dying to put your cute face on a magazine cover."

Yuri's cute face just went bright red at the thought of it, "...I-I guess..."

"As your coach, I insist on you putting yourself out there!" The Russian went on happily, "I'll take care of all the arrangements! Mizuno will be the first! As a major sponsor of the JSF, you already wear their gear officially...why not model it for them, too!?"

"...Viktor...!"

"Maybe they'll even want pictures of me! Since I'm wearing their stuff too now!" He glomped his partner excitedly, "And they can take pics of us with the doooggsssss!"

"...V-Viktor...!"
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED THIRTY TWO

St. Petersburg, Russia
December 24
4:15PM

It wasn't entirely unexpected for there to be fanfare upon the return of the Russian Tiger to his homeland.

What was unexpected...was the sizable crowd of protesters who had shown up as well, shaming the RSF officials who were there to congratulate their Bronze medalist, with signs admonishing them for their decision to sanction their true Champion. Of course, it wasn't lost on anyone the irony of said Champion's family being the ones to accompany his Russian heir.

Yurio pulled his hood up and wedged his thumbs under the studded straps of his backpack, sunglasses and designer black surgical mask on his face, as though he somehow thought he could still sneak by unnoticed. His silver-haired entourage was enough to give him away even if his own odd sense of style didn't. As the group filtered out of the connecting hall into the arrivals terminal, they slowed down, and Mikhail set a hand on the blonde's shoulder to get his attention. Yurio glanced back, turning on a heel, and pulled his sunglasses down just enough to glance over them, "What?"

"I know you have a thing about avoiding your fans in public places, but please don't try to sneak off like you do when Yakov is around." The elder asked, "The faster we all get through the throng, the faster we can leave."

Nikki and Viktoria looked around the terminal with new eyes, gaping at every inch of it. The younger of the two hooked a finger to her father's right coat pocket, "This isn't as bad as you made it sound, papa."

"Don't let the new paint fool you," He explained, "The same people work here as did in the old terminal. They'll still rip you off if you aren't careful. That's why I keep money here in Russia and rent a car instead of exchanging or taking a taxi."

"Let's just get this over with." Yurio said grudgingly, "Staying away for an extra week didn't help anyone, especially after the RSF announced their sanctions on Viktor. I know what's waiting out there. The best I can hope for is that the protesters leave me out of it."

"They're not here to protest you, Yuri." Mikhail pointed out, "Don't let them get you down."

"I just want to get to my place and see Potya. This drama that the RSF stirred up has nothing to do with me, but I'm still going to get booed for whatever interactions I have with them."

"Damned if you do, damned if you don't." Viktoria chimed in, "Let's just go. No sense delaying the inevitable. Gotta just get through it, like ripping off a band-aid."

Yurio pushed his sunglasses back up his nose and let his hair fall in front of them, lowered his head, and started marching off towards the baggage claim area. When all of their things were gathered and settled onto the luggage trolley, they made their way to the 'choke point.'

The volume of the fan gathering had slowly increased as they got closer, like the growing hum of a
beehive. When Yurio finally stuck his head through the last doorway separating him from the crowd, he braced, feeling the sudden roar like a wave hitting him. He raised his hand politely to acknowledge them but pressed on without lingering, spotting the handful of RSF officials that were waiting for him just a bit further down the corridor. Beyond them, though, standing on the outdoor portion of the big glass windows, he could see the protesters. There were police and airport security keeping them there, and a rope barricade to keep them all contained, but it still made the teen nervous.

"Papa, do we have to go out that way...?" Nikki asked anxiously, "They're all so mad about what happened to Cousin Viktor..."

"No, sweetie, we're going a different way." Mikhail explained quietly, "Once Yuri's done getting his prizes from these skating suits, we'll be going to the parking garage. They can't follow us there."

Stepping up to those officials was slightly nerve-wracking for the Rozovskys though. Yurio went ahead of them, looking back briefly before pulling his sunglasses, mask, and hood off, but then went forward on his own. There was an obvious air of tension that everyone could feel; the officials being unsure how Viktor Nikiforov's own uncle and cousins would react, if at all, and Yurio's as well, given his storied history of defending his older counterpart.

Don't start yelling at them, Yuri, Mikhail thought to himself, watching the young skater getting his handshake and greeting, as though everyone was pretending the Russian Legend didn't exist at all. Don't invite trouble by making Viktor's problem yours, too. I know it can be tempting to want to say your piece like you did last year, but this isn't the time or place.

Dozens of photos were taken by official media and fans alike, with Yuri's Angels front and center to get the best shots. To Mikhail's surprise, and relief, the Russian Punk made it through the entire encounter without saying much more than Spasibo, and accepted the various gifts that were awarded to him for his placement at the Final.

I wouldn't have gotten on the podium at all if it hadn't been for what Viktor did, Yurio thought bitterly, These people want to congratulate me for winning Bronze, but they want to pretend Viktor had no hand in it. They can't have it both ways. ...I really hate this. It feels like a pity party.

The one thing that seemed to perk his spirits though was a certificate that was given to him by the senior ranking official; a ratification that one of Putin's rehabilitated Amur Tigers was being named Potya after Yurio's own cat. The teen was stunned, but kept looking through the papers, seeing numerous photos of the infant feline, and an invitation to attend the creature's release into the wilds of Siberia once it was time. Though it would easily be two years before that would happen, it was the one thing that Yurio had been given that he smiled about, and he did his last photo op with one of the tiger's rehabilitators before finally being released from his obligations.

Mikhail and the girls quickly caught up with the teen as he started stepping away, and within a few more minutes, seemed mostly free from the fanfare. They each breathed a sigh of relief to be away. It was even better when they finally got to their rental and were driving away from the airport entirely, leaving the stress of the protest behind.

Yurio watched the city come into view quietly, occasionally looking down to his lap where he kept the folder of Potya Tiger's photos. His silence, however, was becoming something of an oddity.

"You okay, Yuri?" Mikhail wondered, glancing back at the blonde in the rearview mirror, "I thought you'd be bouncing off the walls over that last gift."

The two girls looked back at Yurio to await his answer, but he just kept his eyes down for a few
moments.

"Yuri?" Nikki asked, setting her hands down on the empty middle back seat, and leaned down to try and catch a glance of the Russian's gaze.

"Sorry." Was all he managed to say.

"About what?"

"Putting all of you through that. Maybe it would've been better if it was just me, and I met you guys again after, but dragging you through the middle of it felt like I'd brought Viktor back with me."

Yurio explained, "It was completely different from how I'd been met before by the RSF. It felt forced."

"Well," Mikhail hummed, "The excitement of the Final died down a few days after the end of the event. It might've been a little forced because it was a really late party. The protesters outside didn't help...even though a bunch of them had signs saying they were happy for your achievement, even if they weren't there specifically for you."

"That didn't make me feel better at all." The Tiger sighed, leaning his head back against the window, "Nationals is going to be so tense now. Between the protests, and the boycott...it'll be a wonder if anyone in the audience is actually going to be there to support those of us who are competing."

"The RSF really underestimated Viktor's fans' loyalty. An insult against him is like an insult against them all." The elder agreed, "The fact that they worded the sanction the way they did, and their expectation for Viktor to retire after this season anyway...only for him to troll them by joining the JSF instead...I mean, those jackets that him and Yuri were wearing were the Japanese Olympic Team jackets, not just JSF gear. Wearing it means they're both going to represent Japan in PyeongChang. If Viktor medals, even if he doesn't say or do anything specifically against the RSF, it'll still be like he's rubbing their noses in it."

"I wonder what would happen if Viktor or Katsudon had to compete in Russia after all this." Yurio questioned, "Like Rostelecom, or if some even next year gets scheduled in Russia."

"With any luck, by the time that happens, all this will have died down." Mikhail hoped.

"When are you and Viktor going to start talking to each other again anyway?"

The elder shrugged immediately, "No clue. I had hoped that we could sort things out when he came to Moscow, but that's obviously not going to happen now. Maybe after the move to Hasetsu."

"No one but Yakov knows about that," Yurio sighed, "I can't remember if he told Lilia. I don't think he has...so I'll have to tell her when we all get to Moscow. She was already kind of annoyed with the idea of me hanging out with a former ballerina as it was."

"It's not like Minako has taught you anything at this point." Mikhail shrugged again, "And Lilia was your choreographer before, but now Viktor is. Minako's basically just there to make sure you do the work."

"Taking dance and ballet lessons is still part of training. It's not like we practice on the ice all the time. There's stuff we do in a dance hall."

"I know." The elder glanced up at the mirror, "It just sounds like you're really worried about what she might think when she finds out."
"...I am, kind of. Yakov called her in just for me, and I lived with her for almost as long as Viktor was in Hasetsu before last year's Final." Yurio turned his gaze out the window, "Maybe I just haven't shown her my appreciation enough. I don't want her to think I'm switching up trainers because her and Yakov weren't good enough. Yakov understands...but Lilia doesn't know my history. She only knows what she saw with her own eyes."

"So we'll do something special for her in Moscow."

"Is Okukawa coming to Moscow now, too?" The teen wondered, leaning forward to stick his head between the two front seats, "Since Kastudon won't be alone in Osaka anymore, Okukawa won't have to feel bad leaving."

"I haven't asked her." Mikhail explained, his tone a little dour compared to the moment before, "She talks about it like nothing has changed though, so I'm guessing it hasn't."

"She wouldn't just straight-up ask you to buy her a ticket to Moscow, pipaw." Viktoria pointed out, "She doesn't come across as someone who feels that entitled, but she isn't that rich either. She wouldn't be able to afford a last-second ticket like you frequently do. The ring you got her is probably worth more than everything she owns combined."

"Mmmhhhh, you're right..." He nodded, slouching a little in his seat, "But I feel bad putting her on the spot. If she's happy going to Japanese Nationals with Yuri and Viktor, then I don't want to make her feel like she has to turn me down."

"Or that she accepts, which would mean she'd be reneging on her long-standing original plans." Yurio added, sitting back in his seat again like normal, "I guess it doesn't matter. I was just wondering."

Hasetsu, Saga, Japan
December 25
12:51PM

"TANJOUBI OMEDETTOU!"

Streamers flew and party crackers popped, sending bits of colored paper all over the room.

Viktor put on an awkward but brave face, though it was just a mask to hide his distaste for the occasion.

*I turn 29 today. One more year until I'm 30 and my life is over as I know it.*

He clapped his hands stiffly where he'd been put at the edge of his own kitchen table, with all manner of family and friends from around the city standing all around him. Yuri stood just behind him, hands on his shoulders once he'd finished clapping as well, and they each looked aside as Hiroko came back from the kitchen with a big cake, sparklers fizzing fire over a pair of difficult-to-see wax numbers sitting in the middle.

When the cake was set down, and the sparklers ran their course, Viktor spotted the two numbers set into the cake icing.

18

"...I...what? Eighteen?" He quirked a brow, "You guys are a couple years off, like you grabbed the
numbers in the tray before the ones you should actually have here."

"Just go with it." Yuri whispered.

The Russian wasn't sure what to do, so he just continued to stare ahead awkwardly.

"This is your spirit age, right?" Hiroko mused, "You turn 18 every year. Old enough to do the things you want, but too young to be responsible for it."

"...Oh!" The Russian clapped excitedly over that, tilting his head up against his husband's chest where the man still stood behind him, "That's because you're the responsible one."

The crowd laughed, and Yuri blushed, "I guess so..."

"It's probably safer that way." Minako mused, "I'll bet he filled out most of your paperwork from the JSF, right?"

Viktor smiled, "He knows more about me than I do, sometimes."

"Who better to fill out all that stuff than Viktor's biggest fanboy?" Yuko added, leaning slightly towards the ballerina.

"So you're really ready to just toss your Russian citizenship out the window?" Takeshi wondered, watching as Yuri's mom started taking the burnt-out candles from the cake so she could start cutting slices from it, "Japan won't let you keep it for long. They don't accept dual-citizenships."

"Russia will always be where I came from." Viktor explained, watching the blunt knife go into the cake and out again, making triangular wedges through the circular shape, "But beggars can't be choosers, either. My citizenship never really meant all that much to me anyway though."

"You did call us citizens of the world when we went to Barcelona last year," Yuri added, idly rubbing his fingers against his partner's shoulders where he still had his hands on them, "It's just paperwork to you, isn't it?"

"It's something other people care about." He agreed.

"And it's not like you can't go back to Russia." The younger man went on, "It just...might be awkward if and when you do."

Cake wedges were being pulled from the main body and set onto paper plates, then passed around the gathered. Given the small size of the kitchen table, most people chose to stand. The slow-cooker was at full capacity on the other side of the room, with a brew of red-purple mulled wine within it; enough for everyone to get a taste of the Russian's handiwork. Hiroko went to ladle out a few mugs, setting them on the counter for those old enough to imbibe to collect.

"Maybe just for a little while." Viktor eventually agreed, a mug of mulled wine being handed to him. He held it with one finger hooked into the looped handle, setting it on the table before reaching his other hand up to get his husband's attention. Yuri leaned down to hear the whisper, "Since things with papa are so much better, maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing to go visit him once in a while. He's willing to put up with some of our antics, but we can be merciful on him and keep the peace by not drowning him in our PDA. Right?"

Yuri gave a nervous smile, "I think it's something we should talk about later."

Viktor blinked at him, a bit surprised, but then nodded, "...Okay."
"To Viktor!" Toshiya held his cup up, Hiroko doing the same next to him, as well as Mari and the rest.

*Kanpai!*

"Thanks everyone for coming." Yuri said, waving at the group from the front door as they started heading home. With the house finally empty again, Yuri closed the door and went inside, finding his partner still lording over his loot pile like the Russian Dragon he'd once been called.

"Maybe I should've let everyone celebrate last year," Viktor hummed, "It feels totally different here than back in Russia."

"How so?" Yuri wondered, finding his way to his spot on the couch.

"Remember in Bacelona when you asked what I wanted for a gift, and I told you that we don't really celebrate before the day?"

"Sure."

"In Russia, there's a superstition that if you celebrate a birthday early, you won't live to see the *actual* day." Viktor explained, "Then there's all the pageantry with pulling ears up to the number of years you've been around, which can get painful if people pull too hard... And the *second* birthday if you survive a life-threatening event, so you celebrate *not dying.*" He went on, sipping the last of his mulled wine, then sitting back in his own corner of the couch, "Yakov used to toy with me about my dreams on the eve of my birthday because it was the same eve as Christmas, since legend says those dreams can be prophetic. Christmas, birthdays, Epiphany, even New Year..."

"Did he know you have a habit of predicting the future even outside of dreams?" Yuri teased, reaching for the box that contained a pair of beer steins from Minako, and looked at the photos of them emblazoned on the outside.

"Sure. That's why he was glad my birthday and Christmas were at the same time, so if there was any kind of bad dream to be had, I had fewer opportunities for them to come true."

"Were they always ominous or something?"

"Usually." Viktor mused, shrugging at the idea of it, "Can't help what I dream about. Would be nice if I could."

"Did you dream anything especially strange last night...?"

The silver legend set his empty cup down on the coffee table and pulled back, setting a finger on his lip as he tilted his head in recollection, "...I can't actually remember!"

"Maybe that's a good thing." Yuri shrugged, setting the stein box down before he rose to stand again, "Wait here a minute. There's one more present for you."

"Oh?" Viktor's interest was piqued immediately, and a devious look crossed his face, "Something you couldn't show me when everyone was here?"

The younger man just made a face and squeezed by, "Maybe. Or I forgot about it until now. Or it was something special that I only want you to see. Who knows?"
"You don't forget things so easily, my love."

"Just wait here."

Blue eyes watched carefully as Yuri made his way towards the stairs. Makkachin followed him up, but Jiro just flopped on the hardwood floor in front of the first one. Viktor lowered his arm over the edge of the arm-rest, rubbing his fingers together to get the pup's attention, "Jiro, come-"

Fuzzy triangular ears perked up, and the puppy turned his head. With nothing else to do, he trotted over to the Russian, getting a head rub before finding that hand sneaking under his belly to lift him up. He found himself in the man's lap, and looked up with those dark, almost-black eyes.

"Don't worry. One day you'll be able to go up those stairs even faster than Makkachin." Viktor assured, "That day will come faster than should be legally allowed. You don't want to be an old people too soon, right?"

Jiro tilted his head.

"...Or an old dog maybe? Nah, you'll always be a puppy at heart. Even when you've got grey on your snout and you move slower than you used to. Always believe yourself to be young and you'll never feel down."

Stubby puppy legs perched onto the Russian's chest as Jiro stood up, snuffling curiously at the man's face.

"Oh no. You can probably smell the wine on me still. You're a bit too young for that though."

The pup turned his head suddenly, hearing the sound of feet coming down the stairs again. Viktor looked over as well, and the two pairs of eyes watched carefully as Yuri came back with Makkachin, carrying a blender-sized box in his hands. Of course, as the man retook his place on the couch, crossing his legs under himself, his face was already an endearing shade of pink.

"My my, this must be interesting if you're already flushed before I even know what it is." Viktor teased, turning to cross his legs and face the younger figure, "Let's see it." He held his hands out. Jiro turned in his lap to watch.

Yuri kept the box to himself for the moment though, eyes wandering to look at everything in the room except his spouse, "...Ah...well, uhmm..." He stammered, fingers curling around the paper-wrapped edges of the box, "It...it took me a long time to find this." He went on, slightly more sure of himself but not entirely, "I could hardly believe how many different kinds there were. I didn't even know where to start, or what version you might like better." His arms went up to express his incredulousness, "Some designs were absolutely horrifying!"

Viktor swiped the box while Yuri had his hands up, which only made Yuri's face get redder. The Russian gave an inquisitive look, and held the box up to his ear, shaking it to hear if anything inside would make a sound. Nothing did, however. He grinned and set the box in front of his crossed ankles, in the small space of about two feet between himself and Yuri's legs, "You were saying?"

Yuri leaned back to slouch against the arm-rest behind him, "...Uh...well... Y-Yeah..." He eyeballed the Russian's fingers as Viktor toyed at the corners of the box.

"Nervous?"

He just slapped his hands against his face to hide himself, "Just open it. I can hardly stand it."
“Hmmm... Yuri, what did you get for me...?” Viktor wondered in half a sing-song voice. The first tear of wrapping paper resonated around the room, and those slate eyes got a first tease of what might be hidden underneath.
Yuri could hear the paper ripping, and the box being turned around as the wrapping was peeled away. But, the more he could hear Viktor quietly snickering to himself, the more he could feel his face getting hot against the palms of his hands, each passing second making him more red than before.

"Wow~!"

His knees came up then, and Yuri pressed the back of his hands against them.

What have I done? Can't go back now. What was I thinking...!? I'll never live this down...!

When he heard the sound of the box itself being opened, and the flimsy plastic shell that held the item within, Yuri parted two of his fingers to look through the gap and see what was happening. What he saw, however, just made him quickly close those fingers together again.

"Yuri~"

"Don't judge me."

"YUUURIIII~!" Viktor said again, "You'll never get to see my reaction to this if you're too busy trying to hide yours from me!"

He just shook his head back and forth, hands remaining firmly clamped to his face, "I shouldn't have done this. I regret everything."

"Why not?" Viktor laughed, "I kind of planted the idea in your head. I'm really surprised you went through with it this quickly though. I thought I'd introduce the concept to you myself. In time, anyway..."

Despite how red his face had become, Yuri couldn't bear to keep his hands up anymore. He parted fingers on both hands so he could see with both eyes, and spotted his husband closely examining the item in his grasp.

"I can't help but wonder though."

"Eeep!" Yuri hid again.

"Why did you get this one?"

"I-Istheresomethingwrongwithit!?"

"Wrong?" Viktor laughed at the idea, "Of course not. But I already know what kind of options you had. There are dozens of different kinds. I'm curious why you picked this one." He moved to set the plastic parts of the box and packaging aside, then stood up, setting Jiro onto the floor before tossing himself into his partner's corner, wedging himself up against the man rather dramatically, "Yuri~!"

The jostle forced his hands away, and Yuri found himself staring straight at the business end of the present he'd gotten for his more-experienced partner. His face practically glowed with embarrassment, "V-Viktor!"
"So?"

Exasperated, and his face hurting, Yuri finally dropped his hands to his lap, and confronted the rather odd thing he'd brought into their home. Though he avoided looking at it directly, he could see it out the corner of his eye as he looked to his partner, "...I-I...thought it looked the safest."

"...Safest?" Viktor echoed, confused, turning his head to look at the item, sticking his finger into the soft, squishy, opaque-white shapely-tipped end of it, "Is there a bear trap inside that I need to be worried about?"

"You'd be willing to check by sticking your finger into it?"

"Absolutely. If it gets you to laugh about it." The Russian nudged his left arm against his spouse's side, "So? Why is this the safest one?"

Yuri nervously rubbed his hands together in front of his chest, "Ahh... Well..." His words trailed, and it didn't help when Viktor pulled up from where he'd been, turned around to face him, and dropped the odd item straight across his lap as he pulled both of his legs around his waist.

"Bože moj, posmotri na sebja." The silver legend teased, leaning down over his partner's chest, wedging his arms under the man's back and temporarily hiding the object with his body in the process, "Does this piece of plastic intimidate you that much?"

"...I got it because you said you wanted one... I...don't know that I ever would gotten one for myself if I was on my own."

"Hmm..."

"But...of all the different kinds I saw online..." Yuri continued, nervously reaching for the chip-can-sized tube of clear plastic that was hidden under his partner's chest, grasping it hesitantly and finally pulling it out into the open, looking at it where he held it over the Russian's back instead, "...I thought...it looked the most benign, I guess? The end is a neutral design...not male or female specifically... There were some options I found that were just crazy-looking. Like the top would be shaped and painted to look like a zombie or a vampire's mouth. Stuff that looked like it would hurt. I...don't understand why people would want to cause pain to each other."

"It's a kink."

"I know." He sighed, relaxing a little under his husband's weight, and finally getting the courage to look at him directly. He let go of the toy from his right hand, keeping hold of it in the left as he ran his free fingers through silver hair, "Not one of mine though."

"It was still rather brave of you to buy something like this." Viktor nudged his head back towards the toy, "I didn't think you would."

"You...ah... Well, you were in something of an extreme despair there for a few days?" Yuri attempted to explain, feeling where his partner's frame was moving a bit upwards against his own, until Viktor was more over him than before, and was looking down at him from above, "I thought that maybe if I did something extremely unexpected...that I could give you some relief, even if only for a little while... It broke my heart to see you fall apart over those few days...especially at the restaurant..." He went on, not really noticing how Viktor had pulled his arms out from under his back, moving them up to rest his elbows on the armrest on either side of his head, "Originally I was going to show it to you as soon as it got here, but by the time it showed up, the JSF had already done their bit and you were okay again."
"So you saved it as a birthday present." Viktor surmised, pressing in close, even though his distracted husband still hadn't clued in to what he was trying to do, "Somehow you managed to keep it secret for a whole week, avoiding my suspicion that you'd done something this surprising." He lowered down, speaking the words quietly against his husband's ear, "Where did you hide it all this time?"

Yuri tilted his head back a little, feeling lips against the side of his neck, "...B-Behind...the bag of toilet-paper rolls...under the sink."

The silver Russian gave a push with his hips, "How resourceful. But..." He kissed his way down that pale neck, and traced the tip of his tongue all the way back up again, rising a bit onto his knees so he could look straight down into his partner's eyes, "You do realize we have to try it out now, right?"

A nervous smile answered, and Yuri nodded, "H-happy birthday...?"

"Mh...it's going to be. You're going first."

"Eh?"

Viktor grinned, lowering down again until he found a kiss. He started pulling his arms back, folding them against his sides as his hands came over his partner's shoulders, chest, and lower, "I have every intention..." He explained against those lips, "...of using this..." Fingers snuck under the edge of the younger man's sweater, feeling skin just underneath, "...new toy on you." He pulled just barely away from the kiss then, looking into those nervous eyes with a sultry gaze of his own, "Rather...I'm going to watch you use it on yourself."

"...EH?"

"I'll help you get started." The Russian went on, smiling excitedly as deft fingers undid the button and zipper on the front of his husband's jeans, "I'll show you how to use it."

Yuri just made a face at that, "As though it's not obvious how it works..."

"Oh~? So you can do it on your own?"

"...I knew I'd regret saying that as soon as I opened my mouth..." The younger man lamented sarcastically, but then gave a nod, and watched his husband pull back a little bit with an even more excited smirk on his face, if it was possible. Yuri picked himself up slightly on his elbows to lift his hips, and his partner yanked his jeans away, tossing them over the back of the couch. As he settled back down again, hips wedging down into the niche between his spouse's thighs, his legs went back around the Russian's waist, and Viktor went right back to his teasing.

Warm hands went under Yuri's sweater, feeling for skin up the younger man's chest and around his sides. He could feel the plastic rim of the toy in his husband's hands where Yuri had slid both arms over his shoulders, hugging around his back to keep him close. Through nothing but a thin layer of black elastic fabric, Viktor could tell his antics were starting to have their desired effect. It wouldn't be long before he could have his real fun. He slid his right hand down the front of his partner's chest and stomach, until he could feel that fabric and the bulge it kept hidden, using his fingers to rub and tease at it. Yuri hissed a breath when he felt it, drawing away from the deep kiss they'd been in the middle of, but Viktor didn't quiet let him go, nibbling lightly on the lower lip. He moved down to his favorite place on that pale neck, just under one ear, as Yuri tilted his head back, gasping as fingers became more determined further down.

Those kisses on his neck slowly started moving down though. Yuri could barely feel them through the fabric of his sweater, but it was as obvious as anything where Viktor was going, especially as he
started scooting back on the couch to make room for himself. The warmth and wet of licks and kisses returned as the Russian got below the rim of his shirt, and Yuri tilted his head back against the armrest behind him, closing his eyes to savor the feeling he knew was coming. The tease of lips nibbling against fabric was enough to make him breathe a vocal sigh, and when that barrier was pulled away, the feeling of wet heat made Yuri’s frame go completely limp.

It was just the beginning though; kisses and nibbles from tip to root, the tactile difference between a lick with the tip of a tongue or the flat of it, the tugs on bits of loose skin, and eventually, the full feeling of a mouth around the whole of it. Viktor didn't spend too much time there though...only enough to get that shaft of flesh fully at attention. When it was ready, the Russian half-abandoned it, giving only a light massage with his left hand as the right went seeking into the packaging again, looking for the lubricant that came with their new toy. Finding it, he flicked the cap open, and tipped the bottle upside down...only for nothing to come out.

Yuri shook his head and gave a quiet laugh, setting the canister aside and taking the bottle instead, unscrewing the cap, peeling away the small paper-foam cap that sealed the contents, and then replaced the lid. Handing it back, he saw that Viktor had already taken the toy up as well, and was all-too-happy to start dribbling the liquid all over it.

"You ready?" The Russian teased, setting the bottle aside and using a finger to spread it around, moving the clear liquid over every nook and cranny of the toy's wide tip. He held it out in offering, watching for every micro-expression to cross his husband's anxious face.

"Ah...y-yeah..." Yuri answered nervously, reaching for the foot-long tube of clear plastic, and then for himself. He could feel those slate eyes on him like a heat-seeking missile, watching the movement of every finger, setting the drip of a bit of excess lube as it fell from the toy to his own skin. The moment of truth was on him though...and he placed the tip of his member against the 'mouth' of the toy.

Viktor moved in closer again, retaking his place from earlier with his thighs pressed tight against his partner's hips, hands sliding down the bare legs coming around both sides of his waist. He rubbed his thumbs against the edge of that course hairline, and watched intently with nearly-unblinking eyes as one...then two...then three inches of his husband's flesh went inside the clear tube.

Yuri barely managed to get it half-way down before pulling it away again, "Ahhhh it's cold inside...!" He whined dramatically.

"You have to keep using it." Viktor mused, putting a finger on the capped tip and giving a nudge to make it go down again, "Friction makes it warm up."

True to form, a few more hesitant drags on the canister, and the soft, squishy insides were as warm as Yuri's skin, and as wet as his husband's mouth from a moment before. His face was flushed, and each pull on the toy made him gasp aloud, all to Viktor's extreme interest.

"How does it feel?" The Russian wondered. Though he knew full-well what it was like, hearing Yuri say the words was what he wanted.

"...D-different...from what I'm used to..." The younger man started, all the while raising and sinking the tube over himself, "...Str-raight...instead of curved... I-It feels good, but I can t-tell it's...not real... It's n-not you..." He dropped his head back again, almost unaware that his hips were starting to move, pressing up into the tube as he held it slightly above himself.

Viktor could feel it though, since it was causing friction against himself as well. He smirked to himself and leaned forward, pressing in even closer as he set his left hand to the armrest against the
side of his partner's head, moving to his favorite place on Yuri's neck again. He could feel the
movement of the clear fleshlight against his chest with each pull, and Yuri's knuckles where he held
it, even through the t-shirt still cover him. Kisses moved from neck to ear to cheek, then to lips, and
just as he pressed there, he pushed his hips against the man under him.

Yuri became wise to the feeling rather quickly, and locked his elbows and wrists, holding the
canister in place while his husband's firm but easy thrusts pushed his own hips up, and his member
into the tube as a result. The wet noise of his skin moving in and out of the toy was as arousing as
each vocal breath and needy whine. As the Russian pressed his forehead to Yuri's cheek, trying to
catch his breath even as his pressure below was getting more urgent, Yuri huffed a laugh, "Y-you
want to try? I'll hold it..."

"Don't change anything..." Viktor told him flatly, right hand coming up briefly to brush a knuckle
against his partner's cheek, then went down, vanishing between their bodies, "Hold firm..."

"Eh?"

A quick movement, and the silver Russian was free, fumbling in that closed space for the right path
forward. Yuri felt him almost immediately, prodding at the base of himself, sliding forward and
trying desperately to get into the tube with him. A few slips, and then a guiding hand to help, and
Yuri was overwhelmed by the tightness of two shafts sharing the same small space, with Viktor
going in as deeply as he could. Yuri could feel himself almost being squeezed out as the tip of his
partner's shaft surpassed him inside the toy, but the Russian's words made him try harder to hold his
ground, and he forced his way back inside.

Eyes were locked then, and Viktor smiled, impressed, "And now...?"

"Nhh...it's...so tight..."

The silver legend moved then, sliding back and then forward again, every inch squeezing past only
by the grace of the lubricant. As the head of his own member slipped by, Viktor could sense that
Yuri had managed to get all the way in, but when he started pushing back inside as well, the tip
moved right past and pushed further, right to the farthest inside reaches of the toy...until the whole
thing started to slip off of them. Viktor cupped his hand against the capped end, and pushed it back
down again, freeing up his partner's hands to go around his back again.

"...My hands are too slippery..." Yuri sighed, "I can't keep hold of the thing with both of us trying to
fit..."

"You'll learn how to hold it." The Russian whispered, grunting a breath against his partner's shoulder
as he slid down and up again with his hips. He could feel Yuri's legs clamping down around him,
arms hugging a little tighter, and each new slippery thrust drove the younger man closer to the end.
With the exceptional tightness and his own flesh sliding against his less-experienced partner, Viktor
supposed Yuri could finish sooner than usual. He wasn't wrong. Two more minutes of pressure and
pleasure, and the younger man was crying out, body shaking and fitting from the intensity of the
climax. A hot-spot manifested in the tube, and Viktor could feel it as he continued on, albeit slower.
He found his own release just moments before Yuri slipped out, still quivering against him.

Every square inch of his skin tingled and felt tight, but Yuri still went limp under his husband's
weight. He managed to slide his hands up the man's back, fingers on the right weaving through damp
silver hair. They took a few moments to catch their breath, heaving against each other's lips as they
tried to fit a few light kisses between gasps.

"Well...you're right at least about one thing..." Viktor huffed, pulling the toy off himself to let it slide
into the gap between Yuri's side and the back of the couch, "This would have definitely cheered me up if the JSF thing hadn't happened."

Yuri turned his head and kissed his husband's cheek, holding him close as he went on trying to catch his breath, "...Th-that's...good to hear..."

"There's so much we can do with this thing." The Russian went on, pulling his head up just enough to see his partner's reddened face, "We should go again when we've had a minute." He said excitedly, gently rubbing his bare, spent limb against the one just under him.

Yuri just felt his legs flop where they were still pinned between Viktor's legs and sides, "...I'm...going to need more than a minute."
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED THIRTY FOUR

After a long flight to Russia, it wasn't unrealistic for the troupe of four to call it an early night...and then rise early as well. It was well before dawn when Yurio was wide awake. In the Superior Suite of the Lotte Hotel and Resort, he was able to sneak out of the bedroom space, and close the sliding door behind him to avoid waking anyone else up while he spent his conscious hours in the lounge-like front room. He dragged the blanket from his fancy roll-away bed with him, curling up in it on the curved grey couch in front of the big screen television. With the t.v. propped up on the wall between the lounge room and the bedroom, Yurio decided against turning it on, in case the sound system reverberated within. Instead, he toyed on his phone.

To his right, a set of three huge windows, but through the sheer white curtains, it was still pitch as night outside. Even with St. Isaac's Square directly below, light coming in was sparse. Yurio's phone showed a time of 5:23AM, which more annoyed him than anything.

"With the alarm the old man set, it'll be 3 hours before anyone else starts to wake up. I don't think I can go back to sleep tho-"

The door he'd just come through slid aside unexpectedly, and the very old man he'd just thought about was stepping through. Mikhail looked a bit hazy, but had been awake at least long enough to stumble into the bedroom-attached bathroom suite to grab the bathrobe and start tying it around himself before coming out. He quietly slid the door closed behind him again, leaving his girls to sleep as long as they could.

"You can't sleep either?" The teen dared to wonder, quietly.

Mikhail took a few sluggish steps forward, yawning behind one wrist until he got to the arm-chair between the television and the window closest to that corner of the room. He slumped into it, and then rather dramatically turned his head towards the teen and uttered only two sleepy words, "Dad powers."

Green eyes blinked at the man incredulously, "...O...kay...?"

Another yawn, and Mikhail slid down slightly where he sat, turning his head to look around the dimly lit room, looking for where he knew the coffee maker was set up, "You're one of mine now, right?" He wondered idly, standing up, pushing himself off the chair with a hand on each arm-rest, "If I woke up, it's cuz something's wrong. It's obviously not the girls..." He thumbed back at the two sliding doors leading to the bedroom as he passed the couch Yurio was huddled on, "So that leaves you and Sergio...but we already took care of his problems before we left Canada."

"Did you have a weird sense about him too? Is that how you knew about his car problem?"

"A sense...and an email. Mostly the email...not unlike yours. You really are one of mine. The girls email me too when there's something wrong but they don't want to say it out loud." The silver elder explained, "Shine a light over here, would you? I can't see much."

Yurio turned on the flashlight app on his phone, and set the camera towards the wall behind the couch. Within seconds, Mikhail was able to find the light switch for the room, and moved the sliding switch to half-brightness, letting him see without it being too bright. The skater pulled his phone back and turned the flashlight off, returning to his reading of his Instagram feed. He could hear the sound
of the coffee maker turning on, and water starting to sputter as it heated and dripped down into the clear pot beneath the spout, but not the sound of bare feet on the carpet as Mikhail came back around.

"It was your idea to come here before going back to your apartment. Even though you said you wanted to see Potya right away, you changed your mind. I'm just curious if everything's okay. You're up shockingly early."

Yurio stared at his phone, but wasn't really looking at it. He pulled his arms and hands back within the warmth of the blanket, and shook his head lightly, "I wouldn't be able to bring Potya here. I'd rather not go back, see her, and then have to leave again for the night. When I see Potya next, I want it to be the last time I return to that place after leaving her behind."

"Yeah, it's a little harder to convince a hotel's managers to let us keep a cat in the room when there's no advanced warning. At least, in Moscow, they already know she's going to be there, so I could pay in advance for the pet insurance." Mikhail agreed, "But I get this weird feeling that your cat isn't the only reason you've delayed our trek by a day."

"My mom is there." The teen said simply, "The guy that checks on Potya while I'm away says she turned up yesterday when he was making his rounds. I got the text while we were taking a break after getting into town. I...wasn't ready to deal with her."

"You think she'll still be there when we turn up?"

"Practically guaranteed." Yurio sighed, dropping to his side in the blanket bundle, "When she comes back from one of her drunken benders, she sticks around to recover for a day or two, then leaves again. Usually she sleeps the whole time, but I don't think she'll sleep through us coming in and me moving out."

"What if you went in on your own just to get your things and Potya, and leave the rest? I can replace what you can't bring..." Mikhail wondered, "Or is there a lot of stuff you can't leave behind?"

"...I can't get it all in one trip. It's not a lot, but it's more than I can carry myself. I'll need at least one extra set of hands. One for my stuff, the other for Potya and her stuff." The blonde explained, feeling an upset starting in his stomach over the thought of it all, "...I can live without the rest."

"That shouldn't be too much trouble. I'll go in with you."

"...Mh..."

Mikhail looked at Yurio carefully, but his eyeballing wasn't returned. For the moment, he left the teen alone, stepping back to find the coffee he'd started making. With a few minutes of silence as he fixed his cuppa, he hoped it was enough for the teen to decompress from the things he'd said. Mikhail took a seat at the end of the long curved grey couch, and pulled his ankle over the opposite knee as he leaned back, "We'll go after breakfast. Get it over with, so you have all day to be with Potya and forget about the rest."

"You're not going to make me talk about my relationship with my mom?"

The elder paused a moment, sipping at the brew while he thought on his answer. He drew a breath and shook his head, "You don't have one. You had your sport, your grandpa, Viktor, and Yakov. Your mother was little more than an egg donor."

Yurio gaped at the older man, and pushed up slightly onto one elbow.
"I think I’ve said it before...but if I haven’t, then I’ll say it now. Any man can be a father, but it takes a real man to be a dad. The same can be said for women as mothers. Some are...ehhh...just not made for it." Mikhail explained, shrugging and pulling his cuppa up again for another quick sip, "You can make up your own mind about how you think of the different adults in your life. I'm not here to judge you on what you think of the woman who birthed you into the world. You don't have to call her your 'mom' for my sake if you don't see her that way."

"Galina then."

The silver man nodded, and reached over to pat the Tiger's leg through the thick blanket, "I have your back. We'll get through this thing with Galina together."

Standing outside the brick building, Yurio looked up, staring at the 3rd floor corner apartment window where he knew his bedroom was located. He swallowed nervously, but didn't look back when he felt the three Rozovskys step up behind him on the sidewalk.

"So this is it?" Nikki wondered aloud, looking around.

"Mhm."

"Girls," Mikhail said, turning to the pair, "When we get up there, I want you two to just stand inside the door and not wander around. Yuri and I are going to get his things and his cat, and then we're gone. If his mother is still here, don't talk to her, even if she tries to talk to you first. Yuri said she speaks a little English and she knows who I am. I don't want to start a fight, but she's going to know what's happening if she sees Potya being removed from the apartment...so keep a low profile if she's wandering around."

"Okay." They both agreed, and the trio looked to Yurio.

He looked a little paler than normal, but nodded at them, and turned to start heading up the stairs that lead into the building. By the time they'd made it to his floor, and were standing in front of his door, his hands were shaking and he couldn't hold his keys straight to unlock the door. Mikhail covered the teen's hand with his own, and felt the keys released into his grip while Yurio took a step back, "You do it." He said stiffly.

"Okay." The elder answered reassuringly, flipping the keys in his hand to grip the bronze one he'd seen making an attempt at the lock. A few seconds later, the lock was undone, and the door was opening, with the scent of the apartment falling over the group like a fine mist.

Mikhail stepped in first, looking around as he pulled off his flatcap. Nothing caught his eye, but he did hear the telltale mew of a very excited ragdoll.

"Potya!" Yurio chimed, pushing past the taller man to see his fuzzball of a feline come rushing from around the corner. Her tail was straight up and she came running straight into Yuri's waiting arms where he'd knelt down on a knee, rubbing on the side of his head like a dog that hadn't seen its human in years. She licked the teen's nose and rubbed even more, trying to wiggle out of his grasp to roam all over him. He laughed quietly as his cat went about the task of covering all his clothing in shed fur.

"Yuri, come, let's get this done..." Mikhail whispered, trying to encourage a faster pace.

The Russian Tiger nodded, and reluctantly turned the feline over to Nikki, "Here, get to know each other."
"O-Oh!" She blinked wide and scrambled to hold the incredibly fluffy cat. Potya seemed friendly, looking at those jade eyes curiously, and thankfully didn't hiss at her, "...Uh...hi...Potya? I'm Nikki...this is Viktoria..."

Yurio and Mikhail made their way through the apartment, rounding the corner to the room at the end. The blonde had an empty backpack and a travel case to fill, and Mikhail stood 'guard' in the doorway while a swift inventory was made and the most important items packed. It took a mere five minutes for Yurio to get through all his things, grabbing mostly skating awards and a few articles of clothing he liked. He tossed the backpack to the man standing behind him, and then pushed by to go find his cat's things. They already had a plan, and Yurio went straight for the feline's ceramic food bowls, dumping the water from one into the sink and cleaned the dried-up remains of yesterday's dinner from the other. A quick dry with a paper towel was enough, and the two dishes went into the small rolling suitcase, along with a half-empty bag of litter, a tupperware container of kibble, the last 3 cans of tuna, one of cooked chicken, and a small jar of turkey gizzards from the fridge.

Viktoria took a good look around the apartment while she was waiting, holding one hand up to the feline's nose in the meantime. The apartment looked like it had been decorated once, a decade or two ago, and never modernized. Photos were framed all around of a glamorous blonde woman, dressed fancy and looking like quite the socialite. But, the woman looked a bit too young to be the mother of a 17 year old. She could only assume they were photos from the days before Yurio.

"Yuri! Èto ty?" (Yuri, is that you?) A woman's sleepy voice suddenly came from the opposite side of the flat.

All eyes were up and looking to the other side of the room in an instant. Bright green eyes spotted Mikhail first, but then Yurio in the kitchen to her left.

"Čto vse èto značit?" (What are you doing?)

Nikki and Viktoria took a step back towards the front door as the woman, slightly disheveled from the look of her messy, unbrushed hair, and smeared night-before make-up, stepped into the middle of the room. Slightly sleepy before, but wide awake now, the former 'life of the party' looked quite irate.

"Yuri!" She barked again, looking at the teen with the small rolling suitcase.

"Ja uhožu." (I'm leaving.) He answered, going right back to what he was doing, and zipped up the case.

"Kto vse èti ljudi?" (Who are all these people?) The woman demanded, gesturing mostly at the girls, which made them uneasy.

"Tolʹko požalujsta, sohranjaj spokojstvie." (Everyone, please, stay calm.) Mikhail said, stepping between Yurio's mother and his own daughters.

"Ne ukazyvaj mne, čto delatʹ hik!" (Don't tell me to stay out of it!)

"Galina-" The silver Russian tried instead, but she just marched right up into his face with her finger pointing right between his eyes.

"Ne nazyvaj menja po imeni!" (Don't call me by my first name!)

"Žensina-" (Woman/ma'am (older))

"Žensina!" She repeated in a rage, reaching her hand far back like she was winding up.
Nikki held Potya tight when she saw it, squeak-screaming in fear, but Viktoria had tried to take half a step closer. Yurio barely saw it in time, eyes wide open at the last second.

The slap filled the air like a gunshot...but it wasn't a slap across the elder man's face. He'd caught the woman's attempt by the wrist, mere inches from his skin, the sound of her arm hitting the palm of his hand causing the sudden noise. By all accounts, Mikhail towered over her as it was, him being 6'1" and her being a petite thing at 5'4", but the way he loomed over the woman now made him seem like a giant. He stared down at her, grey-green eyes fixed like a wolf's, and he moved her arm away from where he'd caught it.

"Esli ty popytayesh udarit menja snova..." (If you try to hit me again...) He said rather darkly, "...Ty ob etom pozalees'." (...you'll regret it.)

"Pochemu vy zanjali v zhizni takuju oboronitel'nuju poziciju!?" (Why are you always so defensive!?) Yurio barked suddenly, "Vot pochemu ja nenaviyu s toboj obshat'sja!" (This is why I hate being around you!) He turned his eyes to Mikhail, a nervous bead of sweat rolling down his face, "My mozhem ehat dal'she? Pozhalujsta!" (Can we leave!? Please!)

"Da." The elder agreed, "Tak cho tebe eshe neobhodimo dlja operacii!?" (Do you have everything you need?)

"Yes, let's please just go, I don't want to be here anymore." The teen answered, lowering his face as he started marching towards the door. Viktoria quickly opened it and the two girls stepped outside, carrying Potya with them, but just before Yurio could get out with them, he stopped on a heel and turned back briefly. Mikhail was about to squeeze out as well, but stopped next to the Tiger. Yurio was incensed though, staring at his mother, "Ne vzdujam menja trogat."

He stormed off after that, letting Mikhail pull the door closed as he stalked down the hall, and then stop in place.

"Yuri!" Nikki called after him, hopping forward to catch up. She was stunned to see tears rolling down the Russian Punk's face "...Yuri..."

"I hate that woman..." He answered through clenched teeth, "She's always done this... If she's not making promises she never keeps, she's making a huge scene when confronted on absolutely anything." He looked straight at the younger girl and gestured to Mikhail, "He didn't even say anything wrong! He just said we should all keep cool! Then she lost her fucking mind and tried to smack him!"

Potya's ears went back, tail curling around Nikki's back, and she tried to calm the anxious feline with a few strokes down her back, "It's okay...don't be scared..."

"I'm sorry..." Yurio choked, trying to dry his face on the back of a sleeve. He felt the rolling suitcase pulled from his hand as Viktoria stepped up behind him, putting a hand on his back.

"It's fine. Let's get to the car. We don't have to come back here ever again." She said calmly.

Mikhail came up behind the pair, and turned Yurio on his heel to face him, pulling him close with both arms around the teen's back, "Vikki's right. Let's go somewhere quiet and safe. We have Potya now. It's okay."

The young skater's fingers just clung to the thick black wool of the man's long-coat, and he screamed against the long, grey scarf, volume muffled only by the thickness of the fabric. The two girls moved
in close as well, arms going around their 'brother' as well as they could.
"Grab my outfit while you're in there, would you?" Viktor hollered, leaning back from where he was putting things into a suitcase, which was spread wide open on the bed. He could barely see out through the bedroom door, and his line of sight barely skimmed the top of his husband's slicked-back black hair as Yuri was heading down the stairs.

"I will."

Slate eyes turned back to the suitcase then, spotting Jiro trying to climb into a wedge of empty space near one corner. Viktor smiled and reached to pick the puppy up, "I know I said we were only taking the essentials, but that doesn't mean we can take you, munchkin." He nosed the pup's head and set him down on the floor, "But we would if we could. We won't be gone long. Just until Sunday night. We'll come back right after the Exhibition."

The smol woofer just sneezed at him in response.

Yuri pushed the door open to the spare bedroom with all their trophies, medals, and costumes, spotting the garment bags with their recently-dry-cleaned ensemble hanging from a hook on the front of the closet door. Grabbing the four of them, he moved them over to the main door to the room and hung them from the doorknob, then went back to go into the closet itself. It took a minute to find them, but when Yuri spotted the mummy-like wraps of Viktor's layered white costume shirt, with the sleeves that ended in a pair of deep crimson gloves, he knew he'd found their 'Ghost' section. He pulled the two costumes from the rack and checked to make sure everything was in each garment bag, along with the accessories to his own, and set them over his arm before stepping out again. By the time he'd made it back upstairs with all 6 costumes, Viktor had moved off somewhere.

Hazel eyes glanced around, but just as Yuri stepped into the bedroom, he heard the Russian lamenting about something, and turned his head.

"Jiro! Ryžij cvet očenʹ pojdët k tvoim glazam!?' (What are you eating that garbage for!?) Viktor whined, trying to get something out of the pup's mouth where he'd knocked over the bathroom trash can, "Nyet! Otkrojte, požalujsta, rot!" (No! Please open your mouth!)

"Uh oh...what'd he get into?" Yuri dared to wonder.

"Your empty bottle of hair gel." The silver legend sighed, "Which had a bunch of my stray hairs from my brush stuck in it."

"Hm...crusty old hair gel and hair... Breakfast of Champions."

"Ahhhh and it's all in his mouth and in his fur! Gross!"

Yuri laughed and shook his head, turning back to the open suitcase. He reached a hand in and started moving things aside to make room for the first round of costumes...and stumbled onto a particular opaque plastic tube with a white-silver cap screwed onto the end. It didn't take more than a second for Yuri to realize what it was, and his cheeks got bright red like the night before.

...Viktor really had a lot of fun with that thing...mostly at my expense...but I think I'd die on the spot if we got stopped for a bag search and someone found it...
A bead of nervous sweat rolled down his neck, and without even thinking, he leaned down to roll the canister under the bed before the Russian saw him do it. He fanned himself to try and get the blush to fade, and went back to rearranging things to make a wide, flat spot for the garment bags. He finished, and was able to fit 3 outfits inside, before pulling the suitcase lid over, and heard Viktor finally 'winning' the battle with their Akita.

"Ahhhh so gross! So gross!" He whined again, trying to pull the bits of hair off his fingers where the gel had gotten stuck to him as well. Finding it just sticking to other fingers in the attempt, he pulled the faucet on with the side of one wrist and washed the mess away instead.

"Funny how it's exactly the same stuff as it was 30 minutes ago, but once it goes into the basket, it's the nastiest thing ever." Yuri commented, zipping the bag up and heaving it off the bed. He set it by the door and grabbed the second suitcase; his own travel carrier from years past, covered in airport stickers and Hasetsu decals.

"Once it passes the edge of the trash-can's lid, it becomes untouchable." The Russian commented, flexing his fingers and making a face at how several strands of his own hair were still stuck to him.

"Even the stuff you grew out of your own head?"

"Especially that." Viktor exclaimed, turning his head and giving a look for good measure, "If it's not attached to me anymore, my body has deemed it unworthy."

"What if it's all of them and you end up bald?"

His brow furrowed in horror, and Viktor stared out from the bathroom, hands paralyzed under the running water as a leak threatened to spring from his eyes, "...Why would you say that...?"

Yuri just gave a wink, "Speak nicely about your hair, lest it takes offense and abandons you."

The Russian just gasped loudly, and looked at himself in the mirror rather dramatically before gazing up at his bangs, "No! Don't leave me! I'll never cut you again if it means you stay where you are!"

He made the mistake of reaching up with his still-wet and gel-stained hands, getting it all over his immaculately-styled hair...and suddenly went deathly quiet.

Curious, Yuri looked over, seeing his partner's absolutely mortified expression, "...Oops."

"...I...I guess I'm showering twice today." Viktor sighed, looking aside to where he'd plopped Jiro in the bathtub for the moment, "...You win this round."

The pup just barked at him adorably.

"There you two are!" Minako harped, coming into the main entryway after hearing the doors to YuTopia sliding open, "Was starting to think I'd have to go get you myself!"

"Sumimasen," Yuri said, watching her approach as he set Jiro down on the cow-hide rug under his feet, "Viktor had an accident."

"Uh oh..." She gaped at the Russian, "Are you hurt?"

"Only my pride." He huffed in answer, taking a knee to wipe down Makkachin's paws before letting the poodle have run of the resort, "Jiro got in the trash, and then the trash got in my hair."
"Well," The ballerina gave a smirk, "That is a disaster."

"Right?"

"So...Vik-chan, are you actually skating this weekend...?" Hiroko wondered, watching the pair as she closed the doors behind them.

"Hai!" He answered happily, "As a competitor, too, not just at the Exhibition like last year. I'm super excited!"

"I bet the rest of the competitors are gonna be real impressed by that." Minako teased, "They can all kiss the top two tiers of the podium goodbye."

"Minako-sensei..." Yuri chided.

"It's kind of funny though, don't you think?" She went on, like she didn't hear him, "The best two skaters in the Japanese Skating Federation are surnamed Nikiforov. Not very Japanese-sounding at all."

"I'm Japanese." Yuri added...but was again ignored.

Viktor gave a nervous smile, "I suppose. But there are plenty of athletes who compete for countries they're obviously not native to...plus, Yuri's still Japanese, even though he took my name." He reached an arm over his partner's shoulders to pull him close, though the man still looked a bit salty from being left out.

"That's just cuz he's a fanboy." Minako teased, glancing from the shorter to the taller skater, "Though I wonder...would you have taken the Katsuki name?"

"...That's unfair to ask..." Yuri sulked defensively.

Viktor blinked at her, but then turned to his partner, as though unsure what to say, then looked back at the older woman in front of them, "...I... Er...well, Yuri put the idea forward so quickly to take my name that I never really had a chance to think about it. I mean...I would...but... It's been almost a year now. It would feel weird to put things the other way."

"I was just curious. Viktor Katsuki does sound strange, putting it in that context." Minako nodded, then moved past the pair towards the door, and pulled her knee-boots on to get ready for the snow, "So...are you ready? It's going to be a five hour ride." She asked, shoving the door aside as she glanced back.

"Uh...y-yeah, of course." Yuri answered, feeling rather awkward suddenly.

"Yoshaaa~! Let's get going then!" The ballerina announced, spinning dramatically on one toe before vaulting outside.

The skating duo watched her go, but then turned to Hiroko, who had been nervously listening the last interaction from the side. She pulled her hands up to her cheeks and smiled, though she still looked a bit intimidated, "Sorry about Minako-senpai...she's been...weird all morning."

"...Weird?" They echoed, "Weird how?"

"I don't know...just...more direct? She seems really restless and apprehensive. Like things aren't happening fast enough. It seemed like she was looking at her watch every 10 seconds, even though she got here absurdly early."
"Are you guys coming!?" They could hear Minako hollering from the snowy courtyard.

"We're just saying goodbye to the dogs!" Viktor called back at her, "Give us just a minute!"

"You said you were ready though!"

Yuri sighed quietly to himself, "I hope this passes... Five hours on a train to Osaka with her is going to be miserable if she's this jittery the whole way."

Viktor just stared out the door, distracted by the woman spinning impatiently in the snowdrift.

"Well, good luck, boys, and have fun this time. No more injuries, okay?" Hiroko finished, reaching one hand forward to cup her palm around her son's head, gently thumbing the last remnants of those two pink lines escaping into his hairline, "I won't keep you here any longer. I'll take good care of Jiro and Makkachin."

"Thanks mom." The two skaters said in tandem, each reaching an arm around the short-statured woman to give her a hug before they turned to wave at the pups.

The pair had sat close by, right next to each other, and it suddenly dawned on Jiro that something weird was happening. He whined and started walking towards the single-step ledge that lead to the walk-in area, pawing at the air until Yuri leaned down to pick him up.

"We'll be back, late Sunday night. It's only four days." He reassured, ruffling the pup's head before setting him down again, and looked to the older of their furry wards, "Watch out for your baby brother."

The poodle barked once at him, tail wagging happily, though experience told Makkachin exactly what was going on, so while he was in a good mood, his tail wagged slower than normal.

The two skaters waved one last time, and headed out, spotting Toshiya and Mari mere seconds before the doors closed behind them. They made their way towards Viktor's bright-red Audi, and piled in, though Minako felt a bit squished in the back seat.

Oddly, for as vocal as she'd been in the minutes prior, she'd suddenly gone deathly silent. Even after they were half-way through the trip to Osaka, she hadn't said much more than was necessary to get through the different connecting stations.

Yuri was dozing by then, rocked to sleep by the easy hum of the train, leaning against Viktor's right shoulder. When the Russian felt the cold wet spot just under the man's mouth, he knew Yuri was out cold, and set eyes straight to the ballerina, who was sitting in a rear-facing seat just opposite them.

"What is it?" He asked, in a tone as though he already knew the answer and was dreading to hear it, but knew he had to let the words be spoken anyway.

"Huh?" She glanced back from where she'd been looking out the window, "What?"

"You're being weird. Out with it." He said, that time a bit more firmly.

Minako just made a face at him, "I'm not being weird! I'm just getting used to the fact that you're coming! I got so worked up over the idea that Yuri would be going alone that I made a huge scene in Detroit about it! Now it's all changed, so..."

Viktor gave a skeptical look, one eye brow slightly quirked, "I would think it would feel weirder if I wasn't here."
"Well...sure..." She nodded, but then turned to look back out the window again, "But in a way...I was kind of looking forward to the nostalgia of the old days, when it was just Yuri and I."

The Russian wasn't sure what to make of that answer. One the one hand, he understood, but on the other, he had the odd feeling like he was suddenly intruding. He turned his face and brushed his nose against his husband's gelled hair, "Sorry."

Minako's eyes widened a little bit, only for her to turn back to face him and wave her hands defensively, "It's not you, I promise! I like that you're here!"

"Then what's the problem? I don't want to have to dig it out of you. Just get it into the open."

The ballerina sunk into her seat, "I don't want to make you even more upset than you are now over stuff you clearly don't want to hear about."

"What...is it something to do with my uncle?"

She nodded hesitantly.

Viktor sighed to himself and felt a weight creep down on him, but he closed his eyes and gestured with his free hand, "Just...out with it."

Minako folded her fingers together in her lap, "It's about 6 hours behind, where they are in Russia, compared to us...so it's pretty early in the morning for them. But...Mikhail messaged me about how they'd just gotten done getting Yura's things from his place, but...they ran into his mother there. Apparently she tried to hit Mikhail and was making a big scene after Yura told her he was leaving." She started to explain, her eyes slowly leaving the sight of the silver Russian in front of her, down to the floor, "He was pretty upset with the whole thing, and getting Potya back has only partly helped get his spirits back up again. They're on their way to the train station now, to start to trek to Moscow. Mikhail's hoping they can see Yura's grandpa as soon as they arrive."

"That's still a four hour trip, after they get on the train."

"So they won't get there until even after we've arrived in Osaka...and I feel bad, because I want to call, but I don't think Yura would want to talk about it, least not in front of a bunch of people...maybe not even to me..." She sighed and pulled her hands up a little, "More than that though, I feel like...maybe I could've done something if I was there."

"Not likely." Viktor shrugged his left shoulder, "My uncle's kids were probably there, and she was still willing to put on a show even in front of them. I don't know what you could've done to change what happened." He offered, watching the woman closely for signs of a reaction. She still looked the same though, "When did he tell you this?"

"Huh?" She looked back at him, "Oh, while I was outside YuTopia waiting for you two."

So that's why she got quiet suddenly...but it doesn't explain why she was weird before we showed up, like Yuri's mom described, Viktor thought, "Is anything else going on?"

The ballerina's eyes shifted, but she smiled and tried to reassure him, "...I hope not."

The Russian was skeptical, but for the moment, let the issue go.
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED THIRTY SIX

Yurio hadn't spoken much since getting his cat back. He simply held her on his lap for the trip from 'his mother's apartment' to the St. Petersburg-Glavny train station, letting himself be lost in the comfort of her fluff and purrs. She traveled well; staying on Yurio's lap, either to snooze or use as a lift to look out the window. When they were parked, and Mikhail was giving the keys over to a clerk within the terminal to return it to the rental company, Yurio had the ragdoll feline on a harness and leash.

No companion of his would be contained in a portable prison.

(But also, he forgot to grab it.)

For such a small and sweet-natured creature though, and Mikhail's deep pockets, no one contested the cat's semi-free roaming. They made it through the main part of the terminal, and were grabbing the paper copies of their Premium Class seat tickets, when Mikhail felt a rather particular tingle down his spin and looked back over one shoulder.

"...Oh...papa... It's the huge guy from the audience at NHK."

He spun his head around the other way then, and nearly shrieked for the sight of Konstantin Nikiforov approaching through the doors they themselves had just come through. The behemoth Russian wore the same tired grey suit he'd worn on his first trip to St. Petersburg nearly a year before.

"Horošo, kakogo čerta vy tut delaete?" (Okay...what the Hell are you doing here?) The comparably-miniscule Mikhail asked, his heart in his throat from the surprise of it.

"Privet." Yurio said, his first words since leaving the apartment 45 minutes earlier. He raised a hand under where Potya was perched on his shoulders.

[If you don't know why I'm here then I should be asking this runt why he didn't warn you.]

Konstantin answered gruffly, long jacket slung over one arm, slate eyes peering down from under the brim of an old hat. He nudged his head towards the blonde next to him, [He invited me.]

[He invited you...?] Mikhail repeated, gaping from the bear to the tiger, [...Why? When? How? Who's paying for his tickets?]

[Reasons, last week, over the phone, and you.] Yurio answered simply, pulling out his phone to Insta the occasion; himself and Potya in the foreground, but Kon looming way overhead in the background. From the angle Yurio had to take the picture at, one could be forgiven for thinking it was the poster for some new monster-flick featuring a pale-eyed giant.

"Gods, you really are one of mine. You didn't even ask first." Mikhail grumbled, deadpanning the teen, though Yurio didn't pay him any heed. He drew a breath and sighed, turning back to the kiosk he'd been working on, "You're lucky these tickets aren't expensive." He mumbled, poking at seat selection on the screen.

"Is anything expensive to you?" The Russian Tiger quipped, putting his phone away and rubbing one of Potya's toes affectionately.
"I'm not buying you your own island, if that's where this is going." The slender Russian hit back, looking back over one shoulder, *He's suddenly in a much better mood. What's up with him and Kon...?*

Bemused emerald irises just looked back at him, "Darn. Maybe another time then."

Nikki and Viktoria gaped still, entirely unsettled by the sight of the legendary man-bear. When their father was done getting the 5th (and technically 6th) of the tickets, he turned back and made the obligatory gestures, "Girls, this is Konstantin, Viktor's father. Kon, èto Nikki, ej 14 let..." He gestured to daughter #1, and then to daughter #2, "Èto Viktoria, ej 16 let."

Overtly intimidated by the man's overwhelming size, especially in person, the silver ladies were barely able to manage a meek wave at him.

"...Hello." He managed, accent as thick as anything anyone had ever heard.

Mikhail narrowed his eyes and raised both brows skeptically, *[Started learning English or something?]*

[I already knew one or two words. 'Hello' isn't hard.]

[Point taken.] The younger elder sighed, "Okay everyone...let's go..." He raised both arms up and went behind the group, as though corralling them forward like a Sheepdog with his flock.

By the time they'd made it onto their train and had gotten seated, the 'original' four were seated at a fold-down table in plush, leather-top chairs, and their sudden 5th man was in his own seat (which was actually two seats with the arm-rest down between them) on the other side of the aisle. Yurio pulled his jacket off to make something of a nest for Potya on the table-top; he sat across from Mikhail in one of the rear-facing seats. Nikki was next to him, sitting opposite her sister. She leaned against the table and reached her arm towards the cat-nest, waggling a finger for the feline to paw at until the train started moving.

Mikhail stared at the teen sitting across from him, thinking he could somehow will an explanation out of him for the afternoon's revelations. Ten minutes into the trip though, nothing had happened, and he had to open his mouth, "Okay ...please explain to me exactly why my in-law is here."

"Vengeance." Yurio answered simply, "When he called you about Viktor, and I swiped the phone from you. We ended up tal-"

"Hold on one second." The elder paused him with a hand, then leaned forward to see past his older daughter, *[Kon, how exactly did you call me with a cellphone that doesn't work in the woods?]*

[No signal on the cell, but I could still load the address book. I just looked up your number in the cell and dialed it on my landline.] Konstantin answered, just as simply as Yurio had. He didn't look though, simply keeping his head down as he dozed with his hat-brim covering his eyes, *[You probably have both of my contact numbers in your own address book under the same name for me, so you wouldn't know which I was calling from.]*

"He's not stupid," The teen quipped, "I mean, he lives in the middle of nowhere and is practically a hermit, but that doesn't mean he isn't aware of the world. He knew something was wrong when Viktor's name wasn't in the papers after the Final like mine was."

The silver Russian just sat back against his seat, "...Fine...fine... So, what vengeance exactly are you two going to eck out from the RSF this weekend? I get this weird feeling I should be worried."
"Wouldn't it be weird for the RSF if, even after kicking Viktor out, his entire family is still in Moscow?" Yurio wondered, leaning back as well as Potya moved to climb off the table and into his lap, "I'd be nervous if I were them. People online who know you're one of my sponsors were talking about the irony."

"I'm not terribly worried about the opinions of people on the internet." Mikhail pointed out, "But...I guess so. Just, please don't give him the idea to break anything...or anyone."

"I won't. It'll be fine."

The train arrived practically at the foot of both of the target hotels, stopping at Universal City Station. To the west, the Official Event Hotel for Japanese Nationals: Hotel Keihan Universal Tower. To the east and slightly up the road, the first available hotel for spectators: The Singulari Hotel and Skyspa at Universal Studios Japan.

To Viktor's great disappointment, the train lines were underground, so even though they passed Universal Studios on its southern border, there was nothing of it to see as they went by. Still, once they got onto the upper deck and could look around, he tried his hardest to get a good look.

"Ahh I can't see anything except the one big rollercoaster." He whined, hopping up and down on his toes.

Yuri came up beside him and tried to look as well, seeing one passage of a rail-car on the rollercoaster his partner had mentioned. It was impossible to hear the roar or the screams from as far away as they were, but he felt a flutter in his chest anyway, "We should go tomorrow."

The Russian latched onto Yuri's head rather dramatically, "They have Harry Potter world, and Jurassic Park! We could get sorted in the morning and then chased by a T-rex at night!"

"Oh, I'm Ravenclaw. I already know that." The younger skater mused, patting his husband's arms where they wrapped around him.

"I'm Hufflepuff!" Viktor explained happily, letting go and taking an excited pose, "My wand is 11 inches, Holly, with a Phoenix feather core."

"Mine's Holly, too, but 9.5 inches, with a Unicorn hair core!"

"Unicorn hair is a sign of goodness and honesty! Users of those wands are practically incorruptible and almost never join the dark side!"

"Phoenix feather is for wizards with great skill and potential. Only the best can use them to their fullest potential."

"Sounds like they fit you two rather nicely." Minako commented, pulling up the rear with her luggage. They turned to face her, pointing their hands out as though waving wands at her, and she deadpanned them both, "...You two are kids trapped in adult bodies."

"Hiroko did say I'm 18 at heart." Viktor added proudly, and winked, "Never forget."

"...I think I must be 60 at heart." Yuri added, "Except when I'm at a competition, standing outside Universal Studios...then I'm 10."

"We're both 10 this weekend." The Russian quipped, finding his husband's hand and pulled it down
to hold it, "But let's get going. It's going to be close to 6 hours since we last ate, by the time we're done getting checked in. I'm absolutely dying of starvation right now."

"Minako-sensei," Yuri turned to the ballerina as they started walking, "You want to meet up with us to eat? We should stick to the original plan as much as possible, right?"

"Oh...sure. It'll be a minute for me to get to my hotel and back to here though."

"Would you rather wait for us in the lobby so we can go with you?"

She shook her head, "It'll be fine. Just don't start eating without me!"

"We won't...as long as you hurry back!" Yuri waved with his free hand, then moved off to grab his rolling suitcase, "Call when you're almost here!"

"Haaaai~"

They parted ways then, with Yuri and Viktor going to the station's west exit, and Minako heading east for the sidewalk along the road. Stepping out from under the massive tent-like roof, Viktor's eyes were instantly drawn to the left, seeing the sign for Starbucks ages before realizing it was inside the lobby of their own hotel.

"This city knows me." The Russian cried out, tears in his happy eyes, "This is already better than Sapporo."

"Sapporo had the beer muse-EEAH! V-Viktor!"

Words didn't matter. Only coffee did. Viktor pulled his hapless husband straight into the hotel and right across to the Starbucks cafe. He didn't stop again until he was in line, even as others that had been in their way were calling out to him in recognition. As Yuri heaved to catch his breath from the unexpected stampede, he looked up to see all the eyes that were suddenly facing them. For half a heartbeat, he thought it was just the sight of them having burst into the lobby like a pair of crazy people, but then the stares felt familiar.

"...Is that...Yuri?"

"Ah...yeah, I think it is."

"Didn't recognize him for a second with glasses on."

Shimatta...! Yuri thought in a panic, letting go of his suitcase to reach into his coat pocket and pull out a relic of the Grand Prix...the trusty Calgary Flames beanie he'd been gifted during his melt-down outside the Saddledome. He let go of Viktor's hand only long enough to pull the beanie over his slicked-back hair, trying to hide his recognizability.

Viktor just gave him a look and spoke in a hushed voice, "That thing again? Why do you keep it anyway?"

"W-Why not? A total stranger took pity on me at one of my lowest moments and gave it to me to make me feel better. Plus why would a Japanese National be wearing a hat for a Canadian hockey team here anyway? It's practically the best disguise I have."

The Russian gave a skeptical look, "You're standing next to me though. People would know it was you even if you were hiding inside the giant Krampus costume." He said, speaking in a more normal tone again.
"Not if I was in the *Krampus* costume...that thing was practically a small house." Yuri insisted, shuffling forward in the line.

"Why else would I hold the hand of a Christmas demon?" The silver legend wondered, bringing up the hand he held at that very moment for emphasis. When Yuri gave an exasperated look back as an answer, Viktor huffed a quiet laugh and kissed his partner's ring, then lowered their hands again and looked up at the menu board, "...Hmmm what do I want...?"

"...Nothing big. We're going out to dinner in like 30 minutes."

"Thirty minutes is a long time, my love." The Russian teased a faint, "I'll wither to dust and fade into the wind...!"

More shuffling with the line, and Yuri was starting to get self-conscious about the space they were occupying with their luggage, "*Okay okay*...point taken..."

"Relax. I'll just get a tall of something." Viktor reassured, finally stepping up to the counter. His eyes were closely momentarily as he smiled at his partner, but just as he turned his head to start his order, "...Hi~! I'd like a~"

**DING DING DING DING DING DING DING**

Both of their heads rattled at the unexpected bell tolling from behind the counter, and they looked on with stunned and horrified looks on their shocked faces.

"IT'S YURI AND VIKTOR NIKIFOROV! THEY'RE HERE!" One of the baristas called out; the young lady who'd jammed the hammer against the bell a moment before. She hopped down and went over to a chalk board further down the counter, and put great big check marks next to both of their names. There were other names on the huge board as well, including four that Yuri recognized.

*Kenjiro Minami* - 南 健次郎  
*Omiki Yuto* - 大西 悠人  
*Fujiwara Hikaru* - 藤原 晃  
*Saito Asahi* - 斉藤 朝日

Viktor felt his husband flinch slightly, and glanced aside, his shock from the moment before dissolved by seeing Yuri's face go pale, "...What's wrong? You okay?"

"...Asahi-kun is here..."

"Who?"

Yuri turned his face to look at the man, a bit nervous, "When I used to say I was a 'dime a dozen' top figure skater in the JSF...I said it because there were a bunch of us back then who were all decent, but were about equal. Asahi-kun was...one of the others."

"You're not a 'dime a dozen' top skater in the JSF anymore though, you're the top skater in the JSF."

"...One could argue that *you* are." Yuri retorted, his face flushing a little, more from nerves than actual embarrassment, "Asahi-kun was *better* than me before. Minami-kun may have scored higher than me at Nationals right after the Sochi Grand Prix, but Asahi-kun was the one who got Gold. I...don't know why he was gone...but the fact that he's back now..."

"Things might be interesting then." Viktor said, diverting his partner's train of thought, then going back to the barista behind the counter, "*Domo*... A tall double-spice Chai frappuccino please."
With the small drink already gone, split between the two skaters, fasting had begun for dinner. The first order of business was getting their things into the hotel room though. Viktor slid the key-card into the door, listened for the click, and then pushed the panel in, holding it aside as Yuri snuck by with the bigger of the two rolling suitcases. Once he was in, Yuri discarded the empty plastic cup, took his turn holding the door, and watched quietly as the Russian slipped by to let the door close behind. They each cuffs their shoes off and set them against the wall before moving on.

The room was more open than others had been, and from the Tower Grande Deluxe-Double room that they'd gotten assigned by the JSF, they could see a nice view of the city far below. The singular bed was double-wide, giving the room its name, seeming to be nearly 10ft across, covered in gently-striped white blankets, decorative olive-green pillows, and a rust-red bed-shawl with a 4in golden trim, thrown over the bottom end.

Yuri moved forward and picked up the tall, circular-topped table in the space between the foot of the bed and the couch just opposite it, setting it aside so they could get by. He pulled his own suitcase through the newly opened gap, and propped it up just next to the window. Slipping back the way he came, he started pulling his winter clothing off, beanie first, then his scarf and jacket. Though his hair was disheveled, he flattened it back into place with a quick glance into the bathroom mirror. When he stepped back into the main room though, he spotted Viktor unpacking the second rolling suitcase...and felt a flutter of anxiety rush through him.

Oh boy, he's about to realize the thing isn't there.

Viktor ruffled through the bag casually though, acting completely normal. He set out the three garment bags with the first few of their costumes, making sure they were still flat and hadn't been too badly squashed during the trip. Satisfied, he went back to the suitcase, pulling out the multiple changes of clothes and other items that he'd packed first. He kept his normal happy affect on, though after a while, finding nothing...unique...on the right side of the suitcase's interior, could feel a bead of sweat run down the side of his neck.

Oh dear god, where is the Fleshlight?

Yuri squeezed by again, as though absolutely nothing was out of the ordinary. With his shoes and other things stowed away already, he supposed the next order of business was unpacking his own suitcase. He pulled it up to the left side of the bed, where there was still room, and clicked open the case on the floor just next to it. The three remaining garment bags came out and were added to the pile Viktor started, as well as the zipped-up travel bags that each of their skates were stored in. Those were immediately set onto the table he'd moved earlier, and were easily the most important items of the entire trip. Returning though, he glanced back towards his partner. The Russian's suitcase was empty by then, and Yuri was fastidious in his examination of Viktor's expression.

There's no way he doesn't know it's missing now. ...How is it possible that he's not worrying about it?

Of course, as casual as Viktor was still desperately trying to be...internally he was nothing less than hysterically apoplectic.

WHERE IS IT? WHERE IS IT? WHY ISN'T IT HERE? HOW DID IT GET OUT? IT WAS THE FIRST THING I PACKED. I WANTED TO MAKE SURE IT WAS GOOD AND BURIED. I KNOW I DIDN'T TAKE IT OUT. I PLAYED SUITCASE-TETRIS AROUND IT. OH MY GOD WHERE IS IT?! WAS IT JIRO? DID HE KNOCK IT OUT SOMEHOW??
Yuri stood next to him, blinking in nervous curiosity, "You okay? You stopped moving."

"Everything is fine." Viktor answered quickly, straightening out rather suddenly. He stared ahead woodenly, not even registering as Yuri pulled the top of the luggage over the empty space and moved it aside to join the other empty bag against the wall. He tried to shake out the terror that was seeping through him, but couldn't bring himself to move until he felt soft, warm fingers wrap gently around his left hand. He managed to turn his eyes, but little else.

"We have a little time to unwind if you want..." Yuri suggested, moving his free hand up to catch the end of the Russian's scarf and unwrap it from around his neck and shoulders, "Minako-sensei will probably be another 15 minutes. We could..." His words trailed as the scarf came away, and he raised his other hand to join the first in pushing the man's heavy long-coat away. He set that carefully aside as well, adding it to the garment-bag pile on the left side of the extra-wide bed. Hands went from the Russian's wrists, up his arms gently, caressed across the front of those broad shoulders, settling just under the man's neck as Yuri leaned up to find a kiss.

Viktor gave it easily, but his nerves about the missing toy were making it hard for him to focus. He didn't even realized the transition between standing and lying on his side on the bed...it felt like a blink and the world's orientation was different. It caught him off guard a little, but tried to regain himself in the moment, feeling one hand wedged between his waist and the bed-spread under him, another trailing down his opposite side, sliding over his belt, hip, and down the outside of his leg. It took him a second to even realize where his own hands were then, mercifully finding them parked on each side of his partner's waist where he, too, was lying on his side in front of him.

Yuri gave the Russian's leg a gentle pull, moving it over where he was sliding his own leg forward, putting his knee between his husband's thighs and sliding it up until it could go no further. Viktor was doing next to nothing though, which made Yuri a little paranoid.

...He's never this uninterested in me unless something is wrong. Was the toy that important...? Doesn't he want me anymore without it...? Have I really become that boring...?

Mercifully, or perhaps unfortunately, he heard his phone starting to jingle where he'd left it in his jacket pocket, inside the open door of the room's singular closet.

"Oh, that's probably Minako!" Viktor said suddenly, hopping up almost immediately from the bed to rush and find the phone, "She's early!"

Yuri just stared ahead in stunned confusion for a moment, watching his husband pull the phone out and slide his thumb across the screen to answer.

"Hey, it's Viktor. ...Yeah? Wow~! That was fast. Okay. Head up to the 32nd floor...there's a French-style restaurant up there. We'll meet you in a minute."

Yuri finally pushed up to sit on the side of one hip at the edge of the bed, still a bit stunned. He looked up as his partner hung up the phone and was gesturing to hand it to him.

"She said her hotel was a lot closer than the map made it seem, so she got there and back in half the time." Viktor explained, "We can go eat. I'm famished!"

"...Oh..." The younger man answered quietly, "...Uhm...okay..."
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED THIRTY SEVEN

If interrupting a quickie wasn't depressing enough, Yuri furthered it in his own head by over-thinking everything. He poked quietly at his food, occasionally looking at Viktor, then back at his food again.

_I didn't think he'd get bored with me so fast_, he ruminated to himself, rolling a leaf of baby spinach over on his plate. _Maybe the novelty of me being inexperienced has worn off_. He said once that he hoped I never stopped blushing because of him, but I don't even know if I do anymore, unless it's _so_ embarrassing that I can feel my whole face turn hot. He skewered the leaf on the end of his fork, then a slice of half-peeled cucumber next to it, _But everything I try to do for him is stuff that I learned from him...is that my problem? He doesn't need me to do stuff that he can do himself... Or maybe it's because I'm a man? Maybe all those years of being with women... he wants to go back to that... After all the stuff I tried to learn about online, I know women feel...different inside..._ He suddenly shot his head up, brow furrowed in worry, _Is that why he said we should get the toy!? He wanted to recreate the feeling he got from his old girlfriends!? Is he disappointed with the one I picked, too!? I went _out of my way_ to make sure it _didn't_ have the same feel or outside appearance as a woman because I didn't want to think he _missed_ it...but now _I do anyway_!_ Yuri lowered his head, all but crying at the thought of it._

All the while, Viktor was trying to keep it together, too. He maintained the facade of a nervous smile, but behind those blue eyes, his brain was still screaming.

_How could I have lost the gift Yuri bought for me already!?_ He said he only got it because he was really at his wit's end trying to sort me out after the RSF _fired_ me! And I didn't even have it for a whole _day_ before it disappeared! He's going to be so upset! I was so excited that he was willing to try something new...and I wanted to use it with him so much! I've tried every position on him that I can think of without making him uncomfortable, but he must be getting bored with it by now...! It's been a year since we started! I wonder if he's thinking how much better it might've been if he had been able to get together with Yuko after all!? Being with a guy can be messy and awkward at the _best_ of times... Viktor put his elbows on top of the table, and chin over his plate, perched on the back of his fingers where he'd folded them together there, _All the times I've made a mistake and he got so embarrassed...or all the times we had to change the sheets because we didn't bother to grab a towel first... That's half the reason I thought the Fleshlight would be better! Cuz then we could do stuff without worrying so much about cleaning up after! But we only got to use it for the one night and I'm not even sure I could find another one exactly like it to replace the one I lost without him noticing the difference! Yuri's so much smarter than I am...he'd know for sure! What do I do!? He'll be so disappointed in me! And if I try to replace it anyway and he notices, then he'll think I tried to lie to him! Or worse, that I tried to get one that's better than the one _he_ found, as though it wasn't good enough! Then he'll get all self-conscious and I'll never be able to convince him that I love him exactly as he is ever again!_

Viktor's brain was cracking in half so loudly, he was sure other people could hear it.

"You guys are sure quiet." Minako said stiffly from her side of the table.

"EVERYTHING IS OKAY." They both blurted out, sitting practically at attention with both arms clamped down against their sides as they stared straight ahead.

She raised a brow at them, "..._Mhm_… That was convincing." She pointed a finger at her expression,
then circled it around, "This is the face that I make when I'm *convinced."

They both went back to sweating nervously...but eventually Viktor broke and blurted out the confession.

Or at least tried to.

"Yuri! I lost the birthday gif-"

"I TOOK THE THING OUT OF THE SUITCASE AND HID IT BEFORE YOU NOTICED." Yuri interrupted suddenly.

Viktor gaped at him, the comical tears that had been rolling down his cheeks stopping where they were, "...You...what?"

"IT'S UNDER THE BED AT HOME." The distraught younger man went on, pulling both hands over his face in shame, "I didn't want it here…!"

Minako again gaped at them, "...Whaaaat are you two talking about? And why are you *yelling* about it? People are staring."

Both men's faces went white as sheets, and bullets of sweat fell off of them. They went immediately quiet and stared at their food instead, poking at it in humiliated silence. Still, their minds were going a thousand miles an hour at the few words that had just been spoken.

*He...didn't want it here!?! What does that even mean!?!* Viktor wondered, questioning everything he thought he knew about his husband, *Why wouldn't he...? I thought he enjoyed it! Why did he have to secretly take it out of the suitcase and hide it so I wouldn't notice...?! When did he even have time?!* Viktor suddenly gasped aloud, lifting his head, *It must've been when I was getting the gel out of Jiro's mouth! He turned his eyes slightly, Why didn't he just talk to me...? Doesn't he trust me...?*

Yuri's heart was in his throat, pounding so hard he was sure the entire restaurant could see it pulsating from clear across the room. *Why did I say that!?! He probably hates me now! And I can't even explain myself because we're *here*! He's going to have the whole rest of dinner to think up all his own reasons why I took the toy out without saying anything! He's going to think I was trying to deceive him! I'll never have his confidence again! This is what I get for thinking it was safe to fall in love with my idol...I lied to him just like everyone else did...!*

Viktor lifted his head, about to say something, fingers twitching at the anticipation of his hand moving over to take his husband's...but Yuri suddenly shot up from the table and left.

Minako nearly spat her drink out at the surprise of it, "Wh- Yuri! Where are you going!?!"

The Russian was frantic to get his wallet out of his jacket, simply tossing the whole thing across the table towards the ballerina, "Here, just don't let them think we stiffed them on the bill!"

She fumbled it between both hands, but eventually grasped it and held it tight, barely able to acknowledge that she had it before seeing Viktor disappear like a thin silver blur through the dim lights of the room, "O-Okay...?!"

Yuri was out past the host's podium before Viktor had half a chance to catch up, but when he finally did, and Yuri felt the hand on his shoulder to spin him around, he was a soggy, hysterical mess behind his glasses. Viktor tried to hug him, but Yuri's first instinct was to push him off and step back,
which just further added to the confusion.

"Wh… Yuri, why are you running away like this…?" The Russian asked, his throat hurting already, "Just… talk to me… say something, anything…! I don't know why you're reacting like this!

The words that came out where incoherent, and interrupted by sobbing anyway, so all Yuri would do was cry out in agony and pull his glasses off to try and clear his vision. Viktor stepped closer in an attempt to hug him a second time, that time managing to get a good grip with both arms, holding the inconsolable mess he called his husband in place.

Staff from within the diner were collecting at the entrance, peering around the corner in confusion, thinking someone had been hurt. The Russian glanced back at them, and tried to wave them off with one hand, "Gomenasai! I left my wallet with our other friend! Please charge my card!" He explained desperately, starting to pull his partner down the hall and away from the eyes of onlookers. It took three full minutes to find a place far enough away and adequately secluded before he was willing to stop and sit the man down, finding a plush bench against one wall in a long corridor, just past the elevator hall. As Yuri leaned forward against his knees, Viktor held close, left arm over his partner's back as the right hand held to the man's nearest shoulder. Unsure what else to say, Viktor just stayed quiet, rubbing a thumb back and forth slowly to soothe his spouse until the sobbing was under control and he could speak again.

Still, it felt like a tortured eternity before Yuri could say something without each word being muffled by an involuntary gasp. He never did manage to clear off the lenses in his glasses, and Viktor had to pull them from his hand, slipping them into the inside breast-pocket of his blazer. They left a wet smudge in the fabric, but Viktor didn't pay any attention. He just pat the pocket from the outside to make sure they were secure, and returned his hand to Yuri's arm, sighing against the back of that shoulder where he parked his chin, "...Yuri… please… say something…"

"...I'm… n-no better th-then the g-girlf-friends you've… h-had before… wh-who took adv…" He attempted, only to burst into anguished tears again, unable to finish the statement.

"That's so far from the truth… I don't understand why you think that."

"Why wouldn't you!?" Yuri barked, lifting his head and twisting away a little, "I lied to you, hid things from you, and then misled you about it for half a day because I'm still the same coward I always was! You have every right to be furious with me!"

"...Except that I'm not… I just… want to understand why you feel like you had to do what you did. It's just a toy. I didn't think y-"

"It's not 'just a toy' to me!" The younger man sobbed, "It's a replacement! A substitute! It means that what I'm able to give you isn't good enough anymore, and you have to look for something else to pick up the slack!"

"...It's supposed to be supplemental…" Viktor tried to explain, "I thought it could add to what we had… I never thought you'd get this upset about it… but now I wish I never said anything…"

"I know I'm still rubbish at all this stuff… I'm sorry! I'm trying my best to do everything you do but I'm not as good at it as you are! I just didn't think I was so bad that you'd have to ask for outside help to make it better!" Yuri cried, covering his face with both hands as he leaned back down over his knees, elbows holding him up even as tears freely fell between his feet, "Now I just feel like I've been wasting all your time because I can never make you feel as good as a woman can!"

"...If that was the case, I wouldn't have spent most of last night using it on you though." The silver
Russian said quietly, "Half the reason I ever suggested it was because I didn't want you to get bored… We've been doing more-or-less the same stuff for a year now. I don't ever want you to feel like being intimate is a chore that you're only doing because I want to..."

"I never wanted to use a damn toy though!" Yuri blurted unexpectedly, face red from frustration as much as from sorrow. He returned to settle his hands against his cheeks, staring at the floor.

As loud and distressed as Yuri was, people clear across the hall were staring at them. It didn't make much difference to Viktor, but he knew that his husband would be horrified if his outburst lead to event-wide rumors that lasted all weekend.

I wish I wasn't so bad at this… Viktor thought anxiously, turning to look at his partner again, I don't know what to do or say to make this better… This isn't the best place to get to the bottom of it all either...

"...I never should've...g-gotten the thing..." Yuri started up again though, quieter, hiccupping his breaths between words, "...I was j-just so...desperate to m-make you feel better...after the R-RSF thing...I was willing to do an-anything...even th-this..."

"...I never meant to offend you so much with the suggestion." The Russian tried to explain, "I truly never expected you to react like this… Do you really hate it that much…?

"It-it's not that I h-hate it..." He answered, tears still falling from his chin where they trailed down his cheeks, "I under-stand the app-pleal… But it's...n-not what I w-want...and now I just f-feel bad bec-cause I'm...being sel-fish..." He dropped one arm, pivoting it against his knee as he leaned more on the left, trying to tilt further away from the shame, "I tr-ried so hard to make th-this work...I r-really wanted to d-do this for you b-but I just...can't..."

"...Help me understand what's so wrong with it..." Viktor pleaded, "I don't want to make this mistake again..."

"I t-told you last year that I liked it b-best when you used your h-hands...but this just puts a piece of plastic between u-us..." Yuri attempted, keeping his head down, "To anyone e-else it...might be nothing but...a tool to achieve the same ends...but t-to me...it's..." He huffed several breaths, pulling his left hand up over his eyes, "It's the d-difference between...making love and j-just...hav-having s-..." He paused and shook his head, trying again, "...Just fu-...

"...Oh..."

Yuri heaved an exhausted breath, relieved to be understood without having to say the words, "...And I just...I c-can't do that... I was only e-ever able to let you g-get close to me because...I love you and I t-trust you...and I want more than anything to be with you..." He went on, tears still pouring from his eyes, "But I'm n-not built to just be...free and l-loose with who I s-sleep with..." He explained, rubbing his eyes with his fingers, "I d-don't even th-think...I could stand it if y-you...used the damn thing on y-yourself...w-without me..." He rubbed his nose on the back of a sleeve, leaving an unsavory wet slick on the fabric, part of which trailed as he pulled it away again, "I just c-couldn't...stand the shame..."

"...Why would you be ashamed by that though...?" Viktor wondered, reaching up with his free right hand to rub his forehead in pained confusion, "...Is it because of the crass joke that I made about it being like having a threesome without the need to actually bring someone else in...?"

"Because it's not me!" Yuri cried out, turning slightly towards the Russian, emphasizing his point by
"Yuri you're getting loud-" The silver Russian attempted, sitting up a bit straight and waving his arms down in an attempt to suppress the volume.

"Because I know what that thing feels like and I know it's completely different! They're specially designed to-"
That earned the feeling of Yuri shaking his head against a shoulder. Progress.

"So let's just..." Viktor paused a moment, thinking, to choose his words carefully, "...Let's just go back to make sure the tab is paid, and we can get room-service instead. Then we can just decompress over this and talk about it, after you've had a minute to catch your breath. Given how you reacted...I'm not even really sure you realized how deep this went."

Another gentle head-shake.

"Do you want to wait here while I go back and get our things? I have to explain a little to Minako why we're leaving early, but..."

One last head-shake, but that time, Yuri lifted his face a little. His voice was a whisper and hoarse, but he managed a few words, "...I'll go...with you..." He started, swallowing painfully after that before starting again, "...I d-don't...want to be...al-lone..."

"...Okay..." Viktor nodded, pulling himself back only far enough to shrug out of his suit-jacket. He slipped it around his husband's back and settled it on the man's shoulders, then rose to stand, offering his hands to help Yuri up to his feet as well. Yuri took them, and rose unsteadily, feeling too dizzy from his anguish to stand on his own, so Viktor slid his arms within the blazer and wrapped them around the younger man's thin frame, "Are you okay to walk? I'll carry you."

Yuri attempted a step to the side, but felt so uneasy that he closed his eyes, and shook his head again. All he could do after that was slip his arms through the sleeves of the jacket.

"Say no more."

The next thing Yuri knew. Viktor was slightly crouched in front of him, presenting his back, and the emotionally-taxed younger man leaned forward to collapse against it. Viktor leaned a bit further forward for leverage, and hoisted his husband off the ground, reaching both arms back around to clasp his fingers together, and managed a temporary seat with his hands.

"Ikimashou." (Let's go.)
Making the walk back to the restaurant was a slightly harrowing experience, but one small fortune was finding Minako at the front counter as she was walking out. She paused in her footsteps as she spotted the two skaters coming her way, though with Yuri being carried, he kept his eyes down, brow pressed against the back of Viktor's neck and right shoulder.

"...Oh!" She gasped at the sight of them, "...Uhm... I...paid for the thing, like you asked..."

Viktor nodded tiredly, and nudged his head back towards his partner, "Can you put my wallet back into my jacket? I'm going to take Yuri back to the room."

The ballerina gave an uneasy nod, but stepped forward, fishing for a pocket on the outside of the over-large blazer sitting on the younger skater's frame. She caught sight of his barely-open eyes, staring straight into the fabric just under his eyelashes, but moved on to put the wallet away as told. She gave the clearly-troubled figure a gentle pat on his back before stepping back to give them room. Watching Viktor turn to go back the way they came, Minako followed from a short distance, heading to the elevators with them.

Nothing else was said until the ding was heard and the doors to the small chamber closed behind them, leaving them alone for a moment as the elevator started its descent.

"Sorry to leave you like that." Viktor commented quietly.

"...It's okay. I understand." She answered anxiously, leaning her back against a wall behind herself. She moved one hand up to pull the straps of her purse a little higher onto her shoulder.

When the elevator dinged a second time, it was on the 22nd floor, and the doors slid open to let the skaters off. Viktor turned his head again, about to bid his farewells and more apologies, but he felt a movement from his back, and then spotted the confused look on Minako's face. Yuri had reached to take her jacket at the shoulder, pinching it between his finger, and didn't seem keen to let it go.

What does he mean by this...? Viktor wondered, turning his eyes back to his husband, but unable to see much more than the gelled-down black hair where Yuri still had his head down. The elevator doors tried to close then, tapping against the outside of the Russian's shoe before halting and opening back up again. Slate eyes moved from Yuri to Minako again, Maybe this is Yuri's subtle way of saying he's not ready to talk about us yet... He turned his face forward and stepped out of the small room, pulling Minako with them as a result, "I guess he wants you to come with us for now."

Fingers held to the woman's coat until they were all out and away from those sliding doors, and Minako tepidly followed them back to their room. In that regard, it made getting back inside easier, since she was able to fish Viktor's wallet out again and grabbed the keycard. She pushed the door in and stepped aside, making room for the silver legend to walk within carrying his charge. The door closed with a click behind them, and Minako watched in continued confusion as Viktor sat back against the edge of the bed, letting Yuri go there to sit on his own.

He knelt before his exhausted spouse, reaching up with both hands to cradle Yuri's face, whispering a few words to him. Yuri reached up with just his right hand, curling his fingers around Viktor's wrist, nodding in response to the question before lowering his face and closing his eyes. Viktor stood up again then, sliding his hands down to his partner's shoulders as he moved, and turned to look at
Minako, "Make yourself comfortable. Apparently he wants you for something. Just give me a second to make a phone call."

"O-Oh..." She answered, feeling like she must've uttered that same sound half a dozen times in just the last few minutes alone. She nodded though and looked around hurriedly, finding the couch and singleton seat against the wall opposite the end of the bed, and moved towards them, setting her purse down on the circle-top table next to the pair of skate bags. Watching in perplexed silence, her eyes went from Yuri, who kept his head down, to Viktor, who was looking through the leather-bound room-service menu as he pulled it up from its place on the night-stand next to the phone. A flutter was growing in her stomach.

Viktor sat on the end of the bed next to his partner, leafing through the thin tome and running a finger across the pages. As Yuri nodded at a few whispers, the silver Russian went back to the phone and held it up against his ear, dialing the meager three numbers down to the concierge desk before pinching the receiver against his shoulder, "Yes, hi, I'd like to place a room-service order. Sure...Yes, all items will be à la carte. One tamago-kake-gohan, one miso soup, one hot green tea...oh, no, just plain white rice. Then I'll also need a bowl of cinnamon grits...you don't? Oatmeal's fine. With raisins. Heavy cream on the side, and a French coffee press, with sugar and cream. ...That's it. ...I'm aware. No, please put it separately on the room tab; I'll pay for it myself when we check out on Sunday night. Thanks. 30 minutes is fine; we're in for the night."

With the phone put down, and the menu folded and returned to its place on the night-stand, Viktor stood up and unbuttoned his vest, shrugging it off his shoulders to set it against one edge of the bed beside where he'd sat a moment before. His tie came after, and a few buttons of his shirt were undone after that. He glanced casually over towards Minako again as he raised his wrists to undo the buttons on the cuffs, and rolled the sleeves up to just above his elbows. A few moments later, he took his place a small ways behind his husband, placed a hand gently on the man's back and whispered something to him again. Yuri turned his head to hear, nodded lightly, and scooted backward, until he was sitting between his spouse's parted legs, and had his back flush against the Russian's chest. Arms went around the borrowed blazer, under Yuri's arms, and those opened legs curled under Yuri's own, crossing ankles just under his raised knees.

Viktor hugged him close for a moment, then lifted his head again to rest his chin against the back of one shoulder, "So what did you want Minako to stay for?"

Yuri tried to clear his throat, though it still felt raw from his earlier outburst. Tired eyes looked up from the crests of his knees, and then straight at the ballerina, "...I...wasn't entirely asleep on the train." He managed, though his voice was still somewhat hoarse. His words made both Minako and Viktor nervous, "I overheard what...Viktor was asking you about. I'm sure he...he thought it too, but...you were acting weird at YuTopia...long before we arrived, according to my mom."

"Wow, he must really not want to talk about earlier if he wants to open this can of worms right now... Viktor thought, though he dared not interrupt.

Minako just gaped at him, "I...wasn't aware that I..."

"She said...that you were impatient...checking the time every few minutes like...like you thought hours should've passed in the same span." Yuri went on, "Why?"

"Well I was excited to get the show on the road, I mean, I haven't been to Osaka in years. I was looking forward to the tri-"

"Please don't lie to me." Yuri cut her off, drawing a pained breath, sinking a little where he sat, as though he was just too exhausted to deal with anything more, "I can tell that you...haven't told my
mom about what you told Viktor at the Final."

Minako gave a rather serious stare then, and found her focus, sitting a bit straighter, "I can't."

"I was...going to ask you at dinner..." The younger man explained, blinking slowly as he spoke, "Before I got side-tracked."

"What was that all about anyw-"

"Have you thought about it since we got back from Detroit?" Yuri refused to let her derail his train of thought, "I saw that you were drinking...a few times at YuTopia..."

That just got an angry look from the woman, who reached for her purse again and rose to stand, "I'm not going to have someone half my age and not my same gender judge me over what I do with myself."

"Wait-" He followed, holding one hand up towards her, "I didn't mean that in a bad way... I'm not trying to scold you."

"What then?" She shot back, turning harshly, though staying put.

"I was planning...to ask you tonight anyway. Even if Viktor hadn't been here," He explained, watching carefully as Minako waited for a reason to leave, "I don't want...you to feel like you're being attacked. I just want to...know if there's anything I...we can do...to help..."

Viktor side-eyed the man from his vantage over a shoulder, but made no effort to stop the process. The can of worms was open now. Nothing could put them back.

27 minutes...

The anxious ballerina shot daggers at her questioner for half a heartbeat, but then loosened her vice-grip on the edge of her purse, and lowered her gaze, "...I tried to put it out of my mind." She admitted, "I didn't want to think about it."

"Avoiding it won't...make it go away." Yuri said simply, "You were...always there for me when I was younger. I want you to think that I can be here for you now, too. I may be younger, and I'll never be able to experience what you are...but I've always been on your team, haven't I? I am in this, too."

"You sure didn't seem like it before." Minako answered, staring indignantly at the floor.

That just made his heart hurt all over again, "...Minako-sensei..." He hesitated to speak again for a moment, but when Minako retook her seat, his anxiety calmed a little.

"When you whispered in my ear to never ask Viktor to keep secrets for me again," She elaborated, "I know what the words mean, but it still felt like you put up a wall between us."

"It's...a thing between him and I." Yuri explained, "At least at the Final...it wasn't a time for him to have to deal with more stress than he already had. What you said was kind of a big thing."

"I know. That's why I didn't want anyone else to know." Minako answered bitterly, "I told him only because he has a longer history with Mikhail than the rest of us. I thought maybe he'd understand how scared I was to have this problem...but he reacted completely different than I anticipated." She shot her head up and gestured towards him, "He tried to break Mikhail in half over it, for Christ's sake. Who does that!?"
"I'm literally sitting right here." Viktor grumbled, "You're talking like you think I somehow can't hear you."

"...Sorry..." Minako muttered under her breath, sinking a little where she sat.

"Someone who has a long and conflicted history with him." Yuri went on, trying to snuggle in a bit deeper, pulling his hands inside the long sleeves of Viktor's blazer, "That's a different conversation though...one I'm not sure he's ready to have with everyone else just yet. Suffice it to say tho-"

"...I nearly knocked him out because I was furious that he'd have the gall to knock one of my friends up." Viktor explained for himself, "He's been out of my life for most of my life. I just started to trust him after Trophée de France, and then he goes and does this, like all is forgiven."

Minako just leered at the man, "All my life I've heard people blame women for getting pregnant. I think you're the first to blame the man."

"Takes two." Viktor huffed, looking away in irritation.

"It was my fault." Minako explained, "Both times we messed around, it was me who started it. I thought I was long past the point of needing to care about protection, and I guess he was long past the point of thinking he'd ever be with anyone again, so neither of us bothered. Then I got sick one morning and he completely flipped out about it, asking me to marry him on the bathroom floor after I thought I was going to puke. It was absolutely the least romantic thing I've ever experienced in my life. If it hadn't actually happened to me, I'd think it was some sad, pathetic joke." She growled, reaching up to clasp her hand around the ring hanging at the base of a necklace, "He'd already been joking for a while about me marrying him, but it was always a joke up to then. Suddenly he's taking everything so seriously and it isn't fun anymore. Now I'm just scared. And this morning I-..." She lowered her face then, cupping her up-lifted hand against her eyes, "...I told myself I should stop running from this...and got a test to check..." Her hand went out in an exaggerated gesture again, and held up the ring and small fingers, "I got two tests." She corrected, "One of them came back positive, the other seemed broken. Now I'm just completely confused and I hate everything."

"...So that's why you were antsy." Yuri realized.

"No kidding." She whined, pulling both hands up to her face then, burying them against her palms as her elbows perched on the tips of her knees, "I don't want this." Viktor finally looked back again, pivoting his chin on the shoulder he'd rested it on, and saw the anguished state his friend was in. He suddenly felt rather guilty, "...You...don't?"

"Of course not! Why would I!? But if I terminate, everyone will hate me! If I don't though, I'll just hate myself!" She barked, looking up from her hands briefly before going back to them, "I spent my whole life childless for a reason! It was always so much easier to deal with kids when someone else took them home at the end of the day! I got to go home on my own, where it was quiet, and I could watch crap television until I passed out with a pint if I wanted!" Tears started forming in her eyes, though she tried her best to keep them there, "I could go out whenever I wanted, and sleep late if I had nowhere to be! I had no one to answer to but myself and no one counting on me at home to disappoint!"

Though Viktor had started his cuddle-pile to give Yuri comfort, it was now him wanting it, and he drew a little closer, crossing his legs a little tighter to bring the man in a bit further, "...I thought my Uncle might've done this to you on purpose. As a way of anchoring himself into my life, in a way that I couldn't undo if I wanted. I thought he was using you to get to me." He explained against the grey fabric of his blazer, "But further down...deep down...all I heard was Mari..."
"Mari?" Minako echoed in disbelief. Yuri was just as surprised, but said nothing.

"What she said at Worlds. About how you better jump on him because he was a vintage version of me." Viktor continued nervously, "I don't want to go into a whole lot of detail...but suffice it to say, I've met a lot of people in my life who only cared about me because of my status as a skater. After a while, I learned to keep those kinds of people out of my life...at arm's length. I didn't want people worming their way into me because I'm famous...because I knew they'd leave me as soon as I wasn't anymore. My Uncle was the first person in my family to turn up at events...and he got a lot of attention when people started noticing him. How many non-skaters get interviewed by sports media? None. Except the ones related to Viktor Nikiforov." He shook his head as he said his own name, as though mocking someone else's utterance of it. He grumbled and sighed, lowering his brow against Yuri's shoulder, "Iresented the attention he got. I was worried he would try to make a name for himself as 'Viktor's Uncle' rather than do the right thing and bow out. I warned him not to get too deeply involved into things. He was on his best behavior for months. Then I started calling him by the name I used to use on him when I was a kid, and started to like having him around...then that happened...and I just busted a fuse over it. He did exactly what I was worried he would do, and I was furious."

"That's an understatement." Minako huffed, "I wish I knew. I wouldn't have told you." She sighed and leaned back in her seat, "I can assure you that he wanted nothing to do with all the stuff I did to him. I dragged him into this mess. He was just trying to pick up the pieces and do the right thing."

Viktor nodded where he was, but didn't look up. He just felt a gentle pat on his head where Yuri had moved his hand.

"I'm sure he was worried about what you'd think." The ballerina went on, "That's probably the biggest reason why he was so reluctant with me. All the time we spent together, and he never really let me get too close. He was always really guarded. He said once that it was because he didn't want to be hurt again...and I believe that...but I think he just avoided mentioning what you had said because he knew we're friends."

"Maybe." Viktor sighed, lifting his head again finally, only to lean away and drop down to his back, leaving Yuri to half-sit against him where he couldn't follow. Those slate eyes stared at the spackled texture of the ceiling, "...The way you put it when you told me at the outdoor rink...I took it like you were bragging about it."

"That's not even close to what I me-" He said, cutting her off. He raised one arm and folded it over his eyes like a mask, "Yuri has been trying to get me to be more honest about how I feel, and I'm really trying. Some of the things I feel are bound to sound ridiculous to anyone outside my head though...so...just listen, so I can get it out."

Yuri turned his head a little, looking back over one shoulder as he leaned his back against the side of the man's thigh.

"...When we were in France, and Sophia ran into us...she dropped this subtle bomb on both Yuri and I, that she had a young daughter. It was as though she was trying to use the kid as a weapon, like the idea of me finding out I had a kid out there would make me be responsible...to man up and be a father...to kick Yuri to the curb, and get back with her for the sake of that child." Viktor explained, keeping his arm over his eyes, "For a nanosecond, I hated her for saying those words...but then I realized, she said the kid was 6...and we hadn't been together in 8 years...so there was no chance she was mine. Still, the idea that someone would use my bloodline against me like that really angered me. I just kept it to myself because it turned out to be nothing." He pulled his arm off his eyes,
settling it above his head, brushing his bangs out of his eyes as he moved, "Then when you told me in Detroit that you might be pregnant with my Uncle's kid...I had that same flash of anger...but this time, it was real. It was lasting. The only thing I thought I could do was punish the person who attacked me like this...and that was Mikhail. Using his family ties to me, our bloodline, to forcibly bind us all together in a way I could never undo or change. Over time, that resentment for him has kind of...spread out, into a general sense of annoyance for me. It merged with what Mari said at Worlds...and I started to think you might...do this to me, too, because of the bloodline."

Minako was giving him an incredulous, almost offended stare, but so long as those crystal eyes were staring up, she knew Viktor wouldn't see her anger.

"Between the girlfriends I've had who only cared about me because of my fame...and the random women who would joke about their ovaries exploding at the sight of me, or that they wanted to carry my child, or any number of lady-related pseudo-compliments that...I suppose...wouldn't really bother most people...after hearing them for so long and so often, I started to get really annoyed by them. If I wasn't a famous skater, they wouldn't be saying those things. So..." Viktor turned his head against the blanket, and looked as well towards the ballerina as he could, past the edge of his left knee, "...Even though I knew in my heart you would never think about it that way...I couldn't stop the words from rattling in my head. 'She's only doing this because Mikhail's my Uncle. If he or I were anyone else, she'd never have bothered.'"

"Well, let me say that if you weren't Viktor Nikiforov, I'd have slapped you straight in the mouth for thinking that." She argued.

"...Hmph...I suppose I could count that as the one time my name and fame did me a favor." He went back to looking at the ceiling, "Thank you, for not being as shallow as everyone else."

Yuri looked back at her as Viktor finished, "...How many tests did you buy?"

"Nearly all of them." She answered, throwing herself back against the seat, "So...probably 10?"

It crossed Yuri's mind to ask why, but it didn't seem so important as the seconds wore on, "And you did two this morning."

"Yeah." She said in a monotone, entirely unimpressed with her situation, "The first was the one that came back positive. The second didn't give me anything, so I just threw them both away and stormed off to YuTopia in a rage about how it seemed like the universe was taunting me. I walked the whole way, hoping to calm down before I got there."

"And the rest?"

She hesitated a moment, but then held her purse out in front of her with both hands...and dropped it to the floor before crossing her arms again, "There."

Yuri looked at the bag on the floor, then to Viktor, who just looked back at him briefly before pushing up onto an elbow. He drew in a breath, and leaned over the edge of the bed, pulling up the bag to his lap. Since she'd offered it, in her own way, Yuri opened it up and reached within, finding 6 more single-strip test kits. He hummed a quiet sigh to himself, and rose up to his feet, offering his free hand to the woman, "Come on."

She gaped at him, then at his hand, and turned her head to give an exceptionally skeptical look, "What are you doing?"

"You'll do all the rest of these, since you have them anyway." He explained, "Majority rules. If
they're all inconsistent, or there isn't a real majority, then maybe it's too early to know. So...come on.”

It took a moment to process the words, but Minako raised both hands up in surrender, and accepted the one to help her to her feet. She followed Yuri to the bathroom nervously, and watched him unbox the six test kits, setting them all out in a line on the vanity next to the sink. He read the instructions on one, and reached for a glass cup that was wrapped in paper. He pulled off the hotel logo from the cup and turned it right-side up, then handed it to the woman, "Use this to get your sample...then dip each test strip in it, and come out. Don't wait for them to change. I'll come back and look so you don't have to. You trust me, right?"

"More than these things." She answered, taking the cup.

"Flush what you don't need, rinse, and put the cup on the floor. We'll get housekeeping to take it away tomorrow." Yuri explained, leaving the small room and pulling the door closed behind him.

For a moment, Minako just stared at the cups, then at the test strips on the counter to her right. She swallowed nervously.

...No wonder Viktor says Yuri's in charge now...

Mentally drained, but knowing there was still more to come, Yuri went back the way he'd come. He shrugged out of the over-large coat and hung it up in the closet as he passed, then moved to the corner where the short front hall and bed-area met. He spotted Viktor, lifting his head at his return, and moved towards him, crawling up onto the edge of the bed and shuffling forward until he could drop down on top of the man. He threw one arm over the Russian's chest as he rested his head against one shoulder, but stayed quiet there.

Viktor pulled his free right arm up and folded it in to find his partner's elbow, cupping his palm over it lightly as he twisted around to kiss the man's head, "...I wasn't expecting this."

"...Sorry..."

"Did you really plan to have this talk with her this way?"

Yuri nodded. For a moment, he just held still where he was, but after a few quiet breaths, he lifted up, and propped himself up against one elbow, looking directly at his husband's face for the first time since they'd come back to the room, "This was bad timing." He explained quietly, his voice still a bit hoarse from earlier. He pulled the arm he'd draped over Viktor's chest in closer to himself, and flattened his palm out over the man's heart, "I'm not trying to avoid our talk."

He had so many more things to say or ask, but Viktor knew that Minako would walk out at any second, so he avoided it for the moment. Instead, he just moved one hand to settle over the other to pat gently behind his spouse's head, and nodded quietly. To his great relief, Yuri moved in closer and kissed him, assuaging his fears, at least for a little while. They heard the door seconds after that, and Yuri pulled away again, giving one last solemn look before he lifted off again to leave the bed.

Viktor watched as the two exchanged quiet glances, and Yuri moved out of sight, rounding the corner to the bathroom as Minako retook her seat. She pulled her knees up, hooking her ankles on the front of the chair, wrapping her arms around her legs and holding tightly as she worried and waited.

Two minutes felt like an eternity, but eventually, Yuri came back out again. He sat on the foot of the bed directly in front of the woman, his face giving no indication as to what he saw. He just looked on
with those gentle cherry-hazel eyes, "...No matter what the results are," He started, "No matter what you decide to do with them...we support you."

"If it's positive, and I decide to get rid of it?" She asked pointedly.

"We support you." Yuri said immediately, "If that's your choice, then as far as the rest of the world is concerned, your morning sickness in Canada was just an upset stomach and this whole thing was just a false alarm."

"...And if I keep it?" She asked instead.

"We support you." He said again, turning his head slightly as he felt his partner shuffling forward on the bed to take his place beside him, one arm snaking around his back, "They say it takes a village. We are the village. You, and me, and Viktor...Mikhail, his girls, even Yurio now. My mom, my dad...I'm sure my sister would want to be part of things, too. Whatever you decide, you are not alone."

Minako drew a nervous breath, and unclamped her arms from where they'd clenched around her knees. She lowered her feet to the floor, and gave a vocal exhale, "...Okay... I'm ready."

Yuri gave a momentary glance to his husband, feeling a hand rub against his back for reassurance, and turned back to the woman waiting in front of him. He nodded and drew a breath as well, "It's positive."

The words rang out like the horn of a fast-moving train, blaring right in their ears and passing by like a banshee's scream, eventually fading to nothing in the distance. For a while, Minako didn't react. Yuri lowered down by leaning forward, trying to see her face, but she hid it well behind her hair. Just as he reached his hand to set it on her knee, he felt a tear fall against his skin.

"...Minako-sensei..."

"...I...was so sure I knew what I wanted to do..." She said, her voice cracking as she spoke, "But now I feel like I don't know anything."

"You don't have to decide anything right now." Yuri explained, "If this started over NHK weekend, then it's only been 3 weeks."

"...How can I even think to make this choice without telling Mikhail first...?" She asked, lifting her head even as tears rolled down her cheeks, "He knew before everyone..."

"You can tell him," Viktor said, finally speaking up, "But it's not his choice. His last chance to have an opinion on this ended when he agreed to sleep with you. He went into this as an informed party."

Minako just rose up from her seat, snuffling back her tears as she rubbed a few away that had escaped her willpower. She gathered up her purse again and made for the door, "I need air..."

"Wait, Minako-sensei..." Yuri rose to give chase, and Viktor after him. Without a second thought, everyone had shoes and coats on again, and Yuri stepped out into the hall, "I don't want you to go alone. We'll walk back with you."

She couldn't think of what to say, so Minako just nodded, sniffing another breath as she turned her eyes down.

The door clicked behind Viktor, but just then, he made a weird sound, "Damnit...the room-service people are going to be here any minute...I completely forgot already..."
"Just stay." The ballerina said simply, "...I'll be fine. My hotel's 5 minutes from here."

"Are you sure? This isn't exactly news to be alone with." Yuri worried, "Do you want to stay with us for a little while?"

"...No...I want to go..." She shook her head, then looked back and reached one hand up to squeeze her former student's shoulder, "I appreciate all this... Thank you for listening to me... I want to be alone now. Maybe I'll call Mikhail later."

He didn't like it, but Yuri nodded, "...Okay... Text me when you get back so we know you got there safely."

"I will." She agreed, then twisted on a heel to start making her way down the hall. She walked at a swift pace, and was out of sight rather quickly.

"...She's the complete opposite of you." Viktor commented idly, "Maybe that's why I thought you were interested in her before."

Yuri shot him a look as the door opened again, "She's older than my mom. And you're the complete opposite of me, too."

The Russian just pushed the door open, and moved to step through, "...I suppose." He reached his free arm up and offered his hand to his partner, "Come on back inside. The last time you got as upset as you were earlier, you got yourself sick by sitting in the snow too long. I'm still your coach, so I can't risk it."

Yuri nodded and took a reluctant step forward, taking the hand with his own. He paused just outside the door though and looked back down the hall for a moment. He huffed a nervous breath, and quietly said a prayer for his friend.
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED THIRTY NINE

Going back into the room felt strange. The combination of nerves rising in anticipation of the conversation to come, after the highs, lows, and the lingering, trepidatious worry after sudden end of the conversation prior, gave way to a tumultuous roiling in Yuri's gut. Still, he tried to keep his head on straight as he pushed the door closed behind himself and started peeling off his jacket and scarf again. His shoes hadn't even been laced yet when they ran into the hall after Minako, so he just nudged them off with a toe against each heel, and pushed them together at the base of the wall. As Viktor moved out of the way, Yuri put his coat and scarf up in the closet, but paused a moment, lingering in the sliding glass doorway. His eyes moved across the closet's contents; the 6 different garment bags with their skating outfits, the pair of long coats Viktor had brought, his own singular jacket, plus each of their Olympic tracksuits, but eventually settled on the grey blazer he'd borrowed earlier, and reached for it, fumbling into each pocket until he found both his partner's wallet, and his glasses.

As he pushed the sliding panel across to close the closet, he caught sight out the corner of his eye where Viktor was starting to pull the rest of his shirt off, facing towards the windows as hands moved from one button to the next in the front.

"...So..." The Russian started, looking down to watch his fingers undo the last of the white glossy buttons, "...What do you think she's doing to do?"

Yuri hesitated a moment, but shook his head and stepped into the room, "I really have no idea. I wish I could call my mom and ask her what she thinks, but that would defeat the whole purpose of Minako-sensei not talking to her." He explained, moving to sit on one corner of the bed, "It's a really complicated situation."

"...Yeah."

"I had no idea the whole thing upset you in so many different ways."

"Well..." Viktor said quieter, pulling the bottom of the white button-down from where it had been tucked into his slacks, then let his arms go lax at his sides, "I think it just built up layers over time. When I first found out, I was acting on impulse...I'm not even really sure I consciously thought of all the things I said before, as reasons for why I wanted to knock my Uncle's block off. I just couldn't think straight at all."

"Speaking of the things you said..." Yuri started, rolling down on his back until he could stretch out on the pillow-top blanket, "All the stuff you mentioned about how people behave because of who you are...I suddenly remembered something Mikhail told me once."

"Hm?" The Russian turned his head, hooking his thumbs into the pockets of his slacks as he looked over a shoulder.

"Way back at our wedding party, at the shrine." He explained, "When you were off on your own taking photos with the fans that had turned up. Mikhail talked to me then. He mentioned a lot of things...some about you and I...some about him and Minako-sensei. But the thing that sticks out to me now, after hearing the things you said before, is that...he himself was bothered by the idea that others would only see him as an older version of you."
"I guess she's given up trying to style your hair like Viktor's, too?" Yuri pointed at where it was parted down the center in the man's usual affect, rather than over his left eye like his nephew's, "I can't say I've noticed it look that way in a little while."

"She still tries sometimes." Mikhail shrugged, "But a guy can only stand a lady's attention for so long when she's only giving it because you look like someone else that she already crushes on."

Yuri deadpanned him, "Minako-sensei doesn't have a thing for Viktor...she's a year older than my own mom."

"She'd be crazy not to pine for him! Look at him!" He made a wide gesture, as though dramatically presenting the younger figure in the distance.

"...Not seriously."

The Russian sighed and laughed at the same time, pulling his hands back to the warmth of his pockets, "No, I suppose not. There's a difference between loving a celebrity...and loving a friend, family member, or intimate partner."

"After loving someone so deeply, giving up every secret, exposing yourself body and soul to this person...for that to be taken away from you...you never even get to say goodbye, because that person is just...gone. Can you ever really feel safe loving someone else that way again?"

"No..."

"The opposite can be true, too." Mikhail went on, "And that's the problem I face with Minako. She sees me as just an older version of Viktor. But I'm more than what my person-suit looks like. Who I look like. I'm not Viktor."

"...I know..."

"I can't be sure that Minako-sensei wasn't originally attracted to Mikhail because of his resemblance to you...but I know she wouldn't toy with someone for this long for such a dumb reason. Eventually, the novelty of your resemblance would fade, and she would have had to start to see him for who he is, not for who he shares DNA with." Yuri reasoned, "At least, from what Mikhail told me...he has a really big complex for wanting to make sure people know who he really is. If it's not because he's trying to prove to you that he's trustworthy, then it's trying to prove to Minako-sensei that he's not you."

Viktor listened carefully, but kept his eyes on the sight of the window in front of him, and the mid-afternoon sky of Osaka just outside.

"If Mikhail had been here just now to see Minako-sensei's reaction to the news...I'm sure he'd be extremely relieved. If she was just some vapid, mindless trog who only cared about you or him as deeply as a back-stage groupie might...then she would be absolutely over the moon about this news."

Yuri continued, still looking up at the textured ceiling, "But she's not. She's coming at it like the same person I always knew her to be, since long before you or him ever turned up. She's her own person with her own goals and ambitions for her life, and this news throws a big wrench into her plans. She's not like Sophia, using another life to take advantage of people who are rich or famous."
"...That was unfair of me to say about her, honestly." The Russian finally said, eyes lowering down to the window-sill, "The very first time Sophia even mentioned her daughter, she also said that she was going into kindergarten. She had no time to hover that trap over my head." He turned on a heel and looked towards his partner, "I only brought it up as an example of things I worry about. Sophia's a decent person...she and I just weren't meant to be. I don't blame her for that."

Hazel eyes looked on into blue, but Yuri eventually averted his gaze upward again and closed his eyes, "...I know."

Viktor held still for a moment, unsure how to take that response. Eventually, he took a step forward, climbing onto the far corner of the bed and making a slow crawling advance across the wide top towards his spouse, dropping down onto his chest and flattening out a few inches away from the man, "You don't think I'm crazy, do you?"

"I can only say that I know more about you now than I did earlier today." Yuri answered, "And that what I know now expands on my understanding of what makes you tick." He turned his head slightly and parted one eye to look, meeting the nervous expression on Viktor's face. After a moment, he twisted entirely onto his side, curving himself into a half-moon shape as he reached his left hand forward to comb his fingers through silver hair, "I will always be on your side in any contest with the world, even if you're dead wrong."

Viktor nodded lightly, lifting himself up to slouch over his elbows. As slender fingers brushed against his cheek, he reached up to lightly clasp the hand that moved with them, kissing them, then the palm. He held there a moment and closed his eyes, drawing in breath between his husband's fingers, but soon let the hand go to shimmy a bit closer to the man it belonged to.

Yuri rolled slightly more to his back as the Russian's right arm went over him, and loomed quietly overhead, looking down on him quietly. He felt the gentle brush of a nose against his own, and the warmth of each breath across his cheek, before the silver legend touched his brow down and waited there.

PING

The noise was muffled, but in the quiet of the room, nothing could sound more clear than the beep of a newly received text message.

"...That's probably Minako." Viktor thought aloud, lifting his head up again and opening those crystal eyes a crack.

TAK TAK TAK

"...And that's probably dinner 2.0." Yuri added, turning his head slightly towards the sound.

"Probably."

They reluctantly pulled up from where they'd been so comfortable. Yuri made his way to the front door as Viktor re-threaded one button in the middle of the front of his shirt. With the door opened and the usual greetings given, Yuri ushered the two hotel staffers in, carrying two trays with plates covered in silver-chrome domes. They were set down on the long desk that held up the television, and with nothing else needed, the pair made their way back into the hall again. Viktor stepped towards the trays to sort out which was which, but it became rather clear in a hurry since one tray had a small dish with a single raw egg sitting in it, so he pulled the dome off the other tray, and breathed in the scent of cinnamon and coffee.
Yuri went for his jacket in the closet, pulling out his phone to see the confirmation text from Minako that he'd asked for. He thumbed a quick reply as he walked back into the main part of the room, lifting his eyes in time to see his partner putting the two trays onto the flat of the foot of the bed. With only the entertainment-stand and a single, small, circular-top table to speak of, there was really nowhere else to eat, other than on the bed itself. Yuri tossed his phone towards the pillows before taking a seat and crossing his legs, looking at the comfort-fare Viktor had ordered for him.

"So now I'm curious," Viktor started, getting the younger man's attention as he was reaching for the raw egg, "In the mere days between Worlds and our wedding party, what...in my Uncle's infinite wisdom...could he have possibly had to say about us?"

Yuri hesitated to answer for a moment, cracking the eggshell on the rim of the dish it had come in, and letting its contents drop directly onto the bowl of steaming white rice next to it. He dropped the empty shells back in the cup, and wiped his hand off on a burgundy cloth napkin before reaching for the neatly-bundled wooden chopsticks, "A few things." He started, picking up the rice bowl in his left hand, using the chopsticks in the right to start stirring the raw egg into the mix, "Some of it may help to explain why I got so offended at the idea of the toy you asked for."

"...Ah..." The Russian huffed, twisting to cross his own legs in front of his food as well, but reached instead to plunge down on his coffee press before going after anything else, "I guess that spares me the awkward feeling of having to bring that up again myself."

"You're back to just calling him just Uncle." Yuri noticed, "You were at least calling him by his name for a little while. Did he get downgraded even further?"

"The longer I'm mad at him, the closer to baseline he gets." Viktor shrugged, pouring the brown liquid into a small white ceramic cup. He set the press down and reached for the small dish of sugars, dropping three cubes into the cup, "I don't want to get side-tracked though."

"...No." Yuri agreed, fishing the first bite from his egg-rice as his partner stirred cream into his drink, "Anyway...he told me back then that he could tell I was a pretty emotional person. Not like most guys, who are trained from birth to hold it all in for the sake of their pride. He knew...that to me, there was no distinction between touching me and touching my heart. I can't do one without the other."

"Mh." Viktor hummed, taking his first sip.

"I shoved off Tess back in the day because we had no emotional connection to each other, but she still tried touching me like we did. I generally don't let anyone get too close...and it was like that for my whole life, up until you." Yuri explained, pointing one finger at the man with his chopstick-holding hand, "Anyway though, I forget exactly how Mikhail put it...but it was something like 'the idea of physical touch to [me] without an emotional connection is basically meaningless, maybe even repulsive.' And he's not wrong..." Yuri said, putting the rice-bowl down to grab for the miso soup next to it, using the chop-sticks to stir the broth and mix it all together again.

"I hope you don't get upset at me for saying and asking this..." Viktor started, making Yuri immediately nervous, "...But were you abused as a kid or something?"

For once, it was Yuri who spewed in surprise, though thankfully he'd barely gotten more than a sip of miso before he heard the words, and he quickly grabbed for the cloth napkin again.

"The kind of people who avoid physical contact with others are usually the sort who were molested as kids. People are supposed to be highly social...but you back away, even run from physical contact, except from people you've known for a really long time. I mean...you wouldn't even
let me get close for ages... I was actually telling my father that at NHK..." Viktor explained, leaving Yuri a bit dumbfounded, "That I spent nearly a year trying to convince you that it was okay to be with me. That I wouldn't hurt you...that it was safe..."

"I wasn't." Yuri answered simply.

The Russian just looked at him.

"I wasn't." Yuri said more firmly, "I was just chunky as a kid and I resented how much people made fun of me for it... Why would I want people touching me if they can't even look at me without finding my form objectionable?"

Viktor's eyes got small to hear it, and he could hear the echoes of his own teasing rattling around in his head.

'Yuri gains weight easily, so he was only ever allowed to eat it when he won a competition. Isn't that right?'
'Oh? So you've eaten this recently then?'
'...Yes yes...I eat it often...'
'Why? You haven't won anything. With that pig's body of yours, lessons would be meaningless. You need to get back to your weight at last year's Grand Prix Final, at the least...or I can never coach you. Until then...no more katsudon. Okay, Little Piggy?'

'Little Piggy can't get on the ice until he's lost the weight!'

'Even diamonds start as coal. Little Piggy just needed a little pressure to shine.'

Yuri saw the Russian's expression change, and it looked as though all the blood left his already-pale face, "...Viktor...?"

"Oh my god I friend-zoned myself."

His cheeks went red, but Yuri remained quiet, simply staring straight at the man with an unimpressed look on his face.

"No wonder you didn't want me touching you!" Viktor went on, "I basically showed up out of nowhere and then immediately mashed down as hard as I could on the biggest 'Do Not Touch' button you had!"

"...Sort of..." Yuri deadpanned him.

"Why didn't you say anything!?"

The miso bowl was set down gently, and the chopsticks next to it. Yuri crossed his arms and closed his eyes, "Because you were my hero. You showed up claiming you were going to be my coach. You had only been at YuTopia for an hour when you started saying all those things...what was I going to do? Tell you off? I didn't know your buttons, and you didn't know mine...so I let it slide." He opened his eyes a sliver, "Call it a learning curve."

"That was some curve!"

"...Mhm."

"Ahhh now I feel terrible!" Viktor whined, taking on a more serious look than before, "...Yuri...! I am so sorry...!"
"...I already accepted your apology for this. Last year."

"Yeah but you didn't explain it like that back then though!" The Russian insisted, "...And then I used that name on you again at the airport after NHK..." He lowered his head and cradled it in his hands in shame, "...I can't believe I did it so often... I had no idea how much it hurt you..."

Yuri just drew a quiet breath, watching his partner carefully. He leaned forward, an elbow propped up on his knee, and reached across both of their trays to pat the man's head, "I forgive you. ...Again, I guess..."

"And now I have to apologize about this whole 'sex toy scandal' too..." Viktor sighed, "I was just gauging you for a reaction when I suggested it..."

"...Gauging me for a reaction?" Yuri echoed, looking on skeptically, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Ahh...erm...well..." The anxious figure stammered, "I mean, there were a lot of reasons I could give for why I thought the toy was a good idea...especially since you ended up getting one... But, at least in the beginning, it was...just a test..."

"What are you talking about? Viktor..."

"It's because of the way things are at the Olympics..." The Russian attempted, reaching for the bowl of raisin-cinnamon oatmeal in front of him, but instead of picking it up, he just toyed with the spoon, poking at the raisins thoughtlessly, "Every four years, the best Winter Sports athletes all from all across the globe converge onto one place...and there's...well... A lot of...inappropriate liaisons there?"

Yuri gave another unimpressed look, but now he was worried as well as anxious, "What are you saying...?"

Viktor was hesitant to explain, but knew he couldn't back out of it, "...You said you've never gone, and I was trying to see how much I'd probably have to prepare you for. The things you're going to see and experience there. Suggesting the toy was basically just...Phase 1 of the conditioning process. When you actually went through with the idea and got the damn thing, I thought that meant you were ready for Phase 2..."

Yuri reached up and rubbed his forehead, "I'm just getting more confused."

"Sorry!" Viktor sighed, "I was trying to see how used to everything you were... The last thing I want to do is show up at the Olympic with you and have 30-some athletes all wanting to...do stuff..." His words trailed nervously, "I mean, I was a bachelor back then...four years ago... And I hadn't been with anyone in a long time...so...I was...a bit irresponsible...?" He watched his husband bury his face in his hands, "Ahh no Yuri! I would never do that now! I swear it!"

"But you did...with '30-something athletes'..." The younger skater repeated.

"I was really popular! But I was also really lonely! For nearly 3 weeks, I wasn't alone!"

"You said you've only had three girlfriends!"

"And that's true!" Viktor affirmed, "But it's like you said earlier...there's a big difference between intimacy and just sex! That whole thing was just sex!"

Yuri just groaned into his palms.
"...I'm sorry...I...wish I could be the man you thought I was...

"...I...know I have no right to upset to hear about this... I should've expected it." The younger figure tried to explain, rubbing his eyes with his finger, "...I understand better than most what it's like to feel completely alone, even when you're in a crowd. I...I get it."

"...They didn't mean anything to me..." Viktor went on, "I didn't keep up with a single one of them after the Games... I just, need you to be mentally prepared for people asking or offering..."

Yuri finally lifted his face and gazed straight across to his partner, looking directly into those slate eyes, "You said at Worlds that you would never consider inviting anyone else into bed with us...please don't tell me you've changed your mind and were hoping...?"

"What?" Viktor was half-offended and sat straighter, "No, of course not! Nothing about what I said then has changed. But people who haven't talked to me since the last Games may not be aware of how things have changed. They might not know I'm married, and even if they do, they might not care. There may be times where total strangers come up and grab you or I the same way Chris does...maybe even more aggressively and insistent. It's fine when it's him because we both know he's just teasing, and he knows what our boundaries are. But those other people don't."

Still listening, but unhappily, Yuri nodded lightly.

"To those certain kinds of athletes...going to the Games is just one great big booty call..." Viktor continued, his voice a bit softer then, "They don't care who you are or where your loyalties lie. All they know is that they don't know whether you're willing or not until they ask. When they see me, they're going to ask, because I have said yes before. When they see you, they're going to see you like a new, fresh piece of meat. I promise on my life that I'll try to keep the ones I know about at bay so you don't have to deal with it, but there's bound to be a lot of new faces. It's...kind of one of the Olympics' worst kept secrets. I'm certain it happens at the Summer Games, too."

"...So what...do we do now?" Yuri asked, reaching grudgingly towards his cup of hot tea, "Since I'm clearly not advancing beyond your aforementioned Phase 1.

"We've done all we can, in that case." Viktor answered, "...It's just a matter of time, now. You're aware of what might happen and you can ready yourself for it. You know I'll never agree to solicitations, so I don't want you to worry about it if and when they ask. If event staffs throw condoms at us, don't get worked up. They know what's coming...they just don't know who's participating. And it's not even a lot of people...but we're going to be there for 2 straight weeks, basically living at the Olympic Village. It'll be a lot easier to handle now since we're going together...but you can imagine now why I was so reluctant to figure out what I wanted to do before the RSF fired me... I was having a lot of anxiety about being away from you for any period of time... Things can happen so fast there."

"...Yeah..."

"But I don't want you spending the next two months worrying yourself sick over what's going to happen when we get there. The Olympics can be a lot of fun. This is just...one tiny little part of the whole experience." The Russian tried to reassure, "One that I know, especially now, you're particularly sensitive about..."

Yuri huffed a laugh, surprising Viktor a little. He shook his head and lifted his tea mug, gesturing it at his husband, "So are you."

Realizing, the silver legend managed a wry smile of his own, and raised his coffee cup, "No
one touches my Yuri."

"And no one touches my Viktor."

"Kanpai."
Outside the train, the world was nothing more than a white blur. The ride's singular hot meal, which was really nothing more than a slightly-upscale microwave dinner, was set out in front of each passenger on their fold-down table. For every bite that Yurio was able to get though, Potya stole two, continuously pawing up at his fork as he brought it close to dislodge and claim whatever he had.

"...I guess I'm not eating..." He sighed, leaning back and abandoning his fare, and watching as the fluffy ragdoll went to town lapping up the gravy from the dish.

"Here-" Nikki started, shoving the last bit of a bun into her mouth like a squirrel, then reaching her hands towards the blonde's cat, "I'll take her."

"She's already claimed half my lunch...no point trying to claim it back." He shrugged, "What she hasn't eaten already will just taste like cat-butt anyway."

Viktoria coughed suddenly, trying not to choke. She bumped her fist against her chest to clear it up.

"What? It's true." Yurio huffed, "I love my cat to bits but she still li-"

"No, no, no...stop...no." Mikhail suddenly interrupted, waving a hand across the front of his neck, "No gross stuff at the table."

"...Alright alright..." The teen grumbled, turning eyes down to where Potya was licking her whiskers. He pat the feline's head affectionately, "It's okay. I love you, even if you do lick your own butt."

"YURI-" Mikhail barked desperately. He felt a sudden buzz in his coat pocket though, and went to reach for where he knew his phone was vibrating, "No dessert for a...yeesh..." He paused in his thoughts as he spotted the Caller ID on his phone's screen, but thinking nothing of it, he smiled and answered, "Greetings and salutations, lovely lady."

Yurio watched the man quietly. He turned to glance to the left as he felt an elbow nudge against him.

"You can have some of mine if you're hungry." Nikki offered, "I only ate the bun..."

"Don't like the rest?"

"Ehhh..." She answered demurely, "My stomach isn't adapting to Russian cuisine very well. At least, not this kind..." She poked at the edge of the small tray.

"This isn't exactly cuisine..." Yurio pointed out, "Maybe my grandpa will have time to make pirozhki for you when we get to Mosco-"

"Vikki, let me out please." Mikhail's voice interrupted as the man rose from his seat. The oldest teen quickly shimmied from her seat, mouth too full to object or question it, but when it finally cleared, Mikhail was already wedging himself into a corner at the far end of their train car.

"...What was that all about?" Nikki wondered aloud, leaning into the aisle to look past the edge of their seats, "I hope everything's okay."
"I wonder if something happened in Osaka." Yurio commented, "That was Okukawa calling him."

Viktoria retook her seat anxiously, and the three teens whispered speculations among themselves. A pair of slate eyes watched them curiously, but quietly.

"Oh wow, they're having a whole concert on the ice tomorrow." Yuri commented, looking at the Opening Ceremonies event sheet, "It's just a cover band, but still...this ought to be a lot of fun."

"The JSF really hauled ass to put this together." Viktor added, looking at the schedule over his partner's shoulder, "I don't think any of this was scheduled before."

"Guess they're really rolling out the red carpet for you."

"You really think this is just because of me?"

Yuri shrugged, "They didn't do this for me last year."

The Osaka Municipal Central Gymnasium was anything but a small locale. Located directly across the Aji River from the hotel complex and Universal Studios, it looked like a cinnamon roll from the outside, with a swirl pattern on its domed roof, and well-gardened trails of gradually-rising walk-paths that circled around the entire complex.

"Now I'm just going to feel guilty if I can only give the JSF one full year." Viktor sighed dramatically, pulling off his husband's back to look around the planning hall. It was already buzzing with activity, with dozens of event staffers and participants alike wandering through. His eyes caught on the sight of a gaggle of pre-teens following their coach around, "To be young again."

"If you were that young again, you would have the benefit of getting to walk around normally..." Yuri added, thumbing behind them at the swarm of reporters that had been hinged on their every movement since they first stepped foot on the complex, "I can't even pick my nose without them getting a photo of it."

Viktor laughed, draping an arm across the man's shoulders to pull him along, "If they did, it would be the most adorable nose-picking photo in history. But just think..." He leaned in closer to speak quieter, "In a few weeks, the photos these guys take are going to be posters tacked to the wall of some young aspiring skater's room."

That just made Yuri's face go red, "...I can only imag-"

"YUUURI-KUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUN!"

"Oh here it comes..."

The rumble of footsteps shook the ground like a stampede, but when the spunky young athlete finally came into sight, the two older skaters could see why. Running right at them, coming on the teen's heels, were a number more reporters, other competitors, and choreographer's alike. Minami stopped mere feet away, barely halting his advance before colliding straight into his idol, "YURI-KUN!"

"Minami-kun." He answered nervously, "...You're really out of breath. How long have you been running?"

"Five minutes!" The teen answered, giving something of a salute, as though he were reporting to a
commanding officer, "I heard Asahi-kun was coming back and I knew I had to find you! Have you seen him yet!?"

"No… Viktor and I saw his name on the chalkboard at Starbucks earlier though so we knew he was coming," Yuri explained, then reaching his free arm forward, "But before all that...it's good to see you again. It's been a while."

Minami's light brown eyes opened wide, and looked watery already, throwing the older skater off a little. Before anything else could be said though, the younger figure lurched forward, attaching himself nigh-parasitically to Yuri's chest, uttering out a high-pitched squeal of delight. When he felt the outstretched arm coming around his back, the teen could hardly hold himself up, "I'm getting hugged by Yuriiiiii~! This is the greatest day of my life!"

"He does have the best hugs." Viktor said happily, pulling the man's head aside to kiss it, "Right?"

"I can't honestly critique my own hugs." Yuri smiled anxiously, turning his eyes up at his spouse, "But if I had to rank them, I think yours are better."

The Russian just grinned and threw both arms over him. With Minami redoubling his efforts, Yuri was sandwiched between two overly excited skaters, hugging him tightly.

"Okay okay...I can't breathe now…!" He laughed, wiggling to try and get free. He was sure that a million different photos were taken before either of them finally let him go so they could walk again. They ambled around the building slowly after that, just taking in the sights casually for a little while, "So do you know why Asahi-kun was gone so long? I was sure he retired."

Minami, dramatic as always, whipped up a hand to speak behind it quietly, "I heard there was a death in his family; someone really close."

"Oh, so he was out on bereavement. I guess that makes sense. So he's better now?"

"No idea. Haven't seen him with my own eyes yet. I heard he doubled down after his official leave ended. He got a new coach and choreographer and means to come back with a vengeance." The teen explained, "I bet he thought you were the only one he had to worry about beating! I wish I could've been there to see the look on his face when he found out Viktor's on our team now, too!" He had his hands balled up into fists just under his chin, all but squealing with excitement. It faded suddenly though, and he looked up with those big brown doe-eyes to his idol, "...A lot of people are really sad though, too."

"Sad?" Yuri echoed, "...Why?"

"Because Viktor's on our team now."

The two older skaters glanced at one another, then back at Minami.

"Since Yuri won Gold at Worlds last year, Japan can send 3 people to Worlds this season. Most people were pretty sure there would be at least 2 open spots to compete for, but with Asahi-kun coming back...and now Viktor, too..." The blonde explained with a sigh, hunching over dramatically, then flipping back up and around to point at the both of them, "You guys are a force of nature! I've actually seen a few people cry about this!"

"...That's..." Yuri started, his brow furrowed, "I don't want people to feel like that."

"What are you talking about!?" Minami harped, looking determined, "The people who are all upset about this don't know how lucky they are! They'll never be the best if they don't see what kind of
opportunity just bricked them in the face!"

Viktor smirked, but Yuri was still a bit confused.

"No one will ever push themselves to be better if they don't have someone to show them how it's done!" The younger skater exclaimed, "Most of these people will never see a big International competition, so the idea of competing against the Big Guns like Viktor, or even Yuri Plisetsky, is a fantasy! I wouldn't be shocked if I found out Asahi-kun was coming back because of what you achieved!" He pointed straight between Yuri's eyes, making them cross slightly, "The only people who can win are the ones who aren't satisfied with being left in the dust! You have to want it, crave it...be willing to fight for it!"

The Russian stepped forward and gathered the petite younger figure up in his free arm, holding him up against his side like a bag of corn, "That's it. We're taking this one home."

"Wh-What!? Viktor!"

"Can't we keep him!?" The silver legend sarcastically begged, "We can dress him and Makkachin and Jiro up in little matching costumes and have them be our cheerleaders!"

Minami seemed rather pleased with himself, grinning at Yuri, only to spaz again and flip over under the Russian's arm, looking up, "Is that what you called him!? Your new dog!?"

"Mh!" Viktor nodded.

"Jiro! Kakkoii!"

"...Good grief..." Yuri sighed to himself.

"Oh. There you are." A new voice said, the words unexpected as they were sudden, "Katsuki Yuri."

Viktor was already snorting bitterly, dropping Minami to back him up in the aforementioned man's defense. They spotted a thin 26-year-old staring straight back at them though, black hair cut sharply into a slightly pointed shape behind his head, bangs messy in front with two teal-streaked longer tendrils hanging in front of each ear, almost to his collar-bone. He wore that self-same black and cerulean Team Japan jacket that Minami was wearing, and had his skates, the same Revolution blades Yurio sported, but in silver and blue, slung over one shoulder by their laces. He had both hands stuffed in his pockets, and determined eyes.

"...Asahi-kun..." Yuri whispered, staring at the daunting figure. He gave an anxious smile, "Hisashiburi, ne?"

Dark grey eyes lowered to where the two skaters were holding hands between themselves, and the rings on their right hands. Without blinking, those eyes rose back up, staring first at Viktor, who was still looking rather prickly and defensive, and then back down to Yuri, "So you're gay now, huh?"

"For him?" He wondered, nudging his head towards his perplexed spouse, "No question."

The Russian gaped at him, unsure what to make of the situation anymore.

"Jealous?" Yuri went on, making even Minami blush.

All eyes...the skaters', the media that had been following them around, and anyone in sight of them...were then trained on Asahi.
He just stared on defiantly...and then cracked a sudden smile, "You know I would be. *Hisashiburi, Yuri-kun."

"I'm so confused right now." Viktor half-whined, "I thought you guys were going to be enemies or something."

"Frienemies." Yuri corrected as he dragged the man forward, stepping closer as the new skater moved forward in turn. They extended hands and shook once before Yuri gestured up at his partner, "Asahi-kun, you know Viktor. He's joined the JSF last week."

"I heard...and already part of our Olympic team." The lanky Japanese athlete reached the same hand towards the Russian then, looking markedly more friendly than he had a moment before, "Viktor Nikiforov, the legend himself. Nice to meet you in person, officially."

The Russian stared for a moment, but then let go of his partner's hand to shake the one offered towards him, "Have we met unofficially before?"

"We've shared a small handful of events in the past. You may remember me from that one NHK event where I landed a triple Axel wrong and had to drop out."

"Hmmm..." The silver figure pondered, putting a finger on his lip as he closed his eyes in thought. After a moment, he lifted his head, "Oh! Yeah! You barrel-rolled into the rink-wall, too!" He got more serious then, "That was ages ago though. Like...easily two girlfriends ago."

Yuri went pale, "...Since when did you tell time based on relationships?"

"'Two' is a smaller number than '10.'" Viktor teased, giving a wink, "I don't feel so old saying it."

"I was fresh into Seniors that season." Asahi continued, "Yuri was still floundering in Juniors."

"What? No I wasn't."

"He was the only one out of the bunch of us that ever made it to the GP Final though, so I guess that counts for something." He shrugged, "And to go from near-disqualified at 6th, then to Silver, and then to Silver Plus..."

"Silver Plus?" Yuri echoed frantically, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You didn't actually win Gold, even if you walked out of the arena with it." Asahi clarified, "Silver Plus." He stepped closer and passed on the confused skater's shoulder, "Better luck next time, Yuri-kun. Ganbatte. See you around."

Viktor watched the slightly-younger athlete step away, waving with one hand as he made his way through the parting crowd like Moses through the Red Sea. Slate eyes turned back to Yuri though, "...Frienemies. *Hm.*"

"I can't wait to beat you out there, Dickbutt!" Yuri called back suddenly, spinning on a heel to look for the man's reaction.

Viktor had a stark, nervous smile on his face, but listened curiously.

Asahi stopped dead in his tracks, looking dead to the world. He turned hollow eyes back towards the source of the voice, "...You dare call me by that name, after all this time..."

Yuri just smiled pleasantly, "More like...'you still have your hair like that, after all this time.'" He
reached up to point at his slicked-back strands, "The Dickbutt Do."

The older figure turned around again to face him, making the media hum with excitement. Asahi pounded once on his chest with a fist, "FIGHT ME."

"Take Gold from me this weekend, and I'll never say it again." Yuri answered, "I swear it, on my life as a Nikiforov."

Grey eyes just watched him carefully, but Asahi smirked and straightened himself out again, "It'll be my pleasure then...to take the Gold from not just one, but two Nikiforovs. On the ice, then. Ja ne."

The crowd was buzzing with excitement at the challenge. Yuri was almost disappointed to not hear Mooroka's voice in that moment, declaring for all the JSF that bets had been placed. Once Asahi was out of sight again though, he deflated and sank down to holding his weight up with his hands against his knees, "Whew..."

"I'm even more confused now. Pleasantly surprised and excited, but still confused." Viktor mused, "...I have to ask though...why did you call him Dickbutt?"

"His hair." Yuri answered, lifting one hand to circle it around the back of his head, "It's like a chicken's butt, all fluffed up. But Asahi is a guy, so it's a Roosterbutt...but that takes too much effort to say...and since roosters are also called cocks...which in turn are dicks...so..." He raised his head, cheeks a'flush, "If we follow through on our metaphor...Dickbutt."

"...I see."

Minami leaned close to Viktor, pulling on the sleeve of his coat to get his attention, "That's why they're frienemies. Friendly in one moment...dishing out sick burns in the next."

"I wish I could say I came up with it." Yuri sighed, rising back up to standing, holding his hand on his heart for fear it might jump out if he didn't hold it in place, "...That was Chris, though."

"Chris has his hand in this?" The Russian laughed, tapping his forehead with a finger, "Suddenly everything makes so much sense."

"We were all Juniors together back then." Yuri went on, moving to snake his arm behind his partner's back, "I used to mostly listen...but I picked up a few lines from listening to Asahi-kun and Chris going back and forth. That's actually partly how I met Chris in the first place."

"This weekend suddenly took a really interesting turn."
"GRANDPA!"

The sound of a few pops from the elder Plisetsky's back was enough to give Mikhail flashbacks to a certain roof, and he felt a twinge of pain in his own bones. He groaned quietly as he pulled the small door closed behind them all, even as Yurio pleaded apologies further inside. When all the pleasantries and introductions were made and done, the Rozovsky patriarch was invited to sit down, and he flopped into the corner of a long, old, dusty couch. Potya's leash was wrapped around his hand and wrist, keeping the ragdoll close by as activity buzzed in the kitchen.

Standing so still, he was like a rather large, person-shaped armoire, Konstantin kept a silent vigil in a corner of the room, looking out the window to the street. Steely eyes watched the world go by; cars, families walking along the sidewalks, even a few birds that Russia's deep winter couldn't scare away.

"Ty sidela očen' tiho." (You've been very quiet.) Mikhail asked suddenly, rolling his head against the back of the couch to look towards the large man, [I thought you'd be more talkative.]

[Nothing much to say.] He answered back, not even moving to look, [You went quiet yourself after coming back from that phone call.]

The silver figure looked on for a moment, but then drew a long breath and stared at the ceiling, [My lady friend in Japan had some things to say that weigh a little on my conscience.]

[Still up to your old tricks, even after what happened at my son's competition?] Kon wondered with a huff, at least glancing over one of his massive shoulders.

Mikhail didn't budge though, and his expression remained still, [...]No. Not my old tricks. The heavy hand of fate, maybe...]

[Hm. Must be something then, if my taunt didn't even get a blip of a reaction from you in protest.]

Jade eyes turned towards the bustle of activity in the kitchen, where Yurio and Nikolai were doing their best to impart the Plisetsky Grimoire of Pirozhky onto the two silver teens. It felt like hours, watching them go to and fro in the small attached room.

[She looks just like her.] Kon said suddenly, drawing Mikhail's attention back again, [Your youngest and my Tat.]

[I was wondering how long it would take for you to say so.] He shrugged, closing his eyes as he leaned his head further back on the couch, [Longer than I expected.]

[It doesn't look like they got any of their looks from their mother's side.]

[You don't even know what their mother looked like.]

Kon's eyes turned, staring down at the thin figure, [True. Still. It seems like those Rozovsky genes shine through brighter than anyone else's. You'd never know Viktor was mine if not for the eyes, as you so passionately insisted for so long.]

Mikhail didn't want to think much about that, so he simply exhaled and let his mind go blank. He
raised his arm slightly when the felt Potya climbing up onto the couch-seat next to him, and flopped over, pressing her back to the side of his leg before starting her afternoon grooming session. He lowered his arm back down again in front of the ragdoll's chest, and she set her right paw against his wrist as she licked her toe-beans.

[It's kind of sad.] Kon went on unexpectedly, [Tat and I tried so many times to have kids, and in the end, we lost the only one that made it. But you...? You didn't even want any, and now you have three.]

[Four.]

[...Four?] The bear repeated, [Did I misremember somehow?]

[No.] Mikhail's eyes opened a sliver to glance down at the feline, who had moved to using the wrist of her paw to rub behind her ears, [Well...who knows, really. Maybe I'm full of shit. That's happening a lot lately. In the end, maybe nothing will change.]

"Okay, so now, we preheat the oven to 400, and while it's warming up, we cut out the dough into circles." Nikolai's voice cut through the clamor, and the three teens followed the elder man to the wooden table to the side of the room, "Yuri, butter the pans down while the girls and I start here."

"Da~!"

[Oh. You must mean him.] Kon pointed at the blonde as he all-but-skipped across the room to find the flat trays in the shelf-space under the old oven, [Are you actually adopting him or something?]

[Ah five then, Jesus.] Mikhail sat up a bit straighter then, interrupting Potya in her delicate work and prompting a meow for it, [And no, not unless he asks or wants to...he's turning 17 in 3 months. He might not stick around for long.]

The bear's expression hadn't really changed at all, but the aura around him seemed darker, as though the words 'are you fucking kidding me' were heard as much as they were felt.

Mikhail just pulled his hat off, dropped it to his lap and ruffled his hair, [Don't do that! I can sense it from here! The cement in my spine is practically vibrating from the indignation coming off of you.]

[God is testing me.] Kon said, practically between clenched teeth, [To make me witness all the gifts He gives to you when He takes all of mine away.]

[Maybe He's punishing me.] The silver shot back, looking up from behind his bangs, [Just because I have everything you ever wanted doesn't mean I ever got what I wanted.]

[And with all your vast riches, what is it that you want that you can't simply buy?]

Mikhail leaned back again, only for his flatcap to tilt off its spot on his lap and land on Potya's back. She blinked at it for a moment, but then went back to her grooming, ignoring it out of hand. The slender Russian just sighed, [Control.]

Kon's brow ticked a little as he gave a skeptical look.

[From the moment I came into this world, someone else was always pulling my strings.] Mikhail explained bitterly, [Even after I got away, it never seemed like I was ever able to decide for myself how things turned out. I'm practically the richest guy to come out of Russia without becoming an oligarch, but I'd give it all away happily if I could have the power to make decisions without them somehow blowing up in my face later. Especially lately, I'm no different than a mad scientist, mixing
chemicals like a blithering idiot and somehow still being shocked when my hair gets singed at the end...and then I just go and do it again.]

[Control is an illusion. The only one in control of anything is God.]  

[Oh come off it.] The younger figure motioned a hand at his in-law gruffly, [If I wanted to hear about a celestial dictator's grand plan for my life, I'd go to church.]  

[Surrender this idea of yours to be the one who has the last word in things, Mik. You'll be much happier.]  

[How can I surrender!? I've been fighting all my life!] Mikhail barked, getting the attention of the four in the kitchen, [And I've either lost, or have no control over either of the two things that currently matter the most to me!]

Kon deadpanned him, [What are you talking about? You've spoken a lot of words but haven't actually said anything.]  

[Viktor hates me and Minako's pregnant! And I can't do a goddamn thing about either!] The thin man half-yelled, standing up from the couch, and leaving Potya to roll into the empty space he'd just de-occupied. He quickly grabbed his hat and squished it down on his head, then abruptly handed the stunned feline to the hulking man-bear, [Hold the cat. I'm stepping outside. I need air.] He said, unwinding the leash from this arm to hand over as well, then tip-toed through the living-room towards the front door.  

The bear just looked down at the surprised feline, whose tail twitched slightly from the surprise. In Kon's arms, she looked like a mouse, and she scurried up the front of his jacket to perch on his shoulder like one might to escape the rising waters of a sinking ship. The gruff man just sighed thinly, "Kto Minako?"

Nikki and Viktoria both looked to Yurio for a translation of whatever had just been said, but the blonde just pushed out from the table, the chair squeaking loudly on the hard floor, "I swear, I can't take him anywhere."

"What did he say though!?" The girls both asked in unison, "About Viktor and Minako!?"

"Nothing that we didn't already know. I'll go drag his ass back in here before he drives off and forgets us here."

"Stay put, Yuri." Nikolai said, holding his hand out to block the teen's way, "Give the man his space."

"He's got the keys to the rental though!"

"Do you really think he's just going to drive off into the sunset and leave you three...er...four here?" The older man asked, "He's just stepping outside...and we have pirozhki to finish. I can hear your girlfriend's stomach growling from here."

Grrrgggggglgglgrrr...  

Nikki's eyes went wide and her face bright red, "...Ah...what?" She looked to her older sister for back-up, but Viktoria shrugged, face red as well but having no clue what to do about it.

Yurio dragged his hand down the front of his face, pulling his eyelids down a little, "Why would you say that? We spent nearly 10 minutes earlier explaining that they're supposed to be my siblings."
"But they're not. You're nearly 17, a good-looking young man, successful and popular...you should have a girlfriend." Nikolai went on, turning his attention back to the dough scraps he'd rolled up into a ball, then to the rolling-pin to flatten it out to cut more circles, "Or do you avoid them all like the plague because you're gay?"

Yurio's face turned blue from the horror of the suggestion, "W-What!? No!"

[Right, Konstantin?] The older man leaned back in his chair, [Your son's gay, too. He came here with his fiancé last year. I think they're married now, aren't they? I saw that his last name changed to yours at their competition in America...or heard it, anyway. The announcer said Yuri Nikiforov even though the scoreboard said Yuri Katsuki. Figure skaters...they're a special breed, right?] He laughed.

The bear's eyes were hidden under the shadows of his hat, but he stood as still as a tree in the middle of the living-room.

"I'm not!" Yurio pleaded frantically, suddenly reaching for Nikki's head to pull it against his chest, "See!? Look at how perfectly straight I am!"

"...So she is your girlfriend."

"NO! SISTER!"

"You're confused."

"You're confused!"

[My son is not gay.] Kon said suddenly, dragging everything back to himself, even as Potya was pawing at the frayed brim of his hat, [He's a coach and the Asian is his student.] Nikolai gave a skeptical look back, but huffed a quiet laugh to himself, [Well, that's okay.] He nudged his head towards the Russian Tiger as he rolled the dough flat, [Even if you're gay, Yuri, it won't matter to me one bit. I've known you since the day you were born, and you won't stop being my feisty grandson just because you bring a boy home instead of a girl.]

[Just because I'm a figure skater doesn't mean I like guys! Sheesh!] Yurio gave an exasperated look. He'd have smoke coming out of his ears for how fried his brain was from the sudden change of topic, but his stomach was growling too, and he forced himself to finish buttering the pans he'd retrieved earlier.

[You picked figure skating over hockey though.] Nikolai pointed out, reaching for the metal circular cut-out, and pressed it down into the dough. Nikki moved her hands quietly over to pluck the shape from the mass, and waited for her sister to spoon the filling into it before folding the dough over like she'd been shown.

[That's because I'm small! I didn't want to keep getting crushed by all the stupid jug-heads on the ice! But being small in figure skating gave me a big advantage! I became the best because of it!] The blonde explained frantically, [Good enough to keep a roof over my head when Galina was too busy boozing to work for a living!]

[That's true, I suppose. She was always a wild-child who never listened to anyone while growing up. I suppose we spoiled her while things were still good.]

"Are you guys still talking to Viktor's dad or are you just talking in Russian out of habit?" Viktoria suddenly asked.
"Oh...sorry." The elder smiled, "I don't get many chances to speak English these days, so I forget." He lifted his head towards the bear, [How many pirozhki do you want? Fifty?]

The two silver teens side-eyed one another, but then just smiled nervously and shook their heads. They blinked in surprise and lifted their heads though when they heard the sound of the front door open, a few steps, then the door closing, and nothing after.

"...Papa was standing there that whole time...?"

..., "...Please not first, please not first...please not first..." Yuri begged, mostly to himself, as he pulled the lever on a ping-pong-ball machine. He clenched his eyes shut, listening to the sound of a single plastic ball, painted with an unknown number, being dispensed from the big jar next to him.

"Nikiforov Yuri-san will go fifth."

"YES!" He cried out, jumping around in a circle with an arm up in relief, "FINALLY!" He shot his eyes open and looked into the rest of the room, and the rows upon rows of skaters and coaches who were all waiting to find out their order for the event. He spotted Minami's brightly colored hair and pointed straight at him, "NOT FIRST!"

The small teen shrugged happily, "Even a broken clock is right twice a day."

"Don't try to steal this victory from me!" Yuri pleaded, coming down from the small ledge of the stage at the front of the room.

"Will Fujiwara Hikaru-san please approach and draw a number."

The same brown-haired teen from Regionals, prior to the Barcelona Grand Prix Final, rose from his seat and stepped into the center aisle, passing Yuri as he made his way to the front. Yuri, of course, was over hills with happiness over his rank, and plopped down into his seat next to Viktor in the third row. He practically bounced from side to side in his spot, "Not first, not first...I'm not going first...hmm hmm hmm..."

"I think he's pleased with himself." Viktor mused, leaning his head to the right to speak the words at Yuri's biggest fan, then reached an arm up to saddle over his partner's shoulders and hold him still. On the stage, Hikaru pulled the lever as well, and heard the proclamation that he would go twelth. Viktor huffed a laugh, much to his husband's chagrin, "I hope I go first."

"You would."

"Naturally."

"Even at an event you're going to compete in for the first time..." Yuri said, finally sitting normally again, "...You'd still want to set the bar for everyone else."

"Sono toori." (Of course.) Viktor smiled, watching the next 'victim' go up to the front, "Not to be mean or anything, but just to get it over with. It's kind of fun to get scored first, and then spend the rest of the evening seeing how close people come to passing it. Especially with you here..." He said, then lifted his head to scan the room, spotting the black and teal chicken-butt a row back and on the other side from themselves, "...And that mysterious character, who everyone says is so good even though he's been gone for so long."

"Mysterious...?" Yuri quipped, "Asahi-kun isn't mysterious. He's as perfectly boring as all the rest of
"I'm not boring!" Viktor corrected.

"Kenjirou Minami-san, please come to the front for your placement."

"Yoshaaa!" The teen jumped up, squeezing past Viktor and Yuri's legs to get into the aisle, and marched to the stage with purpose. He pulled the lever, but closed his eyes, wanting to hear the rank rather than see it.

"Kenjirou Minami-san will go fourth."

Big brown eyes opened wide, and the teen seemed utterly deflated, "...F...Fourth...?"

"Saito Asahi-san, please come forward to draw a number."

The path from the stage was practically flooded with tears, and Minami nearly dropped as he was passed by the much older skater. He crawled the rest of the way and clung to his idol's knees, "Yuri-kun...I'm fourth...why is the world so cruel!?"

"Why is fourth so bad?" Viktor wondered skeptically, "It's not 1st, last, or...well, 13th, if you're superstitious that way."

"The number four in Japanese is sometimes spoken as 'shi,' which also means 'death.'" Yuri explained, "It can be a bad omen."

"Oh, is that why you collided with the rink wall that one time?" The Russian laughed, "Because you went fourth during the Free Program?"

Yuri's eye twitched, and he brought a hand up to his nose like it would burst to bleeding all over again just by thinking about it, "...Of course not...!"

"Saito Asahi-kun will go first."

"Ah, damn." Viktor sighed, "Maybe second."

"Tanaka Yousuke-san, please come to the front for your rank."

"I'm still baffled that you ducked out of the way." Yuri went on, looking at his fingers to be sure he hadn't sprung a red leak from his face, "After learning everything about your motives for coming to Hasetsu back then...I'd have thought my bloody nose was the least of your concerns."

"The suit I wore was expensive." The Russian explained, seeing the dark shadow of Asahi passing just behind his line of sight. He glanced up to watch him go by, noting how the man's eyes were trained down towards them, only to flick forward again when they caught his own, but then went back to what he was saying before, "It was my grand debut as a coach. I wanted to make sure I looked good for the post-event interviews..."

"I'm truly heartbroken." Yuri said dramatically, pulling one hand up to his chest, "I would've let you bleed on me."

"The one time you ever saw my blood, you fainted."

"Nikiforov Viktor-san, please come forward to draw a number."

"Hm...saved by the call." Viktor mused, pulling his partner's face towards him with a finger against
his chin. He stole a quick kiss before rising to step by, hoisting Minami up from where he'd still been latched to Yuri's legs in the center aisle. He put the small figure in his previous seat and pat his head, "Stay here."

Minami squeaked happily, and clapped with all the rest in attendance as the legend made his way forward.

The room quieted down again as the Russian reached for the lever and gave it the usual crank, turning his head and twisting on a heel before he could see the number painted on the ball's surface. He heard the light click as it came to rest, bumping into the ball previously summoned, and waited for the call.

"Nikiforov Viktor-san will go eighth."

"Wow~!" He sighed and stepped down, trying to smile in spite of himself. When he retook his place, he just shook his head, "That's practically at the end!"

"I'm sure you'll survive." Yuri teased, reaching his right hand across to pat his partner's thigh reassuringly before letting it settle there for the rest of the assembly.

"I suppose." The silver genius tepidly agreed, sliding his arm back across his spouse's shoulders like before, "I'll be the first competitor on the ice tomorrow either way, so I guess I can deal with not competing first, too."

"That's going to be so cool!" Minami said excitedly, sitting on the edge of his seat to see past the Russian's shoulder, "The JSF must be really excited to brag about getting you on the roster! The whole Opening Ceremonies thing has been choreographed for other events, too, so they wouldn't just be able to throw someone in there on such short notice."

"Viktor's not just someone though." Yuri pointed out, leaning forward as well to see the younger skater, "He choreographed his whole NHK Exhibition the night before presenting it."

"It's not like I'm just going to go out there without practicing it with the other dancers first." Viktor huffed, "It's not as easy to join someone else's choreography as it is to plot out my own. Though I'm flattered you both have such faith in me." He smirked.

"Yeah, the rest of us have to just live with coming out towards the end, doing something simple as a group like we usually do." Yuri slouched a bit, leaning his head back against his husband's arm, "Cookie-cutter stuff...but I guess it's easiest this way."

"I'm so stoked!" Minami was almost in tears from excitement, "I hope this thing ends soon so we can all go practice!"
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED FOURTY TWO

The murmur at rink-side was excited and curious, as nearly half the event's competitors all lined up alone the wall to watch what was going on within the rink.

"I've never actually seen him skate in person..."
"Weren't you watching the Exhibition last year? He did his old Free Skate for us."
"I didn't didn't even know he was going to be part of it...I saw it on the livestream from my hotel room."

"He's so much taller than I imagined..."
"Don't forget, he's wearing his skates now."
"I know!"

"Such a shame he isn't into women anymore...I wonder if something happened to him?"

"He's so cool!"

"I wonder if he'd be willing to take on more students? If he could make Yuri so much better in the span of a single off-season, imagine if he coached a bunch of us at the same time."

"It's so weird now how our two best Men's Singles skaters don't even have Japanese-sounding names."
"You don't think Viktor Katsuki sounds weirder than Yuri Nikiforov? At least Yuri is also a Russian name, like that Plisetsky kid."
"We're getting to be like America, where some of our top people come from somewhere else."
"I'll worry when all of America's best skaters all sound like they come from here."

"I wonder if he'll autograph my skates!?"
"Get both of them to sign one each so you have the Nikiforov matched set!"
"Right!?"

Yuri listened quietly from where he was watching on his own patch of the rink-wall, keeping an eye on his partner where the man had been talking and coordinating with the Opening Ceremonies choreographers. For the moment, being within the mob, Yuri felt like he'd melted into it, giving him an odd sense of déjà vu from the days ahead of Cup of China in Shanghai. As long as he had black hair and wore his regular team jacket, it seemed like it was easy to become a fly on the wall again.

At least until he wasn't.

"That's a face I remember well."

"Huh?" Yuri lifted his head, feeling the bump of an arm against his right shoulder as someone else squeezed in on the wall next to him, "Oh...Asahi-kun."

"The only difference now is that you're not about to get scored for something."

"...Sorry about earlier." Yuri started, turning his attention back onto the ice, "Getting all excited about not being first, only for you to go up there and draw that number 2 minutes later."

"I don't mind going first." The older skater said, leaning on his elbows against the blue top of the
wall, "I've been working hard. I want people to see what I can do now." He turned grey-brown eyes towards Yuri, "I'm not the same skater I was the last time I competed."

"It's not like you were bad before. You won Gold the last time I saw you."

"Being the best of the worst isn't always a compliment." Asahi shrugged, "But I bet that's how you feel being here now. I just saw the scores from the Final. Your Free Program numbers alone would be better than the total scores for most people competing against you."

"I used to complain about that being the problem I had when compared to Viktor."

"That's because you always compared yourself to Viktor."

A moment of 'quiet' passed between them, even with the buzz all around them making the arena loud. Yuri reached up to adjust his glasses, pushing them a bit further up his nose with a finger pressed against the plastic bridge.

"Did you get hurt recently?" Asahi wondered, pointing at the fading pink lines on the younger man's skin.

"You didn't know?" Yuri was surprised, standing a little straighter, "It was all over the internet."

"I don't use social media. I find it too distracting. So...you get to tell me all about what you did."

Asahi put a finger against his chin as he thought back, "The last thing I remember about you was seeing your 11th place wipe-out at Nationals after Sochi. I asked you back then if you'd been hurt or if you'd lost your mind, but you ignored me. Maybe I'll have better luck this time."

"Oh...uhm..." He stammered, trying to think, "Where to even start... I guess I could say that it was just an accident, and another skater ran into me during practice the night before the Detroit Short Program...but I feel like that's oversimplifying things."

"Start with him then." Asahi pointed a finger towards the middle of the rink, where Viktor was starting to mimic the movements of one of the lead dancers, "The last time we trained together, you were still worshiping him from a distance like everyone else. The closest you ever got was a video on your phone, or that time Chris bragged about meeting Viktor in person, at Euros I think. Now, it's a little different."

"...You really don't know...?" Yuri was dumbfounded by the idea, "At all? It's two years worth of catching up and explanations..."

"Cliffs-notes work for me just fine. I don't need to know every detail."

"Oh..." Yuri lifted his eyes in contemplation, "In that case...long story short, I got drunk at the GP Final in Sochi, asked Viktor to be my coach after Worlds, completely forgot about it...then he actually turned up and became my coach...and the next thing I know, we were jokingly engaged, then we were really engaged, and now we're almost a year out from getting hitched."

"Jokingly, huh?" Asahi echoed.

"Well..." Yuri's face got pink again at the memory of it, "I got him a gold ring as a present; for Christmas, his birthday, and as a thank you for being my coach. Something small and unobtrusive, in case I didn't win Gold like he said I would. He bought the other one without me noticing, so when I gave him the one I bought, he gave me the one he bought...and then a friend of mine confused us for married already. Viktor said they were engagement rings and that we'd get married after I won the Final. I...didn't...but Viktor stayed with me anyway. We were pretty close by then anyway."

"And then...?" Asahi prodded.

"And then..." Yuri sat down on a nearby bench, "I gave him the ring, then I was about to perform. He was about to see me. I was getting ready...I was about to go on the ice..."
though...so maybe it was just inevitable." He perched his chin in the palms of his hands, holding himself up on his elbows on the rink wall again as he watched his partner from afar, "Viktor had joked for ages already that he was my boyfriend, even though I was too embarrassed to agree with him. He took the whole thing really seriously though...even got really upset at me for suggesting he go back to Russia after that Final, so he could come back to competition, unhindered by obligations to me. He ended up taking me with him, and we got to compete at Worlds together. Now we're here..." He smiled to himself, though it was hidden from his former rink-mate by where his fingers curled around the sides of his jaw and cheeks, "...Things have changed so much in such a short period of time...but I can't imagine going back to how things were before anymore. It's just too sad." He pivoted his chin on one palm, and looked up at the older skater, past the teal strands on the left side of Asahi's face, "What happened to us these past two years is online if you're really curious though...see it all unfold with your own eyes rather than just my recollections. But what happened to you? After you won Gold at Nationals, you totally disappeared. You were supposed to go to Worlds. Two years went by though, and not a word...you just vanished into thin air."

Asahi stayed quiet for a few seconds, his expression unchanged, "I lost someone. Two someones, actually...I couldn't stand to grieve in the open."

"Wow...I..." Yuri lifted up from the wall again, setting his palms down on the plastic, "I'm so sorry."

"It's hard, right? To focus on the every-day regular stuff...when something that's been a part of it for so long is suddenly gone." The older figure explained, "It's like losing a limb. The world just doesn't feel right anymore after something like that."

"I know what you mean..." Cherry-hazel eyes went back out to the ice, staring at golden blades, "Well, maybe a little bit."

"Hm?"

"In the middle of the Sochi Grand Prix, my family called to tell me that my dog had died." Yuri explained, drawing a breath and exhaling in a sigh, "It messed me up. That's why I came in last. It's not as bad as what you went through, losing two people when I only lost a pet, but..."

"Don't discount your loss just because it was for a dog." Asahi reassured, lifting his head to look past his shoulder at the younger man next to him, "In its own way, losing a pet can be even more devastating than losing a person. A dog will love you absolutely, unconditionally, and they'll never lie to you or betray you. They'll keep your secrets and mind your tears, and they never intrude on your feelings the way people do. Dogs are good that way. As the saying goes...to you, a dog is just a part of your world, but to your dog, you are the world. Someone like you though..."

Yuri turned his eyes slightly.

"...Maybe a dog is worth 10 times more than just a pet. They're like a living, breathing, furry, barking manifestation of your heart into the world."

"You've become quite the philosopher since last we spoke." Yuri noted, raising a brow, but then shaking it away, looking more serious again, "Um...sorry I called you 'that name' earlier. I was just telling Viktor about how much it hurt when people called me names, and then I went and did that exact thing to you without realizing how much of a hypocrite it made me." He bowed his head towards the man, "...I don't know what I was thinking. Maybe I got a little caught up a bit in my own perceived self-importance. Having the media follow me around made my head big."

"I forgive you." Asahi shrugged, "I guess I overreacted anyway. Being away for so long, I didn't hear it, so coming back, and then hearing it from you...it took me back to Juniors for a split second,
and the way I was back then..." He pushed off his elbows and reached behind himself, "Besides, I had planned to do something about it if it came up again somehow..."

"...Do something?"

"Own it." He explained, pulling his hand forward again with a bright yellow plastic chicken squeeze-toy, and gave it a light squish, earning a long, sorrowful, drawn out squawk. "If people want to call me Chickenbutt because of my hair, then I'll turn it into something worth laughing about instead of getting mad. If I don't get mad about it, it can't hurt me. Shall I demonstrate?"

"...Demonstrate?" Yuri was utterly perplexed, looking from the chicken toy to the man who held it, "Uhhh...suuuuure?"

"Okay. Ahem… Faaaaaa-" Asahi started, humming out a note, and then squeezing the chicken toy, though found it gave a slightly off-note squawk in reply, so he repeated the process and got his tuning in line, "Allow me to sing to you the song of my people."

"...Eh?"

"Drop a beat for me." He explained, shoving the chicken under one arm for a moment and then clapping quietly at the pace he wanted, staring at the younger man until he caved and joined in. When Yuri finally picked it up, Asahi gave a wry smile, and pulled up the bright yellow toy again, holding it up in front of his face with both hands.

[Despacito Chicken Version (Mr. Chicken) - Franco Munoz]

By the time the people on the ice could hear what was going on, their attention was grabbed more by the sound of bystanders clapping than anything else. Viktor turned his head to see what the commotion was, and noticed his husband at the literal epicenter of whatever was happening, almost leading the tune. The chicken-toy's squawking was almost an afterthought to the fact that Yuri was laughing so hard.

The toy sounded like it was desperately gasping for air during the chorus, squawking even harder for it. Yuri was practically in tears by then, leaning against the wall as more people crowded around to listen, taking over the beat for him while he tried to dry his face.

"Viktor-san, is there a problem?" One of the choreographers asked suddenly, drawing the silver legend's attention back, "Can we run through it one more time before we call the group out?"

"Oh, sure..." He nodded, looking back again once more as the chicken song apparently ended and the 'mysterious' Asahi bowed his head gratefully towards the group, only to then offer the chicken to Yuri, who took it nervously, cheeks already flushed. The Russian made a face, though mostly to himself, "...He's never laughed that hard for anything I've done."

"Just squeeze it a few times to get a hang on the range." Asahi instructed, watching carefully as Yuri did just that. "There, you're practically Mozart already."

"Mozart would be rolling in his grave to hear his music sung by a squeeze-chicken."

"What if it was two squeeze-chickens?"

"You don't." Yuri gaped, but watched as his former rink-mate pulled a second yellow bird from a different pocket on the other leg. He just drew in an excited breath though, "You do! We have to play something!"
"Hmmm what to pick..."

By the time Viktor was cut loose to investigate, the two-chicken squeeze-fest was in full-blown orchestral mode. Other skaters were either clapping or beating the side of a fist against the rink-wall to create a beat or bass notes.

"Viktor, Viktor!" Yuri hollered, beckoning the man closer as he was skating nearer to them anyway, "Listen!" He jokingly cleared his throat, and then gently gave the chicken's yellow body a squeeze… and then cranked out a rather fast-paced tune that sounded familiar and yet...not. When Yuri gave up his chicken toy and Asahi took his place, it suddenly became clear, "...Can you hear...my heartbeat? Tired of feeling...never enough... I...close my eyes and...tell myself that my dreams will come true..."

Yuri sang, then burst out laughing again, "It's our song! Did you recognize it at first?"

The Russian was entirely unsure how to process the debauchery, so he just smiled and nodded, bringing his hands up to 'clap' lightly.

"Aw it was better than that." Yuri sighed, deadpanning his husband as he stuck the squeeze-toy out to the side for Asahi to take back, "You look about as enthused as you did when I had you listen to that first demo Ketty made for me."

"We're ready to try the full show." Viktor explained, skipping any acknowledgment of the chicken song, "Everyone should take their places so we can start. If we don't get it right tonight, we have to come back first thing in the morning."

"Oh...well, okay..." The younger skater nodded, looking aside to where he noticed Asahi still hadn't taken the yellow rubber chicken away. Grey-brown eyes were just crossed in looking at the thing, so Yuri squeezed it to make that sorrowful squaaaaaawk at him, "Let's get on the ice. Viktor's right; we don't have a whole lot of time."

"...Hai."

The group that had gathered started to filter towards the nearest entrance to the rink, setting blade guards on any patch of the wall that was unoccupied before setting blades to frost. Asahi waited behind a moment to stuff the two rubber chickens back into the big pockets of his cargo pants, snapping the buttons to hold them closed. When he stood back upright, he spotted Yuri darting across the ice, gold blades leaving fine lines in his wake. As his trail of sight moved around, watching the younger man go by to where the group was going 'back stage' to take their places, he found Viktor still standing where he was before, slate eyes staring at him. Hands had since moved down from a half-hearted clap to being perched knuckles-down on the Russian's hips. Eyes were locked for a moment, neither of them willing to give ground.

"Viktoooorrrr!" Yuri called out, his voice slightly muffled by the distance, "There's no sense in the rest of us being in place if you aren't! Come on!"

When dark eyes went back, Viktor was already gone, leaving nothing but a small gouge in the ice where he toe-picked to start moving again. He followed the lines in the ice, and found the silver Russian meeting with Yuri at the far end of the rink, arms snaking around the younger man's lower back to pull him into a hug. Words were exchanged that Asahi couldn't hear, and he couldn't help but watch. Seeing the hug bothered him very little, but when he spotted Viktor bringing up his left hand to touch Yuri's face, and leaned down to kiss him, Asahi felt a slight twinge in his chest. He blinked strongly and looked away, drawing in a slightly pained breath.

"Asahi-kuuuuuuuuuun! Ikimashoooooou!" (Let's go.) Yuri called then, waving one arm up even as Viktor was still holding onto him.
He huffed a breath and just reached for his blade-guards, setting them down at the end of the row with all the rest, and stepping silver-blue blades to the ice. He went around the opposite side of the rink to get to the same place though, pulling the high curtain aside to slip within the safety of the dark behind it.
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED FOURTY THREE

The last of the shuttles parked in front of the hotel, and the overwhelming majority of the Men's Singles group piled out in an exhausted heap. Yuri threw his arms straight up in the air and yawned loudly, then slumped over, "Uhhhh I can't wait to get into the onsen..."

"You look like you're ready to pass out, Yuri-kun." Minami joked, pointing at him.


Viktor's eyes widened in surprise, but then narrowed a little, side-eyeing his spouse, "Here I was hoping..."

"Tsst...there's children in ear-shot."

"I'm 19!" Minami was practically in tears from the insult, but yawned in spite of himself, "I'm practically middle-aged compared to everyone here..." He looked around the group as people started filtering past to get to the doors, and thought on the ages of everyone as they went by, "...Hm...maybe not..." He mumbled, only to yelp suddenly as he felt hands thump down on his shoulders and start to push him forward.

"The onsen won't be open all night!" Yuri insisted, "We should all go!"

"I'm in!" The blonde cheered excitedly, finally starting to walk on his own again. He threw his arms out to the side dramatically, and the motion sensors for the doors made the glass panels swing apart, giving the teen an ego boost as though he'd psychically made them open. He marched forward after that, acting like something of a herald for the two already-chosen Olympians walking behind him.

With most of them all being assigned to rooms on the same floor, there were only a handful of destinations chosen on the elevator's number panel. However, with so many agreeing to go to the hot-spring on Yuri's suggestion, seeing any floor but that destination chosen looked like a stick in the mud. Hazel eyes examined the lit-up button, and then rolled up to the man who'd tapped it.

"Asahi-kuuun you should come with us." He mumbled in a half-sleepy haze, "Everyone else is coming."

The older skater barely turned his head to look, but even then, Yuri was half-hidden behind a certain territorial Russian, and so he looked forward again, "No thanks."

"Whaaaat? How come?" Yuri wondered, reaching around his partner to poke at Asahi's closest arm, "You always used to come! It was practically tradition!"

"That was in Juniors."

"So?" The younger figure whined, then heard the ding for their arrival at the elevator's first stop.

The metallic panels parted, and Asahi stepped through, turning only slightly to nod his head to the group still within, "Osaki ni shitsurei shimasu, mina." (Excuse me for being the first to leave, everyone.) He twisted on a heel then and departed without another word, leaving a few to simply wave at him as he moved off.
Yuri frowned slightly as the doors closed again and the elevator continued its journey up, "I can't read him."

"We should find out what room he's in and pretend to be housekeeping," Minami suggested deviously, "Then when he answers, we grab him and make him come up with us."

"Mmn...no...that'd probably just upset him." Yuri sighed, repositioning his arm where it had been perched behind his partner's back, holding to the man's long coat a little tighter, "It's fine...we'll just make him come next time. He's probably just tired."

The group moved on towards the high-rise hot-spring, but Asahi made his way down the long hall towards the room he'd been assigned. The electronic door-lock mechanism beeped at the presence of a keycard, and he pushed the door open, letting it click quietly behind him. The lights in the room were dim, but on, but Asahi knew that in this condition, it meant at least 50% of his training entourage had turned in for the night.

Stepping into the room, he spotted the three twin-size beds, one occupied by a sleeping middle-aged man, another by an older Japanese woman, who was quietly watching something on a tablet resting on a pillow in her lap. When she spied the skater, she lifted a hand and pulled the glasses off her face, letting them hang by a chain around her neck, [How'd it go?] She asked quietly.

[We stayed late so we wouldn't have to go again extra early in the morning.] He answered, putting his gear bag down on the floor next to the third bed, and shrugged out of his long coat. He reached up to start unwinding the long plush scarf from his neck and shoulders after that, coiling it on the bed as he spoke, [For the most part, memorizing the choreography was easy...but with so many of us doing it at the same time, it took a bit of work to get it right.]

[Did you see him?]

Asahi paused in his undressing, looking at the end of the scarf still in his hand, [Viktor? Sure. He was basically the leader of the pack. Hard to miss him.]

[You know I don't mean him.]

The skater sighed and nodded, [Yeah, I saw him too.]

[And?]

He turned and sat back against the edge of the bed, toying with the coiled scarf and half-heartedly folding his jacket, [It was fine.]

[Them both being here isn't going to mess you up?]

[Coach Nagisa...it's been 7 years since Yuri and I trained together.] Asahi looked straight at her, [And 2 since we last laid eyes on one another. Right now I'm just...] He sighed and shook his head, looking at the floor, [...I'm trying to wrap my head around how much he changed. The last time we spoke, he was miserable and depressed. He was at the lowest point in his entire career, and I was scared for him. I really thought that he would do something to himself when he got back to Detroit, and I'd never hear about it...] He reached up a hand and pinched the bridge of his nose, leaning his elbows down against his knees, [But now he's back...and not only is he back, but he's Japan's top skater and Viktor freaking Nikiforov is his coach. And they're married!?It's incredible! Absurd even! How!? Why!?He was still trying so hard to impress that girl from Hasetsu before! I don't understand anything.]
Even with whispers, the energy in the room changed, and the man who'd been sleeping rolled over to stare at the athlete, "I don't speak Japanese, but I guess I wouldn't need to, to know how your night went, Asahi."

"Gomen, Mr. Weber..." He grumbled, twisting around to sit cross-legged on his bed, and bowed his head towards the man, "I should've taken your advice and looked into things before we got here... Seeing it all with my own eyes without warning..."

The slender figure rose up from where he'd been snoozing so soundly, and rubbed his eyes before yawning, "Ahhhh excuse me... Ahem. Asahi," He started, palms down on each of his blanket-covered knees, "Don't let the ghosts of the past pull the carpet out from under you. It's done and gone...everyone you knew from Juniors has grown up and moved on. Yuri Nikiforov is not Yuri Katsuki. Not anymore."

"I know..."

"This is supposed to be your big come-back event. You're a top contender to get to represent Japan at the Olympics. No one else holds a candle to you." Weber went on, "The fact that the JSF is making a big deal out of Viktor joining up shouldn't shutter your fighting spirit. You've worked hard this past year...rebuilt yourself from the very foundations. I'd recommend just avoiding the both of them and focus on yourself. They've already secured their positions, so beating them isn't the goal. As far as you're concerned, they're not even here."

"...Yessir..."

"Now..." The older man yawned again, and flopped back against the plush pillow behind himself, raising an arm up only high enough to drop it over his eyes, "...If you two don't mind..."

Asahi watched for a moment, and to his fortune, it didn't take long for the snoring to begin. He turned his eyes towards the woman he'd been speaking to earlier, [He's right. It's me versus the rest of the Men's Singles, not the Nikiforovs. They're practically just here for show.]

The older woman nodded quietly in agreement, [Keep your head up. It's just one weekend, and then it's done.]

"...Hai, Nagisa-kōchi..."

The onsen was on one of the higher floors of the building, and with floor-to-ceiling windows all around it, the view of midnight Osaka was breathtaking. Water bubbled in the different pools; some in the main sitting area, others in the separated Jacuzzi area, others still from where Minami had finally picked himself up and out of the water.

"...Ahhh the water made me so sleepy..." He complained sleepily, turning to the two only people left in the pool, "G'niitit~"

"Night, Minami-kun." Yuri waved. Beside him, Viktor raised his hand out of the water politely, but said nothing. Yuri let himself sink a bit on the underwater bench they were sitting on, and leaned his head back against his partner's shoulder, "Guess we lucked out."

"We survived the rest and will be rewarded with...a few meager seconds of solitude before I fall asleep, too." Viktor mused, leaning his own head back against the ledge of the deck. He drew in a breath, and cracked open one eye, turning his head then to kiss the top of his husband's, "Who knew memorizing the choreography for 2 songs the night before presenting them would be so hard?" He
huffed a quiet laugh.

"It would be easy for you if you didn't have to worry about 30 other people dancing around you, too." Yuri pointed out, his left hand barely hovering over the Russian's leg under the water, floated up a little by buoyant laziness, "Do you already know what you're going to say when you get the mic?"

"I had a few ideas." Viktor answered, looking across the water to the row of tall potted plants that lined that corner of the room, "I don't want to take up too much time though. I'm as eager to compete as ever."

"Still feels a bit surreal." Yuri added, sinking his hand to use the man's thigh as a pivoting point, and pushed up against it to turn in place, sitting side-face on the bench and wading his right leg across his husband's lap, cheek against that shoulder now. He brought his hand up from under the water, stroking it across his partner's pale chest, fingers barely breaking the surface, "Part of my brain still thinks it's an illusion that you're here. That I should be getting back to the room soon, expecting a call from you about what order you're going to skate in, so I can try to catch the livestream after I'm done with the SP tomorrow."

"Well, we should be getting back to the room soon..." The silver legend teased, bringing his free hand around to guide his spouse's face closer with a finger under his chin, "But not for any phone calls."

After a long day of travel, angst, tears, and hard practice, those kisses were more welcome than ever before. The first tease of a tongue against his lower lip though, and Yuri pulled away, looking around briefly to see if anyone was still around besides themselves.

"What's wrong?" Viktor wondered, lifting his head lazily, "Did I spook you?"

"Not at all..." He answered, eyes still focused on the halls that lead to the changing area. Satisfied that no one was going to come in though, Yuri turned back around, and suddenly lifted the rest of himself over his husband's lap, following after the leg that had preceded him. He felt a pair of hands come quickly to settle on his waist, and he slid his own over the Russian's shoulders, letting them settle on the cool, damp tile of the deck behind the man's silver-haired head. Knees parted wide so he could inch closer, and tender flesh met under the water just as Yuri pressed in for that kiss he'd delayed. The taste and feel of that tongue on his lips as it slid into his mouth, arms going around him to pull him tighter, and he was in Heaven. His thin frame rose and pressed against the larger one beneath him, and even through the heat of the water, he could feel his husband started to get excited. He pulled his hands back along the deck, his skin now cool, and the sudden change from warmth to cold made Viktor jump and give a wry laugh.

"There's probably at least one camera, my love." He purred, nibbling on his mate's lower lip a little before giving it back, "But if you're feeling adventurous...I wouldn't mind taking you right here."

"I'm not thinking about cameras." Yuri teased, rocking himself forward slowly as he spoke, feeling the rising, stiffening flesh between them, "My pride as the son of a hot-spring resort prevents me from doing anything too inappropriate here...but that doesn't mean I can't tease you a little." He said, the last words spoken against those lips before he returned to kissing them.

Viktor allowed that to go on for a little while longer, relishing every second of it, but his young husband had gotten rather good at the teasing he was up to, and that primal urge was welling inside him rather quickly. His arms suddenly uncoiled from around Yuri's back, hands returning to the man's waist as he rose up to half-standing, spun them both around, and forced Yuri up against the ledge of the deck. He slid him fully onto it before pushing him down to his back, and moved in over
him to continue their passion. He felt one leg, and then the other, slide up against his sides, and he pressed in a little harder to test his husband's conviction. Crystal eyes looked down into those hazel wells, and Viktor whispered, "We're not in the water now, technically."

"Technically..."

It was almost as good as permission, and the excited Russian lowered down for another kiss, wedging his forearms under his husband's shoulders to lift him closer.

"Nnnnh...Yuri-kuunnn..." Minami's voice mumbled from beyond the edge of the doorway. Half a splash later, and the teen was stumbling into the main bathing area like a zombie, rubbing one eye as he lifted his head, though both of his eyes were closed. He 'looked' at the back of his idol's head where Yuri sat on the ledge of the soaking tub, with Viktor sitting in the tub just next to his legs, one elbow on the deck, "Yuri-kuunnn," He said again, "There's staff at the door. They're saying they have to close up for the night. They asked me to come back and tell you guys so they wouldn't surprise you."

"Oh, okay...we'll come right out. Thanks, Minami-kun. Go to bed."

"Mmhmmmmm..."

Once the bleary teen was out of sight, Yuri heaved a breath, one hand up against his chest as his heart pounded, "Wow, that was close. He'd have really gotten an eyeful if he hadn't started mumbling my name before he came around the corner." He whispered quickly.

"Maybe not. He wasn't even really looking." Viktor mused, "But the staff that's about to come in definitely have their eyes open."

"We should hurry then. Wouldn't want to lose our place."

"Absolutely not." The silver legend agreed, finding his towel where it had fallen on the deck in his scramble to submerge.

With bathrobes and towels thrown on to get them back down to their room, they carried their clothing and gear and shuffled along, trying not to look like they were in too much of a hurry. When they finally made it through that last door, equipment was unceremoniously dropped to the floor, and Viktor drew his husband towards the bed, walking backwards until he felt the edge of it behind his legs. Hands fumbled for the loose knot holding the white fluffy robe on his partner's slick frame, soft from the minerals in the water of the hot-spring. The slightly damp cloth fell away as he sat back, his own robe never having been tied at all, simply hanging off of his shoulders as the towel tied around his waist hid the rest.

Yuri quickly pushed the robe off of him though, and Viktor slid his arms out of the sleeves before drawing him forward onto his lap. The towel barely managed to hold on with friction pushing against it from every side, and seconds later, he could feel the Russian's bare length against the inside of one thigh as he spread them out to each side, pressing in close again like before. Kissing and rubbing resumed more passionately than before, no sensation blocked by the heat of the water...just skin and one last pesky towel. Yuri didn't care to remove it though, since it wasn't really in the way. He slid his body up the front of his husband's chest, feeling the man's hands go in under his thighs, eagerly feeling at hidden places between his legs as one thick and eager appendage was pulled through and positioned. Yuri slid back down again, finding another kiss when he settled, feeling that length of flesh sliding up behind him, still under the back-wrap of the towel clinging precariously to his waist. He rolled his hips across his husband's lap, teasing a few more times before the silver legend had both hands around his backside to lift him up, only one releasing him to form a blockade,
preventing that member from sliding through the cleft one more time. When Yuri descended then, that hand guided the hot and wet rod inside him, sliding a few inches, pausing, then sliding a few more, with each of them gasping out a vocal breath at the relief of finally feeling each other.

When Yuri was all the way down, their bodies flush against each other, Viktor leaned a bit forward, kissing at his husband's neck as his arms went around that thin frame again, holding the younger man there as the only thing that stopped him from falling to the floor outright. The Russian started rolling his hips then, each pump forward evoking a breathy gasp from Yuri's lips. He kissed at the younger man's collar-bone and the upper part of his chest before dipping his face down, and pressed the top of his head there instead, focusing more on the rhythm and power of each movement. Yuri started leaning up against him soon after, forcing him to lean back, and then drop down, looking on longingly as the younger man loomed overhead.

They paused only long enough to look at each other and smile contentedly, then resumed the rocking. So close to the edge of the bed though, and Viktor was having to push up on the tips of his toes just to get leverage, and he quickly realized that it wouldn't work for long. Instead, he twisted over, and withdrew entirely as he rolled forward off the bed. Half a heartbeat later, his hands were on Yuri's waist again, and he mounted over the younger man's back, pressing in hard behind him. He kissed the damp skin in front of him, moving up to his husband's shoulder blades, then behind his neck, hands roaming up and under Yuri's sides and to his chest, curving up to follow the contour of those thin shoulders and the length of his arms as far as his fingers could reach. Yuri was pushing back against him though, desperate to feel him again, and he started sliding his hands back down again. Before slipping back inside though, he pressed himself in place, hands going down between his husband's thighs, letting his palms and fingers give some attention before moving on.

Those whimpered cries were music as Yuri clung to the edge of the bed, and he pulled himself a little further up as he found himself wanting to thrust his hips forward to the pumping of those hands around him. Fingers clamped down on the pillow-top, and he bit down on what he could, his chest barely catching the edge when he felt that length of flesh go back inside him again, pressing in deep and forcing him even further against the bed. Yuri felt himself go limp after that, his husband spreading his legs further apart as he started thrusting again, cheek pressed to the back of one shoulder. Arms wrapped tightly around his core to hold him still, and the force of those thrusts grew as well as their speed.

The teasing from before and the anxious wait to run back meant that their fevered pitch put them close to the edge rather quickly. Yuri started pulling his hands down from the top of the bed, sliding his palms along his husband's taut forearms. He could feel them loosening at his touch, until the right released to slide down between his legs again, the left finding his own hand and weaving fingers together there under his chest. Each new thrust brought with it a vocal gasp, until Yuri found himself crying out against the comforter, left hand clenching where Viktor held it, to right clamping fingers down on the arm still pumping between his thighs. The pulses of electrical force rushed through him from center to fingertips, rendering him nearly helpless as his whole frame trembled in fits and starts. He tried to catch his breath as he felt the cry against the back of his shoulder, and the heat of release inside him, his husband pushing in as deep as he could go. A few weaker, slower thrusts followed, but the Russian refused to withdraw, pulling him off the edge of the bed to recover in the gap between it and the wall, wrapped in the warm embrace of those strong arms.

Viktor caught his breath as well as he could, kissing the back of that neck and those shoulders as air allowed, his skin tingling all over him even as his member continued to throb within his partner's heat.

"Th-that...was intense..." Yuri commented, heaving for breath as well.
"That was really fun..." Viktor agreed, hugging a little tighter then as he huffed a laugh against the man's back, "We should start in the onsen more often."

Yuri just gaped over a shoulder at him, "Yeah right! My family would die."

"It was worth a shot." He kissed that skin again before turning his head to press his cheek against it, "I love you."

Yuri squeezed his left hand where they were still connected, and rubbed his thumb, "I love you too."
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED FOURTY FOUR

The middle of the night came, but sleep was hard to come by. Muscles and sinew still twitched from the excesses of practice, leaving every inch of him feeling a little prickly. Though it didn't help that curiosity was keeping his mind on a low-key simmer of interest.

Viktor leaned his face down a little and kissed the edge of his slumbering husband's neck, but then rolled away from his usual place on the man's back, reaching for his phone where it was charging on the nightstand just behind himself. When the plug unhooked, the screen lit up, illuminating the room in a dull glow. Hoping to prevent Yuri from waking up to the sight of it, Viktor quickly moved to place the back of the phone behind the man's head, so the light would face away from him...and the search began.

[JSF figure skater Asahi Saito...]

Eyes scanned the results, and was surprised to find that the skater had his own Wiki page, something normally only reserved for the most well known or popular athletes. Yuri had only just gained his in the last year.

Who is this guy...? Why do I barely remember him? And why did Yuri never talk about him before?

Seeing much more to read than Viktor thought he could manage before his arm fell asleep, he gently coaxed his second arm out from under his husband's neck, where the younger figure had been using it for a pillow. When it was free, Viktor reached for a few pillows, placing two behind his own head as a platform to lean on, and the other between his shoulder and Yuri's back, to hopefully deaden the brightness of the light from his phone. Once he was certain Yuri wouldn't wake up from all the motion, the Russian went back to his 'research.'

Born: October 28 (age 26 years), Imari, Saga Prefecture, Japan
Height: 5'10"
Weight: 133 lbs
Medals: Gold (3), Silver (11), Bronze (5), SEE MORE

Ah I don't care about that stuff...who is he?

He scrolled down the page, thumb pausing on a few bits to scan before moving on, then nearly flying past something that caught his attention. Slate eyes paused on the words 'Loss, Hiatus from Competition, and Subsequent Return.'

Though Saito had been selected by the JSF to represent Japan at the Four Continents and World Figure Skating Championships that season, Saito unexpectedly withdrew from competition, citing a personal loss. Though information on this is scarce due to Saito's absence from social media and his reluctance to speak publicly about his private life, it is believed that the accidental death of rink-mate Riku Itō is the source. Itō was killed accidentally when a car he, Saito, and their coach were traveling in was hit by a foreign driver, just outside of Kyoto. Saito and their coach escaped with minor injuries, but Itō was declared dead at the scene. In the days after Itō's funeral, Saito informed the JSF that he would not be able to attend the FC or Worlds, and was not heard from again until his announcement the following year that he had reunited with his former Juniors coach, Sayoko Nagisa, and brought on new Choreographer, Kyle Webber.
Saito later easily won 1st place at the Chugoku, Shikoku, and Kyushu Championship, and secured his place to qualify for the following Grand Prix Series, but chose to abstain, citing a desire to rise the ranks locally first, then going international after competing at the Japanese National Championships in December. Coach Nagisa has voiced interest in using the Olympics as a potential springboard back into world competitions, but with Yuri Nikiforov, husband Viktor Nikiforov, Himari Nakahama, and Niko Yatsumura already being selected for the Japanese Olympic team, it's possible there may not be room in the 5-member combined singles group, if the final spot is given to one of the Ladies' competitors rather than the Men's. It's an uphill climb for Saito, who has not officially competed in 2 years.

Viktor examined the photo on the side carefully, seeing Asahi standing on the center platform of the winners' tier, holding that same certificate that Yuri himself had won prior to the last year's Grand Prix Series. Asahi didn't look nearly as impressed with himself as Yuri had though. It was the same steely-eyed neutral expression he wore most of the time, so far as Viktor had seen.

Other than mentioning his name for the Winter Games, this whole thing doesn't talk about Yuri's part in all this at all. Do I have to wait to ask him about it? There has to be something...

He clicked back out to the main browser and searched again, this time for both Asahi and Yuri together. There was only one relevant result that mentioned them in the same place, the rest of the listings each bringing up individual mentions. Viktor clicked into it, seeing an old webpage from years ago, though the entire page was in Japanese and had no option to translate. There was a group photo of about 12 young teens at the top of the page, and when Viktor zoomed in on it, was certain that he could spot Yuri in all his low-res, pixilated glory, standing in the middle row...right next to what the Russian could only assume was a much-younger Asahi. Even in his youth, and surrounded by excited, happy faces, the man had that same neutral expression on his own. Viktor scrolled down a little further and spotted what looked like a roster of names and ages.

The image itself was clearly a scanned newspaper clipping, so the 'print' beneath the group photo was a bit blurry, but Viktor had seen his husband's name in Kanji often enough to recognize it even in such low quality. The number next to it was (14,) and the blob of text that came after was accented with the number (15,) confirming at least that it was likely to be Asahi even if he couldn't confirm for the moment.

Viktor huffed a sigh to himself and let his phone drop down to his chest, and looked up at the dark ceiling.

Looks like I'll have to ask. Whatever history they have together predates widespread use of social media, even by clubs...

He lifted the phone again and looked at the picture one more time. He smiled at the sight of his adorably young future husband, and kissed the screen before shutting it off. One last reach to plug his phone back in, and Viktor returned to cuddling up against Yuri's back for his next attempt at sleep.

It would be an understatement to suggest that Asahi slept worse than Viktor did, having put his head down, but never quite managed to turn his brain off. So many questions rattled around in his head, but knowing his old friend's habit for only using social media to watch others, and never post about himself, he couldn't help but wonder if there was even much of a way to find out what had been going on these past two y-

Viktor ’s a prolific SMS user. Why didn't I think of that before? What's that old site Yuri used to talk
He rolled over in bed and reached for the nightstand where he knew his phone was sitting, and pulled it from the charger. Sitting against the wall with his knees pulled up, Asahi pulled up Safari and started typing into the search field.

[Victor Nikiforov social media]

The results page was bursting with articles with the Russian's mention, but about 5 items down, Asahi spotted a familiar name.

\textit{Instagram...? That's a newer thing right? It looks like he's posted here \textit{tons}...thousands of pictures...}

Clicking the link though just lead him to a page demanding that he download the Instagram app. With a quiet grumble, he agreed, and tapped the button that forced him into the App Store. A minute later, as the hotel wifi would allow, he was able to go back and properly load the Russian's page. There were a handful of posts from Nationals already, but nothing substantial. He was somewhat surprised to notice though, that a good number of the posts he saw were candid photos of Yuri, and several of two different dogs. The further back he went, he started to see more that included Viktor himself, either with a selfie-stick or simply holding the camera out as far as his arm could go. One picture that made Asahi huff a quiet laugh was seeing one of Yuri passed out on a kotatsu, surrounded by paperwork. He dared to click into it to read the caption, and saw both what Viktor said about the image...and a few comments.

\textit{v-nikiforov}

\noindent Viktor Nikiforov  
\noindent [photo: Yuri dead at the kotatsu]  
\noindent 11,412 likes

\textit{v-nikiforov} I thought it was a personal problem of mine when I kept falling asleep looking at the citizenship paperwork stuff the JSF sent to me...but even super-smart titans like \textit{y-nikiforov} have fallen. My poor, sweet, noble hubby...he tries so hard. I'd be lost without him. 

\textit{Load more comments}

\textit{y-nikiforov} I think I've learned the contents of the entire package by osmosis just by having fallen asleep on it so many times. Don't worry though, we're about half-way through...you'll be a Japanese citizen yet.

There were other comments, but Asahi didn't care to read. He knew that very first one was Yuri and clicked over to his page instead, seeing a strikingly different place than Viktor's. There were barely 150 photos since the account's creation, and most were from the last month and a half, with the image of a puppy coming up first and foremost as the most recent submission. There was a good chunk from what looked like an Exhibition at the Ice Castle, a few formal Japanese wedding family portraits, and then a smattering of images from the months before that, leading back to what looked like some time Yuri had spent in Russia.

\textit{He posts more than he used to, but still...}

If the photos weren't of the dogs, or food, or what looked like the streets of Paris, the pictures always had both Yuri and Viktor in them, never just one of them. The photos were never \textit{too} personal though, and in many cases, looked like they'd simply been saved from albums other people posted, then uploaded to his own account.

Going back to Viktor's account though, and looking through the comments, something became rather obvious.
Looks like he's living vicariously through Viktor's content. He leaves a note on practically every post. That was how he was back then, too...he'd have an account just to watch people, and let others make posts about what he was up to. You'd have to know who he was hanging around to see anything about him. If you didn't really keep tabs on him and everyone around him, you could easily lose him. I know that much from personal experience...

He sighed and clicked out, tired of seeing the affection between the two men.

I shouldn't have looked. What was I hoping to gain from it...? Even if Viktor was just using him in the beginning, he's obviously been sucked in by how sweet Yuri is, too. But...maybe he was never insincere in the first place... It's hard to think of anyone being around Yuri and still take advantage of him...

He clenched his eyes shut and put his phone away, then roughly pulled a pillow around each side of his head as though he could block his thoughts from the outside.

No, no, no... NO. I can't let myself get wrapped back up in him. It was hard enough getting over it the first time...

The memories came unbidden though. Images of years ago flashing in his mind; words spoken, laughter shared, tears shed...and the screech of tires before the scream of metal twisting and crunching all around. Asahi lurched up, grabbing his phone back again and nearly tumbling off the edge of the bed as he sought in the dark for his backpack. He pulled the headphone cables out and struggled to untangle them, but eventually figured it out enough to put the buds in his ears and find an mp3 of an ambient background noise; a thunderstorm, as recorded from inside a tent. The gentle patter of rain on the tarp, and falling on the leaves of unseen trees on all sides...it quelled the nightmare in the skater's mind and gave him some semblance of peace.

Still, once he settled back down and set his head against the pillow, it didn't get rid of the pain that had stalked its way into him. His eyes burned and his chest ached.

...It's been seven years since he left me...so why does it still hurt like it happened yesterday?

Though still sleepy, the excitement for the day ahead was growing by leaps and bounds. For once, both Yuri and Viktor were bouncing in place like little kids, trying to get through the boring chores of adult life before being freed to the great and glorious Universal Studios Osaka. Waking up, getting dressed, getting their gear together for the Official Short Program Practice, breakfast, then actually going to the Official Short Program Practice...and then they knew they'd be cut loose.

Given that the hotel was part of the USO compound, there were plenty of park maps for participants to look at before going there. Yuri and Viktor were shoulder to shoulder at the communal breakfast table, plates on either side and the map in the middle.

"Okay, so we have at least 6 hours to do whatever we want, between practice and the OCs...where do you want to go first?" Yuri wondered, using a clean and unbroken pair of chopsticks to point down at the paper, "The entrance is over here, and I think we can safely skip the Sesame Street and Hello Kitty areas...unless you've been hiding a secret love for toddler entertainment from me all this time?"

"What? Pfft. No way. We have to go to Harry Potter first." Viktor huffed, nudging the chopsticks around with a fork until they were hovering over a picture of that iconic castle, "I fully intend to be equipped and ready to fight off dinosaurs with my broom and wand and Hogwarts uniform."
"I absolutely agree." Yuri laughed, "Can't be too safe from the Dark Arts or raptors."

"Ahhh I'm so envious of you guys!" Minami whined from the other side of the table.

"Why? Don't you get to go?" Yuri wondered, lifting his eyes from the map.

"I do! I just have to wait until tomorrow!"

"Well that's not horrible."

"But you get to go TODAY! It's the WORST!" The teen flailed back and forth in his seat, forcing Hikaru and Yuto on either side of him to lean away to avoid being hit, "I'M SO JEALOUS I COULD DIE."

The two older skaters side-eyed one another and then smirked, "We also got Express Passes with timed entry so we don't have to wait in ques."

"HNNGGGGG MY HEART-"

Yuri laughed and shook his head, listening as Viktor started plotting the actual stores they would need to go to. He felt his chopsticks move again, and lowered his eyes to spot them tapping down on the first store, "We have to go straight to Ollivander's." The Russian stated, "We'll get our wands first, and then..." He slid the wooden utensils across to the next spot, "We head to Dervish and Banges, and get our uniforms. There's a bunch of other accessories here, too, and if we can't find what we want there, we can head over to Gladrags Wizardwear, or Filch's Emporium of Confiscated Goods."

"We should check out Wiseacre's Wizarding Equipment, too." Yuri added, tapping down on the location, "Just in case the other places don't have absolutely everything already. You know how these places work. They hide bits and pieces of the set in different shops so they force you to go into every one of them looking for them."

"Right?" Viktor laughed, reaching for his mug to sip at the half-drunk coffee, "That's okay though. Even if they manage to trick us into getting way more than we have any business buying, we should be fine."

"We're going to need another room in the house just to fit all our nerdy souvenirs."

They turned to look at one another excitedly, "But it'll be so worth it!"

"SO JEALOUS."

"Get the butterbeer as a frozen thing." Hikaru recommended, flicking a strand of curly brown hair from his eye, "Then it's like ice cream. The drink is too sweet...like fizzy liquid butterscotch."

"Oh, did you go?" Yuto wondered, looking right over Minami's head to see the other skater, "When did you have time?"

"My family came last year during the summer. I'll bet it's a lot easier to go during the winter since fewer people want to go sightseeing in the cold."

"Don't count on it." He gave a wry smile, then turned back to the oldest skaters at the table, "Maybe the only benefit of going in winter is that it won't be so hot. Maybe it'll give a nice little ambiance to the Harry Potter section since some of those books cover the winter time...I dunno about the Jurassic Park area though. Might feel a bit out of place to go on those rides when the dinos couldn't survive in
"Psssh." Yuri waved a hand, then thumbed back at his husband, "Winter is this guy's natural habitat. The animatronic dinosaurs will be fi-" He stopped suddenly and turned his head, deadpanning Viktor where he'd suddenly felt the man's mouth over that very thumb he'd stuck out, "What are you doing."

The excited silver legend just smiled though, thumb still caught in his mouth.

"Did I get whip on me somehow and not notice?"

Viktor bit down lightly as he tried to stop himself from laughing, but shook his head a little to indicate no.

Yuri smiled nervously, turning back to apologize to the others at the table for the odd display, but then spotted three figures walking a short distance behind them. One he immediately recognized, and raised his chopstick-holding hand up in the air to wave, "Asahi-kun! Come sit with us!"

Grey-brown eyes turned slightly, but the older skater looked away rather quickly, "Thanks, but-"

"It's practically the Kyushu table over here!" Yuri went on, low-key trying to get Viktor off his thumb while he spoke, though the man held firm, "You remember Minami-kun...he trounced me at that last Nationals we were at together. Hikaru-kun and Yuto-kun were there too bu-"

"I know them, but I'm g-"

Yuri suddenly made a weird sound; something like a high-pitched squeak of a gasp. His eyes went wide, and he suddenly rose from the table, thumb winching out of the Russian's grasp by leverage and speed alone. He wiggled his way out of his seat and went around rather quickly, leaving Viktor in a confused heap, "Nagisa-kōchi!" He finally managed to say, rushing up to the small group and nearly knocking Asahi out of the way to get closer to the woman he'd spotted, "I almost didn't recognize you!" He bowed his head politely and tried to regain himself, "I had no idea you were here!"

"Yuri-kun..." She answered happily, reaching one hand forward to find the one that probably wasn't wet, and pulled it up to pat it gently, "You've gotten so big since I last saw you. Are you letting your hair grow out again? You don't normally style it like this unless you're skating."

"Hai!" He answered excitedly, "I have this image in my head of me doing my last Free Skate with a messy top-knot sort of thing. I once told Viktor about it-" He suddenly whipped his head around and looked back at his partner, "Viktorgetoverhere!" Then back to his former coach, "I told him last year about the idea and then I just kept putting it off. When we finally got home again after the Final, I realized how long my hair had grown and decided not to cut it right away...so now I have to style it back to keep it out of my eyes. Maybe it'll be long enough for the Olympics?"

"I'm so proud for you to get picked like this." The older woman said, letting Yuri's hand go and patting his arm, "Who knew I would get the honor of saying I coached future Olympians in my little skating rink?"

"Deshou!?" Yuri agreed, nudging the stoic and silent taller man next to him, "I'm sure Asahi-kun will get the last spot on the Singles team. Japan will dominate the podium with all of us there." He pulled his hand up over his heart just as Viktor was finally sauntering up next to him, "I swore a solemn oath that I'd never let Russia win Gold again. Be it the Grand Prix, Worlds, or the Olympics..." He looked rather determined then, balling that hand into a confident fist, "They'll regret
throwing Viktor under the bus for years to come."

"I think it would be fitting though if I got on the podium at the end, and then the Japanese anthem played anyway." The Russian mused, setting his hand against his partner's lower back.

"Viktor!" Yuri bounced up on his toes, and gestured to the woman in front of them, "This is-"

"Sayoko Nagisa." He finished, then eyeballed the thin man behind her, "And Kyle Webber."

"Oh." Yuri deadpanned as his face flushed, "How do you know them?"

The silver legend bowed his head, and reached a hand forward to shake with each of them, "A pleasure." He turned back to his husband and slid his other arm over the man's shoulders, pulling him closer, "I may be competing but I'm still a coach, so I try to remember the names of other coaches if I can."

"Oh...!" He felt a little embarrassed then, but shook it away, "Well, this is Coach Nagisa, she was mine and Asahi-kun's mentor when we were in Juniors!" He explained, suddenly grabbing the aforementioned former rink-mate by the elbow with his free arm, and pulled him into the group, "I was at her rink for almost as long as I was in Detroit after. During the week I'd take the train to Imari, and train with her when I wasn't in school, then on the weekends I'd go back home to Hasetsu and practice at the Ice Castle."

"Sounds busy." Viktor nodded, "Did you ever train with Riku Itō?" Slate eyes turned up towards Asahi, watching carefully for a reaction, though all it seemed to earn him was a slight pursing of the man's lips.

"...Who?" Yuri wondered, oblivious, "I don't think so...but it's been a long time. Maybe I just forgot."

"Oh, it was just a name I heard. I thought maybe he'd be one of the other 'dime a dozen top skaters with the JSF' you always alluded to before." The Russian explained, "I'm always eager to learn about your humble beginnings. His name wasn't on the roster for this event..."

"Anyway though, it was nice to meet you." Viktor concluded, "Yuri and I have a busy day planned so we should probably try to stick to our schedule. We'll see you tonight at the Opening Ceremonies, okay?"

The coach and choreographer both nodded and started to move off, gesturing for their athlete to follow, but finding him unable to. Yuri still had him by the arm.

"I know it's short notice to say you should come with us to Universal Studios after practice, but maybe we can do something later?" He wondered, looking up at the taller figure, "Since you missed getting to come with us to the onsen last night. I'm sure there's some big touristy thing we can do tomorrow morning before the Free Program though, right?"

Asahi reluctantly looked at the younger man, but dared not betray his thoughts with a strange expression. He didn't have to look at the prickly Russian on Yuri's other side to know he was getting a disapproving look from him. He just nodded politely and gently pulled his arm back, "I'll think about it. Ja mata ne, Yuri-kun."

"Oh..." Yuri felt a bit deflated, but waved anyway as the trio stepped away, "Ja ne, Asahi-kun..."
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED FOURTY FIVE

All throughout practice, Yuri felt like he was being followed. Not just by the media who were quietly documenting the morning’s activity as they usually did, or by the eyes of people who watched him and Viktor go by.

But literally being followed.

Nearly the entire Kyushu Singles group followed. Minami bathed in the glory of his idol's magnificence, Hikaru and Yuto hoped to glean some skill or technique from being able to see every move first-hand, and Viktor...well, he was always there anyway.

Despite the initial excitement of earlier in the morning, Yuri had taken on a slightly more serious aura. Even as he danced to the enthusiastic and uplifting notes of his Short Program's chosen music, he couldn't shake the disappointment. He just quietly finished his routine and slid back to rink-side, taking a sip from his water bottle before pulling up a small towel behind his neck to dry the sweat.

"What's the matter?" Viktor wondered, reaching both arms over the rink wall to hook his fingers around the man's waist, and pulled him closer. "You fell on two jumps. Your heart's not in it. I thought you'd be bubbling over with excitement today... Aren't you looking forward to later?"

"Of course I am." Yuri sighed, "I can't put my finger on it. Something struck a nerve though. My brain wants to be anywhere but here right now."

"Any volunteers to go next?" One of the event organizers called, stepping a few feet out onto the ice to get their attention.

Viktor raised his arm and leaned aside, "I'll go!" The man gave a thumbs up and stepped back to the rink door, and Viktor straightened out in front of his spouse again, "Let me dance for you. I'll seduce you with all I have, and hopefully brighten your mood. No sense going to Harry Potter World when you look like you've been drained by a Dementor before you ever walked through the gates."

Yuri gave a wry smile at that, and lifted his arms over his husband's shoulders, feeling the hug returned only for a few seconds before Viktor was twisting around to his side and was starting to drag him along the rink-wall. By the time it stopped, and the silver legend let him turn around to face forward again, he'd been dragged all the way to the door. Arms came away from him as Viktor moved to pull his blade-guards off, and offered Yuri his own back.

"Never take your eyes off of me." The Russian whispered.

"Everything on the ice is love." Viktor smiled at the response, and offered a kiss to his spouse's forehead as Yuri stepped off the ice, and he stepped on in his place. He trailed his fingers down the younger man's arm until he reached the limits of his range, but managed to catch those hazel eyes right before taking off, and gave a wink. Yuri smiled, but then leaned down to pull his blade-guards off, and slowly made his way back towards the spot his partner had been waiting in during his own show. A crowd had started to gather when Viktor called out to go next, and many were watching with baited breath as the Russian legend was about to put on his first practice show as a Japanese athlete.

Yuri took another sip from his water, but as he set it down again, he turned the Makkachin tissue-box
soft-toy around so the 'face' would look out onto the ice, and held it up briefly. Eyes went from the plush's fluffy head to the silver-haired man finding his spot in the rink, "Viktor!"

"Hm?"

When he saw those eyes looking back in his direction, Yuri fluffed the dog's ears with a flick of a finger on each side, "Bowrow!"

It was a rare sight for Viktor's cheeks to flush, but there was a slight hint of pink on his pale skin in that moment, and he smiled back, "Rowf!"

A number of people nearby found the whole display adorable and rather endearing, but eventually Yuri had to let the man go on with his practice, and set the tissue-box down between his arms on top of the wall. He watched happily as his husband began the dance, and their song played loudly overhead for all to hear. Many even sang along with it, which made Yuri's cheeks flush, until he was dragged into the middle of it and was encouraged to sing along with them...then his face was bright red. It slowly faded though as he found his rhythm, and the group finished singing it together.

Viktor eventually slid over, once he was done, and clapped excitedly for them from his side of the rink-wall, "Subarashi-!" (Wonderful!) The group clapped and bowed their heads back at him as he came closer to reclaim his spouse, arms going over to wrap around the man and pull him closer, "Who knew so many people had memorized the lyrics to this song?"

"It's a catchy tune. I'd be surprised if people didn't know it!" Yuri added.

"It was a good choice, my love." The Russian purred, teasing a few kisses from his partner's neck, and getting a few laughs in return from the ticklish feel of it. He let the man go and smacked his hands down on top of the rink wall, "Time to get going though! We've worked our magic on the ice...now it's time for Hogwarts to work its magic on us!"

The whole group laughed when they suddenly heard, "SO JEALOUS!" being yelled from the other side of the rink.

Skates were eventually removed though as the next athlete took his own turn on the ice, and were carefully packed away as sneakers took their place. Once everything was settled and outdoor coats and scarves were finally placed, that singular rolling gear-case was pulled along and the duo started making their way out. Yuri looked back one more time as they headed around the corner of the rink to depart, and waved back at the few other participants from the Men's Singles group that were still out there, "If you fall during practice, don't let it get you down! Ganbatte!"

The rest waved back, especially Minami, who was flailing both arms back and forth excitedly as the pair departed.

"Now all that's left to do is drop everything off, take a real quick shower, and off we go!" Viktor quipped, "I can't wait! I'm so excited!"

"Same! The last time I came through Osaka, the Harry Potter section hadn't even opened yet." Yuri added, finding his partner's hand between them and sneaking them both into the Russian's side pocket. It was a rarity that either of them wore gloves since getting their rings the year before, but the warmth of the other's hand and their pockets was more than enough to make up for it, "The Minions section is really new, too. I think it just opened in the last few months, actually... In any case, the best parts of the park are new enough, even to me, that it'll be like a whole new experience."
"I thought about coming here when I was in Japan for Worlds 2 years ago. Osaka is almost right in the middle between Tokyo and Fukuoka." Viktor started, rounding the edge of the blue curtain that separated the rink-side area from the halls beneath the stadium, "But Yakov was a big stick in the mud about it, wanting to go back to Russia as soon as possible. I was worried I'd never get another chance, unless I came back to Japan on purpose on my own, unless somehow there was an NHK Trophy or Worlds directly in Osaka. This worked out really well!"

The hall to the lower level from the arena floor was slightly narrow, but at the end, it spilled out into a rather wide corridor with a series of staircases that lead to ground level, as well as a handful of exits that went straight outside. Those participants who were still waiting for their group's turn on the ice were waiting in that wider area, along with coaches and event staff. The Pair Skaters and Ladies were loitering around since their own practice earlier in the morning, since their Short Programs would be performed immediately before Opening Ceremonies. Most of the Men's Singles athletes were within the rink area though, excitedly waiting for their turns to practice their programs and work out any kinks before their own official event started.

Most of the Men's Singles.

The first to come around the corner and make their way from the outer ring to the arena floor was someone Yuri didn't know; a young teen who'd likely only just aged into the event and was there for the first time. The older duo stepped aside and nodded politely at the group as they passed, earning an excited blush from the aspiring young skater.

The second, and perhaps intentionally late, but not late enough, was Team Nagisa. They were still speaking to someone beyond the corner of the hall that neither Yuri nor Viktor could see, but there was an immediate air of awkwardness as Asahi stepped into the small space and tried to make his way through, keeping on his coach's heels.

Yuri found it incredibly strange that his former rink-mate had gone out of his way to avoid even looking at him, and paused in place to watch the older figure go by. Yuri sighed, ignoring Viktor's attempt to get his attention back so they could go, and instead found himself feeling rather annoyed, "Why won't you talk to me, Asahi-kun?" He asked pointedly, earning a twitch from the man as he, too, stopped in place, "I thought we were friends."

Asahi lifted his head slightly, but even when he turned it to look over a shoulder, the long teal-colored strands of hair that framed his face made it impossible for him to see, so he just held there, unsure what to say. Coach Nagisa whispered something to him, but he shook his head, earning a strange look from her in response. Choreographer Webber was just-then passing the Nikiforovs to catch up to his group, wondering quietly why they'd stopped suddenly instead of going to rink-side.

Yuri didn't like feeling like he was being ignored though, and let go of Viktor's hand to step a few paces back the way they came, stopping about half-way between the Russian and older Japanese skater, "What was the point of serenading me with your chicken-song if you're just going to spend the entire rest of the weekend trying badly to pretend I don't exist?"

"Yuri, let's just g-"

He held his hand out to stop the words, and Yuri took one more step closer, trying to see around Webber's shoulder, "Asahi-kun...! Kotaete kudasai yo!" (Please answer me!)

Those eyes were afraid to look at him though, even as Yuri moved into plain sight.

"Nagisa-kōchi...?" He tried instead, looking at the older woman for help, but she only gave him a worried look back, like it wasn't her decision. Yuri sighed, a nervous look crossing his face as he
leaned down to try and get into Asahi's line of sight. He found the man clenching his eyes shut, and worried all the more, "What did I do to make you want to avoid me so much...?"

A few tense seconds passed, but Asahi suddenly dropped his gear-bag, and one quick twist and a side-step found him right in Yuri's personal space, with both arms around the man's sides and back, head bowed down against one shoulder.

Viktor practically jumped from the speed of it, losing his grip on the rolling suitcase, and all but barreled right in, stopped only by Webber accidentally stepping in his way. When Viktor was able to get by, he saw the sight of his husband hugging the other skater back, though he had a stunned look on his face as he did so.

"Oh...uhm..." Yuri started, a few strands of hair falling over his eyes as the unexpected bump against his person knocked them loose. He felt the hug tightening a little bit around him, and the slight movement as Asahi turned to put his back towards his stunned husband standing a few feet away.

Slate and grey-brown eyes locked for a moment, but Asahi wouldn't let go until he was certain Viktor had acknowledged him.

"That's enough." The Russian said firmly.

Asahi slowly unlocked his arms and pulled back again. The man was already wearing his skates, so at an inch shorter than Viktor normally, he was now an inch taller than the Russian with his blade-guards, and he stepped around Yuri to get right into the silver legend's face. Looking down slightly into those blue eyes, Asahi didn't even blink, getting so near to that pale skin that he could feel each breath exhaled between them.

"Wh...Asahi-kun...? What are you...?" Yuri's voice sounded like it was miles away, "Viktor...!"

"I know what you're doing, but you can't use Riku against me." Asahi said, deadly serious, but his voice so low that only Viktor could hear, "Every single person in that room who heard you say his name knows for a fact that you didn't hear it here...because we don't disrespect the dead that way. But mark my words, and mark them carefully...you might be married to Yuri, but he isn't your possession...and you don't scare me."

"Asahi-kun!" Yuri protested again, this time getting right in the middle of the pair to split them up, "What's gotten into you!?"

"Gomen, Yuri-kun. Owari da." (Sorry, Yuri. I'm done.) He answered, taking on that neutral expression again, and backing off a few feet to collect the bag he'd dropped, "Hona ne." (See you later (Osaka dialect.)) He stepped past his stunned coach and choreographer, and out the back of the hall, moving out of sight beyond the edge of the blue curtain that lined rink-side. The other two followed after their athlete quickly, leaving Yuri and Viktor alone in the narrow hall.

The whole scene just left Yuri rather dumbfounded, and he looked from the now-vacant hall to his partner, who was simply dusting his long-coat off and putting his scarf back into place, "What was that all about...?"

"Who knows?"

"You two haven't exchanged one word to each other until now! What'd he even say to you!?"

"He'll tell you himself at some point, I'm sure of it." Viktor shrugged, and extended his hand out again after lifting the telescoping handle of the suitcase he'd dropped, "In any case, we may have
missed the shuttle we planned to catch. Let's get going...maybe we'll still catch it."

Nervously, and with a slight whine, Yuri nodded and stepped forward, retaking the hand he'd let go of earlier, and felt it pulled back into his partner's pocket as they started walking. He kept his eyes low as they left the edge of the hall and into the main corridor, then around to the next small hall that lead to the doors to the outside. There weren't too many people walking around in the cold, so it was relatively quiet, especially compared to the clamor of the population inside the arena.

Viktor slowed to a stop around halfway down the ramp to the shuttle-loading area, and drew in a breath, looking down to those anxious brown eyes, "I think you need to start telling me who that guy is and what he is to you."

"...He's just a friend from a long time ago. Like Phichit-kun, only less hyper."

"Did you live with him, too?"

Yuri made a face at that, "No. My weekday dorm was with two younger kids back then. Us older ones acted like Dorm Leaders for the Skate Club."

"So you never dated him."

"Of course not!" Yuri barked, "The only person I ever dated is you. Why would you even need ask that? You've known for two years that I had no experience with relationships before you! I was so naïve about it all that I had to ask Minako-sensei to teach me how to move right for 'Eros'...because my idea of eros back then was katsudon. Remember!?"

"Yeah." Viktor looked on at him, but then turned on a heel and started walking again, though feeling a slight nudge from his partner as Yuri reluctantly followed only when he had to, "Tell me more."

Yuri groaned quietly like the whole thing was stupid, "We learned to skate in the same place. We were the only kids around the same age so we kind of gravitated to each other. We fell out of touch when I moved to Detroit, and only saw each other on the weekends when we shared competitions...then I nearly retired after Sochi. Ketty and Phichit-kun were the only people I got back into touch with after you got me back in the saddle. If there is anything else to say, it's that I'm a terrible friend."

"When was the last time you and him spent any meaningful time alone together?"

"Basically never!" Yuri answered anxiously, stopping in place, though nearly slipping on the icy path as he tried to wrench his hand back, though Viktor held to it easily enough, "What's with this interrogation!? You're acting like you think he's some spurned past lover of mine!"

"Because he is." Viktor answered simply, "But apparently he's the only one between the two of you who knew that."

"...Eh?" The younger figure stammered, looking in utter confusion, "What are you saying...?"

Those crystal eyes watched with pity, "Yuri..." He sighed and stepped closer, softening his grip on that cold hand and rubbing his thumb gently against the man's skin, "You once lost a friendship with Tess because you thought she had a thing for you after she hugged you. Would it really b-"

"This was the very first time Asahi-kun touched me in his entire life!" Yuri argued, interrupting suddenly and feeling defensive on the skater's behalf.

The Russian let go of the suitcase and lifted his fingers to touch them to his husband's lips, quieting
him softly before putting the edge of one finger under his chin, "And maybe he knew you well enough in the past to understand you didn't like being touched, so he didn't. Seeing how many people are attached to you now though...and not even just me, but your young admirer, too. Then you grabbed him by the arm this morning..."

"I don't know what you're saying."

"You were wrong about Tess' feelings because she hugged you. Maybe you were wrong about Asahi's because he never did." Viktor explained, "But I can see it as plain as day."

Yuri's brow furrowed and he looked down, not sure if he felt angry or confused.

"Somehow, after all these years apart, he still has feelings for you." The silver Russian explained pointedly, stepping closer to wrap his free arm over his husband's shoulders, and pulled him close to his chest, "He's not avoiding you because he doesn't like you...he's avoiding you because I won't let him get that close. It's not entirely different from how I kept Yurio away from you for part of the Final."

"...I wish you didn't feel like you had to do this..." Yuri sighed, moving his free hand up to cling to his partner's coat, burying his face in the Kashmir scarf, "...Asahi-kun would never hurt me. He's a good person."

"I'm not worried about him trying to hurt you." Viktor said, patting his spouse's hair gently, trying to put the loose strands back into place, "But it's like you once said about Sophia...you weren't worried that I might go back to her. You were worried that she might do something to put me into a compromising position, even if I was unwilling. However..." He leaned down to kiss the crown of his husband's head, and let go of the man's hand so he could wrap that arm around him, "...You're the skater with a heart of glass. I'm not entirely sure you wouldn't take it badly if Asahi tried anything. He hugged you right in front of me, and stared me straight in the eyes like he was challenging me to make him stop. I gave him the one warning, and he let you go...but what if I'm not around next time?"

Yuri just sighed loudly into the scarf.

"...I'm not going to be there all the time..." Viktor went on, speaking quietly against one ear, "Since I'm competing, there's going to be moments where I have to leave you alone."

"...I'm going to stay at rink-side like I always do." The younger figure said simply. He felt his partner nodding against the side of his head, and he held tighter for a moment before snuffling and lifting off again, "...Can we just...go have fun now? This is all really heavy stuff and I don't want it weighing on me when I skate tonight."

"Sure..." Viktor answered, moving to the side to give the man room to walk, and retook his hand, bringing it back into his pocket like before, "Let's stop in at the Starbucks, too. They have a salted caramel hot chocolate that I think you'll like. You'll feel better."

"...Okay..."
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED FOURTY SIX

The music cut out, leaving nothing but the panting of a skater on the ice, and the nervous, watching eyes of a dozen or more other competitors on the rink-wall. Asahi fanned himself with both hands as he leaned back on the rockers of his blades, and quickly slid back towards the rink door where Coach Nagisa was waiting with a towel and water bottle.

"That was really good." She commented, watching as the man wiped his face down before flicking the teal bits of his hair back into place, "How do you feel?"

"Better than I did coming out here..." He answered quietly, tossing the towel over his head and pulling on the ends casually, "Felt like I let off some steam."

"You won't have another adrenaline rush coming out tonight like you did just now." Webber pointed out, "Try not to pick fights."

Dark eyes went up to the man hesitantly, but Asahi shook his head, "I didn't want to start one then either." He said, grabbing one blade guard at a time as he came off the ice, and put them into place, "Viktor should be grateful I didn't put him on the ground for the comment he made this morning."

"...I know Riku's a touchy subject for you," Nagisa commented, putting a hand against the man's back as they walked around the rink-wall, to make way for the next competitor, "But he probably didn't know."

"There's no way he didn't know." The skater grumbled, keeping his voice low so the best anyone else nearby could hear were a few hushed whispers, "The fact that he knows that name at all, while Yuri doesn't, tells me he knew exactly what he was doing when he brought it up. He was trying to see if he could get a rise out of me."

"Seems he got what he wanted then." Webber added, standing far enough away that no one could hear them anymore.

"Maybe a little bit." Asahi corrected, grabbing his black and cerulean jacket from the bench, "All I did was take Viktor down a notch. He's on our turf now. This isn't Russia. He doesn't get to walk around like he's some god...and no one here is going to bow down to him just because." He hastily pulled the sleeves over his arms, and fumbled for the zipper to pull it up, "When he shows such obvious disrespect...someone has to do something."

"It's not your responsibility to defend Riku's honor." Nagisa said simply, watching her student sit roughly on the bench seat, pulling one foot up over a knee to start untying the laces, "It took you long enough to put all that grief to bed. Viktor doesn't know what he's talking about. Don't give him the satisfaction of knowing that's a button for you."

The first boot came off, and Asahi paused there, setting a socked foot on the cold concrete floor, "I never put the grief to bed. I just..." He shook his head and pulled the other foot up to start at the laces there too, "...Put a sheet over it, and put the whole thing into a corner of the room. But it's always there."

"Are you even going to be able to get through Opening Ceremonies without trying to clobber Viktor from behind?" Webber asked dryly, crossing his arms.
"I haven't laid a finger on him yet, and I'm not about to change that. There would be nothing to gain from retaliating anyway." The skater explained, pulling on his sneakers and stuffing the two skates into his gear bag, "It's like Nagisa-kōchi said...he doesn't know what he's talking about. He wouldn't understand unless I told him, and I have no reason to explain it. He's just some dumb foreigner, thrashing around like a rabid moose in a china shop, completely ignorant to the damage he's doing."

Mr. Webber raised a brow, "I'm a foreigner."

"You're not a dumb one though."

"...I guess that's nice to know."

The coach crossed her arms loosely over her chest, and huffed a sigh down at the younger man, "...You've never really talked to anyone about Riku's death. You've told me a few things, but it was like you were only giving me the list of events that happened. Are you sure you don't want to get it off your chest?"

"I have no interest in digging all that up again right before a competition, least not one this important. I'd rather just focus on the sport." Asahi explained, cutting the conversation short, "I'm going to go back to the hotel and meditate for a while, to clear my head." Asahi explained, standing up again and pulling his gear bag over a shoulder, "Ja ne."

The pair watched him go, but the choreographer raised a hand to his mouth, "If you're gonna be at the hotel anyway, get a massage while you're there!" He called, getting a wave back in return. Webber shook his head and shrugged, looking at his cohort, "He's too tense."

"He'll be fine after he has some quiet time to himself..." Sayoko replied, "...Hopefully."

"YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAY!"

Ollivander's; boxes of wants on every wall up to nearly 20ft. Racks of buyable wands, some even with motion-activated lights.

"Lumos!" Viktor chirped, swinging the wand, and delighting in the bright ball of light on the tip of the stalk. Yuri clapped happily at the sight of it.

---

"YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAY!"

Dervish and Banges; Quidditch supplies from wall to wall, banners, hats, uniforms, shirts, watches, beer steins, scarves, and more.

"You're not wearing that homeless person's beanie one minute longer." Viktor insisted, pulling the Flames cap off his husband's head and plopping a Ravenclaw beanie in its place, "There. Now you're acceptable again.

"When wasn't I acceptable?!"

That just earned Yuri a boop on the nose, "Love you." The Russian gasped loudly then and practically zoomed across the room (at least, as fast as he could given how many people were crammed in there alongside them,) and grabbed immediately for the trademark yellow-and-black Hufflepuff scarf, "I NEED THIS. We also need one of every beer stein!"
"Why do we need one of each?"

"That's obvious! So I can drink four beers at the same time!"

Yuri made a face at that, but then spotted the Hogwart's robes nearby, "Oh look, there's the heavy coats we were looking for."

"I HAVE A MIGHTY NEED."

---

"YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAY!"

Gladrag's Wizardwear; fancy garb like dresses and button-down sweaters, with a dozen different assortments of wizardy-and-witchy hats, ties, coin purses, and more.

"...Are these the same school robes as the ones from Dervish and Banges?" Yuri wondered, passing the rack with the garments hanging.

"Maybe we should get one of each from here, too, just in case." Viktor suggested, looking through the yellow-lined items.

"What if they're exactly the same?"

Cool eyes stared forward, almost hypnotized, "We should get them. Just in case."

"But."

"What if we never come back and it turns out that these are different!?"

"Okay okay!"

---

"YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAY!"

Wiseacre's Wizarding Equipment; it felt more like the Hogwart's estate tourist shop than any of the other stores, sporting a menagerie of display items like slightly-off-but-somewhat-scientific-looking equipment, but most of the things that one could actually buy were toys and trinkets. Scaled models of the Hogwart's express, Platform 9 & 3/4s T-shirts, train conductor's hats, and more scarves, shirts, and T's. There were magnifying glasses hanging in the windows, alongside telescopes and impractical-looking microscopes, but like at the front of the store, most of those items were only for show.

Viktor huffed and put his fists against his hips, "This is unacceptable. This store totally pulls me out of the fantasy. None of the merchandise for sale here would be available to characters in the books if they came looking for things in the story."

"You wanna go to the next one then?" Yuri wondered, half-turning to go back outside.

"No." The Russian said defiantly, "I'm going to buy it anyway because I'm a good tourist."

"You sure...?"

Tears were welling in those blue eyes, "This store is breaking the 4th wall."
"YAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAYTHEREARESOMANYPEOPLEHEREOHMYGOD!"

Filch's Emporium of Confiscated Goods; curious items from throughout the novels and movies that were more akin to props than anything else.

"THE SORTING HAT." Viktor gasped, grabbing one from a shelf and slapping it down on top of his head, "DOES IT TALK?"

"I dunno, bend down so I can see the tag."

"THERE'S TAG ON THE SORTING HAT!?"

"Of course, it's merchandise."

"THE SORTING HAT CANNOT BE BOUGHT."

"You can buy it for ¥7100." Yuri pointed out, "Or we can get it on eBay for probably half that."

The hat suddenly started moving on the Russian's head though, and out of nowhere, it shouted, "SLYTHERIN!"

"THIS HAT IS HAUNTED." Viktor yelled, throwing it up into the air, "ALSO IT DOESN'T KNOW FACTS. I'M A HUFFLEPUFF, THANKYOUVERYMUCH."

Yuri caught the toy before it crash-landed somewhere, but by the time he had it secured, his over-stimulated husband was already off somewhere else.

"YURI THEY'RE SELLING HOUSE-ELVES INTO SLAVERY HERE." Viktor called, pointing excitedly at three shelves with prop Dobbys on them, then found himself distracted again, "TIME-TURNERS! YURI LOOK!"

"Oh, they have House lanyards here." The younger man pointed out, turning as he passed a display case, "And pins. We could get some of these for our skating badges."

The silver legend pointed towards the cash-register area, "They have House Crests! We need those!" He flew by, dodging between other patrons to get closer, and saw the shelves behind the counter more clearly. The Sword of Gryffindor was there, as well as replicas of Lucius Malfoy's cane, and at least some of the Horcruxes, "They even have a replica of the Philosopher's Stone! We need that too!"

"Did you know they call it the Sorcerer's Stone in the US?" Yuri wondered, coming up on his partner's side to see the items being brought up to the counter for Viktor to see more closely.

"Really?" He wondered, "Why?"

"Apparently Americans didn't think their kids would want to read a book if they thought there was a lot of ponderous thinking involved, so they changed it from Philosopher to Sorcerer...makes it more spooky that way, I guess."

The Russian was between giddiness at the prop stone and scoffing at the name change it went through, but sided with glee when he saw that the stone had a built in light and glowed when it turned on, "Guess that explains why Kinder Surprise Eggs are banned there, too." He mused, lifting up the small wooden stand with the stone to see it from a different angle, "Can't handle small parts."
"Kinder Surprise Eggs?" Yuri echoed, confused.

"You don't know about them?" Viktor turned his eyes away from the glowing red glass rock, "They're egg-shaped chocolate shells, with a capsule inside that has parts of a small toy that you can assemble. Don't they have those here?"

The younger figure shrugged, "If we do, I haven't seen them."

"We do," The clerk on the other side of the counter, decked fully in Gryffindor robes, explained, "But you can only find them in specialty import stores. You won't find them in regular markets."

"Ooooohhh." Viktor nodded, turning his eyes back to the glowing rock, "I want this."

Yuri leaned up to look at the small hand-written price tag hanging from one of the arms of the stone's intricately carved metal holster, "Oh it's only ¥22,000." He said nervously.

The Russian gave a devious smile, "Remember when you said I could spend $50 on whatever I wanted if my father asked about you?"

"This is $200."

"After all the money we already spent?" Viktor chortled a sarcastic laugh, "This is nothing!"

"...It's a lot though. For one prop?"

"I can already see where it's going to go on the mantle..."

"...We can't even really do anything with it. At least we can wear the robes and stuff."

"...And I'll get to tell the tale of Harry Potter to Makkachin and Jiro and all the dogs we'll have over the next 60 years."

"We don't even have a mantle." Yuri pointed out, "Our house doesn't have a fireplace."

Viktor just turned to look at him, prop still in his hands. He blinked...Yuri blinked back...and then Viktor leaned forward to kiss his nose, making the younger man's cheeks go pink. He turned happily back towards the clerk, "We'll take it."

---

Hog's Head; a tavern-looking pub that looked ancient even though it had only been erected in the last year or two. Huge wooden casks of Butterbeer were built into the wall, with the tavern's namesake boar's head fitted between them. When one of the servers poured from a cask, the boar greeted him with a sudden snort, its nostrils flaring even in 'death.'

The skating duo found a seat near a window, table and chairs high up off the ground, and barely enough room around their feet for all the bags of their newly-acquired loot. They were a little disappointed to find out that the frozen version of the butterbeer was only available during the summer, but it was an easy settle to get the hot drink, and they waited patiently for the glass steins to come their way. The hustle and bustle of the pub didn't seem so claustrophobic or out of place compared to the road or the other stores.

Just through the window though, Yuri was able to catch a glimpse of one of the outdoor shows being put on display there. The one at the moment featured students from the northern European Durmstrang Institute, and three young men in thick, brown clothing with their heavy staves took the
stage, thumping the ground in time to ominous sounding music. The two on the side suddenly broke off and vaulted through the air behind the lead figure, moving like high-flying martial artists.

Asahi-kun would've liked that... I wonder if he still does Shorinji Kempo? He almost had his Shodan back in the day...

Two mugs were suddenly placed on the table, bringing Yuri back to the tavern. Viktor already had his in-hand and was smelling the sweet scent of the foam spilling over the lip of the mug. One big sip, and the happy Russian was feeling warm and fuzzy inside, "Vkusno~!"

Yuri looked at his, and took a small sip, "It's really sweet." He commented idly, "Like fizzy butterscotch pudding."

"Pity we couldn't get the ice cream." Viktor sighed, though still smiling, and leaned an elbow on the table so he could rest his chin on the edge of his hand, "Are you hungry yet?"

He shook his head, "I think I'll be okay till we're done in the park. I don't want to get on any rides with a full stomach."

"Good point." The silver legend huffed a laugh, and took another sip. They both fell quiet for a little while, looking around the bar and taking in the sights and sounds. Yuri's attention was eventually pulled back outside though to the thunderous show taking place.

Asahi-kun...! Kotaete kudasai yo!

Yuri blinked and shook his head, the memory of his words feeling like a lash from a greenstick in his mind.

That's enough.

Gomen, Yuri-kun. Owari da.

Another lash, enough to make him lose focus on the performance.

What's with this interrogation!? You're acting like you think he's some spurned past lover of mine! Because he is. But apparently he's the only one between the two of you who knew that.

"Yuri."

"Huh?" He blinked and looked up, 'awakening' in the Hog's Head after a moment of being back at the rink.

"I'm a little peckish after all... Share something with me? We can try the fish & chips, or that corn-cob and meat plate. They don't look too filling." Viktor suggested, presumably for the second time.

"Oh... Yeah, sure."

The Russian gave a vacant expression back at him, "...That was an 'either/or' question, not a 'yes or no' question."

"Okay." Yuri answered, just as meaninglessly, and looked back out the window, "I'm good with whatever."

Viktor blinked a few times in confusion, watching his partner carefully, but then turning to the waiter who'd been standing next to them the entire time. He sighed and shook his head, "I'll get the fish &
chips, I guess."

Yuri's eyes went down to the grain of the wood in the table, examining each line of the former tree's growth rings while his mind journeyed a thousand miles away. He sighed and turned his face down, pressing his eyes against the sleeves of his coat as he groaned quietly to himself.

"Minami-kun said Asahi-kun lost someone right before he dropped skating...and Asahi-kun said he lost two people... He couldn't have meant me for one of them, could he? I had been gone to Detroit for 5 years already when I halfway quit...those losses were only 2 years ago... I really am a bad friend; I don't know anything that's happened to him since I left to train abroad...

"You look even more ponderous now than you did earlier." Viktor commented, sipping lightly at the hot and sickly-sweet drink, then licked a bit of foam that had stayed on his lip when he pulled the stein away, ",...I hope I didn't ruin today for you with what I said earlier."

"No..." Yuri grumbled under his breath, pushing up on his arms to sit normally again, and moved both hands to touch his fingers around his own warm mug, "I really want to just talk to Asahi-kun and figure this whole thing out...but he runs like a scared rabbit because of you."

"Rightly so." The Russian answered simply, taking another sip, "No one touches my Yuri. He took advantage of you."

Eyes lowered a little, "When you told me that before...I was really happy. But the idea of needing your protection only conjured up these crazy scenarios of PyeongChang where a complete stranger is trying to hurt me..." He slouched a bit in his seat, the collar of his jacket coming up against his cheeks like a turtle's shell, "...Not someone I know and am friendly with."

"I heard once that most people who suffer abuse, experience it at the hands of someone they're close to."

"This isn't abuse, Viktor...!" Yuri argued nervously, though his train of thought was suddenly cut off by the feeling of his husband's hand on his wrist, and the sight of those crystal eyes on him.

"I didn't mean to suggest it was." Viktor explained, "I only meant that sometimes, the people closest to us can cut us the deepest. We leave ourselves open around those we trust, so it hurts that much more when something goes wrong."

"...We have to fix this...!"

"I don't think it's such a good idea to open yourself up to him right now." The silver legend sighed, rubbing his thumb back and forth gently against his spouse's skin, "You've already let the knife in...don't twist it, too."

Yuri whined quietly where he sat, staring at the drink between his hands.

"There's nothing you can do to stop the pain he's going to experience." Viktor added, moving his hand slightly to peel his partner's fingers off of the mug's grip-handle, and thumbed at the gold band thereupon, "These rings are a sign of our commitment. To each other. The unfortunate fact, my love, is that you're not available anymore...not to him, nor any other person on this planet. Same as me. That's bound to break some hearts along the way."

"...That doesn't mean I can't try to be kind to him." Yuri pointed out, turning his right hand to clasp gently at the man's fingers, holding them there to keep himself grounded in the moment, "If this goes back as far as you say, then he endured me through all the years I was still hoping for Yu-chan to
notice me...but then I ran away to Detroit and abandoned him without even realizing how he felt. I can't even really remember if I ever went out of my way to say goodbye, or if I just assumed we'd still talk even after I was gone."

"Would you have considered being his partner if you knew?" The Russian wondered suddenly.

Yuri waited, thinking, but then shook his head, "...I don't think so."

"Not even out of guilt?"

Cherry-hazel eyes lifted, finding a curious gaze watching over him, "...Do you really think I would've agreed to date someone out of guilt...?"

"I think the person you used to be was willing to do almost anything to make other people happy, even at the expense of your own happiness. We've had that conversation rather recently though...so it's not as though you've completely outgrown that part of yourself." Viktor explained, taking another sip from his fizzy butterbeer, "I'm certain that there will always be a part of you that's willing to sacrifice a bit of yourself for the sake of other people. That's just part of your nature...and in many ways, it's a noble quality. But like I said before, you're not alone in this anymore...so any ground you give up means less for the both of us, not just for you. I have no history with Asahi to make me feel guilty for being the bad-guy in this though, and I won't apologize for making sure he's extremely aware that you're taken."

"You don't have to be cruel to him."

"It wasn't my intention to be. All I know of him is what I've seen so far with my own eyes. If I crossed a line, it wasn't necessarily on purpose."

"...So then what would you do in my situation?" Yuri wondered, sulking a little, "Given how you don't want me addressing it at all..."

Viktor set his drink down and brought a finger to his lip in thought, closing his eyes briefly, then only opening them a crack, "I would wait."

Both eyebrows raised to hear those words, "Says the guy who watched me skate once and hopped on a plane the next day."

"I know I know I know...I know...I'm the last person who has any business preaching patience." The Russian gestured his hands out in wry defense, "But maybe this'll settle down on its own. I think he's pretty much gotten the message to leave you alone...so all you have to do is stop going after him."

Yuri grimaced slightly, "...You've been giving him dirty looks every time I try to talk to him, haven't you?"

Viktor raised his butterbeer stein, and nudged it forward in a mock-toast, "And I don't regret it for a second. You're my husband, and I intend to keep it that way."

An awkward pause answered that. Yuri wasn't sure whether participating was in good taste, but the skating legend nudged his heavy glass mug a second time, so he reluctantly reached for his own, raising it up just a little bit.

"To clear heads, and hearts filled with passion for the day and skate ahead."

"...Kanpai."
12 years prior...

[Everyone, I want you to meet our newest arrival.] Sayoko said happily, standing in front of a small crowd of skaters, ranging in age from 6 to 17. Beside her, and barely half her height, was a skinny barely-teen boy with messy black hair and blue-rimmed glasses, with a flush of pink on his cheeks and ears, [This is Katsuki Yuri. He comes from Hasetsu.]

"Yōkoso, Katsuki Yuri-san." (Welcome) The group all said at once.

"Dōzo yoroshiku, onegaishimasu." (It's nice to meet you.) He answered back, bowing nervously.

One of the younger girls suddenly found a skate sliding out from under her and he plopped down on her butt rather unceremoniously, earning a few giggles from the others. A skinny teen boy went over to help the younger one back up to her skates.

[Keep one toe-pick down so you don't slide around.] He explained quietly, [You can hold onto me if you want though.]

The group coach smiled at that, [Thank you, Asahi-san. What do you say when someone helps you, Haruka-chan?]

"...D-domo...arigatō." (Thank you very much.) The child whispered, earning her teacher's approval and a nod, which made her feel less embarrassed about having slipped in the first place.

[Katsuki-san has been skating for a few years already, but he hasn't taken any advanced lessons yet, so everyone go easy on him.] Sayoko continued, [I expect you'll start practicing English with him, too, so he can get comfortable with the language before he starts competing.]

"Haaaai." The group answered.

[Good. Let's split up into groups then. Everyone up to age 10 go to that end.] She pointed to her right, [You'll be working on basic moves in the field today. Yuri-san and Asahi-san, you'll be here in the middle with me. Everyone else on that end,] Sayoko pointed to her left, [Footwork drills, and spin transitions. Coaches Satoshi and Hana will join their assigned groups in just a moment.]

The group split off towards each end of the rink, save the two told to stay put. Asahi waved off the little girl as she eased her way to her peers, but then turned towards the newcomer, and rubbed his bare arms where the cold was starting to creep in, "...So...do you know any English yet...?"

"...I..." Yuri started sheepishly, his cheeks getting a bit pinker, and he looked off to the side to avoid the older boy's face, "I...know... Ahh... I know some. My English...okay."

"Is okay." Asahi corrected, poking the ice with a toe-pick to slide closer, "My English is okay."

"...Oh..."

[Don't intimidate him too quickly, Asahi-san.] Sayoko commented, reaching to pat Yuri's shoulder, only to find him instinctively recoiling a little bit. She pulled her hand back, and moved around in a wide inside spread-Eagle instead, as though she'd never meant to touch him in the first place, [You
two are about the same age, and most of the other students are either much younger or much older, so I imagine you'll both be training a lot together. Challenge one another, but respect one another. Asahi-san, you're already starting to do quads, but I want you to help Yuri-san master his triples for now.

[Yes ma'am.]

[I want to skate like Viktor one day.] Yuri explained, looking up at a box-television in the corner of the mess-hall that was playing footage of a recent Seniors event, [Yuko-san told me about him a few years ago.]

[Who's Yuko?] Asahi wondered, leaning against the wall where their table was pushed up against it, [Someone in Hasetsu?]

The younger teen's cheeks went pink, but he nodded anyway, keeping his eyes on the screen, [She's a friend. I've known her most of my life.] Yuri explained, resting his elbows on the table and setting his chin against his palms, [She and I like to copy Viktor's programs when we skate together at the Ice Castle back home. She's...] He sighed half-dreamily, [...] She's really good... They call her the 'Madonna.]

Asahi quirked a brow, noting the odd way Yuri was suddenly speaking. He felt a weird pain in his chest, and rubbed it with one hand as though his skin were itchy, but then coughed to himself and shrugged, [She didn't come with you to train here though. Is she not going to compete?]

[Nah...] The younger teen shook his head, [She's never been interested in that. She just skates for fun. I like to show off for her sometimes.]

"Asahi-kuuuun!" Yuri yelled, running up to the front doors of the small dormitory, carrying something small in his arms, "ASAHI-KUN! WHERE ARE YOU!"

"I'm here!" The teen called back, "What's wrong!? Are you hurt!?" He shoved the doors open suddenly, not realizing how close Yuri was behind them, and accidentally knocked him right back onto his butt, "Ah! Gomen!"

There was a high-pitched whimper as Yuri groaned and rolled forward to sit upright, "...Ittaaiiiiii..." (Owww.) He whined, looking down and reaching up with one hand to put his glasses back in place as his arm kept hold of a particular brown fluff.

"...Are you okay?" Asahi wondered nervously, crouching down in front of his friend, and only just then spotted the puppy in his arms, "What's this? When did you get a dog...?"

"...On Friday, after I got back home..." Yuri explained, rubbing his nose where the door had hit him. He shook the dizzy feeling and moved to hold the pup up in both hands, "This is Vik-chan!"

"...Vik-chan?"

"Yeah! I named him Viktor! But it's Vik-chan for short!" He answered excitedly, "Viktor has a poodle in Russia, so I got one, too!"
"You've been acting weird all day." Asahi said grudgingly, "Would you quit being all sour and just tell me what's wrong?"

Yuri sighed, rolling over where he'd been lying on the long grass, and scratched Vik-chan behind one ear to distract himself, "...Yuko-san started dating someone..." He said quietly, "Nishigori... The guy who used to make fun of me..."

"Really? Why...?" Asahi crossed his arms as he moved down to sit in the grass next to the toy-poodle, "Didn't you say she was always defending you from him?"

"...Yeah..." He nodded, and pushed to sit up a little, arms bent out behind himself to hold him up as he leaned back, "Maybe I've been gone too long. Nishigori hasn't teased me in a while because I'm not really around anymore, except on the weekends and stuff. I don't know how this happened." He leaned forward and wrapped his arms around his knees, "...I didn't see it coming..."

"Maybe it wasn't meant to be."

"...The only reason I ever decided to get into competition was because Yuko-san always said she wanted to see me compete against Viktor one day." Yuri went on, barely holding the tears behind his eyes, "I thought maybe she'd like me more if I did, but now it's...a lost cause..."

Asahi watched quietly, not sure what to do. He lowered his eyes down to the poodle, who had since flipped over to stand up, and pawed at his human slightly, whimpering quietly.

Yuri lowered his knees and crossed his ankles, picking his dog up to lift him into his lap, "Vik-chan..."

"Are you going to give up skating now...?" Asahi asked nervously, "You've been doing really good. I can't imagine you quitting after all the work you put into it."

"...I don't want to quit. I still want to meet Viktor one day..." Yuri answered, petting the dog lightly as those soulful brown eyes looked back at him adoringly, tail wagging, "...Maybe I should go ahead and ask Coach Nagisa if I can move up to Seniors. I'm old enough now. I'm just holding myself back by staying in Juniors."

"THIS IS THE WORST DAY OF MY LIFE." Yuri complained loudly, coming off the train in Imari like he'd been practicing his lamentation the entire way. Asahi and Coach Nagisa watched him in complete confusion, "I NEVER WANT TO GO BACK TO HASETSU EVER."

"...What...happened?" The two asked anxiously.

"TRIPLETs HAPPENED." Yuri yelled in answer, "They made me hold them and feed them and help change diapers. IT WAS THE WORST THING."

"...That doesn't sound so bad." Sayoko pointed out, "Triplets are a lot of work but it can be really rewarding."

"I don't care!" Yuri whined, burying his face against the fluff on Vik-chan's back where he held the poodle in his arms. A few tears escaped his eyes as other train passengers continued to unload all around them, "I don't want to go back to Hasetsu! I can't stand it!"

"Well..." The coach thought, putting one hand on her hip as she looked on at the distraught young skater, "When my students transition to Seniors, sometimes they move on to train abroad. You've
been saying for a while that you wanted to move up. I could...see if there's anywhere that has an opening for you."

"Nagisa-kōchi...!" Asahi started, looking rather anxious suddenly, "I-Is that really necessary? Can't he just stay here? I could ask my parents if Yuri can stay with us on weekends so he doesn't have to go back to Hasetsu... Or maybe he could."

"That's kind of you, Asahi-san, but even you can't stay in Juniors with him forever." Sayoko explained, putting one hand on the teen's shoulder, "You're already 18...this is your last season before you have to move on. I'm not even sure why you haven't already...you've been ready to start in Seniors for 2 years now."

The teen's face went red, but he shook it away. He opened his mouth, about to make some excuse, but Yuri cut him off.

"I want to go as far away as I can." He said, his voice cracking under the tears, "Every time I go to Hasetsu, it's like a knife in my chest. I hate it."

"Yuri-kun, you can't be serious..." Asahi pleaded, all but grabbing his friend to shake some sense into him, "Maybe you can just come with me to Tokyo after the season ends...we can move up to Seniors together!"

"...What do you mean, he's gone?" Asahi was paralyzed from the news, unsure how to take it, "Where did he go?"

"...I told him about an opening at the Skate Club in Detroit, in the USA." Coach Nagisa explained, "I didn't think he'd jump on it, but as soon as I mentioned where it was, he said yes."

"I told him I'd make a spot for him at my Skate Club though! He was supposed to wait for me!"

"Asahi-san..."

"I was just telling him about one of the guys retiring after this season! It's only a few more weeks!" Tears were filling his eyes already as he sat in his former coach's office, "I thought he'd be happy and we could train together again, like old times!"

"...I think he was more miserable than you knew." Nagisa explained quietly, "Ever since you moved to Seniors, Yuri-san hasn't had anyone his own age to talk to. Telling him about the club in Detroit...it was the first time I've seen him smile in almost a year."

"It...it was o-only going to be...a few m-more weeks...!" Asahi could barely hold in his despair, "The club m-manager already s-said it was okay for Yur-Yuri to come!"

"Maybe you can tell him when you see him at Nationals?" The coach offered.

"Wh-when did he...go?" The teen asked between charged breaths, reaching one arm up to rub his eyes on the back of a wrist.

"A few days after he turned 18."

"THAT WAS A MONTH AGO!"

"Asahi-san, I know you're upset, but this was Yuri-san's choice." Sayoko explained, trying to calm
the man down.

"HE'S BEING SELFISH!"

"It was a time-sensitive offer, and I don't think your offer was secure yet." She went on despite the outburst, "He really wanted to go with you...but there was no guarantee that spot would open up. It weighed him down quite a bit to have to choose before knowing for sure."

"Who is his coach now, then?" He asked bitterly, "It better be worth it."

"Celestino Caldini." She answered, "Please don't be mad at Yuri-san for this. It's only a week until Nationals. Talk to him...but let yourself cool off first."

"Yuri-kun...?"

The skater in question practically bounced off the walls like a pin-ball at the sound of his name, but when he finally landed and those brown eyes lifted to see that familiar face, his fright turned to panic and embarrassment, "Asahi-kun! Ahhhhhhhhh I'm so sorry!"

The older figure took a few steps forward, breaking off from his Club group, "You don't call, you don't write..."

"I know! I'm bad!" Yuri pleaded, dropping to his knees and bowing repeatedly in apology, "Everything just happened so fast! Then I got really badly jet-lagged and I was a total mess!"

"Who's this? Yuri..." Celestino wondered, stepping up from where he'd been at the hotel check-in counter, "Someone you know?"

"Oh...Celestino, this is Asahi Saito... We trained together while we were in Juniors together." He explained, though still sitting on his knees on the floor, "He's a really good friend of mine."

"Apparently not good enough to keep in the loop until you've been cornered and forced to say something." Asahi said stiffly, watching Yuri go right back to begging for forgiveness again, this time staying down and rubbing his hands together above his head. He watched the spectacle for a few seconds before the flutter in his chest turned his disappointment into guilt, and went down on a knee before his old friend so he could speak more softly, "Yuri-kun...I... Sorry, that was mean of me. I'm just sad I missed you. I had good news for you...I went back to Imari to tell you in person but you were already gone."

"Eh...?" Those eyes came up, and Yuri pushed himself to sitting, keeping his hands on the floor.

"I was going to tell you that a spot at my club was going to open after the season ended...but..." Asahi looked up at the Italian coach who'd been watching them, "It looks like you got out before I got back."

"Coach Nagisa emailed me to say that you turned up..." Yuri sighed, "But I just...couldn't wait anymore. Things in Hasetsu were getting really stressful for me and I..."

"...I get it."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about it. I knew you'd be upset and I just...didn't want to put that on you."

"Yuri," Celestino said suddenly, "We really need to get moving. Maybe you two can catch up later?"
“Oh...” The younger figure nodded nervously, and rose up to stand, looking up into the grey-brown eyes he’d known for the last few years, "...Asahi-kun, I'll tell you all about it as soon as I can. Maybe we can hang out tonight? It's been ages since I last saw you. There's so much to say."

"Yeah...that sounds good."

"Yuri-kun! What in the world is going on with you!?" Asahi wondered nervously, rushing towards his former rink-mate as he came into the prep area, having just finished his Nationals Short Program and heard the appallingly-bad 62.12 score, "That was worse than Sochi!"

"...I know..." Yuri sighed, dark circles under his eyes. He pressed a hand to his hip and hissed a breath, "...I fell on this same spot four times...it hurts really bad now..."

"Just sit down a minute." The older figure suggested, following the man towards a nearby seat, "What's going on with you lately? You've just been falling apart out there. It's entirely unlike you."

Celestino was coming back then with a bag of ice, folding a towel over it and handing it to his athlete, "Shake it off, Yuri. You can still recover in the Free Skate tomorrow."

Asahi backed off a little to let his friend's coach in closer, and watched quietly as Yuri did everything he could not to cry. He couldn’t help but see how ragged the younger man looked though. Yuri’s skin was pale and mottled, his hair looked dry and rough, even with the gel to slick it back. His hands trembled as well. It was all rather worrying.

"Asahi..." Another voice sounded, coming up from behind. The older skater looked back and spotted one of his current rink-mates; a younger man with scattered red streaks in his hair, slightly shorter than Asahi himself but taller than Yuri, and pale brown eyes flecked with gold, "What's wrong with him...?"

"I'm not sure." Asahi whispered back, setting one hand on the shorter figure's shoulder to speak close to one ear, "Maybe he's sick?"

"...Since Sochi though? It's been 2 weeks since then. If he was that ill, his coach should've pulled him."

"That's a real shame." An older man said, sitting behind the wheel of a small sedan, "So he's coming back to Japan?"

"I'm not sure." Asahi answered from his place behind the driver's seat, looking at the small JSF bulletin about Yuri cutting Celestino loose as his coach, "The article doesn't really say anything else...not even if Yuri's looking for someone to take Celestino's place. It's super vague."

"Maybe you should reach out to him." Riku suggested, sitting in the back passenger seat, "Maybe he'll join the Tokyo club this time. You'd be happy about that."

"He hasn't been answering my emails." Asahi sighed, putting his phone away, "I'm worried about him. The way he looked when we all left the hotel after Nationals..."

Riku's eyes looked forward, checking that their coach wasn't looking back in the rear-view mirror,
and then reached his hand across the middle seat to place it gently over his partner's, "He probably just needs some time to himself."

Asahi twitched slightly at the feel of a palm on his skin, but realized quickly that the man in the front seat wasn't paying any attention, and let his heart calm. He moved that hand to curl his fingers around the ones that cupped over his knuckles, "You can never be too sure with him. The longer trouble went on with him, the less he'd talk about it."

"You guys have known each other for so long. I'm surprised he's not replying." Riku went on, rubbing his thumb slowly back and forth, "You're practically brothers."

"...Yeah...brothers."

"I can reach out to Celestino if you want." Their coach asked suddenly, causing both skaters to jerk their hands back and look away from one another, "Maybe he'll tell me since I'm asking on your behalf."

"That'd be great if you c-"

"WATCH OUT!"

KRUNCH

The car flew suddenly and flipped a dozen times before coming to a stop, only to be struck again by two other cars as they tried to avoid it. Everything cut to black. When Asahi started coming to again, his head was spinning and the world was blurry. It felt like his head was in a vice, and the coppery-metallic smell of blood and gasoline was all around. He didn't have the presence of mind to think, or ask questions...his body was numb. Moving his limbs felt like trying to control a puppet, but he eventually crawled out of the twisted and broken door, and flipped onto his back, landing on the crunchy road. Dizziness made his head feel heavy, and he dropped it back, feeling the shards of obliterated glass under his hair. He closed his eyes a moment as stiffness and pain started creeping in, but along with the pain came some of his senses, and worry replaced his confusion.

"R-Ri...ku..."

Asahi used every bit of strength in his body to turn over, and reached for the jagged metal of the car to help him stand. The effort only made him painfully aware of how much his left arm was bleeding, and the shards of glass that had ripped half a dozen cuts into his face and neck. His hair was sticky, and his left eye didn't focus that well, leaving the world slightly blurred as he moved. He was able to find the black blob with the red streaks though, on the other side of the wreckage, and collapsed to his knees.

"Riku...!" He called, putting one hand on the younger man's chest as the other tried to comb a few strands of hair from those closed eyes, "Riku...! Answer me...!"

Eyes clenched and weakly opened to the sound of his name, but only one eye would open to look up, and it closed quickly from the brightness of the sun directly above them, "A...sahi..."

[Are you hurt!?]

[...M-my...chest...] He answered quickly, voice barely a whisper, [I...feel hot...]

Asahi could feel the man's skin was clammy and damp, but he couldn't see any injuries that were obviously any worse than his own. He didn't feel any blood in Riku's hair, or see any pooling under him anywhere. He reached quickly to pull the thin t-shirt up to see if there were any signs of a
puncture through Riku's skin, but there wasn't much to see there either.

[...My ch-chest...hurts so much...As...sahi...]

[Just breathe. Stay calm. Maybe you got hurt inside. I'm sure help is already on the way. Just listen to my voice.] He pleaded, seeing that one open eye rolling back, "Riku!"

The younger man was gone though. That last breath exhaled, his chest never to rise again. Asahi pressed two shaky fingers to the man's neck, trying to feel for a pulse, but was unable to find one.

[Wake up...]

No answer.

[...Wake up...!] He begged, wrapping his arms around the younger figure's frame and pulling him closer, rocking back and forth as tears started rolling down his face, [Riku wake up! Please...! You have to...!]

TaTHOCK

His eyes shot open, and he looked around the room quickly, gaze scanning every inch of his surroundings for the sound of the sudden noise, only to realize it was the Shishi Odoshi bamboo fountain that had been the culprit. It had reset by then though, and water was slowly trickling into the open end of the bamboo tube, getting it ready to tip again in another minute. Asahi drew a breath and tried to calm his heart, resuming his meditation position, legs crossed and wrists perched on the crests of his knees.

That smell was just overwhelming though...the copper-metal smell of blood. Eyes opened again, this time slower, and he pulled his hands into his lap, looking at his palms, seeing the memory of all the red vitae that had once caked them. The bits of gravel, dirt, and broken glass that had gotten stuck to him. A trickle of it started to drip away though as a few tears fell from his eyes, landing on his thumbs...but then it was all gone again, leaving clean, uninjured skin.

I wish you were still here... I could handle this thing with Yuri so much easier if you were still by my side...

His right hand came up to pinch the bridge of his nose, and rubbed some of the liquid away, letting him see again...but his expression then hardened into something more determined.

I'll beat Viktor this weekend for you... I'll make him eat every insult...
Chapter 348

CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED FOURTY EIGHT

Trying to fit everything through the hotel room door after carrying it halfway across Hell's Creation was a trial.

"I can't feel my arms." Yuri whined, practically dragging his own inventory inside while Viktor leaned by to hold the door open, "We need a pack mule."

"Or a shopping cart..." The Russian added, letting the door go to hold open with his foot instead, as he reached for the bags he'd set down in the hall a moment before, and squeezed through before letting it all go on the floor just inside, "Maybe we should swipe one of those concierge trolleys next time." The door clicked as it shut, and the room became quieter, save for the rustling of bags being moved around and shoes being pushed off.

Yuri was done when he got his own cache to the far side of the hotel space. He lined the series up along the base of the wall and under the window, then simply walked a few paces backwards before dropping onto the bed on his back rather dramatically. He stretched his arms and legs out as far as they could go, then flopped and went lax, staring blankly up at the ceiling, "...I can still feel the gravity-rush of the Flying Dinosaur ride. My adrenaline is going to crash right as we hit the ice tonight."

"Don't say that...!" Viktor huffed, barely managing to crawl onto the other side of the bed before flopping down on his face nearby. He waited there a moment before turning his head to see again, "Opening Ceremonies is going to be a lot of fun."

Yuri lifted his head a bit, but then smiled and pulled his arms back down to his sides, using them to help roll onto his stomach and then lift himself further up the bed. Though tired and sore, he managed to crawl around and draped one arm over his partner's back as he flopped down next to him.

"You're not about to fall asleep, are you?" The Russian mused, leaning over slightly to nose at his partner's hair, "Yuri~"

"Mmmhhh..."

"That's what I thought." Viktor smirked, kissing the edge of one ear before turning to flip onto his back, and made at least half-an-effort to undo the front of his coat so he could pull his arms free. He then did his best to move the younger man on top of himself, though in that state, Yuri felt like a sack of bricks, and Viktor had a hard time with any of it, making him laugh sadly and give up, "I can hardly move now. My muscles all feel like jelly."

Yuri lifted his head, looking on sleepily, but then shrugged out of his heavy coat and did his best to shimmy himself over, throwing one leg over the man's nearest thigh, and wiggled his way up inch-by-inch. He curled his arms around and pressed his hands to his partner's chest, just under his chin, resting a cheek against one collar-bone, "...I need a nap..."

"We came back a bit early because of all our stuff." Viktor murmured, reaching one hand back into his coat to fumble for his phone. He held the device up above his spouse's head, opened the clock app, and quietly set a timer, "I think we can manage 30 minutes safely. It's only 4:30pm."

"45 minutes."
"45 it is." He answered, scrolling through the list until it found the number, and hit 'Start' at the bottom of the screen. He dropped the phone down to the blankets, pinched his fingers around the front edges of his coat, and lifted them up as he wrapped his arms around his husband's thin frame. Though the coat wouldn't go all the way around the both of them, it went enough to come up behind Yuri's shoulders, and the Russian rolled slightly to the side. He felt the deep exhale against the side of his neck, but just as he thought Yuri had already dozed off, those cherry-hazel eyes open in front of him, "What is it?" He wondered quietly, feeling the one leg between his own rising up a bit further as the younger man tried to get more comfortable in that new half-tilted position.

"I had a lot of fun today." Yuri answered, smiling despite his losing battle to stay awake. He slid his left hand down his partner's chest and under the arm that came around him, letting it drape across the man's side, "I want to keep having fun. We can make it through this one event without something horrible happening, right...?"

"If anyone out there is keeping tabs, I think we've more-than-suffered enough this season." Viktor agreed, "We're due for some relief."

"Yeah..."

"Get some rest, my love." The silver legend whispered, leaning forward to close the gap between their lips for a moment, "Sleep time is now."

Yuri looked on for a few seconds longer, but then nodded, and closed his eyes as he drew in closer before dozing off.

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Tinnnnnngggggggggg...

The high-pitched chime of the singing bowl resonated through the room as the small striking hammer was set down on a shelf. Smoke from an incense stick rose into the air, filling it with a mild, sweet scent touched by smoke. The lights were dimmed, and quiet prevailed as the bowl's chime faded to nothing. A pinprick of light glowed as the embers at the tip of the scented stick smoldered.

Asahi sat on his knees before the little make-shift shrine, hands pressed together a few inches in front of his face, eyes closed. He held there for a little while, words whispering at the edge of his mind, before finally lowering his hands to press against the top of his thighs as he bent down in a bow towards the small altar. When he rose again, his eyes opened, and he looked on at the small framed picture of his deceased friend.

It's my first competition back on the National level, Riku... He thought, staring at the small black and white photo, Please watch. I'm going out first, so my performance will set the bar for everyone else.

He bowed his head again, snuffling slightly.

Lend me the strength I need to keep it together.

"Ikimasu." (I'm going.) He finally said, pushing to stand up then. He reached down for the smoking stick of incense and broke the burning end off, holding it carefully as he went to put the embers out with running water, and discarded it. He grabbed up his gear and garment bag, and moved off towards the door, clicking off the last light as he went.

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The Ladies' Singles event had just ended as the first waves of the Men's Singles were starting to
show up at the arena. Even though the Opening Ceremonies event would be held after them, many of the earlier-day's competitors were excited enough to stay and watch that hardly any took their male counterparts' places on the shuttles to go back to the hotel.

Even with so many skaters who'd artificially colored their hair though, there was only one skater in the crowd whose hair was naturally silver...and he stuck out like a sore thumb, towering over most other competitors by at least a foot, and with skin so pale, he'd probably tan under moonlight.

Loyal as a dog though, Viktor remained close to his person, disembarking from the hotel shuttle with a few other skaters to the excited crowd of spectators that were waiting outside the events center. With as much fanfare as they saw though, it almost felt like Worlds, rather than just a Nationals competition.

"It's completely different from last year, isn't it?" He mused quietly, leaning slightly towards his partner as they walked through the wide partition that lead to the doors. He leaned back up again and waved politely, earning him a few cheers and excited screams.

"Lots of things are different from last year." Yuri answered, nodding a few times to the crowd before the bright lights of the outside faded to the muted lights of the indoors, "There's a completely different energy."

"It helps that we're decked out in our Olympic gear." The Russian added, looking down at the white jackets and teal runner-pants, and stuck his right leg out a little further to admire the white font reading 'JAPAN' down his shin, "This is way better than when I got my old Russian Olympic outfit."

"You're not going to throw all that stuff away, are you?" Yuri wondered nervously, "You have a bad habit of wanting to bury the past when the memories aren't the best."

"No way." Viktor shook his head, diverting their walk towards the left as he followed the signs to the prep area, "I never throw any of my old outfits away. Besides, I don't have bad memories of being part of the RSF. They just weren't as fulfilling as the ones I'm making now. Besides..."

Yuri glanced up at the man as they went through the last set of doors that separated them from the public-access areas.

"Now that I'm getting to compete, you'll actually have to take the event a bit more seriously." Viktor teased, "Unlike last year, when you spent half the weekend moping about whether or not to skate your best or just skate to averages."

"How do you feel about it now?"

"I always try to give the performance people expect from me." He answered simply, "The scores themselves don't mean so much this time, given how we've already secured our spots for the rest of the year. So I just give the show that entertains and surprises people the most. It's a smorgasbord of skating experience, artistry, and talent. If I score well then that's just a plus."

"...I guess so." Yuri agreed, veering off to find themselves a spot on some nearby benches where they could deposit their gear bags and start stretching, "It's kind of like at that one Regionals event I had to go to...when Minami-kun got the audience all riled up over the energy of his show, even if it wasn't technically that impressive."

"That's exactly the kind of show I expected you to give back then." Viktor went on, rubbing the man's back as he came around the other side, "Before you were settled into your quads. It's much
more practical to drop elements you're not comfortable with than to force them. No one will worry that much about why you're only doing triples if you're entertaining the audience in other ways."

"That's true."

"It's a shame you didn't have more faith in me back then."

Yuri's brow furrowed in sudden surprise, but when he whipped his head around to contest the point, he just found Viktor there smiling at him.

"Maybe we should challenge each other by agreeing that neither of us will do any quads?" The Russian suggested, booping his husband's nose briefly to shake him from his stunned pause, "What do you think?"

Before Yuri could even answer, he caught the tag-end of an echo coming from the public hallway. Coming into sight a moment later was Coach Nagisa, as well as the rest of the team. Asahi came in last, but just as he came into view, he turned on a heel and bowed back towards the crowd that had ushered him through. The cheering was different for him than it was for Yuri or Viktor; there was an air of celebration about it.

"Forget what I said." Viktor suddenly stated, "I'm not dropping any quads."

Yuri just sighed and shook his head, "I feel like an awkward third wheel between you two."

"The crowd didn't cheer for us like that..." The Russian sulked a little, but then turned back towards their gear and started rummaging for his skates.

"That's because they're cheering for different reasons." Yuri explained, unfurling his exercise mat on the floor nearby, "When the fans cheer for us, it's because of the skill they all know we already have...we're wearing our Olympic outfits, and have nothing to prove here. But...Asahi-kun is different. He's vying for the last spot on the Singles team, a spot that could go to someone in Ladies instead if he's not careful, so they're cheering to wish him good luck. Plus..." He pulled one arm behind his head by the elbow, stretching as he stood, "...Given what I've heard, Asahi-kun is almost like a war-hero. He's coming back after being gone for two years. He has a lot to prove this weekend. It's kind of an uphill climb for him."

"Well, if he's good enough then he'll get his jacket." Viktor said with a shrug, setting his blades aside on the bench as he grabbed his own work-out mat to set down on the ground.

Yuri sighed to himself, looking back one more time to spot Asahi moving further down the hall, as though deliberately avoiding him. His brow furrowed, "...I wonder what Nationals would've been like if you had gone to Moscow after all."

Viktor narrowed one eye at him, but then turned back down the hall, "Maybe it would've been better. Maybe it would've been worse."

"Probably better, at least with regards to him." Yuri suggested, moving down to the floor to sit on the end of his mat, "It might've just gone exactly the same way things had always gone."

"Are you saying I specifically made it worse?"

Brown eyes turned up towards the man, but Yuri shrugged, "All I can say to that, is that before you were involved, I never had any reason to believe Asahi-kun and I were anything but friends. It's entirely possible he could've gone his whole life never suggesting anything more to me."
"So in order words, I'm making it worse." Viktor huffed, sitting roughly and crossing both his arms and legs, "Sorry if my protectiveness over you is inconvenient."

"I didn't say that."

"Then what are you saying?"

"Asahi-kun is super Japanese." Yuri tried to explain, gesturing to himself suddenly, "I mean, I am Japanese...but he's really Japanese. If he really has a thing for me, he's gone out of his way to keep it secret, even from me."

"What does being Japanese have to do with that?"

"Remember that conversation we had way back last year, around this time, and I said that it was expected that I take a wife?"

"That's how it is everywhere."

Yuri shook his head, "Not to the same degree. In Japanese culture, your whole life is supposed to fit into these pre-designed boxes of expectation. If you don't go with the flow, you run the risk of being ostracized for being irregular. People think you're a freak if you don't watch television regularly...because that's what everyone else does. There's this kind of hive mind mentality with us, and people who go against the flow upset the balance for everyone, not just themselves. He's acutely aware of the box he's supposed to be in, and the kind of social stigma he may face for refusing to be put in it."

"Can't say I've noticed anyone being uncomfortable around us." Viktor huffed, straightening out his mat and sticking one leg out before leaning down over it, holding his foot with both hands.

"We're different. You're not Japanese, so it kind of gives me a pass."

"...Thanks, I think?" The Russian switched legs and leaned down again, "...And maybe you're welcome?"

"My point is...it's easy for us to be open about who we are." Yuri tried to explain, matching his partner's stretch with one leg out to start, "For Asahi-kun...if what you say is true...then not only does he have to live with the frustration of me being taken already, but he has to watch the both of us being celebrated. Publicly. We can be affectionate towards each other openly, in a way that we probably couldn't have been if you were a native like him."

"No one's culture is going to stop me from loving on you when and where I want." Viktor pointed out, rising up and gaping at his partner.

Yuri rose back up as well, giving him a strange look, "...I vaguely recall your culture doing that."

Crystal eyes widened for a moment, but then narrowed and looked away, "...Touché."

"You and him are a lot alike." Yuri went on, "If not for me being in the middle of things, you two might've even been friends."

"I'm not exactly black-listing him." Viktor shrugged, putting the soles of his feet together as he pulled his ankles close, and leaned down over them while pressing his knees down, "But he's going to have to get over you at some point. From what it sounds like, he's been pining for you for nearly a decade. How much more time does he need before he gives up and moves on?"
"Maybe he just needs the right motivation." The younger skater suggested, though not entirely with confidence, "He'll never directly ask me out. Especially now, since he knows he can't. But maybe there's something we can do to help let him down easy, in a way that doesn't just make things worse. He's still my friend...I don't want to hurt him."

"Whatever we do, it's going to hurt him. There's no pain-free way of explaining to someone that their love is pointless."

"I don't think that fact is lost on him." Yuri huffed.

"Maybe it's just one of those things where it has to come from someone else." Viktor suggested.

"I already said I wanted to talk to him about this, and you told me no." Yuri side-eyed his partner.

"You wanted to talk to him alone." The Russian corrected, "Maybe it needs to be me."

"Yeah right." The younger figure shook his head, "You and him are already butting heads. Neither of you wants to hear what the other has to say, and I doubt he'd ever bear his soul to you if confronted on it anyway."

"And you think he'd bear his soul to you?"

Yuri nodded, "So far as he knows, I'm unaware of how he feels about me. If that changed...maybe he'd open up about it. Or maybe this is just some huge misunderstanding. We'll never know unless we try to talk to him."

Viktor pondered for a moment, which gave Yuri pause. A finger went up to the Russian's lip as he closed his eyes to think, but when one eye crept open again, it turned to look on the anxious younger skater, "No, I stand by what I said before. Let's leave it alone for now."

"Eh? ...Really...?" The younger skater sighed, his hopes of changing the man's mind dashed.

"Mh." Viktor nodded to himself, "He's already avoiding us, but he can't ignore the ice. Maybe the stuff I planned to say during Opening Ceremonies will help move things along."

"...You're going to use your mic-time during Opening Ceremonies to throw shade?" Yuri gaped. The silver legend shrugged and leaned back on his hands, sitting casually, "It was going to be a little subtle shade at the RSF's expense. Nothing annoys bullies more than having their victims happy with the circumstances, right?"

"...I don't follow..."

"You explained to me that joke about Asahi's hair looking like a chicken-butt, but then he came around and used a chicken squeeze-toy to make you laugh. It's like he was using the insult as armor. I'll give him credit where it's due on that one...it was pretty clever." Viktor explained, "But what I mean is...the RSF sanctioned me for giving up my Gold to you at the Final. They thought I'd go quietly into retirement after that, leaving the sport with my tail between my legs. What greater rebuttal can I give than to be as excited as I am to skate for the JSF instead? I've turned my punishment into a reward. I have no doubt that the RSF will hear about everything I say and do here."

"...What does that have to do with Asahi-kun though?" Yuri wondered, utterly confused.

Viktor just smiled and winked at him from behind his bangs, "You'll see."
"Now you're just making me anxious!"

"It's a good thing that I plan to do, I promise." Viktor laughed, "It's not mean-spirited or vindictive in any way. In fact, I should've done something like this a really long time ago, and I would've done it even if Asahi hadn't been here. It just turns out that my plans also help to defuse that whole crazy situation. At least, I hope they do." He pushed back to sitting normally and twisted around on his exercise mat, reaching forward to take both of his husband's hands into his own, lifted them, and kissed the ring, "I swear on my life that nothing I'm going to say or do during the OCs will be malicious towards your friend in any way."

Yuri gave a skeptical look anyway, "He's going to be hurt by it anyway though, isn't he."

"There is nothing we can do about that." Viktor explained, pressing those fingers to his lips as he spoke, "But this is the kindest possible way I can think of to let him know all the things you want to tell him, without either of us looking like the badguys. It puts the ball in his court...it'll be up to him to decide what to do with it."

The younger figure nodded quietly, and sighed a breath, "I guess it'll be like ripping off a band-aid...it only hurts for a second, but then it's done..."

"Exactly."
Fans and event personnel were milling around in the arena’s main public hall as the ice was prepared for the highly-anticipated Opening Ceremonies. A massive red velvet carpet was rolled out, taking over a full quarter of the rink on one short end. On top of it, pieces of a multi-tiered stage were being arranged; the largest out in front, shaped in a half-circle, taking over a full half of the carpeted area. Behind it was assembled a higher level, smaller, with a few stairs on either side. Three mid-sized chu-daiko were set up in a circle on the raised stage, then promptly hidden behind a large curtain that helped divide the front-stage area from the back.

Local group-skaters were starting to assemble on rink-side, each of them carrying an array of colored ribbon-batons in their hands. They glanced from the stage set-up to the arena beyond, looking on fans and spectators as everyone waited in hushed anticipation for the show to come.

Under the stands, in the regular prep area, the Men's Event athletes were getting ready as well. Three of them were dressing for the Opening Ceremonies, as well as three from the earlier Ladies program, and two sets each of Pairs and Ice Dance. There seemed to be two distinct groups that were getting more attention than usual though; one being the obvious newcomer to the JSF, the other being a returning athlete.

Viktor and Yuri had switched their Olympic track-suits for a simpler pair of black slacks and button-downs, though like at the Grand Prix Exhibition, Viktor was in all black, whereas Yuri's shirt was white. Similar to Duetto, the shirts were open by a few buttons down the front. Once skates were on and the pair rose to standing, there was a resounding echo-chamber of applause, and a path was cut to let them through to start heading to rink-side. Viktor was the only one who could see past the tops of peoples' heads though to see the second group farther down the hall. He gave a skeptical look as he beheld that there were almost as many people surrounding Asahi as had been around himself and Yuri.

Who is that guy? If he's so popular, why don't I remember much of anything about him? He can't have been that good a skater if he never made it to the Final... Has he been to Worlds before? Did he not score high enough to make it to the Free Program? Ahh this is frustrating.

"Viktor-san~" A voice came, grabbing his and Yuri's attention. Then they turned, they spotted one of the event coordinators approaching through the group, offering an earpiece with its small receiver. The man tried to explain what to do with them, but his English was appalling, and he gave a desperate look to Yuri for help, speaking the information in Japanese before bowing his head apologetically towards them both.

"Oh, okay..." Yuri started, pointing at the items, "Seems they're foregoing microphones. They want you to wear this for when you get your time to talk. He says that it'll be off during the show, but they'll turn it on for you when the President calls out to have you speak."

"Okay~" The Russian answered happily, placing the earpiece over the left side, but then tugging on the collar of his shirt, "Here, help me get this thing through so I don't have cables flapping around when we're out there. Would be a bit embarrassing if I go out there and get caught on someone."

Nodding, Yuri stepped behind his partner, feeling the small black box-clip going down the back of the silver legend's shirt, tugging a bit of it out from where it had been tucked in, and found the device to clip it and put everything back in place. When he was done, he stepped to the side again, watching
his spouse trying to settle the upper piece to his ear, "All set?"

"I think so. This is getting really exciting~!"

Both of their attentions were grabbed then as the second group was starting to clap like their own had. Asahi was sporting the same white-shirt-black-pants ensemble that Yuri wore, and he was bowing his head politely to the crowd as he tried to back out from it.

Viktor looked from him down towards his partner, reaching up to adjust his earpiece one more time, "Leave it be."

Yuri glanced back, but then down, nodding sullenly, "Wakatta, wakatteru yo..." (I know, I know.)

"Yuuuuri-kuuuuuuun!" Minami's voice rang out, shattering the awkward aura like brittle glass as he came rushing up quickly. He was heaving for breath as he finally arrived, "I thought I was going to miss you before you guys went out! My shuttle got here so late!"

"What happened?"

The teen got sheepish, and his ears and cheeks went equally pink, "I got so excited about tonight that I left all my stuff in the hotel room, so we had to go back up to get it, and then we got stuck in all the traffic from people who're just arriving for the OCs and Men's. We had a hard time pulling into the parking lot!"

"Well, you're here now so that's good!" Yuri nodded, "Oh, come back with me a second. I got something for you."

Minami's light-brown eyes grew to twice their natural size at the sound of it, and he followed like the dutiful fanboy he was as Yuri went back towards the gear he and Viktor had stored. Viktor waited where he was, since it was nearby.

As Yuri went rummaging into his carry bag, Minami was bouncing with excitement, "I'm not 100% sure, but I had this feeling that you..." He started, finding the gift—wrapped package, "...Might like this."

"Whooooaaahh what is it!?" The teen asked, accepting the present with both hands, "Can I open it now!?"

"Of course!"

"Eeeeeeerrrrr!" Minami squeak-screeched, ripping into the paper like a ravenous animal. When the contents were revealed, he saw a yellow and black lanyard, as well as a black robe with yellow lining, "Ohmygodisthis-"

"I hope I'm right about you being a Hufflepuff." Yuri smiled nervously, "It was either that or Gryffindor, but my gut said Hufflepuff."

"I'm a Hufflepuff!" Viktor called excitedly from the side, waving to get attention.

Yuri laughed and waved back to placate his husband, but then turned back to the younger skater, "Do you like it?"

Minami's eyes grew even more, but then tears started rising in them, and soon the teen was a mess of waterworks as he looked from the cloak and lanyard to the idol who'd given it to him, "I am a Hufflepuff! Thisisthebestdayofmylife!" He quaked, throwing the robe over his shoulders quickly and
the lanyard over his head, clipping it to his event badge before pulling the original lanyard away. He twirled around happily to let the robe's cape-like length flare out around him, then lifted those tear-filled eyes back up to Yuri, "Thank yoooooouu!

"Glad you like them."

The young skater could hardly contain himself and lunged forward, throwing his arms over Yuri's shoulders and clamping down tightly, "This is so great! You shouldn't have, but I'm super-glad you did!"

Yuri smiled and returned the hug, "I should thank you, too, Minami-kun."

"Eh? Why...?" Those big brown doe-eyes blinked in confusion as he pulled back to look up, "What'd I do?"

"Back when we were at Regionals, and I got all weird about you wearing a replica of my Lohengrin costume. I didn't realize it then, but when you told me, 'You don't have a dark past. Don't make fun of me for looking up to you,' I should've appreciated you more for it." He explained, "Because I did the same thing with Viktor...looking up to him and replicating his programs to try and be as good as him. I guess I didn't think I was good enough to be replicated by anyone else...but you did anyway. So...thank you."

Minami was a puddle of happy tears. He just stood there in front of his idol, hardly able to process the words. Yuri pat the teen's shoulder to try and reassure him.

Viktor huffed a laugh to himself as he watched, You've grown up so much since that Regionals event, Yuri. I'm sure Minami will skate much better now, even if he's superstitious about going fourth, he thought, leaning back against a corner of the wall that lead to rink-side, and casually crossed his arms over his chest. His eyes were grabbed briefly as Asahi tried to slip past, and for the briefest of seconds, their eyes met, but neither said a word to the other, and Asahi managed to get through without issue. Slate eyes followed the man as he moved on, noticing at the same time that the lights were starting to dim in the arena. He turned back towards his husband, "It's just about time, Yuri. We should go."

"Hai."

"Ganba, Yuri-kun!" Minami called out, waving with both arms as the pair started moving off, "I can't wait to see the full show!"

The murmur in the audience put a certain vibrating energy in the air. The stage area was dark, occasionally hovered-over by the multi-colored spotlights that slowly meandered across the rink. When the lights started to converge on center though, all 12 of them creating a ring around the JSF logo within the ice, the audience started cheering and clapping excitedly.

['Error' - GARNiDELiA (Beatless OP)]

The scratch-like sound of a techno rhythm started playing overhead, and the lights fanned away from the ring, changing colors as they started wandering around over the crowd, drifting about in a choreographed path, colors changing with the lyrics. Everything at rink-side and beyond was pitch black.

Kowarete shimatta mono wo miru you ni
(As if looking at something broken)
"Okashina koto da to" daremo ga iu
(Everyone says, "It's so weird.")

Soredemo shinjitai sono te wo tsukamitai
(But I still want to believe. I still want to take your hand.)

The stage area suddenly burst to life, five white lights shining down from the rafters as a group of dancers slowly rose to standing. Their glittering black-trimmed silver outfits shimmered under the illumination.

An Error, code Error, code Error, code Error...
An Error, code Error, code Error... No Error!

The music took on an added layer of the beat, and the dancers lifted their heads, then their left arms, extending their hands out towards the audience.

An Error, code Error, code Error, code Error...

Their right arms came up to match the left, rising slowly with hands reaching out.

An Error, code Error, code Error... No Error!

The music's tempo grew more intense, hitting a strong beat before falling quiet for a moment. The dancer's raised both arms up above their heads, and burst into an energetic group routine as the lyrics returned.

Bokura no mirai ga seikai to iu katachi ni naranakutemo
(Even if our future doesn't take the "proper" form,)

Ima furetai to omou kimochi dake de ii
(All we need right now are the feelings we wish to feel.)

From both sides of the stage, the first set of six background support dancers started filtering out onto the carpeted area in front of the stage. Their costumes shone like the main group, but they were adorned in mostly black with silver trims, the inverted version of the five on stage.

Dareka ga egaita puroguramu doori ni kimerarenai ne
(We can't make decisions based on a program someone else wrote!)

Imi nara tsunagu te no naka
(Our meaning is here, in these joined hands.)

Another group of six joined the first set on the carpet, weaving in between the performers as the music faded down and their movements halted along with it, their bodies appearing to 'shut down' like robots. The five on stage converged together, back to back in a small circle with the 'lead' in front, the only person in the rink allowed to move as she 'sang' along with the hums of the lull.

As the music jumped in again, more subdued than the previous stanza, the dance began again, all twelve of the actors in front moving together as the five on the stage behind them moved in time as well with different moves, spreading out across their entire space. The spotlights above them all converged and dimmed, coming back to life in a kaleidoscope of color, sliding out from the rink and over the audience.

Sakkaku darake no kono yo no naka de
(In a world that's filled with illusions,)
Tadashii koto nado dare ga kimeta no?
(Who on Earth decided what's right and wrong?)

Me no mae no shinjitsu sae tsukurimono kamo ne
(Even the truth before our eyes might be a fake.)

Kekkyoku dare ni mo wakari wa shinai
(In the end, no one really knows.)

The dancers in front crouched down and held in place, the lights on them fading to black, coming on again directly onto the stage as the main group back back together again in a tighter formation. The 'singer' held still in the middle as the other four circled around her.

Sore nara shinjitai sono te wa atatakai
(If that's the case, I want to believe. Your hand is just so warm.)

The lights all changed to blue suddenly, and the five performers lined up across the stage, moving slowly at first, building up as the tempo of the chorus grew.

An Error, code Error, code Error, code Error...
An Error, code Error, code Error...No Error!

Green lights added to the blue, and smaller disco-ball-like lights flitted across the arena. The beat of the music changed, and the first six of the front-half background performers started rising up, 'coming online' like the androids they represented.

An Error, code Error, code Error, code Error...

The last six actors rose again like the first, each of them either clapping or stomping a foot with the beat.

An Error, code Error, code Error...No Error!

The pace rose to critical mass, and the entire group dipped down to one knee, rising slowly again with right arms extended, snapping their heads on the last beat and grasping their hands into fists. They all shot forward with renewed energy as the lyrics returned.

Kimi to no kotae ga machigai to iu katachi ni naru to shitara
(If the answer I find with you takes the form of a mistake,)

Kono sekai o isso uragitte shimaeba ii
(Then we should just turn our backs on this world.)

Dareka ga egaita puroguramu doori ni kimerarenai ne
(We can't make decisions based on a program someone else wrote!)

Imi nara, tsunagu te no naka
(Our meaning is here, in these joined hands.)

The lyricless climax of the song came into play, and both dancing groups moved in unison, jumping up together on the last beat. The five on stage then started coming down to the carpet, weaving seamlessly into the mass as it, in turn, backed up to make room. Lights moved forward to the ice, lighting a path for the next group of performers to enter the stage; ribbon-dancers on skates, long tails of their multicolored streamers fluttering behind them like smoke in the wind. They formed two long lines on opposite sides of the rink, then merged in and out of each other fluidly, ribbons mesmerizing...
in their flow, with the dancers on the carpet and stage moving evenly behind them.

As the lyrics returned, the bladed group spun low and came to a halt, lights moving quickly back to the main five, who were now at the very front of the circular-edge of the red carpet, spread out across its whole circumference. The 'singer' took center stage, more lights on her as the four who accompanied her stood still, looking out into the dark. The larger part of the stage fell to black, the 12 background dancers completely invisible where they stayed low.

**Nani wo ki ni shite nani ga kowakute**
*(What are we so worried about... what are we so afraid of...)*

**Jibun no koto made gomakashite ikiteru no?**
*(That we end up living a lie?)*

Half of the ribbon-skaters rose up again, streamers flowing magically as they moved through their crouched cohorts, music increasing its tempo above them all.

**Donna fiu ni iraretatte iiin datte**
*(You can choose to be anything you please,)*

**Tada daiji na mono mamoritai dake datte**
*(As long as you protect the things most important to you.)*

The remaining skaters rose up then as well, moving their ribbons in slow circles above their heads.

**Wasurenaide what is precious to you!**
*(So don't forget what is precious to you!)*

All ribbon-batons were tossed up into the air on the last note, spiraling down to be caught on the beat. Lights burst to life in all directions, flooding the stage in a bright glow as all the background dancers rose up to join in, and movement overtook the ice for the finale.

**Bokura no mirai ga seikai to iu katachi ni naranakutemo**
*(Even if our future doesn't take the "proper" form,)*

**Ima furetai to omou kimochi dake de i**
*(All we need right now are the feelings we wish to feel.)*

**Dareka ga egaita puroguramu doori ni kimerarenai ne**
*(We can't make decisions based on a program someone else wrote!)*

**Imi nara tsunagu te no naka**
*(Our meaning is here, in these joined hands.)*

Energy flowed from the ice, and the spotlights danced around from the rink to the audience and back again. The skaters slowly started making their way to the rink walls as the music started to slow down, the background dancers on the stage doing the same, until it was only the five first performers left, and all the light faded down. The song tapered out to silence, and the ice went dark, leaving only a subtle blue glow for the actors to find their way by.

The audience burst into applause, cheering and clapping before realizing the show wasn't over yet. A single spotlight faded onto the stage, illuminating a woman in a pale white and blue Romanesque silken robe, dark brown wavy hair tumbling down over her shoulders, the hum of a quiet orchestra rising around her. As she brought one hand up to rest gently over her heart, she lifted her head, looking down onto the ice where a certain darkly-clad silver-haired Russian was coming out on his
own, one light on him as well. The audience did everything it could not to interrupt, but many couldn't help but cheer out excitedly when they saw him.

[‘The Voice’ - Celtic Woman]

I hear your voice on the wind
And I here you call out my name

Viktor slid about the rink gracefully, his frame moving like liquid on blades.

"Listen my child, " you say to me,
"I am the voice of your history.

He swiveled around the rink wall, blades leaving fine scratches in the ice in his wake. He then made his way towards the crest of the circle of carpet, and tip-toed onto it before turning around.

Be not afraid, come follow me.
Answer my call and I'll set you free…!

The Russian swept his arms forward as he crouched, bending his head down as the ice was suddenly flooded with skaters, flanking him on both sides. They quickly took their positions, using the full field of ice to spread out, setting down a toe-pick to hold in place.

Viktor stepped back onto the ice as the lyrics picked up again, weaving casually through the group as they began to move around him. The spotlight followed him as he glided between different skaters, setting a hand on a shoulder or against someone's lower back as the lyrics were sung, as though each line were a tale he told to each person he encountered.

I am the voice in the wind and the pouring rain
I am the voice of your hunger and pain
I am the voice that always is calling you
I am the voice, I will remain

The silver Russian moved to the front of the group, throwing himself into a flying sit spin while the other skaters wove their two lines through each other behind him.

I am the voice in the fields when the summer's gone
The dance of the leaves when the autumn winds blow

He rose up for the camel spin variant, hands clasped behind his back for a few rotations, then straightening out to jump and switch feet for another camel spin on the other leg. The rest of the group moved out into two concentric circles, the outer ring moving clockwise to the inner's reverse rotation. When Viktor hopped, the rings broke apart into two big U-shaped lines, reversing their direction as they moved down to place the Russian in the middle of them all as he continued the spin.

Ne'er do I sleep throughout all the cold winter long

When the silver legend stopped himself and veered off, the two rings broke up again, each skater twisting off and away from him, drawing the eyes of the crowd as Viktor moved back towards the carpet.
I am the force that in springtime will grow

Half in the dark, Viktor took hold of a small instrument, setting it up against his shoulder and neck before coming back into the light of the performance. The group made way for him again, and the crowd rose up in excited screams as the strokes of a violin played overhead, and Viktor strummed a bow across the strings.

The skaters all around him broke off into pairs, each duo skirting around in a small circle where they stood. The Russian slipped through and around them, sliding along on one blade as he played on.

The lights suddenly dimmed on the ice, with spotlights shining down on the last raised stage at the back, the curtains that hid it from view moving away. Behind them, three drummers started pounding away at the *chū-daiko* drums that were tilted towards them. The audience clapped excitedly to see the *kumi-daiko* performers, lights staying dark for the moment on the rest of the rink, leaving only the sound of the drums and the woman's voice singing together.

I am the voice of the past that will always be
Filled with my sorrow and blood in my fields
I am the voice of the future
Bring me your peace
Bring me your peace, and my wounds, they will heal

Lights shone down on the rest of the ice again, and the skaters all rose back up to standing, immediately breaking off to weave spirals through each other. The drums pounded on with the inclusion of the full unseen orchestra. By then, Viktor had given up the violin, and had returned to his place in the front-center part of the group, twisting off to single out a nearby Ladies skater for a mini-duet for a line, then moved off to find another.

I am the voice in the wind and the pouring rain
I am the voice of your hunger and pain
I am the voice that always is calling you
I am the voice...

He moved across the aisle to the second group, picking up where he left off by 'stealing' the female half of a pair of Ice Dancers for a moment, then sliding off again as the lyrics went on.

I am the voice of the past that will always be
I am the voice of your hunger and pain
I am the voice of the future

Eventually, the silver legend found the only partner he was willing to skate with for more than one sentence, and pulled Yuri from the group to skate in the center spotlight. The crowd cheered happily at that, and watched as the duo seemed to move like ballroom dancers. Unlike their impromptu Waltz in Detroit though, Viktor lead this dance, and Yuri rested his free hand on his husband's shoulder.

I am the voice...
I am the voice...
I am the voice...

The last line of the song, and the Russian legend lifted his partner where he'd had his free arm around the man's side and lower back, pulling him up against his frame for a final spin with both of those golden blades up off the ice.

I am the voice...
As the line faded out, Viktor let his spouse down again, and with the final beat, Yuri spun out away from him, and they both raised up their arms as they stood side by side, facing the end of the rink.

The audience was ecstatic, clapping even more eagerly than they had before. Before they had a chance to think it was over though, the lights shut down again, plunging the arena into complete blackness. Spotlights came back on with the call of a woman's voice, shining at the stage area to illuminate the same group of 5 as had been there before, but in new outfits, wearing what looked like a monochrome set of street clothes; jeans, t-shirts, boots, cute jackets, and messy wind-swept hair. The sound of guitars and a synthesizer resonated throughout the arena.

['Who We Are' - FAKY]

As the 'lead singer' performed in center at the front of the stage, her four cohorts performed behind her, moving in synch with one another as perfect mirror images on either side.

Suka retakute enjite itakedo
(I pretended to be someone else to be accepted)

Doka ka chigautte zutto kizuite ita
(But now I know that's not who I am)

Cuz I...

The lead stepped off the front lip of the stage, one boot at a time setting down on the vast red carpet, spotlights following her as she sang, hands moving about as she was making her next heated declarations. The dancers behind her moved closer to the edge, but stayed on the raised platform as they continued their performance.

Jissai I'm not that kind of girl
(Actually, I'm not that kind of girl)

Zettai I'm not that kind of girl
(Absolutely, I'm not that kind of girl)

Ohh...

Kotae denai mama I couldn't sleep
(Not knowing the answer, I couldn't sleep)

Wakatte tte ienai yo ne
(I didn't know how to ask for help)

The singer had made it to the front of the carpeted area, and part her feet in a stance, raising her right hand up as she dipped down on one knee.

Hitorikiri de down, down, down...
(I found myself going down, down, down...)

But mou The End
(But that's all ending)

So I'll let you know now

She quickly stood back up again and spun around 180 before landing, and lights burst back to life on the ice, revealing the skaters that had rearranged themselves on the rink walls. Two lines of them
started creeping forward, gesturing at the line opposite them as they slid gradually closer and closer
to one another.

Nobody gon' rip
Nobody gon' tear
Nobody gon' break my heart

Two pairs of skaters stepped into the fore, the Pairs duo and the Ice Dancers with them, spotlights
shining down to focus on them apart from the Singles staying on the fringes. Both women were soon
up in the air, held up by their male partners in a complex array of aerial moves.

Honto no Feelings
(My feelings)

Honto no Wishes
(My wishes)

Kukusanakute ii
(I won't hide them anymore)

Blades set back down to the ice, and the duos stepped into a series of pair spins.

We are, we are (who we are)
We are, we are (who we are)

Nobody gon' change itsudatte
(Nobody ever gon' change)

Who we are, who we are

Darkness fell over the ice again, and spotlights focused back onto the singer and her entourage closer
to the stage. The four surrounded her, staying close initially, but then breaking off as she stepped
forward a few paces away from them.

I love what I look like

Mitomete ii yo ne
(And I know it's okay to admit that)

She started pacing the edge of the stage, gesturing out at the audience as the dancers performed
together behind her, staying in center.

Honki de sukinara
(If you truly love yourself)

Osaenakute ii (I already told you)
(You don't need to hide it away, I already told you)

Anyway...
Don't care what you say about me
Don't care what you say about me, no

Twisting on the heel of one boot, the singer changed directions on the stage's edge, making her way
back along the lip to 'speak her mind' at the audience on the other side of the arena.
Cause if I let what you think take over me
Then I wouldn't be, I wouldn't be me

Watashirashikunai nara
(If I'm not myself)

Dare ga watashi wo ikiru no?
(Who's going to be me?)

The leader hopped back to the middle from where she'd ended up on the other side of the stage, and lights came back on over the ice, this time featuring the entire group. The Pair and Ice Dancer couples were in the middle, but four of the Singles skaters had paired off as well, skating together in a behind and to the sides of them. Yuri and Viktor stayed together, and they were mirrored by the two Ladies Singles skaters on the opposite side. Along the front curve of their circle, the remaining Singles Olympic hopefuls were skating on their own, rotating in swift sit-spins and rising up through an arranged combination spin.

Nobody gon' rip
Nobody gon' tear
Nobody gon' break my heart

Honto no Feelings
(My feelings)

Honto no Wishes
(My wishes)

Kukusanakute ii
(I won't hide them anymore)

The couples in the center merged together to perform a combined double-Death Spiral. The Singles in front stopped their spins in place, but started skating backward and around the spiral, and switched places with the coupled Men's and Ladies' pairs.

We are, we are (who we are)
We are, we are (who we are)

Nobody gon' change Itsudatte
(Nobody ever gon' change)

Who we are, who we are

The Death Spiral pulled in and each couple split off again, weaving around the different groups of skaters that had spread out on all sides. The Singles skaters were synchronizing their moves together again, stepping through a string of twizzles as they all rotated clockwise around the peripheries, dipping and thrusting with each line.

Nobody gon' rip
Nobody gon' tear
Nobody gon' break my heart

The whole group synched up, skating one big step sequence together like a murmuration of starlings.

Honto no Feelings
(My feelings)
The lights died down again, but instead of completely shutting out the ice, spotlights came down instead onto each of the different groups of skaters while focus returned to the stage area. The main five spread out across the wide carpet, four dancing in time with the skaters while the lead stayed stationary in front as she sang on.

If you love yourself
And you don't care what they say

Shinjiteminai, baby, don't care what they say
(Believe in yourself, baby, don’t care what they say)

All five came back together again, and the background dancers lifted the singer up over their shoulders.

Cause it doesn't matter anyway, hey

They tossed her up like a cheerleading throw, catching her carefully as the chorus began anew and the skaters took over the focus again, repeating the moves they’d done before.

Nobody gon’ rip
Nobody gon’ tear
Nobody gon’ break my heart

Honto no Feelings
(My feelings)

Honto no Wishes
(My wishes)

Kukusanakute ii
(I won’t hide them anymore)

We are, we are (who we are)
We are, we are (who we are)

Nobody gon' change itsudatte
(Nobody ever gon' change)

Who we are, who we are

The music slowly faded down, and the bladed dancers made their way closer to the carpet, half of
the group on each side as they slid towards where the red velvet met the rink-wall. The dancers on
the stage backed up until they were right up against the curtains that hid the drummers' raised stage.
Everyone lowered their heads, and the lights dimmed until it was black with the finale of the song.

The audience went wild with cheering, clapping and stomping along with the whistles and screams.
A dull glow rose off the ice as lights gradually came back on again, but only barely enough to see. A
single spotlight then shot on to one side of the rink, shining down onto the very woman who had
offered Viktor his place in the JSF; President Keiko Hashimoto. The cacophony of cheering died
down a little to a more-polite clapping, and the stately woman stepped out onto the red carpet, until
she made it to the front of the curve.

[Thank you, everyone, for your excitement and energy as we kick off the first day of competition at
the All Japan Championships!] She called out in Japanese, earning another round of applause,
[Please lend all of your well-wishes to the athletes whom we have already begun to choose for
Japan's Olympic Figure Skating Team for this season's Winter Games!]

Six spotlights came down onto the ice, but each was empty for the moment. A pair of shadows
started skating forward though, stepping into the light of the first pillar.

[Pair Skaters Myu Sakamoto and Kenichi Fujiyama!]
The next pair of shadows moved forward, entering the light opposite the first.

[Ice Dancers Kiara Tabara and Daisuke Watanabe!]
The next two spread out to the far sides, entering their different pillars of light in front of the two
couples that preceded them.

[Ladies Singles Ariyana Nagai, and Hiroki Kobayashi!]
The final two lights were quickly entered into by the last pair of known Olympic competitors.

[And finally, Men's Singles Yuri Nikiforov, and Viktor Nikiforov!]

Applause exploded, and each of the skaters on the ice raised their hands to wave, or bow, politely to
the unseen fans in the dark beyond the rink wall.

[There's still one last spot on the Singles set that has yet to be chosen! Please wish the rest of the
group luck, as they are our preliminary front-runners!]

The last gaggle of skaters stepped into a light that came on in the middle, Asahi among them, and
they too nodded their appreciation to the fans. A few moments later, as the skaters all started moving
off again, the spotlights converged on President Hashimoto prepared the next announcement.

[The news has spread like wildfire since the announcement, but to those for whom this is
unknown...please let me formally welcome the newest member of the Japanese Skating
Federation...Viktor Nikiforov!] She called out, clapping her hands as she stepped back to make room
for the Russian. He bowed his head as he slid closer, waving into the dark as blades moved from ice
to velvet.

He could suddenly hear his happy chuckles echoing off the arena walls, and he realized his mic was
live, which surprised him into taking an uneasy stance, "Whoops...mic is hot all of a sudden." He
laughed, then half-bowed again, "Arigatou, mina-san." (Thank you, everyone.) He turned around
and bowed to the woman who'd announced him, "Arigatou gozaimasu, Madame President." Finally,
he turned back towards the open rink before him, and stepped off the carpet to glide forward casually
on one blade, light following him as he moved, "I apologize for my lack of Japanese right now...I promise, I'll be fluent in time." He explained, pausing in the center of the dark frost, and pivoted on one blade, the other going heel-down with the back pick digging into the ice for balance. He waited a moment for the applause and cheering to fade down before he suddenly took on a slightly more serious tone, and he looked down a little, "It's come to my attention that I'm actually supposed to be retired right now. I guess I didn't get the memo in time...because I'm so full of energy now and ready to skate my heart out for Japan." That earned a new swell in excitement, and Viktor had to wave his hands down to quiet them again, "I know, right?" He laughed, turning in place to face the group behind himself again, "And while my eternal gratitude goes out to the Japanese Skating Federation for this incredible offer and opportunity...I must also thank someone who helped me get here. Without him, I'd be in St. Petersburg now, sitting at home on my second year of retirement. Yuri..." He reached his hand out and waited, spotting the shadow of his spouse coming closer through the dark, coming into focus as he stepped into the light and new energy clapped out at them from the audience.

Yuri reached forward and took the offered hand, letting his partner pull him closer and share the light shining down on them both. Without a mic of his own though, he had no easy way of speaking, so he just waved politely and held fast.

"When I came to Japan in April almost 2 years ago, I did so because I wanted to coach this lovable guy." Viktor explained, pulling his partner's head closer to nuzzle the side of it briefly with a cheek, "He'd skated my 'Aria' so beautifully, and I wanted to see him be able to show that beauty to the whole world. He's done pretty well since then, ne?"

Yuri's face went red, but the audience wouldn't let him off easy, cheering madly for him. A few chants of Viktuuri could be heard under the murmur.

"Grand Prix Final Silver in Barcelona, Gold at Japanese Nationals, then Four Continents...and even the World Figure Skating Championships! He owes me four more of those though, so he's not done yet."

The crowd laughed, and Yuri blushed even more as he stood there nervously with Viktor sliding around him in a circle.

"Then we have this season so far...Gold at both Skate Canada and Cup of China...and even the Grand Prix Final in his own former home-rink city of Detroit!" Viktor went on, cheers echoing from all sides as he slid up behind his spouse, settling one arm over the man's shoulders, "It's been my privilege and pleasure to be Yuri Katsuki's coach...and even to be a little bit more to my beloved Yuri Nikiforov."

Whistles responded to that, and more chants of Viktuuri rose up again.

The Russian came around to face his partner, sliding his hand from one shoulder to the side of that pale neck, "And it's been exciting to skate against him as a fellow competitor. I haven't had so much fun on the ice in years. Yuri..." His voice lowered a bit, and he got 'that' look in his eyes, "There isn't a word strong enough for me to accurately express my gratitude to you for all that you've done to breathe new life into a sport I already loved...and because of you, I've been granted a literal resurrection to a career that had nearly been cut short by forces beyond my control. But..." He said, seeing the light reflecting off his husband's eyes as Yuri started to realize the parallel to the speech that had been given at their wedding party nearly a year before, "...I suppose 'thank you for everything' will have to suffice."

Yuri could feel his eyes getting misty again, but he managed to hold the tears back for the moment, nodding and smiling as he said 'of course' under the roar of the applause.
"Now," Viktor started up again, "In March, right before the next World Championships, on the 16th to be specific...it'll be the one-year anniversary of yet another special event in our lives. Apparently I'm in charge of the festivities." He pushed forward on a toe-pick, and moved to turn his spouse around, going back towards the edge of the red carpet in a slow forward glide, "I remember hearing a story once about a hill in the warmth of nice weather, lights floating into the sky, a few dogs running around...and a tree with leaves the color of fire...red, orange, yellow...like an autumn maple in its splendor. There's only one problem..."

Yuri gaped at his partner, nearly tripping over himself as he wondered what those last words were about.

"This whole thing we have now kind of came about by accident, if you recall." Viktor explained, reaching forward to take his spouse's right hand, lifting it up and clasping it with his own right hand, "These rings we exchanged in Barcelona last year...you said it was as a thank you. It all started so innocently..." He mused, recalling that night fondly, "The two of us at the Sagrada Familia, the Christmas choir singing softly...and your flushed face as you tried to explain why you'd chosen a gold ring, of all the things. Do you remember what I said back then?"

"Of course I do..." Yuri answered easily, though his voice was only heard by those standing close by.

"Skate the way you can honestly say you liked the best." Viktor said for him, pulling the man's hand closer to himself, "I told you I wanted to kiss your Gold medal when you won it...but it ended up being this Gold ring instead." He pressed his lips to kiss the ring on that finger, "We showed these matching rings to our friends, and one of yours actually mistook us for being married already, excitedly telling everyone who would listen that his friend had gotten hitched. It wasn't quite true though... This situation we find ourselves in now, it all kind of came about by accident. A simple misunderstanding took us from friends to...a little something more. But we'd been getting that way over the months as it was...maybe this was just the nudge we needed to be the way we both knew we wanted to be all along." Viktor went on, smiling and letting it all sink in a bit before continuing again, "But I never actually said the words. Not properly anyway."

Yuri looked on in confusion, but his heart was pounding in his chest...he had a feeling about what was going to happen.

"It's my duty to make our one year anniversary something special. You've already given me the blueprints for how to make your dream of our wedding a reality..." The Russian said softly, rubbing his thumb over the gold he still held onto.
...So let me say... ask... this one thing.
Something I should've said in the first place.

Yuri... my truest and dearest love.
The audience was roaring with the echo of those words, and the tears that Yuri was trying so hard to hold back suddenly got the better of him and started trailing down his pink-hued cheeks. He could hardly form coherent thought, let alone speak them, so he just sputtered a laugh through his tears and nodded enthusiastically, starting to lean down to throw his arms over his husband's shoulders. Viktor quickly rose up to meet him, hugging his soul mate close, lifting him off the ground and spinning him one around before setting him down again.

Asahi watched the whole thing quietly from the background, seeing the joy on his old friend's face as Viktor effectively declared for all the world to hear that Yuri was his.
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED FIFTY

The ice was quickly vacated as the usual announcements by the JSF officials were started, and the stage was disassembled. Seeing the swift deconstruction and movement of parts was like watching leaf ants dismantling whole branches of trees, and it broke up the monotony of the droning speech that went on in spite of it. The time it took, however, made it a mercy for those skaters who had to change quickly for the Men's Short Program...and Asahi was quick to get away from the crowd for that, and...other reasons.

I'm being punished for something, he thought to himself, roughly pulling on the dark colored boot covers that would later go over his skates, his mind refusing to end the replay loop of Viktor's proposal from minutes before, I must've done something really awful in a past life. Just when I can finally look at a photo of Riku without being wracked with guilt, I have to deal with this crap.

He dropped his elbows down over his knees, face going down into his palms in frustration. He could feel his hands shaking, so he pulled them quickly away and just hunched over his knees normally. Eyes looked down to the tile floor of the changing stall, seeing his warbled reflection in the glossy varnish, and the light behind his head.

Viktor is only here because the RSF threw him out. I wonder if this would've been any easier if he hadn't been? If he was in Moscow this weekend instead...being around Yuri wouldn't have felt any different than it ever did. He sighed and dropped his head down, closing his eyes, I can stand to be around just him, because I never expected he'd see me as anything but a friend, and I was at peace with it...but the fact that he's with Viktor just... He shook his head and grit his teeth, hands clenching into fists so tight they trembled, It just makes me so mad... He was always so interested in that girl before... Would it have ever made a difference if I'd said something back then? No...he was obsessed with Viktor all that time, too...it's just a cruel joke that Viktor gave him the time of day in the end... Even straight guys would go gay for a man they really admire... He'd probably have just gotten offended if I opened my mouth, or thought I was messing with him. He suddenly stopped dead in the middle of those thoughts, and hit the side of his head, No, I absolutely can't think like this. Riku would be so disappointed in me...heartbroken even...

[Asahi-san, the warm-up period's going to start soon.] Coach Nagisa said, slightly nudging open the door to the large room enough to be heard, [Please hurry.]

[I'm coming.] He answered, grateful at least that his paranoid over-thinking was cut off right then. He grabbed the thigh-length leather coat from the hanger in front of him and pulled it over his arms before grabbing his bag and stepping out. Drawing a sharp breath, he hurried along and reached for the handle to the main door to the outer hall, passing the few other competitors who were sharing the large room. He quickly pulled on his team jacket as he went through the crowd waiting outside, each one fawning over the outfits that they were trying to get a close-up look at before the skaters took the ice.

Not far off, through the mass that was following him along, Asahi spotted the group that was circled around the very pair of skaters he wanted to see the least. He kept a neutral expression despite his irritation, seeing that telltale silver head poking up above the black-haired crowd, and briefly spotted Yuri in the gaps between shoulders, still somewhat overwhelmed by what had happened a few minutes prior. Finally getting away though, Asahi tip-toed in just his socks towards the open space around the rink-wall, and quickly found a place to pull his skates on, spotting the tiny group that was
already ready and waiting at the door to filter onto the ice.

Minami was showing off his Hufflepuff robes to anyone who would give him the time of day to do so, and he pranced around excitedly, using one of his blade-guards as a pretend wand and fired off the words to various spells. His coach, Kanako, was desperately trying to get her pupil to settle down and get his head in the game, but he was far too excited, firing off a reminder that it was Yuri-kun who'd given him the gift.

With blades pulled on and tied, Asahi rolled down the boot covers, turning his skates into what looked like calf-high boots, he rose back up to standing and stepped over to the waiting group. It was only a few minutes, but knowing Yuri was part of Group 1 made it feel like an eternity as they all waited for the permission they needed to enter the rink. A Zamboni was exiting on the far side where it had quickly resurfaced the ice under where the stage had been, and neon orange cones were set down to block off that quarter of the rink so no one would skate there until it was completely frozen over.

Just as Minami had excitedly shrieked out Yuri's name again though, the group heard the call from the announcer to start their 6 minute warm-up period. Asahi was second out, flying across the ice to avoid any public issues with the possessive Russian. He heard the crowd cheering as he slid out, but the noise faded out of focus as he steeled himself against the distraction.

...I have three quads in my repertoire...four if I can land the Toe-loop, though thankfully I don't need it for tonight. It's more than what most other skaters here have at any rate. I know I can't beat Viktor, but I'm not exactly the scrub he probably thinks I am. I'm better than I was before...

He turned his eyes towards the center of the available rink, and turned to follow the path that other skaters had started for jump practice. A quick twist to flip around backwards, and he vaulted through the quad Salchow, sliding out of it with an outside spread-eagle until he was parallel with the rink wall again and straightened out.

His attention was grabbed briefly as the crowd cheered for the 6th member of Group 1, stepping onto the ice a bit late but joining the fray quickly enough. The shimmer off of Yuri's costume pants was distracting, even out the corner of Asahi's eye, but that quickly became the least of his worries as the world seemed to slow down to a glacial pace as he passed the single visible blue eye of Viktor Nikiforov. That stern glare from behind silver bangs that seemed to follow him like the laser sight on a high-powered sniping rifle...but Asahi refused to let himself be shaken by it.

[That concludes the warm-up period.] The announcer suddenly called, five full minutes of the timer seemingly vanishing into thin air, [All skaters please exit the rink.]

One of the staffers quickly rushed onto the ice in just boots, grabbing up the orange cones that marked off the far end of the rink. Asahi went to the inner wall, finding his coach and choreographer there waiting with tissues and water.

"Remember what you're skating for," Coach Nagisa said quietly, "You've taken Gold at this event before...it's not impossible to do so again this weekend."

"I have no illusions about the odds," He commented, "My best chance at getting an Olympic jacket is if I can come within spitting distance of Yuri's scores. I know the numbers I'm up against."

"The percentages are in your favor," Weber added, patting the skater's shoulder. "The Ladies' bracket is fairly average across the different countries, but I'd wager Japan is leaning towards adding the next best Men's skater to the roster. You're in the same bracket as Yuri Plisetsky, and all eyes are on him right now as a front-runner for the Olympic podium outside of Japan. You have the best
chance, and you do really well under pressure."

[First on the ice tonight,] The announcer called overhead, words echoing across the stadium, [From Imari, Saga Prefecture, in Kyushu...Saito Asahi-san.]

The crowd went almost nuclear at the announcement, which gave the skater a brief reprieve from the anxiety he'd been feeling up to that moment.

Sayoko lifted her head and smiled at the sound of it all, then turned back to Asahi on the other side of the rink wall, seeing him wipe his nose quickly, "They remember you and are happy that you're back. Go and show them why you're one of Japan's most popular skaters."

Asahi nodded, and backed up from the wall, bowing to the pair politely and quickly taking off. The applause and screaming rose even higher when he finally raised his arms to them all in presentation, rounding a wide circle around center.

Yuri leaned casually against his husband's arm, watching and listening quietly as his old friend slowly took position, right arm linked through Viktor's and both hands in his Olympic jacket's pockets. His cheeks were still slightly flushed from the excitement of his partner' earlier announcement, but he was slowly calming down again as things normalized around them.

"He sure does get a lot of fanfare." The Russian commented idly, "But for some reason I just don't remember anything about him from the time he said he was still active."

"He was a top skater, but there were more of us than there were spots to occupy internationally, so he didn't go to as many events." Yuri explained, "I don't know what his skating is like these days, but if it's anything like before, then he has the same handicap as he did back then."

"Handicap?"

"Being really modest." Yuri said simply, "His popularity drops off when he leaves the country because he avoids saying anything too personal in interviews and avoids social media. He's 10 times worse than me in that regard...at least I lurk in the background, even if I don't post a lot about myself. Since people don't know much about him, his secret weapon just makes him seem really mysterious, because he's super private off the ice, but really cuts loose on it."

"...What's his secret weapon?" Viktor wondered skeptically, tilting his head to look at his spouse.

"J-Pop and J-Rock." He answered, "He likes to skate to music that's been at the top of the charts in recent years, so people get hyped about his programs more than they would for others just because they like the music so much more."

The Russian turned his eyes out across the ice again, carefully observing the man as he finally took position in center, "Guess that explains the outfit then."

"Mh."

Asahi's pose looked similar to the beginning of 'Yuri on Ice,' right leg set behind the left, toe-pick down. Instead of tilting his head forward though, his eyes were closed and he looked down and to the right, right arm held at a slight angle away from himself while the left was prone on the other side.

"Here we go, Riku... This program is dedicated to you."

The audience's applause gradually died down, and eyes were fixed on the lone skater.
Clad all in black, Asahi’s performance garb made it look like he’d just walked off the stage at a concert, especially with his hair being spiked up like it was, and its teal tails on either side of his face. From waist to just above his knees, he wore light denim jeans shorts, and under that to just above where his boot covers began, black leggings, leaving a 2-inch strip of skin around his calves. His top was entirely mesh, which extended down both arms, ending at a black band around each wrist. Over that, he wore a long jacket with sleeves that rolled up just below the elbows, a high collar around the neck, and two straps that crossed over his chest, starting over the jacket at the shoulders and ending within the jacket at his waist, keeping the coat close to his frame.

"Clock Strikes' - ONE OK ROCK (0:00 - 1:57)"

The music faded in with a series of clock ticks, and a gradually-building harmony that overtook it with a boom. Asahi lifted his head and swung his right arm out in front of himself on that note, bringing it back into himself as the left hand joined it, and he hunched forward with the start of a backward slide.

What waits for you? What's breaking through?

He weaved back and forth as he approached the short side of the rink, twizzling into a short outside spread-eagle.

Nothing for good, you're sure it's true?

Once in the center of that half of the rink, he leaned and jerked around for the backward-entry camel-spin, right blade rotating and both hands clasping behind his back for a few spins before doing a cross-grab and pulling the free leg up behind his head.

"Eien" nante naito ikkitte shimattara
(If "eternity" were declared as non-existent,)

He let the skate go for a jumping foot-change, landing into a standard spin and leaning for a layback variant.

Amarinimo sabishikute setsunai deshou
(Wouldn't it be just too lonesome, and painful to bear?)

Breaking out of the spin, Asahi twisted through half a figure-8, winding his way past the center of the rink as he picked up speed, kicking up frost with each step.

Dare mo ga hontou wa shinjitai kedo
(Everyone wants to believe it,)

Uragirarere ba fukaku kizù tsuite shimau mono
(But can't take the risk of the deep wounds of betrayal.)

The music started to pick up the pace, and Asahi's movements moved faster with it, clicking off a toe-pick to hop into a forward-inside twizzle, pausing at the end of the lyric, then doing it again for a forward-outside twizzle.

Towa ga aru sekai ga risou dewa naku
(If only we could come to realize)

Sore wo shinji tsuzuketeiru sugata
(We have to keep on believing )
Arms went out for balance as he hop-skipped forward a few paces, landing and twisting around backwards in a mohawk that was almost too quick to spot, rounding the inside curve at the opposite end of the rink.

_Sore koso bokura ga nozomu beki sekai;_  
(That a world where "eternity" applies, isn't merely a dream; )

_To kizuku koto ga dekita nara..._  
(And that that's the kind of world we should wish for... )

As Japanese gave way to English, Asahi leaned back in an outside spread-eagle...  

**What will we have...?**

He pivoted on one skate and faced forward, throwing his free leg forward as the music burst into the heavy beats of the chorus, flying through the triple Axel and landing straight into another outside spread-eagle.

_Believe that time is always forever_  

Asahi lowered down into a hydroblade...  

_And I'll always be here, believe it till the end_  

...then leaned to one side, dragging his fingers across the frost as the move tightened into a smaller circle.

_I won't go away, and won't say never_  

His body twisted around sharply, forcing him to spin slightly while he was still down on one blade, the free leg dragging in a circle around him as he raised his hands up in front of his chest and over his head.

_It doesn't have to be, friend, you can keep it till the end._  

He quickly rose back up, turning around backwards on one skate before flipping the other way to curve forward on the inside of his blade. Skates moved quickly beneath him in a quasi-step-sequence, building speed for the launch to come.

_Tameshini "eien" nante nai to ii kiroku_  
(Let's try declaring "eternity" as non-existent.)

_Soshitara kibou ya yume wa ikutsu shinu darou?_  
(Just how many hopes and dreams will shatter?)

Asahi threw himself as hard as he could, landing deep for the Death Drop sit spin, rotating quickly in standard position before switching to a twist variant with one arm up above himself as the other held a blade under him. With each lyric shift, his frame twisted into a different pose, ending on a donut-spin.

_Sore ga sonzai shinai koto no zetsubou to_  
(As I try imagining all the despair over non-existing things,)  

_Sonzai suru koto no zankoku wo_  
(And the cruelty of the things that do exist,)
Still spinning as he rose back up to his feet, Asahi quickly moved out in a wide circle in reverse, stepping through a series of cross-overs as he rounded the short-side of the rink.

"Everyone, we have a new member on the team." A man said, drawing in the attention of several skaters as he stood next to a thin, short figure, with a hand on his shoulder, "This is Riku Itô. He's from Wakkanai in the far-far north."

Some of the older skaters had a good chuckle at that, "Is it true that you can see Russia from there?"

Riku squinted at them anxiously, "No." He said simply, "I can see simpletons from right here though."

"Oooooohhhhh." Others jeered, staring at the man who'd made the initial tease.

"Yuri must be bouncing off the walls over that." Asahi commented idly, looking up at a recap of the
latest Grand Prix Series event, and spotted his old friend on the podium with Viktor.

"I would too if I got to stand on a podium with Viktor Nikiforov." Riku huffed, flopping down on a plastic chair next to him and dramatically taking his rink-mate's arm, "Ah look, he even got to shake hands. Isn't that sweet."

Asahi casually tried getting the limb back, "He probably vowed never to wash that hand again after."

"After all the times you've said Yuri obsessed over Viktor, I wouldn't be surprised." Riku mused, but held fast to that arm.

"Leggo."

The younger figure just turned his head and stared over the crest of that shoulder, "You like him, don't you."

Asahi's face was red in a flash, but he just blanched and tugged harder, almost frantically, "N-no! Why would you say that!?"

Riku stared intently, "That's what I figured..."

"You're not listening to a word I say, are you!?" He tugged again, only to see the younger man leaning closer to set his chin against his shoulder, "Damn it let go!"

"Admit it to yourself and I will."

"I have nothing to admit!" Asahi insisted, trying to stand up instead, but finding his arm locked down. To get it loose, he knew his smaller rink-mate would probably have to go flying, and he was somewhat reluctant to observe the crash-landing, "Look, I barely see him as it is, and he never answered my emails so I stopped sending them a long time ago."

"You still talk about him all the time." Riku pointed out, releasing his grip, only to turn in his seat and lean forward against his crossed arms on the break-room table, eyes returning to the recap of the competition, "Your tone always changes when you do, too. You talk about him like a widower would."

"...A widower?"

"The person left behind when one half of a married couple dies." Riku explained, keeping his eyes forward, but hearing the sound of the chair moving next to him as Asahi retook his place, "They get stuck in the past, never wanting to move forward because doing so is like admitting that loved one is gone forever."

"...We...were just friends." Asahi explained, his tone shifting again, as Riku expected. "We were the only kids of a similar age when we were training down south together. He was my best friend. I thought he'd try harder to stay in touch when he moved on, but...it's like he forgot Japan exists when he went to Detroit."

"You need to let him go."

Asahi cringed slightly, "I never had hold of him in the first place. There's nothing to let go of."

"Quit lying." Riku snapped, standing up sharply, chair kicking out behind him as he rose. Grey-brown eyes looked on in stunned surprise, but the younger man wouldn't return the gaze, keeping his
sights down on his clenched fists, "I've had to listen to you lie to yourself about him since the day I got to Tokyo. You may be content to try and keep it a secret from everyone but I'm not so stupid that I can't see it. You're stuck on a guy that'll never return your feelings and because of it, you don't even notice the feelings of people right in front of you."

"R-Riku..."

The younger figure finally looked, but he had tears in his eyes when he did so, "Yuri wasn't into you back then, and he'll never change! You're just some guy he knows now! Not even really a friend! Why do you keep that flame alive!?"

Asahi looked away nervously, "...There was never a flame to begin with."

"STOP LYING." Riku yelled again, this time half-shoving at the older skater's shoulder, forcing his chair back a few inches in the process, "Are you so ashamed of those feelings that you'll stay in the closet forever!? I'm RIGHT HERE. I've BEEN here for TWO YEARS. You know how hard it is to listen to you carrying on about this guy who will NEVER change!? It's like you don't even know I exist! I'm nothing more than a PET to you, or a SHADOW."

His words rang through the room, but it soon fell quiet, the silence deafening in its stillness. Asahi kept his eyes low, but he couldn't bring himself to speak...at least, not until Riku started stepping away, the quiet, raggedly drawn breaths of a man trying not to burst into tears as he tried to leave, "...Yuri did the same thing...to me..."

"...What...?"

Asahi lowered his head a little further, his hands shaking as his throat started to hurt, "...He...would never stop talking about this girl he liked...or even about Viktor..." He tried to explain, "All that time, I was right by his side, listening to him give his love to people who would never return it. When he said that girl in Hasetsu was starting to date someone else...I was relieved, because I thought...maybe the distraction would finally go away, and he'd see me... But he never did...and then...he was gone." He pulled one hand up and rubbed his nose on the back of his wrist, snuffling quietly to himself, "The last email he replied to was me saying I'd gotten I'd gotten a spot for him on this team, and that he'd only have to wait a few more weeks. I went back to Imari later to tell him to pack his stuff...but he was already gone. I found out from our Juniors coach that he went to the USA. Maybe he was ashamed or scared to tell me...but he didn't answer me again after that, and he blows me off at the rare competition we share. I...don't know why...I keep hoping... The more time passes, the more he treats me like a stranger. It's like he doesn't recognize me anymore."

"...You need to let him go..." Riku said, his voice barely a whisper, though it was clear his voice was on the edge of cracking as he tried his hardest to maintain his composure, "...You need...to move on..."

"...I can't..." Asahi sighed, angry at himself as well as everything else, "I've been trying. Nothing I do works. As soon as I think I'm done with him, I hear his voice and it all just comes bubbling back, like a ghost that haunts me."

"...What...what about him is so special?" Riku demanded, frustrated as well as despairing, "He looks so appallingly average! I don't get it!"

"It's not how he looks!" The older figure barked back, finally meeting those eyes that were looking harshly at him, "It's how he is."

"And what is that!?"
"Shy! Demure! He's...he's..." Asahi wracked his brain for adjectives, "He's just Yuri! I don't know how to explain it! When I look at him, I just want to protect him...I want to put him someplace safe and keep all the woes and troubles of the world away from him. This world we're in now...everyone wants to be so fucking strong and independent...everyone wants to prove that they can make it on their own, and we're becoming so secluded... You know that there's a thing in these big cities now where people are dying 'Lonely Deaths'!? Because people are so hardened to the idea of relying on one another that they go it alone, sometimes even going weeks, months, or years without ever talking to people they know, so no one even realizes they've died! But Yuri wasn't like that! He was always so unsure of everything, it was like he was crying out for help, because he couldn't survive this life by himself! I wanted to be that help...but he always looked right through me..." He dropped down, elbows on his knees, palms over his eyes as he felt the sting of tears, "...When he wasn't pining after that girl...he was focused on the Russian...someone so untouchable, so unreachable that Yuri could try for his entire life and never be noticed... How do I compare to that...? How can I possibly measure up to someone Yuri thinks of like a God...? I'm nothing against that..."

"...I don't care about Viktor..." Riku started, reaching one arm across himself to hold the other, "...To me, you're God..."

Asahi lifted his head, as though he wasn't sure he even heard the words right, "...I'm...what?"

"...Don't make the same mistake Yuri did...and ignore the person right in front of you, in favor of something that you'll never get." The younger skater pleaded, "...I can help you...get over him... I'd do anything...for just one chance to prove myself..."

Those cool brown eyes went down again, and Asahi shook his head, "I would be bad for you. I couldn't give you the love you want."

"...You're not even trying." Riku said flatly, the pain in his throat creeping up again, "Quit holding onto the past. You can move on from him. You didn't even have something with him, so there's nothing to mourn." He explained, taking a few nervous steps closer again, "I understand if you don't want me for a while...there's stages to everything... I can be whatever you want me to be though, in time... But let me help you let him go at least. Even if not for me...but for yourself..." He dared to reach a hand forward, pulling it back briefly from the nerves, but then managing to settle it on Asahi's shoulder. He twitched, and Riku pulled his hand back again in surprise, but then tried again, that time managing to keep it there. Nervously, he inched a bit closer, socks sliding quietly along the wooden flooring, until he could nearly feel their knees brushing against one another.

Asahi lifted his head again, eyes looking aside, but anxiously turning them towards center. For a moment, he found himself looking straight into Riku's gaze, and felt a little mesmerized by it, seeing the color in them, truly, for the first time, "...You...have gold in your eyes..." Before he knew it though, those eyes closed, and the man they belonged to leaned into him. In stunned surprise, he didn't notice the warmth on his lips, but he did feel the cold when Riku pulled away again. A hand came against his other shoulder then, but the world still seemed to stand still in his peripheries. Asahi swallowed nervously, feeling as his body unconsciously sat up a bit straighter, and the wide-eyed expression on the face before him relaxed a little, leaning closer again. That time, he was fully aware of the kiss, and for the briefest moment, he let himself relax into it. Riku lowered down to sit on the middle of his legs though, hands sliding down his chest a little before pulling his head back again. Asahi had no words...his mind was blank.

"...I can make you feel good..." Whispers spoke, "...I know how..." Riku could feel the frame under him starting to tremble, and he pressed in closer to hug the man reassuringly, "...I won't tell anyone. It'll be our secret."
Asahi could do little more than stare blankly over Riku's shoulder, the wall behind him seeming miles away. The hug was starting to calm him though, even as his heart raced in his chest. His arms felt like logs at his sides, limp and lifeless, but after a few seconds, he felt the soft stroke of a cheek against his neck, and he felt the spark of life running to the tips of each of his fingers, letting him move again. Those hands wedged between them though, and Asahi pushed the smaller figure away, at least enough to see his face again, "...You...have to swear it..."

Those gold-flecked eyes widened in hopeful surprise, but Riku nodded, "On my life, I swear it."

"...And..." He started again, feeling his mouth go dry from the sheer fear of it all, "...You...can't be mad at me...if I don't..."

"It's okay." Riku reassured, pressing their foreheads together gently, his right hand coming back to weave fingers through that fluff of black hair, "You're giving me a shot. That's more than I ever thought I'd get."

Asahi nodded slightly, but he told his arms to relax, and though they moved like his joints were rusted hinges on an ancient door, he could feel them giving way. Hands slowly moved down where they'd pushed against Riku's chest to shove him back, feeling every micrometer of fabric like it were covered in glue, stalling him, but eventually his palms settled on the crest of the younger man's hips, and he became aware of Riku kissing him again. It felt so strange...so foreign...so forbidden. But there was a flash in his mind, and when he opened his eyes again, he was looking down at the younger figure, and the arms that were resting over his shoulders had pulled back to just wrists, with fingers laced behind his neck. They were in his bed, in his room, and the warmth between them meant only one thing.

"You okay...?" Riku wondered, squeezing his legs a little where they went around the man's waist, "You stopped suddenly..."

"...I...feel like I just woke up from a dream..." Asahi answered, his head swimming a little, "...Weren't we just...in the break room?"

"That was an hour ago." Riku said pensively. "...Did you forget everything else?" The younger man gave a nervous smile, but unthreaded his fingers and cupped his hands around his partner's head, gently pulling to make him lower down, which he thankfully did, "Don't panic, Asahi. Everything's fine...!"

He blinked in confusion, but let himself down to his elbows, hands slipping under the pillow behind Riku's head, "...It is...? I've never...I mean...this is..."

"You've been wonderful."

Panic started to settle in despite the plead for it not to, and Asahi lifted his head up, looking frantically around the room, "We might get caught...we have to stop... I can't...!"

"It's okay! We're alone!" Riku explained, trying to keep the man where he was, lest he run off in a mad dash for the safety of anywhere else, "Everyone else left for the weekend! No one will be back until tomorrow night! ...Remember?"

"It's...Skate Canada weekend..."

"Exactly... So it's okay..." He continued, voice softer, hands moving gently to try and bring the anxious skater's face back around until he saw those cool brown eyes again, "There's nothing to worry about. It's just us. Breathe..."
Still trembling, Asahi tried to collect his thoughts, every fiber of his being wanting to run, but that foreign feeling keeping him paralyzed where he was. He clenched his eyes shut for a moment, but when he felt the kiss, light as a feather on his lips, he let himself become aware of everything else again; the hands that held him, the legs around him, the warmth between them.

"Shh..."

"...It's...just us..."

"Mh."

"...And this...it's okay..."

"It's okay. I wanted to." Riku explained, though hesitantly, "...If you want to stop, we can stop..."

An anxious few seconds passed without an answer, but Asahi eventually managed to shake his head, and he unclenched himself where he'd become tight and tense in his worrying. With a few nervous movements, he propped himself back up to the place he was when he'd 'come to' previously, looking down on the anxious face beneath him, "...Riku..."

"...Yes...?"

"...I...don't want to stop..."

"You handled that surprisingly well." Riku teased, watching the older skater step into the shared hotel room, "You were totally calm this whole weekend, Mr. Gold Medalist."

"I feel totally calm." Asahi answered, reaching two fingers up to his neck to feel his pulse, "My heart rate's normal, too."

"See? I told you you'd be fine, even with Yuri here."

"Maybe it's finally over..." He said, feeling a strange sense of relief washing over him. He felt hands against his back, and he turned around, only to find himself being pushed down onto the bed, and Riku crawled on top of him, smiling eagerly. Fingers slid through his own, pulling his arms up over his head. He looked up into those eyes, but found them turning away from him as the younger man dropped to his side next to him, and soon he was look down into them instead.

"Can we make it official then?"

"...What do you mean?" Asahi wondered apprehensively, feeling legs loosely clamping around him.

Riku tried to look cute, half-closing his eyes, "That you and I are together. Can I finally say I've won your heart?"

Cheeks went pink, and Asahi realized he hadn't taken a breath in a few seconds, so he sputtered a nervous cough as he tried to get his thoughts together again.

"We've been doing this secretly for weeks now..." The younger figure went on, rubbing his thumbs gently where he held their hands above his own head now, "You were so worried that seeing Yuri again would make you question yourself. Well, you've seen him, you were even able to worry about him without it overwhelming you...I think you passed your test?"
"...I don't...know if I'm ready to tell everyone."

Riku made a face, but then smiled anyway, "We don't have to say anything to anyone...I just
want us to know... Have I won you over, for good and all?"

"It must be frustrating to date me." Asahi sighed, dipping his head a little as he sat back on his
haunches, teetering the edge of the bed, "I always want everything my way but then I never do
anything."

"I love you though." Riku answered simply, "Where you lead, I follow. If you need more time, you
can have as much as you want. You have to be ready for yourself."

"...Your patience is the stuff of legend, you know that?"

"What can I say? You're worth waiting for."

Asahi felt his heart flutter a little, looking down on that smiling face, watching him eagerly for an
answer. He could feel the red on his skin, but a calm settled over him, and he leaned down carefully,
finding a light press of lips between them.

Riku seemed somewhat confused by the gesture though, "...I think that's the first time you've kissed
me on your own accord."

"...I...think I can finally trust myself to be the man you deserve." He answered, but feeling more sure
of his words with each passing second, "I hate that I'm making you wait so long though..."

"As long as we can be ourselves within these walls, everything else is okay. I came into this knowing
you're a very private person. Who am I to ask you to change?"

"...Who are you? You're my Riku." Asahi said easily. He could see the tears in the man's eyes
already, and he gave an uneasy smile, "...We'll tell everyone in Kyoto. I love you...and I don't want
to be scared that people will find out anymore. It'll be out there, and we can finally be
ourselves outside these walls."

Riku pulled his hands free and cupped them over his face, tears falling freely, "Oh no..." He snuffled,
covering his eyes as well then, "Don't look at me...I'm about to start ugly-crying..."

"You could never be ugly. You're the most beautiful person I know." The older figure lowered down,
wedging his hands under his partner's back to hold him closer, "My Riku...my heart and soul...my
savior."

"WATCH OUT!"

KATZss...

The quad Lutz landed perfectly, and the triple Loop that followed was clean as well. The audience
was in an uproar of excitement and clapped loudly as Asahi slid backwards from the landing.

Believe that time is always forever
And I'll always be here, believe it till the end.
Viktor didn't even blink as he watched the complex jump combo, studying the moves carefully.

Yuri wasn't sure what to watch more closely; the performance or his husband's face. He could practically see the wheels turning in the Russian's head. He could only wonder to himself what that would mean for Viktor's own Short Program when the second group took the ice.

_I won't go away, and won't say never_  
_It doesn't have to be, friend, you can keep it till the end._

Asahi threw himself for the quad Salchow, one hand raised up for added difficulty, but wobbling slightly on the landing. It wasn't worth worrying over, and he twisted around for the start of his step sequence, each move of hand and foot feeling like the familiar fluid gestures of a martial arts formation he'd done a thousand times.

(2:49-3:35)  
_Believe that time is always forever_  
_And I'll always be here, believe it till the end_  

He could feel his heart hurting though, that familiar pain of grief that sat like a sickness deep inside him. His eyes closed against it, and when he opened them again, he swore he could see the spectral outline of another skater next to him, mimicking every movement.

_I won't go away, and won't say never_  

They were a blur of twists and turns, blades kicking up frost with every click of metal against the ice.

_It doesn't have to be, friend, you can keep it till the end._

Making it to the far side of the rink, Asahi lowered down into a Cantilever, left hand straight up above himself as the right raked the cold beyond his head, hair nearly brushing the frost before he rose up again.

_Keep it till the end._

Blades clicked, and the athlete flung himself into the flying camel spin, lower hand pointed towards his spinning blade as the higher one raised up high.

_You can keep it till the end._

He lowered down for a sit variant, holding a skate under himself for a few spins before letting it go again and starting to rise.

_And time will stay, (you can keep it till the end) time goes by..._  

His free leg stuck out slightly as he slid his hands up the front of his frame, clasping his hands above his head for the scratch-spin finale. Just as the final lyric was sun, he dug a toe-pick down to slow himself down, and then stepped forward with it, rising up onto both picks with his right arm curved upward in front of himself.

_You can keep it till the end._

Locking himself into that final pose, the music faded out, and the ache in his chest grew...but at least it was finally over. Out the corner of his eye, the spectral image faded away, but when he glanced towards it, hoping to see Riku's face there, even if only for a split second, all he saw was Yuri fading into focus on the other side of the rink wall. He'd let go of Viktor's arm to clap politely, and even the
Russian was going through the motions, but it didn't make him feel any better. He just sighed and rocked back on his blades, momentum sliding him backward, and he leaned just enough to put his back to the pair.

Acknowledging the crowd had never been so difficult.
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED FIFTY ONE

[The score for Saito Asahi-san...]

The audience was waiting with bated breath. Most other Men's Singles competitors were watching the screens in the prep-area, anxious for the tone that first program would set for the rest of them. Yuri had half-gone-through the curtain that lead under the arena, but paused when he felt Viktor stopping in his footsteps just outside. The Russian seemed to stare into space as he waited for the announcer.

"They're not going to say the numbers in English," Yuri pointed out, "We should go find a television before the-"

"Hyaku ju ni, ju yon."

The one visible slate eye turned towards Yuri as the crowd behind them burst into a rancorous applause.

"...112.14."

That's nothing to me, Viktor thought, then finally allowing his feet to move again, and disappeared under the blue drape covering the wall. A few skaters looked their way as they came in, but seeing the look on the Russian's face quickly squelched any curiosity they might've had to inquire after his or Yuri's thoughts.

"He's gotten way better than before." Yuri commented idly, replacing where he'd had his hand snaked over his partner's arm as they walked, "Everyone's probably sweating now. Of all the people competing here, only you and I have scored over 100 before."

"Mh."

A nervous smile crept over Yuri's face, but he didn't push the issue, thinking instead of bring up something that was more light-hearted. He wheeled out in front of his spouse, effectively blocking the man's pace, and found his free hand with his own, rocking up onto the toes of his blade-guards to look into the man's eyes more evenly, "So how long were you thinking about re-proposing to me anyway?" He asked, giving himself permission to be giddy about it in spite of everything else, "And in front of everyone, too... I can still feel the flutter in my chest."

Viktor blinked at him, shaking his head, as though trying to pull himself out of the trance he'd put himself into.

Yuri rolled back down to the rocker of the guards, looking away sheepishly suddenly, "You're always saying you like to surprise people...this really kind of puts my engagement anniversary dinner to shame..."

"Never say that." The Russian said suddenly, pulling his fingers free to slide his arms past his partner's sides and pulled him close, "We have different styles and ways of doing things, but it's not a competition. I've been thinking of how to do our wedding anniversary since you suggested I take charge of it. When I realized I was being offered a spot in the JSF, the first thing I thought of was how much I loved you. You're the whole reason I'm here." He explained, pressing one cheek against the side of his spouse's forehead as Yuri pulled his arms up over his shoulders, resting his head there.
and nuzzling his face against that pale neck, "I just wanted the whole world to know...and this was
the best chance I had to reach everyone."

"A second wedding though?" Yuri wondered, feeling the rubber bars under his skates rubbing small
circles into the floor as the Russian slowly and gently rocked him from side to side, "I've heard of
people renewing their vows, but...usually that's after they've been married for a long time already. Is
it because I've done something wrong...?"

"What? No. Of course not." Viktor insisted quickly, lowering his face to press a kiss to the spot his
cheek had been, "I just want to make something beautiful for you. Each of the weddings we've had
so far have been nice in their own way...eloping to Spain...the skating party...even the traditional
Japanese wedding that your parents arranged for us... But none of those were what you wanted. I'm
just sad it took this long for me to realize and do something about it."

"It hasn't even been a year yet." Yuri pointed out, sliding in a bit closer, until he could feel that neck
against his brow, and the light flick of a pulse just beneath the man's skin, "You're being too hard on
yourself. You've done a lot for me, some things even at your own expense. For a giant fanboy like
me, it's more than I ever had the guts to even dream about."

"Maybe that's just the showman in me." The silver legend wondered, pulling away slightly so his
partner would lift his head. Looking into those cherry-hazel eyes, Viktor could see his own
reflection, "I never want to stoop to being anything less than the man you think I am. I always want
to be able to inspire you."

"You're going to make me cry all over again. It's not a good look for me when I'm skating." Yuri
huffed, cheeks flushed all over again. He leaned to the side to rub his eye against one arm, then
moved to the other side to do the same thing again with the second.

"There's still more than half a century of surprises and fun that we can have." Viktor explained,
waiting for his partner to look up at him again, "I intend to make sure that you never get bored with
me."

"You could never bore me, Viktor..." Yuri fawned, pulling his right arm back just enough to comb
his fingers through silver hair, playing with the strands where they'd been so immaculately trimmed,
"Remember how I said that I'd listen to you even if you were reading the phone book to me?"

"You were saying you thought my accent was sexy, too." He answered, leaning closer, until he
could feel the tip of his nose brushing the tip of his husband's, "Have you always thought that?" He
purred.

"I don't know that I would've ever admitted it before we got together...but..."

Minami's eyes were the size of grapefruits as he watched them from a group near one of the
television, gaping at them in rapt fascination with his coach in a vice-grip in his arms,
"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa-

"Minamiletmego-

Half a second after that, just as it seemed like a kiss was imminent, music from the arena got louder,
and the blue curtain to rink-side was pulled back. Yuri ducked his face down against the Russian's
shoulder as a small group of people started walking by, leaving Viktor to look at his partner in
complete confusion. He lifted his head though, and watched as Team Nagisa went quickly by, tailed
by a small gaggle of video-cameras and microphones. The heavy-sounding thump of blade-guards
vanished as quickly as they sounded off, leaving an odd silence peppered by the hollow echo of the
music from outside.

[Man, someone's excited Saito's back.] Someone commented, breaking up the monotony, [You'd almost think the JSF already picked him for the Olympic team or something.]

[With an SP score that high I wouldn't be surprised if he did just get it.] Someone else said.

The solitary comments gave way to a low murmur of gossip, just in time for the music outside to die down and be replaced by the wave-like-roar of the audience cheering. Eyes turned back towards the televisions, watching as the second skater made his way into the kiss-and-cry. The third was making his way with his coach to the curtain that lead outside, pulling his arms in a few last-second shoulder stretches as he waited for his name to be called.

"Let's go wait with Minami-kun until he's ready to go out." Yuri suggested abruptly, already moving before Viktor was even aware he'd been speaking, pulling him along by a few fingers, "I haven't even asked if he's managed to add some more quads since the last time we skated against each other."

"Oh..." The Russian stammered, trying to regain his focus, and his footing, "Yeah, sure."

[The score for Yoshino Sota-san...82.13.]

Asahi turned his head slightly where he stood in front of the sponsor board, cameras pointing at him and his two teachers from their half of a semi-circle.

[Saito-kun, you just heard the score for the second competitor...how do you feel about your odds at this event?] One of the reporters asked.

He looked forward again, trying to figure out who it was who'd spoken the words, [I feel confident that I'll make it into the top 24 and advance to the Free Skate tomorrow.] He answered simply, [There are a lot of newly-minted Seniors competitors this season. Not many have cut their teeth against adults yet, so I imagine it's daunting.]

[You're not the oldest competitor this weekend anymore. Do you feel like that's altered your chances of getting onto the podium?]

Asahi was careful with that question, knowing exactly who they were referring to, [I think there's good and bad with being an older skater. The chance of an injury is higher, but there's a lot more experience being put into the performance. It could go either way. It's been a long time since I've competed at this level...I think being away for 2 years is a worse handicap than the age of skaters I'm competing against.]

[Have you been training all that time?]

[No...only the last 15 months or so.] He said, feeling his heart skip a beat or two, [Coming back to competitive skating isn't quite like getting back on a bicycle. You remember how to move, but you're not using the same body you had before. You have to re-learn some things, and reacquaint yourself with your center of gravity.]

[You left skating around the same time Katsuki Yuri almost did, and you were both at about the same level back then. How does it feel to be competing against him again, now that he's being coached and choreographed by Viktor Nikiforov?]

[I haven't seen any of his shows in the time I was away.] Asahi admitted, mentally shrugging, [His scores have been erratic though, and my SP score is already higher than all of his so far this season.
He may not even take this competition all that seriously anyway since he's already secured his spot for the next three events.]

[What about skating against Viktor Nikiforov himself?]

[I've skated against him before. This is just more of the same.] The skater explained, shifting his weight from one blade-guard to the other. [He's not the kind of skater I think about when I consider my peers. I doubt most of the teenaged skaters are thinking of me when they compare scores either. Yuri is more my ballpark, as it's usually been.]

[Did you time your come-back with try-outs for the Olympics? Or was it just a happy coincidence?]

[Probably the latter.] He thought aloud, [I wasn't ready to come back in time for last season.]

[We've heard that you deliberately chose not to try to go to the Grand Prix. Is that true?]

[Yes.]

The simplicity of the answer wasn't taken with a grain of salt, [Why is that? You're obviously skilled enough.]

Asahi lowered his gaze a moment, but then closed his eyes as he lifted his head, opening them again only a sliver, [I wanted to start from the beginning and earn my way forward again. If we held our National competition before the Grand Prix, then I would've attempted it, but since we do it after, I held back. I competed at the southern Regional event, so now I'm here at All Japan. If I do well enough to go to Four Continents, then I'll have completed the circuit of lesser events on my way to the top. If I earn a spot at the Olympics and Worlds...or even if only one of them...then I'll consider this season a success.]

There was a slight pause in the questions then, but one newscaster seemed a bit more eager to ask the one thing they all wanted to know about, and took half a step forward to be heard better, [You've never spoken to anyone publicly about the tragedy outside Kyoto 2 years ago. Would you be willing to speak on it now?]

Asahi just looked on at the woman, who was likely younger than himself and probably naive to things, but didn't let his expression change, [...A little, I guess.]

[Were you injured back then?]

[...Not severely.] He explained quietly, trying not to let the memory replay in his head, [The impact was on the other side of the car from me. Coach Tomono and I were spared the worst of it.]

[Kyoto is pretty well out of the way for a Skating Club based in Tokyo. Nationals wasn't held anywhere near there that year either. Can we ask what you were going to do? Vacation maybe?]

[Kyoto is about halfway between Tokyo and Imari. We were going to meet my family there to celebrate my Gold medal victory. It...was my idea to take a car instead of the train.] Asahi said, lowering his eyes again a little.

[Thank you everyone for your questions. Please wish Asahi-san good luck in tomorrow's Free Program.] Coach Nagisa said then, seeing the look on her student's face and stepping in front of him, [If he's in the top 6, we'll be available for other comments at the post-program technical panel later tonight. Thank you, thank you...] She practically shooed them away, then went to catch up with her skater and co-coach, finding one following the other back into the prep area, "Asahi..."
"It's fine."

"Were they trying to bring up the accident already?" Webber wondered, "I heard a few mentions of Kyoto."

"It's fine." Asahi repeated, "People are bound to ask. This is my first major event back since it happened. I'd be more surprised if no one mentioned it."

"The look on your face though when Viktor mentioned Riku yesterday..." Sayoko commented, keeping her voice low, "And then this morning... Are you sure you're ready to talk about that stuff?"

The skater hesitated, stopping where he stood, hands stiffly held in the pockets of his team jacket, "I don't know what Yuri sees in him. Viktor's as much a typical celebrity as I thought he was. All charm on stage, all self-serving arrogance off-stage. He's not even Japanese. He shouldn't be here."

"Keep your voice down." Webber said subtly, "You'll only bring more attention onto yourself if people hear you talking about him that way."

"You really think I care what people think of me?" Asahi grumbled, "There's a reason I'm not online prostituting myself to the masses. I'm not here to win a popularity contest. I'm-"

"Asahi-" Sayoko had hands on the skater's mouth, and got a stern look from over her fingers from him for it, "You know you get testy when people bring up the accident. You should've known better than to agree to answer questions about it."

He grimaced and turned his eyes away.

"Are you going to behave?"

She could feel the low vibration of a discontented grumble behind her hands, but the skater closed his eyes and nodded.

"No more talking about Kyoto or cars or Riku. If anyone else brings it up, just walk away. It's none of their business. Okay?"

He nodded again, and Coach Nagisa took her hands down.

"Then let's go be civilized participants and go watch the rest of the program. Group 1 is probably more than half done by now. Maybe we'll get there in time to see Yuri skate. You'd like that, right?" She wondered.

"I have to watch him and Viktor." The irritated athlete answered stiffly, "At least."

[Next on the ice, from the city of Hakata, Fukuoka Prefecture, Kyushu...Kenjirou Minami-san.]

"Oh, we still have a whole program before Yuri goes out. We can find seats then." The Coach suggested, making the motions to point towards the hall that lead up to the main part of the arena, "Let's hurry."
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED FIFTY TWO

The crowd was cheering excitedly as Minami flew forward, his charming snaggle-toothed self waving happily. He quickly veered back towards rink-side though, finding his coach and idol there waiting to send him off.

"I didn't realize how huge this crowd was until I stepped into the rink just now." He said eagerly, "It's kind of like Four Continents last year."

"The crowds at Worlds can be even bigger." Yuri commented, looking around as well, "I'm actually kind of nervous about what it'll be like at the Olympics. People are probably going to be watching our sport between other events they're there for, so the stands will be absolutely jam-packed."

"I can't wait to see! Maybe I'll get to compete next time!" Minami was fawning back and forth as though he were the fan rather than the competitor right then.

"Maybe." Yuri nodded, "If everything goes the way I think...the next time the Winter Games come around, it'll be my last year in competitive skating."

The younger athlete's excitement came to a crashing stop, and the big happy eyes he wore suddenly started warbling as they filled with tears, "Y-Your last year?"

"Shimatta!" Yuri half-yipped, reaching over the rink-wall to shake the figure, "Minami-kun! Don't think about it! It's still four whole years away!"

"Yuri-kun is going to retire after the next Olympics what am I going to do if I don't get to skate with him then it'll be the end of the road and I'll never get another chance for as long as I live and I just can't understand why this is happening aaaaaaaa..."

"Shakkari shiro, Minami-kun!" (Pull yourself together.) Yuri harped, "It's half a decade away!"

"And I'm going to be old toooooo..."

Viktor's smirk twitched as one eye crept open at that, "...I'm going to be even older..." Dark circles comically formed under his eyes, and a black and ominous aura swirled around him, forcing both Yuri and Minami to hug each other over the wall and back up and away from him, "...In another four years I'm going to be 33...I'll practically be dead by then..." The Russian half-whined, that eerie smile making his visage all the more creepy.

Cheek-to-cheek, the two younger athletes clung to one another.

"Minami-kun."

"Hai."

"Ganba."

"You too."

"Thanks."
The coach just shook her head and smiled nervously.

Thankfully, Minami finally took the stage, departing from the rink-wall and making his way towards center. The fun-size but springy youth wore a dark ensemble; pin-striped black pants that, in old-style, rose up to his navel, with silver suspenders going over each shoulder, and a pin-tucked dark blue shirt with sleeves rolled up to just below the elbows.

He tapped his toe-picks a few times on the ice before taking position, flat on the rocker of the left blade while the right leg was slightly angled away from himself, arms prone at his sides, head bowed towards the tilted skate.

["Sing, Sing, Sing." - Benny Goodman (Performed by The Jazz Ambassadors)]

The drum-roll started overhead, a lively pace from the get-go, and Minami snapped the fingers on his right hand along with the beat. When the saxophones and trombones joined in, he jumped up in a slight hop, kick-starting his three-step toe-pick run before hopping again to flip around to slide backwards. Arms out to the side in presentation as the trumpets finally picked up, he quickly rounded past the flat of the rink-wall, grazing past it swiftly with a number of quick turns and swivels.

Yuri glanced from the skater to the audience, seeing a number of them clapping to the beat of the music, "Ah he's doing it again...getting them all riled up within a few seconds of starting."

"I like it." Viktor mused, coming out of his darkened mood again to look more normal, "It's like a bit of ginger, resetting the palate of the whole Short Program after the mood set at the start."

The audience clapped at the first jump of the program, with Minami vaulting for the triple Salchow on a quick trill in the music (0.36-0:37).

"Yeah...I can see that." Yuri agreed, looking back out onto the ice, leaning onto the wall and perching on his elbows, "Though I get this feeling you're planning something."

The silver legend stepped closer, pressing his right hip to Yuri's left as he draped an arm over his partner's back, "Nothing particularly out of the ordinary. It's like I told you before though...I skate the way I think the audience expects me to. It's my big debut as a member of the JSF. I have to make it worthwhile."

Minami hopped into his first spin, the flying camel, rotating quickly with right hand over his chest and the left up in the air.

"I wonder what it's looking like in Russia right now." Yuri wondered, "Yurio's probably in the middle of the morning's official practice. We should check on him later, right?"

"Or at least find out what order he's skating in." The Russian nodded, rubbing his thumb idly back and forth where his hand hung close to his husband's right hip, making something of an effort to feel through one of the wider mesh gaps in his partner's costume leggings, "It'll probably be way late before he goes out if he's up close to the end."

"I'm just kind of curious about how things are shaping up without you there."

The clarinet solo began (0:57) and Minami jumped into it with his triple Axel, landing it into a long outside spread-eagle, spinning through a few twizzles, and immediately pushing into his step sequence.

"Oh, because of the protest threats?" Viktor huffed, "I'm kind of flattered, but at the same time, I don't think the rest of the Russian skaters deserve to deal with it. I feel a little bad for them."
"Most of your fans are probably watching All Japan at this point anyway." Yuri added, "I wouldn't be surprised if the ones who do turn up at Russian Nationals do whatever they can to make the RSF feel like you're there even if only in spirit."

"How so?"

The step sequence ended, and the music changed again, going from the full wind orchestra to just the drums (1:13-1:14). Minami's step sequence ended on a difficult note, with a set of traveling 3s; backward-entry sit-spin like rotations that moved in a line across the ice. His free leg kicked high as he rose up again, moving into an illusion spin with his head briefly angled towards the floor and free leg up in the air, then dipped quickly into the backward sit-spin. The combination spin started in 'shoot-the-duck,' rising into a donut camel spin, and ended on a swift scratch spin.

Yuri lifted his head slightly to catch a glimpse of his partner over a shoulder, "Maybe it's short notice, but I think it would be kind of funny if fans turned up with banners that looked like the scoreboards they see on the television...showing your SP marks as though it were a score you earned in Moscow that the others had to measure up to."

"I could see that happening." The Russian laughed, "Maybe when we're done here, we can make an Instagram video challenging the Russian Men's group to beat us. Link up our two events as if they were one."

"Prove to the RSF that they can't wash their hands of you like they thought they could."

"I can only wonder what next year might feel like if either one of us ends up getting sent to Rostelecom." Viktor pondered, stepping closer to the wall then as he spotted Minami stepping through the forward cross-cuts for the single quad of his program, "...Ease into it..."

The young athlete slid on a left forward inside edge, pivoted through a right inside 3-turn to flip backwards, glided backward then on the right backward outside edge with the free leg stuck out behind himself. As the toe-pick went down, Yuri leaned down into the rink-wall, and both he and Minami jumped at the same time. The right blade came down after the four rotations, and the young skater landed cleanly, following up with a double Loop immediately after.

Yuri joined the audience in excited applause before leaning into his spouse, one arm around the man's back as the other came up to cup a hand near his mouth, "Yatta! Minami-kun!"

Another drum solo started (1:48) and the skater was off like a shot, really starting to have fun with the program now that he'd landed his hardest element. The crowd was getting even more pumped as well, bouncing in their seats to the beat. As the finale started to close in though, Minami got ready for the final program element, and flew into a death drop for the sit-spin. The heel of his free blade barely skimmed the ice's surface for the first rotations, and he squished himself down into the pancake variant after that, switching feet beneath himself before morphing into a twist variant. By the last few beats, he'd risen back to standing, and descended again to rotate around on both knees, coming to a stop with his arms cocked halfway up from his sides.

The crowd roared their approval, and Minami clapped excitedly before pushing off to stand again, waving and bowing happily towards all sides. He hop-skipped a few paces to get back to rink-side and braced himself for the score to come.

"That was really good, Minami-kun!" Yuri told him as he came off the ice, pulling blade guards on, "You nailed that jump combo."

The petite athlete bowed deeply, "Domoooooooono!"
Sitting in the kiss-and-cry a few moments later though, Minami's adrenaline rush crashed and he found himself wondering if time had stopped. Eyes were glued to the scoreboard.

[The score for Kenjiro Minami-kun...] That voice finally called from overhead, causing everyone to go silent to hear it, "Hachi-ju ni, ju ni."

"82.12." Yuri translated, leaning slightly towards Viktor as they all started clapping again.

Minami was all-but bouncing off the walls, dancing around in the kiss-and-cry even as his coach was trying to corral him out of it.

Even with the young skater's excitement though, it was easy to tell there was a change in the air of the arena. Just as Minami went by, Yuri waved, but then took on a more serious expression...though not by much. He drew a deep breath, and reached up to the top of his white Olympic jacket, pulling on the zipper to undo the front as he exhaled.

"It's going to be the first time in weeks where you're not going into your Short Program upset about something," Viktor commented idly, taking the opportunity to place his palm against his husband's chest, feeling the thin black fabric that separated him from the man's skin, and slid his fingers beneath the glittering silver lapels on either side, "Nothing to worry about anymore."

Yuri nodded, lifting his head as he shrugged the jacket off his shoulders, "What few worries I do have were kind of put at the back of my mind after your little presentation earlier." He explained, his cheeks going a bit pink again. Viktor suddenly had arms around him, but only enough to flip him around and start walking him forward, pinning his arms to his sides where the jacket was still hanging off his elbows. The audience was starting to cheer for them as Viktor waddled them both over towards the rink door, stealing a few kisses from just above the edge of the black turtle-neck sweater, and the ear just beyond that, which made the pink shade grow deeper. It even coaxed something of a ticklish laugh from the younger figure, which gave Viktor some relief from the two missed regular kisses to that point.

It could've probably been more like...fourteen missed kisses, considering how many I wanted to give him right after the proposal... He thought, but trying not to let it bother him. His cool blue eyes watched adoringly as his husband turned around in his arms again to face him, trying to get out of his jacket before he got tangled in it, "You're going to do great. Don't think about the scores at this point. You just go out there and have fun, okay?"

Sleeve-covered fingers came forward to find the Russian's right hand, and Yuri brought it up to kiss the ring on it, holding those fingers there for a few seconds, "I plan to. I can hardly get into the competitive spirit right now as it is." He raised his sights to look into his partner's gaze, "But I guess it's like you said before, we don't really have to worry so much since we already have our jackets."

[Next to skate, from Hasetsu in Saga Prefecture, Kyushu...Nikiforov Yuri-san!]

The applause and cheers were enough to be felt in the floor, and Yuri finally slid out of the coat, letting his husband take it to fold over one arm. He held to the man's shoulder as he reached for the blade guards after that, passing them off as well before sliding out onto the ice.

It's been a while since I've come out for an SP and felt excited for it. I think the last time was at Skate Canada, right before I threw that little hissy-fit over not scoring more than 110... Yuri thought, waving and bowing to the crowd before making a wide curve to come back to the rink-wall. I've only ever scored more than 110 twice in my life, and both were at the end of last season. I don't know what I was thinking when I got it into my head that I could pull that off again at the first event of this season.
Viktor set the white jacket down over the wall, and leaned forward, sliding his hands up his husband's forearms, then snuck under them to find the younger man's waist and pulled him closer, "Ready then?"

Yuri raised his arms up as he closed in, settling them loosely over the Russian's shoulders. He closed his eyes and turned his head, pressing his brow to the crook of his husband's neck, drawing in a deep breath and savoring the man's smell while he could.

"Seduce me with all you have, my love." Viktor purred, patting his spouse's back a few times before pulling back. Cool hands cupped his face, and he looked forward into his favorite hazel eyes, "Melt the ice with your eros."

"I have to leave something behind so you can skate." Yuri pointed out, stroking one thumb before leaning closer and touching their foreheads together, "I'll give it about 70% of what I've got, okay?"

"70% of your eros is still something to be reckoned with."

"It'll be enough to let the rink freeze again before your turn." He added, leaning his face up to kiss the spot his brow had just been, "I'm off."

Viktor gave the best smile and nod he could manage, but he was still somewhat dumbfounded.

**Fifteen kisses I've missed now. Is he doing this on purpose or am I just reading too much into it?**

He turned his eyes towards the audience, looking at the lower rows. He spotted Minami nearby, clapping excitedly near the curtain to the prep area, and the other two skaters that Viktor recognized from Yuri's Regionals competition 2 years prior, and who had eaten breakfast with them at the 'Kyushu Table' earlier that morning - Hikaru and Yuto - though he couldn't remember their names. There were a number of Ladies Singles skaters who'd filtered into the audience to watch the Men's event as well, but Viktor stopped skimming when his eyes settled on the black chicken-butt and its teal highlights.

*Maybe Yuri's avoiding kissing me because of that guy.*

He narrowed those eyes briefly, but then turned them back out to his husband on the ice, taking his place in the center of the rink.

*I wonder if he's even aware he's doing it.*
Yuri meandered around the ice a little bit as he headed towards center, tugging slightly on the frilled black tufts of fabric coming out from under the sleeves of his costume jacket. Hands went up to adjust the lapels over his chest, and straighten the collar of his turtle-neck. Eyes went back towards Viktor on the rink-wall for a moment, but he saw the man looking off to the side at something, and when he looked in the same direction, spotted Asahi in the stands watching him. Yuri braked like he'd planned to, a small wave of ice dusting away from his blades as he slowed and took position, but he kept his eyes in that same direction until he'd completely stopped.

It's been such a long time since him and I spent any real meaningful time together...at least, outside of a competition. But even then, after what Viktor said...I suddenly feel like I barely know him.

He sighed and brought up his right hand, kissing his ring for good luck before taking position and lowering his gaze towards the ice.

He's also gotten so much better than he was the last time I remember watching him skate. What's he been up to all this time? Why did we stop talking...?

A chill went down his spine, but the music suddenly started playing overhead, and quickly drowned out the eerie feeling.

Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh

The right hand raised up as he rotated back on the left blade, twisting himself around until he faced the other way and had both arms at his sides again.

Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh

A toe-pick nudged him backward, and both arms raised together, sweeping in an arc as he brought them in again and he passed the flat edge of the rink, passing closely by his spouse.

Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh

Flying out across open ice again, he twisted sharply around onto a backward inside edge, twizzling a few times as he traveled, and leaned back into an outside spread-eagle when his free blade came back down to the frost.

Oh oh oh oh ohhhhh

Arms went out as he curved through the short-end of the rink, and twisted to the left, facing forward, left outside edge leaving a white line in his wake as the right came up behind him. With a quick thrust, that right leg vaulted him into the air, and Yuri landed the triple Axel - his favorite jump - with ease, hearing the crowd cheering all around him.

I messed up tonight, I lost another fight, I still mess up but I'll just start again.
I keep falling down, I keep on hitting the ground, I always get up now to see what's next.

Viktor watched the pseudo-step-sequence carefully, hyperaware of the other eyes that were on his husband. As something of a spiritual successor to the previous year's 'Eros,' this Short Program was full of playful innuendo, something the Russian knew Yuri had never done before becoming the
man’s coach and choreographer. He could only wonder the impression it would leave on those who watched.

The last few beats of the music echoed through the stadium, and as Yuri slid in reverse through the center of the rink, he did his side-clap maneuver; hands coming in from the sides, left from higher up and right from below, hitting as they passed in front of himself, and then splaying back out in opposite directions, all while he swiveled his hips. Just as the lyrics returned though, the backward trajectory became the entry-point for the first spin, and Yuri kicked his right leg up to start the camel-spin.

His costume shimmered like light on a lake, drawing the eyes of everyone in the stadium.

*I won't give up, no I won't give in, 'til I reach the end and then I'll start again*

The camel spin morphed to a broken-leg sit spin before Yuri switched feet under himself, spinning on the right blade as he rose into the scratch spin. His rotations never slowed down, earning him applause from the audience as he set both blades back to the ice again and started gliding away.

*No, I won't leave, I wanna try everything, I wanna try even though I could fail.*

The left leg folded over the right as the skater bent down, and suddenly he was airborne again, spinning four times through the quad Loop, landing, and doing the same thing again for the triple Loop. Unlike at the Grand Prix Final though, Yuri saw no need to raise his arms up for those jumps, and kept them folded over his chest.

*I won't give up, no I won't give in, 'til I reach the end and then I'll start again*

No, I won't leave, I wanna try everything, I wanna try even though I could fail.

Asahi's eyes followed every movement, his expression unchanging. Every angle, every edge change, every flake of frost that flicked off of Yuri's skates was data in an analysis in Asahi's mind.

*...He's completely different from before. More loose, more open...it's like he's a different person. What happened to the Yuri that was so modest and reserved? The one that impressed with his spins, not his sex appeal? Even his costume...the Yuri I remember almost never had so much light reflecting off of him. This...this is almost exhibitionist...*

Yuri threw himself for the flying camel-spin, hands behind his back for the first rotations. He then straightening himself out slightly to dip for the foot-change, reaching for the frosted blade as the clean one took its place on the ice, and started to pull that boot behind himself as the rest of his frame leveled out again.

*Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh  
Try everything*

Holding the blade steady, Yuri twisted himself a bit straighter, arching his back to its absolute limits as he reached up with his free hand and pulled his leg the rest o the way up for the full Biellmann spin

*Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh  
Try everything*

Mercifully, he wasn't as dizzy as the last time he did that maneuver, and Yuri was able to finish out the array of rotations without losing sight of the horizon.

*Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh*
Asahi’s eyes had gone wide though watching it, then almost furrowed into an expression of confusion and dismay.

...Who is this Yuri that’s suddenly so flexible? A full Biellmann spin? That kind of move is usually reserved for the Ladies...

Look how far you’ve come, you filled your heart with love,
Baby, you’ve done enough, take a deep breath.

Yuri hightailed it into his step-sequence, his intricate moves and flawless footwork reminding the audience what he’d long-been famous for. Viktor had never needed to teach him how to skip his blades across the ice; the ice bowed before him in that regard already. Seamless transitions between mohawks and 3-turns, choctaws and brackets, arms and legs moving somehow in a harmony of dissonance that any new skater would never be able to follow. Even Yurio, who prided himself on being able to memorize the moves to ‘Agape’ on his first viewing, would likely need at least a second glimpse of Yuri’s footwork just to follow it.

Don’t beat yourself up, don’t need to run so fast, sometimes we come last, but we did our best.

Frost flew from Yuri's golden blades as he braked harshly, stomped down with one in time with the last three beats of the stanza. Just as he looked up though on that last clap onto the ice, he looked straight at Asahi, and time seemed to hold still for a moment. The song moved on though, and Yuri pushed through the forward-inside twizzle to break away again to finish up the step sequence.

I won’t give up, no I won’t give in, ’til I reach the end and then I’ll start again
No, I won’t leave, I wanna try everything, I wanna try even though I could fail

Viktor had finally let himself start to enjoy watching the program, leaning one elbow against the rink wall as the hand on the other arm tapped it lightly to the beat. The show's hardest jump was coming up, and it was a relief to the senior skater to be able to watch it without worrying that Yuri might not rise from it again like the last time he'd done it for points.

Yuri slid down the long-way center of the rink, and spread his arms out wide before leaning forward and lifting his left leg out behind himself. As his fingers gripped the boot still sliding across the frost, the left was straight up in the air above him for the Charlotte Spiral.

He can do a free split now, too? Asahi was surprised to see, Another move straight from the Ladies’ program... Does he think he’s too good for 3-turns and mohawks like the rest of us? This program is full of hubris... My Yuri would never let himself be seen as a spectacle like this... This isn't art. This is attention-seeking. His eyes went back to Viktor and narrowed slightly, What did you do to him?

Yuri straightened out from the Spiral with just enough time to set his boots together and stretch the right leg out behind himself, leaning onto the outside edge of his left blade. Gold glinted in the light, his silver outfit shimmering like a thousand stars, and he gouged his toe-pick down for the liftoff. Four perfect spins and a clean landing later, and Yuri was being cheered for his quad Lutz, sliding out in reverse without so much as a shadow of his prior performance - and nearly-scraping the ice with his face at the time - shaking his resolve.

I'll keep on making those new mistakes, I'll keep on making them every day...

The elated skater pressed on with the show, leaning through another outside spread-eagle and the twizzles that followed, tapping his toe-pick down again to stop himself dead-center in the rink.

Those new mistakes
Hands went onto his hips, and Yuri looked aside to his husband, giving a wink as he did that famous shoulder-waggle.

Viktor loved every second of it.

A swift pick-up in speed with a few backward cross-overs put Yuri in position for the last required element of his program, but he opted for the Death Drop entry rather than just sliding into that last spin, lowering down on the landing and going straight into the shoot-the-duck pose; hands gripping the ankle of his extended leg.

*Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh*

*Try everything*

He let go and twisted himself around, free leg coming around the side from where it had been out front, left arm bent behind his back as the right curved up over his bowed head. A few quick rotations later, and his feet switched off, grabbing his left ankle as it folded under himself and the right took over balancing the spin on the ice.

*Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh*

*Try everything*

Rising back up to standing and slowly twisting off, Yuri swung his free leg out like a pendulum to turn himself around, facing forward as he made his way back towards center. He could feel the cool beads of sweat on his skin, but it was a welcome sensation to how hot he was otherwise.

*Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh*

*Try everything*

Gliding forward, Yuri bowed slightly, left arm rising up behind his back as the right went low in front. He swiftly spun around as he straightened up again, frost kicking up from his feet, the end of the program clearly in sight now.

*Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh*

Returning to where he'd started over the JSF logo within the ice, Yuri twisted around and planted a toe-pick down, halting him in place. He cocked his right hip out to strike the final pose, bringing his right hand up to smooth out his hair, fingers trailing down the side of his face and neck before reaching out ahead of himself.

*Try everything.*

His hand went down to perch on his hip, and the music gradually faded out, vanishing entirely under the maelstrom of cheers crashing in from all sides.

Asahi clapped, slowly, but only out of obligation.

Next to him, Coach Nagisa saw, and looked up to see the unimpressed look on the skater's face, "What's the matter? Are you worried?"

"I don't know what Viktor's been teaching him these past 2 years, but that was grotesque." Asahi commented stiffly, "I never thought Yuri would stoop so low as to go for sex-appeal. He already had enough charm on the ice. He didn't need whatever this was."

"Lots of skaters do this sort of thing."
"Not Yuri."

The Coach sighed at him, but returned her sights to the ice, watching as all the different soft-toys and flowers were being thrown out for the younger skater. Yuri waved and bowed to all sides, then eased his way back to rink-side as a number of young ladies skated out to clear the rink.

"It's a marvel how relaxed you get when you're not worrying about your scores." Viktor commented, waiting his husband with open arms, and wrapping them around the man as he slid right into him, knocking him back on his heels a little before evening out again. He kissed Yuri's ear where he could, given that Yuri was still clinging into the hug for balance.

"Haah...I had a lot of fun this time." The younger figure answered, tip-toeing off the ice and rotating around his spouse in the process, then looked up, "I wish every time was like this."

"Every time could be like this." The Russian pointed out, "Just treat every event like this. You know you're amazing...you don't have to prove it anymore."

"We'll let the judges decide that." Yuri huffed, giving an anxious smile before he pulled his arms back. His hands perched onto Viktor's hips for a moment before he pat them both and stepped aside, reaching for his jacket and tossing it loosely over his shoulders, slipping his arms into each sleeve before offering one elbow to his coach, "Shall we?"

Viktor looked at him for a moment, but reached aside first to collect the blade guards, "You're forgetting these."

"Oh! That's embarrassing..." Yuri swiped them quickly and leaned down to slide them on, then tugged his partner along towards the kiss-and-cry, giving Viktor only seconds to grab the Makkachin tissue box and water bottle before they were out of reach, "Guess I had too much fun."

The Russian sighed but smiled, and followed closely, Sixteen kisses missed... He's acting so naturally, but surely he knows what he's doing...?

Sitting on the bench with the sponsor board behind them, and flowers on each side, they waited patiently for the tally to be announced. Yuri kept his legs bent, skates perched under the bench as the guards over his toe-picks pinched the ground under them. Viktor had his legs stretched out in front, crossed at the ankles casually. To the silver legend's confusion, albeit slight relief, Yuri had at least settled a hand on his thigh as they waited, and was idly rubbing his thumb back and forth.

"It's been a long time since I was happy to be right here." Yuri commented, eyes forward towards the score screen, "Normally I'm all worried or nervous... It's kind of nice to know I don't have to worry about getting punished if I don't do well. I can just relax and take my score as an assessment rather than a judgment."

"You worry so much about that kind of thing." Viktor commented, reaching his left arm out to settle it across his spouse's back, settling his fingers to curve around the man's hip on the other side, "But I guess this is kind of a nice change... You suffered enough in the struggle to get through the Grand Prix Series. Now's the time to just kick back."

"Right?" Yuri smiled in agreement, then heard the start of the announcer's voice, and lifted his head.

[The score for Nikiforov Yuri-san...] It started, causing a slight hush to overtake the audience, [101.26.]

The skater seemed pleased enough, "Still over 100, but not as high as I thought I might get."
Viktor didn't need a translation then, seeing the numbers written out on the scoreboard in front of them, "Maybe you were too relaxed."

Yuri turned his head and kissed the edge of Viktor's closest shoulder...

**Seventeen ...!**

...But then rose to stand up, and waved out briefly to the crowd as the Russian stood up as well, "I guess I didn't take the program as seriously as I did before. I just did it like a casual practice." He commented, finding his partner's hand before looking back.

Viktor was gathering up the tissue box and water again in his free hand, but then followed after his partner as Yuri lead them towards the prep area. They paused briefly as Minami fawned at his idol, sticking his head out through the curtain and saying some excited words that the silver legend wasn't paying attention to.

_He's dodged a kiss from me once, because he probably spotted Chicken-butt coming in from rink-side before I did. The rest of the time, he's just made himself unavailable; turning his head or keeping a distance, or kissing somewhere other than my lips. I wonder what'll happen if I try when we're out of sight of that guy?_

Yuri finally nudged Minami back through the curtain enough that they could get within, and the camera crews were there and waiting for them, photos being snapped and flashes dazzling in their eyes. Minami was quickly pulled aside by his own coach so the duo could get the focus they'd earned, and Yuri started heading towards the interview area. The sound of the announcer in the arena was muffled, but it wasn't much longer before the music of the next competitor started playing; classical music of some sort or another.

Viktor suddenly paused in place, forcing Yuri to turn and face him where their linked hands pivoted him back around.

"...Viktor?"

_It's just cameras here...and that guy won't be able to see what they're filming from where he is in the stands... Or did Yuri not see him out there? Maybe he thinks Chicken-butt is down here somewhere._

Yuri tried stepping off again, "...Come on, they're wanting to do the interview..."

"Don't you think you're forgetting something...?" Viktor wondered, giving something of a skeptical look, even as the younger figure was trying to pull him forward unsuccessfully, "Yuri."

"...Eh?"

The Russian's expression changed, given his exasperation.

Yuri immediately recognized it as the 'well, I'm tired' face from Barcelona the year before, and started to get nervous, but did a count of everything, "...Water bottle, jacket, skate guards, Makkachin, you..." He glanced up at the man's face, "I don't know what I'm missing."

A finger went up to the man's lips, but Viktor's expression didn't change for the better, "Yuri."

"Nani...?" (What?)

"Yuuuriiiiiii." Viktor said again, this time more insistent.
Brown eyes blinked in confusion, but when the Russian sighed a slight whine, finger pressing up against his lips a bit more, the realization dawned, and Yuri quickly stepped back, rising up on his rubber toe-picks to nudge the hand aside and give the man a quick peck, "There! Now c'mon!"

Viktor was hardly satisfied, but at least he gave up enough to grant them forward mobility again, and sulked his way after his spouse towards the interview panel.

*I'll get a proper kiss from you sooner or later. You owe me seventeen and a half of them now.*
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED FIFTY FOUR

The interview was both swift and slow at the same time. Viktor had heard all the same questions before, so he tuned out about half-way through, knowing he'd probably hear them all again at the post-skate technical panel anyway. He tuned back in only after he heard Asahi's name.

"...Well, it's been a really long time..." Yuri was trying to explain, "He moved up to Seniors before I did, and then I transferred to a rink in Detroit when I moved up as well. We only really saw each other at competitions after that. Last time I ran into him was at Nationals 2 years ago, but that was a bad season for me, so I don't remember much about it. I had a lot going on at the time, and after I decided to move back home to Hasetsu, it was only a matter of weeks before Viktor showed up to be my coach and get me back in the saddle. I was focused on my training after that. I mean, how many people get the opportunity to train under Viktor Nikiforov, right?" He smiled, looking up to his partner and giving the man's hand a gentle squeeze where he held it.

"So you're not aware of the things that happened to Saito-kun during those 2 years?"

"Ahhh...no. I'm sorry. After my appalling 11th place ranking that year, I kind of stayed off of social media for a while. I didn't want to know what people were saying about me. It was bad enough when people were asking me to my face if I was ill or injured when it was just a mental weakness." Yuri said, looking nervous, "The way you guys are talking about it though, it sounds like something bad happened..."

Reporters glanced between themselves, looks of confusion on their faces.

That just made Yuri feel worse, "...What's going on...? Can we say this off camera...?"

There seemed to be a unique, unspoken understanding in the group, and cameramen lowered their equipment. Newscasters were standing about more casually then, but it was Morooka who stepped in, speaking to the pair quietly.

"Nikiforov-kun..." He started, "...There was a really bad accident that Saito-kun was in after that All Japan event. One of his teammates was killed. Until this season, he was completely off the radar."

"...Killed...?" Yuri echoed, looking nervous, "I had no idea... Is that why he was gone? Was he hurt?"

"He actually didn't speak a word of it to anyone until just earlier when we did his post-skate interview." Morooka answered, "He said that he had only suffered minor injuries. We didn't have time to ask anything else. His coach cut the interview short after that."

"...Wow..." Yuri lowered his head, "I'd heard that he lost someone, but even then, people were thinking it was a family member, not a fellow skater." He turned his eyes back up to his spouse, "I guess that partly explains why he's acting so strange. If I went through something like that, I don't know that I'd ever be able to return to skating. It'd just bring back too many bad memories."

"Don't let his situation get to you." Viktor advised, "It's not your burden to bear."

"I know... I just feel like we could've been nicer to him. It was brave of him to come back to competition at all...he doesn't need us making it worse."
"He skated well enough. I'm guessing he's over it."

Yuri just made a face at that. Morooka seemed to feel a change in the temperature of the conversation, and quietly bowed out to give the pair space. Yuri's eyes followed the newscaster until the man was out of earshot, but then turned back to Viktor, "Even you skated at above-average levels when you were in a bad place. That SP was a new personal best for Asahi-kun. It's easily 30 points higher than anything I remember him getting."

"If you're trying to get me to change my mind about speaking to him, I'm not budging." The Russian said firmly, "That guy didn't talk to anyone about the accident himself and it's not your responsibility or place to pull it out of him."

"...I know..."

"Besides," Viktor went on, starting to walk back the way they'd come, and coaxed his husband along where he still held the man's hand between them, "If he wanted to talk to you about it, he would've reached out. It's not like you're hard to track down."

"...I guess so..."

An awkward silence sprouted, leaving only the ambient noise of the arena, the music from the rink, and the hollow thumps of their blade guards to echo quietly around them. Yuri slowed his pace as they made their way back towards the doors to the noisier prep area, and stopped entirely just before them, leaving Viktor to turn and look back in confusion.

"...What's wrong?"

Yuri remained quiet, keeping his eyes down for a moment in thought. When his eyes came back up again, he glanced around the wide hall, seeing only a small handful of event staffers at a different set of doors, but otherwise the area was quiet and empty; perfect for interviews, and other things. Yuri started stepping backwards, pulling the silver legend around the corner from the doors they'd been standing in front of.

Viktor went along with it, entirely unsure what was going through his husband's brain, but then Yuri abruptly stopped. Quick as lightning, Yuri turned to face him, slipped his left hand behind his neck and head, and pulled him down into a kiss before he had a chance to even ask what was going on. He felt his spouse's other hand sneak around his waist, and one boot nudged between both of his own. It took a moment to process the surprise, barely having enough time to put his own hands on his husband's waist before Yuri had already pulled back again. He didn't go far though.

"...Y-Yuri...?"

"I'm being horrible to you and I don't even notice until after." He explained, drawing in closer, left hand sliding down the side of the Russian's neck and down to settle on his chest instead, "You asked if I was forgetting something and it took me so long to realize you meant the kisses I denied you earlier...the ones I always give you before a program, even after one... I'm not even sure why or how I didn't kiss you after you proposed to me in front of everyone. It just...kind of hit me that I didn't. Here I am, saying I wish you'd never take your hands off me, and I can't even be bothered to give you the same courtesy."

"It's because of Saito." Viktor explained, leaning down a little bit to press their brows together, "You've avoided kissing me when he's around."

"...Oh..." Yuri answered, looking away slightly in shame, "...I guess I just feel bad. When he asked
yesterday if I'm gay now because I'm with you, I only thought he meant me...it never occurred to me
that he meant with regard to himself. All those years we trained together, I had no idea that he
thought of me as anything but a friend. I don't want to rub salt in the wound. He has enough of his
own worries to deal with, trying to get that Olympic jacket...I didn't want to be a source of trouble,
too."

Viktor sighed a little, "So you'd rather punish me than him."

"No! No no no!" Yuri panicked, both hands going up to cup around the back of the man's neck, "I
didn't mean that at all! Please don't think like that!"

"It's a habit you may never shake...I just don't want to admit I need to get used to it." The Russian
explained, "I'm extremely protective over you."

"I'm the same for you... I just..."

"...You don't like hurting people. I get it." Viktor said quietly, pulling his partner closer where he still
had his hands on the man's hips, "But Saito needs to get over you. He never made a move before...he
was so secretive about it that you didn't even know... He has no right to make you feel bad for
finding someone else."

"...I just don't want to do to him what Yuko-chan and Nishigori did to me. Seeing the person I want
being intimate with someone else is really painful. I had to move to the other side of the planet to
stop from being hurt all the time...and even after 5 years, and coming home...I still had feelings for
her. It took you for me to finally move on...and I can't tell you how liberating that feels, even to this
day. I just can't believe, after all these years, he never got together with someone else." Yuri
explained, left thumb stroking gently against his husband's cheek, "I just don't want to think I'd be
responsible for costing him his chance at the Olympics because I dug a knife so deep into his heart
that he couldn't skate..."

"He has to manage those feelings on his own. You can't feel responsible for him. It's not your fault." Viktor attempted, "Yuri, my love...you have to let go of this. Please. Don't make me beg..."

The younger man nodded, holding still then for a moment. He felt the Russian's cheek rub gently
against the side of his brow, but he pulled back then, abruptly reaching for the man's jacket zipper
and pulling it down, revealing the costume hidden beneath it. Hands went within the opening of the
coat, pressing palms to each side of the silver legend's chest, his lips moving down from neck to
collar-bone, kissing where the two halves met in center, and then down again to kiss the bare skin
over Viktor's heart.

The Russian was confused still, enough so that he wasn't sure if he was allowed to enjoy what was
happening. He could feel his husband's warm breaths passing over his cool skin, as Yuri stayed put
where his nose and lips were lightly smooshed against his chest. The hands that were on his chest
moved around his sides, under his arms, and flattened against his upper back, then slid lower, the
right going so far down as to grab at one cheek, even if only lightly. Even Viktor's face was giving
off a slight rosé hue when he felt the light squeeze, seeing just enough past his husband's hair to see
Yuri's face flushing as well, but then those hazel eyes turned up again, and Viktor was entranced.

The leg that Yuri had put between his own pressed in closer, and Viktor hugged the man tighter,
tilting his head to lean in for a kiss. He pulled his left hand off Yuri's waist to grasp gently behind the
younger figure's head, fingers combing through gelled hair, the right sliding down the man's thigh to
pull that leg up against himself.

It was all getting rather heated in a hurry, but neither seemed to care that much. It was only when
they could feel the vibration of the audience's cheering that either seemed willing to pay attention to the world around them again. Viktor managed one last light nibble and suck on his husband's tongue before he opened his eyes again and hesitated to continue.

Yuri was trying to catch his breath, but he noticed just then that Viktor had hoisted him slightly up off the ground, wedging a leg up against him so high that he was standing on the rubber bars over his toe-picks. His cheeks were hotly pink, and he heaved a few puffs of air, pulling both hands up to his husband's chest and slid his fingers under the edge of the fabric, "...Haah...I wish you'd already skated, or were going up closer to the end. ...I want you so bad right now..."

"The feeling is mutual..."

"It's nearly your turn. Maybe after."

Another long kiss followed that, but Viktor had to relent, letting his husband down from where he'd perched on the top of his thigh, "I'll hold you to that. You still owe me 13 kisses."

"You were keeping track...?"

"It's a rough estimate."

Yuri smiled at that, rolling up onto his toe-guard again to find the man's lips, "Now it's 12."

Viktor gave a devious look, reaching his arm around the man's back in a gesture to get back to the rink, but delighted in the sudden yip he'd gotten as he gave his spouse's butt a squeeze as well, "I could never get tired of your surprised squeaks."

"Will you still be all grabby-hands with me when I'm old and everything sags to my knees?" Yuri teased, pushing the door open with a nudge of one skate.

"Will you still play with my hair when it's all fallen out?"

"You're not going bald!"

"And you'll never sag."

"Ohmygod..." Yuri stammered, half-laughing even then, only to shriek as he felt the Russian suddenly lifting him up entirely again. He quickly groped for something to hang onto, arms going over his husband's shoulders as his legs were pulled around Viktor's waist, hands clasping under his backside to form a makeshift seat so he wouldn't slide down. Yuri found his bearings and blinked down at the silver hair, and saw those blue eyes turn up towards him mischievously, "Viktor...!"

"Yes, my love?" He answered, batting those eyes dramatically, his frame leaning back for balance.

"...N-nothing..." Yuri balked, holding tight, but then twisting in place to point the way to the prep area, "Let's go!"

Dutiful steed as he now was, Viktor started stepping forward, relishing at the sound of his husband's laughing.

[Next on the ice...hailing from the far west of Russia, but now making his home in Hasetsu, Saga Prefecture, Kyushu...skating at his first competition as the newest member of the Japanese Skating Federation...Nikiforov Viktor-san!]
The audience was roaring with a thunder of applause, and Viktor slid across the ice with both arms up and out to the side. He made a wide arc before making his way back towards the rink wall, and took one last sip from their shared water bottle. He set it down soon after, lifting his head to the noise all around, "I really need to work on my Japanese now. I can't even brag about what they said about me."

"Your head would get too big to skate if you knew." Yuri mused, leaning over the wall to slide his hands around his husband's waist and pulled him closer, "Let's just say the JSF is really glad you're on our team now."

Viktor turned his gaze back towards his partner, resting his arms over the man's shoulders and giving something of a sultry look down at him, "What should I score today?"

"Ah, this again?"

"Should I try to break my record from Worlds?"

"You don't have to make us all look bad..." Yuri huffed, "This is just for fun, remember?"

"Give me a number, my love."

"Ah fine..." He sighed, defeated, lowering his head for a moment as he thought,"...113."

Viktor smiled, leaning down to get his pre-show kiss, "As you like."

"If you actually manage that...I'm going to start putting money down on your shows."

"We'd really be set then," The Russian laughed, starting to pull away, hands trailing down his partner's arms as he moved off. He gave one last devious smirk, and winked, "Hold my beer."

"Eh?"

He was off like a shot though, blades leaving elegant marks in the ice as he slid by. He huffed a quiet chuckle under his breath as he heard Yuri calling out that he didn't even have a beer to hold, but then found his way gracefully towards the starting marker over the JSF logo and set a toe-pick down to hold in place. He lifted his eyes into the audience though, carefully setting them towards his 'adversary.'

You'll never be good enough for my Yuri...and you'll never be better on the ice than me.

Asahi seemed to understand the unspoken challenge, lowering his face a little and returning the glare with one of his own.

Viktor huffed to himself, his music starting half a second later.
Chapter 355

CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED FIFTY FIVE

['History Maker' - Dean Fujioka (0:00-1:05)]

The arena was filled with the chimes of music; an ever-increasing crescendo of sound that lifted the spirits of everyone who heard. Viktor was off like a shot as soon as it started, speeding off through the start of a half-rink-long figure-8, arcing the short end with a series of crossovers and ending it on a split falling-leaf jump at the trill before the beat really picked up. His frame bobbed and wove with the music then, twisting over himself and switching feet before coming around again as the lyrics began.

*Can you hear my heartbeat?*
*Tired of feeling never enough.*

One hand came up to the Russian's ear as he leisurely made his way forward, spreading his arms out as he tizzled away.

*I close my eyes and tell myself,*

He leaned forward against one blade, arcing around the curve of the rink, and lining up his first jump.

*That my dreams will come true.*

A quick jump, and the silver legend was spinning through the air.

Yuri blinked in surprise, "...That was supposed be a Flip...he gave up a lot of points to do a Salchow instead..."

*There'll be no more darkness when you believe in yourself, you are unstoppable.*

Asahi wasn't all that impressed yet, though he did internally question why the voices in the song sounded so familiar.

*Where your destiny lies,*

The Russian lined up with the center of the rink, pointing his blades towards where his partner was waiting on the wall, and spun around before lowering down to one knee.

*Dancing on the blades,*

...And thrust out his ringed hand.

*You set my heart on fire!*

Yuri reached back like he always did, and Viktor smiled, clasping the feeling in his palm before breaking off and spinning away again. The step sequence began in earnest then, and their two voices became a chorus together, resonating through the rafters.

*Don't stop us now, the moment of truth,*
*We were, born to make History!*
Viktor's blades made good use of the ice, sending frost flying with every quick twist and turn, arms rising and going in and away from himself. He could feel the audience singing along with the music all around him, making him feel light as air.

_We'll make it happen, we'll turn it around,_
_Yes, we were born to make History!_

Arms went up and he spun out to the side on the boom, arcing and twisting his long frame with each subsequent beat.

_Born to make History!_

He threw himself upward for the death drop, flying into the sit spin between beats and landing on the next, immediately twisting himself around to hold one arm above himself as the other held to the thigh of his free leg. A few spins later, he arched himself for a sit-twist variant, and ended it on shoot-the-duck before rising up again and kicking a leg out as the lyrics returned.

_B-b-born to make History!_

His free leg came back down behind him, and he dug a toe-pick down in the ice just as the tempo of the music changed, eyes closing, only to open them again quickly as he pushed forward.

(At 1:05, skip to 1:25, play to the end)

_Can you hear my heartbeat?_

The Russian's arms went up, open to the audience before he spiraled around himself, frame loose and free, like a hopeful lover lost in a trance. He brought up his right leg, swinging it out and around like a pendulum to rotate himself into a layback Ina Bauer.

_I've got a feeling, it's never too late._

Bent over backwards, one arm reached towards the wall, spotting his husband again as he glided by, the world upside-down as he moved on.

_Yuri shook his head and laughed to himself, waving as the silver legend went on, "...Show-off."_

_I close my eyes and see myself, how my dreams will come true._

As Viktor moved towards the curved corner of the wall, he leaned upright again and twisted himself around with a mohawk to put himself into an outside spread-eagle, keeping both blades on the ice rather than skating off on just one. On the last line, he hurtled himself through the triple Axel, and landed into yet another outside spread-eagle.

By the time he was down in the hydroblade, Asahi was already glaring daggers at him.

_There'll be no more darkness when you believe in yourself, you are unstoppable._

Frost flew off of those golden blades, and light glinted from the silver chains woven about the Russian's waist as he rose back up to standing, throwing his free leg around and jerking sharply to force himself into a camel spin, right arm pinned close to his back as the left hung down towards the ice alongside his left blade.

_I knew it..._ Asahi thought, glaring down bitterly at the skater, _He's doing all my same moves. Every required element is copied directly from my program. This camel spin had a regular entry, so it's going to have a jumping foot-change..._
Where your destiny lies, dancing on the blades,

Viktor spun on, having reached back and grabbed his free boot, pulling it close to the back of his head for the catch-foot donut variant. When he let go though, his frame straightened out, and he threw himself upward in a butterfly jump to switch feet, landing in the same spot and twisting over for the layback-camel spin to finish it out.

As he flew away from the rotations though, he brought his arms up, crossing them over his chest and bowing his head, sliding off in reverse with a few curvy arches in his wake.

You set my heart on fire!

Arms came up, uncrossing at the wrists as he reached for the ceiling, rotating in place with a tight inside spread-eagle.

Don't stop us now,

He hopped up and half-scissor-stepped forward to move off again.

The moment of truth,
We were, born to make History!

Asahi grumbled as he watched, narrowing his eyes on the Russian, All that's left is my Lutz-Loop jump combo and flying combination spin.

We'll make it happen, we'll turn it around,
Yes, we were born to make History!

Viktor was quick to make the first of those two predicted elements come to pass, dipping onto the outside edge of his left blade, and launching off with the toe-pick of his right boot as the music boomed above him, spinning four times, and landing, only to vault again for the triple Loop. Unlike Asahi's jumps though, Viktor did his with both arms in the air for added difficulty.

Born to make History!

He curved out of the jump and twisted around to face forward, but by then, Asahi had already had enough of the spectacle, and rose up from his seat. People behind him leaned far to the side to see around his sides, daring not complain to one of the competitors that he was in the way, but getting ready to try.

"Asahi-san...?" His coach's voice followed as he finally stepped off, but he only paused where he stood at the edge of the row.

B-b-born to make History!
Don't stop us now, the moment of truth,
We were, born to make History!

"I don't need to see the end of this." He commented dryly, "I already know how it's going to end. He's doing to do a combo spin with a flying entry and foot change."

"Well, sure...that's the only element he hasn't done." Sayoko retorted, "Don't you want to know the score?"

We'll make it happen, we'll turn it around,
Yes, we were born to make History!
"It's Viktor Nikiforov skating down there." Asahi said, turning his back to the rink, "I already know his score." He said with finality, stuffing his hands into his team jacket and leaving the stands, blade-guards *thumping* as he moved off.

Behind him in the rink, Viktor had started his last required move, and just as Asahi had suspected, it did indeed have a flying entry, lowering down to start off as a sit-spin.


\[ 	ext{Don't stop us now, the moment of truth,} \\
\text{We were, born to make History!} \]

The standard sit formation was made more difficult with both hands clasped behind his back, switching then to a twist variant with one arm curving up, and the other down, around his sides. With that, he rose up, nearly dragging the toe of his free blade on the ice as he rose into a scratch spin. The foot change came into play when he dipped back down to grab the frost-covered skate and pulled the leg up behind himself for the half-Biellmann, free arm gesturing forward until the spin ended.


\[ 	ext{We'll make it happen, we'll turn it around,} \\
\text{Yes, we were born to make History!} \]

Viktor twisted out of the combination spin with ease, serving from side to side before flipping around backwards again. The end of the program was in sight, all required elements fulfilled.


\[ 	ext{I think I might've over-done it with the double-tanos on the jump combo... Viktort thought, passing} \\
\text{the short end of the rink with a series of cross-overs, Oh well...} \]

We were born to make History!  
We were born to make History!

It was all easy footwork from there on, keeping time with the beat as he curved and arced around, arms swaying in then up, down and out.

\[ 	ext{Yes, we were born to make History!} \]

He dug his toe-pick hard and sent a flurry of ice-chips in every direction, coming to a stop in dead center again and throwing his arms out to each side, palms up as the music faded out, and the roar of the audience faded in.

Viktor eyeballed the stands, turning around to see whether Asahi was still watching, but seeing the seat empty by Coach Nagisa. He huffed a laugh to himself between breaths, but found himself smirking more than smiling, the results of his performance meaning rather little in the long run. Soft toys of poodles and bouquets of flowers were being thrown to the ice for him, and as he glided back towards the door to rink-side, he grabbed a few up, smelling at the roses in one bunch. He pulled one free and presented it to Yuri when he finally arrived, lightly squishing it against his husband's nose when he didn't expect it, "So do you think I got it?" He purred.

"I didn't think you'd switch up your whole program," He answered, going cross-eyed to look at the rose bud, but he shook free of it and handed the Russian his blade-guards, "You didn't do your Flip even once...and your Lutz-Toe became a Lutz-Loop instead. And a Salchow? Usually you leave those baby jumps for the Free Skate."

"I didn't think you were watching that closely." Viktor huffed, pulling the rubber bars on with one hand as he held his gifts up against the elbow of the other, "You did say you wanted me to score just above your friend though. It's easier if I just...do his moves." He shrugged then, trying to look innocent.
Yuri deadpanned him, "...I knew you were up to something..."

"Let's go find out how I did."

Unlike Yuri's interview, Viktor was paying all sorts of attention for his own, smiling from ear to ear and looking rather excitable. The whole situation felt like a completely different event compared to before. Yuri stood by quietly, waiting for a reporter to need a translation, and then offering the same thing in return for the answer. It didn't happen often though.

"What about your shift from the RSF to the JSF? What kind of changes have you noticed?"
Someone asked.

"Well..." Viktor thought on his answer carefully, putting a finger on his lip, but then lifting his gaze again, "Everything about Japan and Russia is as different as it could be anyway. Everyone here has always been very welcoming and open. Back in St. Petersburg and Moscow, things were done a little differently. There was always a fine line you had to tread. On the ice, you could be whatever you wanted to be...but off the ice, you had to fit into a set ideal. I feel that I can be a bit more relaxed here with the JSF. They came and offered me a place already knowing who and what I am. I don't know for sure that the RSF would've extended the same courtesy if Yuri had been cut loose instead." He explained, rubbing his right thumb gently where he had that hand perched on his husband's shoulder, arm behind the man's back, "In any case, starting with the JSF now, I feel a whole new world of inspiration flooding in, so I want to skate competitively for as long as my body will hold out."

"Would you consider coaching or choreographing for other JSF skaters in the future?"

Viktor smiled at that, but pointed at Yuri with his free hand, "That would be something my husband will decide. He makes all the important decisions."

Yuri's face went red at that, and he smiled nervously, not wanting to contest the point on camera. Mercifully, before anyone could grill him on the future of those possibilities, he felt a buzz in his coat pocket, and withdrew his phone to see [Incoming Call from Yuri Plisetsky] on the face of it, "Oh...speaking of the RSF..." He held it up to Viktor, "Can I take this?"

"Sure."

"Thanks," He said, bowing his head to the reporters as he stepped off camera, and pulled the phone up to his ear, "Hey Yuri! It's like you knew we were talking about you."

"...Hah? No." Yurio answered skeptically, "I heard something earlier today though that you might be interested to know. But since it's you...I thought I'd wait till after your Short Programs were done to say something."

"...Wait? Is it bad? What's going on?"

Before Yurio could answer, there was a rouse of laughter from behind, and Yuri couldn't hear a thing over the phone. He stuck a finger in his other ear, "I couldn't hear you...what did you say? The noise echoes bad in this hall."

"...I was saying about th...why the RSF fired Vi...you."

"What?" Yuri asked again, turning back to the group but still unable to hear, "Shimatta... Yuri, hang on, I'm gonna excuse myself so I can go somewhere else." He put his hand over the mic and lifted
his head, "Viktor! I can't hear him in this corridor! I'm gonna step out! It sounds important!"

"Haaaai~!"

He started wandering off, pushing through a set of doors that lead back into the prep area. The noise didn't echo quite so badly but it was still loud there, the audience and the rink closer, barely separated by the blue curtain over the doorway. He whined quietly and looked around, but started heading off towards the changing room, "Hang on, I'm about to get somewhere a lot quieter. Sorry."

"It's fine."

He pushed through another set of doors, and then finally into the changing room, where the thicker, insulated walls made the noise of the arena sound dull and distant. Glancing around, but seeing no one, Yuri relaxed a little, "Whew, okay...I'm somewhere quiet. Say whatever you said about Viktor again?"

A pair of eyes, sequestered in one of the stalls, opened wide in surprise. Hands that were putting skates away into a bag were suddenly paralyzed.

Yurio groaned, but nodded, "I guess I'll just go to the start. The old man took us to the arena where I'd be skating, and I was on my own with Yakov, waiting to draw my name for the order of skate."

"Right."

"I heard some suits with the RSF talking behind the tables at the front of the room. They were being quiet, but when I went up to grab my number, I overheard a little bit. I think they got a hair up their ass about the protesters who'd called for a boycott of the event because of the thing with Viktor being sanctioned."

"Yeah, we heard about that too." Yuri agreed, leaning against a wall close to the door, "Viktor said he feels bad about how it might impact Russian Nationals. He hopes people will still turn out to support the other skaters like you." He chuffed a wry laugh, "He even suggested that some of his fans turn up with banners that look like scoreboards, to reflect the numbers he got here, so people there know what they're still up against."

"I really wouldn't be surprised if they do that anyway." Yuri shrugged, leaning against the wall of the practice rink as Mila and Georgi were already on the ice practicing with half a dozen others, "At any rate...one of the people I overheard was getting all passive aggressive about it, saying like 'good riddance...if he wants to be a homo with that Asian then he can do it in Japan.' You should've seen the look on Viktor's dad's face when I told them all later, bu-"

"...So the RSF fired Viktor...because of me...?"

"...Sorry, Katsudon." Yurio's tone changed, "I wanted you to find out from someone you know rather than by rumors."

"And what do you mean, when you told Viktor's father?" Yuri's brow furrowed anxiously.

"Viktor suggested he come to Nationals, remember? After they fired him, I suggested he come anyway, and he did."

"...Oh...so he's there with you guys."

"Apparently the RSF have been looking for a reason to drop Viktor for a while though." The teen went on, "They thought he would ride into the sunset on his own after he got his 5th Worlds Gold,
because he had no concrete plans for the next season. It was no big deal for him to be a coach you for most of a season, since he wasn't skating, but they were kind of blind-sided by him saying he wanted to come back when we were in Barcelona." Yurio explained, turning his back to the rink and leaning against it, crossing his ankles where he stood, "They let him go to Worlds in Helsinki while they tried to figure out what to do. They were apparently pretty pissed when Viktor got the mic to introduce you for your last skate, and he got all sappy about you guys being married."

"Oh..."

Yurio grit his teeth. "There was nothing they could really do to stop him from skating. He had a perfect record, and nothing was stopping him from continuing to get Gold. But when he stepped off the podium at the Final...apparently that was exactly the excuse they needed. It gave them the perfect cover to sanction him, and then not-so-subtly suggest he not try to come back again. They're all shitting bricks out here now that he's skating for the JSF instead. Kind of puts holes in their story about his plans to retire anyway."

"...Yeah..."

"The others don't know that I'm calling you though." Yurio said, leaning an elbow onto the rink wall and glancing back a bit to watch his rink-mates, "Viktor's dad is actually kind of entertained by the whole thing. With all the problems that the RSF is dealing with since they fired Viktor, Kon thinks it's hilarious that they did all this, in effect, because of you alone. Congrats, Katsudon...you single-handedly brought the RSF to its knees. You should call up later and brag about it. Kon has taken to calling you a weapon of mass destruction. I think he's kind of proud of you, in a weird, fucked up kind of way."

"...Right..." Yuri couldn't find any other words, conflicted on how to feel about it all, "...Yeah, maybe. I'll tell Viktor. He was kind of wanting to spend some time with his father anyway, since he didn't end up going to Moscow this weekend. If Konstantin really feels like this...maybe it'll reduce tension if we do end up going to see him on our own. Apparently he was saying that I should be 'the instrument of Viktor's vengeance' and suggested I make sure no Russian ever gets Gold again."

"Yeah, fat chance of that." The Russian Tiger grumbled, "I've beaten you before."

"Hah...yeah, I know..." Yuri smiled nervously, looking up just in time to spot Asahi coming out of one of the changing booths, making a quiet but quick B-line for the door he was standing next to, "Well, anyway...I should probably get back. I ditched Viktor in the middle of an interview and he's probably wondering where I am now."

"Sure. Just don't take this whole thing personally. I think it's funny as Hell. You should, too." Yurio advised, "Or take it as a compliment or something. This whole shitstorm turned out well for you guys, so you can sit back and laugh for once."

Asahi tried to get through, but Yuri suddenly turned, putting his back from the wall to the door instead, and wedged his blade-guard against the base of it like a door-jam, even as he held the phone up to his ear still. Cherry-hazel eyes stared straight forward, looking the older skater dead-on even as Asahi started backing up to the other side of the room, practically in retreat, "Yeah, maybe we will. Talk to you later, Yuri."

"Do svidanija."

The phone call ended, and the screen went dark. Yuri slipped it back into his pocket, never moving his eyes, feeling his heart starting to race in his chest, thumping hard enough that he could feel it in his neck and shoulders.
[I can't get away from you even when I try.] Asahi said flatly, though his voice was tinged with a hint of panic, [Get off the door so I can go. I don't want any trouble.]

Yuri held his ground, even as he could feel his hands starting to shake in his pockets, [No...] He said quietly, daring to blink then, [...]Maybe this is God's way of saying we need to sort this out, for good and all.]

The older figure grit his teeth, feeling a twinge in his chest to hear those particular words being said by Yuri when they'd been said by Riku first, years before. He reached to pull the strap of his bag a bit higher on his shoulder, and tried to stand a little straighter, [There's nothing to sort out.]

Swallowing, Yuri pushed off the door, trying to stand a bit straighter too. He drew in a quick breath, and dared to utter the words, [There's a lot of tension between the three of us right now. You, and me...and Viktor. He thinks he knows why. I think he's seeing something that's not there. But I want to hear it from you.]

Asahi's heart skipped a beat, and he turned side-face, looking at the baseboards and closing his eyes, trying to maintain his cool, [Fine. What?]

[Viktor thinks you're in love with me.] Yuri stated flatly, watching closely for a reaction. He saw the cringe, and Asahi's face turned slightly away from him, then the red on the man's cheeks that betrayed him.

[...I'm not.]

[...You're...lying.] He said quietly, unsure how to feel about the whole thing, [...]I...can tell. I didn't want to believe it, but...you are, aren't you.]

Asahi kept his eyes down and closed, teal strands of hair hiding his shame and anguish, but it couldn't stop the tears forming, [...]It's nothing I want to talk to you about.]

Yuri sighed, feeling where his arms were pinched close to his sides, [This has to stop. If we don't figure this out now, it can only get worse for everyone.] He explained, [...]This may be the only time you ever get me on my own to be honest about what's happening.]

The older figure brought his free left hand up, rubbing his eyes against his palms as he tried to compose himself. He rubbed his nose on the back of his wrist and drew a shaky, nervous breath, [...]Fine. If that's what you really want...]
[I want to hear it all.] Yuri said quietly, keeping his place by the door. [Tell it like it is, right from the start.]

Asahi had his eyes down still, keeping his shoulder to his old rink-mate, the other nearly pressed to the wall on the other side of the room, ... *I could easily shove him out of the way and leave*, he thought. Half his mind was unconsciously analyzing the difference in their size, their difference in foot-wear at the time, but the other was adamant about never hurting Yuri. Putting hands on him was unthinkable.

[Well?]

The older skater drew a quick breath; Asahi hadn't even realized he'd stopped breathing while his mind raced. He shook his head and stumbled around, putting his pack against the wall instead, keeping his face down so he wouldn't have to look, [I don't know when it started. I just...kind of became aware of it after a while. The way you would talk about that girl in Hasetsu that you liked...after a fashion, the mere mention of her would make my chest hurt.] He explained, hesitating to go on as his thoughts raced, [But I just stood back and watched...listened... I thought you would eventually get over her, and see what was right in front of you, but it never happened. If you weren't fawning after that girl...you were obsessing over...him...]

[Viktor.]

Asahi grit his teeth, [...] *I can hardly stand to hear his name now. When I heard the stories that he'd come to be your coach, I was equal parts happy for you, and worried. Someone like him...someone who thrives on fame and attention, who was staring the end of his career in the eyes...he might do anything to keep in peoples' notice. Even prey on his biggest fans.*]

Yuri's brow crinkled and he glared a little, but didn't interrupt. Asahi wasn't looking at him anyway.

[But back then, it had only been a few weeks since...I lost...] His voice quaked, and he slid down the wall, cowering behind his knees. He pulled his arms up in front of his face to hide it, [...] *I could hardly believe...how I'd been dealt such a blow...when you were having your wildest dreams come true. I wondered what I'd done to deserve it. Maybe it was recompense for some crime I did in a past life. To make me this way...and then take everything away from me...]*

[You're talking about the accident.] Yuri stated, [...] *I only...just learned about it earlier. I'm sorry you lost your friend.*

[HE WASN'T JUST SOME FRIEND.] Asahi barked, pushing the strap off his shoulder as he rose up to his feet again, [HE WAS EVERYTHING. I WAS ABLE TO GET OVER YOU BECAUSE OF HIM.] He pointed at the younger man, hand shaking from his fury, [YOU DON'T HAVE A CLUE WHAT IT'S LIKE TO LOSE SOMEONE YOU LOVE. TO WATCH THEM DYING IN YOUR ARMS, NOT EVEN KNOWING WHERE THEY'RE HURT...TO WATCH THE LIGHT IN THEIR EYES DISAPPEAR WHILE YOU BEG THEM NOT TO GO. YOU DON'T HAVE A DAMN CLUE HOW IT FEELS TO LOSE SOMEONE SO IMPORTANT AND NOT EVEN BE ABLE TO GRIEVE BECAUSE NO ONE KNEW...!]

Yuri took a step back, feeling the door behind him again where the heel-picks of his blade-guards
bumped against it.

[Riku was my whole world... Asahi went on, tears falling from his eyes, [He took all the pain and devastation away that you left behind... He gave me the freedom to move on, to make something of myself in a life that didn't have you in it. He kept my secrets and was patient with me, even at his own expense... He gave me the time I needed to get over you. I don't know how much it hurt him to try and win me over, all the while knowing I was still thinking of you when we were together... But he was there, understanding, wanting to help...he said I was worth waiting for...and right as I realized I loved him for who he was, rather than for being your surrogate...he was ripped right out of my hands...]

[...I...had no idea. I'm sorry.]

[...Yeah...sure you are.] Asahi bristled, lowering his voice, [All this time, you didn't even know something happened. I got you that spot in the Tokyo Skate Club and you pissed-off into the sunset to Detroit anyway.] He growled, turning back to find his bag again, [I made so many excuses for you, trying to give some rational explanation to why you just left, to why you stopped answering my emails, and didn't take my calls... It was the time difference, or you were busy, or you saw my messages but then forgot to answer... It was just...desperate coping on my end, not wanting to admit that you never gave a damn about me.]

[That's not true, I-]

[You what?] Asahi cut him off, lifting one eye to look directly at the man, [You're going to try to say that I was your friend? Don't bother. I was just someone you knew. You had no love for me, no loyalty...It was easy to forget about me. I stayed in Juniors an extra year or two for you, and what's the thanks I get? Not even a goodbye.]

Yuri felt the daggers behind those words, [That's not fair. I never asked you to stay.]

[I STAYED BECAUSE I CARED ABOUT YOU.] Asahi yelled, [WHY CAN'T YOU SEE THAT? I'M TELLING YOU TO YOUR FACE AND YOU'RE STILL NOT GETTING IT.]

[Maybe you're the one who doesn't understand.] Yuri retorted, [I was feeble back then. Weak. I let other people push me around and never spoke up for myself, and in the end, all I got was a knife in my chest. Every time I went back home, it was twisted, again and again. You say you cared about me back then...but really, to what extent? I can't even remember a single time you tried to console me. You were always so distant and aloof, like you were only listening because you had to. Maybe if you actually took the time to talk to me instead of at me...you'd know why I went to Detroit.]

[And you think that celebrity you've attached yourself to is listening?] Asahi jabbed, [How can you even be so certain that he isn't using you?]

Yuri was incredulous, becoming aware of his phone in his pocket again, [You were in here the entire time I was talking to Plisetsky! Viktor got himself kicked out of the RSF because of me! Do you think he would risk all that because of some pawn he's playing with!?!]

[How would you know!? When you weren't crying over Yuko, you'd just fanboy over Viktor instead!] Asahi argued, [All those years I sat there listening to you wax poetic about how you wanted to skate on the same ice as him...you practically worshiped him! You'd empty out your bank account if he told you to! You'd...]
I'd what? Yuri asked angrily, having a sense about what the taunt would be, [Go on. Say it.]

Cool brown eyes lifted, staring out from under strands of black hair framed by teal, [How low will you go for someone like him? Someone so desperate for notoriety and fame that he'd fly all the way to Japan to coach the Sochi GP last-place finalist.]

[You're so jealous of Viktor that you're making him out to be a villain.]

Asahi snarled, [You can't think objectively about him! Even a dog thinks getting kicked is a good thing because at least someone is paying attention to it.]

[You're wrong.]

[He's using you.]

[YOU DON'T KNOW THE FIRST THING ABOUT HIM.] Yuri yelled instead, taking a step forward, pointing at the older skater bitterly, [I admit, even I had to question why Viktor was actually around back in the beginning! I thought he was just using me as an excuse for why he's taking time off! But the longer he stayed, the less rational that seemed! He actually took interest in me! He wanted to know everything about me! If he were only in it for himself, then he wouldn't have tried so hard! He would've made it all about himself, but he never did!]

Asahi just shook his head, [You're infatuated with him. He could insult you to your face and you wouldn't have the heart to be mad at him for it.]

Yuri's confidence dropped, remembering the days of being called Kobuta-chan and how he never argued against it. He clenched his fists at his side and lowered his gaze to the floor.

[And now he's just turned you into a little Japanese version of himself. He took out everything that made you who you were and substituted it with his own brand of so-called 'charm.'] Asahi went on, drawing a breath, [...] He got exactly what he wanted out of you. A self-styled minion who will worship him for years and never question him.] He too took a step closer, the tears drying up a bit even as the dark circles under his eyes remained, [I would never have tried to change you. I liked you the way you already were...and I would've protected you. I could've been good for you.]

His throat hurt, but Yuri didn't move a muscle for it. He could barely make out the image of Asahi's shoes coming into view as his eyes started to water, but the more those last words rattled around in his head, the more angry he felt about it. One more step closer, and Yuri found himself backing up slightly, but when he saw the shadow of an arm starting to reach for him, he lashed out, lifting his head and shoving his hands against his former rink-mate's chest to push him back, [Don't touch me! Don't EVER touch me!]

A stunned look answered those words and Asahi stumbled back a few paces.

[You're so caught-up on this idealized version of me that you keep locked up in your mind that you can't see who I really am!] Yuri snapped angrily, [You don't love me. You're in love with my flaws and depreciating self-loathing. You revel in my insecurity and mental weakness. The Asahi I remember never helped me grow because it was better that I stayed feeble. YOU WOULD'VE BEEN TERRIBLE FOR ME.]

[Yuri-]

[YOU WOULD HAVE KEPT ME IN A CAGE.]

[That's not-]
[JUST SHUT UP.] Yuri barked again, trying to hold his tears in as he stared ahead in a fury.

[You've known me all these years, but you really don't know anything about who I really am. Maybe you just heaped your own personality deficits on me too, all the privacy and secrecy that made it so I never noticed how you felt... Maybe that stopped you from seeing anything that wasn't absurdly superficial. You saw what you wanted to see, not what was really there.]

Asahi stayed quiet that time.

[But Viktor wanted to know. He wanted to know my weaknesses and my strengths, and in the end, for all that he was coaching me in my skating...he really just helped me learn to like myself. He never wanted to change me, like you accuse him of doing...he just helped bring out what he already knew was there! Hidden under the surface, hidden behind all my anxiety and crippling self-doubt!]

Yuri took another step forward, forcing Asahi back a pace, [I've never felt so comfortable in my own skin as I do now that he's by my side! Maybe that's why I stopped answering you after I left! Some part of me, deep down, knew you were just holding me back.] He stared forward defiantly, looking on so sharply that it was starting to cut deep into Asahi's psyche, [And while I am deeply sorry for your loss, Asahi...I can't keep feeling bad for leaving you behind. When I first realized you were going to be here, I had this sinking feeling that something bad would happen... Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think it would get like this though. But Viktor saw in 5 minutes what I didn't see in nearly a decade...and I'm tired of making him feel bad because I'm trying not to hurt you. He's my husband... he means more to me than anything else!]

"Tsh..."

[DON'T SCOFF AT ME.] Yuri barked, fists clenched angrily, [I've been defending you from his criticisms since yesterday. He didn't even want me talking to you! He's probably going to be pissed at me when he finds out about this conversation! Does that make you happy!? To know that him and I are probably going to be fighting about this later!??]

[...Of course not...] Asahi muttered under his breath, [I didn't even want to have this conversation. You're the one who forced it to happen.]

Yuri's eyes narrowed slightly, [Viktor and I have had a really emotionally draining season so far. Knowing you're back...knowing you're this good...I have no doubt the JSF will be sending you to Four Continents, the Olympics, and Worlds after that. I wanted to nip this in the bud before it could get any worse, because I don't want to know in advance that my weekend is going to be terrible because of you skulking around in the shadows.] He explained, voice quieter than before, [I'm not even sure why you're clinging to the idea of me when it's been such a long time. You said that other guy helped you get over me, too...you should act like it!]

Asahi was taken aback by that statement, and he stepped against the wall, turning his head away, [...This isn't something I'm doing on purpose. If we could all choose how we felt, I never would've let myself fall for you in the first place. Being like this...feeling like this...it's horrible.]

Yuri's brow furrowed, [Yeah...I know what it's like to have a thing for someone who's not available or interested. Viktor helped me get over it.]

[It's not that easy! You still HAVE Viktor. How would you feel if you lost him!??]

[...It would devastate me. I don't know that I could keep going without him.] He answered quietly. He raised his right hand and pressed his fingers lightly to the faint lines of his nearly-healed injuries, [When I got hurt before the Final, Viktor thought he lost me. I was unconscious for hours. The doctors were telling him that even if I woke up, I might not be the same...that I might have amnesia, I
might not even know who he is...or my personality might change. We already had a scare about me forgetting about us at Worlds last year. I was so nervous about skating against Viktor that I didn't hydrate, and then I passed out after my Free Skate...when I came to, I thought I was back in Sochi... Everything that had happened between us just vanished from my mind. For a while, I couldn't understand why Viktor was so upset. To my mind, he barely knew I existed, and we weren't even friends...but then I saw my ring, and my memory came back. So... He looked at that gold band as he lowered his arm again, stuffing both hands into his jacket pockets, [...I've had to see that look of despair in Viktor's eyes twice in the last year alone... I don't know that I could handle it if he did the same to me even once.]

[...I'll never get to feel the relief of Riku coming back to me.] Asahi said quietly, staring down at the floor again where he leaned against the wall, [I'll never get to hear the audience crying out a cute nickname about us like they do for you...there will never be chants of Asahiku like there are for Viktuuri.] He could feel his heart clenching again like before, and it spread up into his neck and head, [He's just gone...forever. And no one even knew who we were together before he was taken away.]

Yuri started to feel a little guilty then, [I know.]

[...,These past two years...I've felt so empty.] Asahi went on, his neck straining and tightening into a painful knot as he spoke, [...After I won Gold at that Nationals competition, we were going to go to Kyoto to celebrate with my family. Riku had finally won me over, and I was trying to work up the nerve to tell people...about us...about me...about this person who I'd been suppressing for so long because of how much it shamed me to admit what I was.]

[There's nothing to be ashamed of. I've...had to stand up to people who disapproved of Viktor and I, too.]

[I wasn't ready.] He explained, [And right at the moment where I was finally going to take that leap...Riku was gone.] Asahi sniffled and rubbed his nose again, [The accident...the car that hit us...Riku was shaken by the impact so violently that it ripped him up inside. When I got out of the debris...and found him...I couldn't even find anything wrong...] The tears were flowing again, and he slid back down the wall to sitting, his legs giving out under him. He saw the shadow of Yuri's frame moving down as well, crouching down on a knee to stay at the same level, [The last thing he said to me was that his chest hurt. His eyes rolled a bit, and I begged him to wake up, to stay with me...but he was gone... I held him in the shrapnel of that accident for what felt like years. The paramedics that came had to pull me off of him so they could tell me what I already knew. But then our coach was pulled out of the wreck, and I suddenly felt numb... He reminded me of all the years I kept my feelings to myself, and the weeks that Riku and I had been together in secret... My tears dried up and I couldn't cry anymore. The last time I saw Riku was watching the paramedics put him into the helicopter and fly him away. He was just...gone...and since no one knew about us, no one knew how much it hurt for me to lose him. He was...just a friend...just a rink-mate...]

[So you never got to grieve for him the way you needed to so you could move on...]

[...I think there was a part of me that took refuge in no one knowing. It was...easier to pretend we never were. I forced myself to forget about what we had, because it didn't hurt as much to be alone.]

Yuri sank back, sliding down from where he'd taken a knee, and crossed his legs instead, [...And that just made you forget about what he'd done to help you, too.]

Asahi nodded reluctantly behind his knees, crossing his arms in front of his face again to hide himself.
[You're not in love with me, Asahi.] Yuri explained, [You need to let yourself grieve for Riku. I don't think he'd want you to forget what you had together. He worked so hard to win your love, he'd probably be heartbroken if he knew you'd tried to pretend he hadn't.]

[...Probably...]

Yuri hesitated a moment before saying anything else, sighing a breath under the weight of the conversation, [...I don't know if it's my place to try and help you with any of this. I don't know if I even can. I do know that it can be comforting to fall back into familiar memories, the ones that don't hurt...but the past is behind us both. We've all grown and become different people because of what we've been through...the good and the bad. Maybe just the fact that you've finally told someone about who Riku was to you, it'll help you start to recover from that trauma... Coach Nagisa can probably help you, too. She's known you longer than I have.]

Asahi nodded reluctantly, pulling one hand down to rub his face. His eyes were red, but he managed to lift his gaze, looking straight at the man in front of him, [...I came here to start over...to get a fresh start... I never imagined I'd leave this place realizing exactly how much I've lost instead...]

[I didn't mean it like th-]

It happened faster than Yuri could've anticipated. Asahi twisted around in an attempt to stand, but instead of grabbing his backpack, he leaned forward on one knee, both hands grasping to each of Yuri's upper arms to hold him in place. His lips felt cold, and the kiss seemed unending to Yuri's mind, eyes open wide in shock. He managed to get his forearms and hands to move, but he was pinned down well enough that he couldn't do anything. When Asahi finally let him go again, Yuri was paralyzed where he sat, staring forward into the empty space the older skater once occupied at the base of the wall.

[Goodbye, Yuri.]

He heard the sound of shoes tapping the floor, the door opening, and then swinging shut again, then the quiet, subtle rumble of the audience through the floor. It took a moment for him to remember to breathe, but even then, all he could do was roll down onto his back, then onto his side, choking in a few gasps of air as he brought his hands up to cover his mouth and nose. His eyes clenched shut, but as he turned, he heard his phone fall out of his pocket, landing on an edge on the thin carpet. Eyes opened to see that he'd missed several text messages.

8:14pm  
[Hey my interview's done. Where'd you go? :) ]  
[Are you still talking to Yurio?]

8:17pm  
[Must be REALLY important if you turned your phone to silent to talk to him ;p ]

8:26pm  
[YURI (ノΔノ)ノ彡┻━┻]  
[Heh...this Japanese keyboard has a button just for funny text-based faces.]

8:29pm  
[...Srsly tho where are you?]

Viktor...

Yuri pushed up to sitting again, frantically trying to rub his mouth onto the sleeve of his coat. It didn't feel like it helped though.

He really shouldn't have done that...stupid Asahi...! That was the most selfish thing he's ever done!
He twisted around and pressed his back to the wall, hands shaking as he stared at his knees. In a burst of anger, he swung his hand back and punched the wall with the side of his fist, "BAKA ASAHI." Both his arms came back in front of himself after that, elbows propped up on his knees as he bent his head down, hands practically gripping at his hair. He barely had a few seconds to cringe before he heard the door being pushed open again, and a few voices that followed.

They cut off rather quickly though, likely from having suddenly seen him sitting on the floor like he was.

"...Yuri-kun...?"

Minami's voice made everything even worse, and Yuri recoiled into himself.

"Yuri-kun!"

"What happened...?" Someone else asked.

Yuri wasn't sure who the voice belonged to. It didn't matter. Viktor wasn't with them. He could feel the petite skater come up and crouch before him though, nervously putting a hand on his right shoulder.

"...Are you okay? Why are you in here on your own like this?" Minami asked, not hearing an answer, "...Just wait a minute, I'll go get Viktor. I think saw him a minute ago."

The group seemed to follow Minami's lead and left with him, none wanting to wait in the mire of the tension they sensed. Yuri hardly wanted to be found in that state though, and he forced himself up, stuffing his phone back into his pocket as he reached for the door handle. The hall beyond it was empty somehow, and he made a hard right to find the doors that lead to the prep area. He pushed through them so fast that he nearly knocked the door right into his unseen partner's face. The surprise made him jump nearly out of his skin, and he was greeted by the shrieks of several other surprised people on the other side, too, "V-Viktor!"

"...Ohgoodthereyouare..." The Russian stammered, eyes swirling from the shock of both the loud noise and the door swinging at him suddenly. He raised his hands up to fan himself for a moment and regain his bearings, but before he could even shake his head and open his eyes, Yuri was glomped onto his chest, arms around his sides and clinging tightly, "...Oh...Yuri? ...Minami said you looked upset about something. Was it bad news?"

He'd almost completely forgotten about the conversation with Yurio already, and he pulled back slightly, staring forward at his husband's jacket rather than looking up at his face, "...Uhm... Y-Yurio...told me why the RSF really let you go."

"...Why they really let me go?" Viktor echoed skeptically, "As if the medal wasn't reason enough?"

"...H-he said it...was because of me. The RSF thinks I ruined you." Yuri went on, trying to even remember what the teen had told him, "...What happened at the Final was...just a convenient cover-story..."

"Their loss." The Russian said dismissively, "And Japan's gain."

"...Yeah..." Yuri tepidly agreed, "Apparently your father is with the gang in Moscow. We should call and brag about this...right? He did suggest I be a weapon for you... He'll probably think this is great."
"Papa's at Russian Nationals...?" Viktor repeated, almost disbelieving it, "I guess Yurio convinced him?"

"...Maybe."

The silver legend tilted his head back and to the side a bit, trying to get a better look at his spouse's face. He pulled one hand free from where he'd returned the sudden hug, and slid a finger under the man's chin, getting those eyes to look up, "You look a bit rough around the edges, my love. Your words sound proud of this, but your face says you're not that impressed."

"...Oh...uhm... I...guess it's just a lot to take in. I joked to myself last year that I wanted everyone to hate me for taking up all of your time and attention...but now that they actually do...maybe I'm getting cold feet."

"I'm a part of the JSF with you now," Viktor explained, smiling, "Let them hate us both."

"But what if we have to go to Russia next year for a competition? Will we be in danger...?"

"What? No..." He reassured, moving his hand from the man's chin to stroke his hair instead, "If anything happened to either of us it would be a really big problem. The way my papa reacted to the news about me being sanctioned, I could almost see him coming to our events just to make sure nothing happens." He made a funny face then, "Isn't this an interesting turn of events? Everything's all topsy-turvy with my father now."

"...Yeah..."

Viktor grimaced at that, seeing his partner's eyes go aside nervously. He brought his hand back and cupped it against the younger figure's cheek, and leaned down, only to find Yuri pulling his head back and buried his face back into the white Olympic jacket, leaving Viktor rather stunned.

...What was that for? He was just saying half an hour ago that he wanted to mess around after my SP...now he doesn't want to kiss me at all...?

He felt where his husband's arms were clinging around him, hands clawing to hold to the back of his jacket. Something about it didn't feel right. For the moment though, it didn't seem like a good spot to question things. He could see the other skaters who'd gone looking for him standing on the edges of his periphery. For the moment then, he decided to just return the hug again.

...I'll just watch over him for now. He'll tell me the rest in his own time.
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED FIFTY SEVEN

The prospect of any sort of fun after the Russian's Short Program had effectively been squelched. With ought else to do before the post-skate technical panel, watching the rest of the Men's event became their only option.

"Do you want to change before we go find seats?" Viktor wondered, pulling his clingy husband back to where they'd left their gear bags.

Yuri's eyes roamed all over, but only once he was satisfied with what he saw did he let his partner go, slinking down to one of the seats and leaning down to start untangling his skate laces, "...No...I'll just pull my track pants on. This is fine."

Viktor gazed curiously, seeing the nervous look on the younger man's face. He could see a certain paleness that stuck out even under the halogen lights above them, and a stressed darkness under those brown eyes. The silver Russian's brow furrowed, but he just sat down in the seat next to Yuri, and started working on the laces of his own skates, "...Do you want a coffee or anything? Hot cocoa maybe?"

Yuri paused for a moment, loosened laces hanging from his fingers, "...Yeah...that sounds fine." He said quietly, though his tone resembled that of a pre-recorded response that he just voiced without thinking.

The Russian blinked, *Something's not right with him. Why is he-*

A hand came across and grabbed Viktor's wrist lightly, pulling it over and setting it against Yuri's leg. That same hand pressed it flat against the fabric, "...I know...this sounds weird, but...please don't let me go. Until we get back to the hotel at least, don't take your hands off me. Not even for a second."

"You're taking this thing with the RSF really hard." He commented, giving that leg a gentle squeeze before starting the slow, soothing stroke of his thumb there, and turned his eyes down to his skates again to try and untie them single-handed, "I'll speak with the ISU and ask if they can help out...maybe just set ourselves up to never get sent to Russia. We can't ask them not to schedule events there, but...I'm sure they can keep it in mind given the circumstances."

Yuri waited a moment, but then nodded, and then asked the most hypocritical question, "...What about visiting your father? Do you still want to go?"

"Are you sure you want to talk about that right now? ...I mean, you're getting all anxious about just the *idea* of being in Russia, even for skating...but to visit my papa?" Viktor was really thrown off.

"Your father lives in the middle of nowhere." Yuri commented, "It's practically the safest place out there."

"...I guess so."

They finished getting their blades off in silence after that, and Viktor abided by the strange request, keeping one hand on Yuri, somewhere, no matter what. Even as Yuri was pulling the pants of his track suit over his costume leggings, Viktor's hand was on his shoulder. Once Yuri was done, and was pulling the edges of his jacket straight, Viktor pulled out in front of him casually, settling both
hands on the man's hips. He felt his partner's hands and forearms settling over his own lightly, but the way Yuri avoided looking at him was rather odd, "...Hey."

Yuri glanced up a little bit, but then quickly looked down again, bringing both hands up to cup them over the Russian's mouth and chin to keep him back. That only earned him a look of stunned horror and confusion, but Yuri could do little more than lean his face down and shake his head, "...I'm sorry...please...don't ask me to do this for now... I'm feeling really sick to my stomach. I can taste bile at the back of my throat."

Viktor frowned, pulling his face back to get away from those hands, "...Do you want to see the medic?"

"I just want to sit down and stay put for a while."

"...Okay..."

They found seats in a small section of the arena close to rink-side, far enough away from the public to be able to ignore them. They were quick to push up the arm-rest between the seats, and Yuri sat sideways in his, resting his legs over his husband's and clinging to one arm.

The Russian's hand settled gently against the closest thigh, fingers curling around the curve of that leg, wedging slightly between where the two limbs were pinched together over his lap. Just as Yuri used his shoulder as a pillow, he set his cheek to the top of Yuri's head, keeping silent vigil over his nauseated spouse while they both half-watched the remainder of the Men's Short Program. Every once in a while, Viktor would notice his partner bringing a hand up to rub his mouth on the back of a wrist.

After a while of deliberation, Viktor moved to pull his right arm free of his partner's grasp, lifting it over the man's shoulder to curl it around his back. Yuri seemed to take the hint and wiggled in even closer.

This is the first time I've seen him sick...I wonder if he's always this way under these circumstances?

He pulled his left arm up and pressed the front of his wrist against his spouse's forehead, but what he felt was fairly normal. He sighed quietly and replaced where his hand had been perched on his partner's shin earlier.

Yuri just stared blankly ahead, only barely noticing the other programs or the music that accompanied them. His mind tortuously replayed the 'encounter' over and over, and every time it got to the end, Yuri could feel those cold phantom lips pressing against him, making him feel sick again. His mouth watered, reminding him of the way he'd seen animals froth and foam when they ate poison.

I feel so disgusting now... He thought, Like a corruption is spreading through me and there's nothing I can do... All I want is for Viktor to make it go away, but if he kisses me then this taint will just spread to him, too...

"WHOEVER KISSED MY HUSBAND WILL RUE THIS DAY."

"I WON'T STAND FOR THIS!"
"YURI IS MINE, YOU HEAR ME!? HE GAVE THIS RING TO ME! I'M THE ONLY ONE THAT GETS TO KISS HIM! IF I EVER FIND OUT WHO PUT THAT MINTY TASTY ON HIS LIPS, I'LL-"

"NoonekissesYuriEXCEPTME. NOONEBUTME."

He brought his arm back up again and rubbed the sleeve of his jacket against his mouth, looking to see if anything came off, as though the very presence of foreign saliva would show up in some sickly green color...but it was just the usual damp spot from his own.

That stupid idiot...how could he do this to me!? I could've gone my whole life and never been kissed by anyone but Viktor, and he took that away! I want to hate him for this...!

[YOU DON'T HAVE A CLUE WHAT IT'S LIKE TO LOSE SOMEONE YOU LOVE. TO WATCH THEM DYING IN YOUR ARMS, NOT EVEN KNOWING WHERE THEY'RE HURT...TO WATCH THE LIGHT IN THEIR EYES DISAPPEAR WHILE YOU BEG THEM NOT TO GO. YOU DON'T HAVE A DAMN CLUE HOW IT FEELS TO LOSE SOMEONE SO IMPORTANT AND NOT EVEN BE ABLE TO GRIEVE BECAUSE NO ONE KNEW...!] 

[...I came here to start over...to get a fresh start... I never imagined I'd leave this place realizing exactly how much I've lost instead...]

[Goodbye, Yuri.]

...I should've seen it coming... No, I did see it coming, and I didn't do anything to stop it... I'm so stupid and naïve...I trusted him not to take advantage... I trusted him...

Yuri could feel his chest tightening, and he pulled his free hand back to press against it. Settling his palm there, he slid it a bit higher to feel at the base of his neck, able to feel his heart racing there against his fingers. The chill followed, and Yuri's confidence sank again. He couldn't stop the quick, shallow breaths that came after...and that's when Viktor noticed.

"Yuri, you're pale."

His voice was distant though, and Yuri clenched up, "...Viktor...I need to go...I'm... I'm having a panic attack..." He said, though he wasn't sure if his words were spoken or just thought, "...I have...to...to go..." He felt like he was burning up in spite of his cold skin, and his hands started to tingle. Nothing about the world was right; it moved too quickly and it made his head spin.

It started closing in...and abruptly cut to black.

Light started shining in again, and everything was cold and hot at the same time. His skin prickled and felt tight.
"Yuri?"

"Uhhnnn..."

"Don't try to get up yet." Viktor advised, leaning in from somewhere outside Yuri's peripheries, like a shape that came out of shadows, "You passed out. You're at the medic's station right now." He reached forward and pushed a few strands of hair from his husband's eyes, "Yuri?"

Those eyes just stared into space before closing.

"Yuri...take a deep breath. Count to five as you inhale and hold it in for two."

...Ichi...ni...san...yon...go...

...Ichi...ni...

"Now let it out slowly."

Something warm was pulled off his forehead, then replaced with something cold. He couldn't feel hands on him anywhere, so he raised what felt like his own and groped around until someone took it.

"We don't have to stay for the technical panel." Viktor's voice was saying, the sound of it coming closer and more clear than before, "What else did Yurio tell you...? You seem really stressed out."

"...Yurio...?" He echoed in confusion, "What did Yurio say...?"

Viktor gave a worried look, patting his partner's hand where he held it, "I guess I could just ask him myself."

"...No...it's nothing..." Yuri said suddenly, trying to swallow, "...My throat is dry..."

A small cup of painfully cold water was handed to him, but he sipped at it anyway.

"...What time is it?"

"About 9:30" The Russian answered, "The Men's event is almost over."

"There's no point leaving then..."

"Are you sure?" Viktor asked, nudging the cup forward again, "I'm sure they'd understand if we ducked out early."

"...I can't...let him win..."

"...Who's him?"

Yuri felt a twinge of worry, but shook his head and tried to sit up, holding the water cup on his own then and sipping from it quietly. The cool, damp cloth that had been pressed to his forehead slipped away and flopped down to his lap. Looking at it for a moment, and being strangely cognizant of how slowly he was thinking and reacting, he reached to set the small cup down on a nearby mayo stand, then grabbed the cloth to set it aside as well, "...No one." He finally answered.

Viktor gave a skeptical look, but just added that gesture to the list of 'Odd Things Hubby Is Doing Or Saying That Make No Sense.' He rose up to stand from the seat next to the reclining chair Yuri was trying to get out of, and offered his hands for stability. The younger man took them in earnest, and pulled on them for leverage, rising up slowly before tipping forward against Viktor's chest, then
slowly getting his bearings again. While Yuri was there though, Viktor whispered into his ear, "If there's something else going on, you'd tell me, right?"

"Yes." Yuri answered succinctly, "...But not right now."

Viktor stayed quiet for a moment with that answer, but hugged his spouse a little tighter, "...If I called Yurio and asked when you guys ended your call, how many minutes would there be between that time and when we ran into each other again?"

"...I have no clue, honestly." Yuri explained, his eyes half-closing as the high of his panic started fading to a heavy sinking feeling, "...Probably a while."

"Was it really the call that caused you to be so upset?"

"...I barely remember what Yurio even said now."

"You told me he had news on why the RSF really cut me loose. You said the RSF blames you; that they sanctioned me because they think you ruined me."

"...Oh...right."

"I'm really worried about you, Yuri."

He just stayed still where he was, clinging to the Russian's frame for dear life.

"If you can't or won't tell me what happened, then at least...tell me you weren't hurt."

"...I...don't know how to answer that right now..."

"Yuri."

"Please don't ask me to answer that." He cringed, "You know I'll tell you...just, please let me wait until we get back... I don't even know what to say or how to say it right now..."

"Am I going to be mad about this?"

"...The odds aren't good that you won't be."

Viktor grumbled quietly, feeling a confusing mixture of anger, apprehension, and dubious worry.

A crowd had gathered outside the room for the post-skate technical panel. It wasn't much of a stretch to know who had made it to the top 24 and were advancing to the Free Skate, but those new skaters who weren't sure if they'd just made it were hovering, scanning the lines of kanji for their names.

1. ニキフォロフ・ヴィクトル - 115.75 (Nikiforov Viktor)
2. 斉藤 朝日 - 112.14 (Saito Asahi)
3. ニキフォロフ 勇利 - 101.26 (Nikiforov Yuri)
4. 南 健次郎 - 82.12 (Kenjirou Minami)
5. 北 介渡 - 81.15 (Kita Kaito)
6. 山内 一希 - 75.91 (Yamaguchi Itsuki)

"The gap is huge between us three and the next few people..." Yuri said to himself, looking at the top few names. Seeing his partner's score though made him wish he'd requested a number much higher than he had. He shrugged though and stepped out of the group, following the arm that still
held to him at the limits of its range, like a rope that tied glacier climbers together. When he found his husband again, the Russian was glancing around in a way Yuri hadn't seen since one of their last days in St. Petersburg; cocking his head like a meerkat, looking for trouble wherever it might be found. Seeing nothing unusual though, Viktor settled to looking at him again.

"All is as expected?"

"Mh."

They both stepped into the room itself then, and looked up to the table at the front, raised on a small platform, each seat labeled according to their rank from left to right, last to first. Even Viktor could tell that some...*adjustments*...would need to be made.

Without a second thought, the Russian stepped up behind the table, dragging Yuri behind him the whole way, grabbed the first-place name card and replaced it with the third, then took the second and marched it *all* the way down to the other end of the table, swapping that out with the sixth name, and came back to where he started to set his own name in the second spot, and the previous sixth-place card in third.

Yuri was impressed, in any case, "You're getting better at reading Japanese?"

"I can tell which ones are ours, and which one is Saito's...not because I can read them though. For his, I just know he's currently in 2nd place, so now he's 6th, cuz I said so."

A few people in the media who were in the front row were watching, roving their eyes from side to side at the *slightly* unprecedented change in order...but none were willing to argue it.

Relieved, but trying not to look too obvious about it, Yuri nodded and found his seat in the now-1st place slot. He supposed Viktor would've moved the name cards regardless. He moved the chair over a few feet so it would be directly next to his partner's, and sat down, pushing the name card over a little bit so it would be more in front of himself than it had been. Viktor sat next to him shortly thereafter, watching the door like Lynx, ready to pounce on the first black-and-teal chicken-butt he spotted.

What came through first though was a red-and-yellow chicken-*nugget*, and he was quick to notice that the name cards were all disorganized. Minami hopped up behind the stage and took his place, but only *after* grabbing his name card from the 4th place spot and swapped it for 3rd, putting him next to Viktor, and that much closer to his idol, "Yuri-kun...you feeling better now?"

"...I'm fine..." He answered hesitantly, but trying to offer something that resembled a smile.

"I saw on the television that you passed out in the stands..." The petite skater went on, giving Yuri a bit of a start, "Viktor had to carry you out...I was really worried! But no one would let us get near! I'm glad you were able to stay though...I'd go crazy if I had to wait until tomorrow to ask after you..."

*Ah jeeze...the whole thing was caught on camera, too?* Yuri was feeling his guts growl anxiously, but he put a hand over them to silence their complaining. He looked back down the table, around his partner's shoulder, "Don't you have my cell...?"

Minami's eyes got huge, "Nooooooooooo."

"Oh...well, give your phone here; I'll add myself. Then just text me and I'll add you back."

"OhmygodI'mgettingYuri-kun'sPHONENUMBERAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH." The younger skater screeched, fumbling for his device and unlocking it before passing it to the Russian sitting between
them. Viktor handed it in turn to Yuri, and Yuri put himself into the contacts list before passing it down to its owner. Minami just looked on at the phone like it had suddenly been imbued with arcane power, "I'm never changing this phone."

"Message me."

"AHHHHHHH I'm texting Yuri-kuuunn." 

A few seconds later, Yuri's phone beeped with the new text.

[● つ ● ◯ ● つ]

He huffed a meager laugh and added the new contact, "I thought I gave you my number a long time ago. Guess now is as good a time as any though."

Another skater joined them up at the high table; someone none of them really knew, but then Asahi made his appearance, coming down the center aisle and finding his place on the far end, away from everyone. He didn't look at anyone, and didn't make a sound, though Viktor was staring knives at him anyway.

Yuri just felt sick again and curled over himself, putting his head on the table with a cheek down against it so he'd be looking the opposite direction, keeping his arms crossed in front of his stomach.

Viktor turned his eyes back, the sharp implements in his gaze replaced by worry-tinted affection. He just leaned closer, wrapping one protective arm over his partner's back, rubbing his thumb gently where his hand perched on one shoulder, "You going to make it, my love?"

"...Yeah..."

"This'll be over before you know it, and then we'll leave."

"...Okay..."  

It still felt like an eternity before it was over, and they were finally walking through the last corridor before getting back to their hotel room. Yuri felt something of an adrenalin rush just as the door opened, and to Viktor's confusion, he went straight into the bathroom, shoved the door closed - and locked it - behind himself, and turned on every faucet he could find; the sink, the shower, and the soaking tub next to it.

Viktor blinked at the door, He really must be sick... he doesn't even want me to hear how bad he feels... I'm not sure if getting him medicine would help. He frowned slightly and moved further into the room, knowing his spouse was safe on his own now and the worst he'd have to deal with were the voices in his own head. Putting their gear up at least, Viktor put his shoes and winter coat away and rolled sideways onto the edge of their wide bed. Phone in-hand, he started doing another search.

[what do I do if I think my partner has been assaulted]

Within the bathroom, steam and fog was making the small room rather muggy. Heavy winter jacket and scarf were discarded on the floor, joined soon by the white Olympic jacket, and the shimmering silver costume jacket with its black cuff-ruffles and tiger-stripe windows cut into the arms. The sleeveless black turtleneck remained though as he started ravenously brushing his teeth... once, twice... three times... Mouth-wash didn't help either. He polished off both of the travel-size bottles that had been provided by the room. His mouth just burned then, but it still felt dirty. He raked a wash-
cloth over his face, rubbing his skin raw. Not even a scalding-hot shower did a thing to cleanse the corruption away.

I can still feel him...taste him... He was cold, it was like being kissed by a corpse... Did I just imagine how awful it was!? Why am I reacting like this...!?

It went on that way for a while, though Yuri didn't keep track of the time. It had been dark already anyway when they got back, so the only thing he could tell about the time when he finally let himself out of the bathroom again, was that it hadn't gone on so long that it was daybreak already. He looked worse coming out than he had going in though, trying to hide himself under a bathrobe and three different towels, and carefully hobbled onto the farthest side of the bed from where he'd seen his husband's shadow.

"...Can we talk about this now?" Viktor asked quietly, watching carefully but unsure how to proceed, given that he basically knew nothing beyond his own speculation, "...Yuri..."

The towel pile had its back to the Russian, practically curling up into a ball there. Spindly, pale arms came out from under the damp fluff and slowly pulled one towel away, revealing at least the top of the younger man's head. Black hair was near as wet as it had been coming right out of the shower, dripping onto the sheets beneath it, "...I feel so disgusting...

"Did he rape you?"

The question threw Yuri for a look, and his eyes widened, but he reached for one of the towels and wiped his face, "...No."

Viktor felt a pang of relief to hear it, "So then why are you acting like he did? Alarm bells have been blaring in my head since I couldn't get a text answer from you after my interview. I don't want to think my instincts on this are so off..."

Yuri hesitated to answer, the words in his head that he'd practiced for the last several minutes suddenly going silent. He felt a knot growing in his throat as he tried to speak on the fly instead, "...You told me, what...three...four times? Not to talk to him... That I should just let this blow over, and ignore it... I should've listened... Instead...I did the complete opposite... I trapped him in a room and wouldn't let him leave until we'd hashed it out... I thought if I got him to admit the things you were saying about him, that I could make him stop... I thought...if I made him come clean, and then rejected him outright...that he would get over it, like you said he should... I thought he just needed to hear those words from me, and that would end it. I was trying to be brave, like you...but in the end, I just..." Tears were already in his eyes again, burning them like sand and glass, "...I can't...get the taste of him out of my mouth..."

That made Viktor's heart sink, and he lowered his face into his hands.

Yuri cringed, his voice cracking then, "...I feel like I betrayed you... This whole thing is my fault... I trapped him and made him tell me everything, and he told me more than I ever thought there was to tell...and in the end, when I thought I'd gotten through to him, and figured out the answer to this problem... He kissed me, said goodbye, and left..." He sobbed, burying his head under his arms, "...And now I feel like I'll never be clean again, and I don't want to pass it on to you..."

In Viktor's head, he was equal parts enraged and in despair. A thousand grotesque fantasies flashed through his mind's eye of all the horrible things he wanted to do to Asahi that he could never get away with...but in the end, all he saw was his husband at the far end of their way-too-wide bed, crying, trying to be small, and blaming himself. Viktor put away all his violent revenge-fantasies and pushed up to his hands and knees, crawling over to the other side and sitting behind the pile of damp
towels that his spouse had buried himself under. Slowly and carefully, he unwound the bundle, dropping the sopping wet cuts of fabric away, until he could more easily make out his partner's shape, and wedged his hands under those thin arms. In one fluid heave, Viktor hefted Yuri up, twisted around, put his back to the head-board, collapsed against the pillows there, and pulled his partner's back against his front. Soggy hair made a big wet spot on the chest of his shirt, but he didn't care. He wrapped himself as well around the younger figure as he could, feeling every tremble and cry as though it came from him instead. Knees came up on either side of the heap as ankles crossed under it, and he wrapped his arms around his husband's shoulders, pulling one hand up to brush it through raven strands, "...It's *not* your fault."

"...*I knew* that he would do something... I could *hear* you telling me at the back of my head, but I just... *I trusted that he wouldn't*... But he *did* anyway..." Yuri cried, hiccupsing his breath through each word, "...And now I just feel so disgusting...! *Like I'll never be clean again!* *I just don't know what to do*..."

Viktor continued the slow, gentle stroking of his fingers through his partner's hair, and held him close to his chest, "...Tell me everything that happened. I love you, and we're going to get through this, okay?"
Chapter 358

CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED FIFTY EIGHT

To retell the tale came with more crying in fits and starts, but Viktor listened patiently, sitting on the edge of an angry outburst but somehow managing to hold it in. There was a slight edge of anxiety creeping in every time Yuri mentioned Riku.

*He doesn't seem to remember that I mentioned the name just this morning. I guess he didn't take a mental note about it.*

"...I just...want to hate him so much for this...but with all the other things he said, I can't get myself to feel that way towards him..." Yuri went on, staring tiredly at the ceiling, "More than anything...I guess I'm just...scared of him now."

"He forced himself onto you. Feeling scared is natural."

"...It's not just that..."

"Hm?"

Yuri hesitated a moment, but then curled forward to sit up, twisting on an elbow to push himself upward and turn around. Facing his partner, it had been the first time they'd seen one another's faces since Yuri had retreated into the bathroom, and the stress of the whole event was as easy to read on his as a book. He reached one hand forward to tap lightly on his spouse's closest knee, "Cross your legs for a minute and sit up."

"Oh...sure." Viktor answered, hands sinking into the bedding as he hoisted himself up as asked. Once he was done, he watched carefully as his partner inched closer, propped up on one knee before him.

"It was like this when he did it..." Yuri explained, "I still had my skates on so I was a bit clumsy...and then he just...moved so fast..." He said, reaching both hands forward to press his husband's arms into his own sides, "He was so much stronger than me...his fingers went around my arms like I was just a kid. It felt like they were welded to my sides, because I couldn't move anything above the elbow..." He could see how his own fingers couldn't wrap all the way around Viktor's biceps, and that just made him feel worse, and he pulled back again, "...He just...overpowered me...He held me where I was and I couldn't move a muscle. It's like he looked into my mind and saw how quickly I shoved Tess off before, and went out of his way to take that away from me..." Yuri could feel the tears coming again, and he slouched where he sat, reaching a wrist up to rub on his eyes, "I was just so powerless. I've never felt so weak before..."

Seeing that despair made Viktor's heart sink. He scooted closer, and lifted one arm forward to reach for the bathrobe as it was sliding off his husband's shoulder. To see Yuri instinctively cringing away though...that was worse than hearing the story.

"...I don't...think I can do..."

"I'm not trying to undress you." The Russian said calmly, "I was trying to pull the edge up to cover you. I don't want you to catch cold."

"...I'm so sorry...I'm not...trying to be like this..." Yuri brought his knees up and wrapped his arms around them, burying his face against the fluff of the robe that covered his legs, "...Asahi did this
"I'm covered in anti-Asahi Teflon." Viktor explained, "None of his grime can stick to me. You don't have to worry." He managed to get close enough to pull the edge of the bathrobe up over his partner's shoulder like he said he wanted to, and wrapped one arm and leg around the trembling younger man before him. He held there for a moment, resting his chin on the shoulder closest to him, but then an idea came, "Hey."

Yuri lifted his head, turning it enough that he could see past the edge of one arm.

"Come shower with me."

"I scrubbed myself raw in there...I don't know that it will help..."

"You did it though. This time, I'm going to wash you." Viktor explained, moving off the side of the bed to stand up, and turned back to lean down with his hands on the blankets as he tried to coax his spouse to follow, "You're so worried about passing on the dirt he left on you...but if I tell you that you're clean again, then you will be. You'll believe me, right? Nettoyage Rituel par Nikiforov...or Ritual Cleansing by Viktor."

Yuri blinked up at him, but after a moment of thought, he nodded and started to uncoil himself. Every joint felt like a rusted hinge as he moved, but he soon was standing, and he took his husband's hand, letting the silver legend walk him back towards the shower room.

It took a moment for Viktor to gather up all the clothing that had been discarded on the floor in there, and most of it was wet or damp in some regard, too, but he just set it all into a pile on the floor in the main room and came back to look for dry towels. There were three left; one large, and two hand towels. There were a few face cloths still rolled up and put up as well, and Viktor reached for that first before finding his partner's hand again to gently coax him into the small space. The door was closed behind them, and Viktor stepped aside to pull a small stool out from the back of the shower space, setting it up just in front of the shower nozzle before unhooking it from the wall and turning the water on.

"...I'm sorry...for not listening to you." Yuri started again quietly, "For putting you through all this."

Viktor glanced aside slightly, looking past the edge of his bangs as he felt the water warming up in his hand. With it already luke-warm, he twisted the shower-head so it would be a single stream of low-pressure gurgling rather than a spray, and reset the whole thing into the holster it had come from. Both hands went gently to the outside of his husband's shoulders, and he stepped closer, sliding his hands up to either side of his spouse's neck, thumbs grazing lightly over Yuri's cheeks. He bent his head down and pressed his brow to the mess of cool, damp black hair, "You have nothing to apologize for. What Saito did was a violation...of your body, mind, and spirit. You were trying to find a way of letting him down so he could move on, and he took advantage of your trusting nature. Nothing about what you told me came across like an invitation to him. You never offered to let him have that one kiss so he'd know what it was like. He stole that from you, and in doing so, did a lot of damage to you." He felt the younger man stepping closer to him as he spoke, arms around under his own as they wrapped around his sides, and fingers gripped the shirt behind his back. He hugged the man close, one hand behind Yuri's head to bring it down to his shoulder, "The important thing now is to make you feel safe, clean, and whole again." Viktor took a step back then, looking at his spouse's stress-addled face, "Ready?"

Yuri nodded quietly, pulling his hands back to undo the loose knot he'd tied the robe closed with, his naked frame coming into sight as he let his partner slide the damp fluff off his shoulders. He didn't say anything as he could feel those slate eyes scanning him, seeing the red claw-marks he'd left in his
own skin where he'd tried to scratch the corruption off of himself...but mercifully, Viktor didn't comment on them, even as he hung the robe on the hook at the top of the door. Yuri spotted the hand that came out beside him then, and took it nervously, letting the Russian guide him around the front of the small stool so he could sit.

*He's seen me naked a thousand times...* Yuri thought anxiously, staring at the tiles before him, keeping his knees together and resting his elbows against his thighs where he sat, *...But I feel so ashamed now... Not just because of what Asahi did, but because of what I did to myself after...*

One hand stayed on the younger man's back as Viktor reached for the shower head again, pulling his hand away only to twist the nozzle into a gentle spray setting. The water cascaded over Yuri's whole frame, warm but not hot. One hand softly caressed every inch of skin, sliding down from neck to back, around his sides and waist. Viktor coaxed one arm away from where Yuri had pressed it against himself, and ran his fingers down the length of it as the water flowed. He took extra care to lightly massage the middle of his partner's upper arms, wary of where he knew his husband had been grabbed and held still. There weren't any marks there...not yet anyway. Whether bruises in the shape of handprints would manifest over the course of the night had yet to be seen. Viktor moved to the other side and did the same thing to his partner's other arm, though he stayed on that hand for a little while longer, lifting it to his lips to kiss the ring there. He caught a brief smile on Yuri's face as he lifted his eyes, but a second later, Yuri turned away again, snuffling under the cascade of water, letting the run-off from his saturated hair hide a few lingering tears.

It took a moment to coax Yuri to sit more upright so Viktor could continue his make-shift ritual, but when the younger man finally opened himself up to it, the Russian moved in, one hand softly stroking down the front and sides of his husband's chest as the other followed with the water. Legs that were pressed together came loose, one after another, and the same stroke and rinse went down each one to his feet.

"...I thought you were going to be furious with me..." Yuri said quietly, barely audible over the shower's spray, "*When you asked me at the arena if what I had to say would make you mad later...*

"I was angry." Viktor answered, putting the shower-head back into the holster for a moment as he went after the small shampoo bottle already set out nearby, and squeezed a dob into the palm of his hand, spreading it out between both palms before starting to massage it into his partner's hair, "*But the truth is...over these past two years that we've been in each others' lives, and this past one year that we've been together, the more I've learned about how to manage your responses to things.*" He explained, fingers moving in circles as he pressed the shampoo right down to the roots and scalp, "*You were already terrified when you came back to me from the changing room. What good would it have done if I flew off the handle?" He wondered, rinsing his hands off under the slow singular stream from the shower-head, then pulled it free to twist it back to a wider spray, and started rinsing the shampoo from raven-black hair. He combed his fingers through it as he made circles around the crown of his husband's head, "As much as I thought that I was entitled to be angry...and I still am...I don't think that my yelling or crying would've done much to help make you feel safe again. Even if all my rage was directed at Saito, and the horrible position he put you into...without him here for me to actually target my yelling at...it would've just been you, and I'm sure that would've made you feel worse." He explained, twisting the nozzle back to the slow singular stream and setting it aside to reach for the conditioner next, doing the same thing with it to massage it into his husband's hair, "*Saito already violated your trust. It would've compounded the problem if I lost my mind over this. I want you to feel like you can always come to me. The longer you went, saying you didn't want to talk about it until we got back, the more I wondered as to why that might be the case... How you thought I might react was just as critical as anything. You thought it would be bad, so you refused to say anything that might set me off. That just made me do a little introspection.***"
Yuri listened closely, though he kept his eyes closed and his head down, letting his senses be cleansed by the attention.

"In that way, despite how bad you already felt, and how scared you were about everything that was happening...you were still trying to protect me, even if from myself." Viktor said, reaching for the water spray again, and resuming the finger-comb as he rinsed the conditioner away, "If I had found out what Saito did to you before the technical panel, I probably would've tried to confront him. It would've been brutally public, even on camera...what kind of impression would it leave on my new bosses if I started a fight with one of their established athletes? As much as I hated not knowing for sure what had happened to you, it was probably for the best that you didn't confirm my fears until it was impossible for me to act out on them."

"...I wish I could say I did that on purpose..." Yuri sighed, "That I was smart or wise enough to be able to think about all those possibilities... But really, I was just scared to see you get angry at me. I was postponing the inevitable."

Viktor set his hand on one shoulder and gave a meager smile, "Take the credit for it anyway. You're incredibly smart...way smarter than me. Even if it wasn't something you actively thought about, I know for sure that 'If Viktor lashes out right now, everyone will see it' was an undercurrent to everything else."

"...Maybe..."

The silver legend gave his husband's shoulder a gentle squeeze before moving off again, setting the shower head aside to reach for a wash-cloth. He unrolled it and let the warm water make it damp, then reached for a small bottle of liquid soap, squeezing some onto the wet fabric and rubbing it around briskly to spread it out. He took a knee behind his partner's back, caring very little for how wet his clothes had gotten since they started, and pressed the wash-cloth to Yuri's red-streaked skin, "Maybe the smartest thing I did in all this was just consulting Google on what to do."

Yuri turned his eyes, but stayed still, "...Google?"

"I told you once, more than a year ago now, that I was terrible at handling people who cry in front of me." Viktor explained, gently sliding the soapy lather around, "It's taken me a long time to really understand how to help you when you're upset. But this is not something I've ever had to deal with before...I really wanted to make sure I did this right. So, when you were in here earlier, I used my phone to try and find insight. I asked it...what do I do if I think my partner's been assaulted?"

That made Yuri's heart sink, and he lowered his face a little.

"I was actually kind of surprised how few results came back that answered the question I'd asked it." Viktor went on, moving the cloth in slow circles over every inch of skin, leaving a soapy trail as he moved to the left and started lathering up the shoulder and arm, "Most of the stuff I saw was about helping people who were abused as kids. A really disturbing number of hits came back, twisting my question into something like, 'I think I raped my partner, what do I do' or, 'I think my husband raped me, but I'm not sure.' Things that really made my heart break. In the end, I only found a single webpage that actually answered the question I asked. One of the first things it said...was not to get angry in front of the person who'd been hurt." He carefully massaged the cloth around each finger, each nail, trying to clean away any evidence that Yuri had scratched himself in his despair, then moved over to the right arm to start again, "Someone who's been violently attacked doesn't need their loved ones acting violently angry, too. Likewise...doing things in retaliation without giving the victim a say in it. I won't lie, I had a few aggressive thoughts pass through my mind when you finally told me what happened...but that website's advice held me back. Saito took away your right to control what was going on...it would be worse if I did the same thing, by retaliating in a way you didn't
want. The whole thing defused me before I had a chance to explode."

"...I don't want you to hurt him." Yuri said, lifting his head again and turning his gaze aside to see his partner's face, "I don't want to forgive him for what he did, but I can't help but feel like he didn't mean for it to be as bad as it was. He's suffering, too. I even told him, that if you died in my arms like Riku did in his...it would kill me. I can't face this life alone anymore. I don't even know how I made it so long before finding you. The idea of going back to that...living a life without you...is unthinkable."

"It's the same for me." Viktor agreed, "But I can't change the fact that he hurt you. That's an attack on me, too. Whatever was going through his head at the time, there is no excuse or justification for what he did."

"...I know..." Yuri sighed, turning back to center again.

The silver Russian finished with the second hand, and moved around front to start lathering a leg, "But I don't want to worry you all night about what I might do or say later. Tonight is just about us. My primary concern is making you happy. So, once we're done in here, we'll order some room service, sip some hot cocoa, maybe watch some garbage television...and just be us."

Yuri nodded quietly, feeling the later as it went down to each ankle, then roamed up to his abdomen and chest, and finally down to his feet. Viktor rinsed that cloth and set it aside, then went for a fresh one, unrolling it and making it wet, added soap, and crouched down in front again. Though Yuri's mind was clouded and full of doubts and worries, seeing Viktor's smile was a comfort, "Thank you..."

Viktor nodded, and wrapped the second cloth around his hand and fingers, using his free hand to push the wet hair away. He gently pressed the cloth to the skin of his spouse's face, softly stroking it from cheek to forehead, the other cheek, over his partner's closed eyes, chin, nose, and finally over his mouth. Yuri's lips were still a bit red from how hard he'd scrubbed them earlier, so Viktor went very carefully, and ended it with a slide of his thumb across them both. A quick boop of a finger to Yuri's nose, and the Russian reached for the shower-head again, rinsing the man's soapy frame from top to toes. The water was cut off a few moments later, and Viktor offered his hands to help his spouse stand up, moving them up then to start pressing the excess from his husband's hair before reaching for the first of the two small hand towels. Using it to pat Yuri's face dry first, he then moved down each arm, over his front, then his back, then reached for the second of the smaller towels to finish drying his partner's legs and feet. The singular remaining large towel ruffled Yuri's hair to dry and fluff it a little, then went down to get tied around the man's waist. Viktor set his palms against the crests of his husband's hips, and looked forward to those hazel eyes, tired as they still looked, "There. All clean. You're practically factory sealed."

Yuri's cheeks pinked a little as he glanced down, nodding quietly as he looked at his arms and hands. Just as the man had said, the whole 'ritual' really did make him feel like the taint was finally gone. His throat clenched up as he felt a few last tears finding their way to the surface, but the hiccupped breaths were half a laugh, and he reached one hand up to wipe his eyes, "...And he thinks...you're just messing with me. That you're only in this for yourself and that you don't actually care about me at all."

"He clearly doesn't know what he's talking about, my love." Viktor said simply, rubbing one thumb where it barely reached over the edge of the towel and felt velvet skin, "We may be unorthodox...but for as long as I live, I'll never forget that sweet, flushed, drunk face that asked me to come to Hasetsu and be your coach while the rest of you grinded on me."

Yuri couldn't help but snuffle another laugh at that, "...I still can't believe you fell in love with my
ugly mug in that condition...

"You're quite the charmer, Yuri Nikiforov. And you're extremely handsome, even when you're drunk as a skunk."

He kept his head down in spite of it, though he smiled anyway, finally getting the courage to look up again and see into those crystal blue eyes, seeing his reflection in them. A nervous swallow followed, and Yuri raised his arms, sliding his hands across his husband's damp shirt, settling them against that broad chest, "...I think I understand what you mean now when you said you find yourself falling in love with me all over again at random times... I thought I did already, but now I really understand..."

Viktor just smiled sweetly at that, "Right? I've completely lost track of how often that's happened."

Though Yuri's heart raced again, this time it was exhilaration and joy rather than the early onset of another panic. His limbs seemed to move on their own then, left hand sliding up and over Viktor's shoulder, the other cupping around the side of a shoulder, and he leaned in closer, finally feeling clean enough to kiss him. Hands went from his hips and slid up around his back, holding him closer, the right coming further up to slip fingers around the side of his neck and behind his head, cradling there gently. As he pulled back a little, Viktor leaned in again, stealing one more kiss just for good measure.

"You're the best thing that's ever happened to me." Those accented words sounded, "I'll fight to the death to protect you."

"Don't tempt fate," Yuri advised, nosing his husband's lips lightly, "I expect you to stick around for a while yet. I love you too much to lose you now."

"I'm not going anywhere."
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED FIFTY NINE

Just as Viktor promised, the remainder of the night was care-free and, more importantly, had little and less to do with a certain event that had taken place earlier in the day. Room-service was ordered, and hot cocoa sipped...and in the midst of some truly trash television – so trash, there weren’t even subtitles available for those present who spoke next to no Japanese – a back massage was given. With no understanding of what was going on in the program – some game-show or another where contestants had to contort their bodies into odd positions so that a wall, which moved on a platform towards them at some speed, would pass over and around them without knocking them down – Viktor opted to put his attention to better use.

Yuri sat cross-legged on the bed, with the Russian's long legs parted on either side of him from behind, hands kneading and rubbing on sore muscles. Shoulders, sides, upper back, neck, lower back...Viktor smoothed them all out. He knew he'd done a good job when he noticed that his young husband had fallen asleep under his touch, head drooping down, breathing deeply.

Viktor gave a relieved sigh and a smile at the sight of it, and gently pulled the man back, tucking that nearly-naked frame under the covers cozily. He himself stepped aside only long enough to cast aside his nearly-dried clothing, and hang up the rest that had been pulled out of the bathroom earlier in the night. He made a face when he realized how soggy his partner's costume had gotten, but hung all the pieces of it up and spread them out so air could circulate around. Even Yuri's heavy winter jacket – the same one Viktor had bought for him in Barcelona the previous year – was a little damp.

If it's still wet in the morning then I'll just give him mine for the day, and I'll wear my long-coat instead. Packing extras of everything has finally come in handy.

With everything put in its place, Viktor set his phone to silent and turned on the alarm for the following morning. He rubbed his chin in thought though as he sat on the edge of the bed, covers pulled back on the corner as he waited to get in.

I don't want to put Yuri in a position where he has to see Saito before I've had a chance to deal with this. We may have to skip morning practice...

He cast his crystal eyes to his slumbering partner, and reached over gently to stroke his fluffy black hair.

He's already done so much and worked so hard...with all the practice we did for the Grand Prix, he can probably skate the Free Program in his sleep. I won't bother him with this... If he gets antsy, we'll just find another rink in the city and practice like we did in Sapporo and Detroit.

Fingers went to the list of past text messages then, and Viktor scrolled through all the familiar names, until he spotted one in particular.

I feel like we kind of ditched her today… I hope she doesn't think we cut her off because of the talk we had yesterday.

He started thumbing a message into the field.

[Hey, sorry to bother so late at night. You don't have to answer right now.] [Yuri and I are going to skip morning practice...do you want to join us for breakfast? I have some chores to take care of after, and I don't want to leave Yuri by himself while I'm out.]
He clicked out of the window and set an alarm for 10am. Just as he was reaching to plug the phone in for the night, he saw the small drop-down window where Minako had answered unexpectedly.

[For sure. When should I come?]

[We'll be up at 10 so maybe get here by 10:30?]

[I'll be there.]

Viktor looked on at the screen for a moment longer...but then started thumbing another message.

To his surprise, she sent another one as well, and he saw that they'd both asked the same question.

[How are you holding up?]/[How is Yuri holding up?]

[Oh...I'm okay.] Minako answered, [I called Mik after I last saw you guys...we're sorting things out. Seeing those Opening Ceremonies yesterday and that (SUPER ADORABLE!) re-proposal you did for Yuri got me thinking about my own situation.]

[You're reconsidering the engagement?] Viktor wondered dubiously.

[...Sort of?]

[I'm not sure. I don't want to feel like I'm tied down.]

[I get that. Marriage is for lovers, not for friends with benefits.]

[...I wish I could've put it that simply, cuz yeah, that's about the size of it.] Minako answered, the three jumping dots noting her continued typing, [In any case...your turn. I wanted to ask about Yuri earlier but I wasn't sure how many other people had already asked the same thing.]

[Have you heard anything?]

[Nothing beyond the crowd's shock and awe when people noticed you suddenly carrying Yuri out of the stands.]

[He had a panic attack. It was intense enough that it knocked him out for a few minutes.]

[AFTER a program?]

[It wasn't about the program. He ran into an 'old friend' and got into a bit of trouble over it.]

[Oh...you mean Asahi?]  

[You know him?]

[Sure.] She explained, [I've followed Yuri to all his local events, remember? I know basically everyone he does. Asahi was Yuri's skating buddy back in Juniors. I know they kind of drifted apart after Yuri moved to the US, but Yuri made himself scarce to basically everyone after that. He's never one to ignore someone he knows just because he hasn't talked to them in a while though. Was it bad?]

[It's hard to explain. Let's just say that we became aware of one of the (probably many) broken hearts Yuri left behind.]

[...]

[Oh boy.]
[I always had a feeling about that one, but Yuri never said anything, so I didn't either.]

[I see.] Viktor sighed and slouched where he sat. [I haven't told Yuri what I plan on doing yet because I don't want to upset him more than he already is, but I'm tempted to file an official complaint with the JSF about it.]

[Wow...what happened to make you think you need to take it THAT far?]

[Saito violated Yuri's space and trust. That little shit kissed my husband.]

[WHILE YOU WERE THERE?]

[Oh believe me, if he did that while I was standing there, I'd have been taken out of the building in handcuffs.]
[Yuri had stepped out during my interview to talk to Yurio about something. It happened before I caught back up with him.]

[...Oh... Wow. This...wow. How are YOU handling it?]

Viktor grumbled discontentedly, [Yuri said Saito is super Japanese. I think it's a testament to my willpower that I didn't find out what room he's staying in and demand that he commit ritual suicide in it.]

[Yeah seppuku at a skating event would probably make things way worse than they are already.]
[Anyway though...try to have a better night. I'll see you boys in the morning.]

[Da...thanks. Night.]

Viktor plugged the phone in and clicked the screen off, then reached over to flick off the last light in the room, plunging it into darkness. He pulled his legs up and shuffled under the cool blankets and sheets, draping them across himself before wiggling over the few inches before he found his husband's form.

"Everything okay?" Yuri asked unexpectedly, feeling his partner pause for a second before finally coming to rest next to him.

"Oh...yeah, that was Minako. I asked her out with us in the morning since we haven't seen her all day." The Russian explained, rolling to his side as he reached forward under the blankets. His hand found Yuri's shoulder, then slid across the man's back, and he moved the rest of the way forward so he could get comfortable. He leaned forward from his side, rubbing his hand back and forth over his partner's skin, "As your coach, I'm making an executive decision to skip Free Skate practice." He said quietly, but dramatically.

"...As your coach, I'm making an executive decision to concur."

Viktor chuffed, nosing in closer and rubbing up against one cheek, "You're the best coach."

Yuri hummed a quiet smile, turning his face and finding his way forward, nosing his way around in the dark until he found the kiss he was after. He held there in its warmth for a few seconds before pulling back again, "I must owe you a hundred of these by now..."

"Oh don't worry about your kiss-debt. You'll be paying it back with interest. I'll make sure of it."

He huffed a laugh and lowered down to the pillow, breathing something of a sigh of relief, "And none of our regularly scheduled kisses count towards the principle balance..."
"...I have no clue what you just said. It's too late for me to brain good."

"Sorry." Yuri mused, lifting up to find one more quick kiss before settling down, "I'll make it up to you tomorrow. No more holding back."

"Mmmh...I can't wait."

It was an easy thing to fall asleep after a day full of Universal Studios and competitive skating, but in spite of the many exhausting hours spent expending all that energy, a single 5 second encounter at the end of it had made it rather difficult to rest in all that time spent unconscious. When the alarm rang the following morning, and Yuri was jarred awake by it, he felt as though he'd just been woken from the deepest of slumbers by the trumpeting of a military bugle. He practically saw stars floating in his eyes as Viktor tried to get him out of bed. He managed to snooze a few more minutes when the silver Russian stepped aside to shower, but being awoken a second time was still startling.

He became aware of his surroundings sometime after they'd already reunited with Minako in the hotel restaurant, but before food had arrived at their table. He thought he heard a few familiar words about the JSF, competition, and something about paperwork, but without context, it passed through Yuri's mind like wind and was quickly forgotten.

"Yuri-

He squinted as he turned his eyes towards the sound of the voice that spoke his name, "...I can see sounds..."

"Hm." Viktor looked his partner over more carefully then, combing his fingers through the man's hair, "I think I should put you back to bed."

"...Ikitakunaaai..." Yuri whined.

"Huh?"

"He said he doesn't wanna go." Minako explained, looking over from her side of the table, "But I get this feeling he wouldn't put up much of a fight if you took him anyway."

"Yeah..." The Russian agreed, thinking on it for a moment, "Well, we already ordered...we'll stay and see if he'll eat something. If not, then I'll ju-

THWUMPK

"...Just...let him...sleep until we're ready to go." He finished, looking down at where Yuri had face-planted on the table-top. He grimaced slightly, but then just started moving dishes away, and pulled his loaned jacket off the back of his husband's chair. With a few quick movements, he'd created a small cocoon around his partner's head, leaving him in blissful darkness and quiet right there on their table, "...I'll just take his food to go and try to get him to eat later or something."

"Do you have a microwave in your room? I don't remember seeing one."

"Mmmhhhhhhrrrrrr..." Viktor grumbled, realizing she had a point, "Okay maybe I won't do that then. I...ahhh this is such a weird situation."

"Well, I don't think he's particularly aware of what we're talking about anyway." Minako pointed out, "Especially now that you've made it so the lights are out for him. I'm not that surprised he didn't
sleep overnight."

"He was out like a light though." The silver legend commented, gently stroking his partner's back as they waited, "I thought for sure that he'd sleep even better than I did."

The ballerina shrugged and smiled, "Sleep and rest can sometimes be different things. You did your best to wash the stain out, but he still had the worry about seeing Asahi at the Free Program on his mind."

"I'm really worried about his skating tonight." Viktor commented, "Even after everything that happened, he was still worried about Saito's ability to qualify for being part of the Olympic team. I'd hate to be the reason that's taken away, if only because Yuri would feel like it's his fault. I mean, I can play keep-away pretty well, maybe enough to salvage Yuri's skating, but Saito would be going up last tonight, and if Yuri realizes he doesn't go up at all..."

"You have to do the right thing, if not as a spouse then as his coach." Minako said simply, "In the grand scheme of things, what Asahi did might not've really been a huge thing...but in Yuri's head it was basically the worst thing that could've happened."

"I also told him I would let him know what I planned to do so he'd be able to consent to it." Viktor went on, "To give him some sense of control over the outcome, even if I ask that he not be there to see it. Whatever happens, he'll know about it long before we get to the arena tonight."

"So what are your plans?"

A waiter came up next to their table and started setting dishes down, though the ones that were there for Yuri were placed more in the middle than anything. Viktor thanked the man and he went on his way, "I already have the PDF documents saved to my email." The Russian explained, unrolling the utensils from the cloth napkin and folding the fabric over his lap before using the fork to skewer some fruit slices, "Given Yuri's condition now, I'm thinking I'll put him back to bed and then head down to the hotel's business center to print things out. The Men's practice will go till noon, so I expect that the shuttles will start getting back around 12:30...I'll be waiting in the lobby for Saito and his coach to get here."

"You're not going to call ahead?" Minako asked, unfurling her own napkin set and doing much the same that Viktor did, "It might seem odd if you're just waiting for them. What if they don't come right away? You'll just be waiting longer."

"I guess I can call." Viktor agreed, "Kind of takes the surprise out of it though. I didn't want to give Saito a chance to think up any excuses."

"You can just ask his coach not to warn him. If she does anyway, it won't change the fact that you're sitting them all down. This is a pretty serious thing. Regardless of how Yuri interpreted what happened, or what excuses he was willing to make, Asahi's actions could potentially sabotage Yuri's performance tonight and at competitions to come, especially the ones they share." Minako pointed out, pausing a few times to get a bit of food in, "This is also Yuri's first shot at the Olympics. He'd never forgive himself if Asahi made it onto the team and then collapsed at the Games from the sheer nerve and worry of Asahi being around...or even the shame of remembering what happened."

"I know. That's part of what I'm worried about seeing, too." Viktor admitted, looking over at the heap of his husband, "I like to think I got most of that out of him last night, but until I see how he reacts to seeing Saito again...I can't be sure."

"I think you're doing the right thing." The ballerina assured, "It's not like you're going to trap Asahi
in a back-alley and break his legs. You're doing this the official way."

"...That part worries me, too."

"How?"

Viktor looked from Yuri to Minako, shaking his bangs out of his eye as he lifted his head, "If the JSF decides to suspend Saito over this, how long will it be before a reason is given? What will the official reason be? I trust them to be discreet, but there are a lot of people potentially involved...any one of them along the chain of command could leak the real reason, and then Yuri would be traumatized all over again by the rumor-mill and gossip."

Minako hesitated a moment, tapping the blunt end of a fork against her chin as she looked on at Yuri's unconscious form. Every slow breath that made his frame rise and fall just so, and the wrinkles in the jacket as he moved. She looked over at Viktor again, "Well... Here's an idea."

The light in the room dimmed as Minako pulled the curtains aside. She glanced back to find Viktor setting Yuri against the edge of the bed, pulling the sweater over his head to leave just a t-shirt, and the pants off his legs. A quick shuffle, and Yuri was back under the covers, half-asleep already but still trying to focus.

"When will you be back...?" He wondered, looking up as the silver Russian pulled the blankets over and the glasses from his face, "Do you even know?"

"I hope it won't take more than an hour." Viktor explained, sitting on the bedside and putting a hand over his partner's chest through the comforter, "I'll come right back up as soon as we're done."

"You won't tell me exactly what you're going to do though..."

"Minako's going to come with me, so you just rest easy. I just can't tell you what I'm going to do yet because I'm not entirely sure myself. You asked me not to hurt him though, and I can at least promise you that much. I won't lay a hand on him."

"I don't know if I'll be able to sleep, knowing you're about to go confront him..." Yuri sighed, pulling his arms up over the covers, and finding his partner's hand with one of his own, "Are you sure you don't want me to be there?"

"You're the innocent party in all this. You don't deserve to be put in the middle." Viktor answered, curling his fingers around his husband's and patting that hand with the other. He rose up to stand then, and leaned over quickly to give a parting kiss, then reached aside to find Yuri's sleep mask, and slipped it over his spouse's head, "I believe that every word you told me is the truth and nothing else. You can rest now. I'll take care of things from here."

"...I can't believe I'm putting you through all this..." Yuri sighed, thumbing the edge of the black mask to see past it for a few more seconds, "This was supposed to be our fun event."

"We'll make Euros the fun event, and Four Continents. I plan on telling everyone we know that we should make those weekends extra special for you."

Those pale cheeks just reddened at the idea of it, "You're going to tell everyone what kind of muck I stepped in?"

"Not at all. This'll be celebratory. You got your first Olympic jacket and I got to join the JSF to go
with you as a competitor. We have plenty to be happy and excited about anyway, without bringing the rest of it up." Viktor leaned forward again for one more kiss, then fingered the mask down to cover his husband's eyes, "Get some rest, my love. I'll tell you everything that happened when I get back. If you're awake enough, maybe we can even find a video of the Russian Short Program from overnight."

Yuri nodded, and let out something of a sigh, trying to relax, "...Okay..."

"I'll make sure he behaves for you." Minako teased, following the silver coach towards the door, "Gussuri oyasumi." (Sleep tight.)

"...Haaai." He hummed in answer, turning onto his side to get more comfortable, and listening to the footsteps, the door opening, and the click as it closed. He drew a deep, nervous breath, "...Please don't do anything crazy..."

In the hall, Minako quickly took the Russian's free arm and watched as he pulled his phone up to his ear, "Calling already?"

"Mhm." He answered, listening to the dial tone, "No backing out now."

A few tense seconds passed before it became clear that there would be no immediate answer. It wasn't that surprising though. Viktor heard a click and immediately pulled the phone away, tapping his thumb against the Speaker button in case the message that played wasn't in English. The first part was Japanese, as Viktor suspected, but the woman's voice thankfully said the same thing again in words he understood, and he pulled the phone back up to his ear to listen normally. The voicemail message beeped at the end, and he began.

"Yes, hi, this is Viktor Nikiforov, coach for Yuri Nikiforov..." He said matter-of-factly, "I apologize for calling you under these circumstances, but it's come to my attention that there has been some grossly inappropriate behavior coming from your athlete, Asahi Saito, directed towards mine. I'd like to meet with you and discuss this as soon as you're back from the practice session this morning. I'd appreciate a return call on this number to confirm you received this message." He pulled the phone away and ended the call, drawing a quick breath to collect his nerves. Blue eyes turned to the woman standing next to him, "...Ball's in their court. Now it's just a matter of time."
Athletes returned from the arena at just around the time Viktor had expected them to. The trickle of skaters disembarking was tedious though. Given the cyclical nature of the rides, departing and arriving on a schedule rather than when the seats were all occupied, meant that even if a 12-person-capacity van pulled up, it didn't mean 12 people would be getting out. It took an extra 30 minutes, making it nearly 1pm, before a larger chunk of the Men's group really started arriving.

Viktor checked his phone every few seconds for the time, getting impatient. Between clicks, he'd occasionally check back on the text messages he'd gotten in lieu of a phone call.

[Sorry we missed your call, Mr. Nikiforov. What did Asahi do?]

[It's a matter I'd rather discuss in person.]
[I withdrew Yuri from morning practice so there would no risk of further interaction between the two of them. He's already been made rather upset by this whole thing, so the sooner we can come to some resolution, the better.]

[We understand. We will return promptly.]

[Thank you.]

The Russian grumbled a bit as 1:05pm rolled by, Promptly...what a joke.

"Oh, there they are." Minako suddenly said, pointing to one of the shuttles that had just pulled up, "You ready for this?"

"Born ready." He answered, rising up from where he'd been sitting in one of the hotel lobby's many cushy chairs.

"Okay. I'll go get him." She nodded, and started stepping off from the nervous but antsy Russian. She passed by a few other skaters and their own coaches as they all started filtering into the building, and Viktor watched closely from his vantage, looking for any reaction.

Viktor couldn't hear what the ballerina said by that point, as she'd made it all the way outside, but the way Asahi stopped walking forward, even while Webber and Nagisa continued, it was telling enough. He watched as Minako continued her approach, her body-language open and friendly enough, but his eyes then wandered back to the one person whose attention he actually cared about to that point. For the occasion, Viktor had fully reverted back to Coach-mode, donning one of his semi-famed 3-piece suits, a long, dark Kashmir scarf hanging from his shoulders, and a dark grey long-coat over one arm as he carried it. Coach Nagisa spotted him easily enough and started making her way closer, with the team choreographer following close at her heels. She nervously extended a hand when they were within arm's reach.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. There were a number of fans wanting Asahi-san's attention at the arena when we were trying to leave." She tried to explain.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. There were a number of fans wanting Asahi-san's attention at the arena when we were trying to leave." She tried to explain.

Viktor shook her hand once, his expression unchanged, then did the same with Webber, "This shouldn't take long. Please, come this way." He took a step back and gestured to the other side of the lobby, turning on a heel to start walking. He lifted his eyes briefly to catch a glimpse of Minako and Asahi still outside, He hasn't tried to run...maybe she was right.
[So you remember me then?] She asked, still trying to keep a friendly smile on, [It's been ages since I last saw you. You've gotten taller.]

[...You used to be at events with someone...] Asahi answered, giving a skeptical look, only to suddenly realize, and his eyes opened slightly wider, [You were Yuri's fan.]

[Well...I was a little more than that, but...yes... I was part of the Yuri Katsuki Cheering Section.] Minako affirmed, and taking a step closer as she pinched her coat closed just under her chin, [Let's at least go inside.]

[What's going on?] He asked, getting a bit nervous, [You used to actually be around Yuri all the time...if he's not with you now, then-]

[We really should step inside, Asahi.]

The winter chill suddenly felt a lot colder.

A few minutes passed in anxious silence before Minako felt the buzz in her pocket and checked her phone, seeing the message that it was time to bring the skater in. She set a hand on his shoulder and nudged her head aside, signaling for him to follow, and he did, though reluctantly. Asahi's skin was clammy by then, pale and a bit shiny from the nervous sweat that had begun. He had a sneaking suspicion he knew what was going on. By the time Minako had lead him into a small meeting room, he could feel his heart in his throat, and every bit of clothing that touched his body was partly stuck to it.

They rounded a corner to go through a door, and into a room with a few tables lined up in several rows. Halogen lights shone down from above, making the area seem abnormally bright. Asahi caught sight of his team within; they were standing near a table with a few documents spread out across the surface. Minako gestured her hand for him to step closer, and offered to take his gear-bag and set it aside. In his anxiety, Asahi kept it, and stepped by the woman to approach those two more familiar faces. They each looked a bit dour, but neither said anything yet, simply patting a shoulder before retaking the seats they'd been in earlier. They left one between them empty for Asahi to take himself.

Minako stuck her head out the door and glanced down the hall, waving at someone Asahi hadn't seen when they came through. It only took seconds for his worst fears to be realized though, and Viktor Nikiforov entered the small conference room, looking irritated despite his otherwise sharp appearance. Minako followed close behind him, and the duo took seats opposite the three.

There were a few seconds of tense silence between them before Viktor said a single word.

"I'm sure at this point, you know why you're here." The Russian started, staring at the skater in front of him, "But I'd like to give you the opportunity to explain your thoughts on this yourself, before we begin."

Asahi's brow crinkled, but he kept his eyes forward, "This is about yesterday."

Viktor waited in that moment for a few seconds before turning his eyes down to a manila folder, and withdrew a few papers with the JSF logo at the top, "This is a formal complaint that I've filed against you, Asahi Saito." He explained simply, "It documents the time, date, location, and actions committed by both you and Yuri Nikiforov. In no uncertain terms, these papers chronicle an act of sexual assault perpetrated on my athlete."

The skater's eyes twitched, and his heart skipped a beat, but he shook his head, "That's not what
happened."

"Did you force yourself onto Yuri, without his prior knowledge, or consent, and act on him in a manner characterized by any form of sexual conduct?" Viktor asked plainly, eyes firm.

"...I kissed him. I didn't attack him."

Coach and choreographer both seemed to give a quiet sigh of disappointment and worry when they heard the words.

"Did he know you were going to do it?" Viktor went on.

"...No..."

"Without that knowledge, he could not give you informed consent. You then came into physical contact with his person. That's the assault." The Russian said, trying to keep a cool head, "The kiss is what makes this a sexual act. So...sexual assault."

"You make it sound a hundred times worse than it actually is." Asahi insisted, "I didn't hurt him. I never would."

Viktor held there for a moment, drawing a stiff breath, but then grabbed his phone from the inside breast-pocket of his blazer. A few clicks later, and he turned the phone around, showing off a picture of Yuri's left arm, "These marks are from where you grabbed him. They're the same on both sides. You held him hard enough that he couldn't resist and in the end, these bruises are evidence of a crime. I could have called police on you over this."

The skater's eyes narrowed, a drop of nervous sweat rolling down the back of his neck and into his Team Japan jacket, "Then why haven't you?"

"Because Yuri, in all his forgiving and merciful nature, doesn't think you deserve it." Viktor answered, putting his phone back, then lacing his fingers together just in front of his chin, "And I, as his coach and confidant, take his opinion seriously. I won't act in a way that he doesn't consent to."

The words stung, but Asahi wouldn't let himself react. Every fiber of muscle in his arms wanted to reach across the table and smack the silver hair off Viktor's head, but he clenched them down and refused to let them move. He grit his teeth for a moment before speaking again, "Why don't you say what you really mean. This isn't about you and him as coach and student."

Viktor stared, but then closed his eyes briefly as he lowered his gaze, "There are two very distinct possible ways that we can deal with this, Saito. One is the official way, where I, as Yuri's coach, choreographer, and mentor, give an official report to the JSF higher-ups about the crime you committed against my athlete. You can try to explain to them why you think what you did was of little consequence, despite the fact that you left marks on his arms, and have terrorized him so thoroughly that he had a panic attack and passed out while sitting in the audience, watching the rest of the Short Program. He hasn't slept, he's barely eaten, he's inflicted injury onto himself, and quite frankly, he may bomb the Free Program later tonight. I will submit all of these documents, and my photos, and the JSF leadership can decide whether they want you to be able to stay in the competition, or they'll suspend you pending further review."

"And the other?" Asahi asked bitterly.

"You get to deal with me as Yuri's husband, and these papers may not get submitted."

"Well then it's obv-"
"You need to think very carefully about how you want to proceed with this, Saito." Viktor said, his voice raised but not yelling, a finger pointed straight at the skater's face, "Because if you decide to deal with me as a spouse rather than a coach, your official team won't be a part of this."

Coach Nagisa leaned close to whisper into Asahi's ear, [If he submits those papers, the JSF will pull you from the rest of the event, and there's no way you'll make the Olympic team. It'll probably be much worse to deal with Viktor as Yuri's partner though...but you stand a chance of this not becoming an official problem.]

[So you're saying I should take him on a personal level?]

[What you did was terrible. I don't know what you were thinking. But this is the closest thing to mercy that Viktor's going to offer you. If you really want to keep skating, this is your best chance.]

Asahi grumbled under his breath, lowering his head as he brought his arms up to cross on the edge of the table. After a moment of thought, he nodded to himself, "See you guys later, then."

Nagisa and Webber both stood up then and took their leave, and Minako followed them to the door, making sure it shut behind them. She went back to retake her seat at Viktor's side, and broke the ice of the new conversation.

"You've known Yuri for many years." She started, "Almost half of his life. But whether or not you have, or had, feelings for him...doesn't matter anymore, because Yuri is married now. Whether it's to Viktor, or to anyone else...your opinion of that union doesn't make it any less valid. Kissing Yuri yesterday made him feel like he violated the vows he took to keep fidelity and to honor his spouse. It put him into a lot of turmoil and anguish. I would think that, even as just a friend, you wouldn't knowingly want to make him feel that way."

"...Of course not." Asahi answered quietly, keeping his face down, "He said he was strong now. I thought he could handle it."

"It wasn't your place to make him handle anything." Minako explained, "Even if this didn't bother him at all though...Yuri isn't the only person who's been impacted by this. Viktor spent nearly a year trying to capture Yuri's heart. He was the first and only person Yuri ever kissed...that was incredibly important to the both of them...but now, and for the rest of both of their lives, there's going to be the knowledge at the back of both of their minds that Yuri was kissed by someone else."

Viktor chimed in after her, "The way Yuri explained things to me...it didn't seem like you took the idea of our marriage all that seriously." He said, "You scoffed at him for calling me his husband, and ridiculed the very premise that I cared about him in any way whatsoever. I don't know where you get the idea that you can tell Yuri who I am and what I think when you and I have never exchanged words before this weekend."

Nervous to the point of feeling his hands starting to tremble, Asahi pulled his arms off the table and clasped his fingers tightly over his lap. Still, he couldn't help but feel that this would be his only chance to speak his mind, "I have a hard time believing that someone like you would just show up out of absolutely nowhere and agree to be the coach to someone who even I knew had never spoken a word to you in his entire life." He finally said, pausing a moment to see if either of the two would answer, though they seemed to want to let him say the rest and didn't open their mouths. Asahi lifted his head a little, eyes staring at the JSF papers on the tabletop between them, "Why? Why would you do something like that? You accuse me of overstepping because I don't know the first thing about you...well you didn't know the first thing about him, and yet you practically moved into his house without his consent."
Viktor glanced aside to Minako, but he felt it would be better to let her explain it, and gestured a hand forward for her to do so.

"Yuri's family runs a hot-springs resort." She started, "You've known that since forever ago."

"So?"

"People can stay there without giving advanced notice. That's the nature of the business. Viktor could've been there just for the hot-spring." She went on, lacing her fingers together on top of the table, "We learned way later that Yuri did actually invite him there, too. Viktor showed up exactly when he was supposed to, and did exactly what Yuri asked him to do."

Asahi finally lifted his head entirely, and stared at the Russian, "Why would you even give the time of day to someone like Yuri, let alone give up an entire season of your own career to suddenly be his coach?"

"Wouldn't you?" Viktor answered simply.

Asahi blinked in confusion, taken aback by the question, but grit his teeth, "I held back in Juniors for an extra two years for him. I bust my ass to get him a spot in the Tokyo Skate Club with me. Then he left without saying a word to me."

"Maybe he said a lot more than you think, and you just weren't listening." Viktor shrugged, "Not that I have any reason to teach you how to listen to my husband, but he says a lot even when he isn't speaking a single word." He waited a moment to let that statement sink in, seeing that the younger man didn't know how to answer to it anyway.

"If there was ever anything Yuri could tell me about you, Asahi," Minako added, "It's that he never really knew anything about you. He told me he found you strange, because you never talked about anything other than what he already knew about. He left Juniors not even knowing what your favorite color was, and you never asked him about anything that personal either. Do you think you could tell us anything about Yuri that we wouldn't know just from having been around him ourselves?"

"It's not anyone's place to dig into others' lives." He answered grimly, "If someone doesn't volunteer the information, you have no right to ask it."

The ballerina huffed half a laugh and shook her head, nudging the Russian's shoulder with her own, "He's the complete opposite of you. You wanted to know absolutely everything about Yuri. Right from day one."

"That's an assault in itself." Asahi leered, "You have no right."

"Yeah, because asking what kind of rink he skates at and what he likes about the city he lives in is an assault." Viktor shot back, "You really are terribly superficial. It's no wonder Yuri never said a single word about you the entire time I knew him. There's really not that much to say, is there?"

"Having respect for someone's privacy isn't a flaw."

"Showing so little interest in a person's life that they can't even tell if you give a damn is a flaw. You call yourself a friend, and he thinks...or at least thought you were...do you even know what his favorite food is?" The silver coach wondered idly, watching for a moment but seeing the cogs turning without an answer, "Oh come on...his family named the dish after him."

Minako set her hand over the Russian's tense forearm, "In Asahi's defense, Yuri never invited him
back to Hasetsu. I don't think he's ever seen Yu-Topia Katsuki. He'd have no reason to know they named anything after him."

"Still. Yuri goes nuts over that dish." Viktor replied, turning his face to look at her, "The entire 6 months he practiced Eros before Regionals, he was thinking about that thing." He turned his eyes back to Asahi, "Anything? Any idea at all?"

The skater just grimaced.

"It was the thing he rewarded himself with if he won a competition!"

"I don't see why you're making a big deal out of this."

"How can you say you were ever in love with him if you don't even know how much he loves katsudon!?" Viktor was incensed in his disbelief, "If there was ever a check-list on 'things Yuri likes,' katsudon comes even before skating!"

"How should I know that? The only thing he ever talked about other than Yuko was YOU." Asahi pointed across the table, "How much he wanted to skate like you, skate in the same place as you, practice the same programs as you, he even got a dog like yours, and named it after you. Everything with Yuri was VIKTOR VIKTOR VIKTOR." He rose up from his spot, hands on the table even as he loomed overhead.

"Sit. Down." Viktor told him flatly, not moving an inch to 'meet' him at that level.

Asahi growled and sat, crossing his arms tightly over his chest.

"You really resent him for how much he talked about me." The Russian went on, "It must really get under your skin to know that he's married to me now, too."

"Only as far as it worries me." The skater answered curtly, "If he told you even half of what happened yesterday, he must have told you what I really thought about your so-called relationship."

Viktor leered at that, "Oh, you mean about how you demeaned Yuri for being incapable of making good decisions for himself when it came to me because you thought he was too much of a fanboy? Yeah, he told me about that, too."

Asahi rolled his eyes, "Of course you'd repeat it back that way."

"You have a really backwards way of thinking about things." Viktor grumbled, "You consider it a good thing to never ask someone questions outside the scope of things they've brought up themselves. You consider it a violation of privacy. Yuri described you as being super Japanese before, and I get that Japanese people take issue with feeling like they're butting into other peoples' lives...but you take it to such an extreme that it's a wonder you even remember peoples' names."

"You're oversimplifying me."

"You're oversimplifying Yuri." Viktor defended, "You don't like being put into a box of pre-defined characteristics? Maybe you should stop doing it to him first. I don't care what you think of me...but you spent half of your conversation with him yesterday telling him how he should be, as though who he is didn't matter or could be ignored. That's not how the world works. You don't get to define others. It broke my heart when he told me how he explained that you would've kept him in a cage if you'd ever gone out."
Asahi grit his teeth again, looking away bitterly. The echo of Yuri yelling that very thing at him bounced around inside his head.

"You think I changed him so much." Viktor went on, his voice a little calmer then, "All I ever did was believe in him. I helped bring out what was already there inside him, the parts he was too nervous or scared to see himself. That's the difference between you and I...you would've made him stay the way he was...but I set him free."

"You just turned him into a little version of yourself." The younger skater growled, the frustration and anger starting to spill over into sorrow. He kept his head down, bangs covering his eyes, "You didn't just marry him and make him a Nikiforov like you...you killed Yuri Katsuki in the process."

Even Minako raised an eyebrow at that, "The Yuri you knew from Juniors isn't dead. He's grown into a bigger person. The things you knew him for back then...being shy, modest, insecure...those things are still a part of him, but they don't define him anymore. Why you would want him to stay that way doesn't make any sense to me."

"It doesn't matter why." Viktor said, mostly to himself, but turning his eyes towards the trembling figure across the table, "Yuri told you himself what he thought was really going on. You're stuck in the past. You're clinging to an idea that's comfortable because facing the present, facing the truth, is too hard for you." He paused a moment, but then leaned down slightly to see the man's face a little better, "He also told you the best piece of advice that anyone could probable offer you in this situation you find yourself in. You need to face your demons and move on with your life. Avoiding it won't make it go away...and trying to make Yuri feel your same pain won't make yours any easier to bear."

"I never meant to hurt him..." Asahi said, his voice barely above a whisper, his eyes stinging, "...After everything else...I knew I had to let him go... I just wanted to feel like I had some kind of control over that farewell, because I had none over any of the others."

"...Yuri told us what you said about Riku." Minako said quietly, "I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

"Don't patronize me with your false empathy...!" He barked, crossing his arms in front of his head, "None of you gives a damn about me! No one ever has!"

"Yuri still cares enough about you that he's still trying to protect you, even now." Viktor said sharply, "But you're drawing conclusions about unrelated events. Nothing about what happened to Riku gives you any right or justification for what you did to my husband last night. You took that kiss from him without asking first because you knew he would say no. You set aside his feelings in favor of your own selfish need for closure. You didn't just kiss him goodbye," He criticized, "You robbed him of his freedom to choose how to interact with you, and left him in an emotional ruin, as though saying that if you can't be happy, then no one can."

"That's not-"

"But it is." Viktor interrupted, "Look, I get that you've been traumatized by what happened. I empathize with that concept way more than you give me credit for, and while I don't feel like I need to explain myself to you, I know Yuri gave you a few examples of the close-calls we've had in the last year. So before you try and tell me that I don't know how it feels to lose someone I love, I can assure you that I don't need to go that far to know how much it hurts. I've been on that edge. If Yuri died today, I would be dead tomorrow...and that's why what you did pisses me off so much. His despair is my despair. You don't have to acknowledge or deal with the devastation you've caused. But that's not how this is going to end. I'm not just going to let you get in the middle
of my marriage and cause this much pain to my soul-mate without consequences. Yuri is my family...do you understand that?"

"THEN JUST DO IT ALREADY." Asahi yelled, pushing up to stand, "I've already lost everything else...what's figure skating, too!?"

Minako leaned back in surprise at the outburst, but she saw Viktor holding his ground, not giving an inch.

The Russian watched for a moment, steely blue eyes carefully looking as tears splashed down on the varnished table-top. He saw how Asahi nearly tripped over himself as he backed out of the chair he'd risen from, and how the man trembled where he now stood, trying to regain his balance. He drew in a controlled breath, and let it out slowly, then reached forward to gather up all the paperwork he'd spread out earlier. He stacked them all together and tapped the edges on the table to line them up, putting them back into the manila folder they'd originally come from, "This isn't something you get to decide. What happens next isn't up to you." He explained, rising up from his own place, putting the folder under an arm as he folded his long-coat over that elbow, "And it's not up to me, either."

"...What are you saying...?"

Minako stood up as well, following after Viktor as he started making his way around the long table and over towards the door. She paused with a hand on the doorknob, looking back when the man paused in his footsteps.

Viktor glanced back one more time, "You took control from Yuri when you forced yourself onto him. I'm giving him control back. He's the one who's going to decide what happens to these papers."

"...So then this whole interaction was for nothing. All this back-and-forth between us, and it's not even you who's going to make that final call. What was it all for, then?"

"To make you understand why it's Yuri's choice." The Russian answered simply, "And to educate you on the fact that his problems are my problems. You already have enough troubles to work through...so you're not going to be my problem again, are you." He said firmly, more as a statement of fact than an open-ended question.

Asahi hesitated, lifting his eyes for a moment to look the silver legend over, but then shook his head. He then saw the shadows of the duo starting to move out of the corner of his eyes again, "...When will I know?"

Viktor paused in the doorway, holding the panel open for just a few seconds longer, and glanced back over a shoulder, "When the JSF leadership calls you. Or they don't."

Cool brown eyes, reddened by the stress of the meeting, darkened by worry, watched as Viktor and Minako took their leave. The door clicked as it shut again, and Asahi was left in an uncomfortable silence. The heart-pounding anxiety of not-knowing what would happen was starting to sink in.

*Six hours to the Free Program...*
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED SIXTY ONE

Viktor and Minako passed the absent members of Team Nagisa as they went back out into the hotel lobby. No words needed to be exchanged for them to know the meeting was finished, and the duo went by, wondering as to the condition of their athlete.

Viktor watched them go before turning back to the woman who'd been his partner in the mediation, "Thanks for your help. I don't know that I would've been able to get the same results without you."

"Is this what you wanted to get out of it though?" She wondered, though still feeling quite tickled at his gratitude.

"I got to confront the guy who went after my Yuri...said guy got to walk away without a black eye, and maybe some better insight into his flaws...and Yuri gets back a feeling of control. To me, those are all wins." He answered, then pulling the folder out from under his arms, "I should get this to Yuri though. Even I may need a nap when I get up there."

Minako smiled at that, and reached a hand forward to pat the side of the man's arm, "You've been a good and responsible grown-up today."

"Adulting is hard." He sighed and slouched.

"Not everyone's cut-out for it. You have your moments though."

"Hmm..." He nodded in tired agreement, but then leaned down to give her a parting hug, "It helps to have good examples floating around here and there." There was a kiss on the cheek from each of them as they pulled back again, "Thanks again."

"Anytime. Go on and get some rest. I'll see you boys at the Free Program."

"We should get dinner beforehand!" Viktor suggested, "I'll make sure Yuri's gotten some actual sleep first, too!"

"I'll hold you to it!" She waved, pushing out through the doors again and into the winter for her short walk back to the hotel next door.

The silver legend watched her go for a few moments longer, seeing her pass by on the other side of the lobby's tall glass walls, but eventually turned on a heel and went for the elevators, making his way back up to their floor, and the quiet of the room that awaited him there.

What a huge relief to finally have this done... I'm sure Yuri will feel better to know it's over, too.

The walk down the final hall as the elevator let him off was almost serene compared to the morning and previous night, and he slid his key-card into the door lock, hearing it buzz and click as it opened.

What he found within was hardly a surprise.

Viktor stepped within the dimly-lit space and shut the door, turning the deadbolt and setting the sliding-chain lock before slipping his shoes off. His long-coat was hung back up in the closet, and he unbuttoned the front of his blazer as he went to sit at the edge of the bed, right next to the waiting form of his supposed-to-be-sleeping husband. He set the folder down right next to his leg.
"You sure look awake for someone who should be unconscious right now." He commented, only to lean back and look over his shoulder at the man.

Yuri had pulled the blanket over his head and replaced the sleep-mask with his glasses, but otherwise, nothing much in the room had changed. He gave a nervous nod, "...How am I supposed to sleep, knowing what you're up to?"

"I guess I understand." Viktor mused, shrugging out of the blazer and setting it flat on the bed next to himself, and pulled up the manila folder again with that same hand, "Here you go."

Yuri took it, letting the blanket slide off of his frame a little. He looked at it for a moment, leafing through the 10 or so pages it contained, and skimming over the hand-written explanation of what had happened, "How'd he take it?"

"There was a bit of kick-back and a few tears, but...maybe somewhere inside that chicken-butt, there's a brain that'll process what was said, and maybe it'll humble him a little. I'm not letting him anywhere near you for at least the rest of the night though, at very least." Viktor explained, leaning down until he was on his back next to his partner, and could wrap one arm around his spouse's lower back, "But I guess that depends on what you do. Have you made up your mind?"

Hesitating a moment, Yuri then nodded, and came fully out from under the blanket. Wearing not but the t-shirt and shorts he'd been left in an hour earlier, he walked over towards the bathroom. Viktor rolled up to his feet to follow after, and leaned against the door to watch. Yuri stood in front of the sink, perfectly still for a few seconds, and then withdrew the papers from the folder. The water was turned on, and a moment later, he held the loose-leaf sheets under the wet stream, soaking the pages until the ink started to smear a little. Once they were soaked through, he gently ripped them into ribbons, then into even smaller pieces, and finally squashed them into a damp ball in his hands before finally casting the wad into the waste bin. He reached for a fresh towel and dried his hands, hanging it back up again before raising his tired eyes to the man who'd given him the chance to make that choice himself.

"I don't know how or why it...feels like this..." Yuri started, "The way you started this whole thing with the ritual cleansing last night, and then this meeting you just came back from...letting me decide what happens in the end, even though you could probably guess what I'd do before you even left."

"It was always going to be your choice in the end, whether or not I could guess what you would do." Viktor answered quietly, thumbs hooked into the edges of his pants pockets where he still leaned on the doorframe, "And though I'm sure Saito can guess what you'll do, too, I hope he learned a little something from the ordeal anyway. I didn't tell him until Minako and I were leaving the room that it was up to you."

"Yeah..."

Blue eyes watched for a moment, but Viktor could feel that subtle exhaustion starting to creep in, and he yawned behind a wrist as he leaned out of the doorway, "...Ahhh...I promised Minako I'd make sure you slept before tonight. I think I need to as well..."

He barely had a chance to open his eyes again after the yawn before he felt hands sliding around his sides, but when he could see again, he spotted the fluff of black hair just in front of himself. He managed a tired smile and returned the hug over his partner's shoulders, stroking one hand through that soft hair as he pressed one cheek to the man's forehead.

"Thank you for trusting me enough to let me do this my way," Viktor commented quietly, finding himself starting a slow sway, back and forth, soothing to the both of them by then, "I know you were
worried I'd just reach across the table and smack him."

"I was less worried when Minako-sensei said she wanted to go." Yuri answered.

"Did you never tell him about how much you like katsudon?" The Russian wondered then, pulling back slightly to see his partner's face, "I thought I was throwing him a softball with that question...but he couldn't tell me."

"...Wow...really?" The younger figure was stunned, "...I'm sure I mentioned it..."

"I guess it doesn't matter." Viktor shrugged, and started shuffling them closer to the edge of the bed, one slow step at a time, "The way he tells it, he barely has a paper-thin understanding of any of the people around him at any given time. He'll never be able to have any kind of deep or meaningful connection to anyone until or unless he starts to listen more. Seeing people only as a construct of personality traits, rather than the stories they come with, will keep him at a distance to basically everyone."

"...That's really sad..."

"...Makes me wonder though..." Viktor commented, feeling the edge of the bed against the back of his legs as he looked up at the ceiling in thought, "...How he could've ever thought you and him were compatible, when he couldn't really tell me even one thing he knew about you. I know that you were pretty closed off before, and I heard all the stories from the folks in Detroit who said they had a hard time getting to know you because of it, too. Was it really that different for you that it was me in the end?"

"I don't follow..."

The Russian made a face, but then sat back against the bed, scooting back a little bit before waiting to watch his partner hop on as well and lie down next to him. He turned onto his side to face the man, holding his head up on one bent arm, palm against his cheek, the other hand reaching across the gap between them to cup it over Yuri's waist, "It only took a couple of weeks for you to get comfortable enough around me to open up a little bit. That day we went to the beach, and you told me about how others used to make you feel like they were intruding... Did you eventually let me in because I did something so much different than the rest of them, or is it just...because it was me?"

Yuri hesitated a moment, thinking back on those early days. He rolled onto his back then, and stared at the ceiling, feeling his partner's hand slide around from his waist to his stomach as he moved, and the fingers as they splayed out a bit and relaxed again. He closed his eyes for a moment, but then turned his head towards the silver legend and opened them again, "...I think you probably started at a disadvantage, actually..."

"...Really?" Viktor wondered, wiggling in a bit closer to close the gap a little again.

"Mh..." Yuri nodded, "I remember feeling a little jealous of Yurio when he first showed up, and how much more relaxed he was around you compared to me. I told you at the beach that I avoided you because I didn't want you to see my flaws, and that carried on for a while even after you came to Hasetsu. I didn't want to make you think less of me by saying something stupid...and it took a really long time for me to realize and accept why you were even around in the first place. Even not knowing about how you really felt back then, and not remembering the Sochi Banquet...there was some part of me that eventually accepted that you really wanted to be there, for whatever reason you had."

"I still think it's funny that we went all those months without knowing you'd forgotten asking me to
come in the first place." The Russian mused, half-lidding his eyes as he looked on at his partner adoringly. His fingers started teasing the bottom edge of his husband's t-shirt, gliding gently over covered skin, "Back when you were still half-way avoiding me, I had come so close to asking, 'What was the point of inviting me here if you're just going to blow me off all the time?' I wonder how differently things would've gone if we'd cleared up the Sochi incident early on."

"...Who knows?" Yuri wondered, "I like how it turned out anyway though."

"Mmmh...me too." Viktor agreed, hand sliding fully under the t-shirt and around the younger man's side as he tilted his own frame slightly against his, lightly finding a kiss between them. He felt both of Yuri's hands come up between them before settling a palm against each side of his face, a thumb stroking there once before they parted again, nosing one another fondly, "Does it ever bother you...?"

"...Eh?"

"That I'm a guy." He clarified, even as he teased the tip of his nose against his husband's lips, "Or does it matter at all?"

"You don't remember the horrified look on my face when Mila and Sara got on either side of me in the hot-tub at Worlds?" Yuri huffed.

"Oh~!" Viktor laughed, thinking back on that moment, "You retreated from them and backed up into me so fast..."

"I think...it was weird at first." Yuri went on, pulling his hands back down again and brushing a few fingers against the inner edge of his partner's vest, finding where the two panels came closer in the center and buttoned together, "But it was less about you being a guy than it was about you just...being you. Though I guess, things being as they are, it might've taken me longer to clue in because you're a guy...I wouldn't have imagined you having those kinds of feelings for me, so I didn't expect them to be there."

"...That's what I figured." The silver genius nodded, finding another light kiss, and slid his hand a little further up along his partner's side, feeling at the ridges of each rib as he moved it slowly higher, "I suppose maybe I suffered the same confusion, just the other way around. I wasn't really sure how to seduce a man. I spent a long time worrying you'd be repulsed and horrified if you knew how I felt, so I erred on the side of caution...getting as close as I could as a friend and mentor, testing the limits of what advances you might accept from me, little by little..."

"When did you realize I wouldn't be?"

"Repulsed and horrified?" Viktor echoed, "Oh, that would've been when I took you down to the parking garage before your China Free Skate last year. When I asked if I should kiss you to make you feel better, and you yelled no...but not because you were grossed out... You shrugged it off like I imagine you would've if I'd suggested it even as we are now. Sometimes a kiss just isn't what you need. I learned that the hard way before your China Short Program this season, because that's exactly what I tried to do to stave off your looming panic attack. Remember all the good it did?"

Yuri winced a little, but managed a wry laugh, reaching one hand down to rub the outside of his hip, "I can still sometimes feel the bruise where I hit the wall..."

"Without some kind of emotional backbone, the physical side doesn't mean anything. I'm sorry it's taken me so long to learn how to help you."
"You've helped me in other ways," Yuri explained, pulling his hand back to the upper edge of the vest, letting his fingers slowly pull the button through the hole it had been laced through, "In a big way, you've helped me become so much more self-assured that I don't have panic attacks nearly as often in the first place. I don't feel like 'anxious' is my default setting anymore. It's just something that creeps up sometimes."

"Hmm..." Viktor purred, nosing at his partner's ear a little bit, feeling as each button was slowly slipped through and the garment came loose between them, "You've become so much more comfortable in your own skin in the last few weeks. All the better for me, since I've come so unglued in my own right..."

"With all the things you've had to deal with in such a short period of time, I'm surprised you held on as long as you did, especially at the end." Yuri pointed out, sliding his left hand under the edge of the vest, feeling at his partner's chest through the thin fabric of the white button-down shirt he still wore, "I pointed that out yesterday, too... If our roles had been reversed, and it was you who'd gotten hurt instead of me...I don't know that I would've been strong enough to help."

"You don't give yourself enough credit." Viktor huffed, rolling away a little and onto his back, though he kept his face turned towards his spouse, enjoying the feel of that palm against him even through the shirt, "You may have handled it even better than I did."

"...I'm not so sure..." Yuri sighed, letting his fingers sneak between the layers, fingertips finding skin even as the buttons held him back, "Maybe I'll get there one day. For now...I still kind of feel like I can only manage it as long as I know I have you backing me up. If it had been your head bouncing off the ice, I think I would've entirely fallen apart."

"Then let's not tempt it." The Russian suggested, feeling that one button coming loose, and Yuri's hand venturing all the way inside, fingers feeling lightly over his ribs, and the ridge of every muscle, "No more injuries, no more attacks, no more invasions of space from people we don't want it from... Just you and me, doing what we love, showing the entire world why we're the best."

"You don't think I'll mess up tonight?" The younger figure wondered dubiously, pulling his hand back again, toying with the one freed button with a fingertip.

"I don't think you have any reason to mess up tonight. Not anymore." Viktor answered simply, shrugging a little bit. He tightened his core and rolled upward to sit, twisting his arms to pull the vest off of himself, and brought his hands back around the front to finish undoing the rest of the shirt. As he pulled the sleeves off of himself and turned back around, he spotted his husband there reaching his own arms up above his head where he was in the middle of sliding the t-shirt off. Viktor cast his button-down aside and slipped in over his partner's bare chest while those arms were still up, the collar of the dark-colored garment still covering the younger man's eyes. Lips went to skin, and Yuri went limp with a slight gasp, legs jerking up a little from the surprise, but then relaxed again.

Yuri let his arms drop down to the blankets, in spite of the shirt still being partially on. There was something uniquely sensual about feeling his husband's teasing kisses without being able to see him giving them, and he relaxed into the sensation, leaving the collar of his shirt wrapped around his head, covering his eyes. Warmth trailed slowly from the middle of his chest, over to the side, kissing each ridge of lean muscle attached to his skinny frame, moving down towards his stomach. He half-giggled at the tickle of feeling the Russian's tongue dip into his naval, then continue straight up his center, almost to his chest again. He could feel his heart-rate starting to rise inside himself, as though the organ was quivering directly under his skin. Kisses continued working their way up the front of his body, then skipped a few inches. A few soft fingers pressed gently to the side of his jaw, and he felt the tease of the Russian's silver hair against his skin, a few warm breaths on his face, before the
kiss that came against his mouth. He hissed in a breath, the heat of his husband's lips on his own, fingers trailing down his neck and over his chest again until that whole hand cupped around his waist, pulling him closer. It was almost instinct for him to raise his leg over the one his partner started to slide between both of his own, and he felt a strange, relieved feeling take over him when he felt their exposed skin press together between them.

_We haven't done this since we came back from the onsen on Thursday night...and it's Saturday afternoon, now..._ Yuri thought, the hand around his side sliding a bit further behind him, cradling his lower back and pulling his front flush with his partner's, that thigh between his legs sliding up a little and then down again in a rhythmic, slow movement, _I feel a little bad now...I didn't want him to take his hands off me for even one second when we were still at the arena yesterday, but then as soon as we got back, I barely wanted him to touch me at all... He's worked so hard to make me feel secure again after what happened._

He could feel the stiffness of arousal starting to rub against him with each upward slide of that leg, held back by far too much clothing. But, with his arms still pinned above his head by his own clothing, it was impossible to get his hands back so he could work on freeing it. It almost seemed like Viktor could read his mind in that moment though, because he felt the hand leave his waist, gliding up the side of his chest and further over the lower part of his arm, pushing the garment around the curve of his elbow enough that it freed the rest of that limb. When his hand slipped out of the loop of fabric, he reached it over the top of his head to hold the t-shirt in place so he could pull his other arm free, even as those light, teasing kisses continued. A few on his lips, a few on his chin, the tip of his nose, the side of his jaw, moving down to nibble on the side of his neck, too. The Russian's hand went back to his waist though once it had finished helping to free his own hand, and Yuri brought both of his down between them, sliding his palms over every inch of skin as they passed on their way. They found the edge of those slacks, and the flat hook-like clasp that stood in place of a button, then the zipper beyond it. He could feel the nudge of urgency in the way his partner subtly bucked his hips then, but the tease would have to go on for a little while longer.

Viktor enjoyed it regardless, rubbing against his husband's thigh, feeling the younger man's excitement grow as well. Yuri only had those figure-hugging shorts on though, so it would be a moment before the tally of their attire would be more equal. He felt fingers tease the inside edge of his waistband, dipping a bit further in as they went around his back, but with his left side still pinned to the blankets, the other hand was trapped in front. To remedy that tragedy, Viktor twisted upward a little, and laid himself down on top of his partner, giving that other arm the freedom to move wherever it wanted...and it did almost immediately. Joining the first in the finger-tip-tease just under the waistband, Yuri's right hand traveled the curve of his frame, bringing thumbs together at the base of his lower back. They slid back around the other way, thumbs edging over the crest of his hipbones before sliding further within the fabric as they went up again. Viktor pulled up from the kiss he'd been teasing against his husband's lips when the felt both of those hands grabbing a handful of his rump, "...You should do that more often." He mused, smirking despite knowing Yuri couldn't see it.

"...It occurred to me that I should." The younger figure answered, cheeks flushed behind that dark fabric, "I've been allowed to for over a year now, and I think I can count on one hand the number of times I actually have..."

"That's a tragedy in itself."

"Considering the number of people who wish they could do what I'm doing right now?" Yuri wondered, giving his husband's backside a good but gentle squeeze, "It's more than a tragedy...it should be considered a crime..."
"Does that mean you're going to grab my butt more often?" Viktor laughed, hopeful though.

Yuri pulled his hands back some, feeling at the skin of his partner's lower back again, but then snuck his fingers under the black elastic band that had gotten in his way before, and replaced his palms against each cheek, skin to skin. He couldn't help but huff a quiet laugh to himself when he felt the sudden and, perhaps deliberate, push against his hips when he squeezed a second time, "...Reminds me of our first time."

"You'll have to slide your fingers further down for that, my love."

"Oh, you mean like this?" Yuri wondered deviously, slipping his right hand forward and his fingers down between his husbands parted legs, finding that button of flat skin Viktor had once pressed on that made him slide forward so far in the past. Viktor just hissed a breath in and pushed his hips even harder then, forcing Yuri to gasp a breath of his own.

"Mmmhh...yes, just like that..." Viktor purred, finding a few more kisses as he felt those fingers rolling that pressure against him, nudging at that sensitive walnut-sized organ within him. After a few presses, the Russian dipped his head to the side of his partner's neck, lips latching onto the edge of a shoulder. It occurred to him then that he wasn't using his own hands for much of anything at that point, and he brought the right down to remedy that, nudging his partner's left out of the way, and unfortunately out of his pants, to make room. That hand moved between them though, and quickly pushed away the last vestiges of fabric that kept them apart, withdrawing them both and circling his fingers around them to keep them together. He pulled up from his partner's neck then and looked down on the man's face, seeing the rose tint in those cheeks even under the edge of the t-shirt where it still covered those brown eyes. He gave another kiss just as he rocked his hips forward, forcing his member to slide against the other, and being rewarded for it with a whined breath. He let himself find a rhythm with that motion, rolling forward and back, feeling his husband fingers still pushing that sensitive spot between his legs, and purred the words against those soft lips, "...We should wear each other out...so we can both sleep..."

"...Absolutely..."
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED SIXTY TWO

The quiet whispers of heavy breaths sounded in tandem to the rustle of sheets. Though there was a slight underlying impatience on the silver Russian's part, he still forced himself to go slowly, easing his partner into their usual throes with a gentler touch. Each kiss lingered, light as dust, and hands caressed around every curve, fingers finding their way into secret places with subtlety, as though doing it all again for the first time.

Yuri wasn't quite so shy and reserved as back then, but there was a way in which he relaxed under his spouse's larger frame that yielded control, content to just watch, and enjoy the simple pleasures of being touched by someone he trusted; the only person he ever really let touch him. It made him slightly more aware of the blemishes on his upper arms, but he closed his eyes and pulled his hands free from his partner's clothes, raising them up above his head to lay them down in the blankets so he couldn't see the marks. That just opened him up to those slate eyes though, and his pale frame was a sight to behold in them. Yuri raised one leg up against the side of his spouse's thigh, the inside of his knee brushing past the wrinkled edge of those loosened slacks.

Viktor slowed down a moment to look, and slid his right hand up the front of that bare form, pausing deliberately over one pink nub as it trailed back down to the inward curve of his husband's waist. He leaned forward, pivoting on the elbow he'd pressed into the sheets, sliding skin against skin until he found his way back to those lips. He noticed then that his partner's eyes were closed, "You planning on just enjoying the ride this time?" He wondered, teasing the tip of his nose to the one just before him.

"Would you mind...?"

The Russian tapped his fingers against Yuri's collar-bone, and tousled his bangs a bit as he huffed a laugh quietly, "Would I mind getting to do whatever I want to my husband?"

Hazel eyes peeked open again, and Yuri tilted his head forward for a moment, bringing his right hand down to cup his palm around the side of his partner's cheek and ear. Viktor turned his face into it, kissing the palm as he held there, but he half-opened his eyes again and looked back to his love's.

"...Take me..."

Viktor didn't even flinch, though after a moment, he did smile, and leaned down to kiss the tip of his husband's nose as Yuri let his head back down to the blanket under himself. He heard the soft exhale of a long breath as the younger man tried to relax. He took a few seconds to just watch him, seeing each slow breath that made that pale chest rise and fall, they very slight breeze of air in the room that made singular, long black hairs sway, and the gentle play of light and shadow on skin. Viktor slid his hand down from where it had been perched under his partner's neck, the whole of his palm and fingers pressing softly as it moved down around the curve of the man's chest and side, cupping there before pulling up to twist Yuri onto his side. Arms came down over his shoulders as Yuri came closer, hugging around the back of his head and neck, cherry-hazel eyes watching him closely. Both of their barely-open eyes locked into one another as the Russian nosed at the younger man's lips, right hand sliding further down Yuri's side as the left went under the other side to hold him close. As fingers trailed over a hip, past the brief slip of black elastic fabric that still clung to that thin frame, he curved his fingers further around the back of a thigh and pulled that whole leg over his own. He found one more kiss between them before he rolled Yuri down to his back again and moved his
attention to the side of the man's neck instead.

Yuri held firmly, one hand combing fingers through silver hair as he felt the nibbles and kisses trailing down to the edge of his shoulder, the weight of his partner pressing in over him. The hand he'd felt pulling his leg up slid back the way it had come, but stopped half-way, curving down behind his legs and between them, feeling at the skin of the inside of one thigh. Fingers pressed and rubbed a little before coming away again, past the curve of his hip and then under the edge of the elastic. The whole hand went under it, pushing the fabric away as it groped a handful of his skin, making his whole frame tense briefly as he gasped a surprised breath. What little of where Viktor had previously withdrawn them, and was still uncovered by fabric after moving so much, was pressed tightly between them.

The Russian gave one more kiss to that favorite spot of his under his husband's ear before he pushed up to sit on his knees, and migrated down to crouch by his partner's legs. Fingers curled under the edge of that one piece of black clothing, and slid it upward as the man's legs went straight up in front of him, cast it aside and pulled only one of those pale limbs around himself. The other, he perched against one shoulder, kissing lightly at the inside of an ankle, moving down to the calf and knee before finally letting it go to take its place around his other side. Both hands went to the younger man's waist, thumbs rubbing around the front crest of each hip-bone before Viktor leaned down, kissing just under his partner's sternum and nibbling his way slowly upward. He slid his left hand under his spouse's back as he twisted slightly that way, the right sliding up and down a bare thigh again before coming to rest flat against that taut abdomen. He gave a gently buck forward with his hips as he pressed the flat of his hand against the eager flesh lying prone and ready. The gasp and quiet whine with the exhale made him smirk a little, and he raised his eyes to look at his partner's face, fingers encircling around the man's arousal. He slid his grasp forward, cupping around the tip and giving a gentle squeeze, and he felt both those legs press inward against his sides as a reward.

Each slow stroke, with the slight twist, squeeze, release, and return, made legs clench slightly harder. Breaths became more vocal, and Yuri turned his head against the blankets, crossing his ankles behind his husband's back as the speed picked up. It was easy to tell that his body was starting to make some of its own lube again when the sliding sound of dry skin started to sound wet instead, and that grip around him was able to squeeze tighter. He pulled himself up then, arms scrambling to get over the Russian's shoulders and cling tightly, brow pressed to the crook of the silver legend's neck. Every breath was getting louder and more desperate, and hands that were clenched into fists splayed out, fingers clamping down on pale skin behind the man's shoulder-blades. When fingernails started to drag, Viktor eased off, and Yuri collapsed into a heap, trying to catch his breath. Viktor leaned in and gave a quick kiss as he huffed a laugh, "Almost let you go early there."

"...You're...such a tease..."

"Spasibo. So are you."

Yuri cracked an eye open to see at that amused look on his partner's face, and shook his head, "You...gonna join me...or what?" He puffed between breaths, hands sliding from the man's neck to shoulders and chest, giving an inviting look of his own.

"How can I say no to that face?" The Russian mused, leaning up and away as he slid off the edge of the bed, kicking the remains of his clothes off before returning to where he was, sliding in low to find a kiss as arms came up over his shoulders and legs curled around his waist again. He wedged both of his forearms under the small of his partner's back, arching the younger man's hips forward, and pressed in close. He could feel more of that clear liquid that had dripped from the tip of his partner's member, and brought one hand back only long enough to share the wealth, making his own skin
shine from the slickness of it. He pressed himself in hard after that, sliding the length of himself up against his spouse's, then down again, and hugged that lithe frame closer to his front as his arm found its way around the man's back again to pull him in tighter. The more they rocked against one another, the more intense the feeling became, and Viktor unconsciously started lifting his partner up, left hand pressed to the man's upper back to support his weight. He only became aware that they were both nearly upright when one arm came down off his shoulder and clasped between them to replace the friction where it had lessened from their posture. It was him then that was pressing his brow to the crook of a neck and shoulder, relishing in the feeling of his partner's fingers holding them together, sliding up and down with an experienced touch.

Yuri could feel himself edging closer to the end, and released himself from his grasp to stave it off a while longer, focusing all of his attention on his partner instead. He pressed his brow forward, looking directly into those half-lidded blue eyes, black and silver strands of hair weaving into one another as his hand continued at its task, rising up that length of tender flesh, twisting and squeezing, then sliding down again. As each stroke brought the Russian further to attention, Yuri could feel the phantom of it from experiences past, pressing into him, filling him with its heat and pressure. He could hardly stand it anymore, and despite his earlier whispers, uncrossed his ankles and turned his legs around to sit up on his knees instead. He felt soft hands slide down his back to perch on his waist, and he rose above the man's lap, twisting around only enough to pull the member under himself. He teased the edge of a kiss as he nuzzled the Russian's lips, the palm of his hand sliding gently against the member where it was pressed up against him, each slide pushing it closer to its target. Slick from his own fluids, Yuri maneuvered the head to press against that last spot, and then slowly sat against it, feeling a breath sucked in, and every muscle that tensed in his partner's core as another inch went inside. He rose and descended a few times, going slowly, drawing that flesh further into himself on each pass, until he'd reached the limits allowed by the angle of their positions. Still, it was enough to satisfy his urge, and he let himself relax against it. Both arms settled over his husband's shoulders, foreheads pressed together as the gentle rise and fall began between them.

"Wouldn't this count as you taking yourself?" Viktor wondered, half-seriously, holding his partner steady with each hand staying on the man's waist.

"...I couldn't wait anymore...I need...to feel you..."

"Allow me then." He offered, looking up into those hazel eyes before slowly starting to lean his lover down again, feeling those knees rise up against his sides again as he laid down flat into the blankets like before. Viktor slid his hands over his husband's chest, bringing them both down to just over the man's stomach before sliding them back up again as he leaned overhead. Palms lifted off, but fingers continued moving up, brushing against the inside of each arm, around the curve of each elbow, bringing Yuri's hands down to just above his head, weaving their fingers together there...and pushing in those last few inches, pressing his hips flush against his partner's skin.

"...Nhh...yes...just like that..."

Viktor gave a wry smile, kissing the edge of his husband's chin before moving up to the man's lips. As he slid back a bit below, he teased the tip of his tongue against his partner's mouth, and slipped both inside. He kissed deeply, pushing his hips forward hard, withdrew slightly, and finally settled into the beginnings of a rhythm. The feeling of those legs around him, hooking behind his back to hold him close, only egged him on. Fingers gripped tighter around his hands as the rhythm picked up, the rolling of hips progressing to thrusts. Viktor offered one more kiss before pulling his hands back, planting them into the blankets on either side of his partner's waist, the speed of his pace picking up even more then. He dipped his head and closed his eyes as he focused, feeling the tight grip of his husband's fingers around his forearms as Yuri held on, his thin frame jerking up against the sheets with each push.
The silver legend worked up something of a sweat from his efforts, but after a while, withdrew completely. He reached suddenly for a pillow nearby, and rose up onto his knees to give his husband room to turn over.

Yuri seemed to understand, putting the pillow under his stomach as he laid on top of it and stretched out. He glanced back over one shoulder as his spouse loomed over his back, forcing him to gasp aloud and go limp as he felt the member get inside him again, legs and hips pressing flush against him as the man came down over his back. Hands and then arms went under his chest, crossing and coming out to grip at the front of his shoulders. He felt the nuzzle against one cheek as Viktor settled over one side, kissing his ear before starting to rock those hips again. Though Yuri had stretched his arms out straight in front of himself when he laid down, he had to fold them in again as the pressure built inside him, gripping at his husband's fingers as each breath became more of a whimper, then a moan, then a louder cry. He bucked his hips up only a few thrusts before he felt his whole body tense up, heat and electricity shooting out from center to the tips of every finger and toe. He cried out before his clamped-up frame finally gave out, though he held on for the half-minute-more before he felt his husband's release as well. He felt the sudden sharp pain of a bite on the back of his shoulder before the Russian's larger frame collapsed against him, breaths panted heavily against his tacky skin as each of them trembled.

Viktor slowly but surely rolled off his husband's back, though he was sure to keep hold of the man's waist, pulling him aside as he went, careful not to withdraw yet. Both arms curled around the man's chest to keep him close, and he bent his frame to spoon against Yuri's back and legs. He felt the younger man's hand slide up against his hip, reaching to give that cheek a happy squeeze before going back to clasp lightly to his forearms. It was weird, but equal parts endearing to hear Yuri manage a quiet laugh despite himself.

"...Is it weird...that I feel so much better now...?"

"I'd hoped you would." Viktor managed, still trying to catch his breath a little, "Mission accomplished...?"

"...I guess...we'll see...if I nap, and how I skate later..."

"You'll do both perfectly."

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The awkward and tense silence of the elevator ride back up to the hotel room was felt by those who didn't even know a meeting had taken place. People practically fled from the small room, and the ominous dark cloud that spiraled over the oldest of the native-Japanese Men's Singles skaters. Asahi roughly pulled his gear bag up over a shoulder to disembark, and walked quickly in his own right to the door that lead to his room, coach and choreographer hot on his heels.

The door-lock clicked and buzzed as the key-card slid in, and the skater pushed his way in without care to whether anyone followed or not. When the door didn't close behind him right away, he knew they'd both come in, and he threw his bag to the floor near the edge of his bed.

"Asahi-san-"

"Don't even bother." He snapped, sitting harshly on the edge of the mattress, elbows on his knees as
he leaned forward, burying his face against his hands, "We should probably just go."

"What in the actual Hell is going on?" Webber asked, irritated and confused, "Asahi!"

Sayoko went down on one knee before the younger man, trying to find his eyes, speaking low, "Whatever happened, it's okay to tell us..."

"Apparently what I did went across really badly and now I'm probably going to lose my spot in the Free Program." He answered bitterly, refusing to look at the woman, "So what's the point of saying anything!?"

"You said you kissed Yuri." She echoed, "And Viktor ca-"

"He called it assault." Asahi said between grit teeth, "I didn't mean to hurt Yuri...! I just... I can't..."

"Where is all of this coming from? This is so unlike you..."

The tears he'd held back since the start of the meeting were starting to come loose from his eyes, dripping around his fingers and down his wrists, some falling to the floor between his shoes, "...I didn't want anyone to know... I tried so hard, for so long, to keep it all to myself, because I didn't want anyone to think less of me... And now everything's out, and it's going to ruin me..."

"Which part?" Webber grumbled, crossing his arms and looking on disapprovingly, "The part about you being gay or the part about you forcing yourself on a married guy?"

"KYLE." Coach Nagisa barked, whipping her head around to leer at him.

"I don't care how he gets his rocks off! I care that he might've shot himself in the foot by getting on Viktor fucking Nikiforov's bad side!" He argued, gesturing a hand towards their athlete, "We spent a year and a half on these programs! We were this close to going to PyeongChang and now we're probably not even going to Four Continents!"

"You think I'm not aware of that!?" Asahi shot back, lifting his head finally, eyes bloodshot, "I know that what I did was idiotic! I wasn't thinking at the time though! It was just...adrenaline, I don't know..." He went back to hiding his face in his hands, "...I thought I'd never speak to him again..."

"So what, you were kissing him goodbye or something?"

"...Yeah..."

Webber threw his arms up and turned around, "Unbelievable."

Sayoko sighed quietly, but then rose back up again and took a seat next to the skater on the edge of the bed, patting his back gently, "Asahi-san... Just...tell us what happened. Please."

He snuffled and tried to rub all the seeping fluids from his face, tears and snot alike, but it didn't seem to help, "...I had gone to change... Just as I was about to pack up and come back, Yuri ducked into the changing room on a phone-call. I tried to get out and avoid him but he wouldn't let me leave..."

He explained, tears running down his cheeks like rain, "I told him to get out of the way because I didn't want trouble, but he wouldn't budge... He said that it must be divine intervention or something that we keep running into each other despite my efforts to avoid him...and that we should just get it over with... Then he blurted out that apparently Viktor saw straight into me within seconds of me first meeting them on Thursday..."
"That you're in love with Yuri?" Sayoko prompted.

"...Used to be..." He tried to clarify, "Viktor saw into me, but Yuri saw straight through me... He... I had to...tell him about Riku..."

"What's Riku got to do with this?" Webber wondered callously.

Sayoko just gave him another dirty look, and he shook his head, sighing in exasperation.

"...He...was..." Asahi tried, feeling the tightness in his chest all over again, "...We were...secretly going out..." He finally admitted, trying to rub his eyes again on one wrist, "He knew what I was...how I felt... He saw that I was struggling, and how I couldn't get away from the past... He wanted to help me get over Yuri so I could live"

The older woman brought her free hand up to cover her mouth, but said nothing despite the surprise of the revelation.

"...He...he worked so hard..." Asahi continued, barely able to speak through his ragged breaths, "...It took so l-long...to be okay with wh-what we had... We w-were going to tell e-everyone...when we got to K-Kyoto...but we...never..." He couldn't speak anymore, crying too heavily to be coherent.

Even the prickly choreographer couldn't help but feel bad to see the younger man's despair. He wasn't sure what to say though. Asahi couldn't say anything else for a few minutes anyway, but Sayoko put her arms over him and held him gently. When he eventually calmed down enough that he could speak again though, his voice was raspy and hoarse.

"...I c-couldn't handle...that he'd died." He explained, "...It just hurt so much that I went numb...I couldn't think, I couldn't...say anything... No one knew a-about us...and I was suddenly too scared to admit it... I th-thought...people would either be mad...at him, or me...or both of us...or call me a liar, because we h-hid it for so long... So I just...pret-tended...that we never were... I didn't e-even think...I'd regressed so badly...until I saw Yuri again this w-weekend..."

"And Yuri never knew how you felt before." Sayoko commented quietly, "He didn't know anything that happened either. When Viktor mentioned Riku's name the other morning...Yuri didn't recognize it..."

"...Viktor..." Asahigrowled, "...I thought I hated him before, because Yuri would never stop talking about him...but now, he's here, and the way he just...threw Riku's name down like it was a toy to be fought over by dogs..."

"There's no way he could have known how you felt about Riku. No one did. You made sure of that yourself." The coach said, "He has every right to be protective over Yuri though. They are married, after all."

"THAT DOESN'T MAKE ANY SENSE!" Asahi yelled, getting up suddenly and kicking his gear bag halfway across the room, "YURI IS STRAIGHT! WHY IS HE MARRIED TO A MAN!? I SPENT YEARS HIDING HOW I FELT BECAUSE I KNEW HE WAS INTO GIRLS."

"...Maybe if you didn't hi-" Webber started, but Sayoko gave him the 'shut your face or I'll shut it for you' look and he stopped mid-sentence.

Asahi still glowered at him though, "I doubt it." He said stiffly, bringing a hand up to rub his raw and sore throat, "...Yuri doubts it, too."
"So he was willing to talk to you about all that?" The coach wondered.

He nodded and turned back around to look at where the woman was still seated, and cleared his throat roughly, "...He thinks I...would've been b-bad for him... Maybe I would be now b-because...he's changed so much... I h-hardly recognize him anymore."

"Everyone knows their own heart, Asahi." Sayoko explained, rising to stand up, "Don't torture yourself with wondering what might've been. He told you himself that it wouldn't have been, even if he'd known...and if Riku really did help you get over Yuri, then you're dishonoring his memory by erasing all the effort he put into you. What would he think of you now?"

Asahi balked, and lowered his eyes to the floor, "...He'd...be devastated..."

She put a hand on each of the man's shoulders, and looked at him closely, though he kept his gaze down, "So...there are now five people who know about what's rattling around in your head. About Yuri, about Riku...about all of it. What happens next is as much up to you as it is to them."

"...It's...up to Yuri." The skater explained, rubbing his nose on a wrist again and snuffling, "...V-Viktor said...it was up to Yuri..."

"What was up to Yuri?"

Asahi shuddered through a breath, and swallowed the painful knot in his throat, "...Whether that complaint...gets turned in at all. We just h-have to...wait for...whether the JSF calls or n-not..."

Sayoko glanced over at her cohort, and Webber glanced back as well, each of them suddenly realizing there was still hope. The coach gently patted her skater's hair then, and bent down a bit to see his face, "Then there's still a chance you'll be competing tonight. You've said Yuri's changed so much...but people don't stop being who they used to be just because they've grown to be more than that. Under all the newfound confidence that Viktor's helped him find...he's still the sweet boy I taught all those years ago. There isn't a mean bone in his body. I don't think he'll turn in those papers."

Cool brown eyes finally lifted, but they were heavy, and still red at the edges. He looked at the woman briefly before turning away again, "...What...about the rest though...?"

"What about it?"

He gaped slightly, unsure what to make of her question, "...You don't...I mean, you're not... mad at me?"

"Asahi..." Sayoko started, a motherly tone in her voice creeping up, "We're both disappointed by what you did yesterday. But that's already been dealt with. Learn from it, grow because of it...and don't hide inside yourself so much anymore, okay? You'll do yourself and Riku's memory a lot more good by being honest about what happened than by suppressing that it happened."

The skater nodded quietly, snuffling again as the last few tears finally fell from his eyes. He felt a strange chill go down his spine then, and goosebumps raised on his arms within the sleeves of his jacket. The feeling was surreal, almost haunting.

...As bad as it's gotten... He thought, ...Maybe this was how it needed to be all along...
Three hours passed before Viktor's eerily-accurate internal alarm clock went off, and he found himself starting to wake up. He grumbled quietly and rolled to his side, half-consciously reaching an arm around the head of the slumbering form next to him to pull it closer to his chest. He managed to doze for maybe another 30 seconds before he felt his partner starting to wake up; first came the subtle twitch of consciousness, then the heart-in-throat leap of a man panicking himself into being completely awake as he went nearly airborne from the fright.

"Viktorkit's probably super late we slept too long."

One blue eye peeked open to look at that alarmed face, but he just smiled and rolled to his back again, "...Even if we're late, we're skating towards the end." He managed, though the last word or two were spoken in a slur as he yawned. One arm came up in front of his mouth but then flopped back down, "And it's still light outside." He pointed out, gesturing one finger where his hand had come to rest over his bare chest, noting the soft glow of sunlight through a few thin cracks in the curtains.

Yuri looked over, seeing that very light, and heaved a relieved but still-slightly-spooked sigh before he face-planted on his husband's chest, "...It's almost been two years and I still can't get myself to trust your sense of timing..."

Viktor just laughed softly at that, reaching up his free hand to pet the mess of black hair, "Nor should you. The day you finally start to trust my internal clock will be the day it fails." He teased, "That's how these things work."

"Mmmhhhh..."

One long pale arm stretched to the side, fumbling on the night-stand next to the bed for one of their two phones, though Viktor only found Yuri's there, plugged in and fully charged. He realized then that his own was probably still in his coat, somewhere on the floor. With a shrug, he abandoned the worry about how full the battery was, and pulled his partner's device free of the charge-cable, seeing the screen light up to show the time being just barely after 4:30pm. He turned it so Yuri could see, "It's not even dinner time yet. We still have plenty of time."

"Whew..."

"Do you still need more sleep?"

Yuri paused a moment to think about it, but then shook his head, even as he kept his face down against white skin, "I don't think I could sleep again even if I needed to... I just about gave myself a heart attack."

The silver legend huffed a laugh at that, "Then you were probably out cold before that." He surmised, then stretched his arms and legs out straight as far as they'd go before relaxing again, "You must be starving, since you didn't eat this morning at all...and barely anything yesterday."

"...We should probably not go back to the hotel restaurant. I'm sure they've gotten used to the idea that I'll cause trouble every time I go there."

Viktor chuckled and pushed to hoist himself up onto his elbows, giving his love quite the look,
"Probably. Where do you want to go then? I suggested that Minako come with us again. Third time's a charm, right?"

"Ugh hopefully..." Yuri muttered, sitting up as well and ruffling a hand through his messy hair, half a second before his stomach growled a sorrowful plea for attention. That just made Yuri's face go red and his eyes white, "...We should get moving..."

"Mhm..."

The walk to the neighboring hotel was quick but chilly, and for the sake of not having to rush back, the duo dragged along all of their gear for the Free Program later that night. Yuri felt a bit nervous as they went through the lobby to get outside, clenching his hand tightly where Viktor held it in his coat pocket, and the Russian nudged his arm with an elbow to get him to loosen his grip.

"I can't feel my fingers." He mused, though being half-serious, "Care to unclamp the vice-grip?"

"Ahhh!" Yuri panicked again, releasing the hand entirely, "Gomen!"

Viktor shook his hand a few times and flexed his fingers, "You'd think we were ducking snipers, for how tight you held on...yikes."

"Gommeeeennnnn!"

"It's fine." He laughed, reaching to retake the hand that had squashed him, but not without getting an apology kiss first anyway.

"I was worried we'd...run into Asahi on the way out..." Yuri explained nervously, lightly weaving their fingers together as his hand was pulled back into his partner's coat pocket like before, and started walking again, "It seems like we have a habit of running into each other when we least want to."

"It's fine." Viktor reassured, "He's probably hunkered down in his room for now...but even if he does turn up somehow, somewhere...I'm here, and nothing's going to happen." He explained, rubbing his thumb across his partner's where he held to it, "I'll stand guard in the bathroom if I have to." He laughed.

Yuri's face flushed again, adding to the rosy tint that the biting winter air gave to his nose and cheeks. His ears had been spared the exposure under the edge of his new Ravenclaw beanie, "...And I won't wander off to take phone calls again..."

"Oh, speaking of such things..." The Russian cocked his head up, "I forgot, we need to check the Russian lineup. We never got around to watching it."

The younger figure deadpanned at the realization, "...Whoops."

"I'm sure it's fine. We can probably guess who's in the lead right now."  

"Can never be too sure when it comes to you Russians... Seems like someone's always ready to break records at their Senior debut."

Viktor just laughed at that, "Go big or go home, as they say."

"And speaking of Russians and home..." Yuri said, shoe-horning the topic in yet a different
direction, "We keep meaning to talk about visiting the place but we never really get too far with it."

"Ah...yes, hm." Viktor brought his free hand up to press a finger against his lips, "Well, if you're not so worried anymore about how people will treat us when we get there...we could always take a few days before Euros."

"...You did say you wanted to make Euros the fun event for me..." Yuri quipped, "Though I was still a bit brain-dead when you mentioned it, so much so that I couldn't even think enough to ask how that would be possible if we're not there."

"Oh, yeah... Guess I got ahead of myself. But that just means we should go anyway." The Russian mused, turning the trajectory of their path as they found the front of the hotel, "We may not be competing there, but that doesn't mean we can't go as spectators and show support to our European friends. It'll be a nice way to spend time at a competition without the worry of drama, right?"

"Is it even possible to avoid it these days?"

"Mmmhhhh...don't invite trouble. I'm determined to make the last events of this season be better. We're just past the half-way marker...we still have a chance to make the last 4 events be fun."

"How are you going to find time to plan out our second wedding if we're abroad though?" Yuri pointed out, "We're already going to be strapped for time as it is...plus we still have to practice our old programs if we're dusting them off for the Winter Games."

"Could you ever really forget how to do 'Yuri on Ice'?"

"...No, but that doesn't mean I don't want to practice it anyway. You need the practice more than anyone. You put it off last year, and I'm not even sure you got that old costume sorted out so the mantle isn't so top-heavy."

"Oh..." Viktor looked blankly ahead as it all sunk in, but he gave an uneasy smile anyway, "I'll figure it out." He shook the weight of the heavy schedule from his mind and looked happier again, "Anyway...we could go visit my papa during the week before Euros, then take the train from St. Petersburg to Vienna. We'll bring the kids. It'll be great."

"I'm not even sure Jiro's safe to travel yet."

"He's tiny. We can keep him in the cabin with us. Makkachin will have to go into cargo but I think he's done this enough to kind of be used to it."

"...Jiro's going to need a tiny puppy Xanax..."

Viktor just laughed, "That's the spirit. We'll take him to the vet as soon as we get back home, get all his travel papers sorted out. Then, when we actually go, we'll dress up in suits and look all important, that way maybe they'll bump us up to First Class like when we came back from Four Continents last year."

"...I'm going to need a tiny puppy Xanax..."

"I can flirt with the stewardesses to see if they can make it happen."

"Don't you even dare."

The Russian just thought that was hilarious, and laughed all the way to the doors to the next hotel. Just as he was about to reach for the handle to pull the glass frame open though, he felt a jerk on his
hand and was spun around, then backed up right into the door. It thumped under the sudden hit, and Viktor shook his head from the surprise, opening his eyes just barely in time to find Yuri coming right up to him, looking straight into his eyes from barely two inches away...only enough room for the younger man's glasses. He blinked his surprise, but smirked anyway, "I didn't think you were so determined to stay seated in Economy."

"I don't think I could stand to watch you flirting one-on-one with anyone else." Yuri pointed out, pressing in close, teasing a light touch between noses.

"You don't seem to mind when I flirt with Chris."

"I know you're just teasing."

"And I would be with the stewardesses, too."

"Chris knows you're teasing though. I'm not so sure about the flight attendants."

"It could be like the end of our flight on *La Première* though." The Russian thought back fondly, "Remember when you licked the whipped cream from my fingers?"

Yuri's cheeks were pink despite his attempt to be somewhat serious, "And all the noise you made."

"We could put on quite the show for them on our flight to Russia."

"You enjoy tormenting people."

Viktor smiled innocently, "I *only* enjoy showing off how much I *adore* you. If that's torture to some...then..." He tilted his head to the right slightly and leaned forward, finding his kiss there as he brought his left hand up to curl around the back of his husband's neck, "...that's too bad for them."

"I'll think about it."

"Maybe you should try flirting our way into first class." The Russian teased, pulling away from the glass pane behind himself, and reached for the handle a second time, "I already know how people react to me, but I'm curious what reaction they'd give to you."

Yuri hesitated a moment, giving his partner quite the look. Warm air wafted from inside the building as the door pulled open, but as welcoming as it was to leave the cold, Yuri was still kind of stunned.

"...What? I think you're adorable."

"Do I *really* want to be teasing people with fake flirting after I *just* ripped someone's entire heart and soul in half yesterday?"

Viktor blinked quietly, "...Oh...right."

Yuri sighed and shook his head, but finally went inside the hotel, feeling the last bluster of a cold chill behind him as the door closed again. The Russian slid up beside him, and arm sneaking behind his back, but before the man could say a single word, someone on the 4th floor spotted that telltale silver-haired head and started screaming from the banister. That just drummed up more attention, and the buzz of excitement filled the air as more and more people took notice of the skater. Many were quick to seize on Yuri's appearance as well, but their fanfare did little to cheer him up, and he just gave an annoyed sigh instead, staring forward with a rather serious look on his face.

"Maybe we should just make a break for the elevator." Viktor suggested quietly, "We'll be able to
avoid the ones coming down if we go up before they get here."

"...Fine..." The younger man grumbled, reaching one hand up to pull a loop of his scarf up higher so it would cover the lower part of his face.

Feeling guilty, but trying not to look like it, Viktor pulled his partner through the growing attention. For the first time in ages, he had to politely decline requests for photos and autographs, finding their path towards the elevator shafts that would help them escape to the upper floors. Having to wait for the carriage to come down was torture though. Viktor acquiesced to a few fan requests, but defended his sour spouse's lack of interest, "...Please forgive him, he's still feeling a bit under the weather from yesterday."

The mercy of the elevator's ding chimed out after that, and the two skaters stepped aside as the small room emptied, sliding in quickly after them. A few of the people in the new crowd were stunned to realize the pair had just passed them, but the doors were already closing, and Viktor was giving something of a half-hearted wave goodbye at them. Within the elevator, only two other people were there aside from the pair of skaters; two young ladies who were trying to get to one of the floors just above the one they themselves meant to get to. They just stared up in disbelief at the men in front of them, side-eyeing one another briefly before gawking again.

"Hiii~" Viktor said simply, waving lightly again.

The ladies didn't really recognize Yuri, given his beanie, glasses, and scarf, but it wasn't hard to figure out who he was just by his proximity to the silver legend standing next to him. They waved back at the both of them, but the ding chimed again and the small room stopped rising. Yuri turned his eyes aside and slipped through the doors just as they parted enough for him to fit through, and Viktor gave chase quickly after. They paused only briefly to figure out which hall to take to find Minako's room, and then were off again.

"...I'm sorry if I struck a nerve..." The Russian attempted, "You know I wasn't trying to be mean about the Asahi thing."

"Yeah."

Viktor felt like he had to half-jog just to keep up, "Yuri..." The younger man just stopped dead in his tracks unexpectedly, and Viktor flew out ahead a few paces before stopping as well to turn around. All he saw was Yuri's anxious eyes staring at the floor though.

"I feel bad."

"But..."

Yuri shook his head lightly and lowered his face, reaching up to pull the scarf and beanie away, "I was so mad at him before that I yelled at him... The only other person who's gotten me to do that before is Yuri, but Asahi...hit at something in me that I didn't even know was there. All he ever did was fall for me, and not only was I oblivious to it for nearly a decade, but I treated it like an insult or inconvenience when I finally knew."

Viktor watched and listened quietly, brow furrowed with worry, but unsure what to say.

"I did exactly to him what I was always so scared you'd do to me." Yuri went on, "I forced him to come clean about how he felt and I threw it back in his face. I saw his flaws and I used them to tear him down. And after all of it was done and over, I was so busy feeling angry and sorry for myself over that stupid kiss that...I didn't stop to think about what a horrible person I am..."
"Yuri..."

"...And I yelled all those things at him even after finding out about Riku and the violent way he died... What kind of monster am I?"

"...You're not a monster..." Viktor tried, stepping closer, raising his hands forward to offer a hug, but Yuri wouldn't budge from where he stood. He only raised one tail of his scarf to press against his eyes, holding his glasses in the other hand.

"I never talked to you before because I was worried you'd see my flaws and laugh at me, or worse, look down on me as inferior. I avoided you at every turn for just as long as Asahi avoided telling me how he felt..." He went on, feeling that flood of guilt rushing in, "And in the end, I was worse to him than I could've ever imagined you being to me in his place..."

"It was a hard conversation to have. Sometimes honesty is loud and passionate, and technically, he yelled at you first." Viktor pointed out, "All you did was meet him where he was at in the moment."

"I had no right to yell at him!" Yuri cried out, lifting his eyes from the damp spot he'd made on the scarf, "I tore him up from end to end yesterday, and on top of it all, I made him confront the trauma of watching his own partner die in his arms...! He'd been repressing it all this time, and I just took a pick-axe to his heart and dug it all up again! And I spat in his face while I did it, too!"

"Is this a bad time?" Minako's voice suddenly asked, and the two surprised men turned to look down the hall where she'd been approaching without their notice, "We don't have to hang out if you'd rather not."

Viktor turned side-face towards her and extended his hand, "This only just started..."

The anxious woman took hold of a few fingers and let the Russian pull her into the fray, but as she approached, she took a few steps closer to the distressed younger figure before her, "I could hear your voice all the way in my room. ...Yuri, what happened to Asahi and his partner isn't your fault. You can't undo what happened by feeling guilty about it on his behalf."

"If I hadn't trapped him in that room and forced him to talk to me, then none of this would've happened..." He argued, barely managing to keep the tears in his eyes from falling loose.

"If he really intends on going to the Games, then it would eventually come up. Better that it happened here, where it doesn't really matter, than in PyeongChang, where the eyes of the whole world are watching."

"Better for us...not for him."

Minako turned slightly towards the taller man standing next to her, and whispered quietly behind a hand, "Did he not sleep again?"

"...He slept really well...maybe too well..."

"You think he's over-tired?"

"I think he's starving and he's thinking too much." Viktor said quietly, but then finally closed the gap between them and put his arms over his husband's shoulders, pulling the man's head to the side of his neck, "There's not much sense trying to sort all this out when you haven't eaten. Let's put this on a back-burner for now and address it again after you've filled up your tank. You're running on fumes, my love. It's not healthy."
LYuri just grumbled and sulked where he stood, but after a tense moment of becoming acutely aware of the cavernous void in his guts, returned the hug, and nodded his face against the jacket.

For the moment, at least...he'd been slightly defused.
"Do you feel better now?"

Yuri glowered, his cheeks a bit flushed from embarrassment, ramen noodles hanging from his mouth as he sipped at his bowl...but he nodded, and continued eating in silence.

Viktor seemed pleased either way, returning to the bowl in front of his own place, "How do they say it in America? 'Hangry'? When you're so hungry, you're angry?" He laughed, using his chop sticks to find a few noodles in the broth, and twirled them around in the base of a wide spoon to make them into a more manageable ball before eating it.

To call the small 'Kousei Rāmen' restaurant a 'hole in the wall' would be an understatement. The tiny location was built directly under one of the looping arms of the highway interchange between the official hotel and the arena. It would be easy to look over by a non-native resident, especially by those foreigners who wouldn't wander far from Universal Studios on the other side of the river. However, for a Native Son and Daughter of Japan, it was easy to spot. With grey pull-down security walls on one side, and a grey metal fence on the other, the orange and yellow signs above the narrow entry-way stuck out like a sore thumb, beckoning the eyes of any passerby willing to look, with the kana こうせいらーめん written in broad, brush-like strokes.

Inside, there was only enough space to have a few 4-person tables, each pushed right up against the walls, with some 2-person tables closer to the back, and a line of single-person seats that went like 2 long benches around the corner of the kitchen area. A small flat-panel television, above a window next to the door, was playing the local news.

"So did Viktor actually tell you what happened?" Minako wondered casually, taking a sip from her tall beer, "Or were you content not to know this time?"

Yuri glanced from broth to ballerina, but then looked down again as he swallowed the noodles he'd slurped a moment before, "I just asked how he handled it. Maybe I...just imagined the rest." He admitted quietly, still feeling slightly embarrassed for his earlier outburst, "It's been such a long time since I really talked to him. Maybe he's changed as much as he thinks I have, but I just didn't see it. Everything about him since yesterday was new. Before that argument we had, if you can call it that...I'd never once see him yell or cry about anything. He was always so...polished? I don't know how to describe it. Other than the occasional smile, he always had this neutral look on his face...it was hard to read him."

"Is that why you thought he was weird back in the day?"

"Sort of."

"You thought he was weird?" Viktor wondered, half-amused by the idea, even as a few noodles hung from his mouth, "Why?"

Yuri sighed and set his chop sticks down, wiping his fingers off on a cloth napkin before putting both hands into his lap, "I don't know, he just kind of was weird." He tried to explain, "Talking to him didn't always feel normal...I honestly felt sometimes like I got more conversation out of Vik-chan than him. Asahi would acknowledge what I said, and sometimes repeat back what I said in his own words, like he was trying to prove that he was listening, but he never really engaged further
than that. It always seemed like...an interview." He grumbled again and reached his right hand up to press through his slicked-back hair, leaving his fingers hooked to the back of his neck for a moment, eyes watching the oil dots that floated at the surface of his ramen's pork-bone broth, "I was never the sort to really volunteer information, and he was never the sort to ask anything... There was a time I jokingly called him Asahi-senpai instead of Asahi-kun, as though I should look up to him as an upperclassman who didn't owe me any kindness or friendly informality, and he gave me this dead-eyed look like he didn't understand that I was joking." He said, remembering that very moment, and feeling the same awkward pit in his stomach that he'd felt back then. A distraction quickly came up though in the form of an elbow nudging against his arm, and he glanced aside.

"Eat." Viktor told him simply.

Yuri looked back down at the bowl and picked up the chop sticks next to it, fishing for noodles, albeit slowly, "Anyway, he was just...weird. To realize that he...well..." He hesitated to say it then.

"That he was into you?" Minako offered.

"...Yeah..." Yuri nodded a little, "...And that he felt that way all that time...it just makes me a little uneasy."

The silver Russian waited a moment, looking slightly aside to watch his partner find a few more noodles in the translucent soup, only to abandon them and go for the half-egg that was floating near the back of the bowl instead. He waited until he was sure that Yuri would eat it before saying anything, "...It makes you that uncomfortable?" He wondered, reaching for the ice-water in front of his right hand, and took a quick sip.

Yuri swallowed and shrugged, "Maybe that's the wrong word. Nervous? Uncertain? Maybe it's all those things. It just kind of blind-sided me to hear him admit it."

"I saw it and I told you almost right away." Viktor commented, setting the glass down again and reaching for the wide renge spoon to return to his ramen.

"Yeah, but it was different, hearing it from him. I mean, I started that conversation with the fact that you saw it, so he couldn't try to blow it off like I was just seeing things." The younger figure pointed out, looking up at the man, "But hearing him admit it...it just kind of knocked me back a bit. It's the kind of realization like finding out your neighbor is a serial killer or something. It just seems so impossible, so implausible, that when you find out the fact of it, it's just...so hard to process."

Minako looked over the rim of her beer mug as she took another drink from it, but set it down soon after, keeping her fingers around the circular lip as she cast her eyes back to Yuri, "I guess that explains why you never invited him to Yu-Topia."

"Don't get me wrong," He started up again, abandoning the noodles he'd fished for a second time, "I'm not saying he's a bad person. He never did anything mean, cruel, or hurtful towards me. Or anyone, so far as I'm aware. I just kind of feel like maybe I'm the one that's messed up? I feel like I got dropped into a parallel universe where Asahi is a completely different person than I thought I knew. Finding out all these things about him, seeing him utterly break down like he did...it just...makes me feel..." He made a face as he struggled to find the right word, "...Discombobulated...?"

"You don't need to internalize all the stuff that you've learned, Yuri." Minako explained, picking up a rectangular piece of Oshizushi in her fingers, "You and him stopped being buddies seven years ago. You've moved on. It's not your fault, or your responsibility to feel bad that he hasn't."
"...I did kind of vanish though...he probably feels like I abandoned him specifically." Yuri muttered disheartedly, "I told him that he'd know why I left if he actually paid attention back then, but he just dragged the conversation back to the fact that he'd gotten me that spot in the Tokyo club or how he'd stayed back in Juniors an extra year or two just for me. I really don't know what to say to that. I had so much of my own stuff going on that I guess I just didn't notice what he was doing."

"And even if you had, what difference would it have made?" Viktor wondered, holding a piece of pork belly between his wooden sticks, "Just because he did something for you doesn't mean you owe him gratitude."

"It's not an easy thing to refuse people in Japan." Yuri explained, "Even if you know exactly what's going on and you still don't care at all, you're supposed to at least pretend like you do. What I did was...really rude."

The Russian just half-scoffed at that, "Oh, you mean like how you practically have to study someone's business card like it's the next Rosetta Stone?"

"Yeah."

"I thought you only owed that to elders and strangers."

"You're still supposed to try to put your best foot forward and not be a rabble-rouser." Minako explained, "People who are openly hostile or antagonistic can be seen as outsiders. Good and decent people go with the flow and try to keep the peace, even with people they might otherwise not get along with."

"That just seems so unhealthy to me." Viktor huffed, "Like those people who work in department stores who seem all robotic when they greet customers."

"It used to make more sense in Japanese society, because in most cases, one person out of two was always superior to the other, so you owed that person politeness." The woman went on, "We don't have such a rigidly structured hierarchy system anymore, but the desire to be highly respectful kind of prevails anyway. So...students are responsible for cleaning their schools, rather than janitors, to teach them humility...younger people will bow more deeply to their elders than the elders bow back to them, if at all...using polite forms of the language rather than the short-form used in more casual settings...even the fact that working men can go into the city, stay at their desks super late, schmooze with their work buddies at a bar where they pay women to laugh at their jokes and pretend to find them fascinating, only to go home to a wife who still has to go through the motions of being happy to see him, even though it's midnight and he should've been home hours earlier. No one wants to be that guy that steps out of line."

"Asahi really adheres to that, to a fault." Yuri added, "Even the way he told us he didn't want to come to the onsen with us...it's the kind of thing a working guy would say to his colleagues to apologize for being the first to leave. For the most part, no one wants to be the first to leave...it's considered a mark of laziness."

Viktor had his eyes narrowed and brows raised, gaping at the both of them stiffly, "...How did I never notice that kind of thing before...? It's not like I haven't lived here for 2 years already..."

"You're foreign." Minako smirked and pointed her hand at him casually, "No one expects you to know the rules, and no one really holds it against you when you don't adhere to them yourself. Most Japanese people might even think you're making fun of them if you try."

"I've been given dirty looks before."
"You're foreign." She echoed, sitting back slightly and reaching for her beer again, "You can't win. If you try, you're mocking someone...if you don't, you're just dumb and uncultured. I've seen foreigners speak perfectly fluent Japanese at restaurants, but the servers will still look to the Japanese person in the group to speak for them...even if that Japanese person doesn't know any Japanese!" She laughed, "It's fun to people-watch sometimes.

"So that's probably why people in Hasetsu didn't bother speaking Japanese around me." Viktor surmised, "It wasn't just to make it easy on me. To them, there was no point in me learning it, because they'd never listen to me if I spoke it anyway."

Both Yuri and Minako nodded.

Viktor just made a face at that and crossed his arms, "Rude."

"Maybe they'll ease up, now that you're officially part of the JSF." Yuri suggested, "And you're going to be a citizen soon, too. Plus, you're turning into a pretty familiar face in Hasetsu, so you've become of a fixture, and don't seem so transient anymore."

Minako leaned forward again, "Speaking of rude things though...did you get a chance to see the footage from Moscow yet?" She seemed to have a mischievous gleam in her eyes as she asked.

Both skaters shook their heads, and spoke in tandem, "Not yet."

"Oh, you'll love it."

"What happened...?" Yuri wondered for the both of them.

"I don't want to spoil the fun. You should look up video footage if you can." She explained, waving her free hand as though shooing them off already to go do just that, "I was talking to Mik about it in the break between that meeting and dinner. Apparently your father was quite entertained by what happened."

Viktor looked a bit insecure suddenly, though still tried to find the humor in it, "As glad as I am about how things have turned out with him...I'm really struggling to get used to how everyone else is talking about him now." He sighed lightly, "It's fine when Yuri does it...but the rest..."

"I suppose you could relate to Yuri's situation more than you realize then," Minako wondered, "Someone you haven't talked to in years and years...and suddenly they pop back into your life, completely changed."

"My father changed under my supervision," The Russian pointed out, "It'd be more similar if he turned up at the Summer Garden already accepting of my skating and relationship choices. It's been almost a year since then though, and he only started to shift rather recently."

"Hm...maybe."

"And he still doesn't accept Yuri's and my marriage." Viktor sulked slightly, "Not that I ever expect him to, but...if Yuri and I really go there to visit him before Euros, I'm not sure how we'll deal with sleeping arrangements and just...being ourselves."

Yuri found himself slack-jawed at the words, staring at his partner incredulously.

The silver Russian turned his head in turn and gaped back, "...What? It's true."

"I never thought I'd see this day." The younger man started, feeling the tears forming in his eyes,
"My Viktor...is actually thinking about possible consequences in advance..."

Slate eyes just narrowed in confusion, "...What?"

"You're thinking of visiting Konstantin Nikiforov on your own before a major competition...?" Minako added, "...And why are you going to Euros? You're not able to compete there anymore."

"I know I know," He flicked his hands back at her, "We were going to go as spectators for once."

Yuri's eyes were wellsprings and tears flowed down his cheeks like rivers, and he latched onto the Russian's nearest arm, rubbing his face on it affectionately, "I didn't think it would occur to you how we'd sort those things out until after we got there...!" He spoke softly, though his voice cracked on a few notes as he tried not to sob those happy lamentations, "You're growing up so fast...!"

"I'm older than you are."

"I reiterate my first question." Minako chimed in again, "You're going to visit Konstantin on your own?"

"Thinking about it." Viktor corrected, "I half-suggested the idea back at my birthday party but Yuri said to put it on a back-burner, and we've only briefly mentioned it now and again since then." He explained, relinquishing control of his arm to his weepy-happy-clingy husband, "But then we talked about it again earlier and I suggested bringing the dogs with us...and then I thought, where will we all sleep? My papa's house is still pretty small, and wasn't exactly designed with guests in mind...and then I remembered what it was like to share the room with Yurio at NHK and Phichit at the start of the Grand Prix, and then you and Mari after that and...ah...well..."

Minako raised a brow, "...Why was that a big deal?"

Viktor felt a very subtle squeeze of fingers into his arm, but it didn't take that for him to already feel like he was wading into dangerous waters. The distinct memory of Yuri cutting him off mid-sentence at Campus Martius Park, and speaking only a few very specific words, was echoing off the inside of his skull. He put on a nervous smile in spite of the cold sweat running down the back of his neck, "Oh...uhm...well...you know... Reasons."

The ballerina just looked on, eyes moving from the elder to the younger skater, and back again. She then sat back in her seat and crossed her arms, giving them both a rather serious look, "Huh...you won't be able to have sex for days while you're out there."

Yuri dropped face-first to the table, bounced, then rolled to the floor, unconscious on impact.

Viktor_Nikiforov.exe has encountered a problem and needs to close...
Yuri slowly came to on the floor, his head spinning still from the fall. When the world stopped rotating all around him, and he gradually hoisted himself back up into his seat, he pulled the jacket off the back of the chair and pulled it over the top of his head, cinching it from the inside so only his glasses could be seen from without.

Minako, of course, was just smiling innocently on the other side of the table, "Sorry." She mused."

"You shouldn't say stuff like that in public so loudly." He grumbled, voice muffled within the jacket, "Who knows who might understand what you're saying."

"I didn't realize you were still so sensitive about it." The woman grinned, "I'd have thought you were used to it by now."

"It doesn't matter what I'm used to. Don't you remember how fast I dropped last year when you guys all did the scorecard thing at Yu-Topia cuz everyone heard us by mistake?"

"Scorecard thing?" Minako echoed, "When did that happen?"

"Eh?"

Viktor turned his head stiffly, "She wasn't there, Yuri."

"...Eh?" He pulled the coat down off his head to see better, but turned his eyes back to Minako, "Where were you then?"

"Where was I when?"

"The night before the wedding party! Chris and Phichit-kun and Yurio all showed up, and you and Mikhail were there, too! Viktor and I got into an argument and I ran off, but after we all got back to Yu-Topia and things settled down..."

"Oh." Minako shrugged and huffed a laugh, "If it was that night, then Mikhail and I were both absent for all the fun, cuz we were off having fun of our own."

Both skaters stared blankly at her.

"A bunch of us split up into search parties after you ran away." She nudged her face towards the younger of the two, "I had Mikhail drive my car because I'd been drinking, but then we ended up at my Snack Bar and...well."

"You did it at your Snack Bar?" Yuri was incredulous, "Minako-sensei you're so inappropriate!"

"That's what I said about you, too!" She laughed, bringing a hand up to cover her mouth.

"What did I have to do with that!?"

"Not then." She smirked, "Way later; more recently. At NHK." She tried to explain, "Viktor had just finished his Rage Skate, and there were only a few skaters left until the medaling ceremony. When it was over and no one could find either of you, Yurio said he bet it was because you both snuck off for some hanky-panky. I said I doubted it, and he made a bet out of it...then we all ran into Papa"
Nikiforov outside, and Viktor literally spelled out that that's exactly what you two did. Yurio demanded his winnings, Mikhail confirmed the translation, and I yelled that 'you were so in appropriate' while I fished for the money I owed for losing." She laughed again, remembering it all fondly.

Yuri just whipped his head to the right to gape at his partner.

Viktor held up both hands defensively, "It was before the Final. Anything I said before that night at Campus Martius is protected under the Articles of 'Before Yuri Told Me To Shut My Face About Sexy Time.'"

Minako glanced over at the Russian, "He actually told you to stay quiet about it?"

He nodded.

"It's not something other people need to be talking about." Yuri explained stiffly, "I don't even see why anyone would think they need to. Our private life shouldn't be fodder for jokes."

"I didn't mean to make you think I was poking fun at it." Minako leaned back in her chair, one finger slowly dancing around the rim of her beer glass, "I just wonder how and why you guys even want to go visit Kon on your own. Just last year, you were both terrified of him, and for good reason. I know he's changed a lot in the last few weeks...but the operative word is 'weeks.' This is a new development. There's no telling how easily he'll slip back into old habits."

"That's why it's still just something we're considering." Viktor explained, "I think it would be good in the long run for my papa to see how Yuri and I are normally...or at least as normal as we can be when he's around. I really feel like he's trying to make amends, given how he reacted when he found out I'd been cut from the RSF. The least I can do is give him a chance, right?"

"He's trying to do the right thing regarding the skating...but it wasn't the skating that got you punched in the face last year." Minako pointed out, "I mean, just earlier today when I was chatting with Mikhail about how Kon's behaving in Moscow...apparently Kon had mentioned in days prior that he still doesn't consider you and Yuri to be together. Period. Full stop."

"Then what's all this I'm hearing about how he's loving every minute of the RSF being punished by Yuri?" Viktor asked pointedly.

"You and Yuri don't have to be in a relationship for Yuri to be an instrument of your vengeance on the ice. He's your skating student...that's all he is in Kon's mind."

"Even after everything I said before the NHK Exhibition...?" Yuri wondered.

"I wasn't part of that so I'm not all sure what was said, but the way Mikhail explained it, Kon responded more to the fact that you stood up to him, not that you defended a relationship he doesn't approve of." Minako explained, "But you two are practically inseparable. Even I could see how upset Viktor was when he got to the airport in Sapporo and couldn't immediately find you. If you guys plan to spend even one day out there with him before Euros, it's one day that no one else is there to help keep an eye on things...and if you try to be close with one another like you usually are, and Kon gets a wild thorny hair up his arse over it...it would take until Euros for anyone to know you're in trouble."

Both men seemed to go quiet after hearing those words. Viktor cast his eyes down in thought, but Yuri was looking at him instead, seeking some kind of sign as to what the Russian was thinking. Viktor eventually abandoned the thought though, reaching his left hand between them to find Yuri's
right, and brought it up to kiss the ring. He kept a hold of it though even as he relaxed their hands against the table again.

"Nothing is set in stone." He said quietly, "We still have other things to worry about before that anyway."

The day before...

Moscow, Russia - "Megasport" Sports Palace, [дворец спорта "МЕГАСПОРТ"]

Men's Singles Short Program

The warm-up period was about as routine as anyone could expect. The Opening Ceremonies, and event-introduction by the RSF suits, was well received...but the arena was only half as full as anyone had hoped. Yurio grit his teeth in annoyance at the whole thing, glancing up into the sparsely-populated stands as he glided along.

With everything that's happened in Japan over the last week, the RSF must really be shitting themselves now.

He peeled out from the corner he was sliding towards and vaulted through an easy triple Salchow, then moved off again to let the next person through.

If they didn't feel like idiots before, firing Viktor and making it sound like it was a mutual decision...only for him to join the JSF instead, and be given a spot on their Olympic Team...they must really feel like idiots now.

It wasn't hard to spot his personal cheering section. Both of them. 'Yuri's Angels' amassed as close as they could to rink-side, right in the middle of the long section, so they could see as much as possible without having to look up at the big screen held above the ice. 'Team Rozovsky + One' was almost exactly opposite the fangirls, sitting in the mid-section but in the third row. Like in Sapporo, Konstantin occupied several seats on his own.

...It's still fuckin' weird how he showed up. I didn't think he actually would.

The gruff old man wasn't exactly watching though. His eyes moved around the audience, watching the fans, then moving down to rink-side where officials and event-staffers were moving around, going about business as usual despite the small crowd size. Occasionally, those Nikiforov-slate irises would graze the ice itself, but would wander away again shortly after.

[That concludes the warm-up period...skaters, please return to rink-side for the start of the Short Program.] The announcer called overhead.

Both silver teens lifted their heads for a moment to glance over their phones, looking around as the words bounced around the walls of the arena. It didn't take a literal translation for them to know what was going on though. Nikki looked back down at her own phone, careful to keep Yurio in the view-finder as she recorded his last slide towards the exit in the wall. Once he was blocked from view, she closed out of the camera app and clicked her phone off until later, and turned to her father on her right, "Do you think they'd let me go down there when Yuri goes out so I can wish him luck?"

"Probably not." He answered.

"Do you think they'd let you go down there?" She asked instead, poking at the outline of the badge
he had in his coat pocket.

"Probably."

Nikki arced up where she sat, and leaned dramatically to the side, until her head touched the edge of Mikhail's shoulder, "Doooooooom you think they'd let me down there if I had your badge?"

"Do you speak Russian?"

"...No."

"Then no."

"Papa." She whined, "You should take me! With as few people as there are in the audience, I'll bet all the skaters are feeling burned right now. Yuri will feel better if someone other than Yakov is seeing him off."

"Lilia is down there too."

"You know what I mean!"

"I'm comfortable though."

"Dad."

"Mmmmmmmhh..."

"DAD."

[The first skater of the Men's Singles event, coming from Yekaterinburg in central-western Russia...Maxim Lutai.]

The meager audience cheered as a young, thin man in traditional-looking clothing glided out to wave, heading back to rink-side to speak with his coach. Just as he arrived though, fans started to raise their banners and flags...and the hastily-made signs that listed both Nikiforovs' scores from the Japanese Short Program.

[Виктор НИКИФОРОВ - 115.75]
[Ыури НИКИФОРОВ - 101.26]

Konstantin caught a glimpse of a rather ostentatious banner just above the Yuri's Angels gathering, hanging from the banister to the second level...and laughed deeply. He whopped the side of Mikhail's knee with the back of a hand and then gestured over at it, [See? They can't get rid of my son that easily. These cucks made him leave physically, but his fans make sure to remind them that he's still out there.]

Mikhail looked a bit dazed, and his knee throbbed from the clobbering. He reached one hand up to adjust where his flat-cap had been tilted off-center from the strike, then reached down with the same hand to rub the side of his leg, [Of course they would. Before he was fired, he was called 'Russia's Hero.' Now they don't have one anymore.]

"What are you guys talking about?" Nikki wondered, leaning forward to see around her father's shoulder.

Mikhail turned his head to look at her, and leaned back in his seat, "Kon thinks it's funny that Viktor's fans are making his presence known here." He gestured across the ice to the score banner,
"That's Viktor and Yuri's names in Cyrillic. Those are their scores from 6 hours ago in Japan. It's 1am there now though so they're all probably asleep."

"Oh..." She mumbled, squinting her eyes to see it better, but then turning back again, "So can we go down? He's going out third..."

The first skater's music suddenly started playing overhead, Mozart Piano Concerto No23., drawing up their attention again for a moment. Nikki started putting on the puppy eyes though, and set her dainty pale hands on the man's black coat-sleeve.

"Pleeeaaassееeee?"

Mikhail was already half-convinced just by the urge to want to walk the ache out of his knee, and he nodded before puppy-eyes became crocodile-tears, "Alright, alright...let's get going." He started to rise up, and Nikki quietly cheered her victory, "Viktoria, we're gonna go down and wish Yuri luck. Stay here." He turned to the bear, [Kon, we'll be right back. Watch Viktoria please.]

"Da."

Viktoria looked up from her phone to see the two pass in front of her knees, but she nodded and went back to her YouTube feed. Though happy to show support to her new younger brother, watching figure skating still wasn't the teen's first choice of activities. Until Yurio hit the ice, she was content to watch music videos.

Mikhail followed after his youngest as she found the path down under the stands, practically skipping once she found level ground after the stairs. She paused and waited for her father to catch up, but then curled her fingers around his wrist, just above where he'd been hanging his hands in his coat pockets, "So when are you and Cousin Viktor going to start talking to each other again?" She asked pointedly, catching the man by surprise.

"When he feels like it."

"You were the last one to speak between you though..." She pointed out, "I don't know what you guys said, but you were kind of mean to him at the end."

Those crystal blue eyes went back to the skater's direct relation, a finger pointing at the elder silver Russian to single him out, "You need to back off a little bit. I gave you an inch and you took a thousand miles from me. You've basically done everything that I told you last year not to do."

"Vivi-"

"No..." The silver legend shook his head, "No more. Vivi is the child you left behind. He's gone. I was stupid and naive to think that we could pick things up again where we left off, but neither of us is the person we were back then. I need you to stop treating the weight of my opinion as though I'm still 5 years old, when I was to be seen but not heard. I'm turning 29 in 2 weeks and I'm going to be heard. You don't just get to decide to move to Hasetsu without talking to anyone else about it first! Just because you and Minako-sensei are engaged doesn't mean the rest of us don't count! Hasetsu is our place. You don't just get to force your way there! Did you even ask her what she thought!?" His hand gestured towards the ballerina, making her hyperaware of herself suddenly.

Mikhail looked on steadily, giving that same steely-eyed gaze that he'd done when the two of them were in Russia and Viktor had been obstinate about sleeping under his father's roof. He just
shrugged and shook his head, "No."

"Then maybe she should be the first person you have that conversation with. I may ask you to seek mine and Yuri's approval before you move, but it's her consent that you should probably have first."

"Uncle," Viktor called, half-walking-half-skipping to catch up, "Wait."

"Haven't you said enough already?" Mikhail said stiffly, pausing only long enough to look back over one shoulder before moving off again, "If you don't want me involved in things then quit coming after me."

"I never said that. Don't put words in my mouth." The younger figure said simply, stuffing his hands into his team jacket's pockets, "All I meant was that you're doing too much at once. If you still plan on moving everyone to Hasetsu, th-"

"Minako called off the engagement because of you." The elder said bitterly, stopping where he was, but not looking back. Both of his daughters were stunned to hear the words, and Nikki put her hands over her mouth, both pairs of eyes looking from their father to their cousin. Mikhail held his ground though, "Because of what you said."

"I can't make choices for her." Viktor explained, only then switching up his language preferences to something the girls wouldn't understand, for their sake, [But taking it out on your kids by playing keep-away from Yurio, like you don't want them getting too attached while you scheme your way out of moving to Japan, is childish.]

[Says the guy who slept in the car because he was too proud to sleep in his father's house...when it was your idea to go out there in the first place.] Mikhail retorted, [I did everything you asked of me and you still threw me under the bus in the end. I knew you'd be different from the kid I left behind 20 years ago, but I didn't think you'd grown up into an ungrateful jackass.]

Mikhail drew a breath and quietly let it out again as they continued to walk, "It's hard to explain."

"You think the world of him though," Nikki added, "After you found him again last year, you would always talk about him. I hate to see you guys fighting."

"I can hardly remember exactly what it was that set him off in the first place." The elder explained, "I knew I messed up when I brought Kon to Japan for Viktor's last show before the Final...but I thought it was sorted out. Now Viktor seems to be getting testy over the fact that I'm starting to have a life of my own within his circle. I don't think he appreciates or understands that grown-ups all have lives of their own and he doesn't get to decide for others what they can or cannot do."

"I don't think he said he wanted to decide for you." The teen said quietly, following her father around another corner that lead towards the skaters' prep area. She let go of his arm long enough for him to pull the badge out of his pocket and take it in his other hand, "He just thinks you're doing a lot...and you're doing it really fast."

Mikhail went quiet as he held up the badge to the security staffers that blocked the way to the athletes, and they stepped aside to let the two through, though not without getting a slightly dirty look from one of them. Mikhail ignored it, hoping his daughter didn't notice it in the first place, which seemed to be the case.
"Anyway, I hope you guys can sort it out soon." Nikki went on, spotting Yurio by Yakov and Lilia not too far away, and waved. "It's gonna be super awkward in Hasetsu if you two don't get along. We share too many mutual friends now, and it'll be hard to avoid running into one another because of the figure skating stuff that the two Yus and Viktor do."

"I know."

Jade eyes looked up, but then gave up, unsure whether Mikhail would put in any effort towards resolving their small crisis. She sighed and let her father's wrist go, skipping ahead to get closer. She crouched down excitedly where Yurio was doing a few final leg stretches on the floor, "So you're ready?"

"Always." He said confidently, "I'm going to crush all these people."

"Did you see the banners with Cousin Viktor and his Yuri's scores on them?" She asked deviously, smirking behind one hand, "Your bosses must be mad."

"They're too proud to be mad." The blonde explained, legs spread out in a V away from himself, and he walked his hands forward until he was chest-down between his knees, arms straight out, "What little I've heard has been a mixture of righteous indignation and mockery. Some are even trying to say that the JSF took on Viktor out of pity, because of Katsudon."

"...Speaking of him." Nikki said, lowering her voice as she glanced back briefly to spot her father starting to talk to Yakov casually, far enough away that the noise around them drowned out both conversations, "...Could you give me his cell number?"

"...You want Katsudon's cell number?" He echoed in confusion, pushing up onto his hands to rise up a little, "...Why?"

"Papa and Cousin Viktor aren't on speaking terms, and papa won't admit he's the one who should be the one to offer a truce, since he was the last one to say anything between them at the Final. Maybe I can get Yuri's help. I was thinking about asking Minako too but I get this feeling she's too much of a fan of Viktor's to be able to help with personal stuff."

"...That's not entirely untrue." Yurio nodded, and shrugged as he pushed up to sitting straight. He leaned back, legs still stretched out, and shuffled through his gear back until he found his phone. A few clicks later, and Nikkita felt the buzz of a new text message, and she saw Yuri's contact information in a bubble there, "Anyway...it'll only be a couple more days before we get to Hasetsu. If they don't sort out their shit sooner, it'll just have to be later."

"I'd rather it be sooner." She replied, sitting back and crossing her legs to formally add that contact to her own list, "I want to be able to go to their second wedding without Viktor being apprehensive cuz of papa."

"...Second wedding?" Yurio quirked a brow, "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, you didn't see the Japanese Opening Ceremonies?"

"No, I was gonna watch later."

"Ah okay...well...Viktor got a mic and he asked Yuri to marry him again in front of everyone. I'm not sure if he meant it as a stab at the RSF, given what you said you'd heard them say about why they really let Viktor go...but..."

Yurio huffed a laugh and shook his head, "That sounds like something he would do. If the RSF
hates his thing with Katsudon enough to fire him for it, then he's gonna use his thing with Katsudon to rub it in their faces that they can't hurt him."
Chapter 366

CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED SIXTY SIX

Yurio stood idly by as the second skater finished up his routine and headed towards the kiss and cry. His eyes wandered around the arena though, entirely unconcerned with what the score would be. Nearby, Yakov and Lilia were waiting for their athlete to take the ice, but even they were distracted by the way the crowd was behaving. Eyes were raised on both the score-banners, and those that cheered for Viktor, despite the fact that he wasn't even there.

[The score for Sergei Belitrov...61.43.]

Standing just within the curtain separating rink-side from the prep area under the stands, Nikki glanced up, listening to the clapping from the scattered audience. The numbers on the board above the ice were listed numerically, "...Is it always like this?" She wondered to no one in particular.

Yurio turned his head back though, "Like what?"

She blinked and looked over at him, "Maybe I'm used to the scores I saw in Detroit already...but that seemed really low."

"Oh...yeah." He nodded, looking over to where the other skater, happy enough with the outcome, left the kiss and cry with his coach, "Only the top 6 in each group make it to the Grand Prix Final. Competitions like this though...everyone in a given country can compete, so you'll see a range of scores because it's a mix of experienced people and new, good and bad."

[Next to take the ice, hailing from St. Petersburg...Yuri Plisetsky.]

The teen stepped forward, pulling off the rubber guards as he set one black blade to the ice at a time. His jacket slid off his arms as fluidly as the rest of him slid into the rink, spurred on by the louder cheering of what few people had turned up.

The RSF rented out space in this giant-ass arena, expecting it to sell out, or come close to it...but other than me and a tiny handful of others in the Men's, none of these competitors have ever even skated in the Grand Prix Series, never mind a higher level competition. I really wouldn't be surprised if any of these people left after I'm done.

He rounded back towards the rink wall where Yakov and Lilia were waiting, listening to a few words but not really paying attention to them.

If this is the kind of vacuum Viktor's absence caused...then I need to do more to restore peoples' faith in Russian figure skating. This is just insulting. I won Gold at my first GP Final, and I was only 15 then, and I still couldn't fill half the arena.

"Yuri-" Yakov grumbled, seeing that vacant, introspective look on the skater's face, but at least was satisfied to see those emerald eyes come up, "Don't let the fans' reaction to Viktor's situation discourage you. This is a punishment for the paper-pushers who made a bad decision, not for the other athletes."

"I know."

"You'll get your own loyal fan following in time. This is only your second year in Seniors." He went on, "It wasn't apparent how popular Viktor had gotten until he was in his 20s. Keep on breaking
records and winning Gold, and the audience will turn up in time. Who knows how many people are watching from home instead anyway? Could be all the people who chose not to turn up here instead."

"Whether they're watching or not won't change that I'm going to win Gold here." Yurio shrugged, looking back over his shoulder, "And with that Gold, I'll secure my place at the next 3 events. This is no different than that tiny event I went to last year, to kill time between Rostelecom and the Final."

He was sure there would be something else from Yakov, but no words came, and just as he turned his head to wonder why, he spotted the wave of silver hair coming over the rink-wall at him.

Nikki hinged over it by her waist, hands reaching to grab him and pull him into a quick hug, "We'll be cheering for you, Yuri! I'll make enough noise to cover for the people who didn't come!"

"You're just going to make my fanclub freak out again."

She just gave a smirk up at him where she'd been hanging around the middle of his chest, "Isn't that the point?"

"Okay that's enough." Mikhail suddenly interrupted, picking his daughter up with a hand under each armpit to pull her back, though she flailed in surprise, "He's your brother, not your boyfriend, so quit tormenting his fangirls."

"But daaaaaaaaad!" She whined, standing normally again, though wiggling like a worm to try and get free, "It's funny!"

Mikhail just made a face and looked to the skater, using one hand to shoo him off, "Go on and do the thing. No slacking off just cuz you know you're the best here, either."

"No..." Yurio answered, oddly, making the older man quirk a brow, "She's right. It is funny."

Yakov just shook his head as Mikhail deadpanned, and the skater bowed deeply as he slid backward from the wall, making his dramatic escape before anyone could contest the point. Nikki was just giving an immature laugh at her father's expense.

From the stands, Konstantin had been quietly watching the interaction. Though he couldn't hear what they'd been saying, what he saw was giving him a weird sense of déjà vu.

She looks just like Tat...and the more I watch her, the more I see that she acts like her, too. Especially at that age...Tat and Mik were little Hellions.

The bear managed a wry smile at that idea.

Maybe this is more comeuppance at Mik's expense...having to be a father for two kids who aren't supposed to be that close, but act like it anyway just to torment those around them. Mik is going to get just a taste of the shit him and Tat put me through back then, before the Elders set things straight...or tried to, anyway.

Yurio had already found his place in the center of the rink, and the music started half a moment after those slate eyes found him.

['Inner Universe' - Origa]

Even as the blonde began his dance, Kon couldn't help but envision that golden hair being silver instead. In his mind's eye, Yurio became Viktor for a few moments, gliding around the ice with a
skill that seemed supernatural. But the longer Kon watched, the more that long hair served to pull him from the memory of his son, whose long hair he'd never been acquainted with, and the silver-haired Yurio gradually morphed into that other long-haired youth...the one that had tortured him in his own teenaged years.

He blinked and shook his head lightly, moving his eyes back to rink-side, where Mikhail leaned against the wall with one arm casually leaning over one of Nikki's shoulders, the both of them watching Yurio put on his show. That steely-eyed stare seemed to be enough to send a tingle down Mikhail's spine, and he looked right back at him for a moment, only to give a nod and return to watching the ice.

*He's trying to keep those two apart, but that boy isn't related by blood, and no matter how many times Mik says those kids are siblings, they're not.*

Eyes went back to Yurio then, and Kon drew a sigh of a breath, slouching slightly in his many seats.

*At his age, in my time, that boy would've already been married, or arranged to be really soon. He's kind of lucky that he doesn't have to worry about that kind of thing, and can focus on what he wants to do instead of what others say he has to do. The way his grandfather teased him about being single though...*

The mass of fangirls on the opposite side of the arena were fawning over every dashing move, and Kon could see the hearts in their eyes even from his distance.

*...It's not like he lacks for opportunities. What's he waiting for?*

Yurio vaulted through his program's most difficult move; the quad Flip he'd teased Viktor about. He stumbled the landing, but was back onto his feet fluidly, carrying on as though the frost on his backside wasn't there to remind him of his folly. His fans cheered for him anyway though.

Viktoria looked up from her phone briefly, having taken over the task of recording the program in her sister's absence. She glanced aside towards the bear, seeing the contemplative look on his face, and a big hand that came up to scratch at his scraggly short-cut beard.

*...I wonder what he's thinking about...?*

"Oh wow, it looks like Yurio absolutely dominated the Short Program." Yuri commented, looking at his phone while Viktor was busy tying the laces on his skates next to him, "He scored 109.16...he's practically 20 points ahead of the next best skater."

"Georgi?"

"Yeah."

"They need some new blood out there besides Yurio." Viktor mused, going back to his laces and pulling the last loops tight before pulling the teal runner-pants overtop.

"Well, your prediction came true too about the fans holding up banners of your score from yesterday." Yuri added, finding a clear picture and turning his phone around to show it, "See?"

"And yours."

Yuri crept up behind his phone and looked over the top of it towards his partner's gaze, only to spot
those blue eyes turning up towards him suddenly. He blinked in surprise, but then lowered the phone to his lap as he turned it off and put it away again, "Yeah, but having my name on the banner is just to put salt in the RSF's wounds...your name is the one that matters out there, since you should technically be there."

"But it goes to show that not all people in Russia think like the RSF upper management does." Viktor pointed out, reaching his arms forward suddenly to hook around his husband's knees, pulling those legs up and turning Yuri towards him as he settled them over his thighs. He twisted in his own seat slightly to more easily face the younger man, and leaned forward to nose him fondly, "And the overwhelming majority of my fans' messages on Instagram have always been positive about you. I actually caught heat that one time last year, after Four Continents, when I posted the two different pictures of us with all the people who met us at Incheon."

"Oh, the one of us kissing and the one right before?" Yuri wondered, his cheeks flushing at the memory of it, though also partly at the fact that Viktor's nuzzling had gone down to his neck, finding that favorite spot of his just under one ear, "Seems like a lifetime ago already..." He said, his voice quieter then, letting himself have that moment to just enjoy the feeling of lips on his skin. He closed his eyes to savor each kiss and nibble, and brought his hand up to hold lightly to the Russian's wrist as he felt those fingers come around the other side of his neck. It eventually slid down the front of his chest though, and up the side of his thigh, siding under the edge of the silver-trimmed costume panel that hung outside of his track-suit. When that hand groped the side of one cheek, even through those many layers, Yuri couldn't help but laugh, and sat up a bit straighter, pulling himself out of his husband's kissing-range, "Just one year ago, I was still getting used to the idea of being intimate with you...now it's something I can't go a single day without."

"I did warn you that you'd be begging for it one day." Viktor laughed, keeping his hand firmly clasped around that curve of backside, "Though I suppose I beg for it, too."

"You get really cranky when you don't get it when you want it." Yuri pointed out, leaning to the side to rest his arm against the back of a chair, even as he raised his other arm forward to weave his fingers through silver hair, and pulled gently to make Viktor come closer again, and returned the soft nuzzling of noses, "I sometimes wonder how you survived those 9 months before we actually started dating, even though we'd exchanged rings before that..."

"It had been a lot longer than just those 9 months since I'd last been with anyone." The Russian explained quietly, letting Yuri have his turn with the teasing, "...But the year that I had to wait, after falling for you in the first place, was indeed a torture. You were quite the flirt when you were drunk."

"You didn't consider getting me drunk again?"

"I did, believe me I did...but you never drank that much, even when I did." Viktor sighed dramatically, pulling his hand back to cross his elbows over his husband's thighs, relaxing against them as Yuri continued that light touch against his skin, "And I wanted you to flirt with me when you were sober anyway. It would've felt more genuine then."

"Like right now?"

The Russian closed his eyes, "Mhmm..." He felt where Yuri put their brows together for a moment, and his patience was rewarded with a kiss...two of them. He cracked his eyes open again when he felt the younger man pulling away a little.

"I do enjoy remembering that I'm doing it." Yuri pointed out, then nearing again to find a third kiss, and staying there for a moment in its warmth. He stayed close even as he pulled back, sliding both of
his arms forward to rest them loosely over his husband's shoulders, "I'd kiss you all the time if I could."

"You should anyway. Nothing it stopping you." Viktor teased, "Not me, anyway."

"Well...I still have to breathe, eat, sleep...skate..." Yuri explained, feeling nose-tip and brow brushing across the man's soft skin as he lowered his face down to press against the side of his neck instead, and relaxing there, "I feel a lot better about the Free Program now... I didn't even realize how bad I'd gotten before. I just want to have fun tonight."

"You do whatever you want, Yuri." The silver legend said quietly, unfolding his left arm to cup his hand around his husband's side, returning the hug as well he could given how he was seated at that moment, "Don't stress over anything. You're good enough for the podium even without needing to try. By the end of the Men's event, we'll be collecting our Gold and Silver, and we can spend the rest of the night relaxing."

"You're not going to take it easy yourself?"

"Me? No way. I have to defend your honor." Viktor laughed, eyes cracked open enough to scan the prep area for Asahi, but not seeing him for the moment, "My nemesis is going up dead last, so I have to be sure to give myself enough of a lead that there's no chance he can catch up. I only scored barely over him in the Short Program."

"Yeah but you did that on purpose."

"Does he have your same kind of stamina?" Viktor wondered then, "To be able to put harder jumps into the second half?"

"The same stamina?" Yuri echoed, "Not that I remember. He actually kind of reminds me of Otabek, in a way...really strong Short Program, but his Free is a bit weak. At least, that's how he used to be...but he never scored over 100 in the SP back then either. Maybe tonight will be different."

"All the more reason to push myself." The silver legend nudged his partner's face up from his neck to get a fourth kiss, "Besides, while my Short Program was done to a song of your choice, my Free is an entirely different beast now. It speaks my heart. It may never get the scores that 'Evoke' did, but the first time I skated it, I skated it with you...and I always imagine you're on the ice with me at the end. That alone means I can't slack off."

"I don't think it's humanly possible for you to slack off out there."

"Probably not." He smiled.

"Thank you, though..." Yuri added, resting his head back down to the man's shoulder, and feeling the second hand come around his side, both going around his back to hug him closer, "I actually really like that you're using your skating to prove your point. ...I remember how much Phichit-kun's show moved you at NHK...maybe yours will move Asahi the same way. It has a good message. Maybe he'll pick up on it."

"If he even shows up in time to watch it." Viktor said, though shrugging a little, "He'll probably see yours since you're close to the end, but mine's close enough to the middle that he may just miss it."

"I hope he doesn't. I want him to see it." Yuri explained, lifting his head then and sitting up a bit more normally, pulling his arms back to let his fingers cling loosely to the front of his husband's white Olympic jacket, sliding one down the center of the lettering over his chest. He kept his eyes down for a moment, lifting them to look straight into those blue irises before him, "I want him to
watch you, and see how wrong he was. Saying how you're only using me, or that you don't really care... That you preyed on me like the fact that I'm a fan of yours means I can't be rational around you, or that I'd let you do whatever you wanted to me, even if I didn't actually want to..."

"He came dangerously close to saying something that I would've popped him in the mouth for, if I'd been there."

Yuri nodded hesitantly, "I know... Me too... I'm glad he didn't say it, in the end..."

The relative quiet of the arena was broken then, with the music of the Ladies' medaling ceremony beginning, and the audience starting to cheer again. The duo lifted their heads to hear it, then looked back at one another.

"That's it. Let's go watch." Yuri suggested, trying to get off topic at that point, "I don't want to spend all night thinking about him. You worked too hard for me to just let him get the better of me anyway."

"You deserve to enjoy yourself anyway." Viktor pointed out, pulling his hands back to pat his husband's legs and feel them getting pulled off of his own, and they rose up to standing together, "There's only a few things I enjoy more than watching you having fun on the ice."

"Yeah?"

"Well sure...watching you having fun on me is pretty great." The Russian laughed, earning a brand new flush on his partner's cheeks. He held an elbow up between them, and waited for Yuri to take it before starting to walk towards rink-side.

"For a minute there, I thought you were going to say something about watching me skate naked, but then I remembered that I haven't actually done that yet."

"Yet."

That just made Yuri look down and smile nervously, fully embarrassed at the idea, "...Yet."

"Wow~!"
The Ladies event wrapped up cleanly, with the three winners getting their medals, and skating 'round the rink for their victory lap. As expected, the two women who had already been selected for the Olympic team were part of that evening's podium line-up, leaving the third to nervously wait until the Men's event was over before she'd know if she'd gotten the 5th and last Team Japan spot.

One of the other hopefuls was watching from the audience, but the wait for him was even more intense. Not only would he have to wait until the end of the Men's event to find out if he'd gotten the spot, he'd have to wait until the end of the Men's event just to skate. Asahi kept his head down, and covered, from where he watched. The only truly recognizable thing about him were the two teal tails of hair that hung from the front and sides of his face. With the rest of his hair covered by a hoodie though, it wasn't easy to tell if he was truly himself, or just a fan that adopted his style, and he was able to watch the event unbothered.

As the Ladies made their way to rink-side, Asahi pulled his phone out, checking both the time, and to see if any messages or phone-calls had come through that he'd somehow missed. It was nearly 6:00pm by then, and nothing new had turned up in his inbox, which gave him a feeling of relief, though it was still tainted by the anxiety of not being completely sure.

He nearly jumped out of his skin though when his phone beeped anyway, right as he lifted his eyes to look away and put it back. It was a text from his coach, asking if anything had come up. He thumbed back that he'd heard nothing.

[I think it's safe to say, then, that you're in the clear.]

Asahi looked at the words for a moment, looking down at the ice as a Zamboni was coming out to resurface it before the Men's practice period could begin. His eyes turned back down to the screen, and he typed, [Yeah, I guess so.]

[Are you still in the audience?] Sayoko wondered.

[Yeah.]

[You should come back and eat something so you have time to let it settle before you skate. You haven't eaten since this morning.]

[I know. I haven't had an appetite.]

[Then what are you waiting for?]

[I guess I just want the first Men's group to go out.] He answered hesitantly, [The JSF wouldn't wait until it's practically my turn to tell me I'm not skating, right? My name is still on the list for the moment...]

[I think they would've called you hours ago if they were going to pull you at all. They wouldn't embarrass you with waiting until you're here just to tell you to leave.]

[Come down and eat something. It'll be 2 hours before you can do your FP anyway. You don't need
to take unnecessary risks on getting food-cramps or nausea in the middle of your show.]

[...Alright... I'm coming...] He answered, clicking his phone off and pushing up from his seat. He nudged past the knees of a few other spectators before arriving at the stairs that lead down, and only then pulled the hood back, stepping towards the railing on the lower level. He could hear the confused and surprised whispers of people behind him, realizing who he was and that he'd been sitting with them the entire time, but he didn't stop to look back at them. Instead, he just stepped up to that banister and curled his fingers around it, looking across the ice as the Zamboni went by, leaving a slick shine in its wake where hot water had been sprayed to fill in the cracks left by the previous event. What was once dull and frosty, streaked with scratches and toe-pick dust, was left shimmering and lustrous like a frozen mirror.

A familiar voice suddenly caught his ear as someone by rink-side laughed, and Asahi turned to spot Yuri and Viktor with their backs to him, stepping back towards the curtain. Viktor had been the one to think something was funny, but to Asahi's relief, the Russian didn't see him, and he stepped away from the railing to leave the stands, a nervous flutter in his gut.

Irony being what it was, Minako spotted the black and green chicken-butt hairdo moments before it disappeared under the stands. Acting more on instinct than rational thought, she found herself moving on auto-pilot, and rose up from her seat to go after the skater. There were a few other fans who'd had the same idea, but they paused near the bottom of the stairs, where she spotted that they had caught the man's attention. Minako backed up quickly and out of sight again, watching quietly as the small group got their autographs and photos, and let the skater leave. She followed quietly, weaving through the small group, making sure not to lose sight of the man, or get caught by him.

That was nearly impossible though. Asahi had barely made it to the main hall around the underside of the arena before he'd stopped and was staring right at her, forcing Minako to flail and yelp in surprise. She covered her mouth and steadied herself so she wouldn't fall, but those eyes were still on her.

[...What do you want? Why are you following me? Haven't you done enough?]

The ballerina pulled her hands away, and raised them defensively, [Ahhh...sorry. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I'm not even entirely sure why I came after you either...I just saw you in the lower rows and kind of started walking without even thinking.] She explained, though not really. Asahi was clearly skeptical of her motives, so Minako tried to relax and reaffirm that she was harmless, [I guess I just wanted to see how you were holding up. Even I wasn't sure what Yuri would do...but if you're here, then it means he didn't do anything.]

Asahi looked around the small connecting-hall, checking for any nearby ears, but then closed his eyes briefly and shook his head, [I haven't heard anything until now, anyway. My coach hasn't either.]

[Well, that's good then.] Minako nodded, [I'm looking forward to seeing your show. I hope you get picked for the Olympic team.]

The skater cocked a brow at that, [...Why? Haven't I caused enough problems for all of you? Being in PyeongChang would just start it all up again.]

[I don't think so.] The ballerina shrugged, [Yuri may be a worry-wart, but this is a done-deal to Viktor.]

Asahi turned towards the exit, ears caught by the sound of a few people coming through the entry way as they made their way up to the seating area. A handful of them recognized the skater and were
surprised to see him, but they were quickly pushed through by those who'd spotted Minako, thinking it was probably not the best time to be excitable. The older woman just kept her eyes on Asahi, taking a few steps towards him as the spectators passed by them both.

[I'm really not sure why you care so much.] He said quietly, [What I did obviously hurt Yuri a lot more than I meant it to.]

[And I saw that Yuri wasn't the only one who was hurting.] She answered simply, keeping her voice low as well, [Yuri is the son of a life-long friend of mine. That's why I was at the meeting this morning with Viktor...I'm not just some weird fan that follows them around.]

[I got that.]

[I guess I just wanted to say that I understand where you were coming from, given what you said to us. Life around those two can be complicated, but you're also not the first person to turn up from either of their pasts that had unresolved feelings for one of them.] Minako said, putting her hands into her coat pockets and standing more casually, [And they're not perfect people either. The last thing Yuri ever wanted to do was hurt anyone, so he's still reeling a bit from what happened between you two yesterday. Even though a lot changed in his life since the last time either of you really spoke to each other, I guess he didn't expect that you changed, too. I really don't think he expected that conversation yesterday to be what it was, and he feels terrible for having trapped you.]

The skater stayed quiet for a while after that. He just turned on a heel and started stepping off, though the fact that he hadn't made any effort to tell Minako not to follow meant that she did, keeping pace with him wordlessly. She followed him right into the prep area, even waiting in line with him as he found the lunch-dinner he'd told his coach he would find for himself. It wasn't anything substantial though, just a bunch of snacks and a bottle of juice.

By the time Asahi had found somewhere to sit, the warm-up period for the first group had already finished, and the very first skater of the Free Program was being called out. Minako pulled a steel chair from nearby and set it close to the small round table, sitting across from the younger man.

It's weird that he hasn't said a word in the last few minutes. I wonder if this is what Yuri meant when he said it seemed like Asahi never really paid much attention? He's definitely not much of a conversationalist...

[So tell me about him.] She tried, re-breaking the ice, [About Riku.]

Asahi kept his eyes down, [...I've been trying to figure out how to do that for two years.]

[How come?]

He shrugged, [I guess...I never expected anyone to ask me. But in the off chance someone, one day, did...I had a bunch of different little pre-planned explanations, depending on who it was.]

[Which one would you tell me?]

[I'm waffling between the story about how we were good friends, and the one about how we were rink-mates.]

[You don't have one to tell about how you were involved?] Minako wondered curiously.

He shook his head, bringing up the mouthpiece of the drink up to his lip, [It was never a story I thought I'd tell, even if someone asked about him. I never really let anyone ask questions like that anyway.]
That gave the skater pause, and he pulled the bottle away again, setting it down on the small tabletop. [...He really laid it all out, didn't he.] He grumbled, half-deadpanning the woman sitting across from him. Asahi sighed and sat back, looking around the area nervously, and making a mental note about how close or distant other people were in the immediate area. Music out in the main part of the arena was easily drowning out most other conversations, but being in such a public space made it nerve-wracking. He tapped a finger on the edge of the table, unsure what to say, but then leveled a look at the woman, [Why should I even say anything? Were you set up to do this?]

[Set up?] Minako echoed, laughing once, [No one set me up. I just saw you pull your hood off and felt compelled to go after you. You're not the first or only person to be at the receiving end of one of Viktor's bad moods. I was caught in the crossfire just two weeks ago. Viktor had been really stressed out by Yuri's accident, and a bunch of petty little things were starting to snowball into something that was getting out of control. He rather publicly called out a list of people who'd been causing him grief, one of whom was his own uncle.]

[But not you.]

[Not specifically, no.] She shrugged her shoulders up a little, and stretched her legs out, crossing her ankles, [But I...was engaged to that uncle.] She explained, a bit more hesitant than before, but reached into her jacket to pull up the necklace where the silver-white engagement ring still hung, [I still was, in that moment, and some of the things Viktor said made me think. I ended up calling it off later that night. Things still haven't settled down...so I completely understand if Viktor's words sting for a while.]

[Viktor doesn't mean anything to me.] Asahi said simply, looking at her evenly, [I'm singularly upset at the fact that Yuri took what I did so badly. I thought...he'd just take what I did at face value and then forget it ever happened.]

[That's impossible. He would've taken it badly regardless of his personal circumstances.] Minako pointed out, [He's an emotional pack-rat...hoarding everything in his head until it bubbles over into a panic that he can't control anymore. I don't think I've ever seen him have an attack so severe that he'd passed out from it though, at least not until last night, when Viktor had to carry him to the medic's station.]

The skater lowered his head, brow furrowed with guilt.

[It was right in the middle of someone's show, too, so I can only imagine how the guy on the ice felt when the audience was suddenly making a lot of noise out of worry and confusion, eyes on them rather than him.] She went on, only to lean forward and park her elbows on the edge of the table just like the man in front of her, [I know you think Viktor's only in it for himself...but I can assure you, there are only two things in this world that Viktor cares about more than skating...and that's his dog back home, and Yuri. I don't know what else Viktor can do to prove his love and loyalty than getting kicked out of the Russian Skating Federation because of it. That was his whole life for years, and he wouldn't even tell anyone about what happened until after Yuri's big 'welcome home' celebration after taking Gold at the Grand Prix. Yuri is his whole world, and he didn't want to ruin the night by taking the focus away.]

[That just doesn't make sense.] Asahi growled, reaching his hands up to ruffle his hair in confusion, feeling the edge of a frustration-headache settling in, [Of all the people in the world that Viktor could pick, why Yuri?] 

[Why not Yuri?]
That made the skater go quiet for a moment, shaking his head where he still held it in his hands, [...] He sighed, lowering his hands again to wedge them protectively under his arms, [I wanted him for so long, never making a move because I thought he'd be repulsed by my advances. Maybe I could accept it if Yuri had turned up married to some woman he'd met...but Viktor Nikiforov? Why am I the only person who finds that so utterly impossible and ridiculous?]

[It's like I said earlier today...it took Viktor the better part of a year to convince Yuri to go out with him.] Minako explained, raising one hand up to rest her jaw in the palm, looking forward more casually, [So it's not like Viktor just showed up and Yuri just immediately fell into his waiting arms or anything. There's more nuance than that... Yuri and I both thought for a long time that Viktor was just using the coaching thing as an excuse for why he was taking time away from competition. Turns out, it was actually an excuse Viktor used to get closer to Yuri. He was also starting to get a bit worried about his dog's age, and how much time he was away from home. So he packed up Makkachin and flew to Japan...and Viktor got to be with the both of them.]

It was still a lot to process. Asahi struggled to wrap his mind around it all.

[If you knew about some of the things those boys have been through over the last year, there'd be no doubt in your mind that they're devoted to each other. I know it seems strange, considering the way they both were before that, but they really do bring out the best in one another. Viktor even gave up his Gold in Detroit for Yuri.]

Asahi raised his face a little, looking confused, [You said Yuri won it.]

[It's his officially, yes. The record will reflect that event as though Viktor never competed, but he did. It's just...Viktor was so impressed by Yuri's determination to try and win it in spite of the accident, that when Yuri ended up getting Silver, Viktor decided to step down, so he could award Yuri with the Gold himself. ...The bunch of us joked at one point that Viktor was like a Russian dragon, hoarding all the Gold medals to himself...so the fact that he gave up both his GP Final Gold and his place in the RSF for Yuri's sake...can you really imagine the selfish, self-centered Viktor in your imagination giving anything up for anyone?] He shook his head lightly and looked down again, bringing his hands up together under his nose, elbows staying on the table.

[It's not a failure on your part that Yuri ended up with Viktor in the end, Asahi.] Minako explained, daring to reach her free hand forward to set it gently over one of the skater's forearms, [You and him just weren't meant to be. Which is why I want you to tell me about Riku...it seems like he meant a lot to you.] That earned a nod.

[Everything I know right now comes from Yuri though...I'd like to hear about him from you, if you're willing to share.] Minako added, feeling a subtle tremble even through the thick layers of the man's cold-temperature gear, [How did you meet?] Asahi swallowed nervously, drew in a breath, and cleared his throat, [...] He...joined the Tokyo Skate Club a while after I did. He knew of me, and kind of became my shadow; always wanting to practice at the same time as me, even though there were multiple sessions...always following me around. He...actually kind of annoyed me at first. He was really nosey, and kind of blunt...but I saw how everyone else reacted well to that kind of thing. He was friendly with practically everyone...but there was something about me that caught his attention more than the rest. He kind of zeroed in on me, like I was some project he took on. I even had the naïve idea once to try and use Yuri's methods to try
and dissuade him; talking about something to make it seem like there was no room in my heart or mind for anything else. But he...saw right through it, and instead of getting discouraged, he got angry about it. That anger only fueled his determination. I wouldn't be the only person he didn't get what he wanted from.]

[Ah...so he's the one who made the first move.] Minako surmised.

[Yeah...you could say it like that.]

[What would you call it?]

[A stern talking-to.]

[Do tell.] She mused, keenly curious.

Asahi thought back...the memory was fresh in his mind after the Short Program. All of it was. He drew another quick breath to gather his nerves, [Most everyone had left the Club compound for the weekend...it was Skate Canada two years ago. Those who weren't at the event were taking time off. But...I had no reason to leave, and Riku found out, so he stayed to keep me company. We were watching the Free Program...Viktor had won Gold like he always does, and Yuri had taken Silver, putting him and Viktor on the podium together.]

[Ah yeah, I remember watching that event. The look on Yuri's face when he got called onto the ice and stepped up next to Viktor was priceless. The hand-shake Viktor gave him after was great, too.] Minako recalled fondly, [I'm sure his Detroit friends never let him hear the end of it.]

[...Probably...] Asahi nodded, but didn't let his mind linger on the thought, [I had grumbled something similar at the time...and Riku pointed out that he thought I had feelings for Yuri. It turned into something of an argument where I refused to admit it, and he kept taking my denials as confirmation...it really kind of made me mad. But then he said something that'll stick with me forever...]

[What's that?]

[He said I talked about Yuri with a tone in my voice like I was a widower.] He explained, feeling a soreness starting to cramp in his throat, [I remember exactly how he said it when I asked what he meant... He said, it's the person left behind when one half of a married couple dies. They get stuck in the past, never wanting to move forward, because doing so is like admitting that loved one is gone forever.' To hear it like that...it really kind of jarred everything loose in my head that had been welded in place for so long. I didn't want to admit that Yuri and I would never have anything, because it hurt too much to think it was over before anything ever began.]

[Yeah...unrequited love can be hard to deal with. At least Yuri wasn't there to rub it in without even knowing.] Minako suggested.

[...I guess so.] Asahi sighed quietly, pulling his hands down to his lap, and lowered his face down again. [Riku argued his case after that, and basically suggested this ludicrous idea that 'if you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with.' He thought he could win me over if I just let him try, and said that if nothing else, maybe being with him for a while might help me get over Yuri, and get on with my life. So I agreed... Part of me had been wanting to get it over with for so long anyway. To let Riku start things, it didn't feel like it was my fault that things didn't work out...or that I was giving up on Yuri. I was just letting him go. It...was better that way.]

[And it worked?]
Asahi nodded, [It took a long time, but...in the end...yeah. I couldn't stand to be open about us though. I was...still so ashamed of it, of myself, that I couldn't bear to let anyone know.]  

[What were you so ashamed of?]  

[Everything...] He sighed, reaching one hand up to rub an eye against the underside of his wrist, [...] Everyone I ever knew growing up was really... [...] He struggled to find the right word amidst the growing knot in his throat, [...] Conservative? Old fashioned... That there was an order to things, and a reason for why things are the way they are. That there's a reason why people are man and woman, and that each had their role to play, and we should be grateful for it.]  

[Hmmmm...?] Minako started, [Your family would disapprove of me then, too.]  

[...Why?] Asahi raised his head up nervously.  

[I'm old enough to be your mom, but in all my life, I never fulfilled the supposed purpose I was made for, following your family's logic. Never became a wife, or a home-maker, or a mother. My kids were always someone else's kids, even Yuri. I had things that I wanted to do, and all the rest of that stuff would only get in the way or hold me back.] She answered quietly, raising her hands to lace her fingers together, looking on at the skater over them, [Was Riku the first person you were ever with?]  

[...The first guy...] He explained apprehensively, [I tried to please my family by letting them arrange things with girls they approved of. I have three older brothers who are all married and successful...but then there's me, the baby brother with nothing to be proud of and nothing to show for all the time I wasted. But things with me never worked out with those girls, and I just devoted myself to my sport, hoping they'd just leave me alone. I think they gave up eventually. They let me do my skating and focused all their energy on what my brothers are doing. I could be the secret family shame that no one ever had to acknowledge, because I was almost never around. Staying back in Juniors for Yuri...was especially hard...because I wanted to get out of Imari and away from all that stress, but I didn't want to leave him. When I couldn't take it anymore, I went to Tokyo, but I swore I'd get Yuri a place there so he could move up to Seniors with me. It...was devastating, when I went back and found out he'd already left...gone to Detroit without a word.]  

[Hmm...]  

[Being in Tokyo made things a lot better...] Asahi explained, [It's probably the only reason I ever accepted Riku's offer. It...felt like freedom... I wasn't being watched all the time, and no one cared what I did. So when Riku came along...and after that first time...it was more than just getting over Yuri. It was like I could be myself for once.]  

[So all the stuff about you being super private and never asking too much about others...?]  

[A side effect of being a shame to my family. I didn't want anyone else to be dragged into it, so I never told anyone anything. In all these years...you're the first person I've ever admitted all this to.] He answered, keeping his eyes down, [I'm not even sure why I'm saying anything. Maybe I'm surrendering... I have nothing left to lose. I've already lost everything I ever cared about. What's my dignity, too?] He reached his hand up again to rub his nose on a sleeve, [I'm just so numb...and what isn't numb is hurting...]  

Minako watched the skater for a moment, unsure how to respond at first. There was one thing she still wanted to ask though, and she dared to voice the words, [Yuri said that after Riku died, you shut yourself down, and never let yourself grieve for him. Have you ever gone to his grave?]  

Asahi shook his head, [I feel bad saying it now, but...I cut him out of my life and put myself into
something of an exile. I went back to live with my parents for a while, to recover from the accident...but Imari is clear across the country from where Riku's ashes were laid to rest. He's from Wakkanai.]

[Oh...wow... That's as far north as Japan goes before it's Russia.]

[...Yeah.]

[I guess it's a bit out of the way, but...maybe you could go after Nationals.] Minako suggested, [The accident happened almost 2 years ago to the day, now...]

[...I don't...know where his grave is...] Asahi explained, the knot in his throat becoming quite painful then, [...I'm...not sure I'd ever find him...]

[What about Riku's family? Maybe they can help.] She wondered, [You...don't even have to tell them anything beyond the fact that you and him were friends, if you don't want.]

[...Y-yeah...]

[You need closure, Asahi.] Minako went on, [This whole thing is torturing you. Paying your respects would do a lot of good, I think. Riku's spirit would be glad to see you make that journey.]

He managed a nod, but wasn't sure if he was just acknowledging her words or agreeing to carry out the task.

Minako seemed to think along the same lines, and rose up from her seat, stepping around the small table to set a hand on the back of one shoulder, [Gather up your stuff and come sit with me for a while. I don't want you to be alone.]

[...What...what if they see me with you...? Won't that make them mad?]

She just smiled at that, [I'm a big girl and I do what I want...and I want you to sit with me to watch the Men's Free Program, at least until after Yuri's done. That'll leave you about 20 minutes before your turn. Okay?]

He just blinked up at her in confusion, but for lack of any come-backs or excuses, nodded again and did as she said; he picked up the few snacks he'd bought, and the juice bottle, and followed the ballerina back into the audience.

Chapter End Notes

Please don’t ask me if I saw the joke of a movie teaser. Yes, I saw it. No, I hated it. No, I will not discuss it. I already said my piece on the FB page. I’m done with it.
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED SIXTY EIGHT

Coming in from rink-side as the event began, with the first group going out for the 6-minute warm-up, was like trying to walk up-river in a strong current. The two skaters squeezed up against a wall to get through while the rest of the mob went out, flooding onto the ice. Once they were clear, it was easy to get around; the prep area seemed to have been emptied by the deluge.

"I guess everyone else is either watching from the stands or taking their time getting here." Yuri commented, spotting only a handful of people. Some of them were stragglers from the end of the Ladies program, but even then, the gear from that group had been left behind. "...Or maybe they're all here and just in the audience right now."

"With only one spot on the Singles' Team up for grabs, it's kind of a big deal." Viktor commented, "In Russia, people would stick around all day to find out who got picked."

"I wonder if Yurio's anxious about it?"

"Inwardly, maybe...but he'd never show it." The silver legend mused, "But considering the competition, without me there, it's all but certain he's going to get picked."

"He really was the perfect age to join Seniors last year." Yuri added.

They wandered slowly around the underside of the arena, listening for the start of the first Free Program. So long as the warm-up period was going on though, there was little to do but wait.

"I kind of wish I had his confidence, at least at that time in my career. I feel like I'm almost playing catch-up, since this will be my first Olympics, and I'm already of an age where less prominent skaters are retiring." Yuri said, something of a sigh on his voice, but not letting it be too obvious.

"You're Japan's superstar now though." Viktor reassured, "I can't remember a time before where the names of any Japanese skaters in the line-up really caught my attention. There'd be a good one from America now and then, but usually it was European skaters and Russians who dominated the limelight."

"And by 'Europeans and Russians' you mean 'Viktor Nikiforov and some people whose names I can't remember'"

"I was trying to be discreet."

Yuri shook his head and laughed quietly, "Oh well..."

"You're going to go this year and win Gold on your first shot." Viktor stated firmly, looking quite happy about saying so, "And together, we'll own the Team Event, too."

"I've been meaning to ask about that, but I keep forgetting..."

"Oh?" The Russian paused, skate-guards thumping once more before he waited for his partner to look back at him, "What's to ask? Even if my nemesis makes it, he's nowhere near good enough to bump either of us from the Team Event."

Yuri shook his head, "I wasn't thinking about that. I've had it in my head since a week ago that you'd
do the Short and I'd do the Free component."

"Mh...agreed. But?"

"We have a month and a half to get ready for it." He started, "We're each pulling one old program out for our individual competitions...do we want to pull more old programs for the rest, or make something completely new?"

Viktor blinked, but then pulled his hands back, one crossing over his chest to hold his side as the other elbow rested against it, a finger pressed to his lip in thought. He hummed quietly to himself as he considered it, "Well, logistically, it would be easier to bring back old programs...we're ready for them with costumes and such...we'd just have to practice them and refine the rough edges. But..."

"But?" Yuri echoed.

One eye cracked open towards the younger skater, "...We could do something entirely new if you wanted to. It's only one program for each of us. If push comes to shove and we just can't, then we'll each just do this season's SP and FS for the Team Skate, since they correspond. There's also one other hitch..."

"What's that...?"

"Yurio."

Yuri was the one that blinked then, "What about him?"

"It's more likely than not that he'll be going to PyeongChang to represent Russia. But this is the last weekend that Yakov and Lilia are his coach and choreographer. If he wants something new for the Games...it'll be me and Minako he goes to, since I agreed to be at least half of that new team."

Yuri just made a coy face, "It's the Olympics though. I'm sure he'd understand your conflict of interest if you declined to choreograph something for him brand new. You were willing to admit that'd be an issue if you were still skating for Russia, that you couldn't be my coach at the Games, too."

Viktor paused, but then smiled, "...Oh...right, of course."

"You forgot already."

The Russian just quickly threw his arms over his spouse's shoulders and pulled him close, nuzzling the side of his head against Yuri's rather exaggeratedly, "I love you~"

"Yeah yeah..."

[That concludes the warm-up period...all skaters please exit the rink.]

Yuri glanced up, "You wanna find seats and watch for now?"

"We should find Minako and sit with her. See the fans all around her lose their minds when we shower her with attention for no reason whatsoever."

"Oh! That sounds fun actually. Even though it's just us, that's exactly the kind of thing she always wishes would happen."

"And it's not like the people around her know we're all acquainted."
Yuri rubbed his hands together deviously, "Let's do it."

Up in the stands, it was difficult for Minako and her charge to find seats again after having gotten up earlier. The arena was packed with people, forcing her and Asahi to stand on a pathway between the different levels of the stands, leaning against a railing just behind the last row of the lower tier.

["Eh...standing isn't so bad."] She tried to see the positive, ["It's easier this way, to wave flags around at international events and still be able to see the ice."]

[I guess so.] Asahi tepidly agreed, pinching the front of his hoodie closed in front of his nose, hoping no one would recognize him again. They were on the other side of the arena from where they'd been before, so anyone who noticed him earlier would be too far away to notice him again. Still, the longer he stood, the more he could feel his stomach growling, and he knew he'd have to let the hoodie open up a bit so he could nibble on the snacks he'd bought. [Now that I'm thinking about it. ...I...don't think you've ever actually told me who you are. Other than the fact that you're not just some weird fan that follows Yuri around.]

[Oh!] Minako jumped up and looked rather embarrassed, but then covered her mouth in case her surprise was loud. When she was sure no one cared, she pulled her hands back again and leaned closer, [Sorry! ...I guess I should've thought of that. I'm Minako Okukawa. I was Yuri's ballet teacher back before he ever set foot on the ice. I went to school with his mom when we were kids.]

[...Oh, I guess that explains why you guys seem so close. You must live in Hasetsu, too.]

[Yeah, I see those boys almost every day. I was there when Viktor first turned up and saw with my own eyes how everything changed over the months.]

Asahi sighed, [I'd like to think you don't have to defend their relationship to me all the time.]

[That depends. Does me talking about it make you uncomfortable or is it just annoying?] 

[...I don't want to offend you.]

[I asked the question. What kind of fool would I be if I got offended by you answering honestly?] 

[It's annoying.]

[Then it's working.] Minako smiled, feeling a buzz in her pocket, [I want you to be able to leave this event with as much closure on Yuri's side as you possibly can. That way, you can focus on yourself and your future, not the past. You have a lot of healing to do...the less drags you down, the better.]

Asahi turned his eyes, looking past the rim of his dark-colored hood, [...Why are you so concerned about me anyway? You only just barely met me and it was under the worst possible circumstances. I'm surprised you're not chasing me out of here with a torch and pitchfork.]

The ballerina was typing something into her phone, but then pocketed the device and crossed her arms over the railing again, [I guess...it's for a lot of reasons. Plenty of crazy things have happened between me and the others lately, but we work through it. I've had to come to terms with how the things I want may hurt Viktor, and have tried to make adjustments to my plans to soften the blow.]

[The engagement to his uncle...?] 

She nodded, eyes on the young skater on the ice, [There are aspects to all that, that I won't discuss...but I'm hopeful about Yuri's future. I've always seen him as someone who would be able to overcome any obstacle that comes his way.]

[He's not just another member of his uncle's troupe, you know? He's his successor. His uncle will step back and, as of this point, Yuri will be the one to lead Hasetsu.]

Minako's eyes widened, [Then...that's why you're so worried?]

[...He's their prince...and it's my job to make sure he's safe...especially as he steps into his uncle's shoes.]

Asahi smiled, [I see. I thought of it two...no, three times already.]

[Just...just no easy breezy, is it?] 

[No, it's not.]
with most other people...so you'll have to forgive me on that end for not being more specific. But, I was part of something that cut Viktor particularly deep. For a while, I thought he hated me, and was just putting up with me because I was around first. But I realized that for all the things I did that might've hurt him, there's still some fundamental fact about life... She turned her head towards the taller figure next to her, [Sometimes you just have to do things for yourself that make you happy, even if it isn't something others will like. So...that's why I'm concerned for you. You did something that you felt you needed to do in order to close that chapter of your life, and I can't fault you for that. I don't agree with what you did, clearly...it caused a tremendous amount of pain to people I love. But I understand. I guess maybe I'm just hoping you get a better outcome than I have so far.] Brown eyes just watched her in slight confusion, but before he could respond in any way, Asahi found his attention grabbed by the excited cries of some people in the audience behind him. Initially thinking they were in recognition of himself, he quickly realized that it was-

"MINAKO-SENSEI!"

"WAHH!"

Viktor and Yuri were on her like she was the celebrity, and she flailed from the surprise of their mob-hug. Other members of the audience were laughing and cheering at the skaters' sudden appearance, even if their affection for the supposed-stranger made no sense.

"YOU SAID YOU JUST WANTED TO KNOW WHAT DIRECTION TO WAVE IN WHEN YOU GOT ON THE ICE." She argued frantically through their laughing, trying to get herself loose from their overbearing affection. Of course, her flushed face gave away that she secretly rather enjoyed it, especially given how public it was. But, just as soon as it happened, she regained her senses, and suddenly opened her eyes wide, looking around to get her bearings and figure out where Asahi was.

To Minako's surprise...he was still standing there, albeit utterly paralyzed.

"We had nothing better to do, so we figured we'd come pester you." Viktor teased, reaching up to try putting her hair back into a more neat arrangement.

Yuri backed up from her other side and leaned forward on the railing, paying no heed to the awkward figure standing just behind where his husband was standing, "Sorry to scare you. We managed to sneak pretty close from the second tier before people started making noise about us."

"Yeah, you two are a regular pair of lions...yeesh." She fanned herself to calm down.

"Gomen~!" Viktor mused, squeezing more between the ballerina and the stranger nearby so he could lean forward on the railing and get a better look at the rink, "The view from up here isn't actually too bad. Do you mind if we hang out until group 2 goes out?"

"Do I mind?" She echoed, almost mockingly, "Of course not, but-" Yuri came around from behind her, and suddenly both skaters were between her and Asahi, though neither of them knew it. She gave a strange look, "I...wouldn't want to distract the whole nearby area with you two. No one will watch the performances if they're too busy looking back to gawk at you boys."

Yuri made an awkward effort to latch onto his partner's back and look over a shoulder, but given his smaller stature, he barely made it 2/3rds of the way forward-tilted frame, so he just held there with a wry grin, "I guess we do attract a lot of attention." He set his cheek against the man's jacket and looked around, past Minako, and spotted nearly every face looking back at him, many with their smartphones up, "Maybe we should've put on disguises. My glasses alone don't cut
Viktor playfully wiggled his back end, swaying Yuri from side to side as he held on, "No, you don't quite have Clark Kent's legendary ability to completely hide his Superman alter-ego with just a pair of plastic frames."

"Alas."

"You two dorks are going to start bumping into people if you're not careful." Minako warned, looking a bit nervous as their antics were coming dangerously close to knocking Asahi over...but that almost made it worse.

"Oh..." Viktor realized, standing straighter and pulling his partner inward as he rose, and turned his head to the left, seeing the tightly-cinched hoodie around the head of the man standing next to him, "Sorry. I hope we're not bothering you."

The secretly-panicking skater shook his head, then went back to his paralyzed trembling as Viktor smiled at him and turned away again, *I'm gonna have a heart attack standing here like this...or twelve...*

The Russian just pulled Yuri forward and swapped their places, letting the man relax against the railing before taking his customary place behind him. One arm went around Yuri's waist to settle a hand on his stomach, the other curled under the opposite arm to hook his fingers to the front of that shoulder, his chin on the other, the front of his body pressed to the back of his partner's, "I think this works out better. I'm too big for you to hold onto like that and still hope to actually see anything." He cocked his left leg forward a little, pivoting casually on the heel-guard of his blade.

Yuri sighed, but seemed content either way, especially as he felt his spouse turn his head slightly to kiss the edge of his ear, "Guess so. What number are we on now? We'll have to head back down after 11 probably. We already put our skates on, so..."

"This is just the 5th skater." Minako answered, trying to see past the duo. She thought she could see Asahi's legs at least, in the gap under where Yuri leaned, but those legs were walking away suddenly. The figure turned and started heading down the stairs towards the lower level's exit, and Minako gave a slightly sad face as the man left.

"...You okay?" Yuri wondered, getting her attention back, "You looked upset all of a sudden."

"Huh?" She blinked strongly and shook her head, but resigned herself to the new situation and found a place next to the two men on the railing, leaning forward on it as well, "No, it's fine. ...So, have you seen your little admirer yet today?"

Finding the sanctuary of the halls beneath the arena, Asahi let himself inhale air again finally, leaning against a wall until his heart no longer threatened to burst inside his chest. He undid the tight strings of the hood and opened it up a little, letting his teal bangs tumble out as he caught his breath.

*That was too close...they just popped up out of nowhere. If either of them saw me talking to her, who knows what they'd think...of me, or of her...*

He sucked in a sharp breath and tried to calm his rattled mind.

*I have to get my head back... I should probably go find Coach Nagisa, too... She'll chew me out if she doesn't watch me eat something with her own eyes.*
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED SIXTY NINE

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That's it for the first half of the Men's Group. Morooka said, looking over the ice from the JSF Official media table, Oda next to him as always, [There'll be a short intermission to resurface the ice, and then the final group will head out for their warm-up period.]

The next group will be the most hotly anticipated of Saturday's event. Oda added, [With its conclusion, we'll be finding out - hopefully - who in the Singles category will be chosen to fill the last slot on the Japanese Olympic Team...and not only that, but the real heavy-hitters of the Men's Singles are going to be coming out. Rising star Yuri Nikiforov, returning favorite Asahi Saito, and newcomer to the JSF, Viktor Nikiforov...it's going to be a nail-biting event, to say the least. All three are neck-and-neck coming out of the Short Program yesterday.]

And I'm sure Viktor is caught between wanting to make a good impression and not wanting to completely eclipse our native sons. It's an awkward spot to be in. What do you think he'll do?

Hmmm...hard to know. He's currently in the lead by only a few points, but he's always had very
strong Free Programs. On the other hand, though...he's really brought Yuri to the fore by tapping into that seemingly-endless reserve of stamina. The both of them have both held the World Record for the Free Skate in the last year, but Viktor did retire his record-breaking program after NHK.]

Morooka laughed, [I'm not even sure it's fair to count that program. He skated like a man possessed that day.]

[Seems like all the best things from Viktor come from or happen in Japan, wouldn't you agree?] Oda mused, turning towards his co-host.

[Absolutely!]

Yuri swung his arms around in circles, stretching his chest and back a bit while the Zamboni worked its magic in the rink. A hum of energy was starting to buzz in the prep area where the remaining skaters were gathered, surrounded by those who had already gone out and were anxiously awaiting the final show.

Viktor had his phone out, recording a video for Instagram, and offered his own sort of narration to the thing, as though he himself were a sportscaster, "...As you can see, everyone's pretty psyched for the second group to go out. There was one Olympic contender in the first, but there's one more with us, plus Yuri and I, so it's bound to be interesting. I can't wait to see how everyone does. Right, Yuri?"

"Eh?" He lifted his head, not having expected the camera to be on him just then, but there it was, and Yuri waved nervously, "Oh...ah, yes!"

"Ahh...he's so adorable. I'm so lucky~!" Viktor smirked, mostly to himself, but then turned the phone around and waved as well, "Wish us all luck! Davai to my Russian friends back in Moscow going into their own Free Skate later tonight! And spasibo to all my fans who've been so great and supportive with all these changes!" He suddenly put one finger against his lip and gave a sneaky wink behind his bangs, "Maybe we'll see all of you much sooner than the Winter Games. Bye~!"

Yuri watched as his husband rather-proudly clicked off the recording and started writing the post that would go online with it, "You're that sure we're going to Euros?"

"I did say maybe." Viktor teased, reaching his left arm out to the side to find his partner's back, continuing to type with just the one thumb, but then looked over as well, "Are you that unsure about us visiting my papa beforehand? We could skip it. It's not like he knows we're even thinking about it."

"...Unless Minako tells Mikhail, and Mikhail tells Kon, who is literally right there with him right now." The Russian just made some sputtering noises, "I've thought so little about my uncle lately that you'll have to forgive me for not even considering him as part of this equation."

Yuri made a face at that, but slid in closer under the arm that was reaching for him, wrapping his own around the silver legend's core, "You and him are going to have to sort things out if you ever want to relax again back home."

"I can be surprisingly civil when I want to be."

"That's not the same thing."

Viktor slouched a little, already tired of the segue, "I don't have to work out anything with him. If he
wants to have his own life in Hasetsu, then that's exactly what he's going to get...his own life. He
doesn't have to have anything to do with me while he's there, and if he doesn't care what I think
about him being there in the first place, then he's not going to know what I think of him while he's
there."

"Now you're just being stubborn."

"Him and Minako and Yurio can have their own little family thing far away from me, preferably on
the other side of town somewhere. It has nothing to do with me and I don't intend to get involved
anyway."

"Viktor -"

"Maybe it just wasn't meant to be, my love." He tried to sound more reasonable then, looking back at
his phone to type a few last letters, and posted his video, clicking his phone off and putting it back
into his pocket to free up that hand. He turned his frame to face his husband evenly, and pet the top
of the man's head, stroking back against that slicked-back black hair, "We had a good thing going
before he ever turned up anyway. I'm content to go back to that."

"But Minako-sensei isn't just going to stop coming to Yu-Topia just because of him, and your
cousins are going to be around Yurio a lot, probably, so it's-"

Viktor cut him off with a kiss, and held there until he was sure the thought was gone, at least for the
moment. Still, when he lifted his head back again, his eyes caught sight of a familiar figure coming
into view, and he lowered down again to find another. He could feel Yuri's frame relaxing into it, at
least temporarily accepting that the conversation was over, but by then, the kiss was less about the
prior topic than it was about preventing the start of the next one.

_Yuri hasn't seen Saito since the assault. I can't stop them from seeing each other during the warm-
up, but..._

His eyes cracked a little and followed the other skater around, through the crowd, waiting for Asahi
to be far enough away that he couldn't easily be spotted. He closed them to enjoy the end of the long
kiss, but wasn't that surprised to find those cherry-tinted hazel eyes already looking at him before it
was over.

"...He's standing right behind me, isn't he?"

"I can't just kiss you for a long time because I like it?" Viktor wondered, hoping to stave off the
obvious.

"I saw your eyes wandering."

"He's moved off." He explained instead, "Just breathe. Think happy thoughts...think about Jiro and
Makkachin's reactions when we get back home...and about how much fun we're going to have when
we take them with us abroad. I'll get to show you some real Russian auroras, we'll get to do the
winter campfire thing, too...and the train ride from St. Petersburg into Europe is actually pretty
scenic, too. I've done it a few times on the way to a European competition. _La Première_ isn't the only
fun way to travel."

"...I suddenly feel really weird, wishing you weren't competing with me here..." Yuri sighed,
dropping his forehead down to his husband's shoulder and hugging a bit tighter, "This is hardly the
worst thing that's ever happened to me, but I feel like I'm reacting to it a lot more strongly than I have
to other stuff..."
"Oh, trust me...if anything threatens to happen to you while I'm skating, I will step out of my show to intervene. I'll have my eyes on you the whole time. But...I got the impression from Saito this morning that he wouldn't do anything else...and not just because he meant for it to be the end, either." Viktor reassured, returning the tighter hug and gently rocking his partner slowly from side to side, speaking the words against the man's neck, "So please try to relax. You said you wanted to have fun..."

"...I say things, but that doesn't always mean I get to do those things..." Yuri explained anxiously, fingers clamping to the white jacket, "I can already feel my heart racing."

"Shhh..." Viktor cooed, "You're safe. I'm here. I'm not going to let you go."

-[Will the skaters from Group 2 please enter the rink. The 6-minute warm-up will begin shortly.]

"Shimatta..." (Damn it...) Yuri grumbled, sighing and lifting his head, "You'll have to in a second."

"It's a warm-up, my love, not a practice. I don't have to let go of you if I don't want to. Stammi vicino, Yuri." (Stay close to me.)

The younger skater lifted his head, eyes looking on that pale face in surprise...but then relaxed, and Yuri let himself smile a little, "Hanarezu ni soba ni itte." (Stay by my side.)

Skaters amassed at rink-side, but when the Olympic duo approached, many quickly cut a path to let them through first. They approached the wall, and watched as one of the event staffs pulled it in to open the door, and as if the arena was welcoming royalty into their midst, the moment those two set blades to ice, the audience roared with approval.

Even for just a warm-up, seeing the Nikiforovs skating was still an event in itself. They slid clear across the rink before anyone else followed after them, hand-in-hand, waving up at the crowd.

Of course, fanboy-extraordinaire Minami rushed out third, soaking up the last bits of the extra cheering before it faded down and the regular warm-up could begin.

Asahi waited until Yuri and Viktor went by and were circling away from the door again before stepping out himself. Still, when the audience cheered a bit louder for him, he was obliged to raise a hand to acknowledge them, hoping the pair further out front wouldn't look back. They did anyway to do backwards cross-overs around the short-side of the rink, but for the most part, it seemed like they focused on Minami rather than himself...which was a relief, in a way.

With them going out 4th and 8th, they won't be able to stray far from rink-side for the whole rest of the night. It should be safe to wander around once we're done out here...

He twisted away from the group, finding some space and throwing himself through a triple Axel, landing it easily enough before moving off again. Other skaters were starting to do the same thing; vaulting through jumps, or at least practicing some more complex moves. So far as Asahi could see, neither of the Nikiforovs tried any jumps...they stayed glued to each other, skating around as though they were a couple of Ice Dancers rather than figure skaters.

They're not even taking the warm-up all that seriously. Are they that sure of their performances or are they that indifferent because they were already picked...?

For some reason, there was a brief moment where Asahi felt like Viktor was looking at him, and he quickly turned his head again, focusing instead on his own surroundings.

"I gotta try one jump..." Yuri said, even though he was holding a bit harder to the Russian's hand than he had been a moment before, "I'm going out close to the end so even if I fall..."
"You know what happens when you try to jump with something on your mind..." Viktor pointed out, smiling nervously, "It happens every time..."

"Wakatta, wakatteru yo!" (I know, I know!) Yuri whined back, "Still!"

"Well, I guess I'll take any excuse I can get to touch your butt, even if it's because I'm trying to rub out the soreness of a bruise from where you fell on it."

Those cheeks just went red in spite of himself, "Viktor -"

The silver legend grinned unashamedly, "Go on then. I'm ready." He pulled the one free from his husband's grip and flexed his fingers eagerly.

Minami just chortled a laugh under his breath; next to him, Hikaru was watching nervously, more worried about the fact that he was skating first than because of the butt-groping that was about to take place.

Yuri finally snuck away, sliding in a wide curve and picking up speed as he moved. There was a quick 3-turn, and Yuri dipped down onto the outside edge of his left blade, almost tucking it in under himself as he leaned and the right leg went out behind him.

Viktor kicked out frost as he came to a stop and watched, with Minami doing the same next to him, each of them watching eagerly. The Russian crossed his arms, watching his husband...and his nemesis sliding by in the background.

The toe-pick went down, and Yuri launched, spun three times...and fumbled the landing, just as Viktor had expected. When he finally came to rest, the right side of his arse was throbbing where it hit the ice, and the front of his pants and jacket were frosty. The audience winced, but with the silver legend going over to collect his skater, there was nothing much to worry about. He slid down to one knee and dug a toe-pick down to brake, just as Yuri was picking himself up onto his knees and elbows.

"You had to go for the Lutz." Viktor teased, "Even as a triple, falling from it can hurt more than the others. You have a habit of trying the worst possible jumps when you're trying to prove a point. You went for the quad in Detroit, too."

"I can't help it." Yuri whined, drooping his head even as he felt Viktor pawing down his arms to find his hands and help him back up again, "The Lutz was the last jump I tried to master... I feel like if I can still do that when my mind is wandering, then I can still do the others, too..."

"Your mind is wandering?" Minami echoed, "How come? Cuz of the stuff that happened yesterday?"

Yuri thought he could feel the blood draining from his face, but then he remembered that the younger skater technically didn't know what happened, so he nodded and made up an excuse to explain it away, "...Yeah... I guess my anxiety is just shooting through the roof because I got picked for the Olympic Team. It's just like back at Worlds when I skated as a Nikiforov for the first time...I feel like I'm under extra scrutiny because of it..."

"And I keep telling you that you've earned both of them." Viktor reassured, gently pulling on his husband's left hand to guide it behind his back, and let his own hand shimmy down to the frosty spot on his partner's bum, kneading it carefully and grinning from ear to ear the whole time, "And especially then, cuz yikes, you took out my new World Record for the Free Skate just 5 minutes after I reset it myself, and in doing so, swiped the Gold from me right and proper."
Yuri's face went red again, in equal parts because of the story and because of the groping that he was certain every pair of eyes in the arena was watching. He narrowed his gaze and raised both brows though as a few certain cogs turned in his brain, and the arm that was clinging to his husband’s back suddenly slid lower, his own fingers grabbing a handful of skater-butt. The Russian seemed rather gleeful about it though, as did the audience, given the laughter they both heard from a few who’d spotted it.

"It's going to be a good night." Viktor mused then, twisting around suddenly to skate backwards in front of his spouse, both hands groping at the man's backside then. He grinned seductively as he felt a second hand come around to grab him on the other side as well, "The last time you had your hands on me like this before an event, you set a new record."

Yuri tilted his skates and forced them both into a curve, following the wall around as he returned the same sultry look with one of his own, eyes half-lidded, "The last time I did this at a competition, I was talking about how I had a pair of knife-boots I'd use on anyone who upset you."

"I have some of those too, you know..."

That earned the silver Russian a quick kiss before Yuri twisted around as well, finding a hand between them as they both slid through some reverse cross-overs to turn around again. Yuri let go half-way through it though, and stared down the center of the rink like he was glaring at his destiny. He spotted the silver-white-blue blur passing on his right side, and the much-darker black blur with its yellow and red accents alongside it, but Yuri kept his eyes forward. Picking up speed again, he twisted this time through a mohawk turn, and again leaned on the outside edge of his left skate, the right stuck out behind him. A quick jab, and he gouged his blade down into the ice, this time spinning four times...and landed perfectly, earning him an applause.

He drew in a quick breath of relief just as Viktor came up aside him again, matching their speeds, "That was a 3+ GOE quad Lutz, my love. Just stay where you are in your head right now and you'll be perfect tonight."
There was a certain deference for the skaters who went out before Viktor; brave souls whose whole programs barely came close in total to what the Russian had been known to score in only his Free Skate. The very first to go out after the warm-up ended was Hikaru Fujiwara, one of the other three skaters that had performed alongside Yuri himself at Regionals a year and a half prior, with Viktor by his side as his coach. Much and more had changed about the two senior athletes, but one thing that hadn't for Hikaru - then a teen, now a man - was the anxiety of skating before one of them.

Still, it was over before he knew what happened. The kiss and cry was the last hurdle of a terrible obstacle course.

藤原・晃 (Hikaru FUJIWARA) - 60.85 - 136.67 [NPB] - 197.52 [NPB]

[That's a new personal best for Fujiwara-san!] Morooka lauded, seeing the stunned and disbelieving look on the skater's face where he still sat with his coach, [I see him breaking into the 200s very soon!]

[Fujiwara-san is currently in 4th place.] The announcer called overhead.

Watching the monitors, Yuri clapped as he nudged Minami's arm with an elbow, giving a smug grin, "He's caught up to you in a big hurry. You should be more worried."
The excitable chicken-nugget seemed to take it in stride though, and just crossed his arms, giving a similarly-smug grin right back at him, "I think you'll find that you're the one who should be more worried."

"Eh?"

"Wow~!"

"Viktor, did Minami-kun just put me on notice?" Yuri questioned, feeling strangely light-headed and dizzy over it, "I'm not sure...if I heard right."

"Sōda yo!" (That's right!) The teen cheered, sticking out his fingers in a V, "Kenjirou Minami of Hakata is on the path to unseating Yuri-kun, second of the Nikiforov Skating Dynasty. Just you wait...by the time I'm your age, it'll be me that people step aside to let pass."

"Nikiforov Skating Dynasty, eh?" Viktor repeated to himself, then pat his husband's shoulder, offering a sly smile at the spectacle. He then looked down at the smol blond skater, "So then you won't have any excuse for skipping the Grand Prix again, right?"

Brown eyes went from excited to soulful, and Minami suddenly looked rather dour, "...I had actually...hoped to go to Four Continents to compete this year, since I didn't get to compete when you guys went last year..." He sighed and looked up at the Russian, who himself had gotten slightly more serious than before, but only in the sense that his brow was furrowed in spite of his goofy smile, "But now with you and Asahi-kun skating...it's hard to imagine that there'll be any spots available at big international competitions like that until some of you guys retire... Even if you all get on the podium, three is the maximum number of slots that can be offered per country...and Japan's cup is suddenly running over with A-class skaters..."

Yuri looked a bit disappointed at that, too, but turned to look at his partner, "...I didn't even think about that. I've been so excited about us skating for the same team that I didn't consider what it meant for the rest of the JSF's athletes."

Viktor put a finger on his lips in thought, but then pulled it away and shrugged, sliding that arm over his husband's back and shoulder, "It's not unheard of for people who compete at the Olympics to skip either Euros or 4Cs beforehand, or Worlds after. Maybe I'll drop one to open it up to someone else."

Minami lifted his head, but then shook it vehemently, "You can't drop competition just for me! I don't even know that I'd get picked if there was a spot! I'll prove myself in the Grand Prix next year, and earn my place at other events!"

The silver legend blinked a few times at the tiny teen, but then smiled and reached a hand forward, ruffling that blonde and red hair, "That's exactly the kind of thing Yuri said last year. You'll do just fine."

The third competitor was already in the middle of his performance. The second group's athletes were moving in and out fluidly, but the anticipation of the Russian's premiere Free Skate was being hyped more and more in the audience as the minutes ticked on.

There was a slight murmur that picked up on one side though, and people turned their heads as they heard the tell-tale thunk-click of blade-guards rising up the concrete steps towards the second level. Minako took notice as well, pivoting where she had her chin in the palm of her hand, and spotted a
rather familiar face. This time, it wasn't even hidden under a nondescript hoodie, "...Asahi...?"

The tall skater came up the stairs casually, hands in the pockets of his black and teal Team Japan jacket, chicken-butt hairstyle obvious for anyone to see, "Shitsureishimasu." (Sorry for interrupting.) He said simply, coming around the corner as the stairs leveled out to flat cement flooring, [Can I watch from here again?]

She nodded, and pat the banister next to herself, [Of course.]

Fans were snapping pictures of him as he settled in, keeping a professional distance from the ballerina, but was still close enough to speak. His eyes went down to the ice though as he stood in silence, watching the show coming to its conclusion. The music above was of the classical variety, and the skater was young, inexperienced, and could do little more than doubles, but the crowd still cheered for him. When it ended, and the young teen went with his coach to the kiss and cry, even hearing that his total score was only barely in the 150s, he was still happy.

[Nobunari Ando-san is currently in 12th place.]

The audience’s energy changed after that, and a new cheering rose when they saw Viktor Nikiforov stepping out from behind the curtain to the prep area. Yuri followed close, and the two of them offered their congratulations to the petite teen as he scrambled by, utterly shell-shocked that the event's superstars would acknowledge his existence, never mind speak kind words in his direction.

Asahi watched them all quietly, eyes barely blinking.

Minako was watching him half the time, curious about his reactions, [You did everything you could to avoid looking at them during the warm-up.] She commented, [Did they realize it was you up here earlier?]

[If they did, they haven't said anything. Given what you said though, they're about to know I'm up there...so it'll be hard to avoid later on.]

[True.] She gave a nervous smile, [But I'm sure they'll understand.]

[Maybe.]

[Next on the ice tonight, from the Ice Castle in Hasetsu, Saga Prefecture...Nikiforov Viktor-san!]

The audience was immediately apoplectic, screaming and clapping as the Russian peeled out of his Olympic jacket and glided out across the near-pristine frost. He waved and bowed happily towards all sides...but as he turned towards Minako, about to wave the most excitedly of all...he suddenly stopped dead in his tracks. His arm came down half-way in a weak kind of nudge rather than a wave, and his expression changed to stunned surprise. He blinked several times and shook his head, but then went back towards rink-side like he'd meant to anyway.

Asahi tried to hold firm, but he could feel his heart pounding.

[It's over, so don't worry about it anymore.] Minako recommended, [He knows.] [I'm not worried about what he thinks of me.] The figure answered, [It's you I'm worried for right now.]

[Why?] She gaped at him, [If you were really that concerned, you wouldn't have come back.] [...I'm trying to trust your judgment.] Asahi explained, [To put my faith in someone else's intuition.
because mine's been so poorly trained all this time. If you think it'll end well by asking me to come watch their shows with you, knowing that they'll wave at you and see me here with you...then I'll believe you, even if everything in my gut is telling me this is a terrible idea.]

[Your gut is used to keeping you safe in a turbulent life. You wouldn't be wrong to run from here, but for all the bad that you think you're going to invite on yourself by doing this, you also lose out on any potential gains you might make from it instead.] Minako told him, reaching a free hand over to pat the edge of his shoulder, [Take a deep breath and just watch Viktor skate. Watch him as a fellow competitor, not as the guy whose husband you crushed on. He can teach you a lot, even if you never exchange words again...and this program in particular. Do you know what he's about to skate to?]

Asahi shook his head, [I haven't watched any programs since the last time I competed. I wanted it all to be fresh.]

Minako blinked at him, [Really? Not one?]

[...Not one.]

[Wow!] She was more shocked than anything, [You need to watch Yuri and Viktor's shows. Or at least Yuri's.] She suddenly got a brilliant idea and pulled out her phone, inching closer until she was rubbing elbows with the skater, [Here, let me have your number...I'll send you links to all the programs you need to watch! I'm already looking them up...]

[Wh-why do I need to watch them...?]

Minako smirked deviously, [You're about to watch the first of two skating monsters. The least I can do as their friend is help you learn how they got this way. At very least, you should watch Yuri's skating shows. He's going to completely knock your socks off later tonight as it is.]

[...He's gotten that good...?]

[He's always been that good...it just took someone outside his family believing in him for him to believe in himself and skate to his potential.] On the rink-wall, Viktor was rubbing the center of his chest with a few fingers, "...My heart's itchy now..."

"Itchy?" Yuri echoed, giving a skeptical look, "Why?"

"I went to wave at Minako and saw my nemesis standing next to her."

"Eh!?" Yuri turned his eyes up, squinting a little even through the glasses he still wore, but sure enough...there the man was, "...I don't get it...why is he with Minako-sensei?"

"Don't think there's enough time to speculate, my love." Viktor reached across the wall and slid his hands between his husband's arms and sides, cupping his fingers around the man to pull him forward into a hug. His hands kept moving, slipping around Yuri's back, one rising up just behind his neck, "Don't take your eyes off me."

Yuri returned the hug quickly, arms over his spouse's shoulders tightly, and he buried his face against the crook of shoulder and neck, "I'm out there with you."

Viktor could feel the slight tremble starting to settle in through his husband's frame, and he could guess why.
"...I just...want to hate him so much for this...but with all the other things he said, I can't get myself to feel that way towards him..." Yuri went on, staring tiredly at the ceiling, "More than anything...I guess I'm just...scared of him now."

"He forced himself onto you. Feeling scared is natural."

"...It's not just that..." ... "...He just...moved so fast..." Yuri explained, reaching both hands forward to press his husband's arms into his own sides, "He was so much stronger than me...his fingers went around my arms like I was just a kid. It felt like they were welded to my sides, because I couldn't move anything above the elbow..." He could see how his own fingers couldn't wrap all the way around Viktor's biceps, and that just made him feel worse, and he pulled back again, "...He just...overpowered me... He held me where I was and I couldn't move a muscle. It's like he looked into my mind and saw how quickly I shoved Tess off before, and went out of his way to take that away from me..." Yuri could feel the tears coming again, and he slouched where he sat, reaching a wrist up to rub on his eyes, "I was just so powerless. I've never felt so weak before..."

"...Yuri..." Viktor said quietly, his voice the only thing to be heard over the roar of the expecting audience. He pulled back slightly so he could see his husband's face, and those anxious eyes. He pulled one hand up and gently brushed a few stray hairs from that pale skin, "Even though I have to let you go, I'm not going anywhere. I'll be right out here, never out of sight. Just watch me and forget everything else."

"...But why is he with Minako-sensei...!?"

The Russian lightly shook his head, cupping his hand around the back of his partner's neck to pull him into a quick kiss, "She might be up to something; who knows? I'm not thinking about it right now...all I'm thinking about is you. Light of my life, sun of my sky, moon of my night. My greatest inspiration and my truest love..."

Yuri just gave an unsettled smile, trying to let himself refocus his mind, "...Shouldn't I be the one motivating you right now...?"

Viktor smiled, "You always do. Remember when I asked you, 'how can you motivate yourself if you can't even motivate others'?

He nodded hesitantly, remembering why the man asked that as well as the fact that he had at all. His eyes turned slightly towards the prep-area curtain, where Minami was waiting excitedly.

"Sometimes the greatest pleasure I get from you is being able to make you feel good. If something I say can make you smile, that's all the motivation I need... And I will protect you. You have nothing to worry about as long as you're with me. Plus..." Viktor reassured, even as he was starting to pull back, fingers sliding down the lengths of his husband's arms until he could reach only those hands, and he pulled up the right to kiss the ring, "...I'm stronger than him."

Yuri stared for a moment, but just as he felt his partner's fingers starting to pull away, he grabbed them outright and pulled Viktor closer again. A quick glance into those surprised blue eyes, and Yuri moved his hands up to either side of that pale face, looking into them without any real idea what to say...but pressing their lips together in gratitude all the same. That done though, and all the more relieved because of it, Yuri pulled back and spun the Russian around by his shoulders, giving him a playful swat on the derrière to make him move, "Go win Gold for us already!"
Viktor looked back as he went, cheeks slightly flushed, but winked and grinned as he turned back and made his way towards center before the music started without him.

From the stands, Minako side-eyed the skater standing next to her, looking for any sort of reaction to what was happening on the ice. Sadly, to her disappointment, Asahi's face was like stone, giving nothing away. He didn't even have his phone on-hand to check out the links she'd sent to him of all the important skating shows from the last two years. The ballerina just sighed and turned her eyes back out to the ice, hyper-aware that Viktor wasn't making any effort to look her way anymore, but accepting her fate in spite of it.

The silver legend took his place in the center of the rink to the crushing loudness of the audience's cheering. Despite not being anything close to Japanese, he still felt more-than-welcomed by the Japanese people into their nation's big figure skating family. He braked lightly and twisted to face the judge's side of the ice, bowing to them briefly before finally taking his position, head bowed, right toe-pick down, a few fingers hooked together behind himself. His form on the ice looked aglow with the resplendent shimmering of his white shirt.

['Stand In The Light' - Jordan Smith]

Within a second or two, the violins began, rising in pitch and then descending again. Viktor slowly lifted his head, facing the ceiling with his eyes closed.

Stand in the light and be seen as we are

One hand came forward and up, reaching for the bright orbs of luminescence shining high above him. Multiple concentric rings of light glowed on high, like halos, spreading further outwards across the entire field of the arena's ceiling. The Russian started sliding a blade around himself, bringing his arm down as the line ended and he started gliding backward. His frame weaved and twisted gracefully, picking up speed as the rhythm of strings carried him on.

Didn't I tell you I hear what you say?

An arm came up, and Viktor pulled his right skate up, quickly jerking his core to turn through a series of four left-outside twizzles, arms coming up again on the final glide, one hand by his ear.

Never look back as you're walking away

He spun swiftly again before arching his back, raising that same arm up directly above himself as he leaned through an Ina Bauer.

Carry the music, the memories, and keep them inside you...

As he leaned upright again, both hands came together before him, moving from the front of his shoulders to the sides of his face, then down to his chest to pause over his heart. Blades carried him backward in a serpentine path, leaving delicate scratches in the ice as he passed.

Laugh every day

He leaned forward slightly as he shifted his weight to the right skate, left leg out behind himself as he slid in reverse, right hand up and forward as the wind blew by him before he twisted himself around and descended to crouching.

Don't stop those tears from falling down...

Still in reverse, the silver legend balanced on one golden blade, hydroblading in a wide circle with a
finger dragging along the ice. As the line closed, the Russian quickly stood up, winding up the leap into a flying camel spin with a brief scratch-spin-like twist, and then threw himself high.

*This is who I am inside!*  

His frame spread out in the air, and he landed on the right blade in a forward spin, arms out to his sides as he rotated in blade.

*This is who I am, I'm not gonna hide!*  

 Barely noticeable to trained eyes, and not at all to novice skating viewers, Viktor changed edges from inside to outside, and wrenched his core to keep up his momentum. His left arm went behind his back as the right came up in front of his chest.

*Cuz the greatest risk we'll ever take is by far...*  

The hand behind his back reached further to find the blade of his up-turned skate, grabbing around the loop of metal to pull it closer for a catch-foot camel variant.

*To stand in the light and be seen as we are...*  

He then let the skate go, kicking his leg out as his body started to leave the spin, moving himself into wider arcs and rising back up to normal posture before switching gliding-feet with a mohawk turn. He moved forward on the left blade, prepping the right by kicking it back...and launched.

*To stand in the light and be seen as we are...*  

Both hands were thrown up above his head to help carry the weight, and he vaulted through the double-tano triple Axel with ease, landing with a crack and skating off cleanly. To do such a move with such little speed was a trick in itself...but it was only three and a half rotations, and the Russian had learned long ago how to rely on the strength of his arms to pull himself into the air when his legs couldn't do it alone.

Violins played again without words, and Viktor moved through a few simpler maneuvers, twisting and turning to the flow of those stringed hymns, and spinning forward through a twizzle-like spin before the lyrics returned, and ended it in a backward glide.

*With courage and kindness hold onto your faith*  

He quickly leaped through a half-Waltz jump to put himself forward again, landing on the right blade as he lowered down to one knee, sliding right towards the spot on the wall where he knew his husband was watching from. Right hand came up in a gesture forward, and Viktor lifted his eyes in time to find Yuri reaching back for him, palm and fingers forward as though offering something unseen. He quickly clenched his hand shut, catching whatever it was before rising back up to standing again.

*You get what you give and it's never too late*  

Just as he was closing in on the rink-wall, Viktor rose back up again, pushed into a 3-turn, and leaned off a left back-outside edge.

*To reach for the branch, and climb up leaving sadness behind you...*  

Asahi was already expecting that Viktor would be doing harder jumps than most, but to see yet another jump with even *one* arm up, even a triple Lutz, and then *both* arms up again like the Axel for
the follow-up triple Toe-loop, was making numbers float through the younger skater's mind. Every additional hardship that Viktor brought down on himself to increase the difficulty of his moves meant more points at the end...and every positive GOE on a jump was something he'd have to make-up for some other way, in his own Free Program at the end of the night.

*Fight hard for love*

With the jump-combo landed smoothly, Viktor cut across the rink with some backward cross-overs, straightening out at the end as he raised the left leg high out ahead of himself. The spiral-entry gave more points for added difficulty, and the Russian legend's transitions were flawless.

*We can never give enough*

There was only enough time to lower the up-turned leg, set the blade to ice on an inside edge, and kick the right leg out in the back. The gold streak that followed cracked hard against the ice, and the toe-pick launch sent Viktor flying again for his signature move.

*This is who I am inside!*

Both arms were up for it, but this time hitched to his hips, not above his head. He landed it like it was as easy as walking, and glided off perfectly, chest forward and arms back in grand declaration before arcing through a few easier connecting moves. The combination spin was coming up next.

*This is who I am, I'm not gonna hide!*

When he leaned, he brought his left leg up and threw it strongly for the backward-entry, both hands clasped behind his back for the camel-spin initiation.

*Cuz the greatest risk we'll ever take is by far...*

Hands slid down his legs to find a blade again, pulling it up behind his head as he straightened out, limbs above his back for the full Biellmann spin; one hand let go to reach forward.

*To stand in the light and be seen as we are...*

As he let his skate go, he twisted hard to bring up momentum again and dipped low, free leg extended to the side as he came down with knees bent near to 90°, then tucked in under himself for a quick foot-change. As he rose back upright again, he grabbed instead of the newly-freed skate, lifting that leg high for the Y-spin, fingers of the opposite hand clasped around his ankle as the other was freely to his side.

*To stand in the light and be seen as we are...*

He let the leg go and used the pendulum to thrust him out of the spin, the circular groove in the ice abandoned for a straighter line. Viktor moved towards one corner of the rink for the start of his step sequence; his feet then became a blur of elaborate and delicate moves, pivots, twists, and turns. Though the motions were quick and precise, they still exuded power, and the brawny Russian pushed through the burning starting to creep through his legs.

*Riding the storms that come raging towards us, we dive*

*Holding our breath as we break through the surface*

"...This is the part where Yuri came out to join him, when Viktor did this show the first time."

Minako said whimsically, sighing happily at the fond memory, "It's weird that he doesn't come out anymore."
Asahi moved his eyes from the skater on the ice to the one at rink-side, and watched as both of them started to move in tandem. Viktor had gone low and was gliding forward, but as he swept one leg forward and rose back up, spinning twice as he ascended, his hands came up and rose forward from beside his hips, extending towards the wall not too far ahead of himself.

*With arms open wide...*

Yuri’s came up at the same time.

*With arms open wide...!*

Viktor was standing still, one toe-pick down in the ice behind the forward blade, arms up in front of himself. The crowd was cheering to see the pair performing together, each one bringing their hands back together as they came to rest on their hearts.

*This is who I am inside!*

The silver legend stepped off the toe-pick, sliding forward from the nudge towards his husband. He didn’t care if he lost points for it...he wanted to touch that face, even if only for a heartbeat. His palm pressed gently to the man's cheek, and he rubbed his thumb over it as he felt the pressure of Yuri leaning into it. He felt the cold of a single tear as it touched his skin.

Viktor smiled, fingers sliding down his partner's jaw, tipping off that pale chin as he slid away again, returning to the program proper. He pushed himself hard to build up speed in time, twisting through the 3-turn and leaning back onto the left outside edge, right leg cocked out behind himself, ready to click down.

*This is who I am, I'm not gonna hide!*

Frost broke and crystal flew as the blade hit the ice, and Viktor launched, spinning four times with both arms above his head.

Yuri had to reach up and rub his face on a sleeve, *I'm with you...let's finish it together!*

*Cuz the greatest risk we'll ever take is by far...*

Three major moves left, and Viktor was ready. He brought his hands together as he slid out of the double-tano quad Lutz, curving his whole frame to the flow of the music, gesturing to the audience with his right hand as he passed them and spun around.

*To stand in the light and be seen as we are...*

He brought his hand inward again, sliding it down his thigh and calf before grabbing the blade of his right skate to pull it taught. With the left arm gesturing forward, palm down and fingers splayed, he lifted his leg straight up into a split, and glided into a lean around the short end of the rink.

*To stand in the light and be seen as we are...*

He lowered back down onto one knee, leaning backward as he slid forward, both arms raised behind himself to drag his fingers over the ice, feeling the cold on the back of his head from how close he'd settled.

When the song upped the ante, increasing the intensity of the orchestra and doubling-up the vocals for a duet, Viktor curled his arms up and threw them forward to hoist himself upright again.
This is who I am inside!

Back on his feet, he thrust himself through a few cross-overs around the inside curve of the rink wall, ending on another 3-turn. Like the Lutz, he dipped down onto the outside edge of his left skate, but instead of cranking his right leg out behind himself in the air, he set the blade down on the ice directly behind the front blade, and wound-up the rest of his frame for the jump.

This is who I am, I'm not gonna hide!

Quad loop, triple loop, triple loop...Viktor's legs were burning...only two more major moves left.

Asahi was surprised, but he wasn't vocal about it like the rest of the audience, or the woman cheering next to him. He could see the Russian was tiring...he was clawing and scraping for every bonus-point the FS second half could offer.

Cuz the greatest risk we'll ever take is by far...

Viktor was still holding strong though, zipping down the length of the rink, taking in the cool air as it brushed against his heated skin.

To stand in the light and be seen as we are...

He slid in closer to the JSF logo in the middle of the rink, and leaned forward, thrusting his leg up behind him in a series of star maneuvers...

To stand in the light and be seen as we...

...And vaulted onto the other blade in a massive Death Drop.

...ARE ...

The duet ended and the solo singer returned for the finale.

Viktor settled in low for the sit-spin, right leg extended as the left curled under him, spinning in one spot on the ice. Shards of frost broke away as the rocker shaved it away with each rotation.

Oooohhhh ...!

'Shoot-the-duck' morphed slightly as the Russian straightened out, one hand above himself briefly, then came down again as he switched blades underneath himself. His other hand reached for the newly-freed blade and pulled it across for the cannon-ball variant.

Cause the greatest risk we'll ever take is by far...

He sat more upright, free leg extended forward again, heel nearly dragging across the ice as both hands settled on his thigh. Even as he continued spinning, slower than before, he rose up to his feet, leaning to move out in a wide curve before he pushed into a single twizzle, and came out of it into an immediate Ina Bauer.

To stand in the light and be seen as we are...

He leaned up to straighten out, twisting and weaving his feet over one another carefully. There was only one move left.

...Should I go for the quad or just leave it?
Viktor maneuvered through a mohawk turn to put himself facing forward.

...No...I'm too tired. If I try the quad and fall, then it'll just embarrass me and I'll miss the combo, too. I'll leave the quad to Yuri. That's his jump.

*To stand in the light and be seen as we are...*

The silver legend threw his right leg forward and spun for the triple Axel, exhaustedly throwing his arms up above his head to help keep him moving, but wrapped them around himself for the triple Toe-loop that came after.

The second vocalist returned for the final lines.

*So stand in the light and be seen as we...*

Viktor slid quietly, calmly, down the center of the rink, reaching again for the lights shining down on him like he had at the start of the program.

...are.

Both hands came down, forearms crossing over his chest as he lowered his face and clutched his shoulders. The music quieted, strings lingering only a little longer, guiding the skater along a few inside-to-outside spread eagles. By the end, his arms were up and forward again, open to the audience before him...but mostly to his husband. He could see that Yuri was crying, but there was a smile on his face in spite of the tears, and Viktor knew that the music had touched that man's heart the same way 'Yuri on Ice' had done to himself the previous year. Viktor moved on, kneeling down, right hand settled on the upturned leg as he stretched the left out to the side. The drag brought him to a stop, and with his hands palms-out at his sides, he lifted his face to the spotlights...and let the rush of the audience's cheering crash over him.
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED SEVENTY ONE

The ice was blanketed in flowers and plush toys, from poodles to nigiri like Yuri usually saw. Viktor blew kisses to half the arena before slowly starting to move out of center, waving to the rest as he glided along. A dozen young teens and children flew past him in turn, moving throughout the rink to gather up the gifts to clear the ice for the next skater...but there was one toy - or rather, pair of toys - that caught the Russian's attention.

Face-down on the ice were two plush figures, but from the color-scheme, it was as obvious as anything that they were plush versions of Yuri and Viktor themselves, wearing their Duetto costumes. Viktor crouched down to pick it up; the two plush toys together were about half the size of Makkachin. When he turned them around to see the front, he was charmed to see their smiling faces, cheeks squished together between them, hands held together in front like in a Waltz. He turned the toy over again to see the details of the other hands; Yuri's pressed to the plush-Viktor's lower back, and the Viktor's hand up in the middle of the Yuri's. He noticed then that the detail even went so far as to show their wedding rings on each of their right ring fingers.

He hugged the toys to his chest and lifted his eyes to the audience, looking around to see if any fan in particular stood out as the creator...and sure enough, he spotted an older woman with salt-and-pepper hair done up in a loose bun, with two younger ladies on her either side, waving frantically to get his attention. He pointed at them, then at the dolls, and back again, and they seemed to acknowledge being associated with them. Gratefully, Viktor bowed his head low towards them, then turned around to the rest of the arena, holding up the soft-toy for all to see, and gestured a hand up towards the three ladies who'd fashioned them, earning even more applause.

Yuri looked up and around in surprise; he hadn't gotten a good look at what his partner had found yet, but whatever it was, it seemed popular. Between the tears in his eyes still and the smudges those tears had left on his glasses, it was difficult to get a good look at anything, much less a soft-toy Viktor had picked up from the mass. By the time he'd gotten his face and lenses cleaned off again, Viktor was already sliding up to the rink exit, offering up the oversized plushie before even reaching for his blade guards.

"Pretty great, right?" He wondered excitedly, holding it up between them, "It's us!"

Yuri put his frames back in place and finally got to see the thing, and was instantly enamored by it, "...Wow...!"

Viktor reached for the rubber guards, putting them into place and finding his jacket before stepping off the ice.

"I knew I'd already won the proverbial lottery when you asked to marry me, but..." Yuri continued, still looking at the plush, putting one hand over the face of his own, "...Now that I've been turned into a soft-toy as a pair with yours...I think I've really made it big."

"We've both officially been immortalized as cute plushes. I don't know where we go from here." Viktor laughed, finding his husband's arms under the toy and leaning over it to find a quick kiss as well, "Come, my love...the kiss and cry awaits."

Yuri held the toy on his lap as they waited for the score to be called, looking it over carefully and scrutinizing every detail. He was particularly impressed with the embroidery for the colors of their
eyes; the threads seemed iridescent, woven into one another from darker blues and browns to the lighter colors that reflected light. Their rings were lustrous, and each of their jackets had tiny crystals set into place. He hugged it closer again and set his left hand to his husband's thigh, "I'm glad you found this one. It'd really be a shame if you went by without ever spotting it. You can tell they put a lot of effort into it."

"Yeah...but now I'm worried about how many I did miss..."

"Maybe none."

"Hopefully." The Russian gave a nervous sigh, "Our house would be full to the top if I stopped to look at every toy that got thrown after a show."

"I can imagine what Phichit-kun's place looks like...full of hamster soft-toys."

Viktor just laughed at that, sliding his hand from the back of his partner's shoulder to down around his side, "Ciao Ciao having to swim through them to find his student every day...Opens the front door and a dozen hamsters come crashing towards him..."

They both laughed at the imagery for a moment before falling quiet again. Momentary distractions being what they were, they didn't last for very long. Yuri could feel himself starting to slouch a little where he sat; every second that ticked by without a score being announced felt like ages. He rubbed his thumb a bit on his partner's leg, wedging the tips of his fingers a bit further down between them.

"So...where do you want to go for our honeymoon?" Viktor suddenly wondered, as though able to read his partner's nervous mind, "We never technically went on one before because of our hectic schedule...but since we're planning in advance this time..."

"Would this be a separate trip from the one to Germany that you want to go on during the summer break?" Yuri asked, grateful for every second he didn't have to think about what truly bothered him.

"Natürlich." The Russian answered easily enough, "Maybe we could do that All-Japan tour like we considered last year? Since you criticize Hasetsu Castle for being a tourist trap with no significant historical value..."

"...I guess we could. Is that what you want?"

"I was thinking of doing the Japan tour during the spring...when all the cherry-blossoms are popping up and lots of fun festivals are taking place. Then when we go to Germany, we could backtrack to St. Petersburg for a week and visit the Summer Garden, and see what it's meant to look like when it isn't buried under snow." Viktor explained, bringing his free hand around to settle it lightly over where his partner was holding onto his thigh, "You never really got to experience Russia during the warmer times of the year. I'm worried that its cold and miserable side is all you really know."

"Nikiforov Viktor-san no tokuten wa...nihyaku jū ni, jū go. Kare wa genzai ichi-i." The duo lifted their heads, and shortly after, saw the numbers written on the small digital scoreboard. It was hardly a new personal best or a record-breaking score, but 212.15 was good enough for a 6-jump-element program that had only existed for some 4 weeks. The audience seemed pleased with it, and Viktor let himself exhale the breath he'd been holding in since he first stepped out onto the ice in the first place.

"I suppose it'll do." The Russian commented, leaning up straighter as he stroked his partner's back, ready to stand, "Even Yurio has a hard time scoring in the 200s, and I doubt my nemesis is even as good as that."
"...I'm not sure anymore." The younger figure mumbled, nudging his face into the back of the plush-toy.

"Yuri."

Brown eyes turned slightly, but all they saw was a white blur moving to crouch down in front of him...facing away, "...Eh?"

"Get on."

"Eh?"

Viktor reached back to tap his husband's leg with a few fingers, "On my back. I'm in first place...I want to carry you out as my reward."

Yuri just blinked incredulously, but then shook his head and leaned forward, parting his knees around his husband's sides to let the man hook his arms under them as he stood up again. Yuri held tight, holding onto the plush toy with one hand in front of the Russian's chest, and the audience cheered to watch the spectacle of their leaving. Even Minami was clapping excitedly when they went back into the prep area, grinning at the hapless next victim who had the misfortune of going out to skate next. The silver legend walked the path back to where their gear had been left, and quietly leaned so his husband could slide back down to his own feet again.

There wasn't any sense taking skates off at that point though, since they both knew Viktor would be on the podium before the end of the night anyway...so Yuri wasn't sure why they stopped where they did. He just watched as Viktor turned around and flopped back into one seat to recover for a moment before facing the media, rummaging for a water bottle. Yuri found his own in his bag and pulled it out, offering it easily, "...Sorry..." He said quietly.

"Huh?" The Russian lifted his head in confusion, taking the offered bottle and looking at it, "...Why? It's not the end of the world that our water was back here instead of at rink-side." He shrugged, opening the top and taking a quick sip.

"...For being like this." Yuri tried to clarify, and saw his husband stop moving mid-sip, lips still around the mouth-piece. He sighed and hugged his arms around himself, "I promise...I'm trying to forget about what happened...so we can still have fun... But I just...can't shake it..."

Viktor hesitated a moment, but then took one more sip before capping the bottle again and set it aside. He reached a hand forward towards his partner, and slowly pulled the man closer when he took it, slouching in his seat enough that when Yuri sat sideways across his lap, he was half-leaning-back, and wrapped both arms around the skinny figure's small frame, "...You're actually handling it remarkably well, considering it just happened yesterday."

"...I...don't understand." Yuri said, even more quietly than he already had been, practically lying down against his partner's chest. He leaned his head against the man's shoulder, letting the plush-toy go in the seat beside them, and settled his free hand under his chin, "...I felt so strong coming out of Detroit, even NHK...but now I'm just back to the way I was before..."

"Oh, you're not that bad." Viktor teased, giving one shoulder a squeeze, "I expected you'd feel down again when you saw him. There's no way to get around it, really."

"You worked so hard though...I just feel like my brain's ignoring everything you've done to make me feel better..."

"What does your heart say?"
"...That everything is okay..."

"And then your head comes back and says...but, but, but...right?"

Yuri nodded unhappily.

"Yeah, that's how I was, too..." Viktor said simply, tilting his face to rub his cheek softly against his partner's forehead, "It's a shock to the system when something like that happens. You don't just bounce back. Sometimes the salt in the wounds can last for years."

Yuri wasn't sure how to respond to that, so he just stayed quiet so as not to interrupt.

"It was actually back during the Vancouver Olympics..." Viktor went on, looking up at the vaulted ceiling as he thought on the past, "I was just barely 20 back then. Doing well, but not on a big winning streak...and I'd just met Sophia maybe 2 months earlier at the old version of Trophée de France."

"...Oh..."

"She wasn't an Olympian, but she went with me to Vancouver as a friend." Viktor went on, knowing it was a touchy subject, but having a point to make with it made him continue anyway. He kept his arms around his husband's thin body, rubbing one thumb back and forth like he always did to soothe the younger man, "I'd been utterly smitten by her for weeks already, and I thought it was a great opportunity to get closer to her. But, the Olympics being what they are sometimes, and me being so young back then, I unintentionally flirted my way into having a bit of a following. I didn't think anything of it for a long time, and especially back then, I often thought with the wrong parts of my anatomy without realizing how it upset the people around me. Not just Sophia, but Yakov, too...but I was too enamored by all the attention to realize it was hurting me in other ways. I let myself get carried away with all the fun, and drank a bit more than I probably should've...and right in front of her I agreed to go to this big private party. I mean...I liked Sophia a lot by then, but I wasn't getting anything from her but her smiles, and I was young and cruel like most guys... And stupid... I think, somewhere in my pickled brain, it occurred to me that if I went and did all these things with that group, and Sophia knew about it, maybe she'd want me, because everyone else did, right? When I ran into her again the next day, she was really upset, and it took me far too long to realize that what I'd done was the worst possible thing to win her over. It took three days just to get her to really talk to me again, and by then I'd made up my mind that I'd be celibate for her if it meant she'd trust me. The fact that I couldn't wait, and went with that big group before, ate me up. I felt like I violated Sophia's trust...and maybe that's why I tried so much harder to win her over, because in a way, I was also trying to win her back."

"...I'm not entirely sure how this is going to make me feel better..." Yuri admitted sullenly.

"Sorry..." Viktor tried to recollect his train of thought, "My point is...even though the circumstances that lead to each of us hurting were very different, I wanted you to know that I've been where you're at. Things worked out in the end, but it took me weeks to forgive myself for what I'd allowed to happen. In a way, it's a lot like how you blame yourself for how that argument with Saito went, because you said that if you hadn't trapped him, it wouldn't have ended like it did. It took a long time for Sophia to forgive me and give me another chance...but that whole time, I kept over-thinking things, running through countless possible alternative situations where I could've done even one thing differently, and it would've turned out more like how I'd meant for it to. The big difference between you and I though, is that you're a lot smarter than I am..."

Yuri pushed up on one hand and sat upright over his partner's legs, slouching there and cupping his hands together over his lap, "A lot of good it did..."
The stunned Russian blinked, but pushed up on the hand-rests of his seat, pulling back to sit normally. He could feel a flutter in his chest, Oh no, did I say something wrong!? This wasn't how it was supposed to go either! He nervously reached his hands forward, one finding its way over Yuri's balled-up fists, the other settling over the man's lower back, "...Yuri... I...don't know if anything I'm saying is making any sense. I'm just trying to say that I understand if it takes a few weeks for your mind to settle down and move past what happened. You know that I don't blame you for what happened...

"...Maybe you should..." Yuri lowered his head, staring at the hand that cradled over both of his own. He pulled one hand free though...the right, and looked at his ring, "...And maybe I'm not as smart as you think I am."

Viktor could feel the panic under his skin, but he tried to keep a cool head, "You're no less smart than I think you are just because you didn't know what was rattling around in Saito's head. You couldn't have known. You went into that argument thinking Saito would act like he always did...replying like he was barely listening, not giving any of his own thoughts away...maybe that he'd deny everything. You didn't know about the fling he had with that Riku Itō guy, or that he'd end up yelling at you about everything... Nothing about what happened could've been predicted."

Those words didn't seem to help though. Yuri still kept his eyes down, and his ring-hand separate from the rest, even if it was perched on Viktor's knee instead.

"Yuri..." Viktor pleaded.

The ring-hand came up, and Yuri rubbed the back of his fingers under his glasses, pushing them up a bit to get to his eyes, "...I really messed up..."

"It was an accident...! You even said that your whole goal to that talk was just to let him down easy...! Was he did was his own choice!" Viktor pleaded, trying to keep quiet while still trying to be heard under the thunder of the next skater's music. He reached both arms further forward and pulled the anxious man closer, resting his chin on his closest shoulder, "...Yuri, I don't want to have to forgive you for what happened because that'll just make you feel like it was your fault..."

"...All of our problems start with me though..." Yuri said quietly, sniffing, "...The fact that your father pummeled you, that your Uncle's still in our lives and got Minako-sensei pregnant and that they're all invading Hasetsu after this weekend, that Russia kicked you out of their skating union...trapping Asahi in the changing room and forcing him to talk to me was my choice...he tried to leave and I blocked his way! It's all my fault. All of it."

"Now you're just being selfish again..." Viktor sighed, "You're taking everything into yourself like I don't get to be responsible for any of my own part in it. That's not fair."

Yuri had no answer for that. He just hiccupped another breath and kept his eyes down.

"My father would've bloodied me for the skating even if he didn't already know about you, and you can't be responsible for the fact that I fell in love with you, either. That's all me." Viktor tried, "And my Uncle isn't so stupid that you were the only way he could've found to worm his way back into my life. He took advantage of you and I called him out twice for it...because apparently once wasn't enough for him to take me seriously. As for the RSF...I thought we were proud of what happened!? You got to say you single-handedly took down proud-and-noble-Russia's whole skating empire! I'm proud of you for that! My father's proud of you for that!"

Yuri pulled free after that and stood up, straightening out his track-suit and the side-panels of the costume that hung beside his legs.
"...Yuri..." Viktor stood up as well, and tried to step closer, but his partner just cringed under the attempt, so he stopped, "...Yuri... Say something...?"

"...Say what...?" He answered, "...That it's fine that you would've only been beaten up half as badly if it was just over skating? That it's laudable that I can destroy a 20-year skating career just by loving you...? That I'm too weak and naïve to stop myself from reaching out to people I clearly don't know well enough to be rational or smart about? My same stupidity that lead to the Mikhail Problem is the same stupidity that's caused this problem with Asahi now, too."

The silver Russian stepped out in front of him, and gently set his hands on each shoulder, leaning down slightly to try and see those red eyes behind the blue, foggy frames, "I don't know what more I can tell you so you can be at peace with that's happened... There's a saying about how 'it's not the arrow, it's the Indian,' but damnit...arrows aren't always perfect, and you're not the only Indian involved in all this. You can't take responsibility for how everyone around you reacts to things, because you can't control it. Under different circumstances, my whole family might've come into all this as allies from the start, rather than enemies...but the same garbage thinking that made my father and uncle what they are, is the same garbage thinking that made the RSF what it is, too...and it's the same garbage thinking that made Saito think he had to hide his feelings from you for his entire life. You have to let other people own their own choices, even the ones that you're a part of."

Yuri only managed to raise his hands to pull his glasses away and rub his eyes on the back of a sleeve.

"...I wish I could understand why you keep thinking you're doing something wrong..." Viktor added quietly.

The younger man slipped in closer then, glasses folded in one hand as he clung to the white Olympic jacket over his husband's chest, "...I wish I could stop doing things that make you suffer...but the only way I can do that is to leave...and I just..."

"Don't even talk about that." Viktor said firmly. "You used to run away from me at every opportunity before...but I finally caught up with you, and you're not getting away from me again that easily... 'Whatever lies ahead, good or bad, we will face together.' Right...?"

Yuri turned his face inward, pressing it flat to the jacket, ...Those were my words...

"...Nothing has changed...I still mean my vows, and I still accept yours, as if they were spoken this morning. We've been through so many bad times lately though...I know, I understand that it's exhausting...trying to be strong when everything and everyone is trying to tear us down..." Viktor went on, cradling his arms around his partner's shoulders, "That's a big reason why I just want to take you and the dogs and run away for a while...to go to Euros and not worry about anything else. No stress of competition, not needing to be anywhere...it'll be the closest thing we have to peace and quiet for the next four weeks. But my uncle, the RSF...Saito...they can all kiss my ass. They're not going to ruin my happiness...and I'm trying everything in my power to make sure they don't ruin yours instead... Please don't give up..."

Viktor heard no words in answer...but he felt movement. One of Yuri's arms moved away, and he heard the rustle of fabric before it moved forward again. Hands slipped between his ribs and arms, and even though another shaky breath was trembled across his skin, feeling those hands grip to the back of his jacket told him more than enough, and he hugged eagerly in return. The roar of the audience felt really out of place as Yuri sagged against his larger frame, held tight, and just cried.
Despite the cold, the snow, and the blustering wind...the sound of 'Stand in the Light' played loudly outside the Moscow event center. It was barely 2pm, and the Men's Singles practice had just ended. Skaters were starting to filter outside with their coaches and other support staff, expecting to be met by (the few) fans (who hadn't boycotted the event.) However, all they could see through the blizzard-like conditions were the soft grey silhouettes of a mass waiting to get inside.

Yurio paused where he walked, gloved fingers coming up to pull down on the scarf around his lower face. A few strands of hair escaped his hoodie, waving about like a stinging flail against his skin...but he looked on, even as he felt a body bump into him from behind. By the time he'd gathered his senses again and looked back, Konstantin was already in his shadow, crouching down to pick up the smallest member of their group.

"Vy ne raneny, vy v porjadke?"

Nikkita looked up in embarrassed confusion, already finding the immensity of the Russian bear coming down over her. She tried to dust herself off, protesting that she was fine...if that was even what he’d asked, she wasn't sure...but every brush of her mittens across her winter coat was futile. More snow fell, whipping around them in the wind, blowing hair of silver and gold in every direction.

Viktoria came around next, but it didn't take running into Yurio for her to stumble. The icy sidewalk under her boots was invisible beneath the snowdrift, and she yelped as she slipped, catching the bear's shoulder just before she could end up on her butt like her sister.

"Mikhail, led ochen' opasen." Kon commented, looking past the three teens towards the darker figure standing at the front of the group, "Nam stoit ujti."

"Papa-" Nikki started, using the offered arm as a grip to hoist herself back up to standing, "What's he saying?" She grumbled more quietly then, "And what's up with this weather? Ugh...!"

The thin man had the lapels of his black woolen coat pinched in front of his face, but he looked back, seeing the four of them waiting, and returned a few steps towards them, "He was asking if you're okay, and said that we should get out of here. I agree...but these conditions are treacherous. Even if we drive perfectly well, there's a lot of junk plastic cars on the road still and they don't exactly stop on a dime."

"So what do we do?" Yurio wondered, "Stay here until tonight...?"

"We might not have any other option."

That just made the skater anxious, "That's so bullshit though...!"

"Well, if you can't magic us a way out of here safely..." Mikhail shot back, looking up to where his in-law had hoisted both of his girls off the ground, picking up one in each of his massive arms, [Do you mind staying until the weather passes?]"Why would you even need to ask that...?" Yurio wondered stiffly, elbowing the older man's forearm, "Of course he'll stay."
"Kon lives in the middle of nowhere; this weather is nothing he doesn't handle regularly. He may have a better idea."

[I don't care where we go, but we need to get your girls out of this bluster soon.] The behemoth answered, looking through the pair where they were huddled against each of his shoulders, using his arms like big seats, [They're dainty, like your sister always was. I don't want them getting sick or frost-burnt.]

Mikhail grabbed for his hat before it could fly away, but nodded easily, [Let's follow the crowd back inside then. It looks like the front doors are open for the Short Dance.] He said, pointing past the bear's size towards where the grey shadows were starting to move. There was an unexpected uproar just then though, and the group became keenly interested, even as they started making their way carefully closer.

It was hard to hear at first, but it sounded like there was audio coming from an old radio, becoming clearer with every step, [...]score for Viktor Nikiforov...212.15. He's in first place now with a total score of 327.9. He's really giving the Japanese a run for their money, but I suppose it's all good since he's competing for them now. And we can confirm that he's going to represent Japan in the coming Winter Games...he's been spotted wearing the Team Japan track suit alongside the other chosen.]

There was cheering in the small crowd, even as the quintet approached and joined with the mass. Yurio only heard the last few words as he caught up, needing to be pulled along through a particularly rough blast of wind. Once he was corralled into the safety of the human herd though, he looked around for the source of the broadcast, [...]Is that...a report from Japanese Nationals?]

"Da!" A few people answered excitedly, [Viktor's in first place, just like we hoped! We thought he'd hold back at his first event there, but he isn't pulling any punches at all! He had his arms up for practically every jump just now!]

...I thought he'd go easy on them, too...score high in the SP and then take it easy to give the rest a chance, Yurio thought, keeping a few fingers over his scarf as the huddling crowd slithered its way into the Megasports Arena. As the fog and wind were cut off, replaced by the warmer, standing air of the indoors, he pulled the scarf and hoodie away, heedlessly giving himself away to the nearby crowd, [What did he score?] He asked simply.

[Wh-... It's Yuri! Yuri Plisetsky!] Someone noticed, crying out with as much surprise as the Nishigori triplets had upon his sudden appearance at the Ice Castle so long ago, [Everyone! It's Yuri Plisetsky! He's here with us!]

The crowd was starting to gather around, making the skater's entourage a bit nervous, but they kept close. Kon kept the girls on his arms, and above most of the mass, even though Mikhail struggled to keep ground by his side.

[Yeah...so...what'd Viktor score?] Yurio asked again, looking defiant as always, [His usual?] [Pretty close!] A man with a tech-backpack answered; the sound of the event's broadcast seemed to be emanating from the speakers he had attached to the shoulders of his jacket, with cables running into the pack he carried, [He's still screwing around with that less-technically-difficult program that he made for the Final, though. He's in first with nearly 330 points.]

[Has Katsudo-...er...Katsuki skated yet?]

[Katsuki?] The man echoed, finding the mistake almost funny, [You mean the other Yuri?]
Yurio grit his teeth, [Yes, the other Yuri.]

[No...he's due up in 3 more turns.]

[You know that him and Viktor are married, right?] The man's companion, a woman with auburn hair, looked down at the skater with a perplexed expression, [It's Yuri Nikiforov now. Has been for a while.]

Mikhail would've laughed under normal circumstances, but he just remained stoic, more keen to Konstantin's reaction than Yurio's verbal stumble. The bear seemed to be ignoring it entirely though, focused more on Nikki's attempts to defrost her hair and jacket than the banter that neither she nor her sister could understand.

The teen just shrugged and scratched his head nervously, [Of course I know...I just never know what to say around here. The RSF announcers never call him that.]

[That's why we're here.] The woman mused, looking around to the rest of the enamored crowd, [This is the Moscow Division of the Nikiforov Protection Squad. We came to make sure the RSF didn't think they would or could get away with what they did, and that nothing they do can erase them.]

[...Nikiforov Protection Squad?] Yurio repeated in disbelief, [You're kidding.]

"Nyet!"

[So you must be the ones who had the signs with their scores at yesterday's Short Program.]

[And once Yuri's done, we'll have new signs.] The tech-guy followed.

The just made the teen feel a confusing mix of envy and irritation.

[Gotta give skaters like you something real to be challenged by, right?] The man added suddenly, drawing Yurio's eyes up again, indignant though they were, [You're scoring 50 points higher than most of the next-best skaters here. Viktor would've been your only real challenge, if the RSF hadn't booted him. So we're bringing him here, as much for the sake of you and the other Men's competitors as it is to put a stick in the eye of the event officials.]

Yurio quirked a brow, [Thanks, I think?]

"Yuri," Mikhail said, setting a hand on the teen's shoulder, "I still have my tablet. We can catch a LiveStream if you'd rather watch the rest of their event than the Ice Dancers here while we kill time."

"Huh...?" He shook his head, temporarily unable to move his brain from Russian to English, but then nodded, "Yeah, I guess so."

"YURATCHKAAAAAA~!"

"Eh!?!" Yurio twisted around in a hurry, seeing the unexpected and extremely excited remnants of 'Yuri's Angels' suddenly coming in through the main doors, "Ah shit..."

"Yuri! Quickly!" Nikki called, reaching down awkwardly to get his attention above himself, "Get up here!"

"What!?" He quaked in embarrassment, "I'm not getting on Kon with you! He's your majestic steed, not mine!" That didn't stop Mikhail from suddenly hoisting his skinny frame up as though in
offering, and the hulking man-bear seemed to take a hint, leaning down to let the skater be set onto
his arm next to his younger 'sister.' Yurio tried to wiggle away like a cat being put in a pet-carrier, but
when he heard his fangirls shrieking again in excitement, only for them to fall into silence upon
seeing that girl with him again...he stopped. He slouched where he sat on the wrist-end of the
Nikiforov patriarch's arm, back against the man's massive chest, "...Bloody fucking Hell..."

"Language." Mikhail chastised, waggling a finger at him, only then to pat Kon's less-full arm on the
other side, [Let's hurry and find somewhere less noisy. I'll FaceTime Minako on my iPad and see if
she can't show us Yuri's program.]

Nikki half-hugged Yurio with her free arm to help keep him in place while they were walked
around, "They must've been snowed-in, too. No reason for them to stick around after your practice
unless they can't leave, right?"

"I guess." He sulked, crossing his arms, feeling ridiculous being carried, "...This is all really
goddamn annoying suddenly."

"What were those people saying?"

Yurio wiggled again, trying not to sink so far down. He managed to get free, but instead of hopping
down, he put his heels where his butt had been and pushed up to sit on the bear's shoulder instead,
feeling rather superior then, as he could look over and above everyone else's heads from that
vantage. Once he was satisfied, he looked down to the jade eyes that were still waiting for an
answer, "They said they were part of a Viktor-Yuri Fan Club. Apparently they think they're being
helpful by showing off Viktor and Yuri's scores here, as though they're a part of Russian Nationals
even while they're in Osaka."

"That's adorable!" Nikki cheered happily, "I can't wait to get to Hasetsu...it's going to be so much
fun to hang out with them outside of a competition."

"That's what you think."

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?" She wondered innocently.

"They can be pretty gross."

"That's a funny way of saying romantic."

"Gross!" He argued, waggling his tongue from his open mouth.

"I'm with Yuri on this one." Viktoria mused, leaning over to see them both more easily.

"What!? Why!?!" Nikki pointed at her dramatically.

"Viktor's our cousin. Doesn't that make it weird?"

The youngest just made some noises at the idea, "Is being happy for our kin's love-life weird...?"

"It's weird to walk in on mom and dad doing it, right?"

"That has literally never happened." Mikhail interrupted, making a face at them.

"Only half as weird as being on the other side of a bathroom door when Viktor
and Katsudon are doing it." Yurio chimed in, grimacing at the memory of it, "I couldn't hear
them, but I knew what they were doing."
"Why were you around when they were doing it?" Nikki asked pensively, quirking a brow up at the blonde.

"It was me and them and one of Katsudon's friends when we were at NHK." He answered grudgingly, "Apparently they thought they could do it in the bathroom while Pitch-it and I tried to find a movie to watch."

"That's a dangerous game you guys are playing," Mikhail commented, glancing over a shoulder before turning around to walk backwards instead, "The guy who's carrying you three nearly eviscerated those two over just the idea that they were together...now you're talking about their sex life right in front of him?"

"He can't understand English though." Nikki pointed out, "For all he knows, we're talking about the weather."

"...Still. It a cruel irony."

"This one time, those two idiots were so loud, there were scorecards involved." Yurio added with a completely straight face, "Couples are so annoying."

"Keep talking like that, Yura, and you'll be a couple sooner than you can say borscht." Viktoria teased.

"Pssht not likely. I'm happier on my own."

"With your cat." Nikki added, "Like a crazy cat dad."

"I'm not a crazy cat dad, oh my god." The teen argued, sliding down the bear's chest to sit where he'd been before, one leg swaying past the edge of a massive forearm like a pendulum, and pointed a finger at the girl who'd mocked him, "I have one cat."

"You know how many cats most guys have?"

"I don't have to dignify that with an answer." He crossed his arms and looked away stiffly.

"It's zero. Most...most guys have zero cats." Nikki answered anyway, reaching a hand forward to gently pat the Russian Kitten's shoulder, "It's okay though. You're a figure skater. We understand."

"THAT OH Literally DOESN'T MAKE ANY SENSE."

The two silver ladies just howled with laughter at his expense, and he pulled his hoodie over his head again to hide his reddening face.

The audience clapped happily for the conclusion of the 7th skater, but just like after the 3rd, tensions were starting to rise again. It was cute to watch the less experienced athletes competing, but the best shows were taken rather seriously...and the next of the best shows was coming up next.

A low murmur rumbled through the audience as the judges tallied the score for the skater waiting anxiously for them in the kiss and cry, and a hush overtook the arena when the voice finally called overhead, "Yutaka Sano-san no tokuten wa... hyaku yon-jū ni, kyū-jū ni. Gökei tokuten wa nihyaku jū hachi, hachi-jū san. Kare wa genzai san-i."

The look on the athlete's face was a mix of surprise and delayed acceptance of reality...the
scoreboard's digital display told him more than he could believe.

[佐埜·優 (Yutaka SANO) - 75.91 - 142.92 - 218.83 [3位]]

...Hm, jumping to third place, even with such a relatively low score...that's actually not bad, Viktor thought to himself, lowering his eyes from the display to where his husband and athlete was peeling the turquoise track-pants over his skates. He gave a nervous look, He hasn't said a word since he started crying earlier...I wonder if I just made everything worse...? His brow furrowed as Yuri stood up, avoiding looking at him as he stepped towards the curtain to rink-side. Viktor reached ahead to pull it aside and let the man pass unhindered.

The crowd roared their excitement for Yuri's return to the wall, none able to really see the fact that his eyes were red and his face was a bit pale.

Yuri nodded glibly to the younger skater as they passed one another...it was a stark contrast to the way he'd openly congratulated the one that went out before Viktor. He couldn't shake the empty feeling though; that alone made it hard to be happy for anyone or anything.

"Saga ken, Hasetsu kara kita sukēto no tonari...Nikiforov Yūri-san!" (Next to skate, from Hasetsu, Saga Prefecture...Nikiforov Yuri!)

"Ganba, Yuri-kun!" Minami attempted, knowing something was wrong and acting a little hesitant because of it, but trying to be supportive anyway, "You'll kill it like you always do!"

Brown eyes just glanced back slightly, and Yuri barely managed a few nods to acknowledge the younger skater. He stepped forward, coach on his heels, and approached the door to the ice, reaching down to pull his blade-guards one by one by one before stepping onto the cold. He glided in a wide arc, only about 10ft away from the wall at most, before coming back towards it, setting the rubber bars down on the ledge. The Makkachin tissue-box and water bottle came after it, and Yuri reached for each in succession, blowing his nose and taking a sip like it was someone else controlling his hands. There was a subtle tug that he felt on his shoulders, which traveled down the front of his chest, until it came free, and he found himself being turned slightly as his Olympic jacket was pulled from his arms, leaving the cold to rush in like an unwelcome wind.

"Yuri..." Viktor said quietly, but found that his words wouldn't lift those eyes to look at him. He sighed and set the jacket over one arm, placing his hands on top of the wall, "Please say something..."

His eyes moved...but only slightly to the side, staring more at the large font of one of the inner-wall's advert boards than anything.

In the stands, Minako felt a buzz in her pocket, and was curious as to who it might be give that it obviously wasn't either of her two favorite boys. When she saw the FaceTime request from Mikhail though, it was an odd relief, and she clicked to accept it, seeing several faces looking back at the camera on the Russian's end, "Oh...hey everyone." She said, waving her fingers into the viewfinder.

Asahi turned slightly to look, curious, but then looked away again, minding his own business. His focus went to the ice and the pending performance.

"Evening, lovely lady." Mikhail answered back, though his attempts at looking cute for her were thwarted by his being squashed by the three teens trying to get into the frame, "How's it going?"

"It's going, I suppose." She answered hesitantly, "I think I might've joined you on Viktor's shit-list, but otherwise it's good. Yuri's about to go out. He's on the rink-wall right now."
"Oh good, we were hoping we wouldn't miss hi-...wait..." The Russian made a face, "Why are you on Viktor's shit-list?"

"I'm doing something that he doesn't understand and has no context for. It's hard to explain right now." She said simply, looking up as she spotted movement on the ice, only to spy Yuri having pulled his partner's ring-hand up to his lips, holding it there with both of his own hands as though speaking a small prayer over it, "...Yuri looks upset."

"Uh oh..."

"What's happening?" Yurio asked, bullying his way into the front, "What's going on?"

"It's hard to explain!" She said again, flipping her phone around to show off the arena instead, facing it towards the rink to give them something else to look at, "Just watch him!" She turned her gaze towards the skater next to her, speaking to all of them, "He'll spell out how he's feeling when he skates."

Asahi gave a nervous look back, but still said nothing.

Yuri had his eyes closed, lips still lightly pressed onto the gold band, leaving his husband rather confused. His brow crinkled in the middle, and he huffed a nervous breath against the fingers he held. There weren't even words to think up...he just felt; hurt, nervousness, trepidation, worry, anger...and the longer it went on, the more it was anger than anything else.

Viktor was completely out of his depth, left in simple, dreaded silence. He felt the kiss against his ring and the finger it was set upon, and the slight pull on his arm where his partner had allowed it to go around his side as the younger man slid closer. It was just a hug that he got though, arms around his ribs as a face went to his neck, holding there for a moment before lifting to just beside his ear.

"What you did...to Sophia, back then... That...was really twisted...and mean."

Surprised, Viktor's eyes widened briefly, then closed as he nodded, returning the hug uneasily, "I know..."

Yuri wasn't sure what else to say; his mind was blank again. For lack of anything else, he just nodded in return, gave a small peck of a kiss to the edge of his partner's mouth and cheek, and pulled away. He kept his eyes down, not wanting to see how disappointed or worried the silver legend was in that moment, and made his way in a meandering, serpentine line towards the center of the rink. He could barely hear the sound of the audience cheering, though he could feel it against his cold skin.

I haven't felt like this in a really long time...like I'm completely alone out here. But in a way, this is all so different from how I've felt before, too...

He glanced up briefly towards where he knew Minako was standing, and saw how she held her phone out, thought it was a bit too blurry without his glasses to see what she was really doing. The black and teal blur next to her made him uneasy and he looked down again.

Isn't this what I wanted...? He wondered, setting a toe-pick down to hold himself still in the middle of the All Japan Championship logo, For him to watch Viktor and I do our programs...? To tell the story of us with our skating? ...So why does this feel like such a violation...? ...What am I still so angry about...?
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED SEVENTY THREE

Viktor looked out to the audience with a sense of envy; their cheering and excitement coming forward in such stark contrast to his worry. Leaning against the upper ledge of the blue-lined wall, he couldn't help but nervously tap the toe of one blade-guard against the base, barely loud enough for even him to hear, but causing enough of a jolt for him to feel that it kept him grounded in the moment.

I really thought I was getting better at making Yuri feel better and calm down again after random bouts of his anxiety. I guess I'm still as awful as I was last year, suggesting I'd leave him if he didn't get on the podium at his first big event back in the saddle...

He sighed, groaned quietly, and lowered his head over his folded arms. The cheering waned all around as the audience settled to wait for the music to start.

It really is pathetic how much worse I can make it while I'm trying to make it better... I wish there was a book on how to handle this sort of thing... Yuri...

Eyes lifted, just as the low introductory hum of the song began.

I'm so sorry I'm not better at all this...

['Heroes' - Generdyn Music]

Yuri did his best to focus, paying close attention to the sound of his blades scratching on the ice as he moved, pushing off to glide forward with his head still bowed and eyes closed. He knew every inch of a standard rink, but skating blind was still nerve-wracking...it served him well enough, making him pay attention to himself rather than the echo-chamber in his head.

His arms came up slowly as the music grew louder, wrists slightly bent and palms down, face slowly coming up as the lyrics joined in.

I can hear the lost crying,

Hands were up at their apex just before the boom, and were quickly retracted to the man's sides, his left toe-pick digging down at the same time to stop him in place. The right hand went up behind himself himself as the lyric carried forward, left hand rising in front, head tilted down again as he 'bowed' towards his palm.

I can hear the truth hiding, hiding.

Arms switched positions, the left going behind as the right came ahead, setting that hand close to his ear. He shifted his weight forward again, dragging the toe-pick across the frost in a circle around himself, then meandered backward in a wider arc, finally stepping out of the JSF logo's perimeter.

Yeah the shadows are calling us out,

Picking up just enough speed, Yuri crouched down over one blade, dragging the other just over the ice as he hydrobladed, left hand out to the side as he pulled a single finger along the cold.

I see the fear rising.
Back up to his full height, he kept on moving with that same blade down, twizzling forward thrice before setting the second gold blade down again, thrusting his arm out on the next boom.

_Yeah when hope is burning, the shadows are calling us out._

Yuri twisted through a 3-turn to put himself backward again, moving through cross-overs past the short end of the rink, building up speed, arms extended. On the last steps through the curve, Yuri nervously dipped onto the inside edge of his left skate, right set slightly behind it with his legs crossed, knees deeply bent.

_It's feeling like the sun's hiding._

He vaulted into the back-spin, feeling the air flying by him through the four spins…but the ice came up at him too quickly anyway, and the jolt of tripping off his landing-blade and hitting the frost on the point of his ischium sent a shock of pain through his whole body. He gasped as the wind was knocked out of him, but hoisted himself up with the momentum that remained from the corpse of his failed quad Loop, getting back on his feet before he lost time.

_Damnit...! EVERYONE, GET OUT OF MY HEAD!_

_But we're gonna keep moving, surviving..._

Viktor looked on, but did so through his fingers, both hands pressed up over his face. The triple-Lutz, triple-Loop jump-combo that came up next didn't end up in a fall like the quad that preceded it, but he could see that it would lose marks for poor execution.

_Come on, Yuri... Push through it... You've clawed your way back from worse...!

_No we won't go quiet tonight, stand up and shout louder._

The step sequence didn't come with much risk of falling, but most of the audience was still reeling. Minako blinked in surprise over the top of her phone, keeping her view-finder on the ice. Next to her, she tried to see how Asahi was reacting, but all she saw was how the man was leaned down against the railing on his elbows, one hand up to cover his mouth, one finger curling over his nose.

_I wonder if he's trying not to give away how he feels about this...?_

She looked up towards his eyes, but his brow was impossible to see through his bangs. If he was scowling or frowning, or even worried, the ballerina simply couldn't tell.

_Oh no, no, we won't be silent, the shadows are calling us out..._

Yuri pressed through the end of his step-sequence, moving through a double-outside-forward twizzle, then holding still through the exit; arms extended, gliding forward towards the center of the rink as the music faded out overhead briefly.

_We are heroes_

Arms swung around, and Yuri tossed himself horizontally for the flying-entry of his first required spin.

For a split second, his heart was in his throat, feeling his leg and ankle jiggle as he landed. The imagery of him falling from a camel spin entry flashed in his mind, followed by the feeling of humiliation for having to abandon the entire sequence for lack of rotational momentum…but thankfully, the whirl of dizziness that could only be marked by a fast spin, helped return him to the
real world.

*Thank God, I actually stuck the landing on this...*

**He roes in the darkest times, when there is no light, Oooh...**

The first camel variant had him with his hands clasped behind his back, then spread out to the sides, one reaching for the ceiling and the other nearly dragging along the ice from how his torso was horizontal to the ground. He contracted into a ball and splayed out as he hopped through the foot-change, praying between heartbeats that he wouldn't feel the same instability in his ankle again. Thankfully, just like before, the spinning, and the music, continued without interruption.

He reached for his now-free left blade, pulling it under his chest as he spun through the donut variant, then unfurled his thin frame to pull the blade *behind* himself instead for the last variant, raising the spin grade to Level 4. That done, he let the blade go and kicked that leg out as he raised himself to standing up straight again, moving away in reverse.

*We are heroes, heroes in the darkest times, but we'll rise above, Oooh...*

A few footwork maneuvers brought him clear across the rink, and he flew through another 3-turn on the second part of the line, throwing himself on the 'he' into the triple Salchow, the single connecting Loop on 'the,' and finally into the triple Loop on the next boom...but stumbled even worse on the landing than the first fall, sending him sliding away on the flat of his stomach.

*No! Damnit!*

Viktor had his hands over his mouth and nose, palms together as though desperately praying for some kind of divine intervention that would save his husband's psyche. Yuri could do nothing but pick himself up in the absence of such miraculous salvation though, and moved on in frustration to resume his Free Skate.

*We are heroes...*

The flying sit-spin went better than the jumps, though his rotations were slower than he wanted given the time he'd wasted standing up again. His chest was cold and wet from the shaved-ice melting on it, though despite the shock of the fall, the cold helped mitigate how hot his embarrassment felt.

*I can't let my Free Program end like how it did in Sochi... I can't let what Asahi did mess me up like Vik-chan's death did...!*

Sit-spin twist variant, foot change, shoot-the-duck variant.

*When the night is starless, Just we can spark it...*

He rose up to standing again and cracked a toe-pick down into the ice, both hands shooting for the rafters. Fists clenched close together, Yuri spread his arms out to the sides as he brought them back down again. He spotted his worried partner on the rink wall when he looked ahead. Time seemed to slow down in that moment before he arched off again.

*Viktor... Yuri mentally sighed, ...I don't know what you were thinking when you told me that story about yourself at the Olympics...but it...was really idiotic... You're really bad at consoling me sometimes...*
The music caught back up with him, and the athlete spun off to continue his show.

*Light it up in the darkness, Oooh...*

His hands slid up the length of his frame, from thighs to shoulders, as he moved around the far short side of the rink.

*...I guess I kind of understand what you meant by it...? A little bit? Baka Viktor...*

*When the night is starless,*

The second half of the program had just barely begun...Yuri had another jump to attempt. He glided backwards, then dipped down suddenly on the outside edge of his left blade, right going behind himself for the launch. On the boom, he clapped the toe-pick down and threw himself for the quad Lutz, feeling his right skate wobble under him again, but not enough to knock him off balance. The triple Loop that followed, oddly, felt more difficult than the jump that preceded it, but he managed that landing as well with just a slight flail on the out-bound glide.

*Only we can spark it...*

Yuri rotated, arms coming up and out in front of him as the rest of him moved backward towards one corner of the rink.

*I guess I always overlooked your flaws the same way I always tried to hide mine from you...but sometimes, there's just...moments where even a hopeless fanboy like me can't ignore the fact that you're kind of an air-head... A genius, but still an air-head...*

Every muscle in his body seemed to brace for the next move, and Yuri glided in reverse on his right blade, the left leg sticking out behind him.

*Light it up in the darkness,*

The toe-pick cracked down, and he launched, spinning three times and landing on the right blade again. The left leg went behind him a second time...

*Oooh...*

Toe-pick again, another three spins, and a normal landing. The audience cheered.

[Skater Yuri seems to be picking this thing up as he goes!] Morooka commented, [Really rocky start for Japan's All-Star, but the longer he skates, the better his jumps are getting! Will it be enough to recover all the points he lost from those falls at the start though?]

*We are heroes... He roes in the darkest times*

He landed the triple Axel normally as well, gliding off with a sense of relief and growing, but hesitant, confidence.

*...When there is no light, Oooh...*

Viktor could see the change as well, and he pushed up on the wall, standing a little straighter as he watched, You've got this, Yuri...bring it home!

Yuri leaned back as far as he could for the Ina Bauer, gliding from one edge of the rink to the other at an angle, then twisting as he approached the other wall. One skate crossed over the other to
change his direction.

We are heroes...

He glided in reverse towards the next-farthest corner, right leg rising behind him as the left dipped down on an inside edge.

He roes in the darkest times,

The toe-pick went down, launching him through the air again; he spun through four rotations, and landed on the back outside edge. The audience roared its approval, and Viktor anxiously pulled his hands back up to cradle on either side of his head, daring to let himself think that his partner had finally found his rhythm.

...But we'll rise above, Oooh...
We are heroes...

Yuri threw himself into a butterfly jump, dipping his head towards the ice immediately upon landing for the illusion spin, and used the momentum of his up-turned leg to force himself upright, twisting into the scratch spin.

And Asahi... You may not be a genius, but I always thought you were smart at least... I never thought, even after Viktor told me what he thought was going on, that you would be that stupid...

Both arms were up, and he was a blur on the ice, but slowed considerably when he spread his arms out to the side as he lowered them for the cork-screw variant. The music thundered overhead, and he could feel it in his chest even as he spun.

My arms are still sore from where you grabbed me and held me still... I'm sorry that I trapped you... I'm even sorry about what happened to Riku! But that didn't give you the right to do what you did to me!

We are heroes...

The song cut out to silence for a moment, but then burst back to life with more, and rising, intensity than any of the rest that came before. Yuri pulled from the combination spin and rushed backwards along the wall, heading back towards center. The drums and adrenaline were pounding through Yuri's body like a war-beat, fueling the growing anger he felt about it all.

I don't even know how I could ever explain to you how angry you've made me over this...because the pity I feel for you makes me think I don't even have the right to be angry at you...and that just makes me more mad!

He lost sight of the rink, his mind putting him into auto-pilot as he shifted through a mohawk turn. He landed a jump and was already sliding out of it before he even registered that he'd performed one...he could only assume it was the quad Lutz, because that's what he'd done at the Final. His mind was so far off-planet though that he couldn't even muster a sense of relief powerful enough to override his growing frustration.

You over-powered me in that room and made me feel small and weak...and then robbed me of the power to resent you for it by rubbing your traumas in my face like it was my fault that it turned out that way...!
Viktor’s brow furrowed as he saw the next jump being lined up; the last one of the Free Skate...the one that the silver genius firmly believed was meant for his husband. Yuri put himself into an outside spread-eagle as he came around the short end of the rink. The music was a terrifying roar all around them.

But it’s not my fault! It was never my fault! I had nothing to do with what happened to you!

He leaned to the left, straightening himself to face forward as he glided on the outside edge of one golden blade, and the right went up behind him. The world was white to his eyes.

YOU DON’T GET TO DRAG ME INTO IT!

Minako’s eyes were wide, and she nearly screamed in excitement. She flipped her phone around to see the rest of the group’s reactions...though quickly saw that no one but Yurio really knew what happened. He wasn’t reacting that strongly anyway, so she just let them see how crazy she was getting over it before turning the phone back around again and jumped in place as the audience roared and cheered on all sides.

Oooooh...

Asahi had lifted up, both hands gripping the banister, eyes wide in disbelief, Was that...a quad Axel...? How is that even...?

[Double-tano quad Axel from Japan's Hero, Nikiforov Yuri-san!] Morooka yelled into his mic, jumping up from the media table, [That man's going to win Olympic Gold in a few weeks! I'm calling it here tonight!]

We are heroes ...

Yuri hadn’t let himself breathe since landing the jump, his ankle strong as his blade hit the ice; no wobble, no wiggle...just a perfect landing. The music was fading out above him; the final thunder-clap of bass hit a few times before quieting, and Yuri felt the decreasing power of the song helped to reduce the tension of the anger he’d built up.

It felt somewhat cathartic to suddenly ‘become aware’ of his surroundings again when he was already in his final pose, and the maelstrom of cheering from every direction served as his ‘welcome back to Earth.’ He let himself suck in air finally, the icy chill hitting the back of his throat and drying everything it touched, forcing him to cough a few times. He let himself drop down a little, hunching forward to prop himself up with his hands just over his knees, but then simply collapsed the rest of the way down to the ice. Sweat dripped down his face, falling from his nose and chin, salty where he could taste it on his dry lips.

He became acutely aware of his first fall again when he tried to sit down, feeling the thrum of pain when the would-be bruise touched the back of his heel, then the ice when he sat back between his boots. Cringing a little, all his other pains started making themselves known as well, throbbing under the skin-tight dark-blue skating costume that stuck to every inch of him. Yuri pulled his hands up from where he’d balled his fingers into fists between his knees, and slowly unclenched them before crossing his forearms across his chest, grasping his upper arms lightly...and yelled out the last bits of his cinnamon fury.

Viktor heard it, and watched, but with Yuri’s back towards him, it was hard to tell what was going on in the middle of the rink. He just peeled away from that spot he’d been watching from, and moved towards the rink-wall doorway where he knew his partner would return to...eventually.
The shower of flowers, plush toys, and pillow-nigiri was slowly ebbing, and the same teens and children that had collected the gifts for each of the previous skaters were starting to enter the rink to do it all over again. Still, Yuri wouldn't rise up. He lowered his head a little, stray bits of black hair coming loose around the sides of his face, and looked at his partial-reflection in the frost.

Yuri stared at it for a moment, barely getting enough of a clear patch to spot the thin pink remnants of the cuts he'd endured in Detroit 2 weeks earlier. He pulled his right hand down to the ice, touching at the marks in his reflection.

Even after what happened at the Final...how much it hurt to skate, and how high emotions ran because of everything else...I still earned my Silver.

The shine on his finger reminded him otherwise.

...And walked away with Gold.

He pushed up with both hands, finding his toe-picks and rose back up to standing. The audience's cheering renewed for it, and he made himself at least wave and bow his head towards them. He paused when he got to where he knew Minako was with Asahi, and half-glared in their direction.

Between Viktor and I, I'm the alpha, and for good reason. I'm stronger than all this.

Not wanting to give Asahi anymore of the satisfaction that Yuri could only assume he drew from watching him fall apart, the exhausted skater turned away and finally started heading towards the exit. He found his husband there nervously waiting for him, one hand on the wall like he wasn't sure what to do...as a spouse or a coach.

Yuri hesitated to close the gap for a moment, looking on at those worried blue eyes, and that same tired, anxious, desperate expression on the face they belonged to.

It's the same look he had when I found him at the airport after Rostelecom... That look of relief after something so horrible had happened, but we were finally together again, and we knew that everything would be okay...

He nudged a blade and inched closer, and lifted his hand forward to reach it in offering.

I'm done with letting bad things happen to us. I stepped in front of Konstantin twice, each time ready to defend us to the death if need be... This could've been a non-situation, but I let it take control of me...and I put Viktor through Hell because I couldn't handle it...

The silver Russian looked at the hand gesturing towards him, and easily reached back, feeling those fingers take hold of his.

Yuri gently started to pull the man forward.

He's been through so much in his life already, and especially in the last year. When we got married, it should've marked the beginning of the best parts of both our lives, but it's just been a crazy roller-coaster of bad and worse situations...

Viktor stepped onto the ice with his blade-guards still in place, and almost comically sputtered forward when he felt the fantastic lack of traction that he'd expected. Legs and arms flailed, groping for balance, but in the end, he went face-first into his husband's chest, caught by a pair of arms under his own. There was a moderately-sharp twinge in his right ankle, but he quickly forgot about it when he felt a kiss come down on the imaginary bald-spot at the crown of his head. Slate eyes turned
upward, and he saw his Yuri looking down on him, the previously pale and devastated look on the man's face replaced with something more sure and settled.

"I'm tired of letting things spiral out of control." The younger skater said simply, "I'm...not going to let other peoples' problems get the better of me anymore, especially if I didn't cause them. The only problem I want to have from now on is figuring out how to make you happy."

The words were confusing, coming from seemingly-left-field, but Viktor was excited to hear them anyway, and returned the smile despite his traction-related predicament, "That's great~! I can give you a hint on how to start..."

Yuri huffed a laugh and leaned his face down, finding a kiss there while his partner was still somewhat hanging. He could feel where Viktor was trying to stand normally though...and then the shift when they both dropped to the ice, landing roughly on their sides. Each of them opened their eyes in surprise at one another, but then just started laughing again, reaching forward to pull one another closer and start the kissing all over again.

The audience cheered to see that no harm had been done by the fall, and raised their volume a bit higher then they spotted their nation's hero clambering overtop of their newest transplant.

Fingers found each other above the Russian's head, woven together where Viktor's knuckles brushed the frost. Yuri, for once, didn't care how it looked...and parked himself right on his partner's hips to continue their rather-public semi-romp.

Minako turned her phone away, looking a bit sheepish as she glanced at the screen, "Well, things here are getting PG-rated in a hurry. Do you want to wait for the...scores...?" Her voice trailed as she suddenly spotted Asahi leaving, heading back down the stairs he'd originally come up. Like earlier, she couldn't see enough of his face to even wager a guess as to how he felt about it all. She frowned and turned back to her phone, "...Sorry, what?"

"I want to see the score called!" Yurio insisted, apparently repeating himself. When Minako turned the phone again, he just protested, "AFTER THEY'RE DONE BEING GROSS!"

Yuri pulled up half an inch from his husband's lips, and looked on at the flushed face beneath him, "...Is this what you had in mind?"

"It's just like our first Cup of China." He answered with a smirk.

"A bit too much like it..." Yuri answered; he felt his partner's right leg perched oddly behind him, and turned his eyes slightly towards it, "You okay?"

"Forget it." Viktor insisted happily, letting the man's hands go to slide them around the back of that blue and shimmering outfit, "I'd rather you just keep kissing me."

"Really?" He wondered more quietly, even as he leaned in closer again, bringing his own hands forward to cradle around the Russian's silver-haired head, "I would, too."

And he did.
Chapter 374

CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED SEVENTY FOUR

It took the 'assistance' of event staffers to get the two skaters up and off the ice - and each other. They all seemed to take it in stride, offering at worst some teases about how much time the pair were taking. Yuri felt himself pulled up to his feet first, and set his toe-picks down with a comical pout on his face before reaching down to offer his hands to his spouse.

"No one can say we didn't make the best of it this time." He commented, dragging his husband across the ice until those rubber blade-guards could find traction on something that wasn't frosty and slippery. Still, it worried him that the silver legend seemed to be favoring the one leg, keeping his weight on the left and only setting a toe down lightly on the right, "I can wager a guess about where we're going after the kiss and cry though."

"Hah?" Viktor seemed genuinely confused, sticking the right leg out first as he meant to take a step, only to find it collapse under himself as he tried to rock forward onto it. Yuri caught him quickly, but Viktor still wouldn't admit anything specific was wrong, "Ah forget this. It was worth it anyway."

"Viktor."

"Kiss and cry! Now! Coach's orders!"

Yuri quirked a brow as his partner hobbled forward, but he helped offset the discomfort by acting like something of a crutch on that side, pulling his husband's right arm across his shoulders and bracing his own hand against the man's back. He paused half-way through his first step though, hearing Minami calling for him from behind, and looked back over a shoulder to see what the teen was trying to get his attention for, "...Shouldn't you be getting ready to go out next?"

"Your blade-guards." The chicken nugget pointed out, holding one up in each hand, with a goofy-hopeful smile on his face.

"Oh-"

Minami hopped forward excitedly though, pulling Yuri's leg back unexpectedly like a horse farrier would, and slapped each guard onto those naked gold blades with the swiftness of a professional. When he let the second leg down again, the teen had his hands on his hips, only to whip one forward again to give a V-sign, "All taken care of!"

Yuri deadpanned him awkwardly, "...A-arigatou..."

Morooka and Oda were watching the spectacle on their display screens from further down the rink, and the younger of the two was rubbing his chin, [It would seem like Viktor-san is favoring his right leg for some reason. I wonder if he hurt it when he fell?]

Oda looked carefully as Yuri set the Russian down first onto the bench in the kiss and cry, [I agree. Not a good omen for his first competition with the JSF.]

[Let's withhold judgment for now, then. It may be fine by the Exhibition Gala tomorrow night. For now, we all want to know what Yuri-san's score is going to be.]

Minako was watching nervously from her vantage, [I wonder if I should go down there to see if he's okay?]
Yuri forced his husband to sit sideways, setting him down on the bench only long enough to reach down, grab the man's right leg, and pull it up and around as he himself took his place, setting the limb on his lap.

"This can wait till later-" Viktor protested, trying to pull his leg back, only to find it caught by Yuri's fingers looped through his laces, "Yuri." He whined instead.

"Ignoring it won't make it go away." The younger man pointed out, using a single finger from his free hand to push down on the top of the Russian's shin to push the leg back down to where he'd had it before, "I'm the one who pulled you onto the ice...the least I can do is see if you're okay."

"It can wait though-"

"But I want to."

Viktor just puffed his cheeks out and crossed his arms, looking forward at his spouse, only to relent as quickly as he'd begun protesting in the first place. He just leaned back instead, palms gripping to the bench just behind himself, watching as the laces to his right skate were pulled loose and the boot off. His sock came next, and some immature giggles from half the audience...which just made Viktor smirk a bit, and he flexed his toes, straightening out his whole leg as though the very sight of his pasty-white limb was something alluring or taboo. When he tried to extend the foot out though, he felt the same twinge on the inside of his ankle as he'd felt when he slipped, and that was the end of his sexy display. He whined quietly and slouched forward, pulling his hands off the bench again to set his elbows over his thighs to hold himself up, "Well this sucks."

Yuri's fingers were cold initially, but quickly warmed up as he pressed and kneaded with his thumbs, trying to find exactly where the pain was coming from, "I guess it was bound to happen."

"Yakov is going to kill me."

"Not before a lecture that boils down to 'I told you so,' after all the grief he gave you for those stomping moves you used to do at the start of 'Evoke.'" Yuri quipped, pressing lightly with one thumb to the groove just beneath the Russian's medial malleous, though to Viktor it felt like he'd jammed his thumb in there like a knife and he jumped slightly. Yuri pulled his hand back and set them both flat on the top of his husband's exposed lower leg, "...Sorry."

"This is karma for making you feel bad with my stories earlier." Viktor sighed, sulking even more then, "It's going to mess up our Exhibition tomorrow...and you didn't bring a costume for your solo show."

"I didn't think I'd need to, and for the moment, I'm not worried about it." Yuri explained, gently massaging around the sore spot instead, moving his hands down to the silver legend's foot and rubbing on the heel and under the arch, "If this is nothing serious then it'll be fine quickly, but only if you don't overdo it."

"I'd rather we worry about what your score is going to be...?"

"Ignoring it won't make it go away." Yuri repeated, "And I don't care what I scored."

"...You don't? Why not? You worked so hard and made such a great come-back in the second half...you even did the quad Axel again, with both your arms up!" Viktor tried to emphasize, but it didn't seem to matter, "...Did you imagine the look on Saito's face at least...?"

"I wasn't thinking about it."
"Oh..."

"Nikiforov Yūri-san no tokuten wa... hyaku hachi-jū hachi, kyū-jū go. Kare wa genzai ni-i."

Viktor looked up as the cheering started, hearing the words but still not understanding, "...So?" He wondered; the audience's lukewarm reaction made him worry.

"I'm in second. It's exactly where I expected to be."

"But the numbers...?"

Yuri just pointed to the monitor.

Viktor wasn't impressed, and remained seated even as his spouse stood up to start putting the sock back into place, "Yuri."

[Next on the ice, from Hakata in Fukuoka Prefecture...Kenjirou Minami-san!]

"188.95."

The Russian just made a face at that, "...Better than your usual FS scores from last year, but-"

Yuri abandoned the leg for the moment, moving in closer to silence his partner with a kiss. He held there for a moment, pulling back only when he was sure the man wouldn't keep deflecting, "It doesn't matter. You said it yourself long before we started that our scores here were practically just for fun, because the JSF won't do take-backs on the Olympics after picking us. I'm happy with being in second. I would never be sad about ranking right behind you."

"But-"

"Honestly, it's still weird if I manage to score higher than you somehow anyway." Yuri went on, going back to his task from earlier, and pulled the black sock back over his husband's foot, "Feels like I'm upsetting the natural order of things, actually."

"But-"

Yuri reached his hands forward to help pull the Russian up to standing, picked up the loose brown boot, and resumed his place at the man's right side, watching the floor as they started to move out of the kiss and cry, "But what?"

Like before, Viktor just puffed his cheeks out for lack of knowing what else to really say. Instead, he just paused where they were, pulled his arm off his husband's shoulders and reached down to grab a handful and give a playful squeeze, "...No buts. Just butt."

Tension relieved, Yuri's cheeks still flushed, though he felt things would be better going forward as long as his partner was still willing to make such gestures, even given the current situation. Responding in kind, Yuri lowered where his own hand was on the man's back and gave that ample SkaterBooty a few gentle pats before starting to walk again, "Off we go to the medic's station then."

That just earned him a strong nuzzle against the side of his head.

"Yuri's so hot when he takes command." Viktor cooed, mostly to himself, stepping tenderly on his toes as they stepped on, "I have the best husband~! Ow...ow...ow..."

"Yuri-kuuuun~!" Minami called, this time from on the ice rather than next to it, and gestured to all the stuff they'd left on the rink wall.
"Can you watch it for a minute?" Yuri asked, "I'll get it from you later...let me just take care of Viktor really quick."

"Oh! ...Okay!"

"You can use the tissues from the poodle-box if you want." Yuri mused, giving a wink, "Ganba, Minami-kun. Sorry we can't stay to wat-"

"We can st-"

"GANBAAAAAAAA." Yuri waved as he pulled his defiant partner through the curtain.

Minami blinked at the two as they vanished, then down at the poodle-plush tissue box. His eyes suddenly got really wide.

['Phantom of the Opera' - Harajuku]

With the heavy beat of the song vibrating through the floor, Yuri could feel it better than he heard it after a while. But, his focus was on what was right in front of him, and the staff medic who was examining the now-slightly-swollen-on-one-side right ankle.

"You've never hurt it before?" He asked, Japanese accent thick but understandable.

Viktor shook his head, even as he winced when fingers pressed down on the same spot Yuri had done just a few minutes prior.

"Yeah...you strained this medial ligament here." The medic explained, pressing on the same spot again but more softly that time, "You can put your sock back on." He said as he stood up from his rolling stool. He went over to a refrigerator unit where he pulled out a pack of frozen gel-beads, and grabbed an ace bandage on the way back.

"Is it bad?" Yuri wondered, "Can he skate tomorrow?"

Viktor's eyes moved between the two as he listened, but then followed down to his ankle again as the icepack was molded around the inside of his heel and foot. With the sock back on, the cold wasn't as jarring, but he could feel the icy sensation seeping in gradually until the whole thing was secured snugly in place by the elastic-fabric wrap.

"The trick is to stabilize it so it doesn't get stressed out again while it's healing." The medic answered, pulling his nitrile gloves off and tossing them away before grabbing a clip-board to write his notes, "I'd personally recommend against skating until you've gone home and had it imaged. It looks to me like a simple strain...he basically tweaked his ankle by sliding it out to the side too far...but it's always possible that it's worse than that. Is there a Sports Medicine clinic in Hasetsu?"

Yuri shook his head, "Not specifically for sports...but there's three ortho surgeons. Seiwakai Hasetsu has a big PT department, too."

"Then it sounds like you know where to take him. I'll give you a referral."

"...Sooooo what about tomorrow?" Viktor echoed, "Is that a 'yes, but I don't recommend it,' or a hard 'no'?"

"Can you avoid doing jumps or excessive twisting on this leg?" The medic asked, head down while he was still writing.
The Russian glanced aside to his husband, getting a similar look back, then returned forward again, "Uhm...maybe? Most of the big stuff in our Exhibition is on Yuri..."

"If you go easy on this ankle then you can probably get away with a little skating. I have a brace that you can wear that'll prevent a lot of lateral motion, but I can't guarantee it'll fit into your boot...or that it'll be comfortable even if it does."

"We'll test it out." Viktor said nervously, "What's the full recovery time on this kind of thing?"

"Assuming this is a Grade 1 strain like I think it is? 2-3 weeks for the first part, but up to 6 weeks if anything is torn and needs to scar down." He answered, tearing off a piece of paper from the referral pad and handing it over, then moving off again to find the brace he'd mentioned, "But every time you tweak it while it's healing will add layers of weeks onto that. For someone like you, who's already had a long and successful skating career, and only just joined the JSF in time for the Olympics...you should really settle this ankle down and baby it. Take NSAIDs, keep it elevated, rest is as much as you can, and use ice for 20 minutes 4 times a day..." He returned to the exam chair with a few boxes of splints, using the un-burdened left ankle as a sizing guide and placed the first option. It had long, hard sides that went 8 inches above the joint, and another hard piece that went under the heel, with several straps to hold it in place and even more to help keep its proper angle. The sides were lined with a thin gel-pad layer, making it cool to the touch and soft to pressure, "So this is what it'll look like when it's on your right ankle...but keep the ice on it until the medaling ceremony. Ice it again before you go to sleep, and wear the brace as much as you can, even overnight. Try not to put weight on that foot...it'll lull you into a false sense of security by not hurting while you're being good to it, only to give you a really sharp pain if you try standing on it. So don't do that."

Yuri took the offered box with the right-sided version of the splint that was then being removed from his husband's left, and looked it over briefly, "We'll do whatever it takes so he's ready to skate again next month."

"Tomorrow...?"

"Next month."

Viktor gasped audibly, "Yuri Nikiforov you are not benching me."

The medic just smiled nervously, "Uh oh, he brought out the last name...you're in trouble."

"No worse than I've been in before." Yuri returned the uneasy smirk, but then just rose up from the seat he'd been in, and moved to replace the skate on his partner's left foot. When it was on, he sat in that same spot and pulled the boot over his lap to start tying the laces, "I know you can skate with one leg for the medaling ceremony, but don't go crazy with the victory lap, okay?"

"Yuri." Viktor said flatly, arms crossed.

"And try to sit back against the podium and use your left foot to stand up, so you don't have to hop up or use the lower tiers like stairs."

"Yuri."

"Or I can come out early and just help you u-"

"YURI."

Cherry-hazel irises turned to look back sweetly, "Yes, my love?"
Viktor crumbled under that loving gaze and *those words*, and just whined, "...Nothing..."

Yuri smiled, "That's what I thought."
Yurio brooded incessantly while he waited for the 'gross' antics on the ice to end. He found himself feeling somewhat in-kind with the bear sitting nearby, ignoring Mikhail's iPad for his own reasons, but ignoring it all the same.

There were a few small food stalls just inside the arena's main doors, but nowhere to really sit down and eat it, save within the arena itself where fans were starting to find their seats. Places to sit were otherwise hard to come by...and Kon had made his claim on a bench pressed up against a nearby wall.

"...Oh no, Viktor's limp ing..." Nikki commented suddenly, perched over her father's right shoulder, "Is he okay?"

"Hard to tell with this view..." Mikhail said, tilting his head as though it would help make the vantage better, "Minako...? Oi! Minako!"

"I don't think she can hear you while she's holding her phone up like that, papa."

Yurio stuck his head into the gap between their eyes and the screen, "Viktor's what?"

"L-I-M-P-I-N-G." Nikki spelled out, only to reach forward with both mittened hands to squash the teen's head down and out of the way again, "He's not walking normal."

The blonde flailed and pulled away, trying to reset his hair through his fluster, "I know what limping means, dummy!"

"Language."

"What'd he do to himself...?" Yurio grumbled, "He was fine a minute ago."

"He was stumbling around when Yuri came back to rink-side..." Mikhail went on, "I think he might've dinged himself then."

"Oh, there's the score!" Nikki interrupted, getting between them both to get an eye-full of the screen, trying to see the tiny font on the display screen above the rink. Thankfully, Minako noticed it as well and lifted the view-finder to focus on it, "180...no, 188.96? 95! His total is 290.21 and he's in second!"

"So then it's just that guy with the green in his hair." Yurio surmised, "Katsudon fucked this one up badly...what was wrong with him? He was all over the place."

"Maybe it's something to do with Minako being on Viktor's bad side suddenly?" The elder wondered, "She wouldn't say what was going on though..."

"Počemu ty govoris’ o Viktor?" Kon wondered suddenly, getting all their attention.

Mikhail lifted his head, [Your boy tripped and hurt himself. He's limping on the right side.] Quirking a brow, Konstantin reached through the group with his massive arm and swiped the tablet right from his in-law's hands, holding it up so he could see it more clearly...only to get an eyeful of Yuri's attempt to silence his coach with a kiss. The bear groaned loudly and gave the tablet back,
Why can't they keep that to themselves like normal people? Don't they get in trouble for being gross in public?

Yurio cackled, [He gets it! I'm not the only one with some sense around here!]

[They get cheered for it, actually.] Mikhail corrected, turning the tablet around to reorient it, watching the FaceTime footage carefully as it followed the two skaters back towards the prep area. Minami was taking the ice just in front of the pair, [Viktor's too popular to put a leash on his behavior. If he wants to be theatrical, even if it's making-out with Yuri, then as long as it doesn't get too inappropriate, he gets away with it. The JSF staffers were out there pulling them off each other a minute ago though so obviously there's a limit.]

[...It's inappropriate for a coach and student to be acting that way...] Kon grumbled, pulling the lapels of his jacket up beside his face, the brim of his hat creating the lid of a box-like barrier between him and most other people around, [I doubt they're exercising the old socialist fraternal kiss either. Neither of them are political dignitaries so they have no reason to do it.]

Mikhail and Yurio exchanged skeptical looks.

"He's drowning in denial." The teen rolled his eyes, "Should I remind him?"

"...It's not worth it."

"What are you guys talking about?" Viktoria wondered impatiently.

"Dude-bro over here thinks that if he refuses to acknowledge that Katsudon and Viktor are married, that he can somehow complain about how affectionate they are as though it's wrong." Yurio explained, thumbing at the bear casually, though the man didn't see given the blinders he'd erected for himself.

"You complain about it." Nikki poked her 'brother's' arm a few times as she said the words.

He pulled his frame out of reach and twisted to face her, "I complain about everyone who does PDA. It's gross no matter who it is."

Mikhail leaned against his daughter's shoulder, "It's true. He complained bitterly about Minako and I."

"You were being deliberately confusing!" The teen argued, pointing at the elder with both hands, "You weren't even really being affectionate! At least not like them! I complained because you two didn't have your shit together! You guys only made sense for less than a week before it all went weird again!"

"...Sorry?" Mikhail said half-heartedly, eyes crossed to look at both fingers where they'd come dangerously close to his nose. He blinked, shook his head, and swatted the digits away lightly, "Anyway, that's just how it is when two people have an equal say in things. It doesn't matter what I want if that's not what she wants."

"You tell us what to do all the time."

The elder Russian stood up, tablet still in-hand, "We have an unequal relationship. I'm a parent or guardian...you're a minor under my care. You can have a say in things, but in the end, I still have to have your best interests in mind and say no when what you want is dangerous or destructive. That's how it works."
Yurio sighed loudly and turned on his heel towards the rest of the hall, but that just earned him a sudden monkey on his back.

"Listening to papa isn't always the worst thing in the world." Nikki teased, arms tossed over his shoulders as she leaned against him from behind, "He's put his foot down on plenty of things I wanted to do, and even though I was mad at him at the time, looking back on it...more often than not, he was right."

The blonde just started walking forward, even if it meant dragging his giggling sibling along, "This is dumb. I do what I want."

"Yuri Plisetsky, get back here with my daughter." Mikhail groaned, half an eye on the iPad still, hoping Minako would turn it around.

The Russian Tiger cringed under the order, and quickly hopped back to stand where he'd been before with Nikki still attached to him like a remora fish.

"Nikkita Rozovsky, let your brother go."

She was practically at-attention next to him a split second later.

Yurio leaned slightly towards her, speaking out the side of his mouth in a hushed tone, "Notice how it's 'my daughter' and 'your brother' when he says it?"

The silver teen just giggled behind one hand, "He has to remind you of your place in the pecking order. Beneath him but equal to me."

"I'm older than you though. Doesn't that mean I have seniority?"

"You're new to the family...and, Vikki is older than you, even if it's only by a month. She has seniority."

"Are you two conspiring?" Mikhail asked suddenly, gaping down at them past the edge of the iPad, "I can hear you whisper-AH!"

Both teens gave stunned looks as they spotted the older man being abruptly grabbed off his feet, one massive arm going around both his shoulders and hugging him close, and up, to the bear's bulky frame.

[Mikhail...] Kon started, hardly noticing where the skinny figure was trying to escape, [Remember how much you meddled when I was courting Tatiyana?]

[THIS ISN'T THE SAME THING. PUTMEDOWN.]

[I remember it like it was yesterday.] The bear went on, staring off into the air of the hall, [Even before the elders gave their blessing, and both our families made the arrangements...you did everything you could to get in the middle of it all because you didn't want anyone getting involved with your sister.]

[YOU BETTER NOT BE SUGGESTING WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU'RE SUGGESTING.]

Though Nikki had no clue what was going on, she was still amused by the sight of her papa being manhandled like a child.

Yurio, on the other hand, had a stunned-horrified look on his face, [This isn't what you think it is!
Jeeze!

[Hush, tiny blonde creature.] Kon muttered at the Tiger. [The adults are speaking.]

Yurio really had no come-back to that. He just looked on, mouth open and eye twitching.

"What are they saying?" Nikki whispered, still smiling nervously at the spectacle.

"...I think Viktor's dad is trying to arrange our marriage...?" He explained apprehensively.

"WHAT!?!?" She yelled, then rushed forward to get into the bear's line of sight, flailing her thin arms to get the man's attention, "NO NO NO! THIS ISN'T WHAT YOU THINK IT IS! I JUST LIKE MESSING WITH HIM!" She quickly grabbed the blonde and pulled him near roughly, pointing between them, "WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE SIBLINGS!"

Kon just blinked down at her, having no idea what the noises she was making were supposed to mean...and assigned his own understanding, [See, Mik? They get it.]

[SHE WASN'T AGREEING WITH YOU!]

[Like I'd believe that coming from you.]

[No! She's telling it straight!] Yurio attempted, a nervous sweat rolling down the side of one cheek, [She's just a friend! Mikhail even set it up that way! She's supposed to help remind me what it's like to just be a regular teen, cuz I never got the chance!]

[She's practically got him by a leash!] Mikhail added, hoping it would make sense to the huge man.

It didn't, [So you already have a wife-husband relationship then...you go out and work, and she keeps you in line. It's perfect. A wedding would just make it official.]

Both Mikhail and Yurio were gaping in stunned horror at that point, [HE'S/I'M 16.]

Viktoria came up behind her sister, "...We really need to learn Russian. I feel like this would be hilarious to eaves-drop on, but..."

"...Hilarious to you...!" Nikki whined, "Konstantin thinks Yuri and I are dating and that papa's just getting in the middle of it like an over-protective dad would..."

"...You guys have only been hanging out for like...2 weeks."

"I KNOW!" She whined, pulling rope-like cords of hair on either side of her head, "This is so embarrassing...! I'm just trying to be friendly!"

"Maybe you over-did it?"

"How do I under-do it!? I have to take it back somehow!"

"Maybe act aloof instead?" The older teen suggested, "Pretend you aren't interested at all."

"I'm not interested though...why should I have to pretend the truth?"

Viktoria shrugged, "Pipaw's always said his bro-in-law was really old-school. To him, as long as you guys aren't trying to murder each other...then you're good."

"What about you though? Why isn't he dragging you into it?"
Another shrug, but this time with a smug grin and a wink, "I don't horse around with Yuri in an attempt to make his fan-club jealous."

"Oh! So that's it!" Nikki thumped one woolen fist into the palm of the other, looking determined, "He fell for our trick just like Yuri's Angels did! We just have to explain that it's a game, and it'll clear this whole thing up! It's genius!"

"Yeah I don't think that's gonna work at this point." Viktoria mused, pointing at the trio ahead of them.

Mikhail had somehow tweaked his back again and had gone entirely limp, half-crying where he hung like wet laundry from Kon's arm; his flat-cap fell off a moment after that, landing on the tile floor beneath him. He didn't have the energy, or the presence of mind, to try and get it back. Yurio was fumbling against the 'attack' of the other arm, trying to get close to defend his honor but continuously repelled.

The two girls sighed, "...Men..."

Minami looked down at the poodle-plush tissue box on the ledge of the rink-wall, eyes huge and starting to water. His coach waved her hand in front of his face, but the teen was in his own little world. Shaky hands reached forward...grabbed a single tissue...and pulled it up with the gentle, delicate grace of a paleontologist freeing a 100-million-year-old dinosaur fossil from the earth. The tissue was soft, light, and perfectly white. Thick but not cumbersome, and creased perfectly where it had been interfolded with the next sheet.

"Minami-kun!"

"...It's..." He answered, his voice cracking, "It's just so... So beautiful..."

"It's atissue." He sobbed uncontrollably into the fluff, pressing his eyes against the kleenex like it was given to him directly by God, "No tissue will ever be as soft as this!"

"We'll just find out what brand it is and get it later!"

"But this came from Yuri-kun's own stock. Nothing will ever be the same!"

"Quit mucking around and get serious! You have to do your Free Skate!" The coach insisted, holding up the last piece of the skater's costume in her hands.

Minami wore what could be described as a suit...but it was old fashioned; double-breasted, the jacket unbuttoned and with long coat-tails waving behind the skater's legs, the vest beneath it fastened tightly over a white shirt with a white bow-tie. He wore a half-cape over his right shoulder, covering the length of his arm so only the tip of his fingers could be seen beyond it. All that remained was...the quarter-baroque mask, which he took from his coach after much convincing, trading it for the used tissue.

A quick slip under his blonde hair, and the mask stuck to his skin, covering his right eye and cheek, "Okay..." He blubbered through his remaining fanboy tears, "I...I think I'm ready now..."

"GO!"
Retreating from the stands and avoiding people in the hall was easier said than done, but Asahi pressed on until he escaped and was back in the relative safety of the prep-area. His heart pounded like a jackhammer in his chest, and he took a deep breath to try and calm it.

Flashes of Yuri’s Free Program were still blinking through his mind, flickering with the intensity of a strobe-light. The falls, the struggle...

...I never meant to hurt him this badly...! I completely screwed him up! What am I supposed to do!? A few passers-by from the earlier competition spotted him and waved, but that just made him panic internally even more, and he quickly took off in a different direction to avoid them, leaving the group confused.

That ballerina Minako lady didn't know what she was talking about...! I just got them both mad at her too now by being around her to watch their programs! I should've just stayed down here and watched on the monitors like the rest of the competitors! I'm so stupid!

He looked around frantically for anywhere at all that he could use as a hiding place, but nothing was really looking all that promising...so he just kept moving forward. Forward, and forward, and forward, until the circular path of the arena lead to the back halls, and a number of elevator-like doors, beyond which were conference rooms. The herd of competitors and event staffers had thinned out the farther back he went, and by the time he found himself at the end of the line, unable to go further, no one was in sight. Still, he ducked through one of the open doorways and planted himself into one of the many rows of empty seats.

He sat in silence for a while, leaning down over his knees with his face buried against his hands.

...I really can't justify why I kissed Yuri anymore... I thought I could, but after seeing how he's taken it...how angry it made Viktor...I was so wrong about absolutely everything... But maybe Minako was right, even if it was a dumb way of doing things...

Pushing up again, he leaned back against the chair, closing his eyes as he faced the ceiling.

Yuri really pulled it back together again though at the end. The skating in the second half was unlike anything I've ever seen from him, or even Viktor before... A quad Flip, Lutz, and Axel? I knew he could do the quad Loop before...but the rest is just crazy... Almost no skater is ever able to master all of the regular 5 quad jumps, but he got +GOEs on the 6th and hardest jump there is...a jump that most of the world thought was impossible...

Asahi rubbed his face on the back of a sleeve, and slid down the seat slightly, slouching until he felt the back-rest come up behind the back of his neck.

With a second-half like that...I wonder what his first-half would've been like if I hadn't intruded so hard on his feelings like I did...? He probably could've easily broken 300...I'll be lucky if I can still beat him at this point... Yuri always had more stamina than I did. That's half of what caught my attention about him in the first place.

He stared into the halogen lights until he saw spots, but then closed his eyes and looked away, focusing on those spots on the inside of his eyelids instead.

I wish there was a way to tell him how sorry I am...but Viktor will probably never let me get close enough to get a word in. What a mess...
Minami was bouncing from side to side, water-bottle in his hands, Makkachin-tissue-plush on his lap between his forearms. The quarter-mask was still on his face, but he was too excited to take it off.

[The score for Kenjiro Minami-san...]

He half-rose from the bench, crouched down and ready to spring.

[...171.92! Kenjiro-san is in 3rd place!]

To say that the teen started screaming would be an understatement.

[A great score for a stunning performance! Skater Kenjiro-san gets better every single year!]

Morooka announced, looking down at the schedule for the final three performers, [It'll be less than 30 minutes before we see who's up on the podium at this year's All Japan Championship Men's Singles! Stay tuned!]
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED SEVENTY SIX

With the ice-pack still wrapped around his ankle, Viktor hobbled along with the skate on his left foot, the toes of his right barely touching the ground. Yuri stayed close to take most of the weight of each step, seeing the backboard for post-skate interviews coming up just ahead.

The media there were already in the midst of their talk with Minami and his coach, but the young skating nugget spotted them coming and started flailing excitedly in their direction, "YURI-KUUUN! OVER HERE!"

"We're coming, hang on."

Photos and video quickly turned away from the currently-3rd-place athlete, focusing instead on the 1st-and-2nd who were getting closer with each passing moment. But far be it for them to want to get started on the interview both had been putting off...the mob's attention was quickly changed to the fact that Viktor wasn't walking on his own. The clicking and flashes went up to a fever-pitch then.

Yuri pulled his partner over next to the board, but found the teen stepping aside to let the two in, "Sorry, we don't want to interrupt if you're not done."

"It's okay!" Minami insisted, "We were just milling around by this point! You can go!"

He glanced aside to his husband, but Viktor made a face like they should own the situation now that it's gone this way, and they stepped up in front of the sponsor board. Minami still held onto all their things, hugging the Makkachin-plush to his chest and smiling eagerly to watch the interview to come.

"Hi~!" Viktor started, waving at the group, and getting a flurry-storm of photo clicks in response. He smiled nervously where he stood, "...So."

One person spoke for the group, "Ashikubi. Nani." (Ankle. What.)

Yuri half-rolled his head back, leaning it against the arm still perched over his shoulders, "Just like you said...they didn't even say hi before they ask about what you did to yourself."

The Russian waved his hands defensively, "It's fine, really..." He told the group, "I twisted my ankle a little when I got into the rink earlier. The ice pack is just precautionary. I'm sure I'll be fine by tomorrow night."

Yuri didn't argue the statement just yet, despite what he'd said earlier, "I'm just making him be extra cautious."

"Ashita no 'Exhibition' wa dō desu ka...?"

Again, Viktor looked for the translation, but this time, Yuri answered for him, "He won't be in tomorrow's Exhibition." He said, oddly in English, "I'll be skating a solo piece instead."

The Russian's smile cracked slightly and half his face twitched, but he refused to let his mirth go entirely, since another onslaught of photo-clicking rained on them as soon as Yuri was done speaking.
He's killing my chances of even trying...! Yuri, why! Ahhhh! You wouldn't even let me think about pulling you from the Final after you ended up in the hospital over your injury! But this ankle thing is barely a thing at all!

He felt a hand slide from the crook of his waist to relax over his hip instead...followed by the slow, inconspicuous, circular massage of fingers against his rump and the outside curve of his thigh...and Viktor's expression relaxed, almost to a point of narrowing his eyes.

...Oh...right...that's how he does it... He's got me wrapped around his finger... All he has to do is cry or flirt with me and I'll buckle to whatever he wants...! Why am I so easy!?

Yuri had continued on responding to questions in Japanese, leaving Viktor clueless, but when the younger man reached up his free hand to find the fingers holding to his shoulder, and pulled them over to kiss the gold band...Viktor realized.

...It's not that I'm easy...it's that Yuri's too perfect...!

The Russian's eyes were comically warbling from the water-levels rising unchecked in them...and before much longer, there were rivers dripping down his face, and he became a blubbering mess.

Yuri glanced up at him in astonishment, "...Viktor...what's wrong?" He waved his hand toward Minami, and the teen hopped into frame to offer the tissue box. Yuri pulled a bunch free and squashed them against his husband's face, "Why are you crying all of a sudden...?"

"...B-because I'm not gonna get to skate with my Yuri tommoroooowwwww...!"

Click click click click click click click

Being on her own, Minako managed to find a seat to take, and played with her phone nervously. The FaceTime conversation had been over for a few minutes already, and even though there were only 4 skaters left for the night, the three that followed immediately after Yuri felt like they went on forever.

Minami's was at least entertaining; the music was catchy, and even though his show wasn't nearly the level of Yuri or Viktor's, the teen had proven himself in the past and put on a good show. The two after him, however...

Minako looked at the screen of her phone, seeing the text messages she'd received since the FaceTime session ended.

[So are you gonna tell me why you're on my nephew's bad list?]
[Minakooooo]
[We both have iPhones...I can tell you've read my texts...just type if it's a bad time or something and I'll quit bugging you]

She eyeballed the little blue boxes on her screen, but finally relented and typed something back,
[Sorry hun, I was trying to think of how to answer, but the more I think about it, the more complicated it is...it's not really a conversation for texts]

[Cliff's notes so I know you're okay?] He asked instead.

[Ahhh...other than being on the shit-list of Victor Nikiforov, greatest skater of all time...? I'm okay I guess]
[Something happened to Yuri here at Nationals, and it was sort-of taken care of...but I guess I've
taken a page out of your book and I'm trying to fix it for everyone, not just the boys, and they saw me in the stands with the other person]

[Yeah, I could've told you that doing something that I would do was a bad idea. You frequently told me so yourself.]

[It's so much more obvious to someone outside looking in.] Minako sighed as she sent the message, looking up over her phone to spot the second-last skater finally leaving for the kiss and cry, [I guess I get you now...it seemed like a good idea from my own perspective but it's kind of backfiring, and it's hard to explain since I can't just go down there and find them without a guest pass like you always have.]

[I'll try to catch them after the medaling ceremony...we'll see if they're even willing to talk to me tonight]

[Call me when you're done?]

[Yeah]

[Last skater is about to go out. He's an Olympic hopeful so I wanna watch. TTYL]

The crowd started cheering for the previous skater's score, but Minako was too busy putting her phone away to hear what it was, and just clapped along with them out of obligation once she was done. Her eyes went down to rink-side, and the nervous skater she'd conscripted to the audience, who was taking his place to go out next. Asahi was with his coach and choreographer, but it didn't look like much was being said between them; the athlete himself looked lost in his own head.

Minako felt herself pulled out of her own thoughts rather abruptly when someone sitting next to her tapped her arm. She glanced over and saw a number of faces looking her way, "Eettoo... Nani...?"

(Uhm...what?)

[You were standing with Asahi-kun earlier on, while Yuri-kun and Viktor-san were doing their shows...does that mean you know him?] One of the women asked; the rest looked hopeful for a confirmation.

[Er...that...isn't really true. I don't know Asahi. We share a mutual pool of, uh...friends.] She answered nervously, trying to back up against the side of her chair, [He's just an acquaintance!]

[Do you think you can help us get close for autographs later!?] [Wh-what!?] She evacuated her seat entirely then, standing in the stairway aisle.

[The final skater tonight for the Men's Singles Free Skate...] The announcer called overhead, mercifully giving the woman a brief reprieve from the mob, [From Imari in Saga Prefecture...Saito Asahi-san!]

The crowd went nearly ballistic with their cheers, crying and screaming near as loudly as they had for Yuri earlier on. Asahi didn't seem to acknowledge it though, stepping out onto the ice as though it were a practice-run and there weren't any fans in the audience at all.

By the time the group that had pestered Minako settled down again, the ballerina was nowhere to be seen. She heaved for breath as she backed up against a wall in the lower stairwell, the cheers like waves, coming and going as Asahi made his rounds about the ice. Still, once she was sure she was safe, she went back up a few steps to see the ice from there.

Asahi's frame was clad entirely in black, accented with a light blood-red brush-texture that started from the edges of his chest and went over his shoulders and back. Scarlet crystal shimmered within
the brush-strokes like dark embers, accented here and there by orange or yellow. His jacket tapered behind him like coat-tails, tipped by dark red feather-fluff that ended just behind his knees. The same fluff was on the cuffs of his sleeves, nearly hiding his gloved hands. The outside of his knee-high boot covers were edged by sharp, rigid feathers in the shape of pointed crests.

On the side-lines, coach and choreographer were watching him carefully, but looked nervous.

*This was supposed to be my big come-back...* Asahi thought to himself, lacing his fingers together in front of his face, thumbs and forefingers pressed to his skin, *But now it all just seems antithetical to how I feel. The idea of having my programs be loud, explosive, attention-grabbing...I really wish I had something more demure now... I don't know that I can muster the same intensity for it that I had before getting to Osaka... I've completely lost my confidence now...*

Grey-brown eyes looked up a little, sifting through the lower tiers of the audience in the hope that he'd see more friendly faces; not just the fans though, other skaters who didn't know what a giant mess he'd made. There were a few, mostly from the Ladies' group, but no one he really knew. He wasn't surprised that Viktor nor Yuri were in the stands.

At least...until they were.

Coming out at probably the last-possible second, the duo of skaters emerged from one of the arena stairwells, about half-way up the first level. As soon as he spotted them, Asahi could see the rather serious look on his once-friend's face. Viktor was ignoring him outright, focusing on the man next to him instead.

*...Viktor's hurt?* Asahi wondered, noting the way the Russian propped his right leg up slightly, barely touching the ground with his un-booted foot, *I wonder when that happened...?*

He shook the thought away and turned around, looking down at the ice instead, and sucking in a deep breath. The butterflies in his gut became like moths; heavier, thicker, thumping harder against his insides. He tried to quiet them with a palm against his stomach as he settled down in the middle of the rink, but it didn't help. It felt like the eyes of the Nikiforovs were driving knives into the back of his head.

From the stairwell entrance, Yuri watched quietly, even as his husband was still sulking somewhat beside him. He stepped them both closer to the railing and set one hand on it, keeping the other around his partner's back.

"Why can't we go inside to watch? I'd rather sit..." Viktor complained, "I'm supposed to keep my ankle elevated anyway, right?"

"So elevate it." Yuri answered.

The Russian glowered at him slightly, but then twisted away a little and ever-so-slowly started to raise his right leg. He curled his knee up towards his chest before unfurling the rest of the leg even higher up, using his now-free hand to hold it in place by the back of his knee, "Like this?" He asked dryly, hoping the ridiculous imagery would inspire his partner to return to the prep-area.

Yuri glanced over briefly, eye twitching at the sight of it, but he just smirked in the end. He stepped in closer, chest pressed to the underside of that upturned leg, "Yes, exactly like that." He mused, "Keep it up there...if you can."

"*If I can.*" Viktor puffed his chest out, taking it like a challenge, but he deflated as his partner stole a quick peck off his lips...and he resigned to just turn and hold the railing, leaning far forward to stand
in a split for as long as he could. As he rested on his elbows and sighed his latest defeat, he felt his partner's frame lean against his side, one arm resting on his back, fingers lightly playing with silver hair on the back of his head, "...You're enjoying this way too much."

"It's not every day I get to tell you what to do, Mr. Nikiforov."

"You tell me what to do all the time, Mr. Nikiforov." Viktor retorted coyly.

"I make suggestions...you just happen to agree most of the time, that's all."

"Yakov would love to know your methods."

"Love is my method."

"Hah?" Viktor glanced up, seeing the confident smile on his husband's face, even as those eyes were fixed on the ice, and the skater who'd caused him such grief.

"Yeah. If you were hopelessly in love with Yakov then maybe you'd listen to him more, right?"

"Just like you'd be a top-skater already if Ciao Ciao slept with you?"

That made Yuri's face red, but he laughed and shook his head anyway, "...Touché."

"I love you~!" The Russian nuzzled his head against the hand close by, then further towards his partner's chest.

"I love you, too," Yuri responded easily, leaning down to kiss the man's crown, his hand reaching back to brace that still-upturned-leg, fingers sliding precariously lower, "Now watch the show. We have lots to do after."

"Do we?" Viktor wondered, turning his face slightly and giving a sly grin as his partner pulled his hand away again to replace it against his upper back.

"Hai." The younger man answered, "Just maybe not the stuff you're thinking of right now."

"Eh!?"

The thunderous start of the final program's music completely cut off any possible reply.

['Preliator' - Globus]

_Hosana meus (My savior)_

Asahi's head shot up, right arm gesturing forward as the left followed half-way, pulled up into something of an archery pose, but with his hands forward. He pushed forward on the ice, swerving dramatically until the lyric ended, and he twisted around sharply, bringing both hands down close to his sides, bowing his head slightly towards the audience on that side.

_Fortuna deus (Fortune god)_

Again, his head shot up, and he pushed off a second time. Long arching scratches were left in the frost as he moved toward a spot that mirrored the first, but when he sharply twisted around to bow at the stands that had just been behind him, instead of reaching for them, he dipped into a backward-moving curtsey, with both arms forward, raised higher than before.

_Aeterna teus (Eternally yours)_
He rose up again to his full height, moving through a single twizzle-like spin as he picked up speed, only to lower down again and travel across the ice in a rotating knee-slide. By the end of the lyric, he rose up directly into a 3-turn, kicking his right leg out behind himself as the left dipped on an inside edge.

Mystre, morte, sancte pior (By the mysterious, deadly, holy one I'm cleansed)

With the beat, he kicked off for the triple Flip, half-loop to connect, and triple Salchow to finish. There was a brief pause in the music as Asahi glided out of the landing, song replaced by applause until the marching drums began.

Dan ...dadadadan...dadadadan...dadadadadadadada Dan dadadadan...

Viktor turned his eyes to look for his husband's reaction, but Yuri was stone-faced, giving nothing away. All he could sense was the changing speed of the younger man's hand against his back, going from a dedicated brush of a thumb against the space between his shoulders, to sliding down the center of his back and across to cup around his side.

The choir returned, and the sound of a single boy's voice filled the arena. Asahi leapt through a backward flying entry into the first part of a combination spin, moving swiftly in a circle in a standard camel spin, hands clasped behind his back.

Fortuna hosana deus (Fortunate savior god)

One...two...three illusion spins, head swinging down towards the ice on each turn before finally twisting out and lowering down for a shoot-the-duck sit-spin variant, head bent down over where his hands held onto the thigh of his extended leg.

Legionus ab comae (Legions of rays)

When he rose up, there was a quick foot-change, and he continued on with his spin on the opposite boot, grabbing quickly for his right skate to pull the blade up behind his head for a full Biellmann.

Fortune fortuna equis (As fortunate as fortune)

He kicked out of it and started gliding off again, using the long moment to gain speed and cross the rink.

Once more, Viktor glanced up at his spouse, but again was disappointed to find no discernible change in the man's demeanor. All he had to read into were the movements of that one hand, which by then was, to his guess, trying to find its way into his pocket. Viktor pushed up from the railing then, bringing his leg back down to normal, and gestured for his partner to step in front of him.

Ad pugnatoris in veritae (Truthfully into battles)

Yuri found both of his hands clasped by the silver legend's, and in turn, wrapped them around himself, keeping them warm together as the man's chin came down on his right shoulder.

Asahi slid into a forward-inside mohawk, and vaulted on the outbound lyric through a quad Salchow, 'sitting' deep on the reverse glide. The choir of the song quieted for a moment, leaving the skater to breeze across the ice before the next stanza began.

...I wonder what Nagisa and Webber are thinking right now...? He thought, the interlude allowing him to meander across the ice, even if it felt like a battlefield, I didn't talk to them before I came out here... His eyes went up and found Yuri again, ...I wonder what he thinks...? Is he looking for a
message in my skating like Minako said was in his own? What could I possibly even say...? My skating was always about being a force of nature, showing no weakness, no mercy...

Hosana meus (My savior)

The intense music returned, and Asahi’s battle resumed, kicking through a 3-turn and dipping down low on his left outside edge. His toe-pick cracked down, and he vaulted through the quad Lutz, the hardest jump he knew, and followed with a triple Loop, fumbling slightly on the landing but managing to avoid a fall.

...Get your head in this! I'm a fighter! I fucked up but I can't quit now!

Fortuna deus (Fortune god)

The outbound slide from the Loop transitioned straight into another jump; the death-drop into a sit-spin.

Protego causa in sanctus (Protect the cause in holiness)

He twisted his core and extended the free leg for a broken-leg variant, barely dragging a toe-pick above the ice as his right arm went up above himself. Eight revolutions at a blurry pace...

Aeternus praetor, firmitas semper (Eternal governor, everlasting firmness)

...He rose up slightly to finish out the level 4 spin, grabbing the blade of his free foot to pull it under the back of his knee and thigh, and held the fingers of his other hand to the toe of his spinning skate.

Coryphaeus, Rex Regis universae (Leader of the choir, King of the kings of the universe)

As he rose up, he hopped to get a pick-up in speed, gunning for the far corner of the rink as though he were leading a charge, only to quickly hop into an outside spread-eagle for the triple Axel on the curve, and landed straight into another outside spread-eagle. He half-twizzled to get into position, and when the music shifted, banging with a new set of drums for the transition, the step sequence began.

Prose solis hosanna, protego sanctus causa (Onwards for the only savior, I protect the holy cause)

Padre illuminata, gloria in resurrectem (Illuminated father, glory in the resurrection)

Viktor pivoted on his chin, nosing at his husband's ear to get his attention, "You're rather fixated."

Yuri hesitated, but finally let himself blink again, "I feel like I'm watching Silver slip out of my hands."

"...You think it's that obvious?"

"You don't?" He asked honestly, nudging his head out towards the ice, "I remember the posture you took on when you realized Yurio had just wrecked your Short Program record." He sighed and slouched a little, leaning against his partner's frame, "I think this must've been how you felt at the time, too..."

"That's dire."

The step sequence went on, taking on an even more intense air as the chorus repeated, shaking the rafters.

Prose solis hosanna, protego sanctus causa (Onwards for the only savior, I protect the holy cause)
"Well, for one, I don't think he's going to beat you." Viktor attempted, giving the man in his arms a gentle squeeze to reassure him, "He's going into the second half right now and he looks exhausted. I don't think he'll even manage to squeeze one more quad out of it."

"He always has one at the end..." Yuri explained, "Always..."

"Are you worried it's going to be a Flip?"

"Wouldn't that just be the icing on the cake."

Terra tenebrae (World of darkness)

Asahi threw himself above the ice, vaulting through a triple Loop, triple Loop jump combo. Sweat flew off his skin, but the beat wouldn't let him rest at all.

Telluris malus, qui sere pere. Curiatus (Evil earth, who sows, perishes. Curiate.)

Each heavy beat of the drum made the skater twist or kick, swinging or thrusting his arms, and he pushed through backward cross-overs at the end of the rink.

Genitor edo, in ex domino (I eat/beget the begetter, within outside of the lord)

The fight-sequence seemed to fade as he came back around towards center; a lull in the fighting, but not for long.

Patris illuminata, Rex Regis... (Of the illuminated father; King of kings...)

He thrust himself down onto one knee, one arm grasping for the sky as the other trailed behind him, then twisted his gliding-blade to spin him around.

...Universe (...Of the universe)

With the twist, he threw his free leg out and straightened it, gliding backward in a long arc as the lyric trailed and faded out. He slid on as the heavy horns struck two cords, but quickly rose up, twisted over himself, and bent way back for the Ina Bauer as the soulful cry of a Valkyrie sounded overhead.

Yuri's worried look seemed to deepen, and the foreboding notes of the music only served to enhance the feeling. The drums and horns came together, and the intensity of the song picked up again, leading into to explosive finale. Yuri's brow furrowed and he took on a more serious expression, watching for any signs of misstep or mistake. There were few, but his newly-trained eyes, sharpened by the lessons of an Ice God, were able to pick up the obvious blemishes of an athlete absent from competition for two years.

"...I could do this better."

"Hah?" Viktor blinked at him, but the song shifted into overdrive, making his husband's words hard to hear.

Asahi switched into another step sequence, each swing of his legs and arms looking more and more like a martial arts form than the last.

Prose solis hosanna, protego sanctus causa (Onwards for the only savior, I protect the holy cause)

Padre illuminata, gloria in resurrectem (Illuminated father, glory in the resurrection)
The audience was creeping closer and closer to the end of their seats. Even Minako was entranced by the battle. She glanced aside for a second, and spotted the blue and white track-suits of the Olympic team, worn by two men on the next landing. She squeaked in surprise to realize it was her boys, and ducked behind the wall to avoid being seen unprepared.

Prose solis hosanna, protego sanctus causa (Onwards for the only savior, I protect the holy cause)  
Padre illuminata, gloria in unum diem (Illuminated father, glory on that one day)

Yuri had to pull his hands free from the finger-laced hug, gripping the railing in front of himself and leaned forward. He couldn't take his eyes off the program.

...I know he's been planning this program for months, if not an entire year...maybe even longer... There's no chance he could've known what would happen this weekend. So why do I still feel like this battle he's fighting is against me? And why do I feel like he's winning...?

He saw the left blade going down onto an inside edge, and the right leg lift behind the skater. Yuri's hands were white-knuckling the railing, squeezing so tightly that he could feel the breeze under the edge of his ring, brushing cold against skin that had long-ago taken a groove to the gold's placement.

Viktor saw the skate-placement too, and felt himself loosen his arms around his husband's frame, You better not... This better not...

The toe-pick jammed down, and Asahi flew, spun, and landed, earning him a big applause.

"It wasn't a quad," Viktor insisted, pulling his partner back from the edge, "It was just a triple."

"Are you sure? I couldn't-"

"I'm sure." He said firmly, "You're not even wearing your glasses...trust me on this one! I'd be furious if he did a quad Flip!"

Yuri still held tight to the banister though, I don't want to be mad at him...I just don't want him to be better than me!

Prose solis hosanna, protego sanctus causa (Onwards for the only savior, I protect the holy cause)

Though the second step sequence had ended, Asahi still made good use of the full surface of the ice. The end of his program was quickly pressing down though, and he could feel the burning in his chest and lungs. The cold arena air couldn't do much to cool to heat on his skin, and his long teal bangs threatened to blind him with each whip of his head.

Padre illuminata, gloria in unum diem (Illuminated father, glory on that one day)  
Prose solis hosanna, protego sanctus causa (Onwards for the only savior, I protect the holy cause)

He pushed through a series of stars, kicking his leg up as his body rotated in a diagonal line across the ice, then finally straightening out into a forward-entry camel spin, both hands extended out to the sides, looking like wings as he stared ahead.

Padre illuminata, gloria in unum diem (Illuminated father, glory on that one day)

Arms came closer as the skater hugged himself to bring his center of gravity in, and he stepped down for a quick foot change, kicking off again for another camel spin. He used the toe-off from the foot change to push as hard as he could, twisting himself into the direction of the spin, and rounding it out with another kick to stand up straight.
Lacrimosa, lacrimosa (Tearful, tearful)

Stepping out of the spin, he power-housed it as hard as he could, forcing his way across the rink with all the stamina he had left.

In ex dominum (Within outside the lord)

He twisted around in a mohawk, and lowered down on the right outside edge, left going out behind him. The toe-pick jammed down on the final beat, sending him flying into the quiet. The audience heard his blade land on the ice with a crack, and the sound of it echoed off the walls and rafters like a pin-drop in an empty concert hall. The scratching noise of that one blade on the frost sunk deep into every onlooker, a stark contrast to the thunderous roll of the song that came before. The quiet hum of a woman's voice slipped through the crowd like a fog, flowing into the rink until it pulled the skater into his final pose...and faded out altogether.

Yuri stood up straighter when it was over, looking down into the rink as everyone else went wild with cheering. The audience seemed miles away to him...save for Viktor, who was with him in that strange place. They glanced around the arena like they couldn't understand what all the cheering was for; it felt strange and alien to them, given their morning and the night before. Still, Yuri grit his teeth before turning back to his partner, "When we're done with the medaling ceremony, we're going back to Hasetsu."

"What!?" The Russian was immediately in a panic, "What do you mean, back to Hasetsu!? The Exhibition is tomorrow! You gotta skate! If not for yourself then at least for me!"

The younger man was already making an effort to get towards the stairs behind them, "Let's just go."

Viktor felt weird wanting to stay, but he glanced back out to the ice, then down to his spouse, who had paused one step down before turning around to offer his hand. He grumbled nervously and reached for it, knowing it'd be harder to follow after if Yuri got too far ahead without him, and let the man guide him safely down, "...You need to start making sense, Yuri! What are you saying!?"

He paused briefly as they got to the bottom of the stairs, and drew a deep breath, but then just shook his head, "He's just taken Silver. I don't want to be in the Exhibition as a Bronze medalist..."

"But-"

"I'll skate it for the sake of your Gold, but...that's all."

"...So...we're going back because...?!"

"I need a different outfit." Yuri turned on the heel of his blade-guard, and set both their arms back into place before walking again, "The one I thought I was going to be using here in the first place."
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED SEVENTY SEVEN

The crowd’s screams and cheers were deafening, rivaling even the most enthusiastic Central American futbol crowd. Similarly to a certain pair of departing athletes though, the adulation seemed distant, if not hollow, to the one still standing in the rink.

Asahi wasn’t sure what to think of it all.

Stop cheering.

This wasn’t worth as much as you want to believe.

Did I finish?

Did I win?

Did I ever stand a chance in the first place?

I want to win!

I want to go home...

I shouldn’t be here.

This is my last shot at making something of myself...

I don't deserve any of this.

Am I even allowed to be happy about what happened?

The only thing that made sense to him was the sound of his breathing; deep but quick, and the feeling of each drop of sweat that rolled down his face and neck, leaving a trail of ice cold in its wake. His mind continued to race, asking a thousand questions, doubting everything, and he slowly went down to one knee on the ice, then the other, eyes staring off into space.

The cheering seemed to come from 'somewhere else' after that, as though massive walls had been placed all around the edges of the rink. The audience became a staring, harsh, ignorant mass...and he, like a specimen under glass, helpless and prone before their judgments.

Asahi...

Eyes shot open. He saw blue and grey tennis shoes on the ice directly in front of him, with the tattered, frayed edges of black jeans folded over them. His brow furrowed, and in a mistaken blink, he closed his eyes...and the image was gone. Confused and nervous, Asahi felt a hot wave rush through his whole frame, leaving prickles on his skin, traveling from fingers to shoulders and across his back, before finally fading out again.

...What the Hell was that....?
Yuri, Coach Nagisa, and Choreographer Webber, all crammed into a narrow walkway that was slightly set-apart from the regular part of the prep area. A few event staffers stood nearby in suits, lanyards and badges hanging from their necks. JSF reporters were around nearly every corner, filming the awkwardly distinct cliques, and the one person - the lone non-skating coach - who seemed to have ties to both but could not bridge them.

The two younger skaters just kept their eyes ahead, focused on the barely-open blue curtain that lead back out to rink-side. The carpet on the floor was blue as it lead to the doorway, then abruptly changed to red as it went out into the arena.

[Please, let's start moving forward. They're ready.] One of the staffers informed, gesturing politely, but firmly towards the doorway.

Asahi was easily faster, and his team followed quickly behind him, cutting to the left as soon as they exited the hall. He was already reaching to pull the zipper of his Team Japan jacket down as he moved out of the darkened passage.

Yuri followed out next with his coach, who had since taken to trying to put weight on the right leg with the brace on. Stepping up onto a blade-guard and then down onto a nearly-naked foot was a challenge though, and the silver legend gave up quickly; the brace made it nearly impossible to flex his foot down so he could step on his toes anyway.

"Please be careful." Yuri asked quietly, pushing past the edge of the curtain and out into the bright lights of the stadium. The crowd was already cheering, but there was a slight uptick when the two emerged. An old-sounding song of trumpets and other horns played overhead, and Yuri paused to help pull his husband's sole guard off.

Viktor kept his balance with a hand on the nearby wall, able to put a little weight down on his right foot while the left was lifted to free it for the ice. As his gold blade set down onto the velvet carpet, Viktor reached up to pull the white jacket away with his free hand, setting it over the edge of the open door in the rink-wall, and saw his partner's following soon after. Three blade-guards were set next to them in turn, and the Russian reached to slide his arm over his spouse's shoulder while they waited.

Asahi side-eyed the pair now and then, more out of caution than curiosity. The heavy thumping of moths inside his chest and stomach had faded away, leaving him rather numb in spite of it all.

This feels wrong...

The horn-music above faded down, and the audience's clapping gentled as well, leaving a politely quiet space for the announcements to begin, [Ladies and Gentlemen, please kindly turn your attention to the ice. We will now begin the awards ceremony for the All Japan Men's Singles figure skating championship.] A woman's voice echoed overhead.

The crowd started cheering again as Yuri turned to offer a few more quiet words. Viktor listened, nodded, and stepped closer to the door. He heard more words being said high above them then, but in the milisecond it took for Yuri to hear enough to translate, and pat his hand against his shoulder to nudge him out, Viktor craned his head to the far left.

Asahi noticed the weighty tension falling over him in that moment, and glanced back, seeing a single pale-blue eye watching him strongly. The stare he got was enough to make the hot-prickly feeling from earlier feel like a warm breeze...this attention felt like hot knives.

You leave Yuri alone or so help me God ...losing Itô will be the lesser of the two brutalities you
suffer if I have to come back this way.

[Victory!] The announcer called, and the Russian turned his head to the ice, [Ice Castle Hasetsu sports this year's Gold medalist, and member of the Japanese Olympic Figure Skating Team...Nikiforov Viktor-san!]

Applause rose excitedly, even as many fans screamed lamentations over the noise to show solidarity with the legend's one-legged glide. Even with only the one skate though, and hobbled into keeping his right foot up, Viktor still managed to slide around expressively. Single-blade tricks weren't terribly complicated for him, and he swiveled around playfully as he would even if he had two good legs. One arm gestured out to the side as he bowed to all sides of the arena, and he dipped into a forward lean to start moving again.

[A truly stunning performance by Russian figure-skating legend, Viktor Nikiforov, with a final score of 327.90.] Morooka commented for the home audience, [The Japanese team is especially grateful to have him join us, even this late in his career. Having turned 29 just this past week, he was still a top candidate for the Olympic team, and the JSF was right to swoop in and grab him up as soon as they realized his former league had cut ties. Viktor entered the All Japan Championship as a star contender and was expected to sweep the Gold easily, save for his own partner and student, who has largely been Skater Viktor's only real competition this season. We hope to see many more surprises from them both as they continue to challenge one another, together, for Japan.]

When he finally got to the back of the three-tiered podium, with the long table of awards and the suits standing behind it, just off to the side, Viktor carefully set his hands down and crawled up onto the level surface. Someone from the awards table rushed forward quickly to offer a hand to help him get back up again, and he laughed nervously before accepting it and getting up. He tried to look humble and cute as he finally got upright, dusting off his costume pants and gingerly lowering down to give his left leg a rest.

Yuri had crossed his arms over his chest as his husband went out, eyes never wavering in their forward-facing stare. He wouldn't allow the faintest of wavers, not even reacting to movement that he could barely see in his peripheries.

Please just let this thing be over without anyone trying to talk to one another... I don't have the patience right now...I just want to go home...

[The Silver medal is awarded to returning-Champion from Imari, Saga Prefecture...Saito Asahi-san!]

The black and red blur went quickly by without an attempt to exchange words, and Yuri watched the taller man go; it was a bit of a relief to see him moving away. Now it was just a matter of surviving the next several seconds without Coach Nagisa trying to say something on her student's behalf. Yuri just kept his eyes forward and arms tightly crossed over his chest, watching dryly as Asahi gave his bows and waves like every other skater had before, and tepidly took his place on the second tier of the podium, just to Viktor's right.

[Skater Asahi took 2 years off after a fatal car accident that claimed the life of his rink-mate, shortly after that season's Japanese Championships.] Oda said, taking his turn, [He's clearly worked incredibly hard for this return-debut to the National level, leveling out with a final score of 299.35. The last time he skated here, he was only able to land the quad Salchow and quad Toe-loop, and his average final scores were closer to the 220s-260s...but now he's added the quad Lutz-triple Loop to his lineup as a real power-house move, worth just over 20 points on its own. His current coach, Nagisa Sayoko-san, was also the Juniors coach for both himself and Skater Yuri, coming out next.]
It felt incredibly tense to join Viktor on the podium on his own, but Asahi kept to himself, eyes only high enough to make it difficult to tell if he was looking down in the first place. He put his hands behind his back loosely and bowed his head, avoiding the Russian's gaze.

Viktor barely looked at him, looking off to the side where his spouse was due.

[And the third place Bronze medal is given to Ice Castle Hasetsu's second Olympic figure skater...Nikiforov Yūri-san!]

The applause he received was just as warm and congratulatory as the two granted before him, but Yuri still didn't feel too thrilled about it. He went through the motions feeling like he'd just stepped out of the last move of his Sochi Free Program, mentally yelling at people to stop cheering...and cursing himself for his own failure. Without being able to peer into his head though, the audience was entirely oblivious to the roast going on behind those brown eyes...and Yuri got onto the lowest tier of the podium, standing to his husband's left. He felt a slight relief from the rattling noises in his brain as he reached up briefly to touch his partner's out-reached hand, but eventually stood solo like the others.

[A stunning upset for Skater Yuri, who's widely been praised this season for being the Come-back King after a number of stumbles between events during the Grand Prix Series.] Morooka took over again, recounting those harrowing days, [Maybe he's still not feeling 100% after that accident in Detroit?]

[It's possible. He had an extremely lively Free Skate finale though, don't you think?]

[Oh, absolutely. The entire country cries out with pride and joy every time that young man drops a quad Axel into the mix...this time even raising his arms for higher points. Skater Viktor may have pioneered the quad Axel, and been the first skater in history to have its performance ratified at a sanctioned ISU event, but that jump truly belongs to Yuri. Other quad-commandos like JJ Leroy of Canada, and Chris Giacometti of Switzerland, can only stand back and marvel at the tenacity of the quad Axel. I wonder if we can certify a nickname for the occasion?] Morooka wondered, putting a hand on his chin, [Since only those two have successfully landed it.]

[What are you suggesting?]

[The Nikiforov Axel, maybe?]

[Oh! I like it!]

[Home-audience, help us out with this one, would you? Hashtag #NikiforovAxel. Spread the word!]

The big-wigs came out next, walking along the red carpet that crossed the ice, between the podium and the awards table across from it. A few words spoken, names read and certificates labeled, and each skater was awarded with a stiff board that ranked their accomplishments at the event. Viktor was handed a massive gold-chrome goblet-like trophy, its square wooden base nearly a foot long on each side to manage its weight. When the medals were sorted and awarded, Yuri let himself smile a little as his partner struggled to figure out how to hold the certificate and the trophy while bending over and shaking hands...only to settle on putting the trophy down to free up his grip. The audience seemed to find it funnier than he did, but he let himself to live vicariously through them.

Never thought I'd see the day that I'd be angry with a Bronze...at least I'm on the podium, right? I have so much to be grateful for, but it all still feels so...undignified.

More awards came...smaller trophies about 8 inches tall, looking like the tips of Kudu horns with
their ridges and subtle spiral near the ends, then the bouquets of flowers, and even more handshakes. It seemed to take forever for things to finally wind down, though that came with its own perils.

Mercifully, Viktor was cognizant of the trouble to come, and carefully hoisted every award he'd gotten into his arms, just to prevent the awkward 'need' for group-hug photos before they got down from the podium. Asahi was still forced closer by the photographers, but the giant trophy made it easy for him to feign not having enough room and keep a minor distance. Once they were free to start the victory lap, it was oddly cerebral that none of them even suggested the motion of handshakes.

Viktor did his best to lift up and present his Gold as they skated around, but with everything else in his arms, the task was impossible. Saving him, Yuri reached for his chest and pulled up on the red lanyard, hoisting the yellow metal disc free, and kissed the edge of it before leaning up to share a kiss with his husband. Hand-shakes be damned, no one else in all existence would be getting in on that party.

And with that...the event finally ended.

Skaters retreated back to the prep-area to change and gather their things. Congratulations were given...and the palpable tension of still not knowing who'd gotten the last Olympic Team slot was easily felt. It became clear soon after the medaling ceremony that the JSF technical review board would be needing to convene and come to a decision, hopefully before the Exhibition. It left many skaters, Men and Ladies alike, a bit frustrated and apprehensive.

Viktor lost sight of Asahi shortly after they got off the ice, retreating within the safety of the mob that had descended behind the scenes. He wasn't terribly sad about that. It left him with a much more important problem to deal with.

"...So how do we get out of here in one trip?" He wondered, "With you helping me just to walk, I can't even spare one arm to carry or drag anything...and that means you're down to just one arm, too."

Yuri looked between their carry-bags, the shared rolling suitcase, and the gigantic trophy, rubbing his chin with a few fingers, "...I could go back on my own with the first load and then come back for you. It may take me up to an hour though."

Viktor shook his head, "You're not leaving my sight. You may be having fun telling me what to do, but at least this weekend, I'm retaining sole authority to say where you're allowed to go."

"No argument here..." Yuri sighed though, "It wasn't my favorite idea anyway."

"Having trouble?"

The two looked aside, then down...and straight into the empty arms of a certain chicken nugget.

"Oh my god! I'm standing in Yuri-kun's room!" Minami squealed excitedly, still holding onto the big All Japan Championship trophy, and carrying the Makkachin plush tissue-box inside it.

"You've been to Yu-Topia Katsuki though...why is this so special?" Yuri wondered comically, making a face at the teen as he eased his partner onto the edge of the bed, "It's just a hotel room."

Yellow and red hair whipped around as Minami changed directions on a heel, "Don't you know how many people want to get the room-numbers for skaters like you!?"
Yuri felt a pang of déjà vu then, but Minami distracted him out of it again.

"I've been looking up to you since way before you got this good..." He went on, finally putting the trophy down on a small circular table, freeing up his arms to point one finger at the older skater, and more specifically, at the white coat Yuri hid under the layers of cold-weather gear piled on top. "But now you're on the Olympic Team and get on the podium at basically every event! You do a quad Axel! How cool is that!?" He was practically spinning from how much his fanboy blades were turning. "My idol does the hardest jump on record! I have so much work to do to try and catch up!"

Viktor smiled as he listened, but then just leaned down onto his back, "We need to get going. It's just after 8."

"Yeah...I was thinking the same. We took a long time getting back."

"...Going?" Minami crashed out of fanboy-mode and glanced at them, "Where are you going this late at night?"

"Back to Hasetsu." Yuri answered, "I need a costume for a solo show now. We didn't come prepared for it."

"How come you don't just ask someone at the resort to bring one to you?" The teen wondered, "Can't they?"

"I'm not so certain they'd grab the right one, or all the stuff that goes with it. I haven't skated it before so they don't even know what the outfit looks like."

"...Oh."

Yuri turned to head towards the bathroom, looking back at Minami as he went, "We're going to come back in the morning, so don't worry."

"But you're going to miss the Exhibition practice... You guys are Olympic Chosen, you can't really miss it. At least..." A nervous finger went down towards the Russian, "...Unless you've been maimed."

"I'm fine!" Viktor insisted stubbornly, "I'm just milking this for everything it's worth cuz I like having Yuri dote on me."

"Are you serious?" Yuri questioned suddenly, head coming out of the bathroom so fast it nearly broke the sound barrier. He glowered at his partner, "Tell me you're not..."

Minami blinked between the both of them, but then gestured both hands towards the door, "Well, I think that's my cue...I'll see you guys tomorrow! Congrats again!" He waved as he was already sliding out the door, and disappeared like a cloud-puff, leaving the panel to click closed.

Yuri crossed his arms again, "Viktor..."

The silver Russian waited a moment, leaning forward on the bed to be sure the nugget wouldn't come back unexpectedly, "That one's a keeper. Takes hints real easy. He'll be our third pup yet...Makkachin, Jiro, and Smol Nugget." He mused, returning his gaze up to his mildly-annoyed husband, "Don't worry. I only said it to make him go."

"...I...feel really weird being relieved by that?" The younger figure slouched and reached his hands up to ruffle his slicked-back hair, leaving it to look like an awkwardly messy black nest when he was done, "You don't know what this is doing to me right now. If you can actually skate and you're just
making up the limp..."

Viktor offered a comforting half-laugh, but reached forward to tug on his partner's coat-sleeve, "Neh, Yuri... I do like it that you're paying so much attention to me, but that doesn't mean my ankle doesn't hurt."

"...So you're not messing with me?"

The Russian shook his head, tousling silver hair over his eyes. Those crystal hues looked up solemnly, half-lidded, "I couldn't carry it on this long without outing myself. I don't want to see you worrying."

"...Okay..." Yuri nodded, accepting the explanation quietly, "We really need to get moving though. If we're not careful, the last train out of Fukuoka will leave before we get there, and then we'll be stranded until tomorrow morning."

Viktor hesitated to stand though, even as his partner was bracing himself to hoist him upward, "...Smol Nugget does make a point though. The family back home doesn't need to know much about skating to be able to find a costume meeting a description we give them. If you want your solo costume, we could just tell them all of its parts. It's all bundled together real nicely in our closet as it is. Asking Mari to bring us your outfit would be easy. Your mom has our spare house-key."

Yuri was the one hesitating then, and he relaxed his stance, "...I just want to leave Osaka. The sights, the sounds, the proximity to..."

"Mh..."

He shook his head and stood normally again, "My problem used to be that I got so scared of being in first place that I'd mess up because of the pressure. But I've...gotten used to it now, even if it's still really weird to be seeing these consistently high scores. Nothing about my competitive nature ever changed though. I'm angry that Asahi beat me." He clenched his fists, "Really angry."

Viktor reached his hands forward and cupped them gently around each shaking fist, relaxing them until they unclenched and he could weave his fingers around them, "My love, I'd be surprised if you weren't."

Cherry-hazel eyes turned to look down, and rose as they followed the silver genius to his feet.

"Way back when I was still asking people in Hasetsu to tell me things about you...Yuko told me much the same thing." He closed his eyes as lifted his face to recall, "Yuri may not be a genius on the ice, but he has more time to practice than anyone else. He's extremely competitive and hates to lose more than anything.' Or...something to that effect." He offered a smile as he looked down again, "You want to settle the score. You want to remind everyone why you've won the World Championship Gold and never him. Right?"

"...Yes."

"So settle the score at the Exhibition. Skate it perfectly...and skate it in my place."

"...In your place? You want me to skate one of your Exhibitions?" Yuri wondered, confused, "I fit into your old Juniors outfit but you were smaller when you were 16...I don't know how many costumes that leaves me with...and I don't know most of them by heart..."

Viktor laughed at that, "Yes I was...but no, that's not what I meant. You said you don't want to skate as a Bronze medalist, so I'll give you my slot for the Gold spot. That's where we would've done our
duet anyway."

"...But you would've still been out there though...I can't just take your spot...can I?"

"Yuri..." The Russian half-lidded those crystal eyes again and leaned forward slightly, right hand coming up gently under his husband's chin, "Trust in your own reputation. You'll skate in the Gold slot."
One carry-bag was quickly packed with a few necessities for an overnight trip, but everything else was left behind. Yuri, with his hair re-styled from the mess he'd made of it, slung the bag over his shoulder as he dialed for home with the other hand. Viktor switched out of the sneakers he wore back from the arena into more winter-appropriate boots, the brace around his ankle making it snug and rigid. He stepped a little bit around the hotel room before giving his partner a nod and they headed for the door.

"Oh, hey mom, sorry to bother this late at night." Yuri started, holding the door as the Russian went through, limping slightly but otherwise able to hold his own, "No, everything's fine. ...I won Bronze. ...Viktor did." He explained, watching the door click shut before stepping up to his partner. He reached his free hand for the one angled towards him, and let the fingers lace together, drawn into the silver man's jacket pocket for safe keeping as they started walking to the elevators, "Someone you don't know. No, I messed up. That's why I'm calling. Viktor and I are coming home tonight to take a break and pick something up, and I was wanting to ask if someone could take the dogs back to our house, so we don't bother you when we get into town. We're still in Osaka right now."

Viktor reached to click the Down button, and they waited quietly in the hall.

"Yeah, right? We'll practically be the last train into town tonight." Yuri added with a nervous laugh, "Hopefully we make it. ...You will? That's great, thanks so much. Have they been good?" He waited while his mother answered, but then smiled, "You sound like you're fawning over kids of ours. ...Grandpuppies!? That's great, actually...Viktor would love that. Okay, well, I'll let you go back to what you were doing...thanks again. We'll swing by in the morning to drop the kids off before we head north again." He said, then waiting again before holding the phone out to his partner, "Mom says hi."

"Hiíí~!"

Smiling wide at that, cheeks a bit pink, Yuri pulled his phone back and set it to his ear once more, "Hey, me again... Hai, domo." (Yes, thanks.) His phone went down to his pocket after that, and he drew in a little closer, just as the elevator beeped and the doors started opening, "What a relief. It already feels like things are turning up and we haven't even left yet."

"I'm really looking forward to seeing the boys." Viktor added, "Mama Hiroko's grandpuppies!" He laughed.

"I can already feel the cuddle-pile when we get back..."

"Same. You and I barely get to cuddle when we're at competition as it is, but this will be the first time we've left Jiro behind, so he'll be freaking out when we get back." The Russian thought fondly on the puppy, "He's going to weigh more than Yurio before we can blink, so we should enjoy it while we can."

"He's going to weigh more than Makkachin."

"Yeah? By how much? I thought they were going to be about the same size."

"Nearly double."
"Wow~!

"Yeah they only look the same size because of how tall and fluffy they are, but Akitas are big and brawny. Makkachin is pretty dainty by comparison."

Viktor nodded and sighed, "He's turning into an old man, too... Soon he's going to start getting grey on his face."

"But not yet."

"No..." The Russian agreed, turning his face to nose at the fluff of his husband's hair behind one ear, "Not yet."

Minako sat up on her bed, channel surfing through a dozen or more things that couldn't hold her interest. Before long, she dropped her remote-hand to the blankets and glared at her phone, squinting her eyes.

They haven't called me. They didn't come looking for me. They didn't even really wave at me during the victory lap. Either they're really pissed at me, or they're so busy doing other things that they've completely forgotten about me.

The remote came back up again and she tapped the tip to her chin.

Maybe I should try calling Yuri? Or should I just let it sit until tomorrow...?

She flopped down to one side, crossing her arms indignantly as she growled at nothing in particular.

This is dumb. I hate not knowing what they're thinking, especially when they're probably thinking the worst! I just want to explain what I was doing!

Eyes sought for her phone, lost somewhere in the blankets from the new vantage she looked around from, but eventually found it and pulled it up in front of her face. She perched up onto an elbow to prevent the screen from turning, and checked the messages she'd sent to Asahi. She was greeted by nothing though, just a window full of video links she'd sent to what the skater claimed was his number. Hesitating a moment, she shrugged and started typing.

It can't get much worse than it already is, so while those boys are off being mad at me, maybe I can sort this one out.

[Hey Asahi, congrats on silver. How are you holding up?] She sent, not even sure the athlete would message her back. She blinked at the green word-bubbles that her message appeared in though.

Oh...he's not even using an iPhone. Android maybe? I can't tell if he's received or read my other messages...

To her shock and surprise, her phone made its usual bweeop noise when a new message turned up, and she sat immediately upright and crossed her legs to take it seriously.

[Thanks]

That's it? Thanks...?

[I'm ok]
She heaved and flopped backward, landing on an array of piled-up pillows before typing another message. [That's good. I was worried how things would go during the medaling ceremony because of how prickly things are between you three, but at least from the audience, it wasn't easy to tell if anything was going on.]

[At most, people might've thought it weird that none of you shook each others' hands, but considering Victor's big trophy and Yuri helping him around so he doesn't fall, I'm sure people dismissed it easily enough]

[That's good]

Minako made a face, *He's really not much of a conversationalist, is he? Argh, how frustrating...no wonder Yuri had a hard time getting to know him. He's barely engaging.*

[Is Yuri mad at me?]

That made her blink in confusion, both for the question and for the fact that it was a statement more than 2 words long.

[If he is, I don't know. I haven't spoken to him or Victor since they came into the audience and scared you away.]

[I don't imagine Yuri would be mad at you for winning silver though...that's not his way. If he's mad about the line-up, it's because he thinks he should've done better than you, not because he thinks you should've done worse than him.]

[I see]

Minako rubbed her chin as she looked on at that last reply, but then shrugged and sat up again, [You busy?] [no] [You want to get something to drink?] [I don't want to risk running into Victor. He death-glared at me when he got called out, like he'd murder me in my sleep if I so much as looked at Yuri while he was away in the rink. I'd really rather not cause any more problems than I already have.]

The ballerina smiled sadly at that, *That's the most he's said at one time since I met him. Progress, I guess? Even if it's painful progress.* Her thumbs wrote the next reply, [If you see either of those two, it'll be before we meet, because I'm suggesting you come to the spectator hotel for this. They won't show up here out of the blue. You'll be safe.]

It felt like nearly 10 minutes went by before she finally got her answer.

[Which one is the spectator hotel?]

Universal City Station; Yumesaki Line, merge onto Osaka Loop Line. Transfer trains at Osaka Station; go north on Tokaido Main Line. Last stop, Shin-Osaka Station...then three hours and thirty minutes to Hakata Station in Fukuoka.

So late at night and on a Saturday, the trains were sparsely populated, filled mainly by people trying to get around Osaka itself. By the time the pair of skaters settled into their seats on the bullet train back to Kyushu, it was even more of a skeleton-crew.
That didn't bother them at all though, and it gave them a bit of peace and quiet. The tradition of Japanese politeness and keeping mostly-silent on public transport made it easy to relax, drifting into the *whoosh* sound of the maglev. It was louder than a table-fan, but it wasn't so loud that it was distracting.

Yuri sat sideways in his seat, back against the wall and window, left shoulder pressed into the corner of the wall and his back-rest.

Viktor pulled his spouse's legs over his own, and twisted to sit sideways as well, spanning over both of their seats as he leaned to wedge his right shoulder between Yuri's side and the back of the chair, squeezing that arm under his partner's back, the left settling a hand on the man's chest. By the time all was said and done, and the Russian settled his long-coat over himself and his partner's legs, he set his head down onto the front of his husband's shoulder, nuzzling his forehead against either a cheek, the edge of a jaw, or the side of his partner's neck, whichever was open to him at any given time. Yuri's arms settled around him, fingers laced together around the outside of his left shoulder, and he closed his eyes to relax a little.

He enjoyed maybe an hour of quiet before he felt Yuri move, curling his legs up a little but against his waist and side as he turned slightly towards him, one hand coming up to clasp around his head as the other held tighter to his shoulder. When fingers went combing through his hair, and he felt Yuri press his nose into it as well, Viktor opened his eyes, looking up without moving, "Something the matter?"

"I feel bad blowing off Minako-sensei." Yuri answered quietly, turning his head to press his cheek down against that fluff of silver hair where his nose had been a moment before, "She ditched Mikhail and his girls to stick with me at Nationals, and then we just ditch her instead...and after everything we made her do before..."

"Made her do? I don't recall *making* her do anything."

"We made her do half a dozen pregnancy tests."

"Oh...right."

Yuri sighed, "I know you don't like thinking about it. Sorry."

"The idea of my uncle having sex with your ballet teacher does inherently bother me, yes."

Yuri lifted his head and made a face, "Well, when you put it that way...yeesh."

Viktor managed to laugh at that, "Suffer with me."

"I am!"

"Shh!" The Russian teased through a quiet chuckle, turning his head up as well and reaching his free hand forward to put a finger on his husband's lips, "Don't want to bother people." He set the hand back down on his partner's chest and returned to where he'd been resting, "I know what you mean though."

"Should we call her...?"

"I'd rather not open that can of worms right now." Viktor answered, shrugging lightly as he reached slightly to pull the edge of his coat over his shoulder again, "Let her simmer on it tonight. We'll call her on our way back instead. Maybe she can tell that we're not super happy with her right now and she'll think harder on her great ideas next time."
"We're not even sure what she was doing it for."

"I don't care what she was doing it for. Not right now, anyway."

Yuri grumbled quietly at that.

"What?"

"I don't like being mad at her. She helped us both with this whole situation." He explained, "There has to be a good reason why she'd hang out with Asahi after it all happened."

Viktor waited a moment, but then stretched his arms straight forward, fingers splaying before bringing everything back in again, and hugged his husband tightly before relaxing, "I'm sure she thinks it's a good reason. What do you think though?"

"I think she means well."

"The road to Hell is paved with good intentions."

Yuri grumbled and sighed again, closing his eyes to pout into that silver hair.

Viktor just pushed onto his elbow, pressing it down into the seat to prop himself up, and turned his face towards his partner. He looked deep into those nervous eyes, and broke up the tension by nudging forward to kiss the man's nose, "I have no doubt that Minako thinks she's helping...but at this exact moment, whether Saito feels better or worse when he leaves this competition than he felt when he got there...doesn't matter to me. I didn't care about JJ when he ran into you and got his heel slashed, and I don't care about Saito after he assaulted you and then ran. I care about you. He messed up your Free Skate and took Silver from you in the process."

"I messed up my Free Skate. He skated hard and scored higher than I did."

"He got into your head. I know the look on your face when your anxiety shoots into the danger zone. You passed out, Yuri! You've never had a panic attack so bad that it knocked you unconscious." Viktor protested, only to then realize he was getting loud, and quieted himself again before continuing, "...I pretended to be a responsible adult long enough to deal with him like a coach would, rather than a really angry husband, but when we're done in Osaka, I'm washing my hands of him."

Yuri sighed to hear it, "This isn't the last time we're going to see him. Even if he doesn't get picked for PyeongChang, he's going to Four Continents, and probably Worlds."

"You sound an awful lot like someone who wants to forgive him." The Russian pointed out warily, lifting his head again to look on dubiously, "Where are you going with this?"

"I told myself during my Free Skate that I was tired of feeling sorry for myself over what happened." He explained, "You did such an amazing job helping me work through it all, and because of you...because of your support and your kind words and that ritual cleansing you did for me, and holding me and never letting me think that I wasn't as good as I was before because I'd felt tainted by it all...I feel so much better now. I didn't have to sit on these bad feelings for weeks or months on my own like I did after messing up in Sochi." Yuri said, looking straight into that one visible blue eye, "Maybe I was just bitter earlier for losing the Silver when I thought I had it in the bag. I blamed Asahi too for my poor performance, and then I vastly underestimated how much better he'd gotten in the last two years. Even if we completely ignore everything that happened to him outside the rink...he still busted his ass to get on that podium, just like Yurio did before Barcelona. I'll do better at 4C and at the Games...and then I'll win another Gold for you at Worlds like I promised... I
can live with Bronze coming out of Nationals. But in the end...I still feel like I did right after this whole storm started."

Viktor listened quietly, even if he didn't entirely like what he was hearing.

"As angry as I am for what he did...I can't ignore the obvious fact that Asahi would never have done it in the first place if he wasn't in incredible pain at the time."

"So you want to forgive him."

"Part of me already has..."

Viktor gave him quite the look.

Yuri just shook his head, "The part that felt bad for him when he told me about how he watched his partner die. The part that understands that he's been running away from dealing with all those emotions, the same way he ran away from everything else. He's so scared of how he feels about any given thing that he doesn't know how to deal with it. He made a mistake, a terrible mistake...and after everything he's done to avoid us today, I think it's safe to say that he understands that."

"You're putting me in a weird position." The Russian sighed, turning his face down to put his forehead against his husband's shoulder and neck, "I'm furious at him for how he hurt you, but every time you bring up Itō, it just makes me feel bad. I don't really care what Saito thinks of me, but I can't stand the thought of you seeing me as a hypocrite after all the tears I shed over you in Detroit, and I didn't lose you."

"That's a big reason why I'm having a hard time staying mad at him myself." Yuri added, bringing his hand up to gently comb it through his husband's hair, playing with it idly, "I think about how grateful I am that I'm still here to be able to see how upset and scared you were over me...but then I think about Asahi, and how his partner didn't get that chance. I mean...I almost couldn't be mad at you if you went back to Sophia if something happened to me and I died. People who are that badly hurt by the loss of an intimate partner...I can't blame them for seeking comfort wherever they might find it. It was just my bad luck that Asahi found that in me."

Viktor shook his head lightly where he still had it pressed down, "I don't know that I can walk this path with you. He may feel guilty for hurting you, but I doubt it would ever cross his mind to apologize for how he hurt me in all this."

"What if he did?"

"I'm not in the mood to think about forgiving Saito." Viktor answered simply, voice firm in its conviction.

Yuri nodded, cheek rubbing against his husband's head as he moved, "...Wakarimashita." (I understand.)
When Minako spotted a familiar bundled-up figure pushing into the lobby from the blustering and dark outdoors, a ski-mask covering his eyes, hood over his head, and scarf around every inch of skin that might be exposed and recognized...she found herself unconsciously raising an eyebrow. As Asahi spotted her though and made his way closer, she hummed to herself, realizing how reluctant he was to disrobe in the warmth of the indoors. She found herself becoming acutely aware of all the spectators and skating fans that surrounded them.

*I guess I didn't think about how he'd react to having other people around. Yuri and Viktor are pretty comfortable in their own skins, so sitting down in a public place and chatting is no big deal...but this guy...*

She could imagine his eyes darting around, nervously looking through the darkened lens of the visor, but when the skater finally got close enough that he could speak...he didn't. He just bowed his head towards her quietly, hoping she'd recognize his jacket at least.

"I wasn't really sure you'd come...but now that you're here, I can't help but think you'd be pretty uncomfortable talking to me in such a public space, filled with people who recognize you on sight." She said, almost as a dryly-funny stab against herself, "Right?"

The hooded-head nodded once.

"Guess it's not just Yuri or Viktor to consider..." Minako put a finger on her chin and looked around, wondering if there would be anywhere good in the whole hotel to sit where too many other people would be walking around. She shrugged anxiously and turned back to the man before her, "I'm a little embarrassed to admit that this hotel doesn't even have a bar...I thought every hotel did, so I was surprised when I actually checked to find it. So...we can either try to find somewhere outside this place to go to, and waste a bunch of time...or..."

The skater lowered his head a little, as though worried he might've wasted time already.

Minako noticed it easily enough, even under the man's ample layers, "Well, at the risk of this sounding super awkward, you could just come up to my room. It'll be quiet and cozy, at least..."

He seemed to recoil a bit into himself, arms getting tighter where he pulled them defensively closer.

"It's okay, I'm the only one using it. Besides..." She tried to see the humor in it, "You're not into older women, " Trying to preserve his dignity a little, "...and I'm already involved with someone. This is purely an educational endeavor."

"Mrphmpfrmphmpfr..." He attempted, only to groan quietly and reach a gloved hand for the scarf, pulling it down just enough to be heard, "It's fine. I don't really care where we go."

"Oh...well, that makes it easy then. Come...follow me."

As she'd described, Minako's hotel room was rather small. Built with the idea of two occupants in mind, and sporting two twin beds, a couch that was built into the wall by the corner-window, and a bathroom that one might expect to be attached to a mobile home for how compact and space-savvy it was...it was, indeed, cozy. With the door closed behind the anxious athlete, it was quiet as a meadow. South-facing to look over the river, even in the dark of winter night, the view was still
rather nice.

Minako put her jacket, boots, and scarf away again, set her purse on the edge of the closest bed, and gestured to the closet for Asahi to follow her lead. She then went to rummage around in her bag, finding an iPad tablet, and moved to sit down. She crossed her legs as the tablet came alive, and she started seeking for the videos she'd compiled links to.

Asahi quietly put his jacket up, but kept his scarf, loosely wrapping it around the lower half of his face and over his shoulders. He nervously went into the main part of the room and looked around, waiting for some queue as to what to do.

"Here. Sit." She told him simply, patting the edge of the untouched second twin bed, "You can grab pillows or something if you want to hold onto something."

"So you said this was...going to be educational." The skater asked pensively, "What exactly are you planning to teach me about...?"

"The Life and Love of Nikiforov." She explained proudly, sitting up a bit straighter for dramatic flair, but then crouching down again to poke at the tablet's screen, "I'm a bit shocked and appalled at myself for knowing so little about you, despite the fact that you were rink-buddies with Yuri for a long time, back in the day. But something that shocks and appalls me more is how clueless you seem to be about him slash them."

Asahi just kind of narrowed his eyes at her in confusion.

"I know it's not my business to go poking and prodding into your life when you've been so private all this time. I'll respect that." Minako went on, pulling up the first video, "But given everything I've seen and heard over the last few days...I think a lot of the troubles you've faced could've been avoided if you were...in the loop, so to speak."

Asahi just groaned again and drooped his head, "My choreographer told me to do research a bunch of times before we got here. The minute it was announced that Viktor was being brought into the JSF, and he'd be competing here this weekend, he got on my ass to prepare myself."

"No one told you to do that anyway? I mean, even before Viktor was scheduled to be here?" Minako was puzzled.

The skater just shook his head, teal tails waving back and forth beside his face, "I guess they thought that if it was just Yuri, then everything would be fine, because Yuri would just catch me up himself. It...wouldn't be such a shock to find out he was with someone if he told me first, rather than me running face first into the both of them, not knowing who he was with."

"Does it really bother you so much that it turned out to be Viktor?" The ballerina wondered, looking on curiously, "Or did Yuri really annoy you that much with his fanboyness back then?"

Asahi contemplated his next words carefully, but then shrugged and shook his head, "It's...hard to explain. I have so many conflicting feelings about all this, and after Yuri yelled at me yesterday, I'm trying to sort out which of those conflicts are real or manufactured." He pulled his knees up in front of himself and hugged his arms around them, "I missed Yuri a lot after we went our different ways after Juniors. I was actually looking forward to seeing him again this weekend. I thought...maybe we'd let bygones be bygones and we could be friends again like we used to be. I had never fostered any hope that he'd suddenly develop feelings for me just because we'd been reunited after so long." He said against the fabric of his black jeans, looking down at the tablet on Minako's lap but not really focusing on what it showed yet, "I suppose I'd resigned myself to the idea that I'd always be alone,
"Did no one warn you that him and Viktor were together?"

"They tried, but I wasn't paying attention." He answered quietly, "I guess I just didn't want to hear it. I was content to know that Viktor had come to Japan to be Yuri's coach...that seemed fantastical enough as it was. For Viktor and Yuri to actually become a couple though...that just seemed like crazy-talk. I really couldn't process it. I thought people were screwing with me, or that it was just rumors that had been blown way out of proportion. The Yuri I knew wasn't into men, so why would he be into Viktor? Unless something was wrong, like Viktor realized what a huge fangirl Yuri was, and took advantage of him... The Yuri I remember would've done anything to keep Viktor happy. Anything."

Minako nodded and hummed a quiet agreement, but then shook her head, "I can see why people would think that. When Viktor first showed up, Yuri and I were both worried that Viktor was just using him as an excuse to take a break from competition, and that once his inspiration came back, he'd leave. Viktor was always ready to surprise people, and suddenly leaving Russia to be a coach in Japan was...well, a really big surprise. " She leaned back on her twin-bed, propping herself up on her hands as she looked up, "Yuri really lacked confidence back then. He had fairly minimal self-esteem, and often thought negatively of himself, especially compared to others. His collapse in Sochi really devastated his ego. When he came home after his second collapse at Nationals, he was overweight and really depressed. He had no plan, no ideas, no goals...he just kind of floated through those days like a ghost, trying to find his way." She leaned forward again, and pulled the tablet around, lighting up the screen again and displayed the video she'd loaded, "But then he did this..." She pointed down at the hit-count under the video, and it's 3.8 million views. She glanced up curiously, "You at least remember Viktor's programs from that year, right? He'd done them a few times before Yuri lost his game."

"...Y-yeah..." Asahi nodded, letting his legs part again to cross loosely, and clasped his hands together over where they folded, "I don't remember what they were called, but I'd recognize them if I saw them."

"Viktor's Free Skate was called 'Aria - Stay Close to Me.'" Minako explained, clicking the video to full-screen it and then hitting the red Play button in the middle. She looked down at the tilted panel from her upside-down vantage, and listened to the words she'd heard half-a-dozen times from watching it in the past.

Recording it from an impromptu skating session, the triplets' original video had no music to go with it, but when Yuri took that familiar starting position, Asahi could hear it in his head. Seeing that stocky, un-figure-skater-like frame twisting and turning through the delicate moves of an ultra-hard Free Program though...the quad Flip, the quad Lutz...even the later jumps, the Salchow and Toe-loop quads...even the difficult spins. All of it was impressive, given the man's fluffy physique.

"That was so cool!" Yuko screamed from rink-side, "A perfect copy of Viktor! AWESOME! I thought you'd be depressed or something!"

The Yuri on the screen, zoomed as well as could be considering the triplets were still trying to hide, nodded and smiled, blushing as he looked at the ice, "I was. But I got bored of feeling depressed, so I got to thinking...I wanted to get my love for skating back. I thought I could remember how it was when I copied Viktor with you. Yu-chan...I've..." He raised his eyes, though his smile had faded and he looked anxious and tired. There was a nervous swallow as well, but he tried to collect his nerves to continue, "I've..."

The video suddenly ended, leaving Asahi to just stare at that desperate look on his old friend's face,
"That girl who yelled..."

"That's Yuko Nishigori."

"That was Yuko...?" He echoed, "I'd heard so much about her back then, before Yuri left. He...really had a thing for her back then. He was devastated when she got together with the guy who bullied him as a kid. He'd come back to Imari after a weekend home in Hasetsu and complain bitterly about being around the babies."

Minako smiled, but her eye twitched a little, "I can imagine... I was kind of the same way for a while. I think we all could've handled it a little better if it was one kid, but three all at once, and they were all so young, too... Yuko was only 18 when she got pregnant, and 19 when she delivered. Yuri was 17 when it all started and it really shook him."

"And he was gone within the year."

"Yeah... This video is actually the first time Yuri saw the girls himself after that. The triplets were the ones who recorded the video...he had no idea at the time. They posted it to Yuko's YouTube account and it went viral."

"...When...did he do this?" Asahi wondered, looking down to see the late-March upload date, "This would've been right around Worlds."

"Yuri skated this show at about the same time Viktor did in Tokyo." She explained, pulling the tablet back around to start seeking the next video, "The girls uploaded it that same night...and about 10 days later, we found out it went viral...and then Viktor turned up, saying he would be Yuri's coach and that he'd make Yuri win Gold at the next Grand Prix Final."

"Why would he just show up like that though? Yuri had never been able to manage the brass to interact with him."

Minako laughed sadly at that, "I know! I'd tag along with him to competitions with the hope that, one day, he'd be brave, because then he could tell me what room Viktor was staying in and I could go meet him, too! But he never did, so I never did..." She sighed dramatically, "Ah Yuri...the terrified secret admirer. The first time he actually kind of met Viktor in any meaningful way was at that one Skate Canada event before the Final in Sochi, when they were both on the podium and Viktor shook his hand to congratulate him."

"I remember." Asahi said stiffly, given how that night reminded him of other things.

"...Oh...uhm, you okay?" The ballerina wondered suddenly, "You got real apprehensive all of a sudden."

The athlete lowered his face and drew a breath, "...It's the same night Riku and I got together. We...were actually watching that event from the Skate Club in Imari. I had made some dry remark about how Yuri would probably never wash that hand again after Viktor touched it, and Riku called me out on it. I guess he could sense the jealousy in my voice. It's not like Yuri ever thought that highly of me... The next thing I knew, Riku had made it his mission to help me let go of Yuri... He would always say something like, 'if you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with.'"

"That's not entirely a bad idea." Minako agreed, "And if that happened during Skate Canada...then..."

"We had about 6 weeks together before he was killed." Asahi said flatly, and quickly, trying to avoid letting himself fall into that quagmire of unaddressed despair.
Minako could sense that her plans would go down-hill if they carried on with that topic, so she quickly loaded the next video, "Uhm...well, I don't want to make you linger on something that's just going to hurt you... I'll just move on to this thing." She said calmly, loading up a video that showed Yuri all slimmed down again and dressed for competition, standing alone in a rink, black all around him, "Viktor's rink-mate from back in St. Petersburg had gotten a bug up his arse about Viktor being in Hasetsu, and turned up, demanding Viktor return to Russia to be his coach...so Viktor came up with this hare-brained Katsuki v Plisetsky idea. Him and the triplets arranged an Exhibition at the Ice Castle, and challenged them, saying that whoever won the event would get to have him as their coach. He spent a week choreographing each of their programs, and taught each of them how to skate them properly. The shows were actually his own programming that he'd been planning for the next year, but he broke them down into two, and later three distinct SP routines. The theme was Love, and he assigned Eros to our Yuri, and Agape to the Russian Yuri. He'd later do Philia for himself at Worlds, but that's neither here nor there, so I'll ignore it for now. This is actually Yuri's show at the Hasetsu Exhibition..."

"...Eros...?" Asahi echoed, late, "Isn't that...eroticism?"

Minako laughed and nodded, "Yes! It's part of a Christian philosophical outlook on the different kinds of bonds that exist. Eros is erotic love between intimate partners. Agape is unconditional love, like the kind God has for His creations. Viktor wanted to challenge both Yuris to do something he thought they'd either be uncomfortable or unfamiliar with, so he gave them the programs opposite to what they wanted. The Russian Yuri absolutely hated it, but our Yuri took it in stride...he really wanted to impress Viktor, so he gave it all the Eros he could muster." She explained proudly, "And this Exhibition turned out to be something of a big deal. That JSF newscaster, Morooka, even showed up to make the whole thing feel semi-official. When the boys revealed their programs, they even presented themselves wearing two of Viktor's old costumes, from when he was in Juniors. Yuri took this black one because it had both male and female style elements, but also because it was really sexy." She laughed, then suddenly got really serious, leaning far forward over the tablet and straight into Asahi's personal space, forcing him to lean back and away defensively, "Yuri woke me up at ass-o'clock in the morning, the night before the Exhibition, just to have me teach him how to move in feminine ways. We pulled an all-nighter to get it right."

"O-oh..." The skater managed, eye twitching once nervously. He felt relieved when Minako pulled back again, unblinking as she did so though, and watched her finger for the Play button to start the next video, holding the tablet up in front of her face.

"Yuri originally thought to think of the program's story as though he were some playboy that comes into a new town, seduces all the most attractive and noble women, only to then leave. But all his plans changed the night before the show, because he said it would make more sense to him if he portrayed it as a femme fatale instead, seducing the seducer and then leaving him behind."

The video was slow-burning, showing the very end of Yurio's Agape before turning towards rink-side to find Yuri in the dark beyond the ice. It showed Viktor slinking up from the side, nearly scaring the man into screaming, though Yuri had pulled his hands up to stifle the noise by covering his mouth. Asahi's brow flinched to see Yuri reaching his arms over the Russian's shoulders, hugging him, "...Viktor didn't hug him back?"

"Viktor had his hands in his pockets at the time, and he really didn't expect Yuri to do that, so he did something else in response." Minako explained, "You can actually see the look on Yuri's face when he hears it..." She mused, leaning down to rewind to video a little and pausing it on the exact frame where the man's cheeks went a bit pink, "Yuri struggled to find inspiration for his Eros because he'd never been in an intimate relationship with anyone before...so he used food as his fall-back, and more specifically, his favorite food, katsudon. He told Viktor that he was about to go and become a tasty
katsudon on the ice, and Viktor answered by saying, ‘I love katsudon.’” She looked up at the skater sitting across from her with an immature smirk on her face, “You get it? Yuri's going to become katsudon and Viktor says he loves katsudon?”

"I get it." Asahi answered stiffly, "But why would he say something like that if he's just there to coach? You kind of skipped answering that part too earlier..."

"Oh! I did!" She laughed anxiously and fanned herself with her free hand, setting the tablet down, "Viktor came to be Yuri's coach because Yuri asked him to at the Sochi Banquet!"

"...I thought he was miserable in Sochi? And if he asked then, why did it take till after Worlds for Viktor to show up?" The skater asked skeptically.

"Well, I don't know all the details because I've mostly just seen photos, but there is a video of part of it...Yuri got super-mega-hilariously drunk at the banquet because he was miserable, and unfortunately, Yuri gets a bit crazy when he's drunk. He did this whole strip show with Chris Giacometti,"

Asahi couldn't help but glare slightly at the mention of that name.

"...And then a break-dancing competition with Plisetsky...then Viktor joined in at the end and Yuri danced with him for a while...then the video shows Yuri actually drunkenly asking Viktor to come to Hasetsu after the season is over to be his coach." Minako went on without noticing the skater's apprehensive look, "Yuri forgot all about it, and no one brought it up until we were all in Barcelona last year, just over 8 months after the fact, so Yuri went that whole time thinking it was just his replica of Aria that got Viktor to show up. Turns out, Yuri seduced the Hell out of Viktor during their banquet dance...so when he turned up after Worlds, it was basically exactly like Yuri had asked of him. The only trouble with it was that, because Yuri forgot, and also because Yuri was on the edge of retirement after Nationals, Viktor wasn't sure Yuri still wanted him there, so he put it on the back-burner and just kind of waited. The video of Yuri's Aria was the sign Viktor was looking for that Yuri wasn't ready to give up, so Viktor flew his happy ass to Hasetsu the next night." She laughed, putting a hand on her cheek as she remembered the whole thing in embarrassed glee, "Viktor was already at Yu-Topia when I found out, so I ran over there as fast as I could, thinking Yuri didn't even know Viktor was coming yet...only to find the doofus sleeping on the floor in spa-robes like he'd been there for a while already. Yuri was in complete shock over it all, watching Viktor as though it was all a weirdly cruel hallucination." She shook her head and sighed happily, "So, in the end, we found out that Viktor had actually been in love with Yuri that whole time, and he was just doing his best to get Yuri to fall for him in return without freaking him out."

"...Oh."

"So the whole 'I love katsudon' thing was Viktor subtly saying he loved Yuri."

"...I see."

"Well, let me show you Yuri's Eros then. He actually did pretty well for not having skated anything like it before." Minako reached to hit Play again, resuming the video from Yuri's embarrassed face onward.

The sassy guitar introduced the piece, and Asahi watched in confused fascination as Yuri skated the aptly-named program. The step-out from the quad Salchow was a shame, but the quad Toe-triple Toe at the end was flawless. The audience's applause, even without having seen Yuri's show, seemed to be more enthusiastic than it had been from the start of the video...and then, heard Viktor's voice calling out to the skater. Footage played on, showing the Russian reaching out to Yuri as he
came towards the rink-wall...and hugged him.

Minako glanced up to see if he had any reaction, and noted how Asahi seemed to breathe a quiet breath into the hand covering his mouth, "What do you think?"

"...It's a Yuri I've never seen before." The athlete answered, seeing the video return to the original preview thumbnail as it ended, and he leaned back against his hands, pulling one knee up to wobble that leg back and forth to distract himself, "...I...feel weirdly glad that Viktor returned the hug at the end. Yuri must've been really happy about that."

"Oh, he was. Viktor hugged him again when they stood on the podium together after it was done. Yuri was riding the high of that night for weeks." Minako confirmed, "Before the Exhibition, Yuri was still pretty unsure and apprehensive...and was really anxious about things after Plisetsky showed up. He was terrified that he'd lose and Viktor would leave...so after he realized he won, and that Viktor was going to stay, he let himself relax a little bit and started to trust that Viktor really wanted to coach him, not just use him as an excuse to take a break." She explained, sifting through her list to find the next program to show off, "Still, it probably took another month after Onsen on Ice before Yuri was able to settle down and focus...he still thought of Viktor as his idol, this untouchable Skating God, rather than his coach. But...Yuko told me later...Yuri apparently poked the top of Viktor's head once while they were practicing, and Viktor collapsed, thinking he was going bald. Yuri totally lost it, trying to apologize, saying Viktor wasn't going bald and all that...but that was basically when Yuri started to see Viktor as just another person." She glanced up to look at the other figure, and spoke her next words directly at him, "As big a celebrity as Viktor Nikiforov is, he's still human, with all his merits, flaws, insecurities, problems, and talents...just like everyone else."

Asahi crossed his arms nervously, "...Yeah..."

Minako stared for a moment, "Viktor is a normal human."

"Y-you just said that."

"Say it back to me."

"...That Viktor is a normal human?" He said, confused, "Why...?"

"Because now that it's come out of your mouth, you can start to see him that way." She answered, looking down to a video labeled [Yuri Katsuki: Cup of China Free Program.] She clicked into it, turned the tablet around, and waited a moment, hovering her finger over the Play button. The preview image behind it showed Yuri in his starting stance, a pose very similar to the start of Aria, "Viktor and Yuri worked together on the Free Skate for the rest of the spring and summer, perfecting Eros and getting ready to return to international competition. Yuri did his qualifiers at Regionals, and his first Grand Prix assignment was in Beijing. Now...before I show this video to you, I want you to know what the program is about."

"...O-kaaaay...?" Asahi said quietly, his hackles raised slightly.

"This show is about Yuri's journey." She told him sternly, "It speaks his heart. It tells the story of how he was before and after Viktor showed up; how lost he was, and how alone he felt. You already knew Yuri from those days, when he was falling apart after Sochi, so you'll understand what he's saying during the first part of the routine...but I want you to pay close attention to how he is from the moment Viktor turns up, and after. Ready?"

"...I think so."
Minako hit Play, and the video began, showing Yuri stepping out onto the ice. The skater moved glibly towards the rink-wall, took a tissue from the poodle-plush holster, blew his nose...and dropped the Kleenex just out of his coach's grasp. Viktor nearly hobbled over the wall to catch it, but then stopped dead in his tracks as a finger came down on top of his head. Yuri squished that silver hair down by rubbing his finger-tip around a few times, pat the spot with the flat of his palm, and departed without saying a word, leaving Viktor to rise up again with a hand on that same spot and a confused look on his face.

"...Oh, he did the bald-spot thing again." Asahi commented, only to get a swat on the top of his own head for saying it, and he recoiled in stunned horror.

"Viktor's not going bald!" Minako defended frantically.

Yuri took his place in the middle of the rink, his starting pose quite similar to the beginning of Aria. The piano began, and Yuri raised his hands up in front of himself, then spread them out to the side as he raised his face up toward the ceiling. Asahi took the imagery of it rather seriously, hunched over his lap like he was studying for a test, elbows on his knees and one hand over his mouth again. Minako watched him instead of the program, seeing every eye-twitch and half-blink as Yuri progressed through his show.

Every stumble, every over-rotation, every out-step...Asahi felt the pain of those mistakes as though they were his own, but then the music calmed, and Yuri glided forward with his arms out to the side, weightless and care-free, like the burdens of the first half of his show - and his career - were being let go into the wind. Free as a bird. Things picked up after that, the music becoming more hopeful and confident, even determined. Minako watched him even more intently when she knew the quad Flip was coming up, and noticed that Asahi was leaning closer and closer to the screen as the program neared its end. The man seemed utterly invested in it now...then Yuri kicked his right leg out behind himself, leaning on the inside edge of his left skate...and toe-picked down.

Asahi practically jumped when he saw it, "Ahhh!" But then Yuri fell on the landing, and Asahi was left deflated. "He was so close!"

"Right!?"

Yuri stood out of his final move, bringing his arms in from the end of the combination spin, and raised his left hand out to the side. The footage panned over from the skater on the ice to the coach on rink-side...and Viktor, hands on his face, turned away.

"What the Hell was that? Why was Viktor covering his eyes?" Asahi grumbled, angry on Yuri's behalf, "That was so mean."

"Wait for it..."

Viktor was running then, flying towards the opening in the wall, where he nearly ran right by for how fast he was going. He caught his breath for a moment as Yuri came gliding towards him, arms out and hopeful, smiling despite how many times he'd messed up his jumps...and then Viktor jumped straight out towards him.

Asahi's eyes were wide, and even his face flushed a bit to see them connect, kiss, and fall to the ice together, Viktor landing on top of Yuri, and each of them holding there for a moment, "...Oh." He commented, unsure what else to say as he sat up a bit straighter. He watched Viktor push up onto his elbows, looking down at the pink-cheeked skater under him...but there was no way to hear what either of them said. Eventually though, the two had to get up off each other and make their way to the kiss and cry. Viktor obliged to help, getting up onto his knees and feet first, and offered his hands
down to his athlete to hoist him up after. There was another long hug, and Viktor stepped backward to pull his crush off the ice, swinging the man back and forth happily as Yuri held on tight, tip-toeing along on the picks of his naked blades.

"...The score for Yuri Katsuki..." The English-language announcer called, butchering the poor man's surname to sound like Kuh-TSOO-ki rather than KAT-suki, "...177.56, with a total of 284.40. He is currently in second place."

Yuri was literally crying with relief, burying his hands against his face as he sobbed right there and then. Viktor hugged him, crying as well, but out of pure happiness for it all. More unheard words were exchanged between them before the video ended, but the last thing that showed on the screen was Viktor pulling his athlete closer in another hug, kissing the side of the man's forehead and rubbing his cheek affectionately.

"...Wow..." Asahi commented quietly, "...That...wow."

"I know!" Minako agreed happily, "Yuri won Silver that night. Viktor was fawning over him all throughout the rest of that weekend, into the Exhibition, coming off the plane back in Fukuoka. Watching how proud he was of Yuri was really endearing. I don't think I've seen Yuri blush so much in his whole life. His face must've been hurting after a while because he was smiling the entire time. He was just so happy."

"...So I...guess that's when they got together?"

Minako flipped the tablet around as her face went vacant, "...I... You know, that's a good question, because until the Final, the kiss never came up again." She answered, a bit embarrassed by not actually knowing, "I mean, they had little gestures between them...Viktor would touch Yuri's face more, and his hands, but nothing overtly romantic. The next time I remember anything happening that was even in the same ballpark was at Rostelecom in Moscow...Viktor was doing his pep-talk before Yuri's Short Program, fingering Yuri's balled-up fist on the wall, and then suddenly Yuri flared his fingers out, laced them into Viktor's, and touched their foreheads together." She lifted her head in thought, "I didn't get to go to Rostelecom, but I was in Hasetsu when Viktor's dog, Makkachin, had a near-death accident and Viktor had to come back. Yuri was stuck in Moscow by himself for the rest of the weekend, but Viktor arranged for his own coach, Yakov Feltsman, to stand-in for him while he attended to his poodle. Viktor was frantic about everything...Makkachin is his family, and he was really scared. The first time he got to talk to Yuri after getting back to Japan was just a few hours before Yuri had to do his Free Skate." She looked down then, glancing at the screen in her lap, "He was so exhausted...from the flight, from staying awake for his dog, then making sure he got to see the Free Program live as it happened. I had set up a LiveStream at a Snack Bar that I run, and Viktor came by to watch with me...he called Yuri to wish him luck. ...I could tell from the tone of their voices that they were miserable without each other. As relieved as they were that Makkachin was stable, there was still this overwhelming sadness that they were apart. Viktor ended up taking Makkachin to Fukuoka with him to be there when Yuri got back. It was really kind of strange...for a few days, they were happier just to be together again than they were that Yuri had managed to squeak into the Final. The fact that Yuri made it was practically an after-thought. We had to remind them to be happy about that, too..."

"...Wow."

"Yeah..." She nodded, waiting for a moment before moving on, "Asahi... The thing of it all is...while I know that it annoyed the crap out of you to constantly hear Yuri talking about Viktor when you two were younger, I think...it was just a foretelling of things to come." She explained sincerely, "Yuri may have been scared to talk to Viktor for a long time, but from the moment Yuri knew Viktor
existed, he was transfixed. Viktor was the same way in return once he clued in, and they've been nigh-inseparable since the day Viktor showed up in Hasetsu. Now...I myself have had a rocky and unsteady history of flings and brief romances, so I wouldn't know what it really feels like...but these days, I'm convinced that those two are soul mates. Viktor's celebrity just prevented him from knowing it sooner. Yuri...basically knew all along, even if he wasn't consciously aware of that fact. It was just a matter of time before they both kind of figured it out and got on the same page with one another."

Asahi swallowed nervously, but lowered his head and nodded, "...I...think I understand..."

"I hope you don't think I dragged you here to rub them in your face." The ballerina went on quietly, "I just...wanted to show you that the relationship they have is genuine. It's not a famous idol taking advantage a fan for his own selfish purposes sort of situation. Viktor gave up everything to be with Yuri...and more recently, almost lost his skating career over it, too. He's a good person, and he loves Yuri more than anything. Yuri feels the same way back. ...I don't like to be morbid, but they'd die for and without each other."

He nodded again.

Minako waited quietly for a response, not wanting to force it while the cogs turned in that overwhelmed mind.

Asahi held still for a moment, but slowly turned to his side, reaching for one of the stiff pillows at the head of the bed. He brought it down and hugged it against his chest, rubbing his face on the end of it, and sighed aloud, "...I...really had no idea." He started, "About...how they really met, what happened between them, how they felt about everything... Maybe I'm...just jaded, and I wanted to see the flaws because they..." He brought his arm up and pressed his fingers against the bridge of his nose, looking away, "...They get to have each other... And I know what it's like to want Yuri...so maybe part of me was jealous, and was turning that into resentment against Viktor for having what I couldn't. But...after what Yuri told me yesterday, before I..." He cracked slightly, snuffling to try and keep it together, though the tears were already forming in his eyes, "...Before I did to him something that I never should have..."

The ballerina reached her hand across the gap between twin beds and pressed her finger around the man's shoulder, hoping to keep him grounded, and so he'd know he wasn't alone.

"...I never w-wanted to hurt him..." He said through pained breaths.

"I know." Minako nodded, "That's why I'm trying to help work things out. I don't think you're a bad person. You made a terrible mistake, and you know that... I think it's important that you three can talk about it and maybe find peace between yourselves."

"I w-wish that I could tell Yuri...that I'm sorry... If I could take back what I did, I would in a heartbeat." Asahi explained, still trying to stop the tears from falling loose from his eyes,

"Just being here...seeing him, seeing him with someone...and having the last two years of my life brought back to haunt me...making me dig up these feelings that I refused to let myself have before... I just...I'm just..."

"What happened to you and Riku was awful." Minako said, "I can only imagine how much pain you've been holding in because you were too scared to let it out. But...you're 26 years old now. You have your own life, and you don't have to try and live up to the expectations your family set down in front of you. Not like that anyway. You're an incredibly talented skater and you should be proud of that. Who cares if you're gay? That doesn't define you. You are the only person who can set down the parameters of who you are."
"...I'm...just so scared still...of letting all this out..." Asahi admitted, lifting his red and darkened eyes to the woman sitting before him, "When Yuri f-forced me to realize that...I w-wasn't actually in love with him... It felt like h-he was forcing me to confront stuff that I wasn't r-ready to deal with... I don't know that I c-can handle it...on my own..."

"You're not alone. I'm here with you right now." She explained, trying to comfort him as well as she could, "And I mean...who could blame you for wanting to fall back in love with Yuri anyway? He's a sweet kid. But it's like you said...he's right about this. You're just putting off something that you should've taken care of two years ago. Trying to convince yourself that you're still in love with Yuri is just...an attempt to void-out the fact that you and Riku were ever together at all. There's no shame in admitting you loved him."

"...I...s-saw him...you know?"

"Saw him?"

"On the ice...after m-my Free Skate... I heard h-his voice, saying my name..."

Minako watched the man carefully, not sure what to make of the revelation.

"I've...been reminded about him so much this w-weekend... People s-saying his name, mentioning his death... But I never t-told anyone about him...so it's just...poking all these big h-holes into the dam I put up to avoid thinking about him..." Asahi explained, his voice straining under his grief, "If I c-can't...get it together, the dam is going to...break..."

"Maybe it needs to. If you've been putting this off this whole time, and now he's starting to haunt you...? Asahi, it's time to be open about it."

"I can't...!" He shook his head strongly from side to side, "...It should've been me...!"

Minako's eyes widened to hear those words.

"...It should've been me that died...!"
To see Asahi resisting every impulse, urge, and instinct to let it all out...his refusal to get beyond a few tears and some hiccups breaths was both a miracle and a curiosity. Minako sat fully upright, back straight as a board as she watched him in complete confusion. She blinked a few times before starting to slouch again, raising a hand up to rub the side of her head.

"...I...don't really know what to say to that." She explained nervously, "...I know that it can be devastating to lose someone, bu-

"I d-didn't...just lose someone..." Asahi cut her off, crushing the pillow in his arms, using it to hold onto what little respect he still had left for himself, "...I w-watched as the light and life left his eyes... I heard h-him telling me exactly what was wr-wrong with him...and I couldn't do anything to save him. I would've switched places with him in an instant if I could... He was a much better person than I ever was... He should've been the one to live."

"You say that like you think being alive is a punishment."

"Surviving is the punishment." He corrected, burying his face against the end of the stiff pillow, "I made him wait for so long...and I p-put him through so much...and then I..." He brought his arms up to press against his eyes, struggling to squeeze a breath through his clenched throat, "I didn't...even really get to t-tell him how much he meant to me, or even be with him the way I wanted...because I didn't even know it myself until after he was taken from me... I would do anything to have him back...even if it m-means...going to him..."

Minako furrowed her brow, "You don't mean that..."

The skater shook his head to void the negative, "Th-the only...reason I'm still around is b...because I'm scared of...what I'll face on the other side..."

"...Eh?"

"So m-many faiths...preach these horrifying warnings of t-torment and eternal pain for people who end themselves... As though...we don't own our own s-souls... That they're j-just on loan to us, and under th-threat of eternal torture...we have to suffer through the horrors and indignities of being alive until some celestial slave-master t-tugs on our chains and...'c-calls us home..." He explained bitterly, fingers clenching so hard into the pillow that his knuckles went white. The anger he felt was enough to momentarily halt the tears, "I r-resent...my family, for teaching me those things...when I was t-too young to...be able to think about it rationally... And even now, after I've grown up, and stopped believing those things j-just because they did...the ideas still stick to the back of my mind, like a stain I can't wash out...corrupting everything I hear or see..."

Minako hesitated to speak, but the nagging feeling at the back of her mind compelled her to anyway, "There's no one on this earth who knows for sure what's on the other side. The only people who get there are the ones who don't come back. I mean, for all the people who claim to have had 'near death experiences,' the thing they're forgetting is that it...well, wasn't death. Near death is still alive. Brains do crazy things when on the edge. They don't process pain when we're subjected to horrible trauma, they give us adrenaline to keep us moving when we'd drop otherwise, and in the worst case...they make us see weird things when there's nothing left to lose. I always felt like those 'tunnel of light'
stories were just the inverted version of how our vision cuts to black from the edges when we faint."
She tried to explain, "You're putting yourself under too much pressure to conform to a belief system
that tens of millions of people, even given thousands of years, can't even agree on
between themselves. Maybe that's why it didn't really catch on in Japan."

Asahi just shook his head and twisted around, putting his back to the woman and throwing his legs
off the other side of the bed, "My family caught on, for all the good it did. It's th-the same system
that...makes me...hate myself... For being what I am, for who I am... I don't care whether it's true or
not...it still impacts my life... But sometimes I just feel like there's no such thing as a Hell worse than
the life I'm living now. So...I've just..." He sighed heavily, reaching up to rub his sore throat with one
hand, "I've tried to put it all away. I even adopted Buddhism, because it doesn't tell me that I have to
answer to anyone...and I've tried to follow those codes, but it..." He choked on the words and
coughed slightly, pausing for a moment, "...It hasn't dulled the pain or fear at all. It's always there.
Always waiting."

The ballerina nodded quietly to herself, This isn't really something I know much about... I kind of
wish Mikhail was here. More than that, I wish Yuri and Viktor would just forgive him... He's holding
onto so much grief and pain, and he just refuses to let it out... I don't think I've ever even heard of
anyone who's had such a severe case of Survivor's Guilt... But I bet they could probably do
something...

"Ex-cuse me for a minute..." Asahi said suddenly, rising up from the side of the bed to move
towards the corner of the room where the windows folded around the edge of the building. He pulled
his phone from his back pocket and sat on the pistachio-green couch, and crossed his legs, looking
something up online. When he found what he was looking for, he cast the pillow aside and set his
phone down face-up on the couch in front of himself, drew in a deep breath, hit play, and closed his
eyes.

['OM Chanting + Tibetan Singing Bowls Meditation 432Hz | 1 Hour Version' - Meditative Mind]

A few seconds passed before any sound could be heard, but just as Asahi folded his hands together
in his lap and lowered his face, Minako heard the telltale low-toned chime of a large singing bowl,
followed by a chant...and she realized what he was doing.

...He's meditating... He's putting all that badness back into a box at the back of his head so it stops
hurting him... He probably thinks he's actually trying to let it go.

She sighed and just watched him, reminded all-too-clearly of the way Yuri would ignore and avoid
his problems in the past, even though he knew that would just make them worse later.

...Can't stop him now though. This isn't something I can help him with. Yuri, Viktor...I need you...!

Keys jangled and the door opened, and both exhausted men fumbled inside their house,
"Tadaimaaaaa~!"

Barking immediately greeted them from the upstairs, and Makkachin flew down so fast, the big
brown boofer nearly ran straight into a wall once the carpeted stairs transitioned to tile floor. Still,
once he was on the ground floor, he was jumping and leaping all around them like a hot bean. Jiro,
on the other hand...

Hahh-ruumph... Haroooooohhhhhhh!
"Oh my gosh," Viktor's eyes were watering; he wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry, "Did you hear that?"

"He's singing to us the song of his people."

"From the upstairs."

"Cuz he can't get down stairs."

The Russian reached his arms out, catching Makkachin mid-bean, and hugged him close, "I'm coming, Jiro! I'll save you! Your lil' nubbin' puppy-stumps won't keep you trapped for much longer!" He called, setting the wiggly poodle down as the Akita continued howl-barking with his tiny, soulful puppy voice. He didn't get far without getting a quick kiss from his partner though, sneaking his arm around the man's back as he passed and angled inward.

Yuri was happy to oblige, but held the silver legend in place for just a moment longer as he looked into those favorite eyes, "Don't spoil our son too much, Viktor. He's going to be too heavy to ferry up and down the stairs soon."

"Only until he doesn't risk barrel-rolling snoot-first for trying." Viktor mused, stealing a second kiss before peeling away, and carefully hobbled his way towards the stairs.

Smiling as he watched the man go, Yuri then leaned down to find their pairs of shoes and boots and put them off to the side. There was a mat under the edge of the raised floor, where the entryway marked the start of the household and declared firmly that no shoes would be worn past that point. Viktor still had his scarf and jacket by then, but Yuri put his own away, and then followed the poodle towards the kitchen.

The digital clock on the wall marked the time as just past midnight, and Yuri spotted a hand-written note on the island. He set his hands on either side of it and looked down to read, [Welcome back, boys! I fed your kids right before bringing them home. Hope you have a relaxing night so you're ready to go all the way back again tomorrow! -Mom]

At the top of the stairs, the grey-marbled puppy was pacing frantically, tail wagging back and forth as Viktor got closer with each step. Jiro yipped a few more times, tried to chance the first stair, but then backed off, unable to reach it before his chest touched the ledge. Viktor just smirked and went down onto his knees, leaning his tall, lanky frame against the last steps so he'd be at the same level as the puppy when he settled on his elbows, "Hey buddy."

Jiro excitedly licked the Russian's face, forcing him to snuffle, laugh, and pull his head back to wipe it on the sleeves of his coat...but that just opened him up, and the puppy hopped over one broad shoulder. To Viktor's shock and near-horror, Jiro walked down the length of his back and legs until he was on the mid-landing...and got stuck again. He blinked a few times and then called to his husband, "Yuri! Jiro's too smart of his own good!"

"What'd he do?"

"He used me as a ramp."

Yuri laughed, sticking his head around the corner to spot the silver legend still lying belly-down on the upper steps, and the amused pout on his face. The puppy yip-barked and wagged his tail even more to see him, and stuck his head through the vertical posts of the banister to get his first bit of attention from the human he'd been given to, "Well, when Jiro is grown and takes over the world, I for one will welcome our new canine rulers." Yuri commented, ruffling the pup's ears.
"Overlord Jiro does sound pretty official," Viktor agreed, pushing up onto his hands and knees to crawl the rest of the way up the stairs, "I'll be right there. I want to see what kind of mess they made in our room while they were in here alone."

"Hai."

As Yuri returned to the kitchen, Viktor crawled down the last hall to the master bedroom, and no sooner had he arrived did Jiro follow after him. The pup nimbly ascended the stairs to give chase. The silver Russian crawled right up to the bed, sliding his upper body against the top of it and into the fluff of their messy blankets, breathing in the smell of their home, and dogs, and sighed happily. The soft *pap pap pap* of Jiro's paws on the carpet made Viktor lift his head though, and he pulled back to sit on the floor, picking the dog up to hold against his chest and love on him a little more. Before long, he rolled down onto his back, silver hair tousled all around, and he rubbed his hands from the pup's head to his tail as Jiro splayed out on top of him.

"I can't wait to take you to Russia," He commented, "We'll have to buy you a bunch of cute little outfits and booties to keep your tiny self warm, but I think you'll like it."

Yirr...yawrf!

"I know!" Viktor laughed, getting a few more face-licks before Jiro scrambled to get off again. Blue eyes watched him go towards the door, then back along the wall again, and finally to the other side of the room, where it took Viktor's line of sight straight under the bed...and he spotted the *toy*, right where Yuri had said it had been hidden before they left. His expression changed immediately, from excited and happy to introspective.

*What should we do with that thing...? I think it'd just make Yuri upset to see it... I'll just leave it there for now.*

In the kitchen, Yuri was pulling out the various ingredients he knew his husband would want for some *much*-needed mulled wine; a bottle of red, an orange, whole cloves, cinnamon sticks, star anise, honey, and a pot to combine them in. The pot was placed on the stove, and Yuri cracked the wine bottle, smelling the aroma before pouring it in and turning on the stove to medium-high. The blue flame of the gas *whooshed* on under the element. Two cinnamon sticks followed, 8 cloves, 2 star anise, and a squish of honey. Yuri returned to the orange after that, washing the rind under some water before slicing it into rounds and adding them to the mix. He stirred it before adding the lid to the top, and turned his attention on the poodle who'd been watching him the whole time.

"You ready to go to St. Petersburg next weekend?" He asked, getting those dark brown eyes to focus and the dog's ears to pique, "You're gonna be going back home for a few days."

Makkachin restlessly whimpered and inched closer, tail wagging anxiously.

"Oh don't look so sad. I'll be there, too, and so will Jiro. We'll all go to Austria together after that. I'm really excited. Your dad says we're going to go on a sleeper-train between the two." Yuri described, ruffling the dog's fluffy head, but Makkachin just panted quietly, enjoying the attention, "Viktor will have a lot to fun telling all about that trip."

"What will I get to do?" Viktor asked suddenly, getting to the base of the stairs with Jiro under one arm.

Yuri rose back up to standing, glancing over his shoulder to the lightly-fizzing pot, then back toward his partner, "Oh, I was just saying to Makkachin that you'll probably get a kick out of telling me what to expect on that train ride to Vienna. I'm really looking forward to that trip now."
"So you're not worried about spending time alone with papa anymore?" The Russian wondered, setting the pup down to go about his own business as he limped into the kitchen, and into his partner's open arms, "Or maybe he seems like less of an issue after everything else."

"Maybe a mix of both." Yuri answered, sliding his arms straight into his husband's jacket through the unzipped front, and savored the warmth as he pressed in against the man's chest, "I don't want to think about troubles right now."

"Mmhh..." Viktor nodded in agreement, his own arms over his spouse's shoulders, cheek pressed against black hair, "Maybe if it isn't considered troubles, we could watch the Russian Free Skate. Someone should be LiveStreaming it right now."

"That should be fun."

"Practice for watching Euros, right?"

"Watching a skating event from the actual audience is going to be weird." Yuri commented, closing his eyes just in time to hear the pot behind him puffing out a gust of hot air. He pulled away to step towards the stove, and turned it down to simmer as Viktor pulled the rest of his coat off, setting it on the island behind himself.

"Why, because you're not used to mingling with the commoners anymore?" The Russian wondered in a tease, crossing his arms as he leaned back against the edge of the counter.

"I still count myself among the commoners," Yuri answered, shaking his head as he made a face at the man. A quick stir of the ingredients, and the lid was returned, but he barely pulled his hand back and set the spoon down before he felt hands slide over the crest of each hip, fingers hooking gently around his sides to start pulling him back.

"You're skating royalty, my love." Viktor purred, pressing himself against his partner's backside as he returned to his place against the edge of the counter, and set his lips to the side of his neck, "You're part of the Nikiforov Dynasty now."

"I married into it." The younger figure pointed out, tilting his head aside to give his spouse more room to tease.

"And jumped, and spun, and twizzled and turned...straight into my heart."

"I thought I drunken strip-teased my way into your heart?" Yuri laughed, his hands settling on his partner's forearms as they went around his front, feeling those fingers pressing into the creases of his legs.

"...Mhmm...I think it's safe to say you Yuri Katsuki'd your way in. The rest is just quibbling over details."

"I've done that a few times..." He added, feeling the sudden pause of neck-kisses and turned his head slightly to see the flushed look on his husband's cheeks, "Oh, that's a rare sight." Yuri laughed, turning in place to raise his arms over the man's shoulders, and inched in closer, until he could touch those lips with the tip of his nose. He nuzzled softly, eyes half-lidded, "Are you about to Viktor Nikiforov your way in, too?"

"Yes, very yes. So much yes."

"That's what I thought. Better get started."
That didn't take instruction. Viktor's hands were on his partner's butt faster than anything, pulling him closer for a kiss between laughs. Yuri leaned into it eagerly, even as those hands gave him a *lift* to help him along, and he found himself standing partly up on his toes. The Russian pulled back only long enough to lift his partner's glasses away, folding them and setting them gently onto the counter behind himself, then to return his hands to where they'd been before. Faces tilted one way, then the other, some kisses being little more than teases of lips against each other, then deeper and longer. Viktor slowly turned his partner around where they stood, until it was Yuri's back against the counter rather than his own, and the hands that lifted the younger figure into him then hoisted Yuri up entirely, leveling him with the edge and pushing him up to sit on it. Legs parted for him, and Viktor slipped in between them, hands sliding up the outside of Yuri's thighs to his waist, then around his back, hugging him close for more kisses.

He started working at the thin material of Yuri's sweater, sliding his hands under it, one thumb at a time, feeling at the undershirt beneath it. A few gentle tugs, and the undershirt was pulled free from where it had been tucked into the man's jeans.

Fingers found skin soon after, and Yuri twitched slightly before laughing, "Ah! Your hands are still *cold*...!"

"You're so *warm* though..." Viktor teased, moving his attention from lips to neck as those cool digits warmed within his husband's clothing, "I just want to touch every part of you all at once..."

"*Mmmhh*...please do..."

"Maybe I'll taste you a bit then, too..."

"Even better."

Viktor went straight to work pleasing his husband, kissing and nibbling at the man's neck as his sweater and under-shirt were being moved further and further up his pale core.

Yuri could feel himself relaxing and going limp under those touches and teases, resting his head against his partner's shoulder as his own hands idly rubbed up and down the Russian's core. Through similarly-thin fabric, he felt at every muscular contour of Viktor's larger frame, tracing his fingers under the man's pecs until they were nearly under his arms, then down and under them, hands moving around the Russian's back. He followed his lover's lead with the gentle coaxing of fabric from waistband, and slid his fingers under the stiff material in their place, feeling where the flat of his partner's back curved outward into that nigh-trademarked SkaterBooty. Yuri couldn't tease his fingers too far down before the man's belt got too tight, so he pulled them back up again and went instead of the back of his partner's shoulders. He could feel where Viktor was starting to lean him backward on the counter then, and he pulled his hands back entirely, holding himself up on one elbow. His shirt was pulled up and away from his chest, bundled near to his chin, and Viktor went to kissing at his abdomen, teasing a few nibbles to each ridge and bulge of muscle, lithe as he was. From that angle, having his legs hanging off the edge of the counter was uncomfortable, so he brought them up and pressed one to Viktor's side, while the other perched a heel against the ridge of the dishwasher door. The tease of silver hair against his skin was a bit ticklish, but he loved every second of it.

Viktor moved carefully across that pale skin, kissing at one hip and then the other, slowly giving attention to each ab as he moved over and up. His left hand went back to help support the leg that was pressed against him, hand sliding down the back of that thigh until his elbow pinched under his partner's knee so he could relax it. His right arm teased fingers against Yuri's ribs, helping to keep the shirts from slipping down again as his kisses moved further up to his spouse's chest. He found one pink nub there and rolled his tongue over it, earning a few breathy gasps before moving over to the
other to give it the same love. He grinned when he heard the sudden squeak as he gave that nipple a gentle bite, and laughed as he pulled up again to nose his husband's face, "That was adorable."

"You bit me."

"I'll do a lot more than that in a minute..." Viktor teased, giving a quick kiss before pulling back again. His hands went down around his husband's waistband and started undoing the buttons and zipper, pulling it all open to find the bulge he knew was hiding there. He didn't need to look at what he was doing after that though, and he wasn't allowed to anyway, feeling his partner's arms go back over his shoulders as Yuri sat up a bit straighter, kissing him all the way. Both legs went around him then, ankles hooking together behind his thighs, knees going up and heels going with them to pull him closer. They were flush against each other by the time he managed to withdraw the younger man's member, and he pulled it up against the flat of his stomach before starting his slow stroke. Still half-soft in his hand, he had a little work to do, but that was half the fun anyway. Each gentle tug and twist made Yuri gasp a little, and every time Viktor felt those legs clamping down a bit tighter in time with his pulls, only to relax as his hand let go slightly to move down again.

The silver legend nibbled at his favorite spot under his husband's ear, leaving light teasing kisses and small licks against that soft skin. It wasn't long before the flesh in his grasp had grown to its full length and girth, twitching slightly with each heartbeat. He began his slow journey down then, finding one last kiss before descending out of range. With a quick shove though, Viktor pushed Yuri further up the counter, unhooking those legs from behind his waist as he turned the man as well, putting him at a slight angle away.

Yuri was enthralled by his partner's seductions, hardly able to focus on anything but the strong pulses going through him with each firm stroke. When he turned, and felt Viktor's shoulder press against his ribs, he settled his right arm over the man's back, the left hand flat on the counter to help hold him upright. He pulled his left knee onto the counter as well and opened himself up a bit in the process, giving the Russian more room as he continued his travels south. A few more kisses against his abdomen, and a tongue-dip into his naval, and Yuri felt the heat and wet of a mouth brushing against his tip. He exhaled a quiet sigh, feeling each wet kiss moving down the length of it, followed by the long trail of a tongue from root to top.

Viktor nibbled a little while longer at the head before finally ceasing his torments and teasing, and took the whole thing into his mouth, lathing his tongue over it as he sucked, pulled up, and then went down. Each loud gasp, and the feeling of fingers pressing against his back as they flexed and extended tightly, spurred him on. Yuri was sagging over his back, the feeling so strong that the man was losing the strength to hold himself up, so Viktor curled his arm around his husband's back to brace him against his shoulder. His right hand remained in center, holding that shaft steady while massaging the base, offering as much attention as was possible given how much clothing Yuri still wore. Several minutes of that went on, until Yuri was practically draped across him, and Viktor pulled up and off, easing his noodle-limp husband's frame down onto his back against the counter. A few items were moved out of the way, pushed towards the sink or set inside it, before Viktor went back to his task. His jacket, long enough to act like a soft blanket under his partner's back and head, protected skin from the shock of tile-cold. Yuri's nearest hand went through his hair, combing his bangs back through his fingers, and later settled on his shoulder, trying to grasp at it under the pressure.

Before long, Yuri pulled both hands up towards his face, fingers laced together as he pressed his thumbs against his nose and forehead, eyes clenched shut as he gasped louder and louder with each suck and twist, "Nh...V-Viktor..."

Slender fingers worked their way up to the jeans still clinging to Yuri's waist, and the silver Russian
started to pull them further down, sliding them out between velvet skin and silk coat-lining. With just enough moved away to fully expose the younger man’s form, that pulsatile member flat against Yuri’s stomach, Viktor moved lower still, showing tender affection for a pair of squishy bits before licking his way from base to tip again, and further, tongue trailing all the way to the center of his partner’s chest before coming to rest and kissing there. Fingers went through his hair again, but just as Viktor was about to start rocking slightly, he felt legs feebly kicking on either side of him.

Yuri gave a nervous laugh, "You pulled my jeans around my thighs and now I can’t get my legs around you."

Viktor lifted up from his kissing-place, settled onto his elbows and looked on affectionately at his partner, "Is that what you want to do right now?"

"Yeah, kinda." He answered, "I want you right up against me."

"Oh?" The silver legend cooed, intrigued, gently and slowly starting to pull the man down towards the edge of the counter, using his jacket as a slider, "What would you do then?"

"I’d cross my ankles behind your back...and keep you pinned close." Yuri started, eyes looking down to where his partner was bent over him, "Then I’d reach my hands down, and I’d get your pants undone..."

"Mhm?" Viktor teased, allowing those jeans to slide back up a little bit as he pulled his husband’s knees up around his ribs, and felt those heels go behind him just like Yuri said he’d do. But, with knees going up, so too did thighs, and the angle put all that clothing between the younger man’s hands and Viktor’s own garments, "Seems we have a small problem with your plan."

"Do we?" Yuri wondered, sliding both hands down the exposed front of his pale body, over his own quivering flesh, between his legs, and under where his pants and underwear had collected around his upper thighs. He fumbled for the front of his husband’s slacks, finding the first hook-closure and undoing it, then seeking for the thin zipper an inch or two away. Just as he found it, and managed to clumsily pull it down a little bit, he felt Viktor pulling his legs up over his shoulders, resting his calves against collar-bones. Half a second later, Yuri found the all-too-easy-to-find length of his spouse’s ready arousal, and pulled it back through the same space he’d wedged his hands through between his own legs. He held the tip against himself, and pinched his thighs together, giving an Eros-like look to the blue eyes looking down at him, "I think the only problem we have is that you aren’t moving."

"I think I can remedy that..." Viktor mused. However, instead of actually starting to move, he reached one hand for the inside breast pocket of his jacket, pinched just under one of his partner’s arms, and withdrew the small bottle he’d stored there. A quick button-press, and the bottle was open, and Viktor dripped its cold, wet contents all over his husband’s fingers, drawing in a quick hissed breath as Yuri took then hint and started spreading it around.

With fingers slick and slippery, it was easy to squish his hands between his thighs to spread the lube even further, creating something of a tract for the Russian to move through. The clear liquid dripping from his own member, previously slurped up by the man sucking on it, was added to the mix, and Viktor started his slow slide. Yuri clenched his thighs tighter, adding pressure to the thick rod of flesh moving between them, and continued holding to the tip between both of his overlapping hands, twisting slightly where he could when the tip was all the way through. Before long, he’d pulled himself up into it as well, holding himself in place with his thumbs as the rest of his fingers clamped them together. Even through his entranced senses, Yuri couldn’t help but utter a few quiet laughs, making Viktor curious enough to slow down his pace.
"Are you ticklish with this?" The Russian wondered, looking down over where his husband had pinched his knees together for the sake of closing the gap, ankles on either side of his head, "Or is something else making you laugh."

"Something else." Yuri answered, opening one eye just enough to catch the man's glance, and then looked down between them, "You're going to think I'm stupid, but...in this position, it actually looks like I'm the longer one for once..." He explained, pulling his hands back just enough to show them off.

Viktor blinked down at the sight of themselves...and tried to push in further, getting as much of his length between the younger man's legs as he could to try and make their tips even, but inevitably failed, "Well..."

"Let me enjoy this one victory!" Yuri pleaded through his smirk, wiggling a bit where he lay, "I may never get to feel like I'm bigger than you ever again!"

Viktor just made a face at that, "Savor the memory...I'm about to remind you of the reality, my love."

"Eh?" He went blank for a moment, only to feel that length of flesh sliding away, until it was completely gone from where he'd had it. He could still feel the tip gliding against his skin, past the base of his own arousal, over those tender round bits, and then down, starting to prod against him, "Oh." The prod became more insistent then, pressing and then sliding back up where it just missed going inside, and repeating until Yuri couldn't help but beg, "Just put it in...!"

"Sorry?" Viktor teased, doing it again, "Do what?"

That was enough to make Yuri scramble his hands forward between his knees, grabbing for his partner's shirt and using it to pull himself up to sitting. With his bare arse hanging off the edge of the counter, his whole frame counting on Viktor not to move so he wouldn't fall, he looked straight into those crystal blue eyes. Without a word, but keeping their eyes locked, Yuri let go. Thankfully, the legend's arms went around his back in a hurry to hold him steady, and Yuri used his freed hands to maneuver back between his legs and under his clothes, took hold of that teasing member, put it were it needed to go, and moved one hand around the Russian's side to grab a handful of his backside.

Playing along with the surprise, Viktor inched inward, and he watched with delight as his husband full-body-twitched before collapsing back down again to await the rest of it, "You okay?" He mused.

"Y-yes, it's good, I love it... Keep going..."

Viktor happily obliged, still amused by his partner's insistence. He slid in a little bit, earning a tense groan, then withdrew, waited a moment, and pushed forward again, earning the same with a bit more depth gained.

A few more attempts, and Yuri finally got what he wanted; skin to skin, flush with each other, and Viktor Nikiforov some 6 inches deep inside him. He gasped a few relieved breaths before letting some of the tension in his frame relax, and he raised his arms up above his head, dropping his head down to the jacket's lapels. He flinched slightly, but smiled, when he felt a hand come around to slide up the front of his otherwise-naked frame. That hand came back a moment later, joined by the first in gripping around his thighs to hold him still...and the slow rhythm began.

Practiced and careful at first, making sure everything was slippery, and nothing hurt, Viktor tended to that most crucial of moments with the same care as he always did. He watched his partner's face for any sign of discomfort, and only started to pick up his pace once even he could feel that the younger man was relaxed enough to allow it. There was a very visceral difference between wanted tightness,
and the tightness brought on by stress, pain, or unwillingness. Viktor had learned that lesson very early on, and never wanted to repeat that failed first penetration. Seeing his then-fiancé giving up the hope of climax because of pain was enough to impart that lesson clearly. Watching Yuri now, seeing how the younger man constantly moved his arms around, either hugging them around himself, stroking his body, touching his hands to his face, or keeping them up above his head...it was all a language that Viktor was fluent in. Gradually, he built up his rhythm, until he could see his happy partner jerking upward with each thrust, and heard the wet slap of their bodies hitting each other.

He pulled Yuri's legs down, parting them around the outside of his shoulders so they could hook into the groove of his elbows, and leaned forward with them. He felt fingers go around the back of his neck, and looked in time to spot his spouse coming up to press their foreheads together, breathing heavily as he started to cry out against the intensity of it all.

*Our foreplay had been going on for hours before we go home... He's extra sensitive now... Better not overdo it...*

The silver Russian leaned down and pressed in for a kiss, holding there for a few seconds as he slid in as deeply as he could go. Yuri tensed up slightly, giving off one of *those* whimpers like he was close, and Viktor withdrew again...this time completely. He pulled his dazed husband off the counter, and gave him half a moment to realize he was vertical before nudging him to turn around and lean forward.

Yuri grabbed up the jacket he'd been lying on and bundled it up into a make-shift pillow, hugging it in his arms and pressing his face to it as he settled against the counter-top again. He closed his eyes and went by feeling along, sensing his partner coming up behind him, arms going around his thin frame as a kiss was pressed behind his shoulders. The slick heat of his partner's flesh rubbed up and down against him, but eventually found its place again, getting inside him much more easily than it had earlier on, and Viktor pressed flat against him. Hands gripped the tops of his thighs, gently pushing away the remains of his clothes until they hung precariously around his knees instead. He felt the subtle nudge of clothing behind him as well as his spouse pushed more of his own away as well, leaving them to feel more skin than fabric between them. Viktor started up their pace again after that, both arms holding tightly to him as the man hugged against his back. He was practically seeing stars in no time, jolts of fire and electricity shooting through him with each thrust, until he finally felt the release he needed. Viktor was only a minute behind him, pressing in deep like he always did, biting down on the back of his rolled-up shirt as he cried out.

They caught their breath against each other for a moment before even trying to move. Yuri's legs trembled, and he could barely stand on his own, needing the support of those arms still holding to his frame. The Russian did his best to maintain that support, eventually withdrawing from his partner to help him stand upright again. Even then, though, Viktor had to grab for the edge of the rink to offset how much his right ankle was starting to bother him. It all disappeared again when Yuri stepped up and kissed him, holding his hands to the side of his face, pressing their brows together again.

"...*Y-you're always so good at that...*"

"*Domo...*" The silver Russian answered, nuzzling noses briefly. He reached for the hands still pressed to his cheeks, curled his fingers around them and turned his head to kiss into the middle of each palm, "*I love you.*"

Yuri smiled through his tired gaze, and pushed through where Viktor still had both of their hands held up, kissing the man again, "*I love you, too. Now...let's go watch some figure skating.*"

"*You don't want to clean up first?*"
He shook his head, stepping out of the pants and undergarment that had fallen to his ankles, and kicked them towards the base of the counter, "Nah... Let's just grab a blanket. We're long overdue for a good naked cuddle session."

"That's just what I like to hear...consider it done."
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED EIGHTY ONE

The entire couch was turned to be perpendicular to the television, with the kotatsu in the center of the room set right up against it to hold mugs of hot wine. Makkachin was curled up happily on one end, snoozing under a doggy blanket, while Jiro was curled up on top of a blanket, between Yuri's knees. Yuri himself leaned his back against Viktor's frame, sitting between those long athletic legs, head resting against the man's broad chest, just high enough for Viktor to nuzzle against his hair.

Connected to a LiveStream through Viktor's phone, their flatpanel displayed the already-started Men's Singles event in Moscow. Without it being an international event, there were no English announcers, and being live, there were no subtitles or close captions either, leaving Yuri to miss out on a small fraction of the experience. He didn't mind though. There was only one skater in the Men's event he was truly interested in watching, and that skater was at the end. It was about 7pm in Moscow by then, and the event was only half over.

Viktor reached for his mug and pulled it up, taking a sip from it before resting it on his partner's stomach, balancing it with the fingers that were already settled there on Yuri's other side, "This was actually a pretty great idea, all things considered."

"Makes me wish we could take off from every competition when we want to," Yuri agreed, moving one hand down to give ear-scritches to the Akita pup resting its head on his leg. Jiro gave a tired whimper-sigh, eyes barely able to stay open, "Aside from this little guy though, I'm kind of getting déjà vu to our St. Petersburg days."

The older figure nodded against his husband's hair, then looked around the room a little, "A few structural differences, too...but yeah, I can see why you would. Same couch, same poodle, same me..."

"It'll be interesting to go back." Yuri added, "Even though we're just passing through." He turned his head to look back at his spouse, "What are we going to do about sleeping arrangements out there though? You sounded like you had some genius idea."

Viktor nodded again, "My papa and I may be mending things, but I'm still not going to sleep in that house. I was thinking we could rent a camper or something instead."

"A camper?" Yuri echoed, "...That sounds okay. Do you think your ankle will be good to drive it by next week though?"

"Better be." The Russian answered tepidly, "Otherwise we'll be having to ask my father to come pick us up, and we won't have the option for the camper at all."

"At which point, we won't be going at all."

"Da."

"Maybe I should learn how to drive at some point...that way I can at least be a back-up in case something like this happens."

Viktor huffed a laugh and sighed, "It just had to be my driving leg that got tweaked, didn't it?"

"Mhm..."
"I'm actually a little surprised on all that..."

Yuri looked at him again, "About what?"

The silver legend set his mug back down on the kotatsu, then brought that hand up to run his fingers against that shock of black hair, "I figured you'd be blaming yourself for what happened, but you haven't even suggested it."

"Why would I feel like it was my fault? You stepped out onto the ice yourself. I thought you were going to pull me off of it." Yuri explained, "When I realized you were coming forward, I already knew you'd slip...that's how I caught you so fast."

"Oh." Viktor made a face at that, "...I guess you're right. It was my fault."

"I don't really think of it as anyone being at fault," Yuri explained, bringing his hand up to stroke the side of his spouse's face, and pressed his head against the other, "It was just an accident. You've got the ice-pack on it again right now like the medic said, and we'll make sure you see a specialist on Monday."

The Russian grumbled a little and hugged his partner a little tighter then, "Hopefully it's nothing. I don't want to be benched for very long."

"Suffer now so you can get back on the ice sooner. I don't want you to have to skip competition at 4C because you started working it too early."

"I'm surprised the JSF brass hasn't reached out yet. There's no chance they don't know what happened. You'd think they'd have called by now." Viktor pointed out, "Or have they and you just haven't told me?"

"They sent me an email." Yuri explained, "They said they got the medic's report and were relieved that your injury didn't seem serious, but were sad to find out that I was going to bench you for the Exhibition."

"Oh..." Viktor whined, "So you've already sent them your solo music then."

"Not yet." The younger man shook his head lightly, "I can't attach music from my phone to an email, so I was going to do it in the morning before we leave."

"Was all this before or after I told you that you could have my spot?"

"Before. It was when we were in the shuttle on the way back to the hotel. I wouldn't have asked them to make that switch for me anyway...would've been presumptuous."

"Yeah, I guess so... I'll have to suggest it myself tomorrow."

"Mhm."

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The quiet, low-frequency chant and the hum of the singing bowl had gone on for some time. Minako listened, and watched for any changes in the tormented skater's affect, seeing that over the 20 minutes since the meditation began, he'd at least stopped hiccupping his breaths. He seemed serene and at peace, at least from and outside perspective.

The ballerina turned her eyes back towards her phone, and the conversation she'd struck up with her
Russian boyfriend, reading over her last reply while she waited for the next to answer it.

[I just don't know what to do to help him.] She'd written, [He only barely gives me enough information to know what's going on, and nothing more. I'm really worried about some of the stuff he said earlier.]

The jumping dots had been going for a while, but then vanished for a few seconds. What she got back was a surprisingly big blurb for a text message.

[It's hard to really know what's going through someone's head when they're not used to being open with anyone, never mind strangers.] Mikhail wrote, [Considering what you've said about him though, the fact that he's said THAT much is probably a huge step for him. He seems pretty invested in Yuri's happiness though, even if it means letting go of him and trying to be happy for what he's got with Viktor. But I can see the problem there. This kid can't get close enough to apologize because Viktor's ready to eat him alive if he tries, so he can't even properly express how much he regrets what happened. After all, it's one thing to tell YOU he's sorry, but it'd be a different thing entirely if he was able to tell YURI he's sorry. Has he considered saying so to Viktor, too?]

Minako glanced over, but made a face and turned back to type, [The way he talks about Viktor, it's like Viktor isn't even part of all this. He's just an obstacle. I had to work him over just to get him to accept that Viktor's a regular human like everyone else...] She wrote, side-eyeing the skater when she thought she saw him move, only to realize he'd just sat a bit straighter and nothing more, [I was hoping that if Asahi saw Viktor as involved, that he'd understand that Viktor's being protective over Yuri was because he himself was hurt by what happened, too, not JUST Yuri. Maybe I should be more direct? I doubt Viktor will let him near unless he gets an apology first.]

[Probably]

[Then there's the fact that neither of the boys has talked to me since they saw me standing around with Asahi in the audience...]

[Not talking to you could mean anything. Viktor is pretty direct with his indignation. You'd know if it he had it out for you.] Mikhail pointed out, [They're probably just avoiding you by proxy, because they're avoiding this Asahi kid.]

[I hope so... I haven't tried to reach out to them because I was worried they'd GET mad at me if they weren't already. I want to have something to show for this supposed 'treason' they're seeing me do. If I can crack Asahi and get]

"Sorry for all this trouble." The skater said suddenly, leaving Minako to hit send before she meant to just from the surprise of it. He uncrossed his legs and put his phone away, standing up to find his things, "I'll go now so you can have your space back."

Minako quickly stood up, watching the athlete get his coat from the closet and find his shoes again, "I really don't mind you being here. This was my idea after all, right?" She heard her phone beep as a new text came, but she didn't move to read it just yet.

Asahi hesitated, a finger in the heel of his second shoe, but he shook his head and pulled it the rest of the way onto his foot, "...I barely know you, but I've unloaded more on you than I've ever told to everyone else combined. I'm not even sure why I did."

"I kind of made you...sort of..."

"Still."
She watched almost helplessly as Asahi reached for the door handle and pulled the panel open, "So what are you going to do now...? Did coming here help at all?"

He paused in the open frame, looking at the floor in the hall for a moment before shrugging, "I'm not sure. ...Uhm...to both, I mean."

"If I could figure out a way for you to talk to Yuri and Viktor, would you?"

That made Asahi turn around, looking at the woman with his dark, reddened eyes. He blinked at her, then turned his eyes away again, ",...What good would that do?"

"You said you wanted to tell Yuri how sorry you were. I think Viktor deserves to hear that, too... But if you want to get to that point, you have to give Viktor what he wants."

"What Viktor wants is what he's already getting. I'll never speak to Yuri again as long as I live."

"But you're all going to be going to Four Continents together...and it's looking likely that you'll be chosen for the Olympics, too. You won't be able to avoid them. Wouldn't you rather be able to be around them without-?"

"Maybe I won't." He cut her off simply, and took another step through the doorway.

",...Huh?" Minako blanched, reaching to hold the door open before it could close behind the man, "You're not even willing to entertain that you might get picked?"

He sighed, back towards her, "I meant that maybe I won't go to any of those events."

",...So you're just going to retire? Because of one bad weekend? You skated your heart out, Asahi. No one outside of us even knows that anything is wrong."

The hall was eerily quiet for a few seconds, but it suddenly felt like a war-front when the skater turned on a heel, and stared straight into her eyes, "When I said before that Hell couldn't possibly be worse than what I'm going through right now? Well, maybe going there will be a relief. Then I won't have to worry about being a burden to Yuri or Viktor at competitions to come." He gave a singular dark laugh at himself, and started to walk away, "It'll even make it easier on the JSF to decide who gets that jacket, too."

Minako was instantly mortified, barely managing to keep the tip of her foot in the door as she lunged forward to throw her arms over the skater's shoulders. The heavy panel closed on her, but she wouldn't budge, "How can you say something like that!? You said you already lost everything...but you still have your life, Asahi! You can still make things better!"

"My life is worthless. Yuri made that abundantly clear." He explained, trying to shrug the woman off but finding her latched on quite securely, "Without Riku, I have nothing to live for...and with everything that's happened this weekend already, after everything Yuri said to me...I don't even have anything to hope for, either. I'm nothing but a walking, talking Pain Totem, to my self, and to everyone around me..."

"What about Coach Nagisa and your choreographer? What about all your fans...? You're worried about causing them all pain now, but if you take your own life, that'll just make everyone hurt...!"

"What do those people care!?" He argued back, "I'm just a pretty face that dances for them. Should I really be that concerned with the opinions of people who will spend maybe 15 seconds writing out a fucking Tweet with a sadface emoji and then they're done!? They don't actually give a shit about
me. They don’t know anything about me!"

"THAT'S BECAUSE YOU WON'T LET THEM!"

Doors were starting to open down the rest of the hall as people took note of the yelling. Many were instantly shocked to spot one of the competition's athletes at the center of it, then surprised that he was in their spectator hotel...then worried about what was actually being said.

Minako looked around desperately, seeing all the worried faces, then turned forward to the man still trying to get away. In a fit of adrenalin, she pulled him back as hard as she could, shoved the door open with her hip, and brought him back inside. She pressed herself against the door to stop him from trying to open it again, and tried to catch her breath, ",...I think half the floor is worried about you now..."

"Please just let me go..." He begged, ",...I told myself I could've shoved Yuri out of the way to get out, and I didn't...and now we're here... I won't make that mistake twice..."

Minako became even more nervous to hear it, and leveled the athlete a bargaining glance, ",...I'm scared of what you'll do to yourself if I let you out of my sight... I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you. I...I can't let you leave unless I know you'll be okay..."

Frustration and despair were mixing and boiling, but the dark figure held himself back anyway, ",...I can't comprehend why you care so much..."

"Asahi...! You're important!" She pleaded, though kept her ground against the door, "You're smart and kind and incredibly talented! You can't understand why I care so much about you, but I can't understand why you're depreciating yourself so much! You're torturing yourself over how Yuri reacted to what happened, but to me that just shows how much you still care about him! You can recover from this! From all of this!"

Her phone started ringing where it had been abandoned on the bed.

"Pick uppp...pick uuppppp!" Mikhail begged quietly, eyes on the ice but not seeing anything happening on it. Beside him, his daughters and in-law were starting to see how nervous he was getting.

Yuri gently ran his fingers from Jiro's nose, down over his brow, behind his head and down his back, flattening his hand as he went, then starting again. The skater on the screen was novice and didn't hold his interest that well, but something that did get his attention was the sound of the audience's mood shifting. The polite quiet of their observance suddenly changed, to the point where an audible murmur could be heard over the LiveStream. Both men's eyes were on it, and even though the camera continued to follow the skater, they could see in the background where four members of the audience, including one man who was rather gargantuan, had suddenly stood up to leave, hastily forcing their way through so one of them in particular could get out.

"Is that...Kon?" Yuri asked, a brow quirked.

"...I think so..." Viktor agreed, "What in the world is going on...?"
Mikhail darted into the underbelly of the Megasport Arena, trying to get away from the noise of the rink-side area, even as his connection went to voice-mail for the second time, "Minako I swear to GOD if you don't pick up...!" He argued with himself, dialing again.

Nikki pulled out her phone as well, and loaded up the yet-untouched text message window to send a message.

Yuri's phone buzzed from where he'd left it on the counter near the stove, making quite the rattle as it vibrated against the hard surface. He lifted his head when he heard it, "...Am I wrong in thinking that buzz is related to what's going on in Moscow right now...?"

Viktor shook his head, a curious and bewildered look on his face, "Better check just in case?"

"Yeah..." He agreed, putting Jiro close to where Makkachin was curled up at their feet, and threw off the blanket, striding his naked frame back to the kitchen to find his phone, "It's your cousin..."

"What's she saying?"

"...Hi Yuri, it's Nikkita, sorry to bother, but do you know what Minako is up to right now?" He read aloud, "Minako-sensei...?"

"Sleeping, probably." Viktor commented, eyeballing the 1:34am timestamp on the microwave clock.

"...If they all got up like that, and Nikki is texting me, I doubt it's just because Minako-sensei isn't answering a late-night phone-call." Yuri pointed out, feeling nervous all of a sudden, "I'm going to call her back."

Blue eyes watched quietly as the younger man put the phone up to his ear and slowly started walking back towards the couch.

"Hey Nikki..." Yuri started, "It's 1:30 in the morning. Minako-sensei is probably asleep right now." He explained, waiting a moment, but then shook his head, "Hang on I'm going to put you on speaker."

Viktor quirked a brow, "Well this is turning out oddly."

"I know." Yuri shook his head again and set the phone down on the kotatsu, pressing the Speaker button just as Jiro insisted on sitting in his lap again, "Okay go ahead..."

"Ahhhh this is embarrassing...!" Nikki started, her voice a bit hollow through the phone's speakers, "Papa isn't just calling Minako out of the blue. He knows perfectly well what time is it in Japan right now...but they've been texting back and forth for the last little while and then she sent an unfinished message, and now she's not answering. We hoped maybe you knew what's going on? Did she drop her phone in the toilet or something?" She asked, laughing anxiously like she'd hoped that's all it was.

"We're not with her." Yuri answered, "We came home after the Free Program. We won't get back to Osaka until tomorrow afternoon sometime."

"Oh..."

"What were they talking about?" Viktor asked cautiously, "Something important?"
"Ahhhh I'm not completely sure... Minako was asking for Papa's advice about how to help someone. That's all I know."

The two skaters looked at one another, "She couldn't be asking about...?"

"Oh, do you know who she's referring to?" Nikki asked, "It sounded like it might've been someone that you'd kn-"

"MINAKO!" Mikhail's voice resonated in the background, "Why didn't you pick up the phone!? I've been trying to call you!"

"Opps...looks like she finally answered." Nikki stated, "I guess it's fine then..."

Yuri made a face, one hand on the pup and the other on his husband's where a palm had settled on his leg, "...Fine...?" He echoed, "Uhh...well, text me back as soon as they're off the phone with each other, okay? We're watching a LiveStream of the event, so...we'll be up until the end of the medaling ceremony."

"I will." The silver teen answered, about ready to hang up, but then spoke in a more hushed tone, "I want to talk to you about something later anyway, Yuri...if that's okay..."

"Just me?" He asked, surprised.

"Y-yeah...it's nothing seriously important right now. It can wait. I'm not even sure why I asked. Sorry...I'll message you when Papa's done talking to Minako. Bye."

"Cya."

The line disconnected, and Yuri flopped backward, dropping against his husband's stomach as his head hit the backrest, "...It never ends..."

"I don't want to speculate, but..."

Yuri turned his head and gave his partner a coy look, "But?"

"...Minako sat-in with me during the meeting with Saito this morning...and then she watched the Free Skate with him from the audience." Viktor explained, "Now we're finding out that she was asking my uncle for advice on how to help someone, and then randomly doesn't answer her phone for a while... Do you think she's with Saito right now?"

"Pfft...no." He shook his head and lifted Jiro off his lap, twisting around to retake his place from earlier. Viktor reached around him for the blanket and pulled it up to his chest again before he set the pup back down on his lap, "Why would she do that at this hour anyway?"

"Why was she standing with him in the audience?"

"Stop making sense. It's too late at night for me to brain right now."

Viktor gave a wry smile and reached for the last of his mulled wine, "I guess we'll just wait and see. Maybe Minako did just drop her phone in the toilet." He gave a quiet chuckle at the thought.

"Can't leave her alone for 5 minutes." Yuri sighed, trying to find the humor in it as well.

One hand held a phone to her ear while the other gently stroked a certain man's back. Minako had a
strained smile on her face as she focused on each, "I know, I'm sorry...!" She said, sitting sideways against her knees on the edge of the bed, offering the distraught skater next to her what little comfort she knew she could give. It was enough that he'd at least agreed to stay for a few minutes, even if he'd just leaned over his knees and buried his face in his hands there, "...No, the phone was on the bed. I had jumped out into the hall for a minute and didn't hear it before. ...Yes, I heard the text but I'd dropped the phone by then. I think I had my thumb hovering close to the Send button and hit it by mistake while I was still typing." She explained, or at least tried to, as another 8 questions followed every single answer, "Mikhail! Hun! Calm down! Everything is fine!"

Asahi heard the words, but wasn't listening. He was, in some sense, too focused on the strange feeling of that hand moving across his back.

"Yes, he's still here." She went on, waiting a moment as another flurry of questions came at her, but she deadpanned the wall and glowered at her phone briefly, then put the receiver back against her ear, "Of course I know what time it is, but sometimes the hour doesn't matter. You know that better than anyone, Mr. I'm FaceTiming my kids at 3 in the morning to teach them math." She teased, listening to the Russian's flustered admission that she had a point, "Anyway...everything here is okay right now. We were just going to wait a few minutes, and then I was going to help make sure he got back to the competitor's hotel without being mobbed by fans, then I'm going to sleep. ...Yes, of course I'll message you before I cut the lights. Just don't go worrying about me if it's only 30 minutes and I still haven't done it. ...I promise! Give me at least an hour or two! Okay, okay...thanks, talk to you later." She shook her head and gave a nervous laugh, but clicked out of the call and put the phone down, turning her attention back to Asahi, "Sorry about all that. Like his nephew, Mikhail can be very overprotective, and he feels a bit helpless cuz he's in Moscow right now." She made a dour expression then, "He'll probably be hovering over me for days after we all get back to Hasetsu..."

The younger figure could do little more than cringe a pained breath.

Minako leaned slightly towards him, "Thanks for agreeing to stay for a few more minutes. I know this is all really hard for you...but I promise, things can and will get better."

"H-how...can you possibly kn-know...?"

"Because I've known Yuri his entire life, and he's never held a grudge against anyone, ever." She answered easily, "And he's told me himself that he understands what happened wasn't something you'd normally do. I think he wants to forgive you...he just needs to hear from you that you want to say sorry."

"I c-can't...not with V-Viktor around..."

Minako pursed her lips for a moment and made a face, but then shrugged it away, "Apologize to him first. Viktor's the gate-keeper here, as is his duty...and if he's convinced you mean well, and mean it truly, then..."

He snuffled another pained breath, but at least managed to nod into his hands.

"Let's leave it at that though. For now, I'm going to walk you back to your room, and I'm going to tell your coach something about where you've been for the last little while." She explained, "Just enough so she knows to keep an eye on you for a little while, but not more than is necessary. You've trusted me with all this information...I'm not going to betray it by telling people who don't need to know."

"You we-were telling Viktor's uncle..."
Minako shook her head, "That's not exactly right. I gave him a skin-deep idea of what was going on so he'd know what I was up to, but the rest of that conversation was him helping me out with my thoughts. We all need a little help sometimes."

He nodded again, but Minako wasn't sure that meant he understood or accepted her words.

"Anyway...what I was trying to say before," She went on, continuing that soothing stroke like she'd do for her youngest ballet students, years ago, "Everything about what's happened can be worked through... But something that you need to do, other than the obvious, is learn that relationships are a two-way street. You've shut yourself down from having any kind of real, deep, meaningful attachments to people because of the fear you've had about whether it was acceptable or appropriate. You don't even know what it's like. So in a lot of ways, you're just like Yuri used to be, trying to skate his Eros but having to think about food because he had no real eros experience to draw from. But the time for thinking about katsudon is over, Asahi... It's time to grow up. There's a whole wide world out there, ready and waiting for you...but only you can take that first step."

The athlete sat still for a few moments after that, pulling his hands away just enough to look at the floor between his feet. His mind raced from all the things he'd heard and seen and felt for the last hour, so much so that it felt like his brain was vibrating in his skull. Eventually though, he lowered his hands, pivoting his elbows over his knees...and nodded, genuinely, "...Okay..."
The kotatsu vibrated twice and bing'd with the arrival of another text message. Leaning over to look, Yuri then reached for it to pull it up in front of himself, "Looks like they're done. Minako-sensei is okay."

Viktor tilted his head slightly to see around his partner's and oogled at the screen, reading [Okay they're done] and [She left her phone on the bed and stepped into the hall for something, so she didn't pick up cuz she didn't know it was ringing.] He huffed a quiet laugh and settled back again, "Guess she went to get ice or something and just left her phone behind."

"Yeah probably." Yuri agreed, trying to thumb a reply, but finding his phone and arms behind nudged up as Jiro wiggled his way under the arch they made. The pup made a few silly whimpery noises as he moved forward, leaving wet marks on Yuri's face before finally settling his head against his neck and one shoulder.

The Russian booped the pup's nose, prompting a little pink tongue to come out and lick the spot. At the opposite end of the couch, Makkachin was being a very goodboi, using his blanket and his ample fluff to be a foot-warmer for three, and a foot-elevator for one. Viktor nudged the dog's chest where his unhurt ankle was pinned down under one lanky poodle-limb, and Makkachin's tail poffed up a few times before settling down again, "I'm not sure what I'm more excited for at this point...getting to troll Euros or getting to bring the dogs with us."

"Maybe we should get Jiro trained up as a Therapy Dog." Yuri suggested, sending his confirmation reply to Nikki before setting his phone back down again, "Then we could use my penchant for anxiety attacks as a good excuse to get him into competitions."

"...Am I being replaced?" Viktor pouted.

Yuri huffed and turned his head, bringing his hand up to nudge at the side of his husband's face, tilting it enough towards him that he could kiss the edge of his lips, "Never. But dogs can sense them coming before they happen, even before the person who gets the attacks."

"...Are you getting anxious now? Is that why Jiro's cuddling you like this?"

"Who knows?" He turned back and gently stroked his hand down the length of the puppy's back, petting him softly to sleep, "But it's the first thing that came to mind right as you were saying we're bringing the dogs to Austria. My first thought was getting them both vests and claim they're emotional support dogs, but-"

"Yurio would never let you hear the end of it." Viktor teased, "His big thing may be cats, but animal welfare in general is a huge deal to him. Not just for the animals, but for the sake of stopping people from putting the animals into weird situations. He once railed for over an hour about how people were getting vests for their dogs online, so they could take them onto planes, only for the dogs to bite kids and then get euthanized for being vicious."

"Yeah I thought of that almost as quickly," Yuri gave a nervous smile, "That's why I settled on the actual Therapy Dog idea. Jiro would actually have to be qualified and trained...but giving an Akita a job is really healthy for them. They can get pretty unruly if they're bored."

"You don't think Makkachin needs a job?"
"Makkachin's job is being fun."

Viktor laughed at that, "And he wins Associate of the Quarter every time for it."

"Exactly."


[Did you hear what he said in the hallway just now?]
[He sounded really angry...anyone speak English that knows what he said?]
[I came out too late and most of it was already over. I thought I heard him saying something about Twitter? I'm not sure.]
[What was Asahi-kun doing in the spectator hotel anyway? Who was that woman he was with? A fan that he's having a fling with?]
[I'd have a fling with him it'd make him feel better!]
[Half the audience would do that]
[He's never hooked up with a fan before! Why would he start now?]  
[I was on a call with a friend of mine in Britain when we heard the yelling in the hall. I had him on speaker and he says that Asahi-kun was saying he wanted to die! Why would he say stuff like that!? He just won Silver!]
[What's wrong with Asahi-sama?]
[Everyone calm down. The lady he was with seemed to be trying to talk to him about it.]
[Someone do something!]
[Should we call an ambulance for him...?]
[I wouldn't...not yet anyway. That might just make it worse for him. He's upset about something, but he's not standing on a ledge right now. Give that lady a minute to talk him down.]
[Anyone but me think this is connected to how WEIRD the medaling ceremony was? Those three didn't exchange a single word or glance between one another. Viktor is ALWAYS super nice to the other people on the podium! Even if he doesn't know them! But this time, NOTHING!]
[Not just Viktor...but Yuri, too. Yuri and Asahi were rink-mates in Juniors. Did they have a falling out? Is that why it took Asahi so long to come back? Him and Yuri nearly retired at the exact same time back then.]
[I hope this turns out to be nothing...I was so excited when his Club said he was coming back to competition! I wish he'd get on social media so we'd know how he's doing!]

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Minako pulled the door closed behind herself, and pulled her purse-straps up over her shoulder, then reached to take the arm of the silent figure waiting for her. They all-but tip-toed through the hall, hoping not to attract any further attention to themselves after the outburst from minutes earlier. However, it was unmistakable that a few doors clicked open as they passed; fans that had been keeping vigil through the spy-hole in case anyone walked by. The two snuck around the corner to the elevator waiting area, and passed wordlessly down to the largely-empty main lobby.

Asahi didn't bother to mummy-wrap his head again as they pushed through the doors. It was cold, but it wasn't snowing at all. What snow was already on the ground crunched under their boots as they made their way back to the official hotel. It was quiet there as well, save for the late-night staff of the front desk. The two went for the elevators to go up, then made their way towards the athlete's room.

"...I left my keycard in my bag." He said suddenly, "Sorry, I didn't think about it until I didn't have anything to reach for..."

The door opened abruptly though, and Coach Nagisa was standing within, phone to her ear and a
scared look on her pale face, "ASAHI!"

He blinked at her in confusion, [...Yes?]

[I HAVE BEEN TRYING TO CALL YOU FOR 7 MINUTES STRAIGHT, WHY WOULDN'T YOU PICK UP!?] She barked, pulling her phone away to show its face, and display the fact that she was, in fact, trying to call him right that second.

Asahi nervously reached under his jacket to pull his phone out from his back pocket, seeing the incoming call, but also noting the fact that it wasn't ringing or buzzing. He quickly turned the device over and unmuted it with the switch on the top left side, [Sorry. It was muted before the Free Progr-]

[M-MUTED!?] The woman leaned out of the doorway and dropped herself over the skater, [You don't know how worried I've been! SNS is losing its mind! Rumors are spreading like wildfire about some really dark things you said! What's going on!?] She only then spotted Minako standing nearby, [And why are...why are you with him...?]

"Nagisa-kōchi...ochitsuke..." [Calm down.] Asahi attempted, pushing her away again, and then ushered her fully back into the room. [She's the person I said I was going to go meet earlier.]

Minako followed carefully, but only stood within the doorway enough to keep the panel from shutting her out. She watched and listened quietly, waiting for the cue to give her small nod to the circumstances and then take her leave.

It was, after all, getting precariously close to 2am.

The older woman stood on her own again, tossing her phone to the blankets of a nearby bed as she reached both hands forward to press her palms against the man's face, [You look like you've been crying! What happened!?]

Asahi grumbled under his breath and nudged his coach's hand's back, [I cried. It's better now.]

[Why are you spending time alone with Viktor and Yuri's friend? Where are they anyway? What have you been doing!]

The skater was starting to get impatient, and shook his head, [I don't know where they are; I wasn't invited to spend time with them...I was invited to spend time with her.] He thumbed over his shoulder at the ballerina, [We just talked. That's it. Now I want to go to sleep. She just came all this way to make sure I didn't...get lost in the snow or something.]

[ASAHI-]

[Where's Webber anyway? Shouldn't he be here?]

Coach Nagisa was getting impatient as well, [He went out looking for you after the things I told him were being said online! You've got half the skating community losing their minds over you right now! Why would you say such dark and horrible things!? You're better than this!]

Asahi leveled her a rather serious look, but then pulled back a step or two, [I don't need or want anyone freaking out. That'll just make everything worse. If you really want to help...don't ask me things right now and don't judge me. Just tell everyone on that damn SNS thing that I'm fine and not to speculate. It's none of their business. I was just...venting a little.] He explained vaguely, [Now I just want some space.]

Minako watched as the other woman continued to hover, following Asahi around the room as he
seemingly tried to carry-through with his plans to go to bed. However, the more she heckled him, even under the guise of concern for his well-being, the more the ballerina could tell he'd probably get no sleep in those conditions. She sighed and pushed off the door-frame, pushing the panel off of where she'd put her foot down as a door-stop, [Asahi, since we've already been through the ringer on all this, do you want to just camp out at my place for tonight?]

Both of them looked up and back at her, each one wondering WHY in their own ways.

She deadpanned them back, but then sharply turned her head, pushing the door even further open, [I don't have all night! I'm tired, too! It's been a long weekend and there's still tomorrow's Exhibition to deal with!]

Asahi blinked at her in stunned surprise, but his body moved on auto-pilot rather quickly, grabbing up his gear bag before running him into the bathroom for his toiletries, and then out the door again, moving with the efficiency of a soldier. He paused only once he was outside again, and looked back in, [Coach, I'll see you at Exhibition practice in the morning. Please tell SNS what I said.] He bowed towards her, then rushed out of sight before they could argue.

Minako waved and let the door close, leaving the stunned woman behind inside the hotel room. She quickly hopped to catch up, barely making it as Asahi was hitting the button for the elevator to come back. Thankfully, the carriage they'd come up in had never left, and the doors opened immediately. The athlete quickly went in and leaned against the nearest wall, poking at the button for the Lobby level, and exhaled a sigh.

"...She's a good coach...but she tries too much to be motherly sometimes." He complained quietly, "Maybe it works for other people, but to me it just feels suffocating."

"I can see why." Minako agreed, "Swaddling someone who's claustrophobic will just make the panic more intense."

"Yeah..."

The elevator moved down in silence for a few more seconds, pausing on another floor to open the doors, though there was no one outside to board.

Asahi hit the Close Door button and their journey continued, and he lowered his eyes to the baseboards. The cogs were continuing to turn in his mind, even as the doors opened again to release them back into the world. Minako didn't press him for more as they traversed the public domain, even after they were outside again and the few minutes of perceived solitude they shared. It wasn't until the doors closed on her hotel room again that either of them said another word.

The skater set his bag on the slightly-messy-but-otherwise-untouched twin bed that he'd been sitting on during his earlier ‘education.’ He stepped back to push the nearby night-stand out of the way, and then reached for the metal bed-frame under the mattress, pulling it back towards himself until a 3-foot gap had been established between the twins. That done, he turned around and sat on the edge of it, looking out through the corner windows to see the slow trickle of snowflakes starting to pass by outside. He turned his head slightly back over one shoulder, enough to establish that he was speaking to Minako and not just the room, "Maybe she'd feel better if she knew how much less likely I am to do something tonight than I was yesterday after the SP..." He admitted darkly.

"It makes me feel better...in a way..." Minako added, hanging up her jacket for the third time, "But in another, I kind of feel like we dodged a bullet, if that's how it is."

He nodded and leaned forward against his knees again, "Yesterday night, after Yuri caught me in the
changing room... The fight we had, the things I said to him...by the time it entered my head to kiss him, I had partly resigned myself to the idea that I wouldn't be coming back anyway. I was pretty-well convinced that my last act on this earth would be to finally kiss the person I loved from...so far back. Knowing he would tell Viktor, and the fall-out I could expect from that...I didn't plan to be around for it."

"What changed your mind?"

He thought for a moment before shrugging and recoiling into himself a little, "It turns out...one-sided kisses are pretty awful." He explained quietly, "It started to sink in how I had to hold him down...hold him still, just so I could get what I wanted, and it started to eat me up. I didn't want to leave - this world, or this competition - without trying to tell him how sorry I was. Thinking about what I'd done from an outside perspective...and maybe it only hit me because time had passed, and I was thinking back on it after the fact..." He lifted his grey-brown eyes to the snow again, "The selfish urge I'd had before to take what I wanted...only to come to the sad realization that what I wanted was wasn't more important than what he wanted... I couldn't stand to think that my last act on this earth would be to do that sort of thing to someone I genuinely cared about. That's not me. That's not something I would ever do in my right mind." He turned slightly where he sat, bringing a knee up against the edge of the bed to look at the woman watching from behind him, "What I did can never be undone... So I want to do everything I can to prove to Yuri...to the both of them...that the person I really am is different from the monster I was in that moment. It doesn't just end with an apology. Words are just noises, after all. ...In martial arts, every action we do is merely primed with a sound, but if the action that follows is weak, then the noise uttered before that is worthless. The things that you and Viktor told me...prove that I have a lot of things to do before I can be a better person. The apology I give will merely prime the actions I take later on."

Minako's face was practically leaking from a comical rivers of tears flowing from her eyes, and she whimpered pitifully from her side of the room, "...Asahi..."

He blanched a little, "Ahhhhh...sorry...?"

She buried her eyes against the crook of one arm, "IwanttohugyouforthatbutIdon'tknowifyou'llletmeeee..."

The skater gave a nervous half-smile, mostly out of uncertainty for it all, "Err...you...can if you want...?"

The emotional ballerina practically flew across the room, glomping down on him tightly, "You'regoingtobejustfine!"

Mikhail rolled his phone over in his hands, checking the screen every few turns for the incoming message he'd been waiting for. Though only Nikkita sat next to him where they'd returned to the stands, both Viktoria and Konstantin were staring at him from further down, each one wondering how much longer the man would have to be that way.

"Ping~"

His phone nearly launched out of his hands, but Mikhail grabbed it quickly and looked, seeing that merciful text from his lady love, [I'm back, I'm in bed, and I'm going to sleep. Wish Yura luck for me if he hasn't already gone out. I'll find a recording of it in the morning. Night hun.]

He slouched dramatically, nearly sliding off the end of his seat as he sighed loudly, but then pushed
back up and typed his reply, [Ok great, and I will. Goodnight.]  
Nikki shook her head at her father, but smiled anyway, returning to her own phone, [Okay he heard back, so he'll actually be able to watch you now.]  
Yurio glowered at his phone from where he was sitting in the prep area, legs splayed out where he was stretching. The phone was face-up on his mat, but when he saw the message, he leaned down into a split with his elbows on the ground, and tippy-tapped a reply with just his fingertips, [I was mostly worried he'd cause another scene trying to get out of his seat again, but I guess it's cool if he actually watches me, too.]  
[haha ikr?]  
[Oh, maybe you'll be happy to know this, but...Yuri and Victor are watching a LiveStream of this event. They told me they'd watch through the medaling ceremony.]  
Yurio raised his head a little bit as he read that note, but then simply huffed to himself as he started typing again.  
[Yuratchka, it's almost your turn. Better get your skates on.] Yakov told him from nearby. Lilia was next to him, and they were both looking at a monitor of the current skater's show.  
"Da." He answered, hitting Send and pushing up to sit normally.  
In the audience, Nikki read the answer, and grinned mischievously before turning the screen dark to put her phone away.  

While the much-anticipated final skater was being waited on, the Nikiforov household allowed themselves a few idle indulgences as they passed the time. While Viktor's left arm rested happily against his partner's chest, their fingers laced together there, their right hands were a bit more lively. Though moving slowly, they wove and turned their fingers around one another, gently caressing soft skin as they moved, barely touching. Each turn or change in angle offered new places for the other to find, fingertips gliding deftly over each gold band before moving off again, never completely stopping.  
"Oh look, there he finally is-" Yuri saw, nudging his face towards the left side of the screen.  
The skater in the rink was taking his final bow, moving off towards the kiss and cry, while Yurio was getting ready to take his place on the ice. His Team Russia jacket came off, and he took a quick *swish* of water while he listened quietly to some last-second advice from his coach and choreographer. He looked calm and ready.  
[The score for Magnus Orlovis...167.25, with a total score of 253.91. He is in 12th place.]  
The meager audience cheered, and the athlete returned to the prep area, leaving their last athlete on rink-side...who seemed to be making a phone-call for some reason.  
[The final skater for the Russian National Championship Men's Singles Free Skate...representing the St. Petersburg Skate Club...Yuri...Plisetsky!]  
Yuri's phone rung on the kotatsu, startling him enough to jump, but it wasn't a surprise to see whose name had come up as the person calling him.  

On the television screen, Yurio had kicked off his blade guards and slipped onto the ice...still holding
his phone.

Viktor just thought it was funny, laughing even as he suggested his partner answer.

Doing so, Yuri brought the phone up to his chest and set it to Speaker, "Hey."

"Hey katsudon. Word is, you and Viktor are watching right now." The teen quipped, "Any truth to that?"

"Might be some." Yuri teased, "Depends who's asking."

Out of nowhere, the blonde suddenly yelled at the entire audience, "Ugadajte kto s nami na linii!?" [Guess who's on the phone with us?]

"Oh he didn't," Yuri looked on in disbelief, "What are you doing!?"

The crowd seemed to catch on pretty quick, chanting Viktor, Viktor, Viktor... with the odd Viktuuri thrown in for good measure. Just as the fans had promised, they had their scoreboards out showing the pair's results from Japanese Nationals, and their corresponding medals.

"Ty absoljutno prav, èto Viktor i Yuri!" [That's exactly right, it's Viktor and Yuri!] Yurio confirmed, much to the audience's cheering, "Horošo, gde kamera?" [Okay, so where is the camera?] He asked then, mostly to the phone, and started pointing a finger around the audience, rotating slowly as he moved, "Tell me when."

"Uhhhh...more behind you..." Yuri answered, "Keep going, keep going...there! Just lower your hand a little bit...it's someone sitting straight ahead!"

"Ty!" [You!] Yurio barked, causing someone to suddenly shriek, "Egovy že ego glaza!" [You are his eyes!]

The LiveStream suddenly shuddered, and the camera flipped around, showing an extreme close-up of some frantic fan's face, [Holy shit Viktor and Yuri are on my Stream!? AHHH!] Viktor whined sarcastically, "Tell the guy to put his camera back so we can see!"

"Rasslab šja, rasslab šja..." [Relax, relax...] Yurio called, then just laughed, pointing again at the LiveStreamer in the stands, "Udeljàt’prìstàl’noe vnìmanie. Ùžìn, ona budet uvidet’moju pobedu." [Pay close attention. Tonight, they will watch me win Gold.] The audience roared as well as it could, given its thin numbers, but the Russian Tiger seemed pleased either way. He quickly slid back to rink-side and handed off his phone, but no sooner did that happen, that the audience started calling out their well-wishes for Viktor's troubled ankle.

Yakov heard it rather quickly, and his brow furrowed under his hat's brim, [Yuratchka, what are they talking about? What's wrong with Vitya's ankle?]

[He slipped, like the dumbass he is. Stepped onto the ice with his blade-guards still on.]

[I see.] Yurio looked on for another half second...before realizing that he should run, and fled across the ice towards center.

"VIKTOR NIKIFOROV I TOLD YOU TO BE MORE CAREFUL WITH YOUR DAMN LEGS! YOU DIDN'T LISTEN TO ME ALL THIS SEASON WITH YOUR 'EVOKE'
PROGRAM AND NOW YOU CAN'T SKATE!? IDIOT!"

Both Yuri and Viktor were blasted back against the couch to hear the elder coach's consternation.
"...Would it be weird if I said I had a really bad case of déjà vu right now?" Yuri sighed, watching the podium celebration as Yurio claimed his Gold, just like he'd said he would. There was an indignant look on the skater's face as he rose back up from the bow and hand-shake, as though simultaneously proud of his achievement, but at the same time, repulsed by it.

"What would it be for?" Viktor wondered.

Yuri had sat upright since nearly the start of the Russian Tiger's program, cradling the sleepy Akita in his arms at first, then settled it down to his lap, and the blanket covering his legs. Viktor had taken it upon himself to make the most of the opportunity, letting his soft, warm hands rub gently across his partner's bare back; a light squeeze of fingers against the man's shoulders, kneading at skin and muscle as those hands worked their way down.

"...Nationals last year." Yuri answered reluctantly, "I remember all the old conversations we had in Nagano, about how you felt alone at the top, even back home...how it made you sad that people would seemingly give up when they saw you coming...and how I was starting to feel that same way. I don't know that Yurio would ever admit it, but there has to be some loneliness there already. He's only 16 and he's miles above the next best skater..."

"There are bound to be occasions where there's just a drought of exceptional talent from any given place." The Russian pointed out, "Stepping out of Russia and Japan, there's some countries where there just aren't any figure skaters. Little places, or those with no history of winter sports, will sometimes have to band together for a Regional competition because there just aren't enough people to make a single National event."

"Regionals..." The younger man huffed and shook his head before lowering it slightly, looking down at Jiro, who looked back up at him briefly. He felt his partner's hands flatten against his back to start making their way up again, rubbing at his sides as they went, "...I remember the Chugoku, Shikoku, and Kyushu Championship...how excited you were to debut as my coach, and how nervous I was to debut as your first student...then, in spite of the mistakes, how proud I was...standing on the top of that little podium, 1st place winner in a competition of four..."

"I recall that you scored pretty well though. Even Morooka was impressed."

"Yeah..."

Tired blue eyes looked at the time, seeing 1:58am cascade to 1:59am. The silver legend yawned and stretched, but just as he was about to unwind from his tension, he felt Yuri turning around where he sat. Eyes then watched as Jiro was set on the floor to trot away, and a pair of hands settled down to press a wrist against each side of his waist. Though only slightly, Yuri pressed his knees under the Russian's thighs where they still parted around him, blanket barely hanging onto his thin frame. He hesitated for a moment, but then lifted his right hand, setting it on his partner's skin and sliding it from stomach to collar-bone, then down again. There was a slight flush fading into his cheeks, but he looked straight-on anyway, "...You want to go again?"

"...To Regionals...?" Viktor asked, stupefied by the early hour.
"No!" Yuri blanched, laughing piteously as he half-dropped down from the absurdity of the question. He scooted forward then, and pulled those legs up against his waist as he went, both hands sliding past the man's shoulders to lace fingers together behind that silver head, "Is this more clear?"

Viktor smiled innocently, but his hands came up to press lightly around his husband's ribs, sliding down past his waist, moving around to lace his own fingers together above his partner's lower back, "I want to hear you say it..."

"...I wanna make-out again before we go to sleep..."

The silver Russian nosed his husband's lips, purring the words quietly, "My my, you're thirsty tonight...did you put anything extra in the wine, my love?"

Yuri leaned down to press a cheek against his spouse's, whispering words against the man's ear, "Maybe I just like how it feels when you're inside me."

Even Viktor's face went red then, but he smirked anyway, giving a half-lidded look to his partner as the man pulled back again. "Wow~!"

The younger man took that as his invitation to get closer, lowering down for a kiss as he brought one knee up at a time to slide past his partner's inner thighs. He perched the curve of his shins and ankles over those legs to keep them parted under himself, and settled down directly into the man's lap for the start of his fun.

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As the Megasport Arena started to empty, Yurio suddenly felt a weird pit in his stomach. One he'd known was there for a while, but that he'd chosen to ignore for as long as humanly possible. He gathered up his gear bags and waited for Georgi and Mila to get their things as well, standing near Yakov, gleaning his reflection in the gold shine of his medal. He heard the odd congratulatory words from other athletes and staff as they went by, but the Russian Tiger didn't pay much attention. The pit had taken hold of it.

[Yuratchka.] Yakov's voice suddenly interrupted the teen's train of thought, and he jerked in surprise, but kept his cool, looking up, [Looks like your ride is here.] The coach thumbed back towards the exit, towards the Rozovskys and their titan attaché.

Yurio felt even more nervous then, and he turned his eyes up to the older man, [...]I think I'm ready to tell her.]

"Huh?" Yakov gave him a confused look, but the dawn of realization was quick to follow, and he nodded. He turned slightly and looked towards the former Prima, [Lilia, Yuri needs to tell you something.]

Off-green eyes went from the coach to the skater, but Lilia didn't seem at all troubled by those words, [What is it?]?

Yurio held his ground, [After Nationals, I'm moving to Hasetsu.] He said plainly, swallowing nervously at the end of it as he waited for his choreographer's reaction. He could hear Mila and Georgi tuning in, but neither said anything, [This is as far as I can go on my own.] He went on, sending the desire for an explanation even if no one asked him for one, [You asked me once to kill my former self, so my new self could be born from the ashes...and I think I did that well enough with my skating. But...outside of that, outside the rink...my past life is still alive, clinging to every second
of familiarity that it can before everything it knows...knew...changes forever. I can feel it...dying inside me every day...little by little... I guess I just didn't want to be alone when it finally passed.]

The ballerina lifted her head from the athlete in front of her, to the group watching nervously just beyond the doors. Taking it like a professional though, she looked back down at the short-statured skater, [Hasetsu. So Viktor Nikiforov will be your coach after all.] She said, more as a statement than a question.

[He's only agreed to be my choreographer.] He corrected.

Even Yakov raised a brow at that, [Then...?] Lilia wondered.

[You don't know her...] Yurio tried to explain, [But she used to be a ballerina, just like you. I don't know about her being a Prima before, but she won some prestigious ballet award in the past.]

[Your new coach is a former ballerina...?] The two elders asked in unison, only to balk a little, realizing they were trying to finish each other's sentences.

Yakov shook his head, [Has she ever coached a skater before?]

[No. She can't even skate.] The Tiger gave a meager laugh before turning his head down.

Lilia actually smiled at that, [Well...at least he replaced me with someone credentialed.] She crossed her arms and looked to the older man standing next to her, [Can't say the same for you though.]

The coach grimaced, feeling another rage-lecture coming on, and he gripped the top of his hat to hold it in place, [...Why wouldn't Vitya be your coach, too?]

[A bunch of reasons.] Yurio started backing up as he answered, [Mostly cuz he doesn't think he can manage coaching Katsudon and working on his own stuff if he takes me on, too...]

[So when he's retired?]

[I think he intends to consider it later on, yeah...]

That seemed to calm Yakov down a little, and he let go of his hat, taking a deep breath before looking back at the teen, [Maybe this will be a good year for you to take that break you've been worried about.]

Yurio scoffed at that, [The way things are, I'll make it to the end of the season before any growth spurts put me out of commission...and if nothing happens before the next season starts, I'll resign myself to the idea that I'll be this size forever.]

The elder coach just leveled him a look, mentally suggesting the teen has entirely missed the point. He shrugged though and pat Yurio's shoulder, [Then I guess there's nothing more to say, beyond the hope that you find what you need out there. Maybe you'll come back to Russia one day.]

[Maybe.]

Night settled in like a thick blanket, smothering Osaka in darkness even as the snows fell. The room was quiet, save the soft breaths of the woman sleeping nearest to the wall. Asahi was having a hard time falling asleep though.
He'd close his eyes, only to find himself rolling over and 'waking himself up' again in the process, then repeating it as he flopped back to the original spot he'd been in. At one terrifying moment, he could feel his body going to sleep...leaving his mind behind and alert...until he was utterly paralyzed where he lay.

No, not this again...anything but this...

A weight settled on his side, like some other body was sitting on him there, and he struggled as hard as he could to make himself move. Even just the task of forcing his eyes open was hard, but slowly, little by little, he felt himself starting to manage a slight wiggle. The wiggle turned into a rocking motion, and all of a sudden, like a door giving way after being slammed enough times, he felt himself free of the motionless feeling, able to jerk his arms forward and wrench his head up off his pillow.

He caught his breath and looked around the room, checking the downy blanket where he'd felt the pressure, but seeing no abnormal indentation in it. He sighed and pushed the whole thing back with the sheets, and swung his legs out over the side of the bed.

It's been a long time since I had an episode of Sleep Paralysis...not since just after the accident. At least I didn't see anything fucked up this-

"Asahi..."

"...time...?"

He lifted his head to look around the room, but all he could see were the outlines of the furniture, and the shadows they cast. Nothing out of the ordinary. He turned his tired eyes back towards the window, looking at the soft glow of light coming in from outside. The gently falling snow was mesmerizing, and at least for the moment, watching it was comforting. Standing up from the edge of the mattress, Asahi moved back towards the green fabric of the corner couch, and sat down on it like before, crossing his legs as he looked through the wide crack in the curtain.

For a little while, he just watched the snow. In a weird way, it started to make him sleepy.

"...Asahi...!"

He jumped that time, looking around for the source of the voice, "...Who's there...!?"

"Did you already forget what I sound like?"

The nervous figure felt a gnawing sensation in his chest, hearing the sound coming from his right...though the only thing next to him was the glass and another curtain. He hesitantly reached for it, and started to pull it back...and there, just as he'd dreaded...and in a small way, hoped...was Riku, sitting on the reflection of the bench outside the window.

Asahi sighed, and let the curtain fall behind him, hiding the light from coming into the room to bother the woman who'd given him shelter from the bother of the crowd. He settled his elbows down on the edges of his knees and looked forward, "...You're just sitting in my reflection...you're not really there."

"That's a mean thing to say." Riku retorted, assuming the same position as the man inside, "I've been trying to reach out for so long, but you put me out of your head so fast, it's like you didn't want me around in the first pla-"

"That's not true!" Asahi cut him off, twisting around to stare at the figure, only to find him doing the exact same thing...and giving him quite the disappointed look through the glass, "...I've wanted you
around all this time, but knowing you couldn't be here was just...too hard. I couldn't do it." He went back to where he was a moment before, resting his elbows on his knees, and his strange reflection did the same, "Every shadow out the corner of my eye was you for so long...every car that passed was the one that hit us. I was having nightmares, if I dreamed at all...I'd even feel you next to me, only to look and remember that you weren't there."

"How long did that last?"

Asahi shuddered, "The first three weeks... Until I tried to go back to the rink, and people started asking about me, and then you...and I just couldn't take having to lie about it all. It was too raw. I told people so many times that we...we were just friends... I couldn't tell them how much it destroyed me that you were gone...so I started to believe the lie instead of resisting it."

Riku sighed and shook his head, "I guess I can't be that surprised. Your head and your heart are like adversarial forces, always fighting one another for dominance...your head won out in the end to protect you." He looked aside slightly towards the man inside, "How long has it even been...? I lost track."

"Almost 2 years to the day." Asahi answered. He hesitated for a few seconds, but then set his hands down against the couch and lifted himself up to turn around and face the window, able to see his partner's superimposition on his own reflection head-on, as Riku had done the exact same thing, "...I quit the Tokyo club officially about 2 months after you died... I couldn't stand to see the place without you in it, so I went back to Imari with my tail between my legs." He raised his right hand and set it on the glass, wishing he could feel the palm reaching back from the other side. He felt the knot growing in his throat again, and his eyes burned, "I've missed you so much, every single day... And I've hated myself for not saying anything..."

"Don't hate yourself."

"I kissed Yuri yesterday."

Riku leveled him a serious look through the glass, "Excuse you?"

Asahi cringed and bowed his head low, the hair at the crown of his head nearly pressing to the pane, "I'm sorry! I stopped thinking!" He pleaded, "Everything had settled down in my head after so much time, refusing to think about it, but then I saw him here...and all these memories started flooding back... The memory of you and how much it hurt to lose you, and how hard I'd fought to suppress it...only to find myself getting caught back up in all the shit you'd worked so hard to pull me away from."

"Where are you now, a competition?"

Asahi nodded.

"So you saw him on a Thursday and you made it one day before you were after his ass again? ASAIH SAITO, I SWEAR-"

"I'm sorry! And that's not really what happened...!" He insisted, pleading with the morphed reflection before him. Both hands came up to the glass then, pressed against it like the walls of a clear prison, and Riku matched it, looking back at him with a scorned look on his face, "Yuri locked me in a room with him and we got into a huge fight about everything! By the end of it, I was ready to throw myself off the top of the hotel, so I thought I'd take some comfort with me by kissing him before I left... But it was the worst thing I'd ever done, and then Yuri had a panic attack so bad that he passed out...all because of me... I didn't want to leave this world after causing so much pain... And
Yuri was right anyway..." He leaned forward and pressed his forehead to the glass, "This pain I'm holding onto...it's for you, not for him... All these thoughts I've put down at the back of my mind have come back to the front so hard and fast that I...got everything so confused...and did some horrible things to try and make it stop." Tears fell from his eyes, pattering against the synthetic fibers of the couch beneath his face, "I made others feel bad in an attempt to make myself feel better, and it was awful... I'm trying to make amends for it...but the more time goes on, the more I remember you again...and now you're here..."

"I came all this way only to hear you say you cheated on me."

Asahi trembled, hands and forehead sliding down the glass as his fingers curled into fists, "...I didn't... How could I...? I would never..."

"Asahi." Riku said firmly, "Look at me."

Red eyes came up, and looked into the reflection.

"How long am I going to have to wait for you to react?"

A confused look answered.

"You're finally starting to remember me again...but you're clawing desperately at the idea that you can stop yourself from grieving...because why?" The younger figure asked, staring forward with those empty eyes, "We were going to start telling people about us! We were two hours from that moment! You've extended it out long enough now, don't you think...?"

"...I told Yuri...and I told her..." Asahi nudged his head into the room, "...Even Yuri's partner kind-of knows..." He shook his head and lowered his face again, "I could've made it to that moment before because I had you with me, but now I'm all alone... I have no one to back me up..." The tears fell harder then, "I don't even have any way to prove what we were, what we had...except my word for it..."

"That's not even half-true." Riku scolded, "You used to get so mad at me for taking pictures all the time. How often did you tell me, 'How are we going to keep this a secret if you've got a million photos on that thing?'"

"Riku... Don't you see...?" Asahi wept, leaning forward again to press his bangs to the glass, "...Your phone was destroyed in the accident..."

"Was it? I don't know."

"Huh?" He lifted his head fully, staring straight into the reflection. He blinked in confusion, droplets falling away, "What are you saying...?"

"Who knows?" Riku shrugged as well as he could, given how his body was locked into Asahi's position, "...All I remember is looking up at you, and how much everything hurt... And I died..."

Asahi couldn't take his eyes away, "Riku..."

"Maybe it's not as hopeless as you think." The ghost offered, finding a smile despite his slowly-fading apparition, "And maybe you're not as alone as you think."

"Don't go...don't leave me again..." Asahi pleaded, hands clawing at the glass, his reflection doing the same and making him feel as though his partner was trying to claw through it, too. It only spurred
him on to bang on it with the side of his fist, "Riku please no!"

"You're not going to get to this side that way," Riku pointed out, "And I don't want you to try either."

"...You can't just leave me like this...!"

"Then I won't... I still have to leave, but..."

Asahi felt himself leaning forward, and the figure opposite him started to do the same, though in his distressed mind, he could've sworn the reflection started moving before he did. He curled his fingers against the glass again, imagining their fingers together, and pressed his face gently forward after that. The panel was cold, smooth, and flat...but for half a second, he let himself think it felt like his lost love.

When he opened his eyes again, Riku's image was gone, leaving him in the awkward position of pulling back from his own face against the glass. He fell off the back of the couch, barely able to catch an arm over the next section that came out from the L-shape in the corner, and looked up at the tall glass frame in front of him. Snow fell, barely glowing from the light of the streets below, and Asahi reached his free hand forward to touch his fingertips to the pane. They were his own fingers again, and it just made his heart hurt all the more.

...I was... just talking to myself this whole time...

His hand and arm dropped down to the couch-seat, slowly curling in towards him as he brought his other hand up to join it. His vision blurred as tears filled his eyes even more than before...and he lowered his face into his folded arms, and just cried.
Waking up in Hasetsu without a care in the world was like a dream. The coolness of the bedroom air, the sound of a small seaside town outside the walls, the sunlight that barely cracked through drawn curtains and wooden blinds...and the contrast to the dark, and warmth of blankets and bare skin.

Yuri was the first to rise, though it only lasted for the half a minute it took to reposition himself over his husband's back, and fell asleep again for another half hour. By the time consciousness poked at him again, he was on his side next to the Russian, one arm rather insistently wedged under the man's chest, the other draped over his pale back, and one leg curled over the back of his thighs. At some point Viktor had turned towards him as well, and Yuri thusly had his face mashed right up against the side of his spouse's chest. When his eyes finally opened, refusing to let him sleep for a minute longer, Yuri stretched his arms out and splayed his fingers before bringing them in for a tight cat-like hug around the larger body next to him. Fingers grazed the fluff of a third body just out of sight, and he made a meager attempt to scratch at the brown poodle, able to tell which pooch it was by just the texture of their fur. A moment later, he was aware of the much smaller bundle of fluff that had nestled above the blankets between Viktor's legs. That pup, he was able to reach for easily. He gently wiggled out from under his partner's arm to rest his head against the man's back, before lifting his hand forward to find the Akita's ears.

Jiro was awake immediately after that, lifting his head up suddenly and yelping in his meager surprised-puppy-whiney way, eyes barely open as he looked around. Once he realized the nudge that had woken him up was a friendly hand, he got up and lazily scrambled over the silver legend's thigh until he could drop down in the small gap made between the man's hip and Yuri's stomach. Despite the graceless flop, the puppy was content to go back to sleep there, and Yuri was happy to offer more body-rubs to ease him into slumber.

"...I wonder if we could get away with bringing you to Osaka?" He wondered quietly, barely breathing the sound of his words, "It'd be hard to smuggle Makkachin in, but you're still so tiny...plus, you were given to me by the JSF...I'm sure they'd be happy to see you again."

Viktor was barely awake by then, eyes only half-open where he was looking down at the top of his partner's head. He stayed quiet for a little while, content to just watch and listen, but the feeling of being watched eventually attracted those cherry-tinted brown eyes.

"...How long have you been awake...?" Yuri wondered with one of those easy 'good morning' smiles. He slid back up the sheets a little bit to look at his spouse evenly, curling his fingers around the man's shoulder, and he kissed lightly at the closest edge before settling down again, "Did I wake you up when I moved?"

Viktor closed his eyes and lightly turned his head back and forth, "No," He managed, twisting his frame just enough to lift his arm and reach it forward, draping it over the younger man's form to pull him closer and squish their faces together, "I think it was just getting to be that time."

"Mhmmm..." Yuri agreed, tilting his head just enough to turn the squish into a kiss. Given his much smaller stature, it was easy for him to get pinned under his husband's chest and arm as the man looked down at him from above, but there was a certain comfort to take from that. Viktor curled that same arm around and toyed with his raven hair, idly brushing a few of the ever-growing strands from his eyes, "I was thinking just now...about bringing Jiro with us back to Osaka today."
"Yeah?"

"Given what we're going back to, I considered that maybe it'd be a good way to check if the 'therapy dog' idea is even worth the trouble, or if Jiro's cut out for it. He was calm enough in the crowd when the JSF gave him to me, so..."

The Russian waited a moment, looking on with those half-sleepy blue eyes, but then nodded once, silver hair lowering enough to tease his partner's skin, "One of us will have to carry him practically everywhere, but... if that's what you want."

"You're not actually jealous, are you?..." Yuri wondered nervously, trying to soothe the man's potential nerves by stroking his thumb back and forth where he had his hand perched on the edge of the shoulder just above himself, "I don't mean it to be like that..."

Viktor shook his head, kissing the younger man's brow. "There's a teeny tiny part of me that feels like I failed a little bit, since you're considering adding this one thing to your defense arsenal... but I remind myself that Jiro is a puppy, and there are just some things that dogs do for us that people can't, so I understand. Makkachin was always the same for me. He was there by my side during some pretty lonely years."

"Yeah..." Yuri nodded, "He's an add-on, not a replacement or substitution. Besides, you'll always be the first one I go to when I'm feeling anxious." He added, lifting his head up just enough to nose at the Russian's cheek and ear, "Now we just have to worry about Makkachin being jealous."

"It's just for one night, so it should be okay."

The water in the shower-room was running at full-tilt as Yuri, clad in a thin bathrobe, descended th stairs with his pup to get to the main floor. Makkachin barreled down quickly and had his tail wagging as fast as a propeller blade, waiting by the food bowls. Yuri quickly fed the two famished dogs before sauntering down the hall to their 'Skating Memorabilia and Trophy Room,' and nudged the door open to spot the dress-forms within; some with costumes hung on them, others bare where the outfits were in Osaka. The room glimmered with gold and silver, plus the odd bronze here and there, with larger trophies on stands and shelves, including one of his own historical All Japan Championship cups, and two of Viktor's multitude of NHK Trophies.

*We'll have to make room for the monster he just won last night...*

His hand went out for the knob to the closet, and Yuri flicked the light-switch on to illuminate the small room, full with all of their historical costumes. He slid the coat-hangers around as he looked for the Exhibition garb he meant to wear later in the night, and started pulling a few out just for the sake of looking at them. He came upon one in particular that caught his interest, and brought one hand up to his chin in thought.

...I wonder if I could get away with it...?

Jiro started howling in the kitchen, or tried to anyway, and it caught Yuri's attention rather quickly. He rushed to pull the *two* costumes from the rack and departed the closet, and headed back to the main part of the house to find out what his pup was crying over. When he arrived, he found Jiro chest-down and looking under the fridge, about to back up to try another howl, only to spot his person coming up from the side, and abandoned the entire effort, wagging his tail and clumsily rushing towards him.
"Is there a bug under there?" Yuri wondered, rolling the two garment bags together before setting them aside on a nearby counter, "Or did a bit of kibble roll away?" The puppy grumble-whined at him, and he bent down to pick him up, "You want a treat instead?" Ears perked and Jiro tilted his head, making the man laugh quietly, "That's what I thought. Hang out and I'll make you something."

While Yuri arranged to make breakfast, Viktor finished cleaning-up on the second floor, rinsing and drying and getting himself dressed. It was a bit of a challenge though, and he hobbled slightly on the sore right ankle. For a moment, after sitting on the edge of the bed and bringing that foot up to rest on the opposite knee, he just rubbed the deep, angry feeling with his fingers.

**It's not the same sharp pain from yesterday... It's more like a really deep bruise now. Still hurts though.**

He sighed and dropped onto his back against the blankets, staring up at the ceiling.

*I guess it's for the best that Yuri benched me after all. If I tried to jump on this, or even just bear all my weight on it, it'd be a train-wreck.*

Makkachin suddenly appeared in the doorway, panting quietly and wagging his tail, looking on at his human before finally coming in to nose one hand.

The Russian lifted his head towards the poodle, and rolled onto his side, reaching forward to bring the dog closer into a hug at the edge of the bed, "You're going to be the man of the house at Yu- Topia like before." He explained, "But remember...*no rice-buns.*"

The quiet pant and tail-wagging continued.

Viktor pushed back up to sitting normally and reached for the ankle brace, pulling it over his sock with a sigh and a shake of his head.

By the time he'd made it carefully downstairs, the lower floor was full with the smell of coffee, grilled fish, rice, miso, and fried eggs. He watched from the stairs for a moment as his husband worked a spatula gently around the edge of a pan, and folded the circular egg-sheet over itself. He couldn't help but feel the urge to document the moment for posterity's sake, and quickly withdrew his phone, loading up Instagram in preparation of taking a picture.

Though Yuri heard him coming and turned to spot him, Viktor continued his casual stride over, kissing his husband's neck as his free arm went around him, the other raised high with the phone, "*Itadakimaaaaasu~!* (Let's eat! / Thanks for the food!)

Yuri lifted his face to the camera, and smiled as well as he could given the surprise, one hand still on the frying pan handle, the other on the spatula.

*Kli-kash!*

"This'll be great." Viktor mused, pulling back just enough to type his comments and post the image, "Plus it'll make it real easy to explain why you aren't at Exhibition practice right now."

"That's true." The younger figure agreed, turning his attention to the omelet briefly before giving it back to his spouse, "Hey."

"Hm?" The Russian lifted his eyes from his phone, but just found the man leaning towards him with a half-smirk. He quickly caught on and returned the gesture, holding in that kiss for a few moments before pulling back to nuzzle the man's nose, "*Mh...vkusno.*"
"Eh?" Yuri laughed in his confusion, turning to flip the eggs over, "I'm tasty this morning? I haven't brushed my teeth yet or anything..."

"The miso, my love."

"Oh right..." He blanched, looking at the chopsticks he'd used earlier to stir the thin broth.

"Did you find your outfit?" Viktor wondered as he moved off again.

"Mh."

"And you sent your music?"

"About 10 minutes ago, Viktor-kōchi."

The silver legend lifted his head as he sat at their small table, smiling, "Yoku yatta ne." (Good job.)

The return to Yu-Topia was made in haste, with neither skaters removing their shoes as they stood in the entrance hall. Viktor quickly tried to dust and wipe his poodle off so Makkachin could run freely inside while Yuri called out.

"Mooooom! We're here but we gotta goooo!"

"Yuuuri!" Hiroko called back, trotting out as quickly as she could from the common area, stopping just shy of the ledge to the lower shoes-allowed section of the doorway, "Vik-chan!" She noticed that her son was still holding Jiro inside his jacket, head poking out from the nearly-closed neck hole, "Isn't he staying?"

"We decided to smuggle him." Yuri answered with a childish grin, "It's just for tonight though. It'll be fine."

The short-statured woman tilted aside to gape at her silver in-law, noting rather easily that he was favoring one leg, "Vik-chan...what did you do?"

"Hah?" The Russian answered with an eye-twitch, lifting his head up from the dog in front of him. Makkachin was quick to wiggle away from him and scampered off into the resort, leaving Viktor to stand back up to his full height and make light of the situation, "It's nothing. It slipped out from under me. I'm fine."

"You're not even standing on it though!" She explained, "...Do you want a cane?"

Yuri nearly choked.

...Do you want a cane?...

...want a cane?...

...cane...?...

"...I can't deal with this..." Viktor whined, descending to the floor.

Though much larger than Hasetsu, Osaka was similar in its sea-side position. There were no gulls to
speak of in the dead of winter, but the usual noises of a busy port were floating through the air.

It wasn't the most awkward wake-up in history, but between the restless Asahi and the anxious Minako, there wasn't much to be said as they roused. Each of them took their turns in the bathroom getting ready, and departed the room without a word spoken. The skater wasn't sure if Minako was silent because she'd overheard him the night before, and wasn't about to ask. Minako herself was unsure how to respond to the fact that she had.

Asahi bundled up like he had when he'd first arrived, ski-goggles and scarf hiding everything that his hood didn't. They made it unnoticed into the lobby before the young man paused suddenly and turned around.

Minako blinked at him, but waited.

"Thanks..." He said hesitantly, then bowed towards her politely, "For letting me stay here overnight. It...helped."

The ballerina was skeptical, but nodded anyway, "I hope you got what you needed. You have my cell if you want to reach out."

Asahi nodded as well and rose back up, about to turn to leave...but paused again. He looked down in thought for a moment, but then shook it out, "Please don't tell anyone about the...stuff I said." He asked, "I'm sure I'll hear enough about what was said on SMS to last a lifetime...but I don't need or want people feeling sorry for me. What's in my head is my business. The only way others should know about it is if I tell them myself."

Minako bowed her head, "I understand." She raised it up again just as Asahi was starting to turn away, "Promise me something though."

"...Hn?"

"If I can convince Yuri and Viktor to come to the table...you'll come too?"

The athlete hesitated, mouth open and ready to give some generic excuse to avoid answering one way or another, but the hazy memory of the night before came to mind.

...We were going to start telling people about us! We were two hours from that moment! You've extended it out long enough now, don't you think...?

Asahi gripped at the straps of his backpack, but then nodded at the woman, "...Try not to make it feel like an ambush, at least."

"It won't be an ambush."

"Then... I'll come."

Minako watched as the skater turned on his heel and finally took his leave, departing into the cold morning and quickly jogging out of her line of sight. She couldn't help but feel uneasy though.

That weird conversation he had with himself last night... He said before that he saw Riku on the ice after his Free Skate...is he imagining it on purpose to torment himself, or is his guilty conscience causing him to hallucinate? This kid's put such a big monkey on his own shoulders...and he's built up such high walls. He barely let me get a peek inside before he shut the doors on me again.

She sighed and pulled her purse-strap up a bit higher, heading for the doors as well.
He's so terrified of letting people in because he's worried of all the myriad ways he could be hurt. I mean...he let Riku in and Riku died...so I can understand. Hmph...and Yuri thought he was alone...
Slower and more plodding than the shinkansen bullet-train from Fukuoka to Osaka, the meager 'normal' train from Hasetsu to Fukuoka still carried its cargo where it was meant to go. Seats lined the walls rather than jutting into the interior in 2-3 seat sectionals, leaving most of the middle wide open.

Not that Jiro was having a great time of it. The carriage still rocked too much for his liking.

Yuri picked him up and plopped him down on his lap. He sat sideways in his spot, one arm resting on the ledge of the window, right knee curled up on the seat where he settled the puppy to offer comfort, "Guess the floor isn't the best place for you, huh?"

The pup just grumbled and curled into a ball where he was, clearly unimpressed.

The carriage was sparsely populated that morning, with only about 5 other passengers occupying their shared space. None of them seemed that interested in the skaters though, and only two of them paid any mind whatsoever; a pair of foreign girls, likely tourists, who were waving a finger or two at the puppy, trying to get its attention.

Yuri just huffed a quiet laugh to himself as he kneaded his fingers between those two triangular ears, and leaned forward slightly towards his partner, "It's kind of strange for people to be paying no attention to us, right?"

"There's barely anyone here to pay attention to us." Viktor pointed out, playing somewhat forlornly with the thin leash in his hands as he watched the world pass by outside, barely faster than a car at highway cruising speed, "You're the only one between us who doesn't thrive on attention."

"I thrive on attention!" Yuri retorted with a huff, "Though only if it comes from you I guess." He raised his right arm and rested it along the top of the back-rest, fingers gently touching at his husband's shoulder where the man had pressed it against the back of his own spot. His other hand continued the pup-massage.

Viktor smiled for his affirmation, but then turned slightly where he sat, twisting his lower half around to face towards his partner like the rest of him did. He brought up his left knee into the seat, and stretched the right leg out as far as it could go, though keeping it pressed close to the base of their section of the bench to avoid anyone tripping. Attention went down then, focusing on the pup in his husband's lap just a few seconds before he found the younger man's own unfolded leg raising up to stretch forward, right across his thigh.

"Thanks for letting me bring him." Yuri said simply, giving Jiro the freedom to move if he wanted, corralled within a fence of legs, laps, and bench; the pup stayed where he was though, closing his eyes as though in meditation.

"I don't recall getting a say." Viktor teased, "But you're welcome anyway."

"Well, I mean...you could've objected, since you'll have to watch him sometimes while I skate."

"I mind only that I'm not getting to skate with you, not that I'm pup-sitting."

Yuri nodded to himself, but then just leaned his head to the side, pressing it to the glass of the window to his right. Just as he was about to say something else though, he felt a familiar vibration in
his jacket pocket, and pulled out his phone to see a nerve-wrackingly familiar number, "Ah Shimatta...it's our bosses."

"You say that, and I get nervous...but the fact that you can say that makes me giddy." Viktor laughed quietly, "I'm a vortex of confused emotions!"

"Yeah, me too..." Yuri sighed, hesitating to answer as he looked around the cabin, "I don't want to answer this on a train...it'd be rude...but it's the JSF...!"

"Answer! It's easier to ask forgiveness than permission."

Yuri just made a face at that as he clicked 'Accept,' and brought the phone up to his ear, "Mushi mushi." (Phone-call version of 'hello."

The silver legend watched and waited, listening to the unfamiliar words. There was a nervous mirth in his husband's tone, and a slight feint of a laugh, but it was easy to tell that it was becoming an uneasy conversation, especially when Yuri took on a more serious air. He even bowed to no one in the train car, as though out of habit, with a few mentions of 'moushi wake gozaimasen deshiita,' which even Viktor understood to be rather-formal apologies. It only lasted about a minute before Yuri let the phone down again, ending the conversation with a tap of his thumb against the red 'End Call' button, "...So?"

"They're mad at me for not being at Exhibition practice. I got a good scolding for being chosen as an Olympian, only to ditch on the pageantry of Closing Ceremonies." He explained, "Now I feel really bad for leaving... I mean, they knew I had to get my other outfit for my show tonight...I guess they just assumed someone in Hasetsu would bring it to me."

"That was, technically, a possibility..." Viktor agreed tepidly, "But-"

"I can't just ask someone in my family to abandon their duties at Yu-Topia to do a hand-delivery for me." Yuri interrupted, shaking his head and lowering it nervously, "It's not their responsibility to make sure I'm prepared for competition."

The Russian just kept on his uneasy smile, but nodded anyway.

"They also suggested you go home on your own to get it." The younger figure lifted his head, "I guess they think you're perfectly fine to go on missions alone just because of what the medic said in his report about your ankle."

Viktor blinked at that, "Well, technically I could've..." He said in a normal tone, "It just didn't come to mind before you suggested we both come home for the night."

"But-"

"I'm not helpless." The Russian interrupted that time, reaching one finger out to press against his partner's lips to keep him quiet, "I'm very mildly hurt, not crippled."

Yuri just made a face over the feeling of the finger, but then raised his own hand to nudge it away, "It's not that I think you're helpless. I think you could've done this for me just fine... The problem I had with the idea is that if you went to Hasetsu on your own, then that means I would've been on my own. We can debate on all the different times you could've gone and come back, but even the best case scenario leaves me alone with Asahi for a few hours."

Viktor stayed quiet.
"I told myself during my Free Program that I wasn't going to let him - or anyone else - ruin competitions for me anymore. I'm tired of giving away that much power to people. But...as long as things are the way they are, I don't want to face him by myself." Yuri went on, "Especially with all this weirdness with Minako-sensei hanging out with him."

"I could write a book on all the reasons why I'd lose my mind if you and Saito ended up alone together again somehow." Viktor agreed, reaching to pull his partner's hand down from where it was resting against the bench back-rest, feeling softly at those fingers and ring before simply cupping his hands around the whole of them, "I think he's harmless now, but...even at the medaling ceremony yesterday, leaving you with him at rink-side put a pit in my stomach. I don't think I've hopped up onto the podium so fast before. The ankle thing made it an easy excuse to hurry myself along, and let them call you out sooner than you would've been otherwise."

"Yeah..."

"Don't sweat the stuff about missing Exhibition practice though, my love." The silver legend went on, sneaking one hand forward to press a finger under his spouse's chin, lifting the man's face and eyes towards himself. He looked on into those favorite hazel eyes for a moment before leaning forward to offer a soothing kiss, hand moving up to curl around the younger man's neck, "We'll figure something out. Exhibition OCs are always pretty laid back, regardless. I mean, how much original choreography could they really plan for everyone to memorize on the morning-of anyway?"

The whole gaggle of Exhibition skaters was huffing and puffing on the rink-wall as the practice finally ended...minus two. The noted absence of the Men's Singles Olympians was like an eyesore in the otherwise complete group, leaving only one rather-conspicuous Olympic hopeful to stand as the lone Men's participant in the whole gathering. The Nikiforovs' truancy seemed like the lesser issue of the morning though. Eyeballs frequently turned towards the solitary Singles' skater, examining him at times, worrying at others.

It didn't escape Asahi's attention one bit that he was getting odd looks at times. A nervous flutter rushed through his core as he recalled what he'd seen being said about him on SNS overnight. He kept his head, and eyes, down throughout most of the practice session, and stayed far to the side by the end of it.

*It's making me crazy how I can feel their eyes on me. Why can't they all just mind their own business? Don't they know how obvious they're being!?*

[Alright, good practice everyone.] The event coordinator called, clapping her hands to get the group's attention again, [I've just been told that the final Olympic selection announcement will be made after the Exhibition, but before Closing Ceremonies.]

[Is that the committee's way of saying they still haven't picked?] One of the other skaters asked, trying to be funny, but not making anyone laugh.

[Who knows? I'm only passing on what I was just told.] The woman shrugged, tapping a toe-pick down on the ice, [At any rate, I'm done torturing you guys. Thanks for hunkering down with me to get this done for tonight. You should all scamper off so the ice can get resurfaced before the Pairs and Ice Free programs.]

[Yes ma'am.] They answered back, turning to sluggishly exit the rink.

Asahi followed after them, but quickly left on his own path once he was free from the doorway.
bottleneck. Blade-guards, jacket, gear-bag, all went with him swiftly out of sight, even from his management team.

Sayoko sighed as he passed, and next to her, Webber gave a disapproving look, getting more and more impatient with it all.

"Do you regret taking him on?" He wondered suddenly, though keeping his voice down.

Nagisa shook her head, but then hesitated, and nodded once, "There's a part of me that does, but only because I'm not used to coaching athletes in Seniors. I feel like I'm just part of the cheering section with him. Things were a lot different in Juniors." She admitted, stepping up to the rink wall as the Zamboni was entering from the far side, "Maybe I should go back...and do what I know..."

"Don't give up on him just yet." Webber suggested, patting the coach's shoulder as he started to move off, "What's happening now might be super annoying because he doesn't talk to us much, but we've been with him for a year and a half. This is the first time he's ever been difficult. I'm willing to wait it out...I'm hopeful this will end at some point."

"Then what about the next event? What about 4C and Worlds? It'll just happen again and again...and, God forbid he gets picked to go to the Games...it'll be nearly a month. We've almost been lucky that this has only been two days."

"We can make it to tomorrow morning, and see how his attitude changes after we leave."

"But all those dark things he said..."

The hapless choreographer could only shrug, "If he's not willing to talk to us, even after the meeting with Viktor yesterday...then there's nothing we can do but give him the space he said he wanted. For now, frustrating as it is, we can only watch him from a distance."

The arena's upper indoor levels were full of people waiting for the doors to the arena proper to open, loitering in the warmth of the heated building to avoid the cold outside. Like normal, people gathered into their small groups of friends to chat among themselves while they waited, save the odd singleton who waited alone.

Minako was one of those singletons.

Playing on her phone, waiting was still a chore, standing around while the event organizers gave the athletes a chance to leave without being mobbed. There were plenty of posts being made on skaters' pages though, in spite of the craziness of the competition...but two skaters in particular were rather oddly absent from most of the recent activity.

*The only thing I've seen about those two knuckle-heads has been the flood of content from Russian Nationals, where Yura had Viktor on the phone right before his Free Skate... Everyone lost their minds over Yakov scolding Viktor all the way from Moscow. Guess that was bound to happen though...*

She shook her head and kept scrolling, seeing a few fan pages commenting on the night's events in Asahi's regard.

*It's a pity that guy doesn't use social media at all. If he knew the outpouring of support he's getting, maybe he wouldn't feel so down.*
"I'm sure I'll hear enough about what was said on SMS to last a lifetime...but I don't need or want people feeling sorry for me."

Minako made a face at the memory of those words, even if they were from only a couple hours ago.

Well, maybe he wouldn't care either way...

"What do those people care!? I'm just a pretty face that dances for them. Should I really be that concerned with the opinions of people who will spend maybe 15 seconds writing out a fucking Tweet with a sadface emoji and then they're done!? They don't actually give a shit about me. They don't know anything about me!"

The ballerina sighed and went back to scrolling.

That guy is like a really messed up hybrid of both Yuri and Viktor's worst qualities and experiences. Lousy family support for his personal choices and interests, making him feel isolated and alone even when he's around people, has a hard time making or keeping friends...in that way, I guess he went the opposite direction Viktor did after his own experience. While Viktor internalized it all and became really social and outgoing, effectively rubbing the whole thing in his father's face, Asahi bent to the pressure and let the naysayers in his life lord over him. Viktor was able to salvage his situation and make the best of it, but Asahi never got that chance...and his Yuri-ish tendency of not caring what outsiders think makes him particularly vulnerable to loneliness.

She scrolled her thumb across the screen one more time then, and finally came across the one post that certain silver legend had made so far that day.

v-nikiforov
[Image: Viktor and Yuri smiling at the camera while breakfast cooks]
17,291 likes
v-nikiforov Had to make a small detour out of Osaka for the night, but it's turning out to be WELL worth it. Bummer that we're here to pick up @y-nikiforov's solo-Exhibition outfit, since he's benching me over the ankle thing, but it means we got to see the pups and sleep in our own bed! Always good! We're going to be heading back into town in about an hour. Looking forward to tonight! #AJCExhibition #Osaka #SkateHusbands #YuriIsBestHubby #AnkleThings

v-nikiforov Oh! And also congrats to @yuri-plisetsky for his #Gold in Moscow last night!

Minako's face went pale and her eye twitched...but suddenly all she could do was yell.

"YURI AND VIKTOR AREN'T EVEN IN THE CITY RIGHT NOW!? THOSE IDIOTS."

Aaaaaand everyone turned to gawk at her.
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED EIGHTY SIX

Jiro looked around the train platform while they waited for the bullet-train to Osaka. From his high vantage of the shoulder of his taller human, it was easy to look around the entire area, clear over the heads of nearly half the people around him. A few of those same people tried to get his attention just like the earlier tourists on the first train had, but he didn't pay them much attention. All he really cared about were the odd smells in the area, and the slow and gentle squeeze-rubs he got on his back where the silver human kept him in place.

"Oh look, there it comes." Yuri said abruptly, catching the pup's attention enough that he nudged his head under the Russian's chin to look at him, "I swear, these trains spoil us...I wish one would go to Hasetsu, too."

"Some day." Viktor mused, lifting his head enough to let the Akita under it, only to lower Jiro against his jacket a little so he could look on normally again, "I think my bigger concern right now is whether our son will make it to the end of the line without having an accident."

Yuri's cheeks flushed to hear those words, but he quickly shook it out once it settled in what the man had actually said, "Oh...yeah, that's a worry... We'll make sure he gets a break as soon as we get there. I'm sure he can hold it." He offered, hoisting the carry-bag's straps a bit higher on his shoulders as the train finally slowed and stopped before them.

The crowd gathered at the edge of the platform, but was careful to stand only on the edges of the doorway. They created a path for the disembarking passengers to follow so they could all get off quickly enough for the next group to get on before the train left again. The hustle to get aboard was intense once the doorway was clear, and everyone was swift to move forward, orderly, to get through and not be left behind.

The duo-plus-one found their seats on the left side of the carriage, a pair of chairs opposite a set of three at the very back. If traveling was something one could not skip, it ought to be comfortable, and the potential for anyone to kick the back of Viktor Nikiforov's chair was unacceptable. The tall man already suffered the indignity of having less leg-room than he was used to. Yuri would not steal the peace of a gentle ride from him, too.

With seats taken and Jiro settled on Viktor's lap by the window, they waited quietly for the train to begin moving again.

Quietly, until Yuri heard (and felt) the noise of his phone ringing in his coat pocket. He made a face and reached for it, feeling a twinge of nervousness as he dreaded the name that would display on his screen.

"JSF again?" Viktor wondered, "Maybe they have a solution for you missing practice."

"No..." Yuri sighed, "It's Minako-sensei." He twisted and tilted so he could rummage around in his other pockets, withdrawing an ear-bud cable to plug into the device, setting one into his left ear and offering the other for his partner to put into his right. Once they were both hooked up, Yuri pulled the conjoined part of the cable closer to himself so the mic would pick up his voice easier, "Hey."

"Yuri!" Minako harped, her voice a mix of worry and scolding, "Why aren't you in Osaka right now!? You missed Exhibition practice! You're an Olympian now!"
"I know, I know..." He answered, "The JSF higher-ups already called me out on it and scolded me. I can't do anything about it though. If I want to skate in the Exhibition at all, I need my solo-show outfit. I can't do Viktor's and my duet by myself."

"You couldn't just ask someone back home to get it for you...?"

"They're not my personal delivery service. This is our problem, not theirs."

"I could've gone back for you!"

Both skaters grimaced to hear it. The train started moving then, slowly shuffling out of the station but then quickly picking up its speed, the world a blur as it moved by.

"Minako-sensei..." Yuri started again, his voice taking on that 'you're in trouble but I don't want to sound mean' tone that he often used on his husband in the same circumstances, "You kind of made it a weird thing for us to want to talk to you yesterday. There's no chance we were going to just call and ask you to waste 9 hours of your life on a mission that was our responsibility anyway."

The ballerina went quiet for a moment, but eventually sighed and answered, "...Sorry."

"You want to explain what you were doing?"

Viktor turned his head to look out the window with their puppy, who was absolutely fascinated with the speed at which they were going. The Russian turned back slightly though when he felt the arm-rest between them being lifted, so Yuri could hook his leg over his own like he often did when they sat next to one another. One hand went down on the younger man's knee, giving it a gentle squeeze before going back to his sight-seeing with Jiro.

Minako wasted no time, "After I helped Viktor with the meeting, I had this weird feeling about Asahi that there was more going on than just what we saw on the surface." She started, "There were all these fragments of different stories about what was going on with him, what he'd been through, what he'd done...things that weren't adding up. I hadn't actually planned on any of what happened, but I ran into him during the Free Program and asked him to come watch with me. You guys actually ran right into him when you came up into the audience, but he took off before you recognized him."

"We did?" Viktor looked back again, seeing his partner give the same confused look back.

"What are you talking about?"

"That guy with his hood up." Minako explained, "The one that ran off after Viktor asked if you two were bothering him with your antics. That was Asahi."

"Oh." The two men blanched, deadpanning the back of the seat in front of them.

"I guess he went to go change or something because he came back after that, but wasn't in disguise anymore." Minako went on, "It's hard to figure out what that kid wants, or what he's thinking, but I'd told him earlier that he should watch your shows with me. I thought it would help him understand that Viktor is genuine...that his reputation and celebrity status don't define who he is as a person, or that it poorly motivates why he's with you. We went through that doubting and confused phase a long time ago...I didn't want it to confuse Asahi, too, so I tried to nip it in the bud before it could contaminate him."

Viktor just made a face and grumbled slightly.

Yuri sighed, "...Okay...fine...so you invited him to watch our skating. Did he get what you wanted
out of it?"

"He didn't seem to care much about Viktor's, but he really took a shining to yours." Minako said.

"Of course he would." The Russian whisper-mumbled.

The ballerina continued though, unknowing that Viktor was listening, "He felt horrible that the first half of your program was so rough. He blamed himself for it. He actually kind of jumped up when you did the quad Axel at the end...and he stuck around for at least part of your post-skate shenanigans."

"Okay?" Yuri said stiffly, "Is there a point to this?"

"You wanted the story. I'm telling it, but I'm not done yet." She answered curtly, "The thing is...I get now why you never talked about Asahi before. I get how you could say that you barely knew a thing about him even though you spent years training alongside him. He doesn't give a lot away and he doesn't react to things like most people do. But the thing is...I dug into him. I made him come back and talk to me after the event was done."

Viktor would've spat his drink out if he had one. He quickly leaned over to get closer to the mic held in front of his husband's chin, "You spent time alone with Asahi Saito after he assaulted Yuri!? Are you crazy!"

Minako deadpanned, staring at the wall where she'd sequestered herself away from the noise of the arena and more populated areas. She set her free hand on her hip and held the phone out in front of herself, "Don't you dare try to scold me for trying to do the right thing and reach out to this guy, Viktor! You're not the only ones who were hurting after everything went down, and you two completely abandoned him, even after everything else he said." She barked back, only then putting the phone to her ear normally again, "Look. Asahi made a big mistake, one that was committed in a moment of extreme emotional duress and hopelessness. If you knew even 10% of the things I do right now, maybe you could forgive him for fucking up. He never wanted to hurt Yuri, and the fact that he did is eating him alive. But what you guys refuse to see, probably because it would steal away your justification for still being mad at him, is that he regrets what happened and wants to make it right again. He's already got so much else going on...the last thing he wants is to be a source of pain for anyone."

Yuri made a face at that, but then slightly turned towards his partner.

Viktor looked back, seeing that expression in those brown eyes, and he growled, "No, no, no. Saito really messed up with this one. I don't have to care what else he's going through. He lost the chance of getting my attention the second he put his hands on my husband."

"Viktor!"

Minako sighed, "The only thing that distinguishes you from Asahi right now is the choice you made at the same crossroads." She said quietly, more calmly than before, "Viktor...when you were faced with the decision of following your heart or bowing to the will of those around you...you chose yourself. Asahi chose them. He is exactly what you would've been if you had let your father and family choose your destiny on your behalf. Asahi just got lucky in that his family didn't apparently care about the skating part of it. But he's just...he's so shattered and broken by everything. His heart and soul are a ruin. He has no friends, no support, no one to talk to...he's so hopelessly isolated that all he has are the voices in his own head. He won't even talk to his coach, someone he's known longer than Yuri. No one but me, really, has any idea how much the last two years have
crushed him down into a shadow of himself. The skating was all he had, and he's ready to give that up too because of what's happening between you three."

"You don't even really know him. How can anyone really be sure that he isn't just putting on some show?" Viktor argued, "This could all be an act."

The ballerina hesitated a moment, but then steeled herself and drew a breath, "There were some things said last night that, unfortunately, got out to the public, and social media apparently blew up about it. When Asahi and I were done talking about things, and I walked him back to his room, his coach threw a fit about it and I could tell it would just make things worse to leave him there...so I invited him to stay in my room instead."

"**Mina-**"

"**SHUT YOUR MOUTHS AND LISTEN, BOTH OF YOU.**" She snapped, hearing the whines of protest on the other end but ignoring them, "It was the middle of the damn night when I was convinced that he's being honest with me about all of this. I was asleep. He had no reason to believe I was awake and listening, and I'm not even sure how much of it I heard, but it was enough to know that he means all this."

The duo looked at one another, but resigned to listen and settled down into their seats again. Viktor kept one hand on the Akita for balance and the other on his partner's knee for support.

"At some point in the night, Asahi woke up. I guess he went to meditate again or something...he'd done so earlier on, before we'd gone back to his room. By then, I could tell that he was using the meditation process to push down his feelings about everything...to put them down and lock them away where they can't hurt him. But...something happened, and this time, he couldn't put them out of his mind again. He was hallucinating his dead partner...and had this whole conversation with him about how things have turned out this weekend. He mentioned the fight he had with Yuri, and how much it's killing him that you reacted so severely to how it ended. If ever there was someone who personified what it was like to be Murphy's Law...this guy is it. Ever since Riku Itô's death, and including it, Asahi has experienced **nothing** but pain and suffering. Yuri was the first and only thing that turned up that made him happy, even if only for a minute..."

Yuri's brow furrowed as guilt started to settle in over those words.

"The fact that he hurt you so badly was just...the straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak." Minako went on, "All the joy, and love, and trust that Asahi once had, has been taken away from him. He's never even gotten the chance to really mourn the loss of his partner because he was so scared to admit that's what Riku was to him in the first place...and even 2 years later, the three of us are technically the only ones who know about it. He's holding onto a level of grief and guilt that I have never seen or heard of in all my years on this earth. I think...giving him a chance to explain even a little bit of what's happening to him, has started to help him explore all these things that he's been holding in and keeping secret."

Yuri curled his fingers around his partner's hand where it rested on his knee, looking up at the man, though Viktor was still being somewhat obstinate.

"I really think that if you guys would talk to him, and sort things out...it would be better for everyone." The woman went on, staring to pace the halls slowly, "He's more like the both of you than you know. He's like this...really screwy hybrid of both of you...with Viktor's lousy history and penchant for secrecy, and Yuri's crippling anxiety and social awkwardness...but with the added complication of **violently** losing the one person he ever let get close to him. You've both been able to heal each other over the last two years...I think you could help him, too."
Viktor grumbled again, gritting his teeth before speaking, "Saito knows about Yuri's panic attack because everyone knows about it. If he knew 10% of the stuff I saw, in private..." He shot the words back at her, but hesitated to go on, recalling the traumatic memory of seeing his husband's clawed-up back, the pink skin from the hot water, his terror of being touched, and the long talk they had about it afterwards. He shook his head to make them go away again, "...No one would be asking me to forgive this."

"I'm not saying you should forgive him just because I've asked it of you." Minako explained, leaning a shoulder against one of the wood-paneled pillars in the secluded hall, "I'm asking you to talk to him. If you forgive him, or if you don't...let it be because of what you and him say to one another, not because I asked. I'm just an arbiter here...I think it'd only be fair to let him speak for himself, directly to you guys."

"...Is he even willing?" Yuri wondered, "Did you ask him this already?"

"I did. It's the only reason I'm asking you guys to consider it, because I already know he would go if you agreed."

"How would we even arrange this kind of thing...?" Yuri asked, "The official hotel has already been kind-of contaminated by the memory of the meeting...the skating arena wouldn't be a good place either because it's too public..."

"How close are you two to being back in Osaka?"

"We just started out of Fukuoka, so about three hours."

"Okay..." Minako rubbed her chin with a finger, "Let me figure out the details. There's still time. I'll text you the details once I've talked it over with Asahi."

"...Sure..." The younger figure said nervously. He turned his eyes quickly when he felt a cold-wet feeling on his fingers, then warm-wet, and spotted Jiro licking them where he had tightly gripped the Russian's pale hand. He let himself relax a little and raised that hand to rub the puppy's head, "...Yeah, okay. We'll think about it. Go ahead and sort things out on that end...we'll probably have an answer for you by the time you think of a place and talk to him about it."

"Hai."

"Bye for now." Yuri finished, clicking out of the call before leaning his head back against the seat. He drew a deep breath and let out a long sigh before turning to rest his head against his spouse's shoulder, "...So...thoughts...?"

"I'm not convinced." Viktor said sharply, "But I feel a bit outnumbered here, too."

"It's not up to her or Asahi what happens next." Yuri explained, "It's up to us, so it's a 50/50 thing. I say yes, but 50% is not a passing grade."

"It's more like 51 to 49." The Russian said gruffly, "You're a veteran of the Asahi Saito Saga, so you kind of have seniority."

"I don't see it that way...and I won't go if you don't want to talk to him. I'm just considering what this would to do future competitions. If what Minako-sensei is true...he may quit even if he gets picked for PyeongChange, simply because of the fact that he has to see us again so many times and how stressful it all will no-doubt be."

"And I'm okay with that."
"Viktor..." Yuri sighed, "You're not even giving him a chance."

The silver legend tilted his head slightly, rubbing his cheek against the gelled-back slick of black hair beside him, "If you could feel how much pain I was in that whole time I was trying to sort you out after the Short Program..."

"You're holding onto it like he does." The younger figure explained, "Are you mad because Minako-sensei suggested that you and him are so similar?"

"I'm mad because I'm worried." He explained, "Right now, if we do nothing, then the Exhibition might go off without a hitch. If we do this though..."

"It's a risk." Yuri agreed, "But, nothing ventured, nothing gained. We have a chance to make this work, too. If we go, and it looks like we won't be getting anywhere with things...then we can always leave before it gets bad. At least then, we can't say we didn't try."

Viktor grit his teeth again and grumbled a bit under his breath, but then shook his head and sighed, stroking his thumb back and forth over his husband's hand, "...If we go, we do things my way."

"What's your way?"

"I talk to him alone first."

"He might think that's an ambush and bottle up again."

"We won't be far away from you and Minako." The Russian explained, "I just want one minute to lay down the ground-rules for how things will go. If he agrees, then I'll wave you over, if not...I'll come back on my own and we'll go."

"So you're agreeing to speak to him."

"In stages."

Yuri thought on it for a moment, but then nodded, "Alright...

"And one other thing." Viktor added suddenly, forcing his partner to look up at him, "I want to know what's being said online. If whatever was said last night was enough to get the fans riled up, then I want to know what it was."

"...Oh...okay." Yuri turned back to where his phone had been abandoned on his lap, and pulled it up again to unlock it, "...I'll find out."
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED EIGHTY SEVEN

The Osaka Municipal Naniwa Sports Center was a multi-level building with various athletic options inside, from the gym on the 7th floor, to the swimming pool on the 6th, all the way down through to the lowest level above parking, where the skating rink was situated. The first floor, level with the street and the first thing seen upon entry, was, for lack of better terms, a passing-through hall with a small open space for waiting on the elevator. The walls were a muted burgundy red on the right where the elevator doors were, and a greenish color on the left with tall windows overlooking the rink. Throughout the hall, there were thick blue pillars with white-board wraps around them for staff to post bulletins. The stairs going up and down were capped underneath with yellow.

It was, suffice it to say, a colorful place.

Viktor paused in the second doorway and looked around, one hand clasped lightly to where his partner's elbow stuck out, both of those arms and hands occupied with holding up their pup. Just down the hall, halfway to the opposite end where another door lead back outside, Minako spotted them, and stood up from the line of benches in front of the overlook windows. Though they were largely covered from tip to toe to avoid the winter bluster, with Yuri donning his Ravenclaw beanie and a scarf to cover most of the rest of his face, Viktor left his hair exposed. He pulled his scarf down just enough to reveal the lower half of his face, revealing something of a grimace as he stood and waited.

"...Hope she knows what she's doing, picking this place." Yuri commented dubiously as the woman approached, pulling his own scarf down, "Lots of people around."

"I hope this wasn't too far out of the way for you guys." She said, "I tried to pick something productive that was close." She suddenly noticed the Akita in her former student's arms, "...You brought Jiro with you?"

"Productive." Viktor grumbled protectively, looking around a little bit, "Sure."

The ballerina paused a few paces in front of them and crossed her arms, giving a defiant look, "You're treating him worse than your uncle."

The Russian's brow furrowed, and he looked from Minako to the man standing next to him, then back again, gesturing his free hand forward, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but am I the only one keeping score right now? I distinctly recall each of them doing things that, as far as I'm concerned, are nigh unforgivable."

"Asahi wants to apologize though," Yuri pointed out, "Your uncle seems less inclined at this point."

"That's a struggle for later," Minako interrupted, "And you don't have to forgive Asahi anyway. I'm only asking that you give him a chance to explain himself."

"I'm here, aren't I?"

Yuri shook his head lightly, but then sighed and set Jiro down onto the tile floor, keeping the leash wrapped around his wrist as the pup started sniffing around. He stepped in front of his partner, both hands going palms-down against the man's chest, and looked up into his eyes, "Settle down a little bit before you get yourself completely worked up. You do your best work when you have your head
in the game."

"This isn't a game to me."

"I know...!" The younger man protested, "Let me put it this way then...way back when we were still living in St. Petersburg, and you took off to go to your mother's funeral...I was left behind with nothing but Yurio and a head full of my worst fears about what would happened to you. Yurio pointed out to me that I was getting myself wound up about your problems, even though it didn't seem like you were all that worried about them yourself. He said it didn't make sense to feel that way...and he's right. This thing with Asahi...I'm ready to move on. I don't want you to keep stressing yourself out over it on my behalf."

The Russian gave a nervous look anyway, "This is my own grudge." He admitted stiffly.

"Even after all the stuff we read online earlier?"

"I'm not just going to let him off the hook because he wants to throw himself off a bridge somewhere." Viktor said curtly, "The problem between him and I has nothing to do with that stuff."

"Just be gentle with him, would you?" Minako pleaded, "This is supposed to be a talk, not a beat-down."

"I'm not going to attack him." The Russian grumbled, "Where is he? Let's get this over with."

The ballerina sighed and half-rolled her eyes, but then started walking back the way she came, nudging her head so the pair would follow. When they made it to the benches lining the overlook, they stopped, and looked through the glass to where Minako pointed at the ice. There, the same faceless, bundled-up figure from the audience at the previous night's Free Program was standing at rink-side, pulling guards onto his Revolution blades, "Since you said you wanted to go first...I told Asahi to sit in the stands when he was ready. Looks like he's heading up...so, you can go meet up with him whenever you're ready."

"How do I get in there?"

Minako turned around and pointed down the hall again, "There's some stairs that we passed as we came this way. They lead to the seating area in front of these windows."

"Fine." Viktor said simply, turning his eyes to the floor to make sure he didn't mistakenly kick Jiro as he stepped around. When he knew he was clear, he paused and extended his hands forward to his spouse, curling his fingers around them when he felt them in his palms, "I won't be mean unless he says something to deserve it."

"Don't go looking for things," Yuri commented, giving those hands a gentle squeeze before letting one go to reach it over his husband's shoulder, the other staying low just because of the leash attached to it. He hugged as tightly as he could with the one arm, pressing his face to his partner's neck, "Ganbatte ne. I love you."

Viktor had both arms around his husband's smaller frame, rocking the man slightly back and forth as he returned the hug, "I love you too. I'll try to make it quick."

Yuri nodded as he pulled back, but just as he saw his partner leaning for his parting kiss, he pulled his hand back and grabbed the beanie from his head. He looked at it for a moment, but then took it in both hands and motioned for the Russian lean his head down, to which Viktor obliged. Silver hair was carefully pressed down as the beanie was set into place, and Yuri straightened it out once it was on, "I have no doubt that people here will know who you are...so, try to be a bit inconspicuous. I
know it's against your nature to try and avoid attention, but in this case I think it's warranted."

"I don't disagree." The silver legend nodded, reaching his right hand up to straighten his spouse's messed-up hair, "I'm off." He said, tilting his head slightly to the right and leaning forward for his kiss. With that, he departed for the stairs pointed out to him earlier.

Yuri turned back to Minako for a moment, but spotted the bundled figure passing them by on the lower deck of the seating area, going all the way to the far side and taking a space in the 3rd of that section's 6 rows. Yuri moved around to the front of the bench behind the glass, and took a seat as well, keeping an eye as well as he could through the glare from the light outside. Minako took a spot next to him, and Jiro was soon to follow after, sniffing at the baseboards and under the seats.

On the entrance-side of the hall, Viktor had made his way to the doorway and pushed the panel open, hearing the loud noise of the populated rink rising up towards him like a wave. A hundred different pairs of skates all scratched at the ice as the mass moved around the rink in a big circle, following the inside edge of the wall. Young children shrieked as they fell, and adults around them did much the same. Many of them wore helmets for just such an occasion. More wore the rented black-and-white skates on offer at the kiosk on the lower level. Viktor surmised, even from his vantage, that the opening in the rink wall was under the seating area, as the entire rest of the rink wall was closed, with Plexiglas barriers going around the entire length. Markings within the ice noted that it was also used for hockey. For the moment though...it was family fun day and it was well used for that purpose.

The Russian took a moment to acquaint himself with the area, even noting another stairwell near where his target had taken a seat, going back up to the main hallway. There was a wider aisle at the upper edge of the seating area for him to walk the length of it, and he turned on a heel, though not without a slight pain in that ankle, to start limping his way over. He paused for a moment in front of the glass where his husband and furry child were watching, and pressed his hand to it for a second before moving on again. He stood at the top of the thin stairs that lead down the rows, and watched the figure for a little bit longer. Eventually though, he started making his way down, and passed the 3rd row entirely, side-stepping into the foot-space of the 2nd and standing there. The seats were poppy red, plastic, and had no arm-rests to divide them. The lighting above them dim, in stark contrast to the bright light of the outdoors. The silver legend drew a breath and finally took a seat in the first chair of the row, and brought his sore right ankle up to rest on top of his left knee. He wedged his hands into his pockets to keep them warm.

Behind the one-way glass of his snow-goggles, Asahi watched the man nervously.

*Why isn't he saying anything? Does he think I can't hear him? ...Should I take my hood off?*

Viktor listened quietly as the sound of a jacket moved around behind him, and he turned his head slightly...only enough to point out exactly who he was speaking to, though not enough to see the man...and finally spoke up, "I can't say that I understand what you're trying to get out of this, except maybe our appreciation for the effort, or maybe forgiveness..."

Asahi pulled the scarf down from his lower face, and the hood off his head. The goggles came off just as Viktor's one visible blue eye turned to gawk at him, and he stopped right where he was.

"But don't think that what's being said online is going to change anything here today." The older skater finished.

*Don't say anything...don't say anything...don't say anything yet...* Asahi pleaded with himself.

"Before I call Yuri out here...there's going to be some rules." Viktor went on, still staring, "First of
all, no matter where Yuri chooses to sit...you will not be sitting next to him. If he does so inadvertently by trying to be in the middle..." He thumbed to the seat directly behind himself, but then turned that hand to point at the other man, "...You will move. Second, we happen to have our new puppy with us today...he is here for Yuri's sake, not yours, so if he moves towards you, you will not touch him. If Yuri offers to let you hold him, politely refuse. Third, and finally...we're trying to be discrete, so if you yell at either of us like you did to Yuri after the Short Program...or if you break the other rules...we're leaving, and this will be the last time we speak. Understood?"

Asahi nodded once.

"Do you have anything to say before Yuri comes out here?" Viktor offered.

The younger figure swallowed nervously, but then nodded again, and stood up. He set the goggles down on the seat next to himself, then pressed both hands against the outside of his thighs, and bowed forward.

Yuri and Minako were both surprised to spot it, glancing back at each other briefly before watching to see how the scene continued.

Asahi stayed bent to 90, "...I...I'm deeply sorry for the trouble I've caused you. I know that nothing I say can ever atone for what I did to Yuri, and to you by extension...but I hope that after today I can begin to do the work necessary to show that I really do mean it. What I did was beyond horrible...and I really regret it."

Viktor watched the man carefully, but for the moment, said nothing.

Asahi stayed in the bow, waiting for some sign that his words had been accepted, even if not responded to...but it was hard to gage while he was staring at the concrete under his feet.

"...Well, you're right about that at least..." The Russian suddenly said, relieving some tension and allowing the younger man to lift his head a little. Viktor twisted in his spot and waved his hand towards the pair in the upper hall, then pointed at the closer door and watched them start to head for it before turning back to Asahi, "...Words are meaningless without something to back them up."

The sound of the metal door being pushed open echoed above them, followed by the footsteps of the two people who were coming down towards them. True to Viktor's prediction, Yuri did take the space directly behind his partner, though he sat on the shockingly-clean ground in front of the seat so he'd be on the same level as Jiro, and could easily reach his arm across to the lower row. He settled his left arm there across his husband's chest, and Viktor lifted his left hand to clasp around the one pressed against him, rubbing his thumb a few times on a few fingers. Asahi gathered his ski-goggles up and climbed down to the 2nd row, sitting two places over from the Russian, and unfortunately in the spot that Minako had meant to take. She, instead, went up to the 3rd row and occupied the seat that had already been warmed, and reached over to pat the puppy on his head as he started to explore the new space, sniffing at the floor and the underside of the red chairs nearby.

Yuri leaned towards his partner's left ear, sitting sideways against his knees, "So where do we even start...?"

"Hard to say. I guess we can let him start."

"Did he say something while bowing...?"

"He said he was sorry to me and to us, and wanted to work towards a solution."

"Well that's good, right?"
"It's a starting point."

Yuri nodded and raised his head back up again, looking nervously in his former friend's direction, but wasn't sure if he should say anything just yet. The awkward silence made things tense, though it was broken up when Jiro stood his front paws on Yuri's knees and whined slightly. Though it was only to ask for pets and a warmer place to put his tootsies, the pup's timing was impeccable, and Yuri pulled the Akita up onto his lap, cradling him there with his right arm.

Minako looked between the trio and decided to break the ice herself, "This has to be the most awkward podium group I think I've ever seen."

"Hmph..." Viktor snorted quietly, eyes out on the ice, and all the bodies skating by them on the lower level.

"...This is my fault." Asahi finally said, hands bunched up on his lap as he stared at his knees, "I came to this competition completely unprepared and I...really made a mess of things because of it."

"Unprepared...?" Yuri echoed, lifting his head in curiosity.

The Silver medalist hesitated, but nodded, "The...history between you and I, Yuri...and the things that had happened since the last time I saw you... Not just to me, but to you, too...things I refused to acknowledge or even look into, even just to spare myself the shock of seeing it in person... I'd been told to look you up for a hundred different reasons, a hundred different times...and I kept telling myself that if I didn't, nothing would've changed, and we could've picked up being friends again like we had been years ago... I could just forget all the bad things that happened after you left for Detroit, and start over again..."

"...Detroit?" Yuri repeated, "Why all the way back to then? That was seven years ago. We've seen each other since that."

"Yeah, we've...seen each other." Asahi agreed hesitantly, but shook his head and lowered his gaze a bit further down, "But we weren't friends anymore...not really..."

Those words made Yuri's heart sting.

"After you left, I felt pretty abandoned... I didn't know where to turn. Say whatever you want about how I felt underneath it all...but I still lost my best and only friend back then. Even though I had secured that spot for you at the Tokyo Skate Club...going back to Imari to tell you the good news, only to find that you'd left without telling me...that hurt a lot..."

Yuri recoiled a little, fingers gripping at his husband's scarf and lapel as he pressed his cheek to the back of the man's head, "...I...had a lot going on back then. I didn't know you'd gotten the spot until after I had already left. I couldn't think of a good way to apologize, so I just..." He hung his head low in shame, "I stopped replying to your emails...and eventually I switched to a different one entirely. I wanted to forget Hasetsu so badly, it became a need to forget Japan..."

"You're not the one in hot water, my love." Viktor reassured, nudging his head back, "You don't have to explain yourself."

"Don't I though?" Yuri wondered, hugging himself to the back of his husband's neck, "I'm a part of all this... If Asahi is about to bear his soul to us to explain why this weekend went the way it did...I owe it to him to fill in the other blanks and create a complete story. Forgiveness is a two-way street...I can't expect him to walk it all on his own."

"...There's not much you need to say, Yuri..." Asahi explained, daring to lift his head and look to the
side a little, though careful to avoid the Russian's steely gaze, "...I could've pieced together why you
left like you did, just from what I already knew back then. It...shouldn't have surprised me that you
got tired of waiting, and took the first chance you could get to escape from that quagmire with those
triplets. You're the only one who has to feel the way you do and no one can ask you to stay in a bad
situation when you have an out. I was just...being selfish...and decided to take it personally when I
shouldn't have. My emails probably sounded pretty desperate and angry anyway...I don't blame you
for not answering."

Jiro licked at his human's fingers again, nosing his snout into the man's palm to get heat-pats, and in
doing so, distracted Yuri from the whirling ball of guilt growing in his gut. The ball faded slightly for
the moment.

...I don't have to feel bad about that anymore...? Can I really let that go...? I was so ashamed of
myself back then...I buried myself in my skating so I wouldn't have to think about it...

"There was a long time, back when we were still in Juniors together..." Asahi continued, raising his
head to look at the metal cross-beams that made up the rink's ceiling, "Because the both of us were
so secluded... You were always so bad at making new friends, and I... I didn't really want to share
you anyway..." He lowered his head and shook it, "For a really long time, because it was just
us...there was a part of me that stupidly thought you were mine, in a way... My best
friend, my training buddy, my junior, my English-language partner...all those things, we only had
each other for...and I got a bit prickly at the idea that anyone else could get in the middle of that. The
idea of me being forced into Seniors without you made me crazy. I was desperate to keep you with
me. I fought tooth and claw to get that spot in Tokyo for you, hoping beyond hope that I'd get it
before you found something else and left forever...or at least for a few years... Even though
we were just friends...you were still all I had. To know that I had just missed you made me
angry..."

Yuri listened quietly, loosening his grip on his spouse's clothing just enough for Viktor to wedge his
thumb into his palm, and he clamped down on that as well when he gripped again.

"It was such a stupidly long time before I calmed down again... By the time...Riku turned up, you
could probably describe me as being like..." Asahi hesitated, trying to find the right word, "...Not
a spurned lover...but something like that...the one left behind... Acting jealous and defensive over
you at every opportunity... I guess I thought that, somehow, if you knew I was still out there trying to
protect your honor from criticism, maybe you'd come back. Riku was..." He shuddered and
collapsed over his knees, pinching the bridge of his nose, "...He was the voice of reason that no one
else could be, because no one else saw into me the way he did. To Riku's eyes, my walls were glass,
my defenses made of cotton and paper. He could practically read my mind, and knew what to say to
counter the arguments I hadn't even made yet... He snapped me out of this horrible feedback loop I'd
put myself into...but then when I lost him...I got sucked right back in again."

The mention of that long-dead skater made Yuri cringe a little, and he released his right arm from
around his puppy just enough to twist around and wrap it around his husband's other shoulder,
holding tightly there.

The very idea of losing someone so important terrifies me more than I can put into words... Knowing
that at any moment, Viktor could be taken from me forever, and I'd be all alone again...it just kills
me. I can't even imagine how much pain Asahi's been in since losing his partner... It's almost too
much for me to comprehend...

Viktor nuzzled his head to the side and brought his other hand up, cupping over the one against his
chest already, "You okay?" He whispered.
Yuri nodded reluctantly.

Asahi watched them quietly, but then continued, "...The thing is though..." He started, lifting his head towards the ice again, "I didn't realize quite how bad I was...until I saw you here at Nationals, Yuri. I didn't even realize how much of an impact Riku had made on my life until I had to face you without him. It was so easy to fall back into my old way of thinking...it scared me a little...and then I got lost in my head, all the memories of Riku coming back that I'd put away for so long, all the feelings I had for you that I knew were pointless... I acted out because I was hurting and I didn't know what to do..."

Minako leaned closer from the 3rd row and set an unexpected hand on the skater's shoulder, making him jump slightly, but he settled soon enough, "You've been pushing down all thoughts of Riku for so long, Asahi..." She started, "Why don't you tell us what you and him had planned to say in Kyoto?"

He turned confused eyes back towards the woman, "...That speech was supposed to be to my family though...it wouldn't mean anything to you guys... You already know about Riku anyway..."

"I think it would do you some good to say it anyway, don't you?"

"...What's the point now...?" Asahi turned back again, cupping his hands over his face as his elbows went down to his knees, pulling his shoulder out of the woman's reach, "Explaining to anyone that Riku and I were together and we were happy...when he isn't even here anymore...it'd just..." The soreness in his throat was growing again, even though it had never quite left him, "...I can't do it. It hurts too much."

"So then tell us about him." Minako suggested instead, "The kind of person he was, how he helped you... If you can explain to us how much he meant to you, maybe then you can..."

Yuri pulled his face up from where he'd buried it against his husband's neck, and looked on at the other skater a few seats over. He could see the tears already trickling from the man's face, trailing down the length of his nose or just falling from his eyes outright. The droplets that hit the concrete between his skates were clear to see in the light from above, but Yuri stayed quiet, worried he'd choke on his words anyway if he tried.

"This is really such a strange time and place to be getting into all that..." Asahi said, turning his head slightly towards the woman behind him, "This meeting was supposed to be about apologizing to them for how bad I messed up...not about me spilling my guts about my dead boyfriend..."

"Part of the apology process is learning about what lead to you doing what you did." Minako explained, sitting back in her spot with an elbow over the back-rest, "And since you've been so steadfast in never telling anyone anything, I think it would be helpful...to us and to you. So...tell us about Riku. Tell us all the things you stopped yourself from saying before the accident, and after...tell us all the things you wanted to say but thought you couldn't. Get it all off your chest."

"...You d-don't know what you're asking..."

"I think I do though." The ballerina retorted gently, "When people suffer catastrophic losses...they can do monumentally stupid things because of their grief. You've barely touched the edge of your grief...and you've already done something monumentally stupid. Get the rest out in a controlled environment, and hopefully...with any luck...you won't do anything dumb again."

Asahi drew in a few pained breaths, but nodded, "I-If that's what you...want..." He rubbed his nose
on the back of a sleeve and tried to steel himself, snuffling once as he tried to clear his head, "...Where...do I even start...?"

"At the beginning, of course."
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED EIGHTY EIGHT

It was a difficult - and often - extremely painful conversation. Out of the 26+ years of Asahi's life, it was the hardest 45 minutes he had known, save only for the moments he'd actually experienced the traumas he was getting ready to recall. Still, after so long reliving the memories of the good times he'd never know again, by the time he was ready to explain that fateful accident...he could hardly speak anymore.

"...I...I need a b-break..." Asahi pleaded, eyes and face tinted red from his despair. His scarf was a damp ruin from trying to dry his skin.

Minako didn't hesitate, leaning forward from her place in the row behind him to set her hand on the man's back, "It's okay, I think you're allowed. You've said a lot already." She looked over to the other two skaters, as though still seeking their approval, but hoping neither would argue the point given that she'd already given her own.

Yuri had been sitting just over the edge of tears for most of the conversation, face pressed to his partner's shoulder or the back of the man's neck half the time, the other half trying to look on normally, only to return to the soggy place he'd made on Viktor's scarf and coat. Jiro had fallen asleep on his lap ages ago.

Viktor himself had remained stoic through the tale. It made him feel a little guilty to hear the other figure's sorrow, but the stories themselves were benign to his hearing. 'The story of how you met' didn't unsettle him that much, if at all. It only helped to cement the notion that his husband was safe from further unwanted advances, and he let himself relax a little.

With no objections, and a slight nod from the Russian, Asahi pushed up onto his blade-guards and slowly went up the nearby stairs to the main hall, with Minako following after. With the duo through the door and beyond earshot, Viktor turned his attention to his partner, turning around in his seat to face the man who'd clung to his back throughout the 'talk.'

"How are you holding up, my love?" He wondered quietly, reaching up to brush his husband's hair out of his face where the constant rubbing and nuzzling had pulled it from its gelled-down style.

Yuri sucked in a pained breath, and he pulled his glasses off to wipe his reddened eyes, "I just... I feel so bad for him..." He answered quietly, "To hear him tell all these stories about someone he loved so much, but knowing all this time that the person he's speaking about is gone forever... I can't help but put us into his shoes and it just breaks my heart. It actually kind of makes me think of how strong that makes him, to be able to carry on after something so devastating. If I lost you, I'd be done for...I could never recover from a loss like that."

"Try not to think about it," Viktor recommended, reaching both arms over the back of his crimson seat to pull his partner into a hug over one shoulder, stroking the figure's back gently, "There's some wisdom in living every day like it might be your last...but only if you're coming to it from a healthy place. 'Live your best life every day' is a much saner approach than 'live like you won't see the sun rise tomorrow.' Makes people do different things."

"...I guess that's true..." Yuri said, breathing a ragged sigh against his partner's scarf as he clung a little tighter. He held for a moment before letting himself let go a little to sit back again, using the dry part of his own scarf to clean off the lenses of his glasses, "How do you feel about all this though...?"
The silver legend turned his head out towards the rink and watched the people skate by for a few seconds, then shrugged and looked to his spouse again, "There's a degree to which I empathize with his situation. I get that he lost someone he cared about...but maybe I'm a bit divorced from the subject because I don't know him outside of this weekend, so everything I do know about him is based on what happened here." He explained, "My first interaction with him was his rudely questioning your sexuality, as though you weren't allowed to be involved with another man unless he said so...then I watched him flirting with you with that squeeze-chicken thing, like he thought he was better than me and could steal you away. The next thing I know, you're having a panic attack so severe that you passed out because of it, only for me to learn later...after seeing your skin pink and claw-marked from your own fingernails, and sitting under water that was way too hot...that he yelled at you, and then held you down and kissed you without your consent. I watched you trying to recover from that for a full 24 hours, and because of it, he robbed you of the Silver...no, the Gold you should've won."

Yuri lowered his head a little, "...I guess I can understand why you're so distant on this, then." He said, snuffling a little.

"I've done my best to keep my head down on this because he used to be your friend, but eventually, my ability to remain an impartial witness, or a shoulder to cry on, breaks down and I have to do something." Viktor explained, leaning forward to press the side of one cheek against his husband's closest shoulder, "At this point, I'm convinced he won't ever try anything with you again... If you two were stuck in a room alone together for a week, I feel like I could be certain he wouldn't ever get within 10ft of you. But it doesn't always take physical interaction to hurt a person, and your spirit bruises far easier than your body does."

The younger figure just huffed a sad laugh at his own expense, "The skater with a heart of glass."

"I worry about you a lot," The Russian went on, drawing his husband's eyes towards himself, "You have so much room in your heart for so many people and things and experiences... When you're happy, and settled...it's a wondrous thing to see...but when a sadness creeps in, it's all-encompassing, and I sometimes feel overwhelmed, like I can't do anything to make it stop."

Yuri raised his head, looking back to the ground in front of himself. He sighed a little and pressed his cheek to his husband's forehead, bringing one arm up around the Russian's shoulder, "You do more than you give yourself credit for. I'd be raiding every fridge in the country to eat my sorrows away, if not for how much you've helped me cope." He explained, moving his free hand up to set a curled finger under the man's chin, lifting that pale face to kiss him. He held there for a few seconds, and set their brows together when he pulled back again, "...No matter how dark things have ever gotten, you've always been my light to guide me back. I just..." Yuri raised his eyes up to the glass wall just behind them both, seeing Minako and Asahi there on the other side, "...I wish he had a light to guide him, too."

The vending machine by the elevators popped out a bottle of apple juice, and Asahi pulled it up quickly, using the cool, smooth liquid to soothe his dry and cracked throat. He turned around and pressed his back against the clear display pane of the red box and stared at the floor for a moment, taking another quick sip from the bottle before capping it again.

[How do you feel at this point...?] Minako asked quietly, [Are you ready to keep going? I know the next part is probably going to be the worst of it.]

Asahi hesitated, but shook his head, [...I've...never been ready for this...] He answered quietly, [I guess I just...feel weird, telling these things to people I barely know...and the one person I'm supposed to...reach out to the most...just doesn't seem that impressed with anything I say...]

[Who, Viktor?]
The skater nodded.

[Worry less about trying to impress him.] The ballerina advised. [He makes up his own mind about things, in his own time and way. Sometimes those things happen with nearly no thought or planning, like when he dropped his whole life to come coach Yuri. He's kind of impulsive that way. How his feelings about this change may hit him like a brick at some point, but until then, it may seem like you're not reaching him.]

[...How does Y-Yuri put up with that...?]

Minako smiled nervously, [He tries to remind Viktor to think ahead. That's the thing about being in love with someone...you take them as they are, gifts and flaws. You try to make the best of one another.]

Asahi just lowered his head again, brow furrowed all the more behind the damp spikes of his stringy bangs, [...No wonder Yuri said he thought I'd...put him in a cage...] He sighed and slid his back down the machine, coming to sit on the cold floor, [...I don't understand anymore how Riku put up with me...I must've been absolutely horrible...]

The ballerina crouched down before him and reached a hand forward to set it on the man's upturned knee, [It's not like there's an instruction manual on this kind of thing. Some relationships need more work than others. You barely had any time with Riku. When you let the next person in...you'll be better prepared...you'll be smarter, and you'll be more experienced than you were before.]

[...The next person...?] He echoed, pulling his legs in a big closer to himself, [...I c-couldn't...]

[The loss of someone close can be an incredibly difficult thing to process...but I promise, you can get through it. There's no time limit on how long you're supposed to grieve for. The pain you're in now is a sign that you loved someone in the first place...and while I don't want to make it sound like it's a good thing...it is an important thing.]

Asahi rubbed his eyes on one sleeve, [All this p-pain and frustration I have... The more I talk about things, the more it's becoming anger instead...] He explained quietly, [It's like I'm laying out a blueprint for how to be the worst partner to someone. I'm p-practically the poster-boy for exactly what not to be...what not to do...]

[You can only be who you are, and learn from the mistakes you make. Riku saw what you could be, the same way Viktor saw what Yuri could be, and did his best with the time he had to see you grow.] Minako said, then stood up again, [You said before that you feel like you fell right back into the habits Riku broke you out of...but the more you talk, the more you reveal...the more I see that he's left an impression on you, even now. You went to Yuri because you drew comfort from him in the past, not because you wanted him...and that's okay, because Yuri would've been there for you. He just...didn't know. You can still fix this.]

[...How...? They already know Riku died in a car accident...what could e-either of them possibly get from me retelling how it happened exactly...?] The skater lifted his head, a look of hopelessness on his face, [I just feel like I'm dragging them through all my problems, with no end in sight...or even a goal in mind...]

[Understanding is our goal.] Minako clarified, [You're doing exactly the right thing. So...the next step is to make them understand other things. They know who Riku was to you, but they don't know why you tried to keep yourselves a secret. Maybe talking about your background will be good break from the sad stuff, too...give yourself some breathing room. I mean, I'm sure they're curious about...]

what you were going to tell your family in Kyoto...it would have more of an impact if they knew why you were *telling* them anything in the first place.]

The mentally-exhausted figure looked at the top of his knees for a moment, but then nodded, and struggled his way back up to his feet. He held the apple-juice bottle in his hands to ground himself, and turned slowly on the heel of one blade-guard, stepping off towards the door they’d come through earlier.

By the time they’d returned, Viktor had abandoned the Ravenclaw beanie and was trying to un-static his hair, combing his bare fingers through it to put it back into its normal affect. Yuri had moved down to the same level the Russian was sitting in, but was still sitting on the floor with the Akita puppy, who had woken up and was wanting to play. The beanie came in handy then, as Yuri would toss it a few feet behind the pup, and Jiro would chase after it, pouncing onto it with his front paws and then bringing it back. When Asahi came back into view, Jiro paused a moment, looking at the man intently, and wagging his tail slowly twice as the skater found - yet another - new place to sit. Yuri pat his thigh to get the puppy's attention, and Jiro sauntered back towards his lap, settling in like a dog that knew too much despite his only being a few weeks old. Minako took the seat above where Yuri had been on the floor previously. Of the bunch, Viktor was the only one who retained his spot, though now he had his left leg stretched out straight towards the guard-railing, offering it as something of a back-support in case his husband leaned against it. He kept the right tucked under his seat.

"I think we're ready to continue, right?" Minako asked then, to which she received a few nods, "Okay... We discussed where to go next with this and we agreed that he should go back to the pre-Yuri saga."

"Pre-Yuri saga...?" Yuri echoed dryly, "How *pre* are we talking about?"

"About five years *pre*." Asahi answered on his own, "...When I was right on the edge of becoming a good pawn for my family."

Yuri's eyes went from the older skater to his husband, "...Pawn...?" He whispered.

Viktor's eyes narrowed a little bit, but he remained still, knuckles against his cheek where he'd curled his arm around, resting his elbow on the back of the seat next to himself.

"...Uhm..." Asahi started, unsure where to really begin, and looked to Minako nearby for help.

"Who are your parents? What kind of people are they?" She offered.

"Oh..." He swallowed nervously, twisting the bottle-cap on and off, "Well... My mother is a native. My father is... a Japanese man from America. When he came to Japan... he brought with him the things he grew up with in the USA... including a Protestant faith. He was never all that severe... he believed, but he... wasn't particularly concerned with it. My mother, on the other hand... she took to it on a level I can only ascribe to the way certain people take to the lore of their video games. Like them, she knew more about *that world* than she did the one she lived in. She said... it opened her eyes, as though Japanese culture didn't make sense without it. To her, it explained why..." He grit his teeth a little and looked away, "...*It explained* why women were supposed to stay home, and why men were supposed to be *superior*. She *thrived* under that, and she imagined *everyone else* did, or would, too. She never quite saw the hypocrisy in her being the head of the household and deciding how we were supposed to be, even though her *Good Book* specifically says women *aren't supposed* to hold positions of *power* over men."

Yuri leaned back against his husband's leg, a stunned look on his face. He glanced up to his partner,
who was still staring straight ahead, as though not wanting to hear the words, "...Viktor...?"

"I'm listening."

Asahi hesitated for a moment, but Minako gestured for him to continue despite the unintended interruption. He took a moment instead to sip from the bottle in his hands and recollect his thoughts, "...They had my three older brothers...all of whom were showered in the entitlement of their maleness. They were molded to be the men they are today...successful, married, families of their own...the pride and joy of my parents. ...And then...there's me." He lowered his gaze, "...The misfit. The one they let get away with whatever I want simply because three out of four is decent. They pay my way through skating and school, and just pat my head and tell me how cute it is that I have a hobby I like. It wasn't always like this though...there was a time where they were convinced they could get four for four. I was 13 years old when they tried arranging me with the first girl..." He explained in agonized frustration, "They blamed a slow-burning puberty on my lack of enthusiasm. They tried again when I was 16."

"...You never told me any of that, and I was around when you were 16." Yuri chagrined.

"You were around at the rink." Asahi pointed out, "But we both went home sometimes."

"...Oh."

"There wasn't much to say anyway. I...already had my eye on you at the time, and that arrangement by my parents just..." The skater shook his head, "...They were trying to throw a wrench into my plans."

"Were they? Knowingly?" Minako wondered.

"Yeah. Knowingly. They knew what I was since before I even knew what it meant to be what I was. They thought they could...train it out of me, by forcing me into situations with people that I didn't care about. They framed my disgust with it all on the idea that arranged relationships are about family-building and networking, not about love or happiness. You learn to love, later on, completely skipping over the part that I wasn't into any women, not just the ones they stuck me with." He answered grudgingly. "They..." He gave an angry sort of grunt-like laugh under his breath, "...They actually tried to use European Royalty as an example. As I got older though, I started learning about the world and I started making retorts to their arguments... If they told me about European Royals, I'd tell them about the Habsburg Jaw coming out of their deeply-seeded incest. They'd tell me about the Russian Tsars and I'd casually point out their problem with hemophilia that they caught by breeding with the Europeans."

Viktor grimaced at that.

"They got wise to it and started pointing to India instead, and even China...where they literally have women markets, where parents try to sell their daughters into marriage, because they couldn't tolerate the idea of her being successful without a husband. There's so many men out there because of that One Child policy, and the women who do get to exist have much higher standards...I guess they'd get to if they're in such high demand...and some have decided they're better off on their own anyway." Asahi sighed, turning his right foot back and forth where it balanced on the heel of his blade-guard, "It wasn't really until Yuri started talking about that girl back in Hasetsu that I finally clued-in to what my big problem actually was. I felt the pain of jealousy and didn't know what to do with it. All my life I'd been told that I'd marry a nice girl someday, and have a family like your brothers." He said, air-quoting with his fingers bitterly, "The longer it went on, the more I resented it...and with this girl they tried to set me up with when I was 16, I got so mad at them that I...tried to be intimate with her, failed horribly like I knew I would, and then came barging back into the open,
yelling at them about 'how can I possibly marry this woman who can't even satisfy me?" He lowered his head down to bury his face against his hands, ashamed of the entire ordeal.

Minako blinked at him, recalling the brief mention of that interaction from the night before, "...I didn't realize it was that bad."

"They tried one more time...after Yuri left, and 'that annoying distraction' was out of my life, as they described it." Asahi went on, bringing his hands up for those air-quotes again, "I was pretty depressed about Yuri being gone...so I just let them do whatever they wanted. The girl was nice enough...she said she loved my skating... That was actually a gimmick my parents thought up." He sat back roughly against the poppy-red chair, "They thought they could hook me up with a fan...just so long as it was a female fan."

Yuri was looking at his hands, and remembering the odd stories he barely wanted to listen to in the past.

*One crazy religious parent who takes their stuff way too far... Vindictive 16-year-old revenge-sex just to stick it to them... A fan-partner that didn't work out...

Brown eyes went up to the Russian, but Viktor was avoiding his gaze.

*...He sees the same pattern I do...

"I let that go on for about 6 months...before I was just so miserable that I had to call things off. I still feel bad about that one...that girl didn't do anything wrong. She thought it was all her fault that things didn't work out though." Asahi went on, leaving Yuri to rub his temples anxiously, "But then, after I finally got some peace and quiet...Riku found me. I still...suffered from all the wrong messages I'd been taught as I grew up though. I knew what I was, but I wouldn't let myself be that way, even though the opportunity had finally arrived. Threats of judgment and damnation were still fresh in my mind, in spite of the fact that I'd moved on to Buddhism long ago. A while before my parents gave up on me, I tried to explain to them that there's science behind my situation... That the more sons a mother has, the more likely it is that she'll have one that's gay. That it was nature's way of giving her a nurturing child in the absence of daughters...but...they threw it back in my face because of all the martial arts stuff I did, and how cold I was. I tried to bring it back to the figure skating, and that I was cold because they made me that way...but they refused to hear it... So, they gave up, and I gave up...and I resigned myself to the idea that I'd always be alone. Hoping for something, but never brave enough to defy my entire upbringing."

Yuri drew a deep breath and exhaled it in a sigh, reaching his right arm up against his partner's legs to touch his fingers against one thigh, rubbing his thumb there as he often did. He didn't want to interrupt again, but he could sense that his partner was on edge about it all, and did what he could to mitigate it.

"Riku said he waited an entire year before revealing himself to me... But after that, he...kind of bulldozed his way in." Asahi continued, twisting in his seat towards Minako and folding his arms over the back-rest, setting his chin there and looking at his sleeves, "All that time, he said he'd been reading me, figuring me out...but that I'd been so blind to everything around me that I never noticed him. At least, until the moment he wouldn't get out of the way, so I had to see him...and after that moment, we were us...at least, for a little while...until it was just me again..." His brow furrowed and he partly closed his eyes, feeling the sting in his throat again, but trying to maintain himself this time, "...After the fact of Riku's death...the worst part about that accident was how little I'd been hurt. I'd gladly have split the damage 50/50 with him if it meant he'd live... I feel so stupid, and rotten, and ugly now...because I wasn't able to be the person he thought I was. Because it took Riku dying for me to realize what I finally had, and how precious it was to me...and how I'd lost all of it...even the
chance to do things right. The opportunity to grow together, be together...to learn from each other. I learned so much from him, but I...don't think I ever got to teach him anything in return." He rubbed his nose on his sleeve and lifted up in his seat, hunching over his legs again, "I was in so much shock about everything that happened. Riku and I were on our way to Kyoto to tell my parents that we were together, and that I'd finally found my happiness...but we never got there, and all my happiness was taken from me. I've just...been existing since then."

Yuri leaned forward to rest his chin on his partner's right knee, arms going gently forward to wrap around the man's calf.

"I said last night that I wished I could go to him..." Asahi went on, "I felt so much guilt an anger and regret over the thing I did to Yuri that I just...couldn't deal with the pain of it all anymore, and I just wanted it to finally stop. Riku's memory bubbling up after 2 years of being suppressed...being told to my face by Yuri that we would've been bad for each other anyway...getting scorned by you for being so stupidly naïve and obvious..."

Viktor turned his head slightly towards the row behind him.

"I was cracking apart, and then...everything else...with the meeting, and learning about how Yuri was dealing with what I'd done... I feel like I've been on autopilot since the end of the Short Program, with short bursts of self-awareness in the middle of it all... I felt dead already, so what difference would it make if I just made my physical self match my mental self?" Asahi reached up with one hand to rub his sore throat, "I didn't think things couldn't possibly get any worse than they already were...and then I won Silver, and I realized they absolutely could. I've never hated myself as much as I did since seeing my score yesterday night. The only reason I didn't walk away was because I wasn't the only person who'd be impacted by it if it I did. But...at this point, I've decided..." He lifted his head and faced Viktor straight-on, though the Russian's silver head was still slightly turned away, "...If I get picked for the Olympic Team..." Viktor looked at him then, "...I'm going to decline it."

"Eh?" Yuri perked his head up suddenly, "But you c-"

"I've already decided." Asahi bowed his head down, mostly to avoid the stares, "...After Nationals, I'm going...to retire."

"That's so-" Yuri tried again, only to find himself being nudged and moved around as his husband suddenly stood up. To the younger man's shock, Viktor turned and started making his way up the stairs, leaving the group in mystified silence.

Asahi could feel his heart pounding hard in his chest, but he couldn't bring himself to look up. He could hear Yuri gathering up Jiro and his beanie and gave chase, sneakers tapping at the concrete as they went up towards the level to the main hall, leaving him with just Minako again.

"What in the world is that knucklehead doing?" The ballerina wondered incredulously, twitching slightly as she heard the metallic BANG of the metal door being pushed in and open. She was relieved at least to see that Viktor paused his advance long enough to hold the door for Yuri, and they went together...sort of...towards the exit where they'd arrived more than an hour earlier. Minako reached for the backpack Yuri had left behind and slung it over one shoulder, then looked to the stunned skater still stuck in his bow, "Come on."

"...Come on?" Asahi echoed, unmoving, "To what end?"

"To find out which brick just hit him."
Yuri hopped sideways with Jiro in his arms, trying to keep up, "Vik...Viktor!? What's going on? Why'd you leave suddenly!?"

The two sets of automatic sliding doors opened for them, and the frozen wind poured over them, leaving Yuri temporarily stunned. The Russian didn't even seem to notice the cold, walking straight into it without missing a step. The wind picked up around him, sending his silver hair, charcoal scarf, and dark grey long-coat flying all around him. He walked right past the thick blue pillar to his left, and continued moving forward until the white metal railing beside the road stopped him. Hands went into his pockets, and he waited, staring forward with narrowed eyes and furrowed brows.

"...Viktor...!" Yuri called from within the two doorways, trying to get his beanie on with one hand.

"...What is he doing?" Minako asked, deadpanning the Russian skater. Asahi stepped up behind her quietly; confused but trying to stay unnoticed.

"I don't know. He wouldn't say anything to me." Yuri answered.

Jiro barked at the silver legend, and finally the man responded to them...though not in the way they expected.

"ASAHI SAITO."

The skater in question nearly jumped out of his skin, looking rather nervous. He took a few steps into the cold, heedless of his blade-guards on the snowy concrete, "...Y-Yes...?"

Minako and Yuri watched the figure carefully, but their eyes went out to Viktor a few seconds later, each of them waiting on pins and needles to find out how it would end.

"How the HELL do you expect to prove to me how sorry you are IF YOU LEAVE SKATING?" The Russian barked, then finally turned around to face them all, an angry look on his face, "You said it yourself that words don't mean anything if you don't back them up with ACTION. If you retire now, how are you going to ACT? Retiring just means you're a QUITTER."

Yuri's eyes twitched nervously to hear those words being yelled in his direction, even though he knew they weren't meant for him. Asahi was practically catatonic, paralyzed where he stood.

"You're GOING to get picked for PyeongChang, and you're GOING to go to South Korea in February." Viktor continued sternly, "And so help you, you'd better skate like you've never DREAMED you could." He pulled up his right hand and pointed adamantly at the man, "You skate like your life and love DEPENDS ON IT...you struggle, and you FIGHT... You prove to the entire WORLD the kind of man Riku thought you were."

"...Viktor..." Yuri whispered to himself, stunned at the whole thing. He turned his eyes towards his older counterpart, barely able to see the equally shocked look on Asahi's face while the wind whipped those teal bangs around his face, "...Asahi...?"

"WAKARIMASU KA!?" Viktor barked with finality, still pointing.

The anxious younger skater had to break himself out of the frozen position he'd taken, but he finally moved, and bowed forward again, the same 90 angle that he'd taken in his apology...and yelled back, "KASHIKOMARIMASHITA."

The silver legend still had that severe look on his face, but when he spotted the reactions on Minako and Yuri's faces, he dropped the visage for one of slight confusion, "...What? Why do you two look
"He just..." The ballerina started, gesturing at Asahi, who was rising up to his normal posture again, "...I mean..."

"What?" Viktor repeated.

"Uh...well," Yuri tried instead, "He said yes, but...the way he said it... I think you just kind of became his mentor, sort of?"

"...Eh? What, no! That's not what I meant!" The silver man waved his hands around defensively, "I'm no one's mentor but Yuri's! Yurio would kill me!"

"...Well, the word and form Asahi used...it's the kind of affirmation you reserve for your boss or superior..." Minako clarified, "...So...I...guess this means you won?"

"Everyone just go inside! Saito still has to show Yuri how the Exhibition OCs go." Viktor barked, pointing back into the building as he started stepping forward.

"...Hai, Nikiforov-senpai."

"...Blyat..." (Goddamnit.)
Being sidelined had never been a particularly contentious issue for Viktor while he was playing around in coach-mode, but since his return to figure skating, the idea of sitting out for any reason had been hard to fathom. But, every time the silver Russian tried to twist on his heel to turn or walk, and that deep, bruise-like pain jabbed him with a reminder of his injury, it became more and more apparent that being sidelined was bruising his ego, too.

The hallway on the upper floor of the building that lead to the swimming pool was fairly empty, making it as good a spot as any for teaching the basic program elements of the Exhibition's Opening Ceremonies. Asahi had even found a dry-erase marker to use on the white-boards wrapped around the support pillars, and he drew a play-by-play of all the major components of the show.

"This part of the rink is being set up for those Taiko drummers from the Opening Ceremonies on Friday," The skater explained, skates having been taken off by then and set against a wall, leaving him with just his socks on the tile floor. He pointed the dry-erase marker at a rough outline of a skating rink, and a big circle he'd drawn in the middle of one half, "There'll be a carpet where you can't skate, and...uhh...Christmas lights? The white ones...all around the edge like the concert stage, so you don't miss it in the dark."

Yuri stood a few paces back, left arm wrapped around himself to support his elbow on the right, where he kept a finger curled over his chin, knuckle barely brushing his lower lip. Behind him, sitting on a hemi-circular couch that had been dragged closer for better viewing, was Viktor and Minako. Jiro stayed tethered to the Russian's wrist by his leash and harness, and busied himself with all the new smells around the area.

"For the first half of the show, it's just the drummers and the local skaters doing their routine...the rest of us then come out from these two back corners, just like when Senpai called us out before."

Yuri chortled a laugh under his breath, moving his hand up to cover his mouth as he looked down a little.

Asahi stopped and deadpanned him, "What?"

"Eh?" The younger figure looked up again, but then shrugged his arms out to the sides, "Oh...well, I mean, you used to give me dirty looks every time I mentioned Viktor, and now you're calling him Senpai? I don't know if it's funny or ironic or...something else."

The deadpan continued, "...Are you making fun of me?"

Oh crap...! Yuri flailed his hands around defensively, "N-no way! I don't mean it like that at all!" He twisted around to plead for backup, "...V-Viktor!"

"Don't call me Senpai." He answered simply.

"Sensei then." Asahi suggested.

"No way."

"Shishou."
"I don't even know what that means."

"It means 'teacher' but it's more like...a master?" Yuri explained.

"Then absolutely not." Viktor harped.

"Shidouin."

Viktor narrowed one eye, but again looked to his partner for an explanation.

"Also teacher, but in guidance counselor sense."

"No...no, no...no, none of it. Just Viktor."

"Hai, Senpai."

Minako snickered behind her hand and watched the Russian collapse back against the couch with a sigh, "I think it suits you."

"I'm not teaching him anything though." Viktor argued quietly, "How did it come to this?" He whined and slid down the back-rest until he was flat against one shoulder. It didn't take long for a curious Akita snoot to come up in front of him, along with two small paws and those dark eyes, "Jiro, you're smart...how did this happen?"

The puppy just tilted his head and wagged his curly fluff of a tail.

"You're always right..." Viktor sighed again and reached his arm over the edge, curling his hand under the puppy's back-end to hoist him up.

Minako shook her head and laughed under her breath, leaning back against the cushion behind herself, "You're a good motivator. I'm kind of surprised Yuri never went through the Senpai phase."

"That's cuz he never technically taught me anything." Yuri quipped, distracted from the explanation by the chatter behind him, "I mean, when he came to Hasetsu, it was after he saw me do a quad Flip and Lutz already. He knew I could do them...just not in competition. He taught me less about how to skate than he did about how to feel more confident about myself." He turned back to face forward again, nodding his head down in apology, "Sorry...their voices carry in this hall...I couldn't help hear them."

Asahi hesitated, eyes moving from Yuri to the man further down the corridor, "...Is that really all it was?"

"Eh?"

"The coaching thing." The man repeated, "You...said before...that part of what he helped you with was learning to like yourself... So he wasn't really a traditional coach then..."

"Well..." Yuri fidgeted a little where he stood, eyes going towards the tiles under the older skater's socks, "He technically was still a traditional coach. It was just an all-encompassing sort of thing, with the choreography thrown in, too. He coached me skating as much as he did in life...it's just that the life-coaching thing happened to help me more than anything else." He glanced up from the floor, and saw the focused look on Asahi's face, "You don't really seem to have any problems with letting your life circumstances follow you onto the ice though. You still won Silver in spite of everything that was going on."
That struck a strange chord, and Asahi reached up to press against it with a few fingers.

"What is it...?" Yuri wondered, voice almost echoing in the lonely hall.

"...My life does follow me onto the ice." Asahi admitted quietly, "Every time I've set a blade down inside the walls of a rink, I'm...rebelling."

"...Rebelling?"

Viktor, despite being flat on his back on the couch, had his head turned toward the pair, watching and listening quietly while Jiro chewed on his sharp little puppy-nubbins. The Russian kept his arm around the pup, keeping him pressed to the side of his frame.

"Yeah..." Asahi went on, not noticing him, "I've often been asked why my shows are so loud, boisterous, and expressive...when off the ice, I'm just...kind of a lump. I mean, who consistently picks the most popular music to skate to, only to vanish again after an event? It just seems so hypocritical. I guess it was just this desperate cry for attention...I wanted people to look even if I didn't want anyone to see. Does that...make any sense at all...? I have no idea what I'm saying."

"I guess so...it's kind of like Ice Kabuki." Yuri offered, "When you get out there, you're pretending to be someone else. Right?"

It took a moment, but the older figure nodded, "...Ice Kabuki."

With the family fun time on the ice over, the rink was cleared. Two of the three skaters were getting their blades on as Minako returned from the skate-rental kiosk, approaching where they sat on one of the many benches between it and the rink wall, "They said we have 45 minutes, then they have to redo the ice."

"How did you even manage to get the ice for us on such short notice...?" Yuri wondered dubiously, "We had to share it in Sapporo."

"The group that normally practices at this hour is taking a field-trip to watch the Free Dance." The ballerina answered, "So there's a gap in the schedule before a kids' hockey thing later."

"Oh...lucky us." Yuri said, turning his attention back to his boots, lacing up the last of the left side.

Asahi pulled the edge of his runner-pants down over the top of his own boots, and waited a moment, looking aside at the gold that caught his eye, "Oh..."

"Huh?" Yuri lifted his head, pausing where he was, "What?"

"I don't think I noticed before that you have gold blades now. ...When...did you switch?"

Hazel eyes went from the older skater to the skates in question, but Yuri felt a flutter of pride to be able to explain it, and stuck both his legs out straight to hold the boots up, "Viktor got them for me as a wedding present last spring. Since I won Gold at Worlds, he said that I should wear gold."

"...You won Gold at Worlds?" Asahi repeated in surprise, only to turn slightly as it percolated through his head, "...Well, I guess that's not surprising...if you have Senpai as your coach and choreographer, and he always puts together really difficult programs...'Ariad' was one of the hardest, and you replicated that one easily..."
Yuri leaned forward and got a smug look on his face, feet going back down to the floor again, "I beat Viktor for it."

The Russian lifted up slightly where he was sitting by his partner's side...right in the middle of the two, though Asahi kept slightly towards the edge on his end.

"He was skating at that one...!"

"Yeah!" Yuri smiled more innocently then, twisting aside and planting both hands on his husband's thigh, breaking out his Captain Fanboy hat for the first time in ages, "It was the only event he skated at all last year. He did his Free Skate right before me, and I went out last...so when the announcer read my numbers, there was a minute where neither of us could even believe it. I mean, Plisetsky and I broke his Short and Free World Records at the GPF before then, so Viktor went out of his way to reclaim his accolades at his big debut back to competition...and he did. But then I went out and stole the Free and Total score records right back from him 5 minutes later...and the Gold medal."

Viktor just crossed his arms as he wore an exaggerated frown, shadows under his eyes concealing the look within them.

"I still owe him another four World Championship Golds though, so I have my work cut out for me." Yuri went on, sighing nervously, "That's how I have to pay him back for being my coach all this time. I'd never be able to afford him otherwise."

"...But you're married to him."

"Damn right he is." Viktor chimed in finally, arms unclenching from his chest to reach around and clamp down on the younger man before him instead, drawing him tightly close, "But that was an agreement we made beforehand."

Yuri squeaked out a response as well as he could, given how he was being squeezed, "He said I could pay him back after I won Gold at the Grand Prix Final...but I won Silver..."

"You won Gold this time." The Russian corrected, not budging.

"Technically." The younger man managed, wiggling out of his partner's grasp well enough to squash his forehead to the Russian's cheek, "Now it's just going to be a running joke that I never win it on my own."

"...I don't know what you guys are talking about." Asahi said quietly, not specifically trying to interrupt, but confused anyway.

Yuri blinked back at him, "Oh...right, you weren't following anything..."

"How did you know about Yuri's 'Aria' then?" Viktor wondered, eyes going back to his partner as Yuri twisted to half-sit on his lap, facing towards him with his left leg folded between them, while still looking at the man beside them both.

"Cuz of me." Minako explained, picking Jiro up to rest the tired pup against her shoulder, "I showed Yuri's viral 'Aria,' the old Cup of China 'Yuri on Ice' program, and the Onsen on Ice 'Eros' Exhibition." She turned towards the confused athlete, "I still think you should go watch Yuri's other shows from last year. His Worlds Free Skate and all their Exhibitions from this season."

"Oh...okay..." Asahi nodded, "But about that other thing...?"

"I got hurt before the Final," Yuri started, "Viktor nearly pulled me, but I got to compete anyway...in
the end, I won Silver on my own, and Viktor won Gold, but he stepped down during the medaling ceremony and bumped everyone behind him up a notch. So, even though he won the Gold, I was the one who walked out with it...Otakab got Silver, and Yuri Plisetsky won Bronze."

"...Otakab...?" Asahi echoed, "...Not Chris?" There was a slightly dubious tone in his voice.

"Chris came in last, actually." Yuri explained, hands idly moving up and down the front of his partner's jacket, almost like he didn't even notice he was doing it, "It burned him pretty bad, because not only was he 6th, but he was the only skater in the group that didn't break 300 for their totals." He finished, watching the older figure for a response.

"Would it be mean of me to think that's what he gets?" Asahi finally asked aloud, hesitantly turning his eyes to the side to look at the pair beside him.

Yuri just smiled nervously and slid his hands all the way up to cover his husband's mouth, "I'm not sure it counts, since you weren't there." He pointed out, "We all kind of chalked it up to irony, because Chris actually beat out my Detroit friend, Phichit-kun, to get the 6th spot, but JJ Leroy lost his spot and Phichit-kun was allowed to fill it...and then he scored higher than Chris did."

"Why did JJ lose his spot?"

"I got hurt because JJ and I collided during practice that Thursday. I banged my head and JJ cut his Achilles. He'll be out until next season, at least."

"Oh...wow... Sucks to be him, I guess."

Viktor chortled a laugh under his husband's hands.

"Senpai, you don't like JJ either?" Asahi wondered.

The Russian brought his own hands up from where they'd been perched on his partner's waist, and gently nudged a finger at each of the younger man's wrists, "Before the accident, Leroy was beneath my notice. I didn't think he was interesting at all. His cocky attitude got under my skin, but up until the Final, I thought it was annoyingly harmless, so I basically ignored him. But...he was trying to hog the practice rink while Yuri and Otabek were trying to get a few minutes on the ice, and did a jump right into Yuri while he was doing a spin."

"...If I had slept after we landed, I would've known not to skate right where I was." Yuri pointed out, "I wasn't thinking clearly. My head was swimming that whole time."

"Yuri, you need to stop that..." Viktor half-argued.

"Stop what?"

"Trying to take partial responsibility for the stupid things other people to do you that make me mad." The Russian answered, making Asahi a bit nervous, "It doesn't matter if you were jet-lagged. That idiot still had to line up where he was going to jump from and land...and he chose to get dangerously close to where you were. If anyone around here got what they deserved, it was him."

"...I guess so." Yuri said, looking aside.

"Uhm...Senpai..." Asahi interjected quietly, "I should probably start to show Yuri the choreography...we don't have a lot of time..."
Yuri stood in the 'forbidden' zone at one end of the rink, between two big end-zone face-off circles in the ice meant for the hockey group. He watched and listened carefully as Asahi explained and then demonstrated the choreography described in the hallway earlier.

Sitting in the seating area above the skate-rental kiosk again, but more in the middle than to the side where they'd had their big 'group talk,' Viktor watched with Minako. Jiro snoozed on his lap, hands gently around his tiny body to keep him from sliding away, but the Russian's slate eyes stayed keenly on the ice.

"...You're handling this a lot better than I thought you would." Minako commented idly, nudging the man with one elbow.

"You're learning an awful lot of bad habits from my uncle." Viktor warned dryly, eyes unmoving.

The ballerina felt her hackles raise, but she was undaunted, "Is that the subtle accusation of meddling, I hear?"

"Yes."

"I wasn't meddling." She pointed out, "I was helping Asahi for his own sake. It had nothing to do with you two."

"And yet, here we are."

"By your choice."

Viktor grit his teeth.

"That's one thing that your uncle seems to forget about." Minako went on, "He treats you like he does his underage kids...the way a parent or guardian would, someone is responsible for the outcomes as much as the kids themselves are. I'm sure if he'd gotten to watch you grow up and be part of things all along, he'd know better."

"This isn't about him."

"No..." She shrugged, "But the point I'm trying to make relates in our different methods. He doesn't consider giving his kids much of a choice in things...if he does, it's only because he's already decided on the solutions, and he's letting them pick from a list of options that he's sorted out ahead of time. With me, I just lay the groundwork for opportunity...and give you the power to decide what to do with it. You chose to come, and I'm glad for that, because that's what I wanted...but if you'd decided not to, that's fine too. Whether or not you agreed had nothing to do with what I was doing with Asahi before that though."

"Yuri feels like you sided with Asahi over him." Viktor pointed out, "He won't say it outright, and he's kind of gotten over it at this point, but I could sense it. When you called earlier and said what you'd been up to...I could practically feel Yuri's heart drop through the floor just by the look in his eyes."

Minako's brow furrowed, "I expected that. It's why I didn't say anything before or while I was dealing with it. I already knew that when I told you both about it, it would come across better if I had something to show for it. If Asahi didn't respond, I probably would've never said anything."

"It was inappropriate."

"And again, I didn't plan ahead to do all that...I was just kind of winging it. And because of it,
Asahi’s gone from thinking you're too good for us peasants, to looking up to you and calling you Senpai, and he's apologized for what he did."

"To me. He still hasn't to Yuri directly."

"I think he's working up to that." Minako laced her fingers together over her lap, "I think he's trying to show Yuri the kind of person he wants to be seen as...helpful, kind, considerate...not the walking-talking wrecking-ball he was on Friday. He has a lot of work to do. He just needs the chance to do it."

Viktor leaned to his left, slightly away from the woman, and set his arm and elbow against the backrest to prop his knuckles against his cheek, "I guess I just don't understand why you'd go this far out of your way to help that guy. You barely knew he existed before this weekend, and yet after only a couple hours, you're inviting him to sleep in your hotel room? I bet my uncle was thrilled about that."

"Asahi’s young enough to be my kid, just like you and Yuri." She retorted, "And he was hurting. If he had been entirely remorseless about what he'd done to Yuri, I would've thought he could screw off. But that's not what the situation was...so I gave him the benefit of the doubt. I reached out to him for his sake, so even if it turned out that you and Yuri wanted nothing more to do with him in the end...at least Asahi still got some resolution out of it. Now he can go home and figure out the rest on his own."

"I'm still not comfortable with how you did all this." Viktor answered, lifting his head and turning to look at the woman next to him, "What if something happened? What if he did something to you?"

"I'm a big girl, Viktor. I can handle myself."

"You're not seeing it..." The Russian shook his head, then gestured with his free hand toward the ice, "I showed you the pictures of Yuri's arms...and Yuri's not weak. Saito still managed to pin him down enough to kiss him, and Yuri couldn't get away. Between Saito's history of being in advanced martial arts, and the apparent suicidal ball of emotions he was last night... And we weren't even in Osaka!"

"What would you have been able to do even if you were?" Minako wondered pointedly, "You two are set up in a completely different building from me...and I don't need either of you thinking you're responsible for my wellbeing. You're not my kids, and I'm not yours."

Viktor grumbled and sat roughly back again, forcing Jiro awake suddenly. Tired eyes looked around, but the pup settled his head down again soon after, and tried to go back to sleep.

"...I appreciate that you're worried about me...I really am. But I made a judgment call on this one, and put my trust in him to not repeat his mistake. He did fine."

"I wish you'd asked us first."

"You would've told me not to."

"And we would've had this same conversation about how you're your own woman who makes her own decisions...but at least then we would've been able to voice our concerns about it. It's like I've told Yuri a thousand times..." Viktor explained, gently rubbing his thumb across Jiro's back and shoulders, "If you get hurt, you're not the only person who suffers. I mean...we're family, aren't we?"

Minako was dumbfounded to hear the words.

"And I don't even mean because of this thing you have with my uncle..." The silver legend went on, "I mean us. You and me, and Yuri, and the Katsukis, Yurio too...and of course, my uncle and his
kids. When one of us hurts, we *all* hurt. There's a time and place to go by the idea that it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission...this wasn't one of them."

"That's a big chunk of wisdom coming from you, Mr. Impulsive." The ballerina retorted, moving her hands up to take the man's arm between them, "Did you learn that from Yuri?"

"He *is* doing his best to train me to think ahead more often. Don't tell him it's working though. I like that he keeps trying."

Minako just shook her head and laughed before resting the side of her jaw against the Russian's shoulder, "Your secret is safe with me."
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED NINETY

Though the ice still needed time to be resurfaced before the afternoon hockey group could skate, a small crowd had already gathered at the edges of the rink, watching the duo of figure skaters polishing their choreography. Precious few had any idea who or what they were doing though; hockey and figure skating didn't often overlap, save in passing.

Asahi was winded by the end of it, sweating a storm as he made that last glide towards the rink wall. He clutched his arms over the edge of it and held himself up - barely - heaving for air.

Yuri followed after casually, none worse for wear, and paused close by with a heel pick against the ice, "...It really is eerie how similar you and Viktor are. I'm having déjà vu all over again."

"...S-similar!?!" The older figure chortled in disbelief, looking back over a damp shoulder, "How is that...even possible? By all accounts...h-he and I are...galaxies apart in terms of having anything in common besides you and skating."

Yuri hesitated a moment, contemplating whether to explain or not. He mentally shrugged and moved his blade from heel-pick to toe-pick and pushed off to move again, "I guess it's just some stuff I've observed. Don't worry about it."

"Don't let him stroke-out on the ice, Yuri!" Minako called from overhead suddenly, waving down at them from her vantage on the raised seating area, "It'd look pretty bad for him to teach you all about the OCs only to not be able to participate in them himself."

"Haaaaai."

"Wait..." Asahi said, catching Yuri a bit off guard. He pushed up on the wall to straighten himself out, only for the look on his face to betray him slightly. The discomfort of being worn-down and exhausted was overtaken by the nervousness of a coming admission, and Asahi kept his eyes low, focusing on the yellow plastic stripe that lined the base of the wall. He swallowed anxiously and looked up, grey-brown eyes trying - but reluctant - to look directly into Yuri's. He drew a sharp breath and exhaled, "...I know that...what I did to you on Friday was wrong..."

Yuri held still where he was, feeling a flutter in his chest, but not sure what to do other than listen.

"...And all the things I said to you, too...the accusations, the criticisms, the doubts I had...I know I had no business voicing any of those opinions, especially given how I, quite literally, didn't know anything." Asahi went on, still unable to raise his glance higher than the younger man's chest or shoulder. He finally managed to catch his breath though, and spoke a bit more calmly, "I can't fathom how uncomfortable I must've made you just to tell you all that stuff that's ancient history, and to make you feel like I thought you owed me something for my trouble. It didn't really hit me until after the fact how stupid and wrong I was about all of it...and had been for so many years. I'm...honestly not sure that it ever would've been so clear to me unless it had been you that told me. Not even Riku could convince me that effectively. That what if question plagued me night and day..."

"It sounds like Riku really cared a lot about you." Yuri finally spoke, hands finding their way into his jacket pockets, "I wish I'd known him. Maybe things would've been different for everyone if I knew
what had happened to the both of you way back then."

"...Maybe..." Asahi lowered his eyes again, "You only really saw him that one time, at the last Nationals we all attended together...but you were so caught up in how badly you'd performed that you probably don't even remember him being there."

Yuri averted his gaze as well, "...Yeah..."

There was a strange pause then. Yuri wasn't sure if that was all the older figure wanted to say, and hesitated to start moving towards one of the doorways that lead back to rink-side. Hearing his husband calling out to him after arriving at the bottom of the stairs on the far end caught his attention, too.

"Yuri..."

Cherry-hazel eyes went back to Asahi, and he found the man finally looking at him straight-on. He held his ground though.

"There aren't words strong enough to describe how sorry I am for what I did to you." The older skater finally confessed, "I'm not even sure it's sane to expect - or even ask - for you to forgive me...not right now, or anytime in the future. I deserve what I get. I took something precious away from you, and I can't ever give it back, much as I wish I could."

Yuri wasn't really sure how to respond to that. He stood where he was, pensive and apprehensive at the whole thing, "Uhm..." His attention was again pulled away by the sound of Minako harping at Viktor about something, and he turned his head just in time to watch the Russian unclip their puppy from his harness and let him run freely on the ice. On instinct, and instant nervous panic, Yuri crouched down to one knee and clapped his hands, trying to get the pup's attention, "Jiro! Jiro, come to me!"

Asahi watched quietly, unsure if his words had even reached the man. Seeing the Akita come stumbling across the ice was at least a welcome reprieve from the awkwardness of the situation moments before. Still though, part of him wanted at least some kind of acknowledgement that his words had meant something, and he watched carefully as Yuri toed-off to get to the pup and pick him up off the ice.

Blades scratched quietly at the frost as Yuri flipped around in reverse, with Jiro against his chest and one shoulder, sliding through a few backward glides as he thought about how to answer.

_"I feel like I'm in the Twilight Zone or something._ He thought, patting the pup's head gently, even as the little creature wiggled in an attempt to get higher on his shoulder, _Hearing all these things from Asahi this weekend has just been weird. If it wasn't the way we yelled at each other on Friday, then this right now...it's all so different from how it was in the past. And how he's calling Viktor Senpai? I wish I could poke further into that one because it just doesn't make any sense to me... Maybe I just need to think about it for a while. He's never been this open before. I kind of feel blindsided by it, like it's not really happening._

"Yuri!" Viktor called, watching his space-cadet of a husband sliding to a stop, "The Zamboni's coming out! Come back!"

He twitched slightly as the words brought him back to earth, but Yuri nodded and leaned so his blades would arc him back towards the wall. When he got there, he handed Jiro back to his partner, hearing a bunch more words from the Russian but not really taking them in.
Asahi must be thinking he did something wrong by now because I haven't replied to him... I should say something...but I just don't know what.

Yuri turned his eyes a little to where Asahi was putting blade-guards on as he stepped from ice to the concrete floor. For a moment, he hesitated...but just as the older figure was putting his second guard down onto the ground, Yuri reached his hand out and grasped the edge of a shoulder. Nothing was spoken aloud, but Yuri held that shoulder for a few seconds, giving it a squeeze as he reassuringly pushed on it. He then let go again to accept a blade-guard from his husband, looking up as a few whispers came his way from the man on the other side of the wall.

Asahi blinked at him, lips slightly parted where he was sure he should say something, but was stupefied into lingering silence. He just closed his mouth again and stepped across to rink-side like he'd meant to, his brain feeling fuzzy in accompaniment to how his thoughts now sounded like static in his head.


The Russian grunted and his eye twitched, but it wasn't a fight worth starting, "Yuri and I are hungry. You should come with us."

Asahi was stunned into silence again.

"That sounds like a great id-" Minako started, only for Viktor to point a finger between her eyes and cut her off.

"Not you. Skaters only this time."

"What!? Viktor-" She protested.

"You did your part, Minako-sensei, you can stop being our chaperone." Yuri explained, "We'll see you at the Exhibition later."

"Oh." She deadpanned them awkwardly.

Asahi just turned his eyes between each of the other members of the group.

What are they planning...? Is this the ambush...?

It was a small café that was directly across the street from the skating rink, with a rustic set-up. Hardwood floors, a bar area with wooden stools lining it, and a mere three tables; one for a large group of 6-8, then a smaller circular table next to it for a duo, and beside that in turn, another circular table with seats for three.

Asahi practically shook like a leaf where he sat, back towards the open air of the café so he wouldn't feel trapped. Yuri sat ahead of him to the left, and Viktor ahead and to the right, their backs both towards the wall, and the thin staircase that went up over their heads. The pair of them seemed to have no difficulty finding things to talk about, and frequently spoke in Asahi's direction as well, though they barely got an answer of any kind out of him.

This is really weird. He thought in a stifled panic, I'm not used to this. This isn't okay. This is awful. I don't know what to do.
More words were spoken at him, but Asahi could do little more than nod, even though he hadn’t the slightest idea what had been said to him. He spotted Yuri smiling and then laughing about something, only for his attention to shift over to his phone for a moment. The younger figure's visage changed a bit, taking on a more serious tone as he clicked into the device and read something.

"Your tone shifted suddenly, my love." Viktor commented quietly, trying to look over his partner’s shoulder to see what had caught the man’s attention so suddenly, only for Yuri to playfully tilt away and out of his sight, "Uh oh, what are you up to?"

"Nothing." He mused, eyes and smile getting wider with each line of text he read, "Just getting what I want."

"Getting what you want? From someone other than me?" The Russian teased, "You have to tell me."

"No way, it'd ruin everything."

"Ruin everything!?" Viktor had both arms around the man in short order, all but gyrating against him in an effort to endear himself to Yuri's senses and admit the surprise, "What are you planning!?"

"You'll see, tonight."

Like earlier, Asahi's eyes moved back and forth between the duo, but he had no clue what to say. He focused his sights down towards the table, and the plate and cup that had been set in front of him some time earlier. He could still somewhat see the image of the coffee-foam artwork that had been drawn into his drink, but it was slowly-but-surely dissolving into unrecognizability.

"Asahi."

He twitched in surprise, lifting his face up to spot both skaters across the table staring back at him, "...H-Hai..."

"You look really nervous. Are you okay?" Yuri wondered, "You've barely said a word since we got here."

"...Sumimasen..."

"Viktor doesn't speak a lot of Japanese..."

"...S-Sumimasen..."

Yuri deadpanned him for a moment, but then leaned towards his partner to whisper, "I think we're intimidating him."

"Yeah, without Minako, he's shut down again. Maybe we shouldn't have told her to head out so early."

The younger figure nodded slightly, but then pulled back again, about to put his phone away, only to pause and keep it out. He looked at the black faceplate for a moment, clicking the phone on and sliding through a few home-screen panels before stopping back at the first one. His thumb hovered over the Instagram button, "...Asahi."

"...Huh?"

"You should get on social media."

"Eh?"
"Oh, yeah..." Viktor agreed, getting his phone out as well, "I should've thought of that."

"Why?" Asahi asked apprehensively, even if the answer seemed obvious.

"You've been so out of the loop on everything for so long...you'd have a much easier time keeping up with all us scattered friends if you had an account for us all to follow. Your fans would probably enjoy that, too." Yuri explained, "You don't even have to make any kind of regular updates, or show off anything all that specific...even just a photo of where you're at in any given moment would be enough."

"...But that's...just so personal, don't you think?"

"Well, I was never all that good at using social media anyway...most of the content people see about me is through what they see on Viktor's account."

"Oh..." Asahi looked to the Russian, examining the silver legend's phone case for lack of anything else to do or say. He realized it was a caricature of the elder skater's wine-colored 'Aria' costume...but only by half. The left side of the case was blue for some reason.

"Otabek has an account that he keeps private," Yuri pointed out, "You could do something like that until you're used to the platform, then you could open it up to other people. We'd be happy to promote your page if you wanted."

"...P-promote me!?" Asahi seemed horrified by the idea, "That's just-"

Viktor leaned forward against the table, held back by where his elbows hooked over the edges, "...Judging by your reactions, I can't help but wonder what you think social media is actually used for."

"I...er, uh...well...I mean..."

"Tell me."

Asahi just blanched, "S-Senpai...!?"

Yuri snuck his hand in under the Russian's arms and pressed it against the man's chest to nudge him back against his seat, giving their third wheel some space to breathe again, "Viktor's right...what do you think SMS is for...?"

"Uhm..." He started nervously, looking at the dissolving coffee-foam art again, "Posting photos of peoples' food, vacations, their kids and pets, reporting in on every moment of their day..." His face went a bit red after that, "...Naked pictures..."

The two across the table looked at one another, the urge to laugh hidden under the edge of their disbelief. Yuri shook his head and leaned down slightly to meet Asahi at his same level, "...It's true that some people use it for stuff like that, but not everyone does. We sure don't."

Viktor snapped a photo of his soup, then happily started typing...and speaking the letters out loud, "V...k...u...s...no~!"

"...Okay, for the most part, we don't..." Yuri corrected stiffly, sitting upright again after that, "Social media isn't necessarily about all that super-personal or negative stuff. Some people run their businesses online and will use social media to network with similar businesses, or reach out to clients and customers. A few skaters actually use it to help crowd-fund their careers. We use it to post about our lives, but only in a superficial way...lots of stuff that's public knowledge or that they could see for
themselves if they ran into us on the street. We played a game with fans while at Trophée de France by posting photos of where we were, so people could guess what rink we might be practicing at later on."

Asahi looked mortified, "...*People were able to track you down that way!?*

"Well, sure..." Yuri was a bit surprised at the man's reaction...though after a moment, he wasn't, "That was the whole point of the game... Viktor really enjoys interacting with his fans, and we had 2 weeks to kill in Paris before moving on to Bordeaux. We don't always do that kind of thing though."

"I'm not sure we're the best examples of what social media can be used for." Viktor pointed out, snaking his arm behind his partner's back, "At least not *me*... I post lots of stuff that he'd probably consider too personal."

"Well, that's okay." Yuri went scrolling through his feed, trying to find a better example...and found one, though he grimaced as he clicked into the account's main profile, "Here...this page is all business. Nothing but photos from skating events...stuff you'd see on television." He held the device out nervously, "This page is run by the triplets who took the video of me that went viral. They're huge fans of ours, so they basically chronicle our competitions and practices for fans all over the world."

Asahi examined the screen, seeing a forest of small square thumbnails on a white background. He was initially impressed by the number of images, but when he reached across the table and poked at the most recent one, he saw it expand to show a telltale image.

**viktuuri**
[image: Japanese Nationals podium lineup]

12,815 likes

**viktuuri** Congrats to @v-nikiforov for Gold and @y-nikiforov for Bronze! You guys worked so hard and skated so well *more*

Load more comments

**phichit-chu** Congrats! I can't wait to skate against you guys again in Colorado next month!

**christophe-ge** Is that Dickbutt on the bottom left trying not to be near you two? How precious. Leave it to you to steal Gold at your first JSF event though, Viktor. Leave something for the rest of your new teammates, right?

Asahi's eyes narrowed at the sight of it, and he recoiled back into his seat, "...Yeah..."

"Huh?" Yuri was surprised by the reaction and turned his phone around to see what was so upsetting, and saw nothing at first. He scrolled the image higher on the page until Chris' comment was in the middle, "Oh..."

"What's wrong?" Viktor wondered, sipping at his tea briefly.

"Chris commented on the pic the triplets posted of us three on the podium last night."

"...So?"

Yuri leveled a flat look, "Chris was the one who came up with that cruel nickname that I used on Asahi when we first ran into him, remember?"

Slate eyes blinked, but Viktor put on a good show anyway and smiled, "Oh, sure...of course."

"You forgot."
"Only that Chris was the one who came up with it." The silver legend defended, "Hard to forget the nickname itself."

Asahi seemed to recoil into himself, somehow sinking even further beneath his side of the table. He let out a quiet sigh, "...I never used to hear the end of it from him."

"Eh?" Both wondered at the same time.

"You knew him back in Juniors though, right?" Viktor wondered.

"Hai, Senpai."

"But he was so cute and little back then..."

Grey-brown eyes lifted slightly toward the Russian, but no words were said.

"...Mmmhh..." Viktor grumbled and sat back again, "I have a hard time imagining that Chris being a bully."

Yuri held his tongue for a moment, looking from his partner to the man sitting across from them. He sat back as well, a finger on his chin in thought, "I don't know that Chris was purposefully cruel, but...thinking back on it, the stuff that we all thought was funny... Well, I mean, in light of what we learned this weekend, it probably wasn't funny at all to Asahi."

"What did he do...?" The Russian was morbidly curious.

"What didn't he do?" Asahi corrected, "It wasn't just the nickname. Chris was...always very extravagant...and his mannerisms were over-the-top, nigh unbearable."

"That's just how he is though."

Yuri rubbed the side of his forehead as he tried to wrack his brain for memories of those days, "I'm having a hard time remembering anything from back then. So much of what I focused on what either myself, the sport, or you and Yu-chan..."

Both of them looked to Asahi after that, wordlessly asking for a bit of elaboration. He just sighed and tried to sit up straighter, "Let's just say that Chris never had any doubt about what he is, and he didn't care one bit what anyone thought of him for it. He would even..." His words trailed slightly, but he looked to Yuri for help.

"...What did he do?" Yuri asked.

"Well, you should remember...he did it to you..."

"Oh, the thing where he'd half-way feel me up sometimes, just to make me squirm?"

Asahi nodded.

Viktor just laughed at that, "But that's harmless! He did it to Yuri at Cup of China last year, too!"

"It wasn't harmless to me." The other figure said quietly, lowering his head, "...How do I even explain it though? You and him are friendly. You probably think he can do no harm."

The Russian scoffed, "That's not true. I've seen how Chris goes after people sometimes. He told Leroy to go suck on a tit once."
Both Japanese skaters' faces went red to hear *those* words.

"Oh yeah, it was at the GPF in Sochi 2 years ago." Viktor recalled, "We were waiting together just off of rink-side to get called out for the podium. Leroy was being his usually-unbearable self, boasting about something or another...I don't even remember what it was now. Chris and I were just...kind of gawking at him with these *thoroughly* unimpressed looks on our faces. We're both so much older than he is, and *whatever* he was on about just annoyed both of us, like...who is this kid? So Chris just takes a step towards him and says, 'You sound like a baby. If your girlfriend won't let you suck on her tit, why don't you go find your mother?'"

Red faces grew even darker.

Viktor gave an uneasy smile, "...Well, *I* thought it was hilarious... It was probably the only reason I got through that victory lap. It gave me *something* to smile about, because winning Gold again sure didn't do it."

Imaginary signs suddenly manifested over both Yuri and Asahi.

*Last Place at Sochi.*

*Didn't go to Sochi.*

Viktor deadpanned them, "...Sorry, I think?" He shook his head to clear the thought, "Anyway, this wasn't supposed to be my story...we were asking what Chris did to you."

"...H-hai...Senpai..." Asahi looked back down at the dissolving foam. He couldn't even tell anymore what it was supposed to once have been. He closed his eyes then and thought back on those uncomfortable days, "Just don't be mad at me for this?"

"*Mad* at you?" The duo echoed.

"Chris zeroed in on me once. I forget what event it was at...it was ages before Sochi though. You know how he gets when he's warming up for certain shows though..." He began hesitantly, "Well, I tend to meditate if I'm not stretching. He found me and started picking on me for it. Maybe something in me snapped, because normally I can just put whatever's happening around me down and ignore it...but he put his hands on me and forced me to react. It's likely he only thought he was being inappropriately funny again like he does with Yuri, but...to me, he crossed a line. Before I could even think, I...had him on the ground in a headlock."

The pair gaped at him, "You did *what*?"

"It was instinct! It was over before I realized it even began!" Asahi protested, "He just kept pushing and pushing...maybe it was worse because it was *him* and he's so out about everything, while I was...am...still so far back in the closet that I don't even know what *direction* the door is in. He just set me off that day. He was doing all these really hyper-sexual stretches, getting closer with each set...then he tried leaning against my back, and that's...when I lost it."

"**DRAG ME INTO YOUR STUPID PERVERTED BULLSHIT AGAIN, I DARE YOU.**" Asahi yelled, eyes practically white from his rage, the Swiss figure wrapped up like a pretzel under him, "**YOU'LL BE GETTING CALLED OUT ONTO THE ICE AS CHRISTOPHE CASTRATI WHEN I'M DONE...!**"
"...He gave me peace for the rest of the weekend, but he still called me by that stupid name, especially when we were around other people." He went on nervously, "I've never done that kind of thing to anyone before or since."

"Wow~!" Viktor chimed, "He definitely never told me about that..."

"I can't imagine he would admit that happened." Yuri said nervously, "It's hard to imagine that it even has."

"At least I don't have to compete against him..." Asahi added with a sigh, "Not anytime soon, anyway."

"He'll be at the Olympics, I'm sure of it." Viktor pointed out, "We don't need to have another weekend like this though. I'll nip it in the bud before we get there." He went on, pulling up Instagram on his phone.

Yuri watched him seeking for the triplets' 'viktuuri' page, only to pull up the photo from earlier and tag Chris in a reply, "What are you doing...?" He wondered curiously.

"Nipping it in the bud." The Russian repeated, "At...Chris... Thanks...I'll...try." He said, reading his typing as he wrote it, "And yes...that is...Asahi Saito in all caps... Please...don't...be an ass. He...worked...hard. There, done." He posted the comment, and held his phone out for the younger skater to see, "He'll listen to me."

"Who doesn't listen to you?" Yuri quipped.

"...Yurio, Yakov, Mila, Georgi, my uncle..." Viktor listed, counting them on his fingers, "Basically all the Russians I know." He laughed, "No respect at all! It's heartbreaking."

Asahi was still gaping at the words the elder skater had spoken beforehand, eyes wide. He shook the confusion away and leveled the figure, "...Why are you defending me like this? Just two hours ago, you were ready to hang me out to dry."

"You're already dry. You did that to yourself." Viktor pointed out, putting his phone away again before reaching for his tea, "And I'm not entirely without reasoning ability. It's a long road that we have to travel before I'm ready to forgive you for what happened, considering I'll be looking at the reminders of it every day for the next week or two...but that doesn't mean I can't be civil on the way."

Yuri looked away slightly, a bit sheepish over knowing what his partner was referring to, ...My arms, my back...every time someone re-posts the video of me fainting...every photo of the awkward podium...

"...Reminders?" Asahi echoed, sinking again, "You mean...the bruises...?" He could feel the nervous sweat on the back of his neck as he looked down at the tabletop.

"There's more going on than just that, but...yes." Viktor confirmed, taking a sip, "When you completely give your heart and soul to someone, any slight against that person is a slight against yourself, too. It's hard to explain. It's not just being offended alongside that person for posterity's sake...you feel it. You're not the first person to do something that has hurt Yuri, and me in turn, and so long as we live, you won't be the last either. I mean, when Yuri wanted to visit Leroy in the hospital after the accident in Detroit, I refused to follow, because I knew what I'd say if I saw that idiot's face again so soon. What he did is unforgivable. His callous, arrogant indifference and selfish
attitude knocked Yuri unconscious for hours, and Yuri came dangerously close to having to drop out of the Final for it."

The skater in question kept quiet, but he moved his hand over, under the table, and set it against his partner's thigh.

Asahi was silent as well.

Viktor sipped his tea again before he set the cup down, "Saito...as angry as I was at you for what you did to Yuri...and as angry as I still am, under the surface...I can see that you're trying to make amends, and that makes all the difference."

It made Asahi feel a little better, but he still had that lingering stain of guilt behind everything else, "...Thanks..."

"It's going to be a harder road for you though, I imagine," Viktor went on, "After this weekend, you should probably work on putting your feelings for Riku to bed finally. Minako mentioned that you had the strongest case of survivor's guilt she'd ever seen or heard of...and then, there's all the rest of what came up last night, too." The Russian pointed at the other figure casually, "You have a lot of really negative feelings floating around inside you. It's been two years now...I don't want you to hold it all in like I did, for over 20."

"...Over 20 years!?" Asahi was stunned, "W-what, why!?"

Viktor hesitated a moment, but he felt the hand on his leg give a gentle squeeze, and he nodded to himself mentally, "Because for all our differences...you and I are eerily alike. Your backstory is my backstory, with noted exceptions."

"...I...don't understand."

"The backwards family that expected me to fit into the brick-and-mortar plan of life that they had, their objection to me making my own choices about my life... I left home at a really early age to do skating, and I became estranged from my family as a result. When I was reconnected with them last year, it...was a difficult thing to go through." He explained, surprising his partner as he went, "I took a few kicks to the ribs and a fist in the eye, twice in a row, over my relationship with Yuri." He confessed, strangely, "But in all honesty, I would do it again. No question. The last two years I've had with Yuri have made everything else completely worth it. I wouldn't give it up for the world."

Yuri's face flushed again. He leaned where he sat, pressing his shoulder against his husband's arm. The arm that was still around his back held him a little tighter, and a kiss pressed to the top of his head.

"I know it can be scary and difficult to do things that people close to you don't like or approve of," Viktor continued, pressing his cheek to his spouse's crown, "But the only person who can live your life is you. If you give other people the power to decide how you get to live it, you're not really living at all...so you have to do what makes you happy. I mean, it's impossible to please everyone, but in the end, the only person whose opinion should really matter to you is your own. As it happens, you're into guys. There's nothing wrong with that."

Yuri nodded and lifted his head a little, "It's not like there was ever a choice anyway. People always act like there's some switch that you can turn on or off at will...and completely neglect the fact that they themselves don't even have that power."

"...What about you though? All that talk about Yuuko back then."
Yuri gave a weird smile, "I'm not into guys. I'm into Viktor."

"Viktorsexual." The Russian laughed in agreement.

Asahi just balked a little, "...Yeah..."

"Did your parents ever threaten you over your preferences?" Viktor wondered, leaning back against his seat again.

"No...but the weight of their disappointment was crippling in its own way." Asahi explained sullenly.

"You don't even live with them though. What difference does it make now?"

"They still pay my way in life." He answered, "They've threatened to take it away if they ever found out I was involved with someone they didn't approve of."

"...But you were going to tell them about you and Itō in Kyoto."

"Riku was..." Asahi lowered his head down again, this time over where he folded his arms against the edge of the table, "...He was going to take me in if my parents took away my resources."

"And how was he affording it?" Viktor wondered, sincerely curious.

"He was in school. Skating was just a hobby of his, so he didn't train as extensively as people like us do." He explained, "His family paid for it so long as his grades didn't suffer. We...actually lived together in his apartment after the Sochi Final. That's part of why he was so sure he could handle it if my family cut me off, because he was already supporting me anyway."

"...From Sochi to Nationals was only two weeks though. How could he have known?"

"...I can't say our plan was perfect or well thought out." Asahi sighed, looking aside, "We just wanted to be free."

Viktor wanted to press further, but he realized quickly that it was a moot point. He could tell that the younger figure was starting to get soggy on the issue anyway.

Pointing out all the flaws in his and Itō's plans won't really help this situation, He thought to himself, propping a finger on his lips, his other hand gently going up and down his husband's back, He's really in a weird situation if he's counting on his parents to afford the skating. He really, really needs a better source of income...

Yuri squeezed the Russian's leg again to get his attention, and slate eyes turned his way, "He needs to get on social media. We gotta help him learn to network and crowd-fund so he can be on his own."

"Agreed."

"Asahi," Yuri started, speaking across the table again. He spotted the older figure twitch slightly to be called out directly again, "Go download the Instagram app. We're going to help you get off the family teat."

"...Family teat?" Asahi echoed incredulously, even as he pulled his phone up. He was surprised to remember that he already had the app after he'd gone looking for the silver legend's social media presence earlier in the weekend.
"You're incredibly popular, and a lot of fans are willing to help skaters afford to keep skating...but you have to get online so they know where to send the money." Yuri explained, "I'm shocked your coaches haven't forced you to do it already...but...I guess, if your family was paying them, they didn't really have reason to care one way or another." He shook his head, "In any case, get Instagram and make an account. Tell us the name you pick and we'll link to our pages, then all of our fans will see it and spread the word. We'll get you set up so people just see a donate button without you having to ask."

"...O-Oh... ...Okay..."
Chapter Notes

Ch390 was expanded so if the last thing you read was about Yuri pointing out that Viktor forgot the lore behind Asahi’s nickname, go back and read the new stuff or 391 won’t make as much sense.

CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED NINETY ONE
v-nikiforov @y-nikiforov and I want to extend a formal welcome to @official-saito-asahi Instagram. He's totally new to social media so everyone please go easy on him. #NeedsSponsors #PleaseSendMoney #JiroAkita #AllJapanMedalists #JNCExhibition #CoffeeIsLunchOfChampions @viktuuri
Lights were out on the audience, focused instead on the circular island of carpet that overtook the first third of the rink. Small specks of light dotted the edge around the entire circumference, giving an eerie glow to the five taiko drummers and two flutists scattered within it. Three of the group played hard on medium sized *chū-daiko* drums, leaning back from their tilted faces with their ankles hooked into grooves on the sides. As the intensity of the performance waxed and waned, the two remaining drummers jumped in and out on their smaller *shime-daiko* drums, with one of the flutists occasionally stepping up to their own as well.

Local skaters were starting to gather in the wings, holding their stick-mounted ribbons close to their frames for lack of space on rink-side. When the moment came, and the drummers hammered on their instruments even harder, the lights on the ice switched, and the skaters embarked onto it like a flock of starlings, ribbons fluttering out around them in every direction. Most were white, and their associated skating outfits were made to match, while perhaps a quarter of their number carried ribbons and wore costumes of red. They wove in and out through one another with an energy to match the music. By the end of it, the red skaters took hold of the end of the white ribbons and pulled them to center, while the reverse was true towards the outside. On the last note, they all stopped moving; the red skaters facing out from a circle they formed in the middle, with the white facing inward, their streamers creating lines between them.

From the audience, it was clear to see that the red and white stripes, and the positions of the skaters themselves, corresponded with the imagery of Japan's Imperial 'Rising Sun' flag. Common at sporting events, especially in support of the Japanese athletes, it was a welcome sight that earned a grand applause from the crowd.

Not missing a beat though, the show progressed, and a figure in a wide, ballroom-esque dress stepped into the midst of the group. Her dress was a muted silver, with bright scarlet swaths draped around it. A cape hung from behind her back, and an elaborate back-plate rose up in an arc across her shoulders and behind her head.

In the wake of the original group, the Exhibition's skaters were assembled at rink-side by the doors, blade-guards off and ready to fly out onto the ice on cue.

Sighing, Viktor held to the peripheries, holding Jiro up against his shoulder while Yuri stood close by, "I'm so jealous. I want to go out there..."

"Consider it an investment," The younger said quietly, giving the pup a few head-scratches before moving out in front of his partner.

They had mere seconds left, but Yuri handed off his jacket, revealing his solo-Exhibition outfit underneath. Without the rules of the competition holding back his choices, Yuri's costume looked quite a bit like the street-clothes of his 'The Ghost' ensemble, though the color scheme was a bit darker. He wore a loose white t-shirt with a black jacket on top, open in front, studded around the shoulders and back in silver and gunmetal. The pants were of the 'Body Engineer YUREI jogger ANTHRACITE' variety; medium grey with darker grey stripes around the thighs.

"If you don't skate tonight then you can skate later." Yuri finished, accepting his husband's surrender to the fact as easily as he accepted the kiss that came quickly after. He reached his hands up and ruffled his hair a little bit, giving it a slightly messy look, and copped a quick slide down his partner's backside before joining the mass at the doorway with Asahi.

Viktor sighed and waved, then stepped aside to avoid being run down.
The ball-gown-wearing woman in the rink suddenly cried out, raising one arm up to the side, then the other, then both at once. The taiko drummers played anew to the beat of the music, and the ice was bathed in red and purple light.

['A Beautiful Song (Simone)' - NieR: Automata OST, on 'Handsome Jack' channel for intro]

It-su me rron Risi pahl ste
Menn tom rrom Fresty vome
Tse snaff

Skaters flew across the frost from both entrances, stretching out into two lines before weaving through one another, pausing, turning around, weaving through again, and then stopping on the cut-off.

Suyaf ta
Safian fe churi
Kiyat-la
To terus tsetnia

The singer stepped off the carpet and onto the frost, dress concealing the skates she walked on, toe-picks down for the moment to control the slow speed. Skaters zipped all around her as she went further forward, converging into curved lines that rotated around her like windmill blades.

Ainen bi

Two of the four lines stopped, twisted around, and started moving in the opposite direction, each of them weaving through the coming group in tandem.

Tuw elun Mafto
I fi yun ni rronta sity

The remaining two wings that hadn't changed direction then suddenly dispersed, scattering around like rogue ping-pong balls on the ice, 'bouncing' off the rink-wall and heading off into new directions.

Frres vome risi
Risi mo tsom
Risi men som rrome

The Ladies Gold medalist, and Yuri in substitution for Viktor, pulled out from the wall to skate around the figure in center. The 'windmill blades' parted to let them through as they built up speed, gliding in the opposite direction as their rotation, making their way all the way around to the opposite side before each of them bent around into an outside spread-eagle.

I kendio ston

They both launched through an Axel jump, the Ladies with a triple and Yuri through the quad. They landed smoothly and arced over themselves into another outside spread-eagle to 'split' the blades again as they came around.

Dhis tomen so
Musweede davi saza

The Ice Dance medalists pushed into the fray after that, all three duos spreading out and thrusting themselves into various pair-spins. The 'blades' broke up even more as they passed over each one,
until the 'singer' in red released them to disperse. With that, the three Pairs medalists and the remaining Ladies spread all around the ice, joining those who had already moved away.

_Yazwi toreo_  
_Fizi se hela_  
_Yageto rze i magite_  
_Metwi de elessa_

The spins moved off, and the rest slid through in a grid pattern, pushing off the wall towards and through one another, parting just enough to get around the red singer. Once on the other side from where they'd started, most of the skaters started following the rink-wall, moving around in a big clockwise circle while the Pairs medalists stayed in center to show off a few special spin-lifts.

_Dei_  
_O midi saqwale e_

The group suddenly stopped in place, each of them turning to face the same direction, reaching out one hand as they followed it down into a low bow towards their forward blades.

_Span matle qireto e_

They rotated in place, dragging their toe-picks along as they moved, then slowly started moving gain around and through one another. The red singer joined them in the meandering, with skaters she neared speeding off as though she repelled them somehow, like the wrong sides of two magnets coming close to one another and resisting contact.

_Onn matle seqwale e_  
_Ize_  
[End 2:05 - Skip to 8:07]

All skaters dropped to one knee, bowing their heads down as the lights went back to focus on the taiko drummers for a moment, who hammered on their instruments in time with the beat. The lights then switched back to the ice; the singer had stopped in the center of the open space, and skaters were pushing off to slide around her.

_Suyaf ta_  
_Safian fe churi_  
_Kiyat-la_  
_To terus tsetnia_

They formed two big single-file lines, moving around the ice in wide, serpentine paths, cutting through one another where they switched sides of the rink.

_Aînen bi_  
_Twu elun Mafto_  
_I fi yun ni rronta sity_

The music was already starting to fade, and the athletes' lines were losing cohesion as they all started to spread out. The red singer slid towards the safety of the rink wall while a few of the skaters quickly put a few last jumps on display.

_Frres vome risi_  
_Risi mo tsom_  
_Risi men som rrome...
Everyone was on the wall by the time the music died out, and the arena slowly lit up to normal. The skaters clapped excitedly as much as the audience did, and they all bowed their gratitude towards the crowd before gathering up in a smaller space in the center of the rink.

[The JSF would like to extend its gratitude to all the athletes who are here for the Exhibition Gala tonight in Osaka.] The announcer called overhead, giving the signal for the huddle to disperse and skaters to leave the ice for rink-side again. [We are happy to have everyone join us as well, as we celebrate these competitors for an evening of fun and a more relaxed atmosphere before they venture forward into the new year, and a season finale seen only every four years. Let's hear it for the All Japan Championship Exhibition Gala!]

The audience roared and clapped, until the taiko drummers and the singer and the big carpet were completely removed, and only one skater remained close to the rink. The lights died down again, plunging the crowd into complete black, and the Ladies Bronze medalist ventured under the spotlights in center, wearing something that could only be described as an oriental variation on the famed Zatanna outfit.

Yuri went quickly to get his blade-guards on again and seek for his partner, finding the Russian and their pup close to the doorway to the waiting area. Asahi followed nervously after him, but kept a safe distance anyway, watching their fond interactions in the dark.

...It gets easier to look at them with every passing hour... I wonder if this means I've really found some kind of peace with everything that's happened?

"C'mon, Asahi, let's get under before it gets too loud out here." Yuri commented, waving the man over as Viktor pulled up the dark blue curtain.

Like a human-sized puppy, Asahi followed on command, pulling his jacket on as he went. He spotted his team just within, each of them with stunned looks on their faces. Nagisa came rushing up first, phone in-hand, "Asahi! Look!"

"What?" He wondered hazily, the bright lights making him squint. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust, but when he looked at the phone's screen, he spotted something he hadn't expected.

Seeing the numbers made the skater's hand rise to cover his mouth without him even realizing.

"Look at how many people are already following your account! This is incredible!" His coach was saying, "But you won't believe this other part..." She turned the phone back to herself and started clicking around until she switched to a different tabbed page, then turned it over again, "Look how much money people have already pledged on your GoFundMe account...you've gotten more than 40
times what you asked for, and this is just to start. Your Patreon has a bunch of people signed up on repeating donations already, too!"

"...What...?"

Yuri and Viktor watched quietly, though the Russian already had his phone up and was clandestinely recording the entire thing while Yuri took Jiro for a moment to give him room. Viktor looked up over his screen when he realized the mood shifted, "Uh oh..."

"Eh?"

Asahi suddenly dropped to his knees, barely able to hold himself up. He could hardly breathe he was in so much shock.

Yuri rushed forward, popping into Viktor's video unexpectedly, but went down to a knee as well beside the stunned figure and set a hand on the man's back, "You okay? Do you need water? What's happened?"

The athlete's eyes were already filled with tears of disbelief, "...I...I've already raised more than $20,000..." He admitted in a quiet voice, "And I thought...you two were insane when you said I should set it to $5,000..."

"You only let us put $500," Yuri reminded, making a face, "But we told you...all you needed was a way for people to find you. Now you can afford to live your own life. Just don't go spending it all in one place, okay? You're going to have to learn to manage it in a big hurry so you can make it last."

Asahi nodded, though his head felt as fuzzy and weird again, like it had earlier in the day, "This is too much...I can't..."

"What do you mean?" Yuri wondered nervously, pushing up to his feet again, learning forward a bit with Jiro in one arm and a hand on the man's shoulder, "Outside of our winnings, this is how Viktor and I live. You'll probably see it taper off and settle down at less than what it caps at, since people will be excited to donate now given how you've only just turned up online suddenly...but if you keep up your social media presence, and foster those relationships with fans, even from a distance...you should be able to manage something steady."

"...H-how much do you guys get?"

That just made Yuri give a bit of a laugh, "More for Viktor than me, to say the least...but that's partly my fault because I post on his account more than my own. People probably think I don't pay attention to it. The numbers don't matter though. If I tell you what we get then you'll just compare yourself all the time. Suffice it to say, it's enough for us to live."

"...This is all so unreal..." Asahi went on, accepting the hand that was offered to him and getting back up to his blade-guards, only then noticing all the people who'd been standing around them, watching and curious as to why he'd collapsed. He turned his eyes back to Yuri though when he heard the man's voice start again.

"It's a lot to get used to. Viktor had to teach me how to make the most of it, too...and even now, I still resist, because it's really not my thing." He explained, "I kind of consider Viktor's account to be our account."

"And I keep telling you to post more on yoouuurrrssss," Viktor commented, still holding up his phone...still recording. He flipped the device around and shook his head for the camera with a 'do
you see what I put up with?" look on his face before turning it back again, "You were so worried before about what would happen to our income after the RSF fired me. If you used your Instagram more consistently, you'd have your own big donation pool to count on, not just mine."

Yuri deadpanned, though he had his back to his partner so Viktor wouldn't see, "Yeah yeah...I will...eventually..." He huffed, but then turned his focus back to Asahi, "Anyway...keep an eye on how things progress. I'd say you should have a good idea of how things will settle down for you by the end of next month. Give people time to find you...and remember to post stuff."

"Taking advice from a guy who sucks at using social media is always a wise idea." Viktor added, a smarmy tone in his voice.

Yuri just turned his head and gaped, "Do as I say, not as I do."

"Yes dear, always."

"Viktor-

The Russian couldn't help but laugh.

"...I must be dreaming..." Asahi said, mostly to himself, even as he accepted his own phone from his choreographer a moment later. He closed his eyes and shook his head before turning it on and finding the Instagram app, suddenly looking on in even more shock at the numbers he was seeing in their little red circles at the top and bottom of the page, "What in the world...?"

"Oh, those are all interactions with your page." Yuri explained, pointing with his free hand, "These here are specifically for the public side...Follows, Comments, Likes and such...and those are for direct messages. It's impossible to answer all of them, so what Viktor and I do is we make a post specifically to address everyone in a generic way."

"...How?"

"Oh...either with a photo and a comment, or we'll do a video. Viktor had me do a video after Skate Canada because I didn't go to the Exhibition or the Banquet. I was kind of sick after my Short Program...so I wanted to apologize. The best way to let everyone know what was going on was to make a video on Instagram to explain it. By the time we got to Paris, all had been forgiven and forgotten." Yuri commented, "You could make a thank you video!"

"...Just thank you? Wouldn't it be better as a picture then?"

"No no, you say more than just thanks," Yuri chortled, then pointed again, "Here, I'll do it with you. Just hit that button there and start a video post."

Viktor was fascinated, but kept on recording, commenting quietly so only his own phone would pick it up, "Here we have Dr. Yuri Nikiforov, professor of the human mind at 'Too Friggin Cute' University, helping a new fledgling learn to fly for the first time. As you can see, this is Dr. Nikiforov's third natural habitat...the first being at home with me, second being on the ice." He narrated, starting to circle around them slowly, even as Yuri instructed Asahi to hold the phone up so they'd both be in view, "It would appear that Dr. Nikiforov is offering instruction. It's possible I can get closer without scaring the fledgling away...let's try."

"Viktor, what are you doing?" Yuri suddenly wondered, spotting his husband creeping in the background of the video they were making, "Are you still recording from earlier?"

"...Dr. Nikiforov has spotted me. I've heard that you can blend into the crowd if you don't move. I'll
try that now."

"I can still see you!"

"He isn't approaching. This must be a safe vantage point." Viktor went on, eyes still on his screen, though he looked up over it for a moment and gave his partner a wink.

Yuri's face flushed, but he quickly shook it out and went back to the video Asahi was trying to make, "...Sorry about that." He spoke up, redoubling his efforts, "My husband is behind us, being an ultra-dork."

Asahi gave a nervous smile at that, "...Anyway, we're here behind the scenes at the All Japan Exhibition, and I just saw how many people have already found my account." He started saying, tilting his screen to get a better view of himself, Yuri, and then "Thanks to Yuri and Viktor, of course."

"Everyone please continue to show your love and support as Asahi learns the ropes of using social media! This is a long-time coming, and there's going to be much more to come in the future!" Yuri added.

"Please forgive me if I make some dumb mistakes in the beginning." Asahi went on, "But thank you to everyone who's already found me and pledged your support. I hope you'll all watch me tonight when I go out for my turn in about thirty minutes. Bye for now."

"Byyyyye~!" Yuri reached down to gently wiggle Jiro's paw as though in a wave.

"Davaaaaaaai~!" Viktor called from the background.

Asahi's phone was then pulled down again, and Yuri pointed out how to end the recording so the video could be given a caption and then posted. The Russian still recorded the whole thing though.

"Fledgling Saito's first flight...and you're seeing it all here on v-nikiforov TV."

"Ignore him." Yuri grimaced, giving his spouse another look, though inwardly he thought it was pretty funny anyway, "You can put tags here if you want like we showed you before...the hashtag is for topics, and the 'at' symbol is specifically for other people on Instagram, so remember their names."

"Yours was what, y-nikiforov?"

"Yeah, and Viktor's is with a V. We're easy. My friend Phichit-kun uses phichit-chu and the Russian Yuri uses his whole name, so just be sure you know who you're tagging and how they spell it, otherwise you might tag someone else entirely, or no one at all."

After putting in his tags, the younger skater hesitated, thumb hovering over the last button before it would start the upload.

"What's wrong? Do you want to do it over again?"

"No..." Asahi shook his head, "...I just...remembered something."

"Remembered...?"

"Last night," He tried to explain, "I'm not...sure if it was a dream or if it really happened, or what, but... I thought I...got to talk to Riku again, and he mentioned that his phone survived the accident..."
Viktor quickly cut off his own recording and listened more seriously than before.

"If that's true...there's only one place where it might be." Asahi continued, looking directly to Jiro, then finally up to Yuri, "His parents would've gotten it back with all his other things from Tokyo. If it's still functional, and they have it...I...I know the password."

Yuri was stunned, but then looked hopeful, "You should check it out. Where did you say he lived?"

"Wakkanai."

"Yeeeeeeesh that's on the complete opposite side of the country from Imari..."

"...I know..." He sighed. For a moment, the memory pained him, but he shook it away for the moment, and finally let himself hit Post on the video. He lifted his head, and turned towards the silver legend standing behind him, "Once this competition is over...no matter what happens, I'm going to make plans to travel there and see what I can find."

"I agree." Viktor nodded.

"Senpai..." Asahi added, a bit nervously, "...Maybe you don't care, or maybe you'll think it funny...but, Riku once told me...he could see Russia from there."

"Russia...?" He echoed, "Oh, yeah...Sakhalin Island. Other than a short ferry to the mainland, you could take a train all the way from there to Moscow and St. Petersburg. There's even a whole touristy thing where you can take the Trans-Siberian Railway from Vladivostok, which is pretty close to there, all the way to London."

"Wow!" Yuri chimed, "Maybe we should do that sometime?"

"It's a week-long trip, but sure, why not? It'd have to be a summer thing though. Make the most of the daylight and actually see what kind of countryside we're traveling through."

"Yeah! We'll do that for the start of our summer trip to Germany! Then we can stop by St. Petersburg and look at the Summer Garden like you said we should."

Asahi listened to the back-and-forth quietly, but then turned his attention to his phone, and saw that the video had finished uploading. He drew a nervous breath and closed the screen.

*Everything is going to change after this weekend...*
Half-watching the Exhibition from the prep-area, and half-watching Instagram, Yuri was amazed at how many comments had been posted to his partner's account regarding the 'welcome to social media' update Viktor had made.

More specifically...regarding their puppy.

"Viktor, look at this," He started, holding up his phone so the Russian could see it from his usual place on one shoulder. Jiro himself was on the ground, playing guardian to Viktor's sore ankle as proverbial 'giants' wandered all around them, "They obviously got the point about Following Asahi's account, but...most of them are flipping out about our furry son."

"Rightly so." The silver legend mused, reading a few comments while he could. He hugged his spouse a little tighter before nuzzling against the edge of that pale neck, "I wonder what would happen if we made an Instagram account just for the boys."

"Makka and Jiro..." Yuri shook his head and laughed a little, "Watch them become even more internet-famous than the both of us."

"I would be okay with that. They are pretty cute."

"I'll make one just for fun then...see what happens." He added, turning slightly in place to lean one arm against his partner's chest. Viktor repositioned him slightly to make it easier to see the television past his head, leaving Yuri to hug the arm that came around his chest and side, feeling his partner's free hand sliding up and down his back. He rested his head against the edge of the man's shoulder and focused on his phone, thinking the whole idea even funnier as he got closer to establishing the account. Once it was done and he was ready to upload pictures, he sighed dramatically at his own expense and leaned even harder against the man holding him up, "This is sad...I think most of the picture I have on my phone are of the dogs..."

"Mine too...well, other than pics of you or us." Viktor agreed, "I think this will be my sixth phone since I got Makka, and most of the pics I had on each of them are of him."

"Do you still have those phones?"

"I'm sure they're in a box somewhere, long forgotten...but I transferred all my pics to the computer so I'd have them handy somewhere."

"...I have a handful of photos of Vic-chan on here." Yuri mentioned quietly, "I'm gonna post them, too."

"What'd you name the account?"

"Pups of Nikiforov."

Viktor laughed at that, "Sounds like a biker gang name!"

"Dangerously adorable." Yuri agreed, only to then lift his head and turn in place, "Oh, did Chris ever answer your tag about being nicer to Asahi?"
"Oh...I think so." The Russian thought back, "I can't remember exactly what he said but it was something smart-ass-ish."

"Sounds like him." Yuri sighed, "Maybe we should sort him out when we see him at Euros so it doesn't follow us all into the Olympics. We'll be sp-

"We don't know just yet if Saito is actually going." Viktor corrected, sharply but not with ill intent.

"...Are you so sure about that? You made a pretty grand declaration about it earlier."

"I wanted to give him something to focus on that had nothing to do with you. He explained, shifting his weight a little before leaning down to pick up their pup, "Let him skate for the sake of his memories. If he does end up getting picked to go to PyeongChang, then it just makes my declaration more meaningful. If he doesn't, then he still has the rest to think about."

"That's a pretty big thing to sound so sure about in the moment though."

"Say what you think with confidence. Then, even if you're wrong or you don't really mean it, it won't look at bad."

"I get this strange feeling that not much has changed between you and him." Yuri sighed quietly again, ignoring his phone for the moment to get a few licks on a cheek from Jiro, "Or am I reading too much into this?"

Viktor gave the man a solemn look, his tone a little more serious than earlier, "My love, until the scratches on your back and the bruises on your arms are healed and gone...I'll be feeling his presence even in our most private moments. Like a weird shadow on the wall or a buzzing phone, it interrupts my mindset and pulls me back to Friday night...and the horrid fact that for some 20 minutes, you were alone, being attacked, and I wasn't there to stop it. Moreover, nothing he ever says or does will be able to change the fact that he kissed you. I was supposed to be the only person who ever got to touch these lips that way." He nosed at them lightly as he spoke.

"...Then technically you're still the only one who has." Yuri pointed out, leaning into a hug as he pressed his forehead to his husband's neck, "It's not like I kissed him back."

"It's the principle of the thing."

'There aren't words strong enough to describe how sorry I am for what I did to you.' Yuri recalled hearing, 'I'm not even sure it's sane to expect - or even ask - for you to forgive me...not right now, or anytime in the future. I deserve what I get. I took something precious away from you, and I can't ever give it back, much as I wish I could.'

"I guess you and Minako-sensei framed it that way when you had the meeting yesterday morning."

"Yeah, we did mention it. Why?"

"He apologized directly for it, too."

"Ah...well, that's good to hear." Viktor answered simply, lifting his head to look around. The figure in question wasn't too terribly far away, but even that distance was enough to drown out any voices, as the Russian couldn't hear what was being said between the trio. It was evident that it was about the social media topic still though, as each of them had their phones out. I hate that I see so much of what I could've been in him, had I not gotten away when I did, Viktor thought, watching them for a moment. All the things - in life, love, and even the world itself - that I would've been completely ignorant to if I'd gotten stuck in place like he did. Something as simple as social media is such a
marvel to him right now... That terror of being outed as gay was enough to make him hide himself from the public eye on every front imaginable. It's a shame he had to fall so low before he could rise above it.

"We should get to rink-side. It'll be my turn soon." Yuri interrupted, drawing the man's attention back.

"Your turn soon?" Viktor echoed in disbelief, "Yuri, the Gold slot is at the end. We've barely started."

"Yup, and mine is the Bronze slot, so I'm up in the next few minutes."

"...Yuri." The Russian deadpanned, giving 'that' look through the shadows under his eyes, "As your coach, I specifically told you that you'd be skating the Gold spot in my place."

"You did." Yuri teased, smiling innocently in spite of the seriousness his partner's aura had taken.

"And I contacted the JSF to let them know I wanted you to so it wouldn't be awkward for you to ask." Viktor went on, finding himself being pulled forward, one odd step at a time, both of his husband's hands guiding him along by the one he wasn't using to support Jiro.

"And they mentioned that," Yuri mused, backing up towards the curtain, watching that right ankle carefully as he went.

Viktor narrowed his eyes in confusion, "...So if you're not skating the Gold spot, what were you talking about earlier about getting what you want?"

"Are you exaggerating your limp now because you're mad at me?" Yuri laughed, back against the royal-blue barrier, "Viktor..."

"I would do no such thing," The Russian insisted, pouting a little, "Now you're evading the question and confusing me."

"You evaded too. Answer me, and I'll answer you."

"...Okay fine, yes, I am. I can't hear you that well at rink-side so I want an answer now." Viktor whined. Jiro smacked a soft-paw against his cheek just then, knocking a surprise into the man such that his eyes opened wide, only to narrow then and look towards the offending Akita, "You're not helping."

"He's helping a lot." Yuri laughed again, giving the pup a head-scratch for his efforts, and watched that little curled tail wag as well as it could where it was pinned against Viktor's arm.

"...Soooo what's your answer then?"

"I asked the JSF for a favor about tonight and they agreed to it."

"...That doesn't mean anything!"

"Asahi!" Yuri called, leaning around his husband's arm to be heard better, "We're going! You should come watch!"

"YuriNikiforovIswear-" Viktor started, only to cut himself off as he gasped loudly, "Did you ask the JSF to give the last Olympic spot the Saito!? Was that the favor!?"

"That sounds a lot like a bribe."
Another gasp, "YOU DID. YOU CAN'T DO THAT."

"You're jumping to conclusions. I said nothing of the sort."

"THENWHATDIDYOUOOOOO!?!"

Yuri made a face at his panicked spouse, but then gestured for the man to lean closer so he could whisper, "I'm only going to tell you enough so you stop thinking the worst." He started, "I asked the JSF for a really big favor, in light of your injury. They agreed. That's it. It has nothing to do with future competitions or anything else."

Viktor blinked at him, unsure what to think or say about the comment.

"Are you up next?" Asahi's voice came into ear-shot, "All that time went by so fast."

"Yeah. Are you tracking the progress on your funding page or something?" Yuri mused.

"Y-Yeah...it's crazy. Absolutely crazy."

"Where are you at now?"

"About $22,000."

"That's great! That's a good chunk to get started with."

"...I'm not so sure anymore." Asahi admitted nervously, "It's great and everything, no doubt, but...I still have to pay for all my skating stuff. That money will only last a couple months."

"Don't worry so much about it just yet," Yuri advised, pushing the curtain away to reveal the arena behind it, "You've only had that page for a few hours. The funds you're getting from fans online isn't like your one-time prize pot for winning Silver this weekend. It'll keep coming."

"...I'm not sure I'll ever get used to this."

"Just take it one day at a time."

Asahi nodded, and followed after as Yuri went through to rink-side, with Viktor and Jiro coming up behind the both of them. The music of Vivaldi's (Summer) Storm resonated overhead, louder now that they were in the actual arena. They stepped around in the dark, barely able to see the ground as they made their way towards the doorway in the rink wall.

Spotlights followed the Pairs Bronze medalists to their stopping point, and the crowd cheered excitedly as they bowed and took their leave.

As they stepped off, Yuri pulled his blade-guards away and handed them to his still-perplexed husband, "Try not to break your brain thinking about what I meant. It's a surprise. You still like those, right?" He wondered, giving a nervous smile as the rubber bars were taken from his hand.

"Sure, but surprises are usually something you don't see coming. Now I'm expecting something, and I'm worried I'm not going to be able to tell what it is."

Yuri blanched sarcastically, "Are you suggesting that my surprises are bad?"

"Nooooo~!" The Russian lamented, "All of your surprises are good! But you surprise me all the time! How will I know which is the surprise!?"
"It'll hit you like a truck full of bricks. Trust me."

"Is it part of your show!?!" Viktor whined, tears dripping down his confused face like exaggerated rivers, "Can I blink!?"

"Viktor-" Yuri had both hands on the man's cheeks then, trying to be serious even as Jiro started licking the back of his closest knuckles, "You're allowed to blink! It's not during this show! I promise, you'll know the surprise when you see it!"

The silver legend, soggy as he was, snuffled and nodded through his tears, "O-okay..."

Yuri rubbed his thumbs over the wet patches before leaning up to get his pre-departure kiss, "I'm off."

"...D-davai..."

"Ganba, Yuri." Asahi offered, trying not to be as awkward as his Senpai.

"Mh!"

[The next skater in tonight's Exhibition is your Men's Singles Bronze Medalist...Yuri Nikiforov!] The announcer called, just as spotlights rained down onto the entrance again and Yuri toed-off to glide forward. The audience was screaming their excitement as the young athlete meandered around, finding his place in center before pausing. He shook his arms out, and quickly pulled on a pair of textured black gloves from inside his thin costume jacket. Clenching his fingers into fists to make sure the gloves were in good position, he strapped the velcro around his wrists and took position, the right toe-pick down to hold him still, knee bent, as the left slid slightly out and away from center. Hands were held at an angle, palms up, head bent down.

We made this show together over the summer with all the others, before anything that happened this season was even on the horizon. And yet...in spite of all the things that have changed, and the things I've learned...the way I feel about this music is still the same... In a way, it's just like 'History Maker,' telling our different sides of the same story...

Viktor cupped his hand around Jiro's shoulder and side, rubbing his thumb against the pup's chest, "Watch your papa. It's about to get real out there."

"GANBA YURI-KUUUUUUUUUUN!" A voice shrieked from the audience.

"Oh, there he is..." The Russian laughed, "I was wondering where Smol Nugget went."

["Finding Home" - Zack Hemsey (original version, not one of the remixes.)]

I won't return, no no no no...

Yuri lifted his eyes slightly, and swept his left leg forward in a wide arc, the right following after it. He glided around in long curves, changing the direction of his lean with each repeated word.

So don't wait for me, no no no no...

He twisted through a 3-turn to flip himself backwards, and arms came up to press hands over his heart, skating the swerving arcs again as he slid on.

Cuz I won't find peace, no no no no...

Three right-inside twizzles, followed by a long glide forward as he move out of it, pushing through
cross-overs at the end of the rink. He spotted his spouse along the wall just past the corner, and twisted around to face him as he moved away again.

*Until I find...home, home, home, home...*

His hands came up again, and both extended outward from his chest, reaching for the Russian as he backed further and further away. Viktor waved comically, just in time for Yuri to flip away into the breakdancing intro to the first stanza of the two-part ballad.

*This first part is mine,* Yuri thought, winding himself up for the jump.

*I ain't never walk a mile in nobody else's shoes*
*I don't really know why some do the things they do*
*But I can understand what so many have been through*
*I can feel the urge to belong to something new*

The audience screamed with surprise as the skater turned the ice into a new kind of stage, leaping backward as he moved toward the center of the rink.

"...What in the world?" Asahi wondered quietly, pressing his hands against the rink wall as he watched in fascination, "When did he learn those moves?"

Viktor just beamed, idly rubbing Jiro's side while the pup looked all around at the strange sight of the arena.

Yuri's body spun once before he landed on one hand and both toe-picks, then suddenly swung his legs around and under himself for a multi-rotational windmill maneuver, ending with both legs straight up in the air, both hands on the ice. His t-shirt rolled up his core while he paused there upside-down, revealing quite the swath of skin for all eyes to behold, and earning him a whistle from his husband, before rolling down onto his back, using the momentum to foist himself back up to his blades again. Even as he skated around, his feet were a blur, and he moved to the other half of the rink.

*Then it switches to Viktor,* Yuri said to himself, switching back to a more traditional style of skating.

*And I don't want to listen to another sad story*
*Don't want to be deceived with tales of false glory*
*And all these legends in their own mind bore me*
*I'm not distracted by the glitz that's before me*

He moved through something of a face-paced step-sequence, twisting and arcing his frame through a bevy of footwork. Mohawks, 3-turns, choctaws, twizzles, and the occasional half-jump. On the last few words, Yuri bent around for an outside spread-eagle, and kicked his right leg out for a triple-Axel, landing and immediately moving into his next breakdance sequence.

*I can see the discontent that plagues you*
*I can feel the stress that moves to break you*
*I can sense the dread that overtakes you*
*And I can hear the chains that bind and claim you*

Each line came with a quick move that ended with one hand jutting out in a stab. The first was a 2000; left hand on the ice, right sitting on top of it as the rest of his frame went vertical, and he spun down until his blades came down again. He immediately followed with baby swipes; sweeping his legs under himself on his picks and then spinning his core as he hopped from one hand to the other,
blades tapping down opposite from where he'd started. He quickly rolled through a few back-spins, stabbing one arm out for the point before bringing it back again to set on the ice and hoist himself up for a dramatic spinning lift into the air, ending with a quick jump that put him right-side-up again.

*But something isn't right with the hamster on the wheel*
*Day has turned to night now the servant won't kneel*
*Peasants want to fight, they refusing to yield*
*What the devil's going on, can anyone reveal*

Yuri hopped and 'ran' forward on his blades, sliding out as he brought his arms up, one staying around his midsection as the other went above himself through a quick spin. The quick pace of the lyrics fueled him, giving him every chance to put on display the reason why he was known for his step sequences. His feet were golden blurs on the ice, scratches left on the frost being all that told of his passing.

*Though I don't have the faintest idea why people even here*
*I don't believe it has to do with salaries per year*
*I don't believe humanity is floating on a sphere*
*So that you can wait to live until retirement appears*

He continued moving forward, bringing toprock maneuvers into his steps, barely hopping on his rockers to switch blades as the other went out to tap a pick on the ice. He quickly mohawked his way to twist backwards and continued on, then flipped forward again before leaning back into an Ina Bauer.

*And I'm just talking straight as I can steer*
*Society a bunch of crazy bastards over here*
*So puppets and your masters you can find me over there*
*Where I'll be patient waiting for your madness to clear*

The Ina Bauer morphed seamlessly into a singe twizzle to turn him back around, and he glided past the rink-wall with a few crossovers, gesturing his arms out as he moved. He let his frame go loose and kicked his right leg out before using it to turn himself over, and jammed the toe-pick down, launching into a quad Flip and landing as the stanza ended, sliding out for a while as the music calmed and the woman's melodic voice returned.

*I won't return, no no no no...*
*So don't wait for me, no no no no...*

He lowered from the standing glide into a hydroblade, and dragged one finger across the ice as he moved out in a long curved line, rising up at the end only to launch himself for a flying entry into a sit spin.

"You want to do what?" Viktor asked...again, giving his partner a well-meaning smile, though the confused and startled look behind it gave him away.

"I want to do breakdancing." Yuri repeated.

*Makkachin ran like a mad-dog through the summer beach surf, the warm sun shining down on all three of them. The duo of humans walked slowly just beyond the reach of the water, fingers gently hooked to one another between them. The sand went between their toes, and they carried a towel each over their bare shoulders.*
"I've seen the pictures." Yuri went on, "I know you know I can breakdance."

"On a regular surface, sure...but...on the ice?"

"It would be a little different there...I couldn't do a good chunk of the moves, like suicides or nip-ups." He explained, "But if I can get some gloves that'll hold me steady but still let me slide around, then the ice is as good as a polished dance floor, really."

"Suicides." The Russian repeated dubiously.

"It's no more dangerous than our Death Drops," Yuri retorted, swinging their arms forward slightly, "I was thinking of doing this for the Exhibition at All Japan. We have so many Pair skates planned for all the competitions we'll be at together, but for Nationals I'm going to be on my own, since you'll be in Moscow. I want to do something unique, to show everyone what I learned while away in Detroit."

"I don't really know anything about it though. I don't know how much use I can be to you as your choreographer." Viktor explained, "I mean, I know what it can look like, but the technical side of it all..."

"That's okay. I'll show you everything I know!" Yuri pulled out in front of the man, looking excited, "We can use Minako-sensei's studio to start, until you learn all the different move names and stuff! Then we can move back to the Ice Castle and start to see how it looks on blades!"

Slate eyes watched the younger man's enthusiasm, and eventually he cracked, "Alright...we'll start at Minako's studio."

"Yes!" Yuri jumped up, victorious, "It's gonna be great! I'll finally get to teach you something!"

"No no, that's a windmill. This is an airflare." Yuri explained, winding up to start a new spin. Entering the move almost like a cart-wheel, he dropped his hands to the ground and brought his legs up into the air at an angle away from himself, then started rotating his core over itself, continuously jumping with his hands as his legs moved around him in an orbit. He slowed down after a few passes, moving his legs up to be vertical above himself, then lowered them down again so he could stand up normally, "You can keep going like that forever...or until your stamina runs out, whichever comes first." He laughed.

"You could go forever then," Viktor teased, "So the windmill then is where you're constantly passing your legs under yourself and moving your arms out of the way to let them pass."

"Mh."

"And you're sure you can do both on the ice?"

"Well, the windmill, sure...I think I'd run a higher risk of slipping on airflares though, so probably not." Yuri answered, sitting on his knees in front of the man. Viktor was curled up against the mirror-wall, leaning his back against it with his legs crossed and a notepad against one thigh. He tapped a mechanical pencil eraser against his lip, "...This is a lot of stuff to learn for one program."

"So I'll skate it a bunch of times!" The younger athlete bargained, "I'll do it at Skate Canada, too!"
"Mmmmhhhh..."

"Viktooorrrr..." Yuri squeaked in a bit closer.

"Mmmmhhhhhh..."

"Viktooorrrrrrrr..."

"Skate Canada, and Japanese Nationals, and Four Continents...and Worlds after you win your next Gold."

Yuri dropped his head down as he laughed, but then raised up again and slid one arm across his spouse's core, pressing in over the man's arms and notepad, "I'll do it as often as you want."

"Oh my...was that a double entendre?" Viktor mused, "Please let it be a double entendre."

"It can be whatever you want it to be." The younger man teased, finally giving the silver legend the kiss he'd been hoping for, "Love you."

Even as the sit-spin continued, Yuri couldn't help but find the whole memory rather funny, ...I'd almost forgotten how pushy I was back then... To think that Viktor put up with it all summer and into the fall...

Cuz I won't find peace, no no no no...
Until I find...home home home home... He mentally sighed and morphed from shoot-the-duck to cannonball, then started to spread himself out, sticking one leg out and dragging the blade across the ice as he lifted an arm high above. The rest of him soon followed suit for the scratch-spin ending.

I ain't never had to lose what I got
But everything I have is from refusing to stop
And I am not a fool though I duel with a fox
I remain immune to the ruse that he plot

He kicked a leg out and pulled himself forward with the momentum, swerving twice before thrusting himself back into yet another spin, swinging his leg around as hard as he could to give himself speed. A standard arms-out camel spin morphed quickly into a full Biellmann, though he forced himself to slow down quickly, rotating on the hard edges of his toe-pick until he was completely stopped...and held the position, motionless as a freeze, for the last line.

And I'm one confused by the sight,
Of a loved one remaining estranged from their life
When a husband puts his hands to his wife
Though he feels his own worth slip with every strike

Pulling himself free, his up-held leg came down and stabbed at the frost, turning him about-face. He hopped forward from there, all but bouncing on his rockers as he made his way around the rink again, picking up speed as he pushed through his unusual hybrid dance. He split-jump into the final line of the stanza, sliding out backward on his right blade, only to crack the left pick down as he dipped onto the outside edge and flew through a quad Lutz.

And a truth will incite so I'm told
And the wars in my sight will grow old  
And it's painful reflects on my soul  
But my high hopes scream to an empty sky

Viktor sighed as he watched the program go on, *He looks so relaxed out there now. I wish he could do his competitive programs as easily as this.* He felt a really cold nose press against his neck then, sensing Jiro trying to snuggle closer against his skin, *Is that your subtle way of trying to take credit for this?* Viktor huffed a laugh as he pulled the pup down against his chest and bundled the tiny Akita inside his jacket like Yuri had done, though for the moment, Jiro had no interest in watching things; he kept his head down within the confines of the snuggle-cave.

*No this not a lullaby, ya'll follow while I go*  
*To a world full of men void of holes*  
*To a place where MP's don't patrol*  
*And to a time where no values are sold*

Yuri launched through a triple Axel, triple Axel jump sequence, and leaned way back as he skated out of the landing, twisting at the end to pivot onto his right elbow. In one fluid motion, he jerked his core hard, legs spinning up above himself as he moved, spinning above his right hand where he stayed glued to the ice. As he let go of it though, his knees came down, and his bare stomach came down in a roll after it, undulating through two Worm maneuvers before kicking up onto his right hand again. His entire frame parked over that arm, resting on the bend of his elbow, legs up in a V as he gestured up with his free hand, holding for a second or two before kicking out again.

*There's no regime change because they conquer by divide*  
*And the heroes of our day have died and washed up in the tide*  
*Those who prayed for change have found their hope got left behind*  
*Because money's greener than that grass that's on the other side*

The audience was enthralled by the breakdancing, likely having never seen anything like it on the ice before. Yuri was all-too-happy to give them something unique to watch, though even *his* boundless stamina was starting to wear thin.

He bobbed through a few twizzles before halting in place, sending up a spray of ice as he raked a pick against the frost, arms out to the sides as he undulated them into a *wave* motion before he spun off again. His left leg came up ahead of himself, getting to nearly 90 degrees as he leaned back, only for him to quickly hop and twist himself over again, skating backwards a few feet before he lowered his hands to the ice, and suddenly launched his legs up into the air again, spinning *on his head* a few times.

*So I ride the hate of men, let 'em play pretend*  
*Push and shove and when they let their killing games begin*  
*Take a step outside and watch without it getting in*  
*And look to find a home that I can settle here within*

Viktor felt a pang of déjà vu floating through him as he watched his husband's cranium-down glide, finding himself too-easily reminded of the debacle before the Final. However, when Yuri rose back up again and continued on, no worse for wear, the tingly feeling in his head waned, leaving just a slight ringing in his ears. Slate eyes watched as his partner go through those final motions before the calm of the end of the song began.

*I won't return, no no no no...*  
*So don't wait for me, no no no no...*  
*Cuz I won't find peace, no no no no...*
Yuri glided around in a long, slow, meandering serpentine pattern, a blade switching off with each repeated word. Arms moved fluidly, guiding his way across the ice, heading towards the end of the song like a bird flying into the eye of the storm.

Drums returned to the chorus like thunder, and Yuri dropped another quad Flip to kick it off. The audience started clapping along as well, and energy returned to the quiet torpor of the previous stanza. Picking up speed, Yuri’s skates became a blur again, powering through one final elaborate step sequence before twisting his frame into a backward-entry camel spin. Arms went out to the side, a finger dragging across the frost before the position morphed to a twist-variant sit-spin, then up again for the final move...a scratch spin, starting with his arms close to his core, then spreading out, until the last lyric was sung, and his arms were up and both skates braked, leaving a crystalline fog in his wake just as the music abruptly cut out.

With the audience already clapping the beat, once they realized the song was over, they quickly picked up their pace and applauded more excitedly. Whistles, screams, and cheers followed, and Yuri finally let himself relax again, drooping down from his commanding final pose into a noodle-like laxity as he heaved for air. He let himself have a moment, letting the burning in his lungs, legs, and core sink in before he rose up again and bowed his appreciation for their adulation.

As he finally made his way back to rink-side, he was really starting to feel the effects of his exertion, and he practically fell into his husband's one-waiting-arm, "I did good, right...?" He asked, barely able to think.

"That was amazing! You were beautiful out there!" Viktor fawned, careful not to squish Jiro in his excitement, all the while laying a number of kisses all over his spouse's cheek and forehead, "You really are the King of Stamina. I'm going to have to choreograph something really hard for you next season! Nothing but quad Axels and Lutzes and Flips!"

"Viktooorrr..." Yuri whined, despite laughing anyway.

Asahi watched quietly, still applauding like the rest of the crowd. He couldn't help but think back on the song that his old friend had chosen. He sighed in his head and stepped out of the way for the next skater in the Exhibition.

"I know that he planned to skate this program ages ago...but I guess I can't help but feel like part of it spoke directly to me anyway. I wonder why he picked it? ...When did he even learn to move like that?

Yuri had taken Jiro back after slipping his arms into his jacket, and the pup was as excited as the husband to have Yuri back at rink-side. Those brown eyes lifted and looked aside though, even through Viktor's persistent nuzzles of affection, "What'd you think?" He wondered, still trying to catch his breath.

Asahi hesitated, but then bobbed his head once in acknowledgment, "It was really great. I feel like I've just seen the tip of the iceberg with you suddenly... I really had no chance of beating you this weekend...if not for everything else that happened..." He lowered his gaze a little in shame.
Viktor had a smug look on his face, but he slowly nodded from his place against his husband's back, rubbing his hand over one shoulder, "Tip of the iceberg, indeed. And he still has so much potential~! My Yuri~!" He excitedly rubbed his cheek against the man's messy black hair.

Yuri just smiled nervously under all the attention, "Let's head back under. I'm absolutely parched."
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED NINETY THREE

The changing room had a different feel to it. Not just because of the fact that there were other people sharing it in the present moment, but because of what had happened there before, and how much had changed in such a short period of time.

Asahi tied the laces on his second skate and pulled the bottom hem of the pant-leg over it. Putting the roll of clothing into his gear bag, the whole thing felt like déjà vu to him. He could practically hear the room going silent all around him, only for the thump of the door being pushed open to resonate and bounce through his head, along with the conversation Yuri had been having at the same time.

'...So the RSF fired Viktor...because of me...?'

He shook his head to get the memory out, then pushed roughly upward to his feet. The gear bag was pulled over his shoulder and the door pulled inward to open, letting Asahi back out into the main area. He was surprised to realize that the chamber had, in fact, gone quiet for real, not just in his head. It was especially poignant when he saw three muted figures in the open space near the door. One standing, staring straight at him, and two others, kneeling on the floor, facing one another.

Riku...

Asahi felt a slight panic flutter through his chest, as though the entire fight from after the Short Program was playing out in front of him, but this time, with himself and his dead partner watching it from opposite sides. It was impossible to hear what was being said...the whole conversation was barely as loud as distant echoes...but the look on Riku's face, staring at him from the far wall, spoke volumes.

"I never meant for it to be this way..." He tried to explain, even as the contentious sight of his reflection grabbed the arms of Yuri's shade, and leaned in for that...attack. Asahi looked down and away, closing his eyes to the hallucination, "Why is this all coming back again now...? I've worked so hard...to prove to them both that I'm sorry... Am I going to be haunted by this sight forever...? Until they forgive me, if they ever do? ...What will it take...?"

"Forgiving yourself." Riku's voice answered.

Asahi lifted his head, and the figures were gone. Like the night before, the image of that ghost faded from sight, leaving the skater to just look at the ragged sight of his own face in the mirror. He drew in a suffered breath and pressed a hand to his chest, "...I can't forgive myself. I have no right. That kind of thing is earned from others...and until they forgive me, I just..."

The door to his left pushed open, and a few other people came in, completely oblivious to what was going on. Asahi quickly excused himself and left, trying to hurry back to the prep-area before his turn came and went without him.

Still, the seconds that had just passed lingered on him like paint.

I'm worried that everything that's happened today will be nothing but a dream... That I'll wake up soon, and it'll just be this morning again... Not even this morning, but last night...before Minako called me over.
He sighed and slowed his pace, reaching up to rub his face, and pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers.

*All this stuff that's become possible because of those two... I wish I had the guts to ask more questions, because no matter what, it's still so confusing that they would do all this for me, to help me, after the pain I put them both through...*

Pausing for a moment in the hall, Asahi slid his hand down and opened his eyes. Fingers pressed against his mouth for a few seconds...only to have the sleeve of his jacket come and rub against them instead.

*Viktor especially. I've never known Yuri to hold a grudge, even against people who were never nice to him... But Viktor... Yuri was right about how that man is always full of surprises.*

By the time he'd gotten back to where most people were gathered, Asahi had regained some of his wits. Through the sparse crowd, he could see the silver legend and his protégé messing around for the fun of those watching, doing a slow, *really* slow reenactment of the Death Spiral from the program they'd abandoned after Viktor's ankle snafu.

The Russian stood in center, free hand extended to his partner's while the other held a certain puppy against his shoulder like before. He turned in place as Yuri walked around him in a big circle, then was eventually pulled inward to the man's embrace.

"Ah it's a *tragedy* that we can't do this show tonight..." Viktor whined, "Even moreso, I think, that we can't even do the one we had planned for *Euros* anymore."

Yuri nodded, "Yeah it really threw a wrench into those plans. Oh well..."

"Aren't you guys still *going* to Euros though...?" Asahi wondered quietly, approaching closely enough to be heard then, "Or did I remember that wrong?"

They both looked up, but Yuri spoke, "No, you're right. We're still physically *going* to be there, but since Viktor isn't competing, we can't skate."

"You could always do it for Four Continents though, right?" Asahi followed, "Since Viktor wasn't supposed to compete there...regardless of the podium, you could do two pair skates there, one for each of your turns."

"Yeah but then I'd lose another solo show."

Asahi nodded and lowered his head slightly, "...*Mh.*"

"Huh?" Yuri's attention was piqued, "You okay? Wouldn't think you'd be down about our problems. It's just vanity, really...not a big deal."

"It's not that." Asahi shook his head a little, and pulled his gear bag up a bit higher against his shoulder. He looked around and spotted the rest of his team not too far away, each of them still tracking progress on their phones, as though they'd been dropped into the midst of El Dorado. Their excitement didn't seem to penetrate him anymore though, and he looked back to the skaters in front of him, "Maybe I'm just getting pre-skate jitters or something."

"I'm sure you'll do great." Yuri offered, kept close to his spouse by an arm that came around his side and across his stomach, "Or is it something else? *I still have such a hard time reading him... I can only tell when something's bothering him when he says so... Does he want me to go fishing*...?"
Asahi just shrugged a little, feeling the weight of it all even as he maintained the neutral facade on his face, "I'm not sure how much more of my burden you want to hear about after everything else. This morning was set-up for it, but now..."

"It's only a burden when you bear it alone," Viktor suggested, rubbing his thumb gently against his husband's skinny frame, "There's still a little while before your turn if you want to unburden yourself a little."

"...Senpai..." The younger figure mumbled, barely loud enough to hear it himself. He cleared his throat and gathered his courage, "Uhm...I mean, if you want to hear it..."

"That's what friends are for, right?"

Asahi could've died in that moment, but he managed to hold his ground, "...Y-Yeah..." He nervously stepped a little closer, and swallowed his old habits before speaking with a hushed voice, "...My Exhibition...is the first program I put together after the accident. I did it without a coach or choreographer...so it's 100% from my own head... They don't even know what the music is."

They both blinked at him.

"The thing of it is though... This program was...how I handled my grief after everything happened. It wasn't even the program I intended to skate tonight, but after what you guys have done today, I..." He drew a shaky breath, "I mean, when we were on the train ride back from the other skating rink...I was practically begging the JSF to let me switch out. They'd already done the sound testing on the song I practiced with, so this was a big burden on them..."

"Oh, I did the exact same thing." Yuri laughed suddenly. After a second though, he coughed unexpectedly and brought his hands up defensively, "I mean, I did that on the train ride back to Osaka! Begging the JSF to let me do a different show! Cuz Viktor can't skate now!"

"...You're getting awfully weird." The Russian pointed out, "We already knew all that."

"Oh right, never mind then." He just laughed nervously until he quieted down again, "...Continue, sorry."

Asahi nervously looked aside with just his eyes, then forward again, "Ahem...y-yeah..." He cleared his throat under his breath, "I didn't get a change to go back to Imari to get a different outfit, so the one I'm wearing now is meant for the original show... But, suffice it to say...the JSF allowed it for some reason... Knowing I'll be doing this different show now, I guess my heart's just starting to race, because of what the whole thing means to me. Skating was the only way I was ever able to express myself honestly, even if I was the only one who ever knew that's what I was doing."

"I know what that's like." Viktor said, "Since Yuri won me over in Sochi, only for him to stop coming to big competitions after that...all the subsequent times I skated 'Aria,' it was for him, even though he had no idea."

Yuri's face just went pink, even as he made a weird face at the mention of that show.

"I think this Exhibition will be the hardest thing I ever skate..." Asahi lowered his eyes slightly, "But after everything you guys did for me just today, and how much everything is going to change after I leave here...it just felt like the right thing to do. The whole thing just means so much more than it did before."

"Was it about Riku?" Yuri wondered.
"It was Riku." The older figure answered, "From start to finish...it was all Riku... At least, I guess, from my perspective of him. How I imagined he saw me, our situation...his final moments...all of it. But now that I think about it, it almost feels like it's about me, too. He wasn't the only one who died that day. I had just...made myself so numb to it all, that I didn't even realize what a zombie I'd become. Today...in this moment...here, right now... This is the closest I've felt to being alive again for a very long time."

"It's a long road to travel," Viktor agreed, "But hopefully by the end of it, you'll be in a better place."

"It's a pretty sensitive topic for you though," Yuri added, "Are you sure you're ready to do this?"

"No turning back now."

"I guess not, but...still." He sighed slightly and leaned his head back against his husband's shoulder, feeling a puppy-paw tap on his arm. Hazel eyes turned to see the pup, and he brought up a free hand to press a finger to those nubbins, "At Worlds last year, when Viktor did his 'goodbye' show...it was hard to watch, because I knew that the whole thing had been put together with the intention of being Viktor's last performance. Even some of his shows this season have been hard to watch, for the same reasons...knowing what it all meant, under the surface."

"Be glad you were only watching me." Viktor teased, "If you could've seen what I saw during some of those events...especially my SP at NHK...ugh..." He cringed a little at the memory of it.

"Considering how you didn't even break 90, I can imagine the kind of things you were seeing out there." Yuri retorted, reaching up with his paw-tapping finger to tap it against his husband's nose instead, "At least you didn't score as badly as I did at Cup of China. Can you imagine..." He turned back towards Asahi, and thumbed up at the Russian behind him, "...If Viktor scored in the 70s?"

"...Yikes."

"Although if you had," Yuri went on, looking back up to that pale face, "It would've made Phichit-kun's entire lifetime."

Viktor just puffed his chest out a little and got a cocky-determined look on his face, "I have a reputation to uphold. No offense to your friend, but...if I'd lost Gold to him, I wouldn't have been able to look at myself in the mirror for weeks."

"And then Chris wouldn't have gotten to go to the Final, because Phichit-kun would've gotten more ranking-points..."

"But maybe you wouldn't have gotten hurt in that case." Viktor shrugged, "Because I wouldn't have had anyone to leave with to find snacks, so I would've either stayed with you and practiced at the same time, or I would've made you come with me in Chris' place."

"And then I would've won Gold right and proper," Yuri mused, but then sighed dramatically at his own expense, "But I guess I'll just have to swipe it from you again at Worlds."

"You'll win Gold at the Olympics, too, my love."

"Sorry, who is winning Gold at the Olympics?"

"Me, of course." Viktor teased, "I'll show the RSF what a big mistake they made."

Yuri just laughed and shook his head, turning back to Asahi again, "He's always like this... Saying we'll both win Gold, only for his brain to break when I win it instead of him."
"That's literally only happened once." The silver legend hugged his arm a little tighter, making his partner squeak slightly, "What kind of coach or husband would I be if I didn't try to motivate you though?"

"I guess so." Yuri said quickly with what little breath he had left in him. He heaved as Viktor gave him slack again though, "...Well, you know that it doesn't take much for you to motivate me. That, and the promise of katsudon at the end..."

They both sighed happily at the thought of that pork cutlet bowl waiting for them when they got home.

Asahi just moved his eyes between them as they each spoke, only to center on Yuri again as the man caught his attention.

"You should come with us." He said suddenly, making Viktor blanch slightly behind his head, "I mean, unless you're taking a plane back to Imari or something..."

"Uhm...n-no...I'm taking the train..." Asahi explained pensively, "Even though it would take longer, it feels like taking the train is faster since it leaves at a set time and I don't have to wait for it, or go through security check-points just to get to my seat."

"Right?" Yuri laughed, "But that's great! You can take the train with us! We'll be getting back to Hasetsu around lunch-time, so you can come get a katsudon with us as a reward for getting Silver. You can even take a dip in the onsen since you skipped out on us the other ni-ghk..."

Viktor squashed him hard with that same arm, and spoke jovially over his shoulder as though nothing was amiss, "Katsudon sounds lovely, doesn't it?"

Asahi just backed up a step, "Uhm...y-yes, Senpai..."

"V-Viktor...I can't breathe..."
Asahi nervously stepped back as Viktor held onto Yuri in the vice-grip, and warily pointed back the way he intended to go, "...I...guess I'll go put my stuff away before it's my turn. I'll be right back?"

The Russian waved a few fingers where he could and watched the younger figure practically prance away in retreat, only releasing his husband once Asahi was out of sight and ear-shot.

Yuri, of course, heaved for air as he stumbled to regain his bearings, "...What was all that about!?"

He whined, giving the man a dirty look.

Viktor just gave a dubious glance back from behind his bangs, "Why are you inviting him to Yu-Topia?"

"You just said that we were his friends! I'm trying to be friendly!"

"By suggesting we all sit in the hot-spring together!?"

"I never said 'together'!" Yuri argued.

Viktor just gaped slightly, but drew a sharp breath, "You said he should sit in the onsen because he skipped out on the offer the other night, which at the time was implied as an invitation to sit with all of us. Ergo... 'sit with all of us' includes me, and you."

The Russian was given a rather severe deadpan, only for the gears to turn in Yuri's brain, and he quickly looked away again, somewhat red-faced, "...I said 'you should sit in the onsen.' I didn't imply that we'd be sitting with him." He muttered quietly, largely unheard.

"Why are you so ready to pretend nothing happened?" Viktor asked then, a bit more serious than scolding, "I mean, I have no problem with trying to mend fences. I'm on board with that. But...the onsen? That's a naked place. Did you already forget how often I showed off for you before?"

The hue on Yuri’s cheeks deepened to scarlet, "How could I forget? You were hanging out all over the place... I just... Other than you, I never really thought of anyone sitting in the spring as being all that sexual... It's a bath, not a brothel."

"Have you already forgotten how much crap I got after NHK?" Viktor wondered, switching Jiro from one arm to the other to give the former a break, "I didn't understand it at the time, and I think you'll realize it later yourself...but you're too quick to want to forgive and forget. Believe me, I understand how appealing that is... When someone gives you an inch towards something you desperately want, it's easy to let your guard down and let them in. But this isn't something that happened months or even years ago. It happened on Friday." He reached for his phone in his breast-pocket, "I can practically tell you how many hours ago that was..."

"But it's so obvious how sorry he is and how bad he feels about everything... I understand now, more than I did before, why he did what he did... I don't want him to feel guilty about it on top of everything else." Yuri tried to explain, reaching a hand forward to signal that Viktor didn't have to keep seeking, "At least I didn't suggest we go with him to Wakkanai..."
"YuriI sweartoGodifyoudo-"

"I know!" He protested, reaching both hands up to cover his spouse’s mouth before anything else could be said or done, "I wanted to ask you about it first!"

Viktor snorted like an angry bull behind those hands.

"Fine! We won’t!" Yuri threw his arms up then, exasperated, but then lowered them to take the pup for a little while, getting a few cheek-licks in the process, "I want to do everything for him that I normally would for anyone else... He’s been through something so horrible, it breaks my heart to empathize... I don’t want him to be alone. He’s already done so much by himself."

"This is his journey, Yuri. It’s no different than when I went to go deal with my mother’s funeral on my own."

"It's completely different." The younger figure sighed, turning his head from Jiro to his husband, "You left me behind because you didn’t want me to see all the stuff that you hadn’t even told me about yet... You said it yourself, that when it was over, you wanted to forget it ever happened, and go back to being just us, like none of it ever came up. But then Mikhail showed up at the rink anyway, and now we’re here, better and stronger for it all."

Viktor deadpanned him, "I’m not sure this is better."

"Aside from the current drama between you and your Uncle. We are going to visit your father for a few days, aren’t we? Would that have ever been possible if we hadn’t interacted with him?"

The Russian mumbled something under his breath.

"Just think about it...there’s still plenty of time." Yuri suggested, "We weren’t even going to head to Russia for a week anyway."

"Yeah, cuz we wanted to stay home and relax for a few minutes before we left again. Are you allergic to relaxing?" Viktor gave a desperate look, "Are you snooze-intolerant? Do you need a doctor?"

"NoViktorIdon’tneedadoctor."

"Then pleaaaaassssse let us take it easy for this coming week." The Russian brought his hands up, fingers clasped together as he begged, "I just want to sit on the couch and veg until our flight."

That only earned him a quiet growl between grit teeth.

"We don’t even know when he plans on going! It might be when we’re out of town already!"

Yuri sighed and shook his head, but nodded, relenting to the man's pleading, "Alright, alright..."

Viktor nearly collapsed from the relief, slouching where he stood until he felt a hand snaking around his side and back, going into his coat, and pulled him forward. Yuri pressed a shoulder against his chest, and looked up into him with those big brown eyes.

"When you’re right, you’re right..." The younger figure admitted, "It hadn’t even crossed my mind that Asahi might wait a bit before he makes that trip. For some reason, I just assumed he’d go right away, because that’s what I would do..."

"He’s put it off for two years already. One more week isn’t going to make much difference."
"...The anniversary of it is tomorrow though." Yuri pointed out, "All things considered, I'm surprised he's even going south from here in the first place. If it were me, I'd be going straight north."

"...I'm not sure the dead care too much about anniversaries. Funerals are for the living, after all." Viktor explained, even as he returned the hug with both of his arms, "That's what sucks so much about dying. The party keeps going, but you have to leave."

"So you don't think there's anything else after that?"

"I can't claim to know one way or another." The Russian explained tepidly, "All I know is what I can say from my own point of view. Other than in my own head, the dead have never called on me, visited me, or given me any reason to believe they're hidden behind some spooky invisible curtain...and on the other hand, if I were the dead person, and I could reach out, as many claim? You'd bet your ass, there's nothing in this world or the next that would stop me. There isn't a paradise, nirvana, or Valhalla I could go to that would ever bring me peace, knowing I'm leaving the people I care the most about behind. I would raise Hell on earth to be with my loved ones again."

Yuri wasn't sure how to answer to that.

"And yet, we always say to the departed, 'rest in peace.' There would be no peace if my consciousness continued beyond that. If I had my memories intact, and I was expected to be able to answer prayers and offer some sign that I was still around...? I'd be breaking every plate and vase in Yu-Topia to get you to notice. I'd be screaming into every mic you left on, and I wouldn't be giving calm, one word answers to stupid questions either... But that's not really what happens." Viktor went on, spotting Asahi with his coach and choreographer as the man headed for the curtain to rink-side. He gave a nod of acknowledgment before turning to look down at his spouse again to finish his previous thought, "The feelings we get about the dead are the ones we manifest in ourselves as a way of coping with profound loss. It's comforting to think they're still out there...but in that selfish way we help ourselves just to keep it together, we're also completely overlooking the utter Hell it would be for those who've died, if what we wish is how it really turned out to be."

"And what about a god putting peace into your heart so you can move on?"

"A fake feeling, pushed onto me against my will. If I feel anything less, or differently, than I just explained...that's not me. It would be no different than if Saito had been able to force you to fall out of love with me, and in love with him instead. How genuine would that be?"

"Okay okay, you've made your point..." Yuri sighed and leaned away from where he'd pressed his shoulder to the man's frame, feeling unsettled by the whole thing, "...Can we go watch him skate now?"

Viktor blinked at him, "...Sorry, I got carried away."

"I know you're avoiding forgiving him as long as you possibly can, but downplaying his grief like it's just a show to deceive himself is kind of mean."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"You yourself talked to your own mom's grave after everything settled down..."

"I know, and I'm saying that I get where Saito's coming from because of it. My thing about not wanting to forgive him has nothing to do with his grief though. You know that." Viktor reached for his spouse's free hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, just as Yuri started to nudge them over towards the curtain where Asahi was waiting for the music to end, "Yuri..."
"We can finish that talk later." He answered simply, getting too close to the curtain for his partner to offer any kind of retort without giving them away, "You ready?"

Asahi looked back at him and nodded, "I think so. Are you gonna watch from rink-side?"

"Mh."

"...Oh, wow... Thanks." He turned his gaze from Yuri to the frigid silver figure standing behind the man, "...Senpai...are you...okay...?"

"Taihen da." Viktor answered simply, frowning the whole way.

Asahi went pale instantly.

Yuri whipped his head around, "That means everything is terrible. Are you sure you didn't mean genki da?"

"I know what I said."

"Mhhh..." The younger figure grumbled, making a face, only to turn then back to the skater who was about to perform, "Anyway...let's get out there. Captain Grumpypants is upset about something else."

That just made Viktor bristle. Still, as long as Asahi was around, he said nothing and followed through the curtain. He heard a few words passing between Yuri and Coach Nagisa, but didn't pay much attention to what was said...it was hard enough to hear anyway with the roar of the audience overhead. He thought he heard a few words of gratitude, but he wasn't sure.

Would it even be worthwhile to remind Yuri about the fact that he's so eager to please other people, that he ignores how that might hurt me in the process? I've only told him a thousand times already...

Rubber bars were pulled away from blue and silver Revolution blades, handed off to Coach Nagisa as white spotlights shimmied their way across the field of frost before them. The Ice Dancers who'd performed moments before bowed and came towards rink-side, stepping through the door as they departed. Asahi nervously stepped up and shrugged his jacket off, revealing a dark and yet somewhat-revealing costume hidden within it.

His top was completely fishnet, from waist to wrist, revealing every inch of skin through it. Above that was a half-cloak that favored the right side, charcoal grey in color and peppered with a mix of red crystal and smaller fuchsia glitter, giving it an almost sandy-shimmering appearance as it moved. The cloak bore a high, thick collar, which fell loose around the skater's neck like a puffy scarf. On this legs beneath it all, plain black stretch-denim jeans.

He turned on a blade carefully and looked back to the couple who'd followed him, "...I...already told you what this show was supposed to be about, but... I want to dedicate it to you two, if that's okay. As a thank you, for giving me the strength to be able to bring it into the public eye in the first place."

Nagisa and Webber exchanged curious glances, "...Public eye?" They echoed.

Yuri smiled and nodded, "We can't wait to see what you've created."

Asahi bowed his head, though the rest of him followed after, bending at the waist towards the two skaters, "Arigatou gozaimashita." (Polite form; 'thank you."

[Next to skate in the Exhibition tonight...your Men's Singles Silver medalist...Saito Asahi!]
The athlete raised back up to full standing again, and stepped onto the ice, flying across the white field as the colorless glow morphed to reds and purples all around him. The audience was roaring with their cheers, many screaming out phrases that were unintelligible over the rest of the noise, though Asahi could only assume they were well-wishes.

*I wonder how many of the people in this audience right now were part of the group that found me online and donated? I'm going to be posting thank-you notes for days...*

"Are you ready?"

Asahi blinked and looked around, the voice having cut through the crowd like a hot knife. It was hard to describe how clear it was in spite of the roar all around him, especially since he couldn't tell what direction it came from.

"Look down, lover."

Grey-brown eyes glanced southward, nervous, and yet...finding a part of himself relaxing to the sight he expected to be there before him. Just as he'd been seeing since the night before...his own reflection, and all its movements, were reshaped into Riku's form. It brought tears to his eyes almost instantly, and Asahi crouched down onto a knee to press his palm against the cold, just as the warped reflection within the ice did the same, as though reaching up at him from underneath the surface, "...I haven't even started and I'm already crying."

"You're strong. You can get through it."

"You don't know how hard this is..."

"It isn't any easier for me." Riku pointed out, "Since the only place I live and breathe anymore is in your head."

"Don't say things like that..."

[Skater Asahi-san changed up his entire routine at the last second,] Morooka commented from the sidelines, cameras focusing on the unmoving figure, [But he did tell us what his starting pose would be, and that's not it. I wonder what he's doing?] [It looks like he's speaking.] Oda added, [Maybe a small prayer in hopes that this show helps propel him towards being chosen for the Olympic Team?] [Oh! Maybe! We'll be hearing that result later tonight, ladies and gentlemen...]

"It's time to skate, Asahi." Riku said simply, "I was never near as good as you were, even back then...but we'll skate it together, right?"

"...I'm...scared that this might be the last time I see you." The older figure admitted, fingers curling under his hand into a tense fist.

"There was a book series you once read that mentioned a Memory Palace, wasn't there?" Riku wondered, pushing back up to 'stand' within the ice, "I'll always be there. And don't forget about my phone!"

"...But I'm just making that up in my head, aren't I?"

"Are you?"
"...I don't know..." Asahi answered anxiously, brow furrowed under his stringy bangs. He set a toe-
pick down close behind the other blade, and spread his hands slightly to the sides, "...I hope not."
This chapter would work well in combination-format if it were animated or otherwise in artwork form, but since it's not, I'm going to split it into two sections. One for Yuri and Viktor's part, and the other for the show, since they're happening at the same time. I just think it'd be too much to have both scenes overlap each other in writing...music/lyrics + choreography + Asahi's thoughts, and a totally unrelated conversation off-ice.

CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED NINETY FIVE

Everything beyond the rink-wall was plunged into black, illuminated only occasionally by the passing color of the spotlights roaming overhead. Music thundered to life overhead, rattling the arena with the sound of heavy drums. In the middle of the frost-laden stage, Asahi's frame came to life, arcing and weaving out from center in ever-widening circles, changing directions along his path or spinning quickly, as each procession of drum-beats hurtled the song forward.

Viktor watched sullenly, arms crossed as he leaned his back against the wall under the stands. In the dark, he could clearly see his husband's silhouette against the lights on the ice...but, that meant the man was standing in front of him at a distance, rather than within arm's reach. He sighed quietly, feeling his brow crinkle above his eyes, as though a weight had come down over them.

Why is it so hard for him to see how much this bothers me...? He's pushing me off like I'm just some grey and ominous cloud, raining on his otherwise-sunny day.

It felt like half the song had gone by before Yuri even registered that he was standing alone, save for where he held Jiro against his shoulder. He glanced around, having a bit of difficulty seeing beyond himself after having been focused on the lights on the ice. His eyes gradually adjusted though, and he spotted his partner a ways behind him, and down the length of the wall. Making a face, Yuri backed up carefully, hoping he wouldn't trip over anything unseen on the ground, and slid his back down the wall to shimmy up next to the Russian, "How come you're all the way over here?"

Viktor didn't change where he looked, eyes staying forward on the show going on in the rink, "This is where I've been the whole time. You're the one who moved."

"Oh..." Yuri looked aside sheepishly, "I guess I didn't notice since the lights are out."

A strange void of words followed, hollow and yet deafening in its own way.

The younger figure chances a glance towards his spouse's shade, "...Why are you so distant suddenly?"

The Russian shrugged his arms up slightly and shifted a few more inches down the wall, "I'm a third wheel to you right now. I wouldn't trip over anything unseen on the ground, and slid his back down the wall to shimmy up next to the Russian, "How come you're all the way over here?"

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The younger figure chances a glance towards his spouse's shade, "...Why are you so distant suddenly?"

The Russian shrugged his arms up slightly and shifted a few more inches down the wall, "I'm a third wheel to you right now. I wouldn't want to get in the way."

"...Eh?" Yuri narrowed one eye in confusion, "What are you talking about?"

Viktor didn't want to justify the question with an answer. He kept his bangs between his line-of-sight and his partner beyond it.
"...You can't just say something like that and then not explain." Yuri pointed out, hugging Jiro a bit closer in the man's absence.

One eye turned towards him in the dim light, but it wasn't giving a friendly look, "How is it possible that you're so emotionally invested in all the people in your life, but you let yourself become so completely blind to me in the middle of it all?" Viktor asked pointedly, "I thought I was your husband, not him." He nudged his head out towards the skater in the rink.

Yuri grimaced, "...I don't know why you feel that way."

That one slate eye clenched shut as Viktor turned his face away again, gritting his teeth in frustration, "...I'm used to people dismissing me, because they think my being famous somehow means I get everything I want in the end. Yakov, Yurio, him..." He gestured out to the performer in the rink, "...And my Uncle most of all... I didn't think I'd have to worry about you disregarding my feelings, too. It's like you don't even care."

Yuri's heart sank, but he didn't know how to answer. He could hear the despair in Viktor's voice, and could only imagine the tears already in his eyes, though he didn't have the courage to look.

"Time and time again, you put me on the back-burner in favor of others..." The silver figure went on, "And I've...I've told you...so many times how much it upsets me that you're willing to sacrifice yourself in order to make other people happy... But I never thought that meant you'd start to sacrifice me instead." He reached up one hand to rub his eye on the inside of his wrist, "Least not for the sake of someone who attacked you, and made you feel so bad because of it."

Still at a loss for words, Yuri lowered his head.

"...You were supposed to be mine..." Viktor said with finality, holding out that same arm with the gold ring upon his finger, "That's why you took my name, isn't it?"

Yuri nodded where he stood, though he wasn't that sure if it was visible in the dark.

"...Why don't you say something...?"

"...I..." He stammered, feeling a cut on his voice, "...I don't know what to say. I've been lost since you said you felt like a third wheel. How is that...even possible? I do everything with you...he's the one that turns up sometimes."

"Just because we're always around each other doesn't mean we're always mentally available...at least, not you." Viktor explained sadly, turning his eyes away again, seeing the show but not really watching it, "You've gotten so invested in Saito's redemption that it's like you have no room in your heart for anything else right now...me least of all... I've become optional to you..."

"...Viktor..."

"Has this past year just been too hard...?" The Russian wondered desperately, "Have you finally reached your limit...? Did everything with Saito resolve so fast that it's more attractive than returning to the problems I still carry...?"

"What!? No...! Never!" Yuri answered quickly, his voice pleading, "I just... Most of why I reacted so badly to what Asahi did was because of how scared I was for how you would react to finding out...! I was terrified that you'd say I cheated, or that I didn't try hard enough to avoid him like you said I should...or that you'd even accuse me of setting us both up for it on purpose, like I knew he'd try something and consciously allowed it, and betrayed my vows in the process..."
Viktor stayed quiet that time, only moving slightly to rub his eyes again.

"...But then you didn't... You worked so hard to help me get through all of it, listening to me without judging me, or making me feel like it was my fault, even though I was convinced it was..." Yuri went on, barely able to hold it together but for the cold wet nuzzles he felt on his cheek from Jiro's nose, "If you hadn't been so understanding and sympathetic...I'd be a mess for months... But thanks to you, and everything I've learned from you since you first turned up...I was able to bounce back, and clear my head for the things I normally think about..." Yuri lifted his face, trying to find his partner in the dark, "I mean, you walked away from me once because I was so cold to others... You told me, 'how does someone motivate himself when he can't even motivate others?' I took that to heart! Now I want to motivate others! This thing with Asahi...even though what he did was so stupid...after everything else we've both learned about him since it happened, I don't feel like I have the right to hold it against him... I feel like he was just desperately reaching out to someone, asking for help in all the wrong ways, and now that things are clear between us all, I want to help him... But you're just..."

"I'm just what." Viktor asked stiffly.

Yuri cringed slightly and looked away, "You're so hostile towards him still, but then you're so civil, even motivating sometimes... I'm so confused... I don't know why you keep jumping back and forth. It's like you can't decide if you hate him or not."

The silver Russian pinched the bridge of his nose, "I don't hate him." He answered simply, "I resent how much of your time and mental energy has been put towards him. This entire weekend has been about him since almost the minute we got here. Even our trip to USO was marred by the shadow he cast over us. And now I just feel like you're bringing the shadow home with us...asking him to take the train with us, then inviting him to Yu-Topia, a place you admit you never invited him to before... And now you want to go to Wakkanai with him? What next, you'll offer to let him live with us so he can get out of Imari faster?"

"What!? No!"

"Then take it down a notch!" Viktor argued, his eyes still a bit misty, "You've already done plenty to help him! More than he was ever entitled to and way more than he ever expected anyway!"

"...Okay...! I'm sorry!"

"Sorry isn't enough!" He went on, crossing his arms tighter over himself, "It's just like I told him! How can I know you mean it when it keeps happening!?"

The younger figure fell quiet again, a worried look cast over his face.

"...I need you, Yuri." Viktor admitted bitterly, "But putting all of my emotional needs aside for so long, only to call me Captain Crankypants like my attitude is somehow unjustified... " Viktor echoed bitterly, "I don't think I've been so angry in such a hurry in a long time..."

"...I didn't mean it like that..."

The audience abruptly sent out a roar of applause, drowning out anything else that might've been said. The music was over, and when Yuri looked back over his shoulder to the ice, he saw Asahi down on his knees in the middle of the rink, sobbing.
Asahi rubbed his eyes as he rose back up to his feet, and finally took his starting pose despite the anxiety building inside him. He lowered his eyes towards the ice, seeing Riku still superimposed over his reflection directly under him, and waited for the music.

['I (Just) Died in Your Arms' - Hidden Citizens remix (Orig. Cutting Crew)]

The song thundered to life, practically shaking the foundations of the arena with the intensity of the drums. He swiveled and turned in place, gradually drawing a white line in the ice as he made an ever-widening spiral away from center. With each few seconds that passed, and the trill of smaller drums that echoed with the larger, Asahi made a deliberate twist, hop, or direction-change before moving on to the next.

*Oh I.. I just died in your arms tonight*
*It must have been something you said*
*I just died in your arms tonight*

As the first line of a woman's voice resonated, the skater glided forward easily, raising one arm up above himself, then brought both out to the side and around himself, flipping around backwards before leaning into crossovers as he rounded the short end of the rink. Coming out the other end, he kept his arms hugged in place, and descended to both of his knees, forcing himself into a slow rotation as the momentum of his glide pulled him several yards across the ice.

*I keep looking for something I can't get*
*Broken hearts lie all around me*
*And I don't see an easy way to get out of this*

He turned his head to glance around the rink, and lowered his palms to the frost, seeing the glossy, blurred visage of his partner's ghost within the clearer parts. Hands pawed around for a moment before reaching out towards the dark. As his hands came back up, he reached for the rafters, and leaned up, then back until collapsing down to the frost. Legs kicked up and hard, forcing him into a backspin until he set his hands down onto the ice again and forced the momentum to lift himself, setting those blades down with his legs in a V-shape, still rotating, until it became a bent-forward inside spread-eagle, and he could use it to stand again.

Though he did his best not to think about it, he couldn't help but see wreckage in the rink. His new path cut through the debris and fire like he was somehow skating through the accident that had claimed his partner's life.

*I've lost and found, it's my final mistake*
*Loving by proxy, no give and all take*
*’Cause I've been thrilled to fantasy one too many times*

Asahi shook the imagery out of his head, and the ice looked normal again...though he saw that the glow of those flames still shimmered under the ice. It was a completely inverted world down there, showing the highway, the other cars, the people who were running around...and in the center of the rink, and the center of the road, was his own reflection, separate from himself, rocking back and forth with a figure cradled against him.

The pain in his chest hit like a sledge-hammer, and all the fear and agony of those minutes poured through him, fresh like they'd been on that day. He knew Riku was gone already. The echo of his own cries gave that much away. Beneath his own feet, reflected in the ice, he could see the spectral glow of Riku's shade, as though the man had drifted around the accident for a while; lingering,
The tears were hot and stung his eyes, but Asahi did his best to continue on; the music calmed from the clamor of a moment before, leading with a single piano-key as the woman's voice softly returned.

Even so, as she began anew, Asahi kicked off from his reverse glide for his signature quad Lutz, triple Loop, and twisted over for a long outside spread eagle as he landed. His blades stayed spread as the line continued, and he leaned forward and back through a serpentine pattern, until the stanza
ended and he threw himself into a triple Axel. The next lyric went by quickly, giving him only enough time to twist and gesture with his arms before the third began, and Asahi lowered down to glide backward on his right skate for a slow hydroblade.

*Ohhh...*
*I...I just died in your arms tonight*
*It must've been some kind of kiss*
*I should've walked away*

The program was becoming harder with every second, and each word poured into him like molten lead, burning and destroying everything it touched. It reached his heart and it hurt with such ferocity that it felt like it would burst.

He slid forward though, dragging a toe-pick behind himself to slow down, and he came to a stop in the first quarter of the rink, right arm reaching further than the left before he brought them both down with a pained bow. He barely had the strength to lift himself back up again, fingers inching for the toes of his boots as he circled in place before arcing away again, only to come up again and cover over his mouth as he leaned fully upright. The calm of the last line was maneuvered with a few sweeping kicks, dragging a blade across the ice before setting it down in front to switch off...only to brake hard on the drawn-out last line, the intensity of the singer's voice picking up. With the last bit of speed from before the brake, he immediately twisted with all his strength, pushing his body into a brief scratch spin, raising his arms until they were reaching up directly above himself. He suddenly kicked a toe-pick down though and came to an abrupt stop just as the music cut out as well, one arm raised above himself, only for the sound to boom back loudly.

*I should've walked away*

He held still for the line, and stomped his right skate down twice on the return of the drums before quickly moving forward again.

The pain in his chest became a pain of anger and rage; the reflections of fire and shrapnel under the ice were gone. It was just black down there now, like an endless void, with nothing to give away the rink but the white scratches he himself left in its surface. As the drums hammered all around him, the reflections of those he'd known from Tokyo faded into sight, their images shaking with the thunder of the song. He knew the words they all said; the kindness they'd *meant* to give that only fell on deaf ears, because of their ignorance to the truth of the loss they spoke of. There were so many of them, they became faceless golems with empty words, and emptier platitudes.

Asahi's skating became more like a fight; the fury of his silence thrashing around inside him like an enraged animal, desperate to be uncaged. He dipped low and sent a flurry of ice up in a circle around himself, then rose up again, only to kick hard in one place and brake hard in another, whipping up more shards of frost before he took off in another direction again.

*I should've walked away*

The beat of the drums and horns intensified; Asahi cracked his boots against the ice, leaving deep gouges in his wake, but not caring one bit. Every molecule of wrath that he'd locked up under the lies and secrets, it was all coming out; every kick was harder, every jump was higher. It went on like that throughout his rage-sequence, calming only slightly as the chorus tapered down, ready for the grand finale.

*I...I just died in your arms tonight*
*It must've been something you said*
I just died in your arms tonight

In a long, backward glide, Asahi readied for another quad Lutz, digging deep and kicking up chunks of the rink as he toe-picked down for the jump. His blades were like talons, raking the frost on the landing, and tore off down the long-side of the wall like a madman unleashed. He eventually arced back towards the middle again, and threw himself into a flying camel spin, morphing swiftly through a number of variants and sit spins.

Tonight

He kicked hard and switched feet with a jump, continuing the spin as he rose back up for the swift scratch-spin finish. His arms came up, curved around his core as they rose, the drums banging above him until he was a thin and spinning blur under the red lights.

The music cut out to nearly silence, and Asahi spread his arms out far to the side, his spin slowing considerably in a hurry, and he stopped, facing one short end of the arena with his head bent down. It was hard to breathe then, as the pain of the whole performance, and all those memories, settled inside him like lead weights hooked into his flesh. The low rumble of a few more notes echoed around him, and he slid forward gently, arms coming down as his body dared to quit on those final strokes.

By the time it was finally over, he could feel the scream at the back of his throat, even as a few tears clung to his eyes. He barely heard the audience...all that came to his ears was the quiet scratching of someone else's skates.

"...That was fantastic." Riku said, coming to a stop directly behind him, clapping slowly, "For a show you haven't done in two years, and never really perfected... It's one Hell of a send-off, right?"

Asahi reluctantly turned around. The figure before him was no longer just an overcast of his own reflection in something...it was the full figure of his partner; pale and spectral, wisps of light and dust wafting gently like steam, "...I...don't want it to be...the end..." He said, his voice barely a croak under the murderous pain in his throat.

"It's time to say goodbye."

"No..."

"You can't put it off anymore." Riku insisted, sliding closer on one blade. Ghostly hands went to each cheek as he came within reach, and those colorless eyes looked up, "This is it, Asahi."

"No, please no..." He begged, hands going right through the fog of his partner's ethereal frame, "Don't make me do this again, please..."

"It won't be the same." The younger figure reassured, "This time it'll be okay. You've told people. Someone knows."

Asahi couldn't form words anymore; his vocabulary was gone. All he had left was his agony. He could see where the kiss came, but it tortured him that he couldn't feel it...just the whisper of a cold feeling against his skin. The chill faded as Riku pulled away again, gliding slowly backwards then, as though pulled by an unseen force. Asahi reached, but his blades were stuck in place, held down by the same weights he'd felt clinging to his frame before, "No, Riku...RIKU...!"

"I loved you. Don't ever forget..."
The spectral image was gone then, faded into the dark, leaving Asahi utterly alone. He couldn't even blink; his eyes were wide and stuck, until the tears came back, rolling down his face like they'd never done before. He dropped to his knees, limp and dead, and brought his hands up to cover his face before he screamed into them.

Still, the audience cheered, completely oblivious to what he'd seen.

Yuri watched nervously from his place on the other side of the rink-wall. He could tell what was going on, but his own partner's words kept his feet glued to the concrete beneath his blade-guards. He sighed quietly to himself, only to suddenly become aware of the people standing not too far away; Nagisa and Webber, realizing what their athlete had done, and vaguely understanding why he wasn't coming back right away.

Viktor watched the skater as well, knowing all too well what that posture meant. Eyes went from the one in the rink to the one standing just in front of him, and the silver Russian opened his mouth as though to say something anew.

"Yuri, you still have skates on still...could you-" Coach Nagisa started, only for Viktor to get between them and cut her off.

"No." He said, interrupting the idea, and his own, "I'll get him."

"Viktor..." Yuri said quietly, stunned, "...But...why?"

The Russian stepped carefully towards the ice, setting the toes of his leather shoes over the cold before pausing to turn back. He gave a studious look at his partner, "Because in spite of everything else I said, I don't hold his grief against him...and I don't want him to suffer needlessly. It's probably the one thing in this whole situation that I can completely agree with you on."

Yuri watched nervously as his spouse stepped carefully out onto the ice, still slightly limping on that tender right ankle, though holding his own with the aid of the brace. The audience simmered down quite a bit as they, too, watched the silver legend, all done-up in coaching gear instead of a performance ensemble, walked into the middle of the rink, one purposeful step at a time. By the time the man made it, everyone was watching with baited breath, many wondering if Asahi's persistence on his knees had been related to the outburst they'd heard about online. Wondering was all they could do, though.

Viktor gently set one hand on the skater's back as he got close, bending down slightly with his other hand braced against a knee to hold him up, "...Hey..."

Asahi glanced up reluctantly, eyes swollen and red, and full of tears. He couldn't see much of anything beyond the blur of colors and bubbled shapes, though he recognized the Russian's voice as easily as his own, "...S-Senpai..."

"Can you stand?"

It took some effort, and a bit of help, but within a few moments, he was on his blades again, shuffling back towards the exit with one hand perched on the legend's shoulder for guidance. The audience cheered again as he made it safely to rink-side.

Yuri watched quietly, trying to piece everything together. He lowered his gaze though and drew a pained breath, I really did go too far with this one... I got carried away and neglected Viktor despite
how much support he gave to me... How do I even make up for this now...? How do I make him feel better when I don't even feel so good anymore...?

Viktor exchanged a few words with Coach Nagisa as Asahi tried to bury himself under his jacket and scarf again, going incognito like he'd done in public to avoid scrutiny and recognition. No words needed to be said for them to know the man wanted to get away from the noise of the arena, and the group followed after him like a small and confused procession.

Yuri kept his eyes down though, looking more at Jiro and the floor than anything else. He could sense Viktor's presence next to him, but he didn't dare reach like he would normally, My worst fear before was that Viktor would think I betrayed him by 'letting' the kiss happen, even though I didn't...now it just feels like I betrayed him with everything that happened after... I don't know what to do...
Following Asahi out of the rink-side area and into the brightly-lit under-arena staging corridor was awkward. Not just because of the waiting eyes that anticipated the skater’s return from performing, and the excited applause that had to be cut short when they saw him trying to scurry away like an escaped convict avoiding police, but because of how sharply the rest of the mood had shifted in the group that followed him. Asahi couldn't get away from the crowd fast enough, finding the first empty conference room that lined the lower floor hallway around the complex, dropped onto the edge of the raised platform near the front of the room, and sobbed uncontrollably. Though his cries were muffled by the layers of scarf and hood already-wrapped around his head, he still pressed his hands to his face and eyes before outright collapsing to one side, away from the doorway.

Nagisa and Webber looked on from outside in complete confusion, unsure if it was even safe to enter and sort things out. They turned to the two skaters who'd followed in the rear, brows furrowed in a wordless, desperate inquiry.

"He skated for Riku's memory just now," Viktor explained quietly, keeping back from the door, hands stuffed into his pockets, "It's a program he made up right after the accident."

"...I just...don't understand..." The coach said hesitantly, "I know they were friends and rinkmates, but why is he still so violently upset by that accident? It's been two years already... He shouldn't be grieving like it just happened..."

The Russian crinkled his eyes a little and glanced aside, "Wow... He really didn't tell anyone."

"Tell anyone what?"

"Riku Itō wasn't just Saito's friend. They..." He started, wondering suddenly - and at the worst possible moment given how he'd already started - whether it was his place to air that laundry for the pair to hear. He sighed to himself and shrugged, knowing it was too late to do take-backs, "They were dating. Saito and Itō had been living together for the two weeks prior to the accident. When the accident happened, they were actually heading to Kyoto to tell Saito's family about their relationship. It was a secret all that...this time."

Nagisa pulled her hands up to her mouth, though Webber just had that surprised-but-not look on his face. They both turned back to the room to look within, and at their intensely despairing athlete.

"Saito went out of his way to hide the relationship because he was deathly worried about the negative judgment he'd get for it. So...as far as he's concerned, this is the first time he's really gotten to grieve that loss, because he had to play it down for so long." Viktor continued, "It may as well have just happened."

Yuri listened quietly from the background, eyes going to and from each person as they spoke and reacted to the news. He heard a few whispers as Team Saito spoke between themselves, and stood at the edge of the doorway, debating whether or not to go in. After a few moments, Coach Nagisa stepped inside, with Webber staying close to the door, only going far enough within to lean against the doorframe.

*It's weird...that for once, out of this whole weekend...what's happening has absolutely nothing to do with me. I can't think of anything to say, or do... I feel like I don't even belong here.*
Jiro wiggled in his arms, and he set the pup on the ground, unwrapping the lead where it had tangled around his arm. The pup seemed to have ideas of his own, sniffing at the floor before turning around to walk back the way they came. Yuri glanced back over a shoulder only briefly, but could see that his departure was going completely unnoticed, and simply looked forward again to let Jiro lead him where he may.

Viktor stepped towards the doorway, staying in the hall though as he peered within. As he turned to look, he glanced aside, realizing suddenly that his husband was nowhere to be seen. His eyes went wide and he felt a jolt of panic through his chest, but stopped just as quickly as his heart-attack had begun, spotting the younger man far down the hall, following the silver-brindle Akita slowly into the distance. Viktor's brow furrowed slightly, but he didn't know what to do, or say, in the moment, and simply lowered his head.

...This is worse than when he ran off in Calgary...or, rather... when he turned his back on me in Sochi... He didn't say a word to me about it then either...but at least at the time, I couldn't expect to get an explanation, because we barely knew each other. Now... He could feel the sting in his eyes again, I feel like I'm losing him... Why is this so different...?

"We always suspected, but..." Webber started unexpectedly, speaking quietly from just within the room. The Russian lifted his head to look towards him, but the man just gently shook his head, "He never said it outright though. So we just treated it like they were close friends, like brothers. We knew that the Riku situation was a sore spot for Asahi...we just had no idea how deep it really went."

Viktor didn't answer. He leaned his left shoulder against the other side of the door and just watched, his head miles away despite what was in front of his eyes. Nagisa had sat behind the figure and had gently pressed her hand to the man's upturned arm, rubbing her thumb back and forth slowly in an effort to calm and soothe. Asahi just rolled a little further though, legs spilling off the edge of the raised platform until he was sitting on the floor, arms crossed under his face where he leaned forward against the flat of the stage, and in turn, he pulled himself out of his coach's reach.

"I guess we should've connected the dots yesterday when he admitted to kissing Yuri." Webber continued, still in that hushed tone, "But in a way, after such a long time...having a thing for him didn't necessarily mean he'd ever been with anyone else."

Doors to the outside pushed open, releasing a tidal-wave of bitter cold air. It hit Yuri's face like a sand-blaster, leaving his cheeks with the feeling of pins and needles as he stepped outside, Jiro scrambling through under his feet. The pup tried to turn around and get his nubbins on something less frigid, but the door had already closed, and the cold, frozen concrete was all he had to stand on.

"C'mon, Jiro...go do your business so we can go back inside. There's no way you don't have to pee." Yuri insisted, crossing his arms over himself as he looked for a spot off the snow-blown path that looked like it might be appropriate. He stepped up to a small ridge of piled-up frost and kicked it flat, brushing packed chunks aside with his blade-guards until he could see a bit of frozen grass at the bottom. Jiro seemed to know what to do, and had himself a little puppy-wee before briskly rushing back to the end of his lead in a mad dash for the door. Yuri waited a second, kicking snow over the yellow spot, and then followed, pulling the door open to let the warmth of the inside wash over them both. Jiro shook himself out and fluffed up a little, and his tail wagged as he lifted his head towards his human. Yuri brushed his arms off and rubbed his hands over his cheeks, "You're probably starving by now, too...it's been an age since we let you have a break. I need to change anyway so let's get back."

The pup yipped and followed along. Yuri pulled out his phone and loaded up a text message, typing away as he watched-and-walked. It took a while to get the answer he was looking for, having arrived
at his gear bag already and pulled it up over a shoulder before he felt his phone vibrate in his hand. He gave it a quick glance, thumbed a brief reply, and put the device away, then looked down to his Akita puppy again, "Okay, she's coming...let's get going so she doesn't have to wait long."

Another yip, and the skater started plodding off towards the changing room. Once he was there, and closed the stall door behind himself, he set his bag down on the bench at the back and pulled out a small paper plate and a little tin of wet puppy food, cracking it open and setting it down into a corner for Jiro to eat. The pup seemed famished, diving into it eagerly, leaving Yuri to hang the handle of the leash up around the coat-hook bolted to the inside of the door, and then sat back to start untying his skates.

He got one blade off before he paused, watching Jiro for a moment.

_I wish things could be as simple as they are for you... The biggest problem you have to think about every day is how many hours you'll nap, and whether you'll be able to get table-scraps... Why does being a human have to come with so many problems...?_

Yuri sighed and started untying the second skate's laces, pulling the bowed knot loose before unhooking the woven strings from each hook on the front of his ankle.

_Maybe it's just me though... This is my first relationship and I'm already married. Don't people normally go through 2 or 3 before they settle? I'm barely 25, too... Did I jump in too fast...? Even our engagement came and went in the blink of an eye. We never really had a phase where we were just dating..._

His cheeks went pink despite his frustration, and he let the second boot drop to the floor under the bench before pushing to stand. Fingers groped for the zipper on the front of his white Olympic jacket to pull it down, and expose the Exhibition costume he'd kept hidden underneath.

_Sometimes it's still so hard to really grasp that we _are_ married... In my head, I know it's been almost a year...but in my heart, it feels like it's been this way since the beginning of time, and it's just the world around us trying to catch up to our reality. I can't imagine my life without Viktor, and yet...I'm so _bad_ at being what he needs... He's had and abandoned past relationships...what's really stopping him from doing the same to this one? A pair of Gold rings...? Rings that weren't even bought with the intention of _being_ for an engagement... At least, not the one that I bought..._

Costume pieces started to come off, and each one was folded or hung in its appropriate place before being stowed in the garment bag that it had all come in. Yuri dug around at the bottom of his gear tote and found a second garment bag, pulling it out to hang the hook of metal poking from the top just over Jiro's leash. The first bag was gently eased into the latter's place, careful not to squash it in a reckless way, and he turned back to the one he'd just hung up, reaching for the zipper on the front to pry it open.

_Even though we'd grown so close over the months that he'd been with me as my coach...it was all still unofficial, so there was that wall...that cloud of uncertainty all around our supposed intimacy. Were either of us that serious at the time? Were we just screwing with each other...? Teasing, like performers do? Yurio would accuse Viktor of cavorting with the enemy because he was giving away all his talent and experience to someone outside of Russia, but...that means I was doing the same thing. Viktor wasn't the enemy to me...but he was so far out of my league...and yet, there he was, on _my_ doorstep... And as much as I hate to think it, Asahi was right about some things, at least for a while...I really did let Viktor do and say whatever he wanted without argument because of who he was to me..._
"So you've eaten this dish recently then?"

"Yes, yes...I eat it all the time."

"Why though? You haven't won anything...Kobuta-chan."

"Kobuta-chan can't get into the rink until he's lost all the weight! He has to be at least as light as he was in Sochi."

"Even a piece of coal has to be put under intense pressure before it can become a diamond. Right? Kobuta-chan."

Hands reached into the garment bag, feeling at the silky material within. He hesitated to pull the first part of the costume out though, and sat back on the edge of the bench again, resting his elbows on his knees as he wove his fingers through his hair, holding still there with his despairing thoughts.

I'm used to it now, but for a long time, as close as I wanted to be to Viktor, and as much as it hurt to think that he might ever leave me...it wasn't because I wanted to be physical with him... My heart and soul needed him... When I asked him to be mine and take care of me until I retired, and he said he hoped I never did...I knew that meant he felt the same... But it still never occurred to me that we'd ever actually be like this, even in spite of his saying my words sounded like a marriage proposal... I thought he was just...being Viktor... Dramatic...

Yuri lowered his right hand and looked at the gleaming yellow band around his finger. He reached over with his left and pulled it off, looking at the inside of the band, and his half of the snowflake engraving that they'd commissioned during their stay in St. Petersburg.

Every little gesture, every inch forward that I took towards him...I can remember how much happier he was. How much more relaxed he became. It was like the attention I paid him filled him with light and life, and his joy changed... It wasn't just the pride of a World Champion anymore...it was real and true happiness. This past year though...it's just been so hard, ever since Four Continents...

He kissed the band, holding the curve of metal against his lips for a moment before sliding it back into its groove at the base of his 4th right finger, and pushed up to stand again. At his ankles, Jiro was licking the bottom of the plate, having eaten absolutely everything already. Yuri just stood there though, crossing his arms over himself as he looked on at the outfit barely seen within the gap in the front of the garment bag.

Learning so much about Viktor...his family, his past, his struggles... The way those traumas cling to him and follow him around like a storm-cloud, always waiting and ready to pour down all over him... As much as I try to be an umbrella and protect him from the worst, he still gets soaking wet. I feel like I can't protect him...I can't make him happy anymore like I used to; there's just so much more happening now. So many more people involved...and I'm stretched so thin, trying to make everyone happy, all the while trying to keep the bad from getting too close to Viktor's heart. Maybe I'm so used to fighting the really hard battles, like against his father, that I don't know how to do the easy ones anymore without going over the top. I... I gave Asahi the same level of dedication...
that I gave to Konstantin at NHK, but the intensity of it in Sapporo was so much more concentrated, culminating in those two key moments, after the SP and before the Exhibition... With Asahi, it's been constant, practically all weekend long, even following us home yesterday. Leaving Osaka was equal parts about getting my costumes as it was just getting away from him...

Yuri sighed again and shook his head, reaching then for the dark pants that were folded over the wooden, horizontal bar at the base of the triangular coat-hanger. A few easy motions, and he pulled them over his legs, leaving them unbuttoned for the moment as he reached for the black dress-shirt that followed, tucking it into the waist-band before fastening the hidden clasps.

With all that focus on trying to make the situation with him better, even though I did it with the hope that it would mean clear-sailing at 4Cs and Worlds, plus the Olympics in all likelihood...I completely neglected Viktor's immediate needs. He's gone his whole life desperately seeking affirmation and validation that he's worth something, that he climbed to the top of the world and became the greatest skater of our generation, and so many more to come...but none of that could satisfy him. It wasn't the kind of attention his heart needed. He was seeking a kind of personal connection that he could never get from fans or fellow athletes, or even his friends... His life and love were never buoyed by someone who could see past his fame and celebrity... Not even me, much as I tried... I sometimes can't see the difference between him being my hero and my husband...

He pulled the next part out, sliding his arms through it and clasping it across the front, clicking the snap buttons at his elbows and smoothing the whole thing out around his frame.

He gave me everything he had, but for some reason, I just can't give the same back. Am I too stupid and inexperienced in relationships...? There's so much he sees because he's been through the highs and lows before, that I don't because I've only ever been with him... I don't even know how to give him the kind of constant affirmation and recognition he needs to feel secure with me, the way I do with him... And after today, he'll probably be angry at me for doing this program, too, if he's even there to see me do it.

Yuri pinched the bridge of his nose to stave off the tears he could feel threatening to bubble up behind his eyes, then quickly reached for his white jacket again, pulling over everything to hide and protect his outfit. He gathered up all the rest of his scattered things to pack them away, and sat back down to pull his skates back on.

I wish I knew how to dial it back like he says I should, so he can feel assured that he's the only person I have in my heart. I just can't help but try to be supportive to people when I see them struggling... If I don't try my best, it would be like taking a step back and consciously allowing the worst... I'd just feel guilty, for seeing the train coming and letting it hit, knowing all the while that I could've stepped in and pushed the person out of the way. Viktor must feel like that's what I did with Asahi, except...now that I've pushed him out of the way, I'm stuck on the other side of the track as the train keeps flying by, and we can't reach each other... He's calling out to me and I can't get to him!

His vision blurred slightly as he felt those tears fill his eyes, but he clenched them shut, refusing to let them get away from him like they always did. Jiro stole his attention then anyway, looking up at him with a fuzzy muzzle wet with brown puppy-food gravy, and his tongue sticking out in an adorable blep. Maybe it was a mlem. Yuri wasn't sure.

"You're cute but you're filthy." He said quietly, giving his mind the briefest reprieve from his earlier thoughts. He quickly tied the remaining laces and got back up to his feet, leading his puppy out of the stall with his gear-bag on his back. He felt a brief, warm flutter in his chest as he passed through the space where most of their weekend's real problems began...casting a side-eye towards the spot where he'd hit the wall with the edge of his fist after it all happened, but then looked forward again to
the row of sinks and mirrors lining the far wall. He tossed out the dirty paper plate and empty tin, grabbed a paper towel, and picked Jiro up to sit him on the counter, making the towel a little wet before using it to wipe the pup's muzzle. All that done, Jiro was set gently back onto the floor, and the pair pushed through the door to get back outside.

Yuri looked up and around in case Viktor was looking for him, but saw him nowhere. His brow furrowed and he stepped on, heading out to the area where fans could gather, spotting Minako just past the security barrier.

"Yuri!" She called out, stepping closer as he stuck his head through the doors. She saw the slight darkness on his face though and gave a worried look, even as she picked up the pup and took the leash from the man's hand, "You okay?"

"...Uhm...it's hard to explain." He answered hesitantly, "Sorry to interrupt the Exhibition for this."

"It's fine. I'm going to go right back. You sure you're alright? Where's Viktor?"

"With Asahi."

"...Alone?"

"With his coach and choreographer, I guess."

"Oh..."

"That's why I have to give Jiro to you. I don't know if I'll see them again before I go out. Asahi was pretty messed up after he got done."

Minako nodded, "Yeah, I thought that's what was happening... It's hard to see his face from the stands, even with the Jumbotron, but that song choice, and the way he acted at the end..."

"...Yeah..."

"Anyway, you should get moving, your second turn will be soon. I'll find you again after?"

"Okay. Thanks."

The door clicked shut between them, and Yuri made his way towards the prep area, dropping off his backpack before stepping through the blue curtains toward rink-side.

Viktor... I wish I knew what to do...

In that empty conference room, Asahi's grieving had quieted down somewhat, leaving him a trembling, red-faced, wet, hoarse mess. Viktor and Webber had, by then, fully entered the room to allow for the door to be closed and avoid unwanted attention. The Russian sat on the edge of the raised platform, but kept his back to the whole scene, legs stretched out and ankles crossed, as well as his arms folded over his chest. All he could think about was the sight of his partner's frame walking away from him at the end of the hall.

Asahi finally pulled the scarf and hood away, using them, damp as they were, to try and dry his face. When he pulled them away from his eyes, he got his first look around the room since getting in there, and realized the small group that had been there with him the whole time. Despite his hiccupped breaths, he managed to speak, "S...Sorr-ry... F-for dragging...y-you all into th-this..."

"It's okay. We wouldn't leave you alone right now." Coach Nagisa answered for them,
"We're sorry...for not knowing what was really going on all this time... We could've supported you all along but we just...had no idea."

Asahi lowered his gaze to the blotsches of wet on the sleeves of his dark-colored Team Japan jacket, but he could only nod as he choked on a few more shallow breaths. Strands of black and teal hair stuck to his skin, peeling free as he reached a shaky hand up to rub his eyes again.

"I wish you could've felt safe enough before to trust us with the hurt you had these past two years." Sayoko went on, "Viktor told us just now what was really going on, but... I'm sure there's much more to it than just that."

The skater nodded, turning his head to the right to see the Russian's back towards him. He was surprised to realize that Viktor was alone though. He turned even more, scanning the room, thinking maybe the last member of their small group had just gone somewhere out of sight, but his evaluation only confirmed what he already supposed, "Wh-where... is Yuri...?"

"Gone." Viktor answered simply, quietly, and lowered his eyes to the floor, "He left a while ago."

The younger man's gaze returned to the silver legend, "Wh-why...?"

"Who knows?" He shrugged, "He didn't say anything before he left. I only just noticed he was leaving when he was already too far away to ask."

Asahi was stunned, less so from the knowledge that Yuri had walked off than he was at the lackadaisical response Viktor was giving to it. There was a sadness on the man's demeanor that he, even in the midst of his own anguish, could easily feel, "Y-you need... to fin-find him..."

"I'm sure I'll run into him before we all leave." Viktor lowered his head again, tightening up where his arms folded over his chest.

"N-no...Senpai..." Asahi started again, rubbing his eyes on a dry part of his sleeve, "Y-you guys are...f-fighting... You n-...You need to find him..." He managed, forcing out the words despite how much his throat hurt.

One slate eye peered back over a shoulder.

"D-don't...don't ever let him th-think...that he's in t-trouble..." He went on, "He-...he's too s-sensitive... He c-cares...too much...to handle it... Not from y-you..."

Viktor kept his head turned, but focused his eyes forward, staring at the wall on the other side of the room, then the floor.

"He l-loves you...too much... Don't...waste so much t-time...on stupid, little things... Don't...ever let... petty misunders-standings...get in the way." Asahi pleaded, one hand reaching out to grasp unexpectedly at the back of the Russian's long coat. His eyes filled with tears again, and he uttered the last words he thought he could manage, "Love him...like he'll d-die tomorrow...! FIND HIM NOW!"

A fire lit under the silver legend's arse that was so hot, he bolted from the room. Despite the surprised stares from the two older figures in the room, Viktor was on a mission, and he rushed as quickly as he could to anywhere he thought his husband might have gone.

Lights in the arena dimmed, and a single spotlight followed Yuri onto the ice. Gold blades left simple scratches in their wake as he moved around, the cheering from the audience at a fever pitch to see
him again.

[As many know, due to an unfortunate accident, Men's Gold medalist, Viktor Nikiforov, will not be able to skate for himself at this Exhibition... In his place, is your Men's Bronze medalist, and Viktor's husband, Yuri Nikiforov...!] The announcer called overhead, following the man to the center of the rink, [Tonight, Skater Yuri will perform to one of Viktor's past Gold medal performances...!]

The audience roared again, and Yuri took his position, setting one toe-pick down into the ice behind the other blade. Arms were loose at his sides, his head bent down, his eyes closed. Under the spotlights, the twinkle off his blue, sheer jacket, shimmered like starlight...and the soft hum of familiar music began all around him.
Left toe-pick down behind the right blade, Yuri bent his head down, closed his eyes, and tried to ignore the pit growing in his stomach. It was weird, on so many levels, to be performing to the music he was about to hear overhead. Not just because of what the song meant, and what it had meant to Viktor himself in the past, but the fact that he'd stepped into the rink without the Russian to send him off, and the man himself was nowhere to be seen. For a moment, Yuri cracked his eyes open again and looked down at himself, seeing the blue jacket with its rhinestones shimmering under the spotlights, the silver cords that hung in front of his chest and stomach, as well as over his left shoulder.

*I've never done this show on my own, in its entirety, while in costume like this. It was always with Viktor... But now I'm here, and I don't even know where Viktor is right now... Probably still with Asahi in that empty meeting room, and has no idea that I'm even out here.*

Viktor was barreling through the corridors, looking outside through the glass doors as he flew past, scanning every face he ran by. None were Yuri. None were familiar.

The soft sound of clarinets hummed overhead, three notes, each slightly lower than the last. Yuri raised his head and opened his eyes, and brought his right hand up to the side of his forehead before dipping down and turning in place. As he faced forward again, he reached with his right arm into the air ahead of himself, and toed-off on his left blade to glide after it.

*Sent una voce che piange lontano*  
*(I hear a voice crying far away)*

Still running though, the Russian wasn't anywhere close...and his ankle was starting to remind him of that fact. Every stomp down of his heel against the floor sent a deep aching jolt through his whole foot, but instead of dissuading him from his search, only spurred him to find Yuri faster. Without finding the man in the main halls, he pushed into the doors to the prep area, and burst through the door to the changing room where he thought his partner might've been taking his skates and costume off, "Yuri!?"

No answer.

"Blyat!" Viktor barked to himself, leaving again, but feeling that ankle twinge and buckle under him as he twisted and tried to step away. It was enough to hobble him, and he reached for it with one hand before pushing his back against the closest wall. A few eyes noticed him, but he wouldn't look back, pulling his phone out instead. He had his husband's text message history loaded and was about to thumb a few words to send when he suddenly heard a familiar tune.

*Anci tu, sei stato forse abbandonato?*  
*(Have you been abandoned as well?)*

Yuri's frame twisted to the calm of the song, until he dipped down on an outside left edge with his right leg kicked out behind him, and jabbed the toe-pick down hard, launching himself up. Almost on instinct, both arms went up above his head, fingers laced together before parting again as he landed on the outside edge of his right blade for the Lutz.

The applause of the audience seemed foreign and distant. They were cheering for Viktor, not his
Orsù finisca presto questo calice di vino
(Come now, let's empty this glass of wine soon)

Yuri shuffled around in a moving rotation as he pushed through a 3-turn, and dipped down onto the inside edge of his left blade, kicked off, spun four times with his arms up like before, and landed on the outside edge of the right.

Viktor was only barely arriving at rink-side by then, the audience’s cheering echoing all around in the dark. He pushed the curtain aside, and spotted that unmistakable costume on his husband’s frame, gliding across the ice, alone. Tears immediately welled in his eyes as he approached the edge of the rink wall, and set his hands on it, "...Yuri..."

E inizio a prepararmi
(I'll start getting ready)

The younger skater twisted around immediately, arms bending up behind himself before swinging them forward, hands gesturing, pleading to the audience as he continued to turn. In the black beyond the wall, Yuri had no idea those slate eyes were finally on him.
He perked up onto his right blade, the left gestured slightly behind himself before he stepped onto it, switching to face forward. Though he wasn't going as fast as he'd like, Yuri swung that freed leg as hard as he could, throwing his arms up over his head to help build height...and substituted Viktor's triple Axel for the quad.

The Russian was stunned, and he brought both hands up over his mouth, *He's making this even harder than I originally had... Yuri...!*
an inside spread-eagle, and moved off again.

Viktor tried to rub his eyes, but could only manage one at a time, daring not to take them off his partner's performance. *He's doing the same thing I used to do... Calling out, even though I wasn't sure anyone was listening. But he picked this show when we were still at home...and he didn't have a reason to think he needed to reach out like this yet. I wonder...what he was thinking then...?*

*Se potessi vederti dalla speranza nascerà l'eternità*
*(If I could see you from hope eternity will be born)*

Yuri felt every muscle in his body trying to force him to get ready for the quad Salchow, but he resisted, making himself go for the quad Loop instead. Arms were up again for that jump as well, steadying him through the landing. He pulled them in close as he rotated and slid back around, gesturing with his right hand sweeping over the top of his head before both arms crossed and fanned out again. His eyes watched the ice as he skated forward in a slower travel, arcing only to get himself back into the wider part of the rink before he twisted forward and jumped again...this time with enough speed. A second quad Axel in the same already-hard program, with a triple Toe-loop to follow immediately after, earned him a huge applause.

"...*Subarashi...*" A voice said quietly, catching Viktor's attention.

He hadn't noticed, but Asahi had turned up as well, getting through the curtain without the Russian's eyes seeing the light from behind it. Viktor looked back out into the rink before he missed anything else.

*Stammi vicino, non te ne andare...ho paura di perderti*
*(Stay close to me, don't go...I'm afraid of losing you)*

Yuri had always been known for his spins and footwork, but something about his mind-set in that moment made that step-sequence a different thing than it had ever been before. It wasn't just memorized choreography anymore...it was his heart pouring onto the ice.

*I never thought I'd be able to understand what this song meant to Viktor beyond his description of it. When he told me, everything between us was still so confusing... We had our rings, but we hadn't yet clarified what they meant to the both of us yet...it was still kind of a joke.*

*Le tue mani, le tue gambe, le mie mani, le mie gambe,*
*(Your hands, your legs, my hands, my legs,)*

*For some reason, it kind of feels like that again right now... I'm not sure where things stand anymore. He says he needs me, but he's put distance between us...like I've hurt him too badly for him to trust that I won't keep doing it.*

*E i battiti del cuore si fondono tra loro*
*(The heartbeats are fusing together)*

Yuri lost focus of the ice, but he could feel his body continuing on. Muscle memory knew every micro-movement of that step-sequence, even after so many months since the last time he'd practiced it.

*The last thing I ever wanted to do was cause Viktor pain... I've looked up to him for more than half of my life...the idea of hurting or disappointing him is practically a phobia of mine. I ran away from him all those times because I was scared of it... What happened to make it possible for me to not even think about how what I'm doing might make him suffer...?*
No rules, no limitations...Yuri didn't even have to make a choice about it. The triple Lutz became a quad, one hand up above him as he flew. The sweat beading on his skin, and the burning ache in his legs, were completely irrelevant.

Viktor was stunned as he watched,...*He's not even trying and he's already at six quads...and the next jump...*

Another quad Flip. People in the audience were starting to get up at the edges of their chairs.

Yuri reached far forward with his left hand, swept it back, and reached forward with the right, then glided backwards with both hands gesturing ahead of himself. He brought them both back over the center of his chest before reaching out again with his right...though this time, to no one he could see. He glided around himself before raking his blades hard to the side, twisting himself to face backward again for a few cross-over at the short end of the rink. He quickly straightened himself out again, then pushed through another 3-turn...and kicked off again for the last jump of the program.

*Partiamo insieme*  
*Let's leave together*

*He turned my triple-triple Toe-loop combo into a quad-triple... Yuri... You just annihilated my NHK Rage Skate...*

*Ora sono pronto*  
*Now I'm ready*

Forward-entry camel spin, a slight dip, a hop, and a sit-spin variant follow-through, right leg sticking out as he spun. He pushed himself up slightly, keeping his leg straight as he bent himself down over it. Yuri let it go and swung it hard, jumping in place again, but this time switching landing feet, and continued on with the spin as he righted himself to be fully upright. Arms came up, drums thundered overhead, and suddenly...it was over.

The audience went mad. Screams and cheers washed over the ice like a tidal wave.

>[Yuri Nikiforov skating eight quads for 'Aria: Stay Close to Me'? Unbelievable! Where was this Yuri yesterday at the Free Skate!?] Morooka yelled into his mic, [If that man doesn't win Gold at the Olympics, I'll eat my tie!]

>[Morooka-san... ] Oda tried to calm.

Yuri still had his elbows up in the final pose, heaving for breath as the realization of his exhaustion started to settle in. Sweat rolled down his skin, and so did the tears.

"...Yuri..."
Hazel eyes glanced aside, but in the dark, it was hard to see. A spotlight roamed over to the rink exit though, bathing the area in a dull glow that, to his surprise...illuminated his idol's frame. Viktor had his arms up towards him, tears rolling down his own face.

Yuri snuffled slightly as he brought his elbows down, but instead of bowing to the audience like he'd meant to, all he could do was collapse down to one knee, bowing his head low as one hand braced on the ice. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes on a back of his wrist before pushing back up to his feet again, and started moving forward.

*How long has he been there...? How did he even know to come out here to find me...?*

The skater hesitated slightly as he approached the rink-wall, but he saw the Russian dip slightly as he stepped forward on the right. Without a thought, Yuri all-but lunged forward, getting under the man to wrap his arms around his chest, and held him up before he could fall. He felt arms fold over his shoulders, fingers going through his hair, and a wet cheek press against his own.

"I...I can't even believe you did that...!" Viktor cried, hugging even tighter then, "You said your surprise would hit me like a truck...! You weren't kidding!"
Yuri wasn't sure what to say. The words were expected...but not under their current circumstances. All he could do was clench his fingers around the back of his partner's jacket and cry against his shoulder.
CHAPTER THREE HUNDRED NINETY EIGHT

There was barely a heartbeat worth of time that passed between Yuri's exit from the ice, and the switching of the lights for the last act of the night before closing ceremonies. Blue and purple in the rink switched to white, surrounded by a kaleidoscope of colors and shapes that swirled around center and over the audience. The entire arena could be seen again. Cheering lingered from the end of Yuri's performance, dulled to a welcome-level applause as a carpet was rolled out from the other side of the arena by a small gaggle of event-staffers. A nationalistic, parade-like song played out overhead as the JSF elites started walking out towards the center of the rink.

Yuri kept his face down, too overwhelmed by everything to be able to lift his eyes and look outward. Instead, he pulled his hands back from the coat he'd been clinging to and slipped them within it instead, fingers grasping for the cotton sweater within. He managed to avoid complete collapse, but that didn't stop the periodic quake of hiccupped breaths.

Viktor carefully pulled the edges of his coat around the younger figure's back, and replaced where his arms had been around him. Fingers wove back through raven hair, his thumb rubbing slowly back and forth there near one ear.

So much to say, and absolutely no time to say it... Yuri's found so much strength in spite of everything, that it was enough for me to forget for a minute how fragile he can be, too. I should never have put those words out in the open...it was selfish and cruel of me...

Quietly, Asahi glanced over at the pair, his own eyes still swollen and red from his own sorrows earlier on. He sighed a bit under his breath, feeling the cold air catch in his throat as he tried to inhale again, and pulled his coat closer around his frame as he looked out to the announcers.

I can't help but feel like their troubles now are mostly my fault... He thought, eyes lowering slightly to the edge of the rink wall, If I hadn't been in such denial about Riku, I might never have interfered with Yuri like I did... What a mess I've made...

The tension at rink-side was in sharp contrast to the excitement all around the arena, though as a microphone was taken, the cheers died down to a whisper so the words could be heard. JSF President Keiko Hashimoto had a mic in her hand, looking as noble as she had the day she'd presented the Olympic jackets to the Nikiforovs at Yu-Topia. After a few more seconds, she raised the mic up, and spoke simply, [Thank you everyone, for your kindness and support to all the athletes who came here to Osaka this weekend, to skate their all for these Japanese National Championships.]

Yuri turned his head slightly, but dared not lift it away from where he felt the warmth of his partner's neck against his skin. Viktor seemed to notice, and turned them slightly where he stood so Yuri could see out into the rink without having to move much.

[On behalf of the JSF, I offer my heartfelt congratulations to all of our medalists, and my utmost gratitude to everyone who was brave enough to compete.] The President went on, [But it seems like we are still one member short of the full Olympic team.]

More applause answered her words, and the atmosphere at rink-side shifted slightly...at least, for those whose fate might still be impacted by the announcement. Many of the top Ladies Singles skaters had come out to join the Mens who were already there, each of them practically biting their nails with anxiety.
[It has taken us all last night and this morning to come to a decision about the final member of Team Japan, whom we will be sending to PyeongChang in just over 6 weeks.] President Hashimoto continued, taking one small step forward on the velvet carpet, getting nearly to the edge, [There were many things we deliberated upon...not merely the scores we saw at this weekend's competition, but the history of each prospective skater, and their continued potential for growth. But with all of those considerations, we were required to narrow down our selection to one athlete...a single skater from either the Men's or the Ladies' brackets. At this hour, we would like to reveal our selection...]

Asahi couldn't manage the nerve to be anxious. Everything else about the entire day weighed heavily on him already. He could hear the murmur and chatter behind him from the young women hopefuls. Oddly...as he turned his eyes from the President, over to the struggling couple next to him, and out again...his gut seemed to roil on itself, like a painful knot. No longer the butterflies of nervous excitement...but the molten lead ball of dread. The words being spoken overhead seemed to fade away, as though he'd been plunged under a raging torrent of water...the sound of waves breaking above his head morphing into words he'd heard before.

'How the HELL do you expect to prove to me how sorry you are IF YOU LEAVE SKATING?'

'You're GOING to get picked for PyeongChang, and you're GOING to go to South Korea in February. And so help you, you'd better skate like you've never DREAMED you could. You skate like your life and love DEPENDS ON IT...you struggle, and you FIGHT... You prove to the entire WORLD the kind of man Riku thought you were.'

Clapping was all around, and Asahi blinked his sore, red eyes, returning to the moment. On instinct, he just started clapping as well, and side-stepped to get out of the way, assuming one of the female skaters behind him would be needing to get through to the ice. He felt hands on his shoulders though, and a gentle push forward, though he put the brakes on just as soon as he felt it and barely moved a single step forward before he looked back.

His coach was there, and Webber behind her, each of them looking at him as though he was embarrassing them somehow. Another soft nudge, and Nagisa gestured her head out towards the ice, "What are you waiting for!? Go out there!"

"...Huh?"

"Weren't you paying attention?"

"...I...zoned out. Who did they call?"

"YOU! GO!"

Still disbelieving, Asahi turned towards Viktor, as though only the skating legend himself could possibly make sense of it all.

"Congrats," The Russian managed, though in the moment, it was all he could think of to say. Yuri snuffled a breath and those slate eyes were looking down again.

"What are you waiting for!? Go out there!"

"...Huh?"

"Weren't you paying attention?"

"...I...zoned out. Who did they call?"

"YOU! GO!"

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"Congrats," The Russian managed, though in the moment, it was all he could think of to say. Yuri snuffled a breath and those slate eyes were looking down again.

Asahi swallowed his nerves and nodded, though was still unsure of it all. He stepped closer to the rink-wall and leaned to pull off the blade-guards under his feet, This must be some joke. As soon as I step out there, people are going to yell at me and tell me to go back.

One toe-pick touched down to the frost though, and a spotlight found him. Instead of the jeering and taunts of being arrogant though, there was cheering. The perplexed skater could hardly shift his mindset...he could barely muster the focus to stand, let alone participate in any kind of ceremony.
Still though, as soon as he blinked, he was already standing in front of the JSF leadership, and the President was holding out a folded white jacket towards him.

[Represent Japan with all your heart at the Winter Games, Saito Asahi-san.] She said, her words echoing all around the stadium, [The hopes and dreams of the Japanese people are riding on the shoulders of you, Yuri, and Viktor now. Wear this jacket with pride and keep your head held high.]

[...Y-yes, ma'am.] He uttered reluctantly, accepting the jacket, and bowing his frame forward even as the pair of them held it together, [Thank you for trusting in me.]

The audience burst into cheering again as the jacket was passed on, and both figures stood upright again. Asahi couldn't take his eyes off the folded bundle, looking at the light grey hash-marks that decorated it, the gradiented red-to-white line with [JAPAN] written in English letters beside. It was surreal.

...This is what I was hoping for by coming here, wasn't it? He wondered, the clapping turning to a rush of moving water again, then quieting to the tranquility of Imari Bay. It was never just about using Nationals to earn my way back to international competition...it was on the hope of getting to go to the international competition... I just... He cringed slightly, ...It feels like the only way I can be at peace with this is knowing that Yuri already had his jacket before I got here. If I'd stolen this from him, too...

His thoughts were cut off suddenly as music blared loudly from above, startling him into breaking his trance on the coat.

['Last Moment' - SPYAIR]

Shougai kimi ni totte, ore wa donna ore de ireru darou?
(In my life as a whole, what kind of person do you see me as?)

Asahi quickly unfolded the jacket and slipped it over his arms in place of the black and teal Team Japan jacket he'd been wearing before. Lights dimmed all around. The JSF management were already gone, and the carpet had been rolled away...somehow, all without his notice.

Te wo nigitte, yume wo katatte
(Holding your hand, talking about the dream)
Nemuru sono isshun, de ii, kimi no...mirai de itai...
(Even if just for that moment while we sleep, I want...to be your future ...)

Na na nana na nanana nanana na na nanana...yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah!

The rest of the Exhibition's skaters were filtering onto the ice from their singular entrance, keeping close around the rink-wall as they moved along to make sure there was room for everyone. Viktor lifted his head as the lights dimmed again, bringing one hand back over his partner's shoulder to rub a thumb against one cheek, hoping to see those eyes, "Time to go back out."

Hesitantly, Yuri unclamped his fingers from the sweater he'd attached himself to, though he kept his head down a little while longer.

"I know I can't go out there with you, so skate for the both of us a little while longer, okay?"

That earned a reluctant nod. Arms felt like stiff branches, but Yuri pulled them back to hang at his own sides again, pawing for the Russian's right hand as they went though. For a moment, he pressed the ring to his lips.
Viktor could feel the warmth and wet of a few stray tears as that strained face was bent down over his fingers, "...Yuri..."

The younger figure shook his head slightly, but then pulled away, stepping a toe-pick back out onto the ice without so much as a glance as he went. He held onto that hand in spite of it though, trying to rub his eyes on the half-glove that covered his other wrist, "...I don't want you to leave me...and yet, now, I have to leave you. I hate everything about this..."

Viktor was taken aback by the words, "I'm not going to leave. ...There's a lot more that I want to say, but...this isn't a good place. Everything's going to be okay though. Please don't be so worried..."

Another reluctant nod followed, but Yuri still wouldn't look up. He just kissed the ring again before stepping off, gliding away close to the rink-wall, doing his best to pretend nothing was wrong as that almost-nauseatingly enthusiastic music played overhead.

The shuttle ride back to the hotel was quiet in its noisiness. Yuri kept his ear-plugs in, not even listening to music as he watched the snowy roadway fly by, street-lights flashing overhead as the van drove under them. Jiro was passed-out cold across both available laps. Even the feeling of the pup's warm, fuzzy body lying directly on top of clasped hands was of little comfort in that moment.

'Sorry isn't enough! How can I know you mean it when it keeps happening!?'

'...You were supposed to be mine. That's why you took my name, isn't it?'

'It's like you don't even care.'

Yuri tipped his head to press it against the glass, shoulder set on the inner wall of the shuttle.

'I've given him all of me; heart, body, mind, and soul... I thought I was enough...to fulfill him and make him happy, but all I do is make him miserable. He was happy before me...wasn't he?

'Has this past year just been too hard? Have you finally reached your limit...?'

Have you?

"We're just tired, that's all." Viktor's voice said, as though unprompted.

Yuri moved his eyes aside to look, and spotted the other half of Team Kyushu looking back at them, each of their much-younger faces gaping at them in wonderment.

"Are you going to make it to the Banquet later?" Minami asked, skeptical.

"...We might be the oldest competitors, but we're not that old." The Russian huffed, "I'm sure we'll be there...though, we might be a bit late."

"Try not to be too late." The teen gave a coy look, "You're both medalists, and Asahi-kun almost never goes to Banquets...someone from the podium has to turn up."

"There was that one time he went," Hikaru noted, leaning over one of the seats in the next row back, "When he won Gold at that Nationals before he disappeared."

"If he tries to skip out on it tonight, I'll bet his coach drags him in there by his Chicken Butt," Minami laughed, "He's climbed too high to be allowed to not show up for the Banquet."
Yuri looked away again, spotting the lights of the hotel on the other side of the river.

The door clicked open, and the lights clicked on. Feet shuffled in, and Jiro's leash dropped to the ground as he scampered inside before the door closed again. The pup immediately went under the bed, sniffing at everything he could in the wide new space, coming out again only as he heard the sound of kibble being poured onto a paper plate. Yuri used the moment to unhook the lead and remove the small harness, rubbing his hand over the Akita's back to fluff up the fur where it had been pressed down before.

Viktor drew in a hissed breath as he finally let himself sit down against the edge of the high bed, and pushed himself up a bit further before drawing his right leg up against the other. He tossed his shoe to the floor, for once not caring so much about appearances, and made quick work of the brace that he'd worn with it, as well as the thin sock that covered his pale skin. It wasn't so pale anymore though, splotched with a purple-red bruise that he could've sworn wasn't as bad as all that the last time he looked, "Čert poberi..." (Goddamnit...)

Blue eyes caught sight of a blue shimmer, and Viktor looked up from his swollen and bruised ankle to spot Yuri finally taking his jacket off, the 'Aria' ensemble still worn underneath. Still, throughout it all, Yuri wouldn't look at him. Viktor stayed quiet, rubbing his thumbs over his pained joint instead, waiting and hoping that the younger man would say something, anything to break the silence.

However...as soon as his wish was granted, the Russian suddenly backpedaled.

"...Were you...happy...before me?"

Viktor was too disheartened to be surprised by the question, and he hesitated to answer, "...I....was okay. Desperately lonely, but okay."

"Oh..."

"You already knew that though." He added, "You know more about me than basically anyone else on this Earth."

"...I don't know enough." Yuri said, quieter than before, pushing the sliding door to the room's coat closet shut, and held his hand there for a moment where the panel and the wall came together. The mirror that hung on the door reflected his left side, but he kept his eyes away from it, "...If I...keep making the same mistakes, then I don't...know if I'll ever be able to give you what you need to be happy."

"...Don't say that..."

"I'm just repeating what you said earlier, aren't I?" Yuri wondered, hand clenched at his side, "You told me about how you can't even be sure I'm sorry because I just keep doing the things that hurt you."

"...Then I misspoke." Viktor explained, only to sigh slightly and cringe as his thumb hit a particularly tender spot on the inside of his heel.

"Say it with confidence so people believe it even when you're wrong." Yuri said, eerily echoing the man's own words from earlier in the day. He turned around and pressed his back to the wall, sliding down until he was sitting on the floor, and hugged his arms around his legs, "I'm dumb and naïve, and I look up to you...I'd believe almost anything you say."
"Yuri, please come up here..." The Russian asked quietly, watching for a few seconds of motionless before asking again, "Please..."

Though his eyes felt heavy, Yuri finally pushed to stand, and moved towards the head of the bed, resuming the same knee-hugging position he'd been in before, and stared at the blankets in front of his black-clad toes.

Viktor sighed again, "...This is the fourth night we've been away for competition, and this'll be the fourth night in row that we've had a really depressing conversation. If it wasn't the toy, then it was Saito taking advantage of you, then it was you being mad after the Free Skate, and now th-

"Me again." Yuri interrupted, "...You can say it. Every bad conversation we've had is specifically because of me. I had the freak-out about the toy, even though I was the one who bought the thing. I was the one who trapped Asahi, even though you specifically told me to avoid him. I was the one who got mad about Asahi getting Silver when I should've been able to beat him. And now...I once again have caused problems between us." He rubbed his still-red eyes on the side of his arm, "It's okay to blame me...I know it's all my fault..."

"It's not your fault." Viktor countered, "From my point of view, anyway. I don't blame you for any of it. The toy was my idea, Saito didn't have to put his hands on you even though you blocked the door, you can't control your anxiety and it would be crazy to expect you to after everything else that happened, and I wasn't even going to say anything close to what you're thinking before you cut me off."

Yuri wouldn't budge, except for where he clamped his fingers down a bit harder.

"I was going to say...that I made a mistake when I said those mean things earlier." The Russian tried to explain, "I was feeling jealous and insecure...and instead of simply doing something to get your attention when I wanted it, I..." He hesitated a moment, but then shook his head, and looked at his bruised ankle again, "...I lashed out, and made you feel a hundred times worse than I had any right to. I can't take back what I said... I ran my mouth again and said things that deeply wounded you...just like back then..." He let go of his shin and watched the ankle slide off the end of the knee it had been resting on, letting the whole leg dangle off the edge of the bed, "...I did the same thing to you that I was upset at you for doing to me. I just didn't realize it until Saito pointed it out. You can imagine how idiotic I feel to be taking something he says about relationships seriously."

Still, Yuri held silent.

Viktor turned his head and looked at his partner, "...And I... I understand, kind of...how it would be confusing, regarding the way I treat him. I'm still wound up and ready to punch him in the mouth for what he did to you... I don't know that I'll ever be able to forgive him for that. But I can see how much it means to you that I understand why he did it, even if I don't personally care. And... You're right, in that it makes perfect sense to want to make peace, even if it's an uneasy one, so the next time we run into one another, it won't be a giant cluster."

"You didn't even have to want the same thing." Yuri pointed out bitterly, "He was ready to quit anyway. It would've worked just as well to drive him out of competition, so we wouldn't even have to deal with him later."

"That's not the choice you made." Viktor explained, "You tore up the formal complaint and made yourself very clear in the process."

"I mean that grand speech you made earlier today!" The younger figure lifted his head, but kept his eyes clenched shut, "He just said he would turn down the Olympic offer if it was given, and that he'd
retire from the sport after this weekend. You could've left it alone then and been done with it."

"And you would've spent the next few weeks worried sick that he went back to Imari and hanged himself."

Yuri's whole frame clenched up, and he pressed his brow to the tops of his knees to hide his face.

"I wasn't being insincere when I said that I resented how much time and energy you've put into him," Viktor went on, drawing a breath in the midst of it, "But I can understand why you would. I can see how securely you've tied your emotional wellbeing to his situation, and how his outcome will impact you as a result. So...I put my pride and anger away, and forced myself to help him, because I was so desperately worried how you would feel if it didn't end well."

"...Now we're just back to how it seems like your help isn't legitimate..."

"I'm doing my best not to clobber the man who put his lips on my husband, and left bruises behind to remind me of the fact that I wasn't there to stop him." Viktor said simply, "I can't make myself not feel that way. Maybe it's the Russian in me...I've seen people get out of their cars back in St. Petersburg, and smash each others' windshields with baseball bats because one of them cut the other off. Plus, you did once give me grief for having hit my father in the nose."

"...He deserved it."

"Hmm..." Viktor crossed his arms and looked at the wall in front of him, "...In any case, making sure Saito sticks around for a while means you'll have peace of mind. If that means I have to suffer the indignity of seeing him around sometimes...then I'll just have to be okay with that. I appreciate his efforts to make amends for it anyway. I'll give him credit where it's due...he is trying."

"You don't care about his own situation though."

"I said before that I don't hold it against him." The silver Russian corrected, "I empathize plenty with his plight. I just don't accept it as an excuse for what he did. Personal traumas and sorrows do not transcend consent." He pressed his left hand to the bed and leaned slightly, reaching across the poke the crown of his partner's head with a single finger, "You shouldn't be so eager to forgive him for that either."

"You know I blame myself for that whole situation..." Yuri cringed, clinging around his legs a bit harder, "I may not have specifically consented to what happened, but I did deserve it..."

"You did not."

"But-" He lifted his face, already looking like he would cry again, but found himself too surprised to let the feeling linger as the same finger that poked his head now pressed against his lips to quiet him.

"...You didn't." Viktor repeated, slate eyes staring firmly into brown, "You closed a door and talked. You didn't hold him down against his will. The bruises he left were offensive, not defensive. On top of all that, it's not like you went out of your way to track him down. You ran into him by mistake while talking to Yurio on the phone. ...I thought I had already helped you realize all this. Why let it haunt you?" He wondered nervously, pulling his hand away again.

Yuri just lowered his face in shame, "...I don't know..."

"It's all done and over with anyway." The Russian went on, "Saito is going to the Olympics. We've helped him pull his head out of his arse about Itō. We got him hooked up with social media so he can earn an income and get on with his life. We've done absolutely everything humanly possible for that
guy to put him on the right path. And..." He raised his right hand in a half-assed waving gesture, "...Tomorrow, he's going to get to have a Victory Katsudon. You don't owe him friendship on top of that. We're his co-workers now. We can be friendly and socialize at competitions like we do with all the other skaters who aren't Chris and Phichit, but that's it. If for no other reason than because I'm practically begging you...let him go. Until we see actually his face at Four Continents, after tomorrow, I don't want to think about him again."

"You watch his account on Instagram." Yuri pointed out stiffly, "And he watches you back."

Viktor gave a dubious-sarcastic look, "Just because I watch him doesn't mean I see him."

"...Touché."

"So..." The silver legend started again slowly, "...Are we done being sad and confused about everything? I'm really worn out."

"Do you need a nap?"

"...I need a coma, but I'll take what I can get." He answered, flopping down onto his back, arms thrown above his head.

Yuri watched him for a moment, and those eyes that closed, only for one to peek open to look at him again. For a short while, he hesitated, but eventually relented, and unfolded himself from around his own knees. Standing briefly at the edge of the bed, Yuri reached to start unclasping the cords across his chest and stomach, and slipped piece-by-piece out of his blue 'Aria' ensemble. Eventually, he found his phone, set a timer, and set the device down on the nearby nightstand. With nothing left on his frame but his black socks and undershorts, Yuri picked up the puppy, clicked off the light-switch, and climbed back up onto the bed.

Viktor had barely managed to get his arms out of his overcoat before fatigue took him, though he still had at least enough strength to curl an arm around his husband's back as the man crawled and cuddled-up next to him, one arm draped over his chest. Jiro wandered around on the massive bed-space before eventually coming back to curl up against his main human's back.

"Two hours..." Yuri said quietly, "That's when my alarm goes off."

"...Then there's just one thing left that I want to ask..." He started again, feeling the slight twinge in his partner's frame, "...Why 'Aria'?"

Yuri lifted his head again, and twisted to set his chin down where his cheek had been on the man's chest, "...When we were back at home and I was getting my costume, I was thinking how lackluster it would be for the Bronze medalist to skate an unpolished show for the Gold Exhibition, since you were dead-certain I'd be skating in your spot. That's when I ran into my 'Duetto' outfit. I thought... 'Aria' was a Gold-medal performance, and it was yours...and knew it... So it crossed my mind...that I would do a show worthy of your placement."

"Mh...you did...but you went even further than I ever did."

"I wanted to show Asahi what I was really capable of."

Viktor shifted his gaze and gave a wry smirk, "...And put him in his proper place, at the bottom of the podium."

"...Yeah." Yuri turned his head again to settle back where he'd been before, "It just turned out to...be a really good choice for how things ended up today. I think I've gained new appreciation for your
mindset when you were still using it in competition. I...never really understood it before, the way you
described how it felt to do that show after Sochi... But I think I do now... I had no idea you were
watching until I was done, so it felt like I was calling out to someone who couldn't hear me, like you
said about me back then." He drew in a little closer, bending one leg to rest over one of his partner's,
"But then, you were there at the end, waiting for me..."

"And it didn't take you 8 months of concerted effort to get me into bed with you after."

"Viktor-"

"Mhmm..." He mused, eyes closed in the dark of their room, "I love you."

Yuri couldn't help but smile, "I love you, too."
Yuri only managed to doze for around an hour before his typically-anxious mind pulled him from the peace of near-sleep. Just as he was about to move though and try again, Viktor rolled towards him, and gently grabbed his head to pull it close. Yuri felt a pang of déjà vu, even though it was weird to feel like he was remembering that gesture from a poodle's perspective, but when Viktor suddenly awoke and dragged him upward as he sat...it was hard to avoid.

"...I can't sleep..." The Russian mumbled, eyes narrowed hazily in the dark.

"...Why not...?" Yuri wondered, despite being held sideways against the man's chest.

Viktor turned his face to look down, arms unmoving, "...My ankle is throbbing..."

Those four words caught Yuri's attention like a fishhook, and he pulled himself free quickly to fumble for the light switch. With the room beamed with illumination again, they took a moment to let their eyes adjust, and the sight before Yuri's was shocking. The ankle in question was swollen, the skin shiny, and blotched with red, "Shimatta...!

"...Oh...well, that would explain why it hurts."

"What did you do to it!?" Yuri panicked, quickly hopping back up onto the bed, jostling Jiro around like a pebble, and got behind his partner. Hands quickly snaked under the man's arms and around his chest, and Yuri pulled him back until both legs were fully on the bed as well, then dragged him up towards the head of the bed. Pillows were grabbed from everywhere in arm's reach to make a 'nest' for the Russian to lean against, with another few stacked up for the right leg to be propped up on, "This is bad!"

Viktor just blinked, still a bit too sleepy to keep a normal mental pace with things. He turned his head as Yuri came up against his side again though.

"...Viktor, what'd you do to yourself...?" The younger man asked again, this time less frantically, "You were supposed to take it easy..."

"I had to find you."

"Eh?"

"When you walked away." The silver legend elaborated, turning his gaze to the other side as Jiro stumbled across his thigh, finding a spot between them both there and tried to go back to sleep. Viktor set his hand around the pup's back and rubbed his thumb through soft fur, "You took off with our fuzzy son, and didn't say a word about where you were going... I didn't think I was welcome to follow, or even call out to ask why you'd left, so I stayed where I was. By the time I decided to go after you, I didn't want to waste time by walking...so..."

"...You ran on a sprained ankle..." Yuri finished, smacking his forehead so hard, it knocked him onto his back, "...Why'd you do that thing..."

Viktor couldn't help but jump on temptation, and rolled over again despite the puppy trying to snooze between his legs, draping himself between a pair of upturned knees so he could lay himself overtop of Yuri's nearly-naked frame. He set his chin down on the man's sternum and wedged his arms under
Yuri's lower back, "I shouldn't have let you out of my sight. I didn't know where you were. I kind of panicked."

Yuri just brought his hands up to cover his face, "...You might've hurt yourself worse now though...what if you can't skate at Four Continents...? Bad sprains can take more than 2 months to heal, and the Olympics are sooner than that, too...!"

"...I'm sure it's no worse than it was before...I just flared it up by running on it..."

"You just got brought on by the JSF... This looks so bad...!"

Viktor whined a quiet sigh, "...I know... I can still hear Yakov yelling at me..."

Yuri let out a despairing, groaning cry, only to abruptly push up onto his elbows, squashing his partner's face against his chest, "We should've iced it as soon as we got here!" He wiggled himself out from under the man's weight and kicked his legs off the end of the bed, "Don't try to get up! Just stay here...I'll be right back."

The Russian blinked where he lay, lifting up only in time to spot the sleeve of a bathrobe disappearing beyond the edge of the wall. The door opened and closed in quick succession, leaving the room quiet once more. Viktor turned his head to look at Jiro...and got a paw in the face, "Mh-

Nearly skipping down the hall in his hurry, Yuri sought for the ice machine, bucket in-hand. A strange, awkwardly-strained smiled crossed his face as he rounded the corner to the small hall that housed his query.

...I feel really weird...being relieved that Viktor's ankle is the thing I'm worrying about now... It seems like such small potatoes compared to everything else this weekend...

He pushed up the cover of the steel-faced machine and reached for the metal scoop inside, crackling the frost within and shoveling two piles into his bucket. With the lid clapped down again, Yuri turned on a heel and started heading back the way he came.

Not that it isn't serious in itself or anything... Viktor really made a mess of himself... But I'd sooner deal with this than Asahi's situation all over again...that was super stressful.

Yuri reached his hand out for the room and jiggled the handle, thwump'ing himself into the panel before realizing the door wouldn't open. His eyes became beady white things on his face, "Chikushou..." (Crap.) He raised a hand up and knocked, "Viktor, I...left my keycard inside... I'm locked out." He could practically hear the elevator-music playing in his head as he waited for what felt like ages before the door finally clicked and turned inward, revealing a half-dressed Russian inside, giving something of a sultry look.

"What brings you to my door, stranger?" Viktor teased, fingers curling around the top of the panel as he leaned forward, "Do I know you from somewhere?"

Yuri's face went from pink to red, and he scurried inside with a bit of a laugh, feeling a quick pat against his backside as he passed.

The door clicked and Viktor shuffled in as well, easing himself down onto the edge of the bed and lifting both legs vertically in a rather dramatic display, before twisting and lying them down along the bottom edge, "So, my love...we have 90 minutes to kill before the Banquet really starts." He started, stretching his topless frame out into something of a Goldblum, "Thirty if you count the moment the doors open."
Yuri gently - though suddenly - grabbed the Russian's offending leg and pulled it close, hoisting the now-tied bag from the bucket it had lined, and pressed its cold bulk against the swollen joint, "I dunno..." He answered, his mirth from a moment before fading down to nervous guilt, "With everything that happened at the Exhibition earlier...I don't think my head's in the right place." He glanced down to where Jiro had slumped against his crossed legs, and was curiously looking around the room.

"...Oh." Viktor sulked, "...Maybe I can help you get in the mood?"

Yuri hesitated, but then shook his head lightly, trying to flatten the bag around the curve of his partner's foot to cover as much of the bruised and swollen area as he could, "...I...think I just need a while to settle everything out. I won't make you stand on ceremony for long but...for now..."

"...Wait for you."

"...Mh..."

"I guess that's fair." The silver Russian acknowledged, though feeling a little disappointed. He let his elbow out from under himself and slumped down onto his back, looking up at the textured ceiling as the frozen cold of the ice seeped deep into his aching ankle, "Maybe I'm just too simple in that regard... We've had so many moments over the last year where we made amends with our 'post-conflict carnal urges,' that I guess I expected tonight would be the same..."

Yuri felt a little more guilty then, "I know... I just can't get my head in the game for it right now. What happened to me...to us...was so different this time... I feel like I just need a little while to decompress and let it really be over. You..." He started, slouching a little, "...You can take me if you need it for yourself though..."

Viktor lifted his head and gawked, but then just made a face and dropped his silver-haired head back down the comforter beneath it, "There's no way I could do that to you. That's the thing about 'making love,'...you do it together, not alone. That's just 'taking love.' I'm not that way."

There was an immediate sense of relief that washed over the younger figure, "...Yeah..."

"I do appreciate the offer though." Viktor went on, pushing up onto both elbows to lift himself up again, "That's just the kind of thing I'd expect from you, even if you knew already that I'd decline."

"As they say, 'intent is 9/10ths of the law.' I know I'm not always the most engaging bed-fellow...but I try..."

"I'll just have to work extra hard to seduce you again." The silver legend teased, "And I'll start with a different approach."

"Eh?"

With a now-damp ace-bandage wrapped around the ice-bag, and Viktor's right leg sticking out of the tub, dangled over the edge, the Russian put his first plan into effect. Yuri had his back pressed up against his chest, leaning against him as they both sat in the steamy warmth of the bath. He lifted his hands from the water and smoothed them over his husband's dark black hair, "How's this?"

"This is great. It's almost as good as the onsen back home." Yuri said, a slight sigh of content on his voice, and he slid a little bit further down until his chin was just above the water, "Just need some mint tea and I might fall asleep right here..."
"We're not off the clock just yet, my love." Viktor pointed out, smoothing the raven hair out a few more times, "But we can get you some mint tea as a nightcap later if you want."

"Mmmhh..."

"We should consider summoning Minako up here tomorrow morning, too."

"Eh? Why?" Yuri turned his head slightly to look behind himself.

"Remember how poorly I was the morning after my quad-fest at NHK?"

"Oh...sure, but...you did 8 quads at the time... You jumped your way into the record books that night."

Viktor deadpanned, "...Yuri."

"...What?" He turned a bit more, pressing his shoulder to the Russian's chest.

"You did 8 quads tonight."

"...Eh?"

Viktor nodded, "At least, I assume you did quads at the start like normal... I got out there right between what would've been the quad Flip and triple Axel."

"Oh...uhm..." Yuri got a bit sheepish, looking down at the water's surface as he thought back on it. He sat forward and started counting on his fingers, "...Lutz, Flip, Axel...Loop...Axel again..." He started to mumble slightly, "Lutz...Flip...Toe-loop..." He gasped aloud, and spun quickly, making the water splash, "OhmygodIdid8quads." He brought his hands up over the sides of his face, eyes going glassy, "Ican'tbelieveit."

"Most of them were arms-up jumps, too. And technically..." Viktor mused at his husband's antics, "The jumps would've all been legal in competition, because you only did each one twice. You have no excuse for the Olympics now."

Yuri just blinked...and sank, bubbles rising from under the water.

With a still-rather-swollen ankle, getting Viktor's brace on was a challenge. In the end, he was forced to wear it, the ace-bandage around it, and one of his snow-boots instead of the leather dress-shoe he brought for the occasion. Only one foot would get to attend the Banquet as intended.

With fancy attire in place, Yuri offered his hands and helped pull his hobbled partner up to his foot, the right favored and held up slightly.

"Ready?" Yuri wondered, taking one arm over his shoulders.

"Just think...one day, this'll be how we get around normally."

"Hopefully no-sooner than a thousand years from now."

"For sure."

Yuri held the door open with his foot as he ushered the Russian through, pawing for his keycard just to make sure he had it, before they both waved goodbye to Jiro and let the door close behind them. It
clicked, and Yuri set the DND sign on the doorknob.

"Do you really think housekeeping will come at midnight?" Viktor teased, feeling an arm snake around his lower back to help steady his awkward gait.

"You never know who might come by. I'm just hoping no one knocks on the door. Jiro doesn't need to be spooked while we're gone cuz of strange banging noises from outside."

"You could always come back and get him once you've sat me down somewhere upstairs." The Russian suggested, stopping in place as they waited for the elevators, "This hall is pretty empty. I guess most people are already up there." He turned his head and smirked, "We're always so fashionably late to these things."

"It was for a good cause."

The ding came quickly, and doors slid open, revealing an empty coach to take them to the top of the building. Once those doors opened a second time though, letting the duo spill out onto the Banquet floor, it was clear that the hotel would be top-heavy with the number of people floating around. Party music thumped in the distance, and groups of people were taking photos all along the corridors, trying to get the most unique backgrounds.

"YUUURI-KUUUUUUUN!"

"It begins." Yuri deadpanned, stopping where they were, waiting for the excitable teen to pop up from any direction.

Viktor smiled and pat his shoulder where he held onto it, "Smol Nugget to the rescue."

Nearly launching out of the crowd, Minami manifested with flare, done up from tip to toe in a fancy suit that impressed even the somewhat hoity-toity Russian; a 3-piece suit with a bowtie and top-hat. He pulled the hat off and bowed dramatically, "Welcome to the Banquet! We've been expecting you!"

"Were we the last ones to turn up?" Yuri wondered, offering his one free arm forward.

Minami was quick to take his idol up on the offer, and rushed under the arm, both of his own arms going as well around Yuri's frame as they could before Viktor's got in the way. The young skater squeaked out a tiny scream of excitement to get to hug the man, but then finally pulled up again, "Yes, actually! Everyone else got here pretty early!" He looked down then, and saw the big boot on Viktor's leg...and pointed at it...and yelled rather loudly for everyone to hear, "WHAT IS THIS!? THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE."

Viktor and Yuri both blanched at the outburst, but Minami was running away again at top speed before they could shush him. Within seconds, somehow, he was already rushing back...with an office chair. It was wheeled right up to them and stopped suddenly, as though a taxi had arrived to pick them up.

"Good sir," Minami gestured at the seat, "Your chariot awaits."

"...My...chariot?" Viktor chortled, looking from the teen to the chair and then to Yuri, then back to the chair. He shrugged and huffed a laugh before turning to sit back against it, "...Now what...?"

Minami pushed...and pushed harder...but all he managed was to get the back-rest to push up against the Russian's frame, and turned him in place slightly, "...Shimatta...this is embarrassing! I thought for sure that this would work!"
"Viktor weighs like 3 times as much as you do, Minami-kun." Yuri teased, "Even I can barely hold him up for long."

"I'm exactly as heavy as I need to be to be the best figure skater in the world, I'll have you know." The silver legend pointed out, a finger upward for emphasis. He blinked his eyes open quickly though as he felt the chair suddenly move for real, and looked back over a shoulder to find Yuri and Minami pushing him along, "Oh, well, this is different." He mused, "Normally the cart goes behind the horse."

"This might be the only time in recorded history where 'putting the cart before the horse' actually works out." Yuri supposed, weaving his husband through the crowded hall, though letting the younger figure next to him steer, "Has anything official started since most people were here already?"

"Nope! They're keeping a tight schedule." Minami explained, nudging to the left so the chair would get rolled into the biggest of the allotted rooms; it was a field of round, elaborately decorated tables, with bamboo and tree-like decorations scattered throughout, "We're seated way over there!"

Yuri looked over, and spotted Hikaru and Yuto at one table several rows over, each with their coaches, and Minami's own coach there as well.

"You should come sit with us. It's like the Team Kyushu Table from before you guys went to Universal!" The teen suggested excitedly.

"There's more people from Kyushu than there are seats at that table," Viktor pointed out with a half-shrug, crossing his bad leg over the good, "Or is this more like the Chugoku-Shikoku-Kyushu Regionals table?"

"Yes, that." Minami laughed, nudging on the chair to get them moving again, "We hope you're not upset about that? We know you guys helped Asahi-kun, but...he's never been that social with us so we didn't think to save him a spot. You know how it usually goes...we offer and he declines anyway. We just skipped a step this time..."

"It's fine." Viktor answered for them both, smiling more for the fun of getting pushed around like a King - despite his palanquin being an office chair - than anything else, "Is he here, at any rate?"

"I thought I saw him a little while ago," Minami explained, nudging the chair around the last round table before they arrived at their own, "After that thing you guys did to get him onto Insta, a bunch of company people were wanting to talk to him about sponsorship stuff. I'd heard that he basically worked with no one but Mizuno, but...really? Only one sponsor?"

"It's a process." Yuri tried to say, wondering how much he should say, "...He never really needed more than the one, not until now anyway. He's trying to branch out, so this is as good a place as any to network. Viktor got me a bunch more sponsor deals at 4Cs last year because of it."

"Really?" The teen was surprised, light brown eyes watching as Viktor got up and transferred to a different chair, propping his leg up on the one directly beside him as Yuri pulled it out, "After your Silver in Barcelona, I'm surprised people weren't falling over themselves to get in touch with you."

"They were," Viktor teased, sitting sideways in his own seat, "Yuri just wasn't falling over himself to reciprocate."

"Things happened before that Banquet." Yuri pointed out, eyes hidden under the glare of his glasses, "My brain wasn't thinking about sponsorship deals."
"Oh...right." The Russian shrugged, and gestured to the seat with his leg, "I hope it's okay that I put this here...I can take the boot off if it's too bulky against your back."

"It's okay where it is for now." The younger figure stepped up closer and wedged himself between the seat and the table, pressing his hand against his husband's shin before sitting down normally, "I'm more worried about how slowly the food will come out." He explained, feeling the emptiness in his stomach as he looked out across the table to the others who were there, and bowed his head towards them, "Hi everyone."

They waved back politely and offered a few platitudes before going back to the menu cards that had been set down across all the plates. Yuri reached for one and pulled it up to read it, seeing his partner do the same...only for both to realize all the writing was in Kanji and only one of them could read it. So, Yuri moved to gently usher his chair to the side and slightly closer to the largely illiterate foreigner, and started going down the list with a finger.

Viktor slid his arm back across his husband's upper back and pulled the man a bit closer, enough so that he could rest the side of his chin against the edge of one shoulder and watch as Yuri went about his translations. It didn't take long for him to pick what he wanted, and the menu card was set back down again.

Yuri twisted in his seat and leaned back against his spouse's chest, finding hands sneaking in around his sides, under his elbows, to lace fingers together over his stomach and pull him closer. A chin returned over his shoulder, and he felt lips brush the side of his neck. Silver hair slid softly by his skin, and Yuri tilted his head to nuzzle into it a little, then opened his eyes back up to the rest of the scene, "...Kinda feels like we were here for months rather than only a few days."

"Agreed."

"Do you think Euros will be a whole lot different, since we're not competing?"

"Hard to know." Viktor answered, unlacing his fingers again to wrap his arms around the younger man's frame a little tighter. He closed his eyes and dozed for a moment against the back of a shoulder, "I guess it depends on whether or not the Euro folks consider us worthy of backstage access just based on knowing who we are, or if they'll be strict and keep us out."

"Maybe it won't be so bad to really just be spectators, in all ways." Yuri supposed, resting his hands lightly on the forearms around his core, "No backstage drama...no competition stress by proxy... I'm sure we'll hear all about it anyway from Chris and Yurio."

"But at least we won't be part of it this time," The silver legend said quietly, "I could do with a drama-less weekend. We need a few."

"...For sure..."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED

It was barely approaching late afternoon in Moscow, and for once, the sun had come out of hiding, casting radiant light on a city covered in snow. Sightseeing of the city was easy after Exhibition practice ended, and full advantage was taken.

The Red Square, St. Basil's Cathedral, and to cap the day, a nearly 4-hour tour of the Kremlin Armory and Diamond Fund. Massive room after massive room, filled to the brim with antiques, some of which were more than just a few hundred years old; some as grand as snow-sledges and horse-drawn carriages, to plate armor for the horses, then to dresses and other clothing worn by the royals of Russia's past, plates, cutlery, Fabergé eggs, and a jewel repository that glittered from floor to ceiling.

For once, Yurio's observations of his surroundings were made in silence. He made his way around the museum, looking at each piece carefully, then moved on to the next, always sure to stay within a few paces of his adult minders. He was sure to keep his hood up though, not wanting to draw attention from anyone who might recognize him in such a public setting.

Doing the touristy thing during a competition weekend is always a risk, he thought, eyes moving from the display case in front of him to the people standing nearby. Normally it might be one in every fifty who recognizes me, but more people are in town specifically for the skating than usual, so the number goes up pretty high. All those people are doing the exact same stuff that I am, killing time between the events.

Nikki held her phone up and took careful pictures of everything she could; her meticulous cataloguing was what took their adventure so long to complete. Every ten shots or so, she'd pause to upload her cache to Instagram. In a fun and unexpected moment though, she decided to turn around and take a picture with Yurio in the shot as well...but he turned around, pinky finger wedged up his nose, and only had enough time to open his eyes wide before the flash got him. Nikki was nearly in hysterics when she saw the image she'd captured, but the older teen just squashed his hands against her mouth to keep her quiet.

"You're not going to post that one, are you?"

She nearly had tears in her eyes, nodding behind his hands.

"I have an image to uphold."

Nikki backed up from the muzzle and poked the Russian Punk with an elbow as she turned to catch up with the others, "It's not like anyone who follows me actually knows you; it's just my friends from back in Canada. Well, except Otabek I guess."

"...Wait, what?" Yurio repeated, not realizing his volume, "Otabek follows you? Since when?"
"Since the first time I commented on your Insta and he realized it was me?" She explained, "Can't remember exactly when. Sometime after we left Detroit though."

"He doesn't even post publicly though. His account is private."

"So? He approved me to watch his account back, and he DMs me sometimes. I feel like I'm the only girl who's on his page though...I mean, otherwise it's guys like you, and that American skater, Leo I thin-"

"He DMs you, too!?!" Yurio chortled, having taken a moment to process the comment before being able to answer, "Otabek...traitor..."

Nikki found it funny though, "Relax. Half the time he's messaging about you because you're not answering him. Since we're in the same place though...he kind of equated it to following Cousin Viktor to keep track of the other Yuri."

"...Oh."

"Yeah, you post a lot but you don't interact back much. If you comment at all, it's usually on someone else's posts...and apparently you're terrible at checking your inbox."

"...Der'mo..." (Shit.)

"I was just telling him earlier that he should make a public account or something," Nikki went on, starting to take pictures of the next display; gold gilded books and Bibles, set with precious gems and the likeness of prophets, "He posts a lot on his private page...and his coach posts pictures publicly for him for the skating stuff, but when Cousin Viktor and his Yuri made that post earlier today about that guy they helped in Japan, it made me think about Otabek, too. Him and that Japanese guy are the same in that way, keeping out of the public eye so no one really knows about them."

Yurio half-scoffed at her, "You've barely been part of this world for what, 2 weeks? And you already talk like you think you could be some athlete's manager." That just earned him a kick in the shin though, and he winced, "What was that for!?"

"I'm trying to show interest so I can be supportive! Don't discourage me!" She argued.

"So you're saying you wouldn't care if not for me." He huffed, lifting the leg up to rub where it still stung.

"And Otabek, and Cousin Viktor, and the other Yuri...at first...but now I'm getting into it." Nikki reminded, then shook her head as she moved on to get another photo, "It's hard work to get all caught up with everything though. Well...with Viktor it was easy once I found that Viktuuri page, but you and Otabek are a bit harder. I did find out one nugget of neat information though..."

"Yeah?" Yurio feigned interest, still feeling more jealous than anything.

"That Russian skater lady that Otabek went to go hang out with at the Final." She started, looking at her latest photo, "Apparently they dated for like a week and then called it off!"

"...Baba Yaga actually dated him? I mean, he dated her?" The Tiger was thrown off entirely, "I thought he just went to talk to her and the rest."

"I guess he took it kind of literally. I vaguely remember the description of how you guys became friends." She turned on a heel and stuck out her hand in an offered handshake, "I offer you my comradery, Yuri Plisetsky. I have many amenable qualities that are adequate for friendship and feel
this would be an mutually beneficial arrangement."

He just gaped at her, "The Hell!? It wasn't like that at all!"

Nikki just cackled, "I can just imagine him going up to her..." She turned back, and again extended her hand, making a serious face as they moved to catch up with the other three in their group, "Miss Russian Lady Skater, I extend to you my affection. I am a qualified human male with many desirable traits, some of which you are already familiar with, such as my dark and dashing good looks, and cool demeanor. Please clasp my hand if you accept the terms of this relationship."

"Unbelievable." Yurio groaned in an exasperated tone.

"You know that's exactly what happened."

The older teen just rolled his eyes so far back that it tilted his head. When he looked down again, he shrugged and huffed a sigh, "So why did him and Baba break up then? Did she fire him or did he quit?"

"The company dissolved." Nikki mused, "Wasn't profitable enough. The Board of Directors agreed that they had different visions for the future of the business and, since they didn't match, it wouldn't make sense to continue together."

"...Oh." Yurio deadpanned.

"And apparently Baba, as you call her, was a bit too enthusiastic and pushy. It kinda put him off." The silver teen said with half a laugh, "Considering how often she hoists you above her head, I guess I can see that. They're still on good terms though; I guess it's easier to 'date' and 'break-up' when you're in different countries." She offered, putting up air-quotes as she spoke.

Yurio just grumbled, "Her name is Mila. I just call her Baba as a joke on her last name, Babicheva, cuz it means old lady in Russian. She was dating a hockey player right before Viktor left to coach Katsudon...maybe she expected Otabek to be like that guy."

"Who knows?" Nikki shrugged, "He's been pretty chatty since then though. That's actually part of why I'm taking so many pictures...Otabek wanted to see what we were seeing. He's never gotten to see the Kremlin before."

"Hmph..." The Russian Punk grit his teeth, "You sure that's why he asked?"

"Eh?"

"Are we done with this section?" Mikhail wondered, reaching an arm out to gently press his hand to his youngest daughter's back as the pair got close, "Kon said he's getting hungry so we'll have to leave soon."

"We're pretty close to the end anyway, aren't we?" Nikki asked, "Oh! We should take a big group picture! Vikki, do you still carry around that selfie-stick?"

"Yeah," The older teen answered, pulling the aforementioned device out of the inside of her coat to hand it over.

"Everyone get close!" The younger said excitedly, attaching her phone to the end of the pole and telescoping it out to its full length. She could hear the instructions being explained again in Russian as she tried to squish everyone into the frame. It was a trick to get everyone in the view-finder though. A certain bear was difficult to capture, "...I can't reach high enough to get Uncle Kon in..."
"Here, sweetie," Mikhail started, reaching through the gap between heads from the back row to take hold of the self-stick and lift it higher, "Tell me where."

"...A bit lower...a bit lower... Everyone squish in a bit more?"

"Posmotri, kakie u nego glaza." (Let's see if I can get closer.) Kon grumbled, trying to be a good sport even if it was weird for him to participate.

"Okay! That's perfect! Say cheeeeese!" Nikki cheered, throwing her hands up given how she had space to do so then. When she heard the sound of her phone's camera clicking, she cheered and took the selfie-stick back to unholster the device. The sight of the five of them in the same image made the teen giddy, and she immediately went to Instagram with it, "This is great. We haven't gotten a pic with everyone before. Otabek's gonna be super jealous."

"Otabek?" Mikhail echoed skeptically.

"Beka." Yurio explained curtly, "That guy from little former Russia."

"I remember him just fine. Why is he going to be jealous though?"

"He's following our progress through the Armory, apparently."

"Nikkita." The elder's voice was dull, "I faintly recall seeing the number 20 next to his name at the Grand Prix."

"Yeah?" She looked back up at her father and blinked innocently, "So?"

"Twenty." He repeated.

"K?"

"Isn't the age for getting onto social media supposed to be 13 or something?"

She scoffed, "I'm turning 15 in three weeks, thankyouverymuch."

"Why are you talking to him?"

Yurio shook his head...the situation was funny and sad at the same time.

"Cuz Yuri introduced me and now he's my friend?" Nikki answered, looking back at her phone screen, "And he's nice to me? He watched out for me in Detroit when Yuri and I went off on our own? I braided his hair that one time, too, remember? And he caught me when I jumped off the railing."

"Why are you getting involved with all these boys suddenly?" Mikhail grumbled uncomfortably, "And why are you turning 15 next month? You should be 10 forever."

The silver teen just gaped, "I'm not gonna be 10 forever! That's gross and horrible!"

"Might have something to do with the fact that everyone new that she's met is from the Men's Singles group," Yurio pointed out dryly, "Hard to make lady-friends when everyone you run into is a dude."

"Stop making sense. It's not allowed when I'm being her father." Mikhail said, pinching the bridge of his nose, "Nikki, why can't you be more like your older sister? She's not cavorting with strange men online."
"That you know of." All three teens echoed together, then laughing at the coincidence at the elder's expense.

Mikhail pulled his eyelids down in resignation and whined behind his hand, "Why are all my kids so rebellious...?"

Wait-staff started filtering between tables, refilling empty water glasses and setting down plates from the earlier meal orders; the list of options wasn't terribly long, but each of the five possible entrées was as fancy as one could expect.

"Is it weird that I actually kind of miss regular food?" Viktor wondered, eyes wandering around the big room as he waited for their own table to be serviced. His stomach growled under the fabric of his elaborately embroidered suit-vest.

"You eat regular food every day," Yuri deadpanned.

"...Regular for me." He clarified, "Japanese cuisine is still something of a novelty, even if I'm getting used to it. I never thought I'd say that I miss steak and potatoes."

"Oh...yeah, I guess so."

"Ahem," Minami suddenly cleared his throat, standing at his place at their communal table, champagne flute in his hand (filled with ice-water,) tapping the side of it with a spoon, "If I could have the attention of the gathered."

Eyes raised towards him in confusion.

The teen glanced around just to be sure everyone was looking, and made a wide, sweeping gesture with the spoon-hand, "Now that we're all here...I think it's only appropriate that someone say something. It's been two hours...and I don't think anyone has fully acknowledged an unprecedented event that transpired earlier in the night."

Viktor smirked, having a feeling he knew where the Smol Nugget's story was leading. He brought his elbow up onto the back of his seat and propped his knuckles against the side of his jaw, free hand forward to give his husband's shoulder a knowing squeeze.

"Now, while it's true that our illustrious new addition took Gold this weekend," Minami continued, eyes closed as he gestured towards the Russian, "I do believe the MPV of the event is our very own native son, Yuri-kun, who dished out 8 quads in his Exhibition like it was nothing."

Yuri's face went red. The rest of the table clapped and cheered, drawing the attention of nearby people.

"If he did that version of 'Aria' for competition, I'd give it 10 billion points! Each jump would get a three million+ GOE!" The brightly-colored teen went on, getting up onto his chair and getting louder in the process, "It would be a World Record to end all records! No one would ever beat it for the rest of time!"

"Minami-kun, people are staring-" Yuri protested quietly, leaning forward and waving both hands defensively as he caught sight of even more Banquet attendees looking in their direction.

On the younger skater's opposite side, Coach Kanako was trying to get her athlete's attention as well, "Minami, get down before you hurt yourself!"
He suddenly became quite aware of himself, and looked around the hall, seeing everyone looking back at him. He blinked twice, but then shrieked in a high-pitch voice, "YURI-KUN IS JAPAN’S HERO! EVEN IF HE ONLY WON BRONZE THIS WEEKEND, HE’S STILL THE BEST!"

Yuri was practically catatonic from the embarrassment, hardly able to react even as the clapping and cheering reverberated throughout the room, and Viktor pulled him back against his chest. Happy kisses pressed against his neck, and the Russian whispered into his ear, "It's wonderful that you're starting to get the public recognition you deserve."

Zzzzzzz...

Yurio practically hopped into the hotel room, crouching down next to the far bed as Potya got up and mew'd at him. He nosed the feline and got a few licks for it before he stood up and picked the Ragdoll up against his shoulder, "Did you have a good nap? Are you hungry?" Another mew, and Yurio stepped aside, letting others go by as he went to rummage for his pet's dinner. Potya sat nimbly on his shoulder as he dished out the wet pâté onto a small ceramic plate, then jumped down onto the table-top where the plate was put for her to eat. She licked at it happily, and Yurio rubbed her fluffy back before turning to toss out the tin and then find his things.

"Oh wow..." Nikki suddenly said aloud, sitting cross-legged on one of the beds as she looked at her phone, "Social media is going nuts for Viktor's Yuri. Apparently he did 8 quads in his Exhibition earlier."

Yurio would've spat liquid out of his nose to hear that, if he were drinking anything. Instead, he just snorted loudly, "He did what!? How many!?

"Eight."

"That's crazy. Someone counted wrong. Who can even do eight quads in a single show anyway?"

"Didn't Viktor do that many in Japan?" The younger teen wondered, "That's what everyone's saying in the comments section. That Yuri's Exhibition would've probably scored higher than Cousin Viktor's Free Program at NHK."

"Maybe it's a good thing that Minako went with them instead of us," Mikhail huffed, sitting back against that same bed, ankles crossed before him, "If he turns out like my nephew did, then he'll be a wreck of pain and suffering in the morning."

"Those two morons are lucky they didn't break their knees and backs doing that many quads. They're not human." Yurio protested, "It's gonna take a lot more than a simple fascia release tomorrow to recover from stuff like this if they make it common."

"I don't think it will be..." Nikki said, eyes sliding back and forth as she kept reading, "Some folks were saying that it looked like Yuri was crying at the end of it. They were wondering if maybe him and Viktor had a fight sometime between his first and then second show, cuz he was really enthusiastic during the first. ...Apparently he did break dancing on the ice?"

"Ugh that gross dancing again?" Yurio stuck his tongue out, "I thought he retired that crap after the Sochi Banquet."

Mikhail huffed a laugh at the memory of the photos.

"I guess not. There's a few pictures. Wanna see?" Nikki turned her phone around and held it
forward, showing a single photo as a sample; a still-frame from the lay-up exit out of the first windmill maneuver, "Pretty cool, huh?"

"UGH."

"Maybe you need to learn more than ballet." Mikhail winked at the Russian Punk, "I could imagine you doing Hosak dancing on ice!" He laughed.

"Do you have any idea how hard it would be to do that on the ice!?" Yurio lambasted him, "It's all leg-moves while sitting! Flapping the knees back and forth on the ground and kicking the feet out while sitting on your toes! Then there's all the spinning in wide circles while sitting!"

"...That sounds an awful lot like what you already do." Nikki teased, unsure though.

The slap against the blonde's forehead was enough to get Potya to look up, but Yurio was undeterred, "It's nothing like what I do now!" He reached into his bag and pulled out one of his black-bladed skates, pointing at the metal bolted to the bottom, "The soles of my boots are completely rigid. To do Hosak dancing, you gotta be able to perch on your toes, and the soles have to be really flexible so you can kick out and land again without jumping up too high to make room. There's also the risk of snagging the ass of my costume on these," He pointed at the extended heel-blade, "And I shouldn't have to tell you all the reasons why that would be something I want to avoid."

Mikhail couldn't help but howl with laughter at that, nearly rolling off the edge of the bed in the process...though he did lose his hat as he twisted to catch himself. All eyes turned on him in confusion, but he pushed himself up and leaned on one hand as he coughed to clear his throat into the other, "Ahem... Sorry. The idea of someone's ass hanging out on the ice brought back a memory that was really funny." He explained, still trying to stifle the chuckles as he spoke. Still, he could feel the eyes on him, "...What? It was funny."

"We have no idea what you're talking about." Viktoria said flatly, "Who's ass? Why on the ice?"

Mikhail just extended his arms out in presentation of the Russian Bear standing near the door. All he got in response was blinking, even from Kon, who was certain he'd just been dragged into a conversation that he had no clue about. The Rozovsky elder just sighed and rubbed his head, "...Right, you guys don't know. How to put this gently..."

"Čto ty takoe govorišʹ? Èto čto-to nasčët menja?" (What are you saying right now? Is it something about me?) Konstantin grumbled, "Lučše by tak i bylo." (It better not be.)

The silver Russian smiled dubiously, but turned back to the teens on his other side, "When my sister and him and I were kids, there was a time when we all skated...and this one time, he fell, tore up his pants in the process, and his ass hung out...and I made fun of him for it. For years. He hated skating ever since and it's a huge reason why there was such a big family falling-out about it later on, at least regarding your cousin. That's why it's a funny memory...cuz it was funny back then...not anymore."

"Augh would you just say his name, papa?" Nikki groaned.

"So then why laugh about it now?!" Yurio deadpanned the older man as he put the skate away again, deflating his 'younger sister's' point before it could get awkward.

Mikhail took the bait, "Because Kon's here with us now, at a skating event, and he's basically gotten over it."

The silver teen just dropped down to her back and returned to her phone, typing furiously away and
speaking the words out loud as she wrote them, "WHAT...TIME...IS IT...IN JAPAN...RIGHT NOW."

"Honey, don't bother them while they're at a party." Her father instructed, "And it's midnight out there. We're 6 hours behind in Moscow."

"Ugh, you're totally insufferable when you're trying to claim the high-road on something that's your fault." Nikki argued, pushing to sit up again, "Just apologize to him already! Hasetsu is going to suck if we have to avoid each other all the time cuz Viktor's worried you'll pop up! The whole point to going there was so that we could all be together!"

"No it wasn't," Mikhail corrected, "We're moving to Hasetsu because that's where Minako lives, not because that's where Viktor lives. He's having difficulty accepting that I don't have to ask his permission to do what I want with my life. I'm not going to apologize for something I shouldn't have to be sorry for in the first place."

All three teens rolled their eyes at him. Kon did as well behind the younger Russian's back, but for entirely different reasons.

...I'm in Moscow, surrounded by English-speakers...

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Yuri's face was still pink as the dinner event waned, main courses were eaten, and athletes started sipping at bubbly. Desserts started getting passed out by the wait-staff, but just as the last tables were being served, the JSF President arrived at the head of the room, standing on a slightly-raised stage between two massive screens. She tapped the side of her champagne flute to start getting peoples' attention, and before long, the room quieted for her, and she leaned to speak into the mic before her, "Thank you everyone, for making tonight's festivities start off so well. I'd like to interrupt briefly before we continue," She started, watching as everyone grabbed up their own drinks, be they champagne or something else, "Would all the medalists and Olympians please rise."

Several people pushed out their chairs and stood at their tables to be recognized, though it took Yuri and Viktor a moment longer to get there and join them as they maneuvered the Russian's extended leg around so he could get up. Once there though, they scanned the area, spotting Asahi clear across the room.

"Oh, there he is." Yuri whispered, letting his husband use his frame as a support while they stood awkwardly in front of their chairs, "I guess that would explain why we hadn't seen him until now."

The President's voice reverberated through the Banquet hall again, "I'd like to extend a personal congratulations to all of you who made it to the podium this weekend. A toast, to your continued success, and your achievements at the Winter Games."

"KANPAI!" The room cheered together, raising their glasses and taking a jovial sip.

"Once every four years, the world comes together for a massive International month-long event that brings athletes from every sport to one place. Because of skaters like you, and those working hard in aspiration, the eyes of the entire world will see how far Japan has come. Across the board, you of Team Japan consistently place in the top 10 of all individual athletes, with most of you already in the record books. We look forward to seeing what new achievements you'll win in PyeongChang! Ganbatte!"

A round of applause sounded, and though each of the standing athletes was being celebrated with it,
they, too, clapped along with everyone else. Eventually, they were allowed to sit down though, and Viktor propped his leg up along the back of his husband's seat like before. His winter boot had long been abandoned by then though, leaving just the wrap and brace on his sore ankle.

"We should dance later," Viktor suggested suddenly, looking up at the waiter as a ceramic dish with crème brûlée was set in front of him. He turned to look at his partner for a response, "Right?"

Yuri was skeptical, "With your leg like this?"

"Maybe they'll take mercy on me and play something slow towards the end. We haven't danced since that funny ice-waltz we did in Detroit."

"...Viktor..."

"...Maybe you'll have mercy on me, too?" The Russian sighed, poking at the craquelure of caramelized sugar on the top of the flan dessert with a spoon, "Just one dance..."

Yuri sighed and reached across with his left hand, cupping his palm against the man's cheek, feeling a lean into it, and gently stroked his thumb, "...Maybe we can figure something out."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED ONE

The table of Team Saito was rather lively in spite of its namesake. Asahi had long-relinquished decision-making powers to his coach and had turned into himself, returning to the introverted nature that had made him comfortable for so long.

Too many people... Too many things being said, done... I feel like I'm being smothered.

He pushed up from the table and excused himself, seeking for the refuge of somewhere quieter.

The skin around his eyes felt as heavy as lead, pushing down into his line of sight, and weighing so heavily that he felt them pull his entire head down. The pain in his chest from the Exhibition had never really gone away; it was slightly dulled by time, but it still hurt. Anytime Asahi let his thoughts get away from him, the shock of white-hot lightening went out from his heart and up into his throat, sometimes reaching right behind his tired, bloodshot eyes.

It's weird to be grateful that no one in Japan really likes to make eye-contact... It'd be annoying to spend all night trying to explain why I look like I have the flu and pink-eye...

As he wandered out of the main Banquet hall, the lights on the walls changed, dimming slightly, and the mood of the music changed. The fun tempo switched gears to something much slower. Asahi looked back for a moment, looking up at the footage on the two big screens, spotting clips from the Exhibition being played back. Yuri's 'Aria' was on display then, which fit the more somber ambiance of the music then.

Sorry, Yuri... I wish I could've been a better friend to you.

He turned his back to the room and slipped out through the wide-open doors, hanging a left to avoid getting caught-up in all the socializing being done by others. The elevators were to the right, but he didn't intend to leave yet, so it was of no consequence that he couldn't go that way. Finding a window at the edge of the hallway was enough; the entire outer perimeter of the floor was lined with windows where the side of the building wasn't obstructed by more conference rooms. He went as far as he could before the walls leading back to the Banquet pressed up and blocked the hall. Still, it was far enough away from where most other people were hanging out that it offered some semblance of respite.

He found a bench against one of the walls and took a seat, pulled out his phone, and loaded up the funding page. To his shock, and deeper down, his guilt, he saw that the number had reached nearly $40,000. Asahi could hardly contain his shock, and his eyes watered all over again, making them sting fiercely.

I don't deserve all this. Why do all these people care so much? I've never met a single one of them.

He closed out of the page quickly and instead went to check Instagram. His following there had sharply increased as well. It didn't come close to rivaling established athletes, least of all Viktor, but it was still a few dozen-thousand more than he'd had the day before. There were thousands of comments posted to the two things he'd uploaded, especially the video that Yuri had helped him make more recently. Though there were a few comments that seemed only to care for Viktor's antics in the background towards the end, the overwhelming majority were for himself.

But then, there were the odd perceptive few who made mention of things that were still quite a
sensitive issue.

'Your Exhibition was incredible, but I think a lot of us are wondering if your song choice had some deeper meaning. The way you needed help getting out of the rink at the end...are you okay? Was that performance a eulogy for the accident 2 years ago?'

'Was your Exhibition for Itō-kun?'

'That performance you did hit me real hard. I can only imagine how difficult it was for you to get through the whole thing. I'm glad you're being more open about your feelings now, but I wish it hadn't taken 2 years for you to feel comfortable doing so. I know I'm just a fan and we've never met, but if you need to talk to someone...'

Asahi's eyes went down the page, loading more comments. It was...incredibly strange for so many people to be so keen on how he'd felt doing the Gala show, and more so how many of them could attribute it to the accident. Perhaps because it was so seemingly obvious to all of them, Asahi felt a jolt of courage in his gut, and he went to create a new post. He only took a photo of his crossed ankles and the elaborate pattern of carpet on the floor...but the fact that there were no other feet present in the image made it evident that he was alone. His thumbs went to type the message...

[Thank you everyone for your kind words about my Exhibition.] He wrote in Japanese, [I'm...actually kind of overwhelmed at how many people knew that it was about the accident, given how I've never said anything about it to anyone. But...yes... That afternoon, 2 years ago, I lost someone precious to me, and I've been struggling a lot to deal with that loss. The Nikiforovs helped me a lot this weekend; on that front, as well as in getting me onto social media. I'll be forever in their debt. I don't know that I would've ever been able to come to terms with what happened if it hadn't been for them. I know it's going to be a long road to feeling like myself again, but this journey is only just starting. Please be gentle with me. I didn't think it was possible to cry so much as I have in the last two days.]

He hovered a thumb over the button to submit his post, hesitating to be so open with himself, but eventually he let it go through. He drew in a deep, albeit shaky breath before leaning back against the wall to close his eyes for a moment.

It...kind of feels like a relief to finally say something about Riku, even if not what I really think...

Eyes went back down to his phone, and he started thumbing in the search for information on getting to Wakkanai. To his dismay, the trip would be no less than 7 hours no matter what method he used.

I knew Wakkanai was really far away, but I didn't think it'd take 7 hours to get there... Are layovers really that bad?

Asahi clicked through the itinerary, and true enough, the flight itself was barely over half the total travel time. He grumbled quietly as he saw the hour at the top of his phone.

If I could, I'd leave right now...but the trains don't run this late, and I have to use one to get to the airport... They start up again at 5am though... I wonder when the first plane leaves?

A few other clicks, and before Asahi knew it, he'd already booked his trip. He swallowed nervously and checked for the confirmation email in his inbox, showing his departure and return-flight all the way back to Fukuoka.

I'll be leaving in less than 5 hours... I'll have to tell Yuri and Senpai that I won't be able to go with them to Yu-Topia like Yuri offered... Senpai will be relieved about it at least. Maybe I should find a
way to tell him alone so it doesn't feel so awkward with Yuri...

The phone screen turned black, and Asahi drew another sharp breath before he pushed up to stand. With the phone stowed in his breast-pocket, he wandered back to the main Banquet hall. His eyes scanned the room for the Nikiforovs, spotting Yuri at the far end, bringing back the office chair that Minami had found earlier in the night. He watched for a moment, realizing that the pair were heading for the dance-floor in front of the stage.

*I'll have to catch them later, then...*

Viktor sat sideways with his right leg bent under him in the seat, and used his left to push himself around rather than making Yuri push him again.

"How's it feel at this point anyway?" Yuri wondered, looking down slightly, rubbing his thumb over where their hands were clasped together between them.

"It still thumps me sometimes," The Russian explained, nudging himself along at his husband's walking pace, "But for the most part, I think it's settled down. I just have to be more careful about turning certain ways when I stand on it. It only really got me earlier because I tried to turn to my left on it, and pulled my ankle back out the same way I'd hurt it in the first place. If I keep it neutral, it feels fine."

"So with a week of bed-rest, you should be good enough to at least drive, right?"

"A *week* of bed-rest!?" Viktor whined, "I'm gonna get fat if I don't do anything!"

Yuri gave him quite the look for that comment, "You can exercise in every way other than running, and you don't even *need* to go to the gym at the Ice Castle to work out. Maybe the docs will even give you one of those fake peg-leg things to hold your foot out so you can still get around but not bear weight."

"...Fake peg-legs?" Viktor echoed in horror.

"Yeah, it's this thing that you rest your knee in so you can walk." Yuri explained, helping leverage the chair to get the flimsy wheels over the lip of the wooden dance floor, "You keep your knee bent, with a post directly under it to act as the bottom half of your leg, and there's a platform that holds the rest of your *real* leg out at 90 degrees so you never touch it down to the ground."

"...Oh, yeah, I know those. But you're Japanese. It wouldn't work."

"...Eh!? What does my being *Japanese* have to do with anything?" Yuri gaped, finding their spot on the big square surface.

Viktor pushed up to his good leg and turned around, resting his right knee against the seat cushion as he found the best way to stand with the chair's bulk so close to him, "Well, Japan is known for its Ninjas, not its Pirates...and if I have a peg-leg, well... The Nikiforov household will be in chaos! *Yuri and Jiro vs Viktor and Makkachin! Who will survive!?*

Yuri was incredulous, but he couldn't help laughing anyway, "I can't believe you just reduced this situation to a *Pirates vs Ninjas* thing."

"I have to do *something* to make it fun, otherwise it's just a miserable nightmare." The Russian answered, offering his hand out now that he'd situated himself and his 'crutch' properly. His husband took it and stepped in closer. Before either of them could actually take position though, Viktor reached up and pulled his spouse's glasses away, folded them neatly and placed them into his jacket's
inside pocket, "There, now I can really see you. Nothing in the way."

Yuri's cheeks pinked slightly, but he didn't protest; they were close enough that his vision didn't blur anyway. He felt hands and arms slide around his waist, clasping loosely behind his back, and he raised his own up to go over and behind his partner's shoulders, "Don't let me forget you have them."

"Have what?" Viktor wondered, half-teasing. He leaned in closer and pressed his brow to his mate's, brushing nose-tips over one another softly, "All I have right now is you."

"Mmh..." The younger figure agreed, closing his eyes and letting his other senses take over.
With the lights low, music quiet, and the ambiance of the late night Banquet lowered down to a relaxed tempo, the stress brought on by the 'ankle incident' and the 'Saito incident' could almost be forgotten for a while. Dots of pale light roamed around the room, reflected off a mirror ball above the dance floor.

Yuri let himself melt into his husband's warmth, gradually moving down as the music changed over a few times, until he could rest his head against one shoulder. He felt his right hand taken up into another, fingers gently weaving in and out, between one another, feeling and exploring slowly over every inch as though for the first time. He didn't even notice when the chair disappeared, but by the time he did, he supposed it had been gone for a little while, and so long as Viktor didn't make any physical sign of pain, he supposed it was best to just leave it to the man himself to decide how much he'd be willing to use it. All he cared about in that moment was the arm around him, the other holding to his hand, and the feeling of a warm cheek pressed to his brow as they slowly swayed one another to and fro to the music.

To think, I used to be scared of him being close, and of him touching me at all... Now I can't stand the idea of him letting me go.

He glanced up slightly, opening his eyes just enough to see without disturbing his partner's perch there against his forehead. It was hard to tell from that vantage, but he was sure Viktor had his eyes closed and was smiling.

...This is the first time all weekend he's really let himself relax a little. Even when we went home, he was still a bit tense. ...I...should learn how to do more to keep him settled. Maybe I should reconsider what that toy means to me...since it was his idea...

It gave him a nervous flutter to think about the object still hidden under their bed in Hasetsu, but he put the anxiety away, forcing it down until it disappeared.
It must've hurt him on some level that I rejected it so harshly... I wonder what he'd think if I changed my mind...? I mean, it...

He could feel his face getting hot with the red hue that overtook it. He drew a sharp breath, and let it out just as quickly.

...It did feel good...

Feeling the fingers laced through his own for a little while longer, Yuri then pulled his back, sliding them down the sleeve of his husband's arm. He pulled his head up and looked straight on, into those slightly-confused blue eyes. His other arm came out from around the Russian's side as well, and he pressed both palms to his partner's cheeks.

*I'm sorry for what I put you through this weekend... I promise, I'll do better...*

Viktor's eyes softened, as though, somehow, he could hear those thoughts. They closed and he leaned forward, pressing his lips to the younger man's forehead, then down to the bridge of Yuri's nose, "You got so serious all of a sudden."

Yuri lowered his face slightly, looking aside nervously, "...I feel like I did a lot of damage to us over the last few days... I want to take the easy route and blame my inexperience with relationships, but...even if I'd been with a thousand other people before you, it still wouldn't change that your take on things is unique to you. No amount of experience with others will ever help me with knowing how you're doing at any given moment."

Viktor hummed quietly to himself, but then reached a hand up to curl his fingers around the right pressed to his face, pulling it back slightly to kiss the ring there, "Maybe that's partly my fault as well. You may know things about me now, but that doesn't mean I've really changed my behavior around it. I don't do you any service by feeling bad about myself, while keeping it to myself, until it's so bad that it dissolves into hurt on both sides. ...Thinking back on it," The Russian sighed, feeling rather embarrassed suddenly, though his cheeks wouldn't give it away, "...What I said to you before you skated 'Aria,' it must've felt like it came completely out of left field. If I had just come out and said... 'let me deal with Saito on my own...it makes me uncomfortable when you try to help him,' maybe we could've saved ourselves a lot of trouble."

Yuri blinked up at him, but then nodded, "...I thought...after you had that meeting with him and Minako-sensei, that things would be better. If I only ever did things for Asahi while you were around, that it was okay, as though I was doing it under your supervision. Then I got carried away because you were doing so much for him yourself, and some of the things you said...I guess I felt like I had to do something just to catch up to you."

"It was never your responsibility to help him. The fact that you were friendly before was a moot point. You owed him nothing after what he did to you in the changing room." The silver legend explained, stepping carefully as they continued their slow sway, "In that way, I kind of wish I could imbue you with some of my pettiness. I have no problem cutting people out of my life if they cause me trouble...past interactions don't always mean much."

Yuri's eyes were white, "Icauesyoutroublealltheitimethough!" He panicked.

"Shhh...shhh..." Viktor cooed, "The kind of trouble you and I find ourselves in is a very different thing from the kind of trouble that I would want to get rid of. *Our* troubles make us stronger *together*. We'll be stronger still after this weekend." He reassured, releasing the fingers from his gentle grasp, and returned his hand around his husband's waist. Yuri rested his own against his shoulder, those hazel eyes still looking up at him nervously, "And while I hope that, one day, we'll have experienced
enough of the right kind of trouble that we don't have to go through it all that often...this is still Year One for us. Things were different before we got engaged and married. Love and sex, and everything that goes with it, makes the rest much more complicated, because we've *invested* so much more into it. Does that make sense...?"

Feelimg a bit emotional, even as he felt an overwhelming sense of relief, Yuri nodded. He slid his hand up from the shoulder, past the Russian's glossy black ascot and collar, and wove his fingers through silver hair, "It's...dumb how obvious some things are, yet we can be so oblivious to them unless someone else points it out."

"*Deshou?* (Right?) Viktor smiled, "So...does this mean we can start kissing again, or is there something else on your mind? It's been *hours*..."

Yuri blanched, "...I was doing it again, wasn't I?"

"...Oh, you weren't doing it on purpose this time?" The Russian huffed, "I thought you were waiting for something."

"Well..." The younger man started hesitantly, "I did...kind of think that I should probably earn back the privilege of *getting* to kiss you... But...the stuff you said just now...makes me feel a lot better about everything. Maybe it wasn't as bad as I thought."

"We should dance more often then. It's usually quite productive."

Yuri nodded, and pulled a bit where his hand was parked behind his husband's head, "...We should anyway, even if there's nothing to say."

"That's just the kind of thing I like to hear." Viktor nosed his spouse's lips, then...finally...got the kiss he'd been so patiently waiting for.
Chapter 402

CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED TWO

The end of the Banquet came for them all, sweeping over the sleepy crowd like a big, dark blanket. The gift bags that were given to medalists were collected from where they'd been stowed under chairs, and those who remained at the very end started making their way towards the elevators.

Yuri yawned against the back of his hand, then rubbed his eyes. He pawed at his husband's blazer in an effort to find a handle-hold to grip, but instead felt the outline of his glasses under the fabric, and started reaching his fingers inside instead. Viktor held still for a moment, smirking as his partner rummaged around inside his clothing, trying to find whichever layer actually had his spectacles. In his haze, Yuri had passed it over a number of times.

"Let's just get you to bed, my love. You won't need your glasses then."

"Lez ghet you to vehd..." Yuri echoed sleepily.

"...Senpai..."

Viktor's hackles raised immediately, but he turned to the source of the voice, and spotted those teal wings of hair, then the man they belonged to, "...Hey."

Yuri looked on blearily, but he barely had the focus left to stand, so he just leaned, hoping his legs wouldn't give out from under him before they started walking.

"...Sorry to bother at the very end of the night, but..." Asahi started, his frame rigid where he stood, eyes down, "This will be goodbye, I guess, until we meet again for Four Continents next month."

He's not going to Yu-Topia with us? Viktor wondered first, but dared not offer a reminder, "Leaving early tomorrow?"

"Hai." The younger skater answered, "I'm going straight to Wakkanai from here. I... I didn't want to be rude and turn down Yuri's invitation as soon as he made it, but...I think it's best if I go north instead of south right now." He bowed slightly, "It would honor me to partake some other time...but I'll leave that up to you."

The Russian watched carefully, tired as he was, but nodded, "Maybe someday. I think we all need some time to recover from each other for a while."

"...Hai, Senpai." Another bow.

Viktor grit his teeth, but then exhaled, "You don't have to be so formal. 'Viktor' is just fine."

"Maybe someday."

The Russian offered a wry smile at that, then his hand, "That's fair. Until the next we meet."

Surprised by the gesture, Asahi hesitated, but eventually reached for it, "Sayōnara." (Goodbye for now.)

"Good luck with everything. And..." Viktor said, unexpectedly having more to say than that, "If you need anything before the Games, feel free to message me. We're all representing Japan now. We
need to be at peak condition."

"So you can smoke Russia, right?"

The silver legend smirked, "And you can smoke Chris. I hope you don't mind that Yuri and I tackle the Team Event. We've been making plans since we got our jackets last weekend."

Asahi shook his head, "After what I saw this weekend, I think the Team event is best left in your hands. I haven't been at a major international competition in two years anyway. I think it'd be...kind of dumb to throw me into the deep end before I've had a chance to get used to things again. I don't have any backup programs to use for a third bracket either."

Viktor nodded, "Then we'll be in touch after Euros. It sounds like we'll all be pretty busy for the next two weeks."

"Hai."

It took some effort to get back to the hotel room, but once they were there, clothing came off and the blankets were thrown back. Yuri barely managed to pick Jiro up to cradle under the blankets close to his chest before he already felt himself slipping into sleep. He held on to wait for the lights, and the presence of his husband's frame against his back. Once Viktor was there, and arms went around him, he managed one last effort to turn his head for their goodnight kiss.

"Six competitions down...four to go..." Yuri mumbled.

"Only three, my love. Euros is a freebee."

"...Mnhmmm..."

5am came sooner than Asahi expected, despite the fact that he hadn't been able to sleep. His coach and choreographer both knew he would be gone before they woke up, and he'd already said his farewells for the time being.

'I booked my trip so that I'd be back in Imari by Tuesday night.' He'd explained, 'But I'm going to take off for this whole coming week. I...have a feeling I'll need the time to recover from being in Wakkanai.'

'What about your future plans?' Nagisa wondered.

Asahi quietly gathered up his things and made his way towards the door, pulling it open quietly and holding it so it wouldn't slam shut once he was through. The air in the hallway felt colder than he remembered, but he supposed that was because of his nerves running hot.

'I haven't thought about it that much.' He answered, 'My first and only plan after getting back is finding my own place to live. By the time I'm done explaining to my family why I took extra time coming back, I'm sure the rest will be a quick process. Beyond that, nothing else has really changed.'

'So you're going to tell them?'

'I'm...going to tell everyone. When I saw Riku's apparition, he kept telling me about his phone. I don't know if it was a buried memory of mine that was trying to resurface, but...there must be a reason
He could hardly imagine the trove of photos and videos that were on the device, even after so much time had passed.

Asahi made his way through the night-time cold, traversing the brief outdoor area between the hotel and the underground train terminal. As he sat on a bench to wait for the first train, he pulled out his phone, and scrolled through the history of text messages. It wasn't a long list of people; most of them were other skaters he trained with in his home rink, other coaches, and his family...but deep at the bottom of the list...was the undeleted last message he'd shared with Riku. He nervously clicked into it, and read over those last few texts.

伊藤・陸 (Riku Itō)

Text Message  
Dec 26, 2015, 7:16 AM

Me:  
[Where did you go? I got up and you were gone.]

Riku:  
[Morning, sleepy ‘ʕʔ]  
[I went to get coffee. You want something Christmasy or just the usual?]

Me:  
[Ugh the morning is evil]  
[Can I get one of those salted caramel things with a shot and an energy packet?]  

Riku:  
[You're gonna be bouncing off the walls before we even leave]  

Me:  
[I need it. I couldn't sleep. This whole trip we're about to go on has me freaking out.]  

Riku:  
[Relax, lover. ■  ♦  ■ We haven't even left the city yet.]  
[There's still hours to go before we're in Kyoto.]  
[Just get there, THEN get nervous if you have to.]  

Me:  
[I wish I had your optimism.]  
[You don't know what we're about to walk into.]  

Riku:  
[We already have everything figured out. Even Hana is used to you being in my place and she never likes ANYONE.]  
[Oh, I'm at the front of the line. I'll have my hands full so I'll kick the door when I'm back lol]  

Me:  
[Okay]

Asahi tilted his head at it, Hana...? His eyes widened, Oh right, he had a dog...! She even pooped on my things during the first few days after I moved in... I wonder if Riku's family took her in? Maybe they just took her to a shelter...
The train suddenly appeared, and the skater quickly picked up his things and rushed for the loading platform. He could see through the windows that almost no one was on board yet, but on instinct, he still stayed outside the edge of the doorway just in case someone was behind it that he couldn't spot from the terminal. No one was there though, and he quickly boarded, finding a seat before the railcar could start moving again. It didn't take long, and before he knew it, the train came up above ground and he could see the silhouette of the hotel fading into the night and fog. The last few lights on the building disappeared as well, and Asahi signed slightly.

I'm really doing this...

Eyes went back down to the text messages in his hands. With a nervous swallow, he started typing.

If that phone still exists, it's probably in a drawer somewhere... I think I remember what model it is. I'll have to buy a charger on the way.

[I'm coming, Riku. I'm finally coming.] He wrote, sending the message as though there were eyes to read it on the other end. To Asahi's near-immediate surprise, there was no error message that answered him. Nothing to say that the phone line had been disconnected or that the message hadn't gone through. He started to get nervous. 'Sent' was written under his words.

Oh fuck's sake, what if someone else took over his number now? Why didn't I think of that...? My message archive is going to be all messed up if someone else answers! Goddamnit!

For what felt like ages, 'Sent' was all that reflected under his message. It never switched over to 'Seen.' No reply came. Asahi's nerves calmed...slightly. Even as he got out of the train to walk inside Kobe Airport, the text window persisted unchanged.

...Maybe it really is just in a drawer, but his service was never turned off? Why would they even do that?

He dared to tempt the idea of calling the phone instead. His heart fluttered, trying to shake off the weight of the pain it had suffered...but something in him made him click the button and put the phone up to his ear. The dial tone answered, making Asahi's gut twist itself into knots...and then, it clicked.

[Hiii~! You've reached me, Riku~! Please let me know who you and what you need, and I'll get back as soon as I can~! Thanks!]

Bip

Asahi felt his throat clench up, and he choked his next breaths. He lost his grip on the telescoping handle of his suitcase only moments before he dropped to his knees with it, landing on the concrete sidewalk, [O-oh...my god... It's Riku's voice...] He managed, both hands coming to hold the phone up as he felt his strength fade. His voice cracked under the strain, but he forced himself to speak again, [I miss you so much... I wish I could've told you back then how much you meant to me... I'm...so sorry, for everything... I'll be in Wakkanai later today. I'll come see you, okay? I love you..I still love you... Bye...] He pulled the phone back, and promptly dropped it, shaking hands fumbling for the flat device against the ground. When he finally managed to get his fingers around it, and closed out of the call window, he exhaled a pained breath and coughed.

...I haven't even left Osaka and I'm already struggling with this trip... Can I really do it on my own...? Everything is so raw and fresh again, like it all just happened yesterday... I can hardly breathe or see straight...my throat feels like it's being clenched by a vice...

It took everything he had to push back up to his feet, and slowly started heading across the traffic
bloc to get into the terminal. He could only hope that no one had seen him and would be staring. He quickly pulled his scarf up as the automatic doors parted to let him through, and rubbed the sadness off his face as well as he could.

...I have to do this... No matter what...I have to get there...

Jiro's licking and whining woke Yuri up before his alarm had a chance. He mumbled incoherently and started to open his eyes, spotting the blurred outline of his puppy and that nervously wagging tail.

"Mmnnhh...what is it...?"

Another yip-bark, and Yuri was suddenly wide awake.

"Oh...!" He said, startled. Carefully, he unwrapped himself from his husband's pretzel-like grasp, and hoisted Jiro off the bed, taking him quickly into the bathroom before any accidents could happen. Without a patch of grass, all Yuri could do was set the pup down into the shower stall nearest to the drain, and reached for the shower-head. Warm water sprayed soon after, and he let the warm wet liquid trickle around the puppy's paws. The trick seemed to work, and Jiro's fluffy frame relaxed, tiny-puppy-bladder emptying and giving him quite a bit of relief in the process. Once the trickle ended, Yuri quickly pulled a small hand-towel down and set it on the floor next to himself, putting Jiro on it to dry his pink toe-beans before he could wander around and step in what may have remained of his own pee, "I'm suddenly really glad we brought you with us. You're pointing out all these things that I'm not sure either of us would've thought about before leaving Hasetsu." He said quietly, carefully patting each paw dry before setting Jiro down again with a pat on the head, "With Makkachin, he can hold it for a long time...but you're still so young...you need way more breaks."

Another few tail-wags answered those words.

Yuri went about rinsing off the floor, then set the shower-head back into its holster. He clicked the light off and made his way back to the main room, wondering what time it was; 9:14am.

Only 45 minutes before the alarm would've gone off anyway... I guess I'll go ahead and get our things packed so we can leave, and let Viktor sleep as long as he can.

A fresh tin of puppy food was put down on a paper plate, and Yuri refreshed the small water bowl, then went about the business of sorting himself out for the morning. He got himself cleaned up, found a fresh change of clothes to get dressed with, and set out the 'Monday Outfit' Viktor had pre-arranged before leaving home the Thursday before. Everything that wasn't clothing was quietly packed away, including the Gold and Bronze medals that he took a moment to admire - even if to one of them, his admiration was slightly dour - before putting them up.

By the time the silver Russian's instincts kicked in that the space in his arms was empty, Jiro had finished eating, and Yuri set the pup on the bed to act as his surrogate. Viktor seemed content with the substitute for the moment, feeling the warmth and fluff against his chest as though it were his husband's head.

I don't know how long that'll trick him, but I guess it works for now... The more I can get done before Viktor wakes up, the less he has to move around or watch me do it later anyway. We can just get him dressed and go straight to breakfast.

At least, that's what seemed like the easiest plan. When Yuri had everything arranged and ready to
go, he had only 2 minutes to spare before the alarm was set to sound. He stepped up close to the edge of the bed and turned it off before it could trip, and cast his eyes over the Russian's pale frame. Something about the moment struck him...and when Viktor rolled onto his back, he knew what it was.

Jiro was set onto the floor again, and Yuri took the pup's place on the bed. However, instead of merely being a cuddle partner, Yuri carefully set himself down over his husband's hips. He was diligent in making sure he didn't jostle the man awake unexpectedly, and lowered himself down with surgical precision. Blue eyes were still closed, and Yuri deftly pulled back the linens.

*I turned him down all night... The least I can do is offer an alternative until my head's back where it needs to be...*
Chapter 403

Chapter Notes

Just making sure everyone saw that I posted 401 ---AND--- 402 yesterday. If you didn't read about the end of the Banquet, go back before you read 403~

CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED THREE

Yuri was surprised at how soundly Viktor still slept in spite of his sitting on top of the man. Not that he was making himself that obvious, but under normal circumstances, the Russian would have at least stirred slightly to the feeling of pressure on him. With the possibility that it would take more than just his presence to rouse his partner, Yuri set to his task. He rubbed his hands together a few times to warm them, blowing a few breaths between them as he brought them up to his mouth, then gently set them on the pale skin before him.

Chiseled like white marble, but soft as velvet and warm to the touch, Viktor's chest rose and fell slightly with each quiet breath. The contour of each muscle, even when relaxed, was something any man could envy, and once again, Yuri found himself feeling lucky that he was the current, and to his hope, the last person who would ever get to put his hands on that body. Fingers and palms slid softly from the soft curve of the silver legend's lower core, up towards his chest, only to turn and follow the under-curve of those pecs, over rippling intercostals, and up to the underside of each arm, only to slowly pull towards the center of Viktor's chest again. Yuri moved his hands down slightly, feeling the ridge of each abdominal muscle, then up again, over the chest, and touched his fingertips to the edge of each collarbone.

Viktor had his head slightly turned against his pillow, hair lightly tousled over it, exposing the side of his neck. Lips pressed gently onto that skin, moving up to place a few light kisses under one ear. Fingers slid deftly over each arm, tracing through the curves between biceps and triceps, around the elbow, then up again over the softer velvet skin of naked forearms towards the wrists.

Yuri slid his fingers around as those arms became narrower, cupping his fingers under the backs of each hand where they were pressed into the pillow, and slid his thumbs into the palms, clasping there lightly for a moment as he kept on with the feather-light kisses on his husband's neck. In an effort to wake Viktor up then, Yuri lowered down to the collarbone again, and trailed the tip of his tongue back up to where he'd been under the ear. It seemed to work, and he smiled as he continued on, feeling fingers clasp around his thumbs and hearing the surprised hiss of a breath being sucked in. Legs moved under him, only to relax again as the silver Russian realized they wouldn't be going anywhere.

"Morning." Yuri teased, barely lifting from his kisses to speak the words against that slick skin.

"Mmmnh...you forgot to call it what it is..." Viktor mused, still keeping his eyes closed as he leaned his head further away to give even more access.

"'Good' morning?" Yuri wondered, teasing the tip of his nose upward some, tracing a thin line over the edge of his partner's jaw and the curve of a cheek, stopping only when he felt warm breaths against his lips.
"Is that all it is right now?" The Russian wondered, cracking those eyes open only enough to see his husband's outline against the dim lights.

"Great morning then."

Viktor lifted his head up, nudging his face against one cheek to whisper into his spouse's ear, "Any morning where I wake up with Yuri Nikiforov straddling me is an amazing morning~!"

Yuri huffed a quiet laugh against the lips that came before him again, nosing them softly as his partner relaxed to his back like before. Fingers spread and wove together above the man's head, and Yuri felt the slight buck-up of hips under him as Viktor closed in for the kiss. They held there for a moment, tasting and teasing each other, before Yuri sat back up, sliding his fingers down his husband's arms and chest, settling them palms-down on the Russian's stomach. Cherry-hazel eyes admired his soulmate's physique for a few seconds before Yuri started scooting backward slightly, moving down his partner's thighs until he was about half-way down to the knees.

"You're awfully overdressed for this," Viktor pointed out quietly.

"There've been occasions where you've helped me feel good even when you weren't in the mood yourself." Yuri answered, hands sliding further down the Russian's front until the palm and thumb of his right curved over the thick outline of eager flesh, dragging the fabric of the bed-linen with it until it came completely away, "...So even if the pilot isn't on in here," He tapped the side of his head with his free fingers, "There's an inferno in here." Hand came down over the center of his chest, pressed over his heart, "And my heart's desire is and always will be to see you happy. You won't take me unless I'm into it...but I don't want to neglect you either."

"Can I light that pilot by saying that I know Saito isn't in Osaka anymore?" The Russian attempted, giving a breathy exhale as he felt himself taken in-hand, buckling slightly under the first few strokes against his arousal.

Yuri's expression hadn't changed though; he could only manage the mental fortitude to blink in half-surprised acknowledgement, "...Maybe when we get home."

"Mh...guess it was worth a shot." Viktor's hands went down his own frame, seeking for the knees perched on either side of his legs, and rubbed his thumbs there gently through thick black denim, "Your humble servant will graciously accept whatever magic you see fit to offer him." He teased, giving his spouse a wink behind silver bangs.

The brief worry of potentially disappointing him quickly left Yuri's anxious heart, and he reached up with his free hand, pinching his fingers around the thin blue arm of his frames, pulling them past long spikes of almost-deliberately half-dressed hair. If nothing else, that stylishly unkempt mass of raven strings gave him a post-sex-time look anyway, and the way those glasses were pulled away, with those eyes half-lidded in a sultry early-morning gaze, set Viktor's blood on fire. It wasn't enough that Yuri did all that though...he had to put the end of one arm of those frames within his lips, holding his glasses there between his teeth as he maintained that unblinking eye-contact. He smirked to himself when he saw his husband losing that battle of wills, letting out something of a reluctantly-choked squeak of a grunt as those blue eyes closed and Viktor became helpless to his touch.

"...S-So much...Eros...!"

The Russian was almost too easy to please then, each tug and twist of Yuri's hands around him dialing everything straight to 11. The 'build up' was entirely skipped.

Yuri could feel each unconscious contraction of muscle in his husband's flesh; each body-wide
clench, release, and trembled breath. That thick but lithe form under him was practically aching to his whims. He huffed a quiet laugh to himself and then leaned forward, continuing the expertly deft strokes with his right hand as his left travelled up that pale body. Glasses were dropped softly to the bedsheets before lips found their way to unblemished white skin, kissing lightly around the curve of the man's navel. Fingers groped for the rounded edge of Viktor's chest, found the small nubbin Yuri was after, and brushed his thumb over it, feeling the body-wide shudder it sent through his husband's frame as it passed under him.

Viktor sucked in another hissed breath, happily letting himself become more vocal with each release of air. He cried out even louder, and twisted up slightly onto an elbow, as kisses went from his stomach to his center, fingers encircling him and descending as that wet heat enveloped him from above. He fell to his back again and brought his arms up above his head, fingers going through his own hair, elbows pressed closely above his face. The intensity of each suck, the texture of each lick, leaving a trail of wet heat followed by cold, was making him lose his mind. He couldn't find the focus to look, but he felt Yuri moving lower against his legs again, even booting one of them out from under the blankets where it was precariously close to the edge of the bed already anyway.

Sheets and blankets were pulled further away by quick-working hands, and that evicted leg was pulled on top of what remained, but Yuri was sure it stayed bent away from him to keep them both parted for him. Freed fingers went softly down the inside of that exposed thigh, then up, then down again, eventually coming to rest under center to offer some much-needed attention to a pair of squishy bits found there.

Clenching hands were pulled forward again, and Viktor bit down on a knuckle, feeling the heat move from tip to root. He could feel himself forgetting to breathe, needing to consciously suck in air every few seconds just so he could gasp it out again, voice quaking. He couldn't help but move his free hand down, combing fingers through raven hair a few times before pulling it back again, gripping tightly at the sheets. Yuri had put a finger against him and was starting to press, thumb doing much to same slightly higher up. He hissed slightly as the finger went in, and the two massaged at one another through him, rubbing against a particularly sensitive spot between them. Wet heat returned to the tip of his arousal, and all three sensations worked to push him towards finality. He unclenched his hands from where they were and reached instead for one of the pillows behind his head, pulling it up and squishing it down against his face, voice crying out, muffled, but loudly against the fluff. One last jolt of teasing electricity arced through his body before one last hard rub of a tongue over the head put him over the edge, and suddenly that tease became a storm inside him.

Viktor effectively screamed against the bottom of the pillow, every muscle in him clenching up, but Yuri kept on with his task for a little while longer, unrelenting even after the taste of seed filled his mouth. He felt the pulse and twitch of that member against his lips, the way it almost tried to pull away from him and hide from his attention. That white fluid of climax was like the white flag of surrender, and that flesh ached to get away; excited, flushed, and overwhelmed by him. When he was sure those pulses had been milked as far as they'd allow, Yuri gave that flesh one last kiss, and let it gently down against its owner's stomach. He glanced up from his efforts, and leaned forward against his hands and knees, pressing down to lie on top of the man as he caught his breath.

It took a little while, but eventually the Russian calmed enough to pull the pillow up. He still panted to get his breath back, and his skin twitched all over. Slate eyes looked down to where he felt that chin and cheek pressed against the front of his ribs, and his gaze was matched by one still admiring its handiwork. Viktor reached one shaky hand forward and pat his husband's head, "...You'll...be proud to know...I've never yelled like that before..."

"So I did good?" Yuri mused, finding his glasses again to slip them into place.
"...Y-you..." He huffed and puffed his breaths as he tried to answer, "...You never cease to surprise me... Now I'll have to work extra hard so you scream like that, too."

Yuri's face went red in spite of everything he'd just done. He saw the Russian nudge his head slightly though, and easily took the invitation, crawling further up the man's body before lying down again, cheek pressed eagerly to the side of that pale neck. His husband's arms went up over his back as his own wiggled in close to Viktor's sides, hands curling up over the man's chest, and he let himself exhale a contented sigh.

"...Whew..." Viktor went on, still heaving a few breaths as he pet his partner's hair, "I'm gonna be feeling this one for a while..."

With some of the swelling resolved, the silver legend's ankle was looking far better than it had the night before. Still tender though, it was at least able to squeeze into a regular shoe with the brace on, even if the laces couldn't be tied up like normal. Viktor walked on it tenderly...but at least he walked.

The grand trip back to Hasetsu began with the deposit of luggage to the concierge desk for safe-keeping, then to check-out to turn in key-cards. A brief trip outside to let Jiro have another wee followed, then back inside to the restaurant to meet what remained of Team Kyushu. Minami, Hikaru, and Yuto were already there and ready, finally free from the heckling of their coaches for the time being.

Breakfast was calm, but fun, with Minami regaling the tale of 'Yuri's Aria' all over again, only for him to 'rile up the base' and get the other two less-than-master skaters worked up about their own comparatively-minimal quad repertoires.

Yuri set them straight with a simple reminder, "I was 23 already before I really figured out the advanced stuff, and I still had to get a lot of help. You can't imagine how embarrassing it was to have to ask Yuri Plisetsky for help on landing a quad Salchow."

"Isn't he your friend now though...?" Minami wondered, bits of rice and egg stuck to his face where he leaned over his bowl.

"Sure, but he wasn't back then. And think about it...Viktor came to Hasetsu after seeing a video of my sorry self doing a quad Lutz and Flip back-to-back...but I couldn't do either in competition." Yuri nodded, reaching for a triangle of buttered toast, "Imagine how frustrating it is that you physically can do the jumps, but only under specific circumstances. I mean, just my rendition of 'Aria' yesterday is a perfect example... Normally, when something's on my mind, I can't land jumps at all... But I was so out-of-my-mind with worry and fear that I stopped thinking outright. I ended up not even realizing how many quads I did. I only heard about it later on."

The trio of barely-Seniors deadpanned him from the other side of the table, "How do you not notice doing 8 quads?"

Minami was the only one who picked up on the subtext, "...Why were you worried and scared? You weren't even being scored anymore..."

Yuri hesitated, but he felt a hand come down on top of his leg, giving it a gentle squeeze, and he settled again, "There was some stuff that happened with Asahi that got between Viktor and I. I was terrified that it would be enough for us to split up."

Light-brown eyes were wide in shock, "Wh...what? You can't split up! You're my favorite couple!"
"We never came close to that point," Viktor explained, calming the teen down slightly, "It was just a misunderstanding."

"Stuff like that gets to my head too easily," Yuri added, leaning slightly to rest his head against his husband's shoulder, "That's one of the only draw-backs to being in love... You just...feel so much more strongly about everything. I mean, at that Regionals competition I had to go to with you guys...Viktor got upset at me because I ignored you," He looked straight at Minami, "But even after he set my blade-guards down and walked away for a while, the worst I thought was, 'how am I supposed to stay motivated now?' It never even crossed my mind that Viktor would actually leave me. I just had to learn the lesson he was trying to teach, and he came right back. Yesterday though, the lesson wasn't quite so clear..."

"It wasn't just a lesson for you though." Viktor pointed out, picking up a piece of bacon between his fingers and biting a bit of it off for himself, giving the rest to Jiro, who was nomming on a piece of fried potato under his seat, "That's probably why it wasn't so obvious. It was something we both had to learn from. The class might've been the same, but we got different messages from the lecture, so we came away with a different understanding of the same problem."

"You guys are so smart." Minami fawned.

"Oh don't say stuff like that," Yuri teased, nibbling on his toast, "We're both pretty dumb, actually."

"We're the dumbest geniuses you've ever met!" Viktor laughed.

The train ride out of Osaka was as much of a relief as it was swift. The city quickly vanished into the distance, tracks leading them towards Fukuoka. Still, even with Osaka quickly becoming a memory, and the sound of Minami and the others being hyper all around, Yuri couldn't help but reflect on it all. He leaned against his husband's shoulder again, hands clasped together on the arm-rest between them, and looked out through the windows into the snow-covered countryside.

"You've gone quiet again, my love." Viktor's voice spoke quietly, cheek rubbing against the top of the younger man's head before a kiss was set down in the same spot.

"So Asahi left before we woke up, huh?"

"Mh."

"How did...you know?"

"I guess you were too tired to remember," The Russian surmised, "He came to say goodbye at the end of the Banquet. He's doing like you said you would...going to Wakkanai right away instead of waiting."

"Really?" Yuri lifted his head in surprise, "Wow..."

"He should be there by now." Viktor went on. He turned slightly and leaned forward to kiss the edge of his partner's shoulder, feeling the texture of the suede-leather against his lips for a moment, "I imagine he'll need some time to himself for a while once he's done up there...but I did invite him to reach out if he needs help with Olympic stuff after we're back from Euros. Weird as the situation is between us, even I can't deny the fact that there's a point where we have to put the sport first, and leave the rest on the sidelines for a while. He's a liability on the ice for us."

"...A liability?" The younger man echoed in confusion, "Why?"
"He's never been an Olympian-"

"Neither have I."

"I wasn't done." Viktor made a face, "He also hasn't competed at the international level since before Sochi. He mentioned meeting me once, way back, at a Grand Prix event...but what's the Grand Prix Series to the Olympics? Maybe if it had been the Final, but..."

"Oh...yeah, I guess so."

"He's okay with us taking command of the Men's portion of the Team Event." Viktor continued, "So he'll compete as hard as he can for the podium at the individual level. I think it'd be funny if the three of us were up there again."

"It wouldn't bother you?" Yuri wondered, slouching down slightly in his seat so he could more-comfortably rest his head on his husband's arm, keeping Jiro safely and securely on his lap while the pup napped.

"I'm petty enough to want to see all 3 spots on that podium occupied by people from Team Japan. As it happens, that's you, myself, and Saito. It doesn't make any difference who the third person is, but..." The Russian mused, resting his cheek against his partner's crown, "...I have more reason than most to want to see RSF lose. I'm even willing to coach Saito for a little bit if it gives us a better chance of keeping the Russian flag from flying over the Gangneung Ice Arena."

"Yurio's just going to love that."

Viktor laughed sadly, "Yeah...it's pitiful. He wanted me to go back to St. Petersburg with him so bad and be his coach, and now I'm in a position where he's the last person on this earth that I'm willing to coach."

"Well...he can't expect anything from you until next season." Yuri pointed out, "You didn't agree to be his choreographer until then."

"Mhm. And this is for the Olympics... If everyone on Team Japan wanted to come to Hasetsu for last-minute speed-coaching, I'd take them on in a second."

"Don't say that too loudly..." The younger figure teased, "You might get your wish."

Minami leered down at them from above the back of their seats, "Personalized coaching from Skating Legend Viktor Nikiforov, huh?"

"Olympians only, Smol Nugget," Viktor cracked one eye open at the teen and nudged him back into his own seat-space with his free hand, "You couldn't afford my fees anyway."

"You coached Yuri-kun without charging him."

"Pfft," The Russian scoffed, "I told him he could pay me after he won Gold at the Grand Prix Final, that's all. Since he won Silver, he owes me 5 World Championships instead. He's already gotten one..."

"Would Olympic Gold count for anything?" Yuri wondered with a hesitant laugh at his own expense.

"You have a whole wall to fill up with Gold medals, my love," Viktor pointed out with a smirk, "No substitutions."
That just made Yuri sigh dramatically, "...Shimatta..."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED FOUR

The view of Hasetsu Castle coming into range was one of the most welcome things either men could think of seeing since returning from NHK nearly a month prior.

"Is it weird that I feel like we haven't seen this sight in years, even though it was only yesterday…?" Yuri wondered reluctantly, pressing his shoulder to the glass.

"Nope, I'm there with you..." Viktor agreed, leaning as well, "The castle sitting atop a city by the sea, like a beacon."

"You're so dramatic." Yuri laughed, brushing the man back again. He drew in a weighty breath and relaxed against the back of his chair, then tilted his head towards his partner, "So, do you want to stop by Yu-Topia before your appointment?"

"Mmmhhhh...not really. Minako said she was going to go straight to your mom."

"Oh, right..."

"...I need to talk to Hiroko before Mikhail gets here with the rest of the clan..." Minako said quietly, phone pressed to her ear as she stood in the lobby of her hotel, waiting to check out, "I don't know that I could stand to bring it up after everyone's in Hasetsu. The first time someone tries to touch my stomach, I'm going to dropkick them into low orbit."

Yuri nodded and looked up to where Viktor was still getting dressed, then down again to where his phone was set to speaker on the bed, "So you'll be leaving right away..."

"Yeah. I mean, thanks for inviting me anyway." The ballerina went on, "I was just going to grab a coffee and get going. I just...want to get this done and over with."

"She left two hours before we did though. You don't think she's done already?" Yuri wondered.

"I can't speak for her, but I imagine that won't be a fun conversation, given what little she's said to us about it."

"That's true..." The younger figure shook his head, "What a weird situation. I can't even imagine what she's going through. Not even taking her age into consideration, but...knowing her all my life, she's always kind of had her own plan for things. Her own way of doing stuff. This would change everything."

"Mh."

"...And my mom would probably have the complete-opposite reaction," Yuri went on, thinking about that very scenario, "Considering the genes being mixed, it's practically the next-best way for my mom to get grandkids...and the way all your cousins look alike, with your same silver hair, I wouldn't be shocked if-"

"...I'm trying not to think about it." Viktor interrupted softly.
"...Oh."

"Izvinite, moya lyubov'." (Sorry, my love.) He added, rubbing his thumb where he still held his husband's hand, "I don't know that this topic won't always be a touchy subject for me."

"Guess I can't blame you for feeling that way." Yuri settled again, "I think about it more from Minako-sensei's point of view, but I guess you're stuck with Mikhail's."

"I don't see anything from his perspective." Viktor shook his head, fingers tightening slightly. Buildings started whizzing past the windows as the train came down from its elevated rail platform on its way toward Hasetsu Station, "I just...feel like he betrayed everything that I trusted him with."

*Mikhail does have the right to live his own life... Yuri thought, But...at the same time... Viktor was so sure that the guy had the sense to talk to us before just deciding to move here. Hasetsu isn't that big and we share the same social circles, so it's really only one step down from moving into our house with us...*

"I guess there's some horrible part of me that's grateful Minako's just as unsettled by this as I am." Viktor continued quietly, "But I hope she figures out what she's going to do sooner rather than later."

"Do you think you'll be okay with her choice?"

"I think it'll just take one more unknown out of the future." The Russian answered, sort of, "I can start to focus my mind towards whatever she decides to do."

"And if she decides to carry on with it?"

Viktor grit his teeth slightly, keeping his eyes on the back of the seat ahead of him, "My support for her hasn't changed."

"I meant your view of the kid that'll be here at the end of it."

"...I'm extremely apprehensive about the idea of it right now. I won't lie." The silver Russian sighed, feeling a bit guilty about his honesty. He turned towards his partner as the train started to slow down, "You?"

"I'm torn." Yuri answered, "My first thought is to agree with you, since not one person involved seems to be all that excited about it...and you'd think we would be. But then...I wonder...if maybe I'm the only one who could be, other than my mom. Whatever the circumstances..." He paused, shifting in his seat slightly so he could lean his weight against his spouse's arm, "...I can't help but get a tiny bit excited at the idea of a little version of you running around. I start to feel guilty when I think about it though, because I know how unhappy you are about the whole situation."

"...So...it doesn't matter to you that it would still technically be my Uncle's kid."

"Not particularly."

"Mh..."

"...Maybe it's because of the age difference..." Yuri offered, bracing himself slightly as the momentum of the train stopping forced him to lurch forward a little, "Mikhail's old enough to be your dad, but this would be a newborn...and you're old enough to have kids of your own by now. I mean, it's like I was saying earlier...this baby would likely have your family's silver hair, mixed in with mine and Minako-sensei's Japanese looks. It'd be like...our kid, almost."
Viktor stayed quiet.

"I dunno. Maybe I'm just saying stuff that doesn't make sense. I just want to consider all the differences this go 'round. We'll be here for the whole thing, you know? It won't just be another Rozovsky popping up like all your cousins did...heck, if Minako-sensei never agrees to reinstate the engagement, the baby might actually be an Okukawa."

People started shuffling by, and Viktor rose up to his feet, tenderly getting out of the aisle to find their bags and hand a few off to waiting hands. He passed through the small-town terminal and out into the parking lot, looking for his volcano-red hotrod. It was impossible to miss, though it was covered entirely over in snow.

Yuri busied himself with quickly brushing everything away so the doors could be opened without the interior being flooded, but once he was done, he hesitated to open the driver's side door briefly, "...Are you sure about this? We could ask my dad to pick us up..."

"It doesn't hurt if I extend my foot straight." Viktor clarified, "Only if I turn it out from side to side. I'll take it slow and easy, I promise. If I feel like it's not going well then I'll pull over."

"So...home to drop off Jiro and our stuff, then to the doctor?"

"Da."

"Alright..." Yuri accepted tepidly, pulling on the handle to open the door. A moment later, the driver's seat was put forward to make room for suitcases, and he started carefully hoisting them in over the blanket that had been put over the back seats. When all that was left was the puppy and the skater, Yuri paused, blocking the Russian's way for a moment. He took the leash from Viktor's hand, only to wrap both of his arms around his partner's chest, and pressed his face into the man's scarf.

Viktor didn't need a prompt; he returned the hug quickly, "It'll all be fine. We're home."

"I was about to say that exact same thing." Yuri huffed, then lifted his head, pulling his partner into a kiss before finally letting him go to get into the car, "I love you. I don't want to see you under so much stress. It's not good for you."

"Mmhh..." The Russian sighed, making a bit of a reluctantly-quibbling face.

"What is it?"

"...The..." He started, hesitated, drew a breath, and then came out with it, "...The way you put it earlier, about the kid being an Okukawa maybe, and how we'd be there the whole time, and that you're kind of, sort of, wanting to be excited about it... Maybe I can let myself feel that way too, since it is Minako. I may have found solidarity with her in the moment, but...I don't want her to make this choice while my shitty attitude is hovering over her like a storm-cloud, either. She already has enough to think about. The worry that I might be disappointed with her decision should be the last thing she considers."

Yuri blinked up at him, but then smiled and jumped back for another kiss, "Look at you, adulting all over this situation."

"Adulting is hard." The Russian sighed, finding yet one more kiss while his partner was close, "But...it's easier with you around."

Feeling like his heart was floating, Yuri smiled wide, "Subarashī." (Wonderful.)
With Jiro and the gear safely stored at home, and Viktor's ankle behaving for the drive, the next stop was the Sports and Rehab hospital. English was basic there, and the forms were all in Japanese, which left Yuri to do the bulk of the talking and writing despite it being his husband's injury. He set the ID and healthcare cards into the small box on the counter, swiped a number-tab from the pin next to it, put it into his pocket, and moved aside, seeking for the bottle of hand sanitizer. He squished a dob into each palm and made his way back to where Viktor was sitting, paperwork clipboard under his arm.

The room, other than themselves, was occupied by perhaps a dozen or so people, all with varying different injuries, and number tabs of their own.

"How much is there?" Viktor wondered, looking at the clipboard, but unable to see how much of the stack was actually needing to be filled in rather than just read and signed. He held one hand up and watched the clear goopy blob fall into it from his partner's, and they each cleaned their hands.

"Enough." Yuri teased, nudging the man with an elbow as he turned and sat down, an arm coming across the back of his seat to press over his shoulders, "Bunch of questions about your medical history that I never really thought about, but I imagine most of it will be blank."

"Mh. I'm healthy as a horse. Gotta be in this sport."

"Deshou?"

A few minutes went by - other patients being called - with Yuri scribbling in answers, mumbling a few questions to things he didn't completely know for sure, ",...Have you ever smoked in your whole life?"

"Nope."

"Illicit drug use?"

"...Russian skater, Viktor Nikiforov, decided at the last second to give up his Gold. With his withdrawal from the line-up, Japanese skater Yuri Nikiforov got upgraded from Silver, Khazakstan's Otabek Altin moved up from Bronze, and Russia's Yuri Plisetsky managed to take a spot on the podium after failing to defend his title from last year."

"I wonder why he gave up the Gold medal like that?"

"Given the doping controversy after the Sochi Olympics a few years ago, maybe he had something to hide?"

Yuri was immediately incensed, "Viktor would never cheat. Why is that the first thing these Americans think of when something like this happens? Is good sportsmanship really such a foreign concept here that no one can offer a gesture without people thinking there's some catch?"

"Nope."

Yuri sighed slightly, but moved the pen away from the paper, and set his free hand down against his husband's leg, "You'd tell me if the RSF made you do something, right?"
"They tried. I said no." Viktor answered simply, his posture unchanged from where he'd been relaxed earlier. "I made a huge scene about how they were risking my career by even suggesting it. I was pretty angry. Not just because of the moral implications, but because it was like they said I might not win Gold unless I did it."

"And you won Gold anyway. I watched every event."

"I told them that if I went clean and got on the podium, they'd never pressure me again. Short of kidnapping me and doping me against my will, they couldn't do anything. In the end, the argument boiled down to something like they won't let me compete if I don't go through with it, and me firing back that they won't get Gold at all if I stay behind. I went, I won...now, we're here."

"Skating for the JSF." Yuri nodded, feeling more sure than before that he could mark off the 'No' box honestly, "Did anyone else get pulled into it?"

"Yes."

"I wonder if the Olympics people will say something about it..."

"...Ni-juu ichi, Nikiforovu Bikutoru-san onegaishimasu."

Both heads lifted to the sound of a nurse coming through the doors, scanning the room for foreigners and landing on them half-way around. Yuri stood first, and offered his arm to help his partner up, and they moved towards the petite woman. Her face flushed at the sight of them towering over her, especially Viktor, but she let them through politely and bid them follow her onto a raised area of the floor. Shoes were stowed away at that point, and slippers were put on to replace them, and they continued on to the 'second' waiting area, where they sat...and continued filling out paperwork.

After a few more minutes, and the final paper was signed by the Russian's hand, they were called again. A different nurse took them to an exam room, where the doctor was already waiting for them, going over something on a computer while the trio entered. Yuri passed off the clip-board to the nurse who'd brought them in, and dropped the number tab into the glass jar on the doctor's desk, then went back to sit with his partner.

The room was small, but cozy enough, with a big wall-length window on one side that gave them a pristine view of...the parking lot, from the 3rd floor. As the doctor finished reading on an old-fashioned computer screen, he reached for a tablet, and turned in his chair towards his 'victim.'

"So you hurt yourself." The older man said, his English rather good given the lackluster mastery of everyone else they'd run into so far, "Slipped on the ice?"

"...Unfortunately." Viktor answered, "Got carried away in the moment and forgot I had the guards on, so my feet went right out from under me."

"Did you still win?"

"Yes; this happened after I finished."

"And you?" The physician turned his eyes to Yuri, who jumped slightly from the surprise of being called out.

"Oh! Uhm, well, I won Bronze, so it's okay I guess. You know us?"

"Who in Hasetsu doesn't know about Yuri and Viktor Nikiforov by now? Back in the day, 'Yuri Katsuki' was all this town was known for, after all."
"Ah, that's true..." Yuri's face flushed, "It must be kind of annoying to everyone to see and hear about us all the time..."

"It's not that bad." The older man laughed, "But anyway, we need to get your partner in working condition again. Can't have him fall off the Olympic wagon so soon after getting onto it."

"Yessir."

Gloves went on, and a small four-legged stool came out, and the physician wheeled his chair around to sit in front of the silver Russian, setting the platform down in front of that bared right leg, "Set your foot here please."

Viktor did so quietly, watching as the old man looked at it from all sides. He kept his arms crossed closely across his chest, ...

...I hate that I'm getting déjà vu to Sophia right now... I don't want to be thinking about her...

"How's the pain at this point, Viktor-san?"

"It's not bad." He answered, "It was pretty sore the night of the injury, but it settled down by the next morning...enough that I had the option of being stupid and ran on it."

"Not a good idea."

"I know that now," Viktory sighed, letting his leg get pulled out, calf set across the physician's knee as fingers started prodding for all his tender spots, "We've been icing it a lot. I can walk, though slowly...and I was able to drive us here. The swelling's a lot better now too...and right now it only hurts if I turn it out."

"This way?" The man asked, everting the foot so the Russian's sole faced away from his midline, but only enough to make the point.

"Yessir. That's about as far as it'll go before it starts to- AH."

"Right there?" Viktor winced, ready to jump out of his chair, "...Yessir." He cringed as fingers went probing around all the worst-feeling deep bruises. He reached for his husband's hand and clamped down on it.

"Well, it's easy to say I can corroborate the diagnosis made in Osaka." The doctor explained, giving Viktor his leg back as he went to the tablet. Gloves were cast aside and the older man's fingers started tapping on the screen. "You've got an eversion sprain of the medial ligament; the bit there on the low inside part of your ankle that I touched when you jumped. The good news is that it's a low ankle injury, which is easier to recover from than the high counterpart. Most low ankle sprains are from the other side, so you found a way to hurt yourself in a unique way."

Yuri huffed a quiet laugh, "Always have to be special."

"...This isn't a surprise I did on purpose." The Russian half-argued, then turned back to the doctor, "So now we're off to scan it?"

"X-rays and an MRI."

"...Why both?"

"X-rays can tell us if you fractured anything. Sometimes ligaments will pull off the surface of the
bones they're holding together and take their anchors with them, kind of like how certain kinds of tape will peel away the paper, too." The older man answered, putting in the diagnosis for the imaging orders, "The MRI will show us if there's any soft tissue damage...tears and swelling, that sort of thing."

"Are you worried about fractures...?" Viktor asked, nervous suddenly.

The physician pushed back from his desk slightly and looked the man over, gesturing down to the offending limb, "You have some pretty good tenderness in there and bruising. I would be remise in my duty of care if I didn't check for everything possible, even if from my exam, I don't think you've done that much damage."

"What's your suspicion?"

"Somewhere between a grade 1 and 2 sprain. Once we figure out where it's at, we can formulate your treatment."

"We're going to Russia this coming weekend," Yuri interrupted, "Will it be okay...?"

"How long will you be gone for?"

"Ten days total. We're leaving on Friday and we'll be back the Monday after Euros."

"He's not skating, is he? He's JSF now." The doctor gestured to Viktor like he was just a poster.

Yuri shook his head, "No way, we're just going as spectators to show support to our European friends."

"Oh, okay...that's a relief. I'd have put him in a cast before he leaves if you said otherwise."

Viktor scoffed, "...So much for possibly doing the Exhibition."

"Eh?" Yuri blinked up at him, "What are you talking about?"

The Russian just pouted, "There was some talk about maybe us doing an Exhibition since someone we know spilled the beans about us maybe going for fun."

"...Yurio?"

"Christophe Giacometti."

"He knows we're coming?"

"I did say I was going to try and arrange for Euros to be a good event for you, didn't I?"

"...Oh, right... I thought you were just going to wing it."

The doctor cleared his throat to get their attention back, and rose up from his seat, "Whatever you do to that ankle between now and your next competition will likely determine if you keep winning them or not." He warned, "If you want to keep winning, suffer now and get it over with."

"...Yessir..." Viktor nodded sullenly, getting his sock, brace, and slipper on again before pushing to rise up as well. Yuri followed.

"Head on down to the imaging department. They'll do your pictures and scans, and then you'll come back here. I'll show you the results and tell you the verdict. If you're lucky, you'll walk out of this
building the same way you walked in...if not, well..."

"Please not surgery. My ego couldn't take it." The Russian whined.

"...Your ego?" Yuri echoed skeptically, "Why that specifically?"

Viktor grit his teeth, "I don't need he who shan't be named in Canada howling about how this is karma for Detroit."

"...Oh."
Yuri pushed aside the sliding outside door to Yu-Topia, turning slightly to kick the snow off his shoes as Viktor stepped in beside him.

"Tadaimaaaa~!" (We're home~!) The Russian called, putting a hand up to his ear as he listened for the tak tak tak sound of nails on hardwood to herald the coming of The Woofer.

Toshiya pulled back the paper wall behind the main counter, and leaned out through it onto his elbows, "Welcome back. I think Makkachin's actually on a walk with Mari."

"Hi dad...Mari took Makka for a walk?" Yuri echoed, "How come?"

"Does there need to be a reason for a dog to go on a walk?"

"Ehhhhh I guess not... I think we both just assumed he'd be here when we showed up." Yuri explained, pulling off his Ravenclaw beanie as he turned his eyes towards the oddly-quiet man standing beside him.

Viktor's eyes were huge and warbling behind a thin veil of tears, "Makka...chin...isn't..here..."

"Uh oh..."

"They should be back soon, I think." Toshiya back-pedaled, waving his hands frantically before the Russian could unleash his typhoon in their entryway, "Why don't you guys go into the dinner hall? I'll have some katsudon made for you while you're waiting."

Even then, Viktor was practically catatonic, eyes still wet with uncried tears as he leaned heavily against his partner's back where they sat at one of the many low tables. Some soccer game or another played on the communal television for other patrons sitting nearby. Yuri focused on the papers in front of him though, even with the pair of clingy arms wrapped around his waist and a weighty husband pressed against him, himself sitting within the curve of Viktor's loosely-crossed legs. The MRI report was on top of the small stack.

We got confirmation that it was just a Grade 1 sprain...but right in the middle of the biggest season of our lives... It really is a blessing in disguise that the RSF kicked Viktor to the curb when they did.

With his left arm perched on the table to hold up his chin, Yuri gently slid the fingers on his right against the back of his partner's wrist where it came around his front, idly offering what comfort he could in the moment as he continued to pour over those papers. He nudged the MRI away and glanced at the negative X-Rays, then at the treatment recommendations on the following pages.

Rest, ice, elevation, bracing, compression bandages, walking only as required, crutches if going long distances...and physiotherapy. Pending no upset or new injury, he can return to skating in 2 to 3 weeks.

He leaned back then, both arms resting over the ones wrapped around him, "I've read the notes 7 times now...feels like the first time every time."

"...I can't skate until after Euros at the earliest..." Viktor whined against his partner's neck, "It's going to be torture."
"You weren't going to be able to skate the whole time we're in Russia anyway though."

"We were only going to be there for the weekend. Plus I wanted to skate on my old rink a little bit...for posterity's sake."

"Ah..."

"Oh! There you boys are!" Hiroko's voice suddenly chimed.

The two lifted their heads and looked back, spotting the petite woman in the doorway back to the main lobby area. Minako was beyond her, getting her boots on in front of the sliding doors, "Tadaima." They both said in tandem.

"Has your father put orders to the kitchen already?" Hiroko wondered, trying to sound like her usual cheerful self even if it was clear that it was taking every ounce of willpower in her small frame, "You're here for your Victory Katsudon, right?"

"Yes to both." Yuri answered for them, "We're waiting for Mari-nee-chan to come back with Makkachin, too. Dad said they went out."

"That Mari..." The older woman grimaced, "I told her to be back by now. I wonder where she went if she's been out all this time?"

"When did she leave?"

"Right after Minako-senpai got here."

The two skaters looked at one another briefly, then back at Yuri's mom, "So she's been gone for nearly 4 hours?"

"Has it really been that long?" Hiroko glanced around for the nearest clock, and saw that it was indeed after 6pm already, "Wow, time flies."

"Everything okay?" Yuri wondered, leaning slightly to see if he could glean the sight of his former ballet teacher through everything between them, "Minako-sensei."

"Everything's fine." She answered stiffly, continuing on with her preparations to go back out into the cold.

Feeling anxious already, and knowing the woman well enough that 'everything's fine' meant anything but, Yuri turned in place within his husband's grasp. Arms loosened around him, and eventually he was able to get both legs aside the man's torso, only to lean far-enough forward that Viktor was forced onto his back as Yuri 'crawled' forward slightly, trying still to get a better vantage. With hands on the ground aside the Russian's head, Yuri leaned to the side, only for his mother to get the message suddenly and step out of the way, "You sure?"

Minako finally looked back at him, but the expression on her face told Yuri more than words could. There had clearly been tears during that conversation, something he wasn't ready for, and he sat back in slight shock.

"I'm going to call it an early night." The ballerina said, turning to face the door again, pulling her hair up from where her scarf had pressed it down behind her neck and shoulders, "The others will be getting back early tomorrow, and I'm going to go to Fukuoka to meet them when their plane lands."

"Oh..." Yuri acknowledged quietly, feeling hands settle on his thighs where they parted over his
partner's core. Eyes went down to the man, and Viktor looked up at him in turn, turning his head where he'd been trying to look through the doorway from his place on the floor.

The Russian nudged his head towards Minako abruptly, which only made Yuri slightly confused. Viktor pulled himself up a bit, hands groping for leverage higher around his partner's slim frame, "You should go with her tomorrow."

"Eh? What about you?"

"Our pups have their vet visit in the morning. I'll just take them myself."

Yuri nodded, then lifted his gaze again as Viktor went down to his back again, "Minako-sensei. Can I tag along when you go?"

She looked back over a shoulder, hand on the sliding door, "...Oh. Uhm, sure, I guess. ...I'm leaving by 7, so don't be late."

"Hai."

Minako started to pull on the door as she turned to face it again...only to find it opening for her. Mari stared straight at her in stunned surprise, and Makkachin flew in beside them, catching sight of the two men in the common-room and immediately making an overly-hyper B-line towards them. The abrupt laughter coming out of the poodle-assault made it easy for Minako to slip out without another word; Mari turned on a heel to watch the woman go, but said nothing, giving only a worried look.

As the ballerina disappeared beyond the courtyard walls, Mari turned back and stepped inside, closing the doors behind herself as she heard the sound of her brother and in-law being mauled by cold-wet poodle kisses. She huffed a sigh and started pulling her scarf off, "Whew, sorry that took so long...I only meant to go to the Ice Castle and back, but Makkachin got other ideas. He dragged me all the way back to their house, and when we saw Jiro through the glass in the front door, I knew that meant those two dorks were back..." She nudged her head towards the skaters, "Took forever to convince Makka to follow though. He must've thought they were home because of the puppy."

Yuri managed to pull himself up from the chaos, flopping out of the whirlwind of limbs and fluff, onto his back. He rolled to get right-side-up again, and reached to adjust his glasses, "...Yeah, sorry, we had to take Jiro home for Viktor's appointment. They won't let dogs in unless they're certified."

"Makes sense."

"We're thinking of getting Jiro trained to be a therapy dog though," Yuri went on, "He did a really great job at the competition yesterday."

"Oh, was it bad?" Mari wondered, slipping her jacket off her arms, "I thought competitions were supposed to be fun."

"They will be!" Viktor insisted, squishing and stretching Makkachin's panting face, "I'm determined! This is the last time something bad happens at competition!"

"Last time, huh?" Mari deadpanned, "What happened this time?"

"Other than this?" The Russian hoisted his right leg straight into the air, releasing his poodle's face to gesture both hands at it rather dramatically, "This is the worst possible thing."

"My brother had a panic attack in advance of you being a massive dork and slipping on the ice?"
Viktor pouted and lowered his arms to cross them over his chest, "...It's a big deal."

"Mhm."

Yuri sighed, leaning back against their table on an elbow, "We ran into one of my old rink-mates from Juniors. It was...kind of a fiasco. I mean, it's taken care of now and things are better, but..." He slipped off the table and flopped onto his husband's chest instead, lying there like a big splat, "...It was exhausting. I think, if not for the fact that we got to come back and pick up Jiro along with the rest of my stuff, it probably would've been a bigger disaster than it was."

"That bad, huh? Yeesh. Who was it?"

"The guy who robbed my Yuri of his Silver." Viktor explained flatly, one arm around his husband, the other reaching back for his dog to scratch at neck-fluff.

"...Oh, that Saito guy?" Mari wondered, putting her things away and coming properly into the resort, stepping up onto the raised floor from the cowhide rug in the entryway, "He was cute." She admitted hesitantly.

"He's also super gay." Viktor pointed out.

"How would you know?" She defended, both hands on her hips.

The Russian deadpanned her, but it was Yuri who spoke up, "Why do you think it was a disaster?"

"What?"

Viktor explained, reaching both hands up to squish and stretch his husband's cheeks like he'd done to Makkachin earlier, "Who could blame Saito for being in love with this face? Sucks for him though, Yuri's taken."

Yuri nudged the man back again though, pushing both arms away with a finger in the middle of each palm, "It was a big misunderstanding." He said, mostly to Viktor himself, giving a knowing look.

The silver Russian just sighed and closed his eyes, "The biggest misunderstanding."

"How many guys out there are in love with you?" Mari said, frustrated, "I swear, if it's not him," She gestured at the man down, "Then it's Yurio, now it's that guy...ugh!"

Yuri's face went red, "No one but Viktor is in love with me!"

"You just said-"

"...That it was a big misunderstanding! Asahi's in love with someone else!" He interrupted, "He just...kinda fell back on me because that other person died and he was alone."

"...Died recently?"

"No, it...was two years ago, right after my disastrous performance at Nationals. Immediately after. As in...today two years ago."

"It wouldn't have been today two years ago." Mari pointed out, "Each year, the days more forward through the week. Today as in December 26th 2 years ago."

"...That's oddly specific for you to remember." Yuri grimaced.
"I remember it cuz your competition ended on Christmas Day that time, and everyone was all happy and excited for the occasion, but you were just this dark cloud. Even though you didn't come home until months later, I could still feel it through the television." She explained, seeing the two bowls of katsudon set on the kitchen window, and went to pick them up. Out of habit, she set them down on the table in front of the pair, but then sat across from them instead of moving on, "So...the day after that was the 26th."

"Oh." Yuri sighed and turned around to sit properly, reaching for the papers strewn about and put them away in a folder, setting it aside to reach for chop-sticks instead, "Well at least it wasn't on Christmas...? I guess?"

"That would've been super awkward." Viktor added, sitting up as well. He crossed his left leg under the right, stretching the right out under the table as Makkachin set his head down on it, "Itō's death being on my birthday?"

"Yikes." Yuri murmured. He broke the wooden sticks apart and placed them accordingly within his fingers, "This is kind of a weird topic to be on right as we're about to have our celebratory pork cutlets."

"You're right..." The Russian chagrined. He got an idea then though, "Yuri."

"Eh?" He turned his head...and found lips on his own almost as soon as he stopped moving.

"Ugh you guys are gross." Mari whined, getting up immediately.

Viktor just pulled back slightly and grinned, "Itadakimasu, mai ravu." (Let's eat, my love.)

"It's not gross! We're married!" Yuri called, voice chasing after his older sister as they both half-laughed to watch her go.

"You're my little brother! It'll always be gross!"
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED SIX

Wakkanai, Sōya Prefecture, Hokkaidō.

The northernmost city in Japan...and in very-late December, it was a city covered in deep snow. Light through the dense cloud-cover gave the area a pale haze, as though it was all just an old photo with dim back-lighting. The only color visible from the rail line was the deep, dark blue of the Sea of Japan beyond the shore.

The train - Ltd. Exp. Sōya - like a steel behemoth, pushed on through to the small city station covered in frost. It was sparsely occupied; most of the train-car's interior was populated by empty teal seats lined up in pairs, white sheets draped over the headrests. At the back, sitting nearly alone, Asahi had given up trying to distract himself from the impending arrival with the self-tease regarding how his hair matched the upholstery, but the quiet announcement of the station being within eyesight pulled at him like hooks. He drew a deep breath, and glanced outside, watching the winter landscape come to a gradual halt as the train slowed, and eventually came to a stop. He wrapped himself up tightly, knowing full-well that the frozen air would feel like needles against any exposed skin.

With the doors open, he and the four other people who had traveled north that day exited the rail-car, and made the brisk walk towards the indoor terminal. Asahi hauled all his things with him, looking around for a map, and saw one under Plexiglas on the far side of the first hall. A graveyard wasn't something to advertize though, and he had no luck finding it.

I'll have better luck just asking the locals where it is...

A taxi wasn't hard to find once he'd passed through the rest of the train terminal and exited on the other side. For all that the countryside was buried under snow, the city and its streets, from that new vantage, seemed clear enough. Asahi went for the nearest car that looked on, tapped on the window to alert the driver, and moved to open the rear seat. The driver quickly got out, greeted him, and helped put his suitcase into the trunk before they both piled back into the vehicle itself.

[Where do you need to go? A hotel?]  
[Probably...but not just yet. I'm trying to find someone first.]  
[I can take you to places but not people. People don't have addresses.]  
[I know... This one hasn't gone anywhere in 2 years though.] Asahi explained hesitantly, [I need to find the city's graveyard.]  

Slightly spooked, the driver nodded and put the car in gear, [Lucky you, there's only one.]

The drive was moderately slow, but careful, meandering through the city's center before heading west. Asahi analyzed every building they passed, every face; there were more people out and about...
than he expected.

I guess the locals are so used to the weather, that they make fun of us southerners for staying home in conditions half this bad. I wonder what it's like in the summer? ...Did Riku like it here, or did he feel trapped? He never really talked about it.

The cemetery was connected to an off-street, and occupied the entirety of a reasonably large hill. The gravestones, from what could be seen from the road, weren't as densely packed as Asahi had worried they would be...but there were still hundreds of them. He swallowed nervously and paid the cabby the fare he owed, then stepped out, gathered up his bags, and ventured forward.

The entrance was a towering, but old, white Shinto arch, with paint peeling from the corners and ice frosting the two posts that held it up. The top was covered in a foot-thick layer of snow, which from the ground, looked more like pale concrete than snowpack. He passed under it, and scanned the first path into the eerie landscape.

The hillside had been carved into tiers, much like rice fields, but instead of water-laden paddies with small stalks of grass-like rice plants poking up, there were small towers of granite and marble, some much older than others, and all of them caked in ice. Each stack stood about 4 feet high, with a flat foundation stone on the ground, a bigger square base-stone to start the bottom of the marker itself, a medium-sized stone on top of that, and finally, a rectangular stone above that, pointing upward, with Kanji carved into the face of it. In front of the whole display was a smaller square stone for the placement of flowers and other offerings, and in front of that, on a smaller flat marker, was a box-like monument for incense.

Some graves, in spite of the snow, had been dusted off and flowers had been placed, even that early in the day. Asahi checked his phone and found that it was barely after 2pm. When he put it back into his pocket, he let his eyes scan the entire grim, white field, and it really settled in that he was in over his head.

...It could take me days to find him in this place...and that's under the assumption that his family even put his ashes here. I'm doing this all wrong...

He sighed, but pressed on.

I can't let that hold me back though. I've been making excuses to avoid this place for too long.

Thus, the search began. Every stone was systematically examined and the names read quietly. Mercifully, the snow that caked the headstones only really accumulated on the horizontal surfaces, leaving the flat verticals where the names were carved with only a slight frosty glaze that could still be read through.

Asahi’s finger went numb as time wore on. Thirty minutes into his search, he abandoned his suitcase and bag, setting them both neatly on the side of the path, and withdrew a few items carefully. He had no worry about anything being taken. That's not how things worked there. The search was a little easier then, with hands in coat-pockets rather than clamped - frozen - around bag handles and exposed to the elements. Another hour passed that way...but then he spotted it.

Ito...

Anxious to be certain it was the right Itō marker, Asahi went down to his knees and carefully brushed away the snow from the smaller stones in front of the larger monument. There were several names he didn't know. The pain in his chest returned, and his ski-goggles fogged from the inside. Fingers turned red from the cold as frost was moved out of the way, and they hurt, but he wouldn't
stop. Not until he saw it.

Riku... Born 1993.04.14, Died 2015.12.26...22 years old.

This is it...

Seeing the small marker amidst all the others, Asahi hadn't noticed the recently-placed flowers at the front of the grave. Though they were covered in snow, the color of the petals could still be seen beneath it where the snow could not stick. They were as obvious as anything though once he started cleaning off the entire grave and had to temporarily lift the thin metal vases to clear their platforms. Once the snow was all gone, and the entire old marble gravestone could be seen, Asahi stood back on the path and just looked at it sadly.

Keep it together...

He pulled off his hood, hat, and loosened his scarf, so his entire head and face were exposed, and he swallowed painfully, the front of his throat already clenching fiercely, "...It...took me all this time...But I'm finally here..." He said, pulling out the items he'd gotten out of his bags from his pockets, before stuffing the garments back in their place. One was the small framed photo he'd prayed to before his Short Program, the other was a small wrapper of incense. He set the photo down in its place on the small shrine, and lit the incense sticks, setting them sideways on the stone before it.

Hands came up as though in offering, sides together, palms facing him, and he took his time to say a prayer.

I've carried you with me all this time, and spoke of you as only a friend... It went on like that for so long that I started to believe the lie...because it hurt less than knowing otherwise. After everything you'd done, and all the support and patience you showed for me...I turned my back and said you were just a rink-mate..

The guilt weighed on him again, as heavy as ever.

You offered me your love, your home even...took me in, and gave me sanctuary when you knew I'd need it. You gave me everything you had, and all you wanted in return was some acknowledgement that I appreciated it...that I appreciated you...and the best I could do was some long-winded admission that I wasn't pining after Yuri anymore... Aside from the fact that I survived...that has made me feel the most guilty of all. That I wasn't able to love you the way you deserved, and that I didn't realize how far short I'd fallen until after I'd lost you...and couldn't do it anymore...

Tears froze on his face, but he held still. The sound of the wind in his hair, and a distant dog bark, was all that he could hear. It was serene.

If the words 'I'm so sorry' are all I ever say for as long as I live, it still wouldn't come close to expressing how badly I feel for all of that... I tell myself that I would've changed after we went through with our plans in Kyoto, that I would've been more open, honest, caring...attentive...but the fact that we never made it... The fact that I put it off, delaying everything as though on ceremony...I can't forgive myself. The fact that I lived, and you didn't...I can't forgive myself. I just...can't...

He lowered his hands, and then his knees, pressing them down into the snow before bowing deeply to the grave marker, hoping the ashes under it would notice.

I feel like the only way I can atone for this...is to never love again. I've finally come to terms with how I felt...feel...about you, and I just can't imagine ever letting it go. I've told Yuri...and Viktor...even my coach, and choreographer...
The sound of the wind faded down, and Asahi lifted up from his dogeza, even as the sound of distant barking became louder, closer. He balled his red hands into fists on his lap and lowered his face in shame.

*I've been such a coward all these years. It took you and your death, two years of denial...and getting in the middle of Yuri's marriage...to finally realize it. But I'm tired of hiding. If the only way I can honor your memory now is to be as open about it as Yuri and Viktor are with themselves, then...that's what I'll do. When I'm done in Wakkanai, I'm going to tell everyone else. I'm going to make sure my family knows what we were, and what we wanted to be...*

He tried to open his eyes, but found that they'd frozen shut by his lashes. Reluctantly, he reached up with one hand, and used his frozen fingers to scrape away the ice. When he opened them again though...what he saw startled him.

A rather large, snow-white dog, with a honey-colored tint to its ears and the fur along its spine. Nearly-black eyes looked back at him from where the creature stood, just a few feet to his left. Teeth were suddenly bared, and Asahi veered back, leaning away in confusion and horror. The dog reacted strangely to his surprised yelp though...its ears, pressed against its head before, suddenly prickled up, and narrowed eyes opened. It stammered a step forward, only to lunge a moment later, crying out loudly and whining as it threw itself to the snow next to where he sat.

*[...Wh-what in the world...!?]*

The dog's cries were loud lamentations, as though it were reacting to a soldier coming home from a long trip away. Yips and whines, barks and gurgles; the dog threw itself at Asahi's frame, rolling all over him and knocking him back down to the ground, only to smother him even more despite his attempts to shield himself.

"Hana!" An unexpected voice called, *[Get off that guy! What are you doing!? Hana!]*

*This can't be...*

[Oh...my god... It's really him... He really came.] Another voice, this one a woman's, *[Hana, to me!]*

The dog whined a bit more, and reluctantly did as bid, settling down in an overwhelmed pile of wiggles and rolls near the woman's feet. Two other sets of feet seemed to approach, and two pairs of hands went down to the snow to help Asahi back to sitting upright.

Grey eyes looked around in confusion, first at the dog, then the older woman gaping at him beside it, then to the people who'd helped him get up; both men, one much older and the other younger than himself.

[She didn't hurt you, did she?] The elder asked, ruffling a mittened-hand through teal and black hair, checking for blood and finding none, *[I've never seen her do that before. We're so sorry.]*

[Dear, that's Asahi!] The woman said, getting their attention back, *[That's Riku's boyfriend!]*

Asahi's heart could've exploded to hear those words, but everything was so crazy and bewildering that he barely had time to think, let alone react physically.

[I figured that out myself!] The older man answered back, *[Who else would be crazy enough to sit in the graveyard like this right now?]*

[What's going on? Who are you all...?] Asahi finally managed, trying to straighten his hair out and really look at the group. The dog was still whining pitifully, inching closer with every second that
passed where she wasn't being told not to move. Before long, the dog was right in his lap, curled tail wagging and desperate licks trying to get at his face, [I'm sorry...]

[We're the Itō family.] The younger man explained, [And we got your message.]

Asahi's eyes went wide as saucers.

A fireplace was an uncommon thing in most of Japan, but in that house at the northernmost tip of the nation, the sight of it was a welcome departure from the norm. Asahi sat in front of it on the floor, a mat under him, and an oddly-clingy Hokkaido-ken breed of husky-like Japanese dog curled up next to him, refusing to take her head off his leg. The dog's fur was still a bit cool and damp from the snow though, so he kept his hands gestured towards the small fire. His suitcases were by the front door.

[It's so hard to believe that you actually came after so long.] The matriarch said, returning to the room with a tray of hot tea and several cups. She sat on her knees next to a low table and started setting everything out before each person who was there.

The house was old fashioned, a grand sight different than the modern hotel Asahi had gotten used to in Osaka. There were photos and heirlooms everywhere, though everything had its place and the room was still exceptionally organized despite how much had been packed into it. Asahi noted a few pictures that included what, he could only assume, were Riku in much-younger days.

[Asahi-san,] The woman said again, trying to get his attention as she started pouring the hot liquid, [We would've reached out to you sooner... We just didn't know how to get hold of you. After the accident, and you called it off with your coach, it was impossible to get your phone number. The JSF simply wouldn't tell us what it was. And we couldn't use Riku's phone either-]

He jerked his head up and looked over his shoulder at the mention of it, [...You couldn't? Why not?]

[We...don't know the password.]

[You have it!?] Asahi said in a panic, a desperate look on his face.

[Of course we do.] The younger man said, sitting on the floor on the opposite side of the small table, [What'd you think I meant when I said we got your message?]

[...What message...? I'm sorry, my head's spinning...]

[You texted my brother's phone.] He explained, [We couldn't answer it, but we saw what you said because of the preview on the lock-screen. You called it, too, remember? Left a voicemail.]

[...You...couldn't listen to it though, right?] Asahi asked, trying to catch up.

[Right.]

[So many people tried to call him after that day.] Riku's mother said sadly, putting the tea-pot down and offering the steaming cup over, [All we could do was watch the text messages come in, not being able to answer because we couldn't unlock it. Everyone who sent messages was part of Riku's contact list though, so we had no number that we could call from any other phone to text people back. Their names may as well have been missing, for all the good it did. We were too scared and upset to answer the phone-calls back then, too...]
Asahi finally managed to say, taking the tea, and a small sip so it wouldn't burn. He coughed, but then shook his head and repeated himself, *[I can unlock Riku's phone...I know the passcode...!]*

[Hayate, give it over!]

[Oh, yeah...sure.] The younger man grimaced, unsure he really wanted to do so, but eventually parted with it.

Asahi choked up just looking at it; that same silly phone-case with the silver holographic pattern was still wrapped around it. The screen was pristine though, which was odd, and he couldn't help but stop there, *[...It wasn't...damaged in the accident?]*

[It was smashed up.] Hayate corrected, sitting back and crossing his arms, *[We fixed it so we could keep an eye on it. Mom thought you'd call it, cuz we can answer a phonecall without knowing the code.]*

[...I... Asahi stammered, looking back down at it in disbelief, [It never even crossed my mind... Losing him was devastating. I knew I'd lost him. There was...no point calling. I thought his phone was destroyed anyway.] He tried to catch his breath and shook his head again, cradling the phone against his chest, [I guess my 5am phone-call probably threw you all off.]*

[We actually didn't know you'd called until Hayate woke up and saw the phone had new messages.] The matriarch explained, [He's very protective of that thing. It was on silent overnight though.]*

[...I...think I might've died if someone answered.] Asahi said nervously, pulling the phone back to look at the unblemished screen again, and his reflection in it, [I sent the text message and then panicked about how many someone else had been assigned his number. Then I called...and heard his voice...] His own cracked then, *[I'm sorry, I've...been having a really hard time with this lately... It's all come back to me like it just happened... I'm...trying to do things right this time.]*

[It's okay; take your time.]

He nodded, and pressed his thumb against the flat round button on the bottom of the phone's face. The first thing he saw was the denial message for his thumb-print, then the passcode numbers that manifested above it...then the background photo. Something so oddly mundane; a photo of Hana from when she was half her current size. He focused back on the number-pad though, [The code... He hesitated a moment, then typed it in...and the phone unlocked. Eyes filled with tears again as he looked down on the wallpaper; a selfie Riku had taken of them both, with Riku clinging to his chest, showing off exactly how much shorter he was, the top of his head barely coming up under Asahi's chin. His arm came forward towards the screen, showing that it was him who'd taken the pic, and he was smiling excitedly. Meanwhile, Asahi's visage just showed him slightly flustered and red-cheeked, like the glomp (and the subsequent photo) had come as a surprise.

One hand went up to cover his eyes as the other drooped down against his knee, the phone still in his fingers.

[Could you...tell us the number you used?] Riku's mother asked quietly.

*[15 11 20.] He answered back, [He reset it...to the day we got together...so he'd never forget.]*

[Okay...]

Asahi shook his head and focused despite his anguish, examining the new display. The little red dots hovering over half a dozen different app bubbles; dozens of text messages, phone calls, voicemails,
and app update requests that had gone unanswered. He clicked into the text messages first, skimming over the list, but not daring to click into any of them.

*If I touch any of these by accident, whoever is on the other side will get their 'Sent' notification changed to 'Seen.' I don't want to freak anyone out...but...*

He touched into the most recent one, showing his own name. A moment later, he pulled up his own phone, just to see that very notification change over. He set it down again and went back to Riku's device, closing out of the texts to go to the photo folder instead. There were thousands of pictures, all neatly organized into different folders. Asahi was tempted just to load the main folder to see everything, but he caught sight of one labeled [Us♥朝日] and went into it instead.

*He labeled this folder with my name and 'us'...?*

There, he was greeted with a year's worth of pictures; half from before that fated Skate Canada weekend when they'd been alone, and half from after.

*Oh...*

Videos and pictures of Asahi's skating practice and random other times dotted the screen, all rather innocuous for the pre-dating time. After, though...many more non-skating photos. A good chunk of them were of himself sleeping, or candid images that even Asahi couldn't place, [...] *Even with a phone, he was so good at taking pictures...* He then started to see images that he'd hoped to find; them together in the same frame, taking photos as any couple would...

*All that time, it's like he was documenting our secret. I was always so nervous that he would post the pictures and force me to confront everything, but he never did...he just wanted the pictures to show that we had something, so he could look at them when we had to pretend we were nothing.*

Tears rolled down his face again as he looked at each image, scrolling through and remembering each occasion as it displayed. Even some of the later ones that Riku had included Hana in; some of which were sweet, others funny. It hurt too much to laugh though, so even seeing a picture of his reaction to finding out Hana had mutilated one of his favorite T-shirts, and was holding it up with a big pout on his face, seen through a gaping hole in the center of the garment, Asahi couldn't let himself do more than choke a few hiccupped breaths.

*[C-Can I...]* He managed to say, his voice so strained that he barely made sense, *[...Can I...have copies of all these...pictures...? Please...]*

*[We should be the ones to ask you that.] The older woman answered, [There’s so much on that phone that's clearly about the lives you two had together, even for such a short period of time. Riku absolutely adored you. After what you said earlier...I think it would be best if you kept it.]*

*[MOM!?] Hayate barked suddenly.*

*[No, she's right.] The patriarch defended, holding a hand out to keep the young man where he was, [You've been saying for ages that if you could get into that phone, you'd use it yourself, but we never could, so we never thought what it would mean. People like Asahi...people who knew your brother...they all expect him to be on the other end of that line, not you. You can't just take his phone and number for yourself and stick it in everyone's faces. Don't you see what kind of heartbreak and trouble you'd cause if you started calling people who still have Riku in their caller ID?]*

*[I wouldn't though; I don't know any of th-]*
[That's not the point.]

Hayate growled loudly, crossing his arms, *[I've been holding onto that phone for the last 2 years and now you're just going to give it away to a guy Riku dated for less than 2 months?]*

Asahi lifted his head and sneered slightly despite the tears in his eyes, *[...I sincerely...hope that you never love so hard, and lose so quickly...and have to feel what I've felt. To look back on the time you had and wish you did everything differently, and be haunted by all the 'what ifs' that come with it. To not realize how precious something is to you until it's ripped out of your hands, taken from you, and have to deal with the fact that it's gone forever...]*

The younger man didn't argue; he just looked away bitterly.

Asahi choked on the pain in his throat again, and tried to catch his breath, reaching for the tea that had cooled to luke-warm in the time that passed. Still, it soothed the muscles a little and helped to unclench them from where they'd tightened around his voice-box.

*[So...what brought you all the way to Wakkanai now?] Riku's mother wondered, [Did something happen?]*

*[I...got back into skating this season...] He answered, eyes going back down to the photos, [And I ran into an old friend of mine, someone that I thought I loved once, a long time ago... Someone Riku helped me get over. I...did something horrible to him, because he reminded me of what I lost...and even after that, he still helped me sort out all the noise in my head.]*

*[...What...did you do?]*

Asahi sighed and shook his head, *[I kissed him. He's married.]*

*[Oh...]*

*[Even if he wasn't, I had no right to do that to him...] He brought his free hand up and rubbed his eyes on the side of his wrist, [This weekend has just...been so hard... But, it was because of him that I finally got the courage to come up here...and do all the things I meant to do 2 years ago...]*

*[How long were you going to stay here for?]*

*[Overnight.] Asahi answered, rubbing his nose next and snuffling, [I thought it would...take me longer to find you.] He lifted his head to look at the older woman, [How did you even...know when to check if I'd be here...?]*

*[Based on the timestamp from your messages to Riku's phone.] She explained, [When Hayate said you'd texted that you were coming, I went online to see if there was a competition you were at, because I couldn't imagine you just getting the idea out of the blue, not after so long. When we realized you were in Osaka for Nationals, we plotted out how we thought you would get here. We...thought about trying to meet you outside the cemetery, but we weren't sure if you'd get here on the plane from Tokyo or Sapporo, or by train...so we decided to meet you where we thought you'd go whenever you arrived. In the end...it was Hana who noticed you, though she obviously didn't know it was you until she heard your voice.] Eyes went down to the pale and exhausted dog, [Poor thing, she must think Riku's with you somewhere. She didn't take the separation well.]*

Asahi glanced down at the creature, and ran his hand through her fur, over her belly and side, *[I'll feel bad leaving her again, too. She's so much bigger than she was the last time I saw her, but she's clinging to me like she did to Riku back then...]*
[Why don't you stay here for the night?]

Hayate glared, but no one offered any protest.

[...I couldn't... I don't want to impose...] Asahi attempted, feeling guilty already, [I just showed up out of nowhere...]

[You shouldn't be alone.] The matriarch said simply, [And Riku would've wanted you to stay. Hana will go crazy if you leave too quickly anyway.]

The skater held his breath for a moment, the whole thing heavy on him. He looked from Hana to the phone in his other hand, and then back up to the woman who'd made the offer, and nodded, [...Then...I'll stay the night.]
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED SEVEN

[So you're leaving from here?]

[Yup. We only went to St. Peter's to get Potya, and Yuri's things for the move.] Mikhail explained, waiting in line at the hotel check-out desk with the bear. [Thankfully he didn't have much. Mostly his cat and her things, and a few of the medals and such that he'd won since getting in Seniors.]

Kon glanced over the top of his in-law's head, spotting the three teens waiting in the wings with what little luggage they'd packed with them, [You mentioned that the girls were dropped into your lap because their mother died, but...it seems like that's all such an afterthought now. Didn't it just happen? You'd think they'd be a bit more upset about it but they act like it happened years ago.]

Mikhail looked over as well; the girls had started laughing about something, likely at Yurio's expense, since he quickly pulled his hood over his head to hide his face. Potya climbed up onto one shoulder and batted at one of the stray strands of blonde hair that still poked out, [Well... I don't like putting words in their mouths, but from the way they've described it, it's like they had already been grieving it for a long time already, cuz she wasn't the same person when she finally passed. She was just...some woman they lived with. Now they don't.] He sighed and turned to face forward again, stepping closer to the counter, [Feels weird to be grateful that this happened when it did. Their school won't be interrupted so much by all the travel.]

[You're going to take them to Japan though.]

[Yeah...as soon as I get there, I'll be putting my nose to the grind-stone to find them all tutors willing to deal with the time difference. Finding a new house there, selling the one in Edmonton...it's all gonna be a giant pain.]

[And your lady-friend.]

Mikhail sighed again and nodded, [And Minako, yeah.]

Kon roughly smacked a hand against the smaller man's back, knocking him slightly off balance, [Well, you always liked being the ruler of the roost, so you'll probably thrive on that kind of thing.]

[...Thanks, I think?] Mikhail stammered, putting his flatcap back where it was supposed to be, [What about you? The mill is all but shuttered now.]

The bear shrugged, [Not much to do in the middle of winter.]

[I know you'll hate to hear it, but maybe you should consider moving to the city during the cold season.] Mikhail suggested, [You can always go back during the summer.]

[Tat can't leave for milder weather.] Kon pointed out sharply, [I won't leave her to endure the snow on her own. Besides... What'll I do with the horse if I leave for half the year? It's one thing to have someone stop by to check on hay and water for a weekend...it's another entirely to find someone to board him. I'll stay where I am.]

[Why do I get this feeling that I'm gonna go up there to visit one of these days, and I'll just find your ass frozen to your chair?]
[With a glass of half-drunk whiskey in my hand.]

That earned a huff of a laugh, [Yeah, probably.]

Once checked out of the hotel, it wasn't long before paths would diverge. One would lead to the Aeroexpress Train Terminal on the way to Sheremetyevo International Airport, the other would lead to the Sapsan Train Terminal back to St. Petersburg. The Sapsan was approached first, and the behemoth Nikiforov patriarch stepped out of the rental van with his meager travel bag.

[It was actually kind of nice that you came, Kon.] Mikhail said, elbow sticking out of the car window in spite of the heat getting out, [Maybe you'll have reason to do it again in the future.]

[Maybe.] The bear answered, stepping up onto the sidewalk that lead into the station. He looked around briefly, but then back at his silver in-law, [Make sure it's an event my son's at next time though.]

Mikhail made a weird face at that, [I'm honestly not sure if the ISU will subject Viktor to a Russian competition again anytime soon. Not unless it's an international event. If the RSF is sponsoring it though...]

Kon laughed at that, [What, do you think President Putin's gonna poison him or something?]

Yurio leaned forward from his spot in the front passenger seat and gave quite the look, [Don't say shit like that.]

[Oh hush. Viktor may embarrass Russia in these competitions but it's not like he's a spy.]

[The first time he gets gut-sick after this is gonna make me nervous!]

[So don't let him eat raw fish.]

[HE LIVES IN JAPAN.]

Konstantin just grumbled at that, and took a step back from the van, [You'd better get going before someone starts getting annoyed.]

[Aright...well, see you another day, then.] Mikhail waved; the girls did as well from their spot in the next-back seat, [Have a safe trip back home. Say hi to my sister for me.]

"Da. Do svidaniya."

.

Makkachin stood directly between his human's legs as the skating duo got ready to leave Yu-Topia again. Undeterred, the poodle held his ground, moving only enough to let Viktor get around as he needed to.

"Poor Makkachin thinks we're gonna leave him behind again," Yuri noted, crouching down in front of the woofer to scratch his head, "Don't worry. You're coming this time. You'll be with us for at least the next month."

"We should bring him with us State-side for 4C. Jiro, too." Viktor said simply, looping a scarf around his shoulders, "We can find a pet-friendly hotel if needed. It's still far enough out."

"...You sure about that?" Yuri wondered as he stood upright again, "Staying in a non-official hotel might cause us a lot of trouble."
"Trouble?" The Russian laughed in curiosity, "What trouble?"

"SMS went ballistic because people realized Asahi was in a hotel that fans were staying in." He said flatly, "Now imagine if it's us...and we have our dogs."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. By then, I'm sure we'll have Jiro registered as a support dog anyway. We can start puppy classes before we leave..." Viktor started seeing the story play out in his head, "...and then we'll have another 2 weeks to finish the basics. It'll be fine."

"Puppy classes are for obedience." Yuri reminded stiffly, "The 'support dog' aspect is something a doctor recommends, I've learned. I have to get a letter for me, not for him...kind of as an excuse to let Jiro be around where he normally wouldn't be allowed."

Viktor deadpanned, "...Oh." He paused and thought another moment though, "...So we get a letter for me, too!"

That just made Yuri scoff, "A doctor's gonna take one look at you and say you're the least anxious person in the world." He turned back into the resort as he felt the cold air rush in from outside, and pulled on his Ravenclaw beanie, "Mom! We're going!"

"Aren't you going to sit in the onsen for a bit?" Hiroko wondered, coming into the doorway from the common room, a tray of sake and glasses in her hands, "You're leaving so soon."

"We need to get back and rescue Jiro," Yuri explained, "I'm gonna go to bed early too so I can meet with Minako-sensei. She'll leave me behind if I'm late by a second."

"I'll come by!" Viktor stuck his head back in, waving widely, "The dogs don't have to go to the vet till 9!"

"Alright! G'night then, boys! See you tomorrow, Vik-chan!"

"Byeee~!" The silver Russian called as he waddled back out again, Makkachin still between his legs with each step.

"Bye!" Yuri called quickly, taking off to catch up before his partner could slip and fall. It wasn't far to find their car, but it wasn't that far to rink-side either when Viktor slipped in the first place; Yuri would take no chances. One arm quickly went around the man's lower back to hold him steady, and they plodded around the wall to the little red Audi that waited for them there.

Makkachin only came out from between Viktor's legs when the car door was open and the seat moved aside for him to jump inside, finding his place on the blanket that covered the back row. He barked once and went back to softly panting as the two men got in on their respective sides.

As the small car turned on, Yuri slid his hand across the center console as he always did, pressing his palm against his husband's thigh, and rubbed his thumb, "I'm sure we can figure out some way of getting Makkachin to competitions with us."

"Most of the reason why I couldn't try before was because I shared the room with the rest of the Russian team, and they didn't want a dog around. Plus, I couldn't get anyone to watch Makkachin for me when I had to leave him behind somewhere." Viktor explained, turning his eyes slightly to look at his partner, "But since it's just us now...I can always leave Makkachin with you, same as how you can leave Jiro with me. I think it'd be amazing if we could find a way to take them both with us."

"Same. We're gone so much during competition season..."
"And to think, maybe...we could've been bringing Makkachin with us all this past season..." Viktor sighed dramatically as he set his foot down on the gas lightly to ease out onto the street, "If this works out, I'm gonna be super salty about the missed opportunity."

"Sometimes inspiration needs a nudge in the right direction... Maybe my panic attack on Saturday was it." Yuri shrugged, watching the lights pass over the car as it moved, "And Jiro really helped a lot yesterday, too."

"When you walked off during the Exhibition?"

"Yeah." He nodded, "If I didn't need to take him outside for a minute and feed him, I probably would've let my thoughts get out of control worse than they did anyway. I guess...having a puppy to watch after gave my mind enough of a 'purpose' that I could stay calm through it all."

"...Did you get everything out when I asked you about it later?" Viktor wondered quietly, "Or was there more?"

"No...I think I got it all out. If not when we talked at the hotel, then at the Banquet after." He lifted his head and glanced aside, "How come you want me to go with Minako-sensei tomorrow though?"

The Russian was quiet for a moment, trying to articulate his thoughts, but then shrugged, "When we were on our way to Osaka in the first place, Minako mentioned how she kind of hoped that you and her could've gone alone after all. After all the things that have happened in the last 2 years...not even with my Uncle and all that he entails currently, but me showing up as well...I thought, maybe she'd feel better if she had a moment that felt like old times, before it got complicated. Just you and her on the train to Fukuoka."

"After this weekend, I guess I'm just surprised that you're willing to let me go on my own for so long."

"I don't have to worry about Minako trying to kiss you. ...Do I?" Viktor turned his head, a teasing look on his face, "Or have you had a thing for her all this time that you've just convincingly denied?"

"No way," Yuri answered easily, "My one true love is in this car with me."

"That's wh-"

"Makkachin."

Viktor snorted a cough, surprised by the B-line, only to catch sight of that very poodle licking his husband's face. He guffawed expressively and pressed a hand to his chest, "Yuri! I'm hurt! You were in love with my best friend all along! That's why you got Vik-chan, isn't it!"

"Sorry to say, but...it's true... I've been admiring Makka from a distance all these years, ever since you were 16 when it was Kubochin and I had no idea." He answered, "Asking you to come be my coach was just a ruse to get him here..."

"Oof this is getting too real for me," The Russian laughed nervously, "My heart can't take the joke right now."

"Sorry." Yuri mused, pulling the man's hand over to kiss his ring, "In my defense, you did start it."

"I know..." Viktor sighed, spreading his fingers out to lace them through the ones that still held onto him, and settled the pair of hands against his partner's leg, "My heart and my ankle are the same, I suppose. When nothing is messing with it, it doesn't hurt...but the slightest reminder of what
happened makes it act up again."

"Sounds like I should be the one trying to make Euros fun for you, not the other way around."

"Why don't we just agree to make it fun for both of us."

"I think I can agree to that."

Viktor suddenly gasped, "I have a great idea."

"Eh?"  

"We should have a bachelor party."

"But we're...not...bachelors...?" Yuri grimaced.

"Tut tut... Technicalities. We're getting married again. The time leading up to that could be like bachelordom."

"Aren't bachelor parties normally done apart from one another though...? Having one last night of reckless fun before you start being responsible?"

"Oh."

Yuri smiled nervously, "Well, it was a good idea in theory I guess..."

"We should both get drunk at Euros then. Since Yurio's got Minako as his coach now, Yakov and Ciao Ciao won't be there to pull us off each other." Viktor winked at his partner excitedly.

"Yakov will be there with Georgi and Mila..."

Eyes went wide, "Damnit." He turned back to watch the road.

Yuri's face was red in any case, "I don't know if it'd be such a good idea to set ourselves up like that though. Everyone got footage of our antics at NHK..."

"But we had fun though, right?"

The younger figure gave a flushed nod, "I don't remember half of it, but...what I do remember was fun, yeah."

"Ah, yes...that's something to consider... Letting you get buzzed, but not drunk-drunk. So I don't have to keep buying you apology flowers." Viktor laughed.

"All you really need to do is keep a bottle of lube handy..." Yuri pointed out, glancing aside.

The Russian's face was red then, and for once, he had no words. All he could do was stare, mouth slightly open as the car came to a stop at for some lights.

"...Since, unlike me, you don't make enough of your own."

"OhmygodYuri."

The look the young man gave was deadly serious though...until he cracked, and suddenly the both of them were laughing. It was enough that someone had to honk their car-horn at them to get them to pay attention and move again.
Viktor fanned himself as the car started picking up speed, "Whew...I can feel that one through my whole body." He wiped a tear away and put that hand back on the steering wheel, "I thought you didn't like talking about that stuff out loud."

"Only in front of others." Yuri explained, feeling the tightness and heat in his face starting to fade as his embarrassment ebbed, though he still felt the flutter in his chest, "Maybe if I was less of a verbal prude, we'd have fewer misunderstandings about some things..."

"Oh?"

"Y-Yeah..." He stammered, feeling his palm getting sweaty where Viktor held onto it, "...Like the...thing under the bed." He looked over to his partner nervously, "Maybe I wouldn't have had a cow about it."

"Hm...it's okay though, my love. I can't expect you to be as adventurous as I am in everything."

Viktor rubbed his thumb over the fingers he held, and turned the car to head down their street, "You've given me far more than I ever expected anyway."

Yuri just sighed heavily though, "But it's just a toy. You'd think, with as offended and upset as I got, you'd invited Chris into our bed with us or something..."

The silver legend laughed nervously, "Well, technically I did do that to you once...but we weren't officially in a relationship at the time..."

"Oh, that time in Barcelona?" The younger figure wondered with a slightly-embarrassed smile, spotting their house on one side of the road, "I kind of feel like we were, it was just...unspoken?"

"Really?"

"Yeah...I mean, you pushed the beds together and everything... We'd spent nearly every waking moment together for the eight or nine months before that. The one time you had to leave, it was like agony being apart..." Yuri explained, leaning slightly as the car turned that final corner to get into their meager driveway, "I'd known the panic of possibly losing you already, from early on when Yurio first turned up...but actually being away from you, even for just those few days during Rostelecom...and again later between Cup of China and NHK..."

With all the houses so densely packed together, their entryway was a small, covered alley between the buildings, with a 6-foot stone wall protecting the road-side of the house from traffic and pedestrians. On the other side of the small one-way road was another wall, with a long line of naked, snow-covered bushes on top, blocking the view of the much-taller building across the way from them. The road itself was barely large enough to give space for the small Audi to turn into the drive, and it was dotted with tall wooden power-poles and the cables that hung between them. The hard plastic cover over the driveway made the trek from car to door an easy one, without the need to ever shovel snow or dig the vehicle out in the morning. When the car stopped and doors started to open, the pair could hear Jiro barking from inside, though Viktor wouldn't let go of that hand just yet.

"I can't promise that something like that won't ever happen again, but for all that it hurts to be away...I have to admit..." He started, looking fondly across the center console, "The feeling we get when we meet again makes it worthwhile, don't you think?"

Yuri perked up, and nodded deeply, "Yeah!"

Viktor felt the flutter then, and leaned forward, finding a happy kiss there, "Let's get inside then before our fuzzy child has an accident from the excitement."
"You wanna make some mulled wine to cap the night?"

"If you make the Kotatsu pillow-pile."

"Done."

"Perfecto~! Let's do this."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED EIGHT

Yuri finished putting away all the travel gear, sorting out all the dirty laundry and medals from the costumes that needed to be dry-cleaned. The last things to be set aside were the skates themselves. He paused a moment to look at his husband's; the last ones removed from the bag. The little Russian flag insignia was still evident on the inside of each heel, which gave Yuri reason to make a face.

*I wonder if he's considering switching these out so the flags aren't there anymore? I know it's rough to get brand new boots though... Competing in skates that haven't been broken-in yet can be painful. I'll ask him...*

He set the boots in their place; a shelf in the trophy room, pressed up against the wall. The shelving unit itself was like a big stack of square-shaped wooden panels stacked up on top of each other, with each square forming a cubby-hole. His own blades were in the cubby next to it, stored on the shelf second-up from the floor. In all, there were about 18 shelving units in the display, 8 along the bottom and 1 less in each subsequent row up to the top, lined-up on the right nearest the door. Other units in the space held small trophies, framed photos, and a few personalized knickknacks. Nearby, there were 4 dress-forms meant to hold up the season's current costumes, though with those outfits in garment-bags - set aside for cleaning later - the forms were bare.

Yuri moved to put the Gold and Bronze medals away, with the ribbons around the 'neck stumps' of two of the dress-forms, for later placement in the frames that lined their respective prize walls. He looked at his reflection in his own medal, and rubbed his thumb over its pink-brown metallic face.

...I'm still a bit sour that I didn't get Silver at least... I wonder if it would've made any difference if I had Jiro with me before the Free Program?

He glanced down to where that very pup was sitting patiently in the doorway, watching him skulk around the room, putting things away.

...It kind of bugs me that I'm even thinking that kind of thing. Viktor should be enough to get me through my panic attacks, right? Why would I need a dog to do that for me instead...?

"If you mess up and miss the podium...I'll take responsibility by resigning as your coach."

Yuri's face was blank, eyes wide and body unmoving. Viktor flinched slightly as a droplet fell from his student's chin.

"...Why would you say something like that? Like you're trying to test me...?" Yuri finally asked, tears rolling down his face, "I've thought that maybe you regretted being my coach and wanted to quit..."

"That's not-"

"I KNOW!" Yuri screamed out, trembling, "I'm used to people blaming me for my own failures...but now, everything I do reflects on you, too!"

"...I'm not good with people crying in front of me. Should I just kiss you...?"

"NO! You don't have to do ANYTHING! Just STAND BY ME! I need you to believe more than I do"
"THAT I CAN WIN!"

Oh...right... Yuri grimaced, *He gives me anxiety sometimes*... He shook his head and settled the medal against the dress-form's pale-taupe fabric chest, and turned towards the doorway. Jiro stood and wagged his curly tail just a moment before Yuri reached down to pick him up, "You have a special kind of magic the people don't. Even if I completely mess up, you're still super excited to see me come back. Guess that's a perk of not being my coach...you don't have to remind me of my failings so I can learn from them. You can just be happy that I came back without hurting myself." His eyes went white as he remembered three *very* specific times when that wasn't the case, "...*Most* of the time."

The pup yipped and licked his human's face, wiggling in the man's arms as Yuri walked them back out into the main room. Once there though, Yuri set the pup down again, dropping him a short distance into one of the pillow piles he'd arranged earlier, and lifted the blanket covering the kotatsu to check the heater underneath. Makkachin already had the right idea, and was content to lie on his side with everything but his tail under the table-top, and those dark eyes lifted when the light poured in.

"Oh, hey." Yuri teased, reaching further in to ruffle the poodle's ears before lowering his side of the blanket again. He spotted that poof of a tail wagging on the other side, and pushed to stand up, looking towards the kitchen; the air smelled of wine and cinnamon and clove, with a hint of orange and nutmeg.

Viktor was doting over his creation on the stove-top, constantly stirring the concoction while it simmered. So focused on the pot of bubbling wine, he didn't notice the footsteps behind him until a pair of arms went around his frame and a body pressed up behind him. He smiled and set his free hand onto the forearms wrapped against his core, and turned his head slightly to glance a peek at the man who'd hugged him, "Already done, my love?"

"Mh."

"I'm almost done here, t- oh!" Viktor looked forward and down again as he suddenly felt those hands shift, moving up the front of his sweater, then his undershirt, until they could get underneath and feel his skin instead. He laughed quietly at the sensation of cold fingers against him, sliding around from stomach to sides before coming to rest there, "You're a little chilly."

"You're a little hot." Yuri countered, lifting his cheek from the back of a shoulder to see over it, giving a sly look as he waited his husband’s reaction.

"I'm hurt...only a little?" The Russian teased.

"Oh, in *that* case, you're *super* hot." Yuri retorted, hands roaming further up under the garments, "Enough that...you set my heart on fire...!" He sang.

"*Don't stop us now...the moment of truth, we were...born to make history...*" Viktor joined in, finding the younger man starting to sway them both to the imaginary beat. Yuri eventually pulled his arms back though, setting his hands on the silver legend's waist as he rose up onto his toes to playfully nip at one ear, catching Viktor off-guard slightly, and made the taller man give a laugh of surprise. For the second time in a night, those pale cheeks blushed a little, and the Russian watched as his young husband moved back towards the front room, still humming their song as he went.

"So what are your plans for your boots anyway?" Yuri wondered after a moment, sitting on the arm
of the blue couch as he surfed through channels on the television.

"My boots...?" Viktor echoed, attention turned back to the pot of wine. He smelled it once more and decided it was finished, turning off the heat and moving over to a pitcher with a fine strainer set over the open top. He poured the liquid through, catching the chunks of spice and orange peel, until the pot was empty, "You mean my skating boots, right?"

"Hai. You still have the Russian flag on your heels. I know they're hard to see, but..." Yuri explained, "Since you're not skating for Russia anymore, and in a few weeks, you won't even be a Russian citizen anymore...maybe you should consider switching them for the Japanese flag? Unless you mean something else by them being there."

"Oh...I hadn't thought about those things." He admitted, lifting the sieve from the pitcher to cast its contents away. Two wine glasses were on the counter nearby, and he grabbed one at a time to pour the mulled alcohol, "I guess we could do a little 'arts and crafts' to fix them for now. It'd be murder on my feet to get brand new boots right now, especially if it's just for the sake of the flag insignias."

"That's what I was thinking, too. Maybe there's a Shoe Doctor in town who can cover them with something temporarily."

"Here I was thinking white-out and a red sharpie." Viktor laughed, putting the left-over wine into the refrigerator before grabbing up the two glasses, and stepped out into the living-room, handing one off, "A toast to your better brain."

Yuri just made a teasing face at that, crinkling his nose slightly as their glasses clink'd together. He pulled his own close to smell his husband's handiwork properly, "It's always a treat when you make this stuff."

"Yours is pretty good too, you know." The silver Russian pointed out, setting his hot and steamy glass down on top of the kotatsu as he sat down into the pillow-pile, moving Jiro out of the way to avoid sitting on him.

"Sure, but there's something about yours that's special." Yuri explained, following after his partner with the remote control still in his other hand. Just as he set his wine-glass down and found his spot between his partner's legs, he paused and reached to pull his thin sweater away...only to hesitate when it was barely half-way up his torso. He glanced back over his shoulder, lowering his elbows again, "...You don't mind if I do this, right?"

"Do I, Viktor Nikiforov, mind if my husband takes his clothes off." The Russian retorted in a half-mocking tone.

"Well...I mean...the marks on my arms and back are still..." Yuri explained, "You said that every time you see them, it just reminds you of everything that happened..."

"You can take your shirt off, my love." Viktor made a face, "Even if the marks didn't remind me, you just did."

"Oh." The younger man's face went pale, "Shimatta...! Gomen!" (Crap...! Sorry!)

Silver hair tousled slightly as Viktor shook his head from side to side once, "Daijōbu." (It's okay.) "It was already on my mind anyway."

Yuri was stunned, but only for a moment. He pulled his shirt off anyway and cast it onto the couch nearby before turning to lean into his husband's waiting embrace, "...Why were you already thinking about it?"
The Russian wiggled a little as he reached his right hand to his back pocket, and pulled his phone up, "I was checking Instagram while you were putting our things away. Saito updated again."

"Oh...? Is it bad?" The younger man reached for the unlocked device, and saw that Instagram was already loaded from before. He scrolled to the top of the post that his husband had been looking at, reading the comments no doubt, and saw a small photo-album had been posted on Asahi's new account. The first image of the 10-long slideshow featured Asahi, without his hair dyed, and someone Yuri didn't recognize, black hair highlighted with thin scarlet streaks. He read the caption quietly to himself as he made room for Viktor's arm to come back around his core, and felt a chin come down onto his right shoulder.

[I honestly don't know how many people will care, or want to know this much about me, but...] The post started, [If there's nothing else that I learned this weekend, it's that I need to be more open about myself. I've been quiet about this aspect of my life for my ENTIRE life, but I think...I'm ready to be out with it. While it brings me great sadness and pain to see these photos after so long, I thought it would be helpful to use some of them to highlight the kind of person I am...by also showing off the person that I loved.]

[Many already know that the car accident from 2 years ago claimed the life of a fellow skater and rink-mate of mine...but to me, he was so much more than that. I made him keep it a secret because I was so ashamed that anyone would know. He took that secret to the grave with him, while we were on our way to a meeting where I'd planned on starting to tell people.]

[This is Riku...someone I cherished and lost too soon...someone I never got to express that to properly before he was taken from me. My heart has been a void since he was taken out of it...and my soul's been ripped in half since having to confront that loss. I put it off for so long, because at the back of my mind, the fact that the accident that took him was while we were on our way to start explaining ourselves, and the fact that I lived...somehow was meant as a punishment for our hubris. That I lived...as punishment for having ever thought I could admit that I loved another man.]

[I spent 2 years trying to pretend that we never were. I got cold feet about absolutely everything after I lost Riku. I went into seclusion and pretended Riku was just a friend, because it was easier than trying to explain the truth that we'd kept hidden. But he was everything to me, and it kills me that I couldn't tell him that while he was still alive.]

[So...while you look at these photos...please remember these words: Live and love every day like you'll never get the chance to see the sun rise another day...because it will never be as beautiful again if you don't.]

"Wow..." Yuri said quietly as he blinked a few tears away, and scrolled back up to leaf through the album. The images were innocent; hugs, hand-holds, gentle touches on the face, and a few funny ones with Riku trying to style Asahi's hair while Asahi tried to hold the phone...but the last two images hurt more than anything. The first of the two was a photo of Riku's grave-marker from the day of the funeral; snow-covered from the season but colorful from the flowers placed all around, and an almost-invisible white dog with honey-tipped accents that couldn't be moved from the front of it all. The second, was a photo from earlier in the day, showing Asahi with that very dog inside someone's home. Yuri could feel the tears trailing down his face, and he snuffled slightly before scrolling back to the front of the album, "It was just...stories before...but with these pictures...it just makes everything so real now."

"See what I mean about how weird it is to suddenly take relationship advice from him?" Viktor commented, "In spite of all the mistakes he made at Nationals...it's hard not to take him seriously in light of this kind of thing."
"Yeah..."

"It really is good advice though... Live every day like it's your last. You can never be sure when it really will be; for you or someone you care about."

The afternoon and evening had been particularly hard to get through. By barely 9pm, regardless of the sleepless night beforehand and the early rise to make the trip, Asahi was exhausted. Most of the rest of the Itō family seemed to agree, though Hayate remained awake in his own room with the lights on.

This is so unfair. I've been taking care of that phone for 2 years and mom just gives it away to a guy she's never met. A guy who took 2 years just to show up here finally! I was gonna use that phone to keep Riku's spirit alive...but this Asahi jerk is probably just going to put it into a drawer somewhere and forget it as soon as the next pretty face wanders by.

It wasn't difficult to sense the tension, but the 'adults' of the house made sure to keep it away from the target of that indignation. A soft knock came from outside the teen's room, and a simple groan of 'what' bid them ender. Brown eyes with flecks of gold turned as the door opened, and Hayate grumbled even more as his two parents both came in and sat on the edge of his bed. He stayed at his desk and computer though, scrolling through nonsense that he wasn't even really looking at anymore.

[We know you're mad,] His mother started, [But we're not the only ones who lost your brother that day. You heard what Asahi said about why it took him so long to come...and the fact that he still feels this badly after 2 years should tell you something.]

[I'm not mad because he cares.] Hayate growled, [I'm mad because YOU'RE giving away my brother's things. Things I've been keeping safe.]

[We know the phone meant a lot to you, bu-]

[But nothing!] He argued, turning in his seat, [What else of Riku's will I have to remember him by when Asahi leaves with that phone tomorrow!?!]

[Half the things in your room right now were Riku's.] His father pointed out, gesturing to a number of objects; school mementos, toys from younger days, even a pair of skates kept in a corner, [You won't even let Asahi look at those... He gestured at the bladed boots.

[Cuz you'll give them away if he shows attachment!]

[He's getting the phone. You can keep the rest...but for the love of your brother, let him look at the skates, Hayate. Your feet don't even fit in them.]

[That's not the point!]

[Then what is? You seem fixated on things that you can use for yourself, whether realistic or not.]

Hayate crumpled over his keyboard, [I don't just want Riku's things to disappear or to get put into storage somewhere, never to be seen or used again!]

[...That's...part of the point with the phone right now.] The matriarch explained, [You heard Asahi earlier...if someone, if you, had answered back on Riku's phone when he called and texted this morning, imagine how much pain and suffering that would've caused him. The fear that someone other than your brother might have that phone and number is just unthinkable to the people
whose lives he was a part of. You have to give the phone up. Making sure no one other than Riku ever uses it again is exactly why we want Asahi to have it.

Hayate didn't seem to appreciate the words, but he didn't answer, simply burying his face into his folded arms on the table top.

[Now that you know the passcode, leaving it here will just give Asahi a lot of anxiety. You're young and can be kind of cruel sometimes, especially when it comes to protecting the things you think belong to you. I would never forgive myself if I made Asahi give you that phone back, and you used it to torment him for daring to show up here.]

[I would never do that-]

[People do things when they're hurting that they normally wouldn't. If this were about anyone other than your brother...we would believe you. But...this is Riku.] His mother explained, then rose back up to standing, husband going with her. [The phone stays with Asahi. It's a small gesture, but it's something that can give him some peace. He deserves that.]

The sound of footsteps left the room, and the door closed again, leaving Hayate to sulk and be bitter about it. As with most teenagers...the prospect of being told they're wrong was never an easy thing to accept, and he was no exception. But there was nothing more that he could do. The phone was gone.

The two parents went back out into the living room to find Asahi sitting on their couch, arms wrapped tightly around himself, his phone and Riku's on his lap. Hana was curled up next to him, back pressed to his leg. He glanced up, eyes red, to the pair as they returned.

[I know the walls can be paper thin at times, but...I'd like to say to you that the phone is yours.] The older woman explained, [Please forgive Hayate. He's become quite territorial over his brother's things since we went to get them from Tokyo.]

[I could tell...] Asahi sighed, relaxing a little bit to know there was no more risk of the device being taken away, [The sweater he's wearing right now was Riku's.]

[You remember his clothes after all this time...?] The father wondered, surprised.

Asahi nodded, [There's a hole on the front of the left elbow that Hana put there while trying to chew up my clothes once.] He moved his hand over to stroke the dog's fur, [I'd recognize it anywhere...because I felt bad that it happened.]

[Ahh...]

[You look so tired, Asahi.] The matriarch commented, crouching down before him with a hand on one knee, the other pressing up to the skater's forehead, [We don't want you to get sick from all this stress. You should be safe to get some rest now. Put the phone somewhere safe in your bags, and try to sleep.]

He nodded through his exhaustion, and pushed up from the couch as Riku's mother stood as well. He checked the phone one more time before clicking it off and putting it somewhere in the middle of his suitcase, amidst the soft clothes that would protect it from scratches and meddling. He returned to the couch after that, and shooed Hana down so he could lie flat on the deep cushions.

[Do you need anything before we turn in as well?]

Asahi glanced up, then down again, [...]
[What is it?]

[How long did you know about Riku and I? I mean...] He started, nervously unsure if he was clear, [Did he tell you right away? Was it close to the end...?]

[He never actually said it directly...] The woman explained, [But when he did speak about you, there was a very distinct change in the way of it after a while. One day, he spoke of you simply as a rink-mate that he liked, and his slight frustrations at how you hadn't noticed him over the course of the year that you two trained together. Then, suddenly, he was over the moon about you. There was only one reason why that might be. But, as long as he never specifically said anything, I just played along with the terms he used. He had never been shy about his relationships before, so we had to assume it was something to do with your preferences at that point.]

[...Oh...]

[We supposed that maybe it was your first same-sex relationship, or a number of other things. Riku could be quite direct when he wanted something, but he wasn’t so sure about whether you'd return his interest. He complained sometimes about how hard it was to read you...] She continued, moving around the room to start turning lights off, [I guess he got impatient and told you finally?]

Asahi's face was a bit red, but he nodded against the blanket he'd pulled over himself, [He was...very direct. I couldn't resist. Didn't really have the option.]

The woman smiled, standing next to the last switch, [That was my Riku. Never shy.]

[...I wish...that I could've saved him.] Asahi pulled one arm free from the blanket and pinched the bridge of his nose, [But I couldn't even tell where he'd been hurt. He looked fine to me.]

[...There was nothing you could have done,] Mrs. Itō explained, feeling the sting in her eyes to be reminded of that day so specifically, [From what we've heard about what happened, from the EMTs who were there, what you did was enough. My son knew that he was loved when he passed; you held onto him. You will always have our gratitude for that.]

Asahi nodded quietly, drawing in a ragged breath as he closed his eyes. The matriarch waited a moment before finally clicking off that last light, and she went with her partner out of the room. With the room still, dark, and quiet, Asahi could feel his head tingling from the tension of those memories flooding back again. He tried to let himself relax, taking in the smell of the place so he could imprint it into his mind before his inevitable departure, but even after a few minutes, he was restless. Exhaustion wasn't enough to let him sleep, and he rolled onto his side. Eyes opened in frustration...but straight in front of him were two unexpected dark eyes. Asahi jumped a little, blinked, and realized...it was Hana there, with her snout pressed right onto the edge of the couch in front of him, tail wagging slowly, hopefully. She whined at him.

"...W-what...?" Asahi stammered, unsure of the situation, "I don't know what you want..." He whispered.

One paw came up then, and the Hokkaido-ken scratched at the edge of the blanket. She put the paw down and snuffled to get her nose under the warmth instead. The skater finally understood...or thought he did...and lifted his arm, moving the blanket up with it. Hana quickly made the most of it and jumped up, collapsing into a fluffy ball against Asahi's chest and stomach, and set her head down on the arm he'd folded under his pillow.

...She...never wanted to do this with me back then... Riku was her cuddle-buddy. It was always her against Riku's front, then me in the back...if she didn't migrate between us at some point in the
middle of the night, paws against my chest like she thought she could shove me away...

He sighed, but accepted it, and draped the blanket-holding arm over the dog when he let it down over her, "...You know I can't take you with me... You're not even my dog..."

She just snuffled at that, as though she understood the words, and was saying 'try me' in response.

Asahi huffed a pained breath against the dog's fluff, and settled down again as well as he could. Somehow...having Hana there was enough. His heart stopped racing for a little while, and after a few minutes, he finally fell asleep.
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED NINE

The last of Yuri's wine glass was emptied and set on top of the kotatsu, then nudged closer to center to avoid the compression-wrapped ankle that was perched on the edge of it. In his forward lean though, Yuri's back was exposed, and a pair of pale hands pressed against it, sliding from the middle, up around the crest of shoulders, and started to knead there.

"You built up all the knots that I worked out on Saturday again." Viktor teased quietly, "Though maybe these are from your Exhibition."

"...Ech...maybe..." Yuri answered, staying where he was in that forward-hunched position, "Guess I didn't get away with is as much as I thought I did, since I didn't need Minako-sensei to come by just to make it possible for me to walk again..." He lifted his head to look back, "...Like someone I know."

Viktor huffed at that, fingers pressed up against the sides and back of his husband's neck, then down again to rub over the stiff trapezium, "I do envy that stamina of yours... The things I could've done with my skating if I could stack quads like you do..." He sighed dramatically and slid his hands all the way down his partner's back, only then to lean forward, hands pressed around the man's ribs as he looked over one shoulder, "...The things I'll make you do instead..."

Yuri got nervous to hear it, "...Make me do...? Like what?"

"Putting all that stamina to good use, obviously." The silver legend leaned back into the pillow-pile again to continue his massage, "You once made Yurio's face go red with the joke that the only thing that can wear you down is me, but that insinuation was indirectly about us in bed. I intend to make it true on the ice, too. The time has come to take off the kid gloves and training wheels, my love."

"...I can only imagine..."

"You're bringing back 'Yuri on Ice' for the Olympics...and with everything you've learned and mastered since last season, I think it's only fair that we update it, right?"

"That's true..." Yuri agreed nervously, "Just don't forget that my brain does something weird when I go out there to skate for scores rather than for fun...!"

"I know it. That's what Jiro's going to be there for, neh?"

The pup's squeaks and yips echoed from under the table then, until that small fluffy head poked out from under the kotatsu blanket.

Viktor laughed, "Aw! He already recognizes his name!"

"...He's going to be twice this size by the time the Olympics rolls around..." Yuri pointed out, reaching one hand forward to scratch at the dog's ears, "He'll be harder to carry around."

"He'll be able to walk faster and father though, too."

"Yeah..."

"He can't stay a puppy forever," The Russian explained, leaning forward again to reach past his
husband's side and find the Akita's fluff as well, offered a few pats, and then leaned back once more, this time dragging Yuri with him, pressing that skin against his still-clothed chest, "He's going to be big enough to act like a guard dog, too."

"Right?" Yuri mused, seeing the pup vanish under the kotatsu again to join Makkachin in a heater-warmed nap, "Hard to think we've already had him for 2 weeks. I can still remember how weird it felt when the JSF gave him to me... I was still so wrapped up in the shock of learning that the RSF had fired you that I couldn't even feel excited about this puppy in my hands."

"...Well, I guess it's a good thing then that Jiro is a dog and didn't know what was going on anyway." Viktor offered, kissing the side of one arm as Yuri raised them both up above their heads, fingers weaving through silver hair as they came down again, "I'm sure he'd forgive you if he did, though."

"Probably." The younger figure agreed, lowering his arms slightly as he felt a playful nibble on one ear. The snuffle of a breath there was enough to tickle, and both arms came down completely as he laughed and tried to scrunch-up his shoulders in feigned protest. That only encouraged more teases, hands coming up over his chest as kisses went down the side of his neck, "Wait wait... wait... wait!"

"Wait for what?" Viktor wondered, relishing in the sound of his husband's laughs.

Yuri pulled forward to try and catch his breath, only to catch a glimpse of the silver Russian's sweater and under-shirt being tossed away, and arms came back around him to pull him close again. The feeling of hot skin against his back and arms was enough to quiet his thoughts of resistance, and he fell limp in the Russian's embrace, leaning his head away to reveal more of the neck that was being sought for. Soft lips pressed onto his skin, sometimes kissing, sometimes sucking, always wet and warm. Inch by inch, as attention slid up to his partner's favorite spot under one ear, Yuri's knees came up, dragging the kotatsu blanket up with them. Before long, he was a flushed and wiggly mess, both of his hands clasped firmly for grip around the Russian's thighs where they pinned him in.

Viktor's roaming hands slid over every inch of exposed skin, the right hovering over one pink nub on his partner's chest, thumb brushing over it until it was perked up and hard. The sound of the younger man's breaths giving out a slight whine with each movement spurred him forward, and the Russian let his left hand venture under the blanket, finding both legs there pressed tightly against each other. He gently slid his fingers into the cleft between them, gently trying to nudge them apart with a soft touch, "You're quite tense, my love..."

"Nh...hah... I can't..."

"Do you want me to j..."

"No!" Yuri cried out, releasing the vice-grip he had on one leg so he could set it over his partner's
wrist to stop his movement instead. He didn't push it away though, he simply held it there, still, and tried to catch his breath again. He could feel every pulse of his heartbeat cause a throb through tender flesh where fingers still gripped around it.

Viktor was left thoroughly confused, "...Yuri...?"

"S-Sorry..."

"Ah...ehm...don't be, but...I still have a hold of you...what do you want me to do...? Did I go too fast? I got the impression you needed me to..."

More panting, but Yuri wouldn't move from where he was, or where the held his husband's arm, until his breaths slowed down a little bit. He tried to draw in a deeper breath, and glanced back towards a shoulder, though not over it, "...I've...been trying to hold this off all night... I guess the wine hit me faster than I thought it would... Even just sitting with you...got me going almost right away... I've been trying to hide it under the kotatsu..."

Viktor leaned forward, lightly pressing his chest against his partner's back, and kissed the rear of one shoulder as his free hand held to the man's other side, "Why hold back? You could've flipped me over and had your way with me anytime you wanted."

"It's not what I wanted though..."

The Russian's brow furrowed to hear the words, Is he still out of sorts from the competition...? He shook his head lightly and pressed his lips to the skin before him, "I know you can't control what your body does. I'll stop if you want me to."

"Th-that's not it...either..."

"Tell me..."

Yuri hesitated a moment, but then gave a gentle nudge against the hand that was still enveloped around him. Fingers came loose, and he felt the cool rush of air against his wet skin, giving him a chill that pricked a few goosebumps. Instead of simply leaning back again though and pretending like nothing had happened, he hooked his thumbs into both sides of his sweat pants' elastic band and pushed them down, burying his knuckles against the blanket to hoist himself up and get the fabric out from underneath his frame. The kotatsu blanket was shuffled away along with the clothes, and Yuri picked himself up to shimmy over top of his partner's right leg, sitting sideways against the perplexed Russian's frame, shoulder against that pale chest. Both hands came up, one palm against each cheek, "I know it sounds stupid, but...I just don't want to lose sight of you. When I feel you, I want to see you...even when my eyes are closed."

"That doesn't sound stupid." Viktor reassured, nudging forward to touch their brows as his partner's hands descended to his shoulders, "It's kind of romantic, actually." He said quietly, feeling the relief pass through his partner's frame, along with the warmth of a single exhale. With his partner's tension starting to leave, Viktor wiggled out from where he'd been sitting and twisted around to face him. Kneeling slightly, the Russian leaned forward and nuzzled his way into a kiss, cupping one hand around his husband's head to hold him close. With the kiss, he nudged the younger man's frame backward, lowering him gently down to the edge of the pillow pile, and set his elbow down under the back of Yuri's neck to offer his forearm as a pillow. Those cherry-hazel eyes opened as soon as he lifted up again to stretch the rest of himself out, and when Viktor looked back, he felt those hands rise up from his shoulders and weave through his hair, pulling him back down for another kiss. For the moment, he abandoned trying to use his free hand to undo the button on the front of his jeans, and just let himself enjoy the moment for what it was.
He slid his free hand down the side of his partner's thin but muscular frame, pausing only as he felt the ridge of a hip-bone in his palm, and slid back up again. He splayed his fingers out to feel every bit of skin that he could at one time, slipping up past the collar-bone and over the side of Yuri's neck, up into that raven hair, never letting up in those kisses. There wasn't so much as a flinch from that, even as he felt his partner's hands slide down the front of his larger body, undoing that button he'd had to abandon before. If anything, he set his left elbow down against the blanket, hand cradled around the back of his spouse's head, and plunged for a deeper kiss as he felt a hand slide into his clothes.

Being on the floor, flat on his back, Yuri had little room to maneuver his arms before the ground would stop him from going any further. He could only offer a few meager strokes against his husband's excited flesh before the inklings of frustration began and he gave up, sliding his hands up to the waistband of those jeans instead. He was sure to hook his thumbs into both them and the black elastic fabric beneath, and did his best to push them both away, as far as the limits of his range allowed. It was enough at least for the moment; his husband's heat was against him, getting slippery and wet with each slight movement through the slick he'd made on his own skin...and was still making. He wiggled slightly to center himself under the Russian's larger frame, and lifted both legs aside the man's waist, hugging them around to keep him close. That tension from earlier hadn't quite gone away, and the grip of those athletic legs tightened. Hands that had pushed denim away went to center, took hold of that thick member, and started massaging it.

Viktor hissed a breath when he felt it, rocking his hips slightly with each gentle squeeze and rub. He locked eyes with the ones ahead of him for a moment, closing them again only as he lowered down to nose his partner's lips. A little while longer of that slick rubbing and delicate twisting, and Viktor had to pull himself from the warm torpor; he withdrew his arm from under his partner's head and crawled a foot backward, kissing neck and chest as he went. The legs that had wrapped around his waist came loose slightly to let him sit up, and he pushed himself upright only long enough to push the remnants of his jeans and underwear down so he could kick them off when he lowered down again. Hands and arms went up to slide around his core to pull him closer; legs parted wide as the younger man clung to him. Viktor tilted his descent slightly, putting his weight onto one elbow so he could keep the other hand free, and pressed his palm and fingers against the side of his husband's ribs. He trailed it all the way down, around the curve of waist and hip, until he could pull the man's leg up against his own. By then, he was low enough on his partner's chest that he could offer hot attention to sensitive nubs, keeping his mouth on the closest one, circling his tongue around it with the occasional suck. Each time, Yuri cried out slightly or whimpered a breath, making the Russian smile to himself. His gentle rocking against center helped as well, and he could feel his partner's frame starting to relax under him. Once those tightly-wound legs were loose enough that they were barely holding their position, Viktor slid his free hand through his husband's 'puddle' and started probing between them with a few fingers. First, pressing against that small flat of skin, that 'button' that protected the sensitive organ just within, and then further down. He didn't slide his fingers inside though, he merely found where he wanted to go and then guided the proper tool into place with them. Slick as he was from his spouse's self-made lube, it was easy to get inside him, though as tense as he still apparently was in his core, it took a minute and several slow advances before their hips were flat against each other.

Yuri clamped his fingers around his husband's arms, feeling at the hardness of taut muscle as that pressure further down worked its way deeper inside him. When Viktor was all the way in, the man descended over him, pressing their chests flat against one another, and wedges both arms under his back to hold him close. Yuri reached his arms over to do the same thing in return, holding tight as the rocking motion slowly started.
Light was barely coming in when Yuri started to open his eyes the next morning. They opened enough to acknowledge the light from under a blanket, closed again...and then shot open wide.

"OH MY GOD MINAKO-SENSEI PROBABLY LEFT WITHOUT ME."

His heart was pounding in his chest as he tried to untangle himself from arms and blankets, seeing his startled partner looking around like someone had broken in; both dogs were awake and alert as well. Jiro puppy-barked in confusion and Makkachin trotted around as Yuri, buck-ass naked, ran for the stairs...only to pause.

There was no light coming in through the blinds in the front room or in the back. Whatever time it was, it was still before dawn. Even in winter, in Japan, that meant it was still before 7am.

Viktor's heart settled from the scare, and he flopped against the remains of the pillow pile, "Yuurriiii..." He grumbled, fumbling for where his phone had been left on the kotatsu, "You nearly gave me a heart attack...!"

"I'm still in the middle of one!" He hollered back, rushing the rest of the way upstairs. He checked his phone where he'd left it on the nightstand the day before; 5:45am. He heaved a sigh of relief and stepped back out into the hall, "False alarm! It's not even 6am yet!"

The Russian's eyes were staring at his phone's faceplate, and the corroborated time shown thereupon, "...I know..." He mumbled, mostly to himself. He clicked out and let the phone drop to the blankets, and tried to go back to sleep as he heard the shower turning on upstairs. It only took about 15 seconds before his arms were groping for a warm body to hold onto, and Makkachin quickly jumped into place, curling up with his head and the back of his shoulders against his human's chest. Jiro, meanwhile, was trying to get up the stairs.

Yuri didn't spend a whole lot of time cleaning up, skipping the hot bath soak entirely. He scrubbed and soaped himself down in hurry, knowing that every second he took getting ready was a second he might be late to catching the ballerina at the train station.

Should I text her...? Ahhh I wish she gave me a more specific time to be there rather than when she'd leave me behind...

With a quick towel-down to get dry, ruffling it back and forth over his hair, he paused in front of the long mirror. Reaching it forward, Yuri used the towel to dry the fogged-up panel down, and twisted around to check the marks on his back. They were mostly healed by then, but it was still as obvious to see them as it was to see the marks left on his chin and forehead from Detroit 2 weeks earlier.

Viktor looks at all these injuries, and all he sees are his own failures to protect me... It doesn't even matter that I put some of them there myself...

He huffed a sigh to himself and stepped out of the wash-room, rummaged through their shared closet, and found clothing for the day. By the time he had his usual black briefs, pants, and socks on, he heard a pitiable cry coming from the stairwell, and stuck his head out to see Jiro stuck on the landing. Black, almond-shaped eyes spotted him and the pup started whimpering even more, which
just made Yuri hop a little faster, "Aw! Did you get stuck again?" He cooed, getting down to the middle, open step where the stairs leveled out to change direction above the front door, and picked the Akita up, "And you didn't even have Viktor to walk on this time."

The Russian was out-cold in the pillow-pile, one arm draped over his poodle.

Yuri managed a smile in spite of himself and went back upstairs, setting Jiro down on top of the unused bed so he could finish getting dressed. It was about 6:10 when he was done and heading back to the main floor again, careful not to turn on too many lights as he figured his way around the kitchen. There wasn't much fare in the refrigerator given that they'd been gone for 4 days, save some coffee creamer, perishable dog treats, and a half-used daikon radish in the crisper at the bottom.

_Coffee it is. Breakfast of Champions._

With the brew starting to bubble, and water pouring into the grind and filter, Yuri stepped back into the living-room and crouched down next to his slumbering spouse. He combed his fingers through the man's silver hair, using the dim lights from above the stove to help him see, and offered his morning kisses as Viktor mumbled and turned over, _"Hey, sorry to wake you up again... Can you still take me to the train station?"

"Mnnhhh...of course..." The Russian mumbled some more, and rolled onto his back to stretch, "Am I driving you while naked or clothed?"

Yuri snorted a laugh and shook his head, _"Get dressed, sheesh!"_ He sat back on his haunches and rose up to standing, but offered his hands as he bent down again, _"If you drop me off early, then maybe you can catch a nap at Yu-Topia before you take the kids to get their papers."_

"I want to hold onto you as long as I can though..." Viktor whined, kissing the ring on his husband's hand before letting himself get pulled up to his feet, and unceremoniously draped himself across the man, _"I'll wait with you until Minako gets there, then I'll come back and collect our boys."

"That sounds good," Yuri nodded, hugging his spouse's naked frame as he held up half of his weight. He turned his head slightly as he heard the last sputtering of hot water from the coffee maker, _"I made enough for you to have some, if you want."

"Shall I have it while naked or clothed?" Viktor teased, breathing in the scent of his husband's freshly-washed hair while he had the chance.

"Oh, you should definitely have it while naked. No question." Yuri laughed, pulling back to offer one more kiss, and started to guide the silver legend towards the kitchen table.
Chapter 410

CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED TEN

Viktor yawned as he pulled on his big comfy winter jacket and stepped out into the blustery cold. It was still dark. Every breath could be seen in fog against the lights in the night. The pups were gathered on the inside of the door, watching with nervous tail-wags as the car was piled into without them, and the engine came to life. Headlights beamed down to the end of the drive as the small red Audi reversed into the alley-road, and drove off slowly towards the main street.

As per his custom, Yuri reached across the center console and settled his hand on his husband's thigh, rubbing his thumb a few times there before letting it be still, "You gonna be okay taking the dogs by yourself?"

"Sure," Viktor answered easily, "Why not?"

"Maybe the vet doesn't speak Japanese. I haven't been there since before moving to Detroit."

"Oh," He said simply, but then shrugged and smiled, "Unfortunate circumstances that they were, I met the vet last year, remember?"

"Ah...right..." Yuri looked aside, seeing his slightly coy expression in the glass. He turned back though as they rounded the corner to head west out of the alley, "Maybe I should phrase it differently...are you gonna be okay taking the dogs by yourself?" He emphasized.

"Hm..." The Russian rubbed his chin with his left hand, "Maybe I should ask Mari to come with me just in case."

"That's not what I meant either,"

"What then?"

"Need I remind you the kind of hot mess you were the last time we were separated?"

"Oh, hah...I'm trying not to think about it that way. It'll only be a few hours, this time, not a few days. I'm sure it'll be fine."

"Try not to set the house on fire."

Yu-Topia came - and went - from sight on their left as they headed closer to the bridge, with Hasetsu Castle on the hill beyond it. The city was calm and quiet; moonlight reflected off the water like crystal facets. Lights were on in many houses, but hardly anyone was in the streets yet. None, really, save for the snow-management crews who were making sure the roads were well salted and sanded as needed for later traffic.

Viktor lifted his fingers from the steering-wheel in a make-shift wave as they passed a salting truck, "I'm actually more worried for you than I am for me."

"Wh-what!? This was your idea!" Yuri blanched, "Why are you worried!?"

"Because I feel like there's nothing I can do to help, except maybe stay out of it." Viktor explained simply, feeling the slight thump as the car's tires went from the street to the bridge, passing over the metal joints that allowed it to move so slightly as the weather changed, "The problem I have with my
Uncle, the way I reacted to the news when I heard about it in the first place...letting you take the reins on it was the only smart thing I did the entire time."

"We can solve the issues you have with your Uncle..."

"I don't want to."

"What if he does?"

"He doesn't either."

"And you know that because...?"

"We're the same. Maybe that's why I dislike him so much these days." Viktor said quietly, keeping his eyes forward, the back of a finger pressed to his lip where that elbow was propped up on the window's ledge, "There's only room for one air-headed, impulsive Russian in this city, and I was here first. The two of us together just make things uncomfortable for everyone else."

"You sound like you think you can scare him off by making it unbearable here."

"He ran away before."

"And you specifically told him that if he tried to do it again, you'd never forgive him."

"I never forgave him for the first time he did it either. I just gave him a second chance...and he blew it."

Yuri sighed quietly to himself, It's going to be really hard this week...so much for being able to relax a little before we go to Russia... The car slowed down as Viktor prepared to make another left turn, stopping just in front of the highschool on the other side of hill from the Ice Castle. Yuri tapped a finger against his leg, drew in a breath, lips parted and ready to speak...but then said nothing.

"You probably think I'm being excessively petty."

"Er..." Yuri stumbled over his words, but shook his head anyway, "I guess I'm just trying to see it from your perspective. I've only known him for about a year now...but you grew up with him, and after he left, you lived with the damage he left behind. I can't say how much different - better or worse - things would've been for you if he'd been able to take you with him like he said he wanted, but...I think there's a lot of misunderstandings going on between you two right now. I mean..." He hesitated to continue, but he could feel those slate eyes turned in his direction, even as the car turned in the other to head south for the last long stretch of the trip, "...If you dislike him because of how much he reminds you of yourself...what is it you're really seeing?"

"A guy with the same bad habits, but much worse results." Viktor answered stiffly, "I liked him better when he wasn't making decisions about anything. Now it just seems like he's doing everything possible to annoy me."

"...Hhhhhaaaaaaave you considered maybe that you're just...looking...to be annoyed...?" Yuri asked nervously.

Viktor stayed quiet for a moment, but then shrugged, "Even if I am, I offered an olive branch and he rejected it, so it's not like I haven't tried. As far as I'm concerned, the ball's in his court, and it's up to him how things progress."

"You don't even seem to be willing to talk to him anymore though."
"I don't have to want to."

"No..." Yuri grumbled to himself, quieting down for the rest of the drive. The train station wasn't much farther from where they were, and the parking lot was effectively empty when they arrived. They stepped out after parking, and walked slowly towards the terminal entrance, careful to avoid icy patches. Yuri turned his eyes out towards the pillar with the sea-urchin and squid statue on top, It's not like Mikhail's never been here before. He came for our wedding party last spring, and a bunch of times over the summer with Yurio, including to help us move... Even after everything that happened before and during NHK, Viktor never really gave me the impression that those things were what upset him so much. It...was only after Minako-sensei told him her 'secret' that he got mad. Without having more time to talk to him, it's hard to know if that was just the 'last straw' for him, or if it's really the only major issue, and he's just using the rest to justify it.

They turned to get into the terminal, cold air turning warm with the indoor heating. The sun was barely starting to creep over the horizon by then, marking the time as being 6:50am. It was a bit surprising that Minako wasn't already in the terminal, though it just made Yuri worry.

"I wonder if she left already." He said quietly to himself, reaching to pull his phone out of his coat, "She didn't seem too keen on the idea that I'd asked to come at all. Maybe telling me to be here by 7am was just her way of making sure I wouldn't show up when she really meant to go."

"Do you know when the plane she's waiting for was supposed to arrive?"

"No..."

"...When are you even going to be coming back?"

"I have no idea. I haven't talked to Minako-sensei since asking her if I could come."

"Oh," Viktor grimaced, "So you might not even come back until late."

"Assuming I leave at all..." Yuri said, feeling anxious already. He started thumbing a few words into a text message, [ミナコ先生, どこにいるか] (Minako-sensei, where are you?)

Viktor looked around the terminal idly, "I wonder if the girls and Yurio are on layover maybe...?" He turned to glance down at his partner just as that message was sent, "They'd know when they're landing."

"That's true," Yuri agreed, clicking out to find the last text message he'd sent to the Russian Tiger, "Even if they're not on layover, I'd be shocked if Mikhail didn't pay for them to have WiFi access on such a long trip."

"Even if he did, it's usually not that good."

"Deshō?" He huffed and shook his head in half-amused agreement, "I'll message him and Nikki just in case one of them is asleep or something."

Though staying nearby, the silver Russian wandered around in a slow circle, looking as far as the halls allowed in case Minako had been waiting there all along around some corner. There were a small handful of other people passing through for the train, a few pausing in their steps to gape at the skaters and whisper amongst themselves, but it was too early for anyone to be all that excitable. He looked back again when he felt his husband's thumb rub on the back of his hand to get his attention, "Hm?"

"Nikki answered back right away. They're on the last flight right now. Tokyo to Fukuoka. They
should be landing in around 2 hours." Yuri explained, only to feel the buzz in his other hand and
looked towards the phone again, eyes scanning across the screen to read another chunk of text,
"Oh...it looks like Mikhail wanted to pause travel in Fukuoka for a minute before taking the train ride
here. Apparently his back is giving him fits right now, so they're gonna stop for brunch so he can
walk it off." He said, then turned the device in his hand to type a quick reply, [Is he okay? Is it from
the surgery?]

"I guess if I had to see a silver lining in all this, Nikkita would be it," Viktor allowed, "Can't really
tell with her older sister. Viktoria seems kind of quiet."

"At least she's not a blow-hard like Sergio, right?"

"Pfft...that guy... If he was coming to Hasetsu, I'd be calling the Banners from Instagram to amass in
protest at the airport and refuse him entry." The Russian declared, "My Uncle should be grateful I've
left my army out of this."

Yuri gave a sarcastic look, "I get this image in my head of you on a white horse, at the front of some
massive military...and then Sergio at the other end of the field, sitting on a donkey's back, wearing
his cute little grappling knickers."

Viktor chortled, "It's a bit like Don Quixote then; one hapless fool jousting with windmills."

A moment of immature laughter was all they were allowed before the train station's doors opened for
a rather darkly figure, and both men lifted their heads to gape at it. Under the big knit hat and a scarf
to match, a long coat, and winter boots, Minako had finally made hear appearance...and she didn't
look too happy about it. Even from their distance inside the terminal, the duo could see the dark
circles under the woman's eyes, and the pale gloss to what little skin was exposed around them. Yuri
looked at his phone to briefly check if he'd somehow missed a reply text, but there was none...it still
said [Delivered] rather than [Seen.]

The time though...was 7:06am.

Minako approached them wordlessly, took Yuri's arm by the wrist and continued moving forward
without pausing, effectively dragging him a few paces unexpectedly before he caught himself and
stopped them both.

"M-Minako-sensei...!"

Tired eyes looked back, "You said you wanted to go so let's go."

"At least let me say goodbye real fast!"

"Are you feeling okay...?" Viktoria asked for them both, "Did you sleep...?"

"No."

"...Were you up all night drinking?" He dared.

"No." She answered curtly, then suddenly reached up with her free hand to press against the scarf in
front of her mouth.

"...I'd understand if you were. I would've." Viktor offered, hoping to quell any suspicion that he was
trying to offend her mistakenly, "When was the last time you ate something?"

"Quit interrogating me!" She barked, "It's too damn early and I'm not in the mood!"
Both men backed off slightly, "...Sorry."

"Just do what you have to and let's go!" She insisted, letting the wrist go as she spoke.

Yuri pulled it back as he unwove his fingers from his husband's hand, and rubbed it slightly before turning around. He offered a nervous look and a sharp inhale, but Viktor slid both arms around his sides before anything could or needed to be said. Yuri returned it with arms over the man's shoulders, "If we aren't on our way back in three hours, I'll message you."

"Beregite sebja, ljubov' moja." (Stay safe, my love.)

"Keep off that ankle as much as you can." He answered, hugging a little tighter before pulling back to offer his kiss, "I'll see you later. Love you."

"Love you, too."

Another kiss, and Yuri stepped away, hand sliding down his partner's arm until all he could reach were fingertips...and let go. He hopped to catch up with Minako before she could leave him behind like she'd threatened she would, but not without one last glance back to spot Viktor sadly waving. He waved in return, and disappeared through the terminal.

The silver Russian drew a breath and slipped his empty hand into his jacket, and slowly but surely, turned on his good heel to head back towards the car.

*It's weird being without him. Even weirder...to be without him in Hasetsu. It kind of feels like déjà vu, to that first time I came here in the midst of that rare spring snowstorm, going to Yu-Topia on my own. Though, at least this time they know I'm coming...even if Yuri isn't there to stumble into me while I sit in the onsen...*

He pulled up the lapels of his coat and braced for the cold, stepping carefully back to his bright-red car with its Russian license plates still attached. He paused there and looked at the numbers and letters, and the little [RUS] on the bottom right with those three iconic bars of color for the flag.

*I'll have to change that too at some point... I really am going to be giving that all up. My boots, my plates, my passport...everything that once identified me as a Russian is going to be erased. Who would've thought it would come to this when I first arrived here 2 years ago...?*

Viktor huffed a quiet smile to himself and slid over to the driver's side door, unlocked the car and sat inside. With the key in the ignition, and turned, the engine hummed to life, and cold air quickly warmed as it blew through the small space.

*Time to get the boys, at any rate. Good luck, my love.*

Yuri stood on the platform in awkward silence, holding his ticket in one hand as he braced against the cold with half his face sticking out of his coat. His hair started to feel 'crispy' where the cold had frozen his styling gel, and a few stray strands whipped around, making his eyes flinch anytime they bounced off his cheeks.

*It's longer now than it was at its peak in St. Petersburg...*

Cherry-hazel eyes went to Minako standing nearby, though not as close as she usually would be.

[Are you sure you want to wait out here like this? We could at least stand inside the do-]

[This is fine.] She said, cutting him off.
This is gonna be a long trip...

[Did you get my text earlier?]

Minako didn't move for a moment, blinking slowly like she was barely awake in the first place. She tilted to look at the purse hanging off her arm, rummaged around in it, then pat her hands against her pockets, [No.]

[...Do you even have your phone?]

[Apparently not.]

Yuri grimaced, [Minako-sensei... Are you sure you're o-]

[Stop it. Just stop it.] She argued, [I don't need everyone getting on my ass, asking me if I'm okay all the damn time. I'm fine. I'll be...fine.]

He stayed quiet then.

[I just want 10 minutes where everyone stops treating me like I'm made of glass and will break at any moment.] Minako went on, eyes firmly on the platform's edge, [It's bad enough that Yuko felt like she had to whisk her girls away yesterday because of me.]

[Why, were they bothering you?]

[I don't know, I just...I got impatient with them.] The ballerina admitted sullenly, [They were so nauseatingly excited to see you and Viktor come home after winning at Nationals. All I wanted was some peace and quiet to talk to Hiroko, and they were just...too much... The whole Nishigori family left after I barked at the triplets for being too loud. Everyone stared at me. Hiroko had to move me into one of the private dinner rooms before I could bother other guests.]

[I was wondering why they weren't there like they usually are...]

[I got two sips of my beer before Hiroko realized what was going on and took it away from me. I don't even know how she figured it out when I hadn't even said anything yet. It's like she just took one look in my eyes and she knew.]

[...Well, she has done this whole thing a couple times before...] Yuri said dryly, [Apparently she knew Yu-chan was pregnant before her or Nishigori did. Maybe her mom-senses were tingling or something. Some people are just tuned into that sort of thing, I guess. Mikhail's got that eerie dad-radar, too, right?]

[He knew...right away, he knew...] Minako lowered her gaze from the edge of the platform, closer to the toes of her winter boots, [Now I feel sick almost every morning...and I'm getting so tired of it all... I don't want to sleep because I don't want to feel nauseated when I wake up, but staying up all night doesn't help and I feel gross by daybreak anyway.] She sniffled and rubbed her nose on the back of a sleeve, [I don't even know why I'm telling you this stuff. You're half my age and you'll never have to go through this yourself.]

[It's not like we're not with you.] Yuri said, quieter than before, and he side-stepped a bit closer, [I may never know what it's like to be exactly in your same position, but...I've known you my entire life. You're family to me. If not for you, I'd never have gone down the path to skating like I did, and found Viktor to create my own family...the Nikiforov branch of the Katsuki clan. We may never
have our own kids, aside from our dogs, but I like to think you won't push us out like we can't help in any way.]

The ballerina hiccuped a few breaths behind her scarf, but kept her eyes down. The screeching sound of the train could be heard in the distance, coming closer every moment through the dim morning light.

[You're not doing this all alone.] Yuri went on, [We'll always be in your corner. If you need space, then we'll give it...but you have to meet us half-way and at least tell us that's what you want. If there's one thing that'll always suck about caring for others, it's that we all have a habit of creeping in too close for comfort sometimes. Just like when you stripped me down after I first came home from Detroit, remember?]

"I've been wondering, ever since I saw you at the train station... Yuri! What's under all that clothing!?"

"AHH NOOOO MINAKO-SENSEI."

"AHHHHHHH! THIS IS NOT WHAT A SKATER'S BODY SHOULD LOOK LIKE."

"Ahahaha! You look just like your mother!"

"Toshiya-san!"

.

Yuri leaned right into Minako's space, eyes half-lidded in a weird leer, [I still get embarrassed thinking about it. I was practically pouring out of my clothes.]

The ballerina shivered where she stood, and twisted slightly to lean away, [Viktor pointed it out too!]

The skater stood normally again, but reached up with his ticket-holding hand to pull down the rim of his jacket's collar, [Yeah, and so did Yurio, and Nishigori, and the triplets...and basically everyone I know except Yu-chan and my mom. I hated it. But if no one was willing to point it out, even if some of them were a little mean about it...] He hesitated, grumbling slightly, [...] He corrected, [...] Then maybe I wouldn't have started to think about how to get back on the ice, even before Viktor showed up. I was in pretty bad shape for 3 months, and I was in a rotating cycle of humiliation, shame, and disgust with myself...but the constant nagging of family and friends, and the love of my life, got me back to where I needed to be, so I could be myself again. Now, I'm more than what I was...I'm better than all that. I'm hoping that, for as annoyed as you might get with us for checking in on you all the time, you'll accept it for what we intend for it to be. As a show of support, not as judgment, or as some ploy to tell you how to live your life like we somehow think we know better.]

Minako turned her eyes slightly, unsure what to say.

[Just...remember that we're all idiots sometimes. This situation is as new to us as it is to you. You're learning about what your buttons are at the same time we are. Cut us a little slack. We'll figure it out, okay? One day at a time.]
behind her scarf, and reached her left hand out to take the younger man's arm, [...One...day at a time...]

CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED ELEVEN

The dim winter dawn spread through the sky, a pale blue and white contrast to the little red car that moved along the ground beneath it. As the Audi made its way back the way it had come, passing Yu-Topia again at the end of the bridge, Viktor glanced over to check for lights. It was about 7:25am by then, and the sleepy hot-spring resort was starting to come alive. There was one window on the second floor that had been dark for some time though, the view inside obstructed by curtains pulled to, snow caked to the sill.

I wonder if they'll repurpose that room...? Or will it always be Yuri's?

It wasn't much longer before the car turned down the narrow street, off the main road, and went back into the small covered driveway that it now called home. Viktor could already hear the sound of the barks from inside as he stepped out, and spotted the blur of fuzzy bodies inside; he left the car door open - seat pulled forward - even as he reached for the doorknob to the house.

Makkachin was bouncing up and down in the air when he came inside, and Jiro whipped around underfoot, but the pup eventually took to looking outside again, tail wagging slower than before.

The silver Russian crouched down as well as he could and stroked the puppy's back; Jiro had gotten up onto his back paws the try and look over the bottom of the door, "Don't worry, little buddy, your papa will be back soon. You'll be spending most of the day with dad instead." He draped one arm across his poodle's back as Makkachin stood nearby, "You guys ready to go to Yu-Topia?"

Both dogs got excitable to hear those words, and Viktor pushed the door open again, letting the blurs of craziness rush towards the open car. The poodle made one big leap into the back seat, but Jiro needed help, and Viktor plunked the pup into Yuri's spot in the front passenger seat. The car was still running, but the silver Russian closed the door and went back into the house for a moment, gathering up a few items like leash and harness before finally joining his best bois in the Audi. Sunglasses came out from the holster above the rear-view mirror, and Viktor put them on as the winter sun started to glare off the clouds.

"Let's get going!"

.

Slow-going at first, the train left Hasetsu Station and started rolling out eastward, moving from the ground-level rail to the raised platform that whisked across the river. It was hard to see the castle from as far away as the train was, but Yuri was sure that he was at least looking in the right direction. With the train-car being heated, the warmth broke through the chill he'd developed from standing on the platform, and as the rail-line took them out of the city, Yuri started peeling his layers off. By the end, he took his glasses off as well to rub the lenses down on the cuff of his sweater. As he raised them up to check for spots and smears in the light going by above himself, he spotted Minako glancing in his direction.

[Everything okay?] He wondered quietly, bringing his hands down to rub a few more times, then replaced the frames on his face.

Minako looked back towards the ground, [I just...noticed how you're still styling your hair like you do for competition.]

Chapter 411
[Oh...yeah.] Yuri reached up to play with a loose strand that came down over his forehead, [I told Viktor last year that I'd imagined wearing a messy top-knot for my Free Skate at some point. I kept putting it off because it grows so fast anyway...but I haven't had it trimmed since the week before the Grand Prix Series started. It's getting so long in front that it's in my eyes now though, so I have to style it back until it's grown enough to tie it.]

[Hmm... Last year feels like a lifetime ago now.]

[Right?] He offered a smile, but then looked back out through the window, [Have you seen Asahi's Instagram? We got him to make one.]

[Oh...uhm, yeah... I followed him there.] She admitted, [I'm completely amazed at the outpouring of support he's seen. You and Viktor probably saved his life, on a number of levels. As often as he credits you two, I'm sure he realized that, too.]

[Was it really that bad? I saw some of the things people were saying on SMS, but...it's second-hand, so I took it with a grain of salt.]

Minako nodded, sliding down slightly where she sat on the wall-mounted bench, hands wedged into her coat pockets still, [He was in really bad shape. Thinking back on that meeting Viktor and I did with him on Saturday morning...I'm convinced we dodged a bullet, since he didn't actually do anything to himself that day. That whole talk probably pushed him right to the edge, and threatened to throw him off. I'm honestly not entirely sure what stopped him at that point.] She rolled her head aside where it was leaning against the back of the bench's top cushion, [Probably that you didn't file those papers Viktor filled out.]

[Ah I don't need that kind of guilt...] Yuri dismissed, shaking his head, [He would've known all along that I would never submit that complaint. I'm really non-confrontational...I didn't want him to get in trouble with the JSF over a personal thing. It was already bad enough dealing with the fall-out on my own...the last thing I needed or wanted was for everyone else to get into the middle of it, too.]

[He seems to be coming to terms with everything pretty well though.] The ballerina added, tilting her head to face forward again, and looked out through the window on the opposite side of the rail-car, [I saw the post he made yesterday with those cute pics of him and Riku. Those pics at the end though, with that dog lying on the grave marker...I don't know why, but it hit me right in the heart.]

[Same...] The skater agreed quietly, remembering the image as though it was seared into his mind, [Viktor and I were trying to spend some time relaxing together last night before going to bed early... I had it in my head that we'd fool around a bit, but then he showed me the Insta post and the mood in my brain immediately imploded. I spent the next hour or so trying to forget about it all, and I nearly made a mess of everything.]

[Nearly?] He explained somewhat dramatically, waving his hands around a little for emphasis, [I thought things couldn't get worse after the Final. This weekend showed me who's boss.] He pointed out, [I think, at this point, you and Viktor have probably confronted every possible bad thing that could happen to newlyweds and athletes. And you've each had a turn with those dramas, so you can claim experience on both ends.]

[What do you mean?]
[Well...past flames showing up...Sophia for Viktor, and in a roundabout kind of way, Asahi for you. Then there's sports injuries...Viktor's dealing with his right now...but then you had your moments. Your face versus the rink wall, your hip versus the rink wall, then your head versus the ice... You've even both had pet problems...though I guess maybe it wouldn't count since yours happened before Viktor showed up.] She put a finger on her lip in thought, [I'll count it anyway just in case, to spare Jiro.]

Yuri gave a disgruntled-skeptical look at the woman, [You better not have the same freakish prophetic powers that Viktor does. If something happens to Jiro...I'm gonna blame you for it.]

Minako waved her hands frantically, [I don't! I promise!]

[You know that Viktor predicted my accident in Detroit? Even pegged it down to being because of JJ. He was so sure that it'd take at least 2 weeks to come true though, that he felt comfortable taking off with Chris while JJ and I were in the practice rink.] He rubbed idly at the marks still barely-visible in the hairline above his right eye, [Every time I get a headache now, it starts under this spot.]

[That may never go away.]

[Hmph...a lifetime of reminders to look forward to, then.]

[At least you have a lifetime to worry about it.]

[Eh...? Oh...I guess so.] Yuri looked down slightly, then out the window again to watch the world pass by through the snow, [So...what's...the plan with Mikhail once they're all in Hasetsu?]

[I thought I knew. Now I'm not so sure anymore.] Minako admitted with a sullen shrug, [Things for me are only going by a minute at a time. Thinking too far ahead makes my head spin.]

[...Cuz you haven't decided what you want to do yet?]

[I can't even think about that.] She said simply, [I just have this...weird mental fog about it all. I've never felt like I couldn't see what my future had in store, but now it's like I have this strange disconnect with the whole concept.]

[Oh...]

[I can only really see myself getting to the end of any given day. Nothing beyond it. There's this...shadow over it all.]

Yuri started feeling guilty again, [It's not a shadow shaped like Viktor, is it?]

[...Maybe it is...]

He sighed to himself, [I had a feeling...] He sat up a bit straighter, [I tried to talk to him a few times about reconciling things with Mikhail, but he just...couldn't care less about it right now. He said just this morning that 'the ball is in his Uncle's court' because he tried to make peace in Detroit, only for Mikhail to throw it back in his face and storm off after the girls.]

Minako reached one hand up idly to toy with the ring hanging from her necklace, [Mikhail's stubborn and prideful. I've asked him about it, too, and he doesn't think he owes any kind of apology to begin with. The two of them have pretty extreme ideologies about how this was supposed to work out and it's just...not working out.]

[I know I'm biased, but...in Viktor's defense...he was in Hasetsu first...]
[No, I get that.] Minako agreed, [I side with him in this. I've been hoping Mikhail would see that he's accountable to some people and he just doesn't see it. It took Viktor, what...8 months? To stop treating Mikhail like a pariah.]

"Mhm."

[And it took all of 3 weeks for Mikhail to ruin it all...] She twisted around and poked Yuri in the center of his chest, [That's barely longer than the time between yours and Viktor's birthdays.]

[Yeah...] Yuri agreed, [He went from just Uncle, to Uncle Mimi, and back to Uncle again in a pretty big hurry... Viktor thinks the 'Mimi' part went to Mikhail's head, and that's why he started taking liberties.]

[Yeah, that's around the start of when Mikhail started getting stupid with a lot of things.] The ballerina added, [He was really smart up to the end of Trophée de France. Then he fell off that stupid roof and it's been a cluster ever since. I'm starting to wonder which end of him actually hit the ground...his ass or his head.]

Yuri couldn't help but laugh at that, and shook his head. He propped an elbow up onto the back of the bench and set his cheek against the back of his knuckles, [Maybe he's having an adverse reaction to the meds they gave him in Russia when they did the surgery. He's lived in Canada for so long...] [You know...] Minako nudged the man's chest again, [He did seem to be having something of a late mid-life crisis when Yurio and I went to see him in the hospital. Maybe the fact that he broke his back rather than anything else spooked him. I mean, anyone and everyone breaks their legs and arms, but only old people break their backs.]

[Old people and figure skaters.] Yuri corrected dubiously.

[Mikhail is only one of those though.] The ballerina teased, [I wonder...if it's not out of the realm of possibility...that Mikhail's doing this weird power-grab because he feels like he's getting too old. Like...if it wasn't already bad enough that he hurt himself doing something that never hurt him before, but then his oldest kid just left the nest in the middle of all this, and that whole joke between Nikki and Yurio at the Final...? Maybe Mik just feels like he's got to do something to get a handle on everything again because everything is aging and growing up too fast all of a sudden. Then this thing with me...] She hesitated a moment to continue, [...] Well...it resets everything, in a way. This is the kind of thing young people go through...people your age, not ours. The idea of bringing Viktor into the middle of it all seems like such an afterthought when I think about it like this...]

[I guess so. But he still should've known better.] [What was he going to do differently?] Minako wondered, [I'm sure the idea was in his head when he bought the ring for me...but when he suddenly realized my stupid situation, and proposed on the spot... Should he have told me to stop feeling sick for a minute so he could ask for his nephew's blessing? It sounds kind of insane.]

[I know, but... From Viktor's point of view, it's just one more instance where Mikhail didn't think about his feelings when he made big decisions.] Yuri explained, [I only know the stories I've been told, but from what I've heard...Viktor idolized Mikhail as a kid. His whole world revolved around his Uncle Mimi. Then Mikhail just...left him. For a quarter of a century that guy was gone, only to pop up out of tragic circumstances with a whole new life and family, and the expectation of picking up where they left off when Viktor was five years old. The only reason Viktor even gave this situation a chance is because I started meddling in things... If not for me accidentally texting Mikhail]
as he was leaving St. Petersburg, he would never have ended up being invited to Worlds...and everything after that.]

[It's funny how the things that cause the biggest changes are things that happen by accident.]

Yuri hesitated a moment, seeing the multiple facets of the statement. He reached out his free hand and pressed it around the woman's forearm, and gave it a reassuring squeeze, [Yeah.]

"Tadaimaaaaaa~!" Viktor called, stepping in through the sliding front doors of the bath resort, both dogs barreling in on either side of his legs.

Toshiya waved from the other side of the check-in podium, "Ohayo, Vik-chan."

The Russian watched the pups head straight to the common room, and gave a half-amused sigh, "They probably think Yuri's here...now they'll be disappointed."

"Vik-chan!" Hiroko called, peeking around the corner from the kitchen, "You're way earlier than I expected!"

He nodded and turned towards the lockers on the left side of the entryway, kicked his shoes off, and stowed them away before hanging up his coat, "Yeah... I thought about taking a nap at home before coming but...it kind of felt lonely there on my own so I decided to come here early. Hope it's okay."

"Of course!" The older woman practically snorted in disbelief at the suggestion that it wouldn't be okay, "Come inside and get warm! Have you eaten anything yet? We'll make you breakfast!"

"It's been an age since I've had breakfast here." The silver Russian commented, hobbling over towards the common room after the bois.

"Do you want anything special?"

"Chef's choice."

"Yay~!"

Viktor settled himself gently down by one of the tables in the back of the room, seeing the weather playing on the television for one of the other early-rising patrons. It was all in Japanese of course, and there weren't any subtitles, so he could only watch and listen, hoping to glean some understanding based on the imagery.

I'm supposed to have a basic understanding of Japanese to get my citizenship... Even though the provisional one I'm getting won't require it right now, I still feel like I'm way behind the curve on learning.

He frowned a little before putting his elbows down on the table-top, resting his chin in the palms of his hands. Hiroko was out a moment later with a tray of foodables; freshly-baked pastries, assorted cut fruit, coffee with fixings, juice, a soft-boiled egg in an egg-cup, and some toast on the side. She set the tray down on the table and then went down onto her knees before setting everything out. Viktor watched her closely, glancing away only as he spotted Jiro come trotting back.

"It's strange seeing you without Yuri after so long," The older woman commented, setting a folded fabric napkin with western-style utensils out last, "I imagine it's weird for you, too."
"...Yeah..." He agreed, carefully considering each item before him, "I left him once before to go back to Russia for a minute, but it's still an odd feeling to be on my own." He settled on doctoring the coffee first, finding a few sugar cubes to drop into the black brew, followed by white cream, "Especially in this place. The last time I was here by myself was when Makkachin had that steamed bun scare." He looked down suddenly as he felt the puppy crawl into his lap, staying close where he was under the table, "I was just thinking about how far I still have to go for the citizenship that the JSF offered to fast-track for me, because of the Olympics. Without Yuri around to translate or react to things being said in Japanese, I'm really noticing how little I actually understand. I hear words that I know, tenses and particles, honorifics and all that...but in combinations that make no sense at all." He took a small sip of the coffee to make sure it tasted like he wanted, and set the cup down again, "Yuri even tried explaining Kanji to me when we were in Detroit. It blows my mind that the same character can be pronounced in so many different ways, depending on where it shows up in a word, especially names."

"And the same name can mean many different things, depending on what Kanji are chosen to spell it." Hiroko added, "The ones Toshiya and I chose for Yuri...his name means 'courage to win.' Katsuki also means 'born' to win,' which is why we chose 'Yuri' to go with it."

"He certainly embodies those qualities."

"Ahh...he must've been so disappointed with getting Bronze after how well he did in the Grand Prix." She went on idly, "That other boy came out of nowhere. I don't think I've ever seen him before. Do you and Yuri know him?"

"We do now," Viktor explained, nibbling on a piece of toast. He reached for the circular metal shell cracker and set it around the soft-boiled egg, clicking it to create a ring of perforations in the enamel, then set it down again, "Yuri actually knew him from Juniors, years ago. They lost track of one another when they moved up to Seniors. I didn't know he existed until Yuri introduced us on Thursday."

"Ooohhh...from Juniors, huh?" Hiroko thought hard, "Yuri said he had a friend back then...but always said there was something odd about him. I wonder what that was all about?"

"The guy is private to a fault." The Russian said simply, breaking off the top of the egg with a butter knife, and sprinkled a little salt and pepper into the exposed whites, "Made it seem like he wasn't paying attention to anyone...and in a way, it was kind of true. He didn't want anyone getting into his business, so he never made a note of anyone else's. He didn't even know about Yuri's affinity for katsudon."

"Oh~! And you learned about that practically on the first day you were here." "Mh." He nodded, sliding the edge of a spoon into the egg-cap, and scooped out the morsel before tasting it, "But anyway though..."

"Ah...yes..." Hiroko shied away, glancing off to the side briefly as Makkachin came trotting through. The poodle was keen on his search, and went upstairs to the family residences next, "So...uhm...Minako-senpai told me about some things that you and Yuri helped her with this weekend."

Spoon in-mouth, Viktor paused, but then withdrew it and nodded reluctantly, "It's not my favorite subject, but yes."

"...She mentioned that, too."

The Russian just kept his eyes on the soft-boiled egg in its little red holder, and slid the spoon into the
white of it, digging enough to find creamy yellow yolk just beneath the spot where he'd cut across a moment before, "I can't help it. That's why I'm not with Yuri right now. I know I'm making Minako uncomfortable."

"She thinks you hate her."

Viktor was grateful then that he didn't have anything in his mouth, else it would've been flying across the room in that moment. He gaped and reached for the folded napkin instead, pressing it to his mouth before turning to the woman next to him, "I don't hate her! Why would she think that?"

"Because of how things have fallen apart between you and your Uncle, it seems. You've gone around telling people that you and Yuri are a packaged deal, and that you can't impress, offend, or assume one without the other. In a way, she kind of feels the same way about her situation with Mikhail." Hiroko explained calmly, "She told me all about what happened after she went back to Canada to help him with his other kids...and then how things went south in Detroit. Everything got overshadowed because of Yuri's accident, but...the rest was still there."

"I tried to patch things up with my Uncle while we were still in Detroit, but he has a wild hair up his arse." Viktor explained, "I'm tired of feeling like people are making it my responsibility to reconcile things when I did what I could and was turned down."

"That's not actually where I was going," Hiroko reassured, "After Yuri, Minako-senpai is your biggest fan. She'd fight people here for control of the remote whenever a competition was happening, even if she was the only one who wanted to watch it. Even though things are much more casual around you now, since you've been around for so long, she still feels like a bad guy for being involved in something you're reacting rather badly to."

"I don't know what more I can say or do to reassure her that I don't hold this situation against her."

"Maybe try to be happy for her." Hiroko suggested, catching the man a bit by surprise, "She's going to be a mom to a cousin of yours."

Viktor held still, feeling paralyzed.

"Just think about it." She went on. She pushed up against the table to stand again, stepped up behind him as she went back towards the kitchen, and set a hand on her son-in-law's arm, "It could take some of the stress off of your shoulders, too."
By the time Viktor finished eating, it was close to 8am. Mari had come and gone, eating a meager breakfast of her own before clearing the table and starting the day's work. Makkachin had returned from upstairs to curl up next to his human, having failed to find his other human. Jiro had fallen asleep on the man's lap, splayed out over crossed legs like a cat. Viktor's coffee had been refilled, and he sipped at it quietly, eyes fixed on the television even if his mind was miles away.

Mari peeked around the edge of the door to the common room, a strange, curious look on her face. She turned back towards where her mother was helping count the till for the registration desk at the front of the resort, [...He's so quiet. I don't think I've ever seen him like this.]

Hiroko glanced back, holding out a roll of 500-yen coins for Toshiya to take, [...Well, he is sitting alone, Mari.]

[I know that.] She argued, pulling back, [...But he was like that when I sat with him, too.]

[Give him a little break. He's not reacting well to what's going on with Minako. I tried talking to him earlier while you were waking up, but...]

[Oh...] Mari sighed and stuck her hands into the big pockets of her dark-colored apron, [...Yeah he's been salty about everything having to do with Minako since Detroit. I heard that him and his Uncle got into a fight about her.]

Hiroko whipped her head around, [...What? Why?]

Mari leaned back onto a heel, standing casually, [...Mikhail blames Viktor for the fact that Minako won't marry him.]

The older woman could've sputtered from the absurdity of the statement, but quieted herself before regaining her composure, [...Minako-senpai has never even dated the same guy for more than a year. She's always been really independent. I think the idea of being tied down to someone spooks her. The fact that she agreed to an engagement at all, even for just a week or two, still surprises me. Mikhail should consider himself a lottery winner that Minako-senpai even still carries the ring around with her.]

Mari gave a coy look at her mom, [...Mikhail is loaded though. That ring is probably worth more than the resort makes in a year. I'd carry it around, too.]

Hiroko just smiled sweetly, [...Minako-senpai's love can't be bought. Mikhail has a long way to go if he thinks she'll ever settle down.]

Their attention was grabbed a moment later by the sound of the resort's front door sliding open, and the Nishigoris spilled in from the cold outside, snow falling off their hats and heads. Makkachin lifted his head from his snooze and barked happily, tail wagging as he got up to greet those familiar faces. The triplets suddenly looked more lively than before, surprised to see the poodle.

"Makka!" They called out, abandoning their efforts to get their winter clothes off so they could hug the boofer instead, "What are you doing here so early? Did you get dropped off again for something?"
Yuko blinked in surprise at the dog as well; she pulled off her fuzzy Russian-style Chapka hat, auburn hair tumbling down past her shoulders. Takeshi took it and her jacket before turning to his kids to grab theirs as well.

"Uncle Viktor!" The triplets yelled out abruptly, realizing the poodle's presence was merely a harbinger of other things, and they practically flew out of their coats, boots, and mittens to run into the common room; Makkachin trotted after them.

The silver Russian glanced back, but he could only manage a meager smile as they piled in around him, and set his coffee-cup down before their excitement could cause it to spill. Jiro was still in his lap, fast asleep, and Viktor quickly pulled a finger up to his lips to signal a less-voluminous greeting. The girls quickly took notice and lowered their loudness. The poodle sat next to them quietly, panting softly as he usually did.

"We missed you yesterday!" They whispered in a frenzy, only for them each to break off from the main greeting to offer their own words.

"You won Gold at Nationals! We were sure you'd let Yuri have it!" Axel pointed out.

Lutz nodded, almost professionally, "I guess you still thought you had to impress your new bosses though. What do they think about Yuri's Bronze?"

"I think you guys are missing the bigger picture though..." Loop added, forcing the other two to pause and gasp, then collectively gathered on the opposite side of the table like a judge and prosecution, "VIKTOR! HOW ARE YOU GOING TO SKATE WHEN YOU BROKE YOUR LEGS!?"

He nearly sputtered, but managed a defiant laugh, "I didn't break my legs! I just twisted my ankle! It's better now...we got it checked out and everything."

The girls looked at one another skeptically, then dove under the table, pawing at the offending appendage with their tiny hands, "He's wearing a brace!" "Feels warm...shouldn't he have an ice-pack on it?!" "Can he even walk on it!? What's going to happen at the Olympics!?" They barged up again, hands nearly slamming down on the table-top, only to slow down at the last inch and softly press against the wood instead, sparing Jiro the jolt of unexpected noise, "YOU CAN'T WEAR SKATES WHILE WEARING A BRACE!"

"I know..." He answered skeptically, his tone more normal, "I was told to give it a rest for about 2 weeks, then I should be fine again." He sighed a bit and leaned his elbows down against the table's edge, "I was hoping I could skate an Exhibition with Yuri at Euros, but...doesn't look like that'll happen now."

"Euros?" They echoed, "You're not competing there anymore though. Why go?"

"Chris is still competing, and so is Yurio." Viktor answered, gently pressing one hand down the puppy's back to keep him placated and asleep, "Besides...we thought it would be kind of fun to show up at Euros after the RSF threw me out. They'd never expect it, so being there anyway, in spite of them, would be like putting a stick in their eyes."

All three got mischievous looks on their faces, glancing at one another before turning to look across the table again, "Did you see or hear about what happened at Russian Nationals?"

"Oh, Yuri and I actually watched part of them." The silver legend mused, "We spoke to Yurio right before his Free Skate and actually had the whole audience get interactive with us, because we were
watching through a LiveStream from one of the fans. By the end of it, I even got yelled at by Yakov for what happened with my ankle...” He grimaced slightly at the memory of it, but then sighed and shook his head, “We saw the scorecards fans were holding up though, showing off Yuri's and my final scores from our events.”

The girls were nearly howling with laughter, bowled over against the table and on the floor with their hands over their mouths, trying not to be loud. Soon, their mother was walking over though, and settled them down properly as she sat. Nishigori was soon to follow, and the whole family sat around the Russian's table.

"Viktor..." Yuko waved from her side, "We didn't expect you here this morning. We thought you and Yuri would be asleep for days."

"No rest for the weary," He answered with a tired smile, "I took Yuri to the train station to go with Minako to Fukuoka. Now I'm just waiting for a vet appointment."

"Vet appointment? Are the pups okay?" She glanced to Makkachin, who was still just panting and looking around, trying to be part of things where he sat next to Loop on the end.

"Oh they're fine. Yuri and I decided to go to Euros though, but we're taking a small vacation-detour before that." Viktor explained, "We're taking Makkachin and Jiro with us, so they need travel papers so they can get on the plane. Jiro had all his first puppy vaccines before the JSF gave him to Yuri, so it's just a matter of getting some of the 2-week boosters."

"Ah, interesting...when are you all leaving?"

"Friday."

"Anyplace special you're going?"

"The deep, dark, northern woods of no-reception Russia." Viktor gave an uneasy laugh, "Where no one will know if we're in trouble."

The Nishigoris all gave nervous stares at him, "...Say what?"

Another laugh, but Viktor shook his head and raised his hands defensively, "I kid...mostly... Yuri and I are going to go visit my papa for the weekend on the way to Euros. We'll be taking the scenic route on a train from St. Petersburg to Vienna after that." He suddenly had a weird epiphany though, and pressed a fist into the palm of the opposite hand, then held up a finger, "I almost forgot! You guys should come over sometime this week. Yuri and I went nuts at the Harry Potter World at Universal. We bought all of you souvenirs!"

The triplets all gasped in excitement, "Does that mean you picked Houses for us!?"

"Of course!" Viktor announced proudly, "I think Yuri and I picked the right ones for all of you... Because of your creativity, leadership, and resourcefulness, we pegged the three of you as Slytherin."

"Slytherin?" Yuko echoed, "Isn't that the bad House?"

"No!" The Russian corrected eagerly, shaking his head, "None of the Houses are bad in and of themselves. It's unfortunate that a number of darker wizards come out of Slytherin, but that's just because the same traits that are so great in your girls can be twisted into something nasty when arrogant people get their own ideas about things and make the wrong choices. For its own merits, people in Slytherin can be extremely cunning and ambitious, and they crave responsibility, just like
when these three were so determined to help produce Onsen on Ice last year, and organized a bunch of the viewing parties here at Yu-Topia. It's a great honor to be a Slytherin, make no mistake."

Yuko seemed relieved to hear it, "What about me?"

"Gryffindor, no doubt." He mused, "Because of all the years of bravery and loyalty you showed, and standing up for Yuri when he was down on his luck or being picked on,"

Nishigori tried not to make it obvious that he knew he was being singled out, and put on a nervous smile as he crossed his arms.

"...All the support you showed him for his skating, and how you protected him when he needed space. Those are all noble Gryffindor traits."

"What about me...?" Nishigori asked anxiously.

"Slytherin." Viktor laughed, "That's probably where your girls got their natures from."

"He's the evil Slytherin," Axel teased.

"What!? What makes me evil!?"

"For pulling Yuri's pudgy belly out when he came home from Detroit!" Lutz explained.

Takeshi just gaped at them, "You three little goblins were taking pictures and video of it!"

They just laughed though.

"So what Houses are you and Yuri in then?" Loop wondered, looking past the craziness beside her as she leaned against the table.

"I'm a Hufflepuff!" Viktor announced proudly, "Hard work, dedication, loyalty, and patience. My mission in life is to make Yuri happy! Yuri is a Ravenclaw though; because he's super smart, wise beyond his years, and a bit quirky."

"Minako is a Hufflepuff too, I bet." Lutz deduced, "Or maybe a Gryffindor, cuz she's supported Yuri as much as mom has."

Mention of the woman made Viktor 'sober up' a little, and he just smiled at the continued banter between the triplets across from him. He looked down slightly as he felt Jiro move on his lap a little, eyes opening blearily before the pup closed them again to try and go back to sleep.

"I guess her and Yuri are going to meet up with Yurio and your Uncle, and cousins, right? They're coming to live in Hasetsu now..." Yuko wondered, "So many people..."

The silver Russian nodded quietly, "Minako is going to be Yurio's new skating coach...I agreed to be his choreographer for next season, too."

"...You don't sound as excited as you did a minute ago." The Madonna noticed, leaning forward slightly to try seeing the man's face better where it was still looking down, "You okay?"

Viktor kept his eyes averted, looking from Jiro to Makkachin.

*It doesn't seem like they know what's going on with Minako...or the conflict I'm going through. Best leave it be for now and not worry them unnecessarily.*
He then shook his head lightly and drew a breath, "Mh... Yeah... I think so." He feigned, "Harry Potter drabbles aside... I guess I'm still just tired. I was going to take a nap after getting back from the vet. I'll probably come here for it, and go home only after Yuri gets back." He yawned against the back of one wrist, and shook his head again, "What brings all of you to Yu-Topia so early though? Especially since you didn't know I was here..."

"Oh! We came to drop the girls off. Since school is on winter break, but work isn't, we bring them here for the day. The Ice Castle is opening at 9:30. ... I'd say you should come skate later, but with your ankle, Yuri would probably sense it and call you from Fukuoka to tell you to quit it."

The Russian smile-sighed and nodded, "Mmhhh... probably."

Minako and Yuri waited in the ante-chamber to the arrivals gate, nearly in the identical seats that Viktor had used after the Rostelecom Incident with Makkachin. Yuri kept his eyes towards the long glass wall, waiting for the stream of passengers to start flowing by. The monitor on the other side of the room showed that the plane had arrived already, but as with all disembarkments, just because the plane was on the ground didn't necessarily mean that people were allowed to deboard yet.

The buzz in his pocket told him all he needed to know though, and he withdrew it to see a message from Yurio in the group-chat he'd started earlier in the morning, [Ugh these people won't get off the goddamn plane fast enough.]

Yuri huffed a laugh and started to type a reply, nudging the ballerina next to him with an elbow, "Looks like they're stuck while folks get their overhead luggage sorted out."

"They're in First Class. There's no wait for them."

Yuri blanched, "Oh... right. I wonder what he's talking about then?"

"Who?"

"Yurio." He answered, tilting his phone so she could see the screen, "He's complaining about being delayed on the plane."

"Maybe they're waiting on Mikhail," Minako offered, "I'll have to see if I can't fix him when we get the chance."

"With your torture-mitts?"

"Mhm." She waggled her fingers for emphasis.

Yuri laughed at that, "You don't think it's because of the fracture?"

"Nah." She shook her head, "Even if it's still got a few weeks left to heal completely, it's been fixed with that cement stuff. His back's hurting because he's been sitting for hours and he's getting muscle spasms. Not even First Class can change the position you're in for such a long time."

"Ah, that's true... At least he doesn't have to go anywhere for a little while. He'll have 2 weeks to settle down before flying to Vienna." He nodded, then looked more directly at the ballerina next to him, "I guess that'll be your first official event as Yurio's coach?"

Minako hesitated, but then nodded, "Yeah, I guess it would be. For some reason it didn't really occur to me that it would start so soon."
"I can imagine. You have been slightly preoccupied with things."

"...Yeah." She sighed, "It's going to be weird enough to be at Euros, since I've never gone before...but to be there as part of the athlete's staff instead of a spectator, too. Wow..." She shook her head, "It's been ages since I did anything like this. For years, the most elaborate thing I ever went to was a local ballet recital for my students. This is so different, with the kiss and cry..."

"And the Olympics right around the corner, too."

"Ahhh! That's true, too! I didn't even think about it! I keep imagining it's still Yakov!"

"I'm sure Viktor won't mind easing you into it at Euros if you want." Yuri offered, "Even if he didn't choreograph anything of Yurio's this season, he could still technically be counted as part of the team..."

"...Would you ask him for me? Or maybe suggest it without saying it like I need his help?"

Yuri blinked at her, but nodded, "Yeah...sure, of course."

The both of them suddenly jumped when they heard a loud THWUMP against the Plexiglas wall, and eyes turned in the direction it came from, spotting a red leopard-print shoe banged-up against it, and the frustrated Russian Tiger attached to it.

"YOU GOTTA SAVE ME FROM THESE PEOPLE."

"Y-Yuri!" The older skater stammered, getting up from his seat; Minako was quick to follow, and they started walking down the way to the security-door that joined Arrivals with the public Pick-Up area. By the time Yurio had stomped his way down there, hood pulled up and sunglasses in place, Yuri was already nervous about how the trip had gone. He stood in the same place that Viktor had once been for his own return, and watched as the ornery Russian Punk stepped through.

Yurio paused though, flicked his head up, and pulled his sunglasses off, "You guys haven't evicted my big tiger plush from Yu-Topia, have you?"

Yuri huffed a laugh and shook his head, raising his arms, "I hope not. I wasn't there long enough to look."

Yurio stared skeptically for a second, but then, that same sweet katsudon-pirozky smile returned, and he hopped forward the few steps to get his welcome-home hug, "It's only been a couple weeks, but it feels like forever anyway. It's good to be back."

"How'd everyone take the news that you'd be moving here?" Yuri wondered, letting the Tiger go, only to be mauled unexpectedly by a blur of silver hair, "Wah!"

"Yuri~!" Nikki chirped, her much-shorter self looking up from where she'd attached herself to the man's chest, "I'm so glad you came!" She pulled him down unexpectedly and whispered into his ear, "We gotta fix my dad and Viktor!"

"Nihon e yōkoso." He answered stiffly, pulling back up to his normal height with a weird look on his face.

"What's that mean?" The teen asked innocently, head tilting aside just so.

"Welcome to Japan, of course." Yuri answered, patting her shoulders with both hands, "One thing at a time."
Minako waved at the duo quietly, but her attention was focused elsewhere. The group stepped out of the way to let other passengers through. It seemed like forever, but finally, the ballerina spotted the silver hair and dark-grey flatcap poking out above the heads of others nearby. Soon, she could see another silver-haired head close to the first, and the purple-blue-green colors woven through the braid it had been fashioned into, as well as the dark coat worn by the tall figure. Minako felt a flutter in her gut, and felt her vision cut out for a moment, returning only after she heard the words.

"Hey there, zvezda moya." (My star.)

Viktoria waved quietly as she stepped past her father to join the rest of the group.

Minako swallowed nervously before looking up, and finally found those jade eyes, framed between silver wings.

Mikhail reached up to pull the flatcap away, and quickly ran his fingers through his frizzy hair, "How are you holding up?" He asked, feeling just as anxious as the woman before him, but was unsure how to proceed.

The group watched quietly, waiting for someone to finally move.

The ballerina finally took a step forward, and dropped her forehead against the tall Russian's shoulder. Hands came up to grip at the front of his coat, "...You did this to me..." She huffed, already crying but somehow finding it in herself to laugh about it.

The elder Russian immediately wrapped arms around her, "I don't know how to answer that." He retorted, giving an uneasy smile, one hand going up to stroke the woman’s hair.

"I don't either."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED THIRTREEN

Standing slightly towards the back of the 'young people' group, Yuri kept his eyes on the older members. It was hard, if not impossible, to hear what was being whispered between the pair, but given their body language, it was clear that a lot was being said. It wasn't long before Yurio grabbed his attention back though, tugging on his coat-sleeve as he started walking away.

"Come on already, we gotta go get Potya." The blonde commented, "She's been in a crate for half a day."

Yuri turned his head, somewhat surprised, "You couldn't keep her in the cabin with you?"

"There wasn't a seat available to put her in. The old man tried to get one for her, but the flights were all booked completely by the time we knew I was bringing her to Hasetsu."

"Even in Economy?"

"Shockingly." Yurio said, exasperated by the fact, "It was unbelievable. I tried to suggest we put Nikki into cargo instead so Potya could be up in the cabin with us, but Mikhail said no."

"I said no." Nikki argued, arms crossed and a sour look on her face.

"I don't think you can put people into cargo..." Yuri contested, giving a dry but coy glance at the Russian Punk, "We have to put Makkachin down there just because he's too big to keep in the cabin. Jiro can stay with us though. I think he's too young to put in the hold..."

Yurio blinked at him through a deadpan, "...You sound like you're going somewhere, talking about your new puppy like that."

The older figure felt the blood drain from his face, Oh crap... And we hadn't said anything to anyone because we were so worried someone would tell Kon and ruin the surprise... We were already nervous that Minako-sensei knew... He blinked and shook his head though, I guess it doesn't matter now...

"I can't wait to see him in person!" Nikki suddenly called out, practically sparing the man from having to divulge anything, "The pics you've posted on Insta are so cute!"

Yurio nudged the girl with an accusing, stiff finger, "You're spending too much time on Instagram."

She turned and gave him a sly look, "You're just salty still that I'm talking to Otabek."

Yuri quirked a brow, "You talk to Otabek online?"

Nikki was aghast at his question, "Why is everyone so weird about that!?"

"I'm not being weird about it," Yuri contested, "I'm just surprised. Even I'm not on his account."

"That's cuz you're barely a presence of your own online," Yurio explained, "You practically share an account with Viktor these days, and Otabek's not friends with Viktor."

"Oh...I guess that's true."
"Where is Viktor?" Nikki wondered, realizing suddenly that the man wasn't even around, "You and him are practically tied at the hip."

"Oh, he stayed back in Hasetsu. The fuzzballs have a vet appointment today."

"Really? Why?" Both teens asked at the same time.

Yuri leaned his head back, "Yeesh, you guys really are like siblings." He reached up to adjust his glasses, "Jiro is getting his 2-week boosters. We're...also getting travel papers for them."

"...Travel papers?" The blonde echoed, "Why? Where are you guys going?"

Hesitantly, the older figure leaned forward and spoke behind his hand, looking aside towards Minako and Mikhail briefly to make sure they weren't about to interrupt or eavesdrop, "We're gonna go crash Euros, but Viktor also wants to visit his father first, so we're gonna surprise him over the weekend."

Nikki looked a bit disappointed, "...When are you leaving?"

"Friday morning."

She sulked even more then, crossing her arms, "Of course you're leaving almost as soon as we get here."

"Gomen." (Sorry.)

"Guys, let's go," Viktoria suddenly interrupted, noticing the elder units coming to some unheard agreement, disengaging from the moment to start walking. She thumbed at them as the pair stepped past and turned her eyes to Yurio, "Let's go rescue your kee-cat."

Waking up on a couch with the smell of dog in his nostrils, Asahi could be forgiven for feeling like he'd just roused from a very strange, long, and heartbreaking nightmare. However, as his eyes adjusted, he realized that his surroundings weren't what he'd been expecting; it wasn't Riku's small apartment. It was a house, one he was only barely familiar with...but the dog he had his arms around...that was a stark callback to that apartment in question.

"...H-Hana...?"

The pale, fluffy head lifted up and turned, dark, almond-shaped eyes blinking at him. A pink tongue emerged to lick the man's face, and he recoiled slightly under it, worried briefly that she was actually about to bite him, but then relaxed when no teeth came.

Asahi collapsed back into the Hokkaido-ken's fur, even as the dog twisted in his grasp to lie on her front, sticking her nose into his hair. She held there perfectly still for a few minutes, but lifted her head again to look aside, sensing something coming before the skater did in his sleepy haze.

He was shaken awake rather worryingly though as the feeling of a low rumble vibrated through the dog's body; she was growling at something.

[So you're taking his side now, too?] Hayate's voice sounded, [Seems like everyone in this family is turning traitor...]

Asahi lifted his head off the pillow to look over the dog's shoulders, seeing Riku's younger brother
there looking back at him rather accusingly. He barely had a second to process the figure before the next abrupt and loud noise caught him by surprise, and a series of heavy thuds sounded from the floor directly in front of the couch he was lying on.

[Here's the damn skates you want so bad. I hope you're happy now.] Hayate said bitterly, then turned on a heel and stepped out of the house entirely, leaving not but a shockingly cold draft in his wake as the door closed behind him.

The growling stopped, and Hana's fur started to settle again from where it had bristled like porcupine quills. She fidgeted forward though, drooping her head off the edge of the couch to smell at the boots that had been thrown there. A quiet whine came from her then, and she got up from her spot, only to lie down on the floor facing the blades instead. Asahi pushed up onto an elbow, nervous to look at the items, but caught sight of them sooner than he'd meant to. One was nearly upright where it leaned against the other. Seeing the pair of skating boots made his chest hurt, but he pushed all the way up to sitting and turned his legs off the edge, and reached to pull one of the blades up onto his lap.

They were the same style he himself wore, with Revolution blades rather than the standard, but Riku's were all chrome, and the boots were polished walnut-brown leather, though the shoe-shine had all-but faded long ago.

*He took care of these like they were military issued... It's horrible to see them in this condition.*

Closer inspection yielded the possible reason for why the shine had been allowed to lose its luster; the boots were scuffed, cut in places, the laces broken, and in the case of the second skate, the blade itself had been bent.

All Asahi could do was collapse back into the couch cushions and cover his mouth, then his eyes.

*Riku had his skates in his backpack, in the foot-well in front of his seat... They must've been damaged with the impact...*

Hana set her head on his knees, nosing at where one hand was close-by holding onto the boot. She licked his fingers to try and get his attention, though failed, and instead resorted to jumping back up onto the couch with the man, leaning against him heavily as she sat.

[Oh...he brought them...] A man's voice came unexpectedly.

Asahi drew a breath and looked up, seeing Riku's father there, having just come up the hall from the bedrooms in the back of the house. The man was fully ready for the day already, his slim frame dressed cleanly with slacks, a thin sweater, and a thicker wool vest overtop.

[I hope he didn't wake you up.]

The skater shook his head sullenly, [No... I was already awake...]

[Did you sleep at all?]

He rubbed the side of his forehead with the inside of one wrist, but shook his head, [I'm honestly not sure... My sleep has been pretty disturbed since the accident. It...comes in fits and starts.]

[I can imagine. Nightmares?]

[Sometimes.] Asahi answered, eyes returning to the beaten-up boots before him. He drew a sighed breath, [I'm glad I was able to see these. I'm...not sure that I could take them, even if they were offered though. I hope it makes sense...that I would prefer to remember the good times, not the end.]
Asahi nodded quietly, and rubbed his nose on his shoulder.

[Back then, you two were on your way to tell your family about things, was it?]

[Yes sir...]

[Are they bad about it?] The older man wondered, stepping around into the kitchen to put on the morning coffee pot, [I struggled to accept my son's preferences for a long time. He was so sure of himself, even from a young age...it's like he knew, even before he knew what it meant.]

Asahi turned his eyes slightly, looking past Hana's fluff to watch the elder's shadow on the floor and wall.

[But he was always such a happy, charming kid. He didn't know what the world was like; how people looked down on the things he was growing into.] Mr. Itō continued, filling a glass carafe with water to pour into the coffee maker, [Instead of trying to beat the gay out of him, I taught him how to protect himself...how to be assertive and confident, so he could stand up to the pressures he might face from others. I thought, if there was any chance that the world might try to take him out or knock him down just for being who he was...he ought to be prepared for it. I'll bet...it was even his idea that you confront your own family about it, right?]

"...I won't tell anyone. It'll be our secret."

Asahi could do little more than stare blankly over Riku's shoulder, the wall behind him seeming miles away. The hug was starting to calm him though, even as his heart raced in his chest. His arms felt like logs at his sides, limp and lifeless, but after a few seconds, he felt the soft stroke of a cheek against his neck, and he felt the spark of life running to the tips of each of his fingers, letting him move again. Those hands wedged between them though, and Asahi pushed the smaller figure away, at least enough to see his face again, "...You...have to swear it..."

Those gold-flecked eyes widened in hopeful surprise, but Riku nodded, "On my life, I swear it."

Asahi swallowed nervously, feeling his throat clench up a little, but he nodded in confirmation, [I was...terrified of anyone knowing. Even when Riku confronted me about it, I was scared to admit that he was right about me. He promised that he would never tell...and because of it...after he died, I felt like it was my fault.] He felt a few tears collecting in the corners of his eyes, but he did better to hold them there, [Because we were on our way to tell my family about us, it was...like karma was coming back around to remind us of that promise, and how it was being broken. Riku swore on his life, and so...he lost it.]

Mr. Itō held still for a moment, hands curled around the edge of the tile counter. The coffee maker was starting to sputter as water heated up inside, dripped into the grounds, and filtered dark caramel-brown liquid into the pitcher beneath the spout. He drew in a deep breath, and came around the corner to better see the athlete, [Two years is a long time to hold onto guilt over coincidence and circumstances. Ever since we realized Riku was who and what he was, I've heard people tell me that 'things like that happen for a reason.' I get so tired of hearing that, you know? As though Riku's life was nothing more than a cautionary tale to the rest of us. But I'm a firm believer...that accidents are
just accidents. *You* didn't do anything wrong...it's *not* your fault that your car and another collided. It's *not* your fault that Riku passed, nor is it a judgment that you survived when he didn't...and the whole thing *didn't happen* because of any broken promises. It just...happened. *Things in life* happen that no one can predict or prepare for, and we just...have to keep on living.]

Asahi was without words. He could only blink in surprised silence.

[I want you to forgive yourself, Asahi Saito. For my son's sake...and for yours.]

The sun was clearer than it had been the day before, but being Hokkaido in the middle of winter, it was still fairly overcasted, and the morning air was foggy. When the car stopped, Asahi quietly stepped out, skates in his hands and Hana at his heels. It hurt his heart to see the graveyard again so soon, but he couldn't bear the thought of leaving Wakkanai without saying goodbye. This time, at least, he knew exactly where to go.

Both of Riku's parents followed at a short distance as they made their way through the terraces and snow towards the family grave-marker. To no one's surprise, Hayate was there already, braving the cold without the rest, as though trying to get a word in edgewise before anyone could tattle on him for his earlier behavior. Snow crunched under Asahi's boots as he walked the long path; Hana kept close to his side, blending in with the frost but for the honey-colored accents on her ears and back. By the time they'd arrived at the grave, Hayate had taken a step back, grudgingly letting them closer in silence.

Asahi turned himself to face the stone monument quietly, clutching the broken boots in his hands as the weight of everything sunk in all over again. He waited a moment, but then spoke softly, [...If there was anything I could've done to save him, I would've.] He explained, [I've thought a thousand times that I would've gladly taken his place if it meant he'd survive.]

[Same.]

Unsure what that meant, Asahi turned his eyes, then his face, towards the younger figure.

[I would've gladly died in his place, I mean. Not that you should've.] Hayate corrected, snuffling into his scarf, [...I've had two years to sort out my grief over him dying, but no matter what I do, or how much time passes, it still hurts the same. I thought it would be easier if I blamed you for it because you were there when it happened...but it didn't help at all.]

[...I don't think it ever gets better.] Asahi answered simply, [Maybe we just get numb to the surprise that it happened at all.] He added, then turned slightly and stepped a bit closer, holding the boots out towards the younger man, [Thank you for letting me see these one last time.]

[So you're leaving now.]

He nodded, teal tails in his hair waving slightly in a light breeze, [I need to finish the journey that Riku and I started. I...I've put it off for too long. I need to finally see it through to the end.]

[...Yeah...] The younger man lowered his gaze, eyes on the skates still held out to him. After a moment, he turned and accepted them back, feeling an odd sense of relief washing over him to have them in his hands again, [...]Thanks.]

[It's not the objects that Riku once owned that keep his spirit alive.] Asahi explained quietly, [It's *us*...the people he knew, the people he loved, and who loved him back.]
Hayate looked from the boots to the man who'd returned them, feeling the tears freezing on his cheeks...but he nodded, [...Yeah...]

The older figure reached one hand out and pat the man's shoulder, but then turned back towards the gravestone. He crouched down in front of the smaller marker that was set there specifically for Riku, and dusted off the new snow that had fallen since Hayate had gotten there. Without a thought, he bent all the way down and kissed the top of the stone.

*You may be gone, Riku, my dawn...but I will never, ever forget, even unto dusk and night.*
Jiro nuzzled his way under Viktor's scarf as the Russian tried getting to the check-out desk. Makkachin stayed between his knees again, making it harder to walk than it already was. He stood there patiently though, waiting for the travel documents to be processed and printed while he paid for the visits. He stuck his bank card into the chip reader and followed the prompts, accepted the visit summary and receipt, and went off to the side of the waiting room in anticipation of the rest. It was only once he was seated that the Akita puppy came out of hiding; shaking slightly and looking around, but not desperate to get away anymore.

"Aw little buddy...I know that wasn't the most exciting thing you've done all day," Viktor reassured, stroking his hand down the pup's back, "You'll forget about it within an hour or two though. Maybe your papa will be home by then, too." He leaned forward slightly to scratch at Makkachin's head; the poodle had gotten under his chair and only his head poked out from the shadows. Getting a brilliant idea though, the silver legend pulled his phone out, "Jiro! Look here!" He cooed, and took a quick picture as soon as those dark eyes were looking at him. Smirking to himself, though feeling a little bad still for the whole ordeal, he opened up a text window to his husband and selected the photo.

[I have betrayed his tiny trust...] He wrote.

A moment or two later, the hopping dots on the left side of the screen appeared, and he got his answer, [He looks devastated lol]
[Nothing a little love and attention from you can't fix ;)]
[Do you have an ETA yet?]

[We're actually heading to the train station right now. There was a small coup d'état over Mikhail wanting to take a break before heading to Hasetsu.]

Viktor turned his head slightly, rereading the message before answering, [...] A coup? From who?]

[Yurio mostly, then Nikki. Viktoria was a sympathizer. By then, it was 3 teens against 3 adults, so they dragged me into it, using you and the pups as an excuse that I needed to get back to Hasetsu immediately.]

The Russian chuckled quietly to himself, [Can't argue with that logic.]

[Right?]
[How do you want to meet up again when we get back?]
[At Yu-Topia?]

[I'll come get you from the train station, then we can go home.]

Yuri felt his vision shift slightly as he read it, but then shook his head, feeling a yawn coming on. He blinked heavily as he pulled his hand back from covering his mouth, and typed one more message, [Sounds good.]
[So how'd the vet visit go anyway? Any surprises?]

Yurio gawked back, but then abruptly halted in place, forcing Yuri to nearly run into him. The 'nearly' part morphed into a deliberately heavy lean against the teen's back, with Yuri moving his arms over the shorter figure's shoulders to continue looking at his phone screen, "Get offa me!"
"Don't stand in the way then."

"Watch where you're going!"

"I was." Yuri answered casually, slowly starting to let his weight sag against the teen's back. The Russian Tiger grumbled and started walking forward again, dragging the older figure along as he moved, hearing the slide of sneaker-toes against the ground as he trudged along. Mercifully, all he had to carry other than Yuri was the carrier Potya was in; Viktoria was pushing the luggage cart along nearby, with her sister in front to help steer it.

In the back, Mikhail and Minako followed, and for the first time in a little while, the ballerina found reason to smile a little, watching the antics taking place out in front of her. Yurio had started thrashing and complaining loudly, but Yuri held firm, as though glued to the teen's back, and didn't budge. She turned her eyes from their horseplay and looked up to the taller man walking next to her, "So what are you planning?"

Jade eyes looked back at her for a moment, then turned forward again, following the group as they rounded a corner to the elevators that would take them down to the lower level, and the train platforms, "In the immediate future, I'm bracing myself for the torture you've promised." He answered warily, trying not to let it show on his face how much it felt that his back was in tight knots, "After that, I guess...figuring out the first steps of where to move to, exactly. I'm guessing we'll be spending an extended period of time at Yu-Topia until I find something."

"Hmm...I'm surprised you didn't suggest my place."

"I've been in your place." The Russian answered tepidly, "We'd all lose our minds pretty quick, given how small it is. I'll spare you that bag of troubles. I can afford Yu-Topia's fees for a while."

"You can afford Yu-Topia."

"I can, but I won't." He huffed quietly, only to wince slightly as the chuff of air tugged on his ribs, and his back as a result. His right hand came around behind himself to press against it.

"You sure you don't want to find someplace where you can lie down for a minute and I can straighten you out...?" Minako wondered dubiously, pressing her own hand against the man's, "You're going to be a pretzel by the time we get to Hasetsu."

"...I have...a feeling I'm gonna scream...when you do it..." He answered, trying to straighten himself out so he could walk normally. He was grateful in that moment that none of the 'kids' out in front had noticed him slowing down, "...I don't want to be anywhere in earshot...of anyone...when that happens."

"It's gonna be worse if you put it off."

"I'll...I can live with it..."

When they finally managed to get down to the lower level, the girls unloaded their luggage from the cart and started dividing it up. By then, Yuri had finally detached himself from the Russian Punk's back, though he was still chuckling to himself over the whole thing, even as he continued to play around on his phone.

[I gotta go for a bit.] He wrote, [Nikki's giving me stuff to carry.]

[Same, but because the vet's done with the paperwork.] Viktor answered, setting the pup on the
ground as he finished thumbing his message, [Love you. See you when you get home.]

[Love you too. Drive safe.] He wrote back, then put his phone away. For a moment, as he was looking around at their meager group, he caught sight of Mikhail's gaze, but quickly looked away again to watch for the train. He felt a flutter in his gut, *I don't even know what to say to him now, given how Viktor feels about everything. Feels like I'm caught between them, forced to take sides, and everyone knows whose side I'll take...*

"So what's Hasetsu like?" Nikki suddenly wondered, sliding up next to him to pull him from his thoughts, "I've been told it's near the water."

"Oh..." He answered, a bit startled, "Yeah, it's on the coast. It's kind of a small city, nothing like Detroit...or even Edmonton, I'll bet..."

"Maybe more like Banff?"

"Way bigger than Banff," Minako interjected, "You'll like it."

"So where are we going to go first?" The teen wondered after, looking back towards Yuri again, "Are you going to show us around, maybe?"

"Maybe another time," He answered hesitantly, "Viktor and I have a lot of stuff we need to get done before we leave."

Nikki looked a bit disappointed again, "...Is it always going to be like this? Where you and Cousin Viktor are gone a lot? I feel like we barely know you guys..."

Yuri frowned, "Not always...after the season's over, Viktor and I don't have plans to go anywhere again until summertime. Things are just crazy because of competition, since both Viktor and I compete. We can't always get assigned to the same events, so we have to be on the road for twice as long, and with the Olympics this year...well, we're super busy."

"...You're not even competing for another month though..." The silver teen argued, "But you're leaving anyway."

"Nikki, quit bugging the guy like this..." Viktoria attempted to stop her little sister, putting an arm between them to try and pull the teen away, "It's like you said, we barely know him...this is rude."

"We're family though...!" She argued, shrugging the arm away, and turning those grey-green eyes back to the skater, "That's why you came to the airport, right?"

Yuri felt a sting in his chest, *I mostly came to keep an eye on Minako-sensei...* He sighed quietly and turned to where he heard the next train pulling into the terminal, the rumble vibrating against the walls with every meter it came closer.

Nikki felt a pit in her stomach as seconds went by without an answer. She could feel her brow furrow as her face turned towards the ground, and her gaze didn't rise again, even as Yurio yanked her back to get her out of the way of the open door. Passengers quickly filtered by them, eventually leaving the open and empty doorway for people to board, and she felt herself being maneuvered inside. Abruptly though, just as she thought she was about to turn right, her small frame was pulled left instead, and soon, she was positioned to sit on one of the long wall-mounted benches that lined each length of the train cars. Still, with a warm body pressed close on either side, she couldn't help but ball her hands up on her lap and stare at her knees. As the train pulled forward, and the inertia made her wobble to the right slightly, her eyes drifted up and over the top of the suitcases and bags piled in front of her, and she saw what she could only assume were Yurio's black-garbed legs.
Despite the ample available seating, the Russian Tiger chose to stand, holding onto one of the plastic grip-rings bolted to the roof. Nikki sighed and looked down again, feeling her fingers clench a little tighter.

"I have a feeling I'll be apologizing a lot for things," Yuri's voice spoke softly, though not quite a whisper, "But if I say sorry too often, you'll stop believing me...so I have to be careful when I say it."

The silver teen glanced aside, but her eyes only moved from staring at her own knees, to the jeans covering Yuri's next to her.

"It's not that I'm not happy to see you guys." He went on, voice still quiet, barely audible over the sound of the train, "But there's just...a lot going on with the adults in the group right now, and I don't want to rock the boat anymore than it already has been."

"...But that's why I keep saying I need your help..." Nikki answered, just as quietly, "I don't want the troubles between my papa and Cousin Viktor to keep being a problem."

"That's not something either of us can fix just by making them talk. Right now, forcing them into a room together might even make things worse."

"But-"

Yuri squished a hand down on the girl's head, and nudged it slightly to make her look at him, "Viktor...is...exhausted. We were away from home for nearly 5 weeks before the Grand Prix Final, and every event seemed to have problems worse than the last. We barely had a chance to catch our breath before going to Detroit, where I ended up getting badly hurt and nearly couldn't compete at all. Nationals just now...was even worse than that, because it was 2 events in a row where something really bad happened to me and he could do nothing about it. Viktor doesn't have room in his headspace right now to deal with the troubles regarding your dad, too. That's why we're going to Russia."

"...But..."

He shook his head, even as it hurt him to see the teen even more disappointed than she already was, "We're going to a place where there's no phone reception, no chance of running into old flames, no possibility of pre-competition panic attacks, injuries, or other drama. It's just me, Viktor, our dogs, the great expansive Russian wilderness, and one bear that I tamed at NHK." He explained seriously, "We need some time away from everything."

"But Kon's been so mean to you guys before! I heard about what happened last year!" Nikki pointed out, practically on the verge of tears, "How could it possibly be better to spend time with him than with us!? At least you don't have to worry about any of us beating you guys up!"

Yuri sighed and let her head go, leaning his shoulder against the backrest, "A lot of things have changed... Viktor wouldn't have suggested it unless he was sure things were safe enough for us to be there. We talked to Konstantin after the RSF fired Viktor, and the way he puts it, Kon's actually kind of oddly proud of me... I like to tell myself that he respects me in his own way, which is a big change from last year. He didn't even physically react to the stuff we did in front of him at NHK."

Nikkita just pulled her knees up and hugged her arms around them, trying not to cry.

Yurio saw the movement out the corner of his eyes and looked down, seeing the crown of his younger 'sister's' head bent towards him. There would be only one reason for that posture, and he reached a hand down to press it against the girl's shoulder, "You okay?"
"Yuri and Cousin Viktor need to get away from us and that's why they're leaving." She answered spitefully, voice cracking under the edge of tears.

"That's not even what I said-" Yuri contested, feeling worse by the second, "Nikki-"

The Tiger was thrown off by it though, and bent forward slightly, careful that the 'parental units' were far enough away that nothing could be heard, "I doubt you're the reason they're taking off." He turned emerald eyes towards the older skater, "Right?" He said, a bit forcefully, as though subtly suggesting the man better agree.

Yuri just heaved a breath and set a hand on the girl's shoulder, "Viktor actually said earlier, that of all the things going on right now, having you in Hasetsu is a silver lining." He explained, "We're not leaving because of you guys. ...If there's anyone coming to Hasetsu that's making us want to go, it's probably Mikhail... Viktor's not ready to face him right now and being in such close proximity is just going to stress him out even more. Trust me on this one...I've asked him plenty of times about trying to fix things with your dad, but now just isn't the right time. He needs time to heal and recover. Don't let his goofy exterior fool you...inside, he's a boiling cauldron. He just puts on a smile so no one worries about him."

"...It'd be better if he let us worry...then maybe we could figure everything out...like a family would..."

"Nikkita... Viktor isn't ready for that. Up until rather recently, he hasn't even had a family to support him. He's gone through life completely alone."

"W-what about you?" She asked then, lifting her face slightly, though still staring down, "Aren't you his family?"

"Yes...I'm the family he made. But I'm just one guy. Now there's a train-car full of people coming straight for him. He's doing his best, but he's really overwhelmed right now. Give him time to get to know all of you, and he'll start to warm up. He makes his own choices about who he lets into his life...sometimes those decisions take time."

"...So he doesn't even like us right now..."

"He likes you just fine." Yuri attempted, "He's just not ready to call you family yet. He's spent the last 15 years being loved and adored by millions of complete strangers; people throwing themselves at his feet and screaming his name...his capacity for forming deep, meaningful connections with anyone is limited by that experience. Please don't hold it against him. He just doesn't want to get hurt."

"But we'd never-"

Yuri put a finger on the girl's lips, and shook his head, "You'll get there. In time, and on his terms. Just be yourself and let him learn to trust you."

The old car approached the last station on Hokkaido, coming to a stop under a small awning - one of many - that lined the drop-off area in front of Wakkanai Station. A few taxis were parked closer to the building; Asahi was certain he could see the same cabby he'd used the day before, a few spaces up from where the Itō family vehicle parked.

Everyone in the car piled out, and Mr. Itō went to the rear to pull the suitcases and bags from the
trunk. He set them on the curb as his wife stepped up to the anxious skater.

[We'd like to keep in touch, if it's not strange or stressful for you.] She asked, [After everything you've been through, we want to make sure you're okay, and check in once in a while, especially given where you're heading from here...]

Asahi nodded quietly, and withdrew his phone from his thick jacket, using the touch-screen nubs on his glove's fingertips to type in the cold, [What's the best number? I'll text you so you have mine.]

Hayate looked around, examining the snow-covered terminal quietly, skates still firmly wrapped in his arms. His eyes went down to Hana though, who seemed to be pacing nervously, ears sometimes flat against her skull, other times up and alert. He reached down to pat the dog's head and ruffle those anxiously-twisting ears, and she seemed to calm slightly, but only so long as his hand was on her. As soon as he let go, she started to whine, and even barked as Asahi turned to go by her to collect his things.

Mr. Itō stepped closer before extending his arms out to the side slightly, catching the much-taller figure as he approached, [My son loved you, and so we love you, even if you find someone else one day. Don't be a stranger; we are bound together now in our sorrows...let's make each other happy, too.]

Asahi was stunned, but after a moment, he bent down to accept the hug and a few pats on his back. Rising again, he realized the woman behind him wanted a hug then too, in that case, and he obliged to her as well. Surprisingly, even Hayate seemed to want in on it, and got his own hug at the end. By the end, Asahi couldn't just leave Hana without hugging her, too, and he crouched down, mussing the dog's ears before bowing his head down towards her. Again, she barked, followed by a few whines; she was starting to get nervous, and he could tell.

[I don't want to linger too long or she'll get mad at me.] The skater suggested, [Or I'll cry again. Whichever comes first.] He stepped aside and started to collect his things, throwing a long backpack over his shoulders and pulling up the telescoping handle of both suitcases. He took a few steps towards the terminal before turning back around, and bowed deeply towards the group, [I can't thank you enough for the kindness you've all shown me, and I'm so sorry that it took me so long to come here. I should've been here since the beginning... If I'd known things were like this, I...may not have taken so long to come to terms with what happened.] He rose slightly, then bowed again to that deep posture, [I'll be sure to let you all know how things go down south.]

The family bowed back towards him, [Thank you as well for coming...I think we've all healed a little more because of it.]

Asahi nodded, and rose back up to his full height, though not without getting a few angry barks over it. He furrowed his brow at the dog, I have to go now, Hana... I am sorry...

He turned on his heel and started to make his way for the doors, but more barking followed him, and so did the patter of a few taps on the concrete...and then the worst thing came.

Hooooo0rrrrrrrrrwwwwwwwww! Hoooooorrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
Hana, come back here!] Hayate called, trying to hop forward to gather the pup, but she wouldn't let go of the bag. She just whimpered and growled, her voice cracking like someone feeling betrayed.

She tugged hard a few times, letting go only when Asahi turned his head over his shoulder, [You're not mine, Hana...I'm sorry...! You were Riku's dog. You're place is here.]

Hana just whined at him again, and threw her head back, ready for another howl, muffling a few whimpers.

[...She...is more your dog than ours, in that regard.] Mrs. Itō said unexpectedly.

[MOM.] Hayate snapped back at her, [You're not-] [Look at her.] She interrupted, gesturing to the distraught animal, [We got her for your brother so he'd have someone to keep him company after moving so far away; something to remind him of home. She never really knew us before she came to live with us. Asahi is the family she knew before.]

The man in question felt a weird pit-like sensation growing in his gut, but it was a pit filled with fluttering. He stayed quiet. Hana barked at him again, tapping her paws back and forth as though trying to get him to go back with her.

[Sometimes, animals choose their humans, not the other way around.] Mrs. Itō added, taking her eyes from her son to the skater out in front, [Though we'd all miss her greatly...she clearly has an attachment to you, Asahi. If...you want to take her, we won't stop you.]

Grey-brown eyes blinked in shock, but then looked down at the dog; she seemed to understand the shift in emotions. Something had changed. She lowered her head from the howl she'd readied and just whined again instead. Asahi shook his head, and looked back at the trio behind him, turning slightly to stand side-face towards them, [I couldn't just take her...she's been with you guys for so long now...]

Riku's father stepped back towards the car, rummaging around in the still-open trunk. He pulled something from the back corner, and stepped closer, kneeling down...and attached a harness to the Hokkaido-ken's pale frame. She didn't seem to notice until it was clicked against her side, and a leash was attached, at which point she started thrashing and rolling on the ground, trying to get her teeth under the front to pull it off. She barked and practically hissed in anger at it. Mr. Itō reached his hand forward, the leash within it, [She'll never let us sleep again if we make her go back, or if you don't come back with us. Take her...at this point, for our sake.] He offered, trying to find something funny about the whole situation to make it less awkward, [Riku would want you to have her. She was a part of your experience together, as much as those photos on his phone.]

Asahi's gut-pit closed up, leaving just the flutter and a tingle that went into his fingers. He looked to where Hana was still writhing on the ground in turmoil, and for her sake, he took the leash. An instant later, the fact of it all settled in him, and he crouched down next to the distressed dog, [Hana! It's okay, Hana...! Calm down!]

The white-furred pup stopped crying out, her sorrow turned to confusion as she felt the harness being pulled up, and her paws placed back on the frosted cement.

[Hana...come!]

Honey-dipped ears perked up, and she bolted forward, running even farther than Asahi had stepped to that point, pulling on the leash enough to jerk him forward.

[Take care of her, Asahi!] Mrs. Itō called out, [Send us pictures when you can!]
Good luck! The patriarch added, closing the trunk and waving as the younger man was pulled towards the building.

Hayate just waved, still disappointed that the dog was leaving...but his eyes went down to the skates he held, and all he could do was sigh and hold them closer.

The white blur of the world was all that Asahi could see as the train sped towards Sapporo, a vast wilderness with occasional buildings that the far north of Hokkaido kept secret in winter. The further he got from Wakkanai, the less often he'd see Cyrillic writing on many of the road signs, until eventually, it was gone altogether.

I don't have any documents on her history...so there's no way I'm going to be able to get her on a plane, even just to go from northern Japan to southern. I'll have to take a train the whole way back to Imari...

Asahi drew in a deep breath, and shrugged off the last of his open jacket. He looked down at the seat next to him, and at the white fluff of a dog that had fallen asleep there, her head on his leg. He lifted his hand and set it gently on the back of her thick neck, and scratched at it gently, just enough to soothe her, but not enough to wake her up. He reached into his jacket a moment later with his free hand, and pulled up Instagram.

Yuri glanced at his phone to pass the time, and saw the new update on his former rink-mate's account. He blinked at the image in surprise, and read the caption in his head, 'Looks like I have a dog now. This is Hana. She's an old friend.'

"Look! There it is!" Someone's voice called, drawing Yuri's attention back again.

The train pulled into Hasetsu, flying across the river on its raised railway. The group of teens and skaters moved from one side of the car to the other, hands pressed to the glass as Hasetsu Castle's tiny hill started to come into view...and was gone as quickly as it appeared.

"You'll get a better look at it once we're out of here. You'll actually pass right under it as you're heading to Yu-Topia." Yuri explained, "Pretty soon you won't even notice it."

"A real castle! That's so cool!" Viktoria said, nudging her sister's arm with an elbow to get her to be more excited, but all the younger girl could do was nod.

"Eh...it's not that 'real'." Yuri admitted, "There's a ninja-house inside, but the whole thing is just a tou-"

"What!? Really!? A ninja-house!?" Both Rozovsky teens asked suddenly.

"...Tourist...trap..." The older figure finished, leaning back slightly, "...Waahhh...déjà vu again..."

"Why, did Viktor react the same way?" Yurio huffed, still standing, still holding to the ring above his head, "He's such a massive dork."

"Yeah...almost word-for-word, then he made me take a picture of him with Makkachin. People lost their minds when they saw it." He confirmed, "Skating fans started to descend on the city like an invading horde, and reporters from all over showed up, too, wanting interviews or to film documentaries...even you appeared, pretty soon after."
"Oh..." The Tiger lifted his face in recollection, "...Yeah, I think I remember. That pic of him under the castle was what told me where his dumbass went after he left Russia. As soon as I saw it, I knew what I had to do."

Yuri made a strange face as he sat normally again, back to the window, "It's crazy how much has changed since back then."

"...Yeah."

As the train finally pulled into the terminal, Yuri started to feel a nervous flutter in his stomach. He and the others grabbed up all of their things and started making their way towards the exits, skipping onto the platform before the train could leave again. Like at the airport, it was a procession of skaters, then teens, then adults, making their way into the terminal and down the escalator.

At least, until Yuri saw a familiar dark-tan long-coat. Then, it was him hopping carefully down the empty stairs, jumping to the landing, pausing slightly and grimacing impatiently as he tried to hurry his way through the turnstile, and took off running again.

"Yuri!" The group behind him called, trying to collect the luggage he'd left behind, which was starting to slide and tumble down the stairs.

He didn't care though. Even if the contents of every suitcase spilled out onto the floor, it didn't matter. There was only one thing on his mind.

"Yuuuri~!" Viktor's voice called.

"Viktooor~!" He answered back. It's such a weird feeling... The younger man thought as he stumbled his way forward, trying not to trip over himself as he rushed towards those waiting arms, We've been together for nearly two years, and married for half that time...but the imagery of Viktor Nikiforov waiting for me inside this train station...it's like out of a dream I never let myself have.

It was even better than the hug after Rostelecom; open and waiting arms presented the open front of that long jacket. Yuri just extended his hands forward and slipped them right inside, wrapping his arms around tightly, feeling the man rock backward slightly from the impact. He kept them both standing though, face pressed to scarf and neck as the Russian's arms came around him in turn. Hearing Viktor laughing was like music, and fingers went up to weave through his hair. Yuri pulled back slightly and lifted his eyes, seeing those warm blue hues looking back at him, "Is it weird that I missed you this much even though it's only been a few hours...?"

"Only if it's weird that I've re-fallen in love with you again for the 4,163rd time." Viktor answered, leaning those smiling lips forward.

There wasn't time to answer with words; the warmth of kisses was all that was needed.

"Ugh, get a room." Yurio hollered, trying to gather up the suitcase Yuri had left behind as it clattered on the bottom of the escalator.

Viktor just lowered his hands, keeping on with the kisses, and grabbed both sides of his husband's butt.

"UGH, STOP IT, WE'RE IN PUBLIC." The Tiger groaned.

The silver Russian just laughed against his husband's soft skin, and squished their cheeks together as they both looked back at him. He spoke quietly, so only Yuri could hear, "...It's going to be kind of..."
nice to be able to annoy him with our love again."

"True story."
After the awkwardness of the whole trip, Yuri felt like he could lose himself in the warmth of the hug. In part because it felt good - that was key - but also in part because he knew there was more awkwardness to come. Still, when it did, it felt like it came too soon. Arms came away from him, simplifying to a single arm hinged around his back as his partner made him turn around to face the group.

Thankfully at least, it was only the rest of the younger half of the entourage that came all that close. Yurio looked as disgruntled as ever, still reeling from the sight of grabby-hands on his friend's backside, but was recovering in his own way by cooing at Potya through the carrier's holes. Viktoria was cautious and quiet as always, more observant towards her surroundings than engaging with them. Finally, Nikkita, who could be forgiven for forgetting where she'd even been during the day for focusing too much on the people who'd been there, than the there in itself.

In his expected 'Viktor Nikiforov is always nice to his fans' way, said Russian skater waved as he always did, "Hiii~"

"So you look fine at least," Yurio started, standing a bit more casually, one hand in his coat pocket as they other held the carrier by the handle. He stared his older counterpart up and down before focusing on the man's legs, "I can't even remember which ankle you said you trashed."

Nikki looked like she was about to stroke out, giving an oddly wide-eyed, Cheshire-cat-like smile for the mere seconds it took for her 'big brother' to spout his nonsense. Before he could start up again though, she reached up one spindly arm...and head-locked him, "Well that was sure funny wasn't it guys yeah Yuri really is fully of a lot of really strange words from his face hole that makes noises huh." She said rather stiffly.

The Nikiforovs just blinked at her, unsure how to answer.

"Hah hah hah...funny mouth sounds..." She went on, weaker.

Yurio just stood vertically again, dragging the thin teen up a few inches off the ground as she held on, "Quit it."

She just turned and gaped at him, "You're runingthings! Quitbeingmean!" She whisper-barked.

"It's a set-up! Jeeze!" He argued, starting to wriggle to see if she'd let go.

"...A set-up?" Yuri echoed skeptically, "Something I don't already know about?"

The Tiger just deadpanned him, "...Yeah, I guess not, Mr. 'I got my Olympic jacket super early and didn't even have to worry about it anymore.'"

"Oh." He blanched...tick...tock...tick... Yuri's eyes shot open, "OH! You got it!?"

Nikki finally let go, only to get the pet carrier put into her arms as Yurio shrugged his backpack off. The main zipper across the top came undone, and soon, a pale garment was pulled from it. Light warm-grey, but for the long, brush-stroke-quality lines that were painted down the front over the left side, white, blue, and red, from shoulder to lower hem. The hood was rimmed with fur; the right arm bore the grey and white 'Russian Olympic Team' badge, and the left, the white and gold double-
headed eagle coat-of-arms. On the back, in black-outlined white block-letters, 'RUSSIA' was spelled out between a logo above, detailing three wavy bars in the impression of flames, and below, the Olympic rings.

Yuri was rather excited about it and clapped happily before stepping forward to give the teen a quick hug, then held his hands out, "This is so great! I was really hoping you'd get to go! You've earned it! Can I see...?"

Yurio nodded, feeling better already, and let the older figure have his inspection of the coat.

Yuri took all of three seconds to pull his own jacket off to swap it for the Olympic coat, and spun around in a tease before posing for his husband with a sultry look on his face, "Well? What do you think?"

"I like ours better," Viktor answered with a coy smirk, stepping forward with a slight limp before sliding his hands into the shoulders of the coat, nudging it off his partner's arms. He looked down to the Tiger though as he held the jacket so Yuri could pull his limbs out of the sleeves, and offered it back gently, "I'm surprised though. A fur trim that you're not giving yourself ulcers over?"

"It's not real." Yurio answered simply, holding up the hood for a closer look, "Synthetics are getting pretty life-like now, but one quick way to tell is that if you hold hairs up to the light...real ones will taper at the end, but faux will be dull at the end like a cut rope. I could also show you the burn test-"

"Burn test?" Nikki asked suddenly, "There's a burn test?"

"...Well...yeah." He answered, staring at her oddly, "I don't burn the whole jacket, obviously...just a couple hairs. They'll smell like melting plastic."

"Oh..."

"Guys-" Minako abruptly interrupted, the taller man next to her becoming shorter by the minute, "Can we get a move-on? Your dad really needs a break."

The three teens glanced back at the pair, then at one another, then finally again to the two men they'd been focused on, "Are you guys going to Yu-Topia?"

Yuri shook his head, "No, we're going to go home. Viktor needs to get off his ankle. Going to Yu-Topia would just add steps to his day."

"Oh..." Nikki sighed again, repositioning Potya's carrier in her arms.

Her disposition made Yuri a bit anxious, and after a moment, he nudged his husband's arm to get his attention. The silver legend leaned down, and Yuri whispered behind his hand, "You said you didn't have a problem with the girls...and Nikki was really looking forward to getting to see you and meet the dogs. Maybe we can invite them over for a little while."

Viktor seemed amenable to the whole thing, "I guess that's fine."

Yuri felt relieved and nodded, turning back to the trio, only to look right by them and gesture a nudge of his head towards the ballerina in the back, "You guys should go ahead. I'll call my mom to see if she can't bring the resort van up here to get all this stuff, since Mikhail and the rest are staying at Yu-Topia anyway." He offered, pulling his phone out, "We'll take these guys off your hands for a while."

Yurio was a bit surprised, but Nikki was looking rather hopeful, hands up and clasped together in
front of her chin, but not quite ready to cheer yet. She turned towards her father in the back.

"Oh...!" Minako was surprised as well, but turned towards the man next to her, "You okay with that?"

"...I'll do." He grumbled, focused slightly more on the cramp on his right lower back, "It's still early...ngh..."

Minako looked back to Yuri and started moving the elder Russian towards the doors to the parking lot, going by the teens that seemed more-than-excited to get to take a side-trip, "That'll be a big help. I'm going to sit this one down before he drops."

The young skater nodded and started gesturing around for the rest of them to pick up luggage, "Let's get this stuff to the curb so it's ready when the van gets he-...oh, hey mom, it's me." He paused where he was, feeling an arm come around his side and a body press against his back lightly as he stood, "Yeah, we're here at Hasetsu Station. Since Mikhail and his girls and Yurio are going to be staying at Yu-Topia for a while, would one of you guys be able to come by and get them and their stuff?"

"I'll give her a big tip if she comes fast." Mikhail said unexpectedly, hobbling forward with a hand still on his lumbar.

"Mikhail says he'll give you a big tip if you come right now." Yuri relayed, leaning back on his heels against his husband's frame a little, "Oh okay, great, I'll let them know. Thanks." He pulled the phone away from his ear and closed the conversation, then turned to his partner, "Let's go catch up. Mom is sending Mari-nee-chan to come here."

Packing two adults, three teens, and a cat carrier into Viktor's little Audi was like packing a clown-car. In continued comedic fashion, unpacking the car again was like opening the lid off a gag-tin of springy snakes, with all three teens spilling out into the drive. As with Viktor's previous return home, both dogs were being excitable on the inside of the door, barking and jumping as well as they could. Jiro squeaked out his puppy bark-whines as soon as he saw Yuri, wiggling and licking furiously as soon as the man picked him up.

Nikki's eyes were as big as saucers to see both dogs; she wasn't sure which to approach first. Makkachin seemed to make it easy though, tail wagging so fast that it seemed to spin like a propeller. He approached happily and started licking at the girl's hands, and she crouched down to hug the brown boofer, "This is the greatest day of my life."

Viktoria waggled a finger at the Akita puppy, but was cautious to start petting any of them. Her eyes turned instead towards Yurio, having already gone to the other side of the house to put the pet carrier on the kitchen counter, and then to her cousin, who was pulling his coat off.

"You guys don't have any pets of your own," Yuri suddenly said, catching both girls' attention, "At least, that's what I'm guessing."

Nikki nodded through Makkachin's licks, but then stood up, rubbing her face on her sleeves, "Mom wouldn't let us. She claimed to be allergic but I think she just didn't like animals."

"We already had Sergio anyway," Viktoria teased, getting a few weak laughs for it, but she turned back to Yuri after that, "Which reminds me...the way you talked to him in Calgary? I don't think anyone's ever stood up to him like that."

His cheeks went a bit pink, thinking back on it, "...I just didn't want a fight to break out. We'd
already put up with enough on that front...didn't need anymore trouble." He turned to Nikkita though after that, "Knowing you a little better now though, I'm surprised you didn't say anything."

She got a little sheepish suddenly, "...Everything was a bit crazy back then. Between papa suddenly turning up, and Cousin Viktor being a bit hostile at the time...I didn't know what to say."

The aforementioned Russian hesitated slightly as he was putting his coat away, but then continued on wordlessly. He stepped over to lift Jiro from his husband's arms, and to unwrap the scarf over those shoulders.

"Oh, well..." Yuri started, watching the length of wool come off of him like a line of taffy. He turned his eyes down to the buttons on the front of his jacket, and started pulling those through as well to help things along, "It was a weird weekend. Our first event back in the saddle for the new season, and I'd already made a mess of things with my attitude. I wonder how differently things would've gone if it had been him to skate first?"

"Not much different if you went to the same events." Yurio commented, holding Potya on his shoulder. Makkachin took notice and trotted over as he always did, but the swiftly-approaching dog spooked the dainty little cat, and she hissed, sending the poodle into an unexpected retreat, back the way he'd come from. Yurio gave his kitten a pat, "That's my girl, not taking any shit from anyone."

The older skater took note of the whole thing, "If she's gonna be on edge because of the dogs, maybe we should put her somewhere on her own. We have a spare room upstairs."

The van pulled up to the front of Yu-Topia, as though arriving with a delivery of new supplies, but instead of sake-bottle crates or egg cartons, the delivery was a half-crippled Russian and all his traveling gear. Minako helped the man inside as Mari, much to her chagrin, was tasked with bringing all the suitcases in from the back seat and trunk.

"It's always me," She mumbled to herself, piling out of the van, "I'm the one who always gets stuck with the big loads of Russian luggage."

Hiroko and Toshiya watched with perplexed looks on their faces as Mikhail was shuffled inside like a wounded soldier.

"Is there a spot where I can put him down?" Minako wondered, "I need to sort out his back before it folds him in half."

"Oh!" The Katsuki matriarch jumped to it then, breaking out of her stunned torpor to show them the way, "Yeah, I started putting their rooms together when Yuri called...come over this way."

It took some maneuvering, but once they were in the back halls of the resort and a door was slid open, Minako was able to hobble the man inside. She set him onto the edge of the bed to let him catch his breath for a moment, but then hesitated, "...Do you want me to help, or...do you want to get there yourself?"

Mikhail shook his head, "...I need a stiff drink..."

The ballerina huffed a laugh, "I guess that's an answer in itself. I'll be right back." She said, turning back towards Hiroko. Once outside, the door was slid closed again, and the two ladies went back towards the common areas of the resort.

"Minako-senpai..." The younger woman started, "...Is he going to be okay?"
"He will be when I'm done with him." She answered, "He's nervous about it. Speaking of which...do you guys have any lotion or cooking spray? I need something to make his skin slick."

"Oh...sure, let me get it all for you."

By the time all had been gathered and the duo returned to the room, Mikhail still hadn't made much progress towards being ready. His black long-coat had been opened in the front, and his flat-cap had been set aside, but otherwise, he was down on his back, splayed out, staring at the ceiling with his teeth clenched.

"Mik..." The ballerina half-scolded, "I know you're not looking forward to this, but it feels better when it's over, right?"

"...Sure, but...it's not over yet." He grumbled, peeking an eye open.

Minako deadpanned him, then looked down to Hiroko, "Mind giving me a hand to wrangle this one?"

The elder Russian just whined quietly. Working rather cerebrally, the two ladies pulled his coat and sweater and undershirt away, much to his pained protest, but in the end, he was face-down on the bed, and shuddered under the feeling of a cool liquid being dribbled down the center of his spine, "Wh-what in the world was that...!?"

"Vegetable oil," Minako teased, showing him the bottle, "To keep my fingers from catching on you."

"Oh...wow. Minako-senpai, look-" Hiroko caught the ballerina's attention, setting her hand gently on the Russian's pale skin, right next to where one muscle was visibly cramping; rippling under his skin like an animal trying to get out. Mikhail groaned, hissing a breath between his teeth, "I haven't seen one this bad in a long time. Not since that one time Yuri's calf did it."

"I remember," The older woman nodded, rolling up her sleeves as she loomed over the man, "He thought it would never feel normal again." She slid her hands into the shine of the oil and started spreading it out across milky-white skin, "You need more time on the beach, hun. ...Ready?"

"NO."

"Here we go..."

A dog, a car, a shoe, a hat, and a train. All made of polished steel, and none more than an inch on its longest side. They were spread out across a board, multiple squares drawn around the peripheries, each with a different bar of color along the 'top' edge. Labeled with names such as Free Parking and Vermont Avenue, many places between corners were established with little red plastic houses, others with little green hotels. Around each side, and doubled-up on one, colorful paper money was lined up, with each respective player sitting behind it. The whole thing, of course, was set up on top of the kotatsu in the living-room.

"Lord guide you through the Valley of the Shadow of Death..." Yurio commented, grinning deviously as Viktor rolls dice on the other side.

The cubes collapsed against the board, bringing up a 7.

The silver Russian had a silent stroke, picking up his dog piece to move it across. He felt a nervous
sweat bead down the side of his neck. Pennsylvania Avenue, Railroad, Chance, Park Place, Luxury Tax...death.

Everyone around him gasped quietly and looked as the little metal dog landed on Park Place, and its two plastic hotels.

"...I guess you can be the official banker now," Yuri teased, arms going over his husband's shoulders as the silver legend recoiled back to leaning against his front. He rubbed his hands on the man's chest, offering what comfort he could as Viktor groaned quietly, hands on his face.

Yurio, meanwhile, was laughing and collecting the meager stack of Viktor's assets; Railroad properties and a few streets on the 'cheap' side of board.

"Laugh all you want, Yuri," The older skater teased his warning, "You may own that corner, but I own half the board." He gestured one hand towards the stack of deed cards, proving his ownership of nearly everything from St. Charles Place to Marvin Garden; each one had no less than 2 houses on it.

"I'm the happy owner of four railroads and 2 Utility companies now...I have some safe passage through your death trap," Yurio answered, aligning his new cards and cash from where he'd swiped them off of Viktor's corner, "That's what you two knuckleheads get for trading properties to each other rather than charging the landing fees." He reached lastly to swipe the little dog piece up from Park Place, and flicked it up with a thumb only to catch it in his palm again, "Your little dog is mine now, Viktor."

That only earned him a bark from Jiro from under the table. The pup started to rummage around under the blanket, making squeaky-rooting-whimper noises as he sought his way out. Yuri lifted the edge to give the Akita some light to follow, but just as soon as he saw it, Jiro backed down and went to where he'd been napping before; curled up against Makkachin, head resting on the side of the poodle's rising-and-falling chest.

The silver Russian watched the pup quietly, and seemed to take some inspiration from him. He reached for the big quilted blanket that was already over his legs, and pulled it up to his chest, letting his arms fall against his sides and around where he'd been leaning back between his husband's legs. Yuri himself stayed upright on the pillow-pile stacked against the couch. Viktor tilted his head back, and reached one hand up to find his partner's face, trying to get the man's attention.

"I'm a little sleepy." Viktor answered, "I'm gonna close my eyes for a bit."

"Sure. We'll be quiet." Yuri agreed quietly, offering a quick kiss before letting his partner find a more comfortable position in front of him. He let go of the man's hand and combed his fingers through silver hair, leaning back into the pillow pile behind himself, and turned his eyes back to the game. As the girls got their turns, and the dice returned to Yurio - still cocky from the utter annihilation his corner of the board had visited upon Viktor Nikiforov's little metal dog - Yuri had a strange realization.

"I'm a little sleepy. Viktor answered, "I'm gonna close my eyes for a bit."

"Sure. We'll be quiet." Yuri agreed quietly, offering a quick kiss before letting his partner find a more comfortable position in front of him. He let go of the man's hand and combed his fingers through silver hair, leaning back into the pillow pile behind himself, and turned his eyes back to the game. As the girls got their turns, and the dice returned to Yurio - still cocky from the utter annihilation his corner of the board had visited upon Viktor Nikiforov's little metal dog - Yuri had a strange realization.

It's so calm... He thought, moving his eyes again, from the dice to the 'bank' next to him, then to his dozing husband. He drew a breath, and slowly let it out, I hope this lasts.
Chapter 416

Chapter Notes

MinMik stuff for most of the chapter. Skip to the end if you don't care

CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED SIXTEEN

If not for Mikhail's iron-willed restraint, Yu-Topia would've sounded like the bowels of a medieval torture chamber. He bit down on the edge of a rolled-up pillow-case and grunted painfully with every deep gouge of a thumb against his flesh. It felt like ages before Minako - whom Mikhail was starting to think of being sadistic in her own way - was finally finished. Even she needed to rest once it was over; arms, shoulders, and hands sore and cramping in their own right. She flopped onto the other side of the bed, rolled onto her back, and kept her arms up like broken branches, not wanting to get the cooking oil on the sheets.

Hiroko was stunned at the sight of it, "...Does this happen a lot?" She wondered dubiously, stepping back into the room with a half-dozen folded hot towels, "Or just since the roof thing?"

"You told her about that...!?" Mikhail whined, brow furrowed where his face was half-buried in the sheets.

"I had to...!" Minako whined right back at him, "She's been my friend since grade school! She knows everything! And what she doesn't know, she finds out."

Hiroko just smiled sweetly as she came around to the Russian's side, and set the towels on the empty night-stand next to the bed, "We do go a ways back."

Mikhail just turned his head and buried his face completely with a piteous groan. It turned into an unexpected sigh of relief though when the first of those warm towels rubbed against his back, starting the process of cleaning off all the oil. He turned to the Katsuki matriarch then, "...Is this extra or are you just being nice?"

"Normally people are able to clean themselves up here," She mused, "I recall that you never tried out the onsen though, even though you came by here a few times over the summer. You really should..."

"She's right, Mik." Minako teased, rested enough to sit up again and accept one of the hot moist towels from her friend, and started cleaning her hands and forearms, "And you don't even have to sit in the main bath if you're uncomfortable being around others. Even Yurio had a private tub for the first few weeks that he was here."

The silver Russian's face turned a bit pink and he looked away, "I don't have issues with other people's nakedness. I have issues with mine."

"Eh?" Both women wondered, surprised, "Why?"

He just mumbled something that neither of them could understand...and so they leaned closer and asked again.

"Because I'm old and look horrible." He finally said loudly and clearly enough to be heard,
"Everything about me is falling apart. I feel like a leper."

Minako nearly choked on an unexpected laugh, but held it in, swallowing it before it could get away from her and humiliate the man. She took a moment to fan herself and regain her composure, "...You're not serious. You look perfectly fine!"

Those jade eyes just turned towards her, "...If you knew what I looked like in my 30s, you wouldn't say that sort of thing..."

"I don't need to know what you looked like in your 30s. I know what you look like now." She retorted, ruffling his hair suddenly until it poked out in every direction.

Hiroko just quietly laughed to herself, "Minako-senpai has always had a really slim figure, even though she used to drink all the time...! I've always been so jealous!"

The ballerina deadpanned her from her side of the Russian's bare back, only to re-gather the towel she'd been using a moment before and resigned to helping get all the cooking oil off the man's skin, "Won't be slim for long, I guess."

Mikhail's head whipped around so fast, it was like to spin off his shoulders, "...Wait, what?" He started to push up, getting onto his hands and knees before settling to sit and turn towards her. He winced slightly, still sore, but much-less-so than earlier, "Minako..."

"Yeesh, you really do look just like your nephew from behind..." Hiroko teased, much to the man's unseen chagrin. She flopped one more hot towel onto the man's back and shoulders, and took to sitting on the foot of the bed closest to her friend, "Other than the marks from your surgery, anyway."

Minako took the moment for the delay that it offered, and drew in a quiet breath as she set her own towel aside. Those grey-green eyes were on her, and she nervously looked back into them, "...When I said I told Hiroko everything...I meant it. I thought I'd know what to do once I did, but...even after getting it all out there, I still wasn't sure." She admitted slowly, turning her eyes down. She watched as Mikhail's hands fidgeted in his lap, unsure whether to reach forward or to keep them where they were; for the moment, the distance was comfortable, and she continued, "This whole dumb flirtatious situation we've had...part of me never wanted that to end. It was...just fun to spend time with someone my age, who wasn't busy with work or their own lives and families and kids... It was a relief to be able to take some time away from my own jobs...my dwindling ballet studio and my snack bar that barely anyone knows about. In a selfish kind of way...even though it always bothered me on some level...getting away from it all and not having to worry about money for five minutes was...kind of liberating. But it was getting to a point where I was starting to feel like I was taking advantage of you. I didn't know what kind of money you had, and I didn't know if I was putting you into the red or not...even though you'd always point out that if you didn't have enough, you wouldn't make the offer, or be able to sponsor Yurio... It made sense in my head, but there was always that weird spot in me that...didn't quite trust you completely yet, and that always doubted you were being totally honest."

Mikhail's brow furrowed even more then, but he didn't know what to say, even though he did want to interrupt. There were only concepts in his head...ideas...no words to make sense of it all.

"Things started to get pieced together over the last year. Slowly but surely, each different competition we went to brought with it new surprises and revelations about the kind of man you are, and what created you." Minako went on, heart pounding in her chest, though she tried to keep it calm, "Some I learned just from being around you...some I learned from Viktor...the rest, I had to piece together on my own based on how you and Viktor, and later Konstantin, interacted with each other. Even
though I couldn't understand you guys half the time, I could tell there was tension...and then eventually you came clean about it all at NHK. I...was okay with the things I learned, because I could see how hard you were trying at the time to make it right. I know that you were just trying to fulfill your sister's wish that there would be reconciliation between the three of you one day."

"...For all the good *that's* done." Mikhail sighed.

Minako shook her head, "What *I'm* talking about isn't about *that* right now. It's just a part of the bigger story."

"I know. Sorry..."

"Anyway..." She huffed, "Even though you've been making a lot of mistakes since you fell off that stupid roof...and even though you can be petty, and mean, and a little controlling when you don't need to be..."

Each criticism was like a thin knife through the Russian's chest, but he took each one quietly.

"...And *even though* you aren't that person who's the 'same age as me that has no other obligations to contend with' anymore..." She put up air-quotes with her fingers.

A bigger knife that time...*three* of them, in fact - labeled Nikkita, Viktoria, and Yurio - all hit him at the same time. Mikhail put a hand against his chest to keep them from puncturing through.

"...And *in spite of the fact* that you're butting heads with Viktor, someone I've loved and adored and respected for nearly as long as I've known he's *existed*..."

Mikhail felt like he'd been hit with a flanged mace then, the impact hitting him so hard that it knocked the breath out of him for a moment.

"...For some strange reason, I *still like you*.

The imaginary pool of blood Mikhail sat in didn't go away, and the multitude of weapons that were sticking out of his back remained there, but at least he managed to lift his head and look forward. Minako had her arms crossed by then and was giving him a stern glare, which just confused him,

"...When you say it with a look on your face like that, I don't know if you mean it or not..."

"*Of course I mean it.* She barked at him, arms unfurling so she could point at him menacingly, "*I'm just not good at saying stuff like this! I've never been in this kind of situation before!*"

Seeing Mikhail cringe slightly under the expectation of getting a swat across the head, even though she hadn't, made Minako back down and calm herself slightly.

"The point I'm trying to make...badly, as it happens..." She attempted again, "...Is that even though we've had some rough days, and there's some tension right now...and everyone's gotten so comfortable heaping the blame onto *you* because it's easy and you're still *new* in town... Maybe...if I owned up to my own failings, things would get better for everyone."

Even Hiroko was surprised to hear it, exchanging confused glances with Mikhail across from her, then back to Minako, "...Senpai...that's not what we talked about before..."

"It's not even what *Yuri* and I talked about." She retorted, shaking her head, only to reach one hand forward to clasp it around the Russian's closest thumb, "...So many of our worst troubles came up only after I secretly told Viktor about what I thought was happening to me..." She explained, eyes going down as she hung her head in shame, "And I told him in a tone that was...so full of fear and..."
anxiety, and indecisiveness...how could I have expected him to react any other way than he did...?"
She reached up with her free hand to slide a few strands of hair behind one ear, "I already knew that he was stressed and at a breaking point, and some idiot part of my brain decided to heap this onto him anyway. I'll never even understand why I went to him about this... I tell myself it's because he knew you, and we had you in common, so maybe if I told him, he'd understand...? Or maybe just because I was so scared of what was going on, I wanted him to be mad...maybe even mad on my behalf so I wouldn't have to be on my own... So I could call off the engagement and put the brakes on absolutely everything that was happening so I could catch my breath. I don't know." She could feel the start of a sting in her eyes, but she walled them up as well as she could so she could get through what she needed to say, "...I feel like I betrayed everyone...like I unintentionally weaponized Viktor's doubts...and that it's my fault that relationships are so strained right now. If I just..." The wall was breaking, and she put her free hand against her eyes, "...If I could just figure out what I wanted, and left everyone else out of it until I knew, then none of this would be happening."

"Minako..." Mikhail said softly, placing a hand over where she still had hold of his own, "None of this is your fault..."

Hiroko reached out to stroke her friend's back, "No one could find it in themselves to be upset at you for feeling this way. You've had a very dramatic and exciting life...traveling all around the world for your ballet... I remember when you retired from performance, and settled down to set up your studio...you kind of went through a mid-life crisis back then. It took you nearly a year to sort everything out. ...Having baby Yuri around kind of helped mellow things out, in a weird way. He was one of your first students, remember?"

She nodded.

"This is just a different stage in life. It doesn't have to mean the end of your current life though." Hiroko went on, "It's just...something new, to flavor what you already have, not to completely replace it."

"Mrs. Katsuki is right..." Mikhail started, leaning down slightly in the hopes of catching his lady love's eyes, though they were well hidden behind her hair, "After the life you've lead, anything drastically different or new is bound to be shocking. I've heard all about my nephew's inherent terror over the prospect of retirement from skating. You already went through that trauma, and created a new comfort zone out of what came after. I've...kind of thrown a wrench into all that... Not just with myself, or my kids, or my apparently-poor decision making skills at times...but..." He wasn't sure how she'd take the verbal description of the rest, so he simply let it be known without saying it outright, "...I really didn't mean for any of this to happen. I'm just trying my best to do the right thing. I'm sorry if it comes across like I'm being a bully or something..."

Minako shook her head, "...That's my fault, too... Both times I made you do stuff with me, you acted like you'd get in trouble if you did, so you went into it like you didn't even want to. I should've taken the hint and just left things well enough alone...but I didn't, and now we're in trouble, not just you..."

"This isn't trouble." The Russian reassured, "It's not as though there aren't any options. It's only been...what...a little over 3 weeks? You still have time to think about what's best for you-

"I'm tired of thinking about it...of not thinking about it." The ballerina interjected, pressing her hand to the man's bare shoulder to force him to sit a bit straighter, and looked right at him, "I'm tired of not knowing what's to come. I want to just...be at peace with it, and get on with my life..."

"...Tell me what I can do...?" Mikhail pleaded quietly, "I want to help..."

Minako chuffed to herself, the whole situation feeling incredulous to her, but she finally spoke,
"...Tell me what you want to do...?"

"Me?" He was a bit surprised, "What I want to do...? Isn't that what I'm doing?"

The ballerina shook her head, "What you want to do, not what you feel like you have to do." She elaborated, "If I know...then it'll help me figure out what I want..."

Jade eyes went to Hiroko, looking for some sort of odd reassurance, but the woman gestured her head back to Minako.

"...What I want..." He echoed, trying to think of the best way to explain, "...What I want is to have this child with you. To settle down, and have roots here in Hasetsu that I can cultivate and grow. To join my family to yours and finally feel like I'm actually a part of something, not just an outsider looking in. I want to have a home, not just a place that I stay."

Minako held still for a moment, taking in the words and carefully considering them.

"...But I don't want you to sacrifice your own happiness for the sake of mine or anyone else's."

Mikhail added suddenly, "If it's too much...I have a Plan B that's just about as good..."

"...A Plan B?" She repeated, confused.

"Yeah...just in case you decide you don't want to go through with it all." He explained, rubbing his thumb over the woman's hand, "Things can go back to how they were before this scare started...and I can go back to courting you and asking you to marry me all the time."

The suggestion just made Minako huff a quiet laugh, reminded of all those innocent moments where those annoying words had been spoken, even if she persistently declined or ignored it as flirtatious horseplay. She looked down to the white-gold ring hanging from that thin chain around her neck, then reached to pull it up, examining it again as though for the first time. The hand that still held to the Russian's could feel each of their pulses; each heartbeat felt like a tap against her skin, as obvious as the flick of a finger. Eyes went from the diamonds to the face of the man sitting in front of her though, and she pulled the whole length of that chain up and over her head, hair falling messy around her shoulders. A few tense seconds passed, and Minako pulled her other hand free, and used them both to undo the 'knot' that held the chain around the loop of the ring...and held it out towards him, "...You should do that anyway." She said, her voice barely a whisper.

Mikhail's eyes went wide, and he took the ring carefully, "...Will...you...marry me?" He asked, unsure if he was reading the situation correctly.

To his shock, his lady love nodded her head, and spoke the word, "Yes."

Hiroko all-but screamed, hands over her mouth as she watched the silver Russian slip the band around Minako's left ring finger.

He then kissed it, kissed her, and pulled her into a tight hug, completely at a loss for words.

Minako returned the hug, and twisted slightly to sit more comfortably and a bit closer than she had been, "...I'm sorry I put you through all this... I never meant to be so damn complicated..."

"Nothing worth having is ever easy to get. I just hope I'm worth it."

She held still there in the warmth of the hug for a little while, lifting her head slightly as she spotted Hiroko moving off to leave the room. She offered a quiet wave before the door slid closed, and Minako turned nervously back towards the man beside her before slumping down into a heap,
"...That was exhausting...I need a nap..."

"Me too..." The elder Russian agreed, tilting them both slightly towards the head of the bed, only to reach across his lady love to pull at the blanket from the other side. Once loose, he yanked it forward and tossed it over them both, then laid down, snaking his arms around the woman's small frame, "...So when Mrs. Katsuki said earlier that you used to drink..."

"You can call her Hiroko." Minako explained, wiggling slightly to get more comfortable, "And...yeh... It's a recent development. Recent as of earlier this morning. As soon as her mom-radar went off, she stole my beer right out from under my nose." She huffed discontentedly, "It's going to be hard not to drink anything for the next 8 months..."

Mikhail let himself smile, and nudged his lady love's nose with his own, "I'll let you in on a little secret; as long as it's only a little bit, you can still have your beers once in a while."

She was so happy to hear those words, she could feel tears in her eyes, and every tensed-up muscle in her frame relaxed a little, ",...That's such a relief...you don't even know..."

"Maybe just wait until after Worlds or something. Give the little booger a break."

Minako could've kicked him, "Don't ruin my joy, damnit."

He just huffed a laugh and hugged her closer.

With Yuri having utterly dominated the Monopoly victory, the kotatsu was returned to its natural state as a table, bearing a few cups and coasters. On the television, the end of a movie was playing, rolling into the end credits. Yuri glanced down to the cable box and saw that it was nearing 5pm, and turned his head to the three teens nearby, "You guys are probably starving by now. We don't really have anything except coffee creamer and a daikon root... We haven't had a chance to go get groceries yet."

Yurio's stomach growled as if on command, and he set a hand on it to quiet it down, "Maybe we should get to Yu-Topia before it gets dark anyway."

"...Is it dangerous here after sunset?" Nikki wondered nervously, standing up to start collecting glasses.

"No, it's just dark." The Tiger answered, "And it's winter so it's cold out."

"Is the resort far from here?" Viktoria asked, following after her sister to help clean up.

"Not really," Yuri explained, "Just up the alley to the main road and hang a left. Follow it until you find Yu-Topia on the left side, a block of so before the bridge. Viktor and I picked this place because it was close enough to ride our bikes to the Ice Castle." He turned his eyes down to his sleeping husband, and combed his fingers through the man's hair again, "...I could call and see if someone can pick you guys up if you want."

"Nah, we can walk." Yurio decided, stretching briefly before rising to take his own glass to the sink, "I'll get Potya and we can go."

With all the glasses set into the drying rack next to the rink, and Yurio heading up the stairs to the second floor, Viktoria headed to the front door and Nikki returned to the living-room area. She crouched down to offer a few more ear-scratches to the pups that had lifted their heads with the
sudden activity, then turned her eyes to the man watching her. She kept her voice low though, barely above a whisper, "...Cousin Viktor barely said a word tonight... Are you sure he's okay with us being here?" She asked anxiously.

Yuri nodded without hesitation, "He said a lot in his own way. The situation bugs him, but not you guys specifically. He just needs time to adjust."

"...Okay..."

The Russian Tiger came swiftly down the stairs again, this time just with the carrier in his fingers, and Potya perched on his shoulder with her harness and leash on. She hissed again at the sight of the top of Makkachin's head over the edge of the kotatsu, but the poodle hunkered down and stayed where he was, letting out a quiet whine. Jiro remained oblivious, half-awake as it was, head wobbling from side to side as he tried not to fall asleep again.

"Aright, we're going." Yuri waved at the singular conscious member of the pair, "We'll see you guys later."

"Cya. Text me when you get there so I know you did." Yuri asked, waving as well, "Nikki and Viktoria, welcome again to Hasetsu."

They waved their thanks and adieus as well, and the door closed quietly behind them, leaving not but the sound of the end credits music to play softly in the air. Yuri reached across for the remote control and started channel surfing, seeing the weather on the news briefly and paused just to check the Friday forecast; cold, but clear and dry. Good for flying. He moved on from there, seeing a number of programs that didn't interest him, but eventually found what looked to be a documentary on the 'Making of the Olympics.' Footage played of events long ago, some so old it was black and white. He settled on it and set the remote down again, rubbing his thumb idly on his partner's chest where the man was still leaning against him. It was, perhaps, another 45 minutes before Viktor seemed to stir, head turning from one side to the other in quick succession, followed by the sudden rise to sitting as slate eyes scanned the all-but-empty room.

"Oh...hey." Yuri teased, "You were out cold."

"...I guess I was." The silver Russian answered, "...When did they go?"

"Around five."

"...I see."

Yuri leaned forward to rub his hands on his partner's shoulders, but did so as he pulled his knees up and rose to stand, "I avenged you in the game, by the way." He said proudly, leaning down to kiss that silver crown before stepping off towards the door, "Yurio put so much effort into his little Death Corner that he went bankrupt on my properties spread out around the board. No one landed on his usurped railroads or utilities for the rest of the game."

Viktor rubbed his eyes tiredly and yawned, but then scratched the back of his neck, "Thanks."

The lock was turned, and Yuri made sure everything looked in order at the front of the house, checking briefly if there was any sign of snow coming down in the alley. With no crystalline shine passing in front of the lights, he put the curtain over the window in the door and started going back towards his partner, "Do you want me to heat up some of the mulled wine from yesterday?" He offered, pointing towards the kitchen.

Viktor lifted his head, but then shook it, "No...it's fine..."
Yuri hummed to himself quietly, *He slept longer than I did overnight. I wonder if his nap was more about escaping from what's going on than it was about him being tired.* He stepped closer then, and paused just next to his partner, surprised to feel Viktor lean against his leg before he could do anything else, a few fingers clasping lightly around the back of his knee. He leaned down slightly to pat the man's head with one hand, *If I were him...I'd be doing that because I want him to make me forget everything for a while. I wonder...?*

'Because you're the only person in the world that I like being under.'

'Why hold back? You could've flipped me over and had your way with me anytime you wanted.'

His cheeks flushed slightly, but the idea was already planted, and after a moment, he bent down to one knee beside his husband.

Viktor lifted his head in time to see those blue-rimmed glasses pulled away, and a half-lidded gaze turned towards him mere milliseconds before he felt the warmth of a kiss. He felt a hand come up behind his head, another pressing against the side of his neck, then the seat being taken on his lap. There was no question about what was going on, only the surrender to the moment, and the heat, and the specific pressures and touches. He felt himself being lowered down to his back soon after, a pillow under his head as the hand pulled away, and he opened his eyes slightly.

"Flip over." Yuri asked of him, "I want to help you feel better."
Still tired, but incredibly curious, Viktor twisted in place until he was flat on his front, glancing back over his shoulder briefly before resting on the blanket. He grabbed for the pillow that was now in front of him, and waited in quiet anticipation, crossing his arms under the fluff. At first, all he felt was his partner sitting on the back of his thighs, knees pressed in against his sides like wedges, but then hands came down gently on his lower back. They slid from lower to upper, moving his t-shirt away slowly, leaving the bunched-up rim just beneath his shoulder-blades.

Yuri's hands went low again, this time pressing palms to skin, and thumbs started pressing into stiff muscle, "It's been a long time since you were so quiet." He commented quietly, watching as fingers and thumbs kneaded at tense tissues, "Something on your mind?" He wondered. The music from the television softened as the end credits to their earlier movie faded out. He could easily hear the sound of his spouse drawing a deliberately-long breath, only to let it out as arms moved slightly under the pillow, and Viktor shook his head into it. His silver hair spilled over it like molten metal, one blue eye, like a sapphire, looking back through it. Yuri continued the circles he was pressing into his husband's skin with his fingers, and asked something else instead, "Were you okay today on your own? Jiro behaved at the vet?"

Viktor at least nodded then, and closed his eyes, face half-buried in the pillow.

Still, the man's silence was odd, "What did you dream about during your nap?"

"...I...don't really remember my dreams anymore." The silver Russian answered quietly, cracking his eyes open again to stare under the couch, words spoken into the crook of one elbow, "Not since NHK."

"...Really?" Yuri asked sadly, brow furrowed, "At all?"

"I'm not even sure I dream anymore," Viktor went on, staring at nothing in particular, "Sometimes I get nightmares, but...that's it. Usually it's just a black void, sandwiched between moments of being awake."

Fingers and palms spread and kneaded tense flesh, making an even path as they worked up towards the man's shoulders. Fingertips brushed the edge of fabric, "...I'm scared to ask about the kind of things you'd see in nightmares. You have such a vivid imagination as it is."

Viktor was quiet for a moment again, gripping a little tighter against his own arms, but then released them and pressed his forehead to the crook of his elbow instead, "Some things...too graphic for me to want to remember in the retelling. Lately it's just..." He sighed and turned his head, looking towards the kotatsu, knowing Makkachin and Jiro were cuddled up together underneath. The poodle's big puffy tail was lying outside the range of the blanket, like it usually did, but it was still in his slumber, "...It's me drumming up all these doomsday scenarios about my Uncle's move to here...I remember how all those fans and reporters turned up when news got out that I was here...and while I know that it wouldn't happen for him, I can't help but feel like I'll become irrelevant in the end anyway."

"You could never become irrelevant." Yuri reassured, kissing the back of one shoulder as he wedged his hands around his husband's larger frame, under his arms and chest, "You're too extra for that. Besides..." He gave one slow roll of his hips, gently and not too obviously, making it seem more like an attempt to slide further up for the kiss than anything, "...All the stories I've heard about how
people used to accuse Mikhail of being your father somehow, because of how much you look like him...

Viktor grumbled at that.

"...Around here, people think of you first. He looks like you, and that's most of the reason why anyone gives him the time of day." Yuri went on, rubbing one thumb in place as well as he could, his hand mostly pinned to the floor between his husband's chest and the blanket under him, "The novelty of him will wear off in time. Let him have his thing with Minako-sensei, and ignore him."

"But I like Minako..."

"She's her own person. Mikhail's going to be super busy for a while anyway. You may not even notice he's here."

"I doubt that..." Viktor sighed, burying his face in the pillow again, "Not with what's going on with her now. My Uncle's more likely to hover than anything. Given how Minako's supposed to be taking over as Yurio's coach...they'll be at the Ice Castle, and so he'll be at the Ice Castle..."

Yuri huffed a breath against his partner's neck, hands coming out again to slide over the Russian's pale sides, then roamed down to his waist. Another subtle hip roll, "Minako-sensei and Yurio are only half of the people he's responsible for now..."

"They're the only ones I have to interact with though..."

"You don't have to interact with anyone." Yuri pointed out, sliding his hand forward again, up past the silver legend's ribs and around the sides of his chest, fingers grazing over small pink nubs as they went, "You only agreed to choreograph for Yurio...next season. And it's like you said...that doesn't require much attention."

"I guess..."

"If it makes you feel any better, Nikki was trying to conscript me to help get you and Mikhail to start talking again, and I told her to let it go for a while." Yuri went on, sliding his hands softly down the length of his husband's back, then pressing a bit harder as he pushed them back upward.

"...I feel bad putting her and Viktoria into this position." The silver Russian admitted sullenly, pushing up onto his elbows a little, shoulders scrunching up, and he glanced back, "Are they mad at me? I know I was something of a social pariah today."

"I'm not sure what Viktoria thinks...she's quiet like usual. Nikki is worried. She keeps asking if I'm sure that you don't mind that they're here, but I don't know how much she believes me." Yuri explained, squeezing his knees in to brace himself as he leaned forward, rolling the back of the t-shirt up to push over his partner's head and expose more of that back.

"...Now I'm putting you into a weird position, too..."

"It's not weird." The younger figure reassured, hands sliding over newly-revealed skin, kisses following softly. He leaned his hips forward for another subtle roll, grateful at least that his own body was starting to respond, even under the odd weight of the conversation. He nibbled lightly at one of his husband's ears, "I like that I'm the one who gets to protect your headspace. Like a guard standing sentry at Palace Nikiforov." He teased, nudging the wrinkled-up garment down the Russian's arms until it could go no further, and started kissing at the back of the man's shoulders. Kisses soon included licks, and Yuri dragged the tip of his tongue across that pale skin as he moved from one spot to another, one inch at a time.
"Palace Nikiforov..." Viktor echoed, almost too preoccupied to even notice his partner's attention, "Maybe when we buy the Ice Castle, we'll change the name to that...Ice Palace Nikiforov..."

"And you'll be the world's foremost popular and famous coach and choreographer." Yuri added between kisses, "Skaters from all over the world will come here to get training. People will talk about how you took two - as you put it, average - skaters and turned them into national treasures in just a single season...each of them breaking World Records with programs you created..." He said, speaking the words against white skin, "Especially that scrub who went from last at Sochi to a World Champion."

"I'll have you know, I happen to be quite fond of that scrub."

"Really?" Yuri mused, "Tell me more about how you met." He asked, returning to his rubs and kisses.

"I'd heard about him for years from a mutual friend of ours..." Viktor started, closing his eyes as he thought back on it fondly, "But he'd always scuttle away whenever we had a chance to talk to each other. It went on like that for years... Chris would tell me what a huge fan his friend was, but could never quite manage to introduce us. It kind of became a running joke... 'Oh, here comes Katsuki...aaaand he's gone.' Like a rare Pokémon or something..."

Yuri chortled, "A Pokémon? Yeesh."

Viktor nodded and smiled, sinking his elbows into the pillow as he brought his hands up to rest his chin on them, hardly noticing as the elastic band around his waist was being pulled a few inches down, past the crests of his hips, "Every time I caught sight of him, he'd run away...but then in Sochi, something else wore him down, and I was finally able to get close enough to see him properly. Dark brown eyes with a hint of red...hair as black as raven's claws. He was quite the charmer, too...not really a playboy, but something else entirely...something with depth, mystery..."

The younger man's face flushed to hear the tale, and he paused slightly at the last descriptor, but then continued down, kissing his way down his husband's spine as he carefully pulled more and more fabric away.

"I felt like I'd been put under a spell..." Viktor went on, "A spell cast by dancing and champagne, and a pole he had no business knowing how to use so well... For once, I was the one hesitant to approach... But before I knew it, I'd been sucked right in. He latched onto me with both arms, hugged me tight so I couldn't get away... looked up at me with those cherry hazel eyes, and asked me to be his coach..." He let out a happy sigh, and sank back down to the pillow, stretching his arms out into the pile ahead of himself as he let his chest go down to the blanket again, "...And just like that, I was in love. This man I barely knew, apart from his legend...had swept me off my feet."

Yuri paused again, lips pressed to the back of his partner's waist. He huffed an amused breath against the skin before him, "His legend, huh?"

"Mhm..." The Russian hummed, "And he was beautiful... Still is, actually..."

"What happened after?"

"After the dancing?" Viktor wondered, "Hmm...what indeed..."

Moving back up again, Yuri licked and teased his way over the ripple of each muscle. The mood of the conversation had shifted, letting him become more excited than the dour tone earlier had allowed, and he pressed himself a little more firmly against his partner's frame as he moved his lips to the
"...More dancing, I suppose." Viktor started up again, moving his head slightly to the left to give the younger man more access, "But that time, he danced with me... After all those years of being so distant, of running away... he was finally right in front of me. I could see my own reflection in his eyes, and my heart and soul cried out that I hoped I'd be the only one he ever saw..."

The friction of fabric was getting unbearable, and Yuri reached one deft hand down to push his own clothes away, revealing the fainted hint of aroused flesh. He pressed it to the cleft of muscle beneath him, and gently, slowly rolled his hips into it.

"...He came so close..." Viktor went on, the video of the memory playing in his mind so vividly that the reality around him seemed distant. He felt the warmth, and the weight, but took it more for a security blanket than the game that it was. Still, he let himself have another happy sigh, and continued reliving those fond memories, "...I could feel the heat of his breaths on my skin, and it took every ounce of willpower I had not to kiss him right then and there... My heart was full of butterflies and light. Even with all those years of skating success, and the fame and popularity that came with it... nothing could compare to that feeling. I swore I'd make him mine one day..."

Skin was getting wet and slippery with the secretions of Yuri's own making, and with each push of his hips, the fabric that clung to his waist was forced further down, until it was just skin rubbing against skin. The ache of the tease was starting to become unbearable, but he refused to let himself succumb to his baser instincts. He could feel his own pounding heartbeat with each throb of excitement, and the gentle stroke of sensitive skin against its slick companion drove him wild. Still, he wasn't ready for delve further. Despite the ache, he wanted to hear the story.

Viktor obliged, half-oblivious to his surroundings, "And it took months... Months and weeks and days without end. I went to him on the winds of a rare April winter storm, and brought the ice back into the heart of a man who thought it had gone away, becoming the coach he'd asked me to be back in Sochi. My blades sang in the rink when I was with him. I felt like my life had purpose, not merely a goal. I saw into the sadness that my heart's desire was going through, and I wanted more than anything to create the same butterflies and light for him that he'd awoken in me."

"...Did...it work...?" Yuri managed to say, keeping his pace slow and subtle.

"I like to think so." Viktor surmised, lifting his head a bit to glance at the lights in the kitchen, just beyond the back of the couch. A vague glimmer of awareness was starting to dawn in his mind, "...After all my efforts, he finally let me sleep next to him at Rostelecom...even if only for a nap." He mused. He curled his arms back up to fold them into the pillow, and turned to rest his chin on the lower edge of one shoulder, catching half a glimpse of his partner's antics in the back, "By the end of it... he said that he wanted me to take care of him until he retired... and I was able to suggest that it sounded like a marriage proposal. He didn't back down." He explained quietly, left leg twisting slightly, nudging out to the side a little bit to put space between his knees, "He even got the idea to buy me a wedding ring later, as a thank you gift... though I wonder if the idea of marriage had already been planted in his mind because of what I'd said before..."

Yuri's already-flushed face grew to a deeper shade of crimson, looking forward and seeing the edge of that sapphire eye again through silver bangs.

"Not to be undone, of course... I had to buy him the matching ring... as a sign of my commitment to him, then and always." Viktor added, "And even though we went into it all completely backwards... when it was finally the right time, and I asked him to marry me for real... he said..." The silver Russian suddenly became aware of everything; the rhythmic pressure from behind suddenly pushing its way inside him, and he collapsed against his arms, exhaling deeply, "...Yes..."
The relief was palpable, and Yuri clung to his partner's back as well as he could. The reflex he felt under him though, of hips tilting back and rising slightly, drew him further in. He could sense the tension of muscles under him, each one tightening to his presence, eager for him, even desperate. As a small gap opened under the crook of his husband's legs and hips, he wedged his hands through it and hugged tight, pressing himself even deeper in the process. The sound of his spouse's voice gasping for breath, and the quiet moan that followed, was a song. He took a moment to catch his breath, repositioned his knees slightly, and started the slight withdraw.

Viktor groaned under him quietly, drawing in a hissed breath as his body adjusted from surprise to welcome. He parked his elbows against the sides of his chest and tightened his core, relaxing the rest of himself into the soft sway of his husband's efforts. He closed his eyes and let himself be washed over with the sensation of his partner's attention. Pressure forced its way in, and it was relieved as it pulled out again, and with each cycle, Viktor felt himself tilting his hips up even higher, until eager hands found and withdrew the arousal he hadn't even been aware of. He gasped and hissed, moaning between clenched and parted teeth, his senses overwhelmed by the entire unexpected event.

As everything started to slicken, and that slippery, self-made lubricant was spread around, Yuri picked up his pace slightly. His legs clenched and released, pressing harder with each roll forward. The silver Russian was bent over too far for him to rest against the man's back, though he wasn't quite at the tippy-tops of his knees yet either. Yuri released one hand from center and stroked it all the way down his partner's frame, hooking his fingers around the edge of one trapezium to give a gentle squeeze before sliding it back again. He felt himself deep inside, hot and wet and pulsing, and he started rocking himself a bit more eagerly, the front of his thighs pressed hard against the backs of the legs below him.

The eagerness of touch was intensified by the simple fact that they were both still mostly dressed, with clothing only barely pushed far enough out of the way for access to be possible. Viktor eventually pulled his arms out of the sleeves of his forgotten t-shirt, and Yuri pulled the front of his own over his head to bunch up behind his shoulders, but nothing else was removed. Something about the need was overriding, and neither wanted to take any more time to strip and potentially lose the thrill of the moment.

Viktor pushed up slightly onto his elbows, the back end of him up to 2/3rds of its possible height. Knees were parted under him, sweatpants sliding down his thighs a little bit more with each thrust above them.

Yuri's arms held around the Russian's waist, one clamped tightly to hold him still, the other offering an occasional squeeze and stroke at aroused flesh where focus allowed. The hard roll of hips, pushing deep, gradually changed to quicker strikes, the front of his hips smacking against the back of bare legs. Sweat started to bead on his skin, breathing became more vocal and labored, vision blurred in and out as the intensity of that electrical pleasure climbed through him. His pace slowed slightly as he eased off, not wanting to finish too quickly, and he felt his husband's hand replace his own around the length of flesh he'd been holding onto. Proximity alone let him feel the strokes that Viktor allowed himself, trying to match pace with him on the trek to climax. A few more subtle position changes, and Yuri was nearing the edge. He pushed his husband forward against the pillow pile, forcing arms and chest onto the edge of the couch, and wrapped his own around the man's tight core again. With the man's back level, Yuri pressed his forehead down against it, teeth clenched between his own cries and desperate gasps for air. He could feel the beads of sweat fall off of his face with each thrust and smack, and he reached one hand for the stiff arousal under his husband's form, grasping it and giving it a gentle twist and squeeze at the tip mere seconds before he felt the burst of hot liquid into his palm. Viktor cried out and clenched up under him, head buried down against the couch cushion, and everything tightened around him. A few more eager thrusts, and he felt his own release into the man's depths, but he continued on, pushing in as far as he could go, only to withdraw.
again and repeat it. His hand offered more gentle pressures, a tactile sensation that milked the climax as long as it could go on for, and he could feel that length of flesh quivering within his fingers, trying to pull away from him with the pulse of each heartbeat. He carried on with his own lazier pushes until he'd gone too soft to thrust with any force, and wedged himself inside with the remains of his arousal before he pulled his husband back against his hips and sat down again, heaving for air.

Viktor kept one hand on the edge of the couch as he caught his breath as well, lowering the other to press against the arms wrapped around his waist. The pulse inside him was getting weaker as the second pressed on, but it was still hot and thick, and he stayed sitting there against his partner's lap for a while longer. The hand that had put him over the edge was still curled around the head of his spent flesh, and he gently pried it off, pressing the palm against his abdomen instead. He leaned his head back, tousling silver bangs out of his eyes so he could see his soulmate there behind him, "...Y-you outdid yourself, my love."

"...Do...you feel better...?"

The Russian huffed a pleased laugh, "Very much so...and I think...I might've developed a new kink just now...because of it..."

"...Eh?" Yuri blinked back at him, still huffing and puffing.

Viktor nodded and hummed his affirmation, "Mhm... The Random Taking by Yuri Nikiforov."

"...It wasn't so...random to me." He scoffed, though smiling, "I worked rather hard at that."

"You were really good." The silver legend agreed, though he finally lifted off the man's lap and turned where he sat, only to lean in close again anyway, "I was so tightly wound-up in my own head that I didn't even notice what you were doing until right before you got into me."

Yuri's face went red again, even as his partner's lean forced him to sit back, slipping down from where he'd perched on his knees before. He drew in a last deep breath and raised a hand to slide it over the Russian's shoulder, nosing in closer as Viktor neared, "You did...sound kind of surprised."

"Surprise sexy time." He teased, giving a soft Eskimo kiss before nudging forward for the real thing. He felt his husband's other arm come over his shoulder after that, and he crawled forward with his love, forcing the younger man down onto his back as he lowered down on top of him. He let his own hands roam once he didn't need them to hold himself up, sliding them down his spouse's pale frame, until he slid off gently to one side and settled his free hand on the man's waist. He offered a few more kisses and nose-nudges before coming to rest with their brows together, "This was really nice..."

"Mmh..." Yuri hummed his agreement, feeling legs weave below them, his own resting on top of his husband's thigh, "It's still early though...and we have no food here..."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Somewhere that I know it'll be just us, with no risk of accidentally running into anyone..."

"How about that teppanyaki place? We haven't been there in a while." Viktor suggested, stroking his thumb on his partner's slim frame, "I promise I won't even cry this time."

Yuri just made a face and pressed forward for another kiss...or several, "You can cry all you want."

"I'll save my tears for now. The next time I cry, I want it to be because you win Gold at the Olympics with me."
"You're not going to win Gold yourself?" Yuri wondered, nosing his partner's lips softly, relishing in the hot velvety touch of those arms around him, and that bare chest against his own.

"I'm going to win whatever is left after you quad-jump your way into the Olympic history books." Viktor teased, "Hopefully Silver though."

"No RSF blades will ever step higher on the podium than us again."

"Hmm... Hell hath no fury like my Yuri scorned."
Chapter 418

CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED EIGHTEEN

Yurio clicked at his phone with one thumb, slowly typing his message as he and the silver teens approached Yu-Topia. With a foot against the threshold, he sent his message...and threw the door aside, "Oi. We're here."

"...So this is Yu-Topia." Nikki looked around at the snow-covered resort; the walls around the courtyard area, and the quaint, Japanese style architecture of the building itself. She looked inside, starting with the sliding door, then to the floor and its cowhide rug, and the single-step ledge that demarked the barrier between shoes-allowed and shoes-banned. The first face she saw inside was that of an elderly gentleman with what looked like a resort uniform on, and a sash across his shoulders with Kanji written on each length, "...And that's...the other Yuri's dad?"

"Oh, hi there Yurio." Toshiya said, recognizing the 'leader' of the little group, then the cat on the tiger's shoulder, "We were wondering when you'd turn up. ...And the girls with you must be Vik-chan's cousins?" He turned slightly from his place behind the check-in stand and hollered, "Hiroookooooo! The girls are here!"

"...Was I just called one of the girls?" Yurio muttered under his breath.

"Coming!" The woman called back, her voice muffled by distance and doorways.

"Vik-chan?" Nikki echoed quietly, "...Is that like how Yakov called him Vitya?"

"Yeah." The Russian confirmed, "Let's go find somewhere to sit."

"Are Minako and our dad still here?" Viktoria asked, sliding the door closed behind them as the younger two were starting to take their shoes and coats off.

The Katsuki matriarch finally made her appearance, trying to quickly put a tray and some used glasses onto a half-empty counter as she came rushing up to the stoop, "There they are!" She cried out excitedly, coming to a sliding stop on her slippers, and threw her arms out to the sides, "Oh my! Look at you two!" She turned briefly to pet Yurio's head as he skulked by, "And hi to you too~!" She teased, waggling a finger at the nervous Ragdoll perched on his skinny frame.

"Ahhhh." He grumbled, heading for the common room, "I'm starving. When do we eat?"

Hiroko smiled at the grumpy tiger, but turned her attention back to the silver teens, "I've heard so much about you both from my daughter, Mari. Nikkita and Viktoria, ne?"

They both nodded, and pointed at themselves with a free hand.

"Nikki."

"Vikki."

Hiroko put both hands on her cheeks and wiggled excitedly, "Oh my~! You're adorable!" She stood properly then though, and bowed her head, "I'm Hiroko, Yuri and Mari's mom! And that's Toshiya, their dad. Welcome to Yu-Topia Katsuki!" She turned slightly to stand side-face, and gestured for them to follow the same route Yurio had taken moments before, "Come on this way! Your father and Minako-senpai decided to take a nap earlier so they're both still sleeping. Are you all hungry or did
the boys feed you?"

Stomachs growled as if on cue, and the two teens smiled sheepishly as they put away their things.

Hiroko seemed to squee in excitement, "That's what I thought! We'll get you fixed right up!"

The common-room was already a menagerie of activity, with the Nishigori triplets practically bouncing off the walls with Yurio's Gold medal return...and the presence of his cat. Potya stayed as high up as she could, practically wrapped up around the blonde's head, knocking the hood of his sweater off as she scrambled.

"Èj, èj, èj-" The Russian barked, cat paws and tail flailing and swinging around in front of his face. He reached up to grab her, two hands around the fluff's chest, and picked her up. He lowered her down and looked at her straight into those light blue irises, "Uspokoit 'šja. Ty v porjadke." (Calm down. You're fine.)

"Maaooooooow..." She whined back at him.

The triplets just fangirled over the sound of those foreign words, but they quickly went straight to business, "So now that everyone's back in Hasetsu, when are we having the medaling party?!"

"Not just because of the medals though... We've got 3 Olympians in town!"

"OLYMPIC PARTY!"

Yurio kept a gruff look on his face, as though he didn't care, but it was impossible to completely hide the proud smirk under his 'tough' exterior. He shrugged to get out of the weird feeling, "Yeah sure... I'm not representing Japan though. That's tweedle dee and tweedle doofus."

"It doesn't matter what team you're on, duh!" Lutz argued, "We'd have an Olympic party even if everyone you guys know were here!"

Loop held out her phone, Instagram loaded and showing off one of Phichit's many glamorous selfies, "Thailand is having a fit cuz Yuri's friend is going! He's setting new records and he hasn't even gone yet!"

"Just cuz he's the first Thai figure skater to go to the Olympics doesn't mean he's setting records." Yurio contested, flopping to sit at one of the many low-rise tables, and set Potya in his lap, holding her harness so she wouldn't run off, "It only matters how well he skates."

Axel pifflesnorted at him, "You'd be living off the praise if you were the first of your kind to go to the Winter Games for Russia."

He just huffed at that.

"So what's your kitty's name anyway?"

He glanced back, one emerald eye peering through blonde hair, "...Puma Tiger Scorpion."

"That's a mouthful." All three retorted, smiling nervously.

"Potya for short."

"Potya!"

"Mraow!"
"Aaaaaaahhhhhhh!"

"We haven't even been here 5 minutes and you're already making little kids scream," Viktoria suddenly said, coming up behind the teen with her sister.

A trio of eyes turned up to the pair, glancing back at forth as though they'd all seen ghosts. The realization quickly set in though, and the triplets practically banged their heads against each other in surprise, "Uncle Viktor's cousins! They're here!"

"Uncle Viktor?" Nikki echoed, her and her older counterpart sitting on Yurio's opposite sides, "That's so cute!"

"Well, he kind of is..." Lutz started, pawing an imaginary family tree into the table-top with a finger as she pictured everyone they knew, "...Yuri and our mom are like family, cuz they've known each other since they were both really young...so if that makes them sort-of like siblings, then that means we're something like nieces to him...and that means Viktor is like an Uncle to us!"

"Or an Uncle-in-law..." Axel suggested, shrugging, "It makes sense to us, at any rate." She laughed.

"And that makes us Cousins!" Loop declared dramatically, pointing at each of the two, only to converge her arms in center with both index fingers pointing straight at the Russian Punk, "Maybe you too if their dad adopts you."

Yurio's face just went red, "I haven't asked him to! I'm still Yuri Plisetsky...damn!"

"We do kind of count you as our brother though," Nikki pointed out, leaning her chin against her palm, one elbow on the table, "Even if only unofficially."

"Yeah yeah..."

"Oh my..." Hiroko's voice piqued again, and all eyes turned towards her, seeing how she looked on the whole group of them rather excitedly, "So many young people~! This family just got so big all of a sudden! I bet Vik-chan never expected it to be like this when he first showed up..." She said, though mostly to herself. Stepping forward, she put a tray onto the small table, and started setting a few water cups down, as well as rice bowls and miso soup, though mostly just for the three guests she knew were hungry, "So...what do you guys want to eat?"

...To the start of a brand new year...and the end of all the horrible drama." Yuri said, raising a ceramic cup of o-cha, "And the sort-of official one-year anniversary of us living on our own."

"To that and more." Viktor agreed, raising his same ceramic cup forward, "Only good stuff from here on out. Life and love and dogs and Gold medals."

Tak

They each took a sip of their hot tea, and reached for chopsticks to flip over the fare that had already been set down to cook on the hot domed griddle-surface.

"It's crazy to think of how much has changed in just the last two weeks." Yuri started, poking at a slice of beef, then at the squid next to it, "You being fired from the RSF on the same day I got Jiro from the JSF...now we're both Olympians for Japan and everything is really starting to look up. I'm actually starting to look forward to things rather than dreading."
Viktor gave a nervous smile, "Sorry."

"None of it was your doing," Yuri reassured, finding a few pieces of pickled radish to crunch on, "But if we want to get onto the topic of stuff that is your doing...how's your search for the R.V. been going?"

The silver Russian pulled his beef strips off the hot metal dome and dipped them into a pale sauce, "The R.V...?...Oh! The R.V.! Yes!" He chewed on the bit briefly as he processed the whole concept, "I found a decent one for us to pick up on Saturday. It's practically a small apartment on wheels. I asked the business to make sure there's tire chains available since we're taking it into the woods and I don't want to slide on the icy roads. It even has a generator, though that was extra. But...it means we won't have to leave the engine on all night like I had to in the hybrid last time I was there."

"...Would you feel comfortable showing me the mill since it's shut down now?" Yuri wondered reluctantly, "I'm kinda curious."

Viktor hesitated, the second piece of beef half-hanging from his lips in mid-chew, but he pulled it in and nodded, "I guess so." He said, despite his mouth being full. He finished the morsel and added some chicken and squid to the hot metal, listening to sizzle and smelling the steam as it rose before him, "You'll have to forgive me if I get weird when we're there though."

"Well, I'll be there with you this time...so it'll be okay, I'm sure of it."

"It's going to feel like it's haunted," The silver legend continued quietly, poking at his pieces briefly before moving on to some of the other side-dishes, "If not by the ghosts I saw there of myself - of what I would've been - then of all the people who were there before. It'll be like Chernobyl...a city left abandoned in time."

"I dunno if it's going to be that bad. These guys had a month's notice, not an hour."

"Do you want to visit the old house?" Viktor wondered, veering off topic.

"And tease all your old neighbors?" Yuri laughed, holding the bit of squid to a dish of soy sauce, "Remember what Mikhail said about them when he went to go check on the place?"

"Maybe we should say goodbye properly... Hopefully none of them will be mad at me."

"Why would they be mad at you?"

"...The whole 'fired by the RSF for being married to a guy' thing?" He reminded, "We kept it to ourselves when we still lived there, and the RSF has gone out of its way to continue calling you by your old name when they have to. I'm sure even the non-skating crowd who knew me would be aware of what happened by now."

"Maybe. ...How about the second wedding then?" Yuri wondered instead, "So we can put our minds towards something positive."

"...Oh... Well..." Viktor looked a little nervous, "I had a bunch of ideas in the immediate aftermath of the proposal...but then everything went to Hell and I kind of put it at the back of my mind..."

Yuri watched his partner closely, and made a face at him when those blue eyes were turned down, "We should make Jiro and Makkachin our flower boys." He suggested, "I have no idea how we'll get the flower petals to float out evenly as they wander down the aisle, but we should try for it anyway."
The idea seemed to pick up the Russian's spirits a little, "Maybe have the triplets be there with them. Our boys will have the flower baskets, and the girls will scatter them."

"Oh! That's a good idea! ...You taking notes on this or should I?"

"No no I got it, it's all in here." Viktor tapped his head with the back of his chopsticks, "I didn't forget any ideas, I just couldn't think of new ones."

"So where are we going to go for this one?" Yuri wondered then, returning to the food, "You still thinking Barcelona?"

The Russian shook his head, sucking up the end of his squid piece, "Mmm. We'll do it here. More specifically...up there." He tapped the glass with the sticks, and Yuri glanced outside, seeing Hasetsu Castle there in the distance with the lights shining on it atop its hill, "The courtyard would be perfect. In the springtime, when all the Sakura trees are in bloom... It's not quite the red and orange of your fire-dream but pink is okay too, right?"

"Late enough, everything looks like that anyway." Yuri pointed out, "If we time it just right...the hill takes on the color of sunset."

"Oohhhhh good point! Then we could turn out the lanterns and everything! The whole city will see it!"

The younger man flushed slightly, "...We subject Hasetsu to so much of our craziness... If it wasn't just the skating itself, then it's our music being played on loudspeakers, and now our kind-of-third wedding..."

"We need to do one where everyone can participate," Viktor winked, "People were only really able to attend the Japanese one your parents arranged. This time, we'll have a whole reception and after-party...not just us putting on a show in a bunch of different places."

"And a huge multi-layer cake."

"With little figurines of us on top again."

"Duetto again or wedding clothes?"

"Wedding clothes this time I think. And each layer will be something different...chocolate at the bottom, then red velvet, then spice cake, and vanilla on the top...but the whole thing is covered in the same butter-cream frosting so you don't know what you're getting until you cut into it."

"What about the rings?" Yuri wondered then, "By all rights, we've been wearing the same ones this whole time, and you described them as engagement rings before... You think we should get some actual wedding bands this time?"

"Mmmhh...that's a good point." Viktor glanced at his right hand, turning it over where he held the chopsticks with it, "Engagement rings are normally big and flashy, then the wedding rings are supposed to be matching bands, but we kind of skipped that step since you bought the first ring with something else in mind..." He thought for a moment, tapping the table with a finger from his other hand, "Some people I know who've gotten married have gotten their engagement rings actually made into a part of their wedding rings...maybe we could do something like it?"

"What do you mean, like a groove that the new ring will fit into...?"

"Not necessarily...I wouldn't want to damage these rings for the sake of freeing up real-estate on our
fingers." Viktor shook his head as he reached for a few thin strips of chicken and pork to put on the griddle, "But since tradition states the engagement rings are supposed to be removed temporarily while the wedding band is put on, maybe the new rings would be the ones to sport the groove. Specially made so that the ones we have fit into them... I've also seen some where the new ring actually fits into or over-top of the original band. So when the engagement ring comes off, the wedding ring gets slipped inside it, and then both are put back onto the finger together."

"That sounds pretty fancy."

"Right?" Viktor mused, rubbing his chin a bit as he started to seriously consider it, "Since our current rings are gold... we could get silver as the addition. To match our usual standing together on the podium!"

"Except last time."

That just earned a snort of disapproval, "We won't talk about any other spots."

Yuri sighed and smiled as he shook his head, "Gold and silver sounds just fine."

"Or we could do white gold to match the yellow gold we already have?"

"Oh! I like that better... that way there's no suggestion that one of us ever came in second." He laughed, "And it fits in with how you've been saying this whole year that we'd both win Gold somehow."

The silver legend nodded and sat back in his chair, sighing contentedly as he looked back out the window, and the small square of light above the Ice Castle, "... Over the summer, I used to dream that we could. That we'd both keep getting the exact same scores despite doing drastically different shows... and the event organizers would just have to shrug and magic a second Gold medal into their hands. Reality is such a fickle thing though..." He sighed again and shook his head, casting those slate eyes onto his husband across the table, "But even if we can't get exactly the same scores... we both managed to take Gold for our GP qualifying events, so I guess that's as close to having my dreams come true as it can come, so far as skating accolades go."

"We should try to get some time in at the rink before we head to Russia. I'll need your help to polish 'YoI' a bit, since I can't sort the whole thing out the night before like you can." Yuri made a face back at the man, "I need a bit more time to refine any major changes to my programs."

"Pfft... the changes made to my NHK Exhibition were all you, and that was within the hour beforehand."

"That's different. It was your show... I was only on the ice for the last 45 seconds or so. There wasn't much to memorize. Plus, I had you to guide my memory once I was out there. For the Olympics, it won't be so easy. I'm still in the rink by myself, even for the Team Event."

Viktor huffed at that, "Alright alright... I'll think of something for you. I'll get creative with how I make you do those 8 quads."

Yuri felt the nervous flutter in his chest again, "... I wasn't really thinking when I did those quads for my Exhibition, Viktor... I'm going to be thinking a lot when I'm skating in PyeongChang... A lot a lot..."

"Don't worry so much. We'll be bringing Jiro with us to help calm your nerves. And we're going to have a good time in South Korea. Plus, it's all happening in a place you've skated in before, so it won't feel nearly as intimidating as it did at Four Continents last year."
"Everything was still under construction last year..."

"Some things were, but the ice arena wasn't." Viktor retorted, "And the rink is what needs to be familiar. You could skate your programs at the Ice Castle in your sleep because of how familiar and relaxed you are there. Just imagine skating your Olympic program there...right?"

"Hah... Go into a LiveStream of me competing for my Gold from home instead of going to there... Wouldn't that be a trick." Yuri set a few more pieces of meat on the sizzling dome, then reached for his tea mug and took a sip. "Nah...it wouldn't feel genuine. Half the fun of competition is the psychological game that being there plays on all the competitors. Getting a Gold medal for skating in my home rink wouldn't be right."

"Wakatta, wakatteru yo...!" Viktor huffed, "My point still stands though. It's a familiar rink. And even though you're going to be better than me, I'll still be there to help see it through."

"Don't say that...!" The younger figure whined suddenly, "You're the legend, not me."

"Legends never die, but skaters do retire." The Russian explained, "And it's like I told you once before...you're like my heir. I'm pouring all of my experience and tricks into you, so that when I stop competing, I'll still get to be out there on the ice, even if only vicariously, through you."

"...I thought you wanted to go again next year though."

"Sure," Viktor nodded and pulled his cooked morsels off the dome to let them cool for a moment on his plate, "But not hardcore like I have been. It's just for fun, to see how far I can go on style and artsy-fartsy stuff. Less focus on the quads, more focus on the performance. Like what I told you to do before."

"...When I wouldn't listen." Yuri grimaced.

"When you wouldn't listen." The silver Russian teased his echo, "But now you do...usually...and everything is fine. So you'll be out there doing the ultra-hard programs, and I'll go out after you to do the ultra-fancy programs. We'll see how well we match each other when it's technical versus presentation scores going head to head."

The younger man waited a moment, thinking on it...but then lifted his head, a look of determination on his face, "...Sounds like it'll be a really interesting year then."

Viktor gave the same look back, "Count on it, my love."

The last train station on Hokkaido was in Hakodate. The trains stopped frequently and went slower than the ones on the main island, but 8 hours after leaving Wakkanai, Asahi had finally managed 1/4th the distance of his trip back home to Imari. The air was still cold on the platform, but it wasn't as bracing as it had been at the northern tip of the country, and the tired skater made his way quietly through the station with his white shadow following close at his heels.

I'm so tired... There's a hotel right outside this place... I hope they don't mind that I bring Hana. I'll be sleeping on a bench otherwise.

Hotel La'gent Plaza Hakodatehokuto was attached to the train terminal's parking lot, making it exceptionally easy to find and wander into. Just out the front doors, hang a left, go around the corner of the drop-off area of the road, and inside again. He could see the restaurant on the second floor as he neared, through the windows that wrapped around a whole corner of the building, and his
stomach growled in expectation.

Hana whined quietly, hungry as well, and Asahi nodded to her before starting to move to the front doors. Nerves started to tingle as he and the white dog walked through the sliding-glass doors and sought for the check-in counter. Seeing the 'service dogs only' sign on the door made the tingle even stronger, becoming a warmth that inevitably lead to an anxious sweat under all those winter clothes.

...I'll have to think on my feet to make this work...

[Welcome. Can I help you check in?] The receptionist said warmly, as though she hadn't seen the pup on approach, [Do you have a reservation?]

[No...I just arrived with the train.] Asahi answered; years of training to hide his emotions made it a little easier to feign calm, [I'm here with my service dog. I'd like to book a room for tonight.]

[Service dog?] She repeated, and leaned forward to look down over the front of the counter, only to spot the Hokkaido-ken there below it, curly white tail wagging hesitantly, [Shouldn't it have a vest?]

Shit...

[It...uhm... I left it in Wakkanai by mistake. No one there even asked me about it when we got on the train to leave, because they all saw us arrive with it.] He lied, [I hope it's not a problem. Hana watches out for episodes of...uhm...]

[Seizures?] The small woman offered.

Asahi shook his head, [Nothing that serious...] He felt a bead of sweat roll down the back of his neck, but Yuri's image, as well as Jiro's, suddenly flashed through his mind, [She senses panic attacks. I'll black out if they're bad. If she alerts me, I have about 10 minutes to get somewhere safe.]

[Wow!] She answered, surprised, [Service dogs can sense that now?]

He nodded, praying the ruse would hold up to scrutiny, [She was originally trained to sense PTSD attacks. There's cues dogs can sense that we don't notice, especially if we're already nervous about other things.] He gave a weak laugh that was so fake, he couldn't even fool himself, [...Maybe it's the...uh... Maybe it harkens back to how they say wolves can smell fear?]

[Yeah, I guess it would...that's pretty impressive.] The woman nodded, seeing the sense in all, [Alright... I'll make sure to give you the Service Dog sign for your door. Just one night, was that right?]

[Yes, just one.]

*I can't believe that worked...*

A few minutes later, he cut Hana loose from her harness, the door to his tiny room closed behind him. He crouched down onto one knee and bid the pup come closer, and gave her a good rub over her ears, [Okay...that worked out really well, but it may not work every time. Since you're not really a service dog, I have to keep you in here so no one gets suspicious, okay?]

"Hrrrmhh..." She muttered.

[I'll take you out for your last potty-break of the night after I get back. By then, it should be late enough that no one will really care too much, and hopefully since I'm bringing you out of the hotel, people will assume I already got permission to bring you into the hotel. That's the plan though.
Deal?

The white fluff tilted her head to the side slightly, hearing the words but not entirely understanding.

Asahi looked on at her and grumbled, too, [Sorry...I've never had a dog. I don't know how Riku managed this kind of thing.]

Ears perked up to hear the name.

[...He's not here, girl. It's just you and me now.] Another head-rub, [I'm going to leave my stuff here, but I'm going to go for a little bit. Just enough time to get some food from downstairs, and to get a bowl for your food.] He looked around the room, and stepped into the bath area, spotting a paper-covered cup on the vanity. He filled it with water and set it on the floor close to the wall, [Have a drink for now. I'll be back.]
"Never go shopping on an empty stomach, otherwise you'll find that you need everything you see."
Yuri explained, the sliding doors of the grocery store parting as he and his partner stepped into the
sensor's range. Viktor, of course, made an immediate B-line for one of the three parked handicap-
access scooters, and as soon as one was unplugged and turned around, the Russian gave off one of
the most immature laughs imaginable. Yuri deadpanned him, "You're enjoying this too much."

"I have to get my kicks in where I can, my love." He retorted, near-professionally, a finger held up
for emphasis as he steered the scooter closer. As the device came to a stop, Viktor stuck his right leg
out, straight and high, "I don't need to give anyone any excuse to say I haven't been taking it easy
enough."

"I guess that's true." The younger man agreed, opening the front of his coat as the warmth of the
indoors saturated through him. Just as he finished though, and set a hand on his husband's shoulder
to get them both moving, a few of the store's employees suddenly spotted them and started shrieking.
Momentarily startled, they both gawked, but it soon became clear that the noise was celebratory;
congratulations for their wins at Nationals.

Viktor grinned from ear to ear and absolutely devoured the attention, slowly moving the scooter
forward as he and his partner graciously waved and gave their thanks. He himself, while driving the
buggy with one hand, used the other to make a subtle twisting gesture where he held it up.

"Are you doing the Royal Wave?" Yuri asked, incredulous, but kept his voice down so only his
spouse could hear.

"Sure," He laughed in answer, "Why not? We're Hasetsu royalty!"

"Ohmygosh you're so immature..." Yuri whined nervously, though outwardly tried to play along
anyway as he walked alongside the slow-moving scooter.

"That's why I married you, remember? So I wouldn't have to be."

"I can't take you anywhere."

"You know you love it."

Yuri inhaled sharply at the 'accusation,' even as his cheeks went pink. A few more paces though, and
half-way down the line of check-out counters...he'd made up his mind. He twisted sharply and
hopped onto the Russian's lap, squeezing between the man's frame and the steering column, and
wrapped one arm over a shoulder

Viktor laughed and corrected his path, watching as his partner started waving as well, "Yeah, that's
what I thought."

The little buggy moved out of sight, heading into the first aisle. Even there though, Yuri kept his seat,
scanning the shelves for things to buy as the silver Russian meandered them through.

It was a small store, completely unlike the massive multi-level department stores that were further
into town. This grocer had more of a small-town feel; small quantities of any given thing, and a cut-
and-dry number of options. Nothing to keep you staring and wondering for minutes on end about
which option to buy from a list of 30+ different brands.

Yuri reached out and grabbed the first item on his mental list; a big 15lber of rice from the bottom shelf. It came in a brown burlap sack, and he leaned down far to grab for it, one arm kept around his midsection to keep him from tipping forward as his balance was shifted by the weight. The cart waggled slightly as he dropped it into the holding basket on the front, and they carried on again to the produce area in the back.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to that sort of thing..." Yuri commented quietly, settling in again as the scooter slowly pressed on to the open end of the aisle, "People recognizing me on sight in random parts of town."

"I don't think you're wired for it," Viktor teased, "You did once say that the audience isn't why you went into competition."

"...Recognition by the masses was never the goal, no..." He agreed, "I went in for entirely selfish reasons. There was even a time when I wished there wasn't an audience. The smaller the crowd, the better I felt."

The scooter pulled up on the outer wall of the produce area, and Yuri sat forward on one of his husband's legs to reach for a thin plastic bag on a roll nearby, then to the bok choy sitting under the misters. He swiped two, tied the bag, set it into the cart, and it slid another yard or so down the wall for the next thing; cabbage. Another bag was pulled and opened, but only one head was inspected and chosen.

"It's kind of funny how differently we respond to that kind of thing." The Russian mused quietly, turning the cart to break off from the wall and go towards the first row of fruit stands. With Yuri's back to the selections, Viktor took it upon himself to grab a 6-pack of mandarin oranges, and set the red plastic net into the cart. "The first time I got to see a competition, not even participate in one...I thought I'd been let through the gates of Heaven. The noise, the cheering, the signs, and especially the toys and flowers thrown out at the end...I thought it was just the best thing."

"You would." Yuri huffed, "Knowing your background though, I'd say you were starved of attention, so I'm not surprised you ate it up when a whole arena was cheering for you."

"Meanwhile, you had all the attention you could handle and then some." Viktor added, looking back over his shoulder to go in reverse down the other side of the little alley-way, giving Yuri his options back as the crates lined up in front of him again, "And yet in spite of it all, you were really only seeking the attention of a single person."

"Not that it worked." The younger figure pointed out, finding another thin bag as he grabbed up a few small onions.

"All the better for me that it didn't." The silver legend added; he set his chin on his partner's shoulder and batted his eyes a little.

Yuri just shook his head and laughed, setting the bag into the cart before turning around again to face those blue hues, "I can only imagine what you would've been like if you came all the way out here only to find that I was already with someone."

The sultry look on Viktor's face suddenly changed to dramatic devastation, "...I would've been thrown out of the resort for contaminating the onsen with my tears."

"Oh, you wouldn't have tried to seduce me out of that relationship?" Yuri wondered, reaching back
to pull on the handle so the scooter would continue moving backward to the wall, all the while keeping his eyes on the man whose lap he still sat on. "You wouldn't have taken it as a challenge?"

"...I guess it depends on some things." He supposed, "If everything about the Nishigoris was the same as it is right now, except that it was you instead of Takeshi, then I would've just put my tail between my legs and probably gone back home."

"Well that's sad. You wouldn't have even wanted to stay and be friends at least?"

"You underestimate the power of a broken heart. If I had stayed, it would've been on the hope that I'd eventually win you over. But I wouldn't have done that if you were married with three kids. I already made the mistake once of getting in the middle of people who were together...I wouldn't do that again."

"Minus the married and three kids then. Just casually dating. Nothing serious."

"Oh, then it's game on. " The Russian laughed, "May the best man or woman win. No over-the-top intrusive or sabotage-esque stuff...just me and my extra-ness."

Yuri huffed a laugh and draped himself over the man rather daringly, "Oh Viktor...tell me all about how you'd seduce me out of Yuko's loving arms..."

"...Out...of...my...what...?"

Both pairs of eyes widened suddenly, the two of them turning to the sound of that one-in-a-trillion voice. Right at the end of the aisle, where one set of fruit crates became an end-cap of limes and lemons, and the next aisle began, stood both Yuko and Takeshi Nishigori, a shopping cart in front of each of them.

Yuko blinked, face slightly flushed from the awkwardness of it all, "...Oh...uhm, hey. Fancy seeing you two here."

Yuri only managed half a second longer of calm before he vaulted straight up from the surprise of it, having no plan for where he'd land, or on whom. All he could do was issue a child-like scream as he launched and went airborne. When he finally came back down again, Viktor caught him easily enough, a nonplussed look on his face as Yuri began his frantic protests.

"It-it was nothing! We were just messing around!" He tried to explain, face beat red from the embarrassment, hands and arms flailing and legs kicking, "It's just a big joke!"

Mercifully, it was Takeshi who saved the moment, "Sheesh, Yuri, if you can jump that high from a sitting position, it's a wonder it took you so long to get the Flip and Lutz down."

Viktor laughed, "Right? This isn't even the first time he's done it." He turned slightly to look at the panicked man in his arms, "Remember that time on the beach when I said I'd do my best to be your boyfriend?"

"V-Viktor!"

"Boom! Ten feet into the air, without so much as a wind-up." The Russian went on with his tease, "That's the key, then... From now on, no worrying about the speed or strength of your toe-picks...I'll just train you to come to a dead-stop on the ice, then I can yell something embarrassing from rink-side so you launch yourself into orbit from there. Who knows...maybe the height of the jump will depend on how many people hear it? We'll have to get a crane so we can pull your head out of the ceiling..."
Yuri could feel the blood draining from his face, and so he buried it into his husband's scarf.

Viktor looked back at the Nishigoris, "You're out late. Shouldn't you be back at Yu-Topia by now?" He wondered, setting his partner down to sit on his lap normally again, and rested a hand across both thighs, "I'm sure the triplets are wondering by now."

"Oh...no, we messaged them earlier." Yuko answered, cheeks still a bit rosy, "We're here for a special occasion. They gave us a list of stuff to buy."

"Really~?" The Russian was intrigued, "Like what? We're just shopping for boring groceries to get us by until Friday morning."

"They haven't told you?"

"...I guess not. Told us what?"

The Madonna's face lit up with nervous excitement, "They wanted to put together a party to celebrate the wins at Nationals for everyone, and for Yurio getting his Olympic jacket...plus him and your cousins and Uncle all moving to Hasetsu, and I guess now for Minako and Mikhail and that whole thing..."

"...For Minako and Mikhail?" Yuri echoed, pulling his face up from the cashmere wool, "Did she...?"

"Well, she called off the engagement before...you guys know that much, but...apparently her and Mikhail are going to have a baby, so she took the ring off her necklace and put it back on her finger." Yuko explained, holding up her left hand to waggle her own fingers for emphasis, "The population of Russians in Hasetsu climbs by the day, right?" She smiled, "It's a real merging of the clans, just like in the old Feudal days, isn't it?"

Yuri was stunned, brow furrowed as the reality set in.

"...What's wrong?"

He lowered his eyes slightly, I don't think they really know about the problems that have been hovering lately... It all started in Detroit, and as soon as we got back, we jumped immediately into the drama of Viktor being fired... I'm scared to even find out what he thinks of this... He didn't need to wait long, however, as he suddenly felt the scooter moving under him, and the arm that braced behind his back rose up and waved.

"Thanks for that, see you later!" Viktor called, voice as amiable as it ever was.

"Does that mean you're going to come!? We haven't even told you when or where yet!" Yuko called, watching the buggy go.

"We'll be in touch! Do svidanija!"

"Viktor we're not even done shopping yet!" Yuri protested.

The Nishigoris looked from the Nikiforovs back to one another, mutually agreed that what they'd seen was really weird, shrugged helplessly, and went back to shopping.

The pleasant smile on Viktor's face persisted even as he parked the cart at the front of the store and apologized for the groceries that needed to be put back - though Yuri shook his head frantically behind the man to suggest he'd buy them despite it all. He grabbed up the plastic bags and hauled-ass
to catch up, lest Viktor get away from him and drive off without realizing.

*I never thought I'd be grateful for Viktor's busted ankle, but beggars can't be choosers...*

He quickly put the bags into the foot-well of the front passenger seat, and got in just as his husband was doing the same on the other side. Seatbelts were pulled, and the engine started.

"Viktor."

The little red Audi pulled out of the parking lot and headed down the main road, passing people walking on the sidewalk, and the glow of streetlamps.

"Viktor."

The main road became the alleyway, and then the drive-way with its snow-cover. The choir of dogs barking began, and the door to the house opened and closed.

"VIKTOR."

Shoes were kicked off, but the Russian just robotically plodded forward to the living-room. He grabbed a pillow from the couch, dropped onto his back against the blue cushions, put the pillow over his face, and...

"HRRMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM."

Yuri heaved a breath, still standing by the door with both dogs watching the spectacle in awkward silence. All excitement of their return had faded into confusion with Viktor's entrance and complete ignorance to the barking and bouncing as he strode through. Yuri sighed and took his shoes off, kicking them aside for the moment as he moved into the kitchen with their meager catch, and set the bags onto the counter. He heard a muffled growl as Viktor yelled into the pillow again, then a quintuple-whammy as elbows, knees, and stomach *thomp*’d onto the floor where the Russian had rolled off in his fit and landed between the sofa and the kotatsu on the hardwood. Makkachin trotted over, tail wagging slowly in nervous curiosity, and snuffled at his human's face where he could get at it. A quiet whine echoed out from the pillow after that, and Viktor sprawled out like a blown-over pile of leaves.

The few perishables Yuri had picked were put into the crisper, and Viktor's oranges were put into the metal-wire fruit basket on the counter, the net hung on the banana hook. Bags were rolled up and put away for later use, and Yuri pawed his way out into the living-room. He shrugged out of his winter clothes, tossed them onto the back of the couch, and knelt down beside his beleaguered husband, "Viktor..." He said again, putting his hand on the center of the man's back to rub gently, for all the good it would do through so many thick layers, "Talk to me...?"

Another pitiable whine resonated from the pillow, but at least the silver Russian lifted his head and turned it before setting it back down again, bags under his eyes already, "...You know that video of the little parrot stomping around on the wood floor...?"

"Uhm...yes...?"

"That bird is me right now. Stomping around. Having a little parrot fit."

Yuri couldn't help but huff a nervous laugh, "And a little parrot scream."

"Don't tempt me, I'll get up at 4am for it."
"That's why we have dogs, Viktor."

The Russian buried his face and whined again, feet kicking about over the back of his legs.

"I guess this takes out the stress of not knowing what she's going to do though." Yuri offered, "I don't think she'll backpedal again. It's a done deal."

Viktor tried wrapping the pillow around the sides and back of his head, but it would only go up as far as his ears, and he had to bridge the gap by lacing his fingers together behind his hair. His voice was muffled as he spoke, "Now everything we'd started planning about our wedding is going to seem like such a non-event compared to them..."

Yuri made a face, "I'm sorry, are you suggesting that a Nikiforov wedding is somehow less important than theirs?"

"...Only because we did it already...!"

"We had a wedding party, and a quaint little Japanese ceremony, sure...but this is going to be the real deal. I watched the cogs turning in your head throughout most of dinner tonight. Nothing they do will hold a candle to what you've got planned, I have no doubt about it."

"Except for the fact that my Uncle has money practically falling off of him." Viktor continued to whine, even as he felt himself being pulled and pushed and rolled onto his back. Yuri quickly sat on his hips and started undoing the jacket's buttons, but the Russian just dropped his arms out to the sides and groaned like a dying animal, "You know just as well as I do that he's going to make that wedding a HUGE DEAL."

"Maybe they'll just have a quiet, private ceremony with his kids, like we did in Barcelona when we eloped." Yuri suggested, parting the flaps of the winter coat so the man's sweater underneath could be seen, then reached up to unravel the scarf, tossing the loops of it over silver hair, "Mikhail may have money, but Minako-sensei is still the same person she was before. It may well be that she's not comfortable having a huge wedding."

Jiro trotted over finally, less nervous than before, and flopped down inside the now-open lapels of the warm coat. His tiny fluffy frame fit rather snugly in the space formed between the jacket's inside wall, Viktor's side and chest, and under his arm. That little curly tail wagged hesitantly, hoping all was well. It earned him a head-scrritch as Viktor bent that same arm around.

"Plus, who knows when they'll even plan to have it? It was a pretty public spectacle that you proposed to me during Opening Ceremonies. I'm certain that even if Mikhail didn't see it, Minako-sensei would keep it in mind." Yuri went on, putting loose fists against his partner's abdomen to hold himself up as he looked down, "If any scheduling conflict came up unexpectedly, she'd be the first to rearrange their schedule to accommodate you."

"...Me?" Viktor huffed, "Not us?"

"No. You."

"Why just me?"

"Minako-sensei is still a really big fan of yours, and doesn't want to be the reason why you're annoyed or upset. I meant to pose it to you earlier, but she was hoping that maybe you could help her out with the whole 'learning how to be a figure skating coach' thing, by sitting in with her and Yurio in the kiss and cry at Euros. Maybe even hang around with her a little in the prep area - here and there - so she's not on her own." Yuri explained, "She knows how awkward it must be for you to
interact with her while Mikhail's around. But...if you could at least tolerate the idea of him being around on occasion so-

"Ugh fine."

"...Viktor."

"My Uncle isn't a skating staffer. He's a sponsor. Other than to be around Minako or Yurio cuz he wants to, he has no business being in the prep area. Maybe he'll even stay away if he knows I'm down there." Viktor surmised bitterly.

Yuri slouched where he sat, a despondent look on his face, "...Does him moving to Hasetsu really bother you that much? I feel like you're way more angry about this than you should be."

The Russian held still for a moment, staring straight up at the ceiling, and the fan as it spun 'round and 'round there above him. Just as the lights below the blades started putting spots on his eyes, he closed them and twisted around to pull his arms from his sleeves. Jiro was knocked loose in the process, and was pulled up onto his stomach by Yuri's doing. One settled, Viktor crossed his arms and sneered, largely to himself, "I'm angry about a lot of things. Him moving to Hasetsu was just the last straw."

"Anything on that list of 'a lot of things' that I'm unaware of?" Yuri wondered, kneading his fingers against the puppy's scalp between those two triangular ears. Jiro closed his eyes as the motion soothed him.

"...Maybe not... Just some known things that haven't been mentioned in a while." Viktor answered, lifting one hand to rub his face, and the spots he still saw on the back of his eyelids, "I'm the only one here who really knows him."

"Knew him." Yuri dared to correct; that earned him a stiff look from behind silver bangs. He didn't back down though, "You knew him. When you were less than five years old." He repeated, letting the words sink in until Viktor surrendered and lowered his gaze again, "I get how it traumatized you that he left when he did. Your toddler-self thought he was the whole world, and he just left you, like you meant less than nothing to him. That abandonment caused a dark spot to grow on your heart, one that couldn't be filled even by your parents...not even by figure skating. I remember how much you wanted to avoid remembering everything, and how the anger of being forced to deal with him made you get up in the middle of the night, and use my thumbprint to unlock my phone while I was sleeping so you could tell him off."

Viktor stayed still.

"I don't know that Mikhail will ever be able to atone for how his actions, both before and after you were born, tore your whole family apart. But I don't think he's that man anymore. I mean, if he didn't already suffer the guilt of having left you behind...then he has the guilt of his sister's death weighing on him, too." Yuri went on quietly, moving one hand from around the Akita to rest it palm-down on his husband's chest, and stroked his thumb there through the fabric, "To Mikhail, his absence is what lead you to discovering skating, because he probably never would've let you put blades on if he'd been there that whole time. If he'd been there, he would've stopped the thing that lead to the rift between your parents...and if that were the case, your mom would've never tried to leave...and then, she never would've gotten into that accident."

"But then I would've ended up in that god-forsaken steel mill, and I never would've found you." Viktor argued, "He ruined my life by leaving, and he would've ruined it anyway by staying. He's a blight on me no matter which way I look at it."
Yuri's brow furrowed to hear those words, "...But we're past all that now. And you even said it before, how if you had to do this all over again to get back to me, that you'd accept your fate in a heartbeat. That means Mikhail would've had to ruin your life anyway. His mistakes are what made it possible for you to find your destiny on the ice, and for us to find each other."

The silver Russian just drew a deep breath and exhaled loudly.

"...I know that you suffered." Yuri started again, quieter than before, "I can't even fathom what it must've been like to go through the things that you did. I watched you quietly seethe around him...and how it slowly went away, until you started calling him by that old nickname. He got excited and made some mistakes again. He's only human...and just like the rest of us, all he can do is struggle and try again, learning from his errors along the way."

"So, what...should I just stop being mad at him and say that everything is fine?" Viktor asked indignanty.

"No." Yuri shook his head, "You may be a genius, and a legend in your own right, but not even you have the power to choose how and when your heart hurts. I mean, when I decided to stop feeling depressed after coming home after Sochi, I was only dealing with myself...but it's not as easy to do that kind of thing when those emotions involve other people. You have to learn to come to terms with those feelings on your own, in your own time...and I've told that to the people who want to hurry things along." He said, lifting Jiro up to set him aside, and reach instead for the arms that were still in a vice across his husband's chest, "If and whether you decide to forgive Mikhail for the hurt he's dealt to you, is up to you. But consider, for just a minute...that the man who caused you that pain is a man who has changed. He's had 25 years to think about what he did, and to sort out the kind of man he is now. He's a father, one who never forgot you...that first kid who had such a big impact on his life, such that he named one of his own kids after you."

"Mmhhnnn..."

"If nothing else..." Yuri suggested, prying those arms apart, and pushed them down above his husband's head. Pressed into the pillow just above that silver hair, Yuri slid his fingers through and clasped lightly, leaning down over his partner's chest so they were nose to nose, "...Just think about the stuff that's happened only in the last year. Is there anything he's done that can't be forgiven?"

"...He only did everything I asked him not to do."

"After he thought you guys were past that probationary period. You started calling him Uncle Mimi again...that's bound to have an impact." Yuri retorted, relaxing his back a little to settle forward on his hips, pressing stomach to stomach, "Up until that moment, he did absolutely everything you wanted him to, even stuff that probably cost him a lot of money. He sponsored Yurio, he even mentored him, and he bought your old house so you wouldn't have to deal with the hassle of selling it the normal way. He moved all of your stuff here, including your car. If the worst thing he did was miscalculate your willingness to interact with your father, and fall in love with someone we both know...is that really enough to want to black-list him?"

"He didn't just fall for her. He knocked her up."

"It takes two, Viktor. If you're going to be mad at him for that, you have to be mad at Minako-sensei, too."

"You know I hate it when you do stuff like that."

"What, make sense?"
"Mmhhhhrrrr..."

"It's just something to think about." Yuri shrugged, "...And I'm not trying to minimize your grievances. You know I'm on your side in everything you choose to do. Unless you murder him...then I'll be giving you really judgy looks while I help you hide the body."

Viktor couldn't help but smile at that, "Don't give me ideas..."

"Don't turn your cousins into orphans, please."

"Ah fine...I won't..." He agreed tepidly, "...Just don't make me deal with him until after our trip. If things go south, I'd rather it be after we've had more than 4 days to recover from everything we just went through."

Yuri nodded, and sealed it with a kiss, "I promise."

The silver legend leaned up for a second kiss just for good measure, but then gave a long sigh as he slumped back down again, "...Alright...Alright... Help me up so we can move the couch again. I need some quality cuddle-time in front of the television before bed."

"Couldn't agree more."
"Waaaaahhhhhh! This is so cool!" Nikki cried out, silver hair wrapped up neatly into a small wet pile on top of her head, held together with bobby-pins. She kept a large white towel wrapped around herself as she stepped out of the washing room and onto the onsen deck, older sister following behind. Minako was already outside, sitting on the edge of the spring with her feet and lower legs dipped into the water. The younger teen approached warily, observing a few other women in the large, steamy bath, and crouched down next to the ballerina, "...So we really have to go in totally naked huh?"

"Yup." Minako answered simply, "Japanese people aren't as weird about nakedness as westerners are. But, rules are rules, ladies...the towels are not allowed in the water."

Viktoria simply followed example and sat on the edge, dangling her legs into the water, feeling the heat rise up to just below her knees, "Wow it's really hot...whew!"

"If you want, you can use a small bucket to scoop water onto yourself to get used to it before getting in." Minako suggested, "The towel can get wet in that case, as long as you don't drop it directly into the spring."

Nikki sat on the woman's opposite side, following their lead, and stuck her legs in slowly, "...Sheeeeeeeesh it's just as hot as the springs in the Rockies."

"Oh, are there onsen there, too?" The ballerina wondered, glancing over.

"Not like this, that I know of." The young teen answered, "But there's this one place we used to go to, on the B.C. side of the mountains."

"Radium Hot Springs." Viktoria chimed in.

"Yeah...that had a huge hot-spring type pool on one end of the complex, and a regular pool on the other...so dumb kids would submerge in the hot one and then run across the deck to jump into the regular pool."

"...Why?" Minako gaped incredulously.

"Cuz it's a fun shock to the system." Viktoria answered, "I've done it once or twice. The regular pool feels like a thousand sharp needles and extra-special cold if you jump into it immediately after being in the hot-spring. Sergio did it every time we went, cuz he's a perpetual 11-year-old boy, no matter how old he gets."

"Well...there's no regular pool here, and there's no running on the deck, either. Rules here are followed strictly. People with tattoos aren't even allowed in, even if they're obviously foreigners."

"Really? Why?"

"The only Japanese people who get tattoos are part of the Yakuza, and they're banned from places like this for being gangsters."

"Oooohhhhh..." Both girls answered.
Nikki leaned forward to start smoothing some of the hot water across her arms, "It feels like wet velvet..."

"There's different minerals in these baths. Yu-Topia Katsuki is actually the last resort of its kind in the city." Minako explained, "It really hits the spot if you've worked hard all day."

"...I'm gonna go for it." Viktoria announced daringly, hands going for the towel where she had it hooked into itself in front of her chest. She hesitated a moment, but then quickly undid it and slipped forward with less than a ripple, leaving the dry white fluff on the deck behind her. She lifted up slightly and brought her arms above the water, hissing about the heat, but then slowly lowered down again and sat on one of the submerged benches lining the edge, "...Wow it's hot!"

Nikki gaped at her older sister, face flushed, "...You're so much braver than I am...!"

"Why, cuz I took the towel off?"

"Duh!"

"I got tired of having to wait for the two changing stalls in the locker room at school." The older teen shrugged, reaching up one hand to loop a multi-colored strand of hair over her ear, "Modesty goes out the window when you're in a rush, even if there's 10 other girls waiting around. What's the phrase? 'Ain't nobody got time fo' dat'?"

"Oh...my class was always way smaller..." Nikki mentioned quietly, looking at her hazy reflection in the rippling water, "There's more boys in my grade than girls."

"Not anymore."

"Huh?" She glanced up.

"The population of 9th grade just dropped to one person. Same with me in 12th, and Yuri in 11th. Or whatever the school system in Russia is." Viktoria explained, sinking further into the water until she had to tilt her head back to keep her chin out of it. She closed her eyes and relaxed a little, "I'm not even sure what pipaw's plans are for us doing school right now."

Minako piped up again, "He's going to see if someone in Canada can teleconference with you two. You'll finish out this year with the same curriculum you would've had if you'd stayed in Banff. Maybe you'll be able to get done faster since it's private lessons, and you don't have to be dragged down by other students."

"Hopefully." Viktoria agreed, a few long hairs floating around her where they came loose from the bobby-pins on her head, "I was supposed to be looking at universities for next year. Hard to do that from the other side of the planet."

"At least you don't have to do military service," A voice came from the other side of a bamboo wall; Yurio's.

"Eh?" All three ladies muttered.

"Yeah." He answered, "All Russian males age 18-27 are required to do a year of military service. It used to be 20 years way back, but they've scaled it down since then."

Viktoria leaned closer to the other two to whisper, "...Can you imagine him in the army?" She sniggered.
Nikki snorted a laugh, and covered her mouth to hide the rest of it.

"I HEARD THAT. I'M ALREADY A SOLDIER."

"...In his own mind." Viktoria quietly mused.

"Sorry!" The younger teen squeaked, "Why do you have to join the military...?"

"Russia has a mandatory draft. You can put it off for a while if you keep going to university or something, but eventually, that dark horn calls us all."

Minako scratched her jaw, "...I don't remember Viktor ever taking a year off from skating to go to boot camp."

A long splash of water rose high into the air from the other side of the wall, but then came down again in dramatic fashion, "Viktor didn't have to go."

"Oh, really?" She answered, "How come?"

"He got a special excuse." The Tiger answered, "One could say that if military service puts a known talented person at risk of losing their skills, they can apply for permission to be excused from the draft. Viktor got it. I guess being 'Russia's hero' or a 'national treasure' or whatever has its unsung perks." He said, slightly disgruntled.

"What about you then?" Nikki wondered, suddenly nervous, "You're turning 17 this year. You don't have a lot of time left."

"I'm going to apply for the excuse." He answered, "I don't see why I won't get it."

The young silver teen huffed, "Then why did you make it sound like you'd have to go!? I was really worried!"

Yurio smirked to himself on his side of the wall, "...I wanted to know how you'd react."

"That's so mean! I'm gonna tell Otabek about this!"

"You can't turn him against me!"

"I do what I want!"

"...Wait..." Viktoria grimaced at the other side of the spring, "...Does that mean pipaw was in the Russian army?"

Minako blinked, "...He had to have been." She crossed her arms and thought, "...And he's 58 now, so...Viktor's mom would've been...30? No, 29 when he was born. I wonder if they got started late because of Konstantin being in the service?"

The two girls went wide-eyed, "...Woooow! Kon in the Russian army! That's scary!"

"It's a shame Mik's not out here for us to ask. This is fascinating." The ballerina mused, "...Something to mention later, I guess."

With the couch set at an angle to the television, the lights dimmed, and 12:42am shining in blue digital light on the cable box, all four members of the Nikiforov household were piled together. Yuri
was effectively on the bottom, back against the pillows on the arm-rest; Viktor was wedged between the back of the couch and his husband's side, one arm over the man's stomach with another wrapped around his own shoulders, and his head 'hidden' inside his partner's shirt to block the light. Jiro was curled up in a ball between his main human's knees, with a shin from his second human boxing him in where it crossed over to hang the right ankle off the edge, ice packs wrapped around it, and finally, Makkachin was wrapped up in the opposite corner, back to the other arm-rest, chin resting on his own main human's hip.

Yuri couldn't even focus on the programming on the television anymore; his sleepy haze made him feel like he'd awoken from a 10 year coma every time he opened his eyes; everything was new again and he had to remember where and when he really was. Like a totem out of *Inception*, the gold gleam on his right 4th finger was the first thing he looked for; the Russian himself was always too good to be true, until it was reality once again. Yuri reached his arms up and stretched as well as he could without disturbing the many sleeping bodies piled around him. He glanced around the room; the hardwood floor with the carpet under the kotatsu, the wide open space so the fabled blue couch could be moved from one end to the other, depending on how they wanted to sit or snooze on it, the 15ft long black-lacquered entertainment stand - adorned with a number of their Harry Potter knickknacks and a sampling of the Russian's odds-and-ends - and the near-100" widescreen flat-panel that was pegged to the wall just above it all. On either side, with blinds flipped and curtains drawn, were two big windows, one near the winding middle-platform of the staircase, and another near the back corner of the house, the wall changing to go towards the kitchen, with Viktor's large Roman bust sitting on the floor, then another window, the back door to the small yard, and another set of windows around the edges of the breakfast nook; a small, 2ft extension of the kitchen that made room for a round table with a few chairs. Hardwood floor gave way to faux-tile linoleum, which framed the entire kitchen and its granite countertops around the wall and on the island. Beyond all that, the next corner, and the wall that distinguished the common area from the private bathroom of the first-floor guest room...though that had been commandeered as the skating accessory and trophy room. The door into that room was near the house's main exit into the drive-way, with the coat closet nearby, and the thinner entrance to the utility closet next to it, which was neatly hidden away under the stairs.

With surroundings observed, and the vaulted ceiling examined, Yuri turned his head back down to the group on and around him. Getting to the dogs would require that the Russian moved first, and so attention was turned to the head tucked under Yuri's t-shirt. He gave a gentle pet on the round of the man's cranium, and neared his face to kiss it, "Viktor... It's after midnight. We should probably go to bed."

"Mnnhh..."

"My legs are falling asleep. I've been under the effects of Dog and Husband Paralysis too long." He explained, only to feel the warmth of a yawn breathed against his skin in answer.

Viktor stirred slightly, enough that he'd pulled his head out from under the shirt, even if unwillingly. He shielded his eyes against the intrusive light and twisted back slightly as his other senses returned, his movement rousing both pups. They, too, yawned as they awoke, only to try going back to sleep again.

Yuri couldn't allow it, rising up where he could to catch Jiro before moving his left leg off the edge of the couch, and gently set the puppy on the floor. Makkachin got up and hopped down on his own giving a bit poodle-stretch before he meandered off for the water bowl. Like a shadow, Jiro followed after, albeit more slowly, and with a *sploot* at the end instead of an effort to get a drink. The younger man sighed a quiet laugh at the sight, and turned back to where his husband had slouched down into the warm spot he'd vacated, going face-down into the pillow on the arm-rest, "...Come...it's not far,
then you can go back to sleep. I promise."

It was enough to finally convince the sleepy Russian to crack his eyes open a little and make a meager effort towards standing. Yuri nudged off the ace bandage and ice-pack before offering his hands to help his spouse stand, and slipped an arm around the man's back to help guide him towards the stairs. Slow-going, but making steady progress, Yuri helped his hazy spouse up to the second floor, and sat him on the edge of their large King-size bed.

Viktor yawned against the back of a wrist, and raised his arms up as Yuri pulled his t-shirt away, then flopped onto his back as his sweatpants were yanked off after that. He managed to hoist himself the rest of the way, tugging back the smooth, cool bedsheets, and wiggled his way under them, tossing a corner aside so his partner could slip in shortly after. Unexpectedly though, he got a sudden quick kiss, and a hand pressed to one of his shoulders.

"I'm gonna let the kids out for a second and grab my phone. Don't wait up for me."

The Russian huffed, but nodded and let himself sprawl out against the pillows as he listened to the soft press of steps on carpet.

Heading downstairs quickly but quietly, Yuri rounded the bend at the landing and then set out across the hardwood towards the back door. He quickly flicked the light switch on the exterior, and braced himself for the cold as the door was pushed open. Makkachin was first to exit, and Jiro was slow to follow. Thankfully, unlike in Russia, the back yard wasn't at the bottom of a concrete set of stairs, and the Akita pup was able to plop out into the crunchy midnight snow without enduring a sudden drop first. Yuri rubbed his arms as he waited in the doorway, looking around the cold Hasetsu sky, past the edge of neighboring roofs. Once the fluffs were done with their business and rushed back inside, Yuri toweled-down their paws and let them loose into the house again, closing the door behind him. He grabbed his phone off the kitchen island, put the towel into a laundry hamper on the way to the stairs, and then quickly made his way up to the master bedroom.

Once there, he was surprised to see Viktor still awake, looking at his own phone while he waited.

"...Is the Chikuhi Line the only train that leads to Imari?" He wondered unexpectedly.

Yuri blinked, but then shook his head and approached the bed, plugging his phone in before peeling out of his cold clothes. He quickly tossed them towards the closet to deal with later, and crawled in under the covers, "No, there's the Nagasaki Main Line that comes out of Fukuoka, too. It goes way south in a big arc, rather than following the northern coast before heading south at the end. Why? Did Asahi post something?"

Viktor hesitated a moment, but then nodded, "Yeah. He made a post earlier today about leaving Wakkanai, and then updated again about 15 minutes ago saying he'd checked into a hotel for the night in Hakodate. At least, that's what the translation thing says." He turned his phone to show the screen, "The rest sounds like nonsense. I'm not sure what Google is trying to do."

Yuri took the phone and hit the button to hide the translation attempt, and went to read the original text. Just as he read the first three Kanji, he felt Viktor wrap around him...and promptly shiver and cringe against his frame.

"Good lord you're frozen solid." The Russian whined with a laugh, "Should I start calling you 'Yuki' instead of 'Yuri'? Cuz you're cold as snow!"

Yuri huffed a laugh and pat the man's arm where it came around his front, "It's my revenge for the roof-top pool shenanigans that you and Chris made me suffer through in Barcelona."
Viktor just snorted a laugh against his partner's skin.

"...Okay, yeah...it's a bit more complicated than the translator app made it sound like. Asahi writes long sentences so I'm not surprised the translation sounded really screwy." Yuri went on, leaning back slightly against the pillows behind him, feeling his skin warm up more with every passing moment. He held the phone up above his face, and removed his glasses to set aside before reading on, "He says...his train ride will take him from the northern tip of Japan to nearly the southern tip. He's stopped in Hakodate for now, but plans to leave on the first train out in the morning and finish sleeping while on the move. The train on the mainland is much faster than the ones running on Hokkaido, so he thinks he'll be pulling through Fukuoka around 5pm tomorrow if he manages to get started at 5:30am, then he'll be home by 8:30 or so. Wow..." He sighed and clicked the phone off, setting it aside, "What a long trip."

"Mmhh... So that means he'll be passing through Hasetsu sometime tomorrow night."

"If he takes the shorter route, yeah. He'll have to change train lines here." Yuri added, turning his head on the pillow to see the outline of silver hair in the dim lights pouring in through the blinds, "...I'm kind of nervous for him. I feel like he's about to walk into a trap."

"Maybe it won't be as bad as he thinks." The Russian shrugged, "I mean, he did just win Silver at Nationals, and got his shiny new team jacket. Even Yurio came to our defense on that issue before. Surely the fact that Saito is an Olympian now will mean something to his family."

"...Hopefully."

Viktor snuggled in closer and pressed lips to brow, "Don't borrow trouble on his behalf. He's older than you are and I'm sure he can handle himself."

"...Yeah."

"Besides, we have slightly more important things to worry about right now."

"We do?" Yuri wondered, "Like what?"

"Like the fact that our fleshlight is still under the bed right now."

Yuri's face nearly glowed from the embarrassment, "...Y-yeah..."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED TWENTY ONE

It was still dark as black when Asahi's phone alarm went off, beeping into the stillness. Hana twitched where she was curled up against the inside curve of her new human's legs, raised her head, flicked her ears, and waited for the noise to be cut off. Asahi's arm came out from under the sheets and fumbled for the phone where it rested nearby, and pulled it from the charger as he drew it into the warmth. When the alarm was shut off, and quiet returned, the lock-screen appeared, and Asahi's tired eyes looked on at a photo he'd swiped from his lost lover's phone; one of the innumerable cute selfies that Riku had taken, but with the adage that it included an oblivious Asahi in the background.

...4:45am...

He shut the phone's screen off again and rolled over onto his back, rubbing his eyes before running a hand through his hair. That same hand continued on, finding the small chain that hung from the lamp behind him, and clicked the light on, illuminating the room in a glow of soft yellow light. Hana rose to her paws and stretched, yawning with a loud whine as she hopped down off the end of the bed, and meandered tiredly over to the water bowl on the floor. Asahi pushed up to sit on the edge of the bed, then up to his feet, and wandered around the wall. Quickly finding the meager supplies he'd purchased for Hana, he set down a scoopful of kibble and stepped off to find the shower.

By the time the sun rose, he was on the Tohoku Shinkansen line, flying across the long bridge under the Tsugaru Strait. By the time the train entered into the Seikan Tunnel, whether or not the sun had come up was irrelevant...there was nothing but pitch black all around, with the occasional wall-mounted light on either side of the tunnel to guide their path. That early in the morning, as well, Asahi was the only passenger in his car aside from Hana, making it easy at least to continue sleeping.

When light did eventually burst in through the windows, it was like being hit by a brick. The hapless skater's face contorted into dismay and derision, as though cursing the sun, blearily opening one eye at a time and squinting fiercely until his blindness faded and he got used to the light again. It was miles inland by then, just outside the city of Imabetsu, when the underground (and undersea) tunnel released the track to the open air. Further south, it passed by Aomori, then briefly through Hachinohe, a smaller town called Iwate, and further south still, until it was flying through internationally-recognized cities like Sendai, Fukushima - one of apparently many with the same name, though this one was well inland - and Saitama, a city just north of Tokyo, where a handful of NHK and World Championship events had been held.

Asahi started getting nervous as he recognized more of the terrain and cityscape.

He could do nothing about needing to give Hana a rest though, and disembarked at that hallowed place, leaving the train platform for a short walk across the street, and out into Wadakura Fountain Park. Despite the trees being naked from winter, and most everything covered in snow or the remnants thereof, it was still a calm, serene place in the middle of one of the world's biggest and most populated cities.

He sat on the ledge of a bridge and looked out over the long, artificial river. It was partly frozen over, but it didn't matter. He could imagine the way it looked in the summer, with the lawns green and perfectly trimmed, the trees with full foliage, and the odd duck that swam in its warmer waters. Not only that...but the people there. Tourists, locals, salarymen trying to forget that the world's natural beauty even existed, lest they abandon their highly stressful jobs to enjoy it...and one younger man with gold-flecked eyes who'd yet to make his move.
We came here once or twice, as just friends... Asahi thought, recalling every bit that he could, Riku absolutely adored this city. He was such a giant nerd, too...always going to Akihabara on the weekends...

Hana grumbled a howl, quieting again to draw in the scents of the place.

[You remember this park?] Asahi wondered, [I wish I'd paid more attention back then... Maybe I would've gotten to enjoy his company longer if I hadn't been so wrapped up in my own head, avoiding other peoples' lives like they were none of my business. All that time, I would daydream about how things might've been if I'd gotten Yuri to come to Tokyo...and Riku was right there...]

Teal bangs swayed in a light breeze, and the grieving figure rose back up to his feet, looking down at the pale white pup next to him.

[Let's get back. It's another 11 hours to go.]

The Dog to Husband ratio was rather skewed that morning. Yuri was flat on his stomach, head turned towards silver hair on a shared pillow, right arm draped over the Russian's neck, brows together in the middle of it all. Viktor was on his side, tilted slightly forward, left arm curled over his partner's mid-back. However, the rest of their bodies were drifted further apart the lower they went, until finally, a triangle was formed by the cloud-like brown body of a certain poodle, right cheek resting on his human's waist, and one leg stuck out straight over his second's human's thighs. Curled up against Makkachin's knees and his own human's waist, Jiro was a fluffy silver-brindle ball.

Without any particular need to wake up for anything, there was no alarm set. It was easily 11am before dogs started getting hungry and restless, and the food-bowl games began. Jiro nosed his around the kitchen, knocking it into the refrigerator and the island, while Makkachin grabbed his and took it back upstairs again. He hopped up onto the bed and dropped it onto Viktor's blanket-covered knees, and *haroomph*’d at the slumbering food-giver as only a semi-patient poodle could. It was the solemn whine-howl of a starving Akita that eventually roused one of the dog-servants though.

Yuri cracked an eye open, seeing the pillow and a bit of silver, but closed it again before twisting onto his back. He snoozed for a few seconds before the noise stared up again.

"Mrph... Mnhhh...mrrrrroooOOOOOOOOWWWWWWWHHHH...

"...Your son is calling..." Viktor mumbled quietly.

"Our son."

"Before I wake up, he's yours."

"...But you're awake right now."

"Can you be sure of that?" The Russian teased, eyes staying closed the whole time.

Yuri just turned tired eyes at him and blinked slowly, one eye opening at a time after that where sleep stuck it closed. Makkachin's soft panting caught his attention after that...as did the nudge of a nose against that bowl to move it closer.

"Hooooooowwwwwwwwwwwrrrrhhhhhh...

"Aright aright I'm going..." Yuri whined, rising like the dead in an old 80s horror movie, arms
extended forward as he bent up at the waist. Makkachin barked and jumped up, dancing around in a
circle at the end of the bed before catching a sudden case of the *zoomies* and rushed off towards the
stairs. Yuri rubbed his eyes, yawned, grabbed a pillow, and playfully smacked it against his dozing
husband, "I'll be back."

Viktor just laughed and stretched his arms out, wrapping them around the pillow for something of a
cat-like bear-hug stretch as he felt the weight of his partner's frame lifting off the other side of the
bed, "I love youuu~"

"Say that again after I come back smelling like dog food." Yuri hollered back, slipping a bath-robe
onto his skinny frame as he descended to the main floor. He finished tying it by the time his feet
touched the cold hardwood, the shuffle catching Jiro's attention.

That little head cocked back again though, bowl nearby, and he started that muffled whimper all over
again.

*Mmmhhhhhh...*

"Ah it's okay I'm here calm down." Yuri insisted, trying to hurry by.

*Mmngrrrrrrhhhh...mrroooowwwWWWWWWHHHhh...*

Pausing where he was, Yuri crouched down on a knee, and set one hand on the Akita's back, "I
know...you have the sonorous war-cry of a very hungry puppy...and you're ferocious..."

Jiro just looked at him...and leaned his head back again.

Viktor grinned to himself from behind the pillow when he heard the next howl, and looked towards
the door, half-expecting his partner to come striding in any moment demanding a switch-out. Arrival
lacking though, the silver Russian stretched again, arms and legs reaching out as far as they could go,
then contracted again as the man flopped into relaxation. One hand went down under the blankets to
scratch his chest, and he went still again...for a moment or two. Slate eyes turned towards the
window, squinting slightly despite the blinds being drawn; the curtains were only closed half-way.
Eyes then turned down towards the edge of the bed. He waited a moment, glancing back towards the
doorway for a moment in case Yuri somehow snuck all the way back upstairs without his notice, but
upon realizing he could still hear the sounds of dishes being set on the counter, he knew there was
still time. He pulled his side of the comforter and sheet up, and wiggled himself out over the edge,
hands going down to the carpet until he'd lowered himself down to set the top of his head there, too.
He scanned the shadows under the bed until he saw the box, and tried to reach for it.

Broad shoulders and a narrow space made it hard to get more than elbow-deep into the darkened
area, and Viktor started to twist, trying to lower down just enough to get his arm under the bed-
frame. With every inch further though, it was an inch further off the top of the bed. Fingers grazed
the edge of the box, feeling the sharp edge of newly cut cardboard...and another inch of the fitted
sheet gave way.

"Just...a little...bit...furth-ACK!"

That large pale frame came tumbling out, and Viktor crumpled like an accordion in the space
between the bed and the wall, falling arse over end until nothing could be seen of him from the
doorway but his feet.

"...What in the world?" Yuri's voice piqued, "...Viktor? Are you okay?"

"Everything is fine."
"You just fell out of bed and landed on your head."

The silver Russian just pointed at the right ankle where it was suspended in the air above him, "But I didn't land on that! Points for me!"

Yuri huffed a laugh and stepped closer, crawling over the bed until he could lie down facing his twisted partner, and propped one palm under his jaw, "Mhm...10 points for Hufflepuff."

The silver Russian slowly scrambled around, until he could sit properly again and set his elbows against the edge of the mattress, teasing the edge of an Eskimo kiss, "It's 10 points more than Ravenclaw has right now so I'll take what I can get."

"So what were you doing anyway? I thought I'd find something entirely different when I got back up here."

Viktor smiled sweetly and gave a wink, "I thought I had more time. You came back too fast."

"O-kaaaay?"

The Russian pulled his arms back and went fishing for the box again, then narrowly brought it up from under the bed, squeezing it up into the small space between their faces until one edge was under each of their noses. All the while, Viktor was looking straight on.

Yuri's face just flushed terribly and he looked away with a grumble.

"I know, I know..." Viktor sighed, leaning back against the wall with the box in both hands then, and turned it around in examination, "I just think it's such a shame. You're so nervous about how I think it feels that you won't even consider letting me use it on you."

Those cherry-tinted irises glanced back slightly, chin pivoting on palm, but then Yuri looked away again, "It's not that I won't consider it... I just..."

"Mhmmmmm?"

"...It's just that...I..."

"Yessss?" Viktor leaned closer.

Yuri huffed another disgruntled sigh, "...After the fit I threw a few days ago over it, I feel like I'm obligated by pride to refuse it for a while longer. I don't want it to seem like I got all worked up, only to say 'just kidding' afterwards."

"Pssshh."

"It's enough that you know."

"So you won't let me use it on you."

"Ask me again some other time..." Yuri said as he pulled his chin off his hand, and reached forward with it, "Right now, there's only one thing..." He started, brushing a few strands of silver hair out of the man's eyes, "...That I want you using on me."

"Ohhhh~?"

Cheeks flushed anew, but eyes were locked, and Yuri lowered that same hand until a fingertip was pressed to a certain length of excited flesh poking out from under black bikini-brief underwear, "By
all rights, *this* should've been put to task a few minutes ago already."

Viktor gasped rather dramatically, letting the box fall from his lap as he quickly stood up, fumbled for the nightstand drawer for his slippery-fun-time juice, and promptly hopped onto the back of his husband's prone legs. He leaned in close over the man's back, and kissed the edge of one ear, "I'm remise in my duties. How can you ever forgive me?" He wondered, leaning back again to start squeezing some of the clear fluid into his hand.

"Give me your *deepest* apologies."

The Russian squeezed too hard suddenly and the bottle went flying from his grasp, his eyes white from the surprise, "...Ah...?"

"Something wrong?" Yuri wondered, turning his head just so, eyes half-lidded as he looked past his shoulder.

Viktor managed to blink once or twice, but then just gave a wry glance, "...That look on your face should be classified as a lethal weapon."

The younger man just teased a quiet laugh, and bent his knees, nudging his partner with the balls of his feet against the man's back, "Are you hesitating?"

"Me!? Hesitating on the precipice of *sexy-time*!? *Never.*"

"Then what are you waiting for?"

The silver legend huffed a laugh quietly, and reached his dry hand forward to start lifting up the hem of the bath-robe, moving to fold it over his spouse's back; his wet hand went to work spreading the liquid around over himself, the sound of slick strokes rising into the air, "My love, cut me a little slack... It's a treat when *you* make risqué jokes. Allow me a moment to bask in the warmth of their rare glory."

Yuri offered a smile, taking his husband-stunning victories where he could, and then turned to face forward, stretching his arms out over the edge of the bed, fingers reaching for the window. He relaxed though as he felt fingers pulling at the black elastic shorts that clung to his hips, peeling them just barely far enough out of the way to make the rest possible. The wet slick was cold at first, even with the heat of the member it was slathered over, but it warmed with each gentle pass over his own skin. He let out a breathy sigh as he closed his eyes and let his frame go limp, every muscle going lax as he waited for that urgently-needed pressure. Just as he felt it starting to prod at him, he felt his partner's posture change, leaning forward over his back, one hand pressing under his arm as the silver Russian kissed the back of his head.

Without a word - just the soft press of lips to hair, then to an ear, and finally to the crook of shoulder and neck - Viktor pushed his hips forward, and felt himself begin to slip inside. He could sense the slight tightening of his partner's frame as he went forward, the younger man's own hips rising up subtly against him, only to relax again shortly after. Once he was far enough within the man to know he wouldn't just fall out again when he backed up, Viktor turned to straighten the rest of himself out over his husband's back, and wedged both hands under the younger man's arms, and crossed his wrists under Yuri's chest, hugging him close. He was close enough then to hear the hissed breath of each deeper press, and the quiet, breathy gasps that followed.

*It's a real shame that the toy he bought me intimidates him so much,* Viktor thought, easing his husband into the rhythm with a soft, slow rocking of his hips, just enough to move them both, but not quite enough to thrust, "...*Making him feel good is most of what makes *me* feel good... If I can get him...*"
to trust the intent behind it, maybe it won't scare him so much.

"...Ngh...V-Viktor... Harder..." Yuri asked, voice in the tone of a begging whine.

Viktor did ask asked, lifting himself up slightly to perch on his elbows, and rolled his hips forward with more force. He nudged his brow against the side of his partner's head. Cool slate eyes looked ahead, barely able to see the expression on his spouse's face; that almost-worried look, lips parted, teeth sometimes clenched down, sometimes apart as the man gasped.

*Maybe I'll let it rest for now though, Viktor thought on, I need to make sure he's comfortable in his own skin again first. Last weekend will linger for quite a while, I'm sure of it...*

.

The signs were as clear as day.

West with the *Chikuhi Line* and south on the *Hasetsu Line*, or south on the the *Kyushu Shinkansen*, then west on the *Nagasaki Main Line* until it merged with the *Sasebo Line* and finally north again on the *Matsūra Tetsudo Line*.

Asahi looked down to the white fluff next to his leg, [*So...which one? The longer one, or the more awkward one?*]

Hana huffed a half-sneeze at him, but her front paw stuck out to the right as she balanced herself, and the skater sighed in resignation.

[...Awkward it is. Less than three hours left...*]
Chapter 422

CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED TWENTY TWO

Viktor sat quietly in the waiting room of the Aramaki-iin medical clinic, hands folded neatly in his lap as his nerves slowly simmered. He glanced to the side, looking out onto Hasetsu from the third floor; over the top of a neighboring building and out over the waters of the river, the little white castle on its hill in the distance. Thumbs rolled around one another, and the anxious Russian drew a sharp, impatient breath.

*How in the world did this visit about a letter turn into something that's taken a whole hour?*

"Owww..." Yuri's voice whined as he finally returned to the main area, right hand clamped around his left elbow.

Standing up quickly to approach, Viktor felt his hackles rising, "What happened? Why did that take so long? Was the doctor running really late? ...Why wouldn't they let me back with you?"

"Half the visit was about you." Yuri grumbled, moving his hand slightly to look at the lump under his sleeve, "I really wasn't expecting this at all."

Viktor blinked at him, "...Why was your visit about me? I thought we were just here to get the letter for you and Jiro."

"...Apparently Dr. Aramaki wouldn't get to that until after I got my records caught up with him." The younger figure sighed, "I hadn't seen him since before moving to Detroit. ...A few things have changed since then."

"Sure, but I'm only part of the last 2 years, not all 7."

"You're the most significant change in my life." Yuri explained, trying to get his heavy winter coat on, but unable to wrangle it properly. He lifted it to his spouse, "Help me into this thing so we can go?"

"Yeah...of course..." The silver figure answered quietly, brow still furrowed as he held the jacket up. The offending arm went in first, then the other, and he set the garment over his husband's shoulders, "So why does your arm hurt?"

"Full comprehensive, plus extra. He ordered blood-work, but the lab tech hit a nerve or something, then took what felt like half my blood." He answered, "I don't think I've ever been poked and prodded so much in my life, not even for those sports physicals we have to do."

"...And the letter?"

"We can get it tomorrow."

"Well, that's a relief at least."

"Yeah..."

Viktor made a face at that, but went against his urge to ask more questions right away. Instead, he worked to help button up his husband's jacket, wrapped a scarf around him, and helped put the Ravenclaw beanie back on his head. Once all bundled up, he offered a kissy-hug, and slid his hand...
down one arm to find the man's hand, then started moving towards the elevators. Once outside, the little red Audi beeped and flashed with the fob signal, and Viktor opened the passenger side door, letting his spouse in before closing the panel after him, and went to get in on the driver's side. The engine grumbled to life, and settled into its usual purr as it pulled out of its space and entered onto the road.

Yuri sighed and slouched in his seat, hyperaware of his sore arm, but still managed to pass it over the center console to settle his hand over his husband's thigh like he always did. He felt a few fingers slide around it, clasping around and giving it a gentle squeeze.

"Sooo..." Viktor started, slowing the car for a red light at the corner, ",...You're not being normal. It's putting me on alert, like something bad is going to happen, and I don't know what."

"Sorry." Yuri answered, "Dr. Aramaki just... I mean, I went in there to tell him about my anxiety episodes, and how Jiro had helped. I had all these points in my mind that I wanted to tell him about, like I was going to have to convince him that I needed this, in case he thought otherwise...but it ended up being a whole talk about my skating, and then my time in Detroit, and when I came home...and then you. Everything I wanted to talk about was burned out of my head. By the end of it, when he finally let me talk about Jiro, I couldn't even remember what I wanted to say. He had to put me at ease again by showing me pics of his dog, Indy...and all I could think about was how that dog looked exactly like my Vik-chan. Just...younger and alive."

"...So that's what's upsetting you? Being reminded of Vik-chan?"

"No... It was just kind of the last thing that came up." Yuri sighed again, "Everything was fine until he started asking me about you. Dr. Aramaki seemed almost angry at me for the whole thing."

"Really." Viktor said flatly, unimpressed. He gently tapped on the gas as the light turned green and their car could go again.

"Not like the way Kon used to be... It was more about how he thought I had been dumb and reckless." Yuri clarified, curling his own fingers around the ones that already held his hand, "Getting involved with someone who was so well-known and liked by the whole world. He went on for a while about risk-factors like drugs and alcohol, the reputation of Russian athletes and how he thought - if you were into that kind of thing - that you might influence me to do the same and put my career at risk...and then he capped the whole visit by jamming a white-hot knife into my worst triggers. The idea that I'd have to be really vigilant about diseases because people as popular and charming and flirtatious as you may not be so faithful..."

"You told him ab-"

"I tried." Yuri said, cutting off the thought as quickly as he could, "I tried. I mentioned the things that had happened this season so far as examples of how devoted you are, but then he'd just follow-up with questions like 'but how well did you know him before he showed up at Yu-Topia?' or 'Did he ever admit to his past relationships?' and other things..."

"Mhm?"

Yuri winced a little, "I explained to him that anything I don't know about you is because I've made a point to not know it. Sophia was enough. But that guy...I swear, if he wasn't trained as a physician, I'd think he worked secretly for the KGB or something, because he just kept asking more and more questions. I wanted to go get you so you could explain things to him when I couldn't, but he said that you being around would bias my answers." He slouched a little and reached up with his free hand to pull the edge of the beanie over his eyes, "I think the worst thing was, even after all the stuff I'd said
to defend you, and explained that you weren't this rock-star kind of person with no sense of decency, responsibility, or morals...he then asks if either of us ever had a health check before or after we started sleeping together."

"I know I'm clean."

"And I told him you'd said that once...but he asked how I knew that, and all I could say was that I took your word for it. Then he asked when you'd said it, and I told him it was after we got together...and he just gave me this look like the fact that we're married meant less than dirt to him." Yuri went on, pausing a moment to let his own mind catch up with itself. "It's hard not to know who you are, living in this city, so he knows you went to the Olympics before for Russia, and that just made him ask me about the things you might've done there...and you know I'm terrible at hiding my feelings...so he just assumed my silence was a confession that I'd known about you being free with yourself before... He didn't even have to ask about specifics."

"...What else?" Viktor wondered pensively.

He hesitated for a few seconds, but Yuri pushed himself to sitting up again, and drew a sharp breath, "I know he was just trying to be thorough. I just wish he hadn't framed it like we should think we're both sick until proven healthy, or asked questions that made me feel like I have to be distrustful of you just to answer him honestly." He tilted his head on the headrest, giving a worried look, "Is this what it's like to get questioned by medical people about your relationships...?"

"...Maybe just for people like us." The silver Russian offered warily, "When I went over that sort of thing back in St. Petersburg, they called the things I did with women 'conquests,' acting like it was something to celebrate."

Yuri grumble-whined.

"...They really weren't though," Viktor tried to say, thinking perhaps the verbiage wasn't the best, "How could they be when everyone showed up of their own free will? Those doctors made it sound like I was looking for people to subjugate or something. That was never something I thought about though. Even way back in the beginning, when I was rising in popularity, the idea th-" A hand came up over his mouth suddenly, and he quit speaking.

"I get it..." The younger man said urgently, "I was just looking for a yes or no..."

Viktor grimaced behind the hand, but the ache in the arm that suspended it was enough to bring it down again, and it returned to the top of his leg shortly after. He huffed a quiet sigh and curled his fingers around where they'd been before, "Sorry. I keep thinking that if I explain it...then..."

"I don't want to know about the people you were with before." Yuri said, anxious but firm, "I never have, ever since the beginning, when you tried to tell me about them and I stopped you."

"...Can I ask why? They're all in the past... Nothing about their stories can hurt you."

Another light, and another pause of the Audi on snowy streets.

"...Same reason why I didn't appreciate Dr. Aramaki asking questions that made it seem like I should doubt you, and why I don't want to deal with the toy back home." Yuri attempted, not sure he'd made sense. The light turned green, and the car started moving again, "Every intimate moment you've had with someone or something other than me, is a moment you've memorized as something different. If you tell me about the good times, it makes me feel like you miss them. If you tell me about the bad ones, I feel sad for you. All of it makes me anxious. I don't...know how to explain it..."
"There is nothing about you that I would rather have from anyone else, Yuri." Viktor reassured, stroking his thumb back and forth.

"Maybe I'm just too sensitive." Yuri wondered aloud, "It doesn't take a whole lot to break me into pieces. The idea of you leaving, or wanting something I can't give, sets off every internal panic-button I have. I'd never go so far as to say either of us is co-dependent in an unhealthy way...we're both pretty confident in our own self-worth, and you've always been emotionally strong, but I just..."

The Russian huffed quietly, Strong, or just really good at burying the weakness?

"I can't...stand the idea of being on my own. Of being without you." Yuri continued, "Deep down, I consider it my biggest weakness, like I'd be helpless without you...it's a fear worse than the anxiety and self-doubt... And because I've never been with anyone else, and had this experience before, I don't even know if this is normal or...if I'm going too far...?" He turned his head and lifted the beanie off one eye, "Please tell me this feeling is normal...?"

Viktor glanced over briefly, seeing that nervous and desperate look. He turned his eyes back to driving though, and rotated the wheel to take them out onto the main road that lead past the castle, "Having experienced other kinds of love in my life, I can't say I've felt the same way about anyone more than once. But, when it comes to you...I'll say this: If being so in love with someone, that it breaks your heart to even think about being apart, is so wrong...then I don't want you to be right. So...even if it's not normal...at least for us, it's mutual. To Hell with anyone who thinks otherwise."

Yuri blinked at the man, but the evacuation of his worries was swift, leaving him with just the surprise. It was such a powerful feeling that it knocked him right back into his seat, sliding nearly into the foot-well (if not for his seatbelt.) He rubbed his eyes with his free hand and pressed his palm to his chest, letting out a deep exhale, "...That's such a relief...you don't even know..."

The silver Russian smiled with his own sense of relief, "Glad I could put your worries to rest." He said calmly, looking out across the Maizuru Bridge, and up the hill towards Hasetsu Castle. Eyes widened in surprise, and he shook his husband's hand where he still held it over his right leg, "Yuri! Yuri, look! The castle!"

"Huh?" He answered, leaning down towards the dash to get a better look. His eyes went wide as well, and he sat up straight again, "Wow! We have to go up there!"

The train out of Fukuoka was as slow as the one that lead out of Wakkanai, and was quite a bit older. Seats no longer assembled as forward-facing pairs; they now were nothing more than a long, singular bench that lined the walls of the cabin, and everyone sitting inside faced towards the middle. That late in the afternoon though, and on a week-day, the train-car was sparsely populated, as it had been for a good chunk of the trip. Passing through one of the smaller cities, Asahi kept his eyes to the north, watching the water go by. He only turned his gaze inward when he spotted the nerve-wracking sign for the 202...'Hasetsu Highway.' The Chikuhi Line would follow it, nearly parallel, for most of the way down the northern Kyushu shoreline.

He turned to his phone for a little while, and loaded up Instagram to pass the time. Hana was standing close by, pacing lightly back and forth around the mostly-empty train-car. She stretched her arms out, shook, and hopped back up onto the bench on Asahi's left, nosing her way under the man's arm so she could set her head on his leg.

He obliged, and gently pat a shoulder through thick white fur, [We're almost done. Only a few hours
left.] He reassured, though nervously. Eyes went back to his phone, and he spotted the countless new comments and post-like alerts, and went to go read a few.

The overwhelming amount of support I've gotten from the community is still making my head spin, he thought, thumbing his way down the page to see more comments, What few individuals did give me grief were shot down by others immediately. I don't even know any of these people...but they're defending me like they've been friends of mine for years.

His last post was still the one about how 'it look[ed] like [he] had a dog now.' Many commenters were excited, saying that it was meant to be, and that maybe the painful burden would be less of a weight to carry now that he wasn't doing it by himself. Others made reference to the pup's name, and cited that, like Hana (flower,) good things could finally grow.

After a while, he switched out to check the feeds of the tiny handful of people whose accounts he watched. The most recent update from Viktor was the first thing he saw.

v-nikiforov
• Hasetsu, Saga Prefecture, Kyushu, Japan
[Photo: Mid-afternoon, Hasetsu Castle in the background, Yuri and Viktor both showing it off as though in presentation...and for good reason: The castle had been decorated on all four sides with massive banners showing off the Olympic rings, and smaller banners above them with 'Congrats to Yuri and Viktor for Gold and Bronze at Nationals! Good luck at Four Continents, and Skate hard in PyeongChang! Hasetsu is with you!']

76,216 likes

v-nikiforov They're really getting into it now! They waited until after #Nationals to post this, but it still feels like @y-nikiforov and I just won our spot on the #OlympicTeam all over again! Congrats are also in order for @yuri_plisetsky for getting his jacket for the Russian team, and he just got into town the other day! The #PodiumFam is together again in Japan! #SkateHusbands and #SkateSon will be training in Hasetsu together from now on, with @minako-okukawa jumping in as Plisetsky's new skating coach! Still love you though, Yakov. Promise! Also I had nothing to do with this I swear ( • v \);σ I HAVE, however, agreed to be Plisetsky's choreographer for next season, so expect that to be pretty crazy between the three of us! ...Oh, and it looks like my beloved just got a text from the family that there's going to be a party at 18:00 at Yu-Topia to celebrate everything! If you're in town, come on by! Hubby and I are going to get some #bubbletea and take the #DogSons for a walk on the #beach until then. #JiroAkita is getting so strong! And my lovely fluffy #MakkachinPoodle is such a great big brother! Don't forget to check out @PupsOfNikiforov to get content about our #FurKids!

View all 918 comments

damnitmoonmoon omg i cant

bgarren24 Party in Hasetsu! I wish I was in Japan!

livinglargenincharge The RSF is gonna have a coronary with all its best people living in Japan haaaah they're probably scared you're gonna convince their Yuri to switch sides

phichit-chu Bubble tea! Olympics! Dogs! PARTY HARDY! I can't wait to get to Korea! Better keep your eyes on the short-game though, otherwise I'll swipe Gold from one of you in Colorado Springs in a few weeks o(≧▽≦o)

christophe-ge Only a Russian would be crazy enough to take long walks on the beach in the middle of bloody winter. We'll have to do something fun when you guys get to Vienna ;)

47 minutes ago

Asahi felt a flutter in his gut to see the post, knowing he was getting so much closer to Hasetsu with every passing second, but knowing that no one else knew he was approaching.
The words echoed in his head as though Viktor had spoken them aloud, and didn't fade even as the light of the winter sun dipped under the horizon. The sky changed from cerulean to grey-yellow to dark blue, and finally black, leaving nothing but sparse clouds and a crystal canopy in the Heavens, dotted with innumerable stars.

It was hard to discern Hasetsu from the many smaller towns until train stations were being announced, and Asahi could track where they were based on the map listed on the inside walls of the passenger-car. But when it started to list the ones that he knew were within the city, he could practically feel his whole frame tremble.

Hamasaki...
Nijinomatsubura...
Higashi-Hasetsu...
Watada...

...Hasetsu Station... We're here...

He was barely able to catch a glimpse of the 'tourist trap castle' as the train went over the river, but he could see the little white dot within the spotlights that shone into the sky from under it. Still, the lights were like a beacon, and half the countryside could see them. Five lights in all, for each of the five Olympic Rings. As the train stopped though, Asahi had to get off to wait for the train to take him south. It was nerve-killing to stand on the platform in that city, even with Hana sitting by his side. She started pulling on her lead though, and the hapless skater could only guess why.

She snuffled around the terminal, finding the stairs next to the escalator, and made her way down, then took an immediate hard left after the turnstiles to get through the doors. Directly outside was the terminal courtyard, and the statue with the sea-urchin and the squid sitting on top of it, looking happy in spite of the urchin's predicament. Hana yanked on her leash to find the closest bush, and did as dogs are wont to do, then trotted happily back with her tail wagging.

[Okaycomeonlet'sgetbackinside.] Asahi said, half-startled by being outside the station. He offered his JR Pass to get back through the gates, ignored all the posters featuring the local 'famous skaters,' and heaved a breath once he was at the top of the stairs again, [Sheesh... This whole city gives me palpitations.]

Mercifully, the southbound train wasn't more than a few minutes out, though once it arrived, Asahi couldn't get on it fast enough. Leaving the city, and the spotlights, behind, he only felt safe enough to relax again once it was all out of sight.

As if feeling like I'm trespassing in Hasetsu wasn't bad enough...getting back to Imari...is going to be such a mess. I don't know if anyone knows what's happened. No one has called to ask where I am since I didn't come home right away. No one's messaged me about the results of the competition. Not that they usually do...but they knew how important this one was to me.

He pawed at his chest, trying to get his heart to calm down a little.

...The fact that no one's said a thing yet is really making me nervous. Maybe I should've taken the long way after all.

Yu-Topia was half a mad-house with how many people had turned up. There was even a news crew...
from the JSF present, and Morooka was announcing the entire thing like it was a competition in its own right. He was one of the first people outside the main doors when Mari signaled the parking-space-less Audi to come into the courtyard, for lack of a better idea, and the Nikiforovs stepped out, Makkachin trotting out at his human’s heels while Jiro, half asleep, lay against his own human’s chest and shoulder.

"Skaters Yuri and Viktor Nikiforov have arrived at Yu-Topia Kastuki! Looks like the party’s really going to get started now!" The newscaster called into his mic.

"OhmygoshMorookaishere." Yuri stammered, trying to put on a smile, but found it awkward and strained. It was even worse when he realized Yurio and all 5 girls were standing behind the reporter, then his own family, as well as Minako and a few patrons of the resort who were curious about what was going on. For a micro-second, Yuri noted that Mikhail wasn't there.

"It's kind of a big deal, my love. The same thing used to happen with the RSF back in St. Petersburg. The cameras would be hovering for a few days, seeing if I would create anything new for the Games. It'd be a whole event when I actually unveiled something new, even if it was only unconnected pieces of a program." Viktor teased, finding his husband's hand between them.

"I'm seriously not used to that kind of attention here in Hasetsu..." Yuri sighed, stepping closer with Jiro in his free arm, thoroughly exhausted from the adventures of the day.

"At least it's not just because I'm here anymore. This attention is well-deserved by you for your own reasons! Hasetsu has a locally-born-and-raised Olympian now." The silver legend added, pausing slightly out of microphone-range. He turned to face his spouse, slate eyes glowing with nearby lantern light, "If you're too modest to be loud and proud about your accomplishments, then let's brag about each other instead of ourselves. Two coaches for two Olympians."

The younger figure gaped for a moment, but then nodded and smiled, "Yeah."

They found a kiss between each other before turning to face the growing crowd just inside the resort.

Morooka stepped closer, practically beaming with the pride of all Japan to be in the presence of the two skaters. He held the mic up to himself first, and looked to Yuri, "Nikiforov-san..." He started, "Back in Sochi, I pleaded with you not to retire. Who could've guessed that, 2 years later, you'd be representing all of Japan at the Winter Games?"

"...It still feels like something of a dream, actually." Yuri admitted sheepishly, still sporting the remnants of that awkward smile. Viktor had an arm around him by then though and it calmed his nerves, "Let's actually get inside. Jiro is all tuckered out and I want to warm him up." He asked, nudging the puppy's sleepy face with his cheek, "We can all get comfortable and enjoy the party indoors."

The train station in Imari had looked the same for as long as Asahi could remember. Unlike in Hasetsu, where the railway had been upgraded in the last few years, including a raised track and a second floor to the arrivals terminal, the tracks at Imari Station were still on the ground, and the same tired old overhang stood guard on either side. Just beyond the cage-like walls of the terminal platform were dozens of parked bikes, forming a side-by-side line that was easily 150ft long. Beyond the bikes, the parking lot, and the northern half of the city. The skater drew a nervous breath through his scarf; he kept well-hidden under his hood, scarf wrapped around his head, leaving only his ski-goggles for him to look through.
Not that there was any crowd to recognize or greet him. Imari was known for its ceramics, not its skaters.

The anxious figure looked down at his dog, nodded nervously, and started walking. From the Imari Station, it was a straight-shot on the north-south main road. His slow pace meant it was nearly 9:30pm when he finally arrived on that last street. His family's house was the second on the left; it was a small Feudal-era castle unto itself, with traditional Japanese-style architecture for the roofing, but something more European for the main structure. There was a two-car attached garage on one side, with more of the house behind it, and a large workshop-style building to the left. The house covered so much space that it had its own 4-car parking lot out front, as though the house were actually some medium-sized business. The second floor sat above the main section of the building, and to the right of it extended more of the first floor, until it hit the backside of the buildings to the next house over. In front of everything was an irrigation ditch, with a lightly-decorative stone wall in front, and a short concrete bridge that connected the road to the parking area. Across the small, narrow street was a huge field, and closer to the line of houses, a series of small family plots for farming, with a long and thin retention canal between two sections. Behind the houses was a hill with a small forest, separating it from Imari Shiritu Keisei Junior High School on the other side.

Asahi took a deep breath and stepped across the small bridge, heading for the out-pouching entrance hall, complete with its wooden double-doors. He nudged Hana over towards the stone wall and threaded the handle of her leash through one of the decorative holes, tying it off, and then turned to the pup, [Stay here a minute. We never had pets so I don't think they'll let you inside right away. I'll let you in through the back door once they know we're here, and you can stay in my room. Okay?]

The dog grumbled, but she sat down, northern-breed fluff keeping her warm despite the icy chill. She watched her human go towards the door, pulling his scarf and hood away as he reached into his pocket for his keys, and set down his luggage for a moment to fumble with the lock.

It didn't turn.

Asahi pulled they key back just to make sure he hadn't put it in upside-down somehow, or used the wrong one, but sure enough, it was the right key. He tried again, sure to put it in all the way, and still nothing. Keys were put away and he knocked instead, "Okā-san, sumimasen, doa o akete kudasaaai." (Mom, sorry, please open the door.) He called casually, "Tadaimaaa." (I'm back.) He backed off a few paces and listened, looking through the side panels of glass to check for movement. He'd seen the lights from the street and he knew they'd be off if people were gone or asleep, so he was certain someone was there. It felt like ages without an answer, but just as he'd raised his hand to try knocking again, he finally heard the sound of the deadbolt being turned from the inside.

It wasn't his mother who'd answered though. It was an older reflection of himself, but with shorter hair.

"Oh...Daisuke-ni-san..." (Brother Daisuke.)

"Asahi."

The skater immediately felt the pit in his stomach turn into a gaping chasm, [...Sorry, I didn't know you were going to be here. Uhm...also sorry for getting back late. It was a long trip.] He said casually, bowing his head, and reached for his rolling suitcases to start his approach for the door. Daisuke put his arm to the frame though and blocked the way. Asahi stopped in his tracks, keeping his eyes down, [What's wrong?]
[They know.] The older figure answered ominously.

[...I just got done with a competition. There's a lot they could know. You'll have to be more specific.] Asahi retorted, trying to be normal despite his pounding heart.

Daisuke just looked over him from the entry hall, and spotted the dog tied up a few yards back, [That your dead boy-toy's dog?]

Eyes went wide, and the skater's heart skipped a beat, but he lifted his head and stared at the man blocking his way, [Dead boy-toy? Are you serious? Show some damn respect. Even if you don't like what he was to me, there's still a family out there who lost their son and brother.] He tried to force his way through, but Daisuke was not only older, but quickly more physical, and a hand pressed into his chest to hold him back, [What's the big idea? I live here, don't I? You don't.]

[You don't either. Not anymore.] Daisuke answered, [The locks were changed yesterday.]

[Wh-... Why!?] Asahi barked, backing off and swatting the arm away, [What's going on!?]

[If'd be best if you just left. You've already done enough damage to this family's reputation. Dad's terrified he's going to go out of business because of you. Mom is already hearing the ridicule from her church friends.]

Stunned, Asahi felt as though his heart would stop entirely, and his head swam from the surprise. He crouched on one knee and held the taller suitcase for balance, [I don't understand... I just won Silver at a National competition...I got on the Olympic Team...and I'm being thrown out of my own home!? Because of what!?!]

[Didn't the fact that I recognized the dog make it obvious?] Daisuke asked more firmly, [Mom and dad may not be on social media, but I am. I went to check how you'd done, and ran into a whole crap-ton of stuff on SMS about you wanting to fucking kill yourself? And then confessed to the entire world that you like dick, even though you already knew what it would do to our family if you ever said that to anyone? Real classy. Don't you have any shame?]

[...I...] He stammered, taken quite aback by the whole situation. He could feel the sting in his eyes, but the pain in his chest was even worse, [...Shame and guilt are all I have.]

[After everything we've done for you. Paid for your frivolous little hobby, despite how stupidly expensive it was...gave you free room and board...gave you every chance to make something of yourself...and how to you repay us? By betraying us?] The older figure went on accusingly, [Just go. I had to come all the way down here just to make sure you wouldn't tear the family apart when you got back. Mom and dad can't even stand to look at you anymore.]

[Can't I at least get my st-]

[You don't have 'stuff' here.] Daisuke declared adamantly, and pointed out the door towards the road, [This household is for items belonging to the Saito family. You're no longer part of it. JUST. GO.]

Asahi stumbled back from the force of the command, falling over entirely. He scrambled to collect his bags...now, the only belongings he had in the world...and started to move back towards where Hana had started to whimper. He barely got the knot loose from the hole through the stone when she abruptly took off running...straight at the doorway, [HANA! COME BACK!]

Snapping and barking, baring her teeth, spitting and snarling, she charged...and bounced off the door where it was slammed shut without a word. She screamed out, but went right back to her attack.
Asahi scrambled to her to her, clambering for the lead where it was lying on the ground, and started to corral her back.

[Hana, Hana...Hana! Let's get out of here...!] He pleaded, pulling back on the harness, only to spot that the dog's white fur was stained red from the blood trickling out of her nose. The incensed dog was practically frothing at the mouth from her anger, and only turned around to walk in Asahi's same direction when he'd pulled her across the bridge over the irrigation ditch. She started whimpering between pants once whey were at the intersection of the street and the larger road. Asahi wouldn't stop moving though, heading back the way they'd come, fighting to pull his things behind him as the adrenaline of his terror started to wear off.

There weren't even any lamps to light the way until they got back to the main street, where businesses and intersection indicators were built. He had to use the flashlight app on his dying phone to guide the way. When they'd arrived, and the light from the buildings was enough to see, Asahi looked to turn the App off and check his battery...but spotted the words 'No Service' in the top left corner. Panic was starting to set in...both for his dog's injury, and the fact that he had no way of calling or texting anyone anymore.

I know I had service before... Did they cut my phone off!? Were they planning this!? Why didn't they just call and tell me not to come back!?

All he could do was continue the trek back south. There was only one motel he could think of to stay in, and it was next door to the train station he'd just come from. The panic made him practically jog down the road, getting back to that intersection in half the time. His luggage toppled over a number of times though along the way, making it an even bigger struggle than it already was, scuffing the suitcases each time.

'Central Hotel Imari' was no help though. They wouldn't let him through the doors with a bloodied dog, even with the explanation. They roughly told him to try somewhere else, pointing west to where they said another hotel would be. Asahi vaguely knew about a smaller venue in that direction, though it took another cold 10 minutes to get there. It was just past 10:15pm when he arrived, having cleaned up the red smears from his dog's white fur as well as he could. He tied her to the parking sign and left her with his things, thinking he could get permission to bring her inside before they saw her...but just as it seemed like he was home free, the staff at the front desk of the equally-uncreatively-named 'Imari Hotel' reported that his bank card was being declined. In an instant, he knew what it meant, and he bowed his head before turning to leave again with his apologies.

Hana quickly stood when she saw her person come outside again so quickly, tail wagging with uncertainty. Asahi shook his head and untied her.

There wasn't a bench or a seat to speak of, so all the helpless figure could do was walk aimlessly. His mind had gone blank and numb from the shock of everything, so much so that he hadn't even felt safe enough to be angry about it yet. Hana sneezed in the cold, and a splash of fine red mist hit the snow before her.

[...This is so bad...] He lamented quietly, [I don't know what to do... Coach Nagisa and Webber are probably expecting me to be back, and I can't even tell them what happened without my phone.]

The Hokkaido-ken whined at him, and he knelt down to rub her bloody nose with his scarf again.

[What should I do...? I don't know how to help either of us.] His eyes widened suddenly, and he checked his phone again, looking into the Settings app to see if there was a WiFi signal he could get into.
If I can get an internet connection, I can send an email...!

The only signals that popped up in the list though were locked-down with passwords. Standing outside a convenience store had offered him the only hope, but the free signal was so weak that nothing would load, and his email app timed out, unable to confirm his passwords. Struggling and losing hope, he fell against the ground, and leaned his back against the small store's outside wall.

Hana whimpered, but sat as well, looking from her human to the doors, and then down.

Asahi clicked through his useless phone, seeing App after App refuse to work. The previous text messages he'd sent, and the people they'd gone to, but that he could no longer communicate with. The tightness in his chest seemed to get worse with every minute... but one final epiphany struck him, and Asahi practically threw his suitcase open, tossing things onto the icy, dirty ground in his search.

Riku's phone. In the center of his things, just where he'd left it.

Please please please please please!

LTE was displaying on the top left. He practically screamed in relief. He grabbed his own phone again and searched frantically for his coach's phone number, able to at least see the contacts list, even if he couldn't use his own phone to reach out to them. He frantically typed the numbers into Riku's device... but then hesitated.

...What can she even do for me...? She's my coach, not... anything else... At best, all I can tell her is that I can't skate anymore. Even with the money that people donated this weekend, I can't afford everything that my family had been paying for until now, as well as all the new stuff I have to pay for on my own... And it's so late at night... Nagisa is probably asleep by now, and she always sets her phone to mute overnight... I'm sure she was following my train ride south... she was so excited that I was online... She knows I would've gotten in late, but... not that this would happen...

He sighed and collapsed again, reaching slowly to put his suitcase back together again.

'If you're in town, come on by!'

The words echoed in his head unbidden. He shook them away and started walking, dragging his things behind him.

...I came this close... and now I'm literally homeless...

He looked around the cold, empty streets, shut down for the night and void of people.

...Will I be sleeping in an alley tonight...?

Hana whined beside his legs again, and he glanced down. The trickle from her nose had stopped, but that might've only been because of the cold. The white fur over her lip was still stained, and it had turned brown by then, with little streaks of bright red mixed in.

If we're stuck outside tonight, will either of us even make it until morning? It's freezing out here... If we stop moving, a chill will settle in for sure...

High-alert was shifting into despair, and a headache was starting to creep in.

'If you're in town, come on by!'

Damnit...
He lowered the suitcases again, and opened up both phones. In desperation, there was only one option left.

"Okay okay, we need one of just the boys, and then everyone else can pile in." Minako said, holding up her phone as everyone started shuffling into place, "Yuri, Viktor, Yura...go stand over there." She gestured to a nearby wall, and the trio did as told, the older pair holding onto champagne flutes while the youngest simply stuffed his hands into his pockets. All three were wearing their full Olympic tracksuits, their respective medals hanging in front of their chests. Once they were standing close, and Viktor had an arm around both Yuris' shoulders, the ballerina held up her phone and tapped lightly on the screen to get it to focus, "Okay, say cheese!"

"Cheeeese~!"

Happy with the framing, she clicked the picture, and the flash blinked...and so did about half a dozen others, JSF crew included.

"Girls-" Minako gestured to the triplets and their new cousins, "Alright...you three in front, then Nikki and Vikki on the sides. You boys stay right as you are."

"Haaai."

With everyone assembled, arms going around everyone to drag the group closer, they all smiled and waited for the flash, "Cheeeese!"

"Anyone else want in? Did we get everyone?" Minako wondered, looking around the common room.

"I think that's it," Yuri commented, rubbing his eyes under his glasses, "We've taken so many combinations of pictures, I'll be seeing spots for days..."

Viktor sipped at his bubbly, "Me too. Oh, Yuri...YURI."

"What?" Both of them asked.

The Russian was trying hard not to cackle, but it was getting difficult, and he hopped on the balls of his feet repeatedly, tapping his husband's arm for his attention, "Look!

Yuri's eyes went around to where his partner was pointing, and to his immediate horror, the rotund, painted belly of his nightmares was coming into view.

"Heeyyyy everyone thisisagreattparty~!" Toshiya declared, a bottle of sake in each hand, his brightly-colored wibbly-wiggly body stumbling into the room.

"Oh my god. MOM." Yuri yelled frantically, "YOU SAID DAD WOULDN'T DRINK TONIGHT."

Hiroko couldn't hear though; she was up at the front with customers.

Viktor couldn't help himself though and was already loading up the camera on his phone, "This is so great."

Minako, pale from embarrassment by association, quietly slinked off to the side, shaking her head, "Toshiya-san, you can't hold your alcohol..." She mused quietly, taking her seat again near where Mikhail had been watching quietly from the wings. She set her phone on the low-rising table and
reached for the glass of ice-water she'd been nursing in place of beer...though it had been served in a beer glass. She took a sip and nudged her partner with an elbow, "Do you ever get blitzed like that?" She wondered with half a laugh, gesturing her head towards the Katsuki Patriarch; he was starting to do some odd dance in the middle of the room.

"DAD QUIT IT." Yuri protested, trying to get the man's jacket on him again, "THE JSF IS HERE. THIS IS ALL BEING RECORDED."

"Yooooo need tolearntorelaaaaaxxxxx...Yuuuri, get a drink! They're cheeeaaapppp tonight!"

"They're always cheap for me! I only pay the cost of materials when I get something!" He argued. Viktor was nearly in tears behind him, laughing so hard.

Mikhail looked around carefully, but then shook his head, "Nah. I never let myself get past buzzed."

"Why? Did that one time you got drunk cost you something?" Minako teased.

"Nope. Never been drunk, not even once." He explained, reaching for the small cup of coffee he'd had, "I saw families back in Russia torn apart by vodka and I never wanted to be that."

"Oh..." She nodded, sipping her water again, "Oh! The girls and Yurio and I were talking before, and I totally forgot...but Yurio mentioned something about mandatory military service in Russia. Did you...?"

Mikhail blinked at her, but then smiled nervously, "Ah...erm... Well..."

Bzzzzt

Minako's eyes were drawn away, looking to her phone on the table-top. She didn't recognize the number from the text message, and turned away again without reading it, "Well...?"

The elder Russian grimaced, "...I don't want to add another list of horrible things I've done in my youth to the already-extensive library."

"So you did go."

He sighed, but nodded, "When my sister and Kon were away for those few years before having Viktor, yeah... It was a 3-year-long nightmare; another life entirely. By the time it was over, going to work in that steel-mill was a mercy."

"What about Kon?"

"...Y-yeah, he was in the service, too." The silver figure nodded reluctantly, "Way later than I did though...I didn't go to school until after, so they threw me in as soon as I turned 18. I barely know anything about what Kon did or where he was for his own term though. I think he had only just finished school by then, and was forced to do his time before he aged out of the system." He tapped his head, trying to remember the details, "...I never really talked about it with him; I purged my own time from memory. What I know about Kon's came from Tat, and she wasn't in the service with him, obviously. They were stationed out of St. Petersburg and...I... I think they actually conceived Viktor while he was still in it. He got out because Viktor was born, although by then, he'd already been given extensive leave...enough so that he felt safe to move Tat and him back home. He was pretty old by military standards anyway, starting into his 30s, and he had no intention of making it a career. He got out, they had Viktor, and Kon joined me in the mill." He ruffled his hair, "...I think... It's all kind of hazy right now. I've purged all memory of the service so effectively that I sometimes think about the timeline without including it."
Minako impatiently turned away and grabbed her phone, "Who in the Hell is messaging me this late at night?"

"Probably a scammer from overseas who doesn't know what time it is here," Mikhail huffed, taking a sip from his coffee.

The ballerina's eyes went from squinted in annoyance, to wide in surprise, and she swallowed nervously, "...Oh boy..."

"What is it?"

"...It's Asahi." She answered, brow furrowed, "He just got home and...well, it's not home anymore. He's using someone else's phone to reach out because his own was shut off. He has no money and no one will help him because he's got that dog now."

"No money? What about all those donations you told me he was getting now?"

"Need a bank account to transfer funds into, and a few days to validate it...or a home address to send a prepaid VISA to. His bank card was declined, so he has nothing," She looked up with worry, "We have to do something. He'll freeze to death if he has nowhere to go."

"What do you want to do?" Mikhail wondered, "If we were in Edmonton it would be easy, but...I'm nowhere close to being established here yet. Options are somewhat limited, especially this late at night."

Minako looked around hesitantly, but spotted the answer not far away, still recording Papa Katsuki's antics, and Yuri's attempts to subdue them. She pat her partner's hand and rose to stand, "Hold on."

The elder Russian watched her go, but did as asked and simply waited, watching. The ballerina hesitantly approached the excitable skater, waving at him to get his attention. The expression on Viktor's face changed rather quickly, and suddenly, he yanked Yuri out of the fray as well, leaving Toshiya on the floor with his painted belly and his sake. The trio disappeared beyond a wall to find somewhere quieter.

Half-way up the stairs to the residential area of the resort, Minako turned on a heel and gave a pleading look, "...I'm really sorry about this... I'm not necessarily looking for your permission or advice, but I think you should know just to prepare yourselves."

"...We already know." Viktor harrumphed, "We found out yesterday at the store. We ran into the Nishigoris."

"Huh?"

He got confused as well then, but pointed to how her ring was back on her finger rather than hanging from a necklace, "...The...engagement...?"

"Eh!?" She said, louder and even more confused than before. She looked at her hand, phone held in it, but then shook her head, "I'm not talking about that!"

"Oh." The two skaters gaped at her, "What then?"

"Even after everything you boys did to help at the end of Nationals...Asahi was thrown into the street. He only has the clothes he's wearing and what he took with him to the competition." She
explained, "He has no money, he's not even using his own phone to reach out to me... The only thing I can think of to help him is t-"

"Doesn't he have a JR Pass?" Yuri wondered abruptly, "...Or did he pay for every train he took from Wakkanai?"

"Uhm...I'm not sure," Minako answered, returning to her phone to send the question. She got an almost-immediate reply, "Yeah, he has the pass."

The two men looked at one another, seemingly coming to one of their oddly cerebral, wordless agreements, but it was Viktor who spoke, "Tell him to hop on a train and come here."

"...Everyone here will know who he is though, and be wondering why he's showing up at midnight." Minako explained, "You know how he is about his private life. Look at how exposure has already cost him..."

The silver Russian nodded, "Sure, but because everyone knows him, he'll have a good cover. We're having a party to celebrate the Olympians and medalists, right? He'd fit right in. So what if he shows up late? He's coming from another city."

"No one has to know why he's really here." Yuri added in agreement, "And his new dog is welcome, too, obviously. Tell him to come."

Minako gave a heaved sigh of relief, and leaned forward to wrap an arm around each of the men's shoulders, "Thank you so much." She said, pulling back to start writing her message.

"Whatever happened to him in Imari is done and over," Viktor said simply, "We can't abandon him after we basically had him out himself, knowing what his life was like. No half-measures. We'll finish it."

"One thing at a time," The ballerina replied, hitting Send, "Tonight, he just needs friends and a bed. We'll worry about the rest later."

"Sounds fair."

Minako looked at her screen, and gave a quieter sigh of relief, "Okay, he's heading to Imari Station. He'll be in Hasetsu in an hour."
"Alright. Well...everyone, mina-san, thank you for joining us tonight at Yu-Topia to celebrate everything!" Viktor called suddenly, tapping the side of a new champagne flute with a metal spoon, "It's getting pretty late though. Yuri and I need to put the pups to bed. For those staying in the resort, enjoy the night...for those with a journey ahead, safe travels."

The party lowered to a simmer after a few more minutes, with everyone taking the hint and taking their leave where appropriate. Within half an hour, the resort seemed to be its usual, late-night peaceful self, with the surrounding ambiance resetting to a calm, placid note. It felt like a place of rest again.

Yuri helped clean everything up. Viktor, on the other hand, coordinated with Minako.

"You stay here. We'll go get him ourselves," He explained, "This one is on us. We're the ones who encouraged him to get online and be himself, so by all accounts, we got him into this mess. It only makes sense if we're the ones who sort it out."

"Let us help at least a little bit," She retorted, "If it hadn't been for me sticking my nose into it, we wouldn't have even gotten to this."

The silver Russian hesitated, hands on the buttons to the front of his coat. He shook his head and shrugged, then continued fastening them, "I'll leave that up to you to decide how you want to help him. But it's like you said...right now, what he needs are friends and a warm bed for the night. We'll bring him back here. He can stay at Yu-Topia for however long he needs to, and now that all the craziness has left the building, we can have a quiet little toast for him to lift his spirits a bit. Maybe you can do something to help get that ready."

"Oh...yeah, sure."

"Yuri," Viktor called, his own preparations complete for the short trip.

Hazel eyes lifted, and the younger man nodded, taking the tray of dishes to set in the kitchen, and then came into the main foyer. His jacket was held up for him, and he grabbed his sneakers, pulling them onto his feet before slipping his arms into the coat sleeves. His left arm wasn't quite so tender by then, and he could fasten the zipper and buttons himself. His husband still took the task of his scarf seriously though, wrapping it tenderly.

Viktor turned his eyes back to the ballerina while Yuri pulled open the sliding door, Makkachin quickly jumping past him to get out into the snow for a bit of fun, "We'll be back in a little while. You can let those who are still here know that a guest is coming, but let's not make a huge deal out of it. I'm sure he's rattled and just needs some kind words, not an explosion of confetti and music and fireworks in his face. We can adjust the tone once we know how he's doing."

Minako nodded, "Alright... See you all soon."

Yuri chased after the poodle, but glanced back once he saw the light fade and the door was closed again. Viktor stepped out into the courtyard and hit the key-fob, bringing his Audi to life once more, and Yuri reached for the passenger door handle to pile in. Makkachin darted quickly for the back seat, panting happily while his humans got in as well. Yuri reached to pull his seatbelt across and felt the car turn on as he looked over, "Jiro is asleep in my old room. I figure he can stay there for now."
"Yeah, he needs the rest. He'll be a bundle of energy again in the morning." The silver Russian agreed, setting one arm to the back of his spouse's chair as he turned around to back the car out onto the road. Once out and turned to face the flow of traffic, Viktor faced forward again and spun the wheel, slowly starting to move on, "I guess you were right though."

"Right about what?" Yuri echoed, hand finding it's thigh-perch, "I find that I frequently am." He teased.

"About him walking into a trap." He answered, drawing in a long breath, and sighed it out, "I should've been more careful with Saito. Now I just feel like...he didn't just walk into a trap...I lead him into it."

"You were hoping for a more positive outcome, because even Kon changed after he saw with his own eyes how successful you were." Yuri pointed out, giving the thigh a gentle squeeze, "It's hard to know how people will react when you've never met them."

"...I hope he's okay."

"...Same."

Arriving in Hasetsu, it was one of the last trains of the night before service ended until the next morning. The terminal was eerily empty and quiet, like a ghost station, so the noise of the train pulling into the second-floor terminal was an earth-shattering cacophony, rattling the entire building to its foundations, sounds bounding off every hard surface. It screeched to a stop though, and about 45 seconds later, departed once again, though slower, to park for the night.

Makkachin looked around the familiar space, sitting patiently, panting away as he usually did. He turned his dark-brown eyes up to his silver human, but then looked forward, rising up to all fours instantly when he heard the sound of a bark. It was weak, more like a fox's yip than a true bark, but it still came from a dog, and it still echoed off the walls like a specter's howl. That pink tongue disappeared and the poodle took on what seemed like a more serious vibe...something the easy-going pup almost never did.

Yuri reached down to scratch the dog's head, "Easy."

"There he is." Viktor voice said quietly, drawing Yuri's attention up again.

The escalator meandered its usual path, slowly descending toward the turnstiles, carrying its two lonely passengers down from the upper level. Hana's white legs were easy to spot against the dark backdrop of metal stairs and black rubber, but the red-brown stains in her fur were just as easy to see as she was on a whole. Makkachin's nose raised up and his sniffed quietly, and the pace of his normally-flappy tail slowed to a sway. He lowered his head then, and spotted the white dog through the turnstile's rotating barrier-wands.

Viktor was the first to step forward, Yuri following closely with their hands still clasped together. Each of them felt the nerves of the odd situation, but the sight of the mess on Hana's fluff, followed by seeing the same colors in Asahi's clothes, put them on edge. In spite of it all, he stalled on his side of the barrier, looking at the floor before closing his eyes outright.

"...Were you hurt? Are you okay?" The Russian wondered, looking down only as his poodle crept by, sniffing cautiously. Slate eyes went back to the quiet man before them, "Saito...?"

"S-Senpai... ...I...wasn't expecting that you two would be here." He answered nervously, fingers
clamped tightly around the suitcase handles, "I'm sorry-" He went on, bowing down, "I've probably ruined your night..."

"Relax..." Viktor offered, "Come on through to this side. We'll help with your stuff."

Yuri crouched down by Makkachin, one arm over the poodle as he offered his other hand forward toward the Hokkaido-ken, "This is Hana, right?"

"...Y-yes...", Asahi answered hesitantly, stepping forward a few paces to encourage the pup closer, "Riku's dog. She...remembered me." He turned his eyes towards the poodle, "And that's...Ma...Makkasheen?"

"Makkachin." Viktor corrected, "Yes. It's okay though. He's friendly."

"...I'm not super-sure of Hana's temperament. She's moody...and we just..." Asahi started, but heaved a breath, voice still a bit shaky from the whole thing, "She got hurt earlier."

"So that's blood on her snout and chest?" Yuri wondered.

"...Unfortunately, yes. Hers. That's why I'm not sure how she's going to be tonight." He explained, "When we got to the house, I tied her up since my family never had pets before...but things got heated pretty quick, and when I untied her so we could leave, she tried to attack. ...My brother slammed a heavy wooden door in her face and it knocked her down. She got a bloody nose...and one of those little front teeth fell out while we were on the train."

"We need to get her to the vet," Viktor suggested.

"...I can't...afford a vet. I have nothing." Asahi admitted reluctantly.

"We'll get it."

"But-"

"Hang on a second," Yuri said, forcing a pause. He still had his hand out, but Hana was reluctant to come through the turnstile. He wondered if it might be because Makkachin was bigger, "Viktor, hold him?"

"Sure." He answered easily, crouching down as well to pull his poodle back a few feet.

Yuri inched a bit closer, putting his free hand down to the tile floor, "It's alright, girl... It's okay now."

Asahi watched quietly, seeing his dog shift her weight nervously from one front paw to the other, swaying slightly in uncertainty. He knelt down as well, and stroked between those honeyed triangular ears, "Daijōbu, Hana, Yuri ga tomodachi da." (It's okay, Hana, Yuri is a friend.) He explained in a reassuring tone, "To-mo-da-chi."

Black, almond eyes looked on at her human, but slowly, she turned her head towards the turnstile again, and looked at the hand still extended to her. She felt another stroke down her back, and slowly wagged her tail once or twice, whining a little. She licked at a fresh trickle from her nose, harrumphed a little, and then finally stepped through, carefully sniffing at the pale hand. Sensing no danger, she took another step closer, this time to smell more at the man's body and face, and in doing so, allowed him to put that hand against her neck and cheek.

Yuri offered a few gentle scratches, and saw the hesitant sway of that tail become more steady. He
looked back to Viktor and Makkachin, and nodded, "She's willing to engage. Let him go slowly."

The poodle stretched his head out as far as his neck would allow, but when he felt arms come loose from his frame, he stood up and took a step forward, still sniffing. Hana looked right at him, sniffing as well, each of them taking cautious steps closer until they were practically nose-to-nose.

Asahi let out a sigh of relief, and watched Viktor let Makkachin go entirely, letting the two dogs sniff and pace around each other. He turned his eyes to Yuri though, "Jiro isn't here?"

Yuri looked back, and rose up to standing again, "No, he was asleep, so we let him be. He's at the resort. Come on through..." He gestured, stepping back slightly towards his husband, and found the man's hand there with his own.

Nodding, Asahi grabbed his things and shuffled through the turnstile wands, feeling a bit more relief creep in to be on the other side. Makkachin's sudden bark echoed loudly through the terminal, but when eyes went to the dogs, both tails were wagging.

"Alright...we can talk and walk. Let's get going." Viktor said, patting his thigh before reaching to take one of the suitcases, "Makkachin, come."

Yuri reached as well and grabbed the second rolling case, and nudged his head towards the doors, "This way."

Asahi followed the duo quietly, stepping back out into the terminal's arrivals loop where he'd seen the squid and urchin statue before. Without his hands full of luggage, he could do nothing more than twist the loop-handle of Hana's leash idly. His luggage was stowed into the back of a car that seemed too brightly colored for his own mood at the time...but he got in all the same, squeezing into the back seat with a dog on either side of him. He held his backpack on his lap, and leaned his head back against the seat as the car started and pulled out of the lot.

"...So what exactly happened?" Yuri wondered, turning to look at him through the space between the two front seats.

One grey-brown eye opened, but then both, and the older skater leaned forward slightly, "My older brother...Daisuke, the middle one of the three that I have...he said that he went to check on the results from Nationals, and...saw all the stuff on SMS about the things I'd said on Saturday night. Then he found my new Instagram account...and practically ratted me out to our parents." Asahi explained, looking down at the pack between his arms, "He was the only one who came to the door. They'd locked me out...my key wouldn't work anymore. He said that I should just go, because I'd humiliated the family enough. That my father was worried my existence as a gay person in the family would cause his business to go under... My mother, well... I was half-tempted to hurl ice bricks at the church in town. She's more worried about what her friends inside it think than how I feel."

Viktor grimaced slightly, but stayed quiet, watching the road.

"Daisuke wouldn't even let me in to get my things. Started justifying how they were treating me, as though I had betrayed them with my 'choices.' As though...knowing how this has turned out...I would've ever chosen to be this way if I had that option..." Asahi said, drawing in a pained breath, "So after he slammed the door in Hana's face, I dragged her off and we left... By the time I got far enough into town to not need my phone's light to see the sidewalk, they'd already shut my service off. I'm guessing they reported my bank card as stolen so it would stop working. If it...hadn't been for Riku's family keeping his plan on...and letting me have it...I don't know what I would've done. All the shops were closed, and the one convenience store I found...the guy took one look at the blood on Hana and on my clothes, and basically said 'good luck with the free WiFi.' He wouldn't let me inside,
not even to use the phone. The WiFi was garbage, too..."

"What's Coach Nagisa said about it?" Yuri wondered.

"What would I even tell her?" Asahi retorted painfully, "Sorry, I have no financial backing anymore and I can't afford to pay your fees?"

"...She cares about you though. I don't think she'd put coaching fees in the way if you were in trouble."

"She turns her phone off overnight anyway. I'm not sure she would've seen any of my messages until tomorrow morning, and by then it probably wouldn't have mattered anymore."

"Oh..." Yuri turned in his seat to face forward again, only to feel Viktor reaching across the center console to do as he himself normally did; resting his palm over the top of one thigh. He lowered his own hand down to it and curled his fingers around the warmth, "Right..."

"...Where's Minako...?" Asahi asked then, "Did she send you...?"

"No, we told her we'd take care of it as soon as she said she was going to take care of it." Viktor answered, "I never really let her explain her plan, but I think she meant to go to Imari to find you. She only planned on saying so to us as a courtesy."

"What could she have done in Imari though?" The younger figure wondered, staring at his backpack like it was any help, "I had already told her no one would let me in..."

"Who knows? Money talks, and my Uncle wouldn't have let her go alone. He's not quite a Russian oligarch but he's loaded all the same." Viktor said with a shrug, "He stepped in for Plisetsky last year after Yakov kicked him off the team."

"...I see."

The clinic took one look at the hopping brown poodle as Makkachin came rushing through the door, and gaped in disbelief.

"No. Not you again...!" The receptionist dreaded, "What are you doing here!??"

"It's not for him this time," Viktor laughed, coming in next, and holding the door for the rest of the troupe, "It's for this one."

Hana practically lead Asahi in, sniffing around, but then paused. She whined in recognition of vet-clinic smells, and tried to go for the door, only to find it already closed. Asahi did the only thing he could think of, and reached both arms under the pup to lift her off the ground, carrying her over to the counter, "Someone slammed a door in her face a little over an hour ago." He explained, "She's had a bloody nose and one of her little teeth fell out."

"Oh no...! Well, let's get her back quickly then...what's her name?"

"Hana."

"Pretty! And yours?"

"...Asahi Saito."
"Okay...let's get a weight from her. Go ahead and set her down on that metal floor panel in the counter."

He backed up a little and put the dog down as told.

"Oh, she's a big one...27kgs."

"Wow, she weighs as much as Makkachin." Yuri commented, "He's nothing but air under all that fluff."

"Air and stilts and one tongue." Viktor corrected.

The poodle in question was trying to get up onto the counter, paws on the edge of it as he snuffled at the dog-treat jar. Soulful eyes looked from it to the woman sitting behind the counter, and just as he'd hoped, as soon as the young lady rose up to standing, she went for the jar. She offered one treat to the grateful poodle, and he took it down to the floor to crunch on it. Hana didn't even seem to notice, too nervous about what was going on, and watched as her human handed the lead on her harness to the woman who'd handed him a clipboard.

"We'll get started on her if you could fill this stuff out."

He could only nod and bow his head as he took the papers, and watched as his anxious pup was taken into the back. He practically deflated once she was out of sight, and slumped back into a chair, staring at the paperwork like he couldn't read it anymore.

Viktor sat next to him, arms crossed over his chest, but sitting close enough that an elbow nudged over, "She'll be okay. She walked in...she'll walk out, too."

"...I'm...not worried about that." Asahi said quietly, pen in hand, eyes down to the documents, "...This whole thing just..." He sighed again, and slouched forward, teal bangs dragging across the paper, "These past two years, I didn't even remember that Riku had a dog...but she was there with him, all the time, somewhere just on the edge of my memories. But she remembered me as soon as she saw me. Knocked me down in front of Riku's grave and hasn't left my side since. It...was her choice to come south with me in the end. Threw a fit when she realized I was going to leave again. I haven't even had her two days and she's already gotten hurt...trying to protect me."

He reached up his hand and rubbed the side of his wrist against his eyes, "I've never had pets before, so I didn't even know what to do this whole time. If not for you guys...I'd be lost. But then...I can't help but remember how all last weekend went, and I wonder how I managed to get to this point..."

"Don't worry about that for now." The silver Russian advised, "Right now, we're all here as dog parents."

"Hana charged because she thought you were going to be hurt." Yuri added, sitting on Viktor's other side, though leaning side-face against him to see the other man better, "Anyone in her position would gladly take some licks of their own if it means the person they're defending stays safe. She did what she thought she had to do, and you walked away, so as far as she's concerned, mission accomplished and the rest is irrelevant. Just give her extra pets and treats later."

"...Yeah..."
Chapter 424

CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED TWENTY FOUR

"Saito Asahi-san?" Someone called, a door opening from beyond the front desk.

All three heads popped up, then the fourth from under a chair. They spotted a man Viktor already knew unfortunately well.

"Oh no. What are you doing here again?" The caller asked, looking straight at the Russian.

Viktor looked surprised at first, but then just smiled and raised a finger, "It's not what you think! I'm here to show moral support. Makkachin's right here and he's fine." He explained, turning that finger down to the man on his right after that, "The dog you're looking at belongs to this one."

Asahi lifted his head nervously, then stood up, feeling all the blood drain from his face, "...Is...it bad?"

"Come on through. I'll show you."

He just sat back down again, hands covering over his nose, fingers between his eyes as he clenched them shut, "...I can't do this..."

Both Viktor and Yuri stood after that, and the silver Russian put a hand on the man's shoulder, "Come on, we'll go with you. That's the vet. His tone seems normal...it's not at all like when I came here for my dog's emergency."

Grey-brown eyes opened a little and looked up, and Asahi nodded nervously, pushing to stand up again and move towards the open door. The other two followed after, and Makkachin warily went with them, tail between his legs. Once inside the room, Asahi spotted Hana lying prone on a blanket on the floor, a tech crouching next to her. The pup's tongue hung limp out of her mouth, and her paws twitched periodically. Asahi quickly went to her and got down on his knees, fingers going through her fur, but his attention was grabbed by the vet again as the door was closed.

"She's waking up. Don't worry." The older man, hair salt-and-peppered with age, explained, "Since she was fighting us earlier, it was safer for everyone involved that she be given a light sedative. We call it 'happy puppy nap-time.' It only lasts for about 30 minutes...enough time for us to get what we need done."

Asahi's heart was still in his throat, "...So...what did you find...?"

Viktor and Yuri sat on the lone bench and listened quietly. Makkachin laid down under their heels, hoping to avoid notice.

A tablet was held out in the vet's hands, and he loaded up the first of a few digital X-ray films, the black background accented with light blues and whites for the dog's bones. He pressed his fingers to the screen and spread them out to zoom in, focusing in on a side-view of her skull, then the nasal bones, and he nudged his head up to signal for Asahi to stand so he could show the results, "You can see how far back these structures are from where the outline of her snout goes. Her front teeth are the first bones that would get hit in the event of a direct impact. I was told that a door hit her in the face?"

Asahi nodded, fingers tight around the edge of the counter, "It was a really thick wooden door, and she was moving towards it quickly when it slammed shut in front of her."
"I see." The older man nodded. He reached over for a resin-cast replica of a generic dog skull, and used a pen to point at the front teeth, circling around the space where Hana's single tooth had fallen out, "She might lose this other one next to the one that already dropped out, but it won't be any bother to her once it's all healed up. None of her other teeth look damaged in any way...no cracks or fractures of any kind."

"But...?"

He went back to the X-rays on the tablet, and switched to a front-facing view. He used his pen again to circle around the very middle of it, just above those same teeth he'd mentioned a moment before, "There's a tiny little hairline fracture from here to just under her nose."

Asahi's legs lost strength, and he collapsed to his knees almost immediately. Viktor leaned forward on the bench fairly quickly, and put a hand on the back of the man's shoulders, but the younger figure just clutched the edge of the counter in despair, "...Riku's family is going to kill me..."

"This isn't your dog?" The vet wondered, looking over the ledge to the top of Asahi's head.

"It is...he just took her on." Viktor explained, "He's had her for a day and a half, basically."

"...They wanted me to tell them when I got back and how things went...now I'm going to have to tell them about how Hana got hurt and it's my fault..." Asahi despaired.

The silver Russian slipped off the edge of the bench and crouched down to the younger man's same level, hand still where it was before, "Hana is yours now. Having a dog to take care of can sometimes mean dealing with things that aren't so pleasant. When I came here last year, I had to leave Makkachin behind while Yuri and I went to Moscow. Unfortunately, he got into some rice buns and choked on them...and nearly died. I can only imagine how scary and devastating it was for Yuri's family to find him, bring him here, and then have to call Yuri to tell him the bad news, so he could tell me. But you know what...?"

Eyes glanced over the edge of an arm, brows furrowed above them with intense worry.

"When Yuri told me, he didn't frame it like anyone was in trouble. He told me straight up that I had to come back to Hasetsu, and that he'd face the Free Skate alone so I could go. He sent me back here on a mission to make sure my dog was safe and healthy, not to issue judgments and punishments on the people I'd tasked with Makkachin's care." Viktor explained calmly, "And in the end...as is plain to see," He gestured towards the poodle still hiding behind Yuri's legs, "Makkachin turned out fine. He was discharged and I was able to take him with me to Fukuoka, to meet up with Yuri when he got back. So don't sweat this stuff...Hana has a minor injury. She will heal."

"He's got it right." The vet added, "I was going to say that all she needed was soft food for a while and some pain meds. She'll probably look like a cartoon character by morning because of swelling, but otherwise, she should be just fine."

Yuri watched quietly from where he was still sitting, eyes going from each person, to Hana, then back as Asahi finally found the strength to stand again. He drew a deep breath behind his scarf and let it out slowly.

This guy really has the worst luck. I wouldn't wish his troubles onto my worst enemies.

The car ride that took them to Yu-Topia was done in near silence.
Asahi retook his spot in the middle back seat, Makkachin on his left behind the diver's spot, and Hana on his right, awake but not really that alert. Her ears splayed out a little bit and she drooled on her human's pants, but at least she was looking around, spittle hanging from her jowls and all. He drew a quiet breath and stroked her head.

*My whole world has gotten turned on its head in just these last few days. I've acknowledged Riku's death, faced his ghost, publicly skated my swan-song for his memory...and finally went to see his grave and family. And yet...none of it would've happened if not for...them...*

He raised his face to look at the two men in the front seats, and the quiet peace they shared there, Yuri's hand tilted over the console and Viktor's curled lightly around where it rested on the top of his leg while he drove. The radio was on, but it was nigh unintelligible over the sound of the car. Even the quiet *bweeps* and *boops* of Yuri's phone were hard to hear from the back seat. He only knew what was going on because Yuri said it out loud.

"Minako-sensei says that the Nishigoris went home at this point." He explained, looking from phone to husband, "They held out as long as they could but the girls fell asleep."

"Maybe it's for the best." Viktor replied, one hand pressed to the wheel as he turned the car around a corner, "Tomorrow's their last day of winter vacation before Friday's school orientation."

"I'm sure they'll be back tomorrow anyway."

_The Nishigoris..._ Asahi echoed in his head, feeling a flutter of nerves in his gut for a moment.

Yuri glanced back between the seats, "The triplets are pretty big now. They're huge skating otaku, too. They went completely bonkers when Viktor first turned up, then Yuriio, too. If they knew you were in town, it'd be a zoo at Yu-Topia." He said, a nervous smile on his face, but he then turned back to his phone for a moment before shutting it off for the rest of the drive, "At least the JSF crew left, and most of the people from around town who turned up. It'll be a quiet, regular night at the resort. How many people turned up for you anyway, Asahi?"

"...Uhm..." He stammered, not having expected to get questioned, "...None."

"Eh?" Yuri answered, turning around again to gawk, "Not a single person turned up? You're an Olympian though, and you medaled at Nationals." He pointed out, staring at the silent figure for a moment, offering a chance for a reply. None came though, and he sank where he sat, "...Maybe it was too late. You only posted when you left Wakkanai, not your progress as you came south. No one would've known where you were or when you'd turn up in Imari."

"Mmh..."

"I tried to sneak into Hasetsu when I first came home after Sochi, but Minako-sensei knew when I'd get there anyway." Yuri added, laughing quietly at his own expense, "Nothing about my exploits goes unnoticed by her. I'm not even sure how she knew, but as soon as she got word that I had left Detroit, it's almost like she looked up the departure and arrival times of every plane between Detroit and Japan, just to try and figure out when I'd be getting here. She had a banner and everything ready for me. It was super embarrassing."

"...Oh."

Viktor glanced up to the rear-view mirror, and spotted the dark circles under Asahi's eyes. Even accounting for the dark in the car, the shadows of night, and the stringy bangs over the man's forehead, those bags still seemed darker than they would've been under better circumstances. He
gave his spouse's hand a gentle squeeze, "It's been a long day for him, my love. Maybe we should just let him wind down a bit."

"...Oh. Okay..." Yuri mumbled, turning back to look forward through the windshield.

"When was the last time you ate anything substantial?" Viktor wondered, speaking in a normal tone again.

"...Uhm...maybe 13 hours ago...?"

Yuri swung his head back and gaped in surprise, "Thirteen hours ago!?"

"Hana and I nibbled along the way, but...I didn't want to have to stop and spend the night somewhere a second time, so we only stopped once; for lunch. Otherwise, it was just potty breaks for her, and then we got back on the train." Asahi explained tiredly, "Maybe I should've stayed in Osaka after all. Then this stupidity I've caused would've at least happened in broad daylight instead of the middle of the night."

"It's not your fault." Viktor said firmly, tires thump'ing slightly as they hit the metal braces of the bridge, "You can only control what you do, not others. You had no way of really knowing what would happen when you got back to Imari until you showed up there. The timing was out of your hands."

The younger figure nodded weakly, but didn't verbalize an answer.

"Anyway, we're just about at Yu-Topia. I can see it from here." The Russian went on, pointing with a free finger from the steering wheel, tires thump'ing again as they went over the second metal bracers at the opposite end of the bridge.

Asahi could feel the nerves creeping back in as the Audi slowed down and pulled off the street, turning under the flag-bearing arch of a resort's entryway. From the outside, it looked like the strange place had closed for the night...and indeed, for the most part, it had. However, when headlights hit the wall, and then the sliding main door, he could see that hearts and minds were still alert even at that hour. Thankfully, in spite of every unfamiliar thing Asahi saw, the woman who stood in the entrance hall was one he knew. Three shorter figures stood behind her in waiting, two he could guess - silver hair was uncommon enough to place as being related to Viktor somehow - and one he vaguely recognized, if only for his reputation as being either a Punk, a Tiger, or a Fairy, depending on the day. A fourth figure stood in the shadow behind the light, so he couldn't make out any details, but the darkened silhouette turned to step out of the way of yet more people who'd come to the front of the building. In a bout of reluctant fear, Asahi reached to pull his hood up over his head, and tugged the wrapping of his scarf up over his nose, hiding everything but his eyes...though he pulled down further on the hood just to shield them as well. He felt the car come to a stop, the engine shut off, and the cold wind of the outside as it washed within like flood-waters as the doors opened. Both front seats were pulled forward, and Makkachin was quick to leap outside again, but Hana was less enthused by everything.

Yuri leaned down to look past the roof of the car and spotted the nervous figure twisting around to hoist the white fluff into his arms. It was a precarious balancing act to get out of the back seat with the dog's weight upsetting his center of gravity, but Asahi managed all the same. Hana's head drooped down, but she lifted it enough to look around, and blinked tired eyes at their new surroundings.

"...Who is this guy?" Nikki wondered quietly, brushing her arms against the cold that seeped in through the open doorway. She watched Minako step outside, bracing against the frigid air, but then
turned her jade eyes to the unknown and well-bundled figure approaching them, "How do Cousin Viktor and Yuri know him...? And Minako...?"

"He's no one I know." Yurio answered dubiously, watching carefully as well.

The trio of teens kept their eyes on the group as they slowly started making their way towards them, and stepped out of the way to let them in. Yurio shoved the door closed again to stop the heat from escaping, only to find Minako gathering him and the girls up to shoo them out of the foyer. He stepped back up onto the wooden ledge and backed up, twisting to lean against the check-in counter, and watched with keen interest. Only shoes were removed by the group before they moved by and headed for the common room, and the trio followed after in the rear. All seemed to be concerned immediately with the fate of the listless dog that had been carried in, but the unknown figure attempted to get her to stand on her own, and there was a palpable sense of relief when, even if only for a few seconds, she stayed on her own paws before sitting down.

There was a mad high-pitched barking suddenly from somewhere else in the resort, and Yuri quickly stepped off, leaving only his coat and scarf, and a few whispers, behind. Attention went back to the mystery man though, and the quiet words being spoken to him.

"Is she okay now?" Minako wondered, leaning down around Hana's side to try and catch a glimpse of the man's eyes, but he had pulled his hood so low that they were hidden in shadow anyway. She lifted up again and waved to the teens, "Give him some space. He's not a fan of people hovering."

The trio did as bid, but only backed up to the next table further away, and sat down again.

"All the way out of the room, damnit." She barked at them.

Yurio scoffed impatiently, but he stood up again first, and the silver teens followed after despite the intense curiosity. Once they were finally out of the room, Minako looked back at the man in front of her.

"It's okay, they're all gone now. It's just familiar faces." She explained quietly, "You can come out of hiding."

Asahi drew another nervous breath, but nodded under all his layers, slowly moving his hands up. In doing so, he shifted the view of his scarf, and Minako got a look at the dark smears on the fabric. She didn't mention it though, even if it made her worry. Two loops of scarf came off from the man's shoulders, and it was set down on the floor next to his legs. He pinched at the fuzzy trim of his hood and hesitated for a few seconds, but eventually pushed it back, revealing the fluff of black and teal hair he'd kept hidden underneath of it. Even with the protective shroud gone, Asahi kept his head down, moving only to set his hand on Hana's head when she lifted it to rest it on his knee.

"I guess I was hoping we'd meet again under better circumstances." Minako started again, reaching a hand forward to stroke a few strands of messy hair back into place behind his bangs, "I'm really sorry to hear what happened. What your family did is unforgivable."

He gave a quiet nod.

Attention was grabbed suddenly by the puppy-whimpers of a tiny Akita getting excitable in the doorway. Jiro wiggled frantically, licking at Yuri's face where he was being carried, and just as Yuri set him on the floor, the pup took off, running around the room frantically to get to everyone he saw. He practically tumbled into Minako, bouncing off her hip and rolling under a table, only to get up again and launch against Asahi's leg next. The pup sniffed him and realized he wasn't too familiar, and moved on, finding Viktor next and crying out excitedly, spinning in place until the Russian
picked him up. Makkachin sniffed at the puppy, clambering up over Viktor's shoulders, a paw curling over each one, and he looked down to get a better look. Jiro hesitated at the sight of the big brown head coming for him, but sniffed, barked again, and wiggled out of the man's lap to run around the room some more.

"Sorry, he was frantic." Yuri explained, taking his seat next to his partner at a neighboring table, "I think he woke up a while ago and freaked out that the door was closed and no one was around. ...I have a mess to clean up there later." He sighed.

It was only then that Jiro realized there was a 3rd dog in the room, and he crouched nervously under a table next to her. He sniffed carefully, inching closer like a dog hunting a duck, but then went perfectly still when Hana lifted her head in sight of him. She lifted her tail through a single sway, and then let it go still, sniffing at the air in Jiro's direction. The Akita stepped even closer then, smelled the vet on her, and took off again. Yuri wrangled him up as he tried to run by, nudging the pup over onto his back for a little rough-and-tumble with his hand to keep him occupied.

Asahi turned his eyes back to his own dog, spotting how his own hands were shaking slightly. He buried them in the white fluff to keep them steady.

"...How come no one's saying anything?" Yuri asked, making a face at it all, twitching slightly as tiny pin-like puppy teeth pinched around his thumb, "I thought I'd be walking into a conversation, but this silence is awkward."

"...Sumimasen..." Asahi finally spoke, "...I can't think...right now..."

Hiroko stuck her head around the corner of the door, unsure of what was going on. A tray in her hand, she looked to her boys, "Psst."

They both glanced back at her, saw what she had in her hands, and beckoned her in. She nervously came around to enter, and went behind Minako to the side of the next table over, crouching down to start putting things down, only to find the teal-tipped figure lifting his hand to stop her.

"Please, no...I can't...pay for any of it." He said shamefully.

"Relax." Minako bought her hands up, and used them both to gently put the skater's down again, "I didn't invite you all the way here just to tell you we can't help. Your stay here for the next week has already been put onto my fiancé's tab, and if you need more time than that, we'll keep the tab going."

Viktor drew a breath quietly, and leaned forward on the table to rest his chin in the palm of his hand. Beside him, Yuri could sense the subtle tension about that chosen word, and he slid off where he was sitting on his haunches so he could lean into the man's side, resting the side of his jaw on a shoulder and wrapped one arm around the man's back. The Russian turned his head slightly to look, but then turned back, eyes on the sight before him as he let his free hand go under the support arm to find his partner's.

"I can't...possibly burden you for so long..." Asahi choked out, hanging his head low, "I had only asked for help for the night, and then I would..."

Minako gave a sad laugh at that, but reached forward to press a hand to the man's shoulder, "You'd what, leave? Asahi, you're not al-

"I KNEW IT!" Nikki's voice suddenly rang out, shrill and unintentionally loud despite her obvious attempt at whispering it. All eyes went to the side door, and watched as a number of hands reached out to grab the girl by her head to pull her back again, "Mphrphymph!"
Hiroko used the distraction to finish putting all the dishes out, and pulled the tray back against her lap. By the time she was done, she was oddly proud of herself, "Asahi, was it?" She wondered, trying to get things back on track again, "You certainly look familiar."

"He's the guy who took Silver at Nationals." Viktor explained, "You probably saw him on the podium with Yuri and I."

"Oh! Right! Yes! Now I remember." She said cheerfully, "How come you look so down though? When Minako-senpai said we were celebrating a late-comer, I thought things would be a bit more cheerful. This mood is suddenly unexpected..."

Asahi bowed his head towards her, "Sumimasen... I came because I needed help, not because I wanted to celebrate anything."

"Maybe we can do something tomorrow instead." Minako suggested, "You're probably worn out from everything today. Not just what happened before you came up to Hasetsu, but taking the train here all the way from Hokkaido was probably exhausting in itself, right?"

"Hokkaido!" Hiroko echoed, "Wow! What a long trip! You should go for a sit in the onsen then after you've had something to eat! It's the best thing for sore travelers."

"She's not wrong about that one," Viktor agreed, finding a smile, "It was the first thing I did when I got here. It really hits the spot when you've been sitting for a thousand hours straight...even in first class!"

"Maybe not right after eating though..." Yuri added, "But food should definitely be the first order of business, if it's really been that long since you last had something decent."

Minako glanced at her watch, the topic making her think about the time, "It's nearly 1:30am as it is...food, onsen, bed is probably the best order of things tonight." She looked at the other two skaters, "We can take things from here if you want to go home."

Asahi lifted his head slightly, glancing back at the pair where they were sitting somewhat behind him and to the right. He watched as they looked at one another, came to some unspoken agreement, nodded, and pushed off to stand up. Yuri bent down again only to lift his puppy off the floor, and Makkachin rose up on his own, tail wagging slowly in anticipation of the next adventure.

"We'll leave it to you then." Viktor agreed, stepping forward to press a hand to the younger man's shoulder again, giving it a pat before stepping off, "We'll come back in the morning to see how you've settled in. You can rest easy here. Everything will work out in the end."

As he heard footsteps starting to leave, Asahi twisted his core, trying not to move where Hana was still resting her head on his legs. He bowed as well as he could in that awkward position, "Thank you...for coming to get me."

The silver Russian nodded, paused in the doorway, "Sure. We're teammates now. I can't leave you out in the wild. We all have to get on the podium at the Olympics...can't do that unless you're there with us. Ja ne." He said, waving as he turned to leave.

Asahi watched for a moment longer, but finally turned to the food set on the table on his other side. His stomach growled just from looking at it, and with a grudging sigh, he reached his hands up to finally undo the front of his heavy coat.

In the hall, scrambling behind the reception desk, the cadre of teens tried to keep quiet and beneath notice. Yurio, however, peered around the edge of the wall to watch Yuri and Viktor go by. With a
slightly disgruntled look on his face, the silver legend's words repeated in his mind, and he huffed as the pair left the resort. Once the door was closed again, he thumped back against the wall and crossed his arms, looking rather unimpressed.

"What's with the look? You jelly?" Nikki teased quietly.

Yurio just growled and grit his teeth, "Great. One more person getting Viktor's attention for skating."

"Don't you know who that is though?" She went on, poking at his shirt, just above where he'd tightly crossed his arms, "That's Asahi Saito! He's the third guy on the Japanese Olympic Team! Of course Cousin Viktor would want to help him."

"How do you know that? Why do you know that?"

She made a face at him, "I think the more important question is why you don't know that. You're a skater. You should know this stuff before anyone else."

He grimaced, "Why would I know that before anyone else!? It's not like skating competitions broadcast differently to other skaters!"

"What are you three still doing out here?" An unexpected voice asked, causing all three to jump and face it in surprise, "You were supposed to be getting ready for bed when Minako got word that they'd be back late."

"We are ready for bed though, pipaw." Viktoria insisted sweetly, "I wouldn't go around dressed like this in public otherwise." She pointed to the baggy t-shirt and shorts she wore.

Mikhail gave a nonplussed look, one eyebrow raised. He pulled his hands off his hips and pointed down the other hall, "Just get to bed, please. I don't care if you go to sleep right away but I can't have you skulking around the resort this late at night. Best behavior, remember? We're guests here. There's some rules."

The trio sighed, but stood up and nodded, moving away from the reception area and past the open doorway to the common room. They each looked inside briefly as they went by, seeing that the sound on the television had at least been turned on again, and the mysteriously depressed athlete had given himself permission to eat something. Mikhail watched them all go, staying at the doorway until all three had gone through the doorway that lead to the overnight-half of the resort. When he turned his head to look into the common room, he caught sight of Minako's eyes. She whispered something to Asahi before she pat his shoulder and stood up, stepping towards the doorway to let him have some peace and quiet.

"How'd it go?" The silver man wondered quietly, offering a hug as she slipped into arm's reach.

"Just like he was before...he won't say much that can be interpreted as being too personal. Everything is vague and generic, if he speaks at all." Minako explained, moving them off so it wouldn't look like they were hovering beyond the door, "I'm worried that he's just taking all this in as one more thing to feel guilty about."

"How old is he again?"

"Older than Yuri but younger than Viktor...26 I think." She answered.

"Too young to be going through all the stuff you've told me about."
The ballerina huffed a quiet guffaw, "...And I haven't even really told you anything all that specific about him."

"The generic outline of this kid’s recent experience is enough. I'm surprised he hasn't dropped at this point, either from sheer exhaustion or from the stress of it all." Mikhail noted, "He hasn't told you his plan yet either, I'm guessing?"

"What plan? He has no plan."

"Mh."

"He made it sound like he was planning on staying here only tonight and then venturing out into the unknown on his own again. At best, I think he planned on doing something to get access to all the donations he's received so he can pay us back for whatever tonight has cost us all so far, but he's never gone through that process before, so he doesn't know that it can take a few days."

"...Never gone through the process before?" Mikhail echoed, "How sheltered was this kid?"

"I'm not sure how bad it was in his home-life, but just from his own actions, he'd never even opened up on social media to interact with fans, so this whole concept of getting money from them is entirely foreign to him. He may as well have just learned that the internet exists at all." Minako pointed out, glancing back towards the open doorway, then to the man standing next to her, "I'm guessing his phone was attached to a family plan, so they knocked him off of it. His bank account...well, he told me that his parents funded everything he did, so maybe they kept him on a stipend as a way of keeping tabs on him. They basically cut him out of their lives...and that's all I know right now. Who knows how much worse it really was? I'm not sure he'll ever admit any of it."

The elder Russian nodded as she spoke, eyes going to the baseboards as he absorbed it all. By the time she was done, he knew enough, "...So, the bottom line is...he might as well be an 18yo kid who just got thrown out of his home, has no real job, no real life experience, and has no clue what he's doing."

"Well, the skating is a job, kind of... He earns some income from it."

"Unless your job involves buying supplies so you can create a product that you sell for more later, no job should cost you money before you make money." Mikhail retorted, "A competitor is no different from an employee of the skating union, right? But figure skating is only profitable if you're a Champion, and even then...knowing Yura's costs at this point...it's not profitable by much." He curled one arm around his chest and rested the opposite elbow over it, rubbing his chin with that hand, "Helping this kid in any meaningful way is going to take time."

"...I feel like this is my fault, since I dragged all these problems out of him." Minako said nervously, "He was right to be worried about what would happen if he was open about who he is, and his family did him no favors by instilling a sense of shame in him that made him so secretive and aloof. He's paying the price for their backwards thinking, and now they've completely abandoned him, too."

"Not much can be done about the past." Mikhail said with a light shrug, "All we can do is help him pick up the pieces of his shattered life and try to make something meaningful out of it...and I hate doing things in half-measures or only to the bare minimum level."

"...Are you plotting something?"

He drew a breath and sighed it out in resignation, "I already have 4 kids and a 5th on the way."
What's one more?"

The ballerina chortled a quiet laugh, and brought her hand up to cover her mouth, hoping the noise of it wouldn't echo too far. She gave a wry grin anyway though, "I was hoping you'd say something like that."

"What about you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're the kind of person who likes to get her own hands dirty. I doubt you intended to stay on the sidelines to watch what happens."

"Well..." The ballerina looked around briefly, "Part of me felt like being a mediator between him and everyone else was already a big job. But...since everything has already gone so smoothly, I don't feel like I actually did a whole lot. Viktor and Yuri took the wind out of my sails earlier by saying Asahi should just use his JR Pass to come to Hasetsu, so my grand plans of dragging you to Imari on a rescue mission were kind-of dashed. And now, you've offered to help him when I thought I'd have to beg you to, so that went out the window, too..." She shook her head and laughed at herself quietly, "The only thing left I can offer to him that might be of any use is something that probably won't matter anymore, either."

"Why...?"

She pulled her phone out and loaded up the text messages she'd received, and scrolled up to the skater's first note, "I'll read it out loud since he wrote in Japanese, but...

[Minako-san, I'm so sorry to be bothering you this late at night. I know you must be busy. ...This is Asahi btw. I'm using Riku's phone. Mine was disconnected. I'm in Imari and I don't know what to do.]
[I have Riku's dog with me now and she's hurt. Hotels won't let me check in with her, and my bank card is being declined.]

[Oh my god Asahi! What happened!?] 

[My family reacted badly to the stuff I posted online, so they won't let me come home. I'm afraid this might be it for my skating.]
[I don't know how, since it's so late, but...if there's anything you can do to help me, or at least help Hana, for the night...I can try to get some of the money from the donations and pay you back. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry.]

[Go to the train station and hold tight. I'm going to come get you.]

[I will. Thank you and I'm so sorry. I don't know how I'll repay you. I'll do anything you ask.]

[Forget about that for now and just get somewhere warm inside the terminal.]

[Wait]

[Do you have a JR Pass?] 

[Yes]

[Come to Hasetsu asap. No more worrying. Just come right now.]

[Ok. Thank you so much. I owe you everything.]
...And that was it." She finished.

Mikhail made a face, "You weren't kidding about his guilty conscience. But what does that have to do with your idea?"

"It's about when he said that his skating career might be over because of this." She said, "He raised about $50,000 over the last few days, but that won't hold him over for very long. Even if he had nothing else to pay for but his living expenses, that money will only last a year. With skating, he'll be in the red in 4 months or less. I don't know how expensive his coach or choreographer were."
Minako explained, putting her phone away again, "I'm nervous about offering to be a stand-in until he gets on his feet, but until he can do things on his own, it may be his only shot. I don't want him to have to give up the Olympics because he can't afford to pay his team. That chance was the only reason he came back to skating after the accident."

"That's up to you, starlight." Mikhail pointed out, setting his hands on her waist, "If you think you can handle two students at once, more power to you, but be sure it's what you want, not what you feel like you have to do to make it up to him. He thinks this is his fault, not yours, so you'd be doing this for your own sake."

Thin hands went to the Russian's chest, feeling through the thin fabric of the t-shirt he wore. Minako thought for a moment, but then nodded assuredly to herself, and reached both arms over the man's shoulders for a hug, "I think I can manage. I've taught classes with nearly 10 kids at a time. What's 1.5 adults who already know what they're doing?"

"Alright. Well, then the only thing left to do is for me to talk to him."

"Let's give him a bit to finish eating and settle down. Maybe tomorrow?"

Mikhail huffed, "A guilt-addled mind like his won't rest when he doesn't know what to do to solve the problems he's facing. He needs a good night's rest...so I'll talk to him before he goes to bed."

"Good point..."
With Makkachin in the back seat, and passengers in front with Jiro on the lap of one, the volcano-red Audi pulled out from the resort and backed out into the street. Yuri only managed a single yawn before his curiosity got the better of him, "...Did you mean everything you said to him tonight?"

"Sure."

"...So you've forgiven him?"

"No." Viktor said flatly, no pause for consideration needed.

"Hm..."

"But it's like I said before...as long as it looks like he's trying, I will continue to support those efforts." The silver legend clarified, "After everything I've seen since Saturday, I can accept that what he did to you was a mistake, and I understand that he was a confused and hurt mess when he did it. I still hold him accountable for the damage he did though. He still made that choice."

"Yeah..."

"You?"

"Huh?" Yuri turned his head, glancing at the one silver-blue eye that he could see from his side, "...I already forgave him. You know that."

"I mean, how do you feel about things right now. How things have turned out."

"I feel like we saved him. So...I feel good about that."

"I sense that there's a 'but' in there somewhere." Viktor stated warily, reaching his hand across to find his partner's, and rubbed his thumb over it.

Yuri sighed quietly, "I still get a little nervous around him. I know him, but...he's a stranger to me anyway...so I'm just trying to be nice like I would to anyone I'm getting to know for the first time, even if I'm a bit dubious of him. I like his dog though."

"Who doesn't like dogs?"

"Crazy people."

Viktor laughed at that and pulled his hand back, turning the wheel to move the car into the alley that lead to their house. Two short minutes later, the little red Audi pulled into their covered drive-way, and humans and dogs alike vacated to get into the house. Shoes and jackets were put away, and Viktor went over to put kibble down. Grabbing the dishes, and handing off the two for water, the silver Russian went over to the closet, bending down to get the scooper for the big plastic bins. Both were labeled three times, once each for the languages they were fluent in.

Маккачин, МАСКАЧИН, and Makkachin for the first, and next to it, Йиро, 二郎, and Jiro on the next.

Yuri let his eyes wander while the cleaned bowls filled from the tap, and settled on a familiar sight.
Not just of Jiro trying to weasel his way into the pantry, or Makkachin drooling as he watched from nearby, but something a bit more alluring.

Viktor stood up, a bowl in each hand, and he pressed the door behind him with that very object of his husband's eye. He glanced up just in time to see those cheeks redden and Yuri's face turn down to the overflowing first bowl, and struck a smile, "What was *that* look?" He laughed, stepping away carefully to put the kibble down.

"Admiration. You have a nice butt."

Pausing in place, still bent over, Viktor looked back beyond his own legs to the man who was still looking away, filling the second bowl while pouring out some of the over-fill on the first. He smirked, set the kibble down for the anxious bois, and rose back upright again. Socks slid across the linoleum, quiet as silk, and he leaned in heavily against his husband's back, hands sliding from back to front, "*You* have a nice butt." He purred, teasing a kiss to one ear as Yuri fidgeted in place and laughed from the surprise, "The *best* butt."

"*Excuse* you, sir, but you are mistaken. *You* have the best butt." Yuri insisted, pressing his own back slightly to press against his husband's front; if for no other reason than because it was fun, but then also because he had the water bowls filled and he needed the space to back up. He stepped off to place them into the metal rings of elevated dish-holders with the food, and stayed bent over for a moment longer to offer pets to each pup while he was there.

Viktor drank in the whole thing eagerly, keeping a very keen eye on everything. When his partner finally stood upright again though, eyes went to the man's face, and the half-lidded gaze he gave over a shoulder, "Oh, *right there*, you're doing it again."

"Doing what?" Yuri teased, walking off nonchalantly around the other side of the island. He smirked the whole way though, and teased his partner into following, turning around only as he found the bottom of the stairs. To his surprise, as Viktor came up to him, instead of offering the kiss he suspected...the silver Russian nipped the bridge of his glasses and pulled them off, giving quite the sultry look as he looked back down past those blue frames. Yuri did what any normal person would do when their glasses are pulled away, and slid his hands from hips to backside, grabbing a palm-full on each side in an effort to make the man gasp in surprise. His silver husband did indeed gasp aloud, but he was quick-handed enough to grab the delicate item before it fell to far, and licked the tip of his tongue to the tip of a nose.

"Doing everything possible to delay us going to bed." The eager Russian teased, nosing his spouse's lips after.

"Oh, we're *going* to bed..." Yuri insisted, backing up a single stair, and dragging the man forward with him, "Maybe just not to *sleep* first."

"Ohh?" Viktor wondered, setting the glasses atop his head, silver bangs gently pulled away from his face as the arm of one side hooked around the back of his ear. With that hand free, it joined the other around his husband's back, and he pressed in hard for a deep kiss. He continued the descent of his hand though, sliding past the round of the younger back's backside and down the length of a thigh, pulling up just behind a knee to bring that whole leg up against his side. He felt Yuri's hands slide up the front of his chest and over his shoulders, holding tight as he prepared for a hop...but then hesitated.

"...Yikes, I nearly forgot about your ankle..." He admitted sheepishly, unwinding himself as he pulled his leg back. He reached one hand to comb through his hair, feeling where it had already started to become disheveled.
"I don't need to carry you up to get there, my love." The silver legend explained quickly, hands going to his husband's hips to spin him 'round where he stood, and gave him a gently-playful swat to get him moving, "Go! Hurry!"

Yuri yipped and started the ascent, hands down on the stairs briefly as he vaulted forward. He glanced back briefly to find Viktor practically giving chase, hands gripping to the banisters on both walls to pull him forward. They each went around the corner at the landing and continued up, turning once more when they reached the top. They passed the door to the guest room, and the folding doors to the laundry machine and dryer, and finally slipped into the master bedroom, door nudged partly closed behind them.

Viktor quickly caught up just as his partner was spinning around to face him again, and they both went tumbling down onto the bed, the momentum of their previous chase putting Yuri nearly to the other side. The silver legend quickly adjusted, propping himself up onto hands and knees only long enough to crawl forward and level himself with his partner where he found another kiss. He held there in the warmth for a moment, then leaned up only enough to pull his sweater off, casting it towards the pillow pile before going back for more kisses. He felt cool hands on his skin immediately, sliding across each pec, over shoulders and up his neck, cupping around the sides of his head as the tip of a tongue pressed to his lips. He felt the glasses pull away soon after, and silver bangs came tumbling down again. The legs pinned under him pulled out and came up against his sides, socked feet finding their way behind his back to hug him closer to his partner's hips. He needed that man's skin though. Badly. Before the hands that pulled the glasses off could get back around him, he lifted himself up slightly and pulled at his husband's shirt, making Yuri curl up a little to get it over his head and off his arms. He went back for kisses immediately, pressing his broad chest against the one newly-bared beneath him.

Hot mouth and wet tongue went from lips to chin, then lower against Yuri's neck, and legs came loose around him, resting where they parted around him, one lying flat on the bed. With the room, he descended lower, crawling back a few inches at a time as he went down his husband's pale frame. Though he had his eyes closed as he kissed and licked his way across white skin, he could sense how Yuri lifted his arms up and let them hang off the end of the bed, and each subtle arch of the man's body under him, wiggling slightly under the tickle of his teases and hair. He let his own hands wander upward, caressing over each ridge of muscle and bone as they went over the younger man's waist, and up past his ribs. His husband's sudden squirm and gasp as he circled his tongue around one nipple made Viktor grin, and he lowered down on it, lathing his tongue over it and sucking. Legs kicked on either side of him and Yuri wiggled even more, but his attention didn't falter. He licked and nibbled a while longer, and brought up his right hand to thumb over the neglected side, making that nub harden and rise to the occasion as well. Once the first was slick and red to his satisfaction, he quickly moved over to the other and did the same thing there, relishing in his husband's fidgeting under him; each time a leg kicked, or pressed against him, and arms bent down slightly, only to extend up again to open up the whole area, it was all a symphony.

Face flushed and hot, Yuri lived in every touch and sensation, feeling the heat of his husband's mouth go to the center of his chest, fingers continuing the work on the sides of his chest as kisses started to migrate south again. He gasped in surprise when Viktor gently bit against his pants, much sooner than he'd expected, and he looked down to spot that cheeky man grinning back at him.

"Caught you off guard, huh?" Viktor teased, rising slightly on his knees so he could slide his hands down his husband's front.

"Ah...quit stalling...I want to feel you..."

"Oh~!" The Russian laughed, making quick work of the button and zipper in his way.
Yuri let his head fall back again and closed his eyes, relishing in the feeling of his excitement being exposed to the air, and to his husband's sights. Warm lips went to the tip of it, kissing and licking slowly downward, pausing only when too much fabric got in the way.

Viktor pulled off slightly and grabbed around the back of his spouse's jeans, yanking them up and off athletic legs before diving between them again. Black elastic was much easier to maneuver out of the way, and that wet heat returned to center readily.

Yuri drew an immediate, loud gasp, one arm curling up to rest over his eyes, the other dangling low over the edge of the bed. He felt each suckle down his eager flesh, then up again, then enveloped over it entirely. Wet heat surrounded him, and Yuri gasped out again, legs clenching slightly around his husband's larger frame. He let himself relax a little under that attentive pressure, each descent against him giving his legs more outward sag.

His fingers, however...in their relaxed sway against the side of the bed...felt the edge of a box.

Viktor continued his sucks and slurps, bobbing down over the shaft in one motion, then kissing and licking the length of it in another. He brought one hand in to hold the stiff member, squeezing and rubbing the tip against his palm as his kisses went lower. He smirked as well as he could when he felt both legs tighten around him as he took one of the two soft, squishy orbs wholly into his mouth.

Yuri arched his back when he felt it, but the new angle made it easier for him to grab the box, and with that one opportunity, he did so, unthinkingly. When he came down again, he felt the sensitive, fleshy mass fall away from the warmth, and kisses returned to the skin above them. He tried to catch his breath and sense for a moment, and gasped out, "V-Vik...Viktor..."

"Mmmhhhh...?" He answered, the vibration of his voice against the tip making Yuri cry out and clench his whole body in surprise...and smashed the Russian right in the forehead with the bottom of the box, "Mh...!" Slate eyes opened wide in horror and confusion, and he dropped the member entirely, letting it flop against his husband's stomach, "What in the world...?"

"OHMYGODI'MSOSORRY." Yuri pleaded, bringing the box up above his head again, clutching it in both hands like it might escape and hit the man again if he didn't.

Viktor just reached up to rub the spot that had been thwop'd so unceremoniously a moment before.

"IDIDN'TMEANTO."

"What did you even...oh." Slate eyes finally focused enough to realize what he'd even been whacked by, "...How come you grabbed that thing? Were you gonna chuck it across the room or something?" He asked, rubbing the spot again, "So I wouldn't go after it?"

"N-No...!" Yuri answered, voice pleading and uncertain. He pulled the box down in front of his chest so he could look at it, albeit nervously, "I w-wasn't thinking...I just...I felt it when my hands were dangling, and I just...snatched it up."

"You can put it down...I'll forget about it in a minute. Don't worry." The Russian offered, taking rosy, throbbing flesh into his hand again. He managed two strokes, and was lowering himself down again when he heard the rather unexpected sound of the box opening. Tongue-tip sitting between his lips, Viktor lifted his gaze again, staring forward in confusion. To his surprise, he watched Yuri withdraw the fleshlight from inside the cardboard, and dropped the now-empty box back to the floor. Lips parted in shock, "...Don't tease me like this."

Yuri could hardly stand to look at it, and he forced his eyes shut, slowly shoving the item forward
and into his husband's grasp, "J-just take it...!"

"Take it and do what with it though?" Viktor wondered, somewhat impatiently, having clearly wanted to be much farther along in their romp than had been allowed given the interruption.

"Y-you...you can...use it on me if you want..."

Like a perplexed dog, Viktor tilted his head to the side, "Say again...?"

Yuri's face went a deeper shade of red, and he still wouldn't look at the toy, "...L-last year...you said that you'd never been with any other guys before. You s-said that...you'd learn how to...do just what you were doing a second ago, but better, just for me, because you'd have to learn how...since you'd never done it. S...so... If all that's true...th-then why would I...have any reason to think that letting you use it that on me would be something you've done before...with someone else...?"

"Cuz you're an anxious bean?" The Russian wondered hesitantly, "But you'd only be half-right anyway. I've used toys on myself before. So...using it on you would, by definition, be a new experience for me. I'm just not entirely foreign to the concept in general."

Yuri grunted an embarrassed sigh, but then bravely cracked open one eye, "...You've...never...?"

Not wasting any time, Viktor lifted onto his knees and reached far for their nightstand, grabbing up the bottle of warming liquid to dribble it all over his husband's exposed arousal. He clicked the cap shut again and tossed it to the blankets, using his freed hand to start spreading the clear fluid all over. By then, he'd shaken his head in the negative, "Not once. Only on my own."

"...But...why?"

Viktor gave a look, "Now you're just messing with me."

"Okay okay... I actually want to know this time...!" Yuri pleaded, the warmth of the new lube starting to intensify everything he felt, each stroke becoming hot like the inside of his husband's own body.

The silver Russian gave a skeptical look, but shrugged as he worked, "It took me nearly a year to suggest the idea of a toy to you, and I've never been with anyone else that long." He explained quietly, the slick sounds of his hand sliding over rippled skin echoed in the air, "I never felt comfortable enough with anyone else to explore this kind of thing with a partner...not until you. Not only that..." He went on, bringing the fleshlight up and over, using the lube excesses on his fingers to slicken the tip of it for a moment, and slid them just inside to lubricate within, "...There's something uniquely interesting about getting to do this sort of thing with another guy."

"H-hah...?" The younger man gasped quietly, feeling the soft, though cool silicone against the tip of his arousal. There was a sudden, gentle pressure, and before he knew it, half of him was inside the clear plastic tube, enveloped on all sides by the odd-feeling artifice, "Ohgod..." He whined aloud, shivering, arms clenching protectively over his chest, hands over his mouth, as though they were making love for the first time again, and all the surety had left him.

Viktor watched carefully for a moment, sliding the tube up, and then down again, seeing through the sides of the toy where every inch of his husband measured up to. He huffed a quiet laugh to himself though, "You said that you liked it best when I used my hands, because that way you'd know I really wanted you. Consider this toy to be an extension of my hands then, because it goes only where I want it to."

"Nghhh...hahh...ahh..." Was all Yuri could answer back with, each breathy gasp coinciding with each up and down stroke of the toy against his flesh.
With his dry hand holding fast to the fleshlight, Viktor lowered his slickened free hand, dipped his fingers in some of the excess liquid that had dripped down on his husband's skin, and repurposed it elsewhere. Two fingers pressed against the sensitive button of skin beneath his partner's erect flesh, massaging it inward, and got a whined gasp in return. A few more presses, and he lowered his fingers a little further, fingertips pushing against the tightened skin that blocked his way inside. Within a few seconds, the liquid warmth permeated all that new space, and he was able to slip one, then both fingers inside, curling them around to find the walnut-sized bump within, and nudged against it. Yuri's knees came up against his ribs as he did so, clamping hard. Hands went down to the sheet and clutched the fabric tightly there as well. The worried-anxious look on Yuri's face wasn't quite what he was hoping for though, and Viktor sighed and hesitated in his movements, "...I can't tell if you hate this or not."

The younger man let out a gasp of air like he'd been holding it in, and panted a few times to catch it again before cracking an eye open, "...S-sorry...I'm just...n-not used to this... Even on my own...I never..."

"...Is there anything wrong with it? Is it hurting somehow?" Viktor wondered, pulling it off entirely to inspect it, "Did a hair get in it or something?"

Yuri's face just went bright red to watch his spouse practically stick the business-end of the tube into his own face, "Doesn't that thing intimidate you even a little bit!?"

"No." The Russian answered simply, looking past it again, "Why should it? It's just a toy. A tool to spice things up a little, like the warming lube you like so much."

The flush had already reached critical mass on Yuri's cheeks, but somehow he still felt even more embarrassed than before, "...The warming lube is warm!" He argued, then pointed at the fleshlight, "That thing is cold."

Viktor blinked at him incredulously, but then without hesitation, stuck his fingers as deeply as he could inside the clear squishy tube, "...It's cool, but I can't...really tell with just my fingers."

"You try it then!"

That earned a quirked brow, but the Russian was undeterred, reaching down to withdraw himself with ease and pressed the head of his own arousal to the tip of the fleshlight. Yuri refused to watch, but Viktor pressed into it, sliding it all the way down as far as it would go...and then removed it again, and cast it aside without a word. He rose up onto his knees and pushed the rest of his clothes away, much to his husband's confused chagrin.

"...What...?"

"It was frigid half-way in." He explained nonchalantly, "Maybe cuz it's been on the floor all weekend and we turned the heater off while we were gone. The floor is still cold even though we're back. Now I feel bad. Let me warm you up..."

Yuri covered his face again, even as he felt his spouse crawl over top of him. He felt the bear-hug around his thin frame, and then the roll, feeling himself flipped to be on top. He sat upright then, feeling his partner's member behind him just in front of those up-turned knees. Hands went around his center, and he gasped quietly as the squeezes and strokes began anew, warmth returning to his chilled skin. Even as he let his own hands come away from his face again, pressing them down to his partner's bare chest, he couldn't bear to open his eyes.

"I'll fix it." Viktor reassured, "I never considered the temperature of those things before... I guess I
just mentally accepted that it wouldn't be the same as a person, because I went into it knowing it wasn't. ...No pun intended." He huffed.

Yuri couldn't help but laugh anyway, and let himself open one eye a little.

"Give me one more chance to make the toy as fun as I know it can be." The Russian pleaded, brow furrowed but hopeful, "There's warming stands out there; I know it... We'll look for one online together later. Third time's a charm, right...?"

"...R-Right..."
The resort felt eerily quiet, even for being after 2am. Hana had finally perked up enough to start sniffing around the common room, making a slow circuit around the space, taking in the smell of every person who’d been there in the last few days, and every tray of food that had been enjoyed by them. The food that Asahi had been given, however, was largely unlike the common fare most resort patrons called for.

...There's no chance it was a coincidence that everything I got was vegetarian...

Tempura vegetables without egg, rice, miso soup with extra tofu chunks and seaweed, pickled roughage, salad with peanut sauce, even a patty of ganmodoki. Not one thing had been set before him that had meat, dairy, or egg in it.

He nursed over a tall water glass, the ice having long since melted away. His reflection in the glass gave away the dark circles under his eyes, making him think himself something of a wraith than a person.

I want to be so angry over what happened... He sighed, busying himself with stacking up the empty plates and bowls, making sure that the table beneath them was immaculate, But I feel like I've been preparing my whole life for this eventuality. They controlled absolutely everything... One misstep and it would've been gone anyway. Maybe I should be more surprised that it took this long, rather than that it happened at all.

He pushed up to stand, and grabbed the stack of dishes, looking around quietly for the kitchen. That late at night, the lights in the prep area were off and everything had been cleaned, but nothing in Asahi’s psyche would allow him to leave a mess for someone to find in the morning. He clicked a light on with one elbow and stepped within, moving over to the wash basins to begin his task.

They were so nauseatingly efficient with their methods, too... His mind went on, eyes watching tiredly as the spray-nozzle from above sent spouts of water shooting towards whatever he had held up in his hand, Why was it so easy for them to find out what happened...? Daisuke said he found out about the SMS stuff... I wonder if those same people started talking about my induction into Instagram later on? Maybe that's how he found me...

Minako quietly stuck her head into the common room and looked around, seeing only Hana there to look back at her. She crouched down against the doorframe and offered her hand forward, gesturing for the pup to come forward. The water and rustling of dishes to her left was easy to hear, but she thought better of interrupting him, staying where she was instead as the honeyed white dog started to approach her.

Best let him have a moment where he feels like he's doing something helpful for himself. What's coming is probably going to freak him out a little.

Hana nosed at the slim fingers, and Minako opened her palm to the pup, careful not to touch anything that might be tender. Paws inched a little closer, until the ballerina could see her reflection in those dark, almond-shaped eyes. Minako moved her hand slowly, touching just to the bristle-like guard hairs that stuck out furthest from the dog's body, stroking just enough for Hana to know her hand was there. Sensing no worry or aggression, she pressed in a little deeper, threading her fingers through soft under-coat, and stroked gently down the dog's back, "You were such a good girl to
protect him like that. Riku would be proud." She said quietly. Hearing the name got those ears to perk up a little, and the curly tail waged a little faster for a moment, but like everything, that sudden brightness faded, and Hana returned to her prior affect when it was obvious the named figure would not appear. That just made Minako feel bad, and her brow furrowed nervously, "Aw, I'm sorry, girl...I didn't mean to get your hopes up. I know you miss him. Asahi does, too."

The water in the kitchen seemed to shut off for a moment, but then a different spout was turned on. Minako could only assume it was the soap sink, and glanced back to the pup in front of her. She offered a rub between the ears and pushed up to stand again, stuck her head into the adjacent room, and spotted the younger figure holding onto a small scrubby-pad while soap suds and steam rose from one of the sink compartments.

Just outside the kitchen's far entrance, which connected to the hall near the lockers and foyer, was the door that connected to the overnight residences of the resort. Mikhail slid the door across to the room that had been assigned to his latest adoptee, and checked around just to be sure, one more time, that everything was in order. The two suitcases and one backpack were present and accounted for, and the bed Mari assembled looked warm and ready. Without ought else to do for the moment, the elder Russian put the door back into place and turned his attention to the sound of quiet talking coming from one of the rooms assigned to him and his own troupe. He stood outside for a moment, trying to understand what was being said, but the voices were too low and the words were impossible to comprehend. He tapped the back of a knuckle against the wooden panel, "It's just me. Can I come in for a minute?" He asked quietly.

"Oh, papa...yeah." Nikki's voice answered. She was right behind the door when it slid aside, as though she'd approached to open it herself, but then turned and went back to sitting on her bed-roll.

Mikhail looked around as he entered, examining the state of the room; large windows on the walls with their square-shaped wooden frames, curtains pulled half-way across, snow on the outside windowsill. The floor was set with tatami mats covering chestnut-brown floorboards, with one large queen-sized bed at the other end. Surrounding the bed though on all three free sides were big, fluffy bed-rolls, set with thick comforters, pillows, and fleece blankets for insulation; there was a life-size plush replica of a tiger next to one, and a tiny-by-comparison Ragdoll cat asleep on its back. Closer to the door was a low-rising table much like the ones in the common room, with seating mats on all sides, though it was clear that only two of them were meant to be there. The other three looked to have been grabbed from another room to make up for the fact that there were more than the usual number of people staying in the room. Mikhail went for the table and sat down, back towards it though, and crossed his old legs under him, "Come on over, guys." He beckoned.

All three teens looked at him from where their attention had been held by their tech; phones for the girls, and Mikhail's tablet for the solitary boy. They huffed quietly and made their way over, sitting close as asked.

"Sorry for squishing you guys into the same room as me," The elder started, "When we saw how many people were going to turn up for that little skating party, I couldn't bear to let the Katsukis lose all the extra business just on our account. We'll get you your own rooms once things settle down a bit."

"I can just go back up to my old room," Yurio shrugged.

"Your old room is just a walk-in closet in Viktor's old room," Mikhail teased, getting giggles from the girls, and a flush on the tiger's face, "And at any rate, pretty soon, Viktor's old room might belong to someone else soon, and I doubt you'll have the same casual relationship with him. Viktor didn't mind you living in his closet, but Asahi might."
"...What's that supposed to mean?" The blonde asked grudgingly.

"That's why I came," The elder went on, looking to each of the three teens, "That guy out there has had a really rough hand dealt to him. Without getting into specifics, he was just disowned by his family earlier tonight and reached out to Minako for help."

"I've never seen or heard of him before," Yurio pointed out, gesturing to the door that lead out, "How the Hell does he even know Okukawa?"

"He's the guy she was helping over the weekend. The one that stayed in her room on Saturday night when I got all freaked out because she stopped answering her phone."

"...Oh."

"I haven't actually talked to him myself yet, but that's coming up in a little bit. Assuming he doesn't run out of this place like his hair is on fire, I've agreed to offer him a hand so he can get back onto his feet again." Mikhail explained, looking to the emerald eyes on his left, "It's a little different than what I've done for you since last year, since he has plenty of sponsors now and the JSF hasn't made any moves against him. But...his situation puts him into pretty desperate straits anyway. His family paid for everything before, to the point where he had no outside resources, be they financial or just interpersonal. He's never networked before, he's only just recently come into these sponsorships, and as of this past weekend, he's getting online for what amounts to the first time." He leaned back against the table and crossed his arms loosely over his chest, one finger pressed to his chin as he looked aside in thought, "I have my suspicions about the kind of life he's had, but I don't want to speculate when I haven't talked to him yet. In any case, he's gonna be a fixture with us for a little while. So, once he's settled down a little bit, try to be nice to him."

"...Is he moving in with us, too?" Viktoria asked skeptically, a brow raised under her dyed silver hair.

"Eh? No." Mikhail waved his hands a bit, "He's near as old as Viktor is. He doesn't need that kind of help. I'll just pay for his stay here in Yu-Topia until he can find his own arrangements. He just needs time to learn how to manage himself in the world since he's never really done it before."

"...How is it even possible that he's so clueless about the world? If he's near as old as Viktor, like you said, then he's old enough to have moved out years ago." The oldest teen went on, dumbfounded by the whole thing, "I mean, even though Nikki's still 14, she knows about the basics of being self-sufficient."

"I'm turning 15 in 2 weeks ohmygod." The youngest argued.

"Chill." Mikhail leveled his hands, then set them on his legs. "This isn't a competition. ...Now, I don't know a lot about his background, but what little I've gleaned about it from Minako and tonight's events, his parents kept him on a very short leash. One that basically strangled him, even into his adulthood. His phone was on their plan, and they cancelled it. His bank card was under their control, and they likely reported it stolen to cut his funds off."

"...Why would they do such a horrible thing?" Nikki wondered sadly.

"His family is a lot like your Uncle Kon. Very backward in his thinking about certain issues, and very passionate in their response to it. I think the only thing they didn't do was beat him." The Rozovskiy patriarch explained, "Unlike your Uncle Kon though, they haven't made peace with the things they've disowned their kid over, and they haven't apologized for what they did."
Yurio roughly set his jaw against the palm of one hand, elbow on his knee, "So are you gonna tell us what they're so pissed at him for or do we have to play charades?"

"He's gay."

The Punk answered with a deadpan, but then looked away dryly, "...What, did they just find out or something?"

Mikhail shook his head and propped an elbow up on the edge of the table behind him, "From the sounds of it, they've known for a long time, they just refused to accept it...and used the fact that they were supporting his skating as a measure to make sure he never told anyone. No one knew until this weekend. You can see how quickly it spiraled out of control once he started talking."

"I don't even know where to start with that can of worms," Yurio sighed grudgingly, "But I guess it begs at least the one question... If he was so scared to say anything about it for the 26-or-so-odd-years that he's been around, why did it only just come out, and why on earth would he let it slip if he had so much to lose?"

Mikhail hesitated to answer that, but shook his head reluctantly, "...It happened against his will. He goes way back with the other Yuri and they had...a problem over the weekend. It turned into a bit of a big deal and Viktor had to get involved...and that's how Minako got involved."

"But they're okay now, right?" Nikki wondered, "Because they're both helping him."

"So far as I can tell, yes, they're okay now."

"Am I interrupting...?" Minako's voice came, the door having opened so softly that none heard it. Eyes went up to her, and she waved a few fingers at them through the small slit she'd created, "Sorry. I know it's getting late. You all must be wanting to get to sleep."

"I'm wide awake," Yurio answered stiffly.

"Same." The girls echoed.

The ballerina entered then, gently sliding the door closed behind her before she knelt down next to her partner, "Hun, he's done. Since it's late, he decided to go sit in the onsen for a little while. I know you're not thrilled on the idea of the spring, but...maybe you could dip your toes into it just so he's not completely alone with his thoughts out there?"

Mikhail's cheeks flushed slightly, but he nodded, "...I guess I could. I can keep a towel if I stay on deck, right?"

"Yeah."

"That's fine, then...I'll go have that chat. He answered, and pushed up to get back to his feet again. He dusted himself off a little and straightened out his clothes, and set his hand on his lady love's waist, offering a quick kiss to one cheek, "I don't know how long I'll be gone for. If I'm not back by dawn though, assume I drowned."

Minako snickered quickly, but returned the cheek-peek with one of her own and a quick hug, "It's not even waist-deep water."

"I might panic and forget."

"Panic about what?" She laughed, "Go on already!"
"Alright alright... Wish me luck. I'm gonna go be a responsible adult now."

Sitting alone in the wash-room half of the bathhouse, Asahi poured a bucket of water over his head, wetting his skin. Shampoo lathered his multi-colored hair, and was rinsed. Soap frothed over every inch of his frame, washing away the grime of travel and trauma. Without another soul to worry about, he grabbed the small white towel in his hand and simply walked out onto the deck of the onsen. He looked carefully at the spring; the giant red demon-mask that hung on the wall by the door, the multi-tiered fountain in the center of the bath with the stone frog sitting on top, the odd seashell backed display with the bear-like figure standing on front of it, and all the snow-kissed foliage that surrounded the pool itself. He took in the whole sight...and turned his eyes to the wooden tub on his left.

Hana lifted her head from the food bowl that had been set down for her, licking tenderly at her nose as she lifted her head, spotting a figure walk by. Once the man was gone though, she went back to the wet dog-food that had been put down for her, eating it slowly and deliberately.

Mikhail pushed into the men's wash-room with relative simplicity, spotting the multi-colored row of lockers, the red-top bench, the sinks on the far end, and even, to his confusion, a vending machine. He made a face at it, but went on through, reluctantly going through the process of getting ready for the bath he wouldn't even be taking. He looked around carefully though to make sure his target wasn't just around the corner, and was relieved to note that no one was there. Some clothes had been folded and left in a bin on the red bench, but otherwise, there was no sign of the younger man. Once he was finished though, Mikhail wrapped a long towel around his waist, and pressed his hand nervously to the vertical metal bar on the steam-fogged glass door.

*I don't know what I'm more nervous about. Talking to this poor kid about all the shit he's been through, or sitting half-naked on the edge of a public hot-spring.*

He shook his head and pushed on through, immediately chilled by the winter air, but warmed again by the heat of the spring. To his surprise, there was no one around. He blinked and looked all over, stepping closer to the edge of the pool.

*Did I miss him somehow? Maybe he left the locker-room for something. I guess I'll just sit here for a minute and wait. He did leave his things behind...*

The silver Russian stepped warily to the edge of the spring, and pulled up just slightly on the lower end of the towel, bringing it to just above his knees as he dipped his feet into the hot water. To his relief, it wasn't too hot, and he let himself enjoy the moment while he waited.

And waited.

...And waited.

*Where the Hell is this guy?*

He turned around where he sat and looked back towards the wash-room doors...and spotted a small white towel that had fallen to the ground in front of a large wooden tub. He looked up from there towards the rim...and saw what he could only presume was the top of his target's head, "Oh...there you are." He said casually, "You were here the whole time."

"...Senpai...?" Asahi replied incredulously, "...No..."
"Senpai?" Mikhail echoed, eye twitching slightly, "Is that what you call Viktor?"

No answer came to that, just a reluctant pair of eyes receding from the edge of the wooden tub.

"Minako said she told you about me. I've been updated to fiancé-status since the weekend though." The elder Russian started, turning slightly to sit more comfortably on that ledge, right foot low enough in the water that he could feel the smooth stone bench under his toes, "I'm Mikhail Rozovksy. Viktor's Uncle. I think you saw my girls when you got here...the smaller one's Nikkita, Nikki for short...the taller is Viktoria. We usually call her that but she goes by Vikki sometimes. And you are..." He extended his hand in a gesture forward towards the tub, palm up casually, and waited for a few seconds...though nothing came again, "...Asahi Saito." He answered on the skater's behalf, and lowered his hand. He leaned back on both slightly, and cast his eyes towards the water, "Minako was talking to me about your situation over the course of the weekend. She didn't get into a lot of detail, but...I know what happened between you and Yuri and Viktor, and how things have slowly resolved since then." Jade eyes went back to the tub, looking past damp silver bangs, "You don't have to explain yourself on that end. I trust that you've sorted out what you need to, and that's why you're here right now, rather than sleeping on a bench in the snow back in Imari."

Asahi's heart was in his throat, and his mouth went dry, but he really had no idea how to respond.

"Minako is pretty-well determined to help you, and I've agreed to lend my support to that cause." Mikhail went on, "I wanted to come talk to you about it a little so you can rest easy tonight. It...might be a little difficult though if you're not willing to talk back. I'd hate to just be this guy that's speaking words in your general direction, dropping all this information on you without any clue if you're on the same page or not."

The younger man felt slightly paralyzed, but he stretched his fingers out under the water and forced them to move. Once they were pliable again, he reached to hook them over the lip of the tub, and lifted himself up high enough that he could press his chin to the back of his knuckles, "...Sorry." He said quietly, looking down to where his small towel had fallen. It was too far down to simply reach for, so he started making his way to the far side of the private bath, crawling out like a cat trying to avoid notice.

Mikhail watched him incredulously, mystified by the sight of a lanky arm coming out from beyond the edge of the tub to paw for the towel and pull it back. It had only been big enough to dry one's face on though, and when Asahi gathered his courage to stand, he had barely anything to cover himself with. The silver Russian just turned his eyes to the water to give the younger man some semblance of privacy in the open air, and waited until he heard and felt water splashing as the skater got into the bigger spring. Looking over again, Asahi was about 6ft away, sitting up to his chin in the hot water, towel folded over his head.

The elder cleared his throat, partly because he had to, and partly to make sure Asahi was paying attention, "I wasn't there when you first arrived, but Minako has probably told you that your room and board here for the next week has been paid for. We're prepared to extend that though if you need it."

"...I can't...accept help like that..." Asahi explained hesitantly, keeping his eyes on the water, "Once I get access to the funds I have sitting online...I'll pay everyone back for what they've spent, and take care of the rest on my own. I've already caused enough trouble. I can't be a burden, too...least not on total strangers."

"I'd heard that you'd said that." Mikhail huffed, "I can understand how you must feel about it all. Not even taking into consideration everything about your background...but suddenly you're at the mercy of the very people you were in such conflict with only a few days ago. Enough so that, if not for
Yuri's mercy, you wouldn't even be a member of the JSF anymore. It can make a person feel completely helpless, like a feather being tossed around in a tempest."

Asahi breathed a sigh, but wouldn't let it vocalize in any way. His brow crinkled under his hair.

That was enough, and Mikhail could see it, "I know it'll take time for you to adjust to how things have changed, Asahi. But let me do the best I can to help you get through it. When Plisetsky was kicked off Team Yakov last year, Viktor and Yuri asked me to help get him back onto his feet again. He's practically my kid now. He's a bit of a shit, but he's come a long way and I love him like one of my own."

Grey-brown eyes turned slightly towards the older man, but Asahi wasn't quite ready to look directly at him yet. He spotted the white towel and pale skin out the peripheries of his vision, and held there on the edge for the moment.

"I'm told you earned about 50 grand over the weekend, since Viktor and Yuri got you onto social media for the first time." Mikhail went on, "Since I know Plisetsky's skating costs, and the kind of winnings he's gotten back, I kind-of have a taste for the kind of expenses you're looking at. I'm not sure how much your coach and choreographer cost before, but since I've learned that your coach is new to Seniors just for you, I'm guessing she's at least cheaper than Yakov was. Christ, that guy was a pretty penny..." He grumbled to himself, but shook the complaint away to refocus, "I'm sure the last thing you want is more hand-outs, so I'll extend this next bit as a sponsor, not just some random guy sitting in a bath with you. My company will buy in and help cover your skating expenses. The other sponsors you've recently signed up with will help with that, too. You shouldn't have to make any changes to your training regimen, aside perhaps from having move them here in Hasetsu. Minako and I will want to keep an eye on things while you adjust to this new life...so one concession we'll ask you to make is to stay where we can see you."

"...I...can't face Coach Nagisa right now anyway." Asahi finally spoke, "When she found out what happened, she practically smothered me. I like her...but I like her best as a coach, and nothing more."

"Ah, keeping it professional. I can respect that."

"But it means I have to cut ties with her until things settle down. If I have no coach, I have no skating career. So the sponsorships and all that...are a moot point." The man said stiffly, doing everything he could to stay stoic in the face of such a devastating admission.

"So Minako can coach you."

"...Huh?" Asahi lifted his head, looking straight at his Senpai's older doppelganger, "What...do you mean?"

"She's already going to be coaching Plisetsky. She's taught ballet for a long time, and she's a pretty highly regarded ballerina in her own right. Figure skating isn't all that different, plus she's got Viktor in the wings willing to offer pointers if she has questions."

That just made Asahi even more nervous, "I can't ask him for any help, not even by proxy... I'm on a razor's edge with him as it is...!"

"Huh, you too?"

The younger man had no reply to that.

Mikhail shrugged, "It's a thought, in any case. Minako just wants to make sure that you keep your spot on the Olympic Team. You earned your jacket fair and square...it'd be a damn shame if you had
to give it back just because of this." He leaned back on his hands again and looked up into the winter night sky, "The way I understand it, going to the Games is part of your penance anyway. Right?" He cast his eyes down to the submerged skater.

Asahi closed his eyes and nodded reluctantly.

"Viktor takes that kind of thing really seriously," The Russian went on, "That's why I'm avoiding him. He thinks I violated the terms of our agreement from way back, so I'm on his shit-list. If you want to stay on his good side, you'd best come to terms with yourself and make sure you get to PyeongChang."

Another hesitant nod.

"And you're Buddhist, from what I'm told. All this stuff goes into your karma pot, right? So whatever you do in this life either lifts you up or drags you down in the next one."

"...My last life must have been particularly heinous if this is what I must endure now." Asahi confessed, "Even with the blessings I've been offered from these least-likely of sources...the fact that I'm in such desperate need is just..." He lowered his face again, the tips of his hair touching the water, "...I must be paying for something truly depraved."

Mikhail frowned to hear those words, "...I've never really been a believer, myself." He started, "Life plays with an unfair deck for most people, and you just have to work with the cards that are dealt. Knowing even what little I do about your background...everything was really badly stacked against you, right from the start, so it's just been a cascade of bad endings no matter what you do."

Asahi could only lift one hand from the water the rub his eyes, and nod yet again.

"Is there anything else that your parents are likely to punish you with?" The Russian wondered, "They won't let you get your things from Imari. They've shut off your phone and cut off your access to the bank. Is that it? Aside from the skating stuff, at any rate."

"...I can't...think of anything else off the top of my head. Anything else is just..." He sighed a pained breath, "It's just consequences of the rest."

Mikhail hesitated for a moment, rubbing his chin in thought. He leaned forward to rest his elbows against his towel-covered knees, "...Is there anything else that your parents or family have done to you?"

Confused eyes came up, "...What...do you mean? Isn't that enough?"

It was a startling thing to hear, and the Russian sat up again, "It's not a question of whether something is enough or not. Is that all? You know that it's considered abuse when someone with power over you uses it to get their way at your expense, right?"

"...That's...just how it's always been though. They're the parents...they're the ones in charge... They control the money, the resources, and make all the decisions."

"Well, sure, there's a certain level of guardianship and responsibility that a parent has to have over their kids, but there's a line you don't cross. I mean, I'm firm with my kids, but I still give them liberties. I teach them how to be responsible, and to think on their feet, so no one takes advantage of them when they're on their own. Being a parent is about preparing your kids to be adults with their own lives, not about making them slaves with no autonomy." He explained, still stunned that he had to explain that in the first place, "It doesn't sound like your parents prepared you for much of anything. And yet...I'm told you have older brothers?"
Asahi cringed, but nodded, "Yes...three... All wildly successful."

"What was that?"

"Huh?"

"That thing you did when I mentioned your siblings. You tensed up like it hurt to think about them."

"Why wouldn't I?" Asahi asked, almost in an accusatory tone, "One of them was the one that told me I was homeless, and hurt my dog. They're all so much better-off than I am. They're all married, and have kids and great careers, and our parents are just so damn proud of them. And...then there's me. The misfit little brother who skates and has nothing. I couldn't even keep the one partner I did manage to find..." It was enough to put tears in his eyes faster than anything, "...I tried to keep him safe, secret, and away from the things about me that were unpleasant...and he was ripped right out of my hands anyway, like it was all some cruel joke."

"...Unpleasant...?" Mikhail echoed quietly, "What do you mean?"

Asahi snuffled and sat back against the edge of the spring, "I didn't want Riku to think I was more broken than he already thought I was...because of the thing with Yuri..." He explained, the pain thumping loudly in his chest, "I was ready...back then... To go with Riku to Kyoto and tell my parents about the life I'd chosen. I was brave because I had Riku with me...because I knew he'd catch me when I fell...or he'd fall with me in the attempt. I just wanted to be happy, with him, and put everything else behind me like a bad dream..." His hand came up from under the water again to try rubbing the tears away, but his skin was wet already anyway and it just made his eyes sting, "...But then he died...and I was alone again...and I had to move back to Imari and try to reconcile all the broken pieces of my life and my heart. I couldn't...say...anything... I couldn't...do...anything... I just had to sit there, and wonder why God didn't take me, too..."

"...Dare I ask why you have such horrible thoughts of your past that you wouldn't want to tell someone you cared about?" Mikhail wondered dubiously.

Asahi just tried to catch his breath for a moment, the water getting too hot for him to stay submerged in it. For lack of an alternative, he backed up against the wall, and pushed up onto the ledge, bringing that small towel down from his head to hide himself. Cold washed over him from the winter air, and offered some semblance of relief, giving him a chance to breathe again. He rubbed his nose on the back of his wrist, and tried to relay those horrible memories as they played inside his head, "As far back as I can remember...they were needlessly cruel to me. They intimidated me, terrified me with appalling stories of fire and torture, and death... Any violation of The Will was enough for me to be thrown into a burning pit for all eternity. If I didn’t already have nightmares because of the accident...my nights would be filled with the screams of all the tormented souls who came and went before me, crying out that I was next. Everything I did was against the rules. I started to believe that my birth was a mistake...that I was made up of all the broken, worthless, misshapen pieces that my perfect brothers had been able to shake off... I just...got so...so...angry... Angry at my parents for having me...and furious with God for making me this way... I got within a hair's width of ending it all, but the sheer terror of what waited for me was enough to stop me..."

The silver Russian was aghast at the story, but he wasn't sure whether, or how, to speak into it.

"...And I was only 12... There was so much rage built up inside me that I couldn't manage on my own... So much guilt, shame, and fear..." Asahi went on, keeping his eyes down on the rippling reflection of himself on the water, "That's when I threw myself into Buddhism... I started going to
Temple behind my parents' backs...while still being dragged to those appalling Christian services that my mother insisted on attending. I sank myself into the Peace Doctrine...and recited Buddhist teachings in my head while people all around me sang of Jesus. I'd tell myself 'Hatred is never appeased by hatred. Hatred is only appeased by Love. This is an eternal law,' while the pastor read about Jesus' commandment that 'He so ever come to me without hate for their mother, father, brother, sister, even themselves, cannot be my disciple.' I'd force myself to think of calm, placid water, the wind in the reeds, sun on my skin...while my mother ranted about the children who'd died in some natural disaster were being made an example of for society's ill and vices. I retreated into myself. I never told anyone anything about myself...and likewise, I never absorbed anything people said about themselves. If I knew nothing, I couldn't be hurt." He explained sadly, catching his breath for a moment before looking up to the sky, and the stars, "Figure skating found me soon after, and my martial arts. With that, and my faith, peace slowly came to me...and I could see myself, clearly...but alone in the world. But then, I wasn't alone...I suddenly had Yuri." "Oh..." He snuffled and rubbed his nose on the back of his wrist again, pressing his balled-up fists against his hips on the deck, palms to the stone, "Anxious as he always was...there was something calming about him. I was immediately attracted to it...and then to him... But I never said a word. I never made a move. I was scared that if I did, either he'd leave me, or he'd get hurt...or we'd both get hurt, and then he'd leave me. But in the end, he left anyway... I held onto him for as long as I could, for years... I took solace in the memory of what he'd done for me, even though he never knew how I felt. I was devastated when Yuri went down his own path... But then, a few years later, Riku turned up...and showed me that tranquility wasn't the best I could ever hope for. I could have joy in my life, too. And for a little while...even though I was scared...I was happy. He's gone now though...and all I have left is the fear, and shame...and the crippling guilt that I survived... " He swallowed a painful knot in his throat, and tried to breathe, "...And that's been the last 2 years of my life... " "Yikes..." " But I never want to look back again." Asahi asked suddenly, ombre eyes looking straight on at the older man, "I've...had enough of the pain that came to me from Imari. I just...want to be done with it, and get on with my life." "Sure...I understand that." Mikhail nodded, "Is there anything left in Imari that you want to retrieve though? I mean, surely you have some tokens at the house that you want to retrieve...maybe talk to your coach in person about what's going to happen." "... I suppose I owe Coach Nagisa that much... " The skater agreed tepidly, " And if we're going to be in Imari anyway...I guess...there's a few things I could pick up. I can't go along though. Not to the house... " The Russian shook his head, "I wouldn't let you go alone." The lights were all off when Mikhail found himself outside the door to his room. He waited for a moment to make sure Asahi and Hana gone into their own, and the door was shut until morning. Only when quiet returned, did the elder finally go into his assigned space, green spa robes clinging to his frame as he gingerly went around the bed-rolls on the floor. He managed to get to the side of the bed without kicking anyone or stepping on the cat, and pulled the sheets back to climb within, pulling them back over himself, only to stare at the black ceiling for a little while.
"How'd it go?" Minako asked, unexpected but expected. She rolled where she'd been, resting a cheek on the front of one shoulder as a hand went to rest on the Russian's chest, "I don't know how long you were gone..."

"...Uh...I think...he's okay with our help." Mikhail answered in a whisper, "And he's willing to have you stand in as his coach, but only through Four Continents. After that, he wants to re-hire Nagisa and that other guy. For the Olympics. Since they were with him until now."

"That makes sense."

"That kid is the walking personification of Murphy's Law if I ever met one." He went on, exhausted, "I've never met anyone who got the short end of the stick as much as he has."

"Oh, did he open up to you?"

"Boy did he ever... Piecing everything together, it sounds like his parents were kind of extorting him. They let him skate and do other things, sure, but they kept a pretty tight leash on him, even as an adult, all in an effort to keep him quiet about his predilections."

"Yeah, that's the impression I was getting, too..."

"I think we've come to an understanding though." He explained, tilting his head slightly to smell his lady love's hair, "He figures a month should be enough time for him to get things situated. If there's still doubt by then, he'll keep his home-base in Hasetsu for the support, and just take the train south every morning for practice and come back in the evening, like a work commute."

Minako yawned tiredly, but nodded against that shoulder, "That...sounds pretty good."

"...Yeah..."
Chapter 427

CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED TWENTY SEVEN

Sunlight poured onto Hasetsu, piercing the early-morning fog that hovered like a soupy white shadow over the city. Water shimmered in the river as it flowed into the harbor, passing the white castle on its hill as it bubbled by.

A ringtone cracked the silence as Yuri's phone came to life, buzzing and blinking as it sang its song. Yuri grumbled as he heard it, not wanting to move from the comfort and warmth of the husband (and dog) pile. It wouldn't shut off though, and he eventually moved to find it, forcing Jiro off where the pup had used his neck as a pillow. The Akita tumbled slightly and whimpered in surprise as Yuri leaned clear over him to find the phone on the nightstand, disconnected it from the charger, and pulled it to his ear without even checking who it was.

"Mushi mushi..." [Hello...]

He closed his eyes as a voice began to speak, and he nodded slightly, only then to shoot his eyes open and sit upright.

"Hai. Shutokushimasu. Arigatou." [Yes. I'll get it. Thanks.] The phone was clicked off and Yuri leaned towards his husband, dropping the phone between them as he reached to gently nudge at the man's arm, "Viktor..."

"...Fimorminus..." He slurred hazily.

"But the letter's ready now!" Yuri insisted excitedly, "C'mon! Let's g-" He was cut off suddenly by arms clamping around him to hug him close. Surprised, Yuri shook his head to focus again, only to spot the closed-eyed devious leer of the tired figure under him.

"Fimorminus." Viktor insisted...and twisted over, dragging his partner right overtop of himself so he could pin the man under his weight and go back to sleep.

"V-Vikt...tor...I can't...reach my phone...to set an alarm..."

"I am the alrmzzzz..."

Lights were coming to life all over Yu-Topia, but when Hiroko got to the front and saw that the common-room was already illuminated, she couldn't help but be curious. She set a hand on the door-frame and looked inside, spotting Mikhail there at one of the tables, practically surrounded by what looked like his work. A classic, albeit old and well-worn, chestnut brown leather briefcase was next to him and open, and on the low table, he had not only his tablet, but a laptop, three different notepads, all with writing of some sort or another on them, the fancy pen he used to do said writing, and finally, the phone he had just set down.

"...Mikhail...?" The stout woman wondered aloud, "How long have you been awake...?"

"Huh?" Jade eyes glanced over a shoulder, then down to the tablet for the time, then back again, "Well, I got up again after realizing I couldn't sleep, so...technically since yesterday?" He huffed a laugh, only for his attention to be grabbed by the feeling of his phone buzzing next to his arm, "Ah, sorry, I have to take this."
Hiroko just blinked at him and waited for a moment, listening to him speaking to someone she could only assume was a business colleague. For half a second, she thought she saw a few computer windows full of numbers and arrows, with charts and graphs on the side. It was entire foreign to her and she stepped off, "I'll get you coffee."

"Thanks! Oh, yeah hey, thanks for calling me back so fast, Solisse," Mikhail was saying, waving back at the woman as she headed for the kitchen, "...Why yes, I am in Japan. ...Yeah yeah, don't judge," He laughed, "I guess my internal clock hasn't adjusted. Listen, I need to open another sponsorship account...I took on another skater kid. I know, I'll have a small herd of them pretty soon if I'm not careful. It's like all these kids I'm acquiring...they're just falling out of my pockets now. Didn't have any to contend with on a daily basis a month ago, now I have four!"

Hiroko went to turn all the lights on, and was a bit surprised to see the drying rack stacked with the odds and ends of a single meal's worth of dishes. For a split second, she thought maybe the Russian in the common room had made something, but when she did a double-take to the table he was sitting at, there was no sign he'd taken any food or drink there. Looking back, she smiled in realization, "Ah, it must've been Asahi...he seems a sweet boy. I wonder why Yuri never invited him here back when they practiced together?"

Mikhail's voice continued from the background, "Yeah, I'll need him added to all the insurance stuff, and set him up with the same monthly stipend that we did for Yuri before. His name when you're ready... ...Asahi...Saito. October 28...1989. He doesn't have his own place yet so just put down the Yu-Topia address for now. Put my number as his for now, too...we gotta sort his phone situation. ...It's a long story. Poor kid's had it rough lately."

Coffee was brewing as the large griddles were turned on, and Hiroko stepped up onto a small plastic stool, reaching high for the white cup and saucer she needed. On the counter, she'd already collected the usual coffee fixin's and had a mini-pitcher for cream, alongside a small dish with sugar cubes.

"Sure, yeah, that'd be great...the jacket patch, a bag, the usual stuff." Mikhail went on, only to hear a second call coming into the background, "Oh! There's Jericho. I'll holler back at you later if I need anything else. Okay, great, bye..." beep "Jericho! Did it go through?" He paused a moment, crossing one arm across his chest to rest his elbow on as he hunched over and listened. The longer it went on, the more he grinned, until it was a truly devious look on his face.

Just then, Hiroko came around with the coffee tray and crouched down to start setting things at the peripheries of his work. She saw the shift in expression and started to wonder, "Oh my, what did you do...?"

"Thanks man, this is great. You're a wizard." The Russian complimented, "I'll let you know how it went. Yeah yeah I'll sleep on the train. Laters." He pulled the phone back and clicked out of the call, setting it face-down on the table. He leaned forward onto his elbows, "What did I do?" He echoed mischievously, "I did something quite dastardly."

"...Is it bad?" She asked hesitantly.

"If by 'bad' you mean 'illegal,' then no...maybe a bit morally questionable?" He laughed and shrugged, "Global commerce is a fickle creature."

As the resort came more alive, and non-Katsuki employees started arriving, Mikhail started to clean up his paper-laden mess.

He yawned and stretched, reaching up high before flopping down onto his back. When he opened his eyes, he spotted Yurio staring down at him with a brow cocked, "Mornin' sunshine," He teased,
only to get a groan from the teen as he came around the other side of the table.

Yurio grudgingly sat opposite the older man, and thump'd his forehead down on the table, "Why am I awake... Why is the morning evil... I hate everything..."

"Didn't it take you a while to adjust when you were here before that 'Hot-Springs on Ice' thing?"

"No...cuz I could sleep however long I wanted to." He answered, lifting his face slightly to rest on his chin instead, "I was passed out for a while."

"Ah...I see."

"And I didn't have any girls in my room with me." The teen went on, "Do all chicks wake up with the sunrise or something? Ugh..."

"Are they all awake or something...?"

"Look for yourself." Yurio pointed beyond the man's sight and into the hall, through the common room door to the foyer, just as the first of a line of three went by, shuffling like zombies.

"Coffeee..."

"Toooaastt..."

"Shooweerrrr..."

Mikhail blinked at them, but then laughed to himself, "Well, at least everyone's up, so that's good. I won't have to explain myself later."

Yurio lifted his head, dragging his golden hair off the tabletop as he moved, "What's that supposed to mean?"

The silver Russian turned back and smiled, "You'll find out when they get here."

Emerald eyes just narrowed slightly in an exasperated look, "...It should be illegal for someone to be as awake as you are right now."

Within the hour though, all three ladies had finally made it to the low table, and the first courses of breakfast were being brought out by Mari from the freshly opened kitchen. She crouched down on the one open side and started sliding things over, "I heard you were awake when mom got up. What were you doing all night...?" She wondered, looking to the patriarch.

"Little ol' me?" He answered with an innocent smile, "Just a little work before everyone else woke up. I may be here in Japan now, but the main base of my company is still in Canada, and they're still open for business right now."

"...Oh, right. I guess you do have to do some stuff." She agreed tepidly, still tired herself. She pulled the empty tray back towards herself, "So where's this new guy? I was already down for the night when he got here."

"Yeah, they got in really late because his dog needed to go to the vet first." Mikhail explained, reaching for one of the croissants on a big plate in the middle of the table, "She'll need a bird bath before we leave again later."

Minako slowly turned her head towards him, "Leave again?" She echoed, mouth half-full of toast and egg, "What's that mean?"
"We have work to do today, my dear," He answered playfully, cutting the bread along its wide side before reaching for the foamed butter cup with a dull knife. Mari rose to standing and took her leave, heading back to the kitchen as more patrons started entering the common room. Mikhail spread the butter over the croissant-half in his hand, "I spent a good chunk of the night making arrangements."

"I was wondering where you went." She huffed, swallowing before she spoke again, "I thought you'd just gone to the bathroom or something but then you were gone for like...an hour or something, but I fell asleep again. I guess if you had to do work, then..."

"I don't have to do that kind of work that often anymore." Mikhail explained, "The day-to-day operations of what I built are managed by the board of directors and others; that's part of what's nice about being an Incorporated company...I'm not the only one who can run things. I only stick my nose into stuff when big contracts are being negotiated or a new expansion is being set up. So, I basically get to just live high on the hog now and don't have to do much. I did my part ages ago." Minako just glared at him skeptically, "...You really downplay how wealthy you are, don't you?"

"Oh yeah." He laughed, "I don't want these nuggets getting spoiled." He made a face at his girls, "I want them to have as normal a life as possible. That's not easy when you get sent to private schools for the ultra-wealthy or don't have to get a part-time job to earn some life experience. In my perfect world, everyone who lives and breathes would have to spend at least one year working in retail or food service somehow, just to learn what it's like to interact with the normal public. I think the stuff you learn from those jobs is invaluable. There's just some things you can't be taught in school.”

"Have you figured out what that situation is gonna be for the kids?" The ballerina wondered, forking a slice of winter peach, "How will it work with us going to competitions?"

"Oh, yeah, that's part of what I did overnight, too." He nodded as he chewed, "I've narrowed down the candidate pool to four tutors. Marcie, the HR director back in Calgary, is going to do the last interviews today...er, tomorrow, for them. By Monday, all three of you should be starting lessons."

"Won't it be ass-o'clock for people in Calgary?" Yurio wondered dubiously, "I don't wanna listen to lectures at midnight."

"Hah, yeah...no." Mikhail agreed, "Part of the process is finding people who are willing to teach at odd hours so you don't have to learn at odd hours. It'll be the usual 9-3:30 with a lunch in the middle, maybe less if they're efficient."

"So my skating will have to go to the afternoon then..."

"Yeah. Minako was gonna tell Yuri and Viktor that the mornings and early afternoon are theirs, then you and Asahi get the afternoon and early evening. Apparently that's kind of how it was for them before anyway so this is less a formal arrangement than it is letting them know to continue the status quo."

Nikki grumbled from her side of the table, sitting between her older sister on the long-side, Yurio around the corner, and her father directly opposite herself. She poked at her brown-sugar oatmeal with a small spoon.

"Use your words, sweetie. I don't speak food-mumble." The elder Russian advised.

"You talk so easily about things having to do with Cousin Viktor, but you and him refuse to speak to each other." She said bitterly, "I hate it."

"If I go to him, he'll ignore me, and he won't come to me. I don't know what you want me to do
about it."

"He won't *come* because you won't *apologize.*"

"Apologize for *what?* Existing in the same square mile as him?" The elder wondered, about to say more when a big cloud came rushing through. The cloud had black eyes and toe-nail to *clack* on the floor as it moved, as well as a slightly-swollen nose that it used to snuffle around at the food presented at stealing-level.

Minako quickly put her arm between breakfast and the hungry dog, "Ah! Hana! Yame nasai!" *(Please stop it.)*

"Oh!" Nikki's eyes lit up, and the previous topic was practically forgotten. She lifted her eyes to spot a groggy figure stepping into the doorway, kneeling down to corral the hungry pup, "Asahi!"

"...*Hn?*" He wondered in answer as he looked up, spotted the silver teen, and looked down again quickly, whispering something in Japanese to the dog he'd pulled back to his chest.

"Oh hey, morning." Mikhail turned and waved, looking back behind Minako's head to see the man, "Did you sleep okay?"

"Uhm..." Asahi looked around the room a little, nervous at the number of people who were in it; it was much bigger than the *zero* he'd been around the night before. He scanned the people at the table in front of him then, seeing a *lot* of silver hair and jade eyes. He was at a loss for words and looked down again, retreating into the fur on Hana's sides.

"...*Does he know how to talk in English?*" Yurio wondered dryly, leaning towards the elder Russian next to him.

Mikhail wouldn't justify the question with an answer, and simply addressed the older skater again, gesturing his hand towards the open short-side of the table between Minako and Viktoria, "Have a seat. Keep Hana off the table if you can...I'll tell Mari that you're here. I already asked that something be made ready for you both so Hana won't need to beg off scraps. Mari!" He hollered, "He's awake earlier than I thought! Can you bring the stuff?"

"Haaaaai. *(Yes.)*"

"Domooooo." *(Thank you.)* He called, turning his eyes back to the skater as he nervously approached.

Asahi still wore the green spa jacket and pants from the night before, keeping it neatly and tightly tied around himself. Hana sat anxiously next to him, practically spit-bubbling from her jowls as she examined the feast before her; each breath made each bubble bigger until they'd pop and start anew.

Nikki and Viktoria glanced between each other apprehensively, then looked to their father, wordlessly wondering what to do. Yurio just stared, crunching on a triangle of toast like he couldn't care less. Minako, however, reached her left hand forward to rub the man's nearest shoulder, and repeated the question from before.

"How was your night? Was it okay? Bed was comfortable?"

He nodded tepidly, circles under his eyes.

"Did you like the onsen?"
Another brief nod.

"Uhm...hi?" Nikki attempted, leaning forward to offer a small wave, "I saw that you won Silver at Nationals this weekend...and I watched your shows, too. You're really good!"

Grey-brown eyes lifted through black bangs towards the girl, and he nodded, speaking quietly, "Thanks."

"I'm Nikkita...but no one calls me that unless I'm in trouble. It's Nikki otherwise." She said, offering a little humor where she could.

"...Asahi..." The older figure answered, voice still low.

The silver teen gaped at him, but then twisted on her seat-pad, one hand going to her sister's shoulder for balance as she reached right around him to extend her arm, "It's...nice to meet you?"

For a moment, it felt like Asahi had been saved, as Mari came around behind him to offer a distraction from the introduction. Awkward as it was though, given how she sported the widest of smiles under her flushed face as she sat the small plates down.

He's so hot! He looks like he just stepped out of a J-Rock video! Why are the cute ones always gay or taken!?

Hiroko came around her other side suddenly too, putting down the plate and bowl for Hana as her daughter backed out. She offered a few gentle pats to the pup's shoulders as the food was greedily devoured, "Good girl." She turned her gaze up to the dog's human though, "I hope you feel better this morning, now that you've had some time to rest and relax. We didn't get a chance to speak last night, but...I'm Hiroko Katsuki, Yuri's mom." She extended her hand, "It's nice to officially meet you."

"Oh...uhm...thank you." He answered nervously, accepting the hand for the quick bob it offered, looking on as though perplexed. Hiroko just smiled sweetly as she always did and stood back up again to return to her duties, following after Mari to the kitchen. Asahi's attention was grabbed again by the eyes staring at the side of his head, and he forced himself to turn and look at the smaller hand still extended to him. Nervously, he reached for it, holding those thin fingers with his own and bobbing them as well, "...Hajimemashite."

Nikki beamed then and gave those fingers a squeeze before returning to her seat, contented for the moment.

"Viktoria," The older Rozovsky said next, giving and getting a slightly more regular handshake.

Asahi glanced to the other side of the table then, looking at the steely expression on the blonde's face. Words didn't take long to follow.

"I'm the GPF Barcelona Gold medalist." Yurio chose to say, "And Viktor's heir in the motherland."

"Wow, that wasn't subtle." Mikhail huffed, "You got a regular name under all your illustrious accolades, Your Majesty?"

"Yuri Plisetsky. Russia's Champion."

"Ooooooo someone's super jelly." Nikki teased again, nudging the blonde in the arm with one finger.
"Never heard of you." Asahi said simply, his voice more normal.

Mikhail practically spit his drink for laughing so hard. Yurio just fumed. The break in tension gave the older skater half a chance to smile slightly, though it faded rather quickly to his usual neutral affect. The silver elder managed to settle himself down again, though he still grinned viciously, and cast his gaze towards his new athlete, "Well, that went pretty much as well as anyone could've hoped. Welcome to Team Okukawa. Training begins when this lovely lady says so," He gestured towards Minako between them, "Don't make it too easy on her."

The ballerina finished the morsel she was working on and nodded, "You don't have to come to the rink right away if you don't want to. I know you need a bit of time to adjust and that's fine. Plus, we have to go shopping for you and get you a new wardrobe so you're not wearing the same two outfits forever..."

"Well," Mikhail interjected, getting everyone's attention, "Maybe not a whole new wardrobe. We can definitely go shopping though."

Minako just gave the man snake-eyes, "What's that supposed to mean?"

The Russian just smiled, "Go ahead and finish eating. When we're done...we're going to Imari."

Asahi felt his heart in his throat, "...I don't know if I have an appetite now. I don't want to just have everyone see the kind of dumpster fire I left behind..." He said, feeling his hands already starting to shake where he had them balled up in his lap.

"Okay, let me rephrase..." Mikhail shrugged, pointing a fork at himself, Minako, and Asahi, "We are going to Imari."

"What!?" The trio squeaked.

"Oh..."

The Russian just offered an easy smile, "There's a lot to do, but it'll just be today, and then we're done."

Asahi still felt a bit apprehensive, "...A lot? I don't even have two armfuls of stuff to grab...and talking to my old coach won't take long..."

The fork gestured forward again to the proverbial Buddha's Breakfast Feast before the vegetarian skater, "Go ahead and eat." Mikhail mused, "You'll need the energy."

Minako was just as nervous as the figure on her left, but she looked to her partner incredulously, "Mikhail Rozovsky, what are you plotting...?"

"Cold winds always blow from the north," He answered simply, "And today, I am the tempest."
Yuri quickly pushed open the glass door from inside the vet clinic and went bounding for the idling Audi parked just outside. Makkachin squeezed his face through the space between the front passenger headrest and the edge of the window, panting and barking as Yuri approached. He gave the pup a head-scratch to convince him to pull back, opened the door, scooped up the puppy in his spot, and sat inside, letter in hand. He smelled it like it was a big check, "This is great. I never thought something like this was possible."

"How did he phrase it?" Viktor wondered.

Yuri pulled the envelope folds open and withdrew the sheet, seeing the letter written twice, once in Japanese and once again in English, "To whom it may concern," He read aloud, "Yuri Nikiforov, DOB November 29, 1991, is my patient, and has been under my care since he began competitive figure skating. I am intimately familiar with his life-long history of anxiety with occasional panic attacks, and the limitations these conditions have imposed on his life.

"As a result of this condition, Yuri has periodic limitations related to coping with stress and other emotionally difficult situations, becoming quite severe at times. In order to assist in relieving these complications, and to enhance his ability to lead a more normal life and function without worrying about panic episodes - or being made to take medications which may impact, complicate, or even prohibit his ability to compete - I have prescribed Yuri to obtain and maintain contact with an anxiety support animal. The presence of this animal, more specifically, his Akita named "Jiro," is necessary for his emotional and mental health because his presence will mitigate the acute symptoms Yuri sometimes experiences.

"Please allow Yuri to be accompanied by Jiro in the cabin of aircraft and trains, and in any establishments and/or businesses where service animals are permitted or can be reasonably accommodated. In addition, it would be beneficial for the poodle named "Makkachin" to be allowed to go where Jiro is permitted, as the two travel together and are a comfort to each other and their owners on long or stressful trips abroad.

"Signed, Dr. Hideo Aramaki..."

"I think he covered everything, don't you?" Viktor wondered.

Yuri put the letter away again, and pressed the envelope flat against his chest, "This is such a relief. I'm so glad he added Makkachin to the end." He said with a sigh, reaching over to pull his seatbelt across. He clicked it into place, and reached for his husband's closest hand, giving it a squeeze, "This is so great for you, too. I know you've been worried about how much time you spend away from Makkachin, so now he can come with us everywhere we go, too."

"I suppose it's one good thing to come out of your worries," The Russian agreed, twisting over to offer a kiss...and then another. He gave a nose-rub before pulling back again, and set the car into reverse to back out of the parking spot, "Alright...that takes care of that. Let's go check on Saito."

"You know that Mikhail's probably all over this situation by now, right?" Yuri wondered hesitantly.

"The moment Minako started talking to that guy, there was a chance she would tell my Uncle about it. You'd have to be naïve or ignorant to think the man wouldn't offer help to someone Minako thinks..."
is deserving."

"I'm just making sure..." The younger figure followed, setting his left hand on his partner's thigh as the right held the wiggly puppy on his lap, "Odds are good that we're looking at a Yurio 2.0 situation with Asahi."

"Probably."

"Mh..."

"Look, as long as he keeps his head on straight and he doesn't start seeking you out to be his comfort again, after everything that's happened, he'll do just fine." Viktor added, "And it's not even that you're entirely off limits to him, clearly...you've been talking to him. I just don't want him to have the chance to slip into old habits. He needs to expand his horizons beyond the one or two people that he lets into his personal space. And if I'm really honest..."

Yuri looked over, blinking behind his glasses in curiosity, "Yeah?"

"Since he went to make peace with the Itō family, and came back with both his lost lover's phone and dog...I'm actually worried Saito will get stuck on that loop, instead of the one with you that we just broke him out of."

"...Oh..." He looked down to Jiro, watching the puppy's fascination with the 'moving outside' on the other side of the glass, "Yeah, I guess that would be something to watch out for. He's got such a guilty conscience about everything, he may wonder if he's even allowed to move on with his life, given how he's surrounded by Riku's things now. I'd hate for him to be isolated from new opportunities because he's got Hana around to remind him that he would be 'cheating' somehow."

"I'm sure Minako's thinking about that. Hopefully having Riku's things will just give him the chance to mourn like he should've a while ago." Viktor went on, pulling the car out on the main street that would take them all the way to Yu-Topia, "It's hard to set a timer on how long a person can grieve for though...everyone's different. I only experienced that kind of loss when Kubochin died...it still hurts to think about him sometimes. Losing a dog and losing an intimate partner are very different though."

"Yeah..."

The unmistakable little red car eventually pulled into the parking lot for Yu-Topia, and Yuri set Jiro on the ground before stepping out himself. Makkachin darted out like a rocket, rushing towards the doors excitedly, sniffing at the ground as he went. Jiro was just as curious, but had his harness and leash on still, keeping him safe while he learned about the world. Viktor reached his hand out to hang behind his partner's shoulders as they approached, leaving Yuri with one hand free to open the door for them. Makkachin scratched at the baseboards before the panel slid aside and he could bolt within, making an immediate B-line for the common room. The sound of a girl suddenly laughing loudly echoed all the way into the foyer, and it didn't take long for Nikki to come rushing up, knowing exactly whose poodle it was that had snuck up on her.

"Viktor! Yuri!" She called, waving both arms. She came to a sliding stop at the edge of the wooden landing, and propped herself up, "You're here so early!" Makkachin came trotting up behind her and sat beside the teen's legs, panting quietly as he watched his humans reach to remove their shoes.

"Yeah we figured we'd come check on Asahi," Yuri explained, "We hoped to get here before the Nishigoris did so he wouldn't be completely overwhelmed."
"Oh. Well, you won't have to worry about that...not right now anyway."

"Eh?" They both cocked their heads up.

"Yeah...Minako, him, and papa took off almost half an hour ago. They didn't tell you?" Nikki explained, confused suddenly, "Well, I guess there was no particular reason to..."

"Tell us what?" Viktor asked.

"They went back to Imari."

"EH!?"

Shoes were being pulled back on in an instant, and Makkachin seemed to understand that they were leaving again despite having only just arrived. Jiro looked between them in confusion, even as the door was pulled open again.

"The Hell's all the racket out there?" Yurio's grumpy voice called, only to stop, "...Oh." He deadpanned them all, coming from the right as he returned from the onsen wash-rooms, "...Why are you two in such a rush to leave again? Didn't you just get here?"

The pair glanced at one another, then at the teens, but neither was sure what to say in answer.

"Yuri!" Another voice came; Hiroko's, "Yuuuuuri~!

"M-Mom...!"

"Don't forget to clean up the mess Jiro left in your room!"

The young skater could've face-planted for it, but he just lifted his head and groaned loudly instead, bending down to take his shoes off again. He handed Jiro's leash to his partner and practically scuttled off in a bitter hurry towards the narrow corridor that lead to the upper floors of the building. On the second floor, he paused in the family's private kitchen, and grabbed for some paper towels and one of the spray-bottles of hardwood cleaner.

"Oh, hey Yuri." Toshiya waved, sitting at a small table with the newspaper and a cup of tea.

"Morning dad!" He answered hastily, rushing out towards the stairs that lead to the third floor, and the hall with his old room. The door was already open, and his nose crinkled when he smelled the reminder of what he'd forgotten, "AHHHHHHHHHHHHH." By the time he'd shoved the windows open, grudgingly managed to clean up the puppy mess, and washed his hands, the sight he returned to was...endearing, at least, and made him forget about his hurry.

Surrounded by the teens, Viktor held Jiro up against his chest and shoulder, putting the pup easily above eye-level to everyone around him. Yuri could see that none of them had noticed he'd come back yet, and he waited in the side-hall, wondering why his husband had such an invested look on his face.

"...They spent a really long time talking to Asahi alone last night." Nikki was explaining, "Papa said he has plans for him now...but we don't have a clue what they are. He was up all night figuring things out, even after the talk. He said he couldn't sleep, so he's been up since yesterday."

"The old man came back to the room around 3:30am," Yurio shrugged, "But he left around 30 minutes later."
"Oh, you were awake?" Viktoria wondered, "Why? We had to put you into your bed-roll cuz you fell asleep lying right across it instead of in it."

He grumbled at the accusation, "I'm a tumultuous sleeper."

"In any case..." Nikki huffed, crossing her arms, "Papa said that it wasn't the stuff in Imari that he was going there for, but rather, what he's bringing there. If not for that, I would've just thought they were going to try to get some of Asahi's things...but that sounds like a second-hand consideration now."

Viktor was quiet for a moment, but Jiro wiggled and he spotted his partner overtop of the teens' heads, "Oh, Yuri... Let's get going. We need to catch up."

"Eh!?" Yurio barked, "They won't even let us come! Why are you going after them!?"

"Because they won't let you go." He answered, "This sounds serious..."

Yuri scrambled by, squeezing between Nikki and the registration desk to get back to his shoes. He pulled them on and reached his hands up to retrieve the Akita, "How are we going to find them though...?" He wondered as Viktor pulled the car keys out and reached for the door, "We don't even know where Asahi's parents live."

"I found you, didn't I?" The Russian retorted, "It's not like you gave me your address when you told me to come here. We'll figure it out on the way...let's just go."

"Ugh you are all absolutely insufferable." Yurio argued, "I want to come!"

"You don't even know the guy." Nikki refuted, "What would the point be for you to go?"

He shrugged and leaned back on a heel, "I wanna see the dumpster fire he mentioned."

"YURI." The older of that name barked, "Don't be mean! Jeeze!"

"He's the one who called it that!"

Nikki uncrossed one of her arms and pressed a finger to her chin briefly, "...True, but it was still mean."

"I didn't even say it to him though!"

Yuri gave an exasperated sight, but turned in place at the door's edge and went back, throwing one arm over the Russian Tiger's shoulder, "We didn't start to like you less just because Asahi's around. Try not to take it so personally that we're focusing on him right now. You don't know what happened over the weekend."

Yurio just grit his teeth, "...The old man would only say something happened."

"Yeah, that's about all there is to say about it." Yuri confirmed, letting the teen go again to catch up with his spouse, "Just let it rest like that. What happened isn't as important as what's happening now...and we have to go!"

"Yuri!" The Tiger called, even as the door was being pulled shut. He reached out to grab it and swung it open again, sticking his head out into the cold, "Yuri! VIKTOOORRRRR!"

The Audi's doors were pulled closed and the engine roared to life, and the little red hotrod pulled out of the small parking lot, making an immediate header for the train station.
Yuri momentarily put Jiro into the foot-well between his knees, or tried to...the pup started trying to clamber back up into his lap as soon as hands were off him. The skater just lifted his palms to his face, pulled his glasses off, and then unfolded the edge of his Ravenclaw beanie down over his eyes in their place, and sighed loudly, "...In all this craziness it somehow never occurred to me that Mikhail would find out..."

"Well, Minako would've had to tell him why things were going down the way they were..." Viktor pointed out, "Otherwise the reason why she was helping wouldn't have made a whole lot of sense."

"I know, but still..." Yuri half-whined, "I hope that doesn't become public knowledge. It's just gonna make everything so stupidly complicated if it does... I'm trying to forget that it ever happened in the first place."

The silver Russian nodded in understanding, but then reached for the nearest hand, "Sometimes there's merit to remembering the bad things that happen in life. We learned a lot because of it...right?"

"...Yeah..." He nodded, lifting the hand that took his own and kissed the ring while it was near, "This first year really has been hard on us... I hope year 2 goes much more smoothly."

The train south to Imari was only a 49 minute affair, but for Asahi, it had already felt like an eternity. Conversely, for Mikhail, it felt like 3 seconds, as he was practically passed-out as soon as he sat down. The train, a member of the 305 Series, was much more modern than the outdated-but-still-in-use 103-1500 Series. Its sitting spaces weren't so worn-in, and there were individual seat-cushions for each passenger, as well as Plexiglas dividers between sets. Mikhail had become intimately acquainted with one, cheek squished against it where he'd leaned, flat-cap nearly tipped off his head in the process.

Asahi was leaned forward, elbows on his knees, worrying himself into nausea. Minako sat next to him, putting the hapless skater between herself and her partner, and rubbed her hand back and forth across his back to try and soothe his frayed nerves.

[...You can trust him.] She started, quietly, [I know this can all be pretty overwhelming when so many people are suddenly moving on this issue, especially since no one has before.]

[...'Overwhelming' is an understatement.] The younger man answered, covering his face with his hands, [Daisuke is probably still there. I doubt he left when it was already really late by the time I got back. If they haven't burned all my things, I'll be surprised. I hope I can get some of my stuff, but...I'm still scared to face them again to get it.]

Hana sat with her front paws between Asahi's feet, and nosed at his hands tenderly, just enough to put some cold-and-wet on his skin. He let go of his face long enough to reach down and wrap both arms around her instead.

[What kind of stuff did you have?] Minako wondered, [It's a lot of your skating awards, right?]

[Skating and martial arts...Shorinji Kempo... All of my belts are there...and a few other things...]

[...I see...]

He whined into the dog's fur before letting her go again to sit up a bit, [The belts are only a symbol...everything I did to earn them is still in my head, but... They have sentimental value anyway. It's evidence that not everything in the past was awful.]
Minako rubbed one temple with the back of two fingers, [I just don’t understand what your family hoped to gain by doing this to you.]

Asahi was quiet for a little while, staring at his dog for what comfort it could offer. Eventually, he sighed and shook his head, [Trying to understand what my parents are thinking is futile.]

[You said your father was originally from the US, right?] The ballerina wondered, [You don’t look like...erm...how to put it...]

[Like a half-breed?] He said for her, [No, I’m not. He's ethnically Japanese. He was just born in the States, in Georgia, and then moved to Kyushu as an adult. Thought it was his home-coming, even though he brought a bunch of particularly un-Japanese baggage with him. He claims he struggled for a long time with being accepted here, but because the stuff his company made turned out to be popular, he found status and success anyway.]

[Hm...so you have family in the USA somewhere.]

[Only the tombstones to say they were once there.]

[And that's it? They're all gone?]

[So far as I'm aware.]

[And your mother?]

[Never worked a day in her life. She was...really active in the community though, and fairly popular.] He explained tepidly, hands kneading at Hana's cheeks, and she closed her eyes to enjoy the massage, [Without my father, she would be destitute. Without my mother, he would be a nobody. Everything about their lives is intertwined, which is why he never stopped her from the things she did to me when I was younger. He just...kind of accepted it. He never questioned her fanaticism, but he-]

[He never protected you from it.]

Asahi shook his head, [He was the one who agreed to let me have my hobbies...the skating and the Shorinji Kempo. He thought that he could bribe my silence by paying for the things I wanted to do or have. You should've seen the looks on their faces when they realized I'd become Buddhist though...] He sighed, [That day was a total shit-show...]

[So you kept a lot of secrets from them.]

[How could I not?] He asked, turning to face the woman, [Most of my existence, and most of the things I care about, somehow go against my mother's rules and beliefs. I got beaten severely on a number of occasions for things that my mother said were 'ungodly.' On occasions where she was just being super passive-aggressive, she'd prepare meals of mostly meat and egg, just to stick it to me for being vegan. My brothers took shots at me, too...there was always something to fight about.]

[...Wow...] Minako breathed the whisper, slumping her back against the bench, her one hand still on the man's back, [I've heard of siblings having severe rivalries...even Mari and Yuri got into the occasional spat over something when they were younger... Drawing lines in the sand though, it's like your family was split into distinct tribes or something.]

Like before, Asahi just shrugged unknowingly, [I wondered sometimes if I was adopted, but...my brothers all look just like me, only older and with less colorful hair.] He flicked one of the teal tails hanging beside his face, [Takahiro is also overweight...but, well, whatever... You get the point.]
“Yeah...” She nodded and restarted the slow slide of her hand up and down the skater's back, as much to keep her mind occupied as she'd hoped it would keep him calm as they neared ever-closer to Imari. [So there's Daisuke, and Takahiro...who's the third one?]

Jomei, 2 years older than me. Daisuke is 4 years older, and Takahiro is 6 years older.

[No girls to mellow it all out, huh?]

[No...]

[A house full of crazy momma's boys, a father who won't do anything to reign in her worst tendencies, and you... That sounds like a bag of fun.]

[Yeah... He lowered his gaze back down to Hana, brow furrowed lightly under his bangs, [Loads of fun...]

Yuri was dismayed at the schedule he read, and looked from the listings to his anxiously waiting husband, "The train to Imari only comes through here every 3 hours... They'll probably be there, done, and on their way back before the next train shows up."

Viktor whined a quiet groan, "So there's no way to catch them...?"

"Well..." Yuri folded the brochure and put it back into the plastic holder he'd picked it up from, "The train takes 49 minutes, with all the stops. Driving there ourselves though..."

"Yes?"

"Less than half an hour."

The Russian turned sharply on his left heel, "Then we'll do that! Road-trip!"

"Ahhh just be careful!" Yuri hollered, scrambling to catch up as Viktor made a quick exit, "It's still winter! We're barely 2 days into January and these roads can be slippery with ice!"

Viktor seemed at least somewhat pleased in spite of it, "My car is Russian. The tires are designed for roads that are icy for most of the year."

"Need I also remind you that your car is Russian?" Yuri added with a huff, glancing down briefly to see Jiro trotting alongside him, "I've seen the video compilations of car accidents there! It's no joke! We saw plenty ourselves when we were in St. Petersburg!"

"And most of those accidents were caused by people who didn't maintain their vehicles, or who drove those crummy plastic wind-up cars from the USSR days." Viktor retorted, long legs making it easy to outpace his spouse even with the careful steps he took, "I like my car. I take good care of it."

Yuri made a nervous sigh, "Just drive carefully... I'm perfectly happy on the ice under regular circumstances but not in cars..."

Standing in front of the Audi, Viktor paused. Car keys in his right hand, he clicked the fob to unlock the doors, but he didn't immediately go around to the driver's side to get in.

Yuri noticed and paused as well, looking down to both curious dogs before glancing up again, "Viktor...?"
"Sorry..." He answered quietly, shaking his head suddenly, "...I just got this weird chill down my spine when you said that..."

"Eh...?"

"I guess it just reminded me of the accident Saito was in. When I read up on him, the thing actually said it was a foreign driver that hit them. ...I'm a foreign driver."

"You're really not helping your case right now." Yuri said between clenched teeth, "Now I'm really freaking out!"

The silver Russian tilted his head to look over his shoulder, and offered a nervous smile of condolence, "Sorry, I'm not trying to make one of my weird premonitions. Here..." He said, turning around to find Jiro and picked him up, handing the puppy to his human, "Hold him. You'll feel better."

"Viktooorrr...! He's not gonna be this little forever!" The younger man whined again, watching as his husband got into the car anyway and turned it on. Makkachin stayed by his side though, as though sensing his anxiety over getting in. He watched as Viktor reached over the passenger seat and fumbled for the door, trying to nudge it open with only the length he had left in his fingers, though it would only sway out by a few inches before closing again.

"Come on! We don't have time to wait around if we want to catch up!" The silver legend hollered, barely heard from inside, "If they left half an hour ago and caught a train right as it was leaving, then we might be able to catch them right as they're pulling into the station in Imari!"

"Why are you so worked up about this anyway!?" Yuri asked, staying where he was, standing outside with both dogs.

Viktor blinked at him where he still leaned, but then pushed to sit normally in his seat, silently gesturing at the passenger door instead.

Yuri could do nothing but take the bait with a sigh, and stepped over, pulling the panel open. He grudgingly hit the lever so his seat would slide forward, and Makkachin jumped into the back, leaving him to push the seat back into position again. He didn't quite sit all the way inside though; he put one foot into the foot-well and left the other on the cold concrete outside, twisting himself around with Jiro on his lap, "So...?"

"I dunno, I guess I just..." The Russian started, hands on the wheel as he stared forward and over the dash, "...Despite many of the obvious differences between us, and the hostility I still feel towards him for what he did to you...there's a part of me that's got enough empathy for him right now that I want to be there when this thing happens. We've gone through enough with him in the last week that I just...kind of want to see it to the end. Confronting the people that made him who he is today is a major milestone. Right?" He turned to look at his partner, "This could be huge...not just for the closure he needs on his past, but on how he approaches the future. If he's going to be staying at Yu-Topia for a little while, we should know the kind of person that's coming back from Imari today, because it might not be the same one that went there, especially since we're leaving for 2 weeks tomorrow and we won't be here to see how he handles it."

Yuri hesitated, but then drew a breath as he shook his head, and pulled his other foot into the car, along with the door just after it. His seatbelt was pulled across, and he looped the fingers of his right hand through the harness over Jiro's back, "...Alright...Alright..." He conceded with a nervous exhale, and swallowed hard as the car started to pull out of the lot, "Just...please drive safely. The 202 is a single-lane road the whole way down, and even if you're the best driver in the whole
world, everyone else probably isn't. Japan can't lose its two best skaters right before the Games."

Viktor huffed, "...But at least we'd go together."

"Ohmygodletmeoutofthecar."

The silver legend just laughed.

They were still three stations away when Minako got the text message.

[Stay at the train station. We're coming with you.]

She narrowed her eyes and raised both brows skeptically, but thumbed her answer, [...Why?]

[Cuz we don't know where Asahi used to live and it'd be dumb if we showed up in Imari with no clue where to go?] Yuri replied.

[No. Why are you COMING?] She shook her head and sent the message. The jumping dots from Yuri's typing went on for a while, only to fade to nothing, leaving Minako to wonder if he'd erased it all. Instead, she got a small essay, which made her cock her head back enough that Asahi noticed.

[What's with the look...?] He wondered quietly.

[Apparently the cavalry is coming.] She answered, [Yuri and Viktor, at least.]

"...Senpai...?" The younger figure whispered, mostly to himself, [Why though...?]

[That's why I jerked my head back suddenly. Yuri sent a bloody dissertation on it.] Minako explained tepidly, leaning forward to grab her phone with both hands and thumb the screen up to see the beginning of the message where it had vanished off the top of the panel. It took her a little while to read it, but she shook her head and laughed before sitting upright again, [Long story short, they don't want you to do this with just us. Viktor thinks he should be there because it was his doing that you got online and caught-out in the first place, and Yuri just thinks you'd feel better about it all if someone was around that you had more than a week, or a day's, familiarity with, as the case may be.] She nudged her head towards the still-catatonic Mikhail, [There's not much we can do to stop them from coming at this rate. Since Viktor has his car, they can go wherever they want without having to wait for the train. They'll probably turn up fairly soon after we do...so we might as well wait for them.] She hesitated then, and gave the man a challenging look, [Unless you don't want them to come?]

[I'm sick to my stomach thinking about what's coming, and I don't even know what this guy's got up his sleeve.] He thumbed at the Russian on his left, [I'm scared out of my mind right now...but I guess, if they're coming, then at least it'll feel like I have the bigger army...even if it is them...]

[You're still worried about that kind of thing?]

[...I kissed Yuri against his will, and Senpai was ready to go to jail in Yuri's defense.]

[Asahi...it's Thursday. If this was still Saturday, or if you'd shown absolutely no remorse for what you'd done, then I could understand, but you did and we're past all that now... They genuinely want to help you. You have a chance to form a real, lasting relationship with them, and not just as fellow skaters either.]
He nervously looked away, [I don't even know what that's like so I can yearn for it.] He reached up to rub his hand over his face, [All of this... none of this makes any sense to me... The warm welcomes, the food and the bed at a hot-spring resort, not to mention how you guys paid such close attention and made sure that whatever I was given was vegetarian... the offer to be my team for free until I can afford Coach Nagisa and Webber again... saying you'll buy me clothes... Even the fact that this guy.] Again he nudged his head towards the sleeping Russian, [...Is so ready to jump on a train and confront my parents!? This is sheer lunacy. I don't see how any of this is going to end well. I'm absolutely terrified. You guys don't know what you're getting yourselves into.]

Minako gave an uneasy smile, but nodded as he spoke, [That's true, but I'm more likely to believe that Mik's going to be the one coming out on top at the end... Your parents may have friends in Imari, but...]

[They don't just have friends in Imari!] Asahi lamented, hands grabbing for the teal lengths of hair aside his face, [They have influence on the City Council, the police force, other businesses... This whole thing could get really dangerous, even back in Hasetsu!]

"Is he freaking out?" Mikhail suddenly wondered, eyes still closed under his tilted flat-cap, "It sounds like he's freaking out."

"He's freaking out." Minako confirmed, "Apparently his family is akin to Imari Royalty and has some power out there."

The silver elder sat up straight, fixed his hat, and rubbed the drool off the side of his face. He yawned and shook his head before sitting normally again, tilting it against the window behind him towards the petrified skater sitting between him and his lady love, "Kid, do you know anything about Russia?"

"...Uhm... sort of?"

"It's brutal out there. Members of the Russian Mafia own whole towns and businesses, and the police know it... those guys could slit someone's throat in broad daylight, and then go party with those same cops later on that same night." Mikhail explained simply, "Politics isn't much better. You speak out against someone in power on a Monday, and by Friday you're in a frozen gulag, or dead by mysterious circumstances. Forgive me if I'm not entirely shivering in my sleek black shoes over what your parents think they can do to us in retaliation."

"Are you absolutely sure you're not an oligarch?" Minako asked skeptically, raising a brow as she looked past the skater's head. She then leaned closer to the window and held a hand up to hide her mouth as she spoke behind the skater's head, "You didn't poison them, did you? We're not going to Imari to bury bodies and/or burn a house down, right?"

Mikhail just laughed quietly and shook his head, "No, I didn't hurt them. I haven't harmed a single hair on anyone's head. Besides, what kind of an alibi would I have if I went to the scene of a crime after an unreported murder took place anyway? It'd be pretty suspicious. Plus, I'd be implicating you two..." He looked questionably at his fiancé, "...Two and a half...?" He shook his head, "You three."

"THIS IS WEIRD." Asahi finally harped, hunched over between the two older figures. He stood up abruptly and went to sit across from the duo instead, looking back at them as Hana jumped up to sit in a seat next to him, "I thought we were just going to go there to get some of my things and talk to my former coach, but now it's like... you have much bigger plans..."

Mikhail took the opportunity to scoot over and reached one arm over his fiancé's shoulders, "You
come from a perspective that's skewed towards always losing." He explained, looking at the younger man in return, "You expect that this will be more of the same simply because you're involved. But you're not a kid anymore...not theirs, anyway. Whether temporarily or long-term, as a member of Team Okukawa, you've been extended all the privileges and protections they currently enjoy, which includes the vast riches and influence of the multi-national corporation I built. I can afford a few more tricks than simply sponsoring a handful of figure skaters. Your father's cute little ceramics and pottery company doesn't scare me."

Asahi just squinted at him, "...What did you do...? *Buy it?*

Mikhail sputtered and laughed, but shook his head, "At 3am? Who's going to take that phone call? No...that would be too easy anyway, and your parents would simply enjoy a calm and quiet retirement with all the profits they made off of me. What kind of vengeance is that?" He jokingly raised a hand and shook his finger in a scolding manner at the skater, "*How dare you, sir, for all the things you've done...how dare you. Here, have a bunch of unearned money and retire in the lap of luxury.*" He lowered his hand again and shrugged, "I prefer to do things in a slightly more subtle way... I'm playing the long game here. Besides...it's not just my influence that's making this possible. You should have more faith in yourself... Be more self-aware of your ability to inspire people."

"...You do know that no one in Imari celebrates me, right? No one ever has. I am the exile, the pariah...I might as well be a leper to those people. Anything I'm good at becomes a target of ridicule. They don't care what I've achieved...if I'm good at it, then the thing itself must be terribly easy."

Jade eyes glanced aside slightly towards the ballerina, then back again, "You've seen Harry Potter, right?"

"...I know the basics about it."

"The entire book and movie series follows that guy. You first learn about him living under a staircase with an abusive family that hates him...and suddenly, he's thrust into this incredible destiny where he means something to a lot of people." Mikhail explained, and pointed a finger at the younger man casually, "*You're an Olympian, Asahi Saito.* It's time to come out from under the stairs and take your destiny by the horns. But, first thing's first...we need to get these Dursleys off your back. So, if we carry through on this analogy, I'm the Hagrid here to come rescue you, as well as the Dumbledore to guide you...sort of?* He turned to Minako, "Maybe you're Dumbledore. You're gonna be the one coaching him. I'm just part of the cheerleading section once we're done in town."

She shrugged, "The better-looking, younger Dumbledore."

"Right." He nodded and looked back again, "So we've got...Hagrid to save you, pseudo-Dumbledore to guide you some, Sirius Black to be awesome and mysterious, and maybe throw in a little Lucious Malfoy for being a sneaky, cheeky bastard."

"Sounds like you've seen those movies a few times." Minako teased.

"Oh Lord, if my *kids* knew what was in Osaka while we were in Moscow? I'm honestly worried for the moment they realize what they missed."

Asahi slouched and let out a pitiable whine, his stomach in roils again.

It was about 9:30am when the train pulled into the station in Imari, and Asahi was pale and tense. Looking around, there were spies around every corner...every pedestrian was in on what was
happening...every car that went by was going to turn around to head north towards his parents' house.

Except for the little red one that nearly ran him over as he went rushing out into the street in a hazy panic.

Minako grabbed him and pulled him back suddenly, just as his feet hit the curb, nearly making him collapse backward as the car came to a screeching halt right in front of him. He could only hear Hana barking though. The ballerina suddenly shrieked excitedly to realize who had almost run the man over though, "Yuri! Viktor!"

The silver Russian briefly put the car into Park so he could open the door and step out, "Don't run into the road like that, dummy! I could've killed you! Where were you even trying to go!? There's a metal fence in the median!" He pointed at it for emphasis.

Asahi just groaned and dropped to his backside, not even lifting his head when someone else honked as they were stalled behind Viktor's car. Hana stood by him, tail wagging slowly from the adrenaline, but her ears were flat against her head in worry. The Audi's door closed again and Viktor drove it off to the side, pulled a U-Turn at the end of the metal fence, drove back up the road slightly, and turned to enter into the train station's park-and-go drop-off loop. The older pair helped Asahi back to his feet and started walking him down the sidewalk, and a minute or two later, two younger men were bounding across the road with their dogs at their sides to meet them.

Viktor was still heaving, a hand on his chest and a gaunt look on his face, "Yikes." He said, shaken, "Yuri was worried this whole way here that we'd die cuz we were in a hurry, and just as I said 'Hey look, it's the train station! We made it!' you ran into the middle of the street like someone was chasing you!" He threw his arms out to the side, utterly and completely done...but Asahi wasn't looking at him, "Saito!"

"Go easy on him, Viktor...he looks like he's about to have a stroke." Yuri defended, only to blanch slightly as the man in question descended to his knees on the pavement, head bowed, "...Asahi...?"

"You don't have to dogeza in public like this..." Viktor explained sternly, crossing his arms then, "Just don't run into the street again."

It wasn't a dogeza though. The hyper-stressed figure face-planted and went limp, all but frothing at the mouth, as all three dogs surrounded him inquisitively.

When Asahi came to again, his ears were ringing and his skin felt tight, but he was sitting upright, on a bench he supposed, just outside the train station where he knew he'd been moments earlier. Minako was directly in front of him, Mikhail was on the right, an arm reaching towards him to hold his shoulder, and Viktor was on her opposite side, staring at him like a specimen under glass. Yuri, he assume anyway since all he could see was a pair of legs, was on his periphery, standing by Makkachin and Jiro just a bit further to the left than Viktor had been. Hana was propped up on the bench from behind him with her front paws on the seat, nosing her way under one arm to find his hand.

Yuri watched the whole thing cautiously, feeling bad but not sure what to do about it. Instead, he left the recovery effort to his husband and Minako, and tapped Mikhail on the back of his coat to get the man's attention; Viktor noticed and snorted to himself quietly, but didn't argue. Surprised, the elder Russian lifted himself upright and looked over his shoulder, spotting the waggling finger as Yuri beckoned him a little further away, the tiny Akita puppy prancing inquisitively close by. He followed, suddenly getting a little anxious, but didn't say a word until the younger man turned around and spoke in a low voice.
"Are you sure you know what you're doing with him?" He wondered quietly, "You know about the stuff that happened in Osaka, I'm sure of it..."

The Russian nodded, and put his hands back into their usual homes in his coat pockets, "Of course I know what happened in Osaka...and I'm sorry you went through that. I had my own worries about this kid at the same time, since Minako brought him to her hotel room for some insane reason...and then stopped answering her phone for a hot minute."

"We know. Viktor and I saw the bunch of you get up and leave the audience. We were watching the competition from home, and then Nikki called me to ask if we knew what Minako-sensei was up to, not knowing we'd left Osaka." Yuri explained, "That's not what I'm getting at though."

"I don't follow then."

"Minako-sensei asked him to stay overnight with her because he made suicidal threats, and she was scared to let him out of her sight. This thing you're doing might truly break him."

Mikhail gave a measured look, "There is nothing that I'm doing that will come anywhere close to being as bad as some of the things that guy has already gone through in his short life. When I'm done here, I plan on him being better than when we came."

Yuri stared at him, waiting for the adage.

"Nice beanie." Was all he got though, "I kinda pegged you for Gryffindor but I guess I don't know enough."

He huffed and made a face before he shook his head, and tried to be serious again, "Mikhail!"

"Sorry!" The older man shrugged his shoulders up exaggeratedly high, "I don't know what else to say! I've got this! I promise!"

"You'd better keep a close eye on him when this is over. We thought you'd just sponsor him like you did with Yurio last year...this is way excessive."

Mikhail hesitated for a moment, but then reached a hand forward to set it on Yuri's shoulder, and leaned in, "I know that you and him go way back, but from everything Minako told me, and everything he told me...this is a situation I can't just ignore."

That just made Yuri's heart sink, and his brow furrowed under the beanie's edge. He looked back around Mikhail's frame to see that the man in question was starting to stand up again, though with some support. Eyes went back to the Russian standing closest to him though, "I'm trusting you... Please don't hurt him more." He said with finality, stepping around the taller figure to go back to the others.

Mikhail waited a moment, but then followed close behind, feeling somewhat deflated. He doubled-down on his plan again though once he saw Asahi standing on his own, "Yuri has a good heart, but he grew up in a normal household, with a supportive family...he doesn't know what it's like to be the whipping-boy. If he knew how badly the Saitos treated this kid..."

"...I can't do this..." Asahi started again, feeling dizzy still from the whole thing, "I can't face them, not like this..."

"Relax, breathe...you're safe." Minako reassured, holding both his shoulders then.
"We can't make him go back to that house..." Viktor said quietly, "Whatever my Uncle has planned...does it need Saito to be there with him? This is just causing him a lot of undue stress."

"Being there to see and hear it is part of what's supposed to make this work." Mikhail explained, "The longer we wait, the more time he has to get worked up. We gotta pull this off like a Band-Aid. It'll only hurt for a second."

Viktor grimaced and looked away.

"It's a 20 minute walk from here," The elder went on, "Since you drove here though, I can't imagine you'll want to leave the car behind and hoof it."

Yuri watched, wondering what kind of response his husband would give...but Viktor just shrugged.

"The dogs could use the walk."

He approached quietly and set a hand on the man's elbow, "Viktor, the dogs can walk...you shouldn't though. Your ankle will be a ruin by the end of this... You're lucky nothing happened when you slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting Asahi."

Viktor's eye twitched slightly in irritation, "Fine, so we keep driving...if it's a 20 minute walk then it'll take 2 minutes to get the car there." He pointed out.

"That's fine. We'll just-"

"Asahi can't walk like this." Minako interrupted, "Guys, could you take him? We'll walk up there on our own. He needs to sit and drink something."

With a purpose in mind, Viktor's demeanor changed again, and the irritation of dealing with his Uncle faded quickly. He nodded to gesture his head towards where he'd parked the Audi, and helped hobble the man across the street to get to it. Yuri broke off with Jiro to buy something from the train station store, and returned a few minutes later with a bottle of green tea, offering it to where Asahi had been propped sideways in the front passenger seat.

Minako put her hand on Viktor's arm to get his attention, "Why don't you guys just drive around for a little while? Let him settle down a little bit. Sitting with you guys and the fluffs might do him some good."

The silver Russian nodded in agreement, "That's fine." He checked the time on his phone, "Give me the address...we'll meet you there at 10:30."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED TWENTY NINE

Even sitting between two dogs, and holding a bottle of tea, Asahi's heart wouldn't stop racing. He could feel the humidity on his skin, making it clammy, and he could only imagine how pale and deathly he looked.

"...Is there someplace calming around here that you want to go to?" Viktor wondered suddenly, glancing back through the rearview mirror, "Saito."

He blinked and shook his head to regain his focus, but nodded and pointed north-east, "On the other side of the river...the park by the castle ruins..."

"Alright..."

Just across the river themselves, on the main street going north, Mikhail scoffed as they spotted a certain building on the left, "...The police station."

"Look beyond...City Hall." Minako pointed to the next building up, though it was slightly pushed back from the road to allow for parking.

The Russian sneered at them both, "To think Asahi passed by these places to and from the train station late last night. It must've been entirely alienating. Not just because they were closed, but because they would've been no help to him even if it had been in the middle of the day." He growled and turned to look forward again, face slightly tilted down in anger, "There's so much that these careless breeders should be paying for. I only wish I was corrupt enough to think I could buy the police force, too."

"That must've been some talk you two had last night..." Minako worried slightly, "What did he tell you...?"

"Some things that really unnerved me, as a father." He answered carefully, "I'm not even sure why he told me, considering he had only met me a few minutes prior to the admission. But mark my words...there are precious few things in the world that piss me off quite as much as religiously-motivated hatred. There isn't even any goddamn logic to the things they hitch their bigotry to...it's just cuz someone, somewhere, once in the distant past said so." He fumed so hotly that steam could've been rising from him, "And why!? What was the point of it all!? What threat does one person's sexuality pose to society that they have to ban it on pain of death!?"

"Hun, calm down...we're not even there yet."

"I know, I know..." He drew a breath, trying to find some zen in the moment, "...I have to save my energy. If I burn out all my rage on the way there, I won't have any left to drop on them."

Asahi cleared away some of the leaves and snow from the step-side wall that lead up into an old-looking shrine, and twisted around to sit down. He closed his eyes, and forced himself to breathe. The tall, long-needled pine tree on his left bristled slightly in a breeze. Before him, Viktor and Yuri leaned against the car as they waited, looking around the area.
Yuri eventually pulled his phone out and found a map of the city, zooming in on their location to get the names of nearby buildings to pull up. He leaned into his husband's shoulder, cheek pressed to it as he clung behind one arm, phone in front of himself, "Viktor...look."

"Hm?"

"Enzuzen Temple. It's Buddhist. This must be where he learned about it."

"Didn't you come to Imari for skating before? Shouldn't you know all this stuff?"

Yuri made a face and turned to look at the man, "Give me a break. Asahi was notoriously difficult to learn anything about, and I didn't exactly follow him everywhere he went. It was more like he followed me. I knew about places, but they had no context until now, and it's been ages since I was here last."

"Mh..."

He looked back across the road behind them both, "And that's Shiritsukeitoku High School...maybe he found the Temple because he went to that school?"

"I already knew about the Temple." Asahi said suddenly, not having budged from his meditation pose, hands clasped over folded legs, "I used to go to the park and the castle ruins when I was real small, and this temple is between them and the road here. It took until I was twelve before I really associated the temple with a belief system though, rather than just a place I knew. My father brought Southern Baptism with him from the USA, after all, so that's all I'd known before. Buddhism gave me a different way of thinking, and I learned about Shorinji Kempo through it. I added figure skating to my life when I was about 13, met you when I was 15,"

Yuri felt a little strange to be included in the timeline.

"...And by 19, I was in Tokyo." Asahi explained, "I had 5 good years there before everything came crashing down, and I was forced to come back to this place. I...never quite got my head back in the game, and I got stuck."

Viktor lifted his free hand, gesturing towards the man, though Asahi's eyes were closed and couldn't see him do it, "Well, that's why we're here now, right? To get you un-stuck."

Asahi cringed a little, and lost his focus, his head drooping a little over his loosened hands, "I guess so..."

"The girls back in Hasetsu told us that you and my Uncle had a chat about what was going to be happening here. I assume that means you know and understand that he's going to do something that will change everything." Viktor asked, "Even if you don't know exactly what he's done."

The younger figure nodded, "...He...said that what he did already can be undone, or mitigated somehow so that it looks like he didn't do a thing. It's the part about how my parents understand it that makes the difference. If they don't hear it from him, then it doesn't matter. So...I can pull the plug anytime, right up until the second he tells them."

"...And you're okay with that?"

Asahi nodded reluctantly, "I've spent so much of my life in fear of what they'd do to me...putting it into someone else's hands makes me feel a little better, because my feelings of powerlessness won't get in the way. He said that someone else should've stepped in a long time ago to help me, and that it's criminal that no one did...so he wants to do something that forever puts a stop to the 'games' they
played at my expense. He swore that nothing he's done would or could physically hurt them...but it puts the proverbial 'fear of God' in them to never act out against me in any way ever again. My brothers, too." He lifted his eyes a little, turning towards where Hana was watching leaves with Makkachin and Jiro, "...Something about me being an Olympian plays into it, too, but I'm not sure how, considering the fact that no one in Imari really gives a damn."

"Just so long as you're at peace with this." The Russian added, "Half of why I'm not getting along with that man right now is because he never asked my permission before doing things that impacted me. What he does today is going to change your life entirely."

"Maybe he learned, then..." Asahi suggested. He then shook his head, teal strands of hair waving back and forth like water, "But maybe it's just our different starting points, too. He's given me a lot of hope, even though I'm scared stiff. I don't know how to convince myself that any of this is real. The only thing that's sinking in is the crippling terror of what's coming... What happens after...seems like such a dream. It can't be real."

The pair glanced at one another, but it was Viktor again who spoke, "Just think of it like when you went to Tokyo to train. Now, you're going to train in Hasetsu. Most skaters travel to where the coaches are, not the other way around." He shrugged slightly, "I thought I'd never leave St. Petersburg, but even I branched out to practice in France for a little while...and now I'm in Japan. Yuri went to Detroit for a while, too."

"I don't...mean about the skating, per se." Asahi explained, uncrossing his legs to let them dangle off the ledge of the wall, "After everything that happened, and how I tried to escape the memories of Tokyo, coming back here 2 years ago made it seem like I'd never left in the first place. The idea of finally leaving Imari for good, even to go to Hasetsu, a city I'd passed through a hundred times on the way to Fukuoka... Maybe it's just the fact that I never left the train station before yesterday; it just feels surreal."

The silver Russian nodded quietly, and looked at the time on Yuri's phone where it was still held up with the map app open. It was 10:22am. He pushed off the car and stood up on his own, with Makkachin looking up from the leaf he and Jiro had been stalking, "We should get going. Are you ready?"

Asahi hesitated for a few seconds, but then resigned to nodding, "As I can be."

Minako and Mikhail were waiting on the corner when the Audi went by, and Yuri stuck his head out the window, the car pausing briefly while the coast was clear, "Where should we park?"

"We haven't seen any public parking spaces since the Hair Salon a little ways back." Minako answered, "Maybe there?"

Asahi just whined quietly in the back seat, "If we're not staying, then just park in front of the house. It'll give them more incentive to get this done quick if it means getting you to drive the car away." He said, hands pressed through Hana's fur where she had her head draped across his lap, "I can't believe this is really happening..." He whispered in a quiet panic.

Viktor nodded and pressed lightly on the gas again, turning into the small roadway that lead between the big houses on the left, and the farm-plots on the right. Yuri pointed to the one that had the right numbers on the front, and Viktor carefully turned the little red car into the open lot, treading precariously over the small concrete bridge that went over the drainage ditch. There were a number of other cars parked there - new and expensive-looking - that he had to avoid, but there was enough
room in spite of them to completely turn around, and park right next to the stone wall opposite the front door.

Asahi tied to take a sip from the tea bottle, but his hands shook so much, he couldn't get a grip on the cap to turn it. That failing, he just pinched it between his legs and held onto it, listening to the doors in front open, and then the passenger seat shunt forward to let the back passengers out. Hana jumped out first, but her hackles were immediately raised once she stood on that familiar ground, which Yuri noticed easily enough. Makkachin was whining and swaying, trying to see if Asahi would move or if he should jump over the man, but both ideas were quickly dashed when the driver's side door opened again and Viktor reached in from between the two front seats to block the way outright.

"Not here, Makkachin," The Russian said simply, "Hana and Jiro will keep you company in just a minute."

The brown fluffer whined, but sat back as if in understanding. Asahi reluctantly exited the vehicle then, and worked to usher his own dog back inside. Once she was in the back seat again, the seat was put back into place, and Yuri set Jiro on the front seat before the door was closed on all three. With the car secure, the skaters all looked up the road to see the two stragglers finally arrive, walking over the bridge. Mikhail went straight to the man they were there for, and paused beside him.

"I know this is stressful, but bear with me a little bit longer." He started, "Before I go up and knock on that door though...I'll give you this one chance to come clean if anything you said or suggested is untrue or exaggerated."

Asahi lifted his head, drew in a breath, and shook it, "Every word is true."

"And you're still confident about wanting me to go through with what I'm about to tell them."

He nodded then, though hesitantly.

"Then you have absolutely nothing to worry about." The elder explained confidently, "Let's get this thing done. Stay right here until I say otherwise; I'll tell you when to come up to get your stuff."

The skater drew another shaky breath, and nodded, feeling his whole body starting to tremble. Even with Yuri and Viktor standing nearby, Asahi still felt like he was surrounded by a moat on all sides, and extremely vulnerable. The closer Mikhail got to the front door, the more it seemed like the man was walking into the mouth of a great dragon, and if it didn't bite him in half from the start, it would slowly roast him alive in dark fire. The knock on one heavy wooden panel was enough to make the skater jump, and Viktor tugged him back towards the car with a pinch on the back of his jacket.

"Just stay back with us for now." He explained, that hand going back into his coat pocket right after. His other arm was around Yuri's frame, as it usually was. Minako stood on Yuri's other side, and all three leaned against the Audi. Asahi was too nervous to 'relax' like that though, and stood upright, even if he could feel the car against his clothes.

The wait for an answer was a torture, but eventually, someone came. It was the same face as the one that had appeared the night before, and those grey-brown eyes scanned the tall, darkly-clad man standing in front of him.

"Dare ga, omae?" (Who are you?) He asked, knowing full well the clearly-not-Japanese figure probably didn't understand it.

"Hi." Mikhail answered stiffly, "I'm looking for your mom and dad."

A concerned, albeit confused look crossed Daisuke's face, but to that moment, he hadn't seen
anything beyond the Russian's thin frame.

"Okā-san to oō-san, onegai." (Your mother and father, please.) Mikhail said instead, accent atrocious, but knowing it would get the point across. Steely jade eyes were unblinking as he looked down at the younger man, but nerves broke and Daisuke turned away to holler something into the house, leaving Mikhail a chance to make an observation, *This kid really does look a lot like Asahi...but years of arrogance and special treatment have left him with the pseudo-paralysis of a smug grin on his face. I'm gonna wipe it right off him...*

Asahi had both hands on his chest, trying to keep his heart from bursting out, even as the imagery of that fire continued in his mind's eye. It was strange to watch Mikhail standing resolutely in the flames though, as though his frame refused to catch alight. Minako moved in front of him and settled on his other side, taking one arm with her hands to give him some grounding.

What came to the door next seemed rather anticlimactic. For all the tales of terror and bedlam, two very average-looking, skinny Japanese people approached, looking rather small in the large foyer of the huge house. Mikhail was easily a foot taller than them both, and he looked down on them.

"Did you *lose* a kid recently?" He started easily enough, the question sounding like more of a statement of curiosity than a legitimate inquiry, "Cuz I found a guy who says he's a Saito, and I think he's pretty damn cool, so I thought I'd come by just to let you know I'm keeping him."

"Who are you?" The male of the duo asked, practically craning his neck to look the man in the eyes, "What are you talking about?"

"Thursday, December 26, Asahi Saito left this residence to meet with his coach and choreographer to travel to Osaka for the All Japan Figure Skating Championships. He came back here, last night, January 1, but was turned away by a guy who thinks he has the right to deny him entry." Mikhail went on, "Now, I've checked *all* the documentation that Asahi was left with after you threw him out, and *everything he has* says he lives here. So I ask you again...did you *lose* a kid recently?"

"We have nothing to do with Asahi. Please leave." The man said stiffly, reaching for the door. The Russian just turned side-face and extended his long arm to hold the panel open anyway, "We're not done talking."

"Keisatsu o yonde." The man directed at Daisuke, trying again to pull the panel around.

"They're going to call the police, hun." Minako called.

The woman standing in the doorway, petite and wearing a traditional Japanese kimono, stepped just outside to see who had made the noise. She spotted all four of them there, and looked incensed, brow crinkled under the powdered make-up she wore.

All three skaters were suddenly rather nervous, but Mikhail didn't even flinch. He just shrugged lightly, "Let them. Go ahead and bring the police here. They'll just back me up on the fact that you unlawfully evicted a legal tenant of this house, and reinforce the fact that he has the right to enter the property and collect his things..." He dared, watching the comparatively tiny man flinch under it slightly. The elder Russian pushed the door fully open again, "Now, I believe introductions are in order."

"What are you talking about!? Who the Hell do you think you are!?!"
fit in." Jade eyes went to the woman, "And you're Reina Saito, née Hashizume. Though I hear you're so enamored by what Richard brought into your life that you go by Linda to try and sound superior. What a weird dichotomy you two have." He shrugged though, "But then we have me, Mikhail Durovich Rozovsky, founder and CEO of Rozovsky Engineering Equipment Incorporated...and the new proprietor of exactly 51% of the stock in one Saito Ceramics and Fine Porcelain...which makes me your new boss." He pulled his hat off and bowed somewhat sarcastically, "Privetstvie i poklon." (Greetings and salutations.)

"Hah!?" Yuri and Viktor both gaped in surprise.

Minako and Asahi were just wide-eyed and slack-jawed in shock.

"New boss? That was his grand plan for getting even?" Viktor repeated in a hushed tone, "How do you become the boss with 51% of anything?" He wondered more loudly.

"Funny you should ask that, Nephew." Mikhail called back, turning slightly to look at him, though turning again to look at the pale-faced pair in front of him, as well as the nervous one in back with the phone at his ear, "You guys must've been so proud of yourselves when you went public last year. Business was doing so well that searching for anything about this city online brings up nothing but imagery of ceramic plates and vases...from your company."

Richard swallowed nervously, "H-How did you even...?"

Mikhail just smiled, "I've been doing this a lot longer than you have...and now that I'm the owner of 51% of this publicly-traded company, that means my vote carries the most weight at board meetings. Nothing happens to Saito Ceramics anymore without my say so and approval. So that means you, your wife, and all three of your other detestable children are now beholden to my will."

Yuri whistled, impressed, "...Well, that just happened."

"I'm still not sure I understand what he just did." Viktor spoke flatly and deadpanned, "Yuri. Explain."

"When a company is privately owned, it means that only the actual employees, usually the owner and a small cadre of directors, can make decisions about what happens." He started quietly, "When the company goes public, outside investors can buy shares, and those with more shares have more say in the direction the company goes. The ones with the most shares have the most say, and they can even elect their own governing board. Mikhail owns 51% of the shares...so that means he has 51% of the vote, and technically owns most of the company as a result. The others don't have enough to veto him even if they all vote together...unless they have it set up so there has to be a 2/3rds majority, which it sounds like they don't. It wouldn't really matter anyway, because his 51% would have to be in agreement with anything else someone proposes."

"ASAHI." Mikhail suddenly called, turning slightly to extend his hand towards the skater in question, "It's time to get your things."

Though ready to drop again, Asahi suddenly skipped forward, nervously approaching the house he'd been unceremoniously thrown out from the night before. He found his mother reaching both arms up to prevent him from getting by though, fingers clamped around the edge of the second door and the open frame like metal hooks. He hesitated within Mikhail's shadow, unsure how to proceed.

The elder Russian just grimaced, "Maybe we should wait for the police then. You're still calling them, right? Daisuke-chan."
The man in back grit his teeth hard, but looked to his parents, neither of whom looked back at him with an answer.

"Stand...aside...now." Mikhail demanded, "Or I'll liquidate all my shares for pennies on the dollar, and bankrupt the entire operation. A loss like this would barely be a blip on my radar, but for you it would mean losing everything."

"Y-You wouldn't dare..." Richard stammered, "If you destroy the company, everyone who works for it will lose their jobs, too."

"Yeah, wouldn't that be a shame." The Russian said flatly, "I guess you'd better think about how that would go over in this world-renowned pottery hub, shouldn't you? Think about all those unemployed faces, wondering how you fucked up so badly that they all had to pay the price."

"He c-can't come in here..." Reina finally spoke, her voice high-pitched like a child's, fingers still gripping the wooden door and frame, "He'll defile it with his filthy soul..."

Asahi grit his teeth, feeling the burn in his chest and eyes all over again, but he dared not speak a word.

Mikhail drew a long, calm, measured breath.

Minako could feel the wind-up even from as far back as the car, "Oh boy, here it comes..."

One shiny black shoe stepped forward towards the tiny woman, and the elder pointed a finger right between her eyes, "Maybe you should worry about the filth you bring into this house?" He asked, "With your archaic view of how the world should work, and your absolutely unconscionable behavior towards your own son. You, quite frankly, are the definition of evil in this world."

She quaked under the taller man's presence, but she still wouldn't let go of the door, "The Bible says he's committed an abomination and must be put to death for it! He should be glad we left it up to God!" She barked back, accent thick but understandable.

"Do I look like I give two hot shits what a book of plagiarized fables from 2,000 years ago says!?" Mikhail yelled, "A book that's been written and rewritten by countless anonymous authors, changed by Kings and Clergy whenever it didn't fit their immediate whims, and interpreted in so many bat-shit backwards ways that there's more than 30,000 different denominations of the faith on the face of this forsaken ROCK!? AND NONE OF THEM AGREE WITH EACH OTHER!? Do you know how many people have DIED because of those different INTERPRETATIONS!?"

Asahi hadn't blinked since he got to where he was standing, eyes going back and forth between the man in front of him and his parents beyond. His heart jack-hammered in his chest, and he felt a cold sweat trickle down his neck.

"And all this fighting and chaos, and willful, deliberate ignorance was supposed to be in service to a God that's supposed to know everything!? The guy who supposedly DIVINED the inspiration for the damn book to begin with, but who sucked SO BAD at directions that he took Hebrew slaves out of Egypt and GOT THEM LOST FOR 40 FUCKING YEARS IN THE DESERT!?" Mikhail went on, absolutely enraged by the topic, "YOU KNOW HOW MUCH FASTER IT WOULD'VE BEEN IF THEY'D JUST TRACKED THE NILE NORTH TO THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THEN FOLLOWED THE GODDAMN COASTLINE UNTIL THEY GOT TO PALESTINE!? IT'S 300 MILES AWAY. That doesn't even take into consideration the fact that THERE WERE NEVER ANY
HEBREW SLAVES IN EGYPT IN THE FIRST PLACE. EVEN THE ISRAELIS ACCEPT AND ADMIT THAT, AND THEIR ENTIRE BLOODY CULTURE COUNTS ON THAT STORY BEING TRUE. But hey, it's okay, they were wrong about a lot of things, right? That's why Christianity had to break off from Judaism. The Jews didn't even realize Jesus was their King on Earth, the King of Kings and Lamb of God...to them, he was just another prophet, so they obviously missed the boat on a bunch of important information. What's not to believe about Jesus' credentials? It's not like he yelled at a fig tree for not bearing fruit even though he, as the Son and Avatar of God, should've known that it wasn't in season at the time...right?"

She backed her head up and tilted her face away, but still refused to let go of the door.

Mikhail drew a breath and straightened himself out, adjusted his tie, and reset his flat-cap, "But it's fine. So God sucks at geography, drowns the world and every living thing in it - but promises never to do it again - then sends himself to die for the sins he set Mankind up to commit - which, by the way, is considered entrapment, and is illegal in our justice system - but he didn't really die cuz haha he's an immortal God and he knew what would happen before it happened. Who cares? It's all some grand charade; a game for deities. I'm sure he's up there with Zeus, Odin, the Jade Emperor, Gaea, and Quetzalcoatl, having a grand laugh at the Arabian Peninsula for the huge joke he played on them. That big ol' pantheon of Creator Kings who carved up the world and told humanity that they were the only gods out there, setting them up for ages of conflict and destruction that would follow into the modern era where people like you - for lack of lands and souls to conquer anymore - could torture their sons for the unforgivable crime of thinking other guys are hot. My, how far you've fallen."

The quiet ring of a siren slowly started sounding in the distance. The trio by the car looked back, spotting the red and blue lights flashing on a little Japanese patrol car. The black and white Nissan Skyline GT-R R34 was a strangely modern and sleek in design, compared to the rather quaint and old-school feel that most of the city had given off. Viktor looked at it, then to Yuri, "I'm not sure I like where this is going."

"Relax. That one's with me." Mikhail said simply, turning out from the door to step back a few paces, putting a hand on Asahi's shoulder to go with him, "Mad as I am for how useless they were in the past...with Minako's help, I called them on the walk over here and told them that one of Japan's Olympians was needing to get his things from here, and that it would be embarrassing for Imari if the country found out what was happening. Considering the incredible pride and excitement that the Japanese people have for the members of Team Nippon, it would be in the department's best interest to ensure that this one can leave peacefully, with all his effects. I told them to send a car if someone from this address tried to call one for themselves." He leaned aside to see Asahi's older brother looking rather nervous in the background, "So, thanks for that, Daisuke-chan."

Asahi was dumbstruck, "Is that...what you meant when you said to have more faith in my influence...?"

Mikhail nodded, "They were quite willing to help me out when I told them what you'd achieved. You're part of a triumvirate carrying all of Japan's hopes and dreams to the ice of PyeongChang, Asahi. The entire world is going to be watching what you do. You've earned the love and respect of your country...the least your parents can do is let you get your stuff." He cocked his head to the side to leer at the woman still holding the door, "Right?"

The car turned onto the narrow road in front of the house, siren loud and lights bright. They quieted down though as the vehicle blocked the street, the nose parked on the little concrete bridge, and three officers stepped out. They wore what could be likened to suits; white shirts, black slacks and ties, with black Kevlar vests on top, and precinct insignias on the front of their caps. On one hip, they
each were packing heat, on the other, a baton, with a typical can of hand-held mace in a pouch next to it. They stepped into the space between those close to the house, and those close to the Audi, nodding at each in greeting before speaking in Japanese.

[Problem here?]

Richard stepped out, gesturing wildly at Mikhail and spoke loudly and fast, [This creepy foreigner thinks he can extort and threaten me! He comes to my house and demands to be let inside like he thinks he owns it!]

Mikhail turned slightly and held his hand out for Minako, who gingerly approached, "What'd he say?"

"He's trying to make this look bad on you."

"Of course..." He sighed and rolled his eyes, "Translate again for me, would you, starlight?"

"Sure."

He cleared his throat, "Gentlemen," He started, and Minako echoed in Japanese, "We're here to lawfully collect the possessions Asahi Saito has within this household. He has been denied entry since last night. This is currently his legal residence and he has the right to enter, until or unless duly evicted through civil courts. At this time, he has not been served with an eviction order, and therefore he cannot be prevented entry...no matter who his parents think they are."

When Minako was finished with the translation, the officers looked at one another, then to the rest of the Saito family, and gave a shrug as though it was out of their hands. They stepped towards the doors and gently nudged the older two aside, gesturing within for Daisuke to come out as well.

Once the three of them were in the parking lot and the doorway was clear, Mikhail gestured for Asahi to head in, "All yours, kid."

The stunned skater looked to the others, who were equally surprised, but they nodded to go ahead. He gave a nod towards the house, and they followed after him, trotting into the comparatively dark building. Their eyes adjusted to the indoor light, and Asahi lead them through a clean and ornately-decorated interior to the stairs that lead to the second floor, then to the bedroom doorway that had no door; just a sheet hung across it with a gap of a foot or so at the bottom. He pushed it aside like a shower-curtain and revealed the rather Spartan condition inside.

There was a bed and a simple dresser, but nothing on the off-white walls. The blinds looked fancy, but there were no cords to tilt the blades or even open them, so one bottom corner was fashioned with a zip-tie to hook around a few slats at the top in case light was wanted inside. There was only one bulb out of four in the light-fixture in the ceiling. The closet, the pair realized, was the only place that Asahi had anything of any value...and it had a lock on it.

"This place has a really depressing vibe." Yuri noted, turning his eyes to where Asahi was inspecting the locking mechanism by the handle, "...They actually let you have that on there?"

"They never came in here." He answered, "Not until today, or this weekend...probably yesterday at the earliest, when Daisuke says he saw my stuff online. I can tell someone tried to jimmy the thing, cuz the brass is all scratched up, but...it looks intact. Maybe they didn't want to damage it, so they wouldn't have to pay to fix or replace it later. Cheap bastards...” He grumbled, pulling out his keys, and unlocked it. When the door was open, it revealed only an 18-inch-deep recession in the wall with 6 shelves. On those shelves were a few small items, and Asahi started grabbing them.
A tall clear presentation tube with a number of colored belts inside, up to and including the first rank for black belt. A few little sparring trophies. A zip-tied bunch of lanyards that bundled together a number of skating medals of all different ranks. He handed everything off to whoever's hands were closest at the time.

"No Buddhist prayer stuff in here?" Yuri wondered, holding onto the skating medals. He took a big orange envelope next, unsure of the contents.

"Everything I had, I took with me to Nationals." Asahi answered, collecting a few smaller tokens like old coins, "Or I kept it in a locker at the rink."

Viktor looked around again, "...What about all your old skating stuff? Costumes, boots, other equipment?"

Asahi lifted his head out of the closet and blinked at him, "...I have nothing from before. When I was forced to move back here, my father wouldn't let me bring back anything that didn't fit into two suitcases, so I only had room for my skates. I had to throw everything else away."

The Russian growled at that, "...That's just cruel. I practically hoarded my old stuff. It's got sentimental value even after you stop using it. Two of my really old outfits were repurposed just last year..."

Ombre eyes just stared unknowingly, but the dawn of realization hit, "Oh, you mean that one Yuri had for his Short Program."

"You saw it?" Yuri wondered.

"Minako had me watch a handful of your shows from last season. I saw Eros and Yuri on Ice. I also saw Duetto and a few others..."

Viktor nodded, "Mh. The other Yuri wore one of my old outfits, too, for his own Short Program."

"...That's...cool, I guess." Asahi muttered nervously, and returned to the closet, reaching around the side to pull something larger out from the small space between wall and shelf. It was kept in a thin, black, plastic case, but the shape of it was unmistakable.

"Whoa! Is that a guitar!?" Yuri called out, "It looks like an electric one, too!"

"Uhm...yes. I learned how to play a little in Tokyo. I couldn't bring the rest of the equipment with me, so it's kind of useless, but...I kept this at least. Riku liked to listen to me play."

"That's so cool! I wanna hear!"

Viktor gave a skeptical look, but quickly grabbed his husband's shoulders to turn him around and push him back towards the door when he saw Asahi's cheeks gain a bit of color, "If there's nothing else..."

Asahi checked the shelves one more time, and nudged the door with his foot to close it as he slung the guitar case over his back, the strap crossing over his chest, "From here, no...let me check my drawers..." He went over to the dresser and pulled each compartment open, grabbing whatever he could carry and folded it over his arm. What was left after that, he stacked in a pile on the bed, and then grabbed it all at once with his second arm, "Okay..."

The silver Russian lead the way back down the stairs and out into the morning light, making an immediate dash for the Audi. The trunk popped open, and both back-seat dogs put their paws on the
head-rest to see what was going on. Jiro barked from the front seat, but couldn't get over the center console. With those few items and the two piles of clothes put inside, the trunk was closed again, and the trio waited for what else might happen.

Mikhail watched carefully and looked to Asahi, "Is there anything else from here that you need?"

The younger man shook his head silently.

The elder turned back to the police officers, and tilted his flat-cap at them appreciatively, "Thank you for your help. We're done."

"Mark my words, this isn't end." Richard argued, hoping the officers' lack of English would help him get away with it, "My lawyers will find out about what you did."

"What I did?" Mikhail echoed, "I didn't do anything that a lawyer could help you with. You can't ban me from buying shares in your company. Your own buddies on the police force had to side with the law in this case, even against you, so Asahi could get his things."

"This is an outrage! You can't just do all this!"

The Russian rolled his jade eyes again, and took a few steps forward, blocked only by the bodies of the officers standing between them, and leaned forward slightly as he spoke in a hushed tone, "Listen to me, you insidious cretin. You have participated in, or enabled, a laundry list of crimes that were committed against that young man out there. Neglect, extortion, blackmail, physical and emotional abuse...I could probably go on. If you ever try to come after him...to slander him, stalk him, blame him for anything, find him online or try to hurt him in any way, shape, or form...if you ever try to talk to him again without going through me first...I will come down on you so hard and fast, your descendants will still feel it a hundred years from now. Have I made myself perfectly clear? Your reign of terror is over."

Richard gaped, but he turned first to his wife, and then they both looked to Daisuke, who had gone pale through the lecture. None was sure what to say, though Mikhail could guess they had a screaming tirade that they wanted to give if they could.

Mikhail glowered, "You can't bully me or terrify me into silence. I'm better at this than you are and you can't stop me. It's over for you."

Richard went on, standing upright again casually, "So try to play nice in the future, okay?" He said more normally, offering a smile again, "A representative from my newly-minted Japan Division will be meeting with you in the days ahead to usher in the new era at Saito Ceramics and Fine Porcelain. I look forward to doing business with you. I've always wanted to have the option of making my own ceramic brake pads." He said, half-scoffing at the end as he turned away.

Viktor stared at him quietly, watching as the proverbial match was dropped on the whole scene. He could envision the explosion behind his Uncle as the man walked away, leaving the burnt ruins behind himself. When the older figure was close enough, he spoke in the only language he knew only they understood, [What have you done...?]

Mikhail glanced up, [I did what I always wished I could've done for you.]

Slate eyes widened temporarily.

[You may think of me as being overbearing and ignorant to what you want because of the way I do things...and I understand, my methods can occasionally seem cold and uncaring... I apologize for that. It's sometimes hard for me to distinguish business banter from being a father...or an uncle. It was
never my intention to anger you. I just wanted to do what was best for my family.] He lowered his head and glanced aside as the Saitos were allowed back into their house, and the three police officers went by to get their car out of the drive again. He nodded at them as they nodded in turn, but he then lifted his gaze back to his nephew, [Maybe I went too far...or you weren't ready for it. I thought I knew what I was doing because I didn't count on how much you'd changed... I guess, somewhere in my understanding of things, you still needed help, and I wanted to be there for you...but in the end, all I did was force myself into a place you didn't need or want me to be, and I pushed you out the other side by mistake.]

Those who spoke no Russian could only assume what was being said. Yuri held to his partner's hand though, offering what support he could.

[And I'm not even really sure how to make up for my mistakes at this point. From my perspective, it's hard to even understand them as mistakes, because I'm just living my life, managing the curve balls that get thrown at me like anyone else would.] Mikhail went on, [I didn't count on my ex-wife's death, but I couldn't just leave my kids in Canada to fend for themselves after it happened. Likewise, I never intended to make things complicated with Minako...all I can do is support and provide for her now that it's gone there. If my being in Hasetsu really pisses you off so much though...I'll try to convince her to move back to Edmonton with me instead.]

[You being in Hasetsu, or her being forced to leave it, would be equally off-putting under those circumstances.] Viktor answered stiffly, brow furrowed in irritation as he looked up into the taller man's eyes. He closed his own though and shook his head, [But I guess I can't fault you for doing what you think is right, even if I disagree with your methods.]

[Everything that you're mad at me for has been as much out of my hands as it's felt like it was out of yours.] Mikhail added, [I'm doing the best I can with the cards I've been dealt. Minako has decided to keep the kiddo and I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure I can be there for this one, in the way I couldn’t be there for you...and in a way, even my other kids.]

Viktor gave an anxious look, but turned his gaze away, watching the police car back down the narrow street until it could turn and face forward again. It took off down the road towards the main part of town. He drew a breath, and looked back at the older man in front of him, [...] He started, hesitating, but then started again, [...] The way you handled this thing here today was a lot different from how you've done things before. Saito even said you gave him the ability to pull the plug on everything if he wanted... Maybe an old dog really can learn new tricks.] He slowly raised his free right hand and extended it forward, [...]Truce.]

Everyone around, even Asahi to a degree, was shocked to see it, and waited for the older Russian's reaction.

Mikhail was stunned for a moment, staring at the hand like it was a mirage. He shook his head and reached for it in turn, holding it firmly, "Truce."

Yuri gasped loudly and grabbed the first body to his side, not wanting to interrupt the handshake.

Asahi grunt-squeaked from the squeeze, eyes wide in surprise, but could do nothing to stop the younger man from holding onto him and continuing with that strange "Aaaaaa" noise he was making.

When the handshake was over though, and Viktor turned back, he offered his hands forward and Yuri let the man go, jumping up into his husband's arms, and threw his own around the Russian's shoulders.
"TRUCE!" He called out excitedly, hanging from the man's frame, faces squished together.

"GET OFF MY PROPERTY!"

"GO AWAY ALREADY!"

All eyes turned around in shock and annoyance, spotting those people again in the open doorway.

"Shut up and go back inside, you crazy old windbags!" Asahi yelled back, "We'll leave when we're ready!"

Eyes turned again, this time to the man who'd just made a once-thought-impossible resistance. Mikhail was the first to crack and laugh, then Minako, who in turn glomped onto the side of the skater's frame, hugging him tightly. Viktor and Yuri followed with surprised smiles.

For a moment, Asahi wasn't even sure he'd said anything at all...but as reactions poured in, he watched his parents retreat back inside the house, he realized he had said the words. He could hardly believe it, and he swallowed anxiously, even with Minako starting to shake him to get his attention. Once she stopped, and he could regain his bearings, he rubbed his face with one hand and pinched his own cheek, "...That was real... This all actually happened..."

"Sure did. How do you feel?" Mikhail asked, turning to face him.

The younger man lifted his eyes to the bright winter sky, and watched a few birds fly overhead. A light breeze billowed through them, making the trees on the hill behind the house rustle, and the grass shiver all around. Asahi looked back to the whole group, and pulled gently out of Minako's grasp before bowing to them all, "...It's like the world was restarted. I feel light as air. I don't...even know how to say thank you deeply enough."

"Live your life and be happy. That's the best thanks we could ask for." Minako explained, brushing a few strands of hair from the man's eyes as he stood back up again, "You're free now."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED THIRTY

With the most terrifying part of the day done and in the past, there was only one hurdle left to get over before everything in Imari could be marked as 'case closed.' But before that could even be addressed, the question of who would be going needed to be answered. In the end, as before, Asahi piled into the car between Hana and Makkachin, and the two most senior members of the group opted to walk back to the train station.

Asahi looked out the windows of the car as it started to pull forward and then out of the small lot in front of the house, the huge structure starting to fade into the background, and the pair who was left to walk faded with it. They all disappeared for a moment as the car got to the end of the small street, and came into view only one more time when the Audi merged onto the larger road, heading south into town again. He turned his eyes forward once the house was completely out of sight.

...Is this really the last time I'll ever see this place? Have I really managed to break away from the event horizon and escape the black hole?

The whole cityscape seemed new to him then, as though he was looking onto it for the first time. He only looked within the car again when Yuri blocked his line of sight through the windshield.

"That was pretty awesome how you got the last word in." He said, reaching up to pull his Ravenclaw beanie off, and smoothed his hair down a little, "My heart's still racing from the whole thing...kakkoi! So intense!"

"I think mine...has actually slowed to a below-average pace..." Asahi answered, pressing a hand against his chest, "It was pounding so hard when we were in the thick of it though... When the police sirens started fading in from the background, I thought for sure it was over and we'd all either be arrested or chased away with strike-sticks."

"Same." Viktor agreed, straightening out the car from the last bit of the curve in the road before it became a straight-shot all the way south, "Maybe that was the point though."

"Letting my parents believe that they were in control...?"

Viktor shrugged, "I don't think on the same wavelengths as my Uncle. It's hard to know why he decided to do things this way. But, I'm glad it worked out for you. Now you can focus on the things that really matter; getting as good as you can be for the Games, and relaxing a little bit."

"...Yeah, this last week has been a wild rollercoaster..." Yuri added, collapsing back into his seat. Jiro took the opportunity to press his front paws against the window and look outside, standing on Yuri's right leg to get some height. Viktor set his hand down on the left, and Yuri settled his own hand over it, "All the craziness of the weekend, then going to Wakkanai...only to come all the way back down to Imari and run face-first into that proverbial brick wall..." Yuri went on, only to then make a face at no one in particular, "Though honestly, after having seen your living space myself?" He turned his head and glanced back over his shoulder, "I'm glad we got you out of there. That's no way for someone to live...not as a kid, and not at your age either."

"...That whole space gave me the serious creeps." Viktor said tensely, "The lack of a door, the blinds that don't work without a zip-tie, the complete lack of light...I'll bet the ceiling fan wouldn't turn on either, right?"
Asahi wouldn't answer, but the look the Russian saw in the mirror was enough to answer it.

"No door, no sun, no light, no fan...nothing on the walls, nothing in the room to really mark it as being occupied. One could be forgiven for mistaking it as being vacant if they didn't know already that you were supposed to be in there." He went on, shaking his head in disbelief, "I don't know how you could stand it."

"...I...didn't really have a choice. My whole world stopped after the accident. I couldn't think, I couldn't make decisions...all I could do was go along with what other people were saying. My father eventually came to collect me in Tokyo, 'helped' me get rid of what I wasn't bringing back with me...and before I knew it, I was back in that room." Asahi sighed and shook his head, then leaned it back against the seat, scratching Hana's shoulders with one hand to keep his heart calm, "It was like those 5 years were just a dream... All the things I'd done, the skills I'd gained, medals I'd won...the love I found...all gone when I woke up. Things...got really dark after that."

Yuri hesitated a moment, fingers curling a little bit more around the hand that still held to his leg, "...How did you claw your way back from that brink?"

"...After six months of living in a fog, I went out for a walk." The older figure answered, almost too simply, "Maybe the fresh air did some good to me, because I walked all the way to the rink from the house. Coach Nagisa was in the middle of a lesson with some new Juniors when I showed up...and the rest, well..." He shook his head and breathed a quiet laugh at himself, "I never thought I'd be able to compete again. Too many memories."

"I bet it's a big relief now though, since you've been able to slowly get everything out?"

"...In some parts." Asahi glanced aside, keeping his eyes on the white fluff next to him, "I'm glad for how things turned out, but...if I knew what it was going to be like to go through it, and how much it would hurt others along the way, I think I would've done things a little differently."

Arriving at the rink on the far side of the city, Asahi could feel his nerves climbing up again. Even Yuri felt a pang of anxiety to see the building again, and he kept his eyes on it as he set Jiro on the ground after the car parked. Hana came along on her leash and harness, and Makkachin, ever the good-boi, trotted along closely on his own, never far from his human's footsteps as he snuffled along the ground for anything interesting.

The arena was part of a larger sports complex, which included several buildings surrounding a large parking lot, with big park-like open spaces between each one. Trees - barren as they were from winter - rose high, clearing the second and third floors in many cases, with thicker woods going up the hills beyond the southern edge of the compound. The buildings were colored in red or light-grey brick, with simple entryways that looked more like the foyers to business centers than sports centers. The building with the ice rink also housed gymnastics and an Olympic-size swimming pool, and the interior smelled of rubber-foam and chlorine.

"This place looks like it's aged a bit, but otherwise it's exactly the same as the last time I laid eyes on it," Yuri commented, looking through the metal-mesh glass of the inner doorway, "The same boring cafeteria seating, the same store-fronts for those little shops...the swimming gear store, the pool...and the rink way at the back..." He drew in a breath, smelling the pool, "It's been such a long time since I smelled this... Brings back a lot."

"Between here and temple, it's the only place I ever really felt safe in this city." Asahi added, eyes focused through the doors as well, "Nothing bad ever happened here."
"It's kind of weird being back here together after all these years." Yuri said, turning his eyes to look at the older figure, "We were just kids last time."

"Well...you were."

Yuri blinked in confusion, but then made a face, "I'm only one year younger than you."

Grey-brown eyes turned slightly as well, barely looking past teal strands of hair, then back again, and Asahi stepped aside to push the doors open, "You don't know how bleak this world can get, and how quickly a kid can be forced to grow up when put under certain pressures. I envy that...you got to hold onto that part of your life a lot longer than I did." He waved slightly as he stepped within, "I'll be back in a few minutes. This shouldn't take long. I know she's here; I saw her car."

"...Oh, okay..."

The doors clacked and clicked, squeaking on their old hinges, and then closed with a slight bang, leaving Yuri in awkward silence. He watched for a moment, until Asahi was out of sight further inside the building, and then turned to go back out into the cold, only to hesitate and see Viktor's face squished right up against the glass, squinting at him with his nose crinkled up. He gaped for a moment, but pushed outside, practically able to hear the suction-cup like release of the Russian's perplexing expression from the windows.

"What was that all about?" Yuri asked, half-laughing at the man as he rubbed his forehead, and reached forward to retake Jiro's leash, "You could've come inside."

"Makkachin wouldn't come so I had to wait out here." Viktor answered, combing bare fingers through his hair quickly, "But I guess we wait out here now."

Yuri nodded and reached for the comb-hand, weaving their fingers together as he guided both of their hands into his husband's coat pocket for the warmth. All three dogs were like sniffing machines all around them, noses to the ground or the air as they dissected the world through scent. Yuri couldn't help but look on the complex with nostalgia, each building being the backdrop to something he remembered having happened there. Small interactions like the basic coming and going, to bigger things like the first days after finding out about Yuko. Everything before Detroit happened there. Viktor was strangely quiet as they walked though, which eventually drew Yuri's mind away from the flood of flashbacks, "How's your ankle doing?"

Icy slate eyes glanced back through silver bangs, and Viktor's previously stern expression softened a little, "...I don't feel anything wrong with it right now."

"I guess that's the false sense of security the medic was warning us about."

"Guess so."

"Maybe we can casual-skate when we get back?" Yuri offered, "You seem a bit out of it."

The silver legend went back to brooding, eyes turning forward as Makkachin darted across the snow-shoveled footpath. Hana barked at the poodle and whined quietly, drawing the Russian's attention slightly. He hesitated, but he saw the Hokkaido-ken's curled tail swaying over her back, dark almond eyes watching Makkachin's freedom...and he leaned down to unclip the leash from the back of her harness. Hana didn't seem to realize what he'd done at first and looked back at him like he'd just pat her back, but he made the effort of dropping the leash onto the ground so she could see, and as soon as realization dawned, the white puff was jumping in circles. A few excited spins later, she took off and caught up to the brown puff, and Makkachin took off running at full speed through
the trees with Hana at his haunches. Viktor huffed a quiet laugh to himself, "That stocky dog runs pretty quick."

"Mh." Yuri agreed quietly, watching the two boofers zipping back and forth like small barking rockets. Jiro barked at them as well, but Yuri just shook his head at the pup, "Not yet, little dude. You'll be big soon, though. Then they'll be the ones chasing you."

Viktor puffed another quick exhale at that, and looked away.

Yuri glanced up at him, "What? Did I say something...?"

"They." He answered stiffly, "As though Hana's gonna be around still when Jiro's grown."

"...Well, it doesn't take even a year for pups to get to adult size..."

Viktor grumbled a little and spoke more quietly, "...That wasn't the point."

"Then what was?"

The Russian grit his teeth but didn't speak.

"Viktor, I can't figure out what's bothering you unless you use your words."

A crinkled brow turned towards the younger man, and Viktor sighed, as though he thought his next comment was already stupid before he'd even said it, "...Do you think he's cooler than me?"

"...Eh?" Yuri was flabbergasted, "Cooler than you?"

"...He's good at skating, great even...he's a black belt in Karate-"

"Shorinji Kempo."

"Karate." Viktor doubled-down, "And now he's a guitarist, too. What else is he going to reveal he's good at? Is he a full-on J-rock star? Is that why his hair is colored?"

"Viktor..."

"...All I'm good at is skating...and I'm on the edge of losing my grip on that as it is." The Russian went on bitterly, "Give it a few more years, and the only thing I'll be able to do to prove I used to be good is showing a video of my younger self... He's three years younger than me...so..."

Yuri made a sarcastic face, "Are you jealous of him...?"

"I'm not jealous." Viktor insisted swiftly, "I'm not."

"I am."

The words caught Viktor off-guard, and he blinked back the shine in his eyes, "...Why are you jealous?"

"Cuz he's good at three things, and they're all great. I'm only good at two things, and one of them sucks."

"You're good at plenty more than that..." Viktor insisted, "Why would you say otherwise?"

"The only two things I'm good at are skating, because of you, and getting fat. I mean, on my JSF
profile, *dieting* is listed as one of my special skills." Yuri explained, simple as reading a bullet-point from a book, "When I retire from skating, getting fat will be all I have left." He gave a sad laugh at his own expense, "At least when *you* retire, you'll still have plenty of skills and talents. I mean, even if we stripped away skating *today*, you'd still be really good at singing, choreography, dancing, motivating people...plus, you're the best-looking guy I know, so I'm sure you could be a great actor, too. You could walk off the ice and never look back, and never hurt for opportunities. When I'm done though, I'll have to fend for myself, and it's just...kind of pitiful." He shrugged, looking down at the Akita pup standing at the end of his lead, tail wagging back and forth as he watched Hana and Makkachin zip around in huge circles all around them, "So even though I'm jealous of Asahi, I'm really jealous of you, too, but at least I'm *with* you, so I'll never get left behind."

"That's not fair to say. *I'm* the one who worries about getting left behind. I can't have *you* thinking that way, too." Viktor retorted, "Plus, *you* can sing and dance and motivate people just fine yourself. You're the smartest person I know, and the bravest, and *damn it*, you're *hot*, too. You just don't have the kind of mind that would ever seek to take advantage of it...and that's something to be admired in itself, you know?"

Yuri watched his partner carefully, listening to everything, even the things between the lines.

"You're already so good at so many things that you wouldn't *have* to count on being attractive to get what you need." Viktor went on, pulling his hand free from the fingers that held it in his pocket, and reached both arms over the shorter man's shoulders, pressing in close until he could feel raven hair against his cheek, "But me..." He sighed and buried his face into his partner's scarf, clinging a little tighter, "If I don't have someone like you around to take care of me when it's all over, then I'll just...go back to how I was before I got to Hasetsu. Worried about a future where the world finds someone else to shine its spotlight on, because I can't surprise people anymore..."

Yuri returned the hug easily and rubbed his cheek against the side of his husband's face, nosing at the edge of his ear, "You've never failed to surprise me, Viktor." He explained quietly, the caroling of barking dogs echoing off the sides of the buildings and trees, "Why are you suddenly so worried about these kinds of things though? Is it just because I thought Asahi's guitar was cool...?" He could feel the wordless nod against his neck, and he pat his spouse's back where his hands reached around him, "Don't feel that way..."

"...It's so much easier for people to catalogue potential partners once they've gotten their feet wet on the first one..." Viktor explained, "And with how much we're having to spend time with Saito, and how close he's getting because of it...the more comfortable I see him getting around us. The more he comes out of his shell, and the more we learn about him...the more I worry you're going to start being attracted to him..."

"*I only* have eyes for you." Yuri reassured, "Asahi is only just starting to figure out who he is, and I'm trying to be supportive. Sure, I think he's turning into someone that I might think is pretty cool later...but I could never see myself thinking of him as anything more than a friend. I don't even think he'll rival Phichit-kun, and you don't worry about me suddenly falling for *him*, do you?"

Viktor shook his head to that, "...He's...your best friend. You're more like brothers. You've also already lived together before, and nothing came of it but a better friendship... But this is different... It's even different from when I thought *Yurio* was in love with you... Saito was *blushing* earlier when you fawned over the guitar..." He sighed and rubbed his face against the scarf again, "Maybe if he wasn't staying at Yu-Topia, it wouldn't bug me so much... But the farther along we get with helping him, the more involved everyone's getting with him, and that just means he'll be sticking around longer. I'm already having a fit in my head over knowing that they're probably going to put him into *my* old room."
"...Why would that bother you? We have our own whole house with each other now. You haven't even used that banquet hall in nearly a year. The only reason the bed is still in there now is because it would've been a pain in the butt to take it out." Yuri explained, brow furrowed slightly.

"Because that puts him right next door to your old room..."

"I don't use it anymore... We have a bedroom now."

"It's the principle of the thing though..." Viktor lamented, "Saito came dashing into Hasetsu completely unexpectedly, he's going to be staying there for a while, maybe months, probably in that room, right next to your room just like I used to be. He comes from a lousy family background that scorned him for being gay the same way my father scorned me for just the possibility that I might lean that way one day..." He whined, feeling the gentle sway Yuri had begun to try and soothe him, though not noticing how that same sway started to move him like a Mo'ai; gentle nudges backwards with each side-to-side lean, "I just...can't shake this feeling that he's going to start acting like me, too, once he figures himself out and realizes he's free..."

"Even if he started acting like you, he still wouldn't be you." Yuri pointed out, knowing the piles on the edge of the sidewalk were coming up behind his partner's heels, "There's only one you in this world, and you're my husband. I'm not about to swap you out like a used car part."

"...Still... I just...can't shake the similarities..." The silver legend said, quieter than before, pressing his mouth to the man's shoulder as he looked down behind it, and down onto Jiro, who was looking right back up at him. Crystal-blue eyes lifted slightly, spotting the other two dogs not too far away; Hana was down on her chest, arms out, tongue flapping as she panted wide-mouthed, and her back end in the air behind herself, tail wagging fast. Makkachin stood nearby, panting and wagging just the same, but standing up. Hana then suddenly jumped, going down on her chest again but in a different place, then d Art off once more, back legs skipping under herself as Makkachin nearly caught her going by. Viktor sighed, about to say something else, but suddenly felt snow under his heels and tilted back unexpectedly, holding onto Yuri for dear life as he braced to break both of their falls.

It was nothing but soft snow though, and he landed back-down with a poff, snow-chunks jumping away from him as he found himself 1ft deep in the drift. He was too stunned for the moment to relax his arms, wide-eyed as he was, and Yuri wiggled out from within his grasp, moving slightly over top of him to block out the sun with his frame.

"When we get married again, should we change our names to Katsuki instead?" Yuri wondered, curling his arms under himself, elbows and forearms against the Russian's broad chest.

Viktor just blinked at him, "...You're mocking me now..."

"...I'm just trying to figure out if there's a better way for you to feel at ease." The younger figure answered, reaching his right hand forward to brush a few silver strands out of his husband's eyes, "But it's just like I told you in China...there's no one in this world that's better than you...and to me, you are the world. You have absolutely nothing to worry about."

The silver Russian pressed his cheek to the palm that was there, and drew a breath, nuzzling into it a little more before opening his eyes again, "...Sorry..." He said quietly, bringing his own hand up to cup Yuri's against his face, and kissed the edge of a thumb, "...I wish I could make myself stop thinking the worst... I feel like I invited this onto us by making Saito get online and be honest about himself...so I feel responsible for him..." He moved Yuri's hand so it would cover over his eyes, and held it there with his own; silver bangs drifted over their bare, snow-kissed fingers, "I can't just tell him to take a hike because I feel like he's a threat to me... We've gone far beyond that possibility now
anyway. But I just..." He breathed out a vocal sigh, pressing fingers a little harder against his cheeks, "...I wish I could be sure that he wouldn't try to steal you from me, once things have settled down and he's found his own self-worth. Because, aside from that one heinous mistake he made...I really don't think he's a bad guy... I'm sure there's someone out there for him... I'm really struggling with this idea of having to square my sense of obligation towards him, and being able to protect and defend you from him, as he recovers from what I caused to happen to him..."

"...Viktor..." Yuri whispered, leaning down slightly, until he was sure his husband could feel the warmth of his breath on his lips, "You, and I, and our furry sons, are leaving for Russia in less than 20 hours. We're going to be gone for more than 2 whole weeks. By the time we come back...Asahi will have recovered a lot from today's ordeal...and he'll have done it without us. The kind of partner he'll want by then will probably be different than the kind he saw in me when he was still young and closeted...assuming he's interested in that kind of thing at all for a while. We can be friends to him without getting too close. Leave the comforting to Minako-sensei and Mikhail. It seems like they've basically adopted him into their herd anyway. Besides..."

One blue eye peered between Yuri's fingers.

"...I was the one who suggested he get on social media."

Viktor twisted slightly, letting the hand go so he could see more normally again, and nosed at his spouse's lips as he moved, "Sure...but I was the one who made it all about Itō to him..." He sighed, brow furrowed again, "My rant at him outside the rink, the one that lead up to him calling me Senpai... That migrated online after we parted ways..." He tilted his head back into the snow again, looking up into the clear blue sky, watching the waving, skinny branches of barren trees sway in and out of his sights, "...I told him to prove to the whole world the kind of person Itō thought he was...and now, as a direct result, the whole world knows exactly the kind person Itō was to him. So...it is my fault that he got thrown out of his home..."

Yuri just deadpanned him, "Considering what we saw, was it really such a bad thing, in the end...?"

"No...but consider how much differently it could've ended for him if not for Minako and my Uncle..."

"Oh..." He lowered his face, pressing brow to lips and nose, "That's true..."

Viktor lowered his gaze again, and watched his partner's head lift up to look back at him. He brought his hand around and pressed it to the younger man's cheek, and wove his fingers through black hair behind one ear, "What you said is true, too... I'm so highly strung about today that I keep forgetting we're leaving tomorrow."

"You really need a vacation." Yuri teased, "I'm actually really looking forward to that train ride to Vienna, personally."

"Yeah?"

"Mhm." He nodded, leaning forward to find a kiss, "Hours and hours of getting to just cuddle with you and our dogs...no arm-rests between us, no seats to bother us... Just you, and me, and our private sleeper cabin...enjoying the Russian and European countryside going by through a giant window..."

Viktor savored each movement of lips against his own, and offered his own few kisses back as he answered, "You do realize we'll be making love on that train, right?"

"Oh, a bunch of times. No doubt."
"I wonder if there's a fun nickname for that? We already joined the Mile High Club...maybe it's the Mile Low Club?" He laughed, "Whatever it is...we'll get it."

"We'll have to be careful with our antics when we have the camper though... The walls aren't that thick and I'll bet we'd make it rock..."

Viktor chortled, "Wouldn't that be hilarious?"

"Right in front of your father's house? Oh yeah, that'll be a bundle of laughs... I bet he could roll it over if he wanted."

"Okay okay, we'll be discrete...but only because the situation calls for it..." He leaned up for an Eskimo kiss, "I can't go for too long without feeling every inch of my Yuri..."

"And I wouldn't want you to."
Chapter 431

CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED THRITY ONE

The further Asahi got into the building, and the farther behind Yuri was left behind, the more anxious he got. He heard the clamor of the metal door as it closed on itself, leaving an unsettling echo to reverberate through the wide hall. There were a number of people around; some sitting at the tables in the small open cafeteria on the left, many more on the other side of the PlexiGlas wall that divided the main walking-corridor from the temperature-controlled indoor pool area on the right, as well as the storefront that served the swimmers' needs. The hall kinked slightly to the right, and Asahi passed the familiar line of trophy and award cases. He let himself smile slightly as he waited to pass in front of the cases he felt an attachment to...until he realized something was weird about the skating section. His smile faded then.

Pictures had been changed. There were slight dust-outlines where small awards had been removed, and pictures pulled from the back wall. The most telling, and perhaps the most brazen change, was one standing framed photo that showed a much-younger Yuri at the top of a podium, holding up his small Gold medal and paper certificate. The photo, however, had been moved off-center, and the Silver side of the podium had been shoved off the edge of the frame, leaving only the Bronze on the other side, and a gap of about 2 inches where the cardboard backing of the frame could be seen.

They're trying to erase me. They aren't even being subtle...

What was once a space of pride for him, suddenly felt like a gauntlet he had to get through before he could arrive at the doors that led him to rink-side.

At the end of the cases, he saw the segregated doors that lead into the men's and women's changing rooms for the pool area and the gymnastics section in the far back corner of the building. The skating rink and all its ancillary storage and locker rooms were in the back left, behind the cafeteria and the snack bars that served it. Like the pool, each of the sections in the back had their own long PlexiGlas walls to allow spectators to watch from the warmth of the hall, and a number of parents were there sitting on plastic benches, watching their children within on each side.

The gymnastics section had the usual; wide open spaces floored by thick blue-vynil mats, foam pits, cross-beams, the uneven-bar sets, a spring-board and accompanying horse-vault, suspended rings to hang from, ropes that hung from the ceiling, and a number of other usual suspects. The rink on the other side was exactly as one expected, with simple stands for an inner audience to sit in. Within each area, dozens of people were participating in their chosen sports, some significantly more novice than others.

The mood in the hall shifted though once people realized Asahi was there. Jovial faces became nervous or dubious, and many turned their backs as soon as they realized it was him. He didn't let his carefully-trained affect shift; this was nothing he hadn't expected.

It's a good thing we brought dogs for someone to watch, Asahi thought to himself, going through them to the rink-side doors in the middle of the see-through wall. He pulled his hood up, as though needing to brace for the cooler temperatures inside the rink area, and clipped the two buttons in front of his nose and mouth to close it, I wouldn't want either of them to see this.

He drew a long breath and pushed past the swinging panels, hearing the noise of the metal clicking echoing off the walls within. A blast of cold hit his face as he felt the ice, and the chillers that kept it frozen year 'round. Skate blades scratched all around; there were large groups of young students on
the frost, each gaggle of 12 or so guided by an adult teacher. On the far end of the rink, half the space had been cordoned-off to allow for large figure-8 formations where students were able to practice their first half-jumps, but Asahi didn't need to go that far. He followed the rink wall to the left, passing behind a few parents, and eventually found a clear spot to lean against.

Sayoko Nagisa was close to the center of the rink, surrounded by a half-circle of about 5 teenaged students. With no one in the rink actually recognizing Asahi with his hair covered, it wasn't awkward like it had been outside. In that space - at least for the moment - it was still peaceful and normal. He watched for a little while, not wanting to interrupt the lesson; thankfully, it wasn't long until it was over, and Coach Nagisa was coming off the ice, saying goodbye to each of the students as they set blades onto the concrete. He gave them a moment, but when the last skater finally departed, Asahi reached a hand forward to tap the woman's shoulder.

Surprised, she twisted around on a toe-pick, thinking maybe one of the parents was trying to get her attention...but she saw those grey-hazel eyes peering out from within the circle of a cinched hood, and recognized him immediately. Her expression was...unexpected.

She couldn't muster words, but the worried look on her face said what her voice could not. She twisted around slightly, looking around, and spoke low while looking away, [Did anyone see you come in?]

[...Only the people in the hall. I was bundled when I came in here.]

[I can't talk to you here.] She said, sliding towards the rink door as she swiped her blade-guards off the flat top of the wall. Pretending like she was ignoring the man next to her, at least from a distance, she put the rubber bars on her chrome skates and straightened her jacket out, [Go out back to the picnic tree.]

Eyes unchanging in expression, Asahi nodded, and waited a little while before moving on again. He went out through the front doors - back the way he came - and spotted the Nikiforovs throwing snowballs for the dogs. Viktor chucked one hard and far, and both Makkachin and Hana watched it keenly, darting off after it. Hana managed to get there quicker and launched into the air, making the small snow puff explode into smaller chunks when she caught it in her mouth. Another snowball came soon after, farther off to the side, and Makkachin caught that one. Yuri was tossing smaller snowballs for Jiro, though the pup was less interest in catching them mid-throw as he was sniffing at the remains once they hit the ground. To make the pup work for it, Yuri started tossing them into the deep drift, and Jiro hopped like a hare through the white crystalline field to find where the ball had vanished. The attention of each one of them was grabbed suddenly when a loud whistle reverberated through the parking lot, and they looked up to spot a familiar jacket by the building's front doors.

"...That was fast." Yuri commented, dusting his hands off as he stood up.

Viktor's eyes narrowed though, and stared hard at the tightly-tied hood, "Something isn't right. He's in disguise again. Like Sunday morning."

"Uh oh..."

"Makkachin! Hana! To me!" The Russian called, shaking his hands off where snow had melted to water on his pink fingers, "Let's hurry..."

Both dogs came rushing up, panting heavily. Hana went right by, and trotted the rest of the way to her human's side, tail wagging furiously and tongue hanging out. She accepted a quick ruffle of hands against her cheeks, and walked by Asahi's side as he started following a thinner path around the side of the building. By the time the remaining four had caught up closely enough to speak
without being loud, Viktor was sufficiently annoyed enough by his worries that he reached one hand forward for the younger man's shoulder, "Saito..."

Asahi flinched terribly and darted out from under the unexpected grasp, eyeballing him like a scared animal for the split-second it took for him to remember it was someone he knew. He shook his head and cleared the fear, "Sumimasen..."

Both Nikiforovs side-eyed one another in surprise.

"Nagisa-kōchi is going to meet us back by the tree." He explained, trying to ignore their reactions.

"What about your choreographer? Was he there?" Yuri asked, having to hop slightly to keep up with the taller men's longer stride, "Asahi-"

"Miteinakatta." (I didn't see (him.))

"Oh..."

Viktor grumbled quietly to himself, *Is he doing that because he's nervous or because he doesn't want me to know what he's saying? Can't be the latter... I actually knew that one.*

The picnic tree was a massive Japanese Maple, knobbed brown wood growing spindly into the air, branches becoming black the farther into the air they reached. By spring, the entire thing would be shades of shocking red and bright pink, with hints of orange, but for the moment, it was naked and filled with space. The snow under it was less packed than it was outside the umbrella of the tree's shadow, and it looked well worn down, packed underfoot by many people who had come before the last snowfall. They'd barely made it there before Asahi turned around and spotted another figure coming up their same path, almost skipping as she tried to hurry.

"What's going on?" Yuri asked again, "Why is she having to come all the way out here...?"

"...It...wasn't a warm welcome inside." Asahi finally explained, "They stripped the trophy case of everything having to do with me."

"...But...why? You're the most decorated skater to ever come out of this city...they should be celebrating you."

"Because this is Imari." He said stiffly, "Nothing about me happens here by mistake."

Sayoko pulled her hair back from her face and hooked it behind her ears to prevent the wind from flinging it around again, and came to a slow stop a few paces away. Her eyes went to the two other men there, "...Yuri...Viktor-san... What...are you doing here...?"

"This isn't about us." The Russian answered, turning to Asahi again.

"I tried to call you earlier today, but your phone came back as disconnected..." The coach said nervously, "Then I came here to start the day's lessons, and I saw what they did to the trophy case... I was told to keep my mouth shut and just accept it, but I..." She shook her head, "Since I was watching your progress on Instagram, I couldn't help but fear the worst when your updates abruptly stopped before you got here..." Eyes raised, and she looked straight at her student, "You don't know how worried I was for you! And how angry I was that I couldn't even figure out what was happening! Not being able to call you was..."

Asahi's brow furrowed a little under his bangs, and he reached up his hands to loosen the hood, though he wouldn't pull it back. He only revealed enough of his face that it could be seen, and he
was careful to keep the teal bits of his hair hidden, "My phone was shut off late last night. I had Riku's phone though, and I wanted to call you, too, but I thought it was too late...you're normally in bed by that hour and I didn't want to wake you up just to scare you. I... I had to have more than bad news to tell you before I reached out."

"But..." She followed, hesitating before shaking her head, "If it was that late, what did you even do? What happened to you...? What's going on!?"

The silver Russian stepped closer and set a hand against the anxious coach's shoulder, "Everything is perfectly fine now. You don't have to be worried."

"But it wasn't fine if he had to call you two for help!" She protested, "After the weekend, I...I honestly didn't think you guys would speak again unless you had to!"

Asahi grit his teeth, but then stepped a few paces forward as well, hands back in his coat pockets, "I actually didn't reach out to them... I called Minako. They opted to help on their own after she told them what I said."

"But what did you say!?"

He sighed and shook his head, eyes going to the slushy, muddy ground, focused on an exposed knob of tree-root to gather himself, "All the years...that I had kept my mouth shut, and my heart hidden...all the things that I was scared would happen if I stepped out of line..." He shuddered slightly, "...It all happened..." He turned on a heel and looked up into the naked maple tree, "With all my luggage beside me, I found out that the locks had been changed. One of my brothers came to the door and told me I no longer had a home. I tried to use my phone, but it was already cancelled...and I couldn't find a working WiFi signal to use the internet, either. I tried to find a hotel, but no one would let me in with Hana... Even after I tried to sneak her in by renting the room before letting them know I had her, my bank card was declined. They must've reported my card as stolen, since the account was in their name, and cut off all my funding. I was so scared of what was going to happen that it didn't even dawn on me that I had Riku's phone until I had almost given up...but I was able to call Minako with it, and everyone in Hasetsu told me to come north on the train."

"So late at night though!? You're lucky you caught a train at all! What would you have done if it was shuttered until morning!?!" Sayoko cried out, worried anyway, "Would you really have let your worry about my beauty sleep keep you outside in the cold until dawn!?"

"No, but..."

"We would've driven down here to get him." Viktor answered, "Once we found out, there wasn't even a need to talk about it...he was going to spend the night at Yu-Topia."

Yuri nodded in agreement, "We got lucky with the train."

"My parents must've flexed their social muscle to get all mention of me removed from the building so fast..." Asahi said quietly, "It must've all been done late last night or sometime yesterday, like when they changed the locks on the house."

"It must have happened after the last practice." Sayoko added, shocked and horrified, "I was actually expecting that the trophy case would be updated to reflect your new accomplishments, but when I came in today and found that so much had been changed or taken out...I could hardly contain myself. I was told that if I made a scene, I wouldn't be allowed to come back, but no one would explain what was going on. I feared the worst, but hoped for the best..." She lifted her eyes and watched Asahi turn side-face to glance back at her, "I'm sorry that I pretended to ignore you earlier. All I knew was
that you had suddenly become taboo here. People were excited about your win at Nationals...but it turned to crickets today. Everyone's been uneasy."

"How could this even happen?" Yuri asked incredulously, "This is unprecedented..."

"It's like I said...my family did this." Asahi explained, drawing all eyes around him, "They waited until I was here before they showed their cards. They...wanted to see the look on my face when I realized what they'd done. Telling me in advance would've been the kind thing to do, and they've never been so generous. So they waited, biding their time...doing what sneaky little things they could until I turned up, and then...sprung their trap on me. They did all this on purpose, with purpose; leaving me homeless and stranded in the middle of the night with nowhere to go, no money to find shelter, no phone to call someone for help. If it..." His voice cracked slightly, a mix of sadness and rage creeping up, "If it hadn't been for Riku...for his family, their generosity...and his phone... I could've died."

It wasn't an easy thing to hear out loud, but Yuri still looked surprised, "...They couldn't have meant it to be that cruel... I'm sure they assumed you'd have a way out... That you could stay at the train station or-"

"No..." Viktor interrupted, coming up behind his partner with his arms snaking in around the man's sides, and he leaned his chin over one shoulder, "My love, they left him to die. The station's interior closes and the outdoor areas have no heat."

"Even if I did go there...the police are always heckling loiterers. I wouldn't have lasted more than 30 minutes before a patrol found me...and because it's me..." Asahi snuffled behind his hand, "Maybe they would've done something much worse than just chase me away..."

"How is this whole city so corrupt!?!" Yuri barked, getting angry then, "How is it possible that your parents wield so much power that they could actually cause a death and not feel shame for it!? Or fear punishment!?"

"This whole city is built on what my father's business creates..." Asahi explained painfully, clutching at the front of his jacket, his heart hurting all over again. He looked towards Yuri, "It's no different than how things were in Detroit. You were there, you saw how hard the city took it when the car companies left... That's how Imari would be without the ceramics. Haven't you noticed all the decorative vases on street corner pillars? Saito Ceramics crushed the competition here ages ago... No one else can stand up to what my father's company produces. Half the town is employed by him."

"Was employed by him." Viktor corrected again, "He's just a manager now."

"Just...a manager?" Sayoko echoed, "How is Mr. Saito just a manager at Saito Ceramics?"

Yuri's expression changed to one of vindictive pride, "It's Rozovsky Ceramics now."

"Not literally, but..." The silver Russian mused, smiling in spite of it all, and hugged his impassioned husband a little closer, "My Uncle is something of a hot-shot CEO of a really big multi-national engineering equipment company. He's also engaged to Minako. He brought down a handful of vigilante justice and took over Saito Ceramics, just like some Russian mobster would."

"...He...what? How?" The confused coach asked.

Yuri looked rather smug then, "The company is publicly traded. Mikhail bought enough of those shares to effectively own slightly-more than half of it...so now he calls the shots. Viktor's Uncle is
"...Not just him." Asahi added, trying to regain his composure as that hopeful air pulled him back from his grief, "...My...brothers... They're all on the board of directors, along with my father... When things first got going last year...they maintained about 1/3rd ownership between themselves, so they could vote together. But now..."

"Wow~!" Viktor cooed.

"I'll bet they want to keep this all pretty secret." Yuri went on, looking between them, "If the city suddenly found out that they weren't in control of the company anymore, they'd lose face pretty quick. Mikhail's the one who could bully the cops around...and I'll bet..." He looked to Asahi, "...He can have your stuff put back into the trophy case, too. Even better, he could arrange to have one set up just for your accomplishments. And it wouldn't even have to be just to make a fool of them, either...you deserve to be celebrated! The whole city's been pulled out from under this dark blanket of nepotism. It's been freed, just like you have."

Asahi's eyes widened under his hood, "...I...hadn't thought of that..."

"Imagine what he'll say when he finds out what the elder Saitos did here." Viktor mused, "I almost want to stick around in Imari just to see the shit-show, but..."

The younger figure closest to the tree nodded, and reached back up to his hood, grabbing the inner edge of the opening and pushed it back to reveal his hair. He drew a quick, nervous breath, and looked around, feeling the wind comb through each strand, "...I...shouldn't be this scared. But...maybe I still am, just because no one but us knows what happened. Yuri's right though..."

"Often am." He grinned.

Asahi breathed a faint smile, "All of that stuff is in the past, now... People don't have to worry about talking to me anymore...or even saying something nice about me. They don't have to be scared to be seen with me, either."

"...Asahi..." Sayoko whispered, hands moving to cover her mouth as she gaped in surprise.

"And you..." He focused his gaze on the woman he'd called coach for so long, "The last year and a half, wondering if a single misstep would take you from being 'the chosen one' to social outcast...that's all gone now, too."

"It was my choice from the beginning to want to be your coach, no matter what the risks." She retorted, "I just wish that I had known why there was so much secrecy! If I'd known it was because of Riku...I would've..." She lowered her head and shook it back and forth, "...Maybe I could've helped you somehow... Instead, I just bought into the story everyone else was told, and agreed never to question the narrative that you were just...traumatized...from the accident itself...never knowing about the profound loss you experienced alongside it..." Pale hazel eyes lifted, and a few tears welled in them, "How can you ever forgive me for being so blind...?"

"It wasn't your fault..." Asahi said simply, "I bought into it, too. We do what we have to, to survive."

Viktor settled his chin on his spouse's shoulder and watched quietly, We all keep secrets to keep ourselves safe...

"But now that you know what's happened..." Asahi went on, stepping closer to the older woman, and bowed his head to look down towards her much-shorter self, "Unfortunately, because my parents were the ones who paid you before...now that they've cast me out, they aren't paying for any
of my things anymore...you and Mr. Webber included... Even with the success of the donation-drive that Yuri and Senpai orchestrated, I can't afford you on my own..."

Sayoko nodded, "...I..." She hesitated and shook that worry away, "So...does this mean you're...going to retire? Asahi, you've...accomplished so much...you can't quit now."

"I'm not." He answered quickly, "But until I get back on my feet and can afford to pay you what you deserve for your hard work...I'm going to have to let the two of you go for a little while, and move on to Four Continents without you."

"...Wakatta..." (I understand.) She said sadly.

"You and Mr. Webber have done too much to get me to where I am today for me to leave you behind for very long." Asahi explained further, bowing fully towards her then, hands clasped at his sides crisply, "Nagisa-kochi... Ongaeshimasu... Wait until the Olympics. We'll go to PyeongChang together...and win Gold for Japan."

The little red Audi drove back north towards Hasetsu, passing a train as it slowly plodded along on the track just next to the road. Music played quietly through the car as the trio traveled in contented silence, the weight of the trip south having been lifted off of them.

Yuri glanced out the window to watch the train, looking at the windows, "I'll bet that's the one Mikhail and Minako-sensei are on." He supposed, and leaned back into his seat, glancing over his shoulder to the figure in the back seat, "You know, if you asked...Mikhail probably would've been willing to pay Coach Nagisa's fees."

"I could never ask anything of that man." Asahi answered, head tilted on the back of the seat, watching the countryside pass them by. Makkachin panted quietly next to him, and Hana dozed with her head on her human's lap, "He's already done so much for me...the idea of asking for one thing more seems like such hubris. That's not my way." He turned his eyes and lifted his head up to look back at Yuri though, "I'm content to work hard under Minako for now. Besides... Nagisa-kochi deserves a vacation from me. You guys only had to put up with my dark and broody attitude for a single weekend, but she's been dealing with it for 18 months..."

"Yeah, but you've always been like that," Yuri huffed, turning back to look out the windshield, "So she was already aware of what she was getting into when she brought you back to the ice."

"...I guess I hid everything too well..." Asahi sighed, "Or maybe things were always that bad, just for different reasons, even way back in Juniors. Regardless of what I was hiding, I always put on the same face to the world, and kept moving..."

"Well that's just ominous." Yuri said, brow raised. He snuck one arm under Jiro's belly and pulled him close before he fell while trying to look out the window, "I'm certain that's the end of it all though. But..." He looked back again past the edge of his seat, "Just so we're clear, I'm the one winning Gold for Japan."

Viktor would've spat his drink if he had one, and both hands went onto the steering wheel before he spun them all out, "...I feel really weird suddenly, being the only guy around who just hopes to do a good enough job that people don't laugh at me."

"That's just because of your ankle," Yuri reassured, giving the man's leg a few gentle squeezes where he held to it, "Once you're sure-footed again, you'll be flying across the ice. Then you can go
back to saying you'll win Gold, even though you say I'll win Gold in the same breath, just like you used to."

The silver Russian heaved an awkward sigh, "That seems like such a long time ago, now..."

"...I'm sure Plisetsky will say something similar..." Asahi added, "You should've heard him introduce himself to me this morning. He told me he was Russia's Champion before he even told me his name."

Both Nikiforovs laughed at that, and Yuri wiped a tear away from under his glasses, "He would... Unfortunately for him though, I made a solemn vow that no one from the RSF will ever win Gold again, so long as I'm still competing. That's Viktor's and my revenge against them for what they did."

"That doesn't mean someone from the J SF can't beat you for it." Asahi challenged from the back seat.

Viktor whistled, "Wow~! Things are going to be interesting at the Olympics now." He tilted his head slightly, "Those sound like fightin' words."

"Hai, Senpai. I have to work harder than ever now. The world knows I'm skating for Riku...I have to do well."

"You don't want to do well to stick it to your parents and brothers?" The Russian wondered, Maybe my worry about him going after Yuri again is just me being paranoid... He clearly still has a lot of love for Itô."

"Oh...well...yes, that too...but I'll skate better thinking about someone I care about, rather than people I hate."

"I dunno about that, Viktor broke a bunch of records at NHK doing his Rage Skate, and he spent that whole time think about someone he hated." Yuri teased, and smiled confidently, "Let's get through the practice run at Four Continents first. There won't be any RSF skaters competing, but I'll bet Yurio is going to be in the audience anyway, since Minako-sensei has to go now. It's pretty close to the same thing."

"Colorado Springs will be the real test between us in the lead-up to the Games," Viktor agreed, "We won't be handicapped by conflict; what happens there will set up the way people see us next month. If we all make it onto the podium together again...then the Olympics will have the same unofficial challenge between the three of us that we had going into the Grand Prix Series." He looked to Yuri briefly, then back to the road, "The anticipation and expectation for excellence...we'll all have to be in top form." Slate eyes looked up to the rear-view mirror to glance at Asahi next, and caught the man's gaze before he looked down again with a smirk, "I wish we weren't driving...I kind of want to do a toast. The three of us are Japan's Chosen for this sport. Even as individual competitors, we're there as a team for a united goal...but we're also there for ourselves. This will be the last time I can compete at the Games...and you two are going for the first time. We all have a lot to prove. I'm actually getting really excited about this one."

"We'll do a toast tonight at Yu-Topia." Yuri suggested, "For now, we have to go tell everyone the good news about what happened. Asahi still hasn't met the Nishigoris yet, either...so it'll be great to introduce the triplets when we're on such a high note. They'll never have to know how bleak things were."

"I'll be glad to finally put that whole saga behind me." Asahi agreed, "...For the first time in years...I feel hopeful again."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED THIRTY TWO

It felt like it was much later in the day than it really was when the Audi finally pulled back into the parking lot at Yu-Topia, coming to a stop in the same spot it had been in earlier that same morning. Yuri clicked his phone on to check the time, and saw that it was just about noon. Clicking it off again, he waited for the engine to shut off before he opened the door and set Jiro onto the ground below. The whines of the older dogs in the back seat were enough to make him go quickly, and he reached for the lever that let his seat slide forward. Hana jumped out quickly, but Makkachin had to wait for the last human to exit before he could follow after, and he quickly ran around the small lot excitedly once he was out. All three pups knew well enough to go towards the resort's sliding entryway though, and not wanting to be the spoil-sport with the leash, Yuri went with them so Jiro could join in the dog-conga-line. The wooden panel was pushed aside, and the pups all rushed into the warmth, heading immediately towards the common room. Yuri unhooked Jiro's leash from harness and let the tiny Akita run excitedly with the others while he went back outside.

"Okaeri~!" Hiroko called, walking by as Jiro ran underfoot into the common-room.

"Tadaima." Yuri answered quietly, "I hope it's okay that we let the dogs run loose like this while we help Asahi get his things from the car."

"Oh, it's fine." She answered, nudging her head towards the registration desk in front of the door, "We warn people now to expect them around suddenly."

Cherry-hazel eyes turned to the counter, and he spotted a new sign, with a photo of both Makkachin and Jiro on it. The words were in Japanese on the top half, and English on the bottom, and it read, [Resort guests, please be aware that these two dogs may occasionally be running loose in the building! They are very friendly! If you are allergic, please let us know while checking in so we can let their pup-parents know to keep them at home!] Yuri had an embarrassed-surprised look on his face by the time he got to the end, I guess they decided to make that sign after Nikki screamed, when Makkachin spooked her the other day... They'll have to make a new sign with Hana on it though if Asahi is staying for a little while.

Footsteps came up behind him, and Yuri suddenly found himself scrambling to get out of the way, pushing the door open quickly in the process. He hopped to the other side of the threshold and watched as both older skaters stepped through, each carrying a load of the small cache into the building. Yuri looked back to check if the car doors were all closed, and seeing that they were, followed the duo inside, and slid the front door shut after them.

"Which room is yours?" Viktor wondered, using the toe of one foot to nudge off the shoe on the other, and repeated it for the second. He turned his head and followed when Asahi went by, shoes pushed off to the side for a moment.

Yuri stayed back a second to find cubbies for the shoes so they wouldn't be in the way, and quickly went after them again. He turned to look into the common room as he walked past, and realized there were only customers inside, no one familiar. The three dogs were walking around the peripheries of the room, and looked back at him when they realized he was there. Soon after, all three were at his heels, following him into the western half of the resort. It wasn't far to find the room that Asahi had been assigned to for the moment, and Yuri curled his fingers around the doorframe as he stepped into view.
The guitar case was set on top of the bed, and a few piles of clothing were dumped next to it. The small trove of smaller personal effects were carefully assembled onto a pillow and set aside.

Watching it all, Yuri leaned against the frame and put his hands into his coat pockets, and drew a long, quiet breath. *It's horrible that he couldn't keep more of his things. How many memories has he lost because he has no keepsakes? All he has left is whatever he was able to keep in his head, and by the sounds of it, not much of it was worth remembering....*

Hana went into the room and hopped up onto the bed, sniffing at all the new things set out there before lying down in the middle of it all. Makkachin and Jiro held back at the doorway, watching curiously.

"I guess that's it then," Viktor commented, breaking the silence as he looked around. His eyes descended to the unopened suitcases, "That's all the stuff you brought from Nationals, right?"

"...Hai, Senpai." Asahi answered easily, not even needing to look to know what was being referred to. He bent over the guitar case and unclipped it, revealing the sleek instrument inside.

Yuri stood a bit higher on his toes to try and get a better look, but with the lid of the case flipped open, he was impossible to see.

Asahi pulled the whole thing out though, revealing a rounded design with a purple-blue iridescent finish. He examined it quietly, turning it over a few times, but then just sighed and put it back.

"What's wrong? It doesn't work unless it's plugged in?" Yuri wondered.

The older figure glanced up, but shook his head, "It doesn't sound like much on its own, no... It's just...the last time I laid eyes on this thing, Riku was still alive, so it kind of hurts to see it again after so long."

"...Oh..." Yuri lowered his gaze and looked away slightly, "Sorry...

"It's fine..." Asahi said, quieter then, re-cliping the locks on the side of the hard black plastic, "You two don't need to hang around just to watch me put my stuff away. I'm sure you had other plans."

Neither of them really had a follow-up to that, but Viktor nodded and started heading towards the door, holding his hand out for Yuri to take the hint and turn around. He hesitated for a second, but stayed put for a moment longer, "We're thinking about doing a casual-skate soon. If we're not here when you're done and you need us for something, you can find us at the Ice Castle. Just go left when you leave the resort, and head all the way down. You'll see the building for the rink at the bottom of the hill, under *Hasetsu* Castle, on the right at the end of the bridge."

"Oh...sure." Asahi answered simply, bowing his head slightly before Viktor nudged the younger man into the hall.

Hana watched them go, and the door slid shut after them, but once it was closed, she turned back towards her human. Asahi just sighed and turned around, sitting back roughly on the edge of the bed, and stared at the floor for a little while. Hana wiggled forward until she could nudge her nose under her human's arm, and he lifted it slightly so she could get in further, setting her head on the nearest leg before feeling that hand come down on her shoulders.

*[It's hard to believe this is really where we are,]* Asahi commented, his voice barely a whisper, *[This time a week ago, I was being made to confront Riku's death for the first time since it happened... I had kept his picture next to my singing bowl in the closet that whole time, but because I so-rarely opened the door, I never really looked. I wonder if some part of me...thought this might happen...?]
that why I took everything with me to Nationals?]

Hana had no words to answer that. She just kept still and let anxious fingers comb through her thick fur.

[I knew Yuri was still skating, even though I didn't follow the events he went to. I knew he'd be at Nationals. ...I wonder...if I thought, somehow, he would be the one to help me figure all this out.] He reached up to rub his nose on the back of his sleeve, [Or maybe it was my instinct, after all the work Riku did to help me get over the past...to bring a piece of him with me so I wouldn't fall back into my old habits as soon as I saw Yuri again.] He sighed again and dropped backward, head falling to the middle of the pile of clothes behind him. Eyes stared up at the ceiling, looking at each of the dark wooden planks that went across. His other hand came to rest on his chest, and he shut his eyes, For a little while, I know that I stumbled... He thought to himself, Those old feelings I had for Yuri bubbled back up despite my best efforts to avoid it. But now...the hurt that I feel when I look at him isn't the same as it was before. I feel the loss, sure...it's hard not to acknowledge the stabbing pain in my heart to know, for a fact, that he's out of my reach forever. But I've made peace with that...I think I did a long time ago. This ache I feel now is just...something else entirely.

Memories of the weekend poured through him.

'Not that I have any reason to teach you how to listen to my husband, but he says a lot even when he isn't speaking a single word.'

'...Viktor spent nearly a year trying to capture Yuri's heart. He was the first and only person Yuri ever kissed...that was incredibly important to the both of them...but now, and for the rest of both of their lives, there's going to be the knowledge at the back of both of their minds that Yuri was kissed by someone else.'

'...So before you try and tell me that I don't know how it feels to lose someone I love, I can assure you that I don't need to go that far to know how much it hurts. I've been on that edge. If Yuri died today, I would be dead tomorrow...and that's why what you did pisses me off so much. His despair is my despair.'

'The Yuri you knew from Juniors isn't dead. He's grown into a bigger person. The things you knew him for back then...being shy, modest, insecure...those things are still a part of him, but they don't define him anymore.'

Eyes cracked open again, staring at those boards directly above. Asahi drew a breath and frowned, ...I'm jealous of him. He's gotten to grow up, to move on...to find someone. I'm still stuck in the past, like flotsam snagged on a rock in a river. The water still flows by, but I can't. Riku got me unstuck for a little while, but I just got hung-up on another rock a little further down-stream.

'Why you would want him to stay that way doesn't make any sense to me.'

Asahi pushed to sit up, and after a moment, reached across for the plastic guitar case. He pulled it over his lap and held it, as though about to play the guitar inside...but hesitated, Why...would I want
Yuri to stay the way he used to be...? Because...he wasn't a threat to me. Not just because he's smaller than I am...but because he was submissive. He was safe. I never had to worry about him trying to overpower me...to push me around, force me to do things I didn't want to do, or bully me into silence. I could've let my guard down around him and he wouldn't take advantage of me, even in that moment of weakness...and unlike everyone else, he would've listened to me...

He clutched his arms around the black plastic a little harder, fighting back the pain in his throat and chest.

I know that it would've stunted him... I know that I wasn't his ideal partner. But damnit...he was all I had... If I hadn't been so desperate to hold onto him, maybe I could've noticed Riku that much sooner... He was already confident, independent, and knew what he wanted...and he wanted to be what I needed. He never once complained. He never pried, or pushed me to say things I wasn't ready to talk about... The worst thing he ever did was challenge me on my feelings for Yuri, and that turned out to be the best thing he could've ever done...

He crossed his arms over the case and buried his face into them; the pain gripped him like a fully-body vice, and grew beyond his capacity to control. He struggled for breath as his throat clenched in agony, and his frame tightened up in a tortured cringe.

I miss him so much... I'd do anything to have him back... It's just...so...painful...to be alone... Surrounded by all these people who are so happy and in love... I want so badly to have what they have...but it's so far out of my reach now...

Asahi lifted his head, looking down at the soggy patch he'd left in his coat sleeve. He snuffled another pained breath, and tried to refocus himself, [I can't...keep turning into a mess like...this...every time I'm...by myself...] He choked quietly, swallowing the painful knot in his throat.

A few strands of his teal hair slid over his fingers as he pulled his hand back from the front of his neck, and he looked down at the color intently for a moment before moving that hand up to rub his eyes.

The color was Riku's idea. He teased that it was his way of marking me as his own, once I could safely say I no longer had feelings for Yuri. I've been maintaining it all this time, using it as a reminder of what had happened. Something no one would or could ever question me about.

He tried to clear his throat and refocus, combing his wet fingers through the teal strands.

But maybe...I think...it's time to change it... To do a different color, something he'd like, to maintain that 'mark,' but to use it as a way of saying I'm ready to move on. So much has happened in the last week, and even in the last few hours... Nothing will ever be the same... So I can't keep looking in the mirror, seeing the same sad person I've been since Riku was taken from me... I have to change...so I'll...start here...

"I totally forgot that the triplets were doing their school thing today." Yuri commented dryly, making a face out the window as the car went over the bridge, "You even just mentioned it yesterday."

"That's okay. I forgot, too." Viktor mused, "It just kinda...got swept under the rug with everything else that suddenly came up."

"Yeah..."
"But I feel better about it all, now that this whole thing is done and taken care of." He went on, double-checking the road for oncoming traffic before turning right into the Ice Castle parking lot, sans dogs, "I wonder if my Uncle will do something about that trophy case?"

"I'd hope so." Yuri agreed, casually sliding his hand down his husband's leg and back up again, "There's probably pictures of me still in it...he deserves to have hi-"

The Audi came to a screeching halt in the middle of the parking lot, and Viktor turned dubiously, leering over the edge of his arm towards the suddenly-nervous man next to him, "...Did you just say...there's pictures of you in that case?"

"Y-Yes...? Probably?" He answered, spooked, "I did skate for that rink during Juniors..."

"There's pictures of **baby Yuri** standing on a podium, in that case?"

"Well I wasn't a **baby** back then, maybe 14 or something...?" He dismissed, clicking off his seatbelt.

Viktor's affect looked dark, eyes shining through like a cat's, "**Yuri.**"

"Ye-y-yesss...?" He was practically backing into the door then, pawing for the handle.

"Why did you let us leave the city without letting me see those pictures first?"

"Su-**sumimasen.**"

**kIA-KlunK**

Yuri tumbled out backwards with a thud, backpack falling after him, and he rolled arse-over-head away. Like some kind of ninja, he kicked the door shut and took off running.

"**Yuri!**"

"**You'll never take me aliiiiivveeeeee!**"

"**YURI!**" Viktor called, stunned and baffled. He hastily parked the car and grabbed his bag from the back seat before hobbling after his scrambling husband. The younger man was already at the top of the wide concrete stairs and was making a B-line for the doors when Viktor departed from the car.

Yuri barged inside and quickly rushed past the skate-rental desk, catching Yuko's eyes in stunned surprise as he quickly yelled a greeting without stopping. He pummeled himself against the doors to the rink before grabbing them to pull them open properly, and rushed inside, darting out onto the ice with his shoes still on, and slid far into the center, heaving for breath. He gave a devious smirk back at the door and waited for the silver Russian to appear. All he saw was Yurio gliding backwards into his line of sight though.

"The Hell are you running for...?"

Yuri felt slightly deflated, and sagged forward, backpack sliding off his arms until it fell to the ice under him, "...Viktor's mad cuz I didn't tell him about some photos in Imari." He answered with a whine, hearing - and then seeing - another set of skates sliding up to him. They stopped on either side of him, and he felt a hand settle on his bent back.

"What **kiiiiinda** pictures?" Nikki asked, sickly sweet.

"Pictures of me." He answered, wiggling out of the backpack's straps where they still clung wrapped
around his sleeves. He straightened himself out and fixed his coat, "From way back when I was in
Juniors."

"Podium photos?" Viktoria followed.

"Eyup."

"Oh boy. You're in trouble." Nikki teased, nudging the man with her elbow, "If
there's anything about Cousin Viktor that's true, it's that he's got very sensitive feelers for you."

"That's why I ran," He laughed nervously, scratching the side of his jaw, "It was pretty hectic down
there. I didn't even think about it until I mentioned it to Viktor just a minute ago. I didn't actually see
the case myself...I only heard about it from Asahi because he said the rink staff had taken all the
pictures of him out."

"Well that's just rude."

"Deshou?"

"Imari's only an hour away though," Viktoria commented, chewing on the end of a chocolate Pocky
stick, the small red box they came from in her hand, "Couldn't you just go back down there and
look?"

"Maybe we will, after we tell your dad about it." Yuri explained, reaching down to collect his
backpack. When he stood back up again, he tilted towards Nikki on his right, "You're gonna love hearing about what he did."

"Oooohhhhh this keeps getting interesting!" She said excitedly and rubbed her hands together.

"Where is he anyway?" Yurio asked stiffly, "Everyone should be back by now, right?"

"I think we passed their train when we drove back up here." Yuri explained, "They're probably
another 30 minutes out."

"He, not they." The teen repeated indignantly, "That Asashi guy."


"Better get used to saying his name right, cuz he'll be around for a while!" Nikki jabbed, waving her
arms at her 'brother,' "Or he'll get all mad like you do when we put an O at the end of yours!"

"That's different."

"Is it? Ooohhohohohoho."

"Quit it!" He barked, pushing off a toe-pick to get closer, only for Nikki to do the same and veer off
and out of reach, skating off like the wind, "Get back here!"

"So you can strangle me!? Hah! Fat chance!"

"I won't strangle you! I'll just caress your neck gently until you stop breathing on your own!"

Yuri just deadpanned them, ",...Is that how teens flirt these days...?"

"That's not flirting." Viktoria muttered from his left side, chewing on the last bit of the Pocky stick as
she reached for another, "That's sibling in-fighting."
"Oh."

"If it was flirting, it'd be her trying to strangle him."

"...Oh." Yuri squinted, "That makes no sense."

"It never does. It's best not to question." She explained, then offered the Pocky box forward, "Want one?"

"Sssuurreee..." He answered hesitantly, still a bit baffled. He only managed to bite at the tip of it before he heard the rink-side doors get flung open, and he spotted his darkly husband standing within the square frame, "Eep!"

"<NAME>.

Sneakers slid out from under him and he collapsed to the ice, and he tried to scramble backward as Viktor stepped ever closer. Blade-guards were already off when the Russian stepped into the rink, so it was nothing more than a 15ft glide from rink-side to where Yuri had flopped. At the far side of the rink, Yuri had slid right past Nikki, his attention grabbed by the sudden yell with his hands still outstretched; Nikki herself had come to a stop, glancing briefly at the Russian Tiger as he went by, then turned her eyes back out towards her cousin.

Viktor smoothly moved forward, reaching down with both hands to wedge them under Yuri's arms and hoisted him up off the ice, practically holding him out as he continued on like his fully-grown husband was barely bigger than a child, "YURI."

"Oh...u-uhmm...so that's what took you so long. You were getting your skates on... Did you say hi to Yu-chan when you came in?" Yuri asked with a nervous laugh, the heels of his sneakers dragging on the frost.

"I want to see the pictures, Yuri."

"So we'll go back to Imari later!"

"We're leaving for Russia in the morning!"

"After Euros then!"

"I might not remember by then!"

"Kinda like how I didn't remember after 7 years, huh?" Yuri gave a smarmy look.

Viktor just stared at him, "...You and your logic."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED THIRTY THREE

The northbound train finally returned to Hasetsu Station, and Mikhail rubbed his sleepy face with both hands, letting Minako 'shove' him in the right direction to disembark. Fingers pulled down on pale cheeks as he felt the metal carriage change over to the concrete in the terminal, and he gave the place a good look around.

"You ever get that weird feeling of déjà vu even when you're in a place you know you've been before?" He wondered aloud, eyelids pulled down slightly before he let them go again and slumped forward, "I'm so tired I could die."

"That's what happens when you don't sleep, hun." Minako shook her head at him, but pat his back to move him onward, "I'm sure Yu-Topia is overrun right now. You want to take a nap at my place before we go back?"

The catatonic Russian was practically asleep where he stood.

"I'll take that as a yes."

Hiroko paused in the midst of her usual chores and glanced down the hall to the overnight rooms of the resort, one hand on the doorframe to the common room. She hesitated a moment, and rubbed a finger on her chin, but then decided to move away. She glanced back to the reception desk and waved to Toshiya, [I'm going to go check on the newcomer.]

"Haaaaai."

Stepping away, she moved between the kitchen and the vending machines that hid the lockers behind, and pressed her hand to the door that revealed the cool corridor beyond. It went on for about 15ft, then turned to the right, where most of the resort's room doors could be seen. It turned right again at the end to go under the Yu-Topia Family Residence, but Hiroko didn't need to go that far to find the door she was after. It was one of the first doors in the second part of the hall, and she paused in front of it, hand raised to knock, but waiting for something.

She listened in the quiet for a moment, and leaned in closer to the sliding panel, trying to hear for the sound of anything inside. Hearing nothing, she wondered if Asahi had somehow left without her notice, but she tempted fate and tapped her knuckles on the thin wood. She heard a muffled gasp, followed by the clamber of feet and hands on the floor, and suddenly, the panel shifted aside and the much-taller skater was staring down at her in surprise.

[Oh! You are still here!] She called out, trying not to give away the startling effect the sudden action had on her, [I thought you left!]

"Uhm..." Was all Asahi could manage in the moment, but a few awkward seconds passed and he calmed down, slouching a little before reaching up to rub the back of his neck with one hand, [No...I was meditating...] He explained, then stepped aside to reveal the miniature shrine he'd set up on the long wardrobe at the head of the room. His religious relics were set out neatly, with the singing bowl and its striker, the incense plate, as well as a single stick that was slowly smoldering, smoke rising from it to make the room smell like flowers and Sandalwood. In the middle of it all was the small framed picture of Riku.
Hana was watching quietly from her spot dead-center in the middle of the bed, and she lowered her head when she saw who was at the door. Asahi stepped aside even further, unblocking the entryway entirely.

[...Do you...want me to come in...?] Hiroko wondered skeptically.

Asahi was practically dumbstruck by the whole thing, and blinked at her in confusion, [...Sorry, I'm not used to any of this. When someone comes to the door normally, I'd be lucky to get a knock in the first place...I'm a little confused as to why you're not coming in.]

[Do you need something...?]

Asahi's wide eyes turned to the side nervously, then looked forward again, [No.]

[This is your space as long as you're staying here. I wouldn't presume to just barge in.] Hiroko offered an anxious smile, [I just came to check on you. The kids went to the skating rink a little while after everyone left, and I guess Yuri and Vik-chan went there too once you three got back. How come you didn't go?]

[I told them they could go on without me. They shouldn't have to wait on my account. I wanted to put my things away.]

The older woman glanced around the room, finding that it looked near-identical to how it did when the man had 'moved into' it in the first place, aside from the mini-shrine and the guitar-case that was propped up in one corner, [Well...] She started, looking back at that confused face, [I saw all the stuff that you and Vik-chan brought in...I'm sure it wouldn't have taken you more than a minute to sort it out once it was in here. I'm sure they would've been happy to wait for you if you wanted to go with them.]

Asahi sighed quietly, [I don't want to bother them. I feel like I already did enough to them over the weekend...then I did this to them, too. At this point, the trip they'd planned to go to Russia will probably serve as a vacation away from me, as much as whatever their original reasons for it were.]

[If they didn't want to help, they wouldn't.] Hiroko pointed out, [But they're good boys. They've both done a lot to help each other, and those around them. I'd be surprised if they decided consciously to not to help someone.]

[...I...don't honestly feel like I deserve the help.] The nervous figure explained vaguely, [I ruined their weekend, and I took Yuri's place on the podium, too...I'm surprised they're even talking to me.]

[Ruined their weekend?] The Katsuki matriarch echoed, [It couldn't be worse than anything else that's happened to them lately.]

Asahi just leveled the woman a look, and she blinked back at him in surprise.

[...What...happened...?]

He hesitated, but then sat back on the foot of the bed and bowed his head towards the shrine, [You can come in...I know the walls are paper thin anyway, but...]

[Oh...] Hiroko nodded and took the step forward, reaching back with one hand to slide the door shut behind herself, though she stayed where she was even then, [Okay...]

Asahi drew a breath and exhaled it slowly, but then shook his head, [...I kissed Yuri on Friday after the Short Program.]
Hands were up on the woman's mouth in a heartbeat, and she didn't say anything. Her look of surprise said enough without words needing to be said.

[We'd...had an argument...] Asahi continued hesitantly, [I'm not even really sure how to explain everything that lead up to it. I wasn't in a good way and I wasn't thinking straight, so I acted out selfishly, and I...] His words tapered out, and he couldn't go on as he was. He rose up from the bed, turned towards the stunned woman by the door, lowered down to his knees and pressed his elbows, palms, and face to the floor, [I'm sorry, I...I took the kiss from your son without his consent and I caused him a lot of pain because of it. I knew that he was with Viktor already, but I was so torn up inside that I didn't care. I hurt them both and I had no right...]

Hiroko was still in stunned silence, watching the dogeza unfold before her. Eventually though, she had to pull her hands away and draw air, but once she had her hands pulled off her mouth, it was hard not to speak, [I'm...not sure what to really say to that. If that all happened a week ago - and there's no way Yuri wouldn't tell Vik-chan about it - and they're still both willing to help you now...then they've already moved past it...] She huffed another breath though and recollected herself, [I'm not sure what good it would do for me to be upset about it...]

[Everything is really confusing for me, too...] Asahi explained, forehead still on the floor, [My head is spinning from how quickly things happened. Senpai wa-...I mean, Viktor...was ready to have me thrown out of the JSF because of it, but Yuri decided not to go through with it. It was Minako who orchestrated the rest, but I still...] His frame collapsed slightly and he recoiled into himself, [If's...really hard for me to process going from that moment, to being here, at Yu-Topia, with everyone helping me...] He said tensely, only to flinch when he felt a hand press down gently on the curve of his back. He lifted his head, and saw Hiroko there crouched in front of him.

[You don't come across to me like someone who's looking to hurt others.] She explained quietly, watching him push up to his hands, [If Yuri and Vik-chan have already gotten past it, then they must understand in their own hearts that what you did was a mistake. To me, at least...if you still feel so uncomfortable having them be nice to you...it means you truly regret what happened. You expect them to be angry, distant, and mistrustful...but from what I've seen - other than Minako-senpai - Vik-chan is the one leading the charge on helping you. I imagine that's incredibly confusing. I'm confused, but without making everyone tell me what happened...all I can do is see things from the now and move on from there. Despite what happened, Yuri and Vik-chan want to help, and so I do, too. So that's why I came here.]

[...And...now you...know why I'm still here when everyone else has gone.] He answered, looking down again anxiously, [I can only stand to be around them when what's happening directly involves me. Otherwise, I feel like a broken third wheel...the kind that screeches horrendously and snags on everything.]

[What if the girls invited you though? Would you go then?]

"...Huh?" Grey-brown eyes raised up and looked forward on confusion, [...Why would they think?]  

[Well, they're Mikhail's kids...and if Mikhail orchestrated today's events in Imari, then it means he's kind-of adopted you.] She answered with a kind - and amused - smirk, [The same thing happened with the other Yuri. You and them are siblings of a sort now. Not as much as Yuri, probably, because you're much older than they are...but it's the same idea.]

[...I don't really know what to do with that information...]

[You'll get used to it, I'm sure.] She answered, and rose back up to her normal height, [Why don't
you come out? It's after lunch. You're probably hungry.]

[...Not...really...] Asahi said with a slight shake of his head, [I just got done watching Mr. Rozovsky put my family into their place, and told my skating coach that she was basically fired until next month so I can train under Minako for free... My stomach is all in knots right now. I go between moments of relief and disbelief, to panic and worry, so...]

[Oh, Minako-senpai is your coach now, too?] Hiroko wondered, dusting herself off and straightening out the folds of her haori, [So you're going to be staying here for quite some time then.]

[I'm not sure how long that'll be bu-]

[Come on then! I want to show you around!] She called out, patting the man on the shoulders while he was still low enough on the floor to reach them, [There's no sense in you staying cooped up in here just because you're too nervous to go to the Ice Castle right now.] She gestured towards the door and pushed it open again, and looked over to the white dog on the bed, [Right? Hana-chan~]

The pup barked once in answer, tail flopping against the comforter where it had started to wag.

Apprehensive all over again, Asahi slowly rose up to his feet. He glanced from Hana to Hiroko, drew a breath, turned towards the picture of Riku, and swallowed his nerves, [I guess...I'll go see.]

[That's the spirit!] She cheered, [Come! The resort doesn't look that big but there's a whole second and third floor you've never seen!]

Asahi followed after her slowly, keeping his footsteps soft as cotton so he wouldn't make a sound. By the time they'd gotten out of the overnight area and into the reception area, nearly at the small entryway to the side-hall that lead to the family residence, Hiroko had to turn around just to put eyeballs on him.

[You walk so quietly, I was starting to think I'd left you in that room!] She said, a hand over her heart as she half-reeled from the surprise of realizing he'd been there the whole time.

[Sorry... I'm...used to having people expect me to be unheard...]

[What? Why?] She blinked at him.

He gave a reluctant sigh, [My parents kicking me out last night wasn't exactly the first thing they've ever done. It goes back...uhm...decades.]

[Decades?] Hiroko repeated incredulously, keeping an eye on the taller figure even as she threaded herself into the narrow hall between the common room and the ladies changing room, [But you're barely Yuri's age. How could those words even come out of you? That kind of thing is reserved for old people like me.] She laughed, pointing at herself, [You're too young for that vocabulary.]

Nervous eyes looked around the reception area for signs of any inquiring ears, but saw no one, and hesitantly followed through the small hallway to catch up, [It's...true though. I'm also older than Yuri. This stuff has been going on since I was just a kid. I was...the unwanted one.]

[But you've become an Olympian, right?] Hiroko pointed out, setting a foot on the first step, [So you're at least as good as Yuri and Vik-chan. How can anyone get that far without years of hard work beforehand? Toshiya and I may not know a lot about skating, but even we know how hard Yuri worked to get to where he is...]

Asahi just rubbed the back of his neck again and looked aside, seeing the snow-covered garden that
wrapped around the resort as he passed by a window on the ascent, [If I could understand why my family chose to ignore everything I'd accomplished, in spite of everything else, maybe I wouldn't be where I am right now... Unfortunately, because of my...uhm...'proclivities'...nothing I achieved mattered. They didn't want to be associated with me. The nicest thing they did for me was pay for the things that kept me far away from them, so it was more like them bribing my silence, rather than actually supporting the things I was doing.]

[Well, that's not how family works...is it.] Hiroko huffed, hands firmly on her hips in annoyance at the thought. But, by then, they were on the second floor of the resort, and officially within the Katsuki's private residence area, [It's a good thing that Mikhail and Minako-senpai have scooped you up, then.] She went on, turning quickly on a heel to look at him as he finished coming up the stairs, [They can show you what a real family is like, just like they have for the Russian Yuri. You'd be amazed at how much that kid has changed since he first showed up here, yelling and fussing about everything. You'd almost think he's a different person now.]

[...Really?] [Yeah! He used to be a really cranky old man inside that young teenaged body of his...but now, and especially since he started spending time with Mikhail's own kids, he's learning how to be himself...and how to act his age.] Hiroko explained, finding her smile again, [Even though you've been through these heartaches for so much longer, I think you'll learn to trust everyone here, and in time...you'll find out who you really are, too, under all the fear and anxiety you've built up around yourself. You might be surprised at the kind of person you find under all those layers, once they start to peel away.]

He looked on in surprise, but swallowed his nerves again and nodded.

[But anyway, this is the second floor!] Hiroko announced, arms going out to the side, [That's the private kitchen for the Katsuki family, but since you're staying here for a while, you can use it too.] She explained, pointing to the obvious kitchen space just behind herself, [Next to that is Mari's room. Across the hall is the living-room with a television that you can watch if you don't care what's playing in the common-room.] She went on, pointing to the different doors, [Next to that is the family room where we have some odds-and-ends, and the family shrine...you can put your stuff there, too, if you want, so you can meditate up here where it's quiet, instead of in your room. Then further down the hall on the right, is the bathroom and shower room, and at the very end is mine and Toshiya's room. Everything on this floor except the bedrooms, obviously, is fair game and free to use by everyone who lives here. Then there's the 3rd floor... She gestured back towards the stairwell, and the next flight that lead further up. Once there, it was a long narrow hall with windows lining the right side, and only two doors on the other side, [Oh, wow it's cold up here...normally it's really warm...] Hiroko fussed, brushing her arms with her hands as Asahi came up behind her. She passed the first door on the left, [This is a banquet hall, but we redid it as something of a guest room. Vik-chan stayed here before him and Yuri moved in together.] She explained, gesturing to it with a nudge of her head as she stepped up to the door at the very end of the hall, [And this was Yuri's room growing up...and...the source of the cold. YURI.] She harped, rushing within suddenly, and out of sight.

Asahi blinked at the now-empty doorway, but cautiously followed after her, standing outside the room to watch her fish for the windows that had been left open.

[He's been letting the heat out since he cleaned up Jiro's mess this morning...!] She whined, latching the frame down, [The heating bill is going to shoot through the roof because of this...]

[...At least it was only for a couple of hours...] Asahi offered. [Imagine how long it might've been
open if you hadn't decided to give me the grand tour.]

She looked back at him as she clambered off the bare bed, but smiled and nodded, [Mh...I guess everything happens for a reason, as the saying goes.]

[...I guess so.] He agreed quietly, looking around at the empty room, [So this is where he was, all that time before.]

[He took all of his things when him and Vik-chan found their house...but, yes.] Hiroko nodded, looking around the space with her hands on her hips again, [Yuri used to have pictures of Vik-chan plastered all over these walls.] She went on, putting a finger on her chin as she questioned the space, [He took them all down rather suddenly though for some reason. I can't remember when. Sometime after Vik-chan showed up.]

[...He probably didn't want Senpai to see them.]

[...Oh, you call Vik-chan 'Senpai'? How come? Is he helping with your skating now, too?]

Asahi flinched slightly, but shook his head as he leaned aside to press his shoulder to the window frame, [No...but he helped me in other ways. It's because of him that I was able to get focused again.]

[Mmmmmh...that's what he did for Yuri, too. Vik-chan has that ability to inspire people.]

"Moooooooooom! We need your help down here!" Mari suddenly hollered, voice bouncing through the stairwell and into the long hall.

[Oh...I suppose I should get back to work, then.] Hiroko mused, [Feel free to roam if you want. This is your home now too, for the time being...so there's no sense in you being cooped up in your room all the time.]

"MOOOMMM."

"I'm coming!" She called back, hearing a much-quieter 'thanks' as Mari wandered off again. She looked up again at the taller figure as she passed by and pulled the door to behind herself, [Let yourself relax a little bit. I'm sure that whatever happened in Imari this morning was very stressful...but it's nothing to worry about anymore. You're among friends here. We won't let anything happen to you.]

"NO...JUMPS..." Yuri argued desperately, clinging to Viktor's waist as the man dragged him along on the ice. Without brakes, the Russian was able to keep on skating, and Yuri's blades slid right along with him, but he could do little else.

"I...must...jump..."

"NO...JUMPS...AT ALL." Yuri insisted, twisting himself around to put both blades on the same side, and effectively forced his partner into a tight rotation before finally being able to stop, "Four Continents is 3 weeks away! If you mess up your ankle again now then you might be out entirely!"

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH." Viktor whined loudly, frowning piteously as he crossed his arms, "I HATE BEING BENCHED."

"Suffer now so you can win later!" Yuri argued back, "It's only another week!"
Yurio watched skeptically from the other side of the rink-wall, Yuko and the silver teens standing nearby, "Yakov would be giving Viktor a lecture. Kastudon is going too easy on him."

"Yuri seems to be getting results though," Yuko mused nervously, "It's practically legendary that Viktor never listened to his coach before."

"It's ridiculous that I can drive but I can't skate!" Viktor went on irritably, dragging Yuri along again throughout the rink.

"You can skate! You just can't jump or spin or do any moves in the field or-"

"So what you're saying is I CAN'T SKATE."

"You're skating right now!"

"THIS ISN'T SKATING. THIS IS SLIDING AROUND ON THE ICE."

"VIKTOOORRRRRR-"

"I wonder how well it would've worked if Viktor did that to Katsudon in Detroit." Yurio wondered, "Instead of just scolding him after he jumped anyway."

"Just let me do one jump! It'll be a small one! A half Axel!" Viktor pleaded, trying to build up some speed even with his husband clinging to him.

"NOOOOOOO-" Yuri insisted, feeling the man starting to twist in his grasp, "DON'T MAKE ME DO THIS-"

"JUST...ONE-WHUP."

ThWokshhh

"GWUOFF-"

Yuri had shot his blades forward and twisted them inward, forcing this legs to cross around the Russian's, and caught them up like a lasso around a calf's hooves. Viktor tumbled sideways, and Yuri after him, the both of them landing roughly on the ice, and the wind got knocked out of the Russian on impact.

They slid to a frosty stop, and Viktor glared up at him dryly, arms coming up to cross over his chest as he gave a rather nonplussed look, "YOU WON'T LET ME HAVE ANY FUN-"

Thi'PWAP

Two gloves hands came down on either side of the Russian's silver-haired head, and Yuri straddled over him defiantly, looking down insistently, "NO...JUMPS." He said firmly, catching his breath.

"MMMMMHHHHHRRRRRRRRRR..."

"GROSS. GET A ROOM." Yurio yelled at them from the other side of the rink.

Yuri moved upright immediately, sitting right over his partner's hips in the process, and gave a smarmy look, "You're lucky that Nikki is here, otherwise we'd start making out right now!"

"We should anyway."
"I'M TURNING 15 IN TWO WEEKS I SWEAR TO GOD. I'M MORE MATURE THAN ALL THREE OF YOU PUT TOGETHER."

Yuri hummed to himself in consideration, hands pressed palms-down on his husband's chest, "...I wonder if I should reveal my power-level..." He wondered quietly.

"It won't do you any good." Viktor answered, "Not in the condition you're in."

"Condition I'm in? What do you mean? AHHH!" He hollered suddenly, the tables turned as he was quite-literally flipped over on the ice. Hands came down next to his head then, but since he'd already been sitting on Viktor's waist a moment before, the Russian was between his legs, and pressed in close.

"Try to be the mature and reasoned one now, my love."

"As long as you're not jumping, I don't care what else happens..."

"Wow~! Is that an invitation to be devious?" Viktor teased, moving his hands over his partner's arms to wedge them under sides and back to hug the man close. He leaned in much closer then, but heard no protest. He found his kiss when fingers went through his hair and pulled him down, and legs clamped around him a bit tighter, ankles crossing behind his back.

Yuko was down in an instant, blood spurting from her nose. Yurio was quickly after her, going between rages at the Nikiforovs for their gross display on the ice, and worry for the Madonna as she lay catatonic with her hands over her face, trying to stem the flow.

Viktoria just deadpanned the whole thing and put her hands over her shocked sister's eyes, "Nothing to see here."

"They're so inappropriate." Nikki lamented.
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED THIRTY FOUR

It was only because of the complaints and rumbling of stomachs that skating had started to wrap up for the night. Two youth classes taking up space in the rink had helped move the group off as well. For the professionals - Viktor excluded - clothing was wet with sweat from nearly 7 hours on the ice. Both Yuris came to the open doorway to rink-side with t-shirts and practice pants clinging to their skin.

The older of the two grabbed a gloved hand for the wall, and moved to put one guard onto his blades at a time. He glanced over at his junior, "...It's...like old times again, huh?" He laughed through panted breaths.

"Just...don't mention the temple..." Yurio heaved.

"What's at the temple?" Nikki wondered innocently, bundled under her thick, padded purple coat, and the two-tailed back-and-purple matching jester hat she'd made for the Final Exhibition.

"Perspective." Viktor teased as he untied his own padded jacket from his waist, and slid his arms into its shiny black sleeves, "But maybe I should send you two there anyway." He glowered at the two younger male skaters.

"NO." They both barked anxiously, hands out immediately as they got ready to plead with their slave-driver, "Anything but that."

"Why not?"

"I'll hurt!"

The silver Russian just gave an eerie smile, "The pain you feel there will only be the tiniest grain of sand compared to the beach that is my suffering."

Both younger skaters reeled in dubious worry, but Nikki just laughed, "That sounds like it could be fun to watch."

"Don't encourage him!" Yurio argued, hopping off the ice as he pulled on the second blade-guard and his new Olympic jacket. Once he was close to the doors though, he twisted on the heel of one rubber bar and flipped around rather dramatically, "In any case, I'm starving. We need to eat." He declared firmly, and watched as the rest of the group seemed to agree and followed after him, grabbing the rest of their winter garb from where it had all been slung over the wall. They stopped though, looking at him oddly, "What?"

"Hi papa." Nikki said, smiling sweetly as she waved.

"Hah?" Yurio blanched, and quickly turned around as he heard the doors pull away behind him.

In center for only a moment, Mikhail nodded his head in place of a wave, and stepped aside to hold the door; Asahi - entirely bundled up again - did the same on the other side, and Minako stepped through between them. She grinned to herself, "An oligarch and an Olympian opening doors for me. Makes a girl feel special."

"I'm not an oligarch." Mikhail insisted, "I don't meddle in politics."
"You just told me how much you're really worth. Even if you don't play around in politics, you're totally an oligarch." She retorted, looking back over her shoulder with a sly smirk and a wink, "Own it, hun."

"But I'm not even a resident of Russia anymore." The elder grumbled, "How can I be an oligarch if I'm no-"

"A Canadian oligarch then."

"I don't even say 'eh' or 'aboot!'"

"Your accent is barely an excuse anymore. I almost wouldn't even be able to tell where it was from if I didn't already know."

Mikhail sighed, "I shouldn't have told you."

"Is anyone gonna tell us?" Yuri wondered suddenly, speaking for the four of them that still stood by the rink-wall, "Or are you just gonna dangle that bit in front of us like meat to a starving dog?"

Minako grinned even wider then, "6.5 billion. With a B."

"What." The group collectively answered, stunned, "How can you even-

Mikhail groaned loudly, "Most of it is tied up in investments and projects! It's not like that's the number that shows up on my bank account statement! Plus, there's people who have way more than that!"

"Hush. You'd be in the Top 20 richest Russians. I looked it up on my phone on the way over here. Wikipedia wouldn't lie."

"Sounds like you've been holding out on us, pipaw." Viktoria said flatly, "I mean, we knew you were loaded but damn."

"Don't count on getting spoiled suddenly just because you know. This changes nothing." He put his hands on his waist as he glowered, "I still want you all to go through the ropes like everyone else, just so you have an appreciation for what you have."

"How are you not the target of really big criminal organizations who want to extort you?" Yurio interrupted, "That's a huge fortune. You must have a huge bull's-eye on your ass."

"Whoever said I wasn't or didn't?" Mikhail huffed defensively, crossing his arms then, "Maybe I just don't talk about it because I don't want to worry people."

"Should we be worried?" Minako wondered then.

"No!" He insisted, hands going up to his flat-cap to pull it off and wring it in front of his chest, "I don't dabble in things that might get someone's attention! I keep to myself so I can set the terms for how I live my life, not the public at large. The last thing I want is for me or my girls, or anyone else that I care about, getting hounded because of me... I remember what happened to Princess Di. That's not how I want to go; harassed and chased into a tunnel until I crash and die. The media circus that follows Viktor around is plenty."

The aforementioned skater looked aside slightly and cleared his throat, "Anyway... You guys took your time coming back."
Nikki and Viktoria glanced at one another, then up at their older cousin, "Are you...talking to our dad?"

"Yes?"

**GASP**

"Settle down..." Mikhail interjected, waving his hands down, with the cap rolled up into one, "All can be explained."

"WHAT DID YOU DO!?" The youngest yelled in excited curiosity.

"Ehm...well, I helped this kid..." The elder gestured at the silent bundle of winter clothing next to him, "So that helped me, too..."

Another gasp, "WHAT DID YOU DO!?"

Minako shook her head and laughed, "Maybe we should get them food and explain? It sounds like no one's said anything yet."

"Yeah..."

"Wait." Viktor interrupted then, reaching up to pull the hood of his jacket up over his head, and cinched it closed...for no obvious reason. Yuri blinked at him in confusion at first, but then remembered the comments the Russian had made earlier in the day, and played along, slipping his Ravenclaw beanie over his head and wrapped his scarf around his face and neck. Viktoria followed suit and pulled the black-fuzzy-trimmed hood of her own jacket up, though she wasn't sure why.

Yurio blinked at them, but reached a hand up to pinch around the base of his hoodie to close it tighter around his face, "The fuck are we doing?"

"Language."

"I DON'T HAVE A HOOD." Nikki complained loudly, pulling the rim of her jester hat a bit further down instead, and tied the tails around herself.

"We're all gonna do this until Saito stops," Viktor explained, having kept his eyes on the man the whole time, "No hiding in Hasetsu. We're out and proud of it here."

Asahi blanched, gaping at all the half-concealed faces that were looking back at him then. He sighed and reached up, "Okay okay..." The hood became looser, and soon, he pushed it all the way off his head...revealing deep scarlet tails of bangs in place of the teal that had been there before, "I guess I'm not good at surprises."

"Whoa! Cool!" Nikki cheered, "The red looks really good!"

His face went a bit pink to hear her, and his eyes went down nervously, "Th-thanks... Riku used to have red highlights in his hair, so I thought...it could be like an homage."

"Riku...?"

A few people flinched as they pulled their hoods and hats back into their normal place, but no one was quite sure how to explain it. Eyes went to Asahi for insight, but he just furrowed his brow slightly and shook his head, "Someone I loved who was taken too young and too soon."

"...Oh..." Nikki said, voice quieter than before. She untied the tails of her hat to let them fall behind
her shoulders again and stepped forward, gesturing her arms forward to offer a hug uncertainly. To the surprise of the few who knew, and especially to Yuri, Asahi accepted it, albeit nervously, "I'm so sorry." She said softly.

Yurio huffed quietly to himself and looked away, only to push through the doors to get out of the awkward silence and head through to the skate-rental kiosk, and the benches in the open space in front of it. He ignored the wave Yuko offered from behind the counter and sat down roughly to start pulling on his laces. He only lifted his head when he heard the doors of the building entrance open, and the rest of the Nishigori clan entered through.

"Mom! Yuri!" The triplets called out excitedly, practically zipping around the room to get their hugs from Yuko before mobbing the skater, "How come you're here all by yourself!? We didn't see anyone at Yu-Topia!"

"I'm not here by myself." He grumbled, thumbing over his shoulder to the glass doors that lead to the rink. Through it, the triplets could see the backs of several people; Minako, Mikhail, Nikki, and someone they didn't immediately recognize...beyond them, Viktoria, Yuri, and Viktor.

"Who's the guy with the red in his hair?" They suddenly realized, shrieking excitedly as they abandoned the Russian Tiger to clamber for the door.

He grit his teeth bitterly and went back to untying his skates.

Yuko lowered her elbows down to the counter and held her chin up in the palms of her hands, looking at the blonde with quiet worry. She tilted her head slightly as Takeshi approached and he cast his gaze towards the Tiger as well, "What's eating him?" He wondered in a whisper.

"Not sure. He was fine earlier. Must have something to do with Asahi." She answered, equally quiet in her hushed tone, "All three members of the Men's Olympic Team Japan are here now."

"Really? What for? Special training?"

Yuko shook her head, "I'm honestly not sure what's going on. Apparently there was some emergency last night and he had to come up here from Imari. Everyone went to Imari this morning to take care of whatever the emergency was, and now Asahi's going to be staying at Yu-Topia for a while."

"What was the emergency?"

"Not sure. I didn't even know anything was going on until he got here with Minako and Viktor's Uncle."

"Oh my God I can hear you two whispering from here." Yurio barked, one blade in his lap as he held it tightly, "He got kicked out of his house cuz his parents found out he likes dudes."

Nishigori deadpanned the teen, "Isn't he older than our Yuri? Or am I mixing him up with someone else?"

"No, he's older." Yuko agreed, "I remember when him and Yuri were in Juniors together. Yuri never invited anyone he knew from skating here though, so we never got to meet him. It wasn't until Viktor came that others started showing up."

"Hah, and now Hasetsu seems like a hub for skaters." Takeshi added, lifting his elbow off the counter as the bigger group finally came through the doors. The triplets were practically floating through the air and bouncing off the walls, camera-phones and recorders in hand as they mobbed the
hapless newcomer.

He seemed to ignore them though for the most part, looking as though it were nothing more than business as usual as some skating event.

Yuri held back with Viktor slightly as the rest of them moved forward, "It's weird that he handles crowds better than individuals."

"Not so weird," The Russian shrugged, "One on one, you have to look the person in the eyes and acknowledge them...with a group, you can always just pretend to be looking at someone else, even if you're actually ignoring all of them."

"Or flirting, as the case may be," Yuri nudged his husband with an elbow.

"A fan that walks away from an idol feeling appreciated is a fan for life," Viktor said happily, holding up a finger studiously, "And I'm always nice to my fans."

"Yeah."

"Let's get going though. I'm starving, and we haven't even had our victory katsudon yet."

Yuri was surprised for a moment, and shook his head, bringing a hand up to press over his eyes, "How embarrassing... I didn't even think about that! This last week has just been...intense..."

"We need a serious re-charge," Viktor teased, circling out in front of his spouse. He already held one hand, but he found the second as well, and pulled them up around his sides as he stepped in closer, and slid his arms over the younger man's shoulders, "It's going to be nice to get away from everything without worrying about a competition."

"For a little while."

Cool blue eyes looked down for a little while before Viktor closed them, and pressed his brow to the folded edge of his partner's beanie, "Ja ljublju tebję, Yuri...kuda bol'se, čem ty dumač'st'." [I love you, Yuri...more than you'll ever know.]

Yuri hugged a little closer and nuzzled his face upward, feeling where the side of his nose pressed lightly to the side of his mate's, "Aishiteru mo. Hajimete ata tokikara sukidata." [I love you, too. I've loved you from the moment I first laid eyes on you.]

"I'll understand what all that meant one day." Viktor huffed, smiling at his own expense as he leaned into a kiss.

"Wow. That's some Yakuza-level shit, pipaw." Viktoria chortled over her dinner, pointing with her chopsticks across the two low tables that had been pushed together. With her other hand, she tried to hide where rice had fallen out of her mouth from the surprise, "That's exactly like what Minako told us before."

"Language."

"Ohhhh yeah, I remember." Nikki added, "She said the Yakuza would buy shares in a company so they could infiltrate the board of directors, and then force them to do things under threat of revealing some scandal to the public."
"Guess it's a good thing I don't have tattoos." Mikhail mused, and took a sip from his water glass, "Otherwise I'd be giving myself away."

"Hasetsu's own Gaijin Yakuza." Minako laughed, "The gang up north would never know what hit them."

"We'll have to get you a motorcycle and a sword to stick in it, just so you can drive around the city." Yurio added, mouth full of fried rice, "Scare the locals."

"Oh no, I'd never allow it," Minako defended, "He already fell off a roof. I don't need him double-crippled for falling off a motorcycle, too."

"...It's just a fleshwound..." Mikhail whined to himself, "But I feel like I should be much more deeply hurt anyway..."

"So what scandal are you going to expose if they resist you?" Nikki wondered with a laugh, holding up a bowl of miso in her hands, "Or do you have to make something up?"

"I wouldn't have to manufacture any kind of scandal." He answered with a shrug, "They've already been evil enough without me having to make anything up."

Asahi just glowered from the other side of the table, leering with the words 'you'd better not' rattling through his head.

Mikhail relented, "There's no real scandal to expose...just bad parenting and questionable beliefs." He fibbed, "My plan essentially involves making a tidy profit from my shares in the company, and then giving them to Asahi as recompense for the neglect he suffered."

The skater choked briefly, having to put a hand over his mouth to stop from spitting everywhere from the surprise, "You can't be serious."

"Why not? It'd be a lot of money for you to live off of, and I'm not hurting for it."

Asahi hesitated, unable to really argue to logic behind it, "Are you...really going to make them manufacture brake pads though...?" He wondered dubiously, "I may have personal reasons to dislike my family, but that doesn't extend to all the people who work for them..."

Mikhail shook his head, "It'll be business as usual unless I find something that can be improved. Maybe I'll expand on it and have a different section do things relating to my own company's needs."

"...So what about that Japan Division you mentioned?" Viktor wondered then, empty bowls in front of himself and Yuri. He leaned back on his hands, fingers woven through his partner's where Yuri had set one of his own onto the tatami-mat between them, "Did you already have one or did you make it up just for this?"

"I just made it up. There is no Japan Division." He answered simply, "Saito Ceramics is the Japan Division now, I guess...now. I do have a nice lady who's going to come sit in on their board meetings though...but she'll be coming here from Canada."

Asahi still looked hesitant about the whole thing; a nervous bead of sweat rolled down the side of his face.

"Hun, I think you're stressing him out." Minako finally interjected, setting her hand over the Russian's left.
"...I got blame a lot for things that went wrong in Imari, in my family...called the cursed child, a bad luck charm, and worse..." The hesitant figure explained, "If anything happens to the jobs of the people who work for my parents, they'll blame me for it."

"So what difference does it make if they do?" Mikhail posed, "You don't live there anymore and never have to go back, so whatever happens in Imari stays in Imari."

"I know, but..." Asahi started again, only to stop and shake his head, "I'm worried for those people. It's not their fault, and I don't blame them for what they did to or thought of me. I'd hate to think my family would take it out on them just to try and get back at me, or you."

"It's not your problem to worry about, kid." The Russian pointed out, "Whatever happens there is because of me and me alone. You can't be guilty just by association. So put Imari and the family business out of your mind, and think only of your skating and the future. Your time of being under someone's thumb is over. Look forward to what's going to happen."

Viktor sat forward again as the conversation went on, and reached to start stacking dishes together. Yuri followed his lead and gathered glasses, chopsticks, and smaller sauce-dippers, rising up to stand and pick everything up. He looked over to get Minako's attention and whispered a few words to be excused, then followed his husband out of the common-room with their dirty dishes. They quietly moved out without fanfare, and headed over towards the kitchen, putting the stacks on the return counter just as Mari was coming out to gather them.

"It's been a while since we had a single group this big eating together," She commented, "I'm glad your Uncle doesn't think this is a charity just because know each other."

Viktor looked over at her as she started carrying the stack of katsudon bowls to the sink at the back of the kitchen, "With all the people who come here that know me or Yuri, I'm surprised you don't actually raise the prices."

"Nah..." She shook her head and returned for the next few items, taking the glasses and sauce-dippers, "As long as people pay the listed price, it's all good. You, Yuri, and Yurio ate for free so long as you lived here, but three people aren't hard to feed, and eventually it was just you two...plus you helped around the resort sometimes. All eight of you would be a different story though."

"I'm sure they'll find somewhere to move to soon," Yuri supposed.

"Oh, on the contrary...Mikhail's a great tipper. I hope they stay!" Mari laughed, "Are you guys on your way out though?"

The pair looked at one another, but Viktor shrugged lightly, "I wouldn't mind a few minutes in the onsen first. Then we can have our showers out of the way and just go straight to bed once we get home."

"Don't you have to pack first?"

"We travel enough as it is," Yuri explained, "We have packing down to an art-form."

"Oh...I guess that's true." She nodded and took the last few items to the sink, and started spraying everything off, "Well, go enjoy it then. Come say bye before you leave though."

"Sure." He nodded, and waved as he went back through the reception area with Viktor, on their way to the men's changing room. He quickly reached for one hand and threaded fingers together, even though it wasn't a long walk before they'd have to let go again.
The silver Russian pushed the door open, and they stepped in quietly past the slipper-rack, and further through another door into the changing-room proper. One thin, older man passed them in the resort's green robes as he moved out to the main area, but after he was gone, the changing room was void save for them. Viktor reached for a red-painted locker door and opened it, pulling a plastic bin from inside to set down on the red-velvet bench behind him.

Yuri was already busy pulling his thin shirt off, and started the fold it as the Russian sat down to go after his socks instead. Taking the solitude and opportunity for what it was, Yuri stepped up behind his husband and gently put his hands on the man's shoulders, making him sit upright and look back. Yuri just poked at the side of his partner's cheek though to make him look straight backward rather than turning though, and he offered a quiet upside-down kiss to his perplexed spouse, "Maybe it's just cuz it was my sister asking, but you skipped over the possibility of sexy time."

Viktor leaned himself upward to find another kiss before answering, and pressed the crown of his head to his husband's bare chest, eyes closed, "If not for our furry boys, I'd say we should just stay here tonight." He said tiredly, "But once we get home...there's always the chance for sexy time."

"That's good to hear," Yuri said, smiling against those soft lips, "I have an itch that I need you to help me scratch."

"Post-conflict carnal urges?"

"I just want you."

"Oh~! Even better."

"I'd have you right now if I could get away with it." Yuri mused, one hand on his partner's shoulder as he pushed his jeans away, and let go to collect them and fold them like his shirt, "But there's too many people. If this crowd gave us score-cards, I'd probably die."

Viktor laughed and peeled his t-shirt off, adding it to the folded laundry pile in the bin, "Score cards and at least one murder."

"Eh?" Yuri made a face as he balled up his socks, "A murder?"

"Saito."

"Oh."

"I don't think he'd survive us." Viktor clarified, "Even if he's realized he's not in love with you anymore, he still was at one point...seeing you making out with anyone would be hurtful. I'm trying not to rub salt in his eyes."

"Good thing then that he's training with Minako and Yurio. I can't skate right unless I'm trying to seduce you, and it's awkward enough just being affectionate towards you when Asahi is around..." Yuri teased, kicking off his last remaining garment, adding it to the bin, and reaching for one of the mid-size towels on the shelves nearby, "Speaking of Yurio though..."

"He's not taking this well. At all." The Russian shook his head, and sat up just long enough to push the edge of his sweat-pants and bikini-briefs down, thumbs in the elastic waistbands, "I almost wish we weren't leaving for another day. He could use us as a buffer to make this thing with Saito less abrasive."

"Yeah."
Viktor folded his things into the bin and then pushed the bin into the locker it had come from, finding a towel handed to him once he was finished. Yuri had his wrapped around his waist, but Viktor stroke buck-ass naked into the next room without a care, and took a sharp right for the row of shower cubbies across from the indoor bath. He nudged out a plastic stool from where it had been set against the wall, and gestured for his husband to sit.

Yuri tossed his towel over the bamboo-wall barrier closest to him, and took the offered seat, listening to the sound of the water coming to life from the showerhead. He could feel the heat from the steam as the water got hotter, and closed his eyes as he felt it starting to pour down his back. He tilted his head and relished in the feeling of soft, hot water sliding through his hair, washing out the day-old gel he'd styled it back with, "I'm sure things will be fine here though. Yurio could use the competition to motivate him...maybe even as a distraction, while Minako-sensei gets used to coaching skating instead of ballet."

"I could see that."

"...I wonder if she's going to keep the studio?"

"She should. Heck, we should go to it more often. We focus so much on the technical stuff that we barely practice the ballet anymore."

"Yeah... Asahi never took ballet at all, either. It would all be new for him."

"Some people never do it." Viktor shrugged, "I heard Otabek didn't."

"Oh...yeah. He tried one of Yakov's ballet camps when he was much younger, and flunked out pretty bad. He never tried again after that." Yuri explained, and lifted his eyes up to spot his husband over a shoulder as shampoo was lathered into his hair, "Apparently that's where he met Yurio for the first time...though they didn't speak back then, and Yurio didn't make a note of it to remember later."

"I guess it makes sense for him to go to Russia for training, since he skates for Kazakhstan." The silver legend agreed, "I wonder if my Uncle knows yet that we're going."

"I imagine him finding out when he realizes he hasn't seen us in a while."

"So you think we shouldn't say a formal goodbye to him?"

"Not saying that. I just picture the look on his face when he finds out." Yuri smirked, "He wakes up, gets coffee, reads the morning newspaper, asks where we are...someone tells him we're in Russia, and he comically spews his coffee everywhere. Kind of like that time in Barcelona when you realized I didn't remember the Sochi banquet."

"It was a shocking moment," Viktor pointed out, reaching for the showerhead again, and began rinsing the suds away, "All that time, I'd been operating under the assumption that you did remember."

"I know." Yuri pifflesnoted a few laughs, "I imagine things would've been quite different if I did though."

"Yeah, you would've let me sleep with you on the first night!"

"Well..." He flushed slightly, "In the same room, sure...with-me-with-me though...nah."

The water was cut off again and Viktor reached for the conditioner dispenser, massaging it into black hair next, "I would've tried really hard anyway." He mused, "But maybe you wouldn't have flirted
with retirement if you remembered, too."

"That's true... Things would've gone a lot differently in that case. Maybe I would've gotten a boost to my self-esteem from having gotten to dance with you, and I wouldn't have bombed at Nationals...then I could've gone to Worlds and met up with you again in Tokyo." Yuri went on, imagining the entire thing as he felt the conditioner rinsed from his hair, "I probably wouldn't have been so nervous to talk to you, so we actually could've hung out a little..."

"And I was already madly in love with you by then, too..."

"I could've asked if you wanted to come see Hasetsu since you were in Japan anyway."

"And I would've, in a second. I would've also spent all of Worlds trying to hook up with you."

"It probably wouldn't have taken alcohol to convince me, either." Yuri supposed, "Well, I take that back... It wouldn't have taken alcohol to get me to spend time with you, but the hook-up probably would've needed it..."

"Yuri, are you saying you would've made love to me 2 years ago if you'd gone to Worlds?" Viktor asked aghast, squeezing liquid soap onto a wash-cloth.

"N-Not necessarily..." Yuri backpedaled, "I think it still would've taken a while to get met to that point, but...you said we nearly made-out at the Sochi banquet...so maybe would've done that at least?"

"Damn that Celestino...we were so close back then, too..."

"Oh no, in this case, I'm glad he stopped us. I'd never forgive myself for not remembering the day I kissed Viktor Nikiforov." He explained rather dramatically, leaning his head back against his partner's shoulder as the Russian's hand moved the soapy cloth around his side. He stuck one leg out straight towards the wall, "But it all worked out pretty well in the end...now I have Viktor Nikiforov giving me a shower-pampering."

"And so much more."

Yuri pivoted where his head rested on that shoulder, and found his husband's face there before him. He gave an easy smile and raised a hand to thread it through silver hair, nudging the man closer. He felt soapy hands lace together over his stomach as focus ebbed, "I wouldn't have it any other way."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED THIRTY FIVE

Asahi was practically frothing at the mouth where he lay sideways on the floor, half-under the table.

Nikki poked at him but got no response, save his swirling eyes, "Papa, I think you broke him."

"I'm gonna get bags above my eyes for how high I keep raising my eyebrows at this kid." Mikhail sighed, trying to force them down with a finger over each, "It's like he wants me to take everything back. How do I convince him that what may or may not happen in Imari isn't his fault?"

"I just don't think he really understood how serious you were about all this." Minako suggested, crawling around the table to the other side to try and rouse the comatose skater. She set a hand on his upturned shoulder, "Asahi...? Asahi, okiro. Me o samashite." (Wake up. Open your eyes.)

"Just kick him." Yurio said stiffly.

"I'm not just gonna kick him." The ballerina retorted.

"I'll kick him then." "Don't you even dare." She glared daggers back at the teen, but he just seemed to think it roughly funny.

Nikki squinted her eyes at the Tiger skeptically as she sat up normally again, and started discretely scooting around the corner of the table. By the time Yurio had noticed she was getting closer, she was practically squished right up into his personal space. He had no time to react before his face was in a vice-grip between the younger teen's hands, and she pulled him around to stare at him straight in the eyes, "Be nice." She said, her voice a hushed whisper; a sweetly veiled threat if he ever heard one.

Emerald eyes were wide, and Yurio tried to scramble away, but Nikki had him on lockdown and he couldn't move out of her grip, no matter how much the rest of him flailed, "Lemee go!"

"Be nice." She said again, this time more loudly, and banged her forehead into his for emphasis, keeping him right there as the stare continued, "Or I'll tell Otabek about how mean you are. He'll be disappointed in you, after all the progress you made."

That seemed to strike a nerve, and the blonde's eye twitched, "I'm a soldier. Sometimes you have to be mean to toughen people up."

"You're a figure skater, ya dingus. You're gonna be getting an excuse to not go into the army. You're making yourself AWOL before you even go."

Mikhail chortled a laugh to himself, "Ah Nikki, you're so much like your aunt..." He drew a breath and sighed, "I wish she was still around. You guys would've all really liked her."

Nikki rolled her forehead across her 'brother's' brow to look towards her father, "You mean Viktor's mom? Or did you have other sisters?"

"No, it was just us... Tatiyana was a wild-child though; the good version of me, really, but still sharp as a whip. Marriage and motherhood tamed her, which I always thought kind of sad, but..."
seemed to like it. I guess we all change when we have to.” He answered, looking around the table to all his kids, the blood-related ones and those he'd taken under his wing, as well as the one yet to be, "I guess I've changed a lot, too."

"Pfft, papa...you've always been papa.” Nikki dismissed, finally letting Yurio go as she turned and sat down normally again, though she made a point to squish herself right up against the older teen, and retook one of his arms like she did in Detroit, "If you acted any other way, I'd think you had alien brain-parasites or something."

"Hah... Kon could tell you stories. I was ten times worse than Yura when I was his age." The elder nudged his head at the aforementioned Tiger, who just grunted indignantly in response, "He's all bark and no bite. I barked, bit, scratched, clawed, and occasionally breathed fire."

"I bite plenty." Yurio argued.

"Were you ever run out of town after all the shit you did?"

"My town was St. Petersburg. It's hard to get all of them rallied up for anything."

Mikhail paused, blinking once at him slowly, "...People around here have problems with yes-or-no questions."

"Mnnnhhh..." Asahi grumbled, finally coming-to again. He pushed up to sitting only long enough to bang his head down on the table-top and groaned again, "Mnnnnnhhhhhhhhh..."

Minako sat back and pat the man's shoulder before returning to her place from earlier, "Don't think too hard about what happened, Asahi. You'll get used to it."

"I'mgonnagetastressheadache." He mumbled against the wood.

"You should go hit the onsen then. It'll help loosen you right up."

"...Maybeyou'reright..."

"You should go with him." She turned to her partner, "Maybe actually sit in the spring this time!" She laughed.

Mikhail made a face, "If it gets him to chill out a little..."

"Oh! I thought you'd resist more!" Minako clapped her hands, "This is fantastic!" She got up quickly and practically dragged them both out of the room excitedly, dropping them off together - dazed as they were - in front of the men's changing room, "Go enjoy! This is the last surviving hot-spring resort in the city! Make the most of it!"

Both men blinked at her in stunned silence, but then turned to each other and sighed, "...Yes ma'am..."

Minako could only fan herself happily, "Whew! People listening to me! How refreshing!” She mused, hands going down to her hips then as she practically stood sentry to make sure the duo actually went inside before she left. Her smug grin turned to surprise though, and eyes went wide, "Oh! I forgot one!" She chided herself and rushed back to the common-room, grabbing Yurio right as he was trying to escape, and dragged him to the changing-room door, too, "You should go with them! It'll do you good to get to know Asahi! You could be friends! He's cool like Otabek!"

"I doubt tha-"
"GO AND SIT IN THE ONSEN." She pointed insistently, "He's your rink-mate for the next little while! You can learn to be civil to him! He's been through a lot, just like you! Imagine it taking another ten years before someone helped you!"

"Mnnnhhhrrr..." Yurio mumbled between grit teeth, but eventually he turned around and pushed through the door. He just stood in the slipper-rack room for a minute though before cracking the door again to check if the coast was clear. He snuck back out again, fleeing for the safety of the Katsuki residence -and part of his old room -before Minako could spot him, "There's no way I'm gonna sit in the hot-spring with that guy..." He slowed his pace once he reached the third floor, and heaved his breaths to catch up after running up all the stairs. He slipped down the long hall and pushed open the sliding door to the banquet room that Viktor had once occupied, and gazed at the door to the rather large closet that he himself had once taken up as his own room. Instead of heading straight towards it though, Yurio pulled his phone out and threw himself backward onto the huge bed in the first room, despite it barely having the mattress and fitted sheet on it. With the internet at his fingertips, the Russian Punk let himself simmer in solitary irritation.

In the changing room on the 1st floor, Asahi quietly pulled one of the bins from a top-level yellow-door locker, and tossed a big towel and his socks into it before taking the whole thing around the corner to the shower room. Mikhail watched him sneaking out, but said nothing, feeling a slight sense of relief to not have to change in the open as well...though for entirely different reasons. Asahi took the bin to the shower cubby at the farthest end of the room, and used his bare foot to pull out one of the spare plastic stools from the space next to his. He set the bin on top of it and checked around the room again just to be sure no one was there, then slowly allowed himself to disrobe; heavy hoodie-sweater, the thick normal sweater under it, and the white t-shirt under that, then the rest. He showered himself down with military expediency, tying the large towel around his waist securely before reaching to pick the bin up.

Mikhail came around the corner just as Asahi went back around, and they effectively switched places, with the elder going towards the shower cubbies in the younger's place. A stream of water could be heard as the skater stowed his things away, and he wordlessly gathered up his nerves to head back through. He pushed the door open and stepped into the steamy tile room, and without looking to the right where the showers were, kept his eyes straight, passing the Jacuzzi and single-person bath-tub on the left as he reached for the door to the outdoor spring.

This is still so nerve-wracking. It feels good to sit in the spring, but I hate that it's so public...even the private tub is in the middle of everything...

He drew a breath and pushed the door open, and stepped out onto the cool stone deck.

"...Yeah I know you can do the splits the other way, but you're supposed to be able to do it both ways..."

"Ow, oh, ow ow ow! Viktor!" Yuri whined, hands clinging to the lip of the water-fountain as his partner lifted his right leg as vertically as possible.

Just for the added incentive, Viktor slid his hand down the front of Yuri's right thigh, fingers slowly and precariously traversing the 'gap' between the upturned leg and the one Yuri was still using to stand on, and pressed the soft, front part of forearm against him, "Pretend my arm is the floor...can you feel that it's not flat against you? There's still room to impro-"

Asahi's internal screaming could probably be heard for miles as he stood there wide-eyed in stunned horror at the sight of them, and just as quickly tried to turn around to go back into the shower-room.

KRACK
"K-kuso-" (Fuck.) Asahi grunted, stumbling backward with his hands on his face, eyes clenched closed...until they were forced wide open by the feeling of the short deck behind him. Of course, his heel caught it, and he fell backward, arms flailing as he went knees-over-nose into the steaming hot water. By the time the wave of a splash was done, all that could be seen of the panic-stricken figure was his feet where his ankles had hooked over the ledge of the round rub. The rest of him was under what little water remained.

Yuri quickly sank back into the water even as surprise took hold, but Viktor stayed where he was, standing still.

Mikhail stuck his head out, holding a towel around his waist with one hand as the other held the door open, "What in the world was that? Did you just run into the glass?" He asked incredulously, spotting Asahi coming up for air with a splash, pushing up from the bottom of the wooden hot-tub. Only then did the elder realize there were other people around, and he turned his head to the right to gape at the pair in the open-air spring, "Oh...hey."

"Hi."

"I thought you guys left a while ago." He went on, turning his eyes back towards the huge red demon-mask hanging on the wall; it wasn't much better, but it wasn't his buck-ass-naked nephew, at least.

"We left the common-room...we didn't leave the resort. We wouldn't just take off without saying goodnight to everyone." Viktor answered, feeling Yuri slink back behind him to find the spot where they usually sat. He sighed and started walking through the water to the front edge nearest the door, and put his hands down on the stones there as he leaned forward, "Saito." He said stiffly, watching as the feet come off the edge of the tub, and a face replaced them, though hands covered half of its pained expression and elbows hooked over the edge as well, "...You okay?"

A fresh trickle of red streamed down the younger skater's arms, much faster than it normally would go because his skin was already wet, and dripped off the end of one elbow, "...I...I think I'm hurt..."

He said nonchalantly, though his eyes gave away what his words would not.

"Ah jeeze, let me look." Mikhail grumbled, stepping through, dry as he was, "Move your hands. I can at least tell you if it's broken."

Asahi reluctantly did as told, but he didn't watch the inspection.

"It looks okay to me. Your forehead must've taken the brunt of it. The Hell did you even do that for?" Mikhail scolded.

"...Oh no, it's getting in the water now..." Asahi said anxiously, quickly taking hold of his sopping-wet and heavy towel to keep it around himself as he stepped out of the bath, "Damnit, I...I'm messing up everything..." His voice was tinged with slight panic; water cascaded around his feet as it sloshed off the end of the white sheet.

"Calm down." Viktor recommended, though slightly annoyed. He turned his attention to his uncle, "Would you go get him a new towel please?"

"Oh...sure..."

"Yuri..." He turned around and extended his hand. The younger figure quickly took the hint and reached for the Russian's own smaller towel, and shimmied through the water to hand it to him, all while staying at least shoulders-deep as he moved. Yuri didn't say a word as he gave the white fluffy
sheet over, and slinked back to where he was sitting before, bringing his knees up in front of himself to wrap his arms around. Viktor stepped out of the water after that, and approached from the side, one hand on the nearest shoulder to warn of his approach. He brought the towel up with the other, nudging fingers out of the way before pressing the fold up against the man's nose, "You really hit the door hard."

"S-Sumimasen..." Asahi answered with a grunt of pain, and brought his hands up again to take the towel into his own grasp, wiping his arms where he could while still holding up the excessively-heavy wet towel around his waist, "I thought...it would be empty out here."

"You guys really think we'd just leave without saying something?"

"I don't-"

"Here." Mikhail said suddenly, coming back outside again with a new towel.

Viktor took it and wrapped it around the man, bunching it together on the side Asahi was already gripping on so he need only transfer what he was holding, and let the wet towel fall to the ground under it. The silver legend just shuffled it off to the side with his foot after that, gave the man a light pat on the shoulder as he let go, and returned to the water.

Asahi looked over the fluff pressed to his face and frowned at the sight of the half-empty tub before him, "...Shimatta..." (Damnit.)

"Just sit in the main bath like you did last night." Mikhail suggested, not noticing his nephew flinch slightly, "There's no sense in sitting in there now. Most of the water is gone, and we don't need you marinating in your own juices anyway."

Viktor crouched down in the water and slid his hands forward, moving them over shins and hips before settling them on his partner's waist. He cozied in and pressed his chin onto Yuri's knees where they poked up above the water, "You got really quiet. You going to be okay?"

"You said you didn't want to share the onsen with him because you didn't want him to see me naked... I still have my own reasons for not wanting to share it with him right now, too..."

"Wakatta." (I understand.) He answered quietly, sneaking forward a few inches to offer a kiss, then twisted around to sit on the underwater bench beside his spouse, "I'm not letting you out of my sight. Don't worry."

Asahi nervously looked around, his heart racing in his chest, but with Mikhail still blocking the door - even if the man didn't realize his place as an observer had morphed into being an obstacle - there was nowhere to go except forward. Reluctantly, he stepped forward, and sat on the ledge of the spring much like the elder Russian had the night before; putting only his feet into the water, and keeping the towel wrapped tightly. Since he was no longer standing though, he could safely let go of the white fabric, and wiped the rest of his arms off on a dry part of the smaller towel Viktor had given him. He heaved a sigh once he was done and pressed a clean spot back to his nose, bowing his head in shame, and to avoid their gazes.

"I'm gonna finish up and then come out." Mikhail's voice said from behind, and the door closed again, leaving the skater-group in awkward silence.

Yuri unclenched his arms from around his legs so he could stretch them out under the water, but twisted in place to furl them out over top of his husband's. He felt an arm snake around his side to pull him closer, a hand settling with a thumb on his hip-bone and palm pressed flat against the round
of his bum, relaxed there. He reached his own arm over the one that went around him, and reached one behind Viktor's shoulders to rest on the stone ledge behind them, and the other in front of the man's chest, lacing his fingers together on the other side before resting his chin on the shoulder before him. Only then did he feel like he could relax again, closing his eyes as his mate's nose and lips nuzzled through his wet hair.

"Better now?" Viktor whispered, settling his free hand on his spouse's legs where they crossed over his lap.

Yuri nodded.

The silver Russian lifted his head then and turned to face the anxious figure opposite them, "Why don't you sit in the water? I can't imagine you went through all the trouble of bathing just so you could dip your toes in."

"I...uhm..." Asahi started nervously, keeping his eyes down to his knees, "I was...going to sit in the private tub."

"...Even though you thought you'd be alone?"

"Well, Mr. Rozovsky was coming, too...but even then..."

"Why though...?" Viktor wondered, confused, "The whole spring would be private."

Asahi lifted his head slightly, peering through a few strands of black hair, "I...uhm... It's just..." He looked through his bangs to the man speaking to him, but the sight of Yuri there just made his face red and he looked away, "...I don't want to."

KffFT

Asahi's ghost nearly left him at the sound of the door being pushed open unexpectedly behind him, even if it wasn't a jarring noise. The simple fact was enough to startle him.

"Sorry...did I interrupt something...?" Mikhail asked, looking from each person to the next.

"It's fine." Viktor answered, feeling his husband press in a little closer.

The elder shrugged and stepped through, plodding across the stone deck until he got to the edge of the pool. Like before, he only sat on the edge, but that only annoyed his nephew on the other side.

"Would everyone just get in the damn water already?" He harped, "The only people who care about you being naked are yourselves. No one can see anything when you're sitting down anyway."

Asahi twitched, "Hai...Senpai..."

"Wait, no..." Mikhail interrupted, much to Viktor's chagrin, "Don't do it just cuz he told you to. You get in when you're ready."

Yuri watched the exchange, and felt Viktor's reaction through the tension of his skin, but neither of them said anything for the moment.

Asahi went back to the way he'd been sitting before, and checked the towel to see if his bloody nose had stopped. Thankfully, it looked like it was done for the moment, and he set the smaller towel aside where it couldn't get knocked into the water by mistake, "...Sorry..."

"Don't be." Mikhail shook his head, "The hot-spring is supposed to be relaxing. Yuri grew up here
and Viktor's used to it, but you and I are peas in a pod with how strange it is. People in the west are prudes and so I am, too. I imagine your reasons are a little different, but the results are the same."

"...Y-Yeah..." The younger figure agreed tepidly. After a moment of awkward silence, with nothing to listen to but the night and the water gently gurgling, Asahi stood up and walked along the stone bench until he found the deepest inlet of the pool's ledge, and maneuvered carefully so he'd be side-face to the other two skaters already in the water. He held the towel out as he sat and only moved to fold it and set it aside once he was submerged enough, then pressed his back to the wall.

"...You act like you think one of us is going to attack you from behind or something." Viktor sighed, "Things may have gotten off with a rocky start between us, but I'm not going to hurt you. Uncle Mik?"

The older man was a bit surprised to hear his name said that way, but he shrugged and shook his head again, "Nah. I'm no bully. I'm the guy that beats up bullies for picking on others."

"And Yuri would never hurt anyone." Viktor continued, "You're safe here."

"I understand..." Asahi said nervously, "But...please don't...assume I'm blind and forgetful. This is your place..." He added, raising one hand up from the water to gesture at the spring, "I came out here thinking you two were gone. I feel like I'm intruding."

Viktor sighed slightly, "Yeah, a little bit... I won't lie to you." He admitted, "But anyone else coming to the spring right now would be in the same position. Yuri and I do like coming here later at night because we often get the whole place to ourselves. But this is a resort...lots of people come here. If we weren't prepared to share it, we'd sit in the private tub on our own."

"I don't just mean as a third body in your presence. I mean because it's me." Asahi corrected, "I appreciate your efforts to make me feel welcome, I really do...but I'm not so naïve that I don't notice Yuri suddenly trying to be unnoticed." He drew a breath and looked up into the winter sky, past the limbs of the trees that surrounded the onsen, "I'm familiar with the feeling of tension when someone is around that isn't wanted."

"If you left, I'd just feel worse," Yuri finally said, "I'm doing my best to move on from what happened on Friday, but I-"

"I've irreparably damaged our friendship." Asahi finished for him, leaving Yuri to just grit his teeth and breathe a quiet sigh against Viktor's skin, silently letting that fact permeate, "I wish things could've gone differently... If I had just pushed you out of the way, instead of letting myself be trapped to get into an argument with you, then maybe it wouldn't have ended the way it did. I made a terrible mistake and I'm paying for it. It's... This is normal for me... I'm always paying for things I do wrong."

"It's okay to let the past go, Asahi," Mikhail offered, "Try to think about how you felt when you were in Tokyo, and away from the things that bothered you before."

"Thinking about Tokyo just makes me cry." Asahi protested, "I wish people would stop dismissing how much it hurts to have to think about all that stuff after 2 years of avoiding it. You guys may have gotten over it by now, but it's fresh for me. The only reason I didn't completely break down going through Tokyo and Kyoto this week is because I had Hana with me. I'm trying my best to keep my shit together but it's... it's hard... I'm surrounded by people who are so much better off; kinder families, friends of any sort, love in their lives, happiness... This is all the very sort of thing that was either denied to me my whole life, or was taken from me after I just got a taste..." He raised a hand from under the water and pressed it over his eyes, "I'm battling something on all sides, and all the
while, I'm trying to fight off the *utterly crippling loneliness* I'm starting to feel. And that just makes me feel even *worse* because the only reason I'm *able* to feel that is because so many people have come to back me up, and help me fix this *mess* called *my life*...! You've all done so much to clear the fog of fear that had hovered over me since I lost Riku, but instead of being able to feel happy, secure, and free...I just feel miserable and depressed."

Yuri and Viktor stayed quiet, at a loss for words.

Mikhail just crossed his arms and looked at his reflection in the water, "I understand all that better than you think."

Asahi was at a loss then.

"I lost my better half just a year ago." The elder Russian went on, lifting his eyes to the sky, "I lost her a number of times...each time felt worse than the last... But the last time, I lost her forever. Unlike all the times before, I can never go back to her and apologize, or work to earn her forgiveness...she's just gone."

"*You moved on fast.*" The grief-stricken figure said quietly, "*You're already engaged and have a kid coming.*"

"I'm gonna let that one slide because of the circumstances..." Mikhail said, brows raised under his damp silver bangs, "*But I'm not talking about some lover; I've been separated from my late ex-wife for many, many years. I'm talking about my twin sister.*"

Asahi sank a bit lower into the water, but said nothing, feeling a kind of humiliation and regret he was unfamiliar with.

"I know it's not quite the same thing as an intimate partner. I've had a few of those, and each one meant a little different to me." Mikhail went on, watching him carefully, "*But my twin sister was half of my soul. I felt it when she left this earth. Everything's been a little bit darker since she died. I don't know how to really describe what it's like to be how we were... We were like one person split into two. When Tatiyana died, it wasn't as though I became my own man, whole and intact, unattached from a distinctly separate person. Half of me died with her. It's surreal and a bit spooky...but maybe that's part of why I've tried to attach myself to the rest of my family since then.*"

Viktor listened to every word quietly.

"It's taken my nephew, my kids, my new fiancé, the child I'm having *with* her...and even my bear of a brother-in-law...to try and fill up that empty space inside me. No one will ever be able to take Tatiyana's place, though...and neither will anyone take Riku's in your heart...but if you let others in, they can at least patch you up again a little." The silver elder went on, "*And part of the process involves allowing yourself to feel the things you've been suppressing. Minako started it when she started talking to you in Osaka...Yuri and Viktor continued you on that path...now you have a small community of people willing and able to support you. The worst stressors have been taken away, but now, the emotions that were hidden under the surface are finally free to express themselves. Some of them will hurt. We're here to help you through it.*"

"Yeah...you don't have to be so jumpy around us." Yuri offered, "*We'll wade into the deep end with you, not throw you out on your own.*"

"...I can't help that." Asahi shook his head lightly, "*It's become a reflex.*" He rubbed his nose and leaned his head back against the edge of the wall, "*I keep my back to the walls, I have an eye on everyone in a room at all times...I don't like it when people are behind me, and if it can't be helped,
then I'm always thinking of an exit.” He huffed a sad laugh, "It used to make Riku crazy. He could never sneak up on me, and I...never let him do anything while behind me...no hugs, no sleeping, not when just loa

Yuri tilted his head slightly, pivoting his chin on his partner's shoulder, "...Is he...still a virgin or something...?" He whispered.

"I don't think so...I think he just means he's never been a bottom. He can't switch roles like we do."

"...Oh..." He made a face, "Well that just doesn't make sense... I mean, I know it was uncomfortable at first, but he's taking it a bit to the extremes, don't you think...?"

Viktor blinked at him, "Uhm...Yuri..."

"What...?" He whispered more insistently.

"Jeeze, guys, come on...I'm sitting right here," Asahi grumbled, looking over at them sternly, only to look away again almost as quickly as he'd turned. He cleared his throat, "I just... Because of all the years of people telling me I deserved to die or be hurt because of what I am, I've trained myself to be wary that it might happen at any moment. I have taken a few beatings...but thankfully - if you want to think of it that way - nothing that serious. Just enough to send a message, I guess..."

Yuri's gulp for air was loud enough for all to hear, and he quickly brought his hands up to cover his mouth and sank a bit in the water, face turning bright red, "Sorry, I didn't mean to-"

Asahi huffed, ripples moving away from him, "So being here, completely unclothed, with nothing but a towel to hide my shame...I feel ridiculously exposed and vulnerable. I have an eye on every exit, and every obstacle between me and them."

Mikhail crossed his arms and gave a look, "I know you've heard it before but you need to learn to relax. Not everyone is out to get you...especially not here."

The reluctant figure just eyeballed him, looking a bit irritated, and rose him slightly above the water, "You try being a gay man sitting completely naked in a public bath with a bunch of other completely naked men, one of whom you've been in love with before." He gesture his whole arm towards Yuri, though didn't look, and sank back into the water with his face bright red all over again, "I can't relax here."

Yuri lifted his head, but looked away, feeling guilty all over again. He clung a bit harder to his partner's arm, even as he felt the soothing pressure of Viktor's cheek against the top of his head.

"Every instinct I have to know where everything and everyone is, is being thrown off by my reluctance to look at anyone, for fear of what it might do to me if I look too long or think about it too hard." Asahi went on, keeping his eyes on the water, "It's like trying to stave off a betrayal I can't control. I've just come to terms with Riku's death, I've just visited his grave for the first time, and have allowed myself to grieve for him...I don't want to fall back again."

There was an eerie quiet that fell over the onsen, but it only served to make Asahi feel like they were expecting him to say more.

"...There's even a part of me that...almost wants to be celibate for the rest of my life." He started again, "Even before Riku, I didn't like it when people touched me, and I didn't want to touch anyone else. He was the only person who ever got that close to me...and it was a struggle to let it happen."
Viktor's brow furrowed, *So every time one of us touched his shoulder to be nice...? And when Yuri said that hug on Friday was the first time Saito had ever done something like that...*

"Because I was trained to believe that I would never be allowed to have someone, *I kept to myself. I never let anyone get too close. I told people nothing, and I asked nothing of them in turn. Shame, guilt, and fear made me keep everything in my head.*" Asahi said, rubbing his eyes on the towel again, "So ever since I was old enough, I thought...I'd rather people think I was weird and aloof than give them any reason to question me, but then Yuri came along and I just..."

Yuri clung a little tighter to his partner's frame when he heard his name. Viktor rubbed his thumb where it rested over a hip.

"I wanted so badly to be close to him... I thought, if there was anyone in the whole world that I could open up to, it would be him, and he'd be the only person who didn't think less of me for it. Who wouldn't recoil in disgust from me...either because of the admission to my being what I am, or the fact that I was only admitting it because I wanted him." Asahi explained, keeping his eyes on the water, "But I never... I never could. I never did. My thoughts stayed in my head, and I kept a distance even to him. I didn't want him to be burdened with my shame, or put him in danger of being treated like I had been, by getting his sympathy. The only way I could keep him safe, and protect the friendship that I had with him...was to pretend my feelings weren't there. Any of them. I made myself become utterly apathetic to absolutely everything...or tried to. It never quite worked completely. I...started to crack a little when I learned I'd be moving to Tokyo for Seniors training..."

"You scared me." Yuri said simply, "You got pushy and possessive. That's why I never told you I was leaving, and why I stopped answering your messages. ...I never...had any intention of going to Tokyo with you."

Viktor looked surprised, but kept quiet, simply offering his support with a gentle slide of his hand across his husband's legs under the water.

"...I know. Deep down...I always knew." Asahi said grimly, though feeling sad all over again just for that, "I wish I could've told you something...so maybe it wouldn't have been that way..."

*I can't tell if this guy is suggesting that he still hopes Yuri will go to him... Viktor grumbled, Or if he's just waxing poetic about the mistakes he made in the past.*

"I can't fault you for keeping it to yourself." Yuri sighed, looking down from his spouse's shoulder, "You were in a bad situation, and you had every reason to believe your experiences would be transferred to anyone you let in. After seeing how things were in Imari...I'm not sure I would've done any differently from you, if we were switched. You...were really trapped there."

"And then to get a taste of freedom while in Tokyo, only to have to go back to Imari after all..." Mikhail added, "Talk about catching an escaped fugitive..."

Yuri's brow furrowed even more as the weight of it all sank in, "...No wonder you thought you had nothing left to lose when we fought. I represented the last good thing you had in your life...and then I yelled at you and said all those horrible things..."

Asahi stayed quiet for a little while, but then just sighed quietly, "You had no way of knowing. You treated me like you would anyone else. I don't expect any different." He dipped his head down towards the water then, pressing a palm against the top of his head, rubbing it down the back of his neck, "I'm getting such a headache... I have to go lie down..." He complained quietly, reaching for the towel to spread it out, and hid himself as he stood up. Water dripped from his frame as he skirted the edge of the onsen to get back to the deck, but just as he stepped up, he heard someone call him
Grey-brown eyes turned back, looking to the silver Russian on the other side of the spring.

"When we get back from Euros, we'll work together with Minako to improve your form." Viktor explained, "Get on the podium with us at the Olympics. Team Japan will sweep the Men's event and prove to Russia and all the haters out there what we're made of. Yuri and I have faced challenges for being together, too, so we have just as much a reason as you do to prove ourselves."

"...Euros is still a week away." Mikhail pointed out, "Isn't it kind of anticlimactic to wait until after?"

"We won't be here to make good on it until then."

"Hah?"

"We'll be on a plane to Moscow in the morning. We're gonna take the dogs and go visit papa."

"...What."

Asahi was a bit thrown off by the gesture, and turned his eyes away again, "...Uhm...thanks, I think..."

"I know it's hard to change gears from the loss of a loved one to thinking about your sport, but..." Viktor said, switching back to the topic at hand, "I think it'll do you a lot of good to get back into the swing of things, now that you've overcome that painful hurdle. It's like I told you before...skate for Riku. Put your whole being into your art. You're finally away from all the things that've been pressing down on you these past two years...so we'll do what we can to help you create better memories. We do that best on the ice."

"...R-right..."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED THIRTY SIX

"Now boarding Japan Airlines flight to Tokyo Narita International Airport."

Viktor rose up to stand first and pulled their tickets from the brochure in his coat pocket.

Yuri stood next to him, Jiro in one arm and the airline-required pet carrier in the other. He felt a hand press to his lower back and they started walking towards the ticket-scanner. "It's hard to believe we're finally going..." He commented, "And not even for competition. It's kind of like when we moved to St. Petersburg after Nationals last year."

"Yeah, I guess that's true." The silver legend agreed, handing their ticket packet off to the stewardess, "Time flies."

"Too true..."

"Do you...feel guilty at all for this trip now?" Viktor wondered abruptly, pausing where the line onto the plane had congested at the end of the connecting tunnel, "Should we have cancelled? I feel like we've abandoned both Saito and Yurio..."

"Nah." Yuri shook his head, "Minako-sensei and the rest can handle them just fine. At least for Asahi, maybe it's even for the best that we go... Give him some space away from us so he can settle down with everything, and get used to being in Hasetsu. Then, when we get back, it'll be all business."

"I hope it'll be all business..." The silver Russian added, stepping over the threshold behind his partner, and they headed right into Economy, though not too far. Economy Plus came with extra leg-room at the very front of the cabin, and they sat down fairly quickly. With seat-belts on and Jiro set into the pet-carrier in the next seat over, they settled in to play 'hurry up and wait' for the rest of the passengers to board, "I know he's said that Itō helped him get over you, but he was also away from you all that time. Five years he was away from you, save the occasional run-in at a competition you shared...but as soon as he was around you again, he immediately went back to those old feelings."

"Are you really that worried he'll fall for me again?" Yuri said, reaching over to put his hand on his partner's leg. "Even though you're around?"

"I never, ever doubt the desperation of a broken heart." Viktor answered, "I've seen what people do when they're hurt, I've felt that hurt... Even just the suggestion that you wanted to call things off with me in Barcelona was enough to set me off for the whole next day."

"I remember..."

"I don't think Saito is about to go after you again, not directly...not after what happened at Nationals, but...I still worry about his fragile emotional state. I may be mad at him for what he did, but I don't want to hurt him more..."

"Me neither." Yuri went on, leaning back in his seat a little, and looked to the window-seat where Jiro's head was poking out the top of his carrier, looking around cautiously. He offered a few pats and ear-scritches to soothe the pup, "I feel like all I can do to avoid hurting him is to avoid him."

Viktor hesitated, slouching where he sat, "And there I just ran my mouth about helping him get ready
Yuri pat his anxious partner's leg, "I think it's a good idea regardless. He needs to focus on something that - hopefully - won't upset him. For now though..." He said, changing gears as he leaned over to nip his husband's ear playfully, "I want to get excited about this trip. Even though the Russian part makes me a bit anxious, we're still going to Euros!"

The Russian couldn't help but smile at the gesture, and picked himself back up to sit normally, "Even though I don't get to compete...I'm excited about going, too." He reached around to take his spouse's hand, and rubbed his thumb there gently, "And don't worry so much about Russia. The RSF may have fired me, but the RSF doesn't control the country. We're there to see my papa, not skate."

"I guess so, if you put it that way." Yuri nodded, "...And your papa seems oddly proud of me for how things went with your skating career these past few weeks. I'm curious how things will change when we see him again. We all have something in common now."

"You think so?"

"Mh." He nodded enthusiastically, "A positive relationship with you."

"...You always know how to cheer me up." Viktor mused. He pawed for his partner's other hand and lifted it up, clapping lightly around it before kissing a few fingers, "Maybe my father will realize one day the kind of son-in-law he's missing out on."

"...Well, the language barrier doesn't help." Yuri grimaced, extending a finger from the clasped bundle, and tilted it under his partner's chin. He used it to guide his partner's face closer, and nuzzled the tip of his nose, "But we have come a long way already. Maybe by the end of our visit, I'll be able to kiss you in front of him."

"Oh~! That's daring. But you know..." The Russian teased, nosing his spouse right back, "...You should kiss me now, too."

"I'm going to."

"I'm waiting."

"The only thing better than a kiss, is the promise of a kiss."

"You're such a tease."

Yuri couldn't help but laugh at that, and pressed forward in the midst of it, his mirth literally vibrating through their touch. It didn't help that Jiro was lightly chewing on his fingers by then, but he savored those kisses all the while, trying not to let the puppy distract him.

Viktor took a long last one, one hand pressed to his husband's cheek to stroke his thumb beside an eye, "Now I feel much better."

"Good. Now we can relax."

The crate practically trembled as Makkachin wiggled within excitedly, tail clapping against the inside walls as the whole thing was wheeled through. He whined and pawed at the bottom of the metal door, spotting his humans beyond the 'no entry' line, licking at the bars so his big pink tongue could taste the air of freedom. That would have to wait though, as the trolley the crate was sitting on was
merely passed on, and the door remained closed; Viktor did offer what greetings he could through the holes before pushing the ensemble along.

"We need to find somewhere to give the pups a break before we get to the next gate." The silver Russian commented, "And as much as I hate putting Makka back into holding, we at least have to pretend that Aeroflot won't be delayed, so we can't spend our layover time on this side of customs."

"Poor guy." Yuri frowned, hearing the pitiful whines from within the big plastic container, "If he was Vik-chan's size, he could sit in the cabin with us."

"Or if he were a real therapy dog."

"Well..." Yuri righted his posture and walked normally again, keeping Jiro up against his chest while Viktor pushed the trolley next to them, "A dog as big as him would need his own seat. It's a first-class flight...not only are the seats bundled together in pairs only, but they're expensive..."

Viktor made a face, "You say that like we couldn't afford it."

"What's the saying? 'You people spent so much time wondering whether or not you could, that none of you thought about whether or not you should.'" He mused, freeing up one arm to rub his husband's back as they walked, "But I guess I could give you a break...you did humor me with Economy for the domestic part of this trip."

"My love, there's no chance you could ever convince me to sit in Economy for a flight longer than 5 hours." Viktor teased, leaning over to kiss a cheek, "And I say that not purely for selfish reasons."

"Oh?"

"Mh." He nodded, "First-class and business usually have seats that can lean back a good ways, enough that one can easily sleep...which is good for you. And I happen to like the fact that most of the cabins put only two seats together. There's no chance that someone else might be directly next to us."

"When and if we start planning trips with the dogs in the cabin, we'll have to keep the pair-seat situation in mind though. Do we put the dogs together in their own seats, or do we each sit with our respective pups?"

"Makka and Jiro are goodbois. As long as they can see us, they'll be fine sitting together. We'll just arrange it so they're sitting in the seats across the aisle from us, rather than in front or behind." Viktor suggested, "Or...we could sit apart for the take-off, and then sit together until we land."

"That's not too bad."

The Russian nodded, and slowed down slightly to look around. He grumbled a bit, "Blyat, why does this airport have no pet relief areas? This is such a chore..."

"Let's just pull off to the side. If there's no designated areas for pets to do their business, we'll have to make one of our own."

Music quietly echoed off the walls of the Ice Castle as, playing from a small boom-box settled on the top of the rink-wall. Yurio went through the motions of his Short Program, watched by both Nikki and Minako from the sidelines. Minako had a paper-pad in-hand, tracking each major point-worthy
maneuver, but she rubbed a temple anxiously.

"What's wrong?" The silver teen wondered, looking back at her.

"Trying to watch a skater through the eyes of a coach or judge is a lot harder than watching just for the sake of seeing it." She answered, "There's so much more going on here than in ballet. Take-off edges, landing-edges, edge-changes, making sure spins don't travel...and everything else... It's really hard to see everything at once, especially from so far away, and without the ability to rewind and look again."

"How come you don't go out there then? Get a closer look, at least..."

Minako just deadpanned her, "Don't you remember my performance in Detroit...?"

Eyes widened, "OrightIforgotsorry."

"We should probably change that." Mikhail's voice came up suddenly, footsteps impossible to hear over the music. Both ladies looked over to see him, and the shadow walking behind him, "So how's your first day as skating coach?" He asked, reaching one hand forward to press against his lady love's back, and leaned in to kiss her cheek, "Going well?"

"I feel like he'll be teaching me more than I teach him for a while." She answered, "I don't know what good I'll be before Euros next weekend."

"Take it in stride; we all know you're new to this side of things. You'll get the hang of it. For now though..." He stepped aside and revealed the nervous skater behind him, wearing practice gear of his own under all the winter-wear he still hid within, "Mr. Asahi here has already agreed to help you learn how to skate."

Minako's face just went bright red, "You can't be serious."

"You'll have to be able to get around out there if you want to be effective," Mikhail explained, "I learned how to skate so I could do hockey practice with Sergio."

The ballerina just put her hands on her face, "This is so embarrassing...having to learn how to skate from the people I'm going to be coaching on skating..."

"You're not teaching us how to skate," Asahi spoke quietly, "We already know that. Uh...pretend like this is an advanced ballet class that you're substituting for. We know what we're doing, we just need some eyeballs to watch us and make corrections. We can't always see our own shortcomings, even if we watch video of ourselves later."

The music from the boom-box faded to nothing then, leaving the teen in the rink to finally realize how many people were around. He heaved to catch his breath, but gave a bit of a sneer at Asahi as he wiped the sweat from his brow, even if he said nothing. Nikki looked down to the remote in her hand and hit the pause button before the next song could start.

"Don't let him bother you," Mikhail whispered, leaning towards the skater beside him, "He's used to being something of an only-child in many aspects. He's still learning how to share, and get along in groups."

"Didn't he train with Senpai before?"

"They both trained under Yakov Feltsman, sure, but that doesn't necessarily mean Yakov coached them together." He answered, "Yuri only just joined Seniors last year."
"No wonder I'd never heard of him before." Asahi said, mostly to himself. He turned his eyes and looked to the woman who'd (eventually) be his temporary coach, "I'm gonna get my skates on. You should come and pick some."

"O-oh..."

Mikhail grinned and extended his arm back towards the doors, "Go on. It'll be good for you."

Minako just blanched and sighed, but soon followed after the athlete, and readied herself for what was to come. Through the glass doors and out into the skate-rental area, she watched as Asahi found a spot at the end of a nearby bench, and set his things down before sitting to pull his sneakers off. She turned then to spot Yuko watching her in turn, and approached warily, "...I...uh...I guess I need to rent...some skates."

"Oh!" Yuko lifted up from where she'd rested her elbows on the counter, "...Do you know what size you are?"

Asahi propped one blade up on its guard on the bench, and started pulling the laces tight, looping them around the hooks as he went up the front of the boot. He could see the dark frame of the elder Russian approaching, and glanced up slightly just as he reached for his second skate.

"How're you holding up?" Mikhail wondered, sitting against the next bench over, "Did your headache go away?"

"Mhhf...mostly." He answered, "There's...something I wanted to mention though."

"Hm?"

The skater hesitated slightly, pulling the laces to occupy his mind, hoping to stop the nerves from creeping up, "...I was hoping someone else would mention it yesterday, actually. It...sounds kind of conceited, coming from me."

"I'm sure it doesn't."

"Well..." Asahi hummed, and drew a breath as he tied the knot, "In Imari...the skating rink I used to go to... There's a trophy case in the main hall."

"You want to get your stuff?"

He shook his head, "There's nothing to get. Someone...mmhh... Someone gave the order to have the case stripped of everything that mentioned me. Plaques were taken out if my name was on it, trophies, medals...photos... They left one photo inside that had Yuri on it, I guess because he's an Olympian now...but they moved the picture over within the frame so I'd be cut off the side of it."

"...That's brazen." Mikhail grunted, unimpressed.

"I'm...not saying that anything should be done about it." Asahi explained, setting his second boot down onto the floor on the opposite side of the bench from the first, and reached for his sneakers and backpack, "I wouldn't want to force them to put everything back, and make them recognize that I was there when I was clearly unwanted. But...I thought you should know."

Mikhail rubbed his chin in thought, "How much of that town actually thinks that way though? Aren't they just following orders, basically?"

"...I could never tell. After coming back from Tokyo...things got eerie and weird. But, I was so numb
and in shock from everything else already that I didn't pay much attention.” He answered, stuffing the sneakers into the pack before zipping it up, and held the whole thing on the bench between his legs, "I couldn't tell if people were angry or wary of me because of something I'd done...or if they were nervous because of what might happen if word got out that they'd been nice to me. It was like an order had gone out that I was to be ignored. I can only assume that something had been said about the accident, and that maybe I was being blamed for it somehow...so people should avoid me, so I don't cause them strife and chaos, too."

"That seems in keeping with the other stuff you've said." The Russian nodded, crossing one ankle over his knee, "I gotta ask though...after everything else, how do you plan on training with your other coach again once things settle down? I'm honestly not sure it would be safe down there for you, at least not on your own...and the more I think about it, the more I wonder if your coach would be in the crosshairs, too."

Asahi looked at his bag, "I'm...not sure." Fingers gripped his gear, but he lifted his head towards the silver man sitting nearby, "I can't ask Coach Nagisa to come up here. She has a life down there, other students...she's still the Juniors Director. She got away with associating with me before because it was seen as her being paid to take pity on me."

"Maybe you should just cut your losses then."

"...I couldn't. She's been there for me for such a long time." He protested quietly.

"I don't mean cut off ties to her, I only mean that you don't re-hire her as your coach later on."

"But the Games-"

"She can come to the Games. She can sit with you in the kiss and cry. But it wouldn't be in a coach's capacity...maybe as an adjunct-coach, because she taught you until now."

Mikhail explained, turning his eyes slightly as Minako came towards them with her skates on finally. He glanced back to Asahi though, "Give her the satisfaction of getting to be there with you, but do it as a thank-you, not because you hired her back."

"Mmhhh..."

"I know it's hard to let go of someone who's supported you through some of your worst days, but remember...she was paid to be there. If it hadn't been for the blessing of the proverbial Saito Mafia, she would've turned her nose away from you just like the rest."

"Your relationship was a business transaction, and those relationships change all the time. Plisetsky out there tried to ditch Yakov in favor of Viktor once, only to go crawling back after he was refused. Yuri has changed coaches a few times...Nagisa to Celestino, then to Viktor. Coaches understand that they are replaceable. They also understand that the reason for being switched out may have nothing to do with their quality as a teacher. This is a situational issue. You need someone outside of Imari. Your set-up now is perfectly fine, but you may change your mind once you've gotten on your own feet."

"...Yeah, you're under no obligation to stick with me just because I volunteered to be your windfall." Minako added, "We're here to support you while you put the pieces back together. Once you're ready, you may not even want to stay in Hasetsu. You have the option to find a coach somewhere else."

Asahi shook his head, "I don't even have my own phone right now; I had to call Riku's family using his phone this morning...and that was awkward at first. I don't have my own bank account either. I still have a really long way to go before I can even think about that sort of thing."
"We did the bank thing this morning, so you only have to wait for your donations to transfer. The phone...your parents cancelled payments on it, but they don't own the number. You're free to put in a new SIM card with your own account. Everything you need to start a new account is on that device." Mikhail said, and pushed to stand up, offering his hand to his lady love to help her up, "On the other hand, you could always get a whole new number. It's not a problem right now, but I assume they're clever enough to figure out that you won't be without for very long. Most people would jump through a few hoops to keep the number they had before...and they may be counting on that."

"...What...do you mean?" Asahi asked pensively.

"Your family is used to you bending to their will. They're used to being able to bully you into silence...they've been successful at it for more than half your lifetime." The Russian went on, watching the skater carefully, "They may be counting on that to try and undermine me, by reaching out to you in an effort to convince you to sabotage my efforts. After all, even a severely-beaten dog will still return to the owner who struck him. ...You may not be consciously aware of it, but you've been conditioned to accept a certain status quo, especially because of how hard you fell back into it after the accident. My recommendation is to get a new phone number. Give it out only on a need-to-know basis. Cut your family off from any possible way that they could reach out to you. Don't give them any opportunity to hurt you again."

Asahi listened carefully, but then nodded slowly, "...I guess you're right."

"You have time to think about it. Being without a phone for a while isn't the end of the world." Mikhail added, turning to start moving towards the doors to the rink, "The messages in your email can be transferred to a new account, too...I can do that if you don't want to risk seeing what may be waiting in there for you. Do they know where you went after that night? Do they know about Yu-Topia?"

"...I...don't know. I haven't looked at Instagram, so I can't be so sure that Senpai or Yuri haven't mentioned me. Or those three girls that took all those photos yesterday."

"Ah damn, the Nishigori triplets...I hadn't even thought of that." Minako snapped her fingers and grimaced, "They'd be the first ones to post something about him being here. Their viral post was the whole reason Viktor got out here when he did."

"So we'll play along as though the Saitos know you're here." Mikhail said with a shrug, "We'll keep an ear to the ground for it. For now...let's go teach Minako how to skate."

"You're not even wearing skates, hun." She pointed out stiffly.

"I'll be at rink-side showing support." He teased.

The seatbelt light on the plane finally turned off, and Yuri was quick to undo his. He scooted forward out of his seat and went for the pet-carrier strapped to the far front-end of his first-class spot, freeing Jiro from his box before sitting back again. The puppy was ecstatic to be free, wiggling and chirping and licking where Yuri held him on his lap.

"I wish I could show that much excitement," Viktor mused, watching the spectacle unfold, "I'll have to live through him vicariously."

"You can show excitement all you want," Yuri pointed out, trying to keep the pup down for a
moment before threading his fingers through his spouse's, "What's stopping you?"

"Have you ever seen a grown man wiggle and cry and lick someone in excitement?"

"Oh!" He laughed, "Well, when you put it like that."

"Mhm."

"Though there was that one time..." Yuri started, smirking to himself, "After everything else we've done, it seems rather tame now...but that time Phichit-kun got pictures of you in China, when you got all drunk and overly affectionate at me."

Viktor laughed, "I remember! That was fun. At least I could use the alcohol as an excuse."
"I was so embarrassed when I first saw that the photo was online..." The younger man went on, recalling it fondly though even as his cheeks got a bit rosy, "I was so worried people would think we were messing around before a competition..."

"Would that have been so bad?"

"I had a different opinion of things back then." Yuri explained, "I thought that the imagery might diminish the idea that we were supposed to be coach and student, too. I was trying to maintain a little decorum."

"And now there's photos and videos online of me grabbing your butt." Viktor teased again, "On a bunch of different occasions."

"Ah, it could be worse...if Yakov and Celestino hadn't pulled us apart at NHK..."

"At least they had the sense to know we were gonna do it anyway." The silver Russian laughed, rubbing his thumb over where he held his partner's on the center-console, "But that would be the second time Ciao Ciao has stopped you from being with me. I should have a talk with him about that."

Yuri's face went red, "No no, I'm glad he stopped me the first time, remember? I was black-out drunk back then. I had no idea what I was doing."

"You had every idea what you were doing, my love." Viktor grinned eagerly, "You just had a bit of liquid courage to get past your nerves."

"Considering you didn't take advantage though..."

"Ahhh yes..." He sighed happily, though with a tint of disappointment, "There was that small voice at the back of my head that told me not to. I wouldn't have stopped you from kissing me if you tried though. Anything more than that...and, well...I would've had to be sure you were aware of yourself."

"Really? You would've stopped it? You were smitten with me by then though."

"Yes, and I didn't want to hurt or spook you." Viktor explained, leaning aside to set his head against his partner's shoulder, "I may be easy-going and impulsive, but I noticed how miserable you were when you first turned up. I knew your excitement was the alcohol talking. I figured I'd have some fun with you and try to cheer you up, then try to find you the next morning once you'd sobered up again...but you went right back to being miserable, and you didn't notice me in the hotel lobby. So...I backed off. I wasn't sure if you were too tired, hung-over, or if you were ignoring me on purpose...but the look on your face shut me down and I didn't go after you."

"That's a shame...though you were probably right about it..." Yuri grimaced, "Since I didn't remember anything, I'd have probably freaked out again like I usually did."

"...If only you'd remembered." Viktor sighed, getting cozy, "...Or maybe, if only I'd gone up to you anyway."
"Don't let your feet point in different directions." Asahi explained carefully, watching the toes of Minako's books as he pulled her forward, himself going in reverse, "Use the normal sway of your steps to thrust yourself forward. Use your toe-picks to push if you need to, but don't just step forward on the ice like you're wearing shoes."

"Uhhhh why is this so hard." She whined, "I was internationally recognized in ballet, you'd think skating would be second-nature to me...!"

"You can do it!" Mikhail teased from the rink-wall.

"DO NOT SEEK TO MOCK ME, SIR."

"I'm showing support!"

"YOU'RE MAKING FUN OF ME; I CAN HEAR YOUR IMMATURE GIGGLING FROM HERE."

He scoffed quietly to himself, "I don't giggle."

"Ballet and figure skating share common move-sets but that doesn't mean they're the same." Asahi explained, "It's like comparing sitting at the kitchen table to driving. Same posture, completely different results."

"I guess so..." Minako agreed, trying for the moment just to keep her balance as ice slid by beneath her.

"What's the thing that's throwing you off?"

"The blades themselves." She answered, "If this were just a greasy floor and I was sliding around on my bare feet, I'd be a master in minutes...but these boots and blades put an unfamiliar wedge between the soles of my feet and the ground. It messes up my equilibrium."

"Try not to fight the rocker," Asahi said, watching the woman wiggle a little...and then flail, stumbling and flinging her arms around in a chaotic mess of nerves and surprise. He put the brakes on and collapsed to a knee, driving a toe-pick into the ice as his arms went out to catch the ballerina before she landed harshly. He glanced past her head slightly to see Mikhail watching nervously, but then looked back at the woman he'd caught, "You okay?"

"Wow you're fast..." She answered nervously, blowing a strand of hair from where it landed on her face, "The last time this happened, it was Viktor who caught me."

"I've trained for a long time to watch and predict other peoples' movements based on what they're doing in the present moment." Asahi said, rising up again and hoisting the woman up with him to let her try again, "I guess it works as well to watch for someone on the edge of a stumble as it does for predicting punches or kicks."

"So you plan out all your skating routines based on your martial arts, huh? Like a fighting routine rather than a dance."

"Sort of." He confirmed, moving away again to the limits of Minako's reach, and nudged back on a
toe-pick to start pulling her forward again, "Even if the movements aren't always that similar, the methodology is equal in my head. Fluid sweeping motions where the end-point of one gesture goes directly into the start of the next...just like dance. You have to be able to use your forward momentum to your advantage...like keeping the wind in your sails. You go further by turning your rudder into the direction the wind blows. Or in skating, you'll jump farther, spin faster, or-"

"Fall harder." Minako finished, "When you can't control how fast you go or keep track of where you are, and you overstep, or land funny..."

"Control is everything." He nodded, looking up briefly to spot the elder Russian sneaking out into the rink; shoes had been swapped out for hockey skates, "Aisu ni yōkoso." (Welcome to the ice.)

Mikhail easily glided right by them, twisting around on one foot as he leaned into a wide circle, "Don't hunch over so much!"

"I'll hunch you over!" She barked, slipping a bit but catching herself with Asahi's help.

The Russian just laughed, moving around her in a backwards glide, "Is that a threat or a promise?"

Minako grumbled even as Asahi stared blankly, "It'll be with my 'torture mitts' if you're not careful."

"Oh! A threat then!" Mikhail laughed again, and came to a stop safely on Asahi's opposite side. Around him in turn, Yurio and Nikki zipped by, taunting one another as teens were wont to do.
"...Dare I ask...?" The professional skater wondered skeptically, letting Minako go to hold only one hand.

"She does this deep tissue fascia release thing." Mikhail explained, keeping a safe distance, "Works wonders but hurts like a mother when she does it, hence why her hands are 'torture mitts.'"

"...Ah."

"Oh come on, it's clever! Cuz it's her hands and she...y'know, causes pain with them. Like torture."

Asahi had no answer.

The elder sighed dejectedly, "...I thought it was clever..."

Minako was the one laughing then, "I guess you have your work cut out for you, hun. You'll have to figure out what Asahi's sense of humor gets tickled by. Considering everything else, I don't know that he's ever had the chance to laugh before. Maybe you'll have to cultivate it."

"...I have a sense of humor." The aforementioned figure pointed out sullenly, "I've just...uhm...learned how to avoid showing it off, or anything else for that matter."

The ballerina just deadpanned him, "Have you ever laughed before?"

"Er..."

"At, with, or because of Riku even?"

"Um..." Asahi started to feel nervous as he thought back.

"That's what I thought." She shook her head, "That'll be our next goal then. To teach you how to laugh."

"It's not as though I'm completely incapable..." The skater whined quietly, even though the neutral expression on his face had barely changed, "I guess I just took everything too seriously."

"Your family kind of sabotaged your happiness, kid." Mikhail pointed out, "Honestly, I'm surprised you managed to find hobbies in the midst of it all. I get the martial arts at least, but what ended up drawing you to this sport? It's a bit of a leap, if you'll pardon the pun, to go from the art of combat and self defense to...well, this." He held his hands out in display of the rink, and all it represented.

"...It wasn't necessarily about the figure skating at first." Asahi explained, extending his arm out as he started to turn in place, and let Minako rotate around him in an arc, eventually leading her towards her fiancé, where he let her go to find him, "I skated for fun as a really young kid, like most other people... Before everything started to go so wrong, my brothers used to take me to the sports complex to skate. After Hell raised, the skating was an escape. I was fast on the ice. Faster than anyone else."

"So then why not take up speed skating?" Mikhail wondered.

The skater shrugged, "Figure skating appealed to me more, I suppose. I liked skating to music."

Cruising altitude over the great expanse of Siberia put Viktor into a sleepy mood, and he had set his reclining seat forward to let him lie flat, so he could doze for a while. It didn't take long for him to fall asleep entirely. Jiro had cuddled up next to the man and snuggled himself into a small ball,
occupying a corner of the seat above the Russian's right shoulder; feet by the man's neck, belly over
the shoulder itself, and the rest of him squeezed between arm and arm-rest.

Yuri rose up from his spot to grab their jackets, and gently spread them out over his slumbering
husband and their fluffy son. Viktor's long frame was too long for the jackets to cover him from top
to toes though, and he took his own jacket back before unwrapping one of the First Class section
complimentary blankets (though on Aeroflot, it was more like a thick sheet.) He unfolded it and
shook it out before letting it settle softly over the end of his partner's seat, feet hanging off the end of
it as they were, and let the wrinkles undulate up the man's legs until the whole thing met and rested
over the bottom of the long-coat that was already there. Once done, Yuri finally let himself sit down
again, and reached across the console between them to deftly cup his hand around his spouse's head,
and rubbed his thumb there slowly back and forth just behind one ear. With the controls on his own
chair, Yuri clicked on the one to extend the foot-rest out, and then grabbed for the television
controller.

It's too early for me to try and sleep now...though I'm sure I'll feel it later. He thought, turning on the
screen to start searching for something to watch. He looked over when Jiro's ear twitched, catching
his eye with the sudden motion, I envy them both their ability to drift off so easily. ...I wonder what
Viktor dreams about these days? I hope things have settled down enough for him that he can dream
again.

Viktor seemed to smile in his sleep just then, which gave Yuri hope that he was right.

The lobby of the Azimut Hotel Sochi was plain; it as one of many hotels built on the compound
called the Olympic Village. The Grand Prix Final was over, and skaters still in the building were
taking their leave, assembling with their teams or waiting to do the same. Team Japan was only 2
members big, and Celestino was the only one between the two of them who wasn't thoroughly hung-
over.

Not far off, Team Russia was gathered-up, and Yakov handed the key-cards in to the check-out
clerk, surrounded by his gaggle of skaters. The tallest and oldest of the three was still in a sleepy haze
where he stood, but those crystal blue eyes opened and the man perked up into full consciousness the
moment he spotted a particular aqua-blue jacket and the messy mop of black hair that went with it.
He practically lit up, the fog of staying up too late and waking up too early fading and forgotten.

Groggy as he was, Yuri wasn't paying close attention as Celestino waited in line further down the
counter. By the time his bored staring had gotten him to turn far enough, he wasn't even aware that
he was looking directly at his idol.

"Yuri!"

He twitched slightly, but just closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, glasses riding up
over his fingers as the pain of his headache thrummed behind the orbits.

"Yuri...!"

There's probably 40 people in here with that name... I wish they'd be more specific...

"Yuri...?" Viktor's voice was much closer then, as the man stepped closer and paused a pace away.
He smiled and laughed quietly, reaching over to rest a hand on the side of the younger figure's
shoulder, "How are you holding up? You look exhausted."
Cherry-hazel irises opened wide, but Yuri felt paralyzed where he stood. The voice's identity was well known to him, but the fact that it was addressing him suddenly made him terrified.

"After last night, I guess you would be. I'm pretty tired, too." Viktor went on, stepping out in front then to get a better look at the man, "You drank like a fish." He added, hand slipping off that shoulder to go back into the warmth of the coat pocket it had come from a moment before.

Yuri lowered his hand slowly, glasses sliding partly into place, crooked as they were, but he could only stare over the tilted rims at the man who for some reason was speaking to him, "V-Vik...Viktor...!"

The Russian smiled again and tilted his head slightly, "Morning." He scrunched his shoulder up as he spoke, feeling much more cheerful than he had earlier, "I thought I'd come see you again before we all went our separate ways. Fortune smiles on the bold...and you were something else last night." He teased, "For a minute, I thought you were still in a bad mood, like when you showed up to the Banquet...but I guess you're probably just super hung-over after all that champagne."

Memories flooded into the front of his mind, and the whole night replayed in front of Yuri's eyes like a bad movie reel going too fast. His face suddenly went bright red, and both hands came up to cover it, dropping one bag to the floor where he had to let it go, "Shimatta, gomen nasai!"

"Sorry?" Viktor laughed in confusion, "I don't know any Japanese."

Yuri's hands came forward and he waved them frantically in his humiliation, "I am so sorry about last night! I d-didn't mean to be all over you! I j-just...I get a bit carried away when I drink and I didn't think and I was just really excited after being so miserable because of how I did in the rankings and I just...oh my god you basically scored as high in your Free Skate as I did overall and this is just so embarrassing I can hardly stand it I'm SO SORRY."

Viktor could feel where his hair had been blown back from the fast-paced rambling apology, but he shook his head and smiled sweetly anyway, "Don't worry about it. Any of it. I actually had a lot of fun! You're a really good dancer. The strip-tease with Chris was pretty funny, too. I even got photos of your Dance Off with Plisetsky!"

"Ohmygod." Yuri whined even more, collapsing to a crouching position next to his back. Hands went over his face again to hide his shame. He couldn't see that Viktor had gotten down to one knee to meet him at the same level, but he cracked a few fingers apart to gaze through them when the Russian's voice sounded again.

"Don't sweat the scores either, okay?" He said, "You made it to the Final, and it's your first time here, right? Anyone could get first-time jitters. You'll do better next year, I'm sure of it." One blue eye winked behind silver bangs, and Viktor offered his hand down as he stood up, "Take what you learned here to heart and overcome the things that scared you. You'll be stronger for it."

Yuri could hardly believe the words, or the gesture, but he nervously reached up anyway and took the offered hand, letting his idol pull him up to stand again. His fingers were practically paralyzed when Viktor let go.

"You did look kind of upset yesterday though, even before you went out. Did something happen?"

"U-uhmm..." Yuri stammered, feeling a pit in his guts all over again, "...I...m-my..." He drew a deep breath, and his grief overtook his anxiety for a moment, "My dog passed away... My family called t-to tell me...and I... I feel so guilty because I've been away from home for so long. Vi...er...I mean, my dog was with my family in Hasetsu after I left to train in Detroit...I...never got to say
goodbye to him."

"...That's heartbreaking. I'm so sorry." Viktor said quietly, reaching his arms forward to offer a hug. "It's never easy to deal with the loss of a pet, even if you haven't seen them in a while. They find a way into your heart and never let go. I hope you feel better soon, but don't feel like you have to rush through it."

Again, Yuri felt paralyzed. The embrace was unexpected, and his heart hammered in his chest, but knowing how they'd danced together the night before...it was hard to think he could just push the man off in his now-sober state of mind. A few seconds passed as the words were spoken, and Yuri found himself feeling oddly relieved by the gesture, even if he didn't have the courage to react to it in any meaningful way before Viktor pulled off of him again.

"Vitya!" Yakov called, "My zakončili, pošli." (We're done, let's go.)

"Oh..." Viktor said quietly, feeling a bit disappointed that his time was up. He looked from coach to fellow competitor, but then shifted his weight to pull the strap of his carry-bag up higher onto his shoulder, and reached into his jacket for his phone, "Yuri... I know you asked me last night if I'd be your coach, and...ah, I hate saying it, but, well, it's not really something I can do right now. Let me have your number though. Maybe I can help you out in other ways."

Yuri was stunned, seeing his idol offer his own phone forward, already loaded to the Add Contact window. All notions of protest and attempted clarification that he hadn't meant it were lost, and he reached shaky hands forward to take the device, tapping his thumbs onto the small screen to put his information in as requested. When he handed it back, he saw Viktor smile at it, and started clicking a few buttons himself. Yuri nearly jumped when he felt the vibration in his jacket, and pulled his phone out to see, [This is Viktor ;)] on the Lock Screen preview. Yuri's face was hot from being so flustered, but he swallowed and raised his eyes, "Uhm...th-thank you... I...didn't really mean to bother you so much."

"Bother me?" Viktor repeated with a laugh, "You didn't bother me at all! I had a great time with you! Maybe we can drink again sometime, okay? Message me anytime." He said, and leaned much closer suddenly. One hand held to Yuri's left shoulder as lips pecked the right cheek, "Do svidanijya, Yuri. For now."

"VITYA!"

"Coming!"

"B-bye...Vik-...Viktor..." Yuri muttered in response, eyes wide from the kiss.

Yuri was sitting in the airport terminal when he felt the next buzz in his pocket, and withdrew his phone to see an unexpected message.

Viktor Nikiforov
[Haha! I couldn't wait for you... I'm kinda bored though, so what's up?]

Eyes were wide, realizing that man was, in all glorious reality, sending him text messages. Celestino looked over, "Who's that? Viktor?"

"H-hai...er...yeah."
"You going to answer him?" The coach wondered, sitting normally again with a smirk, "I guess you left quite the impression on him last night. Who knew he'd be so easy for you to befriend after all these years you've been avoiding him?"

Yuri's face was red again, but he swallowed his nerves and unlocked his phone so he could answer. Thumbs typed slowly, carefully, [I'm at the airport...my flight is still 2 hours out.]

The reply was almost too fast for him, [Really? We're already back in St. Petersburg! I'm waiting for my bags so I can go home!]

[Must be nice to live so close to this competition.] Yuri sent, only to panic and type quickly, [Um! I mean, I didn't mean for that to sound rude! I just mean it must be nice that you can get back home so fast after an event!]

[Haha!]

*Oh man, Viktor's probably upset at me...that came out so wrong...*

[Yeah it's pretty great to live close this time around! For anything except Euros, it's usually a pretty long flight. I'll be flying to Japan for Worlds though so I guess I'll feel your pain.]

Yuri nearly turned into a puddle where he sat and heaved a breath of relief, then tried to sit normally again to answer, [I'm not sure I'll be able to go this year. I did pretty badly at the Final. The JSF may send someone else if I can't get my act together before Nationals in 2 weeks.]

[Cheer up!] Viktor replied, [I'll study your performances this season when I get back, and maybe I can offer you some pointers. You'll be in fighting form in no time ^u^)]

He could hardly believe the sight of the message, and his eyes glimmered with a hopeful shine.

..."There's no way you got his number *that* easily." Phichit teased, taking a sip from a water-bottle at rink-side, "You could barely stand to be in the same *space* as Viktor before. Remember when you came back from Skate Canada and you said you wouldn't wash your hand ever again because he shook it at the podium?"

"Of course I remember. It practically changed my *life.*" Yuri answered, wiping frost off his blades while he waited, "But I'm being dead serious. *Viktor freaking Nikiforov* is messaging *me!* He texts me every day! It's insane!"

"You sure it's actually him and not just someone else who you accidentally named Viktor while you were drunk at the Banquet?"

"Of course it's actually him."

"Prove it."

"Ohmygodfine." Yuri grumbled, tip-toeing off the ice to find his gear bag in the nearby stands. He fished out his phone, but before he could even send his request, he found that his idol had messaged him already on his own. Yuri laughed and held it up, "Hah! He messaged me again a few minutes ago!"

Phichit just smiled and waited, elbows crossed over the wall.
Thumbs typed away in response to the previous text, [I'm actually at the rink right now.]
[Uhm...can I ask a huge favor of you?]

[Sure! What is it? ^u\ )]

[My friend here doesn't believe it's actually you. Would you mind if I sent a FaceTime request? He thinks I added someone else while I was drunk and just gave the profile your name by mistake.]

There was barely a second before Yuri's phone buzzed with the very request he'd hoped to send, and Yuri jumped in surprise. He rushed down to the wall again with the phone in-hand, and quickly tapped the Answer button, holding it up to see his idol's smiling face looking back at him.

"Privet~!" Viktor said excitedly, waving with a fork in his hand, and gave a wink for good measure.

Yuri could feel his face flush all the more, "H-Hey Viktor... I'm so sorry, was I interrupting you?"

"Not at all!" He answered happily, "It's dinnertime here in St. Petersburg and I was eating, but I'm at home with my best friend. We're just kinda hanging out, so this call is no trouble at all."

Yuri's heart sank for some reason, "...Best friend? Why am I even asking that!? Of course he has friends!"

Viktor turned the phone around to show off his big poodle, "Makkachin!"

The younger skater felt a lightning bolt shoot through him, "Ah crap, I feel so stupid! Of course he's talking about his dog! He shook his head though and fawned over the pup he knew from photos, "Aw he looks great!"

"Thanks! He's a huge cuddle-bug too. But anyway, your friend?"

"Oh! Right...!" Yuri twitched, and twisted around so both he and Phichit would be in the screen together, looking up at the phone, and the silver legend's face on the screen, "This is my best friend here in Detroit, Phichit Chulanont! He's the disbeliever."

"Oh holy Hell you weren't kidding." The Thai skater said, as though Viktor couldn't hear. He suddenly threw his arms over Yuri's head, "YOU HIT THE JACKPOT!"

Viktor laughed, even as Yuri dropped the phone outright from the shake.

[Vitya! Are you going to get out there and practice or not!?] Yakov yelled.

[Yeah yeah gimme a minute! Yuri's about to skate!]

[Yuri!? Yuri is right here!]

Yurio gave him the middle finger just for the insult of being forgotten, but Viktor shrugged it off and made a face, [Yuri Katsuki. He's in Japan right now at his own National competition! Let me wish him luck! Sheesh!] He shook his head and looked back down at his phone, "Sorry about that. I'm being pestered to finish so we can leave."

"Well...we've been FaceTiming for like 2 hours...I'm sure they're well within their rights." Yuri laughed nervously, feeling much more relaxed. He started to pull the zipper down on the front of his team jacket, revealing his Short Program costume beneath, "You don't have to stay on the line all the way up to me taking the ice."
"Well, let me at least say Davai before you go. I'll watch your show as soon as I can, okay? I'm sure you'll do perfectly. You've been working so hard these past two weeks. You're more than ready for a great come-back."

"I hope you like what you see." Yuri answered, feeling hopeful, "Celestino's been jealous at how much you've been helping me behind the scenes. He teased the other day that you should be charging me for all the time you've taken."

The aforementioned coach just shook his head as he waited nearby for his skater's name to be called, "He's practically your adjunct coach at this point, Yuri. I think you listen more to him than you do to me."

"I don't mean it that way!" Yuri protested nervously, "But how can I turn down tips from Viktor Nikiforov when he offers!?"

"I get it, I get it..."

"Ahhh Celestinoooo!"

Viktor just laughed, "I don't want to get between you two."

Yuri glanced back at the phone and sighed, but smiled anyway, feeling better, "It's okay. ...Hey, the person ahead of me is finishing. I should get off the line."

"Okay. Do your very best. Skate like I'm there with you, cheering you on from the stands. Davai~!"

Yuri sat up on his bed, exhausted, but with the Gold medal hanging from his fingers. His phone was propped up on a small holder on the nightstand next to him, and he smiled eagerly, "I still can't believe it. I took this right out of Asahi-kun's hands. Thanks to you, I'll probably get to go to Four Continents and Worlds now."

"You have no idea how excited I am for you right now!" The Russian clapped, "I'm so proud!"

Cheeks flushed, "I...couldn't have done this without you, Viktor. I...I want to dedicate my Exhibition to you tomorrow, if that's okay."

Crystal blue eyes watered, and Viktor cried dramatically on his end of the call, "That's so cool!"

"Can you see me?" Viktor asked, standing in the mouth of the hall that lead into the rink, Russian team jacket hanging loose from his shoulders, barely hiding the Aria costume under it, "I'm through the curtain."

"Uhhh it's hard to tell...none of the cameras on my feed are pointing that way." Yuri answered, holding the phone up as he squinted at the television; the call was on Speaker. Phichit sat next to him as footage from Euros played, "Oh! There you are! I saw you for half a second as Emil did the Axel!"

"Just wait a minute longer. When the cameras focus on me, I'll wave just for you."

Yuri's face went red, "Ah jeeze...you don't have to do that. People will think you're losing your mind if you're waving at no one."
"How would they know?" The Russian laughed. The music above cut out and the audience clapped their loud applause; Emil bowed as toys and flowers were tossed out in appreciation. He started moving over towards the kiss and cry as event staff went out to clear the ice, "They'd probably think I'm just waving to whoever is in that direction."

"I guess so..."

"Vitya, get off the phone already, it's almost your turn!" Yakov scolded, only to gape incredulously at the dumb-happy smile on his athlete's face, "Are you talking to Katsuki again?"

"Yeah, why?" Viktor laughed in wonder, "The score hasn't even been called yet."

"You need to focus!"

"I am... focused." He answered easily, "I'm about to skate my Free Program...and I've dedicated it to him. What better way to get my head in the game than to talk to the man who's inspired me so?"

Yuri's face was bright red as he overheard it; Phichit pat his shoulder in support and laughed quietly. The skating legend returned his attention to the call and smiled, "Yuri... If I win Gold this weekend, I'll come to Taipei to show my support in person at Four Continents."

Nearly dropping the phone from the surprise of it, Yuri's eyes were wide. He shook his head and steeled himself, "...That's practically like saying you'll come anyway!"

"How about it? Do you want me to?"

"Uhhhh YEAH!"

It felt like the plane had arrived an eternity ago, and Yuri was bouncing up onto the balls of his feet in anxious excitement. His heart pounded, but skipped a beat when he saw people starting to come down to the exit lobby where he was waiting, I can't believe he's actually coming here to watch me skate...this is like a dream...!

When that silver-haired head finally appeared at the top of the escalator, Viktor looked around frantically to see if he could spot the man he'd come for. Hearing his name yelled out made it easier, and he spotted Yuri easily enough by the man's jumping and arm-waving. He smiled to himself and tried to be patient as the line went down, but once he was through and on the main level, he stepped forward with a faster pace and spread his arms out, "Yuri...!"

"Viktor!" The younger figure answered, rushing forward. He slowed his sprint right before colliding with the man, and paused outright, unsure if he really could or should leap straight into a hug...but Viktor closed the gap before he could mull it over, and the warmth of the embrace was enough to answer the question. He wrapped his arms around the Russian's larger frame quickly, practically crying from how happy he was, "It's so great to see you in person again!"

The silver legend was quick to offer another kiss on the cheek in greeting, and smiled happily, "It feels like it's been so much longer than it really has been... How was your trip? I feel bad that you decided to wait here until I arrived..."

"My trip was fine. But how could I leave!? When you said you'd be getting here only a few hours later, I knew I had to stay! There's no way I could just sit still in my hotel room and twiddle my thumbs until you texted me that you were out front." Yuri said quickly, already out of breath.
Viktor felt even more elated with every word, and leaned down to offer another hug, "It's feels so strange..." He started, arms embracing a bit tighter, "I'm so used to whole crowds screaming and cheering, and yelling my name whenever I turn up at a competition...but it's never meant nearly so much to me as hearing you greet me here. I'm really glad I thought to come... I haven't felt my heart race like this in a really long time."

Yuri was practically putty in the man's arms, tears of joy in his eyes even as he was in disbelief at the words. He couldn't help but pull back slightly so he could rub the droplets away, and laughed at his expense, "I'm really glad you're here."

The Russian huffed a quiet laugh, "Then why are you crying?"

"I'm...just so happy."

"...They've practically been tied at the hip all weekend." Phichit commented, grinning at the sight of his friend a bit further down the hall. Yuri was stretching in preparation for his Free Skate, with the legendary Russian skater close by, "It's such a difference from before."

Celestino crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head, "Well, what else would Viktor do if not hang out with Yuri? He's the only reason to be here."

"I guess so, but still. It's a crazy thing that Viktor's here at all, don't you think? Just for Yuri?"

"Don't think too hard about it. I'll take whatever I can get if it means Yuri skates better."

"Yeah...!"

"So you're ready for this?" Viktor asked supportively, offering his hands to help the younger skater stand.

Yuri nodded and drew a breath as he rose up to his feet, only to descend again to grab his stretching mat, and rolled it up in his hands, "As ready as I'll ever be... My heart is racing and I'm nervous as all heck, but..." He raised his eyes, a fire of determination in them, "I know I can make it to the podium because you're with me."

The silver Russian smiled adoringly, and reached his arms over the skater's shoulders, even though Yuri stood at equal height to himself while wearing skates and guards. He offered his hug, and then pulled the man's head forward, kissing his brow unexpectedly, "I know you will, too. You've been breaking personal bests since December. You're amazing, Yuri."

Cheeks were bright pink, and Yuri was stunned into silence by the gesture. By the time his mind caught up with him again, there were tears in his eyes, and he choked back a laugh of disbelief, "...You don't...know how much it means to me to hear you say that."

"Ohmygodhe'shere." Yuri said breathlessly, seeing the message on his phone, "Are we ready!? Is the place clean enough!? Do I have anything stuck in my teeth!?!"

"Yuri. Chill. It's just Viktor." Phichit tried to calm his friend, waving his hands down as he backed up towards their front door, "You've been talking to him nonstop for more than 2 months straight. And what are we going to do right now anyway? He's literally right outside."
"He came all this way just for my graduation everything has to be perfect." Yuri said, his voice cracking in its whispered high pitch. He suddenly rushed forward though and grabbed the knob himself, twisting it around to pry the panel open. The Russian's face beamed to see him, and his own eyes widened in excitement, all prior panic forgotten as he lunged forward unburdened, "Viktor!"

The silver legend laughed and caught the man, swinging him around once in the hall before setting him back down onto his feet again, "Yuri...!"

Neither would let go of the other, but the younger figure nervously gestured into the small shared apartment, "You're probably tired from the flight... come on inside, don't stand on ceremony!" He said, only then noticing the small pile of luggage that Viktor had hidden behind him, "Oh... let me help you..."

"I actually made a pit-stop on the way over here... I wanted to help celebrate by doing something special for you." The Russian explained, lifting up the plastic bags first; the sound of glass bottles in brown paper clacked up against one another as he picked them up, "I did say we should drink together again... right?"

Yuri's cheeks became rosy, but he nodded as he hefted up a few of the travel totes, "Y-yeah! What'd you get...?"

"Why don't I show you?"

It wasn't long before the dorm-style apartment was filled with the small of mulling wine from the kitchen, and Viktor fanned his hand over the simmering pot, wafting the air up towards himself so he could smell it, "...Ahh it's ready. You're really going to like this... but let it cool down a bit; it's still pretty hot."

"The only thing on television right now besides the news and documentaries is The Ring, Yuri." Phichit called from the front room, "It's that or we watch the off-air channels."

"That's fine." He called back; he watched Viktor carefully as mulled wine was ladled out of the small cooking pot and into a mug, and he took the offered drink from his idol gratefully. It was warm enough to feel the heat through the thick ceramic wall, and he smelled it just as Viktor had, "Wow... This is unlike anything I've ever had before."

"Right?" The Russian nodded, pouring himself a glass as well, "Does your friend want any?"

"Phichit-kun, you want to try some?"

"Sure!"

A third cup was prepared, and the duo came out of the small kitchen, heading into the meager open space that served as the living-room. The drink was handed off to Phichit, and he smelled it happily before trying to sip, only to regret it, "Yee! Hot!"

"Careful." Viktor teased, finding a spot right in the middle of the couch, putting the Thai skater on his left as he sat down. He offered the spot on his right to Yuri, making sure to put him on the side free from his bangs, so he could watch the younger man more easily, "So we're watching a horror movie, huh?"

"Sorry... We don't get great selection." Yuri sighed, "We can only afford the next-step-up-from-basic television package, so our options are limited."

"It's fine," The Russian laughed, looking around the small space, "This whole thing is really exciting..."
for me anyway. I mean, my place is way bigger, but this *feels* big. I don't get any company back home."

"...Really? But...why? I figured you'd have people trying to break your doors down trying to get in." Yuri said, surprised. He took his place on the couch as well, carefully blowing on the surface layer of wine, and sipped a few drops cautiously, "Wow this is really good..."

"Spasibo~!" Viktor smiled eagerly, "But...yeah, it's the truth. In St. Petersburg, it's really just me and Yakov and the rest of the skating team, but none of them really pay me visits at home since we see each other at the rink a lot. I try not to invite random fans into my house anyway. Just close friends; most of them aren't local though."

"I guess that makes sense..."

"Oh, it's starting...!" Phichit announced, using the remote to raise the volume. He quickly got up and hopped across the room then to turn out some of the lights, and skipped back to his side of the couch.

The movie wasn't even half-over before wine had put the Thai skater into an early coma. Yuri wasn't faring much better, but at least he was still awake. His eyes focused on the screen, and the eerie imagery of the *video* within the tale; he didn't see the shadow of an arm coming down behind him. He yelped quietly and twitched when he felt it, looking back behind himself at first to wonder what had touched him...only to spot a hand there dangling off the back of the couch. He blinked tiredly, cheeks flushed from the alcohol, and he glanced back to the other side to look at the man who'd just pulled the 'stretch and settle' maneuver on him; the Russian's own mulled wine mug was still in his left hand, perched on his lap for easy sipping, where it had been since the movie started.

Yuri could feel his heart pounding in his throat, but he wasn't sure what to say or do. He nervously tried to sip at his drink again, only to find the mug empty. Viktor hadn't said a word, or moved anymore; the arm was kept on the top part of the couch behind where Yuri sat. Nervously, Yuri relaxed into his spot again, even though he could feel the man's arm on the back of his neck and shoulders. He found feel himself calming down after a few minutes like that, but eventually Viktor drained the last of his own hot wine as well, cool as it was by then, and leaned forward to put it onto the small circular kind-of-coffee-table in front of them. In the process, Yuri could feel the man's arm slip over his shoulder, a hand clasping behind it to hold the rest of the figure steady as he reached, and when Viktor sat back up again...the arm slid straight down his back, wrapping right around him as though it was the most natural thing.

"This movie is a completely different experience when you're a bit buzzed," The silver legend mused, "Right?"

"Y-yeah..." Yuri agreed nervously, feeling the thumb on that hand starting to rub slowly against his arm. Viktor was pressed lightly against his side, and he was sure the man could feel his heart pounding all over again, but no commentary came on it...and he tried to settle down again.

More minutes passed that way, and the alcohol helped quiet his mind. Though it had only been the one serving, Yuri felt the wine as though it were 3; enough to make his head tingle and everything around him feel lighter. The movie was more intense though, and he found himself jumping and hiding behind his hands at the most recent jump-scare. He could hear his idol laughing quietly.

"You okay?"

"M-mhm."

"You don't have to finish if it's too scary," Viktor went on, turning where he sat.
Yuri's heart was in his throat when he felt it...he could only assume it was a nose-tip and lips nuzzling his ear, but he felt paralyzed by the surprise. Before long, the sensation moved to his cheek, nudging his hands away, which he anxiously allowed.

"We can stop the movie if you want..." Viktor whispered, moving back to the younger man's ear, then going low towards the first patch of neck just under it.

"N-no...I...w-want...to keep going..." Yuri answered. "Do I mean the movie though...?"

"Then I won't stop it..." The Russian replied, making Yuri wonder if he meant the movie. Lips pressed to lightly against skin, and Viktor wedged his arm a bit lower behind the younger man's frame, making it easier to lean in towards him. He slipped his free left hand around, and dared to settle it down over Yuri's nearest leg, but was careful only to move it forward slowly, testing the waters with just his fingertips brushing against the wrinkles in the man's sweatpants, then further so he could feel the muscle under it. Yuri's frame tightened a little, but he didn't pull away, and so Viktor kept going, pressing a true kiss to that pale neck.

"Nnhh..." Yuri breathed worriedly, heart pounding even harder in his chest. He felt fingertips become a whole palm, and it slid up his thigh, fingers moving between where he had both of them clamped tightly together. Maybe it was the alcohol, but the longer Viktor worked on him, the more he relaxed into it, until he could feel the wet heat of a tongue on his neck, and the fingers between his legs were able to fit right between them without resistance. Yuri dared to turn his face towards the man beside him, and the moment he felt the hand rise from his lap, he knew it would be on his cheek soon after...and it was. It stayed there for a moment as Viktor's cool eyes looked deep into his worried gaze, then a finger traced down the edge of his jaw, settling under his chin to pull him nearer. He swallowed nervously; he could feel his lips tingling, but there wasn't a muscle in his body that wanted to stop. As soon as he felt silver bangs brush against his nose, he closed his eyes, and let the kiss happen.

It was warm, and tasted like the mulled wine. He felt a very slight hum against his nose and Viktor breathed a quiet sigh of relief...and pleasure. They held there for a little while, but when the Russian pulled away again, it was only far enough to open his eyes and look for a reaction.

"V...Vik...tor...?"

"Sorry..." He answered hesitantly, "I...couldn't help myself."

Yuri's silence felt like an eternity, though it was only a few seconds, and his shocked expression changed to one of longing, "Don't...be sorry. Don't ever be sorry." He whispered, leaning close enough that the words could be felt as they were spoken. He didn't dare start a second kiss himself though; he was too scared. A thousand things raced through his mind, but it was quieted down by Viktor leaning forward again, drawing him into another warm, wet moment against his lips.

Viktor's heart raced in its own right, but it steadied into a thrilled gallop when he felt Yuri's frame press in a little closer to his own, twisting slightly towards him. He lowered his hand away from the man's chin then, and slid it down the front of the younger figure's chest, over his waist and the curve of hip and thigh. It curled under both legs and pulled them up, hinging them over his lap before returning to Yuri's waist to hold him there softly...and the kisses continued.

It wasn't long before confidence grew in Yuri's spirit, and he let himself engage more earnestly, demanding kisses rather than just giving permission for them to happen. He pressed a hand to his idol's cheek, but then both slid down the man's chest, then under his arms, and literally pulled Viktor closer. The silver legend was easy to convince, and they descended together to the other corner of the couch, finding new intimacy along the way. Yuri only hesitated to continue after his
idol had become wedged between the back of the couch and his own frame, and arms wrapped around him. He looked into those slate eyes, glinting by the light of the movie playing forgotten behind him, "...You didn't really come for my graduation, did you?"

The skating legend smiled innocently, and nosed his lips, "I came for you, and all that you are." He answered easily, tilting his head against the arm-rest as he leaned forward again and closed his eyes, "I've been hoping for this for a long time..."

Yuri was breathless for a moment, anxiety creeping in even as he felt another few kisses pressed to his lips. He hadn't been able to enjoy them though, eyes open in disbelief, and his idol pulled back as if he could sense it. Yuri tried to put words to his worries, "Wh...why me though...?" He whispered, "...You...could have anyone you wanted... I'm...nothing special at all... J-just...some dime-a-dozen skater with the JSF... I'm n-not famous or all that talented... I'm nobody..."

Viktor hesitated, disappointed, "Do you have so little faith in yourself...?"

"Th-that's not it!" The younger man protested quietly, hoping Phichit would stay asleep where he was, "I j-just... I've never...and you're..."

"Ah...so that's it..." The silver legend smiled then, "You're nervous because this is your first time being this way with someone."

"Ehm...well...y-yeah, but..."

"I want you because you captured my heart in Sochi." Viktor explained, nosing in closer again, "And the more I've gotten to know you since then, the closer I feel to you... I want to be with you..."

Yuri could feel his eyes watering behind his glasses, but his arms were pinned around the Russian's sides, so he couldn't reach up to clear them. As though able to read his mind though, Viktor removed the glasses for him, and gently rubbed his thumb across both eyes.

"I want you to feel safe with me." The older figure explained, folding the glasses with his fingers and gently letting them fall to the carpet at the foot of the couch, "I'm not just some player looking to take advantage of a fan. I did that once a long time ago and it felt terrible. Will you give me a chance to prove myself...?"

It didn't take much to convince Yuri to agree, though he still felt as though he was in a dream. He nodded and let himself melt into the feeling of the Russian's arms around him, and the taste of mulled wine pressed to his lips.

TaK taK Tak

Yuri's eyes were open with a start, and he inhaled a surprised breath. For a moment, all he could focus on was the noise beyond his door.

"Yuri! I'm going to the rink!" Phichit called, "Don't spend all day in bed! We have to get to the auditorium in a few hours!"

"...Mnhh...okay!" He called back, descending to the pillows again...and realized there was a warm body sharing them with him. For half a heartbeat, he couldn't believe that Viktor was there in his own bed with him, but...there he was, sleeping soundly despite of the noise. He was surprised to find the Russian move in his slumber though, repositioning and cuddling in closer, arms going around
him as the older figure found a new spot to rest in...and a hand went flat against his exposed stomach. His t-shirt had come up in the night, leaving a good part of his bare skin in plain sight, and Viktor's palm felt hot against it.

Shimatta...! If I move, he might wake up!

Yuri stayed that way for what felt like ages. Every moment that Viktor stayed asleep gave him time to assess his situation though; one arm was wedged under his lower back, the other with a palm down against his abdomen. On his side, the Russian's frame bent and curled around him, making his knees rise up to go over the man's legs, pressed flat against the back of his thighs. He could feel the warmth of each breath against his neck; Viktor was as close as any lover could be.

...Is that what we are now...? Did we...really spend half the night kissing...? It's a bit hazy...from the wine...

The silver legend's hand moved against his skin, pinky finger brushing against the elastic waistband of his sweatpants. It made Yuri a little nervous, but since the man was still sleeping, he could assume nothing. Things only started to get awkward when he could feel the wet spot forming there against the fabric, and Yuri's face went red to realize the state of his arousal.

Oh jeeze, if Viktor wakes up now and feels that...he's going to think I...

"Mmnnhh..." The Russian skater mumbled quietly, seemingly oblivious, only to smile and lift his face, "You should let me help you with that."

Yuri practically had a heart-attack on the spot, but his heart was caught in his throat a second later as he felt the hand on his stomach move over his sweats, pressing firmly against the stiff flesh under it. One unexpectedly gentle squeeze, and he moaned out a quiet gasp, right hand coming up to wedge itself into the space between the Russian's chest and his own shoulder, "V-Viktor... I didn't...r-realize you...were awake..."

"At the knock." He explained, pressing his fingers down again, and relished in the sound of Yuri's reluctant, squeaky moan. He offered a kiss to one cheek to distract the man, and when that worried face turned towards him, he kissed those lips instead, sliding his hand under the fabric at the same time. At worst, the kiss was interrupted by the younger man's surprised gasp, but he could feel where legs parted slightly where they were bent over his own, giving him wordless permission to continue. The morning evolved into a session of adoring kisses and heavy petting, at least until Yuri couldn't focus anymore on anything but what the Russian's hand was doing. By then, Viktor was curious. He retracted his hand, and laughed quietly at the confused whine of the younger man's surprise, but pat his legs twice, "I want you to sit on my lap."

Yuri's face flushed an even deeper shade of red then, but the ache between his legs demanded he follow-through, and he pushed himself up onto his elbows before rolling over the Russian's frame, and sat over his hips as stated. He felt the man wiggle under him, but only so far as was necessary to pull the front of a t-shirt over the back of his own head, exposing that pale core to his eyes. Hands went right back to center though, picking up where the first left off. Yuri could feel himself nearing the edge with each expert stroke, and he tried to pull off again, "I c-can't...I'll...get it all over you..."

"That's the point," Viktor mused, coaxing the younger man back by raising his knees, "I want you to."

It was too soon to resist; all Yuri could do was pull his hands up to cover his face, even as his whole frame quaked and quivered from the release. He couldn't bear to look though; he could only gasp a breath with each subsequent squeeze Viktor offered, practically milking him through the entire
climax and then some. Yuri could do nothing more than pant in a desperate bid to catch his breath.

Yuri Katsuki - 84.13 - 173.2 - 257.33 - 9th

Yuri sighed as he watched his name sink further and further down the ranking board with each passing performance. The only thing that pulled him out of the mindset was the sound of blade-guards thumping on the floor behind him, getting louder with each step. Arms went around his sides; they didn't hug, but instead held up two lidded cups.

"Hope you don't mind vanilla. It's all they had left." Viktor purred, offering up one of those cups as he pressed his chin to one shoulder.

"No, it's fine. Thanks." The younger figure answered sullenly, taking the drink and accepting the completion of the hug once that hand was free. He held it up with both hands around the paper cylinder, and smelled it through the mouth-piece before taking a careful sip, "I really hoped I'd get on the podium with you. Otabek and Chris killed it though."

"You'll get there." The Russian reassured, nuzzling the back of Yuri's head. He lifted his own drink up in front of the man's chest, and smelled it over a shoulder, eyes roaming toward the television screen as it switched over from the rankings to the next skater, "Out of 30 some-odd skaters though, coming in the top 10 at Worlds isn't half bad."

"Guess not." Yuri allowed, sinking back into the warmth behind him, "So what are you going to do over the summer? I know you were working on some programs for next season already, but you seem to be in a bit of a rut about them. Maybe take a break?"

"Mmhh...maybe." Viktor shrugged and sipped a bit of the foam from the top of his drink, unable to tilt it high enough to take a true sip, "I haven't thought about it much."

"You should come visit Hasetsu with me then." Yuri suggested, turning his head to face the man, "I don't think anyone back home really knows that you and I are friends now. They'd all be really surprised to see you!"

"For the whole summer?"

"Er...well, maybe not the whole summer. I only have plans to stay for a week myself, before I go back to Detroit."

"I'll have to call back home to make arrangements for Makkachin, but...yeah!" The silver legend answered eagerly, kissing the side of the younger man's neck happily where he could get at it, "You said your parents ran a hot-springs resort, right?"

An uncertain tapping echoed into the room from the door, and Viktor stood up from where he'd been lounging on the double-wide bed. He passed in front of the television and checked through the peep-hole, spying the blurred image of a pale face, fluffy black hair, and a cerulean-colored jacket. He smiled and unlocked the deadbolt, slid the chain across, and pulled the door open, "Hey."

"Sorry I'm so late..." Yuri mumbled, stepping through as Viktor held the panel aside, "I got stuck on the phone."

"No worries." He answered; he pressed the door back into place and reset the locks, then followed
after the younger figure. He paused behind and helped pull the jacket off, gently tossing the crinkly garment onto the back of a nearby arm-chair. Hands went down to Yuri's waist then, softly nudging him to turn around, "I'm glad you're here now."

"Do you...normally stay by yourself?" Yuri wondered, looking around as he rotated in place. With Viktor's hands settled on his hips, Yuri lifted his own to clasp lightly around the man's upper arms, and raised his eyes to the blue looking back at him.

"Normally? No..." The silver Russian answered, nudging in closer until he could feel his bangs brush against the younger figure's brow, "Just this time."

Yuri's face flushed, but he had no words to speak as lips pressed against his own. He let himself hum a quiet breath of content.

"Stay with me tonight." Viktor asked pointedly, brushing the tip of his nose past the other, "You don't owe Celestino anything now. The competition is over."

"I planned to."

The legend's cheeks flushed for once, "That's just what I wanted to hear."

"So...can I see it?" Yuri wondered then, letting himself start to settle into the idea that he wasn't going anywhere for a while.

Viktor breathed a smile and nodded excitedly, gesturing towards the bed with one hand as he stepped aside towards some of his things. Yuri sat back patiently, kicking his shoes off before pushing further up onto the flat of the bed. Legs crossed under him just as the Russian finally stood up and came back towards him, sitting sideways on the edge of the mattress at first, holding something in his hands.

"It's been a while since I felt this excited about something," Viktor started, looking at the black-velvet case. He turned it around over one palm, and flexed his long pale fingers over the lid to pry it open, revealing the gold metal within, "But I really feel like we were both out there tonight, winning this together."

"Wow..." Yuri whispered, seeing his reflection in the shiny surface, "I've never been this close to Worlds Gold before."

The Russian huffed a quiet laugh and reached for the lanyard, lifting the whole thing from the case carefully. He spread the ribbon out between both hands and nudged it forward, beckoning for Yuri to lean his head forward. He did so nervously, and the medal went forward, slipping over the younger man's head until it could hang on its own around his neck, "One day you'll win this yourself. I'm sure of it."

"Tsh...not while you're still skating." Yuri teased, sitting normally again to hold the disc in his own hands, admiring it, "This is really special though. It's your 5th in a row."

"...Meh." Viktor shrugged, focused more on finding a way to get Yuri to unlock his legs so he could thread them together where they sat, "They all blend together after a while."

"...Really?"

"Well, I guess the second half of this season will stand out from the rest." The Russian supposed, giving up when the leg-weaving felt less comfortable than he'd hoped. He moved instead to his hands and knees, and crawled out in front of his young friend, teasing his way closer until they were
nose to nose, and he could press his hands down aside the man's seat, "These last 5 years have been pretty lonely for me...until you."

"R-Really...?"

"Mh." He hummed, moving his right hand up to sneak around Yuri's side and lower back, and leaned into a kiss that put the man down onto his back. One leg went flat under him, the other bending out of the way; fingers combed through his hair to hold his head, and he wished he could stay in that kiss forever. Giving Yuri a chance to breathe again though, he propped himself up onto his elbows, and looked on adoringly at the man he'd pinned beneath his larger frame, "...I want more from this, Yuri..."

Cheeks flushed even darker than they already were, but the younger man didn't look quite as surprised as Viktor had thought he would be. Yuri swallowed his nerves and nodded, "...I do, too..."

"Let's make it official, then..." The Russian suggested, feeling hopeful, "No more teasing and flirting...no more making people wonder what we're really doing. I want to be open with you... I want to kiss you in public and tell the whole world what you mean to me." He smiled wider and gave a familiar undulating grind against the younger man's prone form, "Be my boyfriend, Yuri~!"

"Y-you're...serious...?"

"Of course!" Viktor answered easily, "I figured I'd give you a bit of space to get used to me, since you were drunk at Sochi when we got so close before...but I think you're there sober now. Right? You've let me touch you in ways no one else ever has... Let me do more..."

Yuri could feel his heart racing, but the pressure of his idol lying on top of him was whittling away at whatever anxiety he might've had to resist...and nodded, much to Viktor's surprise. He swallowed again and drew a breath, "I don't have to worry about skating at the Exhibition tomorrow... I...want you to have me... Viktor..."

"Mmhh..."

"Viktor!"

The hotel room was gone; the bed vanished with it. Slate eyes fluttered open, and the thrum of plane engines vibrated all around.

"Wow, you were out." Yuri commented, pulling Jiro up over the dividing console between their seats to set the pup on his lap, "The seatbelt light just turned on though. I guess we're about to arrive in Moscow finally."

The silver Russian struggled to get his bearings, opening his eyes one at a time as he lifted up from where he found himself on the extended seat. His head spun a little as he rose up, but there was enough about his surroundings that felt like déjà vu that he was able to sort out which button on the arm-rest made the seat go back to normal again.

"Did you have a good nap at least?" Yuri wondered, rubbing Jiro's head between his ears as he watched his partner clamber for normalcy.
"I..." Viktor managed, reaching up with a free hand to pinch the bridge of his nose, "...Did I dream or...live an alternative lifetime...?"

"Hah?"

The silver man looked at his hand then, and the gold band on his finger there. He felt strange, needing to take a moment to put all the memories back in order again, and sort out the true from the imagined, "...Sorry..."

"You're not making any sense." Yuri critiqued, "What do you remember...?"

"Finding you...at the Sochi hotel check-out." He answered, closing his eyes again as the seat went upright and he could lean back against it, "Instead of leaving you alone...I went up to you. Everything...between us was so different, and yet...so much still felt the same."

"Maybe your penchant for predicting the future inspired your dreams to come back like this." Yuri suggested, "You mentioned a while back that you didn't dream at all anymore... Maybe this was just a back-log?"

"...Dream constipation...?" Viktor wondered with a sad laugh, "A back-log indeed...or maybe just a log..."

"That's gross."

"It was pretty interesting though... I feel like the dream kept going for a bit, into the first few seconds after you woke me up..." The Russian went on, "Up until then... Well, maybe my dreams were peppered with bias. You weren't so anxious around me and you never had any panic attacks before you competed. But then..."

Yuri just made a face, His thoughts are bouncing around all over the place...he's still half-asleep...

"Maybe you never would've suffered so much if the reason why I turned up hadn't been so unexpected in the first place." Viktor wondered, "I dreamt that we messaged and called each other after that Final...we'd be on the phone all the time after a while, hanging up only because we had to. You recovered from your crash-and-burn in Sochi and took Gold at your Nationals, and got to go to your other events after that... I even went with you to Taipei after Euros..."

"Four Continents wasn't in Taipei that year."

"...Oh...it wasn't?" Viktor huffed incredulously, "But it was so vivid."

"It was there the year before though. Maybe you got them switched up."

"Maybe..."

"What happened?"

"I think you won Silver... The way we were there was like how we were at around Onsen on Ice... Then I actually got to visit you in Detroit for your college graduation... I really put the moves on you then." He laughed at himself, "I think my big problem in Japan was the lack of a couch."

Yuri shook his head, "...A couch?"

"I'm kidding." Viktor huffed, "You actually let me help you with your little problem though, unlike that time after Barcelona when you crawled out of the room all embarrassed."
"Oh boy, yeah...I can see your wishful thinking all over that one."

"My dreams have a slight bias, I admit..." The silver Russian sighed happily, "But I can also safely admit that nothing I ever did scared or hurt you. Even when you let me take you at Worlds..."

"That soon, huh?"

"Mhm." He nodded triumphantly. "We made love the night before the Exhibition, just like we do now...and after, we went to Hasetsu to visit."

"Oh?"

"You had only just agreed to go out with me officially by then. I guess we made love to seal the deal." Viktor suggested, "But then we showed up at Yu-Topia holding hands, and all craziness broke loose."

"I bet it would. Was that the first time you came there?"

"Hah, yeah... We took the train from Tokyo. We spent a week at the resort, and made love every night in that same unused banquet hall that your family turned into a bedroom for me. But then it was time for me to go back to St. Petersburg... I checked my bags and was getting ready to say goodbye, but I just couldn't." He explained, feeling sadness creep in, "I got all the way to the front of the line into security before I changed my mind about leaving at all. Somehow I knew where you were though, and I ran all through the airport until I found you again...and I kissed you and hugged you and told you I couldn't stand to leave you." He reached up to rub his eyes on the back of one wrist, "Sorry. It still feels so real to me for some reason. I know it was a dream..."

"Hey..." Yuri moved one hand over the console and pressed it to his husband's leg, giving it a reassuring rub, "I'm not going anywhere. We're going to St. Petersburg together."

"I know..." Viktor nodded, and set his own hand atop the one consoling him, "In my dream, I decided then to be your coach...that way I'd never have to go away. We went back to Detroit together to get your things, and we picked up Makkachin on the way back to Japan. So I guess, in the end...we both brought that rare winter storm to Hasetsu in early April...but instead of me having to spend 8 months trying to seduce you without knowing you'd forgotten about the Sochi banquet, we were officially dating that whole time... By the time we got to Barcelona, it was my idea to get the rings...and I proposed to you for real there at the Sagrada Familia..."

"Did I still have to win Gold before we could have the wedding?"

"I didn't even make you do that for real." Viktor huffed.

"Weeeeell..." Yuri simpered, "Technically we were married before I won that Gold at Worlds...but we didn't actually have the wedding until after that..."

"I guess that's true..." The Russian nodded and shook his head, only then remembering that the seatbelt light was on, and reached to pull his belts over his lap to fasten them, "I still have so much to arrange for the next wedding..."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

Viktor waited a moment, thinking on it, but then shook his head, "Just dream about it more, and tell me all your ideas."
The layover at Sheremetyevo was mercifully short, only two hours, but that did little to assuage Viktor's nervous vigilance. Yuri watched him skeptically, keeping Jiro on his lap while the Russian attempted to snack on something, making his own observations.

*He's doing the same thing as that time we hung out with Yurio on the waterfront in St. Petersburg... Looking around like a meerkat watching out for eagles.*

Jiro fidgeted where he sat, eyeballing the food on the table. They sat at the front of a small restaurant-style café within the airport, waiting for the call that their last flight would be boarding. Yuri reached across and stole a French fry, offering it to the salivating Akita, "You're acting like you think you'll get arrested if anyone recognizes you."

Viktor looked over in surprise, pulled out of his hyper-attentive stupor, "...Part of me worries I might."

"We didn't announce this trip." Yuri offered, "No one knows we're passing through except people we know. Even if there's rumors going around that we're going to attend Euros, despite neither of us competing, it says nothing about our plans to stop in Russia first. Plus, once we leave the airport, we'll only be making a short pit-stop to get the R.V., and then we're leaving. Like you said, this visit is to see Kon, who is in the middle of nowhere."

"I know..."

"And considering how wildly popular you still are here, it'd be nuts for anyone to confront you." Yuri went on, letting the pup lick his fingers for the salt, "And at least for the moment, we're still on the post-customs side of security. People on this side are from everywhere, not just here. We're just travelers, like everyone else."

Viktor remained contemplatively quiet, but nodded.

"...I don't feel like anything I said helped at all."

"Sorry." The silver Russian lowered his eyes to the half-empty plate in front of him, "I was really excited to take this trip, but now that we're actually in the country, I can't help but...be a bit nervous. People in Russia have been thrown into gulags for less than what I've done."

"You didn't do anything. The RSF did."

"The RSF *did* because I married a man." Viktor pointed out, "And *after* the RSF *did*, I joined my husband's team. I practically spit in their faces. ...I went from being Russia's Hero to being a villain."

"You're *not* a villain." Yuri insisted, "You've done nothing disparaging against Russia, and you haven't openly retaliated against them. Everything you've done has only been in furtherance of living your best life. And it's not like you're the first athlete to ever switch nationalities before. How many people seek citizenship in other countries just to have a chance to go to the Olympics in the first place?"

"That's different..." Viktor attempted, resting his jaw in the palm of his hand, elbow propped onto the
table as he picked at the second half of his uneaten sandwich, and the fries next to it, "Leaving Russia to join...I don't know, Lithuania for a chance at the Games is different from being fired from the Russian team, and joining the equally-competitive Japanese team instead. They told the whole world that I was retiring... To them, they probably saw that announcement as a chance to retire with dignity. Joining the JSF after that anyway..." He sighed heavily and looked up, brow furrowed, "I wish my papa was already here with us... Just being around a guy that big and imposing would be enough to keep any possible hecklers away."

"I don't think there'll be any hecklers." Yuri suggested, seeing that his words still made no difference. He made a worried face and reached his clean hand across the table to tug lightly on his partner's sweater sleeve, pulling that hand down from where it was propping up the man's head, and rubbed his fingers over Viktor's once he had it, "Don't make me start to keep track of all the kisses you'll owe me later."

The silver Russian could only smile sadly, "I don't want you to either..."

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Even on the comparatively short flight between Moscow and St. Petersburg, Viktor's dour demeanor hadn't changed. Only after getting Makkachin back did his attitude shift slightly, but even then, the potential for full recovery was dashed by the condition the poor poodle had arrived in.

"...Did they forget to let him out during the layover...?" Yuri wondered anxiously, disgusted by the sight of the disheveled and soiled dog as Makkachin kept a low profile coming out of his crate. The pup's tail wagged, but it practically dusted the floor where he kept down on the ground, whimpering quietly under the attention of his worried human, "This isn't right..."

"Makkachin..." Viktor said quietly, patting the fluff's head as the dog practically crawled under him. He frowned and grit his teeth, "...We're never flying into Russia directly again." He said suddenly, "We'll fly into Helsinki instead and drive the rest of the way."

"...Do you really think this is because he's your dog?" Yuri wondered skeptically, "I don't think th-"

"I don't care." The silver legend answered curtly, "We'll do whatever it takes to stay off of Russian airlines, too. I'm never setting foot into another Aeroflot plane again."

"...Okay..."

.

Despite the length of the trip already, the time-zone change meant it was only early afternoon by the time they'd landed in St. Petersburg, and the need to find a dog groomer was high on the list of things to do. Knowing which one to go to was easy, at least. Even Makkachin perked up a little bit more once he realized the groomer was someone he knew.

[I never thought I'd see this pup again,] The young lady said, black hair pulled into a ponytail behind her head. She took one whiff of the poodle though and shook a hand in front of her nose, [What happened to him? You never let him get into anything dirty, Viktor.]

The silver Russian sighed and shrugged as he watched his dog get hoisted up into a big metal tub, [We just got into town after a long flight. This is all his own mess. Can you fix him?]

[Of course.] She answered, starting the water to check its warmth, [It'll take a while though. Getting him washed and dried alone will take extra time, just so he's not damp before leaving here... I can't let him go outside again in this weather unless he's totally dry.]
The groomer looked Makkachin over carefully. [He's pretty fluffy right now... Give me two hours to make sure his undercoat is dry and he'll be totally ready.]

[Okay. We're going to go pick up our rental in the meantime.]

[Drive safe.]

Yuri looked up as his partner came out of the dog salon, and pushed off the wall he'd been leaning against, "Can they take him?" Snow came down in big white chunks all around, spiraling in the light breeze as cars passed by.

"Yeah." Viktor nodded, "She had a gap in the schedule because of the lousy weather...so we have time to get the camper and come back."

"It'll take that long?"

"Makkachin's a fluffy boi. If she lets him out in these conditions, he could get cold and sick. So, we'll give her all the time she needs to make sure he's warm and dry before we go."

"...Wow...it's way bigger than I thought it would be." Yuri commented, watching as their R.V. - a Thor Palazzo model - was pulled up to the front of the lot. It was a massive thing, sleek on the outside with black, silver, and white streaks, and largely rectangular in shape, making it a much more modern and stylish variant of what Yuri had thought they were getting, "Is this all they had?"

Viktor shook his head, "I don't trust anything older than a few years." He explained, "It was either one of these luxury models, or something you bolt to the bed of a truck."

"...Ah, well, in that case..."

"Do you want to take a look before we get moving?"

The gruff vendor stepped out of the driver's cabin, and walked around the gigantic vehicle to approach them with a clipboard and the keys. Yuri took the hint and stepped away, hoisting Jiro a bit higher against his shoulder as he stepped through the muddy slush. He reached for the handle on the side of the enormous R.V. and pulled it open, reaching his arms forward to put the pup down inside before following in himself. Within the behemoth, it was like a small luxury apartment, compact in all ways but still quite fancy.

There was a small kitchen with what looked like marble counters, a sink - though it was covered for the moment with a similar material as the counter - and dark chestnut cabinetry above and below. There was a full booth-like kitchen table, with a couch directly behind it, facing across the 'hall' towards a reasonably large flat-panel television, and below, of all things, a fireplace. Beyond that was a lavatory with a small sink, and then further beyond, the sliding fabric door that lead into what could only be referred to has the 'master bedroom.' Like the kitchen, it had dark wooden cabinets all around the room, as well as a full head and footboard for the queen-sized bed. At the very back was another lavatory, though that one had a fully functioning shower in it as well, with ornate tile decorating the walls. When Yuri looked to the front of the machination, he spotted the 'loft' space above the driving cabin, which had another queen-sized bed, though without the boards at either end. There was a ladder built in the wall just behind each seat, and two short steps that separated the living space from the driving area itself.
Yuri whistled to himself, *This is crazy. I didn't know campers could be this fancy. How much of Viktor's private funds did this thing cost...?*

Jiro scampered around, sniffing at every baseboard and seat his tiny snoot could reach, but he lifted his head to look to the front when he and Yuri heard the driver's side door open, and Viktor finally got inside. The silver Russian settled into the big driver's seat and tried to get acquainted with all the different devices and settings.

Yuri blinked at him from where he was standing, *Being here is really making him uneasy. He'd be bouncing off the walls with excitement if we did this before the RSF kicked him to the curb...* He made his way through the long space and stepped gingerly into the front cabin, finding the large passenger seat to his husband's right, and looked over, "Viktor...?"

"...Let's just go..."

Surprised to hear such dark words, Yuri nodded quietly and pulled the seatbelt across, listening to the sound of the engine rumble to life. Viktor put the R.V. into gear with the shifter-handle behind the wheel, and turned the steering column towards the road entrance. Driving the massive vehicle took a while to get used to, and it plodded along slowly at first, causing a number of people to honk angrily and take dangerous risks to get around, but the silver Russian eventually got the hang of it and was able to go at a relatively normal pace to get back to the grooming salon.

Makkachin was clearly feeling much better after his ordeal, bouncing and jumping as he normally did as he was sprung from the business. Yuri went in only so far as it was necessary to get the poodle back, and guided him across the street to get into the camper while Viktor finished paying. Jiro was excited to have his big fluffy brother back, and yipped playfully before chasing the clean brown poof up and down the length of the vehicle. Makkachin was quick to find one of the seats in the kitchen booth though, and hopped up onto it before lying down, panting quietly. He lowered his head towards the smaller Akita...but then raised it again and looked towards the door.

For the first time in Yuri's experience, Makkachin bared his teeth and growled, low at first but getting deeper, "...Makka...?"

*Clak Klack eLakk*

The knocking was enough to spook the young skater, and he nervously pushed Jiro under the table before standing up. Makkachin jumped back down from the booth bench and went to the door at Yuri's side, snarling even more than before; each breath in and out was a deep, guttural growl.

"What's gotten into you? It's probably just Vikt-"

"Vyhodi ottuda!" Someone outside yelled; it was definitely not Viktor's voice.

The poodle barked angrily, and Yuri reached only far enough to lock the door before backing up, "*What in the world...!*" He whispered, scared.

"*Otojdi ot dveri!*" Another voice yelled; that one *was* Viktor, "*Iščezni!*"

A few choice words were snapped back and forth, but eventually it sounded like a small group was retreating, their shoes shuffling quickly over snow-covered concrete. No more knocking came, and Yuri scrambled to the driving cabin, barely making it in time to spot a familiar silver-haired head go by in front of it on the way to the other side. Viktor was quick to get in after that, but the clumps of snow stuck to his jacket gave more away than the look on his face at first, and Yuri felt his heart sink into his guts.
The engine came alive again, and the R.V. moved on, pulling out carefully into the street, merging in with sparse winter traffic.

"What the Hell was all that about? Who was outside?" Yuri asked anxiously, "Why does it look like someone pelted you with snowballs?"

Viktor kept a dead stare forward, his face a little paler than it normally was, "...Someone who worked at the salon recognized me. They took and posted a photo of me bringing Makkachin in earlier... Apparently it was shared on a community page, and some sport-hecklers saw it."

"...Sport...hecklers?"

"The kind of people who make plans to stand outside nightclubs and scream profanity at anyone coming out with a same-sex date." He explained stiffly, unblinking, "They got here at the same time we did. You left first with Makkachin and I guess a few of them decided you were easy pickings, since I was still in the groomer's paying the tab." He said, looking down at his hands, white-knuckled around the wheel to keep from shaking, "I'm... I'm sorry... they went after you because of me..."

"...Huh...?"

"As soon as I saw some people go around to the other side of the camper, looking around, I got worried... but when I came outside to see what they were doing, I got pelted on both sides by people who were waiting on the sidewalk." Viktor went on, "It took me a minute to get my head together; I was so surprised and mortified... but then I heard them yell for you to come outside... and I ran into the street to stop them before you could."

Yuri could feel his heart pounding in his chest, and he sank back into the chair as Makkachin came up between their seats. The poodle nosed at his human's arm; there was easily enough space between the two big chairs for a third one to be installed if someone were so inclined. Viktor held on a moment longer before unclenching his fingers from the wheel to offer a few pats to his dog's head, and massaged one ear to calm his nerves.

It felt like a while before anyone spoke again, but at least Viktor seemed calmer, "...We can't come back here."

"We... have to bring the R.V. back though."

"I'll figure something else out..."

Yuri's brow furrowed, but he looked aside when he spotted Jiro trying slowly to come down the small stairs behind the seats. He reached back to offer guidance to the small Akita, and Jiro moved towards it, trying to keep his balance while the camper moved all around him. Once the puppy was close, Yuri lifted him up to put on his lap, "...What if you came on your own...? Would they bother you if I wasn't around?"

"Don't abandon me to them..." The silver legend pleaded, "Stay by me."

"I didn't... mean it like that..." The younger figure said quietly, feeling small suddenly, "I just thought... maybe they'd leave you alone if I wasn't around... It's not like I want to do it."

"I'll just be an easier target if I'm on my own." Viktor explained, a pained note in his tone, "We're stronger if we're together..."

"Then I'll stay and protect you. You should've seen Makkachin earlier... I've never seen him so mad before..." Yuri said, trying to lighten the mood a little, "I think he knew what was happening before I
did... He was ready to *pounce*.

The silver Russian glanced aside, then down to his poodle, and looked on that squishy brown face with its pink tongue hanging in front, "...I...could never imagine Makkachin being mad about *anything*.

"Me neither. It was terrifying. But..." Yuri agreed, reaching over to offer a few pats of his own along the old pup's back and shoulders, "He's a good dog. He wanted to send those hecklers *packing*.

"Maybe we should've let him loose then." Viktor wondered, his fingers relaxing a little where they held the wheel, "It would've been a sight to behold as a group of grown men went running because a *poodle* was chasing them, snapping at their backsides."

"And an Akita, when Jiro's big enough."

The silver legend allowed himself to smile at that idea, "...By then, he'll be like a small *bear*.

"And we're his two favorite non-edible humans."

Viktor nodded, still feeling a little down in spite of it all, "...I guess so."

Yuri could tell that his husband had reached his limit on recovery for the moment, but at least the man wasn't bristling anymore. He waited a moment before looking across again, "Let's take a quick break once we're outside the city. I need a nap, *you* need a good cuddle, and I'm sure the bois would be happy to stop moving for a little while, too, after all the traveling so far today."

"...That...actually sounds really good right now..."
Getting out of St. Petersburg in such blustery winter conditions was a challenge, and the normal 2-hour travel time to Papa Kon's hamlet had been greatly extended. By the end of the first 2 hours, the R.V. had barely traveled half the distance, and Viktor was more than ready for the break. With their travel north putting them nearly directly in the middle of the northwest shore of Lake Ladoga to the east, and the Finnish border to the west, Viktor found a spot to pull over that was safely away from the road, and partly hidden by dense woods.

Door locks were double and triple-checked, the roller shades on all windows were furled, including the ones in the driving cabin, and silence descended on the once-noisy camper. The security alarm was enabled last, and only then did Viktor feel safe enough to unbuckle his seat-belt. He stayed in his seat for a little while longer though, mind racing despite the quiet.

Yuri made sure all the windows behind the cabin were secured and the screen-barriers put into place, but quickly realized his husband still hadn't followed. He lifted Jiro up onto the large bed before going back to the front of the R.V. to find his wayward spouse, and gently set his hand on a shoulder, "You coming back? Everything's ready."

"...Huh? ...Uhm...yeah." The silver Russian answered, as though pulled from a dream. He pushed up from the chair and followed his partner into the main part of the camper, barely registering the sight of everything as he moved through. He hesitated only once he saw the edge of the bed, and its oddly colorful comforter, staying where he was in the open 'doorway' where the sliding barrier had been stowed away.

"Viktor..." Yuri's voice sounded; quiet and nervous. If not for Makkachin's panting, it was quiet enough to hear a pin drop, "We're safe here. There isn't a soul for miles."

"...I know..."

The younger figure pulled his glasses off and set them aside on a small countertop next to the bed, and set his phone timer for an hour, but then went back to his partner, stepping in front of the man before setting hands on his hips, "Did something else happen with the hecklers...?"

Viktor offered a half-hearted shrug, slowly moving his own hands from where Yuri's were perched, up the younger man's arms, until his fingers could curl around the front of his shoulders, "...One of them...outside the R.V..." He started, hating to recall it, "One of them had a baseball bat. I just..."

"...A baseball bat?" Yuri repeated, incredulous, "But it's...it's the middle of the day... Who goes around with a baseball bat, pounding on camper doors?"

"The brazen and uncontrollable." Viktor answered quietly, moving his arms over those shoulders entirely to pull his partner closer, and hugged tightly, "I don't know what miracle happened that made it so you didn't open the door... But I can't shake the imagery from my mind about what I would've found if you had... It's all I can think about...the whole drive up here so far..."

"The miracle was Makkachin...I locked the door outright because he was snarling. Before I even heard the first words." Yuri explained, trying to pull the taller figure towards the bed to make him lie down, "Try not to dwell on what could've happened. It didn't, and we're safe..."

"I can't believe this is where we are now..." The silver Russian said, his voice cracking a little, "All I
wanted was to take a quick trip to visit my father and I feel like I dragged you into a war-zone instead... Mila warned me about that exact thing before...and now I just feel like I didn't listen to her... I thought I could protect you and in the end I just put you in danger..."

"You couldn't have known it would be like this." Yuri tried to reassure, turning slightly to start lifting a foot up onto the bedspread, then the other, and continued the gentle pull on his husband's frame, "You always had good experiences in St. Petersburg."

"I never thought I'd leave that city...and now I feel like I'll never be able to go back..." Viktor went on, putting his knees up onto the edge of the mattress before dropping against his husband's frame outright, clinging tightly where they landed, "I didn't do anything wrong, and it all came crashing down anyway... It's like nothing I did for the RSF matters anymore... All those years, all that work...it's worthless now..."

"There's bound to be more people in the city who love you than hate you right now," The younger figure suggested, trying to get comfortable while their two dogs started to circle around, looking for openings to join the cuddle pile, "It takes a special kind of psychopath to be willing to go out of the way to hurt someone. It just...sucks that those kinds of people exist at all. Being driven to violence over someone else's love-life is crazy. That's like being pathological over someone else's dietary choices, or what sports team they like. What business is it of theirs, and what difference does it actually make in their lives, that other people aren't just like them?"

"You're trying to rationalize the irrational..." Viktor said quietly, pressing his eyes into the crook of space between his partner's head and shoulder, "And even if every one of my fans showed up to see what happened earlier, I don't know that any of them would've been willing to step in and stop it..."

"I would've. Even before we got together." Yuri said assuredly, stroking his fingers through silver hair, "I'm certain others would've done the same. There's courage in numbers. Why do you think those hecklers showed up as a group? On their own, they're nothing but sniveling cowards...and you sent them running by yourself! I wish I could've seen it...that was incredibly brave, especially knowing now that one of them had a weapon..."

"...I wish I could still be brave now..." The silver Russian lamented, "Everything's just caught up to me and now I'm scared to leave the R.V... I wanted to stop at a store and get some things for my papa, as a gift to offset the surprise of us just showing up, but now I can't..."

"Shh." Yuri cooed, looking back over his shoulder as he felt Makkachin lying down behind him. Jiro did the same shortly after, curled up against his arm where it came around his husband's back. The pup leaned and lifted his head, looking up at him with those dark almond eyes, tail wagging uncertainly. Yuri reached his other arm forward, over his partner's ribs, and settled his hand around the pup's side, offering what pets he could, "Mikhail has a branch of his business in the city. Maybe we can call and ask him for help later. Someone from his company can come pick up the R.V. so we don't have to take it back ourselves."

Viktor nodded and snuffled lightly, wiggling a little to get closer, and bent his knees where he felt his husband weaving their legs together to pull one of his forward. He reached a hand forward to drape it over his poodle, and let himself sink into the feeling of all three warm bodies pressing in around him. His frame was still tight and tense, but he let out a breath he'd been holding in since chasing the hecklers away, "...We...can still salvage this trip...right?"

"I think so."

"...Okay..."
Yuri could feel himself waking up just a few seconds before the alarm from his phone finished the job. Jiro twitched from the surprise and whimpered quietly as he sought for his human's hand for comfort. Behind, Makkachin rolled a little, but tried to ignore the beeping and vibrating on the counter at the far end of the bed. Viktor, however, was still out cold.

The phone was still buzzing and beeping, and Yuri grudgingly started to wiggle free so he could reach it. Getting out from under his husband and over the dog that was cozied up against his back was a bit of a challenge though. He was sure his phone's alarm could wake the dead by the time he
was able to stretch far enough to get it and turn it off...but he was just greeted with that weird, eerie silence once the alarm was finally quieted. At most, he could hear a bird call in the distance, but nothing more. The 'No Service' line at the top of his phone's screen made him uneasy.

*We need to get going. The only way we can contact anyone now is if we get to Kon's place and use his landline... I should've reached out to someone before we left St. Petersburg, just to check in...*

"Viktor," He started quietly, twisting back around to where his partner had gotten stuck on the back of his legs, "Viktor, we need to keep driving now... The sun's gonna go down if we don't go."

"Hmmmm..." The silver Russian mumbled in answer. He turned slightly and lifted up...but then dropped down again, setting the side of his head against his partner's derriere as a pillow, "...Thisisfine..."

"Viktor."

"Alright alright..." He whined, rolling off and onto his back to stretch right over top of his poodle. When he collapsed to normal again, he yawned and looked blearily at his spouse, "What time is it...?"

"4:45."

Viktor was up quickly after that, sitting where he was with his hands propped up behind himself, "Yeesh, you weren't kidding..."

Yuri rolled over as well, only to catch the yawn-virus and need to do so as well, pressing the back of his phone-holding hand over his mouth. When he could open his eyes again, he yawned and looked blearily at his spouse, "What time is it...?"

"4:45."

Viktor lowered the rest of himself down, stretching his legs out behind him until his feet dangled off the edge of the bed, and he could be flat against his partner's prone form, savoring the embrace. Yuri just rolled him then, putting him halfway onto his side and back as he felt another kiss start. One soft hand found his own and pulled it up, stretching his arm out across the bed until he was completely on his back, and his other hand could be found to pull it up as well. Fingers threaded through one another, and Yuri slid on top of him, continuing those sublime kisses...right up until he lifted one leg between the younger man's own and suddenly everything paused in place.

"...Mh...much as I'd like to go there," Yuri started, looking into those needy blue eyes, "We only have 45 more minutes of daylight."

The Russian sighed, disappointed, "...Yes dear..."

"Maybe later tonight though, after we get there," Yuri offered instead, pushing up to crawl backwards off the bed, and reached his hands forward to help pull his partner up after him, "As long as we're discrete about it..."

"Mmmm...the quietest sexy-time ever." Viktor hummed, accepting the gesture, and came to sit up at the edge of the mattress, "At least it's better than no sexy-time at all, like last night..."

"Sorry." The younger man gave a nervous smile, "After everything Asahi said, I wasn't in the mood anymore."
"It was mutual; don't worry."

Slowly but surely, Viktor made his way back to the driver's seat, and all the window barriers that had been pulled down were put back away. Sunlight was fading quickly, leaving the earlier pristine blue sky - already a stark difference from the severely cloudy cover over St. Petersburg - a darker blue than before. Fire-golden sunlight pierced through the trees, leaving long transparent beams to filter through naked boughs. The R.V. came alive again, its big diesel engine rousing to attention, and the enormous camper went back towards the thin single-lane wilderness road.

Fourty five minutes was hardly enough time to cover half the remaining distance though, and it was well past dark when the familiar shadows of old woods and a rough gravel road came into view. The lights on the front of the behemoth vehicle were enough to light up half the countryside though. There were lights on at a few of the buildings that the camper passed by on its way to Graveyard Hill, and even a handful of people walking around with lanterns of their own. They gaped at the giant machination in wonder though, and disgust, thinking a gaggle of idiot tourists had gotten lost. None bothered to look into the driving cabin to see who had come; they simply made profane gestures as the big monstrosity clambered by on the rough terrain.

When it finally came to rest, it was parked at the bottom of that well-known hill, right next to a giant black 4x4 truck.

"This must be the truck that Mikhail bought for your father," Yuri suggested, unbuckling his seatbelt to go back for their jackets. Jiro and Makkachin could sense the change in the atmosphere, and started to get anxious and excited all at once. Yuri bundled himself up tightly from top to bottom, knowing full well how cold it was likely to be outside. He crouched down to the two dogs as he put his scarf into place, and Viktor went by around him to start getting his own things, "Okay you two, stay inside here for a little bit. It'll stay warm inside. We'll bring you into the house once we know Viktor's papa is here and says it's okay."

"You think he's walking around in this?" Viktor wondered, half-amused, "If his truck is here then he must be, too, right?"

"He's only had it for a few weeks though. If he's not going distances, he may not use it at all." Yuri shrugged, standing upright again just as his partner was finishing with the placement of a fuzzy Ushanka hat. He pulled his Ravenclaw beanie down to cover his ears and most of his forehead, nearly brushing it over the top of his glasses, "...Whew...getting nervous now."

"Same."

They steeled themselves and unlocked the side door, pushing it open and entering into the dark miserably-cold Russian night. Snow crunched under their boots, packed down since the last major fall, but still deep enough to go half-way up their shins. Viktor plodded ahead, making his way through the piles of compact fluff, until he made it to where a well-worn path could still be discerned from the rest of the hill. Like the last time he'd been there, the main path from the bottom of the hill diverged near the top, one going left towards the graveyard, the other going right towards the 'rancid shack' he'd grown up in. It was obvious from the sight of things that Konstantin had been working his draft horse through the snow, but how recently was more difficult to assume.

"If he took Čužak out before the snowstorm blew through, maybe he hasn't come back yet..." He wondered suddenly, looking at the house with more scrutiny, "I can't tell if there's any lights on."

"What's Choo-jacque?" Yuri wondered, aimlessly as he followed in the path his partner carved.

"It's the horse's name. It means 'stranger' or 'foreigner.' Papa always named our animals by what they
reminded him of. My first dog was named *Los'*...it means 'moose.' He was a big black shaggy thing, and when he was young, he pranced through snow...like a moose."

"Oh."

"I can feel your deadpan from here, my love."

"That's because I'm right behind you." Yuri huffed, keeping his scarf over his face so only his glasses were exposed.

They went right at the fork in the path, but as they came closer to the house, it became easier to see that there were no lights on inside. Heavy, thick curtains were pulled across the windows within, keeping the winter chill at bay behind the frosty glass.

"I guess he's gone." Viktor said sullenly, "...Maybe we should've told him we were coming so he'd be here." He peeled away from where he'd made a circle in the glass with the side of his hand, and started walking back to where his partner was waiting.

**KŁ-BASHHHHHIIkoii**

Both men nearly jumped out of their skins as they heard the crack of a gunshot echo off the hills and nearby woods, and they both rushed back to the fork in the path. A dog started barking, though it didn't sound all that big or intimidating...but the massive black horse that came galloping up from the other side of the hill put that thought to bed.

"**KTO, ĆERT VOZ'MI, VY TAKIE!?** [Who the Hell are you people!?] A familiar, gruff, low, and rather angry voice barked out, sounding far more terrifying than the yipping dog that echoed under him, "**PROVALIVAĜTE OT MOEGO DOMA! JA PRISTRELJU TEBJA!**" [Get away from my house! I'll shoot you!]

Viktor shook himself out of his horrified surprise, and quickly stepped between his husband and the massive horse-beast that was barreling towards him, snow kicking up like waves on either side of it, "Papa! Éto ja!" [It's me!] He called back, throwing his arms out to the side, "Èto my!" [It's us!]

The horse suddenly veered and neighed, rearing up onto its back tree-like legs, thundering its hooves into the drift as it came down again. Behind its thick neck and head, Konstantin finally got a good look at the duo, and nearly rolled his eyes in frustrated irritation, "**VY, IDIOTY.**" [You idiots.]

"Kak zdorovo uvidet' tebja snova, papa." [How nice to see you again.] Viktor added nervously, reaching up with gloved hands to pull the fur hat off, and revealed the shock of silver hair it had hidden, "A my drug druga zdorovo napugali, a?" [We scared each other pretty good, didn't we?]

Konstantin just growled at them from his high perch, and finally put the hunting rifle back into the leather holster on the side of the saddle, [I could've killed you. What were you thinking?]

[...We wanted to come visit. We...thought we'd surprise you, but I guess...you're not big on surprises.] Viktor explained, feeling sheepish, [Sorry.]

The horse whinnied, and the bear riding it tapped its side with a light kick to let it know to move forward again. The beast pressed on and went right by the two terrorized skaters, revealing another two odd things that they were too scared to notice before. First, a deer slung across the back of it, and second, a young dog following in the horse's path, colored like a Doberman, but furry like a highland cow, minus the horns. It was maybe only as big as Hana, but less difficult to lose in the snowdrift given its coloring. Kon looked down the hill towards where he knew his truck was, and spotted the
giant R.V. parked right next to it, [That yours?] He wondered stiffly.

[Yes, papa. For the weekend.]

[So you're planning on staying for a little while.]

[...If...that's okay with you. We've been thinking about it since you called after the RSF fired me.]
Viktor explained, following hesitantly after the trio as Kon went over towards the small barn at the side of the house, [Since I couldn't go to Russian Nationals, even though I'd invited you...]

[I went anyway. Didn't your Uncle tell you?] The bear asked, dismounting with a thud. He reached for the ropes that kept the deer tied to the saddle, and started untying them.

[Yeah...we actually saw you on television. The cameras were focused on Plisetsky and the other skaters, but we could see you in the stands with the others sometimes.] Viktor answered, looking back briefly towards his partner, and ushered him forward to stand by him, [We were surprised you went, since I wasn't there.]

[Plisetsky called me. That kid has brass.] Kon said, hefting the deer carcass off the back of his horse, and pulled it into the barn. Čužák knowingly followed him in without needing to be lead, and shuffled into his open stall, waiting to be pampered down for the night. Viktor and Yuri followed in after the dog went inside, but stayed close to the door, [Close it.] The bear said simply, not even looking back as he hefted the deer rear-first into the air, and pierced its legs with meat-hooks hanging from the ceiling, connected to a triangular frame that kept the legs apart. He followed that with other straps so it wouldn't spin.

Aside from the horse stall, there was an alcove with room to work, and a rack on the wall with tools hanging from it.

Kon glanced back as he pulled a blade down, and waved it slightly towards the two, [If you're going to faint, look away. I have to dress it before it starts to spoil.]

[Oh...] The silver figure stammered, looking to his partner, "He's going to gut it."

"*Right now?*

"Yeah."

Yuri turned around and put his hands over his glasses, keeping his back to his spouse as he listened to the gruesome task. Konstantin waited only long enough to roll his sleeves up, bring a metal tub and a collecting table over, and unfolded the table from where it had been set against the wall. With the tub under the deer, the intimidatingly huge man lifted his knife to the backside of the deer, releasing the intestine from its external orifice.

[Anyway,] The bear went on, his grizzly task hardly phasing him as he pulled out a few inches of that gut-tube to hang by the deer's tail, and went around to the front, [Part of why I went is because Plisetsky said Mik brought his daughters with him. Your cousin Nikkita is the spitting image of your mother, you know?]

[...Yeah.]

Kon probed with his thumb to find the creature's sternum, and used the shallow hook-like projection on the back of his knife to start a long slice from there, up the deer's belly, nearly to the hole he'd made a moment before, [Other people who were at the event were holding up signs with your scores from Japan.]
[Yeah...my fans here are loyal. Yuri and I joked that maybe they would do that, just to put salt in the RSF's eyes.] Viktor nodded, watching in horrified fascination, [I'm thinking it was probably a good thing that there was no way I could be here for the event though.]

[Why?] The bear wondered, knife slicing down though the ribcage after that; the whole gut-bag was starting to protrude from the opening, [Isn't that why you're going to the European event later?]

[Oh, you know about that?]

[Sure.] He answered, pulling the intestine back through the hole he'd made at the start, and carefully started releasing some of the fatty tissue on the base of the spine; the gut-bag continued to droop forward, pulled down by gravity with the release of each string of tissue.

Viktor shrugged up his shoulders and looked away as the esophagus was cut at the base of the deer's neck, and the entire sack of innards came falling out, landing in the bin that had been placed under it with a wet, sloppy thud, [Yuri and I had some trouble in town.] He explained, going back to the original question, [I don't think we'll be able to come back to Russia as easily as we used to; it's not really safe for us here anymore.]

Konstantin waited to continue for a moment, looking down at the tub of guts for a moment, then to his nearly-bloodless hands. He drew a breath and twiddle the knife back and forth between his fingers, [...]I hesitate to say this, but this is exactly the sort of thing I told you about when you were a boy. What you're doing with that man goes against the natural order of things, and people here don't react well to it.]

[You're reacting a lot better than you used to.] Viktor pointed out, unflinching, [What strangers think means nothing to me. It's none of their business anyway.]

The bear hissed a breath between his teeth, but then walked back to the tool wall, grabbing a longer skinning knife to replace the gutting knife he had. He circled the blade around the deer's hocks and slit the skin along the inner thigh, [Apparently it means enough that you think you can't come back home sometimes.]

Viktor bristled a little to hear the word, but he shrugged again, [It might not mean anything to me, but that doesn't mean my apathy will stop people from trying to hurt us. I chased someone off earlier who went after Yuri with a bat. We hadn't even been in the city for 3 hours by then.]

[What you're doing isn't right.]

[What I'm doing is right for me. I need to do what makes me happy, and nothing else has done that quite so well as Yuri has...so I'm keeping him, Motherland be damned.] The silver skater said firmly, reaching one arm back to pull his husband closer, though careful to make sure the man wasn't subject to witnessing the deer skinning as Kon literally peeled the hide from the flesh underneath, [I thought it didn't matter to you anymore? After NHK...]

[It matters.] Kon answered gruffly, [I can't say that it'll stop mattering to me. You being with a man means my lineage dies with you. And it's such a shame...you've risen so high in the world, and accomplished so much... But in the end, you'll have no one to pass the torch on to. You'll have no sons or daughters to give your name to, and I'll have no grandchildren.]

Viktor couldn't help but feel bad then, [...]Uncle Mik is having a baby with Minako. That's...kind of close, if Yuri and I could have kids.]

[Mikhail is only family by law, not by blood.] The bear retorted, practically making his point all the
more poignant by decapitating the deer at that same moment, freeing the hide and head from the rest of the carcass. He set the bundle aside on the folding table, and went to dismember the rest, [I wish you knew how hard your mother and I had to try just to have you...maybe you'd appreciate the concept more.]

[It's not that I don't...] Viktor tried, feeling even more guilty, [I just...]

[We lost 3 daughters and 2 other sons before you.] The older Russian explained, his voice a bit strained, [Each other time broke your mother's heart. And then we had you, and we lost you, too. You were our miracle, and then you...left.]

[...You drove me out.] The silver man corrected dubiously, [Maybe I'd have been here all this time if you didn't get a wild, thorny hair up your arse about a hobby I had.]

Yuri made quite the face as he heard those words, I have no idea what he just said but I feel like I should be worried anyway...!?

Kon hesitated again, wiggling the knife between his fingers like before, but then looked a bit deflated, [You're probably right.]

Viktor tried not to look too relieved, but he was, [Anyway...] He started again, [We...wanted to spend some time with you. Mama wanted us all to mend the bridges we burned way back then...and I don't think that's such a horrible idea anymore. We were going to bring some things with us as something of a token of goodwill, but...the trouble we had in St. Petersburg made me too nervous to get out of the R.V. again until we got here. Sorry...]

[...Some 'things?'] The bear echoed, [Like what?]
Viktor had not felt more like a child since leaving home than he did sitting in the middle front seat of his father's new truck. Even with all the space, Konstantin still took up half the cabin on his own, squishing Viktor between one arm and Yuri on the passenger side. Not that he minded being squashed up against his husband...but it was the principle of the thing. Because everything was so big, including his father...it made Viktor feel quite small.

Thankfully, it wasn't a long trip. Even though the mill town had evaporated into a shadow of its former glory, there were still pockets of civilization dotted through the woods, and one was still big enough to have a small grocery store.

Through the dark, lights cast a hazy glow onto dilapidated buildings; endless lines of nearly-cloned apartment buildings, 4 stories tall at most, blocky in appearance, the lower floors plastered over with ancient graffiti. Snow piles covered over what could only be described as half-reclaimed garbage, refuse from the town's later stages of abandonment, capitalized by broken windows and doors. The apartment buildings gave way eventually to the more industrial side of the once-vibrant and populous town; huge brick fortresses that were now little more than tombs for prior industry, glistening with frost and the vine-like husks of dead summer ivy. Parts of higher towers were crumbled and collapsed, leaving them like broken, forgotten hands reaching into the sky.

Yuri was awe-struck by the whole thing, but was equal parts sad to see it, too. He turned his eyes from the desiccated imagery outside to his partner instead, "...I knew this place was run down, but..."

Viktor nodded, "...I feel like I'm looking at the aftermath of a war. I...I used to know this place... We'd come here all the time..." He twisted slightly where he sat, and leaned forward towards the window, pressing his hands against the glass as the buildings outside went by, "There used to be so many people here... All the lights were on, and most apartments were occupied. Stores had vendors, there were kids playing, even in the snowy days like tonight... This is just... The rotted corpse of my memories..."

It was odd to be squished into the corner of the seat and not be able to get comfortable, and Yuri felt even more sad than before; seeing the dead city was nothing compared to having his husband right in front of him, and be too nervous to reach out to him. Keeping his hands in his lap was a torture, and his knees started to ache where they'd gotten pressed together against the door. He dared to look aside, past his partner's shoulder, towards the bear on the other side...but then steeled himself, and lifted his legs up a little. Just enough for Viktor's to fall into the place where he'd just been, and set his legs down again, right over his spouse's.

Surprised blue eyes looked at the younger man, but Viktor dared not make a scene or draw attention, even as his heart skipped a beat. He felt Yuri just shift position a little more, and before he knew it, his arm was being held by Yuri's gloved hands, and they both looked out the window, using his back as a 'shield' to protect their touch from prying eyes.

"I wonder if a lot of Russia looks like this...?" Yuri wondered casually, "I guess you moved to the big city too early to notice the decline."

"St. Petersburg has its share of decay." Viktor explained, letting his heart settle down again as the truck continued along without interruption, "I guess it's just harder to spot... It's easier to maintain the image of modernity when you keep the touristy sections clean. And a lot of people live there..."
"Yeah..."

It wasn't much farther to the small store; it looked like it had once been much larger, but the occupied sections had been reduced to only a quarter of the original size. Beyond the 'used' area, shelving units were used to block further access, but it was plain to any observer looking towards the ceiling that there was much further beyond. Yuri could see the collapsed ceiling tiles and drooping cables from the doorway as they entered, and he swallowed anxiously.

As late as it was, the store's skeleton crew was restocking and cleaning. There weren't many other people in the aisles either, making it easy to slip through without much difficulty. The aisles were thin and cramped though, with support pillars stacked on all sides with more shelving, or boxes of goods. Cooking oils, big boxes of juice, chip bags, bread, jars of pickled fish or vegetables. At the back, the cooker section, where dairy items were kept cold right alongside a chiller-unit for beer, and the vodka selection just next to them in turn. On the other side, frozen fish in various states; some cut up into small 'steak'-like portions, other simply gutted and put onto a tray whole. All told, it was a typical grocery store, but with a uniquely Russian flare, except...

"...There isn't a single fresh thing in this place." Yuri noticed quietly, "It's all frozen or processed..."

"This area is a bit out of the way." Viktor tried to explain, "And it's the middle of winter. There's probably better selection when it's summer. There used to be huge farmer's markets outside, and people from all over the region would bring their stuff to sell." He looked around the building again, and the uplifted feeling faded, "...All the life is gone from this place now. It's a wonder the people haven't just let it go back to nature at this point." He looked down then, into the freezer bins, and poked idly through a few boxes of frozen ready-made pizza, perogis, and potato pancakes, "...The last vestiges of a dying community..."

Yuri offered a single-armed hug, though he was quick about it before pulling his hand back to his coat pocket, "...Let's not think too much about it. What are we even here for?"

"...Stuff that I took for granted, I guess." The silver Russian sighed, "Nothing I want is here." He moved behind his partner, sliding one hand along the younger man's back as he squeezed past, and stood in the main aisle, looking down to the other side of the store, "There used to be a deli counter back there, and the produce area...they even had a small wine selection."

"You sure you're not just projecting?" Yuri teased, coming up beside his spouse to look as well, "What kid cares enough about wine to remember it?"

"I'm certain I remember it right..."

"...In any case, what's Plan B?"

Viktor reached up one hand to rub his fingers across his forehead, "I'm honestly not sure. This place just drained all the inspiration out of me. It's worse here than I thought possible..."

"Yeah..." Yuri agreed reluctantly, bringing his hand up behind his spouse's back instinctively. He was surprised to find it being tugged away soon after, and looked to spot two big fingers pinched around his coat sleeve. His eyes followed the arm with growing trepidation, and found quickly that the big Russian bear had somehow snuck up behind him without a whisper to give himself away, and was staring straight back at him with those slate Nikiforov eyes.

Half a heartbeat later, Kon's fingers let go, and reached over his son's shoulder to physically twist him around, putting himself between the two, "Dyont...do zhet." Konstantin said flatly, "Nyet heer."
Yuri felt his heart jump into his throat as his husband was pulled away from him, but all he could do was look to where Viktor was standing, and spoke between grit teeth at his stupefied partner, "...Was that English or Russian...?"

"Both?" Viktor offered, leaning his head back against the giant man now behind him, "Čto èto, papa?" [What is it?]

[You can't let him touch you.] Kon answered stiffly, finally letting go, [Neither of you are Russian enough to get away with it. No one would believe that you're just mucking around as friends.]

Viktor felt the accusation like a bolt through his chest, Not Russian enough? He shook the bitter feeling away and turned to face the man, [But we're not fri-]

[I don't want to hear it, and no one else does either.] Kon said more firmly, "V Rime bud'le kak rimljane." He added, stuffing his hand back into his coat pocket, and started moving off again, towards the Vodka shelves.

The silver skater let his eyes follow the bear for a moment, giving quite the stare.

Yuri wasn't sure what to make of it, daring to step closer again, but kept his hands to himself that time, I can't tell if he's surprised or angry...or both... "What did he say...?"

"To quit being ourselves." He answered grimly, "'When in Rome, do as the Romans,' more specifically."

"...Guess we shouldn't be so surprised. It is coming from the guy who threw us around like sacks of rice the first time he realized we were together..." Yuri offered, "...It's not what we want, but he's moving in the right direction."

Viktor just looked on as his father eyeballed the hard liquor, remembering the sting on the cuts around his eye after that very liquid was poured onto his head nearly a year prior, "...Yeah..."

The truck ride back to the hamlet was uncomfortable in its silence. The trip had resulted in no purchases beyond Konstantin's resupply of liquid fire, and Viktor felt even more miserable for it. By the time they arrived, and the truck parked in the same spot it had left from, all he wanted to do was crawl into bed and forget the trip entirely. He only grudgingly stayed available long enough to say they weren't for sure leaving in the morning, but then went over to the R.V. and fled within, not wanting to face the world anymore for the night.

Yuri watched quietly, surprised and yet not. He heard the dogs both barking excitedly as the silver legend entered, and the camper door closed behind. He hesitantly looked towards Konstantin for a moment, but the bear had already started to stalk up the hill towards his house without a word.

Not that there would be anything to say anyway, since I don't understand Russian... But, this is still sad...

He drew a breath through his scarf and went after his partner, kicking the snow off his boots as he stepped up onto the first level of the small staircase. Both pups were excitable again, tails wagging and bodies shaking as greetings were given to Human #2. Yuri was disheartened to find his spouse curled over the table at the kitchen booth though, face buried in his arms, one pressed up and over the back of his head in utter heartbreaking despair. He frowned and pulled his things off before going over to sit on the bench-seat beside the man, and reached his arm freely across the Russian's back, "...I'm sorry..."
"This isn't going anywhere close to how I hoped it would..." Viktor lamented into his folded arms, voice muffled by the jacket's thick fabric sleeves, "I thought he'd be more happy to see me...but this is just a bother to him."

"I don't think he thinks it's a bother..." Yuri offered, "Don't you remember how off I was when you first turned up? I was so shocked and surprised that it took me until that night to let myself get excited that you were around. Before that, I could hardly believe it, let alone accept it. Give your father a minute to settle into the fact that you're even here before you worry about whether he's unhappy about it."

The silver legend could offer no answer to that; he just curled his arms a little tighter around himself, even as he leaned a little closer into his partner's space.

Yuri pat the man's hair gently, "Weird as it might sound, you only know your father about as well as I do right now. It's been more than 20 years since you had any kind of lasting, meaningful contact with him. You weren't even around him all that much when he showed up at NHK, and by the sound of it, you didn't really interact with him that much when you were here last, either. He's still trying to figure out what kind of person you are, too. I'm certain that things will be different by morning..."

"...I wish I had your faith..." Viktor answered, lifting his eyes over the level of his sleeve at least, rubbing them on it as he lifted up, "...All I can do now is wonder what a huge mistake this was."

"We only just got here though." The younger figure suggested, twisting to sit sideways and pulled the man into a closer hug, kissing the back of that silver head as he leaned over the Russian's shoulder, "I know it's only 8 right now, but in Japan it's after 2am, and we've been traveling all day. You need to give yourself some time to rest, too. Sleeping on a plane isn't the same as sleeping in a real bed."

Viktor was silent again, save an unhappy sniff as he tried to keep his overwhelming disappointment from spilling out.

"Let me help you wind down..." Yuri offered, "We got a bomb dropped on us last night that we never really got to settle down from before leaving, and the last few hours have been super stressful...

"How are you not more anxious about everything?" The silver Russian asked pointedly, lifting his head to turn and face over his shoulder, "You're acting like none of this has phased you..."

"...I...guess I just get into a certain mindset when I feel like you're struggling." He answered, "It doesn't do any good if the both of us are freaking out at the same time."

"...We were nearly attacked in St. Petersburg though... My father put a bullet over our heads and yelled at us... He even pulled me away from you earlier..." Viktor pointed out, snuffling again, "The most basic of comforts are denied to us in public because of how backwards this country is..."

Yuri hesitated to explain himself further, and worked instead to start unwinding his husband's scarf. When it was all off, he rolled it in his hands until it was a neat little bundle, and set it next to the fur hat already on the table-top. He pulled his spouse's leather gloves off after, one at a time, careful to pull the fingertips loose first before tugging the rest off. He then pushed back off the side of the bench, and grabbed the Russian's nearest leg to pull it towards himself, and gently yanked each boot off. When all of those items were put away in the camper's closet, Yuri made sure to lock the side-door, then went to the driving cabin to activate the sliding blinds to cover all the main windows, doors, and windshield. The interior of the R.V. felt a little brighter and warmer without the bleakness
of the night visible from within, and Yuri returned to his quiet partner, offering his hands to pull the man up to his feet. Viktor took them easily enough, and he helped the man rise, letting go only to start undoing the wooden peg-buttons that hid the thick winter zipper underneath. He then pinched that big slider between his thumb and the second knuckle of his first finger, and pulled it all the way down, letting the teeth come free from the box-pin retainer far at the bottom. The coat parted open over the silver Russian's chest, and Yuri slid his hands within, pressing his palms against that hard core and moved them up, sneaking his fingers over the man's shoulders, and pushed the jacket off with his wrists. It only fell to the man's elbows where Viktor had bent his arms in a gesture of uncertainty. Seeing it, Yuri lifted his eyes half-lidded and looked straight into his partner's anxious gaze.

"This country can attempt to do anything it wants to us." He finally said, keeping his voice low, "It can try to hurt us, it can try to scare us...it can try to pull us apart... But...that's all it can do. Try. It can't, and it won't."

Viktor still felt a little deflated, and his shoulders sagged as he lowered his face. He could feel fingers under his chin, but all he could do was press his cheek into the palm that followed, "...I'm no good at any of this..."

"You're completely focused on trying to make a good impression to your father...calling him 'papa,' and being sensitive to his...ehm...cultural differences." Yuri offered, gently brushing his thumb over his husband's pale skin, "I've known you for half my life; you've always been an optimist. You're silly and fun, you try to find the good in every situation...and you can inspire people like few others know how. But Konstantin isn't like the kind of people you're used to dealing with. I don't think he's the kind of person who's receptive to the methods that you've been able to rely on until now. He doesn't look up to you, either; he looks down on you. He accepts your skating but he isn't impressed by it; I think he's only mad about the RSF firing you because of the principle of the thing...you're a Nikiforov. He tolerates me being around about as much as a shark tolerates those fish that swim under its belly; he won't attack me outright, but he could do without me, too. But I'm not going away. So while you focus on figuring out what kind of relationship you want to have with Konstantin, and what you can realistically have...I'll watch over you. I'm not particularly worried about whether he likes me; I'm worried about whether he's doing to try to hurt you."

Viktor nodded quietly, bringing up one still-ensleeved arm to press his hand to the one still cupped against his cheek.

"Your father has come a long way since that cold day in the Summer Garden when the bunch of us first met. I can almost see the existential crisis going on behind his eyes...but he is trying... So I guess...the way I'm approaching this is the same way you're dealing with Asahi back home... As long as they behave, we'll give them room to improve. I imagine you'll completely pull the plug on Asahi if he messes up...because that's exactly what I'll do where it comes to Kon. I think I have enough clout with you now that if I say we're never coming back, we're never coming back."

Again, Viktor nodded.

"So we'll take it one day at a time. We just got here...we're both jetlagged and a little spooked. It's been a really strange day...the state we got Makkachin back in, the hecklers, the steep change in the way we're behaving around each other while in view of others...and now we've got Kon as this huge, intimidating cherry on top of the pile. I'm a little stressed out." Yuri explained, sliding both arms over his partner's shoulders to hug him close, "But I'm focused completely on you. I want you to be okay and I want you to get something positive out of this."

With the jacket still clinging to his arms, Viktor could only inch them far enough to press his fingers
to his partner's waist. He wiggled his left arm out first and used the right to set the coat on the nearby table, then moved both back to hug them around his husband's lower back, "...I guess I finally understand what you meant last weekend when you said that you wanted to hate Saito for what he'd done, but couldn't help forgiving him anyway..." He said quietly, pressing his eyes to the crook of his spouse's neck, "I'm starting to resent this stupid, naïve hope that I have that I can reach him..."

"It's not stupid or naïve... You have reached him. There's just a long way to go still. It won't happen overnight."

"That's where you're wrong, my love..." The silver Russian snuffled, lifting his head back up to nudge lightly at his husband's nose, "You reached him. I just watched."
The sound of the R.V.’s running water came in fits and stops, but research had been done on how best to manage the camper's limited 10 gallons of heated bathing water. Without the summer to thaw the pond or any nearby brook, it would be impossible to make the most of the camper's built-in water heater system, so the single tank designated for the shower had to be used sparingly. Though the major water holding tank was much larger, it would take a while for that water to heat up again.

Viktor sat cross-legged in the center of the bed, able to hear the water turning on and off as Yuri used it. He toyed around with the R.V.’s television, flipping through its meager selection of Russian programming. He clicked through the different menus a number of times before realizing he'd looked at every option without being able to pick one.

*I'm too distracted,* he thought, dropping down to his back with a sigh, *I've looked at every preview, but I can't remember a single one of them.*

Jiro whined quietly at the side of the bed, but made no effort to try and get on top. He simply lay down there on the floor, whimpering until someone paid attention. Makkachin came up beside him, sniffing at the pup's splayed ears, but then lifted his head up and set it pitifully against the edge of the bedding, brown eyes leering over at his human.

Viktor looked over, spotting his poodle, and the soulful gaze being leveled at him, "...What is it?"

*Grgrllurgrl...*

He gaped in surprise at the noise that came from his own stomach, and the dawning of realization hit, "...Oh...right. We haven't eaten since the plane...which means they haven't eaten at all." He pushed up to sitting immediately, and stepped over to the shower room. He pressed his ear to the panel to listen to what was happening on the other side, and supposed the apparent quiet meant Yuri was lathering up or drying off. He pulled back and tapped his knuckles on the door before he pulled it open, and hastily made his way through to close it again.

It didn't help.

"Iyaaaaaa samuuuuiiii!" [Cold!] Yuri whined aloud, reaching up frantically through the soapy-suds to find the locking mechanism on the side of the showerhead, and clicked it off to let the hot water rush at him. Once the room's temperature ambiance had been recalibrated, and his goose-bumps receded, Yuri looked over and clicked the lock on again, "Oh...Viktor. I thought one of the dogs got in..."

"The boys are starving, my love." The Russian answered easily, "And we never stopped at a grocery store to stock up."

"...Do you...want to go back into town or something?"

Viktor shook his head, arms crossed over his chest as he leaned against the wall and admired the view, "It's a bit late to make that trip again. I was...going to see if papa had anything to spare."

"Oh!" Yuri's eyes went wide, and he quickly rushed his hands through his hair to finish spreading the conditioner around, "Give me like ten minutes and I'll-"

"No way." Viktor raised his hand to stop the man, "You're going to be damp for a while, and I don't
want to risk you getting sick by stepping outside, even if you blow-dry your hair. I'll come right back. I just didn't want you coming out to find me gone." He explained, pushing off the wall to step past the vanity. He pressed his cold fingertips to his husband's lower back and leaned into the shower stall to steal a kiss, "Take your time. I won't be gone long."

"...Alright..."

The silver legend waited for Yuri to put the hot water on again before sneaking out of the small space, and put the door back to keep more cold air from rushing in. He looked to the starving faces of both the dogs and made an immediate B-line for the closet, reaching in to grab his fur hat and thick winter coat, as well as his tall boots. Makkachin was at his heels in eager anticipation, and stayed by his side even as the man tried to keep him from following. It was no use though, so Viktor pat Jiro's head, and promised to be back as soon as he could.

The bluster of the frigid Russian winter poured in like sand as the external door was unlocked and opened, and snow crunched under Viktor's boots as he hopped out. He pressed the panel back into place and drew a deep breath, feeling the cold deep in his lungs before exhaling it in a swirling fog. He swallowed, looked down to Makkachin, and started plodding off towards the house on the hill.

When Viktor took the right fork in the path, he nervously lifted his eyes from the snow and started looking around for signs of activity. It hadn't been long since they'd returned from the trip into town, but Konstantin had been alone for almost a year, and Viktor could only assume that meant the man had expanded his presence in the household and had a number of places he could possibly be. Most of the lights were on inside though, so Viktor had only one logical place to go...and stepped up to the front door, Makkachin by his side.

He drew a nervous breath through the lapels of his coat, and raised his pale hand, looking at his ring briefly for strength...

Tak taK taK

It felt like ages, waiting there on the front step, but no one came. Viktor tried knocking again, and pressed his ear to the door, wondering if he could hear anything inside through the wood as easily as he had through the shower door. Still, nothing, and no one came.

Did he leave again...?

Curiosity got the better of him, even with the echoes of the earlier gunshot still ringing in his ears, but Viktor stepped off to the side, moving towards the barn. Makkachin sniffed at the snow, following the tracks of the horse's shoe-prints where it had moved inside earlier in the night. Just as the poodle got close to the big swinging door though, another dog suddenly started barking from inside, and Viktor jumped in surprise. Makkachin was behind his legs, trembling in sheer terror.

The panel pushed open, and the yearling came rushing out, barking more at the unknown intruders before settling down again at the meager recognition. Konstantin stuck his head out next, spotting the skinny figure skulking outside, and grimaced, "Čego ty hočeš?" [What do you want?]

Viktor felt his heart seize, and he suddenly regretted leaving to R.V., [Uhm...n-nothing...] He stammered, quickly turning on a heel to go back the way he'd come; the hungry pit in his stomach was forgotten for the moment. His poodle was quick to follow after, tail between his legs; the other dog, even though it was smaller, was intimidating enough to spook him.

Kon blinked twice in confused surprise, and watched quietly for a moment at his son's retreat. He grit his teeth and sucked in a breath, and pushed the door open a bit further to half-step outside, "Viktor."
The silver skater paused in place, just near the fork in the path, shoulders scrunched up as though in a wince, and he looked back over one, "...Eh?"

"Čto tebe nužno?" [What do you need?] The bear asked differently, his voice a bit less stiff than it had been a moment before.

Viktor hesitated, but then slowly turned around, keeping his arms close to his sides as the oppressive cold pressed in all around him, [I...erm... I had intended to go to a store before driving out here...but after the trouble in St. Petersburg, it didn't happen... The dogs haven't eaten since before the plane ride, and they're getting lethargic...]

[Just the dogs?] The silver Russian's stomach growled loudly again, betraying him, and he shook his head, [...All of us.]

Konstantin leveled his son a look for a moment, probably the closest thing to a deadpan one could expect from the man, but he pushed the door to the barn open a bit further then and gestured his free hand towards the interior. Viktor blinked at him, but his feet started moving before he'd thought it through, and before he knew it, he and Makkachin were inside the warmer space, and Konstantin was pulling the door closed behind them again. The yearling had followed, and was cautiously sneaking around them, suspicious but not acting aggressively.

Viktor took notice of the strange animal, [I don't remember this one being here when Uncle Mik and I came through before...] He commented, stepping aside as the bear went to the rear of the wooden structure and grabbed a big scoop-cup. It went into a large bin, and Konstantin grabbed a big steel bowl to put the fare into, revealing it to be large dog-food pellets as the man returned with it.

[I found it in the woods a few days ago.] He answered, releasing the metal bowl as he felt Viktor take hold of it, [I think it's about 6 months old. Maybe the discarded runt of a litter meant to be a prison guard-dog.]

[...Oh.] [It's a Caucasian Shepherd. Like Moose was.] [Maybe this one will be as tough as you wanted Moose to be.] [Maybe.]

An awkward silence befell the barn, and Viktor reached into the kibble to stoop a handful out before setting the bowl down for his poodle. Makkachin had been too hungry to care about how it tasted, and wolfed it down as any famished pup could.

[Have you named it?] Viktor asked, trying to break up the quiet.

"Prizrak."

[Ghost...?] He echoed, [It's not even white though...]

[It slinked around like a specter for the first day or two. Took food out of my hand and then went to hide with it. Felt like the house was haunted.] Kon explained, putting away the brushes he'd been using on the massive horse, and grabbed another scoop in a different bin and brought over a portion of fodder for the beast. He dropped the pellets into a big black bucket hanging from the inside of the stall, pat the animal's massive neck, and dusted his hands off before putting the scoop away and
headed to the door. He pushed it open and gestured out, [Let's go.]

"Oh..." Viktor grimaced, and reached down for Makkachin's bowl, lifting it up even while the pup was still trying to eat. The poodle whined in confusion and jumped up onto his back paws to try and sneak some more, but Viktor trotted outside quickly to avoid making his father impatient, and Makkachin had no choice but to follow.

Konstantin plodded by, securing the barn door as Prizrak came out at his heels, then went to the door at the front of the house and pulled it open.

Like a child, Viktor nervously went after the man, and went within wordlessly. A flood of memories washed through him as he looked around, realizing he'd too-easily gone inside, despite his incredible protest only a few weeks prior.

[You can put the bowl down over there,] Kon said, startling his son out of his imagination, and pointed to the side, near where the iron fireplace stood, [On the brick stoop. Let him...what's his name?...finish eating. He looked ravenous.]

"Makkachin."

[Does it mean anything?]

[Not that I know of.]

Kon just gave him a look of confusion.

Viktor could only shrug quickly, helpless in the simplicity of his answer. He moved on and set the dog-food back down again, and Makkachin dove into it even faster than before, in case his human decided to try taking it away again. The silver Russian reached up to scratch-scratch the poodle's shoulders and down his back, and rose back up to stand again, [...]The other dog is named Jiro. Yuri picked the name. In Japanese, it means 'second son,' since we already had Makkachin. Jiro's just a few weeks old though. He's an Akita. The JSF gifted him to Yuri after his win in Detroit.]

[Have they given you any gifts? Kon wondered idly, rinsing his hands off in the aged kitchen sink.]

[Not...technically?] Viktor answered, [Putting me on their Olympic team...fast-tracking my citizenship paperwork...]

[Citizenship...] The bear echoed curiously.

[Ein...y-yes...] Viktor stammered, suddenly wondering if that was the best thing to say, [I can't compete at the Games for Japan unless I'm a citizen... So...]

[But you don't even speak Japanese.]

[I'm learning... They're giving me a provisional citizenship for now. I have to do the language testing eventually. Yuri is trying to teach me when we have time.]

[Have you tried teaching him Russian?]

[He knows a few words... He has a hard time making the right sounds... I think he's embarrassed by it so he doesn't try too often.] Viktor explained, [I wish more than anyone that he could speak it, but...]

[Why?] The bear asked with a rough laugh, pushing away from the sink to find a dish towel to dry
his hands, [It's not like you live here anymore.]

Viktor felt a bit more nervous then, and wrapped his arms around himself, still wearing his thick winter gear, [He feels left out when we are here though... I think you and him would get along if you could talk directly to each other. He's really smart... smarter than me, at least...]

[You were Russia's Hero. Was he Japan's Hero?]...
[Because of you.]

The silver Russian was feeling smaller and smaller by the minute, which was odd considering the bear was saying things that should've been considered complimentary, [I didn't teach him anything he didn't already know... I just gave him the confidence he needed to do it for competition.]

[Isn't that what all coaches do?] Kon wondered skeptically, moving over to the ice box, and pulled the door open to look at the contents.

[Er... well, Yuri's had other coaches before... What I did was a bit... unorthodox.] Viktor attempted to explain, not sure how safe it was to elaborate. He shook his head and decided to take it a different direction, [Yuri doesn't respond to the kind of boot-camp training that others might. Plisetsky and his friend Otabek refer to themselves as soldiers because of the rigors they put themselves through for their training. But Yuri wouldn't be able to thrive under those kinds of conditions. He needs positive reinforcement, not a verbal whipping.]

[So you have to treat him like a wo-]

[Like a Tsar Bomba.] Viktor cut the man off, half-acting on instinct, feeling his heart race, [You called him that before.]

Kon hesitated then, looking down at the strips of venison he'd pulled from the cooler.

[You went all the way to St. Petersburg to get on the phone with me and then seemed proud of Yuri for what you said was his doing.] Viktor went on desperately, [That the entire RSF imploded on itself because of him... They threw out their best chance for Olympic Gold because they were so angry that I'm married to him and don't want the whole world to s-]

[I know what I said.] The bear interrupted that time, drawing a breath between his teeth, [I also know what I meant.]

Viktor could feel his legs shaking a bit, but he held his ground, [Apparently I didn't then.]

[You can't make an old man like me change my view of the whole world, Viktor.] Kon explained, transferring a few of the meat strips from the package to a cold, black-iron skillet, [I have my own way of trying to reconcile what you're doing with your life. You may have given him that ring, and your - our - family name, but that doesn't mean you can make me accept it. I cannot.]

[Then what's-]

[I've... decided to put it into God's hands.] He answered stiffly before the question could become too tense, [Judge not, lest ye be judged. I'm doing my best not to be angry at your proud disregard for the Word... but that doesn't mean I'm not angry.]

[... That... ] Viktor started again nervously, [... That can pass if you just get to know him... get to
know us. I didn't fall in love with him because he's a man...it was in spite of the fact. If you believe so firmly that God sets us all up with a destiny in mind, and knows who our soulmates are before we ever take our first breath...then He set it up this way. He put my soulmate into a man's body. I won't let Yuri slip through my fingers just because I can't have kids with him. He is half of me.]

Kon continued with his work, though tensely.

[And if kids are the metric by which we're judging acceptable relationships...you've failed, too.] Viktor dared, making the bear stop where he was, and spotted those small, slate eyes turn towards him, [All those failed attempts at having children...only for me to be the only one that survived... Do you get angry at normal couples who can't create life? Or who choose not to? Why can't you judge me on whether my choices have made me happy or not?! I was Russia's Hero for years, but that all got taken away from me in a second. I'd be lost without Yuri; he's the only reason I'm here right now!]

The rest of the meat-pack was put back into the ice-box, and Kon held the door where he closed it, drawing in a bitter breath. His fingers clamped around the ancient refrigerator, but then let go, and he moved off towards a few woven baskets on the floor near the back wall. He picked up a small sack and emptied part of it out, then gathered up some things from the baskets nearby, and returned to the skillet still on the counter, keeping his eyes down from where Viktor was still staring at him, [...Maybe your Uncle was right.]

[...Huh?] Viktor deadpanned, feeling the adrenaline leave him like air from a balloon. He could almost hear the fweeee noise flying around the room.

[He spent most of his life refusing to do what he was told. Raging against a system that he thought was out to get him. He called this morning, you know?]

[He called you!? I told him not to tell you we were coming!] Viktor was already incensed, half-stomping around the room in anger, [He's always bloody meddling!]

[He didn't tell me you were coming. He just called.] Kon explained simply, putting the sack on the counter to tie a knot at the top, and watched his son's tantrum end.

[For no reason whatsoever.] Viktor said dryly.

[To check on me. On the truck.] The bear clarified, [And, in hindsight, perhaps to prime me for the fact that he knew you were coming.]

The silver skater was still skeptical.

[Most of our conversations end up returning to one of three topics...him, your mother, or you and your...situation.] Kon went on, putting his big, calloused hands on the counter, looking down at the items he'd gathered, [He ended that conversation on the note that, if I can come to grips with the idea that I will never change...perhaps I should extend that understanding to you as well. You've grown up in a world far removed from the one I did. Your obligations, responsibilities...everything was different.] He explained, gathering up the small pile, and slowly came out of the old kitchen, boots thumping along the wooden floorboards like a woolly rhino's steps, [It's because of what he said that I've decided to let go of the anger I had for what you're doing, and...simply let God sort it out, in whatever way He sees fit. God doesn't make mistakes; that's why He's God. It's not our place to question His will. We can only spend our lives trying to learn and understand what He's trying to teach us.] He said, and paused a pace away from his son, holding out the items, [The fact that I have been this way my entire life may be why God has chosen to use such harsh methods to...humble me. Denying your mother and I more children while giving Mik a small brood that he never
wanted, taking Tat from me, giving you a way to leave...and then gave you the gifts to rise so high in your sport, only to inspire you to couple with a man and tear you down with it.]

Viktor wasn't sure what to make of the words, but he reached his hands out nervously to accept the skillet and the sack, unsure what else had been gathered.

[These are all things I've told you before, in one form or another...but my understanding of what it all means gradually shifts.] Kon went on, calmer than before, [And even though you don't believe the way that I do, maybe you're still getting some kind of message from it, too.]

[...I don't...understand what the point of all this is.] Viktor admitted reluctantly.

Kon shrugged and stepped back, reaching down to scratch the yearling's head as it came trotting up next to him, [I learned to release the anger I had about the skating, and accepted it as God's gift to you...and because of it, I've been able to learn about the champion you've grown into. I'm...trying...to let go of my anger on the rest...so I can have a similar clarity there, too. Some days I succeed more than others; calling Yuri Tsar Bomba was a better day, but I've obviously had some...setbacks. I'm an old man now, and things work slowly out here...be patient while I learn to see the forest for the trees.]

Yuri was half-dressed in his winter gear when the door finally opened and Viktor stepped back inside, "I thought you got eaten by bears!" He harped, watching precariously as Makkachin zipped by in a dash for warmth, "You said you'd only be gone for a little while."

"Sorry." The Russian answered quietly, holding out the items he'd been given, "...I got stuff, though."

"...What...is it?" Yuri wondered, starting the arduous process of peeling out of his layers all over again, though he watched his spouse go by to set the collection on the counter, "Viktor?"

The silver legend held still for a moment. His attention was grabbed by Jiro whining again, and he reached for a small bowl in the cabinet, and put the spare kibble into it that he'd stowed in his pocket. The pup struggled a little bit with the big pieces, but managed to figure it out. Viktor rose back up again, and pulled off his hat, hair slightly mussed where it clung with static. He set it down onto the counter, and shrugged out of his jacket, putting that aside as well, and turned to face his partner.

Yuri was a small sphere of jackets, sweaters, and scarves, but his head was entirely uncovered by then; Ravenclaw beanie put back into the closet as the rest was being gathered to join it. He stared in confusion as his husband stepped closer, and felt hands deftly slide up his many sleeves, one palm pressing to his cheek as the other settled on his shoulder. A thumb rubbed slowly over his skin, "...You're being weird...?" He said nervously, "What happened? Why were you gone so lo-"

The line of questions was ended with a kiss; soft and gentle, barely enough to touch, then pressing a little closer. Yuri's confusion only grew, but the kiss was welcome anyway, and he tried to reach his overly-dressed arms forward to hold around his partner's frame.

The kiss went on for a little while longer; Viktor changed directions twice before nuzzling his spouse's lips with his nose, and drew a quick but deep breath, "...I think tomorrow will be better."
"...It's not my greatest work, but I think it's edible." Viktor hoped, presenting the meager fare to the waiting table of one. The skillet-seared venison, boiled & mashed turnips, and sliced & baked potatoes were set down before curious eyes, and the silver legend backed up a bit to await judgment.

Yuri smelled at it happily, "They say any food is a feast to someone who's starving, but I think this actually looks pretty decent...and considering you had no spices to work with or anything..."

"Good old Russian loner backwoods alpha-male cuisine." Viktor mused, folding the small stove-towel he'd used to bring the skillet over, and hung it from the oven handle before returning to the booth-style table to take his place opposite his partner, "None of the fanfare...just raw fruit of the earth, made hot."

"But you made it hot, so it's already doing pretty well." Yuri added, dividing up the portions as his husband sat down, "So...are you finally going to tell me what happened?"

"Sorry..." The silver Russian sighed, "I didn't want to run my mouth about it until I understood what happened."

"That's fair."

Slate blue eyes watched as flaky potato chunks were set before him, next to the boneless cut of deer meat, "...I'm actually still trying to wrap my head around it. If there was ever a guy who embodied the hashtag 'the struggle is real,' it's my father..." He started to explain, waiting patiently as Yuri served out the second half of dinner onto his own plate, "I can't even remember now how it even started...but we ended up back on the issue of you and I... He said he thought he might've regressed a little in how he handles the idea of us, so he's kind of lost that 'pride' he had for you from when he called you Tsar Bomba."

"...Oh."

"I think it's partly my fault though." Viktor shook his head, letting his partner put the skillet aside and sit down properly again before he reached his feet across the space under the table, and wove their ankles together in the middle, "His understanding, and my explanation for it all, didn't really match. I'm not sure how or why, but...he seems to frame everything that he...erm...disapproves of with me, is actually a test for him. My whole existence is just a tool for him to learn and grow from, rather than being my life that I'm trying to live. I just..." He sighed again as he reached up for the utensils on either side of his plate, and stared at the seared meat before him, "I'm trying to be accommodating to how he sees the world. I'm really trying. But that just doesn't make sense to me at all. How can I possibly have a relationship with someone who views me as a bump on the road of his personal journey?"

"Maybe it's all you can do." Yuri shrugged, blowing on a potato wedge where it still steamed on the end of his fork, "Until he gets to the end of that journey, anyway. He has to reconcile these small pieces of your life and-"

"You're not a small piece." Viktor corrected, "And I told him that, too. He tried to frame you in female terms again, and I had to set him straight... If there's anything about his mindset that I understand, it's that he sees us as some failed coupling simply because we're incapable of having our
own kids together. That man and woman has their role to play and that we're failing at our Creator's Purpose if we deviate from that path, especially if it's for selfish reasons, which he thinks this is."

Yuri just raised a brow skeptically.

"To him, our situation is more of an offense to him because we're not fulfilling our duties as men. He's got these really rigid ideas of what we're supposed to do with our lives, and reproducing is for sure one of those things that we absolutely must do."

"What about-"

"I know, I know...I posed the same scenarios." Viktor cut him off and shook his head again, then went after the venison, cutting a chunk off the end, more to look at it than eat it though. He held it up at the end of his fork and just stared as he turned it in place, "He didn't really have an answer to any of it though. I guess he's just hung-up on the idea that if you can, you should...and even if you choose not to, there's a chance you might accidentally anyway. But with us, there's no chance whatsoever."

Yuri was quiet for a moment, chewing on a bit of the turnip mash while he thought about how to answer. He wanted to make sure his partner ate something, too, and gave the man a breather from questions. Once Viktor had downed a fair portion, Yuri spoke again, "...I feel kind of bad about that. I'm sure my parents are kind of disappointed too, deep down, that I can't give them grandkids. It's all on Mari-nee-chan, now, and she's single as heck."

"...Maybe she could be a surrogate for you." Viktor said suddenly, dead-neutral in his expression.

The younger figure's eyes narrowed slightly, and he reached his fork-hand across the table to put a finger on his husband's lips, "Let us never speak of that again. It was the creepiest thing to ever come out of your mouth."

Viktor just smirked behind the digit, and kissed it before it pulled away again, "You know I'm teasing. Mari doesn't even like it when I kiss her cheek. The idea that she'd volunteer to be a female stand-in for you and carry a kid just for me is ludicrous."

"...I...don't think I'd want to ask her even if she was willing." Yuri admitted hesitantly, "Is it weird or selfish of me to say that I...don't want to change how we are...?"

The silver legend shook his head and cut off another slice of venison, scooping a bit of potato on top of it to chew on both.

"I mean, we could adopt a whole pack of dogs...it still wouldn't hurt how we are. But...a kid? That changes everything." Yuri tried to rationalize, "It just reminds me of everything Minako-sensei said about her own situation. Nothing will ever be the same once she has that kid."

"Mh."

"I don't want to lose what we have together because all of our focus and attention has to go towards raising a child. It's...not something I see on our horizon. We have too many other things going on to fit that kind of responsibility into the middle of it anyway."

"See how selfish we both are?" Viktor huffed between bites, "I can feel my father seething from here."

"I guess the alternative isn't so bad..." Yuri started up again, his thinking going a different direction, "When Minako-sensei does have that baby...we'll get to be part of its life. We'll get to be the cool uncles or something. Given how all of Mikhail's kids look like him, and how you look like his sister,
it's safe to say that *those* genes are pretty strong. So by appearance alone, at least...that kid really would look like a mix of *us.*"

"The cool uncles, huh?"

"Maybe they'll make us Godparents?"

"Neither of them is religious though."

"Non-custodial guardians?"

"*That's* a mouthful."

"*You're* a mouthful." Yuri shot back sarcastically.

Viktor glanced up, eyes grinning even before the rest of his face did, but then he looked back to his dinner, "*Hm...*maybe later."

Yuri just blinked, then the realization set in and his face went red, "*Ohmygod* Viktor you're *so* inappropriate."

The silver Russian just chortled a laugh at his plate.

Jiro chewed on a piece of raw turnip in his spot on a corner of the big bed. Makkachin had abandoned his a while ago and was snoozing on the fold-out couch, and had wrapped himself up in the blankets of the make-shift bed to snooze, warm and content. The whole interior of the camper had been opened up to make it feel like one continuous room.

The main bed itself had been repurposed into something of a nest, with piles of blankets from the unused other beds brought over, along with more pillows. Everything had been piled high against the headboard, making it easy and comfortable to lean back and watch the big flat-panel at the front of the room.

To Yuri's chagrin, the only options for viewing were a pre-selected library of movies and television shows, most of which were either Russian in manufacture, or were available only with a Russian voice-over. When they'd finally settled on something to watch, it became a very peculiar viewing experience.

"I never thought about how silly this movie would be if spoken in a language other than English." The younger figure commented; he'd thinned himself down to just the t-shirt and shorts he'd worn under all his thicker outer layers, and was well-tangled with his partner within the nest, "But in Russian it's just downright weird."

"Why is it weird...?" Viktor wondered, turning his head aside briefly, "The mouth movements don't match?"

"I'm used to the original voices. I don't have recognition with the voice-over cast, so when someone off-screen talks, I have to think about who it's supposed to be." He explained, "After 20-odd movies in this series, it's hard to adapt."

"Can't be worse than the old Godzilla English-dubs."

"...What do you mean?"
"Oh, you don't know?" Viktor laughed, "There's an ages-old joke about those movies, where someone would have a long line in the original Japanese cut, but then the English dub would have some paltry little thing for the person to say...so the character's mouth would still be moving but there wouldn't be any dialogue."

"Oh." Yuri deadpanned him, "...Well, this isn't like that, necessarily." He said, gesturing at where the television was playing The Avengers - or as he'd come to know it, Mstiteli - and its scene with Loki using the Mind-Stone-carrying-Scepter to turn Hawkeye into his pawn, "But you can tell that it's a voice-over...none of the dialogue sounds like it's coming from the mouths of the characters who are speaking. There's no depth."

"I've heard of movies being filmed for 3D, but now it sounds like you want 3D audio, too." Viktor teased, kissing the nearest shoulder before looking back at the screen, "You ask too much of my people."

"Your people made an Avengers knockoff so blatant that people are making fun of it."

"Did they?"

"Mh. The Guardians."

"Of Ga'hoole?"

"Of what? No, just The Guardians."

"Rise of the Guardians of Ga'hoole."

"No." Yuri flustered, dropping his head back against a pillow, "I wish I had internet access...I'd look up a trailer for you. They have a machinegun-toting were-bear instead of the Hulk, and a guy that looks like Bane in place of the Winter Soldier. ...I think it's supposed to be Bucky anyway. They have another character that looks kind of like him, but the Bane-looking guy was in a scene reminiscent of the Winter Soldier origins with the people in icy tubes."

"A were-bear, huh? You sure they didn't cast my papa?" Viktor laughed, squishing his head against the same pillow to grab a nibble on the man's neck.

"Maybe that's his beastial form." The younger figure huffed, "Finally giving form to his namesake."

"By day," He started with a kiss, "He is a normal, albeit huge, man," He moved a bit lower and kissed again, "By night," He gave a slightly-more-wet kiss then, "He stalks the woods as a grizzly."

"I'm starting to feel conflicted..."

"Why?" The Russian teased, walking a few kisses up his husband's neck, back to that spot under the man's ear that he liked so much.

"I'm starting to get a warm tingly feeling, but then I lose it cuz I can't get the image of Kon out of my head?" Yuri huffed, twisting slightly where he was so he could wedge an arm under the back of his spouse's head, and give him easier access, "I'm going to need you to try a little harder..."

"To seduce you while I'm putting the idea of my father into your mind?" The silver legend laughed again, curling his right arm where it had been resting under his husband's back since the movie started, and pulled him closer, kisses moving under his partner's jaw, "That sounds like a tall order."

Yuri smirked a little, and brought up his other arm to rest it over his spouse's frame as he enjoyed the
attention, "The perils of jokes about your father has its ups and downs."

"Sounds like this conversation's about to get shafted though."

"Maybe you just came to your senses?"

Viktor chortled a laugh against that pale neck, and pulled his husband over his frame slightly, looking up with a grin, "Or my dad jokes are firing blanks."

Yuri settled in a little closer, gently touching nose-tips, "Thinking about your father while in bed is a pain in the ass, and not even the good kind."

"I'll be sure to give my deepest apologies again."

"Mhh...I'm not sure that pun rose to the occasion."

The silver man sputtered a little, "Overdone?"

"Ah you ended that one prematurely."

"You could go all night long on puns."

"On puns?" Yuri shook his head, "No...on you."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED FOURTY THREE

The light in the R.V. were turned down, and the couch fold-out bed was set into place. The main compartment's television was turned on for the ambiance, and Yuri built a small nest for his curious puppy, placing Jiro into it when he was done. Water bowls were set down onto the floor, and Makkachin hopped up onto the make-shift bed, turning in a circle a few times before finally lying down, and got a few head-pats as Yuri passed. Viktor squished the poodle's face a few times for good measure before bidding his pupper goodnight, scratched Jiro's back through the nest, and headed off behind his partner.

The sliding partition was pulled across, and the last few lamps in the back of the camper were dimmed, leaving little more than the Russian dub of The Avengers playing softly in the background for light. Thermal blankets and thick comforters were pulled back already.

Yuri stood side-face as he watched his spouse put the door to, leaving just enough of a crack open that they could easily hear the dogs. He rubbed his eyes on the side of his wrist and forearm, and held his free hand out, turning slightly around as he felt fingers find it. Though clad in loose-fitting sweat-pants, the rest of that pale physique was bare to Yuri's sight and touch, and he pressed his lips to the man's collar-bone as he neared into a hug. Arms went around his back, and one hand rose up, tracing a fingertip against his spine until it got to his neck, and wove through his raven hair. He threaded his own arms around the Russian's larger frame and held tight, relishing in the feeling of velvet-soft skin against his chest.

Viktor waited in that moment, breathing in the scent of his husband's hair. Their earlier teases had already put him well on the path towards excitement, but he hadn't entirely lost his faculties yet. Even those simple, quiet moments could still be enjoyed. Eventually though, he could feel the cold of the hard floor creeping into the soles of his bare feet, and he started stepping back, guiding his smaller partner along with him. He waited until he could feel the mattress against the back of his knees before he started to lean back and sit, but he did so only on the edge of a kiss, teasing his spouse to follow after him. He got slightly impatient though, and he playfully pulled Yuri down and over himself, putting them both onto their sides, facing one another, with Yuri's legs draped over the side of his own.

A few quiet laughs were breathed between them before the tease of kisses began in earnest, and Yuri draped his arms over each of his husband's shoulders. He rolled slightly onto his back as Viktor moved to lean over him, feeling the Russian's free hand slide down from ribs to waist, and waited there for a little while. Eventually, it started to move down again, following around the curve of his backside and up the back of his thigh where his legs still curved over the silver legend's frame. He could feel that warm palm go just up to his knee before sliding back down again, and fingers snuck under the edge of his hip-hugging black shorts. The trail of probing fingertips traced their way over his skin, following the arch of toned muscle, even bridging the space to the other cheek before coming back again. Those fingers then curved towards deeper reaches, curling all the way around the back of one thigh, coming precariously close to going fully between them, then retracted again. For a split second, Yuri was of the mind to pull one leg down so he could press his whole front to his spouse's, but Viktor had other ideas and moved on them quicker.

Instead of letting that lower leg move down, Viktor nudged the upper away, setting his husband completely flat on his back, save that one leg that still hooked over him. He pulled that leg up a bit higher, bending it more over his waist. He slid his fingers down the now-accessible inner thigh,
slowly rubbing his thumb back and forth as he went.

Kisses moved from lips to jaw, then to neck, and Yuri lifted his head up to give the man all the more access. He let himself go limp under his partner's attention, and focused everything on the sense of every inch of skin that lips and fingers caressed. But...to Yuri's surprise, Viktor had suddenly hesitated, "...What's wrong? Do I have a pimple or something...?"

The silver Russian shook his head, but then lifted up to look at the younger man directly, and huffed an amused laugh, "I just...had this really odd sense of déjà vu, and I realized where I remembered the moment from."

"...Oh...?" Yuri wondered skeptically, tormented by the pause.

"Mh." Viktor nodded, silver bangs brushing against his husband's skin as he leaned back down onto his left side and shoulder, "The dream I had on the flight over here."

Yuri deadpanned him, "That was hours ago. You forgot already? I figured it would be seared into your brain."

"Oh, it is, but to me it feels like that's how things could've actually happened, so I remember it as having happened two years ago..." The Russian mused, sliding his hands softly up and down his partner's side, nose to nose on their shared pillow, "We should reenact it."

"...What part are we on now?" The younger figure wondered, intrigued at least.

"In your apartment in Detroit." Viktor explained, cozying in closer, "Phichit is out-cold from the mulled wine I made. The Ring is playing, a-"

"The Ring!?" Yuri could hardly believe it, "Why are we watching that!?"

"I guess because I remembered the story about Phichit putting water under your door after?" The Russian laughed, stealing a kiss or two as he spoke, "I could tell you were getting tense watching it, so I used it as an excuse to get closer..." He said quietly, grinning the whole way, "I started kissing your neck...lightly...barely touching, testing the waters..."

Yuri tilted his head aside to open that space up again, and smiled to himself as those very light brushes of lips returned to his skin, "Mhm...?"

"I said that...we could stop the movie...if you wanted..." Viktor went on, breathing the whispers onto pale flesh, "But you said...no..."

"...I want to keep going...?"

"Mhm~" He purred, turning up the heat on those light touches, moving up to just under his husband's ear. He nosed at the edge of raven hair for just a moment before dragging the tip of his tongue down the length of that neck in a string of wetter kisses, and back up again to his favorite spot, "By this point...I wasn't sure if we were...talking about the movie, or what...I was doing..." He smirked, toying with his partner's earlobe, "But then I...got you to look at me..."

Yuri turned his head as suggested, eyes half-lidded as he looked on curiously.

Slate eyes watched him back, "...And I inched closer..." He said quietly, leaning further in until he could feel the very edge of his husband's lips, "And then I..." He couldn't wait anymore, and simply pressed into that kiss without finishing the words to announce it. It fell apart though as he laughed, "Yeah...just like that..."
"Then what?"

"We stayed like this for a while..."

"And Phichit-kun never woke up?"

"Of course not. It was my dream." Viktor mused, "Everything works out the way I want it to there. But then...I carried you to your room...and we slept together-"

"I thought that didn't happen till Worlds?"

"No no, not like that...we slept together, like how I said we should when I first got to Yu-Topia."

"Oh."

"And you shot me down."

"Don't remind me!" Yuri pleaded, embarrassed.

"Hmm..." The silver legend rubbed nose-tips together, "We did kiss a bit longer there first... The next morning though, for your college graduation..."

"Oh, this is when...?"

"Mhm." Viktor grinned eagerly, and twisted around to put his back to the pillow pile pressed up against the headboard. He offered a hand, "When you let me help you."

Yuri took the hand without hesitation, and let the man guide him up and onto his lap. It was as obvious as anything that their bodies were excited and ready, but the dream story was tantalizing, and Yuri wanted to follow through, "That must've been some graduation ceremony later on that day."

"Indeed. You let me do this to you three times before we left to attend." The Russian explained happily, letting his hands wander up his husband's legs where they straddled either side of his waist, thumbs teasing the more sensitive inner skin, "The first time...we were still in your bed...just like this..." He said, watching his partner's face as fingers curved around that hardened flesh still-hidden under black elastic, "And you didn't even try to run away..."

Yuri closed his eyes and let himself savor the feeling, and reached both hands forward to settle them on his husband's shoulders, "You sure it was me in your dream?"

"Of course it was you." Viktor insisted, sliding both palms up his spouse's abdomen, stopping on the man's chest, "Maybe I just think you wouldn't have been so suspicious of my intentions if we'd been talking for a while beforehand..." He supposed, sliding his hands down again to settle on the man's waistband, though he was given quite the look for his answer, "...What?" The Russian wondered, cocking a brow in return, though he saw his partner struggle to explain himself, and he sighed, "My dream was about you remembering the Sochi Banquet, not about changing who you are. I didn't fall for you so I could turn you into someone else."

Yuri pursed his lips slightly as he shrugged, "...I am different now though." He pointed out, pulling his hands back from their perches to press them down against the pillow-pile on either side of his partner's frame.

"Sure. So am I."
He slowly leaned forward from there, pivoting forward on his elbows as he wedged his hands under his husband's back, and crinkled his nose up on the edge of the Russian's chin, "...Is it what you wanted?"

Viktor tilted his face down, sneaking under his spouse's nose to lift those eyes. He replaced his hands behind the younger man's back, hooking his fingers there loosely. "I wanted you to be happy. I wanted to be the reason you were happy. If you became this way because you're happy, then yes, it's exactly what I wanted. If it's not, then I've completely misread the situation and I have work to do."

Yuri turned his head aside a few times, indicating to the negative, "No, I'm happy..."

"...I sense there's a 'but' in there somewhere." The Russian retorted skeptically.

"Maybe I'm just a little jealous of your dream-version of me." Yuri answered; he pressed his face lightly to the crook of neck and shoulder, and set his lips against the groove just above his spouse's collar-bone, "I put you through so much simply because I didn't remember."

Viktor rubbed the side of his jaw against the side of Yuri's head, feeling the rough texture of raven hair, "There was only one time you ever really 'put' me through anything, and that was the night you said 'after the Final, let's end this.' Everything since has either been an accident or happened to both of us, not just me."

Yuri could only manage a nod.

The silver Russian suddenly pushed up to sit then, and reached around widely for the edge of the big comforter, "...But now I'm going to say 'let's end this.'" He huffed, unable to reach on the left side; he used his foot to lift up the blanket and brought it closer, then dropped down to his back again, pulling the blanket up over his husband's frame in turn as Yuri stayed upright, looking confused. Viktor just reached up and pulled the man down, fingers curled around neck and head on both sides. He gave quite the sultry look as he tilted his face slightly to the right, "You should be dripping-wet and I should be inside you by now. No more delays. I want you."

Cheeks went red immediately, but Yuri didn't have time to say anything, feeling himself get pulled forward just as those words were spoken. Hands released his head, but he stayed where he was, sinking into the feeling of that kiss as fingers went down the curve of his back, and slipped under the edge of the elastic around his waist. Viktor wasted no time, pushing the fabric away as well as he could, before the bulk of his own body made it impossible to tug the material any further. Yuri pulled away from the kiss only long enough to push up onto his knees, giving the fabric slack again, and let his husband pull it the rest of the way down his thighs. One leg came out, then the other, and the garment was lost in the bed-sheets. Yuri repositioned himself above the Russian's body as the man pushed his own clothes away as well as he could, getting everything to just around mid-thigh before his reach ended. That was enough by Yuri's standards; he lowered back down again and sat skin-to-skin against the hard flesh he'd been teased by during that whole awkward 'conversation' about his husband's dream. As it always had been, the feeling of the member was hotter than the skin around it, and through his own, he could feel the Russian's throbbing heartbeat.

Viktor took him into his hands rather quickly after that, and Yuri gasped a slight breath against the lips that still urgently needed his kisses. Hips started to rock gently under him, and legs parted - knees coming up behind him - making the undulating rhythm of their slow-dance much more obvious. It was clear that part of his excitement had evaporated in his earlier doubts, but the feeling of gentle squeezes, twists, and tugs on the head of his arousal put him right back to the edge again. His husband's member slid forward and back under him, teasing the length and girth of the shaft against sensitive skin. He pulled one hand back from where he'd pressed them into the mattress, and ringed
his fingers around the tip of it, giving the Russian something to enjoy as well. It seemed to work almost instantly, as he felt his partner's tongue pull out of his mouth, and he heard a soft gasping exhale. He kept hold of the man even as Viktor started to roll them over, moving slowly between renewed kisses until the silver legend rose up between his legs and pressed in even harder.

Yuri drew a gasp, leaning his head back into the pillows as he felt his fingers nudged away. Smooth heat pressed against his skin, and a hand went around to circle them both before the slide began. Viktor loomed over him, trailing the tip of his tongue from chest to neck, holding himself up just high enough to make space for his hand to caress them. The rolling of hips, forward and back, was driving him to ecstasy, and he lost all train of thought on the moments before. He couldn't help but lift his feet up to cross his ankles behind his husband's back, pulling him down to lock him in place, and started to roll his own hips up in turn. He could feel the huff of a soft laugh against his neck as Viktor leaned up slightly, but both arms went up over the man's shoulders to pull him back down again.

The silver Russian felt a flutter in his chest when he noted the lock of lips on the side of his neck, and the subtle but obvious suck that came with it. It was high on his neck, too, high enough that Yuri's cheek brushed the side of his ear while he went about his task. He couldn't help but let go between them and set his now-free arm against the bedding to hold himself up, and gasped a surprised laugh as the suck suddenly sent a shock through him, "Y-Yuri... Do you want my father to know...?"

"Mhm." The younger man hummed his answer, not letting go, and not letting up. All the while he suckled hard, he kept up the rolling of his hips, as though the two were tied together and could not be stopped.

Viktor hesitated a moment, but then just let himself relax into it, and lowered himself down to lie flat on his husband's frame. Legs hugged around him even tighter, and arms went further over him. He answered in kind by wedging his arms under the man's thin body, and pressed his hands flat against that pale back. The suck was slightly painful...but it was a good hurt...and the pleasure of the rubbing further down was an easy distraction. Yuri eventually let him go though, collapsing down to the pillows to catch his breath and inspect his work.

He brought his fingers up to gently touch at the dark red dime-size spot he'd left on his husband's previously-unblemished skin, and smirked, "There...now... Haah... There's no...doubt..."

"Was there ever any before? I did tell him to his face that we made love in the middle of NHK..."

"You did what!?"

Viktor just offered an easy but nervous smile, "I love you."

"Ican'tbelieveyou-"

The thought was put off by another kiss, and Viktor pressed in heavy over the younger figure to quash the protest, even as he laughed in the middle of it all. He took over the hip-rolling as well, and found the warm, wet feeling on his stomach when he squished their fronts flat against each other. He moved himself a little bit lower then, kissing his husband's neck lightly as his hand wandered around for the bottle he'd sourced earlier on. When he found it, he lifted his head up, and looked on adoringly at his exasperated spouse, "Oh good, you're all wet now."

"Gshhhhh..." The younger man answered, pulling down on his cheeks with both hands so the pink under his eyes showed.

Viktor laughed again and pushed up to sit on his knees, careful not to move too far away, "Now it's
"I can't believe you told him..."

"I was mad and wanted to make a point." The Russian answered, squeezing a dollop of lube into his palm, then squeezed more out onto each of them directly for good measure. He capped the bottle and used both hands to spread the warming liquid around, lathing it over each member, and all around them, especially between his husband's legs, "Why do you think Minako yelled at you?" He mused, his words losing their bite as his hands massaged.

Yuri bit the edge of a finger as he tried to maintain his composure, "...I don't...know..."

"She lost a bet with Yurio." Viktor explained, leaning forward slightly and scooching in a bit closer, "She had to pay up because of it."

That just made Yuri's face go even redder than it already was, and he turned his eyes towards his partner's mischievous grin, "But...why would they..."

"Speculation on why I was late to the medaling ceremony?" The Russian supposed, kissing his spouse's chest, and dragged his bangs across that pale skin, "Poor Minako, she must've been banking on your innocence... But Yurio knows..."

"Y-Yurio...has a dirty mind..."

That just made Viktor laugh, and he pressed his forehead down, "You think so?"

"W-well...he put up a fuss...about skating Eros instead of A-Agape...hngg..." Yuri tried to answer, losing himself in the slick strokes, "A-and then...he went from Agape...t-to...his Madness Exhibition..."

"Mmhh..." The silver legend hummed, lifting his head again to admire the way his partner wiggled under his attention, "And you went from Eros to Duetto... You both completely switched out; Eros to Agape and Agape to Eros. I suppose you two did become more self-aware in the end."

"M-maybe..." Yuri whispered a breath, feeling the probing, prodding sensation of his husband's member trying to find its way down. He closed his eyes and let his tense and needy body relax, legs unclenching from their place around his partner's waist. The tip moved up and down, teasing a push only to ease-off again, but the torment of such denials only lasted a few seconds, and Yuri lifted his arms to drape over his spouse's back as Viktor leaned down over him again, sliding smoothly inside, "Nh... nghhh..."

"Mhh..."

Slowly in, hold, slowly out, rest...repeat...gentle...

Viktor eased down, propping himself up on his elbows on either side of his spouse's ribs, and nosed at the man's collar-bone and neck. He savored the hot feeling of his husband's body, pushing further into it with each ease forward. He shifted his knees closer when he felt himself flush against the curve of his partner's figure. He breathed a relieved sigh against the man's skin, and pressed hard to get as far inside as he could, holding there with the heat around him. He could feel the subtle switch between relaxation and high-involuntary tension, and cast half-lidded eyes down on the younger man's face, watching Yuri's expression change as he adjusted to the penetration. Viktor pulled out slightly, and eased back in, and slowly started to pick up his pace as his spouse's reactions allowed.

The feeling of fullness was overwhelming, and the constant slide up and against that sensitive
walnut-sized organ sent pulses through him. Pressure and relief came quicker, Viktor's body rocking against him, staying close enough to avoid allowing any space to grow between them. He slid his hands back down, pressed his palms to his partner's chest, and moved them back up again to cup them against Viktor's cheeks. He locked his gaze on those slate eyes, momentum keeping pace.

Viktor pressed his face to the side, savoring the presence of the hands on his skin, and turned slightly to kiss one palm before he lowered down to touch brows. Hands slid to push down on the sheets and lifted him up, then moved to Yuri's waist to hold him in place...and started to go faster. The slick noise of skin sliding in and out - hips hitting against each other - rose into the quiet of the R.V., overtaking the quiet ambiance of the movie still playing on the wall behind them. Viktor pulled his head up and sat a bit higher, and hooked his arms under the back of his husband's knees, and moved even faster still. He watched eagerly as Yuri's smaller frame jerked up with each thrust, each bounce of loose hair over his face, each crinkle in the pillows as the younger man was pushed into them. Hands went to clench around his knees, and Viktor huffed a quiet laugh despite his exertion; as a reward, he started hitting his hips harder with each thrust.

Yuri's breaths became vocal then, and he closed his eyes tightly. He barely had the mental faculties left to reach a hand up and away from where he'd gripped his husband's knee, and set it over himself instead, taking hold of his forgotten flesh. Though he wasn't looking, he could tell his partner had taken notice, as his legs were released from the Russian's arms so the man could get a better view down. He did his best to give a good showing despite being so thoroughly overwhelmed, and Viktor relished every moment.

The thrusting pace slowed slightly as the Russian's focus waned, watching his partner pleasuring himself, even if many strokes were slightly incoherent. He huffed a laugh and eased off, sliding forward and back more slowly than before until he was just bobbing his hips in a roll against his husband's frame. Not needing to hold himself up anymore, Viktor moved his hands to his partner's legs, and gave each one a long stroke from knee to core. The feeling of it nearly put the younger man over the top though, and Viktor laughed and pulled his hands back. He pat his partner's side, and Yuri heaved a deep breath before he pulled his legs back and twisted around where he sat.

Looking back, Yuri waited for guidance on where to go, and watched as the silver Russian positioned himself behind him, putting hands on his waist again to pull him back. The empty feeling of his husband's absence was quickly remedied, and Viktor slipped back inside. Yuri gasped and grit his teeth as he felt himself fill up again, reaching one hand back to grip around a leg parted around him. Arms went around his core and pulled his back to the silver Russian's chest, and kisses set against his neck. Yuri turned his head over one shoulder with a half-lidded gaze, and got a few soft kisses for his efforts before the thrusting fever-pitch returned as before.

From sitting, they toppled over to their sides, and Viktor pushed inside him, holding one of Yuri's legs up in his hand. The next switch put Viktor over the younger man again, though Yuri stayed on his side, one leg bent up and around the Russian's chest. Yuri then grabbed a pillow and turned onto his stomach, tantalized as much by the slapping sound of his husband's body hitting his as the feeling of it. By the end, Yuri found himself on top again, rising and falling on that shaft himself while Viktor tended to the front with his hands. Just as in his dream, Viktor watched his young husband's release, white seed spurting and dripping from member to the Russian's stomach.

Yuri continued his ride even after climax, spurred on - even if slower then - by Viktor's attentive hands, milking him for everything he could. Red flesh throbbed and trembled in the silver legend's grip, and Yuri cried out with each passing breath, reaching down behind himself and between his husband's legs, to feel with his own hand as those muscular contractions began, and Viktor's own release carried out inside him. He listened to the man's vocal, breathy moans, and felt each extra desperate thrust go as deeply as possible. He lifted himself and descended for as long as he could,
until his own strength gave out, and all he could do was sit in place, suspended on his husband's member.

He caught his breath for a minute or so before leaning forward to collapse against Viktor's chest, and heaved there quietly as one arm went up and around him. The other reached to pull on the blankets that had tumbled away in the midst of the romp, then joined the first around Yuri's back.

"...S-...so much...for quietest...sexy time ever..." Yuri huffed a laugh, "D-do...you think..."

"No way..." Viktor answered, catching his breath as well, "This R.V...is sound proof...cuz of the tele...vision..."

"O-Oh...okay, good..."

The Russian laughed and nuzzled his husband's head, "Getting c-cold feet about...him knowing...?"

"I want him...to see...the aftermath...not hear us...in the act..."

"Ah..." He smirked, "Naruhodo..." (I see.)
It was never unexpected that Yu-Topia was noisy after 9am or so. Between the full staff being awake and working, customers coming and going, conversations being had, the television playing...all manner of things...there was always something happening. This time, however, it seemed to unsettle the resident critters, as both Potya and Hana seemed restless.

The common room seemed normal enough though. Potya stayed on her harness so she wouldn't sneak off and hide, but even then, she stayed curled up within the nest her human's crossed legs formed under the table. Yurio tried to coax her into eating, but she just gave her surroundings that 'thousand-yard-stare' that cats sometimes had, and acted as though the food wasn't there, even when pushed up against her nose. Hana at least ate a little, but between bites, she looked around, eyes constantly going towards the exit. Asahi kept a hand relaxed over her ribs to keep her settled, white fluff of the dog's back pressed to the side of his leg.

"I wonder what's gotten into them?" Nikki said quietly, trying to put her chopsticks into place, though one kept tilting down uselessly. She made a face and set them down, going after a fork instead before she turned back to look at the pale pup between her and the skater, "Is there a storm coming or something?"

"None that I've heard about," Minako answered, looking at a weather app briefly before setting her phone down on the low table, "Maybe Yu-Topia is haunted."

"Yu-Topia isn't haunted." Yurio argued from his end of the gathered, "They probably just smell something."

More people came and went from the common room as breakfast finished, but still nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Asahi had finished a while back and was just waiting to be polite, stroking his fingers through Hana's fur for her sake as much as his own. Once the last person had finished though, he excused himself and rose up, taking his empty dishes to the kitchen counter with his dog at his heels. The rest of the group watched him go, but Yurio just rolled his eyes while everyone was looking away. When Asahi was out of sight though, Nikki got up to quietly follow after him, making Yurio grunt in annoyance.

Hana stayed as close to her human as a Seeing Eye Dog might, the ample puff about her neck often pressed against Asahi's knee as he stepped. The pale pup paused and lifted her head to glance back though, spotting the silver teen, but then went after her person again in a bid to catch up. Nikki warily followed them into the overnight section of the small resort, turning around the corner just in time to watch Hana's tail-fluff disappear beyond the edge of a doorframe.

"He spends all this time in there if we don't make him come out..."

Cautiously, Nikki stepped forward, trying not to make her footsteps on the hardwood too obvious. The door was still open though, and she nervously slid her hand along the frame, keeping her fingers on it as she peered around and looked inside. Within, she spotted Asahi pulling out a different set of clothes from the closet, and eyes locked in surprise when the older figure came out to turn around. Nikki eep'd and whipped around the doorframe again, "Sorry!"

"...Why are you sneaking around like that?"
"I didn't mean to!" She answered hurriedly, back pressed to the wall, "But I've been trying to figure you out since you got here and I just can't read you at all! I know your dog better than I know you!"

Asahi deadpanned the empty space, but then sighed as he shook his head, set the clothes onto the bed, and went to the door, peeking around to see the teen trying to be smaller than she already was, "Animals are honest. Humans are liars. It's best not to get too worked up over me."

Nikki looked back at him severely, but her expression softened into disappointed shock, "You really think all people are liars...?"

He shrugged lightly, "If you always expect the worst, then nothing can come as a shock, and when things go better than you think, it's a pleasant surprise."

"...I can only wonder what you think of me being here then, if you're that suspicious." The teen said, not sure if she should be offended.

"You're snooping, that's all." He answered, turning back into the room to return his attention to the clothes he'd gathered. Hana hopped up onto the bed and laid down close by to watch him, "I didn't think you came for any nefarious purposes, if that's what you're worried about."

Nikki peeled herself off the wall and turned around to stand in the open entryway, watching from there with her fingers on the wooden panels beside her, "I'm worried about a lot of things. Whether or not you're okay was chief among them, but now..." Her words trailed off slightly as she gave a look of recognition on the garments being pulled off their hangers, "...Isn't that the same outfit you wore to the rink yesterday?"

Asahi looked down at them, then to the girl, then back again, "...Yeah?"

"You haven't even washed them though. You're gonna wear them a second time...?"

"It's not like I really did anything yesterday. I didn't even break a sweat. What difference does it make?"

Nikki's eye twitched, "...I'm not sure if this is a moment where I need to check myself, or if it's just a difference of opinion between us...but...I don't tend to wear the same clothes twice without washing them first."

"Then you have more clothes than I do." The skater said flatly, only to then - rather unexpectedly - cross his arms over himself to hook his fingers under the edge of his t-shirt, and pulled the whole thing up over his head.

Nikki saw half an inch of skin and was immediately back into the hall again, face beat red, "You don't make any sense!"

"...What...?" Asahi asked, confused, from within. Even with the door wide open, the sweatpants he had were allowed to fall to the floor, and he sat back against the bed to pull the runner-pants on in their place, "I pulled clothes out so I could change into them, not admire them. What did you expect?"

"A warning maybe!?"

"It's not like I showed you anything." He huffed, adjusting his socks before standing up again to reach for the long-sleeve shirt, "I'm not just gonna strip naked in front of you, cripes... What would be the point of that?"
"A flippant display of apathy maybe?" Nikki shot back, "I've only really seen you give three expressions so far as it is; neutral, worry, and fear. If nothing else, you seem to exude shocking amounts of apathy."

Asahi paused in his efforts to get his arms through the sleeves, and turned his head slightly towards the door. He drew in a breath and returned to the task at hand, pulling the bottom hem of the shirt up over his head to pull himself through it, and straightened the garment out around him as it settled in and clung to his frame, "It's not as though I don't feel anything. I just don't express much. I learned a long time ago that there was no point in having others know what I think, because no one I could've told really gave a damn, so it was a wasted effort. If it satisfies you to know that I'm envious of your freedom to be expressive, then I'll admit that I am."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then forget I suggested it."

"What if I said it upset me instead?"

"Then I can't help you."

Nikki grumbled a breath on her side of the wall, and crossed her arms over herself, "I came here thinking I could help you, or at least learn a little bit about you." She admitted stiffly, "But you're a much harder nut to crack than Yura was. I feel like we don't even speak the same language."

Footsteps tapped on the floor as Asahi went to the closet again, and Hana jumped down after him, nails clacking lightly. He reached for his black and teal Team Japan jacket and slipped his arms inside it - but left the front open for the time being - and stepped towards the open doorway, looking aside to where he knew the teen was standing, "I don't want you to think you have to crack me. I was already smashed to pieces before I ever got here. I'm trying to put myself back together again right now."

Nikki's jade eyes glanced up at the much-taller figure, but she just gave a worried look, "Do you really want to put yourself back the way you were before though? I don't know much of anything about you other than the feeling I get from being around you, and it's not pleas-"

"It's what?" He asked skeptically, his tone flat.

The silver teen hesitated, but held firm, rewording herself, "...Like you think someone's out to get you."

Asahi stayed quiet a moment, expression unchanging. He reached down to the zipper of his coat and hooked the pieces together, pulling the tab up about halfway, then stuffed his hands into the pockets, "There's no point in making you worry about why I seem that way. I won't be in your hair for very long. Once I get going and can manage on my own, I'll be gone, and you won't have to think about me at all."

Nikki was stunned, and watched aghast as the older figure stepped by, Hana following quickly behind. Eyes trailed the man's path until he was around the corner and out of sight without another word. Bewildered by Asahi's words, Nikki pushed off the wall and went after him, finding him in the main foyer where he was putting his shoes on. Without thinking, she started doing the same thing, grabbing for the things she'd left in a locker near the front doors.

"...Where are you going?" He wondered, one eyebrow slightly cocked.

"With you."
"You're not even dressed for this weather; and how are you going to keep up anyway? I'll be jogging, not walking."

"Where are you two going?" A third voice suddenly joined in; both pairs of eyes wandered up to the doorway to the common room and spotted a certain elder of the Rozovsky crew there looking back at them, "Or rather, where are you going?" He corrected, turning his gaze down to Nikkita.

"Out." She answered stiffly, fully assembled in her winter gear, though in spite of the big jacket, scarf, hat, boots, and gloves, her legs were largely uncovered save the figure-hugging pajama pants she wore; they looked like grey sticks poking out from the thick bundle above them.

"Oh well, that's specific." Mikhail answered, "There sure is a lot of out out there. Glad you made it clear which one it was."

Nikki started to get impatient, "Dad! Quit interrogating me! I'm just gonna follow him around on Cousin Viktor's bike while he takes Hana for a run!"

"Ah," The elder rubbed his chin with a thumb, "Well, call if you're going to be gone longer than an hour. We have errands to run later. Don't forget."

As the Russian left again, disappearing back into the common room to finish his coffee and the morning news, Nikki turned her head to leer at the skater again, "There.

"Just cuz he said you could come doesn't mean I said you could come." Asahi shot back, "Why are you so set on this anyway? You don't know the first thing about me."

"That's why I want to go. Papa set me onto Yura before, too, to get him to come out of his shell and learn to relax a little bit. Maybe I can help you do the same."

"I'm practically twice your age. What makes you think I want a kid following me around, asking me probing questions?" He asked pointedly, and rose up to stand, zipping up the rest of his jacket before he stepped towards the door, "My runs are supposed to help me clear my head, not fill it up with things that upset me."

The door slid open, and he hopped out into the chill of the Hasetsu January morning. Hana was quick to rush out as well, happy as any northern dog could be to jump into snow. Asahi turned back long enough to look inside again and focused on the silver teen, "I won't stop you if you come, but I won't adjust my planned route because of you either. You can't ride your bike down the beach or all the way up to the castle. I'm also putting my ear-buds in, so I won't hear what you're saying anyway, even if you manage to keep up somehow."

Nikki just blinked at him, "...So you're avoiding me."

The door slid closed without a reply, leaving the silver teen aghast in the foyer. A few seconds later though, she felt a hand slide over her well-padded shoulders, and she turned her disappointed gaze up to whoever it had been to sneak up behind her.

"He's not trying to be mean." Minako explained quietly, "He ran away from us a lot at Nationals, too. Half the time, he wouldn't even go into public unless he was in disguise first. Whatever you think of him now, this is better than he was."

"...I've...never been shot down so thoroughly before." Nikki said quietly, brow furrowed sadly as she looked back down to the floor, and the cow-hide rug in the lower section of the exit, "Back in Canada, people would always let me talk to them...even Yura opened up... This guy though..."

"His situation is a lot different from Yura's...and like he said, he's practically twice your age; Yura's
not. Asahi opens up to your father and I though. It may be that he's just more comfortable talking to people older than himself, rather than younger." The ballerina pointed out, beginning the task of unwrapping the girl from her garb, starting with the heavy scarf draped over her shoulders, "He also has competitions to think about right now. He probably doesn't want to get too distracted. Men are often simple like that; we're the ones who read into it too much."

"...But there are things wrong right now for him..." Nikki protested, letting Minako pull her mittens off and unzip her purple padded jacket, "And even though he's here with us, he still has this aura like he thinks he's totally alone. Even if he doesn't really talk to me, I want him to know he's not alone."

"He knows." Minako reassured, pushing the jacket off the teen's shoulders, and moved aside to put them back into the slightly-open locker just behind her, "This past week and a bit has been really hard on him though. He's only just come to terms with the death of his partner, and then the universe decided to heap Yuri and Viktor on top of him, too...not to mention, the cluster that happened in Imari with his family. I can't hold it against him if he just wants some space and quiet right now."

"But that's all he has right now is space and quiet. He spends all his time in his room if we don't make him spend time with us for dinner or something... People are social, we're supposed to be a community...but he's putting himself into this self-imposed exile." Nikki whined, feeling like she'd personally failed.

Minako leaned down in front of her and put both hands on the teen's shoulders to get her attention, "You're an extremely outgoing person. Very extroverted. He isn't though...he's introverted and extremely private. Everyone has their own comfort zone...and for Asahi, spending all his time in his room is where he feels safe right now. It took years to turn him into the person he is right now, many more than you've even been alive. It'll take more than a shoulder to cry on for him to settle down from that."

The teen sniffled slightly, "...Otabek is introverted, too, but he talks to me."

Minako managed a laugh at that, "You sure do talk about him a lot."

Nikki's cheeks flushed a little, but she didn't interrupt.

"I can't really say him and Asahi are anything close to being the same though." The ballerina went on, pulling her hands back to settle them on her hips instead, "From the little bit of time I spent with him in China, Otabek seems to me like a people-watcher, an observer...someone who's quiet because he's taking everything in, not because he's anti-social. I mean, he sought out Yura on purpose to be his friend, so it's not like he's incapable of socializing. He's just...selective with who he spends his time with. He chose you, just like he chose Yura." She explained, holding out one hand for emphasis, "Asahi - at least for the moment - is used to being completely alone. Yuri was the same way growing up. Sometimes it just takes a special kind of person to get them to open up and bare their hearts and souls. For Yuri, it was Viktor...for Asahi, it was Riku, and Riku is gone. He may not be so willing to let people in for a while." Minako said, quieter than before. She set a hand on the girl's shoulder and pat it there twice, "It's not a failure on your part."

Reluctantly, Nikkita nodded, and after a sullen deep breath, reached down to pull her boots off.
Ice crunched underfoot as Asahi made his way towards and across the bridge, eyes up on the castle - and the congratulatory banners still strung across it for Yuri and Viktor - as he slowly approached. A few cars passed by as he made his trek over the river, but he kept close to the railing, putting as much space between himself and the curb as he could. Hana trotted along in that berth, keeping up on her human's left.

Even here in Hasetsu, I get the same feeling as I did in Imari... Every passing car is likely to stop, every pedestrian will either give me dirty looks or shy away in fear. I can only wonder...if the people of that city have settled down a little since I left. Do they even know I left?

He shook his head and carried on, hanging a right at the end of the bridge to start the slow, winding ascent up the castle hill. The stairs were wide, but had patches of hoarfrost clinging to every step, so Asahi treaded carefully. No one else was on the route though, leaving the pristine quiet of the trail undisturbed. The sound of every bare, iced branch rustling in the wind could be heard; that small bit of forested 'wild' surrounding the castle was alive and watching through the naked backdrop of winter. A few little birds flitted through the treetops, chirping their morning calls. Once Asahi was around the far side of the hill, he couldn't even hear cars anymore; just the birds and the sound of the water in the bay behind him.

Lined by a metal railing on the left, and a simple stone barrier on the right, Asahi continued his climb up, able to spot the water through the trees before the path made a sharp turn to go the other way. Once at the top, the trail terminated at a T-junction, under a snow-covered wooden canopy. A grid of metal bars was laid across the top like a porous roof, and through it grew the gnarled, tentacle-like limbs of an old tree that was protected behind a bamboo fence. One simple sign pointed left to get to the castle, and another pointed right towards the bay overlook point. Asahi took the one to the left. He passed a few square, wooden posts, and then emerged back into the open sunlight of the unobstructed sky.

Hasetsu Castle loomed overhead, and Asahi squinted his gaze up against the brightness to look at it. Even slightly overcast, it still made his eyes water a little to glance straight up, but he wanted to see everything.

This is the first time I've ever really wandered around this city. I've seen this castle a hundred times, passing through on the way to Fukuoka...but I never had the guts to get off the train. After I met Yuri, I didn't want to bring trouble to this place... Before that, I just never had reason to...

The skater caught his breath, having jogged the entire way from the resort to the foot of the castle wall, and moved towards a solitary bench under a second wooden canopy. In summer, it provided a little bit of shade in the open space of the castle courtyard. The gravel underfoot crunched as much as the frost did, and Asahi dusted some snow off the flat seat before turning to flop onto it. Hana jumped up and sat next to him, panting happily. Asahi reached an arm around the dog's back, and paused to really take in the surroundings.

The foundation of the 'tourist trap' was an easily-30ft high sloped stone wall, tightly packed with grey rock, surrounded all the way around by a short bamboo fence - 7 posts between each support strut, and 3 horizontal posts to weave through them - just like the one that protected the old tree. A few posts for vertical flags rose up in intervals, blue fabric with white kanji flapping in a gentle breeze. Behind himself, and past another - albeit smaller - gnarled old tree with a fence, Asahi spotted the
Not being a practitioner of Shinto though, it was just the entrance to someone else's holy place. It may not have even been all that holy if the whole site was barely more than a money trap. It was still a nice place to visit, at any rate. With his breath mostly caught, Asahi rose back up to his feet again and walked quietly around the base of the castle.

_I guess this is a place that Yuri would've come to a lot, since it's right behind the skating rink... I mean, why wouldn't he? Even if it's not a real castle, it still looks the part... Does he bring Senpai here...?_

His skin started to tingle where the biting cold air got to the sweat from his jog, but he paid it no mind. Instead, he reached for Riku's phone, opened the music player, hit random, and waited for the first song to begin.

_[The Way Back] - ONE OK ROCK_

Guitar feedback.  
**BANG BANG**  
Riffs.  
**BANG BANG**  
And again, followed by quiet, and words.  

_I am still broken in two parts_  
There is my mind, there is my heart  
No way for me to run and hide

Asahi shook his head and huffed what could be considered a laugh, but lowered his gaze.  

_Of course it would be this band... Half the reason I used them for my SP was because of Riku... I didn't want to lose him entirely, even if I'd refused to speak of him for so long..._

The song continued on, giving a strangely calm setting a rather energetic and demanding atmosphere. It wasn't long before Asahi's fingers started to twitch where he'd put his hands back into his pockets. Grey-brown eyes looked around the courtyard for good measure, ensuring no one was coming around, but once Asahi was certain the coast was clear...he let himself relax a little bit. His hands came out of the jacket, and in his mind's eye, he could see his guitar in them, cable trailing to unseen amps. He waggled his fingers along the imaginary strings and neck, and closed his eyes, bobbing his head lightly with the beat.

Hana watched quietly, tilting her head slightly as her human seemed to really get into whatever he was doing, listening to music she couldn't comprehend. But, as long as he was going to be prancing around, she hopped down off the bench and joined in. In the seclusion on Castle Hill, Asahi gave himself permission to let loose a little, and jammed on that air-guitar like he was the lead guitarist for the band playing from his pocket, with his dog jumping around excitedly in a big circle. Hana barked playfully, especially when her human decided to use the bench as a jumping-off point.

For a good minute, the freedom of the cold and solitude was everything. Other than Hana, only the castle, the birds, and the sky could see him. He could forgive himself the enthusiasm of his imaginary show for those few moments...right up until the moment he couldn't.

Someone was watching.

Everything disappeared, but the music kept playing awkwardly. Asahi's eyes lifted to a man standing
near the information hut, about halfway between where he himself was by the shade-beams, and the 
roofed section by the stairs. The man was older, thin, and shorter than himself. Were it not for the 
location...Asahi was sure the man looked just like...

*Otōsan...!? (Father)*

Hana could sense the sudden fear, and her barks switched from playful to angry. She bared her teeth 
at the man as Asahi fumbled to turn the music off, dropping the phone to the snow-touched gravel in 
his panic. He swooped his hand down to pick it up and ran for it instead, music still playing. He 
managed to start turning it down instead, his thumb too wet to get the censor to check his print, and 
his hands shaking too much to punch in the security code instead. He nearly slipped as he went 
around the corner and started flying down the stairs, heart in his throat.

Blinking, the thin elderly man watched in confusion as the skater evacuated the grounds, [What 
happened...? Who is that guy? I've never seen him before...]

Going down the wide steps was precarious given the ice, but Asahi's panic wouldn't let him slow 
down. He kept up the summer pace and stumbled through the slick icy patches. He made it back to 
the first sharp turn in the path, and held onto the metal guard-rail to help spin him around. He could 
already see the next turn in the trail, and made a B-line for it. Just as he was about to reach it though, 
an unseen branch sticking into the air above him grazed the top of his head, and his hair got caught in 
the thin strips of wood.

Everything seemed to change in a flash. The winter path was gone, replaced by a long, narrow, 
bland hallway. There were doors every few meters, each looking identical to one another...but he 
knew which one he was going to.

...635...

The numbers were black printed on a metal rectangle, bolted to the dark grey door. The panel 
opened, and the small apartment inside was bright...and devoid of life.

[Get going already, I don't have all day.]

Asahi looked back over his shoulder, and his irate father was there waiting to follow him in. Having 
no strength to argue or talk-back, he just turned into the doorway and entered, pulling a singular 
suitcase with him. His father dragged a second suitcase, and shoved past to get within the little living 
space.

[Just open the case and grab your things. Whatever doesn't fit, we're getting rid of it. I'm not 
spending all day playing games with space in my car.]

His eyelids were heavy, looking around the room in utter despair. He felt his limbs going weak, but 
he forced himself to move, heaving the empty shell onto the floor beneath bed he'd shared with Riku 
for those brief two weeks. The sheets were still messy from when they'd left the week before, 
heading off to Japanese Nationals. The nightstand still had Riku's last empty water glass sitting on 
top.

The apartment was studio-size, too small for doors or walls besides the ones that lead into the 
bathroom and the exit hall. The bed was raised up high, like the upper level of a bunk bed, with 
shelf-space built beneath. Directly opposite it, the counter, sink, dishwasher with microwave on top, 
and stove of the kitchen, with the small fridge at the end near the door. The bathroom door was built 
into the wall next to the bed, with a thin sliding door pulled half-across. At the other end of the room, 
there was a big window, curtains pulled partly across, and a desk next to the nearby wall.
It was never meant for more than one person.

[Asahi! Get your stuff, now!] The elder barked at him.

He didn't even have to focus to be startled by the yell, and dragged his feet to find things he knew were his. The closet space under the bed was opened, and he started pulling out his tightly-pressed clothes, stacking them into the suitcase next to him.

[Let's go already! It's been 45 minutes! How much stuff can you possibly have!?!]

Asahi looked up slightly, unsure how to process the idea that so much time had already passed since they’d arrived. The clock above the stove didn't lie though. He blinked, and he was putting his key onto the desk. His father's oppressive glare was following him impatiently.

[Don't ever tell your mother that this is where I helped you get your things.] The angry older man ordered, [She'd never let me back into the house again without a thorough decontamination first.]

[...Have some pity...] Asahi dared, his voice barely above a whisper as it cracked and tears fell.

[What did you say?]

[...Even if you hated that I was with him...he was still a friend and rink-mate for over a year. Have some pity.] He repeated. Through the thick well of tears in his eyes, he could only listen to the sound of footsteps coming up beside him, and he cringed as his father's presence loomed uncomfortably close.

[Get the garbage bags with your skating crap, and get into the hall. I'm not spending another second in this nest of sin.]

The door suddenly slammed, but the echo sounded oddly like distant barking.

A loud bark brought him back, and though he could see something again, Asahi's eyes couldn't focus. He felt the cold on his skin rather than clammy heat, and he realized he was back in Hasetsu again. Unfortunately, somewhere along the line, he'd stumbled and fallen, cutting his hands on the frozen rocks and splitting the knees of his runner pants. His Team Japan jacket was scuffed where he’d landed on his chest. It was a struggle to get back up again, but Hana's barking kept him grounded in the moment, and he managed to get back up enough to sit and lean against the railing.

Everything was hurting though.

He reached up a bloodied hand to his hair, and felt for the twigs still stuck in it. He pulled them free and threw them to the ground, carefully looking around at his surroundings. The woods, the cobblestone stairs, the railing, and the clear sky high above...it wasn't the apartment building in Tokyo, not by a mile.

...It was already bad enough when I started to hallucinate Riku at Nationals...now this...!? Is it because I said something...!?

Asahi grit his teeth and used his elbow to help get himself up to his feet again. Getting down the rest of the stairs without slipping again was suddenly going to be much, much more difficult.

Sneaking back into the resort was easier said than done. As he approached on the sidewalk, it was clear even from down the street that there was something going on. More cars were parked nearby
and there were people loitering as far outside as the external wall. On closer inspection, some of them seemed to be holding up television equipment.

...You've got to be kidding me...is that the JSF...?

Annoyance and pain made Asahi slip forward anyway, growling under his breath. Just as some of the crews were starting to realize he was there, he lifted his red-slicked hands to show off the wounds, hoping to keep people at bay with them. The ringing in his ears returned, and all he could do was think passionately, even if he didn't dare speak his mind.

Get out of the way... Get out of the way...! GET OUT OF THE WAY!

The Nishigori triplets seemed to be at the epicenter of the trouble, and out of sheer excitement, pointed Asahi out once they realized he was approaching, spotting the top of his head through the crowd, "There he is! We told you he was here!" They each said together.

Asahi finally managed to part the Reporter Sea, and made a break for the slightly-open door without looking back. Though he did little more than furrow his brow behind his bangs, the aura of frustration coming off him was enough for even the trio of skater otaku to feel it, and they wordlessly let him get inside, not even noticing the injuries as they kept their eyes fixed on his face...until he was inside and he out of sight. All the sportscasters still standing outside were dumbstruck, glancing at one another in confused silence.

Within, Takeshi and Yuko made a desperate bid to explain and apologize as the skater rushed by, "They posted a video of practice yesterday and everyone freaked out...so the crowds came just like they did back when Viktor first turned up."

Asahi paid no attention, moving past them and the Katsukis to get to the door at the left end of the foyer, and used the cleanest bits of his fingers to try and open the door to the hall that lead to his room. Every other person, including those who were expecting him back - save a certain Russian Punk - watched in perplexed horror as he disappeared again from sight without a word. The aura he left behind was all he could offer.

Yurio gruffly turned back to the television in the common room, and leaned against his plush tiger, "Hmph...saw that coming a mile away."

Both Rozovsky teens gave him dirty looks, but he ignored them.

"I wonder what that was all about...?" Mari wondered, whispering to herself as where she stood near the kitchen. She looked to her mother, who was trying to wrangle the triplets inside so they could close the doors again.

Toshiya just looked on, marveling at the whole strange situation as he leaned against the registration podium, "Hm...no wonder Yuri never invited him over."

Rounding the corner and striding to that first door on the right, Asahi thought he was home free. Unfortunately, like everything else, nothing ever worked out the way he wanted it to, and he ran face-first into Mikhail as the man came out from his own room on the left. They guffaw'd in surprise at one another on impact, but Asahi was nimble with adrenaline and ducked into his room, sliding the door across with a thud before the elder Russian could even process what had happened.

"...Wasn't that him just now?" Minako suddenly wondered, brush in hand as she came to her own door, "The timing couldn't be more perfect! Now we don't have to go out there without him."

Mikhail rubbed his nose and chin where the skater hat bumped him, and slowly opened one eye at a
time, skeptically looking at the sliding panel that had shut beside him, "...That was weird..."

"What was weird?"

"He just ran straight into me and retreated into his room without saying anything? Not even an 'excuse me' like you say he always does...?" Mikhail wondered, shaking his head to regain his composure. He pressed an ear to the pane and listened, but heard nothing, and tapped his knuckles against the wood, "You okay? Asahi."

No answer came.

Minako stepped up instead, putting the brush handle into her back pocket for the moment, "Asahi...the crowd outside is a bunch of sports journalists and local fans. They all found out that you're here and wanted to-"

"I don't want to talk." The skater finally spoke, voice tense, "I'm done talking. Tell them to go away."

The pair in the hall gawked at each other, but Minako was the one to answer again, "We were going to go talk to them ourselves anyway since you weren't here...that should keep them satisfied for now. Are you sure you don't want to come though? They're all pretty stoked about you being in Hasetsu, given the Olympics and how Yuri and Viktor train here, too... That's the whole Men's Singles Team."

Hana only then finally caught up, and whimpered quietly from her low vantage, clawing at the baseboards with her nails.

"At least come to the door to let your dog in...?" The ballerina asked.

An awkward moment of silence passed, but eventually they heard footsteps thumping on the hardwood, and the panel slid open. Hana squeezed in as soon as her snout fit through the gap, and the rush of the rest of her body pushed the door open even further...enough so that Mikhail was able to get a look at the skater's hands as he watched the white fluff go through.

"...Yikes." He commented, "What happened? Did you slip on the ice?"

Asahi's eyes squinted half-shut, and he kept his gaze down, but he nodded reluctantly.

"Relax then. I'll ask if someone can bring a wash basin to the door, so you can just stay in there if you want."

"...Thanks." The skater answered, and slid the door closed again.

Minako lifted her eyes to the Russian, but he just nudged his head towards the exit, and they made their way into the foyer after the ballerina tossed the brush back into their room. Once they were out of earshot and passed through the exit though, Minako drew close and whispered behind her hand, "You didn't see his hands? They're all bloody."

"Oh no! We should-"

Mikhail shook his head, "If he's anything like I used to be, then all he wants is to be left alone to lick his wounds. He'll feel better faster if we give him his space. It was probably quite the gauntlet to get through the crowd at the door without drawing attention to himself in the wrong ways."
"...Oh...

They spotted Mari in the doorway near the common-room, and Mikhail gestured over to her as they approached, "Hey, could you put together a bucket of water and some hand-washing things? Knock on Asahi’s door, let him know the stuff is there, and then let him be."

"...Is he okay?" The Katsuki daughter wondered nervously, "He looked pretty angry when he got here..."

"He fell while out on his run. Hands are scuffed, knees too probably. Minako and I will take care of the crowd if you can get that bucket together."

"...Y-yeah...sure..."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED FOURTY SIX

Without the expected skaters being around for the press and fans to speak to, it didn't take much time at all to get the crowd to disperse. Once told that Yuri and Viktor had gone abroad for some personal time, the one pressing question that remained was about the one Japanese athlete that was in Hasetsu.

"...What happened to his hands...?"

"He fell earlier while out on a run." Mikhail answered, "Think nothing of it. It's slippery outside, that's all. He'll be fine."

"Yeah, by the time Yuri and Viktor come home, Asahi will probably be ready to start doing interviews." Minako agreed, "I'm not sure exactly how much Olympic prep they'll be doing when they're still technically competing against one another at Four Continents first, but we'll see."

"Thanks for the questions, everyone...see you after next weekend." Mikhail said, waving as he started to turn back towards the doors to the resort. The crowd started to disperse around them, and slowly vacated the half of the parking lot they'd moved into. The elder Russian slipped his hand behind his lady love's back to walk with her, and waited until they were close to the doors before he spoke, "Is there a first-aid kit or anything in this place?"

"Yeah, I'll get it."

The duo parted ways in the foyer, with Minako heading around the side to the right to find Toshiya, and Mikhail making a break for the overnight section. Mari was coming back through the door just as he was heading through it, and after they passed each other, the elder Russian spotted the door to Asahi's room sliding open slowly. On the floor just outside was a wooden bucket of steaming water, with a wash-cloth folded over the edge. On a small tray set on top of it, some cleansers and soaps, and a drying towel. Through the crack in the door, Hana's snoot came out first, sniffing at the items briefly before a few Japanese words were spoken to make her go back in again, and hands came out in her place. Tenderly, they tried to find a way of lifting everything with just the use if fingers, but by the time the skater figured it out, Mikhail was already standing there and leaned down to pick it all up for him.

"Is it bad?"

Asahi shrunk a little, and backed away from the door, leaving it open. Hana's tail wagged slowly back and forth, and her dark almond eyes went to watch the panel get pushed all the way aside, though gently to keep the noise down. Once through, Mikhail used his foot to push the panel to again, but left it slightly ajar for when Minako arrived. The elder Russian looked around the room and found a small table to set the bucket and tray onto, and beckoned the younger man over.

By then, Asahi had already peeled out of the ravaged runner-pants he'd been wearing, leaving him with just his shorts and blood-crusted knees. He'd clearly tried to remove his shirt, given the bloody smears left on the hem from his scuffed palms, but he'd abandoned the task for the moment.

"...So, where did you fall?" The Russian wondered casually, dipping the wash-cloth into the hot water, and wrung it out before handing it over, "You weren't even gone for half an hour. I thought you'd be out longer."

The skater took the cloth nervously, holding it gingerly in damaged hands. He tried for a moment in
pained silence to start scraping away the red flakes and dirt, but his skin was too sensitive, and he quickly gave up. He rested the cloth on the edge of the small basin and bent down to slowly submerge his hands instead, hissing as the hot water hit the worst of the cuts. The sting subsided almost as quickly as it arrived, and Asahi let his hand relax to soak.

"...Psst."

Grey-brown eyes looked over at the older man again, then to the water, tinted red now with the spiraling swirls coming away from his marred palms, "...I went to the castle. I fell coming back down."

"Ah, yeah...it's kinda treacherous up there."

Having no come-back to that, Asahi just focused on the water. Feeling the tension in his back from being bent over as he was, he opted to start moving down towards the floor, and pulled the bucket down to cross his legs around it and sit more comfortably. He glanced up at the Russian, who had taken to looking around the rather Spartan room, then down again as he withdrew his hands from the heat. He spotted a number of small, sharp pebbles that had been embedded in his shredded skin, and grit his teeth at the grim task before him, "...You don't have to stand sentry over me." He said simply, offering an escape from the awkward silence.

"Hm? Oh, no...Minako's coming with some bandages. By the look of things, I'll need tweezers, too."

"...You'll need them?"

"It'll be faster if I just help you. The water will probably be cold by the time you finish."

Asahi grit his teeth again, but said nothing, and reached for the wash-cloth to tenderly start wiping away what grime he could. The small cuts stung all over again, but at least they weren't filled with dirt anymore. He managed to pick a few stones out with his fingers before Minako finally made her appearance.

"Ah, sorry...it took a while to gather everything." She explained, holding up what looked like a cleaning-supply tray. She plucked a brown bottle from it, "All they had was peroxide...no alcohol."

"That should be fine." Mikhail nodded and started rolling his thin sleeves up, "Let's get started."

The ballerina pushed the door closed and moved over towards the small table, setting the tray down on the floor before kneeling down on Asahi's left side. Bias made her look at the man's hands first, but she spotted the red on his knees fairly quickly, "Sheesh, what happened...? You look like you fell down half a mountain."

"Half a hill at least," Mikhail answered on the skater's behalf, and went down to cross his legs and sit as well, in front of the younger man. He reached his own hands out for the injured ones, and gestured for Asahi to sit closer. It took a moment, but he eventually did, and relinquished the cloth in the process. Mikhail carefully studied the wounds, finding the worst the be in the meat of the man's thumbs and near-wrist palm, "Do you have pick-ups or tweezers?"

"Oh, yeah, sure." Minako answered, rummaging through the things she's gathered, and soon handed over a pair of fine-pointed metal grabbers.

"Thanks."

Asahi watched in quiet confusion as the silver Russian gently probed and picked, carefully and gently removing small slivers of stone and twig. Each small piece plucked out was cast aside on the
fluff of a piece of gauze from the kit, and once the first hand was clean, it was handed off. It was perplexingly weird for the skater to have one person tending to him...but two was just made things complicated.

"You look miserable," Minako pointed out suddenly, drawing the younger man from his headspace, "But even at the worst moments at Nationals, you never let it show so much. Something must really be bothering you if you're showing tells..."

Eyes lifted towards the woman briefly, but Asahi just lowered his face away soon after, "Maybe you're just better at seeing them now."

"Hm...maybe. But that still leaves the question of what's wrong. I can't imagine you'd be this ticked by a stumble."

Asahi carefully considered his words. The memory of the 'reliving' earlier was still fresh, and the fact that his injuries - all but one, at any rate - matched the ones he'd suffered on that day made it all the worse. There was only one person in the room who even had the vaguest awareness of what had happened, and it wasn't the person asking the questions. He felt a sharp pain as a larger stone was pulled out, and Minako dribbled peroxide over the bleeding hole. The pain was enough to distract him, and got him into a different thought, "I'm not upset because I fell. I fell because I was upset." He explained simply, "I got spooked at the castle, that's all."

"Spooked? At Hasetsu Castle?" Minako echoed, incredulous, "How'd you manage that?"

"I let my guard down and someone snuck up on me. Not even Hana noticed the guy before I saw him."

"Must've been a ninja." Mikhail teased, "One trained inside that ninja house you were standing under."

"...I guess." Asahi answered flatly.

Minako leaned slightly and spoke out the side of her mouth, "Hun, I don't think he's ready for humor."

"I get that impression." He whispered back, and returned to his task.

"It was just some old man...but I just...didn't see him like that until after I got to the bottom of the hill." Asahi explained, "I guess I'm just so highly strung about what happened in Imari... I was certain for a while that I saw my father in that guy's place."

"...You think he'd be this brazen?" Minako wondered, carefully placing a square gauze pad on the man's palm, then started wrapping it in a white bandage to keep it in place, "Coming all the way to Hasetsu to give you grief over what Mik did?"

"It might be my fault for more reasons than that." The Russian added, "I did mention that they might seek you out and try to use your history with them to try and get me to back down. If they can't call you...they can figure out where you are. So, I kind of put the idea in your head that someone might turn up." He said, setting the tweezers down to grab the peroxide instead, and started to clean the empty cuts, "I could arrange for you to have some protection, if you want."

"...What...do you mean...?"

"Hired help. A body guard."
"A body guard!?" Asahi practically squeaked in horror, "I'm not even that important! Why would I need a bo-"

"You're an Olympian; you're important...but more than that, it's because you deserve to live. Unharassed, unbothered, and happy. If it takes having a guy follow you around for a while when you go out, then why not? I'd rather you have it and not need it, than need it and not have it." Mikhail explained succinctly, and handed that second hand over to his partner for wrapping as he pulled the bucket from the man's crossed legs, "You don't have to agree or disagree right now. Just consider it. I know you're happier on your own...but, you don't feel secure on your own at the moment, not even here in Hasetsu." The bucket was set down on the side, and the silver Russian reached for the wash cloth again. Hot water was soaked into it, and Mikhail went to address the skater's ravaged knees.

"I don't know if I could handle having someone follow me around." Asahi protested, wincing at the sting of water on cuts all over again, "I'll just do my runs at the Ice Castle gym instead."

"Yeah, that sounds better anyway while it's still cold out." Mikhail agreed, picking out a few stones, then moved to the other knee, "What about over the weekend? We're all going to be gone to Austria. You're welcome to come to that, too, if you wa-"

"No." Asahi said firmly and without hesitation, "I already have so many things that I'm counting on you for while I figure things out...going to Euros on top of that would just be unacceptable to me."

"Everyone needs a break though."

"I couldn't. Let Yuri and Senpai have an event where they aren't dragged down by something...or someone. They'll get plenty of me when they're back." Mikhail glanced over to his fiancé, brows raised in surprise, but she just made a face and shrugged, "I dare you to try dragging him there against his will."

"Nah." The Russian shook his head, and turned his eyes back to the younger figure, "Well...I'll tell you what. If you're determined to stay behind, when I'm determined to help you out...let's find a happy medium."

"...What are you getting at?"

Mikhail turned his gaze towards the guitar case in the corner, "We're going out anyway to get you a new phone and all that jazz...why not get you some amps and set you back up with your music?"

Asahi's eyes just went wide.

"Wow! That's a great idea!" Minako cheered, "Don't you think?" She glanced at the skater. All he could do though was look at the framed picture of Riku on the dresser next to his singing bowl, and gasp a quiet breath.

Cuddle Pile 2.0 was lingering well into the late morning; it was a pile of furry and naked limbs, lumps, bumps, and rumps. The alarm had gone off and been ignored hours ago. Outside, it was bright and sunny, making the snowy hills practically glow with light. Within, it was still warm and dark, save the rim of illumination that circled the lower edge of a few blinds. It was all that anyone could use to guess what time it was...but under the blankets, it wasn't entirely relevant.
Arms and legs wove together. Viktor took his usual place with his head under his husband's, letting his neck and shoulder be used as a pillow. Yuri clung to him, pressing as much skin together as he could, wanting every possible inch of himself to be touched and held. Behind him, he could feel the dog puddle, the both of them having managed to get under a part of the blankets.

Makkachin's head perked up though, and he mrrf'd a half-bark in his sleepy haze. Jiro started puppy-yipping before he even knew what he was doing it for...and the commotion of both managed to jostle the skaters into consciousness. The poodle trotted off towards the front of the R.V. and looked at the doorway skeptically, tilting his head from one side to another. Jiro stumbled up next to him, and his curiosity was stymied by typical Akita territoriality, and started barking a little bit more loudly, squeaky-sounding as his noises were.

The thump of a knock followed, and then both dogs were barking.

Yuri slowly opened his eyes, "...Is it even sunrise...?"

"...Eh...I think so..." Viktor answered, rolling onto his back as he yawned, "It's probably papa." He mumbled.

Another knock, and the silver legend rose like the dead, ruffling his stringy hair as he pushed towards the edge of the bed. One grand swoop, and he pulled one of the blankets off the bed, leaving Yuri with only several others. He wrapped himself in it and stumbled towards the door, wedging his way through the wall of perturbed dogs.

"It's okay, guys, there's no hecklers out here...that I know of..." Viktor whispered. He pulled the blanket tight and moved to undo the latches and locks on the inside of the door, and nervously pushed the panel open. As he'd expected, Konstantin was outside, standing nearly level with him despite being on the ground, [Morning papa.]

[Get ready.] The bear told him simply, [We're going into town.]
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED FOURTY SEVEN

The duo got dressed in awkward silence, with Viktor of the mindset that they needed to hurry. He was putting on his furry chapka hat and was ready to leave the R.V. by the time Yuri had just finished pulling a sweater on. Makkachin and Jiro watched the Russian's frantic pace, turning their heads to follow him as he went from closet to hall to assemble his things, and back again to get the next item. Yuri had even stopped getting ready to watch as well, leaning forward with elbows on knees, fingers loosely fanned together.

Viktor opted to go for a second scarf...or at least tried to. He found his wrists gently grabbed by a second pair of hands, and he turned his eyes towards their source.

"Calm down." Yuri recommended, "You're putting yourself together like a kid who's worried he's gonna miss the bus or something."

The silver Russian blinked in surprise, but a breath escaped him and he slouched slightly, "...I'm getting worked up again, aren't I..."

"...Again?"

Viktor nodded, moving his hands back to the second scarf in a bid to remove it, but hesitated, closing his eyes and leaning into a palm as it pressed to his face, "It happened to me last night when I went to papa, asking for food. I swore that I'd never go back into that house again...but something about talking to him in the barn put my mind back 25 years, and I rushed inside when he said to...like a kid..."

"Take a deep breath." Yuri suggested, and felt the air go in and out past his skin, "Slower." He felt it again, a longer drag than the previous attempt, "Good. Now kiss."

Slate eyes blinked once, but Viktor leaned in and offered his love, feeling arms go around his waist and back as he moved his own to shoulder and cheek, giving a second kiss just for good measure.

"We're here so you can have an adult relationship with your father, not pick things up again from the time you left." Yuri explained, "He will probably always treat you a certain way just because you are his son, but that doesn't mean you have to behave like a child. You're 29 years old. You've had a rock-star career, become an Olympian for two different countries, you have millions of fans all over the world, and got married. You have every right to be who you are, because no matter what happens here this weekend, you still have to be comfortable living inside this skin." He went on, reaching one hand up to brush silver bangs from his partner's eye, "Be who you are, not what you think will impress Konstantin. You're doing this as a favor to him, not because you have to. That means, if he wants this to work, he has to meet you where you are, not the other way around."

"...We did kind of foist ourselves onto him unexpectedly though."

Yuri hesitated, deadpanning the man before him, "Touché, but my point rests. Doing the unexpected is part of what you are. 'Always do the opposite of what people expect,' that's your motto, right?"

Viktor's eyes watered rather dramatically, "R-Right...! You're so smart!"
The drive was as cramped and strange as it had been the first time, with Viktor still squashed in the middle between his partner and his father. Yuri kept Jiro on his lap, and Makkachin had the whole back seat to himself. Prizrak had been left at the cabin. From his vantage, Konstantin could barely see the top of his son’s head past his shoulder, but it didn’t stop Viktor from still trying to keep his scarf bundled high around his neck. Eventually though, Yuri reached over and snagged his hand to pull it down, and kept it there between them. It seemed to calm the Russian down a little bit, but Yuri should still feel how tense he was.

"This is all so different from how I imagined it would be." Yuri started, offering his voice as a focal point for his husband, "Being with your family, I mean."

"...What did you expect?"

Without another thought, the younger man threaded their fingers together, and gently, slowly rubbed his thumb back and forth over the one next to his, "I'm not really sure." He started, the thumb on his other hand making the same motions where it was pressed to his Akita puppy's fluff, "You never spoke about your family, and none of the fanboy research I ever did on you mentioned it either. I guess I had scenarios in my head...that in one possibility, you were either the oldest or the youngest child of a big noble family, famous in Russia in all manner of things. That some of your many siblings were famous in their own right...artists, engineers, researchers, inventors...and you were a God on the Ice. Or maybe you were the single child of old money, steeped in Russian culture dating back to before the Tsars, putting everything you had into your skating because you didn't have any other worries in the world."

"...Seriously?" Viktor made a face, quirking a brow.

"Well, that, or Yakov found you in a basket on the side of the road somewhere, and you were actually created by fairies or something."

The silver legend laughed at that, "That actually sounds more likely. The basket part, not the fairy part."

"I don't think the real story ever crossed my mind. I guess I just didn't know enough about Russian history." Yuri added, leaning aside to rest his jaw on the edge of his partner's shoulder, and rubbed his fingers between Jiro's ears, "What did you think you'd find in Japan when you came?"

Viktor chortled, "You already told me what your family did. I expected to find Yu-Topia, just like how The Google showed me."

"Oh." Yuri made a face, "No mystery to me at all. Damn you, The Google."

"Finding out things about you was pretty tough though. Outside the generic profile that the JSF put together for you, there was hardly anything out there about who you were outside of skating." Viktor added, "I remember reading it and thinking you must practice skating all the time if gaming was your only hobby. You haven't even gamed since I turned up."

"...Hard to when I've got my idol floating around." Yuri quipped, "How am I supposed to focus on a game when 'oh my god Viktor freaking Nikiforov is in my house' is rattling around in my head 24/7?"

"So you never got used to me."

"Every time I got close, you took things to a new level and I'd have to start all over again." He pointed out, "I mean, as soon as I could be in a room with you without trying to claw my way
through the walls, you'd start sitting next to me instead of opposite. As soon as I got used to that, you'd start putting your arm on my shoulder. Then came the hugs, using your finger to put balm on my lips, falling asleep against my arm on flights...clinging to me between competitors...stripping me down to my underpants to put me in bed, then falling asleep on top of me..."

"Mh...a delicate progression." Viktor laughed, rubbing his cheek against his spouse's fluffy hair, "You skipped the kiss though."

"That was spontaneous."

"Was it though?"

"Was it?" Yuri echoed, "Viktor..."

"I did offer to kiss you while we were in the garage, technically... But you just yelled at me."

The younger man gave his husband quite the look, "I was emotionally fragile and falling apart. It didn't make sense to me since you'd just said you'd resign as my coach if I didn't medal."

"...Oh, maybe that's where you got it from."

"Got what?"

"The whole 'switcheroo' thing. When you got us these rings, but then said we should end our relationship later that same night." The silver pointed out, "You made me so happy, and then mercilessly broke me in half."

"Then I'm the opposite of you. You broke me apart first."

"...Mhhhh..."

"It's okay. I forgive you." Yuri teased, "So where are we going anyway? Some town further away than the one we went to yesterday?"

"Hmm...maybe. I'll ask." Viktor said, turning his head around to look up and over the bear's shoulder, "Papa, kuda my idem?"

"Sankt-Peterburg." The man answered roughly, keeping his eyes straight and forward.

The silver Russian blinked in confusion, "Sankt-Peterburg...?" He echoed, "No my edem iz Šičikokujama." [But we just came from there.]

[You said you planned on shopping before you came up.] Kon explained, [I'm willing to bet that there's no where north of the city that will have everything you'd wanted to buy. So, it's just easier to take you back and let you try again.]

Viktor was stunned, [...Papa...it wasn't for lack of trying... We basically got run out of town by people with bats and bad intentions... I don't think we can be in St. Petersburg anymore...I have too much face-recognition...]

The bear's steely slate eyes seemed to look more determined then, [Let them try while I'm watching.]

Viktor blinked a few times, unsure he'd heard the words correctly, and turned his gaze forward again. He could see Yuri creeping into his line of sight though with a concerned look on his face.

"...We're going back to St. Petersburg?" He asked, "Did I hear right?"
"...Y-yeah..." The Russian answered, "Papa says he's going to watch out for us, so we can do the shopping we'd meant to do before trouble found us."

"...We meant to go to like 6 different stores though."

"It's fine, it's fine." Viktor insisted, giving a weird smile, "We'll cut it down to one and call it a day."

"Which one though?"

"Wine and grocery. I'll tell him where to go."

Leaving Makkachin in the back seat with a thermal blanket, the rest of the group hopped out of the behemoth truck. The whole thing seemed to shift a few inches when the bear got out, and shook again as the driver's side door was shoved closed, leaving Viktor to stumbled gracelessly out from the middle seat on the other side. He quickly regrouped though and looked across the cramped lot at the bright red lettering for the [Л& Лэнд 24 часа Супермаркетов] (The Lènd 24 Hour Supermarket,) and breathed in a sigh of both relief and nostalgia.

"...It's been so long since we came here..." Viktor commented, looking at the outside of the multi-level 'Vladimirsky Passage' shopping mall. On the other side of the complex, it looked like a palace because of the fancy hotel on the front, but at the back it was rather plain. The street was narrow, and people parked on each side, tight as sardines or dominos. A parking lot was within, but only limited spaces were available, guarded by a security booth and a rising-beam barrier. Far off though, through the crowd, above a number of brown-painted doors, were those haloed red letters, glowing like a beacon.

It didn't take long for the silver legend's name to be yelled out excitedly from somewhere, and the St. Petersburg that Viktor remembered was starting to reassert itself. He waved at the two young ladies who called out to him, and confidently pulled his husband's hand into his coat pocket before making his way forward to get to the doors, his hulking father following a few paces behind.

The store was high-end, expensive, and modern. It was absolutely everything that the little backwoods grocery store they'd gone to the night before hadn't been. Spacious and decorative, with new glass cases protecting the innumerable fancy pastries, imported cheeses, deli meats, freshly-prepared sides and salads, as well as an olive bar, butcher, seafood, and bread bakery. The deli area even had a cafe-like section with French-style seating; small wiry chairs with glass-top circular tables.

Viktor breathed in the smell of the place with an appreciation he hadn't known before, and grabbed the handlebars to a big grey-and-red shopping cart; it was thickly built, made mostly of plastic, and looked like something designed by LEGO.

Yuri pushed forward the collapsing child seat and set Jiro within it to hold his own, then returned his hand to his husband's coat pocket, and followed along through the store. As they made their way through each aisle though, the cart was quickly filling, and Yuri started to wonder, "...Viktor, we're only going to be here until tomorrow night. We'll never be able to eat all this before we leave."

"Mh, I know." The silver legend answered, inspecting a wine bottle, "Some of it is to experiment with and see what my papa likes. Besides, he probably eats a lot on his own anyway...even if we couldn't put all this down in 2 days, he could."

"...Point taken." Yuri grimaced, then looked around, drawing in a bit closer in familiar surroundings,
"We need to get food for the boys, too."

"Yeah."

A few more people recognized the skaters as they wound their way through the building, some even asking for the usual autograph or photo. All the while, Kon kept a semi-safe distance, following like a cautious shadow. It wasn't long before the warmth of the indoors made it possible for some of the thick winter layers to get peeled off, and less time still for the bear to spot a certain splotchy red mark. Confused and fearing injury, the huge man reached one hand forward to nudge down the edge of his son's scarf and lapel, getting a better look...and realized the size.

Viktor was paralyzed where he stood, wide-eyed and red-cheeked.

Yuri, however, stayed calm and collected. He simply stepped out behind his husband's back - withdrawing his hand only to wrap an arm around his partner instead - and gave the bear a defiant look.

Yeah...I did that. What are you going to do about it?

Kon's cheek twitched slightly under one eye, but he pulled his hand back and grumbled under his breath at the realization. His gaze wandered away and he said nothing.

That's what I thought.

Yuri stayed on that side, keeping his arm around his husband's frame as he coaxed the man to keep walking, "This trip is going a lot better than it did yesterday, don't you think?"

"...Y-yeah..."

With groceries retrieved and no trouble found, the voyage back out of St. Petersburg was quaint and easy. Makkachin sat up front that time, while Yuri and Viktor commandeered the back to go through and organize their catch. The poodle spent the whole time with his front paws on the seat, looking back at the pair as he panted quietly and swayed his tail back and forth. For his curiosity, Viktor offered him a small bone-shaped dog-treat, and Makkachin ate it happily. Jiro nibbled on one of his own where Yuri held him in the crook of one bent leg on the seat.

[Papa, you should try this-] Viktor commented then, holding up a small strudel as he went up through the space his dog had moved out of for the moment, [It's like a little apple pie.]

Kon eyeballed the morsel in his son's hand, but then took it cautiously, and popped the whole thing into his mouth like it was barely a tic-tac.

[...Do you like it?]

[It's sweet.]

[Mhmmmmm?] Viktor leaned in closer, creeping over the bear's massive shoulder.

[It's good.]

The silver legend's eyes went wide, and he squished his fingers around that shoulder excitedly before pulling back into the rear passenger area. He couldn't help but laugh a little in his relief that things were finally going the way he'd hoped, and he nuzzled foreheads with his husband before returning
to their task.

Kon saw it in the rearview mirror, but like earlier...said nothing.

...

Vehement barking came from inside the house on cemetery hill, and as Konstantin opened the door, Prizrak came rushing out, barking all the more loudly for being unobstructed. She bounded through the snowdrift, her yelping quenched by the depth, and burst out again onto the path a few yards further down the hill. By then, she'd decided that there was no one worth barking at, as she recognized everyone coming to the house, and she skulked back inside on her giant human's heels. Makkachin quickly followed after, and Jiro trotted in like he owned the place, pausing in the doorway only long enough to get a sniff of the inside air before walking right in.

Viktor couldn't help but take courage from the pup's determination, and swallowed the lump in his throat as he stood on the threshold. He felt his partner behind himself and glanced back over a shoulder to see a nod, and he returned to look inside the place he once called a 'rancid shack.' With one more nervous breath, he stepped inside, and waited close by until he heard the door close behind him. Yuri snuck around and went towards the kitchen area, small and old-fashioned as it was, passing the wood-burning stove-furnace as he went. Makkachin's food bowl from the night before was still there on the stone-faced front of the mantle.

Thankfully, it only took one trip with everyone carrying things, so there was no need to return to the blustering cold. Viktor nudged off his boots beside where Yuri had done the same, and he went to catch up to the younger figure, putting his own cache of grocery bags on the old wooden table.

In that moment, it was the first time Viktor really let himself look around the place.

...It's barely changed at all since I lived here. It's practically a time capsule to before things went south.

Plastic bags crumbled and crinkled all around, but the Russian was too caught-up in his remembrance to participate. Eyes went from the kitchen and make-shift dining-room to the living-room area behind him, and back to the front door as his gaze scanned across from right to left. He realized then that the shoe-rack that was by the entrance was the same one he'd been thrown into two decades earlier. Without a thought, he abandoned the groceries and went towards it.

Yuri looked up and over curiously, but said nothing, watching quietly instead. He saw his husband's hand nervously reach out towards the rack, sliding fingers across its old and worn wooden surface, the other hand coming up behind the man's back, as though feeling an ancient, phantom pain there.

Viktor moved off then, looking around some more before finally settling his attention on the cast-iron pot-belly wood-burning stove that kept the whole house warm. He could see the hot glow behind the grating; yellow, red, orange, and sometimes white if he looked at it just right. He could even see the darker shadow of the wood within it, smoldering and blackened to charcoal.

A weird feeling overtook him then, and he reached for the metal spoke to pull the small hinged door open. He poked at the charred wood a little bit, feeling the waves of heat as a small log crumbled and fell apart within, sparks rising towards his face before fading to ash in mid-air. The nostalgia was real all over again, becoming something like déjà vu...and Viktor couldn't help but feel the heat on his face be joined by the cool drip of a few tears. He blinked fast and shook his head, and set the spoke aside, grabbing for the fireplace-tongs instead.

[Viktor, what are you doing...?] Kon asked, perplexed.
Yuri had a feeling, and looked back over his shoulder at the bear for a moment, then back to his husband.

The rummaging went on for a good minute or so before the tears on Viktor's cheeks were replaced by sweat, and he finally grabbed something. Pulling out of the blaze, the silver Russian held fast and tight to the object he'd found; blackened, singed, cracked and warped...he held a rather ancient skating blade within the prongs. He gasped for breath, staring in disbelief at the sight of the metal, but then just set it down on the furnace's flat top, and went right back into the flames, seeking for the blade's twin. It took a minute longer, and a third search, but the two last broken pieces were withdrawn and set on top of the iron stove before Viktor closed the front panel again and backed up, panting, eyes watering as much from his sadness as they did from the sting of the fire.

"...Viktor...?" Yuri whispered, stepping up to try and get the tongs back, "...Are...those...?"

"The first blades Yakov bought for me." The Russian answered, a pained hint in his voice, "The ones papa made me burn..."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED FOURTY EIGHT

The heat was so intense that Viktor could feel it burning his skin even from the few feet away he was still standing.

[Put them in.]

[N-No...please no...!] The boy begged, tears turning to steam on his cheeks.

[Do as your father commands.]

The man's voice was as if it were imbued with the power of God Himself, and the tiny silver Russian could do nothing but obey. He held the bladed boots close to his chest and sobbed as he started taking the last couple steps toward the open door.

[Heed me, boy.] Konstantin went on, watching as Viktor hesitated despite the pain of the heat, [You will never skate again. Understand?]

Slate eyes met one another, and in that moment, everything inside Viktor died...and he watched the leather boots burn.

It had been almost 17 years to the day since those blades first went into the fire, but in that moment, to Viktor, it felt like time hadn't passed at all. The heat, the pain in his chest, the sting in his eyes...it was all as it had been the first time. The only things that really had changed, was the vantage from which he looked at the pot-belly stove...and the fact that there was another person there trying to back him up away from it.

The wooden handle of the iron fireplace-tongs left his grip, and Yuri propped them up against the wall before returning to nudge him further back. Viktor's eyes hadn't left the crisped remains of those blade fragments though. Words were caught in his throat.

They...they were in there all this time... When I came here for mama's funeral... When I came back for the lawyer's interview... When I came again to make peace with mama's resting place... They were in this furnace, meters away from me...

"Viktor, say something-" Yuri begged, brushing silver bangs from squinted, watery eyes. Makkachin came up on his human's side as well, licking at one hand where it dangled low, "They've been in there for ages...there's no way he could've meant anything by it... Things have changed between the two of you...he wouldn't have left them there on purpose to spite you..."

The silver Russian tried to regain himself, blinking the pain from his dry eyes. He lifted his unlicked hand and grasped his partner's wrist lightly to hold it still, and pressed it to his cheek, "...I...I don't..." Was all he could manage. He swallowed his fears and turned his gaze towards the bear beyond the kitchen counter, [...W-why...?]

Konstantin had simply watched quietly until that moment, but even he felt his heart skip upward slightly to finally be brought into it. He removed his hands from the bag he'd been emptying when the stove was opened, and put them on the antique tile instead, [...I forgot they were in there.]
[For nearly 20 years!]

[I would've taken them out a long time ago otherwise.] The bear went on, keeping his gaze fixed and unblinking, [That stove is nearly 150 years old and the hinges don't work as well as they used to. I never scraped all the way to the bottom when cleaning it out. They must've been lost under the dust.]

[FOR NEARLY 20 YEARS!]

Kon grit his teeth, [I considered the subject closed and done afterwards...enough so that I put the whole thing behind me. I haven't thought about those blades since probably a week after-]

[You destroyed me when you made me put my skates in there!] Viktor said, tears streaming down his face, [I'd rather have taken a beating from you anytime...it never hurt half as much as it did when I had to watch my boots burn...!]

"Viktor..." Yuri started up again, pulling his spouse's face towards his own, "Focus on me..." He asked quietly, calmly, and moved his arms up over his husband's shoulders to cradle his head and pull it down to his shoulder, "I don't know what you guys are saying, but I feel like it could jeopardize everything you were hoping to achieve out here." He explained, stroking the back of the man's head, fingers dipping beneath the edge of the scarf and lapel Viktor still wore, "I know it was one of the worst moments of your life...but I doubt he was keeping those blades in there as a keepsake to old times. With as much progress as he's already made regarding us, I bet the last thing he wants is to hurt you again, least not with a reminder of something that happened years ago."

"Th-they're practically a tr-trophy to how he tried to ruin me...!" Viktor said between choked breaths, and he pressed his eyes down against his partner's shoulder, clinging tightly, "H-how can he claim to ha-...have forgotten they were i-in there!?"

"The same way I forgot I seduced you in Sochi!"

The silver Russian's brow furrowed in shock and surprise, and he lifted his wet face, "...You were black-out drunk! He wasn't!"

"You forgot that you promised to choreograph Yurio's Senior debut if he won Gold at the Junior World Championship. It meant the world to him, enough so that he came all the way to Hasetsu to try and hold you to it...but it still slipped your mind." Yuri said instead, arms coming back down enough that he could rest his palms against the side of his husband's neck, and rubbed one thumb gently over the red mark he'd left, "You've forgotten plenty. I've forgotten plenty, even when totally sober. Kon's going to forget things, too..."

Viktor stared, incredulous still, but at least the grief had somehow been extinguished. He snuffled and pulled a hand back to rub his nose against a sleeve, "...I...just don't... I can't understand how...he could just forget that though..."

"You and him came to that moment from very different places." Yuri explained, "For him...he was just acting as the father figure, scolding his kid for something he'd said to drop many times before. For you, it was your whole world, your life, your one escape from the boring existence you had... It had a lasting impact on you, but for him...it was just a blip on the radar. Done and over in a flash."

The silver Russian sniffled again, and bowed his head.

Yuri pulled one hand back and rubbed his chin in thought, glancing over at the bear - who couldn't look more guilty if he tried - then back at his husband. He wiggled his fingers in an attempt to pull his sleeve forward, and pinched the fabric around Viktor's drippy nose to wipe it away, "We might
actually be able to use this as a healing experience between you two. That moment - the burning -
was one of the defining moments that fractured your relationship with Kon. What if you both worked
together to do something productive with those blades, and put it in the past forever?"

"...Wh...what do you mean...?"

Viktor used a big plastic rake to 'sweep' away the snow beneath his childhood fort; the tank behind
the house, a good way into the woods at the back end of the hill. Makkachin and Prizrak darted into
and out of each wave. Konstantin stood nearby, holding a shovel and pick against his shoulder as he
watched, and moved forward as the rake grazed the ground to kick away a bit of cracked ice with the
edge of his boot. As Viktor kept clearing the area, Kon handed the shovel to Yuri, who stood aside
with Jiro against his shoulder, and nudged his head back at the cleared area. Yuri nodded and took
the handle, backing up a step or two into deeper snow to give space. The ground resisted with all its
frozen might, but Konstantin's strength was enough to break it apart pretty quickly anyway. There
was more worry about whether the tools would survive than whether the bear could punch through
the frozen dirt.

Yuri watched quietly as the earth gave way, breaking up like sugar cubes, then turned his eyes
towards his partner, who had suddenly crouched down for something, "What is it?"

"...I...completely forgot about this." He answered, kicking a bit at a spot under the snow that didn't
quite look like dirt or dead grass, "When we were here last year. You and Yurio found me out here
after I ran off...and I threw down a ratted old backpack."

Yuri's eyes went wide, "Your first blades! The ones your mom gave you!"

"...Yeah..." Viktor confirmed, breaking the frozen pack loose finally, and lifted it and its content up.
One antique blade nearly fell out of the hole-filled bag, but Viktor caught it up, and grabbed them
both in gloved hands. He turned around and leaned back against the frozen metal of the tank, looking
at the ancient metal, then to the leather satchel hung over one shoulder. He pulled out the water-
cooled burnt skates and looked at them all together, "These blades span a course of about 6
years...the first and last blades I owned while I still lived here." Slate eyes looked up to spot the half-
foot deep hole that his father had cracked apart, and watched as the bear reached the pick out
towards Yuri to switch the tools. Kon took the shovel and cleared the pit, making a small pile of
frozen dirt nearby. Once the hole was sufficiently deep, Viktor stepped forward, leaving the rake
against the tank. He held the blades out in his hands, and realized the confused look on his father's
face, [These blades.] He started, gesturing the antiques forward, [Mama gave to me when I first
learned how to skate on the pond. I used them for a long time in secret, hoping you'd never know.
There's another set of boots out there somewhere...girls' boots, since that's all she could find, so I
could skate with a pair that actually fit my feet properly. ...They didn't actually fit, but...they were
better than these.] He said, pulling them back again to push the burnt fragments forward in their
place, [And these...were the first real pair of figure skating blades that I ever owned...the ones Yakov
bought for me to replace the girls' skates I'd been using when he found me. I guess you could say...]
He offered both forward together, [...These skates span the years between Mikhail leaving,
and me leaving...and all the lies and hurt we dealt to each other in between.]

Konstantin wasn't sure what to say at first, looking at the different sets of metalwork. He huffed a sad
breath and shook his head, reaching to put his hand under Viktor's, and lifted up the antiques,
[These...were mine, once.]

Viktor's eyes went wide, [...They were...?]
"Da." The bear nodded, [From when I was a kid...these were the blades I had when I first developed my hatred for the whole thing...when your Uncle humiliated me.]

The younger Russian looked aside, catching Yuri's attention, "...My first skates were apparently my papa's last."

One cheek twitched, and Yuri made a surprised face, "...Wow."

Viktor looked back to his father, and watched as the bear let the shovel fall to the snow behind him, took both his hands into his own, and moved the two sets of blades together between them.

[Once the weather changes, and it warms up...I'm going to move one of your mother's rose bushes over here, to mark this spot.] Kon said quietly, [Maybe it'll help her to know what we've done.]

The younger figure could feel tears building up in his eyes again, but he quickly blinked them away before they could freeze to his face. He nudged his hands down, and his father followed down to crouch, and they both set the broken, warped blades into the small hole, and began filling it back in again with the chips of earth that surrounded it. Once it was covered over, Viktor reached again for the rake, and started moving snow over the small mound, keeping the spot protected until the spring thaw.

Kon grabbed the discarded shovel and reached to retrieve the pick from Yuri's grasp, but set his hand on the man's shoulder unexpectedly instead.

Yuri looked on, surprised, pick still in his hand, Jiro held up in the other arm, "Uhm..." He stammered, unsure.

The bear just nodded, "Youh...ehr gud mehn." He said with his ultra-thick Russian accent. He rubbed the top of Jiro's head with a finger before finally taking the pick back, and stepped off without another word. The huge man's boots crunched the snow like gravel, and he pushed his way back through the woods.

Viktor stepped closer to his spouse, rake in his hands, "...Did he just...?"

"...He said I'm a good man..."

As the cold of winter descended in the frigidness of evening, and the winter sun dipped below the distant horizon, a trail of smoke slithered its way into the sky. A small camp-fire burned behind the house, set up in the middle of three chairs made from packed snow and tarps. Each snow-chair had a human and a dog sitting in it, and each human had a mug of Viktor's mulled wine, steam trailing off just like the smoke did.

[...Sorry I overreacted earlier.] Viktor said unexpectedly, looking at the dog clinging to the edge of his father's seat, held there by an arm going over her other side, [I'd put so much of what happened here behind me that I didn't realize how deep the wounds still were.]

Kon sipped at the wine, then rested the mug against one knee, slate eyes glinting in the firelight, [I didn't know it hurt you that much to begin with. I thought you'd just get over it and move on. I never considered how much more like your mother you'd be than me.]

Viktor wasn't sure how to take that critique, so he didn't retort; he just took a sip from his own drink, holding the mug there as he looked past the rim to Makkachin. The poodle was curled up on the edge of the seat, head resting over his lap where a blanket covered his legs. Viktor gave the pup a
head-scrich, [I don't really know how much I take after her since I was so young when I left. Other than what I vaguely remember about her, all I know is what Mikhail said.]

[Your Uncle has a skewed view of his sister.] Kon said gruffly.

[...I know.]

[But twins can be strange like that, I suppose.]

Yuri listened quietly, but like usual, had no idea what was being discussed. He recognized his in-law's name despite the thickly accented pronunciation of it; it sounded more like 'Mi-hael' than the 'Me-kai-el' that he'd known and used. He focused his attention on the trembling Akita puppy on his lap, cold despite the fire and the blanket over him. For a moment, Yuri considered undoing his jacket to pull the puppy in, but he realized he wasn't wearing a jacket that allowed room for him, and frowned. He hugged Jiro a little closer, but his arms were cold on the outside, which didn't help either. He himself started to find that the tarp was a poor insulator, and his back and legs were starting to get cold, too.

*There's no way to move these snow-chairs forward; they'll melt if they're too close to the fire...but this far away, we can't feel much of the warmth. I don't want to sit on the ground to get closer, either. My eyes will start to burn from the smoke anyway... What do I do...? I don't want to go back to the R.V. by myself...*

[...So...what have you been doing since the mill closed?] Viktor wondered, lifting his eyes from the Caucasian Shepherd to the man she sheltered by, [Do you have enough to keep you busy?]

[There's always something to do around here.] The bear answered, [I was starting to clear the burnt-down houses around the area. Might as well return those places to the woods if no one lives on those plots anymore.]

[Oh...]

[If it gets dark or there's too much snow, I'll stay here and tend to Stranger, or read...listen to the radio sometimes. I was thinking about replacing the television, too.]

[...Is the other one still in the pond?]

Kon nodded grimly, [Yes.] He took another swig from the wine, and sighed a breath, [I'll get it out when it's warmer. I should've done so last summer, but it was still too soon after losing your mother. I didn't want to *look* at the pond, because I knew the television was in it, and that it was the last thing we fought over before she took off...]

[Yeah...]

[...How is...the insurance money treating you?] The bear asked awkwardly, [Did you get it in the end?]

[Yeah, I got it... I keep it stashed away in case of emergencies or something.] Viktor explained, [I use it to buy Yuri nice things sometimes, too, so he doesn't see the charge in our bank account before I can get it to him. Ruins the surprise, you know?]

Hearing his name, Yuri looked up. Jiro was starting to whine a little, whiskers frosty.

[I bought this *massive* bouquet of flowers a few weeks ago.] The silver Russian explained, smirking as he remembered the *reason* for why he'd purchased it, [The whole thing was so big that it took
over our dining-room table. We basically had to sit around it rather than at i-...oh!

"Sorry, Makkachin, move over..." Yuri suddenly said, dragging the thin blanket with him as he leaned into his partner's space, trying to nudge the poodle out of the way, "It's for a good cause, I promise."

The big brown poof eventually got up, and curled up at his human's feet instead, and Yuri moved to sit in the dog's place. He spread out his blanket on top of the first and bundled Jiro up into them, creating something of a nest to put on his lap. Caring not for the optics or bother, Yuri twisted around in his new spot and draped both legs of his husband's lap, and guided one of the man's arms around Jiro's back, while he himself nestled up against that closest shoulder.

"Everything okay?" Viktor wondered quietly, nervously leaning closer to speak quietly.

"Jiro's too small for this cold, and I'm having trouble keeping myself warm, never mind him." Yuri answered, teeth threatening to chatter in the frozen evening air, "If I could get Makkachin up onto us, too, without his weight making our legs go numb, I would..."

"Are you saying Makkachin's fat?"

"Wh-what!? No way! He's just a large-breed adult dog." Yuri protested frantically.

That just made Viktor laugh though. He cut it short rather quickly as he was once-again reminded that his father was nearby and watching, and he dared not move in any closer than he already had, "Ahem...

[Puppy's cold?] Kon asked stiffly, eyes going towards the fire instead.

Viktor hesitated, but then felt fingers threading through his where Yuri's arm had come around Jiro's other side, curling around the pup to meet where his hand had come to rest earlier. He took a bit of courage from the daring move, and lifted his head, "Igrušku i muž." [Puppy and...]

Yuri felt his heartbeat go faster in his chest, 'Muž...?' Did he just refer to me as his husband to his father? Nervous cherry-hazel eyes looked past blue frames to the bear, waiting for some rude gesture or condemnation. To his surprise...nothing vulgar came.

[They're both Japanese. I guess they're not used to this kind of weather.] Viktor let himself smile, [Jiro will be better off when he's older. Akitas come from northern Japan, and it's plenty cold there. They're actually called Japanese bear-dogs. They can get pretty big. Jiro's just a baby right now.]

Yuri exhaled and started to relax, able to focus more on the pup, and his slowly fading shiver. For some reason, the fire was warmer on that side than on the one he'd been sitting on previously, and the heat took the cold sting off his cheeks. He leaned his face down to nuzzle the top of the pup's head, "Feel better over here, little dude?"

Jiro seemed to understand, and yipped a little puppy-bark before he settled down into his nest a bit more. He curled his head down under the folds of the blanket and buried it in the fluff of his tail with a huff.

Both skaters smiled to watch it, and each of them relaxed a little more, feeling the tension starting to evaporate in the fading light of the sun. In the distance, wolves started to howl, and the night was alive with the haunting sound of their music.
Though miserably close to freezing, waiting another two months for the weather to turn to go shopping wasn't an option. The bright sunlight and clear skies made the early afternoon of Hasetsu look deceptively mild, but stepping outside made quick-work of the hope for warmer temperatures. Snow was brittle and crunchy underfoot, and breath came out in thick, steamy gouts, leaving the youngest member of the semi-permanent residency of the hot-spring resort unable to help herself...

"Look! It's like I'm an ice dragon!" Nikki said dramatically, breathing a torrent of 'white smoky fire' into the crisp air.

"I thought you were turning fifteen this month." Yurio chided in a monotone, entirely unimpressed by the spectacle. This time, at least, he'd humored his younger 'sister' by donning his red-and-black long-tailed jester's hat from the Final, matching the purple one she wore. It didn't help to elevate his mood though despite how much she liked it.

"I am turning fifteen. What's it to you? Will I suddenly become a humorless prude when the clock strikes midnight on that day?" She retorted, fun spoiled as she pressed knuckles to her hips, "Just like you?"

The Tiger grimaced, "I'm not a humorless prude. I'm just not into stupid kids' stuff."

"It's not stupid kids' stuff. Papa does it, too!"

"As if."

"Minako, Minako...! Look! Haaaaaaah."

She blinked at the man as a stream of fog was formed.

"It's like Godzilla's atomic breath!" Mikhail explained, still excited.

Another blink, but then a side-eye went towards Asahi, who himself was...perplexed by the sight.

The Russian just huffed and crossed his arms, sinking into a sulk as they rounded the corner into the outdoor department store, "You two are no fun."

Yurio just got up and pushed the front door open, retreating from the cold to go back into the resort, "This is dumb."

Nikki watched, dumbfounded, "...Wh... Why are you so salty!?" She barked, kicking a snow-lump away, "You've been acting like you've got a thorn up your arse since we got here! I thought you'd be happy to be back in Japan!"

The older teen just turned to look in her direction, hand still on the sliding door, and scowled slightly, though not specifically at her, "This isn't the Japan I left behind." He said stiffly, then abruptly slid the door shut again, leaving Nikki alone in the front courtyard.
She blinked at the panel, but a few seconds later, her face went red with annoyance, "That guy...!"
She huffed, grabbing the door with both mittens to get back inside. Yurio was already slipping into
the common-room when she stepped into the foyer, but as soon as he heard her, he changed
directions and went towards the family-only hallway along the side of it, "You can't get away just
cuz you go upstairs!"

"I'm not trying to 'get away.' I'm just going." He argued back, slipping around the corner and out of
sight.

Nikki flung her things off, kicking her boots away to land where they may, and rushed off, right past
where Toshiya had silently watched her disassembly. He held a finger up and his mouth was open,
ready to tell her to put her things away properly, but she just zoomed past him, and chased after the
Tiger, "You're still trying to get away now!" She barked.

"That's cuz you're chasing me now." He hollered, spinning 'round the edge of the stairwell to get to
the next flight.

Toshiya looked behind himself in confusion. [...]It's been a while since Yuri and Mari were that
young...but they didn't behave that way...] He mumbled quietly in Japanese before turning his eyes
back to the registrar. He pulled closed the small panels that blocked his sight of the foyer from the
admin desk, but found his attention grabbed by a shadow coming up on his side.

"That's cuz neither of us were little rebels with a stick up our butts." Mari mused, keeping things in
English for the sake of the shadow coming up behind herself in turn, "We're done. What do you
think?" She wondered, reaching one arm back to present the smaller figure walking around her side,
"The uniform is a little bit loose on her, but mom can tailor it down after dinner."

Toshiya stood up from his chair and clapped his hands together, then stepped forward to put those
same hands on the teen's shoulders, "You fit right in!

Viktoria smiled nervously, donning the same smoky-pink kimono that Yu-Topia staff wore, as well
as the white tabi socks and sandals, and one of their maroon aprons tied around her waist, "...I feel so
out of place anyway..."

"Nonsense." The elder shook his head, "You might not be Japanese, but if you're an employee of
Yu-Topia Katsuki, the uniform is what you wear."

"You don't wear it, dad." Mari pointed out, eyebrow raised.

"I wear the official haori." He answered, turning in place as though putting himself on display, the
dark-blue jacket flaring slightly as he twirled, "And your mother wears both, so it's fair. Also I stay
here at the front."

Mari just deadpanned him, then leaned towards Viktoria, "What he means is...he stays in the admin
closet all day so he doesn't have to help clean stuff up like us women-folk do."

Toshiya just chortled, "What I do is just as important!"

"Yuri avoided it, too."

"No he didn't!"

"He wouldn't even wear the same uniform. He always insisted on wearing the blue one with the
black apron, like he thought he could avoid the common-room by pretending to be higher-level staff
or something." She explained, "Or he'd take off to the skating rink as soon as I'd ask him to help with
a project." She leered up the stairs, "Just like when Yurio first came...and Yuri took off instead of helping clean out the room where he was gonna stay..."

"There's a blue one...?" Viktoria echoed, "Can I wear that one?" She asked, hopeful, clasping her hands together.

Mari backed up slightly, "Er... I mean... if you want to... but we only have the one Yuri used to wear... It might not even fit you..."

"This one doesn't fit me." The teen pointed out, grabbing for the slightly-too-low hem of the haori jacket, "Yuri is closer to my size. Maybe it'll fit better at least."

It took a moment, but Mari eventually shrugged and nodded, "Alright... let's see if I can't dig it out."

"Yes!"

Toshiya watched the second set of youngsters walk away, and he waved slightly before returning to his seat, [...] So many teenagers around now... And Yurio doesn't even know yet that he's going to be working here soon, too...] He commented to himself, then reached for a uniform catalogue, [Guess I'll have to order more of the blue ones after all. I was just going to give him the ones Yuri used to wear...]

Rifling through clothing racks at half a dozen different stores, it was becoming clear that Asahi was as picky as a pre-teen girl, finding maybe one article that he'd even consider from any given establishment. Minako looked at the watch on her wrist, then out the doors to the fading light before she looked back, "It's going to be dark soon, and we've barely gotten anything. What's wrong with this place?"

Asahi twitched slightly at the judgment, "...It's all so expensive... The material and labor costs are probably less than ¥600, but they're charging ten times more than that just for the brand label, and I don't care what brand it is..."

Mikhail eyeballed the man, "Most of the clothing you wear right now is brand-name from Mizuno. That's expensive, too..."

"But they give it to me at a steep discount for being in the JSF." The skater retorted, "I just... can't justify spending this kind of money on something I could make myself for way less."

"You make clothes?" Minako wondered.

Asahi shook his head, "Figure of speech. I did fix my own clothes, but... everything I had was second-hand. I don't think I ever had a new piece of clothing until I moved to Tokyo, but even that came from a second-hand store because my stipend was so small. So... it was new to me, but not new in general... My first real piece of legitimately new clothing was a jacket Riku gave me for Christmas a few days before we went to Nationals."

"A jacket? You still have it, I hope?"

"Yeah..." He nodded, "It's not meant for this weather though. It's a thin black leather jacket... Riku thought I'd look cool in it because of the guitar thing... It's in the closet at the resort. It was one of the things I picked up when we were in Imari."

"Did you ever get a chance to wear it?" Mikhail asked then.
"...Sure, just...not outside." Asahi explained, then looked around again, "Everything in here is way beyond what I could ever spend on clothing."

The elder Russian shook his head and stepped forward, feeling his lady love's hand let go of his arm as he moved out of reach. He lifted it up to the skater's shoulder then and leaned down slightly to speak, "You're not the one spending the money."

"I know, I just-"

"If there's something here that you like or want, then just grab a size that fits you and we'll get it."

"But it's-"

"Asahi," The Russian interrupted again, "I own $45,000 suits. This jacket I'm wearing right now was $8,000. My boots are $1,200. I bought Viktor's father a new truck worth some cool P5.5 million, which I think is about $85,000. I'm. Not. Worried. About. A t-shirt. Worth. $35."

The skater felt a pit in his gut, "...But I am..."

"What are you gonna do when we get to a music shop and your amps cost $500?"

"The guitar only cost me $250. Why would I get amps that expensive?"

Mikhail blinked at him and pulled his arm back down, "A $250 electric guitar? What's it made from, cardboard and sewing thread?"

Asahi could feel himself go pale, "...I'm poor. What do you want from me?"

The Russian raised a hand to lift his flatcap and ruffled his hair a little bit, then settled it back down again, "...You got a huge chunk of money from your fans over the last week. You've got sponsors waiting to talk to you once we get your new phone. You just won Silver at Nationals, and I've been reading that you're a front-runner to medal at Four Continents, where the prize pot is much bigger...not to mention the Olympics, where you measure up alongside skaters who have won Gold at big events. Plus, and I feel like I shouldn't have to bring this up, I just set up a continuous inflowing fund for you based on the profits I get from my shares in your parents' company. So long as Saito Ceramics is in business, you will have an income." He hesitated then, and put a finger on his chin, "Well...actually, now that I think about it...what happened to all the money you won before the accident?"

"I didn't win a lot. What I did get went to coaching, rink, and equipment fees." Asahi said simply, "If my parents ever demand payback for the money they spent on everything else...I'm toast. Everything I have now will evaporate."

Mikhail just waved his hand and shook his head, "I don't care what they might demand. They don't matter anymore. As far as I'm concerned, you're free and clear, and are starting with a blank slate."

Minako's eyes drifted between the two, "...If your parents wouldn't even pay for new clothing for you to wear outside of skating, what did you do to afford your skating costumes? Those can get pricy. And they just made you throw them out when you moved back to Imari?"

Asahi just felt even more humiliated then, "...My skating outfits were cobbled together from Halloween costumes I found online after-season, and I modified them myself. Can you guys stop questioning me about my finances already? This is humiliating."

"Sorry."
Mikhail huffed, "I didn't mean it like that. I was trying to reassure you that you can have these stupidly expensive things if you want them. I'm not going to ask you to pay me back. Consider this part of my investment into you as a skating sponsor." He shrugged, "Happy cows produce more milk, and happy skaters score more points. I mean, look at what happened to Yuri..."

The younger man just looked down, feeling the skin on his face tighten in his embarrassment.

"Look..." The elder reached his hand forward again and pat the skater's shoulder, "I appreciate that you're trying to be thrifty. That's what you're used to doing, so I get it. I lived off table scraps and the good will of other people when I was in Kiev. But the good will of the people of Kiev sometimes included whole meals, and shelter for a week at a time. Sometimes it was also a kick in the ass and a good public scolding...but beggars can't be choosers, and until I made it on my own, and got to Canada where things finally took off, I was at the mercy of those around me. Weird as it may sound, you're at my mercy right this second, and I'm trying to do right by you."

"...That just makes it sound even worse..."

Minako quirked a brow, "He's kinda right. That last bit was terrible."

Mikhail groaned and looked up in desperation, "Okay okay, it was bad...fine...! My point is that I'm trying to help and you're not making it easy!" He sucked in a breath and shook his head, "I did nothing less than this for my own kids, even though I didn't get to be there with them much to appreciate it. Let me enjoy helping you, damnit!"

The ballerina chortled a laugh under her breath, "Maybe you should've just said it that way from the start. 'Let me spend money on you, ferchrissake!'" She laughed, waving her arms around for dramatic effect.

"Yououuuuu have no room to criticize, young lady." Mikhail pointed at her, "You barely let me spend any money on you at all."

"I didn't know how much you were worth before!" She argued, "I didn't know if you were running up credit cards to try and look like you were rich, or if you really were! Plus, I didn't want you to think I was mooching off you!"

"You weren't mooching. You were accepting my flirtations." He corrected stiffly, "I was courting you. It's different."

"Yeah and if you sent me a bill at the end when I declined you?" She crossed her arms and deadpanned the man severely.

"Ugh, everyone thinks I'm gonna come after them." The Russian threw his arms into the air and turned around, "I'm not going to send anyone a bill!"

Asahi was the one looking between them then, but he leaned towards Minako, "...You declined him? But he's right here...and you..." He pointed to the ring on her finger.

"Oh, that was after." She explained, "I said yes at first, then I said no, then I said yet again later after things settled down." The ballerina offered a tepid smile, "I'm not easy to please. I don't like feeling as though I'm indebted to anyone. This is just a really shiny ball-and-chain."

"Hey." Mikhail chortled, hands on his hips as he looked on, pouting.

"...So...then you understand where I'm coming from." Asahi continued, as though nothing else had been said.
"You're not in debt or chained to me!" Mikhail chimed in from a small distance away, and scuttled back through the clothing racks to get to the duo, "We're engaged now! Your debts are my debts! I can't be in debt to myself..."

Asahi just gave a flat look, "I'm not going to marry you to get out of an I-O-U."

Mikhail yelled.

Minako laughed loudly, but then leaned against the skater, forearm resting on the edge of his shoulder, "Watching him struggle is fun, right?" She mused.

The skater wasn't sure how to answer. He watched as the elder Russian stalked close and loomed over his fiancé.

"Oh, the struggle is real, starlight." Mikhail said grimly, eyes twinkling with a sort of deviousness that hadn't been there before, "I'll get my pound of flesh as payback for that one way or another-"

"OH, HE ADMITTED IT!" Minako yelled and laughed at the same time, swiping the Russian's flatcap with one hand as she grabbed Asahi's wrist with the other, and made a break for the exit, "RUN! BEFORE HE GIVES YOU AN INVOICE TO SIGN!"

Mikhail blinked in surprise as the door-chime sounded and the pair were off. He shook his head and gave chase, "I MEANT FOR THE COMMENT, NOT FOR THE SHOPPING! GET BACK HERE!"

Finally arriving at the top of the many flights of stairs, Nikki stepped out onto the hardwood of the third floor. Having never been up there, she wasn't sure where to go, but at least the space was small; a hall, windows lining the wall on its right, one door at the far end, another on the left, opposite the windows, and the wall that shielded the stairwell from someone stumbling into it by accident.

"Yuri!" She barked, "You can't hide up here! I'll find you!"

The blonde just pulled the door to the banquet room open and stuck his head out, "Why are you even after me!?" He barked back, the long tails of his hat making the words sound silly in spite of his annoyance.

"Why are you even running away!?

"I'm not running away." He slammed the door-panels together again after pulling his head back in. There wasn't a lock though, so he stood on the other side, using his hands to keep them together in case the girl outside tried to open them.

"You're being dumb and combative, just like how you were at the start of Detroit!" Nikki pointed out, equally annoyed. She crossed her arms and stared at the door, "What happened to the fun and happy Yuri that started to come out!?

"He got chased into the damn attic by someone who won't let him have any damn peace!"

The silver teen guffawed, "That's absurd."

"Why don't you go cry to Otabek about it then!? He seems to think pretty highly of what you think!"

Jade eyes saw red, and the door was quickly thrown open, leaving Yurio no choice but the stumble
backwards into the unmade bed a few steps behind him. He pulled up the felt trim of his hat, and
gaped angrily at the girl standing over him.

"Are you mad about that, too!? That I talk to Otabek without you!?” Nikki harped, leaning forward
to eyeball the Tiger, "You seemed okay with it before!"

"I don't care!" Yurio growled, trying to pull himself up onto the foot of the mattress, "Quit heckling
me!"

"You were doing so good, and then as soon as we get to Japan, you get a wild thorny hair up your
butt! Why? Not because of Otabek, clearly, since he's not here. Is it cuz of Asahi!?"

The Russian Punk grit his teeth.

"Are you jealous of him!?"

"I'm not jealous of anyone!"

"You're sure acting like you are! You were perfectly fine when all the attention was on you!” Nikkita
scolded, leaning up to stand normally again, "This is part of what being in a family is about! We
help each other, not just one of us. Asahi is a lot older than us though, and needs a kind of help that
neither of us is really able to give! If having someone to talk to and be friends with was all he
needed, then papa and Minako wouldn't have gone all the way to Imari to sort things out."

"He's not family! He's just some idiot that Okukawa met over the weekend!"

Nikki leered dubiously, "Projecting much?"

"...Eh!?"

The teen sighed and shook her head, "Papa took you on despite not having a clue about you
beforehand, simply because Cousin Viktor and Yuri asked him to. If not for that, where would you
be now? Would you even be skating? Where would you be living? What would you have done
about the tendon you snapped when you punched that tile wall like the dumb genius you are?"

"...That's an oxymoron."

"You're an oxymoron!"

"Katsudon and Viktor said they weren't even on good terms with him at Nationals! Why is everyone
so desperate the help someone that no one even likes!?” Yurio argued, pushing back against the bed
to cross his legs in the middle of it, then his arms, and scowled, "At least Katsudon and Viktor
backed me up."

"Barely." Nikki retorted, "I've heard the stories...about how mean and rude you were to papa when
you first met. How even Yuri yelled at you beforehand, and that he was so worked up about
everything that he couldn't even rant in English at the time! YURI! RANTING ANGRILY! It's
insanity!"

"It's not like he's incapable of getting mad."

"That's not the point!"

"Then what is!?"

"Not everything has to be about you! And not everything is a contest!” She explained, "No one is
out there comparing notes on the level of tragedy and neglect that you and Asahi suffered! The only thing that anyone cares about is that Asahi is in trouble right now, and you're not."

The Tiger just scowled a little more.

"Fine...if that's how you're gonna be, then I will tell Otabek." Nikki huffed, turning on a heel to go back out into the cold hallway, "Maybe he can knock some sense into you."

"Don't you dare."

The sliding panels slammed together, and the silver teen's footsteps thumped down the corridor, "Watch me!"

"NIKKITA!"
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED FIFTY

Even for the early setting of the winter sun, it seemed particularly late and dark when the shopping crew finally returned to Yu-Topia. It was snowing quite heavily by then as well, turning the outdoors into something of a foggy soup; even lamp-posts were barely visible but for the glow their lights gave off.

Hiroko marveled at the sight through the open doors as the trio stumbled through, carrying as much as they could to avoid multiple trips, "Wow, it's really coming down out there. Did this just start...?"

Minako dusted the white frost from her head, "It was just barely starting when we decided to come back...it got heavy in a hurry. Glad we called it a night when we did. This will be treacherous in no-time."

"It's gonna be deep by morning." Mikhail added, shaking his hat off through the open door, "Can we leave this stuff here while we get the last of it from the car?" He asked, making the motion to put down the few bags he had in his grasp.

"Oh...sure." Hiroko nodded, and watched as Asahi did the same with what he had, and the two went back out into the snow. They disappeared rather easily in the swirly cascade, returning about a minute later with a big box each, "...What's all that...?"

"Equipment for Asahi's electric guitar." Mikhail answered, once again tossing the snow from his hat out the door, but this time closed said door behind them, "Without it, the guitar will sound like a child's toy."

"Is it loud?"

"We got him a set that has headphones, and he won't practice late."

"...We didn't actually need to get these for me to play..." Asahi explained nervously, "But they're what make an electric guitar sound different from an acoustic, so..."

"No, I get it..." The woman put a finger on her cheek as she looked on at the boxes, and the photos of the equipment they contained, "...You're still in that room in the public area. Maybe we should just go ahead and move you upstairs?"

The skater blinked, "...I don't want to be a bother..."

"It's no bother. We just hadn't gotten around to doing it yet. MARI! VIKTORIA!" Hiroko hollered, turning towards the common-room to wait for the duo to come scampering out. They did, rather quickly, with Viktoria donning the blue and black that she'd hoped for.

"What is it!?" Mari huffed and puffed, startled from the sudden yelling. She spotted the bags and boxes on the floor and deadpanned them severely, "Aw man, more stuff? Is there a CedEx truck coming, too!?"

Mikhail grinned mischievously to spot his oldest daughter in uniform, "Looking snazzy, Vikki."

The teen grimaced and tried to hide behind her older counterpart, "...No, no...no."
"Don't worry. It'll be good for you." The elder laughed, reaching around to pat the girl's back anyway, "And it's only part-time, so consider it a good way to earn yourself some fun-money to spend around town. School starts Monday anyway, so this is great to get you back into the mindset of being responsible for your time."

Viktoria just sighed.

"You won't suffer alone for long, don't worry." He added, which only served to draw up those jade eyes in a confused look.

"...Nikki?"

"Huh? No, she's still too young."

"GIVE IT BACK!" Said young daughter's voice rang out, as though on cue, "I'LL KICK YOU!"

"THEN QUIT SELLING ME OUT TO MY OWN FRIENDS!" Yurio barked back, running out of the common room with the youngest's phone in his hands. He caught sight of the gathered though and stopped in his tracks in surprise, giving Nikki the time to get her device back without resistance,

"...Uhm...hi?"

Mikhail and Minako waved.

"Why is everyone standing around?" Yurio wondered nervously, empty hand still up from where he'd had the phone a moment before.

"We were just talking about how much it's snowing right now." Hiroko mused, "We'll need someone to shovel it in the morning."

The suggestion was entirely lost on the Russian Punk, and he turned his attention back to the girl next to him, spotting that she was still typing furiously, thumbs a'blur, "Would you quit it!? Otabek wouldn't want to listen to this crap anyway!"

Nikki just sneered up at him, then turned her nose the other way and closed her eyes, "Hmph! Shows what you know!"

Before Yurio could even launch another attack, his own phone started buzzing in his back pocket, the guitar riffs of 'Welcome to the Madness' playing loudly for all to hear...and his face went pale. As though his pants had suddenly caught fire, Yurio spun around in a mad dash to get the phone, and answered it emphatically...though he abruptly calmed down to his usual 'cool' affect and cleared his throat before speaking, "Yeah." He started. All of two seconds later, the blood drained from his face, "...That was it?" He wondered quietly, "...Okay. Laters."

Crossed arms and an indignant, haughty stare came into the young Russian's periphery, but he refused to look. Nikki's voice was cutting though, "See?"

"Hmph."

"What are you two knuckleheads on about?" Mikhail asked flatly, helping Minako with her coat as the group finally started to disassemble.

"Yura's being a jerk again, and I told him I'd complain to Otabek about it if he didn't fess up and fix it." His daughter answered, "So I did."

Mikhail grumbled slightly, "MnnrrrrBekaagain..." He cleared his throat as he put his stupidly-
expensive boots away, and shrugged out of his also-stupidly-expensive jacket, "And what did he say?" Eyes went to Yurio.

The blonde stayed sullenly silent.

"Yura. What did Beka say."

"BenicetoNikki." He answered quietly.

"Say again?"

"HESAIDTOBENICETONIKKIORHE'LLPUNCHME."

Mikhail was caught between wanting to laugh at Yurio's expense, and yell about his baby talking to boys, and ended up silent. Nikki laughed triumphantly though, much to Yurio's chagrin.

"Anyway." Mari deadpanned, looking back to her mother, "Why'd we get called out here?"

"Oh!" Hiroko spun back around, caught in her previous 'people watching,' "I wanted to ask that you two fix up Viktor's old room up again. We're going to put Asahi into it."

"Oh." Mari looked over at the aforementioned skater, then started to twist away, nudging Viktoria along with a finger towards the side-hall, "Okay. That'll be easy."

Yurio looked up as the two passed, a desperate expression on his face suddenly, "V-Viktor's room!? But...that's where I-"

"You slept in his closet." Mari teased, ruffling the teen's hair under his hat, though he swatted her arm away quickly, "You'll live without it."

"But."

"You don't need a hiding place in anyone's closet." Mikhail huffed, reaching down to gather up some of the clothing bags again, "C'mon, Asahi, let's get your stuff up there. You can unpack and take off tags while the ladies bring the bedding in."

Nervously, Asahi nodded and gathered up one of the big boxes, following after the elder.

Minako made a face and did the same, picking up more of the bags. She spotted the dirty look Yurio was giving his older counterpart as they streamed by though, and flicked at one of the tails of his hat as she passed, "Be nice to him, too."

He just seethed quietly as they went around the corner and out of sight. Once they were gone and their footsteps too faint to hear, Yurio couldn't contain himself, "You see!?" He barked, twisting towards Nikki, "They're giving him my room now, too!"

"It was Viktor's room. He doesn't use it anymore. It's empty."

"MY ROOM WAS IN HIS ROOM."

"You can't live in the closet forever, Yura." Nikki shrugged, "Eventually you're going to have to come out."

"Don't you dare turn this into a reference to me being gay. It was a literal, actual closet that I stayed in. It was huge, and it was my space when I needed it."
"...What about Yuri's old room? It's empty, too." Hiroko chimed in, turning on a heel as she wandered back towards the common area, "Since Yuri has his own house now, I don't see why he'd care if we let someone else use it."

The Russian Punk wasn't sure how to answer that, and simply grabbed the tails of his hat to skulk off back to where he'd been originally. His silence was answer enough as he went past the Katsuki Matriarch, and she watched him go by in confusion.

"...What's eating him?" She wondered to herself as the teen vanished through the doorway.

Nikki approached, still looking rather indignant about the whole thing, arms still crossed as well, "He's super jealous of all the attention Asahi is getting right now. Seems to think the guy is sabotaging him."

"What was he expecting?" Hiroko turned inquisitively, though troubled by the whole thing, "It's not like anyone planned it this way."

"I know. He doesn't accept it though. He takes every change in plans like it's a personal attack or something, even if it has nothing to do with him..."

The older woman sighed and smiled, and shook her head, "You and your sister are very mature for your ages. I'm sure your father is proud of you both. He has a son too somewhere though, right?"

Nikki nodded and loosened her arms, "Yeah, Sergio...he stayed in Canada cuz he's too old for this kind of globe-trotting stuff. He's dumb like Yura though."

Hiroko smiled even wider then, "Girls mature faster than boys, and some boys take a long time to grow up even by that standard. Even Toshiya can act like a little kid sometimes." She mused, moving her hands to adjust the blue haori that hung over her shoulders, "Your cousin Viktor does, too, and he's much older than Yurio. But...they all have their serious sides. I don't know much about Yurio's history, but I can wager a few guesses given how young he is, and how he's basically been adopted into your family, rather than being with his own... He's probably very territorial of the things he has in his life. He was very angry when Vik-chan came here, too, enough so that he left abruptly when he realized he couldn't make Vik-chan change his mind and go back to Russia. He's used to getting what he wants and isn't that good at compromising...so even though your father's done a lot to help him get past that, it's still a part of him, and will come out from time to time."

"...So what do we do to help him through it? I don't want him to be angry until Asahi gets his own place. That could take a while." Nikki sighed, "He was doing so well before..."

"Your papa needs to talk to him." Hiroko suggested, "But, I think he realizes that. So for now, just let it rest, and leave it to him."

"...Okay..."

The unused banquet room was much bigger than the lodgings Asahi had been transferred from, and the lack of stuff he had to decorate made it look even more Spartan than before. The windows were different, too...there actually were windows, and they were huge. The snow immediately beyond them was all that could be seen though, other than the glow on the glass from the lights inside.

Asahi looked around carefully, from the newly-arranged bed and pillows, to the dresser, the two night-tables flanking each side of the bed, the small two-level book-shelf on the wall next to the sliding closet doors, the sofa and low table in the center, and the short green L-shaped couch in the
corner by the door to the hall. All the things he could guess had been arranged and placed to Viktor's liking before him, and not moved since due to lack of occupancy.

...I wonder what it looked like when he was here? Was it this barren, or did it have a lot of things to remind him of home?

He stepped around the room to get a better look at every inch, and eventually came to the closet itself, sliding the door across to find - of all things - another bed inside.

What on earth...?

It was more like a mattress with a bed-frame and a white sheet wrapped around it to keep it clean, but the wrinkle pattern on it made it look like it had been sat upon sometime after being made. The space inside was rather large, too, and Asahi stared in confusion at it for a moment. He glanced aside, and stepped out into the hall, opening the door to the empty neighboring room to look at it.

The closet in Senpai's room is exactly the same size as Yuri's entire bedroom.

He went back again to the banquet-hall storage room, and realized that the closet had a closet inside. Things had been rearranged within the space to act as though it were an entire separate apartment inside the space. It was even stranger then that the opposite wall in the main room had another wardrobe of its own, adding even more storage space.

This is bonkers...who was living inside Senpai's closet...?

Asahi shook his head and abandoned all inquiry, simply closing the door stoically in a hope to forget the whole thing. Instead, he went to the low table between the foot of the bed and the sliding door to the hall, and started pulling over bags of new clothes. Just as Mikhail suggested, he started taking off tags, and sorted everything into colors and whites piles. A few garments in though, and he was already starting to slow down. He held a t-shirt in his hands; the ¥4000 t-shirt he'd complained about being too expensive to warrant purchase. It was black and had fine, silvery threads woven throughout, converging into a pattern on the chest that looked like the stormy clouds of a monochrome sky, with a silver, shining sun piercing through. Asahi pulled the garment close to his face, closed his eyes, and breathed in the smell of the fabric, then slowly let it go again.

...Mr. Rozovsky had to convince me to let him buy all this stuff as a late Christmas present, as though he was making up for all the lost and ignored opportunities my own family had squandered. Even though he had to go to those lengths...I still feel like I should've said no.

It was done though. He put the t-shirt into the colors pile and reached to pull one phone from each of his back pockets. The new one was larger than the borrowed phone, and had a plain, light green case around it. For a moment, Asahi thought to transfer his contacts over, but quickly realized there was no point.

I have to go dig my old phone out for this...I only pulled the ones I needed onto Riku's phone...

He sighed and pushed up to his feet, grabbing both devices as he moved to leave the room. It was easy enough to sneak through the resort without being noticed. He made it all the way to the door into the night-housing hall before he realized something was weird.

Why do I feel like I'm forgetting something...?

He stepped up to the door, fingers fitted to the handle to push it open...and suddenly realized what it was.
Barking came immediately to his ears, and Asahi threw the door open, spotting the white blur coming right at him.

[Ahh! I'm so sorry!] He lamented, crouching down to one knee immediately to try to contain the wiggly and excited fluff, [I got so caught up in my own head today that I just... Ah, who am I kidding? You don't even know what I'm saying... Come on, let's get this stuff packed up. We're moving again.]

The Hokkaido-ken yipped and wiggled even more, staying right by her human's legs as he started picking up the most important things. First-gathered were the religious artifacts from the dresser, the small framed photo of Riku, and the incense sticks. Asahi moved then to the closet and pulled out the suitcase that had his skating things inside - as well as his original phone - then pulled the guitar-case strap over his head.

I'll come back for the rest of my other clothes tomorrow...

He snuck back outside and slid the door shut, then made his way back through the hall, the foyer, and past the door to the common-room where everyone else had gathered. Mostly, anyway; there were some notable absences. In fact, of all the people Asahi was acquainted with, the only person he knew in the common-room was Mikhail himself...and the Russian could feel eyeballs on the back of his head.

"Oh...hey. Done already?"

Asahi shook his head, "I keep getting started with stuff and then get distracted. I came down just now to get some of my other things so I could make the room upstairs feel a bit less...formal." He said, stepping into the doorway briefly, "Where is everyone?"

"Minako and Nikki are in the onsen, having a dip before bed. Yura's in our room, sulking probably. Viktoria is with the Katsukis, learning how to clean and close shop." The elder explained, twisting around to grab and drain the last of his drink, then stood up, "Do you want a hand?"

"...I couldn't..." The skater backed up again and bowed his head, "I don't want to interrupt..."

Mikhail huffed a disappointed laugh, but started shuffling across the tatami mats towards the exit, "Interrupt what?" He wondered, leaning down to offer some ear-scratches to Hana, "I'm just waiting for Minako to come back so we can all hit the sack. My girls are starting school soon and there's still a lot of preparations to make."

"...School? Here, in Japan...?" Asahi questioned nervously, finding his suitcase handle being nudged out of his grip, "...Or do you mean something else?"

"I have a Canadian and a Russian tutor that are going to be tele-conferencing with the kids." Mikhail explained, gesturing his hand towards the hall around the corner, and nudged his head towards it so the skater would go...which he eventually did, after an awkward moment of uncertain posturing. Once they were walking though, Mikhail continued, "My girls and Yura are at different places in their education because of their ages and where they come from. The last thing any of them needs is to be uprooted and start a whole different system. It would mess them up...so I'm having them continue with someone who's reasonably local to carry on with them. Viktoria will also be working part-time here at the resort like I explained while we were shopping. Yura will find out he's been hired, too, but I was going to wait until later to tell him."
"How come?" Asahi wondered, rounding the bed in the stairwell.

"He's having a small fit because of you right now..."

The younger man swallowed a painful knot to hear those words, but Mikhail continued unknowing.

"...So adding 'hey, you're going to have a job other than skating' will probably tick him off. His first chore will be to shovel all the snow in the front court-yard and parking lot. It'll wear him down so he doesn't have any fight left when he comes in to start his own lessons." The elder stated, getting all the way to the third floor before finishing.

"I see..."

The sliding panel to the banquet hall moved aside, and Mikhail looked around, seeing the start of some laundry piles, as well as one small bag that had been set aside to collect tags and plastic bits. Five other larger bags of clothes still remained though, and were lined up, ready to be processed by the small table. Asahi slipped by and set down his artifacts and personal effects on the book-shelf, though he held onto the small framed picture of Riku for a moment longer before sitting it down as well. Hana made herself comfortable on the L-couch in the corner, making it easy to watch the rest of the room from that vantage.

Mikhail set the suitcase down at the foot of the bed, and then joined Hana on the green seat, rubbing his hand down the back of her head and neck as he looked at the still-standing figure before him, "Today went pretty good in the end, don't you think?" He started, trying to break up the silence, "...We got your bank account open so you could transfer your donations, we got your new phone, some equipment for your music, and a bunch of new clothes so you don't have to wear your training gear everywhere."

Asahi glanced over, and nodded once, "Mh."

Silence came again, and Mikhail struggled to find something else to say, "Ehm... So...what kind of music did you know before?"

"I used to copy songs Riku and I knew. I was rubbish...but he seemed to like it, so I kept playing."

"Rubbish, huh?" The elder echoed, and abruptly pushed back up to his feet again, moving to the other sofa where the boxes had been set down, and started peeling the tape off the tops.

Asahi watched quietly as the amp was pulled out, freed from the styrofoam packing edges, and the plastic wrap that protected it from dirt and dust. Cables and the headset came next, then the second box with the effects pedals - something he didn't even know how to use yet - and their assorted wiring. The boxes were packed up and set aside by the wall, and Mikhail started plugging everything in, then handed the end of the audio jack to him.

"Go ahead. Give it a whirl. See if it's like riding a bike."

The younger man's cheek betrayed him as it twitched slightly under one eye, but Asahi relented and pulled the guitar case off his back, opened it, and withdrew the guitar from inside, plugging it in with the offered cable. A quick check of everything - and volume set very low - and Asahi nervously pulled up a thin plastic pick. He looked at the Russian anxiously, "...Promise you won't laugh."

"Why would I laugh? This is gonna be awesome."

"...Like I said, I'm rubbish at this."
"You're better than I am, so I have no room to mock." Mikhail shrugged, sitting down on the edge of the bed to make room, "Besides, if Riku enjoyed it then I'm sure you're fine."

"He liked me though."

The Russian blinked in confusion at that, but the strum of the guitar cut off any possible retort for the moment, and Asahi adjusted it louder as the chords hummed, but only loud enough to fill the room, not rattle the building. He continued to pick at the strings as he adjusted the tuning heads. Volume and tone knobs were adjusted on the body of the beast again, giving the electric hum a clean, warm sound. Soon, the rumblings of a melody started to come forward; slowly, in fits and starts. Asahi backed up until he could sit on the sofa behind him, keeping the guitar on his leg as he watched his fingers.

[NieR: Automata - Weight of the World - Solo Guitar cover - Aki K]

Lost in the music, Asahi let himself forget about everything for a little while. His fingers were nearly on autopilot. Those two minutes and 30-odd seconds were the closest thing to peace he could think of since everything fell apart. He was almost ready to start something else, but he could feel eyes on him, though he didn't return the gaze.

"Sad song." Mikhail commented, "Your own?"

Asahi shook his head, "I...was reminded of it after a song the JSF used at the Exhibition. They come from the same game. I don't know how to compose...I just emulate songs I've heard."

"I see." The elder nodded, "It sounded pretty good, considering you haven't played in a while."

The awkward silence was quelled at least a little bit by quiet strings being strummed, even if it was basically the musical equivalent of idling.

"I get this feeling you're not adjusting well." Mikhail said unexpectedly, arms loosely crossing over himself, "Are we doing anything wrong...?"

Asahi stared at the floor for a moment before putting his pick-hand over the still-vibrating strings, ending the quiet hum that had been lingering, "No. ...And...no, I guess not."

"What's the matter then?"

The younger figure swallowed, but then raised his eyes to the framed picture on the other side of the room, "I guess I'm just having a hard time accepting that all of this is even real. ...The last 2 years, and especially this last week...has just been an endless Hell for me. To think that it's...in a way, finally over, and in another way, beginning all over again...is hard to process." He snuffled quickly and leaned back against the sofa, "I did so much wrong to Yuri and Senpai at Nationals, and yet...they're a huge reason why I'm here at all. Minako, too."

"Ah...so that's what you meant earlier." Mikhail nodded, "You think no one here likes you."

"Yuri and Senpai tolerate me. Minako pities me. You were roped up into this by proxy...I don't know that you've even formed an opinion of me yet, other than me being trouble." Asahi explained reluctantly, "And you just said Plisetsky is having a cow because of me, so..."

The Russian shook his head and huffed a laugh to himself, "I can't speak for those who aren't here, but between Minako and I, we like you plenty. Plisetsky basically hates everyone except his Khazak friend; if anyone gets by just tolerating folks, it's that kid. ...It's kinda hard to get a read on you most of the time though. People are going to have a hard time getting to know you, so they can like you."
"I don't know any other way to be."

"And I'm not saying you should change. Personally speaking, knowing what you've been through...I think you're going to need more than a couple days to get over it." Mikhail said, then shrugged and leaned back, "You deserve the time and space you need to get through a lot of it...space you weren't given before. If I were you, I'd have snapped a long time ago and left."

"I haven't really had the will to live for the last two years. I've just...been." Asahi countered, "I consider it a triumph that I'm still around at all."

"Small victories. We take them where and when we can." The elder pointed out, "...Have you at least regained some interest in what life has to offer? I mean, you did really well with your skating...no one saw you coming. I was reading about stuff this morning at breakfast and the whole skating community is really curious how you'll stack up against the heavy-hitters. They've been looking at all your previous scores compared to this past weekend and-"

"The skating was a distraction." The younger figure interrupted, "It got me away from the house. It got me thinking about something other than the accident. Now that I..." He drew in a shaky breath, "Now that I don't have to worry about everything...all I have left are the thoughts I've been putting away all this time. I can't...even begin to describe how hard it is to keep it together..."

"...Ah...the ‘crippling loneliness’ you mentioned in the spring before."

He nodded sadly, "Even though I'm surrounded by people here...none of them are the same as having Riku with me."

"I understand..." Mikhail explained, his voice quieter than before, "I told you about how I felt about my twin when she died. I've been trying to fulfill her last wishes ever since, for better or worse. I like to think that my efforts are at least a part of why Viktor and Yuri are visiting the old bear out in Russia right now. I won't be able to settle down completely until Viktor, his father, and I, can sit down and have a pint sometime. As family, not just as people related to each other by forces beyond our control."

"...I...can't do that..."

"I'm not asking you to reconcile with your relatives." Mikhail clarified firmly, "What happened in my family was just a bunch of us bitching at each other over stupid shit, getting mad, and taking it out on one another until we all left. Your relations...they did actual wrong to you. There is nothing on the face of this earth that could ever convince me you should need to forgive them, or even be cordial with them ever again. I know some people think that forgiveness leads to healing, but I'm not one of them...I think you're entitled to your rage and grief."

"I hadn't even thought about the idea of forgiving them, or ever seeing them again. I don't want to..."

"That's good...then I don't have to worry about ever having to try to talk to you down from wanting to go there." Mikhail said, relieved, "What I meant though...is that Riku wanted you to be happy. He did everything he could to get you there. I know it can feel impossible to think about being happy again when you've lost so much, but my hope is that you can make your way to that place again, and find a reason to keep living."

Asahi stayed quiet.

"I'm not going to put you on a schedule though, or check-off milestones on a list of things I expect you to get to." Mikhail added as he pushed off the bed to stand up, "You've got a lot of stuff to
process, and a lot of adjusting to do. It's daunting to deal with the ghosts of our pasts, while at the same time, struggling to make new lives from the ashes of what we left behind. You'll get there though, in time." He stepped forward to pat the skater's shoulder, "But you have allies now, and we'll help you along the way. Don't think about it so much in terms of whether you're liked or not...just ask yourself, does that person have my back or not? The adults here all have your back, I can guarantee you that. Viktor and Yuri do, too, even if you're not exactly friends with them. I mean...damn...they were both ready to kick Plisetsky's ass to the curb, right before they asked me to intervene and help him out, and now they're all on good terms again. Viktor's even going to be his choreographer next season. If you work hard, you'll slowly make your way towards being forgiven for what happened between you and Yuri. It's not impossible...it's just a long and hard road."

He nodded then.

"Stay the course, Asahi. You've only just started on it." Mikhail added as he stepped to the door, "I'll leave you to your music now though. This space is your sanctuary. Fill it with stuff that makes you feel comfortable and safe."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED FIFTY ONE

With the sliding door put to again, Asahi listened to the sound of the Russian's footsteps head down the hall, and disappear down the stairs. The last spoken words echoed in his head, and he looked around the room in silent observation.

...My sanctuary, huh?

There were doors on all but one side, and Asahi looked at those huge windows at the head of 'his' new bed, looking on at the swirling, frozen maelstrom just outside. Even with the pillows and Hana between him and the glass, he could still feel the brisk chill radiating from it. He moved over with the guitar and sat on the edge of the mattress, reaching over one hand to ruffle the dog's ears a little before pushing back to be more in center. It was a bit chillier there, but he didn't mind.

I've been in hotel rooms...though never really on my own.

Eyes went around the room again, glancing briefly at the photo on the bookshelf.

Riku's place was pretty cramped even before I got there...we were practically living on top of each other in that little apartment. This place though...

He looked up at the vaulted ceiling, then down at the bed again, Hana, the guitar, and his own crossed legs...and exhaled a breath.

...I feel like I could get lost in here...it's so big... I've never had this much space to myself before...

The endless Russian sky was alight with auroras, dancing like bright green rivers in the stars. A light breeze rattled through the barren nearby forest, and sent a chill down Yuri's already-cold frame. Even though he and his little family had moved closer to the fire - sitting on a tarp in the space between the snow-chair and the rocky pit - spending so long outdoors had started to take its toll. He turned his head back to look at the man whose front he'd been leaning against, "...Viktor...I think I need to call it a night. I'm gonna catch a chill out here..." He whispered, one hand coming out from the warmth of Jiro's nest to rub on his partner's leg where it came around him.

Viktor looked down from the sky and nodded, "Oh, sure." He glanced aside at the bear, whose eyes were still turned upward, "Papa, a my idem v krovat'." [We're going to bed.] He said louder, and started to disassemble from the husband-and-dog pile he'd been partly pinned under.

Kon looked down then, at least, and watched the pair rise back up to their feet, canines following suit with yawns and stretches. He had nothing in particular to say though.

[We had a really good time today.,] Viktor added, helping his spouse up so the man wouldn't have to let go of the Akita bundle, [Thanks to you, we were able to do some of the things we wanted. It...ah...] He rubbed at the fur on the top of his chapka hat, [...It wasn't much of a surprise anymore since you were there with us, but...I hope you liked it anyway.]

The bear leaned forward and hefted himself up off the snow-chair. Once he was upright, he reached for a shovel set against the side of the house, and started piling chunks of snow onto the fire to put it out for the night, [You put a lot of thought it into what you were going to do.] He said simply,
smothering the flames, [You got that from your mother, too...attention to detail, and all that.]

Viktor wasn't sure what to think of those words, and he smiled nervously, keeping his hands on his husband's coat, [...Thanks...I think?]

[It was good.] Kon corrected simply.

Yuri felt a heavier lean against his back as his partner hugged him, "Spasibo." He heard Viktor say, voice tinged with relief. He glanced to the side and spotted the bear nodding in their direction, but Viktor started nudging him forward to walk, and he lost sight of the man quickly. He saw Viktor wave out the corner of his eye, but turned his sights forward to watch his steps, spotting Makkachin trot by on the way to the R.V.. They made it to the fork in the path before the Russian stepped out from behind him and moved next to him instead, and curled an arm around his back as he walked alongside.

"You want some tea as a nightcap?" Viktor wondered quietly.

"I'm actually not that tired. Just freezing." Yuri huffed, embarrassed, "I don't know how you guys can stand being in the cold so long like this."

The Russian laughed quietly, steams of breath escaping him, "Guess it's just part of how my ancestors adapted to this place. Every generation I've ever heard of has been here, or close to it." He explained, reaching over for the camper door, and pulled it open, gesturing inside with his free hand. Makkachin jumped up first and bolted within, "My family's skin pigmentation is even paler than yours...so we've been further north than any of you have, and for much longer. Winter in Hasetsu has been a quaint thing compared to some of the winters I've been through here in Russia."

"Yeah, I remember asking how much worse it would get last year." Yuri agreed, moving up onto the first raised step to get into the warm space. He hesitated to finish going inside though as he realized Viktor hadn't immediately followed, and looked back to see the man looking back up the hill, "What's wrong?" He wondered, sticking his head back outside to look. He spotted Kon still on the hill, right where he'd been when they stepped off initially, partly obscured by the smoke-swirl of the extinguished fire. The bear spotted him in turn though, and lowered his face before turning to head into the house. Yuri blinked in confusion, "...Did he just...nod at us?"

"Kinda looks like he did, didn't it?" Viktor agreed, turn turned and took a step up, nudging the younger man further in, "Let's get you warmed up."

Makkachin waited eagerly by the cabinet where he could smell the kibble bag, and wagged his tail in expectation. Jiro found himself plopped on the floor next to the poodle soon after, and whined as any puppy would to be evicted from his warm spot. Food was dispensed rather quickly though, and all was forgiven.

Viktor peeled out of his outer-wear while Yuri set the food and water bowls down, then moved over to start unwrapping his partner. Once enough had been pulled off and set away, he slid both hands up his husband's sweater, resting them on the man's collar-bones, "Oh, you are cold. Even your shirt is cold."

"I don't think the coat I brought was meant for this weather." Yuri answered, looking up with eyes half-lidded, and set his own hands lightly around the back of his spouse's hips, "At least not for anything longer than an hour or two."

"Then there's only one thing to do." The Russian purred, sneaking in closer.
"Oh? What's that?"

"I'll need to spend an hour or two..." He went on, nosing the younger man's lip, hands sneaking down to the edge of the cool shirt, "...Warming you up." Hands went under quickly, and Yuri shrieked at the feeling of those frozen fingers against his sensitive skin. Viktor just howled with laughter though and grabbed him up as he jumped, pushing through the door to the bathroom, the eyes of confused dogs watching them go. He wasted no time once in there, pulling the door shut with his foot as well as he could before reaching a hand out to grab and secure it. All the while, he attacked those lips with his own, kissing between laughs and nudge further inside, and the removal of clothing.

Sweaters, t-shirts, thermal undershirts...all tossed away, leaving nothing but bare chests and backs. Viktor continued on eagerly, kissing at lips and neck as his hands fumbled blindly at his spouse's belt and jeans fasteners. Yuri couldn't help but feel the contagion of his husband's mirth, and quickly began returning the gestures, weaving his arms through or around the ones already between them to try and undo the Russian's clothes, too. Pants and thermal underwear fell to their ankles fairly soon, and Viktor started moving them both towards the shower, sticking his hand into the stall to find the nozzle blindly. With the water already hot from the heating-holding tank, it was only seconds of sputtering through the pipes before cool water was warm enough to step into, and the duo fussled with their socks before tumbling into the narrow little 'room.'

The shower stall itself was tiny by comparison to the one they had back home, but that just made the fun more unique and interesting. The steaming cascade fell all around them, warming their cold skin and muscle, right down to the bone. Viktor was sure to keep his partner close, arms wrapping around the younger man's lower back as Yuri's went over his shoulders in turn.

Between kisses though, Yuri couldn't help but wonder, "What's...all this...sudden passion about?"

"What?" The Russian mused in answer, "I can't love on you for no reason?"

"You can love on me whenever you want, for no reason at all if need be." Yuri answered, feeling the back of his shoulders press against the wall behind him, and one leg went between his. He gladly accepted another string of kisses, seeing the steam rise around them. He could already feel the tightening of the muscles around his core and between his thighs as his partner's intimate attention roused him, "...I'm just...curious..." He started again, keeping the man close, "You went from perfectly calm to this in two seconds flat."

"We just spent the last hour cuddling in sight of my father and he did nothing against us." Viktor explained, eyes closed as water cascaded over his head, turning his bright silver hair into a darker steely color, "He drove us all the way back to St. Petersburg to keep an eye on us so we could go shopping, and didn't criticize anything about what we did when we made dinner for him. He didn't chastise either of us for bucking any perceived spousal roles...he didn't even make a fuss over seeing your little love bite on my neck. And the biggest thing of all...he didn't shy away or get angry again when the blades came out of the wood stove. I don't know, I just...feel more whole than I did before coming here. It's like wounds are finally starting to close...I won't have to keep them bandaged and bleeding in secret for much longer. I don't have to stress or worry anymore. I can just..." He leaned forward for a longer kiss, and twisted them out from under the shower-head's direct spray, so he could open his eyes and look at the face before him, "...I can just be me again...we can be us again, without all the hurt that's happened. It's finally behind us."

"...It took a really long time...almost an entire year since it started..." Yuri echoed, feeling up the back of the Russian's neck and head, until his fingers slid through water-soaked hair, "I remember like it was yesterday, how you said you wanted to move on from it all, like I could somehow ignore or
forget how you'd come back to me caked in your own blood." He explained softly, rubbing the edge of his thumb over the basely-visible scars around his husband's left eye; scars that - other than a certain grumpy coach - only he knew about, "We can finally go back to that moment, right before the proverbial tea-cup shattered."

"The tea-cup has gathered itself up again, Yuri." Viktor added, smiling in a way he hadn't in ages, "All the broken pieces have maneuvered back into place, restored to how they were before...better than before..."

"Better?"

"Mh." The Russian nodded, nuzzling for a moment before pulling back to reach for a squirt from the shampoo dispenser, and rubbed it between his hands before slathering it into his partner's hair, "This new tea-cup is bigger, stronger, more secure than the last. It isn't as brittle as before; there's nothing left under the surface that can come out and break it."

Yuri tilted slightly and made a face, careful though of the white froth above his eyes, "You almost make it sound like it's an entirely different cup now. Was it replaced?"

Viktor shook his head, "No, it's the same one...it's just joined together with tougher stuff than it had on its own. It sits higher and stands taller because it's not alone anymore."

"...You weren't alone back then either though." Yuri's brow furrowed, but he found himself pulled forward under the water, and fingers wove through his hair until the shampoo was clear.

"Maybe not, but I kept you outside my inner walls all the same. I didn't want you to see my weaknesses and shortcomings." The Russian explained quietly, slicking that raven hair back out of his husband's eyes as the white foam washed away. Cherry-hazel eyes opened up to see him again, and he could see the reflection of a beach in Hasetsu in them, "I didn't want to stop being who I was to you. It was important that I keep being Viktor Nikiforov, not just some sad Russian with a miserable back-story and a vaguely familiar name."

"...I...guess I can understand that."

"There's a saying...'I wish I could be the man my dog thinks I am.' Same is true for you; I never want to stop being the man you admired before. I don't want to disappoint you." Viktor went on, nosing in close again as he felt arms go around, and return with a cold squish to the top of his head. The lather built up quickly, and he kept his lips on his husband's shoulder while hands worked through his hair.

"You've always been exactly the kind of person I thought you were." Yuri reassured, massaging his fingers into his partner's scalp, "Maybe a bit goofier, but you were never less than what I expected."

"So learning about where I really came from didn't make you think less of me?"

"What? No way." He answered quickly, turning them both around in place to stick the taller man's hair under the water, "I think I actually admire you more than before, because I've found out what kind of hardship you overcame. I mean..." He paused in the slide of his hands through his partner's water-soaked hair, and looked on at the slate blue eyes that opened under the cascade. Yuri shook his head and thumbed back over his shoulder, "That guy...he threatened and menaced your whole childhood over skating. He made you put your first real boots into the fire. When destiny came knocking, he knocked you into a shoe-rack with such force that you thought you'd gone blind in one eye. He drove you from home. On top of that..." Yuri reached back for the conditioner, and spread that through his husband's hair as he continued to speak, "He made you feel so insecure about your male-ness that you took advantage of a lady just to prove to yourself that you weren't the super-
gay fiend your father accused you of being - \\

"Says my husband, not my wife."

"Shht." Yuri hushed the man, putting a soap-soaked finger over those lips, much to Viktor's distaste, "And you were wracked with guilt over that encounter, and vowed never to be that way ever again. You stopped letting your father define who you are, and made your own way, choosing for yourself who you want to be, not who Konstantin thought you should be. Even after we met...and you took yet another beating for your choices...you never backed down. You never second-guessed yourself...or me...or my place with you." He said, feeling the hot water wash the conditioner away, leaving silver hair smooth as silk between his fingers, "Through thick and thin, good times and bad, there's no place I'd rather be than here, with you."

Viktor smiled, "You can't see it cuz of the water but I'm crying."

"You're also super aroused, and I can see that."

The Russian laughed and stole a quick kiss, "Can't help it. I'm all excited about how well things are going, and then you make such a grand and eloquent declaration? My love, your way with words is like poetry to me."

"So is yours."

Viktor chortled at that and poked the younger man's chest with one finger, "I'm not half as well spoken as you are."

"Hmmmmm...maybe." Yuri teased, "Remember that time you tried to advertize Yu-Topia before 'Onsen on Ice,' and your Japanese was so stiff and unnatural?"

"I was trying to impress you."

"It sounded like you got those lines off The Google."

"Who says I didn't?" Viktor mused, squishing a blob of conditioner down onto Yuri's head to catch him off guard, and started slathering it around under a feigned protest, "At least you understood me well enough that you could tell me to quit it."

"Meanwhile, I still don't speak a lick of Russian..."

"Mmhhh...low-hanging fruit there, beloved."

"Eh?"

"You may not speak a lick of Russian, but on occasion, you do lick a Russian."

Yuri's face went bright red, "O-Oh."

"It's almost the same thing." Viktor laughed, rinsing the conditioner then, and combed his fingers through raven hair as it washed clean, "Sorry, my mind is going there."

"...I guess if we're sort-of on the topic of sayings we've heard, here's one...'God gave man a penis and a brain, but only enough blood to run one at a time."

The Russian hesitated for a moment, but then cackled again, "That's too true! I guess my sense of humor goes to the gallows when my supply goes south."
"That, or you get super flirty." Yuri answered, stepping closer, until the prod of his husband's aroused flesh needed to be given better direction, and he pressed it flat against his stomach between them. His own growing interest slid between his partner's thighs, "But now I have to pose an important question."

"Oh! Important!" Viktor echoed eagerly, "What is it?"

"Remember that time, at Worlds, when we started making out in the shower, and I accidentally turned the water nozzle all the way over to cold?"

"Sure, it was awful and hilarious all at once. Why?"

"If we don't move to the bedroom, it's likely to get awful and hilariously cold again. Hot water's in finite supply here, and we haven't been shutting it off between rinses."

"Oh, good point." Viktor deadpanned, "We better go then." He added, then reached for the knob behind his spouse's back and cut off the water entirely before it even had a chance to chill the man. The shower door was nudged open, and Viktor fumbled for the towels, grabbing one but dropping the other as he pulled on two at the same time. Shrugging, he delighted in the task of getting to pat his husband dry, then himself quickly, and flopped the whole towel over Yuri's head before abruptly hoisting him up against himself.

Yuri eep'd under the towel and clung tightly, arms and legs wrapping around as the unexpected lift surprised him, and felt the clamber of footsteps taking them both out of the shower room and into the larger bedroom just around the corner. The air outside was cold against his slightly-damp skin, but it was quickly forgotten when he found himself gently dumped onto the bed covers, and that larger, pale body crawled in over top of him.

Viktor suddenly seems to have a spark back that he'd lost... Yuri thought, leaning his head back under the attention moving to his neck, I wonder if he's had a hint of depression following him around since things went bad? In any case, I'm glad he's starting to feel like himself again.

The cold air was quickly forgotten in the midst of kisses, and skin dried off in the blankets, leaving them both warm against each other to continue their romp.
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED FIFTY TWO

An alarm clock beeped at the ungodly hour of 6:30am, rousing the Rozovsky-Okukawa-Plisetsky cadre. Partially, at any rate - the Plisetsky wing refused to acknowledge the call to awaken until it started getting poked with toes and fingers and sleepy taunts. By the time he made it out to the foyer, his crankiness-level was already mid-way up.

*Why the Hell are we being made to get up so fucking early on a weekend anyway? No one said there were any plans...* He snarled in his head, rubbing his eyes as he dragged his feet through the reception area, *If it has anything to do with that guy that took over my old room, I'm gonna-

"Here you go."

Yuri glared up from behind his straw-blonde hair, seeing the blurry visage of a silver-haired man behind what looked like a wooden post of some sort, "...Here you what...?" He questioned skeptically.

"No, you." Mikhail repeated, and nudged the 'post' forward into Yuri's reach, "Before you come get breakfast, you are requested in the parking lot. With this."

"...Hah?" Yuri looked down the length of the wood, and realized there was a big plastic scoop at the end, making the entire unsightly thing a tool, much to his chagrin, "What the Hell is...?"

"It's a snow-shovel. You're gonna be using it." The elder explained, and reached forward to turn the teen on his heels and face him towards the lockers where coats and shoes were stowed, "Dress warm."

Dread realization finally started to dawn in the younger Russian's mind, "You can't be serious. Why?"

"As long as we're staying here - eating their food, and occupying beds - there will be formal assistance given by all peoples of legal age who aren't paying their own way. That means you and your big sister."

"Then I'll pay my own way. I'm not shoveling anything." Yuri protested, trying to push the shovel back.

"That's not how it works."

"I have my own money. I'll pay for my stay here like anyone else."

"Being part of a family means you don't just get to pay your way out of helping around the house or doing chores."

"You can't tell me how and when I can spend my own money."

"I'm asking you to do chores." Mikhail crossed his arms, but extended one hand forward to nudge the wooden grip back the way it came, "Why are you so resistant to all this?" He looked down at the blonde's continued indignant glare, and changed his own to one slightly more serious, "I'm not asking you for much. I'm treating you like any of my other kids; Viktoria is also working with the Katsukis, and Nikki will have her own chores once we get the new house. I can't make her do
anything here because she's still too young to work in a business. Didn't Yakov or Lilia make you do chores when you all lived together?"

Yurio grumbled a little, and sullenly started moving forward to get his things.

Mikhail managed a wry smirk, "That's what I figured. No freeloading, even for professionals."

"What about the other guy?" The Russian Punk wondered stiffly, putting the shovel against a locker stack as he found his boots, "You're going to make him work, too, right?"

"Asahi is not my kid or dependent. I can't make him do anything."

"But you're his sponsor."

"Do your other sponsors make you do chores?" Mikhail shrugged and moved towards the doors, setting a hand on it in readiness to slide the panel across, "The relationship I have with Asahi Saito is a professional one. He isn't beholden to me in any way. What he does with his time is for him to decide, not me."

"You just spent a ton of money on clothing and phones and shit!"

"Would you quit comparing yourself to him through me?" The elder huffed, "It's not a competition. It's also none of your business. As far as your concerned, my dealings with Asahi are as irrelevant to you as my work back in Canada."

"Your work back in Canada isn't standing all around me."

Mikhail tapped the wooden doorframe with a finger for a moment, looking down at the teen with his brows raised. As Yurio finally finished getting his winter-wear on, and shuffled closer with a cranky look on his face, Mikhail lowered his hand to block the way.

"If you want me to shovel the snow, you have to let me outside." Yurio said quietly, though clearly bristling on the edge of rage.

"You came a long way since I took you on last March." The elder Russian said quietly, not quite looking at the grumpy tiger next to him, "You had a setback in Detroit because of a misunderstanding with Viktor. You're having another setback now because of this misplaced jealousy you have for a guy who has nothing to do with you. Leave it alone, Yuri. You don't need to be getting yourself into trouble right now." He said with finality, and pushed the door over. Cold plunged in like a wave, and Mikhail lifted his arm up, returning it to where it had been folded across his chest earlier. Outside, the snow from overnight had piled up to nearly a foot deep, and Mikhail pointed to the area just in front of the door, and moved it up towards the old-style Japanese arch at the exit, "Hiroko asked that a path be cleared from the door to the gate first, then the rest of the parking lot. Be careful not to damage the cars that were parked overnight as you clear around them. And try to keep in mind...the other Yuri did this kind of thing for free, too...to help out his family."

Yurio grit his teeth and stepped out into the early morning snowy landscape, and growled quietly at the work he was now tasked with.

"The quicker you finish, the quicker you can come back inside and eat. This will be your job every morning that there's snow. When I have the house, you'll do the same there."

The Tiger had no response to that, and simply plodded forward into the snow. He waited for Mikhail to close the door again before he turned around and glared; he didn't dare speak a word of complaint aloud.
When Mikhail heard the sound of the shovel scraping across the front steps, he moved off to go towards the common room, satisfied that his message had been heard. He spotted a particular shadow coming up the narrow hall beside said common room though, and paused his advance to look back, seeing Asahi there, eyes on his phone, one hand moving earbuds up to the sides of his head, and a white dog at his heels, "Heading out already?"

Asahi blinked and looked up, pulling back one bud that he'd just placed, "Sorry?"

"I didn't think you'd be up so early. We were going to leave you to sleep in. It's been a long week for you." Mikhail reiterated.

"Oh..." The younger man lowered his eyes again, looking at the phone like before, and moved his thumb away from where he'd intended to hit Play on his music, "I sleep with one eye open and wake up for whispers. I heard the Katsukis...so did Hana." He reached a hand down to ruffle the pup's ears, "She started pawing at the door, so that settled things."

Mikhail waited a moment, but pulled one hand up to rub his chin, "...I see. Well, have a good run then. I'll ask the kitchen to have breakfast for you in an hour."

Asahi's eyes moved with the Russian as Mikhail moved off, following past the edge of the wall. He blinked and looked down to Hana again, That was weird, right? She tilted her head at him and gave a whined exhale, Yeah...that was weird. He huffed a confused breath and started moving forward again though, and before long, he stepped outside.

Hana jumped off and landed in one of the first snow-piles she found, splattering the stack like a puff of smoke, and sent white everywhere. She shook off and looked aside where she could sense a certain snow-shoveler sneering at her dubiously, but then trotted off towards the gate as though nothing was wrong.

Asahi just walked on casually, ignoring the Russian Punk entirely despite the daggers being glared at him, "Ikimashou." He said simply, speaking only to the dog, and in a language he knew the teen didn't understand, I wish I could understand why that guy is so angry all the time, he thought. He jogged under the arch and headed left again like the previous morning, feeling the throb in the palms of his bandaged hands for a moment, and quickly vanished from sight.

Yurio just stared at the archway and gripped the shovel-handle harder...before chucking it several feet away into a section he hadn't cleared yet, "This is stupid!" He said angrily to himself, and fumed even more once he realized he'd have to dig through the snow to get it back.

Within, Mikhail went into the common room to find the rest of the crew already settled in for the morning. It was about 7:30 by then, and the kitchen was starting to come alive. Both girls were practically asleep where they sat; Minako was slumped over as well, but...not for the same reasons. Mikhail stepped over and crouched down behind his lady love, rubbing his hands up and down her back, "You okay?"

"I hate everything." She grumbled in answer, "Why are all of us awake? The morning is evil. I want to die."

"Moral support for the kids who have to work." He answered simply, "But you can go back to bed if you want."

"I feel like I'll spew if I move."

"Minako-senpai...?" Hiroko's voice chimed, coming close with a tray of breakfast drinks. She
crouched down at the empty end of the table and sorted them out, "Are you feeling sick again?"

The ballerina groaned pitifully.

"Don't worry. I have just the thing."

"Hiroko~" Mikhail interjected, catching the short woman's attention, though he stayed where he was behind his fiancé, "Could I ask you a favor?"

"Sure. What is it?"

A short while later, with a bowl of fresh cut winter strawberries set before the nauseated Minako, Hiroko followed Mikhail to the third floor with Toshiya dragged along. The three of them stood outside the old banquet hall, and the Russian flicked a finger against the wood frame of the door, "Would it be possible to put a lock on this door?"

"A lock?" The two Katsukis echoed, "Why? What for?"

"For Asahi's peace of mind." He answered, putting his hands on his hips as he nudged his head towards the room, "This is the first place he's had in a long time where he actually had some semblance of privacy. At his family's house in Imari, they took the door off its hinges. It was removed as far back as him getting into Junior High. I feel like he'd be able to relax a little bit if he felt that he and his things were secure."

"But we wouldn't-"

Mikhail waved his hands in front of himself defensively, "No no no no! It's not that anyone thinks you'd do anything! I know for sure that you're trustworthy!" He explained in a panic, stopping the wave but still holding his hands up, though he gestured at the door with them, "It's just...he's super high strung. Everything's changed for him in a really short period of time, and that's after all the other stuff that's happened to him over his short life. The lock is basically just a night-light; something temporary to make him feel more comfortable while he gets used to his new surroundings. Also to keep Yurio out."

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The two Katsukis looked at one another, and seemed to come to a sort of cerebral agreement, "That's no problem." Toshiya answered, "I'll see if I have any spare door handles with locks in the equipment room. I'm sure there's something we can use."

The Russian held his hands up and put his palms together, "Thanks a ton. It'll mean a lot to him." He brought his clasped hands closer to himself, and used one finger to nudge the sliding door aside just enough to look within, "Now that I think of it though...putting a lock on the door is just one step. No doubt, Asahi's seen the remnants of Yurio's old room...would it be okay if I took the stuff he had out of the closet?"

"Sure. You can put it into the room you guys are using now if you want." Hiroko answered, "Or we
"Nooooo I don't think that's a good idea," Mikhail said nervously, "Yurio's got a wild hair up his backside about Asahi. The less proximity they share, the better...so I'll keep Yurio with me. Asahi needs the space." He finished, pushing the door all the way open to step within and go to the closet. The two Katsukis followed after him, and the Russian opened the door on the right wall, "It's hard to imagine Yurio actually stayed in this place like he did. I figured he'd be too proud to sleep in someone else's closet."

"It was Vik-chan's closet though." Hiroko teased and smiled, "There was some element of prestige associated with it back then."

"There isn't now?"

"Well..." The matron's smile got a little nervous, "It's not Vik-chan's room anymore. That's really just the closet to an unused banquet hall now...er...well, was. It's Asahi's now."

Mikhail shook his head, and stepped within the small space, reaching down to gather up the folded mattress, "He still feels he has some claim of ownership over this space, as though Asahi is taking it by force and kicking him out, even though it's us that's making these changes."

"Even though Viktor is gone?" Toshiya wondered, stepping forward to take hold of the folded bundle so Mikhail could go back for another batch of items, "This place was set up like a living-room that happened to have a bed in it before, so it wasn't strange to just wander through, but I'm not so sure that's true anymore." He looked around the space, but his eyes settled on the little Buddhist shrine with the framed photo, "...This is much more personal. The most personal thing Viktor ever had in here was a framed photo of himself."

Hiroko's face flushed and she put her hands on her cheeks, "I always thought that was really weird. Who keeps framed pictures of themselves around? It wasn't even a family photo with him in it, it was just him."

"What kind of picture was it?" Mikhail wondered, returning with a stack of bed-linens and a pillow.

"Uhm...one of him skating, I think."

"Oh. That's easy." The Russian shrugged, "When Viktor lived here before, it was after the world lost its mind about him deciding to basically quit skating out of nowhere to be a coach instead. The photo wasn't so much about him as it was a commemoration of his passion, the thing he loved but had lost." He used the ball of his heel to nudge the closet door closed, and started heading for the hallway again, "Yuri told me about how he struggled to find his own motivation back then, before Viktor came. Viktor hadn't planned on retiring at the time either, but he was looking for reasons to keep going, too; he still loved the sport but it had lost its luster, if that makes sense. He was so much better than everyone else that it wasn't fun anymore. When Viktor turned up here to be Yuri's coach, they ended up being each other's motivation. I'm sure Viktor would've - or maybe he has by now - switched out the photo of himself for one of Yuri instead."

"You sure do know a lot about Viktor, even though you were gone for all of that." Toshiya said suddenly; not meanly or out of spite, but just as a matter of cause, "We still struggle to keep up with Yuri sometimes, and he lives here. Well, not here, but in town."

Mikhail stopped at the end of the hall, slowly turned to look over a shoulder, and just...nodded and shrugged at the same time, "After I saw Viktor at the funeral last year, I spent a lot of time digging into his history...to figure out every bit of information I could about him from all the years I'd been
away. The most telling thing I ran into was his Instagram page...and all the associated pages that were run by his fans." He turned to look forward again, staring at the linens in his arms, "The thing that really got me wondering about his motivations...was the look on his face in photos at the end of Sochi. That soulless, joyless smile he put on while holding up yet-another Gold medal. He had achieved everything he could've ever have dreamed of...but something was still missing. I realized that, in all my research, I never ran into anything that said Viktor was involved with anyone...so it was easy to figure out why he was able to just drop competition to be a coach instead. The puzzle was figuring out why he came to coach Yuri specifically, when there was nothing to suggest they even knew each other before that...but then I heard the story of the Sochi Banquet, and everything made sense. Yuri shot Cupid's arrow straight through Viktor's heart...but was so drunk at the time that he forgot all about it. So...Viktor, being the competitive charmer that he is, sought out to attain his greatest desire yet; the love of Yuri Katsuki...and then hold onto it."

"You got all that from Instagram?" Toshiya asked with a nervous smile.

"Only the stuff from the most recent years." Mikhail answered, starting to walk again, carefully going around the edge of the stairwell, "Digging into the past was a bit harder. I found a really really old LiveJournal of his; he'd probably die if he knew I'd seen it. Then he had a MySpace account...then FaceBook, then he finally settled onto Instagram. I really thought I knew him because of everything I'd read from him directly. I was...ah...a little bit wrong."

"Oh?" Hiroko chirped, following the duo down the stairs.

"The person that Viktor puts online is his public self; happy, confident, knows what he wants, has lots of friends. His real self is much different; unsure, indecisive, but worst of all...horribly lonely. I kinda blamed myself for a lot of that, because I...left him behind to save myself. I didn't want to be selfish like that again. So...that's why I wanted to know everything I could about Viktor; because I'd been away so long. I didn't want him to think I was just showing up again after all these years, acting like some long-lost relative who only wants to attach themselves to him parasitically, to leech off his fame and popularity for my own sake. My goals were the complete opposite. I wanted him to know that I cared enough to find out what he'd been up to, and then provide things for him, never asking anything in return...except maybe his forgiveness for being gone all that time. It's hard to find things that a guy like Viktor wants though, y'know? The stuff he wants isn't something you can buy, no matter how rich you are. He needed his L-words, and he found those without me. But...I still wanted to be of use to him somehow...to try and make up for all the time we'd lost. I wanted to be there for him, in a way I hadn't been because I left him." Mikhail said, stopping at the bottom of the steps for a moment. He sighed and shook his head, "I don't know if I'll ever be the kind of person I want to be for him. I'm used to things working out the way I want...but all the people who count on me right now are minors, so it has to work out. Viktor's too old for me to Lord over though...he has agency, and can refuse me. He's got his whole life figured out, and he has everything he needs and wants without me. All the stuff I've done to try and get close to him again...I just feel like it's been a lot of 'getting close' to the people he knows, but not to Viktor himself."

"Try not to beat yourself up over it." Hiroko suggested, squeezing by her husband to get to the front of the line, and squeezed by Mikhail in turn, "One thing Toshiya and I learned, as our kids went from being teenagers who needed us, to being adults who wanted to be on their own...is that if you give them space, and support them when they fall...it's enough for them. Trying to get too close just makes them feel smothered, and they push back against it."

"...So I've been smothering Viktor." The elder Russian realized.

"Maybe a little bit...but you mean well. I'm sure he knows that." Hiroko explained, giving the man's arm a gentle pat as she went by, "Be the guy that answers the call, not the one that sits around
looking for a problem to solve."

"It's like how you've helped this Asahi kid." Toshiya added, "You're going above and beyond to help him out of a terrible situation...but now that he's safe, you're doing what you can to give him room, so he can figure things out in his own way and time."

"I think you've learned from the mistakes you made with Viktor." Hiroko added, "And that makes you better-able to be there for Viktor, without smothering him."

"...And yet, he's gone all the way back to Russia to be with a father who hates, disowned, and beat him." Mikhail sighed again, "I'm not even really sure why he's doing it. He doesn't owe that man anything, and yet...for a minute, when I found out they were going, I actually wondered if this was a punishment for what I'd done. As though Viktor would rather spend time with that guy than with me."

"I doubt that's the reason." The Katsuki matriarch pointed out, adjusting the folds on the front of her henna-pink coat, "You said that his mother hoped the bunch of you would one-day reconcile, right?"

"Yeah..."

"Maybe this is just his way of trying to do that."

"Maybe..." He nodded sullenly, "...But I always thought that would be something the three of us did together. I never believed in a million years that Viktor would be willing to go out there on his own."

"He has Yuri with him." Toshiya said, trying to nudge the group forward through the narrow hall, "And he had you the last time he went, right?"

"Yeah..."

"So maybe you'll be part of the next one." Toshiya shrugged, "This time, he's there to work on just his relationship with his father, not the whole group of you. You'll have your time later."

"...I guess so."

"In any case...let's get this stuff to your room so I can go looking for that door-lock...before Asahi gets back. That way you have something nice to surprise him with when he returns."
Running indoors at the Ice Castle's gym was much more comfortable than running in the cold outdoors, but it made stepping back outside to return to Yu-Topia a bit more of a shock. After running to the Ice Castle, running in the Ice Castle, and running back from the Ice Castle...it was like he'd gone on three distinct jogs in one morning. He had given himself plenty of time to clean up before the one-hour breakfast call; the parking lot and front courtyard area were nearly cleared of snow by then, but he still got a dirty look from the Russian Punk when he went through. Ignoring it, he went inside with his dog, and wiped her paws down before sending her through to the common-room.

The Rozovskys plus one were still in there, having finished their own morning routine, and Hana happily trotted in to seek attention from those she hadn't seen yet that morning. Of course, the arrival of the pup heralded the arrival of her human, and eyes went up to the doorway as Asahi caught up and stood within it. He bowed his head to the group as he spotted hands coming up to wave, "Ohayo." (Good morning.) He said politely. He heard the usual polite responses, but was surprised to find the pair of adults whisper something between themselves before they pushed up to stand, and looked straight at him.

"We have something for you."

That earned the pair a few confused blinks, but Asahi could feel a sense of quiet excitement coming off of them, and he moved out of the way to let them pass. He looked back over towards his dog, but Hana was happily panting where she'd settled down between the two teens, and wagged a finger at her as he turned to follow the pair around the corner. It didn't take long for him to realize where they were going.

"...What did you get...?" He asked warily, "What's left after everything you already got for me...?"

Mikhail turned his head as they ascended, "Nothing that money can buy. I think you may appreciate this more than anything else you've gotten so far."

"Should I be worried?"

"Why would you be worried?" He laughed, turning onto the second floor landing to head around for the next set of stairs, "Has anything bad happened yet?"

"No, but-" Asahi started, only to catch himself and go quiet again. He shook his head, "Sorry."

"Sorry, why?" The Russian echoed as they arrived on the third floor, "If you're waiting for the other shoe to drop, you'll be waiting a long time."

"I don't mean to be so suspicious..." The skater sighed, brow furrowed behind his bangs, "It must seem very rude of me."

"If it were anyone other than you, maybe, but you have good reasons and I understand it...so, nah."

As they finally made it to the last door on the left, Asahi could feel the nerves in his gut rousing. The two older figures stopped right outside of it and turned to face him, and he turned his eyes between the sliding panel and the duo, "...Are...we supposed to go in...?"
Minako shook her head, and gestured to the closed door, "This is your space now, officially." She started, "I'm sure you've noticed the small bedroom set-up in the closet though."

Asahi nodded, "Whose was it?"

"Plisetsky's." Mikhail answered, "Way back when Viktor still lived here; Yurio had nowhere else he was willing to stay, so they stuck him into the closet here as an alternative. He thought he was too good to stay with the peasants on the first floor."

"...I...see."

"At any rate..." The Russian gestured his thumb at the door, "We went in while you were on your run to move all that stuff out, so now that closet is all yours, too, and hopefully Plisetsky will stop giving you smarmy looks over his belief that the space is still somehow his. We also did this..." He went on, reaching into a pant pocket to withdraw a set of keys, and offered them forward.

Asahi went pale, "...You bought me a damn car!?

"What." Mikhail deadpanned him, looking at the keys, then back at the man, "No. The keys are for the door." He explained quickly, stepping back a little to put a finger on the new locking mechanism, "This room is - at least for the time being - kind of your apartment now...it's got a deadbolt on the inside for you to turn when you're in there, and you can lock it with this key when you go out." He offered the pair of nickel cuts forward again, "Keep one on you, and put the other somewhere safe."

"I don't...understand. Is there a concern about someone stealing things...?" Asahi asked skeptically, accepting the keys but not closing his fingers over them.

"Not in the slightest." The Russian answered, "It's about giving you something you've been denied for a really long time; a sense of security and privacy, something even Yuri was aware of despite how little you ever told him about yourself. There are some other things we want to talk to you about once you've gotten cleaned up and come downstairs again to eat something, but that's all official business, and it can wait."

"...Official...business?"

"The skating stuff."

"Oh."

Minako set her hand on the younger man's shoulder as she and her partner started moving off again, "No student of mine is competing at the international level wearing recycled Halloween costumes."

Asahi's face went white hearing those words, and he stood there - paralyzed - as footsteps vanished behind him. Once he was sure they were both out of sight, he looked back over his shoulder in the direction they'd been, then down to the keys in his palm, and finally to the closed door. Thinking nothing of it, he reached to pull the door open, only to find it locked.

...They were really serious...

Keys went in, and the door unlocked, giving Asahi access to his room. He stepped inside, turned, and set the deadbolt before backing up from the sliding panel. For a moment, he just stared ahead, but the longer he went on that way, the more hyper-aware he became of the keys in his hand; his fist tightened around them, and he lowered his face, eyes clenched shut.

...I can't...believe I feel like this.
He stepped forward towards the door and tugged on it; he knew it was locked, but there was something about it that still didn't seem real. The door wouldn't budge though, and it clicked its resistance against the dead-bolt. He only let it go again once he was satisfied that it really wouldn't open, and backed up a step or two. He lifted his hand to look at the keys in his grip.

...I...I hate that this is so important to me... It should never have needed to be like this. All those years...that they robbed me of a tiny little piece of my own space, all because they were so damn worried I'd sneak a boy home with me...

He growled and grit his teeth, but then backed up to sit on the end of the bed.

They had the audacity to ask why they should spend money on a dorm when I was skating for Juniors, even though the rink was within biking distance of the house... If I hadn't ended up being reasonably good, there's no way they ever would've let me go to Tokyo... I'm sure they were speculating about what I did there the whole time I was gone; that's why they insisted on paying for everything instead of letting me get sponsors, right? That's why they controlled every little thing I did...and it's why my father told me never to tell anyone about whose apartment he had to help move me out of...

Asahi reached up with the key-holding hand and rubbed his nose on his wrist, and turned towards the little shrine at the edge of the room by the now-empty closet. He bowed his head towards the framed photo.

I have so much work to do before I'm satisfied that I've made it up to you... The secrets I kept from you, the secrets I kept about you...about us...

He sighed and shook his head, and turned away to go to the closet on the opposite side of the room, rummaging around for a fresh change of clothes.

But...I've already suffered the worst possible scenario since my family found out we'd been together. I've pushed through, and made it to the other side, getting ready to live on my own without the worry of my parents trying to stick their fingers into things. I just can't seem to get motivated to move beyond this point that I'm at right now...

He hesitated, hands on a t-shirt, spotting the droplets that fell from his eyes where they hit the fabric, making little dark spots where it made the material wet.

...It was supposed to be with you... I'm...scared to be on my own...

By the time he'd made it through the shower and back down to the common-room, Viktoria had left to join the Katsukis and their other staff. Nikki had spread out all her school things and was organizing, labeling, and decorating them meticulously. Yurio had finally returned from the cold outdoors and was shoveling food into his mouth, but paused - rice grains spackled on his face - as he spotted the damp figure come in. The pause in shoveling caught Mikhail's attention from where he'd been reading on his tablet, and Minako looked up from the assorted fashion catalogues stacked nearby.

"Everything good?" The elder Russian wondered, "You took a bit longer coming down than I expected."

Asahi moved to sit at the small table, taking his place at the narrow end opposite Yurio, and bowed his head, "Sorry."
"It's no worries."

The skater barely had a moment to look up again before he felt the cold wet snoot of his dog; she'd wiggled over towards him under the table, and set her head on his knees. He reached under to squish her cheeks a little bit before realizing what sort of catalogues Minako had on the table in front of herself, "...Those...are figure skating costume catalogues...?"

"Mh." She nodded and turned around the one she was looking at, and spoke in their shared language, [These are old magazines that Yuri used to look through when trying to find his own outfits. Some of them are pretty old, but they're good for getting an idea of what's out there, or for finding a tailor if you want something more customized.] She flicked a fingernail against a few yellow tabs she'd attached to previous pages, [I thought some of these pages had stuff that was close to your FS outfit.]

[...I'm...kind of partial to the design I put together.] He said sullenly.

[I know you are.] Minako answered, and reached one hand forward to pat the younger man's where he'd set it onto the paper, [But you're going into the big leagues now. As your coach, temporary as it may be, I have to insist on professional conduct and presentation. Your conduct is perfect, but the rest needs some work.]

"Mhh..."

Minako raised her hand and used a finger to move a few strands of black hair from the skater's eyes, [It's not a judgment on you, Asahi. You were left without access to the proper resources and had to make do with what you could. Japan will want you to go to the Games with the best equipment available...and one of your sponsors is going to foot the bill for that. All you will need to focus on is skating your best.]

[One of my sponsors?] He echoed, looking towards the confused Russian, [You mean he is going to pour thousands more into me.]

[Consider your success at the next three events to be your way of returning on his investment. He's not looking to skim cash off the top of your winnings...he just wants to see you skate your best, and enjoy it.] She explained, and leaned back a little, [It's not going to be easy though. You're on the same level as a lot of the skaters who are looking to de-throne Viktor and Yuri, but not all of you can stand on the podium. Something to keep in mind; everyone but Chris Giacometti scored over 300 at the Final, and he still scored a bit higher than you did at Nationals. I've looked back on your record and you've never scored over 300 at all before. Until this season, your scores were about as good as Yuri's were before Viktor became his coach; 70s to 80s in the Short, 150s to 170s in the Free. I honestly don't know what happened while you were on hiatus, but I'm hoping Nationals wasn't a fluke. You'll have to be even better than that if you want to hope for the podium at any of the next three competitions.]

Asahi swallowed a lump in his throat; Viktoria came around his side with the anticipated breakfast tray, and he swiped the ceramic mug of green tea right off of it to spare himself from having to think of a reply right away.

[Are there any areas of your skating that you know you're weak in?] Minako asked pointedly, [Stuff we need to focus on for sure?]

He nodded reluctantly, but spoke into his tea-mug, [...I can only do 3 quads. I've never been able to land a Flip or Loop.]
[Those are worth more points than the Toe or Salchow.]

[...Yes. I spent a lot of my time working on the Lutz, because it's worth the most, if we don't ever mention the quad Axel.] He explained, [The quad Lutz + triple Toe is my signature move. It wears me out though, so I can't do as many jumps in the FP as the rules allow.]

[So we need to work on the Flip, the Loop, and building your endurance so you can add that last jump element. How many quads did you do in your FP? I forget.]

[Three.]

[We'll need you to raise that to four, and bring it in line with Yuri and Viktor's program difficulty.]

[...It's going to be a lot of work. Many long days on the ice...and off.]

[You up for it?] Minako asked, hopeful.

Asahi took another sip, [...I have to be. If not for you two, then for Senpai and Riku, too...and all the fans who've been so generous.]
The morning seemed brighter, even with the R.V.'s window covers all drawn and closed. The blankets felt warmer, the pillows softer, and the breathing rhythm of a certain Russian seemed calmer; less like he'd just finished crying sometime earlier. Yuri couldn't help but just watch the man while he slept, content to see him peaceful for the moment.

_I wonder if he dreamed overnight? Other than his dream on the plane ride over here...he really hasn't had anything but...black and nightmares since last year. Maybe his mind has finally settled down enough that-

He reached his hand forward and gently brushed a few strands of hair from the man's face, only to find a brown poodle-snoot rise up from behind the Russian's head to snuffle and lick his fingers. Yuri made a face and _boop_ d Makkachin's nose to satisfy the pup's curiosity, and the cold, wet, black nubbin went back down and out of sight. Jiro was sleeping soundly on a pillow behind his head, snuggled up into a little Akita-ball with one paw pressed to the back of one shoulder. He smiled and turned his attention back to his sleeping partner. For a moment, he held still where he was, hand resting on the Russian's pale chest, but he slowly started moving it up again. He traced the line of one muscle from its base to just under one ear, and cupped his palm over his husband's cheek, thumb gently stroking at the crest of one eye.

_Viktor…_

The Russian seemed to hear his name, even if it was only thought of, and roused slightly, turning onto his side before half-opening his eyes, _"Oh...hey."

"_Hey._" Yuri whispered back, leaning forward to offer his good-morning kiss, _"How'd you sleep? Better?"

"_Mhm._" Viktor hummed, _"I even got to see our wedding. The way you described it… It's going to be beautiful._"

"_Everything I've imagined has basically just been about the reception though….what about the actual ceremony?_"

"_I saw that, too._" Viktor answered. He yawned against the back of his wrist and twisted onto his back again, looking up at the ceiling, _"All of our family and friends, former coaches...everyone who's touched our lives._"

"_And your father…?_"

"_Oh...he was there, too… He…"_ The Russian's words trailed a little, but only because he looked down to where Yuri had rolled partly on top of him, resting his chin on his chest, _"He walked me down the aisle...and actually gave me away to you._"

"_Yeah…that's some dream..."_ Yuri mused, tilting his head a little to press his cheek flat to that pale skin, and listened to each breath that followed, _"Maybe someday...but… Probably not in time for that..."

"_Maybe..."_
“So if you saw him walking you down the aisle...how’d the rest of it go?” Yuri wondered then, and turned his face down to place a light kiss on that same skin, "Were you in a wedding dress?” He laughed.

Viktor chortled, "No," He shook his head and raised his left hand to pet at his partner's hair, "I had a suit, kind of like the one I wore to the Nationals Banquet. Inverted colors from the usual...silver-white for the main part, black trim and lining."

"And I'm the one in all-black then?" Yuri asked, speaking more normally now that they were better awake than before; he pressed down another light kiss, slightly aside the first one.

"Mh." The Russian hummed, "Like the western version of the Japanese wedding party."

"There's symbolism in the white and black in Japan." Yuri explained, tracing the tip of his nose across the contour of his husband's chest, "The wife comes into things wearing white so she can be dyed in the colors of her husband's house."

"Mhm?"

"And yet I'm the one who took your colors...or, well...your family name, anyway."

"So?"

"Shouldn't I be the one wearing white?"

Viktor shrugged and closed his eyes, simply savoring every light touch as it moved slowly across his frame, "In my dream, we were both brought to the altar at the same time with one of our parents, so the color scheme was less about who was playing the wife or husband role than it was about preferences." He explained, idly stroking one finger around the younger man's ear to hook back some of those longer strands, "And because of your gorgeous black hair, and my lighter silver, I suppose I see out suits matching those color palettes."

"Mh..."

"But maybe there's also a part of me that still sees you as the head of this household, so I'm more than happy to be dyed in your colors rather than have you dyed in mine."

Yuri pressed upward onto his elbows and looked at the Russian squarely, "Going back to that alpha and beta thing from the Final, huh?"

"I've found myself a bit more relaxed since that realization...so, yeah. I suppose."

"Hm… For some reason, I thought that mindset would be temporary." Yuri shrugged and lowered down again to return to his kisses, "But if you're happier that way..."

"You're not?" The Russian looked down, chin nearly pressed to his neck, "Does it bother you?"

The younger man swayed his head lightly from side to side, "I guess I've gotten used to it. But...in a way, it's also like splitting up the chores in our lives. You're the King of the Ice Castle...and I'm the King of Our Castle."

Viktor huffed a laugh at that, and leaned up to kiss his spouse's forehead before lying back again, "That's a quaint way of putting it."

"It's true though." Yuri pointed out, scoothing a bit further up his spouse's chest, and lowered down
to kiss the man's chin, "No one will ever be able to steal that crown from you."

"Except you."

"Oohhhhh no. No no, no." He insisted, lifting up again to waggle a finger at the man, "You're the indisputable ruler of that kingdom. Even if I can skate competitively longer than you, I could never take your place. And I wouldn't want it that way anyway. I'm your student...I can carry on your legacy because you're coaching me, but I'll never be you."

"Jeeze, I'm not retired yet."

Yuri fake-shoved the man, "That's not even what I meant!"

Viktor just laughed and rolled them over, causing Jiro to tumble out of the little nest he'd made on his pillow. Surprised, the pup whimpered and wiggled, trying to get right-side-up again, paws flailing in the air until they landed squarely on Viktor's face. The Russian's cheek squished up against his eye, and he glowered past it, but then just shook his head to dislodge the puppy-nubbins and let them fall to Yuri's face instead, which he thought funny. Jiro scrambled over the man and rolled off to find Makkachin instead, and Yuri just deadpanned upward.

"Puppies." The Russian teased, "Makkachin was like that too when he was small. So was Kubochin."

"It's funny when Jiro puts his paws right on your face." Yuri commented, rubbing the spots where those little nails had poked him, "But you never liked getting dirt on yourself...so I can only wonder what goes through your head when it happens. Remember the time you jumped out of the way because I had a bloody nose?"

Viktor huffed, "Blood is hard to get out of fabric."

"You really had me going that you were gonna catch me." Yuri retorted, poking a finger up at the man's chest from under him.

"There's some kinds of stuff I don't mind getting on me." The Russian deflected, leaning onto his support-arm a little more as the other slid a hand down his husband's bare side, "Clean puppy paws..."

"I do carry him a lot..."

"Poodle hair...other stuff that comes out of you..."

Yuri's brow rose, "Mhm? And why's that?"

Viktor nuzzled in close to his partner's neck, hair tickling the man's skin, "Because I'm the one who makes it come out of you." He laughed.

"Wow, it's...smaller than the photos made it look like..." Yuri commented with a nervous smile, looking out at the nigh-ancient outdoor skating rink. It was still as miserably cold during the day as it was during the night; the sun's presence did little more than act as a teasing mockery of warmer days. Yuri stayed well-bundled, scarf and beanie in place amidst a heavy jacket, and he held his skates by their blades in one hand. He looked first to Makkachin standing next to him, then glanced back over his shoulder to where Viktor was holding Jiro, Konstantin just beside him. Eyes went back to the younger of the two though, "So this is where Yakov found you, huh?"
"Yup."

Yuri turned back to the rink, and looked at the empty space around it, "Looks abandoned. Do they even manage the ice here...?"

"If by 'manage' you mean 'there is ice,' then sure."

That just made him grimace, and he started to step off towards a nearby bench, "Alright...Alright..."

Viktor smirked behind his scarf and started to follow after, looking back briefly at the bear next to him as they all started moving. The nearest rink-side bench was only 20 or so paces away from the derelict entrance gate, and they watched as Yuri brushed some of the snow off with a gloved hand, then sit down to start removing his boots. Viktor looked around again though as they paused to wait, [I know it's only been a few weeks since I was here last with Mikhail, but it's...still hard to see the condition this place is in now. When mama and I came here before, it still looked like people cared for it. Chipped paint was redone, the netting on those old hockey goals was new every year...] He nudged his face towards the naked, bent metal on the far side of the rink, stacked up like garbage with a pile of dead leaves, all of it partially frozen to the rink, [Now I think it's just a bunch of punks who come here to wreck things.]

[Mh... Like most everything around this area.] Kon agreed quietly, [It's nothing but fodder for...disrespect and vandalism.] He drew a ragged breath and shook his head as he exhaled, fog billowing forth from him, [Even in the big cities, there's places where it seems like people have just...let it all fall to ruin.]

[All cities can be like that though, papa.] Viktor pointed out, gently pulling Jiro's head to the shoulder of his jacket, and rubbed his fingers against the pup's cheek.

[Maybe I've noticed it more since your Uncle dragged me to Japan.] The bear replied with a shrug, [Everything out there is so...clean and orderly. Coming back here...half the roads don't even have dividing lines painted on them. It's no wonder there are so many accidents. No one knows where the Hell they're supposed to be; what their place is.]

[In their defense, it is winter... You can barely see where the roads are under all the snow, never mind the lines painted under it.]

Yuri finished tying the laces to his second skate, and pulled the lower hem of his pants over them to keep the heat in. He pushed up to stand and dusted the back of his jacket off as he turned around, "Everything good?"

"Mh." Viktor nodded, and gestured over to the already-open rink wall, "After you, my love."

The pair started moving off, but Kon stayed where he was, watching quietly from that vantage. He lowered his eyes to the big brown poodle as the pup waded out onto the rink, pawing at every little ridge in the wind-worn ice. Once more surefooted, Makkachin trotted out more happily and started chasing leaves. Kon watched as the dog scampered and slid his way across the rink, all the way to the other side where the skeletons of the old hockey goal-posts were strewn. He turned his eyes back to the two younger men further down the rink wall, and saw Yuri reach down to pull those two rubber blade-guards off.

[I never want to hear from you again.]}

Kon looked around suddenly, the words echoing in his head like the barks of far-off dogs...barks on the wind that only he'd heard.
[Don't ever find a reason to contact me.]

Slate eyes went back to the two skaters, speaking quiet words between one another that he couldn't hear across the distance. Something about the echoes were merging with the present moment, and every unheard word Viktor spoke before him seemed voiced by the sounds rattling in his head.

[Don't contact Yakov, or even the ISU for that matter. I don't even want to hear about it when you finally die.]

[Just go back to your queer lover, Viktor. You're not welcome here.] Kon heard his own words then, and felt his lips move along with them, as though he was speaking them all over again. Viktor laughed about something right then, just like in the echo, and the bear felt a pain in his chest.

[His name is Yuri Katsuki...and soon, it's going to be Yuri Nikiforov! HOW DO YOU LIKE THAT, HUH?]

[Viktor I swear to God if you don't shut up and get in the car-] Yakov protested.

[He's going to be my husband and we're going to do all kinds of unspeakable things to each other!]

"VITYA!"

"Papa!" The young Russian's voice cut through like a knife.

Konstantin blinked hard a few times and shook his head, seeing his son there looking at him incredulously.

[...You okay?]

[I'm fine.] The bear answered.

[You look a little pale.]

[I am pale. Always pale.] He protested, backing up a step or two from the rink wall, [Just go on and do your thing. I'm watching; I promise.]

[...Okay...] Viktor answered nervously, and turned back towards his partner, "He says to go ahead."

Yuri's eyes moved between the two, and he stepped off reluctantly, "...I...think I'm gonna check the quality of the ice first. It looks a bit sketchy."

"Sure."

Jiro barked and wiggled as his human slid away, blades scratching at the uneven ice, but Viktor held him back from falling.

Yuri made his way across the rink, heading directly across to other side, "Makkachin, time to go-" He started, bending down to try and corral the poodle. His efforts were quickly rebuffed though as the pup scrambled off playfully, barking all the way as he used leaves frozen to the ice for traction. Yuri just huffed and stood upright again with his hands on his waist, "Really? C'mon, I have skates on. You think I can't catch you?"

"Rouwfl!"
Viktor called, amused by the struggle, but wanted to get on with things. The poodle's ears perked up and Makkachin started making his way back towards the open part of the rink wall, barking and jumping as he finally made it back off the ice again.

Once Yuri spotted the pup's face come up over the wall, paws on the rim to hold him steady, he shook his head and laughed quickly to himself, "I guess there really is such a thing as a favorite parent." He sighed and pushed off again, heading around the rink to check it out properly, "Oh well..."

Viktor hugged a free arm around his dog's frame as they all set their sights on the man in the rink, and watched patiently as Yuri examined every inch. Before long, the younger man returned, and set his hands on the wall just next to Makkachin's paws.

"It looks okay. Not very flat in places, but I don't think it's that bad."

"Can you manage with the size of it?" Viktor wondered.

Yuri nodded, and reached up to pull his glasses off. He folded them neatly and offered them down with both hands, "Should be fine. I'm more worried I'll forget a step since it's been a while."

"Muscle memory. Trust yourself." The Russian reassured, letting Makkachin go to take the glasses, put them into his coat, and reach forward again to brush the back of his fingers against his husband's rose-kissed cheek, "Trust the music."

"I'm ready when you are then."

"This is going to be great." Viktor said quietly, hesitating a moment there with his gloved hand on his husband's face. Without thinking, he let instinct take over, and before he knew it, he felt the warmth of his spouse's lips on his own. But, just as quickly, he pulled back again, coughed to clear his throat nervously, and pranced off back the way they'd come like someone had called him to return.

Yuri was paralyzed where he stood, dumbfounded and shocked. He managed to blink, watching the dark blur of his husband vanishing back into the parking lot. Mercifully, Makkachin stayed behind, paws still on the rink wall, and Yuri was able to use him to ground himself back into the moment. He turned his eyes towards the huge bear standing a short ways off, only to see him looking right back at him with the same sort of vacant shock.

Kon broke the awkward silence and coughed to himself, grumbling as he turned to look outward again.

Yuri took the moment to shake his body back to life, and darted out to the middle of the ice to take his position. Two honks from the R.V. made him twitch, but he lifted his gaze through the dilapidated gates and spotted Viktor waving at him from the driver's seat. He swallowed, and crossed one blade behind the other, bent his face down, and raised his hand to wave back. Half a second later, the R.V.'s external speakers burst to life, and a song he hadn't heard in ages started to play.
The echos of piano keys rushed from the R.V. and into the little skating rink, pulsing through the old gates like the rushing waves of a tsunami. Despite the biting cold and the layers he wore to compensate, Yuri began the routine, bringing his hands up slowly in front of his chest, and opened his eyes as the came near. Viktor trotted back in as quickly as he could, shoving the R.V.'s driver's side door closed with a thud. He hustled in just in time to find his father again, and joined the man for the first jump.

Quad Toe-loop, double Toe-loop.

Viktor kept a marginal berth between the two of them, wary of the bear's reaction to his slip a moment before. He kept his eyes forward though, watching his husband's impromptu performance. He felt his heart pounding his his chest and throat.

"That was so stupid of me... My father's tolerance of us hangs by a single frayed thread... I could've done a thousand other, safer things to send Yuri off, and I kissed him!? Konstantin probably isn't even watching anymore-

[No lyrics to this song, hm?]

"Huh?" Viktor looked up, confused and surprised. He narrowly missed the quad Salchow.

[The music,] The bear repeated, eyes on the rink, [This music...doesn't count on words. The plot is told by him.] He pointed one finger out towards the skater, just as Yuri kicked out and down to launch into a triple Flip, [This is his story.] "Yuri na l'du." [Yuri on Ice.]

[It sounds familiar.]

The young Russian blinked, left eye twitching once, [...] [Familiar? How?]

Konstantin shrugged, and the duo fell into silence as Yuri continued. There was one more jump, a triple Flip, before the song changed its tempo, and Yuri's movements slowed down. The rest of the orchestra faded out, and a single key of the piano echoed all around; Yuri raised his arms out to the sides and closed his eyes, gliding forward as if on wings. They came in towards him, and he lowered down to slide in a kneel, dragging one blade behind him. The bear's eyes squinted as he watched it.

Viktor looked up curiously, half side-eyeing the big man standing nearby. The music carried on; Yuri arced into a wide outside spread-Eagle, then twisted into an Ina Bauer. The younger Russian swallowed nervously though.

"Are you sure you want me to do that program though...? It's been months since I last did it...not since the wedding party, I think..." Yuri pointed out, sliding his arms into his jacket while Viktor held it up behind him, "It's such a personal show, too..."
"It's your story..." Viktor explained, hoisting the jacket up over his husband's shoulders, and squished his fingers around the side of the younger man's arms, "But we worked on it together, and at some point along the line, it became our story. It's the only thing other than Eros that we have that doesn't have lyrics for me to translate...and I'm not about to have him watch you skate that."

"...Thanks?" Yuri paused and made an unimpressed face before continuing.

"I already nearly had a stroke when it started to play in the car, when I was here after Cup of China. Viktor went on, lost in his memory of the event, and deadpanned it severely, "When him and my Uncle took over the car to drive us to the mill. I still had my phone connected to the Bluetooth thing, listening to our skating music..."

"I know. You told me." Yuri huffed, pulling his scarf down to wrap it over his lapels, "I dunno though..."

The silver Russian rubbed his face, "I just can't think of any other way to reach him. I may be multi-lingual, but skating is the only language I'm really fluent in...it's the only way I know how to really tell the truth about what's going on in...in all this." He waved his hands around his head and then the front of his chest, "And I put a lot of that into that program... It's as much a story about you realizing yourself, as it is about how we came together."

"But Konstantin doesn't speak that language. Even if it's as clear as crystal to us, he won't have a clue what's being said."

Viktor frowned and lowered his face, feeling a bit deflated, "I...don't know what else to do then."

"I'm not even sure what you're trying to do."

"Maybe I don't either..." Viktor sighed, "I just... I feel like he's right on the edge of understanding what we have is real. That he may even accept us! Yuri! This may be the key to getting him past it!" His voice was starting to get disparate and frantic.

"Shh..." The younger man cooed, stepping forward with both arms sliding around his husband's sides, "I understand that this is important to you. I'll skate whatever you want me to. I just want you to keep your expectations realistic. It's very likely that seeing me skate won't change anything...and while you have an eerie knack for saying things that eventually happen, prophetic dreams don't come true when you try to force them."

Viktor nodded and rubbed his eyes against his partner's scarf, clinging tightly, "I know...but it's the only thing I can think of that he hasn't really seen..."

Triple Lutz, triple Toe-loop.

Yuri moved on into the step sequence; the time on his program was running out, but nothing about the bear's demeanor had seemed to shift at all, and Viktor was starting to feel that pit of dread-realization growing in his gut. Two pairs of slate eyes were on the ice as the music - rising in its hopeful crescendo with the inclusion of the entire orchestra - was reaching its climax all around them.

Between the four of them at rink-side, only Makkachin really seemed to be happy about everything that was going on, wagging his tail back and forth as Yuri moved around. Jiro seemed more interested in Viktor's demeanor than anything else, and gently nosed and pawed at the man's neck to try and get his attention. Viktor at least looked down to acknowledge the pup; he felt his own
emotions at complete odds with the emotions the music would normally illicit in him. The triumphant overing of past trials seemed utterly lost on him then, and he felt the weight of his brow bearing down over his eyes, casting a sense of depressed resignation over him.

This really isn't doing anything at all. My father doesn't understand anything about me...about us... This is just some dumb hobby with no deeper meaning... He only agreed to come here because I asked him to - to keep the peace - like a parent saying their kid's macaroni art is good even if it's utter shit ...

He snuffled bitterly and lowered his eyes into Jiro's fluff, and entirely missed the quad Flip. Kon glanced over, but said nothing, returning to look out over the ice, and Yuri's program-ending combination spin. Viktor eventually looked up, only in time to see his husband raise his left hand out towards him like he always did, this time tilted more like a distant hand-shake than a desperate palm-down reach, but panting behind it all the same.

Every time he reaches for me...the position of his hand changes slightly... Viktor thought, lowering his face in a subtle, abdicated nod, and started moving over towards the broken rink-wall exit, Is he reaching for me this time because he wants me to reach back? Or because he wants me to come to him...? Like he's offering an out from this stupid idea I made him humor me on... He could hear Yuri's blade scratches getting louder with every step, and he found the confused younger man there at the wall waiting for him, but he couldn't muster the courage to look directly into his eyes, I don't want to admit that he was right... That this was a fool's errand...

"So...?" Yuri asked, still catching his breath, "...Anything...?"

"...I don't want to talk about it." Viktor answered, disappearing into Jiro's fur again, one hand creeping up to pull down the front edge of his chapka hat so it covered his eyes.

Yuri blanched, "Oh no, did he hate it...?"

"I can't tell. He didn't react at all the whole time."

"Aw, Viktor..." Yuri stepped forward on his toe-picks and brought his hands up, trying to get the Russian to lift his face, but - that failing - moved his hands further around the man's head to pull him down to his shoulder, careful not to squash their Akita between them. If I say anything, it'll just crush him even more... He was really banking on this being the answer... He turned his eyes to the side, keeping his own head between his husband's and the bear's line of sight, wishing beyond hope that he could speak directly to the man without an intermediary. The words came forth from him anyway though, "I wish I could understand what it is you're looking for, or what you hope to gain, by playing around with Viktor's feelings like this...only to give him nothing in return."

Kon barely moved, eyes still oddly forward, staring into the rink...at least, that's what it looked like; Yuri couldn't see the bear's eyes under the rim of his hat.

"If you really don't care, then tell him so! Quit stringing him along and giving him false hope!" He went on, starting to get angry about the whole thing, "He's not some child anymore that you can placate with fake indulgences! Mikhail did the same damn thing! Viktor's 29 years old! Don't any of you people know how to talk to a kid who's grown up!?!"

The bear didn't flinch; it was as though he didn't even register that the words were meant for him.

"Konstantin! Answer me!"

"Ja vspominaju..." [I remember...] He said, his voice barely a stumbled whisper. Kon lifted his head,
then his hand, and pulled off the ages-old flatcap from his head. He ruffled the meager, short-cut salt-
and-pepper hair and replaced the cap roughly, revealing slate eyes tinted by red, [...Why the song was familiar...]

He looked up at the dark winter sky; the moon was barely a dull glow behind thick clouds, and
snowflakes fell like pin-prick crystals, only visible if the light shone on them just right. The woods were barren and empty, void of all sound and warmth...but the lights of his house were on. With his skin covered in black soot and ash after a long day, the comfort of home was a simple thing to look forward to. He nudged a knee against Čužak’s shoulder, and the huge beast of a horse turned slightly to start heading up the path up the hill.

Once put safely away into the barn, Konstantin pat the animal’s croup as he walked out, put the wooden gate to, and moved off to put away the grooming supplies he’d used. Soft brushes, harder brushes, even the hoof-pick, all were put back into their place on the wall. He turned back one more time to watch the creature chewing on a handful of hay, but then left the barn and made his way towards the house proper.

He gripped the handle and pushed the door inward, careful to prevent snow from outside tumbling in. The sound of piano music resonated through the small, rustic household, but for the moment, Kon didn’t care what it was. What caught his attention was the sound of his wife scrambling out of his big reclining chair in a mad dash for the television. That’s when he looked over, and saw what he could only assume was a skating program playing on the old screen. He only saw a second or two of it before the silver-haired woman got in front and blocked his line of sight.

[K-Kon!] Tatiyana said, surprised and panicked, [I didn’t realize you finished so fast out there... I heard you coming but I guess I...damn this thing!] She grumbled, struggling with the old knobs. The one for the channels broke off suddenly though, and she looked at it in horror, [Oh boy...]

[What are you watching?]

[Uhm...] She started again, turning around with a feigned smile, [I...I saw a program about our son... He...]

[We don’t have a son.]

[Kon-] Tat said quieter, [He’s done so well, and climbed so high...the whole country is calling him a Hero now! Don’t you-]

[WE...DON’T...HAVE...A SON.] The bear barked, loudly enough to make the petite woman back up against the old wooden television stand, [HE’S DEAD TO US.]

[But he’s not!] Tat pleaded, pulling away from the set, the piano music oddly hopeful considering how tense the situation suddenly was, [Look here, it’s a documentary about him! He’s a coach now! In just one season, his first student went from being a complete wash-out to coming in 2nd place at the second biggest international comp-]

[ENOUGH!] Konstantin yelled louder, stomping forward towards the television, and spooked his wife out of the way like a fox escaping a train. He snarled viciously at the sight of the Barcelona Grand Prix Final podium, and barely caught the last image - coach and student approaching the camera, from what looked like before the competition had even started, each looking determined - before reaching both hands around the set, and heaved it upward.
The piano ensemble suddenly cut out, and the boxy machine was ripped right out of the wall, [I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF HEARING ABOUT THIS! I'M SICK OF HEARING HIS NAME!]

[But I haven't even-]

[IF THE ONLY WAY I CAN GET SOME FUCKING PEACE AROUND HERE IS TO TAKE MATTERS INTO MY OWN HANDS, THEN SO BE IT-]

[What are you doing!??]

The door was pulled open roughly again, then kicked aside, and the angry bear stomped outside into the winter cold again. Tatiyana followed him to the doorway but lost him to the snow and the dark rather quickly, and ducked back inside to find her boots and coat. Kon just marched down the back of the hill though, guided on pure rage to where he knew the half-frozen pond was located, and once at the edge, heaved the entire television up into the air to toss it as far as it would go. The sound of the machine-box crashing through the ice, splashing into water, and cracking into a dozen pieces on impact, was enough to slack the man's hatred for a few seconds, and he bitterly turned his back to the sparkling, smoking ensemble. He twisted on a heel and spat at the whole thing just for good measure, and then started making his way back up the hill, following the path he'd carved moments before. By the time he made it around the side of the house, Tatiyana had bundled up in meager winter-wear, and was standing defiantly in the doorway.

[How dare you!] She yelled at him angrily, [Why'd you have to rip the television out like that!? Why don't you ever want to talk about Viktor!? He's our baby boy! The only one that made it! And you're treating him like he didn't!]

[VIKTOR IS DEAD.]

[No, he's not!] She argued, [He's OUT THERE, living his life! He's successful and famous! He's everything we WANTED him to be! Everything we PRAYED he would be!]

[Then apparently God only listens to the prayers of ONE parent!]

[What-]

[Go back inside before you catch your death out here-] Kon ordered, pointing towards the open door, even as his yelling still echoed off the countryside. He took a few steps forward and opened his arm to corral the woman, but was stunned to find her shove it away.

[Don't touch me!] She snapped at him, [We lost every single one of our babies... except him...and you're acting as though he died like the rest... We HAD him here...and YOU drove him away! I'm sick of having to deal with this! I WANT TO SEE VIKTOR AGAIN.]

[He hasn't spoken to you in years.]

[BECAUSE OF YOU!] Tat argued, face red from her frustration. She stomped back through the door-frame only long enough to grab the keys from the hook just inside, and bitterly went by her behemoth husband towards the path. As he tried to reach his arm out again to block her path, she shoved it off hard like before, [We're DONE. Don't TOUCH me.]

[Tat-]

The silver-haired woman made it angrily to the fork in the path before she stopped, and turned
slightly to look back at the man, [...He turned 28 a few weeks ago. It's been 16 years since I saw his face in person. I... No, if YOU'RE going to destroy the one way I CAN see him, then I'm going to go TO him. I'm going to St. Petersburg. ...I...don't know when I'm coming back.]

Konstantin was taken aback, eyes wide, and he could do nothing but watch his wife go down to the base of the hill where their old car was parked. His surprise switched over to rage again though, [IF YOU GO TO ST. PETERSBURG THEN DON'T COME BACK AT ALL.]

[Fine! I'll NEVER come back!] She yelled back, pulling the door open roughly and slamming it shut behind her. The headlights came on, and Tatiyana pulled out of the rocky space.

[...It...was the last song that ever played from that television before I...] The bear said quietly, staring out at the barren ice, eyes stinging from the dry cold, [The last music that I heard before she...]

Viktor hesitated, but he lifted his head up from where he'd buried it against Yuri's shoulder, [...Wh...what...?]

[That...stupid documentary she was watching... It was playing that music...and then I chucked the whole t.v. into the goddamn pond...] Kon answered, lowering his face to pinch the bridge of his nose, [She wanted to see you, and I told her that if she left, she should never come back...and she never did...]

[You can't be serious...you just can't...] Viktor pleaded, [Not this song... Not this song...]

"Viktor, what's going on...?" Yuri asked quietly, finding Jiro being passed to him suddenly.

"It's no wonder he didn't react the whole time... He was trying to figure out why he knew it already..."

"Huh...?"

"He said it's the last song that was playing on the t.v. the night my mother died...!" Viktor answered incredulously, frustrated already. Yuri was just dumbstruck.

Konstantin stepped backwards from where he stood, finding the edge of the abandoned skate rental kiosk press up against his back to make him stop. He pulled his hat off again, but pressed it to his face, pinching it against his eyes, [...Everything... Everyone... It's all gone, because of me... You, your mother, your uncle, probably even the town...they're all gone...because of me... And now, after everything else...the thing that brought most of it back together again was the thing I railed against the most... And this song...]

[Don't you dare...] Viktor protested, stepping between the two, [It's our song! I won't let you turn it into something morbid and horrible!]

The bear just shook his head, and pulled his hat away, revealing the darker circles starting to form under his reddened eyes, [I wasn't going to.] He rubbed his nose on the flat-cap, and stuffed the whole thing into his jacket pocket. [Tragic as the circumstances may be...it's the thing that started us all coming back together again, too...just like she wanted...] He lowered his gaze, but pushed off the kiosk wall, and stood back up to his full height, [And that song...is the story of some fool of a Japanese man...who rose up from nothing...and brought you back to me...so I could hear the song again...]
Viktor's eye twitched, but he wasn't sure what to say in answer. He just reached his hand back, insistently seeking for his husband's, and wouldn't relax it again until he felt fingers weave through to hold it.

[I've been such an idiot...all these years.] Kon went on quietly, [Raging against a sport, like it was the same as the person who'd humiliated me. Making everyone around me miserable under that insatiable hatred. Letting it carry on for so long...that it stopped being about the original accident, and became more of an issue of pride; I wouldn't let it go...I couldn't. That hate had become part of me...I let it define me...I wrapped myself in the mockery other people made of me for still being angry about it after so many years, and used it as a cudgel to keep people in line... Worse still, I let it make me throw everything I loved away, because I loved my hatred more...]

Yuri stepped over on his toe-picks and twisted around in front of his spouse, keeping hold of the man's hand until he stood in front of him. He looked back towards his partner and whispered, "What's going on? What's he saying...?"

"A lot..." Viktor answered, just as quietly, and stepped forward to cling to the younger man's back.

Konstantin passed the both of them by and started making his way back towards the broken gates, but pause slightly as he got past, and looked back over his shoulder, [...]
Watching Kon leave the ramshackled skating rink was like watching a dark tide go out, and Yuri kept his eyes on the man the entire way. Only once the bear was out of sight did he return his attention to his partner. He sighed and shook his head, and stepped around in front of him, letting the Russian's hand go only so he could pay it across the chest of that heavy woolen jacket, "What a day." He commented quietly.

Viktor just looked on sullenly, "...I don't...even know what to say anymore..."

Yuri felt what he was looking for, but then just curled his fingers around the jacket's lapel and pulled his husband closer, "You can start by telling me what he said." He suggested, offering a quick kiss while he rummaged into the man's coat for his glasses. Once found, he pulled them out and leaned away to slide them into place, "Be merciful on my anxious mind, and help me out?"

Hesitating a moment, Viktor closed his eyes and nodded, turning away to find a clear bench to sit on. Finding only the same spot that his husband had swept off to put his skates on, Viktor moved towards it and expanded the space, dusting crunchy snow away with a gloved hand.

Yuri reached for his blade guards as they moved towards the spot, planning to put them into place as the snow was moved away. He felt a tug though, and followed his partner down to sit on the bench. To his surprise, Viktor wasted no time in getting comfortable, pulling him forward with both arms and legs going around his sides. Yuri settled into it, depositing the Jiro-bundle onto their laps, and let his arms go over his partner's shoulders; he gently, slowly rubbed his spouse's back with one hand, "Viktor..."

"You're always right..." The silver man said quietly, pulling his hands back to clench his fists on either side of Jiro's little body, loosened only by the feeling of Makkachin's snoot nosing its way under one wrist. He unclenched that hand and pulled the poodle's head closer, "...My stupid knack for making eerie predictions doesn't hold a candle to you..."

"I'm just looking at things from the outside." Yuri explained, pressing his head closer against the furry side of the chapka hat, "I don't have a relationship with Kon that I'm trying to protect. You're what I'm trying to protect. So...what did he say...? He looked pretty upset...at least, as far as I'veever seen."

Viktor kept his forehead down against his partner's shoulder, looking down on Jiro and Makkachin in that small space between them, "He's just trying to make this about him again, like he always does." He snuffled in answer, "That my being a skater is a test of his faith, or that my being with you is a punishment on him." He slid his hands forward around the younger man's sides again and held hard, "He turned the song of us coming together into his theme-song, like he thinks he can repurpose it! That this whole horrible ordeal is just coming full circle, because he heard the song again now when we're on the verge of being family again..."

Yuri grumbled a breath, "So 'Yuri on Ice' is just 'The Death of Tatiyana and the Return of Viktor' to him."

The Russian nodded, much to Yuri's chagrin, "...The only thing he didn't bother with this time was bringing his faith into it..." He said despondently, lifting up from his partner's shoulder, and rubbed his eyes across the back of one gloved hand, "Maybe this was a stupid idea all along... He'll never
recognize how much he's hurt others in any way but in how much it impacted him, too. It...it always has to come back to him being a victim...every time..."

Yuri reached into one of his pockets and withdrew his phone to check the time; 11:23am, "Do you want to go ahead and leave? The hotel room in St. Petersburg will be ready after noon, so it's not like we'll be catching them unprepared if we get there early." He explained, tilting his head suddenly as he was about to click the device off; his phone had a signal somehow. He looked around as he put the phone away, "I wonder if there's a cell tower out here because of the bigger town nearby...? Maybe Kon's little hamlet was just barely too far away all along.

"...I thought that by making him see your program, he'd understand how important we are to each other. That he'd see something beautiful that we created together, and learn to love you, and accept you...because of how much I do..." Viktor explained, keeping his head down against the cold, "I hate that we have to be so damn accommodating, as though his seeing us love each other is as dangerous to him as a peanut allergy... I feel like giving up...

Nodding, Yuri pulled his hand back up from his pocket, and propped a finger up under his husband's chin to lift the man's eyes again. The look on that pale, rose-tipped skin said it all, and he offered a sad smile, "You once said I was the one with a heart of glass." He commented, leaned forward into a quick kiss, and put their pup into Viktor's grasp, "Here, hold our fuzzy son for a minute."

Viktor blinked, but took the hint from Yuri's movements and unwrapped his legs from around the younger man's frame, putting his shoes back onto the ground as Yuri put the blade-guards onto those naked gold blades, "...What...are you doing...?"

"I once lamented the troubles we'd found ourselves dealing with because I blamed myself for having started this whole thing in the first place...when I dropped my phone at the rink, and accidentally sent Mikhail the message that I hadn't yet intended to send." He explained, fastening each bar to the bottom of his skates, then stood up, "Before I knew what kind of Pandora's Box I'd be opening...I stuck myself into the middle of things, and forced people to interact with each other when they hadn't in some 20 years. I was so naïve back then; I didn't know anything about your past, but so I convinced myself I knew enough, as though it could never have been as dark and twisted as it turned out to be. I mean...we uncovered a decades-old tall-tale that claimed you were the product of twincest, something even they hadn't entirely sorted out yet."

The Russian grimaced slightly.

"It's okay." Yuri reassured, leaning down to offer an apology, and nosed the man's lips for a moment while he was there, "I would still love you even if it was true. I fell in love with who you are, not what you are or where you came from." He gave another kiss before he rose up to his full height, and stroked the back of the man's shoulders, "But you've been trying so hard to make this work. I never thought that skating for Kon would make any difference...but I was half-wrong on that. The music spoke to him...and now, I think...I need to speak with him."

"But you two don't speak the same language, and I'm not-"

"I think this is a heart-to-heart that I need to have with him on my own," Yuri shook his head, "And Hasetsu is only 6 hours ahead of us."

"...Are you sure about this...?"

The younger man offered a wink, "I pulled the NHK debacle out of the fire, didn't I?" He leaned down to kiss the flat-furry-top of his husband's hat, "I know more now than I did then, and I can't always be a bystander, standing ready to swoop in at the end and make you feel better after yet
another calamity... I'm your husband. We're a team. I need to do my part now, and this is the last time I'm going to tolerate seeing you cry because of that man."

The bear's massive black truck idled in the parking lot, parked a ways away from the entrance gate. It seemed to have a cloud hovering over it to match the mood of the man sitting inside. Konstantin kept his eyes closed under the bright light reflecting off all the nearby snow, hat-brim pulled down to shield them. Though he leaned against the knuckles of his left hand, elbow propped up on the window sill, the right was white-knuckled around the steering wheel, keeping that arm in turn from trembling.

All he could think about was the unknown gap in time, between seeing those red tail-lights fade in the winter darkness, and finding the crashed car after the storm had passed. He moved his left hand off his cheek and pinched his fingers across the bridge of his nose.

"My God...how long were you out there like that before the cold set in...? Please, Lord...she was innocent... I pray you took her swiftly, and didn't let her suffer alone in the dark...

Tak tak

The bear twitched in surprise, and looked around with a start, only to eventually spot the top of someone's head through the passenger side window. A hand raised up above it, and waved briefly before it went down to find the handle, and before Kon knew it, Yuri had plunked himself down into the passenger seat...and Viktor was nowhere to be seen.

"...Where...my son?"

Yuri pointed back towards the gate where the silver legend was walking out with their two dogs, heading towards the R.V. for the warmth.

"Tam holodno." [It's cold out there.]

Konstantin's brow furrowed in surprise at the unexpected voice, "Čto proishodit?" [What's going on?]

Yuri settled into his seat and set his phone down, face up, on the big center console between the driver's place and the middle seat the Viktor had previously occupied. On the face of the phone, a phone-call was active, set to Speaker.

[I've been asked to translate again.] Mikhail's voice answered, [Like in Japan.]

[Isn't it late where you are? Shouldn't you be with your family?]

The Rozovsky elder laughed, [I am with my family. I was, anyway...they shooed me out of the common-room though. So now I'm walking through this neat little hot-spring resort to get to my room...rounding the corner...now I'm by the door, sliding it open...]

[Alright, I get it...] Kon grumbled, rubbing one temple, [What's all this about? Why were you dragged into this again?]

[I have no idea what's going on.] Mikhail shrugged as he answered, and slid the door closed behind him. He started making his way over to the big bed at the other end of the room and moved to sit cross-legged on top of it, [I just saw Yuri's name come up on my caller ID, had a small stroke over the idea, answered like I thought I was about to find out that Yuri and Viktor had been stranded or
hurt, got asked to speak Russian, said sure in a confused state...and here we are.]

[I see.]

"Can I talk now?" Yuri asked, slightly impatient, "I know you're trying to explain stuff, but I really want to get on with this."

"Yeah, yeah...sure, go ahead, Yuri."

"Thanks."

The younger figure twisted around in his seat, bringing one knee up as he leaned back against the door, and crossed his arms. He leveled the bear a stern look, "There are...a lot of things I want to say. A lot of things I want to ask...to clarify and understand..." He started, giving Mikhail a chance to catch up in Russian, "But the one thing that I need to sort out is...after Viktor has gone above and beyond to try and reconcile with you...what is it that's getting in the way of you trying to meet him half way?" He asked firmly, "He accepted your apology at NHK for hitting him, but I don't think you ever stopped to consider the lasting damage your actions caused on Viktor's life." He tensed up with his crossed arms and shook his head, staring at the center console, listening to his words being repeated in Russian, "And look...I get that the two of us just dropped in on you unannounced...Viktor's got a bad habit of wanting to surprise people. Sometimes it works out, and sometimes it doesn't. But after we had that whole issue with the skate blades in the furnace, I really thought things were finally going to work out." He watched the behemoth's face for a reaction as Mikhail's translation filtered through him, "But Viktor says that you turned my show just now into another conflated problem where you were the victim again."

"What do you mean, your show?" Mikhail asked as he caught up.

"I skated my old Free Program because Viktor asked me to." Yuri answered stiffly, "Konstantin was apparently familiar with the music. He claims it was playing on the television when he walked in on your sister watching a skating documentary the night she died...so now he's trying to conflate the two, as though my music was part of his destiny. That's not what I skated for. It's not about him."

Mikhail grabbed a few pillows from the head of the bed and squished them onto his lap to lean against, and rubbed his temples as he looked at the phone before him, "Alright...Alright..." He cleared his throat and adjusted his seat, [Apparently you missed the point of Yuri's show so spectacularly that they're wondering if you were even really paying attention.]

[I watched the entire thing. I don't know what they wanted me to get out of it. It's figure skating; he did it fine!] The bear argued at the phone, [The only thing that resonated with me was the music, because I'd heard it before.]

[Kon, they don't care if you've heard the song before.]

[It was the last song that played before Tat died.]

[Yeah, and that's because she was watching a figure skating documentary on the boys. You haven't been getting a hair up your ass about Tat's death every time you see Viktor's face, so why drag their work into it?] Mikhail pointed out, squishing the palm of his hand against one cheek as he raised a brow at the phone, [Figure skating isn't meaningless to them. Part of what they're scored on is their ability to tell a story through their performance...they get scored on how well their choreography matches the composition of the music...even their costumes are judged. For Yuri and Viktor to put on a show, just for you...they're trying to tell their story, to you.]
Yuri pulled his beanie off and slicked his hair back with one hand, "Why are you guys arguing now?"

"I'm trying to explain how figure skating works. He's stuck on the music though because it's the only thing he understood." The elder answered, "I think you need to make your case a bit more literal. The bear doesn't understand subtlety or artistry. He's a man of the earth...hard work and grit...just tell him how it is."

Yuri inhaled sharply and nodded, "That's what I told Viktor, too...that Kon wouldn't understand the message. Alright..."

"Go ahead when ready."

Waiting a moment, Yuri considered how best to proceed, what words would work the best without making it more complicated than it already was. It came to him though like a brick, and he pressed his finger down against his knee, "Let's just forget the skating then. ...Konstantin," The gruff older man side-eyed him.

"...Viktor and I...have been walking on eggshells around you since the day you came crashing into our lives, nearly one year ago." Yuri said flatly, giving time for the translation, "And though it's incredible the progress you've made...I mean, we don't fear for our lives around you anymore...the fact of the matter is that you..." He hesitated, and pursed his lips as he gathered his courage, "You refuse to recognize our marriage. Maybe that's partly our fault, because we're still too nervous to be ourselves around you... Viktor ran off after kissing me earlier because he was worried you'd backhand him again if he stuck around too long. He did it entirely without thinking, because he got comfortable after we did the thing with the skate blades yesterday. Viktor wants you to be a part of his life so badly...he actually dreamed last night that you were going to walk him down the aisle at our wedding in the spring. That you were going to give him away to me."

Konstantin grit his teeth and looked away when he heard it.

"See? That's what I'm talking about." Yuri growled in return, "This deep, burning hatred you have for the fact that we're both men. But the thing of it is...right now, Viktor has trusted the outcome of this relationship he has with you to me. If you can't get over this hang-up you have about the state of my chromosomes, then this will be the last time you see him. If Viktor ever sets foot on this land again after today, it'll be because he left me to see you...and I can guarantee he won't do that." He lowered his face and pressed his fingers to the sides of his brow in frustration, "...He's told me on more than one occasion that if it hadn't been for me, he'd have jumped in front of a train by now...because of you. Because of all this. We spent nearly a year together before, and he never uttered one whisper about his family or where he came from, and as soon as we got the news about Tatiyana, he started to feel like the walls were crashing in all around him. I have watched the love of my life go from being on top of the world to feeling like he wants to die because of this family...and the only reason he's still here is because of me." He explained bitterly, fighting back to tears in his eyes as he recalled those dark days, "I... I won't let him feel like that again, ever. The rest of the world and his fans be damned, he's too precious to me to see him suffering."

Mikhail caught the bear up as quickly as he could, but his tone changed halfway through, "...This family' includes me."

"Yes it does, but Viktor knows you're trying, so you're fine."

"Thanks, I suppose...?"
"The problem right now is this guy, not you, so let's please try to stay on topic. I know you don't want to stay away from the others for long so I'll try to make this quick." Yuri explained, turning his attention back to the big man in front of him, "Kon... The damage you did to Viktor - when he was a kid, and over this last year - is something I'll be sorting him out for years to come. I'm willing to take that on because I love him unconditionally...but a part of that is going to involve not letting anyone add to it. If you can't learn to recognize the absolute torture you've put Viktor through - in terms that recognize his suffering, not yours - and get over your pathological hatred for the fact that he and I are lovers, with all that it entails - to the point where you could walk him down the aisle at our wedding - then we're done here. We'll thank you for not beating us up the last couple times we've seen you, and we'll get out of your hair forever."

Mikhail finished the translation after a moment, and an eerie silence befell the inside of the truck. Konstantin hadn't moved, and barely blinked.

Yuri pulled his beanie back on, reached across to gather up his phone, and held the speaker up to himself as he went for the door latch, "That's it, then. Thanks for your help, Mikhail."

"...That's it...? He hasn't even replied..."

"I wasn't really here to have a conversation. I came to give an ultimatum." Yuri explained, pushing the door open a few inches, "If he wants to have a conversation about it, it's not going to be with me or Viktor. We've said all we can at this point."

"We-" Mikhail stammered, grabbing his phone up again in a hurry, "I can hear the wind; put the phone back into the truck!"

"I'm going back to Viktor now." The younger figure answered, stepping down onto the icy concrete as the cold nipped at his skin like shark teeth.

"Put it back in the truck for two seconds, damnit! Please!"

Yuri groaned, but pulled the door back open again and stuck his phone-hand inside, and listened to words he didn't understand, then pulled it back, "Are you done now? It's cold out."

"Yeah. Call me back in about two hours."

"Okay." He nodded clicked out of the call, and twisted to push the door closed. Without looking back again, Yuri started stepping off towards the R.V., and pulled his scarf up over his nose to keep it warm as he went, leaving the bear to mull over his words.
Walking away from the truck, Yuri could feel his heart in his throat, but every step further helped it settle down again. He made it halfway back to the R.V. before bringing a hand up to cover his heart, and slumped slightly in astounded relief.

That was terrifying! The way he bickers with Mikhail...even over the phone, I was almost sure Kon was going to grab it and find a way to throttle him all the way in Japan somehow. Then me!

The truck's engine suddenly roared to life, bellowing into the cold like an angry dragon, and Yuri spun around with a start. Ice crunched under the vehicle's massive wheels as it backed up, turned, and started moving away. Yuri watched in surprise - and then not - as the rumbling mechanical belch of the diesel beast faded down the crumbling concrete road. With nothing left to do, he turned again and finished his walk back to the camper, spotting Makkachin on the raised tier behind the seats in the driving cabin, tail wagging and tongue hanging. Jiro barked, but territorial yips became whimpers of urgently-needed attention as the pup realized who had come knocking on his door.

Within, sitting and waiting anxiously at the dining room booth, Viktor lifted his head in nervous surprise, "What happened? What'd he say? What did you say?" He asked, squeezing back out, not having bothered to take off any of his ample layers of cold-weather garb...other than the hat and gloves, which he left on the table.

"I'm not really sure what happened." Yuri answered, pulling his gloves off to rub his cold fingers on his rosy cheeks for the warmth. Viktor quickly took them and cupped them between his own, blowing warmer air onto cold skin, "I was right about him not understanding why I skated through.

"I know...it was a long shot..." The Russian sighed, putting those hands on his own cheeks then, and his hands over them in turn, "Your fingers are red from cold, my love."

"Yeah...Kon never turned the heat on while we were in there. So, it was an icebox." The younger figure nodded, "I don't think the cold bothers him as much as it would anyone else...he's-

"What did you tell him?" Viktor asked again, cutting him off, "Did you get through to him?"

Yuri hesitated, and looked down, then slightly away before looking up again, "Honestly, I'm not sure if I got through like I did at NHK. After it became obvious that the skating display was a dud...I tried to explain to him in terms entirely unrelated to it what we were hoping to achieve here, but...he didn't really answer to anything I said. He only argued with Mikhail a little bit about the point of the show, then he went quiet as the grave."

"...That...doesn't sound optimistic."

"'Fraid not..." He lowered his face again, "In a few more words, I basically told him that...because he's come so far in the last year, we - mostly you - are giving this whole reconciliation thing a fighting chance. But...we need more than just the promise that he won't lash out at us for being ourselves around him. I told him about some of the darker times he's caused for you... I wanted to bring up that nervous eye-twitch thing that you've started up with again, but I...didn't know if saying so would come across the way I wanted it to, or if it would just give him too much power over your peace of mind, so I didn't. Same with your Short Program breakdown in Sapporo."

As Yuri spoke, Viktor moved them over towards the couch and sat them both down onto it. All the
while, the anxious Russian did his best to warm those cold digits.

"In the end, it boiled down to him needing to think about how badly he wanted to be in your life. If he wants it bad enough...then he can start treating us the way everyone else does; as a unit." Yuri went on, seeing the disappointment creeping across his husband's visage, "I set the bar pretty high though, and mentioned that he should be supportive enough to be able to walk you down the aisle like in your dream, and be able to give you away to me. He grimaced hard enough for me to feel it though, but...if he thinks he can strive for that, even if we have to let him set a timetable for it..."

"I think that's a bit too high, at least for him." Viktor sighed and shook his head, silver hair swaying in front of his eye, "Considering how often we've seen him in the last year...if he agrees, and we leave today as planned, then the next time we meet, he'll be like a completely different person."

"I know."

"We'd need to spend a lot more time around him to get him that used to us."

"...I know." Yuri said more quietly.

"Why'd you say it then...?"

He made a face as he exhaled, "I'm tired of just toeing the line. Mikhail said that your father's a 'man of the earth, hard work, and grit.' I didn't think it would do anyone any favors to drag it all out and make a bunch of exceptions. If he wants to be part of your life, then he needs to be part of the family, not just some grumpy wall-flower, judging us from the outskirts of it all."

"All families have their black sheep."

"Not all black sheep are made-up of 8 tons of pent-up rage looking for an excuse." Yuri pointed out, stroking his thumb across the hidden cheek, "Things can't continue like they have been...but now it's up to him to decide. Whatever happens, no one can say we didn't try, nor give him a chance. I think we've given him way more consideration than he was ever entitled to considering how things started."

"Yeah..."

"Not many people get second chances after they get physical. If it hadn't been for your mother's life insurance policy dragging us back out here before, we'd probably have never seen him again, and things wouldn't have ever gotten to this point."

The silver Russian nodded in agreement, "So...I heard his truck take off. Where do we go from here?"

"I think Mikhail plans to talk to Kon more, so Kon is probably on his way back to the cabin. We're supposed to reach out again in 2 hours." Yuri answered, pushing up to stand again, and slid his hands down his partner's sleeves to find his hands again, and helped him up as well, "So...we have a little time to kill. I'm still curious about that steel mill, if you're up to it."

Viktor hesitated, but then nodded again, "We'll have to leave the boys in the camper. There's too much junk lying hidden under the snow, and I don't know if there's such a thing as a doggy tetanus shot..."

"Mh."

Though a settled plan, there was still a moment of anxious hesitation. Viktor hadn't let go since being
pulled up to his feet, holding more tightly with the mention of that place.

"Shh. It's an abandoned steel mill now." Yuri pointed out, "And I'm going with you this time."

"It still gives me the creeps."

"You don't have to come in with me if you'd rather stay here. I just want to take a peek around." The younger figure huffed a laugh and stepped up onto his tip-toes, offering a quick kiss...that turned into a slightly longer kiss. Viktor didn't seem to mind though, and his grip on those pink fingers relaxed a little. Yuri smiled as he felt it, and moved aside to kiss the love-bite on his partner's neck, then finally stepped out of the way to the driver's seat. "The helm is yours, Captain."

"Mhr...iceberg, right ahead..." The Russian lamented dryly, moving forward to find his place.

"Nah, just an icebutt."

"Icebutt?" Viktor echoed, pausing to look back...only to feel a gentle pat on his backside.

"Icebutt." Yuri teased, "Let's go."

Konstantin could've knocked the wall out if he'd slammed the door any harder. He kept his hand on the solid wood frame for a moment longer though as he regained his composure, just in time to remember that someone was expecting a phone-call. He sucked in a hissed breath and went rummaging around in drawers for the small flip-phone he'd been given in Japan, and plugged it in to gain enough of a charge to turn it on. Within a minute, he loaded the contact list and its singular contact, and arduously typed in all the (too many) numbers for an international call into his house's rotary phone; 8, 10, 81, to get out of Russia and into Japan...then 780 for the Canadian-issued cell-phone...then, and only then, his in-law's personal number. Every turn of the dial set his teeth on edge, but finally, the (way too many) numbers were put in, and the dial-tone rang out from the speaker.

Thankfully, it didn't take long for the call to be answered, since the man on the other end had been on stand-by to begin with.

"Čto ž, èto bylo bystro." (Well, that was fast.) Mikhail huffed grimly.

[I have no words.] The bear answered, grim as well, [I don't even know if this phone-call is worth the effort it took to dial out.]

[Simmer down.]

[Because after all these years, and especially since losing Tat, you have a chance to reconnect with your son and you're about to blow it because you've got a theological hair up your arse?] Mikhail suggested glibly, [Really, do you have a single non-religious reason for hating everything you think your son's become?]

[It's not natural.]

[Homosexuality has been observed in over 500 species of animals since people started checking into that sort of thing in the late 90s.] The younger Russian shrugged, reading it off the Wikipedia page dedicated to such information, [There's even this cute and famous gay penguin couple in Germa-]
Mikhail would've been knocked off the bed by the wind of the yelling if not for the distance through his phone, but he ran his fingers through his hair to reset it anyway, just in case, [You don't have to give a goddamn about gay penguins, Kon, but your boy's involved with another man and that's just the way it is. If you can't learn to reconcile that, and get over it, you can basically kiss Viktor goodbye again; him nor Yuri are willing to continue this tense armistice anymore. Last time Viktor left, it was what...about 15 years before you heard from him again? This time it'll be never.]

[I'm surprised you're even trying to preserve this. If I quit, then he's yours forever. You finally get to be the father to him that you always wanted to be.] The bear growled, sitting down roughly at the small wooden table near the kitchen, extension cord swaying between him and the wall.

Mikhail stayed quiet for a moment, but then just shook his head, [I gave that up a long time ago. Viktor is his own person now...he's created a life for himself that doesn't include the people he left behind in Russia, or who left him behind, as the case may be. I'm grateful that he's let me in as much as he has, but he still keeps me at arm's length. If you want in, too, you'll have to meet him where he's at. Considering what happened at the funeral...it's a bloody-fucking miracle he's talking to you at all.] He explained sternly, giving the beleaguered and conflicted man a moment to catch up, [...You've got one chance, Kon. You gave up your hatred of skating for him...but that's only his job; it's almost irrelevant what your opinion of it is. You can't have any kind of meaningful relationship with him though if you're steadfast in your rejection of his chosen partner. Yuri is his life. Yuri's going to be there until they're both dead and gone, and that'll be long after both of us are dead and gone.]

[Asking me to accept that grotesque coupling is like asking me to help him jump off a cliff.] Konstantin retorted, [I cannot believe or accept that what he's doing isn't destructive to his soul. His unholy union with that boy is a violation of two Commandments, never mind all the other, lesser laws spoken into the world by God. To put Viktor aside as an exception to all that I hold dear and true, would be like making Viktor a God unto himself, distinct and exempt from the rules laid down in Scripture...which would put me in violation of yet another Commandment.]

[But he's your son.]

[He was Baptized into the Orthodoxy. He's partaken of the Eucharist. He knows what he's doing...]

[And he's quite happy doing it.]

[I can't watch my only child live in sin...]

Mikhail drew a breath, but waited a moment before speaking, tapping his knee idly, [...]Kon... I...can't make this choice for you. I told Yuri to call me back in 2 hours, so...I think you need to use that time to really think about what you want to do, moving forward. They've already done the monumental task of effectively forgiving you for attacking them - and Viktor in particular, on three separate occasions - not to mention, the lasting psychological damage those attacks have had on him, and the trouble its caused their relationship as a result.]

[You're asking me to choose between my son and my God.]

[I am; they are. It's peace through love or separation.] The silver elder nodded reluctantly, even though Konstantin couldn't see it, [And I am sorry to pose it to you that way...but you've both lived away from each other for a very long time. You have a chance to change things...or, you can go back to the way it was before. In the end, it's your choice.]
"Wow..." Yuri said, looking \textit{way} up as he and his spouse stood close to the mouth of the gaping, empty steel mill, "It's \textit{way} bigger than I thought."

"Okay great you've seen it can we go?" Viktor whined, keeping back a few paces.

"It's a dried-up husk." Yuri retorted, stepping back through his footprints, and took his husband's arm into his own, "I just want to take a peek inside. It looks like a black hole from out here."

"It is a black hole."

"Okay, so you can stay out here then. I'll just be a few minutes." Yuri huffed, patting that arm before letting it go again to start walking off.

Viktor watched in stunned horror, but Yuri managed to get pretty far pretty quick, "Yuri~!" He cried out, "If you break your legs in there, I can't come get you!"

"Why not?" He called back, standing between two railway tracks that lead into the rust-red building.

"Because my leg is still broken!"

"It was a grade 1 sprain to your ankle! In another 6 days you'll be right as rain!"

"Are you saying I left my skates at home for nothing!? That I could've skated at the Euros Exhibition!?"

Yuri shook his head and laughed, "Of course not! I left your skates at home, for good reason! You won't be tempted to skate early...like at the Euros Exhibition!"

"But that's another 7 days from now! Seven is \textit{bigger} than 6!"

"...I can't hear you from so far away, Viktor!"

The Russian stammered from side to side piteously, whining to himself nervously where he stood between the R.V. and the mill. He could barely see his husband through the all-encompassing darkness anymore. He could practically see the ghost of his past self being carried inside against his will, and he could hear the echo of his uncle's mocking laughter as it happened...but both faded as reality set in again.

The mill was silent as the grave. There wasn't a bird for miles. If not for the sun shining down on the woods at the edge of the mill's periphery, it would be as though \textit{nothing existed at all}. The stillness was as eerie as it was comforting, but Viktor was still too reluctant to go within the building. At least...until he heard the echo of a massive \textit{CLANG} coming from inside.

Then...he was almost running.

"YURI!"

The intense brightness of the winter sun gave way to the gloom within the corpse of the steel mill, but Viktor's eyes quickly adjusted, and he realized nothing at all was wrong. Yuri was giving him a stupid, sly grin, holding up a piece of twisted rebar that he smacked a \textit{second} time against a railing, making the same echoing noise as he'd heard from outside.

"I \textit{NEARLY HAD A STROKE.}" Viktor lamented loudly, his own voice echoing through the structure
like the bang had.

"Well, it got you in here, right?"

"You're so mean."

"At least you came inside on your own volition this time." Yuri pointed out, and set the rebar down again, "I guess I can kind-of understand why Mikhail wanted to make you come in before. But...the mill was still being used at the time, so it had a different feel than it does now." He looked up and around at the huge indoor space; all the rails on the ground, the presses and their extended troughs to hold steel bars as they came out, and the two enormous furnaces that once housed the flames of Hell itself. There were big pouring pots, and metal cat-walks surrounding the furnaces, and a level with a number of open doors leading into dark rooms.

"I hate this place." Viktor commented grimly, hugging his arms against his sides, hands in his pockets, "I've been afraid of it since I was a kid... Coming here, it felt like..." He shook his head and moved to step closer to his partner, wedging his hand into one of Yuri's pockets for safe-keeping, "It's like going to bed after watching a scary movie. That incessant dread that one of those demons, ghosts, or murderers would somehow spring to life and find you under your covers... Even though it's not real, it feels real, keeping you up all night... You can plug your ears or bury your head under your pillow, but the terror is still there."

"At least no one's pouring water under your door." Yuri offered, sliding his hand into that same pocket to find the one that was hiding there, "Or calling you just to make horrifying croaking noises before you take a test."

"...Croaking noises?"

"Like the noise the ghost from 'The Grudge' or whatever made."

"...Oh."

"Phichit-kun never let me go more than a week without pranking me after a horror movie. He'd find a way to stack my things strangely after a poltergeist movie, or he'd move stuff around after an exorcist flick...stuff to unsettle me without being obvious." Yuri explained, rubbing his thumb over the back of a leather glove, "Putting water on the floor after we saw 'The Ring' was just the worst because I screamed and nearly wet myself over it."

Viktor managed a wry smile, "So you admit it then finally."

"Only to you." He sighed and turned, looking around again, "...It's hard to imagine that Mikhail worked here once, or that Kon would've expected you to work here."

"I think I would've run away if it came to that..."

"Can't blame you on that one." Yuri agreed, stepping off to get a better look at the back of the building, "Being in here...to me, it reminds me of when I went to Hiroshima as a school kid. We did a day-trip as part of our history studies...and when I saw the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, it felt like I was looking at a ghost. But...seeing what the building looked like when it was still the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall...and how it looks now...I guess I just became more grateful. Hasetsu is practically in the middle of Hiroshima and Nagasaki...at any time, a bomb could've been dropped there instead."

Viktor listened quietly.
"So I look at ruins like that...and like this...and I think, I'm so glad that I didn't have to go through that. It's super scary to think about what it was like to be there in the thick of it though...so it just makes me want to show no fear, as a sign of respect for those who were there." Yuri continued, only to slow down and turn around to face the man carefully following him, "The Hiroshima memorial is beautiful now. The building stands in the midst of carefully tended park-land, with cherry-blossom trees that bloom every spring, and a river that flows in front of it. It's harrowing...that towering, burnt-out building, in the middle of so much green and life..." He reached around to his untethered pocket and withdrew his phone; there was no signal there, but that's not what he was looking for anyway. He unlocked the device and clicked around a little, then scrolled and waited, looking back up into the slate eyes of his anxious spouse, "I don't know that this building will ever be turned into a memorial, or that it'll be remembered in any way, despite how it's existence helped so many families prosper in its time. But...maybe we can bring a little something here on our own, and give the ghosts inside this place something to remember us by."

"...What do you mean?"

"Music. Something that has value and importance to us. We'll fill this whole place with a song. ...And maybe, in the process, help you let your fear slip away. This place has no power over you."

Intrigued, Viktor turned to face his partner, and looked down at the man's phone, curious as to what song would be chosen, "I'm not sure how one song can get rid of a fear I've had my whole life."

"Maybe not get rid of it...but...be a comfort to you in a creepy place. Like Makkachin would be, or a night-light..."

"Or you."

Yuri smiled, "Or me. Ready?"

"...Mh."

Nodding, Yuri looked back down to his phone, and hovered his thumb over the screen. He carefully slid the volume bar all the way to max, and clicked Play above it.

Music burst forth from his tiny device, sending sound to every corner and dark place in the empty, hollowed-out structure. Every surface was touched, every rail, wall, broken window, and trolley cart. Every half-opened office door, smelting bucket, broken rake, and bent safety-railing. It echoed all around in a haunting sort of way, but permeated the space with a song that brought it all home.

...Stand in the light...and be seen as we are...
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED FIFTY EIGHT

Thought its source was tiny, the music reverberated off the inner walls of the empty steel mill, drifting out into the nearby snowfields and railway graveyard. For Viktor, hearing the song put his nerves entirely to rest. The specter of 'what could've been' seemed to drift away, pulled aside like a curtain. He let himself close his eyes, even in that place, and just listened to the song, feeling his partner's fingers where they held to his hand.

*I know this place would never take me alive...* He thought, drawing in a deep breath, *The day I left home with Yakov, I knew I'd never have to come here. But...even though this mill had an expiration date stamped on it when I did return...I never quite could shake my terror of it...*

Slate eyes opened, and he looked around with renewed perspective.

*I always felt like the fires would burn me alive, or the steel would fall on me, crush me, and mangle me...I'm sure this place would've killed me if it had the chance... But...*

He felt Yuri turning in front of him, and started to pull him forward, walking along the mid-level catwalk across the back of the furnaces. The song continued to play; something about it kept the ghosts away.

*Now it's dead...and I'm still here. In a way...it feels familiar...but I can't quite put my finger on it.*

"This place isn't so bad when it's got a melody in it." Yuri commented idly, leaning against one railing, and felt the Russian cozy up behind him into his usual clinging-spot. One arm went under his own to hook in front of his shoulder, the other curled around his side. He looked back over the shoulder that his pensive husband had settled his chin onto, and the music played on, "Is it helping?"

Viktor offered a reluctant nod, but he clung tighter as he did so, "...The song feels a bit out of place for a eulogy though."

"You think this is a funeral?"

"This place was once alive...and it taken decades, but now it's dead. It feels a bit like it was euthanized."

"...A pitiful creature that lived well beyond its natural span." Yuri shook his head, "It was time."

"Putting it out of its misery."

"Sometimes letting go is the best kind of mercy."

Viktor nodded against the shoulder, lowering down to press his lips to the edge of his spouse's scarf and a thin epaulette, "I'm sad for it, but...I can't find the tears to cry. It feels like I found out about the passing of an enemy. I just..." He sighed and lowered his face down even further, until his bangs brushed over that shoulder and he pressed his brow to the back of it, "...My emotions about this place are all over the place. I don't ever want to come back here again."

"...Yeah, I understand." Yuri agreed, folding one arm up to pat the hand that clung now to the front of his chest, "To be honest, if we ever come back this way to see your father again...I would expect that he come to St. Petersburg. Coming all the way out here, into the middle of nowhere, is
just...hard. There's nothing really to do but stare at each other...even in better weather, what could we do? Walk? Is there anything out here even worth seeing?"

"...I don't think so. This place isn't even an empty shell of what I remember it once was. It's just...utterly deceased."

The song faded out as it came to its gradual end, and Yuri twisted around in place as he put his phone back into his coat pocket, then leaned his back against the rail now-behind him. He looked from his spouse's scarf to his face, and pressed his hands to the lapels of the dark-colored jacket in front of him, "I used to wonder what you were up to when you weren't skating. I'm honestly glad you never had cause to come here by yourself."

"Me too..." Viktor agreed quietly, stepping closer into his husband's space, and pressed his brow to the edge of the younger man's beanie, holding still in the silence for a moment. He drew a long inhale, but let it out quickly and opened his eyes, "How much time do we have left to wait?"

"Another hour." Yuri answered, arms going up and over the Russian's shoulders to hug him, "Let's head back to the rink. I'll text Mikhail once my phone catches a signal and see if we can't get this over with early."

The silver Russian nodded - though given their proximity, it was more like him rubbing his forehead against his husband's face, "Can I have a kiss before we go?"

"...You're asking?" Yuri huffed in surprise.

"...Yeah..."

The man's answer was just as confusing as the question, but Yuri nodded, "...Of course you can..."

Viktor seemed oddly reluctant even after hearing the words, but he eventually nosed his way into place, giving a kiss as light as air; it was as though it was their first all over again - after Cup of China - and he was just testing the waters. He held there for a moment, bringing a hand up to touch gloved fingertips lightly to his husband's jaw, but then pulled away again, "...I know...at the back of your head, you're waiting for the other shoe to drop, and you can tell me how you 'told me so' about how this trip was a stupid idea."

Yuri stayed quiet.

"That we should've stayed home and worked on our skating ahead of Four Continents, and just taken a plane to Euros like we would've anyway if I were competing in them." Viktor went on, pausing for a few seconds as he leaned into another hug, "But...whatever happens...please don't say it."

"If he agrees to try harder then I'll be the one eating my worries."

"You'll have managed to straighten him out again, just like you said you could after NHK." Viktor corrected, "You're the only person who seems to have ever been able to get through to him. Or at least...it seems that way. Maybe my view of things is just so biased or corrupted that I can't see what's really going on with him...he's harder to figure out than Saito."

Yuri nuzzled his face to the side and rubbed his cheek against his husband's ear, "Your perspective is...maybe a bit tainted...because of the memories you have from when you were a kid. You said before that Kon was like a benign shadow, always on the peripheries of whatever you were recollecting, but never really part of anything. Then he suddenly came barging into the forefront when he beat you and drove you from home. Everything since that day has been a confused mess of
which version of him you'll be dealing with...the one that's barely involved, or the one that's a violent center of attention. Whatever happens..." He leaned back to get a better look at his partner's dour expression, "It's going to get better from here on out."

Viktor nodded slowly, "I really hope so... We still have 3 major competitions left this season and I'm just...too exhausted to keep dealing with these huge problems we keep getting mired in."

"We'll be back with familiar, friendly faces before long, Vitya." Yuri said, trying to cheer the man up.

Slate eyes opened wide, and Viktor cocked his head back, but managed a weak smile, "Yeah, that's true...Yuratchka."

"Oh no, don't use that on me..." Yuri stammered, quickly putting both hands on his spouse's face to cover his mouth, "I can hear Yurio screaming from Japan about you appropriating his nickname..."

Yuri kept his eyes on his phone as the R.V. plodded along on weather-worn and unkempt back-roads, with Jiro on his lap between his arms. Makkachin panted contentedly from his space between the two big chairs while Viktor drove, making their careful way back to the old skating rink. It was harrowing at times, with the road being so narrow in places, but the camper's low center of gravity kept the whole thing from feeling like it would tip over at any moment; the behemoth vacation-mobile was their proverbial fortress.

The rink hadn't even come into sight yet when Yuri saw 'No Service' change over to having a signal. He quickly clicked over into his text message panel and sent a message to his in-law, [Hey...any word?]

No answer came for the moment, and the R.V. slowly started turning down an even narrower road that lead towards the decaying skate-plaza. Yuri didn't see the little jumping dots until they were practically parked already, but then the 'word' came.

[You can go.]

"Huh?" Yuri blanched out loud, "We can what?"

"What can we what?" Viktor repeated, putting the massive camper to a stop across a number of pock-marked parking spaces. He spotted his husband's phone lifted for him to see, and he read the message for himself, "Čto èto voobše značit?" He grumbled.

"Viktor, use your English words."

He shook his head and repeated himself, "Sorry...got myself into the mindset. I was asking what it meant."

Yuri felt the phone buzz in his hand, and he turned the phone around again to read it.

[He's not going back to the rink just to say goodbye. Sorry, kids.]

It was strange for Yuri to feel his heart sink a little, but he let out a sigh and unbuckled his seatbelt. He lifted Jiro up into one arm and went across the open space Makkachin was lying in, lifted the arm-rest, and plunked himself gently down across his husband's legs.

"Yuri...?"
He hesitated for a moment, "...I'm not...really sure how much you had your heart invested in this, but...Kon's not coming." He explained, showing off his phone again just as another message came through.

[I only talked to him for a couple minutes before it seemed like he'd made up his mind. He said he was pushed to his breaking point while you guys were there. He...said he tried his best, keeping the two of you compartmentalized as separate people, but the more comfortable you got, the more he felt like he was enabling sinful behavior.] Mikhail wrote, [By the end of it, he told me that he felt like he was being asked to choose between his son and his faith...and his faith isn't leaving to go to Vienna tomorrow.]

[So...you can go.]

"He can't even be bothered to tell me to my face?" Viktor growled.

"...Do you want me to do some digging on this?"

The silver Russian hesitated, but then closed his eyes and shook his head, "...Why bother."

"Okay." Yuri said quietly, carefully reaching one arm around his spouse's head to offer a hug, "I'm here; whatever you need."

"...Let's just go. There's nothing left for either of us here now." Viktor said grimly.

The younger figure held on for a moment longer, but then nodded and stood back up again. He put the arm-rest down and carried Jiro back over to his original seat, scratching Makkachin's head as he sat down. The R.V. started moving as soon as his seatbelt clicked, making the wide turn to go back towards the parking lot exit.

Mikhail looked down at the lack of a reply to his last message. He reached one hand up to rub the back of his neck nervously, "...I wonder how they're taking it?"

The dots on his screen manifested almost as soon as he finished speaking though, and he held the phone with both hands as he anxiously waited for the message to come through. To his disappointment, all that appeared was, [Thanks for your help. Sorry for the trouble. We'll see you in Austria.]

The elder Russian just frowned, but then drooped and sighed, rising back up again with a hand though his hair. He held his palm there for a moment and scratched the back of his head, but soon let go and turned his phone face-down to set it onto the small table next to the couch he was sitting on. Next to him, Minako looked up, and rubbed his shoulder to get his attention.

"Not a good day for the boys, huh?" She wondered, turning to press the side of her head against that same spot, and looked back at the small television across from them.

"I'm really not sure." He answered, and slouched a bit to wiggle under the blanket that went over them both, "I thought this would go very differently. Now I feel like I dragged you here for nothing."

"Dragged me to my own apartment?" She retorted, "I don't mind."

"I really expected this would go well into the night." Mikhail added, moving his socked feet to try to get them under the blanket as well, but resigned to the fact that the blanket wasn't long enough to reach them where he'd crossed his ankles on the small table ahead of them, "But I guess it's not so bad to get away from the kids for a minute."
"Do you think this could've ended any differently for them?" Minako wondered, looking back up at the man again from where she held his arm.

"I...honestly don't know." He looked down, "Maybe I had too much faith in Kon wanting to hang onto Viktor. When he said that Viktor was leaving again though...I guess it made sense. He spends so much time secluded in those woods, barely another soul to talk to as it is, and probably less now that the mill's shuttered...being thrown into the middle of Viktor and Yuri is probably too much of a shock to his system."

"Is he going to be okay out there by himself...?" Minako asked, sitting up a little to reach for her kocha, and sipped at it carefully, blowing on the steamy surface first, "No wife, no kid, no neighbors."

"He has a new dog now...? And that big beast of a horse..." The Russian shrugged, "I'm worried about him though. I once teased that I'd go out there one day and find him frozen to his kitchen table with half a glass of alcohol in front of him...but now I'm nervous that I just gave him ideas."

"Isn't it a crime to end one's own life in that religion?"

"Yeah."

"And he gave up his only son for his faith."

"Slowly failing to care for himself wouldn't quite be the same." He explained, and dropped his head back down to the plush cushion of the couch behind himself, "...I don't want to have to go out there just to check on him."

"Then just call him once in a while." Minako suggested as she set the tea-cup down, and moved that hand across the blanket to pat where she felt one of the man's legs, "I used to call my mom once every other week or so."

"Used to?" Mikhail quirked a brow.

"I'm not as clingy as I used to be. It was more during the time when I was traveling for my ballet, and wanted a reminder of home."

"I see..."

"...You gonna be okay, hun?" She wondered, moving that hand up again to brush a few silver-white hairs out of the Russian's face, "I'm sure things will be fine."

"I'm just thinking about the boys now." Mikhail turned his head on the couch-plush and looked to his lady love, "I...really don't know what they're thinking or how they're taking this. I think that bothers me more than the rest, in an immediate sense... I honestly can't cobble together a prediction for how Viktor's dealing with this. It already didn't make a lot of sense why he was trying so hard to make it work. What's he gonna do now that it hasn't?"

"That's up to him. Yuri will handle it."

"Yeah..."

The R.V. was well on its way back to St. Petersburg, and well away from the nearest cell tower, but the 2 hour drive already felt like it had been 10. Yuri idly pet Jiro where the pup had fallen asleep...
against him, rubbing his thumb back and forth across the Akita's side. He glanced aside to his spouse, and saw that same empty look on the man's face as had been there since they left the rink.

I wish I knew what to say to him... He thought, and looked forward again, watching the Russian wilderness go by through the big front windows, Did he really think Kon would come around...? He looked up at the edge of the windshield, where the glass met the solid plastic and metal of the R.V.'s roof, When I went to talk to him in the truck...I felt like I was telling him to prepare to say goodbye. All this time, it was my fault that any of this even started, because I went behind Viktor's back to meet with Mikhail...but the longer it went on, the less I could support my own position of wanting to keep family in his life... He got Mikhail, and that went south for a bit...but I don't think Kon was ever going to work out...

A small, old car darted around the icy road to get past the R.V., and promptly went into the ditch on the other side in a snowy wave. Yuri sat upright with a start as he watched it, but then just looked back at Viktor as they went right by; Viktor didn't even look phased by it.

"...We're not going to stop and help them...?"

Slate eyes looked over, then went forward again, "No."

"...But they could be suck out here. What if they can't get their car out of the ditch?"

"What if they try to steal the camper and drive off with our dogs and our stuff?" The Russian retorted, "I don't stop for accidents unless I'm part of them. Not out here; you're just asking for trouble. They only skidded into the snow-bank anyway...they can dig themselves out. Maybe they won't be reckless idiots next time. They shouldn't be driving an antique car like that anyway."

"...Oh..."

Silence overtook the camper again for a little while, and Yuri brooded anxiously. He eventually twisted his head over on the head-rest to look over at his partner.

"Please tell me what's going on in your head, Viktor..." He asked, "I can't tell if you're upset or angry or what."

The older man hesitated a moment, brow furrowing slightly, "...Angry and disappointed."

"Yeah?"

"I really thought I was going to win." Viktor went on, his tone as flat and ambivalent as if he were speaking to a certain unmentionable Canadian.

"...Oh."

"All those insults he used to hurl at me...saying I was nothing more than a prostitute on ice, that I danced for money and fame like a stripper...that I'd let men use me like I was a woman..." Viktor explained, fingers gripping tightly around the wheel, "That no Nikiforov should ever be mounted by another man...as though I was some...kind of animal..."

Yuri felt himself shrinking in his seat.

"He stopped his open hatred for skating after my mother died...but now I wonder...did he ever really stop thinking that I was just some whore with skates?" Viktor asked, watching an oncoming truck carefully, and paused his train of thought until it passed by safely. He shook his head, "...Then I showed up again after 15 years...with a man by my side. No matter how many times
I tried to explain things to him...it never really sunk in. I can only wonder what he really thought of you..."

"Well...I went from some pipsqueak to a pet of yours, then to Tsar Bomba for a few minutes, then to 'a good man,' but maybe he didn't me-"

"I think he meant all those things." Viktor interrupted, glancing aside slightly, "But only when he thought of you as someone who had nothing to do with me. Or, at most, thought of you as my student... Anything more than a strictly professional association was...not something he could process."

"He processed enough that he didn't try to hurt either of us again. I'm grateful for that much."

"Yeah..."

"Viktor, I..." Yuri started again, unsure how to parse his words, and paused to try and figure out how to speak his thoughts. He sat upright in his seat and clicked the controls to raise the back upright again, "...I don't want you to think that you failed here. Getting him to be as accepting as my family was...probably never really in the cards."

"I know."

"Oh..."

It was Viktor who hesitated then, but he grit his teeth and came clean, "I never loved him. I...felt a weird urge...like I was compelled by some force beyond my comprehension that I had to try and make him see what was right in front of him. I got him to admit that he was wrong for hitting me...that he was wrong for hating skating... More than anything though, I...I wanted him to admit that he was wrong for seeing me as some harlot. Every choice I ever made for myself...I second-guessed it because of those words bouncing off the inside of my skull."

"...That's...horrible."

"Does this skating routine make me seem too loose with myself? Does this outfit reveal too much? Is it too flashy? Sometimes I would do shows or costumes that probably pushed the limits, just because I could, as though I was somehow fighting back against what he'd said about me... It became less of a concern as the years went on, but there was always that slight taint in it somewhere, like a hair in my coffee." Viktor sighed to himself, eyelids feeling heavier, "I let myself become goofy and aloof...I put myself out there because I wanted the attention...any attention. If it hadn't been for Yakov, I'm sure I would've gotten into a lot more trouble than I did, growing up. I always needed someone in my life to curtail my worst tendencies."

"...You don't give yourself enough credit." Yuri pointed out, "I'd never have admired you as much as I did if you were a player or narcissistic. Even if you were looking for attention, you did it by being nice to people, by working hard to impress and surprise people. You're the best because of it. Don't let what Konstantin said about you in his rage get you down...because that's exactly what he was wanting to do to you when he said those things."

"...That's another reason why I'm disappointed about all this. I wanted him to see that he had no control over me...but in the end, I left him with the impression that he controlled basically everything." Viktor grumbled, slouching somewhat, "My skating was just a stick in his eye, my success was irrelevant, my accolades meaningless, our marriage was just a twisted rebellion...he took nothing about me seriously. I'm...a complete joke to him. That's why it was so easy to pick his stories over me."
"Well, does his opinion really matter anymore? We're probably never going to see him again."

"...It doesn't...but it still hurts a little." Viktor shrugged, "But...I guess there's one consolation to this whole thing."

"What's that?"

The silver legend managed to smile a little despite the defeat, "Now that we're done...we're gonna go see my real dad now."

Yuri could feel his spirits lift as well, and he nodded enthusiastically, "Yeah, we are."
The plan to rent a car, hitch it to the back of the R.V., drop the R.V. off, and then transfer everything to said rental car, made the trip into St. Petersburg much smoother than the initial arrival had been. The Mazda Grand Touring was a bit different for Viktor to drive, but at least it was easier to maneuver than the house-on-wheels, and Yuri was able to re-establish some semblance of traveling normalcy between them, with their seats close enough for him to rest his hand on his partner's leg again. The next stop was to check-in at their hotel, which, as with the day's other transactions, Viktor opted to deal with on his own.

"I'll leave the keys in so you can keep the heater on, but lock the doors when I leave." He instructed, stopping the vehicle in the hotel's parking garage. As the car clicked into the proper gear, the Russian leaned over the center console for his parting kiss, "I'll be back in a hurry."

With that, Viktor departed in a rush, wanting to return as quickly as possible. Yuri locked the doors as told, and let the quiet ambiance of the radio overtake the smaller space. Makkachin and Jiro panted and looked around while they waited, watching a car or two go by behind them through the multi-level garage. Access to an internet signal made it easy to pass the time catching up on the internet, and Yuri quickly took a photo of the two canines to post onto the 'Pups of Nikiforov' page when he was done with the rest of his feed's 'housekeeping.' He moved on to clear out the expected clutter on his own page; hundreds of comments, replies, tags, and other such things that he never paid too much attention to. He could only wonder what Viktor's feed looked like.

He finally clicked out of his personal account though and logged into the PoN page, doing the same housekeeping there to clean up the page, and moved on to upload the photo he'd just taken. He hesitated to 'check-in' to St. Petersburg though, and simply started typing as he normally would.

**pups-of-nikiforov** Been a busy weekend, but I'm glad we're back in town again. I'm sure the boys are happy to be back, too, since neither of them is used to such expanses of wilderness on all sides. Tomorrow, #JiroAkita will be getting to experience a much fancier train than the ones he's been on in Japan so far. #MakkachinPoodle has been on it before though. I think they'll both like the trip.
@y-nikiforov @v-nikiforov

Once the post was done uploading, he clicked out to check his text messages and voicemails. Nothing out of the ordinary; in fact, nothing at all.

*Other than my family and local friends back home, most calls have been going to Viktor ever since he became my coach. Thankfully, the JSF has been more willing to talk to me about Viktor's skating than the RSF ever was...though I guess, in part, that's because they communicate mostly in Japanese... I wonder if they sent anything?*

He clicked over to his email inbox and saw a handful of emails from the JSF, as expected, regarding generic information about the upcoming Four Continents event, as well as more up-to-date info about accommodations and locations in PyeongChang. He saved the important ones, replied to one requesting an update on the status of his husband's ankle, and then...saw an email he hadn't expected.

*Yakov...? This is from days ago...*

The subject said it all though, [One of you two idiots needs to answer me RIGHT NOW.]
Feeling his heart skip a beat, Yuri sat up immediately and clicked into the message, seeing a broken link to what might've been an image. He tapped it to enable it to load, and spotted what looked like a screen-grab from a grainy video...one of Viktor being pelted with snowballs outside the dog groomer's.

"Oh no...did this go viral...!?" He panicked, scrolling down to read Yakov's message.

*I've been trying to call Vitya all day, but I imagine you two are already out of service range and won't answer until you get back. I can't tell you how bad an idea this whole thing is right now. I wish one of you had the sense to ask me before deciding to just come to St. Petersburg. Tell Vitya to call me when you get back into town. -Yakov Feltsman*

Yuri jumped when he heard the tap on the glass outside the driver's seat, and saw Viktor there as though by providence. He clicked the button to unlock the doors, and the Russian clambered in, phone to his ear already, listening to a conversation that had been going on for a minute or two already.

"Hold on, I'm in the car. It's gonna connect to BlueTooth..." He said.

"Who's that? Yakov?"

"Chris."

Yuri grimaced, "We need to talk to Yako-"

"Am I on?" Chris' voice echoed through the car, and Viktor pulled the door closed.

"Yeah, we can hear you. Say again what you just told me." The Russian explained, pulling his seatbelt across as he set his phone into a thin holder above the radio.

Yuri could feel his guts turning over inside him, and the dread fear of what the Swiss might say, especially given the dour look on Viktor's face. It felt like ages before anyone spoke again.

"The people at Euros wanted to extend an invitation to have you two knuckleheads skate in the Exhibition as guest skaters, but apparently some certain person decided to make Viktor leave his skates at home." Chris said with a tone of scolding, "My dear Yuri, how could you be so cruel?"

Yuri nearly turned into a puddle where he sat, and his ghost threatened to leave him, but at least it wasn't about that topic, and he sat upright again as Viktor keyed the engine on to start moving them,

"Viktor's ankle was hurt last weekend. The doctor said two weeks to recover. I made him leave his skates at home specifically because I had a feeling the Euros managers would want him to skate if they knew he was coming, even if only as a spectator."

"But Euros is two weeks after Japanese Nationals-"

"It's no use, Chris, I already tried that." Viktor lamented, "I even tried sneaking my skates into our luggage but he caught me doing it."

"Coach's orders, no skating until you're cleared by the doctor back home." Yuri insisted, "You messed it up on the Free Skate night. It's a wonder you didn't need crutches to get onto the podium."

"Speaking of the podium..." Chris mused, "How about that Asahi turning up again after so long, huh? I thought he retired for good."

Yuri grumbled and went quiet.
Slate eyes watched him briefly as Viktor navigated to the garage's exit, and back out onto the roads outside, "It's a bit of a touchy subject." He explained on his husband's behalf.

"I'll bet. He stole Silver right out of Yuri's hands." Chris teased, "The three of you looked absolutely irate with one another. Well, not you two to each other, but you get my point."

"Yuri will beat him in Colorado Springs." Viktor explained, "It was a rough weekend before anything even started. Not even Universal Studios cheered him up properly."

"Oh that's right, there's one of those in Osaka."

"We have some souvenirs with us from Harry Potter World." Viktor went on, feeling much more settled since their trip, "I've pegged you as a Hufflepuff like me."

Not even talk of Harry Potter could drag Yuri back out of his own head by that point. There was just too much to think about, and no one's mood was matching his own. He decided it would simply be best to stay quiet after that, and waited patiently for Viktor to drive them to their next stop.

It was practically a torture though.

Throughout the trip, he continuously looked down at his phone, re-reading the coach's words like they'd somehow make more sense the next time...and felt his heart wrench every time his eyes glanced over the grainy screenshot.

...It's hard to tell that it's Viktor...but... I know it's him. That's the dog salon we took Makkachin to...I know that's what Viktor was wearing that day... How did Yakov even find this...? You'd think Instagram would've blown up over it over the weekend, but...I didn't see a thing.

"Right, Yuri?" Viktor's voice suddenly asked, drawing those brown eyes up in confusion.

"Huh...?"

Both he and Chris seemed to laugh, but that only added to Yuri's confusion.

"...What?"

"I think he needs to get to Vienna more than I do." Viktor commented to his friend, "He's so lost in his thoughts that he didn't even hear what we were saying this whole time, and we weren't even being subtle."

"When are you getting on the train tomorrow?" Chris wondered.

"Right after breakfast." Viktor answered, a palpable sense of relief in his voice, "It's kind of weird to be this excited about going to a competition, considering I'm not skating in it."

"You're still the Belle of this Ball, Viktor."

Yuri could practically see the sparkles floating around his husband's smiling face. He turned back to his phone, clicking the screen off to hide the photo, and put the device away...and slumped a bit lower in his seat.

I feel like I'm going to sabotage his happiness if I say something... I don't know what to do... Viktor hasn't smiled like that in a while. I don't...want him to stop...

"Well, I'll try to appeal to the better angels of Yuri's nature, and see if he can't show mercy on me in time for the competition." Viktor went on, turning their Mazda into an older, but still upscale
neighborhood; unlike in other parts of St. Petersburg, the houses weren't squashed up against one another, and the properties looked better maintained, "I'll talk to you later, Chris."

"Salut, Viktor."

"Salut."

The car went eerily quiet after that, leaving nothing but the sound of the engine, and tires on the road, to fill the gap. Not even the sound of Jiro yawning from his cuddle-puddle with Makkachin in the back seat was enough to draw Yuri out of his headspace.

"My love, you look worried." Viktor said quietly, reaching across the center console to rest his palm against the man's leg, and gave it a gentle squeeze, "What's wrong?"

Yuri hesitated, moving only to put his own hand over the one against his thigh, and turned his eyes down to look at them. He thumbed at the golden band around his husband's finger, "...I'm just...tired."

"Yeah." The Russian agreed, turning down yet another street, "A lot has happened today and it's not even 4pm."

"...And it feels like more is coming."

"Yeah." Viktor said, quieter than before, "It's always something."

Yuri turned his gaze aside and furrowed his brow, "...You...huh?"

"What...you think your phone was the only one that caught wind of a cell tower while we were at the rink this morning?" He answered, "I did have a few minutes of uncomfortable separation from you. I had to do something to pass the time, so I wouldn't be tempted to sneak out to my father's truck and eavesdrop."

Yuri just made a face at that, "...Is it weird that I'm glad you're not calling him 'papa' anymore?"

"Any man can be a father. It takes a real man to be a dad...or, a papa, as the case may be." Viktor shrugged, and started pulling the car aside on the road, parking it in front of a long, tall, wrought-iron fence, painted black like the gates surrounding the Summer Garden, "My father quit because I wasn't what he wanted me to be, so he lost the moniker. His loss."

"Yeah..."

"Anyway, we're here."

"Where's here?" Yuri echoed, looking around as Viktor pulled his hand back to unclick his seat-belt. "Come on outside. You'll like it. Maybe you'll even recognize it."

"Recognize it? Viktor, we've never even been to this neighborhood... I have no idea where we are."

"Don't you?"

"I thought we were going to the ri.-"
back of it, and the Akita was set onto the ground, soft black puppy-nubbins feeling the cold and wet
ground.

"Viktor-"

He closed the car door and clicked the key-fob to lock it, making the vehicle beep and flash, "Shall
we?" Viktor asked, offering up his free hand.

Yuri squinted one eye in astonishment, but shook his head and sighed, relenting to his confusion to
take his husband's palm. Makkachin came up beside them as Jiro followed nervously behind, and
Viktor guided them towards the iron gate, pushing down the ornate, curved handle to unlatch it. The
whole thing screeched loudly as it swayed inward, and Yuri stepped through, looking up at the two-
story building with perplexed awe.

The house was styled in tan-brown side-paneling, with faded yellow window-sills all around each
face. The front had a wide garden at its base, with a number of naked bushes sprouting from the
ground in a row. The front door was flanked by in-frame windows, the glass thick and frosted as
much by the ice outside as by the intent of the glass-maker, making it hard to see inside through
them.

Just before they stepped up onto the two steps of the landing though, Viktor paused and nudged Yuri
aside, and guided him to stand just off to the left of the entry path, "Hold your fingers up to make a
box frame." He said, stepping out in front to guide those hands up to take that shape. He then
stepped out of the way and moved beside his partner instead, squinting through one eye to position
those hands properly, "Look through, just so."

Yuri glanced back over his shoulder for a moment, but did as bid and looked through, seeing the
bottom corner of one yellow window, and the branches of a few of those barren bushes, "...I have no
idea what's going on right now, just so you know."

"Hold on. Makkachin~!"

The poodle scampered over, but, so did Jiro. Viktor quickly crouched down and threw the end of
one scarf over his dog's back, and hugged the brown boofer closer, "...Anything?"

Yuri looked on, unsure at first...but then the realization hit, "This is where you took that photo with
Kubochin when you were a teenager!" He looked past his fingers with a deadpan though, "But I still
don't understand..."

"I guess I should've thought to bring you here sooner." Viktor smiled, though his brow was furrowed
behind his bangs, "But for some reason, it never really came to mind in those few months we were
here. We were always at the rink, or at home... But..." He pushed to stand up fully again, and reset
his scarf, "This is the place we need to be right now."

The door behind him suddenly clicked and squeaked open, and when Yuri beheld the person who
came through, everything made sense.

"I could've told you on that first day that it wasn't a good idea to come back to Russia."

"I know, I know..." Viktor whined, leaving the spacious kitchen with two mugs of coffee, and
handed one off to Yuri where he was sitting in the den, "But you know I never listen."

"Of course I know you never listen. I tell people that all the time." Yakov argued loudly, "But I wish
Yuri reached up for the mug being offered to him, and held it carefully as his spouse sat next to him on the big couch. He wasted no time turning in place to drape his legs over Viktor's, and settled in close to blow on the top of the hot drink.

"How could you have possibly know that something like this would happen though?" Viktor asked desperately, "Yuri and I lived here for three months without any problems."

"YOU WERE PART OF THE RSF BACK THEN, IDIOT!"

Viktor just grumbled quietly into his coffee, brow crinkling where he sulked. Feeling Yuri's hand squeeze arm didn't help much.

"Your old house was vandalized the day after the announcement. Your accolades have basically been scrubbed from the Russian skating archive. They consider you a traitor." Yakov went on, a bent tea-spoon in his hand, "This is hostile territory for you now! Vitya!"

"I didn't know it was this bad!" Viktor defended, lowering the mug against his partner's knees, "I thought the heckling on Friday was just an isolated incident... I had no clue about the rest."

"How could you not know...?"

Viktor grit his teeth, lowered and shook his head, "Maybe I've been distracted. I've had other things to worry about than the stuff happening here. You know better than most how many messages I get, too...it's impossible to read all of them. I try to narrow it down to just the ones that come from people I know."

"You should count yourself lucky that this didn't get too far off the rails." Yakov explained, leaning against the kitchen island, "But I can't guarantee that things will go the same way if it happens again."

"I'm not even sure this won't go off the rails." Viktor sighed and lifted his gaze again, taking a careful sip from his drink, "It looks like this video was recorded with a potato; you can barely tell it's me in there at all. It could be anyone. Since Yuri already took Makkachin before this stupidity even started, it would be easy to deny that I'm the one in the footage."

"You're really going to try that again?"

"It worked last year when I blamed my father's attack on a car accident, didn't it?"

Yakov was the one grumbling under his breath then, "This can't keep happening. When I couldn't get either of you on the line, I had a feeling I knew why you were here. It's stupid, Viktor...why are you even bothering?"

"Because he looked like he was trying." The silver Russian said curtly, "I really thought he was on the edge...because why not, right? He gave up his hatred of my skating...he apologized for hitting me..."

"He hit you multiple times, attempted to blind you twice, and poured vodka on your head to make it hurt more." The elder coach corrected, crossing his arms, "The sight of you after the last time put Yuri on the ground."

"He gestured one hand towards the aforementioned Japanese skater, making him open his eyes a bit wider over his cuppa, but Yuri didn't interrupt; he just frowned and gave Viktor a dirty look, as though silently scolding the man for making light of his own description, "You spent the whole last year doing the exact opposite of what I thought you'd do. I know that..."
surprising people is kind-of your thing, Vitya, but this?"

"I wanted him to admit that he was wrong." Viktor argued back, "I wanted to hear him eat his words! I wanted him to feel like the last 15 years of contempt and disgust for me was pointless, because nothing I did ever justified the way he treated me!"

Yuri backed up slightly where he sat, and leaned aside to set his mug on a nearby coffee table. With his hands free, he slid them both over his provoked husband's shoulders and wrapped his arms around the man's head, "Shh."

Yakov shook his head, "I don't think you ever would've gotten that out of him even if you'd attempted it before you got involved with Yuri."

Viktor grit his teeth, crossing his arms defiantly. "You look too much like Mikhail, Vitya." The coach explained, "Konstantin will go to his grave resenting you for that."

"That's not even my fault! If I was a girl I'd look just like my mom."

"Maybe he'd have liked that better."

That just made Viktor sulk even more. "If I'd known as much about your Uncle Mimi back then as I do now, maybe I would've put it together sooner." Yakov continued, trying to unbend the spoon. He gave up and moved over to the ceramic teapot he'd set out, and poured some of the clear-amber liquid into a waiting cup. He used the angled silverware to stir in some sugar and lemon, listening to the clink of metal on the inside of the teacup, "He left Russia before The Fall, and escaped the worst of the devastation that followed. He went to a much better place and achieved great success there...found a woman, had a family, built a life with it all. Then he returned to Russia after the fires were put out by those who were still here, and then basically picked up where he left off with you."

"...That's not how it is between us." Viktor muttered.

"My point is...because of how much of a relationship you had with your Uncle, even back then, you never really had a relationship with your father. He was just this...dark force in your background that haunted you. I watched how much of an impact Konstantin still had on you after I took you in. You spoke incessantly about Uncle Mimi but it was Konstantin who left the biggest impact on you, and I don't only mean that in a literal sense." Yakov went on sternly, still stirring his tea as he came out of the kitchen and found his way to his solo reclining chair, "You were never going to have a positive relationship with that man."

"I didn't want one! Not unless he ate his words and treated Yuri better!" Viktor harped, pulling up slightly from where his aforementioned spouse was still holding onto him, "How could I possibly have a positive relationship with a man who denies half of my life?"

Yakov shrugged and sighed as he sat back, careful not to spill the amber tea, "How could you even try to have a positive relationship with a man who effectively tried to kill you?"

Viktor stared.

"He was easily 6 times your size back then and he hit you with enough force that you went flying across the room. You hit the shoe-rack - something, I should point out, was made of solid wood back
then - with such force that everything fell off of it on impact. The way you screamed when the realization struck that you'd been hurt is something I will remember unto the grave. Have you ever heard a child screaming, Viktor?" Yakov wondered, "Really screaming? Not just throwing a fit because mom wouldn't get them candy...but that true, visceral scream...the kind that gets half a town's attention because you just know that something is truly and horribly wrong."

Yuri swallowed nervously as he listened, and could feel the tension in his partner's frame.

"It's different when you hear it as an adult. When you're old enough to be a parent, and have that instinct to protect a child, at the cost of your own life if need be." The coach continued, sipping lightly at his tea, "It's the kind of thing that makes your heart stop in your chest, and your soul freezes over. It's the kind of thing that...in retrospect...makes me wish I had never given you that message. But...out of respect for your mother, and all that she endured to get you onto the ice...I felt like I had to."

Viktor had no answer to those words. He looked down to where he held his coffee cup over his partner's legs, and watched the liquid rippling against the rim.

"After Cup of China, when you left early to return to Russia and accompany your Uncle to NHK, I never anticipated that you'd want to go back home, too." Yakov continued quietly, "When I learned about everything that happened there, after seeing how you two had brought Konstantin to Japan with you...I wanted to throw Mikhail into the Pacific. I wanted to throw you first, but...I know you didn't go back home to ask your father to watch you skate, so the fact that Konstantin ended up in Sapporo anyway was all Mikhail's doing. I still hold it against him. The only reason that whole thing didn't turn into a catastrophe was because of Yuri." The coach said, turning small eyes towards the younger man, and nodded at him, "You're something of a bear-tamer."

"My love and loyalty to Viktor is worth more than my fear of Konstantin." Yuri answered easily, "I couldn't protect him at the funeral...but I swore that I'd never let that man hurt Viktor ever again. Thankfully, Konstantin never really tried to put his hands on Viktor again after that...but...the emotional toll he took on Viktor's peace of mind instead was getting intolerable. I wasn't going to let it keep happening. We're done with Konstantin for good, now."

Yakov quirked a brow, "...You're what?"

"Yuri gave my father an ultimatum this morning." Viktor explained, a slight tone of frustration on his voice, "To either man up, or we'd go away forever. No more toeing the line..."

Yuri nodded, eyes turned slightly towards his partner, but then looked back to Yakov, "Konstantin chose his prejudices, so we're washing our hands of him."

The elder coach looked on skeptically at his former pupil, "Vitya. You look annoyed about that."

Viktor just huffed a breath, "There are no winners in this. It sucks all the way around. I worked so hard to show him what kind of relationship we could have it he accepted me for who and what I am...but it wasn't enough. The most important part of my life was the most intolerable thing to him. And now..." He grit his teeth and looked down at his coffee cup again, shaking his head bitterly, "I'll never get to see that change in him...to see the moment the lights go on in his eyes, and he realizes how stupid his bigotry is...and how small it makes him look. This guy who values his size and strength above all else...now looks pathetically weak and little..."

"Well, I'm with Yuri on this, Vitya. I know you wanted to prove a point, but it's time to move past it." Yakov advised, "And for your sake...when you leave this country tomorrow morning, don't look back too fondly. This place has turned its back on you. You'll be a Japanese citizen by the end of the
month. Focus on your sport and your art...and remind everyone why you were the five-time consecutive World Champion."

The hotel room door opened, and the lights clicked on, and both dogs were set loose to run inside. One after another, the duo's seven suitcases and carry-bags were hauled up from the bellhop's cart and set within. Viktor dropped a few rubles into the bellboy's hand to see him off, and stepped in to close the door, drawing in a sigh of relief that they were safe and could settle in for the rest of the night. He pulled off his coat and put his other winter-garb away before stepping further into the room to grab his partner's things to do the same. By the time he returned, Yuri had found the suitcase with all their overnight items, and was pulling out the ziploc bags of dog and puppy kibble out, as well as their bowls. He slid in from behind and slouched over his spouse's back, catching Yuri's attention rather easily.

"You wanna call it an early night?"

Viktor nodded against the man's shoulder, "Mhm."

"Alright. Let me feed the boys real fast. We can use one of those aromatherapy bath-bombs you found yesterday."

"Mhm."

Yuri looked back, finding his tired spouse unwilling to let him go to carry on with his chores. Jiro and Makkachin both had drool dripping from their hungry mouths, and Yuri was getting hyperaware of it, "...Viktor...I gotta feed them."

"...Mhm."

"Guess I'll just drag you along."

Viktor smirked at that, "Mmmhm."

And so, Yuri did just that, meandering to and fro across the room to find bowls, fill two with water, and two others with dry kibble with a can of wet into each one. It took a number of minutes to get it all done, but Viktor clung the whole time, until they wound up at the foot of the bed where they'd started. Yuri rummaged around through a white plastic bag and started to examine the different soapy spheres, "...Which one's the sleep bomb?"

The Russian hooked his chin over a shoulder and read each ball as Yuri held them up, looking down again on the third one to confirm...and Yuri plodded them clumsily back to the bathroom. The hot water was started, and the bomb set aside as the tub filled.

Yuri managed to wiggle in place and turned around, resting his forearms on his husband's shoulders, "You ready for tomorrow?" He wondered, trying to lighten the mood, listening to the water rush.

Viktor nodded tiredly, but then said something Yuri hadn't expected, "I want to skate at the Euros Exhibition."
The smell of lavender and chamomile was a balm on Viktor's ragged psyche; Yakov's words, and the morning's turn of events, left him sliding through a depressive mental decline. The most recent bait-and-switch had rendered him blank.

'I want to skate in the Euro's Exhibition.'

'I know you do.'

'...And?'

'And what?'

Viktor had gone quiet after hearing those words; Yuri's lackluster response - lacking an impassioned plea to mind his ankle entirely - had only made things seem worse.

He fought so hard to get to skate at the Final despite his head. I can't blame him...I've seen skaters push through worse. It seems that unless it's the back or legs, nothing can keep a skater off the ice... But my ankle feels more-or-less fine now...and yet I'm too exhausted to even mount a convincing argument over it...

The trip from bath to bed was forgotten as it happened. Pitch darkness greeted the Russian's tired eyes as they opened. All he could sense was the presence of warm bodies all around him; Yuri under the covers, dogs above. It was a bit of a trick to wiggle out from under them all as he turned onto his back, but eventually Viktor made it out, and sat up against the headboard, looking around the dark room as his eyes adjusted. The pups stirred a little from the movement, but they both seemed heedless to it and went right back to sleep. One of Yuri's arms was still draped over him where the younger man was now curled up against his waist rather than his shoulder, and Viktor gently stroked that dark hair, careful not to wake him as he moved around idly.

I wish I could understand when or how my mindset changed... When I started to get invested in this stupid idea that I could make him change... Was it because of what happened at NHK? Or was it while I was still here in Russia...?

Every encounter from the last year flashed through the man's head all at once, but all he was left with was the imagery he'd seen during his SP in Sapporo. Those black, ash-filled tentacles that poured into the rink and made it decay, the chains that held him down...the embers and soot that poured from his mother's ghostly visage as she told him 'You did this.'

I wonder what things could've or would've been like if she hadn't died. If she'd left the house that night and made it to wherever she was trying to go... What would she have done then?

He hesitated and looked down again, barely able to see his partner's outline in the dark.

Where was she trying to go...?

Viktor could feel his legs starting to tingle and itch...but it wasn't from anything pressing against them, or an awkward position he was sitting in. It was the urge to move that was making them feel electrified.
I need to get some air... I can't sleep anyway...

Slowly and meticulously, Viktor moved to get out from under the heavy blankets, careful not to rouse anyone. He grabbed a few pillows to put in his place, and gently set his spouse's arm over them. It was impossible to get too far though before Makkachin noticed him, and Viktor spotted the outline of an upturned head watching him in the dark. He sighed quietly and went back to his search for clothing, seeking out the table where they'd folded and set-aside their things before getting into the tub earlier. He couldn't tell which pile was his own though, and simply gathered them both up, taking them into the restroom, silent as a cat. He quietly closed the door, and waited for the latch to click before turning the light on, and hissed to himself at the brightness. He clenched his eyes shut and went about the business of getting dressed, if only to turn the lights out again, which he ended up doing halfway through the task anyway. He used feel alone to figure out which clothing was his, though by the time he'd managed to sneak out of the room - even though Makkachin whined and wanted to follow - Viktor realized at least half of what he had on was Yuri's. One mismatched sock, a t-shirt, and the hoodie were all unintentionally borrowed. He shrugged and started heading down the hallway, pulling the hood of his husband's sweater up over his head.

With no real plan, nor idea for where to go, Viktor simply meandered around the hotel. Mercifully, it was around 3am, and there weren't many people around aside from staff, but even they were thin in population. He eventually found himself sitting on a window-facing couch in the main atrium, looking out onto the St. Petersburg streets and the lightly falling snow.

I remember seeing this same sight at the Fukuoka airport the morning I arrived in Japan... He thought, eyes fixated on the snow as it passed in front of street-lights outside, That rare April snow-storm that left a foot or more through the Kyushu region... My flight was nearly cancelled outright because of it. Slate eyes went down to the road, and the cars that treaded carefully to get by, Is this what it looked like to you in those final moments...?

He couldn't help but imagine the sight of that old car, and the state it was in just moments after crashing.

Were you awake then...? Did you look up and see the snow falling, only to lose consciousness and never wake up...? Or was it over for you in an instant...?

Viktor slouched and slid down the couch a bit, and drew in a long, painful breath.

You were all alone out there with him for as long as I was gone. Practically my entire life. So many things happened in those years...some to me, some for me...it feels like such a long time, but now that I'm here, in this moment...I feel like I could blink and it would flash in front of my eyes; gone in an instant, and vanish forever.

He pulled his phone out and went to find his profile with the RSF.

'Your accolades have basically been scrubbed from the Russian skating archive. They consider you a traitor.'

'...When you leave this country tomorrow morning, don't look back too fondly. This place has turned its back on you.'

Yakov's words echoed through the young Russian's head, bouncing around repeatedly as that final page loaded. Details for the RSF's 'Team' page loaded, as well as a PDF document that gave a complicated list of all the various national teams. They were listed first by gender, then split into age ranges, and their ranks within those groups. It was easy to see that his own spot had been removed; the boxes had been whited out. Georgi's name appeared after the blank space, being the same age as
himself with exception to a single day's difference. Yurio's name was further down the page in the 11-19 age bracket, first rank.

It's like I don't exist... Viktor sighed quietly and kept scrolling, Like I never existed... All those years of work, all that time I was away...and it's like none of it ever happened. The country I was born and raised in...spent most of my life in...and they've erased me.

He tabbed across to previous seasons, but more of the same was there. His spot was blanked out, leaving an empty white hole where he used to be honored. The RSF page only went back a few years, but it was clear that there would be even more of the same if it went further back. He dropped his head back against the upper edge of the couch and stared vacantly at the vaulted ceiling, phone-hand limp at his side.

Maybe they're treating me this way because I was so good... I thought the worst that I'd ever deal with would be no different than how Yakov treated me...

'Here to beg for your spot back?'

'I don't want to hear it unless you say you're coming back to competition.'

Tired blue eyes closed, and Viktor lowered his face again, looking towards his knees, Yakov was a stern coach...but he always had his focus on the students he had, not on socializing. But even though he gave me the cold shoulder, it's because he wanted me to come back... When it got serious, he was there for me. He even coached Yuri for a day when I had to go back to Japan for Makkachin.

'If you're ever in trouble, just hug him and he'll help you.'

'This place has turned its back on you. You'll be a Japanese citizen by the end of the month. Focus on your sport and your art...and remind everyone why you were the five-time consecutive World Champion.'

Viktor shook his head and pushed up to his feet, pocketing the phone after checking the time again.

Yakov may be the only person in the RSF that'll ever openly acknowledge that I was ever here, or what I achieved while I was here. The JSF can't take credit for, or brag about my history. At least the ISU has the records...but the ISU isn't Russia. I wasn't skating for them. I was skating for my country...a place that has cut me out like a cancer...

He turned on a heel and started heading back towards the elevators, quietly simmering in his growing frustration.

My whole family fell apart because I wanted to skate. My mom died because of it. All that pain and sacrifice for the sake of being part of the RSF, and they don't even have the decency to keep a record of what I achieved for them. And why...because of this?

Viktor lifted his right hand up and looked at his ring, seeing the warped line of his reflection on its curved surface.

My personal life has nothing to do with them! The RSF is as backwards and obtuse as my own father! The RSF, Konstantin...and all those bloody hecklers who think their opinion of me matters in the long run...

The elevator door opened, and the roiled figure stepped inside, clicking one of the floor buttons before backing up against the rear wall. He stuffed his hands back into his pockets and grumbled
What does everyone hope to achieve by attacking me like this anyway...? That I'll leave Yuri and come crawling back, begging forgiveness? Is that what those punks by the R.V. were hoping to do...? To remove Yuri from the equation entirely? It's not like any of them came up to me with that bat...

Thinking those words made a pit in Viktor's stomach deepen, and he moved a hand over it as the elevator came to a stop. The doors ahead of him opened, and he stepped out into the cold concrete parking-garage. The keys jangled slightly under his fingers, and he withdrew them as he circled around to the rented Grand Touring. The garage felt like a tomb; cold and lifeless, empty but for himself. Being inside the car didn't cancel out much of that hollow feeling, but having the engine on dulled it somewhat.

No one knew Yuri and I were coming to Russia... These freaks mobilized fast to catch us coming out of the dog salon... The video they took of their mission that day was awful, too...like it was recorded on something old...so you can barely tell it's even me in there. Maybe that's the only reason why I didn't know about it before...? Chris would've mentioned it if he knew. I would've had messages from here till Tuesday about it if it got out of this city...Mila loudest of all...

He shook his head and drew a sharp breath, but then put the car into gear and started backing out. He carefully turned the vehicle forward again and started heading down the ramp of the multi-level garage, going slow to keep an eye out for drunks and those too tired to be on the road. Thankfully, as before, there wasn't a soul to be seen in the whole ar-

k'THUNK'hnk
SCREEEEEEEEEEEE
RahTHMPPmppmp...

Viktor's eyes were as big as his head as the blur of limbs and hair went rolling off the hood and disappeared from sight. He shook his head and put the car into Park before shoving the door open, "Kakogo čerta èto bylo!" (What the Hell was that!?) He barked, mostly to himself, only to pause in place as he saw a shaky hand come up over the front grill to grab hold of the hood. He growled angrily and stepped out, but only with one foot, standing up through the gap between the roof and the door, "Ostav' menja v pokoe, ty p'jan! Propustite, proč' s dorogi!" (Leave me alone, you drunk! Move! Get out of the way!)

"Where-" The figure started, choking out the words as it stood up from the ground, "Where the Hell are you going!? It's 3AM!"

"Y-Yuri!?" Viktor squeaked in horror. He felt all the blood drain from his face, but he finally got out of the car and rushed forward, helping the younger man to stand up, "What are you doing!? You can't just jump in front of a moving car like that!"

"You answer first!" Yuri argued, trying to dust himself off as the Russian frantically moved all around him, "You explain to me why I was woken up by Makkachin crying at the door because you left in secret! What are you doing!?"

Viktor was taken aback, and the deep pit in his gut filled with guilt instead, "...I...I just needed some air..."

"You're leaving the hotel in our rental to get air!?"
"I needed specific air."

"What." Yuri stared at the man, aghast and confused. He shook his head to collect himself, and pointed a finger directly into the center of his husband's chest, "You can't do this to me. You don't get to sneak out in the middle of the night when you're in an emotionally raw and vulnerable place."

"...I was going to be back..." Viktor answered quietly, eyes down, "I planned on being in bed again before you woke up..."

"So you'd never have to tell me you left!? Viktor!"

The skewered Russian rubbed the back of his neck with one hand, nervously unsure how to proceed, "...I...was going to come back..."

"...Were you though?" Yuri pressed.

"I left all my things with you, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did."

Viktor blinked in confusion.

"You left everything behind...your stuff, me...Makkachin..." Yuri's voice started to crack under the stress, "I can't even think of why you'd be leaving or where you'd go... You just spent all of today being rejected by your own father and then scolded for trying by Yakov...can I really be sure you're going to come back!?"

"That's not-"

"Your mom died in a car accident, after leaving in the middle of the night to drive through snowfall and hard feelings! It's snowing outside right now, it's dark, and you're leaving alone to drive somewhere!" Yuri went on, his heart racing in his chest, "You can't stand there and tell me you were going to come right back!" He couldn't tell anymore if he was angry or desperate, but he could see the blur in his sights even behind his glasses where moisture was building, and he relaxed his grip on the hoodie, "You just told me a few days ago not to abandon you...to stay by you...but you're not even doing that for me right now... Viktor, I can't...do this without you... The optics of this... You didn't even say goodbye...what if you never came back...?" He asked, speaking those last words into his spouse's shoulder.

Viktor wrapped both arms around the younger man, holding tight to spite his guilt, "...I'm sorry...I didn't mean it like this. I just didn't want you to see...and I had to know before we left..."

"See what? Know what?" Yuri pleaded, bare fingers clinging to the back of Viktor's coat, "What could possibly be worth the risk of being on these roads this late at night!?"

"Nothing...I guess..."

"Then come back to bed...! Please!"

Viktor grit his teeth, "I'll probably never get another chance..."

"Or at least take me with you!"

That made his heart jump up into his throat, but Viktor nodded against his partner's frame and
hugged a little tighter. He pulled back after a moment, and offered a light kiss of apology, wet by Yuri's despair, "...Let's go then..."

Without the radio on, the drive was a quiet one. Yuri took the silence to calm his nerves, leaning tiredly against Viktor's shoulder across the center console. There weren't many other cars out, but the light dusting of snow made the roads treacherous anyway, and Viktor went slowly through the city. Their trek took them along the Palace Embankment; a road flanked on one side by the Neva River...and on the other, at one point, by the Summer Garden.

"...I didn't realize we were so close to this place."

Viktor looked aside, then faced forward again to watch the road, "Yeah. The hotel we're at is the Taleon Imperial. It's one of the only hotels in St. Petersburg that's pet friendly because it's managed that way on purpose, rather than being a consequence of bad housekeeping. Why keep the dogs out if there's mice already, right?"

"Right..." Yuri agreed quietly, going back to his headspace.

"So..." The Russian attempted anyway, hoping his husband's nerves were soothed enough by then, "...Are you going to tell me why you jumped on the hood of the car to make me stop? And how you even knew to find me there?"

Yuri hesitated a moment, the fatigue of late-night shenanigans starting to catch up with him, "It was the first place I thought to look after I realized you were gone. I wasn't going to waste time looking around at the other amenities just to check. If the car was still in its parking spot...I was going to wait there just to be sure you never turned up."

"All night?"

"I had hoped you would go back to the room and found the note I left. It asked you to text me if you got back before I did." He answered simply, trying to keep his eyes open, "If you came to the car instead, I'd be there to stop you from getting in. If you didn't turn up at the car, and you didn't message me by dawn, I'd call Yakov so he could call the police."

"I see. Why didn't you just text me though?"

"I did. You never answered. That's why I hauled ass to the garage." Yuri explained, "I forgot what level we parked on, but when I got out, I saw the tail-lights go around the corner to the lower tier. I jumped out of the elevator and spotted you through the divide in the ramps, so I ran after you. I couldn't catch up, so I slipped through the wire barrier between the levels and then ran between the cars that were parked there, and jumped onto the hood. You braked so hard that it knocked me off."

"...Why didn't you just go to the passenger door? I could've seriously hurt you."

Yuri went a bit limp against his spouse's shoulder, feeling his eyes getting heavier. He blinked hard a few times and shook his head, then sat up and reached forward to the glove box, and pulled out the paperwork for the rental. His phone came out soon after, and he took a photo of the unfolded paperwork, then leaned back in his seat to start typing something, "...All I could think of was how you drove right past that car that wiped out when we were coming south again yesterday morning. If I went for the passenger door, you may have not seen that it was me, and sped off...so I went where I knew you couldn't miss me. I lost my grip though and tumbled off the front when you stopped."

Viktor had no response to that, so he moved on to the next question, "...What's with all the typing
suddenly? And the pictures?"

"It's to Mikhail." He answered simply, "I wrote, Hey, it's me. I'm writing this message as a scheduled email, so if you get it, that means I wasn't able to cancel it. I've attached a photo of the rental documents for our car. We're staying at the Taleon Imperial Hotel. Their number according to Google is +7 (812) 324-99-11. Please get Jiro and Makkachin and bring them home. Obviously, if you get this message, I won't have any idea what's happened or why, but Yakov told us the old house was vandalized and Viktor says he needs to see it, so that's where we're going as of me writing this. It's 3:30am and I did ask Viktor not to go because it's late and it's Russia, but he insisted, so I made him take me with him. I hope we can tell you what happened soon. Thanks, me."

Viktor made a face, "Are you that worried about my driving?"

"No." Yuri answered flatly, the swoosh sound-effect of a timed email going out resonating through the cabin like an airplane flying overhead, "You got us around with one eye before and we didn't get into any wrecks. I trust your driving implicitly. It's everyone else that scares the Hell out of me...and quite honestly, between your mom and Asahi's boyfriend, I'm not taking any chances."

"...Right."

There was quiet in the car again as they made their way out of the city center, and Yuri put his phone away again before settling back down against that shoulder. He idly watched the windshield wipers as they brushed snow away, and carefully followed any and all approaching headlights. As they finally started making their way down more familiar streets, he sat upright again and sucked in a nervous breath.

Viktor looked over uneasily.

"...Yurio once told me...about how you had the whole world in the palms of your hands, but that you were losing your inspiration because people weren't as surprised as they used to be. But...when I hold the world in my hands, it's not because of the skating, or what other people think..." Yuri explained, staring forward into the night. He watched as their old roadway came into view, and the car came to a slow stop, easing to a stop next to the sidewalk. When they were motionless, Yuri twisted in his seat, and put both of his hands onto his husband's arm, holding it there over the center console, feeling the warmth of fingers curling around a few of his own; he made sure to keep those slate eyes on him, and the empty black void of the old house behind his spouse, "...This isn't the first time you've run off before. You've always come back. If it wasn't late-night sake-runs in Hasetsu, then it was to hang out with Chris on the roof-top pool in Barcelona while I slept-off my jet-lag. I trust you. I have no doubts about you. But that was before...everything else. Before these rings and...before the funeral...before you got fired by the RSF. I know how much this year has tested you...how much it's tested us...but please try not to forget..." He lifted his hands and put them on either side of his spouse's head, "...I have my entire world in the palms of my hands right now, and I'm trying to be strong... But I'm begging you...never, ever leave me again without saying goodbye first. After what we've gone through, even just in the last 24 hours...the idea of you running off and me never seeing you again is just...too much."

"...I remember telling you much the same thing in Detroit." Viktor answered quietly, "But I never wanted to put you into a position where you had to feel that way. I'm...really sorry...for being selfish."

"...So am I..." Yuri answered, leaning forward as he felt his husband do the same, and lightly touched their foreheads together, "...It's...a lot harder than I ever realized...to be so close to someone that you can't even think in terms of just yourself anymore...it's always us or we. Maybe it's because
you're my **first** for everything...or maybe it's because I haven't hit a breaking point like you have...but I'm hoping this is as close as I ever come. I don't ever want to feel this scared or unsure again...so unless we **have** to come back here for Rostelecom or Worlds...please...let this be the **last** time... **This isn't home anymore.**"

Viktor half-closed his eyes, and looked down. He brought up a hand to clasp over one pressed to the side of his face, and rubbed his thumb over a few fingers there, "I feel like I've just become some huge burden to you... I'm entirely dependent on you for everything now...more like your **kid** than your **husband**."

"**You're not a burden...**" Yuri reassured, voice still ragged from sleeplessness and worry alike, "*And I don't see you as dependent on me at all. These changes were forced onto you...and the end result is because of your merits, not mine. I'm sure every other country, especially France, was ready to pick you up after what the RSF did...the JSF is just the one that stood the best chance.***"

"Yakov was right, you know... The RSF removed all mention of me from their site. It's just white blanks where my name and record used to be." Viktor sighed, leaning slightly further as he felt his head pulled into a hug against one shoulder, "I feel like they just wiped out my whole life. Everything I worked so hard for...everything I sacrificed to get here..."

"**The RSF is going to pay for it, one way or another.**" Yuri explained, softly stroking his hand across silver hair, "*The rest of the world knows.***"

"...I'm..." Viktor sighed quietly, "I guess I'm just glad my mom didn't have to be here for this. As much as I'm feeling sorry for **myself** right now...she's the one that really suffered to help me get to where I am. If she hadn't lied to cover for me, if she'd never told Yakov to take me...if she hadn't been willing to let me go...I don't know where either of us would be now."

"**Maybe you can dedicate your Euros Exhibition to her.**" Yuri suggested, sliding his wet cheek aside to pull back, and looked on that pale face before him, "*Or make up something entirely new. Not as shade against Russia - letting you skate at all is a big middle-finger from Europe as it is - but something beautiful to mark the loss of someone who supported you.***"

"...You'd...let me skate something, even with my ankle...?"

"...**Maybe you can choreograph something without jumps.**"

"**Or I can have you jump for me.**"

Yuri nodded, and reached one arm up to rub his face on a sleeve, "*Anything you want. For now though...*" He paused, and looked into those slate eyes, "**Steel yourself...you're not going to like what you see.**"
There wasn't a great need for light to make it possible to see the extent of the damage to the house. The dull illumination from nearby street lamps was enough to creep into the black hole where it once stood, casting every lump and bump in a subtle glow. Viktor stood at the edge of the road, his back to the rental, and drew in a shaky breath as he looked at the barren heap where he'd once lived. He couldn't move his eyes away even as he heard Yuri coming around to stand at his side, but he held tight when he felt warm fingers slide through the fist he kept balled up in his pocket.

"...It's...all gone." Viktor said quietly, the heavy feeling at the front of his head getting worse, "...Every beam...every wall... It's just...cinders and ash now."

Yuri held his tongue, but that didn't stop him thinking, *Yakov said this place was vandalized...but this is arson. Maybe to Yakov it's the same thing...but maybe this...was just a cover for what really happened.*

"I bought this house after my days in Bordeaux...to prove to Yakov that I wasn't going to leave again." Viktor explained solemnly, keeping his voice low so as not to draw attention from sleeping neighbors, "It was never much to look at from the outside...but Yakov and I fixed it up on the inside, so it would be nice. The way I decorated it, with all the new and modern designs...Yakov joked that it was like a time machine into the future. Step out of the Soviet Union and into the new world..."

Quietly, Yuri followed his partner forward and through the gate, snow crunching underfoot. The remains of the single-story house were piled up in heaps of burnt wood, drywall, and scorched concrete where the foundation could still be seen. The bare skeleton of the building - still standing, if only barely - made it easier than otherwise to figure out the house's floor-plan, even though it was charred and blistered black. The support struts looked fragile enough to crumble under the weight of the night's light snowfall, so Yuri wouldn't let them get any closer; he kept them by the front stoop...that same half-step that they'd had to work together to get Viktor's backed-up mail crates over to push inside. It was there that their Duetto costumes had been delivered, too, before Yuri even knew what they were.

"It's hard to believe this place is really gone." Viktor commented quietly, looking up at the blackened remains of his front door, and the shell of the front of the house where it went to the edges of the first big windows. Glass was shattered all over, but only a few sections were angled well enough to be seen above the snow, "...It just looks like the hollowed-out carcass of some fantasy villain's lair now."

"You're not a villain." Yuri tried to reassure.

"...It sure feels like I am. Here, at least." Viktor answered, shaking his head woefully, and turned off from the walkway to step around the perimeter of the smoldered husk.

Yuri looked at the light-colored remnants of a section of the entryway as they walked; he was sure he could see the faint color of spraypaint on its surface, mostly burned away by the charred edge above it.

*I don't even want to know what was here before... Maybe the arson was providence, done to erase the words that were scrawled across the front so no one else would see.*
He turned his eyes back to his partner, and felt his heart drop to see the look on Viktor's face. Everything from rage to despair was painted on it. "We should go..." Yuri suggested quietly, trying to nudge the Russian back towards the car, but Viktor held fast where he was.

"This country...is really doing everything it can to erase me, and everything I stand for..." He whispered, "Using photos that don't show our ring-bearing hands. Refusing to recognize our marriage by continuously referring to you by your old name. Firing me so low-key that some people may not even realize that's what made me join the JSF. Blanking out my name from all the PDFs online, as though I never skated for them at all. What else could they do to me!?"

"Don't say it." Yuri muttered.

"...Ask for all my Nationals medals back!?"

Yuri grimaced, Ahhh he said it... He reached his arms around the man's frame and held him close, "Viktor, if Yakov hadn't mentioned the house, we wouldn't even be here, and we wouldn't know what happened. I know it's hard to look at, but don't forget...you sold this place to Mikhail months ago."

"Someone burned it down because I used to live in it though... "

"How can you even be so sure that anyone burned it down? If it's been standing empty all this time, maybe something just short-circuited and no one was here to stop it till it was out of control." Yuri rationalized, rubbing one hand across his husband's back.

"It's the principle of the thing though... " Viktor half-heartedly argued, fighting back to need to cry, "What if we did still live here? What if we just lost everything...? What if Makkachin or Jiro, or one or us was stuck inside and- "

Yuri moved one hand over the anxious man's mouth, and shook his head, "That's dangerous, worrying over stuff that could've been. This isn't the dodged-bullet you think it is... You have a home still, with me, in Japan. We may have come here for a little while, but...Hasetsu has been home to the both of us for a couple years already; we're safe there." He pulled back and pressed his palms against his partner's pale face, sliding silver bangs out of the way as he went, "There's nothing wrong with feeling sad that a place you made so many memories in is gone - I grieve with you - but you don't need this kind of negativity going forward. Remember this place for what it was when we were here, not for how it is now. We didn't lose anything in this."

Viktor looked forward, wanting to agree but unable to get over that threshold.

"You've been going through a lot of really horrible things for the last few weeks," Yuri added, "Building up gradually like a pot of water being put over a fire...every time something else happened, it just stoked the fire to get a bit hotter. Things like the RSF firing you, or that whole kerfuffle at Nationals with Asahi and I...coming back here to see if your father would warm up to the idea of us at all, only to be summarily rejected through a mediator...the hecklers who spooked us both, and now this..." He nudged his head towards the charred rubble, "The water is boiling now. You've been stewing in it long enough. It's time, Viktor...time to let it all go."

"...I wish I could just do that..." The despondent Russian sighed and looked away, "But I can't...even form words to describe how all of this..."

"It's enough to make a person want to quit." Yuri nodded, and again tried to nudge his partner back towards the car, this time with a little more success, "I've been there before...I get it... But none of this is your fault. You're just living your life, doing what makes you happy... If certain people in Russia want to get offended by that, it's on them. You're amazing, Viktor, but not even you have the
power to make others feel a certain way. They choose it for themselves.” He explained, moving his spouse around the house, through the gate, and back to the driver's side door. He reached into the man's pocket to rummage for the keys. When he found them, he pulled the door open, and eased him inside, even pulling the seatbelt across to click it into place before offering the keys again.

Viktor cupped his hands over his lap, and felt the links descend into his palm, followed by the feeling of Yuri's hand closing his own fingers over the metal.

"Keep your chin up, Viktor. The bad will pass, and we will have happier times ahead." Yuri suggested as he leaned forward, but waited a few inches away to give his partner the option of deciding whether or not he was even in the mood for a kiss right then.

Anxious and getting more exhausted by the moment, Viktor seemed to hesitate, but eventually he nodded, and leaned forward as well to find a soft, quick kiss between them, "...Sorry...to drag you out in the middle of the night like this..." He said sullenly, "I think I'm too tired to process all this stuff..."

"We can go over it a bit more on the train if you want later." Yuri offered, "And don't be sorry. I understand now what you meant when you said you needed specific air earlier. I should've suspected that you would have wanted to come here, and see what Yakov meant." He leaned inward again to set one last kiss against his husband's brow, then pulled back to push the door closed and head around to his own side. The engine came alive as he reached for the handle, and quickly got in, more than ready to feel the warmth from the heating vents on his skin, "Let's just get back, slow and careful. You need a good cuddle with Makkachin."

The front sliding door slammed open, and Yurio stood in the middle of it, shovel in hand, growling to himself. It was almost like adding salt into the wounds of his pride that he spotted Hana there in the entry-hall, as no doubt, it meant her human was nearby. The pup wagged her tail and turned her gaze away, and Yurio shoved the door closed behind himself. He kicked his boots and winter-wear off as quickly as he could, stowed them in the same haste, and moved away before he could be inflicted with more than just the sound of Asahi pulling his shoes on. He made an easy B-line towards the men's changing room, and started grabbing towels...just in time to hear his ring-tone chiming from his hoodie's front pouch.

"Who the Hell...?" He wondered angrily, pulling it out to see the name listed on the caller ID. His rage-face turned to confusion, and he accepted the call, "...Isn't it damn near 4am for you right now?"

"Hi to you too." Yuri grimaced, speaking somewhat meekly, "I have a favor to ask. Well, not just me, but you know what I mean."

"What?" Yurio asked stiffly, sitting roughly on the singular bench in the middle of the bin-room, one arm folded across his lap and the towels he'd placed on it.

"I need you to get the spare key to the house from my mom. I made Viktor leave his skates behind and now it turns out we're gonna need them. Can you get them and bring them with you when you come to Vienna?"

The teen deadpanned, "...What on God's green earth could Viktor need his skates for at the European Championship? He doesn't skate for Russia anymore...or did he forget that, too?"

"He didn't forget, jeeze." Yuri huffed, staring at his phone for a moment before putting it back against his ear, "Are you okay? You sound peeved."
That time it was Yurio to deadpan his phone, and he hesitated to answer. He stood up for a moment to check around the changing room, checking to see if anyone was nearby, or in the shower room. It looked clear, so he returned to the first chamber, and put his back to the door so no one could barge in, then put the phone back to his ear just as he heard Yuri saying his name again, "I am. I fucking hate it here."

"Eh?" Yuri gaped, "...Do you want me to put you on speaker so Viktor can hear?"

"What's going on?" The aforementioned Russian wondered.

Yuri put a finger over the mic to answer, "Yurio says he hates it at Yu-Topia."

"Eh?"

"Right?" He turned back to the phone, hearing the answer as soon as he did, "...Okay, give me one second. I'll connect my phone to the car's Bluetooth thing." He explained, clicking out of the call to seek his phone's Settings. A few seconds later, he saw that his phone was connected, "Can you hear me?"

"Da."

"Privet, Yuri." Viktor greeted quietly.

"Hey."

"Sooo...what's wrong?" Yuri asked nervously, "Why do you hate Yu-Topia?"

"It's not Yu-Topia. It's this...that fucking guy you people brought here."

"Asahi?" Yuri echoed incredulously, "What's wrong with him? What'd he do?"

Viktor could feel his jaw clench.

"He's just getting everything fucking handed to him on a silver goddamn platter. The old man's spending every waking second doting on him. He spent thousands on him in the last few days...clothes, new guitar gear, they put a fucking lock on the room upstairs that Viktor used to stay in-"

Slate eyes opened wide, then narrowed into a sneer as Viktor heard it.

(Internal screaming.)

Yuri reached across the center console to press his hand on his husband's arm to soothe him, "Easy; you knew it would happen eventually."

"What, Viktor hates it, too?" Yurio asked grimly.

"Sort of. Go on though."

The Russian Tiger felt at least a little vindicated then, and relaxed his stance, sliding down the door to sit on the floor at its base instead, "Yeah, so...clothes, guitar shit, they gave him Viktor's room, and my room by extension...they bought him a brand new fucking phone, too, and they've been driving him all over the fucking city like some damn celebrity who needs his goddamn handheld like some child." He snarled bitterly, "Meanwhile, the old man's put me to work like I need more stress in my life, and is basically framing it like I have no choice! This is the second day in a row he's made me shovel the entire parking lot! My fingers are red."
Yuri raised a brow, "...I've shoveled the parking lot before. I just sat in the onsen after to warm up again. Even Viktor helped once or twice."

"That's not the point." Yurio said angrily, holding his phone out in front of him and pointing at it like Yuri's face was right there, "He's making me do it like he'll pull his sponsorship if I don't, but he's not making Saito do a goddamn thing."

"Didn't you and my Uncle have an agreement that he was basically doing everything short of adopting you...?" Viktor wondered carefully, "I mean, you're not just a skater he's sponsoring...he's kind of your de-facto dad."

"That's not the point!" Yurio argued again, "Who the Hell is this Saito guy that makes him so fucking important that he's getting a free ride when I'm being made to work!?"

"Asahi got the short stick in life." Yuri attempted to explain, "He lost everything after Nationals two years ago...he lost what little he got back right after Nationals this year. Cut him a little slack...he had further to go than you did to get back to a sense of normalcy."

"Mikhail's not even expecting Saito to pay him back once those goddamn fan donations are processed! He just gave him all this shit entirely for free!"

"He gave you everything for free." Yuri pointed out, "He basically became your guardian just because we asked him to, even though he barely knew you at the time. He paid for the surgery to fix your finger after you broke it on the tile wall in your bathroom at Worlds, and kept it secret for ages. He ferried you back and forth from Russia to Japan just cuz you asked, paid for you to talk to a professional about your old anger issues...and he invited you into his family. I know it can seem like Asahi's getting a lot of attention right now, but...Mikhail's just a generous person; he bought Viktor's old house, shipped the Audi to Japan, and bought Konstantin a brand new truck, just because. Asahi happened to need more than you did, materially speaking. All he had were the clothes he took with him to Osaka."

"I feel like I'm being left behind." The teen said weakly, wrapping an arm around his legs as he put his forehead down against his knees, "I just got here and now Saito's totally taken over everything."

"It's not really our place to say anything about what Saito's gone through, but I can assure you that it's a lot more than you have." Viktor explained, "I'm sure if he had the option, he'd switch places with you in a heartbeat. I mean...you had to grow up and provide for yourself and your family before you were 10. Saito never got the chance...he was sheltered, threatened, and basically extorted by his family, and worse. We realized at Nationals that his parents wouldn't even let him have something as basic as skating sponsors...they controlled absolutely everything."

"Why do you even care so much to defend him if you can't even stand the idea that he's in your old room?" Yurio shot back, "You shouldn't even care about a place you haven't lived in for so long."

Yuri lifted his head and made a face, hiding behind the glare on his lenses. He tilted slightly and looked over his frames at his partner, and gestured at the stereo, wordlessly saying 'see?'

Viktor huffed, "I have my own issues with Saito."

"So you hate him."

"I don't...hate him." The silver Russian grumbled, sulking over the steering wheel a little as it gripped it with both hands, "It's complicated."

"Explain."
"Mmmnhhhh..."

"Viktor."

Yuri sank back against his seat and crossed his arms, "We had some problems with him at Nationals."

"I know that."

"No, you don't." He guffawed, staring at the digital display on the stereo face again.

"What then?"

Yuri grit his teeth, "...Asahi and I have history and it just kind of came to a head in Osaka. We sorted it out. That's all. The point is that if we can be on civil terms with him even after the actual problems we had directly with him before...you should be able to tolerate him, too. Your problem with Asahi is actually a problem with Mikhail."

Viktor pursed his lips as he considered jumping in again, but then just sat back and shrugged, "At the risk of sounding super fake...you could actually end up being friends with him. You thought Otabek's DJ'ing side-job was pretty badass, but Saito actually plays..."

"He owns a guitar. I have yet to hear him play a goddamn thing. He barely talks as it is, and generally speaking, only to Okukawa and the old man." Yurio shot back, "And yeah, you sounded insincere as Hell."

"I tried." Viktor shrugged again.

"If it makes you feel better, Asahi barely speaks to anyone." Yuri added, "He wouldn't socialize at all at Nationals. He basically avoids interacting with people and he has no friends."

"So what does he think of you two?" Yurio huffed.

The duo grumbled a little, "...Benevolent adversaries." Yuri answered.

"I wish you guys would just tell me what happened."

"It's not worth the headache of what might happen if you knew." He explained quickly, "He's already suffered enough for what he did. I've forgiven him. I won't let him be punished more for it."

"What, did he kiss you or something?"

Viktor nearly choked as he coughed, and on instinct slammed on the brakes, putting the Mazda into an awkward forward slide as it came to a slow stop on the mercifully-empty 4am road. He pounded his fist against his chest to catch his breath, and wiped the tears from his eyes. Yuri just deadpanned him the whole way.

"...Jesus Christ." Yurio's voice sounded, "You two are shit at keeping secrets."

"I didn't say anything." Viktor harped between coughs, trying to get the car moving again, "I confirm nor deny anything."

"Well that just means he did it. Do I need to beat him up for you?"

"NO." They both barked in answer.
"I just said I didn't want to say what happened cuz I already forgave him for it!" Yuri grimaced, "He's got more important things to deal with than a stupid mistake he made in the heat of an argument; something he's already made amends for!"

Yurio just scowled as he stared at the opposite wall.

"Anyway..." Yuri tried to regain his zen, "Talk to Mikhail about what you said to us. He may not even realize how you feel because he's so focused on getting Asahi out of the woods. He may just think you're cranky cuz you don't want to shovel snow."

"Mmhh..."

"And if you can get my skates, we'll take you out somewhere nice when we all meet up again in Austria." Viktor offered, "Just the three of us, like old times."

The teen seemed to perk up slightly to hear it, "...Seriously?"

"Yeah, I think that sounds like a great idea." Yuri agreed, "We'll be there by tomorrow night. We'll find something fun. We could use it, too."

"...Fun? Why? Did Russia suck?"

Yuri drew a nervous breath, but then nodded and reached back across the center console, cupping his hand over his husband's leg to ground himself, "...It's a long story. We're about to pull into the hotel, so we'll have to tell you later. Like you said, it is basically 4am..."

"As long as you promise to tell me."

"I'll tell you what... We'll promise to give you all the details about what happened, if you promise to talk to Mikhail and get your thing with Asahi sorted out." Yuri bargained, "Oh, and get Viktor's skates. Deal?"

Yurio rubbed his chin, but then nodded, "Alright... I'll hold you to it."
The duo practically dragged their feet through the hotel's parking garage, and up to their room, each nearly bowled over by anxious and excited dogs when they finally stepped through. Viktor did his best to calm Makkachin's wiggles and whines, and Yuri did the same to settle Jiro's puppy-barks before neighbors could complain. Only once the two canines were convinced that neither of the humans would leave again did either of said humans consider undressing from their many layers.

Yuri sat on the end of the bed to coo his Akita for a few more moments as Viktor went by to hang up his jacket and scarf, "Half of our clothes are mixed up." Yuri commented, massaging a hand over his puppy's head rhythmically, "Did you change in the dark or something?"

"Hm..." Viktor huffed a tired laugh, "Yeah, actually... I tried it with the lights on but my eyes wouldn't adjust fast enough, so I cut them off again and grabbed things." He explained, unzipping his husband's hoodie to peel it off as well. As he returned to look towards the man it belonged to, he noticed the hand-written note that had been left behind on the entertainment stand, and reached to lift it up. 'VIKTOR, CALL ME RIGHT NOW, IT'S IMPORTANT.' it said. He made a sad face at that and sighed, crumpling the note to cast it away, "...I really thought the dogs would be okay if you were still here."

"The saying, 'you're not my real dad' seems apt in this case." Yuri shrugged; Jiro was finally quiet where the pup sat on his lap, lulled into complacency by the massage of head-scratches, "Makkachin knows you're his person. Maybe he got the same vibe I did."

"Was it really so terrible...?" The Russian wondered.

Yuri grumbled a slight whine under his breath, "...Yeah."

That just made Viktor feel worse again, "It hadn't even occurred to me that I wouldn't come back. I was just...going to survey the damage. I thought if I didn't go now, I'd never get the chance again, either because the vandalism would be cleaned up by the time I could come back, or that...I simply never would."

"Yakov should've never said anything." Yuri chided, setting his puppy aside enough that he could start to undo the front of his coat, "You didn't need to hear about it, and you really didn't need to see it either."

"Maybe..."

"After the hecklers, and knowing already how dangerous these roads are...I was really scared." Yuri went on, finishing the last of the zipper and unhooking it from the bottom, and shrugged the vestment off his shoulders, "All I could think about was your dark mood since yesterday morning...and the freakish similarity to the story of your mom's death."

"Dark mood?" Viktor echoed, collecting the jacket from around his husband's hips to put it away with his own.

"You've barely said a word in response to what Konstantin decided, or the way in which he did so. Everything you have mentioned since then has basically just been about how the RSF and Russia on a whole has treated you."
Hesitating with his arms in the closet, Viktor felt the pit in his gut open wide again, and he looked down as his hands slid down the sleeve before him, "I guess I'm just...trying to figure out how I really feel about it." He explained, "I know that I'm angry because I didn't get what I wanted out of it...but there's something else; I can't quite put my finger on it. Irritation that he wouldn't tell me himself? ...There's part of me that feels guilty because...I have this small sliver of doubt about my Uncle. I know in my head that he had no reason to lie, but I still can't help but feel like there's this shred of potential that he did, knowing - or maybe betting on the idea - that my father doesn't have my direct contact information."

"I don't doubt him on this." Yuri reassured, patting the bed next to himself opposite where Jiro was already sitting, and waited for his partner to take the seat before continuing. He reached for the man's hand and held it close, "I think Kon had just enough shame left in him, that he couldn't stand to see the disappointed look on your face if he told you in person that he didn't want to keep trying. You've said that he described you as looking like your mom...maybe he felt like he would've been telling her that he failed in her last wishes."

"Maybe..." Viktor shrugged, "But he's also said that he doesn't believe she's watching him. In the weird way that he believes in those things...my mom's spirit is somewhere else now. She isn't looking down from on high to check on what he's up to...or me...or anyone."

"Is that what you believe?"

There was a reluctant pause, but Viktor shrugged again, "I tend to think of my mom in terms of 'what if,' not 'what is she doing now.' I don't know what kind of person she became after I fell out with her, so most of those 'what if' thoughts revolve around how my father would've behaved if she hadn't died, and we'd somehow been put back together again some other way."

"Do you think it would've been better?"

"...Honestly? No." He answered easily, "I think it would've been more of the same from when I was a kid, when he was just that...dark presence in the background. I think I would've been more aware of him, as an adult, but I feel like he would've just let my mom do as she pleased, and most of our liaisons would've been with her alone. I'm sure it would've lit a fire under my father's ass if my mom and Mikhail would've spent time with me together. Maybe their home life would've gotten rough over it."

"...I hope not..."

"Water under the bridge now, I guess." Viktor supposed, looking down from the blank television stand to his knees, then to where Yuri held their hands on top of his thigh. He curled his fingers a little tighter as he felt a pang go through his chest, and his eyes started to sting, "...I guess the thing about all this that bothers me the most is how everything seems to be happening to me whether I want it or not. If I could've...freely chosen to leave the RSF for the JSF, then I wouldn't feel so much like I'm losing my Russian self as I am. It's like it's being taken from me though, by force. In a way, it's almost like history is repeating itself for me. I left home to join the RSF in a fit of screams and fear, and now I've been thrown out of it in much the same way. The only difference is who was around to hear it. I've once-again lost the roots that I had to part of this place, rejected by my father a second time...Yakov himself is all I have left here."

"And he will leave the country often enough for competition that you won't have to come back here to see him."

"It's not that I'm worried I won't be able to see him again..." Viktor tried to explain, reaching up with his free hand to pinch the bridge of his nose, "It's just..."
"...What is it...?"

Slate eyes looked back towards the digital clock on the nightstand; 4:27am. The alarm would sound in another 5 and a half hours. By noon, they’d be on the train to Moscow, and from there soon after, on the sleeper train that would drop them off in Vienna on its way to France.

"Viktor?"

"...I don't...even know if I should say it." He answered vaguely, and rose to stand up. Fingers went to pull away the last of his mismatched set of owned and borrowed clothing, folding it all up again to put on the table where he'd found them. He pressed his palms against the rounded edge of the wooden surface and looked down, seeing the vague outline of his reflection in the shine of the buffed coat, "...I...can't even remember if we made love before I originally fell asleep. My mind is in so many different places. My father, my uncle, his family, Minako...their family, plus Yurio...everything about the RSF... the transition from RSF to JSF...giving up my Russian identity for a new Japanese one; something that I hadn't had a chance to mentally prepare myself for...my old house being burnt to the ground, the hecklers we faced-off with...not to mention, all the stuff that happened between you and Saito, and all the stuff still happening with Saito...and now, this dread knot in my stomach that...this place I called 'home' for 27 years of my life...a place I never thought I'd leave...is about to become a place I may never come back to."

Yuri listened quietly, unsure what to say. He watched instead as Viktor peeled away from the table and walked back towards the side of the bed, and started pulling the blankets aside, folding them over one another into a more orderly fashion from the scattered pile they'd been left in.

Viktor stared at his handiwork for a moment, flattening out the fitted sheet but not quite ready to climb in. He turned back to his spouse and side-stepped closer instead, reaching careful fingers to pull away the man's sweater and undershirt as a single unit, then offered his hands to help Yuri stand. Once upright, he reached down to unfasten the button and zipper at the front of his partner's jeans, and as Yuri withdrew his phone from the back pocket, let the garment fall to the floor. He then backed up, letting his husband step out of the pile and over to the prepared edge of the big bed. He lifted one hand to pull Yuri's glasses away, folded them against his chest, and set them next to the alarm clock; the phone followed after. With all that done, he finally gestured for Yuri to slide under the covers first, holding up the edge of the blankets for the younger man to weave his legs under, and then followed in himself.

The silence had made Yuri uneasy, and he wasn't sure what direction to face. It was typical for Viktor to spoon against his back as they slept, but he felt like he should face the man for the words he still hoped to hear. In the end, Viktor himself chose their positions; one hand went to turn the singular light off on the night-stand, then the Russian's whole frame twisted around again to nudge him onto his back, with that now-invisible head coming to rest on his chest, one arm draping around to his other side. Viktor was low enough against him that it was clear the man was listening to his heart beating, and he raised his arms up to cradle them around the man's head, gently combing his fingers through silver hair...and waited.

It felt like Viktor had likely fallen asleep again, but he did, mercifully, finish his thought from earlier, "...I can't think of a way to say it without it sounding worse than it is."

"I'm sure it's fine..."

Viktor waited a moment, listening a little while longer, but then drew a breath against his husband's bare skin, "...You can't ever leave me..."

Yuri could feel his heart skip a beat, mostly out of confusion, "I don't plan to. My worry is that you'll
"No...I mean... You can't get sick and die, either. Not before I do." Viktor clarified, much to Yuri's chagrin, "The way things are now...I feel like I'm adrift at sea, and a storm is pressing in above me. My old safe harbor has been blown away, and I'm having to go back to one that I'd only been to previously as a visitor. I know I'm welcome there and the people expect me to stay, and I have some roots planted...but it's only because of you. You're my anchor there...and without you, I'd be lost..."

"You sound like you think Japan would kick you out if I wasn't around."

"My usefulness to anyone is waning." Viktor lamented, "I don't have the same kind of connections and relationships in Japan as I did here in Russia. The opportunities I might've had before...they're all gone now. I'm basically starting off like a blank slate...hoping for a miracle at the Olympics to keep me relevant."

Yuri frowned at the dark, and reached one hand over to the side where he could feel Jiro's little nubbins walking up the comforter to get closer. The pup curled up against his side, and snuffled at the side of Viktor's face before settling his nose down there, "I remember when Hasetsu became a media zoo because word had gotten out that you were in town. The city has changed because of you...Japan's presence in figure skating has changed, too...because of you. I'm just an instrument of your will out there on the ice. And it hasn't even been a month yet since you joined the JSF; people are going to go nuts when they realize you're at Euros. I wouldn't be surprised at all if you're completely mobbed by people who are amazed that you turned up. Four Continents is likely to be an even bigger deal, because people are expecting you." He explained, rubbing his thumb against the back of his husband's head, "And, pardon my language here, but...you're Viktor fucking Nikiforov, the greatest skater in history, and a legend of our times. Nothing about you is waning; you will always be relevant. Today was just a dark spot on an otherwise bright future. We're going to have an amazing time on the train ride into Europe tomorrow, and an even better time with our friends once we get to Vienna. We can put this whole crazy nightmare behind us and get back to doing the things that make us both happy." He said, and lifted his hand to reach for his phone on the nightstand.

Viktor lifted his head, putting his chin down on his husband's skin, "...I'll have to live vicariously through you for a little while. I don't know that I'll just bounce back from this low-point."

Yuri clicked a few buttons, and cancelled the automatic message that was due to go out later to Mikhail. That done, he put his phone back down, and fumbled to find the charger cable and plug it in with just his fingers, "That's okay. Now that we're done with all this, I'll be excited for the both of us. You'll find your joy again in your own time. Until then..." He huffed a breath as he finally got the cable in, and he saw his phone's faceplate shine with light for a moment before going dark again. He returned his arm to where it had been before and combed his fingers back through his spouse's silver hair, "...I'll be here to offer anything you need."

"...It...doesn't bother you that I feel so down...?"

"Of course it bothers me." Yuri answered quickly, "But in the way where I want to help you through it in the best way possible, not in any way that I find annoying or anything. If there's anything you need or want from me, just say the word and it's yours."

"...Maybe I'll feel better once we're out from this oppressive atmosphere." The Russian suggested sullenly, "It just feels like a thousand feet of water over my head right now."

"It'll get better." Yuri assured, "By this time tomorrow, we'll be long gone."
"...Yeah..."

"Get some better sleep then for now."

"Yeah..."

"Viktor..."

"Hm..?"

"Kiss."

Surprised, he pushed up onto his elbows, and wiggled a bit up his husband's frame, until they were nose to nose, "Sorry...I'm so brain-dead..."

Yuri closed the gap between them, hands on either side of his partner's face, and nuzzled him fondly thereafter, "It's entirely fine. I love you."

Viktor felt a pang of relief to hear the words, and nodded, finding another kiss between them before he lowered down to get comfortable again, "I love you, too."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED SIXTY THREE

An alarm rang from a towel pile next to the wooden private tub, and Yurio grudgingly rose from the comfort of the hot water to silence it. His fingers were still pink, but at least now it was because of the onsen, not the bitter cold. He stepped out of the steaming pool and wrapped his many towels around himself, going back inside to change just as a few others were coming out to sit in the water. Before long, he donned the usual green resort robes, and plodded grudgingly over towards the big room where he expected the rest of the clan to be waiting.

Despite the knowledge of the daunting task about to be set in front of him, he couldn't keep himself from thinking about the conversation he'd had minutes earlier with his cohorts in Russia.

'*Asahi and I have history and it just kind of came to a head in Osaka. We sorted it out. That's all.*

'It's not worth the headache of what might happen if you knew. He's already suffered enough for what he did. *I've* forgiven him. I won't let him be punished *more* for it.*

Yurio grit his teeth as he stepped across the threshold to the back hall, towel over his head to wick up excess water from his hair.

*If that Saito guy really put the moves to Katsudon...how did he walk out of Osaka alive? I know first-hand how territorial Viktor can be. He would've been all over that like white on rice, he thought, waiting outside the big family room with a hand on the sliding door, *How did Saito even get that close...? And why are either of them so keen on helping him after all that? I can see Katsudon being forgiving, but not Viktor. Once on that shit-list, it'll take a goddamn miracle to get off it-*

"How long you gonna stand out there?"

"Hah?" Yurio blinked hard and looked up in confusion, spotting a single eyeball looking down at him through a thin gap in the doorway.

The door parted all the way, and Mikhail loomed overhead, looking near as confused as the teen in front of him, "You've just been staring. I hated school as much as anyone when I was younger but it must be done."

Emerald eyes looked up keenly, barely spotting the two silver blurs out the corner of his vision, "How much do you know about what happened at Japanese Nationals?" He asked pointedly.

Mikhail cocked his head back slightly and quirked one brow, "Japanese Nationals?" He echoed, "What's *that* have to do with anything?"

"I'm just wanting to make sure we really know who's living under this roof," Yurio muttered, and squeezed by to start making his way towards the make-shift work-desk that had been assembled on the other side of the room. Potya had already made herself comfortable on the seat, and was easy to scoop up when the Tiger approached, offering a pitiful little *mew* as her tiny fluffy body was lifted up.

The workstation was like a small half-cubicle, with a short table - high enough to warrant a chair with a back - and a series of short walls that came up around the sides and back. In the center of the table, a new laptop - already open and on, with a peer-to-peer program loaded, though no one had
logged-in on the other end yet - and on either side, note pads, mechanical pencils, a noise-canceling Bose headset hanging from the wall on the right, and a printer-scanner hybrid in the back left corner.

Nikki and Viktoria - each with their own similar set-up - followed the Russian as he glided across the tatami mats behind them, then looked towards each other with a shrug each. They wordlessly looked to Minako between them, who'd suddenly gotten a rather serious look on her face. Nikki turned back around to look at her wide and colorful ensemble of elaborately decorated school supplies, and reached across the lot for her tea mug, sipping at it with a crinkled brow.

"What's gotten into him, right?" Viktoria whispered, leaning aside on one hand, glancing back on the hope that Yurio wouldn't hear. Both her younger sister and Minako silently agreed, and the elder rose to stand up, patting Nikki's chair as she moved off towards the door.

"Everything seems to be working pretty well so far." The ballerina commented idly, pausing with one hand still on the head-rest, "Questions?"

Both girls shook their heads.

"If there's any connectivity issues, just text me." Mikhail announced from where he still stood in the doorway, "Break for lunch at noon." He pointed to a piece of paper with the schedule on the wall next to him, with font large enough to be read from anywhere in the room, "Today's an easy day to get you back into the swing of things and to meet-and-greet with your tutors. Remember, for them it's the end of a usual work-day, or really late at night, so go easy on them while they get used to the weird hours."

"Thanks for setting this up for us, pipaw." Viktoria chimed in, "I was worried you'd throw us into a Japanese school or something and we'd be all messed up."

Yurio just put the headset on and waited quietly, eyes turned forward like he wasn't listening. Potya had rolled onto her back in the teen's lap and was 'grooming' his fingers idly where she could catch them.

Mikhail made a face at him, but turned back towards his eldest daughter and nodded, "I know better than most how disorienting that can be. You won't have to worry about that. I made sure that what you guys are getting is the exact same curriculum that your peers back in Banff - and St. Petersburg - are getting this term. You may get through it quicker than them though, so it's your choice to either call a short day or to advance faster." He looked down to check his watch as Minako stepped closer, "We'll leave you to it. The tutors should be signing back in right quick."

The silver girls put their own headsets on after that and turned back to their computers within their cubbies. The pair of adults stepped out and slid the door closed, heading out towards the common room. Mikhail grabbed his tablet from the leather bag he'd stowed in one of the front lockers, and hustled to catch up to his lady love as she went seeking for an empty table.

The common room was moderately populated by around five older men and two women, each with their eyes fixed on either a newspaper in front of them, or on the news showing on the television.

The two settled at a table in the middle on the left side of the room, and Mikhail loaded up a bookmarked tab, pulling up a Japanese website with real-estate listings, "You want to check for new stuff or just pick up where we left off before?"

Minako hesitated to answer. In part, because houses weren't on her mind, and also in part because her stomach seized as she smelled the aroma of fish being grilled in the kitchen. She closed her eyes
and covered her mouth and nose with one hand, "...How long am I supposed to keep feeling sick like this for...? This is miserable." She whispered grudgingly.

Mikhail curled an arm around the woman's back, and she leaned into his shoulder, "You started getting sick way sooner than most do...it usually goes away entirely by 14 weeks though." He whispered back, "Do you want to make an early appointment to get looked at...?"

"I don't even really qualify to go until after Euros." She grumbled, "It's only been four weeks."

"I'm sure they'd be understanding of your situation and see you sooner if you ask..." The elder Russian suggested, rubbing his thumb back and forth, "You're already AMA, but being a first-timer at our age..."

Minako wasn't sure if she had the energy to be offended, or whether she even should be, "...Yeah..." She shook her head, "What's AMA though...?"

"Advanced Maternal Age. Usually starts at 40. Carries different risks than if we were in our 20s."

She just groaned pitifully.

Mikhail rubbed his chin lightly and looked around the room, taking in all the sights and sounds, and smells, to be found. It wasn't so easy to smell the fish, but he did pick up on it, and turned his eyes back down to his nauseated partner, "My late wife couldn't be around cooked meat for most of her pregnancy with Nikki. Made her sick as all Hell. I imagine you're probably pretty sensitive to that kind of thing right now, too."

"I'm not sure how that helps my situation in an immediate sense."

"I'm thinking...of an easy way to get you away from all this bustle and noise, and the smells." He explained, "Maybe we can overnight at your place, and then I come on my own to see the kids to school so you can stay in bed."

"And leave them all here alone otherwise...?"

"Yurio stayed here on his own before, didn't he?"

"Sure, but..."

"Maybe there's no way to avoid asking if he can go up to the 3rd floor..." Mikhail tapped his chin with a finger, "I love him, but he is 16, and he's my kid only by Scout's Honor, really." He nudged out from under his partner's head, and kissed her crown as he stood up, "Hang tight. I'll find you something inoffensive to snack on to settle your stomach."

Before the slender figure could get out of arm's reach, Minako reached for and snagged a finger, pulling his attention back again, "What are we going to do with him...? What he asked you before..."

Mikhail waited a moment, and gave his arm some slack as he took a knee, "I want to talk to Asahi first. Then I'll get Yuri, after lessons. Then maybe the both of them together, depending on what they each have to say. I can't make Asahi accommodate Yuri's sensitivities."

Minako gave a nervous look, "I don't think it's just Asahi that's lit a bonfire under his arse, hun. He just confronted you about Nationals...and you weren't even there."

"If I'm supposed to take on the role of a parent for him, then I can't be his best friend all the time. He's never really had any authority to deal with so he's probably not happy with having one
now...he barely listened to Yakov, and I'm sure Lilia just scared him. She scared me and I barely knew her." Mikhail explained, and shook his head, "I don't think I'm being unfair to him. I'm not treating him any differently than I am Vikki. Shit, I thought this was what he wanted." He shrugged and rose back up to his feet, "He can't be treated special and different if he's part of the family. He's gonna have to come to grips with the idea, somehow. Maybe it'll just take time to get used to things. Everything is changing for everyone, not just him."

Nodding, Minako let the finger go, and returned to her upset stomach and the tablet before her, "I'll keep looking for places."

Running along Hasetsu's beach was less risky than running up the icy steps of the castle, and the footprints of everyone who came before dotted the sandy embankment. So early in the morning though, the beach was fairly empty, leaving a pristine and quiet landscape for one skater and one dog to amble up and down undisturbed. Once they'd made it to the edge of the small peninsula and could see the bridge, they paused for a break. The rocky embankment that went around the small marina was an ideal spot to sit and catch their breath...away from prying eyes and obtuse, mindless small-talk from strangers.

Watching the water for a little while, Asahi turned his eyes down to his hands, and the bandages still wrapped around them. He flexed his fingers a bit, stiff from cold and still a bit painful from the fall, but feeling better than they had at the time.

It's been a few days since everything happened, but I still have this sense of unease at the back of my mind, he thought, shaking his hands before wedging them between arm and ribs to keep them warm, I can't really stay in one place for too long or let myself fall into a routine... I don't even want to run at the gym too frequently...not until I'm skating there...and I've been avoiding it because it's their rink...

Hana barked at a few seagulls that were hovering, and Asahi took that as a hint to start moving again. A chill was threatening to creep in since he'd stopped running anyway.

[Come on, let's head back.] He said quietly, climbing up the rocky face of the marina wall. Once back on the road though, he twisted around to go backwards, looking up at Hasetsu Castle on the other side of the river, then down at the Ice Castle beneath it, ...I think I should quit avoiding it. It's been a week, if you don't count the afternoon I tried to teach Minako...and I really need to get serious about 4Cs and the Games...

The jog back to Yu-Topia was much quicker than the rest of the run, and Asahi wiped Hana's paws down before he made a B-line for the 3rd floor, unlocking the door to his apartment-within-a-resort to find a change of clothes. The white fluff immediately hopped up onto the bed and sprawled out, ready for the first of many naps. Asahi sat next to her for a moment on his way out, scritching her head between her ears and sliding his hand down her back.

I wish I could be so care-free. Sleep well...I'll come back in a few minutes.

He rose up again to head for the door, locking it behind him as he headed for the family residence on the second floor. Everyone else was already down on the first floor for the day's work, leaving the shower room empty and quiet. Water hissed and the room quickly filled with steam. Cuts still stung as though they were fresh under the heat, but the lean figure trudged through it, with the eventual reward of sitting in the hot bath afterwards. With his eyes just above the water's surface and his ears just below, Asahi could hear the subtle thumping of the goings-on below the floor.
It's still weird being in this place. I avoided it for so long because Yuri never invited me, though I vaguely knew of it since we were young. I wish I'd paid more attention... He looked around the tile walls, Maybe I could've avoided the worst...

Like all good things, the bath eventually came to an end. Swapping cold-weather running gear for a thinner, more streamlined skating practice outfit, Asahi emerged into the hall, ruffling his hair under the fluff of a big towel. He checked the time on his new phone; 09:25.

"Oh. Good timing." A voice came, drawing grey-brown eyes up. Mikhail was at the end of the hall, looking to be heading up to the third floor, but stopped in place with a hand on the railing, "You have a minute?"

"...Sure." The younger figure answered pensively, "...Am I in trouble?"

"Huh?" Mikhail blinked at him, "Nnnno...? Should you be?"

"No one ever really asks for my time unless it's something bad, so..."

"Oh." He scratched the back of his neck, "Well, it's your lucky day then...you're definitely not in trouble. I just want to talk to you."

"I see..."

"Were you about to head out again or something?" Mikhail pointed at the new outfit, "I remember you leaving in something else earlier, but that doesn't look like loafing-around clothing."

"I was going to practice at the Ice Castle for a while."

"That works just as well. Mind if I tag along?"

It had warmed up a little bit since earlier in the morning, but even with the sun creeping out between grey clouds, it was still cold. Bundled from tip to toes though, Asahi was warm, and waited patiently, albeit nervously, for the Russian to start whatever conversation was going to happen. He hung his skates over his shoulder by the laces, and watched as the older man bid his farewells for the moment to Minako, and pushed the door closed. Footsteps were loud as thunder in Asahi's head, and his heart started to beat harder in his chest as the silence went on. They left the court-yard and rounded the corner outside the traditional gates, and made it nearly off the property before Mikhail finally said something.

"So that partner of mine is going to be arriving tomorrow to start dealing with stuff in Imari."

Asahi's eyes got small behind his bangs, but he tried not to react too much.

"I'm hoping everything will go smoothly and it'll be settled before we leave for Austria on Thursday, but I am still concerned about leaving you here by yourself." Mikhail went on, "I know you balked at the idea of having someone follow you around, but...I'd appreciate it if you at least humored me while we're away for the weekend...unless you've changed your mind about coming."

"I haven't." Asahi retorted skeptically, "And there hasn't been any trouble. I worry something might, but I'm always worried. No one from Imari has reached out to me in any way."

"That you know of."
Asahi grumbled a nervous breath, "That doesn't make me feel any better."

"It'll make me feel a lot better if you let someone hang around to keep an eye on things." The Russian pleaded, "Maybe it'll help you feel better, too."

"And if I refuse anyway?"

"I'll be a pest to you the whole time we're away. Checking in every 10 minutes to ask if anything's changed since we took off." He explained, "Things have been fine since we've been here together, but I'm not one to be caught unawares...and everyone is going to be gone for Euros. What if they're just waiting for that? If your family figured things out about you by stalking Instagram, it really wouldn't be a stretch for them to be stalking the profiles of the people you know, and they're bound to comment about being in Vienna, which will leave you wide open."

Asahi pinched the bridge of his nose and gave a mildly annoyed sigh, "How would the logistics of something like this even work? Does this person sleep in my room with me? Stalk my every move? Taste my food for me?"

"You're an Olympian, not a King." Mikhail guffawed, "This person would stay at Yu-Topia as a guest like anyone else, and leave with you if you go anywhere. Having a security detail only works if you're a willing participant though. You'd have to be in contact with this guy and let him know you plan on going somewhere, that way you can still have your personal space and alone-time."

Asahi stopped in place, forcing Mikhail to do the same and look back, "I just don't understand the need. If my family cared that much to hurt me, they could've done so ages ago. Everything they ever did before was subtle or secret anyway. Everything they ever did before was subtle or secret anyway. It was systemic and long-term, meant to control and limit me, not actively hurt me. It wouldn't make any sense for them to suddenly shift gears and send someone out to break my legs or something. It would only serve to draw attention to them...because I'm an Olympian who just fell out with them."

"So it's a hard no."

"Listen, I..." He started again, turning away with an exasperated look, "...I owe you a lot. You basically swooped in and saved me when I was on the edge of a really bad situation. ...If you decide to have someone tail me while you're gone, I won't complain or try to avoid them, but...I'd really rather you didn't. My family owned a pottery company in a small city...they're not exactly the Yakuza."

Mikhail drew a long breath, but eventually nodded, "Alright, alright... I'll take it into consideration."

Awkward silence overtook them as they started walking again. They made it to the bridge before Asahi spoke again, "If you're still walking with me and you're not broaching the bodyguard subject again...what else is there?"

The Rozovsky elder steeled himself, "Kind of a pitiful sub-topic, but...it's stuff about Yuri Plisetsky again."

"Okay?"

"I'm trying to be sensitive to what he's experiencing right now...but, I can't help also believing that those feelings of hostility and perceived injustice are...a bit unfounded." He explained, "My nephew used to let him sleep in the closet of the room you're in now, but my nephew hasn't slept in that banquet hall since the summer. Yura hasn't been in there for a while either, yet for some reason he still thinks it's his."
"...And...?"

"Has he bothered you at all?"

"Other than some dirty looks here and there, no." Asahi answered simply, "But I'm starting to think that's just how his face is and he can't help it."

Mikhail groaned a laugh, "Yeeaahhh...it's not." He shook his head, "I plan on talking to him about it later. He's been losing ground since we got here, to the point where even my youngest is getting annoyed with him. She hardly gets annoyed by anything for very long. Worst I've ever seen out of her was when I took all the Twix bars out of her bag at Halloween when she was six. She held a grudge against me for like a week."

"Deserved."

"Right? I couldn't help it though...they called to me." He laughed, looking aside to find a most-awkward sight. He gasped and pointed a finger, "Holy crap, you're smiling!"

"What?"

"Ah it's gone...but I saw it! Now I know it's possible."

Asahi zipped the front of his jacket up high enough that it went to his nose, "...What does any of this have to do with me?" He deflected.

Mikhail was still amused, but then cleared his throat and tried to be serious again, "Well...Plisetsky asked me a really odd question this morning and it makes me think he's poking into what happened at Nationals. He's fiercely protective of his friendship with Yuri, but unfortunately lacks my nephew's tempered self-control." He slowed his pace down as they passed the midway point of the bridge, and the skater slowed as well to look back, "I'll sort this whole thing out. I just wanted to be sure that you and him haven't had any encounters that I somehow missed."

Asahi shook his head.

"Alright...well, have a good skate then. Do you want me to send Minako down at some point?"

"If she's feeling okay. I know she gets sick in the morning."
Chapter 464

CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED SIXTY FOUR

The morning alarm went off, and the usual task of washing, dressing, and packing was carried out. There was a heaviness in the air though, enough so that even the dogs could sense it, and became subdued by it. Yuri could see the cloud hanging over his partner's head, but he knew there was little he could do for the time being.

He looks like he feels worse now than he did overnight. I wonder if he didn't sleep again...

Viktor was crouched down on a knee, fastening the clamps on the last of the suitcases. Makkachin stood just next to him, watching everything like a supervisor. Once the case was clicked shut and the straps clipped into place, the slender figure stood up to his full height, "...That's the last of it." He said quietly, fatigue on his voice. Half-open eyes looked blearily over, "Shall we go?"

Yuri set Jiro on the bed for a moment and slipped in under one of the Russian's arms, both of his own going around the man's back. He held there silently, feeling a bit of relief as he felt the hug returned, arms coming to rest over his shoulders. He stayed there until at least the count of thirty, cheek pressed to the man's pale neck, and kissed the spot lightly before lifting his face up to look on his husband's tired face, "Were you able to fall asleep at all after we got back?"

One hand came up to run down the length of slicked-back raven hair, and Viktor attempted a smile, "Yes, my love..."

"That doesn't sound terribly convincing..."

"I fell asleep. I didn't rest." Viktor answered, and paused, "Nightmares again."

Yuri's brow furrowed above his glasses, "What about?"

A quiet breath of hesitation came, but Viktor bowed his head a little, "All the different reasons and ways that my old house burned down, and...seeing you bounce off the front of the rental, as though on replay, but you never get up at the end."

"...I really should help you work on your sleep hygiene." Yuri explained, though sorrowfully, "You're a worrier."

"Maybe that's why all my hair is grey."

That earned a huff, "It's silver, and it's gorgeous." Yuri reassured, slipping out of the hug to grab the big jacket Viktor had set out for himself earlier, and held it up for the man's arms to go through. He adjusted it across those broad shoulders, and stepped over to get his own jacket as well. Scarves and gloves and boots followed, and luggage was gathered.

Waiting to get to the bottom floor in the elevator, Yuri glanced aside to the reflective walls, looking at himself for a moment before turning to see his spouse's downturned face from a different angle. Eyes were looking at Jiro on the floor of the carriage, but it just made those shadows look darker. Yuri looked back again as he heard the ding for the arrival on the 1st level, and they all stepped out. By the time they'd made it through the check-out counter and let the pups do their business, standing in front of the archway to the restaurant - and breakfast - seemed a moot point.

"...I think I'll pass on eating." Viktor commented dryly, staring inside with a vacant look on his face,
"I don't...have the stomach for it right now."

"Because you're not hungry or because you're stressed out?"

"...Yes."

"Hm." Yuri looked into the restaurant again, but then just nudged his partner's arm with an elbow, and gestured with his head towards the elevator hall, "Let's just start going then. Maybe you'll feel differently on the train."

"Maybe..."

Moskovsky railway station was as populated as anywhere. Yuri followed close as Viktor guided them through, pups following in turn with the luggage. Brown eyes looked all around the elaborate terminal; the metallic bust-monument of Peter the Great, the marble-tile frescos above the stores lining the walls, the great golden letters that marked Санкт-Петербург above the main entrance, and the enormous display that Yuri could only assume was a rudimentary, if not decorative, map of St. Petersburg's main nearby streets...or other rail lines. He wasn't sure which.

The Sapsan waiting area was outdoors, and downstairs, from the main entryway, but a number of people were out there waiting already, making it easy to stay close without looking terribly conspicuous. Thankfully, they didn't have to wait long, and the high-speed bullet-train pulled in.

Yuri marveled as he always did as people crowded the doorways, preventing passengers from easily getting off; he shook his head at the whole thing, "You'd think they'd eventually realize that if they made room, people would get off faster, so everyone else could get on faster."

"It's better in the summer when people aren't desperate for warmth." Viktor explained, "I'd be right in there with them if we didn't have the dogs with us."

"I thought you didn't mind the cold so much?"

"When I'm feeling good." He answered simply, keeping his eyes on the crowd, waiting for them to clear, "It's just going straight through me now though."

"Oh..."

As the zealous crowd finally filtered onto the carriage and there was room enough to move without Jiro getting trampled, the duo pulled their things on board and made a quick B-line for their assigned seats. Two big leather recliners with plush pillow headrests were paired on one side, with a singleton seat across the aisle, all the way down the walls in about a dozen or so rows, and every seat was occupied. With luggage temporarily stowed in the suitcase-holding area at the front of the carriage, the immediate stress of carting everything around was relieved. Makkachin was content with a blanket on the carpet floor at the foot of their chairs and laid right down for the time being. Jiro was a little more curious, standing on Yuri's lap to get a good look out the big window. The pup looked back though when Viktor slumped down into his aisle seat, eyes closed and letting out a near-vocal groan.

Yuri found a hand and rubbed it gently with his thumb, "Try to get a little more sleep. I'll wake you up when they bring lunch, okay?"

One blue eye opened, and Viktor glanced up, even as one finger was already seeking for the reclining button on the chair's control pad. He sat up a bit straighter and looked around cautiously,
seeing only a solitary woman in the singleton seat across the aisle from him, and she was busy doing
her make-up. Still though, peripheral vision was a factor, and Viktor wasn't willing to risk anything
when the train hadn't even started moving yet. He undid his jacket and pulled it off, resting the
shoulders over his forearm to lift up as a make-shift barrier - blocking her and the people in the row
behind them - and Viktor leaned forward for a quick kiss. In one sweeping motion though, he acted
as though he only ever intended to bring the jacket up over his head to block the light, and pressed
his finger down on the control button. His chair slowly started to expand, until he could lie down
nearly flat, and his body went completely limp under the coat.

Though subtle, Yuri could see the huff of an exasperated breath being exhaled under the fabric as it
bulged up briefly. He reached for and unpacked the second blanket in their possession, and tossed it
out across his husband's exhausted frame, keeping enough of it over one of his arms that he wouldn't
have to let go of his partner's hand. Viktor seemed to sense it, and lifted up one leg to 'tent' the
blanket a little more, and gave his fingers a gentle squeeze.

As the train finally started to move, Yuri could feel a shy relief pass through him.

*We're finally on our way out... It's just the first part of the trip; we still have to get to Moscow and
board the next train, but at least we're moving. Please, Kami-sama...*

Eyes lifted up to the ceiling, intended for the heavens beyond it.

*...I know I've asked for a lot...but please, please...for Viktor's sake, and to make the most of the time
you've given me with him...don't make us ever come back to this place. I would hate to have to
withdraw from competition if an event we have to go to is in Russia... I owe Viktor so much... I don't
want to fail him in one aspect of our lives while trying to protect him in another.*

It was nearing the end of the first day of 'classes' at Yu-Topia, and Yurio watched tiredly as his
papers got scanned into his computer. He turned his sights to the flat screen and watched the PDFs
load, renamed the files, and sent them through to the tutor on the other side of the world. With all that
done, he tabbed the P2P panel open again and looked at the face of the middle-aged woman who
was looking back at him.

*[That's the last of it. I'm going now.]*

*[You did a great job today. Rest and we'll do it again tomorrow.] She answered, "Vsego dobrogo."*

*(Bye.)*

Yurio nodded and closed the laptop. The headset came away next, and he looked around for his cat,
spotting her in the far corner where her food dish had been set up the week prior. He hung the head-
set up and stretched for a moment, looking up at the ceiling.

*I really should practice... I've been fucking around too much lately.*

"Everyone about done?" Mikhail's voice sounded from the doorway, pushing it aside as he stepped
within.

Yurio leaned his head against the back of the chair to look, but then turned forward again and stood
up wordlessly.

*I know I promised Viktor and Katsudon that I'd talk to the old man...but I really don't want to right
now. I wish he'd just notice how pissed I am, instead of telling me to just get over it like I'm*
He snuck out of the room as the elder checked on his true children. He heard his name as he started slinking down the hall, but ignored it and kept moving as though he hadn't heard. Having changed into something more 'normal' during the lunch break, it was easy to just make a break for the lockers at the front of the resort and grab his gear. Boots and a jacket were thrown on quickly, and he rushed outside before anyone could stop him.

Of course, by the time he arrived at the Ice Castle, the Russian Tiger was more like a Russian Glacier, teeth chattering and icicles hanging from his ears. He burst in desperately, frost breaking off of him like he was a little snow-cloud all on his own.

"Y-Yuri...!" Yuko said, startled, "You don't look dressed for this weather."

"N-n-n-n-n-nooooo kidding!" He stammered.

"Did you come to practice with Minako and Asahi? I think they're almost done..."

Yurio's clattering stopped on a dime, and he got a dubious air around him as he deadpanned the woman severely, "Christ, is this where he came? Ugh." He muttered to himself, then cleared his throat, "No. I came on my own to skate alone."

"Oh." Yuko said quietly, watching the teen go by to the benches in front of her rental desk.

Feeling slightly less cold, Yurio plunked down and kicked his boots off, sticking his legs out in every direction to stretch. Every once in a while, he'd glance back towards the clear doors that lead into the rink itself.

"I haven't seen either of them yet...what the Hell are they even doing out there? No music, either... Is Yuko really so sure they're even here?"

"Oh...Yuri?"

The teen whipped his head around and spotted Minako coming through the door from the women's locker-room. Emerald eyes immediately went to the men's side, but no one came through.

"Is it that late already?" The ballerina went on, looking at the thin watch on her wrist, "Did you come for business or pleasure?"

"Where's the other guy?" He asked flatly, warily.

"Asahi?" She asked, "He went to the gym section about half an hour ago to cool down. He put as much effort into today as I'd expect normal people to put into three."

Yurio had nothing to say to that.

"If you're gonna practice, do you mind if I take a break? I'm kinda winded..."

He gaped back at her, "Winded? Why? Weren't you just standing at rink-side?"

Minako shook her head and held up a pair of rented skates, "I spent the last three hours on the ice. It's a lot of work to try not falling when you're still learning."

"We do have ice-abled walkers if you want one..." Yuko offered, smiling nervously.

"I'm learning, not crippled!" Minako barked defensively, though the Madonna just laughed and
winked.

"You know I'm teasing. But, you should be more careful. You won't be the only one feeling the fall if you drop." She pointed out, leaning over the counter to rest on her elbows, "Takeshi wouldn't let me on the ice at all when I was still pregnant with the girls."

"Well..." The ballerina looked a bit apprehensive, "You were pregnant with three, not just one."

"Isn't Mikhail a twin though?" Yuko wondered casually, "Twins are more likely than others to have twins of their own. Older women are more likely to have multiples, too..."

Minako felt the echo of those words bang through her like jolts of thunder, and she slowly sank to the floor, "...Twins...have twins? But none of his other kids..."

Yuko quickly clambered over the counter to rush forward, crouching down beside her older cohort, "Ah I'm sorry! I didn't mean it like that! I was just saying! There's no guarantee at all! It's just a thing people notice! There's no way you could know this early anyway!" She frantically waved her arms around as Minako's eyes leaked like a fountain, "I mean, I had triplets on the first go and I'm not a triplet! Takeshi isn't either! I don't think we had any multiples in either of our families! We just..."

Minako put both hands on the younger woman's face to silence her, and glowered dubiously, "I hope you didn't just jinx me. I'll never forgive you. I can barely handle the idea of one."

Yurio just rolled his eyes and went back to his stretches. The topic quickly grated on his nerves though, and he re-gathered his things to wander through to rink-side, opting to put his blades on there than stay a minute longer. The floor there was much colder through his socks, but at least the rink was silent. Skates were tied on quickly, and the Russian Tiger slipped out onto the frost, blades scratching the glass-like surface as he went. He glided along idly for a little while, acclimating to the movement while he analyzed the ice's surface...seeing where it was marred and pock-marked, just like the St. Petersburg rink had been the day Yuri's blade got caught and he collapsed.

This is fucking ridiculous. Who leaves the ice looking like this!? The memory of his own stumble at Trophée de France came back, and he recalled a certain silver-haired man's Free Program.

No, goddamnit! Yurio argued with himself, This Saito fucker doesn't get to make me mad at Viktor, too! He should get his ass out here and fix this.

Angry eyes went immediately for the door that lead to the equipment room, a place that, in itself, was nearly sacred in its own history. Yurio bitterly pushed towards the rink exit nearest that door, and ignored the need for blade-guards as he stomped off towards it.

This guy is tainting absolutely everything I like about this place! On top of that, he assaults my friend and then comes back to Hasetsu and starts touching and breaking everything!? Who the Hell does he think he is!? The door was already open when he went through. The vertical blinds had been pulled all the way open, making the room much brighter than it had been in the hall just previously, and Yurio balked to shield his eyes. He spotted his target on the other side of the room, facing the windows to look out on the bay while he ran on a treadmill, ear-buds in and cable flailing with every step. The music was loud enough that Yurio could almost tell what was playing - were he familiar with that sort of music - and he stepped up directly behind the unsuspecting figure, growling and gritting his teeth. The toes of his blades nearly skimmed the rubber belt where it curled around the base of the track.
All it took was 2 seconds for everything to go incomprehensibly wrong.
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED SIXTY FIVE

Everything seemed to go in super-slow-motion the moment Yurio made himself known, beginning to yell something that was cut off before it could even be understood. Asahi’s shock put his hands on the grips on either side of the treadmill terminal, and he jumped right off the moving belt, twisting in mid-air with one foot ready to launch backward. Yurio was only barely too far away, and Asahi spotted him with enough time to realize it was just him, and failed to fully extend his leg as a result. Instead, the surprise and sudden termination of the maneuver sent him up, and then down, collapsing to the rubber in a rather undignified way. The belt was still moving though, and he went flying with it, straight into Yurio’s legs. By the time they’d come to a crashing stop, they were nothing less than a tangle of very angry limbs and even angrier words, several feet away from their original places.

Asahi was too stunned to do anything more than blink in horrified disbelief at the ceiling as the pain of the collapse settled in, but Yurio was too furious to let a collision stop him. He snarled and picked himself up, caring rather little for the awkward position he started from on top of his adversary. He planted both blades down, one on either side of the older figure’s hips, and stood up over him, wincing and grabbing at a spot on his left arm.

"WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT!?"

Eyes tilted downward slightly, looking from ceiling to tiger, and Asahi slowly picked himself up a little, propping up onto an elbow as he reached to rub the back of his head, "I think I deserve to ask that question, not you." He growled, moving his hand forward to check if there was blood on it. Thankfully, the carpet was just soft enough to prevent any cuts, though it did smart quite a bit where he’d bounced the back of his cranium off it. He’d quickly had enough of the skinny Russian trying to look intimidating though and reached that same hand up to shove against the teen’s stomach, pushing him backward enough to sit up and find his scattered phone and cable. He stood up after that, and glowered at the angry foreigner, looking down on him from his higher vantage, "Do not sneak up on me like that. You’re lucky I realized it was just you. I’d have kicked you right in the face and sent you flying otherwise."

"YOU SENT ME FLYING ANYWAY YOU ASSHOLE."

Asahi grit his teeth and drew in a breath, trying to find his zen, "What part of standing behind a treadmill seemed smart to you? In what idiotic alternate universe did you think that I wouldn’t stumble and fall when you screamed at me out of nowhere?" He asked pointedly, reconnecting the aux-in to his phone, and checked the whole thing over in case it was already broken. It came on like normal though, much to his relief, and he put one bud back into place as he stepped over to the treadmill control panel.

Yurio was just incensed, "I thought you were supposed to be some fucking black-belt. What kind of martial arts master trips and falls over themselves cuz they got spooked?"

"I'm a black-belt. I'm not a master. There's different levels, smartass." Asahi retorted, gawking back at the blonde, "Do all of your views of Japanese people get colored by stupid ninja movies or something? Give me a break. I'll bet you'd be pissed if I assumed you were a stumbling drunk just for being Russian." He growled, clicking the terminal's off button, and the belt quieted as it slowed. As he stepped forward again between the different machines, he sneered at the Tiger, "Why are you even here? What could you possibly want from me?"
"You left the fucking ice in ruins. I came to demand that you fix it before you jog your happy ass back to the resort." Yurio snarled, gripping his arm a little tighter, "Or do you destroy everything you touch without any care whatsoever for those around you?"

That tripped a nerve, but Asahi remained stoic, only furrowing his brow a little, "I'm not the only one who used the rink today; there were two full classes that came through after I got here. Okukawa-kōchi also said she would take care of it once she was done. If it hasn't been resurfaced yet, then she isn't done." He explained, and stepped by to find his gear bag. He slung it over his shoulder and glanced back slightly, "What the Hell did I even do to you, anyway? You've had it out for me since the minute we met. I'm used to people hating me, but they usually have reasons for it at least."

Yurio scoffed, "As if I have any obligation to explain anything to you."

The older skater's expression didn't change, but he did give that thousand-yard stare of annoyed confusion. He shook his head and sighed, "Fine."

Stunned at the impossibly-fast retreat, Yurio gaped, but then stomped a few paces forward, "Where the Hell do you think you're going!? I'm not done with you!"

"Yes, you are."

"I KNOW YOU KISSED YURI."

Asahi stopped in his tracks, and one angry eye turned to leer over his shoulder, "You've got some nerve."

The Tiger took some sick pleasure in knowing he'd gotten under the man's skin, "Aw, did I touch a button? You're lucky Viktor didn't eviscerate you for it. Whatever you did to convince them to go easy on you, it won't work on me...and I won't be so forgiving."

"So that's what all this is about?" Asahi growled, turning side-face where he stood near the door, "You think you've come to lay down righteous justice on me for a stupid mistake I made? Grow up. It's not your problem, and it's not your business either."

"It is my business when a total stranger comes up out of nowhere and starts hurting my friends."

"How could you even possibly know?" The older figure asked stiffly, eyes darkened by the shadow under his hair, "No one here told you."

"No one had to tell me. I figured it out on my own."

"That's bullshit. You couldn't have known there was anything to know unless someone said something."

The teen just shook his arm out and crossed them both defiantly, "Not knowing anything sucks, doesn't it?" He said contemptuously, eyes like daggers.

"So let me get this straight." Asahi started, turning a bit more to face the teen and started walking forward slowly, gesturing at him with a free hand, "You came all the way back here to find me...snuck up behind me with the intent to yell and scare me, knowing I'd probably fall...and all for what...?" He loomed overhead, staring down his nose at the much-shorter blonde, "To give me shit about the ice and call me out for something I've already sorted out with the people involved? What's your aim, really?"

"I want you gone." Yurio started, putting the older figure's teeth on edge, "-so the old man focuses
on his family again...instead of you."

Asahi stared irritably, "I'm already trying to leave. You think I like feeling indebted to people? That at my age, I want to need saving by complete strangers? By the family of someone who wanted me thrown out of Nationals, and probably the JSF, too, no less. This is quite nearly the most humiliated I've ever felt in my entire life." He poked a finger against Yurio's chest, enough to make him step back a pace, "And then to have you - some kid skater I'd never even heard of until this week - come and try to get in my face and pull one over on me? Are you kidding? You don't know the first thing about me. You don't even want to try, because you've got your head wedged so far up your own ass that you can't see me as anything other than some perceived threat!" He lowered his gaze and stepped aside, "To think, Yuri himself decided to give me the benefit of the doubt, and convinced Viktor not to come down on me like a ton of bricks...that they both agreed to offer me sanctuary here...only for you, their supposed friend, try to drive me out because you're so goddamn jealous. What would Yuri think of you? Would he be proud of you, if he could see us right now?"

Yurio growled to himself quietly, tightening his arms across himself defensively.

"I've known Yuri near as long as you've been alive. I may have made a lot of mistakes regarding him, but I know his heart...he would be disappointed. If you think you're half as good a friend as you claim to be, then just drop this." Asahi demanded, stepping back towards the door again, "Leave me alone for whatever time I have left at Yu-Topia, and I won't even tell them about what happened here today."

Watching the figure leave the small gym, Yurio could feel his heart pounding in his chest. He dug his fingers into his arms where he held them, and kicked the carpet with a naked blade.

Goddamnit...

Half-way through the 4-hour trip to Moscow, the lunch-hour had arrived, and as Yuri had said he would do, he gently worked to rouse his husband. Softly shaking the hand he held didn't seem to do much, so he let it go and moved it to the up-turned leg leaning against the arm-rest.

"Viktor...Viktor, it's break-time. Even if you don't want to eat, you should try..." He cooed quietly, nudging the leg a few times, until he heard the sleepy figure groan in disappointment, "You need to keep your strength up. You'll get all mushy otherwise."

The jacket that had covered Viktor's head slowly slid down, pulled by hands underneath it, and slate eyes deadpanned, "Mushy?"

"Well, I'd say you'd get squishy like I do, but that implies eating more than you should...not less." Yuri explained, watching as the seat started to rise up again with his husband in it, "So all that muscle you packed away will just wither away instead and you'll get...mushy."

Were he capable, Viktor would've just opened his mouth wide and consumed the entire lunch arrangement - plates, utensils, table, and all - in a single bite. That failing though, he looked down at whatever had been placed in front of him.

"I wasn't sure what you were feeling like so I just got one of everything." Yuri explained, "Since there's only two options anyway, that was easy though. So...if you don't want to pork tenderloin thing, you can have my poached salmon. The salad is arugula with fruit and a molasses sauce, or you can do the baby spinach with vinaigrette. They even had a choice of iced cream or cake at the end." He looked quite pleased with himself, as though he'd prepared the whole thing with his own hands,
"So what do you want to try?"

Viktor blinked slowly. "...Coffee."

"Viktoretatsomething." Yuri harped, skewering a half-cut strawberry with some roughage and dressing, and held it up, "It's noon and you haven't eaten since we were at Yakov's yesterday. No amount of skin toner or expensive lotion is going to make you look any less undead than you do right now." He nudged the fork closer, his other hand under it to prevent sauce from dripping.

"Please."

The Russian's expression sank, "Do I really look that bad...?"

"You look like you haven't slept in days and you're about to get sick. Eat."

Viktor couldn't help but look around slightly, nervous about what others might be seeing, and how they'd be reacting to it.

"Stop worrying so much about others." Yuri attempted, getting the worried man's face to turn towards him again, "I've been keeping an eye out...I don't think anyone here actually cares. It's like at the store when we came back to St. Petersburg."

Still a bit dubious, Viktor looked to the morsel on the fork, then back to the man holding it, "...My entire life has been about worrying what others think. I can't...just shut that off."

"Worry what I think." Yuri suggested, and finally got his partner to accept that one bite, which made him feel a lot better, "There...now, do you like that one? Do you want to try the other?" He asked, starting to gather up a bit of the blue cheese crumbles, pecan bits, spinach, and dressing, and found his spouse giving a slight nod. Like before, he offered the bite, and Viktor nibbled.

"Mh...I like that one better, but..." The Russian said quietly, feeling a bit more at ease, "Maybe we can just eat it family-style."

Yuri's eyes lit up, and he twisted around in his seat, pulling the fold-out table a bit more evenly between them and offered the second roll of utensils, "I think we can do that."

All the while, two pairs of beady dark eyes watched their food longingly.

Takeshi had nearly finished polishing the rink with the Zamboni when Yurio finally returned to rink-side. To his surprise, no one had apparently heard the yelling...or if they had, they didn't say anything about it. Asahi was long gone.

"The next class is due to come in pretty soon, and then there's a break, then two evening classes." Yuko explained, looking at a few pages on a clip-board with the Ice Castle's schedule, "But there's no reason why you can't all share the space, so I'm sure it'll be fine." She flipped the pages back into place and looked to Minako specifically, "You feeling better now?"

"Yeah, I'll...be fine." She answered, leaning against the wall on her elbows. She spotted the blonde coming around the far side, and snuck onto the ice without a word. She watched as the teen glided by, "I need to get those two to skate at the same time." She muttered quietly, looking a bit sullen, "I know it's a long shot to get them to see each other as friendly competition, and push each other to be better, but...for my sake at least, so I don't have to be here twice as long..."

"Yeah, I can understand that."
"Or maybe Yuri and Viktor can take Asahi on when they're back...they're all on the same team."

"Maybe."

Practice didn't last for that long anyway, much to Minako's relief. Yurio was distracted and she herself was getting hungry. By the time the second class had arrived for skating lessons, Yurio had had enough of sharing the ice, and opted to settle things much earlier than he'd originally intended.

Thoughts wandered throughout the entire drive from the Ice Castle to the resort, leaving the teen to be a very poor conversationalist. Minako's attempts fell on largely deaf ears, and Yurio watched the river pass them by through the windows.

_I wonder what's gotten into him?_ She wondered, watching him briefly out the corner of her eye, _I was expecting him to argue about everything tonight, but he barely said a word. Was he tired from school this morning...? I don't think I've ever even asked how he handled school _before_ staying with us..._

They pulled into the resort, and parted ways to change out of the day's training clothes. Dinner was as quiet an affair as the skating practice had been, at least as far as the skater himself was concerned - Asahi was not with them though. Nikki was a chatterbox about the day's lessons and the plan for the rest of the year. Yurio listened, picking at his food slowly, but didn't contribute at all.

_'What would Yuri think of you? Would he be proud of you, if he could see us right now?_'

_'I've known Yuri near as long as you've been alive. I may have made a lot of mistakes regarding him, but I know his heart...he would be disappointed. If you think you're half as good a friend as you claim to be, then just drop this.,'

The sullen teen poked at cuts of green onion in the katsudon bowl in front of himself, picking up rice kernels a single bit at a time with his poorly-held chop-sticks.

_'Why do you even care so much to defend him if you can't even stand the idea that he's in your old room?_' Yurio shot back, _'You shouldn't even care about a place you haven't lived in for so long._

_Viktor huffed, "I have my own issues with Saito."

_'So you hate him._

_"I don't...hate him." The silver Russian grumbled, sulking over the steering wheel a little as it gripped it with both hands, "It's complicated."

_Yurio grit his teeth again, chewing on the end of one of the wooden sticks idly. He pulled it free and set them both flat on top of the bowl and pushed back from the table, "Can I leave?" He asked quietly._

_"Sorry?" Mikhail answered, not having expected any words from that end of the table. All eyes were looking at the teen, "Say again?"

_"Can I be excused please." Yurio repeated, slightly annoyed but not wanting to drag it out._

_"Oh, yeah, sure."
He pushed to stand and silently stalked out of the common-room, turning right to head back to their overnight rooms. He cuddled with Potya and his big plush tiger for a little while, staring at the ceiling.

Yuri said it wasn't worth the trouble of me finding out, because of how I'd react if I knew... He thought bitterly, He knew I'd say something. But how could I not? Everything about what I know that happened at Nationals makes so much more sense in light of this... The panic attack in the stands during the SP, the angry looks on all their faces during the medaling ceremony, and how they avoided him... Whatever 'fix' they figured out must've happened between then and the Exhibition, cuz Viktor would've never helped Saito off the ice otherwise. I heard how he let Leroy have it after the accident at the Final...that cuck is never coming off the shit-list. Not that he had a chance before, but...whatever.

He groaned and turned over on his bed-roll, and rubbed his fingers between his cat's ears, listening to her purr contentedly.

This whole thing with Saito is super fucked up and confusing. All the shit he said earlier took the wind out of my sails. I'm still pissed at him, but for some reason I can't help but feel sorry for him, too. What the Hell is with that guy!?

He rummaged for his phone and tempted the idea of calling Yuri to ask again after the truth, but then stopped, thinking better of it. He growled and looked to Potya, whose eyes were closed, but slowly opened when she could feel sights on her, and she mew'd quietly at him before rolling onto her back to stretch.

"If I can't call Katsudon or Viktor...then there's only one option." Yurio said to the feline, scratching her belly gently.

'This is quite nearly the most humiliated I've ever felt in my entire life... You don't know the first thing about me. You don't even want to try, because you've got your head wedged so far up your own ass that you can't see me as anything other than some perceived threat!'

"...I have to try, apparently..."

Potya rolled again as Yurio left the bed, and she tumbled into the cushy dent the teen's body had left on the roll. He stepped out of the room, and made his way quietly through the foyer, ducking between a few other resort patrons in a bid not to be seen as he went by the common-room. Through the narrow hall to the Katsuki residence, and up all three flights of stairs, Yurio pressed on, stopping only as he came to the top of the last step. He placed his feet carefully after that, not wanting the floorboards to give him away.

In the silence, Yurio was sure he could hear the quiet strum of guitar-strings, but only in their barest possible manner; the sound of the strings bring plucked only, with no melody to follow.

He must have those headphones on. He won't even hear me if I knock.

Scratching suddenly sounded from the inside of the door, and Yurio balked, backing up against the wall-length windows behind him. A whine followed, then another scratch, then the worst thing...footsteps.

Goddamn his dog.

There was nothing left to do but stay and face the music, or run like a coward. Yurio gripped the window-sill, propped himself up, and waited for the worst.
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED SIXTY SIX

I spent literally all goddamn day thinking about this...and now I don't feel like I thought it through at all.

Yurio's heart raced like mad as the footsteps got closer to the other side of the door. Panic set in and he thought his body might take over to start running any second. The stairs weren't that far away. Yuri's old room was even closer. The sound of the lock being turned on the other side echoed through the teen's ears like the clinking of chains, binding him to the moment.

Shit!

The panel started to shift in its track, and cracked open an inch or two, just enough for one eye to peer through. Yurio could feel himself paralyzed and shaking all at once.

This was such a stupid idea!

Asahi seemed confused to see him, that eye wide for a moment, then narrowing, "What now?"

"Ah...uhm..." The teen stammered, "Er..."

Fuck's sake, why can't I say anything!? I really should've called Yuri first!

"If you're not going to say anything then I'm closing the door." Asahi said simply, and did exactly that.

"Wait!" Yurio barked, pushing off the windows finally, but the door had already closed, "Hear me out at least!"

"Haven't you already said enough?" The older figure wondered, going back to where he'd been sitting on his bed earlier, and stroked a hand down Hana's back as she hopped up to retake her own place as well next to him. He reached for the big head-phones next to his guitar, and lifted them up over his head.

"Yuri's gonna be pissed at me if he comes back and finds out what happened!" The Tiger argued, "Viktor too probably!"

Asahi just rolled his eyes slightly, and let the big muffs on the head-set cling to the sides of his head, "I already said I wouldn't tell them anything if you left me alone. This is kind of counter-intuitive."

"You don't get it! They always find out! They're almost as bad as the old man!"

"Maybe you should've considered that before you carried out that ill-contrived plan of yours earlier then."

"Let me come in and explain!"

"Why?" Asahi glanced over his shoulder, guitar pulled up into his lap. He stared at the still-closed door with an impatient glare, "What difference would it make?"

"A lot! For everyone!" Yurio insisted.
Asahi just grumbled quietly to himself, "That's a funny way of saying it would help you."

"Just let me in!" The Tiger begged, "Before Mikhail finds out and makes us talk to him, too."

Drawing a breath of annoyance, Asahi leaned over his guitar and pinched the bridge of his nose. He looked over to the small altar against the wall, and the photo of Riku that stood with it.

He's as persistent as you were back then. Things ended up getting better when I stopped fighting... Is this worth the trouble of giving up again though...? I have nothing to really gain here...

"Saito!"

He groaned, pulling his lids down a little bit, but then waved his hand out, "I never locked the door." He said grimly, half-expecting the panel to fly open as soon as he said the words. However, it slid open slowly, and only after a few seconds' hesitation. He could see the blonde slink in like a whipped dog out the corner of his eye, but didn't bother looking over. He kept his sights down on the guitar, plucking at a few strings idly even with the headset still clinging to the tops of his ears.

The door slid closed again, but Yurio stayed by the panel, back against it as he nervously looked around.

"I really hope you have a better reason for bothering me than to save your own hide from your friends."

"...You're not even seeing the bigger picture." Yurio contested quietly, dubious to be in that once-familiar space.

Asahi slumped over the guitar and grimaced, "All I see is some kid who's realized he's walked neck-deep into trouble and is looking for a way to take it back before it bites him in the ass." He pointed at the anxious figure standing by the door, "Do you know what it means to be self-serving?"

Yurio bit down on the inside of his cheeks to stop himself from arguing further. Eyes closed and he drew a breath, then released it, "...This isn't what it looks like. I'm just...really bad at explaining things."

"And I'm particularly bad at listening, so we're both at a disadvantage."

"You seem to be doing better than I am."

"Maybe I've had a head start in trying to fix the problem."

Yurio grit his teeth, "Yuri and the old man have been trying to fix the problem when it comes to me for nearly a year. I mean...I introduced myself to Yuri by kicking in his door and yelling at him to retire. I met Mikhail by telling him to basically fuck off and mind his own business."

"Charming."

"My point is, that isn't who I'm supposed to be anymore. The last few weeks were complete upheaval. I thought once we got back to Hasetsu, everything would finally fucking calm down, but then you showed up and everything got crazy again." The teen explained, or tried to. The irritated glare he got over one shoulder told him he wasn't doing too well, and he growled desperately to himself to get it together, "Christ, this is harder than I thought..."

"Given what you said before," Asahi started instead, pressing his hand to the still-vibrating strings, "You want me out so Mr. Rozovsky pays all his attention to you again. You were expecting far
"It's not just about attention or interest." Yurio fumbled, "This was supposed to be my new beginning." He grit his teeth and side-eyed slightly, looking away from the figure sitting on the bed with his dog, "Now it just feels like a false-start because the old man had to focus so much of his time and effort on someone we didn't even know existed until last weekend."

"So sorry if my shit luck has inconvenienced you." Asahi huffed, "I'll be sure to keep you in mind the next time I'm thrown out of my home with no phone or money."

The Tiger had no 'clever' way to retort that, so he drew a bitter breath and attempted a different angle, "Why did you get thrown out, anyway?"

"I thought this was about you coming clean."

"It would go a long way towards that end if I understood why you're even really here. Or would you rather I just keep making up excuses on my own, just so I can keep being angry at you over them?"

Asahi hesitated, looking to Hana briefly for an answer. She just tapped her tail on the bedsheets a few times and lifted her head. Eyes then went back to the picture of Riku, and Asahi lifted one hand to gesture at it, "I admitted publicly to the fact that I was in love with him. I was thrown out over it. My family is...passionately intolerant to that sort of thing."

"...Didn't he die though?" Yurio asked skeptically. The look he got for it would've sent him flying back into the hall were it not for the door blocking the way, and he raised his hands defensively, "Sorry."

"I'm exposing things to you that I've told only four other people on this earth. Don't be rude." Asahi growled.

"Sorry!" The teen said again.

"Your turn, then."

Yurio's cheek twitched in surprise, "Hah?" He stammered, trying to collect himself. He coughed to clear his throat, "Er...fine... My mom thinks she's high-society back in Russia, and squandered everything we had on supporting that image of herself. My father's been gone for so long that I don't even remember his name or what he looked like. I had to support myself from a really young age...and my mom still took most of it for herself. So I grew up angry, resentful, distrusting of others...and bitterly proud of the fact that I made it on my own despite the disadvantages. I didn't listen to anyone because I hadn't needed to for so long, and I picked fights with anyone who didn't do what I wanted. That's why I went after Yuri... I hated the fact that we shared the same name, and thought his appalling performance at the Sochi Grand Prix would make me look bad by proxy. So I tried to scare him into retiring. It seemed like it worked, because after that...he basically vanished."

"Not for long."

"No..." Yurio tacitly agreed, "...Viktor plucked him out of it and coached him to Grand Prix Silver the next year. Now they're both Figure Skating Royalty, or whatever you want to call them. I thought the angry looks the bunch of you were giving each other last weekend was because you took Silver and they were mad about it."

Asahi shrugged slightly, "I'm sure there was a bit of resentment there about it, but it wouldn't have been that way if I hadn't won it on the coat-tails of everything else."
"...Cuz of the kiss, you mean."

"...Unfortunately." He lowered his head.

Yurio just looked confused again, and frustrated, "How did you even... I mean, Viktor never leaves his side... How did you even come within a thousand miles of being able to get that close?"

"He was on the phone with you at the time."

"Hah?" The teen balked, trying to remember, "...I only talked to him for a few minutes though..." He rubbed his head, but then the realization came, "Ah shit...he had to leave cuz it was too noisy. He couldn't hear me over the crowd around Viktor..."

Asahi just watched the epiphany descend on the younger figure.

"Viktor was stuck down because he was doing his post-skate interview. So...that's how you got Yuri alone..."

"I didn't get him anywhere." Asahi defended, "I was minding my own business. Yuri was the one who found me, and it was entirely by accident. Then he refused to let me leave."

"...He what?"

"He used his blade-guard like a door-jam, and blocked my way. He finished that call with you while staring at me. I tried to leave, because I knew it would end badly if I stayed...but he wouldn't let me out."

Yurio looked aside in disbelief, "That doesn't sound like him..."

"We got into a fight. Asahi went on, feeling Hana's head plop down on one of his legs. He looked towards her and set a hand on her fluff, "...It...was a really bad time for me. It was my first major competition back since Riku had been killed, and I was falling back into old habits...trudging up past feelings that Riku had helped me move on from. It was easier to want Yuri again, than it was to deal with the fact that Riku was gone...even though Yuri was already with someone else. By the end of that fight, I felt like I'd lost Yuri, too...and so I had nothing left to lose. The competition didn't mean anything to me anymore. My own life meant nothing. I had no hope, no love left in me...no will to live. So I took from Yuri the one thing I ever wanted, and I left, fully believing it would be my last night on earth anyway."

"...You are still here though."

"Yeah. Whatever that's worth." Asahi rubbed his dog's neck, "Viktor would've had me thrown out of the JSF if he had his way, but Yuri stayed his hand out of pity. Winning Silver just pissed them off, so I'm sure they regret letting me off the hook. Minako-kōchi insisted on trying to find out what was really going on though, and because of her, I was able to find some kind of reconciliation with Yuri and Viktor...and that's when Viktor became Senpai. They convinced me to go see Riku's grave in Wakkanai, and they gave Hana to me...she was Riku's dog before." He reached over to pet her again briefly, "If it hadn't been for Hana...I probably wouldn't be. My parents had somehow cancelled my phone and bank card. They wouldn't even come out of the house themselves to tell me off...they let one of my brothers do that for them. Cowards..." He paused a moment in that anger, but sighed and let it out, and pulled the guitar strap off his shoulder to set the whole thing down. He shook his head and slouched over his crossed legs, "I should've been more careful when I started posting stuff online. I never should've mentioned Riku...then none of this would've happened. Things were fine before... I held it together for two years..."
Yurio’s eyes looked aside, then forward again, confused at the statement, "...Two years? Fine? Riku died and you were fine?" He asked, disbelieving the whole thing. He stepped into the space between the shrine and the bed, and gestured at the photo, "If they kicked you out because you posted online about this guy, I can't imagine it was much better while you were still there."

"My father was the only one who knew...before I admitted it to the whole world." Asahi explained, keeping his eyes down on Hana, though he could see Yurio's legs past the edge of the bed, "He took at least enough pity on me to keep it to himself after he helped me move back to Imari. He found out Riku and I had been living together in Tokyo when he came to help me get my stuff. I couldn't skate anymore after the accident."

"...Were you hurt?"

"No. Heartbroken. I was dead inside."

"Oh..."

Asahi rubbed his nose on a sleeve, "Being back in that house...I had to bottle everything up. Even before that, I avoided people because I didn't want to talk about what I'd lost. No one knew; no one could know. Riku was just a friend, for all they knew. A friend who'd died, so I was only allowed to be that sad for him being gone. I didn't tell anyone the truth...not till Yuri dragged it out of me while we were fighting." He flopped down onto his side, facing the closet door straight ahead of him, and drew a deep breath, feeling the cramp in his chest as he exhaled, "Now all this other stuff is happening... As if being made to face Riku's death after two years wasn't hard enough...but then I hurt my friend, nearly lost my place in the JSF over it, had to face Riku's family after so long avoiding them, got kicked out of my house, and then...even though a regular person would probably be grateful for the help...I've had to submit to the will of others. I...have so much guilt and shame sitting on me right now... All I wanted was to be left alone to sort it out, and figure out a way of being able to pay all this back, all while still trying to deal with Riku's death. It's like...I'm finally free from one dungeon, but now I'm just sitting in a newer, nicer one. I'm still trapped though. Then I have to face Yuri and Senpai again when they get back... And Mr. Rozovsky is bugging me about accepting a bodyguard while all of you are gone, as though he anticipates my parents might send someone to hurt me over his decision to mess with their company."

Yurio grumbled quietly to himself, "...I...talked to them...Yuri and Viktor, I mean. About you. This morning." He admitted nervously, "That's...how I found out."

Asahi's eyes moved, but then he propped himself up onto an elbow, "They told you?" He asked in disbelief.

"No... I was being truthful when I said I figured it out myself." He shook his head, "Yuri called to ask me a favor, and I ended up complaining to them about all the shit happening here that was making me mad. They defended you and told me to talk to the old man instead, but they spoke in such weird terms that I realized something had happened between you all. I guessed right by accident; I wasn't even being serious. Viktor nearly crashed their car because of it though. So when you..." He grit his teeth and sighed, planting his hands on his hips as he looked away in embarrassment, "When you asked if Yuri would be proud of this, all I could think of was how he'd already said that the trouble of me finding out what happened wasn't worth it, because you three had already sorted things out. But then I had to go and make a giant mess anyway, because I was already mad at you for just being here."

"So you just used the kiss as an excuse to come after me."

"...I'm not proud of it, not anymore...but, yeah. It...took the pressure off of me." The Tiger confessed
nervously, "If I could be angry at you for something you'd actually done, then I didn't have to bring up the rest. I didn't have to see you as a victim needing help...I could just keep going on being mad that you were taking up all the old man's time and effort, and feeling justified for it." He paused then, and descended to sit on the floor, wrapping his arms around his crossed legs, "I...guess I didn't realize how badly I wanted to feel like I was part of something until it seemed like I had it, and then had it taken away. After spending my whole life having to go it alone, it was...a bit of a relief to finally put responsibility for things into someone else's hands, so I could just focus on doing what I wanted, not what I had to do. When we left Russia, it was after we had gone back to my mom's apartment to get my cat and a few things...and I never want to look back."

"So Mr. Rozovsky has basically become your dad then. That's what you're defending."

The teen nodded against his knees, "...Don't tell him I said that. He'll get a big head about it."

"Hmph..." Asahi huffed, "You're probably right."

Yurio glanced up and over, watching as the older figure sat up again, putting feet on the floor. He lifted his head, "So what happens now...?"

"That depends on you."

The teen grimaced a little, but his mind went back to that fateful day at the airport nearly a year prior.

"The last thing you want to do in a bind is push everyone away who could help you. I don't know if lashing out is a coping mechanism or what...but we've got to teach you a better way. You do have people besides your grandpa that care about you...and you've got to learn to treat them better." Yuri explained, "Your first lesson will be with me."

"...Ehh...?"

"From now on, anytime we meet or depart, you gotta give me a hug, and let me hug you back." He answered simply, "It doesn't have to last long...just a quick hug, that's it."

"...Why?"

"It's something Viktor taught me...and it's important. Being held by someone makes you feel good. The longer you're held, the better you feel, and the calmer you are. Every time I get anxious about something, Viktor hugs me somehow, even if it's just one arm. Plus, he hugs me a lot anyway, so I don't often get a chance to become anxious in the first place. How do you feel now?"

Yurio wasn't willing to admit it.

"That's okay. You don't have to say. Just think about it."

Asahi nodded and stood up again, about to gesture towards the door, but found that the shorter figure hadn't budged to leave. He blinked in confusion, but then cocked his head back slightly as both of the teen's arms slowly started to raise up, outstretched, "...What...what is this...?"
"I'm offering a hug. Don't make it weird." Yurio harped.

"I don't...really parta-"

"Viktor taught it to Yuri, and Yuri taught it to me. This is how we forgive each other." He explained quickly, "One hug at a time."

"Uhm...o...kay...?"

It was stiff and awkward, but a hug happened nevertheless, and Yurio finally made his way towards the door. He paused within the frame though and glanced back, "...I'm...sorry all those things happened to you. You had it worse than I thought."

"...Ah...thanks..." Asahi nodded nervously, waiting for the door to close and the teen to depart. Once it slid shut again, he approached the door, and quietly turned the deadbolt to lock it again. He kept his hand on the wood for a moment though, and glanced back to the picture by the shrine.

I guess it was worth it.
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED SIXTY SEVEN

The rail terminal at Leningradsky Railway Station was an industrial-level operation. Twelve huge tracks and countless interchanges between them, with a number of different train brands and a half-dozen different destinations, all gathered against 8 platforms. The Sapsan train from St. Petersburg pulled into the place slowly, backing up against big, prong-like metal bumpers that signaled the end of the line, and people started flowing out.

Viktor became hyper-vigilant again, eyes moving to look in every direction and at every person who came too near. Makkachin kept pressed against one leg, and Yuri - carrying Jiro inside the front of his big jacket - kept close as well. They pulled a rolling suitcase behind them in each hand, weaving through the different flows of traffic to get into the main terminal.

It was quite a distance to walk before the huge, pale-gold building came into view. Each waiting area along the tracks was covered by a metal awning, with the visible underside decorated with an odd geometric pattern of tiles. The ground was tiled by grey and red brick, with yellow-painted sections on either side to mark the 'safe zone' before the edges. Once the 'roof' was gone, Yuri got a good look at the terminal building itself.

"...It's weird..." He commented, looking at the decidedly underwhelming sight of the backside of the building, looking like the backside of a warehouse, rather than the fancy Summer-Garden-like spectacle he'd expected from looking it up online before arriving, "We've been through Moscow a couple times, but for some reason we never came through by train."

"My Uncle and I came through here on our way to St. Petersburg before NHK." Viktor explained dryly, "This is the only station that goes between here and there."

"Oh..." Yuri hummed, feeling the cutting edge of that answer. The big clock above sliding doors read 2:30pm, and Yuri hopped to catch up with his husband's long stride, "So how long is the layover anyway?" He wondered, slipping through the middle set of doors.

"...Four hours."

"Four hours!?!" He echoed, aghast, "I thought it would be way less than that..."

"It's a once-weekly departure. It's also bound for Nice, in France...not specifically Vienna." Viktor explained, looking around the more modern-appearing interior, reading the sights to find their next destination, "The train only stops for 3 minutes. I had to buy tickets all the way into France just to get one that went through Vienna at all. We'll have to be ready to jump ship when we're pulling in."

"...I see..."

"For now..." The Russian went on idly, looking around again to try and peek over the heads of people around them, "We have an intermission."

"...I feel like I should've asked for more details about this trip." Yuri commented warily, trying to keep close behind his partner as they weaved through the crowds, "What exactly are we doing now...? You seem like you're in a rush despite the layover time..."

"Our train out of Russia is going to arrive at a different train station. We have to get there first."
"Viktor..."

There was no pause in the man's pace.

"Viktor." Yuri said more insistently, letting go of one suitcase handle to grab his partner's sleeve and force him to stop. Confused, Viktor looked back, looking breathless like he'd just run a marathon. Yuri let the sleeve go and set his hand against the arm within it, "Viktor, slow down. No one can get to this part of the terminal without a ticket anyway, and no one knows we're coming. If anyone recognizes us, it'll be completely by chance...like that lady last year, who spotted us on the airplane when we first left Japan to come here." He tried to reassure, massaging his gloved thumb through the thick wool, "You're more likely to run into fans than adversa-"

"I don't want to run into anyone who might recognize me." The Russian answered, barely audible over the bustle of the terminal. He pulled down the front edge of his furry hat and stepped a little closer, "I just want to get out of here."

"I know, but you'll draw more attention to yourself if you act frantic like this." Yuri explained, drawing a look of surprise from his partner, "Just act natural."

"Natural for me is hanging all over you though, and I can't do that right now."

Yuri frowned, "I understand that, my love, I hate it too...but it's only for a little while longer."

"...It's a rare thing that you use pet names."

His cheeks flushed slightly, adding color to his cold-touched skin, "...I know...but I really super mean it when I do use them... So please, settle down a little bit. There's security crawling all over this place. Don't let my complaints about the wait time get you down."

Viktor's frame slouched a little, "...I can't wait till we're in Europe and I can act normal again... My stomach has been in knots for ages because of all this constant stress..."

"Well, let's slow down the pace a little bit... The train out of Moscow isn't leaving till after supper, so there's no sense rushing. Take a deep breath. We have dogs if you need a quick cuddle."

Slate eyes went down to the puppy peeking out from the collar of Yuri's coat, and the Russian's gaze softened a little as he let a suitcase go to pat the pup between his ears, "It's a temporary substitute... But, I suppose it'll have to do until we get into friendlier territory..." He said quietly, feeling the Akita's head lean into his gloved palm, "Even though you've been with me this whole trip...I feel like you've been a thousand miles away."

"I know... Ever since the hecklers, you've been really on edge. You're super wound-up and tense. It's been like trying to cuddle with a log; all hard and stiff, and not even in the way I like."

That just made Viktor worry, "Oh no... You don't mean I...?"

"It's fine." Yuri reassured, nudging his head towards the doors they'd been going towards before, "We can talk about it when we're in a less public setting."

The Russian grumbled a whine to himself, brow furrowed under his chapka hat. He reluctantly turned and retook the suitcase handle, heading towards the subway terminal to get to their next ride. Waiting the few minutes for the next carriage felt like an eternity in the man's head, and even longer for the 26 minute trip to the next train station. Arriving at the Moscow Belorussky Station did little to assuage the man's worry, and an endless array of disastrous situations played out in his mind.
Yuri could only look on with concern, not wanting to betray his partner's anxieties about being 'spotted' by the wrong eyes. The best he could do was sit at the edge of his small seat in the waiting lounge, enough to press his shoulder to his spouse's, and unzip Jiro from his swaddling pack. The pup seemed happy to have his limbs freed again, but didn't stray far on his leash, simply sniffing around the waiting area before opting to lie down on his human's boots. Makkachin was lying down as well, panting and watching all the people who walked by.

Stomachs growled before long, right as the daytime winter sky plunged into darkness. The sun always retreated fast at that time of year. However, like before, Viktor struggled to find an appetite. All Yuri could convince him to take in was some sugary coffee, and it just made him worry all the more.

He's going to get sick like this... I hope being in Vienna is enough to help him recover. Skating at the Euros Exhibition is probably the only thing that he's looking forward to right now. I feel so helpless... The only thing I can offer is me and he won't accept it as long as we're here...

The long wait for their train though eventually came to an end, and the announcement overhead heralded its arrival. A number of people had been waiting for several hours with them, and everyone rose to gather up their belongings.

"It's finally time," Yuri said, hopes rising, "We're leaving it all behind."

Viktor gave a tired nod, "I'm going to shower as soon as we're settled into our cabin. I'm scared to know what my hair looks like right now."

"Well, you never did take that hat off..." Yuri mused, reaching down to hoist Jiro up for one last swaddle to get through the crowd. He tapped the pup's nose once he was strapped in, and the jacket was zipped up over him again, "Much as I like you as a puppy, I am actually looking forward to you being all grown up. I've seen video of Putin's Akita barking at the Japanese delegation...you guys are intimidating."

Jiro licked the finger that booped his snoot, and flopped his head around trying to get Yuri's chin, too.

"Maybe not so intimidating right now though."

"Right?"

"Makkachin though..." Viktor looked down at the brown fluff, whose head tilted at the sound of his name, "This is what peak performance looks like."

"Ferocious."

With all their things picked up and dogs accounted for, the pair made their way down to the first floor, and out into the cold of the boarding platform. The wind had picked up a little bit, and there was a little bit of snow, but it wasn't terrible. They traversed the deck, passing each grey car with its red decorative paint, and found the boarding stairs for their assigned cabin. Though a relatively small space, it was spacious enough for their needs for the next 30-some-odd hours. Luggage was stowed, pups secured behind closed doors, and they peeled out of their winter gear.

Viktor, however, refused to remove the chapka hat in sight of anyone. Yuri cocked a brow as he watched his otherwise-naked husband step into their tiny bathroom, but made no comment about it. He heard the water turn on, and a few thumps and bumps on the walls as the Russian got used to the tiny space, but turned his attention to the sleeper cabin itself.
In day-time mode, there was a wall-length couch, upholstered in a deep evergreen color. The upper bunk-bed was fastened to the wall in its upright position, but Yuri pulled it out just to see what it had. The plush mattress was thick and soft, and the sheets and blankets folded neatly. He grabbed the pillows and blankets and pushed the bed back into place, clicking the knob to lock it down, and then pulled out the back of the couch to see the width of the lower bunk. It was **almost** as wide as a standard twin bed, but it was still wider than he expected, so seeing it was a relief. He set the extra blankets down on top of it and went to find a certain suitcase. As he rummaged through it, seeking for his laptop and the charger that went with it, he could feel the train starting to move. He finally found it though, and went to sit on the bed, putting the laptop on the small desk between it and the shorter single-person couch opposite him. Makkachin was quick to hop up and nestle in, and Jiro begged to be lifted.

Yuri ruffled both of the dogs' heads once they were up, "It's been a lot of travel for you two lately. We'll be staying here for a little while though, so get some rest."

Several minutes later, Viktor emerged from the steamy little room again, sopping wet but feeling much better than when he'd gone in. A thin bath-robe hung from one shoulder, tied loosely around his waist, and a towel over his head to replace the hat he'd worn earlier. He still looked a bit dour, but he looked past the white fluff to see out the window, "It's nice to see that we're moving. I could feel the train start to go, but it feels still and motionless now."

"All the better for sleeping, I suppose." Yuri commented, lounging against the wall of the cabin with a number of their pillows behind him and both dogs between his side and the compartment divider, "Come. Join the pile." He offered, lifting the laptop off of his legs to make room between them. Viktor rubbed his hair for a moment longer, but then set the towel down on the shorter couch, and crawled up onto the bed. He slowly made his way closer, and bumped his wet forehead against his husband's brow, drawing a long breath, eyes closed. He opened them again as he heard the laptop being set down on the table, and both hands pressed to his cheeks. When he looked forward, he saw Yuri's irises looking straight back at him.

"Feeling better now?"

"You were right...I really do look like undeath..." Viktor sighed, lowering his face a little, tracing strings of damp, steel-grey hair down his partner's neck, "I can't stop thinking about how stupid an idea this whole trip was. I'm so sorry..."

Yuri slid both arms over his spouse's shoulders, and felt the man descend against his chest, arms going around and behind his back to wedge between himself and the mattress under him. He wove his fingers through wet strands and rubbed his cheek against the side of his partner's forehead, "Try not to dwell on it too much. You couldn't have known what was going to happen until it did. Even I didn't see it coming, and I worry about everything."

"To think, the part of this whole misadventure that made my Uncle nearly choke, turned out to be the easiest part of the whole thing." Viktor added, turning his head to the side so he could see Makkachin beside them, and pressed his ear to his husband's frame, hearing the heartbeat under the surface. He pulled an arm out and stroked the poodle's head, "I wonder if he knows the house burned down. It's technically his, like you said..."

"Not sure. The house was basically unoccupied. Maybe they think he set it ablaze himself." Yuri shrugged, "I have my own theories."

"...What theories are there to have?" The Russian wondered skeptically, looking up slightly, "Yuri."
He hesitated slightly, pursing his lips as he thought, but then shook his head, "I thought I could see spray-paint marks on some of the unburnt exterior wall structure. Maybe Yakov burned it down himself so you wouldn't see what the vandals wrote on it."

"...When would he have had time though? It looked like it had been down for days, maybe weeks."

"As soon as he saw the video of you being pelted with snowballs, maybe."

Viktor slouched again and groaned quietly.

"But it's entirely possible that one of the vandals did it themselves. I feel a little better about the idea that Yakov did it though. To protect you, y'know? It would've been more like a cleansing than a final disrespect."

"Maybe..."

"I accept it as head-canon until or unless evidence arises to suggest the contrary." Yuri tried to reassure, "We can always ask him at Euros if he even knows it was burned down."

"I feel so stupid..." Viktor lamented quietly, "I still can't get over how much danger I put us both in with my recklessness... Mila warned me over a year ago that Russia was dangerous for people like us, but I still threw us into the middle of it like some idiot..."

"There was simply no way to know before it happened."

"I should've known...I lived here for most of my life..." He went on, rubbing his face on his husband's shirt, "I feel like I don't even recognize these people anymore..."

"You were protected by prestige and privilege before. We both were." Yuri explained, "And hindsight is always 20/20. We know now, and we can do something about it. Just...please let us do that stuff together from now on... Don't try to bear this burden alone."

Viktor let the words sink in, but just as he was about to nod, he suddenly felt a jolt go through him. He was up and sitting on his knees in a heartbeat, pulling clothes off his confused spouse's frame, until he was down to just his shorts.

"V-Viktor! What in the world...?"

Slate eyes scanned every inch of skin as hands moved to flip the smaller figure around like a big vegetable, but eventually Viktor settled and sighed a breath of relief, hands dropping into his lap, "...You aren't hurt at all... I'm sorry, I never even asked this morning if you were okay after I hit you with the car..."

"That's b-because I'm fine...!" Yuri insisted hesitantly, "I mean, I was a bit sore, but no worse than if I haven't worked out for a while and suddenly got crazy at the gym..." He looked up and rubbed his chin suddenly, "We really need to get back into a routine, you know... Maybe we can jog a bit once we get to the hotel. I don't think they have a gym or pool, but we can go to that public pool around the corner--"

"I hit you with the car, Yuri." Viktor interrupted, emphasizing his prior point, "I don't know if I can ever recover from that."

"Correction. I jumped onto the hood when you didn't expect it. Let me take responsibility for what happened."
"...But I should never have tried to leave on my own. I basically forced your hand."

"Yes, all true, but you still didn't tell me to jump in front of a moving vehicle. It was just 3am and I couldn't brain that good, so I did the only thing I could think of that I knew would make you stop." Yuri explained, feeling a little awkward with his legs parted when his partner was so far away from him again. He lifted his right leg and nudged the man closer with a foot pressed to Viktor's side, and the despondent figure edged forward again, descending nearly to where he'd been before. Instead of putting arms around him, Viktor paused on his elbows and looked forward with a guilty visage. Yuri brushed a few damp strands from his spouse's face, "We all do stupid things when we're stressed and upset. I mean, I turned down a kiss from you once because I was so upset. How crazy was that?"

Viktor looked even more guilty then, and pressed his chin down to Yuri's chest, "I don't...remember..."

"At Cup of China. Last year. I was yelling at you and you asked if you should just kiss me and I said no."

"Oh..."

Yuri made a face, "Flip around and lean against me. I want to get your mind off this negative stuff and make you feel better."

Viktor tilted his head in confusion, but did as bid and slowly twisted around until he was on his back, and could rest his head against that spot his chin had just been propped against on Yuri's chest. Yuri brought the laptop back around and plunked it onto his stomach, setting it up so it would expand up against his upturned knees. The initial view of the screen was just the younger man's Instagram feed, but Viktor was sure that had nothing to do with what was going on, "...Anything interesting...?" He asked anyway.

"Only a lack of content from people I had hoped would've been posting while we were MIA." Yuri answered, getting comfortable before sliding one arm over a shoulder to reach for the mouse-pad, "I.G. isn't what I was wanting to show you though. It was..." He moved the cursor over to the tabs across the top of the window, and clicked a different one into view, bringing up a page Viktor had entirely not expected, "Hopefully you didn't forget about this, too."

"Uhm..." The hapless Russian stammered, getting an eyeful of an online sex-toy bazaar, "Well..."

"You said we should shop for a warmer for the thingie back home." He explained, moving the mouse over to the fleshlight section on the drop-down menu, "So, help me find one. Maybe you can explain some of these...weirder things to me."

"My love, you come from the hentai capital of the world..."

"Sure, but that doesn't mean I participated in it. Plus...remember what side of the fence I started on." Yuri pointed out, scrolling through the first page idly; a number of different kinds of fleshlights passed by the wide-eyed Russian's sights, "I would never have looked at any of this stuff because I never planned on being with a guy before you crashed into my life. So..." He pulled his hand back and gestured at the screen before wrapping both arms loosely over his spouse's chest, "Teach me. If we find something we like, we can have it delivered to the hotel."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED SIXTY EIGHT

It didn't take much time at all to find the warming-stand that Yuri had requested, and it was quickly added to the digital shopping cart. With that done though, Viktor's finger hovered over the mouse-pad, not sure where to go from there. The drop-down menu had a long list of choices to pick from, but his eyes just glossed over them one at a time, not really reading the options.

"It's okay if you're not in the mood..." Yuri said suddenly, seeing the indecisiveness, "I kind of sprung it on you."

"...I want to be in the mood..." Viktor answered quietly, clicking into an area he thought might be safe to look at, "You'd think I would be after all the complaining and stressing I did..."

"Stress doesn't just fall off like clothing though." Yuri reassured, "You're still pretty tense. It'll take some days for you to thaw out. I just thought..."

Frustrated by his lack of focus or interest, Viktor set both hands gently on the laptop and closed it, pressing it flat against his bare legs - Yuri didn't bother to finish his statement. The robe Viktor wore was more of a formality than anything - barely clinging by its sleeves and waist-tie - and it covered little. One hand moved to lift the laptop up and set it down on the nearby table-top, and both then moved to hold lightly to the arms crossing over his upper chest. Viktor leaned his head back against his spouse's shoulder, "I'm sorry, my love... Maybe when we get to the hotel."

"Don't be sorry." Yuri reassured, "Can I do anything for you that you don't have to think about?"

"Nothing that wouldn't just serve to remind me that I'm derelict in my duties..." Viktor sighed, his whole frame going limp where it lay. He closed his eyes for a moment, "...Tell me how badly I performed yesterday night."

"Well that's just going to guarantee you feel that way."

"Yuri."

He hesitated a moment, trying to figure out how to explain it. He rubbed his cheek against the side of his spouse's head, "Well...it's not to say that you did badly. It's just...you just did it. It's like you were doing your chores, and didn't even stick around to collect your allowance for the trouble."

The Russian groaned sadly and covered his face with his hands.

"It's fine, really...I just..."

"...What...?" Viktor whined, dreading the rest.

"...If you're in a mood like that, I wish you wouldn't force yourself." Yuri explained nervously, "I know you've said that most of what you like about sexy time is getting to do stuff for me, but...when it dawns on me that you're not into it for yourself, it makes me feel bad. It's harder to finish when it seems like you're counting on it."

Falling silent, Viktor drew in a long breath and held it. Hands slid down his cheeks, pulling down the heavy, darkened lower lids of his eyes, "...This is humiliating... How many times have I done this to you now? Just this season..."
"Counting only the events and not the number of sessions...I can think of three?"

"I was hoping you wouldn't answer that..."

"Oh...sorry..."

"It's fine..." Viktor sighed again, arms flopping at his sides. Makkachin lifted his head when he felt it, and licked at the fingers that were closest.

Before another word could be said edgewise though, a knock tapped on the door. All heads were up and looked towards it, but Yuri dipped his own down, "Let me have your robe for a second. I'll answer it."

The Russian nodded and unwrapped himself, sliding his bare frame under the blankets as Yuri rose from the bed to slip the robe around himself. Just in case, Yuri unclicked the lock on the upper bunk and pulled it down, tossing one of the blankets up to make the place look used. He turned then towards the door and unlocked it, opening it a crack, "Yes?"

"Ticket check." A voice answered, accent thick.

"Oh. Sure, one second." Yuri put the door to and went over to the travel packet in the front pouch of one of their suitcases, and withdrew the boarding passes and documents for the dogs. He waited patiently while everything - and everyone - was checked, accounted for, and stamped, took the papers back when they were returned, and locked the door again. Once the paperwork was back in its folder, Yuri looked towards his exhausted and mentally-spent spouse. Without a second thought, he clicked the lights off and let the robe fall off his frame, pawing his way towards the beds. Fingers fumbled in the dark for the second bunk and pulled the blanket back down, folded the bed back into its upright position, and furled the comforter out to let it fall on top of husband and dogs alike. He then crawled into the warmth, small as the space may have been, and snuggled in close, "I don't want you stressing over whether you're performing in bed or not."

"...What about the Mile Long Club...? I feel like I promised it to you..."

Yuri huffed a dry laugh, "I don't care about ticking off boxes on a Boy Scout's list of achievements. We aren't earning any badges for all the weird places we make out."

Viktor sighed anyway, "...I know, but-" He started, only to find himself silenced by a long kiss. The hand behind him slid across his upper back to join the other on each side of his face, and Yuri pulled back again only far enough to nuzzle the tip of his nose.

"Remember when I told you that I hold the entire world in my hands." He said simply, "I would stay by your side even if we never made love again for the rest of our lives. I fell in love with you, not your dangly bits."

"...My dangly bits happen to like your dangly bits though." Viktor retorted sullenly, "And all your other bits."

"And they're yours when you want them." Yuri mused, "For now, just relax. We have our dogs and..."
each other, and no obligations for the next day and a half. Let yourself dream about the Euros Exhibition. Everyone is going to go completely nuts when they find out you're going to be there."

Viktor made a face, though it was impossible to see in the dark, "It's not like I'm going on my own..."

"You're the previously-reigning European Champion though. I'm just a tag-along. My being there is neat, but you being there is - dare I say - controversial." Yuri explained, nuzzling in closer, feeling the heat of one arm going over his side to hold him there, "I can't wait to see it all."

Tuesday morning in Hasetsu started like the Monday before it, with exception to the absence of one Minako Okukawa. Mikhail rose with his gaggle of kids, sorted out breakfast and the order of bathroom use, and set the 'middle child' to his morning chore in the parking lot. Yuri grudgingly went out, but had resigned himself to his fate after Hiroko had made a point to thank him for his help. Asahi came down from the 3rd floor at around the same time - Hana trotting next to him - for his usual morning run. He nodded his head to the elder Russian as they passed each other, but hesitated to go outside right away, simply looking through the open sliding door to see the Russian Tiger trudging through the overnight snowfall. He could see the teen struggling through a foot of the stuff, sticky and heavy from the slightly-above-freezing air temperature.

[Quite the odd sight, don't you think?] Toshiya's voice sounded, drawing the skater's attention, [Usually we just get a dusting of snow at best, but we've seen a lot lately.]

"Hai." Asahi agreed quietly, looking out again. Yuri hadn't looked back, and simply worked to get the job done so he could go back inside. Eyes went down to the Hokkaido-ken, and she looked back curiously, wondering when they'd go out with a subtle wag of her curly tail. Asahi looked back to the Katsuki patriarch though, "Sumimasen, betsu no yukikaki wa arimasu ka?"

Toshiya blinked in surprise at the question.

With only a handful of square meters cleared, Yurio was stunned to see Hana playfully running around him. He tried to shoo her out of the way to she wouldn't drag snow into the lot again from the piles he'd shoveled off to the side, but she just huffed a bark at him, as though telling him to quit complaining. The teen nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard the unexpected, loud scraping noise of hard plastic on frozen concrete right behind him. With a hand pressed to his chest, Yurio turned around, about to demand what was going on...only to stop and see Asahi there with a second shovel, scooping a line of snow off the pavement next to the spot he'd just cleared, "...What...are you doing...?"

"Helping."

"...Why though?"

"You won't finish in time if you do it on your own. It's half-slush." The older figure explained, tossing the first pile away. Hana didn't bother jumping into it though; it was too wet for her liking. Asahi shielded his eyes as he looked up at the resort, and at the depth of the snow all around them, "It looks like it all blew in from behind the building, so it's deeper in this corner than by the door. I'll get this section if you want to do the area between the gate and the entrance."

Perplexed, but too cold already to question further, Yurio moved off towards the archway. Pausing there, he looked back, noting that Asahi looked to be ready to go on his usual morning jog, but had
donned a heavy jacket and gloves, and had traded his sneakers for snow boots, none of which he needed if he'd expected to keep warm by running. Yurio shook his head.

*This guy is confusing. How come Yuri never said anything about him before? If they really go back so far, I feel like he would've mentioned a name at least...*

The teen made a face, but turned to start shoveling snow-slush again.

*Maybe Nationals isn't the first time they had a run-in. Saito barely gives anything away and I can't even tell if he's happy or sad just by looking at him. He's a lot like Otabek that way...but at least Otabek smiles sometimes, damn.*

The work was finished in record time with the extra set of hands. The air was a bit warmer, too, and parts of the drive were starting to dry out, leaving only a few damp patches scattered here and there. Within the foyer, both shovelers stripped out of their boots and coats, but unlike the teen, Asahi just traded boots for his running shoes. He made it back to the sliding door before Yurio spoke his name to get his attention, and he turned his head slightly.

Yurio had one arm extended, "Thanks."

Asahi blinked at it, confused, but then reached back, taking the Tiger's forearm for a brief grasp, "Sure."

"...See ya."

"...Y-yeah..."

The door slid shut again, and Asahi took off with his pupper. Yurio reached for the snow-shovels leaning on the wall, and hoisted them up to return them to the tool closet they'd come from. Just as he moved though, Mikhail spotted him from the door to the common-room.

...*Two shovels?* The Russian wondered to himself, eyes following the teen around the corner.
The curious calm and quiet from Yurio didn't go unnoticed by those around him. Whispers went between the Rozovsky girls. The Katsukis looked on curiously anytime the teen passed through. Mikhail was perplexed but curious, but there were other things looming that kept hold of the majority of his attention.

With the gaggle of teens sitting before their tele-tutors, the elder hopped back into the old, borrowed car he'd used to arrive at the resort that morning, and started heading to Minako's flat. Arriving there, he found the disheveled, tired woman loafing around the unit in her glasses, slippers, and bathrobe, but feeling much better than when he'd left her earlier on.

"How did you do on your own last night?" He wondered, peeling back the edge of the robe where the fluffy trim went around the back of her neck, and gently rubbed her shoulders, "I think I spent half the time worrying about you."

"I had a hard time sleeping, too...I just couldn't get comfortable." She explained quietly, trying to avoid falling asleep again.

"I'm going to arrange for Yura to have his own room, apart from the girls. That way I can be with you tonight."

"We really need to sort him and Asahi out. I'm going to be useless to one of them if I have to coach them separately."

"I agree..." Mikhail pointed out, sliding his hands down the woman's back to lean against it, and wrapped his arms around her, "I want to try and sort things out between them. I talked to Asahi yesterday about whether Yura had given him any trouble, but it seems like they've just been avoiding each other, for the most part."

"I think they might've run into each other during the switch-out at the Ice Castle yesterday..." She pointed out, and turned her head slightly to see where the Russian had perched his chin on her shoulder, "Asahi left in a hurry and Yura was evasive and quite for the rest of the afternoon."

"Really?" Mikhail tilted his head a little, "He has seemed a bit subdued since he got back...I thought it was something else."

"Maybe Asahi put him in his place."

"Maybe." He nodded, "Now I'm just extra worried though. Maybe we should drag Yura around with us today."

"Us? Drag? Where are we going...? House-viewing?"

He shook his head, "I wanted to get some cars before that. Two of them, at least. One for all of us, one for just us."

"...I hate that you can just say that." Minako grumbled, deadpanning severely as she turned to look forward again.

"It's not like you can owe me back for them. They'd be family vehicles. We can't all fit into your little
The ballerina huffed a sad laugh and shook her head, "I know, I know... it's just... I've had to work so hard, all my life, for every little thing I have... I think about how rich Lilia became out in Russia after being a Prima, and how little I came away with even though I won that," She pointed at the Benois de la Danse trophy on a dresser near the window, "...And even the million-dollar prize that came with it, but I put it all into my studio, only for it to not really go very far. I had to open up the Snack Bar just to cover costs." She put a hand over her mouth and chin in sudden nervous worry, "...I really need to sort those things out. They've been closed for the skating season so I could travel with you, but I've probably lost a lot of business because people have had to find somewhere else to go."

"So close the Snack Bar and focus on your studio."

"That wasn't the point I was trying to get at..." Minako shook her head and moved her hand again, "It just... unsettles me a little that suddenly I don't have to think about that stuff anymore."

"Starlight, it's not your fault that your investments didn't work out. I mean, you said that this whole city used to be known for its hot-spring resorts, but now only Yu-Topia is left standing. This place just isn't that big. You did have that uptick in students over the summer though..." Mikhail pointed out, "Aren't you pleased by that?"

"Sure, but it's not like I can just take that success and go buy a car in cash because I feel like it." She retorted, "I don't know. I guess it'll take a while to get used to having your resources..." Her eyes went down to the elaborate ring on her finger, "It's a bit of a Cinderella experience for me. From rags to riches, practically overnight..."

Mikhail sputtered, "Overnight? I've been trying to woo you for almost a year. I had to work really hard!"

"What, are you suggesting that you got started at Worlds?"

He nodded emphatically, "That dumb joke I made about smart-phones was my first move. Flirtation starts with laughter. If there's no laughing, there's no point... so..."

"... I see..."

Mikhail made a face at the lackluster response, and lowered his forehead down to the shoulder before him, "... I know you didn't appreciate my secretive nature over the months. I apologize for that. You know I'm good for my word though, and I did tell you my actual worth in the end."

"It's not really about the money. That was just the subject." Minako said, but shook her head and leaned it forward, pulling her glasses off before rubbing her eyes, "I guess I'm just overwhelmed."

"Well, there's been a bunch of really big changes in a short period of time... Ever since NHK, it's just been crazy. Give it a little more time. Okay?" He suggested, nosing his lady love's cheek a bit.

"... What about that car you already had in Edmonton?" Minako half-deflected, "Couldn't you just ship it here like you did with Viktor's Audi?"

"Who says I'm not?" Mikhail mused.

"Wait... so you're getting two more cars even though you have one on its way already...?"

"No," He kissed the spot and rose up to his feet, offering his hands to help his fiancé stand as well, "I don't know how Viktor manages to drive on the left side of the road in a car designed to be driven on
the right, but I don't think I could compensate like that. I'm buying local cars, to be driven as the natives do."

"So what are you doing with the car in Edmonton? And the house...and all your other stuff out there...?"

"Everything in Edmonton is going to be sold." He explained, following her to the bedroom so she could get ready to leave. He sat on the end of her bed while she began to rummage for the clothes she wanted for the day, "Once we have a house here in Hasetsu, the house in Banff will be packed up, all the girls' things will be sent here, and then the property sold. If I need to go back for business, I'll just rent a hotel room."

Minako paused and stepped out of the closet, "...Do you expect you'll be gone a lot...?"

"Nope."

"Oh, that's a relief."

"It's a perk of the fact that the business is big enough to manage itself. I only really step in when there's asset expansion or other big things happening. I have someone who represents me at meetings and confers with me via email about anything they're unsure about."

"...I see." She said quietly, going back to her hanging clothes.

Returning from his run, but finding that the onsen was occupied, Asahi retreated to the Katsuki residence to clean up. Given the late start and the warmer temperatures, it was effectively lunchtime when he finished and came back downstairs. He found an empty table at the back of the common-room and waited patiently with his napping dog. Within a few minutes, a bowl of vegetarian ramen was set down before him. He bowed his head in thanks to Mari, grabbed up the chopsticks and soup-spoon, and went to task.

He was able to eat maybe half of it before the Rozovsky duo + one wandered in for their own lunch break. Of course, with all the other tables occupied by other patrons, their only option was to sit with him.

It felt a small bit awkward at first, with the girls offering quiet greetings so as not to disturb anyone, but they both felt their hearts go into their throats when their 'brother' plunked himself down directly across from Asahi. Yurio's elbows went down on the table-top, forearms crossed between them, and he stared forward.

"Yurithat's rude." Nikki tried to whisper out the side of his mouth, "Whyareyoupesteringhim?"

"It's okay." Asahi defended, much to the teen's surprise. Grey eyes went forward to the figure across from him, "You look cranky."

"I'm starving." Yurio answered, practically salivating at the sight of the food opposite him.

Asahi squinted at the pitiful sight, but before he could say or do anything, Mari returned with napkin-wrapped packs of utensils and the first round of lunch items. Bowls of rice, miso soup, and a platter of pan-seared dumplings were put on the table, followed by little white dipping saucers and small plates. Yurio quickly swiped one of the utensil bundles and unwrapped it, grabbing the chopsticks to stab at one of the dumplings roughly.
"Chill out, Yura...food isn't going to go anywhere." Viktoria huffed, watching the small morsel disintegrate under the Tiger's man-handling.

"...What are you doing to that poor thing?" Asahi asked unexpectedly, drawing all eyes towards him again.

Yurio finally managed to get half of the dumpling up, pulling it across to pop it into his mouth, but it fell and bounced off the table and into the dipping saucer. He grumbled and went fishing for it.

To the surprise of all, Asahi set his own things down and reached across the table. He pulled Yurio's hand up by the wrist and reset the chopsticks in his fingers properly, "Hold the bottom-one still and use the top-one to grab. Pinch only enough to get a hold on something, and no harder."

Yurio held still in surprise for a moment, but then dared to reach for the chunk of dumpling that had fallen. Strangely for him, when he did as told, he was able to pick the piece up without any trouble. Of course, when he went to do the same thing with the rice, he had trouble; only able to pick up 4 or 5 grains at a time, with the rest squeezed out.

"Pinch the tips together from the bottom and use it like a spoon." Asahi told him, having returned to his own food by then. He reached over with his own chopsticks though and showed an example of what he meant, closing the tips of the sticks under a lump of rice in Yurio's bowl. Lifting from beneath, he was able to hoist the lump up, and showed how easy it was to move it then by swiftly pulling it back towards himself, "Didn't anyone ever teach you how to use these properly...?"

Yurio side-eyed the girls next to him, then looked back at the man across from him, "...Technically, no."

"...Why not?"

"I usually use a fork."

"So how come not now? You have one." Asahi nudged his face towards the half-unwrapped napkin and the fork still inside the folds, "There's no need to struggle."

"Cuz...I wanted to use the sticks?"

Asahi shrugged and went back to his ramen, "Alright."

Nikki and Viktoria were still stunned at the exchange, eyes moving between the pair with each response. With the duo going quiet though to eat, they decided to keep the peace and join in rather than question it. It wasn't too terribly long before the front doors of the resort opened, and Mikhail returned with Minako. The duo pulled out of their heavy winter clothes and made their way into the common room...and were caught, stunned and surprised, that the group of four were sitting together. Peacefully.

"...What is happening." Minako said stiffly, pointing at the two males at the table, "What sorcery is this?"

Mikhail was just as perplexed, "Did we come to the right resort?" He looked back at the door in confusion, "Did we go through some ley-line and travel to another dimension?"

"Calm down, ugh." Yurio grumbled, "We sorted things out on our own."

Asahi nodded quietly in agreement.
The adults looked at each other, then back at the skaters, "HOW."

The pair glanced between one another, but Yurio raised a hand to shovel more food into it and left the explanation to his older counterpart. Asahi took the hint easily enough, "We got into a fight. He felt guilty and came to sort it out afterwards. Now we have a mutual understanding of where we're each coming from and things are fine."

Mikhail's cheek twitched, and he side-eyed his fiancé with dubious acceptance.

"Asahi taught Yura how to use chopsticks properly." Nikki chimed in, "It was really cute."

Yurio's face flushed a little, "It wasn't cute. He was just helping. There's nothing cute about it."

"Oh you don't know how much of a relief this is." Minako heaved, hardly able to stay standing as she slumped forward, holding herself up with hands on her knees, "I was so worried about how I was going to coach you two when I get winded so easily... It was going to be a nightmare to do everything twice..."

Both skaters exchanged glances again, "...Sorry."

"No no, this is great!" She rose up again, only to go down to her knees at the short edge of the low table, "Fantastic, even! I can't tell you how glad I am that you're getting along!"

Mikhail moved down as well and scooched into the tiny space at the corner, wedged between his lady love and one of his daughters, "Yeah, this actually makes a lot of things easier...not just the coaching aspect."

"Eh?" Yurio looked up from his breakfast, rice stuck to his face again, "Why? What else?"

The elder looked right at him, "We were trying to figure out a way to give you your own room again, and I was about ready to ask Toshiya to rent me another one so I could put you in it." He started, reaching forward to swipe one of the last bits of food on the communal tray, "But if you and Asahi are getting along, then we can actually put you back up onto the third floor."

Asahi half-choked for a moment, pounding a fist against his chest, and cleared it with a bit of difficulty. He glanced back at the two older figures, "The third floor?" He cleared his throat, "You don't mean in my closet, do you?"

"HEY." Yurio shot.

"Look, we're on good terms, but I like my room as it is." Asahi explained, "I don't need goblins in my closet."

"I'm not a goblin whatthefuck."

Nikki and Viktoria laughed quietly under their breath, much to the Tiger's chagrin.

Mikhail shook his head, "No no, not the closet. Yuri's old room."

"...Eh?"

Minako nodded in agreement, "We've already talked to the Katsukis about it. They're okay with it."

"...What about asking Yuri about it?" The teen questioned, "Shouldn't he get a say?"

The older duo looked at one another, then at him, "Well..." Mikhail started, "Hiroko said that since
Yuri has his own whole house now, that it really wouldn't matter. I'm sure he'd be fine with it though. It wouldn't be for long anyway. Minako and I already have a short-list of houses we're thinking about getting." Jade eyes then went to Asahi, "Not that it's any pressure on you at all. If you need to stay at Yu-Topia even after we leave, that's totally fine."

The skater nodded and bowed his head in understanding.

"Today's big chore however...is buying some new vehicles. We were going to wait until after school was done, so we could ask you to come along," He went on, nudging his head towards Yurio, "But since everything between you and Asahi is fine now, there's no need, so we'll take care of it while you're in school."

"Oh..."

"Your tutors all have the skating schedule for the season so they're aware that we have to leave on Thursdays and will return on Mondays," Mikhail continued, "So there's no worry about bringing work with you when we're abroad. The only question is the schedule for the Olympics..."

"What's to question?" Yurio wondered, trying to go back to his food.

"The events are all over the place, but they're in South Korea...which is practically a stone's throw away. If there's a joke about being able to see Russia from your back yard in Alaska, well...the same could almost be said about seeing PyeongChang from here." The elder answered, "I can't exactly pull everyone out of school for a month and some change while we wait between events. There's four figure skating things, plus the Exhibition at the very end...and Opening Ceremonies, which all athletes will have to be there for..." He started counting on his fingers, "But I'm not opposed to flying back here if there's more than 2 or 3 days between them. You can get more practice in if we come back, too."

"Going through International customs so often though..." Nikki complained.

"I'm an internationally trusted traveler, sweetie," Mikhail pointed out, "We only went through customs for the Final and to get here because you're not part of the program. It would be really simple to get you added to my pass though."

Asahi fidgeted a little, "...I couldn't."

"Don't you have your own pass...? You had to travel internationally for competitions before, and those passes are valid for five years...unless yours expired already..."

"No, but...traveling back and forth all the time won't be covered by the JSF. They'll pay to get me there and get me back, but only once each." He explained, "I'll stay there for the duration of the Games. I was planning on it anyway."

"...Okay..."

"What are Yuri and Viktor doing?" Yurio asked, "I gotta ask Otabek what his plans are, too..."

"I have no idea. You should ask them."

"...I gotta call them again soon anyway." He added, poking his well-held chopsticks into the last bits of his rice, "I'm supposed to go to their house to pick up Viktor's skates, but I don't know where he hides them. I forgot to ask when they had me on the phone about them."

"His skates...?" Minako asked nervously, "Why? His ankle is still..."
"Yuri asked, so he must be okay with whatever is happening." The teen explained, "I'll find out."
Chapter 470

CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED SEVENTY

Food-bowl games began earlier than expected, but Yuri roused to address it before Viktor could be awoken as well. He quietly clambered around the small room for the hard-cover fiberglass travel case that housed all the dog's supplies and food. Just before he unlocked the thing though, he realized there was a...strange smell. Sniffing curiously, then with concern, he followed it into the tiny bathroom. He walked on his tip-toes to avoid any possible surprises, and closed the door before he dared to turn the light on. To his shock and surprise, none of the mess was on the floor. Still, Yuri made a stunned face at the sight of it in the base of the shower instead.

Well...at least they knew to go somewhere that was easy to clean... I guess the moisture from Viktor using it last night was enough to make them think it was like soggy grass? Oh well...it beats having to risk the train leaving without us when we would’ve had to take them off at rest-stops...

He sighed and lowered his head in realization of the task ahead, but quickly went about that gross early-morning business. Solids were picked up with the plastic bags brought for just that purpose, and the rest was rinsed with exceptionally hot water. Yuri let it run while he finished up putting food and water down, and the smell was entirely scorched away by the time he was done.

With hands washed and everything finally done, Yuri made his way back towards the bed. He checked his phone briefly for the time and found that the pitch-darkness was well-earned; it was only 4:02am. He felt fingers brush against his skin though and put the phone away, welcomed into the warmth of the blankets, and the feel of hot, velvet skin.

"Everything okay?" Viktor wondered quietly, pulling his husband close to warm the man's cooled frame.

"Mh. Our kids are pretty smart. They used the shower as a potty instead of the floor."

"...I see."

"Have you been able to sleep?"

"...Yeah, actually." The Russian answered, hand sliding down his spouse's slim waist, thumb skirting the edge of the one garment clinging to his hips, "I may sleep half the day though...I kind of feel reset now..."

"Sorry..."

"It's not the worst thing in the world." Viktor explained, nudging in a bit closer, wedging one arm under his spouse's side to match the one that went over the other. He nuzzled his head under Yuri's to mouth at the side of the man's neck, "Tending to the pups is a worthy cause."

Yuri pressed his ear against the side of his partner's head, damp steely hair now dry and silver again, and felt himself being pulled over the man's chest. He went with it easily, and slid one leg over to help, feeling the unmistakable presence of a certain fleshy mound. He was sure to square himself over it once Viktor had settled, even if the man himself had made no mention of it. Unsure if Viktor just meant to fall back asleep in their new position, Yuri pulled his arms in, pressing his hands flat against his partner's upper chest, just under his chin, and offered a little Eskimo kiss, "...Your body is still going through the motions. Do you want to use it while it's all worked up?"
"Do you want to use it?" Viktor retorted simply.

"...Kind of... I miss you..."

"Then we'd best get started before my head sabotages the moment." He suggested, pushing up onto his elbows, "Where's our stuff?"

Yuri sat up with him, but pushed back with his hands to stop his spouse's ascent, "It's here...don't worry, just lie back down."

Viktor looked up, barely able to see his partner in the dark, but did as bid and went back his spot in the pillows. Half-expecting a hand to find center right away, he was a bit surprised that Yuri went for his neck first instead. One hand slid up from his chest to press against his opposite cheek, and Yuri walked his kisses up from neck to lips. The other hand slid slightly down, pausing on the side of his chest, thumb brushing against a nub there. He started to worry though, because he felt nothing for it all.

_C'mon, body...don't muck around like this... You practice all night for the moment where you might need to do it for real, and then you don't even let me enjoy it...!?_

Every touch, stroke, and kiss, was only half-felt. It was as though his entire frame was wrapped in plastic; he could sense the pressure, but the feeling of pleasure he could normally expect from it never made it to his head.

Yuri could feel his husband's muscles tightening under him, and ended the kiss, pressing brows together instead, "...You're so tense, I feel like you're about to jump."

Viktor was in tears in seconds, hands up to cover his face, "I'm so sorry...I can't, Yuri, I'm so sorry..."

Sitting up, Yuri felt worse by the moment. What little arousal his partner had awoken with, that he'd hoped to save, had already evaporated. Even the dogs noted the sudden air of despair, and they each came over, one head poking out from under the table where it lipped over the edge of the bed. Yuri reached over to scratch Makkachin's noggin, then grabbed Jiro to lift him up, and set the pup down again in the wedge of space between the wall and Viktor's side. The next reach across, however, was for his phone again, and Yuri clicked it on, "Viktor," He started, pressing one hand to the Russian's chest, "I want to show you something."

Confused and humiliated, it took the man a moment to realize what had been said, but eventually he wiggled aside enough to make room for Yuri to lie down beside him. He pulled the Akita up onto his chest and tilted slightly towards where his husband had settled, and squinted his damp eyes at the phone screen. Yuri had opened the map app, and the little blue dot in the center showed their current location.

"We haven't been in Russia for a few hours." Yuri explained, zooming out on the screen to show the national borders, "We crossed the border of Belarus around 1am. So...according to the itinerary you sent me earlier, we should be between Orsha and Minsk Pass right now."

"...It...doesn't really matter." Viktor lamented, "This country is effectively no different from Russia. It's practically a vassal state. It was part of the Soviet Union before..."

"Oh..."

"We won't be completely safe until we get to Terespol." He went on, turning his face to rub his eyes on the pillowcase, "For all that Russia gets to be included in the Euros competition...it
"Yeah..." Yuri agreed quietly, shutting his phone off to put it on the table again. He wiggled back under the covers and reached an arm under his partner's neck, the other around the opposite side to cradle the man's head. Makkachin came out from under the table and hopped up onto the end of the bed, spinning around once or twice in the crook of his human's bent legs, and laid down there, resting his head on his person's hip.

Viktor reached down to ruffle the poodle's ears, grateful for that moment, but then turned back to his spouse, "I'm sorry I keep putting you through this..."

"I wish I could do something to take some of your fear away." Yuri offered, gently stroking his fingers over his spouse's hair, "It breaks my heart that you're going through this and I can't do anything."

"I wish there was something I could do... I just feel like I'm running away." Viktor answered, wet face pressing to his partner's skin, "...Or rather...like I'm being chased out."

"There's nothing left but to wait then." Yuri agreed, turning to kiss his husband's brow, and hugged him closer, "I'll let you go back to sleep. Just try to get a bit more rest. We're almost there."

Morning light crept into the train car, but through the pulled-blinds, the brightness was kept low. Yuri peeled out from under the covers only long enough to quietly find his eye-guard, and placed it over his sleeping partner's face before the sun could rise any higher. He grabbed his MacBook Air and hooked the charging cable around the edge of the nearby table, and set the device on his lap before Viktor could awaken and notice he'd moved. Arms still latched around him as the Russian slept, and Viktor pressed in close to his side, seemingly unbothered by his momentary absence.

Both pups were happy to stay asleep for the time being as well, tied over by their early-morning breakfast.

Eyes kept a very close tab on the time at the top right corner of the screen. It felt like every minute took hours, but as long as Viktor stayed asleep, it didn't matter one bit. Focus instead turned to Vienna, and a bit of research on fun things to do there. They city was rife with interesting places to see, tours to take, museums to visit, and shopping centers to meander through. Yuri could feel a wave of reluctant but hopeful relief passing through him.

*This is all the kind of stuff that Viktor would go nuts for...the shopping especially... He'd love to get some kind of local 'haute couture' of something or another. Maybe I'll avoid putting up a fuss if he tries to pull me into it this time. He went half-crazy with excitement when I let him buy me stuff for the Final in Barcelona last year...but I've resisted ever since because of how expensive even that one jacket was...*

He sighed, remembering the shocking $500/¥55,000 price-tag on the dark blue pea-coat.

*Viktor has a jacket and scarf set for every occasion, but I swore I'd wear that coat he bought me until it was thread-bare and falling apart... I mean, the ring I bought him cost quite a bit more than that, but at least it's solid gold and it'll last forever...*

He looked at his own as he thought about it, then to the one on his husband's finger where that hand poked out from under the pillow behind him. Just as he looked away again though, he could feel a slight change in the speed of the train, and he reached for the remote control to the television hanging
from the wall. The first screen to come up was the train's complimentary channel, showing their position on the journey and the station that was next to be passed through. He muted the sound, but was pleased to see the Cyrillic and English lettering for the Brest Belarus Centralny train station, with its expected 90 minute break, followed by the Terespol train station 20 minutes later, with its own 45 minute break. There was a 10 minute ETA from their current position on the tracks.

Brest and Terespol, cities that flank each other from opposite sides of a shared river. Kind of reminds me of how Detroit and Windsor were split the same way.

He looked back at the laptop screen, and the tourist-help website he'd loaded for Vienna. He tabbed over to the itinerary details in his email.

We don't have to do anything for this border check because of the kind of train we're on, but we still have to wait a long time to get through all the same... But at least by late tonight, we'll finally be in Austria, and Viktor can finally start to feel like normal in public again.

He leaned aside to kiss the man's crown.

Only a little while longer.

The train left Belarus' final city and plodded across the border, only to pull into the first of Poland's cities and stop again. Exactly as had been stated on the itinerary though, the train stopped at 9:31am sharp. The station wasn't much to look at; white, two floors, lined by windows on the track-side, and the letters "PKP TERESPOL" on the top center. Still, for as slight as it looked compared to some of the other train stations they'd been in or passed through - looking more like the train station in Hasetsu than Moscow - the sight of those letters gave Yuri something to be happy about.

"Viktor," He started quietly, "Viktor, we're here...we're in Poland."

It took a moment, but the hazy Russian eventually moved one arm to lift the visor over his eyes, and he looked blearily around the tiny room. Makkachin and Jiro looked back at him curiously, and Viktor turned to his spouse, seeing the hopeful look on Yuri's face.

"Check it out." He explained, pointing out through the partially-raised blinds, "You can see the letters on top of the train station. We're finally out of Belarus."

"How long...have you been awake...?" Viktor asked, somewhat in disbelief of the sight.

"Since around 7am." He answered, "I got anxious about everything, so I couldn't sleep that deeply. Plus, I wanted to be completely awake when we pulled into safe territory...so I could wake you up with the good news."

Viktor still seemed a bit foggy, the mask clinging to his forehead. He reached up to rub his eyes with his fingers, "...We're...in Poland..."

"Mh."

"...It's hard to take in, since we're still on the same train, with all the same workers who came with it out of Moscow." He went on, leaning back against the wall and the pillows pressed up against it.

"But the laws are all of the land," Yuri explained, pressing his hand to his husband's leg under the blanket, "People like us are protected here. They may not marry us like the Spanish did, but...they would recognize it if we lived here. We're safe...and it's going to keep getting better, the further away
from Russia we get." He said, feeling more elated with every word, "But here's something even better, which may mean more to you personally than the laws of whatever country we're in at the moment."

Viktor blinked in confusion, but pushed himself further up against the wall to sit properly. He looked at the MacBook on his husband's lap, and saw the cursor more across to pull up one of many open tabs. This one pulled up a Japanese page...one that seemed strangely familiar.

MEN ヴィクトル・ニキフォロフ / Viktor NIKIFOROV
Classification: Premier Athlete (Highest Division Skater in the JSF)
Birthday: December 25th (29)
Hometown: Saga Prefecture
Height: 180cm
Blood Type: Unknown
Affiliation: Self, Ice Castle Hasetsu
Comment: To be added
Hobbies: To be added
-Special Skills: Quad Axel, choreographer, coach, Olympian
-Special Notes: Married to Yuri NIKIFOROV (né KATSUKI)
Goals for the Year: To be added

Competitive Wins and Awards (primary):
- Japanese National Champion; current season
- Russian National Champion; multiple, consecutive
- Grand Prix Final Champion; multiple, consecutive
- European Champion; multiple, consecutive
- World Champion; multiple, consecutive
- Olympic Champion; Sochi, Vancouver

Yuri kept scrolling, bringing up the big chart that showed every competition, including the smaller ones, dating all the way back into his husband's Juniors days, "They've got all the years listed if we click into each title...the JSF is super stoked about having you part of our team." He said excitedly, "They've set up a huge gallery of your photos, embedded clips of some of your best moments, even that quad Axel you premiered at Worlds last year...! And the best part..." He clicked into the link attached to his own name at the top of the profile, then into the World Championship section. Though Yuri had never medaled at Worlds prior to stealing Gold the previous year, there were a number of times he'd attended, and he had to scroll past all of those photos to get to the end. There, as obvious as the noses on their faces, were pictures of Yuri's victory in the kiss-and-cry, and the kiss that was watched across the world. Yuri twisted in place and placed a similar kiss against his husband's cheek, and pressed his brow to that spot to look at the screen again, "They revel in our celebrations and victories. They absolutely adore you, and it doesn't matter that you're married to another guy. I mean, they did link me to your page, and they didn't have to do that at all..."

Viktor was speechless, a hand over his mouth in disbelief at the whole thing.

"I also got an email CC'd to me from the JSF that your citizenship stuff has gone through...so we'll be able to collect your new papers and passport when we get back home after Euros." Yuri added, "And as soon as we get all that...we'll have a family registry."

"...A what...?"

"Koseki. The Japanese Family Registry." Yuri repeated, "...You have to be a Japanese citizen to be included on it, so as it stands...according to Japan officially...even though I've legally changed my
name, I'm still a Katsuki, and I'm still on that registry. But now that you've become a citizen, we'll finally get to have the Nikiforov registry, and I'll get moved onto it." He explained, nosing his spouse's cheek softly, "It won't just be a vanity change anymore. We'll be recognized. We'll have our own paperwork, just for our family."

Viktor's eyes were wide, trying to comprehend it all after just having woken up from restless sleep. He reached up to pull the visor off his head, and looked to each of the dogs again, then to the MacBook on Yuri's lap, "...This is... This is real..."

"Mh."

"...I think I'm going to cry again..." The Russian lamented, though this time - and for the first time in a while - because he was happy.

Yuri quickly folded up the laptop and put it away, and put both arms over his husband's frame, pulling him down against his shoulder. He kissed the man's forehead again and combed his fingers through silver hair, "Russia has done everything it can to tear you down and erase you, but Japan has lifted you up again. I can't tell you how happy I was to see that email this morning... I know you've been avoiding checking your own, so you may not have seen that they sent this directly to you."

"I just can't believe all of this... How is it possible to go from such a low to such a high in the span of 24 hours?" Viktor lamented, twisting around to latch onto his spouse's chest, face pressed to the crook of that shoulder, "I lost my whole career...but it's like Japan somehow gave it back to me..."

"Russia may not be willing to list your accomplishments anymore, but I doubt they're willing to go so far as to ask for your medals back and redistribute them to everyone who ranked after you. It's over a decade of wins...it's too much work, even for bigots." Yuri supposed, "Plus...they never really could erase your international wins. The ISU would have those records, not the RSF."

"My head is spinning..." Viktor said, his voice practically a squeak from the tension in his throat. He cleared it and pulled back, "I just don't know what to say..."

"Are you hungry?"

Blue eyes widened, and he managed a weak smile, "...Y-yes..."

"Then let's get ready and feed you." Yuri suggested, nosing in for a kiss...or several.

A little while later, fully put together and ready to face the world outside their cabin, Yuri took his husband's hand and lead him out. At the end of each VIP carriage, there was a bar and snack area, and theirs was no different. It was a small space, with a two-stool bar and two small tables with a few chairs at each, curtains hanging from the windows, and blinds pulled up to let in the sunlight. The tables had small, thin vases of flowers, and one woman manned the station behind the counter. She waved to get Yuri's attention while Viktor kept looking around, and he turned to pull his partner over.

"I was wondering when you'd come out." The barista teased, Russian accent heavy but easily understood, "But I'm kind of glad you came late. Everyone else has already gone back to their cabins for the next leg of the trip, or they went to the restaurant car."

"...You were...wondering? You're glad?" Yuri echoed, curious, "How come? Limited seating space?" He glanced around the room, "Seems a table or two short to serve the whole carriage at once."

"Well, there's that..." She answered, drying off a few drinking glasses on the counter before her,
"But I recognized the name and realized you two are minor celebrities. They do have your name wrong though..." She pointed at Yuri with the cloth-holding hand, one finger above it, "The registrar has both of your names as Nikiforov. You're Katsuki though."

Viktor nearly snorted in discontent, as though wordlessly grunting 'this was a bad idea after all' or 'I told you so,' but Yuri tugged his hand to toss the thoughts out.

"No, it's Nikiforov." He corrected, "The registrar has my name right. It's Russia that had it wrong."

"...Russia...?" The woman echoed in confusion, "How?"

Yuri lifted up the hand that held to his spouse's, pulling it up into sights of the barista, "Because we're married. Russia refuses to recognize it though, and persists in calling me by my old name. They even went out of the way to edit out our rings in the past, or not show our hands at all." He explained, lifting his other hand to show off the gold band. He was pleasantly surprised to feel arms wrap around him from behind, and Viktor took his perch over one shoulder; he smiled and looked back at the bartender, "We'll have been official for a year on March 16th."

"Aw...I see..." She seemed a bit disappointed and pouted, but in friendly way, only then to cheer up again, "Well, I guess that means I can oogle you both from across the bar and I won't get either of you in trouble with each other. So, it's a win for everyone. What can I get you?"

With orders placed for the limited breakfast, Yuri sat his spouse down at one of the tables, and they watched as the Polish sky spread overhead; clear and bright, not a cloud for miles. The train actually started moving again just as plates were set in front of them; French toast with a strawberry Romanoff topping, hard-boiled eggs in cup-holders on the side, a small fruit salad each, coffee, and juice.

Viktor remained composed despite his unintended multi-day fast, and started with some maple syrup drizzle on the toast, "...I'm still having a hard time believing all this. I feel like I'm going to wake up at some point because the train crashed or something."

"That better not have been prophetic." Yuri warned dubiously, utensils in-hand, but taking a sip of the juice first.

"...No, just spit-balling..."

"That's what your comments about JJ hurting someone at the Final were, too, but it still happened."

Viktor made a face, tired as he was, and lifted a corner of the toast, "If we were taking the train into China or India, I'd be worried...but we're going into Europe. Conditions only get better the further west we go."

"...Why China or India?" Yuri wondered, brow raised as he nibbled as well.

"Elephants on the tracks in India...and the general condition of things out that way." The Russian explained, "At least in the rural sections of those countries. Things are getting pretty modern when you get into the urban clusters. Sometimes I'm still not sure about China though." He huffed, letting himself taste that first bit of food, and for the first time in a while, didn't feel nauseous for eating it.

"Yeah... I've seen news about how China is practically building cities at a break-neck pace, but no one is living in them. Some are even getting knocked back down again because they were built so poorly."

"Well, I guess that's why no one's moving in." Viktor huffed.
"Apparently *that's* not even the big problem. Investors from all over the country are buying whole sections of these apartment complexes and high-rises, and are leaving them uninhabited, all for the sake of being able to sell them again when the value goes up." Yuri explained, grabbing the pre-cut top portion of the hard-boiled egg, and sprinkled some salt and pepper on the cap before scooping it out, "So there's this huge problem with homelessness or people not being able to afford to move to where the work is...and all these empty housing units that no one is willing to actually rent to anyone."

"Wow... Glad we don't have to deal with *that* back home."

"Yeah, seems to be a local phenomenon." Yuri agreed, chewing on a bit of cut grape, "So have you put any consideration towards the Exhibition?"

"...Not exactly. I haven't been too terribly inspired." Viktor admitted hesitantly, "I'm worried we may have to pull the show we had planned for Worlds."

"*Worlds? What about the original* Euros show?" Yuri asked, surprised.

The Russian gave a look across the table, "*You do* remember which shows were meant for which events, right?"

"Well, sure...but..." He started, only to pause, and the dawn of realization crept over him, "*Oooohhhhhhhhh...*"

"You see?"

"Yeah, absolutely. I don't know why I didn't consider that before."

"Well, you thought I would come up with something new, given the circumstances...but I don't want to put all sorts of pressure on you to learn a whole new program in less than a week when I haven't even started putting it together yet." Viktor explained, reaching for the sugar and cream to doctor his coffee, "You're the only one between us that's cleared to jump though...so that's what I'm probably going to think about for the rest of the trip into Austria. *And...*"

"And?" Yuri wondered nervously.

"We'll be switching roles."

"*Oh.* He blanched, "...Well, I guess it's a good thing we practiced it both ways then..."

"Back then, you were still really insistent on being a bigger part of the choreography process, so it was inevitable." Viktor went on, tapping his tea-spoon against the mug, and raised it up to take a sip. He saw the sheepish look on his partner's face, and reached across the table to thumb at the man's hand lightly, "Don't worry, it's not like I thought it was a bad thing. We were both learning how to compromise, remember? We didn't really sort out each of our roles for certain until Skate Canada."

"I still feel bad about the big head I had though. I guess I got a bit to haughty because of the role I played helping put 'YoI' together..."

"Well, that show was about your journey, so your input was necessary for the choreography to make sense. It's not like I had Ketty's knowledge about your background."

"That's true..."

"In any case...you know my moves for the World's show, and I know yours...so we'll just have to
figure out the outfits. And the end of the song."

"Yeah...what do you want to do about it...?"

"Redo the last couple lines. Change it to ’...and now I have you... The world is watching, its eyes are wide,’ or something like that.” He waved the coffee-mug for emphasis, but then took another sip while Yuri thought it over.

"Ooohhhh I like it. Erm...how do we edit the music on such short notice though? We don't have any recording equipment, and I only have an mp3 of the finished song, not the producer's version..." He wondered, "We don't have a lot of time..."

"Call in the cavalry again. We can record ourselves with a phone easily enough. We'll just have to ask Yurio to get onto the desktop at home when he's there getting my skates anyway, and have him email the file to one of us."

"And grab our outfits."

"Yeah, that too."

"Well, that makes me feel better at least. I was worried we'd spend all our time in Vienna at that 24-hour outdoor rink just to pull the whole thing together at the last second. I wanted to go sight-seeing a bit."

"You have some sights to see in mind?"

"I was poking around online this morning... I was hoping maybe I could surprise you, like how you surprised me in Barcelona."

Viktor smiled, but looked a bit skeptical, "The great Tour de Yuri, eh?"

Yuri nodded and smiled, "Yeah...!"
Chapter 471

Chapter Notes

Okay, so, in case you didn't see the news on FB...I have greatly changed some things around with the 'Asahi & Russian Vacation Arc.' You can check the NAD FB page for details on what exactly changed, but suffice it to say, among other things, there is no longer any incest-rape subplot in this fic, and Mikhail isn't going for green blood, so there's no trip to Imari with any legal team. Please read the new end of Ch469 to see how that went and to understand why Ch471 is going in a different direction. Ch470 is just a consolidation of the 2 Viktuuri scenes that happened afterwards (JSF website update and breakfast.) The previous versions of Ch471-474 have been deleted, and edits have been made to most chapters from 426 onward (major changes being to the 435 onsen group-chat, 436 intro, 445 flashback, and 469 lunch break,) but you can check FB for the specifics. Sorry for the trouble.

CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED SEVENTY ONE

With the early afternoon's itinerary decided, the three teens were put back with their tutors, and Asahi returned to his space on the third floor, picking up the guitar and sitting on his bed. Hana laid down nearby as she always did, chewing idly on her front nails as the electrified strings were gently plucked. She looked up once in a while as she heard the sound of footsteps going by, and licked her nose.

[What is it?] The athlete wondered, pulling off one side of the audio-muffs. He turned his eyes to the door and heard the sounds as well, and curiosity got the better of him. Taking the guitar with him, he hopped off the bed and moved towards the door, turning the latch and sliding the thin panel across. Outside, he didn't see anything except the windows to the outdoors, but he stepped out and looked to the left, spotting the source of the shuffling.

"Oh, hi Asahi." Mari said nervously, spotting him in the doorway. She was setting down a big bed-set onto the floor so she could prepare the bare mattress, "I didn't mean to bother you."

"...It's no trouble, I just wasn't sure what the noise was." He answered, looking at the bedding pile, "...Do...you want a hand?"

The woman's messy-haired head popped up in surprise where she leaned across the mattress, smoothing out a fitted sheet, but she glanced at the figure, still waiting for an answer. Her face went red, but she nodded and stood upright, "S-Sure...if you want to. You don't have to though."

"Yeah, let me just put this away." He replied, moving off again to put the guitar and his headset away. When he returned, he found Mari trying to unfold the big flat-sheet from the bundle she'd brought up.

Between the two of them, even with Hana running around between their legs, trying to get under the blankets as they were each heaved up to cover the bed, it took only a few minutes to set the whole thing up. Pillows were arranged, and Yurio's suitcases, life-size plush tiger, and of course, his cat, were brought in.
Asahi looked around the space again, quietly taking in every inch of wall and floor.

"Thanks for the help. Yuri used to always leave me hanging when I needed him, so it's nice to actually have someone turn up for once." Mari teased, though only half-sarcastically. She straightened out her henna-pink uniform, "How are you holding up? Is your room okay?"

He glanced back at her and nodded, "It's more than I'm used to having."

"Really? Don't your parents own a company or something where you're from?"

Asahi grimaced, but nodded again, "Yes."

"Were they really frugal or something?" She wondered innocently, putting the door to her brother's closet aside so she could put Potya's litter-box down where it would be out of the way. The ragdoll rubbed on her hip as she crouched.

The skater just looked on though in concerned confusion, *I guess she wouldn't really know much about my background even if she knows what's happened to me since I got here.* He sucked in a breath though, and hooked his thumbs into the pockets of his jeans, "My family paid for everything I needed, but only the bare minimum, I guess you could say... Their opinion of me wasn't exactly high."

"Well, they kicked you out, so that much was obvious. I'm sorry they did that to you though. It wasn't right." She said, picking up the little cat as she rose back up to standing. She held Potya against her shoulder to keep her out of Hana's reach, though the pup was gentle anyway, "I'm sad though too that Yuri never brought you to visit. He was always kind of clueless though so I guess it's not that surprising."

"...Y-yeah..."

"Maybe if he had, you'd have just come straight here instead of bothering with Imari in the end." Mari went on, putting the cat down on the bed as she made her way towards the door, "Water under the bridge, I guess. You're here now. What are your plans?"

"...Plans?" He echoed, trying to compartmentalize the previous statements. He turned in place as the elder Katsuki sibling went around him, "What do you mean?"

"Well, you're on the same skating team as Yuri and Viktor now, so you'll be training for the same competitions... But I meant like...you're supposed to be looking for an apartment, too, right?" She clarified, nudging her head towards the door.

Asahi took the hint and stepped out again, and put himself into the open doorframe to his own room as Mari closed the door to Yuri's room. He swallowed nervously, "...I haven't really made any plans yet. I'm trying to settle down a little bit and get used to being in Hasetsu before I go anywhere."

"Really...?"

He nodded sadly, "Even when I was living away from home to train, the dorms I was put into were always shared. I was always with people, somehow. The closest I got to being on my own was when Riku and I were living together...but it didn't last long, so I still felt more like a guest than anything."

"So it must be pretty daunting."
Another nod.

"Well, if it makes you feel better, I'm older than you are and I've never been away from home at all."

Asahi quirked a brow, "...Yuri never actually talked much about home when we were training together. How much older?"

Mari huffed, "I'm about to turn 32."

"Oh." His face went red, "You look younger than I do though."

She smiled forgivingly then, "Did you think I was only a single year older than my brother?"

"Yeah...maybe that you'd be my same age at most. Yuri...spent most of his time talking about Viktor or complaining about his friend Yuko..."

"Oh yeah, I remember those days..." Mari laughed, making her way down the narrow hall, "Don't feel too bad about feeling like he was ignoring you back then. He did the same thing to all of us." She shook her head and sighed, dismayed by her brother's earlier days, "Sometimes it would seem like he was talking to himself, because only other Viktor-fans could really hold a conversation with him...so that's part of what kept him glued to Yuko. She's the one who told him about Viktor."

"...Yeah...""Anyway though, thanks for the help. I imagine Yurio will bring all his school stuff up here, so you'll have company during the day."

"At least until Thursday, then it'll just be me up here."

"You're sure you don't want to go to Euros? I wish I could go. I tag along with Minako to all of Yuri's major competitions, but he's not competing there, so I had no plans. With all the stuff that Russia did to Viktor though, I'm sure it'll be pretty interesting."

Asahi shook his head, remaining in place in the doorframe, "I'll catch it on the television."

Mari rounded the edge of the stairwell to head down to the lower floors, "Suit yourself. Thanks again for your help!" She hollered, her hand waving as the rest of her vanished beyond the wall.

"...Yeah..." He said quietly, waving back. He breathed a heavy sigh as she vanished from sight, and went back into his room, watching Hana trot in beside him before he closed the door again. Moving over to sit on the edge of the bed, he squished the Hokkaido-ken's fuzzy cheeks, and looked past her ears to the framed photo on the shelf.

I can't seem to get myself to want to look for places to move to because I don't want to go alone. At least here, there's people around that I know and can talk to...but when I leave, it'll just be me and Hana.

He shook his head as he looked down to the dog again, and the dark almond eyes that watched his every move.

I know you're with me, through her...but it's not the same as you really being with me... I really don't know that I'm ready to branch out by myself yet...

With the train moving through Poland at the same steady pace as the 'escape from Russia,' every mile
was a gallon less of cortisol flowing through the haggard Russian's tired frame. With breakfast done, a good long cuddle with the window blinds pulled up was in order. Sunshine poured into their little cabin, giving the space a glow to match the new, hopeful feeling in the air.

Though it was usually the opposite way around, Yuri clung to Viktor's back for a change, letting his spouse lean back against him on their messy bed like a big warm pillow. With his MacBook propped up against Viktor's up-turned legs, and his arms draped loosely over the front of the man's broad shoulders, he watched intently as Viktor re-typed, purely from memory, the entire component list of their coming Exhibition.

Three columns, one for each of them, detailed every jump and spin, and one more between them to detail every combined element, throw, and death spiral. Once finished, Viktor pulled his hands back from the keyboard and curled his fingers softly around his husband's forearms, "...I think that's all of it."

"Looks right to me." Yuri agreed, rubbing his cheek against the side of his spouse's head, "I know you hate the idea of having to take your jumps out..."

"...It's fine. A bit of a downer, but...this isn't a competition. I can compensate." Viktor answered, leaning his head back a bit to savor the warmth of the embrace, "I picture a revision of this thing where some part of my choreography lends a hand in launching you into jumps. You'll still let me lift and spin you though, right?"

"It's easier to control where your legs are going when you're firmly planted on the ground...so I don't see those moves as a problem." Yuri reassured, "So long as you take your blade-guards off before you get on the ice."

Viktor turned and made a face, "That happened one time."

Yuri just huffed a laugh, "One time was all it took."

"I was utterly overcome with emotion." The Russian defended, nosing the younger man's cheek affectionately, "You have a habit of doing that to me."

"As it should be." He mused, pulling one hand free to press his palm to the side of Viktor's face, and pulled him gently forward into a kiss, "And I never mean to stop."

Viktor pressed into another hug, feeling it for everything it could offer, but eventually turned his focus back to the laptop. He extended his left hand down alongside his leg where Jiro had wedged himself into the space between it and the wall, and set his fingers down on the warm pink puppy-belly. The Akita wiggled a little, but just stretched his arms and legs all the way out before falling still again in that same position, and Viktor rubbed his thumb to lull him back to sleep. Makkachin was curled up just beyond his feet, acting like a wedge for Viktor to anchor his legs against, "My love, we should probably call Yurio. Hopefully he hasn't gone to the house yet, so he doesn't have to make a second trip."

"Hmmm...I suppose so..." Yuri agreed with a dramatic sigh, but reached for his phone on the table just beside him. He thumbed through the lock-screen and found his address book, "Maybe he's even talked to Mikhail by now."

"Do you really want to spend the next half hour explaining our trip to see my father?" Viktor huffed.

"I'll just tell him now's not a good time if that's the case." He answered, clicking the Call button to send the message out, and pressed the phone to his ear and free shoulder.
In Japan, the sun had set a while ago, but the Ice Castle was still bustling with activity. With both Olympians on the ice though, it was the coach at rink-side who heard the phone jingle in Yurio's bag. She pulled away from the wall and went rummaging for it, "Yuri! Your phone!" She hollered, fumbling for the device.

"Who is it!?!" The Tiger hollered back, continuing his back-spin unbothered.

She looked at the face-plate, "Yuri!"

"I ASKED WHO IS IT?"

"I SAID SO. IT'S YURI."

"Oh." He huffed and braked, turning his spin into a glide, and arced his way closer. Minako had already answered by the time he got there though, and was reluctant to give up the device so quickly, so he had to stand there and watch her use his phone while he waited.

"So where are you guys now? Oh, just outside Warsaw? How long until you get to Vienna...? Oh, wow, another 11 hours..." She was saying, but then spotted Yurio right behind her, and smiled innocently, "Yeah, he's here, giving me dirty looks. Here he is." She teased, and handed the phone over.

"Hey."

"Oh hey." Yuri answered, "How's it going?"

"Okukawa is a slave-driver, almost worse than Viktor." He grumbled, reaching for a black water-bottle sitting on the rink wall, and squirted some of the cold contents into his mouth, "What's up?"

"We were wondering if you'd gone to get Viktor's skates yet."

"Not yet. I got the key from your mom before we left for practice, so I was gonna ask to swing by on the way back to Yu-Topia."

"That's perfect then, would you mind getting some other stuff?"

Yurio deadpanned, "...Like what?"

"There's two really elaborate outfits in our skating closet that need to be brought to Vienna. Viktor got an invitation to skate in the Euros Exhibition so we're rearranging our season's programming to accommodate it."

"The Euros Exhibition, huh?" He echoed, catching Minako's attention. Asahi was alert to the words as well, but tried to carry on with his own practice, desperate to land a quad Loop without stumbling, "What about Viktor's broken leg?"

Yuri just sputtered, "It's not broken."

"You know he's gonna milk that injury for all it's worth, right?"

"I'm sure he would've if we hadn't left the country, but he's actually been honest with it."

Viktor made a face, "Is he trying to suggest I was exaggerating how hurt I was?"

Yuri just laughed and nodded, much to his partner's half-sarcastic annoyance. He turned back to the conversation, "No, I'm being serious... It would've been weird for him to go all weekend walking..."
just fine, only to start limping again because he wanted attention."

"So I'm supposed to be your pack-mule all the way into Austria...do I get paid for this?" Yurio wondered, biting the nub at the top of his water-bottle.

"We're taking you out for a nice dinner, aren't we?"

"Sure, but we already had plans for that...this is extra."

"Do we have to pay you for every favor?" Yuri wondered dubiously, "I could always call your dad instead."

Both Russians spat abruptly to hear those words.

Yurio wiped his mouth, water dripping from his chin, "You don't have to call Mikhail, Jesus. I'll get your crap. What am I looking for?"

"Probably the most gaudy, shiny, sparkly things you've ever seen, honestly." Yuri teased, rubbing the flat of his other hand against his husband's chest, "In the closet on the first floor, in the office-bedroom-thing we converted into a trophy room...they're between the wall and our 'Duetto' costumes, on the left side. The accessories are all inside the garment bags so there's nothing extra to grab."

"...Fine..." The Tiger grumbled, "Anything else, Your Highness?"

"Yeah,"

Yurio spat again, "What else is there?"

"Nothing else to carry, but something on Viktor's desktop to send to us. I'll text you the password to log onto it and all the other junk, but basically, there's an audio file we need emailed to us so we can make some edits. It's our music for the Exhibition."

"Shouldn't all that have been finished by now?"

"We were planning on using it for Worlds, so in that way, it is finished. Like I said though, we're making some edits for the Euros version, so we need the uncompressed version that has all the different layers intact. I had made some changes to it before already."

"...I see."

"So can you do it?"

Yurio paused, "...We better be going to someplace really fancy."

Yuri huffed another laugh, "I think we can figure something out. Thanks a ton, Yuri."

"Thanks, Yuri!" Viktor chimed in, hoping to be heard in the background.

"Yeah yeah." He shook his head, "What time is it to you guys right now anyway?"

"Uhh..." Yuri pulled his phone back to check really quickly, "It's about 2pm. Why?"

"I'll call you again later. Maybe when I'm at the house. I'll have to confirm that the costumes I'm grabbing are the right ones anyway."
"Oh...yeah, sure." He made a bit of a face, "Is something wrong? Did you talk to Mikhail?"

"No, not yet. Don't worry about it. Laters."
Yurio slipped his arms into his Olympic jacket and grabbed up his gear-bag, making one more check on the time on his phone before putting it away. It had only been 30 minutes since Yuri had called, but Warsaw was 8 hours behind Hasetsu, and 10:30pm was late even for the competition-anxious skater.

"Where's Saito? Shouldn't he be out here?" He wondered impatiently, looking over to where Minako had returned from the rental hall, "We've already kept Yuko here way past closing."

"Chill, I'm here."

The teen twisted on a heel and spotted the older figure coming from the changing room, pulling a thicker winter coat up over his own Olympic team jacket, "We're gonna make a pit-stop before we go back to Yu-Topia."

"...We are?" Asahi echoed, pausing with half an arm through one sleeve.

"I gotta get some stuff for Yuri and Viktor so we're going to stop by their house."

"Oh."

Minako finished pulling a scarf across her shoulders, and was fluffing it up around her neck, "It's not too far out of the way. They live within biking distance."

"...I...ehm... I'll just jog back." He deflected, pulling the zipper up on the front of his big jacket.

"...Are you sure?" The ballerina asked, giving the same perplexed look Yurio was, "It's getting cold out there. How are your hands?"

There was no sense in avoiding the question, and Asahi moved his the offending limbs forward to pull off the fingerless gloves he'd trained with. Underneath, the deep cuts were still easy to spot - especially in the meat at the base of each hand where he'd hit the cobblestones in an effort to stop the fall - but they were dry, clean, and didn't look likely to bleed again.

Minako gently touched her thumbs over them, "Do you have any pain still?"

"How'd we go from me jogging back to Yu-Topia to my hands...?"

"Sorry." She laughed, returning the limbs, "My brain jumped from jogging to cold to ice to fall. Just be careful."

Asahi nodded quietly and pulled the gloves back on, and followed after the pair to head to the exit. Yuko was standing by the night-control panel, and after the doors closed, set the alarm and quickly hopped out to lock the deadbolts.

"So you got a new car, huh?" She wondered excitedly, heading around the concrete landing towards the stairs, "What'd you get?"

"Well, Mikhail got us a new fancy hybrid." Minako answered, walking next to her as the two skaters followed behind. She pointed to the sparse parking lot, "I was half-expecting him to want to go all the way to Fukuoka to find something he was willing to drive, but he was actually happy with
just...one-stop shopping at the first dealership we went to in town." She explained, approaching the dark colored Lexus, and clicked the fob to light it up, and the engine rumbled on.

Yuko seemed particularly impressed, "Whoa! You got the self-starter!"

Minako held up the fob and jangled the keychain, "Kind of nice, right?" She teased, and approached the driver's side door. Yurio went around her to go to the passenger door on the opposite side and tossed his things in, but came back around as Minako finished her explanation, "Mik didn't like any of the bigger HOV options though so he's ordering one custom-made online to have shipped here."

"...What's not to like?"

"None of them were hybrids."

Yuko made a face, "How many seats does he need? I've seen hybrid SUVs for sale..."

"Those only have 5 spots. He wants a third row."

The Madonna started counting on her hands, "...You, him, Yuri, Nikki, Viktoria...oh, so Asahi can ride along?" She looked up, making the aforementioned skater lift his head slightly from where he'd practically turtle'd it into his jacket.

"Well, for the moment that's probably true," Minako nodded, "But it's cuz we're gonna need the space for a b-..." She stopped herself, "For a...b-" Stopped again, grumbling incoherently, like her mouth sealed shut every time she tried to say the words. She huffed and tried one more time, "...He wants the extra room so there's space for a seat for the brrrrrrrrrrrrmmmmhhhhhh-"

"...Baby?"

"Yesthat." She blurted, heaving a breath, as though even agreeing to the word was a Herculean Trial. She went for the door again though and pulled herself into the driver's seat, "Anyway... Yuri and I should get going. Sorry for keeping you here so late."

"Well, we have Olympians in town, and I can't say no to those faces." Yuko teased, earning a wry smirk from Yurio. She pat the teen on the head through his hoodie, "I'm sure there will be plenty of late nights when Viktor and his Yuri get back, too. Maybe I'll see about getting a spare key made for them."

"Them but not us?" Yurio mumbled, suddenly looking dour, "How come?"

"They don't have school."

That earned a scoff and a growl, but Yuko just gave a knowing mom-smile as he stepped off. Yurio mumbled a goodbye to Asahi before both not-particularly-fond-of-hugs skaters accepted a forearm-grasp and shoulder-bump in parting. He hopped up into the front passenger seat afterwards and waited. With all farewells given, Yuko turned off to head to her own vehicle, and waved as the Lexus started moving away. Asahi raised his hand as well as the car went by, watching as it pulled out onto the thin Hasetsu roads to head back across the bridge.

Ambient music played as the car moved over the river, but otherwise, it was largely quiet. Antsy as ever though, Minako couldn't help but speak.

"It's nice to see you getting along with Asahi." She commented, "Call me selfish, but having you two train at the same time makes things a lot easier. I was really worried for a bit."
Yurio kept his eyes down on the glow coming from his phone, "Why?"

Minako glanced over, "...Cuz it's always easier when people get along?"

"No," He shook his head, "Why do you call it selfish?"

"...I'm feeling a lot more tired lately than I normally do. I don't think I would have any energy left for whoever trained second if I had to do you both separately."

The teen just dropped his hands down and looked over impatiently, "Why are you even having this kid if you can't bring yourself to say something as simple as 'baby seat'?"

She went silent in surprise, gripping the wheel a bit tighter than before. The quiet of the music and the sound of the car moving along the cold pavement felt like it was louder than it had been, too. A pin dropping would be like metal clanging on a hollow drum. She sighed though, "I don't know, I guess I feel like I'm stuck with it now."

"You're only stuck with the choices you make for yourself." He huffed, turning back to Instagram, "No one can make you accept anything, not even this."

"I know, but..." She shook her head and slouched against the door, "Mik is so happy about it though."

"And you're miserable."

"It definitely wasn't in my plans, no..." Minako agreed easily, watching Yu-Topia come and go. The woods that divided the city from the beach moved in on the left, and the river came back into view on the right. She sighed a breath, and sat upright again, "I don't know. Every day, I wake up, and I feel like it'll finally get tolerable, but then I start to feel sick again anyway, and I'm really worn out the rest of the time. But..."

"...But?"

She frowned a little, brows furrowed, "Mik's a good man. Dumb as a rock sometimes, but means well with everything he does. I want him around, but I'm worried I'll lose him if I suddenly change my mind on this thing...or it'll damage the relationship so severely that it won't mean anything anymore. He'll be around because of you and Viktor, but not because of me."

"So you're keeping a kid you don't want so you can keep a man around."

"It's insane, right?" She huffed, somewhat bitterly, "My old self is screaming at me right now for how stupid I'm being about this. I used to be so careful. Never let anyone get too close; never kept anyone around for too long. I had my dancing to use as an excuse back then though...now I have nothing." She paused for a moment, then spoke quietly, "I guess I'm just getting to an age where I'm worrying about things that I never used to think about. Or maybe I'm just subconsciously picking up signals from the people I'm around and acting on them without realizing."

"...Eh?"

Minako shrugged, mostly to herself, but put on a smile for the teen as she turned into the neighborhood, "It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

"I do worry about it though." Yurio retorted, "If you thought you were being selfish..." He scoffed and shut his screen off, propping up on an elbow on the center console, "I dropped everything I had and knew in Russia so I could come here. I'm counting on you to be my coach, cuz Viktor won't."
Without you, I have no alternative. I need you to be sure of yourself, and to have the energy to follow-through on this."

"If I can't keep up, then we'll find something else for you. Don't worry about it...those are things for Mik and I to consider, not for you to stress over."

Yurio just slouched back into his seat and watched the wall as they drove by, "I can't help it. I'm done with things changing. I just want it all to settle down and be the same for a while."

"...Me too..."

The phone-call had been over for a while already, but Yuri kept the phone in his hands, perched on Viktor's chest where he still had his arms wrapped around. Periodically, he would lift it just to check if Yurio had called or messaged him again, but each investigation ended fruitlessly.

"I think I need to get on the ice before I can figure out much more of this." Viktor said, interrupting his train of thought. One arm came up, and the Russian scratched the side of his head, combing fingers through his bangs a few times before settling them to curl around his partner's wrist, and glanced aside, "Unless you have any ideas to try and kickstart my brain."

Yuri shook his head, "None at the moment...Yurio threw me off my train of thought."

"Oh, because of what he ended the conversation with?"

"I worry about leaving him alone in Hasetsu." He huffed a sigh, and lowered his face slightly to press his mouth to the Russian's neck. He held there just for the sake of it, and hugged a little tighter.

"It's not like he's completely alone. He's got his whole new family there."

"I know, but...everyone started coming to Hasetsu because of me, and then you...and neither of us are there."

Viktor leaned his head back, opening his neck up a bit for more attention, and closed his eyes, "I had asked you on Friday if you thought we should've cancelled for his sake and you said no. Quite easily, as I recall."

"Well, he hadn't left me with an ominous choice of parting words at the time." Yuri answered, speaking against that pale skin, nosing his way up to just under his spouse's ear, "Now I'm just worried what he might tell us later on. It's super late back home by now...I'm not sure he'll even call again before tomorrow...and by the time he gets up again, we'll be getting ready for bed."

"Mh...time-zones."

"I wonder if I should call him instead."

"You said he claimed it was nothing." Viktor pointed out, raising both arms up to hook them over the back of his husband's shoulders, and slid the right down behind the man's neck and into his hair, "I'd take him at his word."

Yuri hesitated a moment, lips pressed under his partner's ear in a half-nibble. He spotted the look of one blue eye turned towards him, but just as he was about to reply...his phone vibrated and jingled in his hand. He lifted it and spotted that very teen's name written across the screen, and he sighed a quiet laugh as he flipped it over on his spouse's chest, finger hovering over the green Answer button,
"I always have room for one more worry." He said, and tapped the glass twice to pick up the call on Speaker, "That was fast."

"It's late as shit here." Yurio answered curtly, "I'm standing in your front hall. Skates, costumes, and audio thing, right?"

"Yep."

"Where's the skates?"

"Top shelf, front closet." Viktor answered on his own behalf.

"Oh...hey Viktor."

"Hey."

"You have to tell Yuri what you have on your mind or he's going to go crazy." The elder Russian teased, hearing the sounds of rummaging on the other end of the line, "And explain why you haven't talked to Mikhail yet about your troubles with Saito."

Yurio hooked a finger into the heel-strut of one gold blade, and pulled the pair down, tied together by their laces. He caught them with a grunt and slung them over a shoulder, "That'll be a short conversation then; I sorted out the issue with Saito on my own."

Yuri looked concerned, "...You did?"

"Yeah."

"...Hooowwww?"

"Quit being so skeptical, jeeze... I'm not incapable of just talking things out." The Tiger defended.

"No...but did you start that conversation by kicking anyone's bathroom door first?" Yuri retorted.

"I did that one time."

"What happened, Yuri...explain please." Viktor said, interrupting.

Yurio groaned, kicking his shoes off before pushing open the door to the make-shift trophy room, and clicked the light on, spotting all of the season's current costumes set-up on dress-forms, "I just went up to him and demanded to know what was going on with him. I thought the old man might embellish the story somehow or be generally vague, so I went to get the answers straight from the horse's mouth."

"...And what'd he tell you?"

"Actually..." He answered, his words drifting a little as he snooped around a little, "Now that I think about it...not all that much."

Viktor pulled his hand down from Yuri's hair and pinched the bridge of his nose, but the teen continued before he could criticize.

"But he basically said that his family is a bunch of assholes and that he's been dead inside for a few years." He explained simply, "He explained some of what happened at Nationals with you guys...and how you convinced him to go visit his old lover's grave...came back with a dog, and then got kicked out of home. I think he actually spent more time talking about that guy...what was it,
"Ruki?"

"Riku." Yuri deadpanned.

"Yeah, that." Yurio went on, making his way to the closet finally, "He spent more time talking about him than anything that had to do with Mikhail. But I guess if he was looking for me to feel badly for him, then it worked, cuz by the time I left again, I felt like shit for having ever been mad at him at all."

"Didn't we already work out that you were projecting your anger at Mikhail onto Asahi?" Yuri wondered glibly.

"Yeah, maybe." Yurio shrugged, leafing through all the different garment bags with their history of skating costumes inside. He spotted the 'greatest hits' from the most recent seasons; Eros, Yuri on Ice, Philia, Aria, Duetto, and an assortment of Exhibition outfits to go with them, "In any case...he's thawed out a bit since then. We're able to piggy-back onto each other's ice time so Okukawa doesn't have to be there twice."

"Oh wow, so you're training together already." Yuri commented, surprised.

"Well, we're sharing the ice." Yurio said, shrugging, "I dunno if you want to call that training together though. Did you know he can only do three quads?"

"You could only do three quads until this year." Viktor pointed out, "And your Flip is still inconsistent. You really need to pay more attention to where your fe-"

"Whoa whoa whoa...if you're not about to offer to be my coach, Viktor, I don't wanna hear what you think of my skating." The teen harped, pulling one garment-bag out that matched the description he'd been given; bands of shimmering gold across a black field, with scarlet-purple iridescent velvet vanishing under the edges of the bag zipper, rhinestones glinting, "Or are you offering?"

"Pfft, no." The silver chortled, "I'm on a different team now. I'd probably get yelled at for coaching someone outside Japan."

Yurio stared at his phone, wishing it was a FaceTime call so he could show off the disgusted look on his face, "When the Hell did you ever care what anyone says!? You're half a legend for the fact that you never listen!"

Viktor put a finger on his lip and crossed the other arm across himself, "Hm... That's true."

"So you'll consider it?"

"No." He smiled, "I stand by what I said before. As long as I'm still competing, I can only manage one other student, and that slot is already occupied."

"Ugh you're so damn fickle."

"I take my work very seriously. If I spread myself too thin, then everyone will suffer. Consider it my guarantee that I give my all to whoever I'm working with." Viktor shrugged, moving his hand back up to try guiding his distracted spouse towards his neck again, "If and when I take you on, you'll know you're getting my best, not my leftovers."

Yurio grumbled and pulled the next garment bag out, finding a similar costume to the one he'd grabbed already, but with blue-green velvet instead, "Sometimes I wonder if you're doing everything you can to avoid coaching me."
"I'm not!" Viktor insisted, using his free hand to close the laptop propped up against his legs, and moved it, and the phone, to set onto the table next to them, "I already agreed to sit with Minako in the kiss-and-cry for you at Euros, so I'm practically an ancillary coach to you as it is."

"You did...? Why though? You haven't done anything."

Yuri couldn't help but sputter a laugh where he'd been nibbling.

"...I fail to understand what was so funny about that." The teen grumbled again, closing the closet door with his foot, and headed out to the main living area. He set the garment bags and skates across the back of Viktor's blue couch.

"Yeah I don't know why that was funny either." The elder Russian agreed, poking his husband's shoulder where he could.

"Oh, so you've eaten this recently? Yes, yes...I eat it often. Why though? You haven't won anything." Yuri replicated, "That's exactly how you mocked my katsudon habits back when you first showed up."

"...I don't remember."

He dropped his head down, "How could you forget that!? I was practically traumatized by it!"

Viktor just looked on with a vacant expression for another moment...only to suddenly smirk knowingly, "Oh right, you were still squishy back then."

"Viktor."

"Ow..."

"Ahsorrysorry."

"You guys are really confusing to talk to tonight." Yurio complained, "I could be changing all the passwords on your computer and you'd never notice."

Only a few odd noises answered him though.

The teen grimaced, looking from the text messages he'd been sent earlier to the computer again, and opened up his email to send the document Yuri had asked for. That done, he closed everything down and grabbed up the suit-bags and skates again, "Look, I'm done here, so I'm going back to Yu-Topia." He started, slipping his feet back into his shoes, "In case you didn't know, I got moved up into your old room."

"...You what?" Yuri questioned, surprised again, "My old room?"

"Yeah. Since Saito is in Viktor's old room, and cuz the old man and Okukawa are staying at her place overnight now. I wasn't sure if anyone mentioned it to you so I am."

"Oh. Yeah. Okay, take care of it."

Yurio blinked, then held his phone out, blinking at it as well, "...That's it? No problem? ...You don't care?"

"No problem. Thanks for the help tonight, Yuri. Have a safe trip back to the resort."

"...Uh...sure. Bye." He answered, clicking out of the call and shaking his head, "I swear...one of
them had their hands in the other's pants at the end. Weirdos. *They're so inappropriate.*
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED SEVENTY THREE

Listening to the phone-call end, both sets of eyes were on the device, waiting for the screen to click over from being black with a red button, to being white like the text-message window Yuri had been looking at prior. As it did so, eyes turned towards one another nervously...only for both to suddenly start laughing.

"I can only wonder what imagery is going through his mind right now."

Viktor sat up slightly, forcing his partner's arms to withdraw from the southern territory they'd reached, and lifted himself up onto his hands to scoot back. He pressed against Yuri's chest and leaned his head back, tousling his hair dramatically, "He can handle it. He's used to me being Extra anyway." He mused, gently sliding his fingers along his spouse's bare wrists, and lifted them over and around his waist to replace them close to where they'd been a moment before, "But beggars can't be choosers, and I'm desperate."

"Maybe you should've moved the laptop out of the way sooner." Yuri teased, sliding his hands down even further, making them flat to sneak under the rim of grey sweatpants. Lips returned to the Russian's neck, kissing through each of his words, "I would've seen you needed a hand earlier than I did..."

"Are we back to inappropriate puns, my love?" Viktor wondered, drawing a long, easy breath as those digits traced over him again.

"Maybe some pillow-talk this time." He answered, moving up to the spot under his husband's ear, and whispered within, "But do it in French."

"Oh~?" Viktor was surprised, glancing over briefly before leaning back again to allow his partner room, "En français? Je ne pensais pas que tu le voudrais." (In French? I didn't think you would want me to.)

"It's the only thing about you that I haven't claimed for myself." He answered, and continued to tease deftly against sensitive skin, nibbling on an earlobe before moving down again to the hem of his spouse's thin t-shirt, "Maybe my rejection of it has been a handicap. I want to be able to hear it for me."

Viktor hummed and tensed, knees wandering with each gentle stroke, "Tu as répondu comme si vous avez compris... Tu es charmant." Viktor went on, whispering the words with a tone of longing, "Tu me rends heureux."

"Does all French sound so over-the-top or is it just you?" Yuri teased, withdrawing one hand from the sweatpants to move under his partner's t-shirt instead, migrating slowly up to the man's chest. His kisses were stiffened by the grin he'd grown, but he latched onto the top of a shoulder and nipped lightly.

"Seulement moi. Toujours moi." He answered with a smirk, "Je le fais sonner bieeen."

"I have no idea what you're saying, but I must admit...French with a Russian twist sounds really..."
hot." Yuri encouraged, drawing a long slide on the aroused flesh in his hand, and used the back of his wrist to nudge the waistband away. The other hand continued its massage upward, grasping around the curve of one pec to give it a squeeze. That drew a bit of a whined gasp from his spouse, and he felt a finger trace around behind his ear and under the curve of his jaw, lifting his face up from the shoulder he'd been nibbling on, and aside to look at the man's face.

"J'ai envie de toi." Viktor whispered, looking on with longing, half-lidded eyes, "Embrasse-moi, j'en ai besoin."

Still clueless, but enticed all the same, Yuri let himself be drawn forward, feeling the welcome warmth of his partner's kiss. The stroke of his lower-placed hand stilled for a moment, and he felt the pulse of his husband's heartbeat against his palm, accentuated by the heat. He managed two or three more pulled on it before he felt his spouse twisting around entirely, lying on his side against him.

Crystal blue eyes opened slightly to look at him, but Viktor turned just-enough around to lose his grip. He could feel where that aroused flesh had flopped against him, the rest of the man's larger frame still wedged between his legs from their cuddle before. Viktor's right elbow pressed down beside his ribs, holding himself up, but the left hand came up to slide over his chest, coming to rest with a finger on his chin. Confused, Yuri just looked on, seeing the playful look on his husband's face as the rest of the figure twisted around between his legs.

"Tu es l'amour de ma vie..." The silver whispered, pressing in a little harder as he brought his knees up to squeeze beside Yuri's hips. He huffed a quiet laugh as he leaned further in, and slid his hands down his husband's sides, until his fingers caught the edge of the younger man's waistband and started pulling it down and around, "Prends-moi..."

Yu-Topia's sliding front doors opened and closed, and the last two members of Team Minako stepped through. They each seemed to have the same idea, removing only their snowboots, and shuffled on through. It wasn't terribly surprising for Yurio to go straight for the skinny hall behind the common-room, given his extra load, but Minako was a bit surprised that he left without another word.

...Is he mad at me for what I said earlier...?

She sighed and shook her head, and headed through the open doorway to where she knew Mikhail was waiting. Yurio just pressed on through the corridor until reaching the stairs at the opposite end, and ascended all three flights to the upper floor. As expected, the door to the former banquet-hall was closed when he got there, but he made no effort to pester as he went by, heading to the room at the very end. The push-door was shut, and he nudged it aside to head through, looking around to the space that had been prepared just for him.

Potya was a lump under the blankets, and meow'd her awareness of the sudden intrusion. She pawed and wiggled until she found her way out from under the covers, trilling at the sight of her human. She sat on the pillow and watched as the blonde put the two garment bags down at the opposite end of the bed, then sat beside them, letting his older counterpart's skates slide off his shoulder. He paused, looking around again, and raised his hands only as he felt the ragdoll clamber into his lap.

"So...I guess you've broken it in, then." He said quietly, looking down as the small cat rubbed along his palm, arching her back into it to thread her tail between his fingers, "What do you think?"

She meow'd at him again and went right back to getting her pets.
"It's a bit weird, to be honest...but I guess it'll be okay for a little while." Yurio explained, shrugging out of his winter coat. "This used to be Yuri's room. Viktor used to be in the bigger room next door...and I used to stay in the antechamber."

*Mya*a*

"Yeah yeah, closet...whatever... Call it what you want, it was still big enough for a bed to fit inside."

"Oh, it's just you..."

Yurio lifted his head, and spotted the guitar and its player standing just outside his door.

"Thought I was hearing things."

Hana trotted out and into the smaller space, sniffing and sniffing at everything from the tatami mats on the floor to the cat in Yurio's lap. Potya just swatted at the pup's pale white snoot and sent her off with a surprised squeek, much to Yurio's amusement. Hana went back to sniffing things, but kept a safe distance from the defensive Siamese-point.

"Is that the stuff they asked you to get?"

Nodding, Yurio picked Potya up to set her aside on the bed, "Yeah. Exhibition outfits and Viktor's skates."

Asahi was a bit confused, and let the audio-muffs drift from the sides of his head to settle around the back of his neck instead. He leaned against the doorframe, keeping the guitar vertical and away from it with one hand, "...For use at *Euros*?"

"Yeah. They invited Viktor to skate as a guest. Until last year, he won the last 5 in a row, so he's pretty popular out that way."

"...They *only* invited him though?"

"He never really does anything on his own anymore." Yurio shrugged, standing up to go check the closet, and moved things out of the way to make room for the garment-bags, "Nearly every Exhibition this season has been a duet of some kind. Whatever solos they did were probably planned only in the event that one of them couldn't join in for some reason."

"I was about to point that out..." Asahi nodded, watching carefully, "Yuri had *two* solo Exhibitions at Nationals."

"I don't know if skating Viktor's old Free Skate counts as a solo Exhibition." Yurio retorted, returning to the bed to lift the bags by their exposed hangers, "But the other one, yeah... Yuri and Viktor expected to be at different competitions that weekend."

"Wait-"

Emerald eyes looked up, and Asahi pushed off the wooden doorframe again, slinging the guitar gently behind his back, "Why?"

"...Can I see them before you put them away...?"

One eye narrowed skeptically, but the teen shrugged and turned back to the bed, "I guess so. I don't care." He said, putting the bags back down across the comforter. He pulled one side the other and reached up to pull the zipper down on the front of one, revealing the blue-green pearlescent jacket.
Asahi hesitantly stepped in, one arm keeping the guitar from sliding back around his front as he bent forward. The glimmer and shine coming off the outfit, even with only a few inches visible through the opening, was enough to put the skater in awe.

"Jeeze, don't drool on them." Yurio taunted, crossing his arms.

"Sorry." The older figure answered, sucking his lips in and biting down on them for emphasis. Still, he reached his free hand forward to part the opening a bit further. Every new inch revealed even more glamour, with rhinestones shining from the upper part of the chest, getting denser close to the shoulders. Even further below, where the front of the coat opened to reveal the white pants that were clipped to the horizontal bar under the hanger's arms, more shimmering met his eyes. The sides of each leg were elaborately decorated in gold embroidery and leafing, with clear, blue, and green crystal scattered throughout. Curiosity was killer, and Asahi moved the bag off the shoulders, revealing golden epauletts, and a white silken neck-scarf with a gold and blue clasp set into the pre-tied knot. Turning the whole garment over, he moved the bag out of the way, and saw an immaculately designed and precisely embroidered pattern of loops and curves from shoulders to mid-back. He couldn't help but tease his fingers lightly across it all, "...Most of these details are so small, no one's ever going to see them..."

"Viktor and Yuri will though. Back in Russia, Viktor's had full costume shows before, where all of his past outfits were put on display at once so people could look at them. Like some damn museum."

"...Really?"

"Yeah. In part because they were his outfits, but also in part as a gallery for the tailors who made them. Viktor was practically a show-pony for some of the most expensive bling-smiths in the country." Yurio explained, though seeming rather blasé about the whole thing, "He was really particular about the way he wanted his skating outfits to look, but because of the fame he racked up over the years, he'd often get steep discounts on his prices because he was such an easy model. He would get stuff that was way more elaborate than anything he ever needed for competition. Stuff that most of the rest of us could never afford if we asked for those same outfits for ourselves." He looked down on the blue-green velvet and its glittering design, "There were a few designs this year that you can tell were made by someone else though. I guess Viktor decided to give Yuri's chosen tailors a chance. They were safe costumes, but they weren't really that innovative."

"...How innovative do competition outfits need to be?"

Again, Yurio shrugged, "Some of the materials that Viktor had access to in Russia were custom-created just for him. The wine-colored jacket he had for 'Aria' was actually 3D printed."

Asahi just squinted at him in disbelief.

"Regular sheer material like that would look dumb when sewn because you can see every folded hem, even on the inside of it. It bunches up sometimes, too, which looks dumb. But he wanted something partly see-through, for the sake of seeing the color of the shirt underneath, so his people back home figured out how to do it, just for him. They even designed fake seams into it in places, just to make it look like it had been sewn."

"If it was 3D printed, why bother making it look like it had been sewn?"

"Because they can."

"...That doesn't make any sense."
Yurio quirked a brow at him, "...Maybe it would to plebs like us. I keep things pretty simple. Most of my outfits don't even get half this sparkly." He waggled his fingers at the elaborate jacket, watching Asahi reach for the second bag, "My stuff gets colorful or ruffled, but I tend to avoid letting my shit get bedazzled like this. Seems a bit gaudy."

"Yuri always loved these costumes." Asahi noted, realizing the red-purple version of the outfit had identical decorative markings as the first, "He could place each outfit to each performance."

The teen rolled his eyes, "Oh my god I know... He even recognized the get-up he picked last year, when Viktor had all his shit mailed here, even though that costume hadn't seen the light of day for years outside of those galleries."

"That's not surprising..."

Yurio got curious then, "...I was told that you and him go back a long time. How come he never mentioned you?"

Asahi hesitated for a moment, but then went back to tidying up the two costumes, and zipped up the bags that housed them, "I can't speak for him. You'd have to ask Yuri."

Eyes followed the older figure as Asahi moved the garment-bags over to the closet and hung them in the open space Yurio had made, "Well, you kissed him, so I can only imagine what happened between you two before."

"...Do you really have to bring that up again?" Asahi grimaced, turning to look back as he slid the closet door closed.

"I'm just trying to figure out what kind of person you are. You're so quiet and hardly tell anyone anything, either about yourself or even about what you're up to... Yet despite doing something that Viktor would've buried anyone else for...here you are. You survived, and you're under their wing of protection. Yuri must've really done his absolute best to stop Viktor from carrying out whatever vengeance he had planned. He couldn't even stop Viktor from nearly throwing me under a bus."

Asahi just gaped, "Does everyone around here have a thing for Yuri or something?"

"What? No. That's not what I meant at all." Yurio protested bitterly, "I was trying to be friends with him but Viktor kept pushing me back, like I was getting in the middle of them somehow. It's the most annoying goddamn thing about them now. You can hardly get one away from the other for five fucking minutes." He threw his arms out to the side for emphasis, but then let them drop back again, and he raised one up to comb through his mussed hair, "Look, when I said before that Yuri taught me about the hugging thing...it was because he helped me out of a bad situation last year. He was the first person to reach out to me, and in a way, was the first person to really be my friend. I mean, I know people...Otabek in Kazakhstan is a friend of mine...but he's not the same as Yuri. It's because of him that I'm only half the raging asshole I used to be."

"...Half...?"

Yurio cocked his head back in annoyance, "Yes, only half, ohmygod." He swung down again and leered, "That's the big reason behind why I got so angry at the idea that you'd hurt him. He's not just a friend; he's an important friend. I only managed to pry him away from Viktor's vice-like grabby-hands because Mikhail stepped in."

"...I don't know where you're going with this."

The teen pinched the bridge of his nose impatiently, "I'm trying to say that Yuri must've held you in
pretty high regard if he went to task to stop Viktor from dropping his ultimate revengeance onto you for that kiss. So it's confusing as Hell that Yuri never mentioned you before."

Asahi just slowly made his way back towards the door, Hana at his heels. He paused there, but shrugged, "I can only repeat what he told me before; in the last days that we spent together, before I went to Tokyo and he went to Detroit...apparently I scared him. I didn't mean it, and I feel terrible for it...but I guess it was enough that he wanted to forget about me. Not talking about me would've been part of that."

"...Scared him?" Yurio echoed, following the older figure out of the room, only to stop in his doorway, "What do you-"

Asahi had already sat against the edge of his bed, and had pulled the framed photo of Riku off of the shelf it had been sitting on. Hana jumped up onto the bed as well, and flopped down to roll onto her back, stretching her arms and legs as far as they could go before she laid flat. Her dark eyes kept an eye on the teen at the door.

Yurio just looked on skeptically, "That's the second time I've seen you retreat to that picture."

"...Riku helped me get over Yuri before." Asahi answered, quieter than before, "From the time I met Yuri to the day before Riku died, I was...fully committed to those feelings. Riku spent all of our time together trying to help me move on from it because...we all knew nothing would ever come of it." He swallowed a hard knot in his throat, "It was only after Riku was taken from me that I really understood, and truly felt, what he'd been trying to get me to feel...that Yuri was a lost cause, and Riku was right there. I...never gave him all of me. After that last Nationals, I thought I had finally gotten past the broken heart I'd been coddling... Riku and I were going to go to Osaka to meet my parents, and tell them that I was going to stay with him; that I wasn't afraid of the consequences anymore. But we never made it...and I spent two years living with the reality of how alone I was. I...couldn't help but latch back onto what Yuri meant to me again after I ran into him at Nationals, because hurting for him never felt half as bad as hurting from losing Riku..." He lowered and shook his head, "I didn't care that he was with anyone. I only cared that he was open to being with a guy...because up until then, he'd never made it seem like he was...because he only ever had eyes for his lady-friend here in Hasetsu; Yuko..."

The blonde seemed a bit surprised by that, "...He had a thing for Yuko?"

Asahi just nodded and rubbed his nose on the back of one wrist, "The fact that he was with Viktor though... Someone of such celebrity... I just couldn't believe that Viktor would have ever cared for Yuri as much as I did. I thought Viktor was taking advantage of him, maybe even using him...as though the scandal of a Russian Champion being involved with a nobody like Yuri Katsuki would keep him in the spotlight for just 10, 15 seconds longer... I couldn't stand it..." He closed his eyes, and turned the photo over in his hands to face the floor, unable to tolerate the eyes of the picture looking at him, "...I thought I was doing Yuri a favor, when I pointed out all the reasons why Viktor was bad for him...but I guess it was just my...misguided attempt at trying to seem better than him, so Yuri would finally come to me...like I was the safer option..."

Yurio grumbled to himself quietly. He spotted Potya trying to leave through the open door, and used his heel to nudge her back, pulling the panel closed, and returned to his spot against Asahi's doorframe, "Viktor's the biggest idiot I know, but he's never been insincere. I don't think I've ever known him to use people. The kind of attention he craves is the kind he gets from the stuff he's done himself, not for the associations he makes. I mean, for as big a deal as it was that he dropped everything in Russia to be Yuri's coach, he didn't do it because of the reaction he expected to get from the wider world...it's because he wanted to be here."
"...I know..." Asahi nodded grimly, "I've learned..."

"So then why does it seem like you're still in love with him?" Yurio asked stiffly, one brow cocked again.

"...I don't...think I ever stopped." He answered tepidly, "I think I just managed to spend enough time away from him, and with Riku, to be able to put those feelings away for a while. Maybe even trick myself into thinking I was over him... Now that I'm on my own again though, and I'm here, in this place...it's just...harder than ever to keep my shit together." He pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling the sting in his eyes, "But I don't want to make a mess of things again... Yuri and Viktor have both done so much to help me, even though I did something terrible to them... The last thing I want to do is betray Viktor's trust in me to behave...and make Yuri feel uncomfortable again..." He shook his head, red tails of hair swaying beside it, "We're all supposed to go to 4Cs and the Olympics together. Maybe even Worlds. I can't let myself fall for him again... It would just be a disaster..."

"...So how come you don't just find someone else to be with?" Yurio posed, perhaps immaturely, "I doubt you'd have a lack of options."

Asahi just flashed a glare at the teen, "I can't just do that."

"Well you did it with Riku, didn't you?" The blonde pointed out, "You basically started dating him even though you were still eyeballs-deep in your feelers for Yuri. But Riku is gone now...and he's been gone. For two years. It's time to move on. From him and Yuri."

"You make it sound like you think that's so easy."

"Maybe I don't know. I'm a lone-wolf...I don't need anybody. But I've been around Yuri and Viktor long enough to know what it looks like when someone's miserable because their other half is missing. You look miserable." He pointed at the older figure, but stayed where he was in the doorway, "If the biggest reason for that is because you're alone, then...maybe you should do something to change that."

Asahi maintained the glare for a moment longer, but then looked down, and side-eyed the dog lounging next to him, "...I can't... Hana used to be his dog... I look into her eyes and I feel like I can see his reflection in them, standing with me..."

"That's your guilt." Yurio pointed out, "For still being into Yuri even though you were with him, for surviving that car accident when he didn't...maybe for a thousand other things. But he's not really here. Hana may have been Riku's dog, but she's your dog now. She follows you around, not anyone's specter. ...You've got to forgive yourself and move on."

No answer came to that, but he could tell the older figure could hear his words rattling around in his head.

Green eyes scanned the room, "Maybe one of the best things you can do is find a place of your own. If being here is causing you to worry about relapse...then you'll always be on edge, as long as you stay. You don't even have to go far...you could move across the street for all anyone cares...but somewhere that doesn't have Yuri's name literally written on the building. Yu-Topia Katsuki? Yuri's Special Katsudon? This whole place is nothing but a giant knife in your chest."

Asahi nodded slightly, "...I want to go...but I don't know that I'm ready to be by myself... I'm barely coming into my second week of really letting myself deal with Riku's death. I feel like it only just happened. I don't...think I'm ready to go..."
"So then what are you going to do when Yuri and Viktor come back? They're not going to stop being obnoxiously affectionate towards each other just on your account. Hell, they've practically turned it into a sport, just to get a rise out of me." Yurio pointed out, much to his chagrin, "You're going to have to make peace with something, or you're going to have a really bad time going forward."

"I know..."

The Russian Tiger let the moment sit for a few seconds. Eventually though, huffed a breath, "Anyway...I can't let this topic follow me to sleep. It'll just piss me off. You need something else to think about, too."

Asahi was just stunned, looking up at the teen with a perplexed look on his face, "I don't...know what else to say...?"

"Then show me your competition stuff." Yurio suggested, taking a step forward, "You oogled the shit out of Viktor and Yuri's Exhibition suits...show me yours."

"Ehm... They're..."

"Ugh just show me before I go grab mine."

Flustered, but unsure how to contest the demand, Asahi rose up, leaving the guitar on the bed and stepping forward to put the framed picture back onto the shelf. He swallowed nervously and went to the other side of the room, opening the big wooden cabinet to reveal the tiny section with his skating gear. He pulled one plastic garment-bag out, containing both of his outfits, and returned to the bed with it. The zipper on the side was pulled down, and Asahi gestured towards it, stepping back to let the teen have his gape.

Yurio stepped up to get a gander, more out of necessity than actual curiosity. What he found didn't impress him, and he pointed first at the dark colors of the Short Program outfit, "What is this...street clothes?"

Asahi nodded reluctantly.

The Free Skate outfit came out next, and the Tiger rubbed his thumb across the turtleneck's fabric, and the stiffer sections where the red color shimmered slightly, "...What is this...glitter-glue...? Sparkly fabric-paint?"

"You're just going to make me feel worse than I already do...!" Asahi protested, "What's your point!?" He stepped forward again to stuff the outfits back into their Bag of Shame.

Yurio huffed a breath again, "No wonder you were star-struck by the other costumes. Is that why Okukawa was making you look through catalogues the other day? She knows the state your outfits are in?"

"...Yeah..." He nodded grimly as he put the package back into its place, "I had to make all my stuff by hand before."

Yurio's eyebrows would've fallen off the back of his head if he could raise them that high, but he just breathed an 'I see' and went quiet again.

"You're judging me."

"I can't help it." The teen barked back, "You can't go to the Olympics wearing those." He said,
gesturing at the door as it was shut to hide them again, "You've gotta let Okukawa and the old man get you real costumes."

"...I'm going to get them on my own." Asahi retorted, "I can't keep letting either of them hand me the answer to everything. I'll never get onto my own two feet if I let others take the reins all the time."

"Whatever it takes...damn..."

"Ugh just go to bed already. You've said and done enough." Asahi harped, shooing the teen out of his room, "Go on! Get!"

Yurio let himself be tossed out, but he stayed in the hall just between their doors, "Alright alright...I'm out..." He dusted himself off and straightened out his hoodie, "But don't just throw off what I said because it's annoying or difficult."

Asahi hesitated with a hand on the sliding door, "...About what...the costumes or Yuri...?"

The Tiger paused then, "...Yes."

"...God, you're more like Riku than you have any right being." The older figure said, frustrated. He reached up with his free hand to rub one temple and groaned quietly, "You don't know how annoying that is."

"I'm glad it's annoying. Maybe you'll take my advice more seriously." Yurio huffed, and reached his arm forward like in the Ice Castle parking lot, "But just so you know, I'm not into guys, so don't fall for me instead. Then you'll just have two Yuris who didn't return your feelings."

Asahi staggered, legs nearly collapsing under him from the surprise, "You're a kid. That's gross."

"I'm just sayin'." He retorted, nudging his arm forward again.

Grimacing, Asahi shook his head and grasped the arm for the shoulder-bump, "Fine... You said it. You said a lot. Now say less."

"Hmph..." The teen smirked victoriously, "You're not so bad, Saito. You might even be fun at some point."

"Don't push your luck, Plisetsky."

"Da, da... Na noć'.” (Yeah, yeah... Goodnight.) He waved, and went back into his new room.

Chapter End Notes

Tu as répondu comme si vous avez compris... Tu es charmant... = You answered as if you understood... You're charming...
Tu me rends heureux. = You make me happy
J'ai envie de t'embrasser = I would like to kiss you
Seulement moi. Toujours moi. = Only me. Always me.
Je le fais sonner bien = I make it sound good
J'ai envie de toi = I want you
Embrasse-moi, j'en ai besoin = Kiss me, I need it
Tu es l'amour de ma vie = You are the love of my life
Prends-noi = Take me.
Brow to brow and panting heavily, the spent duo collapsed into one another. Viktor couldn't help but laugh at the whole thing, "...Well, it...wasn't the most romantic thing we've ever done...but..."

"...You got your mark for the...Mile Long Club...after all..." Yuri huffed in answer, rubbing his palms up and down against his partner's bare chest. He tilted his head back into the pillows to get a better look at the man's face, "But I'm...mostly glad you...feel better."

Viktor nuzzled down and slid his arms down under his husband's back, hugging tight, and pressed his face to the crook of neck and shoulder, "...I won't be a dud for much longer...I promise..."

"You're not a dud," Yuri insisted, rubbing the Russian's back, "You're perfect." Viktor nibbled his partner's skin a bit, and moved up to just under one ear before he came up again, nosing the man adoringly, "Not as perfect as you, but I do aspire." He teased, then pushed further up onto his hands to sit back. Slowly and carefully, he withdrew from his partner's heat, then scooted back to make room and offered his hands to pull the younger man up, "I do feel better though, and not just because I could finally rise to the occasion."

Yuri took the Russian's fingers and let himself be hoisted him, but instead of just sitting, he wiggled his knees around to sit up and continued his forward momentum, right into his husband's chest, knocking him down to his back. He followed after and went gently down on top of the man, putting them nose-to-nose again, "You're learning to relax again. Pretty soon, you'll be back to your silly air-headed ways, and all your creativity and inspiration will get unstuck in your head." He whispered, offering a light kiss between every few words, "It's probably one of the things I see as a silver lining to your darker moods...I get to watch you bloom again."

"...That's...an interesting way of putting it." Viktor huffed, making the most of their new position, and slid his hands up and down his husband's soft, warm back, then down over the round of that ample SkaterBum, "But I guess I can see why you'd frame it like that."

Yuri just looked on adoringly, and shifted his weight slightly to free an arm, moving it forward to play with a few strands of his partner's silver hair, "I could never tell before, if you were in a mood or not...you always hid it so well..." He started, "It's taken a while to really tune-in to your 'hidden language."

"My hidden language." The Russian echoed, curious.

"Mhm." He nodded, "All the years before you came to Hasetsu, I was convinced that you were always happy...it just seemed surreal, but I thought...well, you're Viktor Nikiforov, so of course you're happy. But then you came to me, and I started to learn how to read you...so I can go back on those years, and I can see the subtle tells when something was starting to get you down. Now..." He paused, offering a longer kiss, and pressed down to squish their brows together again, "...I think I'm nearly fluent in you. It bothers me when things drag on you...but I get to watch it all melt away again, too...and see you turn back into the happy person I know you are. I get to see something no one else really does...not even people who've known you much longer than I have."

"Well, hopefully this phase won't last much longer... I'm ready for the good times again."

"You won't catch me disagreeing."
Viktor hummed his approval, and lifted his head up again for one more kiss, "We should go clean up." He mused, "Maybe get out of the cabin for a bit...give the pups a moment to unsee what they just saw."

Yuri couldn't help but laugh at that, "We really are insufferable."

With a mutual shower, clean clothes, and the room reset to its daytime arrangement, the duo set the pups up with lunch and fresh water. They left their little section of the train car and wandered, making a pit-stop at the end with the bar, and a few hours later, to the restaurant car.

By the end of dinner, they were close to the border to the Czech Republic, and excitement was starting to creep in.

"Ostrava is where Euros was last year." Viktor reminded, collapsing onto the once-bed-now-couch in their room. Makkachin hopped up with him and squished against his human's side for some well-deserved pets. Yuri moved in to the opposite side, hoisting Jiro up as well, "It's crazy to think about how much has happened just since then..."

Yuri reached for the remote control and clicked the television on for some background noise, "Just before Euros is when I said I loved you out loud for the first time." He pointed out, looking aside, "Even though I only managed to say it over the phone."

Viktor smiled all the same, "You should've seen the look on my face when I heard it. I thought I'd cry right there in the ER waiting room."

"I can see your face right now though."

The Russian turned and gave a sly grin, "You can."

"I love you."

That earned an affectionate head-rub with Viktor's cheek, "I love you too." He answered easily, and slipped his arm over his husband's shoulders to draw him closer, "Only a few hours left till we get off this tin can."

"I thought you were really looking forward to this part of the trip?" Yuri wondered, wrapping his remote-holding arm around Jiro where the pup was leaned up against his leg, and set his other hand on his spouse's thigh.

"I was...but it feels a bit spoiled now." He sighed in answer, watching each channel click through as Yuri surfed, "I spent the first half of the trip worried someone would break the door down and drag us both out."

"Never again." Yuri pointed out, turning his head to kiss his partner's cheek, "We'll do everything we can to never go back to Russia or its territories ever again."

"...That's kind of sad..." Viktor said quietly, "I know it has to be done, but...still."

"It's the place you grew up...but as much as you've suffered there, I'd hedge a bet that it never really felt like home for you."

"...Ehh..."
"Home is where your loved ones are." Yuri explained, sliding his hand down the length of his spouse's leg, then slowly back up again, "All the time I spent in Detroit, even with Phichit-kun sharing an apartment with me, it never felt like home. It was just a place I liked being at the time...my first real taste of freedom and independence. But when I went back to Hasetsu, even though it was at a really low-point for me, being around my parents and sister, and even being back at the Ice Castle...it made getting over it easier. I felt safe and happy, protected and cared for, you know? I could stop worrying about a lot of things because I knew the basics would be dealt with by someone else for a while. I want you to be able to feel that way."

"Well..." Viktor started, watching the channel-changing stop as Yuri suspended the search, and it stayed on a news channel with the local weather, "I do follow on the 'home is where your family is' part..."

"I sense a 'but' in there."

"You don't have to be ethnically Japanese to be at home in Japan." Yuri explained, feeling where his partner twisted in place, until Viktor was sitting sideways against the couch, putting his shoulder against the man's chest, and moved both of his legs up as Viktor wedged his own underneath of them, "You don't still feel like a visitor in Hasetsu, do you?"

"...Not as a visitor, no." The silver confirmed, leaning his face forward to nose at the younger man's ear, and breathed in the scent of his hair, "Other than the few months we spent in St. Petersburg last spring, I've lived in Hasetsu for nearly two years. The locals don't treat me like I'm a celebrity anymore; I'm just another guy they know now. The JSF isn't breaking the doors down to see me anymore either. Mostly, I guess I'm just...still getting used to how different the culture is compared to back in Russia. Japan is so reserved and private...or, it goes to the extreme, to an almost ludicrous degree. Plus, the language barrier makes it harder to re-establish myself the way I was before."

"Well, you only just officially got brought into the fold. Japanese groups couldn't exactly set-up shop with you before because you were still owned and operated by the Russian Skating Federation." Yuri pointed out, "But now that you're with us, it's only a matter of time. I'd almost say to prepare yourself, even... They've given you space to adjust to these changes, so once we get back home, they may even be waiting for us. They'll all know we're at Euros as soon as we set foot into daylight in Vienna. So, they'll know when we're coming back."

"...And with Saito being in Hasetsu, too."

"Oh yeah, that's true." Yuri smiled nervously, "Him too. All three Men's Singles on the Olympic team will be gathered in one place. We may have more press at the Ice Castle than normal, where everyone's trying to see how we're getting ready."

Viktor pulled his arm down from the back of the couch and slid both around his partner's smaller frame, chin down on Yuri's shoulder, "I could feel the chill go through you when I mentioned his name, my love."

Yuri sighed and leaned into the hug, "I...can't help it. I'm almost certain he either still has a thing for me, or he's relearning it. The stuff he said in the onsen the night before we left all-but assured that..."

"All the better that we don't live at Yu-Topia anymore."

"I know, but that's where my family is... I don't want to feel like I have to steel myself just to visit or
sit in the spring once in a while." He explained, slouching a little where he sat, "And that just makes me feel like a bad-guy, because I'm constantly having to check my behavior around him, like the slightest thing I do is going to encourage him."

"The fact that you exist encourages him." Viktor pointed out, sliding one hand down to wedge his fingers between his spouse's legs, and gave the thigh under his palm a gentle squeeze, "We can only act natural around him and hope he comes to grips with things in his own time."

"...That's just the thing though..." Yuri whined, "I don't want to hurt him either...but I can't be sure that even he's able to get over me, no matter what I say. Not on his own. Being our regular selves in front of him isn't the same as when it's in front of Yurio. There's nothing funny about Asahi's reaction."

"I get it."

"And especially cuz I have such a hard time reading him..." He went on, tilting his head against his husband's shoulder, "And with everything else, even though I want him to know that I don't have any hard feelings for what happened at Nationals...the fact that it happened...makes me not really want to learn how to read him."

"It's not your responsibility to figure him out."

"...I know, but there's a certain level of decorum we have to maintain if we don't want Four Continents and the Games to be a mess. Especially the Games...we're going to be sharing a dorm bloc with the entire Japanese team."

Viktor shrugged and offered a smile, "Yuri, my truest and dearest love...you're married to a three-time Olympian participant, and two time Champion. I know all the secrets of the Games. We could go the whole time without ever seeing him, except when we know we'll see him."

"...Wouldn't it be obvious that we're avoiding him then...?"

"Only as obvious as you want to make it." The Russian teased, nosing into his partner's raven hair, "The grounds are enormous. You've seen them already yourself, even though they were under construction before...it's practically a whole city unto itself. Other than for the events we're competing in, and the opening and closing ceremonies, and Exhibition...we can go wherever we want, and so can he...somewhere else."

Yuri just made a face and tried to laugh, "...Ahhh... I guess you're right... I'm over-thinking it all."

"You're a gentle soul," Viktor reassured, "It's part of what makes you you, and I wouldn't have you any other way."

It was nearly 11pm when the train finally pulled into Hauptbahnhof Wien. Pups were ready, luggage grabbed, and both skaters stood ready for the swift deboarding. The platform area practically looked like it was all indoors, given its modern swanky design and clean upkeep. The big train came to a gradual stop, and Yuri hit the door button for the manual override, forcing the panels open where they normally wouldn't, given how that wasn't the train's final destination. The frame parted though, and the cold Austrian air poured over them.

"We're finally here!" Yuri cheered as they all hopped out. He let go of the suitcase handles he had and spun around; Jiro was securely tied to one suitcase handle by his leash and harness, rather than strapped to Yuri's chest, "This is amazing. It's like the air itself feels free."
Viktor looked up and around; the station was sparsely populated at that hour, but even he could sense the change in the atmosphere. All the signs were written in familiar German; blue backgrounds and back-lit to make the white text easy to read from a distance, the architecture was geometric and precise, and with as many platforms as there were, the passenger escape route went underground. He scanned the entire area, looking at everything, until he eventually settled onto his husband's antics next to him, "...It does feel different." He agreed easily, feeling the relief pour into him. Like Yuri, he let go of the suitcases he'd been pulling, but instead of just dancing around, he spun once and then threw his arms around his husband's shoulders, "We're finally here."

Yuri gladly let himself be squished into the hug, and returned it just as tightly. They swayed each other back and forth a few times and laughed excitedly, but eventually Yuri paused and reached up to cup both hands on his partner's face, and pulled him in again.

Without the anxiety of being called-out for wearing matching rings, neither of them wore their gloves, and the warmth of skin brought everything home. Pale fingers on paler cheeks, Viktor lifted his own to press his palms to the back of Yuri's hands, and let himself melt into the warmth of the long celebratory kiss he found himself in. The train even started pulling out of the station again before they finished, and as they parted, they waved it goodbye.

"I don't mean to say good riddance as though it was a bad trip...but..." Viktor started, hugging with one arm as the other kept waving, "...I'm not sad to be off that train."

"It felt a bit claustrophobic after a while." Yuri agreed easily, and pulled the man's attention back to himself again for another few kisses just for good measure. Once he was satisfied, he leaned back again, "Let's go find a taxi. We'll check in at the hotel, have a nice tea or something, get some real sleep in a real big bed...and then tomorrow, we're off."

"You look particularly excited about that." Viktor mused, and reached for the handles of the suitcases again as Yuri did much the same, "You've put a lot of thought into it."

"I had a lot of fun when you took me sight-seeing around Barcelona last year." He explained, clicking at the Akita pup as they all started the walk to the underground stairs, "And I have to make the most of the time we have here before Yurio and the rest pop up, because it's going to go haywire once they're all here."

"Ah, yeah, that's true."

"Not that it's a bad thing, but...well, it's always different when you're around people you know." He went on, stepping carefully onto the first step, and looked back to make sure Jiro did so after himself without trouble, "I'm actually looking forward to them getting here anyway...but I'm still excited to do some stuff here just with you."

"Well, we have all day tomorrow to ourselves. This city will be crawling with skaters by Thursday though." Viktor added, going down slowly to give the short-legged puppy the time he needed to get down each step without stumbling, "I'm sure most of them aren't expecting me, never mind us."

"I know!" Yuri laughed, "I can't wait to start seeing their double-takes."

"The fans are going to go crazy, too." The Russian continued, stepping off the last step, and looked around for the exit to the street. Makkachin stayed close by his side, and followed quickly as they moved forward, "It's going to be weird to go into an event through the spectator doors for once."

"Yeah, it'll be different, that's for sure."
The short hall dispensed into a major corridor, with multiple levels of the building visible through railed cut-outs in the floor. The ground was tiled in dark-grey stone squares, polished and waxed. Each pair of platforms was marked with more blue signs above the hall that they lead to, and between each hall was the entrance to the closed-for-the-night escalators and a few small store-fronts. In the main corridor itself, between each big decorative hole in the floor, were sets of glass-walled elevators, and hanging freely between them in the open spaces were elaborate displays of hanging white lights. On the floor below, it looked as though there was a whole shopping mall, as well as signs for Platforms 1 and 2, which lead to Linz and Salzburg. Platforms 3-12 were on the upper floor, and connected to everywhere else.

They headed left once they arrived into that main corridor, and made their way all the way down to the biggest part of the building, and turned around only to look at the massive blue digital display-board with all the trains and their arrival & departure times. They looked around for their own train's listing, and chuckled quietly to themselves as they turned away from it again. More closed store-fronts greeted them, as well as the Infopoint and map kiosk where several partial-walls - with display boards above them - notated all the train routs and points of interest in the nearby city. Another left-turn from there though and they were passing the last opening in the floor with the big access-stairs that lead to the lower floor...and finally, the wide exit.

The outside of the building was just as big as the inside, but with an easy, unobstructed view of the dark sky. The glass-front of the train station was alight with a wall of the same hanging string-lights that decorated the open gaps in the terminal, giving it a Christmasy look.

Viktor nudged his head towards the taxi area, "There should still be someone waiting...but it shouldn't be hard to call for a cab if they're all gone for some reason."

"I think I can see some yellow cars," Yuri pointed out, squinting a bit through his blue frames.

True to his suspicion, the cars turned out to be taxis, and they were quickly able to find one that would accept their pups. The trip to the ARCOTEL Kaiserwasser was an easy 15 minutes that late at night, and they were already up in their room before either of them realized it.

Jiro ran around like his fur was on fire as soon as he was cut loose from his harness, letting off his untapped puppy-energy in spades. Makkachin went after him, chasing the pup under the bed and running around the sides of it where he couldn't fit his bigger poodle-body underneath. Yuri laughed at their antics, but relaxed when he felt Viktor's arms wrap around his frame from behind.

"You think we can try another bath bomb?" The Russian wondered quietly, "I might even remember it this time."

"That actually sounds pretty great right now."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED SEVENTY FIVE

The tub was deep, the water hot...bubbles sudsy and aromatic. It was everything Viktor had wanted the last time, when his senses were so dulled that he couldn't even recall having been there. One toe at a time dipped into the wet warmth, and the travel-worn Russian slowly sat back, leaning against the soft towel that had been set against the angled back-rest. He managed to stay still there for only a few seconds before he slid straight under the water, dragging the towel along with him, until only the tips of his bent knees could be seen above the bubbly surface...and even then, only barely. He held for a few seconds, listening to the hollow echo of thumping wherever his elbows or back tapped the tub's walls. The sound of a swish above him caught his attention, and he came up to the feel of a poke at the crown of his head. Clearing the water and froth from his eyes with a quick slick against his hair, Viktor glanced up to spot the amused face of his still-dressed partner there looking back at him.

"You didn't waste time." Yuri teased, standing upright again with his laptop, and went over to the granite countertop opposite the tub, "Guess I can't hold it against you though."

"I thought you were right behind me." Viktor answered, twisting around to find the towel again, and spread its wet edges out where they'd been clinging to the tub before, and leaned against it as he watched curiously, "What's keeping you? Not the laptop..."

"Hm?" Yuri glanced up and back, but shook his head, "No, not this. This was easy. Finding the WiFi password for the hotel though..."

"...Ah..."

"Not being able to see the letters as I typed them made it hard to get it in correctly." He explained, finding a good spot to put the MacBook where it couldn't get wet by mistake, and hit the space bar to play a video that was already loaded on YouTube. Quiet music started playing; calming, like the sound of bubbling water with instruments, "And German words always seem to be extra long..."

"...What was it?"

"ArcotelKaiserwasserWienWilkommen...01."

"That's a mouthful."

"So is this." Yuri added, drawing the Russian's eyes over the edge of the tub as he stepped out again. Barely a second passed before Yuri returned, this time carrying two thin wine glasses, and a half-bottle of something. He set the two glasses down on the edge of the tub, and sat down just next to them as he worked out removing the plastic seal to expose a cork. It popped out easily enough, and a dark golden liquid poured out, bubbly like champagne, "Some plum wine from the welcome basket they left on the bed for us." He explained, and raised one glass forward, "A better nightcap than tea, I think, given that there's only one bag of green and the rest is caffeinated."

Viktor sat up a bit straighter and lifted one hand from under the bubbles to take the glass, "Agreed."

Yuri set the half-bottle of wine aside, and raised his own glass, "To the coming stress-free weekend and all the fun we're going to have."

"And you getting in the tub."
"Oh!" He quickly stood up and set his glass aside, threw his clothes off and tip-toed into the hot water. He sat opposite his partner, facing the man, and retook his glass, "Okay, there... **kanpai.**"

"Much better. **Kanpai.**"

**k'Klink**

Glasses were drained slowly as the heat from the bath was absorbed, and the scents of chamomile, lavender, and shea butter from the bubble-bomb imbued their desired effect. What meager conversation Yuri considered was quickly put on the backburner as he realized there would be little of it reciprocated. Viktor succumbed to the relaxed atmosphere rather easily, all but falling asleep as he leaned his head back against the towel and the tub-rim.

It was almost a crime to have to rouse him again after time let the water go lukewarm and all the bubbles faded.

"**Viktor,**" Yuri started, already out and donning a bathrobe, "**Viktor, the water's about to go cold. Let's transfer you to bed so you can sleep.**"

The hazy Russian barely managed to open one eye as he lifted his head, but he nodded and accepted the help out of the water. Yuri toweled him down as well as he could, and helped hobble him into the main room, where both pups were already tuckered down for the night. Makkachin lifted his head though to watch the two go in, and rose up to his paws to follow. Jiro was already on the bed, placed there by his human earlier on.

The walls were solid pearl-white, with a black-and-white matte photo of Vienna hung above the headboard. The bed was like an enormous red leather couch, with two red frames underneath a single wide mattress, and a plush headboard dotted by tight buttons in a grid across the front. The sheets and blankets were all as white as the walls. The curtains in front of the wall-length window were light warm-grey; sheer on the glass-side and thick on the room-side. Across from the bed was a long cherry-wood desk with a flat-panel television hung against the wall above it, suspended in a wooden cabinet. In the corner, where Makkachin had been, a red corner-couch made to match the bed frame, with a standing lamp next to it by the window. On the other side of the room, between the bathroom and closet doors, was a two-seat mini-bar-style counter, with a single-cup coffee maker and a small box with assorted K-cups, and two ceramic espresso glasses nearby. The carpet looked as much like granite as the tile walls in the bathroom, but colored in mottled red and gold.

Yuri pulled the blankets and sheets away to make room on the nearest side, and sat his exhausted spouse on the plush mattress. With a quick kiss on the man's forehead, he went to raise Viktor's legs to put them up as well, and pulled the blankets back across to cover that lanky pale frame, "I'll be right back...I'll just drain the tub and turn off the lights."

Viktor watched his husband move off to go about that very business, but found his attention grabbed by the feeling of puppy-nubbins coming up behind him above the blankets. He rolled onto his side...just in time to get one of those very nubbins directly in the face. Blue eyes crossed towards the dog-hand, then looked forward and beyond it to the pup, who was looking back at him with dark eyes, "...**Why do you do this thing...?**"

**Mrff**

"...**I knew you'd say that.**"

Yuri returned only a moment later, clicking off lamps on his path back. The sound of the bathtub gurgling as it drained followed him out of the bathroom. He slipped the robe off his shoulders as he
moved, setting it over the back of one of the bar-stools, and glided his naked frame over towards the
same edge of the bed where he'd put his partner earlier. He reached up to the top of the headboard
and clicked off the overhead lamp, and slid under the blankets to join in the warmth as Viktor
wiggled over to make room. Yuri quickly spooned against the Russian's broad frame, always a bit
amused by the difference in their size once he was pressed right up on him, making it hard to look
over. He reached his right arm over the man's side though and kissed the side of Viktor's neck, "I
won't bother setting an alarm. Just sleep as long as you want."

"...What about your plans?" He asked, twisting back slightly, though it was impossible to see
anything in the dark.

"There's nothing in this city I want to see more than you without bags under your eyes." Yuri
retorted, feeling the tickle of puppy whiskers against his arm, then the wet of a warm tongue, and he
lifted his hand to ruffle the Akita's head, "We have the next five days to see and do things. If we
spend the whole of Wednesday sitting around in the hotel, lounging in the sauna or going to the hotel
spa...then that's what we do. There's no need to go register or get paperwork...no one to check in
with...no official or unofficial practices to go to...it's just us, the pups, and Vienna. We're tourists with
no obligations."

Viktor hesitated to answer, threading his fingers across Jiro's little fuzzy frame. The pup seemed
to settle against his chest, and Makkachin jumped up onto the bed to curl up against his
husman's legs as well. The Russian looked around in the dark, taking in the feel of his spouse's hot
skin, and the growing warmth of the two dogs pressed up against him through the blankets. Still, the
words 'tourists with no obligations' echoed in his head, and he nodded quietly, "...Yeah..."

Waking up with an arm over a big white floof, Asahi's eyes slowly opened unprompted. His phone
laid quiet on the night-stand next to the overly large bed, and no light came in between the slats of
the blinds behind his head.

...Is it...still the middle of the night...?

He rubbed his eyes and reached over Hana's half-sleeping frame to find his new phone, and pulled it
free of the charger, seeing the ungodly-early hour of 3:42am display on its screen. He groaned and
flopped back down, but after a few minutes of dozing...he realized there was no point in trying to fall
back asleep again.

I just can't...my brain's wide awake...even though my eyes are tired...

Grumbling quietly, he clicked on one of the lights nearby and gently threw his feet off the edge of
the bed. He rubbed his eyes, and reached a free hand over to ruffle Hana's fur, [Sorry...I woke you
up so early...]

She moaned as dogs do and flopped her head back down to where it had been before, yawning wide
before trying to sleep again. She only lifted her head to look again once her human had, for some
weird reason, stepped out of the room. Hearing the click of the key in the door-lock, Hana's ears
twitched, and she watched the 'sound' of footsteps going down the hall on the other side of the wall.

Asahi yawned as he quietly made his way down the stairs, all the way down to the first floor, and
made a sharp left at the end of the hall. Though it was dark in the foyer, he'd effectively memorized
every inch of the floorplan, and it was easy to find his way over to the men's changing room. He
grabbed the towels and slipped out of his meager night-sweats, underwent the obligatory shower,
and stepped out onto the deck.
The giant red demon-mask hanging on the wall behind him seemed to watch his every movement, but the eyes of a mask were nothing to the eyes of living beings...and there wasn't a soul around. Looking briefly at the private tub...the entire spring seemed like just a bigger version of it that late at night, and he opted for the main pool.

Sitting back against the ledge, Asahi closed his eyes, hooking the back of his head against the stone lip. He yawned and let his frame float a little, opening his eyes to look up into the winter sky.

...I'm starting to dream about him again...about Yuri...

He grimaced and looked down again, forcing himself to sit properly on the underwater bench, and looked across to where he'd last seen the younger man sitting.

Riku would be devastated if he knew...but I feel like I can't help it... Yuri's come crashing back into my life, and...Riku is gone from it forever...

Lowering down until the steaming hot water was just under his nose, his grey-brown eyes fixated on that spot on the other side of the spring.

And Plisetsky is right...absolutely everything about this place makes me think of him... This is where Yuri grew up. This resort witnessed his entire life. First steps, first words...all those days he'd come back here during Juniors, where he saw those things that upset him so much... There isn't an inch of this place that doesn't make me think about him.

He looked back at the wall behind himself, and at the big demon mask again, then up to the barren side-wall of the resort. There were no windows on that end of the building, save the one in the glass door to the shower and bath-hall.

Being in the room that Senpai stayed in...even though there's a lock on it now, and I'm the only one with a key...I still feel like I'm borrowing it from him. I'm just...stepping all over the footprints he left here. I'm messing up those memories just by being here...and since it wasn't Yuri's idea that I come here...I don't feel like I belong. He never invited me to Hasetsu for a reason. ...I...shouldn't be here at all.

He twisted himself around and folded his elbows on the edge of the stone floor, and rested his chin on his crossed wrists. The heaviness in his eyes grew, and he lowered his face to bury them in his arms.

Why can't I get over him...? Nothing about him wants me... He's with someone else, and all I ever did was scare and betray him... The fact that he's helping me at all is a goddamn miracle...

[...I'm sorry...Riku, I never wanted it to be like this...]

Hana was waiting on the inside of the door and jumped up as soon as it opened, tail flying back and forth as her person came back inside. It slowed as she watched the man go by without any acknowledgment, but followed after dutifully anyway. Asahi immediately reached for his phone again. All of the donation funds had finalized their transfer into his new bank account; seeing so much money again made him anxious, but part of him had gotten used to it. He was relieved to see that motorcycles were cheaper than he'd worried; $1000 or less. On the other hand, pull-behind hutches were nearly half that on their own...and to his shock, the kits to add a passenger seat on the side of the bike for Hana were nearly twice the cost of the bike itself. He sighed and shook his head though.

There's nothing I can do to change myself...so the only thing to do is remove myself... I can't stay
here...
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED SEVENTY SIX

The Hasetsu morning was as standard as it could get, given the strange ensemble of actors staying at the resort. Yurio shoveled some overnight frost from the parking lot and sidewalk, Mikhail returned on his own to manage breakfast and school-start with the Skype tutors, then left again an hour or two later. Other nameless patrons came and went through the common-room for breakfast, and the Kastukis went about the building like attentive hummingbirds. Through the bustle, Asahi snuck out unnoticed – as was his preference – to run to the Ice Castle.

It wasn't as easy to escape into the work-outs though as he'd hoped. The monotony of running on a treadmill left him with too much time to think. It wasn't worth it to try skating instead, either, as his stomach growled too much by the end of his routine to make the effort. He didn't run with a bag on his back anyway, and so didn't have his blades.

Returning to the resort, he overheard the discussion of wrapping school up early for the day so there would be time to pack for the trip to Austria in addition to everything else. Showering and returning to the main floor for lunch, he merely ate and half-listened to the chatter around him. His silence was noticed but left unquestioned – one of the perks of not being particularly chatty anyway...unless pressed to be.

"So what are your plans for the weekend?" Minako's voice rose up, directed uncomfortably in Asahi's direction.

He paused in the middle of a soba noodle and looked up, realizing the question was directed at him, and looked down again. He shrugged and bit the noodle to cut it off, "...Just skating, I guess."

"And you're sure you don't want someone to hang around to keep an eye on things...?" Mikhail added.

"Completely sure." He answered, finding those words easier to say. I don't need anyone getting in my way now.

It was a relief when it seemed like the questions ended there. He was too tired for more anyway. He took kibble and fresh water to his room for Hana and stripped down as she chomped it all down. With sunlight pouring in through the big window, Asahi slipped under the cool sheets and squished one of his pillows over his head to make it dark. Sleep found him before he even remembered to set an alarm, and some number of hours later, a knock on the door woke him in its place.

"Oi, Saito, we're going out...you coming?"

P...Plisetsky...?

Sluggish and half-brained, Asahi barely managed to lift the pillow up in confusion, looking towards the door. Hana was up and wandering around the room by then, and had paused between him and the panel, wagging her tail in recognition.

"Hey! Do you have your muffins on or something?" Yurio asked more loudly, thumping the side of his fist against the wood, "Saito!"

"I'm up... I'm up." He answered back with a grumble, reaching for his phone to check the time. It was about 3pm by then, so he could only assume all the packing for Euros has been done. He slid
the blankets aside and shuffled reluctantly across the floor. He could hear the teen grumbling something behind the door, and glared down in a haze once the panel was unlocked and pulled aside. Hana barked and jumped into the hall, but she drew no attention from either of the awkward figures, and glanced up to see them staring at each other.

"Oh." Yurio said stiffly, "That's what you meant."

Asahi blinked once, slowly, "...What else could I have meant...?"

"It doesn't matter," The Russian scoffed, and gestured down the hall impatiently, "Are you coming skating or not? It's the last night we'll all be here until Monday."

Another slow blink, and the taller figure scratched at a bit of exposed skin on his chest, "You're testy. What'd I do now?"

Yurio cocked his head back and groaned, "It's not you, ferfuckssake. Quit asking questions and say yes or no to the one I asked."

Asahi just turned on a heel and stepped back into the room, ignoring the request again, "If I'm not the one you're mad at, then don't treat me like I am. I'm not your punching bag. I've put up with enough of that crap throughout my life already as it is."

Green eyes followed skeptically, but at least the older skater bypassed going back to bed. He stayed by the doorway as he watched Asahi head to the wardrobe on the other side of the room, "Look, they're all waiting downstairs. If you're coming then we need to go now."

Asahi looked back over his shoulder, hand on one of the knobs, "What, do you want me to skate half-naked or something? I thought you said you weren't into guys."

Pale white skin flushed red, "And you said you thought I was gross. Screw off and get ready." He argued, pulling the front of his hoodie down over the top half of his face. He listened for a minute, hearing the rustling of clothing, and the tap of toenails on the floor as Hana came close again, and he took a knee to pay her attention instead. The white pup lavished under the scritches, curly tail swaying happily, "So how old is she anyway?"

"Eh?" Asahi glanced back, looking under the hem of a form-fitting Mizuno shirt as he pulled it over, "Oh...Hana?"

"Yeah."

"...About four I think." He answered, arms sliding through the sleeves, "She was half a puppy when Riku had her in Tokyo. His family got her so he wouldn't be lonely in the big city."

"So where'd she go during competitions?"

"Riku would put her on a flight to Sapporo so his family could pick her up, and they'd mind her until the following week. She was already with them when Riku died...so...she never had to come back." Asahi explained, "She was Riku's baby, and hardly paid any attention to me when I was there...was kind of annoyed by me, really. She actually shredded a few of my shirts once, just to show me who was favorite."

"She seems to like you well enough now."

"I was just the last person to be with Riku. She must've thought he was with me when I popped up in Wakkanai." He went on, and reached back into the wardrobe to find his Revolution blades, "...I
wonder at times if she's waiting for me to bring her to him, and is getting impatient with the fact that I haven't yet."

"Nah. She knows." Yurio deferred, "How come you have her now though?"

"She threw a bit of a fit when she realized I was getting ready to leave." Asahi explained quietly, stuffing his blades into a backpack, along with a small towel, and found his water-bottle to fill, "Riku's parents didn't want to make it worse for her, so they suggested I take her with me. I wasn't really sure how to say no, so..."

"It's probably better that you have her." The teen said, ruffling the pup's ears as he rose back up to standing, "Animals are better than people most of the time anyway. They'll keep all your secrets and never betray you."

"...I guess so."

Practice had an air of anticipatory anxiety hovering over it. Yurio ran through his Exhibition twice before focusing everything he had on trying to perfect his quad Flip, though struggled. By the end of the night, he came off the ice knowing full-well his feet would be blistered and his butt bruised. Asahi quietly watched the teasing between the three young teens, though kept to himself on his side of the rink.

Minako watched him, keeping a camera running on the rink-wall to record all of the skater's moves. Mikhail observed as well, though he had less of a clue as to what he was looking at. He stuffed his hands into his coat pockets and moved his eyes from his fiancé to the skater, "What's wrong with him?" He wondered simply, keeping his voice low.

The ballerina blinked to regain awareness of her surroundings, and turned back towards the source of the voice, "...Something's wrong with him?"

"You tell me." The elder retorted, "I've only known him for a bit over a week. I'm curious based on how you're observing him. You're watching like you're concerned about something."

Minako shrugged, "I've only known him a few days longer than you have...so I'm hardly the specialist. But..."

"But?"

"...Something's changed." She answered, "I can't put my finger on it...but his demeanor is different."

"Well, getting along with Yuri and having time away from the stressors of Imari are bound to have an impact..." Mikhail offered, pulling one hand up again to press to the small of his lady love's back, "Maybe this is just what he looks like when he's relaxed."

"...This doesn't look relaxed to me." She shook her head lightly, "He's keeping his eyes down, like he's trying to avoid notice. He did the same thing at Nationals, after his run-in with my Yuri. I'm just...not sure why he'd do that now." She turned her head, giving an exasperated look, "...What could he possibly be trying to keep his head down for here?"

"Who knows? Could always ask him."

Minako just groaned at that, "...He said before that he wanted to keep his relationship with his previous coach professional. I don't want to pry too much or make him feel like I'm smothering him."

"I could ask."
"I've already asked you too much for his sake."

"Eh...I've joked with the team back in Canada that I have a small herd of kids now. He's not too old to be counted among them."

"...Maybe I'm just reading into it too much." Minako said, second-guessing herself, "I don't know him well enough to make good calls about his demeanor. This could be entirely normal."

"So you want to give him the weekend?"

"...Yeah."

"Fair enough."

Practice morphed slowly into a cool-off period, but before much longer, the rumbling of young voracious stomachs was a choir of hungry protest. Dinner-fare at that late hour was lighter than the lunch had been though, and sleepy heads started yearning for a quiet wind-down, opting for a movie on the second floor. Unsurprisingly, Asahi went further up to the third floor; ...it wasn't his family to cuddle up with. Yurio stayed behind though, watching as long as he could, and made it at least long enough to spy both his 'sisters' passed out against their papa's arms, putting the man into something of a daughter-related paralysis. It didn't help that Minako had fallen asleep in front of him as well, pillow on his one crossed leg and the other straight out next to her.

Mikhail didn't seem to mind though; he actually seemed quite endeared by the whole thing. He glanced over to Yurio, where the teen was perched under a blanket with a mug of tea pressed against his lips, "You nervous?" He wondered idly.

Green eyes lifted in curiosity, but then looked forward again, "Not sure why I would be. It's just Euros."

"It's your redemption event though." Mikhail pointed out, "You didn't make the podium at all last year though, despite your Golds coming out of the Final and Russian Nationals."

The teen just huffed into his drink, light from the television flickering against his dark frame, "My grandpa had a heart attack the day before I got on the plane last year. I was handicapped. I don't have that worry this time."

"There's a few other skaters with some redemption of their own to manage." Mikhail added, moving his left arm out from under Nikki's grasp to put it behind her instead, and she blearily snuggled in closer before falling back asleep. Mikhail pat the girl's hair lightly to soothe her, "Chris will have something to prove after being the only person at the Final to not score over 300. Georgi is making this his last year in competition, so he'll be pushing his limits to go out with a bang. The rest are likely to be wound up, given how it's usually the European bloc that dominates the Grand Prix, and yet it's top tier has been usurped by the Asian bloc...Yuri, Phichit, Beka..."

"I wish Kazakhstan was included with Europe instead of Asia." Yurio diverted, "It used to be part of Russia, but they treat it like it's closer to China or Mongolia."

Mikhail huffed a quiet laugh, "Honestly, I'm surprised Russia is included, never mind Kazakhstan. I mean, by land-volume alone, it covers more of the Asian continent than any other country. By all rights, it should be part of the Asia bloc."

The teen just scoffed into his drink.

"But I guess, being so far west in Russia, you feel a closer kinship to Europe than Asia. I get that.
Maybe that's the only reason the ISU divvies it up that way... most of Russian civilization is in the western half." The elder acknowledged, "Still, given my nephew and his Yuri's opinion of things, this may be your last chance to win Gold for the rest of the season." He grinned.

"I'm not worried about them." Yurio shrugged under the blanket, "I have other things on my mind."

"...Oh?"

"...I'm way past due for dramatic physical change." He answered, "I was worried about it last year, thinking that may be my last season before my body changes and I have to take a break... But I haven't noticed anything. My hair's the only thing that's grown. I'm worried it'll all come to a head right before the Games or Worlds, when suddenly my skates won't fit right anymore, and I'll either have bad form from new boots, or from the ones I have now fitting poorly."

"I get that." Mikhail nodded, "When it hit me, people back home teased that I looked like some cartoon character, with big hands and feet but lanky everything else. Took until I was 19 or so to balance out. My sister and I were both late-bloomers, and boy did we grow like weeds... I shot up four inches in a single year. Was tripping over absolutely everything, even nothing... dropping stuff, knocking things over by accident... it was a disaster."

"...Shockingly, that doesn't make me feel better."

"Sorry." The elder Russian teased, "I was trying to be empathetic, not reassuring. Maybe you'll get lucky and all the worst changes will happen right after Worlds... then you can get through most of the awkward phase over the spring and summer when no one cares."

"If I was that lucky, I'd start buying lottery tickets."

"Maybe you should."

Yurio huffed again, but then started moving under the blanket, and rose up to stand, "...I'm gonna go to bed. About the only thing I want to have luck with is getting some sleep before you wake us up."

He said with a yawn, eyes watering a little by the end of it.

"Sorry." Mikhail mused, watching the blanket-covered figure stagger by like a sleepy wraith, "I thought I could find better flights, but it was either ass-o'clock in the morning, or we'd be traveling for 2 days. We'll be on a 6-hour layover at Sheremetyevo though. Maybe we could have lunch with your grandpa. He really enjoyed having you by when we were there for Nationals."

"...Yeah, maybe."

"He'll probably like it more since we won't have Kon with us."

"I didn't think he'd actually come." Yurio protested suddenly, "I was just as surprised as you were when he turned up."

"Relax." Mikhail reassured, "It's not like I'm mad that he was there. Kon just... has a habit of getting a rise out of me sometimes... and I do the same to him. I'm sure there's going to be stories about the trip Viktor and Yuri took to see him. I swear, I was having palpitations about that trip the whole time I knew they were there..."

The Russian Tiger hesitated where he stood, "...They told me they'd tell me what happened if I talked to you about my problems with Saito. I feel like I shot myself in the foot by taking care of it myself."
"I'm proud of you for that." Mikhail pointed out, "Though I'm still confused how and why it happened."

Yurio just shrugged and started moving by, blanket dragging on the floor behind him, "I guess I just got tired of being seen as the asshole bad-guy. I was mad at him for shit he didn't do, and had no business being mad at him for the shit he did do."

"...That being?"

"The thing he did to Yuri at Nationals."

"...Ah. So that's why you asked what I knew about that event."

"...Da."

"Water under the bridge, Yuri." Mikhail added simply, craning his head back as the teen made it to the sliding door behind him, "The other Yuri told Viktor what happened, and then Viktor and Minako talked to Asahi about it the next morning. Viktor pushed to get him officially reported for it, but---"

"He'd have gotten off easy if that's all Viktor wanted to do to him."

"...Yuri stopped him." The elder finished his previous statement, "They had all the paperwork done to file with the JSF and report Asahi for what happened...but Yuri decided not to go through with it. It was his choice to spare Asahi, and that continues to be his prerogative. Viktor is respecting that wish, so we can only honor it as well."

Yurio hesitated in the doorway, and nodded, "That's part of what made me realize I was being a butt about everything. When I found out what happened, they even told me not to get worked up about it, because Yuri said he'd forgiven Saito already. I...guess part of me latched onto the anger I could feel in Viktor's voice, and let it fuel my anger...and it just snowballed into something much worse than it ever should've been."

"Yuri is a big squish. It makes the people in his life want to protect him." Mikhail added, "Viktor will probably never forgive himself for not being there when Yuri needed him...and there'll always be a hint of that anger in his heart when it comes to Saito. But even when he was here, I could see that he was trying. He knows he can't be mad on Yuri's behalf if Yuri isn't angry for himself."

"...What's really stupid about you saying that..." The teen shook his head and gave a wry laugh, "...Is that I told Yuri the exact same kind of thing last year, when Viktor first left with Yakov to go to his mom's funeral. That there was no sense mourning or being worried for Viktor when Viktor himself didn't seem bothered by what was going on. In the end...the problem was about Viktor getting cold-clocked, not that he was grief-stricken for his mother. Yuri actually passed-out when he saw the state Viktor was in when they got back...did you know that?"

"...I vaguely recall hearing something to that effect."

"Hmph." The teen turned back into the hall, looking left to the wall where the stairs lead up to the next floor, "I should've taken my own advice. It was too easy to slip back into that old mindset, when I felt powerful in my anger. Between the stuff Yuri and Viktor said, and how Nikki was pissed at me for being cranky for no reason again...I just couldn't keep up the act. I didn't want people mad at me. I hate the feeling I get now when no one wants me around...and I could sense it getting worse, day by day. I remembered how bad it was in Bordeaux and Detroit, when Viktor wanted nothing to do with me because of how I made Yuri feel..." He shook his head, trying to get rid of the feeling. Part
of the blanket slid off his head, revealing half of his long, straw-blonde hair, and the one green eye that peered through it, "I'm still learning to be more aware of how others around me feel, especially in reaction to things I'm saying or doing. Once I gave myself the chance to consider Saito that way...I couldn't be mad at him anymore. It just wasn't in me."

"...What do you think of him now?"

Yurio paused, thinking on the question for a moment, but then glanced behind himself again to the man who'd posed it, "I dunno, I guess I just...want to be his friend. He had a momentary lapse of sanity just like I did, and nearly lost everything because of it. I...get him. He started on the complete opposite side of the trouble spectrum from me, but we met in the middle somehow, each wanting to make up for our mistakes. I've just had more time and help than him to this point." He explained, and somehow managed that ultra-rare smile; the smile that would make angels sing, "I even taught him that stupid hug-thing that Yuri taught to me at the Helsinki airport. I'm not as good at it as he is...and Saito seems even more awkward about it than I was...but it worked for me, so I'm hoping it at least...attempts to work for him."

"Careful using Yuri's methods on Asahi." Mikhail warned, though in a teasing manner, "You don't need that kind of attention."

Yurio couldn't help but shake his head and laugh at that, quiet as it was, "I already told him off about it. He just insisted that I was too gross for him to be into me that way."

"...I said you were a kid, and that kids are gross." A certain voice abruptly clarified, drawing up the teen's eyes towards the stairwell, "I'm gay...but that doesn't make me a hebephile, too."

Emerald eyes blinked skeptically as Asahi came down the last few steps, "...It's too late at night...you're using words too big for the hour."

"I means being an adult that's attracted to teenagers." Mikhail mused, "Sorry, Asahi...are we too loud?"

"No." He answered simply, "I didn't even hear you until I started coming down." He explained, pausing in the hall to point down to the end of it, "Needed a bathroom break, and there's the bathroom."

"...Hope the topic didn't upset you." The elder Russian added, "Yuri was just telling me about how you two made peace."

Asahi shrugged and drew a breath, "It's fine. I never requested that he keep it secret."

Yurio passed him by to drain the last of his tea and put the mug into the Katsuki kitchen sink, "I'm going to bed." He said simply, and turned back towards the much-taller figure between himself and the stairs, "You gonna be up at dawn when we go?"

Shaking his head, Asahi shrugged again, "Not sure. Might be if you're loud enough."

"Aright...well, if not, then I'll just say bye now." The teen answered, and tussled the blanket until one of his arms poked out to offer a reach, "Stay out of trouble while we're away."

Mikhail watched as well as he could from his paralyzed spot on the family-room floor, but he spotted Asahi taking the teen's forearm with his hand, and the two bumped shoulders before letting go again. "I plan on there being less trouble when you get back than there is when you leave."
Yurio nodded and yawned, reaching a hand back just enough to tap his fingers against the older skater's back as he went by, "Then we'll see you when we get back...and I'll be one Gold medal richer when we do."
Without the blaring noise of an alarm to wait for, sleeping in was easy. The pile of blankets and dogs and husbands was allowed to remain in still and warmth, undisturbed. Near as expected though, Yuri was the first to rouse. His innate sense of dog-bladders was as attuned as it could be, even if neither of the pups was awake enough to notice themselves. Once he'd lifted his head though, both Jiro and Makkachin became acutely aware of their predicament. Makkachin made a B-line for the door, peeling out of where his human had spooned against his back, but Jiro was still too small to leap from the high top of the mattress, and whined until he was helped down to the floor.

Yuri quietly threw on a pair of sweatpants and a bathrobe, and found Jiro's harness and leash before writing a quick note about his plans. A winter coat, his Ravenclaw beanie, and sneakers were found next, and Yuri went with the dogs into the hallway, hoping the still-slumbering Russian would stay as such until that morning chore was done, never needing to know why the room was empty.

The Arcotel wasn't a high-rise by any stretch, only a few stories high, right next to Kaiserwasser lake. Behind the wide building, the lake was surrounded by a big park, with a well-worn footpath going through it and its ample bank-lining trees. Though Yuri could imagine what it looked like in summer, when it was warm enough for people to sun-bathe, fish, and idly boat on the lake's surface, it wasn't half-bad to look at in winter either. A few snowmen had been erected, as well as something of a snow-fort, and Yuri looked around to the group of young kids that had probably built them.

There were eight of them in total, with half being around 11 or 12 years old, and the rest being just above their toddler years. The snow was a wonderful marvel to all of them, and they chased each other around excitedly. Makkachin's tail was wild with anticipation as they came down the pavement stairs and he could hear them screaming as only playing children could. Jiro was a bit more reserved, staying close to Yuri's heels as he took in the sights and sounds.

There was a designated puppy rest-station in the park that was close to the side of the hotel, and Yuri veered them off towards that spot to let the pair have a moment to do their business in peace, but once they were done and their mess tossed in the dog-bark bins...there was a certain insistence that playtime be allowed.

"I guess I can't blame you guys," Yuri commented quietly, seeing Makkachin's body practically vibrating with desperation, "You two have been cooped up somewhere ever since we left. It was just too damn cold in Russia to let either of you out for long...it was too cold even for me." He crouched down to speak quietly to both pups, "My lungs burned from breathing that dry air up in those woods...I can't imagine how you two felt about it, with your bare paws on the frozen ground."

Makkachin spun around and looked ready to launch, as though sensing that Yuri was about to give him leave to run. Even Jiro was starting to look anxious; the poodle's excitement was infectious. Yuri almost couldn't resist, and he glanced up at the kids throwing snowballs and chasing each other again.

"...I only meant to bring you two down to pee, but it seems like you're usurping my plans."

The poodle bark-whined, pleading to be allowed to go.

"Alright alright...but stay close."
Makkachin was off like a shot, fluff kicked up behind him as he rushed like a brown blur through the white snow. Jiro was more content to stay close, jumping into the frost-pack, deep enough to be a significant obstacle for his tiny body. Yuri huffed a laugh at the little Akita and reached down to pick him up, setting him down again on the shoveled path where he could walk more freely, and moved them both down towards the main walkway where a bench could be found.

Despite being smack in the middle of Vienna, the park had a quiet ambiance about it, with the frozen lake expanding forward. The cityscape on its opposite bank was postcard-worthy, cast in the bright glimmer of the winter sun. It was strange to see swans out on the lake, but there were at least three, waddling across the frozen surface like there was any chance of finding an opening.

One suddenly-loud scream caught Yuri's attention, and he looked over to spot Makkachin having joined the children in their play, chasing snowballs as they were thrown between them. He caught sight of a second fort then, behind one of the trees, and realized Makkachin was between them, trying to catch the frozen chunks as they were pitched from one to the other. He was impressed by how high the poodle could jump just from standing, but Makkachin was determined to go after every toss. The kids seemed to love it, throwing each ball specifically for the poodle.

It was strange then for Makkachin to suddenly rush off, as though the game had come to a stop, and took off in an entirely different direction. He darted through the trunks of the big trees, constantly looking back with each excited pause, then darted again at full tilt. Yuri found it entertaining even if he didn't understand it, and watched the poodle rush all around, skirting the edge of the lake, even leaping over a patch of frosted yellow-brown reeds as he went by. He nearly twisted around 360 on the bench as Makkachin went all the way around him...and suddenly realized why the pup had gotten up to acting so strange.

"Oh...hey." He half-laughed, spotting Viktor only a few paces directly behind himself. He turned around to sit more neutrally and reached his hand back towards the figure, "Sorry, I didn't mean to take so long."

The silver Russian took the fingers and bent down to kiss them as he walked around. He picked Jiro up as he came to the front of the bench and plopped down next to his spouse, setting the puppy down on their laps, "I had a feeling Makkachin would force you to stay down here." He said, understanding, and slid his arms around the younger man's frame to pull him into a tight hug, "He's a free spirit...likes to feel the wind in his hair."

"Like his person." Yuri agreed, relishing every second of that embrace, and turned his head to offer a long good-morning kiss. He turned the rest of himself to perch his legs over Viktor's, feeling one hand slide down his thinly-covered thighs, "How did you sleep?"

Viktor nuzzled in close, lifting up again only as Makkachin's frosty frame came barreling in to get some attention before tearing off again. The silver watched, then nestled into his husband's warmth again, "Better than since we left home, though a bit disappointed you were already gone when I woke up."

"You saw my note though."

"Da, I saw it. I wager you'd only been gone for a minute or two when I woke up though." He explained, and did his best to help wrap part of his long scarf around Yuri's bare neck without making him do too much to help, "But it's been about half an hour now, my love. You must be frozen solid."

"It's a bit chilly, yeah." Yuri agreed easily, shivering for emphasis, "But I didn't want to ruin Makkachin's fun. After the crate incident on the flight, keeping them in the camper, and then in the
train cabin for 30 hours...he deserved to run like a mad-dog for a little while."

"It's nice to see him so excited."

"He's a big goof. He looks a lot more relaxed now though, despite how hard he's going." Yuri added, turning to look out onto the lake, and pointed at two of the visible swans, "Even the birds want to be in the city, despite how cold it is. They must be well-fed by locals. I don't remember seeing any birds in Russia."

"Most of them migrate. Even the owls will move to less-frigid parts of the country when it gets really cold. By the middle of winter, only the wolves and cats are left." Viktor explained, feeling cold palms come up against either side of his neck, and slid up to his cheeks. His favorite eyes looked at him squarely, and he leaned forward playfully to nose his partner.

"We migrated, too." Yuri mentioned, brushing his bare thumbs back and forth across that pale white skin, "I'm really glad we're finally here."

"Same." Viktor agreed easily. There was no question though that his husband's nubbins were getting colder by the minute, and even in the midst of another kiss, he opened the front of his jacket to pull the younger man's arms fully into it, and wrapped the zippered edges as far around Yuri's smaller frame as he could. With cold hands pressed against his sides, warmed by his own heat within the thick coat, he was more content to relax and enjoy the brisk morning chill.

Even Jiro seemed more confident about the snow after a few more minutes, and clambered down from the double-pair of nested legs to go after his canine cohort. Makkachin came romping close again to give the pup some fun, and chased the little Akita around, pressing his chest to the ground, tail wagging high.

They sat for another half hour or so, until Makkachin was a fog of panted breaths, and Jiro was demanding to be picked up and put onto less-cold ground. They packed the pups up and headed back to their room, warming up with a shower and a fresh change of clothes, then headed for restaurant UNO on the first floor.

Though it was well-past the breakfast hour, the lunch menu was still welcome, and Viktor's fancy coffee preferences were well taken care of. Yuri was inwardly thrilled that his husband's appetite had come back by then, eating a real portion rather than just the anxious bits and pieces of whatever was put in front of him. More than that though, Viktor looked more alive than in previous days. There was a distinctly refreshed air about the Russian, and though there was still a lingering darkness under those crystal eyes, they were less obvious than before.

With their tanks filled to the top though, and a vote taken on what to do first, they went back to the room to grab their gear and kids, and advanced out into the world. Some culture was the first order of business, with a tour around St. Stephen's Cathedral, followed by a few leisurely hours shopping on Kärntner Straße. With easily-recognized store names and the lesser-known local fare, it was a smorgasbord of boutique delights that easily titillated the inner couture of the subdued Russian. It was a long pedestrian area that had existed since Roman times, and sported some of the most agreeably fascinating Austrian architecture that could be found in one place, with stone and brick buildings towering over the street. On the street itself, there were elaborately detailed sculptures in the frozen fountains, standing alongside the remnants of Christmas decor and other artistic displays. Hundreds of other people enjoyed the street despite the temperatures, taking full advantage of Vienna's coffee culture at every turn.

One place that Viktor took no convincing to see was the Swarovski Outlet, the world's foremost epicenter for all Swarovski crystal designs. It glimmered and shimmered in his eyes, and Yuri could
see a thousand different costume ideas fly through his husband's mind.

Snacks and other delights were found at the Pink Outlet of Manner, and a little closer to sundown, the region's famed gourmet fried cheese. The line to get into Hotel Sacher for their famous Sachertorte chocolate cake was a bit daunting though, so for the moment, it was bypassed. Instead, they took the pups back to the hotel with the things they had bought, and return to attend the Opera House, to watch a presentation of the other-worldly ballet, 'Sylvia.' A production of richness and detail, it told the tale of Diana, Goddess of the Hunt, and her wayward disciple, for whom the play was named.

With the night descending, and colder temperatures settling in, it was easy to start meandering back to the Arcotel. A relaxed evening in the spa, followed by a good sit in the sauna, was welcomed to shed the frigid temperatures and let warmth back in. Heading to the U-ONE Bar was next on the night's itinerary.

The room had something of a small, chic, and modern restaurant quality to it, with tables that sported mirror-tops, reflecting the color-changing walls. Lights behind the paper-thin backboard of the alcohol display morphed through the spectrum, bathing the bar in a multicolored glow. One bright-blue frozen cocktail and a whiskey-spiked hot chocolate later, they settled into the late-night 'happy hour' in the midst of a growing crowd.

"So I did good?" Yuri wondered, chin perched in the palm of one hand as the other was clasped on the tabletop by his spouse, thumb rubbing over his knuckles.

"More than good." Viktor agreed, taking a sip from his frozen drink through a colorful straw, "Today was perfect. I almost feel totally normal again."

"Almost." Yuri echoed, "So it wasn't entirely perfect..."

"Well, I don't have my skates yet, so a little part of me is still missing." The Russian explained, "Yurio and the others should be on a plane with them by now though, so my blades are getting closer with every passing second."

"How's your ankle after all the walking we did today?"

"Mmhhh..." He hummed, feeling hyperaware of it suddenly, "It's a little bit sore, but only enough that I noticed it when you asked. I don't think it changes how I walk at all."

"I haven't been able to tell," Yuri agreed, taking a sip from his hot chocolate, "Have you been able to think anymore about the Exhibition?"

"Only peripherally." Viktor shrugged, "I need my skates...to just let myself feel the new program and figure it out on the ice."

"I looked into the public skating times for the other two rinks at the event center. They're open from 1pm to 6pm tomorrow night only, then the ice gets taken over for competitors only."

"...Five hours..." The Russian restated contemplatively, "...I guess that should be enough."

"We could always ask for official ice-time to be put aside for us on Exhibition morning. I mean, if they're inviting you to skate, they can make room for you to practice."

"Yeah, probably." Viktor nodded, looking down into his bright blue drink.

Yuri tilted his head slightly at the sight of it, "...Why is it that every time I mention the Exhibition,
you seem sad...? I thought you'd be really excited about it."

"I am excited, I promise..." He answered, albeit unconvincingly, "...I just..."

"...What is it...?

"This whole time...the idea of coming the Euros despite not competing, seemed like such a fun idea."

Viktor started, stirring the drink a bit with the straw poking out of it, "Sticking it to the RSF by being here in spite of them, and even now, getting invited to skate at the end... In my head, I'm happy about it, proud of it even. But in my heart..." He sighed a bit and looked down, "I can't help but feel depressed about it. I'm supposed to be part of the Euro Championship, not just a spectator to it..."

Yuri's brow furrowed, He's really having a hard time with this... Skating at All Japan must've just felt like a novelty to him...

"There's a part of me that's even nervous about being recognized by people here, once fans start trickling into the city." Viktor continued, avoiding the sight of his reflection in the table-top by putting his elbow where the image of his face was, and perched his chin in the palm of his curled hand, "I guess it didn't really hit me until we got here. I...feel like an invader."

"This isn't an RSF event though. Russia is just another participant." Yuri rationalized, "They have no say over whether or not you can be here. Remember what we said about it before...? We came here despite the circumstances to prove to Russia that they can't stop you from being where you want to be...and with the European division of the ISU actually giving you a formal invitation to skate, they're sending a message that they stand by you, too."

"...I know, but..."

Yuri waited a moment, but with no other words coming, he sighed and switched the position of their hands, and offered the soothing thumb-rub to his partner, "Maybe it'll just take time to get used to things... It's only been a month since everything happened, and this is the first event you've been to where past membership with the RSF actually means anything. You were too distracted by being in Osaka to care about what was happening in Moscow at Russian Nationals..."

"...Yeah, I guess so..." Viktor acknowledged, barely, and slumped further into his palm, "...I didn't think it would bother me, being here. This was supposed to be the weekend I made you feel better...now we're back to this again..."

"It's a process you have to go through... I've been waiting for the other shoe to drop for a while." Viktor explained, getting a passing glance from blue eyes as they lifted for a moment to look across the table at him, "You suffered a loss. It's normal that you grieve for it, especially when you're having to face it like this. It must've felt weird as Hell for you to be you when you won Gold at All Japan...being this foreign guy with naturally-occurring double-eyelids and solid silver hair, surrounded by a sea of people with slanted eyes and black hair... But I promise, it'll get easier."

"You've never been thrown out of the civilization of your birth though." Viktor sighed.

"No... But I know that time heals all wounds. You may bear scars from it, but you'll recover." Yuri said simply, taking another long sip from his warm drink, "You have a safe place to go home to, and a big extended family that'll be happy to see you come back. Your fans all still support you, even if they have to hold up a different flag now."

"It must look rather pathetic...that I have all these things working out in my favor, and yet I still feel the need to mope about what happened, as though it was the most heinous crime ever committed and
I was so wrongly done..." The Russian retorted, sliding down over the table until he could rest his chin on his folded arm. He closed his eyes as he felt his husband combing fingers through his bangs, and kissed the crown of his head.

"There's nothing wrong with how you feel." Yuri reassured, and moved his drink and Viktor's aside to make room before leaning forward to wrap his arms over his spouse's broad shoulders, "If you weren't depressed about it...you'd either be enraged, or vindictive, and I don't think either really makes sense for you." He explained quietly, sliding his hand up and down the man's upper back, "Take all the time you need."

Viktor nodded as well as he could, "...I just never thought my career in Russia would end like this... Things were always going so well...the idea of being suspended or even terminated never entered into my thoughts... My worst fear was having to retire early because of an injury...not because I'd been fired..." He cringed a little, "...And then erased." He lifted his head just enough to be able to see his partner's face, and pressed his brow to the side of Yuri's jaw, "Even though the JSF has done such an incredible thing for me, by putting up all of my accomplishments...for some reason, it doesn't dull the pain of what happened."

"...Really?"

Viktor nodded a bit, "I guess...because there's a part of me that thinks they would've done it anyway, so it doesn't really feel like they did me much of a favor. Why wouldn't they post all of my awards, you know? It's only rational that they would, if they were going to list my profile at all...and since they put me on the Olympic Team, putting me up as one of their skaters just makes logical sense. All they've really done is posted my credentials...selling my qualifications for being on the team in the first place." He lowered down in a slouch again and exhaled a long, quiet breath, "...I keep trying to think back on what happened at Nationals instead... How involved they made me in the Opening Ceremonies, and how they gave me the time to make my proposal to you, even though it had nothing to do with skating whatsoever... I still get a shiver when I remember how happy I was in those moments... But now there's just this...wall between my different memories... I have a hard time connecting back to them because of what happened over the weekend, and how I'm here, now, in Vienna...as just some tourist...when I should've been here as a competitor..."

"...I wish I could say I know how you feel..." Yuri whispered, pressing his lips to his husband's hair, "The worst that I ever went through was floundering in Hasetsu while Worlds was going on. I couldn't even stand the shame of watching it on television with Minako-sensei... I just...ran and hid at the Ice Castle, and pretended it wasn't happening without me. Even before that, hanging out in Detroit, finishing school while Four Continents was taking place... I just...got so angry anytime someone brought it up. I don't want you to have to feel like I did back then though, as though there's no hope. You have hope. Everything's been taken care of already...and you're not alone. The rest will just take a bit to get used to."

"...Yeah..." Viktor agreed quietly, unfolding his arms in an attempt to return the hug as well as he could, "I'm sorry...I feel like I ruined your day now..."

"Meh." Yuri shrugged, "While it was a possibility that we could've just had our drinks and finished the night making each other scream, I kind of like this, too."

Viktor's cheeks went slightly pink, but he stayed where he was and didn't respond.

"It's easy for me to open up because I'm a big squishy ball of emotions most of the time anyway...but for you, it's a lot harder. I imagine I'll be seeing you put your mask on once Chris gets here, too, so he doesn't have to know that you're unsettled. But I'm glad you told me. I won't have to speculate, or wait to find out why you donned it again. I can just be there for you."
Feeling a bit of relief, Viktor nodded, and pulled back just enough to put him nose-to-nose with his husband. He nuzzled lightly before putting his brow to Yuri's, "...Do...you think there's any chance we can still cap the night with Plan A?"

Yuri huffed a laugh and reached for his mug of melted whipped cream and luke-warm whiskeysed hot-chocolate, "I might need a microwave...but, yeah, absolutely."
Yurio woke up when it was still dark, hearing the buzz and seeing the flashing light from his phone on the night-stand next to him. Potya darted, spooked by the noise, paw-pads tapping on tatami-mats as she scrambled for cover. The blonde yawned widely and rolled, all-but flailing his arms to find the phone and turn it off. The room was plunged into darkness and quiet again, and Potya returned to the pillow-top, finding her former place like a disgruntled diva.

[Sorry, girl...I know it's the middle of the night, but I actually have to get up.] Yurio grumbled in Russian, yawning again as he stared up at the ceiling. He started the sordid process of having to sit up, feeling the stink-eye he was getting from the ragdoll as the rising tilt of blankets rolled her tail over ears.

He knew it was only a matter time before someone would come upstairs looking to make sure he was awake, and didn't want to hear it that early in the morning. Feet slid out from under the blankets, and the Russian Punk forced himself up, stretching and scratching and rubbing his face. A little while later, fully dressed and slightly-more-awake than before, he pulled the bedroom door open to sneak outside.

Myaaahh

The door creaked open again, and Yurio crouched down, spotting the cat trying to get through the gap through osmosis if need-be. He nudged a finger against her head to push her back, [You can't come out...this is your new home.]

Myeh...meeeeeeiiii...

One paw came out, reaching for freedom.

[Maybe the Katsukis will let you come downstairs, but that's up to them. You're too sneaky to be let out when no one is up to watch out for you.] He explained, reaching in to cup his palm under the cat's little body to push her further back into the room, [But for now, you gotta stay here. I'll only be gone a few days. You know the routine.]

"Yuri!" Someone whisper-yelled from the far end of the hall; Nikkita, "Papa's waiting!"

The door clicked shut despite the mew'd protests, and Yurio stood fully upright again, turning his head slightly towards the door to the larger room next-door. He partly hoped it would open at the last second, but not hearing anything on the other side, the likelihood of that panel sliding aside seemed less and less. He sighed and made his way towards the stairs, sneaking down quietly behind his younger 'sister,' and found the rest of the crew and a last few carry-bags ready to go.

"Papa, I found him." Nikki whispered, all but prancing over towards where her father was waiting.

Mikhail looked to the narrow hallway and spotted Yurio coming through as expected, and held up the teen's coat to make the dressing process go by more swiftly, "Hey. Sleep enough?"

A yawn answered the question, but the skater nodded anyway and turned in place to slip is arms into the offered sleeves. It was barely worth the effort, given that their 'chariot' was outside, on, and hot inside already, but it was still cold for the 30-odd feet between the resort doors and the car doors. Yurio wedged his feet into his shoes and followed the trio outside, spotting Minako in the front
passenger seat, barely awake enough to wave at them.

Within, the smell of hot chocolate and croissants was evident, and once the last straggling bags were tossed with the suitcases in the back, Mikhail plopped into the driver's seat and reached for the tray of drinks, "Here...Vikki, Nikki, pass that one to Yuri, and here's yours. It's not caffeinated, so don't worry about it messing with your napping ability on the planes." He said as each lidded cup was passed into the second row. Bagged breakfast buns were handed out next, and the elder Russian finally sat straight, "Okay...we all ready?"

A murmur of mumbled confirmations replied, paper rustling as bags were folded to hold the buns up without getting fingers sticky.

With a vehicle capable of holding every passenger comfortably, as well as their things, Mikhail opted to forego the train and drove them to Fukuoka - not that there was a train running at 3am anyway. He gave one last look at Yu-Topia Katsuki before pulling out of their enclosed parking lot, and started them onto their morning journey.

Like on the train, half the journey east was along the coast, though as dark as it was, it was impossible to see anything past the shore, save for a sliver of moonlight that reflected off the water. The low hum of excitement for going on another plane trip was enough to keep everyone awake for the hour-long drive. Pulling into the airport parking lot and finding a spot got hearts pumping even harder.

Nikki was bobbing up and down on the balls of her feet, looking around the terminal as they waited in line at the security checkpoint. Even though Mikhail had his 'trusted flyer' pass, Minako didn't have one, and so they all waited together. Like two peas in an early-morning anti-social pod though, both Yurio and Viktoria were nose-to-glass with their phones, ignoring the world around them as they let the wiles of the internet entertain them.

Before long though, they were finally boarding their first plane, and by 7am, they were on the main flight out of Tokyo Narita on their way to Moscow Sheremetyevo. Aeroflot Business Class on an Airbus A330-200 was structured in three rows, with a pair of seats in each, but Yurio had no trouble volunteering for the odd-man-out spot, preferring to catch up on a little more sleep without the hassle of a chatty seatmate. It would be a 10-hour nonstop flight, arriving in Moscow at around 2pm local-time. It was only just then that Yurio realized the 6-hour layover previously described would mean where was no chance to get that fancy dinner he'd been looking forward to with his SkateFam. Even though the flight from Sheremetyevo to Vienna was only 3 hours - and even though the time-change meant it would only be one hour later by their clock's perception - 9pm was still too late for anything. He groaned and fell back into his seat, disappointed.

"Problem?" Mikhail's voice wondered, eyes rising from his iPad as he glanced over at the suddenly-perturbed teen.

"...It just dawned on me that I'll have to wait until Saturday night to get my fancy dinner with Viktor and Yuri..."

"They promised you such?"

"Yeah. I imagine they must've thought we'd be there a lot sooner than we really are." He sighed, curling one arm over his eyes, "All of today is going to be taken up by flying, and then Friday is for registration and all the official practice crap...then it's straight into the opening ceremonies and the Short Program. ...We should've left a day sooner."

"Sorry, kiddo." Mikhail answered, "I couldn't find anything that would fit all five of us on the same
"Itinerary. This was the earliest they had."

"I'm sure you could've found something in Economy that was sooner..."

"I don't fly Economy." The elder said simply, "And I don't split up the family. Maybe if it was you and Sergio and you asked for it, but not my girls. They stay with me, and with that in mind, throwing you back into Coach by yourself would be excessively rude, even if it got us to Austria a few hours earlier."

Yurio just groaned.

"If it makes you feel better, I already have our flights settled for the rest of the season's competitions, and we'll be there early Thursday or late Wednesday for them."

"That's just the Games and Worlds though...and the Games are all over the place."

"What, you think we're skipping Four Continents?"

The teen's arm raised, and he peered out from under his sleeve, "...Oh, we are going?"

Mikhail gave a vacant look, "...Of course; why wouldn't we?"

The arm went down again, "...I guess it was a stupid question."

"Don't worry about it. I already told them when we'd be getting there anyway." Mikhail continued, looking back at the tablet in his hands, and the news he'd been reading. He clicked over to a Moscow-based publisher next, hoping to catch a bit of local news ahead of arriving there, "Yuri texted me about it when him and Viktor were still on their train ride...he said he was making a bunch of plans and wanted to know when we'd arrive, in case he had to switch things around. I guess he was trying to sort out when they'd be taking you out to dinner. Maybe they'll plan a fancy lunch instead, before the opening ceremonies."

"...Maybe."

Yuri kicked up a wave of snow as he passed by, swift as the wind...only to stumble, tumble, and come to a sliding stop on the hard-pack, snowboard trailing behind him.

Viktor clapped and laughed, standing safely on a pair of ski blades, but then slid over to help his ruffled husband back up to his feet, "You almost had it that time."

"...The going is easy." Yuri whined as he recalibrated himself to being vertical, and started helping to dust the snow off his chest and face where he'd landed, "...The stopping is hard."

"Are you sure you don't want to just use skis?"

"I'd have to learn them, too..."

Viktor shrugged and laughed again, "I guess that's true. ...I can't believe you've never skied before."

"It never really came up." Yuri huffed, clicking one boot back into the board, and surveyed the bunny-hill, "I think I'm getting the hang of this though. It's not like we're pressed for time. We got here pretty early."

"You're just avoiding Chris." The Russian teased, "Taking me an hour away from Vienna just to
Yuri lifted his eyes, hands on the visor clinging to his head, but he just smirked, "Can you blame me?"

"Mh'mm." He shook his head and grinned, then pulled his own visor down again, "Ready when you are."

Nodding, Yuri positioned the board horizontally against the slope, and carefully clicked the second boot into the holder. One quick breath, and he hopped, twisting around to slant himself down, and started to slide. He swerved and turned a few times for the sake of it, but then tried to brake again...and came to a scratchy stop, staying mercifully upright that time.

Viktor skidded to a halt nearby, clapping despite the handles of his ski-poles, "I think you graduated."

The ski-lift carried the duo up a few hundred meters before diverging from the main traveling-path and headed off into a thicket of trees for the rest of the trip. Yuri marveled at the sights in every direction, though being so high up off the ground made him a bit anxious. With feet dangling and snowboard clicking against Viktor's skis, he couldn't help but cling a bit.

"Ohmanwe'resohighup." He whined pitifully, "Weshouldtakethecarriageupnexttime."

"You're doing fine, my love." Viktor teased, reaching an arm across his husband's shoulders to draw him nearer, "It's wonderful up here."

"IfeelikeI'llslipoutofthisthing." Viktor laughed, rubbing his thumb over the man's tense shoulder. He drew in a deep breath as the woods passed them by on both sides, raising them higher and higher up the side of the mountain, "Semmering Pass is beautiful. This whole place is beautiful. The train ride was probably the most romantic thing we've done in ages...definitely better than the 30 hour boondoggle I put us through... " He explained dramatically, "Even the hike to get from the train station to the resort town was nice. This whole thing has been really great."

"P-pity we couldn't really see the viaducts from aboard the train..." Yuri said nervously, trying his best to settle down as the ski-lift continued them on their journey.

"That's okay." Viktor mused, "I still really enjoyed the view." He leaned forward and around as well as he could to find a winter-cold kiss, "When we get to the top...we should take a picture and post it online."

"...You're ready to tell people we're here?" Yuri wondered, a bit surprised. He pulled up the visor over his eyes and looked on squarely, "I thought you wanted to wait until the last possible second."

"Well, thinking about it...if we go skating at all at the event plaza, we'll be recognized by any competitors who are already in town." The Russian explained with a shrug, nudging his own visor up again as well, and set it against his forehead, "The fans will freak out no matter when they find out, even if they know we're around before they see us."

"Well, it's up to you...we haven't posted anything for days so I'm sure everyone is worried or wondering."

"You've still been posting to the 'Pups of Nikiforov' page though."
"That's true... So they at least know I'm still alive."

Arriving at the tippy-top of the mountain ridge, between the drop-off point for the open lift and the one for the closed carriage lift, there was a single lonely restaurant that looked to be cobbled together from the pieces of several other buildings. A teal boat-like section was stuck to the left side, a circular domed structure, painted yellow and blue, and then the simple house-like building that connected the two, labeled in front with big brown letters, Liechtensteinhaus.

Yuri held tightly to Viktor's hand as they disembarked from the still-moving bench, relieved once they were standing on their own again, and followed down the simple slope that lead in front of the establishment.

Viktor pulled his phone out and loaded up the camera, and held it up, "Smiillle~!"

Yuri marveled at the sheer encyclopedic volume of excited commentary on his partner's Instagram post, scrolling through a few dozen and reading about half of them. Everything was mentioned, from the disbelief and excitement that they were in Vienna, to the anger that their star wasn't getting to compete despite being there. There was even the odd mention from a few fans that they'd noticed Viktor's digital absence from the RSF page, with a few wondering if they had actually asked for medals to be returned. Yuri just scoffed, "I'd like to see them try."

"Try what?" Viktor wondered, turning the back of his head across the white sheet covering the royal-blue velvet of their twin-seats, "Oh, are you online again? Yuri..."

"I can't help it." He huffed, "I'm still head of the Viktor Nikiforov Fan Club. I want to know what my underlings are saying."

"Underlings." The Russian laughed, "What say them, Lord Commander?"

"A few are starting to notice that the RSF stripped you off their website. They're wondering if the RSF has asked you to return any medals."

"Not yet."

"...Hopefully never."

"They better not. They have no valid reason to do so. It's not like I cheated to win. They're just mad cuz I moved on to a different team after their failed attempt at forcing me into retirement."

Yuri lifted his head, but then clicked the phone off and slipped it back into his open jacket. He replaced his hand onto his partner's thigh and gave it a gentle squeeze, "That almost sounds like you're putting what they did behind you."

"...Starting to, I suppose."
"Well, I'm glad to hear it." He added, leaning slightly to kiss the edge of the man's shoulder, then pressed his cheek to the same spot and relaxed into his plush seat, "Pretty soon it'll have no hold on you."

"...There's a lot of things on the list of things I need to either let go of, or wiggle free from." Viktor sighed, but smiled, "One thing at a time, I guess." He tilted himself slightly to press his own cheek to the crown of his partner's head, and rubbed the dark black hair a little, "So, we'll have to head straight to the rink as soon as we're back in town. We do have some work to do, even if I have to rent skates to do it."

"Mhm." Yuri agreed easily, "For now though...I need a nap."

"All tuckered out from a half-day of snowboarding?"

"Mhm."

"Are you even going to have the energy for practicing an Exhibition?"

"...Mhmmm..."

"You're already asleep, aren't you."

Zzzz...
After a quick trip to the hotel to offer some relief and love to the pups - and to get Yuri's skates - the duo were off again, heading to the skating complex for what little public ice-time was left of the night. It wasn't entirely unexpected that people who recognized them were starting to turn up, staying at any hotel nearest to the competition, including their own. As mere spectators, they were not allotted a room at the official hotel, and thus were thrust into the midst of the fandom.

Candid photos were being taken every few minutes; in the hotel lobby, on the little electric city-train, and on the sidewalk going around the exterior of the three-rink sports complex where they hopped off. Seeing the competition venue put flutters into the chests of both skaters.

The main outdoor waiting area in front of the arena was concrete, right up to the street, and a number of small cars were parked along its edge, barely leaving room for the city-train and other cars to pass through. Across the street, on the same side as the small train-station, was a big parking lot, and a small intersectional nest of rail-lines and a small road with a cross-walk.

The front of the venue was decorated with a series of huge photo murals, showing off a good number of the best performers from previous seasons. The Men's selection included Chris as the focus, given that he was the previous season's Gold medalist, Georgi as its Bronze, and a face neither of them recognized, who had won Silver. It was a bit disappointing that they didn't see Yurio on the display, but since his emotional handicap had crippled him through that competition, he hadn't made it onto the podium, and therefore had no honors to defend. Viktor pointed up at the display of Mila's visage though, as well as Sara Crispino, before pulling his phone out for another photo.

He loaded up his camera and lined up a selfie in an attempt to include as much of the mural as he could, then pulled his partner into the shot excitedly. It was unavoidable that there were photobombers in the background, realizing whose picture they were going to be in, and several fans started laughing and cheering as Viktor lowered his arm to check the image. He glanced back and waved before leaning an arm against his husband's shoulder, "Things are really starting to pick up. It's beginning to feel like competition."

Yuri dared not answer openly, but smiled anyway. Don't get too worked up, Viktor... You'll only disappoint yourself when your adrenaline crashes in the audience rather than on the ice.

"...Guess it's time to put on my face." The Russian said quietly, forcing Yuri's smile to fade as quickly as it had appeared.

"...Your face?" He echoed, confused.

Viktor drew a breath and finished posting his photo, then slid his phone back into his jacket pocket. He turned to the man standing beside him, and raised his free hand, palm facing his forehead...then slowly slid it down past his chin.

Yuri found it eerie and a little disturbing, literally watching the Happy Mask appear over his husband's still-recovering visage. He wasn't sure how it was possible, but he was certain that he actually witnessed the shadows under his spouse's eyes lighten. Even Viktor's smile seemed to change, losing the subtle disappointed curve to replace it with something he liked even less...that Botox-like, paralyzed grimace. He frowned, brow wrinkled under the House sigil of his Ravenclaw beanie, "...I know you have to do it...but I hate it all the same."
"Sorry, my love." Viktor nodded, "But just think...I wore this mask for years and you never noticed."

"...That's why I hate it." Yuri sighed, sliding in front of the man to offer one last hug before he knew they'd be going inside, "I notice it now. I know what you're doing."

"It's only until I actually feel this way." The silver reassured, returning the hug as well as he could, given the bags Yuri had on his back, "But no one knows we were in Russia, nor what happened to us while we were there, and I don't want to give anyone reason to ask. We'll be lucky to make it to Saturday without anyone asking if I know the old house burned down...and at that point, I'll have to start lying, too."

"If you have to lie, then I do, too." Yuri pointed out.

"You don't have to say anything."

"Lying by silence or omission is still lying...I'll probably give you away without even trying..." He sighed, "I'm no where near as good as you are at hiding how I feel."

Viktor made a face at that, "Well, then we'll just go as long as we can. If someone asks me something I don't want to answer, I'll just...do something else."

Yuri just grumbled, "I wish I didn't put you into a situation like this."

"Eh...the way we each do things is bound to change when we're not doing those things alone anymore." Viktor explained, and lifted a hand to slide his palm over slicked-back raven hair, "I can't make you take-up my bad habits, so I'll have to change."

"...I feel like I'm just forcing you to open yourself up to the things you've been protecting yourself from all these years." Yuri pointed out, bringing up a hand of his own to hold that palm against his cheek, "You were able to hide how you felt for so long...people are going to start thinking I make you unhappy because I'm the reason you're not able to hide it like you used to."

"I'm the happiest I've ever been, Yuri." Viktor said firmly, "Don't ever let what others think change that. They didn't know how miserable I was before because no one knew. Don't ever forget that; I was alone back then. Makkachin was great company but a dog isn't the same as a person. I speak words to him, but he's just reacting to noises and tone...he has no idea the things I said when we were at home by ourselves in those days. Not even Yakov - not even Chris - knows a lot of what was rattling around in my head back then."

Yuri didn't answer...but his silence spoke volumes in itself.

"Let's head inside and see if we need to check-in with anyone." The Russian suggested instead, turning them around, and looked up the long incline of the concrete ramp, leading to the glass doors underneath the mural. He slid his hand down Yuri's arm to find his hand, and started moving forward, eyes bright with glassy luster.

Yuri had seen them shine like diamonds before though...

The cold outside air was replaced by the warmth inside as they passed through the concourse of double-doors, leading into the main foyer of the arena. It was tiled in white, with long blue lines following the walls. V-shaped support struts lined the far edges of the floor, looking more like thick, decorative pipes than stands to keep the structure up. A wider variety of vertical banners were set-up throughout the area, featuring near as many skaters as were probably attending the event. A huge digital display above the doors that lead into the skating arena itself morphed between its
Willkommen bei der ISU Europameisterschaft in Wien' screen to dramatic photo-montage of the athletes expected on the ice. Simple signs, black print in English and German on laminated white printer-paper, signaled the way for competitors to head downstairs. With aught-else to do, they followed the arrows, and made their way down to the ground floor of Hall 1. They barely had enough time to spot what looked like the skate-rental kiosk before an excited clamor grabbed their attention.

"Viktor!"

"It's Viktor and Yuri!"

More voices joined the fray. Soon, a proverbial stampede of people had captured and surrounded the pair, all speaking enthusiastically, but over one another. Yuri noticed quickly that the majority of the crowd was donning badges of some form or another - hanging on lanyards around their necks or pinned to colored vests - and appeared to be a mix of event-staff, local media, volunteers, and a small handful of competitors; none that he recognized though. It seemed like a good number of them were all rather similar-looking though; young ladies with their hair tightly tied in buns, matching wind-breaker jackets, and had skates on.

Viktor was happily overwhelmed by the whole thing, turning from one elated face to the next, even if he couldn't tune-in to any one person's voice to hear a single full sentence. He ended up having to raise both his hands, taking Yuri's up with one, and waved them back and forth to get the crowd to quiet down a little, "Hii~!" He said cheerfully, only to get blasted again by a cacophony of returned greetings. He laughed and brought a free finger up to press against his lips and shushed them before the clamor got out of hand again, "Settle, settle...I can't hear any of you clearly enough to know what you're saying."

"You're really here!"

"We didn't think you'd come after what happened after the Final!"

"We heard that you were invited to skate! Is it true!?"

More questions followed, but they all seemed to be asking the same thing, and Viktor nodded, "Yes, the ISU extended an invitation for me to skate as a guest in the Exhibition, so Yuri and I came to run-through a program we prepared over the summer."

Excited screams and cheers answered that, followed by a sudden press of insistent clinging. Yuri held tight to the hand he had hold of, desperately trying to not lose his spouse in the mass.

"Pass auf, bitte!" (Pay attention, please!) A strong woman's voice called, followed by the twice-clapping of hands. The horde of bun-haired and bladed ladies looked up with the alertness of a rabbit-warren being circled by a hawk, "Wir müssen die Eröffnungszeremonie üben!" (We have to practice the opening ceremony!)

"Kamen!" (Coming!) They all hollered back, peeling away and thunk'ing off on their blade-guards, leaving a smaller group of less-excitable-but-still-excited people behind. As the gaggle of young ladies funneled through the narrow doorway leading to the rink-side area though, a few more faces were starting to peer into the wider hall.

"He's not even competing and he's stealing the lime-light."

"Settle down; he's popular."

"I know he's popular!"
"Are you jealous?" The second figure asked with a teasing laugh.

"Just because I hate that he's taking up all this time doesn't mean I'm jealous of him!" The first argued, "But it's B.S. that a non-competitor is getting more attention than the people who are actually competing!"

"Micky, are you being petty again?"

Two heads turned and spotted one Sara Crispino staring back at them, arms crossed and a stern, scolding look on her face.

"I'm not being petty!" Her brother contested, gesturing out into the open space where Viktor was already being interviewed, even if it was a subdued and rather relaxed affair given the impromptu nature of it, "But he's not even supposed to be here now! This was supposed to be our chance to get out of his damn shadow!"

"He wasn't even here last year. You're facing off against Chris for the Gold.

"I've been trying to explain that Viktor's just here as a spectator, but Micky seems intent on the notion that attention off the ice is as important as performance on the ice." Emil sighed, grabbing the skater over the shoulders with one arm, "But he just doesn't want to hear it, right?"

"Getoffame."

Sara sighed and shook her head, and pushed her way past the two men to step out into the open hall. Emil just chuckled as he held Michele back, thrashing as the lanky skater was.

Yuri heard the commotion and turned his attention out of the mini-interview, and spotted the young Ladies singles skater coming towards them with a smile and a wave. It was a relief to spot someone he knew, even if only slightly, and he waved back quietly before returning to his prior focus until the interview ended. Thankfully, it was only another 30 seconds or so, and the smaller crowd dissipated, leaving only a few photographers snapping pictures from a short distance.

"Hi, Yuri~" Sara mused, stepping in with an offered hug, "It's been a while...I never thought I'd see you here though."

"Yeah...well," He nudged his head towards his partner, "It was supposed to be hubby's event, so we were expecting to be here anyway...it would've been weird to suddenly stay home when everything is going on."

"Yeah...it's crazy what happened after the Final," She nodded anxiously, looking up at the skater in question, "I'm really sorry they did that to you. It looks like you've settled into your new team pretty quickly though. You got hired and put on the Olympic team on the same day!"

Viktor offered that fake-easy smile, "I've been pretty lucky, that's for sure."

"So what are both your plans for the weekend? I saw you got to go skiing this morning...I'm so jealous!"

"We'll join the Yuri Plisetsky cheering section in the audience," The Russian explained, "But for the rest of today at least, Yuri and I still have to practice our Exhibition a little bit. It's been a while since we last did it, and we have to make a few changes before presenting on Sunday night."

"Oohhhhh I heard about that. Why changes though?"
"I broke my leg and Yuri benched me."

"You didn't break your leg." Yuri protested dryly, "Jeeze."

Viktor just laughed, "I know, I know, but it sounds more dramatic this way."

"I see..." Sara put one hand on her hip and the other on her lip, "So you may not have been able to compete this weekend anyway then."

The Russian blanched, "Well, if I was still competing here, then I wouldn't have been at All Japan. Maybe a lot of trouble would've been avoided."

"Then who would've carried Yuri out of the audience when he dropped?" Sara pointed out with a sly look, "That was quite the dramatic development."

Yuri grimaced slightly, "I prefer not to think about how things would've been if Viktor had been in Moscow instead of with me."

"Yeah, it's a pretty big time difference..." She nodded, but then clapped again and mercifully seemed ready to move onto other topics, "Well, I guess I'm getting in the way of you and the ice. See you around, okay?"

"See ya." They both answered, waving as the Ladies skater skipped back towards her entourage.

Yuri heaved a secret breath of relief, and followed around as Viktor turned them both towards the competition registrar's desk. It was easy to slip out of the mental-congestion brought on by the questions, and Yuri was happy to see that there were badges and lanyards prepared for them; special passes as guest skaters, with access granted to Official Practice time and the prep area, but little else. Still, even without the icons that noted the ISU was paying for their stay, food, parking, and other competitor-only privileges, having a pass at all was nice. They slipped the lanyards over their heads and turned to head towards their next stop; the skate rental desk.

...The hockey-skate rental desk.

"...That's all you have?" Viktor asked, incredulous, and he looked around at the racks behind the clerk, "...That's all you have..."

"Well, it's skates at least, right?" Yuri offered, trying to find the silver lining, "You won't be able to jump in them, but you shouldn't be jumping yet anyway...so it's a win-win. You can't-"

"Can't jump in hockey-skates?" Viktor echoed, "That sounds like a challenge."

"Oh no you don't."

"Says the guy who jumped anyway after a concussion that put him in the hospital."

"That was different!"

"How?"

"It was my head! And I don't skate on my head."

Viktor huffed, "Your head happens to be very important to me."

Yuri's face went red, "It was THE FINAL though. You hurt yourself when the option to not skate was an easy choice to make. I got hurt right at the start of things. If I'd bonked myself after the
medaling ceremony then I would've skipped the Exhibition."

Slate eyes watched closely, half-narrowed skeptically, but Viktor just stared blankly, "...I see your mouth moving, but I only hear you saying wonk wonk wonk."

"It was different."

"...Wonk wonk...wonk wonk wonk..."

"Aw c'mon, Viktor! Skaters are like race-horses when it comes to leg injuries...and they kill race-horses."

"Then it's not the same." Viktor shrugged, and took the black boots and his bank card off the counter as they were offered, "And my ankle feels fine now."

"The doctor even told you it would feel fine, and he said you'd be at higher risk of re-injury at that point!"

"Then it's a good thing hockey-boots are like ski-boots and everything below the knee is bolted-down and immobile anyway." The Russian retorted, heading to the same narrow doorway that the flag-skaters had left through earlier, "And you let me ski for that exact reason."

"But skiing isn't what you do for a living...I thought that meant you'd take it easy because it wasn't super-familiar..."

"Says the guy who started doing jump-tricks with a snowboard on the first day he ever set foot on one."

Yuri's face went red a second time, "...I'm not hurt though..."

"Wonk wonk...wonk..." Viktor taunted, heading down the steps to find a bench.

"...Look, maybe it's different now...I understand better why you got so upset that I didn't listen, when I kept jumping even when you told me not to." Yuri explained, watching his partner sit down and start to remove his shoes, "But being on this side of the injury, I'm really worried. You push yourself harder when you think you have something to prove...remember those late nights when you worked on the quad Axel by yourself, because you just had to surprise everyone with your return to competition?"

"And you had your reasons for not listening to me in Detroit...and I have my reasons for not wanting to be that cautious now." Viktor retorted, "I've already got it in my head that I'm not going to do anything too risky for this show...so let's just go out there and practice it."

"...I don't..." Yuri stammered, feeling his back go rigid with the stiffening of his nerves, "...I don't know how I'm supposed to respond to that."

"Well, you put your skates on...and then we go to Hall 2..."

"Now you're just being a smart-ass."

"I'm trying to get onto the ice." Viktor said flatly, half-stopping the process of putting the bulky blades on as he looked up at his still-standing partner, "Do you want to practice or not?"

"...Why are you being so mean about this suddenly? I thought you liked it when I worried about you."
The Russian looked down again and pulled hard on the laces, "This doesn't feel like worry. It feels like doubt and smothering."

Yuri went silent after that, not wanting to put his foot in his mouth. He just quietly sat down and rummaged in his pack for his skates, feeling the knife twisting in his chest as he went.
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED EIGHTY

Following Viktor to Hall 2 felt worse than following him back into the Saddledome.

At least back then, he was working on making things better...and his hands were occupied by coaching stuff... Right now though...

Eyes looked to where the man's left hand was stuffed into a pocket and the right held the heels of a pair of shoes.

...He's avoiding me.

Yuri pulled the lapels of his coat up and wedged his thumbs under the straps of his backpack, and continued to follow quietly, eyes low. Seeing members of the public coming the other way in the connecting-corridor made him look aside. Hearing the amiable and excited exchanges between them and the world-class athlete walking in front of him just twisted the knife already in his chest. He kept his head turned as they all moved by him, and the sound of Hall 2 came clearly into the fore.

The second section of the sports complex was like a steel, breadbox-shaped warehouse with a skating rink in the middle. It had no stands for seating, one end facing the street was capped in glass to let in light, and the other was a doorless steel wall with a digital hockey score-board hung in the middle. The noise of skate-blades on the frost, kids laughing or screaming, and people trying to talk loudly enough to hear one another, made the space seem even more congested.

This place makes me feel claustrophobic... There's only one way out...

He looked back into the narrow hall they'd just come through, and realized even that was now impassable, clogged with people holding up camera-phones. His brow crinkled under the front rim of his beanie.

I can't practice like this...

The show went on though, and he felt himself pressed into the warehouse like a cow to slaughter, followed at a small distance by a growing crowd of people. To that point, given the laser focus of the mass, he wasn't even sure if they realized he was there...or if they did know who he was, whether or not they cared. With beanie and glasses on, he felt a bit guilty hoping they didn't.

The swarm on the ice seemed to part like spooked fish as Viktor stepped out, gliding on the awkwardly bulky hockey-skates. It was as obvious as anything that a good number of the people who were skating that afternoon were fans waiting for the competition, and immediately recognized the silver-haired figure. For them, it must've felt like winning the lottery to see that long-celebrated and effectively legendary Russian skater making an appearance on the public side of the complex.

For Yuri though...there was nothing to celebrate. He was still on rink-side, and it didn't seem like Viktor was waiting for him to follow. The crowd was pressing in around him, cameras clicking, lights flashing, and practically squeezed him out behind them. Fans on the ice were making space and clapping excitedly, even though to that point, Viktor had done little more than slide around, getting used to the bite of the deeply-grooved blades of those unfamiliar skates. There seemed to be a shift in the way he carried himself though, and Yuri had to rise up onto the toes of his blade-guards to see the end of what looked like an Axel jump, and the crowd clapped and cheered for it.
"I specifically told you not to jump. And you jumped anyway."

The younger figure pushed to standing upright, but put his hands together as though in apology, "I know! But I had to! I was going crazy!"

"You fell out of a spin, Yuri. What made you think attempting a quad was a good idea? You could've been hurt! There's no way to know you could've controlled that fall!" Viktor pointed out, hands going to his hips instead, "The Bielmann still makes you dizzy even when you're perfectly fine, but you have a head injury! You know you're vulnerable right now!"

"I felt like I could do it!"

"It was a quad LUTZ!" The Russian went on, right hand going out towards the skater as he took on an exasperated look, "You hit the rink wall the last time you did that one!"

"I know, but I had to try!"

"And you fell anyway!" Viktor wasn't sure if he was more upset than angry, but he felt a tightness in his chest. The gawking of the onlookers meant little and nothing at that moment, "You couldn't have done it on the Axel instead!? You just had to do it on the hardest jump in the latest part of your whole program!"

Yuri went down to his knees, fingers clasping together as he all but begged, "I'm sorry! I did what you wanted from the start but the Lutz was my last chance!"

A pale hand went back up to Viktor's forehead and he turned away from the defiant skater bitterly, not even sure what else to say.

"Please don't pull me from the Final, Viktor!"

The media and spectators were stunned into silence as they heard the lamentations go on.

"I just don't even know what to do." The silver skater said, pinching the bridge of his nose as he half-turned-away from his partner, "If you won't listen to me when it matters the most..."

.

Yuri reached one hand up, lifting his glasses out of the way as his eyes squinted.

I don't get what he's trying to prove anymore, He sighed, feeling the knife twist again. Is this his revenge for what I put him through at the Final? ...Is he rebelling against me being more firm about the restrictions than he was?

The crowd cheered again, and Yuri could only assume Viktor had done another jump. He couldn't see anymore though. Europeans were generally taller than he was, and even with his skates and blade-guards on, being shoved to the back, and trying to look through a sea of heads, fancy winter hats, and the arms that were lifted to try and get a good shot on all their respective phones...he couldn't see anything.

What's the point of me being here? I can't even tell if Viktor's noticed or cares that I'm not out there with him.

He snuffled a pained breath and pulled the lapels of his jacket higher, and moved his scarf up to
cover his mouth and nose, leaving just his glasses visible under his beanie. It took quite a bit of effort to squeeze between the metal wall and the mass of people who were still piling in, followed by the camera crews who were bursting through from the singular exit, but he eventually made it. It was impossible to miss the animated chatter coming from everyone he passed, but the language barrier left Yuri not knowing for sure what was being said. It only added to his sense of alienation.

...Viktor feels like he belongs here...I feel like I definitely don't...

He managed to get back out to the bigger atrium of Hall 1 before he swapped his blades out for sneakers again, and replaced everything into his backpack. He checked to make sure he had a key-card for the hotel room in his wallet before closing the bag to sling over his shoulders again. With all that done, Yuri heaved a pained breath and stood up, looking around the building. On the ice before him, the flag-dancers were spiraling through their big typical circles, carrying flag-less poles as they went through rehearsals. Other skaters wove through them, and though there wasn't any music playing, the choreography looked like something of a party.

In his distraction, he didn't even notice Chris walk right behind him, and he left the complex unnoticed and without a word to anyone. He walked back to the train station, hopped back onto the small city-train, went across the bridge and disembarked close to the Arcotel. No one along the way said a word to him either.

...I generally don't care about what fans think of me...but that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt to realize that people really only notice him.

Both Jiro and Makkachin were super excited to see one of their people come back, but at least Makkachin noticed that this was one less than there should've been, and the poodle looked longingly at the door. His tail wagged swiftly in expectation, but slowed as he felt a hand settle on his back, and he looked to the one human who was there.

"Sorry, Makka...it's just me."

The room stayed relatively quiet and dark as Yuri put all of his things away, grabbed up his MacBook, and crawled under the blankets of the extra-wide bed. With the internet loaded up and both pups snuggled close, Yuri did his best to avoid thinking about what he was missing. It truly didn't take long for that plan to go out the window though.

mila-babi
[livestream]
12,634 Likes
mila-babi @v-nikiforov spotted at #Euros practice arena! Also @christophe-gc is here ;p
Load more comments

Yuri groaned sadly and clicked to play it, seeing rather rough-cut footage of the rink he'd just left, and both Viktor and Chris on the ice. Whatever plans Viktor may have had to sort out the Sunday Exhibition had clearly flown out the window...and looked to be having a grand ol' time doing whatever it was that he was doing. The laptop was closed as quickly as it had been opened, and Yuri set it aside, slumping down into the blankets with his arms around his Akita.

He awoke some hours later to the sound of his phone ringing, but half-opened eyes closed again until the chime ceased and the jingle of a new voicemail rang out. He waited a minute before rolling over to reach past Makkachin's frame and find the device. A dread pit grew in his stomach, and he kept the phone face-down on his chest.

...I never thought I'd be so scared that Viktor might call me...
He drew a breath though and lifted the phone up, clicking the screen on to see...a message from one
Yuri Plisetsky. It was 10:30pm, nearly pitch-dark, and past the hour when the Russian Tiger's plane
was meant to land. Yuri nearly hit his head on the ceiling from the jump, and he quickly loaded up
his voicemail box to pull up the message.

"Where the Hell are you?"

Yuri blinked in confusion, and looked at the phone a second time...but sure enough, the recorded
message was barely 3 seconds long, and there was no more to listen to. He brow crinkled in anxiety,
and he put a hand against his chest as his heart settled down. A confused look crossed his face
though.

...Where the Hell am I? Not us? Viktor must've gone to the airport on his own...Yurio would've
asked about the both of us otherwise...

He swallowed nervously and loaded up a text window, and started typing.

[Depends.]

Yuri leaned back against the hard leather headboard, curling an arm around Jiro as the pup tried to
press against him again. He spotted the moving dots on the screen as a reply was written. It appeared
with a bwee'op.

[Look, I don't give one flying rat-turd what happened between you and Viktor, but if you're not right
in my face in like 10 seconds I'm gonna kick your ass SO HARD when I find you]

A brow raised, but Yuri could feel the relief creeping in.

[Is he there with you?]

[Yeah him and a guy who ISN'T you]

Yuri was about to start typing again, but stopped and erased the few letters he'd already clicked as
another message popped up.

[It's late though and everyone's exhausted, so we're going our own way. I'm pissed that you skipped
this.]

Frowning, Yuri typed, [Sorry...] He answered, waiting a moment before typing some more, [Are you
heading to the hotel already?]

[Yeah. I gave Viktor all the stuff you asked me to get, and he's heading back to your place with it.]

[...Did he say anything?]

[He didn't have to. He was being a smug prick, like he always does when something's wrong and
he's too proud to cop to it. Being around Chris makes it 10x worse.]

[oh..]

[So, back to my original question...where the Hell are you?]

.Tak tak tak
The Rooms Bed & Breakfast was a small cluster of customized apartments, set up to be rented like Airbnb rooms, but that stood alone like hotel-rooms. The street-facing side looked like the plain white duplex of a regular city apartment bloc; 2 floors high, but clean and modern-looking. The door to the first-floor apartment - built out of the bottom half of a 1900s Viennese house - opened, revealing a tired and ragged-looking skater with one confused dog.

"Y-Yuri!" Minako called, latching onto him rather quickly before dragging him inside, "You had us all worried sick!"

The rest of the people in the apartment came out from their hidey-holes, half with toothbrushes hanging from their mouths. Yurio stood with a shoulder against a wall, and a stern look on his face, hands in the pockets of a pale-colored hoodie. Mikhail came out from the bedroom, directly across from the front door, and ushered them all further into the long space so he could close the door to keep the heat in. Yuri barely had a chance to cuff his sneakers off before he found himself pushed halfway into the kitchen, but once he was in, he set Jiro down on the floor to let him roam and heaved a sigh...not quite of relief, but...a sigh.

"What in the world is going on?" Minako asked, speaking for them all as she helped peel the sullen figure out of his heavy coat, "Yuri...?"

Nikki and Viktoria weren't sure what to say, and just waited instead, watching from the bathroom door in their half-ready-for-bed states. Yuri was nudged by them, until he was in the main living area, and allowed to sit down on the edge of the sleeper-sofa.

"I'm...sorry to impose like this." Yuri started, looking at the dark eyes of his Akita, who had come up to his knees instead of exploring, "I didn't want to be there when Viktor got back...if he was even planning to come back..."

"...What happened?"

Yurio slumped back into a reclining chair nearby, "I'm guessing Viktor did something to be a jerk-ass."

"...He started getting mean for no reason when we got to the rink earlier today." Yuri confirmed grimly, "He made fun of my worry about his ankle by claiming everything I said about it was just weird, annoying noises instead. Then he turned our Exhibition practice into...into a PR stunt." He huffed angrily, though at the same time feeling his throat hurt, and his voice cracked, "He went out on the ice without me. I don't even know how long it took for him to realize I didn't go with him, or if he ever did. I went back to the hotel instead, and by the time I got there, Chris had turned up at the rink and they were goofing off. Mila streamed it on Insta. I watched it only long enough to realize I wasn't missed and no one cared, and fell asleep..."

"Figured." The Tiger grumbled, twisting himself on the reclining chair to lean against one arm-rest, and dangle his legs off the other, "Him and Chris were insufferable at the airport."

"...I just thought they were excited to see each other again." Minako added, "But he refused to say anything about where you were." She put her hand on Yuri's shoulder and sat on the edge of the bed next to him, "Even Chris was reluctant to say anything. The best I got was him shaking his head subtly. I could only assume that you were...fine, but somewhere else. Yura was mad you weren't there to see us arrive though."

"...I meant to be there..." Yuri sighed, and rubbed his nose on the back of his wrist. He reached down to pull Jiro up into his lap, "I just...fell asleep suddenly, and only woke up when Yuri texted me. I was worried it was Viktor and didn't even want to look at first..."
"I wonder what crawled up his arse?" Mikhail wondered, shaking his head as he pressed his shoulder to the olive-green doorframe, "Was he like that all week?"

"...It...had its ups and downs..." Yuri answered, keeping his eyes down, "But he was never mean to me until today. He...said he had to put his face on; that fake personality he wears when he's out in public and wants people to think everything is completely fine. It didn't even take five minutes for him to start being rude. I didn't..." He pressed a palm to his forehead, feeling a headache coming on under the faint mark at his hairline, ",...I didn't say anything that he hadn't heard before... Was it the hockey-skates? ...The flag-dancers? I...I don't know what set him off, but he took it out on me...saying I was smothering him. But as soon as we started heading for the rink, he was all smiles again, being nice to everyone around us while completely ignoring me. He even went out of his way to keep his hands to himself...even after being so miserable all weekend because he felt like he couldn't touch me at all..."

He could feel his eyes tearing up, but tried desperately to keep them there, "I don't understand what happened... I don't know why he's taking it out on me... What'd I do!?"

"The worst thing you could do, obviously." Yuri answered casually, getting dirty looks from basically everyone, "You took him to a competition he can't compete in, and you're telling him what he can and can't do while he's here. You know the kind of fights him and Yakov go into cuz he'd try to tell Viktor what to do?"

"...That's different though...Viktor and I are supposed to be-"

"...You're telling him how and whether he can skate. It doesn't matter who it comes from."

Yuri blanched, staring at the teen in confused horror.

"Jeeze, for being so smart, you sure are dumb." Yuri huffed, pulling on the arm-rest between his knees to sit straighter. He leveled a look over a shoulder, "What's the one common thread in Viktor's life where he's always been at odds with people?"

"I don't...understand..."

"...Oh, vo imja ljubvi Gospodnej." (Oh, for the love of God.) The teen guffawed. He twisted to put his feet onto the floor and stood up, stepping forward just enough to put a finger between Yuri's eyes, "Konstantin, that one Fake-Ass-Girlfriend, Yakov, and now you. What do all of you have in common?"

Brown eyes crossed, but Yuri couldn't think well enough to answer. Mercifully, Yuri didn't give him much time to contemplate it anyway.

"You're all telling him what to do with his skating! He hates that shit!"

Yuri threatened to bite the finger, and Yuri pulled it back, "Viktor's ankle was hurt! If no one tells him to stay off it, then he'll hurt it worse!"

"That's up to him."

"THE OLYMPICS ARE IN A FEW WEEKS!" Yuri barked, about ready to jump up off the bed. Mikhail stepped forward though and extended a hand to keep him down.

"Chill, Yuri." He said simply, "You've both got valid points, but yelling at each other isn't going to solve the problem. It may also get us kicked out...we literally just got here."

Yuri crumpled up in his spot again, hugging Jiro against his chest, "Sorry..."
"It's fine...just settle down a bit." The elder conferred, "There's not really anything that can be done about this kerfuffle tonight...and we need to figure out how six people are gonna fit into a space meant for five."

The two teen girls came into the living-room just then, nervous about intruding, even though it was the space they were meant to sleep in, "Is everything okay...?" Nikki wondered dubiously.

"Viktor's being a butt, so Yuri's staying with us tonight." Mikhail explained simply, "We're trying to figure out how to make room."

"...I'll...just stay on the chair." Yuri said, nudging his head towards the recliner that Yurio had been in a moment before.

"...Are you sure?" The elder wondered, "...I was thinking, the ladies can share the bed in the other room, I can take the roll-away, and you share the pull-out sofa-bed with Yura."

"It'd be like when we were stuck on our own at NHK." Yurio huffed, crossing his arms, "I don't mind."

Yuri lifted his eyes towards Minako and the rest, "...Only...if it's okay with you..."

"I guess it's the least we can offer after Mari and I barged into your room at the Final..." She shrugged, "It's only for tonight anyway."

"...Yeah..."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED EIGHTY ONE

It was weird enough to wear rented skates, but hockey skates were entirely foreign. Lacking the thin boot-like housing of a figure skate - replaced by what felt like plastic, plated armor - and having no toe-pick whatsoever, they felt like snow-shoes with blades. But, they were a good enough fit that they felt like the ski-boots from earlier in the day, and since Viktor was already used to that feeling, it wasn't so much of a handicap to get used to these new skates.

_I can make these work... It won't be super-fun, and I'm sure I'll have pressure-blisters before the end of the night, but I'm sure it'll be fine. Yurio is getting in tonight with my boots, and then I can skate like normal again._

The fans were spreading out around him to make room, and camera flashes blinked from every corner of the warehouse-like building. There was a growing opening on the ice that he could see himself moving towards, and mentally shrugged, winding up with his right leg out behind himself. The throw was easy, so was the spin...the landing on that right side felt a bit strange, but nothing hurt.

_Not having any flexibility in these boots is a real problem... I don't know if I can do half of my regular moves with these on. There's some wiggle-room, but it's so stiff that there may as well be none._

The cheering felt like a warm blanket, and Viktor looked around, seeing that most of the ice had been cleared by then. Those who had been on it had moved to the rink-wall to stay clear, and behind them, on the other side of the Plexiglas, fans and film-crews were growing in number.

_Seems that the rumor of me being here has spread like wildfire. I don't know why they cheered for that Axel though...I barely hopped. Guess it doesn't matter... I wonder if I can do a backward-entry in these?_  

He flipped around and looked back over his shoulder, arcing in a wide curve on his left blade. He straightened out and set one bulky boot in front of the other - left in front of the right - and kicked off. It was a slow double-Loop, but like the single Axel that preceded it, Viktor noted how his ankle felt.

...No pain, no pressure...no tightness beyond the boot-lacing... I really don't think my ankle was strained as bad as it seemed.

He looked up and back towards the opening in the rink wall, "Yuri, my ankle feels fi-" No one was there, "...Yuri?"

"Viktoooor~!"

Slate eyes moved aside, looking to the one exit from the warehouse, clear across the rink from where he was. The crowd had parted and Chris was there, waving amiably. There was no time to worry, and the slender Russian raised his hand, putting on that wide smile, "Chris~!"

_Damn...now I can't even leave. Where did Yuri go...?_

He gestured his waving-hand across the length of the rink and pointed at the doorway, but scanned every face along the way as he went.
...Did he take off...? When did I even lose him?

Chris seemed to pop up next to him faster than he had any right to, and Viktor was pulled out of his head with a start, "Why in the world are you practicing on this side of things?" The blonde wondered abruptly, circling around, but playfully reached for the Russian's guest-pass. He turned the lanyard around Viktor's neck as he moved, letting it go again only when the man's jacket pulled on it, "You've got rink-access to Hall 3. It's super crowded here."

"...Guess I assumed it was being used. Hall 1 has the OCs practice." Viktor answered, "And I am just a guest now."

"Viktor..." Chris shook his head, and teased a few tongue-clicks in sarcastic disappointment, "What'd I tell you about being the Belle of the Ball here? You could probably get away with going to Hall 3 even without a pass."

"Well, I'm here now, so..."

"Seems you are. What are you working on? Exhibition practice isn't till Sunday morning."

The Russian felt a hot rush in his chest, but he just smiled, "Nothing. I haven't really gotten to skate but once since Nationals."

"Fair enough. Have some fun with me then. If you're going to take over the public rink, we might as well give them a show."

"That's what they're here for, isn't it?" Viktor mused, moving a bit faster to catch up with his long-time friend.

It wasn't too long a period of time before the crowd started filtering back out onto the ice to join the two European Champions. The hours passed, and fun with the crowd was had, showing off how to do certain tricks or joining in on pair-displays, even one big game of Red Rover on the ice, followed by tag. A bunch of other professional skaters had trickled in through the afternoon as well. A long session of getting autographs and photos ended the night, and Viktor stumbled out of the arena, feeling his hands and legs shaking from the low blood-sugar.

"Whew...I'm so hungry I could eat you." He teased, slinging himself across Chris' back for the support.

"Yuri might take issue with that suggestion." The blonde quipped, hefting the Russian up, "It's been hours since I spotted you. Where is Yuri?"

"Let's just get something to eat~!"

Chris glared skeptically, but turned his sights to his friend's right hand.

He's still got his ring on...

"Chriiiiiissss~! I'm dying~"

"Alright, alright...let's find something. Where are you staying?"

"Too far away. We'd have to take the train. I'll wither away before then."

"It's a 10 minute walk to the Official hotel. There's a pizza place around the corner from it though...it's on the way from here."
"Yay, food."

The Pizzeria Piccolo was a little establishment off the main road, but only a 5 minute walk from the arena. It was a busy little place though, with people even willing to sit outside just to have a seat at all. Waiting to sit inside though, it took another 15 minutes before the skating duo were able to even place an order.

Viktor's stomach growled like an angry leopard, and he hugged his arms around it, moaning a whine as water glasses were set on their small metal table, "...I feel like I haven't eaten for days..."

"When are you going to tell me where Yuri is and why he's not with you?" Chris asked pointedly, taking a sip from the drink.

The Russian just slumped down, "He's just not here. Is that a crime?"

Chris leveled the man a flat look...then reached across the table and smacked him once across the top of his head, leaving silver hair disheveled and a stunned look on Viktor's face, "Quit being an idiot."

Hands went up to cradle the spot, which now stung slightly, "He can be away from me without anything being wrong!" He argued, trying to flatten his hair back into place.

"You know...all these years we've been friends...did it never occur to you that you're an open book to me?" Chris asked grimly, adjusting his wide-framed glasses as he looked down at the pizza menu, "I may not prod you for details, but that doesn't mean I can't tell when you're being a fake-ass."

Viktor grumbled and crossed his arms across his chest, "That doesn't mean anything."

"You haven't said Yuri's name all afternoon, and when I have, you dismissed it like I hadn't. You can't sit there across from me, look me in the eyes, and tell me for a fact that nothing is wrong."

Slate eyes narrowed, then looked away, "I'm not discussing the details of my marriage with someone outside of it, friend or not."

"I just want you to admit something is wrong."

"Fine. Something's wrong."

"Do you know where Yuri is right now?"

"Probably at the hotel."

"But you don't know."

"I don't even know when he left."

Chris nodded, and put on his best smile as a waitress came by to leave real drinks and took orders for the food to come. Once the menus were handed off and she stepped away again, Chris leveled his friend a serious look, "And you're not even worried about confirming that he's safe."

"He's run all over Hasetsu by himself."

"I'm not sure if you're aware of this or not, but...this is Vienna, not Hasetsu." Chris said dryly, "He's never been here before in his life."
"Our hotel is right across the river from here. Walking distance if he were so inclined. It's probably as far away from the arena as the Ice Castle is from Yu-Topia." Viktor deflected, gesturing out as though pointing towards the Arcotel, "He also spent 5 years living in Detroit, one of the most dangerous cities in the States, and the worst thing that ever happened to him there was having a girl hug him unexpectedly. What's the worst that could happen to him here? Vienna is consistently one of the safest cities in Europe."

"...You're going awfully far out of the way to convince yourself you don't need to call and check on him."

Viktor grumbled and settled down again, wasting time with his drink, "...He probably wouldn't even take my calls right now anyway."

"Wow, Viktor...what did you do to that poor soul?"

"What did I do?" The Russian shot back, offended, "Why is it always my fault?"

"Cuz Yuri would literally burst into flames before he ever did anything to hurt you on purpose." Chris pointed out, "And I've seen how he reacts when he thinks he's hurt you by mistake. He wouldn't run from that...but he's not here."

"He ran when he humiliated me in front of everyone the day before the wedding party." Viktor growled under his breath and roughly set his elbows on the table, only to have to back up again right away as the pizzas were set down. The mask went up again and he thanked the waitress happily.

Chris lifted his fork and knife, and started cutting a piece of the pie out in front of him, "Yuri ran off back then because he thought you didn't care about his feelings. You wouldn't even look at him, and then just said you weren't good at dealing with people who cry in front of you. Yuri pointed out that he wasn't crying in front of you because you weren't looking at him, and then he left." He explained simply, "You left, too, and I told people to leave you alone. Everyone else went after Yuri though, because we all knew that he shouldn't be alone when he's that upset."

Viktor just stared at the cheesy disc in front of himself, tapping a finger on the silver fork in his right hand, "...Feels like déjà vu, hearing that."

Chris huffed a half-amused laugh, "Why's that?"

"Cuz Saito said the same damn thing at Nationals."

The blonde held a piece of the pizza in front of his mouth, paused in place, but then lowered it down again to the plate and gave an incredulous look, "Are you saying that you upset Yuri at Nationals, too?"

Viktor grumbled, "I didn't mean to..." He insisted, hacking angrily at his portion, "He was so focused on Saito's feelings though...I felt like he didn't care about mine at all, even after I'd put them aside myself just to avoid burying that guy."

"Dare I ask...?"

The Russian sighed and dipped his head, stopping shy of dragging his bangs through red-sauce, "...Yuri wandered off to take a call, because it came in while I was doing an interview, and it was too loud. By the time I found him again, it had...been after him and Saito had gotten into a huge fight. Some words were said and things were done that...left Yuri vulnerable and upset. I wanted Saito thrown out of the JSF for it, but Yuri insisted he be spared, and I agreed more for his sake than Saito's. I wanted Yuri to feel like he had control of things again, so I left it up to him."
"I see." Chris nodded, but then pointed his fork at Viktor's plate, "Try eating something while you're feeling sorry for yourself. You can still multitask, last I recall."

Viktor grumbled, but started poking at a few of the chunks he'd cut apart in his earlier furor, "...We managed to sort things out with Saito - mostly - but a huge part of that was me trying to suppress how furious I was at everything, just to make it happen. You know how hard it is to try and support a guy who did something so reprehensible!? It's like Saito's problems were more important than the ones he caused. And now he's living in my old room at Yu-Topia, and I'm supposed to keep acting like everything is fine."

"Yuri knows how you feel about all that though, right?"

"Of course he knows. We both thought that whole debacle would be finished when we left Osaka, but then it followed it to Hasetsu a few days later cuz Saito managed to get himself kicked out of his house." Viktor sighed, eating at least a small piece of the pizza, "I'm not sad we got out of there when we did. Leaving Hasetsu to go to Russia was a relief to me, because then I wouldn't have to look at the face of the guy who hurt Yuri so badly. But then the trip to Russia turned into a catastrophe, too, and now we're here and everything's gone to shit again."

"Sounds like the last two weeks have been rather rough on you guys."

"This whole season has been rough on us." Viktor corrected, exhausted, "I wanted to make Euros the event where Yuri and I had nothing but a good time, but I can't manage 5 minutes of peace before I do something to mess it all up again. It's bad enough that I messed up the idea that it was supposed to be me making him feel better...but then he does such a good job making me feel better and I just-"

"What set you off?" Chris asked, cutting the man's words short, "And why are you taking it out on him? Cuz it sounds like he was trying really hard to make things better, and now you're acting like he did all that for nothing."

Viktor sighed and set his utensils down, and leaned back against his chair, "...I was getting some skates to rent...and Yuri started giving me grief about not jumping again. And it just made me so angry, because I'd already gone so far out of the way to fix our Exhibition for Sunday so that I wouldn't be jumping. The whole point of us practicing today was supposed to be so I could sort out the little details that I couldn't think of while cooped-up on the train..." He folded one arm across himself and pinched the bridge of his nose with fingers from the other, "...It was just...getting to me. He knew I'd already caved on what limitations I'd tolerate...but he just jabbed me with them again right as we were going out there. All I could hear was Gracie's voice and I stopped listening."

"...Wow, there's a name I haven't heard in years. I thought it was like a four-letter word to you."

Viktor grumbled and nodded behind his hand, but then rubbed his face and reached for the fork again, "For a long time, it seemed like if anyone said her name, she'd pop up again. And it just made me so angry, because I'd already gone so far out of the way to fix our Exhibition for Sunday so that I wouldn't be jumping. The whole point of us practicing today was supposed to be so I could sort out the little details that I couldn't think of while cooped-up on the train..." He folded one arm across himself and pinched the bridge of his nose with fingers from the other, "...It was just...getting to me. He knew I'd already caved on what limitations I'd tolerate...but he just jabbed me with them again right as we were going out there. All I could hear was Gracie's voice and I stopped listening."

"You know full-well that's not what Yuri was doing." Chris pointed out, "I won't let you suggest that he had some other motive."

"I know he didn't... It was just...a knee-jerk reaction. I couldn't help it." He added, stabbing a piece of the pizza with the prongs of the fork, "I even started doing the wonk wonk thing at him...just like I
used to with her when she'd get unreasonable."

"So you treated him like an ex he doesn't know anything about, because he told you not to jump on a bad ankle."

"...I guess I hit a wall with the issue. I thought he trusted me enough."

"You were jumping when I came into the rink, dummy." Chris pointed out, "How's he supposed to feel about that? You promised him you wouldn't jump and then you jumped."

"...I know... But I only did enough to test how it felt... I wanted to reassure him that it wasn't going to hurt. Unlike him, doing quad Lutzes after smashing his skull against the ice, I just did a single and a double, and then I didn't jump at all again for the rest of the afternoon. He didn't even give me the benefit of the doubt."

"He was probably gone by then. I didn’t see him when I came in." Chris shook his head, and reached across the table to steal a piece of the cheesy pie that was slowly going cold, "I don't know how much more time you need before you realize that Yuri isn't like the other people you've been with. Gracie was a psycho who treated you like you were her prized property...Sophia took one look at you and ranked you alongside every other dumb jock who ever flirted with her; and there were many. They erected barriers around you - either to keep you for themselves or to keep you at a distance - but Yuri doesn't have that now. The barriers he put up between you and him, all the years he would run away rather than say hi...? Those all came down when you went to be his coach. You can't treat him like you think he can handle your pettiness. He's not petty, so he doesn't have the mindset to know how to push back against it...and if it comes from you, you might as well be hitting him, too."

"...You describe him like you think he's some fragile little dog. He's stronger than that."

"Not when it comes to you." Chris shot back, "He may be more comfortable being around you but that doesn't change who he is. He never wanted to talk to you before because he didn't want you to see his shortcomings, but it goes without saying that he meant he didn't want you to judge him. Everything you think about him has ten times more of an impact than the views of anyone else...so when you treat him like an ex, he feels like you've already broken up with him...and so he runs away, avoiding your judgment, probably thinking you'd be better off without him."

"...He knows that's not true."

"Do you really think he feels that way right now? You lashed out at him because he was worried about you, after everything else you guys just went through. I don't even know all the details of what happened, but I still feel like I should be mad at you on his behalf just so someone is."

Viktor grumbled and leaned over his plate, poking at the crust with his fork.

"We should go to the hotel and check on him."

"...I can't." The silver sighed.

"Why."

"Because I'm still mad. If I go back now then it'll probably just make things worse."

"You can't stay out all night, Viktor."

"I know..." He grumbled, "...There's only a couple hours left before Yurio gets here. I'll go back
after that. Maybe Yuri will be at the airport, too."

The Arrivals terminal at that hour of the night was relatively quiet, but the noise on the floor above, where passengers were collecting their bags, gave away the activity. The massive wall-high digital display board had marked the plane from Moscow as 'landed 21:17.' It was only a matter of minutes before the flood of people from the upper level would be coming down towards the exit.

"Viktor!"

He turned towards the escalator and spotted Yurio there, all but jumping off the railing to get to the ground floor. He hauled his things and wedged past other passengers to get down faster, only to get off the moving stairway and realize the second figure was not who he expected to see there.

...Where's Yuri? Did he have to pee all of a sudden?

"Hey." Viktor waved, "Where's everyone else?"

"At the top." He answered, looking around, "Where's Yuri?"

"Oh, didn't you notice?" The Russian teased, gesturing at Chris, "I up-graded. Get it?" He held his hand higher to compare their heights, and the taller figure's extra singular inch over him, "Up-graded?"

Yurio deadpanned him, "...You're an idiot."

"Cousin Viktoooorr~!" Nikki called out excitedly, waving, and lost her bags on the escalator just as quickly. She scrambled to get them all back before they started bumping into people, face red from the embarrassment of it all.

"I brought your stuff." The Russian Tiger interrupted, drawing slate eyes down again as he opened his big rolling suitcase. The garment bags and gold-bladed boots came out, handed over quickly so he could close the case again, "Hopefully this was everything. Yuri didn't say there was anything extra lying around, so I didn't look."

"No, this is it. Thanks." Viktor shook his head and slung the bags over the back of one shoulder, keeping his skates in the other hand, "I can't wait to get on the ice in my gear again. I've got blisters on my blisters from those awful rentals..."

"Let it be known to all that playing tag was your idea," Chris pointed out, "And then you were it and couldn't catch anyone."

Viktor blanched, "...I can't...argue with that, I guess."

The rest of the group started filtering into the foyer as well, tired as they were, but waved anyway. Minako looked around, "Hey guys...where's Yuri?"

"He's not here. How was the flight?"

The ballerina was stunned, but confused eyes went to Chris, and he just shook his head, staring straight at her...which only confused her further. The pleasantries were strange to watch after that, but when Yurio started to wander away, it seemed that they would be cut short. He was, after all, going to the car rental area, not the train.
"Guess we'll see you guys tomorrow then." Minako said, getting her hugs from the two skaters, "Say hi to Yuri for us, okay? Sorry we missed him."

Viktor nodded, and watched the group move off towards the external doors. He felt a pit in his stomach when he saw Yurio pull his phone out, and stop in front of the automatic doors with only five words to say to the voicemail recorder before hanging up again. He shook his head though and turned on a heel, heading back to the other end of the Arrivals terminal to find the train back into the city.

The awkward silence was starting to turn into a painful one though, and Viktor paused in place, pulling the garment bags back over his shoulder. Other people walked around them, like leaves in a river, pushed out of place by an errant rock or log, but Viktor paid them no mind. His focus was on the bags, and more specifically...the second of the two costumes contained therein.

"You know..." Chris started up again, "It's easy to fool the people who don't really know you...but trying to use those same fake-face tactics on your family is a different thing entirely."

"...I'm aware."

"They saw right through you. Plisetsky can already tell something's off."

"I know."

"So you're going to let the guy that tormented him for all of last year be the first person who talks to him tonight."

Viktor shot him a glare, "...Yuri is his special buddy now. What happened last year is water under the bridge."

"It's the principle of the thing." Chris corrected, crossing his arms, "He's just a kid. You're letting him walk into the middle of a fight."

"Maybe talking to someone else first will make it easier when I do show up." The Russian huffed, "Not that it's helping me much, apparently."

Chris' brow crinkled behind his circular frames, and he exhaled an annoyed breath. Without a second thought, he grabbed Viktor by the collar of his jacket and started dragging him backwards through the Arrivals terminal again, much to the silver's protest. By the time he was ready to let the man go again, they were standing outside the Duty Free shop, and he flipped the Russian around, "Buy Yuri some flowers and something nice. Don't come out again until you do." He ordered, taking the man's skates and costume-bags before Viktor could protest, and shoved him forward with a push of his shoulder.

Viktor was incensed, but looked around cautiously, seeing the crowds still wandering around, thin as they were. He practically marched into the shop, looking around indignantly. The store had everything one could expect to buy for someone arriving from a long flight; alcohol, candy, chocolates, toys for kids, wine, perfume, other assorted fancy gifts, and of course, flowers. Viktor grabbed two individually-wrapped roses somewhat roughly, and glared back at the Swiss man standing outside.

"It doesn't mean the same thing if someone forces you to do it."

Chris just stared back though, and Viktor returned to browsing. His wounded pride slowly started to hurt less as he made his way through and eventually paid, but he felt his heart go back into his throat when he had to go back into the fray.
"If you go back to him acting this entitled and bitter, Yuri is going to come out the other end hating himself, not you. You know that, right?"

"...You're really starting to get under my skin, Chris."

"You don't often have people stand up to your petulance." He pointed out, expression unchanging, "Take all your anger out on me. I don't care. I can take as much shit as you can give. But don't you dare go back to him in a mood like this. He may be your husband, but he's still my friend, and he's technically been such longer than you have."

Viktor just grit his teeth and pushed past.

Chris turned and went after him quickly, "Hate me now...like me later."

Returning to the Arcotel felt like a Death March. Viktor could feel his heart pounding in his throat and head, and his hand shook with the key-card as he stood in front of their door. Eyes were wide and felt dry as he tried to put the card into the lock-slot, but no matter what he did, he couldn't get them to connect.

"...I...I can't do it..." He said quietly, getting a sinking feeling in his gut. He turned to look at the man next to him, "...What if he's hurt himself...? What if he's done something...?"

Chris reached to steady the Russian's shaking hand, and pulled the card from his fingers. He unlocked the door and pushed it open after a tap to knock. He pressed the back of his other hand against Viktor's chest to keep him in the hall for the moment, and stepped inside, door held open by Viktor's shoe. Makkachin was right inside, shaking with excitement...but in the dark, and alone. Chris checked the bathroom just in case, but returned with a shrug, "He's not here."

"...Where's Jiro...?"

"Oh, you brought the pup, too?"

Viktor nodded, and stepped inside, letting the door click behind him before putting the two flowers, a bottle of peach wine, and a box of fancy chocolates down on the counter by the coffee-maker. Eyes went around the room in stunned disappointment...which sank into worry. Even feeling Makkachin's cold, wet nose against his fingers could do little to pull him out of his shock, and he turned to back up against the foot of the bed, "...He took Jiro with him..."

"Well, we know he came back here at least." Chris pointed out, looking around, "His gear-bag is in the closet, but his coat and shoes are gone."

"...He must've...gone to spend the night with Yurio and the others." Viktor thought aloud, unblinking eyes starting to water, "...He'd...prefer to stay with someone else...than wait for me to come back..."

He said quietly, his voice starting to crack, and he lowered his head into his hands, "...I really am horrible..."
Chapter 482

CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED EIGHTY TWO

Lights were turned off, save for one lamp in the living-room, and voices lowered to the volume of hushed whispers. Yuri lifted up from the bathroom sink, water on his face, and hovered over it as the drops fell into the carved stone bowl. Lifting his face to look in the mirror, he reached forward to wipe away some of the shower-fog, and looked at the unfortunate sight of his reflection. Though his hair was toweled dry, it was still damp, and a number of stringy black strands came tumbling down into his face, well past his reddened eyes. He combed them back into place with his fingers and looked down again.

Yurio was the only person who asked after me all day. No one else has tried to call... Am I really that invisible here? Maybe so invisible...that even Viktor put me aside...

He watched the droplets hit the spackled basin, and the warped reflection of his image in the faucet.

Is the idea of Euros so important to him that he wants to experience it the way he always used to...? I wouldn't be here in the first place if I hadn't followed him...and this is the first time he's been back since he became a coach. Maybe he...wanted to recreate what it would've been like if not for me... He'd...still be in the RSF if I hadn't come into things...

Yuri hesitated, but then shook his head, eyes clenched shut, and he smacked his forehead roughly.

No... Why am I thinking like this...? I know Euros was important to him, but he never suggested it was because I was never there before. This has nothing to do with me...it's all the RSF's fault... They went so long without ever suggesting Viktor's life-choices mattered to them. They only dropped him after he gave up a medal...

He balked then, collapsing against the basin despondently.

...to give it to me...

Reaching for a towel hanging nearby, he buried his face into it for a moment. He sucked in a pained breath once he was sure he could avoid crying again, and reached for the change of clothes he'd brought over with him. With black under-shorts and a t-shirt pulled onto his frame, he stepped quietly out of the bathroom, through the back end of the kitchen, and out into the living-room. By then, Mikhail had set-up the roll-away bed that Yurio was originally meant to sleep on, and Yurio himself was surfing the local television channels; they both looked up when Yuri came into the room.

He found his bag on the floor near the edge of the bed, and put away the clothes he'd peeled out of earlier on. Seeing his phone though, and how it seemed to light up on providence, he couldn't help but pull it out.

Chris (10:55pm)
[Yuri please confirm that you're safe and have Jiro]

Viktor (11:15pm)
[Yuri please answer]
Viktor (11:17pm)
[I can understand if you want to ignore ME but don't ignore Chris too]
Viktor (11:21pm)
The knife that had been in his chest all day twisted all over again, and he couldn't look at the screen. He unlocked it and pressed it against Yurio's arm, where the teen was sitting nearby, "...Please tell them I'm fine and then hide my phone."

The Russian Tiger blinked in confusion, but took the phone anyway, looking down to see the Group Chat window with its messages loaded already. He side-eyed Yuri for a moment, but grumbled and crossed his legs before starting to type.

Me (11:35pm)
[This is the other Yuri. He's fine. Leave him alone. Bye.]

Viktor (11:35pm)
[What about Jiro?]

Me (11:35pm)
[Also fine. BYE.]

Yurio clicked the phone off and checked the side to be sure it was set to silent, then tossed it into his own bag. He turned around in place and watched Yuri bury his head under the aforementioned pup, who had since taken to chewing on his fingers and licking his ear, "...I told them." He said simply.

"Fnks."

Viktor stared vacantly at his phone, at least until Chris pulled it from his fingers...then he just stared at his empty hands instead. Unblinking eyes dripped with tears, falling to his palms.

"Do you want me to stay over?" Chris wondered, finding a stray phone-charger to plug the device in, out of reach.

"...I don't..." The Russian stammered, lowering his head, "...I can't think... Is this the end of us...?"

"This?" Chris echoed dryly, "No, this is Yuri fleeing a potential confrontation; he doesn't want to fight with you. He's gone to spend the night with people who aren't mad at him."

"...I'm worried sick about him..."

"Wonk wonk."

"Chris, seriously." Viktor snapped, lifting up from his palms, "Making me feel worse about this isn't helping."

"But you're starting to understand how he feels. You have a particularly bad habit of digging deep when you want to make people suffer."

"I didn't want him to suffer! I just wanted him to stop!" The Russian protested, grabbing his nervous poodle and flopping down onto his side with him.

"Then just tell him that next time instead of mouthing off. Make-fun of him at your peril."

Viktor groaned sadly into Makkachin's fluff.

Chris sighed and scratched idly at the back of his head, and moved to sit down across from his
despairing friend, "...I know you did your best to not jump into things too fast, but..." He started, reaching across to pat the Russian's shoulder, despite the man's back turned to him, "...I don't think you got to know him well enough before you sprung that engagement on him. Anyone with eyes could see that he was caught by surprise back then."

Viktor didn't answer.

"Maybe there was a part of you that knew Yuri wouldn't say no if you suggested it...and I know you meant it sincerely." He huffed a laugh and shook his head, remembering the previous year, "I started getting jealous of you back then, because you had so-easily given up the ice for someone...even though I thought you were like me; living for the ice. But...at the same time, because I knew Yuri so well, I honestly couldn't blame you for being smitten by him. I feel like...maybe I encouraged the both of you too much. I teased Yuri about the 'special training' you were giving him, as though you were already sleeping together...and failed to warn you about how fragile I knew Yuri was." He explained, shrugging out of his heavy jacket before leaning down to lie on his back. Staring at the ceiling, he cupped his hands over his chest idly, and breathed a remorseful sigh, "...If I had taken the same steps with you as I had with Saito, maybe things would've been a bit less drastic."

The Russian lifted his head, twisting to look over his shoulder at the man behind him, "...With...Saito...?"

Chris nodded and reached up to pull his glasses away, folding them carefully over himself, "Yuri was always naïve...oblivious to the things around him. But I had a dirty mind as far back as I can remember, so I noticed the things that Yuri didn't. I saw Saito's infatuation, but I also saw this...almost desperate, predatory look in him. Not that he would ever hurt Yuri, but that he obsessed over him. It wasn't like how Yuri looked up to or idolized you, and pushed himself to be better at his sport so he could be closer to you, even if impersonally. Saito wanted to possess Yuri. So...I wedged myself in between them. Called him chicken-head, duck-ass, dick-butt...messing with him...whatever it took to keep him at a distance while Yuri was still innocent. ...Under the best of influences, Yuri can be molded into something to be reckoned with. But under the worst...he could become dependent, needy, unsure of himself, and worst of all...willing to take the abuse, and be a prisoner of those who claim to want the best for him. That's part of what makes him vulnerable...his anxiety and self-doubt make him very easy to manipulate...and why he takes it super badly whenever the people he trusts start putting him down. When he gives...he gives all of himself, no holds barred."

"Now you just make it sound like I'm the same as Saito."

"I'm not done yet." Chris corrected, pushing himself a bit further up the bed so he could perch a foot against the edge of it, "...If I had more than just the first two days of Cup of China to figure you two out, before you kissed him, maybe I could've gleaned more of my insights into you about Yuri's sensitivities. You have the occasional mean-streak. No one is perfect. But I know you can - and want - to make improvements so you can be the best person possible...for yourself, and for Yuri. I've seen him come out of his shell more in the last 2 years than I had in all the decade before. You are the best possible person to have a hold over him, if anyone was going to at all." He explained, only to twist over and nudge the Russian in the arse with his knee to get his attention again, "But you are occasionally a bit of a shit. You get impatient and would rather put people down than just say what you mean. You're a master of distraction and deflection...and while that's fine and well for being the world's second-best figure skater-"

"Second-best!?!" Viktor flipped over outright then, dragging Makkachin halfway over in the process. Chris winked, "I'm the reigning European Champion. You're on my turf." He said, and flicked the Russian between the eyes before going back to the prior topic, "As I was saying though...putting on
a show is great for the camera and the audience, but not for the people you know. Maybe you've
gotten too used to putting on the façade...but you've taken it off for Yuri at this point, and it's not so
easy for him to go between the two faces you wear."

Viktor grumbled quietly to himself.

"Lying by silence or omission is still lying...I'll probably give you away without even trying..." Yuri
sighed, "I'm no where near as good as you are at hiding how I feel."

"It's especially hard on him to try and read you when you're wearing the mask because you're angry
about something." Chris added, "I think it's time to consider refining your approach. Maybe just drop
the act entirely."

"Now isn't the best of times to open myself up to that kind of thing."

"Why not?"

Viktor hugged Makkachin a bit closer and spoke into the poodle's fluff, "Aside from the fact that I'm
sure people want me to rip into the RSF for firing me...?"

"...Sure?" Chris asked skeptically, rolling over slightly to look at the man more squarely, "What
else is there?"

The silver hesitated, "...We...had some problems in Russia."

Attempting to sleep was impossible. The best Yuri could manage was dozing for a few hours, but
every time he roused again, it felt like he'd been awake the entire time anyway. The weight of that
empty time passing felt heavier with each spell. He had no idea what time it was when he realized
that sleep wouldn't happen, and sat up instead, trying not to get too deep into his own head.
Thankfully, Jiro was awake as well, and was eager for attention despite the dark.

...I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have you to distract me...

The pup's innocent playfulness was a welcome reprieve from the stresses of everything else, and for
a few minutes, it seemed to offer the relief Yuri needed. Jiro was starting to get excitable though, and
was starting to make little grunty-barking noises as he wrestled with his human's fingers.

Enough so that a bleary jade-eyed Russian turned over to leer at them.

Yuri gasped in surprise and put his hands over Jiro's snoot to try and keep him quiet, but the jig was
up and Mikhail turned over entirely, "S-Sorry...!" Yuri whispered, feeling his heart in his throat.

"...How can you see in the dark like this...?" The elder asked skeptically, looking around in what - to
him - was complete blackness.

"...I...I guess I had a minute for my eyes to adjust. It's not a lot, though..."

"Does the puppy need to go out or something...?"

Yuri looked down to the fluff pressed between his legs, and lifted his hands off Jiro's nose to let him
loose again, "...Erh...no, I think he just wanted to play... I can't sleep...so..."

Mikhail rubbed his eyes, "I'm not surprised..." He yawned into his hands, and pushed up to sit, "I always have a hard time adjusting to new time-zones."

"...Sorry..." Yuri sank down again.

"It's fine, really." The elder insisted, moving the plush blankets off his legs so he could stand up. He pawed along the wall until he found the open door, and the bathrobe he'd hung on its upper corner. Threading his arms through it and tying it in front, he groped for the refrigerator and pulled it open, casting a dull light into the long kitchen. Able to see, Mikhail looked back into the room and gestured tiredly for Yuri to follow.

Confused, but curious, Yuri picked up his Akita and shuffled gently out of the bed, hoping not to wake the Tiger next to him. Once he was through the doorway though, it clicked shut behind him, and Mikhail slid the gradient-light switch, and let the circular overhead lamp turn on to a dim level. Yuri watched quietly as the elder went across the room and out through the gap to the foyer just to make sure the bedroom door was closed, and then came back, nodding that it was safe to put Jiro down. The puppy's little nails clacked on the tile floor as he rummaged around.

"They called this rental the 'Fantastic Suite.'" Mikhail started, still quiet but not quite a whisper anymore, and went around to the cabinets where he knew some tea-bags were stored, "It was one of the only places close to the arena that was both big enough for the bunch of us, and not so cheap that I worried about quality."

Yuri felt a bit awkward standing unmoving, but the Russian gestured to the pull-out black wooden table just next to him, and he quietly went about the business of expanding the segmented panels. Once fully extended, it was a table to seat four, and Yuri was able to find a place at one of the square black stools underneath of it. By then, Mikhail had already put on the electric kettle, and two mugs were ready with bags of white tea.

"I considered the Arcotel, but it was already booked out by the time I knew I needed to make changes so my girls could come...and the other Arcotel is taken over by the ISU for competitors and staff, so that was a no-go." The elder continued, leaning against the counter by the glass-top stove as the kettle heated, "It's surprising how few options there are for bigger groups, without having to rent multiple rooms."

As before, Yuri was unsure what to say, if anything, so he just nodded and listened, eyes going down to where Jiro was exploring under the other stools.

"How did the rest of your trip go, at any rate?" Mikhail wondered, casually crossing his arms as he looked forward, "Was everything with Kon okay otherwise?"

Nodding, Yuri leaned his chin into a palm, "...He has a new dog now... I can't pronounce the name, but it means Ghost." He started to explain, "He was out when Viktor and I got there. Scared the Hell out of us by shooting into the air when he got back, thinking we were burglars or something, and nearly ran us over afterwards on that giant horse."

"Even a guy who doesn't have much to steal will defend what he does have." Mikhail mused, finding the image of the scene funny, "Looks like he didn't shoot either of you though."

Yuri shook his head then, "No...Viktor was able to tell him who we were... He didn't seem too thrilled with the fact that we were there. Viktor's love of surprises clearly didn't come from his father."
"Noooope." The elder agreed easily, "He's a slow, steady, and consistent kind of guy...doesn't like change, doesn't like anything new. Everything has its place and knows what it's meant to do or be." He crossed his arms and made a face, "It's super boring...but I guess it worked for him."

"...Staying with Kon was probably the only good part of the whole trip, to be honest." Yuri added sullenly, "Even though it was rough, and stressful, and he didn't seem to like 90% of what we did or said...it was still better than everything else."

Mikhail was oddly quiet for a moment, and looked down at the kettle, watching the spout for steam so he could turn it off before it made any noise, "I can't imagine what could've been worse than spending a weekend with Konstantin Nikiforov."

"...Being too far away from him to protect us." Yuri answered, drawing up the Russian's confused eyes, "Even though he hates everything about us...he still kept trouble away. He tried really hard...I have to give him credit for that, even if it didn't work out in the end." He rubbed his eyes a little, "Viktor said he wanted things to change, so he could get Kon to admit that he was wrong about us...but when Kon said he would rather just let Viktor go than keep trying...it put Viktor in a weird mood. It...was bad enough that we were nearly attacked during our stop-over in St. Petersburg, but then when we got back, we found out that Viktor's old house had been burnt down, too..."

"...Attacked? Burned down?" Mikhail echoed, pulling the kettle away and clicking it off. He poured the piping-hot water into the two cups, and brought them over to the dark-colored table, "What in the world happened...? Why didn't you guys call me?"

Yuri shook his head and looked into the pale caramel liquid, reaching for a tiny spoon to push down on the bag and speed the steeping, "...We think Russia at large has turned its back on Viktor. The Aeroflot crew let Makkachin fly in a crate full of his own waste...so we had to take him to a groomer when we got into St. Petersburg. We went to get the camper while the groomer cleaned him, and when we got back...there were hecklers. I didn't even know until after it was all over, since I took Makkachin into the R.V. while Viktor paid, but they tried to get inside. Makkachin has never growled or bared his teeth, but on that day, he did...and Viktor said one of the people standing outside had a bat. They all threw snowballs at him, but he managed to chase them off... We were outside the city before he could tell me what happened." He said quietly, and rubbed his nose on the back of his wrist as he snuffled, "Someone had recorded the entire thing, but it was such low quality that you could barely tell who was really there. I recognized Viktor only because I knew what he was wearing. I'm sure he's worried that people who know him will see it and know it's him, too...even though Yakov said he got the vid taken down."

"...I haven't seen or heard anything yet."

"...That's good..."

"And the house...?"

Yuri nodded, and pulled the tea-bag out, setting it aside on the small white saucer under the cup, "Yakov said it had been vandalized. Viktor couldn't leave the city without seeing it, and for some insane reason, tried to sneak out in the middle of the night to go look... I barely caught him, and only managed that because I threw myself onto the hood of the car before he could get out of the garage."

"...Yeesh."

"...So after that stressful exchange, we went to go see the house...only to find that it was burnt to cinders." He added, drawing a pained breath, "I...I have my suspicions about what really happened. I saw a tiny section of remaining exterior wall that looked colored, as if by spray-paint... I think maybe..."
Yakov burned it down himself to avoid us ever seeing what was written on it."

"...I see."

"I'm surprised you didn't know about that. Shouldn't someone official have contacted you about it?" Yuri wondered, looking past his tea to the man sitting next to him, "Since you bought it..."

"I'm sure someone should've, but if things are as bad as all that, maybe they chose not to out of spite."

"...Maybe..." Yuri agreed, looking back down to his tea again. He lifted up the small porcelain cup and blew on the hot water before taking a little sip. "Viktor was so stressed out after the incident with the hecklers...but even before that, as soon as we were in Russia, he started getting distant out of fear. He said on the train at the end that he was still worried about being his regular self with me...as though someone would break down the door of our cabin and drag him out at any moment, and throw him into a gulag or worse."

"I don't think you guys should go back to Russia." Mikhail said simply, "Viktor was a national treasure, but all that is gone now...so whatever slights they let him get away with before, are no longer protected."

"I told him the same thing. ...Even though it's been a few weeks since the RSF sanctioned and fired him, I don't think it really sank in what all that meant until we got through the weekend. He's...devastated about it all."

"Yeah, I'll bet."

"Being here in Vienna, for Euros...it's like everything's just gotten so much worse...because he's at the one competition outside of Russian Nationals where he isn't allowed to compete. He was the King of Euros before...but now he's just a spectator..."

Mikhail nodded and sipped at his own tea, "I can imagine... It must feel like coming back from vacation, only to find out you've got squatters in your house, and you're not allowed to throw them out. It's frustrating and takes a long time to deal with, and causes a lot of stress and heartache along the way. It can feel like no one is on your side."

"...I've been on his side though." Yuri pointed out, feeling that pain in his chest and throat coming back. His eyes had been slightly red all afternoon and night, and he could feel the sting in them as well even without the tears, "The whole time...I've always had his back. I was there for him, I comforted him, I gave him space if he needed it...I did everything I could for him...and after all that, after everything we went through, he just belittles me and gets impatient. I don't even know what I did wrong."

The elder listened carefully, and set his small china-cup into its saucer. He looked past his shoulder to the younger figure, "Tell me exactly what was said...and his tone as it changed."

Yuri pressed a palm to his forehead and closed his eyes, trying to remember it, "...We...were standing outside the venue. Viktor was a bit sad about being there as just a guest, but we were supposed to go to the public rink to practice our Exhibition, since he was invited by the Euros organizers to present on Sunday. He had been having trouble figuring out how he wanted to change his part of the program, because of his ankle...and wanted to get in some ice-time so he could sort it in real-time. I thought that getting on the ice would be good for him and make him feel better, but he just-"

"Ah ah...you're getting to the end already. Go back."
"Sorry." Yuri dipped his head, and tried to figure it out as told, "...We were about to go inside, and Viktor said he 'had to put his face on.' I knew what he meant, but I didn't think it was...such a literal thing to him..." He explained, feeling the wrench in his gut as he remembered the imagery of the moment, "He passed his hand over his face, and it was like he became a different person... A version of Viktor that I hadn't seen in a long time...one I barely recognized... He started speaking in that sweet tone like he does with fans and interviewers...but he was still saying things that were his regular self... That if people pried him for details on anything he didn't want to talk about, he'd have to start lying... I told him I worried that I'd blow his cover because I'm a terrible liar, and that I can't hide how I feel like he could. Worse still, I said I was worried that if I gave him away, people would start to think I was the reason he was unhappy, because he was fine before, right...?"

The elder nodded, and turned slightly on his stool to sit facing the younger man.

"He just said that I shouldn't have to lie for him, and that if it came down to it, he'd just do something else to avoid the topic so I wouldn't be put on the spot. Then he abruptly changed topics, and we went inside." Yuri went on, trying to sip at his tea again to calm his aching throat, "We figured we'd go see if we had to check-in with anyone since we were going to be Guest Skaters on Sunday. While inside though, a bunch of people started to recognize him, and we got swarmed. Well, he got swarmed...I was nearly pushed out. I tried so hard to keep hold of his hand so we wouldn't get separated...and I could feel him squeezing, too...so I know he was at least with me then..."

Mikhail lifted his hand and rubbed the skater's back, trying to soothe him in spite of the topic.

"A skater I recognized, Sara Crispino, came up to say hi... She asked about us skating in the Gala, and we told her we were there to practice the altered program. It sounded like she hadn't heard about Viktor's injury, so she asked about it... Viktor was still being dramatic about it then, like he was having fun with it, but then Sara pointed out how Viktor wouldn't have been able to compete at Euros anyway under the circumstances. I guess she was trying to make him feel better about not being in the right league to compete at Euros?"

"Who knows."

"...In any case...Viktor said that if he were able to compete still, it would be because he was still in with the RSF. He sounded a little salty about it, but nothing worse than he had been..." Yuri said, pressing a cheek against the knuckles of his ring-hand, "No worse than I expected he would be, given the mask he was wearing... He said suddenly that 'maybe a lot of trouble would've been avoided' if he hadn't been in Osaka. Sara teased about me fainting then, and asked who would've carried me out if Viktor was in Moscow...so I interrupted and said that I didn't want to think about what All Japan would've been like if Viktor hadn't been with me."

"Right..."

"Sara left after that, saying she didn't want to get in the way of us and practice...so we went to go find some skates for Viktor to rent. We realized the arena only rented hockey-skates, and I said that maybe it was a good thing that's all they had, because hockey-skates don't have toe-picks, so it wouldn't be able to really jump in them..." Yuri went on, swallowing a knot in his throat as he pressed on to the part where it all seemed to fall apart, "...He took it like a challenge though...and then started bringing up all the other risky behaviors we'd done before... My jumping at the Final after hitting my head, the both of us skiing that morning... I tried to tell him that I jumped at the Final because I don't jump on my head, but he just shot it back at me. So I tried to appeal to him by the fact that my injury happened before a competition, and his happened at the end...and if our roles had been changed, I'd have skipped skating the Exhibition, too...but then he just started saying that he couldn't understand me anymore. The words coming out of my mouth were just the incomprehensible honks
"I got it."

"We got into a bit of an argument at that point... He kept *wonk wonk*’ing me, and I tried to appeal to him by being serious...but he kept dismissing me. By the end of it, he just said that if I had my reasons for skating with a head injury, he could have reasons for skating on his bad ankle, and got short with me when I said I didn't know how to respond. He was like...‘well, you put your skates on, and we go practice...’ as though I could anymore." Yuri shot his head up, eyes redder than before, "He knows I can't skate when my head's somewhere else. He *knows* that...and he told me to lace-up anyway."

"Shhh... Breathe..." Mikhail advised, trying to keep the volume down.

Yuri lowered his head again, cringing slightly, "...I was just...so dumbfounded... I told him he was being a smart-ass, and asked why he was being so mean all of a sudden, because I thought he liked it that I worried about him. He just said it didn't feel like I was worrying about him, but that I was doubting and smothering him instead. After that, I was just so hurt that I put my blades on in silence and followed him to the rink. He wouldn't talk to me after that...he wouldn't hold my hand...he didn't even look back when he got on the ice." He slid forward on his elbows until his forehead pressed to his crossed arms, "I don't...even know how long it took for him to realize I wasn't behind him anymore... He started practicing jumps as soon as he got out there...like he was sticking it to me. I...I never bothered to follow him out there. I just left... No one in the crowd seemed to know who I was and no one cared that I wasn't there... No one even asked where I was... No one tried to reach out until Yuri did...not one person...not even Viktor... I didn't hear from him until after I got here and had showered already...and it was only because I hadn't answered Chris' message..."

"...I see..."

"I don't know what to think or say about it anymore... I feel like Viktor washed his hands of me, and was only checking in after so long because he was worried what others might think if he *didn't.*"

"You could tell him that."

"I c-can't tell him anything anymore..." Yuri lamented, "It's all just 'wonk wonk wonk' to him now..."

"Well, what would you want to say if he *did* hear you?" Mikhail wondered, raising a hand in an attempt to reset the part in his hair, moving it over his right eye, and flipped the extra hair over the left. Yuri's watery eyes blinked at him, but he shrugged, "I know I'm a poor substitute, but...it worked for Yura back in Bordeaux...so..."

Yuri just rubbed his eyes and shook his head, "...It's...stupid how much you look like him..."

"Maybe it'll help then. You know I won't dismiss what you have to say."

Yuri went quiet though, staring at the half-empty cup of tea before him. Jiro's cold nose snuffled around his toes and grabbed his attention, and he leaned down to pick the puppy up to help with his nerves. With the Akita on his lap, Yuri tried to gather his courage, "...Ehm...V-Viktor..." He started, feeling a little ridiculous at first, "...I don't...understand why you think I'm smothering you...when I've been trying to protect you from your own excessive ambition... You've...practically encouraged me...all this time...especially since we were in Detroit, and you joked...maybe seriously...about how
you felt like you'd suddenly become the Beta between us...and how you felt relieved that you could leave things to me... You even said that you liked how I worried about you...and even though you hated being hurt, when I told you to go easy on that ankle...at least until now...I didn't think you hated me for pointing it out..."

Mikhail could feel his heart hurt, but he knew he couldn't say anything. His voice sounded nothing like his nephew's. Even the accent was all wrong.

"You know I wasn't trying to hold you back out of spite... With everything you could stand to lose if you hurt yourself again though...I felt like I... Like I had to be the annoying bug on your shoulder, stopping you from overdoing it..." Yuri continued, lowering his head a little, "...You're always looking to amaze and surprise people... You want so badly to prove to the RSF that they can't stop you... But you... have such a bad habit of making stupid decisions without thinking... And for what...!? You've won the Euros Championships more times than I have fingers... what could you possibly need to prove here? Why can't you just take it easy for once? People are going to understand that you're still recovering from an injury, and they're gonna cheer for you anyway! The Exhibition isn't even being scored! But Four Continents and the Olympics are, and they're right around the corner!"

He lifted a hand to rub the wet from his eyes, and pressed it to the front of his sore throat after, "...If you get excited and do something to mess up your ankle again, that could be it for the rest of the season, AND your career."

The volume was increasing, but it was impossible to abort the situation...not that Mikhail would've wanted to anyway. He moved a hand up to pet back against Yuri's hair instead, hoping it would calm him a little and bring it down slightly.

"...And I understand, more than you know, how hard it is to quit this... I made you so mad at the Final because I kept doing the jumps despite hitting my head... But the situation really is different..." Yuri went on, snuffling again, trying to keep half an eye on Jiro in an effort to keep himself calm, "...I was... under so much pressure... all season long... After winning that Gold at Worlds, expectations were so high... Look at how many problems we had because I kept cracking under the weight of what people wanted from me... and despite it all, I managed to pull through and get into the Final with both Golds from my preliminary events... How could I just quit!? I'm the guy that broke your winning streak! To get to the Final, only to have JJ freaking Leroy collide with me... there's just no way... I couldn't show my face again if I dropped out... I'd rather try and be dragged off the ice, than just... give up...

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He brought his hand up to cover his eyes again, "I still have so much to prove... With you as my coach, everything I do reflects on you... And I'm having to prove myself as your husband, too... everything is being judged... I hate that you can't understand things from my point of view... No matter how many times I tell you, I still don't think you know what it's like to be the nothing that got to take you off the ice! I used to revel in the idea... but now it's got me so scared! If anything happens to you... it's my fault!"

Mikhail slid forward and off the lip of his stool, and slid his arms around Yuri's shaking shoulders.

"...I'm barely holding it together as it is, because of all that pressure that I feel from the outside... Forcing myself to look at things rationally, and convince myself that things aren't my fault just because other people say they are... But I can't take it when it seems like you're judging me, too..."

He went on, letting himself lean into the hug, "So why... why is it so easy for you to go for the jugular with me?

"He asked, pausing for a moment to catch his breath, "You did it when you first came to Hasetsu, calling me Little Piggy like you didn't care that it hurt me... You did it at Cup of China, saying you'd resign as my coach if I didn't get on the podium, as if I wasn't already terrified that might happen... You even did it at Nationals, just two weeks ago, accusing me of not caring how you
feel, when I couldn't tell what you felt about everything after all the help you gave to Asahi... And now you're doing it again—pushing me away, making me feel like less than nothing—making me wonder if I was ever the person you said I was to you...or if was all just some...lie...like everything else... That Ch-Chris was right...and you only d-did this...for the shock-value..."

Jade eyes lifted past Yuri's head, spotting the blur of a faded blonde head passing before the windows in the living-room door. He dared not mention it. It was likely that everyone was awake by then, but as long as they didn't interrupt, neither would he.

"Th-this stupid mask...that you say you have to wear, so people don't try to get too personal with you..." Yuri continued, unaware of the extra ears, "Why does that prospect bother you more than how much you're hurting me when you wear it...? Minako-sensei says you're always nice to your fans...but what good is that when you're nice to them at my expense...? It's like you care more about what they think than you do what I think... It kills me to have to wonder how long it even took for you to notice I was gone today... Minutes? Hours? Did it even bother you? You looked like you were having so much fun without me there." He cried, feeling how the felt of the bath-robe was damp about his face. He drew a few pained breaths, but then lifted up on his own again and coughed, "...I don't...even know what to say or think anymore... Maybe I just...got in over my head...thinking a super-star could love someone like me...

"I don't want to throw off your train of thought, but I can't stand to hear you depreciate yourself anymore..." Mikhail finally said, "I know for a fact that Viktor loves you more than anything. You're all he talked about and wanted when we were in Russia before NHK. He's a useless lump without you. He really fucked up yesterday, but it's not because he doesn't care about you."

Yuri was a liquid mess as he looked up, but those words couldn't get rid of the fear in his eyes, "...Wh-what...am I supposed to do though...? I c-can't...face him like this..."

"Let me talk to him first then..." The elder suggested, "I'll take what you said here and tell him...that way he knows what he's walking into when it's time. I should probably talk to him about what happened in Russia anyway... Just...for now, settle down, finish the tea...try to get a little more sleep before the sun comes up. Maybe you'll find it easier, now that you've gotten all this off your chest, right?"

"...R...right..."

Mikhail reached his arms forward to hug the younger man again, "It's gonna be okay. Everyone here loves you, too. We'll take care of this as a family. Viktor needs an education on how those work anyway..."

Yuri nodded against the elder's shoulder, and hiccupped a few pained breaths.
The sliver of light that came through the curtains was an unwelcome sight to tired blue eyes. To Viktor's sights, it just looked like the edge of the knife that had been pierced straight through him since the night before...the same sort he imagined Yuri had sticking out of himself, too. The kind that had his fingerprints all over the handle.

Viktor blinked suddenly and jerked awake; fully and truly awake. The light was gone...so was the knife's edge. The room returned to pitch darkness, and the beleaguered Russian collapsed back down into a heap.

The huge bed felt entirely empty, even with the lumpy form of Chris lying some distance away. Makkachin was lapping at a bowl of water on the floor nearby, but eventually clambered back up onto the blankets, turning in place like a cat a few times before flopping down. It was some comfort to have the poodle in arm's reach, but Makkachin's scratchy fluff was nothing compared to hot velvet skin in the cold morning air.

...Why do I keep doing this to him...? Why do I have such a hard time being gentle when I'm upset...? He's never done anything to deserve it...

Viktor reached an arm across Makkachin's side to rub his eyes, and squinted painfully against the burn.

...But I always manage to make a bad situation worse...like I'm kicking him when he's already down... Is he really just that sensitive...? Or am I...just that jaded towards how others react to me?

He rolled onto his back, keeping his eyes covered against the back of his forearm. One peeked out from under it though and looked up at the dark ceiling.

I'm so used to everyone around me always being 'yes' types... Other than Yakov, or Chris...maybe Yurio to a degree...everyone always did what I wanted, and took the crap I gave them like it was a gift... Have I been unintentionally trained to go to extremes because it's...the only way I've gotten people to react before...? I'm not good at making anyone feel better when they cry around me, because no one ever does...unless I make them...

'Skaters have hearts of glass...I wonder what would happen...if I shattered his...?'

"Yuri."

"...Eh?"

Viktor slid his gloved fingers under his bangs, and moved it over the right side of his head, "...If you mess up the Free Skate and miss the podium...I'll take responsibility by resigning as your coach."

The instantaneous crack could be heard around the world. Yuri's eyes were wide, and shock settled in on his paralyzed face. He looked on in stunned horror, unsure how to respond...or even if he'd heard right.

The coach felt a bit uneasy over it...but then Yuri fell apart. Tears scrawled down that pale face,
dripping off his chin, "...Why...would you say something like that...like you're testing me?"

'Ah! It shattered...!' Viktor thought, feeling a tingle rush up his spine, realizing too late that he'd really overdone it.

.

The same feeling crept up the Russian's back as he laid in bed, but this time, it felt like those shattered pieces of Yuri's heart and psyche were being crushed and grinded into it. He grunted a quiet pained gasp, and twisted slightly, forcing himself to sit up and rub at it as he caught his breath.

...I d-deserve this... I can't keep hurting him...

Makkachin looked up at him curiously, tail thumping lightly against the thick, cushiony comforter. It thumped a bit faster when a hand came down to squish his head a little. Viktor rose up from the warmth then, sliding his legs out from under the blankets, and leaned over his knees as the sharp pains faded away. He stared at the still-darkened corner of the wall, the cool air washing over his clothed skin like ice-water.

...I don't even know what I'm going to do or say to make it up to him... He spent the night away, and had Yurio answer his phone for him...so he obviously doesn't want to talk to me...

Viktor turned back to the other figure on the second of the two mattresses, who sighed a breath in his sleep and continued dozing.

Chris is right though... If Yuri thought he hurt me by mistake, he'd be on the ground begging forgiveness. I've seen that...I know better... Yuri only runs when he feels like I'm judging him... He did it when he blurted out his original motivation for Eros...he did it again when he threw his skates off in Calgary... He just didn't make a scene before taking off this time.

Eyes went back down to the dark corner.

He didn't want anyone to know he was leaving. He...didn't want anyone to go after him... At least, not me.

He sighed and pushed up to stand, heading around the corner to the bathroom. A shower and a change of clothes later, Viktor grabbed up his blades and winter gear - and a pair of sunglasses - and went around the far side of the bed to nudge his friend awake, "Oi, Chris... Chris. I'm going."

Bleary-eyed and still half-asleep, the aforementioned figure looked up, "Yerwuht...?"

"Thanks for staying...but I need to figure things out on my own now. Feel free to use the place before you head out. I'll see you later."

Chris barely registered the sound of the door closing.

.

It was easier to sleep after the 4am chat, just as Mikhail had supposed, and the accommodating group let Yuri sleep until he woke on his own. They obliged in the task of taking Jiro out for morning relief in his place, and offered an hour or so of play before bringing the pup back inside to warm his nubbins again. When they returned, Yuri had awoken...and had found his phone.

Tired eyes were trolling through YouTube, but glanced up slightly as the crowd came inside through the long kitchen. Jiro was happy to run around on the much-warmer wooden floor, and slid around
without a care, yipping excitedly. The noise drew a smile from Yuri's face, but the expression gave more away than even he realized.

Minako took one look at him and pulled her gloves off, "Yuri..." She started, coming over quickly to sit on the edge of the bed closest to him, only to stick both palms against his cheeks, "You look pale and clammy...are you feeling okay?"

Yurio blanched and immediately covered his mouth and nose behind a sleeve, "Damnit...did you get sick!?" He barked, only to get elbowed by both silver teens.

"...Uhm...I mean, I still feel tired, but..." He answered nervously, looking around the room at the worried faces looking back at him. Eyes went to Minako though, who had since pressed the inside of her wrist to his forehead, "...Am I too warm...?" He asked dubiously, dreading the answer.

"Maybe it's just cuz we were outside for a little while, but...you feel slightly hot to me," She explained, looking at him worriedly, "Maybe we can check again in a few minutes, once the rest of us have had a chance to warm up. You do look a bit ragged though."

Yuri nodded sullenly, "...I was out, but I don't know that I got much rest."

"Having a long and painful conversation in the small hours of the morning probably didn't help." She retorted, pushing to stand up again, and watched the dawn of realization cascade over the poor man's face, "...It's not to say that you were loud or anything, but...we were all light sleepers. I think a gust of wind could've woken us up."

"...H-How much...did you hear...?" Yuri blanched, looking to everyone slowly, "...This is mortifying..." He stopped on the Tiger though, "...And...you pretended to be asleep when I came back in..."

Yurio just scoffed, "I thought you'd end up too embarrassed to go back to sleep if you knew I'd been up. You already have enough shit to deal with." He seemed to recoil behind his sleeve then, "If you get me sick though, right before a competition, all my pity goes out the window."

"It's more-than-likely a stress fever." Mikhail reassured, "He wouldn't be contagious. He's just running hot because his engine's been going nonstop for too long. You heard what he's been through."

"You said you didn't get to eat anything after you left the rink yesterday, so you're probably starving," Minako added, looking down at her Yuri again, "Why don't you get dressed. This is a bed and breakfast. You've had the bed...now let's have the breakfast."

The spread was truly Germanic, with an assortment of soft cheeses, breads, jams, and oatmeal. Coffee was welcome, and with it, Yuri felt grateful to his stomach for letting him eat despite how tense and tight it felt. He was still in disbelief though that everyone had heard everything, even if part of him wasn't surprised at all.

...I...guess I'm glad they all heard me through the doors... I don't have to explain myself again... But I still feel terrible for bringing all this down on them on the eve of their getting here. I'm sure this isn't what they hoped or expected to find.

He looked around the table though, seeing that everyone was still in good spirits despite the cloud hovering over his head.
I can see why Yurio likes to be around them. Having a big family, together like this...it really makes you feel like you're part of something.

"You've stopped eating, Yuri." Minako pointed out abruptly, drawing his eyes up, "You full?"

...Even she's gotten into it, he thought. She's always been kind of motherly with me, but there was a part of it where it felt like she was toeing the line between that and being a big sister. Maybe that's why she gets along so well with Mari-nee-chan. He shook his head and took another bite from the brie and bread in his hand, "I was just thinking." He explained, "Because my family works so hard to keep Yu-Topia going...we never really get to have a lot of times like this...where we just share a meal together or something. Someone is always bussing tables or cleaning up...taking shifts with our own food so service isn't interrupted. As much as I regret the circumstances that brought me here, I'm glad I am anyway. ...This is nice."

"You can stay with us as long as you want." Mikhail agreed, "We were gonna head to the arena after this so Yura can check-in."

"...Practice for tonight's SP will be this morning, too." Yuri added, looking to his younger namesake, "Or is the scheduling different here?"

Yurio shook his head, "No, it's the usual."

"Yeah...so you'll be at the rink for a while." He finished, looking a bit unsettled then, "I feel torn about whether I should go with you or not..."

"Try not to worry so much about anything." Mikhail suggested, "Not yet anyway. If we run into Vikt-"

"He's there." Yuri interrupted, "...I...saw it on my phone earlier. It seems I can't avoid seeing him even when I'm trying."

"If he's still there when we show up, then leave him to me." The elder went on, "You just stick with the rest of the group. You don't have to say anything."

Yuri could only nod.

The Erste Bank Arena was bustling with activity, with competitors, coaches, volunteers and associated staff - and fans trying to get a look at everything - all converging. The street outside Hall 2 was dense with spectators, looking into the rink through the road-side wall of windows. The glare from the sun made it hard to see too far in, but there were still skater-shaped blobs inside that passed within range now and then, and everyone got excitable over it. It was crowded on the peninsula in front of Hall 1 as well.

Yuri kept a surgical-mask on beneath his scarf, hoping not to really get sick while his fever was still going. Everything around him felt that much colder though, even under his layers, and he was as eager as anyone to get inside. Covered from head to toe, wearing his dark-blue pea-coat, a long plush scarf, gloves, and his beanie to top it all off, he was nearly impossible to recognize by anyone who didn't know him on a first-name basis. For the moment though, he was glad of it. For once, even Yuri's Angels was a sight for sore eyes...because at least with them, the Yuri in question wasn't him.

Waiting patiently with the group as Yurio checked-in with event staff and got his badge, as well as helping Minako sign-in as the teen's coach, Yuri focused on keeping his calm. Mikhail was like a watch-dog, keeping an eye out for anything untoward, and Jiro did his own job keeping Yuri's
anxiety down. The pup seemed to be happy to walk around more on his own than usual, at least once they were inside the arena, and kept dutifully close to his person's gait.

Minako flapped her hands around her head, "Whew...I'm getting so nervous. This is entirely unlike anything I ever did in ballet."

Yuri felt the weight of his eyelids pressing down, but he turned towards her anyway, "...Don't feel bad if you have to ask someone to find Viktor. He agreed to help you out, and I wouldn't want to deny you that."

She blinked at him, but tried to offer a reassuring smile, "That's nice, but I don't think I'll really need him until the SP tonight. It's just the atmosphere I'm getting used to right now." She pressed her hand to the side of her former-pupil's arm, "Honestly though, I'm hoping that by then, you and him will be on better terms anyway."

He just stared at her, brows crinkled above blue frames.

"...Erm..." Minako stammered, feeling a hot rush to her face, "No pressure though."

Yuri had no answer.

"Let's just go. Yurio interrupted, "Hall 1 is being used by the Dual Skaters, and Hall 3 is for Singles."

Minako squished her hands against Yuri's shoulders and started to shuffle him nervously forward. The sound of Jiro's tags jingling on his harness helped keep the man's focus, and he eventually leaned down to scoop the pupper up against his shoulder. With wiggly and excitable Akita twisted around until he could perch on it with both elbows and paws, and watched the world go by in reverse as Yuri walked through the crowd. With Jiro up so high, eyes started turning Yuri's way, but he quickly settled into the idea that those eyes were admiring the puppy, not questioning who was holding him.

Hall 3 was only accessible through an outdoor hall that came out the northwest end of Hall 1, but on that concrete terrace, Yuri could see through a second set of wall-length windows into Hall 2. From so high up, he could see the entire length of the ice, but because of the sun's glare, anything standing on it was little more than a shadow. Yuri's eyes refocused, and he could see his reflection in the glass instead of through it, and felt a hand against his upper back to get his attention. Mikhail was there, nudging his head towards the doors on the other side...but a flash of yellow-orange light through the glass caught his eye, and as he looked up, Yuri looked back.

The glamour was easy to spot, as the light hit gold-plated skate-blades just right. There was only one person at the European Championship who would be wearing those though, and Yuri felt a pit in his stomach.

Mikhail couldn't help but squint and try to see through the glass better, "...Is...he skating with sunglasses on...?" Yuri started to nudge him onward then, "...What a dingus..."

"If sunlight hits the ice then it can cause flash-blindness." Yuri explained, stepping from the blistering cold of the outdoors to the dry heat of the inside, and looked around at the mini-restaurant and catering area, aptly named 'Overtime Eat 'n Drink.' It looked like the kind of cafeteria you could expect to find on an Apple tech campus, with polished and expensive-looking, slick plastic bucket-chairs, a modern-chic counters at the kitchen. Through wall-length glass windows on the far side, Yuri could see the first seats of the Hall 3 rink-side seating.
The group pressed on, making their way through those very doors, and the hollow echo of blades on the ice rushed at them like a gust of wind. There were already a dozen athletes on the ice; Yuri recognized a good number of them, but there were always new faces turning up as teens aged out of Juniors.

...I don't see Chris down there though...is he in Hall 2 with Vikt-

"Hey."

Yuri was nearly in the rafters from the surprise, screaming loud enough to get the attention of everyone in the auditorium. He crouched down low to avoid notice as he landed, and buried his face in Jiro's fluff for a moment before standing up again. He looked around quickly at the surprised faces nearby, but then pushed the offending Swiss skater back with a hand in the center of the man's chest, "You scared the crap out of me."

Chris just smiled innocently and threaded an arm over the shorter skater's shoulders, booping Jiro's nose as he went, and pulled Yuri close affectionately. The Akita seemed rather confused about it all, and went about the business of sniffing everything he could reach before coming to judgment about the man, "I'm glad you came out. I was worried you'd keep your head down all weekend."

"...I-it would be boring on my own..." Yuri stammered, still feeling his heart in his throat. He spotted Yurio impatiently gesturing at the ice though. Yuri obliged, starting to move towards the grey metal staircase that lead down to rink-side, dragging Chris alongside, "...Shouldn't...you be with Viktor though...?"

"Shouldn't you?"

Yuri cringed slightly, "Don't mess with me right now, please...I'm...not feeling super good."

Chris shrugged, "I thought it was an honest question, but I understand."

Mikhail stopped them halfway down the stairs and leveled Yuri a serious look, "Do you want to be left alone?" He asked, gesturing slightly towards the blonde for emphasis.

Yuri hesitated, but then shook his head, "I'm not...having a disagreement with Chris. It's okay."

The elder waited a moment in case minds were changed, but Yuri seemed confident in his words, and turned back around to finish following after his girls. He kept an ear out though in case the mood turned.

"We missed you yesterday." Chris started up again, letting Yuri go to walk on his own; he had nothing to say in answer though and stayed quiet. Chris drew a quick breath and tried to dispel the awkward air, "I hope you weren't alone for too long. I was worried about you."

Yuri hesitated, but shook his head, and found a seat on the lower row of stands with Nikki and Viktoria as Yurio sat to swap shoes for skates. He set Jiro on his lap and stroked the pup to soothe his fraying nerves, "...I think...we just narrowly missed each other." He said quietly, "I just went back to the hotel though and fell asleep for a while. I woke up cuz Yuri Plisetsky called, and then went to be with him and the others soon after. I...was technically on my own for a few hours, but I was out for most of it, so I don't know if it counts."

Chris had started to swap footgear as well, but was listening closely, "We kept trying to get away, but Viktor wouldn't move to Hall 3 like I suggested early on, and we got trapped by the fans and cameras. You know how they can get when there's competitor's on the same ice as them..."
Yuri nodded quietly.

"...I hope you don't get yourself stuck in an echo-chamber of your own making, Yuri." Chris added suddenly, more serious than he had been, and set a hand on the skater's knee, "We've been friends for a long time though, and I know that the longer this goes on, the harder it's going to be to sort it out later. Do you want to just cut to the chase and have me clock Viktor for you?" He offered with a huffed laugh, "You know I would. Viktor Nikiforov doesn't dazzle me."

Yuri just blinked at him in surprise, "...He...what? You spent all afternoon with him...didn't he tell you what happened?"

"I dragged it out of him." The blonde nodded, "And I've come to the conclusion that he was in the wrong. He made the ill-conceived choice to taunt you instead of just saying what he really meant, and now he's really paying the price."

Cherry-hazel eyes went down to Jiro, and Yuri hugged the pup a bit closer, "...He doesn't seem all that bothered right now... He's having fun with fans, he's livestreaming, messing around on the ice..."

"That's his comfort-zone. Please don't hold it against him." Chris reassured, "It's the only thing he has any control over right now."

"...I...wish he didn't look so damn happy about it...

"Yuri, my dear friend," The older skater started, patting that knee again before pulling his hand back, "If you could see how badly he's taking this, you'd know how hard it is for him to put on that smile. But he has years and years of experience, having to put on a brave face even if things aren't going well or he isn't feeling it. If not for that, he'd have to use safety-pins to pull the corners of his mouth up. So...if you take anything that I'm telling you to heart...know that he's really not as happy as he looks right now."

Yuri looked up slightly as Chris rose up to his feet, watching the figure wave at someone on the other side of the rink.

"Ah...my people are here. I have to get going." He explained, leaning down with a hand perched on his own knee, the other coming down to Yuri's shoulder, "I hope you give him a chance to explain himself at some point. Don't let the mask fool you; it's not meant for you. ...The eyes always give him away."
Chapter 484

CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED EIGHTY FOUR

The venti white chocolate mocha sitting on the rink-wall had gone cold ages ago, but Viktor still sipped at it as he paused to take notes. The thick, sugary syrup had settled at the bottom of the cup. The notepad - with its many pages written-on and flipped away - was put to yet another new page, where more new notes were scrawled by cold fingers. Beads of sweat dripped down the Russian's pale skin, passing under the plastic arms of the dark sunglasses. A thin cord went from arm-to-arm around the back of the man's head, cinched by his hair to prevent the black lenses from flying off.

"How long has he been here...?" Sara wondered, sliding her arms into her Team Italy jacket.

Mila glanced back from where she leaned on the wall, but then turned her attention to the ice again. Viktor had pushed off and was gliding to take position near center, "At least as long as we have...probably since early this morning. They opened the doors for Pairs practice at around 6am."

"Oof...so glad I don't skate Pairs. That's too early."

"Right?"

Sara set her gloved hands on the wall and watched the Russian carefully, seeing the start of a delicate routine. Her eyes moved around the rink though, and its relatively sparse population of spectators, "...He must've been here for ages if the crowd's this thin now."

"I haven't seen him jump once." Mila pointed out, "Maybe people got bored."

"What's with the sunglasses though?"

"Who knows?" She answered, looking to the wall of glass at the far side, "Sun's move off. If the glare bothered him earlier, it shouldn't anymore."

"Staff on the other side are starting to kick people out. I'm sure they'll be coming this way sooner or later." Sara added, looking back the way she came to see if any yellow vests or suits were coming up; there was at least one grumpy-looking figure heading their way, flanked by a rather smug-looking shadow, "Can't let anyone sneak onto the ice for more practice time than they're entitled to."

"Viktor isn't competing though. Would they kick him out, too?"

"Mila, it's time to head out." Yakov called, coming up only far enough to see around the corner. He spotted his wayward skater, then the errant one out on the ice, "...Vitya..."

Their attention was grabbed then by the sound of the overhead speaker-system coming to life, crackling and echoing the end of a murmur before a man's voice spoke with a loud boom, "Das offizielle training für die ISU Europameisterschaft ist jetzt vorbei. Alle athleten, verlassen bitte die Eisbahn." He started, then repeated in English, "Zee official practice für zee ISU European Championship ist now over. All athletes, please exit zee rink."

Viktor came to a slow stop in the midst of cross-overs, and just sullenly glided backwards into open, empty rink, arms falling limp at his sides. He watched the scratches left behind by his blades carry on into the distance. He huffed to catch his breath, but started to overhear the chatter at rink-side, and spotted his former coach there scolding Georgi over something.
...Does that guy still feel threatened by me just because I'm here...? Jeeze...

He turned away and pushed off to head back to the corner with his drink and notes, paying no attention to the rest anymore. His interest in chatting was quite exhausted. It didn't seem to do anything about the dark grey shadow with its bright blue scarf and receding hairline from coming up on his right though. Viktor pulled his jacket off the wall and slid his arms into it, mentally preparing himself for what he was sure was coming.

[You're still spooking Georgi.] Yakov's voice said gruffly, much to Viktor's surprise, though he remained stony-faced about it as he adjusted the way his puffy-sleeved black jacket sat on his shoulders, [He still blabbers on about competing here as though you're on the roster and he's going to beat you.]

[He's never been able to beat me.] Viktor retorted, finding the two halves of the zipper and slid them together, [I've learned to ignore the way he stares at me. I got bored with his burning need for me to 'watch him' beat me a long time ago, since he never comes close.]

[Yeah, there's just no helping it.] The elder agreed, looking back to where Mila was taunting the man in question, and her and Sara went back down the corridor towards Hall 1, [He's letting it go after this season though. Says he's moving on to become a writer.]

Viktor couldn't help but chortle under his breath, but did his best to keep it quiet as he pulled the zipper up under his chin and reached for his blade guards, [At least he has a plan, I guess.]

[Mh... What's yours?]

The silver lifted his head, but with the sunglasses in the way, it was hard to know he was blinking in confusion, [...My plan? I have plans.]

[And?]

[...Be a skating coach? Skate in Gala events? I dunno, whatever else comes up.]

Yakov gave a skeptical look, [Coach to a student who hasn't been seen with you since yesterday...practicing a Gala presentation meant for two, by yourself...]

Viktor grit his teeth, and his hackles were immediately on end as he roughly put the rubber guards on, [Here it comes.]

[People are starting to notice that the Emperor is wearing no clothes, Vitya.] Yakov shrugged, [It's only a matter of time before they start to wonder if he notices.]

The younger Russian hesitated as he stepped through the opening in the rink wall, second blade half-inserted into its shield. Viktor shook his head slightly though and clipped it into place, [Of course I notice. You think I'm wearing these as a fashion statement?] He asked, pointing at the sunglasses strapped to his head, [You think I've been on the ice since 6:30am because I had nothing better to do? I needed to think...find out how my ship got so lost at sea.]

[Vitya, how many times have I yelled at you over the years about the fact that you don't listen?] The coach huffed grimly, [That the only person you ever really think about is yourself.]

[...A lot, but that doesn't mean I haven't changed.] Viktor grumbled in answer, coming fully onto rink-side to get the carry-bag he'd left along the base of the wall, under his ice-cold latte. He withdrew a thick-toothed comb and ran it through his bangs a few times, careful not to snag the cord holding the shades to his face, [I may still have a problem with listening, but I've learned to
compromise and put others before myself.]

[...And how's that working out?]

Viktor shot the man a glare, even if the only part of it that could be seen was the salty bend in his
crinkled brow, [Look, maybe I'm not as good at it as most other people, but I'm trying.]

[Vitya, you've spent your entire life bucking authority, and banking on the power of your talent to
help you get away with everything. Who's going to tell Russia's rising star that he can't stay up late or
that he has to study? Genius like yours crops up only once every few generations. You could've
gotten away with murder, so long as you kept winning. Why do you think the RSF let you off on so
many things they disapproved of, only to throw you under the proverbial bus when you gave up
your Gold at the Final?] Yakov pointed out, watching as his former pupil swapped skates for boots,
[It's a bad habit of yours to be impulsive and stupid because you never really had a check on your
impulses. It's a damn miracle you still grew up to be a decent human being, considering what a
spoiled brat you were.] That just earned him a contemptuous look, but Yakov was unrelenting, [But I
think that's because being kind and honorable were traits that came naturally to you. You didn't have
to be taught to treat people with courtesy because you already knew better. You just took it to the
extreme, as you gained in popularity and fame. You were pleasant and charming even when you told
people no, or insulted them to their faces...so no one knew whether they should even be offended by
what you said, because you smiled and spoke so sweetly when you said it. No one knew how to
be angry with you, never mind stay angry with you.]

[Where are you going with this?] Viktor asked suddenly, stuffing the two skates into his bag as he
stood up. He looked at the shorter man next to him, waiting for an answer, but then realized...they
weren't as alone as he thought they were.

"There are people around you, close to you, who don't know how to process their anger at you when
you do or say things that are cruel. You've made the mistake of using that against them." Yakov
explained - switching to English - knowing who was there without even looking, "I'm trying to get
you to consider the idea, in a way that doesn't directly tell you to do so...because then you won't." He
added, turning to step aside a little to finally go catch up with his skaters, "There's someone who is
ready to tell you how mad you've made him."

Viktor watched, silently and dumbfounded, as Yakov walked down the long edge of the rink-wall to
got to the exit hall's entrance. There, he passed one Rozovsky, and the outstanding Nikiforov, and
exchanged a few quiet words with them both before stepping through and out of sight. Nervous eyes
came back around as Yakov moved on, looking straight down the length of the rink to where Viktor
was still too stunned to move.

Yuri looked over a shoulder towards the windows nearby, and spotted the dwindling crowd of
people who were outside, still trying to look into the rink. A few had their hands cupped against the
glass, trying to reduce the glare. They waved excitedly, as though expecting him to collect Viktor
and bring the Russian to that corner of the building on the way to the exit hall, but he just sighed and
looked away again. "Maybe we should've done this somewhere else..."

"Anywhere else is either in open public, or at your hotel room, and you already said that neither was
an option right now." Mikhail retorted, "If you want to nip this in the bud, this is the best possible
time and place."

Nodding, Yuri drew a deep breath, "...Alright... I'm ready."

"After you."
Viktor couldn't hear what they were saying. He just wasn't sure if it was because they were too quiet, too far away, or because the sound of his heart throbbing in his ears was too loud. Every muscle in his body was both paralyzed and shaking, and the sweat from his hours-long practice had become cold like frost on his skin. The jacket helped in no way whatsoever to keep him warm. His blood ran cold, adding to his chill. Even spotting Jiro trotting alongside Yuri's feet did little to quell his dread.

It felt like an eternity, and instantaneous, watching the trio come closer to where he stood...and when they finally did, Yuri reached his gloved right hand forward, fingers closed around something.

"Here." He said simply.

The world went silent.

Viktor's heart shattered, and tears rolled down his cheeks, coming out from under the sunglasses like two thin cascades. He bowed his head forward, managing only a few abrupt breaths before he collapsed to his knees and started sobbing, "...Oh my g-d... Y-you're...giving your ri...ring back..."

He cried, the bag falling off his shoulder to slide down his arm.

Yuri had nothing to say that Viktor could hear. He just stepped forward and reached down to grab a hand. The tiny item he held dropped into the Russian's palm, and he closed those pale, cold fingers around before letting go again, "It's ibuprofen." He corrected.

Breath caught in the Russian's ravaged throat. He raised up his bare, trembling hand though, and forced his fingers back open again, spotting two white tablets there in place of where he'd thought the gold wedding-band would be. A fresher cup of coffee was offered then, and he looked up through flooded, dark lenses to his Uncle's face, who'd presented it.

"No one is asking for a divorce today, nephew." Mikhail explained, "But there are a lot of really hurt feelings to deal with. And a hurt ankle, and probably a migraine. So, bottom's up."

With neither of the trio wearing competitor's passes, it was an easy thing to pass through Hall 1 without being bothered. They had to go outside though to get to the 'Overtime' venue, and found seats as far away from any doors as possible. With the two pills swallowed and some coffee drunk to chase them down, Viktor felt the heaviness of emotional exhaustion settle in, and he nearly collapsed against the table before him, elbows barely able to hold him up. Even with Yuri rubbing his back with the circular motion of one hand, he still felt as though he was on the edge of a small heart-attack.

Perhaps on purpose, but perhaps not, Yuri stayed on his partner's right side, making it easy for his ring-hand to sit on the table - with the gold band in plain sight - as the left continued on its slow path against a damp black t-shirt. He waited a little while to give the man a chance to calm down again, but once he was sure enough time had passed, he slid his hand up towards the closest shoulder to let the Russian know he was about to speak.

"...I don't...know what was going through your head yesterday..." He started, "In those few minutes after you put on your mask, before you told me to get my skates on... But, there's one thing that I need to tell you straight-up." He explained, watching Viktor's face turn slightly, nervously towards him. Yuri steeled himself, and reached toward the back of his spouse's head, crimping the clip that kept the sunglasses-cord taut, and pulled it down a few inches, "And I don't want to hear any arguments, excuses, or explanations. ...I...don't care." The shades came loose on Viktor's face, and Yuri pulled them up and away, cupping a hand around the man's opposite cheek to pull his sights
around. Though those blue eyes he sought were wet, swollen, darkened, red, and closed by virtue of the fact that they were looking down, Yuri pulled the man's face up and over until he could put a hand on each cheek and stared at him evenly, "...Look up, Viktor."

He drew a quick and painful breath, but lifted his eyes. The agony in them was easy to see, and it was as obvious as anything that they'd been in such a state for longer than just the past few minutes; the sunglasses had been on all day to hide the spectacle of them from the world, not to shield against any sun-glare on the ice.

Yuri steadied himself, and swallowed a nervous breath, "...Don't...you...ever..." He started, pausing for emphasis, "...Ever...use that 'wonk wonk' thing on me again. Have I been clear?"

Viktor nodded.

"...Good..." Yuri replied, stroking his thumb once before letting go entirely again, "...That's...all I wanted to say."

Bloodshot eyes turned to jade on the other side of the table, but Mikhail just nudged his head in the youngest man's direction. He retrained his focus on the pup sitting on his uncle's lap then, keeping paws off the table as Jiro looked around inquisitively. A waitress came by a moment later with a coffee carafe, cups, fixings, and a small paper cup of whipped cream, and set it all on the table. She made no mention of the 'corner of despair,' asked if they needed anything else, and took her leave again when told no and thanked.

Jiro sniffed at the 'pupperccino' before sticking his whole snoot into the cup, licking at it eagerly, and came back out with white fluff all over his nose and baby-whiskers. He licked his maw clean though and looked quite pleased with himself for it.

Yuri smiled at the sight of it, feeling a little bit of relief in the midst of all the tension. He turned his eyes slightly towards his spouse though, wondering if any kind of reply would be forthcoming, but it seemed as though Viktor had taken his words entirely literally and had buttoned up. Yuri reached his left hand forward, sliding it over his husband's sleeveless forearm to find a hand and pulled it out. Taking the Russian's thumb into his grasp, and curling his fingers over the back of knuckles, Yuri slid his right hand forward to cup around the back of the one he held to sandwich it between the two, "I've...talked, and cried, and spent most of the night not able to sleep because I was so upset." He started again, quietly, feeling Viktor's fingers curl a little to return the light clasp, "But after all was said and done...it kind of boiled-down to two really stupid and avoidable problems."

"...B-both...are...are m-me..." The Russian attempted, voice raw and haggard.

"No." Yuri shook his head, "I have to take responsibility for my own part in this."

"I d-don't...unders...stand..." Viktor snuffled, trying to pull some air in, even as he kept his head down.

"If we want to cut to the chase...the problem with you is that it's too easy for you to become someone else. The mask you've cultivated, probably since even before Yakov discovered you. The mask you used to hide your skating from your father, to cover your pain and shame after you left. To fool the whole world into thinking you were happy, well-adjusted, and content, when the truth is that you were miserable, lonely, and afraid." Yuri explained, almost too matter-of-factly, but he continued, "But the thing is...I've...I've done everything in my power to be there for you. I've been trying so hard to make you happy...to become the best skater in the world and make you proud...to fill your heart with happiness and joy as your husband..."
"You have," Viktor insisted quickly, as his strained throat would allow, "I swear you have...Yuri...you h-have..."

"So then why do you still have to put the mask on?" Yuri asked simply, "If I make you happy...if you feel safe, and secure, and everything is going well... If you don't feel like you're alone anymore, and you can count on me...then...just... Why...?"

The silver hesitated, pressing his face down into the crook of his left arm, bending it over his face to hide his wet and stinging eyes, "...I d-don't... I just...a-always have... It's...it's what I've a-always done... At e-every competition... In ev-every...Interview..."

"...You don't need it anymore, Viktor." Yuri explained softly, "The person you are, under the mask, isn't the person you used to be. Your father can't hurt you anymore...and he's shown that he won't, even if he had the chance. He protected us when we went to visit him...so that's all done and gone now. The fans love you no matter what...through quitting competitive skating for half a season to be a coach out of nowhere, through others surpassing some of your World records, through the surrender of a Grand Prix Final Gold medal, through the RSF sanction debacle... signing on with a rival country, and giving up your entire Russian identity to be the husband of the scrub that you quit skating to go find." He went on gently, trying to sound reassuring, despite not knowing if it would help. He leaned aside slightly to press their shoulders together, and gave the hand between his palms a soft squeeze, "Your worst fears have manifested and been overcome. You're safe now. ...The mask...can be put away."

"I'll...I'll tr-try..."

"And I'll try to fix my major malfunction, too..." Yuri agreed, kissing the edge of that shoulder before pressing his cheek against it, "...Because I'm still letting the opinions of others...real and assumed...determine my feelings of self-worth."

Viktor lifted his head up slightly, and tried to look at the figure next to him, though it was difficult to see anything more than a wet blur, "I d-don't...understand... I th-thought...you said you didn't c-care what others thought..."

"...It's...a conundrum." Yuri added, "...I don't care what they think, but I care that you care what they think... Not a lot has changed since I yelled at you in that parking-garage last year. I still firmly believe that...everything I do...reflects on you. The good, the bad...all of it... But now, we're married, too...not just coach and student...and I feel like I have to live up to this insane standard...because you could have anyone you wanted... Your partner has to be above perfect."

Viktor choked a disbelieving breath, and tried to lift himself up a bit higher, "Y-Yuri...I've..." He started, "...I've neveve-based my opinion of your worth on the op-opinions of strangers..."

"...I know...that's why this is a problem I have to fix..." He explained, looking on sadly at those swollen, reddened eyes, "It's part of why I'm asking you to drop the mask... It's like I told you yesterday, that I worry I'll give you away and people will think I make you unhappy. If you just...quit worrying about putting up a front, and you're honest about things when valid issues arise...then I won't have to worry people are blaming me for it, because they'll know the truth... These two problems of ours feed into each other...and it just becomes a horrible, painful cycle..." He said, and hugged a little closer, pulling one hand free to clasp it around his partner's arm, "...But we both have to agree to let go at the same time...otherwise we'll just end up right back here again..."
"N...No..." Viktor snuffled, shaking his head, "This can...n-never happen again..."

"So you'll agree to stop putting up a front?" Yuri asked, "...Not that I'm asking you to divulge all your secrets, but...to be free with how you really feel from now on... No more hiding..."

"And y-you'll agree...to take only my opinion to heart...when you w-wonder whether you th-think you're worthy of me... Since I'm th-the only one...who can decide that..."

Yuri nodded, nudging in a little bit closer again.

Viktor moved closer as well, and pressed the edge of their brows together, feeling a rush of relief flow through him, "...I'm s-so sorry...I put you through this... I never want you t-to feel like you have to...go somewhere else...ever again..."

"It's okay... I forgive you. We'll work on being better together."
Chapter 485

CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED EIGHTY FIVE

Staying a little while longer in the Overtime seating area, warming up on the fresh coffee and the addition of an actual lunch, Viktor took the time to try and clear the mental fog that had settled in the day before. With grievances addressed and amends made, he slipped the sunglasses back on to hide his eyes again, which by then were even more red and swollen than they'd been before. No one at the table was about to tell him to leave them off by that point though.

"So how long have you been at the rink anyway?" Yuri wondered, surrendering his whole left arm to the clingy-clutches of his ragged spouse, "I'd heard from others that you were here before they arrived, but everyone turned up at different times, so no one was really sure. Earliest I got was 9am."

"...Since the doors opened." Viktor answered quietly, "I...needed to think about everything. So I kind of went into auto-pilot, trying to figure out my revised half of the Exhibition." He nudged his head back towards the jacket behind him, "You should see how many times I redid all my notes because I couldn't focus. My body would go where I wanted it, but I couldn't keep track in my head..."

Yuri hesitated with the rim of a water-glass pressed against his mouth, but took a sip soon after and set the cup down, "So you've been at it hard for the last 7 hours."

The silver was the one who hesitated then, but nodded and avoided making the admission worse by nibbling on the edge of a wedge-fry.

"I was already worried that the last 4 would've been rough enough on you as it was." Yuri went on instead, fishing into the pea-coat hanging on the back of his chair, and withdrew the small bottle of ibuprofen he'd carried. He set it on the table next to his partner's plate, "You'll probably need these again later. Maybe we can see if the sports rehabbers will rub you down tonight so you aren't a wreck in the morning."

Half-shut eyes glanced down at the bottle, "...We didn't bring these with us. Why did you...?"

"Yuri has a fever." Mikhail answered simply, "We went to a pharmacy on the way over here to buy that and try to get his temperature down. When he heard you'd been practicing all morning on your own, he figured he could give you some, too, as a peace offering, so you'd know he was still looking out for you."

Viktor's brow crinkled behind the sunglasses and he lowered his face, "...Really took it the wrong way." The elder finished, offering Jiro a bit of the hamburger meat from his own lunch, which the pup sniffed and licked before eating, "I can only wonder what conversations you've had if the idea that Yuri would give his ring back even crossed your mind."

"...I didn't need to talk to anyone to think that's where this was headed." He answered, letting go of his partner's arm briefly to rub his eyes under the black lenses, "I was already worried that Yuri'd had enough. This is...what...the third time just since the Grand Prix started that we've been reduced to this state...?" He adjusted the frames back into place and looked outside the windows to the cold winter sky, "How many times will it take before it's finally enough...?"

"A lot more than this." Yuri answered, pulling his arm free to slide it behind his husband's back, "There was a little while where I was worried you were ready to end it...but the notion of me leaving..."
was never something I thought about."

Mikhail raised a glass to that and nodded before taking a sip, "I'll attest to the truth of that."

Viktor just felt a pit in his gut, but without an arm to hold onto, he moved his hand down to his spouse's leg, curling his fingers around it gently, "...I wish there was something I could do or say that could convince you that I wouldn't just give up like that." He looked back again, and down his shoulder to where Yuri was resting against him, "...You seemed to trust me more when I wasn't competing. Should...I retire for good...?"

"If you're gonna go that far, you might as well suggest blinding yourself and having your legs cut off, too." Yuri shook his head, "I would never ask you to give up your passion for my sake...and besides, I was the one who wanted you to stay in for one more year. I knew what I was asking."

"...Then what can I do...?" The Russian asked, a pleading tone to his strained voice.

"Just what you already said you would do; be yourself. The rest is up to me... Training myself out of my anxiety is going to be hard." Yuri explained, spooning up a bit of his tomato-basil soup, "Jiro has already helped a lot with that. Trying to stay entirely off of social-media has, too...but it's a double-edged sword."

"What do you mean...?"

Yuri lifted another spoonful before patting his lips on a napkin, "I was so preoccupied with the fact that I was invisible at the rink, that I didn't see how many people were actually asking about me online. I kept getting mad at how many livestreams there were of you on your own, so I shut the internet down and just assumed that no one cared that I wasn't there." He explained, feeling a bit down about it again, "...But then people noticed me in Hall 3 earlier today, and started asking why I wasn't around all afternoon yesterday, and why I was with Yurio rather than you now that I had turned up again... So I went back to all the pages that I'd been mad at, and actually looked at them...and felt really stupid about my fears, because it seemed like nearly everyone asked where I was."

"...And you still think people look down on you as being my partner...?" Viktor wondered, "They'd be saying 'good riddance' if they thought you were unworthy, wouldn't they?"

"That's what got me thinking about everything." Yuri admitted, stirring his soup idly, "I'd gotten so wrapped up in my anxieties that I was making up scenarios and opinions, rather than looking at what was really there. Then I spotted Yakov with Mila and Georgi...and I put your old advice into action again."

"...Hug him and he'll help you..."

Yuri nodded, "I didn't want to put Mikhail into the line of fire again when it had only been a week since you and him sorted things out...and I thought maybe Yakov would have better insight into why you were like this anyway. So...I told him what was going on, and he agreed to help me get your attention."

"...I see." Viktor answered, pausing for a moment to absorb all the new information. His sore eyes scanned the plate in front of him, and the last few wedge-cut fries that were going cold on it...and the interested puppy on the opposite side. Jiro licked his lips and started to fidget as Viktor picked up a fry with a fork and ushered it across the table towards him, and scrambled to get at it once it was within sniffing distance. The morsel dropped off the fork and Viktor pulled his arm back, but he turned his eyes up to his uncle, "...Thanks for keeping an eye on them overnight."
"Sure." Mikhail answered, watching as the Akita in the seat next to him made quick work of the potato-bit. "Who kept an eye on you though? Just Makkachin?"

Viktor shook his head, "Chris stayed with me."

"He's a good friend to you."

That earned a grumble, "...I guess so."

The hotel-room door clicked and whirred, and Makkachin was immediately up from his napping nest, rushing towards it excitedly. His whole body swayed from side to side with the force of his tail-wags, and he jumped up when the two men stepped inside. Viktor crouched down to keep the poodle from going airborne, and Yuri snuck past, unhitching Jiro from his harness before the poodle came rushing up again. With the little Akita set onto the floor, free to run around at his pleasure, Yuri greeted the worried boofer.

"It's okay, Makka...I'm back, I'm back..." He said, hugging the wiggly brown fluff, "I just went to stay with Yurio and the others."

Makkachin seemed satisfied enough with the human-noises he heard, and bounced back towards the door again, pawing at it before glancing back.

"Seems he wants his turn outside." Viktor surmised, pausing his disrobing to start pulling the coat-zipper back up again, "...I'll take him."

Yuri pushed back up to his feet and shook his head, "You'll get sicker than me if you don't shower and change. You've been in damp clothing too long as it is."

One finger lifted up the shades from beneath, and Viktor's stress-ravaged eyes looked out into the dimness of the room, "...Even just to take the dog outside, I feel weird letting you go already..." He sighed, "Last night felt like forever. Hearing someone's breathing in the room that wasn't yours..."

"I can relate." Yuri answered, "I think the only reason I managed to fall asleep at all was because I had Jiro with me. ...It'll be fine though; it's just to let Makkachin out. I'll be back before you're done." He said, reaching to cup a hand across one cheek, and stroked his thumb just under one eye, "...So go warm up. We can't both be sick this weekend."

Viktor sighed and leaned into the palm, and stepped forward to slide his own hands around Yuri's sides to pull him closer, "...After everything we went through last week...I still can't believe I put you through what I did... I don't know how I'll ever be able to make it up to you..."

"You promised with me that we'd both make changes, and I forgave you... I'm not asking you to make it up to me, too."

"I know, but I..." He started again, bringing one hand up to thread his fingers around his husband's, and kissed the ring thereupon, "...I feel like I've fallen far short of being the man you believed me to be. I don't want to think that you fell in love with the mask I wore, since that's the persona you saw from that distance over the years. The one I used so the world would like me."

Yuri shook his head, extending a finger to nudge the Russian's lips, as though to shush him, "I idolized you for your skating. I like to think you showed your true heart on the ice, even if you didn't speak from it. I don't think I ever expected you to expose that much of yourself on camera anyway. I got to know the real you over the months after you came to Hasetsu...and
there usually weren't cameras around. ...And it's not as though the two are really so different...but the mask lets you keep up the image of being happy when you're not."

Makkachin whined and pawed at the door again, tail wagging a bit slower as he looked back at the two nervously.

"I'm coming," Yuri answered. He turned his hand slightly, and gently pinched his thumb and forefinger over his husband's chin as he pulled it back, "Go on. There's nothing to worry about."

Viktor reluctantly nodded and let go, turning in place slightly to watch Yuri and the poodle head back out through the door. The room collapsed into an uneasy silence...but, almost thankfully, Jiro barked to break it up. The pup beckoned for attention, rushing forward playfully to attack the Russian's boots, but Viktor quickly bent down to hoist the Akita up before needle-like puppy teeth could cause damage, ",...Those are expensive, little buddy." He said quietly, propping the silver-brindle fluff against a shoulder. A little pink tongue-tip hung out of the pup's mouth, perhaps unknowingly, and Viktor lifted a hand to poke it with a finger, "Blep."

Jiro yipped and wiggled playfully, moving in to lick his silver human's face a few times, drawing up a subdued laugh, but a laugh all the same. He yipped again in that high-pitched puppy voice, paused briefly, and then uttered a very smol 'awoo."

Half-shut eyes, swollen as they were, looked on at the pup fondly, but like most things that day, Viktor fell back into a slump. He snogged the Akita's fuzzy neck and set the pup back down on the floor, offering a head-pat as he rose back up again, "Thank you for being what Yuri needs when I can't be."

Makkachin burst out of the pet-rest area beside the hotel like a ballistic missile, snow kicking up behind his paws with every bound. The footpath area wasn't quite as occupied as it had been the morning prior, but there was still the odd cold-weather jogger that passed through, splashing a bit of color into an otherwise white, brown, and sky-blue landscape. He sat down on a small section of dry concrete steps just near the back doors and thumbed away on his phone.

[...Yeah, sorry.] He wrote, [We were going to take you out before Opening Ceremonies, but with the way things went...]

Yurio's answer was expectedly disappointed, [...I get it, ugh.]
[So when CAN we go?]
[Tomorrow night? Before the FP?]
[Or would you rather wait till Sunday?]
[I'm more inclined to ask when it would be better for you two idiots because you're both probably going to be sick after today.]
[Sorry...sorry... /dogeza/]
[I'm thinking Sunday then... We'll let you focus on competing and not distract you.]
[So before the Gala.]
[Yeah]
[...Fine.]
[I'm gonna hold you to it though.]
[If something happens and we have to postpone again, I'll just give you my bank card and you can go to the most expensive place you want]

[It's not about getting fancy food, stupid]

Yuri jerked his head back slightly, but was distracted as Makkachin came rushing up to him, big pink tongue flapping around as the poodle panted from his zoomies. He slung an arm over the poodle's back to hold him still and looked back at his phone.

[It was supposed to be about just the three of us getting to hang out, like old times. After everything with the old man, and shit hitting the fan every five minutes, and then all of those things getting mixed together cuz of Saito back in Hasetsu, it's just been hard to pin you guys down. I don't care if we go to Pizza Hut, as long as we just get to do something on our own eventually.]

Yuri felt a pit of guilt in his stomach, and shook his head slightly as he rose back up to stand and started heading towards the door. He kept his eyes down as he typed, but focused his peripheries on Makkachin and the path forward to avoid running into anything, [Well, we have a time in mind, and I don't think Viktor and I will be getting into any new arguments before then.]

[Don't borrow bad luck.]
[You can't afford it.]
[Cya later]

[Laters...thanks Yuri]

Fatigue was settling in heavily by the time he made it back to the room, and he dragged his feet across the threshold. Shoes were nudged off, and Yuri trudged towards the bed, pausing only long enough to listen to the sound of the shower running as he passed the bathroom door. It was only as he sat on the edge of the bed, bent down to lift Jiro up next to him, and pulled his glasses off that Yuri saw the two roses, bottle of wine, and box of fancy chocolate sitting on the night-stand.

Surprised, he moved to set his folded glasses down, and lifted one of the roses in their place.

...Viktor must've gotten this stuff yesterday, thinking I'd be here when he got back.

As if by providence, the sound of the shower cut off as he thought the words, and about a minute later, the light cut off and Viktor stepped out. With a towel tied around his waist and another ruffling his wet, silver-steel hair, he came around the corner and was relieved to see Yuri there as he'd hoped. Seeing the rose in the younger man's hand though, he knew that much-needed nap was still a few more minutes off. He ruffled his poodle's fluffy ears as Makkachin came trotting up again, and then stepped forward to sit next to his husband.

"...I didn't want to get this stuff, to be honest." He admitted quietly, touching his fingers under the clear plastic film to lift the rose towards himself, and smelled it, "Chris made me buy it. I...thought it was kind of tacky."

"I could see that." Yuri agreed, smelling the rose as well, then set it back down next to its twin, "Your style is a bit more extravagant. Go big or go home."

"I wasn't even sure if I should buy anything at all, really." Viktor added, "If I were going to, I wouldn't be buying it from a gift shop at the airport, at very least... But I felt like the idea of trying to buy your forgiveness, in this case, probably wasn't the best plan."

"Chris meant well. But...I agree with you. Apology flowers are best used for other things."

"Like trying to make love in public."
"I thought that huge bouquet was for going in dry." Yuri huffed, thinking back on that banquet fondly, even if it was a pain in his arse at the time.

Viktor scritched the towel against his hair a little more before pulling it away, and tossed it to the desk across from the foot of the bed, "Maybe it was. It's all a bit hazy now." He explained, though he managed a smile at what he could recall, "I mostly remember how squirmy you were when we were waiting at the airport the day after."

Yuri's cheeks went pink at the memory of it, "Yeah...that event ended on a high note, all things considered."

"You think we can salvage this one, too?"

"I see no reason why not. It's barely started." He answered quietly, tugging on the ends of his sleeves to pull his hands back through the cuffs. The thick winter sweater came up over his head then, leaving just his thin under-shirt, "But I think maybe the best way to kick-start things is to catch up on the sleep we missed last night."

Viktor huffed a sad laugh as his husband stood up to unbutton his jeans, and he rubbed his sore eyes, "...We're turning into a regular couple of old-people, you and I. Taking naps all the time."

"Just wait..." Yuri chuffed, sitting back down as he peeled his socks off, and pushed his way back up onto the comforter before turning around to beckon his partner to come closer, "If we get our sleep in now...then we can spend all night enjoying ourselves. It's not my competition so I can drink."

"Are you suggesting we get rowdy?" The Russian wondered, curiosity piqued. The towel around his waist came loose and fell away as he made his way up the bed, but it wasn't worth going back for. He reached instead for the second big blanket behind himself, and gave it a good pull to toss it over both of their prone forms, "Cuz it sounds like you think we should both get drunk again."

"Maybe not completely...but..." Yuri mused tiredly, relishing in the feeling of his husband's hot skin sliding in under his t-shirt to pull him closer, "...Yeah, we should go have some fun."
Chapter 486

CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED EIGHTY SIX

Like the living alarm-clock that he was, Viktor stirred precisely when he meant to - 2 hours after falling asleep and 2 hours prior to the start of Opening Ceremonies. After the day's earlier revelations though, it wasn't entirely a surprise for Yuri's lithe frame to feel warmer than it should. There were a few beads of sweat dotting the younger man's skin, and his sparse clothing had become damp, along with the pillowcase under his head. Viktor pulled his arm out from under his partner's back and used it to prop himself up on an elbow, and slid the other up to gently move a few strands of stray long hair from his husband's face.

...This is the third time he's gotten so worked up about something that he's caused himself some kind of harm over it... Throwing off his skates in Calgary and running himself ragged until he lost his voice, then the overly-hot water and scratching at himself because of Saito... ...I...never thought I'd be a reason for one of those occasions myself though...

He sighed quietly and lowered down to kiss his partner's brow, but then held there, nose pressed against skin.

I can't ever hurt him again... I don't ever want him to run away from me again... What happened yesterday should never have happened.

"Mmn...Viktor..." Yuri mumbled sleepily, rolling slightly in place until he could squish himself under the larger frame hovering over him. One arm found its way across the curve of the Russian's bare waist, but he easily fell asleep again once he was there.

Not wanting to bother him, Viktor stayed right where he was, free arm curling around his husband's side to caress his back. It was eventual, however, that the waking antics of the two dogs would pull Yuri from his nap. Makkachin ran up and down the room with Jiro giving chase behind, trying to catch the fluff's ears or tail, nails catching on the carpet. Yuri's eyes opened blearily after the big poodle made one big leap onto the bed to bounce over the Akita's head.

"Guys! Settle down!" Viktor attempted, though it did no good, and Yuri rolled onto his back.

Yuri snuffled and rubbed his face with both hands, realizing easily that he'd worked up a sweat while he slept, "...Mh... I thought my fever would break once we sorted things out... Guess not..."

"Let me get you some of those tablets. Your last dose is probably wearing off, that's all." The Russian offered, wiggling out the back of the blanket-pile so as to keep his spouse covered. His pale frame moved towards the footboard and into the front closet, rummaging for the ibuprofen bottle in his jacket, and returned with both it and a small water-bottle.

Two little white pills went down the hatch, and Yuri rubbed the back of his wrist against his mouth before capping the bottle again, "I guess there's not much time before we have to get to the arena."

"About 90 minutes before the OCs start."

Yuri nodded, barely managing to put the water-bottle down on the night-stand before a yawn settled in, and he reached up high with both arms in a stretch. He slid down the red leather headboard until he plopped back down into the pillows, and held still there. He could feel the blankets and mattress shift a little as a weight lifted up off of them, though he half-expected it to be Viktor wandering off to
find some clothes to put on. Instead, that naked frame came down directly on top of him, followed by
ticklish snog and a number of kisses wherever they could find skin. By the end of the wiggle-romp,
Yuri found himself plopped up on top of his partner's chest and was laughing. He looked down
fondly at his husband's disheveled silver hair, unbrushed since toweling it dry earlier in the day, and
then at those crystal blue eyes, less swollen and red than they had been, ",...You look like you
managed a bit of real sleep, too."

"Maybe a little bit."

"Your internal clock is going like we have to be there to get ready." Yuri countered, sliding a leg
across to pull himself over, so he was directly over his spouse's broad, pale chest, ",...I know it's hard
to shake the disappointment of being at an event that you were originally scheduled to compete
in...but try not to think of it that way... " He suggested, sliding down off his elbows to extend his
hands and arms around his partner's head, putting them within inches of nose-tips, "And
not just because you'll be competing at 4Cs instead, but...next year, the ISU is probably going to
work harder to make sure our little PodiumFam isn't going to be competing against one another at all
in the GP Series. So...if we go with Yurio to his events, especially if you end up choreographing for
him, then...we'll be at all 6 events, and neither of us will be competing in at least 2 of them..."

Viktor inhaled a long breath, sliding fingers under the edge of his partner's t-shirt, "...I appreciate that
you're trying to help...but I need to make peace with this in my own way. This is all just...really
hard."

Yuri nodded meekly, lowering his face down to press his nose down to the Russian's collar-bone. He
took meager comfort in feeling Viktor's hands slide further inside the back of his t-shirt, and the slow
stroke from shoulder-blade to hip and up again.

"...And it's no excuse for the way I treated you yesterday." Viktor added quietly, "So...right now, I
just want to focus on us... Euros is nothing compared to that."

"...I really didn't mean to scare you earlier...when you thought I was giving my ring back..." The
younger figure commented quietly, "If I knew your mind would go there I would never have gone
about it that way. It just...seemed like you were having so much fun without me that...it was like you
didn't care I was gone. I thought I was going to have to win you back..."

"I wasn't having fun." The Russian answered simply, raising his arms up into a clutch around the
smaller man's frame, "...Far from it...that was the performance of a life-time, to keep people from
thinking something was wrong. I even had to fool Chris, and he knows when I'm hiding something,
even if he doesn't know what it is."  

"...Well, you've known him for over 10 years now. I imagine it's harder to pull one over on him."

"He does have more practice than most." Viktor agreed tepidly, "I didn't tell him what was going on
until he forced me to after we left the rink yesterday."  

"What'd he say?"

He hesitated to answer, and instead, rolled them some to flip their positions. Viktor pulled his arm out
just enough to hold himself up, and leaned up onto his side, pressing his free hand down onto his
spouse's chest, feeling the rhythmic thump of the man's heart just inches below, "...Plenty of things.
Most of which I didn't want to hear, but probably had to."

"...I see..."
"Apparently my...prominence on the world stage has made me somewhat callous towards the idea of listening to people." He tried to explain, "And so when people try to force me to, I get...a bit prickly." He said, and lowered down to wedge himself against his husband's shoulder, forehead pressed to raven hair, "...I know I have a long way to go. To train myself out of the idea that being Viktor Nikiforov means I'm above reproach. After spending the first 12 year of my life having absolutely everything controlled by my father, only to be thrust into stardom...and get the ultimate freedom to do absolutely anything I wanted... It got into my head that if anyone tried to control me again, I'd react badly..."

"...I thought you said it was a relief that I took the lead on things?" Yuri asked nervously.

Viktor just turned his head back and forth a few times, "That's different. Being the responsible one between us isn't the same as putting limits on me."

"...So then all of this is because I tried to stop you from jumping."

"...Yeah..."

Yuri brought up one hand to pinch the bridge of his nose, "...I was just trying to watch out for you. The competitions coming up are so important... If your ankle went out again, you could risk the entire rest of your career."

"And what about your head injury was so much less important that you went all-out in spite of it?" Viktor shot back, "The stress you put me under, having to watch you compete even after staying in the hospital for so many hours because you wouldn't wake up..."

"I know, it makes me a huge hypocrite..." Yuri admitted sullenly, "...Maybe I...took advantage of you, too." He sighed, turning his head to stare up at the ceiling, "...Because I already knew you didn't know how to deal with someone who's crying. Not to say that I turned on the water-works on purpose - I really was upset about the whole thing - but I guess...I had hope that you'd cave if I was upset enough about it. I just...couldn't stand the shame of dropping out when I'd worked so hard to get to the Final. I was under so much pressure... I didn't think I would ever skate again if I quit then."

Viktor turned over onto his back then and stared at the popcorn-texture above them as well, "...I should've pushed harder to pull you out."

Yuri lifted up onto his elbows, "But I won Silver..."

Slate eyes turned, "I should've gone in front of everyone and told them I was withdrawing you from the Final. It was my responsibility, and I let you go out there anyway..."

"Viktor..."

"The doctor even told me that your injury might cause permanent personality changes...and I'd already gone through a worst-case-scenario at Worlds last year when you dropped and woke up with amnesia... I was so reckless with you..." He carried on, "I'm so used to not letting anyone tell me 'no' that I don't even know how to tell others 'no'...even if it could mean life and death, or worse..."

Yuri just laid back down again, unsure how to argue that.

"...I have to learn how to be a real spouse...not just a live-in friend with benefits." Viktor said, throwing Yuri off slightly, "I have to place limits, and I have to accept some in turn... I also have to stop treating you like I can get away with whatever I want just because I know you're a fan of mine."
"...When did everything become so complicated...?" Yuri sighed.

"Love is complicated."

"...Yeah..."

The winter sun had fallen below the horizon by the time the Ladies Singles event finished, and an intermission was called to clear the ice and ready the stage for the Opening Ceremonies. The venue was cleared out, and those who had already been there, spectating the previous two events, were regrouped on the concrete peninsula outside. Headlights from parking cars and street lamps sparkled in the dark, with everyone heading towards the arena.

Without staying at the Official Hotel, Yurio had to wade through the crowd to get to the barricaded walkway where other competitors were being dropped off by the shuttle. Being who he was though, it didn't make any difference whether he was recognized or not, and simply tugged down the front of his hoodie as Minako walked nearby. They made it to the start of the walkway with the Rozovsky trio in tow without too much fanfare; it helped that Yurio had put on a plain winter jacket on top of his skating garb to slip under the radar until they were ready. Once they were by the shuttle drop-off though, they paused and prepared to go their separate ways.

"Good luck, Yuri," Mikhail started, extending a hand forward before pulling the teen close into a quick hug, "We're pulling for you. No drama to keep you down this time."

"...Only as long as what you said about Viktor and katsudon is true."

"Why would I lie about that?" Mikhail answered, making a face as he stepped aside towards Minako, "I'm sure they'll be here any minute, then you'll see for yourself that they made up."

Yurio huffed and shook his head, but then shrugged off his scarf and winter jacket, handing them off to Nikki mere seconds before she glomped over his shoulders, "Good luuuuuuck~!" She cheered, "And have some fun out there! Don't be so serious!"

The blond allowed himself to hug back with one arm, but then pulled away again, "...I'll try."

Viktoria just waved and smiled, "Udači." (Good luck.)

Yurio quirked a brow, "I thought you didn't know any Russian."

The older teen just shrugged, "I asked pipaw what to say. So...go go Team Russia. Do good in the skirmish. Score the goal unit." She teased.

Yurio just shook his head and turned back to the two adults in the group. He could hear the start of a cheer rising in the crowd further off as a few fans started to realize he was there, "Let's get going."

He suggested, "I don't like it when they scream right in my ears."

"Just a second," Mikhail answered, and turned back to Minako. He pulled both of her hands up between his own and kissed her fingers, then her ring, then her brow, "No pressure. No stress. It's just like a ballet thing, just on the ice."

"Thisisnothinglikeaballetthing." She retorted nervously, "OohhhhmygodI'msonervous."

"Settle down-"
"Ahh you don't understand!" Minako lamented, "All those years I bothered Yuri just for room numbers, I've kept my distance! Just a fan, admiring from afar! Now I'm going straight into the wolf's den~"

"Wolf's den...?" Yurio chortled, "Please. Most of these guys have been hanging around like bugs on a hot day."

"Most?" Minako retorted, grabbing Mikhail by both arms to shove him out of the way like a big sack of rocks, "Try three..."

The teen just cocked a brow at her. Before another word could be said though, the recognizable shrieks of the far-off crowd were noted - distinct from the ones Yurio had heard a moment before from his fan-group. Heads turned, and eyes squinted against the mass of people. From that distance, it was difficult to see what the commotion was over, but a part through the crowd gave Mikhail a good view of two particular dogs...and one silver-haired head with a pair of shades on.

"Oh, there they are. Right on the corner." He said, pointing, then raised that same arm to wave instead, "Look for the dingus wearing sunglasses in the dark."

Yurio looked back again, and sure enough, the crowd was starting to coalesce around two central figures. It was easy to recognize Viktor then, since he waved back - or at least lifted a coffee cup in their direction - and he leaned down slightly to the bundled-up mass of coats, hats, and scarves next to him. Like before, practically nothing of Yuri could be recognized given how much of him was covered by something, but the puppy he held up against his shoulder was easy to sort out.

The pair started skirting the edge of the road to get around the crowd, camera-flashes following them like glitter. Yuri set Jiro down to walk on his own again, and the pup trotted happily alongside, sniffing at everything as they moved. It was odd to see Makkachin on a leash for once, but the poodle seemed to take it in stride, and jumped right up onto Nikki when they got near enough, sniffing her face before going back down to the ground.

Yurio was more relieved than anything, and pushed his way to the front of the group to look the pair over. He couldn't help but linger on Viktor though, and cocked his head up, "...Why are you still wearing sunglasses? It's pitch dark outside."

The silver Russian just moved his coffee cup over to the leash-holding hand and used those free fingers to lift the shades. His eyes were still a bit red and puffy, as though he were having severe allergies, and he lowered the frames again in front of them, "I'll take them off later."

Yuri tried to pull the surgical mask off his nose, but couldn't quite get a finger to hold onto it when both his hands were full. Viktor quickly reached over to pull the second cup from his partner's hand, and the mask came down easily after that. He hooked it under his chin and drew a quick breath of the cold night air, "Guess we got here just in time. We had to walk all the way here. The train guy wouldn't let us on with Makkachin."

"...Isn't it gonna be a problem to get him into the arena then?"

Yuri pulled the edge of a letter out, "We brought the doctor's note just in case. We wanted to see how Makka would handle being in a noisy place like this while we were both available to manage whatever happens. If it's too loud or rowdy, we can take him back without worrying about anything. But..." He paused and pulled up the second of two scarves he was wearing, "We brought an extra to cover his ears. I think he'll be okay though. Makka's been to the Ice Castle without problems."

Viktor looked a bit sheepish then, "I didn't want to leave him behind again, cooped up by himself
when we're bring Jiro with us."

"We should let these two get going." Mikhail pointed out, gesturing towards the doors, "Yura skates third so he needs the time to warm up."

"Sure." Viktor agreed, moving forward to offer a cheek-kiss to Minako, "Good luck. Message me if you need me to come down early. Otherwise I'll just show up during the second performance."

"Thanks. I think I'll make it till then." She answered, giving the Russian's arm a gentle squeeze of reassurance, "I'm just glad to see you and Yuri talking again."

"Same." Viktor agreed easily, "I had some big plans for tonight that would've been a real shame to have to cancel."

"Eh...?" Yuri quipped, confused, "What big plans?"
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED EIGHTY SEVEN

The arena slowly filled back up again; hundreds filtered into Hall 1, soon becoming a few thousand. Flags and banners were strategically placed over railings and walls, some thick like books, each layer ready to be peeled back according to whichever athlete was on the ice at the time.

It was something of a strategic endeavor to find seats with a good view of the ice, but without a row of seats behind to contend with. After a bit of difficulty getting through the excited crowd - dozens gathering like a congested mob to get a close look at the former multiple European Champion - a row of seats was found at the back of the lower section, along the middle of the long-side of the rink, nearly directly behind the judges. Viktoria sat on one end, followed by Yuri with Jiro, then Viktor with Makkachin at his feet, Nikkita, and then Mikhail on the other end. The section in front and beside them was packed thick with fans, most turning around in their seats with camera-phones out.

Yuri heaved a sigh of relief to himself to finally be inside and sitting down, but kept his surgical mask up, leery of getting sick. He kept his eyes on Jiro instead, watching the pup taking in the sights all around them.

He's so serious, Yuri thought, seeing those triangular ears twist and turn, Most puppies are goofy and energetic, but Jiro is super chill. He looked then to the poodle wedged between their knees and the backs of the seats in front of them, Makkachin doesn't look certain about this. Hopefully he'll relax a bit once the fanfare dies down, and people start paying attention to the rink rather than to Viktor.

The aforementioned Russian just panned his gaze across the entire arena from behind his wide sunglasses, looking down only when he felt his poodle's head nudge under one hand, in an effort to rest it on his knee. He rubbed the pup's head and ruffled an ear slowly, hoping to calm Makkachin's nerves, "Uspokojsja. S toboj vsë budet horošo." (Relax. You'll be okay.) He cooed.

"You think he'll make it to the end?" Yuri wondered.

"He's been in big crowds before, but never in the stands of an arena." He answered, squishing his free hand up and down over the poodle's fuzzy head, "I'm sure he'll be fine though."

It wasn't terribly long before the lights in the arena started to dim, and the ice was covered in a cool blue light. The audience simmered down to a low hum as well, with eyes turning towards the focus of spotlights. A small podium was set-up at rink-side, surrounded by dark royal-blue carpet and curtains, flowers arranged behind, and the logo of the ISU in thin white lines in the center. A polite applause rose up from the blackened crowd as a small group of people came out from behind the display, and one approached the podium itself.

The usual greeting-and-gratitude speech was made, first in Austrian-German and then again in English. Yuri had heard such speeches a thousand times in the many years of competitive skating he'd endured. As such, he tuned most of it out, looking around the arena instead as his eyes adjusted slowly to the dark.

Eventually, he turned his sights from Jiro's fuzzy outline on his lap, to where Viktor held his hand on the armrest between them. Beyond the clutch of interlaced fingers, Makkachin panted softly, head still being lightly pet by his human's free hand. The bright epicenter of light on the podium reflected off of Viktor's ring, and Yuri's eyes were drawn back between them.
...I know that things between us are better...but part of me still feels a bit like I'm in shock that any of it had to happen in the first place. Trying to be strong, to get my point across... Something about this still feels wrong though.

The polite applause rose up again as the speech was concluded, and the absolutely ancient-sounding ISU orchestral anthem played overhead. By then, Viktor had at least taken the sunglasses off, shielded from prying eyes by the dark in the stands. He watched the colors on the ice changing in an array, with a big ISU logo manifesting in the middle via some huge projection machine somewhere in the rafters. The entire white backdrop of the frost was like a theater screen, with giant blade-scratches carving swiftly across its surface, accompanied by the echo of their sound-effects.

The rink then went dark though, and the scratches moved to form a wide circle around the center, speeding up until the lines formed a ring. It suddenly burst down though, as though a massive vortex of sparkling light had formed through the bottomless hole that replaced the rink. The audience cried out in surprise and awe, and watched as the vortex moved around the entire space, giving the illusion of swift movement through a long tunnel.

For a few moments, the optical illusion was enough to startle Yuri from his thoughts, and he sat up a bit straighter as he looked on at it. A low hum of noise was noted rising from the background, felt as though it were the low rumble of some apex predator. It made everyone feel a bit uneasy, but it faded out soon after, making the arena go eerily quiet. It was the perfect time to start playing something entirely different, and the techno-pop electric noises of the OC's opening song started to play.

['Dragostea Din Tae' - O-Zone, 2004 DJ Ross Extended Remix]

The tunnel of light faded, replaced by a singular ring with a bar going through it, as though displaying the wave form of the music across the ice. A clamor of excitement started to rise, the song feeling familiar even if not immediately recognized. Heavy beats reverberated through the entire arena, and the energy of the audience climbed with it, ending on a particularly thick note at the end of the song’s first 30 seconds...then cheering sounded.

Maya... Maya... Maya... Maya...

The lyrics were known, and most of the audience sang out with them, even though the song faded the tailing lines out as though one were hearing them from under water or behind a door. That didn't stop the kareoke of it though. The hectic joy of 2000 Austrians and a number of foreigners singing along to that well-known song just made the arena shake even more than the bass did. Skaters were able to slip onto the ice almost unnoticed.

Differently colored lasers shot beams into the rafters, jolting in and out of focus in time with the beat of the music. An array of disco-lights circled around the audience, swirling like glowing snow in every direction. Even the skaters who had come out were starting to light up, their costumes made up of fiber-optic sheets that morphed through a kaleidoscope of shades.

All at once though, another big beat dropped, and the arena was lit up entirely in a burst, and the voice above was crystal clear.

[0:55]

Maya-hii, maya-huu, maya-haa, maya ha ha... Maya-hii, maya-huu, maya-haa, maya ha ha...

Skaters swarmed around and through one another, their outfits practically crawling with color from
cuffs and hems - or skirt-bottoms as the case may be - to shoulders. The tempo picked up, and the lights dimmed down again, every stanza filling with more energy than the last.

[1:10]

The performers suddenly slowed and stopped in place, with a second group coming out from the different doorways at rink-side. The new group was all ladies, and each of them carried a long baton with an arcing ribbon of LED lights attached at each end. They found their places, scattered across the entire surface of the rink, while the music sounded subdued.

[1:22]

With the overhead sound fully returned, the light-show really began, with the motionless fiber-optic skaters taking off again, swirling in streams around the amorphous blobs of light created in the dark by the swirling batons. Still, the audience sang along.

[1:37]

Tempo picked up again, and everyone on the ice was moving around then, trailing a 'mist' of glowing color in their wakes. All the while, the light-show projected onto the ice itself became dizzyingly complex.

Yuri was baffled by the participation, though not so much until he saw Viktor apparently taking part as well. The Russian really seemed to get a kick out of the whole thing, and new all the lines, just like nearly everyone around them. Yuri glanced aside to the only person he knew who wasn’t singing, "I don't get it." He whisper-yelled, trying to be heard over the rush of techno, "I feel like I'm missing out on something huge."

"I don't get it either." Viktoria whisper-yelled back, "Must be a European thing."

"I kind of know the song, but I've only ever heard it in tiny bits, like when people use it to make fun of someone."

"Oh, like the Numa Numa Kid?"

"Yeah."

"That's about all I know it from myself."

Yuri sat normally again and returned to solitary confusion. The song went on, the audience continued singing with it, and the light-show of color danced along. Towards the second half, the flag-dancers joined those already on the ice, replacing the LED-ribbon-bearers. The cheering crowd was rowdy and clapping by the time the music ended though, and the ice returned to a singular color of light blue for a moment while the last of the fiber-optic skaters made their way to rink-side.

The flag-bearers collected on the inner edge of the rink-wall, catching their breath for a moment while the audience tapered down from their excited adulations. The ice then morphed colors again, bearing the bold red-white-red bars of the Austrian flag, with all of it moving as though on the surface of water. A bit more light came on over the rink then, making it easier to see the colors of each flag-bearer, and soon, they were all circling the inner edge of the wall together, their flags waving proudly above them. In the background, a new song started to come into focus, fading in from quiet as the Austrian flag coalesced and morphed into the ISU logo.

[‘Despre Tine’ - O-Zone - Prezioso Remix]
A pair of announcers spoke overhead, audible over the music as one spoke the German names for each of the competition's participating countries, followed by the English. The flags changed on the ice, and the flag-bearers skated across as their nations were called. They made it through the first six before Yuri spotted movement out the corner of his eye, and saw those sunglasses going on again before the lights could fully come on. A chill ran through him that was distinct from one caused by the cold, and he started to wonder if finally figured out why everything still bothered him so much.

Eyes went up in confusion as Yuri rose from his seat, holding Jiro up against his shoulder. He kept hold of his partner's hand though and nudged his head towards the nearby stairs, giving the not-so-subtle suggestion that they should go out together. Perplexed, Viktor rose up as well, but coaxed Makkachin up to occupy his seat instead of dragging the poodle along in the near-dark, and then followed the younger man out.

It was much easier to leave than it had been to get in, since it was harder to see who they were in the dark, and the halls outside were much less crowded with everyone already inside and seated. They didn't go far though. Yuri set Jiro down on the floor and backed himself up against a nearby wall, pressing himself against it before reaching up to pull the surgical mask under his chin. Breathing in the cooler air was refreshing, but it did little to quell the nerves that had fired up over the last few minutes.

"How come we're out here?" Viktor wondered, looking around, "When you got up, I thought you were wanting to go to the prep-area or something. Bathroom maybe...?"

Yuri shook his head, staring down past his partner's legs to the floor just behind him. He squeeze his hand a little tighter, and looked up to spot Viktor lifting those shades up with a free finger, revealing the still-red and sunken eyes they'd hidden.

"...Did I...break us...?" He asked suddenly, forcing Viktor to gape a little in surprise, "...I feel...like it's different now. I can't even enjoy the OCs because it feels like a betrayal of how bad the last 24 hours has been."

"...It's a bit of a shift, yeah," Viktor agreed, "The mood, I mean. It's like EuroZone in there."

Yuri pressed his hand to his face, and went under his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose, "...I don't know what that is..."

"Doesn't matter, I guess..."

Awkward silence fell between them, punctuated by the thumping of the music on the other side of the arena's inner walls. Viktor was entirely at a loss for what to say, and stayed in nervous quiet where he stood, feeling each tightened and loosened grip on his hand. He didn't know what else to do but look around idly, getting more confused with every silent second that passed. Eventually he turned though, about to ask why they were out there, but Jiro's whines caught his attention first, and he looked down at the puppy, spotting the little Akita looking up at his human, as though with worry.

"...I sh-should never have left yesterday..." Yuri started, quickly drawing Viktor's attention back, "...I should've just...stopped nagging you...and gone out onto the ice like you did... Walking away was the worst thing I ever did..."

"I...don't want to linger on something that we've worked through already..." Viktor attempted, "It's fine..."

"How can it be fine though...?" Yuri asked, lifting his head, "We haven't shared a kiss
since yesterday...and you're keeping your distance, like you don't even know if you're allowed to be near me anymore. If I had just...trusted you to know your own limits, like you did with me in Detroit...we wouldn't be in this situation..."

"You can't take all the blame for what happened onto yourself." Viktor explained, stepping closer at least to lean against the wall as well, and moved his free hand up to pull the sunglasses away entirely, "If I hadn't gotten so conceited then you wouldn't have felt like you had to leave. It's my fault for pushing you away. I..." He hesitated slightly, but sucked in a breath to get his courage, "...I treated you like someone I didn't even like. It was horrible of me. Instead of just telling you that I planned to take it easy and test my limits gradually, I started acting out like a damn brat instead. In all my supposed genius, apparently I'm too stupid to even notice when I'm..." He paused slightly, feeling a knot in his throat, "...No...I knew what I was doing...and I did it anyway..."

Yuri hiccupped a breath beside him.

"I let myself fall into a class of pettiness that I haven't thought about in more than a decade...and I became the person that took everything for granted, and never listened." Viktor sighed, "I singled-out your greatest anxiety about me, and then turned it against you...and for what? Three or four seconds of feeling superior...? It took so long to convince you that I wasn't just using you as a platform for my own fame...and it took two words to destroy everything." He looked aside slightly, towards Yuri but unable to look at him, "...I haven't tried to kiss you because I don't feel like I deserve to. This...isn't just something I can say I'm sorry for and everything is okay again. I hurt you enough to make you want to leave...and I didn't even start to feel bad about it until I got back to the hotel room, and saw that you weren't there, either. It...made me realize something that no one else has been able to inspire in me." 

"...I wasn't...trying to make you realize anything." Yuri said quietly, keeping his eyes down on Jiro, "I j-just...couldn't face you..."

"I know..." The Russian nodded sadly, "But it...forced me to come to terms with the fact that I can't get away with everything anymore. There are limits to the things people are willing to put up with. I've had glancing-blows from people whose opinions didn't matter that much to me...my father, my uncle at times...but nothing really stuck...until it was you. You mean everything, and I still acted out. I...can't accept that you've forgiven me."

"I made you think I was giving my ring back. The pain I've c-caused you is a thousand times worse than what you did to me yesterday..."

"You didn't mean it though." He shook his head, "...In the heat of the moment, when I used those words on you...even though I knew better...I did." He drew another pained breath, and pulled his hand free so he could slide his arm over his partner's shoulders instead, "If I hadn't realized the gravity of the mistake I'd made...I don't know that I would've thought you were giving your ring. I...think I deserved to believe that you were...because it's given me an appreciation for everything that I didn't have before. In a big way...this is even worse than how it felt in Detroit...thinking you'd gotten killed, or put into some unending coma. Because this would've been you choosing to leave me, and then going on with your life without me."

Yuri wasn't sure what to say or think. He kept quiet for lack of an answer.

"...I said it earlier...and I really do mean it... I can't ever let myself do something to hurt you like this again. I have to be better than this." Viktor went on, twisting around on the wall to put both arms over his husband's shoulders, "I just...I feel like I'm slipping. Every time I think we've recovered from the last big problem, something even bigger happens. I'm tired of everything being so damn
difficult... I just want to give up and go home sometimes... To crawl under the blankets and hold onto you until the world turns to dust all around us...

"...I know...how you feel..."

"This was supposed to be the weekend when we reset, and I was able to make you feel better again after everything else that happened this season. Instead, you got stuck trying to make me feel better, and then I turned it all right back around on you, and threw it in your face..." The Russian lamented quietly. The thunder of the music tapered out within the arena, "...I let myself become cynical and couldn't even appreciate that you were watching out for me. It's like I've completely fallen out of sync with you, and I'm struggling to find that rhythm again...so I'm turning back into the awful person I used to be... Feeling like I'm alone when it's me who's pushing you away..."

"...I haven't...made it easy on you..." Yuri attempted, "I've meddled in things I had no business getting involved with...and I've had complete meltdowns over the stupidest stuff...and about a thousand other things..." He snuffled and buried his face against one shoulder, "You'd think I'd grow some thicker skin by now..."

"I should've learned to have a softer touch anyway... I'm the one who showed up out of nowhere... I should've adjusted and been more accommodating."

"I'm the one who drunkenly invited you..."

Viktor pulled back slightly, giving quite the look through his tears, "...You really need to let me take the blame for something."

"...Can't we just blame someone else...?"

"...Like who?"

They each paused for a moment, thinking back...and then both said the same name at the same time.

"Celestino."

It was enough to draw a few laughs, pained as they were. Yuri pulled one hand back to rub under his glasses again, trying to dry his face, "...I thought I was going to be the one who turned into a big mess out here... I thought I made such a huge mistake, and overreacted again..."

"At some point, my love, you're going to accept that I'm a bit of a shit sometimes." Viktor hoped, doing much the same to clear his own eyes, "I'm not as perfect as your dreams would have you believe."

"Only your skating is that perfect."

Viktor hesitated then slightly, surprised, but then nodded and managed a smile, "I can accept that."

Yuri heaved a relieved breath and dipped his head forward, pressing his brow to his spouse's scarf and neck. He hugged tight, and then tighter still when he felt it returned, feeling his feet lift up off the ground for a moment. When set down again, he snuffled another hard breath and pulled back enough to see his favorite blue eyes, "...Let's never fight again...this is exhausting..."

"Agreed..."

He waited a moment, bringing his right hand closer to cup his palm against pale skin. His frame felt lighter, and Yuri was sure that Viktor's gaze seemed to become kinder; less distant and guilt-ridden
than it had been. He felt the man nuzzle into his palm a bit, and the aura around them changed, feeling more familiar and affectionate, like it had been before everything got wrenched out of place so suddenly...and so did the kiss that Yuri finally allowed. Viktor's relief was palpable even through their layers of winter clothes.

Tense muscles unclenched, and everything seemed soft and warm again.
The six minute Group 1 warm-up was in full swing, and it would be another likely 15 minutes before Yurio’s turn on the ice.

A quiet spot was found in the main foyer, and the last bits of lingering unease were put to bed with a little bit of puppy-play. Beside one of the glass walls, Viktor sat on a simple bench, and Yuri crouched down in front of him on the floor, flicking a coin on the tile to spin like a top. Jiro was fascinated by the sight, watching it for a moment before jumping around, then watching again. He swatted at the coin and knocked it over, and Yuri set it up to spin once more.

With the pup's attention occupied, Yuri leaned back a bit, lifting his elbows up to rest them on Viktor's legs where they parted on either side of him. The Russian leaned down over him, arms wrapping around the front of his frame as he moved to nuzzle at his neck. There was comfort in the quiet - relative as it was - and the sparse number of people wandering through the foyer didn't bother them.

When the sound of the first skater's introduction being announced could be heard, the duo knew that time was running short. Yuri twisted around where he sat and leaned forward, threading his arms through the front of Viktor's open coat to hug around his mid-section. He held there for a little while, breathing in his partner's scent; like ice, a very light cologne, and the wool of the suit he wore. Hands moved up and down his back, but then paws smacked against it, too, and Yuri pulled his head out from the dark within the coat. Eyes turned back over a shoulder to spot Jiro cocking his head slightly. The pup seemed to know that it was time to get up and move again...or perhaps he just wanted to. Yuri wasn't sure. He turned his face forward again, and looked at the spot where the suit-jacket folded over itself, then up at the loose loops of Viktor's thick scarf.

"You look like you're ready to take another nap." The Russian commented quietly, watching those brown eyes turn up towards him, "You sure you'll be awake enough for later?"

"For your super secret plans?"

Viktor nodded.

"I'm sure I'll get my second wind at some point." Yuri answered, feeling a yawn coming on anyway. He pulled his right arm from the warmth to hide the yawn behind a hand, but once it passed, a few fingers came up under his chin, lifting his face upward. He opened his eyes only enough to see the shadow approach, and felt the touch of a nose against his lips. It moved to make way for the warmth of a kiss, and Yuri could feel himself melting into it, savoring the length and gentleness of it.

Viktor held for a moment, then turned to kiss again from the other side, and back again after a while. Pressing their brows together, he nosed his husband's lips again.

"It's been a while since you've kissed me like that." Yuri commented idly, feeling the small smile against his cheek, "It's nice."

"Ironic that it took going to a competition to find some quiet time." The Russian added, pulling back slightly to look at his spouse's face, "Everything's just been so hectic or stressful for so long... It's hard to just find a moment to breathe. I've thought we had time...but looking back, it was more like the eye of a storm passing overhead..."
"We should slow down...focus on just us for a little while. We've put everything we had into other people for so long that it's like we've forgotten to think about ourselves."

"Well..." Viktor started, tone moving towards an aside, "...We still have Minako to think about. At least, for a little while."

"Minako-sensei is an exception." Yuri pointed out, sliding his right hand up to cup over his partner's cheek, and curled his fingers through silver hair around the back of his neck, "She's...not exactly the emotional vampire we've been dealing with lately."

Unable to stop himself from laughing at the description, Viktor stymied himself by finding another kiss instead, "That's an apt way of putting it."

"It's true though."

"The others have had an annoying habit of sucking all the life and love out of us..."

"Time to reclaim our L-words."

Slate eyes looked on quietly as those words echoed through Viktor's head. He closed them though and lowered his gaze, oddly overcome for a moment, "...I can't remember when it was the last time that I spontaneously fell in love with you. It feels like such a long time ago..." He said quietly, turning to press his mouth to the open palm aside his face, and curled his fingers around that hand to gently hold it in place, "...I feel like I've been on such...heightened alert since the Final... The fall, then Saito getting too close...then the almost-attack in St. Petersburg... I don't know that I've been such a good husband or lover to you. I've been replaced by this bundle of nerves and tension...and worry...so focused on watching for the next thing to come after you that I stopped giving you the attention you need. And all the while, you've been doing so much for me instead... You're the only thing that's kept me sane and grounded all this time." He said, kissing the palm, then the ring from that side, "I just...feel at a loss for how to turn this around."

"...It just takes time." Yuri reassured, rubbing his thumb over the fingers that curled around near to it, and shifted in place to sit up onto his knees. Rising up to be eye-level with his spouse, Yuri leaned forward to put both arms over and around Viktor's shoulders, and hugged him tight, "You know I love you no matter what...through thick and thin."

Viktor breathed in his husband's smell, and clung tight in return, "I love you, too...through the good times and bad."

"Mawooh!"

Both figures turned to look down...and spotted Jiro there demanding attention, tail wagging. Viktor pulled a hand free to scoop the pup up and brought him up between them, "And we love you, too."

"And Makkachin." Yuri added, snogging the pup a little.

"The goodest boi."

Using ever fiber of her being to maintain something of a professional decorum, Minako found herself stiff as a board. Eyes darted around the prep area, oogling every skater, coach, choreographer, and assorted attaché that could be seen.

"There's so many people, and so many new faces! I feel so out of place here!"
"If you stare like that, people are going to think you're lost." Yurio chided, glowering at her from a doorframe he was leaning on, one leg pulled straight up into the air against himself. "The badge won't mean anything then."

Minako blanched and let out the breath she'd been holding onto, "I know but I can't help it."

"Try to. You're embarrassing me."

She sighed and slouched, about to give 'acting natural' another go, but suddenly spotted a moving shape out the corner of her eye, through the door her athlete was using as a stretching post. She leaned back to get a better look, and spotted Viktor and Yuri there, with Jiro trotting out in front on his harness. It was a relief to see more faces of people she knew, and she waved, "Hey guys."

They both waved back as they got closer, then reached those same arms forward to pull the duo into a greeting hug, "Is that the first or second guy out there?" Viktor wondered as he let the ballerina go.

"That's the second."

"Oh good, so we got here right in time."

Minako quirked a brow, "...Didn't you intend to come down during the second skater?"

"Yeah, but we left the arena earlier and meandered around for a bit. In any case though, we're here now...how are you holding up?"

"...Nervous..." She answered, "I feel like an impostor down here."

Viktor offered a well-meant smile, "Well, me too, so...let's go be impostors together." He said, extending an elbow as he stepped forward. Minako took it, feeling reassured, and let the Russian guide her over to the curtain to rink-side.

Yuri shook his head and sighed a smile as he watched them go, and turned his attention to the Tiger next to him, "How about you?"

"Same as always, I guess." He answered with a shrug, "Viktor knows he's not using his sunglasses, right?"

"Probably not, but I'm not about to remind him." Yuri huffed, putting his hands into his coat pockets, "It probably looks more suspicious than the condition his eyes are in anyway."

Yurio held quiet for a moment, watching as his older counterpart made it to the curtain with Minako, "...At least he seems normal again now. What'd you say...?"

Yuri was the quiet one then. Minako peeked out through the curtain, looking nervous as she kept her grip on Viktor's arm. He sighed quietly and turned his eyes towards the Tiger nearby, "...made him think I was giving my ring back. Not intentionally...I was giving him some pain tablets, since he'd been skating so hard all morning, and I thought he'd be hurting...I didn't expect he'd take it so wrongly. All I could do was give him the tablets and prove his fears wrong as quickly as I could. I honestly feel like I damaged us with that, even though I entirely didn't mean it. We...have a lot of stuff to work through."

"You're going to be okay though, right?"

Yuri looked a bit surprised, but his shock softened into a smile, "You're worried about our relationship? Yuri...a year ago you were ready to jump off a bridge to get away from us."
The Tiger shrugged, "If it was anyone else...I'd say I'm only asking because you two would both be incredibly irritating if you broke up. But since it's just you? Yeah. I'm worried." He said, twisting on one blade-guard to face the older skater directly, "You two are my closest friends. I don't like watching either of you in this much pain. I've seen enough already over the last few months - wrong done to you by outside sources - that it'd be a real shame if you ended up tearing each other apart at the end, after surviving through all the rest."

"...Yeah..." Yuri nodded solemnly, thumbing his ring a little in his coat pocket, "Other than supporting you and Minako for this weekend's competition, Viktor and I have agreed that we need to focus on ourselves for a while. Fix the damage that's been done."

"He's as broken as I've ever seen him." Yurio commented grimly, "He was barely getting his shit back together when we finished at the Final, and then the RSF kicked him when he was already down. But..." He said, starting to step towards the curtains, "If there's anyone who can help him get back to himself, it's you."

"...I don't know that I'll be able to help him with all of it." Yuri admitted quietly, moving to catch up as the teen moved off, "Being here as a spectator instead of a competitor is really hurting him."

"He'll get over it." The young Russian said curtly, "It's only been a month, and you've only had one competition. At some point, the feeling of novelty will wear off, and he'll start to take his place on Team Japan seriously."

"...That's just the thing though... I don't...think this is a novelty to him." Yuri pointed out, forcing the Tiger to pause and look back again, "There's never been a non-Japanese person on the Japanese team before. It's not like America or Canada where people from any and all nations can come be a part of things...Japan has always been very homogenous. As much as I try to make him feel like he's really a part of things - his coming citizenship and our family registry, among other things - I think Viktor still sees himself as an outsider. He was thrown out of the only world he ever knew, and doesn't see himself fitting into this new one. I don't know how to make him feel comfortable with it. I don't...know that it's something I can even do..."

"Then just keep doing what you've been doing."

Yuri lifted his gaze in confusion.

"Remember what I told you about him, way back at the very beginning - he had the whole world in his hands. His aim in life was to be able to surprise people, but was starting to feel like he couldn't do it anymore. Now, he's the one who's been surprised. The eyes of the world are on him, wanting to see what he'll do in response to what's happened. There's opportunity here...to help him redefine himself...not as someone who was sanctioned and thrown off Team Russia - but as a guy who's finally taken his rightful place on Team Japan."

"...His...rightful place...?" Yuri echoed, unsure of the meaning.

Yurio cocked his head back, knocking the hood off his long blonde hair, lips parted as he was about to speak...only to be interrupted.

"Die Punktzahl für Gabe Fernandez..62.91."

The arena cheered excitedly, the roar of their applause echoing back through the halls and into the prep area under the stands. Yuri's eyes had raised as he listened, but lowered again, spotting Viktor and Minako waving at him to hurry up, then lower again to the Russian Tiger standing before him.
"...Viktor stopped being a part of Team Russia the day he got on that first plane to fly to Hasetsu. Coaching you to Grand Prix Silver and Worlds Gold, and onward into this season. He's given everything he has to you, including the medal that he denied to Russia when he gave it to you, too. To Team Japan." Yurio explained, "This is just the way in which his efforts are finally being recognized officially. He's having trouble adjusting because it happened behind his back. Don't doubt for a second that he wouldn't have jumped on the opportunity to join your team if it were offered to him from the start."

"Yuri! Come on!" Minako called, pulling the curtain back, "They're about to call you onto the ice!"

Yurio turned away again and started stepping off, leaving Yuri in stunned silence. The audience's cheers started anew when the Tiger stepped into the light at rink-side, and Minako followed him through, leaving Viktor behind the curtain.

"...Yuri?"

Eyes refocused, and Yuri shook his head to recapture his thoughts so he could move forward. Shoes shuffled along the floor until he was close, but instead of going through the doorway as offered, he threaded his arms around his partner's frame. Viktor's free arm came around him as the other held the dark-blue fabric up, only to lower down for a moment.

"You look unsettled suddenly." The Russian commented, "Everything okay?"

"...You know that feeling you get when someone else tells you something you already knew, and maybe have even said, but for some reason, it makes more sense coming from them than it ever did coming from yourself?"

"Sure."

"That happened...just now, with Yurio." He explained, lifting his face up from the scarf and coat, "...It's just weird."

"...Is that a good or bad thing?"

"Good, I think. It's...helped me understand you a little better." Yuri answered, rising up onto his toes for a moment to sneak a kiss, "Come on, let's go through so we can wish him good luck."
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED EIGHTY NINE

The audience's cheers washed over the small group as the last stragglers came out to rink-side. The volume rose up to a new height though when that silver-haired head became visible, and just as had happened at Rostelecom the year before...and at the end of a certain performance at the NHK Trophy a few weeks earlier...that slow chant of a name soon overtook the arena.

"Viktor...Viktor...Viktor...Viktor...!

Yurio scoffed as he pulled his blade-guards off, and shot a look back at the man for whom the crowd was cheering, "You would steal the lime-light at an event you're not even competing in."

"Don't feel bad," Yuri attempted, looking anxious on the Tiger's behalf, even as Viktor waved at the crowd over his head, "He stole everyone's attention more than once when he was just coaching."

"Sorry," Viktor laughed, bringing his arm down again, "If I could yell loud enough, I'd tell them to chant your name instead."

"Weiter auf dem Eis, Russland repräsentierend... Next on the ice, representing Russia... Yuri...Plisetsky...!"

The cheers changed again, and the Tiger glided out into the rink, reminding the audience who they were supposed to be applauding. He could hear the small section where Yuri's Angels had gathered, and waved at them before turning back to get a final word from his 'staff.' He adjusted the placement of the gloves on his uniform-like outfit, took a breath, and set his palms down on the rink-wall.

"You're gonna kill it, don't even worry." Minako started, "Just stay loose and try to have fun."

"Just remember, this may be the only international competition you'll stand a hope of winning Gold at for a few years." Viktor teased, pulling Yuri out in front of himself and rubbed the man's shoulders as he loomed over one side, "This one has promised never to let a member of the RSF get Gold again so long as he skates."

Yurio just cocked a brow.

Yuri flailed his hands back and forth defensively, "N-no pressure! Just do what you do!"

"...It must be weird as Hell for you two to be down here, wishing me good luck, even though I'm still skating for the people who threw Viktor under a bus." The teen huffed.

"Would you feel better if we said 'boo, do bad, skate the worst, come in last'?” Viktor wondered glibly, leaning his weight against his partner's back until he, in turn, leaned further forward, and those slate eyes could leer more closely, "Hm?"

Yurio lifted one hand and flicked the elder Russian's nose to make him back off, "Just for that, I'll score higher than you did at your last Euros, jackass."

"Oh! ...Do you even remember what it was?” Viktor mused smugly, even as he rubbed the sting away from his safe spot behind his husband's frame.

The teen just stared indifferently, but then shook his head and smiled, leaning over the wall to pull
the pair down into a hug, "No, but wish me luck anyway."

Both pairs of arms came around the skinny figure, and offered a 'Davai' and 'Ganba' in quick succession before spinning the skater 'round to send him off. Yuri leaned back against his partner’s chest and heaved a sigh of relief, "...Is it weird that I'm glad that we sorted things out in time for his sake?"

"No, I feel the same." Viktor agreed, sliding both arms back around his husband's lithe frame, and started to walk them back towards the wall, "It may not have been as serious to him as his grandpa's heart attack last year, but it's never easy to deal with friends who are fighting."

"The rest of us are relieved too you know." Minako quipped, looking back at them over her shoulder, as Yurio moved towards center beyond her, "After we saw you at the airport yesterday, Mik said it felt like there was a disturbance in the force. Even before Yura got hold of Yuri, it was as obvious as anything that something was horribly wrong."

Viktor made a face, but before he could answer, the music above them boomed through the arena and cut him off.

['Inner Universe' - Origa (Long version: 0:00-0:11, then 0:23-1:55, then 2:06-2:42, then 4:25-4:48)]

Yurio kicked off to the side, his thin frame a blur of swift movements. The bass of the music thundered through the arena, making it vibrate. As the lyrics began, the teen thrust into a backward-entry camel spin, and grabbed his black blade with one hand, then both, to lift into a Biellmann.

Angely i demony krujili nado mnoy
Rassekali ternii i mlechnye puti

The momentum of releasing the boot helped him hop through a foot change, and he dipped his head low in a fake-out illusion spin before continuing with his hands behind his back.

Ne znaet schast'ya tol'ko tot,
Kto ego zova ponyat' ne smog...

Cross-overs morphed into a backward-entry twizzle, and he moved diagonal across the ice before setting both blades down for an outside spread-eagle, and lined up for the first jump.

Mana du vortes, mana du vortes
Aeria gloris, aeria gloris

The right leg kicked out, and Yurio vaulted forward into a triple Axel, landing with grace.

Yuri felt Viktor's arms clench around him a bit tighter in silent celebration, but his eyes went over towards Minako, who looked more nervous than her student. He wiggled to lean forward, and reached an arm forward to tap the woman's shoulder.

She seemed to startle a bit when he felt it, but when she spotted that hand offering the nylon loop of a leash, she looked past it to the man holding it out.

"Hang onto Jiro for a bit. He has a knack for being able to calm anyone who holds him."
Minako blinked, but then looked down at the pup, who was glancing up at her in turn with a few tail-sways. She bent down to hoist the little Akita up against her shoulder, and immediately felt the effect Yuri had alluded to; her heart-rate settled a bit, and she was able to breathe. Eyes then turned out to the ice again, ready for Yurio's next - and most difficult - jump.

The Tiger stepped through a 3-turn, kicked his right blade out behind himself as he leaned on the inside edge of the opposite foot, and jammed the toe-pick down as hard as he could before launching.

The audience cheered, and Yurio slid backward on his right outside edge, mentally celebrating the landing as much as the crowd was.

"...He's really owning that jump now." Yuri deadpanned, trying to smile despite his nerves, "It's going to be really hard keeping him off the top of the podium next month..."

Viktor had much the same expression, "...I feel so torn..."

Yurio pushed through a series of stars, kicking a leg up through a traveling camel-spin before finally stalling in place to toss himself up into a scissor-kick, and landed in a stationary sit-spin.

Spinning on his right blade, Yurio curved his body inward to increase his speed, then reached around to grab the dragging left blade, and raised his free hand up above himself. Both arms then raised together behind his back for a few spins, then moved down under himself to switch feet. The right leg went out in a twist-variant, and he brought both arms back toward himself.

As he finished out the spin, he rose back up to his full height, and paused with the right toe-pick on the ice to stop his movements.

Rotating on the pick, Yurio dragged the left around himself in a full circle, then shifted his weight onto that toe-pick.

He repeated the motion from before, dragging the right toe-pick around himself.

Pushing off, he picked up a little bit of speed before raising his arms up to the rafters, and lowered himself down again, right leg dragging behind him as he glided forward, head bowing lower and
lower as he moved.

*Mana du vortes, mana du vortes*
*Aeria gloris, Aeria gloris...*

He rose back up to his feet, and swung his free leg around before moving backwards down the center of the ice. His frame swayed to the tapering lyrics, arms rising and falling as he moved, until the line faded out entirely and the tempo of the music changed.

*Stand alone, where was life when it had meaning?*

Finding himself returned to the center of the rink, Yurio gestured out to the audience as he rotated in place, dipping down slightly as one leg extended to draw a circle around himself in the frost. He nudged off once he returned to center, and started gliding forward.

*Stand alone, nothing’s real anymore, and...*
*Beskonechnyj beg...*

Viktor's eyes followed the Tiger across the ice, thinking back to that first time he'd been tasked with choreographing for him.

*Back then, neither of them knew enough about themselves to be able to define their own image...but they've both really come into their own over the last year and a half. The audience doesn't see them as a kitten and a piglet anymore. They've both become forces of nature, something to be reckoned with and watched closely...*

He looked down from the rink to the back of his husband's head where the younger man was still leaned up against him.

...It's weird to think that I'm the one who can't pick his image now. I don't even know what it is at this point...I'm not even that same person anymore.

*Poka zhiva...* The music continued.

Yurio's step-sequence had taken him to the far end of the rink, and he twisted around backwards to line up his last required jump element; the power of his program was ramping up along with the energy of the song. He wound himself up and launched into the quad Salchow, landing with the archetypical low sit-like landing position, then launched again for the triple Loop.

...*Ya mogu starat'sya na letu ne upast'*

Landing the second jump, he immediately twisted into the start of his combination spin, entering backwards for a camel-spin, arms out to the side before leaning back into a layover variant.

*Mana du vortes, mana du vortes*

Yuri glanced up over his shoulder, spotting the oddly serious look on his spouse's face. That unblinking stare that both watched the show on the ice, and yet cut completely through it at the same time.

*Aeria gloris , Aeria gloris...

The combination spin ended with a broken-leg sit variant, and with the last lyric of the song echoing into silence, he stopped in place. Sweat rolled down his skin, and he heaved for air as the audience started cheering.
Minako cheered and waved before handing the puppy back to his human, and clapped as she walked back towards the wall.

Yurio bowed and acknowledged the audience, but eventually started to return to the doorway, passing through the shower of soft-toys and flowers that were tossed towards the ice. Strangely though, when he did finally return, he looked anxious...more so than he had any reason to be. He kept his eyes down even as Minako showered him in compliments, and took the blade-guards silently, putting them into place before stepping off the frost.

Yuri felt Viktor's arms relax around him slightly, and glanced back again briefly as the Russian moved to push off the wall. He followed along for a moment as the group headed towards the kiss-and-cry; something was off, but he couldn't tell anymore if it was the same melancholy he'd felt from his husband earlier on, or if this was in reaction to Yurio's mood. He only felt himself distracted from the wonder when Minako handed Jiro back.

Viktor and Minako sat on either side of the teen on the bench as they awaited the skater's score. It wasn't unusual for Yurio to be silent as he waited, but it was slightly out-of-keeping that he didn't give off an aura of smug confidence. Nothing really changed even after the announcer called off his score; 96.2, firmly cementing him as a front-runner even that early in the competition. Viktor offered a well-meant pat on the back, but Yurio didn't seem to notice. He lead the group back towards the curtain as the next skater stepped through, keeping his eyes down the entire time.

Yuri hopped up next to his partner as the noise of the arena was dulled by the walls, and curled his fingers around the man's arm to get his attention, "Doesn't he seem off to you? He should be happy with his score, but he looks mad."

The Russian kept quiet, but pulled his arm free to drape it behind Yuri's back, and brought his free hand up to curl a finger over his mouth, "I wonder..."

Ahead of them, Yurio had made it a few paces away, but suddenly paused, spotting the sponsor-logo backboard where the press was waiting to do his post-skate interview. They all looked towards him, ready to get started, but the Ice Tiger couldn't make himself move.

"What's the matter?" Minako wondered, coming up beside him, "Don't you want to go talk to them?"

"...I...can't..." He answered reluctantly, "...I can't focus."

"How come? Your program was practically flawless. No stumbles or falls, spins were clean..."

"Everything feels so tight...like my clothes are all 2 sizes too small for me..." Yurio admitted quietly, a bead of sweat rolling down his cheek, "...And my feet hurt, like I skated that program with brand new boots, even though I've had these same ones all season..."

Minako blinked, but before she could say a word, Yuri and Viktor came up around the teen's other side. Yurio looked up at them with a pleading, worried look on his face.

"...Is this it? Is this...really when my body's finally decided to change...? Right now?" He asked, a hint of desperation on his voice, "It didn't feel like this before... It's only been a month since the Final, when everything felt perfectly fine... Nothing really felt unusual at Nationals either... But now!?"

"Don't think about it too much," Viktor advised, "I grew pretty quickly too when I was about your age. Don't forget, Yuri fit into a costume I wore when I was 16...and now I'm way bigger than that."
"The Olympics are a month away! If it only took a month for me to get to this point, I won't even be able to wear this ensemble by then!" The teen shot back anxiously, clenching his toes like it was the only way there was enough room. "This is going to ruin everything."

"Don't borrow bad luck," Yuri suggested nervously, "The fact that I, at age 23, could wear a costume of Viktor's from when he was your age, is a testament to the fact that I didn't get much bigger than a 16 year old. Maybe you won't grow as much as you think. It could just be a quick burst and then you're done." He added, slipping forward to pull the teen into a one-armed hug, keeping Jiro up in the other, "You'll be fine. We'll get your outfit adjusted and you have a whole month to break in the boots that you'll get as soon as we're done here...and you'll have room to grow, so they won't feel tight at the Games."

"Don't the feet and hands get bigger faster though!?" Yurio asked, twisting around to cling to his friend, "I'll just be tripping all over myself if I have to get boots big enough to compensate...!"

"Not if we make sure your same-sized blades get moved to the new boots." Yuri explained, rubbing the teen's back, "And we'll make sure to practice every day so you never get surprised by anything. It'll be okay."

"Yuri's right." Viktor added, putting a hand on the Tiger's shoulder, "And despite the changes you've noticed since the Final, you were still able to land that quad Flip, too. Your boots and costume felt a bit tight, but you didn't suffer for it. Just take a deep breath and keep your focus on the moment. Nothing dramatic can or will change between now and Sunday night, so if you can tolerate how things felt during your SP, you should be able to finish out the Free Skate and Exhibition without trouble."

"Yeah, just focus on this competition. The rest can be looked at after."

Yurio held for a moment longer, but then nodded and pulled back, taking in a quick breath to steel himself, "...Okay...okay, sorry... I freaked out..."

"You've been dreading these changes for a while. We'll do whatever it takes to mitigate them." Viktor reassured, "So go do your interview. You skated really well in spite of everything. We'll meet up with you again after."
Watching the interview from a small distance, but sure to stay close enough if help was asked for, Viktor and Yuri hung back and waited for the chatter to come to its natural end. Yurio flashed a few fake smiles, bad at is as he was, looking more and more nervous as things went on.

Yuri couldn't help but laugh quietly at it, and sigh, shaking his head slightly as he drew in closer to Viktor's side, "He reminds me of myself, back when you first turned up at Yu-Topia."

"How's that?" The Russian wondered, bringing his arm up behind the younger man's shoulders, and eventually up to his head, sliding his fingers through gelled black hair, "Because he's a bag of anxiety?"

"Well..." Yuri huffed, making a face for a moment, but then looked ahead normally again, "I just imagine what's going through his head...and it's probably just like how I thought of myself in those early days. When I was still a bit of a chunk. I mean, I've seen the video of myself doing 'Aria,' and I know I wasn't that bad...but anytime someone brought up my weight, or I thought they were judging me, I'd always imagine myself 10x heavier than I really was. That my shirt couldn't come all the way down or my pants wouldn't fit. But Yurio probably imagines that his legs are so long now that his costume only comes down to his knees, and there's all this skin visible before his boots start...and maybe his toes have burst through the front of the boot itself."

Viktor chortled and kissed the side of his husband's forehead, "Such a vivid imagination. I don't think I ever had that problem."

Yuri cocked a brow as he turned his head, "Yeah?"

"Mh. I went through my growth spurts with grace and calm. Having the odd pimple was probably the most devastating thing I ever went through, but I learned how to conceal them pretty quickly."

"Is that a fact."

"Mhm."

Yuri paused for a moment, hearing the clock ticks in his head as he waited... Tick, tock, tick, tock...

Viktor's hands suddenly slid up casually to thread over the crown of his head, "Yep, that was definitely the only thing."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Absolutely."

"I see." Yuri mused, sensing that growing tension in his husband's frame. He couldn't help himself though, "I'm seeing Franciscan monks, with their egg-bald heads above a ring of short-cut hai-"

"Thaaaaat's enough of that." Viktor coughed, quickly bringing his hands down to cover his partner's mouth instead, "I'll never get that image out of my head now."

Yuri just laughed as well as he could, and snuck his own hands up to press his fingers to the spot the Russian had been trying to hide, "Oh, what's this? It's all bushy up there. Can't feel an inch of skin."
"But it's getting super thin."

"It's so thick and luxurious, so soft, so silky..."

Rivers were practically dripping from Viktor's eyes suddenly, "Don't lie, even just to make me feel better!"

Yuri pulled the man's head down slightly and kissed the obviously-not-bare spot at the crown, "I wouldn't lie about something that important to you. I'd probably be the only person on this earth that would have the guts to tell you if it was getting thin."

"...Really?" Viktor asked, surprised, and the water-works ceased, "...Why though?"

"Because I feel like you'd want to do something about it as early as possible." He explained, combing his fingers through silver bangs to put everything back into place, "You've already entrusted me with all your other fears and secrets...what good would I be if I didn't try to guard you from exposure?"

"...You don't think it's just a little bit thin...?" Viktor asked quietly, reaching a hand up to rub the spot again like he had to feel it just to be sure nothing had changed in the last 30 seconds.

"You can't see the top of your own head without help, and I think the fact that you can't see it makes what you feel up there seem so much worse than it really is." Yuri explained, pulling his phone out, "But you constantly poke at the very end of your part, where your hair kind of grows out in all directions rather than to either side, like it does everywhere forward from there." He added, lifting the phone up to take a photo of the dreaded area, and pulled it down to show it off, "You see? Even though it looks like an empty space compared to everywhere else around it, it's not even that easy to see down to the scalp at this epicenter." He said, spreading his fingers out across the screen to zoom in, "And it looks exactly the same as it did last year, when I took that photo of the top of your head when we were at the airport in Helsinki."

Viktor eyeballed the photo intensely, but after careful consideration, sighed and nodded, "...I guess it does feel worse than it looks."

"You got the biggest chunk of your looks from your mom's side, and Mikhail isn't balding even at his age." Yuri offered, clicking his phone off to put back into his pocket, "I remember you testing him over it when he turned up at the rink in St. Petersburg...you wouldn't let him say anything until you'd been able to check if he still had hair on top or not."

"Well," The Russian suddenly started, putting a finger against his lip in thought, "In retrospect, I wonder if he's just been able to hide it well. With the kind of money he apparently has, he could afford getting some pretty convincing plugs... No one would ever know better."

"Viktor he's not going bald and neither are you." Yuri deadpanned.

The Russian just perched his elbow onto his husband's left shoulder, and leaned in close with a smirk, staring straight into those hazel eyes, "Are you sure about that?" He asked, poking a few fingers up under his partner's chin.

"Absolutely sure."

"..."

"..."
"Love you."

"Love you too."

Viktor just huffed a quiet laugh and closed the gap between them to steal a kiss, then moved back to his husband's side to wait out the remainder of Yurio's interview. To his surprise though, just before it ended, he caught sight of Yakov moving through on the far side of the hall, heading into the prep area with Georgi. He lifted his head and raised a hand to wave, but Yakov moved on without responding; Viktor wasn't sure if the man had seen him, or was just unwilling to reciprocate.

"Whew," Yurio's voice came up, "That was even more harrowing than actually skating the damn program."

"True story," Minako agreed, fanning herself with both hands.

Viktor turned his attention back to the group, but it was his spouse who spoke, "I'll bet you want to change into something more comfortable for the rest of the night."

"Yeah, probably should," Yurio agreed, "Every step I take makes it feel like my costume is shrinking."

"Viktor! Viktor Nikiforov!" Other voices called, drawing the eyes of the group back towards the media. One of the men in the group was waving nervously, "Viktor! Would you be able to do an interview between competitors?"

Those same eyes then went up to the aforementioned athlete, but he just looked back at them, surprised, then towards the people who had called to him, "...What...? Oh, me?"

The herd of sportscasters that corralled the former champion, splintered off from the main group, and moved away from the bustle of the main competition hall to someplace less noisy. That took them back out into the main foyer of Hall 1, where the skating duo had spent their last minutes prior to Yurio's Short Program.

Viktor looked around for a reasonably-lit area where he could sit down, and found a spot where there was a bench flanked by two potted ferns in front of a painted wall. He made his way there, but glanced back over his shoulder as he felt his hand pull back with some resistance. Yuri looked around, uncertain of what to do, but Viktor nudged his head towards the bench.

Yuri was still reluctant, "...They asked to interview you, not me. It'd be weird if I'm in the shot but not saying anything."

"I want you to be there though."

Still feeling nervous about it, Yuri nervously stepped towards the bench, and pulled Jiro up into his lap as they sat down. The media personnel around them set up a bit of extra equipment, but in short order, they were ready to go, and cameras were focused on the one newscaster who'd brought them all out that way. Yuri could feel the butterflies in his stomach starting to flutter wildly.

_I can already tell what they're going to ask him about_, he thought, looking aside towards Viktor, who looked as calm as he always did in front of cameras, _I wonder if he's expecting the same as me. He doesn't look nervous at all. Maybe he's trying to parse out what his answers are going to be so he doesn't look unprepared...?_
"Welcome back to the ISU European Championships; we're here for an exclusive interview with the former five-time consecutive European Champion, Viktor Nikiforov, who surprised us all with an appearance here in Vienna." The man spoke into his mic, looking at the main camera, and gestured over towards the duo sitting on the bench. The cameraman panned around and lowered down to record from knee-height, and focused on the silver-haired skater. The newscaster stepped up next to the cameraman and looked towards the duo, "Skater Nikiforov, firstly, thank you for giving up some of your time to speak with us."

"It's my pleasure." He answered easily. He pulled his hand slightly-free from where Yuri held it, and moved it to curl his fingers around the younger's man's leg, nudging Jiro's puppy nubbins out of the way to get there. Yuri barely managed to retake that hand before the Akita laid down right on top of them.

"It's been an entire month since the skating world was shaken by your sudden sanctioning by the RSF," The man continued, "But this will be the first time, to our knowledge, that anyone has properly asked you about it. Would you be willing to say a few words to that effect?"

"I'm not really sure what there is to say about it." Viktor surmised, "The RSF put me to pasture, and the JSF offered me a spot on their team, which I accepted gladly. I guess I wasn't ready to retire for real."

"So it wasn't your decision to resign your spot with the RSF?"

Viktor hesitated then, giving his partner's thigh a gentle squeeze, as though using it as a mooring to keep him steady, ",...Well, not exactly." He admitted, "I sort of found out about it after the fact. We had landed in Fukuoka, and were getting ready to greet the JSF and all the celebrations after Yuri had gotten Gold."

"After you forfeited it."

"Ehm...yes." He stumbled anyway, "...Yuri worked exceptionally hard all summer and throughout the Grand Prix Series. He deserved to win that Gold. I had enough of my own anyway."

"So how did you find out about the sanctioning?"

"My old coach, Yakov Feltsman, told me over the phone. It was originally framed as a sanction for the rest of the season...but it was clear that it was the end of my career, especially when the RSF started to make subtle changes to my profile on their website."

Yuri was surprised at how candid and truthful the man was being, and gave that hand a squeeze of reassurance beneath Jiro's fluff.

"I actually didn't think much of it at the time. Yuri took it much harder than I did initially. We had come home with five Gold medals for the full Grand Prix, and had plenty to celebrate despite what happened. I didn't want to ruin the night by being mad or resentful of it all, so I put it on the backburner." Viktor went on simply, "The JSF was extremely excited about Yuri's many victories so far this season, and there were a lot of fans who'd come to the airport to cheer his return. We were even given Jiro here as a gift," He explained, reaching his free hand over to scratch the pup's head, and got a few licks in return, "Our friends and family didn't bring it up though. They actually thought we hadn't heard yet, because neither of us said anything. I only lasted until that night though. I cracked when the town leaders in Hasetsu put on a big fireworks show in Yuri's honor, playing his Free Skate music from last year."

"Why do you think they did it?" The newscaster asked, "After all the wins you achieved for Russia,
and all the coming events, it was almost foolish to sanction you for the entire rest of the season. You were their best shot at winning more Gold medals."

Viktor shook his head reluctantly, but stayed silent for a moment. His eyes were cast down, first towards the reporter's shoes, then to Jiro on Yuri's lap. He could feel his heart race a little, but he felt another reassuring squeeze, and he drew a breath, "...I've never spoken openly about the things that Yuri and I have been dealing with since we've been together." He started hesitantly, getting the full attention of everyone in earshot, "About how angry it's made me that my reputation and skill as Russia's Champion was being questioned because of choices I made in my private life. About how much it hurt to know that Russian newspapers and film were being edited so our rings were never easily seen...or that Russian presenters continued to refer to Yuri by his previous name, Katsuki, even after he'd legally changed it to mine." He lifted his eyes and looked straight into the camera, as though daring the entire Russian Federation to try shutting him up, "...His name is Yuri Nikiforov, and he's my husband, whether anyone likes it or not." He said firmly, "Er...sorry, that came across aggressively."

"It sounds like you've had to go through a lot."

"That would be an understatement," Viktor smiled sadly, and drew in a deep breath before he continued, "I've never once questioned my love and commitment to Yuri. He's my rock, my heart, and my soul. But the way the RSF...and Russia itself, really...have continuously and unashamedly attacked me over it...has made me question how I could've ever been proud to skate for them. It was never my choice to be born in Russia...but I did my best for it as long as I could. If my accomplishments meant so little to them that they could throw me out as easily as they did...then I clearly made the right choice. I needed Yuri in my life, as much as I need air to breathe. The skating will come and go...but he'll always be there."

"So you think it was your controversial marriage that caused the RSF to act this way?"

"...I think they put up with it as long as they could." Viktor shrugged, "But giving my Gold medal to Yuri at the Final was the last straw, I guess. Even though I wouldn't have been able to do so again at Euros, since Yuri can't compete here, or at the Olympics, where I would've been barred from even being his coach, if I'd chosen to compete on Russia's behalf. What I did at the Grand Prix Final was a one-off. He's given me enough grief on his own...I'd be sleeping on the couch if I tried it again."

Yuri smiled nervously, but the rest of the crew took the joke for what it was, and even Viktor laughed a little bit before continuing.

"Yuri asked me in Barcelona, to stay in competitive skating with him for another year. I told him that, in exchange, he'd have to win five World Championships for me." He explained, leaning aside to nose his partner's cheek adoringly, and kissed there for good measure, "He's already made good on one. He'll win another in a few months...and another next year, and the year after that, and the year after that for the fifth. I have no doubt in my mind that he's the best skater in the world, and it's truly my honor to be his coach. I wouldn't give it up for anything...even my place on the Russian team, and every medal I won while part of it."

"V-Viktor..." Yuri stammered, his face going red.

"Don't be modest, my love." The silver retorted, bringing his free hand up to tap a finger against his husband's nose, "You asked me once to be yours until you retired, and I told you that I hope you never do."

"Do you intend on going back to coaching exclusively after this debacle with the RSF?" The reporter asked.
"Not for a little while," He answered, looking at him again, "The Japanese Skating Federation has generously offered a spot to me on Team Japan for the Winter Games, and I had intended to skate for fun next year, just to see how far I can go even if I'm not pushing myself as hard as I have been up until now. After that, I'll be satisfied with the finale of my skating career. I won't mind retiring on my own terms at that point. It's just a bit hard to take when someone else makes that choice for you when you're not actually ready, you know?"

"So you intend to give up your Russian citizenship in order to skate for Japan?"

"I have to, don't I?" Viktor smiled sweetly, even if there was a hint of sadness in it, "It hasn't been easy to adjust to all these changes. I'm still Russian, even if my paperwork changes. My roots are back there, in St. Petersburg...and a part of me will always yearn for it. But my home is where my husband, my dogs, and my family are...and those things are all in Hasetsu now. Russia has changed...or maybe I did, and I'm just now becoming aware of a side of the motherland that I never had to see before. Whatever it is...I have to do what's best for me," He said, turning to press his chin and nose to Yuri's shoulder, "...for us... And if that means walking away, then that's what I will do. I have a bright and promising future with the JSF, and they've accepted me into their ranks, already knowing my relationship with Yuri. Even though Japan is still fairly conservative, they still asked me to join them, and I intend to do whatever I can to make that worthwhile. If it's skating competitively, or coaching, I'll do it."

"Does that mean you're open to coaching other people from Japan?"

"Right now?" Viktor blanched, "Er...ah... Not yet. As long as I'm still competing, I can only coach one other person, and that person right now is Yuri."

"That's fair. Being a coach and competitor at the same time must stretch you fairly thin."

"It does, yeah. I don't want to short-change anyone by taking on additional students, only to fail them because I can't give them the attention they need."

Yuri deadpanned, but couldn't stop himself from interrupting anyway, "...Viktor's coaching methods with me are unique. I don't think I could tolerate it if he coached someone else if I'm still competing."

Viktor brought a hand up in front of his mouth, "Yuri~! Wow~!"

The younger man doubled-down though, "So...I guess I'll dash everyone's hopes until further notice. I need Viktor all to myself until I retire."

The reporter looked between the two, but settled on the Russian, "Coach Viktor, what say you?"

He just smiled though, "If hubby says no, then it's a no, I'm afraid. He has the final say on things like that."

"Do you mean to say that, even though he's your student, he's also your manager?"

"Quite the conundrum, wouldn't you say?" He laughed, "It makes sense to us, at least."

"The skating world has been quite cross with Yuri since he took you off the ice last year. But I suppose they'd be willing to forgive him a little if it's true that he's the one who also brought you back." The reporter mused, "But let's bring things back to Vienna. Since you're not competing for Russia anymore, what brought you to Euros?"

Viktor pulled his hand off that warm thigh and slid behind his husband's back, clinging to the backside of the nearest shoulder as he let himself relax a little, "We kind of wanted to come anyway.
Yuri Plisetsky has become part of the extended family in Hasetsu, so we wanted to show him our support, too."

"Even though he skates for the RSF?"

"In spite of it." Viktor nodded, then rested his chin down on that shoulder again, "We don't judge him for the colors he wears. He's still our friend. I've even agreed to choreograph for him next year, and he has a new Japanese coach, too. You saw her earlier. Minako Okukawa."

"Where did she come from? She's never been a skating coach before."

"Oh, she's a ballet instructor in Hasetsu." Yuri chimed in, "She's been a friend of my family's since my mom and her were in school together. It was actually her suggestion that got me into figure skating in the first place. Yuri Plisetsky is in capable hands with Minako-sensei."

"Are you considering the idea of pulling him into the JSF as well?"

Yuri and Viktor blinked in confusion, and looked at one another briefly, then back at the sportscaster who'd posed the question. They each smiled nervously, and shook their heads, "No way. That's poaching."

"One final question then... If you could give one message to the RSF, what would it be?"

Yuri side-eyed his partner quietly, and Viktor gained a look of consideration, humming to himself in thought. The Russian waited a moment though, carefully choosing his words, then looked to the camera and smiled, "Ty požalees' o tom, čto sdelal." (You'll regret what you've done.)
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED NINETY ONE

Equipment was disassembled and hands were shaken, and the media group slowly made their way back into the competitor's hall to re-take their places for post-skate interviews. Viktor and Yuri held back in the foyer, close to where the interview had been done, watching the group move away from them.

It was oddly quiet once the gaggle had gone away.

Viktor exhaled a long breath, and slumped forward a little, "...I can't believe I did that..."

Yuri waited a moment, but couldn't hide that smile, "I'm...oddly proud of you for what you said."

"...You are?"

"Mh." He nodded, pulling his hand from a coat pocket to sneak it into his husband's, and threaded their fingers together therein, "I asked you not to put the mask back on...and you didn't. You answered their questions with honesty, and you didn't even get nasty about it. It was classy, polite...but on point."

"You don't think it was too much?"

"I think you said just enough. There was a hint of venom where it needed to be, but I think you're entitled to that." Yuri reassured, nudging in a bit closer, and kissed the back edge of his husband's shoulder. He turned slightly though and looked up at the man's eyes, seeing at least one through a part in silver bangs, "What did you say at the end though...?"

Viktor drew a deep breath, "The only thing I may regret later."

"...What do you mean?"

"I told the RSF, in no uncertain terms, that they may come to regret how they handled me." He explained, feeling a bit of a chill down his back, "I just...couldn't stop the words from coming out. It's like I was being compelled."

"Well, it's not like what you said wasn't true."

"...I spotted Yakov earlier, when Yurio was finishing up his interview." Viktork explained, turning slightly to face his partner, and brought his free arm up over Yuri's shoulders, "He was looking our way, and I waved at him, but he didn't respond. He just walked off like I wasn't there."

Yuri made a face, "It's not entirely out of keeping with him." He offered, "Remember how prickly he was at Cup of China last year? You were just asking if he wanted to go to hot-pot with us, and he actually said it made him sick that you were 'pretending' to be a coach, and not to talk to him unless you were ready to beg for your spot back as an athlete."

"...I know, but...it's been a long time since then. He stopped punishing me for being a coach by the time we got to Rostelecom. He wouldn't have agreed to take you on - so I could go back to Hasetsu - if he was still mad at me over everything."

"...I guess that's true..." Yuri sighed, pulling back slightly so he could look at the Russian's
"...I wanted to say what was on my mind anyway, after we talked. I was ready. ...Maybe I just...gave myself permission to be a bit nasty at the end because of it." Viktor answered, casting his eyes down slightly, and brought his hands up to idly flatten-down Yuri's scarf, and tucked it back into the front folds of that dark-blue pea-coat he wore, "I don't even know if the RSF had anything to do with it...but I feel like there's a chance. They've done so much to try and undermine the core of who I am...denying my marriage by denying you proper recognition, editing out our rings, or just not showing them at all, questioning my qualifications because of what I'm doing off the ice...not to mention, the underhanded way that they changed things online. Trying to force me into their chosen narrative by making claims about my career that weren't true."

"...They did already eat their words on that though." Yuri pointed out, "While they were saying 'enjoy your retirement,' you were joining the JSF. Your fans were pretty dubious about it all, too, and made the RSF suffer the indignity of seeing your All Japan scores at Russian Nationals, as though you were still there."

"Oh..." Viktor laughed, "Yeah, they did do that, didn't they?"

"Your fans are loyal. They know when something doesn't smell right."

The silver Russian nodded, and moved one hand up from scarf to cheek, rubbing his thumb across it lightly, "I do feel a little nervous for Yurio though. I'm worried he's going to get caught in the middle of a feud I may have just started."

Yuri shook his head, "The RSF already made a big mistake with you. Yurio is their only shot at staying relevant for the next several years. If they do anything to try and punish him for associating with you, they may not have a Champion at all."

"Do you really think Yurio would drop the RSF over something like this though?"

He hesitated a moment, "If there's anything about Yurio that I know for a fact is true...it's that, one, he cares about the both of us, and two, he's vindictive. He'd never join the JSF...he'd probably join Skate Canada or something."

Viktor quirked a brow, "...Skate Canada? Why them?"

"To stick it to JJ. Also because Mikhail's established in Canada, so it would be an easy transition. They could sponsor his citizenship the same way I am for you."

"...You're sponsoring me as a spouse."

"...Okay maybe not exactly the same way, but you get the idea. It's a family thing. Mikhail could formally adopt Yurio."

Viktor nodded, thinking on it...but then cracked a smile, and huffed a quiet laugh. He found a few kisses between them, and scrunched his hands against his husband's shoulders, "I love your brain. You're so smart. Could you imagine it though?" He wondered, bending down quickly to pick up Jiro, "Yurio as a Rozovsky?"

"I don't know that he'd go that far." Yuri mused, taking his partner's elbow, and followed alongside as Viktor started walking, "When it came to sharing a name with me back in the day, he was ready to fight me for the right to be the only Yuri in Seniors. I think he counts on people recognizing his true name. He has nothing to gain by confusing people with a change."
"You didn't mind."

"I became a Nikiforov though. It's different." Yuri teased, "How many fans get to marry and take their idol's name anyway?"

"Touché."

Hasetsu, 2:30am

The air practically shimmered with frost, cast in the light of lamp posts. Yu-Topia's front door slid quietly and carefully open, and a white dog jumped out, paws crackling the brittle ice that caked the parking lot in sheets. Hana rushed out about half-way to the shrine-like arch by the sidewalk, sniffing at the ground, but then stopped and looked back, watching her human carefully bring one last small box outside.

Asahi slid the door shut again, determined not to make a noise, and then grabbed up the box again. He carried his guitar on his back in its case, and had bundled up to shield against the cold: jacket, hood, scarf, ski-goggles. Enough to stay warm, and avoid recognition, even by anyone crazy enough to be awake and outside at that absurd hour.

Hana trotted alongside Asahi's legs as he moved under the arch, and slipped across the street to a nearby parking lot. There, the motorcycle he'd purchased online, with its attached side-seat, and a rented trailer hitched to the back. He put the box on top of the rectangular trailer and unlocked the case, put the box inside, and closed it again. Hana had her paws up on the edge of the side-seat chassis, sniffing at the fabric within. Asahi moved over and shook out the thick blanket he'd bundled into that spot, and coaxed the Hokkaido-ken to jump in, then wrapped her up and buckled her in securely.

Goggle-covered eyes looked back towards Yu-Topia, and both hands came up, pressing together in front of the figure's face.

*I can't begin to thank you enough for all of your hospitality and kindness. But with everything else that's happened...and Yuri's looming return...I just...can't stay any longer. My presence will only be a burden, and I don't want to make anyone uncomfortable.*

His eyes clenched slightly, and his brow furrowed under the bulk of his hood.

...*And I don't want to be uncomfortable... I know Yuri doesn't live at Yu-Topia anymore, but it's still his childhood home, and he's entitled to go there whenever he wants. I can't do what I need to do if I'm constantly paranoid about the next time I'll see him unexpectedly. ...I'm just...not strong enough.*

Eyes opened reluctantly, and Asahi's hands moved down to his sides as he bowed forward.

*Please forgive me for leaving like this.*

Hana whined behind him, and Asahi rose back up to his full height. He pat the pup's head through the blanket and slid a leg across the seat of the motorcycle. The ignition was flipped and the engine came alive. A single headlight poured luminescence into the street, and Asahi put his hands on the handlebars. He looked over at the dog. *[You ready?]*

She whimpered and fidgeted slightly, but made no effort to escape the non-binding straps.

*[Let's get going then. I don't want to be on the road too long in these conditions.]
The motorcycle revved and roared, though hopefully far enough away from any sleeping bodies that no one was awoken by it. Asahi slipped out onto the road and slowly started making his way towards the river, and the bridge that lead under the Ice Castle, leaving Yu-Topia behind.

Makkachin was the first to spot the duo returning, and nearly jumped out of the seat he'd been warming to greet them faster. Viktor quickly hugged him from the walk-way behind that last row though, calming the poodle down slightly, then helped Yuri climb over the back of the seat. Yuri held tight to both Jiro and the hand, and helped Viktor over the same way.

"What took you guys so long? I was starting to worry." Mikhail commented, watching the duo reclaim their seats, "Minako and Yura have been in the stands for a little while already."

"Viktor got asked to do an interview after Yurio's was done." Yuri explained, "It took a little time to let the crew set up since we moved away from the designated post-skate interview area."

"An interview?" The elder echoed, "They didn't bother you unnecessarily, did they?" He wondered, jade eyes lowering to look at his nephew.

Viktor shook his head though, and leaned back from where he'd been giving Makkachin some attention, "unnecessarily? No...it was probably necessary."

"Can we see the interview?" Nikki wondered.

"If you find it. I'm not sure when they'll air it." He answered, "Was Makkachin on his best behavior while we were gone?"

"Oh...yeah, he was fine."

"So what was the interview about?" Mikhail wondered, feeling a bit nosy.

"You think the European division of the ISU is going to let me float around without asking how I feel about not getting to compete as of a month ago?" Viktor huffed, "This is the first time I've been to a European Championship since I took time off to coach Yuri. If not for the fact that I was barred from coming last year, I'd probably be watching someone usurp my winning streak, and suffer the anxiety of not being able to defend it, even though I'm here."

"...Why were you barred last year?"

"I didn't skate at Russian Nationals." The silver answered simply, turning his eyes down towards the skater on the ice. Vivaldi's 'Winter' played all around them, and a teenaged skater glided across the ice.

[Four Seasons - Winter' - A. Vivaldi] - 3:35 duration clip on channel 'legusas', starting at 0:38

"To get a spot at Euros, I would've had to place high at Nationals, but since All Japan is always held on the same weekend, I had to be with Yuri." Viktor explained, "I basically gave my spot up."

"...How did you manage to get to Worlds then?" Mikhail asked.

"Placement at Worlds depends on your standing the previous year. I won my 5th consecutive Gold there at the time, so I got 3 spots for the Russians. I went, and so did Yurio, and Georgi." Viktor answered, "The RSF could've chosen not to send me if they were being petty about it, but it was my big return to competitive skating at the time and they were kind of shoe-horned into letting me go. It
would've been psychotic to tell me no when so much hype had built over it."

"Psychotic like saying you're barred from skating for the rest of the season?" The elder quipped, "The RSF seems to have run out of good ideas."

"Right?"

"All those names that went to Worlds last year though...you guys were all sharing the same coach." Mikhail pointed out, "Does Russia have no other good skaters?"

"Yakov is the eminent coach in Russia, at least for the Men's Singles." Viktor explained, idly squishing the fluff on Makkachin's head as he watched the performance below, and the combination spin that would finalize that skater's Short Program, "He'll start scouting the students he wants to bring to St. Petersburg, if he isn't getting referrals already. With me fired, Georgi retiring this year, and Yurio transferred to Hasetsu...he'll need fresh athletes. I'm sure he'll be fine. It's easiest to start with new students after Worlds, so he's probably just waiting."

The music faded out, and applause rose up in its place. The young blonde skater bowed and moved towards the kiss-and-cry, waiting on baited breath for his judgment.

"Die Punktzahl für Benjamin Müller...78.12."

The teen looked excited, jumping up from the bench with his hands together as he thanked the crowd for their support.

Viktor scanned the crowd for the area where athletes were watching from, and spotted it just near to curtain that lead under the stands to the prep-area. Yurio had changed by then, and had his sneakers up on the back of a seat as he leaned into the one he was sitting in. Minako was sitting with him, but just as soon as Viktor spotted her, she got up and started heading off somewhere, disappearing into a doorway.

"Looks like Minako-sensei is ready to come back." Yuri commented suddenly, pulling Viktor's attention away, "I dunno where she's going to sit though."

"You and I could always go sit with Yurio." Viktor suggested, "Maybe we'll find Chris in the prep-area along the way."

"Should we bring Makka with us this time?"

"Sure." He agreed easily, and started to push up out of his chair, "Uncle Mik, we're gonna go down again. It looks like Minako is going to come up here so we'll take off so she has somewhere to sit."

"You guys are allergic to being in the audience," The elder shook his head and huffed a quiet laugh, "I guess we'll see you at the end then when we pick up Yura."

The pair of non-competing skaters lumbered back over their seats, and Makkachin hopped over with them, excited as ever and panting happily. They started heading towards the stairs behind the row like before, though Viktor found himself pausing suddenly. Mikhail had pulled off his flatcap to scratch a spot behind one ear, and slate eyes had zeroed in on that crown, like a hawk that had spotted a vole.

Yuri paused as well, realizing his husband had stopped, and looked back just in time to spot the Russian loom directly over his uncle, "...Viktor...?"

Mikhail felt eyeballs on his scalp and quickly put his hat back, staring directly up, with his fingers
still holding the hat's brim. He made a face at the one looking down at him, "...What?"

Viktor's eyes narrowed slightly, "...I can't tell."

"Can't tell?" The elder repeated, confused, "Can't tell what?" He wondered, only to hear Yuri suddenly crack up laughing. The whole thing was so strange that he squished his hat down harder on his head with a hand on top of it, "Why are you guys being weird? What's going on?"

"Weiter auf dem Eis, Tschechische Republik repräsentierend... Next on the ice, representing Czech Republic...Emil Nekola!"

Yuri tugged on his husband's hand, but was still sporting a bit of a smug grin from before, "Don't worry about it, Uncle Mik. It's nothing important."

It did little to dissuade the elder's confusion, but he could do little more than watch the pair and their dogs head down the stairs all over again. The audience was cheering as Emil slid out onto the ice, and Mikhail simmered in his bewilderment. He grimaced when his youngest daughter leaned against his arm.

"Maybe you're balding, papa." She teased.

"Me!?" He harped in surprise, "I'm not balding at all! My hair is thick!"

"Well, he said he couldn't tell, right?"

"...This is so unfair...now I'm paranoid...!"
Almost as soon as the music began, the sound of it became muffled by the walls of the under-arena hallway. Back on flat flooring, Yuri set Jiro down to walk alongside his bigger counterpart, and rose back up to the feeling of an arm sliding across his shoulders. Returning the gesture in kind, he slipped his own arm behind his husband's back, and they slowly made their way through the arena.

Yuri casually leaned his head up against the arm perched behind his neck and tilted slightly, "So can you give me even the slightest hint about your grand plan for later?"

Viktor just offered a sly grin, "Only that it starts at around 9pm and goes until 5am."

"Oof..." Yuri winced, "Why so late?"

"Honestly? I have no idea." The Russian mused, rubbing the shoulder under his palm a little, "And that's just when the doors open. The actual stuff doesn't start until 10."

"...I guess it's better than having everything start before we even have a chance to get there. We'll have to drop the dogs off first, right?"

"Yes, and change into our spiffy duds."

"...Spiffy duds?" Yuri echoed skeptically, "All I brought was a suit for the Banquet at the end..."

"Don't worry; I took care of it." Viktor reassured, turning their path slightly as they neared the doorway to the prep area, "I didn't pack so many suitcases just for me."

Brown eyes narrowed slightly, "...You busted into your slush fund again didn't you?"

"It's the only way I can spend money without you knowing." Viktor teased, offering a wink as well, "How else will I be able to surprise you?"

"Well, your motto was always 'do the opposite of what people expect,' and you surprise me plenty even without spending money."

Viktor huffed a laugh, "It's a bit harder to do things the way I used to when I'm sharing a bank account with the person I'm trying to surprise. Purchase memos on our statement don't leave much to the imagination, and you track everything."

"It's a habit I formed in Detroit," Yuri sighed, pulling his badge and lanyard out of his jacket to let it hang in front of his chest, "Had a lot of moments out there where I couldn't understand why I had no money...turns out I was nickel-and-diming myself to death with a thousand little purchases. Who knew eating out all the time would be so expensive?" He laughed at his own expense, "Now I'm just paranoid, especially since our income isn't consistent or guaranteed anymore. Back then, I lived on what my parents sent me every month. Now it's just us...and a lot has suddenly changed."

Badges were flashed to the staffer who stood by the entrance to the prep area, and the little group moved through, dogs keen to smell at everything they could. Instead of continuing to move forward towards the gaggle of skaters and the televisions they were focused on though, Viktor nuded Yuri
to the side, much to the latter's confusion.

Turning slightly and moving in front of his partner, Viktor flipped around to walk backwards, and continued to pull his spouse down the side-hall, "I don't want you to think you have to watch everything so closely." He said quietly, both wrists hooked over his husband's shoulders, fingers loosely woven together behind his neck, "I'm may be spontaneous, but I like to think I'm not as reckless as I used to be."

Yuri was quiet, unsure what to say in response. He just let the man continue to pull him slowly down the corridor, until deciding to pause and lean against the white-painted stone-brick wall. Hands moved from the front of Viktor's shirt to slide around his sides, through the open front of the coat, and clasped loosely behind his back.

"You're looking at me like you're not sure whether to believe me or not."

"Er..." Yuri stammered, confusion switching to surprise, "I don't...uhm...I mean, I believe you, I just also think there's been plenty of reason to feel apathetic about stuff like that lately. Maybe I'm just projecting though...my eating habits are slightly self-destructive when I'm depressed. You stop eating though. Maybe your coping mechanism is spending too much from your slush fund..."

Viktor just hummed a smile, and pulled his right hand back to brush the edge of curled fingers against his partner's cheek, "My love, there are too many things in this world to be worried about already. My spending habits shouldn't be one of them."

Yuri quirked a brow, "...You took us into a side-hall just to tell me not to worry? Worry is my default setting. If I have nothing to worry about, I'm worried about not being worried."

"I know, but no," He laughed, "I did this so I could have a moment alone with you. I just happened to have had a few other things to say beforehand."

"I see... So my rambling is holding you up."

"Maybe a little bit." Viktor mused, leaning in closer, "But I know just the remedy."

Yuri felt the hand that was still sitting beside his neck slide down behind his back, fingers pressing between his shoulder-blades to nudge him closer. His own fanned out and pressed palms to Viktor's back, slowly sliding down to perch on the Russian's hips. The kiss was warm and welcome, with the subtle tingle of a few hummed laughs behind them.

"This must be the real reason you wanted to leave the audience," Yuri commented between passes, "You just used Yurio and Chris as an excuse."

"Well," Viktor started, "My 'to do' list does frequently have you at the top."

"At the top and on top."

Viktor's face went a bit red in his surprise, but that just left him open to getting pushed slightly sideways until his back was pushed against the wall. He smirked a little as Yuri pressed up against him for another few kisses, and slid both arms over the younger man's shoulders, "I thought you didn't like making racy jokes in front of people though."

"There's no one here but us and the dogs."

"Really."
Yuri's left eye twitched in sudden concern, but it didn't stop the shadow that snuck in from behind him. Jiro started barking as well, but before Yuri could do anything, something slid over his elbows to clasp over his hands where they were still perched on his partner's waist, and a body cozied up behind him, moving his hands down and around to cup behind his husband's rump.

"You have him all to yourself and you don't even take advantage."

Viktor smiled innocently, albeit slightly worried, and lifted his arms up just a few inches as he could feel Yuri's frame tense up under them. He was a bit stunned to see Yuri flip around as quickly as he did though, practically falling back against him as hands flew forward, shoving the looming figure backward with a start and half a shriek. The Russian's eyes were wide, and rubber blade-guards thumped on the tile floor to regain balance. He quickly lowered his arms again and clutched his hands across the younger man's shoulders to keep him still.

"Ch-Chris!" Yuri barked incredulously, looking a bit more irritated than spooked like he normally would be. He felt all the blood drain from his face, and Jiro continued barking, giving his human a little bit of puppy-courage, "Don't sneak up on me like that! You just about gave me a coronary!"

"Sorry." He mused, looking down to hold his leg out slightly as the little Akita tried going for one skate, "I'm glad to see you two getting along so well again. I have a feeling this baby nugget is going to hold a grudge against me though." He smiled nervously, "Do a friend a favor?"

Yuri steeled himself and pushed up to standing normally again as Viktor helped nudge him up from behind, and crouched down to pick the pup up, tugging on one skate lace briefly as Jiro rose. He settled the puppy against a shoulder and tried to soothe him with a few pats, "Easy, little dude, it's fine. He just scared me."

Viktor pushed off the wall to wrap his arms around his husband's sides, and set his chin over the opposite shoulder from Jiro, who had taken to growling a little instead of barking, "You've incurred the wrath of an Akita. I don't think he'll ever forgive you."

"I guess it could be worse." Chris shrugged, looking to Makkachin instead, who was panting away and just watched the whole scene calmly, "At least he still likes me."

"Makkachin likes practically everyone though."

"Except for those guys in St. Petersburg, right?" Chris teased, though spotted the gaunt look on Yuri's face as soon as he said the words.

"...Erm...sorry, Yuri," Viktor started nervously, "I had to tell him what happened so he could understand what was going on..."

"I'm not mad that he knows." Yuri sighed, "I just don't like thinking about what happened. I was just finally starting to feel safe, and now my teeth are on edge again like before."

"Sorry." Both older figures said in tandem.

"Ugh, it's fine... Shouldn't you be getting ready to go out there though?" Yuri huffed, trying to change the subject, "You have your skates on, so you're done stretching at least..."

"I'm first up in Group 2." Chris explained, sliding his hands into the pockets of his red and white team jacket, and turned on the heel of one blade-guard to start walking back the way he came, "I just thought I'd come bug you two since I saw you come in. Seems I stepped in at a bad moment though."
Viktor offered an innocent smile as he watched his friend move back towards the main foyer of the prep area, but then slowly looked back at Yuri next to him. "...Sorry."

"...How come you didn't warn me that he was standing right there?" He sighed quietly.

"I honestly didn't see him until you turned my back towards the wall." The silver Russian explained, "I guess he was quiet enough that even Jiro didn't notice him until he was inches away. Chris does have an eerie knack for sneaking up on people..."

Yuri held quiet, stroking his hand down his pup's bristled back.

"...Are you okay...? You shoved him pretty hard." Viktor wondered, feeling the hair on the back of his neck prickle a little in unease, "...Yuri?"

He just sighed and shook his head, "Maybe I'm just over-thinking it, or feeding off of Jiro's reaction...but I wish Chris wouldn't do stuff like that."

"...I don't follow."

Yuri's brow furrowed slightly, but he turned to lean a shoulder against his partner's chest. He felt a hand slide up behind his back to hold his other side, "Normally I wouldn't care that he gets so close, because I know him and I know he's just teasing. I think I'm just over-sensitive to people getting into my personal space right now though. All Japan is still too fresh."

"I can talk to him if you want."

"...I don't want to make a mountain out of a mole-hill. Telling him to stop doing what he's always done would be like telling him to stop being himself." Yuri said, and shook his head, looking down the corridor in the direction the blonde had gone, "He already probably feels like he stepped in it. Don't need to make it worse."

"I don't think Chris will take it personally if I ask him to stop sliding in on your backside." Viktor pointed out, "But it'll work out better if I ask him while this is still fresh."

Yuri hesitated to answer, pressing his face to Jiro's fur instead. He held there a moment, breathing in the smell of the pup, but then shook his head uncertainly, "...I'll leave it to you to decide."

"That's fair. Let's go find Yurio then."

"...Wait..." He said quietly, causing the silver to pause and look back at him. Yuri just stepped forward and offered a quick peck to his partner's lips, "Sorry I make things so difficult."

Viktor smiled though and gave a second kiss, "My love, nothing worthwhile is gained without effort. Come."

By the time they stuck their heads out at rink-side to find the way up to the athlete's observation area, Emil had been long-finished and the next competitor was on the ice. Performing to 'Tanguera' by Mariano Mores, a tango whose tune that had been the inspiration for Moulin Rouge's 'Roxanne,' the Euro's lone Estonian skater was hitting all his marks.

Viktor stuck his head out from the sectioned hallway that only competitors could access, and looked over to the seating area, spotting a half-dozing Yurio slouching in his seat. He looked back to his husband and pointed the way, and offered Makkachin's leash and another quick kiss before going back down the stairs and into the prep area on his own. Yuri watched him go, but turned back to the arena and started heading towards the still-unaware Russian Tiger.
Yurio barely noticed Makkachin coming before the poodle practically threw himself across the teen's lap, and he all-but-jumped in surprise. Bright green eyes looked past the rim of his hoodie to spot Yuri coming up next with Jiro still against one shoulder, "...Yuri!" He huffed, reaching under his hood to pull off one side of his head-set.

"Sorry to sneak up on you like this."

The teen eased Makkachin off his legs and pulled them down from where his feet were perched on the spot ahead of himself, putting his shoes on the ground, "...It's fine. How come you're over here though?" He wondered, reaching an arm up to return the greeting-hug that his older counterpart offered before sitting down, "Where's Viktor?"

"Right behind me. We thought we'd come down to keep you company since Minako-sensei left."

"Oh." The Tiger nodded, sitting up more normally than earlier, only to stick one foot against the back of the seat ahead himself again anyway, "Yeah, the nerves got to her."

"...Too many skaters to fangirl over in one place?"

"Maybe. She said she was feeling a bit overwhelmed so she went to get away from everything."

Yuri set Jiro on the floor and lifted his eyes to the audience, trying to get his bearings to find the spot the rest of the family had set up. It took a moment, but he found them, and realized the two seats he and Viktor had occupied were still empty, "...Hm. We thought she was gonna go sit with Mikhail and the others. That's part of why we came down, too...there wasn't a seat available for her with us there. We left to make room."

The music came to its end a few seconds later, and the audience broke out into applause. Eyes went down to the ice, watching the young Estonian wave to the crowd and bow in appreciation before pushing off to find his coach and blade-guards.

"She's been gone for like 15 minutes then." Yurio pointed out, "What do you wanna do?"

"Did she say she was going to come back?"

"She just told me to stay here."

"We should go make sure she's okay." Yuri said, standing up again, "Come on."

The teen grumbled but stood up as well, following after the older skater and the two dogs. He watched as Yuri rounded the corner, only to pause as he seemed to bounce off something behind it.

"Oh." Viktor's voice countered, surprised to see them, "I just got done talking to Chris," He started, feeling Yuri flipping him around on his heels to face the way he'd just come, "...Aaaand now we're going back...?"

"We're gonna find Minako-sensei."

"We are?" He asked, looking back over his shoulder as Yuri continued nudging him forward and down the stairs, "Where?"

"Don't know yet. Halls, bathrooms maybe."

"I'm texting her." Yurio commented from the back, thumbing at his phone as he barely watched his step, "Maybe she'll just tell us where she went."
"Is something wrong...?" Viktor wondered dubiously.

"Yuri said she wasn't feeling good, so I just want to check on her, since she isn't in the audience with Mik and his girls." Yuri explained, waiting a moment at the bottom of the steps as Jiro finished clambering down after them, "Maybe it's nothing. Doesn't hurt to find out."
Chapter 493

CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED NINETY THREE

Viktor quickly hopped back down the stairs and into the open space beneath the audience, looking around for the blonde Swiss skater. He spotted him a short distance away with his coach and SSF entourage, biding his time with varying arm stretches. The Russian drew a sharp breath and pressed on towards the man, sliding his hands into his coat pockets as he glided through the open space. He kept his eyes forward even as he passed Yakov and Georgi, though the two didn't see him to notice; they were watching the performance on one of the wall-mounted televisions.

A subtle tingle crept through Viktor's frame, getting more intense with every step closer towards his friend. Chris seemed to have felt him coming though, and turned his face over a shoulder to watch his final approach.

"Just you?" The younger figure huffed, "I must be in trouble."

Viktor just smiled and moved in closer, "The worst kind."

"How mad is he?" Chris wondered, letting his arms go limp at his sides.

"You told me about the things you thought you had to do to keep Saito away from Yuri when they were younger," The Russian started casually, speaking quietly so as to not be heard by those for whom his words were not meant, "Would it surprise you to know that I felt the need to do the same thing when I met him?"

"Jeeze, he's still at it?" Chris sighed, "That guy doesn't give up."

"In his defense, I can't blame him...Yuri is perfect. I told Yuri what I thought was going on with Saito while we were at Harry Potter World, but instead of heeding my advice to keep a safe distance, Yuri ended up confronting him."

Chris' brow furrowed, "...I don't like the sound of that. Yuri's no fighter."

Viktor lowered his gaze sadly, but then shook his head, "No, he's a lover...Saito's the fighter, and Yuri lost."

Lime-green eyes widened, looking the Russian up and down skeptically, then with growing concern, "...You don't mean to say that chicken-head actually...?"

The silver raised one hand to stop the thought from being worse than it was, "Saito kissed him. Roughly." He explained simply, then returned his hand to its pocket, "Yuri stepped away while I was doing my post-SP interview, because Yurio called and he couldn't hear over the echo in the hall. He bumped into Saito entirely by accident. Yuri felt like it was meant to happen, so instead of leaving, or even letting Saito escape - which he did apparently try to do - Yuri trapped him and told him how he felt. All fine and good in theory, I suppose...Yuri wanted to let Saito down gently. It didn't go over well." Viktor said, pausing for a moment as the memory of that pain crept in again, "He wouldn't tell me what happened until we got back to the hotel and he'd scalded himself under hot water, scratching red lines into his own skin with his nails to try and make the dirty feeling go away."

"...After your SP but before leaving..." Chris echoed, thinking back on the event, "So when Yuri passed out in the audience..."
"Panic attack. Bad one." Viktor confirmed, "In any case...Yuri's been pretty rattled since then, and I've gotten rather protective. I wasn't there for him and he got hurt. We both know and trust you, Chris, but...I'd avoid sneaking up behind him from now on, and quit the provocative touches. Yuri needs time to feel comfortable in his own skin again."

"You guys really can't catch a break, can you?"

The Russian offered his best smile, "I suppose there's some aspect to the fact that we're a couple now that makes otherwise-non-issues suddenly be issues." He agreed, turning on his heel slightly, "But it has been hard, yeah... We can only do our best."

Viktor glanced back over a shoulder as the little group moved back through the prep area again, and spotted the same faces from earlier. Eyes were fixed on the televisions though; the Estonian skater was about to get his score. He turned back to those nearby then, feeling a hand with a nylon strap over it cupping against his own. Looking down, it was just Makkachin's leash looped around Yuri's palm. Viktor curled his fingers around it and pulled the hand into his coat pocket to warm it up.

Yurio kept his eyes down on his phone as he followed the duo and their pups from behind, though quickly found himself next to them as Yuri slowed down to let him catch up.

"Anything?"

"Not yet." He answered grimly, putting his phone away, "There's only so many places she could be in this place though. Should we split up?"

"We can't just waltz into the ladies' bathrooms." Viktor pointed out, looking around dubiously, then down towards the two pups waiting and watching him in turn, "...Hm."

"You think she's feeling sick again?" Yuri wondered, clutching his free hand to the front of his pea-coat nervously, "Maybe that's why she isn't answering. She's too busy praying to the porcelain gods to notice she's even been messaged..."

Yurio shot him a smug look, "You sound like you speak from experience."

That just made Yuri's face go red, and he looked aside sheepishly, "That would probably be a story to hear from Phichit-kun...if I drink too much, I black out and don't remember..."

"Yuri, do you have anything of Minako's by your gear?" Viktor wondered suddenly, drawing up the eyes of both figures, only for the older to realize quickly that the 'Yuri' being sought after wasn't himself, "I have an idea."

"Oh...uh..." The teen grimaced, "Maybe...?"

Quickly finding their way over to the bench with the Tiger's gear-bags, Yurio rummaged for anything that might not be his own. Under his winter coat, he found Minako's purse though, and he handed it to Viktor.

"This is all hers."

"What are you planning...?" Yuri wondered, watching his husband rifle through the bag.

Viktor paused after a moment, "Well, this explains why she wasn't answering." He said, lifting the woman's phone up to show it, then put it back inside again. Half a second later though, he found her
gloves, and pulled them out entirely, "Here we go...these should work."

"Do you make sense ever?" Yurio quipped. He watched as the older figure went down with the garments, offering a sniff to an eager poodle.

"...Oh! That's a great idea!" Yuri said excitedly, suddenly realizing, "Makkachin can find her by scent!"

The Tiger guffawed, "You know that sniffer-dogs take actual training to do tha-...wh-hey! Wait up!"

Makkachin was off towards the stairs again, nose to the floor, tail wagging as the rest of the group trailed behind. Viktor quickly put the gloves back in the handbag and buttoned it up, slinging the straps over his elbow as they moved. The poodle moved halfway up the stairs, sniffing at each ledge, then moved over to the other side and came back down again, moving across the floor towards the gear-bench they'd just come from...almost. A few feet away from it, Makkachin veered off again in a different direction, heading into a side-hall.

Yurio paused at the entrance to that corridor and looked at the signs posted next to it, then shook his head and sighed before hopping to catch up again. As he suspected, the poodle stopped outside a swinging door, pawing at the baseboards and whining.

"You think she's in here...?" Yuri wondered, gently pulling Makkachin's harness to get the poodle out of the way.

Viktor stepped up in the pup's place and knocked the back of a knuckle against the door, leaning in close to listen, "Minako?" He asked, nudging the panel open a little, "Minako, you in there?"

Makkachin wiggled free and wedged his snoot into the open space, then pushed all the way in before Yuri could stop him. The leash had a few feet of slack before he got too far away, and Yuri was yanked halfway into the bathroom, leash still looped over his wrist and hand, "M-Makkachin...! You can't just-" He stammered, stumbling through the door-frame. Viktor helped him regain his footing, and he repositioned his glasses over his nose, but as he looked up, he spotted the brown boofer standing proudly in the middle of that first open space, tail wagging, and those dark brown eyes looking back at him. Yuri looked to the side though, to a darker shape against the pale wall, and gasped, "M-Minako-sensei!"

Hearing it, Viktor immediately pushed the whole door open, and sent Yuri stumbling inward all over again.

Yurio's brows were raised skeptically, "...I can't believe that shit worked."

Makkachin barked triumphantly, his booming voice echoing loudly through the small space.

"Shhh!" The ailing woman pleaded, reaching one hand forward towards the poodle. She sat alone in the small bathroom space on a lone plastic chair with a wire frame, a stack of wet paper towels pressed to her forehead. She recoiled again though once the echo faded away, and lifted the dangling side of the damp 'cloth' back into place.

The skating trio moved in softly then. Yuri handed Makkachin's leash back to Viktor before crouching down in front of his former teacher's knees, with Jiro coming up around his side as well, "You okay? What's wrong?" He asked quietly.

"...I don't...feel good..." She answered in a mumble, "Lightheaded..."
Viktor stepped closer, but stayed standing, bending down to place one hand on the back of Minako's shoulders. "How long have you been down here? Since leaving Yuri in the stands?"

Minako could only nod slightly.

"Have you eaten recently...?" Yuri asked, "Is it low blood-sugar? Does anyone have a juice-box or something?" He looked up and at the other two, but knew it was pointless, and they each shook their heads.

"It's...not that... We ate an hour before coming up here..." Minako tried to explain, "I was just...walking down the stairs. I felt a bit nauseated, so went looking for a bin, just in case...but then I started feeling dizzy... I came here to try and cool off, but my head is still spinning..."

"Do you still feel sick at all?" Viktor wondered, rubbing his hand across the woman's back, "I could probably carry you back out if you don't think you can walk on your own."

She huffed a sad laugh, "I may have to take you up on that just so I can say 'I got carried off by Viktor Nikiforov.'"

"Sounds like I should then," Viktor mused, handing off Makkachin's leash to his husband again, and Minako's purse to Yurio, though he guffawed in surprise when it fell into his arms. Viktor moved to crouch down in front of the dizzy ballerina, and balanced carefully as she slid forward onto his back. With a bit of effort, he rose up to standing again, hoisting the woman up with him, "Okay...all set?"

"Viktor, are you su-" Yuri started, only to stop himself as slate eyes turned his way, "Uhm... You practiced really hard this morning...is your ankle feeling okay?"

The silver Russian gaped for a moment, but then smiled, "Yes, my love, it feels fine. Let's get going."

Relieved, Yuri nodded, and reached a hand over to hold the door while Viktor carried the ailing woman back into the hall. Yurio followed out after, then the two pups, and finally Yuri at the back. He stepped beside Makkachin to offer an extra pat, "You did a good job." He commented, looking up just in time to avoid running into the back of Yurio's stalled frame. He jumped back with a start, "Y-Yuri! Why'd you stop?"

The teen kept his eyes forward, watching Viktor and Minako continue down the corridor, "...It's going to be a problem if she's always sick like this."

"...It's not always..." Yuri countered, trying to sound reassuring as he stepped up next to him, "But I can see your point."

"What if it never gets better?"

"...It's impossible to know. There's only two other competitions after this though. We'll figure something out if things don't improve...and by next year, well, it'll be done and over anyway."

"Will it though?" The teen asked skeptically, his tone low; he kept his eyes straight ahead.

"...What do you mean? She can't be like this forever." Yuri countered, taking a step forward as the two antsy dogs seemed eager to catch up to the others, "If she's only a month into things, then she'll be done with it by...uhh..." He looked upward slightly, counting in his head, "...August-ish? September?"

"Babies don't raise themselves, stupid." Yurio harped between clenched teeth, "It's a full-time job."
Yuri hesitated in surprise, but then smiled, "Minako-sensei isn't alone in this though. She's got a secret weapon."

"...Hah?"

"Well, two I guess... Mikhail is particularly invested in this...and then there's my mom. She practically adopted Viktor within hours of him showing up at Yu-Topia, calling him Vik-chan and all that. Can you imagine her with the equivalent of a grandkid?" He explained, looking back to nudge his head and make the not-so-subtle suggestion that they try to catch up, "I imagine this'll be a village effort anyway. That kid's gonna have a huge family; you included."

Yurio's face went red, but his eyes went down to the side, no clue how to answer. He just took a few steps forward to follow after the older figure and his little pack. By the time they'd gotten back to the main foyer of the prep area, Viktor had settled Minako down on the bench by Yurio's gear bags, and he turned slightly towards the duo as they approached. He raised a hand to wave them over, and slid it across his partner's shoulders as the younger man came in close.

"Should we call Mikhail down?" Yuri wondered, "He'd probably want to know if you're not feeling good, Minako-sensei."

"He's already on his way." Viktor explained, "I stuck my head out the door to the audience and waved at him to come down. He should be here any second."

"Oh okay."

"...Ugghhh...being like this sucks..." Minako whined, rubbing a few fingers over one eye, "...I don't recommend it."

Yurio set the hand-bag down next to its owner, "Are you sure you're up for this coaching thing?"

Yuri shot the teen a look, but he ignored it. Viktor glanced between the two curiously.

"I've been a dancer for decades, and I've taught dancing for half of them. I can coach figure skating." She argued, "I just...need to get used to this other thing... I'm sure there's just something about it that I'm fighting against or don't understand. I will figure it out."

Yurio just grumbled quietly. Movement out the corner of his eye caught his attention, and he looked over to spot the rest of the clan coming in through the doors from the public area. He turned back to look at Minako for a moment, then up to Yuri again, and finally lowered his gaze downward. The commotion of the reunion seemed to go right through him.

I'm not the only one who's counting on her to get to these competitions, he thought bitterly, But I feel like I can't even mention it because Yuri might take it badly. What a shit situation...
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED NINETY FOUR

The group moved out to sit in the athlete's section of the stands just as the final skater of Group 1 was getting his scores. All together, rather than scattered throughout the arena - or in transit from one spot to another - the atmosphere around them felt more relaxed. As had been the case earlier, and was typical, Mikhail took his spot at the end of the row, putting himself between the stairwell and the seats the rest of his family sat in, with Minako next, then Nikki, Yurio, and Viktoria beside him on the other end. Sitting in the stairwell, Viktor perched on the longer, level step that lined up with the row of seats. Makkachin leaned up against his human's back, resting his head over one shoulder. Yuri sat on the step in front of his partner, using the legs that parted around him like arm-rests for his elbows, and snuggled back against his husband's chest, arms protectively around him. Curious as ever, Jiro wandered up and down the steps to the limits of his leash, then returned and found somewhere else to explore.

"Gruppe 2 beginnt nun mit einer Aufwärmphase von 6 minuten... Group 2 will now begin a 6 minute warm-up period..."

The audience clapped and whistled as the skaters set down onto the ice, a few of them donning their newly-minted Olympic team jackets. Even Chris finally donned one; an all-scarlet ensemble with 'SUI' on the left arm, and a small white plus-sign - the lone symbol on the country's flag - on the right.

Yurio scoffed and rolled his eyes as teammate Georgi came out as well, being way too proud of himself. He leaned forward in his seat and set his elbow on his knees, "Ah, Viktor...get a load of that guy." He said, thumbing at the ice, "He thinks he's super hot shit now cuz he has that jacket."

Viktor huffed a laugh against Yuri's crown, "Cut him a little slack. It was his last shot at going to the Games and he finally made it."

Yuri made a face as he watched the skaters going around the ice, and focused on the lone Russian, "...Come to think of it, he's never been there, has he?"

"Nope." His husband smirked, "He would've had the same red and white track-suit I had before if he'd gone."

"He probably would've slept in it like pajamas." Yurio laughed, leaning back into his seat again.

"Shouldn't you be cheering him on instead of making fun of him?" Nikki wondered, eyebrow raised.

"Why?" The blonde wondered, still looking a bit smug, "He's on Team Russia, but that doesn't mean he isn't ridiculous."

"Well, he's confident, just like Cousin Viktor."

Both Yurio and Viktor coughed in a fit at the same time, gaping at the young silver incredulously.

"That's not confidence," Yurio stammered, "Viktor is extra, but Georgi is extreme."

"He's simmered down a little bit, Yuri," Mila's voice came suddenly; she and Sara Crispino emerged from the covered part of the stairwell nearby, "Remember last year?"
"No." He answered simply, eyes narrowed like he wasn't sure if the Ladies' skater was about to trap him in a joke or not.

"What was wrong last year?" Yuri asked; the voice of tempered reason in the group.

The two women took seats in the row ahead of them, and Mila twisted around, hooking an elbow over the back of her chair to see the duo more easily, "His whole theme last year was 'heartbreak;' his ex-girlfriend had already hooked up with another guy and it was eating him up inside. It had been months since they broke up though...but his Short Program played out like he was still angry and desperate. He went from crying at the start, to being on the attack. It was actually a little scary."

"...He made it to Worlds though...his scores were still really good, even if he didn't get to the GP Final. How come he's never made it to the Olympics?" Yuri wondered, "He's good enough."

"Being good enough isn't always enough," Viktor explained, slowly rubbing his cheek against his husband's ear, "When Russia picks its people to represent them at the Games, they do so with the idea that the people they send are likely to get on the podium. Sending someone who's 'good enough' to qualify, but not 'good enough' to medal, stands to serve as an embarrassment. Georgi has never made it to the Final, nor earned a medal at Worlds. Euros and Nationals aren't enough."

"So why send him this time?"

"Maybe Yakov asked." Viktor shrugged, "As the premier coach for Russian skaters, he's kinda hurting for representation."

"I'm going!" Mila protested, pulling on her own Olympic jacket to puff it out for emphasis.

"Yakov's bread-and-butter has always been the Men's Singles group though." Viktor pointed out, "It would be weird if he wasn't there for it...kind of like if Russia wasn't being represented at the Games at all."

"You shouldn't say stuff like that." Yuri pointed out, leaning his head back against his partner's chest to see him better.

Viktor looked down slightly, "Well, if Russia wasn't going to be allowed to go, don't you think the IOC would've said something by now?"

Yuri gave a skeptical, if not worried look, "...What you said before, when we were at the doctor for your ankle...about how the RSF offended you..."

Slate eyes were unmoving for a moment, but Viktor then glanced aside, "...I don't know why that could come up now."

"...How did the RSF offend you?" Mila wondered suspiciously, "Er, I mean, other than the super obvious."

Viktor seemed reluctant to answer, but he could feel all eyes on him by then. He drew in a sharp breath and held his husband's frame a little tighter, "They had the gall to ask me to cheat at the Sochi Games. I told them there was no way. Back then, I was in the middle of my last winning streak...I didn't think I needed help, and I didn't want it. They were forced to let me go anyway for various reasons, but it still got under my skin that they'd even make the suggestion."

Mila and Yurio exchanged nervous looks, and the Tiger spoke up, "...What kind of idiot would risk their career by cheating?"
"The kind desperate to win." Viktor answered, his voice in subtle monotone, "A Russian-hosted Olympics without Russian medalists would've been unthinkable."

"It wouldn't be the first time the Russians would've been caught doing something like that," Mikhail chimed in, "Way back in the 80s, when the Summer Games were held in Moscow, it was actually jokingly referred to as the Chemists' Games by some, because no one believed the Russian medalists got on the podium without help."

"...Wow." Yuri commented quietly, looking down towards the rink again, "...How do you even go about proving you didn't do something like that if accused?"

"Not sure you can." Mikhail answered grimly, "The kind of drugs that have been used before can get into and out of someone's system in a matter of weeks."

"The ISU makes medalists give samples for testing at every event though. Doesn't the same thing happen at the Games?"

"Sure." The elder nodded, "That doesn't mean people can't cheat at that, too, though. Other countries, including Japan, have requested that Russia be banned from Olympic events before, unsuccessfully, because Russia is a big superpower and a valued participant of the Games. The IOC has a brittle spine on punishing cheaters, to the point where it's said that 'not everyone pees in the same specimen cup.' There's lots of hot air about being serious, but usually little action is actually taken to punish those caught in the act."

"...Oh."

Awkward silence fell over the group for a little while, as most watched the remainder of the practice with blank minds. It took the booming voice of the announcer calling for the last minute of the warm-up for them to be jarred out of their stupor.

Yuri pulled in his elbows, and curled his fingers around the arms that came around him, looking down at his knees. Viktor could feel the mood shift, and leaned down to whisper, "Why do you still seem worried?"

He grumble-whined a little, "Because of that news segment in Detroit that I told you about, the one that made me believe the RSF would be mad at you for giving me your Gold. The anchors were also talking about the doping scandal from Sochi... They were speculating, suggesting that maybe you cheated to get it, and then gave it to me to avoid being tested."

"You know I got checked anyway. I still won the thing in the first place."

"...Yeah, but...if what Mik said is true-"

"I would've been caught a long time ago if I were doing something dishonest to win." Viktor reassured, "Five straight years of Gold-medal victories at every single competition...by year 3, I was getting blood tested, too, just in case I pulled a 'Lance Armstrong' over on them. Someone would've found something if I was cheating, but no one ever has, because there was nothing to find. You couldn't find a more all-natural free-range Russian chicken if you tried."

Yuri leaned back with a sigh to hear those words, "That's a relief then."

"...I feel like you were doubting me for a second there."

"Not you. Never you." Yuri answered easily, "...Didn't you hear about why it was a scandal?"
"Maybe at some point, but I didn't pay attention because I knew I was clean and had nothing to worry about."

"...I've looked into it a little bit since I saw that news segment. The scandal arose because some whistleblower said the Russians were tampering with samples...switching them out with clean specimens, or giving athletes someone else's to claim as their own." He explained, "But if the ISU took your blood themselves, then the RSF couldn't have done anything to it. There's no chance your word could be doubted because your victories were scrutinized by someone who had no reason to protect you. Proving someone's innocence can be harder than proving their guilt, and it would kill me if anyone ever doubted you. It wouldn't be enough that no one could definitely prove you had done anything wrong. I...think it's important that you're able to avoid any specter of plausibility."

"...I guess I hadn't thought of it like that before."

"Die Aufwärmphase ist beendet. Alle Sportler verlassen bitte die Eisbahn. The warm-up period has ended. All athletes please exit the rink."

Viktor had looked up as the announcer's voice echoed through the arena, but then looked down to the ice again and watched as everyone started heading towards the door. Chris moved around to find his coach, undoing the front of his bright red jacket. The Russian nosed his partner's hair a little, "...I'm sure it'll be fine. If the JSF had any inclination about my track-record being tainted, they would have been more critical of me before bringing me in."

"...Yeah, that's my belief as well." Yuri agreed. He pushed to sit up a bit straighter and turned in place, lifting his hands up to cup on each side of his spouse's face, "Let's not borrow more bad luck then. I think we've had our fill." He suggested, kissing brow, then lips, "Time to enjoy the skating."

"Erster aus der Gruppe 2, die Schweiz vertritt... First to perform from Group 2, representing Switzerland... Christophe Giacometti!"

The audience cheered excitedly as the tallest skater of the Men's Singles pushed away from the rink-wall and slid around the ice-field.

"Ganbaaaaaa!" Yuri called out.

"Davaaaaai!" Viktor added after him.

Chris looked up and around to the source of the voices, and realized the duo had relocated from where he'd expected them all. Glad to hear Yuri's voice between them, he felt a bit of a relief, and he waved at them specifically with a slight bow of his head. Blades turned him in place so he could take his starting pose, and bent his head down again, leaning his frame slightly forward with the left hand arced behind his back, the right held forward, and the right leg crossed in front of the other.

['Broken' - Lifehouse]

The sound of the guitar began, and he raised his head, looking up high towards the darkened windows wrapping around the far end of the rink, and the huge Jumbotron screen hanging in front of them. Twisting in place, then pushing to the side, he moved across the cold frost through a smooth mix of long, sweeping gestures and mini-cross-overs.

The broken clock is a comfort, it helps me sleep tonight,

He dipped down as his frame rocked, swerving his path from side to side. Arms came up around himself, then came up under his cheek with palms pressed together.
Maybe it can stop tomorrow...

He leaned forward and started thrusting himself across the ice in a series of star-maneuvers.

...from stealing all my time.

The last star vaulted into a butterfly jump for a flying-entry camel spin.

And I am here still waiting though I still have my doubts,

Hands clasped behind his back for the standard spin, followed by the right reaching down to clasp the blade of the left boot for the donut variant. When he let go, the leg stayed nearly in place as his hands went out to the side, and the right came up over his chest for a layover.

I am damaged at best...like you've already figured out.

Chris pulled himself upright again with the free leg still held out, now perpendicular to the rest of his body, and kicked it behind himself to add thrust to his breakaway. He made his way towards the short end of the rink, picking up speed as he went, spun through a quick twizzle with the left blade coming down on its outside edge, and flared both arms widely to the side.

I'm falling apart,

He glided through an outside spread-Eagle, leaning backward slightly into the momentum of the curve. His frame twisted over to kick his right leg forward as the gap in the lyrics pressed on, and landed the triple Axel before the next lyric began.

I'm barely breathing.

As he glided out of the landing, his hands clasped over the ruby starburst over his heart, and blades cut a serpentine swath across the ice as he moved through the start of his step sequence.

With a broken heart that's still beating.
In the pain, there is healing,

Viktor slowly rocked back and forth in time with the music, pulling his husband alongside, eyes following the quick-footed hustle on the ice.

Chris dipped down at the end, hands clutched over his head as he glided backward on one blade in a circle, but then rose back up, sliding forward, hands coming together to cut ahead and then spread out to the sides.

In your name, I find meaning.

As the blonde moved across the rink, he picked up speed again, flipping around backward with a 3-turn before edging back on the outside of his left blade.

I'm hangin' on...

He jammed the toe-pick of his right skate down and vaulted, spinning four times for his trademark quad Lutz, and landed in the gap between the lyrics with both arms outstretched to either side.

...Another day, just to see what...you throw my way.

He glided backward towards the middle of the rink, and twisted himself sharply into a tight, backward-entry corkscrew scratch spin, with the left arm raised up, and the right blade grinding frost
in a circle beneath him. The left leg stayed curled over the other for a few spins, then slid up, heel brushing over the man's thigh as he reached down to grasp the blade with both hands for a cannonball variant. A few rotations after, both blades were on the ice for a fraction of a second before the right blade came up for the foot-change, and he continued on the spin, looming over his free leg, holding both hands to his ankle for a high-rise shoot-the-duck spin.

And I'm hanging on to the words you say...

As he rose back to standing up straight again, his free leg curved around for one last quick rotation, then touched down to the frost to slide away in a wide arc. He swerved backward, then forward, then backward again on his right back outside edge. His body wound-up, and the left blade came down, kicking off the ice for the quad Toe-loop.

...you said that I will...

He landed deftly, and jammed the left toe-pick down a second time for the triple Toe-loop.

...will be okay.
The broken lights on the freeway...left me here alone,

Chris continued sliding backward out of the landing, arms out to the side for balance.

Yuri watched the older skater go into something of a choreographic sequence, still feeling the subtle sway of his husband's frame behind him.

I may have lost my way now, haven't forgotten...my way home.

Lime-green eyes settled on that one section of the audience where the gaggle of not-skating skaters were watching from, but more than anything, on Yuri himself.

"You told me about the things you thought you had to do to keep Saito away from Yuri when they were younger," The Russian started casually, speaking quietly so as to not be heard by those for whom his words were not meant, "Would it surprise you to know that I felt the need to do the same thing when I met him?"

"Jeeze, he's still at it?" Chris sighed, "That guy doesn't give up."

I'm falling apart

Chris lunged forward, sliding a number of yards on his knees towards the rink-wall, hands sliding from his chest to expanding out beside him, frame leaning backward to face the ceiling.

I'm barely breathing...

The right blade came out and carved a circle in the ice as Chris started to rise up again, using the momentum of the slide to stand into an inside spread-Eagle, then glided out in a few twizzles.

"...Yeah, Chris, I've settled in okay." Yuri said, pinning his phone to his ear, "I think the hardest part about leaving was having to say goodbye to Vik-chan. I couldn't bring him here like I used to bring him to Imari."
“It's always hard to leave a pet behind. My cat would probably murder me if I couldn't train from home.” He mused, "Speaking of Imari though...did you hear from dickbutt? Is he being weird still?"

Yuri paused his unpacking and sat back, lonely in the middle of his box-filled but otherwise-empty room, "...I haven't checked, to be honest. I didn't tell him I was leaving. He probably just found out I'm gone..." He sighed and slouched over his crossed legs. "I just want to forget about it all... This is the worst thing I've ever done."

“You have to do what's best for you.” Chris pointed out, pulling his free arm out from under the back of his head as his aforementioned cat jumped up onto his bed. He stroked the cream-colored feline's back, and waited for her to lie down in her usual spot, nestled into the crook of arm and side, "Just tell all the people you know to message you at a different email. Block Saito's number on your phone so he can't call or text you. Put him out of your mind and-"

"I can't avoid him if he's going to be going to competitions." Yuri pointed out, "Nationals especially..."

"That's still a long time away. Things may be different by then."

"Maybe..."

"Is there anyone with you in Detroit that you can distract yourself with? A cute girl? Someone who you can be friends with?"

Yuri's face went a bit pink, and he scoffed lightly, "I didn't come all the way out here to socialize. I do want to get my skating game up to snuff. Now that I'm in Seniors, I have to get way better than I am. I'd hate to go into my first event and then Viktor sees nothing but a joke in me."

Chris smiled, "I've known him a little while. I wish you'd come hang out with us some time."

"I c-can't! I'd make a complete fool out of myself!"

"You'd get used to him. He's actually a giant goofball. You'd probably have a lot of fun.” The blonde teased, "Maybe have some drinks with us and loosen up."

Yuri's entire head was practically glowing red, "You know I can't drink too much before I lose all sense of myself."

"That's the point though." Chris laughed, "Tell you what... The next competition we're at together, I'll figure out a way to get you two into the same place at the same time an-"

"No way! Don't set me up like that!” Yuri protested, holding his phone out in front of himself like he could see Chris' face in the screen. "I..." He looked down slightly, nervous, "...I'd rather he notice my skating first... If he doesn't even know who I am from competition yet, then meeting him will be pointless, because then I'll just go out there and embarrass myself and him, and then he'll never want to talk to me again."

"I really don't think Viktor picks his friends based on how well they skate."

"...S-Still... Everything I've done on the ice has been to get to this point. I...I have to do this my way..."

"Alright..."

"Anyway though," Yuri shook his head and put the phone back against his ear like before, "If...if I
gave you my email password, could you go into it and delete anything Asahi might've sent me...? And block him, or...something... I don't want to inconvenience everyone else I know just because of this...but I..." He breathed a nervous sigh, "I can't face seeing his name in my inbox. I don't want to know what he said if anything's there, or that anything is there, if there is..."

"You know you can count on me."

With a broken heart that's still beating
I'm holdin' on (I'm still holdin')...

Chris was in the middle of his final required element; arms were clasped loosely behind his back as he descended from a camel-spin to a sit spin. Hands moved out over his bent knee as the arena spun all around him, and he rose up to standing, arms traveling up the sides of his body as he moved into the scratch-spin.

I'm barely holdin' on to you...

His arms flared down and extended out, elbows slightly bent as the rotation of his spin slowed. His free leg extended out slightly, toe-pick dragging around him, leaving a circle carved into the ice. As the lyrics faded, he went down to one knee, wrapped his arms around himself, and leaned back slightly with eyes closed...and the music faded.

The audience's roar of applause thundered through the arena, and Chris let himself fall down to his back, splaying out to catch his breath. As his chest moved up and down with each heave, he tilted his head to look into the stands again, straight towards the duo who were now as close as ever. One arm extended, and gave a lazy thumbs up. Yuri and Viktor both clapped and returned with their own thumbs up.

I'm sorry I let you down by being the very thing you'd been scared of... He thought, throwing his arms forward to help hoist himself up again, I wish I knew what had happened. I would've never teased you like that... He lowered his head for a moment, but then forced himself up to his blades and started his bows and waves to the audience to show his appreciation, I'll have to make it up to you somehow.

As the athlete made his way to rink-side, and the small legion of young skaters poured out to clear the ice of fan-thrown gifts, Viktor settled his arms down again, and nuzzled against his husband's cheek, "It's like he was skating for you this time rather than me."

"...You...think so?"

"Mh." The Russian nodded, hugging tightly, "When I talked to him earlier...I told him what happened at Nationals, so he'd understand why I was asking him to back off of his teasing."

Yuri had no response, save the slight furrow of his brow.

"He actually feels really bad about it. He had actually been trying to protect you from Saito even back in Juniors."

"...Chris was my sounding-board back then." Yuri admitted uneasily, "I...bet he saw more than I did though. Being friends with Asahi was never a problem until it started to become obvious that we were going to be splitting up for Seniors. Maybe I was really lucky...but after I went to Detroit, I always had someone around that I could use as an excuse to...be somewhere else. If it wasn't Chris, then it was Phichit-kun, or even Celestino. It got so routine that I almost forgot Asahi and I had even
known each other at some point...I guess that's why I barely registered when he stopped turning up at events. He just kind of faded from my memories."

"I can only wonder the kind of things that go through your head when it comes to him now." Viktor commented, rubbing the side of his jaw against his husband's raven hair, "I know you're trying to do what you think is right, but...maybe eventually you'll tell me the rest."

Yuri's brow crinkled and he turned in place, looking up at the man incredulously, "...You think I'm not telling you the whole story...?"

Viktor shook his head, "Not on purpose." He explained, placing the flat of his hand against the younger man's chest, feeling that heart pounding swiftly inside, "I think you've just been so good at walling Saito off that you aren't consciously sure what to think. You've been taking it all one day at a time, doing what you always do because you're a good person; kind, generous, forgiving... I don't think you've really allowed yourself to be honest with yourself. Maybe because you think it's dangerous to let yourself think clearly about him when he's living at Yu-Topia and has Minako as his new coach."

"I don't want to be angry all the time." Yuri explained sullenly, leaning into his partner's frame, sliding his right arm into the man's jacket to wrap around the small of Viktor's back, "I'm worried that if I think too much about it, I'll just...always be as high-strung as I was when him and I got into that argument in the changing room."

"Holding onto that anger isn't helpful either though."

"...You held onto anger..."

"And it nearly broke me when I did my rage skate at NHK." Viktor pointed out, "You didn't want to be around me when I was in that mood, and that just made it feel even worse. But...you're a gentle soul. Feeling anger isn't something you let yourself experience too much. That's part of why I didn't want Saito around once I keyed into things; I felt like you'd sooner accept his awkward behavior than upset him by getting mad and telling him off."

"YOU WOULDE'VE KEPT ME IN A CAGE!"

Yuri blinked hard and shook his head, "...I guess I just wish I could understand why he's fixated on me like he is. ...Was?"

"Is."

"...Yeah."

"By the time we get back home, it'll have been over a week since we saw him last." Viktor started again, "But I don't want you to think you have to brace yourself. Hasetsu is supposed to be our place. I don't want you to feel like I did when we went to Russia."

"...I don't want to think about it yet." Yuri grumbled, and turned to face the kiss and cry by rink-side.
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED NINETY FIVE

"Die Punktzahl für Christophe Giacometti..."

All eyes were on the scoreboard as the voice of the announcer echoed through the arena. Yurio tried to look unconcerned about it, but his tightly-crossed arms betrayed him slightly.

"...97.61!"

Cheers replaced the pregnant silence, and Chris blew kisses to the audience. He and his coach rose up from the bench in the kiss and cry, rejoining the rest of the Swiss entourage as the next athlete came up to the rink entrance.

Yurio slouched back into his seat, slightly relieved...at least for a moment.

"Wow~!" Nikki teased, poking his shoulder with a finger, "He just barely scored higher than you! Jealous? Worried?"

"No." Yurio huffed, "The Free Skate tomorrow is where it really counts. I'll bury him."

"Ooooo them's fightin' words!"

"Weiter auf dem Eis, Russland repräsentierend... Next on the ice, representing Russia... Georgi Popovichi!"

The dark blur pushed out into the field of frost; a form-fitting ensemble of black, blue, and purple, with sheer sashes coming off his hips. The dark feather boa around his shoulders shimmered with the silver steaks of tinsel throughout, hanging slightly behind his lace-covered back. More lace wrapped around his arms; windows cut through the sleeves in a snake-like path that wrapped around, and ended with long sheer tails hanging off the wrists. He glided around in a wide arc, waving at the audience before coming back to the wall for some final words from Yakov.

Viktor kept his eyes on his former coach for a moment, but broke his line of sight just a second before Georgi nodded and pushed off, looking up into the stands where the rest of Team Russia - current and former - was watching from. Viktor turned his attention to his husband's neck instead, nibbling lightly to distract himself. He felt that Yuri could use the distraction as well, given the topic only a few minutes earlier, and it was a relief to hear the younger man quietly laughing under the tickle of kisses and the tips of silver hair.

['El Tango de Roxanne' - Moulin Rouge OST]
[Use the Lyric video on channel 'martin varela' for correct timing - Start 0:28-1:40, 3:15-4:38]

A strong choir of cellos and violins burst into hearing, strumming powerfully as a single higher-tension violin joined them. Georgi strutted forward on his toe-picks in the exaggerated walking style of a tango, using the flare of the sheer sashes hanging from his frame to emphasize his movements.

Mila couldn't help but chortle a bit, though Sara was a bit confused beside her. The red-head turned towards Yuri and Viktor on the step just behind her, "Neh, Viktor...do you think he did this because of Yuri's 'Eros' last year?"

Yuri's face was already a little pink from his partner's flirtations, and he glanced between the two in
quiet confusion. A Spanish guitar joined the orchestra, and its tempo became more serious.

Viktor just sputtered a little, "I hope not. 'Eros' was so Yuri could *seduce* me."

Mila just laughed again, "You know how Georgi obsessed over you all those years...trying to get one over on you *just once* because you were always one step ahead of him."

"I *barely* noticed." The silver smiled sweetly.

*Will drive you...will drive you... will drive you... MAAAAAAAAADDDEEE!* 

Georgi slid across the ice on one knee, fingers dragging behind him.

*Rooooooooooxanne...*

He rose up quickly, hands coming in towards his sides, then thrust the right out towards the audience on the X. He looked down the length of his arm, spotting Viktor in the stands, as though sitting in the palm of his open hand, *See me from there, and watch as I become Russia's Champion!* 

Cameras flashed in the outer hall while Chris stood in front of the sponsor board, towel slung across his shoulders as he gently dabbed the side of his neck and face. The boom of the music was dulled by the walls, but it could still be heard playing in the background of the interview.

"Chris! As the reigning Euros champion, how do you feel about your performance?"

The blonde lifted his eyes carefully, and smiled, "Well, I'm in the lead at the moment, so I feel fairly good about it all."

"Do you still feel as competitive given that Skater Viktor isn't in the listings with you?"

He sighed and shook his head dramatically, but kept that smile going, "I've finally gotten over the heartbreak of Viktor leaving me for another man." He laughed, taking hold of the towel on either side of his chest where the ends hung down, "And even though he's not competing, it's good that he's here to watch. When I win Gold, I can rub it in his face in person rather than over the phone later."

The crowd of media-staffers laughed as well, "What about defending your title from Yuri Plisetsky? You and him are neck-and-neck now."

"It's a bit daunting to have such a serious challenge from someone a decade younger than I am, but I guess I just have to look at it like one of those Indiana Jones switch-outs...swap one Russian for another." He mused in answer, "He's really trying hard to out-do Viktor's legacy. We'll *all* have to be careful of him. The Free Skate is what's important though, and I can still pull one over on him there."

"And Georgi, the skater on the ice right now?"

"...99.21!"

The audience cheered excitedly, and Georgi's eyes lit up in stunned disbelief, looking at the numbers on the scoreboard in front of him and his coach.

"...Getting onto the podium in PyeongChang is going to be impossible if you can't stop focusing so much on one-upping Viktor." Yakov scolded dryly anyway, staring into the cameras in front of the
kiss and cry with his arms crossed, "People in the stands are too much of a distraction for you. You have to focus on yourself and your technique-" He went on, twisting slightly in place to look at his skater...only to realize the man was doing something of a celebratory dance and wasn't even listening, "...On the ice! Not right here!"

All eyes of the athlete's section were on Yurio, and he did everything he could to pull his hood down over his face as they teased.

"He almost broke 100 this time!" Viktor joked, holding one hand up to his mouth so his voice would carry over, "You'll have to step it up tomorrow!"

The Tiger just shot a one-eyed glare from between long strands of blonde hair, "His Free Skate batting average is 150! I'll bury him and Chris!"

Yuri smiled through the jers and laughs around him, but didn't want to add to the torment, so he kept quiet. He turned his gaze back to the ice and waited for the next skater to come out, watching Georgi move off with Yakov towards the curtain that lead under the stands.

*I still need to ask him about the house in St. Petersburg...* He thought, catching himself starting to clap automatically as he heard the rest of the audience start up again. Maybe I can catch him tomorrow. ...I kind of want to ask Mik to help with it, too, but I don't know how to do this without upsetting Viktor. I need to know though...

"Chriiiissss~!" Viktor hollered, swaying his frame with his exaggerated wave.

Yuri looked aside slightly as he spotted the figure stepping out from the lower stairwell, coming up onto the landing just ahead of the group. As a blur of vivid color against the bright white backdrop of the rink, Chris looked like a scarlet candle with a bright, glowing yellow flame. The older skater came into focus though as Yuri's eyes adjusted, and he felt a tension in his legs as the man started to turn around to face them.

"Good job out there!" Viktor continued, looking a bit smug then, "You're almost in first place, Mr. Best Skater in the World."

"Yeah yeah, rub it in." Chris sulked, brows raised skeptically. His expression softened though as he watched Yuri rise up to his feet, pulling right out of the Russian's grasp in the process.

The whole group seemed to simmer down a little as they spotted Yuri moving down a step or two and pause there, looking at the taller figure nervously.

Chris hesitated a moment, unsure if he should say something, but the look on the younger man's face was enough, and he bowed his head, "Sor-

"Sorry," Yuri said, a bit louder, cutting those words off in the process. He watched as Chris lifted his gaze again in confusion, and brought his hands in front of his face, palms pressed together, "...For shoving you earlier. I just..." He paused in the middle of his sentence, opening his eyes to spot Chris' hand covering both of his, gesturing for them to go down. Hazel eyes lifted in confusion.

"You have nothing to be sorry for." Chris explained, "I more than understand why it happened. I'm the one who's sorry."

"...You've been teasing me like that for nearly ten years though. I've never reacted like that before..." Yuri said sullenly, lowering his eyes, "I even heard your voice...I knew it was you, but for some reason I just...went crazy for a few seconds, I guess."
Chris' eyes followed Yuri's body-language carefully, looking beyond him to Viktor in the back, still sitting on the step beside his uncle. Viktor looked rather serious, all things considered. Mikhail watched the scene carefully as well, as did the rest of the group, even those who had no idea what had inspired the discussion or why it was such a stiff moment. Chris finally broke the odd silence, even as the music of the next skater started playing above them, and leaned forward, pulling Yuri into a one-armed hug. He was careful to keep his hand around the middle of the younger man's back, but was equally careful to speak only loudly enough to be heard by Yuri himself, "I'm sorry about what happened to you at Nationals." He started, forcing cherry-hazel eyes wide against his shoulder, "I thought that the years would've calmed Asahi down...but I was wrong."

"...I...don't hold it against him." Yuri answered, "He's gone through a lot since back then. He was hurting, and...lost. I've forgiven him."

"Have you though?"

Yuri's gaze lowered as Chris let go, and he turned slightly to watch as the older figure settled into a seat opposite Mikhail, and leaned against the armrest, hanging slightly into the stairwell. Chris' eyes were focused on the rink though, and the performance taking place upon it. Not knowing what else to say, Yuri looked forward as well, only to feel a tug on the back-bottom hem of his pea-coat, then a stronger pull, making him step backward in response. Viktor's shoulder came up under him like a chair, catching him before he could stumble, and he gripped quickly to the upper corner of Mikhail's seat before he fell head over heels, "V-Viktor..."

"Can't watch the show when you're standing there, my love." The Russian answered, "You make a great door, but not a good window, I'm afraid."

"...Oh, sorry."

Viktor gently rubbed the side of his head against his spouse's leg, then turned and kissed the same spot before looking up, "Come cuddle again. My front is getting cold."

Yuri hesitated a moment, looking at Chris again briefly, but then nodded and slid back down between his husband's legs. He crossed his own as he sat on the step, and pulled Jiro up into his lap before leaning back into expecting arms. Makkachin laid down on his elbows, paws dangling off the step by his human's knees, and set his chin down on that thigh to Yuri's right, earning himself a nose-boop for his efforts. Yuri settled down again though, moving his hand back down into Jiro's fluff to warm his fingers.

"You doing okay?" Viktor wondered quietly, leaning down over a shoulder as he pressed in behind his partner's shoulders, "You look stuck."

Nodding slightly, Yuri turned his face to nuzzle against one cheek lightly, "...Chris apparently thinks I have unresolved issues with Asahi, too." He answered, keeping his voice low as well, "I don't know what either of you guys are talking about though. I thought I dealt with it all."

"Sometimes the lies we tell ourselves are more convincing than the ones we tell others." Viktor suggested, unwrapping one arm from his spouse's frame to smooth a few strands of black hair back down, "Or so I've heard, anyway. Try not to worry about it so much. Maybe the both of us are just projecting onto you, and there's really nothing else there."

"...But if there is...how do I even know...?" Yuri wondered, "I mean, I can let myself get mad about stuff that's happened recently...though I don't want to... I've gone out of my way to forget the rest."

"Why would you want to do that though? You've both emphasized how harmless and benign he was
"...Maybe it was nothing he did." He suggested ponderously, lifting his knees up a little bit to pull Jiro up against his chest for the warmth, "...Maybe it was me."

Hundreds of people stood on the peninsula of the arena as the end of the Short Program ushered everyone back into the outdoors. The moon was nearly full and especially bright in the clear, cloudless sky, illuminating the ground in a dull, pale glow. The SkateFam hung around for a little while before breaking off to head back to their different hotels.

As before, the dogs were disallowed on the tram back to the Arcotel, but the walk back wasn't terribly long. Feeling the warmth of the indoors, apart from the chill of a skating rink, was a welcome change. The room itself felt almost too hot by comparison.

Yuri let Jiro off his leash as soon as they stepped in, and peeled his jacket off before finding the pair's doggy dinners. With the pups occupied, Yuri flopped to the pillow-top on his back and splayed his arms out, legs dangling off the edge, and closed his eyes. He drew in a deep breath, listening to the sound of Viktor putting their jackets into the closet. It was hard to hear the sock-steps through the sound of Makkachin's vacuum-like appetite, but Yuri cracked one eye open as he felt the bed shift on either side of him.

Hands were pressed to the comforter beside his waist, and Viktor clambered up onto the high top, walking his hands further up until he could slide them under the back of his shoulders. One knee went beside his own, then the other, and the exhausted figure slowly collapsed down on top of him with a heavy exhale. Yuri lifted his arms up to hug around Viktor's back, combing his fingers through silver hair, "After spending all night wondering if I would be too tired for tonight...should we actually be worrying about you?"

Viktor huffed a hot breath against Yuri's shirt, "No... I'm looking forward to tonight." He explained, turning his head slightly to set his chin down in the place his cheek had just been, "I just wanted to lay down for a minute."

"Get me too warm and comfortable and I may fall asleep anyway. You'll have to carry me to wherever we're going."

"I have a limo coming to pick us up." The Russian teased, rising back up onto his knees to sit over his husband's lap, and offered his hands to pull the younger man up to sit under him, "Everything's arranged... It's going to be amazing."

"A limo, huh?"
"Mh." Viktor nodded, eyes shining in the amber-lights of the room. He slid the palms of his hands up his partner's chest and over his shoulders, feeling a pair going around his waist and back in turn, "Where we're going tonight isn't just some regular thing."

"Regular plus?"

"Super extra regular plus." He laughed, wiggling in a bit closer to sit higher on that lap, practically looming over his partner from that vantage. He leaned down and nosed him adoringly, "It'll be like nothing you've ever seen or experienced before. When people arrive, it's like a red-carpet event...photographers taking pictures of everyone... High-society people go, local celebrities, misfits like us who happen to be able to afford to go... It's all rather incredible, actually."

"Something you've done before?"

"No... It'll be my first time, too. But I've been looking into it for a long time. You can only do this kind of thing in Vienna...it's the chance of a lifetime." He explained, sliding his hands up from Yuri's shoulders to the sides of his neck, tracing the sides of his thumbs lightly against his jawline, "And I can think of no one better to share it with than you, my love."

"I feel so uncultured suddenly. I hardly know anything about this city, even though I poked around a little for stuff that we could do."

Viktor just smiled in that seductive, eyes-half-lidded way, and pressed in close for a long kiss, with another quick one after for good measure, "One of the perks of spending most of my life living next-door to Europe is knowing all the little things about the different cultures. This one though...this is special. I think you'll be really impressed."

"I think my heart's starting to race already just from the anticipation of it."

"That's good." The Russian smiled wider, "Then let me show you your spiffy duds."
Yuri stayed sitting on the bed, eyes closed - and covered by a pillow-case pulled over his entire head just to be sure - as the rustling noises of Viktor's digging sounded around the room. A hard plastic suitcase was unclipped and pushed open, and the telltale crinkle of thin plastic tickled Yuri's ears. He turned his head to follow the sound as Viktor carried each of the two garment bags from the suitcase to the end of the bed. One eye cracked open inside the pillow-case, 'looking' towards the spot where he felt the blankets moving a bit by his leg. The plastic crinkle could only suggest that Viktor was pulling the sheeting away to put the garment on display.

"...Okay." The Russian said quietly, stepping up to take his husband's hands, and pulled him gently forward to find his feet on the floor. He guided his partner around and turned him in place, holding to the sides of his shoulders, and slid his fingers under the edge of the silken fabric covering Yuri's head. Palms covered the younger man's eyes, "Pull the drape away."

Confused but curious, Yuri did as told, and reached up for a corner of the covering. He could hear the subtle crackling of static as the cotton shifted over the top of his head and came away, leaving strands of his coal-black hair to tumble forward over the fingers curled around his eyes.

"You don't know how long I agonized over these outfits," Viktor teased, "Though the cities that these competitions are held in are chosen a year or two in advance...after I decided to take a break from skating to be your coach, I couldn't be sure I'd attend this one. That day in Hasetsu, when I told you that I'd regained so much of my inspiration...that I could create a thousand new programs and never be able to decide which I'd skate. This place, this city...it was among the many things I started dreaming about. Then, when you told me about your dreams...of the trees with leaves the color of fire, and flowers, and lanterns rising into the sky...I knew there was no chance we could miss this."

"So this wasn't a last-second thing you decided on after we had such a bad time at Nationals."

"Oh no, I've been plotting this since summer." Viktor laughed, "As soon as we got those professional measurements taken for our costumes this season, I sent them off to a suit-maker as well. Being fired by the RSF was devastating in more ways than the obvious."

"...The idea of not having reason to come here anymore, since you wouldn't be competing..."

"Mh." The Russian agreed and nodded, "It would've been a real tragedy to have gone through all that planning, only to have it wasted...or used on some flimsy Plan B scenario. It would be like re-gifting an unwanted fruit-cake at Christmas."

Yuri turned his head around, managing to peek one eye out from under the right hand, "Fruit-cake...?"

"You'll understand when we get to where we're going. Anything but that would seem unworthy of these outfits."

"So can I see them then?"

Viktor nodded, and watched his husband turn back around within his still-cupped hands,
"...Okay...one, two...three."

Yuri felt the hands come away, and slowly opened his eyes, looking down onto the bed. A tingle and a flutter rushed through him as he beheld the 'spiffy duds' directly before him; a pure white tailcoat tuxedo jacket with golden, fern-like embroidery woven delicately from shoulder to lower hem. Beneath the folds of the lapels was a black vest, then a white shirt, and a black bowtie at the neck. White pants were folded neatly within, through the bar of the hanger that poked out the top. Yuri's eyes were wide, "...Wow...!" He looked back over his shoulder to Viktor's beaming face, then back again, unsure if he could even touch something so richly fancy, "...I can't believe I'm the one who's supposed to wear this. I...I don't even know what occasion it could be for. What are we even doing tonight? Meeting royalty?"

"We are the royalty." The Russian mused, rubbing his spouse's shoulders for a moment before stepping aside, and moved the blanket that he'd folded over the second garment bag to hide it from sight, "It was hard to decide which of us would wear the black suit tonight, but...I figured I would, since I know what I'm getting you into." He explained, showing off the dark twin to Yuri's ensemble, with the silver embroidery on a dark field, "There are at least a few rules to follow."

"R-Rules...?" Yuri balked, "How am I going to be abl-

Viktor raised a finger to quiet those lips, "Shush," He cooed, "There's absolutely nothing to worry about. It's not rules like knowing which fork to use first or how to bow or curtsy...it's dress-code rules."

Yuri went slightly cross-eyed as he looked towards the finger just in front of his nose, but then straightened his sights out to look up and forward, "...I can't even imagine right now."

"Let's get ready to go then. The limo is just the first thing."

With the pups put up for the night and the lights turned out, the duo made their way down to the lobby and then outside, long coats and scarves covering their elaborate ensembles beneath. The long silver limousine was already parked out front and waiting when they came through, and the door was opened to the passenger compartment by the attendant driver.

The Viennese cityscape passed by under a dazzling display of street-lights, illuminating the regal architecture of the last half century. Every building leading up to Vienna's City Hall was like a huge bank or hotel, with multiple stories of quaint square windows built into tall stone faces. The lower floors were decorated by sweeping archways and tall pillars; all meticulously reconstructed after the devastation of the last World War.

City Hall itself was like a gothic castle; two-floor-high arches, narrow and pointed double-windows in various designs, elaborate stonemasonry with decorative pillars. The entire outside of the building was illuminated with multi-colored lights, accenting every nook and cranny of the building's face, giving it an almost Notre Dame-like aesthetic in the dark. The towers of the clock spires at the back were lit up in yellow, with the main floors ghosted by light-blue, and the ground-level arches in red, purple, and green. By the time the limousine pulled up to the side entrance, it was impossible to see the upper edge of its roof without getting out.

Dozens of other people were moving towards the main doors; huge wooden panels with detailed metal-work designed around and into it, set slightly back from the edge of the street, through a big arch that was flanked on either side by black, wrought-iron gates.
The limousine door was opened, and Viktor stepped out first, offering his hand to help his husband out after. When Yuri stepped out, he found himself gob smacked by the entire sight all over again.

"...This is incredible..." He commented, his voice barely audible, "It looks like we've stepped 200 years into the past, attending some big royal coronation or wedding or something."

"Close." Viktor confirmed, extending his hand out towards the vertical banners that had 'Blumenball' written on them in big white font, "Vienna is known for a number of things...but one of the most exciting is Ball Season."

"...Ball season?" Yuri echoed, pausing for a moment...then his jaw slackened, "We're at a ball!?"

"Mh." The silver nodded excitedly, pulling the long tickets out from the inner pocket of his long black jacket, "Blumenball means Flower Ball in German." He mused, gesturing towards the open gate towards the small line of people standing outside the doors, "Shall we?"

Still shocked, but starting to get excited about what to expect inside, he nodded eagerly and took the offered elbow, following his partner towards the ticket check-in. He looked around at every possible sight as they passed through, their tickets were scanned, and they were allowed through, walking under a series of outdoor hanging chandeliers. Some ball attendees just within were paused to take photos as they went by, heading into an inner courtyard that was flanked on each side by the daunting, high walls of the building. Yuri looked up through the square cut-out of the yard, seeing the sky for a moment, then the gothic ceilings again as they passed under another roof. Ahead, another set of huge wooden doors that actually lead within the Hall.

Jackets and scarves were removed and given to a concierge attendant, and small tickets were handed back for their return at the end of the night. The walls were white marble and stone, elaborately carved into pillars, ledges, and the frames of huge windows...the same windows that seemed so narrow and small from outside. Red carpets were laid out on the floors, trimmed in gold lines, and turned the corners that lead to the stairs to the upper floors. The duo moved to the base of one, and watched as each group or pair went up the stairs at a time, being videoed or photographed as they went.

Yuri just marveled at the entire thing, clinging close to his spouse while taking in the sights all around, "...This is absolutely incredible... There's nothing like this in Japan... Even in the USA, you won't find something like this unless you go into a state's Capitol Building, or some huge New England church."

"There's sights like this in St. Petersburg, but I guess I was just so used to it that it wasn't magical anymore." Viktor explained, stepping forward as the cue moved on, and another pair moved up the red carpet stairs, "But this is all as new to me as it is to you...something to mark on my bucket list."

"I can only wonder what else is on that list." Yuri mused, "This place is just blowing my mind."

"And we haven't even gotten to the Flower part of this ball."

A minute or two later, and it was their turn to head up the marble staircase. Though an odd sight - two men rather than one with his lady - the fact of their profession and the presence of the European Championship preceded them, and a number of people recognized them, leading to a cordial and relaxed atmosphere.

At the top of the stairs, another cue was waiting outside the doors to the main ball room. There was a second set of doors a few meters away where another set of stairs was letting people arrive from a different ground-floor entrance, and between them, a wall of flowers set up like a mural. Some
people took advantage of the wait and took photos in front of the display. The crowd slowly moved forward though, and Yuri got his first good look at the big main hall that the event was being hosted in.

The entrance was packed with people, with many more trying to file through, past the open bar on the right and the numerous tables set up everywhere else. Across the field of moving heads, the metal frame of the orchestra stage could be seen, decorated with vines and flowers.

"Yuri, this way," Viktor commented, pointing to the far side of the stage, "I've reserved a table flanking the dance floor."

The big hall was easily 200ft long, and perhaps 30ft across between the outside wall and the archways close to the inner wall, with another 15ft of space between them where more tables were arranged. There were hundreds of people, practically swarming the place. More faces looked down from the second floor, peering between the pillars where the arches curved to their points above them. White marble decorated with gold leafing and trim, with dozens of big-bulb, double-level chandeliers hanging in rows from the high vaulted ceiling. The dance floor itself was polished wood, flanked on the orchestra side by a raised platform where more tables were set up in view of the huge gothic windows.

With a bit of effort, trying to get through the crowded room without being able to cut across the dance floor, the pair were finally able to find their numbered table, and Viktor helped Yuri sit first, gently pushing the chair in behind him before taking his own seat. Their view of the dance floor was pristine; not one singular person or table blocked their view.

"...This is really something else." Yuri commented, finding one of his husband's hands on the tabletop to hold onto, "And you said this is a season of events?"

Viktor looked over excitedly and nodded, eyes shining, "Mh! This is just one of hundreds of balls that happen. The biggest ball of the season is the Vienna Opera Ball, which takes place next month and is hosted at the State Opera House. There's also other themes like the candy or Bonbon Ball, the Doctor's Ball, Lawyer's Ball, the Vienna Philharmonic Ball, even a New Year's Eve Ball at the Vienna Imperial Palace."

"Wow..."

"This place is actually going to transform from a Flower Ball to the Viennese Ball of the Sciences next week, so if you randomly see displays that look like they have beakers or instruments, that's probably why."

"...So how does all this work anyway?" Yuri wondered. The answer was paused as he and Viktor watched as a second pair approached the table and took the other seats across from them.

"Bonsoir," The lady said; an older woman with an immaculately styled midnight-blue evening-gown, with silver and blue jewelry, and a dark sash across her shoulders. Seating her was an equally older gentleman in a traditional tail-suit tuxedo with black bowtie.

"Bonsoir," Viktor replied amiably before turning his attention back to his partner, "So...given the size of the tables and the number of people who are coming here as pairs, most tables are set up to accommodate multiples. Bigger tables are arranged for larger groups to reserve so they can all try to sit together." He explained, then gestured his head out to the empty dance floor, "In a little while, once the noise of everyone's arrival has settled down, there'll be a number of dances performed by practiced teams...kind of like an opening ceremony. There's a few waltzes and some ballet. Then the floor opens to the rest of us, and it kind of becomes a sea of chaos; a mass of people who know how
to dance, and those who don't."

"We know how to dance."

Viktor smirked, "Yes we do. And the neat part about all this...is that this room isn't even the only place where we can dance."

Yuri lifted himself up a little, "There's more?"

"There's theme rooms."

"Oohh! Like what?"

"Disco, salsa, swing, I think there's a country room...lots of themes. But first thing's first..." Viktor explained, "In a short while, they'll bring out the food and alcohol."

"I can't even imagine how much it would take to organize food and drink for this many people...there must be thousands crawling all over this place." Yuri surmised, looking around as more people were taking their seats, and others were starting to crowd around the other side of the dance floor, held back only by a velvet rope-barrier.

"All that was arranged ahead of time." Viktor answered, reaching towards the center of the table where a corked bottle of sparkling water was sitting, and turned over two of the glasses on his and Yuri's side of things, "There's a brief, 4-item menu that you choose in advance and they make those items according to the numbers."

"Oh...what did they offer?"

"There's usually a meat-based dish with different sides and desserts, and a vegetarian option. Neither of us is vegetarian though so I got one each of the former, so you can pick which sides you like best."

"That's so great," Yuri said dreamily, wishing he could smell it already, "I can feel my stomach starting to grumble..."

Viktor rubbed his thumb across his husband's hand, but then reached over with the other to pinch his fingers lightly over the younger man's chin, "This is just the start, my love. It's going to be a night to remember."

"This was a really great choice," Yuri agreed, feeling the gentle nose-rub against the tip of his own, "And I really do see what you mean about the fruit-cake now." He laughed, stealing a quick kiss before looking around at all the sights again, "This really is something else."

Chapter End Notes

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHt5jEOwtpk - Video of the 2018 Blumenball if ya'll wanna see what it looks like beyond my descriptions.
CHAPTER FOUR HUNDRED NINETY SEVEN

The constant hum of excitement grew over the course of the first hour, with more people pouring into the main ballroom than one might think could even fit. The small orchestra tuned their instruments quietly, creating a quiet chorus of strings and horns under the clamor of chatter, laughter, and clinking glasses.

Yuri looked around in utter amazement at the flower decorations around the huge room, listening idly to the small-talk at the table - though having no idea what was being said, as it was entirely French. He understood a few familiar words like figure skater, Olympien, and the description of the Championnat d'Europe, but the rest was largely lost on him. He let his husband speak for the both of them, occasionally feeling a light grip around his hand tightening affectionately, but otherwise, the sights of the ballroom were too exquisite to overlook. The white polished stone with gold trim, arched pillars, the overhanging second floor with its balcony edge, and of course, the thousands and thousands of flowers. Different arrangements were set against the base of the walls; taller displays that towered over even the tallest standing person, smaller ones that were set in the center of each table, and the spaces between the windows that were adorned with fence-like wooden slats, flowers and grasses woven throughout into elaborate colored patterns.

Just as Yuri's eyes caught sight of what looked like the beginning of a distinctly professional-looking line - young men with matching tuxedos and their lady companions wearing white dresses - his attention was pulled back to the table. As if by unseen hands, the dinner assortment that Viktor had described earlier suddenly appeared, and its rich smells filled the air.

The main dish was braised pork loin with bacon and potato soufflé, with a saffron sauce around the rim of the plates. One of the two sides was a beef soup with chives and fried meat, and the other was zander terrine - a big sashimi-like fish roll - sliced and set onto its side on a bed of lentil salad, with yellow daisies and a turmeric cream. A sparkling elderberry wine was poured and set out as well, and the remaining bottle placed in a bucket of ice on the table.

"Wow...everything is so fancy..." Yuri commented, eyes wide with awe. He spotted a hand coming over to lift a wine glass though, and so he reached to lift his own as well.

"There's still so much we have to do this season, but..." Viktor started, looking from the deep purple-red liquid to the man sitting next to him, "Maybe tonight can be a reset for everything yet to come. The three biggest events of the year are still coming up, including one of the most important competitions that any athlete can hope to be part of."

Yuri rubbed his thumb against the fingers curled around his hand, "It's still hard to believe sometimes..." He said quietly, looking at his reflection in the wine-glass, "I used to aspire just to go to the same ISU events as you...but now I'll actually get a chance to compete on Olympic ice against you..."

"Well, you said you had the chance before, but-"

"I know, I turned it down... It was too much for me to handle." Yuri smiled nervously, "My anxiety would've gotten the better of me, considering how I never placed all that high even at Worlds before you came along."

"Ah, if only you could understand French... I've been bragging about your last Worlds scores, and
how far you've come in such a short time."

Yuri's face went bright red to hear it, "W-well...bragging about what I've accomplished is more a
testament to you than anything."

"Don't sell yourself short. You always had the potential...I just pulled it out of you." The silver
Russian insisted, turning slightly in his seat to face his partner more evenly, "But I would never have
scored so high myself if I didn't feel like I was facing such strong competition. I was satisfied with
my 330 averages; no one else could come close. You lit the fire under my butt to get into the 340s
though. You and only you."

"...I never thought scores like that could even be achieved." Yuri added, "It's going to be so hard to
see those numbers again."

"We're going to have to push each other harder than ever."

Yuri drew a quick but deep breath, and nodded, moving his wine-glass closer to his partner's, "...No
more warm-up mode."

"Four Continents will be the proving ground." Viktor agreed eagerly, "The Nikiforov winning streak
is going to continue on and dominate straight into Worlds."

"And every year thereafter until I fulfill my promise to you."

"Five World Championships."

Viktor nodded, "Then a toast...to a fun and challenging rest of this season, and to all the Gold medals
that no one else is going to be able to wear because of us."

"And all the Life and Love we can experience along the way."

**Klink**

The food was melt-in-their-mouth savory, and every flavor unique and new. The distraction of the
spread made it easy for the cue of ballroom dancers to file onto the dance floor for the opening
ceremonies. Each pair was impecably dressed, shuffling by in lockstep as a second line
approached them from the opposite end of the hall. They met in the center, directly in front of the
music stage, and turned a corner to start walking out into the middle of the room. Within a few
minutes, the entire dance floor was occupied, with the dancers waiting for the music to begin.

Yuri looked up, marveling at the multiple rows of men, then women, and repeated across the room,
all facing the north end of the hall. Eyes turned to the small orchestra then, and the conductor that
stood at the front of it, looking about for the signal that the festivities were ready to begin. An unseen
grant was given, and the conductor turned back to the musicians, raising his thin white baton.

[*Fächer-Polonaise, Op. 525* - Carl Michael Ziehrer]

The music was strong from the start, with the boom of the instruments echoing off the high walls.
The dancers all held their position for a moment, then turned to face their partners, hands held up and
out between them...and the Polonaise began.

Yuri could feel the power of the music thumping straight through him, vibrating the chair and table.
Finishing the dinner suddenly became markedly more difficult than before, as neither skaters could
completely sit still with the dancing going on so close by.
The next song was extremely tame compared to the first, and the dance had more bounce to it than before. It seemed the perfect transitionary piece from waltz to ballet, with the ladies springing around their male partners at a faster pace. The song was also much shorter though, and the long group danced their way to either ends of the hall, making way for the next group that was going to take the stage.

The final course - dessert - was brought out as the music faded out. One was a 'cooked cream' called Panna Cotta with Italian Amarena cherries, sitting above slices of mango. Another was a rich chocolate mousse above a bed of berries. There was no way to pick which one to take, so Viktor scooted his chair around to be on Yuri's same side, and they squished up together, shoulder to shoulder, and took little tastes from each as the show went on.

The final show of the ball's opening ceremony was a full-on ballet, with five different pairs of dancers that entered, merged, and departed the stage at various times throughout. The ladies, all dancing on point, wore flowery summer-style dresses to match the name of the song. Their male partners wore suits of crushed velvet, each one a solid color of scarlet red, wine purple, rose pink, tulip orange, and finally, a bright, verdant green.

With both desserts polished, and some more of the elderberry wine to cap the meal, the pair sat back to relax and just enjoy the ballet while everything settled. The standing section on the opposite side of the dance floor looked eager for the moment that everyone could pour forward.

"I can imagine you doing stuff like this," Yuri teased, rubbing his thumb across his husband's leg where he held it, "Back in your show-ballet days."

"Didn't you ever do ballet recitals?" Viktor wondered, one arm draped across the younger man's shoulders.

Yuri just shook his head, "Nah, the only performances I ever did were skating. Ballet lessons were always background stuff for me."

Viktor smirked, putting the rim of his wine-glass to his lip, "At some point I'm going to have to ask Mama Katsuki about photo albums of you in your youth. I've really only seen that one photo of you with Vik-chan on the shrine..." He took a quick sip, and turned to nose his husband's cheek, "And the tease of photos in Imari."

Yuri's cheeks flushed, "...I'm almost positive my mom has copies of all that stuff...somewhere..." He started, only to slow himself and look nervous, "...Actually...now that I think about it, I think the photos she has of me were from when I wasn't skating...like, the time I was at home between competitions or something. The actual memorabilia from the skating would...either be in Imari, or with Celestino."

"You didn't keep stuff for yourself...?" The Russian wondered, a bit perplexed, "Even a little bit?"

"I was never exactly put on the cover of sports magazines or did modeling photo-shoots." Yuri quipped, "I was no super star. I had a few good photos from some of my better performances, but those were official shots that the JSF took. You've seen those."

Viktor just pouted, "I just find it so hard to believe that there isn't something more... As though there's maybe some huge cache of amazing stuff out there that maybe even you don't know about."
"Maybe there is." Yuri shrugged anxiously, putting on a brave smile, "I wouldn't really know where
to look though. I mean, my family was never that into my hobbies...you were there when the triplets
gave them the first real explanation about how skating works that they've ever gotten."

"Minako told me that she used to go to most of your competitions. Maybe she'll have something."

"She went with me, but she was no photographer."

Viktor set his wine-glass down and rubbed his chin in thought, "I guess I'll have to go with Plan B."

"...You have a Plan B...?" Yuri wondered skeptically, making a face at the man's ponderous look.
Before he could think though, Viktor already had his phone out and had snapped a quick selfie of the
two of them. The Russian's arm came up from behind his shoulders so both thumbs could type,
"...W-what are you...doing...?"

"Calling...on...all...fans...of...my dearest...hubby, the...love of...my life...Yuri Nikiforov." Viktor
mused, reading aloud as he wrote, making Yuri's face go redder with each word, "I am...in
need...of...help. It would...appear...that...there are no...good...pics...of...him...from...his...earlier...skating
days. Please...photo-dump...everything you...have. Arigatou~"

"Hm...not 'spasibo'?"] Yuri deadpanned, an awkward smile frozen on his face.

Viktor shook his head as he wrote out his hashtags, "For the sake of you and my new country, I need
to make a bigger effort towards speaking Japanese. I'm only getting a pass for now because of my
athletic history, but eventually I'm going to have to pass those tests like everyone else." He
explained, posting the new content to his Instagram, then pocketed his phone back into the breast
pocket of his suit coat. He leaned aside to lift his arm up again and slid it back over his husband's
shoulders to retake the place he was resting in before, and then moved in closer to offer an adoring
peck to one cheek, "But that's chatter for later. We can figure it out when we're back home."

"I guess that's fair." Yuri agreed, looking out to the ballet performance again. It was the longest
planned show of the night at nearly 10 minutes, and it was only slightly more than half over by then.
The different dancers were moving by them with grace, a blur of different colors moving through the
pale golden glow of the ballroom. He couldn't help but think on those last-spoken words though, and
his eyes drifted from the show to his husband again.

Viktor was watching the show still, relishing in its exquisite beauty and precision. His attention was
suddenly compelled away though as he felt Yuri twisting around under his arm, and a pair of legs
went up across his lap. Before he could even look to see what was going on, a hand went around the
side of his head to pull him down, and he felt a warm pair of lips under his ear. Tense at first from the
confusion, he let himself relax, and eased into the long kiss and nuzzle on his neck.

"You know that I appreciate everything you've done, and are doing, right?" Yuri wondered,
speaking quietly into that nearest ear, "The huge sacrifices you've made...both willingly and
unexpectedly... Everything you've given to me...even though I've had hardly anything to give to you
in return..."

Viktor slid his free hand up onto the pair of thighs that were draped across his lap, and turned his
head to look into the cherry-hazel eyes that were looking back at him.

"...Even though I feel like I've known you my entire life..." Yuri went on, "I still sometimes catch
myself realizing that I really don't know what I can do for you...to make it all worthwhile."

"It's been worthwhile since you said yes." The Russian replied simply, "Because all I
ever wanted was you. Not your stuff. From the moment you wrapped your arms around me and sang your drunken song about coming to Hasetsu, I knew my life would never be the same. My greatest joy was getting to see you again, and it's been a dream ever since. Just because you don't have a giant pile of cash to surprise me with doesn't mean I'm not getting what I need from you."

He gave a reluctant look, but nodded.

"Yuri, my love, you don't need to buy things to make me happy." Viktor rephrased, "All told, this ball wasn't even that expensive. The suits were, sure, but that was my choice; it's what I like to do for myself."

"...Because...you're 'extra.'"

"Mhm." Viktor nodded a smile, "And it's another reason why I don't want you to measure you're ability to please me by how much money you're spending. I've had most of my lifetime to be lavished with fortune and gifts...nothing on that end really impresses me that much anymore. What makes me happy with you is experiences. I get to share with you all the things that I couldn't do when I was alone, and seeing you enjoy it all gives me joy. Your happiness, excitement, curiosity, wonder...all of it...it's contagious for me." He explained, reaching up with his free hand to take hold of the hand that had pulled his head down before, and kissed into its palm, "It's become clear that nothing in this world makes me happier than making you happy...and I would do absolutely anything to that end. It just happens to be my great advantage that you haven't had the same life that I have. If you were as much of a superstar as you're always describing me to be, then there would be nothing I could do to impress you. You'd have seen and done it all already."

"It's not like I wouldn't have fun even if I had done all these things before already..." Yuri retorted, "No matter what it is, doing things with you is a whole different experience. I just can't shake the feeling that this situation the RSF has put you into is a bridge too far... It's forced you to do things that you should've been allowed to decide for yourself, in your own time..."

Viktor pressed his husband's curled fingers to his lips, and breathed out a long sigh against them. He kissed them, then his partner's brow, then his lips, but then shook his head, "It's been one of the most challenging things I've ever had to endure, that's true...but it's been easier because you've been with me. And I know that everything will turn out fine in the end, even if there are still some hard days ahead of us."

"What else could there possibly be...?"

"...The day I actually sign-away my Russian citizenship. Even though - realistically speaking - it's just paperwork at this point; I've been living in Japan for almost two years now...I'm still Russian by every other measure. Being here at Euros...even though I can't participate, and maybe to a degree because I can't...has really just made that fact super obvious." He explained quietly, letting his husband's hand go so he could pull the man closer. He took solace in the hug being returned, two arms going over his shoulders, "But I can get through this because I have your strength to lean on when I stumble. I don't think any of this would be working out if I thought anything less of our relationship. I would've thrown my hands up and called everything off, and gone back to St. Petersburg with my tail between my legs, if there was any thought in my mind whatsoever that being with you wasn't what I wanted."

Yuri could feel his breath catch in his throat, "...So...there was never a moment where you had...second thoughts?"

Viktor lifted his head and rested it on his partner's shoulder, and shook it 'no,' "I've had moments of shock, disappointment, and a sense of injustice about it all - it was an unpleasant surprise - but
it never once crossed my mind that I should fight back or resist it. In the end, all this means is that Russia finally accepted that you and I aren't going to change for them. Maybe they thought this was just a phase..." He huffed, "The latest in a long string of eccentric choices I've made over the years. They must've been just as surprised as everyone else when they realized this was probably the first time I've ever really been serious."

"...Yeah, dropping everything to go be a coach to some scrub in Japan was...ehm...well, sudden and unexpected." Yuri agreed nervously, "It was definitely in keeping with your drive to surprise people though."

"Yeah...but for once, I did it for me, not for the show." Viktor retorted, "I honestly was never that concerned with how other people felt about it. The only person whose opinion mattered was yours. If you hadn't been looking for a reason to get back on the ice at that moment...and had decided, finally and absolutely, that you were moving on from the sport...I'm not sure what I would've done."

"Yeah that would've been awkward..." Yuri agreed hesitantly, "I'm sure we would've figured something out though. Skating with you was the whole point of my career to that point...it would've been psychotic to say no when you showed up at my doorstep to do just that."

Viktor hugged a bit tighter then and smiled against his partner's neck, "It was meant to be."

"And look...good timing." Yuri added, pointing to the ballroom dance floor, and the final bow of the ballet troupe; clapping was starting to resonate through the grand hall as the music faded down.

Viktor lifted his head to look around, and reluctantly let go so he could just in the clapping.

Yuri clapped as well, but then just took hold of his spouse's arm with both hands, "If it's like you said, then it'll be time for the rest of us to finally get out there. You ready for it?"

"The meal was light enough...my stomach's settled. You?"

He lifted his legs from their warm spot on Viktor's lap, and set his feet on the floor, "I'm ready."
Hundreds of pairs were clamoring at the edges of the dance floor as the ballet troupe made its way off of it. There was a literal hum of anticipation vibrating through the excited crowd. As the last of the colorful danseurs fled for the proverbial safety of the back halls, all eyes went onto the maestro. The man almost seemed to relish in the anxiety of the wait, but he didn't torment the crowd long. He waved a hand to gather more attention, and spoke those highly-anticipated words.

"ES IST ZEIT! ALLE TANZEN!"

Feet couldn't hustle fast enough onto the dance floor. From the mezzanine, watching people spill into the open space was like watching flood-waters set loose from an open dam. Soon, the entire area was awash with eager waltzers, and the music began to play for them.

['Frühlingsstimmen Op. 410' - Johann Strauss II (Voices of Spring Waltz)]

Booming with power, the orchestra went full-tilt, and the dance-floor came alive with movement. Though a bit disorganized and chaotic at first, by a few minutes in, the glittering horde was twirling in the same counter-clockwise direction. Some dancers were, of course, more experienced than others, but there was laughter in the absurdity of not being able to dance at a ball, but their best efforts were good enough for fun.

The Nikiforovs were a white and black spinning blur in the crowd, moving in time with the more seasoned ball-dancers near the middle. Their waltz was swift, moving with the expert grace that years of figure skating had imparted onto them. Like with figure skating though, by five minutes in, the fatigue of that big burst of exertion lead to tired but funny exhaustion. When the last minute finally passed, and the music faded out with an epic finale, Viktor practically draped himself over his partner, heaving for breath as the rest of the dancers clapped their appreciation.

"Oh boy, that was the longest Free Program ever." He laughed, "My legs are going to be a ruin tomorrow morning."

"I'll do my part tonight so we don't have to call Minako-sensei over." Yuri offered, feeling the Russian's weight pull off him again as Viktor stood on his own, and the next song began.

['Waltz No. 2' - Dmitri Shostakovich]

Feet moved again, but by the mercy of the music, they were allowed to go a bit slower.

Viktor couldn't help but grin throughout, "You'll do your part, hm?"

"Mhm." Yuri nodded, legs moving him around in the traveling circle as they made their way around the room again, "In the absence of those huge automatic leg-massager pant things, you'll have to make do with the not-so-automatic ones."

"It sounds like you're going to spend half the night rubbing my legs down with your hands, my love."

"Sounds about right."

"Oh, now I'm torn..." Viktor teased, keeping half an eye on the other dancers nearby as they
cavorted through the hall, "We've only just begun but I already can't wait to get back."

"Better wear yourself out completely then," Yuri suggested, giving a sly look, "Then I can rub more than just your legs."

Pink flushed hot across the Russian's face, he smiled broadly, "Oh my, Yuri... You have such a mind tonight."

"Well, no one's gonna sneak up on my butt this time."

"Ah, yes, that's true." Viktor agreed, pulling his husband a bit closer as they moved, "I'll sneak up from the front."

"You can sneak up from any direction you want."

"Don't tempt me; we're in public."

Yuri chortled a laugh, and the waltz continued through to its end. Another round of applause resonated up from the dance floor as everyone took a moment to catch their breath. The hall felt a few degrees warmer, and the first switch-outs began. Most who departed after the high-energy prologue moved over towards the open bar by the door, and Yuri's interest went in that direction as well. He kept a hold on one hand and started leading the way through the crowd as the next song began around them.

['An Der Schönönen Blauen Donau, Op. 314' - Johann Strauss II (By the Beautiful Blue Danube)]

Though they were waiting for their turn at the front of a crowd that loosely resembled a number of lines, the duo did their best to dance along with the music anyway. Viktor slid in close against his partner's back, hands sneaking around the younger man's waist and under his arms to weave fingers together in front of him. Yuri folded his hands over them and leaned against his husband's chest, going easily into the sway from side to side. It took nearly to the end of the song before they finally got to taste their drinks, but the wait was worthwhile.

['My Sweet and Tender Beast' - Eugen Doga]

To cool the body and titillate the senses, Yuri sipped on a raspberry sgroppino; a frothy, frosty mix of vodka, raspberry sorbet, and prosecco, an Italian version of Champagne. Viktor chose a Roman Holiday cocktail; a mix of prosecco, amaro, lemon, honey, and a rosemary sprig for flair. They meandered back through the crowd to nurse their drinks at the comfort of their table, and recharge for the next round on the dance-floor.

Yuri found his perch sitting across his partner's lap, one arm draped behind Viktor's shoulders, and a nose behind one ear, "This is really amazing." He said quietly, lifting his face up to look around again, then back at his spouse, "I can hardly believe stuff like this still happens in the world. I'm surprised you were able to keep it secret all this time."

"Well...keeping secrets is kind of a skill of mine."

"I know I know, but I don't mean like that!" Yuri huffed, squishing their cheeks together for a moment, "This is just so much fun! I'd have been bouncing off the walls if I knew something like the Flower Ball was on the horizon."

"I'm glad you're liking it so far."

"The dancing, these suits you commissioned..." Yuri went on, taking another sip from his raspberry-
vodka smoothie, "This place...it's all just absolutely incredible."

"Just make sure you pace yourself," Viktor teased, nosing his partner's neck lightly, "We still have the whole rest of the night to enjoy ourselves."

"Oh don't worry, this is the only thing I'm going to get. I want to make sure I remember every detail of this place." Yuri reassured, setting the drink on the table beside him, "When we're done recharging though, do you want to go find some of those theme rooms?"

The halls were swarming with people; some standing still to get photos with the floral displays, others making their way through the building on their own private adventures. The duo insisted on taking photos themselves, conscripting random strangers to hold their phones so they could be in a few shots together.

They eventually found their way down to the first of the ball's themed dance rooms; the disco. It sported a wide open space in a rather large would-be meeting room, with a metal stage-skeleton in the center in shape of a cube-gazebo, with different flowers woven through the four pillars. Above it, the glittering disco ball, shining its colored lights all over the room in a dazzling array of blinking spots. The floor, beneath the square shape of the display, a light-up mat had been rolled out, and its dozens of square colored tiles shone brilliantly. None too many people were brave enough to get right into the middle of things, but the music was speaking to the figure skaters, and the bit of alcohol made it easy to change things.

['Earth, Wind, & Fire' - Boogie Wonderland]

Yuri was the first to make a complete fool of himself, but he did so with enthusiasm, hitting the dance floor like he'd been dancing to that music his whole life. Colored light bounced off his white suit, making him a living canvas trimmed in black. He had his fun for half the song before Viktor jumped in to steal to spotlight for a little while, upping the ante in that way he always did, but then extended a hand towards his partner and dance-rival. Yuri took it, and they grabbed the attention of the whole room with their antics, gathering a small crowd around that little space for another two songs.

Water was urgently needed after that, and they took off for the next room on their grand tour. A familiar sound emanated from the second theme-room, and Yuri stuck his head in immediately, "...This is Minami-kun's music!"

"Oh, yeah, you're right. Smol nugget would love this." Viktor mused, "Shall we?"

"For sure."

They sauntered in as the current song, Sing Sing Sing, came to its end, and the next one started up.

['Crazy Swing' - DelaDap]

Pairs on the wood-laminate dance-floor were as energetic as ever, bringing the feel of the 1930s and 40s to life even if to music made in more...recent years. Chairs were found to hold suit-jackets, and more foolery was had. Viktor was slightly more in-style in that case, and took the occasion to teach his eager partner the moves of the rhythm. Before long, they were at least improvising well enough that no one could tell they weren't carefully choreographed swing dancers. Yuri took to the style easily, and then spent another four songs in the room, before breaking off again to find the next one.

"It's nearly 1am already." Viktor huffed, "Time is flying."
"Still not even half done. We'll be fine!" Yuri insisted, searching for the door to the next space. He spotted what looked like a sign on a door, and pointed down the marble stairs, "There's one! I think it's...tango?"

"Oh my god yes."

They couldn't get down to the next floor fast enough, and burst in just as the room had burst with the sound of clapping. A pair of dancers caught their breath in the center of the room; dark, and illuminated by a few strategically placed - and rather large - floor-lamps. Like the swing room, another large wood-laminate floor had been rolled out in the center.

Yuri looked on at it, a bit intimidated, but feeling brave anyway. He reached up to undo the bowtie around his neck, letting the loose ends hang down. His partner did much the same, and shimmied up next to him.

"You ready, or need a breather?"

"Oh I'm ready." Yuri insisted, raising his hand up, and Viktor took it keenly, "I didn't spend an all-nighter with Minako-sensei learning how to move in feminine ways just to leave Eros behind at the end of last season."

"Is that how you broached the subject with her?" The Russian teased as they made their way around the crowd, "Knocking on her door at midnight to ask her to teach you to dance like a lady?"

"Feminine ways, Viktor." Yuri corrected, "Just like you did back in Juniors when you last wore that same outfit."

"Ah yes, imparting the imagery of both the feminine and masculine natures." He reminisced, "Maybe I should take lessons from you then."

"Why's that?" Yuri wondered coyly, standing near the edge of the dance-floor, "You jealous of my slick moves?"

Viktor scoffed dramatically, "Me? Jealous?"

"Are ya?"

"Maybe a little bit." He laughed, "Educate me then, my love."

Yuri nodded eagerly, "Gladly."

['Libertango' - Astor Piazzolla]

More dancers came forward with them, finding space on the big square stage. In keeping with the same spicy themes of Yuri's prior Short Program, the music above and around them came to life with passion, lighting a fire in the hearts of all who heard. The singular guitar that seemed to bring out both excitement and a forlorn, distant sadness, paired with the accordion to create an entirely new feeling. Every dancer on the stage had their own interpretation of the song, and the Nikiforovs were no different. Cerebral as they were with their moves, it looked as though they were choreographing a whole new Pairs version of Eros right there at the Flower Ball.

The sight of two men dancing a tango so eagerly drew eyes and interest, and soon, it was just them on the dance-floor, entirely oblivious to the crowd as the music changed.

['Tango Santa Maria' - Gotan Project]
Viktor kept the lead between them, and expertly twisted, swiveled, and lifted his spouse, keeping those keen blue eyes on him alone. All the months of practicing programs together made the dance easy to maneuver through, even if they were largely making it up as they went. Alluring sweeps and deep dips, lowering Yuri down close to touching the floor, only to be brought back up again seductively close, drew in the crowd even more as the dance went on.

A slight pause about half-way through though, as Yuri leaned far back, held up only by one hand against his lower back; a rose came forward from the dark off-stage. Confused at first, it was too perfect to ignore, and he quickly took it in his extended fingers, coming up to place it between his teeth.

Viktor hesitated in that moment of confusion as well when he saw it, but that look on his husband's face spurred him on, and he smirked before continuing on. It became a game of playful keep-away as the music carried them forward, with Yuri trying to keep the rose for himself, teasing his partner with it. In the end though, Viktor managed to swipe it in their last move of the dance, leaning Yuri back again with one arm as the other held the rose up high victoriously.

The crowd clapped and whistled for them, and only then did they become aware of all those watching eyes. Surprised at first, Viktor ate it all up, even if Yuri backed down slightly in rosy-cheeked embarrassment. They both bowed though, and Yuri nodded appreciatively at the group before slinking off to give the stage back to them.

Viktor caught him before he could go too far though, and spun him back around to face him, "Getting cold feet suddenly?"

"No way, I just-" He stammered, only to stop mid-thought to catch a breath in his throat. He let his frame relax and he leaned into his spouse's embrace, "I guess I got a bit carried away."

"It's a good thing. You're having fun without any worries."

"...I know. That's why I'm worried." Yuri laughed nervously, "Remember what I said about being worried because I'm not worried? I'm waiting for the 'but' to come up..."

"Sure, but this is a night for merry-making, not for thinking too hard."

"Maybe I'm too used to being so worried, that letting it go and cutting loose feels weird." He suggested, "I'm really loving this though. Let's keep going!"

"Where do you want to go next? Something a bit lower-energy?"

"Oh that's a great idea! ...I wonder if they have slow-dancing somewhere?"

"Let's find out."
It was nearly 2:30 in the morning as the dancing duo made their way around Town Hall in search of the slow-dance room. They'd found another several different dancing themes, including freestyle, line and country, and even classy, Viennese version of a rave...but no slow-dance. Finding themselves back at the huge doors to the main ball room, Yuri couldn't help but sigh, looking inside to see the same waltzes taking place as before, just with far fewer people still sober or awake enough to dance.

"We could always do our own thing in spite of the music," Viktor suggested, sliding his hands up over his partner's back and shoulders, rubbing there slightly before leaning in over one side, "There's plenty of space now."

"Yeah...looks like most people have settled down into a half-inebriated stupor." Yuri agreed, "Maybe we can stop by the bar again."

"Oh, feeling thirsty again?"

"May as well. I don't think the other one stood a chance, given I'd eaten right beforehand."

"Alright."

As Viktor moved around to stand beside him, Yuri slid an arm around his lower back, and they stepped into the huge hall with eyes on the bar. The line was only a few people long, and within a few minutes, two new drinks were gathered and taken back to that lonely table near the small orchestra. Tailcoats were hung over the back of their chairs as they moved in to sit down, and Viktor gently pushed in the chair for his partner before taking his own seat beside him.

With an iced Irish Coffee and a White Russian at hand - cold espresso liqueur drinks - the pair settled in for a little bit of the lazy man's time-honored sport; people-watching. Interesting characters were given grand stories; dancers weren't just locals looking for fun, they were Dukes and Duchesses from faraway lands, or a Maharaja's daughter on a secret tour of the world. Their drinks gradually emptied and the ice melted, and the duo's previously sleepless night soon started creeping in on them.

"Why don't we see if anyone's posted any of those pics you asked for?" Yuri suggested, draining the last of his flavored ice-water before leaning back in his seat.

"Oh...yeah, why not." Viktor agreed, twisting around to get at the pockets of his cast-off tailcoat. When he found his phone, he also found his husband leaning against his back, and without a second thought, he turned the rest of his frame to get more comfortable with him there.

Yuri perched his chin on a shoulder, and slipped his hands around either side of the Russian's waist, and watched as his spouse unlocked the phone. He felt a flutter in his stomach at the prospect of all the ancient photos that may resurface; events he'd entirely forgotten, places and people lost to the fog of his memories.

"I remember when we looked at Phichit's photo galleries when we waited for our plane to taxi last year," Viktor mused, clicking into Instagram, "Of all your Detroit days, and the crazy stuff you two did together while training together."

"Detroit was my first real taste of freedom." Yuri explained, "Away from the regimented
expectations of Japanese society, away from the constant of Yu-Topia...and all the things that bothered me there."

"Ah, ah...no thoughts on sad topics." Viktor chided, turning his head to nose his partner's cheek affectionately, "Only good thoughts tonight."

"Oh...yeah, for sure." Yuri balked, smiling nervously before creeping back down behind a shoulder, "There was lots about Detroit that I really liked. I could talk about it for days. It's hard to remember most of it just because though... Maybe someone posted photos from then."

The silver Russian smiled as he turned back to his phone, and saw a number of new notifications from the past few hours. He checked his DM's first, and one of the many new messages contained a link to the first of many small photo-dumps.

Yuri scanned the thumbnails, unable to recognize anything on such a small screen, but when Viktor expanded one to start flipping through the gallery, Yuri's face turned red and his eyes widened, "Oh wow...these are pics from my Senior debut..."

"Do you remember the music?"

Eyes went down to the Russian's shoulder for a moment, "Eeehhhhmm..." He grumbled, wracking his brain, "...It was a really obscure song. I'd know the tune if I heard it, but the name escapes me."

"You stayed in Juniors for a few extra years, right? So you were what...18 here?"

"Yeah, about there, depending on what part of the season it was. At the very start I was still 17."

"Tsh...a baby."

"So long ago...when I was young, and new..."

Viktor chortled a laugh, and zoomed in on the first photo he'd loaded, trying to see some of the better details. The petite figure in the picture wore a costume that only Celestino could've picked; a green, pillow-sleeved tunic with white figure-hugging pants, "Oh you poor, innocent thing... Ciao Ciao did such terrible things to you."

"He got me to a point where I was ranked as one of Japan's best...even if there were a bunch of us at around the same level." He answered, "Keep going...maybe there'll be a group shot of us. This looks like it was from All Japan."

Viktor did as bid, and flicked a finger across the screen to shuffle through the different photos. There were a few from the actual skating program; jumps, spins, other elements. A dozen or so shots into the gallery, a picture appeared that included five different skaters, standing in front of a large map of Japan that had been painted on a wall behind them. The bunch of them were all pointing rather dramatically at Kyushu, including a rather uncertain younger Yuri at the bottom in the middle, pointing both fingers up at the bottom of the island.

"Oh jeeze... I look like I'm about to make a break for it there." Yuri sighed, "I don't even remember any of their names."

"Who are they?"

"Back then, the Kyushu Region's Senior Men's division. All of them were quite a bit older than me...they're all retired now."
"Hm..."

"Hm?"

"Saito's not there." Viktor pointed out, "But I digress..."

"Oh." Yuri stammered, squinting his eyes as he tried to think back, "Uhhh... I...don't think he was there, actually. I can't remember him being around at all."

"This would've been your first Japanese Nationals after moving, right?"

"Yeah I think so."

"Maybe he couldn't face you."

"Who knows. I don't remember him skating either though."

Viktor had no answer to that and continued on through the small gallery, finding a new costume from what looked like the same time period. That one was a little more elaborate than the first; black elastic dress-pants, and a shimmering navy blue top with a crimped purple fringe that went all around from right hip over left shoulder and back again, and a V-cut neck that went down to a point just above the center of the younger skater's chest.

"Oh, I definitely remember that one!" Yuri said, "I did that program two years in a row. It was my old Free Skate, done to The Sorcerer's Apprentice. I thought if I did the same program long enough, I'd master it and come out on top at the end."

"Did you?"

"Nah. I didn't really get good at anything until well into Seniors. I was too insecure about my jumps. I was good with my triple Axels but I refused to try any quads until I was nearly 20."

"So you put everything you had in the safer stuff like footwork and spins."

"Yeah...if I fell while doing those, it wouldn't hurt as much."

Viktor smirked, "I guess so." He turned to offer an adoring nuzzle, "You're a Jump King now though."

"I had to learn to do a quad Salchow from a 15 year old." Yuri huffed, giving a wry look in return, "And I only learned that last year."

The Russian guffawed dramatically, "My love, my dearest, don't be so hard on yourself. You were just a late bloomer. Think of yourself like Superman, drawing power from the glow of a yellow sun. Under any other, he'd wither. You just needed your yellow sun." He explained, leaning his head back far enough against Yuri's shoulder that he could speak the words against his partner's skin.

"My silver sun."

"Oh, that sounds mysterious." Viktor teased, finishing his words with a kiss to the cheek in front of him.

"It's true though." Yuri insisted, cocking his head back slightly so he could turn it enough to face the man, "The silver sun with the Midas Touch that turns everything to gold."

"Nah..." Viktor said, rocking his head back and forth slightly on that shoulder to shake it 'no,'
"Well...okay, maybe a little bit."

Yuri smirked a little, looking into those slate eyes, so close to his own. With the phone forgotten, he pulled his left hand free and brought it up and around his husband's shoulder, brushing the back of his curled fingers against Viktor's pale skin.

_There's so many things that I wish I could say...but there aren't words strong enough to describe how much he means to me..._ He thought, extending his fingers to cup his palm to that same cheek, and rubbed his thumb there softly. Viktor seemed to relish in it, half-closing his eyes. _I want to be so much more for him._

"You look rather lost in thought suddenly."

"...In thought...in your eyes...in this moment." He explained, "I've told you a thousand times how much I love you, cherish you...even earlier, how much I appreciate you and everything you do. But for some reason, it's like I can't convince myself that I'm saying it right, because it always falls so short of how much I mean it. ...Does that make any sense?"

"It's the story of my life." Viktor answered easily, twisting slightly where he sat, keeping his head on his husband's shoulder but putting one shoulder to the man's chest as he sat sideways in front of him. He set his phone on the table and reached both arms around Yuri's thin frame, "Remember at Nationals last year, when I told you how much of a relief it was to finally have someone at the top of the skating world with me, to see it from my same point of view?"

"Sure. I would never believe it, coming from anyone else."

"Having you in my life has lifted me up in so many other ways, but I often find myself thinking that the skating is really the only thing I've been able to offer you. I count on you for almost everything outside the rink. It's...kind of embarrassing, really."

"I like that you can rely on me for easy stuff like that though." Yuri reassured, threading his fingers through his partner's hair, and returned the hug with the other hand, "It's the least I can do, considering how much you've sacrificed for me. Those five World Championships just seem like such small change compared to what you've lost..."

Viktor hesitated a moment, but he drew a quick breath and lifted up off the shoulder he'd been perched on. He turned completely around in his chair to face his mate, lowering his head as he took Yuri's hands in his own, carefully and gently, rubbing his thumbs across them. When he raised his eyes, there was something of a forlorn look in them, "I gave it away."

"...Viktor..."

"People were asking me what my plans were for the next season, when I was doing my last interviews at Worlds in Japan two years ago. I didn't have any. I was at the end of my rope; none of my ideas really meant anything anymore. What I thought about, and had been thinking about since the December prior, was how I was going to get back to you. How do I explain that to the skating press? That I wasn't even thinking about skating anymore. I was thinking about my life, and what I really wanted to do with it. With all the talk around me about my age, and whether I was going to keep going, or retire...everyone wanting to know now, now, now what my plans were. It just...got so easy to tell them nothing." He explained, moving his right hand up to slide around the side of Yuri's neck, pulling his head down to set his brow against it, "I know it was my fault that no one knew anything about me outside of skating. It was my entire world for over a decade. It's the one thing I was ever good at...but figure skaters shine bright for only a short period of time, and my blaze was burning out quick. I was really getting worried about what I'd do after...and I've told you about those
"When I saw that viral video of you skating Aria, I had that epiphany about what I knew I had to do. I went to Hasetsu and reached out for the thing I'd been calling out for... After you agreed to let me coach you, all the ideas I'd had before that suddenly made so much sense. Aria was about longing for love, and the other programs I'd been working on for the next season?"

"Eros and Agape..."

"The different kinds of love I was so desperate for. Heh..." Viktor dropped his head down again, "I felt so stupid when I started skating those two shows at the Ice Castle... It was so obvious why I made them at a time like that... My skating knew more about what I needed than I did, but I didn't have either in my life, and that's why I was having such a hard time finishing either of those programs before. It became clear what I needed to do to complete them when I finally had both right in front of me. You already embodied agape, but I wanted your eros, too...so that's why I had you skate it. I told you to skate that show like you were trying to seduce me, but in a roundabout kind of way, it was a tool that I used to try and bring you closed to me. You convinced yourself to think of katsudon...but I had hoped you'd eventually think of me."

"I'd been thinking of you since the start." Yuri confessed, "...I just...didn't have the nerve to admit it, even to myself. It seemed too absurd. I didn't want to let myself think about you that way because I didn't want to get hurt when you backed off. I finally had you, even as just a friend, and I didn't want anything to put that at risk. It took...so long to let myself get past that barrier. And the way you always seemed to know what my limits were...it's like you knew I was wrestling with my own feelings over you, and you didn't want to push me too hard."

"...I knew you were struggling, yeah." Viktor nodded, lifting his face to kiss his partner's brow, "I didn't know how though, so all I could do was wait for you to meet me where I was at. Kissing you in China was the moment when I knew you were there with me."

"...Everything changed after that."

"You say that we never really had a phase where we were just dating...but I think, the whole time between China and Spain...that was it." He went on, "The rings...that was proof. Asking you to marry me afterwards was just an unconventional way of getting the both of us on the same page about how to move forward. I never wanted to lose you. I couldn't stand the thought... Hearing you say that we should end our arrangement after the Final...was the closest to a worst case scenario I could ever imagine."

Yuri could see the tears falling past the silver bangs that hung over his husband's face. He could feel them forming in his own eyes just as quickly, and he reached both arms over Viktor's shoulders to hold onto him, "I never wanted to hurt you... I thought I was doing the right thing. I'm sorry..."

"Don't ever be sorry." Viktor insisted, holding tight as well, "Not for that... It just made me realize how much I wanted to fight for you, and how far we still had to go. Now look at us." He said, snuffling a wet laugh against Yuri's neck, "Trying to find a way to describe how much we love each other, when words fall short."

"I don't think we'll ever find a way. It's just too much to say." Yuri answered, pressing into the soggy spot he was making, feeling more tears fall from his eyes as his heart felt like it was full of light, "Guess we'll just have to fall back on our skating, like always."
"It's a language we both speak fluently, even when we don't know what to say. It gets the point across in a way that words fail at."

Yuri nodded a wet laugh as he pulled back from Viktor's shoulder, trying to find a fabric napkin to rub his face with.

Viktor spotted one first and reached for it, drying Yuri's eyes himself, "We're completely hopeless." He teased, snuffling anyway, "Crying in the middle of a ball..."

It was almost providence that the lights dimmed slightly after those words were spoken, and the duo looked up. The ambiance of the hall shifted with the lowered brightness of the huge space, and soon after, the low, quiet trill of a single piano filled the entire space.

['Slow Dance Music, Piano' on PolygonMusic channel]

Viktor smiled at the sound and looked back, taking both of Yuri's hands into his own, "It's like this is just for us. Shall we?"

He could only nod through more tears, and let his partner pull him up to his feet, following as Viktor walked backwards onto the wide, near-empty dance floor. His hands were guided around the Russian's waist as Viktor's own went up over his shoulders in turn, and he raised his eyes.

"Let's remember this night forever, Yuri."

The words nearly caught in his throat, but Yuri nodded again, trying to smile despite the mess he'd become, "...O-okay..." He managed, moving his hands up from where they'd settled on his husband's lower back, until he was practically clinging. He lifted himself up on his toes quickly though, and pressed in for a much-needed kiss, just as Viktor began their slow sway. It was eagerly returned, and their slow-dance began, moving across the open floor like a gently-rocking upright cuddle.
Chapter 500

CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED (omg)

The night waned on, and the closer the hour drew to dawn than midnight, the more the population at the ball dwindled. Many politely slipped out, and a few were less dignified in their stumblings, but all could agree that the night had been a grand success by most measures.

Standing on the outskirts of a small group, waiting to get their jackets returned, Viktor held his partner close - and upright. Yuri half-dozed where he stood, paying little attention to what was going on around them until he had to look up and watch where he stepped. He half-registered the sound of his spouse's voice as their garment tickets were returned and their jackets brought back to them, and stood on his own for a moment while they were collected.

"I know you're tired, my love, but-" Viktor started, putting his own jacket into the crook of an elbow as he used both hands to swing Yuri's jacket over the man's shoulders, "There's one last thing I want to show you."

"...There's more?" He wondered blearily, looking up as he rubbed one eye.

The silver nodded, "Just one more thing. It's a bit of a walk to get there, but I promise, it'll be worth it."

Yuri nodded through a yawn, but then found his husband's hand again and let Viktor guide him right back into Town Hall. They stayed on the ground floor though, passing the remnants of the theme rooms they'd danced in earlier, and a few other flowery displays, before finally arriving at what could ostensibly be called the back door. What greeted his eyes outside was enough to make all thought of bed disappear.

From just beyond the edge of the bottom step, and extending hundreds of meters out into the park behind Town Hall, an outdoor skating rink came into view; two, in fact. The first rink was near as wide as the building was, though was narrower than a competitive rink. Extending beyond it on the right side, to their sights, was a looping, meandering path of ice with wooden walls, giving it the feel of a garden walkway, or even a bobsleigh chute, gloriously lit by dozens and dozens of lamps as it wound its way through a small forest. Four huge loops all joined together to connect the front rink to the second smaller one in the rear, and between them more directly was a full - and large - outdoor patio, complete with food stalls, a skate rental kiosk, and a bridge that went over the ice-path entryway.

"...Wow." Yuri said breathlessly, looking slowly around, taking in all the colors; blues and purples on the rink before them, warm yellow on the looping corridor. There were a tiny handful of people who were skating at that late hour, and Yuri suddenly felt his heart sink, "...We didn't even bring our skates."

"Didn't we?"

"...Eh?" Yuri balked, looking back towards the Russian standing beside him. He could hardly believe the sight of a bag in Viktor's opposite hand, "...You brought our skates? I thought that was just extra warm clothes or something!"

"Well, I brought some of that, too, but...yes, I brought our skates." Viktor teased, "This may be the only chance we have to skate in this place, at this hour, and have most of the rink to ourselves. I
couldn't pass it up, even on the risk that you or I might be too tired to want to keep going."

Yuri gave a wry look, "Would you still have come out here if you were too tired?"

"I would've told you about this much earlier and hoped to get my second wind." He answered easily, then gestured out to the rink-wall, "Shall we skate?"

"Uhhh...yeah!"

Dress shoes were hurriedly removed, and a brief moment was taken to rub sore dancing feet before slipping them into those well-worn boots. The gloves Viktor brought were also put on, and the night's below-freezing temperatures were kept at bay. Their 'spiffy duds' were kept covered as well by their long-coats, with long scarves hanging from their shoulders. Yuri stepped out onto the ice first, golden blades bathed in multi-colored lights, and bouncing off the glossy white suit he still wore. He couldn't help but be somewhat lost in the gothic architecture of the Hall, looming over them like a castle from a dark fantasy novel. He paused in the middle of the rink to gape at the whole sight, eyes drinking in the palette that reflected off every intricately detailed tower. Five of them in all, with the clock-tower in the middle, highest of them all, looking out over Vienna like a silent sentinel.

It completely entranced him, to the point that he didn't hear the sound of icy scratching approaching from behind. Only the artificial camera-shutter that followed finally pulled him out of it, and he turned quickly to spot Viktor crouched on a knee with a phone up, pointed towards him.

"A perfect shot." Viktor teased, rising back up to his full height, and slid in closer to show off the photo.

Yuri looked at the phone screen, and beheld the image, showing him from behind from an ant's point of view, and the clock-tower illuminated behind him, shining high in the sky like a beacon, "...Wow, that does look really good."

"We could make a whole new photo-book with pictures we've taken over the course of this season." Viktor explained, "I have a folder just for them."

"...I can't remember taking many pictures other than in Paris."

"Oh I took plenty." Viktor mused, "I don't ever want to miss an opportunity to save a memory. I've seen and done so many incredible things in my life, sometimes it can be hard to remember every bit of it just from my own head. Pics like these are good for jogging the memory."

"And you are somewhat forgetful anyway."

"Somewhat." He agreed, nudging himself backward a bit so he could take another photo, this time of his husband looking directly at him, and Town Hall in the background. Yuri gave his best tired smile, and saw the dazzling flash, but then approached for a bit of warmth. Viktor drew him in easily while setting up the pole of his selfie-stick behind the younger figure's frame. A few seconds later, he moved slightly to put them both cheek to cheek facing the camera, and snapped another photo, pulling in the blue and purple lights on the ice into their background, "You know, this is the first time the both of us have been on the ice together since we left Hasetsu."

"Feels like such a long time ago, with everything else that's happened." Yuri agreed, watching his partner put the phone and stick away. They took each other's hands and started meandering on the long, thin rink, passing the tiny handful of other people who dared to be out at that absurd hour with them, "Going to Russia, spending a few days with your father...and...all that entailed. The train ride
out of St. Petersburg and again out of Moscow...and the long ride here to Vienna."

"I really hoped this trip would turn out better than it did." Viktor said solemnly, "It just seems like we stumbled from one awful situation to another."

"The time we spent with Kon wasn't the worst thing ever." Yuri shrugged, "All things considered, it was probably the highlight of all the Russian stuff."

"Being the best of the worst doesn't necessarily make it good though."

"Maybe not, but it actually went pretty good...I think, anyway." He said, rubbing his thumb gently across the fingers curled around it, "I know you didn't really get what you wanted out of it, but I think you still got closure."

Viktor was quiet for a moment, but then sighed and shook his head, "I didn't get what I wanted, no...I think...I got what I needed instead." He explained, watching the ice as it moved towards and under them, then up towards the wooden bridge that went over the rink, "The terrors and nightmares that bubbled up again after my mother's death...all the things I'd made myself forget, just so I could have something resembling a normal life."

"Hmph... As normal as the greatest skater of our generation can have, I guess."

Viktor smiled slightly as the pair headed through to the looping ice-paths, "Yeah, all things considered...as normal as I could get. I got to live in the city, spend time with people who shared my interests, and finally found open encouragement to pursue the things I wanted to have for myself. I dread to think of the kind of life I would've had if it hadn't been for Yakov showing up at my house the day he had."

"Don't borrow bad luck." Yuri advised, looking to his partner's visage, glowing softly golden with the lights of the lamps passing behind him, "But I'm sure I would've found reason to fall in love with you anyway, no matter where your path in life might've taken you."

Viktor made a face, "If I'd gotten stuck back in that little awful town, I would probably never have come onto your radar."

"I doubt you would've been content to stay there forever." Yuri pointed out, "Mikhail escaped. I know you would've done the same at some point. Maybe we would've met under different circumstances, but I'm completely sure that we would've met somehow, eventually."

"Do you think you ever would've gone on to competitive skating if not for seeing me on the television?" Viktor quipped, giving something of a wry, smug look.

"I think I would've done whatever it took to find you, whether or not I knew that's what I was doing."

"...Really?"

"You've called us soul-mates before." He answered, "I read the timelines of our lives and I tend to think that you're probably right. Sometimes it seems like we each had a small list of things we had to do before the stars aligned that put us together."

"...A list of things?" The Russian echoed skeptically, "Relationship things?"

"Maybe not just that." Yuri shook his head, and let the hand go between them so he could slide his arm around his husband's back, feeling the opposing arm come up over his shoulders in turn, "You
had to find your destiny, and become a World Champion, to make the earlier suffering make sense. You didn't really climb so high and hold onto that achievement until you cut ties with other people holding you back. Whether you like it or not, I've been an anchor on you, dragging you down and holding you back."

"...I don't think of you that way."

"That's why I prefaced it with 'whether you like it or not.'" Yuri teased, nudging against him slightly before skating forward normally again through the winding curves of the icy path, "But if not for me, you'd probably be a six time World Champion right now, getting ready to skate your next Olympics for Russia."

"I'm not even sure that's true." Viktor shrugged, "It was super easy for me to drop everything to be your coach because I already had no real drive to compete anymore. Maybe I just would've helped coach Yurio instead."

"Water under the bridge," Yuri huffed, "My point though...is that your life was far less complicated before you came to me. But, in spite of how hard certain things have been since you blew into Hasetsu that fateful April two years ago...I like to think it's been worth it."

"...I'm just hoping that what happened yesterday and this morning is the last awful thing that happens to us for a long time." Viktor added, "I never want to feel like that again."

Yuri paused in thought for a moment, listening to the sound of their blades scraping across the uneven ice beneath them. As they rounded the loop of a second track, he shook his head and sighed, "...I took for granted how upset I thought you were over the whole thing. I really thought that you'd react the same way you did when I went off on you at Yu-Topia before the wedding party."

"That was different."

"I know, but in my head, I thought it was more likely that you'd...be basking in the afterglow of your righteous indignation."

"I have no idea what that means."

"That you'd feel justified being mad at me, like you'd thought I was being immature by leaving because you made some dumb noises at me." Yuri clarified, twisting around so he'd glide backwards in front of his partner. He slid his hands down the man's arms until he found his hands and pulled them forward in his own, keeping his eyes low for a moment, "I know I've come a long way from the anxiety-crippled coward that I was before... I've gone from running away at the sight of you, to making love with you in public places. But you're still my hero, and I don't like thinking badly of you, even if it means blaming myself for the things you legitimately did wrong. It's just my nature...to think of myself as an unworthy speck, bumping up against better men."

"You're literally the current World Champion and record holder, Yuri..." Viktor attempted, but found the younger man shaking his head anyway.

"Because of you." Yuri insisted, "It's like that old saying, of dwarves thinking themselves tall because they're standing on the shoulders of giants. I didn't get that score and title because of Celestino, or the years of practice and heartache of losing and trying again...I got it because of you. You're the key that unlocked me. Because of that, I'll always have a certain reverence for you."

"...I thought we were more equal than this."

Yuri shook his head fervently, "It's not like that at all. I'm trying to say...even if I'm
standing with you, it's because you pulled me up. The admiration, the higher respect, the deferment... It's because you broke that ground ahead of me, cleared the path, and made it easier for me to come after. It's a reverence formed out of gratitude. You've done more for me just by believing in me than anyone else in my whole life. It's just like we said before...you're the King on the Ice, no matter what else happens."

Viktor pursed his lips slightly, but nodded in understanding, "As long as you accept that you're the King at Home."

"Oh of course." Yuri laughed, reaching one hand up to pinch his husband's cheek, "You're hopeless on your own."

The Russian's brow crinkled slightly even as his face was tugged on comically.

Yuri let it go and rubbed his gloved thumb across the spot, "I already forget what point I was trying to make with all that... Sorry. I must've gone on some weird tangent."

"...You were trying to explain why you didn't think I'd be upset about what happened between us."

"Oh...right." He stammered, turning to take his place at the Russian's side again as they started skating forward, "Because it's easier to think problems are my fault than yours. You're sometimes a bit stand-off-ish when we disagree about something. The confidence you have in your position is enough to convince anyone that you're right, even when you're not. And I'm still a bit of a push-over."

"You know that you can tell me when I'm wrong."

"I do...but that doesn't mean I like doing it, or that it gets easier." Yuri countered, looking up through the naked trees to the sight of Town Hall as it came into view again, the loop of the course turning them back the way they came, "Overall, I think we communicate better now than we did in the past. We'll never be able to read each other's minds, but we've been pretty cerebral in most of our thoughts. Like how much the colors on the ice in the main rink-"

"...Reminds me of 'Duetto.'" Viktor said, finishing the sentence before looking aside, "Right?"

Yuri blinked, but then nodded brightly, "Exactly."

"I have the song on my phone. Maybe we can skate a bit of it for old time's sake before we head back?"

"One of our greatest hits. Stammi vicino."

Viktor smiled, "Non te ne andare."
Eyes and ears raised to the sound of the door-lock whirring and clicking, and light poured inside the quiet, dark space. Makkachin got up to his feet and hopped down off the far end of the bed, approaching curiously as two tired figures stepped inside, and the light from the hall was replaced by the dull yellow light of the entryway. Though happy to see his people, Makkachin was half-asleep by any standard, and his usual excitable jumping and wiggling was more of a calm greeting, tail swaying side to side behind him. He got his head-rubs and then sat back to watch the pair disassemble from their winter garb.

Long-coats were removed and hung in the closet, and dress-shoes placed on its floor. Scarves were folded and put away, and gloves followed. The bag of skates and extra gear was stored last before the closet door was pushed closed again.

Yuri stepped into the main part of the room, and found Jiro still on the bed, sitting upright but too tired to move much farther than the warm nest-like dip he'd formed in the comforter. He bent down to rub the pup's cheeks and ears, and kissed his fluff, "Were you good tonight?" He asked quietly, leaning up again to see Jiro's curled tail wag a few times before the little Akita yawned widely, "That's what I figured. You're always good."

Rubbing his eyes as he turned back around, Yuri didn't see his partner's approach, though he seemed peripherally aware of it. He stood still, feeling the hands that slid into the open front of his pale tailcoat. It was pushed off his shoulders and drifted down his arms, pulled free and folded before being set neatly on the bed nearby. Deft fingers pulled buttons through button-holes, and the black vest came off next, followed by the white bow-tie, threading out from under the folded edge of his shirt-collar. He opened his eyes as the buttons on the front of his shirt were starting to come undone, and looked up to the tired-but-pleased expression on his spouse's face, "I have a feeling tomorrow's going to be a 'don't even set an alarm to wake us up' kind of day." He mused quietly.

Viktor nodded, going down his husband's chest, one button at a time, "Sounds about right. We only have one chore to do before the Free Program."

"Finishing touches on the Exhibition."

"Mhm." He hummed, pulling the bottom of the glossy black shirt out from Yuri's white slacks so he could undo the last button, "Hopefully you still have the muscle memory of our practice from the summer. We expected to have another few months to go over it."

"A few practice runs tomorrow afternoon should be enough...then we can fine-tune on Sunday morning."

Viktor nodded again, sneaking his hands inside the folds of the shirt to push it off his young husband's shoulders, feeling every inch of skin that he could along the way. As the garment came loose, he withdrew again, and turned the figure around where he stood so he could gently tug the sleeves from Yuri's arms. Once it was free, it was loosely folded and placed on the pile with the coat and vest. Before Yuri could turn around again though, Viktor leaned forward, pressing his chest to the smaller figure's back. Arms came forward and around, pressing palms flat against his spouse's exposed frame, feeling that hot, silky skin.

Yuri relaxed into the Russian's embrace, feeling the heat of a yawn against the side and back of his
neck, morphing into a kiss that traveled up to the bottom of his ear. He leaned his head aside to make room, and rested his hands over Viktor's wrists, "...You know..." He started quietly, eager for each press of lips on his skin, "...Before Barcelona...even before Beijing...there were occasions when you'd hug me, just like this...and I'd wish you did what you're doing now...

"There was one time when I tried." Viktor pointed out, sliding his hands across to wrap his arms around his partner's core a little more tightly, and pulled the man back against his skin, "But you pulled away right before I could."

"...I remember."

Viktor lifted his head in surprise, "You...remember...? You noticed?"

"Mh." Yuri nodded, and wiggled in place in an effort to turn around. Arms loosened their grip just enough to allow it, and hands settled on his bare waist when he finished, looking up the few inches to those slate eyes, "I was slowly starting to realize how I felt about everything...but my fear that you didn't feel the same way was enough that I avoided even giving the opportunity to find out if you did."

"I didn't think I was being that subtle." The Russian said, giving an odd look, "But if you knew what I was going to do and pulled away...?"

Yuri shook his head, and brought his hands up between them, watching his fingers trace over the contours of his partner's partly-exposed chest, "I thought you might've been like that with everyone. The fear that you didn't mean it the way I interpreted it, if I let it happen, and took it the wrong way...the idea that you'd have to find a way to let me down easy was the worst, so I buried it deep, hoping it wouldn't get away from me. I would've rather gone on never knowing, than risk you leaving because it got awkward."

"...That sounds a bit familiar." Viktor grimaced, quirking one brow.

"Good thing you just went ahead and kissed me then." Yuri teased, looking up with a sultry expression, "Though I do sometimes wish I'd said yes when you asked if you should."

"Oh, in the garage?"

"Mhm."

The Russian leaned closer to offer an adoring nuzzle, "I wonder what your skating would've looked like then."

Yuri slid his hands up to push the undone shirt and vest off his partner's pale shoulders, "I think we would've needed to rename the program." He laughed quietly, tracing his fingers down the Russian's collar-bones back towards center, "There's no way 'Yuri on Ice' would've made any sense if I never touched it."

"We could've called it 'Yuri floating on Ice.'" Viktor suggested, reaching behind himself to tug at the cuffs of the tumbling shirt, and leaned over to add it to the fancy pile.

"You got me addicted pretty early on, to be honest, even though I didn't dare indulge." Yuri pointed out, getting a confused look in response, "Over that summer, when we'd mess around on the beach. Chasing Makkachin around and scooping up handfuls of the surf to throw at each other. I never really wanted anyone touching me before that...but you found a way to get into my space, and make me want it."
"Well, I had the one advantage no one else did."

"Ungodly levels of patience?"

"Yes, but no." He mused, nudging foreheads together as his hands came forward on his husband's hips, tracing the edge of the white slacks that still clung to his frame, "Something else."

"Knowing that you always get what you want?"

"Mmmh...yes, but no." Viktor laughed, fingers finding their way to the button and clasp at the front, loosening the waistband.

"Finding out early-on that I admired you and didn't want to disappoint you?"

"That did help, and it gave me hope...but no." He went on, letting the garment slip down his husband's legs, and gently ushered the younger man backward, until the edge of the tall bed forced him to sit.

"Swooping into Hasetsu right as I was trying to figure out how to get my love for skating back, and then became that reason?"

"I brought the storm of ice and snow, to remind you of how much you needed to skate...but no. Not that either." Viktor teased, crouching down on a knee to pull the pants off each leg and foot. He folded them neatly over one arm, and gazed up at his partner from the lower vantage, "Keep guessing."

With not but socks and underpants left, Yuri huffed a smile, "Being my coach?"

"That was a vector, so...yes, but no."

"Getting me to skate 'Eros' so I'd be more open to the idea of...stuff?"

Viktor snorted a laugh as he rose up again, putting a hand on the bed on either side of his partner's legs, and leaned in close, "That helped...but again, yes, but no. You're getting closer though." He explained, brushing nose-tips together.

Yuri balanced precariously as he was nudged backward, but he managed to find his spouse's waistband, and hooked a finger into each side, bringing them down towards the front, "Telling me to skate like I'm seducing you."

"Closer, but still no." Viktor answered, just barely louder than a whisper. The pitch-dark slacks were loosed, and fell down the Russian's milk-white legs, collapsing into a pile around his ankles. He stepped out from one side, and used his foot on the other to lift the garment up, putting both pairs of pants onto the pile without ever taking his eyes off the face in front of him. He leaned further forward then, forcing Yuri backward on the top of the bed, "One more guess."

Yuri paused, having backed up enough that only his ankles dangled off the blankets. The teasing look changed slightly, a tiny bit more serious, and he raised a hand to curve it around Viktor's cheek and neck, "There was a crack in the wall I built around my heart...and you found it...and spent months, and months...and months...slowly chipping away at it, until there was a hole big enough to squeeze through."

"Ooh~! That's volcano-hot, my love." Viktor mused, "Keep going."

Yuri paused to think, and bought himself a bit of time by turning around to fish for the far end of the
blankets and pulled them away from the pillows at the headboard. He reached down to push off his thin black socks, then scooted backward into the freshly-opened space, and looked forward to offer a hand, "After you managed to get in, you saw that the walls inside me were plastered with images of you. Like the posters I tore off my bedroom walls so you wouldn't see, I hid my heart under a barren and boring exterior, keeping my real feelings so far under the surface that even I didn't...wouldn't know what they were. But you made it in, you made me see...and you pulled out an Eros that could - and was - meant only for you."

"I could only let you skate for your love of katsudon for so long." Viktor laughed, taking the offered hand to draw in closer, "Though admittedly, watching you become that pork-cutlet bowl that seduces men was amazing."

"You liked that, huh?"

"I did. Immensely." He answered easily, twisting from side to side to pull the blankets and sheets up over his back. He felt feet and ankles slide past his bare waist and hook around him, pulling him nearer his husband's nearly-naked frame, "The summer-long practice of those programs was like a slow crawl as you learned to like yourself, and get more comfortable around me, but by competition season...you were running hard and fast."

"You jumped out of the way though." Yuri quipped, poking a finger into the center of the Russian's chest.

Viktor just took it with one hand though and raised it up, kissing the center of that palm, "You were bleeding at the time, but...I've let you bleed on me since."

"Hmm...maybe."

"I've let you get other fluids on me, too." Viktor teased further, slipping between the legs that had parted 'round to pull him closer.

"On you...in you..." Yuri added, face going red as he spoke the words, much to his partner's interest.

"We should do that again. Right now."

"Right this second..." Viktor moved in quickly, one hand sliding around his husband's waist to hold his back, the other going around Yuri's neck, kissing his way down to his chest, backing up slightly under the blankets as he went. He felt a few kisses on his own shoulder as Yuri tried to keep after him, but soon he was out of reach, clinging to the younger man's core as fingers combed through silver hair. He placed a few more kisses onto Yuri's chest before pulling up, and slid his hands down the man's legs where they were still tightly wrapped around him. The gentle stroke loosened their grip, and he pushed them back just enough to pull that last vestige of clothing away, tossing it away before lifting up onto his own knees. Thumbs went into his waistband and pushed the dark bikini-briefs down, getting lost somewhere in the blankets after being pulled off his ankles. Viktor went immediately back to their prior position, pulling those soft but athletic legs around himself again.

Yuri hissed a breath as he felt skin touching skin, dropping his head down against the pillows, feeling his hair pressed up against the headboard. Every kiss moved lower against his chest, nibbling and licking at each little ridge, soon latching onto one nipple. He gasped each breath, feeling the rub
of a rough tongue over that sensitive nub, leaving it wet and hard as Viktor moved to the other side to offer that same attention on the second. Electrified heat shot through him from his core to the tips of his limbs, getting more intense with every brush of excited flesh pressing against his own.

Viktor seemed to slow down then though, walking his kisses back up from Yuri's stomach to his chest, and back under one ear, feeling the needy wiggle underneath himself. Hands that pressed to his back were sliding towards his shoulders, then over them, and disappeared between them. The back of knuckles brushed against his chest, and fingers opened up to curve around his ribs, palms feeling for every bit of ridged skin they could find. Viktor moved his kisses from under an ear to the tip of his husband's chin, finding his favorite eyes watching him for every move he made. It was odd though. There were tears in those eyes.

"...You okay?" Viktor wondered abruptly, rising up a little, and pressed his hands down into the sheets to hold himself up.

Yuri nodded easily, but brought both his own hands up to his face, rubbing over the whole of it before finally trying to dry it, "...I think I'm a bit...over-tired, and delirious from lack of sleep. I'm just really emotional right now?" He laughed at himself, "The front of my head is all tingly, and I just want to feel you on every inch of me... I had this weird...almost instantaneous internal panic attack over how stressful the last few weeks have been, and right after that hit me, I felt this weird cold rush go through me from the top of my head to my toes... It was like this big relief that all the badness was all finally over, even though it seemed like I'd only just allowed myself to realize just how bad it had really gotten for a while..."

Viktor was stunned and dumbfounded, but brought his hands back up to peel his husband's from the side of his head, moving them back over his own shoulders to hug around him. As Yuri clung, Viktor wedged his hands under the younger man's back, partially lifting him up off the bed to keep him close, "...I think I know how you feel. Putting off the emotional baggage of feeling the misery of the moment, until you think you're safe enough to let it all go... Then it just comes in one big uncomfortable wave."

Yuri nodded where he'd pressed his face against his partner's shoulder, "I didn't realize how worn down I was..." He said quietly, bringing his knees up against the Russian's ribs, "And I don't know why it's hitting me just now..."

"Let me do my best to make you feel better. I'll wear you out so completely that you can sleep easy."

The almost-wet snuffle-laugh that followed was enough to confirm Yuri's agreement, and he let go, lowering back down to the pillows and blankets behind him. He slid his hands over those broad shoulders and pressed his palms to Viktor's chest, looking up at him with a vulnerable look in his eyes, "...You always know what to do." He started, watching the love of his life lean over him and lower down to get closer, and nuzzled at his brow, "You always seem to know where I am in my head and how to find me there."

"That's because I love you. Now let me make love to you."

Yuri just huffled another laugh, "Ah, take me, Viktor..."
Chapter 502

CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED TWO

With those proverbial marching-orders given, Viktor pulled the blanket back only far enough to lean towards the side of the bed. The drawer on the one bed-side dresser opened and he pulled out the small velvet dice-bag that contained their fun-time items, returned to his place, and loosened the cords on the satchel. With the bag open, he offered it forward, and Yuri reached in, as though pulling the number for competition skating order out. Instead of a number though, he found one small bottle, put it back, and then grabbed another, "This one."

"You do like your warming liquids." Viktor teased, pulling the strings up again and setting the bag aside. Turning the bottle bottom-up, he squeezed a dollop into the palm of his hand, dropping the little container before rubbing the liquid between his palms.

Yuri snagged the bottle before raising both arms up above his head, pressing the back of his forearms against the red leather headboard. His back arched as he felt the first slide of those slick warm hands against his skin, spreading that warm fluid from hip-crests to his collar bones, gliding over primed pink nubs as they went. He relished in the slow feelings of those hands sliding across his frame, up and down, teasing and touching at every space. As the warming fluid started working its magic where it had been spread across his chest and stomach, Viktor's hands moved to his legs. A little more of that slippery liquid was dribbled over the younger man's frame, and eager hands slathered through it, moving it to the thighs that yearned for it. Each time wet fingers came tantalizingly close to center, Yuri's legs tightened around his husband's frame, pressing ankles to the Russian's lower back in an effort to pull him closer. Neither of them needed to look to know how arousing the oil-play had been.

With every inch of exposed skin slick and shiny with the warming liquid, Viktor slid his fingers along his husband's arms, leaning further over the younger man's smaller frame as he went. He circled his palms around the ends of each elbow before sliding them back down again behind Yuri's shoulders, kissing the man's chin, nose, and lips, as his hands went under Yuri's sides. Lowering down, Viktor pressed his chest down to his spouse's and the heat of the warming liquid intensified the heat of their skin.

Between the slippery feeling, and the need to feel more, Yuri started to wiggle in place as well as he could, trying to feel as much of his spouse's arousal as he could, and the little electrical jolts it caused in his own. The hands that had circled around his back came to his sides again, the right caressing down to his waist and the crook of hip and thigh. He gasped aloud as Viktor pressed against him, sliding up and forward firmly, then down again. The easy slide of lubricated skin, the firmness of excited flesh, and the heat of both bodies and warming fluid, made every bit of pressure that much more obvious, and sent an electrical storm of pleasure from their cores to the tips of toes and fingers.

Yuri tilted his head back against the pillows, and the tease of kisses moved to his neck, even as the slow, firm slide continued over the rest of him. Knees weakened, and toes curled and flexed, as each push against him drove him further into the ecstasy of the moment. He narrowly opened his eyes as he felt his husband's frame tilt off slightly to the side. One perfect hand slid across his chest as the other snaked its way up to the space between his head and the headboard. He moved his own nearest hand down to meet it, weaving fingers together to hold tight.

"Yuri..."
Both eyes met for a moment, even as the slow grind continued lower down. They smiled and huffed a laugh each before Viktor leaned into a kiss, sliding his free hand up and down the side of his husband's thin frame. When he slid it between them, and took hold of what he found there, he relished in the sound of his husband's gasp. Yuri's unheld hand came down against his upturned shoulder, squeezing it with each twist and stroke. It slid inward, curling around the back of his neck before grasping and pulling him down again into another kiss.

Pulling his other hand free, Yuri held the Russian's head close with both, and tilted his hips upward against the man's stomach. The urgency of that need to move on wasn't subtle, and he was relieved to feel Viktor reaching around him for the satchel again. Though he held onto the kisses, he paid close attention to every blind movement going on around him, and his legs twitched slightly when he felt the cool sensation of more lube dribbling onto his skin. His husband's length slid through the cleft of his back end, spreading that new liquid around, pressing firmly against him with each push. There was a brief pause in the kisses as Viktor pulled up slightly, right hand going down to try positioning himself. Yuri uttered a quiet vocal gasp with each tease of penetration, and he tried to wiggle his hips into better position for it.

Viktor wasn't ready to let it happen so quickly though, and huffed a laugh against his lover's lips, "Slow down...there's no hurry."

"...I need you though..."

"I know; I need you too...and I'm here."

"V-Viktor." Yuri gasped, voice more urgent in its need.

"Alright, alright...if you insist."

Desperation gave way to relaxation, and Yuri let his frame go limp in the blankets. He drew a long, deep breath as he felt his husband's flesh press against him, and slowly go in.

Carefully as Viktor usually did, he entered a little, withdrew again, and pressed in a little further the next time, repeating until he was sure his husband's body was relaxed enough to accept his full length. He cast his eyes down onto the younger man's posture, watching for Yuri's arched back to loosen, and hesitant breaths soften. Once Yuri unclenched and exhaled, Viktor slid in the last few inches, and pressed their hips together. He leaned forward to offer a nuzzle to his husband's brow, and hooked Yuri's knees around his upper arms to tilt him into better position. Hands came up on both sides of his head, fingers threading through his silver hair, and the gentle press of a relieved kiss found his lips.

"...It's so weird...that I feel like I finally have you back...even though you never left my side." Yuri whispered, feeling those exhausted tears springing up again, "This feels so different than it has for so long..."

"Maybe we just needed to hit a breaking point. A lot has happened."

"I never wanted to make you think I was going to leave... It should never have had to come to that... We talk so much better than we used to...why did this happen anyway...?"

Viktor lowered down to wedge his arms under his husband's back, pulling him up slightly into a tight hug, and pressed his hips in further as legs wrapped around him, "...I don't really know..." He sighed, kissing where he could against his partner's neck, "But I know that we're stronger together, and I love you more with every passing day."
Yuri snuffled and rubbed his eyes against the Russian's shoulder, and nodded, "I love you too...so much...more than I knew was possible for a person to feel..."

Pulling back slightly, Viktor pressed their brows together and nuzzled slightly, half-opening his eyes to see his reflection in the cherry-hazel orbs looking back at him. As he felt his husband's hands slide down behind his shoulders, he leaned into another kiss, and slowly began to rock his hips, feeling a sharp breath drawn against his cheek. He clung to that feeling for a little while before turning his hands around under his spouse's back, and pressed down to push himself up slightly. Silver bangs dangled down, swaying slightly with every new push, breaths becoming more vocal as every movement added to the intensity of the feeling between them.

As Viktor lifted higher up, Yuri's hands slid further up the man's back, until he could only hold on by lacing his fingers together behind the man's neck. He unhooked them and pressed his palms to his partner's chest as the thrusts became more forceful, pushing him up into the pillows with each push. His knees slowly slipped down the Russian's arms as they went on, until Viktor let them go entirely to plant his hands into the sheets against Yuri's waist, lifting himself up just slightly until the comforter shifted off his back.

They kept up that pace a bit longer, until Viktor was practically holding onto his husband's waist to keep him from getting knocked away by the force. He paused suddenly and withdrew as he scooted backward. Yuri didn't need any hints to know to turn over, and just as he managed to get one leg over himself, he felt hands on his hips to help him finish, lifting him up in the process. He clambered for the headboard, and pushed up to press his back to his husband's chest, feeling hands roaming all over him as they guided him backward onto stiff and needy heat. Feeling that flesh enter into him again made him gasp, and his back arched forward, fingers clenching into the red leather in front of him. One hand slid up from his hips to his stomach, moving further to his chest as lips went down onto his right shoulder. A gentle bite followed; enough to get his attention, but not enough to hurt at all. He looked over to see a coy smirk on his husband's face, with the added fun of a wink and a few huffed laughs against his skin.

Viktor's hands slid down again, fingers pressing into the grooves where his partner's legs bent, pulling those hips back against his own. He started rolling forward into them, pushing as far inside as he could go with each rhythmic push. Hearing his spouse's breathy grunts spurred him on, especially as each thrust made him lose the strength to hold himself up. Soon, he saw Yuri press the top of his head to the leather, one hand still holding onto it as the other went down between his own legs. Though he couldn't see, he could feel his spouse's self-stroking as fingertips reached down low and brushed against his legs. That just wouldn't do. Viktor leaned towards the left side and pulled his husband up again, sticking his head under that arm as Yuri's thin frame backed up against his shoulder.

"V-Viktor...?"

"I want to see~!"

Yuri's face went right red, but he wouldn't deny his partner the show he wanted, and once he'd balanced himself out again, he started moving his right hand again. It was odd to feel eyes so intently on him stroking his own arousal, but knowing how much his husband liked to watch him do it spurred him on.

Viktor did his best to match the pace, but the odd way he was bent and tilted made that a bit difficult. As though Yuri had thought the same thing, Viktor felt the younger man pull off of him, and in blur, had turned around in front of him, nudged him backward, and followed after to straddle over his hips. He was completely transfixed, watching his perfect husband guide him back into its warm, wet
place, lowering down to sit flush against his skin. Sultry brown eyes were gazing down at him, and Yuri licked his lips.

"You can watch better if I'm in front of you."

"Wow~!"

Finding a bit of courage, and tapping into those vast reserves of his Inner Eros, Yuri did his best to please his partner. As he rocked his hips, he slid his hand up and down his own flesh, slowly gasping each vocal breath as his own senses were excited. Electricity flowed through him; every ridge of his husband’s member moving inside him, every tug on his own, drove him further forward to the edge. He went on as long as he could, feeling the hips under him starting to help, until it was all he could do to hold himself up. He dipped his head down and tried to catch his breath, letting his own arousal go, seeing it twitch slightly with every heartbeat through it.

Viktor slid his hands up his partner’s thighs, thrilled and impressed by the whole sight of the younger man’s display. Moving his hands back down again towards Yuri’s knees, he pressed up onto his elbows, and then scrunched up his core to sit up the rest of the way, hugging his husband tight, "You are so incredibly hot. I'm an exceedingly lucky man to be the only one on this earth who gets to see it."

Still catching his breath a little, Yuri lifted his head and smiled tiredly, "I wish...I could control it better...so I could go on longer for you..."

"Every second is precious." Viktor mused, squishing their faces together as he pulled the man down over his chest, "One of these days, I'm going to get to watch you do it when we aren't already in the middle of sexy time."

Yuri pushed up slightly, putting them nose to nose as he gave quite the embarrassed look, "%...What...you mean you want me to just whip it out when we're watching television one night and stroke off?"

"Sure." Viktor grinned widely, "Would you?"

"Would you?"

"Absolutely." He laughed, starting to rock his hips again, pushing slowly upward into his husband’s heat, "If I didn't think I'd traumatize you somehow."

Yuri groaned loudly as he dropped his head down again, much to his husband’s amusement. As the upward thrusts increased and got faster, he moved his arms under the Russian’s neck, clinging to the man’s head, crying out quietly with each hesitant gasp. He pressed his forehead down to those silver bangs, opening his eyes just enough to see the blue looking back at him. One particular thrust hit him just right, and a loud cry escaped him. Hands went down to the blankets on either side of his partner’s head, and he pushed up frantically, feeling loose strands of his hair swaying past his face with each new push.

With the intensity of the feeling getting stronger and stronger with each passing second, the pair redoubled their focus. When Yuri started lowering down again, losing that renewed strength in his arms, loose hair tickling Viktor’s skin, Viktor sat them both up. He reached aside to grab for one of the stiffer pillows in the pile, and made the motions for his partner to lay down over it, quickly climbing over top of him once he was there. With the pillow keeping Yuri’s back end upward, Viktor slid in easily again, and wedged his hands and arms under the younger man’s stomach to keep him close as he started to move. Vocal gasps became whimpers, cries, whimpers again, reluctant moans
into the sheets, and desperate hands reaching forward to clamber for anything within reach. Viktor knew he was pressing against that perfect spot when he saw his husband's reaching hands pull back again, and every muscle in the man's body started to tense up. Every fiber of his being wanted to make that feeling last as long as possible, slowing down to focus on kissing his husband's back and shoulders for a little while, then rolled his hips again.

Yuri twisted around, pushing Viktor away until they were both on their sides, and he could wrap his arms around that same pillow that had held him up a moment before. His right leg was lifted by a hand behind his knee, and the thrusts picked up again. Between desperate gasps, and an arched back, Yuri reached around to grip the side of his husband's hip, as though trying to slow him down as he neared the edge. It didn't do much though, and he could tell that Viktor was getting close as well, trying his best to time the end to be in tandem. He felt the hot breaths behind his shoulder, and Viktor's hands pressed against his chest, holding him in place as those thrusts hit their fever pitch. Yuri pulled his free hand back and held the one that was pressed over his heart, feeling those fingers curl around his own.

Just as Viktor pressed in hard, holding there, deep, Yuri felt the first of those strong electrical jolts that shot out through his entire body. He let go of the pillow with his other arm and reached down to take hold of himself, trying to ricochet the feeling from the front as well. Every muscle clenched, and his back arched tightly as soon as he touched it. Viktor held onto him, making sure he didn't just jump off, and pushed in hard again, slower, going just as deep as before. A gasped cry uttered behind his shoulder, and he felt the tremble of release against his skin, his own feeling prickly as the aftershocks of his climax shot through him.

They each did their best to catch their breath, even as Viktor continued his pushes at a slower pace. When he finally came to rest, they were heaving for air. Taking a few moments to get their wind back, Yuri twisted in place, daring not to pull off his husband's member. He could feel it still pulsing slightly inside him. He looked back over his shoulder, spotting a few wisps of silver hair, "...That...that was great..." He said between pants, his body still shaking slightly.

"Amazing...completely..." Viktor agreed, heaving his breaths against the younger man's back, "The best...so far..."

The seconds pressed on, and their breaths slowed as their lungs gathered what they needed to stop going so heavily. Viktor slowly let go, flopping to his back as the blackness of welcome sleep started to creep in. Yuri twisted in place to curl up against him, and settled in with his head on the front of one shoulder, hand coming up over his chest as one leg curled over his own.

"...So...who's...gonna get up to...turn the lights out?"

Viktor just closed his eyes and groped for the edge of the blanket, pulling it up over them both, "What lights?"

"...Ah...there they go... Night night..."

"That's what I thought..." He mused, turning just enough to wrap both arms around his husband's smaller frame, "Love you."

"Luvyu." Yuri managed to mumble, and drifted into sweet oblivion.
"Yuri, time to wake up." Mikhail's voice said, quiet but loud enough to be heard. He nudged the splayed-out teenager in the ribs, "Yuri!"

"Five more mi-"

"This was the five minutes. It's time to get up! The girls are coming out soon."

Yurio groaned, yawned, and felt the blankets get pulled right off him, leaving his lightly-clothed frame exposed to the colder air of the open room. Like a caricature of the living dead, he sat up stiffly at the waist, and looked around the living-space. Mikhail had already put away the extra bed and looked antsy to get the fold-out couch reset. Emerald eyes went down again with another yawn though, and Yurio examined himself instead.

Though he felt like his body looked the same as it always did, his mind's eye was making him think his feet and hands were cartoonishly big all of a sudden. He shook his head, and everything looked normal again, but it didn't make the nervous pit in his stomach go away. Instead of letting himself focus on it though, he reached for his phone, charging on a table nearby, and pulled it near. Instagram was lit with activity. Of course, the chatter was about someone who wasn't part of the European Championship, but that wasn't what surprised him.

'Viktor Nikiforov gives stark warning to Russia.'

'Former Russian Champion gives candid interview about leaving RSF.'

Yurio slowly blinked, and his eyes narrowed as he watched story after story slide by on his feed. All thought of his growth spurt seemed to vanish, and the hollow pit in his stomach was replaced with what felt like hot water splashing around his insides. He couldn't even look up as he felt Mikhail hoist him up to his feet by his shoulders, and just stood there in surprise, still staring at his phone as he heard the pull-out bed get folded and put back into place under the couch cushions.

"There we go." The elder huffed, dusting his hands off. He turned back to the teen, "What's gotten you so transfixed this early in the morning?"

"...Viktor did an interview yesterday." He answered, keeping his eyes down, "It was posted online late last night. By the way people are reacting, it sounds like he said a lot that no one expected from him."

"Do you have it?"

Yurio scrolled and clicked on a few links, "Yeah. It's here."

The rest of the small apartment's temporary tenants slowly made their way out as the video played, walking by curiously as the sound of the interview resonated from Yurio's phone. By the time it ended, everyone except Viktoria was looking over or around shoulders to see what was going on. She just shook her head and went to find her coat.

The very last line of the interview was only understood by the two Russians listening to it, and they side-eyed one another as the interviewing network's logo faded over the video before the screen went black.
"Did I miss the subtitles? What'd he say?" Minako wondered, "Was it bad?"

Mikhail rubbed his chin, elbow propped on Yurio's shoulder still, "He said Russia would regret what they did to him. I can't tell if that was supposed to be taken as a threat though?"

"He'd never make a threat so openly." Yurio huffed, crossing his arms, "He probably just means that he plans to win Gold for the JSF and that Russia would feel stupid for firing him."

"Apparently Viktor has an uncanny ability to make predictions about things." Minako pointed out, "Maybe he thinks there's something coming down the pipe."

"He's one of the best skaters in the world still. It could well be a self-fulfilling prophecy if he thinks he can keep winning." Mikhail shrugged, and moved his arm down to pat the teen on the back, "Go on and get dressed. We'll get some snacks before your FP practice and then get brunch after."

The blonde nodded and started moving off, setting his phone back down on the table before heading towards their luggage to find a change of clothes and go shower. Once he'd left the room though, Nikki let out the breath she'd been holding onto.

"Bit dramatic for first thing in the morning, innit, sweetie?" Mikhail mused, spotting his oldest daughter leaving through the front door at the end of the hall. He stepped off casually, offering a greeting-nuzzle to his lady love as he passed.

"I didn't even know an interview was out there," Nikki answered, holding up her own phone, "I guess it's cuz I only watch Cousin Viktor's personal page, not all the skating pages. Apparently him and his Yuri went to a really swanky party last night." She turned the device around in her hands, and showed off a photo of the pair in front of a wall of flowers, "See? Cute, right?"

Fangirling already, Minako swiped the device and tapped through a series of other pictures, "Wow! I wonder what this was? They posted these photos at 5:30am, too...it's only been 3 hours since then... They'll be out cold by now." She sighed and gave the phone back, "We probably won't see them until right before the Free Skate."

"It was probably one of those Viennese Balls." Mikhail called back, sliding his arms into his black long-coat.

"How come we didn't go?" Minako huffed, crossing her arms and giving a daring look.

"Cuz they start super late and run super late." He explained, buttoning the jacket up, "If Viktor just posted those pics a couple hours ago, it's probably because that was the first chance he had; on the way back to their hotel. We'd be super deceased if we tried to go to a ball like that while following a competition schedule."

Minako's nose crinkled, "You and your logic."

"I'll bet Cousin Viktor had to make plans for this pretty far in advance though." Nikki added, looking through the photos again, "Maybe even so far back that he was still part of the RSF at the time."

"Viktor's nuts though." Yurio commented from the background, hand on the bathroom doorframe, "He used to go out drinking all night, wake up for practice, and then go back to bed, sleeping until right before he was supposed to perform."

"That sounds reckless."

"Not like he had any other responsibilities, less so here and now." Yurio shrugged, "I'll be done in a
"I'll be right back, too." Mikhail added, sticking his flat-cap onto his head, "There's some coffee made already if you want any." He explained, nudging his head towards the electric java-maker on the counter with a pot of hot black liquid in it. After adjusting his coat collar, he pulled the door open and stepped outside, heading into the cold winter morning air.

Looking around, Viktoria was nowhere in sight, but her tracks in the remaining snow gave her trajectory away easily enough. Jade eyes went to the sky for a moment, watching thick grey clouds starting to roll in, practically splitting the heavens in half, clear blue beyond it.

*Looks like a cold-front coming through. Might only be a couple more hours before it starts to snow. The temperature's already quite a bit lower since yesterday.*

Looking back down again, he started to follow the footprints that went to the B&B's back yard and pool area. That time of year, the pool was empty, but the picnic tables were still there, covered in what snow hadn't melted off of them the day prior. Viktoria was sitting on one of the benches, looking at her phone, half-oblivious to the sound of footsteps crunching their way closer to her.

"You've always been the quiet type," Mikhail started. He leaned down to brush off the crusty remnants of ice from the spot next to his daughter, and sat back against it, "Wise beyond your years, always observing...but I don't think you've ever walked off before."

"I'm just over it all." She answered stiffly, keeping her eyes down, "There's already too much stuff happening with us to add Viktor to it, too."

"We jumped into their world, honey." He tried to explain, "The whole reason we're here is cuz of him."

*We're here because of Yuri.* She corrected, "Viktor isn't even a competitor this time. I don't get why everyone still has to make such a huge deal out of him. *Oohh he did an interview!* Whatever, I don't care."

"I know you don't..." Mikhail nodded, crossing his ankles as he stretched his legs out, "But he's pretty famous in these circles. These folks do care."

"I feel like we're getting swallowed up." Viktoria sighed, locking her phone before putting it into her coat pocket. She crossed her arms on the table and pressed her chin into them, "From the minute we get up to the minute we go to sleep, everyone's talking about him. How is it even remotely possible that with as much publicity as that guy gets, that you didn't know what he was doing all these years?"

"I never followed sports." He shrugged, "My focus was work, and you girls and Sergio."

*Hmph...in that order..."

Mikhail blinked, and smiled nervously, "Well, it's hard to show where my priorities were after your mother put me out. I did my best with the options I had."

"And now that you're around all the time, it seems like we're still playing second fiddle to something else." Viktoria shot back, "If it's not Viktor, then it's Yuri. If it's not Yuri, then it's some random homeless guy."

"...Asahi."

"I don't care. The only person who has a good excuse for getting so much attention from you is
Minako. I can accept being in second place to her. I can't accept being fifth or sixth after strangers."

"...I don't understand why you feel like that. Haven't I done everything I can to make this a soft transition? I found those tutors to work with your existing school curriculum, got you all those workstations..."

"It's not about the stuff, dad!" The silver teen protested, "I feel like you're just handing us off to be raised by an iPad or something! It's not the same as being with you."

"...It's going to take some time for everything to settle out. It's big change for me too, you know?" Mikhail sighed, looking at the toes of his shoes, "There was no chance to really ease into things. Things basically went from ambulance to airplane."

"My mom died in our house and no one knew for hours. Sergio then tried to keep it all under wraps because he didn't want you to come in and make changes. He got lucky in the end, and got to stay where everything's familiar. Nikki and I? We got dragged out by our ears and taken halfway across the planet." Viktoria growled, "We've been with you for what, a little over a month? I don't feel like we've spent more than a few days in any one location before we have to leave again. I'm just...." She lamented, words drifting. She buried her face into her folded arms, "...I'm just tired of moving around so much... Maybe Nikki's handling it better than I am, but I'm tired... Not just from jet-lag either... Jumping into the middle of these relationship problems that everyone seems to have, on top of all the competitive stuff... The drama is wearing me down..."

"...And this all just came to a head this morning because Yuri and I saw that Viktor did an interview...?"

"I don't care that he did an interview. I care that it seems like what he said in the interview is going to dominate the conversation for the rest of the weekend. We can't just be here for Yuri anymore. Viktor won't let us."

Mikhail stayed quiet for a moment, but then reached over to rub his daughter's back, "I know all these big changes are hard to process in such a short period of time, and it seems like I'm miles away even when I'm right next to you. Don't take it out on Viktor though. He was famous long before we came along."

"...I'm not mad at him directly." Vikki grumbled, brow furrowed as she stared forward at the snow stuck to the other side of the table, "He's just...a vector. A thing you focus on, in your weird, never-ending quest for his approval."

"...I don't focus on him that much, do I?"

Jade eyes shot a look at the elder, "You spent all weekend wondering what he was doing and how things were going in Russia, only to nearly have a coronary when his Yuri called you outta the blue. Yes, you focus on him too much."

"But Konstant-"

"I don't care. It was his choice to go out there."

"And it was dangerous."

Viktoria twisted in place and poked a finger against her father's cheek, "He's a grown-ass man who can do whatever he wants without other grown-ass men doting on his every move."

Mikhail's brow crinkled, but he didn't argue.
"We barely had mom, even though she was around... I don't want to do all that again with you..." Viktoria went on, taking hold of his arm as she pulled her hand back, "But right now it just feels like...you might as well still be on the other end of a Skype call... Cuz your focus is miles away... I don't even really have my friends anymore, because they're all back in Canada...so I'm stuck following you around everywhere, even though I'm not really part of anything..."

Mikhail grit his teeth as those words cut deep, and he shook his head at himself.

"...If we have to keep doing this...can you at least be my dad while we're doing it?" Viktoria pleaded, "Not just my chauffer..."

"...Does Nikki feel like this, too?"

Viktoria shook her head and shrugged, snuffling a little from the cold as much as from the topic, "...I think she's distracted enough by Yuri and her online boyfriend that she can get by."

Mikhail's brain went two different directions, "...Online boyfriend...?"

"That guy Yuri knows. The one we saw in Detroit. She has a huge thing for him. Didn't you notice...?"

He could only snort a breath grimly, "...I knew they were talking but I didn't..." He started, only to pause and sink like a turtle into his jacket, eyes narrowed, "Mmh..."

"Relax..." The teen sighed, looking away again, "I don't think he's noticed."

Mikhail just grumbled again.

Viktoria pulled her father's hat away before the jacket's upturned collar could knock it off, "...I think...I'm gonna keep this for a while." She started, "I'll give it back when I think you've shifted gears."

Mikhail's eyes went up towards the empty space beyond his bangs, "...But now my head's naked..."

The hat just went up onto the teen's crown, "Better get to work then."

The elder sat up normally again and leaned forward on the bench, turning in place to extend his arms around his daughter's small frame, and pulled her into a hug, "I'll work hard. I promise to do better."
Once Yurio had (finally) finished washing - and he was made to *completely* dry his long hair, so as to avoid catching his death from a cold outside - the odd blended family stepped out into the cold morning, carrying an assortment of items with them. It didn't take too long for folks to notice the hat-switch, though no one was particularly sure whether to ask about it. Instead of dwelling on it though, they just dutifully followed Yurio the short distance to the rink. He'd even resurrected the black and red jester's hat from the Final, matching the black and purple Nikki had on.

Arriving at the venue, they went in through the front doors and followed the hallways that lead to Hall 3. Hall 2 was in use by the Ladies Singles, and the main area in Hall 1 by the Pairs and Ice Dancers.

"...How come everyone's practicing at once? It wasn't like this in Detroit *or* Moscow..." Nikki pondered, looking at the proverbial swarm as they made their way through, "These aren't even spectators...everyone's got a badge..."

"Euros is a competition for everyone, not just Seniors." Yurio explained simply, trying to watch where everyone was going, "The competition actually started 4 days ago."

"Ehh? Why!?"

"The Juniors all got their stuff out of the way early. The ISU breaks it down so the Seniors compete on the weekend. There's still a literal crap-ton of us though, so even if only the best 24 from the SP made it to the FP, *we all* need our ice time for practice." He answered, pushing the door open to get to the outdoor cross-over area between Hall 1 and Hall 3. He held it until Mikhail took over for him, keeping the panel outside as the rest of the family went through, and then caught back up with his younger 'sister,' "Nationals were broken up the same way, but the Junior segment was held the following weekend rather than in sequential days, so that's why you didn't see any of them. We also only had some 17 or something skaters in my group, rather than over 30, so there wasn't as much need for time. The Final in Detroit was only the top 6 in each group, which made it really easy."

"Oh... So then this place is super crowded because there's 75-ish sets of competitors here all at the same time."

"Basically." He nodded, reaching for the handles of the next set of doors; the ones that led through the small café above the rink. Like before, Yurio held the door open until another set of hands took his place and he moved on.

"Papa said he met you at the World Championships last year. What's *that* like?"

"Same as here, plus a few extra. It's still only the top 24 that make it to the Free Skate though."

"...There's way more countries to represent at Worlds though. How are there only the 'same' number of entries?"

"Oh, Worlds qualifications is based on how well each country did the previous year. Whoever won Gold last year gets to bring 3 competitors this year, 2 for Silver, 1 for Bronze."

Nikki made a face, "...So then how do countries who *don't* medal get to skate ever?"
"Podium placement just guarantees representation the next year. People who score well enough can still qualify without it."

"Oh okay."

Yurio opened the last door to get to the rink, passing by a number of people who were waiting in the small restaurant. The noise of the practice below resonated through the small group as they made their way out into the stands. For another 20 minutes or so, it was a chaotic sort of freestyle warm-up to whoever wanted to be on the ice, but after that, the official practice warm-up would begin. Yurio spotted the placement coordinator near the entrance in the rink-wall, and turned to the rest, "I'm gonna go find my spot."

"We'll just find somewhere to sit." Minako answered, taking the half-emptyed backpack as the blonde removed his skates from it.

Nikki pondered a moment before giving chase, and hopped down the stairs a few paces behind, waving off her father's call to be careful and keep in their sights. Once she'd caught up though, she looked out into the rink at all the other competitors who were already out there. Chris was easy to spot, sticking out brilliantly in his scarlet track-suit, but he was the only person other than Yurio that she recognized.

Yurio himself had his arm elbow-deep in a tubular sack, rummaging around for something as the coordinator held onto the edges of it. When he withdrew his hand again, he held a token with the number 12 on it, and handed it to the man holding the bag up, then turned back to his silver sibling, "How come you're down here? You'll be by yourself."

"Oh, are you going out right away...?"

"There's a while till this thing officially starts. I was going to try and get my bearings."

"...Does it really feel that bad?"

Yurio blinked at her, and glibly looked aside, "...It's...probably mostly in my head. I've been dreading this day for a year and a half. It couldn't happen at a worse time."

Nikki immediately stuck her mittened hands on the Tiger's face, forcing him to look at her again, and she smiled brightly, "You're gonna win anyway!" She explained happily, "You got thrown off yesterday cuz it was the first time you'd skated in your costume since Nationals. Going into the competition tonight, you'll already know what to expect. We'll get some mole-skin stickies so you don't have to wear two pairs of socks, and free up some boot space for your feet. Your other outfit is also pretty loose, too, so you may not even notice the same tightness that you felt in the one from yesterday."

Yurio just blinked at her from behind his squished cheeks, "...Maybe..."

"Nice headgear, Plisetsky." Chris teased as he glided by.

Nikki looked over in surprise, but suddenly felt her 'brother' pulling loose, and saw both of his skates get hurled into the rink like a deadly knife-boot snare. Chris' legs got caught up and he toppled over comically, landing face-first with his arse in the air, smoke fizzling out above his head in frustration.

"THAT'S WHAT YOU GET FOR MAKING FUN OF MY HAT, JACKASS."

Mikhail looked out to the commotion in the rink as the hapless 'victim' of the skate-flail started to untangle himself from the laces, getting teased by other skaters who passed by. He shook his head,
"Can't leave that one alone for five minutes." He huffed, and turned back towards his lady love, watching as she sat down and took the big white and blue thermos that Viktoria had been carrying, "You guys want to snack now or wait?"

"I could nibble a bit," Minako answered, trying to get the grooved twist-lid off the thermos. Once it came free, and Mikhail slung off the small pack from his shoulder, she poured some of the contents into the cup that she'd popped off the canister. It was just hot cocoa, but in the cold of the rink and winter weather, it was a welcome warmth. She smelled its aroma before passing the thermos over to Viktoria, "I don't normally drink stuff like this but it's really appealing now for some reason."

"You've expanded your horizons beyond beer, starlight." Mikhail teased, pulling out a white paper bag from the small backpack, "Croissant? Egg-biscuit?"

"Didn't you bring those cheesy pigs-in-a-blanket?"

"Yeah, here." He answered, reaching deeper into the bag to pull out the individually-wrapped snack, "You want one, Vikky?"

"I'll get the egg-biscuit thing."

Another foil-wrapped breakfast snack was handed off, and Mikhail finally took his own seat.

"How's your back been doing on the roll-away bed, hun?" Minako wondered, peeling back the wrapping from her food, "I don't think the girls would mind switching around sleeping arrangements if you want to be in the bedroom. Right?" She turned to Viktoria next to her, "Better just one bedmate than two."

"Just as long as it's Nikki and not that one." She nudged her head at Yurio, who was sliding across the ice in his sneakers to get his blades back, only to find that it wouldn't be so easy as Chris started to get his revenge; skating away from him with boots in-hand.

"What's wrong with him?" Minako wondered.

"He's a boy." The teen and her father both said in tandem.

"Oh, right. I thought you were worried that he snored or sleep-walked or something." Minako said tepidly, only to look back at Mikhail, "But, there you have it. The girls will get the pull-out bed in the couch, Yuri can have the roll-away, and you can come sleep with me."

"Almost sounds like you're trying to get used to the idea of married life," The elder Russian teased, making the ballerina's face go red, "Practicing for when we get the house?"

"Th-that's not even why I thought about it."

"Ah, you just want an excuse to use your torture-mitts on me then."

"Pfft." She scoffed, "As if I need to find an excuse. I can lay you out anywhere."

"Keep it Rated G, would you?" Viktoria interjected, giving them both a judgy but teasing look, though they laughed anyway.

"I'm being entirely innocent." Minako insisted, "I just miss my cuddle buddy."

Mikhail's face was the one to go red then, "...I...don't think I've ever been called that before."

"...Really?"
"Ahh...my late ex-wife wasn't one for nicknames." He explained hesitantly, wary of Viktoria's reaction on Minako's other side, "That was more my thing...cuz it's a Russian thing..."

"Russians do nicknames?"

"Oh for sure," He nodded, "Like when Yakov would call Yuri 'Yuratchka,' it's a pet-name based on his real name. Same with 'Vitya.' Then there's whole dictionaries just for the silly things lovers call each other. Tat and I had our own that our parents called us, but they weren't as refined."

"What'd they call you?" Viktora wondered curiously.

"...Er...well, in English it's like...'my little chickens' or 'my darling potatoes.'" Mikhail answered nervously.

Both ladies were choking back laughter.

"We were four. It was okay back then." Mikhail insisted, feeling his phone vibrating in his pocket. Feeling a bit of relief for the potential escape, he reached for the device and looked to see who was calling, "Oh...it's Yuri's parents."

**PFFT.** Hot chocolate blew out like fine mist.

"Yuri's parents!?" Minako started, trying to find napkins to wipe her face, "How do they even have your cell number!? We practically went running from his mother, and we never even met his fath-"

"Not that one. Viktor's Yuri's parents. The Katsuki clan."

"...Oh." She deadpanned severely, "What do they want...? It's practically mid-day for them by now."

"Yeah, they must've been waiting until now to call. Hold on, I'll find out." He said, sliding his thumb across to answer, "Mushi mushi." (Greetings.)

Both sets of eyeballs were watching curiously, wondering what was being said on the other end. They watched the man's face for a reaction, but he seemed aware of it and went stony just in case.

"...No, I haven't. Why?" He asked, pausing to let the answer come, "...I see. How long have you known?" Another pause, and he nodded, "That's fine. No, I'll figure it out. Thanks for letting me know."

"That didn't sound good." Minako commented quietly, "What's wrong?"

Mikhail clicked the screen to disconnect the call and put his phone away again, "Asahi left."

"...Eh?"

"Mama Katsuki doesn't know when it happened. Her and Toshiya just kind of realized they hadn't seen him or Hana in a while. They went to check if he was just hiding in his room, but they found it had been emptied of his things, and the key was left in the lock."

"...That...doesn't make any sense." Minako said, dumbfounded. She turned her gaze down to the rink, too stunned to keep her head craned to the side, "...I thought he was doing okay."

Mikhail grumbled, "I should've had someone there watching him. I should've expected he'd use this chance to get out while we were too far away to stop him."

"Why would he leave though?" Minako wondered, "He was supposed to train with me and Yuri. 
The whole point of him being in Hasetsu was because he had nowhere else to go and no other resources. Where is he going to go...?

"Well, he has resources now...the ones Viktor and his Yuri helped him acquire." The elder Russian explained, slouching a little in his seat. He glanced aside, past Minako's stunned expression, looking to Viktoria. She slumped back into her own seat and huffed quietly. He could see the subtle crinkle of her brow by looking at how her eyes narrowed slightly, but it was only because he knew what to look for.

It's no use... I half-expected this would happen. Asahi's his own person and can make his own choices. He...he knows the risks, doesn't he? He's been sheltered for most of his life, and super naive-

Mikhail clenched his eyes for a second and shook his head, and pushed to sit up straighter in his seat.

No... He's not my responsibility.

"I'll check on him later. I'm sure he's fine. He complained about feeling like a burden so it's no surprise that he bolted."

"He's never been on his own though." Minako half-protested, "What if he does something stupid?"

"We all learned how to get on in the world, one way or another, at some point or another. Plus, he has Hana to think about. She's counting on him to be responsible for her." Mikhail offered, reaching over the narrow arm-rest between their seats to pat the woman's knee reassuringly, "He's near as old as Viktor though. He can't cling to anyone's apron anymore."

"...I hope you're right. The things he said in Osaka..."

"...He made it through that, and confronted a lot of his demons already. Sudden as it is, this is the logical next step." He said simply, "We'll just...see if he can handle being treated like an adult. No more training wheels."

Minako reluctantly nodded, and let out a sigh, "I still think he's vulnerable... And what do we tell Yuri? They were starting to become friends..."

"No sense worrying him about it now."

"...I guess so..."

Mikhail nodded, and leaned aside to kiss the edge of his partner's shoulder. Beyond her, Viktoria seemed to relax a little, letting out a whisper of a sigh of relief before going back to the breakfast snack she'd been nibbling on.
Though no alarm had been set, the whining of hungry dogs was enough to act as a substitute. Since only Makkachin had the height to get up onto the bed though, the focus of the begging was on Viktor, and one fuzzy brown arm reached forward to tap rough paw-beans against the Russian's frame. A few pats and a clear whine roused him enough to roll over, peeling himself off his husband's frame, and gave the poodle a head-scratch to simmer him down for a few moments. Jiro squeaked a bark, but Viktor shushed him with a finger to his lips, and the small Akita settled to a much-quieter pup-mutter.

Sleepily reaching for the nearest phone, Viktor checked the time, seeing that it was just after noon. Eyes moved up to spot both dogs being antsy at the door, and despite his haze, Viktor resigned to getting up. With hair disheveled, he rummaged around quietly for something warm and comfortable to wear before hooking both dogs up to their harnesses and leashes, and took them outside.

The park behind the hotel was fairly empty, Viktor noticed. Bleary blue eyes scanned the frozen lake, spotting those same swans from the days prior, though now they'd found a patch of cleared water to wade in. The sight of them brought a smile to the sleepy Russian's face, and sat back on the park bench that he'd found Yuri using that first morning. Like then, Makkachin ran roughshod through the snow, leaping and darting over as much space as he could cover. Viktor cut Jiro loose, and the wary puppy started rooting around nearby, but soon got caught-up in Makkachin's contagious joy and started chasing after him.

"Feeling a bit more confident since that first adorable nope on the bridge back home, huh?" Viktor teased, catching the Akita's attention for a moment, "Guess you're starting to realize you come from a long line of mountain dogs. Your ancestors fought bears, you know?"

Jiro quirked his head as he glanced back, barked, and then jumped awkwardly before trying to catch up to his big poodle brother. The sight of it made Viktor laugh, and he settled in to let his two fuzzy sons burn off some energy for a while.

"Everything feels so much lighter now... He thought, looking up into the sky, Even though it's getting cloudy, the snowstorm that's coming kind of feels like a welcome thing. The kind of weather that makes one want to snuggle up with a loved one in front of a fire, make s'mores, and sip on hot chocolate. Or in our case...maybe fine a fancy Viennese café and sip on coffee, admiring the work of latté foam art made by the baristas, while we watch the snow fall from wall-length windows.

Makkachin rushed by Jiro, getting as close as he dared so as not to get caught, and ran wide circles to come back around. He paused after one big turn and went down on his chest, tail wagging and tongue hanging, steam panting from the dog's mouth. Jiro rushed to catch up, but Makkachin just jumped clear over the little Akita and took off again.

Viktor pulled out his phone after a while and recorded a short video of the dogs' antics, getting some good footage of their snow-play before turning the phone around on himself. He put a finger over his lips and winked at the camera, "Letting our sons run loose for a bit to let off some steam while hubby gets some well-deserved rest. See you all tonight at the Euros Free Skate. Ja ne~"

He clicked the recording off and made his way to the 'Pups of Nikiforov' page to upload it. By the time is finished, Viktor knew it was time to wrangle the dogs back up and head inside. With one good whistle, Makkachin's ears lifted off his head at attention, and he let Jiro catch him before
herding the puppy towards their human. The two eagerly followed after Viktor's lanky legs, not even needing their leashes reattached to know to trail him back into the Arcotel.

Softly and quietly, Viktor opened the door to the room, and the two canines tippy-tapped inside. The door gently closed after, and Viktor was pleased to find that Yuri was still out cold, nearly still in the same position as he'd been left in, even though it had been almost 45 minutes. Viktor did his best to put food and water down without making so much noise, and despite the rattle of kibble in metal bowls, Yuri stayed blissfully asleep.

Within a few minutes, Viktor was able to disassemble from most of his clothes, and climbed back into bed with just a t-shirt and sweat-pants remaining. Blankets were pulled up and then back over again, and the Russian's cold frame cozied up to the heat of Yuri's toasty-warmth.

A soft quiet fell over the room as the two pups finished their breakfast, and Viktor let himself drift into a dozing snooze, listening to his partner's easy-going and long breaths. It got even easier when Yuri rolled onto his back, and Viktor could set his head down on the man's chest. Listening to that slow rhythmic heartbeat lulled the Russian into sleep again for a little while. It was impossible to know how much time had passed when he drifted awake again, but he could see that Makkachin and Jiro had curled up on a seat-cushion for a mid-day nap, and were well-asleep.

Viktor turned his attention back to his husband's slumbering frame. He knew intuitively that it was probably close to 2pm by then, and so waking Yuri up wouldn't be the cruellest thing he could do. To blunt the devastation of being made to rouse him, Viktor decided to go about that delicate task in a way only he could.

Soft whispers of kisses were placed on Yuri's brow, moving slowly down to cheek, neck, and collar-bone. Keeping himself propped up on his left side and elbow, Viktor slid his right hand over his husband's bare frame, softly sweeping across velvet skin as the younger man's body disappeared under the blankets. It wasn't long before Viktor himself vanished under them, too, trailing kisses down Yuri's chest and stomach. In the darkness under the sheets and comforter, the Russian followed the contours of his partner's athletic but relaxed core, past the naval, and eventually found what he was after. He gently pressed his lips to the tip of that hot length of flesh, finding it half-aroused in the midst of its normal slumbering practice.

Yuri mumbled something, but seemed to still be asleep, turning his head over on the pillow. Viktor smiled as he gently nibbled his way down the length of the member, doing his best to bring it fully to attention. Once he got to the base of it, small kisses became sucks and licks, and he moved slowly back to the tip again, lathing his warm, wet attention over every inch. By the time he got to the end of it, Yuri had roused enough to gasp slightly, tilting his head back into the pillow. Confused at first at the feeling of it all when he'd just woken up, Yuri's arms curled up over his chest, and he sucked in a sharp breath. Hands moved up over his face, rubbing over it in an effort to wake up a little more, slowly becoming aware of what was going on, "V-Vik...tor..." He gasped, crying out a bit louder in surprise as his skin resonated through him like the song of a newly-struck tuning-fork. Whatever had been going on before he woke up, it had been enough that the big lump under the blankets started bobbing slowly up and down, and Yuri felt the wet heat engulf him. He squeaked another gasp as his frame tightened in surprise, one knee bending up under the blankets. His back arched when he felt fingers come up under him, massaging and kneading the squishy and more delicate bits between his legs.

Every twitch of his husband's muscles made Viktor smirk as he continued at his task, licking and sucking and nibbling and kissing with all his focus. Yuri's hips started to roll slightly under his attention, and he felt a hand come down over his head through the blankets, grasping gently but
eagerly. Still leaning against his left arm though, Viktor couldn't reach for anything but what was in front of him. To remedy that, he momentarily left the aroused flesh alone, and pushed up onto both his hands to slide his entire frame over and between his husband’s legs under the blankets. He could see the light from outside come into that dark space, but he lowered down again to close the gap, and hooked his elbows over the crook of his husband's hips and thighs. Both hands free now, he slid them forward over his partner's waist, moving them up over the man's stomach until his fingertips poked out from under the sheets.

Yuri huffed a laugh at the sight of them, but quickly returned to his breathy gasps and quiet moans, feeling the long hot lick from his root to tip. His fingers and toes flexed and curled with the growing intensity, and he reached to find the hands that were roaming over him under the blankets. When he found them, they clasped his fingers in return, and for a moment, Viktor paused in his focus to come up for air.

With a ruffle and a wiggle, the silver-haired head popped out from under the blankets, and Viktor smirked at the face looking back at him, "...Happy morning-afternoon-time."

"Vik...tor..." Yuri gasped, pulling one hand back to try straightening out the blanket-mussed hair. He moved a few erratic silver strands out of the way and saw those clear blue eyes behind them. With his focus allowed to wander, Yuri realized something he hadn't before, "...Oh...I can feel your clothes...? Did you get dressed?"

"Only to let the kids out for a bit." Viktor explained, rising up enough to lean forward and offer a greeting kiss, and another, "I came back to bed for a small nap, and when I woke up again, I wanted to surprise you, so I went about a certain business to get your attention."

"Oh you have it."

"That's perfect then-~" He laughed, giving another kiss before moving back down again, pecking a few more kisses to his husband's chest as he went, and disappeared under the blankets once more.

Yuri quirked a brow, tilting his head in an effort to see, but Viktor was gone quick and had gone back to his work so quickly that he didn't even blink first. He gasped in surprise and fell back down to the pillow, feeling his partner's eager efforts sliding up and down on hard and needy flesh. Viktor's nigh-professional efforts brought him to the edge rather quickly after that, and both hands went up to comb through his own hair, elbows pressed together above his face. Fingers clamped down as fireworks started sparking in his core, legs pressing against the Russian's form, getting tighter with each suck. Knees rose up so high by the end that they held the blanket up, and he got to watch his husband handiwork through a gap in the folds. His eyes clenched shut though as those fireworks burst out, sending hot fire through every limb, to the tips of fingers and toes and to every hair on his head.

Viktor kept on going though, easing off only slowly, feeling the waves of clenching and relaxing muscles all around him. Listening to his partner's cries and gasps was the ultimate reward, and the subtle twitches of skin and the limbs under it as Yuri was desperately trying to catch his breath. He came out from under the covers to admire his achievement, sliding up further between the younger man's legs until he could press his elbows down against Yuri's sides, holding his chin up in the palms of his hands, "Sounds like you enjoyed it." He mused, meaning into the left palm as he let his right hand slide over his husband's chest.

"I don't...know how you...do that so well..." Yuri said between breaths, arms splayed out across the wide mattress.

"I did promise to get better at it just for you. I'm glad I'm doing it to your liking."
Yuri just made a face at the ceiling, "}...I...need to step up my game then..."

Viktor laughed and pushed up on his hands, gazing down on his spouse's perfect form, "You're only about a year into this. Give yourself more time. There's still a lot you should be allowed to get used to at your own pace."

"...I guess so..." Yuri answered, his voice a quivered gasp as those jolts still shot through him. He managed the strength to put his elbows down and push himself up a little, but Viktor had to help him the rest of the way, hugging around his lower back to pull him closer. Yuri nosed the man fondly, letting his arms dangle behind the Russian's back, and offered his own kiss. "Thanks for being patient with me."

"It's absolutely worth it." He answered easily, "It means I get to enjoy your innocence a while longer this way."

"...I think I just fell in love with you all over again."

"Really~?"

Yuri leaned in again for an Eskimo kiss, "Absolutely."

The shower was hot and steamy, and especially soothing to tired muscles from the exertion of the day before. Yuri rinsed the conditioner from his hair, lifting his face up towards the corners of the tub space, and opened his eyes as the hot water rushed through his hair. For a moment, he just looked up, and savored the feeling of the wet rushing down his body. He closed his eyes again though and combed his fingers through his hair, leaning back under the spray to finish rinsing.

As he came back out into the main room, toweling his hair as he went, he spotted Viktor on the bed in another of the same white bathrobes provided by the hotel. Viktor had his MacBook Air open and was clicking through something online.

"More picture galleries from Instagram?" Yuri wondered with a huff, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Mh." The Russian nodded, "Most of these are from your time in Seniors, but there's a few from Juniors popping up."

"...I have a small confession to make."

Viktor looked up immediately, "...Eh?"

Yuri ruffled the towel against his hair a bit more, but then turned to sit properly on the bed, and crossed his legs, "...Last night, when we were dancing our disco, and later our tango..." He started, looking down at his hands where they'd folded over his lap, "...I didn't think much of it at the time, but for some reason, it all felt really familiar. Like déjà vu almost."

"...Okay...?" Viktor said weirdly, confused.

"Does...this pose mean anything to you...?" Yuri wondered, cheeks getting slightly pink in his embarrassed wonderings. He brought both arms up, curled his small and ring fingers under, and stuck the others out, bringing them both up on either side of his head, elbows up.

Viktor deadpanned him with an awkward smile, "...Well, uh...sure... It's the 'bull' you did in Sochi... I was your matador. I used my suit jacket." He explained, "...I showed you pictures of all
that...you're probably just remembering that because the dancing reminded you of the slideshow."

"...I thought that too at first, but I'm...seeing it from my point of view, not from the photographer's." Yuri retorted, bringing his arms down again as he went deep into thought, "...I remember this odd dance-shuffle that we did... We practically did a tango back then...right?"

"...Well...yeah..." Viktor answered, more hesitantly than before. He pushed up from his lazy lounging position and sat up a bit straighter, a concerned look on his face, "Even though you were drunk as a skunk...you still danced sure-footed. You pulled me in pretty quick with your moves..."

"...I...feel like I'm remembering...how easy it was to follow you..." Yuri added, "It was like we'd practiced before...because we were so in-sync..."

"But we'd never even really spoken before that night."

Yuri closed his eyes and rubbed his wet hair with both hands, "...I feel like I'm right on the edge of something...like a word on the tip of my tongue that I just can't speak..." He looked up, brow furrowed, "...What am I trying to remember...?"

Viktor looked on nervously, "I'm not sure. A lot happened that night. Do you remember the strip-tease with Chris...?"

Yuri's face went bright red, "...Oh man... I think I do..."

"How about the dance-off against Yurio...?"

"...I...think so...?"

Viktor pushed the laptop lid down and put the whole thing aside, hoisting himself over to sit cross-legged in front of his partner, and took the man's hands in his own, "What about after all that? After you hugged me and told me I should be your coach...anything...?"

"...Is there something that happened that you're trying to make me think of...?"

"Well, I'm just..." He started, shaking his head, "I mean, if you do remember...that'd be pretty great, wouldn't it? All the things we did that no one caught on camera..."

"The stuff you talked about when we were in Detroit..."

"You told me all about Hasetsu, in so much detail that I could find Yu-Topia without knowing the address..." Viktor explained, feeling his heart race, "...Does anything ring a bell...?"

Yuri wracked his brain, trying desperately to follow the vague memories through the fog of the alcohol that had enshrouded them.

"...I told you back then that I'd come." Viktor said suddenly, stopping the memory in its tracks, "I said, after the season was over, I'd find you, just like you asked me to. I just... After the night ended, and when I saw you again the next morning, and you didn't remember a thing...I thought the offer was off the table. I wanted to find you at the next competition, but you never came..."

Yuri gave a thousand-yard stare, making the silver feel like he was being looked through instead of at.

"...Do...you remember that?"

He shook his head, eyes still wide, but his face lowered and Yuri stared at his husband's hands where
"...What's wrong?" Viktor asked tepidly, "You look like you just got punched in the gut."

"...I..." Yuri stammered, "...I remember...but... Not that..."

Silver brows crinkled in confusion, "...I don't understand. What do you remember?"

"...The...things you just said...right now... Oh my god..."

"Yuri, what is it?"

Yuri lifted his head again, but fear and shame were written on his face, "...I...I told him the s-same thing..."

"...Hah?"

"A-Asahi..." He answered, voice quieter, "...The day he...asked me to go with him to Tokyo... It was all such a chaotic blur...he was saying things so fast... I d-didn't know what to say, so I just agreed to everything, thinking I could sort it out later..."

Viktor was giving a dubious look, but he held onto those hands reassuringly.

"It was practically in the same breath..." He went on, eyes starting to get wet as the memory broke loose, and the despair it wrought came with it, "I didn't even realize what had happened until after, and he was so happy...so I didn't... At the time..."

"Yuri, deep breaths... It's ancient history. Whatever it is can't hurt you anymore."

"I know, but I... No wonder he can't get over me... He's... He must be fixated on the fact that...he asked me to go out with him, and I said yes-"

"Shh."

"I told him yes because I panicked and I didn't know what else to do, and he was just so happy; I'd never seem him smile like that before...he even laughed... I was so overwhelmed." Yuri explained hectically, "...I felt like I was just agreeing to something about Tokyo still, but as soon as I said I go there to train for Seniors, he instantly brought up the rest...and I just, I said... He said...he'd arrange it so we'd have the same dorm together, and it all got so out of control..."

"No wonder you kept your plans about the US secret." Viktor said quietly, rubbing his thumbs across his partner's fingers.

"Everything happened so fast..." Yuri said again, snuffling a little where he could feel his nose starting to run, "It didn't even really sink in what I'd agreed to until the next day, when he brought me a gift. I'd gotten myself worked up to tell him that I'd agreed to something I didn't really mean, and that I was sorry... I don't even remember what he got me anymore, but seeing him hand it to me, and just being so thrilled about it all... He suddenly hugged me, and I was just absolutely paralyzed..."

He said, holding tighter to the fingers that were curled around his hands, "And I remember feeling so wrong and...and horrible... I was so scared to tell him off after that, so I just... I avoided him... I ran away, back to Hasetsu... Made excuses to not be in Imari unless I absolutely had to be there... It was a miracle that I'd been trying to find somewhere outside Japan already for Seniors, because of everything happening with Yuko...and that Asahi was making trips to Tokyo for his own stuff... But by the time I got to Detroit, and escaped...I'd... I'd never actually told him that I never meant to agree to...being with him..."
Viktor offered a nervous smile, "Well, I guess that explains why he just abruptly asked if you're gay when we saw him at Nationals, rather than at least saying hi first..." He suggested, pausing for a moment as he felt his husband's hands starting to shake. He let go and reached forward, pulling the younger man into a hug, and leaned back against the cushioned headboard, "My love, don't let that memory bother you. I know it's hard to think about it after so long, but it really is ancient history. It's not your fault."

Yuri clung to his partner's bathrobe, burying his face against the man's chest, "I had never been so freaked out by people touching me before then...but after that hug...I didn't want anyone anywhere near me..." He explained, voice cracking from the stress of it, "I kept people away, and forced them off, like Tess, when they got too close... It was like I was trying to keep him off me all along..."

"Shh..." Viktor cooed, petting his partner's hair gently, "You don't have to feel bad about all that. You have the right to choose your relationships, and not be tricked into them. What he did was an ambush. Maybe he meant well, and got carried away, but he didn't take your feelings into consideration, and took advantage of your good nature. Just like he did at Nationals when he went after you."

"...I... I didn't realize how much I'd made myself forget... How deeply I'd buried that..."

"You don't always find what you're looking for when you go digging. Sometimes you find things that you can't predict. It's okay." He added quietly, rubbing his cheek across the top of his spouse's damp head, "You have nothing to be upset about. You did what you had to so you could get out of a situation that made you uncomfortable and scared."

"But what else is in my head that I don't know about?" Yuri asked, pushing up a little to look his partner in the eyes, "Is there anything worse in there?"

"I think you'd have become a different person if something worse had happened." Viktor reassured, rubbing the man's back.

"...L...I always liked how it seemed like I'd found my soul-mate on the first try... What if... I mean, does this mean I didn't...? Does what happened back then."

"It doesn't count." Viktor cut the thought off, "Not even close. Saito could've spent the last six years firmly believing that you and him were together, and it still wouldn't count because you didn't agree. Does that make sense?"

Yuri hesitated.

"What we learned just now doesn't change anything. It just paints a clearer picture of things" Viktor went on, bringing up his other hand to rub his fingers across his husband's cheek, "We have a better understanding of what happened. That's all. You're still the same beautiful, kind natured person I fell in love with. I found you when you were ready, and you didn't run away."

Still holding quiet, Yuri looked down. Despite his furrowed brow though, and the sunken feeling in his stomach, he still managed his best attempt at a smile, "...Well, except for that one time..."

"What time?"

"...When you first got to Yu-Topia, and we'd gotten all your stuff to your room. You crouched down beside me, and took my hand, getting really close to me...saying to tell you about myself..."
Viktor blinked and looked aside, but then the light came on, "Oh yeah, you backed outta the room so fast...!" He laughed, hugging even tighter, "You can't blame me though...after dancing with me in Sochi, I didn't think you'd mind..."

Pulled so close, Yuri breathed a sigh of relief against his spouse's chest, and gripped the bathrobe a little tighter, "...You...helped me learn to trust again...to let people in..."

"And to relax, and like yourself."

"...You've done so much more for me than I even realized."

"And I'll keep doing that forever."

Yuri swallowed a lump in his throat, and looked up again, seeing the warmth in the eyes looking back at him. He could feel his own starting to water again, but this time for joy instead of regret. He found his smile, and pressed his eyes to his husband's neck, "Forever."
At the corner of Schwarzenbergstraße and Kärntner Ring, the Café Schwarzenberg was tucked into the first floor of a five-story gothic white brick building. The same tall, rectangular, narrow windows that were set into the walls like dominos were facing out from each story above the first, with the café's big wooden arches rounding out the ground floor. The front door was framed within one of those same arches, shielded by the elements by a long, extended, retractable awning, under which were a number of outdoor tables and chairs, with a few brave cold-loving Austrians enduring the winter chill with their coffees.

Within, the high vaulted ceilings with boxy wooden pillars between the windows, and the cozy booths beside them, and curtains above. Chandeliers hung from above, circles of crystal with smaller rings around the circumference like dazzling moons orbiting a brilliant golden-white Saturn. Beneath them were a row of small, paired rectangular stone-top tables, with four wooden hemi-circular chairs at each, upholstered in leather and metal studs. Small idyllic paintings hung on the walls, facing the pastry bar on the other side of the room. Under the curved glass, different slices of cake were lined on long display plates, marked expertly with their white name and price tags. Dark wooden walls decorated the back of the café, going around a corner to another section of the floor where a cozy nook came to form the front of the building. Bussing the little L-shaped facility were tuxedo-wearing waiters, drifting through like pleasant coffee-wraiths, moving between tables and chairs to clear and replace plates and cups with only a whisper to say they were there.

In a booth at the front of the café, sitting next to one of the store-front's big windows, sat two particular world-class figure skaters. Beneath the table, licking at small bowls of whipped cream or nibbling on slices of ham, were their two dogs.

"Wow~!" Viktor sang, looking at the fancy lunch-spread in front of him; a plate of grilled pork tenderloin with oyster mushrooms and potato croquettes, a side of house bread with whipped butter, and a bowl of mixed-leaf salad. On the other side of the table, Viennese fried beef with onions and gravy, with roast potatoes and gherkin (small pickles,) and a bowl of the café's famed clear broth soup with liver dumplings. Blue eyes trailed up from the lunch offering to the figure sitting in the seat opposite him, "What do you think? Yuri~!"

"This is great." He answered simply, reaching slowly for the small plate that held a butter-knife and fork over a napkin. A sudden growl from his stomach betrayed the serious look on his face, but that just made Viktor laugh a little.

"You've been so serious since coming out of the shower." He commented, pulling the salad in front of himself to start, "You're physically here but your mind's a thousand miles away."

"In Imari, I'm afraid." Yuri admitted sullenly, cutting up the fried beef into smaller pieces, "I just...have this persistent nagging feeling that I'm forgetting something important."

"Has anything else from the Sochi Banquet bubbled up?" Viktor wondered, hoping to keep things positive despite the theme, "You were pretty toasted at the time, but memories usually come up like movies...even if you don't know what's going to happen next, once you start remembering, the film plays on."

"...Some has." Yuri answered, looking at a morsel of the beef with an onion clinging to it, "I think I remember Celestino coming to get me... I think I argued with him?"
"Sure did. You were pretty convincing...but I suppose I have a slight bias."

Yuri's face flushed a little, "...Did I...try to tie myself to you somehow? With my necktie...?"

Viktor lifted his eyes up, and chortled a quiet laugh into his salad, "Yeah."

"Jeeze..."

"It would've worked," He went on, "But you tried to tie it around our torsos. If you'd tied our hands together instead..."

"I can't claim genius when under the influence."

"You put up a valiant effort."

"...I don't remember what you did though." Yuri admitted, finally putting the piece of beef into his mouth.

"I just kind of stood there, grinning like an idiot." Viktor answered, pouring a vinaigrette over his first course, and used a fork to mix it all together, "If I had any sense, I would've held onto you in place of the mismanaged necktie. Alas...I had none."

"Oh..." Yuri said quietly, brow furrowed a little.

"I was trying to go easy on you." The Russian explained, skewering his first bite of the mixed salad, "It was our first formal meeting and I'd been watching you since you came into the room. You didn't come happy. If I'd put an effort in to make Celestino leave you in my care, I'm afraid you might've regretted how you awoke the next morning."

"...Eh?" Yuri deadpanned him severely.

"Oh, I don't mean that it would've been naughty." Viktor mused, "But I imagine that even just being in my same room would've freaked you out. Your years-long habit of trying to get away from me was something of a running joke between Chris and I. I liked you, quite a bit, to the point where I was ready to agree to be your coach already, and had even tacitly agreed to find you in Hasetsu after Worlds like you'd suggested. I wasn't ready to scare you off so severely that you'd never show your face again. I thought I'd get you the next morning on the way out."

"...I only remember the migraine I had..." Yuri admitted grimly, "I only became aware of my surroundings again sometime long-after we'd been on the plane back to Detroit."

"Yeah, you drank like a fish, that's for sure."

"...How could I have forgotten that you'd agreed to come though? I mean, that should've been branded to my brain."

"Maybe I wasn't loud enough. Who knows?"

"What did you even say?"

Viktor looked up in thought, eyes squinting in the light as much as from concentration, "...I think you were actually still dry-humping me..." He started, making Yuri's face go bright red in humiliation, "But you'd looked up at me with that sad but hopeful drunken look on your face, tie around your head, no pants on... It was right after the video ended; the one I showed you right after the Final last year. I'd said something like, 'Yeah...sure, okay!' Then Yurio had a bit of a fit, and I'd told him to not
ruin the moment. I guess no one thought I was being serious at the time. You'd gone back to snuggling against my chest by then so I'm not even sure you heard me. I didn't bring it up again."

"...This is devastating..."

"See?"

Yuri sunk into his lunch for a few minutes, finishing the broth and liver dumplings and half the fried beef before pausing again. He tapped his fork against the cut-up bits that were still there, "...You said before that Chris was around for most of the night...what would he say happened...?"

"A hypersexualized exaggeration of the truth, just to see your face go red." Viktor answered with a small chuckle.

"...Yeah, you're probably right." Yuri sighed, "What about Yurio?"

"He'd complain about the gross display."

"...Celestino?"

"Uhhmmm..." Viktor looked up again, tapping a finger against his chin, "He actually wasn't around for everything. Once he saw that you were socializing, he kind of wandered off somewhere until it was ready to leave. I only remember seeing him again when he came to collect you."

"And I was sitting on your lap at that point, right?"

"Mh."

"...And you're sure I didn't do anything inappropriate...?"

"Other than dry-humping me in front of everyone?" Viktor teased, watching his husband's ears go red.

"Y-Yeah..."

"No, nothing worse than that. You mostly sat side-saddle on me."

"...Mostly?"

"Well, you straddled my knees at one point, and leaned forward with your hands on my thighs, but it's not like you slid forward."

"...Why was I doing that?"

"Ahhhh..." Viktor said as he thought back, eyes squinting again, "...I think it was the part where you were saying how perfect it was that Worlds was being held in Japan, because then we could go right to Hasetsu from there... You were talking all about how we'd take the train from Tokyo and that you'd show me the way to Yu-Topia, and all the things we'd see along the way. I think you'd forgotten that I'd said I'd go by then, or you never heard me in the first place, because the way you talked about it was like you were still trying to convince me."

"...All that was before I bombed at Nationals though..."

"Thinking back on everything," Viktor said a bit more seriously, "After the dream I had on the plane to Moscow...I'm convinced that if I'd tried to say something to you at the hotel check-out, you would've done fine."
"...Water under the bridge."

"I know. I just kind of feel a bit responsible for it."

"Why though? It's nowhere near your fault."

"I could've done more to cheer you up when I saw you." Viktor explained, "I truly regret that I didn't. Shot myself in the foot as much as I let you down."

"...Don't feel like that...please." Yuri insisted, looking up from his dour posture, "I let myself down. And besides...if I hadn't bombed out like I did, I may have never skated your 'Aria.'"

"...I guess that's true. You would've been too busy training on your own programs." Viktor nodded, "But...then you would've been able to go to Worlds."

"And you would've worked your magic on me there?" Yuri teased, trying to feel better.

"Oh, if I'd talked to you in the lobby in Sochi, I'm fully convinced that my dream is how it would've gone." Viktor explained affirmatively, "It's established head-canon now."

Yuri smiled and looked back down into his food, "I'm glad you're so sure of it. Your dream sounded pretty nice."

"You've said that I have an uncanny ability to make predictions. Maybe I was actually seeing an alternate reality. One where I'd done the right thing."

"You did do the right thing, Viktor." Yuri said pointedly, "It just came at a different time. You did still come and save me, and now we're here, in this moment, enjoying lunch at a fancy café in Vienna with our two sons."

Viktor glanced up, but then turned his eyes down again and laughed, "Yeah, you're right. We still made it. But...don't forget that you saved me, too."

"See? Then there's nothing to regret. We each made the right moves at the right time, and it all worked out in the end."

As lunch gave way to the after-meal coffee and dessert, the tuxedo-wearing waiters cleared the table and replaced the used dishes with new ones, laden with a small assortment of cakes and pastries. Two fancy coffees were brought out as well, one dusted by cinnamon over whipped cream, and another sprinkled with chocolate curls and almond bits. They each took a good long smell of their drinks, breathing in the sweet aromas, and had their first sips.

Viktor gave a happy sigh and leaned back against the booth, holding up his cup with both hands, "Vkusno~!"

"Oishi~!" Yuri agreed.

"I was just thinking about doing something like this earlier this morning." Viktor explained, taking another sip from his drink, "Thanks for indulging me. I know you want to get to the rink."

"Well, the rink isn't going anywhere..." Yuri answered, "I kind of like that we have a chance to take things a bit slower and just...relax."

"Right? Feels a bit weird to not be in a rush over something."
Yuri nodded in easy agreement, taking another sip as well. He felt a nudge against his knees though, and looked down from his cup to see two black eyes looking up at him from under the table. Jiro tapped his leg again before giving a gruff little puppy-whine. Yuri blinked, but then scooted out on the bench-seat, and stepped out just far enough to take a knee, "C'mere," He said, beckoning his Akita closer, and picked the pup up when he came. Makkachin watched closely, but was content to stay where he was, lying at the base of his human's seat, legs cast over him at an angle under the table. When Yuri stood up again, taking Jiro with him, he boop'd the little dog's nose...and then hesitated to take his seat again. Contemplating for a moment, Yuri then decided to sit on Viktor's same side, keeping Jiro on his lap as he scooted closer.

"Hey little buddy," Viktor greeted, giving the pup an ear-scratch before lifting that same arm across his husband's shoulders, "Welcome to the other side of the table, love." He mused, kissing the side of Yuri's brow, "What brings you over?"

"Just felt like it." He answered, sliding his hand down Jiro's back a few times. He watched his partner's free arm go across the spread to retrieve his coffee and saucer, bringing it closer for him to set it down again, "Thanks."

"My pleasure."

A little while passed in the quiet of that moment, with Yuri keeping his eyes down on the Akita on his lap. The pup seemed focused on him for some reason, watching him in spite of the movement of Viktor's arm reaching out across the table periodically, to sample at the different pastries and cakes that were on offer.

"He's feeling you out," Viktor said, pulling Yuri out of his almost trance-like stare, "He's sensing something."

"He's just looking for attention."

"Jiro could've looked for that anywhere. His eyes have been fixed on you for a few minutes though. I think he can sense you drifting again."

"...Drifting?"

"Back to where you were before," Viktor said simply, "I tried to pull you out by having you focus on Sochi, but you didn't stay with me there for long."

Yuri sighed the breath that he'd been holding, and looked down again, "...I didn't even notice."

"Why are you so worried?" The Russian wondered, "What compels you back to Imari?"

"...I...can't help it." Yuri answered quietly, trying to hug his puppy, but not so much that Jiro would start to squirm, "I..." He started again, the words stumbling as they came forward. He shook his head and leaned a bit into his husband's side, "I feel safe. But...I'm scared anyway, and I don't know why."

"Do you think there's more you've forgotten?"

"...I guess so." He said, nodding a little as he massaged one hand around Jiro's shoulders, "For some reason, I'm not thinking so much about Imari as I am about...something you said..."

"...What'd I say that's bothering you so much?" Viktor turned his head in dubious wonder.

Yuri hesitated, and reached his hand forward for the finger-loop on his coffee cup, though he didn't
"lift it yet, "...Back in Osaka, right before I told you what Asahi had done..." He started reluctantly, "You were trying to figure out what it was...and you asked if he'd raped me."

Viktor didn't say a word in answer. He lifted his own drink back to his lips and held the ceramic there against them, staring past the melting whipped cream to the booth on the opposite side of the table.

"...What if I'm blocking it out? What if-"

"He didn't." Viktor said firmly, "Trust me on that much. I only thought of it in the moment because I considered that you might still be in shock. Enough time has passed though and I can safely tell you that you don't act like someone who's been attacked that way. Not in Osaka, and not in Imari either."

"...But the way I kept everyone away from me. The way I freaked out about a simple hug, and our toy... Stupid things that shouldn't make me feel so bad but did anyway."

"My love, a lot of people have anxiety about stuff like that. You've told me all about the body image problems you had growing up, being taunted by Nishigori over your weight, being rejected by the girl you liked for the guy that tormented you. Finding out, on top of it all, that your friend wanted more from you than you were willing to give...and then to be tricked into it anyway..."

Yuri pulled his finger free from his cup, and set it down on his partner's leg instead, holding onto it like it was all he could do to stop himself from sliding off the bench and under the table, "...I just...can't shake the feeling that there's more that happened than I'm able to remember though... It's following me like a darkness out the corner of my eye, disappearing beyond sight when I try to find it."

"Your anxiety is fed by your doubts and worries. Jiro can sense it; that's why he got your attention. He could see it before you noticed."

"...He...can see the shadows bounding around in my head..."

"It's no different than the creeping darkness that followed me around after I left home with Yakov." Viktor explained, rubbing his husband's shoulder where he held it, "But your darkness is one you're creating on your own."

"...I just don't...trust my own memories right now." Yuri said quietly, crossing his ankles against Makkachin's ribs, trying to find some mooring in the poodle's warmth, "Because I remember things now that I didn't before...and I don't know what else might come up later..."

"What exactly are you so worried about?" Viktor wondered, pressing his cheek to the crown of his spouse's head, speaking into his hair, "I know you feel guilty about abandoning him by going to Detroit...but in doing that, you were saving yourself, and that's the most important thing."

"...I just..." Yuri stammered, trying to find a breath, "...What if Osaka wasn't the first time he'd kissed me...? What if he got that first from me instead of you...? What...other firsts did he get that I thought you did?"

"I don't think he got any."

Yuri looked up abruptly, "How can you know though...?"

"Because he didn't react when Minako explained to him about how he'd ruined the fact that I'm the only person you'd ever kissed before that day." The silver explained, looking into those anxious brown eyes, "He's normally stone-faced, but in that moment, he wasn't. There's no doubt in my mind
that he would've flinched somehow, or given off some other kind of tell, if he knew he'd kissed you back then. I don't think he did. He didn't ruin that for you like he ruined hugs."

Jiro licked at the side of his human's wrist, offering what comfort he could with that soft pink puppy tongue. He rested his chin over it soon after, eyes looking back.

"...I just...wish I could be sure..." Yuri sighed, struggling, "I buried all that so deep that I didn't even think of it when I was having that fight with him... Why wouldn't he mention it...? Shouldn't he have...? In that angry state, he could've used the fact that I'd agreed to go out with him as a weapon against being with you..."

"I may not like Saito much because of what happened, but I don't think he's stupid." Viktor attempted, "I think he's smart enough to know that it didn't count, and that you really didn't mean it when you said yes. I mean, you said you avoided him afterwards, and then spirited yourself away to Detroit as soon as you had the chance. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know what kind of message you're sending."

"...It...couldn't have been more than a day and a half...before I went back to Hasetsu to get away from it all." Yuri said, trying to piece together the fragments in his head, "I feel like...at the time, being around Yu-chan and her newborns was easier than being around him."

"Did you ever confide in Coach Nagisa back then?"

Yuri shook his head adamantly, "No, absolutely not. I never told anyone anything. I didn't even tell Chris...at least, I don't remember telling him... I know I asked him to help me block his contacts and clear out my email...but not that I told him anything that happened specifically."

"Do you think you would've if there was something else to say?"

"...Honestly, I'm not even sure. I never really told anyone anything. Not even Phichit-kun knows. In the years before Asahi disappeared, I don't think either of them met at all. I don't even think he knows I know Asahi. At all. I completely put Japan in the rearview mirror when I left."

"I remember you other rink-mates in Detroit saying that was the case. Getting to know you at all was really hard for them."

"I wanted things to be better... I have memories that didn't make me so anxious. Being in Michigan was like starting a brand new life. I could take the things I liked and leave all the rest behind."

"...Does being in Hasetsu now cause you trouble?"

Yuri shook his head, "No; I have you there with me. Hasetsu is our place. Asahi never touched it, and the struggle I had because of Yu-chan back then is just a weird memory now, not a bad one."

"...And I guess it helps that her kids helped get me to you." Viktor suggested, nuzzling his partner's hair again, "I'll be forever in their debt for that."

"Yeah, same." Yuri nodded, snuffling a pained breath. He drew a sharp one after that and slumped a little where he sat, "I want to believe that nothing worse happened than that hug... I just don't know how to be sure..."

"Lean on the faith you have in me." Viktor suggested, "Despite the fact that you said that you like it best when I use my hands on you, your disgust with being touched before that was driven largely by the fact that Saito invaded your space. You pushed off Tess when she tried to comfort you at that hospital, and you even recoiled from me at first. I had to earn your trust before I could touch you
without your skin crawling...and so now I'm asking you to rely on that trust, and believe what I'm saying that I know to be true about you."

Yuri looked up again.

"Saito may have hugged you, but I got all your important firsts. I'm the first person you really hugged, I'm the first person you kissed, and got kissed by. I know this because I know you. And you've said it yourself..." Viktor went on, bringing up his free hand to cup it over his husband's cheek, gently stroking his thumb across it as he gave a little Eskimo kiss, "...I know where you're at in your head, and I meet you there. There was nothing about our first kiss that ever made me think you were repulsed by some prior bad experience. You were all smiles, and you even kept your arm over me. I want nothing more than to see you smile like that, all the time. You deserve to be happy."

"And I am happy... I hope this mood of mine doesn't make it seem like I'm not..."

"Nah," Viktor said easily, brushing his thumb against his partner's lower lip, "You're just reacting to something that happened. I'm just glad you're remembering some good things, too. The Sochi Banquet, where all this craziness between us started... Those are worthwhile memories to have, even if you went into it under less than ideal circumstances. We still had fun there together. Right?"

The worried look on Yuri's face started melting a little, and he nodded again, relaxing into a forehead nuzzle. Trying not to move out of it much, Yuri turned the rest of himself towards his husband as well, lifting his legs up to drape them across the Russian's lap, and slid his hand up the man's chest, up to his neck, "I remember having a lot of fun with you, yeah." He agreed, "It was the best thing that ever happened to me, up to that point. I hope I remember more about that night. I want to remember more about how good it felt that I was able to have that time with you, without being overcome by my fears."

"The start of our whirlwind romance." Viktor teased, feeling the relief of relaxation in his partner's frame again.

Yuri nodded, taking a quick breath as he looked at his roaming hand, coming back down to his husband's chest like before. He could feel the slight tap of the heartbeat underneath, and pressed a bit harder against it. Looking up again, feeling each thump against his palm, he looked into those crystal eyes and smiled. Learning forward, he stole a quick kiss, "I don't know how you do all that... It's like you know exactly what to say to make me feel better."

"It's a far cry from that garage in China, right?" Viktor laughed nervously, "Back when I didn't have a clue how to handle you when you're upset."

"We've both come a long way since back then. Seems like such a long time ago now."

Viktor reached for his coffee mug again and lifted it up, "A toast then, to forging a happier path forward than the one we walked on to get here."

"And to getting out of this first rough year of marriage."

"Oh yeah, year two is going to be way better." He agreed, clinking their cups together as Yuri lifted his own, "And we'll start it off right with an amazing fancy second wedding."

"Kanpai."

They each took a sip from their drinks, and relaxed again in their little booth by the window.

"Oh, Yuri."
"Hm?"

"You've got a little something there..." Viktor teased, leaning forward suddenly to lick the whipped cream from his partner's nose. He huffed a quiet laugh and smiled at the younger man's stunned reaction, and turned up to the big window beside them, "...Look... It's starting to snow."
"Uuhhh..." Yuri looked up at the swarm within the supposedly 'not being used' rink.

"Hm." Viktor concurred, eyes scanning across the same.

"Is Euros supposed to be like this?"

"This one is, I guess."

Yuri sighed and shook his head, "I don't think I realized how many more people there were in the European division than the rest." He said in a more normal tone, "It's pretty stark when I see them all in one place like this... At Worlds, we all kind of blend together."

"Well, Europe had a head start in ice sport as compared to the rest of the world." Viktor pointed out, "I remember 4C's last year, and how most skaters were in the Singles competition. Hardly anyone skated in Pairs or Ice Dance. One could be forgiven for believing that there was no pair sport."

"Yeah..." Yuri agreed sullenly, but then looked from the crowded rink to his spouse, "So what do we do? We won't be able to practice now."

Viktor turned his eyes to the schedule boards on the wall behind them, and put his free hand over his mouth in contemplation. He scanned the lists and times, "...It looks like they're putting two events up at the same time. The Ladies Singles Free Skate in Hall 1, and the Pairs in Hall 3. Hall 2 is the overflow rink where people are able to do their warm-ups between Groups and ice resurfacing." He huffed with impatience and frustration, "I should've paid more attention. Not being a competitor has turned me into a slacker."

Watching the analysis percolate through Viktor's brain, Yuri stood by quietly, looking down instead to check on their pups. Makkachin sat by his human's knees and looked around normally. Jiro was a bit more dubious, sitting on one of his own human's shoes as he gaped at the mass of people at rink-side - cued skaters and their coaches - warily.

"It doesn't look like tomorrow's going to be as much of a rat race." Viktor added, "Just the Free Dance and then a bunch of technical meetings before the Exhibition. Halls 2 and 3 are being set aside entirely for Exhibition practice."

"So we're stuck without until tomorrow..."

"Are you worried?"

Yuri gave a nervous smile, "Any time I skate with you, I'm worried. I can't think of a worse thing that could happen than falling or forgetting what I'm supposed to do in the middle of a pair skate."

Viktor piffle-snorted, "You just skated your Free Program from last season for my father, after not having skated it for months. You'll be fine."

"...Ehh...sure, but...I practiced that show until I could do it in my sleep. This Exhibition...? Not so much...especially not with our roles within it switched."

"You sounded so sure of yourself before..." The Russian worried, trying to smile anyway, "I'd hate
"...I thought we'd have more time."

"I'm sure it'll be fine. I drilled my part down pretty hard yesterday morning. Whatever happens, just follow my lead." Viktor reassured, releasing the hand he held between them and slid it across his partner's back instead, "We will have time to practice tomorrow. for sure. What time we lost today was worth the time we had last night. Right?"

Returning the half-hug, Yuri nodded eagerly, "Oh, absolutely. So what should we do instead then?"

"We could go see if anyone we know is still here?"

Yuri scanned the board briefly for the Men's practice, but then shook his head, "They'd be long gone by now. Let's just text them and see if we can't meet them where they're at now. Make it easy on us."

"Hm." Viktor hummed, looking up at the quaint little cottage-like B&B, "So this is where you stayed the night before."

"Yeah, pretty cute, isn't it?" Yuri mused, "Tucked away in an area where most tourists would never think to go. It's the perfect place to get away, even though it's within walking distance of the arena."

"Well, lead the way I guess."

"Yeah, it's just around the side here." He explained, nudging his head around the corner as he started walking. Jiro and Makkachin followed closely, sniffing around the walkway as their little group moved to find the front door. Once there, Yuri paused before it to knock a few times, and they waited. They quickly heard the sound of the knob being jiggled on the other side, and locks undone, and Yuri waved, "Hi Vikki."

"Uhm..." She stammered, looking out at the pair in surprise, then down at the dogs in more surprise, "...Hi...?"

"Oh, didn't Yuri say we were coming?"

"...No."

"Viktor and Yuri are coming over." Yurio's voice hollered from inside.

The duo outside smiled nervously, but Viktora stepped back and presented the indoors, hiding the perturbed expression until they went past her. She pushed the door closed after them though and moved off, heading through the narrow hall and kitchen area before disappearing through the olive-green door into the living-room. Yurio came back through it though, veering off in the kitchen to snag a towel from the bathroom, and then came the rest of the way, handing it to Viktor as Yuri gave him their usual greeting hug.

"How'd practice go?" Yuri asked, pulling back to finish removing his jacket.

"...I fell on every jump, but whatever." The teen grumbled, looking over to where Viktor was wiping off Makkachin's paws to dry them off. Once the poodle's nubbins were cleaned, the Russian bent down to get Jiro's, and cut the two pups loose from their leashes.

"Were you in costume...?" Yuri wondered, finding a coat-hanger for his jacket, and put it in the
"No and no." The teen sighed and shrugged, "We're working on fixing my outfit right now, at any rate. My boots are fine for now."

"So then what happened?" Viktor wondered, following Makkachin towards the main room.

"Psyched myself out, I think." Yurio shrugged indignantly, "It's not the growth spurt that's causing the problem. It's my anger about it happening now."

"Yeah, I get that. It's like breaking a toe on the morning of the first event."

"Better a broken toe than a broken skull." He retorted, flicking a finger against the subtle white lines barely visible from Yuri's hairline, "It's still a goddamn miracle you pushed through that one."

Yuri just rubbed the spot, deadpanning the Russian Tiger as they went into the main space, "I don't skate on my head. It wasn't as bad as people seem to think." He grumbled, entirely unaware of the proverbial 'war flashbacks' rushing through Viktor's head as he followed behind. Eyes followed where Viktoria had moved to the spot she'd gotten up from earlier, settling in for the television again, then over to the only other person in the room, "Oh, hey Nikki."

"Hi~!" She sang back, sitting cross-legged on the couch with Yurio's costume pants lying across them. They were inside-out, and she'd dissected the high hems at the ankles with a seam-ripper tool, carefully pulling the broken threads through so as to leave the outside of the fabric as undisturbed as possible.

Yuri looked around the room as Yurio retook his spot on that same couch, "Mikhail and Minako-sensei aren't here?"

"Minako felt tired and went to take a nap." Nikki explained, starting to fold out the previously sewn-together cuff, "Papa went out to buy some stuff for tonight. He should be back soon though."

"Ah okay. So what are you guys up to in the mean-time? Just hanging out?"

Viktor scanned the room for somewhere to sit, but at least for the moment, there wasn't anywhere easy to drop into. Nikki's sewing supplies took up a good amount of space, and other than the wooden seats from the kitchen table, there were no spots available. That failing, he pressed a hand to his partner's low back and nudged his head towards Yurio's side of the couch.

"Nikki's making some last-minute adjustments to my Free Skate outfit." Yurio explained, watching the duo come closer, "Otherwise, yeah. We were told to avoid the arena until it was actually our turn to be there. Is that where you two came from?"

"Yeah. It's a zoo." Yuri answered with a glib sigh. Viktor turned around in front of him and sat down with his back to the front of the couch, and Makkachin came over quickly after, slumping down to rest against his human's side. When Viktor's hands came up to beckon, Yuri let them guide him down, and he sat between the Russian's legs, "We slept in way too late to make use of any available ice-time this morning." He explained, fidgeting until he was comfortable, and leaned back against his partner's chest, "We didn't think they'd use all three rinks at the same time."

"Or have two events taking place at the same time either." Viktor added, sliding his left hand around his partner's side while the right draped over the poodle next to him, "Did you realize this was only a four-day event, Yuri?" He wondered, tilting his head back to glance at the Tiger behind him.

"Only four? I thought it was six."
Nikki looked up from her work, "Yeah, Yuri said it was practically all week, getting the Juniors out of the way early so they could flaunt the Seniors for the ratings or something."

"Nope, only four this time. I saw it on the schedule board before we came here. Viktor shrugged and looked forward to the television again, "I was trying to figure out why the lists were so dense, and realized this thing started on Thursday rather than Tuesday like last year. It's a wonder we had any time on the ice before."

"Oh, I think I know what happened..." Yuri chimed in, looking at the breakdown on his phone as Jiro came up between his knees beyond it. He reached a free hand forward to squish the fur on the back of the pup's shoulders and neck, "They did the novice Short Programs early, but they're doing everyone for the Free together. The top 24 all skating in a unit like normal. The Ladies Singles and Pairs are starting in about a half hour, and then Men's will cap the night starting at seven."

"So what the Hell was with that ominous-sounding threat at the end of that interview? Hah? Viktor."

Yurio asked dubiously, poking his older counterpart in the back of the head for emphasis, "Saying Russia will regret firing you? What are you gonna do about it? Poison Georgi?"

Viktor just laughed at that, "Are you saying that you haven't already?"

"Of course not. If I poisoned him, I wouldn't be able to see the look on his face when I thump him tonight." The teen retorted, slumping back into his spot, "So did anyone ask you about it when you were at the rink?"

"Nah. We snuck in and snuck out again."

"Ridiculous." Yurio huffed, slouching into his corner with a knee up, "It's practically the only thing people talked about all morning."

"Really?"

"People think you're aware of something that's going to happen that no one else knows about." The teen explained, "Do you?"

"What could I know about? I'm not even in Russia anymore." Viktor huffed dismissively, "People are just making things up. I was only referring to the fact that I'm gonna keep winning on my new team, and then when I'm officially retired from competition, Yuri will keep winning, and then anyone else that I coach after that."

"What's that supposed to mean? You'll never coach me so long as I skate for the RSF?"

Both Yuri and Viktor blanched, but Viktor just smiled sweetly, "I hadn't thought about it that much. Yuri did say I wasn't allowed to coach anyone else so long as he was still competing, so..."

"I thought he only meant strangers. It's just me though."

"I meant everyone." Yuri said, turning in place to put his shoulder into the warm spot his back had just been in, and looked over to the Tiger, "Viktor's mine."

Viktor leaned forward to offer a few nibbling kisses to his husband's cheek, "I love it when you're possessive of me."

Yurio just rolled his eyes and groaned, "Dear Lord, this shit again..."

"Be glad when you see that kind of thing, Yuri." Minako's voice suddenly sounded, and the woman
herself appeared leaning in the olive-green doorway, "It means everything's okay in the World of Nikiforov."

"Doesn't stop it from being obnoxious." He grumbled, trying to focus on the television instead.

"Oh you'll understand it one day, don't you worry." The ballerina teased, going back as she waved a hand, "Hi kids."

"Minako-sensei-" Yuri called after her, scooping Jiro up against his chest as he pushed up to his feet, "I'll be right back." He said to his partner, and quickly hopped through the door. Spotting Minako at the counter, rummaging in the cupboards for tea, he closed the wood and glass door and stepped closer, into earshot of his quiet words, [...] Could I talk to you for a minute...?] He asked quietly in Japanese, hoping to obscure their conversation in any way he could.

[Yeah, of course.] She answered easily, playing along, though feeling a tingle go down her spine, [...] Is something wrong after all?]

[Not with Viktor. Him and I figured everything out and we're great again.] Yuri explained, keeping his voice down as Minako went back to making her drink. [This...actually just came up earlier, right before we left to go find brunch.]

[Oh?]

He nodded, and turned around to put his back against the counter as he listened to the sound of water being poured into the electric coffee-pot. The tea-bag was unpackaged and set into the glass pot, and placed onto the hot-plate before the machine was turned on, [Last night, Viktor took me to the Flower Ball. We had such an incredible time...and something about it felt familiar enough that I actually started to remember stuff from the Sochi Banquet.]

[Oh...like from the pictures we saw in Barcelona that one night?]

[Yeah.] He nodded, eyes down on Jiro to help ground him, [But those memories weren't the only ones that started to bubble up. I've talked to Viktor about the Sochi memories that are fading into my mind, and he's been able to confirm most of them...but there's a few that are just so outrageous that I'm embarrassed to ask. The problem I'm having though...is the memories from right before I went to Detroit.]

[...Before Detroit?] Minako echoed in confusion, [How could you forget any of that? It was a whirlwind in Hasetsu. You spent the last two weeks there before you moved. It was so crazy with the triplets being newborns that you were practically jumping onto the train to get away from it all.]

[...The stuff that happened in Hasetsu isn't the only thing I was trying to get away from though.] Yuri pointed out nervously, feeling his heart in his throat, [Was there...ever a time when I came back from Imari and you thought I was...acting weird?]

She narrowed her eyes and raised her brows at the question, [...] Weird.] She repeated, [Well, you were weird all the time after the triplets came. But to me, it was nothing unexpected. You were 17 years old and acted as I imagined most boys that age would act in that environment.]

[...So...you thought I was basically normal...?]

[Normal for you, I guess, but sure. Why?]

[I...remembered some things about Asahi that I made myself forget when I moved.] He answered hesitantly, [...] I have no one that I can ask to confirm them or tell me I made them up.]
[Why not ask Asahi himself?]

Yuri lifted his head and shot her a dubious look, but then looked away again, down to Jiro. [I can't. I don't...trust him.]

Steaming water started to sputter from the coffee-maker, and the liquid started to pour down from the empty filter basket to the little glass pot underneath, dripping onto the tea-bag.

[I've forgiven him for what he did to me in Osaka.] Yuri started again, [But...I don't trust him. I can't face him alone and ask these questions. If he said the memories were right, I'd hate him. If he said I made them up, I'd think he was lying.]

[...What are you saying you remembered?]

He drew a sharp breath, and lifted the puppy up higher onto his shoulder, [Right before I found out that I'd been accepted at the Detroit Skate Club, Asahi asked if I'd try for Tokyo with him. He said he was sure he could get a spot for me if I wanted it. I was hedging my bets at the time, just in case Detroit fell through...Tokyo would still be far enough away from Hasetsu that it'd be inconvenient to come home often. I'd have an excuse to stay away. So I told him sure, to go ahead and ask. He was...] Yuri's words tapered, and he hugged Jiro a bit closer, feeling the pup's warm belly against his neck, [Asahi got so excited that I'd said yes...that he... Uhm... He started this excited rant about all the great things we'd be able to do there together. Tokyo's amazing for all sorts of reasons, right?] [Sure.]

[We'd be away from home, away from parents and familiar faces...we could do whatever we wanted. Stay up late, sleep in late...share a dorm to reduce costs... All this stuff that I got excited about, too, and that made logical sense... But then he suddenly asked if I'd be his boyfriend and I was so caught by surprise that I said yes like I'd been saying to everything else to that point...] He said quickly, bringing his other hand up over his mouth to hide his trembling voice a little, [I was just... Back then, I was still so unsure of myself, didn't know how to speak my mind, and was...just so beaten down by the years of doubt and bullying and body-shaming by Nishigori...I feel like he did it to keep me away from Yuko, and then he got her instead...because I was too ashamed of myself to ask her...]

Minako listened quietly, brow furrowed as much from the worry for Yuri's current state of mind as she was from the tsunami of confessions.

[Being around them and the triplets was torture. Leaving was my only hope. Tokyo would've been just fine...so when Asahi threw that last wrench into the mix, it just stopped me in my tracks. I know that he hugged me... It was long and awkward, and I remember wishing he'd stop... But I just can't stop myself from wondering if anything else happened...?]

[...I see.]

[When I came back home for those two weeks, it was an effort to avoid him. I didn't...have the courage to tell him that I didn't mean it. That I had no idea that he had those feelings for me whatsoever, and that I didn't return them at all, and that I was sorry. I didn't mean to say yes; he caught me by surprise, and I didn't want to upset him when he was already so happy about all the rest. Going to Detroit was my way of escaping everything. But I just can't shake this feeling that something other than that hug happened before I got back to Yu-Topia.] He went on, raising his hand to cover his eyes instead, [I don't know if it's a memory I'm seeing, or just my anxiety making me imagine things that I hope to God aren't true...]

[I don't...] Minako started, wracking her brain for those days and weeks for any details she could
recall, [...I really don't know...but I can't think of anything that might've suggested you'd been that involved with someone. You wouldn't have been agreeing to anything, clearly, so I feel like you would've given yourself away if something had happened. You're not all that great at hiding when you're upset about things...] She said, hoping her words were reassuring even if odd to say, [I think you got out before anything else happened.]

[...That's what Viktor said, too. I just can't stop these images from going through my head though, and feeling so guilty about it, because it would change everything I think about myself...] He explained, [All the firsts that I gave to Viktor because I thought I'd never given them to anyone else...]

[I think you're worrying yourself over imagined events.] Minako attempted, leaning forward where she'd pressed her back to the counter, trying to see the front of Yuri's face, [When you came back to Hasetsu, you had the mental space to feel annoyed only by the stuff with the Nishigoris. When you got word that you'd been accepted at the Detroit Club, you were over the moon about it. I don't think I'd ever seen you as excited about anything before. There was nothing about that time that ever suggested to me that you'd been hurt or spooked.]

[You're...you're sure?]

[I've known you for almost as long as you've been alive. I like to think that between your mom and I, one of us would've noticed if you acted like something was that wrong.] She pointed out, putting a hand on the man's shoulder, [So if you don't trust the images in your head...trust your family and friends. I'm positive you came out of Imari intact. Not only because I believe from you that it's the case...but because when Viktor and I mentioned to Asahi how important it was to you that Viktor was the only person you'd ever kissed, Asahi didn't react as though he knew better. He was in such a bad place mentally at the time that I'm sure he would've said something if what we said wasn't true.]

[...Viktor mentioned the same thing. That Asahi didn't react when you guys brought that up.]

[Try not to imagine those horrible scenarios anymore, okay?] Minako advised, [Your loyalty to Viktor is so unquestionable that you're giving yourself nightmares over something you're scared may have happened. But don't be scared. We're both sure that you're in the clear on this. That awkward hug was the worst thing that happened. The rest is just your imagination getting away from you.]

[...I hope so...]

[Don't dwell on it. Go let Viktor love on you a little bit and feel better.] She recommended, turning around to find a mug in the cabinet, [Or think about Sochi some more.] She teased, offering a smile, [From what I remember about those pictures, you had a Hell of a time at that Banquet.]
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED EIGHT

The door cracked open and Yuri stepped through, glancing back over his shoulder one last time to nod to his former teacher...only to stop in his tracks.

All eyes in the room were on him.

"...What?"

As though a machine that had gotten hung up for a moment, everyone suddenly went back to 'acting natural,' leaving Yuri to deadpan them all rather severely. Sighing and shaking his head, he stepped forward, feeling the subtle swish of Jiro's tail going back and forth across his arm. He found a hand coming up for him like before, and as he did then, accepted it and descended, retaking his spot against his hubby-shaped pillow.

"Get what you needed?" Viktor wondered quietly, bending his left knee upward as it looked like Yuri would be leaning against him sideways.

"...I think...I'm at least satisfied for the time being." He answered, pressing his shoulder down to his partner's chest as he carefully avoided squishing Jiro. He drew in a long breath, looking around the room for a moment, then back to the blue eyes watching him, "I just needed a corroborating witness to my youth."

"And?"

"She said the same thing you did, almost word for word."

"But it's only enough for the time being?"

Yuri hesitated to say anything, but then just shook his head and brought a hand up against his husband's cheek, and leaned in for a kiss to soothe his frayed nerves, "In my heart, I know that what you guys are saying is right...but convincing my head to stop manufacturing false memories will take longer."

"Listening to you two whispering in the middle of a room full of people is totally not suspicious."

Yurio taunted, nudging the back of Viktor's head with his toes, "You wanna share with the class?"

Yuri's eyes moved between the two, but Viktor's were darkened. Suddenly, one lanky arm reached up and behind, grabbing the Tiger around one leg and completely yanked him off the couch. Makkachin scrambled before the teen could land on him, and Yurio flailed in stunned surprise as the room went bottom-up and his head thumped the ground.

"Wh-what the Hell, Viktor!?"

The eerie visage morphed into a sickly-sweet smile, though he didn't let go, keeping Yurio suspended by his leg, "Are your feet in the right place right now?"

"None of me is!" Yurio argued, "Let me go!"

"Stinky toes belong on the floor, not in my hair."
Yuri smiled nervously at the tangled pile of Russian Punk next to him, but then just twisted around to avoid the teen's gaze, and slid down until his arms hooked over his husband's legs and the back of his head rested on the man's sternum. Jiro spread out over his stomach, head set down on Yuri's chest as the pup tried to doze a little bit. Yuri clasped his fingers together over the small Akita's back and settled in, watching the television past his upturned knee. The cherry on top of it all was feeling Viktor's hands come sliding over his collar-bones to clasp fingers together across his chest.

Yurio grudgingly got untangled from himself and crawled back onto his place in his corner of the couch, and kept his feet curled underneath himself to avoid a second thumping. A flash of silver caught his eye and he looked aside, watching Nikki pull the last cut threads through the ankles of his show-pants.

She seemed to be aware of his attention and glanced up at him in return, "You wanna help?"

"Er... Y-yeah, sure. What should I do though?"

Yuri glanced backward to try and see what was going on, keeping silent through his observation. He followed Nikki's arm as she lifted it to point to a small object nearby.

"There's a mini iron right there. If you put a few ounces of water in it, and plug it in, it'll heat up and I can get the folds out of the fabric." She explained, unfolding the denim outward, "Whoever made these for you had your looming growth spurt in mind, and gave a lot of extra material to compensate. There's nothing I can do about the waist-band, but I think this extra length in the legs should hold you over tonight."

As Yuri had seen a dozen or more times with Yuko, Lilia on occasion, and even with Minako, Yurio took instruction from the ladies in his life in stride, and moved without complaint. The blonde hopped off the couch and grabbed the little half-sized iron, examining it to find the water access point as he headed out through the door. When the kitchen faucet turned on, Yuri tilted his head back against his husband's chest and smirked, putting one hand on the pair threaded together under his chin, "Wish he'd listen to us like that, right?"

Viktor huffled a laugh in response and nodded, "I wonder if he realizes how differently he reacts to women."

Within the kitchen, Minako was getting to take the first sips of her hot green tea. She'd scooted down the counter to make room, and was watching Yurio figure out the mini-iron out the corner of her eye. Smirking into the mug as she watched the little machine over-flow with tap-water though, she took a quick sip and reached back to turn the faucet off, "It's an iron, not a water bottle." She teased, "You'll need to drain some out."

"How come?" He wondered, one eyebrow quirked, "What's wrong with filling it up?"

"Turn it down like you're about to use it."

Confused, Yurio tipped the iron over, and saw the puddle form immediately. Through the colored transparent plastic, he watched the water bubbling out through the open hole at the front where he'd filled through. He just grumbled at it forlornly, "Well that's a stupid design. Why would someone put the hole at the front like that if all the water's just gonna come out when someone uses it?"

"To give something for people like me to laugh at." Minako answered, smirking into her drink again. Before she could take another taste though, she heard the tapping and thumping of something on the
other side of the front door, "Oh, that must be Mik." She surmised, putting the tea-mug down for a moment to go help the man in.

Yurio watched her go for a second, but then sighed at the watery mess on the counter and went looking for paper towels.

The ballerina-turned-skating-coach went around the corner and into the forward hall, hearing the fumbling noise outside even louder than before, "What in the world is he doing out there? Why doesn't he just open the-" She asked herself, reaching for the old Venetian doorknob, and plucked it open, "...door?"

"Ohhey." Mikhail greeted starkly, covered in snow, but carrying way too many bags for just himself, "Brr."

"Oh." She blanched, "Hey hun. What are you...?"

"Don't ask. Long story. Arms are tired."

Minako quickly stepped back and the hapless older man stumbled through, bringing in enough snow to make the front room seem like it had no roof. He shivered again and started trying to put the bags down, only to find his fingers not cooperating too quickly, so Minako stepped around to close the door behind him and then tried to help with the inventory, "...What did you buy? Half the grocery store?"

"Not quite. I just made the mistake thinking I was only 30 years old." He explained, feeling the straps of bags coming off his hooked fingers, "Ow ow ow..."

"Go thaw out. You're frozen solid." Minako advised, putting those first bags onto the counter in the walk-through kitchen.

By then, Yurio had finished cleaning the puddle, and waved at the older Russian on his way back to the living-room, "Hey."

"Hey kiddo." Mikhail answered, trying to keep his teeth from chattering. Slowly but surely, he peeled out of his now-damp coat and frost-coated dress shoes, and ruffled his hat-less head. Just as he turned to head into the kitchen after his lady love though, he found himself suddenly screaming instead.

Viktor's hair blew back from the sound of it, but he stayed where he was, leaning against the doorframe to the shoe-hall, blinking in surprise, "...What the-"

"Cyka blyat." Mikhail hiss-whispered, trying to stop his heart from popping out of his chest, "You scared the literal Hell out of me."

"Hi." The younger answered, sticking a pinky finger in one ear and trying to yawn to make the drums pop and feel normal again, "Man, for a Russian, you sure don't dress for the weather."

"What are you even doing over here?"

"I invited them over." Yurio called from the other room.

"'Them?'" Mikhail echoed, only to spot both Makkachin and Jiro trotting after their silver human to investigate the child-like shriek, "...There's one pup missing."

He wasn't missing long; a pair of skinny arms came threading forward around Viktor's frame, and
Yuri propped his chin on the man's shoulder, "I'm here. Hey Mik."

"Ah, there's the fourth." The elder said, peeling himself off the wall he'd flown into from his earlier fright. Both men smiled nervously at him, but he just laughed at his own misfortune and shook his head, "Sorry for my less than mature reaction. Viktor just took 10 years off the top with that one though."

Yuri smiled anyway and reached his hand forward, feeling gesture returned as Mikhail stepped closer to go past, "We'll try to give them back."

"Ah, it's all good. By all accounts, I should've been dead before I was born with the number of times someone's scared me like that." He retorted, using cold red fingers to turn the kitchen faucet back on. Though the water was cool to everyone else, to Mikhail, it felt comparatively hot, and he let his frozen digits thaw out for a little while, "So what brings you two over? I thought you'd be practicing by now, given how late you were awake at that ball last night." He commented, "Super jealous, by the way."

Viktor smirked, walking Yuri backwards across the kitchen floor in an exaggerated slow march, with hubby's feet dragging along the tiles between his legs. Their pair of dogs followed close behind, "As well you should be. It was a great time."

"The rink's a zoo." Yuri explained, holding onto his partner's frame as the man made his way through with that odd waddle, "There was nowhere for us to skate so we left. We figured we'd try to find someone to hang out with after that, and I remembered that this place was pretty close, in case you guys were here."

"We'll go tomorrow morning and pound the ice till we drop." Viktor added, trying not to trip over Makkachin as he got to the olive-green doorway again, "I went at it pretty hard yesterday morning too so I just need to catch Yuri up on the minor tweaks."

"Why tweaks?" Yuri and Mikhail asked in tandem, though Yuri more in surprise than the other.

"Well, I don't have clearance to jump right now, so there's that... Plus, Yuri and I have tried to swap spots for Death Spirals and I'm too heavy, so I had to readjust some things." Viktor explained, waiting in the doorway.

"...What's a Death Spiral...?" Mikhail wondered, brow quirked. He reached for a towel to dry his warmed and thawed hands.

"It's a pair spin where one person stays in the middle and holds the hand of the other, who goes around really low to the ice in a circle."

"Oh that thing. I thought it was that other move..." The elder said, moving off to help unpack his wares, "The one where a guy holds a lady's ankles and swings her up and down so her head gets close to the ice."

"That's a banned move." Yuri said, "Thankfully." He added, giving his partner a wry look, "At least in official competition. Some pair skaters still do them for Exhibitions though...but there's no way I'd ever get myself into something like that. I've bumped my head one time and that was enough. Don't need to add 'Viktor was holding onto my ankles at the time' to it." He said, putting up air-quotes for emphasis.

Viktor just brought his hands up to hold his husband's head still and kissed the two pale scars coming down his forehead, "No more head-bonks. Once was too many."
"So what'd you buy anyway...?" Yuri wondered, squirming to try and get a better view through his partner's arms.

"Uhhh... Some stuff." Mikhail answered vaguely, looking at the growing pile to try and find a place to start. He reached for a small package to toss at the pair, and Yuri caught it with some effort, "Those are for Yura."

"What is it?" Viktor wondered, trying to look back over his shoulder to where Yuri's hands were holding the item.

"Mole skin. Nikki's idea."

"Oh yeah, to make room in his boots." Yuri nodded, and felt the waddle-march begin again to go into the next room. He twisted in place though once they were in, and spotted the aforementioned teen ironing the untethered hems. He looked further aside though and tossed the package in Yurio's direction, "You know what to do with those, right?"

"Probably better than you do." He quipped, catching the little plastic item, "I bet I put more miles in the ballet studio than anyone in this room."

"Pfft." Yuri sputtered, "I spent more time in Minako-sensei's ballet studio than I spent at home when I was a kid."

"Spending time there doesn't mean you learned anything."

Viktor chortled a laugh, "Don't you know? Yuri learns by osmosis. Just put him in the middle of a room and he absorbs everything."

"I do ballet just fine thanks."

"You could never do the splits though even with years of trying." Minako betrayed him, looking past Mikhail where they were still putting groceries away.

"I can too do the splits!" Yuri protested, "Viktor quick, hold my leg-" He harped, spinning in place to give his partner the ankle of his right leg, "Just pull it straight up."

"You can only do it on one side and you haven't even warmed up yet." The Russian pointed out, "If I just yank your leg up, you'll start making inappropriate noises like you did in the onsen that one time..."

"But I have to prove I can do it now."

The Russian's visage suddenly took an ominous look, "Your inappropriate noises are for my ears only though."

Yuri's face went red, "...V-Viktor."

"Hey, if you two are gonna be sticking around for long, make yourselves useful." Mikhail asked, moving towards the expanding kitchen table with a pair of cutting boards and knives, "There's some stuff that needs cutting. Would you, please?"

The duo glanced from the cutting boards to each other and back again, but Yuri quickly pulled his leg down again, "Yeah, sure. We'll be right there." He said, and started nudging his partner towards the bathroom just behind. Once through the door, the table-top blue-marble sink greeted them, and Yuri turned the spigot to let the water flow, "Didn't think we'd be helping make dinner." He teased,
feeling the flow over his fingers, "It's kinda nice though."

"This is all so foreign to me." Viktor pointed out, finding a bar of lavender soap on a shelf under the basin, "I've cooked with your mom a few times but that was in an industrial kitchen. This is totally different."

Yuri glanced up, but then down again as he felt the water come up to temperature. He reached behind himself to pull the door closed to the little bathroom, "I know you're still slightly apprehensive around Mikhail, but you're doing better now, right? This visit is okay?"

Viktor nodded and reached for his partner's hands, cupping the soap between the younger man's palms and slid them under the warm water, "There's a sliver of me that's still worried he'll try lording over my life again, but he's been okay. Since it's not just him and I alone though, I think it's fine. I feel like I owe it to Yurio and the girls a little that I should try to get along with him and forgive."

Yuri lathered his skin for a moment before handing off the soapy bar, "I feel like Mik's settled down a lot since NHK and the Final. He made some poor choices back then because he got excited, but knowing how much it upset you...and then having to take his kids in suddenly...his focus is spread out more."

Viktor looked at his reflection in the mirror as he wet and lathered his hands as well, "His kids...I have so many questions but I have no idea how to ask without sounding insensitive."

"...Eh?"

"I remember how much it upset you last year...when I told you that finding out my mother had died didn't make me feel anything. I wasn't sad about it, I wasn't happy about it either...I just...didn't care." He explained, watching the soap bubbles on his skin, "But they actually had theirs, right up until the end, and yet they seem so well adjusted. Does everyone in my family have trouble connecting to their mothers or something?" He wondered, keeping his voice low against the water, "Thinking back on those really early days, I can't remember much about my grandparents, either...Mikhail and my mom's parents, that is. I don't even remember what they looked like. I feel like their existence was a footnote, kind of like how my father was just a shadow lurking in the background of my memories."

Yuri rinsed his hands and reached for a green fuzzy towel under the sink, but just listened.

"Is that just...how things always turn out for this bloodline?" Viktor went on, rolling the bar in his hands, "Do we all become estranged from one another after a while?...I feel like I have a stronger connection to your parents than I do to anyone I'm actually related to."

"My parents are steeped in the hospitality industry though... Yu-Topia didn't come out as the last man standing on luck alone." Yuri pointed out, "And there's a lot of hurt in your background. You still kind of hold a grudge against Mikhail for things that happened when you were just a kid, same as how he's trying to make up for it, even though the both of you are trying to forge a relationship in the present, as your current selves."

Viktor nodded quietly.

"...And I know you're still disappointed by how the trip to see Kon turned out. It's...hard to figure out what exactly you were hoping to get from it... Calling him 'papa' even though you didn't care if he loved you or not." Yuri went on, using a finger to nudge the soap from his partner's hands, gathered it up, and put it on the dish on the under-basin shelf, "I mean, I heard what you said you wanted, but..."
"I thought I'd see what could happen." Viktor answered, moving his hands under the warm water stream, "In a way, I thought...my father had lost everything he had before. Everything he worked his whole life for. I guess I felt sorry for him. He lost my mom and is all alone out there...would he appreciate me more if I was all he had left? Could he put aside the things he doesn't like about me if it meant getting me back in his life?" He said, reaching to turn the faucet off, and took the towel from his spouse's hands to dry his own, "It hurt a lot to be told the answer was no. It made me question my own worth for a little while. I'd achieved so much and risen so high...but in my father's eyes, it meant less than nothing. Like giving pearls to swine, you know?"

"Yeah."

"But now, I'm seeing my situation with my Uncle through similar eyes... Is what he's doing enough for me to forgive what bad happened between us? ...Then I think, 'wow, I really am just like my father, feeling so justified in my anger that I can't appreciate what's right in front of me,' and the breath catches in my throat. I don't...want to end up like him. I want to have love in my life, and family...all these things that I didn't know could be, until I had you." Viktor explained, folding the towel and casting blue eyes on his husband, "You practically dared me to want more for myself, when you said to give him a chance last year. Maybe I've been keeping him at arm's length too long..."

Yuri's brow furrowed, dubiously hopeful, "...So you're...saying you forgive him...?"

Reaching for the doorknob, Viktor pushed the panel out, and looked around, as though with new eyes.

"...There they are." Minako teased, "We thought we were going to have to send a search party after you two."

Yuri practically tip-toed out behind his partner, and looked past him to spot Mikhail on the other side of the expanding table, setting down a bowl of tomatoes, cucumbers, and onions, and an empty salad bowl to put it all into. A pair of peelers had joined the knives and cutting boards, and the elder looked up at the pair coming towards him.

"Do you guys want the chairs or nah?"

"Dunno yet." Viktor answered, stepping up to one 'station', "We'll sort it out. Thanks, Papa Mimi."

Yuri's eyes went wide, and he glanced aside to the equally-stunned older man standing nearby, who looked back at him in turn.

Mikhail just pointed at his nephew though, "Did he just-"

"Don't question it!" Yuri whispered, finding his place on the opposite side of the table, heart aflutter in his chest. He grabbed for a cucumber and a peeler, and looked down at the two items in his grasp. He couldn't help but smile.
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED NINE

The big bowl on the kitchen table slowly started to fill with the finely cut bits of the ingredients that had been set out. Small cucumbers, about the size of large pickles, and multicolored and oddly shaped tomatoes; it was eventually discovered that they were all heirloom vegetables, bought from a small local store that specialized in 'fancy' varieties of top-quality goods. It didn't take long for the wine to come out, and four glasses were poured and spread out among the eldest of the group.

"Okay, so..." Minako started nervously, "Fifteen eggs, plus three extra yolks, 750 grams flour, and a bit of salt...mix together..."

"It should be soft enough to move with gravity but not run." Mikhail explained, grating a brick of Emmenthaler nearby, "Don't be afraid to really get into it."

"Mix it good."

"Mix it good." He laughed.

"What are you guys making?" Yuri wondered, tipping a bottle of balsamic over the cut salad, splashing the dark liquid all over it while Viktor waited with two mixing spoons.

"Käsespätzle." The elder answered proudly.

"...Kaysuh-what?" Yuri echoed in confusion.

"Austrian mac 'n cheese."

"Oh neat!"

"And you bought eighteen eggs?" Viktor mused, "You weren't expecting to feed so many but it looks like you're prepared anyway."

"I meant for the eggs to last into breakfast tomorrow." Mikhail explained, tapping the cheese grater to dislodge the bits stuck to its underside, and reached for the bigger main block of cheese to cut off another smaller, easier-to-manage chunk of it, "I'll have to go buy some more at some point. Maybe tomorrow morning before everyone else starts to get up."

"Early enough to walk to a store, buy stuff, and get back? That's a lot of trouble to go through." Viktor pointed out, gently mixing the balsamic around, watching Yuri tap some salt and pepper in as he went.

"I take my responsibility as an athlete's dad very seriously." Mikhail mused, starting to grate the next chunk of pale cheese, "No processed foods, no sugary things, no soda, no 'convenience' foods that are full of salt. Just good carbs and hydrating veg. I try to avoid eating out much, too, to avoid the potential of stomach upset. It's like how the Windsors have an outright ban on anyone eating shellfish."

"...The Windsors?" Yuri repeated.

"The British Royals." Viktor explained.

"Oh." He deadpanned, "Why? What's their major problem with shellfish?"
"The potential to get sick. There's a higher likelihood of getting food poisoning from it than other foods." Mikhail answered.

Both skaters glanced at each other, but they couldn't help but chuckle a few laughs to themselves, as if reading one another's minds.

"What's so funny...?" Minako asked, looking back at them as she continued to work the noodle dough.

"Last year." Yuri explained, "When Viktor and I were in China... Phichit-kun found us at a hot-pot place and invited Celestino. He got super sick on the drunken shrimp Viktor ordered."

Mikhail blanched a little, "Drunken shrimp...? You ate them alive?"

"It was a one-time thing." He half-defended, half-reassured.

Yuri looked a bit sheepish, "...I thought it was weird, too, but...I was able to blame the alcohol they marinade in as the reason why I wouldn't eat them. I don't drink before competitions." He explained, reaching into the salad bowl to steal a piece of tomato, "I didn't want to get sick either though. I thought maybe your Royals had allergies or something."

"Nah." Mikhail shook his head and went back to cheese-grating, "No one's allowed to eat garlic in the Queen's presence either because she hates the smell of it. Onions have to be used sparingly. Meat has to be cooked medium-rare or better. She doesn't like rice or potatoes either."

"Blasphemy." Yuri huffed, "That's a crime against good taste."

"Food crimes, Mimi." Viktor added, "She's committing culinary felonies."

"I didn't make the rules." He laughed, tapping the grater again before putting the bowl of cheese bits onto a kitchen scale, "But I agree. Life in prison for those offenses." He added, reading the weight before putting the bowl aside and sticking a plate over-top to cover and protect the contents. He glanced over to Minako's side, "That looks about done, starlight. We can let it sit now."

"What's next?" She asked, pulling her hands from the mix to go wash them off, "You said that this stuff rests for about half an hour, right?"

"Yeah." He nodded, reaching for a frying pan. He set it on the cook-top and turned the heat on, "We'll melt some butter in here and then sauté a few onion slices. Just enough to brown them, then set them aside."

"How do you know how to make this stuff without looking up a recipe?" The ballerina wondered, rinsing her fingers before cutting the water off and toweling dry, "I feel like I've barely seen you cook ever, yet you seem to know this like you've made it often."

"I know a few things," He teased, grabbing a new cutting board and knife before returning to the ingredients pile to grab an onion, "This is really easy. I've made it for the kids in the past. Cheese, flour, eggs, butter, onions, done...and those last two ingredients are optional extras."

Minako slid her rings back into place, "What else do you know how to make?"

The elder Russian gave a sly look, "Get me a panini grill, and I make a mean chipotle grilled cheese sandwich."

"As loaded as you are, I'm surprised you don't have a personal chef." Viktor huffed, taking a sip
from his wine glass as Yuri wandered around the table to his side, "You seem to go without a lot of things that most of us peasants assume rich people have by default."

"I guess so." Mikhail shrugged, slicing up rings of onion from the bulb, watching butter starting to melt in the pan, "I have some things, scattered across the face of this earth, but not much by the metric of other people in my income bracket. I guess everything just happened so fast that I never really adjusted. I still act like a guy who only makes a few million every year."

"...It is a really strange thing to think about." Viktor commented into his wine glass before taking a sip. His eyes went over to follow Yuri coming around the side of the table towards him, "When I last saw you as a kid, you were just as poor as the rest of us, and knowing how old everyone was when everything happened...you must've been no older than 34 when you left, cuz mom was 29 when she had me. Then you somehow had time to float around in the Ukraine for a while, and then get to Canada, where everything took off somehow?"

"Yeah, it was a whirlwind of lucky breaks and lightning striking twice. Right place, right time sort of stuff." Mikhail agreed, using the knife to help lift up the onion slices and dropped them into the pan to start sizzling and browning, "I started my way a lot sooner than when I left though. Your father and I were both stuck joining the Soviet army back when we were young, even though I did my time way sooner than he did. Part of my early instruction was at the Saint Petersburg Military Engineering-Technical University, or VITU for short in Russian. I carried that on when I got back home and started working in that god-awful steel mill. It wasn't as bad back then, since it was a busy place and people respected it, but that was before the Union collapsed and everything went to shit."

"...I see."

"My major was in construction mechanization, and I was good at it." Mikhail went on, watching the onions browning in the butter, and he stirred them around frequently with a flat-tipped wooden spoon, "When I did eventually leave, I already had nearly a decade of experience building and installing heavy machinery at big refineries. The one by our little town wasn't the only one I worked on. It was the only one that survived until now though."

"So what did you do in the Ukraine then...?" Viktor wondered, holding Yuri against himself as he slouched in his seat, "I'm guessing you weren't there too long."

"Nah. Two years, then I moved on. It was lousy there." Mikhail confirmed, reaching across the counter for some paper towels and made a small towel with a few sheets stacked together, and tipped the pan over them to dump the caramelized onions, "I got there in '91 or '92, in the aftermath of the Ukrainian declaration of independence from Russia. It was a complete shit-show out there though. I tried for a long time to get established but I could never really get a foot-hold. The economy was collapsing like a star and corruption was rampant. One of the buildings I lived in even burned to the ground, and I lost everything. If it hadn't been for the Canadians being involved with Ukraine at the time, I may have been stuck. But...after independence, the Canadians were there trying to free Ukrainian scholarship from Soviet orthodoxy, and a bunch of Ukrainians went to study in Canada because of it. I ended up going, too, which is why I ended up there."

Viktor looked down in thought, pressing his mouth to Yuri's shoulder where the younger man stood in front of him, "...So I guess you were already in Canada when you said you tried to come back for me. I'd just turned 11 when my father made me burn the skates, and you said you'd come just a few weeks after that."

"Yeah, that was in the late spring of '99." The elder confirmed, reaching for his wine glass, "I was pretty well established by then. My then-wife, Mylene, was pretty pissed at me for that trip though. Viktoria was only 2 months old at that point and Mylene didn't want to be left alone. I promised her
I'd only be gone for the weekend, and I came back as expected...but the second plane ticket I had for the ride back went unused."

Viktor's brow furrowed slightly. Yuri reached a hand up to pat the man's head gently.

"I hadn't even told Mylene what my plan was. I didn't want to give her the chance to tell me no." Mikhail admitted sullenly, swirling the white wine around in his hand, "I'd insisted on giving Viktoria your name, and then I'd gotten the chance to actually bring you home with me...two Viktors under the same roof... It would've been crazy." He shook his head and took a sip, "Since we also had Sergio and he was only barely a year old by then. Maybe it would've been too much to ask of her, to care for an older displaced kid who didn't speak a lick of English and had just come out of a rough situation, as well as two young babies. But...I thought we could manage..."

"Didn't you help with anything?" Minako deadpanned him.

"Of course I did." He answered, giving her the same look back, "I loved being a dad. I still had my day-job to go to, but I was very active and attentive when I got home every night. By the time I had the option of being a stay-at-home dad, Nikki was a toddler, and I made the most of it. It was all I could do to stop myself from thinking about what Viktor's fate had been. It would be more than another decade though before I'd find out what had really happened...and it'd only be after the divorce that the business took off. It's amazing how things start to happen when you have nothing else to do." He said, though sadly, "...I'd really rather have been with my kids. The money meant nothing when it was just me. It...was a pretty hollow consolation prize for having lost everything else."

"...I guess I can relate to that." Viktor agreed, hugging Yuri a little tighter, "After Sophia dropped me like a bad habit, I had nothing to do but focus on the skating...and as much as that focus helped me with my sport, it was pretty lonely. Dropping everything to go to Hasetsu was easy because of it. I felt like I'd gotten something back that I'd lost for a long time."

"And having it is so important-"

"...That you'll do anything to get it, even putting your old life on hold for a year to work on it." Viktor finished, nodding behind his husband's shoulder, "I guess I understand you a little better. We really do have a lot in common."

"More in common than you had with Kon." Yuri pointed out, looking back, "Maybe this is how things were meant to be all along."

Viktor held for a moment, but then loosened his arms and leaned back in his seat, sipping at his wine again, "...I guess so."

"You guess so?" Yuri quipped, turning in place and leaning back against the edge of the table, "You came out of the bathroom calling him Papa Mimi, after stonewalling him for weeks. The last time you called him Papa, it was only a joke and he nearly ran us off the road because of it."

"Yeah you can't tease me with stuff like that." Mikhail added, staring over the rim of his wine glass at the two, "Not after hearing all the stuff Kon brought up in Sapporo."

Minako looked around in confusion, "What are you guys talking about? What did he say in Sapporo? When did he say it?"

Viktor drew an uncomfortable breath, but Yuri seemed more at ease, "It was when I called him and Mik into the back hall during the Exhibition. I wanted to dispel all the tension so Viktor would skate
like he used to, rather than being held back by his nerves, and I intended to do it by confronting Kon about the elephant in the room...me."

"Oh." The ballerina blanched, cheek twitching slightly under one eye, "...I can't even imagine how that conversation went."

"It actually went well, all things considered...but it brought up a lot of stuff I hadn't even thought of." Yuri explained, sliding his left hand over his husband's knee, and rubbed his thumb against it, "It turned into this big beef that Kon actually had with Mik all along."

"...Define 'beef.'" She replied, eyes going towards the nervous man standing next to her.

"...It's because of how much time I spent with Viktor when he was a young kid." Mikhail started to explain, "Kon apparently felt like I'd tried to steal Viktor from him."

"...Oh, that stuff." Minako sighed.

"Kon made him admit it in front of all of us." Yuri added, "It was pretty tense."

"Well, if Kon had actually acted like he gave a damn, maybe it wouldn't have been so easy to slip in." Mikhail pointed out, "That bear didn't have a fatherly bone in his body. I'm not even surprised that Viktor followed me around like he did back then. I was the only person who paid him any attention besides his mother, so what was I supposed to do? Push him away?"

"You don't have to defend yourself to us, hun." Minako hushed, "We know what kind of person you are. You wanted to do the right thing."

"He was such a cute and endearing little kid, too." He went on, heaving a sigh and shaking his head, "I could never understand why Kon was so emotionally unavailable. He doted on Tat, but Viktor got nothing, and that poor kid was starving for affection." He explained, his tone sounding frustrated, "There were so many times when Vik was just a baby where Tat would have to come find me because Kon just wouldn't help her with anything. Apparently he thought doing the work of caring for an infant was beneath him...it was a woman's job. His job was to provide for them, to put food on the table and a roof over their heads, not to change diapers or give baths. But...Tat needed a break sometimes, and she knew she could always come to me, and she did. Frequently. I'll bet that's part of where those stupid rumors came from, about how Vik was actually mine, because Tat and I raised Viktor together more than Kon did. A big chunk of me wanted to be, after all the hours I'd put in...Kon just never stepped up."

"Well, he told me himself to bugger off in the end, so I guess it was a long time coming." Viktor sighed, "Even if he wouldn't tell me to my face."

"...I really don't know that there was anything you could've done to win him over." Mikhail offered, "You looked and acted nothing like him. He even told me at NHK that, up until that moment after the medaling ceremony when you told him all the stuff you'd done, he basically saw you as if you were me, and he resented the shit out of you for it. It wasn't until you'd actually shown him what you're like when you're happy that he could comprehend that you were someone else."

Yuri's brow furrowed, "Wow..."

"...Kon wanted a bear cub, not a wolf pup." Mikhail continued, voice a little quieter as he lowered his gaze towards the ground, "Someone he could turn into a little version of himself. Instead, he got a mini-me; a kid who, in all but name, is a Rozovsky. The day that your brown baby-hair turned silver, the change in Kon's demeanor took a palpable turn. It's like he thought you came out wrong."
The room was quiet for a moment, save for the soft sound of the television from the other room.

Viktor shook his head and sighed, "I'm not surprised by that, honestly." He said grimly, "My father reminded me often that he valued strength above everything else...and I was just this skinny little wimpy kid. Considering how all your kids came out though, I doubt Konstantin would've ever gotten an offspring that took on his traits. Those Rozovsky genes are stronger than his, and mom was exactly the same as you."

"...And I think he understood that, on some level, even if he didn't say so."

"He sort-of did, once..." Viktor corrected, "...That time we all went out there. When I was alone with him in front of mom's headstone. He touched my face and said I looked just like her."

"Hm... Yeah. That's as close as you'll probably ever get."

"...Water under the bridge now." Viktor shrugged, taking another sip from his drink, "I hope he's happy with whatever he thinks he has. He probably thinks that he's effectively surrendered me to you, after all these years, as though admitting that you won."

Mikhail looked aside to Minako briefly, but then shook his head, "You don't belong to me, Viktor. You never did."

"I hope not." Yuri quipped, pulling up his partner's right arm, "It'd be awkward to have to explain why his matching ring is on my hand."

In rare fashion, Viktor's cheeks gained some color, but he smiled and buried his face against his partner's side, feeling an arm go behind his shoulders to return the hug.

"If you want to keep calling me Papa Mimi though..." The elder added, "I could be convinced to play the part."

"...Well, I didn't say it to torment you." Viktor pointed out, looking up from the odd tangle of a hug he'd gotten into, "I think, maybe, you were that person to me all along. It just...sucks that you got forced out when you did. There were a lot of times growing up that I needed you."

"I'm not going to leave again, that I can promise." He answered easily, "There's finally no more obstacles standing between me and the people I care about. I feel like I have a lot to make up for and I intend to do just that."

"Just don't get carried away. Again."

Mikhail deadpanned forward, and blew bubbles into his wine, much to Minako and Yuri's amusement.
"Hee... I'm feeling tipsy already..." Viktor laugh-whined, holding to his partner's shoulder for the stability, "...I shouldn't be drinking before eating..."

"That's some strong wine." Yuri agreed, face flushed from it all, "Maybe we should sit somewhere before we fall over."

"I thought we were sitting."

"You only have half a butt-cheek clinging to the edge of a high wooden stool." Yuri explained, reaching a wobbly hand towards the nearby doorframe, though he missed grabbing it the first time. Behind him, he could hear the hazy, immature laugh of his husband.

"Hehehe...you're talking about my butt."

"Only half of it." Yuri teasingly corrected, reaching one hand back towards the man, "Come along, husband, bring it this way."

Leaving the empty wine glasses on the table, Viktor took the offered hand and went after his spouse, letting Yuri guide him into the next room and around the heavy wooden table in the middle of it. They passed Viktoria in the single-person recliner, eyes on Yurio where he clung territorially to his corner of the couch.

"We're gonna sit." Yuri warned mischievously, "Better look out."

"Don't you even dare. I was here first."

"We're gonna sit..."

"Why don't you find another spot!?" The teen barked, clinging to the cushions.

"Viktoria's spot is too small for us both and Nikki has sharp-pointy things. So...we're gonna sit...here."

"NRRRGGGHHHH!" Yurio protested, using both feet against Viktor's arse to keep him from lowering down much further, "THIS IS...MY...SPO-hrk..."

Nikki couldn't help but chortle a laugh under her breath, pulling up the half-sewn pants to hide her face. All she could see under the pile of skaters was Yurio's twitching right hand and leg.

"It's a bit bumpy here, my love." Viktor pouted comically, "I think I sat on something."

Yurio hollered and squirmed, but his voice was muffled by his older counterpart's bulky frame. Viktor eventually leaned to one side and Yurio yanked himself free, but his spot was then gone, and he could only watch in annoyance as the older figure twisted in place to put his back into the corner, and Yuri came down to sit against him, both facing towards the flat-screen just past Nikki. Yurio could do little but sit indignantly, squished between the older skaters' upturned legs, and a perceived force-field around Nikki's workspace.

"I guess all that stuff you guys were talking about explains why I'd never heard of you until this year." The silver teen suddenly commented, trying to go back to her task, sewing zigzag patterns into
the new, lower hem of the pant-legs, "All the big stuff happened before I was even born."

Viktor and Yuri, despite their buzzed haze, both looked a bit surprised to hear those words. But, a few seconds later, they both relaxed.

"So since papa was never able to spring you from Russia, what did happen to you?" She wondered further, "...I thought I heard something about your dad burning yo-"

"He was never my dad." Viktor corrected sharply, "That's a title he never earned."

"Oh...uhm..." Nikki stammered, still a bit surprised by the interruption, "...Your...father then?"

"Let's just stick with his name," Yuri suggested, "Call him Kon."

"...R-Right..."

Viktor shook his head, pushing up against the couch's arm-rest to sit a bit higher against it, and returned his hands around his partner's skinny waist to clasp his fingers over it, "He made me burn my skate...the ones my old coach, Yakov, had gotten me earlier that winter." He explained, still feeling the sting of it, "He hated skating as much as a person could hate something, and it was pretty hard when he found out my mom was helping me do it in secret. Papa Mimi said my mom had called him soon after it happened, and then he came a few weeks later, apparently looking to take me away from that place. I wasn't there to see it, so I didn't believe it at first. I spent as much time as I could away from home after the incident, using my tank playground to keep me occupied in the wood."

"...Tank...playground?" Nikki echoed skeptically.

"We don't know how long they were there for," Yuri explained, "There were trees and roots growing through them...so maybe since World War 2. We were out there last winter for something, and I got to see the tanks myself... Viktor actually found an old backpack in one, that he'd hidden away with his first skates as a kid. They turned out to be the ones Kon used when he was young. They were these bent old antiques that you tie to your shoes."

"Oh..."

"...We...actually also found the skates that Kon had forced Viktor to burn." Yuri went on, clapping one hand over where his partner's were folded together against his side, "They were burnt beyond use, having been in that old wood-stove for some fifteen years. Kon said he didn't realize they were still in there, but I doubt that."

"Yeah..." Viktor agreed, "There's no way he could've not known they were in there."

"Seriously..." Yuri nodded quietly.

"We tried to put the whole thing to rest by burying those old burnt blades in the woods by those tanks. My father said he'd plant one of mom's rose bushes on top of them once the ground thawed out and the roots could take hold of something. Whether he does or not...I doubt I'll ever know. I won't ever be going back there."

Yuri had nothing to say against it. He just nodded again, feeling the latent despair that had followed them out of Russia, and the relief that had bound it to the border.

"You were twelve when Yakov got you onto the team." Yurio finally chimed in, trying to get a little comfortable in his small wedge of the couch, and leaned against the upturned knees Yuri had propped up near to him. Putting one elbow across them, he turned to look at Viktor, "Right?"
"Yeah." He answered simply, "The skating season had already ended when my father made me burn those boots, and so when the next one rolled around, Yakov noticed I wasn't coming to the rink like before. He came to our house to find out what was going on...and the next thing he knew, he was my new guardian and we were driving back to St. Petersburg. I didn't go back again until last year when my mom died."

"Oh... I'm sorry..." Nikki said quietly.

"So you lived with him back then?" Yurio wondered, "Does that mean you lived with Lilia, too?"

"Yakov had just finished his split from her, so his house was pretty empty. Might be the only reason he was able to take me in at the time." Viktor explained, "I'm entirely not sure how things would've worked out if she'd still been there."

"If she was the same back then as she is now, probably the same, but with more arguing." The teen huffed, "She means well but she's pretty bossy; an absolute slave-driver. Living with her was like being in a military barracks, I swear."

"You wouldn't know a military barracks if one dropped from the sky and bit you in the butt."

Mikhail teased, leaning against the doorframe, "Lilia was a Saint compared to the sergeants and drill-masters I dealt with."

"It was regimented as Hell!" Yurio protested.

"Oh no, structure!" The elder teased and laughed, lifting his half-drained wine glass to his lips, "How horrible!"

The Tiger was shrinking into a tiny kitten, and he sulked where he leaned against his friend's knees, laughter coming at him from most sides of the room.

"Hun come back, something's weird." Minako's voice called, and the snickering elder Russian turned back find her. What he found was Minako standing over a pot of semi-boiling water with what looked like a big-holed cheese-grater across the top, and a square-shaped porcelain box on top, full of dough. She just gestured at it, "You said this stuff would go down and get cut into bits, but...it's not even doing it now. It'll just smear back and forth without making the little noodle-dumpling things."

Mikhail blinked at her, then at the pot and spätzle-maker above it, and with one finger, nudged the square holder forward. The dough lowered down by an inch in the dish by the time it slid to the other side of the grater, and Mikhail could almost hear the click in his partner's head.

"Okay you can go away now." She said instead, nudging him back, "Go, be gone. Nothing to see here."

He chortled quietly into his wine, and rubbed the ballerina's back before he returned to the doorway. Jade eyes went down to where it looked like Nikkita had finished her work finally, as she held up the show-pants and shook them out.

"Here," She started, turning to hand them over to the kitten next to her, "See if these come down far enough."

Yurio perked up and looked the pants over, "...Why zigzags?"

"Zigzag stitches offer flexibility in material that stretches. If I did just a straight line across, the thread would either break or the cuff would have no give. Go, go! If I have to make adjustments, I don't
have lots of time to do them!"

Yurio hopped off the couch and darted around the table as told, squeezing past Mikhail in the doorway to find the bathroom just around the corner. The light clicked on and the door closed behind him.

Once gone, Nikki stretched her legs out and yawned, then started putting her supplies onto the big wooden table in front of the couch. She leaned back against the couch and looked at the television briefly, watching a few seconds of some random program her sister had found, but then rolled her head back the other way to look at the duo in the opposite corner, "What if you were a girl instead?" She blurted unexpectedly, staring at her cousin.

Viktor just gaped at her, "...If...I was a girl instead?" He repeated, "There were a lot of things that would've been different if I had been. What difference does it make?"

"Well..." Nikki looked up again, "When Kon came to Nationals with us, the way he acted towards Vikki and me was super different from how he treated papa or even Yuri. Right?" She looked towards her sister, who had been entirely silent to that point.

"Huh?"

"Kon, in Russia. He was really sweet and protective towards us."

"...I guess so."

"Yeah, he even picked us up and tried to shield us from the snowstorm." Nikki went on, "I was a bit nervous around him at first because of what I'd heard about him, but he was really nice."

"And serial killers always turn out to be the guy no one suspected." Mikhail huffed, "Never judge someone based solely on how they treat you when you're in public. Everyone has their dark side, that they only show to certain people or in certain places."

Nikki just gave that naive young teenaged look, "What's your dark side?"

"Business Mode." Viktoria answered for him, rising up from her chair as though impatient or frustrated, "But I don't think you've seen it."

"...Business Mode?" Nikki and Viktor echoed in tandem, turning their eyes towards the nervous-looking figure in the doorway, "What's that?"

Mikhail coughed, "Erm...well. It's when I stop being fun?"

Viktor deadpanned him, "Oh, like the time you argued with me about the car keys?"

The elder grumbled, "I wasn't arguing. You being difficult about something dumb and I was trying to get you to be reasonable."

"That's Business Mode for sure." Viktoria clarified, breaking up the tension, "Be glad he didn't do the hair-thing, too, cuz then he's really insufferable."

"...Hair-thing?" Everyone echoed back at her.

Pale hands pressed against Mikhail's frame to push him back into the kitchen area, just as Yurio came back through with the new pants on. Viktoria just kept moving until she was through as well and disappeared from sight, leaving the living-room in an awkward silence, save for the television.
Yurio blinked open doorway, pointing at it as he looked back at his friends.

They both shrugged in confusion, "The pants look good though."

He looked down towards his feet and examined how the hem went past his heel, bunching up just under it, "Yeah, this'll work. ...I guess I'll just...sit in them for a bit..." He said, ambling slowly towards the seat Viktoria had abandoned.

"Does this t.v. get the channel showing the event?" Yuri wondered, leaning far aside for the remote control, "I wanna see how Mila and Sara do."

Within the kitchen, Viktoria went up to the stove to see what the food-status was, and looked into the big pot to see Minako stirring the still-melting cheese shreds, "How long? I'm starving."

"Just a few more minutes. You wanna help?" Mikhail answered, setting his now-empty wine-glass down before reaching to open a nearby cabinet.

The teen glanced out past the door, hearing the sound of what could only be figure skating coming back through from the television, "...Yeah, may as well."

"You okay?" The elder wondered quietly, starting to pull small bowls down, "You did the thing again."

"What, walking?"

"...In so many words."

Viktoria took the first stack of bowls and moved over to the kitchen table, reaching for one of the salad spoons that had been left next to the big bowl, "I guess I'm just curious."

"What about?"

"Why you skipped the whole section of your life about how you met mom and why you even married her." She answered, stirring the salad idly, pulling up the balsamic that had settled on the bottom, "It's important, isn't it?"

Mikhail got a nervous tingle in his gut, and he glanced over at Minako briefly before going back to the table with the last few bowls, "Of course it is...but it's not always the best idea to talk about old love in front of new love."

"So mom's just off limits now..."

"She's not. If you want to talk about her, we can."

Viktoria was quiet for a moment, but unstacked the first bowl and fished out the first spoonful of the salad into it, "...I'm not even sure what to ask now. You skipped over her so fast that it's like you didn't want to bring it up anyway."

"If you're asking whether or not I'm bitter, then sure, I'm super bitter." He explained, "She kept you guys away from me, like she held you hostage. I missed out on some of the best years of your young lives, and the only reason I got you back was because she died. That's miserable."

"She told us that you didn't want to be there."

"...Well, that's a crock if I ever heard one." He huffed indignantly, "Did I ever give you the impression that what she said about me was true?"
The teen hesitated, but then went around her father's back to push the door closed to the living-room. With her hand still on the olive-green panel, she looked back, "I'm not sure what to believe from her. The stuff she said made sense, but...it was like finding two puzzle pieces that seem to fit together at first, but the further you go, you realize they don't fit at all and you have to reexamine everything."

"...You were really young. Not even ten yet. Your mom changed a lot, even to me, and I knew what was going on."

Viktoria raised her right hand and pushed a few colored strands of her silver hair over her ear, "...It really sucked... Sergio was so attached to her, and mad at you for leaving. Nikki didn't know better; she was too young to understand. But there I was, in the middle...you were gone and mom was losing her mind... And all those years, I wished you were around, and then when you finally came, you brought other people with you." She said quietly, looking at the salad in that one little bowl that she'd put together, "...But now I hear all this stuff about how desperate you were to get Viktor...how you lied to mom, went to Russia to get him...all these things you were ready to do to bring him back with you, and it doesn't seem like you fought even half that hard for us..."

"I can tell you everything you want to know." Mikhail said, pulling his daughter into a hug, "But there's a lot to say, and I wouldn't be doing you any favors to start now, only to stop in 30 seconds because dinner's ready and then we have to go. Can I get a rain-check until after Yuri's thing is done? Then we can talk until we're blue in the face."

"...Promise?"

"Yeah absolutely. We'll make it a date." He nodded eagerly, and pat the teen's shoulder, "Let's finish serving this stuff up then. It's best when it's fresh."
Sorry for the delay. I had a pretty acute case of writer's block about halfway through this chapter and couldn't think of what to do. I'm still a bit unsure what to write so I apologize if the second half of the chapter seems kind of aimless. I may alter it later.

CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED ELEVEN

Staring at the closed door, Nikki tilted her head, first out of curiosity, then out of impatience. With sewing box in one hand and the mini-iron - now cooled - in the other, she put her knuckles to her hips and banged her forehead against the textured translucent glass, "Augh, what are you guys doing in there!"

"Just come in." Mikhail hollered back, voice muffled by the door.

Finagling her things to one arm, the youngest of the group managed to get her fingers around the handle, pull it down, and pulled the door open. The smell of the food was like a Heaven Send to an empty stomach, but Nikki was on a mission, and in nearly comical fashion, grabbed the door from the inside to pull it closed again.

When the latch clicked, three pairs of eyes glanced at each other.

"...Is it always like this?" Yuri asked, stretching his legs out before rolling over where he was, going chest-down on his partner's larger frame. His feet flopped against the other arm-rest, and he let his right arm dangle over the edge of the couch, the left curled up in the wedge of space between Viktor's side and the seat-cushion.

Yurio gawked at him, "Always like what?"

"Where it seems like Viktoria is bothered about something."

The teen snorted a breath and stared at the door, "She hardly ever talks. No one seems to think it's weird though so it must not be new. I don't get it though. It's like she's always waiting for someone else to ask her what's wrong because she won't speak up on her own."

With fingers nearly dragging on the floor, Yuri waggled them until Jiro came up, and rubbed that warm round puppy belly when the little Akita flopped onto his back. Makkachin was quick to occupy the newly-vacated space on the couch, too, lying down right on top of Yuri's legs, though he slipped between them like sand through a sieve. Satisfied with the 'this space was made for me' sort of snugness, the poodle repurposed one of the man's thighs as a pillow and looked quite pleased about it. Yuri looked back over his shoulder at the brown fluff, smiled, and set his head back down onto his partner's chest, feeling a hug come up under his arms and around his back. He closed his eyes and hummed a happy sigh, "This is the best."

"You two don't make any sense at all."

"Why's that?" Viktor wondered, settling into the cuddle, stretching his own long legs out.
"All this..." The teen started gesturing at them, "...This. Don't you ever get tired of crawling all over each other?"

"Nope."

"You don't know what it's like cuz you've never let anyone get that close to you." Yuri explained, retracting his arms until he could slide his hands into the small space under Viktor's back where the arm-rest rose from the seats, and hugged tightly, "...There was once a time when I couldn't stand the idea of anyone touching me. Now I think it's great...but only with Viktor."

Jiro whined a bit as he scrambled back up to his puppy nubbins, rising up onto his back paws to poke at the arm that had just abandoned him. Viktor reached down to scoop the pup up and deposited him onto Yuri's back, only for Jiro to roll into the U-shaped gap between Yuri's side, Viktor's hip, and the back of the couch. Little legs flailed for a moment, but Jiro settled there soon enough, sniffing at Makkachin's floppy ears when the poodle looked over to investigate.

"The correct terminology for this sort of thing is a 'cuddle pile.'" Viktor explained, returning his arm to the snuggly hug around his smaller partner, "It's highly technical."

"A 20-second hug reduces the impact of stress and lowers blood pressure." Yuri affirmed, "A 10-second hug can ease depression and fatigue, and even fight infection by boosting the immune system. But it only works if it's with someone you trust. If you hug a stranger that long, it just gets awkward."

"Mrph..." Yurio grumbled, leaning back into his single-person seat, dropping the side of his jaw into his palm.

Yuri turned his face up to spot the irritated Kitten, "Babies who don't get affectionate touch can actually die, even if they get all their other needs met. Maybe you didn't get enough hugs when you were really young."

Yurio just piffle-grumbled into his hand and looked the other way.

"You should try hugging your sisters more."

"Pfft."

"I know Nikki hugged you at the Final before our triple-skate...maybe she cou-

"I don't need more hugs." Yurio argued.

Yuri just smiled innocently, "I can see from here that your Anger Organ is starting to fill up again...though it has been at historic lows... I don't think my hugs are enough."

Before the Russian Punk had a chance to retort again, ears caught the sound of the kitchen door jiggling and clicking, and finally pushed into the room, "Dinner tiiiime~!"

Dog heads popped up immediately, and paws scrambled for the hardwood to see what was being brought in. Mikhail came in first, carrying a wide wooden tray with stacked plates and bowls, followed by Viktoria with another tray with the series of smaller salad bowls, and napkin-rolled utensils. Minako came third, pausing in the doorway briefly to look back for the fourth member of their little group, and stepped aside to let Nikki through before coming in after her.

"Right, so there really aren't enough proper spots to sit at the table with so many people, but I think we're safe enough out here." The elder explained, watching as Yuri quickly tried to move things out
of the way on the big coffee table to make room, "Ah, thanks."

Viktor pushed up into the corner of the couch to sit normally, and dragged his legs off the edge. He drew in a breath, smelling the aromas wafting through the room, but it was his partner who spoke the words on the tip of his tongue.

"Smells really good."

"The best food is the kind we make together."

Yurio sunk into his chair a little bit, but his meekishness didn't go unnoticed.

"You're on clean-up duty." Mikhail teased, handing him the first bowl with a plate covering the top, "Or would you rather change first?"

The Tiger blinked, but shook his head, and took the offered bowl, watching quietly as everyone else got their own in turn. The smaller salad bowls were spread out on top of the long coffee-table. By the time everyone had their share, Nikki and Viktoria had squished onto the couch, and the two chairs from the kitchen had been brought in for the two oldest members of the group. Everyone got as close to the coffee-table as they could.

"I know this is nothing compared to the fancy stuff you're used to at Yu-Topia, but I hope this at least tastes alright." Mikhail said, taking the small plate off the top of his käsespätzle bowl, and watched the steam rise from the cheesy dish.

Everyone else followed suit and unlidded their own, breathing in the smell of the afternoon's efforts. Even the two pups got their own small portions as treats.

"Bon appétit."

The snowfall that had begun earlier hadn't let up, leaving a good few inches on the ground already, fluffy and light. Makkachin leapt right out the door and into the flurry, jumping in the air to try catching big chunks with each pass. Jiro was content to try and pin each snowflake down as they landed, only to lift his paws, unable to find the bit he'd squashed. Both canines looked up curiously when the herd of humans went by, like a procession of shadows through the white swirl, and pranced through the cold to catch up.

Shoes moving through the snow weren't quite like the crunches on hard-pack, but more like a wet, velveteen squish. A line soon formed, moving away from the door as it was locked behind them. Yurio took the lead, the ends of his twin-tailed hat swaying behind him with each step. Trailing behind him, his two 'siblings,' each with their phones out as they walked elbow to elbow. Behind them in turn, the SkateHusbands with their pups, and at the back, the proverbial - and in some cases, literal - parents of the whole group.

"You've been strangely quiet for the last hour or so," Yuri commented, keeping his voice low as they walked through the new snow.

"We were eating." Viktor answered with a slight shrug, rubbing his thumb across his partner's where he had both their hands in his coat pocket.

"As if having your mouth full has ever stopped you from talking." Yuri teased. He felt the fingers come away from his own as the Russian's hand withdrew, finding its way up behind his back to rest on his shoulder, pulling him inward.
"Hopefully you won't suddenly knock me in the head again if it happens in the future."

He just offered an innocent smile, keeping his fingers hooked into that pocket, "It was entirely unintentional. ...But seriously, you have been pretty quiet."

Viktor leaned back up to his regular height, and loosened the tight grip he had on his spouse's shoulder, "I've just been thinking."

"What about?"

Slate eyes scanned the trio ahead of them, being aware of the pair behind them without needing to look, "...I haven't quite figured that out yet."

Yuri made a face, "...Is that good or bad?"

"Neither?" The Russian answered, his uncertainty confusing even himself, "I'm not really sure. I feel like my brain just dumped out a puzzle box, and every piece is a different thought. I'm working on putting it together into something that makes sense."

"...Was it because of what I said about hugs...?" Yuri offered, "That's what I was talking about when I last remember you saying anything."

"Mmhh..."

Yuri pulled his hand out of his partner's pocket and slid that arm behind the man's back, "I'll just let you keep thinking about it then. You'll tell me when you sort it out."

"Yeah..."

The sun had already been low in the sky when the group left to walk to the arena, but the quickly sinking winter sky had gone entirely black by the time they'd arrived. Snow still fell all around, blanketing the city in a thick white glaze, and raising a fog that turned everything into a greyish, out-of-focus soup. Lights twinkled through windows and on the tops of lamp posts, giving the night a sort of enchanted, mysterious ambiance.

Arriving at the arena felt much like it had the night before, with a large crowd loitering on the peninsula of intersecting streets. Yurio's distinctive and colorful hat had gotten the attention of the people, and the usual excited cheering and flashes of cameras followed him to the participant's entryway, where his own little fanclub was parked and waiting for him. The blonde paused when he spotted their signs from a slight distance, before they'd caught sight of him in turn, and let out a slightly annoyed sigh.

"What's the matter? I thought you were used to them." Nikki wondered, coming up on his side, "Yuri?"

"...I've thought for a long time that they were kind of annoying." He admitted, his voice a slight monotone, "They've been following me to all the competitions they could for a few years now. Back when I first noticed them, I felt entitled to their praise...because I was younger and dumb and pretty arrogant. I always kept my distance though. They were part of the audience, and I was part of the event...always a wall between us, even when I walked by them at the airport or in the hotels, and places like this."

"...But now...it's different?"
"I can't help but wonder if they'll still be around when I get to the other side of this physical change I'm starting on." He admitted quietly, "Or if I'll wind up like many of those child stars who suddenly get unpopular when they become adults."

"Well, if they stop liking you because you've grown up, then they aren't really fans, are they?"

"I know, and I've told myself that...but it's still a bit daunting. I'm having to face the reality that I'm not entitled to their cheers at all...I actually do have to earn them, and I can lose them."

"Gasp!" Viktor's voice suddenly interjected, "Is that the sound of Yuri Plisetsky growing up!?"

The teen grit his teeth and spun around on his heel, spotting the cheesy grin on his older counterpart's face, "Wh-... V-Viktor!"

"I never thought I'd see this day come." The older Russian went on, wiping away fake tears with a finger, "Our beautiful SkateSon is becoming a man."

Yuri stood by with a nervous smile on his face, "He's being so dramatic." He shook his head though and tried to look more normal, "Do you want us to come with you?"

"If you want to, you can." Yurio grumbled, mentally weighing the levels of annoyance he'd be inflicted with, between Viktor's sarcastic cajoling and the screams of a group of girls wanting to put cat-ears on his head for fun. He looked beyond them though, at the still-weird sight of Viktoria wearing her father's hat, to the taller figures behind her; his sort-of-but-not-quite parents. It was impossible to hear what anyone was saying beyond the small circle standing around him, but he could tell the pair were speaking to one another. His attention was grabbed though by arms suddenly going around him, and the brief flash of concern that he didn't know who it was.

"I'll go with you!" Nikkita said, effectively revealing herself as the culprit, "I won't draw near as much attention as those two would, being down in the prep area." She added, thumbing back at the skating duo behind her, who were trying to look innocent within the growing dazzle of camera flashes.

"She has a point...people are starting to notice we're here." Yuri agreed, looking around to the circle that was forming around them, "We don't want to steal the show since we're not skating."

"Not tonight anyway." Yurio huffed, "But...this is fine. I better go. I'm supposed to do a pre-program interview since there wasn't time for one after the SP yesterday."

"Yeah, I'll bet Chris and Georgi are already inside for it, too." Viktor nodded, looking 'normal' again as he scanned around the area, "This event is sure packing things tightly, aren't they? Doing that session when the FP is starting."

"This arena doesn't honestly seem to be built like a place that leaves a lot of room to make things easy." Yurio shrugged, "Maybe this is the best they can do." He looked up at the pair and nodded, "I'm gonna get inside so they know I'm here."

Yuri and Viktor both nodded in agreement and stepped around to offer one big hug, even squishing Nikki in the middle for good measure, "Davai, Yuri~" They cheered, pulling off as Minako stepped up, shaking her head and smiling at them.

"Don't squash him too hard." She mused, "He still has to be able to skate later."

"Gbff..." Yurio huffed as he was given space again, and reached up to adjust his hat, "I feel like I need to be re-inflated like a tire."
"Skate with all you've got." Yuri added, "And don't forget, we have a fancy thing to do tomorrow. Win Gold so you're in a good mood."

"I'll win Gold." The Tiger said, his usual confidence starting to creep in under the anxiety of his prior thoughts, "Then I'll have something to taunt Otabek with when I see him at Four Continents."

"Pfft, Otabek doesn't get jealous like that." Nikki chortled, latching onto her 'brother's' arm, "He gets even."

"You've watched him compete one time. How would you know how he normally acts?" Yurio guffawed, feeling Minako starting to nudge him towards the competitor's entryway. He could see the remaining members of the group waving as he went, until they disappeared into the constantly-moving crowd.

"It's not like a competition is the only place where people show off their personalities." She retorted, stepping up into the more open pathway for coaches and skaters to walk unhindered to the doors, "You know I talk to him online."

"...Maybe you shouldn't?" He grumbled, hearing the start of the excited cries of Yuri's Angels as they got closer.

"Why not? You jealous?" Nikki taunted smugly.

Yurio just gaped at her with brow furrowed, "He's like...six years older than you."

"So? My mom was eight years younger than papa."

Minako's left eye twitched slightly, "Robbing the cradle...sheesh."

"It's different when you're both already adults." Yurio tried to explain, though feeling a sting in his gut, "It's just weird when you're 14. Why are you even making a comparison between you two and your parents? Do you have a thing for him or something? Is that why you always talk to him?"

Nikki's face went bright red, but she just let go of Yurio's arm and punched it lightly instead, "I don't. Quit making stuff up."

The sting became a freezing liquid rush, "Oh my god you do."

"I just said that I don't."

"Come along, kids, we can't just stop walking." Minako interrupted, stepping between them and taking both their hands to make them keep up, "Keep your eyes on the prize, Yuri. No distractions."

"This is a really big distraction."
Hearing the tag end of the trio’s banter, both Yuri and Viktor smirked nervously, feeling the prickly air around Mikhail standing just behind them. Yuri glanced back first, looking at the elder like the man was ready to start lecturing his youngest daughter even though she wasn’t there anymore.

“Well, *I'm* not surprised.” Viktor laughed, finally breaking the awkward silence in their little group, "Otabek's the 'dark, handsome, and mysterious' type. I bet he's swamped with ladies."

"*My baby girl isn't a lady yet.*" Mikhail stammered, "*She needs a few more years to grow up.*"

"She's turning 15 in a week." Viktoria said flatly, "A couple hundred years ago, she'd already be a mother of two with a third on the way."

"*This isn't a couple hundred years ago. She's still a kid.*"

"Then all the better that she likes a guy who lives nowhere near where we do."

"Yeah, Otabek went back to Almaty in Kazakhstan last year." Yuri chimed in, "He's actually a pretty nice guy though. Quiet, but nice."

Mikhail loomed over, giving Yuri the same creeping terror that Minako had when she'd been on the verge of finding out what had happened to his 'figure skater's body,' "I'm a father. No man is good enough for my girls." He said eerily, only to then deflate and look rather anxious, "...I can't believe this is already happening... It feels like just yesterday that she was learning to walk."

"And tomorrow, you're gonna wake up and realize you can only get around with a walker with the tennis balls on the bottom." Viktor teased, "And you'll wonder where all the time went."

"*I already* wonder where all the time went." Mikhail whined, reaching up to his head, only to find that the hat he was going to tug on pitifully wasn't there. He kept his hands there, and looked to Viktoria, who simply turned on a heel and started heading into the crowd, towards the doors, and with his hat.

All three watched her go, but it was Yuri who dared to ask the question, "What's up with her lately? Is she mad...?" He wondered, looking back to the teen's father.

Mikhail's brow furrowed, and he flicked the snow off his hair with a few finger-swats, "She's a bit annoyed with me."

"...Really? How come?"

The elder was quiet for a moment, formulating how to parse his words, but then shook his head, "...She resents me for being gone as much as Viktor did. The circumstances were different, and I did still talk to them a lot, but...it doesn't change the fact that I wasn't physically there for the day-to-day. She must've heard me whining about Nikki being my 'baby girl' and thought, 'well, no shit, Sherlock, the last time you were really *there* for us, she *was* a baby.'" He explained, looking even more deflated than before, "I have so much time to make up for, with everyone it seems..."

"You seem to have really bad luck with stuff like this." Viktor surmised, giving a nervous smile, "Hopefully the third time's the charm."
"...I hope so... If Minako gets tired of me, too... I don't know what I'd do."

"Well at least she can't take your kids away." Viktor appraised, only to get shot a look, and he hid behind Yuri for safe measure, "...Mmmmmmost of them."

Mikhail kept the look on his face for a moment longer, but then sighed, "...I don't want to count my chickens before they've hatched. As much as I hate admitting my age, Minako and I are both pretty old to be doing this. Honestly, I worry every second of every day that something's going to happen... It's taking every ounce of will-power not to smother her. She'd hate me if I hovered like I want to..."

"Yeah, Minako-sensei likes her breathing space." Yuri agreed quietly, looking past Viktor's arm to where the competitors were going inside, though Yurio and the rest were already in and beyond sight. He turned back to the anxious older man in front of him, "She'll tell you if something's wrong though. Of that much, I'm certain."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Experience." He shrugged, leaning back into Viktor's frame, "She's always been pretty expressive. There's no question about it when she's upset about something. Everyone knows it."

Mikhail still looked unsettled though, and sunk a bit into the upturned lapels of his black long-coat, "...This is so different from everything else though. When we're alone, I get this feeling from her, like she thinks her body betrayed her, and that just means... that I did, too, technically. Or I helped, anyway."

"That may well be the case." Yuri agreed, casting his eyes downward for a moment to watch Jiro and Makkachin still exploring their immediate surroundings, and eyeballing anyone who walked nearby, "But I seriously doubt she'd carry on with this if she wasn't sure about it, in her own way. Unlike Viktoria, where getting an explanation may be as hard as squeezing water from a rock, Minako-sensei is pretty forward."

"...I guess so."

"The doors are open." Viktor chimed in, "We can go find seats... and Viktoria."

"I'll leave the seat-finding to you kids." Mikhail said, "I'll find my daughter and catch up with you."

Yurio scanned the large room, looking over the press huddle and the camera crews on the sides, and a good sized chunk of the Men's Singles group in the seats in the middle. There was a woman at the front of the room with a long velvet sack in her hands, and seated at the table just behind her, with the Euros banner-board behind them in turn, was one older woman with a microphone and a man sitting to her right.

"Looks like we got here just in time for the order drawing." Minako surmised, "Let's find somewhere to sit before they start calling people up."

"...Why do I get this feeling like we're behind the curve on everything this weekend?" The Tiger asked aloud, following Nikki through the center aisle in the seating area, "We're following the schedule, aren't we?"

Minako pulled her phone out, "Yeah. I don't get it either. I'll ask if there was a new program put out that we somehow didn't get." She said, leaning forward to put her hands on both teens' shoulders, "Stick together and don't wander off. I'll come right back. Save a spot for me."
"Yeah, of course." Nikki answered, watching the woman veer off from them, then turned forward again. As she and the skater following her found their chairs, other skaters were getting called up to the front by name and nationality. They reached into the long sack held by the woman walking the floor in front of the big table, withdrew a number, and the rank was called out and recorded, "Oh...isn't that your old coach?" Nikki wondered suddenly, looking to the other section of the seating area, and pointed, "The one with the hat and the cranky look on his face."

Yurio leered over, "...Yeah, that's Yakov."

"He doesn't talk to you anymore. How come?"

"He's got his own athletes to worry about. He barely talked to Viktor last year at all when he was being a coach." The Tiger shrugged, turning to face forward again, "Yakov just focuses on whoever he's actually here for. He'll talk to you if you go up to him, but he won't go out of his way to return the favor when he's on the clock."

"Oh... Do you miss him?"

"That's a funny way of asking if I miss getting yelled at."

"Do you?" She prodded, "You trained under him for a long time, didn't you? Papa said you even lived with Yakov and your choreographer last year."

"...Yeah, I guess." Yurio leaned away slightly as Nikki pressed in closer, "I don't know, Yakov and I weren't exactly close. He was just my coach. Skaters trade coaches and training facilities all the time. It's not a big deal."

"Oh..."

"...From Russia, Yuri Plisetsky." The announcer called into her mic, scanning the room for the blonde to rise up.

Yurio pushed up to his feet and squeezed back through the row, picked his rank, groaned at it being 22nd, and went back to where he'd started, hoping his seat wasn't cold already when he retook it. The rest of the ranking session went by in a blur, being done in only five minutes. Minako still hadn't returned though when the athletes all started bailing from the room, trading places with the press and photography corps as most headed for the practice rink. Yurio stood off to the side with his younger sister, looking around for his coach, but spotted only Georgi, Yakov, Chris, and Josef coming their way. He cringed under his hoodie and pulled it down over his eyes in an effort to avoid the bunch of them.

Extra bubbly and super-social Nikki, however, waved at them excitedly, "Hiii~!"

"Is this your new coach, Plisetsky?" Chris mused, patting the tiny silver on the head, "One to match your size?"

"You know damn well she's not." He shot back, glaring out from between thin blonde strands.

"Hm, feisty." Chris shook his head, and leaned down to whisper to Nikki, "If he's mean to you, you have my permission to hit him."

She just snickered behind one hand, "Oh I don't wait for permission."

"Better to ask forgiveness?"
"Every time."

"You could get away with murder." Yurio taunted, "The old man dotes on you like you're some princess."

"I'm his princess." She teased, throwing her arms over the cranky Tiger's shoulders, "And it's 'papa,' not 'old man.'"

"That's just what you call him." He grumbled, trying unsuccessfully to wiggle out of the girl's grasp.

"...Well, we only call him 'dad' when he's in trouble."

Stoically proud but weirdly quiet, Georgi just watched them out the corner of his eye, waiting for the event coordinators to give the three of them the clearance to head up to the table. He found himself getting nudged backward though when Minako finally returned, squeezing past the skaters and the far edge of the press corps.

"Jeesh, that took way longer than it had to." She complained, "Sorry I was gone so long. I found out why we didn't have the current program though."

"What happened?" Nikki wondered, finally letting Yurio go.

"Some chuckle-head put my email all in caps, but missed the 'I' in my name, putting a lower-case 'L' instead. ...In any case, things were shifted around a little bit, but only by about 30 minutes, so we got here just in time." She explained, sliding a few loose strands of hair over her ear with a finger, then looked around, "So what rank did you pull? Close to the start?"

"Fat chance. I'm practically last." Yurio answered grimly, seeing the wave from the staffer guarding the tables as everything was being changed out, "Stay here. This'll be a few minutes."

The Tiger stepped forward with the other two skaters - the top three out of the Short Program. Since Georgi came out in first, he found his place in the middle, with the other two on either side. Yurio grit his teeth as the call came for the pre-conference photo-op, and he had to allow Georgi's arm to go over his shoulder in a show of solidarity. It was a relief though when he got to sit; his chair was a good four feet away.

The sports press was quick to get to business, even with the sound of cameras clicking and papers shifting all around in the small space, "We would now like to begin the press conference for the Men's Singles event, following yesterday's Short Program. My question to all three skaters is, how do you feel about your performances in the SP, and what motivations do you have going into tonight's Free Skate?"

Finding seats for themselves, their dogs, and two extras for the pair who would come later on, Yuri and Viktor plunked down close to the center of one long side like they had the day before. The usual shock and awe from those sitting nearby, spotting them as members of the audience again rather than going down to the participant's viewing area, lead to a number of photos and requests for autographs. Sociable as always, Viktor was quick to happily oblige all the fans that approached.

Yuri, on the other hand - though better than he used to be - was still a bit stiff and, although polite, was to-the-point to get it all over with quickly. One conversation with Viktor was entirely in Russian though, leaving Yuri with not much to do but watch the ice and crowd, occasionally checking for signs that Mikhail and Viktoria were on their way over. With nothing to see, Yuri resorted to checking Instagram, keeping Jiro plunked onto his lap, phone against that warm puppy-belly.
Other than a few late posts about Viktor's unscheduled interview, the feed was largely benign, showcasing photos of the previous night's event, a few new posts from the triplets, Yuko offering well-wishes to Yurio, and unrelated posts from Phichit and others gearing up for Four Continents. The butterflies in Yuri's stomach swirled in a maelstrom as he read that Phichit had, at long last, conquered the quad Loop.

"Ne, Viktor-" Yuri started, nudging his husband's arm with the side of his wrist. Slate eyes turned towards him, and the Russian leaned back in his seat, curious. Yuri held up his phone, "Phichit-kun figured out the quad Loop finally. He's gonna be even tougher to beat in Colorado now."

"You're still going to win Gold, my love."

Yuri made a face, "And what are you going to win?"

"Gold, clearly." Viktor laughed, squishing a kiss to his partner's cheek, "That's the way it always goes."

"We're going to have to live at the Ice Castle for the next few weeks to get into fighting form. We've been slacking so badly..." Yuri sighed, looking down slightly, seeing Jiro looking back up at him with a slight tail-wag, "I bet I'm getting a pooch again...all the rich foods we've been eating, and barely any exercise..."

"Noses to the grind-stone when we get home. That's a 10-4." The Russian nodded, "By then, I'll get clearance to start jumping again."

Yuri paused for a moment, but then nodded and offered a wry smile, "I do appreciate that you're taking the ankle thing seriously."

Viktor slid his hand across the arm-rest and offered his spouse a gentle squeeze on the leg, "I may act like I don't think it's a big deal, but I do think pretty long-term. After what happened at the Final, especially...I have a new appreciation for taking it easy when hurt. Seeing how hard you struggled to keep going was a real eye-opener."

"...If nothing else, for the sake of my heart, I'd certainly be happy if I never see you get taken off the ice on a stretcher."

"It hasn't happened yet and I don't plan on it happening anytime in the near future." Viktor reassured, settling into his seat, giving Makkachin beside him a few head-scratches, "It's been kind of nice to take it easy though."

"Sort of."

"Sort of, yeah." He laughed in agreement, "I worked a lot out of my system yesterday morning; I'd been feeling pretty antsy for not skating in a while. I've really got an itch to go back to coach-mode, too. So...it'll be long, hard days in Hasetsu after you recover from your jet-lag."

"I'm actually looking forward to it."

"Only two more sleeps till we're home."
Chapter 513

CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED THRITEEN

With the rink in the 'spare' hall being used for practice, once the Free Program got going, it was right down to business in a flash. The top 24 of the Short Program were ready to hash it out for the podium, and the first athlete of the night slid out into the rink. His program went by in a blur of spins, jumps, and fancy footwork, set to one of the Classics.

[1][FRA] Benard, REMY - 71.25 - 156.28 - 227.53

The second skater came out, impressing the crowd with a much more energetic show, dancing to the more up-beat sounds of a techno selection.

[1][DEU] Fritz, LEON - 73.19 - 166.82 - 240.01
[2][FRA] Benard, REMY - 71.25 - 156.28 - 227.53

The third, and the fourth skaters also dazzled the audience, one using a song from a movie soundtrack, the other skating to a more traditional ballet piece.

[1][DEU] Fritz, LEON - 73.19 - 166.82 - 240.01
[2][EST] Ivanov, KASPAR - 68.87 - 169.31 - 238.18
[3][FRA] Benard, REMY - 71.25 - 156.28 - 227.53

By the time the fifth competitor glided out onto the ice, a particular pair of eyes was less interested in what was going on within the rink than they were in the absence of something outside the rink.

"Where are they?"

"...You think he can't find us?" Yuri wondered, "I haven't gotten any texts."

"Me neither." Viktor added, "Maybe him and Viktoria went down to hang out with Minako."

"...He said to save them seats though. That means we're on the hook to keep them until they show up."

"Yeah..."

"I'll text him." Yuri offered, clicking his phone on as Viktor settled back into his seat. Jiro had decided to snooze on his human's lap, head tilted against Yuri's chest so the pup would always be looking in his direction, and those dark eyes cracked open slightly when Jiro felt hands settle on his hip. They closed again though as Yuri started typing a quick message, "Who knows if he'll even see this, but..."

"Maybe he still hasn't even found her." Viktor wondered, slouching slightly in his seat, and leaning until he felt his shoulder press against his partner's, "...I don't know why I'm worried. It's none of my business."

"Well, you're on good terms with Mikhail now, so it makes sense that you're empathetic to what he's going through." Yuri pointed out, turning his elbow on the arm-rest to hold his hand out, and curled his fingers around the hand that found it, "I think it's just...more confusing right now than anything. Because Viktoria's barely said more than two words to or around either of us, it's impossible to really..."
know why she's suddenly acting like this."

"...Teenage angst over all the changes in their lives recently? Maybe it's only just really hit her. Everything happened so fast. Being with Mimi must've just felt like a sudden vacation, and the fact that they're not going back to Banff is only now sinking in."

"That's my bet." Yuri agreed. He felt one of Viktor's fingers starting to slide softly against his own, curling and threading idly. It was like a little finger dance, and Yuri moved his own in turn, offering what soothing touch he could.

"...Maybe this is my fault. I wonder if they're mad that I'm not more social with them." The silver wondered, eyes on the ice even if he wasn't paying close attention, the overture of Carl Maria von Weber's 'Der Freischütz' playing all around them, "I just don't know the first thing to say to them."

"You're taking on some of my bad habits; don't borrow trouble by finding a way to make it about how you may be what's wrong." Yuri advised, "I don't think either of them would be ornery because you don't talk to them much anyway. At least, not unless they've tried to talk to you first, and you rebuffed them somehow."

"...I wouldn't if they came to me."

"I know. You'll talk to anyone who approaches you. You're a really nice person."

"When I'm not being the worst person."

"Pfft." Yuri sputtered, turning his head around to look straight at the man, "Viktor."

Cool blue eyes turned slightly back, but Viktor just squinted slightly and made a face.

"You're the most amazing person I know, but nobody's perfect. That's what makes us all human."

"I feel like I'm slipping a bit, though." Viktor sighed, "Do you think I'm projecting?"

"Mhhh... Maybe a little bit. Give yourself some time to recover from these past few weeks. You've had a lot of negative stuff suddenly heaped onto your shoulders all at once, and it's been really stressful." Yuri recommended, pushing up slightly in his seat so he could reach far enough to peck a kiss to his husband's cheek, "We'll go back to Hasetsu and back to being us. The Exhibition tomorrow will be our big kick-off to normality."

Viktor seemed to agree for a time, nodding as he let himself watch the conclusion of the program on the ice.

[1][DEU] Fritz, LEON - 73.19 - 166.82 - 240.01
[2][ITA] Ricci, ALESSANDRO - 84.25 - 155.54 - 239.79
[3][EST] Ivanov, KASPAR - 68.87 - 169.31 - 238.18
[4][FRA] Benard, REMY - 71.25 - 156.28 - 227.53

The audience was still clapping at the results when Yuri glanced over. Viktor had barely offered the bare minimum applause before resting his elbows down again, looking in the direction of the rink, but with that thousand-yard stare that made it plain he was looking through the ice, not really at it. Yuri twisted around in his seat, trying not to bother his snoozing Akita, and reached his right hand around to nudge his partner's face towards him, "What else?"

"...What else?" The dumbfounded Russian echoed.
Yuri brushed his thumb against his husband's cheek, "Your thoughts are like a stream, but I get the sense there's a rock in the middle of it. *What else?*

"...It isn't really normal back home." Viktor blurted, his eyes serious.

"...Well, we'll need a bit of time to get used to Yurio being around again, but I-

"I'm not talking about him." Viktor interrupted, pulling his hand up from Makkachin's fluff to gently take his partner's fingers off his cheek, and kissed them, "Yurio being around was *already* normal for me. I'm talking about Saito."

Yuri was quiet, brow furrowed slightly, knowingly.

"I've been *far* kinder, and *more* tolerant of him, than I ever needed to be." The Russian explained, "And I'd be lying if I said it didn't make me nauseous to know he's going to be at Yu-Topia when we get back. The only thing stopping me from chasing him into the hills with a torch and pitch-fork is knowing how much worse things would be if I did. If he's still going to Four Continents and the Games, it's far easier to be on good or neutral terms with him than to be enemies. ...But, mark my words, he is my enemy."

"But it was my fau-"

"No." He said firmly, cutting Yuri off entirely. He let go of his partner's fingers and slid his and forward, curling his fingers behind Yuri's head and neck to pull him closer, and kissed his brow, "You started the fight, but he alone chose to put his hands on you. Nothing I've learned about what's happened to him, and nothing he's said or done since, will *ever* get me to forgive what he did to you...and while you may have gotten me to stop putting on the mask that I wear for the public, the one I wear for him is all that stands between peace and a declaration of war."

"...So then why are you actively helping him so much...? I calls you senpai now because of it..."

"Because if he gets help from *me*, he won't seek comfort from *you*. He'll have no excuse to get close to you. I can control how the interactions go and I can keep him a safe distance away."

Yuri frowned, and lowered his head until only his nose hooked over the edge of Viktor's shoulder. He looked down and sighed.

"Him kissing you was just the first violation." Viktor went on, rubbing his cheek against his partner's forehead, "His complete disregard for your feelings was another. He caused your panic attack in the audience, he caused you to pass out from the stress. But worse than those things, he made you run away from *me* when we got back to the hotel. He wormed his way into the middle of our relationship, made a giant mess, and then left, using the excuse that he didn't think he'd be around to see the damage he'd done. His actions forced me to wonder if you'd been raped, and I had to go looking online for help on what to do if you *had* been. I had those images going through my mind, and hearing what *really* happened did nothing to make me forget what I'd imagined. To me, it doesn't even matter what he did or didn't do...he hurt you, and for that, I will never forgive him. Watching you starting to remember things that you'd buried all those years ago, just makes my hatred for him go deeper. It even makes my appreciation for Chris go up, because he was trying to protect you back then, too."

"...I don't want you to carry around those kinds of feelings though..." Yuri protested, barely audible over the next skater's music, "It was hard enough when I knew you were doing it because of Kon...and *he* was a thousand miles away. Asahi is *in* Hasetsu. Any little thing he does might set you off, and it'll be like watching you do your Rage Skate all over again, except it'll be *all the time.*"
Viktor look on, forlorn, but before he could say anything, a puppy-nubbin squished against his cheek, and both men turned their eyes to look at the culprit. Jiro had stretched both arms forward, the other paw going over Yuri's opposite shoulder, as though the toe-bean swat to Viktor's face was entirely incidental. The pup yawned widely, and stood up just enough to get his snoot between the duo, giving them each a few licks before settling down again, the offending paw sliding down a few inches. Viktor's brow furrowed, "...I wish he was fully grown, and that we'd taken him to Nationals in the first place. Maybe he could've protected you while I wasn't there."

"Please don't carry that albatross around your neck. It's not your fault."

"It's no use, my love." Viktor said, giving a morose smile, "You'll never be able to convince me that it wasn't. I made a vow to protect you and keep you, and I let you go off on your own in a place where I knew danger was stalking. People do get put in jail for murder even if their method was negligence or disregard."

"...You weren't being either though... You were doing an interview and I was trying to talk on the phone. You make it sound like you may as well have been standing outside the changing room, holding the door closed."

"I tend to think of it more like that I let you jump into shark infested waters and then walked away. You then came back to me with a chunk bitten out of your side...and you're telling me not to blame myself for it."

"Your analogy still admits that I jumped on my own, knowing the sharks were down there."

"But you jumped with the mindset that I had an eye on you."

"...I knew you weren't there." Yuri grumbled, "But now you have me all worked up about what bad's going to happen when we get home."

"I don't want any bad to happen. I just feel like I'll always be on edge with that guy around. We can't even go enjoy the onsen anymore because he lives there." Viktor pointed out, arms going up in his frustration.

Oddly, the skater's music ended at that same moment, and the audience started their applause, leaving Viktor stuck in the moment with a confused look on his face, as though his gesture had actually caused it all to happen.

Yuri reached to lower the nearer arm down, and held onto it, "You're getting yourself worked up over something that hasn't happened yet."

"Saito already lives at Yu-Topia. That has happened."

"But he hasn't done anything...and-"

"We left the day after he moved in. He hasn't had a chance yet."

"...You've given him the impression that you're empathetic to his situation."

"I do. I am. But that's entirely distinct from my overall opinion. I can feel bad for a serial killer who was hit by his dad as a kid but that doesn't mean I think it's enough to forgive him from killing 15 people as a grown man."

Yuri quirked a brow, "From sharks to serial killers...your opinion of Asahi is rather morbid."
"...Maybe I should talk to Mimi and put my foot down about Saito." Viktor suggested, mostly to himself, bringing his free hand up to put a finger over his lips, "If he wants to spend all this money on yet-another stray, he can do so by sending Saito somewhere else, and support him from a distance."

Deadpanning severely, Yuri turned his eyes towards Jiro, and resigned to stand up, "Come on, let's go..."

"You don't want to watch the skating?"

The audience started cheering again; somehow, they'd missed the announcement of the score. Yuri looked out to the big screen though, and saw footage of the skater and coach cheering from the kiss and cry, with his score and rank shown at the bottom.

[2][AZE] Pashkevich, SERGEI - 82.4 - 157.51 - 239.91

Yuri looked back down to his partner again, "We haven't really been watching anyway. Your mind is wandering, and I'm less invested because neither of us are competing. Let's just...go find Mik and sort this stuff out. We'll figure out why he hasn't come back yet, too."

Viktor suddenly felt a bit guilty, but the offer was too good to let go, and he nodded before pushing himself up to stand. Makkachin got down off the seat next to him, and the small group made their way out to the stairs in the aisle. A few sad faces watched them go, but nothing was said in protest. Soon, the duo and their pups were out of sight, and the sound of the announcer seemed clear as a bell.

"Weiter auf dem Eis, Russland repräsentierend... Next on the ice, representing Russia... Georgi...Popovich...!"

Both skaters looked back into the arena over their shoulders, and for that one moment, neither could help but laugh, "...Of course we'd walk out right before his Free Skate."
Chapter 514

CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED FOURTEEN

Mikhail waved the phone in his hand loosely, unsure whether to answer or what to even say. Yuri's earlier text was still on the screen, until the phone was clicked off and put away. He'd found Viktoria some time earlier, but at that point, he'd just been following her around, until eventually ambling outside again, right back to where they'd been originally. It was less crowded on the sidewalk-peninsula by far, but that didn't mean there were any new places to go out there.

Exhaling a mildly-frustrated breath into the fog, Mikhail stopped where he was on the long declining stairs, "...Honey, are you going to talk to me at some point, or am I just going to follow you around aimlessly until I have to go back inside?"

"You never had to follow me in the first place." She answered simply.

"...Oh, yeah, no problem. It's just a city neither of us has ever been to, in a country whose language neither of us speaks, and you're wandering off alone. No worries."

Viktoria twisted around on the heel of her boot and shot her father a look, "I'm 16 years old, I have a phone with a map on it, and I know where we're staying. It's right around the corner from here."

Mikhail just blinked at her, before quietly, slowly, pulling the keys from his pocket, and jangled them once for emphasis.

Jade eyes just sneered, and Viktoria turned back around, heading towards the sidewalk with more purpose than it seemed she'd had before.

"What are you gonna do when you get there, then? Sit outside in the snow until you're freezing and have to come crawling back?" Mikhail called after her.

She just shot back over a shoulder and kept walking, "Would it kill you to stop being sarcastically passive-aggressive and just say what you mean for once!?"

"What am I supposed to say when you're leaving?"

What few people were loitering outside were starting to look in the duo's direction, even as Viktoria got further and further away, kicking up snow as she went.

"Viktoria!"

A light-brown blur when rushing by, chasing after the silver teen in her retreat, leash flapping behind. Surprised, Mikhail quickly looked behind, surprised-but-not to see the rest of the poodle's pack stepping outside through the long row of glass doors. He quickly looked away again though as he heard Viktoria's startled squeak-scream; Makkachin had caught up to her, tail wagging like always, but slowing as he realized his presence seemed largely unwelcome.

Viktoria sucked in a breath and let her heart calm for a second, but then leaned down to ruffle the poodle's ears, "Don't scare me like that. You came up on me like a ghost."

Makkachin's spirits seemed to rise, and his tail started to wag again, and he perked his head up over Viktoria's arm as footsteps came rushing up in his wake.
Makka, you can't run off like that. There's streets right here; you could get hit by a car—] Viktor chided in Russian, fumbling for his dog's harness so he could find the lead and pull it up from the ground, regaining control of the pup before he could run off again, "Sorry." He stammered, backing off from his cousin, "He doesn't normally chase people like that."

Yuri stood back with Mikhail on the long steps, Jiro standing on his own at his heels.

"How'd you know to come out here?" The elder asked quietly, "I never answered your text."

"We thought to let the dogs out for a minute. It's just odd luck that we found you at the same time." Yuri explained, "Seems we walked into the middle of something."

"...The end of something, I guess."

"What happened?"

"She won't tell me anything."

"...Is that typical?" Yuri wondered, brows furrowed slightly, "She's always been super quiet."

"Apparently I don't have the experience to know that." Mikhail grumble-sighed, sticking his hands deeper into his pockets, "I really don't know what to do for her. My way of speaking pisses her off before I can even say anything."

"Way of speaking? Like her father?"

Mikhail shook his head, "Like a wiseass."

"Oh."

"No, it's none of your business." Viktoria's voice suddenly rose, stepping back from Viktor and Makkachin, and catching the attention of the rest in the process. Viktor looked a bit surprised, but Yuri was unimpressed.

"You don't have to be rude." He started, heading down the rest of the stairs with Jiro close behind, "He's just trying to help."

"It's none of your business either." She argued, looking at the both of them rather bitterly, "You don't even know what he said."

"I don't have to know what he said. I know him." Yuri countered, "And you're being unnecessarily mean."

"Because you're butting into something that has nothing to do with you."

"Don't take your anger out on them, Vikki." Mikhail finally said, coming up behind Yuri as the younger man took position in front of Viktor, "If it has nothing to do with them then you have no reason to be snarky at them while they're collecting their dog."

The teen just watched him come and turned around again, trying to make her retreat while she could.

Mikhail looked on helplessly, "Vikki! I can't do anything if you don't tell me why you're mad!"

"Maybe you should've been paying more attention then!"

Viktor slumped against his partner's back, clinging to one shoulder, "...I don't know what just
happened but I feel bad about it anyway."

"...I'm really sorry," The elder said, "...If I knew teen girls were this complicated, I would've studied
more."

Yuri felt Viktor's chin move through his jacket, and immediately had a hand up to cover the man's
mouth. He could do nothing for Mikhail though; Yuri knew he was gonna get it.

"You really think this is because I'm a girl?" Viktoria said, dark and grim, back still turned to them,
though she had at least stopped, "Are you starting to worry that Nikki's gonna be just like me when
she's older?" She asked, louder than before, and she turned to look at the man sideways, "Huh!?"

"That's not what I sa-"

"...You have all this great experience and insight to draw from," Viktoria went on, ignoring him,
"All your worldly travels, all your different lives... Not being a girl is hardly the reason you're so
clueless right now."

Viktor chortled a cough, but tried to keep quiet. Mikhail just shot him a look.

Viktoria was hardly impressed with them, "...It's because you've never been the middle child."

The elder Russian just looked entirely baffled, "...I don't follow... You're not the middle child right
now. Sergio's gone; you're the olde-

"Oh I'm sorry, was I mistaken when I heard him call you papa Mimi earlier?" She gestured at her
much-older cousin, "This guy who you basically consider your first kid? The one you missed so
much that you named me after him? The one whose shadow I now live in?"

"...I thought this wasn't about him." Both Yuri and Mikhail muttered in tandem.

Viktor stared blankly.

"It's not about him. It's about you. It's always been about you." She explained in frustration, pointer-
finger turning towards her father then, "I don't even have memories of a time where I was ever the
focus of anyone's attention, for anything. I was too young to remember what it was like to be the new
and shiny thing in your life, because as soon as I was old enough to be able to remember, Nikki was
born and she was the new and shiny thing. Sergio was the test case for you, and whatever experience
you got from making mistakes with him just washed downstream... I always got the shit he deflected
off, and Nikki could do no wrong."

All three just stared in silent confusion.

"But now you've adopted all these stray cats since you couldn't get him at first," She went on,
pointing at Viktor again, "And you're so damn focused on making things better for them that...once
again, and as usual, I've practically become a side-thought."

"...Where'd all this come from? I thought we had an understanding earlier."

"That was about mom."

"...Okayyy soooo can't we come to an understanding about whatever this is?" Mikhail pleaded, "I
really don't want to make all my kids mad at me in one day...but we did come to this place for
Yuri..."
"He's not your kid." Viktoria barked, "He's a stray cat, just like that other guy in Japan right now."

"...We asked him to help Yurio." Yuri chimed in, "If you want to be mad at anyone for that, then be mad at Viktor and I. Your dad would never have gotten involved if we hadn't asked him to."

Viktoria just looked on indignantly, "You asked him to help, not to adopt. He did that on his own. Yura and that other guy are just the most recent new and shiny things he's focused on...and now that he's got his first son back finally, that'll be what he focuses on next."

"He tried that already and it blew up in his face." Viktor countered, "I won't let him do it again."

"Viktor doesn't need your dad's help, either." Yuri added, "The others did. Don't scorn him for being generous."

"...Great, now you're all just going to gang up on me. Typical..." The teen grimaced, turning away from them.

"It probably just feels like he's giving out special attention because they're getting so much from him all at once..." Yuri continued, "...But you and your siblings had that the whole time, so you're used to it. You've lived it. He never wanted to make you think you were less loved because of it. If you need more from him then just tell him. He's not psychic."

"You think I haven't tried?" She asked, "Every time I'm about to talk to him though, it seems like some other thing has come up. With everything building up so heavily, there hasn't been any room for me... And now he actually has a good reason for being distracted...so what am I supposed to do? Be mad at him for stepping up?"

"...It kinda seems like you...are...anyway?" Mikhail pointed out, ignoring the nervous side-glances he was getting from the younger duo.

"I'm not mad that you're doing what's expected of you." She harped, "I'm mad that it seems like you've forgotten the rest of us in the process. We're just being dragged along on everything. At least Nikki has the illusion of feeling like she's part of things because you made it her job to make Yuraless of a raging butthole."

The peanut gallery could only nod in quiet acknowledgment of her point.

"And now you're all worked up about this stupid long-distance crush she has-"

"...He's not going to be so long distance in two weeks." Mikhail pointed out, "And then two weeks after that, for nearly a whole month, and then again two weeks after that."

"Ugh, there you go doing it again... Ignoring the point by blaming something else!"

"I'm not blaming anything." He countered, "I'm trying to explain why I'm acting that way. If you were pining after a guy 6 years your senior I'd be up in arms over that, too."

"But you and mom-"

"...Were already adults when we met. You two are kids, Nikki especially. You guys don't realize how fast things change when you're teenagers." The ruffled Russian tried to explain, though feeling mildly uncomfortable about the whole topic, "You and your sister are only two-plus years apart, but anyone can see that she is still more a child than a young adult...and yet you are more young-adult than child right now. I can't make any mistakes in this range. If something happens, it could haunt you into adulthood."
Yuri felt a jolt go through him as he heard the words, and he pulled his hand up over his chest.

"I'm just not really sure what exactly you want me to do to fix whatever's gotten so bad. I'm just doing my best to keep up with everything right now. You're not the only one whose whole world just got turned upside down..." Mikhail went on, "I try not to think about what happened in Banff before I found out about what happened in Banff. The idea that your mother was too proud to tell anyone she was sick again, and ended up leaving you kids all alone like she did...it just..." He tried, feeling his fists clenching in his pockets, "...It makes me furious. She deliberately kept me in the dark about how bad things were getting just to avoid the possibility that I would come get you guys before she passed."

"...She didn't think she was going to." Viktoria pointed out, "She was so convinced she was going to be fine that she wouldn't let it slip that anything was wrong. If she started feeling bad, or it hurt, or something else went south, she'd blame it on something else. Anything else...and of course, Sergio bought the whole story... Nikki and I weren't allowed to question it."

"So your mother shut you down...and now that you're out of that mess, you just feel like I'm doing the same thing."

The silver teen was quiet for a moment, seeing the cogs finally turning in her father's head, "...Not exactly the same..." She muttered, looking down slightly, "...We were made to go along with things under the threat of a big fight before. Now it just...feels like we don't matter. We're just the extra bits, tagging along on Yura's big adventures." She lifted her gaze again, starting to feel nervous, but pressed on anyway, "...And I'm not going to lie about how boring I think this all is. The cold isn't fun anymore because it's always cold now. The rink, the arenas, the walks and drives to get there... I'm freezing. ...And I'm tired of feeling like this... I don't want to be dragged to these events anymore like it doesn't matter what I think. I'd...actually rather stay in Hasetsu. At least there, even if I'm stuck working, it's warm, and I'm actually doing something..."

Mikhail kept his eyes forward, but looked aside briefly to the pair of skaters nearby, then back to his kid, "I never wanted you to think I was making you come to these things. I just didn't want you to think I didn't want you to come."

"...Figure skating isn't for everyone." Viktor chimed in with a meager shrug, still holding onto his partner's skinny frame, "My father hated it. I wouldn't be surprised to learn your dad doesn't care for it either. He would've known where I was years ago if he cared even the slightest bit about the sport, and looked at the Olympics results in the news. He's just here because Yurio and I am involved, and he's trying to be supportive." He nudged his head towards his uncle, "Right?"

Mikhail looked a bit stiff, "I neither confirm nor deny the claim."

Viktor huffed a laugh, "Yeah, that's what I thought. He's here because he's a dad, not because he's a fan. No one will think any less of you because you're not a fan either."

Looking on, Viktoria ruminated, unsure what else to say. She backed out of her aggressive-looking forward stance, and turned slightly away from the group, "...Thanks."

Mikhail stepped past the pair and their pups, and glanced back slightly over his shoulder, "I'm gonna walk back to the rental with her. I'll see you guys later."

A bit more surprised than anything, the skating duo nodded, and Viktor waved slightly as he pulled off of his spouse's back, "Yeah...see you."

Yuri exhaled a long-held breath as the Rozovsky pair got further and further away, but kept his
fingers curled around the inner fold of his jacket's lapel, where he'd held it since he felt the ping through his chest, "...I don't know if he's going to come back before the night's over."

"I can't even remember what we came out here for in the first place anymore. I wasn't expecting all that." Viktor commented, scratching the side of his head uncertainly, "Are extended families normally this...uhm..."

"...Conflicted?"

"In so many words..."

Yuri let go of his jacket and used that hand to find his husband's, threading their fingers as he moved them both into Viktor's coat pocket, "No... Well...maybe?"

"That's super clear."

"It's hard to explain." Yuri muttered, looking down to where Jiro was, looking back up at him in turn, waiting, "I'm just glad she was finally able to say something. That must've been bubbling under the surface for a while, maybe even before Mikhail and Minako-sensei went out there to collect them all."

"Hopefully she gets it all off her chest. Keeping quiet can be more problematic than just letting it go."

Yuri turned slightly towards the man next to him, "Are you speaking from experience?" He teased.

"I may be an old people but I'm still capable of learning new things." Viktor answered simply, leaning forward to kiss brow, nose-tip, and lips, "Let's go back inside. Maybe I'll remember why we came out."

"It was for Makka and Jiro."

"Oh...right. Finding them was an accident." The Russian said, only to pause, feeling a thought suddenly come loose from where it had been jammed-up in his brain, "Cyka blyat... I was supposed to talk to him about kicking Saito out of Yu-Topia."

Yuri just deadpanned, "...We're not gonna ask to kick Asahi out. Sheesh."

"Well what would you call it?"

"Helping him be independent."

"Away from Yu-Topia."

That just earned another slightly-unimpressed look.

Viktor shrugged, "I know you don't like being the badguy. You already saved him once from the worst consequences of what he did. That's why this is all on me. I have to do what's right for us...not just as a couple, but as individuals. I need to feel like I'm protecting you, and you need to feel safe in your own head." He explained, bringing up his free hand to gently pat his husband's head, brushing back the slicked-back strands that had fallen in front of his partner's glasses, "Home is where we're supposed to be able to relax...and he's getting in the way of that."

"...I know..." Yuri sighed, "I just can't help but feel bad for him anyway. It's not his fault I never returned his feelings. I just feel like we're causing him a lot of grief."

Viktor was quiet for a moment, but then shook his head as he reached that free arm over his partner's
shoulder to pull him closer, and pressed his cheek to Yuri’s brow, "Not as much as he's caused us. If he has any shame, he'll understand why it has to be this way."

"...I guess so..."
A few minutes passed after Mikhail had followed his kid away from the arena. Neither Makkachin nor Jiro seemed at all interested in doing what they'd been brought outside for, and with the deepening evening chill starting to settle in, Yuri was ready to go back into the arena. He pushed off the edge of the last doorframe he'd been leaning against, and looked down to his wary Akita, "I've made a decision." He said, as though speaking to the pup. Jiro turned his head around and looked up, tail wagging uncertainly.

"Have you?" Viktor answered in the puppy's place.

"Since this was supposed to be the fun weekend, I've decided that I'm going to lay down a rule that'll last until we get back home."

Confused but curious, Viktor tilted his head, "Oh?"

"No one's going to say one single word more about Asahi. It makes me feel bad and I don't want to think about it until I have to." Yuri explained, steadfast in his conviction, "I do enough to make myself feel bad with these made-up memories that I'm still sorting through, so the last thing I want to worry about is the stuff that hasn't even happened yet."

"But if we don't-"

Yuri squished his hands to his husband's face, "Nope."

"Bhurt Yureh-"

"Nope." He insisted, moving opposite hands up and down and warping the Russian's cheeks in the process, keeping him from speaking, "You wanted this time in Vienna to make me feel better about all the crap we just went through before, but we ended up just bringing the crap with us. Let it go for now. You'll have plenty of time to ruminate on the hour of your attack when we get on the plane. I just want to have the rest of this weekend with you to enjoy the end of the competition and do our Exhibition. I don't want to lose the good memories we've already made because I'm so nervous about the negative stuff that came up."

"Desh fihn...I gesh..."

Yuri smiled and let go of Viktor's mug, "I'm glad you were able to see things my way."

The Russian just padded his cheeks until they felt normal again, "I'm glad you were able to see things my way."

"Not a chance." Yuri insisted, stepping closer to his partner's frame, and took the scarf and lapels of the man's jacket between his fingers, "There is nothing about you wanting to protect me that I don't love and appreciate. But I went out of my way to forget Asahi before, and for the last 2 weeks, he's all I've been allowed to think about. You need a break from my anxiety about him as much as I do. So let's just go back inside and enjoy the rest of the competition...maybe get something to drink later...and have an easy, restful night that we remember for being positive."

"...Then what about Viktoria?"
"Mikhail's problem."

"She called me out though."

"Cuz of Mikhail." Yuri explained, feeling a pair of hands come around his waist to settle on his lower back, pulling him a bit further forward, "The thing about family living close together like ours does now, is that you may be aware of all their problems, but you're not responsible for most of them. Mikhail's going to have his work cut-out for him now that one of his kids is starting to react honestly to everything that's happened; it may cause a chain-reaction. But it's none of our business. Just like our problems are none of his business."

"Alright...alright..."

"Deep breath." Yuri suggested, "Inhale..."

Viktor sucked in some air and held it.

"And let it all out."

"Phoo..."

"And kiss."

Chu~

"Let's go cheer on Yurio. Hopefully he didn't skate while we were outside."

The ice was being resurfaced when the duo returned and tried finding seats, only to discover that their original spot had been taken over by others. Not wanting to bother anyone though, they resigned to take their chances in the prep area. Not being competitors came with the chance that they wouldn't be allowed through, but it was difficult to refuse the Skaters Nikiforov when they asked to go by.

The air in the competitors' area seemed to change with them in there, too. Even without Viktor being in the line-up, just being there where he would've been seemed to give the place a bit of electricity that it otherwise didn't have. Watching on the same televisions as the others also let Yuri get a bit more invested than he had been while watching from the audience. It felt like one of their own events from the previous year then, with Viktor there playing at being a coach.

Another similarity to the previous year's events, Chris found himself struggling to get motivated without Viktor in the ranks. Not wanting to be one-upped by the Russian Tiger though, especially after being the only skater at the Final to not break 300, he mustered up what inspiration he could and found his place on the ice.

"The Short Program is where people can catch some easy points...but the real competition is in the Free Skate." He said, when asked at the earlier conference about the challenges facing him later that night, "Anyone who thinks they've got this in the bag from just the SP will end up losing."

"You do tend to surprise people by coming from behind." Viktor teased, following his friend to rink-side, along with Yuri, their pups, and Chris' professional entourage, "But you're neck-and-neck with the others right now."

"The others' being a kid whose luck is running thin, and a guy who thinks he's finally going to beat
"Weiter auf dem Eis, Schweiz repräsentierend... Next on the ice, representing Switzerland...
Christophe Giacometti!"

The usual excited applause echoed around the arena, and Chris bent down to pull his blade guards off before sliding out. He threw his arms out to the side and greeted the crowd before gliding back to rink-side for a few final words with Coach Josef and a hug. Those lime-green eyes turned to his rival though, "Just when I'm starting to get used to the idea that you've left the ice, Yuri brings you back, and then you manage to get yourself booted."

"It wasn't intentional." Viktor defended with a lazy smile, half-leaning on Yuri as they waited nearby, "We'll compete against each other in South Korea. For now you have to defend your title. It's been a few years since you were last the reigning champion."

"The last time I had it was right before your winning streak."

"It was the first time you had it, too." The Russian teased, "With me out of the European division though, you have a chance for your own winning streak."

Chris smiled, but it was tinted by a forlorn backdrop, "It somehow doesn't mean as much if I didn't beat you for it."

"Try not to make him feel bad." Yuri chimed in, "It took enough time to get him used to the idea that he's skating for Japan instead. Coming here like we'd planned to, but doing entirely different things, made him super melancholy the whole way into Austria."

"Well, you had other reasons beyond just that... But, I'm off." Chris said, and pushed off the wall with a wave. The audience cheered anew as he made his way around, and took position in the center of the rink.

['Courtesy Call' - Thousand Foot Krutch (Nightcore remix)]

Yurio watched the show starting on one of the televisions in the prep area, one leg held straight up in the air in a split as he stretched. His eyes squinted though at the silver-headed blob just out of focus behind the rink-wall in the background, and he let his leg go. Edging forward, he finally realized what it was, "That's Viktor out there. How long as he been down here?" He glanced to Nikki, "Did you see him?"

She shook her head, and deferred to Minako, "You?"

The ballerina-turned-coach looked up from her phone, "Sorry?"

Yurio grumbled, "Never mind."

"I wonder why he doesn't just come down here from the start instead of going into the audience." Nikki asked aimlessly, "It seems like he always ends up down here anyway, and he just leaves papa and Vikki alone out there."

"Why would that matter?"

The silver teen buttoned-up slightly, but offered a nervous smile soon after, "Papa made himself like figure skating because everyone he knows is into it...but Vikki isn't that interested at all. She just doesn't want to make anyone feel bad by saying so, even though she gets headaches cuz she's bored."
"And you know this because...?" Yurio glowered at her slightly.

"She was texting me about it on the way over here." She answered meekishly, "I bet Cousin Viktor and Yuri are down here because papa and Vikki aren't here."

"...He wouldn't leave like that." Yurio defended, pulling on an arm to stretch his back under the Russian Olympic jacket.

"He would if he thought there was a good reason for it. Like finding out that Vikki doesn't want to be here."

Emerald eyes gave a stern look, but Yurio turned his gaze up towards Minako, "Do you know if he's here or not?"

"Yup."

"...And?"

"He's having a hard time deciding which child he wants to disappoint." She answered, "He's not going to win, no matter what he does tonight."

"Well then just tell him that I'm up nearly-last so he can be here just for that and the medaling ceremony."

"I'm working on it." Minako explained, "But he's already left with Vikki to walk her back to the room. He's trying to sort out whether and if he can get back without Vikki thinking he doesn't care."

Yurio could feel the 'what about' in his throat, but he swallowed it down and stayed quiet, turning instead to watch the second half of Chris' Free Skate. It would easily be another hour before he himself got to go out, but that only left him with time to brood on the sudden turn of events. His eyes couldn't focus on the program, and instead looked down to the knuckles of his right hand, looking at the pale scar where he'd split the tendon at Worlds the previous year, punching the bathroom wall.

...All that time he spent with me last year, it was like he had no one else to think about in the world. I completely forgot the idea that he even had kids somewhere...

He flexed his fingers a bit, observing the subtle difference in the cascade as he made a fist, the middle finger sticking up slightly higher than the rest.

*I wanted him to be here to watch me win. It kind of felt like when grandpa would watch. ...But the more I learn about him and his real family, the more I wonder if he spent any time with them at all last year.*

He looked back at Minako, "Tell him to just stay with her."

"Hah?"

Even Nikki was a bit surprised to hear the words, but she said nothing.

"If he's already left, then there's no reason why he should haul his ass all the way back to the arena." Yurio elaborated stiffly, "It may not be far but it's cold and it's getting late. I'll just...show him my Gold when we get back after we're done."

Minako couldn't help but give a wry smile over the top edge of her phone, "That's awfully mature of you."
"Don't say that, or I'll change my mind and drag him back here myself."

With the program ended, Chris caught his breath, holding his last position for a few seconds longer before letting his arms swing down for a moment. Sweat dripped down his cheek, jaw, and neck, until it faded into the collar of his costume. He waved though and bowed to the crowd, returning to rink-side for his water, jacket, and blade-guards. He caught a few encouraging words from his coach as the small group moved over towards the kiss-and-cry, and to his surprise, found Yuri and Viktor both piling in onto the bench with them.

"Everyone suck it in, make room." Viktor laughed, squishing himself up against Chris's side while Yuri clambered for the edge of the seat, "Actually, better just take a knee..."

Yuri blinked in confusion, looking aside briefly as both dogs waited for him to move...and he rose up from his precarious perch, and lowered down again onto one knee next to the bench instead of on it.

Viktor just gaped at him, "...What are you doing...?"

"You said to take a knee, so..."

"Take my knee." He clarified, gesturing at it with both hands as Chris laughed quietly beside him.

"OH." The younger figure stammered, rising back up again to step forward those few inches and side sideways on that half-lap, and he leaned against his husband's shoulder, arms going around him, "Sorry, I feel really dumb now." He admitted sheepishly, face a bit pink.

"I'm truly shocked that you think I'd make you sit on the floor," Viktor said dramatically, "Shocked I say."

"It's the kiss-and-cry! And it's not even our kiss-and-cry!" Yuri protested, "I thought I'd take up too much space if I couldn't sit on the edge of the seat."

"It is a bit crowded in here." Chris mused, squashed in the middle as Coach Josef clung to the other side, using one leg out to the side to wedge against the athlete, "But I guess it's okay, as long as Jiro doesn't go for my boots again."

"Don't go fondling my husband again and you'll have no problems." The Russian laughed, and looked down to the offending Akita, "Right, little dude?"

"Roaf!"

"He's gonna be a giant one day." Viktor went on, "I'm scared and excited all at once."

"Don't be scared." Yuri suggested, "He's the most chill puppy I've ever seen...he'll be like that as a large boi too."

"A large boy with a big appetite." Chris pointed out, "Better keep your blades stored safely before he starts teething, too."

"Here we are at the Euros kiss-and-cry for the Free Program, and you three knuckleheads are talking about a puppy's mouthing habits." Coach Josef interrupted, shaking his head, "Figure skaters."

The trio laughed anyway, but turned their attention to the score-board and waited.

When those expectant numbers finally appeared though, Chris was stony-faced for a moment.
"...He is currently in first place."

"Whew." The blonde heaved, finally letting himself be happy about it all, "The math-gerbil of my brain totally fell off the wheel for a second there."

"You scored over 300. I think you're safe from Georgi." Viktor teased, "Welcome back to the club. It's been half an epoch...when was the last time? Worlds?"

"...Sochi."

"Sochi!" The Russian repeated and laughed, only to elbow his friend annoyingly, "Better get cracking on your work-outs. Yuri and I are going to score over 350 and shatter our Worlds records from last year."

"You two are absolute monsters."

The group eventually got their acts together and departed from their little victory stage, heading back towards the prep area with pups in tow. As they moved under the curtain to get back-stage, Yuri looked around at the crowd that was clapping for Chris' rise to 1st place. It wasn't difficult to spot the dark cloud hovering in a far corner, and Yuri caught sight of both Georgi and Yakov there, looking at a television with rather serious - and disappointed - looks on their faces. Still holding to Viktor's arm, Yuri pressed in closer to be heard over the crowd, "I'll be right back. Don't go too far."

"Okay."

With Jiro following closely, Yuri stepped away and started heading for the dour duo. He carefully approached from behind, and cleared his throat to get their attention. Georgi glanced back over his shoulder, but turned back towards the television, expecting mockery and wanting none of it. Yakov knew Yuri better than that, though.

"What is it?"

"...I don't know if there's ever going to be an appropriate time or place for a question like this, but...before I do, I wanted to say thanks, for helping me sort things out with Viktor yesterday." Yuri started, looking back towards his partner, and the man's goofy antics with his rival, "He told me once that if I ever needed help, that I should just hug you and you would. That's been true since the start...so, I really am grateful."

"...What are you getting at?" Yakov wondered dubiously, "What's the question?"

Yuri gathered his courage and stepped a bit closer so he could speak a little quieter, "...Were you the one who burned Viktor's old house down?"
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED SIXTEEN

The little three-room apartment was oddly quiet with just two people coming inside, dark from the lack of light, until bathed in a dim glow from the hall where the pair removed their shoes. As before, Mikhail had to dust the snow that had landed on the top of his head, while Viktoria kept ownership of his flatcap.

"So how mad is everyone?" The teen wondered, pulling her arms out of her padded white winter coat, eyes fixed on the phone her father still held out in the open.

Mikhail blinked between the two, "Mad...?" He echoed, "It hasn't come up."

"Disappointed then. Annoyed."

"...They're actually being surprisingly understanding." He explained, sliding his phone into his back pocket as he pulled his own jacket off, "And that's only regarding me. They accepted the explanation on your end without issue."

"You didn't have to walk me all the way back here."

"I have the keys, remember?"

"You could've let me have the one to unlock the door."

"I wouldn't have been comfortable with that."

She furrowed her brow, "Why? Don't trust me to be here when you're all done?"

"That's not it." Mikhail said, putting his coat into the closet and closed it after, "Vienna is considered one of the safest cities in Europe, but that doesn't mean it's danger-less. I'd be paranoid about something happening to you on the way here, leading to an outcome where you never arrive."

"...So then now that we're here, you can go back."

"My liege lord has already given his blessing that I stay, such as it is." The elder mused quietly, watching his kid head through the long kitchen towards the olive-green door to the living-room, "Unless you'd rather be alone."

"...I'm already doing what I'd rather do." She answered, pausing in the doorway, "So if you want to go back, I won't stop you."

Mikhail watched the teen disappear beyond the wall, and heard the sound of her frame slumping down on the couch, clicking the television on. The light of the screen illuminated the dark room, casting darker shadows onto the walls, flickering brighter and dimmer with every movement. He sighed quietly to himself and followed through, clicking on one of the few small lamps in the room to prevent himself getting a headache from just the light of the television. Viktoria had squished herself into the same couch-corner that Viktor had been in earlier in the day, so Mikhail found himself a spot in front of her, leaning back into the back-cushions to avoid being in his daughter's line-of-sight to the t.v. screen. He turned his head to the right to look at the imagery for a minute or so before his neck started to cramp and he was forced to look forward again instead, "...I'm just gonna sit here until you're ready to talk." He started, "You don't have to say anything right now...but I won't leave
Yuri looked on with a steady gaze, but eventually nodded, and bowed his head, "Thanks."

Yakov watched the young skater turn away from him and start heading back towards the gaggle surrounding Chris and Viktor, with that small but growing Akita puppy following dutifully at his heels. He drew a breath and exhaled quickly, shaking his head slightly as he turned back towards the television. Georgi had already lost his spot at the top of the podium, but there was still one skating prodigy waiting to take his turn, and the top-3 line-up was yet to be settled. Still, the attempt to refocus on their reason for being in Vienna failed, and Yakov couldn't help but look aside again.

Yuri had returned to the group by then, sliding into the fray as though an opening had been left just for him to sneak into. If he had any reaction to the words he'd heard, Yuri didn't give it away on his face, which, to Yakov, was the eeriest thing about it.

Asking me a question like that and then wandering off like the answer didn't matter, the elder coach considered, I wonder what he'll do? Yakov grimaced slightly, deadpanning the skating prodigy rather severely as the expected 'you've been gone for 5 minutes, I nearly died' snogging started, Vitya... Genius on the ice...not so much off it...

Yakov just shook his head and turned back to Georgi. At least, that man's morose aura made some sense.

Viktor pulled Yuri further into the skating gaggle, hugging him close, "So what were you up to over there? Telling Georgi not to feel bad?"

"You know I'm not the sort to rub it in." Yuri retorted, "I went to talk to Yakov."

"Oh." The Russian looked nervous then, glancing over his partner's head to spot the gruff older man slightly in the distance, and looked away again, "I guess it would be safe for you to talk to him... Why would you need to though? Cuz of yesterday?"

"Sort of. It's not important right now." Yuri answered, looking to the television closest to the group, and the triple Lutz that the current athlete had just landed, then back to his spouse, "Let's go find Yurio; check on him and Minako-sensei."

"I guess that's as good an excuse as any." Viktor nodded, turning instead to look at Chris, "Hey, we're gonna leave you to it. Have fun with your interview."

"Oh, yeah. I'll catch you guys again after." He answered, peeling off from the group as well, "See ya."

"Byeee~!"

All told, the competition went by rather...normally. Despite the hiccup of having the wrong schedule, there was precious little else about the event that was perceived as negative, as many before it had been. There was no clan upheaval, as had been noted at the Final, nor the tension at the lack of a Nikiforov at Russian Nationals. There had been no melt-downs over not being watched by certain eyes, as had been the case at Skate Canada, nor the distraction of fractured friendships like at Trophée de France. For once in a long while, Yurio was able to wait for his turn without worry.
Watching the other skaters go through the motions and fill out the ranks was rather peaceful. The top spots had rarely changed out, seeming firmly positioned after the Short Program's leaders each took their turns. The only thing that was still a question was whether Chris would retain his title as the European Champion, or if Yurio would usurp it from him.

*Scoring over 300 is never easy, but with a strong Short Program, it's easier than otherwise,* Yurio thought, watching every interim performance with blurred interest, forgetting each as soon as it was over, *I can easily take the top spot on the podium if I just stay focused.*

Easier said than done, given the company he kept. Lacking a competitive mind-set, Yuri and Viktor were *slightly* less than serious. Waiting for the end of the Free Skate was almost boring without the anxiety of worrying about other peoples' scores coming close to their own. Minako appeared to be doing well with the waiting game anyway, and so the antsy duo scampered off with their dogs again.

"Just text us when the guy before you goes up." Viktor explained as they wandered away, "We'll come back right away."

Yurio just grumbled quietly and turned back towards the televisions, "...Waiting for my turn has never felt like it took so long."

"That's cuz everyone you're really worried about has already gone up, and you're getting impatient." Nikki teased, looking up at him from a seat she'd found, over the top of her phone, "Have you ever just watched an event?"

"Of course I have." He scoffed, almost offended, "It's hard to avoid."

The silver teen just pointed her phone at him like an accusing finger, "*Aha!* You admit it. Watching other competitors is a chore for you."

"There's nothing to be gained from watching people who aren't as good." Yurio defended, nudging her phone back down with the flat of his palm, "I only watch the people who are *as good* or better. There aren't a lot of them."

"Wow..." Nikki gave him quite the look, "How do you manage to fit your head through the doors in these places when you walk through? It's huge."

"Do you like watching amateurs and novices?"

"It's not about that." She retorted, "Sometimes it's just about showing support to people who are doing the same thing you are now...watching the people who are as good or better than they are. Or, if not showing support...at least giving the impression that you aren't looking down your nose at them."

"It's not like I'm friends with any of them. Whether I watch is irrelevant."

"Maybe you *would* be if you watched them more."

Yurio just gave her an impatient sigh, "What makes you think I want to be?"

"Cuz there's only two kinds of people you know from these events, from my observation."

"Short-lived as its been."

Nikki smiled sweetly, "...There's the people you don't know at all, and the people you do. You don't have acquaintances...it's either friend or foe, ally or enemy, with no in between." She explained,
hopping up from her seat as she put her phone away, "Maybe that's why your perception of Asahi flipped around so drastically."

One brow quirked above one emerald eye, "Explain."

"Well..."

Minako listened quietly, but didn't interrupt. There were only two other people in Vienna who knew about the developments in Hasetsu, and she knew such information could be a distraction more than it was worth. She just kept her eyes on the scoreboard and the television, trying to enjoy the performances as a fan even while standing around in the cue as a coach.

"You were openly hostile towards him for the first little while that he was around." Nikki explained, "But then something changed and you were friendly with him. There was no transition where you went from hating him to just not caring, and then being friends. You just went from zero to sixty in ten seconds flat." She went on, loosely threading her fingers together behind her back, and leaned in against her adoptive brother's side, looking up at his distant expression, "And all that happened while you on your own with him. You didn't have the bias from Yuri and Cousin Viktor tainting your opinion."

Yurio's eyes flinched slightly, but he turned towards the younger teen, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"They both left within days of Asahi getting sanctuary at Yu-Topia, after spending a weekend dealing with him in Osaka. Yuri went through a trauma that no amount of forgiveness will ever really fix. It really wasn't that long ago either that he was hurt." She pointed out, thinking back on their time in Detroit, "It's kind of weird to think about it, but...the only thing I've ever really known about either Yuri or Cousin Viktor has been when they're suffering. When I met them for the first time in Calgary, Sergio had already picked a fight and made Viktor mad, and Yuri had to step between them to get them to quit fighting. I remember how hoarse his voice was back then, so it's clear he'd either been sick or upset beforehand."

"...I wouldn't call that a fight..." Yurio contested, eyes moving away again to stare in the direction of the television, even if he wasn't specifically watching what was happening on it, "There were some warning shots, but that wasn't even an argument. That was Viktor being smarmy."

"Call it whatever you want...point was, things with us didn't get off to a smooth start. They've both done their best to be friendly with us since papa had to take us in, but it's obvious that there's still some distance there. When we showed up in Detroit, it was already after Yuri had been hurt, and so instead of seeing him okay but without his voice, he was in the hospital and barely awake from his bounce off the ice."

"What are you getting at with all this? I thought you were talking about Saito."

"They're being amiable with him because they don't want problems, the same way they were being amiable with Vikki and I." She said, framing it rather simply, "I'm a bit nervous about how they're going to feel when they find out you're actually friends with someone that hurt them."

Minako stepped in a bit closer behind the pair, "Maybe the pending apocalypse isn't the best topic of conversation before a Championship event?"

Nikki craned her head back, "You think it'll be that bad?"

"I don't know...not anymore, anyway." She shrugged, "Asahi isn't there anymore."
Both teens swiveled in place, "He's what...?"

"Yuri's parents called us earlier, while you were doing official practice."

"Where did he go?" Yurio added, "Why'd he leave? Why didn't he tell anyone?"

"Not sure on any of that." Minako said, a pang of worry to her tone, "I was really hoping he wouldn't use our absence at Euros as an opportunity to escape, but...I can't say I'm surprised by it either. What happened at All Japan was bad on all sides, not just for Yuri and Viktor. There's no excuse for what he did, but I have a hard time being angry at Asahi after finding out so much about his background."

"You've known Katsudon all his life. I'm surprised you didn't try breaking Saito's neck for what happened." Yurio huffed, leaning back on one skate where he stood, "Why didn't you?"

"...I guess, because Viktor was already mad enough for the both of us. We took care of the problem as professionally as we could, but then afterwards...I guess my anger about what he'd done devolved into morbid curiosity for why he'd done it." She explained somberly, shrugging up her shoulders a bit as she squished her hands deeper into her pockets, seeking warmth for her fingers, "By the time I got done with him, I thought that being angry at him was just going to make things worse than they already were. I started to see Asahi as being a victim, too, but more than that...as someone who deserved a chance to fix things. Not that I'm keeping score, but Viktor's made Yuri cry more than Asahi has, so I try to keep things in perspective."

"...Yeah..." Yurio nodded slightly, "My gut reaction with him was wanting to kick his colon into his throat...but he dodged and we ended up exchanging words instead of blows."

Nikki chortled a laugh under her breath, drawing a look, but nothing more.

"By the end of it, I just thought he was some dumbass who screwed up." Yurio went on, shaking his head at the absurdity of it all, "I thought back on how Viktor and Yuri both said they didn't want me to be mad at him on their behalf, when they'd done enough to try and handle it the way they wanted to... Maybe it was the wrong move to end up being friendly with him. I couldn't help but see him as some wounded animal. Wrong place, wrong time...bad outcome."

"He didn't have to put his hands on Yuri." Minako said, "He chose to do that."

"Bad decision in the heat of a bad moment. I've done my own share of those." Yurio pointed out, flexing his right hand openly, and rubbed the knuckle of his middle finger with his thumb, "If I hadn't been given the chance to get my shit straightened out, a lot of things today would be very different."

"I wonder where he went." Nikki said quietly, "He already seemed pretty lost even when the bunch of us were around, and had papa's help. Being on his own..."

"Well, he's not entirely on his own." Minako interjected, "Maybe having Hana around will keep him on the straight and narrow. Your papa's been trying to get in touch with him since we found out he'd left, too."

"Yeah, hopefully he hasn't done anything idiotic." Yurio added.

"I hope he's okay..." Nikki half-whispered.
"Wow, you really worked this thing over yesterday..." Yuri marveled, watching his partner's shoe-on-tile recreation of their revised Exhibition, "And you weren't tempted even once to jump?"

"You kidding? I was tempted the entire time." Viktor laughed, shuffling closer in place of a long glide, "It's hard to maintain limits when you feel fine, but you know that."

"I may have some minor experience with that..." Yuri smiled nervously, feeling a hand slide into his own, and raise it up to spin him 'round in place once before extending him out to the limits of their reach. He walked around slowly in a big circle as his partner stayed where he was, following the path of a death spiral, "Do you still feel like my personality's changed since then...?"

"At the time, I thought so...but the longer out we are from then, the more I think I just saw a side of you that I was told existed, but hadn't really seen yet." The Russian explained, pulling his spouse closer as the spiral would've as it concluded. He kept hold of the younger man's fingers, but spun him one last time to bring Yuri's back to his chest, bringing up their still-clasped hands as his left went around Yuri's waist, "I'd been warned before that you really hate losing. You may not know how to handle winning, but you're fiercely competitive anyway."

"...I don't know how I make any sense that way." Yuri laughed nervously, letting his husband rotate them in place. He knew they were moving much slower than they would be on the ice, but there was no hurry in the side-hall they'd borrowed. Two pairs of dark eyes watched them curiously from the base of a nearby wall, leashes tied loosely around a support pillar, "I hate losing but I'm paranoid of winning. It's a conundrum."

"No worse than being scared of another person's touch, only to say you like it most when I use my hands." Viktor teased, kissing his partner's neck where he could, "We all have traits that make no sense." He said, warm words against cool skin, "I'm sure there's things I do that just break your brain sometimes."

"Less than you think, probably."

"Oh?"

"I think the only thing that really messed with me about you was...well, realizing you wanted me." Yuri explained, cheeks going a bit pink in spite of everything else, "Complete subversion of expectations, to be sure."

"I forgive you for not noticing what I was trying to do." Viktor mused, "Would it have made it anymore obvious if I'd been with some other guy before?"

Yuri just guffawed and turned in place, putting them each chest to chest. He slid his hands through the loose open front of his partner's jacket to hug around his lower back, "I'm sure there would've been some benefit, but I've no doubt it would've mean complications in other ways."

"Complications...?" The Russian echoed, "Why would that make things complicated?"

Glancing around for any nearby ears, Yuri looked up at that confused pale face, "Remember how I made a point to avoid getting a toy that looked or felt like a woman...? Because I was worried you'd feel it and miss it, and I wouldn't be able to satisfy you anymore."

Viktor gave an uneasy smile, "Ah...yes, your ability to worry about things that I'd never even think of. You'd be scared that I'd always be comparing you to someone else."

"I already worry about that to a degree, but not for the same reasons." Yuri huffed, "But, yes, in a nutshell..."
Viktor quirked a brow and stared for a moment, but then closed his eyes and smiled, leaning forward to kiss his partner's nose, "The fact that you're not an insatiable horny-toad is probably for the better for both of us." He started, making Yuri's face glow red for his choice of words, "But it's like I've been telling you since the start; I think you're perfect exactly as you are. Your tempered modesty is enough to keep me in line, and I like it that way. You give me enough of what I want to placate me, and yet hold back so I keep wanting more. On the rare occasion that you're as thirsty as I am, it comes as a fun surprise."

"...You have a way with words, sometimes."

"My love," Viktor started again, as though a different train of thought. He stroked his partner's hair with both hands, one sliding down after the other, until those raven-black strands were slick and flat, "You already know this innately...but maybe it'll sound more convincing when it comes from someone else. There is so much more to being with someone than just the creative ways we touch each other. It's just one more layer of things added on top of all the other reasons why we're meant to be. We just connect." He explained, ceasing the smooth stroking to squish both hands together on top of Yuri's head, looking the younger man squarely in the eyes, "That's what's going to keep us together when we're both too crippled to skate anymore, and our bodies start to fail us in bed. So...while I hope that day is centuries in the future, it's still only a small part of us. Don't worry so much about how you compare to my past partners...I never got on with any of them well enough to marry them. Only you got that far. Think instead that you're the only one who could satisfy me...because you've been the best of them all."

Yuri's brows furrowed under the hands that still held his head still, but he managed an awkward smile anyway, "Viktor..."

"Exactly." The Russian mused, stealing a kiss while he was close, "Now...I just felt a buzz in my pocket. I imagine that's Yurio sending out the summons. Let's go see if Chris can hold onto his title."
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED SEVENTEEN

The kiss-and-cry was named as such because of the often-restricted range of emotions one expressed while sitting inside it. It was either excitement or devastation...usually nothing in between. However, the muted expression on the face of the Finnish skater barely seemed to change when he heard his 6th place score called out. Stoic but satisfied, perhaps, he stood up with his coach, nodded to the camera at the edge of the rink-wall, and departed.

"Wow~" Viktor mused from afar, leaning on the wall with his chin resting in one palm as his other hand helped Makkachin look over the ledge, "I can't tell if that guy's happy or sad about his score."

Yuri glanced over, but then turned his attention forward again towards Yurio, who was talking his Olympic team-jacket off, "How do the adjustments feel that Nikki did? Are you more comfortable now?"

"A bit, yeah..." The teen answered, not noticing his pseudo-sibling's sagely nodding next to him, "Boots are still a bit tight though, but it's not as bad as it was yesterday."

"We'll sort out your skates first thing after we get back home." Minako suggested, taking the jacket and blade-guards from her athlete, "You'll have time to break them in before the Games. For now, try not to let yourself get distracted by it all. You've only just noticed the feeling. It's nothing anyone else can actually see though."

"Yeah..."

The announcer's voice echoed through the arena, and all eyes were up at the big screen, watching the cameras panning onto them.

"Davai, Yuri." Viktor teased, swiveling his position behind his poodle's frame as he looked back to where the teen was standing.

"Fight the good fight, Yuri." Came a less-expected voice.

Yurio practically spun to look behind himself, and spotted a familiar face on a small screen - tired, but awake enough to watch the event live anyway, "O-Otabek."

Nikki smirked deviously behind where she held her phone up in front of her nose, "He said he was watching, so... Good luck!"

He just about had a coronary event just from the sight of it, but Yurio stammered an acknowledgment and then poured onto the ice like an angry pile of clothes spilling out of an over-full closet.

Yuri just watched him go in surprise, arms half-up but lowering as he realized his offer of a send-off hug had been missed, "...Oh...okay... I guess I'll just...stay here."

"Are you trying to sabotage him?" Minako scolded, looming over the silver, "You know he doesn't know what to think of you talking to his friend."

Nikki just looked surprised, and glanced at her phone quickly before muttering something and closing the FaceTime window, using the cover of the cheering crowd to keep her words a mystery.
She put the phone away again though and looked up innocently, "If Yuri had his own phone on him, Otabek would've called him on it instead. This was the only way he could say good luck. I don't see why everyone's making such a big deal out of it. I thought I was being nice."

"Yura already thinks you have a crush on Otabek. This just reinforces it." Minako explained, about to continue, but found her words cut off before she could speak them.

"I already told him that I don't-"

"Me thinks the lady doth protest too much." Viktor hummed, still holding Makkachin up with one arm as he raised the other, and slid behind his husband's back as Yuri approached. His words just made Nikki's face go red, "But...maybe it's not actually you. It's probably late in Almaty, right? But he's still awake. Maybe it's him."

"Quit making stuff up."

The skating duo just laughed and looked out into the rink where Yurio was taking position.

"He's at a nightclub right now being a DJ-person! He'd be awake anyway!" Nikki went on, even though her words went largely unheard by then. The music of Yurio's Free Program rattled through the arena like a crack of thunder, violins breaking through the cheers. The teases just left her fuming in her tiny helpless frustration.

By the end of the Free Program, only three things that were certain.

One, that Chris would successfully defend his title, and claim European Gold for the second year running. Two, that despite the upset of a sudden growth spurt, Yurio did secure his place on the podium. Finally, three, one should never presume to know what every athlete's capabilities are, else you'll find yourself standing in the Bronze position by half a point to an unexpected new Personal Best.

Yurio could only sulk indignantly where he stood on the lowest tier, holding his flowers and Bronze medal by its royal blue lanyard as the first round of photos were taken. Next to him on his left, Chris stood proudly on the central tier, and on the opposite side, surprising practically everyone, was Emil, rather than Georgi. The Czech skater was especially proud of himself, and once the three of them were motioned to crowd together on the top level for some closer group-shots, Yurio resolved to let the crankiness go and just be glad he was up there at all. He still didn't look terribly happy about it, but he wasn't being a sourpuss anymore.

Once the medaling ceremony was done and the victory lap taken, a few more big photos were done on the ice itself, and finally, the last word from the event hosts was announced so everyone could take their leave. Yurio rubbed his socked feet once he got his blades off, trying to unsquash his toes and calm the red and shiny marks - soon-to-be blisters - at the corners of his heels.

"We're gonna start heading back." He heard Yuri saying somewhere nearby. Yurio looked up to see him and Viktor talking to Minako; Jiro was collapsed into sleep against his human's shoulder, "Are you guys okay to walk to the rental on your own?"

"It's practically around the corner," She answered, reaching up one hand to rub the pup's noggin lightly, "We'll go whenever Yura's ready and packed-up."

"Have a good night then, everyone." Yuri added, hoisting Jiro up a bit higher against his shoulder. He glanced over at the two teens, and raised his one free arm up to get his goodbye hug from the first
of them, "Congrats again on your medal. We'll see you tomorrow night."

Yurio rose up to return the gesture, "Thanks." He started, looking over to Viktor then as well, "You two still owe me a fancy dinner. Don't forget."

"We won't. We'll text you." Viktor reassured, squishing his tired poodle's cheeks before he rose back up to his full height. He watched a moment as Yuri pondered extending the invitation for a goodbye hug to his cousin, and wasn't surprised when it eventually came, though Nikki seemed to be. She jumped in for the quick exchange - cheered up a bit from the prior mean teases - and waved goodbye to them as the pair started to move off.

The air outside in the late night had become colder, but the sky had cleared, taking the falling snows with it. Even with all the light-pollution from being in the middle of a huge city, many of the stars could be seen. Yuri watched them for a little while as they walked across the long bridge, far enough away from any other pedestrians to avoid being harangued by fans, but close enough to hear the crunch of their boots on the snow and the whisper of private conversations.

"It's been a while since I've been so absent-minded about a competition." Viktor commented, drawing his partner's attention away from their surroundings, "I can barely remember much about it at this point."

"Coming into it the way we did, I'm just glad we could enjoy any part of it." Yuri agreed, "In spite of the hiccups though, this really was a lot of fun. I'll be thinking about the ball for a long time after we leave here, and all the touristy stuff we got to do that wouldn't have been possible if you were competing." He said, offering a light nudge with one elbow, "Knowing that you planned for that ball when you were still in the RSF though, I can't imagine how you planned to compete after staying up until nearly dawn."

"Don't forget so easily what I told you in Moscow last year," The Russian answered, "The frequent pre-competition naps we've taken this season have never been rare for me."

"Ah...yeah, I remember. You said you used to always sleep until right up to the last minute." Yuri recalled, "My mind was elsewhere at that particular moment though."

"Oh? Where was it? You were barely coherent at the time."

"Mired in the existential panic of the fact that you were lying on top of me at the moment." Yuri laughed, "And that you hadn't set an alarm so we wouldn't just sleep through the competition. Mostly that you were on top of me though."

Viktor smiled, "You were comfortable. I couldn't pass up the opportunity."

"I couldn't pass up an opportunity either." Yuri said, though his tone seemed to change a little as he spoke the words, "I want to say something...and make it be the last unsettling thing either of us has to deal with before we go back home."

The Russian's attention was laser-focused, "...I have a feeling I won't like where this goes."

"It's about the house in St. Petersburg."

"Ah..."

Yuri paused for a moment, shifting Jiro's weight from one shoulder to another; the motion made the pup grumble a little before closing his eyes again. Trying to find the right words, Yuri eased on as gently as he could, "When you snuck out of our room that night to go see it, and I made you take me
with you if you had to see it at all...I was pretty nervous about what we'd find. I didn't want you to have to see it on your own, whatever it was."

"Mhm?"

"Seeing the whole place burnt to ash and charcoal was pretty hard to take. I'd already seen a lot of terrible things since we first moved to Russia last year...I was starting to wonder how someone could come out of the place with such an optimistic view on life like you did. Russia was amazing to you, right up until the minute it wasn't. It really broke my heart. For a while, I internalized it, like it was my fault...but you've told me so many times not to feel that way, so I really tried not to. But that old paranoia came back anyway, and I started to see details in that wreckage that made me start to question the whole thing."

Viktor nodded wordlessly, clasping his hand a bit tighter where it cupped over his husband's opposite shoulder.

"It was already absurd that it burned down at all, but I gave it the benefit of the doubt, since it had been unoccupied for so long...maybe something short-circuited." Yuri continued, "Dwellings are supposed to protect their internal structures from the elements by always having the inside be a certain warm temperature. No one was there to keep the heat on, and no one was there to let the faucets drip during freezes. There's plenty that could've gone wrong while no one was looking."

"...Why though? It survived all that time before." Viktor wondered, "Mimi went there to check on it after NHK and reported nothing awry."

"NHK was before the Final though. That just adds to why I think someone put it to the torch." Yuri explained, "But the thing that really made me question whether it was an accident or not, was the fact that I thought I could see the color of spray-paint on one of the exterior walls, where the fire hadn't burnt it all away."

"...I see."

"But that just made me question it further. Why would someone vandalize your house, only to burn it down after? I always thought that the point of vandalizing something was, in itself, the defacing that was intended. Destroying it defeats the purpose of mocking it with graffiti."

Viktor could feel his jaw clenching a little. The lights of the Arcotel on the other side of the road did little to make him feel better.

"But the more I thought about it, the more I started to wonder...what if the fire was meant to get rid of the vandalism?" Yuri offered, pausing a moment to let his partner catch up mentally, "Maybe someone set it ablaze to stop you from ever having to see what was there before."

"What are you suggesting?"

"We were harassed and heckled before we ever left the city. The people who came after us didn't really get much out of it though. They couldn't get into the camper where I was, and you chased them off anyway. Maybe they took out their frustration on your house, and messed it up the way they couldn't mess us up."

"...Oh."

"No one has said anything about it though. No one knew we had gone to Russia until we told Chris on the way out...and Yakov."
"You're not suggesting that Yakov burned my house down."

Yuri's brow furrowed a bit. "That's exactly what I'm suggesting."

"When would he have even had time though? How could he have known to bother looking?"

"He told us... He said he recognized you in the video, and was already trying to get hold of us before we even got back into town. He knew we were in Russia, he saw the welcome we got there...maybe he considered what those hecklers would do after getting sent packing."

"You must've asked him about it earlier. You already know the answer then... There's no 'maybe' he did anything."

Yuri sighed, a fog of breath escaping from him, "...You're right... I did ask him about it. And...I was right... My hunch is exactly what happened."

Viktor slowed his steps until he'd stopped entirely, eyes cast down towards the walkway, "What was written on my house that was so bad that Yakov had to burn it down? Why was he so sure he had to?"

"He wouldn't tell me what was on the walls," Yuri explained, "He said that if he told me, it would defeat the purpose of making it disappear in the first place."

"...Right."

"He just said that he had a feeling you'd want to see the place before leaving. Knowing what happened to us, he went to see it himself, before we could. He..." Yuri said, his words trailing a little, "...His fears were confirmed when he got there. The neighbors were talking about it outside when he showed up, complaining about the incident having happened earlier on. The police took so long getting there that the vandals were gone already, so they just left it alone to deal with later. Yakov decided to deal with it himself...and since he had your spare keys from forever ago, he let himself in. He set a few really small fires on the wood floors and hoped one would take, but long enough after he'd left that no one would suspect anything. By the time anyone noticed and called the fire department, the place was already too far gone. The water blasts finished what the fire didn't. ...It was already gone before we ever went to meet with him."

"I see."

A cold chill breezed through. Makkachin whined a little, yawning sleepily.

"He did it to spare you." Yuri tried to explain, "He may have to place a two-face now, since he still works for the organization that cut you out...but he still cares a lot about you. You know he'd do anything for you if he had the power to make a difference...like helping me get through to you after our fight."

"I guess so..."

Watching the look on his partner's face change from confusion to concern, then to not knowing what to feel, Yuri wanted to do something. He nudged his puppy into a hazy state and put him down onto the ground to free up his arms, and wedged them under Viktor's to hug him, "I wanted you to know... I don't know if it...makes things better or worse. Maybe you would've preferred that I never brought it up. I'm sure there's a thousand other things you'd rather think about than what we left behind."

"Sure..." Viktor agreed tepidly, returning the hug over his spouse's shoulders, "But I guess, if I'm
going to know about it at all, it makes sense that you'd tell me now. Late enough to not spoil the competition, but not so late that we take it home with us."

"Our Exhibition tomorrow can fully prove to Russia that nothing they've done to us will bring us down...because we know exactly all the things they've tried. They can't beat us. They have no power over us, either."

"Yeah." He nodded, turning his face inward to feel the warmth about his partner's neck, and drew a long breath there. He didn't care about the people walking by periodically. When he pulled up again, he pressed their brows together for a few seconds, and then nodded and pulled back, "Hopefully that'll be the last time anyone tries to stick it to me like this. I'm at a point where their efforts are making me numb to the disappointment. This is just...getting petty now."

"The best way we can get them back is to always show a united front. Being happy together in spite of everything else would just burn them severely."

"I think we can manage that." He agreed, giving a tired smile, "Especially since it's real, rather than just some show we're putting on."

"Exactly." Yuri said, feeling brighter already, "Let's finally get back then. I'm frozen solid and I need my Viktor to warm me up."

"We should hurry then~"
The cold of the winter night and the remnants of the rink were peeled away with each layer of scarf, jacket, and glove. The pups were quick to settle in and go to sleep, sorting out their blanket-nest on the floor - spinning in place like cats at times - before finally lying down and closing their eyes. Jiro had long-ago passed out, but his tiny body made the motions anyway, as though unconsciously going onward via autopilot.

With winter gear stowed away for the night, and shoes kicked off, Yuri plunked down onto the foot of their wide bed, rubbing his eyes in the heels of his hands. Viktor stowed the backpack with their unused skated into the closet, and slid forward to lift the glasses that had been left next to his partner's hip where he sat; he crawled over top of the bed to set them on a nearby nightstand instead. When he came back, Yuri had only halfway realized his glasses had even been moved, but just yawned instead of asking questions.

"Are you even awake enough for a night-cap?" The Russian wondered quietly, turning to sit sideways against the edge of the bed, left leg crossed to curve around the younger man's seat, the right going straight across Yuri's lap. Viktor leaned in to kiss the edge of his husband's shoulder as he slid his hands forward, clasping his fingers together over the subtle curve of the man's waist, pulling him closer, "Or did our late-night adventures throw off your sleep-cycle?"

"No worse than if we'd just slept in all day." He answered, tilting his head against Viktor's shoulder, eyes closed, "If you want to pull out a bottle of the stuff we brought with us though, I'll have a glass."

"You're making me rethink it anyway...I'm already comfortable."

Yuri huffed a laugh and looked up slightly, "Same. I still feel the chill from outside. It's like the cold went right through me."

"I can tell." Viktor mused, relaxing for a moment with his cheek to his husband's brow, "Even your clothes are still cold. Better get rid of them."

Only somewhat grudgingly, Yuri sighed and agreed, pushing off of his comfortable warm-spot so he could raise his arms over his head. Viktor tugged at every few inches of his sweater and pulled it up carefully, hearing a few crackles of static as it came away. His undershirt came next, and between the two, Yuri's hair was left rather fluffed. Viktor's skin was still quite cold though, and Yuri's thin frame squished into itself a bit when those fingers pressed to his stomach again. He laughed at the absurdity of his big flinch, and felt that hand warming up against him, sliding up the front of his chest until it cupped around his neck and jaw, pulling his head to turn slightly. The warmth of a kiss met him there, and he hummed his relief into it, feeling the rest of his tight frame relaxing.

"Mh... You're really tense." Viktor commented, sliding his hand back down again, fingers curling around ribs as his thumb settled into the groove beneath his partner's sternum, "You can let it go. There's nothing left to stress about."

"Seems like there's always something to stress about..."

"Maybe, but-" He countered, pressing into another soft kiss, speaking the words against his
husband's lips, "There's nothing to stress about here. Let me melt your worries away along with the cold."

"Hmm... Maybe I'll need a bit of that wine after all then."

Viktor smiled, "Something to warm you from the inside out, while I'm warming you from the outside in?"

"Sounds pleasant." Yuri huffed a laugh, and briefly mourned the feeling of his spouse disassembling from him to stand up. He drew a long breath as he watched Viktor move back towards their many suitcases, and rummaged around in one until a particular green-glass bottle was found, as well as a white box with four wine glasses packed inside.

Viktor pulled two of them out, and put the box back where he'd found it before taking the glasses to the bathroom. A quick wash, drying them with one of the new and unused towels, he then returned and collected the bottle once again, taking the three items to the bar-like counters nearby. He quickly uncorked the wine with a corkscrew from a drawer, prying the bit of spongy wood from the glass neck until it popped, and the bottle let out a subtle fog from within. He lifted his eyes from the small circular opening when he saw Yuri moving around in his peripheral vision, lunging clumsily for the remote control to the television. He smiled as the sound came on, and Yuri turned it down a little just to give the room a bit of ambiance before standing up to start turning lights off.

The room dimmed from its original brightness to just half of it, and with one more lamp turned off, was more dark than lit. With the pale glow of the television coming into and out of brighter imagery, the walls flickered as though in white fire-light.

"Trying to set the mood?" Viktor wondered, pouring some of the Riesling into their glasses.

"The silence was deafening." Yuri answered, pulling back the blankets before taking a moment to stretch. Slate eyes were keen onto his pale frame and wine nearly overflowed, but Viktor caught it just in time, gulping a big swig to even the two levels out. Yuri heard the sudden slurp and glanced over, but didn't quite see what had happened before his eyes opened, "Did you just drink half your glass?"

Viktor puffed a breath, "Of course not." He explained, a twinkle in one eye as he handed a glass forward, "I drank half yours."

"Well, that's hardly fair." Yuri quipped, accepting the offered cup with one hand, and reached forward to take the second in the other.

Viktor blinked at him, still holding his hand up as though the glass were perched within it, and watched as his partner back-ended the flute until half of it was gone, and put the cup back where it had been a moment before...only to then drink half of his own right after. Yuri coughed slightly as the bubbly and bitter aftertaste suddenly caught him, and Viktor gave a nervous smile, "You haven't eaten anything in a few hours. Drinking like that is going to leave you tipsy in two minutes flat."

"Maybe that's how I want it." The younger figure answered, clearing his throat before taking another big sip from his wine, "This much won't leave me brain-blinded, but I want to be able to loosen up...I don't want to take anything negative home with us. There's enough waiting for us to deal with as it is."

"...Can't say I disagree with you." Viktor agreed, cocking his brows up a bit before raising what remained of his glass, "A toast then, to a better tomorrow, and some fun tonight."
Both drinks were finished with one last big sip, and Viktor took the two glasses to set aside. His sweater, and the t-shirt he wore under it, quickly came off as he followed his husband to the uncovered part of the bed. Standing beside it though, rather than getting in right away, the Russian slipped his hands to his partner's waist and held him there. He pulled Yuri closer, pressing the warmth of their exposed skin together, and noused the man's lips gently, slowly, before kissing them. Yuri's hands slid up the length of his arms, then over his shoulders to hug around them loosely, pressing in closer for the heat, and the taste. Viktor wanted more of it though, and he opened his mouth a little more, coaxing his husband's tongue out. With a bit of a nibble and a light suck on it, he could still sense the flavor of that wine from a minute before. Hands pulled back, fingers grazing the crests of each hip before slipping within Yuri's waistband, deftly undoing buttons and zippers to let the denim material fall away. Before Yuri had a chance to return the favor though, Viktor pulled him in closer again, delving deep for that sweet flavor as his hands slid under the black elastic, gripping at a palm-full on each side.

Yuri felt himself rise up onto his toes, practically lifted up by both of those hands on his backside. The simple reminder of what it felt like to have someone else's skin pressed against him there made the remnants of his clothes feel itchy and bothersome. Without a second thought, he lowered his arms from his husband's shoulders and pressed his thumbs into the elastic band, pushing the material away entirely before the back of his legs touched the bedside. He moved quickly, between new kisses, to be rid of Viktor's remaining clothes as well, wanting nothing more than to feel the heat and velvet-soft frame pressed against his own. It was a slightly awkward maneuver to be pushing clothing away while still wanting to keep on kissing at the same time, but before long, Yuri was rewarded for his efforts by the feeling of those warm hands lifting him up, pulling him against his partner's athletic core, and then hoisted up onto the open bed. Viktor's weight was a welcome pressure over him, in the immediate absence of two certain appendages that were still working on rising to the occasion.

"...I'm starting to feel it..." Yuri commented, "The wine's already gone to my head..."

"I told you," Viktor laughed, kissing at his partner's chest and neck as he worked his way back up again, "Two minutes flat."

"In another two, I'm going to be a lump...totally relaxed and one with the moment." Yuri added, gasping a vocal breath as he felt his husband's frame line-up with his own, pressing into him rather deliberately, "I want to feel everything..." He whispered.

"You're super sensitive when you're tipsy." The Russian commented, relishing in the sight of his partner's reactions to him, even as he moved off slightly to the side so he could hold up his weight on one elbow rather than both.

"And a bit more courageous."

"Oh?" He huffed a laugh and pressed in for another kiss, letting his free hand slide down the younger man's waist and hip, pulling that leg over himself so he could wedge his own between them. He gave one more kiss before pulling up to reach for the blankets, and grabbed them to bring them over, settling in again once they were covered, "What kind of courage do you still need to drum up with me?"

"Every kind."

Getting back to the pseudo-apartment was, in its own weird way, more harrowing that taking the ice
earlier on had been. Phones had gone quiet, and Yurio wasn't even sure if at least his performance had been watched. He put a hand on the front of his chest, feeling the Bronze nestled under many layers of sweater, hoodie, and winter coat. Seeing the lamp posts light the way back only seemed to be like a count-down to that moment, too. He huffed a cold sigh into his scarf and squished himself inside the coat.

"You're super quiet." Minako commented, looking over at the blonde, Nikki between them, "I hope you're not brooding about the turn-out of the competition."

"No point." He answered grimly, "I couldn't have done any better than I did, in this condition. Giacometti and Nekola skated better than me. That's all there is to it."

"Well, this whole motley crew could respect your headspace a bit better." She retorted. Though not specifically at Nikki, the teen did catch the hint and lowered her eyes a bit, "I'll talk to Mik about how we can help with that. I don't think we'll make Viktoria come with us to the Winter Games, so that should avoid some upset when we're there."

"It's a month-long competition. You can't possibly be there the entire time anyway. I bet even the competitors get tired after a while. They probably just come for their events and then leave again."

"If only that were such an easy suggestion." Minako countered, "All athletes are expected to be there for the Opening Ceremonies, for the big parade...and then, at least for figure skating, you have events scattered all throughout. The Short Program and Free Skate are several days apart. The Team Event is in there somewhere. Then you have the Exhibition towards the end, and the whole Olympic Closing Ceremonies, too."

"I know. We talked about it already."

"We didn't make any decisions about it though." She explained, "We really need to. It's only a few weeks out."

"If the old man can really get us onto that fast-travel pass so we don't have to spend half our day in customs each time we get on a plane, then we'll just come back between events. Make each competition a day-trip or something."

"You don't want to stay and see any of the other stuff that goes on?"

"Of course I do, but I'm suddenly not entirely in control of my own schedule anymore." Yurio countered, "I can only make suggestions now."

"Well, what do you think you'd be doing if you were still training with Yakov?"

"I'd be there from start to finish, whether I liked it or not. He's got more events to be there for than I do."

"And did you ever ask Viktor and Yuri what their plans were?"

"No. Why would it matter though, really?" Yurio wondered, crossing the street while it was clear, "They both play for a different team. They'll be staying in different housing. Maybe I could stay close to Otabek, but definitely not them."

"Why not?" Minako quirked a brow.

Yurio just gave the woman a look, "Cuz they have sex with each other. Often. They're probably doing it right now."
The ballerina deadpanned him, but it didn't stop the rose color manifesting on her cheeks anyway, "Fine, so you can't spend the night with them. I'm sure they have plans to go see the countryside or something. There's going to be plenty of people they know around, like at the Final or Worlds. They'll all be hanging out together at some point or another."

Emerald eyes gawked back through the cold, "I can't tell if you're trying to pawn me off onto someone so you can leave me there."

"I'm trying to think about how we can let you attend the Games the way you want." She retorted, "It's just hard to know what our options are when so many other people are involved. In a way, it's just not the right other people."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

They turned into the small road that lead into the walkway to the door.

"If you were still with Yakov, I'd know who was supposed to be keeping an eye on you all the time. But you're with me now, and I have a bunch of things to consider beyond just you. Asahi already says he plans to stay the whole time, but that doesn't really solve any of our problems. You and him may get along with each other, but he seems to like being alone, so I can't exactly ask him to be your chaperone if you stay when the rest of us go back to Hasetsu. You already made your point about Yuri and Viktor, and we don't know Otabek's plans-"

Yurio shot a look back at Nikkita, but she squeaked and looked away to avoid it. She pulled the front of her hat down over her eyes after that, taking hold of Minako's arm to guide her the right direction as they approached the door.

Minako grumbled slightly, "Nikkita Rozovsky, do you know Otabek's plans for the Olympic Games?"

"NOPE. NO SIRIE BOB. SURE DO NOT."

Both older figures just cocked a brow at her in disbelief, and Yurio shook his head as he turned to grab for the doorknob. Almost expectedly, it was locked, and he pounded on the panel to let the occupants know to let them in. It seemed that Mikhail was already on the way, as the door clicked open just two seconds later, and the awkward trio stepped inside.

"So how'd it go? Did you win?" The elder wondered, closing the door again behind them to lock it again, "Yuri?"

"I'm taking a shower and going to bed." He answered curtly, barely kicking his shoes off before taking everything else into the bathroom with him.

Mikhail looked at him go until the door closed and the sound of the water started running, and he looked back at the ladies next to him still disassembling from their winter assortments, "...Was it that bad?"

"He got Bronze, papa." Nikki answered quietly.

"Oh! That's still really good! Why doesn't he look happy about it? He was so worried about not winning anything at all before." The Russian wondered, glancing between them, "...Anyone?"

"I'm kind of tired, too, hun." Minako said, "I think I'm going to change. If the girls want to stay up, we can just put the roll-away into the kitchen and close the door between them. That's still the plan, right? That all the kids stay together tonight?"
"Yeah, but-"

"That's good." She said, not meaning to cut him off, but didn't back off when she realized she had. She just put her coat away and gave a lazy sliding hug as she moved around him to the bedroom, "I'll come out again in a minute."
Chapter 519

CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED NINETEEN

Viktor fell back into the pillows, hair askew, and stringy from moisture. He panted for breath, beads of sweat clinging to his frame, and he looked up to the figure looming over him. One of his legs was lifted and moved, twisting him partly onto his side, while the other was partly sat upon. He felt the back of his thigh press against his partner's chest, but then his knee bent and changed his whole posture. The expected pressure came against him after that, but he could still feel that almost-universal hesitation behind it.

Towels had been laid out over the bedsheets after an accidental over-squeeze on one of the lube bottles. They found it impossible to take the cap off and put some of the excess back inside, especially as buzzed as they both were, so instead opted to just use it everywhere. Yuri enjoyed a long, slippery back massage, and returned the favor afterwards, until Viktor flipped around underneath of him and began the more 'sexy' part of their sexy-times. Yuri had completely relaxed by then though, as he'd intended to be when he started to imbibe. Drinking on an empty stomach had done more than just help Yuri feel more at east though; it put him right to sleep.

Viktor glanced up in confusion when he sensed that Yuri had stopped moving. Hands that held his leg up started to slide down, and even though their collapse had jarred Yuri awake again slightly, it wasn't enough to keep him there. The Russian watched his exhausted partner fall asleep at the wheel and crash. Yuri's head started to slump down, bobbing once or twice in a well-intended effort to rouse again, but he lost the fight and started to lean as well. Viktor sighed a sad smile and pulled free, pushing upright to guide his spouse down against his chest, "Come here, my love," He whispered, hands on his husband's shoulders to turn his back towards him, "I'll help you finish another way."

"Mmmmbiktoru..."

"Ah, now I know you're fading fast...your accent is slipping."

"S...sorrimasen..."

Viktor shook his head slightly at the Englipanese being mumbled to him, and helped find a more comfortable position. He kissed his partner's neck and nibbled lightly at the nearest ear as his hands roamed.

"What about you...?" Yuri managed to ask in his haze, "I was...trying to..."

"I finished a little while ago, my love." Viktor answered, "That's why you went to prop my leg against yourself. I think you intended to finish the same way."

"...Oh...hic..."

" You like it better this way though, right?" He wondered, "When I use my hands."

"M-mhmm..."

Viktor smiled again as his husband flinched and gasped, feeling fingers go around him. Though Yuri's eyes had closed again, his breaths and muffled gasps kept him awake, until his exhausted body gave over to the Russian's touch and surrendered. It was hardly the explosive end that Viktor had been hoping for, but Yuri didn't seem to have the energy for such anyway. The younger figure grunted slightly between clenched teeth, but then relaxed again, slumping his head back as sleep
came for him again.

"...I don't...want to come to Euros again..." Yuri mumbled quietly, and nodded off.

Viktor stopped himself as he was wiping his hands on one of their many towels, blinking at his spouse in confusion. Yuri was officially down for the count though, and offered no explanation or follow-up to his half-conscious confession.

It left Viktor rather awake though.

The livingroom had been reassembled and rearranged for the night, moving the big wooden table aside to make room for the couch to become a pull-out queen-size bed, and the roll-away. Yurio's normally-golden hair was now a greyish dull straw color where it laid out on his pillow, still wet from his earlier shower. Nikki's was more like liquid steel than silver where it poked out from the towel wrapped around her head. She listened to the sound of the shower going in the room next-door, eyes on her phone screen as the noise cut out and the water started to drain away.

Otabek:
Yuri doesn't hate you. He used to be mean to everyone, even his fans. It's part of his personality.

Me:
'Used to be' is the problem though. He hasn't been like that in a while. Every time your name comes up though, he gives me this look like he wants me to drop dead.

Otabek:
I can talk him down if you want. He's just jealous and territorial, and a bit immature still. I've had to protect him from his worst impulses in the past, but it's not so easy if I'm not actually there.

Me:
I'm not even sure if he'd listen to you, BECAUSE you're not actually here.

Otabek:
So what would you have me do?

Me:
...I really don't know. I hadn't really thought about you doing anything at all. It's not your fault. I didn't think he'd care if I stayed in touch with you after he introduced us all at the Final.

Otabek:
It's part of him being territorial and immature. I'm almost certain he would've been like this after Viktor decided to stay in Japan. He complained bitterly last year when Viktor returned to Russia with Yuri-then-Katsuki. I guess he thought things would go back to how they were 'supposed' to be once Viktor was home. Plisetsky doesn't adapt to change very well.

Me:
No kidding... There's this guy in Japan that papa was helping and Yuri got really mad about it, like the other guy was stealing from him.

Otabek:
Not surprised. Yuri kind of operates under this idea that 'what's mine is mine and what's yours is mine, too.' He's not used to sharing or being a member of a group. He always has to be the outsider...better than everyone, more important, and everyone else is a worthless peasant. I'm sure he'll settle down. You said he just started a growth-spurt so that's probably weighing on his
mind, and he's taking out his frustrations on the easiest thing.

"Oh my god are you still talking to him?" Yurio grumble-barked, twisting over on his singleton bed to gape at her from the other side of the table, "I can hear your thumbs tapping on the screen from here!"

Nikki didn't say a word. She stared over the top of her phone for a moment before setting it down, and reached to untie the knot holding the towel like a turban on her head. With her steely hair tumbling loose, she pushed up from the edge of the bed and left the room, passing through the olive-green doorway and into the kitchen.

Yurio gawked until the teen was out of sight, then roughly fell back down to his pillow, staring daggers at the wall in front of him.

Fingers started combing through the rope-like grey-black waves, but Nikki could go no further with the door to the bathroom still closed; her comb was on the counter inside. She sighed and turned around, looking at the chairs tucked neatly under the pull-out table up against the wall. Just before reaching for the back of one though, the bathroom door behind her opened, and she turned back around to spot her father coming out, one towel still lazily set over his head, his frame garbed loosely in a plain t-shirt and ultra-dad-mode plaid sweatpants. She saw the surprised look on his face to see her right there, but she just made a B-line for the counter to find her comb in an effort to make a hasty escape.

Mikhail wasn't that clueless though, and caught her easily with a single arm as she tried to squeeze past him, "You're wiggly, but not that wiggly." He mused.

The comb was just out of reach, but Nikki relented under the lasso-like arm around her small frame, "I just wanna get my thing so I can-"

"You've been acting weird since you all got back," The elder noted, looking at the top of his daughter's head over one shoulder, "What's the matter?"

She held still for a moment, but then made a quick lunge to grab her comb finally, and found herself free of the snare. She grabbed the bundle of damp hair from behind her back and pulled it forward, half-intending to brush it out, but stopped, "...I used to have tons of friends. Now I barely have any, and the few I do have are causing me problems." She explained, "Why can't I just be friendly with someone without everyone coming up with stupid stories about it or getting angry?"

Mikhail gaped for a moment, but then pulled the towel off his head to hold it around his shoulders instead, leaving his hair unkempt and stringy, "...Beka again?"

She nodded reluctantly.

"Sweetie..." He started quietly, reaching forward to slowly take the comb into his own hand. He looked at it briefly, but then moved to his daughter's side to start coming her hair out for her, "I can't speak for everyone, but...you're entering into a period of your life where the relationships between ladies and gents gets a bit complicated. Most guys can't just be regular-friends with girls anymore. Unless it's in an entirely professional setting, or there's a significant age gap, or the guy is gay...there's usually something more bubbling under the surface of any male-female interactions. It's also unfortunately true that guys don't mature as fast as girls. Most of us are effectively braindead until our 30s. I know I was. But, because I know that about myself, and that it's true for most other guys, too, as a father, I'm hyper-vigilant of any testicle-owners you talk to. You're cute and super smart, and any man will be lucky to have you, but the first one is always an experiment, and at least for my sake, barely-15 isn't the best time to be hitting-up older men."
"But I'm no-"

"I know, I know, he's like 21 or something...not really an older man but older than you by a good chunk, and slightly inappropriate at your age. And by 'slightly' I mean 'super.'"

"I don't even mean that." She protested, turning in place as much to see her father as to let him have easy access to the other half of her hair, "He's just...nice to me. Cousin Viktor and his Yuri are always doing their own thing, and-..." She stopped for a moment, choosing her words carefully, "Our Yuri is either practicing or he's with us, so it's different. I can talk about stupid stuff with Otabek and he doesn't make fun of me or say I'm stupid. It's hard to do that with everyone I knew back in Banff cuz we're on the other side of the planet from them. I'm always playing catch-up, replying to messages they sent while I was asleep and vice versa. Otabek's awake at the same time though. He's...the only friend I have now. I wish people would stop giving me such a hard time about it."

"Beka was Yura's first real friend." Mikhail explained, still keeping his voice down, "It must feel like he's competing for the guy's attention now that you're talking to him, too."

"He seems to manage just fine with other people whose attention is split." Nikki argued glibly, frowning at the marble bowl that acted as a sink, "And I'm not the only person Otabek talks to, either."

"But you're the one Yura sees doing it. Maybe try including him in your conversations or something." Mikhail recommended, hand following after each comb-pass, flattening damp silver hair as it started to curl at the tips, "Even if he declines a group-chat invitation, you can't say you didn't try."

"Yeah..."

"And it'll bring my heart-rate down a bit to know that it's a group thing."

"He was dating that Russian lady before. I talked to him then, too."

"And if I remember right, they're not dating now."

Nikki grumbled slightly, and puffed a loose strand of hair away from her eyes, "Nothing I say will convince you we're just friends."

"Nope. Sorry. It'll always be at the back of my mind." He answered, handing back the comb now that the teen's hair was all sorted out, "I'll try not to be intrusive. Remember that I'm just trying to watch out for you. I'm not trying to ruin anything. I'm just...like the goofy dog in the picture you showed me the other day. A labradog labrandoing what a labradog labrado. Or...labra-dad in this case."

"...Right..."

"Go on and try to get some rest then. You're not doing anything wrong. It's just life." The elder suggested, sliding a hand behind his daughter's shoulder to usher her back towards the olive-green door, "Try as you might, you can't please everyone...though you do a pretty good job anyway."

"I'm not used to anyone being upset at me like this..."

"And that's why it hurts." Mikhail nodded, "All things pass with time and understanding. Try what I suggested at some point and see if that doesn't help alleviate tension."
"Okay..." Nikki agreed tepidly, turning in place to give and get a goodnight hug, "Thanks papa. G'night."

"Night, honey." He replied, watching her go back to the livingroom. He waited for the last lamp to turn off before following the walls to the other side of the kitchen, and into the antechamber where the door outside and the door to the bedroom were. He checked the lock for the 18th time to make sure it was activated, and then finally went to the bedroom itself, finding Minako there in bed on her phone, "Anything interesting?" He wondered.

Grey-blue eyes peeked past the device as the door closed and the room fell to silence, save the Russian's shuffling where the heels of his pants dragged behind each step, "Normally I'd say sure...but it isn't like it used to be for me." She answered, shutting the phone down before leaning forward against her upturned knees, "I just feel strangely detached from it all now. Like I can't be a fan the way I used to be." She sighed, resting an elbow on the crook between her knees, and rested her jaw in her palm. She watched her partner climb under the covers next to her, "Am I weird?"

"Maybe it's different because you got a look behind the curtain." He suggested, "You're working in it now, not just admiring from afar."

"...I guess so." She nodded, pivoting on her palm to look at the phone in her other hand, "I thought it would be like the ballet."

"The players are a bit different in figure skating than ballet, I bet." Mikhail offered, wiggling down until he could pull the blankets up under his chin, and then turned onto his side to look up at his partner, "Do you want me to look for a coach to take over? Someone who doesn't mind relocating to Hasetsu."

Minako hesitated for a moment, but then shook her head, and turned to put her phone on the charger on the nightstand, and cut the lights. When she turned back, the room was pitch dark, and she couldn't see an inch in front of her face. Fingers brushed against her cheek lightly, and proximity came back to her, "I want to think I can manage. That I'll get into the right frame of mind and not be distracted by wanting to be a fan still. Both of the skaters I'm supposed to be responsible for have just had a bunch of upheaval in their lives and I want to be the thing that helps settle everything down. But all the mistakes I made this weekend, getting the schedule wrong and not knowing what to do until practically the last minute...I just feel like I'm making things worse. I can't be a liability to him - them - going forward."

"So far, just him. I haven't heard back from the other one."

"I hope he's okay..."

"I'll keep trying."

"How'd things turn out with Viktoria?" Minako asked, eyes starting to adjust to the dark.

"Unresolved. I told her we should talk but she never had anything to say." Mikhail answered, his tone a bit forlorn, "I don't know if I'm doing it wrong or if she just doesn't have anything to tell me. She won't give me my hat back until she feels like I'm being her dad right though, but I don't know what to change if she's unwilling to tell me. I feel like I only have half the picture."

Minako huffed a laugh as she slid an arm forward, dangling it to rest her elbow in the crook of the Russian's waist, "Kids are that way sometimes. They sometimes think everyone should know intuitively what's wrong because, to them, it's so obvious."
"I feel clueless."

"It's frustrating. Maybe you're just out of practice handling your kids' problems. You'll get there."

The hours passed into the late night, and then into the early morning. Viktor half-dozed, eyes facing the television even if they weren't really watching what was going on upon its screen. Yuri had been asleep for half an age by then, using him as a pillow, and occasionally as a drooling-mat, as the case may be. Viktor just gently strokes his partner's hair idly, until the weight of his own eyelids was too much to resist anymore. He sighed quietly to himself and twisted to reach for the remote control on the nightstand behind him, and clicked the television off, plunging the room into abrupt darkness. He settled back in as gently as he could and closed his eyes.

*Yuri's always been an honest drunk,* he thought, eyes cracking open slightly as he stared into the black, *But that doesn't always mean he makes sense. ...I don't know what he meant by half of what we said since we got back. ...I wonder if he even knows...?*
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED TWENTY

The sheets tugged and the bed shifted slightly, but when awareness dawned in Viktor's sleepy mind, it was obvious that the source of the rummaging was his poodle. The fuzzy pup rooted with his nose like a boar in the woods, but eventually laid down, tail patting lightly near his human's knees. The room went to silence again, save the occasional close-up snuffling of Makkachin's nose by Viktor's ear, and the hazy Russian lifted an arm over the pup and tried to go back to sleep. It was still rather dark at that point; the only light sources in the small space were the digital displays on the front of the cable-box and an alarm clock. Makkachin licked the tops of his paws for a little while, nibbling the back of his wrists with his tiny front teeth as dogs do when they're itching something, but eventually set his head down.

The hollow, far-off sound of a flush, and the spray of a tap, sounded-off quietly in the background. Viktor was already nearly out when the door clicked, and soft footsteps padded across the short-fiber carpet. The sound of Jiro's squeaky whine was enough to catch the Russian's attention though, and he listened closely thereafter. He heard, but couldn't understand, a few soft whispers being spoken to the puppy. It sounded like the pup was lifted up after that, too. The bed shifted a second time, slightly further away than when Makkachin had come up. For a moment, there was nothing else, but then the bed reset to its original position and was replaced by the nearly-negligible indentations of Jiro walking along the foot-end, and then stopped. The footpads continued their quiet shuffle across the carpet though, followed by the crinkle and zipper-noises of suitcases being rummaged through. The odd sound spurred Viktor to move then, but whatever noise he made was ignored or unheard, as was evident when the sudden bright spot-light shone down on Yuri's naked frame and made him squeak in surprise.

He turned in place where he was crouched on his knees by their luggage pile, and brought up a hand to block the intensity of the light, "V-Viktor...?"

"What are you doing?" The Russian asked in confusion. The softer light of his phone beamed closer to his face and he checked the time, "It's nearly 4:30 in the morning. Why are you even awake?"

"Can you cut the flashlight so I can see?" The younger man pleaded, squinting severely. The bright laser-light went out a second later, and Yuri rubbed his eyes, still seeing red and orange spots on the back of his eyelids, "I couldn't sleep." He explained in a hushed voice, "I think I've been awake for an hour or so. My head's pounding and I feel a chill. I was trying to find my meds from the other day...ideally without waking you up, too."

Viktor blinked at the darkened silhouette crouching on the floor, but then shook his head, "Shield your eyes, I'll turn a lamp on."

Yuri could hear the blankets rustling and Makkachin being made to move, but the click of the lamp followed soon after and the room lit up in a dim yellow glow. As he rubbed his eyes, trying to adjust still after the blinding sun-like pin-light from his partner's phone, he heard the man get up and walk behind him. He could see again just in time to find Viktor unzipping a small satchel in the bathroom, and withdrew a small white bottle with a blue label. It jangled with the sound of the tablets it contained, a couple tumbling into Viktor's palm before he put the cap back and filled a nearby glass with a bit of water.

Returning, Viktor ushered his spouse up to his feet and back to the foot of the bed, sleepily offering both, "This will help more than your ibuprofen...which I think is actually still in your jacket."
"...Oh, right." Yuri answered simply, eyes still slightly squinting as he took the offered items. Two Aleve tablets went down the hatch with a water chaser, and Yuri pressed his now-empty palm to the top of his head, "I regret everything." He grumble-whined.

Viktor pressed the underside of his wrist to his spouse's forehead, "You're hot again."

"I feel cold."

"Wait here."

Jiro clambered closer over the big piles of blankets, and plunked down next to his human's hip as the Russian moved back towards the bathroom. Yuri wasn't sure which of them to pay more attention to, but just as he'd settled on the one that was right next to him, a pale blur returned to his periphery and a luke-warm wash-cloth spread across his skin. A bit surprised, but liking the cool sensation on his hot skin, Yuri closed his eyes to let his face be wiped down, followed by his neck, chest, and arms. Viktor climbed up onto the bed to get behind him, and used the other side of the same wet cloth to wipe his back.

"I worry about you sometimes."

Yuri glanced back hazily over one shoulder, one hand still on Jiro's little frame, "What I do...?"

"Drinking too much on an empty stomach, saying cryptic things, making yourself sick again..."

"I know... In hindsight it was a bad idea, but I thought better of it at the time. I forget on occasion that wine is as potent as it is." Yuri tried to explain, feeling every inch of cool skin, damp from the cloth and drying in the open air, "All I wanted was to let go for a bit, but I don't even remember how it ended."

"You fell asleep."

Yuri sat up straighter and turned his whole core, gaping, "You're kidding. I didn't..."

Viktor shook his head and leaned back on his hands, offering a meager smile, "Sorry, my love. But you did"

"Shimatta..." Yuri said aghast, dipping his head down, "How embarrassing..."

"It happens to everyone eventually. You're pretty worn out, I guess. I haven't helped a lot on that end. I've kept you up too late even though you were already feeling sick, and before that-"

"It was worth it." Yuri said, cutting off the thought, "Don't ever think otherwise. I'd come all the way back here anytime to go to another one of those balls."

"...Just so long as it's not during Euros, right?"

Cherry-hazel eyes looked on in confusion, "I don't think it matters. Neither of us is going to compete at a European Championship, so..."

"...Right."

"Mmmnhh... That came out wrong." Yuri said, slight panic in his voice as he rubbed the back of his neck.

"It's not untrue." Viktor shrugged, "I just turned 29 a few weeks ago. My skating career has gone beyond dusk and into twilight. Even if something insane happened and I was put onto another
European team, I may never compete at Euros ever again. I've already made my plans clear that I intend to treat next year as a personal challenge, rather than a real one... If I'm even chosen to go to 4C's next year, I'll be surprised."

Yuri made a face, "You're head-and-shoulders above most everyone else in this sport even when you're not trying."

"Most everyone else, but not everyone else." Viktor corrected and shrugged again, looking to the damp cloth in his right hand, "Chris has another few years left. Yuri's literally just getting started. Then there's all the others...and most importantly, there's you. You're not just Japan's rising sun, you're for the whole Asian bloc, as well as for the non-European side of things. Coming here after everything else..." His words trailed, but he pushed up from his hands to lean over his half-folded legs, elbows resting on his bare thighs, "It was a mistake."

"I don't know why you'd think that. Other than that one hiccup, I've had a lot of fun here."

"You said you never wanted to come to Euros again."

"...Eh?" Yuri stared blankly, one eye twitching slightly above a puckered cheek, "When did I say that?"

"In your amnesia phase, I guess." Viktor answered, "I can't blame you though. How can something like this be fun when we arrived like refugees?" He asked, looking rather disappointed by the whole thing, "This event was ruined before we even got here. I made us go on a stupid side-quest to see a man who's made it evidently clear since the start that he didn't like us being together. We should've cancelled the whole trip and just stayed home. At least Saito is a Hell I can control."

"...But then we never would've gone to that ball."

"I'm sure I could've figured out another reason to use those suits."

Yuri furrowed his brow, unsure what to say at first. He turned in place where he still sat on the edge of the bed, his bent knee coming to rest over his partner's, and he reached his right hand forward to slide it across the man's shoulders to pull that silver-haired head closer to him, "I think it's important that we got to go. It wasn't just the eye of some storm that's still raging all around us...it was the first glimmer of sunlight coming through the clouds. There may still be some thunder coming, but the worst is behind us. We needed that ball." He explained, rubbing his cheek slowly against the crown of his husband's head, thumb against his opposite shoulder, "We've barely had time to relax and unwind this whole time. Every little moment we've had was rushed, or there was some shadow looming over it. The ball was the first time I felt like the rest of the world could just bugger off for a while. No one we knew was there, no one bothered us, no one made us feel bad, and we even got to skate a little at the end. It was entirely perfect, and I'd come back to Vienna in a heartbeat to do it again."

Viktor nodded in quiet agreement.

"...But...me saying...that I don't want to come to Euros again..." Yuri went on reluctantly, "I'm not sure what inspired me to say that so randomly, but... All the worst things that happened because of this trip happened at Euros. I don't think we can come here as just spectators; too much about this event has become tainted. It would be like going to Russian Nationals."

"...It wouldn't. Nationals would be much worse."

"I... Yeah." Yuri tepidly agreed, trying not to think on it too much, "But my point is, even though the
Euros organizers still want you to be part of things, being here after being fired by the RSF just carries too much baggage. Skating in the Exhibition is neat, but it feels hollow when you were supposed to be in the competition beforehand. They should be calling you out to skate as the European Champion, not as just some guest skater."

"That's all I'm going to be at some point."

"But you'll have gotten to that point voluntarily." Yuri corrected, "I may never fully understand exactly how you feel about all this, but try as you do to be optimistic and not let anyone see you down, I can still feel the difference. This is nothing like going to competition as just a coach last year, when everyone was giving you grief about how you should quit mucking around and come back as an athlete. This...feels even worse than when I fell apart, and was avoiding watching the competitions on t.v. because I didn't want to see what I was missing out on. We're in a place we're not supposed to be and there's a hint of that in the air every time we go into that arena. In some ways, it can be fun, because fans are excited to see you...but knowing they're excited because they expected you wouldn't be here kind of ruins it. Then, of course, we had that fight while attempting to practice for the Exhibition that we weren't supposed to be part of. I just..." He said, his words trailing for a few seconds. He turned in place a little further and brought his other arm up, weaving his fingers through his husband's hair to cup his hand around the back of the man's head, "I want to do our show, and stick it to the RSF, but then I just want to go home and put it behind us. Putting on a brave face is tiring. I'm exhausted to the point where even wine and sexy-time isn't wearing me out enough to sleep. I don't think I'll get much more than naps until we're finally in our house, and in our bed."

"...I guess I understand." Viktor sighed, lifting his head up just enough to squish his brow to the side of his husband's neck, "I'm sorry I'm putting you through all this."

"You didn't do this on your own..." Yuri reassured, such as it was, "I had hope things would work out with Kon, since he'd come so far... I had hope that being part of the JSF would be enough to put the RSF at the back of your mind. When you said at All Japan that you wanted to use the Euros trip to cheer me up, I didn't want to spoil it by saying we shouldn't go. I'm in this neck-deep with you."

The silver Russian nodded tiredly, and glanced up at the cable box for the time, "...Is there any point in trying to go back to sleep at this point?"

"Dunno. I'm pretty awake now..."

"Yeah..."

"I could use a cuddle though."

Viktor lifted his head up, but offered his best smile, "...I may pass out...but that sounds perfect."

The two pups were left to their own devices in the hotel room when dawn broke and their humans had to get down to business. Skates were packed up again, a quick and simply breakfast was grabbed, and they made their way to the Erste Bank Arena. First to arrive for the Exhibition Practice, they had Hall 2 all to themselves for the first three hours. Even when the trickle of other athletes started, most didn't arrive until after the Free Dance ended around 11am and the sports-complex was turned over to just the competitors. With three rinks available, there was plenty of room and time for those who would be part of the Gala later that night.

Many observers were still disappointed that Viktor would not jump, even as a few teased an attempt to goad him into it anyway. He just waved and smiled as he always did, and reminded them that he
couldn't before moving on with the practice.

They heard some of the usual banter between Emil and the Crispinos, and later spotted a broody and tired Yurio stumble through, only to turn around and leave to find a different rink to practice in. Chris turned up a little while after that, having slept most of the morning away after celebrating his 2nd year Gold into the early hours.

"You look as tired as we feel." Viktor teased, taking a break on the inside of the rink wall as Yuri continued to hone his role. He pulled up a gold-bladed boot onto one knee to brush some of the frost off the metal, and repeated it with the other, "Who were you even partying with all night if not us?"

"No one that I knew, per se." He answered, watching Yuri as he leaned on the wall, "My taste isn't quite as cultured as yours."

"Pfft. I've gotten shitfaced at some shady places before." The Russian guffawed, then leaned in to whisper behind one hand, "I actually spent all night at a ramen stand in Hasetsu when I first got there, after Yurio showed up."

"I wouldn't call a ramen stand 'shady.'" Chris said, brow quirked.

"It was after I got done with it." Viktor laughed nervously, and leaned onto the rink wall on his elbows more casually, "Had to drown my sorrows into something after he got there."

"Drowning your sorrows in Japan...?" The blonde teased, batting his eyelashes, "My dearest friend, are you suggesting that he was cockbl-"

"No, no no." He huffed, putting a finger over Chris' mouth to shush him, "It was never like that. It was more like...being friend-zoned by proxy; Yuri's attention was scattered. Yurio was just a handful. I mean, I still had fun with it however I could, but it's not like I expected him to show up out there."

"I see." Chris nodded and looked back into the rink, "Two adults trying to have a serious relationship and suddenly this angry teenager throws a brick into the middle of it."

"Exactly." Viktor laughed, turning around to put his back to the ledge instead, "Why don't you get your practice done? We've been here since before the sun came up. We could get lunch together after."

"I suppose I could be convinced." Chris said, pushing off the wall to stretch his arms up.

"Perfecto~"
Chapter 521

CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED TWENTY ONE

Hot water sprayed down like needles from the unrefined commercial shower-head in the changing room. It was an open area with a number of the same shower-heads lined along the upper rim of the walls, with small white tiles interspersed with black for a pattern that went all the way around and onto the floor, until the pattern circled the brass drain-cover in the center of a slight dip. Soapy water flowed down legs and pooled at the drains, floating until they dissolved and disappeared.

"So are you feeling alright about the Exhibition now?" Viktor wondered, raising his face into the spray to rinse the shampoo from his eyes. He lowered it again and let the water rush through his hair, "You went at it even harder than I did."

"I didn't have to choreograph it at the same time." Yuri answered, rubbing the crown of his head with his fingertips to get the conditioner out completely. He turned in place and let the spray go down his front, closing his eyes to avoid the spray of the hot mist. He rubbed his hands over his skin to help push the soapy residue away, "I think I feel okay about it though. I was worried about the music, but it seems to have come through, too. You can hardly tell we had to re-record the last line, least not that we did it with a smartphone."

"Well, there's nothing terribly fancy about putting a screen of some sort between your mouth and the microphone. The hotel room was a pretty good audio-booth, too, all things considered."

"Yeah."

"So what do you feel like eating?"

"Probably something light if we're supposed to go out with Yurio again before the show later. Just enough to take the edge off for a few hours."

"Yeah, that's smart..." Viktor agreed, reaching for the bottle of conditioner to squeeze some of the creamy pale-yellow goop into his hand, "Or we can split something."

"Sure." Yuri nodded, stepping back slightly to open his eyes. He glanced casually around the shower area, seeing the occasional other athlete go through, though none were needing the showers thankfully. Seems they're all just getting here now to do Exhibition practice. Guess it pays to pack it all into the other days. Today can be a bit more relaxed. Thinking about the very concept of relaxation made Yuri's eyes shutter a little, half-closing as though he were ready to fall asleep on his feet. He shook the feeling away and ignored the heaviness on his eyelids, and turned instead to spot Viktor with his hands in his wet hair, lathering the conditioner through as it sat and soaked for a bit. For once in a rare while, Yuri actually let his eyes wander a bit over that pale frame, watching the bubbly water cascade over every shapely ridge and curve.

Viktor ran his fingers through molten silver strands, feeling the prickle of water-spray contrast with the softness of his hair. One hand, then another, combing through until all the conditioner was washed away, and he could open his eyes again. Just before he did though, he felt another set of hands slide over his form, starting at the outside edges of his thighs and moving slowly up. Water-warmed skin pressed velvet-soft to his back, and lips went to the far side of one shoulder, hands still inching their way vertical. Viktor cracked one eye open to peer at his partner there, but didn't dare interrupt him. Hands trailed up over the crest of each hip, turned to point fingers upward to move up his flank, then twisted to go sideways as they lowered again. Viktor was surprised to feel those palms
caress over the curve of his hind-end, even if only for a moment before moving on.

Yuri pressed in a bit closer then, turning his cheek to replace the spot on his husband's back where his mouth had been before. His fingers guided the new path forward and over the inward curve of the Russian's waist, feeling the subtle ridge of every muscle until they finally slid over the man's chest and pulled him gently backward against himself, "Don't mind me." He said casually, coiling his arms a bit tighter to just hug the man where he was.

That one slate eye that was looking already smiled and closed again, and Viktor lowered one hand to give his husband's a knowing pat before going back to his rinse. A handful of people went by as the last bits of conditioner were rinsed away, giving the occasional odd looks - mostly of surprise until they realized who the pair were - as they moved through toward the rink area. Viktor kept half an eye on things; there was still something to be said about the odd European openness of the shower-area floorplan, leaving it entirely visible to everyone who was going through. But, nearly 2 years of being on display at the Yu-Topia onsen had dulled was little modesty the Russian still had. It was his delicate husband's modesty he was being vigilant for; even that 'proud son of a hot-spring resort' still happened to be Japanese - tinted through 5 years of systemic American shame - and all that entailed.

He penguin-stepped to turn the both of them around slightly, making it easier to reach for the wash-cloth in their travel-size shower-caddy, as well as the liquid soap bottle it came with. Limbs and neck were lathered first, and Yuri quietly moved his arms up or down so the Russian's chest could be soaped-up next. Viktor leaned back into him for balance while he washed his long legs, and suddenly found himself without a way to get his own back. He looked at the cloth in his hands, and back over his shoulder to the raven-haired figure clinging to him still.

Realizing the pause was because of him, Yuri gave one last squeeze with his hug before letting go, and reached his hands forward to take the small square of rough, soapy fabric. Without hesitation, he flared it out and squished it to his husband's pale back, moving it methodically across every inch. By the time he'd finished, Viktor was turning around in front of him. Yuri looked up through the spray, able to see the pale silver blur on the other side, but what was crystal clear were the two long arms that came up on either side of him, palms pressing to the white tile wall behind him. Viktor himself came through the water a moment after, head drenched to momentarily hide the grin beneath the run-off.

"It's a shame this is such a public place. Things could go very differently from here if we were home."

Yuri's cheeks flushed, but he smiled anyway before squashing the wash-cloth to Viktor's face to nudge him back. He could hear the laughter even through the hiss of the shower, and he followed through as well, feeling his husband's hands come down on his head.

It wasn't quite the same as the summer beaches of Hasetsu, where the outdoor shower stations lead to a number of exciting water fights, but a bit of playful fun in a Viennese locker-room was a welcome reprieve from the stresses of competition season anyway. Every shower-head in the wide open stall was on by the time Viktor was done with them, carefully darting to the nozzle of each before moving off to avoid the initial cold splash. He laughed with each yelp or shriek from his husband, chasing him carefully from behind, and getting the ice-cold water on his feet with each pass. They made it around the room twice - plenty of time for the water to get hot and fill the space with a thick fog of steam - before Yuri finally caught the man...or Viktor let him, it wasn't clear.

Yuri squished against his spouse's chest, and Viktor backed them both up against the same wall where they'd started. Blue eyes met brown for a moment, and Yuri stepped up onto his toes to steal a quick kiss...which Viktor insisted be a longer kiss. They each turned again, pressing shoulders to the
wall as those laughing kisses continued in the steamy space.

"I'm starting to believe the mist is because of you two rather than all the showers being on."

Yuri blanched, eyes wide at the sound of the voice. Viktor looked up, but then smiled and waved before returning his hand to the small of his husband's naked back.

"Is there even any hot water left?"

"It's pretty warm in here." Viktor mused, "We're done; we were just messing around. It's all yours, Chris."

The blonde cocked his head back in a single laugh, "You two are just going to leave as soon as I arrive? I thought I was about to get a show."

"'Fraid not. Just some shower pranks." The Russian explained, reaching around to finally cut the water from the spout just by him. He reached for one of the many folded towels on the shelf lining the top of the wall, just above the shower-heads, and threw two onto Yuri's frame before getting two for himself, "Have you thought about where you want to eat?"

"...It still feels like a kick in the arse that you were here this whole time but not really." Chris sighed, taking a sip from his small glass of white wine, "Worse than last year, to be honest."

Viktor looked across at the man with an innocent smile, though his brows were raised suspiciously, "I can't help what happened. I had plans here though and the tickets and everything else were already paid for."

"I know."

Restaurant [VERANDA] was upper class and rather contemporary in its design. The walls were white, textured like the folds of a fan or accordion, with large glass-covered paintings hung upon it. A booth seat lined the lower half of it, velvety and dark green, with dark-wood square tables and wrap-around cushioned chairs opposite. A white runner laid over the table in place of a full tablecloth, with a lit candle sitting within an arrangement of pink flowers, and red flower petals arranged in a pattern on the table itself. There were small chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, and large, heavy curtains tucked into the corners where it looked like each wing of the seating area could be made private if they were pulled across. During the daylight hours though, the sun came in with a yellow glow, leaving a sleepy golden haze over the whole dining hall.

"It just doesn't feel like much of a victory to get Gold again if I didn't win it because I took it right out of your hands." Chris continued his complaint, "You know how long I've waited to see that look on your face? That you've been beaten?"

"I've seen that look." Yuri chimed in mischievously, raising one hand up slightly above the edge of the table. That just earned him a grim look of sarcastic contempt from the man across the table, and he laughed quietly to himself before going back to the bread he'd been tearing apart above his small plate.

"Then beat me at the Games next month." Viktor offered, "It'll mean more than beating me at Euros anyway. The whole world will see it."

Chris grumbled again though and sat back in his spot, mouthing the edge of the wine glass before taking another small sip, "You've robbed me of opportunity for too long. I thought we were friends."
"We are friends." Viktor shot back, reaching for a slice of pumpernickel from the bread basket, and a dollop of butter from the small cups next to it, "I'm as disappointed that I couldn't compete this weekend as anyone. If not for what the RSF did, I wouldn't have broken my leg two weeks ago either."

"You didn't break your leg." Both Yuri and Chris retorted.

He ignored their corrections though, "But it's not like I'm entirely out of competition. It's exactly one less event for you to try and fail to beat me at each year. There's still Worlds and the Grand Prix Series and Final, and a host of weenie events throughout."

Chris just narrowed his eyes, brows raised high, "You wound me, Viktor. You haven't even been to any of those weenie events since you moved to Japan. Even Plisetsky went to the Golden Skate last year before the Final."

Viktor smiled, "I've been busy." He explained simply, raising one hand up to rub across his husband's back, "But you know as well as anyone that part of why I took off like I did was because I wanted to spend more time with Makkachin. He's getting older and I've been away so often because I've competed in so many events...I've lost a lot of time with him. Going to Japan to be a coach was as much an excuse to be available for Makka as it was to seduce Yuri."

"You came all this way with Makkachin though and he's still cooped up in your hotel room." Chris pointed out, grabbing for a small wedge of Pecorino, "Same with Jiro, much as my skates are glad of it."

Yuri felt a pit in his gut, "We're gonna go back after this to check on them. We just couldn't square bringing them to the rink when we were both practicing at the same time. It would be too distracting to constantly look over the rink wall to make sure they were okay and not being bothered by fans who know they're ours."

"Things are better with Papa Mimi again though...maybe we can ask him to watch the pups if we run into something like this again later." Viktor suggested, "Besides, part of why we got permission to bring the dogs to competition in the first place was so Jiro could hedge your anxiety." He pointed out, sliding his hand up the younger man's back again, then down to rest it there casually, "Most of the time, one of us will always be available to watch them. It's just impossible when we're practicing a pair program."

Yuri nodded in agreement, "Euros isn't a normal situation at all, really... Other than the obvious, getting invited to skate the Exhibition at the last minute left us scrambling to figure out what program to use. Neither of us has practiced the one we're doing tonight since September or so..." He looked aside to his partner, "We could've picked one that we'd skated more recently, but...this one means something, so it was worth the trouble."

"Even on that broken leg of his?" Chris wondered dryly, nudging his head at the Russian.

"Even with his Grade 1 ankle strain that he's probably going to get clearance on as soon as we're home again."

"I'm surprised they even asked, given the whole world was freaking out about it." Chris said, nibbling little bits at a time of the cheese he held between his fingers.

"Viktor's pointed out a number of times this weekend that he's the only one who knows how his body feels. The event organizers know that, too. I'm sure they considered it. Better to offer and be turned down than to not offer at all under the assumption that they'll be turned down. In this case, it
worked out...Viktor's taking it easy and he still gets to skate."

"Hmph... Much to the Russians' chagrin." Chris shrugged, leaning forward towards the table's edge. He crossed his elbows over it and spoke a little quieter, "After Popovich lost his spot on the podium, things got grim in the RSF's corner. I doubt Plisetsky noticed since he's not hanging around the Old Guard anymore, but anyone who walked by them could feel the tension. Popovich got a pretty stern talking to by someone higher up than Yakov. Even Mila looked a bit flustered by it, and she's usually pretty cool about everything."

Viktor's expression looked a bit more grim than before, but he shrugged and tried to let it go, "It's not really my problem anymore. The RSF can scold Georgi all they want. He was never their most solid shot at a podium anywhere though. They should be focusing on Yurio; even with his growth spurt hitting right now, he's still their best shot at winning medals for Russia."

Chris smirked behind his fingers, "Oh, is that what happened?" He wondered, mostly to himself.

Yuri made a strange face at the mention of the Russian Tiger, "Maybe they did..."

"What do you mean?"

"He totally blew us off this morning at practice. Didn't even say hi. Just looked into the rink, spotted us, looked kind of deflated and left for a different rink." He explained, "I thought maybe it was residual shame from last night, since he lost the Silver by such a narrow margin...but maybe it was cuz the RSF caught him on the way in."

"I don't want to speculate on things the RSF may or may not have said to Yurio." Viktort said dismissively. "He may just still be salty cuz of the thing with Otabek last night."

"Why would he avoid us because of Otabek though?"

Viktor reached up his free hand and boop'd his husband's nose, "Stop saying things that make sense. You're killing the hope I have that this is explainable by simpler means."

Yuri crossed his eyes as the finger came near, but then focused on the bread basket again, keeping quiet.

"You guys have a lot of work to do before Four Continents now." Chris said, changing the topic slightly. "Once you get your ankle cleared, I imagine the next two weeks are going to be grueling." He added, pointing to the silver across from him.

"If not for that, then for the Games after." Viktort agreed. "It's actually kind of annoying that we have to share the Ice Castle with so many other skaters. We actually have to think about splitting time into shifts so we can all have fair time."

Chris puffed an incredulous singular laugh, "So many? Viktort, my dear friend, there's four of you. Most of us practice on rinks that are shared by whole clubs, not just locals."

"Maybe I'm spoiled then," The Russian shrugged and leaned back against the booth, "Up until two weeks ago, Yuri and I had free reign of the rink. Then skating got more popular in the city and more people wanted skating lessons. That's all fine and well...they have their set times during the week and we can bugger off to do something else. But now we have two whole other Olympians training on our turf, and I only like one of them."

Yuri sunk a little where he sat, but said nothing. He just moved one hand under the table to set it on his partner's leg, giving the subtle reminder that he didn't want to hear about that issue. Viktort
acknowledged it with a few quick rubs of his thumb where his hand still pressed to Yuri's low back and waist.

The whole issue seemed dropped for the moment anyway as a waiter came by with their lunch orders, setting down a spread of assorted soups, salads, new breads and a cheese plate.

Chris looked at the soup in front of him; thick and green, but looking like a rather small portion given the comically miniature-sized bowl in the middle of the really wide lip. It looked like an upturned summer hat...for someone with a really small head. Chris just reached to unravel the cutlery from its cloth napkin, spread the fabric neatly over his lap, and dipped a spoon into the liquid. "Honestly speaking, I'm not at all thrilled that Saito is back in your life, Yuri." He said darkly, making the youngest member of their trio feel on-guard, "Never mind that he's literally on your doorstep now. You never invited him back home for a reason, even when you were friendly with him."

"I'll be dealing with it." Viktor assured, taking a sip from the soup-spoon of his own appetizer, "There's nothing to worry about."

"You should've put the complaint through to the JSF," Chris scolded, looking at the Russian again, "I know there was a point to why you didn't, but I can't help feeling like that was a mistake anyway."

"It wasn't his decision to make." Yuri said firmly, "That was my choice, and it wasn't a mistake."

The blonde looked a bit surprised, but his brow came down again, "I feel like you've forgotten how upset you were about things with him before. That one thing practically changed your entire outlook on life."

"It didn't..."

"I've known you since Juniors, Yuri. Give me some credit."

"It didn't." He repeated, "I've always been who I am. I just felt more or less inclined to express it at various points in time."

Chris raised a brow, and looked slightly over at Viktor again, who just seemed entirely helpless and out of his breadth for the topic. He put his spoon down, dipping the mouthpiece into the green soup again, "You went from being open and friendly to timid and paranoid." He explained sharply, "Chulanont is literally the only new friend you've made since you were 18 years old, and that may only be because you were roommates."

"...Don't I count?" Viktor grimaced nervously.

"No." The Swiss answered, putting the Russian down slightly, "You were his hero and now you're his lover. It's entirely different. If you hadn't bulldozed your way into his life and refused to leave, he would've never spoken two words to you, out of sheer and utter terror of what you'd think of him if he said more."

'I never talked to you because I didn't want you to see my shortcomings.'

"I think it would be wise for you to find a way to send him somewhere else." Chris advised, "You were reunited with him for all of 24 hours before whatever he did made you pass out at rinkside. You got a reprieve of what...two days? Before he rang you guys up for help? And now he lives at Yu-Topia."

"We don't though, and it wasn't us he called." Viktor pointed out, "And trust me; half of why I'm so annoyed at the arrangements at the Ice Castle is because half of that is to avoid putting those two in
the same room together. Out of sight, out of mind."

"I wish the both of you would stop talking about him like he's going to murder me if he can't have me." Yuri grumbled, "And even worse, that you're entirely blaming him for what happened when it was my fault."

Chris looked at the younger man carefully for a moment, but then cast his eyes to Viktor, and bore a look more serious than most he'd already given, "Get Saito out of Hasetsu as quickly as you can."

"What?" Yuri gaped and sat up straight, "What the literal Hell, Chris? Why are you being like this? Asahi's got his own problems to worry about! He's already capering at Viktor's feet, and his whole motivation for getting back into things was because of Riku, not me. Viktor made sure of that."

"If that guy weren't dead, then I'd give it the benefit of the doubt." He answered pointedly, "He'd have someone around to actively distract him. But Riku's dead and Asahi's got nothing to think about but you again. I'm saying this as your friend...Viktor should've ignored you when you said that you didn't want to file the complaint with the JSF. That was a mistake. But the lid's off this Pandora's Box, and as long as you want to keep saying that it was your fault that things went south the way they did...then for your sake, Saito has to go."

Yuri stared for a moment, and let out a sharp sigh of wordless frustration, furrowing his brow to look away. He eyeballed the bread-basket again.

"Yuri..." Chris' voice continued, not that he wanted to hear it anymore, "You're one of my closest and oldest friends. There's aspects of you that I know better than your own family does, and in some ways, better than even Viktor. He came in and turned your whole world upside down, but I know what you are under the new confident person you've become. Deep inside the walls of 'Fortress Nikiforov' is 'Cabin Katsuki'...and inside those flimsy wooden walls is a guy who would rather hurt himself than anyone else. I hate to put it this bluntly, but maybe it's the only way you'll take it seriously... Yuri, you can't be trusted with Saito. 'Cabin Katsuki' is well protected when you let it, but there's a quick-escape hatch that leads you outside those fortified walls. You walked right in the Mouth of Madness when you confronted Saito at Nationals, and you're still licking your wounds now. Saito may not have intended to hurt you, but you opened yourself up to it so easily... You have to be protected from yourself as much as him."

Viktor's silence was louder than any spoken agreement could've ever been, and it rang in Yuri's ears like a bell. He could do nothing but scowl at the bread, not even wanting to look up again. Whatever else was said over the course of that lunch was lost to him, like the hollow sound of bubbles under water. He heard what he thought sounded like distant laughter after a while, and vaguely tuned in, hearing Viktor prattle on about the work they'd done over the summer to make a different Exhibition for each competition, and in particular, how proud he was of the one they were going to perform that night. Yuri lost interest in hearing it though, and tuned out again, mindlessly watching the comings and goings of lunch plates.

"...So, most of the point of why I wanted to bring this one forward is because it seems so appropriate, you know?" The Russian explained, "I mean, it would've been neat to do it at Worlds anyway, and that's why our outfits are so decked, but I just couldn't pass up doing it here after the RSF made it so I can't compete. None of our other Exhibitions say the same thing this one does."

"You changed the end of the song, too."

"Yeah...that was a last-second edit." The Russian explained, "Feels more hopeful this way. In a sense, maybe it should've been changed since the start, but...better late than never."
"Yeah, the message is super unsubtle at this point. I'm sure there's gonna be a storm on Twitter and Insta as soon as people realize what you're skating to."

"Right?" Viktor laughed, "I feel so inspired now. I thought I lost it for a little while, cuz the whole crazy thing was such a shock to the system...but I'm slowly starting to feel like myself again." He explained, picking up a fork, "Russia kind of beat me down on all sides there for a bit...but I'm getting over it. If not for Yuri and the JSF, I'd probably go missing for months. I guess it's a risk we have to take when we climb so high...the impact when we fall can be worse than it would be otherwise." He elaborated, taking a quick breath before looking down to snag a bite of the plate that had been set down a few minutes ago.

Except it was empty.

So was the bread-basket, the cheese plate, the soup he'd gotten as an appetizer that he'd forgotten about, and basically everything else.

Viktor could only look in confusion from the missing food to the quiet figure sitting next to him.

...Jiro and Makkachin were blurs of excitement and whole-body wags when the duo finally returned to the hotel room, each of them jumping up and bark-whining their urgent need for attention. There was still a bit of kibble and water in their bowls, so Viktor quickly knew it wasn't hunger that made the two so adamant, but he calmed them down as gently as he could before reaching for each of their harnesses and leashes. Before the last clip was hooked, Yuri was down on the bed, feet dangling off the edge like he couldn't have fallen asleep sooner.

Viktor blinked at the man, and frowned slightly, but his stomach growled and changed his train of thought. Wordlessly, he moved closer and bent down to kiss his unconscious spouse on the head, and took the two wiggle-boofs out of the room to let them loose outside.

Makkachin zipped around like he had before, overcome by an acute case of the zoomies. Jiro tried to keep up, but like usual, the long-limbed poodle ran circles around him. Viktor bit down on the edge of a pre-packaged sandwich he'd bought in the hotel on the way out, but then looked at it as he chewed. No words came to mind...only imagery, floating to the surface like dead logs from the bottom of a lake. Imagery of those early days, when he was still just getting to know the basics about the man he'd fallen so hard for a few months earlier.

His eyes went up to the pups again, spotting Jiro coming back towards him, as though crying out that Makkachin was being too rough on him. He pulled a small bit of ham-slice from his sandwich to offer the Akita, and it quickly made the whimper fade. He finished his unexpected alternative lunch with Jiro sitting next to him on the bench, and Makkachin spent the rest of his energy on chasing ducks and the odd swan.

When they all finally returned to the hotel room, Yuri hadn't budged from where he'd collapsed on the freshly-made bed. Housekeepers had been though while they were at practice, and everything in the room was put back to like-new condition. Fresh water was put down, which was lapped up eagerly, and Viktor went to peel himself from his cold-weather gear. After pushing his partner's shoes off, he clambered up onto the high bed and wrapped one arm around the man's sleeping frame, hauling him a foot or two further up the bedding before letting him down again. Viktor curled up tightly against Yuri's prone form, arms wedging under one side and wrapping around the other. He pressed his nose into freshly-washed raven hair, the smell of the shampoo still lingering slightly, and closed his eyes for a brief moment...only then to look absently forward rather seriously.
Chris is right...
Though it had only been the better part of an hour, Yuri awoke feeling like it had been half a day. His eyes scanned the blurry haze of the room, though he faced the wall and couldn't see much more than that except the small bar area and the hall to the bathroom and exit. Arms around him were loose, and he moved as gently as he could to turn himself around, wiggling little by little until he was facing his husband's chest and could roll the man to his back instead. Able to see the rest of the room, he could see the light from outside through the cracks in the curtains, and the curious tail-wags of the only one of their two dogs that could see over the edge of the bed. Yuri lowered his head down again, squishing his cheek against Viktor's chest, and sighed slightly.

*If it's daylight out, then it's either way past our departure flight time...or it hasn't been nearly as long as it seems since we got back.*

Jiro whimper-barked from somewhere beyond the edge of the mattress, and Makkachin's slowly-waving tail moved around the perimeter like a submarine scope, until it and Jiro's noises were coming from closer-by than before. Yuri could still feel the heaviness of his eyelids, but he eventually pushed himself up, and reached down into the crevasse between the bed and the wall to scoop up his puppy. Makkachin jumped up quickly after, rooting around for a moment before coming to rest next to his human.

The motion caused Viktor to rouse slightly, and he turned his head to look around blearily before dropping it down again and covering his face with both hands, "*Ugh, I was out.*" He mumbled, letting his arms go loose to fall where they may beside him and against Makkachin's side. He turned slightly to look at his partner though, who was sitting a bit away from him with his back turned, "*Yuri?*

Half-closed hazel eyes looked back for a moment, but Yuri turned forward again, simply moving one hand over to pat the Russian's shin before taking it back again. Jiro wiggled on his lap, but generally stayed put there, mouthing at the fingers of his person's other hand playfully.

Confused, but perhaps mostly because he was still half asleep, Viktor wasn't sure what to make of the gesture. He glanced for a moment to Makkachin as though the poodle might be able to explain it to him, but all the pup could do was look back at him with those big dark eyes, panting softly. He ruffled the poodles head as he pushed up to sit, before scooting forward to lean against his husband's back, nosing his way through raven hair to find skin and press his lips to it, "*My love...*

"*My headache is coming back...*" Yuri answered simply, keeping his eyes down.

"*...Okay.*"

Yuri felt the Russian peel off his back and watched the man get up off the bed, turning around as he passed to kiss the crown of his head. Viktor went to the bathroom like he had that morning, and returned with the Aleve and another glass of water.

"*I can call room service to bring some peppermint tea to help settle your stomach.*" He offered, but Yuri shook his head and downed the tablets. Slate eyes went to the alarm clock and saw that it was only 3:32pm, "*There's still a few hours left before we meet up with Yurio. We could watch a movie.*"
"...That's okay..."

Viktor made a face, though Yuri wasn't even looking at him to notice. Eyes moved to the side as the Russian considered his options, but all that came to him was that odd sense of *déjà vu*. He hummed a breath to himself and then went for the closet, grabbing Makkachin's harness and then Jiro's, tossing the smaller one next to Yuri's lap, "We're going for a walk."

"I don't-

"One of you two is going to be wearing that thing in a minute. Best figure out who."

Yuri grimaced slightly, but there was no arguing *that* look.

Jiro trotted along contentedly, sniffing at the odd leaf or twig as he passed them by on the snow-cleared path. Makkachin had been allowed to free-run nearby, so long as he kept close. Yuri was kept on a much tighter leash than either though, clasped to his human by a harness no man could hope to escape from; Viktor's hand.

The Arcotel was somewhat in the distance behind them as they made their way around the partly-frozen lake. Brown and grey reeds poked through the ice along the banks. Trees with black and brown bark dotted the field through which their path wound. Yuri kept his eyes down though, barely able to keep focus on the sight of footsteps that came before them.

"...I know it was hard to hear him say all those things." Viktor said quietly, giving his husband's hand a gentle rub with his thumb, keeping it secure in his jacket pocket, "But he said it all because he cares about you."

Yuri's brow furrowed, "You didn't even *try* to stop him."

"...I wanted to hear what he had to say."

"I didn't."

Viktor could feel every muscle in his partner's hand tighten where he held it, but he didn't let go, "I'm-"

"I even squeezed your leg so you'd get the hint to stop him, but you didn't." Yuri went on, speaking partly through grit teeth, "What was the point of giving me my agency back if you and Chris are just going to take it away again yourselves?"

Viktor was puzzled, and paused in his tracks, "It wasn't even your idea to have him live at Yu-Topia. How would either of us be taking your agency away by asking Mimi to find somewhere else for Saito to live?"

"It may not have even gone that far if I hadn't said it was okay! That's why she told us before they left, isn't it!?"

Viktor grimaced slightly, bringing a hand up to scratch the side of his head, "I don't remember it being like that... She just told us what was going on to be nice, not asking permission."

"And then the both of us *actively helped coordinate getting him to Yu-Topia*. I remember *you* saying he could stay there as long as he wanted!"
"...Until he could get on his feet again. It was the only thing I could think of to control the situation. He probably would've ended up there anyway, even if I hadn't said anything." The Russian retorted, "And he ended up moving into my old room in the end. I practically shit a kitten when I found out, remember?"

"You don't make any sense at all with all this."

Viktor shook his head, "What would you have done if Sophia forced herself on me at Trophée de France?"

Yuri blanched a little and retreated slightly, staring at the ground again, "...I...don't know."

"I know it's not in your nature to want to hurt people." Viktor went on, stepping a bit closer and leaning down to try and get into his partner's line of sight, "There's nothing about this situation that's fair to anyone. Saito's got a rough life, and nothing's been easy for him...but I cannot and will never forgive what he did to you, no matter who was at fault for putting you two into the situation. I've tried to work with him given how you didn't want to file that complaint. The best I could do was keep an eye on him; the enemy I can see is safer than the enemy I can't."

"He's not an enemy."

"He's my enemy." He corrected, "I get that you don't want to be the reason he suffers more hardships...but at this point, Papa Mimi has probably given him enough of a leg-up that he can manage on his own anyway. He just needed time to get his shit together and transfer all the donations we helped him source at Nationals. You don't have to even say anything. When I talk to Papa Mimi, I'll just phrase it like it's a good idea for Saito to get his own place. The fact that I'm trying to keep him away from you doesn't even have to come up."

"But I know that's why you're doing it."

"Am I not entitled to that...?" Viktor asked pointedly.

An uncomfortable breeze blew between them. Jiro looked up at the two in confusion and whined slightly.

"It was your right to decide whether to file that complaint against him at Nationals. You chose not to. I'm at peace with that." Viktor started again, reaching his free hand up to cup his bare palm against his partner's beanie, though Yuri still wouldn't look up, "But I feel like I should have a right to do what I can to keep you safe."

"...He wouldn't hurt me..."

"You thought that when you closed the door to that changing room..." The Russian explained calmly, waiting a moment before going on, "...He may not have pinned you to the ground and forced himself on you, but he pinned you all the same, and took from you something he wasn't entitled to. Your mental well-being has suffered terribly since then...and so has mine. And now, half a world away, he's gotten between us again, right before a performance where we're supposed to show Russia that they can't even do that."

Yuri could only feel the sting in his eyes. No words came to him.

"...You practically fled the country to get away from him seven years ago." Viktor started again, "Of all the reasons why you left Japan to train in Detroit, he's the only one you went out of your way to forget. All those memories about him that started bubbling up...they've brought all those negative emotions back with them. It hurts me to see you suffering like this over him."
"...You guys can't keep treating him this way though." Yuri answered quietly, "Every move against him makes me feel like I'm doing it to him, and I'd ne."

"You're going to have to decide at some point, my love..." Viktor's voice cut him off, his words ringing like shots fired through the sky, "About whose well-being means more to you. His, or your own. ...I can't give back what he stole from you. Your sense of security, safety, peace of mind...your uncorrupted loyalty. Hell, even that Silver medal, if you ask me. All those things he took away, replacing them with an iron vice around your neck. He's not even here and he's causing problems. What's going to happen when he's right in front of you again?"

"Hopefully nothing because we told him we'd support him!"

"So you're worried this feels like we're reneging on our word."

"Obviously!"

"We haven't." Viktor pointed out, trying to offer some comfort with a gentle squeeze of his hand, "And asking Papa Mimi to help Saito move on doesn't change that."

Yuri looked to Jiro, unsure what else to say.

The Russian watched his partner for a moment, looking aside briefly as Makkachin sent some ducks fleeing for the air, "...I'm not going to do this because I want to make Saito's life difficult." He attempted, "But if we ever mean to go back to Yu-Topia and actually hope to enjoy ourselves there, he can't still be there." He said, stepping closer to thread his free arm over Yuri's shoulders, pulling him close against himself, "In a way, because you were always so shy, this is basically the first time you've really had to deal with the sordid consequences of unrequited love. Everything with Saito happened so fast, and then you went to Detroit right away, so you didn't have to deal with the fall-out of whatever his reaction was. ...You kind of let Chris do that for you."

Yuri's eyes widened slightly where he had his brow pressed to Viktor's jacket, and he quickly jerked his head back up again, "Oh no..." He said quietly, voice slightly panicked, "What if that's why Chris brought all that stuff up...? I told him to never tell me what Asahi sent, or even that he'd sent anything at all...what if it was bad?"

"It's something to consider. I don't know what good it'll do for Chris to tell you now though. We were all different people seven years ago...you and him were still kids." Viktor answered, only for his brow to furrow, "...But who am I kidding? After all this time I've had with you, I should know that letting you imagine what might've been is often worse than what really was. You're not going to be able to relax until you know what was sent, now that everything else is coming to a head."

Yuri groaned a sad sigh and dropped his forehead down again, "I'm so sorry...that I'm like this...I'm such a pain in the ass..."

"Nothing worth having is ever easy to get." Viktor explained, rubbing his cheek against the edge of brow and beanie, "And I had to work harder to get you than literally everything else. I intend to keep you, even if I had to fight for it." He added, feeling the tension starting to melt off even through their many layers. Makkachin barked at some of the water fowl that eluded him, and Viktor looked over, "The only question then is whether you want to know right now, or if you want to wait until we see Chris again in person."

"Let's wait..." Yuri suggested, words a bit muffled where he'd pressed his face to his husband's scarf, "Let's...just enjoy the rest of the walk instead. I have a feeling Chris won't be the only one with something to say about Asahi before the night's over."
"Oh?"

He nodded into the fabric, "We promised Yurio that we'd tell him what we did on our trip... He'll probably have a thing or two to say about what he did while we were away, too. He had almost a week after we left. Maybe it'll help us figure out what we're going to walk into when we get back home tomorrow."

"Maybe...but we don't have to ask. Yurio would've complained by now if something wasn't sitting right with him."

Yuri nodded again and pulled his head back up, keeping his eyes low for a moment longer as he drew a shaky breath, "...I never realized how difficult this sort of thing could be. I thought if I just made it clear that we'd never be, he'd get over it and move on, like I did with Yu-chan..."

"Rarely in life is anything that simple...least not love." Viktor explained, "But there are the occasional few people who make it even harder than it has to be."

Yuri blanched slightly, "...I hope you don't mean me right now."

The Russian just smiled and shrugged, leaning in to steal a kiss while his partner was baffled, "We'll sort it out, sooner or later, no matter who the difficult one is."

"You totally mean me right now."

"Come along, my love." He laughed, turning to start walking again, "...And don't forget, we still have to get back afterwards."
The Clementine restaurant within the Palais Coburg was one of at least three such businesses within the aptly-named Coburg Palace. The huge building was like Versailles in the city, surrounded by a huge and thick brick wall, with black wrought iron fencing to top it. The property architecture bore small gardens and pools, double-winged stair cases that curved from ground to entry-way, and at the front of it all, a hotel check-in desk under modern blue-glass walls, like a chunk of aquamarine cut to fit inside a wheel of brie. All it lacked were the horse-drawn carriages pulling-up out front, and the sword-armed guards at the gates.

Within, the Palais Coburg was every bit the palace that it claimed to be, with huge vaulted ceilings, white walls elaborately marked and edged in gold-leaf, and little statues of paired cherubs watching from high above. As the name suggested, within the restaurant itself, there were a number of decorative Clementine trees, growing in their huge ceramic pots. Tables came in square and circular flavors, with medium-brown wooden trim surrounding a black laminate center. Chairs were glossy black wood, booths colored similarly to match the brown wood trims. Bulbous black iron lamps hung from above, and all around, the walls were empanelled glass like a greenhouse. In the grand central rotunda, a portrait of Princess Clémentine de Orléans, clad in a flowing and fluffy white dress, watched over the guests as they basked in the scattered light coming down from a glorious crystal chandelier.

"He says he's here." Viktor said, looking at his phone casually; he and Yuri wore a set of suits for the occasion, though not near as fancy or bedazzled as the ones they wore to the ball the night before. He waggled his extended leg where it was crossed over the other knee, looking around, until uncrossing his legs to sit up straighter. He squinted slightly to try and focus his sights, and eventually spotted what looked like a fancy version of the Russian Tiger. Viktor raised his arm to get the teen's attention, but when Yurio waved back, an awkward-something-else became visible behind him. The Russian squinted even more, "Oh...he brought someone."

"Eh?" Yuri looked over, trying to see around their neighbors by leaning back against the booth, "Oh...you're right. That's not going to be a problem, will it?"

"It's unexpected, but no, I'm fine with it." He answered, pushing to stand up as the pair came closer. Yuri stood up as well on his own side of the table, but instead of staying where he was, he took a sliding step forward to offer his greeting hug to the blonde, then to the young silver who followed, "We weren't expecting more than him, but it's good to see you anyway, Nikki."

"...I hope it's okay." She answered meekly, "I didn't know I was coming either until you guys texted Yura about where to go."

"His idea?"

"Papa's."

"He sent you unexpectedly to a place like this?" Viktor commented, brows slightly slanted in concern.

"Mikhail Rozovsky sends his regards." Yurio huffed, flicking out a bank card before sliding it down onto the table, "The whole thing is on him, not just her part."
The older pair glanced at one another, but each shrugged and smiled, "Guess we should take advantage."

"He's not trying to bribe one or all of us, is he?" Viktor wondered as they all started to find their seats, "Or is he up to something?"

"If he is, he didn't cop to it." Yurio explained, waiting a moment to push in Nikki's chair behind her before taking his own spot opposite his Slavic counterpart, "At least not to me."

Three pairs of eyes turned to the solitary female in the group, and she blinked back at them nervously, but smiled, "...It's cuz him and Minako are taking Vikki somewhere. They know I'd probably have more fun with you guys than them, so...papa hoped if he sent his card with us, you'd forgive him for the extra baggage."

"So it is a bribe." Viktor laughed, "No problem; I am quite bribable."

With seats taken and focus turning to the point of being in such a place, drink orders were placed, and eyes started to scan the menu for the night's fancy fare. They didn't scan for long though before curiosity got the better of both Yuris and they each peered over the tops of their leather-bound tomes, "So are you going to-"

"Oh, er..." Yuri stammered and leaned back again.

"What?" Yurio huffed.

"No you, you go first."

"Uh...sure... You know what I'm gonna ask though. What were you gonna ask?"

Yuri cleared his throat, "We were wondering if everything was okay from earlier today. We saw you come into the rink-side area during Exhibition practice but you practically turned on a heel and left like you didn't want to be there after all."

Yurio looked slightly nervous, "...Oh."

Nikki looked over at her older sibling, "...You want me to tell them?"

He shook his head and huffed a breath at the same time, but then gestured over anyway before falling silent again. Yuri and Viktor both watched in confusion, but then deferred to the youngest member of their table.

"There's two reps from the RSF at Euros." She started, making all three feel a stick in their guts, "One of them was here to evaluate the coaches, the other was here for the athletes. After the Free Program, they kind of ganged up on Yakov and Georgi. I don't know what they were told, but when they found Yura..."

The blonde had his fists clenched against the edge of the table; the whole topic made him grind his teeth, "...They're blaming my lackluster results on the fact that I changed coaches. They're demanding that I move back to Russia and 'get with the program,'" He added air-quotes for emphasis, "And train under Yakov and Lilia again."

"You didn't move to change coaches though. You changed coaches because you moved." Viktor surmised, "What are they going to do if you don't?"

"...They...didn't say openly." The Tiger felt deflated, "I think they're going to try and get me to cheat."
They said...it would be embarrassing for Russia to go to an Olympics and not come back with Gold, and that if us athletes are going to sabotage our chances 'like this,' they'll have to do something drastic."

Viktor quirked a brow suspiciously, "How are they gonna make you cheat? None of their lab people are on staff in PyeongChang. They won't be able to swap samples like before."

Nikki's eyes went wide and she covered her mouth in shock, "You didn't-"

Yuri reached across the table to pull her hands back down, and gave a reassuring squeeze, "He didn't. He was as offended as you are at the very concept."

"Something that can't be checked on urine samples, probably." Viktor considered, putting a fingertip against his chin, "Something that isn't a drug, hormone, or steroid...something that leaves the body quickly...or degrades." He pulled that finger away and pointed it at the teen skater in front of him, "I bet they want you back in St. Petersburg because they want to do blood doping."

"Blood what?" Yurio asked, incredulous.

"Suppose you move back to St. Petersburg after Euros." Viktor started, "They draw a unit of blood from you. Then, they keep it on ice for a few weeks, and take it to South Korea. So you have your own blood, and you've recovered the supply they took from you, then they add that back, and you have a ton more red blood cells to carry oxygen to your muscles during competition. It's impossible to test for that on a urine sample, and even if they did check your blood, it's hard to prove that you added anything because everyone's volumes vary naturally. One could argue that a Champion is born with more blood cells than other people, and that's why they consistently outperform everyone else."

"Is that true though?" Yuri wondered skeptically.

Viktor shrugged, "I'm a figure skater, not a scientist. I like to think I'm successful because I work hard and I push myself, not because I have a bunch of extra little floaty-thingies in me."

"...You're so open about knowing that Russia cheated before..." Nikki commented, "...Isn't it risky to just blurt out what you know they did?"

Viktor smiled, "I don't skate for Russia anymore. It doesn't matter to me."

Yurio glared at him, "You stupid idiot, just because you don't skate for Russia now doesn't mean you can't be accused of cheating when you did."

"Oh..." The older Russian blanched slightly, "Right. Yeah."

"You're lucky that being a skater doesn't mean you have to be smart, too...goddamn."

"He didn't cheat. He didn't have to." Yuri defended, "And he's plenty smart."

Yurio slouched slightly and gestured at Viktor, who was innocently reaching for a cup of iced water, "You do realize this is the moron who routinely forgets his promises and makes dumb last-second decisions, right?"

"Yes but he's my moron."

Viktor coughed into his glass.
"Why do you think he married me?" Yuri went on, sitting back against the booth seat. He slid his hand up his husband's leg as he went, and kept it there. "I'm the paranoid responsible one between us that over-thinks the consequences of all the dumb stuff we do."

"Like your Russia trip?" Yurio huffed, one brow quirked.

Yuri twitched slightly, "Ehh...maybe not all the consequences...?"

"In his defense, I didn't really give him much of a choice in all that." Viktor pointed out, sliding his arm along the booth-back to settle behind Yuri's shoulders, "And honestly speaking, seeing my father was the least worst part of that trip. Being with him was comparatively pleasant."

"How much worse can it get than spending a weekend at Kon's?"

Yuri rubbed his thumb softly against his partner's thigh, "You or me?" He wondered.

"Feel free."

Nodding, Yuri looked back across the table to the pair of green eyes watching him expectantly, "Well...it started with a rather messy arrival at Pulkovo Airport..."

...By the end of it all, finally getting off the train here in Vienna was like landing on a completely different planet."

"Wow..." The two teens both said, picking at the last bits of their dinners.

"We'll be doing whatever we can to avoid going to Russia again." Viktor commented, using a fork in the last piece of venison to wipe up the remnants of its own juices, "So we'll be avoiding Rostelecom, and I guess we'll have to skip Worlds if it's held there."

"I think you'll be lucky enough to not have to worry about it." Yurio shrugged, looking at a cut sprig of asparagus on the end of his steak knife, "At least the next four aren't held there. Unless plans change, it's Milan, Tokyo, Montreal, and then Stockholm."

"Oh...Japan again...? It was just in Saitama the year before last."

The teen shrugged, "I don't decide where we go. I just get there."

"Guess you better be sure to win all four of the next Championships." Viktor teased, nudging Yuri with his elbow, "Wouldn't want to be forced to go to Russia the year after you planned to be retired."

Yuri quaked slightly, "Don't say that, now it's gonna happen!"

"Just become a five-time consecutive Champion like you promised."

"You've practically jinxed me."

"Nonsense." Viktor laughed quietly, "The only one who can beat you isn't going to be competing for real after this year."

Yurio nearly choked on the asparagus sprig, eyes watering as he pounded the front of his chest.

"You're still competing for real this year! And even if you don't push yourself next year, you're still going to be really hard to beat!" Yuri whined, "Even you ought to know that you'll never
be able to skate without meaning to go for the Gold... It's practically not in your DNA to accept anything less."

"I'm just skating for fun next year though."

"Fun for you is getting up on the top tier of the podium so you can laugh at all the plebs down below!"

Viktor hesitated, thinking on it slightly with a quiet hum, "...Yyyyeah you're right." He laughed, "You know me too well."

"Everyone knows that." Yurio grumbled, face slightly red from the prior vegetable assault, "One look at your dumb gold-plated skates would give you away."

"I like my gold-plated blades, thanks very much." The elder Russian contested, "But you're right...I suppose I do project a bit."

"...Yuri had golden blades too though." Nikki pointed out, "What does that mean?"

"Oh...those were a late wedding present from Viktor last year." Yuri explained, cheeks colored slightly at the memory of unboxing them, "He said that I should skate on Gold if I intended to win Gold."

"Has it worked?"

"...Shockingly, yeah...at least until 2 weeks ago." He sighed, "Bronze got me."

"You were robbed." Viktor commented with a huff, "Just like Otabek at the Final last year. Totally robbed by a lesser athlete."

"Yeah I'm still not sure how JJ managed to get on the podium that time..." Yuri agreed, "I'm just glad I was up there at all...I wonder how he's doing now? He's going to miss all the biggest events this year."

"I'm not sad about it." Yurio commented, "Good riddance."

"Yuri." Nikki chided, but he just shrugged. She turned instead to the 'more mature' members on the other side of the table, hoping for backup.

Viktor just chewed the bit of venison extra slowly. Yuri looked a bit uneasy.

"Someone say something!"

"...I never found JJ all that interesting before." Viktor explained, swallowing. "Then he nearly killed my husband, and he moved into a category of reprehensible people that will have my eternal scorn."

Jade eyes turned to Yuri instead, but he looked uncertain, "...I never really knew what to think of JJ before the accident. Now I just feel sorry for him. By all measure, I got hurt worse, but the location of JJ’s injury means he won't be skating again until long after the season's over. If he doesn't seriously rehab that area, it'll get stiff and inflexible, and he may never skate competitively ever again. But...skating is his passion, and we all know how hard we'd work to get back on the ice if we were in his same shoes." He turned his head slightly to glance at his spouse, "Thankfully, most of us haven't really gotten that hurt during our careers. Skaters tend to burn-out hard and fast."

"Really? How come?" Nikki wondered, looking between the three.
"Jumps put a lot of torque through our backs, and the landings are bad for our knees." Yuri explained for them all, "There's been some rumblings in the skating world that the ISU may change the scoring system at some point, to reduce the pressure on skaters to jump, and bring the focus back to artistic expression and choreography."

"In which case, you'll definitely be the reigning Champion," Viktor surmised happily, "Even before I came along, your step sequences and spins were top quality."

Yuri smiled sheepishly, "It's the only way I could compensate for my lackluster jump repertoire, and regain lost points from falls."

"But now you're super well-rounded." The Russian continued, beaming for his pride and joy, "And with your stamina, you're the only skater on the planet who can do the quad Axel so consistently, and put it at the end of your programs for massive bonus points."

"The Axel was already my favorite jump...I guess that made it easier to go for the quad."

Yurio grumpily pointed at them with his fork, "The fact that either of you can do that jump is ridiculous. It should be impossible."

"A hundred years ago, a Ladies skater was reprimanded severely because a single Salchow caused her costume skirt to rise above her knees, which people thought was practically pornographic for the time. It took until after World War 2 for a triple to be landed, and until the late 90s for the first quad to be recognized." Yuri explained, "We push the limits of what we think is possible every few decades. By the time you retire though, quads may be seen as newbie jumps."

The Tiger just scoffed, "I doubt it. Quint jumps actually are impossible."

"Don't say that." Viktor scolded teasingly, "Yuri will end up doing it next year, and I'll be left on the sidelines wishing I wasn't so old so I could keep breaking records before he can."

"You're not old." Yuri huffed. "I'm an old people. I'm nearly 30; practically dead."

"I dare to wonder what you'll think of yourself when you're 60."

"Held together by little more than necromantic magik and duct tape..."

"Papa's nearly 60 and he doesn't need duct tape." Nikki teased, "Can't claim certainty on the necromancy though. You never know for sure with him."

"Right? See? She gets it." Viktor gestured at his cousin, "I see Mimi and I know my future."

"He's not even balding." Yuri countered.

The Russian guffawed dramatically, "We don't know what he's done to keep his hair from thinning. Maybe he got plugs."

"He didn't get plugs."

"How do we know for sure though?"

"You poked the crown of his head when he first showed up at the rink with Kon, like you were testing him by his level of baldness for whether or not you'd trust him. I'm sure he would've told you if it was artificial."
Viktor paused for a moment, but then leaned closer, "Are you sure about that?"

"He wanted you to like him. Why would he mess up and risk your ire by lying to you about something so minor?"

"Reasons, Yuri. Reasons."

A single hand shoved the man back with a laugh, "You're impossible."
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED TWENTY FOUR

A concierge clerk approached from behind the desk with a large duffle-bag and a smaller backpack, and put them up onto the counter to remove the identity tags. Viktor lifted them both and pulled them towards himself, and started heading for where the rest of the group waiting by the glass doors. Everyone had gotten their jackets back by then, and Yurio had his own gear-bag slung over one shoulder. The taxi to take them to the arena was still on its way.

"...Hard to believe this is really the last thing we're gonna do before we leave." Yuri commented idly, looking back as the silver blur at the edges of his vision came into focus, "In a weird way, it feels like we just got here."

"I think our timing is all messed up because we only really just skated today for the first time." Viktor suggested, "By our measure, that's the first day of practice before the Short Program the next night."

He added, leaning down slightly to set the bags down on the ground.

Yuri pulled a jacket off of where he'd had it hanging over his forearm, and held it up for a pair of hands to slide through. As it lifted up and Viktor shuffled it over his shoulders, Yuri stepped back to make room, "It'll be nice to just skate for fun tonight though. Exhibitions were always my favorite part of events, even if I rarely got to perform in them myself."

Viktor nodded as he adjusted the way the jacket's lapel sat around his shoulders and neck. Satisfied, he slipped his hands forward, pulling his partner into a quickly grateful Eskimo kiss, "Skating for fun and love is always the best."

"What are you guys skating to tonight?" Nikki wondered, leaning back a bit to see behind Yurio at them, "A duet right?"

"Mh." Yuri nodded, turning in place to put his back to his spouse's front, "It's pretty uncommon for us to do Exhibitions on our own now. Not since Four Continents last year when we premiered the duet version of Viktor's 'Aria.' He turned to look at Yurio next, "What about you? What's your Exhibition?"

"...Honestly, I'm not even sure I want to do one at all anymore." He answered sullenly, "I can't get the bad taste out of my mouth from this morning."

"...And you're absolutely sure they intend to ask you to cheat?" Yuri asked, "Do you want us to tell someone?"

"No...and no." The Tiger said, shaking his head slightly, "I'll figure something else out... If the IOC caught wind that the RSF was asking its athletes to dope up, Russia would be banned from competing. I don't want to remember this as the first time I got my Olympic jacket, only to have to send it back because the RSF is a bunch of sore losers."

"Did they give you a time-frame for when they expect you to be back in St. Petersburg...?" Viktor wondered, "What about Minako? Did you tell her what they were suggesting?"

"I didn't tell either of them; her or the old man." Yurio sighed, eyes down towards the base of the sliding glass doors, "I didn't want to upset her, since the RSF goon-squad is basically accusing her of being bad at her job. It's not her fault though."
"So how'd Nikki know...?" The elder wondered, pointing a finger at his cousin.

"She laid siege to my silence until telling her was the only way I'd get some peace." He explained, much to Nikki's stained amusement.

"He's actually pretty awful at hiding when something's wrong." The aforementioned silver teen teased, "I'm sure papa suspects, but he may be keeping his head down for the same reasons Yura did. I don't think he was close enough to overhear the conversation though."

"Conversation?" Yurio echoed sarcastically, "It was more like a one-sided talking-to. Being lectured in no-uncertain-terms that I suck and my coach sucks and that every decision I've made for myself since the Final was a mistake is hard to swallow, especially when it's coming from my bosses. I just...wish I knew what they really wanted from me. I can't even fight back because they never actually said anything. I'm just guessing."

"They'd wait until you were back in Russia before divulging that sort of thing." Viktor pointed out. He nudged Yuri closer to the younger skater and leaned down to speak quieter, "Maybe hedge your bets and do like I did...tell them you're too good to risk on something like this. You compete clean and win clean, or you don't compete at all...then Russia will really be up Shit Creek."

The Tiger still looked deflated though, "...Seems to me like they're willing to toss me if I don't bend over though."

"They're crazy then. You're the youngest skater to ever win Gold at the Grand Prix Fin-" Yurio turned his head sharply, "And I've been garbage ever since. I haven't won a single Gold."

"...You did get Nationals Gold the last two times." Yuri pointed out hesitantly, but the look he got for it made him regret saying anything. He retreated a bit deeper into Viktor's arms. It was a small mercy that their taxi pulled up in front of the doors almost immediately after, and thoughts - at least for the moment - turned towards their travels.

Bags and backpacks were picked up and carried outside as the driver exited the vehicle to confirm his passengers. Yurio called shotgun pretty easily, and Nikki sat behind him, with Viktor next to her, and Yuri on the far side behind the driver. The ride to the arena was awkwardly quiet. Even after finally arriving, little more was said than was necessary to pay the cabby and move on.

Yurio lead the way along the front of the building as the cordoned-off section gave easy access to the arena's front doors. They followed through, past the cheering voices and camera flashes, until they finally made it through to the athletes-only section inside. Yurio made a hasty exit before anyone could even turn to realize he was sneaking off, awkwardly leaving Nikki with the two older skaters.

"Well, that's rude." She complained, crossing her arms, "What was that for?"

"That's typical of him." Viktor pointed out, "He used to always leave Yakov with the gear so he could wander around on his own. He'd also take off if he spotted his Angels fanclub."

"But I don't-" Nikki started, only to spot the group with their banners through a gap in the crowd, "Oh..."

"Don't worry about it." Yuri reassured, "It'll work out somehow. Russia's had to give up medals before because of bad behavior...I don't think they want to be seen as cheaters."

"Let's figure out where Mimi and the others are so we can safely hand you off." Viktor added, "Yuri and I need to get ready."
Yurio weaved through the crowd, annoyed at how everyone was so much taller and how tightly they pressed in around him. Trying to avoid his fan-club was tiring, but he really wasn't in the mood to feign interest, much as he'd always been encouraged to do in the past. Hiding his hair under the hood of his jacket made sneaking around unrecognized a bit easier, but all he could do was try to get to the changing rooms.

...I don't even want to skate tonight because of this shit, he thought, pushing through to the crowded restroom. It was a mercy that he found an unoccupied stall and pushed his way inside, past the others who were putting on make-up at the mirrors or adjusting their costumes. He hadn't noticed whether Chris or Emil were in there, but he wasn't watching for them either. He just put the lock into place from the inside and sat back against the toilet-seat, backpack on his lap as he stared blankly forward. **If I decide not to skate, people are going to ask why...but if I do skate, they'll see something's wrong with the performance... I don't know what to do... Why is the RSF being like this!? If they were that concerned about not winning then they shouldn't have thrown Viktor out!**

A quick text and a brief wait made it easy for a meet-and-trade, and Mikhail was soon reunited with both his kid and his bank card. He approached the trio with a nervous but well-meaning smile, "I guess everything went okay then."

"Yeah, everything was fine," Viktor answered, holding the plastic rectangle between his fingers. Just as the elder went to take it back though, he flicked the card out of the man's reach, getting a confused look, "But warn us next time. Our reservation was for three. It would've been problematic if they didn't have room."

"Was the table set for four when you got there?"

"Sure, but-"

"That's because I called ahead." Mikhail explained, "They would've cleaned up the fourth spot when you arrived if there was no one using it."

Viktor deadpanned him, "You messed with our reservation?"

"Just to say that your guest was bringing one of his own. If they'd said that wasn't allowed then I wouldn't have pushed it." Mikhail pointed out, finally swiping his card back, "In any event, I hope you guys all had a good time. Yura needed some cheering up."

Viktor and Yuri exchanged glances, but Yurio's words rang through their heads like an echo. Instead of just spelling it out though, Viktor simply put one hand on his uncle's shoulder and moved in to speak next to the man's ear, "Talk to Nikki about it. We told him we wouldn't tell, but she didn't."

"...Tell me?" He mumbled back in confusion, but Viktor pulled away again without another word. There was something of an unspoken understanding though after that, as Viktor nodded at him before resuming his usual friendly affect.

"We're going to go get ready. Thanks for tagging along, Nikki; it was fun."

"Are you guys all going to the Banquet after?" Yuri wondered, half-turning to follow his partner back the way they came.

"We're planning to." Minako answered, "It'll depend on how long this one manages." She thumbed
at the young teen next to her, but promptly got a look for it, which just made her laugh, "We'll be there. We may just not stay all night long. Keep half an eye on Yura though, would you? Where is he right now anyway?"

"Avoiding being noticed." Viktor answered with a shrug, "As per usual. We'll track him down. Jane."

The two guest-skaters started moving away from them again, but Mikhail just gave a lazy wave while Minako and Nikki were a bit more enthusiastic. His eyes went down to the bank card in his hands, and the words that Viktor had whispered to him.

I knew something was off this morning...didn't think it would be like this though. I those two openly agreed not to tell though...maybe Nikki won't either. I'll have to coax it out of her somehow.

He reached into his jacket to pull out his wallet, put the card away, and slipped the wallet into its fold again as he turned towards the pair, "I'm sure the Gala's opening ceremony is going to start before we find seats. Shall we?"

Making their way back towards the changing rooms, Yuri couldn't help but be hypervigilant. Eyes checked the faces of everyone they passed, scanning the crowd for the teen they'd lost a few minutes prior. Viktor gently tugged him along though, keeping him on track even if his eyes were everywhere but forward.

"Please don't add him to your list of worries, my love." Viktor pleaded, pausing slightly with a hand on the door to the big bathroom, "Whatever happens, Mimi will take care of it. That's his job."

"I'm not thinking we can do anything about it." Yuri answered, looking at the man before him, "But I can't help but feel like this is déjà vu, in a weird way."

"Because of last year?"

"Yeah." He nodded, "Yurio wouldn't do what Yakov wanted, so Yakov booted him. Would the RSF really be so brazen? Wouldn't it look even worse if they lost their best two skaters in such a short period of time, right before the biggest event in the world?"

"If love is the death of duty, pride is the death of common sense." Viktor explained, "I can't explain the lengths to which Russia will go to prove themselves. I got lucky...but Yurio is much younger, even younger than I was when my first Olympics came up...and he may not have the ability to stand up for himself when he's had such a hard time of late."

"And you're telling me not to worry." Yuri said, making a face like the suggestion was preposterous on its face.

"I can ask." Viktor smiled, "I may not be able to stop you but at least I've tried."

The door was pushed open and the pair went within, greeted by the sounds and smells of a Gala changing room. Yuri felt slightly out of place, despite knowing several people within, or at least being familiar with them if he didn't know them by name.

It's kind of like Rostelecom last year, where Yurio and Viktor were really the only people I had to talk to... I'm a stranger in a strange land.

By providence, it seemed, they bumped into Chris, who had just finished putting himself together for
his Gold performance, "I was wondering when you two would turn up." He commented, pulling his
crleat Olympic jacket over the dark costume. Yuri could vaguely make out what looked like a
scaled pattern in the one-piece, each one being the size of a silver dollar, but diamond-shaped, giving
off an iridescent blue-green color before going to black, "Did you just get here?"

"Sort of, but not exactly?" Viktor answered, looking around to see if there were any open changing
stalls, "We were out to dinner before coming, and had a guest to give back to her father, so we just
get back from that. Seems this place is still pretty packed though."

"You and him were just prancing around naked in a shower this morning, and now you're worried
about being watched while changing clothes?" Chris teased, "You make no sense at the best of
times."

"I have nothing to hide about myself," Viktor explained, "But I'm an artist and I don't want people to
see my work until I'm ready to show it off."

"I know, I know... " The Swiss mused, flaring his jacket's collar a bit, but then leaned closer to his
silver friend, "Maybe try that one close to the end on the right." He whispered behind a hand,
"Someone's been in there for fifteen minutes and not come out."

"Someone?"

"Someone you may know."

"I see." Viktor smiled, and stepped forward to get up behind his partner, placing his hand on Yuri's
lower back, "My love, we may have found Yurio."

"Why are you whispering?"

"Shh!" Viktor hushed, putting a finger against his lips for emphasis. He offered a wink and nudged
his head towards the door that had been pointed out to him, "Stealthy now."

Yuri moved forward in confusion, but didn't question further. They just slowly scanned each stall for
doors that were ajar or closed, until eventually coming to that last one on the right. The door was
closed, and the gap between it and the next wall was tight enough that one couldn't peer through.
Viktor leaned back to see if he could spot feet, but he saw nothing in the small open area under the
walls. Instead, he pulled out his phone, set it to record a video, and quickly peeked it over the top
edge of the door, avoiding the flash of a camera or the noise of a fake shutter clicking. When he
pulled it down again, and reviewed the footage, it was indeed the Russian Tiger within, clutching his
backpack and unwilling to move.

"Jeesh, he reminds me so much of myself when I was really young." Viktor huffed quietly, closing
the feed to put his phone away again. He looked up though, and then aside, realizing that the huge
handicapped stall capping the end of the row was being vacated. He nudged his head as the
unfamiliar athlete went by them, and he and Yuri took it for themselves.

Setting their bags down and hanging up their winter jackets, Viktor looked up at the edge of the
dividing wall as he unbuttoned the cuffs of his dress-shirt.

"Do you think he knows we're here?" Yuri wondered, unbuttoning his vest, "He's had to have heard
us by now..."

"Even if he has, we've been quiet since we talked to Chris. It's impossible to see between the doors
and walls though so unless he paid particular attention to what our shoes looked like tonight, he
wouldn't be able to tell its us by looking at our feet shuffling by." The Russian answered, "I have an
Yurio checked the time on his phone, and grit his teeth. *It's practically show-time... I have to tell them I'm not going to skate...*

A rustle and thump caught his attention to the right, but looking down gave nothing away. There were no shoes poking under the gap at the base of the plastic wall. Another thump, and the light above him seemed to dim somehow. He turned his eyes up and spotted the unexpected and unlikely face of Yuri Nikiforov there, peering down at him, *"What the shi-"*

"Yuri!" He called down, "Chill, it's just me...can you-" He stammered, and looked back, "What do you want me to say? I don't even know why I'm up here!" He said to someone behind and below him. He grumbled and looked back over the wall, "Why aren't you changed...? You're up almost first..."

"...I can't stomach skating right now... It just makes me sick. I was getting myself ready to tell the organizers to skip me."

"Skip you? But you won Bronze. You earned your place."

"Weren't you listening to anything I said tonight? I feel like I've just lost my spot in the Games no matter *what* I do..."

"All the more reason to skate the Gala tonight. You got your spot in the line-up fair and square, without outside help." Yuri explained, choosing his words carefully given the number of people still nearby, "It's not like you'll be skating against people you don't *know* in the Olympics. We *already* skate against the best figure skaters in the world. The only real difference with the Games is how many people are watching, and how many other events are going on at the same time. There's nothing for you to worry about."

"How can you say that, knowing what I'm up against?" Yurio protested, gripping his bag a bit tighter, "I feel like everything I've accomplished is being questioned... That none of it matters suddenly. All the choices I've made are coming back to haunt me."

"No...you made the right choices. We may live for the ice, but it's not everything."

"...If the RSF tells me to move back to St. Petersburg and I tell them *no*, they're going to take my jacket back."

"We don't know that for sure. And besides...Viktor's right; Mikhail's the one to take care of all that for you. Your job is to skate. So let's all get ready and show the whole of Europe why Team Hasetsu is going to be on the podium in PyeongChang next month."

"...Team...Hasetsu?" Yurio echoed, looking up in confusion, but all he saw was the hopeful look on Yuri's face, "...You don't mean that..."

"Why wouldn't I?" He asked, "I'm literally sitting on Viktor's shoulder right now, talking to you over the edge of a bathroom stall. When you and I first met, it was under similar circumstances...and I didn't doubt your sincerity back then."

The Tiger's face twitched, and he looked down again, unsure whether his skin had flushed or not, but hiding it anyway just in case.

"C'mon, Yuri...skate the Gala with us. This is supposed to be when we have fun and let loose. It's also the last time you'll get to skate *until* the Games. Make the most of it! Forget the rest until..."
something actually happens."

"...It's really weird...hearing from you that I shouldn't worry about something..." The teen grumbled, but then unfolded his legs from their perch on the front edge of the toilet, and set his feet back onto the tiled ground, "But maybe you're right... I'll...let Mikhail deal with it. Whatever it turns out to be."

"That's the spirit. Now let's all hurry...I'm sure the OCs are already starting."
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED TWENTY FIVE

The flag-dancers were already on the ice - performing again to the Euro-Zone-style remixes of the same two O-Zone songs they’d skated to in the Opening Ceremonies - when seats in the audience were found and occupied. Mikhail's preference for sitting on the end-cap was thwarted that time, but he made due, sticking Nikki between himself and Minako. He pulled out his phone briefly, keeping its lighting dim to avoid bothering others, and sent one last message to his event-in-absentia daughter.

[Hey, just letting you know that we're going dark now. Buzz me if you need something, but otherwise, have a good night.]

He kept his eyes on the screen for a few seconds before closing it down and putting it back into his jacket's breast pocket, leaning slightly towards his youngest as he did so, "So did you have fun with the boys or was it super boring?"

She looked aside at the man, confused for a second, but then shook her head and smiled, "No, it was fine. They were really nice. Yuri and Cousin Viktor told us all about what happened on their trip to see Kon... Apparently Viktor's old house burned down at some point, too."

"Yeah, I'd heard about that."

"Really? When?"

"The other night, when Yuri came to stay with us. He and I had a long conversation about a lot of things. Their trip and the house was part of it."

Nikki's brow furrowed, but she looked back to the ice, only to wiggle closer slightly and take her father's nearest arm into her hands, "What are you going to do...? That's a lot for them to have to deal with."

"The house was technically mine anyway." Mikhail explained, patting the teen's mitten hands, "I bought it off Viktor last summer, when he moved to Japan permanently. I thought I'd restore it as a vacation home for whoever wanted a Russian getaway, but...I suppose there's a list of reasons why that's not going to happen. ...I guess I'll just have the remains bulldozed and sell the plot...or just sell it as it is."

"I could tell that Cousin Viktor was still upset about it." Nikki commented, barely audible over the music, "Even though he chose to move away, the place still had meaning to him."

"Memories of the times he liked being in Russia, before everything turned against him..." The elder nodded, "Maybe it's for the best that he has nothing left to return for. All of us, really."

The teen made a face, unseen in the dark, but the unconscious squeeze of her fingers gave her away. Mikhail looked towards her, "Is there something going on?" He wondered; hoping.

"...Maybe our Yuri will have to go back for something." She answered vaguely.

"What for? Everything of value that he had there is in Hasetsu now. Even his cat moved."

"...Ehm..." Nikki hesitated, hearing Yurio's worried voice echoing through her head. Her father's
eyes were on her though and that was a force to be reckoned with, and she caved, "...The RSF told Yuri this morning that he should move back to train with Yakov again. He thinks they're going to ask him to cheat at the Games." She blurted quickly, only to then cover her mouth, trying to get the proverbial horse back into the barn, though it had galloped away already.

Minako heard the verbal deluge, and looked over in surprise, "...They want him to do what?"

"Ididn'tsayanything." Nikki protested, burying her face into the wedge of space between her father's arm and the back of their seats, refusing to say another word.

Mikhail's eyes moved back to the rink though, focusing on the flag-dancer bearing Russia's colors. His brow furrowed slightly as he moved his arm around his daughter's slim frame.

'Chemist's Games,' indeed... Russia, when will you learn?

Yurio took a deep breath as he looked at his reflection in the mirrors at the front of the changing room. Yuri and Viktor weren't long behind him, coming out of their big stall with their Olympic track-suits on to cover the costumes beneath, save for their long jackets, which they kept in their opaque garment bags. Emerald eyes looked back towards them, golden hair long and loose around his shoulders.

"You're not tying your hair back?" Yuri wondered, approaching the long vanity with a small container in his hand. He pulled his glasses off and popped the cap on one of the two compartments of the container, fishing for a lens, "Are you going to be able to see?"

"It should be okay."

"I'm glad you decided to skate." Viktor added, dressing his hair to curve over his left eye rather than covering it, "I'm actually pretty excited to see what you do."

"I'll just be glad to get it done..." Yurio sighed, "I've never dreaded to skate before, but..."

Yuri blinked purposefully a few times as the second contact lens was placed, and he started cleaning the case they came in, "I know that feeling." He explained, rinsing the small plastic container before shaking it dry and putting it away, "But you're way more head-strong than I am. Just looking at your outfit, I'm guessing this show's going to be up the alley of 'Welcome to the Madness,' right?"

"I guess."

"Use it to let out your frustration then, like Viktor did at NHK." He recommended, "We don't know what the RSF really meant when they talked to you this morning. For all we know, they really only meant to say you should get back with Yakov and Lilia. Minako-sensei is unknown in the figure skating wor-"

"So was Lilia before Yakov brought her on." Yurio pointed out.

Viktor pressed down on the spritzer of a small hairspray canister, "Lilia has cred now, and she worked with Yakov, not in place of him."

Both Yuris gave him a confused look, "How is that supposed to help?"

"Minako has only been on the job for like two weeks," He answered, "I don't know that she was ever a Prima like Lilia was, but she has dancing experience and credentials. Right now, while she's
learning how to teach figure skating rather than ballet, she's getting by on the coattails of the work you did while you were still with Yakov and Lilia."

Yurio's left eye twitched, and side-eyed Yuri next to him, "When is he going to make sense?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." He answered, shrugging helplessly.

"The RSF is lashing out." Viktor said, looking at himself in the mirror. He put a finger on his lip and a hand on his hip, but then turned slightly and gave the duo a wink, "Every coach and every athlete is under heaps of pressure in the run-up to the Games. Does Russia even have a third guy to send to PyeongChang right now?"

"...No..." Yurio admitted.

"So the zeal of doing well is being put onto the shoulders of two instead of three. You're feeling more pressure because there's more to go around than there would've been if I were going for Russia." Viktor went on, watching as his partner pulled blades out of their bag, "Not only that, but the RSF is embarrassed that they tried to force me into retirement, only for me to come back swinging for Japan instead. On top of that, you moved to where I live, putting you at risk of being unduly influenced. I'm surprised they haven't told you not to talk to me or Yuri."

"What makes you think they haven't?"

Yuri stopped what he was doing, one skate on and laces half-tied. Eyes went from Yurio to Viktor, but Viktor just gave an uneasy laugh.

"What, have they?"

"Yakov, too." Yurio confessed quietly, "Even Georgi, and Mila... We've all been told to avoid talking to you."

Viktor was quiet for a moment, but breathed out a sigh, "For how long?"

"...Nationals."

"Well, that hasn't worked out." Viktor supposed, "Pretty much everyone still talks to me... What about Yuri?"

"He doesn't matter to them." Yurio explained, keeping his eyes forward to avoid the gaze from those around him, "...They think he's a joke. That he's nothing without you."

Yuri choked a surprised cough, but just went back to tying his laces, even if he was a bit rougher with them then.

"...But that's exactly why I keep hanging out with you two." Yurio explained, turning to face them both, "And why I still moved to Hasetsu, even knowing the RSF was shitting themselves over it. If I let them police everything I do, then I've lost."

Viktor hummed a breath, curling his fingers around his lips and the point of his chin. Both hands went down to his hips then for a moment, before he stepped forward and put them onto Yurio's shoulders instead, and pulled him into a hug, "And that's all the reason you need to skate tonight." He said, "Make a stand. Show the RSF that they don't have a choice in whether they let you go to the Games or not; without you, they've lost."
The arena was dark and musical when the trio finally arrived in the prep area, being the last to leave the changing rooms. Yurio veered off from them early on, finding some space to stretch and put on his blades before his time on the ice. In the rink was the Bronze Ice Dance duo, performing to a shortened version of Tchaikovsky's 15-minute long 1812 Overture.

Viktor sauntered along until they both got the televisions, pulling Yuri behind by a few fingers. Yuri's eyes were looking dubiously around the area, scanning faces, wondering if those two RSF officials were there with all the competitors. He didn't see anyone that stuck out though. It was just the regular event staffers, mostly those keeping things orderly around the sectioned-off area where the curtains blocked the entrance to rink-side, keeping the lights down in the dark arena.

"It's going to be such a long wait..." Viktor complained, though still in good spirits, "I'm practically itching to get out there."

"You didn't even put your skates on earlier." Yuri pointed out, coming back down to Earth from where his mind had been floating.

"I know. I still have to loosen up."

Yuri turned his eyes towards the television mounted high on the wall, looking over the heads of the others who had gathered in front of it. There were a few other t.v. stations around the hall, and other small crowds in front of each, but Yuri couldn't spot Mila, Georgi, or Yakov anywhere. To that end, the Crispinos weren't obviously around either, nor was Emil.

Are they at rink-side already? Yuri wondered, I'm not even sure what medal Mila won...but she's always been really good... Sara's probably with her. Wherever Sara's at, her brother is sure to follow...and Emil is usually hanging out with them. Maybe Yakov is there, too...wherever they are.

The music in the arena started getting rather energetic, and Yuri looked back to the screens, seeing the Ice Dancer's kicking it up into overdrive to keep pace. The thunderous crack of cannons firing could be felt even under the arena. He pulled his fingers free from Viktor's loose grasp, drawing a look of confusion at first, but he stepped up behind the Russian instead. Yuri perched his chin behind Viktor's right shoulder, and slid his hands around each side, hugging close to his partner's back as he watched the show continue on ahead of them.

"Am I going to have to ground you tonight?"

"Huh?" Yuri blinked and lifted his head up again, spotting the one blue eye that was looking back at him, "Ground me?"

Viktor smiled and settled his one free hand over Yuri's where it had come to rest on his front, "You tend to fall when there's something on your mind." He reminded, "Your head's so far up in the clouds that you forget where your feet are."

"Oh." Yuri answered, pressing his lips and nose to that shoulder again. He looked down slightly, not really looking at anything in particular, but his fingers clenched around the fabric beneath his palms, "I'm looking out for those RSF officials."

"You'll get yourself worked up."

"...I just want them to watch." He explained, "I want them to see exactly how much of a joke I am."

"You're not a joke, my love. You're a Champion." Viktor reassured, rubbing his cheek against the side of his spouse's forehead, "And last I checked, you were still in command of the highest total score in history...and you did it without cheating. You got into the rink by yourself and earned those
marks from your own strength."

"...I was never out there alone." Yuri contested, "You were always out there with me."

"But I was never pulling your strings, making you move in ways you wouldn't be able to on your own." The Russian pointed out, "No one can ever take away what you've achieved. That's yours forever."

"I know... That's what I want them to see. That you're physically right next to me, and I can keep up with you on my own." Yuri added, "I have enough trouble dealing with the doubt I put on myself. I don't need a whole other country dismissing me like that, too."

"We'll both show them. Hell, all three of us will."

"...We've gotta figure out how to tell Mik about what Yurio said." Yuri said, voice a bit lower, and a more serious look on his face, "I know he's scared he'll lose his spot at the Games if someone says something, but-"

"He'll find out without us." Viktor explained, "I honestly wouldn't be shocked if he knows by the time we see him again."

"Nikki?"

"Mh."

.

The Gala was a blur of fun and exciting performances. Distraction was easy to come by, watching so much unstructured creativity on the ice. The missing skaters that Yuri had been looking for made themselves known when Sara went out to skate her Ladies Bronze show, and Yurio reappeared to skate his own for the Men's.

[Through The Fire And The Flames' - DragonForce (3 minute version)]

On a cold winter morning, in the time before the light,  
In flames of death's eternal reign, we ride towards the fight...

When the darkness has fallen down, and the times are tough alright  
The sound of evil laughter falls, around the world tonight...

High-energy and faced-paced, memories of the previous year's Free Program were quick to the audience's mind. Yurio quickly felt himself freed-up from the dubious confines of the words he'd heard earlier in the day, letting them get cut away from him like the ball-and-chain they'd come to be. He wasn't even annoyed anymore that it was the Bronze skate he'd performed in, and seeing Emil go out a little while after him was like watching any other skater, not someone who'd bested him.

[I-2-I' - A Goofy Movie]

Got myself a notion, and one I know that you'll understand,  
To set the world in motion, by reaching out for each other's hand...

Maybe we'll discover, what we should've known all along, yeah,  
One way or another, together's where we both belong...

In-keeping with his other programs that season, Emil's tug on the nostalgia-levers was in high-gear;
he even wore a bright yellow costume like the performer in the movie for whom his show gave life. Much of his choreography was pulled right from that fictional stage, minus the giant electrical exploding spheres and back-up dancers, but with the new finesse of being played-out on the ice.

[’Remember When It Rained’ - Josh Groban]

Wash away the thoughts inside, that keep my mind away from you,
No more love and no more pride, and thoughts are all I have to do...

Ooh, remember when it rained, I felt the ground and look up high and called your name,
Ooh, remember when it rained, in the darkness I remain...

The iridescent scales of Chris' costume bounced with light in the rink, looking like water pouring over oil, reflecting the multiple different colors that shone down from the rafters; blue, then green, then magenta. Given the loud and boisterous nature of most of Chris' usual programs, and lacking the liquid sexuality of the others, everyone paid close attention to this new display. Viktor was particularly interested, not having seen such a thing from his long-time friend before.

Soon though, it was time for those last two performers to get onto the ice. The energy of the anticipating was vibrating through the arena. Yuri and Viktor slipping inside the box-like quarantine of curtains that stood between them and the rink, slipping into their immaculately detailed jackets while letting their eyes adjust to the dark.

Clapping was persistent outside that little temporary room. The chaos of it - perfectly emulating the sound of the rain that Chris had just been skating in homage of - coalesced into a more coherent organized noise. Yuri felt a chill go down his spine as he heard the unmistakable sound of that chanting begin, and he felt his shaking hand taken by Viktor's. Fingers clasped tightly - partly out of sheer nervousness, partly out of excitement.

"Don't forget to breathe, my love."

"They're chanting for you..."

"No, Yuri." Viktor corrected, "They're chanting for us. Listen closely..."

Under the loudness of the clapping, the full sound of the audience's chorus was hard to discern at first. Yuri was certain they were hollering his husband's name. But, he listened...

Viktuuri...

Viktuuri...

Viktuuri...

Someone on the outside pulled the curtain back, and they looked through the opening to the colors swirling beyond them. The announcer was already starting the introduction in German, but when it repeated again in English...

"Ladies and Gentlemen... People of Austria, Europe, and the whole world... It is the distinct pleasure and honor that we at the Österreichischer Eiskunstlauf Verband - Skate Austria - welcome our dear friend and his husband to the ice for a very special Guest Performance at our Exhibition Gala."

The applause was enormous, and Yuri squeezed Viktor's hand harder than before, swallowing nervously. He felt Viktor stepping forward though, and quickly made himself move with him, blade-
guards already off as they approached the opening in the rink-wall.

*This is it...* He thought, seeing the spotlights converge on the frost just within the doorway.

Viktor tugged on his partner's hand to draw those eyes up, and he smiled in the faint light, "Let's go make history."
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED TWENTY SIX

Though it was hardly the first time Yuri had stepped into an Exhibition Gala at Viktor's side, stepping into the rink for this one felt very different. It was the European Championship; an event Yuri had never been to. They were there as guest skaters; previously, at least one of them was an official competitor. They were there by invitation, flying directly in the face of Russian sanctions that should've put Viktor to pasture under any other circumstances; by all accounts, even just announcing Viktor as a 'dear friend' of the European bracket, and Yuri as 'his husband,' was a direct snub at Russian sensibilities.

The RSF is bound to feel slighted by all this, Yuri thought, lowering his eyes for only a moment as he and his spouse stepped out onto the ice, But since it's the Europeans doing it, maybe the RSF will think twice about being so brazen in the future...at least, for Yurio's sake.

"Friends, fans, and family of the ISU...please, give a warm welcome to Japan's own Viktor and Yuri Nikiforov!"
The audience was alive with cheers and clapping as the pair moved out into the rink, golden blades gliding on blue-white frost. Jackets glittered with a rainbow of dazzling light, spotlights shining down on them slowly fading into and out of different colors as they moved. Circling around widely, waving at the audience hidden behind the curtain of shadow beyond the rink-walls, they slowly made their way towards center for a few last words.

Viktor skirted around as they came to a stop and reached to take Yuri's other hand, holding them both between them with a gentle stroke of his thumbs, "Well, *that* intro was sure one way to tell the RSF to take a walk." He mused, blue eyes turning purple and green and lavender as the lights around them continued their kaleidoscopic shifts, "How are you feeling?"

"Nervous." Yuri answered easily, smiling awkwardly, "But...I'm pretty sure I'm ready for this. You?"

"Probably more nervous than you are." He said, fingers clasping a little tighter, "All this fuss and drama because I married the most perfect person in the world."
"With a set of objectionable dangly bits."

"I like your dangly bits though. And all your other bits."

Yuri's face flushed, hard as it was to see under the magenta lights. He lifted his eyes with confidence though, and laughed a bit as Viktor leaned forward, nuzzling their foreheads together affectionately, "I love you."

"Hmmm...I love you, too." The Russian agreed quickly, "Let's show the world how much."

Yuri nodded and the two of them turned their backs to each other, holding onto the last fingertips of touch for as long as they could. A magenta-pink light descended over where Yuri moved to, a few paces between himself and his partner, making the purple-red velvet of his jacket glimmer. The blue light over Viktor did the same with the green-navy velvet of his own coat. The arena fell to anticipatory silence, fans waiting behind the veil for the performance to begin. Yuri bent his head down slightly, right toe-pick clicked into the ice by his left boot, hands on his hips and elbows flared. Viktor stood more normally, feet slightly apart, right arm loosely wrapped around himself as a finger
from his left hand curled just under his nose, and he closed his eyes.

['Rewrite the Stars' - The Greatest Showman]

You know I want you...

The lyrics began, and Yuri lifted his head. There was a pregnant pause in the music, the silence lingering for several seconds.

It's not a secret I try to hide.

He turned in place slightly, eyes fixed on the cool hues ahead of him, sparkles blinking in and out of focus. The extra-long pause pressed in again, and Yuri nudged forward, gliding restlessly towards Viktor's back, raising his hands to gently press them around the side of his husband's arms.

I know you want me...

Viktor lifted his head and turned around, acting as though that touch was oddly unexpected. He pulled away slightly, leaving Yuri to only hold the hand that had unwrapped from around his front as his blades cut the ice. The twist moved him away a little bit, forcing his arm to extend slightly where Yuri still held his fingers.

So don't keep saying our hands are tied.

Viktor pulled his hand back and slid away, spotlights following him as Yuri watched him go. The music's pace started to pick up to its normal pace, and Yuri gave easy chase.

You claim it's not in the cards; fate is pulling you miles away...and out of reach from me.

As the Russian moved about the ice, he kept his gaze down, doing a bit of a step sequence as though dancing to an entirely different song; ignoring what was coming after him. Yuri kept pace though, keeping up the chase, reaching to the man until they both slipped into some crossovers, moving backwards around the short end of the rink.

But you're here in my heart, so who can stop me if I decide that you're my destiny?

Yuri reached for Viktor's hand, held up for balance, and pulled the palm to his chest as they straightened their paths. Blue eyes fixed on hazel, a surprised look on his face, but he didn't pull his hand back. Instead, they glided out towards the center of the rink, slowing gradually, until Yuri could place his other hand on his partner's cheek, and Viktor curled his fingers around it, tempted by the moment.

Why don't we rewrite the stars? Say you were made to be mine...

Yuri pulled his hand back from that pale skin, and cast it in an arc towards the rest of the arena, as though presenting the world. His expression was hopeful, and he turned to look at Viktor, wondering if he shared in that fleeting feeling. He placed his hand on the man's waist and drew nearer.

Nothing could keep us apart. You'd be the one I was meant to find.

In something of a quick inside spread-eagle, Yuri glided around in a small circle, turning Viktor in place as he moved. When his back faced the longer expanse of the rink again, he started moving backwards, pulling his partner forward.

It's up to you...it's up to me. No one can say what we get to be!
They started skating in tandem, matching each others' moves, further tempted by the possibilities. Steps got faster and more confident, moving together with a hand held tight between them.

*So why don't we rewrite the stars? Maybe the world could be ours...*

Viktor pulled Yuri closer, left blades gliding side-by-side as they twisted and turned together. Hands went to Yuri's waist, and they each bent their knees; Yuri flew.

His frame spun through the air, Viktor's hands following from the throw, and golden blades landed and glided away.

*Tonight...*

As Yuri moved off, sliding backwards in a curve, he reached both hands out, gesturing for Viktor to follow. However, as they slid into the brighter lights, Viktor braked hard, frost flying from his blades. Yuri straightened out in confusion, coming to a slow stop on the opposite side of the rink.

*You think it's easy?*
A male voice sung the lyrics rather than a female, and the audience cheered with realization; it had been *them* singing all along.

Viktor bowed his head as he turned away, spinning elaborately, his body moving sharply in frustration.

*You think I don't want to run to you?*

He slid in a diagonal across the frost, both hands reaching forward, only to pull them away again as Yuri reached back.

He twisted around and veered away, forcing himself through a powerful step sequence, legs and blades swinging with purpose.

*But there are mountains, and there are doors that we can't walk through...*

Yuri tried to catch up, but Viktor was barreling down the rink as though on a war-path. Just as he reached the man, Viktor spun around in a single twizzle, rounding out with his front facing the rink-
wall in a wide outside spread-eagle, one hand reaching back as the other guided his curved path.

*I know you're wondering why, because we're able to be just you and me, within these walls...*

Yuri was able to take that hand, and synched their moves again. He found Viktor pulling him in, putting a hand behind his waist and rotating them as they glided, as though in one long ballroom sweep. Viktor pressed their foreheads together, blades still moving over the frost.

*But when we go outside, you're gonna wake up and see that it was hopeless after all.*

Viktor pulled away again, letting go with one hand, leaving Yuri to slide away on his own in surprise. They both came to a stop, facing off again with a distance between them.

*No one can rewrite the stars...*

As Viktor tore off in the other direction, Yuri ran on his toe-picks to go after him, reaching with one hand.

*How can you say you'll be mine?*

Though Yuri made it across the distance quickly, Viktor kept out of reach, holding his hands out just inches away from his partner's grasp.

*Everything keeps us apart, and I'm not the one you were meant to find!* 

Viktor twisted out of his path with a quick turn, leaving Yuri to fly right by him. They each banked around in a wide curve, mirroring one another's movements as they moved closer and then past one another again.

*It's not up to you, it's not up to me, when everyone tells us what we can be...*

The last curve moved then within arm's reach, but they moved around in a circle, reaching into the center between them without being able to touch. They then twisted away from each other, twizzling into a new path that lead them to opposite sides of the rink.

*How can we rewrite the stars? Say that the world can be ours...tonight*

They continued to mirror each other's movements from far away, ducking through opposite corners of the rink through an elaborate step sequence, coming back towards center.

*All I want is to fly...*
They leapt past each other with a death-drop entry, passing with just feet between the crowns of their heads in mid air.

...with you, all I want is to fall with you...

Flying entry camel-spins rotated next to one another, dipping down into a twist-variant sit-spin, hands reaching up above themselves.

So just give me all of you!

They came back up to standing, moving swiftly through a fast scratch-spin, braking just to reach for one another again.

It feels impossible...

Viktor broke off.

It's not impossible...
Yuri reached.

*Say that it's possible...!*

Viktor looked back, and they stared into one another, giving each other a knowing look.

*How do we rewrite the stars?*

They broke off again, this time together, moving in perfect sync like their tango, nights before.

*Say you were made to be mine! Nothing can keep us apart, cuz you are the one I was meant to find!*

Viktor lifted his husband up, spinning him in the air before catching him again and setting him back down. They danced around the rink with speed and grace.

*It's up to you, it's up to me...*

Leaning back, Yuri let himself be pulled backward in a circle.

*...No one can say what we get to be!*

They clasped hands and Yuri widened the gap between them, starting to lean, until only Viktor was holding him above the ice as he spun around in a wide circle.
So why don't we rewrite the stars? Changing the world to be ours!

The music started to fade down from its climax, and after a few more rotations, Viktor pulled his husband back up to standing, and brought him close. They continued to spin together where they stood, Viktor's arms curled around his partner's sides, hands pressed to his chest as they looked at one another.

You know I want you...

The song continued, quieter than before and more solemn. Yuri moved his hands aside, sliding them from the silver Russian's chest to his arms, and down to his elbows.

It's not a secret I try to hide...

Hands moved back up again; their slow stationary rotation continued. Viktor pulled his spouse in a bit closer, fronts flush against one another.

And now I have you...
The crowd immediately noticed the change in lyrics, and started cheering before they even knew what else was coming. Yuri moved his fingers over his husband's collar-bones and shoulders, resting his forearms there.

*The world is watching...*

They both stopped on their toe-picks; Yuri rose up onto his...and they kissed.

*Their eyes...are wide...*

The audience went apoplectic with cheers. Even Minako was sobbing into one of her coat sleeves, much to Nikki and Mikhail's confusion. The adulations went on; even in the dark, one could sense that the ovations were standing by then, and only got louder as the duo on the ice finally parted to acknowledge it.

Yuri turned in place and put his back to his husband's frame, feeling one arm snaking around his left side. They both started waving to the darkness beyond the rink walls, feeling the energy of the excitement. Viktor pulled Yuri up off his blades again to hug him close, nuzzling the side of the
man's head with his cheek adoringly. Once he set Yuri down again, he reached for his partner's right hand to bring it up, and kissed the ring thereupon before finally letting him go again.

"We did it..." Yuri said, still catching his breath from the whole event, "All the anxiety about the lead-up, but we did it..."

"Perfectly..." Viktor agreed, "I can't wait to see what it looks like on video."

The colored lights around them dimmed slightly before coming back as white, and the audience's continued cheering was merged with the sound of new music. Over the volume of the crowd, one could only hear the beat of the song, and it only continued as the rest of the Gala's skaters came back out onto the ice for the end of the Exhibition. They swarmed out into the rink, going to every side, circling around the two that were still standing together in the middle of it all.

Yuri watched a few go by, seeing their own applause as they went by, and he turned his eyes back to his husband. No more words need be said between them. The satisfied looks on each of their faces was enough. Instead of wasting breath on words they each knew intuitively, they put their lips to better use and kissed again, hugged, and joined the rest of the skaters for the Gala's closing ceremonies.
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED TWENTY SEVEN

With just enough time between the end of the Exhibition and the start of the Banquet to change into all their fancy duds, athletes and coaches switched from business-mode to social-mode. Yuri mulled over whether or not to bring Jiro with them for the late party, but eventually decided to spare the pup. His *goodboi* job of being an anxiety specialist wasn't necessary outside of competition. At the Rozovskiy Clan rental, things were a tiny bit less simple.

"That's a different look for you," Minako commented, slipping her arms into her thick winter coat. She watched Mikhail buttoning the cuffs of his dress shirt as he came out of the bedroom.

"I don't have my hat to keep my head warm," He explained, keeping his eyes down on the buttons.

Minako quirked a brow, "Most people don't use their hair to keep their heads warm... Why not just ask for your hat back?"

Viktoria came into the kitchen through the olive green door, the aforementioned hat still on her head. When she spotted her father though, her brow furrowed, and she ducked down to the edge of the kitchen table where her siblings were sitting, "Why does he look like that? What's going on?" She asked warily.

Nikki wasn't sure how to answer. She just balled her hands up and pressed them against her mouth, keeping her silence.

Yurio looked between them in confusion, "What the Hell does it matter how he does his hair?"

"I guess you'll find out." Viktoria finished grimly, returning then to the room she'd come from.

Still confused, Yurio turned his attention back to the adults for a moment, unable to hear the quiet murmuring between them as they finished putting themselves together to venture outside again. At a loss, he turned once more to the girl next to him, "Well?"

Nikki blinked open at him, but she was steadfast in keeping her mouth covered. Yurio just rolled his eyes and slumped back against his chair, resigning to that age-old game of 'hurry up and wait.'

The upper floor of the *official* Arcotel had been taken over by the ISU, decorated with flowers and hanging lights, as though trying to emulate the Blumenbal for those who hadn't been able to go. Yuri paused in the hall, pulling his partner's attention back along with his hand.

Viktor glanced over in confusion, "What's the hold-up? You want to bring Jiro after all?"

Yuri shook his head and stepped forward, just enough to get in front of the man. He pulled up the hand he held and kissed the ring on it, then let it go, and reached both hands up to idle them by adjusting a perfectly good bowtie at Viktor's neck. He could literally *feel* the eyeballs of confusion on him, and he flattened his palms against the front of his spouse's shoulders, "Promise me..." He started, making Viktor's eyebrows go *way* up, "No matter what happens, no matter *how* curious or interested you get in it...no matter *how badly* you want to bring it up yourself... *No talk about Asahi tonight.*"
"But we were going to ask Chr-"

"None." Yuri restated, "We're going to have breakfast with him before we leave anyway. You can ask him then."

"It was supposed to be for you though."

"And I don't want to hear it tonight. It's the Banquet. This has to be fun. So if he or Yurio or Mikhail brings it up for any reason, even Minako-sensei, or absolutely anyone...please help me out and shut it down. If Asahi is my fight, then I'm the one who's going to choose the battlefield... The last thing I need is to fight it when he isn't even here. At least, tomorrow morning, it makes a little bit of sense to bring it up, because we're going to where he is. But he's not here. He's not at Euros, he's not in Vienna, he's not in Europe, and he's not at this Banquet."

Viktor made a face at him, lips squished together in a grimace and brows scrunched in the middle.

"Promise me."

The Russian held for a moment longer, but then let out a dramatic exhale and slouched, "Ugh fine, I promise."

"And you absolutely cannot forget. We're only here for a few hours."

Blue eyes gaped down, mildly irritated, "...If I can't bring it up tonight then you have to promise not to have any weird panic attacks or brainstorming sessions about what Chris might know about those emails." Viktor started, bringing his hands up to start counting fingers, "No brooding, no staring off into space, no worrying, no nightmares later tonight, no hesitation in talking to our friends because you worry I might bring it up anyway, none of it." He finished, flashing all his fingers out as though it all somehow added up to ten, "Okay?"

"Deal."

"But you have to let me ask tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow morning, you can ask whatever you want."

" Alright."

"Are you two going to go in or just stand in the doorway all night?"

Both sets of eyes widened in surprise and glanced back towards the sound of the female voice, spotting Mila there giving them a sarcastic look. She had her arms crossed, bare shoulders poking out the top of a cute little sleeve/strapless dark red dress. Behind her, a huge stylized bow gave the illusion of small wings, and the tails of it went down to her ankles, "People are going to be climbing over you to get in and out."

Viktor matched her sarcastic grit and leaned in her direction, "Aren't you supposed to avoid talking to me?"

"Who says?"

"The RSF?" He answered, letting the young lady go by. He slid his arm over Yuri's shoulder - feeling one going around his lower back in turn - and the duo followed her in, "We heard that you guys were getting dirty looks from the bosses for associating with me."
"It's a delicate issue, yeah." Mila agreed, but looked back over her shoulder and offered a Viktor-esque wink, "But the RSF and the JSF have a friendly history-"

"...If you can call it that." Yuri quipped.

"They put up appearances at least." Mila agreed, "They've asked that we avoid you in competition, where the public can see or cameras are rolling. In places like this though," She explained, spreading her arms out as though presenting the Banquet itself to the pair, "They can bite me."

"I guess I feel a little better." Viktor commented, "Still kind of sad though."

The redhead turned on a heel, knuckles on her hips. Eyes went from Viktor to his partner though, "I know it's a bit early but can I borrow him?"

Yuri blanched slightly - mostly internally - but shook his head and pulled his arm back. As though offering his most prized possession over, Yuri took his husband's forearm and gently presented it, "Be careful. He's delicate. I need him back in the same condition I gave him to you in."

Mila just laughed, taking the arm into her palm, and clasped the other overtop of it, "Worry not. I may be young and reckless, but only on the ice."

Viktor could only smile, thoroughly enjoying the whole thing. Reality came crashing back though and he found himself tugged gently along, and he looked aside as Yuri faded further and further behind him. Thankfully, he spotted Yurio and co. stepping in soon after, and Yuri seemed to notice them as well, avoiding the awkward state of being alone at the Banquet. Viktor let himself look back at Mila again, and she dragged him towards the far side of the room.

The wall was lined with a buffet-style display, plates sitting on top of ice, with a wide assortment of appetizer-style dishes to choose from. Different salad greens and associated toppings, with glass bottles containing vinegars and oils on a shelf above, and more 'normal' salad dressings in small jars sitting in the ice near the greens. Further on, different salads such as potato, Waldorf, fruit, caprese, and coleslaw. After that, pickled peppers, hand-rolled mozzarella balls, tomato slices, asparagus, and other cold prepared vegetables. Then, after that, assorted soft and hard cheeses, sliced and placed neatly onto plates like tiles, with Genovese, Soppressata, and Hungarian winter salami. To crown the whole thing, a leg of prosciutto, with a small plate nearby for prepared thin slices, and a wheel of Parmigian-Reggiano, newly cut.

Mila snagged a clean plate from a stack, and handed a second to her kidnapped friend, "I distinctly remember warning you a year ago that you'd have problems back home because of Yuri." She started bluntly, pulling Viktor out of his distraction, "Do you?"

"Of course I remember. I told you it would be fine." He answered, feeling the gurgle of temptation as Mila started moving by the salad bowls, "And it mostly has been."

"Remind me whose Olympic jacket you're wearing now?"

"I'll have you know that I'm actually pretty happy about this turn of events now."

"Now, he says." Mila teased in echo, spooning some of the Waldorf salad onto her plate, and stole a taste of one of the pineapple bits, "Truth be told, I'm a bit envious."

"You are?" Viktor lifted his head in surprise, "You considering jumping ship?"

"Not exactly, but I could see the appeal. Sometimes it's a bit much to represent a country which is obsessed with not being humiliated." She explained, moving over to the slices of cheese and salami,
"A collision of worlds...the new modern fun and loose athlete crashing against the old rigid Soviet managers."

Viktor quirked a bow as he used a pair of small metal tongs to pick up a mozzarella ball, "Were you even alive when Russia was still Soviet?"

Mila laughed once, "No, but neither were you, really."

The elder guffawed dramatically, "I'll have you know I was born and raised in Soviet Russia."

"Did you even notice it collapsed?"

Viktor paused with his mouth open, but then deadpanned her, "...No."

"And there you have it; you're part of my people, Viktor. Us kids are leading the charge into a strange new world, and the old people are having a hard time with it. They're trying to hold us back, desperately trying to make us just like them."

"Is this what you had me abandon my husband for, Mila?" Viktor wondered then, stealing the cheese tongs from her hand as she shimmied down the line.

"I hardly see you at all anymore, Viktor. Forgive me for getting caught up." She answered, fishing for a knife and fork from the round bins on a separate table, "Especially since the higher ups are being such sticks in the mud about you."

"Do tell."

"As I was saying a minute ago..." Mila started up again, watching as Viktor found his utensils after her, "I represent a country that is obsessed with not being humiliated...and you, dear sir, have humiliated it."

"They did it to themselves. I was just being me."

"Oh I entirely agree; if they had just left you alone, they would've been fine. But, this is Russia we're talking about, and when did something that make sense to us ever make sense to them?"

Viktor nodded and started looking around for a table, "Have you heard anything about them asking for my medals back?"

"No. I think you're safe there. Yakov would've blown a gasket if they even suggested it."

"So they're hoping to just ignore me into obscurity?"

"There's no chance they'll ever manage that without pulling the FSB into it." Mila explained, nudging her head towards an empty round table near to where they'd been earlier, "But I don't think your crimes go far enough to warrant their involvement."

"Wouldn't that be something." Viktor commented idly, "If they considered my coaching Yuri to be on the same level as selling state secrets, and sent someone after me?"

"Pravda."

Slate eyes blinked in confusion, [Oh, are we speaking Russian now?]

Mila just laughed again and took a seat, but shook her head as Viktor sat next to her, "Nyet. It's a joke I've heard in the last few weeks, since you got thrown out on your ample
arse. *Pravda* means *truth* in our tongue, but to the rest of the world, it means *lies*. What the RSF has said about you since cutting you off..."

"*Pravda.*"

"Exactly. Everyone worth their salt knows what anything Russia says about you now a days is probably a crock. So, in retaliation, they've told us peasants to pretend you don't exist. 'He's on Team Japan now; let them put that old cow to pasture.'"

Viktor choked a little and sputtered, "*Old cow!*"

Mila was practically howling, "Oh my gosh you should see your face right now." She said, wiping a few tears from her eyes. She caught sight of Yuri giving her a dirty look from the other side of the room though and waved happily at him to ease his concerns, "Ahh I miss having you around...you and Yuri both. Things were fun when you were both in St. Petersburg. The other Yuri, too. Seeing the both of you tormenting him with your PDA was always a joy."

"A simpler time." Viktor agreed, "But...it's like our Exhibition tonight made clear. We could only really be ourselves when we were in the rink. As soon as we stepped out, it wasn't so easy. I feel a little bad that I never really noticed how obvious I was being back then. It's like night and day in Hasetsu. Out there, people think something's wrong if we aren't climbing all over each other everywhere we go."

"Well, I'm glad you've found your piece of happiness." Mila surmised, "And don't ever let what the RSF says get you down. It's just marching orders. We're all still on your side, even if we're supposed to give you the cold shoulder when we're on the clock."

Viktor nodded, and reached over slightly to clasp her nearest hand with his own in gratitude, but the look on his face when he let go gave him away a little.

"What's the matter? Is there something else?"

"I'm worried about how this is going to pan out for Yurio." He explained, looking up to where the two Yuris had been mingling, "The RSF is apparently making demands that he move back to St. Petersburg, and cut his losses in Japan. He thinks they're going to ask him to dope at the Games somehow."

"All the more reason for him to stay in Hasetsu."

"Are you worried?" He wondered, "Or have they not said anything yet?"

"All I know is that they've made Yakov super ornery." She answered, leaning slightly closer until her shoulder touched her friend's, "Just between you and me though, I think they're waiting until we're back in Russia before they say anything out loud."

"You sound pretty not-worried." Viktor commented, surprised at her.

"Why worry about something that isn't going to happen?"

"...Are you really that sure?"

Mila nodded, "After the problems Russia faced because of Sochi, and all the issues before that, I'd be shocked and amazed if they were brazen enough to suggest we cheat again. Russia's going to get itself banned from the Games *entirely* if they keep up that old pattern of behavior."
"Mh..." Viktor hummed, "Wouldn't that be something."

"Hm?"

"Nothing." He reassured, pushing his seat back so he could stand up again, "Thanks for telling me about how things are back in St. Petersburg. I feel much better now. I'm going to meander back to Yuri though. I'll see you later."

"See you around, Viktor~!"

He walked his now-empty appetizer plate to the 'returns' section of the plate area, putting it into a bin with a few used forks and spoons already inside. He made his way around the perimeter of the table hall after that, snagging two flutes of white wine as he went. Yuri easily spotted him coming.

"Everything good?" He wondered, threading both arms around his husband's frame, forcing both hands to go up with the wine to avoid spilling.

"For sure." The Russian answered easily, offering one of the flutes, "Here's to representing Japan at the Games."

Yuri was confused for a moment, but went with it anyway, clinking their glasses together, "To Japan. Kanpai."

They each took their sips, but Viktor's eyes soon drifted to the two elders in the group he'd joined. One was looking particularly serious, "You've only been here a few minutes, Papa Mimi, but you already look like you're not having fun."

Mikhail twisted back, craning his head over a shoulder, looking quite odd to his nephew with his hair slicked back, "Oh, hey...yeah."

Viktor looked around at the others; Viktoria and Nikki looked a bit dour. Yurio was subdued, but mostly annoyed, even if (for once) he didn't make any loud declarations about it. "What'd I miss?" Viktor wondered, looking around skeptically.

"Those two goons from the RSF showed up." Yuri answered for them, half-whispering into his wine glass, "Everyone's been on edge. You could practically watch the hairs on the back of Mik's neck stand on end."

"...Does he know?"

Yuri shrugged lightly, "I'm not sure...but I think he's up to something. Yurio insists no one's told him. Mik always seems to know everything though, so maybe no one had to."

"Yeah."

"What are you two old ladies whispering about?" Yurio grumbled, trying to break up the odd atmosphere, "Not me, I hope."

Yuri just smiled, "I think we're just wondering how long it'll take for those two guys to cause trouble. They saw Viktor and Mila hanging out, now Viktor's here with you. If Georgi and Yakov do the same..."

"They won't." The teen insisted, "They've both walked away from you before, even way before this crap started."
Both Yuri and Viktor smiled nervously, "Yeah, that's true." They mused, "Why don't we go find a table instead of standing around?"

Minako turned towards them and nodded in agreement, "No sense standing on ceremony." She said, putting a hand on her partner's arm, "Let's go sit down, hun. You'll have all night to give them the stink-eye."
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED TWENTY EIGHT

As the rest of the Banquet's attendees filtered through those grand doors, the field of big circular tables filled up. A meager attempt at organization had been made with little flags on each table denoting which team it was for, but with such an uneven number of people in attendance, it quickly became a free for all, with everyone sitting alongside friends rather than segregating themselves per nation. Table Hasetsu was no exception, with both Teams Nikiforov and Okukawa, their associated family, and eventually Switzerland's sole athlete, as well as his coach and single-man entourage.

People went over to the appetizer bar in small shifts, with Yuri deciding to follow after his Russian namesake and in-laws. They'd barely made it to the far end to collect their plates before Yurio seemed to veer the whole adventure off on a tangent.

"Would one of you two please explain already why you're so uptight over the old man's hair?" He blurted, drawing all three sets of eyes towards him. He pointed a finger at the table, and - more specifically - the patriarch sitting at it, "He's way over there and can't hear you criticizing him. Is he hiding a bald spot?"

Yuri nearly choked, but coughed and cleared his throat, "Ahem...Y-Yuri...you shouldn't say st-hack-stuff like that."

"Well you try dealing with them being all wound-up and quiet!"

"He only does his hair like that when he's in a certain mood." Viktoria said, trying to get their small quest-group back on track, and started moving slowly down the buffet behind some others who'd been there already, "It's not a good mood. Even though it's been a few years since pipaw was around all the time, even Nikki knows what it's like."

"Hard not to..." She chimed in, reaching for the tongs to grasp baby spinach from the big iced bowl in the first display, "PTA meetings were intense."

"PTA?" Yurio echoed in confusion.

"Parent-Teacher Association meetings." Viktoria answered, spooning over some coleslaw, "Every few weeks, or at least twice a year, there would be these big Open House events where kids would go to their schools with their parents in the evening and have sit-down conversations with all the different teachers. Kind of like an in-person progress report."

"Teachers liked having that connection to the parents of the students they're in charge of. It basically gives both sides a chance to address set-backs or encourage talent." Nikki added, "But papa always took it super seriously. And he'd..." She said, words lingering a little as she looked back over her shoulder towards her father, "...He'd look like that."

"So he took school seriously. Most parents do." Yurio huffed, making a mess as he scooped the potato salad onto his plate, "I wish mine did, but it was never a priority."

Nikki gave a reluctant, nervous smile, "Maybe it's better that you didn't. There's a point where taking something seriously becomes scary. He intimidated our teachers and the other school faculty. If it
wasn't already a thing that he was rich and well-connected, making them all think they were practically *vassals* of his, then he put *that* look on and basically *glamoured* them into subservience."

"Glamoured...?" Yuri echoed, "Like...literally charmed them? Isn't that the opposite of scary?"

"You'd think, but when it's coming from *Mikhail Durovich Rozovsky*, it's just kind of terrifying." Viktoria answered, moving on down the line, "I actually felt bad for our teachers. They went through him *three times* because of us. It didn't help that Sergio was a brat when he was younger."

"He's still a brat." Nikki quipped, which made her sister smile for a moment.

"Yeah...but anyway. Since Sergio was always a momma's boy, and since she dealt with school stuff the most earlier on, if it ever came to having pipaw come to the school for something, everyone paid attention. He'd give off this aura like he didn't want to know his kid was being a shit, and one teacher actually tried to claim Sergio had ADHD or something and said he should be medicated. Pipaw-"

"Oh, that sounds like it's going to be bad." Yuri said, unintentionally interrupting, but needing a moment to pause for brevity, "The idea that any of *his* kids are defective must have rankled his *superior Soviet sensibilities*."

"Seriously!" Viktoria agreed emphatically, "Nikki was probably too young to remember, but we were all there...the look on pipaw's face when he heard those words could've killed someone. His reply probably took a few year off that teacher's lifespan...if not, it put some grey in her hair."

"What'd he say?" Yurio wondered skeptically, one brow quirked.

"It doesn't sound scary coming from me, but from *him*, hearing 'my son doesn't need to be medicated so your job is easier' was." She explained, rummaging around in the fruit salad bowl for just the strawberries and pineapple, "You could've heard a pin drop on the other side of the room. Two days later, Sergio was in a hockey class, and pipaw went with him to make good and sure he did what he was supposed to. Turns out Sergio was just bored; he needed something beyond recess to burn off his energy. By the next PTA meeting, everything was different...except pipaw. The teachers started to realize he was on their side when they were right, but it wasn't any easier to tell him when or if we were doing something wrong."

Yuri nudged Yurio with an elbow, "Looks like this is going to be your PTA meeting." He teased.

The blonde just grimaced, "Why would it need to be." He said, less a question than a statement, "I haven't done anything wrong."

"They have though." Nikki pointed out, nudging her head towards the sparsely-populated Russian table; Yakov and Georgi where there with those two RSF officials, but Mila looked like she was vying for an escape route, "What they're doing is no different than that teacher who said Sergio needed Ritalin."

Yurio's face contorted into a grim sneer, and he looked back at the appetizer line, trying to avoid the gaze of the Slavs behind him, "I haven't said anything to him about it because I don't plan on being around for them to bother. No sense making trouble."

Nikki looked nervous again, but didn't reply. She just moved on to take her sister's place at the fruit salad bowl, and fished for blue and blackberries.

"He deserves to know," Yuri chimed in, "Even if nothing comes of it. Keeping it a secret will just make him anxious when he does find out. You know he's going to."
Yurio barely had a second to turn towards his friend before Nikki squeaked and dropped the serving spoon onto the floor, sending berries and chunks of honeydew melon sprawling. She whined and went down to her knees trying to find them before anyone could squash them into the carpet, but Yurio ended up crouching down next to her to help find them, though he did so with a sigh and a head-shake, "You've been acting weird since the Exhibition. Why are you so jumpy?"

Yuri watched quietly, but a nervous twinge went through him, _She told him..._ 

Viktoria looked over at the pair on the floor, "Better leave it; it's not your job to clean up. We're holding up the line."

Big jade eyes couldn't keep the secret anymore; she burst into tears and dropped all the bits of lint-covered fruit she'd already collected, "I'm sorry I couldn't keep it a secret!" She blurted, dropping her head down, much to both Yuris' chagrin; Viktoria deadpanned and quirked a brow, more wary of public staring than anything, "I told him what you said!"

"Nikkita-" Yurio harped between clenched teeth, _dropping_ the fruit he'd picked up, "You weren't supposed to-"

"I couldn't help it!" She protested.

A curious murmur had started around them as people gawked at the display. Mikhail's head popped up above the crowd from the far side of the room; dad-senses were tingling even from over there.

"I wanted him to know! It was the right thing to do!" Nikki went on. Yuri went around to try helping her up by then, and Yurio grudgingly followed.

"If he gets involved in this then the RSF might just kick me off the damn team entirely!" He argued, "You should've left well-enough alone!"

"Let's step out of the way at least-" Yuri suggested, half-nudging the duo out of the buffet line. He nodded to Viktoria to let her keep going, "We'll be right behind you."

"Oh sure, this isn't awkward or anything..." She quietly sassed to herself, but carried on without them.

Yurio watched for a moment, but then looked back at the young silver in front of him, and felt hamstrung slightly by her ample tears, "What did you say to him then? How much does he know?"

"I told him everything, stupid!" Nikki harped back, _"He's my papa and he always fixes things. Why would this be any different?!"

"Because this is different from everything else he's ever had to deal with!"

"How!?!" She argued, _"He's been helping you with your skating stuff for almost an entire year now!"

Yurio could hardly contain his frustration; all he could do was gesture at Viktor on the other side of the room, _"Because this is the Russian Skating Federation! Look what they did to him!"

Yuri glowered uncomfortably, "That's not the same..."

"It's exactly the same!" The teen shot back, brow rankled severely, "They threw Viktor out like last night's trash!"

It was awkward to hear that very Russian laughing at something suddenly; him and Chris were
having a grand ol' time despite the conversation the rest were having about him.

Yuri hummed a nervous breath to himself, "Viktor embarrassed them. If he hadn't already flirted with the idea of retiring to be a coach, they probably wouldn't have done things this way. It might've been much worse."

"Yuri!" Another voice called suddenly; it was a familiar one, and it sent a cold shiver down the teen's back, "Yuri! Počemu by tebe sjuda ne podočiti? Neprijatno, čto vam izbegaete."

"...Y-Yakov..." Yurio said under his breath. Yuri and Nikki were already looking at the Russian table when Yurio finally turned; the whole group of them were staring straight in their direction, but eyes were only on him. Mila looked a bit wary, but Georgi looked completely defeated. Yakov didn't look particularly impressed either, but he was maintaining some level of professional decorum. Yurio barely managed a smile, fake as it was.

"What'd he say?" Yuri wondered quietly.

"He wants me to come sit with them."

"My ved' ešë komanda, verno?" One of the RSF officials asked, trying to sound pleasant but making Yakov's eye twitch. The pair were scrawny and tall, even when sitting at the table, but both were clean-shaven and pale. One had thin grayish-blond hair, sitting stringy over his forehead like the legs of a cheap Halloween decoration. The other was well-balding, but had a strip of thin gray-brown hair wrapping around the back of his head. Somehow, the balding man looked younger than the one that had hair, though they were easily both in their mid to late 40s.

"...I better go..." Yurio said, resigning himself to the idea; he picked up his half-forgotten plate and started moving towards them.

Yuri and Nikki watched anxiously, but something else had suddenly caught their attention. Given how Yurio was keeping his face tilted down though, they were sure he hadn't noticed it.

[Your performance at the Exhibition reminded us of your victory in Barcelona.] The younger, balding man commented as the teen approached, [We were wondering if you plan to skate like that at the Games.]

[Maybe you should try to condense that program to under three minutes and use it for your Short Skate?] The other 'suggested,' [Your record-breaking SP helped you win Gold back then. You could do it again.]

Yurio came up behind one of the chairs, but his eyes were still downcast, [I hadn't considered it...I-]

[We were talking to Coach Yakov about ideal training conditions for the next few weeks.] The second official interrupted, [We had come to an agreement that bringing all of Russia's Olympic skaters to St. Petersburg would be best, including the speed skaters. They'll all be heading that way over the next week. When can we expect you to arrive?]

[He won't be.]

Yurio finally looked up, head practically jerking in its quick movement. On the opposite side of the table, he saw those jade eyes, but unlike their warm counterpart, these were steely and full of contempt. He hardly had a second to process it before he felt a hand against the back of his shoulder, and his feet were compelled to move aside, stepping around the table with two shadows on his heels. When he finally regained some sense of his surroundings, Yurio looked back to see it had been Yuri pushing him along, and Nikki was flanking him on the other side. They brushed past Mikhail, who
stood like a sentinel between them and the Russian table.

[Yuri just moved to Hasetsu to be with family. He'll be training there for the rest of the season.] The elder said firmly, [He is well taken care of.]

[Respectfully, we disagree.]

Viktoria had reclaimed her seat at the family table by then, and her father's voice cut through the noise of the crowd like a hot knife. Though she stood by her place, she couldn't make herself sit, and her awkward standing posture caught Viktor and Chris' attention. They looked up at her, then in the direction she was looking, and each spotted the strange stand-off taking place.

Mikhail hadn't budged; with hands in his slacks pockets, jacket looking sharp enough to cut someone, he stared at the two RSF officials, and at Yakov beyond them at the circular table, [Who are you to decide what's best for him?]

[More than 100 years of Russian skating prowess supports us.] The stringy-haired older man said, standing up from his place at that round table, [We know what's best for our athletes.]

[Your athlete; my son.] Mikhail corrected, [And as long as he's under my care, he trains where I say he trains. He's happier in Hasetsu, so that's where he's going to be.]

Tensions rose with each exchange, but neither were ready to back down, [The quality of his programs has suffered since he left St. Petersburg. He should return to his original coach.]

Yurio could feel his head starting to spin, and he blinked forcefully a few times trying to clear it. He didn't notice when Minako and Viktor helped sit him down in the chair Mikhail had abandoned. All he could hear were the hollow noises of the Banquet around him.

I'm going to lose my spot at the Games... I'm going to get kicked off the team because of this...

[There is nothing Yakov taught Yuri that he's forgotten in just two weeks. He just needs time to adapt to these changes.] Mikhail continued firmly, [He's still your best and only hope for a spot on the podium.]

Yakov grunted a huff, but Georgi sneered slightly. Mila listened intently, but her eyes kept wandering over to Viktor to see what he was doing. All she could see through the bodies standing in the way though was that Viktor had sat back in his seat, and it looked like Yuri sat sideways across his lap, but she wasn't entirely sure. If Chris' serious-face was any indication, Viktor was paying close attention.

[All the more reason for him to return home. If he plans to skate for Russia, he should train there with his own people.]

Mikhail's eyes twitched slightly, and he lifted his face a little, [Maybe it's for the best that he stays away until the season's over. Training on the same rink as the world record holders will do him better than any help that you can provide right now. You shouldn't get in his way like this.]

The two officials seemed to find something about those words funny, and they snickered between each other before gesturing their heads in the other table's direction, [Two world record holders...] The younger started, [One who's past his prime and should retire, and another who would never have gotten this far without being carried by his betters. We don't need their influence on our athletes.]

Viktoria could feel the insult viscerally, and immediately put his arms under his partner's back and
knees to lift him up, stand, turn, and put him into his own seat. Yuri was utterly perplexed, but the way the immediate area seemed to go a bit quiet suddenly made him stay where he was without protest. Chris set a hand on his shoulder to settle him there as Viktor joined his uncle.

"Ne umničaj so mnoj, ja predupreždaju tebja." He said angrily, held back by Mikhail's arm, but not meaning to go much farther anyway.

"Would all of you old women sit down already?" Yakov said, pushing up as he smacked his hands down on the table, "Yuratchka isn't going to move back to St. Petersburg. There's no point. If he doesn't get on the podium at the Games then yell at him afterwards. For now, trust him to know what's best for himself."

The four tense figures just stared at each other for a few seconds longer, but expressions contorted into confusion as Viktor uttered an almost mocking laugh, "...It's almost like they're more worried Plisetsky will win because of me than they are that he'd lose if he doesn't go back to St. Petersburg."
He shook his head, "Pathetic... It just burns them so badly that I'm not skating for them anymore... and that I put a non-Russian on the podium, and married him."

"Seems so." Mikhail agreed, wondering if the pair had any idea what was being said. The contemptuous looks they got from them conferred that the RSF duo at least understood they were being ridiculed. Yakov loudly sat back down again though, jolting the officials out of the stare-down, and they grudgingly returned to their seats as well.

Viktor hesitated, but when his uncle turned and pat his chest, he let go of the breath he'd been holding onto and followed after the man back to their own table. They each reclaimed their spots - Viktor picking up his smaller partner again before sitting and setting Yuri back onto his lap - and huffed at the absurdity of it all, "Well, that was unexpected."

Mikhail gave a quiet laugh, but threaded his fingers together under his chin and smiled, satisfied, "I was expecting it. I came prepared."

"...Prepared?" Viktor echoed.

A finger rose from the weave to point at slicked-back silver hair, "I save this for special occasions; 'no-fucks-given' mode."

"Language." Nikki scolded suddenly, making her father laugh again.

"Sorry, sweety. I had to defend your brother's honor." He mused, "But since that's out of the way, maybe now we can have some fun?"

Eyes turned to Yurio, who still seemed catatonic, "...Y-yeah... Fun..."

Chapter End Notes

Počemu by tebe sjuda ne podojti? = Why don't you come over here?
Neprijatno, čto vy nas izbegaete. = Hate to think you've been avoiding us.
My ved' eščë komanda, verno? = We're still a team, right?
Ne umničaj so mnoj, ja predupreždaju tebja. = Don't get wise, I'm warning you.
Despite how tense the situation had been for those involved, the rest of the attendees of the Banquet hardly noticed the strange little Russian stand-off in their midst.

A few more chairs had been brought over to accommodate the number of people who had come to sit at Team Hasetsu. The atmosphere relaxed again, and at least between Chris and Viktor, an attempt was made at bringing laughter back.

The ISU officials made their usual announcements of congratulations to the event's victors and brought out the celebratory cake and gift-bags. Photos were taken, flowers were given, and eventually, the trio were allowed to go back to their tables. Throughout the whole thing, at least of the Men's winners, Yurio did his best to vanish into the background of the medalist's gaggle, and when each were finally allowed to return to their seats, he did so quietly. Mila practically evacuated from the Russian table and went to join Sara and the others at their own, where things were much lighter and fun, even with Michele being salty over Emil's Silver. The Canadian pair skaters, the Spanish ice dancers, and all the other winners surrounding that one icy table in the middle of things, were like glowing moons around a dark joyless void.

Yurio had lost his appetite ages ago, and resigned to just cross his arms on the tabletop, leaning his chin against them, staring forward aimlessly. Minako tried to ease his nerves, but nothing she said or did seemed to stir him. On the teen's opposite side, not even Yuri could do anything, nor Viktor beside him. Yurio couldn't retain anything going on around him. In one ear and out the other, as it were.

Minako sighed and leaned slightly to her left side, and set her hand on her fiancé's forearm, "Hun," she started in a hushed tone, "He's not handling this well at all."

Mikhail nodded and set down his flute of bubbly, eyes on the reluctant figure on his lady love's other side.

"I don't think I've ever seen him this withdrawn before." She commented.

"Switch spots with me."

Nodding, Minako pushed her seat back and stood from it, stepping aside as Mikhail passed in turn, and each sat in the other's spot. Mikhail made a few adjustments in his new place, moving the plates and silverware out of the way before unexpectedly sliding his elbows down over the tablecloth to emulate the Russian Tiger next to him. He was sure to cozy-up next to the teen, until he could nudge the round of his shoulder against the side of Yurio's head.

Despite the press, Yurio didn't respond. He just turned his gaze ever-so-slightly further away.
Mikhail just became more obvious then, squishing that whole side of himself against the teen, even hooking his ankles around the legs of the chair to move it closer. Still, Yurio refused to acknowledge him. Jade eyes went past the blonde, looking for backup.

Yuri had been watching curiously, half-listening to Chris and Viktor yammering about Euros-gone-by like they had been earlier, but nudged his partner subtly to get his attention. When Viktor turned, Yuri gestured silently at the situation beside him, and Viktor nodded. Like his uncle, he moved a few plates and such out of the way before sliding down to lay his chin into his crossed arms, scooching inward until one elbow prodded the back of the teen's right arm. Yuri joined in after that, crossing his arms over both Viktor and Yurio's backs, forcing the teen to finally gawk up at them.

"What are you idiots doing?" He growled, burying his face instead.

"Trying to get you to quit moping." Viktor answered, "Why are you so pent-up? I thought you'd be glad to get saved from having to sit with Yakov and those old farts."

"I am glad I don't have to sit with them," Yurio answered, voice muffled some, "But now all I can think about is how long it's going to take for them to tell me I'm not going to the Olympics."

"They're not going to kick you off the team." Mikhail reassured, pushing up slightly to prop himself up onto his left elbow, putting the right on Yurio's shoulder to give it a reassuring pat, "They've already given you your jacket. Take-backs aren't a thing. And I told them you're not going back to St. Petersburg, so you don't have to worry about them trying to pressure you into doing anything untoward."

"Mila and Georgi, and all the others though..." 

"You have to let them deal with it themselves."

"Mila's strong-headed." Viktor chimed in, "You know she'd be loud in her protest, or she'd feign cooperation and then just not go through with it."

"Besides..." Mikhail added, "Given how bad the cheating was at the last Summer Games as well as Sochi before that, I'm certain that Russia is under the microscope by the IOC anyway. You're way too young to have been involved in something scandalous before, so you'd be a safe bet to send to PyeongChang. Mila, too. Georgi...maybe not so much, but-

"Georgi and Viktor are the same age but for a single day." Yurio pointed out, lifting his eyes above his arm enough to see the Russian next to him.

Mikhail didn't seem fazed, "And Viktor's been a medalist at literally every event he's gone to since before Sochi. Georgi hasn't; he'd have a much harder time proving he has a clean history. His tests at Russian Nationals would practically be dismissed, too; everyone is clean when tested by the same state running the doping scheme."

"Try not to worry about it so much," Yuri suggested, "Whatever happens, we'll stick by you. The RSF has to go through both Minako-sensei and Mikhail to get to you, and they'll both make sure you're kept out of trouble. Being in Hasetsu makes that really easy."

"The Games are only a month away..." Yurio sighed, pushing up a little, "So much can still happen in such a short period of time."

"Yet that doesn't leave a lot of it for them to scheme, either," Viktor explained, "And it's like you said earlier anyway...anything that the RSF does wrong will fall back onto both of us. You won't be the only one dealing with the fallout. So...until then, focus on your training. If the Games fall
"Because if the RSF doesn't send me to the Games, they'll still send me to Worlds." Yurio echoed dryly, "Seriously, how does that make sense?"

"Because I'm 99% certain that if something happens with the Games, it'll be because of someone higher-up in the pecking order than the RSF," Viktor pointed out, nudging the blonde again as he rose back up to sit normally, "Besides, I think you have more important things to consider."

"Like what?"

"Like the fact that Mimi told those goons that you were his son, and they didn't question it." Viktor mused, ruffling that blonde mess of hair as he stood up with Yuri, "Congrats. You graduated. We're brothers now."

Yurio was taken aback, a lot aback, and he turned around red-faced despite his disheveled appearance to gape at the other Russian sitting on his other side. Mikhail just smiled.

"C'mon, Chris." Viktor added as he and Yuri started moving off, "We're gonna go mingle and drink and dance a little."

It was nearly 4am when the hotel-room door finally opened, and two half-conscious pups roused from sleep to greet the pair coming inside. The fluffy bois stayed on the bed though, tails thumping the blankets as their bleary, half-opened eyes watched one blurry figure step closer to them.

Yuri was the first to greet their canine sons, bending forward and give each one a kiss on the noggin and a quick head-rub. He went back to the entry hall to disassemble from his winter layers, passing on each item to his partner to be put away. By the time he was untying the thin laces of his dress-shoes, Viktor was halfway out of his suit already.

"I think tonight went pretty well, don't you?" The Russian wondered casually, "The RSF thing got done so early that I almost forgot it even happened by the end."

"I didn't even notice when they left." Yuri agreed, grabbing both leather shoes by their heel-cups to slide them into the bottom of the coat closet, and rose up to start unbuttoning his blazer, "I'm sure they only hung out for a really short while though. I didn't have this weird feeling like someone was watching me."

"Ditto."

"What did they say that got you all upset though?" He wondered after a fashion, putting the blazer onto a coat-hanger before putting some slack into his tie to pull the loop over his head.

Viktor glanced back from where he'd stepped into the bathroom, tap on as the water warmed, fingers under it to check the progress, "Oh, nothing that's worth repeating." He answered vaguely, turning his eyes back down to the running water.

"Something worth getting up for though."

A tired look came out of the bathroom, but Viktor shook his head, "You made me promise not to talk about Saito all night, because you didn't want to deal with the conflict it would inevitably spawn. I got up just to make a point that I wouldn't tolerate their rhetoric. I think Mimi and I both knew that the Banquet wasn't the place to start a fight over it though. I bet he would've had a lot more to say if
we were anywhere else."

"...Not that I knew what he did say." Yuri huffed sarcastically, "I wish I could wrap my head around the Russian language. It just kind of sounds like English in reverse though; so many impossible sound-combinations that only make sense the other way around."

Viktor blinked at him in confusion, but then looked at his reflection in the mirror as he thought about it. He couldn't help but shake his head and laugh slightly at it, "I guess you're right." He said, feeling the water finally achieving a warmer temperature. He lathered the small bar of soap in his palms before rubbing the suds onto his face. He listened to the sounds of his husband's clothing rustling and being put away as he finished washing his face, but just as he counted to 30 in his head and went to cup his hands together to gather water for rinse, he felt a presence come up behind him. First it was fingers, gently sliding over his still-clothed legs, then came the press of a hot bare chest to his back, followed by a cheek, the ticklish brushes of a few loose strands of hair, and finally, those hands sliding up and under him, arm coming around his trunk to hold there for a moment. Hands full of water, Viktor just smiled and rinsed his face, splashing the clear liquid onto his skin. Yuri kept hold even as he finished, reaching for one of the small hand-towels on a roll-rack nearby. As he folded it and put it back though, Viktor twisted in place to flip around, and lightly touched his fingers to his partner's bare shoulders and neck to get those eyes to open and look up, "I'm not going to tell you what was said." He teased, "No matter how much you try to seduce me into revealing it."

"Who says I'm trying to seduce you into a translation?" Yuri countered, eyes half-lidded, "Maybe I just want you because I can."

"Oh, that's actually the best reason to have." Viktor purred, leaning down into a kiss, even as Yuri huffed a few breathy laughs into the effort.

"I'll find you again in a few minutes," The younger man said, getting one last good feel of his husband's broad back with his splayed hands, "But if you fall asleep before I'm back, I'll forgive you."

"I'm tired, but I'm not that tired, my love." Viktor reassured, tracing a finger down Yuri's jaw until he could lightly pinch the point of the chin with two fingers, "I'll warm the bed for you though. Don't keep me waiting too long."

"If I take too long you'll just jump in with me." Yuri retorted, reaching around the marble-tile wall for the shower nozzle. To that, Viktor hummed a laugh to himself and went back out into the main room, stripping down from the last bits of his Banquet attire in preparation for sleep. The hiss of the shower faded as Viktor moved away from the bathroom door and pulled the big blankets up, sliding into their coolness. Makkachin got up just enough to wander closer and flopped down again into a heap next to his human's side, and Viktor was all too happy to cuddle the poodle for a few minutes. With arms around the brown booper's fuzzy frame, Viktor whispered into Makkachin's fur, "I feel bad bringing you all the way out here, only to leave you in the hotel-room half the time anyway. I have to wonder if it was worth it..."

The poodle seemed to comprehend - at least in some way - what was being said, and lifted his head all the way back to offer a lick to his human's cheek. Half-rolled-over by that point, and with all four paws in the air, Makkachin just stayed that way and closed his eyes again.

"We're flying home with Air Japan, so there's no way you'll be treated so badly in-transit again. I promise," Viktor added, squishing his brow to the pup's head, "I'll never let what happened, happen to you ever again. No matter what I've done to deserve what's come down on me, none of it
should've ever come down on you, too."

A slight rustle came from beyond Makkachin's softly-beating tail, and Viktor soon felt the cold-wet of another nose, then the warm-wet of a tongue licking the back of his wrist. He lifted that arm and reached into the dark, finding another pupper-noggin there needing some pats. Jiro squeezed in as close as he could before settling down again, chin lifted up at an angle against Makkachin's tall chest, and Viktor slid his hand down the pup's curved back soothingly.

The minutes wore on, and the spray of the shower was like a lullaby, dragging Viktor closer and closer to sleep. It didn't help that the two canines had already passed out again already, and their snoozing was becoming contagious. It was an odd feeling to close his eyes for what felt like just a blink, only to feel Yuri climbing into bed behind him right away like he'd somehow teleported there. The Russian jolted with a start, surprised by the sudden presence, but settled back down again when Yuri whispered a reassurance.

"Sorry...didn't mean to startle you."

"I fell asleep anyway..." Viktor half-whined, feeling one hand slide across his upturned hip and under the arm beside it. He lifted that arm and helped pull Yuri's palm towards his chest, threading their fingers together when it found its place against his skin, "This is a rare treat; it's not often you curl up behind me."

"Normally it's the other way around." Yuri pointed out, pulling the blankets over himself as he curled up along the curve of his husband's back, "By morning, we'll have switched places. That's how we always end up." He teased, kissing the bare skin in front of him, "It's how you used to sleep with Makkachin, too."

"Seems like such a long time ago...and yet, like it was yesterday." Viktor added, voice trailing slightly as sleep called to him again, "Love you."

Yuri smiled and pressed closer, "Love you, too."

It wasn't a long sleep, but staying up late came with its consequences sometimes, and this was one of them. By 9am, Yuri's phone-alarm was beeping, and the day had officially begun; Yuri crawled out from the pretzel of limbs Viktor had tied around him from behind, just as Yuri had predicted. Viktor was dead on his feet, needing constant guidance to get ready, dressed, and packed so they could go, but all the while, his eyes were closed and he yawned throughout. Even when they were outside in the cold, frosty morning, letting the pups do their morning business, Viktor practically fell asleep again, this time perched on Yuri's back, standing upright only with his arms clinging around Yuri's thin frame and a shoulder to prop his head on.

"Is he going to make it?" Chris wondered, laughing at the sight of it as Viktor continued to dose when they met for breakfast.

They sat in a booth at the hotel's restaurant, with Chris on one side and Yuri with Viktor on the other. Jiro and Makkachin were close-by, leashes tied to the bottom of the table so they wouldn't wander off to investigate the smell of food. Their own would be arriving soon enough anyway.

"I think he just needs his coffee," Yuri mused, patting his husband's head where it was still propped up on him, "He was moving around a lot last night though. Woke me up a few times."

"Is that abnormal?"
"A little." He nodded, lifting his head as he spotted the outline of a waitress coming their way with a tray of breakfast drinks and a basket of croissants. Once it was all set out, Yuri reached for the coffee carafe and did his best to doctor his partner's preference, "Well, maybe it isn't. I normally don't wake up. If he tosses and turns, maybe I just haven't noticed until now. ...To be honest, I'm dreading this breakfast a little, so maybe I was a light sleeper this time around and he was being normal."

"Really? Why?" Chris wondered, a brow raised behind circular lenses, "It's just me." He gave a nervous smile.

"Yeah but when this one wakes up, he's going to start up a really uncomfortable conversation, and I promised that I'd let him." Yuri explained, lifting the small white cup to his lips to taste the light-brown coffee. Satisfied, he tried to nudge Viktor a little, "Hey, wakey wakey...coffee's here." He said, holding the cup under the man's nose to try and let the smell catch him. It worked well enough, and after a few seconds, hazy blue eyes finally opened, and Viktor took the cup carefully.

"...Mmnn...I'm super not ready to adult yet..." He whined quietly, but took a grateful sip anyway.

"What would you be doing otherwise?" Chris laughed in wonder.

"Sleeping."

"...Oh boo, you're supposed to respond with a pun, Viktor."

"I'm just kidding."

"...You are?"

"Yeah." Viktor nodded into his coffee, "Get it? Kid-ing? Instead of adult-ing?"

Yuri groaned, but Chris shook his head, "I guess that'll do."

"It's the best I can manage with only half a brain to work with." The Russian explained, "I'll be more fun later."

"Yuri says he's dreading breakfast with me." Chris managed, "Maybe we can get the not-fun-stuff out of the way, so we can get to the better part of the day at the same time that you become fun."

Viktor blinked at him slowly in confusion, "...Dreading? Why?"

Yuri smacked his face, "...You forgot."

"I'm sure I didn't." The hazy Russian contested, taking another sip from the little white cup. He then set the cup down so he could reach for the croissant basket, "Chris, did you look into the thing like I asked?"

The Swiss figure lifted his head up, and glanced between the pair across the table from him, but the realization was creeping in quickly, "Oh...I see, that's why Yuri's anxious." He said grimly. He lifted his glass of orange juice though and leaned back against the booth with it, "There wasn't really much to look at. I only have my memories. I never stole any of Yuri's emails. I didn't think you'd ask about it with him around though."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"You sent the request as a text message when I was sitting next to you both, that's why."

Yuri shot his silver a look, "I think that counts against your promise not to talk about Asahi at the
"I didn't talk about him. I didn't even mention his name, actually." Viktor reassured, dubious as his point may have been. He reached into his coat for his phone and unlocked it, pulling up the message he'd sent as proof, "See? 'Can you look into the email arrangement you and Yuri had back when he first left for Detroit?'" He read aloud, only to realize Chris had sent a reply, "Wait, I didn't see this... 'You mean the ones from Saito?'"

"Viktor-"

Chris shook his head again, "Like I said, I never took any emails out of Yuri's inbox. I did exactly ask he asked; I deleted what Saito sent him, and blocked his address. I camped out in Yuri's email for about 2 weeks, just to be sure messages didn't come from a different account to get around the block. I forwarded everything else to a temporary account Yuri had made so he could still correspond normally."

"So Saito did message him."

"Of course he messaged me." Yuri said despondently, "We were friends back then, and I didn't tell him I was leaving. I expected he'd at least ask where I was, even if I didn't want to answer."

"He already knew." Chris explained, taking another sip from his juice before setting the glass down, "Apparently he'd gotten back to Imari after a meeting in Tokyo where he'd gotten approval to let you call dibs on the next available spot in the camp, and when he couldn't find you, he went to your coach. She told him you went to Detroit, so his first message was asking if you'd already left Japan or were just working your way up to it. I'm a bit confused on the timeline...he said something about how it had been a month since you left when he found out?"

Yuri groaned and thought back on those days, "...It'd muddled in my head. I didn't compete in the adult Grand Prix Series until I was in my 20s. I was 18 when I went to Detroit though."

Viktor leveled a flat look, "I thought you said you'd only agreed to be with him for like a week before you took off. How'd he not notice for a month?"

Chris was the one giving looks then, "...You...did what with him?"

"I said my memory was bad about the timeline!" Yuri harped at them both, "I made myself forget! I don't even trust that what I do remember is right, okay?" He said defensively, crossing his arms and leaning against the back-rest, "I could've sworn that it was summer, cuz he was around a lot... Maybe I thought it was the off-season. I don't know. The Junior Grand Prix starts in August so everything's all weird in my mind."

"Yuri got spooked and cornered by Saito once, and basically agreed to go out with him." Viktor explained reluctantly, almost impatient, "He said that he thought it was only for a few days, a week at most, before he was able to bail to Detroit in secret. But Saito's emails said it had been a month before finding out...?"

"I don't remember." Yuri grumbled, "And I really don't want to remember, either."

Chris sighed loudly enough for them both to hear and pulled out his phone, "There's only one way to find out where he was, maybe." He explained, typing into the search field. A few moments later, he was thumbing the screen to scroll, and held the phone closer to his face to read, "...Ah, okay, this explains it a little. Yuri moved at the end of that November, and Saito said he didn't find out until nearly a month later. Nearly a month would be when Japanese Nationals happens, and it looks
like..." He explained, waiting a moment again as he searched and scrolled, "Yeah, you were both at that competition. He would've been able to talk to you about it then because you were in the same place. He must've found out right before that."

"So he was probably in Tokyo then for that month." Viktor surmised, "Was he in the GP Series?"

Chris nodded as he tapped his phone again, "Yeah, Rostelecom and Trophée Éric Bompard, so he would've been done until Nationals since he didn't go to the Final. Tokyo really isn't that far away from Imari...it's easy to guess he went back home a bunch when he wasn't at a competition, especially if he was trying to get Yuri to join the Tokyo Club. That month he was away must've been right in the middle of crunch-time for those two events, and he went back to Imari when he was done, only to find Yuri had left already."

"...I must've kept up the charade longer than I thought." Yuri said quietly, staring at the croissant that Viktor had set on his plate earlier, "I definitely wasn't with him in person for long though. There's no way."

"He could've been in Imari right before the Senior season started, asked you to be his boyfriend, and then had to leave for competition." Viktor surmised, "That would explain why you could be mostly sure that nothing severe happened between you."

"Severe?" Chris echoed, "What, like sex?"

Yuri buried his face in his hands, "Yes, like that...or anything more involved than a hug."

"Oh, no, Yuri, trust me..." Chris said, his tone reassuring as he reached across the table to pull one hand down with his own, "If anything like that had happened, I'm certain I would've found out. Even though we hadn't shared competitions in a while, since I moved up to Seniors before you, we still corresponded a lot. I could more-or-less tell you when you ceased being an innocent, even though I teased you about Viktor at Cup of China last year."

Brighter red than he'd already been, Yuri gaped, one hand still on his face, "How in the Hell can you tell something like that?" He asked, feeling defensive again.

"Now I have to know...when do you think it happened?" Viktor asked, super curious.

"Sometime between Nationals and Four Continents. That span of weeks when you skipped events despite your big come-back declaration." Chris explained to the Russian, as though he frequently thought about it and had the information at the front of his mind, "I suspect that you two hadn't yet been intimate even in Barcelona when we found out about the rings...but it definitely happened before the next time I saw you two again in person at Worlds in Helsinki. Living together in St. Petersburg must've really made the difference." He teased, leaning back to sit normally again, "Being alone in a house, with no shared walls for family to listen through."

"...As if the shared walls stopped him." Yuri chastised, giving his husband a slight look.

Viktor just smiled though, "It didn't stop me completely. Do I have your consent to tell him if he was right?"

Embarrassed, Yuri looked away, but flicked his one hand forward in a gesture to go ahead.

"Our very first truly intimate moment - beyond kissing - was the night before Japanese Nationals last year." Viktor explained happily, "At very least, it was the first time he let me do some heavy petting."
"Fascinating." Chris said, smiling eagerly, "Go on. Please."

"Ohmygodhe'simaginingitrightnow." Yuri quietly groaned.

"It was a few more weeks before anything progressed from there." Viktor explained, feeling his husband's hackles rising like skyscrapers with every word, "But without going into too much detail, I can confirm that, yes, it was between Nationals and Four Continents. Our first real sexy-time was in the days before Euros, actually."

Chris seemed pleased with himself and nodded, and turned his eyes back to the super red Yuri, "So you see? I can tell. Rest assured in the knowledge that nothing severe happened between you and Saito before you went state-side."

Viktor's expression changed to one of judgment after that, "Now that I think about it though, if the timing was really that compact, it was kind of stupid for Saito to drop that bomb on you when he did, not yet knowing if you'd get to join the Tokyo Club at all. What could he have possibly been going for? A long-distance thing? What would the point of that even be?"

Yuri finally looked over, "Says the guy who dreamed-up a whole different origins narrative for us, where we were going for it long-distance for months before we finally started living together."

"My dreams can skip the filler-weeks where we aren't together." The Russian defended, "You'll note that the real me came to you as soon as I realized something was possible. I didn't even bother warning you I was coming. That's how seriously I took it."

"How could you have warned me you were coming?" Yuri asked skeptically, "It's not like we'd ever exchanged numbers."

"I could've asked Chris for it. Or I could've DM'd you over Instagram."

"I didn't post on Instagram back then. You would've had a hard time even being able to find me on there."

"Not important." Viktor shrugged, still smiling even though his spouse was giving him a rather serious look, "The point is...I came to you as soon as I could. That's how I am. I did the same thing with Sophia back in the day, remember? Moving to France despite Yakov complaining about it."

Yuri just looked at the man incredulously before rankling his brow and scooting towards the edge of the boot, "...I need some fresh air."

Viktor looked on in confusion, "Yuri?" He asked, watching the man go, "Yuri?"

"...You have a habit of over-sharing." Chris said, smacking his hand against his face before shaking his head in disbelief.

"...But I was just giving evidence for-"

"He doesn't care about that." The blonde explained in an exasperated tone, "If you never mention her name again to him, it'll be too soon."

"But-"

"Tut." Chris silenced, smacking his palm forward to cover his friend's mouth, "You mean well, but you're an idiot."
Blue eyes stared on in stunned shock from behind those fingers.

"A precious, beautiful, talented, loveable idiot, but still an idiot." Chris went on, making Viktor sink with every adjective, "Never say her name in his presence again. Never speak of any of your past relationships to him again. It took him years just to stay still long enough in your presence to say hi to you. No doubt, he thinks you're comparing everything he says and does to every past girlfriend you've had. It's traumatizing to him just to think he might not have been as innocent as he believed when he got together with you."

"Mphrmphbt..."

Chris shook his head 'no' again, "In many ways, Yuri is stronger than either of us...but in a few key areas, he's not. He doesn't know how to just have a fling or 'try someone out' for a little while. He can't comprehend either of us in that way because of it, and it really hurts him to think about the fact that you have that in your history. So even if you wouldn't think less of him if it did turn out that he'd been intimate with Saito before, the very threat of that possibility has wounded his view of himself."

Viktor's brow furrowed and he tried to explain himself again, but under the muffler of Chris' hand, it was pointless. Chris just leveled him a look, and Viktor sank into defeated silence again.

"When you two did your wedding at the Shinto Shrine in Hasetsu...there was meaning behind why you wore white that day." The blonde explained, "You came to him as a clean soul, untouched, untainted by the past...pure. He accepted you exactly as you were, knowing you'd been with others before him; to him, you were still perfect. You gave him your last name, but he gave you his colors. This whole unfortunate situation with Saito has made him think he was tainted this whole time, and he had no idea. Am I wrong?"

Viktor hesitated, but with the hand still covering his mouth, he could only shake his head.

"Now he has the confirmation that he, in actuality, was exactly what he claimed to have been all along. Pure. ...And then you threw Sophia at him again."

If not for his head being pinned to the cushion of the booth, Viktor would've slid under the table from the shame. He just closed his eyes and sighed out through his nose, and felt Chris finally let him go again. Viktor stayed put with his guilt for a little while before pushing to sit up normally again, eyes downcast, "...When Saito kissed him at Nationals...after we got back to the hotel, before he told me...he took a shower that was too hot, and clawed at his skin with his fingernails, like he thought it was the only way he could feel clean again. Even though he wouldn't let go of me until we got back, as soon as we did, he suddenly wouldn't let me touch him at all. I had to convince him that it was okay. That I still wanted him, even though Saito had put lips on him. I...did this whole, elaborate, ritual cleansing with him, hoping that if I were the one to clean him, then in Yuri's head, he'd feel clean again. Maybe I'm the one who was dirty all along."

"He knew that going into it though." Chris pointed out, "He just didn't want to hear-"

"-The details." Viktor interrupted, looking further down, "The first time I tried to tell him, he shut me down...and every time I tried to help him with his 'Eros' performance by telling him to draw inspiration from a relationship he'd had, he'd shut me down again, because obviously he didn't have that experience. I don't know why I keep running my mouth like I don't know that. I do know."

"You and he are alike in your opposite-ness." Chris said, drawing a look of confusion, "In the same way that he can't comprehend being in a relationship with someone where he isn't giving 500% of himself, you can't comprehend someone who hasn't had a few practice relationships before finding the one. You have to make a better effort to remember and respect that about him. He's not
"I've tried... I guess, I just..." Viktor grumbled, pausing in a moment of introspection before suddenly moving to the edge of the booth, "I'm an idiot..." He said, finalizing his prior thought, "I'll be right back."

Makkachin and Jiro both tried to go after the man, but found their paths cut short by their leashes catching. They both whined and looked at Chris, but he shook his head, "Don't worry. He won't be long. He's just had a breakthrough about himself that was a long-time coming."

Viktor followed the open space of the UNO Restaurant until it lead him outside. There was a big white city-bus with red trim parked out front, and a number of people getting off so those waiting on the side-walk could get on. For a split second, the Russian worried his husband was in that crowd trying to get away, but he forced himself to be rational and look away. When he turned to look all the way to the left, to the concrete street-side entrance to the path that lead into the park behind the Arcotel, he spotted two benches. Yuri was sitting alone on one of them, facing the street, looking at the open phone-booth and a singular skinny tree next to it. Relieved, he started walking quickly over, feeling the chill creeping in; he hadn't grabbed his jacket at all. Neither had Yuri though. When he got there, Yuri was looking at him, but neither were sure what to say. Instead of stammering nonsense though, Viktor rubbed his arms through his thin sleeves and moved to sit on the little metal bench beside his partner.

"You're freezing," Yuri commented, worried, "Normally you don't chill this easy."

"I normally have 15 layers of ego to keep me warm." Viktor answered, "Shame doesn't keep me warm at all though. I'm sorry I upset you with my...uhm...dumb and unnecessary commentary. I thought I was offering proof about my habits, but it came out wrong."

Yuri shook his head and huffed a single laugh, but then pinched the bridge of his nose between the tips of his thumbs, elbows resting on his knees where he leaned over them, "...I wanted to come outside anyway. I've been so worried about what Chris would say about those stupid emails that I forgot how he could put my mind at ease, too. I guess I was just thinking the worst..."

"Expect the worst, always, then you'll be pleasantly surprised when it doesn't come to pass." Viktor surmised, "Right?"

"Yeah."

"So then why did you want to come outside...? You didn't bring your coat. It's freezing. The sun isn't even that high...so it's like being in the shade, too."

Yuri looked past the edge of one thumb to see his spouse, and sat upright. The bus screeched and puffed as it departed and entered the roadway, drawing both of their attention for a moment. Yuri stood up though as the street quieted again, and stepped in front of his partner, offering his hands.

Viktor took them unquestioningly, and let himself be pulled up to his feet again, hoping for his confusion to be lifted sooner rather than later. He felt those thumbs rubbing over his fingers, but didn't dare make a sound. He just waited for Yuri to speak in his own time.

A few more seconds of quiet passed before Yuri stepped closer, letting go of his husband's hands as he guided them over his shoulders. He wrapped his arms around Viktor's back and pressed his face to the crook of one shoulder, drawing in a long, deep breath, holding tight, "...I just needed a little space to recover from the embarrassment of the topic. It's...hard to explain how profound my relief is right now...to hear from Chris that he knows I was spared back then because he could tell when
things got serious between you and I... I just... It's hard to explain."

"Well, you told me point-blank not to talk about our private-life with anyone, so...when you told me
to go ahead earlier..."

"Thank you." Yuri added, "For saying enough, without saying too much."

Viktor managed a wry smile, "...Well, I'm an idiot...but I'm your idiot, like you said. Eventually I'll
do the right thing, even if I don't understand it sometimes."

Yuri breathed a laugh and lifted his head up again, looking at that dumb innocence on his uneasy
partner's face. He leaned forward though, nosing the man's lips lightly before allowing a kiss. Hands
moved back over his shoulders to cup the sides of his face, and he opened his eyes to see Viktor
looking back at him, as though examining him. He smiled nervously though, "...Sorry I'm like this...I
make things difficult."

"You deal with things in the only way that makes sense to you. I can't be mad at you for that. I just
have to learn how to cope with it, without making you feel worse." Viktor explained, brushing his
thumbs across his partner's cheeks, "You and I see the world, and the people in it, very differently.
That should've been obvious to me from the start...but in some ways, I'm a really slow learner."

"...It's okay... You've been really patient with me. I couldn't ask for more."

"Well, you should anyway." Viktor mused, leaning in to kiss lips and forehead before giving another
tight hug, "I have to be held to a higher standard. You're too important to me."

"I'll try..."

"Good. Let's head back in then."

"Yeah..." Yuri agreed easily, "I need to know what the Hell I was doing for a month before I told
Chris to moderate my inbox."
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED THIRTY

Makkachin barked loudly at the sight of his two humans returning to the indoors, and both he and Jiro paced anxiously as the duo got closer. They got a quick greeting from their people to calm them down, but both pups went under the table to lean on their humans' legs once they were sitting, just to be sure they didn't leave again so soon.

"Everything okay?" Chris wondered, though already sure of the answer given how quickly they'd returned and how neither seemed to be in distress.

"Yeah...sorry." Yuri answered, retaking his place on the booth bench, "I thought I'd die of embarrassment with Viktor telling about our...erm...stuff. I needed the cold air to cool me down."

"Your secret's safe with me." Chris mused, "The waitress brought the rest of breakfast over right after Viktor went out after you, so dig in before it gets cold."

Yuri nodded and turned the plate before him around a little bit, putting the eggs and sausage at the front for easy cutting, but before he could get his fork and knife out to start, he put his wrists against the edge of the table and looked across, "...Did you read all the emails before deleting them or did you just toss them?"

"I read everything, in case Saito said something stupid." He answered, taking a bite from a half-eaten bagel with creamcheese. "I felt like some of the things he wrote were particularly off-putting, but I guess it makes sense in the context of him believing you two were together at the time."

Cheeks were red, but Yuri felt guilt more than embarrassment, "He must've thought I lead him on."

"Truly."

"...I feel really bad about how I did things back then." He went on, lifting his arms again to start cutting the sausage links into smaller pieces, "I really didn't want to hurt him. He didn't do anything wrong, he just...fell for someone who didn't feel the same way back, and was too cowardly to be honest about it."

"I'm not sure that 'bravery' is the word I'd use when describing a person capable of shooting someone down." Viktor commented, pouring maple syrup over his waffle.

"Weak, then."

"Ehhh..."

"Being compassionate isn't a sign of weakness or cowardice." Chris pointed out, licking a bit of stray creamcheese from the corner of his mouth, "But it can cause people to take advantage of you, even if they don't mean it. Mercy is a strength, so long as others aren't so vindictive that they'd use it to trick you."

"Asahi isn't vindictive..." Yuri defended, "After everything I've learned about him since Nationals, I think it's a freaking miracle that he managed the courage to ask me out in the first place. Besides the risk of rejection, he was putting his life at risk... He must've only found the courage to speak the words because he'd had a taste of freedom in Tokyo beforehand."
"...A miracle? What was so wrong with him before?" Chris wondered, swapping his bagel for a fork to poke at a bowl of fruit cuts.

"His parents are hyper-religious, and his father brought it to Imari from a childhood spent in America. What did he say the practice was? Southern Baptist?"

Viktor shrugged, "I can't remember."

"In any case," Yuri went on, "He was treated poorly growing up because of what he is. Thinking back on it...I should've noticed how he changed after moving to Tokyo. He was really guarded and stand-off-ish before, but then he found some kind of weird energy after leaving. He must've thought it was safe to approach me only \textit{then}, because he could've kept us a secret if we lived in another city altogether, like he did with Riku."

"That makes sense." Chris nodded, popping a bit of cantaloupe into his mouth, "His emails make sense now, too."

"How so?" Yuri asked, finally putting the butter-knife away so he could start eating the morsels he'd been cutting.

"In all the messages he sent that I read, he never once actually put it into writing that you two were \textit{together} in any sense." Chris started, fishing for a grape with his fork, "To me, it read like a guy that was obsessed, but no worse than I thought he already was for the few years before that. The worst thing he said was that you betrayed his trust, and that was before Nationals."

"It got that bad \textit{before} Nationals?" Yuri questioned, feeling a nervous pit in his stomach. He rested his fork on the edge of his plate and pressed his other hand to his brow, "I can't remember any of it... Not the emails, I mean, but Nationals itself. That would've been my first competition with Celestino as my coach, right?"

"If you moved at the end of November and weren't in the Junior Grand Prix Final, then yeah." Viktor nodded.

"...It's so weird...I remember certain aspects of the competition, but none of it has to do with Asahi."

"Maybe it's because I told you to stay close to your coach." Chris surmised, draining the last of his orange juice, "You must've already intended to, given how you were already avoiding Saito online by then. You focused on your sport, just like you should have."

"I do remember being with Ciao Ciao that whole time..."

"Did you read any emails from \textit{before} Yuri told you to watch his inbox?" Viktor wondered for them both, "In those few weeks where Saito thought Yuri was still in Japan."

"I did. A few." Chris answered, pushing his glasses up a little higher on his nose with the tip of one finger, "Just to kind-of get a good baseline for how they talked to each other normally. I guess it wasn't that normal after all, if Saito was talking to someone he thought he was dating."

"...What was he saying?" Viktor asked warily.

"Mostly about the progress he was making on getting Yuri a spot in Tokyo. The first email I read - the most recent one Saito had sent before Yuri gave me the login credentials - was that he had a surprise. He wanted to tell Yuri in person."

Yuri felt himself go cold, and shook slightly, "That must've been it... The moment I knew I couldn't
"Eat while you think, my love." Viktor advised, rubbing his hand over his husband's back.

Chris watched for a moment as Yuri did as asked, slowly chewing on the small bit of egg he'd picked up, "I recall thinking that Yuri's replies in those weeks were really short and simple." He started again, "But to my thinking, it was entirely in-keeping with how he always wrote stuff. Short, sweet, and to the point. He was always really bad at being a presence online."

"I'm a lurker." Yuri corrected, "I was present."

"You did get a bit more subdued after that though." Chris surmised, "You were never really that active online anyway, but after the debacle with Saito, it was harder to track you down. That's around the time I had to start texting you to get an answer. Thank goodness for Phichit though."

Viktor laughed, "Right?"

"He came in at just the right time, and was everything Yuri needed; a good friend with no weird motivations, and had a big presence online. He helped make up for the lack of participation on Yuri's end." Chris dramatized, turning his eyes to the younger of the two on the other side of the table, "It was suddenly so much easier to keep tabs on you when he popped up in Detroit."

Yuri nodded and gave a sigh of relief, "I felt so much better out there when he came. He was always fun and cheerful...it was hard to mope with him around. The best part was how he never really prodded me for information...so I never had to tell him anything about Asahi. He just thought it was my personality that I was quiet and weird. Phichit-kun made it possible for me to be silly again. He took my mind off of everything back home."

"Your skating improved dramatically, too."

"You think so?"

"Absolutely." Chris affirmed easily, "You went from being adorably average to good. Don't you remember? Celestino threw you head-first into Four Continents and Worlds, and then made you do the GP Series the next year, along with a zillion other smaller events. I remember distinctly how competitive you got, and how hopeful you became that you'd finally be good enough to compete against Viktor, not just be at the same event."

"...I don't get it." Viktor stammered, looking vacant, "If you were at the same events as me then we were competing against each other."

"In my head, there were always two different competitions happening." Yuri explained, "There was the good skaters' event; the top 15 or so. Then there was everyone else. People like me, who had no name recognition because we never stood out. People who never made it to the Grand Prix Final."

"Then you got to Sochi."

"And that's when you noticed me."

Viktor blanched slightly, "...I noticed you before that. You just...made a name for yourself as someone who always ran away."

"I still feel like I should take part of the blame for that." Chris sighed as he smiled, "I should've thought to get you drunk years ago."
Yuri coughed, "...I think I like how things turned out. Who knows how badly it could've gone under any other circumstances."

"I do have one confession to make." Chris added suddenly, making both Nikiforovs pay close attention, "I know you told me not to engage Saito if he emailed you...but on one singular occasion, I did."

"Uh oh..."

"Right before I gave back the keys to your account, I sent him one message." He started to explain, making Yuri swallow a nervous gulp, "I didn't tell him who I was, but since I knew he couldn't reply...I told him one simple thing."

"...What did you say...?" Yuri asked pensively, brows crinkled behind his glasses.

"Six simple words: 'Yuri isn't gay. Leave him alone.'" Chris revealed, "That would've been a week after Nationals."

Viktor gasped, and smacked one fist into the palm of his other hand, "That explains it!"

"Explains what?"

"The first words he said when we saw him at All Japan!" He answered, reaching one arm across his husband's back to grasp both shoulders excitedly, "He didn't even say 'hi' first, he just asked, 'so you're gay now?' Remember?"

"Uhm..." Yuri stammered.

"He really said that...?" Chris asked, quirking one brow, "For real?"

"Yeah!" The Russian exclaimed, "I mean, not that it makes a difference in the end, but I guess it explains his way of thinking."

Yuri rubbed his face with both hands, "...I made a complete fool of myself."

"Eh?" The older two looked at him.

"Don't you remember how I answered him then?" He went on, turning to look at Viktor.

"Of course I remember. You said you went gay just for me!" The Russian answered proudly, pointing himself before throwing both arms around his partner, squishing him energetically, "I'm the luckiest guy on Earth!"

Yuri's cheeks just went red again as he was jostled around, "My face is going to hurt by the end of this..." He muttered, covering it again with the hands he'd slid aside a moment before, "Is there anything else that I need to know about before we go back and face this guy again?"

Chris thought back, resting with a finger curled around his chin.

"Other things I agreed to but didn't mean to? Dumb stuff I said or did that I shouldn't have?"

The blonde laughed at that, "It wouldn't be fair for me to spout-off a list of things you've said or done that were dumb, because you and I have very different views of the world. I would've had no problem breaking Saito's heart in half to make him go away, but you're not like that. You want this thing solved without hurting him. In that regard, you're a better man than I am, Yuri." He explained, skewering a piece of pineapple with a blackberry from the nearly-empty fruit bowl, "The past is
ancient. You can't fix things that happened when you were 16, or 18, or even when you were 23."

"...When I was 23?" Yuri echoed, perplexed.

"Forgetting Sochi."

"Oh." He deadpanned, much to both other men's amusement.

"Point is...don't dwell on what happened before. There's nothing you can do to change it. You have to fix things in the here and now." Chris explained, lifting his fork to examine the bits of fruit he'd picked up, "You have time to think about how you want to handle it, but whatever you decide to do, make sure you're at peace with it ahead of time. This has to be the last time it comes up. Saito has to accept that you aren't available to him, and he can't loiter around you on the hope that you and Viktor fall apart so he can swoop in and steal you away... More importantly, you aren't interested in him. You never were, you never meant to make him think otherwise, and that's never going to change. You and he are not compatible. He has to move on."

"We helped him get sponsors for his skating. Maybe we can get him signed up on some dating site."

"Honestly, he should probably do that on his own." Chris chimed in, sparing his friend from further torment, "You two should be hands-off with him. Viktor explained that his uncle is dealing with things now...let him finish."

"I already mean to ask Mimi to help Saito move out of Yu-Topia. We may not live there anymore, but the family still does, and I don't want either of us to have to steel ourselves just to visit." Viktor added, "And I definitely don't want there to ever be an opportunity for Saito to share the onsen or showers with Yuri, on purpose or by accident."

"What's the plan for Four Continents then?" Chris wondered, picking up his bagel again, "Saito and Plisetsky share a coach now. He'll be around a lot in Colorado."

Yuri felt a hollow pit open up in his gut, and a nervous look crossed his face, "...All this time, I've been worrying about the Olympics, I didn't even think about Four Continents..."

"Let's solve one problem at a time," Viktor suggested, "Once we know how the expulsion from Yu-Topia goes, we'll have a better idea how to address the next competition. I'm sure Mimi is already on top of it anyway."

"Yeah, just tell him what you hope to see happen and let him figure out how to make it so." Chris agreed, "That way it comes to Saito from a neutral party and it just seems like a push towards independence, not a nudge out the door."

"...Yeah..." Yuri agreed reluctantly.

"All Nippon Airways flight 8563 to Tokyo-Haneda International Airport is now boarding. Please approach the boarding tunnel as your section is called and present your tickets for scanning."

Viktor looked up and over from the waiting area, but then turned back and reached to unplug his phone from the charging-tower behind him. Yuri lifted his head when he felt it, and pulled out one of the ear-plugs he'd used to keep the noise out while he tried to take a nap. Jiro was in his carrier on the seat next to him, though the top was open so he could get fresh air and look around.
"Time to go. They'll be calling us up any second." Viktor explained, putting his charging-cable away first, then his phone, and moved over to put the lid securely down on the carrier. He smiled as Yuri stretched like a long cat next to him before finally standing up sluggishly, "Just a little bit longer and you can go back to sleep, my love."

"I don't know how you're not as tired as I am..." Yuri commented in the midst of a yawn, pulling out the other ear-bud to secure them both in a pocket, "You moved around so much last night that I'm surprised you slept at all."

"Oh don't worry, I'll be out like a light once we're airborne." Viktor reassured, kissing his partner's forehead and patting his hair affectionately, "Tell me more about how much I moved around though. Does that happen a lot?"

Yuri couldn't help but yawn again as he rubbed his eyes under his glasses, "I'm not sure...I normally sleep through the night. I'm just looking forward to getting a good night's sleep at home again. We've been gone a long time."

"Agreed," Viktor nodded and started moving towards the terminal, taking their carry-on luggage while Yuri picked up Jiro in his dog-box, "At least this first leg of the flight back is non-stop to Japan. We'll get to Tokyo around 7am, hang out for a bit of a layover, and then be back in Hasetsu by noon-ish."

"Did we find out when the others are getting back?"

"They have two layovers so they'll be back around dinner-time. Mimi said it was the best he could do, given how he had to buy a bunch of new tickets after he got his kids after NHK." Viktor explained, waiting in the crowd of other first-class passengers who were cueing for their rows to be called, "I feel a little bad for them. They have to stop in Moscow, then Taipei, then Fukuoka."

Yuri felt a chill at the mention of Moscow, "I don't know if it was providence or luck that we decided to buy these tickets like we did, not having a layover in Russia on the way back. But, I'm glad it turned out this way."

"...Truthfully?" Viktor commented, "If I'm not flying to Russia, I don't go through it. It was like that even before this kerfuffle with the RSF."

"Oh..."

"Because Aeroflot is always late." He went on with a laugh, "And for a guy like me, who is impulsive and likes to do things quickly, getting a bug to go somewhere gets hampered pretty seriously when the damn plane won't go. Right?"

"That makes sense."

They fell to silence for a little while as the first few sections were called, then their own, and they made their way forward. The eventual sight of their seats was welcome, and Yuri quickly plunked down next to the window, and gently set Jiro's carrier down on the floor in front of his feet. Viktor put their carry-bags away in the overhead compartment before taking his own seat, and let out a long exhaled sigh.

"Well..." He started, "In spite of the sad hiccups we had, I think being in Vienna was pretty good. But...I'm super glad we're finally going back." He turned his head against the cushion behind him, and held up his hand, feeling Yuri's fingers slide through his own before bringing them to his lips to kiss them, "I am sorry for the mistakes I made. I was supposed to make you feel better after
Nationals, but I messed up."

Yuri was a bit surprised to hear the words, but he turned in his seat and leaned in closer, adding his own kiss to the finger-threads, "You still made me feel better in the end...and I forgave you anyway." He explained, reaching around with his other hand to press his palm to one pale cheek, "We'll just be careful not to do anything super stressful again. It's not fair to either of us. ...Maybe we should've known better, but after all the times last year where I pushed you to try to be more open to the idea of your family, I couldn't back out. Especially since Kon said he'd been proud of me, a little. I had the same hopes that you did."

Viktor nodded, and turned his face into the palm, kissing it as he brought up his free hand to hold it there. He waited there for a moment, drawing another long breath against Yuri's skin, "...The high cost of needing to know."

"And now we do, and we'll be better off for it."

"Yeah..."

"Mom said the first year of marriage is the hardest. We're still two months out from the anniversary of our eloping to Barcelona." Yuri continued, nosing his husband's forehead and a few strands of silver bangs, "So while I hope the worst is finally behind us, we still have room for a few troubles. We can get it all out of the way before we go on our German vacation in the summer."

Viktor smiled at that, "There's so much stuff I want to see and do, all the beer I want to try..."

"Only three competitions to go."

"Only three, and a second wedding."

"Exactly."
Chapter 531

CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED THIRTY ONE

The 'Flight of the Nikiforovs' was still hours from starting when the second half of Clan Hasetsu started making their way to the airport. The winter morning was still dark when Mikhail rose to begin the difficult task of waking everyone up despite having only just gone to bed 6 hours prior. First though, he had to wake himself up, and that was half the battle.

7am... He thought grudgingly, turning off the vibrating alarm on his watch. The room was pitch black without the glow from his wrist, but Mikhail knew his way around well enough. His first wake-up victim was Minako, sleeping soundly just inches away, but he spared her the imminent moment for the time being. Carefully, he slipped out of bed, found the fleece bathrobe hanging on the back of the door, and quietly made his way through the door.

Proximity to the front door made the square hall between the bedroom and the kitchen a lot colder than the rest of the space, but Mikhail passed through it quickly, keeping the robe close to his pale skin. The olive-green door that led into the room with the three teens was still closed, making it easy to flick on the bathroom light in the kitchen without bothering them. Within a few minutes though, coffee was being made, and five mugs were set out on the counter, so he returned to the dark bedroom to begin the dreaded 'wakening.'

"Starlight," He whispered, sitting on the edge of the bed on Minako's side. One hand went forward to stroke her hair, and nudged a shoulder, "Hey, time to get up."

"Idon'twanna..." She mumbled, rolling slightly onto her side to 'escape' the threat of consciousness. She clenched her eyes shut as she felt the weight next to her shift a little, with another heavy spot manifesting in front of her. One eye cracked open and she spotted the dark outline of an arm that had reached over her waist, and the hand at the end of it that had planted itself in the blankets. Mikhail leaned over her, and his free hand came against her back to stroke slowly, "C'moooonnnn..." He teasingly pleaded, lowering down to kiss her upturned shoulder, "Coffee's almost ready."

"Trying to bribe me already..."

"To tempt you. Come...join me in caffeinated bliss."

Minako huffed a few quiet laughs, but finally turned onto her back enough to look up at the man. She loosely curled her fingers around his forearm, "What time is it even?"

"Morning o'clock. Dark-early time. That evil hour..."

"Yikes, is it before 6?"

"Nah..." He shook his head, "It's about 7:15."

Minako couldn't help but yawn and shake her head, "Glad we cut out from the Banquet when we did... Any later and we would've slept through our flight."

"It won't be like this again; I promise." Mikhail assured, going quiet for a moment as he looked on at his lady love, almost studying her. Her odd expression wasn't lost on him.
"I feel a bit like a bug under glass suddenly," She commented quietly, eyes adjusting to the dim lighting so she could see the man's expression, "What's up...?"

"How are you feeling?" He asked instead of answering, pulling his left hand back from where it had been pressed into the blankets by Minako's waist. It came to rest on her stomach over the comforter, "...I know you're not the biggest fan of this turn of events. I'm...trying to temper the excesses of my excitement, so I'll just...casually check in with you from time to time, if that's okay."

Minako's confused expression morphed to disgruntled concern, and she pushed up onto both elbows, "I hate that you think you have to ask permission to ask me how I feel." She grumbled, "Of all the people, you should be able to just ask..."

"Can I though?" He asked pointedly, "Our first appointment is Friday. I've been told that, despite absolutely everything else, it didn't really become real for some ladies until they heard that heartbeat."

Brows raised, and Minako pursed her lips slightly, "...A lot of ladies, huh."

Mikhail managed an uneasy laugh, but he lifted both hands defensively, "Easy, easy...I took parenting classes the first time around. I wasn't the only student. Worked with a doula and everything."

"A what...?"

"Doula. It's like...a midwife. It's Greek for 'women's servant' though, so you can take your pick which meaning you like better."

Minako just gawked, "...I prefer neither." She huffed and flopped back down, closing her eyes for a moment before opening them again to stare at the ceiling, then back at the man still watching her, "You've been pretty quiet about this all weekend. Are you feeling sentimental or is something about to happen that I won't like?"

Mikhail deadpanned, eyebrows going up, "...How do you find out about these things?"

"You're projecting." She grumbled in answer, grabbing his nearest shoulder to help pull herself up to sitting, "What hair-brained thing are you about to do?"

"Expensive chores." He explained with a vague sigh. His arm went around her frame again, but this time as just a hug, "We have a layover in Moscow. I need to go to St. Petersburg."

"...Why?"

"Viktor's old house. I'm responsible for the remains."

"You can't let someone else deal with it?"

"If it were any other house, in any other part of the world, sure...but I feel like I owe it to this one to put my own eyeballs on the rubble."

Minako leaned into the hug and raised her arms over the man's shoulders, "How long are you going to take? We haven't even told anyone about the fact that Asahi left. I'm sure everyone's going to be up in arms about it, one way or another. They'll want you around. I'll want you around; we were helping him together."

"Just a day." He answered easily, "I'll be there by dinnertime on Wednesday."
"I wish you'd ask before you just do stuff like this. ...But, I imagine Viktor gets it from you. Still."

"I'm worried that if I leave it any longer than it's already been, I'll start racking up fines, or the city will bulldoze what's left and send me an enormous bill."

Minako huffed a sad laugh and pulled back again, pressing her palm to one cheek before patting it, "I love you, but sometimes it's annoying that you have an answer to everything."

"An answer to everything, except the question I asked you earlier." He retorted, "Set my mind at ease... If you don't think you can manage on your own, I'll forget the whole thing."

"No...no, it's fine." Minako insisted, waving a hand dismissively, "So long as you do only take a day. I don't want to have to throw Yuri into a suitcase so I can bail you out."

Mikhail just guffawed and made a sarcastic gesture at himself, "I'm shocked; you make it sound like you think I'll end up in prison if I go back."

"You better not have your nephew's knack for prophecy." The ballerina warned dryly as she scooted around him to get to the foot of the bed, "I've heard the stories."

Watching her rise up to stand, Mikhail pressed a hand down to push himself up as well. He followed quickly behind, held up her fleece robe, and stepped out in front of her as he pulled the ties around to loop them for her, "Minako..."

"I'm okay." She finally answered, "But please don't take more than that one day. Yuri finally feels like he's a part of our merry little band, and your girls need you. I'm only 50% of this partnership, and 50% by any measure is a failing grade."

"You're doing much better than you think. But...I promise. Only one day. I'll keep you abreast of everything I learn."

"I'll do the same."

Mikhail could feel eyeballs on him, as though being watched by a pride of hungry lions...lead by a tiger. The wait at Sheremetyevo had suddenly become rather complicated, given how the teens hadn't quite 'approved' of their father's announced departure. Viktoria kept her proverbial vice-grip on the flat-cap.

"It's only one day." The elder repeated, "You'll hardly even notice I'm gone."

All three raised brows and glanced at one another, then back at him skeptically.

"...Okay, maybe you'll notice a little bit. " Mikhail said, scrunching his shoulders up, "It's just one day. I'll be on a red-eye flight to Japan overnight."

"Explain one more time why you have to do this?" Yurio questioned, "You have that hub of your company in St. Petersburg that kept Viktor's car until you shipped it to Hasetsu. Just let them deal with Viktor's old house."

"It's the principle of the thing, Yuri." He answered, looking across the aisle to the seats opposite him and Minako, "Sometimes you have to go yourself."

"It's just a house though..."
"It's the site of a hate crime." Mikhail corrected, "That house didn't burn down because of faulty wiring."

"But what can you do about it?" Nikki wondered, sitting in the middle of the older two, "It's not like someone's going to walk up to you in the street and volunteer a confession."

"I'm not looking to figure out who did it. As far as I'm concerned, it was Russia at large. Once I sort out that house, I'll be putting plans into motion to move operations to Moscow. I only set-up shop in St. Petersburg because of Viktor anyway." The elder shrugged, "He's never going back, so I have nothing to go there for either."

"What about to see Kon?" The youngest retorted, putting her father to stunned silence for a moment.

"Well...ehm..." He stammered, "I mean... He doesn't exactly make it easy to just drop in. He lives 2 hours away from the nearest major city...and since he basically disowned Viktor, there's not really much reason for even me to go out there. A big part of why I kept going back after my sister died was because she had hoped us three idiots could reconcile, and I was trying to make that happen. There's no point in trying anymore, now that the bridge between Kon and Viktor's been burned."

"Oh..." Nikki sank a little.

"Aeroflot-Russian Airlines flight 38 to St. Petersburg is now boarding..." The announcer called with a heavy Russian accent, repeating in Russian soon after and again in English.

Mikhail looked up as he heard it, and rose up from his seat, "That one's mine. I better go."

The three teens and one fiancé stood up as well, with each one coming in close for their parting hug, even Yurio. Minako came in last, getting her longer hug and quick kiss, "Be careful, hun." She said quietly, "I'll come meet you in Fukuoka when you're on your way back."

"Alright." He agreed, and reluctantly pulled back to turn back to the gaggle of teens again, "Vikki, you're second in command. Please help Minako if she needs it." He asked, getting a nod from her. He breathed a loud sigh and bowed his head, "Sorry again everyone. I'll make up for it when I'm back with you in Hasetsu. Be safe until we meet again."

The group turned as Mikhail started padding slowly away, disappearing down the terminal's long departure hall. Yurio turned to look back at Minako though, "Was there any other reason he told you for why he wanted to stay here an extra day?"

"No." She answered simply, looking rather serious all of a sudden, eyes still following the terminal like she could somehow still see the man, "But there are a lot of things he could find along the way. As long as he gets on that plane like he said he would...and doesn't fall off a damn roof again."

Nikki managed a giggle at that, "You're never going to let him live that one down, are you?"

Minako tried to smile as she turned towards the trio, and moved to sit them all back down again for the remaining 30 odd minutes of their layover, "Someone has to be there to chronicle all the dumb things your father does. I have a feeling no one else has."

"I could give a list a mile long." Yurio pointed out, only to get a sarcastic pat on the head.

"A list of grievances isn't the same as a list of dumb things he's done." Minako corrected, "He's doing his best as he juggles all these different things that have come up, and all the people who've arrived in his life. I think we can forgive him the times he's messed up; he's still learning. We all are."
"I can't wait to get back to Yu-Topia." Nikki said, trying to veer the conversation in a more positive direction, "Sitting in that hot-spring after all this travel...and getting to see Mama Katsuki again, too!"

"Ah, yeah...she'll be happy to see us all back."
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED THIRTY TWO

Ever the predictable one, Mikhail saddled-up in his favorite rental car - a blue Prius - and headed out into the early St. Petersburg afternoon. No luggage weighed him down, but there was a light snow starting to fall from the city's grey sky. Stopped at an intersection in the middle of the city, Mikhail leaned over the wheel to look up, and shook his head.

_Hopefully this doesn't get any worse before tonight. I'd hate to have my promise broken by the damn weather._

It took nearly 45 minutes to get through the city to Viktor's old home-district, and cut through some narrow back-streets to find the way away from other drivers. If Russia was ever known for anything in the world - other than for the KGB and that one time a nuclear power-plant exploded and poisoned half the planet - it was for its notoriously bad roads and terrible drivers...and the dash-cam footage to prove it to everyone.

When he finally arrived at the site though, it was a bit peculiar. For one, Mikhail couldn't even see the house - he expected that - but a strange little crowd had gathered at the site of it. The wrought-iron fence was still standing, acting as a good barrier to keep people out, but it wouldn't be long before the heavy equipment that was standing by would knock all of it down. Parked in the skating legend's former driveway was a massive metal bin for all the burnt remains.

Mikhail parked a little ways down the street and walked up, getting a good look at a number of faces before stepping too close. One of those faces, hidden in the cab of one of the equipment delivery trucks, was a familiar sight. Mikhail crossed the street, climbed up on the far side of the cab, and gave the glass a few quick taps, his eyes barely coming up over the edge of the door.

"...Boss?"

"Unlock the door for a sec, would you?"

The man inside clambered over the center console and flicked the lock-pin up, grabbed the inside handle, and pushed the whole panel out.

Mikhail stayed on the foothold outside but held the door open with one arm, "Hey Benson...hope you haven't been sitting around too long." He said, leaning forward to rest an elbow on the passenger seat, "You're not stalling because of the crowd, are you?"

"Nah," The man shook his head, "I need Lopez out here with the excavator to start. Have to rip the fence up so we can get the rubble out. What are you doing out this way? Thought you'd be flying back to Japan by now."

"Felt like I owed it to my nephew to look at the place before reducing it to a vacant lot." The silver answered, "What's the ETA on the excavator?"

Benson looked at his watch, "About 10 minutes ago."

"...Figures." Mikhail shook his head, "Alright, I'm gonna walk around." He said, getting ready to hop down again, only to pause, "All the permits were given, right? No trouble there from City Hall?"

"Nope, it's all done. Paperwork is in the glove-box if you want it."
"Nah. I left you in charge for a reason." He laughed and closed the door, straightening out his black long-coat before going around the cab to cross the street again.

The iron gate that lead up the yard was partly hanging off its hinges, and as Mikhail made his way through the onlookers with their smart-phones, the damage came more and more into view. When he stood in the entrance, the sad, charred husk of the house was easy to see, even if difficult to look at. Two more steps forward, and people were starting to wonder who he thought he was, while others tried to follow, as though the prospect of wandering through the corpse of that once-home could be fun.

Mikhail twisted on a heel though on the snow-laced concrete walkway and shot the followers a look, [Stay behind the fence. It's not safe in here.]

[...Who the Hell are you? Some city inspector?] One of the men asked.

[Worse.] He answered, [I'm the guy who owns this pile.]

[Viktor?] Someone else asked; a woman's voice this time, older and motherly-sounding.

Mikhail turned his eyes and spotted a plump elderly lady approach the fence from the other side, donning a flowery parka and a scarf around her weathered head; she looked every part the legendary Russian babushka. He stepped over the crunchy winter snow towards her, but kept a small distance inside. The older woman put one hand around one of the bars, looking something like a prisoner from her side of the fence.

[No...you're not Viktor...]

[I'm his uncle.] He explained, [He sold me his house last year when he moved away.]

[He's been gone such a long time now... The neighborhood's changed since he left. How's he doing? Is he safe?]

Mikhail was a bit surprised by her concern, and stepped a bit closer to the fence, [He's doing really well actually. He lives out in Japan now.]

[Oh, with that student of his?] The babushka asked, [They weren't here that long. I did warn Viktor that he can't throw his warm-weather friends into the middle of a Russian winter. It needs working-up to.]

He never told them, Mikhail thought, feeling a bit of a twinge in his gut, but he feigned a smile, [Yeah, they decided to go back. It was getting crowded here. They have the ice almost all to themselves now. They're both going to the Olympics next month.]

[That's so good to hear. Viktor will win Gold for Russia again, I'm sure of it. He always does.]

[...Yeah...] He nodded weakly, and slowly turned away as the babushka took her hand back from the fence. He stepped up closer to the rubble pile and scanned every inch of the exposed structure, burnt as it was, but even there in the middle of it, he could hardly believe it. He shook his head and pulled out his phone, getting some photos where he could as the snow continued gently falling all around.

"Boss!" Benson hollered, catching his attention.

Mikhail glanced back and spotted the next big hauler, carrying the excavator needed to get things started. As the truck's huge brakes screeched and slowed down, Mikhail stepped in front of the gathered crowd, [Everyone, please be sure to stay back. The rubble will send up dust, and we have
to rip out the fence just to get in here.]

Within about 30 minutes of the last hauler's arrival, the excavator was on the street, and welders had clipped the iron bars into segments. The big, toothy bucket at the end of the excavator's arm was lifted over the wrought iron. Mikhail stood back and watched sadly as the first tug bent and twisted the barrier, making a terrible noise as it was warped out of its original position. The concrete bases were torn right out of the frozen ground, too, and the whole front segment peeled away. It sounded even worse as big chunks were getting dropped into the dumpster nearby. Mikhail breathed a foggy sigh into the early afternoon breeze and slipped into the cabin of the nearby truck again.

He rubbed his ears a bit to warm them up before pulling his phone out again to send his promised update to Minako. Thumbs were tippy-tappying as the hollow noise of the operation went on outside.

'Things look like they're pretty wrapped up here,' He wrote, 'Maybe I should've just sold the house instead of keeping it around in case anyone wanted to come out this way for a visit. Oh well.'

He lifted his eyes from the bright little screen and looked out again across the street. The excavator was moving into the yard now, reaching its long arm to start pulling charcoal away from where the garage once stood. Cars that had cued behind the heavy machinery were starting to filter through; jade eyes caught sight of a black Mercedes sedan. It was just one of millions that poured into Russia after the fall of the USSR, but this one made Mikhail keep looking for some reason. He watched it until the hood disappeared beyond the rim of the driver's side window, and turned his glance back down to his phone, hitting 'send' before hopping out of the cabin again.

Shoes crunched on the snow-caked sidewalk, and the elder stepped out in front of the truck, waiting there between the grill and the back of another work-truck as the clean-up continued ahead of him. The crowd that had gathered was staying a reasonable distance away, but with the excavator being far less exciting to watch than they'd hoped, many started peeling off to walk back home. Mikhail spotted the babushka from earlier; she, too, was starting to move on, walking alongside two young boys, presumably her grandsons.

For a split second, Mikhail let himself believe that the sight of them meant that not all bad happened in Russia...but then a darkness came into his peripheries, and all thoughts of peace were gone.

"What are you doing here...?"

Confused and shocked, Mikhail shook his head and blinked hard a few times, but there was no denying the fact that Yakov was standing there, "What am I doing here...?" He echoed, looking around at all the equipment with 'Rozovsky' written on it, then back again, "What are you doing here?"

"Going home."

"This is a bit out of the way for going home."

"You don't know where I live."

"No, but unless you live around the corner from here, this way is out of the way." Mikhail shot back, stuffing his hands and phone into his pockets, "I'm cleaning up a mess. You just..." He started, getting a stern look back from the coach, "...Look like someone attending the funeral of a guy you murdered, just to see everyone else's reactions."

"That something you're familiar with?" Yakov retorted with a grunt, "Attending funerals of people
Mikhail sighed loudly and turned around, facing the pile across the street again, "Even though we're close to the same age, I always feel somehow like you're my father, scolding me for something that takes too much effort to argue against."

"You saying I wear you out?" Yakov wondered, taking a step next to the man to watch the scene unfold from that safe distance, "I'm surprised to see you here, in any case. You didn't need to come all the way here just to watch some burnt wood get dropped into a dumpster. Why are you really here?

Hesitating, Mikhail shifted his weight from one foot to another, but kept his eyes forward, "I had thought about storming the ROC Headquarters in Moscow to give them a piece of my mind, but considering how utterly terrified Yuri is that he's going to get thrown off the Olympic Team because of me, I thought better of it. Instead, I took a plane here to avoid giving in to temptation." He explained, "I'm hoping that by refusing to let Yuri come back here to train before the Games, he'll be kept far away from whatever insane bullshit those morons are trying to force on the athletes."

"Say that in a tone any more accusing than you already did and I might think you suspect I'm in on it, too." Yakov huffed, giving a stare from under the brim of his hat, "I'm not. But those goons that came to Euros are trying to use me as cover."

"...Cover?" Mikhail echoed, looking back at the shorter man, "How? Why?"

"Making everyone come to St. Petersburg to 'train' at my rink for a few weeks before the Games start. I have the best track-record of all Russian skating coaches; more of my athletes have stood on the podium than all the others. They think that if everyone comes to train with me for a while, it'll somehow lessen the suspicion if all the skaters do really well." Yakov explained grimly, "I think it's idiotic, but really, coming out of this place, what can you expect? When the Soviet Union collapsed, it's not like Russia was rebuilt with a pantheon of fresh new faces. It was mostly the same people, with a new coat of paint, and some new letters on the buildings...minus a few countries. They still had all the same flaws that they did in the first place though, putting yes-men into positions of authority while actual professionals were merely consulted on the side. I'm one of those professionals. Those goons in Vienna were the yes-men."

"So you're saying they fully intend to make the competitors cheat somehow, despite how much trouble Russia's been in before for that exact thing?" Mikhail was surprised, yet not, "Unbelievable."

"Something's going to happen." Yakov added, "I can feel it. An ill omen. It's going to be bigger than Viktor being thrown out of the RSF when it happens."

"What, like Russia being thrown out of the Olympics altogether?"

"The ROC was put on probation in early December, in the middle of the Grand Prix, pending an investigation." The coach explained, "But it's all been kept on the down-low so far. The IOC is spineless...most of what it does is going to be for show, and it won't have any teeth. But...mark my words; when the IOC makes its move, it's going to seem like a big deal. Be ready when it happens...Yuri being in Japan isn't going to help."

Jiro snoozed soundly in the nook of space between Yuri's curved frame and the arm-rest of the big, booth-like seat. With the chair reclined half of its full way down, Yuri opted to lay down on his side, back to the window-wall, one elbow on a pillow as that hand held up his head, the other resting on
the Akita's soft back. The cables to Yuri's earbuds connected to the console between the two seats, and a movie played on the wide flat-panel ahead of him. In the next seat over, restless as he'd been the night before, Viktor tried to sleep, though it seemed like he rolled over every other minute. Half an hour had gone by that way. Viktor rolled onto his side again, back to the center divider as he gave out an obviously-annoyed sigh. Yuri looked over quietly, but then pulled out one of the ear-buds to let the cable dangle, and reached across, putting his hand over the curve of his husband's waist.

"Can't sleep?" He asked quietly, giving a few soft pets.

Viktor twisted slightly so he could look back, and lifted the eye-mask with his thumb to look out tiredly, "...I can't get comfortable." He grumbled, letting the mask smack back into the place as he dropped his head down to his pillow again.

"Weird. You normally just pass out, comfortable or not."

"I know...this is frustrating...and I'm super tired, too..."

"Is it because it feels like you're sleeping alone...?" Yuri wondered, starting to look around their arrangement for ideas, "These seats are a lot narrower than some we've flown in...we both wouldn't fit into one..."

"Yeah." Viktor grumbled more. He went limp in another attempt to make do, paying little attention to the noise going on all around. The constant hiss of the plane's engines, the clatter of cups being lifted and set back down by other passengers, even the far-off crying of a child in Economy Class. The crying bothered him the most, even though it was the quietest of all the sounds he could hear, and he roughly tried to fold his pillow around his head to block it out.

"Why don't you try listening to something?" Yuri wondered, seeing the man's frustration.

"...If I'm on my side, the bud squished into the pillow makes my ear hurt." He answered, pillow still wrapped around him uselessly. He let the one side go, and it folded outward into its normal state again.

"Lay on your back,"

Viktor lifted his head and the mask again, but gave a weird look, "Why?"

"Because then the ear-buds won't hurt." Yuri retorted, offering the white cables attached to his phone, "If I can get you to fall asleep quick then you won't care whether you're on your back or on your side. Maybe you can keep dreaming about the alternate origins story you invented for us."

Confused, the Russian grudgingly twisted onto his back, and fumbled his hands into the empty space ahead of himself until he could feel the soft rubber-coated wires. With the mask straightened and buds in his ears, he drew a long breath and waited.

['Non-Eternal' - Max Richter]

Ethereal, ghostly sounds started to sound in his ears, making his mind feel as though it were being swayed in the gentle roll of warm waves. A haunting voice hummed in from the distance, melting into the harmony. The sound of the airplane vanished entirely, even the overbearing hiss of the plane itself. Viktor exhaled and felt himself relaxing, brow furrowed under the mask like it was somehow a shame that he wanted to sleep. He could feel the soft rustle of the blanket over his legs being straightened out, halting the progression of a few cold-spots that had emerged from his turning, but he then felt a hot press of fingers against the skin of his abdomen.
Yuri slid his arm under the blanket and the shirt, offering what soothing touch he could before lying on his own pillow where he'd set it across the center console, and set his head down onto his husband's chest. Jiro moved a bit to sort out his own sleeping-spot again with all the movement going on, but eventually settled, propped up against his human's front, and closed his eyes. Yuri watched the pup for a moment, but then looked 'up' again, feeling Viktor's one free hand come up from the far side to rest on top of his own where it was still under the blanket. It held on for a little while, even through the fleece, but slowly it slackened. Yuri could hear that his partner's heartbeat had slowed, and his body seemed more like a lump than a tense ball of nerves. When he felt the man's head tilt slightly behind him, he knew Viktor had finally drifted off, and pulled his hand out from under the blanket to hold onto the fingers that once sought for it.

_You're stressing yourself out needlessly..._ Yuri thought, slowly stroking his thumb over his husband's fingers, _Try not to... There's so many more important things to worry about than how quickly you can get Asahi to leave._

With the worksite clean-up well underway, Mikhail found himself with less to do than he thought. He checked his watch, saw that it was barely 2:30pm, and huffed an impatient sigh. Yakov had left a while ago; the suspicious black Mercedes had vanished with him. With nothing else to manage, Mikhail waved at his crew-boss and went back to his car.

_Why are you really here?_

St. Petersburg was replaced by woods and wilderness. Roads became more treacherous, but at least it wasn't snowing north of the city. The sky was still bright, and despite all the madness of what had been going on, Russia's uninhabited places still felt peaceful, even if they protected hidden dangers.

It was just about 5:20pm then. The sun was getting low in the dark-blue winter sky. Familiar breaks in the woods lead the way, and before the sun completely vanished, the little blue Prius pulled up at the bottom of a certain hill.

As Mikhail got out, he looked around the area. It looked like there hadn't been a soul around for days; even the little village with its one tavern looked abandoned.

_I wonder if everyone packed up and left with the mill closure? Most people would stay because this is the land their ancestors settled on...but maybe these folks aren't so attached._

Eyes went up the hill and to the left to spot the graveyard, and its one angel statue close to the center. Mikhail frowned sadly at it, and started to make his way up the worn path. There hadn't been a fresh snowfall in a few days at least, making the walkway easy to navigate, but that didn't make it any warmer. Dress-shoes weren't made for frolicking in the country.

**BANG BANG BANG**

Mikhail stepped back a pace or two to avoid snow falling on him from pounding on the door. Seconds passed without an answer, sound, or whisper. The silver looked around skeptically, "Kon!" He called out, "Ty ignorirueš to, čto ja govorju?" [Are you ignoring me?] He asked, stepping back again to look at the house more broadly. He could hear a dog barking, but nothing else, "Otkroj dver' i vyjdi ot tuda!" [Open the door and come out here!]

Still nothing. Mikhail shook his head and sighed impatiently, and went instead for the barn next to the dwelling. The big black truck was parked at the bottom of the hill, but that never stopped anyone from taking a horse out. He stepped up to the big door and pulled it open, half-expecting the place to
be empty...but there within was the statue-like form of a behemoth black draft-horse.

"What in the Hell is going on...?" Mikhail asked himself, stepping inside. He came up to the edge of the animal's stall, content at least to see the beast still on its feet, but when he looked over the big wooden wall, he could see that there was no feed and the water was frozen. The horse barely moved, lifting its head slightly, but was clearly too cold to do much of anything, never mind break the stall down to go after the hay above, "Damnit, Kon...where the shit are you?" He asked grimly, looking around for anything at all that he could use to warm the barn up. He could still hear a dog's bark, but it wasn't getting any closer, so he ignored it for the moment. He found a massive horse-blanket and pulled it down from where it had been hung, and stepped into the stall to toss it over the animal's back as well as he could. With some effort and persistence, the blanket was tied into place, and several squares of hay were forked down from the storage space in the loft. With the horse showing interest, Mikhail pat the animal's massive neck, "I'll go warm some water for you. Just stay here and eat your fill. I'll find out where your idiot went."

Leaving the barn, Mikhail went back to the house and banged on the door even harder, knocking some snow loose from the roof. It fell all around him, but still, nothing inside stirred. The door was locked, as one could expect. The silver stepped into the deep old snow and went for a nearby window, not even bothering to look inside, seeing the curtains were pulled closed before he got there. Fingers fumbled around under the sill until he found a hidden key, and he went back, unlocking the door and forcing it open with a bang of his shoulder.

It was freezing cold inside.

Eyes went to the stove-heater, but found that it had been out for some time. Attention switched quickly as scuttling and a whine replaced the bark from before, and a shaggy Rottweiler-point Caucasian Shepherd came nervously out of the kitchen. Her tail swooshed across the floor like a duster, but was kept low as she crawled closer, unsure and nervous.

"What happened here? Where's Kon?" Mikhail asked naïvely, as though the dog could answer. He offered the pup some affection before turning his attention to the household again. Cupboards were open and there was a mess; the canine had clearly done what she had to to survive, finding bits of raw food here and there. A worried pit sank deep in the man's gut, but he pressed on, rounding the corner through the livingroom, past the bear's giant reclining chair, and looked to the main bedroom door. He swallowed a painful lump in his throat and stepped forward, the Shepherd at his heels, anxious as he was, "Kon?" He asked warily, "Ty v porjadke?" [Are you okay?]

The door was freezing cold to the touch, but he opened it anyway, turning the brass knob. He was completely horrified to hear the cracking and breaking of ice from the inside of the wooden frame, and backed off a little as little crisps of it fell to the floor. The room was even colder than the rest of the house somehow; as cold as the outdoors. When Mikhail looked up, the first thing he saw was the open window, and the frost-licked curtains that hung beside it. The next thing he saw was a massive figure on the bed. Shadows obscured most of the form, but there was enough light still to make out an arm and half a frostbitten face.

Prizrak whined again, practically squished up against Mikhail's leg as he looked on in muted horror. For a minute, he could only stand and look, unable to blink, let alone move. When it was clear that what he saw wasn't a dream or a mistake, he made himself take a step closer. He sat on the far side of the bed, farthest away from the big man in it, and just stared at the bottom of the wall.

"...When I said that one day, I'd come here and find you frozen...it wasn't meant as a damn suggestion..." He said bitterly. He didn't expect an answer, but the lack of one still hurt...and all he could do to stop from yelling was to lean over his knees, and press his face into the palms of his
hands.
Chapter 533

CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED THIRTY THREE

Without wanting to disturb the house more than he had to, Mikhail took Prizrak out to his car and put
the pup inside where it was warm. He returned a moment later with a steel bowl of kibble from the
barn, and a second bowl meant for water soon after. Inside the tomb-like house, the pipes had frozen
and no water came through, forcing Mikhail to restart the antique wood-burning stove-furnace. With
a big pot sitting on top and a huge chunk of snow in it, he stoked the fire until it roared inside and the
door could be closed to heat up.

Mikhail had closed the door to the bedroom, but his eyes were on it as he sat back on the couch.
With nothing to do but wait for officials from the nearby town to show up, he surveyed the scene and
put his mind to task doing the one thing he was at least somewhat good at...figuring out how things
work.

He was in bed with the window wide open in the middle of January...with the door closed, and the
dog stuck in the main area. The horse was in its stall, brushed and well cared for, save the fact that it
was slowly freezing to death in there, no food in reach, no liquid water. ...But aside from how
disturbing the whole thing is on its face...it can't have been for more than a few days. Viktor and
Yuri were just here.

Jade eyes looked around the big C-shaped living space, with the kitchen on the far side, curving
towards the dining area, doorway, through the living-room and back towards the bedrooms. The
master bedroom where Kon had been was at the very back of the house, with Viktor's childhood
room just off to the side of it, with the bathroom separating the two, and the kitchen walls up against
them in turn. In spite of the mess the Shepherd had made trying to find food while trapped, there
wasn't a lot of waste to be spoken of on the floor. It was too cold inside for there to be much of a
smell; the musty scent of Kon's house was always a bit barn-like anyway, to Mikhail's nose.

Kon was many things, but an abuser of animals was never one of them. They were probably the only
living beings he could ever call friends of his, especially after Tat died. He took better care of them
than he did himself.

He pushed up to stand again and walked over to the wood-fire stove to check on the progress of his
snow-melt; there was a trickle at the bottom of the pot, but still had a long way to go. Mikhail moved
back to the master bedroom then, grabbed the knob, and paused, shaking his head in resignation
before pushing in again. He looked at the morbid mound on the bed, covered by yet another blanket,
then turned to the window. He dared not touch it, but leaned in close to inspect what he could,
looking for damage.

I can't tell just by looking at it if it's too damaged to stay closed on its own...

Grumbling, he pulled his hands out of his coat pockets and just did what he had to, the rest be
dammed.

The politsiya aren't going to put so much effort into this that they dust the window for prints. Who am
I kidding? People freeze to death in the woods all the time.

Testing the window for proper latching and a good seal around the edges, Mikhail could find nothing
specifically wrong with it, and could only surmise that it had been opened on purpose.
Would Kon really be so ready to join Tat that he'd sabotage his own chances of survival by letting himself freeze to death? Even knowing his animals would be left to die from the elements and neglect...? No... I can't believe that about him... He would've arranged for someone to stop by on a planned visit, and be dead before they get here, but he had no one to call except me...and he didn't.

He eyeballed the covered body, brow furrowed in worry.

Did something happen to you...? Viktor didn't say you were off at all... Would he have even noticed though?

Mikhail flicked his arm to see his watch, and spotted 6:55pm on its face. He looked around the room one more time in case something stood out, but it was all as normal as it had ever looked. A few things on the long solid-wood dresser were clearly Tatiyana's, like a silver comb and a little jewelry box, but Mikhail wasn't ready to disturb more than one ghost that day, and let it all be.

Moving back out into the main room, a thin steam was rising up from the pot, and half the snow had been melted into water. A canister with more snow was dumped in on top of what was there, and Mikhail made his way back outside to get another scoop from the ground. He looked down the hill towards his Prius and the dog inside, then up and through the trees as he saw headlights coming through them, getting closer.

Looks like two...three cars...?

He reached down to get the scoop of snow and went back inside, stirring the half-frosty slurry to help melt it faster. Within a few minutes, the snow was warm water, and Mikhail carefully poured some of it from the pot to the same canister he'd carried snow in, and went for the door again. As he stepped outside, the first group of politsiya were coming up the hill, using big flashlights to figure out their way up the path.

[Are you the one who called in the death?] One of the officers asked, shining the light at Mikhail, putting a massive black shadow of him against the barn.

Mikhail squinted, "Da." He answered, [Master bedroom. Where's the groom?]

[Coming. You said the horse was huge so he's got to get the big trailer.]

The silver nodded, [Go on inside. This water's for the horse. I've got the dog in my car.] He said, turning and heading the way he'd meant to go. He could hear the men sounding off orders at one another as they went to the front door, and let themselves in. Going inside the bard, the horse had already eaten everything that had been put in front of it, ready for more, but first thing's first. Mikhail let himself into the stall and kicked over the rubber bucket, breaking out the ice before replacing it with the heated water. That was gone in a flash, too, with Čužak nearly knocking the whole thing over in a bid to drink too quickly. Mikhail narrowly avoided getting splashed, and ran his hand down the behemoth's withers, back, and hindquarters as he went around it to leave without being kicked. More hay was forked down from the loft, and the silver made his way back to the house.

The half-dozen officers who had responded to the scene were swarmed all over the hill, checking all the same things Mikhail already had; looking for signs of an accident, or a note being left behind...anything to indicate why there was a corpse inside. Mikhail just went by them to the pot, and poured more into the canister to take to Prizrak.

[So how long ago did you get here?] One of the politsiya asked, watching him pour the snow-melt.
Mikhail answered, keeping his eyes down on his task, [I was passing through St. Petersburg on business before heading home, and thought I'd come by to see him before my plane departs.]

Ah, so he wasn't expecting you.

No. Kon's usually outside anyway. It would've been pretty pointless to call ahead. He doesn't have an answering machine.

When was the last time you heard from him?

About a week ago. His son was here visiting and they called me. He answered, putting the pot back as the canister was full enough for one dog, [There was nothing unusual about what was said or the mood. Nothing to suggest anything was wrong.] He explained, heading back towards the door, [I'm going to water the dog.]

Sir, The officer interrupted, stepping closer and rifling around in his pockets, [Would you mind if I got your details first?]

Hesitating a moment, Mikhail shrugged ambivalently, [If you can walk and ask questions at the same time then just follow me down.]

Another hour or so passed before all the questions that could be thought of were asked, and the groom with the extra-large horse trailer arrived to pick up the destrier. Mikhail made sure to get every ounce of information about the man's stables before allowing anyone to enter the barn. His nerves about letting his eyes off the animal were put at ease when he saw how well Čužak tolerated a stranger leading him out.

Maybe he's just that happy to be out of the barn though...

The hollow thud of hooves echoed off the trailer ramp as the horse entered, and the gate was closed behind it. The groom came around the other side to head to the truck in front, but Mikhail hollered out to him one last time, [I'll be in the country for another six hours. If you need anything, call before then. That horse should want for nothing.]

Everything's in order at least for the night, Mr. Rozovsky. We'll get the vet and farrier out tomorrow to take a look at 'im and let you know. The thin, elderly man called back, long beard keeping his face warm as much as the ushanka-cap did his ears. He hopped into the passenger side of the truck, and the trailer was soon pulled out of site.

What do you plan to do with the dog? An officer asked, coming up beside the silver.

...Not really sure, to be honest. Mikhail answered, looking at the pup again as she watched him in turn, [My nephew's got a couple dogs that she's met. I'll figure something out.]

We have an ambulance on the way if you want to go. There's nothing left for you to do here except watch. The officer explained, [We'll have a coroner's report ready in a few days.]

Just a few days? Mikhail huffed, [I thought it would be weeks out here.]

Any closer to spring and it would be. Dr. Legashov is leaving soon, heading to St. Petersburg like everyone else. Pretty soon, this whole region will be empty, except for the old ladies that won't go. This guy will probably one of the last that he takes care of before his office is closed.

...Yeah. He nodded to the politsiya and started heading down the hill again, back to the Prius and
his unexpected companion. He pulled the door open and slumped in, exhausted and half-frozen. By comparison, the inside of the car was pretty hot, making his joints hurt a little as they warmed back up again. He eyeballed the time on the dash; 8:12pm. Prizrak stuck her head between the two front seats curiously, and Mikhail offered a scratch to her noggin, "What am I going to do? All I really came here for was to talk to Kon about what really happened out here and now I have you."

She just whimpered at him anxiously.

Like zombies, shoes shuffled around the ground, but unlike zombies, the shoes were trailed by luggage and paw-pads. Makkachin barked excitedly and ran around the red Audi, parked in the covered driveway by the front door, while Yuri fumbled for the key. By the time it was in and turned, and the door was pushing inward, it seemed like everyone and their things were falling in rather than stepping.

"...We...we're so close..." Yuri whined pitifully, one outstretched hand reaching out from the people-pile, yearning for the interior.

"Are we...really home...?" Viktor asked, eyes closed like he was worried they'd still be in an airport if he opened them, "I'm scared to look...!"

Suitcases and carry-bags tumbled, but Makkachin jumped over the whole bunch of them and trotted around happily, nails clacking on the tile and hardwood as he went from one room to the next. Jiro was quick to go after him, halted only by the leash still hooked to his harness. He whined and looked back, and Yuri lazily pulled his hand free from the nylon loop so the Akita could run freely. With Jiro trotting off, Yuri finally managed the strength to push himself up and over to his back, splaying his arms out to the side as he stared at the hall light directly above him.

"We're...really here... After so long..."

Viktor was a tangle of arms, legs, a scarf, and the straps of one bag, but he eventually pulled himself out of the knot he'd made of himself and flopped to the floor on his side. He looked ready to fall asleep there in the hall. Instead, he just rested his eyes for a moment before pushing up to sit, pulled or shoved the last bits of luggage into the entryway, and nudged the door closed with his foot. That done, he dropped back down again, and stared up at the ceiling, too.

"My arms feel like lead weights..." Yuri complained, but laughed as well as he could at the absurdity of their situation, "I can hardly move..."

Viktor looked aside at him, managing a smile despite his exhaustion, "...I need...a shower..."

"Wait..." Yuri pleaded, lifting his arms just a few inches off the ground before they dropped again, which just made him sigh loudly, "I...need a hug...but I can't move..."

That earned a laugh, and Viktor did his best to roll over and drag himself across the foot or so of flooring before he let himself collapse again, this time with one arm slung far enough across his husband's frame that he could lay his head down on the man's chest.

Through the bundles of thick coat sleeves and scarves, Yuri managed to lift his arms up around the well-bundled mass that was his partner. He hummed happily as he held on, feeling Viktor's arms squish against his sides as well as they could to return the gesture. He kissed the crown of that silver head, "You're heavy." He teased, drawing those blue eyes up. It was easy to see that what little sleep Viktor had managed, it wasn't enough, but Yuri smiled anyway, "Let's forget the luggage for now..."
"That...sounds perfect..." Viktor agreed easily, lowering down for an Eskimo kiss before he pushed himself up again, and offered his hands to help Yuri after him. Though it took some effort, and bumping into one wall as their balance faltered, they did eventually get up to their feet. They fed and watered their fuzzy sons before making their way to the stairs, looking up the long flight as though it went on forever.

Shoes were left on the ground floor, and coats came off after them, being discarded on the stairwell as they moved slowly upward. Gloves, Yuri's beanie, scarves, sweaters and undercoats, it was a path of tossed clothes to the second floor. Around the corner, and on the landing towards the bedroom door, went shirts, pants, undershirts, underpants, and just inside the bathroom door, socks were finally cast off. The hiss of water in the shower was a welcome sound, and just as it warmed up enough to be tolerable on their skin, they both shimmied in and sat side-by-side on the tiled ledge of the covered soaking tub. Yuri pulled the glass door shut behind them, and they both heaved a sigh of relief before laughing again, water spraying at them from the wall behind.

"I can't believe how tired we are."

Viktor nodded and twisted in place, "Don't ever let me suggest doing another trip like this right after 6 weeks of Grand Prix competitions."

"Next year will be easier. We know what went wrong and how to fix it." Yuri supposed, watching Viktor reach for the pump-bottle of shampoo. He expected the suds to later on Viktor's own head, but found those hands coming down on his, massaging the foamy liquid into his travel-matted black hair. Having no reason to complain, he just turned slightly and bowed his head down to make it easier to reach.

Viktor's mind went blank as he lathered the shampoo, simply giving in to his exhaustion, and wanting nothing more than the simple joy of washing his husband's hair. His arms hurt and felt heavy, but he pushed through, feeling their relief fading in with the warm rushing water over his skin. Black hair was almost completely lost under the white froth, and he reached for the hand-held shower-head to rinse it all away slowly. Conditioner came after, turning the mess of wet black frizz back into a silky smooth state. He ran his fingers through it, combing it back until it was away from Yuri's eyes again.

Instead of just turning around to switch positions though, Yuri gestured to the tile step at the base of their make-shift bench, and Viktor easily understood. He went down from the higher ledge and sat on the lower one, and Yuri sat behind him, knees bending down beside the back of his shoulders. Instead of going straight for the shampoo though, Yuri pressed his palms down on his partner's upper back, and slid them forward until he could knead his fingertips against the back of the man's neck and shoulders. He could feel the knots in that tense muscle, and worked gently to rub them out, slickening the skin with liquid soap, "Try to relax more...you're still really stiff."

"If I relax any more than I am now, I'll drop." Viktor mused, eyes closed and head bent down, elbows propped on his knees loosely, "You'll have a hard time waking me up again once I fall asleep here, and I'd rather not wake up in the bottom of the shower stall."

"I'll be there with you, don't worry." Yuri laughed, understanding the feeling all too well, continuing to work his fingers into that tense flesh. A few pressure points made Viktor wince, but a slower pace flattened them out until they didn't hurt anymore, and one last wide sweep let Yuri believe he'd found the worst offenders. Shampoo then came to the Russian's silver crown, frothing into a white lather before it all washed away. Conditioning his husband's hair was always Yuri's favorite part, as the slick silver strands moved like liquid platinum through his fingers as it rinsed out.
Viktor lifted his head up after a while and leaned back against the ledge between his partner's knees, using one hand to slick his hair back out of his eyes before opening them and looking up. He didn't have a chance to get a word in before he felt hands slide down over his shoulders to roam over his chest, and lips came down against the side of his neck. He just let himself relax a bit into that new space and let those hands go wherever they wanted. Those soft kisses moved as well, going from the crook of shoulder and neck to the edge of a collar-bone, then back up to just under an ear, then to nibble on the earlobe. Viktor pressed his hand through raven hair, water cascading all around them, steam fogging up the glass. With one snuffled breath against an unexpected rush of water, Viktor laughed, feeling it ticklish against his skin, and he turned to look at Yuri's stunned expression.

"...I think water got in my nose." He half-complained, laughing as he tried to clear it. Viktor had turned in place on that step though and had snaked an arm around behind him, resting back against his left knee.

"I'll forgive the break in your attention if you come back to it." Viktor offered, reaching a hand up to help guide his young partner down towards him again.

Yuri came easily, worrying less about the water and more about the kisses, closing his eyes as he found those lips press to his own. He could feel Viktor moving around in his embrace, until it was clear that the man had perched his knees on the step and was facing him. The stream of water from the showerhead was moved aside then, and Yuri wiped the trickle from his eyes so he could see, only to close them again as Viktor came up under him for another kiss. Hands moved all over him, sliding over his shoulders and down his chest, around and over his waist, then down his legs until they could go no further, and back up again. Thumbs traced over the inner part of his thighs as one hand stayed cupped over his right hip, and the other came up to press to his cheek, holding him in a long, deep kiss. He could feel the tingle of arousal manifesting. Viktor hummed into that last kiss, drawing a light suck on the end of his tongue before pulling back slightly to kiss the tip of his nose. He heard a pleasant huff of a laugh and opened his eyes again, seeing Viktor rise up to stand, offering hands to help him up.

"I guess I found my second wind." The Russian teased, "Hopefully you can indulge me?"

"You have to ask?" Yuri asked, taking those hands to let them help him up. Viktor pulled him closer, and away from the wall, back into the spray of the hot water. Those hands then slid around to his back, one going up as the other went down, moving soft as silk over every ridge and curve. Yuri moved his own over his husband's shoulders, holding on tight to that slick frame as those heated kisses returned...
Chapter 534

CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED THIRTY FOUR

Viktor wasted no time in his advances, one hand against Yuri's back to keep him near, the other roaming down against the man's backside, fingers sliding through the cleft as they came up again, then again as they slid down. There was no mistaking his needs, and he felt the whole area open up a bit as Yuri parted one leg away, perching a foot on the step beside them. Fingers explored further then, pressing and stroking every inch, palms grabbing and squeezing gently.

As the Russian went about his worship of Yuri's frame, Yuri himself returned to the little traveling kisses against his husband's neck and shoulder, sneaking in under one ear and staying a while. The warm rush of water continued to cascade against him from above and behind, soaking his hair and leaving long wet tracks to travel down his figure. He kept his eyes closed for it, imagining the way every touch looked like as he felt hands move over him, until Viktor seemed to move around him much further than he had been to that point. He spotted one hand rummaging, "What are you looking for?"

"Sexy-shower-time fun-juice." Viktor answered with a laugh, turning bottles around in their shower-caddy until he found the one he wanted. With both arms still hugged around his spouse's thin frame, he squeezed a bit of the liquid into the palm of one hand, capped the bottle, and nudged the shower-head to spray slightly away from them. He pulled back slightly then, getting a better look at the younger man's face as he rubbed his hands together, seeing the rosy flush starting to creep across those pale cheeks. He smiled and leaned in again, nuzzling his husband's brow adoringly as he put his hands to task again, feeling hips press against his own eagerly. They both laughed a little into a new string of kisses, each of them exceptionally well aware of how aroused they were both becoming with every passing moment.

Yuri slowly pulled his hands back, gently sliding his fingers against the sides of his husband's neck as his palms moved softly over shoulders and collar-bones, down the front of the man's chest and felt every curve and contour. He felt one hand slide down the round of his backside, continuing down on his left side until Viktor was pulling that whole leg up and against one hip. The second hand stayed at the small of his back to help him keep his balance in that preciously slippery spot, hips sliding and pressing against each other. Yuri moved his own hands lower, pausing briefly to slide up again against Viktor's chest, then going down again and through the gaps between arms and ribs as they traveled around.

As a reward for Yuri's slowly-building bravery, Viktor gave an obvious push when hands slid down from his flanks to grab at his ample skater-bum. Lips curled into a smile through their continued kisses, "Mmh..." He mused, "Such a rare treat."

"I'm...still learning how to appreciate you physically." Yuri answered, somewhat embarrassed, "Of all the things we've done together, this is the one area my anxiety still has trouble with."
"It's always amused me that the one thing you still struggle to overcome is the one thing you like the most from me." Viktor teased, speaking the words to the corner's of his husband's mouth, nipping the tip of his chin as he moved back to look into those nervous eyes, "But...maybe it's a side-effect..."
The words trailed as Viktor moved in for another deep kiss, briefly nibbling on his partner's lower lip before seeking for the man's tongue again. Yuri's frame clung tighter to his own as one slick finger pressed a bit harder than before and slipped inside, gently probing as every muscle around it seemed to clench in surprise. The leg that he'd perched against his hip grabbed a bit tighter, and hands went flat to his back to hold on. He hummed a laugh against his spouse's lips and cracked his eyes open a little, "I remember well how you jumped when I did this to you the first time, too."

"Is that all the same side-effect?" Yuri wondered, words broken up slightly by the little breathy catches in his voice as that finger slid further in and then pulled back again, only to repeat.

"You'd neglected this whole part of your body because you'd never let yourself think to love another man." Viktor explained, sliding his hips up against his partner's front at the same time as his finger continued to tease, "And yet, this is such an important part of you..."

"Forgive me, it's a bit difficult to wax philosophical when you have a finger in my butt." Yuri huffed, though his word-choice just made Viktor laugh.

"So literal." He mused, withdrawing the digit, "Maybe you'd prefer something else in there." He supposed, putting his hands on his husband's waist to turn him in place, and pressed in against his back afterwards. He slid his hands all over Yuri's front, gliding effortlessly from chest to tubs to tummy, then further down to the crook of each thigh, and pulled the man hind-end against his hips.

Yuri's back arched slightly, and he hissed a breath as fingers moved to tease a touch between his legs, not quite grasping anything, but moving it around all the same. His head pressed back against his husband's shoulder, feeling a few nibbles against his own, even as those hands continued to tease and push and tug. He gasped when those fingers finally took hold of him, wrapping around firmly and sliding forward, his own hands going back to grip at whatever they could find. Viktor continued to tease and lick at the side of his neck, and he could feel the man's smile against his skin. He couldn't hold in the needy breaths as each slide against his arousal came in tandem with a push of hips from behind him, "V-Viktor...ngh..."

"Mmhh... You're so sensitive today." The Russian commented happily, arms pinched against his husband's sides as both hands moved down to center to titillate the younger man's flesh. The left kept a steady slide and tug motion on the length of him, but the other went right between Yuri's legs, offering gentle squeezes to the pair of tender orbs, massaging them with palm and thumb as fingers went further back, pressing to a sensitive button of skin found there. The hard length of his own arousal slid by with every press of hips, but after a few more pushes, Viktor curled his fingers around it to bring it up, and held it there in place to slide firmly against his husband's skin. To his surprise, Yuri actually pinched his legs closed around it, making the space tighter to push through, but glided easily.

With the growing need to feel more, Yuri couldn't help but lean forward, reaching one arm over the covered soaking-tub to press his palm to the wall. Viktor's kisses went to the upper part of his back then, but continued the slow thrusting slide between his legs, hands holding him firmly in place. The right hand came back though, sliding around the hip and over Yuri's back before coming down again on the outside of the man's right leg, moving around to the inner side from behind to pull it away. Viktor moved it to prop a knee on the edge of the tub, and then backed up, moving his hand gently up that leg again. Fingers played in the new space, two pressing where one had entered before, but then sliding down and under to push against the button of smooth skin nearby. To Yuri's surprise, Viktor pushed his thumb inside, and pinched with his fingers from within and without. He squeaked...
slightly to feel it, hand sliding down the wall as his head bowed down.

The simultaneous internal and external massage was slowly building-up the sense of intensity, and Viktor carefully watched every twitch and quake of his husband's thin frame. Whether Yuri's back arched down or up, how high he picked up his head before lowering it again, the way his fingers pressed and curled where he could see them on the wall before they vanished entirely to help hold the younger man up. Blue eyes watched all of it, reading it carefully, feeling the tension around his thumb tighten or ease up. When he could feel his partner had relaxed enough, Viktor pulled his thumb away and stepped up to center himself behind him. He offered a few reassuring slides, and pressed his chest to his husband's back before using his fingers to guide himself into place, and pushed in gently. Yuri rewarded him with a breathy gasp, but was quickly up on his toes. Hands resumed their exploring on the younger man's front, trailing up and down and everywhere as Viktor pushed in further slowly, backing out a little before trying again. Once flush to his husband's back end, Viktor held there, hugging his partner close to his chest, and slowly started to roll his hips into him.

Yuri cried out quietly, unsure what to do with his hands; keep them down, hug around his spouse's arms, both? He tried everything, feeling each roll of the Russian's hips getting more needy, pushing in deeper. A few kisses tapped against the back of his shoulders, and Yuri lowered his heels back down to the tile, relaxing into the slowly building rhythm of his husband's pushes. He melted into the warmth, savoring the pressure, and the jolts of electric pleasure it sent through him. Viktor hands went under his chest though, and pulled him slowly upright, withdrawing to turn him in place and step in front of him. A teasing guide of kisses put Viktor between him and the edge of the soaking-tub, until the Russian let a playful lick to the tip of Yuri's nose before sitting down.

Following easily, Viktor guided his partner closer, hands curling around the younger man's waist as he rose to sit over him, with parted knees on either side. Yuri lowered to sitting on the man's tummy, and slowly slid back down into his lap, directly over the aroused length of flesh that had just been inside him. He paused there for a moment, bringing his hands down from where he'd pressed them against the walls beside him, curling one around the back of Viktor's neck and head, thumb by one ear as he lowered down into a new kiss, the other hand resting on the Russian's shoulder.

Viktor perched the balls of his feet against the step, raising the tilt of his knees so his partner didn't risk sliding right off the end of his legs. Yuri started sliding in the other direction though, pressing his hips forward to glide against him, then back down again. He repeated this, soaking up the warmth of kisses all the while, relishing in the feel of both of Viktor's hands sliding against his body. Hazel eyes cracked open slightly, looking down onto the wet, pale face under him, fingers feeling the softness of Viktor's neck and jaw, and touched the tip of his nose lightly to those pink lips. He slid up the Russian's front again, this time further than before, and on the descent, pushed the member out behind him. Eyes were locked as Yuri reached back, guiding the aroused flesh against himself again, humming a breath against those lips as he felt the heat going back inside him.

Yuri sat back against his husband's lap, pushing up with his hands balled against the Russian's chest. He looked into those intrigued blue eyes, and slowly started to rock, lifting up just slightly on his knees with each pass before sitting again. He could feel hands sliding up his thighs, teasing thumbs pressing close to center as they passed on their way up. Yuri moved his arms out of the way as he continued his shower-wet grind, hands going out to the sides to press against the walls so Viktor could get his eyeful. Watching the way every muscle crimped and stretched with every one of his movements, and feeling them under his skin as hands roamed all over him...and then roamed down, encircling the member left near-forgotten on that athletic core.

A gasp uttered, and Yuri looked down, watching those fingers pay their tribute as he continued to roll his hips. It was harder to keep focus with Viktor's fingers knowing exactly where to go, but as
his rolls began to slow, Viktor knew to take over again. He leaned forward just enough to get Yuri to raise his knees up for balance, hooks his elbows under them, and stood up, carrying the surprised younger man with him. With a slight twist, Viktor pushed his husband's back against the side wall, and gave his partner a deviously innocent smile.

"Y-You sure you're not gonna slip...?" Yuri asked nervously.

"I have traction." Viktor reassured, leaning in close to nibble at his spouse's neck a little.

Yuri held on tightly as those thrusts began again, pushing him up the wall with each press forward. The spray from the shower-head was pointing near to him, sending a wash of warm water behind him, heating the tile to make it pleasant against his skin. With Viktor's arms busy holding him up though, Yuri could do little more than press his back to the wall, and pulled his hands back from where they clung to his partner's shoulders. Viktor had already put him close to the edge already, and each new push nudged him closer than the last. He drew a hissed breath as a surge jolted through him, "...V-Viktor...I'm...nhgg..." He struggled to say, toes clenching where his feet were suspended in the air, fingers tight around himself as he tried to hold off the end for his partner's sake.

"Don't hold it in." Viktor told him though, "I'm about t-

"I w-wonoo don't finish before I do, you'll pull out-

"I w-won't!" Viktor insisted, though he did slow down considerably as the shockwaves went through him. He couldn't help but laugh at the sudden speed to which Yuri was trying to catch up, legs literally clamping around his arms to prevent him from letting go as that expected post-coitus fatigue settled in. Viktor held in admirably though, continuing his upward pushes until he felt that final tense clamp of those legs around his arms, and the guttural gasp of release. He slowly let the younger man go to stand on his own again, reluctantly withdrawing from the warmth. But, feeling Yuri's arms go around his chest, and his heavy breaths against his skin, made the trade easy. He twisted slightly and nudged the shower-head to spray towards them again, letting the heat of the water warm them up.

Yuri drew a long breath, and exhaled a satisfied sigh against his husband's neck, turning his face towards it to avoid the spray. He slid his right hand closer again, pressing it to the center of Viktor's chest, and stroked his fingers there a few times, "We're gonna be out for hours." He commented with a laugh and a headshake. He looked up to see Viktor smile back.

"It'll take days to recalibrate to being on home hours." The silver agreed, "But if it means we'll get to sleep a lot, I'm okay with that."

Dododo dodo dodo dodo do dododo dododo dodo dodo...

Yuri's phone rang out with that typical iPhone ringtone, half-startling him out of the coma he'd been in. The loud ring just kept going though, and he peeled himself off his husband's chest to reach for the device on the nightstand. Too tired to look at the screen, and feeling those protective arms trying to pull him back under the covers, Yuri put the phone to his ear without looking at the caller-ID, "...Mushi mushi..." He mumbled.

"Getting over your jet-lag?"

"OhheyI'llputyouonspeakerrr..." Yuri mumbled back, barely coherent enough to click the button as he'd said he could, "Heeyyyyyyyyy..."

"You're both jetlagged? Isn't that against the rules?" Yurio's voice resonated out of the phone, lost
somewhere in the sheets already, "Viktor, how did you get so worn out?"

"I think I'm still tired from leaving in the first place." He answered, trying to get comfortable as he pulled Yuri back to where he'd been before, re-wrapped his arms around his husband's thin frame, and squished his cheek against Yuri's upper back, "What's up...?"

"We're pulling into Hasetsu on the train right now." The teen answered, "Minus one, but still."

"...Minus who...?"

"Name starts with M and ends with stupid."

Viktor lifted his head and blinked slowly in confusion, "Huh?"

"It's the old man. Mikhail. He's the one who's MIA." Yurio grumbled, "You guys are boring when you're tired."

Both sleepy heads lifted then, staring in the direction of the phone's glow, "...Why is he not with you?"

"He said he had to do something in Russia and ditched us during the layover in Moscow. He swore he'd only be delayed by a day though." Yurio explained, "I can see the castle from here now. You guys gonna come to the resort tonight or are you too dead?"

A moment of consideration was given, but Yuri's stomach roared and betrayed their silence, deciding for them, "...I guess we need to eat."

"If you leave now, we should get there at the same time. See you then."

The phone clicked and went dark a moment later, and though comfortable and warm, Yuri twisted around to face his partner. He pulled one hand up and brushed a few strands of slightly-damp silver hair behind one ear, "Mnnhh... Ready or not, here we go..."

Makkachin and Jiro were asleep on the couch when the duo came down, collecting their discarded clothing as they made their way. Though both pups lifted their heads, Jiro was too sleepy to keep it up, and fell asleep again soon after, unsuspecting of the humans' intentions. Once they heard the jangle of keys though, both heads were up, but the bipedal pair escaped outside before either of the two canines could get off the couch.

The engine of the Audi came alive, and the car backed out of the driveway to start making its way towards Yu-Topia. It was just about 7pm when they left, and they waited in the car where they parked. Tired and hungry, but wanting to go in as a big group rather than just themselves, they kept half an eye out for Team Okukawa while they sat.

Yuri kept a hand firmly on his husband's leg like he always did when they drove, eyes closed behind his glasses as he dozed in his seat.

"So what are we going to eat?" Viktor asked, trying to break-up the quiet, "Katsudon? We haven't had that in a while."

"Oh...sure." Yuri answered tepidly, eyes opening slightly.

"Yuri,"
His head turned slightly, catching sight of the outline of silver hair in the street lights.

"My love, look at me." Viktork said, twisting in place to lean against an elbow perched on the center console. Brown eyes came up, but there was an obvious anxiety in them, "Tell me what you're thinking right now."

"That...I'm scared, and ashamed...guilty...doubting everything..." Yuri sighed, sinking slightly where he sat, "Everything I've said since we left, how sure I was about how I wanted things to go...how sure I was about how I felt about everything... Now we're here, and all I can think is...how stupid I was...am..."

Viktor frowned slightly, but moved his free hand over to cup the side of his husband's face, turning those eyes towards him as he brushed his thumb gently over one cheek, "You are many things, Yuri, but stupid has never and will never be one of them."

"...Being too scared to go into my own childhood home isn't too alpha of me." He retorted dubiously, looking extremely unsure of himself, "I feel like such an omega right now... The bottom of the pecking order, counting on the mercy of others just to survive..."

"You haven't lost your place just because of a moment of fear." Viktork reassured, "But, this is the sort of thing that I've been expecting, much as you've argued with me over it."

Yuri reached up and pulled his glasses off with a sigh of frustration, leaning into the palm of his partner's hand, "I just feel so weak... In my head I know exactly how I feel...but it's like my heart and body are run by a completely separate system... My heart's racing and I can't entirely blame my trembling on having low blood-sugar..."

"There's nothing wrong with feeling the way you do."

"Then why do I feel so bad about it...?"

Viktor didn't answer immediately. Instead, he leaned forward and offered what soothing balm he could with a kiss, and then another just for good measure, "Just like how your head is telling you a different story than your body is... I think you've used your big brain to downplay the impact of what happened to you. You had your purest reaction in the hours immediately after the fact, and you've been rationalizing it away ever since."

"...I don't know how to stop feeling like this.

KNoCK kNOck

Viktor turned as Yuri looked up, seeing fingers pulling back from where they'd tapped against the glass. Yurio bent down to gape at them from outside, "C'mon, we're here."

Heading to the resort's front doors, the ladies of the little group were waving and gesturing the way forward. The pair raised a hand each to wave back, but Viktor turned to Yuri again before opening the door, "Just give yourself time. There's no deadline."

"But-"

The door clicked open, and the car started to beep, but Viktor turned back, "But what...?"

Yuri grumbled a sigh, "What if I make a mess of things...?"

"I'll be right next to you the whole time. Everyone here knows what happened, and no one expects
you to be completely okay right away. You *have* the right to feel wounded for a little while, so don't feel guilty that you *do*. But this is still your first home, and you should be able to go inside without feeling like you're walking into an ambush...so all of us will go in first, and you'll come in after me. Okay?"

Yuri nodded, and let out another sigh, "...Okay..."

"Just think about all the katsudon we're going to be eating soon. That's the most important thing right now anyway."

"...Yeah..."
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED THIRTY FIVE

The coast was clear on the first floor. Greeting to Parents and Sister Katsuki were given as everyone went through, and Viktor all-too-happily put in the order for two of Yuri's Special Katsudon to be ready when they came down from the 3rd floor. The duo followed after Yurio to the narrow hall that lead behind the common-room and towards the stairs, while the ladies took their things to the big rented resort room they were still using.

For once, Yurio even carried his own luggage, though he did struggle with the last flight to the top floor. Once there, he heaved a breath and looked down that last hall towards the door to his newly-obtained bedroom. The door to it was open though, meaning Potya was likely running around the resort somewhere, but the door to the repurposed banquet hall was expectedly closed. Yurio passed it by as Viktor and Yuri held back by the stairs, and the pair listened for a moment as luggage was hefted around and opened.

Yuri's grip on Viktor's hand was like a vice, but the Russian didn't complain or even wince. He just returned the tight squeeze, relieving some of the discomfort of the crush. Moving forward, Viktor lead Yuri towards the latter's old room, and let the younger man go inside to the familiar comfortable space while he stayed back in the doorway.

Yuri looked around the room as Yurio dug out all his dirty laundry from the trip and threw it to a pile on the floor, "It's weird to think that this space is being used by someone other than me." He commented, overlaying the way it used to look in his mind's eye; the posted of Viktor, his MacBook Air on the desk, his huge suitcase with all the Hasetsu and poodle stickers tucked behind the bed...all of it. But none of it was there anymore. Yurio hadn't started decorating yet - and maybe he wouldn't - but the realization that the room wasn't Yuri's anymore was really strange.

"I probably won't be in here long. I'm just a visitor." Yuri commented, finding his skates in the midst of all his poorly-packed items, "Mikhail isn't going to want to stay in this place too long, not with his kids around. I don't know what the status is on him finding or building a house here, but I'm sure there's something going on. There has to be, right?"

Viktor had kept his eyes on the banquet-room door the whole time, half-listening to the pair behind him talking. He turned his head when he heard the far-off cries of an excited cat, the 'myaa'a'a'a'a'aaaaa' of the ragdoll's voice jumping as she went quickly up the stairs. When the fluffy beast finally came around the corner, she was practically running down the hall, pausing only to rub the side of her body against the doorframe in front of Viktor's legs.

"Potya!" Yurio called out happily, going down to a knee with his hands forward. The feline easily went towards him, sniffing his fingers and then turning in place so only her tail-fluff would touch his hands. Never being easy, Potya maintained her aloofness until Yurio leaned forward to scoop her up, then she smelled his cheek and rubbed her own against it.

Smiling at the reunion, Viktor watched them for a moment, then looked back at the banquet door. He dared to take a step forward, wondering if Asahi was even there, Maybe he's at the Ice Castle? He thought, turning his head slightly in an attempt to put his ear to the panel, I'm sure Hana would've barked or something if they were here.

Just as Viktor was about to listen though, he spotted the sight of the lock at the panel's edge...and the key-chain hanging from it; one in the lock, the spare hanging behind it from a key-ring. Viktor's
brow ruffled, and without a word, put his hand to the wood and slid it quickly open.

Yuri and Yurio both looked up at the sound of the shuffle, but neither made a move to look. They could see Viktor's shoulder and arm through the doorway, and read his body-language for whatever was going on.

"I thought Saito moved into this space." The Russian commented flatly; the two Yuris could just imagine the unimpressed look on Viktor's face.

"He did. Mikhail had a lock put on the door for him and everything." Yurio explained, staying put, "Why?"

"There's nothing here."

Brown and green eyes looked at one another briefly, but they both stepped towards the exit to the hall, and looked into the same banquet room that Viktor already was. Just as he'd said, there was nothing within. The walls were bare, the floor-space unused, the bed disassembled to the bare-bones frame and mattress.

"Now what am I going to do with all my righteous indignation?" Viktor asked, right before he heard a thump on the floor...and a snore to follow, "...Yuri?"

Yuri wasn't sure where he was when his eyes cracked open again. Everything was a blur without his glasses. He could tell he was lying down, and the dark space just next to him was probably the underside of a table. The walls looked vaguely familiar though, and he was mostly sure that his head had been supported by a leg. There was a hand resting on his upper chest, just below his chin, and a thumb was gently stroking back and forth. He could hear voices, and when he turned his head to the left, he looked past the end of a knee to see the crossed legs of about a half-dozen other people under that table.

My head hurts...

"Oh, he's awake." Viktor's voice sounded, drawing the younger man's gaze up again. He smiled and looked down at those squinting eyes, "Welcome back, my love."

Yuri blinked slowly a few times, but then pushed himself up to sit, only to feel an arm snake around his side to pull him back against Viktor's. He didn't resist though; instead, he looked around to figure out where he was and who was around him. Viktor offered him his glasses back, making the analysis easier, and Yuri realized he'd been stretched out along the base of a wall in the common-room, keeping him out of the walk-way in the center aisle, using Viktor's thigh as a pillow while he was out. There were a handful of strangers in the space - other patrons who were there for the after-dinner beer - but the nearest table was occupied by Team Okukawa, minus one.

"...How long...was I out?"

"About an hour." Viktor answered easily, seeing his husband's expression sink, "Don't worry. Mama Katsuki was able to put our dinners on pause until you came to. If you're up to it, they can have the food out in a few minutes."

"...Yeah..." Yuri mumbled in answer, his mind too clouded to process the words into anything more complex than 'food yes' or 'food no.' He heard Viktor calling out for it to be brought to them, but all he could think about from that moment on was his growing headache. He lifted his hand and pressed it to his forehead just above his right eye, feeling the two lumpy scars where they were most obvious
beyond his hairline. It was a jarring pain right underneath of them, like a knife being stabbed into his brain, over and over with every heartbeat pulsing through the area. If anyone was speaking to him, he couldn't hear or understand their words, and instead did the only thing he could comprehend; he backed up until he was sitting directly behind his husband, slid his arms around the man's waist, and buried his face between Viktor's shoulder-blades where he made the man lean forward.

"You okay?" The Russian wondered quietly, looking back over one shoulder, but all he got were Yuri's glasses handed back, which he took in confusion. He folded them carefully and set them down again, and brought that hand back to rest it over where Yuri's had clasped together in his lap. He offered a gentle squeeze, but didn't push the issue, content to just have the younger man rest.

Dinner seemed to come and go, but all Yuri was really aware of was that, in one moment, he was starving, and in the next, he wasn't. He thought he heard something about the onsen, but he blinked and was in the car heading home again. He looked to the dash and saw that it was after 11pm, I lost 4 hours...?

"You've been unusually quiet, my love." Viktor commented, "Does your head feel better?"

"...Yea, but... I...don't remember saying anything about it."

"You didn't. You kept pawing at your forehead - the spot where you'd cracked your head like a nut - so we gave you some Excedrin and made you eat."

"Oh..."

"Do you remember anything about tonight?"

Yuri hesitated, but then shook his head, "Nothing specific, after we went to my old room."

"Do you want to hear a summary?"

"Summary of what...?" Yuri wondered, suddenly becoming aware of his hand as Viktor gave it a squeeze; on the man's leg, where it usually was, but he felt bad not knowing if he'd put it there himself or if it had been brought there.

"Saito. Or rather, the lack of him."

"...You seem pretty chipper, despite me." Yuri commented, looking down at the glove-box above his knees, "He's gone, I suspect."

"I can't help but feel a great sense of relief knowing he's not at Yu-Topia." Viktor explained, rubbing his thumb reassuringly, "I was a bit annoyed at first, because it meant we'd been worrying all weekend for basically nothing...but once it sunk in that he was gone, I felt better."

"Where did he go...?"

"No one knows." The Russian answered, "He left no note, he told no one he was going. No one's even sure how long he was gone before someone realized the room was empty. Your mom called Mimi because he was taking responsibility for him, but for various reasons, no one thought to tell us."

"...I did make a point to not talk about him. Maybe they didn't bring it up because the topic - on a whole - never did."

"Probably." Viktor agreed, flicking the turning signal with his free hand as they came up to their last
turn, and then rotated the wheel, "Yurio actually mentioned early on that he'd suggested Saito move out. He thought that Saito just ended up agreeing, and left on his own after everyone else had gone to Austria."

"...Where did he go?" Yuri asked; again, for some reason, as though he'd forgotten he'd already posed the question.

"No one knows." Viktor answered after a moment, and shrugged, taking it slow down the narrow street that lead to their house, "Minako said that Mimi had been trying to get hold of him, but there hasn't been an answer. Saito hasn't updated Insta since his parents disowned him though, so it's hard to know what he's up to, or where."

Yuri groaned a quiet worried sigh.

"Please don't feel badly about this, my love." Viktor reassured, pulling into their covered drive-way, and clicking the brake on, "You ditched him yourself for much less. This had to happen. I'm sure that once Mimi gets back, he'll figure out pretty quick where Saito went. He's just been busy in St. Petersburg and hasn't really had time to think about it."

"Did anyone explain why he's staying out there?"

"The old house." He answered, pulling the hand up from his thigh to kiss the fingers, "Let's get inside. I'll explain more."

Yuri nodded quietly, and rubbed his thumb once over the fingers holding his hand before he let go to get out of the car. The pups were excited to see them home, wiggling to get their greetings as the doors opened and closed. Winter ensembles were pulled free and hung up, but the pile of luggage remained in the front hall, only attended to long enough to be put out of the way until the next day. Yuri eventually plunked down onto their couch, and found himself buried at the bottom of a canine cuddle-pile while Viktor attended to something in the kitchen. The aroma of wine, star anise, orange peel, and cinnamon gave away the man's intentions though, and he joined the pile while the concoction simmered.

A documentary was playing, showing the history of Japanese achievements in past Winter Olympics. Footage for many of the very historic games was grainy and the audio equally distorted, but it was still clear what was going on. Yuri kept his eyes on the big flat-panel television, but he wasn't paying too much attention to what was on it.

"I bet we're both going to be in this thing towards the end." Viktor commented, "Since we're both competing for Japan in a month."

"...Maybe."

The Russian made a face, but then sighed and moved to wiggle his way through the pile until he could turn around and put his head against his husban's tummy, and looked up at him from his upside-down vantage, "You're taking the fact that Saito left rather personally, aren't you."

"If not for his morbid behavior at All Japan..." Yuri answered simply, "This whole complicated mess is specifically because of me. He left because of me. He's missing because of me. I have his awful feeling that if no one else can figure out where he went, I'd be the one person he'd answer...which makes me feel responsible for him, more than I think I should have to..."

"He's older than you are, Yuri. You can't be his minder. He has to take responsibility for himself...and if he left because of you, then it's clear he understands that he has a responsibility to be
a better man than he has been so far. I'm sure we'll eventually be in contact with him again. He's going to Colorado and South Korea...can't avoid us when he's a competitor."

"I know..." Yuri sighed, "I just... The more this all sinks in, the more I wonder...why didn't he ever mention what happened before? Even when we had that fight, he never said a peep about how I'd agreed to go out with him before. You'd think that would've been the first thing he'd mention. I would've."

"There may just be some things in life you never know, my love." Viktor tried to explain, lifting his legs a bit so Makkachin could wrap himself around and rest that floofy head on his stomach, "The inner workings of Saito's brain are something I don't fully understand either."

"But how's he going to get to Four Continents and the Games if he ditched Minako-sensei?" Yuri contested, "Where is he even living? Did he go back to Imari...? He can't have given up on everything just to avoid being around me, right?"

"So far as we're aware, nothing else has changed. He probably went back to his other coach since she's right there south of us. It's the most logical thing. You can't protect him from the choices he makes for himself...and you can't live in a state of perpetual guilt over him, either. Healthy boundaries include you knowing when to back off. This is that moment. Saito left, he didn't want anyone to follow or find him, and that's just how it's going to have to be. Let it go."

"If I had just been a better frie-"

"Yuri, let it go." Viktor repeated, "Saito himself has made it impossible for you and him to just be friends. You fled the country, in part, because of how things were. You have to give yourself permission to move on. You have me now, and this whole crazy dumb family we've made...you don't owe Saito a slice of your happiness. He has to find his own."

Yuri's brow was still furrowed, but his husband's words made more sense than anything he could think of on his own. He drew a deep breath and quickly exhaled, but then sat up a bit straighter, squishing his partner's head where he rose, "...Yeah... I can't keep letting him make me unhappy. I don't think that's his goal anyway. If anything, he did this because he's running away... I can't do anything to make things better except let him vanish into his sunset. Doing anything more will just give him the hope that I'll eventually come around, and that's just not true...so it would just be cruel to try."

Viktor lifted himself up a bit and turned back, "Exactly. Letting him go is a mercy."

"...Yeah..."

"Switch places with me." The silver suggested then, "I'll rub your back until the mulled wine is done, and then we can have a quiet, calm, peaceful evening. Tomorrow, we get my ankle cleared and we can get back to doing what we love. Training and working-out again will do your brain good, as well as your body."

"You're right..." Yuri agreed quietly, and reached to pick up Jiro so he could switch places.
Yurio sat up into the night, restless and tired all at once. Potya snoozed on the bed-space next to him, content to have her person back to cuddle with. However, all Yurio could do was stare at the ceiling.

It's just about 8pm in St. Petersburg right now...I wonder if Mik's already on a plane? Nah...he said it was a red-eye flight...he's probably loafing around at the airport or something.

Curious fingers were never idle, and the teen couldn't help but call the man. However, the dial-tone rang on for a while and there was no answer, which was mildly annoying but not entirely unprecedented. When the voicemail finally answered, all Yurio could do was stumble through a message, "Uhhh...hey...it's me. Was about to go to bed but I figured I'd holler. Uhm...Saito's not at Yu-Topia anymore. Took everything and ditched. Not sure if Minako told you or not. Anyway...I guess I'll get to sleep. Bye." He finished, closing out the call and watching the black screen change back to white.

He clicked out and found his past text messages, seeing the window from when he'd originally exchanged numbers with the missing skater. The content wasn't even voluminous enough to warrant a scrolling bar on the side.

[Hey, this is Yuri Plisetsky. Okukawa told me to message you so you'd have my number, since we're training together.]

[ok]

Yurio made a face at the screen, sitting up to type a new message, but then halting after writing only two words, [wtf stupid]

He grumbled and looked at the message, wondering if it was even worth sending.

'Now what am I going to do with my righteous indignation?' Viktor had asked, only to suddenly change gears as he heard a body hit the floor and start snoring loudly, '...Yuri?'

'What the Hell was that!?' Yurio barked, running around to his friend's side on the floor, 'What'd he drop like that for!?'

Viktor made a face and knelt down as well, 'Didn't expect he'd do that right now, but...I guess I should've.' He shook his head, moving his husband's limbs around to make it easier to pick him up, 'He does this when he's mentally overloaded and then something just cracks. Like that time he realized you'd heard us making-out because of the score-cards we walked into.'

'And at Nationals?'

'No, that was a faint. You could call this something more like panic-induced narcolepsy?'

'Isn't that the same thing?' Yurio deadpanned, watching Viktor rise back up to his feet with the unresponsive Yuri in his arms, 'They're both unconscious in the end.'

'Maybe in physiological terms...but Yuri does different things depending on whether he fainted or
just dropped like he did now. If he **faints**, he **doesn't** snore. This here is just lights out. No warning, no light-headedness, no feeling a hot flush, or seeing dark at the edges of his vision. It's just...Yuri.exe has stopped working, system crash, blue screen of death.' Viktor explained, walking towards the stairwell, 'He'll wake up after a nap has given him a minute to cool down and reboot.'

'You seem oddly okay with this happening to him.' Yurio huffed, following ruefully, 'Shouldn't you be more worried?'

'I am, but if there's nothing else I've learned from dealing with Yuri, it's that panicking or making a fuss over something just makes it worse when he comes to.' Viktor said curtly, looking carefully down the stairs to make sure he knew exactly where his feet were going, 'I plan on having him talk to my doctor tomorrow when I get released to jump again. I've been wanting him to see someone anyway; he never got checked out again after the Final. I should've pushed harder for him to follow-up with someone, but we were so blindsided by the RSF firing me that I couldn't think straight for a while.'

**Your** doctor is an orthopedics guy, not a head guy.' Yurio pointed out.

'He's a Sports Medicine specialist...concussions are part of his area of expertise.' Viktor retorted.

'Still, if Yuri dropped because of all the crap about Saito, you **should** have him see a head guy. This could be a serious trigger and mess him up in the rink.'

'One specialist at a time. If my doctor says Yuri needs to see a head guy, then we'll go, but it doesn't hurt to ask him first.'

Yurio still stared at his phone, and the half-typed message...but then deleted it and put his phone back on the charger. He stayed sitting-up in bed, arms crossed over his chest and a frustrated look on his face.

*I feel bad being friendly with Saito when I know that what he did to Yuri still hurts this much. I don't know what to do... Yuri's one of my best friends, but Saito really does feel bad about what happened. Viktor's never going to forgive him though... It would just complicate things for them if I was talking to him.*

He dropped down to his pillow, arms still crossed, and stared towards the rim of the window.

...I won't interfere. Yuri is my friend; Saito is just an acquaintance. I'll leave it to Mikhail and Minako to sort out. He's their project anyway.

Yuri woke up a few seconds before his phone-alarm could do it for him; he reached out of the warmth of blankets and arms to turn it off, and looked at the hour; Wednesday, 9:30am. Viktor was resisting the call to consciousness as well as he could, but Yuri kissed him into waking. With nowhere to be until just after lunch, it was easy to come to a wordless agreement that a leisurely morning romp was on order.

Yuri reached for his favorite warming lube and brought his partner's arousal to full tilt; an easy thing to do given that the male anatomy was typically at half-mast in the waking hours anyway. With a session of rubbing, hand-roaming, and gentle kisses, Yuri stayed on top for the first bout, rocking against his husband's hips at a steady, but just-woke-up kind of pace. Watching eagerly, Viktor got in
his daily worship of his partner's perfect self, offering teasing strokes against tender flesh to coax him to go a little faster before flipping their positions. Viktor kissed the inside of his husband's knees as they came up over his shoulders, and soon after brought them both to climax. They heaved happy breaths against each other until they were able to come to an accord on getting out of bed.

Though showering in shifts, they ended up in their soaking tub together, with Yuri's knees comically poking up above the water for lack of room. He twisted sideways though in the small space, resting his side against his partner's front while hooking his legs over the rim. No words need be said between them; the calm, quiet, soothing relaxation of the atmosphere was enough. Words would've just corrupted it.

Breakfast was just as tranquil. The pups came excitedly for their own, and each got their bowl of morning wet-food, with a few sweet-potato treats afterwards. A quick nap was in order while the humans slowly went through the motions of eating their own food and getting their morning coffees.

When all were done and dressed to meet the day, Jiro was fitted with his leash and harness, and everyone piled into the little red Audi. They drove down to the beach-head, and Makkachin lead the way for their first true morning walk since leaving for Russia. Yuri contemplated letting Jiro off the lead, and eventually cut the pup loose to chase after his big poodle brother.

He retook Viktor's hand, and they slowly followed after their canine sons. Viktor, of course, pulled it back into his jacket pocket, keeping it warm there.

"You seem to be feeling much better this morning than you have in a while." The Russian commented, giving his husband a nudge with an elbow, "You haven't said a word, but I can feel it."

"It's hard to explain, but I...just feel free suddenly." Yuri answered, "I chalk it up to finally getting a good night's sleep though, and being home again. Even though I still have some of my worries...I feel like I can handle them better from here than I could abroad."

"Here I thought it was the mulled wine from last night." Viktor teased, earning a laugh and a playful shoulder-bump, "I'm just glad for it, whatever the cause may be. Does your head feel better, too?"

"Mh." Yuri nodded, reaching up with his leash-hand to rub his fingers against the two faint scars, "It was throbbing something serious last night, but it went away. You could probably thank the wine for that...it made me pretty sleepy, and I didn't wake up at all during the night."

"I was going to ask if I tossed and turned again, and bothered you, but I guess that answers the question. Even if I moved, you were too asleep to notice."

"I was out." Yuri laughed again, "I think I was ready for it. I was so on-guard going to Russia, then trying to be strong for you when we were leaving...and then that stupid fight we had...and then dealing with whatever Asahi was going to throw at us when we got back..." He sighed and shook his head, watching his foggy breath evaporate in the cold winter air, "Now that it's all over, and we're finally, truly safe...it's like I can let my guard down again. I can just be me, and focus on the three things I love best in this world. Our dogs, our sport..." He started, and paused in place, drawing blue eyes towards him, "And most of all, you."

Viktor's eyes shone in the morning sunlight, but he laughed and leaned forward, cupping his husband's cheek with one palm as he touched their brows together, "Ah, I think I just fell in love with you all over again for saying all that."

"And in saying so, I can sense that you're okay again, too." Yuri commented, sharing a quick nose-nuzzle before they started walking after their pups again.
"It's just...strange, you know?" The silver went on, "Maybe I'm just living vicariously through you, or maybe there's something in the air here...but for some reason, I feel the same as you; free. And it's not just Saito being gone either...there's something else." Viktor added, "Something I felt before we even knew what happened. It was subtle...at the back of my head, like it was in a queue, waiting for something else to happen before coming forward. Maybe it was just waiting for you to start feeling better."

"I'd hate to think that my anxious nature puts a damper on you."

"Not at all. I couldn't figure out what it was anyway. You just put the words in my head and made sense of it... It really just...feels like something gave way." Viktor elaborated, watching Makkachin play keep-away from Jiro, carrying a bit stick in his mouth as he trotted down the rocky beach, "I haven't felt like this in a long time. The air feels fresher, our coffee earlier tasted better, my joy for everything seems unimpeded... Do I make any sense at all right now?"

"I think we're both on the same page right now about all that." Yuri agreed easily, "It's like a shadow just lifted off of both of us."

Viktor nodded as they continued walking, keeping up his slow thumb-stroke where he still held their hands in his pocket.

Viktor flexed his toes slightly as the doctor finished his exam and let the appendage go. With sock and shoe being put back into place, the surgeon finished writing his notes and gave a nod before extending his hand.

"You're officially cured. Well done."

The Russian took the hand excitedly and shook, "Arigatou." (Thank you.)

"Dou itashimashite." (You're welcome.)

"Before we go though, I was wondering if you might look into something." Viktor started unexpectedly, drawing up the doctor's eyes in curiosity. Viktor pointed at his husband sitting nearby, "That one cracked his noggin open on the ice about a month ago, and was unconscious for hours after."

"VIkto-" Yuri started, only to get a look from the physician that made him simmer down again.

"He's been getting headaches, and his memories come and go sometimes. Just last night, he lost 4 hours to the abyss of amnesia, and he didn't even drink." The silver went on, crossing his arms, "Should I slash we be worried about this? He didn't have a seizure or anything, but do we need to make an appointment to look into it?"

"Hard to say, just from that." The older man answered, flipping his visit-note over to write on the back, and wrote Yuri's name at the top in Kanji, "Since the incident, have there been bouts of lost consciousness?"

"Yeah."

"In response to things." Yuri argued defensively, "I don't just drop for no reason."

"You mentioned the memory problems...does that happen any other time than when you pass out?"
"Err... I mean, I don't think so..." He said, unsure.

Viktor still had his arms crossed, swiveling slightly in his stool, "He's had memories coming back that he'd completely forgotten about before; some I can confirm as being true memories, not just him piecing together events as told by other people. That's all on top of not remembering new things that've happened."

"Nausea, vomiting, dizziness?" The doctor asked, looking to Yuri, but he just shook his head, "Sensitivity to light or sound?"

"Only if I've had a migraine at the time."

"Mood changes?"

"...Only as a reaction to things happening. Nothing unprovoked."

"What about your anxiety? Is it changing?"

Yuri hesitated slightly, but shook his head, "No, it's been better since we got Jiro, and Viktor's also gotten a lot better at managing me when my anxious side comes out. There's just been a lot of things going on lately...external things that are getting the better of me. If I didn't react, I'd be worried."

"How often do you get those headaches?"

"...Since coming back from Detroit, not that often at all. I think just twice, but I was really stressed at the time."

"And how's your sleep been?"

Yuri made a face, somewhere between a deadpan and worry, "I get jetlagged really badly. We've been traveling a lot. My rhythm will even-out once we've been home for more than one night."

The doctor finished writing his notes, and turned to Viktor, "Loss of consciousness after a head injury can lead to post-concussion syndrome...it can last up to three months, but it may never completely go away either." He explained, then turned to Yuri and pointed the end of his pen at him, "You should wear head protection when doing any rough physical activity, and expect that every headache you ever have from now on to start or get worse under the spot you impacted."

"So you don't think he should get a scan...?" Viktor wondered, "What if he had a brain bleed that's-"

"Knowing it's there won't change that it's there." The doctor explained, "He's not showing any signs or symptoms that he had any kind of major trauma. I suspect that, aside from the concussion, he might've suffered a minor brain contusion. Those go away in time, like any bruise. There's nothing we can do to speed it up. It's not like our skulls can be tapped for fluid like maple trees."

Yuri chortled a laugh, but Viktor remained rather stoic, "So you don't have any recommendations."

"Avoid using NSAIDs for pain, take Acetaminophen instead. Use a helmet." The elder suggested as he stood up, "And if it's still a problem in another two months, then come back. For now, expect some lingering pain and brain-fog. All you can do is wait it out." He explained, reaching to give the pair their departing handshakes, and took his leave from the room.

When the door clicked closed again, Yuri couldn't help but shake his head and laugh, "Like maple trees...jeesh..."
"It was worth a shot." Viktor grumbled as he pushed up from his stool, and offered his hand to take, "I'm just relieved he doesn't think it's serious enough to having lasting effects. Where to from here, my love?"

"Ice Castle. My core isn't as strong as it should be. We both need to really hit the ground running to get back into peak condition."

The silver nodded and brought up his husband's hand to kiss his ring, "Ice Castle it is then."
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED THIRTY SEVEN

Off-ice training was always more intense than on-ice training was. From the bare-bones-basics like angled crunches, push-ups, star-jumps, and rope-skipping, to more specific things like pulling heavy weights over long distances as quickly as possible, grapevines, throwing medicine balls against a wall and doing sit-ups to grab it and toss it again, and practicing the various jumps from one-foot standing on regular floors. Actually getting onto the ice meant practicing routines and fine-tuning the character of the art-form. Finishing the day's work-out with ballet, emphasizing flexibility, balance, and strength in motion.

The final cool-down was a welcome affair. Sitting on pool-chairs in the ballet room, watching the television for a little while, the exhausted duo sat in a pants-like pair of leg massagers, with back massagers behind them for good measure.

"Ugh...I hurt so much..." Yuri whined comically, sagging severely where he sat, "I shouldn't have let myself go so much..."

Viktor was just as bad, slouching with both arms hanging off the sides of his deck-chair, listening to the whirring of the little motors that moved the massagers up and down his legs. For once, he was too tired to care that his hair was all over the place, "I can't move."

"We have to sit in the onsen tonight." Yuri said, managing to turn his head enough to see his spouse, but being able to do little move, "It's decided."

"No question." The silver answered, letting his head drop to that same side so he could look back, "But how are we gonna get there?"

"...Eventually..."

"How, my love, not when."

"Yes." Yuri heaved, laughing as well as he could.

Viktor whined a little as he sighed, "We really overdid it. I thought we'd be okay since we made it through the Exhibition...but I guess not..."

"Five minutes is nothing to five hours." Yuri suggested, "You think we should bring Yurio with us to work-out next time?"

"No reason why not." He answered, pausing for a moment before looking up at the television again. He laughed quietly and closed his eyes, "Unless you think it's helping the enemy."

"Helping him struggle for Bronze isn't too bad, I don't think." Yuri huffed, "I'm honestly not sure who I want to see with us on the podium. Chris, Phichit-kun, Yurio...even Otabek deserves it. Maybe some underdog will come out of nowhere and take it."

"As long as we're on top, the Bronze can go to anyone." Viktor shrugged, just being happy that 'Asahi' wasn't a name coming off his husband's lips for once in a blue-moon. I'm not about to ask why he didn't name that one... He thought. As the automatic leg-massagers continued to inflate and deflate around his sore limbs, Viktor turned his head again, "You ready to hobble over to Yu-Topia then?"
Pushing the sliding door aside, Yuri caught sight of his father first, the window open to his little registrar's office on the side of the entrance hall. Toshiya waved and pointed the way into the common room where the Nishigoris had turned up. After a quick bout of being mobbed by the growing triplets, fawning over the apparently-still-going viral video of the duet Exhibition, the Nikiforovs peeled away to go soak their sores away.

"I promise, we'll talk all about it when we come back." Yuri promised, a child on each arm while the third stood in the middle with her phone out, "Viktor and I were working really hard today so we need to sit for a minute."

"You won't just sneak out when we're not looking, right?" Lutz asked skeptically, "The exit is closer to the onsen than it is to here."

"We're not gonna ditch." Yuri emphasized, turning to look at Viktor behind him desperately, "Back me up!"

"We won't leave." The Russian reassured, leaning against the doorframe to amuse himself at the sight of his partner being lavished with attention, "We're going to have dinner here. We just want to soak for a little while."

"Don't soak too long! You'll turn pruny!" Axel called after them.

"We'll be right back!"

The duo moved back out of the common room and headed towards the onsen entrance, grabbing their share of towels as they started to disassemble from their sweaty work-out clothes. Viktor pulled a mesh laundry-bag from the backpack he carried with him, and all their smelly garb was kept safely apart from the cleaner clothes they brought to change into after.

"It's kind of nice to know that our stuff still surprises people after a year." Yuri commented, stuffing his sweatpants and loose socks into the bag, "I guess seeing two men pair-skating is still unusual enough."

"I did tell you once that I'd gotten ideas to last forever, right?" Viktor mused, pulling the cord tight to seal the bag with a clip, and set the pile into a bottom-level drawer of the cubby wall, "Being here with you pulled all the cobwebs and dust off of my creative machinery."

"I remember. Even just thinking back on when you first suggested 'Duetto' feels like yesterday in some ways, even if it feels like a thousand lifetimes ago, too."

"This past year has been busy..."

"What are we going to do for Worlds now that we've used that show already?" Yuri wondered, putting his folded glasses on top of the small pile of folded clean laundry set aside in a higher cubby, "Something we've already practiced or something new?"

"I'm ashamed to admit that I hadn't thought about it yet." The Russian answered with a sad smile, though he stepped forward to nudge Yuri through to the shower room, a towel over his shoulder for later, "Aside from Euros being the focus for the last little while, the Games are overshadowing the rest. There's so much more to consider there than at any regular ISU event."

"...Why?" Yuri wondered, though he suddenly shook his head and made a face, "Well, obviously I know why, but...why...?"
"Costumes."

"...Eh?"

Water started to spray from two of the stalls, and Viktor pulled his from the holster to spray over himself quickly, "I know that when I say that the world is watching us when we compete, it's true...but that's just the figure skating world. At the Games, it's the entire world. People who don't watch us any other time will watch us then and there. People who don't know who we are or whether we're any good, people who don't know the difference between a Lutz and an Axel, if they can even remember the names after the show is over. News articles will be written that go on the front page, temporarily set free from the confines of the sports section. For one entire month, the Olympics is a truly world-wide event. ...Do we want to just wear the same outfits we already used? Or re-imagine them as something more?"

Yuri paused in thought, half-covered in soapy froth, "...I...don't know."

"Me neither. Therein lies my dilemma."

Memories of the past year flooded through Yuri's mind. The humble beginning and evolution of 'Yuri on Ice,' before it became the record-shattering program it had blossomed into at the end of its run in Helsinki. The dark purple-blue jacket with its cut-out section around the sides and back, dazzled in gemstones and other fine details, the purple shirt, the dark pants. He blanked after that though and looked sheepishly at his spouse, "I...can't think of a way to make my old outfit look any better than it already does."

"Yeah I can't either," Viktor mused, "They all already look really good anyway. Adding stuff to them would almost seem like sacrilege."

"Kind of like that time I nearly had us switch which finger our rings went on."

"Well..." Viktor paused, sudzing his hair until he could make a silly shampoo-mohawk out of it with his fingers, "It wouldn't be entirely uncalled for if we did... It's not like we were ever married in Russia's eyes, so keeping it on our right hands is...ehm..." He stammered, the bigger spikes of his wet hairdo flopping over to splat against one cheek, "...You know."

"It's where we put them." Yuri finished, "Moving them over would be like saying we did it wrong or something."

"Yeah."

"And it's less to do with Russian tradition than it does with what we wanted them to mean to us anyway."

"Exactly~!"

"Now that I'm thinking about it though..."

Viktor looked over, showerhead above his crown, pouring water everywhere as he looked through, "...Eh?"

"Nikki was the one who pointed it out originally. I didn't see her or Viktoria or Yurio when we passed through. I wonder where they are?"

"Maybe they went with Minako to go pick Mimi up."
"Mimi’s the one probably picking them up."

Viktor blinked through the water cascading off his head, "Wha...?" Math equations went flying through his mind, "...But he's the one at the airport...and they went there to...get...him...?"

"Minako-sensei and the others came back on the train." Yuri pointed out, "But they went to the airport originally in one of those new cars Mikhail bought. Unless he makes Minako-sensei drive, he’s technically driving them home even if he's the one who just arrived."

Another long blink and a confused look, but Viktor then just smiled and nodded, "It's kind of late. The few parts of my brain that help me pretend to be as smart as you have long-since shut down already."

Yuri made a face at him, "You don't have to pretend. You're plenty smart." He pointed out, trying to ignore the goofy look being returned to him.

"Not as smart as you, Dr. Nikiforov."

And with that, the 'doctor' was aglow.

Soaking in the hot mineral-water up to their ears, the quiet calm of the onsen-proper was just what was on order. They both hummed a contented sigh as they waded in that pool of liquid relaxation. Their heads bobbed in the gentle ripple of the little space, and they listened to the ambiance of their outdoor surroundings; the cascade of water from the fountain nearby, the soft rustle of naked tree branches in a little breeze, and the far-off barking of a dog.

Though largely unaware of their slow movements around the hot-pond, being pushed about by the subtle currents under the water's surface, when Viktor found himself between Yuri's back and the rim of the nearest ledge, he made the most of it. He pressed the back of his head to his husband's shoulders and hooked his ankles onto the stone ledge, and hung between them like a long hammock, clasping his fingers over his stomach. Yuri couldn't help but smile, and reached one hand back to pat the man's silver head as he anchored his heels to prevent from sliding away.

CRASH

Viktor splashed and flailed as Yuri jumped, and both were gargling for air amidst confused yelling and the sound of shoes screeching to a halt on the deck.

"YURI-KUN."

Brown eyes rose from the water, and Yuri looked to the door that had just been smashed open unexpectedly. There, standing in front of the big red demon mask, was one Kenjirou Minami.

"...What in the world...?"

"YURI-KUN!" The teen barked again, looking like a confused mess between losing-his-shit excited and utterly-humiliated dishonor. The stars in his eyes disappeared as he suddenly went down to both
knees and started bowing dramatically in his deepest apology, "AHHHHHH!"

Viktor sputtered to get the water out of his nose, but when he caught sight of the display on the deck, he couldn't help but laugh and clap his hands together, "Wow~! He's doing a dogeza, too, like you used to do!" He said happily, looking at his perplexed husband.

"...But why is he here!?"

"Yuri-kun!" Minami belted a third time, pushing up onto his hands as he crawled meekly to the ledge of the pool, "I'm here to tell you that I'm coming with you to Four Continents!"

"...Oh." Yuri blanched, pushing his sopping-wet hair back with one hand, but looking rather confused, "...That's...great? It'll be like last year."

"No!" The blonde corrected, sitting back like a samurai before his daimyo, hands pressed neatly over his thighs, "I'm going as a competitor this time!" He bowed down, pressing his forehead to the stonework, "It'll be my first time competing at an international competition! I heard the news and came straight here!"

Yuri couldn't process it, and brought both hands up above the water to count, "...Me...Viktor...Asahi...uh..." He looked at Minami with brows furrowed, "Did we somehow get allotted four spots?"

"Saito Asahi-kun withdrew!" The teen explained, much to the duo's surprise, though Viktor was clearly pleased rather quickly even if Yuri still looked like none of it made sense, "So I've been selected to go in his place!" Minami finished, bringing his hands up under his face, balled in excitement, "This isn't going to be like Nationals! I'm going to take it super-duper seriously!"

Yuri's eyes squinted, and he turned his head to look at Viktor, whom he found nodding approvingly.

"Four Continents is going to be a lot of fun now." The silver chirped.

"None of this makes any sense at all." Yuri sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. He sighed and gestured to the over-stimulated skater on the ledge, "Let us finish our soak...and then explain to us what's going on."

"Oh well you see we-"

"Soak first. Explain after."

"O-Oh! Hai!"
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED THIRTY EIGHT

It was like a spectator spot with how many people were sitting at the one table, while Yuri and Viktor were trying to have their dinner; the Nishigori parents, the Nishigori triplets, and Minami. Everyone was eager to speak, but every time someone tried to open their mouth to say something, one of the two Nikiforovs would either give them the stink-eye or would shuuush them.

"What in the Hell is-"

"Shhhhh!" The whole group chided on the duo's behalf, holding a finger up to their lips to quiet the unexpected Tiger, who'd appeared in the common-room doorway despite no one knowing he was 'home.' Confused, he joined the others, taking up a spot next to Yuko, silently wondering why Minami was there and why everyone was so quiet.

The silent watch began anew. Eyeballs followed every movement of chopsticks from bowl to mouth and back again.

Nikki and Viktoria were soon coming along, too, one yawning as the other gaped at the odd sight, "...What in the world."

Yurio joined in on the shushing that time, and the two silver teens joined the table, looking around in confusion at all the silent watchers. With a few more minutes passing that way, the meal came to its eventual conclusion, with both Yuri and Viktor finishing off the last of their clear onion soup at the last. They set their bowls down quietly, put their chopsticks and other dishes into a polite pile for pick-up, and quietly looked at one another before nodding.

"We've decided." Yuri spoke for them both at first as he threaded his fingers together at the edge of the short table, "...That Minami will be the first to speak."

The multicolored teen yip'd and sat up straight, stammering for a moment before clearing his throat, and opened his mouth to speak.

"Tell them all what you told us first." Yuri cut him off.

Eyes were wide, but Minami didn't say a thing yet.

"Yeah, why are you here?" Yurio huffed, leaning back against the nearby wall.

"Who is he?" Nikki asked out the side of her mouth, leaning towards her brother. The blonde just shrugged.

"He's Smol Nugget." Viktor explained, "Smol Nugget, meet Nikki and Viktoria Rozovsky, my cousins, and Yuri Plisetsky."

Minami waved nervously at the trio on the opposite side of the table, and at least Nikki waved back. He waited a moment though before attempting to speak again, "Ehem...well...I'm going to be competing at Four Continents, in place of Saito Asahi-kun."

Yurio would've spat his drink if he had one, but instead he just half-choked on air at the surprise. He hit his chest with the thumb-side of his fist until it cleared, "Y-You're what? Why?"
Minami was a bit intimidated by the younger but more aggressive skater, "...Ah... I don't know the reason for it, but Asahi-kun withdrew from the competition. Just this morning, I'm told. I've been on a train all day trying to get here so I could tell Yuri-kun in person."

"Why don't you just call like a normal person?"

"Because he's Smol Nugget." Viktor explained, patting the teen's head like he was a pup.

Yurio just squinted his eyes in annoyance at them both and went quiet.

"So far as I know," Minami went on, "He hasn't withdrawn from going to the Olympics at this point. But, he's definitely out for Four Continents. So, as the next best skater in our bracket, I'm going in his place."

Murmurs arose on the Nishigori side of the table. Yuri crossed one arm across himself to perch an elbow, and curl a few fingers around his chin in thought. He couldn't help but think out loud, "I wonder if he joined up with a new team and just doesn't have time to get ready."

Loop stood up and crossed her arms, "We've been looking ever since we found out he wasn't at Yu-Topia anymore. We haven't seen a single photo of him on any of the Japanese team pages, not even in the backgrounds. Wherever he is, he's off the radar."

"...He must've gone back to Imari." Yuri said, but was pulled out of his thoughts by an unhappy grumble from next to himself. Eyes turned and he spotted an unimpressed Viktor looking at their stacks of dishes, "...Something to say?"

"Nothing I haven't said already." The silver moped, "But I have this strange feeling we'll be going south soon."

"You did get upset that you didn't get to see the pictures of me from my younger skating days at the Imari rink." Yuri pointed out with a wry smirk, "You chased me into the Ice Castle because of it."

The Audi came to a screeching halt in the middle of the parking lot, and Viktor turned dubiously, leering over the edge of his arm towards the suddenly-nervous man next to him, "...Did you just say...there's pictures of you in that case?"

"Y-Yes...? Probably?" He answered, spooked, "I did skate for that rink during Juniors..."

"There's pictures of baby Yuri standing on a podium, in that case?"

"Well I wasn't a baby back then, maybe 14 or something...?" He dismissed, clicking off his seatbelt. Viktor's affect looked dark, eyes shining through like a cat's, "Yuri."

"Ye-y-esss...?" He was practically backing into the door then, pawing for the handle.

"Why did you let us leave the city without letting me see those pictures first?"

"Su-sumimasen."

klA-KlunK

Yuri tumbled out backwards with a thud, backpack falling after him, and he rolled arse-over-head
away. Like some kind of ninja, he kicked the door shut and took off running.

"Yuri!"

"You'll never take me aliiiiivveeee!"

"YURI!"

"Consider it incentive to go." Yuri said, poking his partner's shoulder affectionately, "Or a silver lining, or the cherry on top...whatever you want."

Viktor couldn't believe the quagmire he'd suddenly found himself in, and just crossed his arms, muttering something about 'baby Yuri' under his breath.

"Don't your parents have pictures like that?" Yurio asked for them all, as though it were so obvious that even Viktor should've thought of it.

"Maybe, but they're really old, so they're probably in a banker's box somewhere in storage." Yuri shrugged, "Besides, Viktor was more keen on the fact that those pictures were in a display case than anything. Right?" He looked back.

"...Pictures of baby Yuri..."

"Ah jeeze, we'll go tomorrow." He shook his head, "If we find Asahi, then at least we can figure out why he's dropping things."

"Can I come?" Yurio asked meekly, drawing perplexed eyes over. He just pressed harder against the wall and pulled his knees up as a defense, "Don't look at me like you forgot that I said we'd sorted things out while you were gone!"

"We didn't forget." Viktor huffed, resting his jaw in the palm of one upturned hand, leaning against the table, "Just surprised you'd want to come."

"Mik's probably going to want to be part of this, too." Yuri pointed out, "I had hoped they'd be back soon enough for me to ask if he would."

"Not even gonna give him a minute to sleep?" Viktor wondered, feeling even more exhausted on his uncle's behalf, "We don't all have your boundless stamina, my love."

"I wasn't planning on going at the crack of dawn." Yuri defended nervously, "Maybe after lunch. Though..." He paused, turning to the triplets and their parents behind them, "Did you guys notice anything off about Asahi before he vanished? Did he say anything...?"

All five shook their heads in unison. Yuko looked a bit disappointed, "No, sorry... He barely said a word to anyone." She turned her attention to Yurio though, "He talked to you some."

The teen looked a bit cornered, "Erh...well, I mean... He helped me with the snow-shoveling a bit. We had some words, sure, but-"

"What'd he tell you?" Yuri wondered.

"Christ." Yurio muttered under his breath, "Of course he'd ask." He cleared his throat and lifted his head again, "About a bunch of things. I made him show me his post-Halloween liquidation sale costumes, after he got an eye-full of your outfits."
"Ours?" Viktor asked, eyes narrowed slightly in dubious skepticism.

Yurio nodded, and rested his wrist over one upturned knee, "I had to bring the Exhibition suits here before we left, and Saito was in the banquet-hall at that point, so he was right next-door to me. I wasn't going to be a dick and tell him he can't look at some clothes." He explained, "Okukawa is worki-...er...I guess she was working on getting Saito into some proper outfits for the upcoming competitions. His outfits were literally cobbled together from whatever he could find. He might as well have been using duct-tape and a prayer to keep them from falling apart. I'm shocked he hasn't had any wardrobe malfunctions yet."

Yuri's brows raised anxiously, but before he could let his worry get the better of him, Viktor snaked an arm around his waist and pulled him back to rest against his chest. Yuri drew a breath and exhaled quickly, focusing on the feel of his husband's body against his back, *He's his own person...and he's older than I am*... He thought to himself, echoing the words in his head like a prayer of his own, and held his fingers loosely to Viktor's arm where it crossed over him, *I can't have so much of my worry piled up for him that I have none left for Viktor or myself.*

"Anyway," Yurio carried on, "I tried to pry out of him a reason for why he had never been mentioned before, but he was slippery about it and wouldn't answer. The best I got was that he thought he scared you, and that's why you left for Detroit." He nudged a finger towards his friend, "But he never actually explained *anything* about what that meant. What the Hell's he talking about?"

Grimacing slightly and muttering a grumble to himself, Yuri held a bit tighter to Viktor's arm, practically folding both of his own over it to keep it lodged in place, "...He..." Yuri started, stumbling slightly on how he wanted to phrase it, "...He thought we were more than friends for a bit. I already had a thousand other reasons for wanting to train abroad, but he just...got a bit overbearing and zealous for a minute. I got spooked and wanted to put everything about Japan in my rearview mirror, including him. Being in Detroit was such a distraction that Asahi got buried deep at the bottom of my brain." He explained, pausing a moment in his thoughts before going on, "...What I did to him was the worst thing I've ever done to anyone. The guilt over it, and especially as I was starting to remember the things I'd repressed, was starting to eat me alive. Even now, there's this gnawing at my soul, like I have to try and put him back together after I broke him right in half all those years ago." He sighed quietly, "I'm having a hard time not blaming myself for all the things he's suffered since I abandoned him. If I'd have more courage back then...I would've told him that I didn't mean to lead him on, and that I was sorry. But I never did. I *still* haven't. I...think that's why I keep wanting to help him. I'm still the same weak coward I was back then...too scared to admit to him what wrong I'd done, and apologize for it..."

"You're *not* a coward." Viktor challenged, twisting slightly so he could lean down and kiss his husband's brow. He brought his other arm around to hug him with both, "You're the strongest and bravest person I know, and I'm *not* just saying that because I love you. That's the truth. You inspire me every day."

Yuri managed a smile, but it was short-lived, "I'm stronger because I have you...but when I see Asahi, the guilt makes me frail. I can only *imagine* how it feels for him to see me now, especially since I hurt him so badly before when I left, because I was so sure I wasn't into guys...only to show up with you on my arm..."

"Anyone who's known you since you were about 12 would understand why you'd be with Viktor if you got the chance." Nishigori pointed out, "You and Yuko would never shut up about him back then. I wouldn't be surprised if you'd been in love with him that whole time, not *just* since he showed up."
Face beat red, Yuri looked aside with puffed-out cheeks for a moment, but Viktor gave him a gentle squeeze to bring him back.

"Maybe that's part of why you rejected Saito so soundly." Nishigori went on with a shrug, "Your heart already belonged to someone else, even if you didn't know it yet."

Hazel eyes briefly scanned past Yuko, but Yuri looked away quickly, melting into his soulmate's embrace to avoid the thought, "Whatever it was...I knew I didn't want to be with him. I don't think I'll be able to completely stop worrying about it now that I remember what I did to him in the end. It's like a black spot on my conscience. ...This is what I've been scared to confront all this time...and part of it is because I know how much it's going to hurt him to have to go through, too... I just...don't want to keep hurting him. He never did anything to deserve it back then. And now..."

"You gotta tear that bandage off at some point, Yuri." Yurio pointed out glibly, "It'll never heal if you don't let it breathe."

"I know, but-" Yuri contested, pausing a moment as he felt his heart pounding in fear as he thought about it. He grunted a sigh and forced himself to breathe and calm down, closing his eyes for a moment, "...He's suffered so much since I left. He finally found some happiness and freedom, and right as he was about to break off the chain that held him to his parents, his happiness was ripped right out of his hands. I have a really hard time squaring the idea of having to cause him so much pain again when he's still recovering from Riku's death." He explained, falling silent for a moment, able to hear the sound of the kitchen winding down for the night as dishes were washed and the grill's scrubbed. All that kept him from feeling like he would slip away like oil was having Viktor holding on, "...Confronting what I did to him, and making amends, may be better for me in the end...but I feel like...my mental wellbeing is almost not worth how selfish it would be of me to attain it. I can't stand it. It's tearing me apart."

"Have you considered that he may actually be able to handle it?" Viktor chimed in curiously, "It's a sore spot for him, sure, but he's survived so much already...maybe hearing one person say they're sorry would actually help him more than hurt."

Yuri tilted his head back against his partner's chest to better see his face, and was surprised, "...You're...supporting my insane wish to go find him now?"

"I support whatever you think you need to do to feel comfortable in your own skin again. I don't want you to carry this monkey on your back forever. It's not fair to you, and it's not fair to us." He explained, "When we have our second wedding, I want your conscience to be clear."

Feeling a flutter in his chest, Yuri couldn't help but let his eyes water a little, "You don't know how happy it makes me to hear that."

"I know it seems chaotic that I waffle from adversarial to agreeable when it comes to Saito, but my primary motive has always been to do what's best for you." Viktor explained, rubbing his cheek against his spouse's hair affectionately, "If this is what you think you need to do to finally have this cloud go away...then I'll help you through it, like I've always done."

"...Who would be arriving here this late at night?" Minami wondered quietly, looking towards the door to the foyer. His eyes went back to Yurio as the Tiger stood up.

"We're two idiots short of a fun-house." He explained, heading through the opening in the wall to look. Peeking through, he spotted the expected last pair of people that would complete their little clan, "Yeah, it's them."
Viktor and Yuri looked aside, as they could hear the sound of the front door closing even if they hadn't heard it open. The round thumping noise of shoes being kicked off and tired feet shuffling across the hardwood was easy to pick-out after that, as was Hiroko going out to greet them, drying her hands on her apron.

"Are you guys hungry?" She wondered, "We've closed down the kitchen here, but I can make you something upstairs if you want."

Minako shook her head as she shrugged out of her winter coat, "We're actually so late because we stopped to get something to eat before coming back. Needed some time just on our own for a bit."

"Ah yes," Hiroko smiled, "Having time away from the kids is always important."

"...It's...not actually because we wanted time away." She explained reluctantly.

Exhausted, Mikhail quietly stepped by them, coat hanging across his arm as he made his way towards Yurio, "Is my nephew here?" He asked quietly, bags under his eyes.

The Tiger nodded wordlessly and stepped aside, the aura around his 'father' feeling heavy and ominous. Emerald eyes went into the room to spot the nervous look on Viktor's face for having heard his name. All eyes were focused on Mikhail though for the moment.

"Viktor," The elder said simply, "A moment."

No one said a word as the silver stood up, bare feet tapping on the ground as he followed his uncle out of the room, glancing back briefly before vanishing behind the doorframe. As they made their way through the hall that lead to the overnight area of the resort, Viktor slowed his pace a little, "Mimi...?"

The sliding door to the big rented room was pushed open, and Mikhail gestured inside, following after as Viktor went in. He pushed it back into place after, and blinked slowly, eyelids heavy.

"...Have you slept at all?"

"Mmno." The elder answered grimly, "I'm still wearing the same clothes I left Vienna in, too. I probably smell awful."

"...Can't say I'm worried about it. What's going on? Did something happen with the house?" Viktor wondered, his sense of trepidation growing with every confusing second that passed, "Did you get attacked like we did...?"

Mikhail shook his head slowly, but worked up the strength to look his nephew in the eyes, "...Viktor... Your father...he's..."

"...Gone."

Jade irises were wide for a moment, but Mikhail could feel himself slouch slightly to hear the word, "...Yeah."

Viktor was surprisingly pragmatic about it, "How?"

"It's being investigated. I'll probably get a call in a couple days."

"Why were you even out that way? I thought you were just poking around St. Petersburg because of my old - your new - house."
Mikhail waited a moment, his brain a bit foggy from lack of rest, "I wanted to check on Kon after that last phone conversation I had with him and Yuri. It's not every day you lose your son twice, right?"

"Sure...but that was his choice."

"I know." The elder nodded, crossing his arms loosely over his chest for lack of knowing what else to do with them, "But I thought I'd check anyway, since I had a lot of hours to wait for my flight. I...found him at home. I don't know when he passed. He was in bed. It looks like he just went to sleep and never woke up, but...you never know with these things."

"And his animals?" Viktor asked simply.

"A groom came to pick up the horse. A vet and farrier are checking him out today." Mikhail explained regimentally, "The dog..."

For a moment, a pang of worry shot through the younger's chest, "Is she okay? Was she hurt?"

"...She's in the car." Mikhail answered, huffing an uncomfortable half-laugh as he ran a hand through his hair, "I didn't know what to do with her. I don't even know her name, if she had one..."

"Prizrak."

"...I can see that. Well, I named her Scruffy for the travel paperwork. I don't know if you and Yuri would consider adding her to your pack, or-"

"We'll take her. I hold no grudges against dogs; they're innocent." Viktor answered easily.

"...That's good." Mikhail nodded, feeling some relief to know the pup had somewhere to go, "Are you going to be okay?"

Hesitating a moment, Viktor stepped forward, and put both arms over his uncle's shoulders, giving what comfort he could, "There was no love between my father and I. I gave him a chance to see me for who I am, and to be a part of that, but he rejected it. My concern is you. You're the only one left."

"...Yeah..." The elder agreed quietly, patting his nephew's side before Viktor let go, "...I guess I am, aren't I?"
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED THIRTY NINE

It seemed like ages passed. The group in the common-room had fallen to an uneasy quiet. Minako stood like a sphinx in the foyer, a dubious look on her face while she waited. All the uncertain waiting and confusion, the silence and watching, hoping anyone would speak up to break it up, went unanswered.

And then, it all suddenly came to a crashing end.

"Yuri, we're going." Viktor called suddenly, and all the sound of the resort came back to their hearing.

Yuri blanched in surprise, watching Viktor go by to find their jackets and bag, "We're not even going to change...? We're still in our spa robes."

"No time. Minami, you're coming too."

"Eh?" The teen gasped, jumping up to his feet.

Viktor was pulling his coat-sleeves on his arms as the younger pair came out, and he grabbed his husband's as soon as his hands were through, tossing the garment over to its owner, "Come. We don't have time to wait around. The store's closing soon."

"Store!?" Yuri echoed, "Why are we worried about going to a store?"

"Why is he going instead of me?" Yurio suddenly asked, thumbing at Minami.

"Because you have a family to spend the night with, and since he came here to see Yuri, that makes us responsible for him." The elder answered, also thumbing at the confused teen, "I don't want to make Mama Katsuki get everything ready for a new overnight stay when we have a guest room we can plunk him into."

Still confused, Yuri pulled his jacket on, hyper-aware of the parts of his legs that were about to be painfully exposed to the winter night air, "Viktor, can you please slow down and tell us what's going on? What's so important that I can't even take a second to put some pants on?"

"We have a new puppy to get ready for."

Yuri's eyebrows did something weird as he struggled to comprehend why that was such an emergency, but he clenched his eyes shut and shook his head, "Minami isn't a puppy, no matter how much you like to toy with him like he is."

"Not him, a real puppy. Come on, I'll show you."

The doors to the parking lot slid open and Viktor bid his cohorts out. Watching them go, Minako felt Mikhail's presence slide up quietly beside her, "...I thought you were going to tell him."

"I did. Rather, he figured it out." The silver elder answered tiredly, "He's being surprisingly practical."

"He's acting like he doesn't care."
Mikhail hesitated a moment, looking to his gaggle of kids all watching from the doorway, wondering what was going on, "...I don't think he really does." He said simply, then stepped out into the light and ushered his brood back into the common-room, "Gather 'round...I'll tell you what happened. I just wanted to tell Viktor first."

Outside, Viktor went straight for the still-running vehicle, and the lights on inside. Though the Shepherd wasn't visible yet, when the door was pulled open, the pup jerked up from where she'd been curled up on the back seat and flattened her ears against her head with a whine. Viktor offered his hand forward, squeezing it through the space between the edge of the door-panel and the front passenger seat, "Bud' horošej devočkoj, vot tak..." (Be a good girl, like this...) He said soothingly. Prizrak sniffed his fingers pensively, and Viktor smiled when he saw her tail thump nervously against the leather seat. He reached further to grab for the leash that was lying around the dog's paws, and clicked the seat to bend and slide forward so she could jump out.

Yuri deadpanned the whole thing, looking rather serious with part of his coat covering the bottom half of his face, and his hair slicked back, "...Why are you talking to a dog in Russian...?"

The anxious fluffy boofer jumped out of the car, looking up at Viktor first and then at Yuri and Minami next to him. Her tail continued to sway, but she held it low against her legs, still as nervous and skittish as ever.

The red-flags were suddenly flying in Yuri's mind, "...Russian language, Caucasian Shepherd, came with Mikhail, who just came from Russia..." He said, putting it together. Eyes went up dubiously to his husband then, "Is this Prizrak?"

"It's Scruffy now, apparently." Viktor answered, pushing the door closed again.

"Viktor Nikiforov, what the Hell is going on? Why is Prizrak in HASETSU? Is Kon about to jump out a bush or something!?" Yuri barked, making the pup go down to the ground, tail pressed between her legs.

Viktor paused, surprised by the use of his first and last name, but once it passed, he shook his head, "My love, Konstantin isn't going to jump out of a bush. He's not here. He's not...anywhere."

Minami stayed quietly by, listening in confusion, but not wanting to interrupt just to ask for an explanation. He turned his eyes to his idol, and watched the dawning of realization rise on his face.

"...He's...gone?" Yuri said, his voice barely a note above a whisper, and he looked down, "...So these past few days... And when you said...that you felt free..."

"The shadow that's been cast over me since back then...it lifted. It went with him when he left this world." Viktor nodded solemnly.

"...How did he...?"

"Mimi doesn't know yet. He's waiting on an answer." He answered, "All he knows is what he saw himself. My father passed at home in his own bed. It's...probably the best way anyone could ask for."

"...Are you okay?" Yuri wondered, brows raised anxiously, "I mean, after all the effort you put into trying to have a relationship with him..."

"'Tried' being the operative word. My effort lead to nothing. All in all, after everything that's happened...I think this is probably the most appropriate way this whole thing could've ended. I don't ever have to worry about him suddenly deciding to try and reconnect again in the future, Mimi doesn't have to go out there to check on him anymore... That whole saga is over. He's at rest, and
I can rest." Viktor explained, suddenly feeling bad for having dragged Minami into the middle of that kerfuffle, "...Sorry, Smol Nugget. This must all seem like insanity to you."

"Ehrr... Well...I mean, it's not like I told anyone I was coming... Anything could've been going on when I got here." The teen defended, "I feel a bit like I'm intruding now though."

"No, it's fine." The Russian reassured, and looked back to his partner, "...Yuri?"

He sighed slightly and shook his head, turning on a heel, "...I'm going back inside to change. There's nothing Prizrak needs that can't wait until tomorrow, and my ankles are frozen solid. ...Minami-kun, come on."

Viktor watched the two go back towards the door, confused at first, but then nodded to himself in understanding. With his head bent down, he looked to the dog lying down by his legs, "...Horošo, Prizrak, pojdem vnutr'." (Alright, Ghost, let's go inside.)

Though everyone else had been ferried back into the common-room and were getting the news about what happened still, no one was deaf to the sound of the front door sliding open again. They went quiet a moment to hear footsteps, shoes being kicked away, and more footsteps that lead to an unseen door.

Yuri paused there, and looked back to Minami still standing in the foyer by the cow-skin rug, "...I'll be right back. My clean clothes are in here. Just hang out a second and then we'll go."

"...Okay..."

Viktor came back in as well a moment later, and slid the front door closed behind him. Prizrak shook the outdoor chill off and sat down to look around, staying close to Viktor's side. He spotted Minami watching him in turn, and suddenly felt a bit guilty, "...Uhm...sorry again." The silver started, reaching his free hand up to rub the back of his neck, "Everything leading up to what just happened is kind of a long story..."

"You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to..." The teen answered, "I get the feeling I walked into a few big...things."

"Oh, the Saito issue? Yeah, I guess you did walk into that one. That's complicated...but we're going to try and sort it out tomorrow. Yuri's on a mission, and I'll follow him wherever he goes." Viktor answered, "Though I am personally relieved that Saito's not going to Colorado with us, I'm hopeful that he doesn't drop from the Olympics, too. There's room enough in PyeongChang for all of us. He's earned his spot there."

"I see..."

"Tonight it going to be pretty light though, Yuri willing." The silver went on, "I worry that he'll take the news of my father's death worse than I have." He shrugged though, "My father was...difficult. We were estranged for some 20 years. We only started talking again because my mother died last year, but it hasn't been the easiest reunion."

"So you're probably not sad at all that he's gone now."

Viktor paused a moment, but then smiled forlornly, "...Not really. I gave it my best shot to make amends and figure things out with him, but we'd grown too far apart and our values were irreconcilable. In a way, I'm actually kind of glad he's passed away...not for myself though. He was completely alone out there. In a weird way, he's free now, too, and he can go to my mother knowing he tried, for her sake."
"Yeah..."

Quiet fell between them after that, and they waited in that silence for Yuri to return. It was thankfully only another few seconds before the door to the men's changing room opened and the aforementioned skater came back out, fully dressed and warmed-up from his earlier chill. He pulled his jacket over his arms again, eyes staying down for a moment, but then raising to the concerned dog staring back at him.

"...You go quiet when something is on your mind, my love." Viktor commented, bending down slightly to try and catch a glance.

"I...don't really have words right now." Yuri answered, pulling the zipper up on the front of his coat, "I just want to go home."

"Maybe I should stay here..." Minami suggested quietly, "I don't want to impose. It seems like you guys have a lot going on."

"No, it's...fine, really." Yuri insisted, trying to shake the weird feeling he had, "I mean, we were just in the middle of a pretty stark situation anyway, learning that Asahi quit Four Continents...and now this comes up. It's a lot to take, but it'll be okay. I'd be glad if you came to stay with us tonight."

Hearing those words lifted the teen's spirit, and he nodded once emphatically, "H-Hai!"

"Alright...give me one second then, and we can go." Yuri added, patting Minami's shoulder as he side-stepped to go back into the common-room for a moment. He was only gone for a few seconds, and when he returned, he pulled his shoes back on and made his way forward to the big sliding door. Viktor caught his hand before he could push it open though, and he looked up at those blue eyes.

"I'm sorry." He said quietly.

"...What for?"

"I'm not sure yet, but I still am."

Yuri hesitated, a little confused, but shook his head and pulled his hand free, pressing his palm over the center of his partner's chest before rising up onto the toes of one foot to offer a kiss, "You have nothing to be sorry for. Let's go."


The guest room on the second floor was illuminated by the gentle glow of a table-lamp, and Yuri stepped out of the way to let Minami through, "Hopefully this'll serve. I know your parents are both doctors though, so I'm sure you're used to much nicer digs."

"No no, this is great! Perfect!" Minami insisted, looking excited regardless, "I'm a bit embarrassed that I didn't think about what I'd do after getting to Hasetsu. I guess I was just overwhelmed with excitement. I mean...I made my Senior debut last year but I didn't get to go to any real big events until just now."

"Yeah, the limited number of spots available for each country makes going to big events a bit complicated, when there's a bunch of good skaters on the same team. I'm really glad you're getting to come this time though, as an athlete. I'll introduce you to Phichit-kun. You'd fit right in with him, Leo, and Guang-Hong." Yuri explained, feeling a little more relaxed now that he was at home again. Jiro had followed them upstairs but was sniffing around in the master bedroom, "Make yourself at home. We're gonna relax downstairs for a little while if you want to join us."
Minami nodded again, and turned excitedly to go into the room. Yuri went looking for his wayward puppy, shuffling into his bedroom to spot the Akita's rump sticking up in the air where he'd tried to get under. Bending down, Yuri picked the pup up, and put Jiro against his shoulder with a finger-boop to that cold nose, "What'er you up to, little dude?"

Jiro just playfully licked and nibbled at the finger while it was close, tail wagging back and forth under his human's arm. Yuri smiled and turned back around, clicking off the light to head back downstairs. He found Viktor on the couch with Makkachin, watching a silly Japanese game-show with a cup of reheated mulled wine in his hand. When he came around the side of it, he found his partner's hand coming up to find him, and he reached back to take it. He kissed those fingers as he came around the front, and apologized to the poodle as Makkachin got up to make room. With a yawn, Yuri set Jiro down, and the puppy trotted off, passing Prizrak where she'd curled up on the floor near the back door on his way to the water bowl.

"How's she doing so far?" Yuri wondered, looking to the long-haired Shepherd as he sat down, cozying up against his husband's side. One of Viktor's knees was perched upward, and Yuri wrapped an arm around it.

"She hasn't barked, but she did eat some, so that was good to see." He answered, switching his wine mug from one hand to the other, and reached his newly-freed fingers forward to paw at the side of his spouse's neck and shoulder, "I feel like you've been holding back your true feelings on things. My love, please don't..."

"Maybe I have a little bit... I guess I needed a second to process things." Yuri admitted, pressing into the feeling of those fingers brushing against his cheek, "We were just there, and he was fine...and now he's gone..."

"I know..."

"I didn't want to think the worst, but without knowing what Mik saw, I couldn't even begin to speculate. I had to go back to ask him before we left, if Mik thought your father had...done this to himself on purpose somehow..."

"I considered the same, but Mimi is certain this wasn't a self-destructive act." Viktor explained, moving his fingers further up to brush a few stray black hairs behind an ear, "He thinks my father went to bed one night, and something happened. Maybe a heart attack like Yurio's grandpa...maybe a stroke...? He said that the only thing he couldn't figure out was why the window in the bedroom was open. The door was closed, and Prizrak was left alone in the front rooms, but because she was inside, and Čužak looked well-cared-for, Mimi doesn't think this was planned. Everything to him looked as though Kon had planned to get up and go back at it the next morning. He just...didn't get to."

"...I can't stop myself from thinking this had something to do with how we left things." Yuri commented, "I know that it was his choice how we parted ways, but...still. The timing is just..."

"I know. It's hard not to think they're connected." Viktor agreed, "But try not to stress about it. Mimi will tell us what the Russians find out about how Kon passed."

"What about a funeral...?"

"My father would never want to be buried anywhere but next to my mother. The ground is still frozen though. They'll have to wait for a thaw."

"...Would you want to go?"
"No."

Yuri was stunned slightly by the immediate answer, but as it sank in, he nodded in understanding, "Okay."

"I hope you don't think less of me for that."

"No, I...I get it. Going back to Russia wasn't supposed to be something we had to think about again, unless one of us got assigned to Rostelecom. I don't want to go back, and I don't want you to go, even on your own...especially not on your own." He corrected, shaking his head as he drew a nervous breath, "This is all just so shocking still. I wonder if he just lost the will to live...? Next week will basically be the anniversary of your mom's sudden passing. Maybe he just couldn't do it anymore. Between that, choosing to cast you out for good, and then the mill closing...it was just a constellation of bad luck for him."

"Yeah. It's possible. I have to believe he never meant to cause his animals to suffer though. Even when he came to NHK on short notice, he got something arranged so Čužak would be looked after until he got back." Viktor pointed out, taking a sip from his hot wine.

Yuri reached a hand up, silently asking for a sip of his own, and Viktor passed the mug over easily. Having a taste or two, Yuri looked into the dark purple liquid, "Are you going to be okay with all this?"

"My concern is for Mimi." He explained, "I mean, it's weird to think that I'm technically an orphan now, but since I'm grown, it doesn't bother me so much...I already have a life established, and a new family. But Mimi is the last man standing from that group. He was basically as estranged from them as I was, and technically it was for more years, but...he really tried to reconnect with Kon when he got back. It must've been really hard to find things in the condition they were. I think this'll hit him harder than anyone."

"Yeah..."

"For now, the only thing we can really do is move forward on your plan to go to Imari tomorrow." Viktor said, changing the topic, "I'll get to see the pics of you in that display case, and with any luck, we'll figure out what's going on with Saito...and you can finally get your peace from him."

"Maybe going south will help Mik, too. It could at least serve as a distraction while he waits for that call."

"Yep. One thing at a time."
Despite having been home for a day and a half already, no groceries had been bought yet still. The orange peel for Viktor's mulled wine had been dried months back, kept in air-tight jars in a neat line - with his other favored ingredients - on the back of the counter. Still, there were enough non-perishable dry snacks around that the evening wasn't without something to nibble on. A bunch of brainless television was watched until people started dropping, and Viktor was the last one still awake.

Yuri had curled up around his frame like Makkachin used to, legs curled under upturned knees until he could rest his head on his partner's chest, one arm draped across his front. Minami had taken up residence on the edge of the kotatsu, and had fallen asleep leaning against it. Jiro and Makkachin had made a nest in the opposite corner of the couch from Viktor, squeezing in between Yuri and the cushion, keeping Viktor's feet warm. Blue eyes wandered to the time on the cable box though, reading nearly midnight, and he quietly resigned to the idea that it was probably time to go to bed.

"My love," He started whispering, trying to nudge his husband awake so he could unravel himself, "We should go upstairs."

"Mmmnh..."

Viktor began the delicate task of wiggling free, and helped his partner sit up normally again as he rose to stand next to the couch. He offered Jiro and Makkachin some pats as well before he looked around the room for the newest member of their pack. He didn't spot the lady-critter until he looked over the back of the couch and found her lying curled-up, half-underneath, with her nose pointing towards the back door. Viktor wasn't sure if that was a sign of her starting to relax, or if that's just how she'd always been. Knowing she'd basically been found in the woods as an abandoned pup made him question whether it was possible for her to be a normal happy dog. Without a second thought, he went around the end of the couch and sat on the floor next to the dark-colored creature, offering a few soft strokes over her head.

"Znaju, èto neprosto." (I know it's not easy.) He said quietly, "Dela pojдут lučše, obešaju." (Things will get better, I promise.)

"Everything okay?" Yuri wondered, adjusting his glasses a little.

Viktor glanced up, then back to the Shepherd, "I can't tell if this is just how she is, or if she's in shock or depressed or what. My father didn't really have her for a very long time, but he was all she had. I don't know if she understands what's going on."

"I'm sure she knows..." Yuri suggested, "She may have been stuck in another part of the house, but she would've been able to smell the change. We'll take her on a walk tomorrow and see how she
"...Are you okay with this...?" The Russian asked suddenly, looking up again at the face watching him from higher up, "Having her?"

"...Well, if I had my way we'd change her name at least. I have a hard time pronouncing it."

"What would you call her? Not Scruffy, I hope..."

"No way." He answered, shaking his head, "...I'd have to think about it. You should think of something, too."

"Maybe just Ghost."

"Oh...yeah, sure." Yuri agreed easily, yawning after. He turned away after that and moved towards Minami, nudging the teen's shoulders to wake him up, "We're all going to bed now, Minami-kun."

"Hokaayyyy..." He answered hazily, lifting his head slightly to look around with bleary eyes.

Makkachin and Jiro were both up then, sensing the transition, and they hopped down to start trotting towards the back door. Viktor rose up to slide the glass frame across, and the two pups went out for their midnight wee. The back yard was a small space, enclosed by a high wall of bushes that blocked the view to and from the street, but it was enough for the dogs to root around a little bit and get their business done. To his relief, Ghost got up as well and went out after the others, shuffling along with her tail and head down.

Viktor watched her go curiously, and rubbed his chin as he wrapped his arms around himself to shield him from the cold night air, "...She walks like she's 15 years old." He commented, "You'd never know she was barely a yearling if you hadn't been told."

Yuri looked back from where he'd helped usher Minami to the bottom of the stairs, and wandered back to the open doorway, rubbing one of his partner's arms as he got near, "I'm sure she'll be alright. This is a big change of scenery, even without the rest."

"We need to get her to the vet as soon as we can." The silver commented, pulling his spouse closer with an arm over his shoulders, "My father thought she was about 6 months old. She could have a heat cycle at any time if we don't get her fixed. I doubt he did it."

"Yeah..."

Jiro was the first to come back inside, and Yuri bent down to scoop him up like the wiggly bean he was. A towel was quickly procured and wet nubbins were dried before they were allowed to set down on the floor again. Viktor was sure to do the same with Makkachin as he came back through the doorway. Ghost submitted to the pat-down as well, though it was clear to see she was confused and uneasy, as Yuri could see the whites of her eyes when she looked around. With all three dogs accounted for and their twelve collective paws dried off, the door was closed again and the duo made for the stairs.

Keeping the lights down, they changed and got ready to sleep, but before Yuri could lie down, he pulled his MacBook out. Sitting in bed with it, he did a quick search for Caucasian Shepherds, and was notably surprised at what he found.

"What is it?" Viktor wondered, pulling the blankets up on his side as he got in, stripped to just his underpants...for Minami's sake, he at least wore something.
"...Although certain breeds are more vicious than others, they are often very aggressive and territorial towards other dog." He answered, reading off the screen, and leaned back as a terrifying image of a snapping and lunging adult Shepherd displayed, "...Maybe she's dangerous."

Viktor paused a moment, but then scooted closer, and looked over one shoulder to read the screen, 
"...The breed can be a good family dog, if it is well trained and socialized."

"I'm not sure about this." Yuri sighed, slouching where he sat, "I mean, she seems to be pretty sedate right now, but when she settles down and starts to show her real personality...?"

"Akitas are bad with small kids and other dogs, too. But they're being exposed to those things - and each other - really early on. As long as we consistently reinforce that we are the pack leaders, they will fall in line."

"Look at how big these guys get though..." Yuri pointed out, clicking over to a picture showing an adult standing next to a rather burly-looking mountain man, 
"...I already thought she was big, since she's bigger than Makkachin... But an adult... It's like a damn bear."

"And Akitas are bear-hunting dogs."

Yuri looked to where Viktor had perched on his shoulder and made a face, "All this talk of Akitas but not a peep about poodles."

"Makkachin will be the peace-maker. Poodles are pack dogs and are extremely social, with people and other dogs. He's got seniority between the three of them and the other two will learn to behave based on how he does. He's the example to follow." The silver explained, using one hand to push the laptop's lid down. He kept his husband's eyes on him alone as he moved to pull him down to the sheets and pillows, and slid in slightly over him with a kiss.

Yuri could feel hands roaming, and the laptop slid off his legs as they stretched out. He sighed a breath into one long kiss, and slid his hands up to curl gently around the back of his husband's neck, 
"...This could get R-rated in a hurry."

"I'll be good. You're still over-dressed though." Viktor pointed out, nuzzling the tip of his partner's nose adoringly, "I understand why, but..."

Pausing in the moment, Yuri huffed a disquieted grunt at himself and wiggled out of his t-shirt, casting it aside as Viktor lowered down to his skin for another kiss. The heat of it was welcome after standing in the cold doorway for so long earlier, but Yuri was too aware of Minami being down the hall to want it to go too much further. Somehow, either because Viktor said he would or because the man could read mind, Viktor backed off naturally, kissing the tip of his nose before lying down on his side.

"Is it weird that I want you more when I know I can't have you?" The silver laughed quietly, reaching up to find and place his pillow.

Yuri had reached down to find and secure the MacBook so it wouldn't get knocked off the bed while they slept, and he eased into his husband's embrace as he returned to his spot. The hot velvet skin of that chest against his bare back was better than the warmth of any blanket, and the hands that pressed to his chest and stomach were like the comforting pressure of a thunder-shirt, warding off all the evils of the world. He exhaled a relaxed sigh as Viktor spooned against him, and tried to look behind his shoulder, "If it were possible for either of us to be that quiet..."

"We could try." Viktor teased, giving a very deliberate push with his hips.
"And people say I'm the inappropriate one." Yuri harped with a laugh, but settled down again and reached for his own pillow to pull it under his head, "Sorry I fussed at you earlier." He added, sliding one hand against the forearm that came around his side, and held to the fingers pressed to his chest, "I guess I was just tense because I was waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"It's fine." The silver answered, kissing the back of one shoulder, "Maybe that's what I apologized for earlier. Not having that other shoe. It's done and over...I have no other feelings about it."

"You sure it's not just going to creep up on you later, like the firing did?"

Viktor didn't hesitate to shake his head no, "Not likely. I gave my father a chance for my mom's sake, out of the things I remembered about her later on. I tried, too, but I never quite got to the point where I liked the man. I left because he caused me pain, and he did it again when we reunited... The fact that he put his hands on you, and made you think you had to protect me...that was unforgivable. I just put those feelings away while I gave him a chance to figure out his priorities." He explained, and kissed that skin in front of him as he paused a moment, "He did apologize for some of the things he'd done, but he never went past that. He never tried to create something positive with me. Not hitting us isn't good enough. So..."

"...Yeah."

"I love you."

Yuri turned his head back again, and felt another kiss against his shoulder. Unable to twist so far around to return it though, he opted to pull his partner's fingers to his lips, and kissed them instead before putting the hand back to its favored place, "I love you, too."

Feeding Minami and putting him on a train back to Fukuoka Prefecture was the first task of the next morning, and he was a ball of energy the entire time. By the time he excitedly promised to win Gold in Colorado, Yuri and Viktor were ready for a mid-morning nap. But, there were chores to do yet, and they hopped back into their red Audi to go back home and pick up the pups. Makkachin was quickly let into the back seat, and his harness was resized and fitted around Ghost's excessively fuzzy frame before she, too, was lead into the back of the car. Yuri kept Jiro on his lap in the front passenger seat, though at about 12 weeks old, he was easily twice the size he'd been when he'd been gifted after the Grand Prix Final...and Yuri's legs felt the difference.

Getting to the beach-head though, Jiro quickly hopped out on his lead, and snuffled around the parking lot as the other two canines were brought out of the back. Makkachin was well-trained and stayed close by even without a leash or harness, but Ghost had developed a sort of gravitational paralysis since the harness had gone on. Viktor had to lift her up to get her out.

"Whew...okay then." He huffed, straightening out his coat and scarf, looking down at the nervous Shepherd, "I'm gonna speak in English from now on cuz basically everyone around you will, too. I know you've never been on a leash before but we aren't in the deep woods anymore, so leashes are a necessity until you learn to stay close like Makkachin does. Right!?" He called, turning to shout the word at his poodle.

Makkachin lifted his head from the frozen sand, ears flopping from the inertia, "Boorf!"

"Exactly." Viktor mused, looking back to the pup in front of him, whose tail was wagging slightly at the tip. "Alright then, let's get moving. If you get used to the leash quick enough, we'll turn this into a morning jog."
Ghost felt the tug on the back of her harness, but looking up to see the humans and two other dogs moving away from her were what got her to rise up and follow. Like the night before, she kind of shambled along like an arthritic old boofer, tail sunken low and head held down. After a few minutes though, and with a few encouraging pats on her head and shoulders, started to let herself get curious about the beach.

"Oh, Yuri, look!"

"Eh?"

"Her tail's up!"

Yuri looked behind his spouse and saw that the words wrung true, and the Shepherd's tail revealed itself to be near as curly as Jiro's, swaying back and forth, dragging long thick hairs across her back with each wag. He looked down to Jiro then, "You ready for this? We're gonna go."

The pup tilted his head curiously, but caught on quickly when he saw his two humans picking up the pace. He chased after them until he caught up, galloping alongside them as well as he could with his comparatively-short legs. Makkachin barked when he spotted them starting their slow run, and seemed to lead the way down the beach, checking back now and then to make sure no one had gotten lost. After several minutes, Yuri had to stop and go back to pick up Jiro, but then rushed to keep going again, carrying the tired puppy like a sand-bag in his arms.

By the time they'd made it nearly back to where they'd parked the car, Ghost's curiosity about the area lead them into the Niji no Matsubura Pine Grove, a strange stretch of woods between the beach sand and the road going along the coast. Within, the narrow trunks of the trees were twisted and gnarled, as though they grew along paths set by oddly-bent wires. Yuri found one that grew at a diagonal with a twist that made it an easy seat to collapse into, and fought to catch his breath. Jiro had regained his stamina by then and was sniffing around the area.

"What a strange forest." Viktor commented, looking around in every direction, "I know where we are but you can't see the road or the beach from in here. Kind of spooky."

"Y-Yu-chan and I...and Nishigori...used to come here...during the summer..." Yuri commented, still slumped against his tree-seat, "We'd...run all up and down...these woods."

"As little kids? You were allowed to do that?"

Yuri looked over, turning his beanie-covered head on the bark, "Y-Yeah...why not...?"

Viktork shrugged and smiled, "Guess you guys weren't as worried about getting lost. I had my spot in the woods to go to and stayed there. I got lost one time back then, and my dog had to come find me, so I didn't wander far after that."

"Oh..."

Looking at his phone, Viktor checked the time, "It's nearly 11am. We should head back to the car."

"Nearly 11am already? Yeesh...time flies..."

"Right?"

"Alright then..." Yuri huffed, throwing his arms forward to hoist himself back up to sitting. He looked down at Jiro, "You're walking the rest of the way. You're heavier than you look."
Viktor crouched down to Ghost's side and scritched one floppy ear, "Just as soon as you get to trusting us, we're about to betray it and take you to the vet. I assure you though, it's all for the best. They saved Makkachin's life once, and they've helped other dogs, too. I don't know how Mimi got you into the country without a rabies certificate but we'll be sure to fix you up properly."

"Don't say the V-word, she'll learn to know what it means." Yuri teased, stepping closer on the frost-crunchy sand.

"V, E, T, that spells walk." Viktor answered, rising back up again. He turned to find his poodle darting through the grove, and whistled as he reached for his husband's hand, "Makka! We're going!"

"Wu-worf!"
As a precaution, a cloth muzzle was put around Ghost's snout to keep her from biting or nipping. Having all the dogs with them at once made the room feel rather crowded, but between Yuri being the only one to know Japanese, and Viktor being the only one to know what his father might've said about the Shepherd's past, there was little they could do; the tech who came for them spoke broken English.

The veterinarian that came in after was different than the man who'd saved Makkachin, seen Jiro at his first appointment, and helped Hana. To that end, there was no teasing about any new 'broken dogs' that the skaters were bringing in. When they started getting down onto the ground though, getting at eye level with the nervous canine, the air in the room seemed to change.

Yuri observed from standing, watching the two attempt to put the dog at ease. Every bit of anxiety that Ghost felt, and especially as the level started to go down, just seemed to fill Yuri more and more instead. When they went to remove the cloth muzzle, Yuri backed up a step.

The vet's keen, bright eyes noticed the shuffle, and turned to look, [Are you scared of her?]

Sitting casually with Makkachin, Viktor turned his gaze upward. Not knowing what was said made it difficult to understand exactly what was going on, but he could read his husband like a book, and reached a hand out to press to Yuri's back for reassurance. He could feel the nervous flinch under his partner's layers, but kept his hand there anyway.

[...Uhm...yeah, a bit.] Yuri finally managed, [She hasn't done anything yet that I know of, but we only just got her yesterday. You could...er...say...that she came from a rough place. I just don't know what she's learned up until now.]

[She's a bit nervous, but considering what she's been through in the last few days, that's to be expected. Just give her some space and meet her where she's at.]

Yuri's eyes widened briefly, "...Hai..."

The blue cloth muzzle came away, and Ghost licked her nose, keeping her ears back and eyes peeled. With a lot of encouragement, pets, a few snacks, and expert movements, the entire exam seemed over in a heartbeat. A few notes were dictated and written into a digital chart, and some vials with different-colored caps were pulled out from under a counter. A needle, a clear plastic vacutainer to attach to it, and a squirt-bottle of alcohol were gathered as well, set onto the end of the counter.

[We're going to draw some blood now.] The vet explained, as though in warning to keep a distance in case of resistance, or worse, fainting at the sight of that sanguine liquid.

Yuri nodded, and found himself swallowing a nervous lump in his throat. To his immense relief, he felt a pair of hands tug on his coat pockets to pull him backward, and he found himself sitting on his partner's lap, wrapped in warm arms to keep him calm as much as Ghost. They all watched intently as the tech crouched behind the massive canine, giving a few reassuring pats before gently reaching to pull Ghost's head up, fingers firm around the pup's snout, keeping her nose up. The vet squirted alcohol into the fur on one side of her neck, pressing it in to cleanse the skin as he searched for the pulse of a carotid beneath the surface. Poke, one, two, three vials, withdraw, pressure, done. Ghost barely noticed anything, beyond the odd positioning of people around her. She licked her nose again
when she was let go, and was given one last treat for her cooperation. The vet and his assistant stood up to collect the vials and turned to complete the visit.

[So,] He started, having been entirely un-phased by the Shepherd's demeanor, [She does appear to be about six or seven months old. She has some growing to do yet, but her teeth are all basically brand new and perfectly clean. Since not much is known about the kind of care she had before, I'm going to go ahead and just give her all the regular shots she should get at her first puppy visit, deworm her, and get her scheduled for a spay surgery. She'll need to be back in two weeks for booster shots. Sounds good?]

Yuri had stood up again while the vet was speaking, and bowed his head, [Yes, thank you.]

[Okay, then we'll be right back while we pull the right vaccines from the fridge. Hold tight.] The door out the back of the room opened and closed, and the small square space fell to silence, save Makkachin's soft panting. Ghost stayed where she was, though the worry was as obvious on her face as it would be on any human's. She whined slightly, and her paws slid down on the tile floor until she was lying down, and put her chin on the floor.

Viktor frowned slightly at the sight, and he pat his husband's side to get him to stand up, "We've got to try to integrate her into the family better..." He commented, "I know she was my father's dog, but she's ours now. We can't treat her like she's going to hurt us like he did."

"I know..." Yuri said, though not very convincingly. He watched quietly as Viktor crouched down beside the dark-furred pup, and gently stroked a hand down the length of her head and back.

"What did the vet say?" The silver asked, twisting around so he could sit with his back against the wall, and extended his legs alongside the Shepherd's long frame.

Yuri sat where Viktor had risen from, and pulled Jiro close to his hip where the pup sat on the bench next to him. Makkachin got up and started sniffing around the room, nails tapping on the hard floor. "He said that she's as old as we believed, and that he'll be right back with her shots. She'll need to come back for boosters when we get back from the States."

"It sounded like he asked you something."

"Oh..." Yuri said, quietly, looking slightly aside. He felt Jiro lick his fingers, and he let the small distraction assuage his nerves, "He...asked me if I was afraid of her. When I backed up."

"Are you?" Viktor wondered, a bit surprised.

Brows furrowed, but Yuri nodded, "I can't get the images of those pictures I saw online out of my head. I'm...scared that my fear of her will make her want to do something to me. A dog her size could..."

"She's just as scared as you are." Viktor attempted, massaging the scruff of Ghost's neck soothingly, "But she hasn't even bared her teeth or growled or anything. I think you're scaring yourself over something that isn't meant to be."

"What do you mean...?"

"Those scary pictures of dogs like her were meant to be shocking. These kinds of dogs are used in Russian prisons. But...even poodles can be terrifying, given the right circumstances." He explained, using his free hand to find his phone, and poked around on it to find a picture, "Can you imagine being afraid of Makkachin?"
Eyes went to the silly-looking boofer, and that brown fuzzy tail swayed back and forth with added enthusiasm at the sound of his name.

"Afraid of *Makkachin*?" Yuri echoed, and thumbed at the pup, "*Him*?

"What if he looked like this?" Viktor asked, turning his phone around to show a picture on its screen. Yuri squinted as he leaned forward, and beheld the startling image of a photo...of a brown standard poodle snarling viciously, teeth on full display, lips curled back like it would jump out of the phone and go for his throat if it could. He sat back and held Jiro a bit closer, rubbing the front of his neck nervously, "...I...bet that's what Makkachin looked like when those guys came to the camper."

"Ghost could protect you like that, too." Viktor suggested, and put his phone back into his jacket. He smiled and went back to his soothing pets, "Imagine having a Russian Prison dog defending you against those guys."

Yuri swallowed again, but then steeled himself, and rose up from the bench to join his husband on the floor.

"No fear. Just warmth."

With a nod, Yuri offered his hand forward, fingers relaxed. He reached carefully towards Ghost's nose, and she lifted her head as she spotted the shadow of it out the corner of her eye. A quick sniff, but she turned away then, and to the surprise of both, got up entirely. She walked out of reach, heading towards Makkachin at first, sniffing the baseboards and looking around. They could see that she didn't hold her tail between her legs like she had the night before; it was held neutrally, not wagging, just relaxed. Just as quickly as she'd gotten up though, she turned back around, seemed to sniff the air in Jiro's direction, and then made a B-line straight for Yuri. To his shock and Viktor's amusement, the massive fluff-beast tucked her legs under herself...and flopped against Yuri's side. Viktor huffed a laugh and smiled, "Looks like you've just been adopted."

Yuri was half-paralyzed at first, but feeling the dog seem to relax where she'd slumped made him feel better about the whole thing, and he dared to run his fingers through the fur on the side of her neck. That just made the pup lift her head, pressing her noggin against Yuri's ribs before he lifted his arm over her, and she looked up at him, cheek against the front of his coat. Those dark brown eyes were penetrating, but unlike before, Yuri couldn't see the whites at the edges anymore. It was like her anxiety had all gone away...and so, too - finally - had his own.

"I...guess I was jumping to conclusions." He admitted sullenly, feeling the butterflies in his stomach fluttering away into calm, "All this worrying about her being mean and it turns out she just wants to cuddle."

"More specifically, she wants cuddles from *you*." Viktor teased, getting a look for it, but he smiled anyway, "I can't blame her. You're a Master Cuddler, in my humble opinion."

"I wonder, why me though? It was *you* who had been trying to connect with her before." Yuri wondered, gently stroking his fingers up and down the dog's neck and chin.

"Maybe because you're the exact opposite of my father. He was huge and overbearing, but you're small and friendly. He was cold, you're warm. Or..." Viktor's thoughts trailed, a finger coming up over his lips, "Maybe she sensed your vulnerability and felt a kindred spirit."

Yuri huffed a breath and shook his head, "You still think I'm vulnerable?"
"Skaters have hearts of glass." He answered, but then pointed forward with the finger that had been on his lip, "You've had the misfortune of dealing with people who walk into yours like raging bulls, smashing everything in sight without even realizing."

"Sounds like you're projecting," Yuri teased.

Viktor leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes, "I don't know what you're talking about." He mused, "I've always walked as delicately as a deer, stepping carefully to avoid damaging the undergrowth."

Yuri made quite the face, "Like a deer, huh?"

Watching the television in the common room, though paying little attention to it, Minako kept watch over her subdued partner. Mikhail hadn't really slept, and was slumped over the edge of one of the many low tables. They kept to the back corner though to avoid notice, and let other patrons lord over the remote control.

"Hun, you haven't eaten." Minako commented quietly, rubbing one hand across the back of his shoulders.

"I feel like I did it to him." He answered, entirely off topic. He sighed and slid his fingers into his hair, covering his forehead with the palms of his hands, head bent low, "I told him months ago that, one day, I'd find him in that house, frozen to death. And now..."

"It's not your fault." Minako tried to reassure, "You weren't even there."

"I was part of the last conversation he ever had." Mikhail retorted, sliding fully down to cross his arms and bury his face, "I can't get it out of my head... The idea that we all hung up the phone in the end, and Kon just... quietly slipped away without notice."

"It only seems worse than it is because of what was being talked about at the time." She pointed out, "If it was his time...but had chosen differently...then it would've come across as a terrible irony. He finally agrees to accept Viktor and Yuri for who and what they are, and then he doesn't get to do a single thing to be part of their lives. An unfulfilled promise. Maybe it's better this way...that he didn't get anyone's hopes up first."

"I can't not feel bad about him dying." Mikhail retorted, "Promises or disappointments aside, whatever anyone else thought of him, I still went way back with him. All of our parents died years ago... we were the only ones left. Now...I'm the only one left..." He sighed and tilted his head, looking towards his lady love beside him, "It's not often that I feel out of my depth, but...I'm there now. I'm not even sure if I feel bad because he's gone, or if it's because I'm still here."

"You think you have survivor's guilt...? But...why...?"

"Kon always wanted a big family, close ties to his kids, to be proud of what he was able to help them become. But..." Mikhail sighed a sad grumble, "That was all denied to him. Instead, I was the one who got everything he ever hoped for...and in some sad twist of fate, it was everything I'd been trying to avoid." He shook his head and rose back up onto his elbows, hooking a few fingers together under his chest, "I sabotaged engagements arranged by my parents. I terrorized girls I didn't want to be around. I did everything I could to destroy Kon and Tat, too, and was less successful there... But it seems like when the universe was handing out boons and banes, it missed Kon entirely, and everything he should've had ended up sticking to me like lint. I thought I was being punished. If
Kon had known what I'd been up to after leaving, he would've hated me for stealing his destiny."

"I don't know how much it means, coming from me, since I don't know much about your history
with him...but..." Minako started, nudging the elder with a shoulder as she pressed onto the table next
to him, "Even if you never wanted all this family stuff, it seems to have grown on you. At some
point, something clicked, and you took it really seriously. Konstantin could've had something like it,
but he threw it away. You rose to the occasion and he cringed away from it. Even Viktor tried to
make a father out of him, and Viktor didn't owe him anything."

"And he suffered for those efforts..."

"I think he's over it. He had the high-ground and held onto it, by being the one who offered that
peace between them. He can go on with his life knowing he wasn't the one who said no."

"...I know...I just..."

Minako pulled away from the table, and wiggled her way back along the floor-mat until she could sit
behind the melancholy figure, and pressed her hands to the small of his back, kneading that tense
flesh gently. "You shouldn't have to feel bad because you got what Kon wanted, and he didn't. That
kind of mind-set will just spread to the things you care about... Your kids will wonder if you regret
that they exist, and that's not fair to them. You don't have to take on some imaginary weight of
unhappiness just to make things seem more equal. No one out there is tallying up how you and Kon
rationed out your successes. Life doesn't work like that. Rarely do things work out the way we want
them to." She said quietly, working her way up the length of Mikhail's back, and back down again,
finding all the knots and rough spots along the way.

"...Yeah..."

Makkachin suddenly came flying by, rushing into the common-room with tongue lolling out. Jiro
chased after him, and both caught sight of those familiar faces as they spun around looking for their
other humans. They wasted no time with their excited greetings, and rushed back out again, as if to
tell their main people that they'd found someone.

"Oh hey, just who we were looking for." Viktor commented, trying not to trip over his dog as
Makkachin went darting between his legs, "We just got back from the vet with Ghost."

"...Ghost?" Minako echoed in confusion.

"Prizrak." Viktor corrected, "...It means Ghost in Russian. It's the name my father gave the dog that
Mimi brought with him."

"Oh."

Viktor laughed a bit, "Yuri said he had a hard time pronouncing it, so we settled on calling her Ghost
instead."

"V-Viktor!" Yuri's voice suddenly called from the foyer, and eyes turned to the doors, "Sh-She's too
big...I can't move."

Much to the Russian's amusement, he spotted Ghost pinning Yuri to the floor with her head on his
chest and her tail swaying proudly, "What on earth did you do?" He laughed, coming over to help
get his husband up. Jiro was trotting nearby as well, thinking it was a game.

"I was trying to see if she could learn to sit on command, but when I went down to a knee, she got
excited and walked right into me. I fell over, and then she laid down." Yuri explained, "...This feels
"You've been bowled over by dogs before?" Viktor teased, wedging his hands under his partner's arms and pulled up, watching those lanky legs slide out from under the Shepherd's ample fluff.

"...Oh yeah, when you first got here." Yuri recalled, putting his feet under himself to stand on his own, "I was going to go out and shovel snow, but Makkachin caught me in the doorway. He knocked me backwards. My dad said he belonged to a good-looking foreigner, and...that was the moment I knew you were here."

"Ah, then the stampede happened."

"Yeah." Yuri laughed at himself, and looked back down to Ghost as she propped up to sit, her curly tail swaying softly still. She sat up and scooted forward an inch or two and licked her nose, looking between the two eagerly. Yuri leaned down to ruffle her fuzzy ears, "You're much bigger than Makkachin though, aren't you? I couldn't get up on my own."

"You'll make Jiro jealous if you talk to her that way." Viktor warned jokingly, making the Akita's head tilt at the sound of his name, "Anyway though, Mimi and Minako are in the food hall. We should go talk to them. We don't have tons of time if we want to get back for dinner."
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED FOURTY TWO

With all three dogs corralled into the common-room, Yuri and Viktor sat at the same table, opposite Minako and Mikhail. It didn't take too long for the younger duo to spot the subdued atmosphere around the older pair though, and the nervous enthusiasm that they'd had for saying they were going to try and track down their wayward Olympian was replaced by concern.

"...You look really tired, Mimi." Viktor pointed out obviously, but then turned to Yuri beside him, "Maybe we should just go on our own, and tell them how it goes?"

"Tell us how what goes?" Minako asked, leaning forward on her elbows, "What are you two plotting?"

"We were going to go to Imari for the afternoon." Yuri answered for them, "Viktor wants to see the pictures of me that are still on display at the rink there, from my Junior days. We were also going to see if we can find Asahi."

Minako looked surprised, but Mikhail kept his same affect, looking back at them blearily, "Okay."

The skating pair side-eyed one another, but then looked forward again, "...Just...okay?"

Mikhail rubbed his face with one hand, "I've tried to reach out to him, but he won't answer. Maybe he got another phone and doesn't even realize anyone's been calling. He dropped from Four Continents on top of that. Maybe he'll drop from the Olympics in time, too. Wherever it is, he's making an effort to not be found, at least not by us." He explained, and brushed his hand through his hair in tired frustration, "I can't decided if it would help him or feel like an attack, if we all went down there to track him down."

"...I was going to message him myself when we got there." Yuri pointed out, "I feel like...I might be the only one he answers."

"Why do either of you want to run him down like this?" The elder wondered, perhaps a bit too pointedly, "This was such a contentious issue for you both. Going after him is like walking into a fire." He added, and watched them struggle to answer at first. He gestured at his nephew, "Viktor? You're letting this happen?"

Viktor just shook his head, "I'm not letting anything happen. We spent half the weekend arguing back and forth about this issue because Yuri started remembering things. Every time there was an opportunity for me to ask you to make an effort to get Saito to move on from this place, I was either asked to leave it alone, or something else came up. Yuri believes that he slighted Saito and that it's haunted the both of them unfairly ever since. He feels strongly about apologizing, on the hope that they can both finally move on from it."

Minako quirked a brow and gazed at the young man sitting across from her, "What'd you do to him?"

"I just abandoned him, and then forgot about him entirely. I...didn't even notice when he vanished"
from competition rosters."

"That's because you vanished at the same time, dummy." Minako chided, "You wouldn't have noticed he was gone because you weren't there either." Yuri sank down to the table. "Don't talk down to him about this issue." Viktor warned, to the shock of all, "He already feels bad enough about it. He doesn't need the people he trusts telling him he's stupid."

Minako slowly pulled her elbows off the table, and kept her arms crossed across herself as she sat up straight, saying nothing but posturing defiantly anyway. She looked to Mikhail for a defense in turn, but he said nothing at first. He just looked on at Yuri with a ponderous look on his face. "Anyway," Viktor went on, "We thought we'd tell you about our plans because we intended to invite you along. You've both been involved with him enough that we thought you'd want to be a part of tracking him down."

"You haven't figure out where he is yet though." Mikhail pointed out, slouching against the palm of one hand as he leaned on the corner of the table, "Imari is a good bet, but...he could've just as easily returned to Tokyo, or maybe even all the way back to Wakkanai."

"It's possible." Viktor agreed, "But at least for my purposes, I want to try Imari first."

"...Abused kids often go back to the people who abused them, even if they have the option not to." Mikhail added, rubbing a finger over his mouth as he thought about it, "If he did go back there though, I'm sure his family would've pressured him to get me off their asses. Since I haven't heard a peep though, he's either got a stronger constitution than that, or... Well, a myriad of other things could've happened." He said, and paused a moment, but then pushed to sit upright, "I'll go."

"You going to be okay to drive? We're bringing the pack with us."

That made Mikhail huff a quiet laugh, "The pack indeed. Should I round up mine?"

Viktor looked to Yuri, but Yuri shook his head, "Yurio said that he and Asahi smoothed things over, but I don't know if that means they liked each other. Where are they all right now?"

"Vikki's here; she wanted to get back into some kind of routine after all the globe-trotting since I uprooted everyone. I think she's working with Mari on something upstairs. Yura and Nikki went to the Ice Castle about an hour ago. All three are trying to wear themselves out so they can sleep. They were all a bit restless last night, and I'm not a fan of drugging my kids to knock them out."

Viktor deadpanned him severely, "You were willing to drug me." He muttered. "They weren't trying to get into bed with me. You were."

Yuri gave his partner a look, but Viktor didn't act like he saw it. "You offered me the muscle relaxants from your surgery before that happened."

"Why were you trying to sleep with your uncle...?" Minako asked. "That makes it sound way worse than it actually was!" The silver defended, "I haven't slept alone for years! I didn't have Yuri or Makkachin with me. I just...felt like a kid that was scared of the dark or something. I just wanted to know that someone was there with me. My brain does weird things when
I'm exhausted and over-stimulated."

Mikhail smirked at the memory, "I did have to kick you out like four times..."

"In Viktor's defense, he does seem to have a sixth sense about that sort of thing... He'll wake up if he realizes I'm not there. Then he'll find me. He's jumped into the shower with me at least twice because of it." Yuri explained, looking aside for a moment as he felt Jiro trying to wedge himself into the space between his and Viktor's crossed legs. He put his hand under the attention-seeking puppy's chest, and pulled the Akita into his lap, his other hand still where it was keeping Ghost placated on the other side, "Anyway though... We wanted to be done and back here by dinner-time. We need to get going."

As the skating duo made their way up to their feet, Mikhail looked to his lady love, "Are you going to come or...?"

"I'd like to, but...honestly, all this travel still has me completely wiped out. I'd be a drag on things." Minako answered, looking a bit disappointed, "I'll probably be down for a nap in an hour or two. Drive carefully and let me know how it goes, okay?"

Mikhail waited a moment, but then nodded, leaned over to kiss her cheek, then her hand, and rose up from the table, "Hopefully there'll be something to say about it. I'm really curious about what made him decide to leave like this."

As Yuri and Viktor herded their pack out of the room, Mikhail followed soon after, and Minako waved quietly as they all went. She spotted Hiroko coming towards them on the other side of the open door, and the surprise of seeing a third pup.

"Oh my..." She started, wiping her hands off with a dish-towel she was carrying, "Where'd this one come from...?"

Yuri looked up at her, then down to Ghost, then back to his mom, "Oh...she was actually Viktor's father's dog, but..."

"Oh..." Hiroko answered quietly, and looked to Viktor, "I'm so sorry. I'd heard last night after you two already left..."

The silver smiled as well as he could, "It's fine. He and I...weren't close." He answered, and came back up from the lower step of the foyer. Shuffling across the hardwood, Viktor made his way closer to his in-law, and leaned down to gently take her hands into his own, "The Katsuki and Rozovsky clans are my family. As long as I have all of you, everything is right in the world."

Hiroko's face lit up, and she smiled brightly as Viktor kissed each of her cheeks before moving off again, "Things wouldn't be the same without you, too, Vik-chan." She said, and watched the trio finish getting their shoes and coats back on. Just as Yuri stood up though, Hiroko smacked her hands together, "We need to update the photo!" She called, drawing their attention, "The one that warns customers that there may be a puppy stampede." She laughed, pointing at the one for Makkachin and a much-smaller Jiro, "MARI!"

The woman's voice went all the way to the second floor, where Mari and Viktoria were busy cleaning the family's residence, and the two put their chores aside and made their way for the stairs. When they arrived in the foyer, Mari looked around in confusion, "What is it?"

"Would you mind taking a picture with your phone? We need to update the puppy poster!"

"...Oh." She deadpanned, but then pulled her cellphone from her apron pocket and nodded as she
moved towards her mother. She lifted a hand towards her brother and in-law, as though orchestrating their movements, "Can you gather them all up in one spot then?"

Viktora spotted her father all done-up to leave, and her brow furrowed, "Where are you going...?"

"I'm going with these kids to Imari, to try and figure out what happened to Asahi." He answered, watching as Viktor and Yuri gathered up their trio of wiggly boofers, in an attempt to line them up for the picture, "Minako's going to stay behind. Yura and Nikki should be back in a little while, too."

"...Oh."

Mikhail could sense the tension on her voice, and stepped behind Mari and Hiroko to avoid a photo-bomb, as he got to the other side where Viktoria was still standing by the entryway to the back hall. He squished his arms around her in a hug, "I'll be back in a few hours." He explained, though didn't get a hug back, and could feel her prickliness over the whole thing. With the rest of the group still distracted by trying to get the photo, Mikhail leaned down to look into his daughter's face, hands gently on her shoulders, and he spoke quietly, "I know you think I'm stretching myself too thin by helping with so many people, and that you resent me for it... But in this case, it's a venture to cut myself loose from one of them. I just want to get an explanation as to why he left. I'm not going to ask him to come back. This is for closure's sake...not to open another Pandora's Box."

Viktoria breathed out an annoyed sigh through her nose, but then nodded, and leaned forward to give a small hug against the crook of his neck.

"Oh wow, this picture came out really good!" Yuri commented, drawing their attention back again, "Can you text this to me so I can post it online?"

Mari nodded and started clicking on her phone's screen, "Yeah, sure."

"This is going to be a great shot for 'Pups of Nikiforov,'" Yuri added, and pulled his own phone out to wait for the message, "We can introduce everyone to Ghost, now that she's settling in and doesn't look scared all the time." Ding! "Oh, there it is! Ahhhh I'm gonna post this right now!"

"Type it in the car, my love." Viktor laughed, nudging his husband towards the open door, practically penguin-walking him forward with hands on each shoulder. He glanced back to where Mikhail was still chatting with Viktoria, "Papa Mimi!"

"Coming." The elder called back, and gave one last kiss to his daughter's cheek before he went out after them. He pawed for the key fob in his pocket, and the dark, gunmetal-grey Lexus hummed quietly to life as he approached. As he went to the opposite side to get into the driver's seat, he looked over the roof to the pair loading their larger two pups into the back seat of the smaller Audi, "Should I follow you or do we want to just meet at the rink?"

"Yes." Viktor smiled.

Mikhail narrowed his eyes skeptically, "...Okay."

Yuri turned around after scooping Jiro into the footwell of the front seat, "Do you know where the rink in Imari is?"

"I could find it if I had to."

"...I guess then just follow us. If we get separated somehow, we'll wait for you in the parking lot until you show up."
"Alright, sounds good." Mikhail agreed, and sat down into his new car. The Audi roared loudly as Viktor turned it on, in stark contrast to the hybrid Lexus purring ever-so-lightly, and the bright red coup pulled out and turned towards the street.

Yuri looked in the rearview mirror to watch as the larger vehicle came out after them, and then sat back, looking at his phone again, "He's there."

"Alright, let's go do this thing."

pups-of-nikiforov
[pic]
Liked by phichit-chu and 7,298 others
pups-of-nikiforov @v-nikiforov and I want to introduce the newest member of the Nikiforov Pack!
This is Ghost, she's a 6 month old #CaucasianShepherd and #MeansSeriousBusiness, and is starting to learn #HowToDog after a weird start in life. She's doing really great so far and it looks like she'll be getting used to Japan pretty quickly. これが「ゴースト」です。私たちの新しい犬です！
View all 419 comments

phichit-chu omg! New puppies! They pop up faster than new hamsters do n_n;
kenjirou-m I was JUST THERE and I didn't see this precious face!?

Yuri smiled as he read through the comments, happy at all the welcoming comments, and a number that had mentioned how much bigger Jiro had gotten. Others still mused about Makkachin's apparent immortality, looking the same now as he had when Viktor was a teenager and posted the first picture of the poodle, "It's nice to know I'm not the only one who thought it was Makkachin this whole time..."

"Hah?" Viktor gaped in confusion.

"Makka will outlive us all, apparently." Yuri teased, and put his phone away. He pat the side of Jiro's chest as he kept the pup propped up against himself to let him look out the window as they drove, and returned his other hand to its usual perch on the Russian's nearest leg, "You've never clarified that your first poodle was a different dog, and Kubochin looks practically like an origins dog that Makkachin was practically cloned from..."

"Vik-chan looks just like them, too, albeit fun-size." Viktor mused, "And I've met a number of people who brought lookalike dogs to competition, saying they got the pups because of mine."

"Guilty as charged."

"As long as people keep their dogs for life, that's all that matters. It's always bothered me when people get a pet because some celebrity or show made them popular, only to ditch them when the thing isn't in fashion anymore." Viktor added, somewhat grimly, "Every home should have a dog, and every dog should have a home."

"Agreed." Yuri nodded, glancing up over the shoulder of his seat to look at the two larger pups in the back seat; Ghost had apparently taken up the habit of panting just like Makkachin did, and so the pair of them were back there panting softly with those big pink tongues hanging out under their noses. He smiled and looked out the windshield again, watching the Japanese countryside pass them by, as well as the occasional car, "...Do you...think I should message him now or...?"

"Let's wait till we're in Imari." Viktor suggested, "If it turns out that he's not there, but does answer, we should be in a calm, quiet place for you to have that conversation. I can't focus on driving if
"You're talking to him..."

"Yeah..." Yuri agreed quietly, "I just hope he's there. I'd rather talk to him in person. There's so many ways that he could avoid me otherwise, or make up a story about how he's doing since neither of us can see his face to know he's lying."

"Do you think he'd do that?"

"He ran away, didn't he?"

"So did you."

"From lots of things..." Yuri sighed, "But I've never been good at hiding things. Asahi's spent his whole life doing that though. Even if he doesn't outright lie to me about something, he could easily obscure the truth by being vague."

"How much of what he's up to do you really want to know though?" Viktor wondered, "It's one thing to ask the right questions to make sure he's physically and mentally safe, but beyond that is kind of unnecessary, don't you think?"

"I'm not about to suggest that we inspect and approve whatever apartment he may have gotten." Yuri huffed dryly, giving that thigh a reassuring squeeze, "I just want to be convinced that he's okay. I want to be sure that he's okay and that he'll continue to be okay when we're gone."

"If he's in Imari, there's a good chance he may have gone back to his parents, and be in that abusive situation again." Viktor warned, "We can't take him back to Hasetsu with us again."

"...I want to believe that he's stronger than that." Yuri said, looking on resolutely, "He's had enough of a taste of freedom, and has gotten so much support from the skating community, that he isn't forced by circumstance to move back into their house. He was trapped before, and had no choice. I'm really hoping that, if he's there, it's because things are better now. That what Mik did to shift the balance of power out there, will have done enough to make it safer for Asahi to be out and public in the city."

"I hope so, too, but...just in case. Mentally prepare yourself for seeing something you won't like."

"That's why I'm glad Mik decided to come." Yuri explained, "There are things that he can do that we can't. Being outside the conflict from Nationals makes him the perfect trump card. He can say the same things we would, but coming from him, it might mean something different to Asahi. Also, being so much older kind of gives him the wise elder edge."

"Pfft... Don't tell him that." Viktor laughed, "But, I get it. Getting input from someone other than us might mean the difference between whether he listens or not."

"Yeah."

"Well... Let's get to the rink, look at all your adorable baby pictures, and take it from there." Viktor suggested, "Maybe fate will smile on us today and we'll run into him there because he's fine and he's skating."
Watching Viktor ogling the photos in the display case was like watching Mari and Minako blubbing at the table in Barcelona, tears flooding down from their eyes for the sheer joy of getting to sit with so many skaters. Or, in Viktor's case, seeing so many adorable photos of his precious cinnamon roll.

"He's just so beautiful," The Russian said, leaving wet smears in his wake as he went from one framed picture to the next, "So young and so innocent, so full of life, so full of hope."

Yuri deadpanned his husband severely, "If someone had told me back then that one day, Viktor Nikiforov would be sliding his face across a display case, looking at pictures of me, I'd have said they were nuts." He mumbled to himself, and looked down to Jiro sitting next to his legs, "This is excessive, right?"

The pup tilted his head as he looked up.

As though imitating his human, Makkachin rose up and put his paws to the glass, sniffing at the clear surface. Ghost just sat patiently, living up to her name by being completely silent. She looked around a little bit, but kept dutifully close to Yuri's side. The sound of the sports complex echoed off the painted cinderblock walls. The skating rinks on one side, and the pool area and gymnastics sections on the other. The smell of chlorine and splashes was most prominent, but trained ears heard the sound of blades scratching on the ice...and then the click of dress-shoes on the concrete coming nearer.

"I don't see him," Mikhail reported, approaching the pair where he'd left them earlier, "I'd go into the changing rooms but that would be weird."

"I'll just text him," Yuri said, rifling into his dark-blue pea-coat for his phone. Seemingly at ease with his actions, Yuri went easily into a contact window, and loaded up a new text message to his former rink-mate's number; an empty window that had never been used before. With the leash-loops sliding down Yuri's wrists, he took the phone in both hands, thumbs ready to type, and paused, "...Hm."

Viktor pulled his face off the display-case with the sound of a suction-pop, and looked back. "'Hm' what?"

"I've had all this time to figure out what I wanted to say in this message, but now that I'm about to write it, I'm blank."

"Why not keep it simple?" Mikhail suggested, "If he answers, you'll have plenty of time to talk anyway. If he doesn't, then you didn't waste all your time on an essay he won't reply to."

"Yeah..." Yuri nodded, and typed it out in as few words as possible.

[朝日, どこにいるの?]

With a nervous gulp, Yuri clicked 'Send' and waited. A marginal relief was that he saw the word-bubbles were in blue, which meant Asahi's phone was also an iPhone, and he would know if and whether Asahi's eyeballs ever saw the message he'd sent. However, whether where it said 'Sent' ever changed to 'Read' remained to be seen. It felt like days passed as he stared at that tiny blurb of text, but nothing seemed to happen.
"...Either he's busy, his phone is on silent, or he doesn't have that number anymore." Yuri surmised, "Maybe this was a fool's errand all along."

"Let's swing by his parents' house and see what it looks like." Mikhail suggested, "Even if he's not there, I'm still curious."

"Yeah..." Yuri agreed sullenly. Viktor scooped up his hand and rubbed a thumb over it, and he leaned into its comfort as they started heading back towards the exit doors.

Mikhail turned to follow, but then paused, and turned back to look through the glass of the display case. In spite of the many looping smudge-marks where his nephew's face had leaked all over the panes, he noticed something; Viktor hadn't smudged any of the other sections. Inside the case, every photo featured Yuri...on his own. There were no photos that had been folded and repositioned, with the backs coming through on the other side. There were no pictures where faces had been cut out or covered. Mikhail rubbed his chin ponderously, and then backed up a few paces and looked at a banner he'd noticed above the whole thing, but hadn't really looked at before.

[伊万里市のオリンピック選手、平昌で頑張ってください]

"Mimi, aren't you coming?" Viktor called back, the bunch of them standing half-in, half-out through the first set of doors.

"Can you guys come back for a second?" He called back, eyes stuck on the banner.

The duo looked at one another, but then shrugged and returned as asked. Viktor stepped up closest to his uncle, and lifted his eyes, "What are you looking at...?"

"That." Mikhail answered, nudging his head towards the hanging cloth, "Yuri, do the thing?"

Brow furrowed, Yuri took a step back and looked up, and read across the long length of blue and white material, "Imari-shi no Orinpikku senshu, Hirama-sa de ganbatte kudasai." He said aloud, "Oh, they're wishing us luck."

"Translation, Yuri, not interpretation." Mikhail clarified stiffly.

"Imari City Olympic athletes, please do your best in PyeongChang." He answered, "What difference does it make?"

"Your husband appears to have tunnel-vision," The elder answered, and stepped to the side slightly. He looked down at the next case over, then over again, then over again, "Here."

Viktor made a face, "Tunnel-vision? What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you missed something super-obvious while you were salivating over Yuri's baby pictures."

"I was a teenager." Yuri defended, "Why does everyone call them baby pictures?"

There wasn't much else to say as the pair and their trailing pack came up beside Mikhail at the other display-case. Though they'd passed two others on the way over - one of a speed skater, and another of a long-distance skier - when they looked into the case in front of them, they realized it was just for Asahi. Every photo featured him, none were cut off, none were off-centered to minimize him in any way. He was just as well-featured as the other athletes being honored.

"...Oh." Viktor mumbled, staring at the glass case.
"They put everything back..." Yuri realized, "They aren't hiding him like before."

"Maybe he isn't doing as bad as we worried." Mikhail surmised, "If he isn't here though, maybe we should tell him what's happened."

Yuri agreed with a nod, and pulled his phone back out again. He backed up to the wall on the opposite side of the hall, held the device up, and took a picture of the banner, then another one directly of the display case, and sent them both with a note of congratulations. The new messages joined the cue of yet-to-be-seen texts, and Yuri put his phone back again, "...Well, I guess, if this is how we have to leave it, it's more-or-less good enough."

Ding

Stunned, Yuri furrowed his brow and pulled his phone out again, and to his surprise, the preview message displayed clearly a note which he hadn't expected.

斉藤 朝日
[なぜはここにいるの？]

"Was it him?" Mikhail asked, looking over Yuri's shoulder but unable to read the text.

"...Y-Yeah." He answered, "He's asking why we're in Imari. Er...I mean, he's asking why we're here. That has to mean he's here, too."

"Well, answer him!" The elder encouraged, "Get to typin!"

Yuri blanched, but returned to his phone and wrote out his answer, [私たちは朝日見つけるようになりました] He then shook his head, "The irony is that, because Japanese names have inherent meanings, saying we came to find him actually sounds really poetic and sad."

"Why's that?" Viktor asked.

"Because my question, literally translated, says that 'we came to find the morning sun.' That's what 'Asahi' means." He answered, and heard another beep from his phone.

斉藤 朝日 (Saito Asahi)
[私たち。か？] (We?)

[私、ヴィクトル、そしてミハイル。] (Me, Viktor, and Mikhail.)

斉藤 朝日 (Saito Asahi)
[おわかりした。] (I understand.)

[会えますか？] (Can we meet?)

斉藤 朝日 (Saito Asahi)
[外に出してください。]

Yuri sent a thumbs-up emoji in place of more words, and put his phone back, "He said to go outside. He must be nearby." He explained. Mikhail offered a quick shoulder-rub as he passed by, and made a quick B-line for the exit doors. Yuri was puzzled by the reaction, and looked to Viktor, "...Why'd he do that?"

"Guess it's his way of saying good job?"

"Good job for what...being right?"
Viktor laughed quietly, and retook his partner's hand, "Don't get a big head just yet, Dr. Nikiforov. We aren't out of the woods yet."

Outside the complex, Mikhail had his eyes peeled for anything that looked remotely like his erstwhile stray-cat project, but didn't immediately spot anything. There were groups of people - or at least pairs - walking in the distance, but Mikhail knew better than to think any of them were walking with the man he was looking for. Asahi never walked with anyone unless he was forced to, and even then, he tried to cover himself up so much to avoid notice that he stuck out instead. Within a minute or so, Yuri and Viktor were behind him, and he sighed as he turned back to them, "Did he say where to go outside?"

"No." Yuri shook his head, "Maybe he plans to watch us from afar or something before coming forward."

Ghost lifted her nose up, sniffing at something unfamiliar, but then turned into the wind and barked. All eyes went down to her, then in the direction she was barking at, and though they didn't spot Asahi, they did see the incoming white blur that accompanied him of late. Hana barked back at them, and stopped a small ways off, uncertain of the new canine in the midst of those familiar scents. All tails swayed and ears were up, but Ghost kept up a quiet mumble-bark at the strange white dog.

"It's okay, we know her." Yuri explained, crouching down next to the Shepherd with a few pats down her head and neck, "That's Hana. She's a good girl."

Makkachin quickly trotted away from the group to greet the Hokkaido-ken, and Jiro tugged on his leash in an effort to do the same. Yuri let the loop fall from his hand, and the Akita went onward, greeting Hana warmly. The three of them snuffled at each other, then yipped and started chasing one another. A far-off whistle echoed through the complex, bouncing off the walls of the buildings and trees nearby until it faded to nothing again. Hana quickly bolted off again, heading back the way she came, and vanished around the back of one building. Makkachin chased after her, and Jiro as well, though slower. Ghost looked towards Yuri, and he rose back up to stand.

"I guess we follow them." He suggested, "Shall we?"

With tracks easy to follow in the snow, the path they followed lead around to a long chainlink fence. The dogs had already gone through an opening in the fence that lead to a footpath, and beyond that, a running track. Hana had gone all the way around to a set of bleachers, though no one was in them. She sniffed around a bit at the base of the first set of stairs, sniffed the air, and then took off running again. This time, Makkachin and Jiro stayed put, looking back to their humans as the trio finally caught up to them.

"So where is he?" Viktor asked, the glare off the snow making it a little difficult to see. He kept his eyes on the track instead, and followed the white flurry running along it, as though she were doing laps herself. She eventually caught up to a figure on the innermost ring, and jumped around him excitedly before running alongside him. Viktor drew a breath, "...That's him."

"What gave it away? The white dog or the red in his hair?" Mikhail huffed, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

"The chicken-butt." Viktor retorted, fingers tightening slightly around where he kept his husband's hand in his pocket, "But I guess that was the most obvious thing."

"Would you two be a little serious please?" Yuri chided, "I'm the youngest person here but I feel like I'm the only one treating this with the consideration it's due."
"I am being serious." Mikhail contested, shrugging up his shoulders a little bit, "It just happens that he's not exactly here yet."

"He can probably hear every word we're saying."

Ghost barked at the duo as they got closer with every step along the track, but with both Makkachin and Jiro looking rather relaxed, it was hard for her to continue being the only guardian. She grumbled to herself and went quiet, and sat in the snow to literally cool her heels. As the taps of running shoes grew lower with each step closer, the whole group fell to silence, watching as Asahi passed them by with his pup, and veered off the track to head towards the bag that Hana had been sniffing earlier. Next to it, a water bottle, and he picked it up to take a quick drink.

Yuri didn't dare speak a word yet. He saw the phone clipped to Asahi's right arm as the skater went by, and the white cable that connected to ear-buds that were still in use. Instead, Yuri reached for the loop of Jiro's leash, and slipped his hand through it like before.

"Was it really necessary to take off like you did?" Mikhail asked pointedly, looking annoyed already, "Waiting for us all to leave the country and then sneaking off under the literal cover of darkness without so much as a note about where you were going. That was rude."

"Mikhail-" Yuri scolded, "Why are you being mean already? We're lucky he answered my text in the first place, and now you're turning it into a damn ambush."

"I feel like I got used." The elder argued back, "I hate being used. It's my number one pet peeve."

"He didn't use you."

"Then maybe you did?" Mikhail suggested dryly, "Or maybe it was Minako? Someone is taking responsibility for what happened."

Viktor looked back and forth between the pair and sighed, then to Asahi, who was barely starting to take his ear-buds out.

"We didn't ask if you wanted to come so you could attack him before he's said a single word," Yuri pointed out, "I'm really hoping that you're just being ornery because of Kon's death. Don't take it out on him." He warned, gesturing at his former rink-mate, "It's not his fault Kon died."

"This has nothing to do with Kon." Mikhail retorted, "It's everything to do with him and his choices." He thumbed at Asahi behind him.

The bickering went on for a few more exchanges before Viktor finally deadpanned in annoyance and cut them both off, "Why did you quit Four Continents, Saito?" He asked loudly, enough to make the others to stop talking outright.

Asahi kept his eyes forward, wrapping the white audio cable around his phone before he put it into his bag, and pulled the whole thing onto one shoulder, "Hi." He finally said, and lifted his head. He looked straight to the man who'd just spoken, "Senpai." Then to his former friend, "Yuri." And then, finally, to the cantankerous old man, "Mr. Rozovsky."

"The competition is less than ten days away." Viktor went on, "Japan chose you to be one of the three going to Colorado, and with eight days left until we get on our next plane, you drop out. You're not hurt, you have...or had...plenty of support. You had everything going for you and then you ditch. Now we have a chicken nugget going in your place, and it's nearly guaranteed that we won't be taking all three medals home. What good is a major comeback if you skip-out on opportunities?"
Asahi held his tongue for a moment, keeping his eyes down on Hana as those words reverberated all around them. He just shook his head, and then spoke quietly, "Tall words coming from someone who announced that he'd time his own comeback for Russian Nationals, only to skip both it and Euros." He said simply, making the hairs on the back of Viktor's neck bristle, "I'm sure you had your reasons. I have mine."

"You should've told someone you wanted to leave." Mikhail chimed in, "Taking off in secret when everyone was already gone was below the belt."

"Waiting until you were gone was the only way I could get out without being served with a pity parade on the way out." Asahi retorted, "And you're the last person who gets to complain about being used when I offered multiple times to pay you back, and you refused. If you won't let me pay back my debts, then I'll be damned if you ring up a tab at my expense. Nothing in life is ever free, and I don't trust anyone. The only reason I haven't sent a check to Yu-Topia for you is because you already have total control over all the profits my parents' company is bringing in."

"I told you that those profits are yours."

"The profits from shares don't become real money unless you cash them out. You're literally paying me with your own money on the idea that you'll be able to reclaim the difference when you decide to sell the shares back." Asahi retorted, "Everything I have is yours first. How stupid would it look if I paid you back with the money you gave to me in the first place?"

Yuri and Viktor both pinched their lips closed, side-eyeing Mikhail quietly.

"I'm sorry you feel slighted." Asahi went on, "But after everything else is said and done, where I choose to go is literally the only freedom I have. I chose to come here, because even though I hate everything about this city, at least it's a hatred I understand. Hasetsu just tortures me with the imagery of everything I can never have. But Imari? I never had anything here in the first place. Starting at the bottom means I have somewhere to go. I'm the only Olympian training here. At least I've been allowed to celebrate that."

Mikhail grit his teeth and snarled quietly, looking away.

Asahi then turned to the Nikiforovs, "So...why are you two here?"
Chapter 544

CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED FOURTY FOUR

Yuri felt the winter chill cut right down into his bones. His many layers were as meaningless as a paper gown. The look on Asahi's face was completely unnerving; he was a sphinx, passing on a riddle that Yuri had no answer for. Lips parted, desperate to say something, anything, but he couldn't even breathe. Instead, Yuri just shut his eyes and looked down in petrified shame. He turned his face towards Viktor's arm and just hid there behind it.

With Yuri's voice frozen solid, Mikhail shook his head and looked back at Asahi. He nudged his head in the skater's direction, "How are your hands, anyway?"

Though he had gloves on, Asahi lifted one hand to look at his covered palm, and flexed his fingers slightly. He pulled the glove off to reveal the heel of his palm and showed it to the older man, "No lingering issues." He explained, "Just waiting out the last of the skin-healing process. Euros?"

"The competition itself was...completely benign." The elder answered, satisfied with what he saw, "Just a few in-group troubles that would've popped up regardless of where we were. Biggest issue was Yura starting his growth spurt. To say that he was mildly annoyed would be only a half-truth."

Asahi pulled his glove back on, "Who was Kon?"

Mikhail grimaced slightly, "My brother-in-law. I'm still not sure what happened to him. I'm supposed to get a call in a few days."

"I see. Sorry to hear about it."

"So why did you decide to come back to this place?" The elder asked pointedly, again, this time sounding more confused than accusatory, "You're not hiding in plain sight. There's a glass case in the arena recognizing you. I was really hoping we wouldn't find you here."

"I couldn't think of anywhere else I wanted to go." Asahi answered with a shrug, and looked out into the field within the track, "Wakkanai is too far away from everything. Tokyo has too many sad reminders. Everything went horribly wrong in Osaka."

"You could've stayed in Hasetsu, even if not at Yu-Topia."

"I considered that, but..." He explained, but shook his head, scarlet tails swaying beside his face, "I would never find peace there. Me being there would be bad for everyone. I know I cost Yuri his place on the podium at Nationals. What good is history if we don't learn from it?"

"I'm worried about history repeating itself for you though." Mikhail pointed out, "Where do you live now? Are people being decent to you?"

The skater nodded, "I'm within cycling distance of this place. I haven't sought out my kin, and so far as I'm aware, they haven't come looking for me either. The rest of the town..." Asahi's words drifted, and he looked back to the main building complex of the sports park, "It's hard to describe. They still give me a wide berth, but one might think they're starting to thaw out after a long freeze. It's chilly here; I still get cold easily...but it's not as bad as it used to be."

"Well that's good, right?"
"If I hadn't known what you'd done to *metastasize* into my parents' business, I wouldn't be able to tell you'd done anything at all." Asahi explained, but then looked squarely at the Russian, "Did you threaten them somehow?"

Mikhail was as stony as a gargoyle, "Depends on what you consider a threat. I never said I'd hurt them."

"No, but the Russian definition of 'hurt' and the Japanese version are quite different."

"Too true." Mikhail smiled, though it was clear he wasn't showing his cards, "There are ways of getting Japanese people to bend to my will without actually doing anything to them. It's the risk to their reputation makes them move."

"...Did you dig something up about them...? Shady finances...?" Asahi asked skeptically.

"Something like that would be a threat to my future income, so, no." The Russian retorted, "Keep in mind, I own these shares, but there are still limits to what I can do. Think of it like...we're all on a boat. I'm the navigator, but your family is still manning the helm. If I want to steer the boat in a different direction, I can't just tell them to turn. They don't trust where I'm saying we have to go, so I have to be a cartographer, too. I'll change the map itself, and force the change by making all alternative routes seem too risky."

"...Which means...?"

"I've left the company itself as it is, but...given how well you're doing alone here, it would seem I've successfully convinced your parents that *you* have become too valuable to torment. Remember the dumb references I made on the way down here before?"

"...Sure."

"*Yer a wizard, 'Arry.*" Mikhail mused, "You're not just some kid living under the stairs anymore. You're important. More than that, you're a public celebrity. The whole country is going to be cheering for you in a month. It would be sheer suicide for the Saitos to make your life a living Hell when you - and by extension, them - are under such scrutiny."

"You did all that from Austria." Asahi said stiffly.

"No...I had proxies out here doing all that while I was gone. But the message was still mine. Seems to have done well enough, given how it really hasn't been that long." The elder answered, and looked around the place again, feeling the weight lift off his shoulders, "Minako will be happy to know you're doing okay out here."

"How come she didn't tag along?"

"Still tired from traveling. She's learning the hard way that globetrotting with kids is a completely different adventure than going on our own."

Viktor half-listened to the smalltalk going on behind him, but only so far as keeping an ear-out for verbal cues. If it sounded like either of them would be leaving, he'd respond. Until then, he kept his focus on his tongue-tied husband, who had taken to hiding inside his jacket.

*He did this when confronting his old rink-mates in Detroit, too...* He thought, gently stroking the younger man's soft black hair, *I suppose it's better than outright running off, at least.*

"We're gonna go back inside," Mikhail said suddenly, catching Viktor's attention, "You guys look
like you could use the warm-up, too."

Yuri lifted his head up, but kept his eyes down on the spot he'd had his face buried a moment before. He could think of nothing to say to go against the suggestion, and so, without a word, he nodded slightly and they were off, dogs trotting alongside. At their slightly-slower pace, they were well-behind when Asahi and Mikhail made it back to the concrete path, taking the longer - proper - way towards the complex than had been taken to get to the running track. That far behind, they were easily out of ear-shot, and Viktor nudged a shoulder against his partner's.

"My love...?"

"Sorry..." Yuri answered in a hushed voice, "...I...got stuck."

"I could tell."

"Every time I see him, I'm back in Juniors again, and I lose all sense of myself." He explained, raising his free hand to rub his forehead, "It's like I have to be pushed right to the edge to say what I really think to him..."

"All for the better then that you already had plans to go to Detroit." Viktor commented, "I can't help but think about the kind of person you'd have become if Saito hadn't been away from you when the time came, and you'd gotten stuck with him. It makes me really sad."

"Would it have really been that bad?"

Viktor pursed his lips for a moment, thinking about how to answer, but then sighed out an exhale, "I've had a conversation or two with Chris about it."

'. Under the best of influences, Yuri can be molded into something to be reckoned with. But under the worst...he could become dependent, needy, unsure of himself, and worst of all...willing to take the abuse, and be a prisoner of those who claim to want the best for him. That's part of what makes him vulnerable...his anxiety and self-doubt make him very easy to manipulate...'

'.

'I've seen him come out of his shell more in the last 2 years than I had in all the decade before. You are the best possible person to have a hold over him, if anyone was going to at all."

'.

"I thought that maybe he was being a bit mean..." Viktor explained, hearing his friend's words still ringing in his ears, "But then when we were in the kiss and cry with him, and I told you to take a knee..." He paused, coughing out a sad laugh as he shook his head, "It was so stupid. You went down on your own knee instead of sitting on mine like I meant...and I just... Everything Chris said made sense. I imagine this horrible alternate reality where you'd somehow gotten trapped in a relationship with Saito, too scared to say anything, and too intimidated to tell him off. I can't imagine he would have meant to make you into something of a slave, but...I feel like he would've made you his house-wife. You said back at Nationals that he was super Japanese...well, super Japanese house-wives are subservient, quiet, and do what they're told. The whole appeal of Gieshas and Maikos is the fact that they're beautiful...and completely silent unless prompted to speak or sing. They are in cages. There are men who go on wife-finding tours to places like Indonesia, and look for exactly that kind of woman to bring back."
"...How do you even know this stuff?" Yuri asked nervously; in part because he was curious, but also because the rest made him uneasy.

"Sochi Olympics." Viktor answered vaguely, "Need I say more?"

"...Maybe a tiny bit...?" Yuri really didn't want to say it, or hear it.

"Four years ago, I'd already been single for an epoch it seemed. People started getting on my case about it. Some suggested I just...needed to go buy a wife from somewhere. Never learn her language so she can't ever talk back, and teach her only enough of my own so I can remind her of her place."

Yuri's brow furrowed, "That's horrible."

"Chris said he did his best to keep Saito away from you for as long as he could, because he worried what it would be like for you to have someone like Saito lording over you." Viktor explained, "Not that he thought Saito would deliberately abuse you or anything...but just...trap you, and make you think it's normal."

"Oh..." Yuri stared at the ground.

'Now you just make it sound like I'm the same...'

Viktor cringed at the memory of his own words, and he paused their walk to look his partner in the eyes, worried as he was, "...I don't want you to ever think that you can't tell me no. I did a horrible thing to you in Vienna, when I made those stupid noises and made you think I didn't appreciate you, or that I didn't care about your concerns."

"...It's okay though, we sorted it out..."

"It's not okay..." The Russian lamented, looking rather bothered by the whole thing, "...Half of why I hate Saito is because of what he did to you. The other half is because...there's so many things about him and I that are so similar... Lousy family backgrounds where no one really supported us, religion being the root of all the conflict in our homes, using our skating to express ourselves because no one was really listening, feeling completely alone...and then finding you." He explained, "If it had been him that escaped his parents rather than me...things could've turned out so differently... But seeing how much is still the same, it just...scares me to think that I might take advantage of you the same way Chris and I think Saito would've."

"...You've never done that." Yuri reassured, "If you had, I wouldn't have been happy being around you. And so what if you had similar backgrounds? If you boil us all down far enough, we're all the same...and if it makes any difference, I don't think you and him are anything alike anyway."

"...Really?"

Yuri nodded, "If you were anything like him, I would've lost 'Onsen on Ice' on purpose so you'd go away."

Viktor blanched, "...Really...? That's so harsh."

"I run from my problems. It's...a bad habit of mine." Yuri admitted grimly, "I don't like to admit when I'm in over my head, so I just fall apart. Like earlier..."
"We'll try to figure out a segue into the issue so it doesn't seem like an interrogation." The silver suggested, pulling his husband into a hug. "It'll be sorted out before we leave this place."

"Yeah..."
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED FOURTY FIVE

The cafeteria of a family sports complex was the farthest thing from healthy fare one could imagine. It had the closest fare that Mikhail had seen to western food since the Grand Prix though, and didn't complain, ordering up what appeared to be a rather normal hamburger and fries. Asahi grabbed a cold green tea, keeping close to the older man for safety's sake. Yuri and Viktor hummed and hawed at the other options in the meager public kitchen, not really wanting to eat but feeling like they'd be sticks in the mud if they didn't. They settled on a safe-looking bowl of chicken curry to split, and ice water.

Everyone re-converged at a single circular table near the glass walls of the pool. Transparent colors decorated the clear windows, depicting child-inspired imagery of seaweed, ferns, and cartoonish fish, otters, and beavers. Beyond, in the pool itself, it was leisure time and open to the public, and the shrieks and laughter of kids and parents echoed through the halls. It was quite the contrast to what any of the four were used to, but their four dogs seemed keenly interested, watching the pool play in a line, tails wagging slowly behind them; Makkachin and Ghost let their tongues hang, panting softly where they sat next to one another.

Mikhail and Asahi still seemed to be in the midst of a meager conversation; getting caught up on what the younger had been up to since everyone left for Europe. It all sounded rather mundane until Mikhail started to ask about Asahi's plans to leave.

"How long in advance were you thinking about it?" He wondered casually, holding the burger up in his hands as he inspected the edges, looking for the best spot to bite, "You didn't have a lot of stuff to move, but you couldn't have carried it, either."

"No," Asahi affirmed, "I'd been trying to think of what to do as soon as I was told to get on the train to Hasetsu. It just...got a bit complicated because of Hana, and because you started buying things for me."

Mikhail made a face, but then went for the bite to stop from saying something sarcastic.

"I ended up buying a motorcycle, with a small trailer to pull behind, and a side-carriage for Hana." Asahi went on, mouthing the rim of his tea bottle, "It was a bit harrowing to get all the way down here since it was all frosty on the roads."

"So I guess you snuck out in the middle of the night." The elder huffed, trying not to make a face as he tasted an unusual sauce on his food, "That's pretty dangerous, you know? Never mind the frosty roads...you must've been half-asleep at the wheel."

"...Not really." Asahi answered, "I was wide awake the whole time. Sitting around in Imari was the hard part. It only takes an hour or so to get here from Hasetsu, so I had to wait for things to start opening."

"You didn't have a place lined up before you came?"

"No. I had an idea of where I wanted to look, but I needed to be here in person to confirm anything."

The other half of the table was mired in silence. Viktor listened to the conversation, but only for lack of one of his own. Yuri kept his head down, looking at the curry plate like it was an open book, studying it for some massive, life-changing test. The table kept the pair quite apart from one another,
the stools mounted into the table itself, acting like legs with seats on them, but Viktor still held the hand closest to him, and he kept it on the table top in full sight of everyone. He looked back slightly when Makkachin moved, getting closer to the glass wall, and the curious kids that had come up on the other side. Many were pointing at the group of pups, and a few of the youngest put their hands on the glass. Makkachin pawed back at them, and sometimes licked where he could, but the clear panes kept the two groups separated.

"You guys are being awfully quiet, considering this trip was your idea." Mikhail's voice came suddenly, and drew Viktor's attention back, "I can't keep him here all day."

Yuri swallowed nervously, so Viktor posed his question again from before, "Why did you drop Four Continents?" He said, turning on the swiveling part of his fixed seat, "You're still training for the Games. It's only two weeks difference."

"Coach Nagisa isn't available to go." Asahi answered simply, "My choreographer went back home, too."

Viktor rubbed one temple with his free fingers, "Minako's going to be in Colorado. You know she wouldn't mind filling in. She was already planning on it."

"It's not a good fit."

"Mmhrr..." The silver grumbled under his breath, "I don't know if I should be offended on her behalf."

"It's nothing against her." Asahi clarified, "I feel like I shouldn't have to keep justifying why I left Hasetsu?"

"You swore to me that you'd skate for Riku." Viktor pointed out, "You're still calling me senpai so you obviously haven't forgotten that conversation."

"I haven't, but I..." The younger skater said, only to stumble on his words. Asahi grit his teeth, "I went all the way to Wakkanai to make peace with that loss, and I'm trying to start a new life. The longer I go on though - the further out from that trauma I get - the more I look back and wonder...what was I really grieving for?"

Mikhail stopped mid bite and side-eyed the man next to him, but said nothing. Viktor just gaped for a moment, then shook his head to regain his composure, "You're not suggesting that you don't think you ever really loved him."

"I don't know anymore." Asahi said simply, keeping his eyes on the middle of the circular table, "All those negative things I felt at Nationals, being made to go through all those memories, the loss, the pain... That was all real, I have no doubt, but...the more I've thought about it - and I've had a lot of time to think about it lately - the more I question what I really felt for Riku. I know I cared about him...I was rather fond of him... I still mourn for him. But I feel like there was always too much in the way for us to really connect. That was purely my fault...that I couldn't get invested..." He said quietly, and rubbed his nose on one sleeve, "Everything I've said, thought, and done since he died...has been a betrayal of him. In a way, I feel like Hana is an albatross around my neck, serving as a constant reminder of how badly I failed."

Viktor could feel himself bristling under his layers, the anger rising from somewhere deep.

"It's because of me..." Yuri said, finally finding his voice. All eyes went to him, but he kept his own low still, looking at the half-empty plate, "It's...because of what I said, and did...before I went to
Detroit...

No one else at the table said a word. Viktor's heart changed gears in a flash - annoyance changed to nervous enthusiasm - and he rubbed his husband's fingers with his thumb.

"You must've gotten hung up on the fact that I said yes to you back then..." Yuri continued anxiously, "When you were getting that spot for me on the Tokyo team, and had asked me to...be with you." He admitted, closing his fingers around his husband's to fortify his nerves, "I took off and never even said goodbye, or explained that...I didn't mean to say yes in the first place. I just didn't want to hurt your feelings. So...instead of manning up, I ran away like a coward, and hid on the other side of the world, so I could avoid having to explain myself."

Asahi said and did nothing. He just watched.

"That's...why we came to Imari." Yuri explained, "Viktor wanted to see the pictures, but... After what happened at Nationals, and having you in my head since then...I started to remember things that I'd put away long ago. I remembered how...you'd asked me to be yours, and in sheer terror and surprise, I said yes, all the while yelling 'no, no no...' in my head where no one but me could hear it."

He said, dipping his head down lower, "...I'm so sorry..."

Viktor and Mikhail kept quiet, but looked to Asahi for any kind of reaction or reply. For a while, it seemed like silence would be all they got, punctuated by the occasional screams and splashes of kids in the pool. Just as Yuri started to look up though, and his eyes grazed the curved edge of the table opposite him, he caught sight of Asahi standing up.

"Hana, ikimashou."

"...Eh?" Yuri gaped, catching the blur of white going around his right side as the Hokkaido-ken went, "Wha... Asahi!" He called, pushing up from his seat, only to be shot a glance over one shoulder, and he sat back down again.

"You can't apologize for that." Asahi said coldly, "It never happened."

Yuri was baffled, "...Huh?"

"Thanks for coming down to check on me. I have to go now though." The dour skater said, bowing his head a little, "Good luck in Colorado."

The remaining trio watched in stunned silence as Asahi made a break for the exit doors and disappeared through them. The sound of the sports complex's interior washed over them like water from the pool, and the two Russians looked to Yuri, who couldn't get the gaunt look off his face.

"Yuri...?" Viktor attempted, cupping his other hand around the one he was still holding onto, "Yuri..."

"...Never...happened...?" Yuri said, his voice barely over a whisper. "Did...did I make it up...? I remember it so clearly now though..."

"Let it be done, my love..." Viktor begged, "Whether it happened and he's trying to give you a pass, or it didn't and you're in the clear anyway...let it be done..."
The entire drive back to Hasetsu was done in near-total silence. If not for the stereo, the panting of
the dogs in the back seat, and the noise of the car itself, one might've been able to hear a pin drop.
Yuri was all but catatonic, staring at the glove compartment with eyes that hardly blinked. The hand
that normally rested on Viktor's thigh had to be brought over; it was like Yuri had entirely forgotten
his own habits. He just felt...
...numb.

Arriving back home hadn't roused him. The journey from car to couch had seemed to happen in the
space between blinks. His coat, scarf, and shoes had vanished somewhere in that time, too. His head
felt tingly, like he'd been awake too long, and had suddenly come awake in the middle of the night,
not knowing what time it was or what he'd been doing before. He thought he heard Viktor saying
something, but the words were distant, and then there was nothing.

The house felt like a tomb in that silence. The occasional tap of nails on the floor broke up the
monotony of it, but Yuri still struggled to stay focused. His mind had gone a thousand miles away.

*He's lying... He *has* to be lying...right? I...couldn't have made all that up...*

His attention was grabbed when he heard the front door open, and all three dogs were up and
barking. He could see the distinctive red of Viktor's Audi just beyond the doorframe, through the
swaying tails and fuzzy bodies of the pups, and past Viktor's figure.

...*When did Viktor leave...?*

"Yes, yes, it's me, I came back...now get out of the front hall so I can bring everything in!" The silver
shooed, though he laughed anyway, "*Go on! Git!*"

Ghost sauntered back to the living-room and squished back down into the space between couch and
kotatsu. She was practically liquid there, her magnificent dark fluff conforming to every nook and
cranny of the space. Makkachin did everything he could to get his snoot into the bags his human was
trying - and failing - to get through the front door. Jiro was just trying not to get stepped on, keeping
close to the wall until he could trot back out to the safety of the open room.

Viktor was finally able to get into the hallway though, even with his poodle's head stuck in the
handle-loop of one bag, snuffling at something that could only be treats. The door was nudged
closed with one foot, and the encumbered Russian stepped out of his shoes, and up onto the higher
step that lead into the rest of the house. He was a bit surprised to see Yuri watching him, and quickly
set the many bags on the counter before coming back out again. He undid the front of his jacket as he
came back around the kitchen island towards the back of the blue couch, and leaned over it, sliding
his hands down the front of his husband's chest as he came over one shoulder, "You look a bit more
alert than before. Are you feeling better?"

"...I feel like I just woke up from a really bad dream..." He answered vaguely, but turned into the hug
and nuzzled that silver hair with his cheek, "I'm not even sure I'm awake *now.*"

"You've been in a bit of a trance since Imari." Viktor confirmed, kissing the side of his partner's neck
and shoulder, "I didn't think it would help if I nagged you about it though. You weren't really paying
much attention anyway."

"Where did you go...?" Yuri asked, "When did you go?"

"I just went to get some groceries finally, about an hour and a half ago. I ran into your mom so I took a bit longer than I meant to."

"Oh..."

"It's okay. I told her you were just tired and wanted to take a nap." Viktor explained, "How about an Irish coffee?"

Yuri nodded lightly, and felt the warmth of one more kiss on his cheek as the silver pulled up again. When Viktor pulled his jacket off though, and left it on the back of the couch, Yuri couldn't help but grab it and pull it around himself. He closed his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest, holding the coat closed around him, and leaned back, "...I don't know what to think...about what happened." He said quietly, barely heard over the rustling of plastic bags.

Viktor paused, milk-jug in his hand and the fridge door open, but then put it away and closed it, "I think that trying to forget about Saito again might be for the best. He came crashing back into your life only a few weeks ago, and he's completely annihilated your peace of mind. In a weird way, he's caused more damage than JJ did at the Final. At least, in my opinion."

With a sigh, Yuri nodded, and lifted his knees into the coat. He wrapped his arms around them, holding the undone zipper-edges with his fingers, "At least I can take a pill for the pain that accident caused. There's no pill for this..."

"You've had it particularly rough these past couple of months." Viktor commented, gathering up some filtered water from the refrigerator dispenser in a glass coffee-pot, "Much as I like to think I've brought light and love into your life, I've also brought my share of shadows."

"...What do you mean? You never did anything wrong." Yuri wondered, looking back over one shoulder as well as he could, "You've made mistakes here and there, but it's not like you did any of it on purpose."

"Not stuff that I've done, per se..." The Russian explained vaguely, "But I've pulled you into an entirely different world of experiences. You used to have a fairly calm, quiet life. It's a tad bit more complicated than that now. Not even just with the skating, but in how you look at - and interact with - the world around you." He said, moving to a new spot on the counter, where he poured the water into a coffee maker and set the glass carafe under it, and clicked the on button to start it heating, "When you said before that you had a bad habit of running from your problems. I don't know why it hadn't hit me sooner how true that was... And yet, here I make you confront everything head-on. I never feel compelled to retreat, so I've forced you to endure some things that were really uncomfortable. The pressure to win Gold was only the foundation of your stresses. On top of that, I made you endure Sophia, and my drunken lament on top of a skyscraper, then I left you outright so I could collect my uncle from Russia, only to bring my father along as well, making all of NHK a complete cluster. At the Final, I couldn't keep it together...and even though you were hurt, you still had to step up, because I couldn't anymore. I can't help but feel that maybe Nationals wouldn't have been this bad if I hadn't been there."

"You're the only reason I survived Nationals." Yuri protested, twisting against the back of the couch to curl his fingers over the edge, and looked over his knuckles, "If I was alone there, I would've dropped out."
"I disagree..." Viktor shook his head, and scooped some dark beans into a grinder, "Saito had left you alone for the three years prior to his own disappearing act. Even without Itō there to curtail his obsessive habits over you, Saito still kept himself in check."

"...Maybe it was just Chris." Yuri huffed, and sank back to where he'd been before as Viktor's bean grinder whirred noisily.

"I suppose it's entirely possible that Chris was partly involved...but he wasn't at every single one of your events."

"Neither was Asahi." He retorted, "I can't recall a single event we went to together outside of Nationals, and even that's vague. It's like, I knew he was there, but I never saw him, so he entirely escaped my notice, and I could keep on not thinking about what I'd done." He said with a grumble, only to drop his head against the back of the couch and sighed loudly, "...If I even did it."

"You don't have to feel bad about that anymore, my love." Viktor pointed out, pouring the course bean powder into the bottom of a taller glass container, then slid that into a thin metal holster. The water was half-done in the coffee-maker pot, and slate eyes watched the level rise past each quarter-cup line on the glass, "Whether it happened or not is irrelevant now. You said what you had to, and are absolved of that guilt now. You can move forward, knowing you did your part."

"...But he said it never happened." Yuri contested, brow crinkling above his glasses, "I ruined half the weekend with the guilt I felt for what I'd remembered. If my memories were completely made-up from whole cloth, then I don't...know what to think anymore."

Boiled water poured from one carafe to the other, and the taller glass pitcher was filled to nearly the top. Viktor grabbed the lid with its metal-mesh plunger, and placed it on top of the mixture, letting it sit and steep for a little while, "That's just it. You don't have to think about it anymore."

Yuri sighed quietly to himself, and just looked at the surface of the kotatsu. Jiro and Makkachin were sitting at the edge of the kitchen, watching Viktor assemble his brew, and Ghost stayed in her spot at the base of the couch. They could all hear the clinking noises as Viktor pulled mugs from the cabinet, and looped a finger through the pair to carry them in one hand, bringing the French Press in the other. He set the three items on top of the kotatsu, but on his way back to the kitchen, he paused behind the couch again and leaned down to kiss his husband's crown, "I love you," He whispered between strands of raven hair, and gently gave a squeeze to one shoulder.

Yuri reached up for those fingers, curling his own around them, and kissed the gold band. He pressed the back of that pale hand against his nose and forehead, bowing into it without knowing what to say. He felt another kiss on the top of his head before he let go, and Viktor went back to the kitchen to find the bottle of Baileys and a few other things.

A few dark noses sniffed at the air around the kotatsu, but the curious pair were good bois and didn't go knocking anything over. Ghost lifted her head to sniff as well, but then laid it down again, and licked her nose before dozing off.

Still in a bit of a haze, Yuri watched tiredly as Viktor pushed down on the French Press, plunging the filter down and pushing all the rough-ground beans to the bottom. The two mugs were poured, some brown sugar was dissolved in the hot liquid, and the cream liqueur added after. Some whisked heavy cream was added to the very top, and with that, Viktor handed off one mug to his somber spouse.

"In time, even this will pass." The Russian said quietly, watching as Yuri took a first sip, "I can't begin to suggest that I know how you feel right now...because I'm coming to this place with you from a completely different starting point. But I'm still here with you, okay? You aren't alone."
"...I wish it was easier to explain, what's going on in my head right now." Yuri said quietly, looking from eyes to coffee, and the slight disturbance his earlier sip had caused to the white surface, "You said Asahi cut me loose...but...all I feel is..." He said reluctantly, exhaling briskly in frustrated annoyance, "...Resentment."

"Resentment?" Viktor echoed, "Why that?"

"...Because I don't know why he said that...nothing had happened." He answered, cringing slightly, "He's made me doubt my memories. Three words were all it took to make me question everything I thought I knew about him, and those years. I just..." He bristled, fingers clenching tight around the ceramic mug, "...I want to hate him for this... Either he's lying to me, or he's made me realize my own mind has betrayed me. Whatever it is, he's forcing me to feel something I've never felt for anyone before..."

"You said in Vienna that if he did this, you'd hate him..." Viktor pointed out, "I...think you knew all along that he could possibly lie about it."

"If this is how he wanted things to end... If he wanted to make it so we never speak again...all he had to do was say so..." Yuri went on, feeling the clenching pain in his chest.

"I think we all know that wouldn't have worked." The silver said, keeping an eye on that hot mug, in case it started to tip, "And maybe it was incredibly selfish or cruel of him to decide to do it this way instead of some other...this is probably the closest he could get to escaping you that he could get without leaving everything else, too."

"Are you suggesting he planned it this way?" Yuri asked incredulously, "That he wants me to hate him?"

"I think he wants you to stop chasing after him." Viktor answered simply, putting his palm against the near-side of the mug, and pushed the tilt upward slightly, "And that's why I think it was cruel. He knows you as well as anyone could, as a friend. He knows you're a gentle soul. He knew you well enough that you'd never deliberately hurt someone. And yet, now...instead of simply accepting your apology, thanking you for it, and asking that you two simply go your separate ways...he's driven a nail into your heart, and created hate where there was none before."

Yuri only felt worse to hear it, though feeling his partner's hand press warm to his chest was like a balm to the pain he felt inside it. He pulled one hand away from the mug and pressed it to the back, and bowed his head.

"This pain will heal with time, as all wounds do...but it'll leave a scar that will stop you from ever approaching him with warmth or worry again." Viktor went on, rubbing his thumb across the thin fabric, "He's made it impossible for you to be the same Yuri you used to be to him. It's...maliciously selfish, in a way... He's left a dark spot on your heart, just to make sure that he never has to see your smile again. Maybe this is the only way he thought he could be free, too. To make you hate him."

"...I'm so mad that it had to come to this..." Yuri said, his throat hurting as he spoke, "That we're so bad for each other that we have to hurt one another to make it better."

"There was no possible way that you two could reconcile in a way that would work out for the both of you." Viktor agreed, slouching against the couch so he could kiss the edge of one shoulder, even through the thick and rumpled layers of his jacket where Yuri was too small to fit it properly, "If you're nice to him, he'll fall for you, and then he'll realize again that he can't have you, and it makes you feel bad for the pain it causes...so you try to make him feel better, and he falls for you again. It's a horrible cycle. He still wants to compete at the Olympics though, so the option to just disappear
into the night isn't really available. All he can do is drive a wedge so firmly between the both of you that you don't want to be around him."

"...What about...you...? All the help you...you gave..."

"I'm done with that." He answered easily, "He was right to leave when he did. A second longer and I would've tried to put Ghost on him. Saito knew what he was doing when he said those words, and the damage it would do...and it's what he wanted. Even if I agree with the idea of you two never speaking to each other again, I'm still furious that he chose to hurt you again in the process. I nearly went after him to give him a piece of my mind, but Mimi stopped me."

"I...don't remember any of it..."

"I figured. You were catatonic pretty much instantly." Viktor explained, "You were out of it for a good few hours...you hadn't said a word since he shut you down. At least, not until just now."

"...We weren't even in Imari for an hour. But it's almost 7 now..."

"Yeah. You had a rough day." He nodded against the fabric, but then lifted up again, and nudged a few fingers against the warm mug, "You ate all that curry though, so I'm guessing you're not hungry. Go ahead and sip your night-cap. We'll snuggle-up under the kotatsu, and I'll love on you until you fall asleep or feel better. Tomorrow, we'll get back to being us, and focus on what we need to do to get ready for Four Continents."

Yuri drew in a shaky breath, but feeling his husband's nuzzle helped the anger start to go down, and he relaxed his posture enough that the coat fell from his shoulders, "...What about Mikhail...?"

"He's done, too. I'm not sure if he plans on actually washing his hands of the whole thing, or if he's just going to keep the status quo and leave Saito alone out there...but I think he went out there with the intent of ending things anyway." The silver explained, "There's only so much you can do to help someone who doesn't want to be helped anymore."

"Yeah..." Yuri nodded lightly, drew in a new breath, and leaned forward. He set his mug on top of the kotatsu, and gave Ghost a gentle pat so she'd move out of her wedge. With a little bit of rearranging, their pillow-nest manifested, and Yuri took his spot under the heated table. Viktor's legs went around him where he sat, and he leaned back against the man's chest. The blanket pulled up to his chin, and the warmth grew all around him. As his partner's arms wrapped around him, and another kiss came down on the top of his head, Yuri pulled his glasses off and set them on the table ahead of himself. He drew the mug of Irish coffee back and took a long sip, feeling the heat of the whiskey chase down his throat, slowly working to replace the agonized clench around his heart. Their dogs came in and curled up on either side of them, and Yuri settled in, surrounded by the love of his family.
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED FOURTY SEVEN

Viktor's uncanny sixth-sense to the hour crept into full effect around two minutes before Yuri's alarm was meant to go off. With the greatest care, he pulled himself free from his husband's slumbering figure, and reached over him to the night-stand. Unhooking the phone from its charging cable, Viktor made sure that the light didn't shine down, and quietly cancelled the alarm outright before he reached over once more to put the phone down again. As he pulled back, he held gently to the younger man's upturned shoulder, and placed two soft kisses on his skin, then carefully slipped out from under the covers; a task more difficult than it needed to be, but Viktor's habit of seeking Yuri in his sleep meant he was farther from the edge of the bed on his own side than Yuri's. It seemed to have worked though, and Viktor was able to slip out of their bedroom without waking him. Even Jiro hadn't noticed his creeping, as the pup was still curled up in the nook made by Yuri's bent knees, entirely unbothered by the subtle movements in the mattress. Makkachin dutifully followed the Russian out, keeping close and waiting as Viktor put the door to.

The wildcard was Ghost, who to that point still hadn't ventured to the upstairs. She made herself into something of a sentinel, quietly guarding the night door from the entry hall. Her head perked up at the sound of feet pressing onto carpet steps, and she saw Viktor's shadow before he came into sight, still tying a fleece robe around himself.

It was only once Viktor had made it to the kitchen that any lights came on, and even that was meager, being only the microwave light above the stove. It was enough for him to find what he wanted from the fridge - or at least, that was the intention. As he stood there with the fridge door open, his attention was grabbed by something outside of it.

...What happened to all my daifuku mochi?

Eyes scanned the counter for the covered container he knew he'd set out the night before. He moved around the island in search of a dog-ravaged Tupperware container, thinking Ghost had gotten to it, but he didn't find it on the floor. It wasn't under the couch, it wasn't in the front hall, the trophy room, or anywhere else the Russian could think to look. It wasn't in the sink either, or on the drying rack next to it. The dishwasher was empty.

Great so my mochi is gone and the container.

He put his hands on his hips in frustration, but with no idea where the thing could be, he had no choice but to give up and look when he had all the lights on. He sighed and went back to what he meant to do earlier, and opened the fridge again. Around 45 minutes later, Viktor went back upstairs, and sat on the edge of the bed. Yuri had moved only enough to pull the big blanket up over his exposed shoulder, but was still soundly asleep. The depression in the mattress hadn't roused him, and Viktor leaned in over the younger man's frame. He hugged his arms around the whole heap, blankets and all, and offered soft kisses to his husband's ear. Yuri mumbled a little, and Viktor started to lift him up, leaning the man against himself as he continued his kisses down the side of his partner's neck and other shoulder. When he could feel Yuri holding his head up on his own, Viktor came back around to find his beloved's face, "Morning, my love."

"Is it already?" He grumbled, and dropped his face back down to a shoulder, rubbing his eyes on the edge of the fleece robe.

"How'd you sleep?"
"...I don't think I did..." Yuri answered, yawning as he clung to his husband's larger frame.

"Really? You've been out cold for the last hour."

"...Hour?" He echoed, and lifted his head again, looking to his partner's face in confusion, "How...? Did I miss the alarm? What time is it?"

"Relax; I turned it off so you could keep sleeping." Viktor reassured, and turned just slightly so he could retrieve his husband's glasses from next to his phone, "Here. Come downstairs. I made breakfast."

Jiro squeaked a yawn where he'd finally tumbled awake in the rumbled bed-spread, and Viktor helped the pup down with a hand under his chest. The growing Akita trotted out the room and down the hall like a wind-up toy, and the pair could see him braving the stairs as he took the first two steps carefully.

"I'm super not ready for today to start." Yuri grumbled, but put on his glasses anyway, "I don't feel like I slept."

"We'll start out gently then, and if you need a nap later, then you'll have a nap." Viktor suggested, and slipped out of the hug so he could stand. He offered his hands, and Yuri hazily took them, peeling his bare frame from the warmth of the blankets. Viktor was quick to pull his bathrobe off and slip it over his partner's shoulders, "It's a bit chilly downstairs still. Have a pre-warmed cover."

"Then what are you going to wear?"

"I'll just grab yours on the way out. Also, I have pants."

Yuri blinked slowly, squinting as he looked down, hands still fumbling with tying the fleece rope around his waist. Indeed, as told, there were a pair of sky-blue pajama pants on his partner's legs, and nothing on his own. He just saw two pale sticks coming out from under the colored robe, "...Oh."

Viktor hummed a laugh and slipped behind his spouse, hands at the man's waist as he nibbled a kiss to the side of his neck again, "Let's go, my love, before Makkachin gets it all." He suggested, and started to nudge the younger man forward. Once at the table, Viktor unveiled the elaborately simple fare he'd prepared; broiled fish, rice, soft-boiled egg, pickled radish, and miso soup. Between their two places was a pot each of coffee and hot green tea, "Voila~!"

"Wow you really went all out." Yuri said, eyes a bit more alert at the sight of it. He looked around the room and saw the time on the stove, "...It's almost 9:30 already."

"Don't wait; dig in." The silver requested, kissing the crown of his partner's head before stepping off to sort their pack out. The back door slid open and all three went out into the frozen morning, "I didn't want to risk waking you by getting these guys all riled up."

Yuri reached for a pair of shiny black chop-sticks, "Is there some occasion I'm embarrassingly forgetting about?"

"Does there need to be?"

"I guess not."

"Then enjoy." The Russian encouraged, closing the door for a moment so he could put the dry food down from their pantry.
Yuri felt a little bad starting on his own, but he knew Viktor would be disappointed if he just sat there staring at it all after being told twice to start without him. With utensils in hand already, he reached for a bit of fish first. He was nearly half done when Viktor was finally done drying puppy-paws, filling bowls, and washed his hands so he could eat, too.

"Feels pretty cold out this morning. Maybe we'll wait until the afternoon to walk the kids." Viktor suggested as he sat down, one hand sliding across his spouse's back as he came close, "We can just take our time at the Ice Castle until then."

Yuri nodded quietly, chewing on a bit of pickled radish. He watched idly as Viktor started gathering up the bits of his own breakfast, but in the process, Yuri found himself starting to lean. With rice-bowl and chop-sticks in his hands, he set his shoulder against his husband's, and continued chewing in silence.

Passing Yu-Topia as they drove towards the Ice Castle, Yuri looked in through the gate and into the small parking lot. It had already been cleared of snow earlier in the day, but Yurio was nowhere to be seen. Neither was Mikhail and Minako's new Lexus though.

"I wonder if he's heard anything about Kon yet." Yuri wondered aloud, going quiet again as the resort passed behind them.

Viktor looked over for a moment, "Nothing that I know of. Are you really that curious?"

"We may not have gotten the ending we wanted from him, but...he apologized for what he did to you, to me, and to us. He watched us skate. He tried his best to figure out how he felt about us being together. I didn't like him in the end, but I did respect him... I'd feel better if I was sure he didn't suffer in the end. He already lost everything else." Yuri explained, "I'm worried about Mik though. The way he acted yesterday..."

"...Honestly, I don't think my father's death is the reason why he was cranky." Viktor offered, and reached across the center console to rub his partner's leg, "He was ready to suggest it was Minako's fault that Saito bailed. I wonder if maybe something's going on between them."

"He suggested it was my fault too though." Yuri pointed out, "And I sure didn't suggest that Asahi take those gifts and leave."

"Maybe it's just like he said then." Viktor shrugged, and returned his hand to the wheel as they crossed over the icy bridge, "I'm sure we'll run into him later."

"I didn't see their new car in the parking lot when we passed."

"They do have lives outside of waiting for us to show up."

"I know, but-" Yuri started, only to catch the words in his mouth before they could come out.

"But?"

Yuri slouched a bit, "...Minako-sensei doesn't really speak to anyone about what's going on, except my mom I assume, though I'm not even sure she speaks about the topic at all unless she has to." He said, hearing no response, but able to feel the slight edge of that quiet, "...You're still not thrilled about this."

"I can't promise that I ever will be." The silver answered, "That's the best I can do."
"I guess I understand."

"Are you excited about it?"

Yuri turned his head slightly, then looked back as he felt the car veering slowly into the parking lot at the base of the bill, "For my mom's sake."

"I see."

"She'll never get grandkids from us. We can joke about our dogs being grandpups, but it really isn't the same." Yuri explained, sitting up straight again as they parked near the concrete stairs that lead up to the doors. "Mari-nee-chan seems a hopeless cause. It's a bit sad to think that your father had a point...about how us being together means each of our family lines dies with us. I feel like...the least I can do to make amends for that, is to latch onto the fact that Minako-sensei and Mikhail are having this kid after all. Everything except your eyes came from your mom's side, and...well, in a way, us Japanese folk don't come in too many variations. Dark hair, dark eyes, light skin. My mom can at least get the illusion of being an obā-chan by living that experience vicariously through their kid."

"...Yeah."

(Chapter ends here for folks who don't want to read the Minako subplot.)

It was like a daycare center in the lobby. One section was for toddlers, three of them kept corralled in a playpen. Another was for newborns still held or closely watched by their parents. The third section was for those who weren't dealing with kids at all, or were there for those yet to be born. The strangest thing Mikhail noticed, while waiting on his own, was that he was the only male in the whole place. He lifted his gaze to the nearby door, with its overly cheerful cartoonish character on the door denoting it for women to use, and watched Minako carry a paper cup across the room, tissue covering the top, and put it on a tray at the reception desk. She pushed down on the top of an antiseptic and rubbed her hands in the smelly liquid, and walked back to the seat being saved for her.

"...Was there no hatch in the bathroom?" Mikhail wondered quietly, sliding his hand up his fiancé's back as she sat down beside him.

"No," She answered, trying to calm her shaking hands, "It's like a walk of shame. Just imagine some kid running out under my legs and I throw that damn cup by mistake..."

"I imagine that's why the kids are in a pen on the other side of the room, starlight."

"...Yeah, it's probably happened at least once to someone. What a nightmare..." She grumbled, and turned her head slightly, "So there's hatches in Canada, huh?"

"Yeah. Bathroom is flanked by a room where the techs do testing, and there's a metal box in the wall between the two, so the ladies can stow their cups without being watched."

"Lucky."

"Did you look at any of the stuff I gave you?" The Russian asked nervously, "You're not going to have a good time if this is all a surprise as it happens."

"It's just an ultrasound and some blood, right? What could go wrong?" She asked gruffly, putting her chin in the palm of her hand, slouched over her knees with an elbow perched on one, "I've had both before for other reasons."
Mikhail grimaced, "...Sweetie, this early, they can't see anything with an ultrasound on your tummy."
He explained warily, "They gotta...you know..."

"What, go in like you did?"

The red hue on the man's face could've rivaled Yuri's darkest blushes any day, "Y-Yeah..."

Minako puffed a breath, "I can do this. It'll be fine."

The door to the second waiting room opened, and to Minako's relief and horror, she heard her own name called. She swallowed nervously and rose up, Mikhail's arm held in the vice-grip her hands suddenly became. He winced and followed, offering what moral support he could while she still had a grip on him. Thankfully, the tech who came to pull them back needed the woman to let him go, and he rubbed the spot through his sweater, feeling the pins and needles in his hand as the oxygen-starved nerves cried out for blood. He shook his hand lightly until it started to feel normal again, and by the time the prickly feeling went away, Minako's vitals had been taken and she was being ferried to the next room. That's when he noticed the weird look he was getting.

"...What?"

Minako looked uneasy, "She says that you're supposed to wait out here for this next part."

"Oh." He deadpanned, "I could do that. They're not gonna have a good time if I do though."

"...Are you saying you're going make a scene if you have to sit out here for two minutes?"

"Yes."

Minako quirked a brow, and sighed in the tech's direction, [Just let him come in.]

[...Are you sure? We need you to get undressed and-]

She held quiet for a moment, listening to the unnecessary justification, I forget sometimes how reserved my own people are, [How do you think we got into this situation in the first place?]

The tech blushed a little, but then bowed her head and gestured into the room, letting both of them pass without further argument. Once inside, the two looked around the room, seeing a big ultrasound machine, a chair, and the dreaded exam table with its terrible stirrups.

Minako swallowed, "...I always hated that thing. Even getting a yearly was a task. Always thought I'd end up kicking whoever went down there."

"At least you don't have to get prostate exams." Mikhail quipped, trying to make light of it all, "Imagine getting a finger up your backside and you're told to cough."

"...Gross."

"Then imagine if you get aroused by accident." He laughed uneasily, "And the doctor you're there with is another guy. And you're both standing there, looking at each other, both of you knowing exactly what's going on and trying not to die."

Minako gave a look, "Are you speaking from personal experience?"

"Me? Never. That never happened."

"I have weird images manifesting in my head now. Those are there because of you. You should
know that." She poked him in the chest, "Images that are wrong."

Mikhail just poked her back, "You're stalling."

"You're telling weird stories!"

The tech just moved her eyes between them as they spoke in a language she only had a very distant recollection of. Eventually though, she cleared her throat, [Okukawa-san, if you could...please.] She asked, gesturing towards the exam table with its terrible leg-holding antlers. On the seat was a paper skirt and a quilt, [We'll need you to disrobe from the waist down. Are you sure you want him to wa-]

[If he leaves the room I'll freak out.] She explained stiffly.

[O-okay...I'll come back with the doctor in a few minutes then.] The tech bowed her head a few times and took her leave, closing the door behind her.

Minako let out a breath and slouched again with a whine, "Why is this hard." She asked, more as a statement than a question, but then maneuvered herself close enough to the seat that she could lift and unfold the blanket, "Oh my god look at all this." She guffawed, looking at how it was decorated in cartoonish baby imagery, "I'm going to die. Everyone in this place is so damn excited."

Mikhail looked at her, one eye twitching slightly, "...Please don't die."

"I just wish they'd tone it down a bit! This is too much!" She complained, looking uneasy then. She dropped the blanket onto the regular chair nearby, and pawed for her coat, hanging from Mikhail's arm, "I'll just use my jacket. I really will kick someone if they make me endure one more indignity-"

Letting the coat go, Mikhail could only frown a little, "...Indignity...?"

"Not you; them!" She attempted to clarify, roughly kicking off the indoor slippers she'd put on at the start of things, and went for the button of her jeans, "I'm doing my best to be okay with this but I'm really not this super-excited expectant mom that everyone around here seems to think every woman is. It's just overwhelming. I feel like I'll get a lecture if I'm not jumping off the chair with happiness."

"...Can I be excited?"

"Of course you can." She harrumphed, jeans kicked off as unceremoniously as the slippers, "...I just don't want total strangers making me feel bad because I'm not on the same wavelength as they are. I'm handling this in my own way."

"...Are you really sure you want to go through with this?" Mikhail asked warily, "Cuz I get this feeling th-"

She put her hand over his mouth to silence him, and looked on seriously, "I've made my decision. Don't confuse my irritation with this clinic's style as being a sign that I want to quit after all. I've gotten plenty pissed at people in the ballet sphere, too. It's not because I didn't want to do ballet."

The Russian's pale brow furrowed a bit, but he waited until the hand came away, and watched anxiously as his lady love finished undressing for the exam, "...Just as long as you made this choice for yourself, and not because you felt pressured."

Minako flopped back into the exam chair, and folded her ankles over one another, peeking out from under the bottom edge of her jacket, "I would never let anyone pressure me into something like this. I would never have said a word about it if I had no room in me to consider the possibilities." She explained, swaying her legs back and forth softly, "...I'm sorry I'm so difficult."
Mikhail pulled the other seat up close to the side of the exam chair, put the baby blanket over the back, and sat down. He reached over the arm-rest to pull a hand closer, "You do whatever you need to feel okay with it. Just don't leave me out of your thought process. I can't help if I don't know."

She nodded and gave a gentle squeeze, "...I know."

A few seconds later, a quiet knock came on the door, and the tech returned behind the kindly face of their chosen physician. Introductions were made, curious gazes at the foreigner in the room were gotten out of the way, and the visit got to business.

[You're rather old to be doing this.] She warned, [And as your first time, you'll experience challenges that younger women wouldn't.]

[I understand.] Minako nodded seriously, [I have experience all around me though. This is...definitely a bit of a village event, so to speak.]

[That's good. A big support system can mean everything.] The doctor agreed, [With your partner insisting on being in the room the whole time, I can assume he's very invested.]

[...That's an understatement.] She laughed nervously, and looked towards the silver next to her, "She's talking about you."

"...Is it good? Do I have something on my face?" He wondered, rubbing one hand over his mouth and nose.

Minako shook her head, "No, just that you're a good man."

[You'll need to come more often for visits.] The physician went on, writing notes on a card, [Normally the first chunk of things is only one visit per month, then once every two weeks, then once a week until you're done. In your case though...we'll go straight to every two weeks.]

"Oh..."

"What's wrong?"

"We're going to be frequent flyers, hun."

[There's a higher incidence of problems with the babies when one or both partners are older.] The doctor continued, speaking in a rather serious tone, [We will need to keep a close eye on things, to make sure there's no problems with development. Some problems may not be visible on scans though, so be ready for that, too.]

[Okay...] Minako nodded sullenly.

[Be vigilant and talk to him about how you feel. If anything doesn't feel right, you need to give it the attention it deserves.]

[...Alright...]

[Let's get to the interesting bits though, shall we? I don't want you to leave here thinking all I did was scare you.] The physician said, finishing her note before standing up, [We'll take some measurements on the outside first, okay?]

Minako nodded, and felt the seat lean back. Thankfully, she wasn't told to do anything with her legs yet, and was allowed to keep them together as the footrest raised up, until the whole exam chair was
more like a table with a raised headboard. Her jacket was nudged gently out of the way, and her shirt pushed up towards her chest, exposing her whole belly to the cold air.

Nothing has happened yet and I already feel like this is the worst thing ever.

A half-inch wide tape measure was stretched across her skin in multiple directions, and the tech took notes as they were spoken to her. Fingers pressed against her then as well, probing for bumps and lumps, even on her upper half, which she didn't expect. The dreaded moment had come at last though, and she felt her legs hoisted up into those terrible devices. She knew the doctor was telling her things but she couldn't stand to listen, resigning instead to just close her eyes and wait for things to happen.

The probe had a cover, and though odd to call it a pleasant surprise, the jelly on it had been warmed beforehand, making it more tolerable to endure. She pulled her hands up to cover her face anyway though, seeing the glow on the screens and the grainy image of a doppler came into view. The probe moved around, which she liked less and less with every passing second...but the strange silence was the worst.

[Is there nothing there?] Minako asked impatiently, [Why isn't anyone saying anything?]

"Akachan ga futari iru." The doctor answered, keeping an eye on the screen. She raised her free hand from the mouse-ball on the other side and pointed at a black splotch on the screen that looked like a black avocado with a greyish circle in the middle, [One...two. See?] She pointed at a second blotch.

Mikhail tried to get his partner's attention, "What's going on?"

"...There's two." She answered, "I'm gonna kill her."

"Her!?" The Russian coughed, "What."

"YUUUKOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED FOURTY EIGHT

The Ice Castle had a placid ambiance. The soft scratch of blades on the frost danced on the air like crystals on a crisp winter morning. A small class of older kids - from the Junior High School on the other side of castle hill - was finishing up their figure skating session. While not specifically learning how to skate, they did take up the whole of the rink.

Yuri grumbled at the sight of them, holding onto his skates as he stared through the glass doors by the rental desk.

"I told you they'd be here all day." Yuko attempted, "...I'm sure I did."

"Why are they even here?" Viktor wondered, looking a bit less bothered as he leaned against the counter.

"It's part of the school's cultural appreciation studies." She answered, "Because the both of you are representing Hasetsu at the Games next month. It's kind of a field trip for every grade. They're taking a period off to come experience what you guys do."

"But it's only during school-hours, right?"

"Mh." She nodded.

"That's not so bad. Yuri," The Russian pushed up to stand and walked towards his spouse, "We'll just come back later."

"They'll be here again Monday, too. The High Schoolers are coming then." Yuko warned, "They'll probably be rowdier than this group. The chaperones and teachers seem to have a good grip on these guys."

"That's fine." Viktor looked back, then turned to Yuri again, "Shall we go? I'm curious how Ghost will handle a walk now that she's a bit more comfortable."

"I guess..."

A trio of uniform-clad girls suddenly rushed through from the rink-area, squeezing past the skaters on their way out the front, and disappeared down the concrete steps...only to reappear and dart in all directions like a flock of scared birds. Coming up in their place though was a woman who seemed to be on literal fire. The doors parted in her wake, and dark eyes lifted across the counter.

"YUUKOOOOO." 

"Eep!" She ducked behind the counter.

"YOU DID THIS TO ME." 

Yuri glanced back as well as he could, given how Viktor had latched onto his head. He spotted Minako coming in through the sliding doors, and she approached the rental counter, hands practically melting the plastic cover where she set them.

"THIS IS YOUR FAULT."
Viktor dared a nervous laugh, "...What's her fault?"

Mikhail finally hobbled in through the front doors, and heaved several breaths as he slouched over his knees, "...Stairs...too long...

Eyes went to him next, "...What's Yuko's fault?"

The elder held up a hand to make them wait, and caught a few more breaths before he finally stood upright and tried to sound more normal, "...She thinks Yuko jinxed her." He explained, a hand on his chest to stop the cough that he could feel coming, "...Apparently she said something before and now it came true."

Yuko slid her fingers over the counter's edge, then peeked her head up, seeing the still-seething image of the ballerina there beyond it, "...Ehhhh...what'd I say that came true...exactly?"

Minako’s image smoldered like a desert blaze, "...There's two."

"Eh?" Was heard from multiple places in the room.

Before another word could be said to explain it though, the rental area was suddenly flooded with people from rink-side. Dozens of Junior High School kids poured through, making it seem like a Tokyo train had stopped and everyone had suddenly gotten off all at once. They hardly paid any mind to the smoking woman, or the Olympians in whose honor they’d been given the free period, or the slender older man standing like a post in the middle of the doorway. They filtered through, out into the wilderness, followed quickly by their minders...and then - save the licking of the emotionally-ravaged flames on Minako’s shoulders - the Ice Castle was eerie silent.

"...There's two." The woman echoed, quieter this time, her fires dwindling until she looked more normal again, "...We just found out."

"T-Two what...?" Yuko muttered nervously, still crouched where she was on the safer side of the counter.

"Don't make me say it."

"Fraternal twins." Mikhail said for her.

Yuko couldn't help but feel her eyes getting big, and she suddenly jumped up in the air, arms out, "That's so cool! Twins!? My girls will love that!"

Yuri was stuck between being happy and nervous and terrified. He turned to look up at Viktor's face, but it seemed likened to stone, and gave nothing away. He wasn't sure if Viktor had 404'd again or was just holding his reaction in for later. He looked to Mikhail then, who he could see was side-eyeing them from his vantage, probably looking at Viktor as well.

Minako's reaction grew colder as Yuko continued to fawn over the possibilities, and by the time the young mother stopped, the older to-be was slumped on the floor in an icy heap, fingers still holding to the glass-front of the case.

"Your reactions are really confusing," The Madonna pointed out, smiling anxiously as she loomed over, "You're gonna have to figure out how you want people to react at some point."

"I don't know how I want people to react." Minako whined quietly, "I don't know how to react. I thought I'd made my peace with the idea of having one, but now I have two, and I'm just having a minute with it."
"...There's always the option of reducing it to just one..." Yuko pointed out, though a hint of sadness on her voice, "If you really had to... I was warned that I probably should've done it, because of how small I am, but...I decided the best thing for me was to keep them all. What's best for you may be different though."

"I don't know that I could make that choice..." The older woman sighed, releasing the counter to pull her hands to her lap, "As much as I dislike, even dread this whole thing... I just...have this overwhelming sense of responsibility over it..." She admitted quietly, "If I did something like that, I'd always wonder...what would the other have been like? I don't want to have to think about that... I feel...like if I didn't finish it out, I'd feel worse than I do now..."

"Then you have everything you need to be great at this." Yuko explained, crouching down next to her senior, "Sometimes kids are like husbands in arranged marriages. The love comes later. You just...have to figure them out first."

Minako offered a reluctant nod, and pulled herself up to her feet again. She timidly tried to flatten out the counter where she’d mauled it a moment before, but then just turned around to pretend it wasn't there, and looked to her oddly silent partner, "...Honestly I thought you'd be ecstatic to find out we were having twins. It's like repeating history, in a way."

"I guess." The elder answered with a nervous shrug, "I'm just figuring out how to tip-toe around you. If I annoy you, then you won't want me around, so I have to be careful. I'm trying to go through this as the helpful type, being pragmatic instead of sentimental. By the time I have to start being annoying, maybe it won't bother you so much."

"When would you have to start being annoying?" She asked skeptically.

"When we have to start buying stuff." He answered simply, "For the moment, we carry on like before. Nothing will really feel all that different until around four months from now anyway. So..."

"Yeah..."

"The other trouble is that I have an unpleasant phone-call to make." Mikhail continued, eyes going to the tiled floor, "So it's a bit weird for me right now. On the one hand, I'm processing the start of new life...and on the other, I'm having to deal with the end of one."

"My father's...?" Viktor asked, breaking his silence.

Mikhail nodded, "I got an email that the report was ready. Dr. Legashov wants me to ring him to go over it. It's barely 6am out there right now though, so I have to wait a minute, which is killing me."

"Why don't you come to the house?" Viktor suggested, "I want to hear it, too, if that's okay."

"Yeah... Yeah, sure." He agreed sullenly, but then lifted his gaze to Minako again, "What do you want to do in the meantime?"

"...I guess I'll go to the snack bar." She answered, hesitating a moment, but then shook her head, "If I'm really putting the space up for sale, then I need to get my junk out. I've been putting it off."

"It's as good as any way to spend time."

"We're gonna walk the pack then," Viktor added, "I can see the next herd of school-kids coming this way anyhow. May as well get moving, since there's not much we can do here while there's so many other people on the ice."
"Alright," Mikhail agreed, "Then I'll call you in two hours. I'll be on my way over by then."
For all the different reasons that there were, a quieter walk would not have been possible. The ambient sounds of Hasetsu hovered in the background with every step, punctuated by the sound of paws on the crunchy ground. Returning home from their foray through the town's little roads, the skating duo and their pack quietly reentered, cleaning off paws before any were allowed to set foot on the slightly-raised wooden floor past the entry-way. Coats were put away with scarves and gloves, and feet stepped out of shoes and into slippers on the landing.

Yuri shuffled off towards the bathroom, door clicking closed behind him before the muffled hiss of the faucet could be heard. Viktor shuffled into the kitchen, watched by the dark eyes of the pupper-pack, each swaying their tails in muted anticipation. True to their hopes, the taller human went for the pantry, and a few tasty morsels were handed out as reward for being good on their walk. Each fuzzy head got a scratch before Viktor stood back up to wash his hands.

The missing mochi still made the Russian a bit salty, but to that point in the day, he still hadn't found them or the container they'd been in. It boggled his already-anxious mind into something of a fermented frustration, eyes still scanning the counter as though the mochi would spring into existence if he just looked one more time. No luck though, and with a sigh, he turned back towards the living-room.

The time on the cable-box showed that it was close to 2pm; still an hour to go before any expected phone-calls were to be made. Viktor plunked down on the couch, and let himself sink into it, head tilted against the back-rest. He listened to the quiet sounds of the house, much as he had outside it, and took in every subtle noise. The faucet still running in the bathroom not-too-far away, the water-plunging tongue in one of the dog-bowls behind the counter, and tiny nails tapping somewhere near the front door. Viktor opened his eyes and stared at the white vaulted ceiling, accented by dark wooden crossbeams.

Too many things were rummaging around in his head, and the cacophony of competing thoughts left his mind prohibitively silent. He barely registered that the hissing water faucet had got out, but he turned his eyes slightly when he heard the door click open. Jiro sauntered up to his human, rushing back from the front door where he'd been rooting in the smells of shoes, and went up on his hind legs for a few high ear-rubs before he trotted off happily again. Yuri quietly made his way towards the living-room, and carefully side-stepped through the gap between the kotatsu and the foot of the couch. He too slumped backward, looking up at the ceiling absently.

"Maybe I'm too sympathetic to Minako." Viktor said, breaking the silence as he stared upward again as well, "I can't be happy about this because she isn't...and I was the first person she told."

Yuri had no answer. He could only recall the distant sight of memory on the moment Viktor had found out, and the ever-changing reasons for the man's distaste for the situation.

"We're feeding off each other." The Russian went on idly, closing his eyes, "Maybe I'm just projecting though...the idea that she feels like she's wronged me somehow, as a fan of mine, and is trying to be discontent simply because I was at first...and now it's just a cycle. I was unhappy, so that made her unhappy, and now that makes me unhappy...neither of us can shake it. ...And now...twins...? It's like I'm being compelled to be twice as unsettled as I already w-" Viktor's words cut off, and he cracked one eye open, feeling Yuri clamber over and sit on the middle of his thighs. Confused but curious, he lifted his head up from the back of the couch, and looked into those eyes
that had pierced into him like fish-hooks, pulling him from the water of his ramble, "...Was?" He finished, unsure.

Yuri leaned forward, hands softly sliding up his partner's chest. He lightly set the tip of his nose to Viktor's lips, and moved up from there, drifting up with a feather-soft touch. He nuzzled into the brush of a few stray silver hairs, and kissed that pale forehead before he put his own on that same spot. He could feel Viktor's frame unwind from the subtle intensity of his frustration, and an exhale against his neck. Hands slid up the tops of his legs and perched on his hips, and he moved forward, as though the curl of those fingers around the back of his waist had pulled him closer. He pressed into a gentle kiss as he settled again, and cradled his hands around the back of that silver head. Fingers groped for skin under his shirt, and before long, Yuri could feel both of those arms wrap around his sides and back, holding to his warmth; a long, hot exhale breathed out against his chest.

Viktor suddenly pulled both arms back, but only so he could push his hands down into the couch cushions and lift them both up a little. He turned to the side and backed up into the corner before leaning away, drawing the younger man down with him, and returned his hands inside the warmth of Yuri's clothes. Yuri himself curled up against him, turning his head inward to his shoulder and neck, hands wedging under his back.

There was something of an unspoken understanding within the quiet. Even the dogs could feel it, and they each melted into the stillness in their own ways. The hour passed within the haze of that half-expected afternoon nap, broken up by the devastating sound of a knock on the door. Viktor practically jumped in his surprised twitch, and Yuri grumbled quietly to be woken up as a result. Ghost barked loudly at the door, muffling the groans of the pair still struggling with the wake-up call on the couch. Jiro soon joined in, adding his higher-pitched puppy yips to the chorus of canine 'who goes there's and 'state your business's. Viktor hobbled through the excitement of the pack, wading through to get to the door and finally pull it open, spotting his uncle out there.

"...Didn't you get my text?"

Viktor just blinked slowly, "I'm a bit foggy on details right now?" He answered, feeling Ghost's long shaggy fur slide past his leg as she stepped into the doorway, still half-mumbling a bark as she realized the person outside was familiar. Her duty done, defenses assured, she turned and went back into the household.

"She looks like a completely different dog now." Mikhail commented, "Who knew being stuck in the woods with a lonely old man would hide so much of her personality."

Unsure how to respond to the statement, Viktor stepped aside and gestured into his home. With the door closed after the elder, Viktor dusted off his feet before stepping up onto the hardwood, and Mikhail did much the same, stepping out of his shoes and onto the upper level with just his socks.

"This place looks pretty different from how it was when you first moved in," Mikhail commented, looking around, "Definitely more lived in."

Yuri raised a hand as the elder came into view, but he stayed on the couch.

"Pretty quiet though, other than the pups."

Viktor nodded sleepily, "We kinda came back and crashed. Yuri didn't sleep well and I...uhm...well..."

"You didn't say a word when Minako and I came to the Ice Castle..." Mikhail observed, his eyes down on the kotatsu as Ghost wedged into the space between it and the couch Yuri was on,
"I had hoped that my changing status in your mind would've helped with our situation, but I guess not..."

His nephew sighed, "Sorry. It's not because of you though, if that makes any difference."

"Same opinion, but different reasons now?"

"It doesn't make any sense. Like I said a minute ago, I'm a bit foggy on details right now. I don't even remember where I left my phone. I must've put it on silent at some point." The younger Russian explained tediously. He lowered down next to the kotatsu and fumbled under it to find the switch, and clicked it on, gesturing to the other sides of the table as he pulled the thick blanket over his crossed legs, "Shall we?"

Mikhail nodded and set his things on one arm of the couch before he found his way down to the floor, and claimed the opposite side of the kotatsu for himself. He pulled his phone up and set it onto the table-top, the phone number ready to dial out, but hesitated to click the Call button for a moment. He looked across to his nephew, "I don't know what happened, just to preface this...whatever it is, it'll be as much a surprise to me as it is to you."

"You're expecting a surprise?" Viktor wondered, watching as Yuri passed behind him - walking on his knees - before he looked forward again, "Is there more than what you said you found?"

Mikhail shook his head and crossed his arms over the table, elbows pressed against it, "People tell me I'm smart, but not when it comes to family. I like to think I can figure things out, piece together bits of information and get the right answer, like the things I used to build for work. But...opinions, motivations, and personalities are not as easy to sort out as a milled piece of equipment. I really don't know what to think of what I saw out there. The window being open doesn't make sense in any way but that Kon did this to himself...but everything I know or knew about the man screams that he would never do such a thing. Not on purpose anyway."

"What about his horse?" Viktor asked, "You brought Ghost here, but..."

"There's someone in the Netherlands that wants him. The equine vet says that monster-beast of a horse is actually pretty young, only four or five years old, and was never gelded. Your father liked things all natural, it seems." Mikhail explained, looking over to where he could see Ghost's head lying on the floor, just barely hidden under the shadow of the underside of the couch, "What about that one?"

"She bonded to Yuri." Viktor explained, "And she's about six months old. She's going early tomorrow morning to get spayed before she has a chance to go into heat and make us crazy."

"Yeah, she's still a baby." The elder agreed, reaching over to rub the back of his fingers along her cheek, "But I guess it wouldn't have been a problem for Kon, being in the middle of nowhere." He supposed, and turned his attention back to his phone.

Ghost lifted her head as soon as the fingers moved, and realized Yuri had gone to the other side. She pushed up and went around, flopping back down into a heap on the corner between her two humans. Jiro and Makkachin soon found their way over as well, though Makkachin made himself at home in the semi-warm spot Yuri had just left, and Jiro insisted on being under the kotatsu blanket.

"Alright then." Mikhail said nervously, "Here we go."

The phone was set to speaker, and the dial-tone rang out like a bell. A few rings sounded before the phone clicked and a decisively Russian voice answered in greeting.
"Privet."

"Doktor Legashov. Èto ja, Mikhail Rozovsky. Moj plemjannik zdes'." The elder started, explaining that his nephew was with them, "Èto Viktor. On syn Konstantina." (This is Viktor. He's Konstantin's son.)

"Pozdravljaju tebja." (Greetings to you.) The doctor answered, "Spasibo, čto prišla." (Thanks for coming.)

"Da." Viktor said simply.

[So should I just speak plainly or should I discuss the process?] The doctor asked.

[Just tell it straight. We don't need to waste your time.] Mikhail answered for them, [What did the man in?]

[A stroke. A big one.]

Viktor lifted his head up slightly, and whispered the translation to his quiet spouse.

[A man like Konstantin, who worked his whole life in that steel mill, no doubt suffered a number of terrible head injuries. Even just from the external exam, I could see he'd been beaten up over the years. Lots of scars, burns, and a nose that had been broken more than once.]

Viktor's left eye twitched slightly, but he drew a breath and sat back a bit from the kotatsu. Mikhail noticed, but didn't interrupt.

[Every so often, if an injury to the head happens just right, it can cause an aneurysm - an out-pouching on a weakened blood vessel - to form. Not life-threatening on its own - an aneurysm can sit there idly for years and you'd never know - but then one day it just bursts like a balloon, and it hemorrhages terribly. Sections of the brain die because no blood is coming in the way it's supposed to; spilling out on top of everything uselessly. If the brain dies, everything else does, too...and these kinds of strokes are quite painful.] The doctor explained, his voice bouncing off the walls of the home.

[Would that explain why the window was open?] Mikhail wondered.

[Maybe not why it was open, but perhaps why it had not been closed.] Dr. Legashov answered, [I suspect the man had opened the window for some fresh air to come in, and the stroke happened then. He must've gotten into the bed, hoping for the sudden headache to pass, and then simply never got back out again. He would never have felt the cold.]

[I see...] Mikhail nodded solemnly, [Can you tell how long he was alone like that?]

[Maybe a day. Day and a half.] The pathologist answered, [Enough to make the animals unhappy, but not suffer the consequences of neglect.]

[...Could he have been saved if someone had been there?]

[Not from this. He would've been dead in minutes.] The sapient voice explained, [Maybe if he was sitting in an emergency room lobby when it happened...but not in the middle of the woods, so far from the nearest hospital. Even if he had somehow survived, this would've probably left him severely disabled and needing round-the-clock care for everything. He would've passed on within weeks or months.]
Mikhail nodded, and sighed quietly, looking over to see his stoic nephew.

[So this would've caught up with him sooner or later anyway.] Viktor asked.

[Without early preventative treatment, I imagine so.]

The silence after those words was palpable. No one knew what to say.

[...Do you have any other questions?] Dr. Legashov prompted.

[How long can you keep hold of him?] Mikhail asked quietly, fingers moving up to pinch the bridge of his nose.

[Not more than a week.]

[How am I going to be able to bury him in a week?] The elder asked, [The ground is frozen solid and... I don't even know who his friends were, if he had any, or how to contact them. It's basically just me.]

[People in the old country used to thaw the ground with hot coals, and dig the graves a few centimeters at a time.] The doctor explained, [It took a few days, but it got the job done.]

[...Yeah. ...I'll...think of something. Please keep him for as long as you can. You know how to reach me if anything changes. Thank you for your time, Dr. Legashov.]

[I'll be in touch. Stay safe in Japan.]

"Pogovorim pozže." Mikhail said, and clicked the End Call button. The room fell back to quiet; Makkachin had even stopped his usual soft pant. The air was thick with uncertainty.

"...Mimi, why don't you stay for a little while." Viktor suggested, "I don't want you to be alone."

"...I don't think I can face the others right now anyway." The elder said, head bent down. His elbows slid forward until his crossed arms could offer a spot for him to bury his face, and Mikhail stayed there on the kotatsu top.

Yuri looked over to his partner, and gave his hand a gentle squeeze before the silver slowly stood up.

"I'll make some hot wine." Viktor said, leaning over the table-top to press a palm to his uncle's shoulder. He saw that head, silver with its wisps of occasional white, bob once in acknowledgment, and he pulled back to stand, shuffling quietly towards the kitchen.
Chapter 550

CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED FIFTY

Viktor picked through the cabinets for his wine-mulling supplies, grabbing a few mugs for later while he was there. On the shelf above the ceramic cups though, an unusual article caught his attention.

...*my mochi container!?*

He reached up to pull it down quickly, only to feel a sticky residue on the side. His brow furrowed and he turned the container around a few times, looking it over before taking the lid off...and spotted that the inside hadn't been cleaned at all before being put away. He blinked at the sight of the thing in confusion, but he knew he hadn't - and wouldn't - put dirty dishes away as though they were clean. He felt a pit in his stomach, and looked out beyond the island, past the top of his uncle's head and over to the younger man on the right side of the kotatsu. His brow furrowed and he looked back to the sticky mochi container in his hands.

...*i really don't want to think about Yuri eating all these by himself overnight...but I sure didn't, and none of our dogs can put the container back together or put it away where it's supposed to go.*

He groaned quietly to himself and set the plastic box into the sink, and went back to his original task.

Yuri kept his eyes down on the forlorn Russian bent over his kotatsu. One hand stroked through Ghost's long fur, the other splayed out under the blanket, fingers nibbled and licked at by the puppy under the table. Words were sitting on the tip of his tongue, tapping on the back of his teeth, wanting to be let out...but something kept his lips together. He turned his eyes down instead, staring at the grain in the dark lacquered wood.

"You're uncharacteristically quiet." Mikhail commented, lifting up from the crook of his arms, "Yuri."

"...I don't really know what you guys were saying. Viktor only translated the cause of death for me." He answered quietly, looking aside as he felt Ghost lift her head against his side briefly, "You don't look too good though so I'm guessing there's more?"

"...Strokes like the kind Kon had lead to several minutes of excruciating pain, followed by death." The elder explained sullenly, "My only consolation in all this is that Tat wasn't there to watch it happen. If she'd still been alive..." He said, his words trailing. He lifted one hand to comb his fingers through his hair, and shook his head, "Actually, I don't even know... If things were as rocky as Kon said at that stupid lawyer meeting last year, maybe it would've been better. It could've been Tat's escape. I could've...gotten her out..."

Yuri stayed quiet for a moment, unsure how to respond to the words, though he had a few ideas. He pulled his hands free from the pups that had been preoccupied with them - wiping the one on his jeans to dry the drool - and then crossed his arms over the table, leaning down into them to match Mikhail's posture. He held there a while, listening to the sound of Viktor's wine cooking, and waited for those sorrow-filled jade eyes to finally rise up again. They did eventually, even though they stayed low, barely peeking over the ruffle of shirt sleeves. "You and your sister were fraternal twins, too, right?" Yuri posed, hoping to veer the conversation to something less morbid, "I think all boy-girl twins are..."
"Mhm..." The elder hummed, "...Well, most. There's been occasions where an egg will get dinged by two sperm, and it'll look like identical twins on scans at first...two embryos sharing a placenta...but then they turn out to be only semi-identical. On the off-chance that the twins are identical despite being boy and girl, the girl actually...doesn't often come out so well. The chromosomes are all messed up, information is missing...the girl twin comes out with Turner Syndrome. For Tat and I...we had to be fraternal."

"You sound oddly disappointed about that."

"I did some reading before I came over here. I'm an engineer, you know?"

"Yeah."

"I know machines, buildings, gizmos and gadgets...I know inanimate things. But biology? Not my avenue. I know that babies don't come from storks, but that's basically the extent of it. All this time...I thought Tat and I were two sides of the same coin. That we were identical twins. We looked exactly alike until puberty ruined it, we acted the same...we even had that dumb spooky twin language for a little while when we were real young. Turns out...the only reason we're called twins at all is because we shared a womb. We're...no different than regular non-twin siblings. We were only special because of the timing." He explained, and rubbed his nose on his sleeve, "I feel like I don't know who I am anymore."

"...Just because you weren't identical twins, doesn't mean you weren't twins." Yuri attempted, "You still shared all the typical stuff that you thought made you identical anyway. I don't think knowing the rest should take away from that. It doesn't change you."

"I guess..."

"Will it change how you think of your new kids?"

Mikhail lifted his eyes, but then shook his head, "No..."

"And because you know that you and your twin were the same, you'll know what to expect from them as they're growing up."

The elder coughed a sad laugh, "That's terrifying. If they turn out to be boy-girl like we were..."

"Well, whatever horrible things you did as kids, weren't so horrible that you weren't able to move on in life. We all do horrible things at some point or another. I think that's just...a rite of passage, in a way."

"I guess..." Mikhail answered quietly, sinking back into his folded arms.

Yuri watched the man for a moment, and glanced into the kitchen, seeing Viktor's back as his hovered over his slowly-boiling concoction. Unsure if he could even hear what was being said, he spoke at a more normal level, and pushed up on his elbows, "I feel like there's a huge elephant in the room." He said, "I know everyone's scared to make Minako-sensei uncomfortable about what's going on, but I think, in a twisted sort of way, you're giving her too much control over how everyone else regards it."

"She's the one whose status is 'pregnant.' No one else really gets a say on the matter." The elder pointed out, "Her body, her rules."

"She's not God Emperor over how you feel about it though."
"She doesn't like people talking about it." Mikhail explained, "Even when it's just us, it's a touchy subject. At the doctor's earlier, she made a big stink about how 'excitable' everyone there was about the prospect of having a kid. It's like she hates the idea that anyone would be happy about it. She wouldn't even use the blanket they gave her because the cartoony pictures on it were too cheerful."

"...Too cheerful?" Yuri echoed, incredulous, "What does that mean?"

Mikhail rubbed his face with one hand before he settled his jaw in his palm and leaned to one side against it, "She's not the glowing, happy mother-to-be, daydreaming about all the cute little clothes we're going to buy, or what the nursery will look like. She hasn't considered names, whether they'll be a boy or girl, or any of the normal stuff people think about when they're expecting. She's just...a soldier, reluctantly doing her duty. I wonder if she hopes she miscarries, so she can be relieved of this burden without having to choose it on purpose."

"...I don't think she'd want that." Yuri defended, "Minako-sensei doesn't dislike kids."

"Then why does she always talk about it like it's the worst thing ever?" The Russian asked, sounding a bit impatient.

"...Probably because she's scared."

"I know she's scared!" Mikhail blurted, "But she won't let me do anything about it! I really don't know what to think. She says she's at peace with this, but then she complains about it endlessly, or ignores it outright. When the doctor said there were two, the first thing Minako did was curse Yuko. It's like fate has conspired against me, having all these things happen at once, and made me utterly useless at dealing with any of it. I can't help Kon; he's dead. I can't help my sister; she's dead. Viktora's mad at me for how things are, as a direct result of the fact that her mom's dead. Everyone is dying all around me and I can't even be happy about the one thing that's coming alive, because Minako acts like she'd rather be dead."

"...That's harsh."

"Am I making it up though?"

"...Nnnnnnooo...?" Yuri answered reluctantly, but then sighed and shook his head, "...I think this is just a situation that Minako-sensei has never really been prepared for. She's always been extremely independent and self-reliant. Now, she's in a situation where she really needs someone else to help her, and that makes her feel weak or vulnerable. Stranger still, she's counting on you,"

Mikhail made a face.

"...Someone who's related to that guy," Yuri said, pointing into the kitchen, only to get a confused look from Viktor as he looked back, pointing at himself in turn, "Someone she's been a fan of since as long as I can remember. In a screwy kind of way, she's going through all the same emotions I did in the beginning, where I couldn't believe that Viktor was even here, or that he gave a damn about me as anything other than a distraction."

"You wound me." The wine-maker mumbled, rubbing the center of his chest to quell the sharp pain within.

Yuri went on anyway though, "It took me a really long time to accept that Viktor was exactly what he claimed to be, but as time went on, and I got more comfortable with him, so did Minako-sensei. His opinion means a lot to her...and when he found out about this, his reaction was...less than stellar."
Viktor leered over the island, "...Should I be offended at all this...?" He wondered to himself.

"So she feels like this pregnancy is a direct attack against him...and so she hates herself for having upset him."

"...I literally just said that an hour ago."

Mikhail thought on it for a moment, and rubbed his chin. Eyes turned to Makkachin on the couch, and considered the odd, nervous swallow the poodle made for having suddenly been focused on, "...So if we can get Viktor to stop being mad about it, maybe she'll stop being mad about it."

"Maybe." Yuri agreed.

"Viktor's seemingly forgiven me at this point though, so I don't know why he's still mad about the pregnancy." Mikhail went on.

Viktor narrowed his eyes at the pair of them, I could put on a damn Broadway show in here and they'd still be talking about me like I can't hear them.

"It's a remnant of when he was mad at you." Yuri explained, "It still kind of hurts his pride a bit."

"Why would it hurt his pride?"

"Because Minako-sensei was his friend before you turned up, and since he wasn't super thrilled with the idea of you hanging around, he feels like getting Minako-sensei into this situation was done on purpose, so you'd have an excuse to be around."

"...Seriously." Mikhail deadpanned, only to twitch in surprise as he felt something hit the back of his head. He held the spot and looked around, seeing the nugget only half a second before Makkachin gobbled it up. Another flick hit him, this time on the side of his arm, and Makkachin dove for that as well, "What in the world...?"

"Ow-" Yuri whined, getting beaned by something as well. Jiro was intrigued by the sound of the poodle's rummaging, and came out from under the kotatsu, finding the morsel that had landed on the blanket, and went for it quickly. Three more strikes landed before any of them looked for the source, and Yuri suddenly spotted Viktor with another round of ammunition in his hand, gaping at them with narrowed eyes from the middle of the kitchen, "Viktor, why are you-"


Yuri raised a brow, "...Care to tell the class why you're upset?"

"Cuz everyone's always so ready to speak for me instead of just asking me what I think directly." He answered, tossing another dog-treat at them, though that one bounced off the table and landed on Ghost. She lifted her head and sniffed at it, but Jiro jumped onto her first and swiped it.

"So then tell him why you're upset about this. I thought you were ignoring us."

Viktor continued his deadpan, hand in the baggie as he reloaded, "...Cuz Minako was my friend first and it seemed like Mimi knocked her up on purpose so he'd have an excuse to be around me long-term."

Yuri just gave the 'I know, you've told me, that's why I said it' look.
"That's literally what he just said," Mikhail defended, gesturing at the youngest member of the group.

"And," Viktor emphasized with a pause, staring at his uncle, "Because I felt like you did it only for that reason, and that you were using her...trapping her in a situation that could only end in pain, no matter what she did."

"But that's not even close to wh-"

"Notice how I'm using the past tense," Viktor explained pointedly, "I don't think that anymore."

"You really must've hated me if you'd actually think I would do something so cruel." Mikhail grumbled.

The younger silver shrugged, rolling the dog-treat between his fingers, "My last memory of you from before your miraculous reappearance was the incredible amount of pain you put me through. I was just a little kid when you abandoned mom and I. I didn't trust that you wouldn't just do that again. I know better now. I know you're doing the best you can, and I know that you didn't leave us behind because you wanted to."

"So then why are you still hostile?"

"Because she is." He answered, gesturing out towards the door, as though Minako were right behind it, "And it's just...impossible for me to get past it so long as she can't."

"And she can't get past it so long as you can't."

"I know." Viktor sighed, looking down into the sink, and the empty mochi container, "...Maybe I should talk to her. I just...don't want to assume her reasons. If it turns out she doesn't care what I think - and this whole thing really is just because she's scared of the process - then I'll have made a big stink about this for nothing, and I'll look like I'm full of myself."

"You already talked to her about all that." Yuri pointed out, "At Nationals, before we made her do all those pregnancy tests, remember?"

"Yeah, but that was different from now. Back then I was still on the fence about Mimi." Viktor explained, shaking his head, "Her reasons could have evolved just like mine did. Maybe if I just reassure her that I am okay with things, she'll feel less apprehensive."

"Are you okay with it though?" Mikhail asked, "I mean..."

"I know." He said, wringing his hands nervously, "Everyone is on edge about it all because I'm such a stick in the mud. Even Yuri doesn't want to say he's excited about it, saying he's just in it for his mom."

Jade eyes turned, but Yuri just shrugged, "...Would you be excited?"

"Once upon a time, I fled halfway around the world to avoid the outcome of a pregnancy. But that was at a different point in my life. I'm a...bit more settled now." Yuri explained, "I think I'd be a good big brother, if that makes sense."

"You barely interact with the triplets as it is."

"That's different. There's baggage with them. ...I used to have a thing for Yuko, and the triplets are a reminder of why I left Hasetsu. I've never had a thing for Minako though."
"...You're weird." Mikhail deadpanned.

Yuri returned the expression, "For not having a crush on someone as old as my mom?"

"No, stupid." The elder grimaced, "For holding it against a couple kids that you didn't hook up with their mom."

"I don't hold it against them." Yuri harped back, "I'm just not as attached as I probably could be."

Mikhail stared, unconvinced.

"Look..." Yuri started again, "It doesn't make any sense to indulge in Minako-sensei's anxiety. I would know...because I hate it when people indulge in mine. Did she seems upset about this when you first found out?"

"...Not that I can recall. She was just surprised."

"So she only got upset after telling Viktor about it. Maybe she really would feel better if she knew Viktor wasn't angry anymore."

Eyes went up to the man in the kitchen.

Viktor averted his gaze though, "So then I'll tell her later."

"As in later today or later next week...?" Mikhail quirked a brow, "Shit, I'll drive you over to the snack bar right now if you want."

"Later today, jeeze." He huffed, and turned back to his simmering wine pot, "If I don't see her at the rink with Yurio then I'll just find her at the resort. Or do you guys not spend the night there anymore?"

"Off and on...but I'll make sure she's at the Ice Castle tonight."

"Then it's settled." Viktor said, stirring a wooden spoon through the dark red mixture, "With any luck, I'm the only reason this is still a problem."
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED FIFTY ONE

One glass of hot wine was enough to put Mikhail on the very edge of being tipsy, and he called it a night on the drink soon after. It was nearly time to start thinking about his own pack back at Yu-Topia though, and he bid his farewells until later in the evening. His car could barely be heard going by, even though they knew it was there, given away more by the sound of ice crunching under its hard wheels than by any noise its hybrid engine made.

Viktor closed the door as he watched the dark colored Lexus pass from view, and held his hand to the frame for a moment. He could hear the sound of Yuri's footsteps thump lightly on the hardwood floor, heading back from the entry hall, and he looked to spot the younger man going to the kotatsu. Yuri picked up their three wine mugs and carried them quickly around the big kitchen island, stopping in front of the sink as he stared within. Viktor held his breath for a second, stepping closer in turn, and watched in perplexed curiosity.

"Oh no..." Yuri started, brows furrowed into a frown, "Did the dogs get the mochi somehow?"

The silver made a face, but shook it away, "...No idea. I found that in the cabinet earlier...hadn't been washed."

"That's weird."

Viktor heard those words echo in his head a few times, ringing like bells, That's weird? There's only two of us here who would've done that and it sure wasn't me...

Yuri turned the water on to pour into the plastic bowl, and added some bubbles of soap, "I had a weird dream about getting to have some. I was really looking forward to it, too."

Get it together, Viktor...you can do this without sticking your foot in your mouth.

"I didn't want to ask about them at breakfast though since I didn't see them on the counter." Yuri continued, washing the container with a scrubbing pad, "I guess this explains it."

Viktor was practically bending over backwards, going through the mental gymnastics of how to approach the topic without being a giant butt. He winced as he parted his lips, "...What...do you think...haaaaappended to them?"

"...Why are you asking like that?" The younger figure wondered, a brow quirked, "It sounds like it hurt."

Don't mess this up, Viktor! Just play it cool!

"Viktor?"

The words came out like shotgun spray, "You ate my soup and all the bread and fruit and cheese in Vienna when we had lunch with Chris and then you ate my half of the curry yesterday in Imari and then you had a dream about eating the mochi and you're not at all curious as to how a dirty dish would get into the cupboard when only you and I live here and I've already said I don't know what happened?"

Yuri held the soapy bowl up defensively and narrowed his eyes, "What are you suggesting?"
"Cyka blyat." The Russian groaned and writhed in agony where he stood, eventually going to the ground to crouch and hold his head. Makkachin trotted over, wondering what was going on, but the poodle's adoring snuffles did little to assuage the man's sorrow, "I tried so hard not to sound accusing! It's my accent, isn't it!? Russian accents always make things sound worse than they are!"

Pouting slightly, Yuri went back to washing the dish, and examined it a bit more closely as he turned the soapy water around in the basin, "Never mind the accent; it's clear you think I ate the mochi, just like I apparently ate everything else."

Viktor crawled to the side of the island and peered over his fingers where he held timidly to the ledge, looking rather pitiful, "I'm not making it up! Both of those other times, I went to get my share, and all of it was gone! I didn't even notice you take any of it because I was so busy talking!"

"So then how do you know it was me?"

"Process of elimination!" The Russian whined, sinking a bit behind his knuckles, "It's not like Chris or Mimi took the food! But both times happened when we were eyeballs-deep in Saito Drama! And now, we're just one night after he threw a grenade into your headspace!"

"You sure do like making him my boogeyman." Yuri huffed, moving the bottom piece of the container to the next compartment of the sink to rinse it off, and set it to dry in the metal rack on the counter between him and his husband, "And you were so sure he said nothing ever happened because he wanted to cut me loose. At some point, I have to be responsible for my own reactions to things."

Viktor made a face, though only the upper half of it could be seen where he was still taking refuge behind the edge of the counter, "You are being responsible for your own reactions...by eating a bunch more than you should, and not even remembering it. You said you'd hate him if he lied, but I don't think you even know how. So instead of hating him, you're punishing yourself, because the guilt clings to you like a baby monkey."

"A monkey!?!" Yuri guffawed, dropping the container's lid as he cleaned it. He scrambled to pick it up off the floor and stick it into the soapy water again, "...That's absurd."

"It's not." The silver insisted, finding the courage to stand up normally again, and pressed his fingertips nervously to the counter as he watched his partner carefully, "You said before that you binge-ate during Sochi because of everything that was going on, and then you basically quit skating after and focused on finishing school instead. You switched gears so completely that you finished school in three months, but you ballooned out-

"Are you saying I'm getting fat!?!" Yuri barked, feeling himself filling out like he had back then. His pants felt tighter, and his shirt seemed to lift, exposing his gut from the underside.

"Bože moj, ja vsë isportil snova!" (Oh my god, I messed up everything again!) Viktor whined and went down behind the counter to hide like before, "No!" He insisted, putting his back to the wooden vertical surface, and pulled up his knees, "You're doing too much athletic stuff for that right now! But you probably would've if we weren't getting ready for Four Continents right now!"

Yuri reached around, pulling on the lower edge of his shirt to cover his exposed skin, though unsuccessfully, "That's so mean!"

"How was that mean!?!" Viktor asked, incredulous, and twisted to the side to look up at the man from his spot on the floor, "I said you weren't gaining weight!"
Rolls of excess skin felt the draft, straining the waistband of Yuri's pants, but he sucked in his gut to give some slack, and gaped down at his partner, "So then what am I supposed to do!? I don't remember doing any of that stuff you said I did!"

"Quit feeling like you're responsible for the situation Saito's in! You're not!"

"I don't!"

"But you do! You're the thing he wants and can't ever have! Your relationship has been damaged beyond repair, and hearing him lie about it just made it that much worse! He gave you a gift yesterday by saying it wasn't true, but he doesn't understand that when he does that kind of thing, it just makes everything worse! His gifts to you are cyanide!"

"...Cyanide...?" Yuri echoed, his imaginary girth forgotten for the moment as confusion reigned.

Viktor scooted slowly from his hiding spot, and slid cautiously closer, until he was sitting on the floor next to his spouse's legs, "To certain kinds of people, cyanide smells like almonds. That's me right now; I see this gift he's given, and I think it's pretty good. But you don't smell the almonds; you just feel the way it's slowly killing you from the inside out."

Yuri held quiet for a moment, returning to the sink to finish cleaning the last piece of the container, and rinsed it, "Even if the lie smells good, it's still a lie." He said quietly, and looked down as he put the lid in the drying rack. "It'll poison you, too."

"Because I'm watching you suffer in silence, doing damage to your body like you think it'll help you atone for what you think you've done to him." The silver answered, curling his fingers around the nearest leg. "And I just...really don't know what to do about it. It's easy to me to write people off and forget about them. I can say you should do the same, but that's not the kind of person you are. You're better than me in that regard, even if it hurts you more in the long run."

"...So how do we stop me from subconsciously punishing myself?"

"I really don't know. ...How did you stop yourself last time?"

"I didn't." Yuri answered tepidly, drying his hands on a kitchen towel before he lowered down and joined his husband on the floor, "I was really depressed before. I thought I'd lost my way. Coming to Japan for Nationals back then...being back home...even though I bombed, being here made me feel a little better, so that's why I decided to move back. I failed horribly being in Detroit, so the obvious thing was to return to the place where I'd found my inspiration in the first place. I could...kind of reset myself. Somehow...I got bored of being depressed, and I was able to let it go...but the impact it had stayed with me until you showed up." He explained, settling his hand on his spouse's thigh, "You were what I needed to get back on my path forward. But since you've been with me through this kerfuffle, I've kind of pulled you off the road with me. ...Maybe we both need outside help."

"Who are you thinking of? Mimi?"

"I actually don't even know."

The Ice Castle was shockingly quiet compared to earlier in the day. The massive number of people who'd been there from the school on their day-trip had entirely disappeared, and the ice had since been resurfaced, erasing any sign that so many had been there in the first place. Behind the rental desk though, Yuko was still sorting out the returned skates, spraying the last of them with anti-fungal
treatment before putting each pair back in its proper place. She heard the doors open and close, and pulled the goggles off her eyes to look, spotting the two skaters from earlier.

"Oh...hey, welcome back." She said, the fatigue obvious in her voice, even with the protective surgical mask on. She pulled it down and smiled as well as she could, "The rink's good as new again. No one else is here, so you came at a perfect time."

"No one else is here?" Yuri echoed, "Shouldn't Yurio and Minako-sensei...?"

"Maybe they're coming later." Viktor suggested, "Since Mimi is making them all do school stuff...Yurio probably has to catch up."

"...Yeah, probably."

Yuko looked a bit sheepish then, "Is Minako even okay after earlier? I've never seen her so ramped up before."

"She's doing the best she can." Yuri answered on the woman's behalf, "We were going to try talking to her...or at least Viktor was going to."

"Really? Why just him?"

Viktor huffed a breath quietly, "Cuz it's probably my fault that she's as ornery as she is about this whole thing. At least...in a screwed-up kind of way, we hope it is. Don't tell her anything about it though; I don't want her on edge, thinking the worst."

Yuko nodded and gave a half-assed-but-well-meant salute as the pair strode over to the nearby benches. Mask and goggles went back on as the Madonna returned to her task of resetting the boots for their next use.

The time seemed to glide by like blades on the ice, and even with the early setting of the winter sun, it was palpable that something strange was afoot. Concerns seemed to be put aside briefly as the practice session was paused by Yuko coming to rink-side, but all she could do was shrug unknowingly as she checked her phone for the time.

Sweaty and out of breath from his second-in-a-row run-through of his Free Skate, Yuri came up to the younger lady, swapping out to give Viktor his time as well. He pulled a towel around the back of his neck and leaned onto the wall, "Nothing, huh?" He wondered casually, listening as the quiet intro to 'Sol Invictus' started to play from their CD Player nearby.

"I'm trying not to be super obvious in asking if everything's okay with Takeshi and the girls, but it seems they're not even at Yu-Topia right now. If something's up with Minako or Yurio, they wouldn't know." She answered, "Wouldn't one of them have tried to reach out to you guys?"

"I imagine Mikhail would've tried to, since he told us he'd make sure Minako-sensei got here tonight. I'll check our phones..." Yuri answered, and started maneuvering towards the nearby opening in the wall. He pulled up his gearbag and rifled around until he found his phone inside, but nothing appeared on the preview screen to indicate anyone had tried to reach him. Even in his email, all he saw was the reminder from the vet that Ghost would have to be fasting for her procedure the following morning. Next was Viktor's phone, and finally there seemed to be something to look at, but all it was, was a message from Mikhail to call him, "...Well at least there's something. This was two hours ago." He commented, and unlocked the device, much to Yuko's surprise.

"...You can unlock his phone with your thumbprint?"
"Yeah. He can unlock mine with his own, too." Yuri explained, holding the phone up to his ear, "After I had that accident in Detroit, Viktor started to worry that if something worse happened to either of us, we wouldn't be able to reach out to people we know to tell them. So, now, if the worst comes to pass, at least we can let people know privately instead of having to post on Insta or something."

"That's smart."

The phone clicked then, and Yuri turned slightly, "...Ah, no, it's me." He started, brow furrowing slowly as he heard the words from the other end of the lines, "I see. Should we come...?" He asked, pausing for a moment as the answer went on, "...Alright. See you."

"That sounded ominous."

Yuri put the phone back where he found it, and wiped his face with the towel before looking out onto the ice again, "It's always something." He said grimly, "Yurio is holed-up in my old room and won't come out.

"Why...?"

"Viktor has an uncanny ability to say things off-the-cuff that end up happening." He answered vaguely, "Seems he did it again."

"What'd he say?"

"Did you get to see that impromptu interview we did at Euros?"

Yuko made a face, "The girls mentioned it but I haven't gotten around to watching it myself."

"That's okay. They asked a bunch of stuff about how Viktor feels being at Euros when he can't compete, what it's like being with the JSF and all the usual stuff... They asked him at the end if he had a message for the RSF. I thought he'd play it coy and just say thanks for the years he had with them, but...he said something in Russian. I don't think anyone around knew what it meant until folks started posting the video with the translation."

"So what'd he say?"

Yuri watched as Viktor went through the motions of his previous year's Short Program, packing all the jumps in the second half, and still holding its title as having earned the highest score in the world to that point. The music was getting close to its conclusion, "...He warned that Russia would pay for what they did to him. It seems they may well just have felt the bite behind those words."
Stepping into Yu-Topia felt like it had on any other occasion. There were a smattering of guests in the common-room, drinking and watching the television. Mama Katsuki went between them and the kitchen, waving as she saw her boys come through, fleeting as it was. Viktor paused as Yuri made for the skinny hall behind the common-room, and stuck his head just barely around the door-frame to look inside, spotting Minako there watching the television with the others. For the moment, he pulled back without alerting her, and returned to head up the stairs to the third floor.

As expected, the door to Yuri's old room was closed at the end of the hall, but unexpectedly, the sliding panel to the unused banquet room was open. They quietly tip-toed forward and looked into the old room, spotting Mikhail on the unmade bed with his tablet. He leaned against the headboard with his knees up to hold his tablet, and looked up over them as he saw those two conspicuous heads come into view.

With a finger over his lips, Mikhail bid the pair inside, and pushed up to sit more normally. Viktor went in first, but Yuri held back a moment, listening for anything coming from his old room. It seemed silent though, and he pointed at the door quizzically as he came inside.

"I think he wore himself out." The elder whispered, clicking off his tablet as the duo flanked him on their former sides of the bed, "But I think he also went into his closet, cuz it was hard to hear him even before."

"So what happened?" Yuri asked, just as quietly, "You said Yakov called him with bad news but you didn't say what."

"I didn't want to blurt it out while I was around so many people." Mikhail explained, "It's not public knowledge yet. They're letting the athletes know privately first."

"Letting them know what?" Viktor asked impatiently.

"Russia has been banned from the Winter Games."

Yuri's was the only face that changed, looking worried and nervous all at once. Viktor's visage didn't change one bit...at least for a moment.

"The JSF is bound to come for me if that's the case." He said, looking unimpressed as he crossed his arms, "Yurio made a point to share that sprig of insight with me when we were out to dinner with him."

"Not surprised by that notion, honestly." Mikhail shrugged, getting a look from both of them, "But I imagine you've already considered your options."

"I've never cheated. I made a huge stink about it when they tried to force it on me before." The silver insisted, "I'm sure that the JSF considered that possibility before they ever offered me a spot on the team anyway."

"Maybe so, but they'll still have to get some kind of confirmation."

"We're here about Yurio, not me." Viktor retorted, "What did he say?"
Mikhail nodded and leaned back against the headboard again, "Before he smashed his phone, he yelled that Yakov was a stupid liar. After he smashed his phone, he screamed that this was my fault...and partly yours." He said, lifting a finger towards his nephew.

"Why me? Why you?" Viktor guffawed.

"You because of that taunt you made at the end of your interview. He thinks you knew this was coming and didn't tell him. Me? Well, because I was adamant that those goons at Euros left him alone. I think he believes I threatened to out the RSF to the IOC while I was in Russia before." Mikhail explained, crossing his arms over himself as he lifted a hand to rub his chin, "Never mind the fact that the Russian Olympic Committee HQ is in Moscow; a city I didn't go to. But I guess he thinks I may have just called them or something."

"No one did anything to make this happen though." Yuri pointed out, "Surely he understands that, on some level..."

"I'm sure he does...I think he's just lashing out because he's so upset." The elder answered, "Minako and I tried to talk to him after he hauled-ass upstairs but he won't let us in. Minako gave up a while ago, but I figured I'd stay. Nikki was up here with me for a while, too, but I told her to head downstairs before you two got here."

"How come? She's helped him feel better before."

"Cuz she's loud." Mikhail mused, "I don't want Yura to think he's being ganged-up on. He really isn't interested in seeing anyone with grey hair at the moment either."

"Silver." Viktor huffed in correction.

"Then I guess it's up to me." Yuri realized, looking back out into the hall. He glanced over to his spouse though, "It'll be like at the Helsinki airport. Wish me luck."

"Do you want us to wait or...?"

"No," He answered, leaning over to give a parting kiss, and pat his partner's head before he stood up, "Go on and talk to Minako-sensei. I'll come down, with or without him."

Wary eyes watched the younger man go, and stayed quiet as they heard him knock gently on the door.

"Yuri?" He started, "It's me. Can I come in?" Nothing but silence answered...silence, and the mews of a certain cat on the other side. Yuri clicked the door and pushed it open, gently catching the ragdoll as she came out, rubbing on the doorframe, "Where's your person, Potya?" He asked, propping the small cat against his shoulder as he stepped into his old room.

The door clicked closed behind, and the two Russians listened for anything at all. Viktor just sighed and shook his head though, "I don't think it's any use trying to eavesdrop. I tried plenty when I was here last year, and I could never hear anything through the walls."

Mikhail gave him a look, one brow quirked, "I don't think Yuri had many people to talk to in his room when you were here last year."

"Who said I was listening for conversation?" Viktor smirked, and pushed up from the bedside.

The elder couldn't piece together Viktor's meaning for a moment, but when it finally did, his whole head lit up with red light, "You're so inappropriate."
"He was my future husband. I was doing research. It was very scientific." Viktor whispered, though his voice was tinged with the hint of a laugh.

Mikhail followed his nephew out, face still bright red, "I can't even begin to imagine the things you heard..."

Viktor paused at the end of the hall, and gave a wink, "Things that are for my ears only, as is the case with all of Yuri's unique noises." He turned then and started heading quietly down the first flight, "I'm surprised at how easy it is to embarrass you though."

"I'm not exactly the most sexual of people." The elder huffed, crossing his arms, tablet tapping his ribs idly as he followed.

"Really?" The younger looked back in confusion, "So how did you end up with so many kids?"

Mikhail just dropped a fist to the top of Viktor's head, "Get downstairs I swear to God."

Viktor sputtered a quiet laugh and turned to keep descending, and allowed himself to speak at a more normal volume as he entered the main Katsuki dwelling on the second floor, "I actually wanted to ask you something about Yuri." He started, pausing as he looked at the small private kitchen across from the living-room and family shrine, "Well, maybe not him specifically, but...a scenario."

"...Okay?"

Viktor paused for a moment, but then turned to face his elder, "...Have any of your kids had eating problems? Or doing questionable things and then saying they don't remember doing them?"

Mikhail's eyes narrowed, perplexed, "...No?"

"...Oh." Viktor deadpanned, defeated, "...Well, never mind then, I guess."

"Not never mind. Is Yuri doing weird shit?"

He sighed and slouched a little, "I've never actually seen him doing it, but...sort of? I don't know if it's been happening for longer, but I noticed it for the first time in Vienna, after we had lunch with Chris. There was shared food on the table, but Yuri didn't stop with that stuff; he ate my soup, too." He started to explain, idly heading towards the sliding door that lead into the closest room.

Mikhail looked left and right, "Are you allowed to just wander into these rooms...?"

"Yeah." The younger man looked back, hand on the doorframe where he'd pushed the door panel aside, "Well, this room and the family room next door. Mari's room is on the other side, and then there's bathrooms on the right at the end. The door there is the Yuri's parents room." He pointed to the one at the very end of the hall, "I've never gone in there. But this room is open to anyone who's allowed on the second floor."

"I see."

Viktor moved further in and sat at the low table, looking at but otherwise ignoring the television in the corner. He waited for his uncle to follow in, and pointed at the door so the elder would slide it shut again, "If you wouldn't mind..."

Mikhail did as bid, and warily sat down across from his nephew, "So...the food thing."

"Da." Viktor nodded, his switch to Russian being noticed easily, "Éto vse iz-za nego." (It's all
"Emu?" (Him?)

"Da..." Viktor nodded, and slouched as he slid his elbows down on the table, until he was laying chest-down on it and breathed a foggy sigh against the wood, [It always seems like Yuri and I are switching off... When one of us is in turmoil, the other steps up, but as soon as the former is okay again, the latter seems to have troubles crop up. I dread to think what would happen if we both had problems to deal with at the same time.]

[Don't say shit like that; you have a screwy power to make things happen just by speaking.]

Viktor groan-whined, [I know...] He agreed warily, but then lifted his head enough to prop himself up on his chin, [After I took Yuri to the Blumenball, something triggered in him and he started to remember the Banquet at Sochi. He'd only seen photos and video of it before, or heard stories, but otherwise had no clue what happened... But he did. Somewhere deep in his brain, the fog of his torpor lifted and he started to recall things. I knew he was remembering stuff right because I was there with him that whole time...but then he started remembering other stuff, too.]

[The stuff with Asahi?]

Viktor groaned to hear the name, [Yeahhh... He whined, The whole sad story about how Saito had been working on getting a spot for Yuri on the Tokyo Team while Yuri was trying to get into the Detroit Club... Yuri remembered this stupid little thing that happened right before he left Japan, and it's been tearing him apart ever since. Going to Imari yesterday was supposed to help lift the guilt, but Saito said it never happened, so now Yuri's unsettled about whether he can trust his memories or not. I can only confirm the stuff I was there for...and I wasn't there for that...]

[The bit about Asahi asking Yuri out?]

Viktor nodded with a cringe, [Ever since Yuri remembered that, he's been wracked with guilt. He only half-way accepts that he's punishing himself over it still.]

[The food thing?]

[Yeah... But the thing about it that really just galls me is how he did the last bit overnight, and how he doesn't remember doing any of it.] Viktor explained, [He has some passing recognition that he did something, but to him, it's only a bad dream. But he ate an entire package of mochi on his own!]

[...Mochi?] Mikhail raised a brow.

[Yeah it's like this...rice-based cake-dumpling-candy...thing.]

[Sometimes you have the best words.] Mikhail huffed, shaking his head, [Sometimes you don't.]

[I don't really know how to describe them. They're mochi. But in any event, he ate a whole pack of 12 on his own overnight. I normally have this uncanny sense about him not being near me when I'm asleep, and I've woken up on more than a few occasions cuz he wandered off for something.] Viktor explained, only to suddenly make a rather strange face, [This one time, over the summer, he got a really bad stomach bug...and he kept getting up. He was gone a long while at one point and I woke up to go find him, only to find him...uhm...praying to the porcelain gods. He didn't appreciate my attempts to soothe him.]

[Yeah I bet not. But your point is taken; you wake up if he's gone too long.]
[Somehow, I didn't wake up at all last night...but you'd think I would, if he was gone long enough to eat all that mochi on his own.]

Mikhail pondered it a moment, [Maybe he wasn’t gone all that long.]

[But then how’d he eat all the mo-

[Multiple trips.]

Viktor stared blankly, but then slapped his hands down on the table and pushed up, [How did I not think of that!? No wonder he said he didn't sleep well! He got up a bunch of times! That's how he avoided me waking up! He was only ever gone for a minute or two! Then he'd come back!]

[But you said he thought of it like a dream. He must've been sleepwalking.]

[Is sleepwalk-eating even a thing?] Viktor wondered, slinking back to retake his seat.

[Oh sure...there's lots of things people do while sleepwalking.] Mikhail nodded, listing off the items on his fingers as he spoke, [Eating, cleaning, driving a car, cooking, jumping out of windows, holding full-on conversations and seeming rather awake and coherent, sending emails, murdering people, letting strangers into the house, having sex...]

Viktor quirked a brow, [That's quite a mixed bag.]

[And you said you didn't really notice anything was wrong until the mochi vanished?]

[Well, I noticed food disappearing from the table, but I didn't think it particularly strange until food disappeared overnight. Then I thought back on all the times I'd noticed it before without thinking anything of it...and I realized that it always happened whenever we were talking about Saito.] Viktor explained, [I confronted him about it after you left the house.]

[And?]

[He thought I was screwing with him. But...now I worry that something like this has been going on for much longer, but I didn't notice... Maybe he wasn't eating stuff before.] Viktor said, and sagged back down to the tabletop again like before, [Other than tying a string to him, I don't know what to do to stop him. If he knew to come back to bed fast enough so I wouldn't come looking for him, he'd probably know to remove the tether, too...]

[Sleepwalkers may seem to comprehend certain things, but that doesn't necessarily mean they're smart.] Mikhail suggested, [Yuri's aware that you wake up because it's happened often enough for him to expect it. Maybe if you tied the tether after he's already fallen asleep?]

[...If I didn't pass out like a narcoleptic, I'd say that was a good idea, but I'm practically out as soon as my head hits the pillow.]

[What about...uhm...] The elder started, only to clear his throat as his face started to turn pink again.

Viktor quirked a brow, [What about what?]

[...Does he...you know...after you two... Ahem. ...Does he fall asleep?]

[...Hah?] Viktor blanched, only to suddenly blink hard and shake his head, [Oh. Uhh... I think he does, but I probably do before him.]

Mikhail rubbed his temples, [...I can't believe I'm suggesting this...] He grumbled to himself, [But
maybe try not to fall asleep next time? Like, put in a conscious effort...]

[Pun intended?]  

[Very intended.] The elder shook his head and huffed an embarrassed laugh, and pinched his nose, [...Maybe try tonight. Get your tether ready ahead of time, so it's within reach when you're...erm...yeah. Do whatever you guys normally do before bed. Then, once he's asleep, attach the leash around him somewhere... Someplace safe, like around his wrist or something. Don't put it around his ankle though cuz if he walks away, the loop will make him trip, and God knows what he'll bang his head against on the way down.]

[...Ah, yeah, good point.] Viktor nodded, feeling a quick, hot, empty feeling in his chest as the memory of the last noggin-smash came to mind. He shook his head to clear the memory away though, [...Around his wrist then, or his waist...probably his waist. Jiro's leash should work. I'll tie it so it doesn't just slip off either one of us while we sleep.] He said, taking mental notes as he thought about it.

[Just be careful.] Mikhail warned, [If this works, Yuri is going to be completely asleep whether he's on his feet or not. You've gotta be gentle in waking him up.]

[So you've deal with sleepwalking before?]  

Mikhail nodded, [Your mom. She had it bad when we were young.]

[...Really?]  

Another nod, [Probably from around age ten to twelve...it was a pretty regular event. The family house wasn't exactly big, so Tat and I shared the same room for most of our childhood. Our parents only split us up later on, but until then...and especially during the winter months, it wasn't a terribly uncommon occurrence that we slept in the same bed. As kids, no one thought a thing about it, and rightly so...we were kids. We did nothing except keep each other warm. But that's how I noticed she was sleepwalking. When she would get up, she'd push the covers all the way off, and it got cold. Cold enough to wake me up to want to pull the covers back on again...but because I knew she was supposed to be there beside me, noticing she wasn't worried me.] He explained, taking in a long, deep breath before shuddering, [This one time, she scared the absolute Hell out of me.]

[...Okay?]  

[With the room being really dark, but not entirely, I could make out shapes and shadows. I didn't know where Tat had gone, but she was still in the room. She was standing just inside a shadow at the foot of the bed, staring at me like some goddamn demon-child. I screamed, she screamed, the whole household screamed. Dogs outside started barking, I think the neighbors woke up...it was a whole crazy event.]

[Yeesh.]  

[Yeesh is right.] Mikhail let the breath out in a sigh, [I couldn't help it though. I thought she was a ghost or something. It was awful. But the dumb thing about it is that she was still asleep the whole time. She didn't remember a thing about it. Waking up for her was a process that took a minute or two, and I learned over time that the best thing I could do was to just...kind of coax her back into bed. If she didn't go completely back to sleep again, she'd rouse normally. So...that's my advice. If Yuri is sleepwalking, carefully coax him back to bed, or at least to somewhere safe so he can lie down. Don't try to shake him, or push him, or do anything too forceful. Being asleep, he won't recognize you. He'll resist any attempt to push him around. Tat punched me in the mouth once while
sleepwalking. I lost a molar. It was awful.] He said, and deadpanned at the end, [It was one of my last baby-teeth, but still, losing any teeth that are firmly adhered to your head is painful.]

Viktor deadpanned as well, and rubbed his mouth with one hand, [...]I won't do anything too rough. Should I set out bait...?]

[No need. If there's food in the house, he'll find it. I've read that some people sleep-eat sticks of butter and whole bottles of ketchup. If it's edible, they'll eat it.]

[Alright...] Viktor nodded, and pondered his next move as he looked up at the ceiling, wondering too what his husband was up to at that very moment on the floor above.
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED FIFTY THREE

The room was quiet and dark when Yuri stepped in, and he felt rather out of place despite it having once been his. The bed was a mess - not entirely out of keeping on its own - be he knew how he left his bed that morning, and it wasn’t like that.

"...Yuri?" He asked again, looking to the cat still on his shoulder as she wiggled and hopped down onto the mattress. She hopped further to the floor, and skittered across the open space, towards the closet door, and pawed at it until the small crack pulled open. It looked as though it had been opened wide enough already for her to get out, but she pulled it open further anyway before disappearing into the dark within. Yuri parted it the rest of the way and peered within, seeing nothing beyond the layout he already had in his mind's eye, "...I'm not sure where you are in there...so I'm gonna turn my flashlight on for a second, okay?"

No answer came, but Yuri was almost sure he could hear the sound of a shuddered breath as he stepped into the closed space. The door slid back into place behind him, and Yuri clicked on his phone's flashlight, shining it directly towards the floor to avoid blinding anyone. The diffused light cast a pale white glow onto everything within about a foot of the ground, and Yuri looked around until he saw the shape of toes and feet peeking out from under a cluster of low-hanging shirts. Potya mewed and came into the glow, fluffy tail up and swaying lightly. Yuri leaned down and crossed his legs under himself to sit, looking into the hanging clothes that hid the despondent Russian Tiger.

"...We heard what happened." Yuri started quietly, "It's not out in the public yet. I'm certain that there's going to be a fight about it. The IOC can't just cut out a whole country when so many of the athletes were too young to have been mired in whatever scandal they're basing this decision on."

Like before, there were no words to answer him. Yuri hesitated to continue though; not knowing what was on the teen's mind made it hard to know how to proceed. To his surprise though, a hand emerged from the racks, palm up. Yuri blinked at it, but then saw the hand gesture towards his phone, and he reluctantly held it up.

"Mik said you smashed yours. Please be gentle with mine?" He pleaded, and set the device into the cold, sweaty palm.

The coat-hangers rattled as the phone was pulled in, but the shirts hid the sight of the blonde hidden against the wall behind them. Yuri couldn't even hear the sound of thumbs typing on the screen, but he waited patiently for several minutes before the phone was eventually returned. He looked down at it, expecting a small dissertation to be written...but it was only a few words tapped onto the Notepad app.

[I'm not going to PyeongChang. I'm NOT going to be like Viktor was at Euros.]

"Oh..." Yuri managed, feeling disappointed. I really have no come-back for this. Who am I to say he should go anyway when I already saw first-hand what it was like for Viktor? He shook his head though, "...Are you going to be mad that him and I are still competing?"

The hand came out again, and like before, Yuri set his phone in it. He loved on Potya for a little while, until the phone was returned...and again, only a few words were written; a paltry sum given how long it took to write it.
[I can't stop you from going, or from talking about it, but I can ask that you don't rub it in.]

"...Ok-

**Tak tak tak**

"...-ay?" Yuri barely had time to finish his response before his head turned up to the darkened door behind him. No one outside saw fit to identify themselves though, and he sighed loudly as he turned to lean for the panel again. Fingers barely rubbed against the wood surface to slowly nudge it aside, and though he expected it to be Viktor despite the earlier warning, someone much shorter was outside. The long wavy hair gave her away though.

"...I know...I shouldn't be up here, but-

Yuri nudged the door further aside, "I'm not gonna turn away a friendly face." He explained, and went back to find his place in the far end of the large closet.

Nikki slowly squeezed through the narrow crack, and slid the panel closed again behind herself. It was impossible to see anything even when she squinted her eyes, but mercifully, Yuri lit the way with his phone again, and she lowered down to scooch next to him on her knees.

"...He hasn't said anything." Yuri explained, "But he's written a couple notes."

"Well, after how much he was yelling before, *that's* no surprise." She answered, "But...it'll make a conversation a bit difficult."

"We'll do what we can."

"Yuri, *why* are you hiding in a closet?" An unexpected *fourth* person asked.

The hanging shirts parted like the Red Sea, and Yurio emerged like a long-dead zombie from a sarcophagus, "*O-Otab...bek!*"

Nikki was practically paralyzed from the embarrassment, but she pulled her own phone out from behind her back, where she'd dulled the glow on its face by putting the phone-case on backwards. The small hole for the camera gave it away though, and she pulled it off before setting the device on the floor between the three of them, "Sorry... He called *me* and said to find you."

"Way to bust your phone, stupid." Otabek chided, "I would've called you directly if I could."

Yuri rubbed his hand down the side of his neck nervously, "I'm not sure calling him stupid is the nicest thing we could do right now?"

"He's handling this like a child." Otabek retorted, "I know that being booted from the Games is a huge blow, but you're not the only one. There's over 150 other people who all got to hear this same news today. I'll bet none of them decided to smash their phones over it."

Yurio could only grit his teeth and let the shirts sag against him again.

"You know as well as anyone that Russia won't take this lying down," The Kazakh went on, "After they're done blaming the Americans for it, meetings will be held and *some* kind of resolution will be found to let Russian athletes in. You just have to be patient."

"Th...the Games...are three we-"

"The Games are only three weeks out. What can be done about something like this in such a short
period of time?" Nikki asked in his stead.

"That's not for me to know or to decide, but you can bet that this will be a big deal once the wider world finds out about it. Even just the fact that the IOC can't ban Russian spectators from going will be enough incentive for them to reconsider."

"Why would Russia blame the Americans though?" Yuri asked skeptically, lifting his arms a bit as Potya clambered across his lap.

"Because they blame America for everything." Otabek explained, "If Putin stubs his damn toe, it's the Americans' fault. They even had the brass to claim the Chernobyl meltdown was actually an American CIA agent's willful act of sabotage against the USSR."

Nikki chortled an unbidden laugh, and quickly smacked her hands across her mouth to silence herself.

"Did Yakov even give an explanation for why the ban happened? Or did you throw a fit before he could?" Otabek asked pointedly.

Yurio lifted his head a little, but he just waved grimly at Yuri to answer for him.

"...The doping thing?" He asked. The teen nodded angrily, and Yuri looked to the phone on the floor, "Yeah, the doping thing. Yuri was worried about it all throughout Euros. He was worried they were going to ask him to do it, too. There were these two committee officials that skulked around the competition, and even came to the Banquet, and they all but said they were going to get their athletes to do it. Apparently they were arranging for all the athletes from all skating disciplines to converge on St. Petersburg in the run-up. They thought to use the gathering as a cover."

"If they were that obvious at Euros then it's no wonder they got their asses handed to them." Otabek huffed, "But it's been a long-running issue for Russia anyway. They refuse to accept any guilt or responsibility when they're caught doing something dumb, and just work to do it less conspicuously next time."

"...Yeah, Mikhail's said similar before." Yuri agreed, "He said the doping was so bad at one point that the Olympics were referred to as the Chemist's Games."

"It's a wonder they haven't been banned before." Otabek said stiffly, "This was a long-time coming."

Yurio grumbled from his shelter, and leaned forward to paw for Yuri's phone again. He swiped it and typed a quick note before handing it back.

"He says you're not making him feel any better."

Otabek huffed, the closest thing one could think of as a laugh from him, "I'm not aiming to make him feel better. I'm scolding him."

"He told me earlier that he doesn't even plan on going to PyeongChang anymore because of this. He doesn't want to look like the same kind of sad desperate lump that Viktor was at Euros. ...

...Annotations mine."

"He's getting too far ahead of this." The absent skater sighed, "Yuri, just give it a minute to settle down. Even Viktor's had to face something like this before, and in the end he was better for it."

"Yeah...Otabek's got a point." Yuri agreed, "And you never even saw how bad Viktor took it back then. He kept that misery private. But then the JSF scooped him up fast. I'll bet the resolution to the
ban comes quickly, too. They can't just throw Russia out and expect it to go uncontested."

"No doubt." Otabek commented, "In any event, whatever happens with the Olympics, you still have Worlds to think about in March. The IOC and the ISU aren't run by the same people."

"We should still be cautious about it though." Yuri posed, "They may not be the same body, but ideas are contagious."

"Then we can only put our first hopes into the notion that figure skaters aren't the ones doing most of the stupid crap." The Kazakh suggested, "Our sport isn't so easy to cheat at, even with a chemical boost. There isn't a steroid on this earth that can make you land a quad any better if your balance is bad, nor make you more artistic if you have a blank canvas in your head."

"True..."

"And the ISU tests every medalist anyway, so you've got that going for you, Yuri."

The dour blonde nodded and uttered out a long, quiet sigh, and let his head sag down.

"I'll let you go then." Otabek said, "I'm sorry this happened to you, but keep looking forward. Keep practicing like you're gonna go. They can't punish all of you for the stupidity of a few. Just be patient."

"Thanks for calling, Otabek." Yuri added.

"Bye guys."

The phone screen brightened again as the call ended, and lit the remaining trio in a ghostly grey aura. Yurio snuffled a bit and rubbed his nose on his thumb, but eventually lifted his head again, long hair parting over his left eye, "...Th...thanks." He said, his voice a quiet croak of a whisper.

"We should go downstairs and see if we can get you some lemon tea or something." Nikki suggested, picking her phone back up off the floor, "Your throat's gonna hurt like crazy tomorrow otherwise."

"We don't have to go all the way downstairs." Yuri explained as he rose up, gently putting Potya back down again, "No sense making him a spectacle right now. We can sit in the family kitchen."

Yurio grudgingly followed, but he knew he couldn't stay hiding in his borrowed closet forever. He picked up his cat where Yuri had set her down, and let the little fluff sit over his shoulder as they headed for the stairs. The sound of their three sets of feet thumping down the steps caught the attention of a peculiar pair that they hadn't expected to be there.

"That was fast." Viktor commented, sticking his head out through the sliding door, having gotten to it on his hands and knees, "Everything good?"

"It's not good but it's better than it was." Yuri answered, patting his partner's head as they went by, "I'm gonna make him some tea. Yuri wore his voice out as badly as I did in Calgary."
Chapter 554

CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED FIFTY FOUR

Yurio looked much worse under the bright lights of the second floor, his bloodshot, dark-encircled eyes peering through straw-blonde hair. He tried to keep his gaze down, looking at the tea cup in front of him, but it seemed that being the topic of conversation made that difficult.

"So you really don't want to go to PyeongChang anymore?" Mikhail asked dubiously.

Yurio bobbed his head.

"And you'd be happier if everyone kept their big gobs shut about the whole event, until or unless you can go again."

Another bob of his head.

Mikhail slouched against the low table in the family room, "...I mean, okay, I get it...but... That mob that came for Asahi before is bound to come back now that Yuri and Viktor are home again." He pointed out, "We'll be lucky if they at least call ahead next time."

"...Mob?" Viktor echoed dubiously, "What mob came for him?"

"Reporters, sportscasters, local news people...basically anyone who was excited about local Olympic athletes." The elder answered, "They didn't know you two had gone to Euros, so all they found was Asahi...and he had just split his hands open on the steps leading up to the castle, so he wasn't in much of a position to give an interview either."

"...His hands...?" Yuri repeated, "Oh...that's why you asked him about them yesterday."

"Yeah."

"We haven't heard anything about anyone wanting to come by yet." Viktor explained, "But we'll try to keep them away from Yu-Topia if we do."

Yuri huffed a meek smile where he held his chin up in the palm of his hand, "That's a far cry from how you were advertizing it at 'Onsen on Ice.'"

"I recall you doing the same thing."

Yurio just glared at the both of them, remembering his own 'I'll crush him' to veer the Exhibition interview back on topic. He wished he could do the same again now.

"Anyway though..." Yuri said, much to the Tiger's relief, "I thought you were going to talk to Minako-sensei. You're a floor too high for that, and in the wrong room."

"Eeeeyeeaaahhh I got side-tracked." Viktor admitted sheepishly, "I guess I could go now... I kind of feel bad that she's downstairs on her own while all of us are up here."

"She doesn't know you're here though." Mikhail pointed out, "She's probably hoping I managed to get into that closet with Yura."

"Where did all that yelling and phone-breaking happen anyway?" Yuri asked suddenly, "Nothing really seemed out of place when we got here."
"We were actually in the parking lot at the rink." The elder answered, letting out a long, drawn out sigh as he thought back on it. "Yura was ready to get to practice when he got the call. At first, he didn't even want to answer, because he thought it was just going to be useless pandering from Mother Russia, using Yakov as a mouthpiece to try convincing him - again - to go back to St. Petersburg like everyone else. But, he answered it anyway, and right as we all piled out of the car, Yura stopped dead in his tracks, a look on his face like he'd just seen a ghost. The next thing anyone knows, his phone's smashed to pieces on the concrete, and he's screaming at full tilt like it was my fault."

Both Nikiforovs looked across the table, but Yurio avoided them. Nikki side-eyed the whole bunch of them skeptically, but said nothing, though the mildly worried look on her face gave away a little of how she felt at mention of the event.

"You complained to the IOC about what those cucks in Vienna were suggesting, didn't you!?!" Yurio snapped, realizing everyone was still too stunned by the high-pitched crack they'd just heard as his phone splintered into a thousand pieces on the frosty concrete, "Didn't you!?" He shouted again, louder.

"Russia's been banned from the Games! You think I give two hot shits about a fucking phone!?!"

"Watch your language." The elder ordered, giving both Nikki and Minako a moment of pause as they watched from the far side of the car, "You can be as angry as you want, but don't speak like someone who learned from degenerates."

Yurio blistered anyway, "Yakov just said that Russian's been thrown out of PyeongChang because of that stupidity with the doping. What are the odds that you get a wild hair up your ass about it in Vienna, and just days after you get back from Russia, suddenly everyone's being thrown under a bus!"

"You already know why I went to Russia. It had nothing to do with the Olympics, or any of the questionable behavior shown by those gargoyles at Euros. If anything, this was a long time coming. Russia's been cheating for years." Mikhail defended, "I am sorry that it happened right as you were about to go for the first time...but I definitely didn't play an active role in the IOC's decision."

"Then Viktor did! That cryptic B.S. at the end of his interview all but threatened this!"

Mikhail deadpanned the angry teen, and partly rolled his eyes before staring at him straight-on again, "You can't seriously be blaming Viktor for this."

"He had to know this was coming! Why else would be say it!?"

"Because he's obnoxious that way. You know he has that annoying habit of saying things off the cuff that end up happening." The elder retorted, "He probably just meant that he would see to it personally that Russia never got Gold again. He already said Yuri would be winning the next bunch of World Championships, and that was before Viktor got back into competition himself."

"What better way to prevent Russia from getting Gold than preventing Russia from competing?!?"

"...You're really pushing conspiracy-theory-level stuff right now, kid." Mikhail sighed, "Viktor didn't
sabotage your chances at the Games. He didn't even sabotage Russia, much as he probably wishes he had such power. Even I don't, and I could if I wanted."

"You don't know what Viktor's capable of! He practically brought Russia to its goddamn knees when he left."

"Yeah, the part of Russia that likes figure skating. I doubt the rest of it noticed."

"If you two are done arguing, can we go in?" Minako grumbled, "I didn't come dressed to stand outside like this."

"I turned the whole bunch of us back around and we came back to the resort afterwards." Mikhail finished, "I wasn't going to reward that by letting him go practice still."

Yurio crossed his arms, looking rather bitter.

Viktor still had his eyebrows up so high that they threatened to fall off the back of his head, "...You seriously think I did this."

"Quit being so mean to him." Nikki defended, getting in their line of sight by leaning over the table, "He doesn't mean any of what he said. He's just really upset."

"You were told to go and stay downstairs." Mikhail pointed out, unmoving in his scan of the opposite side of the table, "What are you even doing up here?"

The youngest of the group slid back down to where she'd been sitting, looking rather sheepish suddenly, "...I...uhm..."

"She helped me out." Yuri stepped in, "Don't be upset that she went back upstairs."

"You never actually said not to come back up." Nikki pointed out warily, "But after Yuri smashed his phone, no one could get in touch with him anymore...and...uhm...well, you know I'm friends with someone he's friends with, so-"

"Did you call Beka?" Mikhail grumbled protectively.

"He called me and told me to go up!"

"Bože, pomogi mne..." (God help me.) The elder whined into his hand, only to hear a few muffled chuckles from his nephew, "What? Got something to add?"

Viktor just smiled and shook his head...only to take it back, "Actually...maybe just as an outsider looking in, but...you should know from personal experience that the more someone tells you to do something, the less likely you are to do it."

"I honestly have no idea what you're referring to." The elder huffed dismissively.

The younger Russian laughed quietly again and pushed out from the side of the table, "I'm going to go save Minako from her solitude then." He announced, and leaned down over his still-sitting husband. Yuri looked straight up at him, and Viktor lowered down to set his hands on the man's shoulders, and stole an upside-down kiss, "Wish me luck."

"Ganba." Yuri answered quietly, and watched as his partner went off without him for the second
time that day. Once Viktor had gone, and the door slid shut again, Yuri looked back across the table and scanned the remaining faces. He landed on Mikhail, now next to him where Viktor had vacated the space between them. "Soooo...how are you doing with getting your hat back?"

Outside, Viktor listened for a moment before quietly shuffling towards the last set of stairs to the public part of the resort. As he came around the corner that lead through the entry hall, he felt a flutter in his stomach, and drew a breath to calm his nerves. How hard can this be? He wondered to himself, stepping closer to the door to the common-room, It's just a reassurance that I'm not mad about this.

As he looked into the big space though, he realized the woman he was after had left. In her place were about five resort guests, some lounging in post-onsen green spa-robles, others in regular clothing. He could hear Hiroko's voice somewhere, as well as the clatter of glass bottles she was likely pulling together. Mari and Viktoria were nowhere to be seen, but that could mean anything.

Where could she have g-

"Took you long enough, hun." That voice commented, catching Viktor off-guard. Arms snaked around him and a thin frame pressed up close to his back, "Thought I was going to have to send a search party. How's Yuri?"

"...Coping." The Russian mused, only to hear an eep and felt those arms peel back faster than lightning.

"OhmygodI'msorry!" Minako stammered, flailing her hands back and forth as her face went red, "IthoughtyouwereMik!"

Viktor just laughed though as he turned around, "Relax. I'm not going to scold you for hugging me." He said, patting the front of his t-shirt back into place, "I guess we are dressed similarly..." He noted, thinking on his own and his uncle's dark colors. He shrugged though, "I'm actually a little bit relieved though."

"...R-Relieved?" She echoed, utterly perplexed.

"You and him are supposed to be engaged, yet I nearly never see you guys be affectionate to each other." He explained, "Kind of seemed a bit like an arranged engagement."

Minako seemed to deflate a little bit, "...Arranged?" She repeated again, "I mean...I guess... It probably would seem like that..."

"Come. Tell me about it." Viktor suggested, holding his elbow out, "It's just us for a while."

It was hard not to quirk a brow at the idea, and Minako took the arm warily, looking around the entry hall like she was about to get punked somehow, "...Where is everyone else...?"

"Still upstairs with Yurio." He answered, nudging her towards the door to the seating area, "He wore himself out pretty thoroughly."

"...When did you even get here? You didn't come say hi or anything."

Viktor slowly walked the cautious woman into the common-room, and found a place to sit near the door, away from the prying eyes of strangers sitting closer to the television. Once they were both at the table's edge, Viktor looked forward, "We didn't want to bother you. We didn't even expect to be over today. Thought we'd wait to say hi until after things had settled down and peoples' spirits were less anxious."
"...I don't even know what we're going to do." Minako said quietly, "This is such a hard blow. I don't blame Yura for being this angry. He already had so many setbacks; losing you as a team-mate, and all the struggles you guys had just to be on good terms again...and then his growth spurt..."

"This will be sorted out without us." Viktor advised, "All we're going to do is smack the proverbial hornet's nest if we get involved. There'll be plenty of outrage to go around once it's out in the public sphere anyway."

"I guess so..."

"So then." The silver said, making Minako swallow a nervous lump in her throat, "Tell me about Mimi. You can say anything you want or need to."

"...Why are you trying to be my sounding board all of a sudden?" The woman asked skeptically, "Is this a set-up?"

"What? No." He huffed, "I'm just trying to be a good listener. You told me about the thing back in Detroit before you told anyone else, so why not?"

"About the thing." She repeated, a brow raised, "The thing that's become two things."

Viktor exhaled a hissed breath between his teeth, all but wincing openly, "...Yeah...those."

"You sound like you've been harangued into this conversation against your will."

"No...no..." He answered sigh a reluctant sigh, "I came to this on my own. I know I've made everything complicated with how badly I reacted before. I am sorry for that. If I could take anything back about all this, it would be that moment."

"So then you're here to tell me you're okay with it all."

Viktor just made a face at her, "Why are you so perceptive? My whole plan was to be as charming as possible so it wouldn't come across as forced and you took all the wind out of my sails."

"You're projecting." She puffed at him, "Severely."

He grumbled quietly to hear it.

"Look, I'm happy that you were willing to go out of your way for me like this, but I really don't want you to worry so much about it."

"I can't help it though." The silver answered, "I feel like things would be a lot less stressful for everyone if it didn't seem like you were so bothered by everything going on. I can't help but think that I'm partly responsible for it, by being such a butt about it in Detroit."

"There was a bit of apprehension because of that, yeah...but-"

Viktor twisted where he sat and took the ballerina's hands in his own, staring at her rather closely, "Please let me be the only reason this isn't going better. If there's something else, and it's not me, and I can't fix it, then."

Minako just deadpanned him, and puffed a breath to blow a few stray strands of hair out of her face as she looked away, "I'm sorry, Viktor... It's not just you."

"...Then what else is there?"
"Aside from all the things about *me* that you can't and shouldn't try to fix?" She answered, slightly sarcastically, "There's plenty about your uncle that makes me feel this way, too."

"I want to help in whatever way I can. Maybe I can help him get his act together, if something's wrong."

"Oh, no...he's *quite* together. He knows exactly who he is and what he's doing. ...It's kind of annoying that way."

"...I don't follow."

"Buckle up then." She teased, and pat his arm endearingly, "If you came down here to help sort me out, then there's only one logical place to start."
"He's taking on too much by himself."

Viktor stared blankly, "...What."

"Once upon a time, his only concern was trying to impress you." Minako clarified, "Now though...he's got you, and Yuri...one or both, depending on who you ask...and his own kids, and now these two to-be..." She grumbled and crossed her arms over herself, slouching where she sat so her elbows blocked the sight of her stomach, "And he's got that depressing backdrop of his sister's death being the only reason he's even here, and now Kon passing away... When you said that you were relieved that I hugged you, thinking you were him, only to point out that you never really see us be affectionate towards one another..." She said, her words trailing slightly. She turned in place and leaned forward against the table, looking towards the television, "...I don't think he has enough room in his head to think about that sort of thing. I mean, he didn't really before, but he definitely doesn't now."

Viktor couldn't think of how to answer. His eyes scanned low for lack of knowing where to look, but then drew a breath and shook his head, "He got so miserable when he thought you were cancelling the engagement though...and I've heard him use pet-names on you..."

"I wonder sometimes if he's only going through the motions because he thinks it's expected of him." She admitted cautiously, "All these people he's become responsible for... It just feels at times like I'm counted in the tally. I'm not really his fiancé, I'm just another one of his many kids."

"That's harsh..."

"Tell me I'm wrong then." She challenged, looking at the man past her shoulder, "Tell me I'm not just one more thing he thinks he has to look after."

Viktor stopped dead in his mental tracks and narrowed his eyes slightly, "...You're leading me into a trap here; I can feel it."

She just looked on, expression unchanging.

"You want me to tell you something reassuring, but...you also want me to tell the truth. You've already called me out because you thought I was being insincere." Viktor continued dubiously, "...But telling it how it is will just upset you, too."

"Just say it and get it over with." She grumbled, and looked forward again, feeling defeated. She slouched down into her crossed arms on the table-top and waited for the cringe to set in.

Viktor held on quietly for a moment longer though, carefully thinking of what to say, "...You're one of the strongest people I know, but...you've come into a particularly fragile state." He started, waiting for a reaction, "...And you've told me before that you hate feeling like you have to count on someone, and for the first time in your adult life, you're being forced to. And...it seems like...he's not doing it the way you want him to?"

That earned him a nod, at very least.

"What do you want him to do then?"
"Learn how to ration his availability better." Minako answered, almost glibly, "I need more than just his brain, you know?"

Viktor deadpanned her, his cheeks slightly reddened, "...I don't think I'm the best person to tell my uncle that you want more of his p-"

"OHMYGODNO." She barked, getting the attention of everyone in the room. She paid them no mind though, grabbing Viktor by the head to keep his mouth from finishing that last word. She was practically in tears from the embarrassment, "That isn't even close to what I meant!"

"Mfphrmmpphmphmr!?"

"HIS HEART. Jesus, Viktor. His heart."

"Mrr..."

Minako let the flustered skater go, and deflated face-first onto the table top with a whine, "I just wish he was more emotionally available. He's always so busy trying to fix or manage things that it's hard to just relax and be us for a little while." She explained into the wood grain, "I bet that's why he's still struggling to come to grips with Vikki and get his hat back. He's trying to fix the situation like it's a machine with a broken part. But nothing was ever actually broken. He's just...using it wrong."

"...So I guess it wasn't just me missing something when I said I hadn't seen you two be that affectionate. He really...just isn't." Viktor surmised, turning to lean against the table as well, though not as flatly as Minako had spread herself over it, "Would you feel more at ease about your situation if he was though? I mean, it's hard to know what kind of loving you want from him. He's not that...at-ease about the topic. I was just asking him about stuff between Yuri and I, and he got completely flustered at any mention of intimacy."

Minako rolled her forehead until she had one ear down to the table in its place, and quirked a brow at the Russian, "Need I remind that he practically considers you his kid? That would be an awkward conversation for any parent."

Viktor huffed, and leaned down to the table top to match the woman's look, "Sure, but in the process of it, he admitted that he was never the most sexual of people. In light of that, I teased him about his brood and he hit me on the head." He explained, seeing the sudden worried look on Minako's face. He tried a smile, awkward as it was from that angle, "It was a tease, not an actual strike. He was just embarrassed."

"...So it's not just me then." Minako sighed, and turned to set her chin down, looking forward again with a visage of disdain, "If he's just that way then maybe there's nothing that can be done at all."

Viktor matched her posture again, "...All that time I was mentally accusing him of doing this to you on purpose, and it turns out it was never something that crossed his mind."

"I told you that weeks ago."

"I forgot." He whined.

Minako twisted slightly to look at him, "How does Yuri put up with you?"

"I don't knooowwww!"

"...You two look rather out of place like that." Hiroko commented, bringing in a tray of Sapporo beer for one of the other guests, "What's the matter?"
"Everything." They both complained.

"Where's everyone else?"

"Upstairs with Yurio."

"Shouldn't you be up there with them?"

The two side-eyed one another briefly, but Viktor was the one who rose up slightly and shook his head, "It's basically done now... I came down on my own afterwards. But I guess...since I have you both here, out of earshot of the others..."

Minako lifted up in confusion, and Hiroko got worried, "...What is it?"

"When Yuri was younger...did he ever sleepwalk?"

"Sleepwalk?" The ballerina echoed, but shook her head, "Not that I've ever heard of. Hiroko?" She wondered, looking up.

Mama Katsuki just looked up in thought, but then turned on a heel slightly, "Let me go finish what I was working on before and I'll come right back."

The seated duo watched her go, but Minako looked over, "...Is he doing that now?"

"I think so." The Russian confirmed quietly, "He's been stress-eating lately and doesn't realize or remember doing it, and then last night, the mochi I bought for us vanished. Yuri said he didn't sleep well, and then when Mimi came over earlier, I found the unwashed container in the cabinet. Mimi suggested I find a way to attach a tether while Yuri sleeps tonight, so it wakes me up if he tries to go."

"I can already sense that it's going to be a disaster." Minako said and shook her head, a nervous smile on her face, "You sure you wanna do that?"

"I don't know how else to make sure he doesn't eat overnight again."

"Why's he stress-eating though? Is it the Olympics?"

"It could be a factor, but he only seems to do then when Saito comes up."

"Oh..." She said, almost not surprised, "I heard yesterday didn't go that well."

"That's an understatement." Viktor grumbled, and leaned forward onto his elbows, eyes on the television so he wouldn't see the memory play out behind his eyes again, "Yuri told me in Vienna that if Saito lied about what happened, he'd hate him, but Yuri doesn't know how to hate, so it's just massively backfiring."

"You think he lied?"

"I don't know." Viktor sighed, "But...Yuri remembered things about Sochi that only I would really know, so when he says he remembers about Saito asking him out all those years ago, I have to believe him. How can I not?"

"You're kind of biased." Minako pointed out, "Asahi messed up really bad at Nationals, so, because you love Yuri, you'll do anything to make Asahi look worse than he really is."

"Sure, except that I was the one telling Yuri that Saito lied as a way of cutting him loose from the
"Past." Viktor retorted, "Would I do that if I was really out for blood?"

"Mik said you looked like you were ready to break Asahi's legs yesterday." She shrugged, "I don't really know what you're thinking when it comes to him. Before then, I was impressed by your ability to compartmentalize everything that was going on, but I wonder if that's starting to crumble."

"He made Yuri doubt himself. The last time he did that, I wasn't there. This time, I was. All the pent-up rage I had for the attack at Nationals came bubbling back up in an instant. If Mimi hadn't gotten in my way...I really don't know what I would've done."

"Probably something really stupid that you'd regret later," Minako offered, patting the man's shoulder as she spotted Hiroko finally coming back, "I hope you don't think less of me for having wanted to hear him out and help him before."

"No..." Viktor shook his head, "Since I let Yuri take the lead on how to deal with Saito, I think the fact that he forced me to take a step back and think about it, made it so I was able to accept that Saito didn't mean to be horrible. My anger mostly stems from the fact that he doesn't seem to learn." He explained, "Then all I can think about is all the stuff Yuri said about him before...that he was super Japanese, that he didn't really invest in people because he was so private in his own life that he applied it to everyone, to the point that he didn't even know about Yuri's love of katsudon." He turned to the woman, arms out, "How do you not know Yuri loves katsudon!? It was practically the first thing I learned when I got here!"

"Simmer down, Viktor, people are staring." Minako recommended.

"Sounds like things are getting a bit heated over here." Hiroko teased, taking a seat opposite the pair, "Everything okay?"

Minako just shook her head and offered a quiet laugh, "I think the both of us are steaming hot messes and neither of us really knows what to do."

"...All this because of Yuri sleepwalking?" Hiroko wondered, confused, "I didn't think something like that would bug you, Minako-senpai."

"Oh, Yuri's thing isn't my mess. Not entirely, anyway." She huffed, "No... My problem is wanting Mikhail to be everything I never wanted to have in my life before."

Viktor stared at her, "...Everything you never wanted? That doesn't even make sense."

"Doesn't it?" She shrugged lightly, "I never wanted a man to get this deeply embedded in my life because I felt like it would put a damper on the things I wanted to do. I only ever had flings now and then; dating was a hobby that I never took that seriously. I had my dancing career and then my school. I didn't need anyone for anything, and I never wanted to settle. Now, it seems like that's my only option...and the guy I've hitched my horse to treats it like a duty he got roped into by mistake."

"I don't think he sees it that way." Hiroko commented, "He's extremely devoted; I just don't think he knows how to relax or have fun."

"He knows how to have fun." Minako huffed, "We used to have fun all the time, before."

"So what happened?"

"This one got mad at him." She answered, thuming at Viktor, "And then his kids fell out of the sky, giving him a whole bunch of full-time responsibility that he didn't have before. The last time we had fun was back in Sapporo, and then I ruined it all by letting this happen." She complained, poking
herself into the stomach.

Viktor shook the accusation from his mind and took Minako's arm rather casually, pulling her hand away from herself.

"He probably thinks I've trapped him!" She went on, "No wonder he doesn't act like before! I did this to him! I've ruined everything!" She lamented, leaning into the pull on her arm until she was slumped against Viktor's side. She pulled the other arm up over her eyes, "I'm the worst! Maybe that's the real reason I've always been single! No man ever wanted to stay around!"

"I really don't think that's the problem-

"Of course I'm the problem!" She whined, kicking her feet up helplessly, "I'm the only common denominator in all this!"

"Well, yeah, but-

"But nothing!" She went on, sinking lower against the young Russian's side, arm still over her face to hide her shame, "When we were in Edmonton, Mik even told me that he kept his distance for so long because he wanted to be sure I wasn't some vapid gold-digger! He only showed me all that stuff he has because he trusted me, and then I end up springing this on him! How does that make me any better than other women who've tried to take advantage of him!? He's probably backing off because he thinks I'm using him!"

Viktor seemed to lean slightly, but then went back to where he was before, "...What if he's just being cautious cuz he doesn't want to annoy you?"

"Why would he annoy me!?!" She barked, pulling her arm off just enough to peek up at the man with one eye, "That's absurd!" She grumbled, covering her face again with her bent elbow, "I knew I was getting sentimental when I realized I was okay with the engagement! I didn't think I was getting senile, too!"

Viktor leaned slightly again, and back like before, "Well...if he could do one thing that would convince you that he doesn't think all those horrible things, what would it be?"

"...One thing?" She echoed in confusion, "I don't know! All the things I want are apparently selfish!"

The silver raised a brow as he looked down at the despondent woman, but pat her arm where he still held onto it, "Well, then what do you want to do that would make you feel more like you guys are actually a couple, rather than just obligated?"

"I don't know..."

"Think of something."

Minako grumbled, but then let out a long sigh, "...Back when we were in Russia, when he fell off that damn roof and had to have surgery, he got really salty because he couldn't come to Cup of China. I teased him about it, but he said...that he really wanted to go because it would've been just us, and we could've had all that time to ourselves. No responsibilities, no cares in the world for one whole weekend. We tried to recapture it at NHK, but...with Kon around, and everything else...it just wasn't the same."

"...So you want a date weekend?"

"I guess. Maybe." She sighed, her words trailing again, "I don't know... He's got his kids here now.
"They may be kids, but it's not like they're really young." Viktor pointed out, "I was on my own and doing crazy stuff at Nikki's age. Yurio had been on his own for a while before now, too. They're not helpless, and they wouldn't be alone anyway. If you guys wanna go somewhere and take a break, then just tell us and go."

"How is something like that even possible right now when Mik's dealing with Kon?" She asked pointedly, mildly annoyed, "He's the only one who can take care of all those arrangements, and he doesn't even have a lot of time. And therein lies my whole dilemma... With everything he has to deal with, there isn't really time for me. The attention I get is just because I got myself knocked up."

"...I don't think Mimi realized how little time he had." The silver pointed out, "I know you think he has too much on his plate to worry about simple stuff like us time between you two, but now that he does, it should be easier."

"Now that he knows? What's that supposed to mean?" Minako asked pensively, and wiggled her way back up to sitting, only to realize there were a few more people at their small table than she'd previously noticed. Not only was Yuri there, sitting on the short-end between Viktor and Hiroko, but Mikhail was there, too, on the opposite side from Yuri. Minako's eye twitched, and she hauled ass to her feet, pinning her back against the open doorway to the entry hall, pointing rather dramatically and gaping in stunned horror, "H-How long have you been there!?!"

Yuri waved and gave a nervous smile, "...A little while."

"Enough to ask a few questions through Viktor." Mikhail explained, holding up his phone to show that the last few things his nephew had asked had all been written down for him to read, "...I didn't realize you thought I'd put you on a backburner like this. I thought I was doing good."

Minako deflated a little from her prior hysterics, and slouched forward from the door, "...Uhm...well, I mean...you've been there...but I guess, it just...seemed like you were around for a purpose, not just...because you could be."

"We've spent time together." Mikhail protested quietly, "When we went to your place instead of staying here overnight."

"...You were asleep for most of that. You've been exhausted."

"It's not entirely for lack of trying though."

"...No...maybe not." Minako answered, sliding down to the floor again, "...Now I just sound like I'm ungrateful."

"It's not a lack of gratitude." Mikhail shook his head, "I just haven't been doing my part. I've focused so much of my effort and energy on doing the things that need to be done, that I've neglected to give time to maintaining the things that got me here in the first place. It's not enough that I'm around... You'd think I would've learned that lesson years ago."

Minako looked up, a bit confused.

The elder looked towards Hiroko, "Would it be an imposition to ask you to keep an eye on the kids this weekend?"

She shook her head and smiled, "Not at all. It's fun having them here."
"...What about Viktoria?" Yuri asked, "Wouldn't she be upset if you just left?"

Mikhail shook his head, "We've had a few long talks over the last several days. She thinks I've forgotten how to be sociable; that I've sunk down to being a dictator rather than a dad. She'll probably see this as a step in the right direction. I guess I've just had trouble adapting to all the changes since NHK. Running things like a worksite made sense in the short-term, just to keep things under control...but, long-term, I really need to step back and remember how to enjoy the time I have with everyone, too. I've lost sight of things by thinking of people and issues as items on a list." He looked over to Minako then, who was still somewhat stunned at what he'd said, "...So, what do you think?"

"I think you're nuts. It's Friday night already! What are we going to do to relax on such short notice?" She harped.

"I dunno. What do you want to do? Do you want to go somewhere?"

She blanched at the thought, "No way, I'm all travelled-out for now."

"So then we'll go to your place." He said, and rose up to his feet. He moved over towards his lady love and offered his hands, "C'mon. I'll let the kids know we're leaving and then we'll go."

Anxious eyes looked at the offer, and she shook her head in disbelief, "You're totally serious."

"Of course I am. When you mentioned how grumpy I was over missing Cup of China, I realized I never really got to put on the Rozovsky Charm. I owe you."

Minako's face went red, but she accepted the held up to her feet and looked around. Everyone seemed to be rather happy about the turn of events - even, oddly, the other guests who'd overheard the whole thing. Viktor looked a bit torn, stuck somewhere between excited and awkwardly embarrassed, but Minako looked back to the man who still held her hands, "...I...yeah. I mean...yeah! You do!" She said, feeling more confident.

"Then let's get going."

Hiroko had her hands happily on her cheeks as she watched the pair head into the entry hall, "How exciting. Maybe she'll finally realize that being settled isn't all that bad."

Yuri slid his arm over his husband's shoulder and smirked, "You look so confused."

"...I feel like I just overheard that my parents are gonna have sex later. This is incredibly weird."

"You did, and it is." Yuri laughed, leaning closer to peck a kiss to the nearest cheek, "Welcome to the club. You made it."
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED FIFTY SIX

It was a flurry of activity to suddenly see the two eldest members of the group scurrying to get ready to leave. Minako muttered under her breath the whole while that she couldn't believe any of it, even as she hopped to pull her boots on. Mikhail had gone upstairs to try finding the first few cat in his little-but-growing colony. He nearly bypassed the second floor altogether on his way back up to the third, but skidded to a sudden stop when he caught sight of Nikki out the corner of his eyes.

"Sweetie, we're leaving." He started, heading towards the small family kitchen area. His daughter had her hands in the sink, sudsy water halfway up to her elbows, "...What's this?"

"What's what?" She asked, lifting her arms slightly as she looked into the basin, and then back again, "I'm just washing dishes."

"I thought you were just going to wash the stuff we made messy."

"Yeah but then I saw this other stuff and I just got it while I was here anyway. You were saying something?"

"Oh." He deadpanned as the gears tried to catch up in his brain, "Minako and I are taking off. Mama Katsuki has agreed to watch you guys for the rest of the weekend."

"Oh." She answered in quiet surprise, "...So you're not coming back...?"

"For the weekend," He repeated, making a strange face, "We're not even leaving town, it seems, so we'll never be more than a phone call away. There's not much I can really do here right now anyway, and Minako needs some time for just us. Apparently I need it, too, so I can quit being on auto-pilot. I need...to recalibrate, you know? You guys need your dad, not a manager. All my time away made me forget."

Nikki was a bit awe-struck, paralyzed as she heard him finish. After a moment, she blinked hard and shook her head, and pulled her hands from the soapy water. She shook them out a few times before latching onto her father's frame, "Yeah." She managed, and held tighter as she felt the hug returned.

"Has it really been that bad?" Mikhail asked dubiously, looking into his youngest's wet eyes, "Jeeze... I didn't realize. I'm so sorry."

"I don't think I did either until you said so." She answered, snuffling against the back of her wrist, "Because we've travelled so much and had so little time to think about anything except what was going on around us at the time... Even dealing with what happened to mom."

Mikhail's brow furrowed to worry, and set a hand on Nikki's shoulder as he leaned in to kiss her forehead, "...You're making me have second thoughts about this."

"No! No, absolutely not! You have to go!" The young teen protested, "Getting you back would be the best birthday present I could ever ask for."

"Birthday present...?" He echoed. Horror fell over the Russian's face, "Oh no. It's tomorrow, isn't it?"

She nodded with another sniffle.
"Internal screaming. "Now I definitely can't go!"

"YOU HAVE TO GO. IF YOU DON'T, I'LL NEVER FORGIVE YOU." The silver teen insisted, damp hands squished to her father's face as she stared intently into those matching jade eyes, "I WAITED NEARLY 10 YEARS, I CAN WAIT TWO MORE DAYS!"

"I'll makhe ith up thu you, I promish!"

"You have all next week! Now go tell Yura your plans!" She puffed, patting those cheeks before spinning the man around to point him in the direction of the family room directly across from them.

Mikhail's heart sank a little bit, but he swallowed and nodded. With a gentle nudge, he pushed aside the sliding door that lead into the little entertainment room, with its television in the corner, and low table in the center...and the dried-up 'former Olympian' lying catatonic against its surface. He let out a disappointed sigh and stepped in, pushing the door to behind himself, and sat down by a corner near the teen, "Yuri," He started quietly, reaching one hand up to set it across the blonde's shoulders, "I know it feels like this is the end, but I'll fight for you. Trust me at least on that much. ...But I need to go away first and recharge my batteries a bit. You've seen first-hand how crazy it's been these past few months. I didn't realize how much of a stick-in-the-arse I was until Minako set me straight a minute ago. For now though, we both need to take a step back and watch the world burn a little bit. When I come back though, I'm gonna pour gasoline on it and raise complete Hell to make sure you can still go to the Games."

Yurio lifted his eyes from where he'd hidden them behind his crossed arms, and swallowed a painful knot, "...What...are you g-gonna do...?"

"Tread lightly but carry a big stick, as the saying goes." He answered, "Or, in my case, a team of lawyers. None of the people I use have any experience in sports stuff, but their community includes all types. I'll have them put together a plan for how to deal with this. Depending on who pisses into the fire first, we'll either have to go after the IOC to lift the ban, or the ROC for causing the ban. I'll bet there will be a lot of people lawyering up in the coming days, so maybe we'll have a big united front against them both."

"What would it matter if you go after the Russian committee though...?" The blonde asked dryly.

"I expect them to make a big stink about the ban, because they have a history of denying absolutely every wrong thing they've ever done. They'll probably do something really obnoxious like boycott the Games, or say they'll just do their own Winter Olympics. They have Sochi all ready to go. The bigger problem, I think, will be getting the IOC to allow proven-clean athletes go, even if not as Russians."

"...Not...as Russians...?"

"Orphan athletes...people who are qualified to compete, but who have no country to represent." The elder explained, "That may be the only way the IOC can save face and maintain the ban while not punishing athletes who earned their spot legitimately."

"Wouldn't all th-that take a long time though...?"

"A difficult task is completed in haste when you set an army to it. Don't worry about any of those details right now though. I need you to take the weekend to settle down from the shock of the news, and recover your strength. When Monday dawns, I need you to soldier on and get back onto the ice. This isn't a good time to let your growth spurt get out of hand. You need to be ready."
Yurio stared in surprise, unsure even how to blink anymore. He hardly expected the hug that came after, nor the kiss to the top of his head as Mikhail stood back up again. He just let his eyes follow the man upward.

"If you need anything while Minako and I are out, just call or text me. We're not leaving town." The elder explained, heading for the door again, "If you want a distraction though, your younger sister's birthday is tomorrow. Maybe you can help sort out the pre-party party. We'll do something special altogether as a family before we leave for Colorado. Okay?"

He hesitated, but Yurio nodded again, and Mikhail took his leave. As the older man's voice and footsteps vanished into the ether, Yurio lifted his hand to the spot he'd felt the kiss on the top of his head. ...No one's ever done that before...not even granpa... Mikhail...really does think of me as being a part of things...

The narrow hall that spilled out into the foyer was like a chute that spat the elder Russian out, and he quickly veered right, striding past Minako by the front doors and the stack of heads that watched him go by the common-room, "I still have one kid to find. It'll be just a minute!" He explained, making a rather dramatic exit as he backed through the door to the overnight section that wrapped around the back of the resort. At the far end, and around another corner, past all the rooms that he'd been renting for what felt like ages, he found the laundry room. He could hear the sound of work being done before he saw anyone, but when he stuck his head in through the door, he spotted both Viktoria and Mari working on all the freshly dried towels for the onsen changing-rooms.

"...P-Pipaw!" The eldest Rozovsky daughter blanched, "What'er you doing back here...?"

He cleared his throat, "You'll be glad to know that I'm taking my happy-ass out of this place and I'm going with Minako to wind-down somewhere for the rest of the weekend."

She just deadpanned him, "...Nikki's birthday is tomorrow. You're bailing on her?"

"I already talked to her. She says she'll never forgive me if I don't go. We'll do something fun when Minako and I get back. The hope is that I'll be fun again when I do and we can celebrate properly."

The two ladies side-eyed one another, paused in their work like machines that had their power cut off unexpectedly. Mari slowly lowered the large towel she had in her hands though, "...Where are you going?"

"Just somewhere else." He answered, "We're staying in Hasetsu. We'll come right back if you guys need us, but for now, Minako has made it absurdly clear that I'm basically a Fun Nazi, marching people from place to place and sucking the joy out of everything I touch. So, I'm gonna go scuttle into a corner somewhere and shed my skin, so hopefully, when we get back, I'm cool again."

Mari stared for a moment, but then leaned down to where Viktoria was sitting, "Your dad just described himself as both a 'Fun Nazi' and 'cool' in the same breath."

"I know. You get used to it." The multi-colored teen huffed, but then put the smaller towel aside and rose up. She fussied her dark blue uniform back into place and approached her father, "...If you're gonna go through all that trouble, then you should do it like the guys in Raiders."

"...Raiders...?" Mari echoed in confusion.

"Indiana Jones." Mikhail answered, cocking a smirk, "She's saying I should melt, like any good Nazi ought to if they're worth a damn." He turned back to his daughter, and moved his hands forward to take hers, "You've been saying this whole time that I can't see the forest for the trees, really. You're
right. Getting away for a little while should help pull the crap off my eyes."

"How are you going to manage to unwind in such a short period of time though...?" Viktoria asked pensively, "Yu-Topia is the last-standing hot-spring resort in the city. Where else could you even go that would be as good?"

"Somewhere that lets me and Minako be naked in the same place." He teased, making his daughter just severely deadpan him. He couldn't help but laugh though, "You should see the look on your face; oh boy."

"I'm gonna punt you out of here so hard that my foot will be stuck up your butt if you put that image in my head again."

He chortled anyway, "Fair enough. Wish me luck." He asked, and stepped forward to hug the teen, "We'll be back Monday morning."

"We have a lot of movies to catch up on." She answered and pulled back again, "Hopefully things settle down enough that we can knock some off my list."

"There's a list?"

"It's big."

"How many movies have even come out?"

"A bunch. Now go already! You're wasting time back here." Viktoria argued, shooing her father out of the room with both hands, "Git!"

"I'm going!"

"Bye Mr. Viktor's uncle-dad!" Mari called as he headed back the way he came.

"Uncle-dad?" He repeated, sticking his head back around that last corner, only to get a wet towel thrown at him, "That's gross and kind of weird! You should know that!"

"DAD JUST GO I SWEAR TO GOD!"

"Don't swear to god! Swear to me!"

"DAD."

His laughs could be heard as he vanished down the corridor and back into the main area of the resort. Mari snickered to herself, but Viktoria just breathed an exasperated sigh, hands crossed over her chest.

"He seems to be in a better mood." Mari teased, lifting up the big towel from earlier again, "I remember how different he was last year when he came for my brother's wedding. Still a bit guarded, but he teased more."

Viktoria stepped out into the short part of the hall and picked up the wet towel with a squish, "It's been a really long time since I got to see that from him." She explained, "I've seen glimmers of it now and then since he picked us up, but...he always kind of acted like he wasn't allowed to have fun. It was like if he told a joke and then stepped in a cow-pie, and ruined it."

"...Cow-pie?"
The teen turned back and quirked a brow, "You don't know what a cow-pie is...?"

"I don't exactly run into a lot of cows here. So...is it like...a meat pie?"

"...Oh wow, no. Gurl you need to come camping with me back in Canada sometime. I would show you wonders."

Mari stared nervously and shied away slightly, "That sounds like something I'd expect to hear in a horror flick, right before people start to die. Horribly."

Viktoria breathed a quiet laugh and sat back down again, dropping to wet towel into a dirty-laundry bin to be rewashed, "I'm sure I got it from one. Probably Hellraiser or something."

That earned another raised brow from Mari, "...What kind of movies are you gonna make your dad watch? Jeesh."

Mikhail half-stumbled back into the foyer, greeted by an impatient and yet confused look, "What took you so long?"

"I know, I'm sorry, I had to explain the situation to everyone and make sure they were okay with it. Kind of a bad time, you know?" He answered with a huff, going for his jacket as the ballerina handed it to him, "Nikki's birthday is tomorrow, Yura just got kicked out of the Games cuz of Russia being stupid, and Vikki was already annoyed with me."

"It's Nikki's birthday tomorrow?" Came a chorus of voices from the side.

Mikhail looked over and saw the triple-stack of curious heads looking out through the door; Yuri on the bottom, Viktor latched onto Yuri's shoulders above him, and Hiroko leaning over Viktor with her hands holding to the doorframe to top it off, "Yeah, I got the timing all messed up... I put Yura in charge of doing something fun for it tomorrow, and then we'll all do something big early next week. You want in?"

"Uhh...yeah!" They all answered.

"Great, then we'll make it a big big thing." The elder surmised, and flared the lapels of his dark colored coat, "We'll start the week off right and hopefully carry it into Four Continents. Until then though, do svidaniya."
The chorus of barks sang out as the little red Audi pulled back into the covered drive-way, the loudest and most menacing being from the pack's lone female. Jiro and Makkachin were used to the sound and sights of the car parking and were excited, but Ghost wasn't yet so fluent in the 'humans come home' ritual, and didn't settle into the realization until she spotted them walking through the door, and Yuri had reassured her that everything was safe. She whined and whimpered as fingers wove through her long fur and ruffled her ears, and once satisfied, her shaggy tail swayed from side to side and she sauntered back to her post, halfway to the kitchen at the base of the stairs. Yuri turned his attention to Jiro afterwards, making certain that no pup thought anyone was more favored than another.

"We should get her a bed or something." Viktor commented as he put his jacket away, "Before she wears a pit into the floor, like a wolf in the snow."

"Yeah, she seems to have made that spot her own for some reason." Yuri agreed, giving his Akita puppy one more cheek-squish before he rose back up to standing, and started to disassemble, "Guess it's the best way to watch both doors at once. Wanna go shopping, then?"

"Right now?"

"Yeah."

Viktor made a face, and pointed into the closet where his jacket was now hanging, alongside the door-hang for scarves and gloves.

Yuri just huffed a laugh, "I meant online. I'll get my MacBook."

"Oh...I thought we could get one from the pet store, after we drop her off in the morning."

"It's not that late...did you forget we can shop for stuff locally and have it ready for pick-up?"

The Russian stared for a moment, but then blinked and scrunched his brow defiantly, "No."

"Careful, your face will get stuck like that." Yuri teased, tapping the tips of his pointer-fingers against that wrinkled forehead, "We have some other stuff to buy anyway."

"We do?"

Yuri looked at that confused expression, and moved his hands down, tapping the end of his husband's nose with one finger, "You're really out of it tonight. Where's your head?"

Still perplexed, Viktor crossed his eyes down the end of his nose, and shook the feeling away before looking ahead normally again. *I can't understand what he's saying. I can't think of anything except what I have to do later...*

"If you turn on the kotatsu, I'll go get my computer." Yuri suggested, drawing the man out of his thoughts again, "Viktor?"

"Yeah...yeah, I'll turn it on." He answered, and stepped out of his shoes to the floor above the entryway step.
Yuri watched him go, confused now as well, but shrugged and put his coat away without questioning it further. As he said he'd do, he went upstairs to grab his computer, followed up by his small Akita. It was entirely impossible not to be distracted by the pup, scrambling up the stairs with legs that were some inches longer than the first time he'd tried. Yuri laughed as the pup tried to catch up with him, trotting alongside his legs on the landing to the bedroom door, only to toss himself on top of the bed where Jiro couldn't follow. The puppy yipped and ran around the sides, lifting up to put his paws on the edge of the bedding, but was only ever able to peek his snoot over the rim. Yuri boop'd that little black nose, and reached down to pull the Akita up to join him.

"It's amazing how fast you've grown in the last month." He commented, playfully flipping the pup onto his back before pulling him into his folded arms, and rubbed the pup's belly, "You're so wiggly and goofy. I can only wonder what you'll be like when you're all grown up."

Jiro became oddly cerebral for a moment, ceasing his squirming as he tilted his head slightly, looking up at his human as though asking 'really?'

Yuri nodded, "In another month, you'll be twice as big as you are now. Pretty soon, you'll be able to hold your own against your big brother and sister. Tomorrow though, Ghost is going to be getting a surgery done and she'll be feeling pretty bad, between the anesthesia and because she can't eat anything tonight. I'll try to sneak you something though; Makkachin, too." He paused for a moment then, and gave a nervous smile, "I probably shouldn't give-away the fact that you'll be getting a surgery at some point, too...probably not until after Worlds though. For now, you can keep your trouble-nuggets."

Jiro just started wiggling again and wrestled his way out of Yuri's grasp, tumbling to the floor rather un-gracefully and took off like a shot out the door. He barked at the end of the hall, and waited for his human to follow before carefully prancing back down to the main level.

Yuri cradled his MacBook in one arm, and looked out across the living-room through the decorative gap in the wall as the stairwell turned and changed directions. The pillow-nest was almost done being assembled, and Yuri looked over to where Viktor was, rummaging around in the kitchen for something. For a moment, he stayed here he was, even as he heard Jiro's nubbins tippy-tapping at the bottom of the stairs behind him.

...As much trouble as we've had over these last few months, I'm not sure I'd change anything, Yuri thought to himself, only to grimace slightly, Well, maybe I'd change Nationals, but only that one part of it. ...I really owe Viktor a lot for what he did there. I don't even want to think about what that would've been like if he still had to go to Russian Nationals.

He turned and made his way down the rest of the flight, giving Ghost a pat on her head as he passed her on his way back to the living-room. Jiro had already dive-bombed the pillows, but Makkachin was nowhere to be seen. A quick glance around the big open space, and Yuri spotted the subtle swaying of a fluffy brown tail just past the edge of the kitchen island. Mystery resolved, Yuri turned back to the 'nest' and the kotatsu beside it. He set his laptop down on the surface, felt under the blanket quickly to see how warm it was, and then made his way quietly to the kitchen.

Makkachin looked up and back as he spotted the blur of color behind him, tail still swaying, but he didn't make a sound outside his usual quiet pant. Yuri came up quietly, pat the poodle on the head as thanks for not giving him away, and slipped in behind his partner. He slid his hands gently over and across the Russian's hips, and pressed in against the man's back as his arms held close, "Smells good." He commented, "Chocolate?"

Viktor looked over his shoulder, and brought his free hand up to touch at the arms around his frame, "Mh. To help you sleep better."
"You don't think the sugar will keep me up instead?"

"It'll only last an hour or so." The silver explained, looking back down to his simmering brew, and continued to stir it gently, "I used to make this back in St. Petersburg if I couldn't sleep. There were a few occasions where I'd be up at three or four in the morning, and I'd only be able to go to bed if I made some of this. Maybe it'll work for you, too."

"Was that a common occurrence for you?"

"When I was younger, yeah." He answered, rubbing his thumb against one of his husband's wrists, "Before I discovered hot wine."

"So when you were a teen then."

"Mhm. Yakov taught me."

"...I've always wondered." Yuri started, getting the taller man's attention enough that he stopped stirring for a moment, "Was Lilia there when you showed up? She and Yakov used to be married, right?"

"Ahh...Lilia Baranovskaya. Prima Ballerina." Viktor huffed, and went back to stirring, "She was there. Peripherally, anyway."

"...Eh?"

"She was in and out, because of her ballet. Yakov timed his ventures into the great Russian wilderness, looking for skating talent, when she was out on tour...so, you can imagine her surprise when she came home after one excursion and found a kid living in her house. Her and Yakov never had kids of their own for a reason. My being there was really hard for her." Viktor explained, "They fought and fought about it. Yakov tried to explain everything to her, but she just wouldn't have it. She acted like she was allergic to me. She resented how much attention Yakov paid to me, even though so much of it was no different than what he did for students he met at the rink. The fact that I came home with him after really got under her skin. In the end, it was either me or her, and I had nowhere to go, so that kind of made the decision without him."

"Guess that explains why she never said a word to you last year when she was helping with Yurio."

"Hm... The very idea of me makes her skin crawl, unfortunately. I'm not at all surprised to hear that they may reconcile after all this time, now that I'm away from Yakov." Viktor said quietly, and turned away from the chocolate-pot to turn the stove off, "I was really surprised when I heard that Lilia had actually made Yakov and Yurio move in with her after the fuss she made over my living with them before."

"Well, she's a former Prima now, and she was invited into the mix, rather than having it sprung on her without warning."

"I guess."

"Do you hold it against her?"

"Nah. Not after all these years." He answered, side-stepping carefully with Yuri still attached to his back, and reached into the cupboard for some mugs, "I'm not even sure I held it against her back then. I was a loner, and Yakov was the only person I really talked to. It would take a really long time before I came out of my shell. By then, I think I'd forgotten all about Lilia."
Yuri pulled back to give the man some arm-room, and watched from the side as the cocoa brew was carefully poured from spout-pot to cups. The pot was quickly taken to the sink in the island and rinsed off, and Viktor dried his hands before officially handing off one of the mugs.

"To a hopefully uneventful night, and sweet dreams." The silver said, holding up his portion.

[kLINk]

"But first, let's go shopping."

The nest of pillows was cozy and the warmth under the kotatsu made it even better. The first item on the list was a bed for Ghost, and Yuri typed in the names of any local pet-stores he could think of, until they found one that allowed them to order online and pick-up later. It was a massive thing, bought with her continued growth in mind.

"Maybe we should get beds for the other two as well?" Viktor suggested, taking a sip from his cocoa, "Otherwise they may sleep in this one and Ghost will still be on the floor."

"Yeah, you're right." Yuri agreed easily, and changed the quantity to 3 before making the purchase, "We gotta get something for Nikki's birthday next."

"...Wouldn't it be super obvious that we got something last-second?" Viktor posed, sliding his hand up and down his husband's back as the man leaned forward to type, "Or do you already have something in mind?"

"...Only that it probably shouldn't have anything to do with skating." Yuri answered, "She got pulled into our world so hard and fast, I'm sure there's things she would rather think about."

"What kind of stuff does she like though?"

Yuri huffed and looked back, "Gifts don't always have to be something that the other person likes; not specifically anyway. I was thinking something more along the lines of a 'welcome to Hasetsu' sort of thing."

"Viktoria might feel left out if we only welcomed her sister, even if it is a birthday present."

"Oh...yeah, I guess that's true. Hmm..." Yuri pondered and looked back to the laptop screen, "Maybe we really should just get something for them both. How about a pair of kimonos?"

Viktor was unsure, and it showed on his face, "...Whenever I've gotten Asian clothing abroad, they're usually really cheap and fall apart after one use. Getting something like that on short notice is...well..."

"We aren't aboard here." Yuri pointed out, "There are a few places in Hasetsu that sell hand-crafted traditional clothing. Maybe we should bring Yurio with us. He spends more time with them than we do. He could probably give us insight into the kind of decorative stuff they might like. It'll help get his mind off the Olympics stuff, too."

"Yeah."

"...Are you worried about that at all?"

"It's at the back of my mind, but I'm not worried yet. The timing is a bit garbage, but I feel like the JSF will let me know pretty quickly if they plan on doing anything." Viktor shrugged and took another sip, "My mind has been more on that mention of people coming here looking for us to do
interviews. Not that we've never had unannounced media-drops before, but they were here looking
do that meeting with all three of us. And I don't mean Yurio."

"...Yeah." Yuri nodded and looked back to his screen again, "I'm sure it'll be fine. After missing us
before, I bet they learned their lesson about showing up without an appointment anyway."

"Hopefully."

Words seemed to die out after that, neither really sure what to talk about. After Viktor's earlier
cluenessness regarding the shopping, Yuri wasn't even certain the man would have the presence of
mind to notice what else he'd been referring to. Yuri drew a long breath and returned to his laptop,
supposing it wouldn't hurt to look anyway.

Given the nature of what appeared on the screen, Yuri could feel the heat on his face turning his skin
pink, but the silence from behind him was awkwardly deafening. Too nervous to look and find out
why, but worried that Viktor had no clue what was going on either, Yuri glanced slightly over one
shoulder...only to spot the silver Russian with his head cocked back against the edge of the couch,
and his eyes closed.

The flutter in Yuri's gut dropped low and his brow crinkled, "Viktor..."

"Hm?" He answered, unmoving.

"...Seems your hot cocoa idea worked more for you than it did for me." Yuri sighed, "I thought
you'd be really interested in this, but I guess not."

"Mnh...?" Viktor mumbled, lifting his head off the couch to see, "Interested in what?"

Yuri gestured dryly at the computer.

Slate eyes narrowed in confusion, and blinked slowly, "Why are you looking at porn...?"

"I- what!? No." Yuri stammered, looking back quickly to wonder how that could've been the
answer.

"I mean...it's fine if you do, I just didn't think you were into that sort of thing...or that you thought
you'd need it."

"I'm not looking at porn ohmygod. It's just a stupid ad on the side of the page. I didn't pick it." He
went on quickly, covering the vertical image with one hand so it wouldn't be a distraction, "There!
Now do you see?"

Another slow blink, but Viktor seemed oblivious anyway.

Yuri could only groan in embarrassment, and lowered down onto the kotatsu-top until his forehead
thumped on the wood, "I was looking for a warmer for the thing I got you. Remember? We tried
looking for one while on that train out of Russia, too, but you weren't interested then either."

"...Sorry."

"What's the matter?" Yuri asked, almost pleading for clarity. "You've been out of it since we left Yu-
Topia. Does the thought of what Mik and Minako-sensei are up to bother you that much?"

"...Huh? No...I wasn't even thinking about them."

"Then what's going on? Every time I try to be brave about this stuff, you don't seem to care."
"I care..." Viktor attempted, leaning forward so he could safely stow his mug on top of the table, "I guess you just have bad luck being brave when I'm too tired or distracted."

"I wish I didn't..." Yuri sulked.

"Sorry, my love." The Russian cooed, pulling one leg back so he could scoot in behind his sullen partner, and pressed both hands to the man's back as he leaned forward against it, "I guess the whole thing slipped my mind. There's just been so much else going on. All thought of trying to make you like a toy that you haven't liked so far just got put on the back-burner."

"...I liked it that first time..." Yuri defended, "Maybe I just ruined it for myself because I got so worked up about it after the fact."

Viktor slid his fingers under the edge of the t-shirt, and pressed his palms to warm skin as he kissed the back of one shoulder, "I really wish you weren't so intimidated by the whole thing. It's supposed to just add a bit of fun to what we already have, not replace anything."

"I know...I know..." Yuri sighed, "I just...don't like taking risks, I guess."

"Taking risks...?" The silver echoed in confusion, "You still think the toy would remind me too much of women and make me want to go back?"

"It's completely irrational. I know that. I just..."

"Tell me." Viktor asked, sliding his hands around his husband's ribs, and pressed his palms to the younger man's chest, "What could you still be afraid of with me?"

"That you'll get bored, or impatient. Since I...hardly ever do the things that you do practically all the time."

"If I was looking for perfectly equal reciprocation, I would've married a mirror, not you." Viktor teased, "I knew it would be a long, uphill climb to get to you. I've had my share of fears along the way."

"What could you have possibly been afraid of?" Yuri asked, doubting, "You're the guy who gets everything he wants."

"In time, and with effort, and if I give other people what they want, too. Everything I ever got only came after I gave something up first. Nothing in life is ever free. Remember that." Viktor retorted, feeling his partner's heart thumping hard under his skin, "My biggest fear was that I wouldn't be able to make you happy. That I'd always be fighting to get you to see me as something other than a skater. After I got past that...my fears changed. Now that I have you, how do I keep you? That first time we went all the way, even though it hurt, I still got a sense of what I knew would eventually make it feel good. When your turn came though...you focused so much on how uncomfortable it was, that I was terrified I'd never be able to make you feel good that way. I couldn't stand the thought of putting you through that every time we made love, knowing that all you ever felt from that part was pain. I had a few sleepless nights over it."

"We're so far past that though..."

"And I have newer fears because of it. After everything else...my biggest worry now is that I'll never be smart enough to avoid hurting you. Every time I do, I look back on it later, and all I can see is me being a complete idiot."

Yuri pressed his cheek to one shoulder as he looked back over it, "If we could all stop ourselves
from doing stupid things right as we're about to do them, no one would ever get upset again. There will always be days where we do stuff that's moronic."

"That's not good enough for me. That's really the one thing about myself that I can't stand." Viktor explained, working his thumbs into his husband's tense skin, slowly bringing his hands back out around his sides, "I'm only really good at a small handful of things, and some of those things will be completely useless to me one day. If I can't sort myself out, it'll turn into one of my greatest failings as an adult; I'll just end up like one of those useless former child stars. I'll burn out as a skater eventually...but what then? If I don't figure out a way of being useful before you retire, then I'll just...end up as some parasite on you. The day we come home after your fifth Worlds Gold is the most terrifying day that I know will eventually come. Whether things are still interesting in the bedroom or not will be entirely irrelevant because I'll have no purpose."

"...So...the huge deal I've made out of the toy...really doesn't matter in the end."

"It matters. Just...not in the way you think it does." The silver answered, hearing the subtle change in his partner's breathing as he moved his hands back towards the front again. The bulky wrinkles of the thick blanket collected above his spouse's lap, but Viktor did his best anyway, massaging every inch of skin as he slid his hands upward against the younger man's ribs again. He found one raised nub of flesh and deftly circled a fingertip around it, and smiled when he heard the quiet gasp of a breath ahead of him, "...There no one and nothing on this Earth that could ever convince me that there's anything better than you out there for me."

Yuri could hardly focus by then, bowing his head low as even just that one finger distracted him from everything else. His feet rubbed together under the kotatsu, toes curling around one another; even his knees buckled slightly, unseen in the mass of blankets.

"There...it'll be here Monday."

"...H-huh!?"

Viktor lowered the lid of the MacBook and pushed it aside, torturously pulling that one attentive hand back as he used it and the other to pull his t-shirt off. He barely had two seconds to cast the garment aside before he found Yuri pushing him down into the pillows, and quickly sat on his hips.

Yuri huffed and puffed, his face pink, "...It's...not fair that you can get me worked up like this so easily."

"Oh, is that what happened?" The Russian mused, acting coy, and moved his hands up to help pull his partner's t-shirt off as well. The air around them was cool against their skin though, and Yuri was quick to pull up the kotatsu blanket up over his back. Viktor slid his hands over that exposed skin though, fingers brushing against that rosy nub he'd already teased into arousal, "If you're cold, you should let me warm you up. I'll finish what the cocoa started."
Chapter 558

CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED FIFTY EIGHT

Yuri raised his head up and drew in a desperate breath, barely able to hold himself up against his partner's chest as that sublime pressure radiated through him, making his muscles weak from delirium. Each palm felt the quickened pace of the heart under his skin, and his fingertips pressed to his spouse's collarbone with each careful forward-upward push. It was all he could do to stay upright, and avoid melting off the man's lap. The steady pace of slick upward thrusts, rubbing gently against that internal sweet-spot, sent jolts of electricity up into his chest and down both legs. Ragged gasps and quiet, needy, whimpered moans were a song in the otherwise-quiet of the living-room.

Viktor twisted slightly, careful to support his husband's weight as he lowered that lithe frame to the side. The feeling of cold air on wet skin sent a shudder through him as their motion forced his withdraw, but he was patient. He lifted himself up in one fluid motion with Yuri's descent, and pulled one of the man's legs up against his side as he loomed over the younger figure's core. He felt a gentle pass of fingers over his shoulders before Yuri's weakened body collapsed under him, heaving for breath even as he craved more. Viktor obliged, sliding in overtop of that pale figure, and pressed a kiss down to his partner's chest. He let that skin come up to him after that, moving further and higher as each deep breath brought his husband's athletic flesh to his lips.

Yuri couldn't help but smile through a few tickled breaths, silver hair teasing his skin as Viktor came closer. He only managed to open his eyes for a split second before the kisses traveling up his front came directly down on him, and lips connected as the Russian's weight bore down on top of him. He found what strength he had left and summoned his arms up, curling them over his husband's back to keep him near, savoring the press of hot velvet skin against his body. He felt a hum in the midst of the kiss, and opened his eyes again, seeing the winter glimmer of blue in front of him. Viktor nuzzled an Eskimo-kiss to the end of his nose and smiled.

"For all the craziness that happened today, I didn't think we'd get such a calm evening." He commented quietly, supporting his weight on one elbow as he brought his free hand up, and brushed a few threads of black from his partner's face, "This actually surprisingly serene."

With his one leg pulled up against his husband's side, Yuri felt the man's waist propped up over the other, and nudged it upward softly to guide that toned core directly over top of himself. Twin heat pressed together, and Yuri gently bucked his hips to feel all the more of it, all the while keeping his sights on those blue eyes, "Just a month ago, half of what happened since yesterday would've felt like the end of the world. I hope this doesn't mean we've gotten numb..." He said, cupping one palm over his partner's cheek. Another hand pressed up behind it, and Viktor turned in to kiss into the curve.

"Maybe we're just coping better."

"Hmm...maybe." Yuri agreed, gently stroking his thumb over that pale skin, barely gliding over those secret scars by the man's eye. He pulled his hand back then, sliding the tip of his pointer finger down the curve of the silver's jaw, and tapped the end of his nose before he raised both hands over his partner's shoulders, "Everything's so different now."

"Not us though, I hope."

"Us probably most of all." He corrected, pressing in with his thighs, "Or maybe mostly me."
"Nah..." Viktor shook his head, and wiggled just enough to bring his knees aside his husband's hips, excited flesh seeking for the warmth it had known earlier, helplessly poking without a guiding hand, "I think this is who you were always meant to be. You just suppressed it."

"Suppressed it." Yuri echoed skeptically, feeling the prod of a few near-hits, nearly ready to just reach down between them and guide the member into place himself, though there was nearly no room to do so with Viktor still leaning down over him, "All these years."

"I feel more like myself than I ever have, too, you know." The silver puffed, punctuating the moment by finally slipping back inside, forcing Yuri to gasp and clench his knees slightly, "It's amazing how much of a fake I realized I was before."

"You weren't a fake." Yuri reassured, repositioning his legs a bit higher against his husband's ribs, "You're a showman. The greatest showman."

"I sense a pun in there."

"Only a little one." Yuri laughed, "But I mean it. You were playing a role, no different than any ballet performance or skating show you've ever done. I count myself lucky that I've gotten to see under the veil."

"I thought it was a mask."

"You were feeling threatened and vulnerable at the time. Anyone who doesn't know you as well as I do wouldn't be able to tell the difference." He explained, pulling himself up slightly to speak the words as kisses to his spouse's ear, "And I know you intimately well."

"Mnhm, that you do, my love. That you do." Viktor hummed, turning back to nudge his partner down into the pillows again with a kiss. His gentle rocking started again, and he wedged his arms under Yuri's back to hug him close to his chest, delighting in the sounds of his husband's vocal breaths just by his ear.

The quiet of the room soon sounded with the subtle taps of water drops on the windows, and soon, it was a chorus of taps on the glass. Some sounded sharp as crystal, others were dull and splattered, but they soon all merged together into a cascade of winter rain. A gentle drum-roll of distant thunder came in off the bay. With the lights of the living-room on, it was impossible to see the flash of lightning, but it didn't matter. By the time either of the pair could think about it, they were asleep anyway, tangled in one another with pillows and blankets strewn everywhere. All three dogs had piled on as well, wedging themselves into any space that was available closest to the kotatsu.

Another low thunder-rumble banged through the darkened heavens, this time followed by a louder crack. Makkachin's head jerked up in alarm, looking around as the seconds passed, and the room abruptly cut to complete black. The poodle whimpered slightly, and Ghost lifted her head after, looking around curiously. The abyssal black was flashed with illumination in brief bursts; lightning coursing through the clouds over the city. All seemed to calm down after a few moments, and the pupper-pile lowered down again to try going back to sleep.

Kr'KA Owww

Jiro yelped into consciousness that time, and both older dogs looked at him. He flailed and rolled, trying to find his paws, but he paused and slumped as the rumble faded. He whimpered quietly and tried to find his way under the blankets, and snoot-rooted under one of his person's arms. Almost expectedly, Yuri moved to give the little Akita room, but soon after, Jiro found himself rolling into the empty space Yuri had left. Three pairs of eyes watched the naked figure shamble through the
dark quietly, until he was out of sight behind the couch.

Viktor hadn't moved, save where his arm had slipped over his partner's side as Yuri slid away.

Jiro warily left the comforts of the warm nest to go after his human, and wiggled his way under the couch to get to him quicker. Makkachin and Ghost seemed curious enough about it to get up and follow around the sides, and all three pups watched in confusion as Yuri wandered silently like a ghost through the dark kitchen. Cupboards were opened, some were closed again. The pantry was opened as well, and that got the pack's attention. Jiro made a break for it, scrambling in between his person's ankles before finding the door closed behind him again.

It was even darker in the pantry somehow. The subtle grumble from on high seemed duller, too, and the flashes of light through the windows were like less than fireflies under the door. Jiro snuffled for the bag of dog treats, and pulled the first bag that smelled right from the lowest shelf. The plastic was crunchy in his puppy-teeth, but he gnawed heroically to get inside. He stopped suddenly when he heard the back door unlock, and the roar of the outdoors came pouring inside like the waves it sounded like.

The freezing mist wafted over the back of the couch, and Viktor found himself waking up in complete confusion. Half a thousand questions all echoed in his head simultaneously, but there were three that bubbled most prominently to the surface.

1. Why is the door open?
2. What happened to the lights?
3. Where is Yuri?

Also, 4. Where are the dogs?

The blanket was quickly thrown off, and the Russian stood up, stumbling around in the disorienting dark. He felt the soggy couch fabric to get around it, and quickly caught himself as his feet slid under him, ice-like puddles on the hard floor. A flash of Nationals came back to him in that moment, trying to catch himself as he stumbled onto the ice with his blade-guards still on, but he shook it away, reassuring himself that the phantom pain in his ankle was just that; not real.

"Yuri!?" He called, and carefully pulled himself back up to his feet. The lights over the hedges at the edge of the yard made it almost impossible to see into the yard itself on a regular night, but it was completely dark outside. The merciful glow of lightning sparked through the sky and gave enough light to see the hazy outline of someone standing in the freezing rain, "Kakogo hrena, Yuri, čto ty...?" (What the shit, Yuri, what are you...?) He stammered, not even realizing he was speaking Russian, "Vernis' v dom, Yuri, požalujsta!" (Come back into the house, Yuri, please!)

The onslaught of rain continued, but the figure just stood still as a statue. Ghost started barking, but wouldn't step into the deluge; beside her, Makkachin whined and tip-toed around the edge of the growing puddle.

Viktor grit his teeth and looked up into the pitch black sky, unable to even see the clouds that the rain was coming from. It was freezing cold though, and he wasn't even wet, barely misted by whatever was sucked into the house by the warm air. Yuri was right in the thick of it though, hair soaked to his scalp. The Russian swallowed and held his breath, the terrified haze of being woken up so suddenly fading enough that he could think again, "...He has to be sleeping...!" He cried aloud, and psyched himself up. In one big sweep, he dove through the door, buck-ass naked, grabbed his frozen husband, pulled him back inside, and pushed the door closed again.

Wanting to take no risks, Viktor hoisted Yuri up over the back of the couch and settled the man
down onto the cushions on the other side, careful not to let his feet slide out from under him, lest they both take a painful tumble. Ghost was still barking, her low, earthy voice sounding scary in the dark. Makkachin darted around like a bug that couldn't find the opening in the window, but Viktor realized one member of the pack was missing.

"Jiro?" He called, "Jiro!?" He turned back to the door, and reluctantly pulled it aside again, stepping out into the freezing rain, dreading to find the tiny puppy soaked to the bone in that weather, "JIRO!!" He called again, louder, reaching for the outside light-switch, but finding it futile, as the glow wouldn't come on, "Shit, shit! The power's out! JIRO!"

Bare feet crunched through rain-soaked icy grass, but the Russian couldn't feel the Akita anywhere in their small yard. The cold was starting to seep into him though, and he reluctantly went back inside, feeling like he was two heartbeats away from a Yuri-level panic attack. Ghost was still muffling a few unsure barks, and Makkachin had stopped running, but the absence of the third pup was like a deep void.

"Where's my phone!?" He barked out suddenly, rushing for the kotatsu and feeling around for anything. He didn't find his phone, but he found his poodle, stepping on the poor creature's tail as he stumbled around the square table. Phone forgotten as the poodle yelped and ran again, Viktor grabbed the only thing he could find; Yuri's MacBook. The light from the login screen was enough to guide Viktor back to the door, and he looked through the glass helplessly, ...The rain's going to destroy this thing...but Yuri would never forgive me if I hesitated because a laptop... He thought frantically, reaching for the latch to pull the panel over a second time.

Just as he touched it, he heard a particular squeaking-yelp come from the left side of the room. Viktor looked up, rain-soaked steely hair dripping all over the computer screen. He turned the laptop into the kitchen, and hoped beyond himself that he hadn't just heard something that wasn't there. He could see the open cupboards though, and the shadow of something under the pantry door. It was gone when he looked right at it, "Jiro?"

Thunder cracked loudly overhead, and the scream from inside the storage closet was as real as the cold. The puppy flailed and fought in that tight space, dog treats spilling out under the door. Feeling the relief, Viktor quickly went over and pulled the door open, spotting the terrified Akita spill out with bits of plastic and half-eaten pup-snacks all around that - notably dry - fuzzy little body. He leaned down and scooped the puppy up before he could get away, and held him up against his shoulder.

"You really gave me a scare, little dude." The silver grumbled, adrenaline still coursing through him, "Yuri and I would've been devastated if you were trapped outside in that."

Jiro seemed too nervous about the awful sky-sounds to listen, and wiggled to get out of the man's grasp. Viktor eased the pup down, but found him staying close anyway...just on the ground. With all pups accounted for though, Viktor went back to check on his husband, finding the younger man out like the lights on the soggy blue couch. He was absolutely slab-cold to the touch though, and Viktor couldn't abide that. He set the MacBook down on the kotatsu and pulled Yuri up, slinging the man over one shoulder so he could feel for the walls with his free hand. Up the stairs and into the bedroom, and finally, into the big bathroom, he set the unconscious figure on the bench in the shower and fumbled for the faucet.

There may not be electricity, but the toshi gas won't be impacted. The water should still get hot...

The spray started out cold, but to Viktor's half-frozen skin, it was warm already, straight from the shower-head. It was enough to satisfy him for the moment, and he pulled the hand-held from the wall, carefully soaking Yuri's scalp from the top down to get all the icy rain out as quickly as he
"Mn...nnhh..." He groaned, eyes opening to the unexpected slosh of water coming off his head and hair. He jerked and flailed in the darkened surprise, but his knuckles hit the tile wall and he stopped just as quickly.

"Shh." Viktor cooed, "Calm. The power's out, and I found you sleepwalking."

"E-Ehhh!?"

"Just let me finish, and I'll tell you. I'm too amped up for details right now."

Yuri blinked into the darkness, scared and confused but oddly reassured. The water was getting warmer, and his numb limbs were starting to come back into feeling...even the knuckles he'd banged on the wall, which stung some as the water rushed over.

Thunder cracked in waves above their house again, and it sent the dogs into a chorus of barking, as though taunting to sky to come down and fight them. Something in the house beeped loudly though, and the lights started to come on again. At least, the ones downstairs did; Viktor hadn't turned any on as he went upstairs, so all they could see was the reflected glow from the stairwell as it came in through the open bedroom door.

"What were you dreaming about this time?" The cold silver asked, taking a moment to swish some of the hot water onto himself before turning it back to Yuri again, "Do you remember?"

Yuri searched his mind, "...Something...about the dogs, I think?" He answered, unsure, "Something else... I can't place it..."

"Mh..."

"Why are we cold and wet...?"

"You went outside for some reason. I had to pull you in."

"...Guess that explains why I feel like a Popsicle." Yuri surmised, trying to make light of it.

"...I was supposed to tie you to me so this wouldn't happen." Viktor added, grimly, "...I...must've fallen asleep before I could. I'm not going to forget again."

Yuri blinked at the blackened shape in front of him, but...nodded quietly, "...Okay."
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED FIFTY NINE

Ghost sat nervously in the back seat of the car, the whites of her eyes visible with every turn, ears pressed back. Being alone in the back of a car had only meant negative things to her in her short life, and she dreaded that this would be no different. Yuri was there with her though, eyes darkened behind his glasses, nearly unrecognizable under his beanie and behind the surgical mask he wore that morning. That distinctive, wet, slurpy sniffler gave him away though, and he leaned back to draw in a pained breath before groaning quietly.

It was still dark out, even though the car's digital display said it was close to 7:15am. It was still raining, too, though not as hard as it had been. Yuri turned his head and looked outside, but he couldn't see much beyond the hedge that denoted the property line between theirs and the neighbor's houses. Ghost whined a little, and he turned into the car to look back over the shoulder of his seat, offering what little comfort he could with a few fingers to rub her nose.

"It'll be fine," He said, hopefully congested, "The worst part will be having bald spots until your fur grows in again. And the cone, I guess."

The front door finally opened though and Viktor slipped outside, doing his best to keep the other two dogs in the house before he locked the door. The car interior was pleasantly warm by the time he got in, but it didn't stop the silver from shuddering a little as he escaped the wet and rainy outdoors. He rubbed his hands together briefly before taking the wheel, and quietly backed the little red Audi into the street behind their house.

Raindrops splattered on the roof as the protective cover over the drive gave way to the open and dark sky. Thunder still rumbled over the water, but it was far away now. The trip over to the vet's clinic was quiet and lonely; there was hardly another soul on the road that early in the day, least not in that weather. When they finally arrived, Ghost was none-too-interested in setting foot onto the wet pavement, but she did so grudgingly as Yuri beckoned her out. Paws that were acclimated for snow and ice weren't that impressed by freezing puddles of water that soaked quickly into her undercoat. The office doors were open and welcoming despite the smell making the Shepherd a little nervous, and she held her tail low as the two humans took her towards the counter.

Words were exchanged, and she was made to stand on a floor-level scale to get her weight. The moment had come though, and she swallowed nervously as Yuri crouched down in front of her. Though she couldn't understand his words, she could sense anxiety on him. Something about his posture told her that things would be fine though, and she let her tail sway behind her, but only a little.

Yuri stood back up again and gave the Ovcharka a few last rubs on her fuzzy ears before he stepped back. Viktor leaned down over her next with a hug around her precariously large canine frame, and rubbed her noggin as he spoke a few words of his own. The two humans stood in place as she felt a light tug on her harness. Confused, Ghost looked back to see a thin figure with long black hair, and she seemed to be trying to coax her forward, but those nervous eyes went back into the waiting room. Yuri offered a wave, and Ghost finally went with the vet tech, disappearing into the back of the clinic towards some unknown fate.

Car doors closed and the engine came alive again. Yuri snorkled a breath behind his mask, sounding miserable. He put his seat back so he could half-way lay down, fingers barely able to cling to the edge of his partner's leg, practically hooking his wrist to the seatbelt to keep a grip.
Viktor easily took the hint and gave him some slack, threading his fingers into the tight space in his husband's palm, and moved the whole set over to Yuri's side, thumb moving gently from knuckles to thigh with each slow, wide sweep. He could feel Yuri's fingers relax a little there, and he gave the hand a light squeeze, "I know you're tired." He commented quietly, "Only one stop left before you can sleep."

With a nod, Yuri shut his eyes, and listened to the sound of the car making its way through the rain to the nearest yakkyoku.

If not for the fact that Viktor still couldn't read most Japanese, he would've been happy to let Yuri stay in the car. But, he needed those hazy eyeballs to read the labels on all the different cold medicines so they'd get the right one. Yuri could barely hold himself upright as they browsed, but he eventually handed over a box, brightly colored in yellow and orange.

"...This is it?" Viktor asked skeptically, looking at the odd graphic of a head with starbursts over the nose, forehead, and the back of the neck.

Yuri nodded, "See?" He said, pointing to that odd advert, "Congestion, headache, and muscle pain. It's the brand my mom used to get for us as kids."

"It looks like I'm about to buy something that'll help you achieve enlightenment."

Tired and full of mucous, Yuri couldn't help but huff a sickly wet laugh anyway, "I could probably use a bit of that anyway. I feel like I've been struck by an acute case of the dumb."

Viktor let himself smile tiredly at that, and he slid his arm behind his partner's back to guide him back to the front of the store to make their purchase and get the man home again. Makkachin and Jiro were there, ready and waiting with barks and excitement, but both were a little confused at the fact that Ghost hadn't come home with them. They settled into the idea soon enough, and followed their humans into the living-room.

A space-heater had been set up behind the couch to help dry it faster, and the kotatsu had been left on in front, with the blanket pulled back so the heat could escape towards the front of the couch. A few hours that way and the blue sofa was pretty toasty. The pillow nest had been picked up by then though, and there was still a small pile of towels left at the base of the back door, but otherwise it was nearly back to normal. Viktor helped peel his spouse out of his winter wear and then over to the base of the stairs, ready to help hobble the man upstairs, but Yuri resisted.

"...Unless you plan on chaining me to the bed-post, I don't want to sleep alone." He said simply, raising one hand up to hold the mask to his face as he coughed a few times.

"Alright..." The silver agreed easily, "Let me put you on the couch then. I'll go grab the blankets and bring them back down."

A few more steps over, and Yuri sat back onto the blue cushioned frame, letting out a piteous groaned breath as he slumped into place. Viktor kissed the top of his head before he started to move off, but Yuri snagged a finger to keep him from leaving. Slate eyes turned back in confusion, but Yuri whined and sighed, "...I'm not going to get to kiss you again until I'm not sick anymore." He surmised, "...This is the worst..."

"All those times I've taken your booger-tissues at rink-side and you think some snot's gonna scare me off?" The Russian teased, and leaned back down to pull the surgical mask down. Even he had second thoughts though as he spotted the proverbial river flowing from his husband's nose to lip, and he put the mask back where he found it, an odd look on his face, "...Okay you win this round."
Yuri just shook his head and gasped a few laughs, "Super attractive, isn't it?"

"I'll get the blankets and bring you all your drugs," Viktor offered instead, pointing both index fingers at his sickly beloved, "We'll dry you out like the couch." He added, and made his way quickly to the stairs. Quick as the wind, the silver blur was up on the second floor, and returned moments later with all the bedding from their bedroom. He heaved the pile on top of his stunned partner, but had returned to the kitchen before Yuri could dig himself out from under the fluffy deluge.

Once freed, Yuri looked around just in time to spot Viktor coming back around the other side of the couch. He plunked down into the empty space with Makkachin at his heels. Jiro had stayed by the kotatsu, and both pups were watching curiously. Viktor held out his palm, and offered two of the gel-caps from the medicine box, and a glass of water in the other hand.

"Pop these down the hatch and then I'll help turn you into a burrito."

"...What about you?"

"Burrito with double-filling?"

"Oh, in that case..." Yuri mused, nervously pulling the mask off his face again, wiping his nose on the inside of it before casting it onto the kotatsu-top. The two orange gel-caps were swallowed quickly with the water chaser, and Yuri nodded to say he was ready to get bundled up.

Viktor took the cup to set it down and helped Yuri rise back up to his feet, catching all the comforters and such that he'd brought down. Blankets were pulled around and wrapped before he turned to look at the spot he was about to sit in, and he beckoned his sick partner down to him. With blankets piled thick over his back, Yuri crawled onto the couch as well, and layered himself in as snugly as he could. Viktor sat slightly higher against the armrest, and his partner's arm went over his waist, the other curled up between them in what little space was left. Settled for the moment, Viktor reached for the remote on the nearest edge of the kotatsu and clicked on the television for something to play quietly while he gave Yuri time to catch up on much-needed sleep. Oddly - yet not - it didn't seem like Yuri was entirely ready to bed down.

"...Why didn't you just tell me you thought I was sleepwalking?" He asked, leaning his head up against the arm behind it.

"I thought if I told you, then you wouldn't when I was expecting it. I only wanted to confirm that's what happened...since you said you dreamt about eating the mochi. Seems the dream was real."

Yuri sighed and lowered down slightly, hearing the channels click through behind him. Fingers went through his hair though, and he let himself relax into the soothing touch, "You're sure that it was only these two times though?"

"If you've done it before, it was completely benign. Here I was worried about you stress-eating..." The silver answered, carefully threading strands of black hair into place, over an ear or into the slicked-back mess going over his husband's head, "I wish I could help you. I wonder if I'm just part of the problem though."

"There's no chance..."

"I haven't exactly made things easy for you." Viktor retorted, "Right from the start, I've complicated things. You didn't tell me until you had that meltdown in China last year, but ever since, I've wondered how else I make thing worse."
"I've made things worse for you too in a bunch of ways."

"And I wouldn't have it any other way." Viktor reassured, "But so far as I'm aware, nothing that's happened has left me standing outside, buck-ass naked in the freezing rain. I mean, what if I hadn't woken up? How long would you have stood out there? Pneumonia? Hypothermia? Would we have gone to the ER last night? ...Do we even have an ER in Hasetsu?"

Yuri grumbled quietly, but nodded, "The hospital is closed on the weekends except for emergencies. You would've been fine if you took me."

"...I know you thought I was mad at you this morning because of what happened, but...I was really just caught off-guard because I didn't know what I'd do if the cold hadn't woken me up. You scared the absolute Hell out of me last night."

"...Sorry..."

"I was mad at myself, though, for not being able to stay awake long enough to get to put a leash on you." Viktor went on, looking down at the top of his partner's head as he moved his hand over to set it on the younger man's shoulder, "Minako even said she could see this ending badly somehow. I tried to ask your mom if she'd ever known you to sleepwalk when you were younger, but she couldn't answer before you and Mimi showed up. I guess she caught on that I didn't want you to know yet. I wanted to be sure before I bothered you with it. ...And I didn't want your sleeping brain to consider untying my tether. I think you kind of have to know already about something before you're able to do it while sleepwalking. That's why you went for the mochi, and put the container away."

"I didn't clean it first though."

"Well, you are asleep at the time. It's amazing you got that far."

"Maybe..."

"What I can't understand is why you went outside. I get that you may have wanted to feed the dogs at first, since you knew we hadn't last night, but...standing outside in the cold? It's damn-near freezing outside overnight. You unlocked the door to get out there. You could've been seriously hurt... And I nearly lost my mind over thinking Jiro was out there. I was ready to take your laptop out there with me to look for him, since it was the only light I could find. I got lucky that the thunder scared him and he screamed." He explained anxiously, brow furrowed, "And you're sure you don't remember what you were dreaming about?"

"I don't even remember dreaming about the dogs anymore, if I did." Yuri answered, "It's just a big cut to black now. I remember us making love, and deciding to stay downstairs to sleep...and then I woke up cuz I jammed my hand against the wall in the shower."

"Is there stuff bothering you that you don't want to tell me...?"

"If there is, I don't even want to tell myself." He said, shaking his head a little as he drew in a bit closer, "...Do I talk in my sleep at all?"

"Not that I've heard. But, I tend to fall asleep first no matter how hard I try, so I'm not even sure I would know."

"...Yeah, you've always been that way."

"Maybe we could set up a recorder overnight? We could put it on the nightstand on your side of the
 bed, and play it back in the morning."

"Yeah."

"We'll worry about it later. I'll try to stay awake for now though. We'll grab Yurio after lunch and go shopping like we already planned. I need you to sleep for a while. You've gotta kick this cold before Four Continents."

Yuri groaned, feeling the vibrations in his sinuses where he was still completely plugged up, "...Ugh, I know... My stamina is going to be garbage if I'm still sick when I compete. I'd rather be sick for this than the Games though, if I had to pick."

"...Ah, right?" Viktor agreed, nosing his beloved's forehead, "You should be fine by then, at least."

"How come you didn't get sick? You said you went running around the yard in that rain. You should be as miserable as I am."

"Don't jinx me." Viktor teased, "As far as I'm concerned, it's against the law for us both to be messed up at the same time."

"But now that you've said it, you will get sick."

"You better not be right again."

"...Yeah, I hate that..."

Viktor ruminated in his nerves then, "...I'm gonna get sick anyway, aren't I?"

"Probably. I'm getting all my gross boogers all over you."

He stared forward dutifully, "...I'm ready to make this sacrifice."
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED SIXTY

The air was cold enough that his cheeks stung, even though the ice was so far away. The sound of chains rattled in his ears, and pulled hard on his wrists, dragging his arms towards the ground. Laughter slowly rumbled in from the background, and lights gradually came on, becoming brighter with the growing volume of merriment.

Yurio watched in anger. A podium appeared in front of him, with the Olympic symbol emblazoned on the front in brilliantly vibrant colors. Someone stepped up beside him, and Yurio looked over, seeing Viktor there, but the silver didn't seem to notice him at all, simply walking by, heading to the podium with those golden blades on his boots. Yuri did the same on the other side, then Otabek appeared where Viktor had been before, and Chris behind Yuri, and all manner of other people he knew but whose names escaped him. All other skaters...but none of them Russian. Somehow, every one of them managed to climb up onto that podium, standing together on the top tier, Gold medals swinging from lanyards around their necks.

"This is bullshit!" The teen screamed, trying to go forward, only for those chains to yank him back. The laughter was louder than ever, and Yurio could suddenly see that it was those skaters who were laughing...and they were staring right at him, laughing at him. There were new figures passing by him then; people who weren't even skaters. Nikki, Viktoria, Minako, Hiroko, Mikhail, even the Nishigori family and Toshiya. They all had Gold hanging from their shoulders as well, and joined the rest on the podium.

"You'll never get up here!" They all called, "Never get up here! NEVER!"

"SHUT UP!"

Yurio practically screamed himself awake, sitting up sharply in bed as darkness poured in all around him. Potya was startled and jumped off the comforter, but the teen couldn't see her on the floor. He wiped the sweat away from his forehead with the inside of his t-shirt, then peeled it off and rubbed the rest of his skin dry with it, too. He threw it onto the floor and fell back to the damp pillow, still trying to catch his breath.

"Èto tak nespravedlivo..." (This is so unfair...) He grumbled quietly, lifting the arm he'd draped across his eyes as he felt his cat jump back up onto the bed next to him. She sniffed at his elbow and sat down, then reached one paw forward to touch ever-so-gently to the nearest exposed cheek. Yurio lowered his arm around her, and Potya snuggled against his shoulder, "...Prostite." (Sorry) He said quietly, "Ja ne mogu spat'. Mne postojanno snitsja odin son." (I can't sleep. I keep having the same dream.)

"Myaa..."

Breakfast didn't make him feel better either. Neither of his sisters were particularly morning-people and they were both too tired to notice his odd mood. Even when Viktoria finished and left to get ready to start her shift with Mari, Nikki seemed half-asleep where she sat.

"Why are you even up this early if you're still tired?" He asked, somewhat grumpily.

Jade eyes blinked slowly and opened in his direction, "...Vikki's alarm woke me up." She explained blearily, "There's no point in going back to sleep after that. I can't anyway."
"You look like you barely slept in the first place. How late were you up?"

Another hazy blink, but Nikki shrugged and pushed herself up to slouch over the table rather than against it, "It wasn't for lack of trying." She insisted, "Guess I was too anxious or something."

"...What could you possibly have to be anxious about?"

"Papa wasn't here. That's all."

Yurio could hardly keep the guffaw in, but he managed somehow. Instead, he quietly cleared his throat to make the urge go away, and drew in a long breath, "Unless I understood wrong, Mik hasn't been around you guys for very long until recently. You must've had a lot of sleepless nights if him being around was a requirement."

Nikki stayed silent for a moment, simply staring like she'd been before, but then closed her eyes and shook her head, "I don't even know how to answer that without it seeming like I'm taking a stab at you."

"Go right ahead." Yurio huffed, taking another spoonful from his cereal bowl.

"...Maybe you wouldn't know what it's like because neither of your parents was ever around. I've always had mine, one way or another...except for that one week." Nikki explained, looking away to avoid seeing whatever reaction she got, "...At the time, it was just hard to believe what had happened. Now that I think back on it though... I'm not sure if I was upset because mom was gone, or because it didn't seem like papa noticed we hadn't talked at all. The last thing he told me was that he was stuck in Russia for a little bit because he got hurt. I didn't talk to him again until he showed up at my school. But...then I just get mad at myself for being so excited that he was back, that I forgot how upset I'd been that he hadn't talked to me at all."

Yurio was dumbfounded for a moment, but put his spoon-hand down on the low table, "You do know what he was doing all that time though, right?"

"Sort of."

"Viktor went back to Russia after Cup of China to pick him up. They ended up seeing Kon. He had no cell reception out there."

Nikki just looked a little sad, "He went to Sapporo after that though. He had all the time in the world, even just waiting at the airports, to call or email or something. But he didn't--"

"He was with Viktor though." Yurio attempted, "He gets stupid around Viktor. They both get stupid around each other. Sometimes for the worst, sometimes for the better. Not to mention, they had Kon there with them, too, since they dragged his ass to Japan. I'm not even sure how Viktor tolerated that flight without jumping out of the airplane, or throwing Mik off of it."

"They probably weren't even sitting together, considering how short-notice the ticket for Kon was bought." Nikki pointed out, only to space-out slightly, "...It's hard to believe that guy's gone now though."

"...Yeah." Yurio agreed stiffly.

"My point is though..." Nikki veered back to her original thought, "...Even if papa wasn't always physically around, we never went more than a couple days without talking somehow. Now that he's back, in the flesh, it's just...weird. For so many reasons."
"...How old were you when he left?"

"Six or seven-ish." She answered, keeping her eyes down, "I guess I've just gotten so used to our relationship being long-distance that it's hard to adjust to him being around all the time...not to mention everything else that's going on, and all the new people. In a screwy kind of way, it still feels like we're on some big vacation. I don't know when it'll hit me that this is...our new normal."

Yurio went quiet for a moment, looking at the remaining bits of cereal floating in milk ahead of him. He poked at them with the tip of his spoon, "...I wonder what he thinks about it all."

"...Huh?" Nikki lifted her head, "What do you mean?"

"He's had a lot of loss and struggle over the last year." He elaborated, "Everything started because his sister died suddenly. Losing her after being gone for so long, he never had a chance to make things right...maybe that's why he was so determined to get back with Viktor. One accident brought him back to everything and everyone he thought he'd lost years ago, and he saw a chance to fix things."

"...Oh."

"Did he tell you what was going on over the year?" Yurio asked cautiously, "I mean, did you know he'd found Viktor?"

"...I knew he'd run into someone he knew a long time ago, but he didn't really give any details until close to the summer. He was spending a lot of time in Japan and Russia for some reason, so we started bugging him about it, so that's when he told us about Cousin Viktor and about you and Minako."

"That must've been after the wedding then. It probably took that long for him to think it was safe to say anything about it. Him and Viktor had a really rocky start. Hell, it was still touch-and-go until pretty recently...stupid shit just kept happening that would piss Viktor off."

"...Like what?"

"At first it was just the fact that Mik popped up again after so long, trying to act like everything was fine and they could pick up where they left off. Things settled enough for him to be part of Viktor's wedding ceremony, and he helped get all of Viktor's stuff here to Hasetsu. Then the new skating season started again, and Mik was going to events because of me. It was fine at first, but Viktor made the mistake of getting too settled, and started calling him Mimi or whatever, and it just went straight to Mik's head."

"Cuz of the Kon at NHK thing?"

"Yeah." Yurio nodded, "I don't really know a whole lot of details about what was going on at the time, but I know that Viktor felt like he'd had his arm twisted into agreeing to let Kon go. There was a lot of anger, and a couple fights about it. By the end, things seemed to be better. Viktor seemed more empathetic to what Mik was going through, especially after finding out you guys were in a scrape. Even through the start of the Final, they were on good terms. Mikhail even got Viktor to agree to be my choreographer next season. The trouble came when Minako told Viktor she'd gotten knocked up, and then everything exploded."

Nikki quirked an eyebrow, "What difference would it have made to him?"

Yurio shrugged, "Something about how Viktor thought the whole thing was done on purpose, so Mikhail would have good reason to stick around no matter what. Viktor was really angry about it for
a good long while. Something about the situation with Asahi got them on better terms again, but I'm not exactly sure what. The big turning-point was at Euros though."

"...Yeah, I think everyone could feel that the air was a bit lighter at that point." The silver teen quietly agreed, "When he started saying Papa Mimi. That lunch we had was the first time I'd seen papa act like papa, too. He's been pretty uptight."

"...So you're hoping this excursion he has with Okukawa will help him get his shit straight, so he acts like that more often."

Another nod from the silver teen, "I feel like he's been stuck, not really knowing what his place in everything is. He's so used to knowing exactly what his role is...hearing everything you've said, I guess it makes sense why he was such a stick-in-the-mud for so long. He didn't know what he was supposed to do. Being a nobody is not something he deals with very well."

Yurio deadpanned the girl, "He wasn't a nobody to me."

"But he wanted to be somebody for Viktor." She pointed out, "Now he finally is, and he can thaw out from this stiff and frosty administrator that he's been acting like since we showed up."

Yurio slumped slightly where he sat, "...You're making me question if I even really know him now."

"There's parts of him that we'll never, ever see." Nikki explained, "But that's just cuz we're his kids. Our relationship is different. There's parts of each of us that we only show to certain people. He'll change the way he treats us as we get older, too. I just hope...that when he comes back...he's ready to just be papa again. If I could get that for my birthday present, I'd never ask for anything else again."

Yuri groaned loudly as the car pulled into the Yu-Topia parking lot, a mask replaced over his face. He pulled the sides of his beanie down over his ears and glasses, trying to hide.

"It's not going to do you any good, my love." Viktor commented dryly, patting one shoulder, "It has to be done. It's like pulling off a band-aid."

"Why are you doing this to me!?"

"Because it's going to help."

"Nooooo...!"

"Come along, husband." The Russian teased, putting the brake on, "Mother awaits."

Jiro and Makkachin quickly hopped out of the car on Viktor's side, and rushed excitedly towards the doors to the resort. Their approach had been noticed, and the panels slid open as both pups came up the short stairs, and they jumped up and around like little dancing bears as Hiroko laughed and greeted them.

"Come here you too goofballs." She mused, getting happy licks as she wiped each of their many nubbins off with a towel, "There you are, now you can go in."

Viktor strode up soon after with Yuri in tow, and gave a helpless smile, "He found out, but I got him here, as I said I would."

Hiroko just looked up, and stared at her rather unhappy son, "Oh come now, Yuri, this is for the
Neither of you appreciates how awful this is going to be." He groaned, barely understood between the mask and his congestion.

"It might be awful but it always works." Hiroko insisted happily, and stepped aside for the duo to come in, "I have it started upstairs."

As the two made their way in and up, Viktor had to start pushing Yuri forward from behind, especially as they got to the stairs, "Come on, don't make me do this-"

"You'll never take me alive!"

"I'm gonna hoist you over my shoulder like before."

"A curse! A pox on everyone in on this scheme!"

"It's not a scheme!" Viktor insisted, and laughed as he did just as he said he would; he spun Yuri around to face him, and leaned a shoulder into the man's abdomen before lifting up again to toss him over, "You'll feel better when it's done!"

"You don't know what you're saying!" Yuri complained, flailing his arms and legs as he watched the stairs go by under him. It was even worse when Jiro and Makkachin came trotting into the hall after them, and were all too excited to go to the upstairs, tails wagging and tongues out, "Traitors! Traitors, all of you!"

Even more to Yuri's chagrin, he realized Yurio and Nikki were up there waiting for them, and were watching in surprise as he was literally deposited at the small kitchen table.

"...How come you're carrying him like that?" Nikki asked in stunned confusion, pointing at the perturbed skater.

"He wouldn't come up willingly." Viktor mused, patting his husband's beanie before lifting it right off Yuri's head, leaving a ruffle of unkempt black hair to fall out of it in every direction.

"I am not pleased." Yuri grumbled, pausing only to try to blow some of the hairs out of his eyes, never mind the fact that the mask was in the way, and he had to un-cross his arms to use his fingers instead, and harrumphed back to how he was.

"Yikes, you sound awful."

"The Hell did you do to yourself?" Yurio asked, one eye squinted shut in amazement, "I don't think I've ever seen you this sick before."

"He did something dumb and now he's paying for it." Viktor explained, using his fingers like makeshift combs to put his partner's hair back into place, as well as he could.

"You did it too and you're not sick!"

"My love, I've done the polar bear plunge in Russia a bunch of times. You think some rain is going to make me sick?"

"...What's a polar bear plunge?" Nikki asked, looking over briefly as Hiroko came up the stairs finally, carrying a big basin with her.

"In the middle of winter, when the rivers and lakes are all frozen over, the townsfolk will cut holes in
the ice to expose the water. They'll carve out steps and everything. People will then jump into the water, submerge themselves completely, and then get out on the other side." Yurio explained, "I've done it, too."

"Wow that sounds super cold."

"Only if you stay in for too long." The blonde explained, crossing his arms loosely over his chest as he watched Hiroko put the basin on the table in front of her son, "The worst part is actually getting out again. You're almost in too much shock to notice how cold the water is, but once you get out again, and you have the frozen air all around you, and nothing to keep you warm but a single towel as the rest of you is wet and exposed...well, yeah. That's when it gets cold."

"Why do people even do it?"

"Epiphany celebration." He answered. Hiroko moved around them to get to a pot of boiling water on the nearby stove, and carefully poured it into the basin on the table. Yuri winced and tried to get back from it, but Viktor was right behind his chair and prevented him from going. Yurio just shook his head, and turned back to his sister, "They cut the shape of a cross into the ice, and people who jump into the water will submerge three times, like the Holy Trinity. It's symbolic of washing away one's sins from the previous year, and you feel spiritually renewed and reborn when you get out."

"Oh...weird, but interesting."

With the basin full of the boiling water, Hiroko pulled a small vial from the pockets of her apron, and dripped some of the contents into the steaming liquid, "Eucalyptus oil to help. All set, then. Vik-chan?"

"Towel at the ready." He answered, pulling it off the back of the chair, "It'll be fine. Just don't dunk your face in it like last time. The water's hot."

"I am really unhappy about how everyone's making light of that! My nose had a blister on the end of it!"

"Yuri, you were seven." Hiroko tried to reassure, "You haven't burned your nose since, and you get sick like this nearly every year at least once." She explained, reaching over to pull the surgical mask and glasses from her son's face, "The medicine did what it could to stop your nose from dripping, but now you're all stopped up and that snot's all stuck in your head. This will make it clear away. You'll feel better! You want to be able to breathe while you're shopping, right?"

"Breathing is an optional luxury! Who really needs air anyway!?"

Viktor snorted a laugh and put the towel over his husband's head, "Just breathe, my love. I'll stay with you."

Yuri whined even more as the edges of the towel were pulled over the rim of the basin, and his face was positioned over the steaming water. It was hot and wet, and his face felt sticky and sweaty almost immediately, but there was nothing he could do. He would breathe again whether he wanted to or not.
"...So...shopping, huh?"

Viktor glanced across the table and nodded, "It's a secret mission for tonight, actually." He explained, giving a wink at his cousin, "Can't give it away, but I need to borrow your brother."

Nikki looked aside to Yurio, then back again, thumbing at the blonde, "Why him?"

Yurio just sputtered a cough, "Why not me?"

"He's part of the SkateFam." Viktor explained, "And we need his insight."

A silver eyebrow rose skeptically, "You need his help to buy a birthday present for me? He doesn't know what I like."

Yuri looked up from his eucalyptus steambath and lifted the front of the towel to glower at them both, "But you've spent all this time together now. How could he not know?"

Viktor tugged on the towel and pulled it forward to cover the tub and prevent more steam from getting out, "Keep breathing, Yuri."

"We've been around each other for like...a month." Nikki explained, "He doesn't even know my favorite color."

"Sure I do!" The teen contested, "Purple!"

"Mmmmmnnn close but no."

Yurio deadpanned her, "But half your stuff is purple."

"Half my stuff was bought by someone else." She retorted, "My favorite color is midnight blue."

"What."

Nikki took a calming breath, lifting her hands up in front of herself as she inhaled. She then turned, faced Yurio, moved her hands forward in a slow-arching karate chop, and set the sides of each hand against each of his shoulders, "...Dark, dark blue. On metal it looks black, but then shines blue in the light."

"Ohh that sounds amazing~!" Viktor clapped, leaning back on his chair next to Yuri, "Now we know what to look for."

"Maybe I can just come with you...?" The silver teen asked, nearly pleading as she pulled her hands back and laced her fingers together in front of her chin, looking at her elder cousin, "I promise I'll still act surprised tonight!"

"Hmmmm..."

"Pleaaaaasssstttteee?" She begged, "If you're taking Yuri with you then I'll be stuck here by myself. Vikki's working and papa's gone with Minako. I'll have nothing to do and no one to talk to."
"You could always call Otabek." Yuri teased from under the towels, huffing a few congested laughs.

Yurio just bristled, *"Say that again and I'll dunk you."*

Nikki's face was bright red between them, *"Don't be so mean!"*

Viktor still had a hand on his chin in thought, "Well...I wouldn't want to leave you here being bored on your birthday... Maybe taking you out with us would make it easier for Mama Katsuki and the others to decorate. Then it'll be more of a surprise when you see it all done."

"So I can come!?!" Nikki slapped her hands down on the opposite side of the table, jostling the water bin and making Yuri jump, "You're serious?!"

Viktor waited a moment to catch his husband on the descent, and set him back down in his seat, replacing the towel where it had been a moment before, "It's alright with me."

"What about your dogs?" Yurio grumbled, and thumbed at the pair that were watching quietly from the side, "We won't all fit in your tiny car."

"We brought them here to be watched while we went out." Viktor explained, "Yuri's mom said we should bring them over when I told her what our plans were. She says she likes having them around. Besides... We need to pick up Ghost from the vet's later, and the calmer her environment tonight, the better."

"The vet...?!" Nikki echoed, "Is she okay?"

"*Mh.* She's just getting her spay surgery done. But anyway...why don't you two go find your winter clothes? It'll be a few minutes before Yuri's fully defrosted." Viktor mused, rubbing his husband's back as he groaned helplessly under the towel.

The stream from the shower hissed, the hard water hitting Minako's skin like pin-pricks. With conditioner rinsing from her hair, she combed her fingers through it, and pulled the long brown tail over one shoulder. Her idle gazing around her small shower gave way to what felt like an odd, early-morning, pre-coffee epiphany.

*...My place is so tiny and old compared to everything of his that I've seen.*

She grumbled and turned the water off, grabbing for her towels as she stepped out. She dried herself off some and slipped a bathrobe over herself, grabbing her glasses as she stepped out of the bathroom. The smell of coffee greeted her, but for a moment, that creeping nausea made itself known again, and she paused with a shoulder against the doorframe as she waited for it to pass. When it did - or at least subsided enough that she could focus on walking - she made her way out of the little hall-nook and followed the wall towards the kitchen. Mikhail hadn't noticed her approach, as his back was towards her, but he wasn't one to easily startle, and he just looked back over his shoulder when he felt her presence directly behind him.

"...Sorry there isn't much here." She commented, hearing the sound of his tablet being set down on the counter, "I wasn't exactly prepared for us to come over right away."

"I know," He answered, reaching back to find the woman's arms and pulled them around himself from her standing-spot behind him, "Being unprepared is half the fun."

"You must be having the time of your life then." Minako huffed against the back of his shoulders,
finding some meager comfort in the softness of his sweater.

"Oh this is just the start." He answered, "I want to show you something today that I've been working on."

"Working on?"

"Mh." He nodded, "Our little blended family is already much bigger than most in Japan, so figuring out what to do about getting us a house has been a bit of a challenge. But, I think I've figured something out."

"...You did?" She echoed again, a bit confused, "I couldn't even tell you've been doing anything."

"Well, I don't do all the heavy lifting by myself." He explained, and reached for the half-drunk mug of Joe he'd been nursing, "I compiled a list of all the things we need; how many rooms, bathrooms, how much space, how far away from the Ice Castle, all that sort of stuff. I then sent it to a realtor that's based here in Japan, but who works especially for foreigners who are coming to live here, and who need help navigating the process with language barriers and all that. She's been fastidious in finding things for me while we've been occupied with other stuff."

"Okay?"

"There's actually not been a lot available that came anywhere close to what I think we should have at a minimum. But, we may have gotten really lucky rather recently." He went on, "None of these houses were built in mind with a family larger than four people, tops. A lot of the bigger places here are generationally-owned homes, and none of them are about to go up for sale. But..."

"But?"

"What if two smaller places next door to one another were up for sale at the same time?"

"...What are the odds of that happening?"

"It's actually not that unlikely."

"Yuri and Viktor had such a hard time finding a place for just themselves last summer though. How'd you manage to avoid their troubles?"

"I don't need our house to be ready to go and perfect from the start." Mikhail answered, "If I can at least get the space we need, the rest can be figured out. And so...I've gone ahead and bought the two houses already. The next step will be a bit more involved, because I've learned that Japan has a pretty weird housing market. Turns out, most of the homes built after the war were made in factories and they weren't built to last, so the notion of knocking one down to rebuild isn't at all unusual. The weird part comes from the fact that they can't pre-fab a house as big as the one I plan on having built for us."

"Sounds like you're trying to have them build a castle." Minako deadpanned him, though he couldn't see it.

"Close, but not quite. I'm not about to plunk a second Hasetsu Castle into the neighborhood. It'll look like any other house on the block, just...bigger."

"And you're okay with that?"

"Eh?" Mikhail blinked, and set the coffee mug down again without having taken a sip. He turned in
place and looked down into those confused eyes, "Why wouldn't I be okay with that?"

Minako squinted one eye shut as she stared skeptically, "Cuz your net worth has like...12 digits?"

"Oh." He grimaced slightly, but shook his head, "No, I don't care about that kind of thing. Having money is nice because it always made things easier, but...none of it meant anything to me when I didn't have my kids. I learned a long time ago that home is where the people I love are, and it doesn't matter if we're in a hotel or an apartment or a hot-spring resort...or in the most expensive house in the world. If there's no one in it that matters, then the fancy decor doesn't either."

Minako was speechless, and just stared forward at those jade eyes.

"So..." Mikhail went on, rubbing his lady love's shoulders with his thumbs, "It'll take a couple days to demolish what's on the lots right now, clean it all up, and get the paperwork together so the units are consolidated into a single address...but I want your input on how the next place will look."

"...My input?" She stammered, "But I've never built a house. I've never even really lived in one. It's always been an apartment."

"So?"

"So?" Minako gawked, "Sooo what good is my input?"

"Well, you're going to be living in it. I imagine there's things you'd like to have. Maybe a dance studio?"

"A dance studio...? In the house...?"

"Sure. Why not?" The Russian pondered, "You could do all the off-ice training with Yura at home instead of having to take him somewhere. Maybe the girls will like it, too. And who knows? Maybe our little ones will take an interest later on."

Minako felt a pang in her chest to hear it, but she shook her head to get rid of the feeling. She set it against her partner's shoulder, brow pressed to the side of his neck, wordless.

"In any case," Mikhail wisely went on, gently stroking one hand down his fiancée's smooth, damp hair, "There's bound to be things that you've always wanted to have at home that you couldn't have before. Maybe a Jacuzzi instead of just a regular boring soaking tub, a library, or secret passages to hidden rooms. Just think about it. There's so much we can do when we're building from scratch, and I want you to have a say in how it goes."

"...This is all still so weird."

"It's going to work out." Mikhail reassured, and tilted his head in an attempt to get Minako to look up at him again, "I'm having to rethink how I'm doing things, too. I need to go at this like a father and a soon-to-be husband, and I don't want to mess it up..."

"This is so sad." Minako shook her head and huffed a laugh at her own expense, "In my fifties and doing all this for the first time."

"You never did tell me how old you are." Mikhail mused, "Would you be willing to tell me now?"

"...Fifty one. A year older than Hiroko."

"Ah, so that's why she calls you Senpai."
"That goes back a long ways. We all grew up here together. I've known Hiroko longer than Toshiya. ...I remember how happy they were when they had Mari, and even more excited when they had Yuri. It was like they got the full set, you know? Then Yuri got his poodle, and...they just seemed to be so perfect."

"Were you envious?"

"...In a roundabout kind of way? I'm not sure how to explain it. I didn't sit there at Yu-Topia wallowing in self-pity over how I wanted what Hiroko had. I was doing my own thing and I enjoyed it. But I guess...I recognized that I was giving up a huge potential part of my life to do the things I wanted for myself. I never let anyone make me feel guilty about it though. But...I never really felt any kind of connection to a man where I thought, yeah, this is the guy I want around forever."

"...I hope that's changed a little bit?" Mikhail wished.

"You're definitely different from all the others...and I don't just mean that because you're foreign. Maybe it's the experience." Minako shrugged and leaned back a little, playfully pinching the man's chin between her thumb and forefinger, "You're the only one I've felt could handle me and all my quirks...and not want to change me into something I'm not."

"What's the point of being in love with someone if you want them to change?"

"I guess people just...figure out who they want their partners to be and then force themselves and each other into the moulds that their families or peers expect them to be in. Wife, mother, home-maker, salary-man...whatever it is. It's not something I ever wanted to be forced into. Then I worried, that the guy would change somehow, and stop being the person that I met and fell for...so I avoided thinking about anyone in the long-term. With you though..."

Mikhail felt a nervous shiver go down his spine.

"...You're already who you changed into, so you're not going to become something else later on." She explained, "And I guess I take some comfort in that. I'm just worried now, how I'll change, and if you'll still like me then."

"That's one of the appealing things about you, starlight." He reassured, "You know who you are. I don't think anything can change that now...and I wouldn't want to anyway. I don't want you to think you have to become something else because of how different things will be in a year. Our lives will be richer, but there's so many people around us that have gone through it all before already that you shouldn't feel like you need to evolve into some new person to compensate."

"...What about...when we..." She hesitated, bringing her left hand close between them to point out the ring she bore on it.

"You don't have to change your last name if you don't want to."

Minako shook her head slightly, "That's...not how it works here. Japanese law doesn't recognize marriages where people have different surnames."

"So we'll do it in Canada then."

She stayed quiet a moment, looking at the ring against the backdrop of Mikhail's dark-colored sweater. The thought of going across the world for such a venture didn't appeal to her either though, and she shook her head, "...I don't want to go through so much trouble. We'll just...do it like normal here."
"It's entirely your call. There's plenty of time to think about it; we haven't set a date or venue yet anyway. Maybe in late summer or early fall...I wouldn't want to cramp on Viktor's style with him and Yuri redoing their own wedding here soon."

"Yeah..."

"Thank you, by the way."

Minako raised her eyes again, "...Eh? What for?"

"For accepting me as I am, with all the extra kids and baggage I came with. I know they weren't on your radar when we started this whole crazy relationship of ours, but...I'm actually pretty happy it turned out this way. I hope you warm up to it."
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED SIXTY TWO

The cover on the back seat of the Audi was pulled out and folded-up into the trunk, making dog-fur-less space available for the two non-dog occupants. Nikki was practically bouncing in place the whole way through town, marveling at the sight of it all as though for the first time.

Yuri couldn't help but notice, and turned in his seat slightly to look back at where she was sitting behind Viktor, "So how's Hasetsu fitting so far?" He wondered, sounding significantly more normal than he had earlier, "We've had a lot more snowfall than usual, but it's been like this since Viktor first came so it's basically his fault."

Viktor snorted a laugh, "It was one rare April snowstorm. One."

"And cozy temperate mostly-rainy Hasetsu has gotten snow as though we're further inland ever since."

"Alright, fair enough... I guess I have snow-powers or something."

Nikki laughed and clung to the back of her cousin's chair, leaning aside to see Yuri past it, "So it's not normally this cold, huh?"

"Nah. Well, I mean, today is pretty normal, with the thunderstorm last night, but all the ice and frost is unusual. It rarely gets below freezing here."

"Totally unlike Banff..." The teen said, and sagged back into her seat, "I've practically spent my whole life up in those mountains. Being on the shore like this is really weird. I mean, we have seagulls, too...but they're more like trash doves than sea-birds."

"Seagulls in the mountains...? Weird."

"Oh yeah, they go way inland. Farther than the Chinooks, I bet."

"The what...?" Yuri asked, perplexed.

"Chinooks. Warm winds that go over the mountains." Nikki explained, "They dump all their moisture as they pass overhead, but when they fall down the other side of the Rockies, they bring warm air. Warm enough that you can go out in shorts and a t-shirt in the middle of winter, even though there's still snow on the ground."

"Heh, wish we had that in Detroit. That place was just straight-up cold in winter. All memory of warmth fades and you freeze in your boots where you stand."

"Wow, dramatic much?" Yurio huffed, nudging his knee into the back of Yuri's chair.

"We had to go uphill both ways in 10ft deep snow to get to the skating rink, and then we had to dig it out of the drifts just to get inside. Whole neighborhoods were buried." He retorted dubiously, "If you found your car you'd have to shoot a signal flare into the sky to let people know where you are."

"Dude, I lived in Russia most of my life, your weak pathetic snow would be eaten alive by my snow!"
Nikki put her hand over her chin, "I feel like there's some Soviet Russia jokes to be had here."

"Eh?"

"Oh, you know... In America, you break law. In Soviet Russia, law breaks you!"

Yurio deadpanned her, "...That was bad and you should feel bad."

"Bet'cha can't come up with something better." She leered.

The blonde guffawed, "Bet I can!"

"Bring it."

"In America, they bear arms...in Soviet Russia, they arm bears!"

"In America, they explore space...in Soviet Russia, space explores you!"

"Oh, I got one." Yuri chimed in innocently, "In America, ten Navy SEALS lift one log...in Soviet Russia, one babushka lifts ten logs!"

The silence was palpable; blinks could be heard, "Uh..."

"What? I saw a picture once!"

Yurio shook his head, "In America, you laugh at jokes...in Soviet Russia, jokes laugh at you."

Nikki chortled and held up her hand for a fist-bump.

Yuri just twisted back around, "Fine, I see how it is...you don't think I'm funny."

"You're plenty funny." Viktor reassured, giving his partner's leg a reassuring squeeze, "Just...normally it's entirely unintentional."

"Viktor, I love you, but...shockingly, that doesn't make me feel better at all."

"I tried." He mused, "No one ever said you married me for my wit."

The Ikedaya kimono shop smelled like cotton and linen, and looked rather much like a modern middle-class dress and accessories shop. Various different kimono - all different colors, some with patterns, some with stripes, some for men, some for women, some for kids - hung from T-frames or were carefully folded on shelves along the walls. The store was segmented into different areas; tile floors in the accessories section, and tatami mats in the clothing area.

Still in her 'tourist' phase, Nikki looked around the shop in awe, having no clue what was being said between Yuri and the shop keepers, or the behaviors that were expected from shoppers. She found herself in the midst of a sudden clutch-and-yank, and she was off her feet, mere inches from setting her snowboot down on one of the tatami mats.

"Careful," Viktor's voice said, lifting the petite teen up against himself, and turned her to set her down again on the tile, "Never put your shoes on tatami mats. Socks or special indoor sandals only. And be careful never to step on the joins between them. Step only on the body of the mats."

"...That's a lot to remember."
"Step on a crack, break your mama's back." Viktor suggested instead.

"Oh."

"Sore wa musume desu ka?" (Is that his daughter?) One of the shop-keeps asked to Yuri, who looked pale behind his surgical mask. He flailed his hands back and forth defensively.

"Iyaiya! Sore wa itoko desu!" (No no! That's his cousin!) He clarified, "Tanjoubi purezento o kai ni kimashita!" (We came to buy a birthday present for her!)

"Aa! Nansai desu ka?" (Oh! How old is she?)

Yuri blanched and looked over, "Nikki, how old are you now? Fifteen?"

"Yep!"

"Juu-go sai." He answered easily, turning back to the shop-keeper. She seemed to smile then, but then looked back to the silver duo. Yuri's brow furrowed as he followed her gaze in the same direction, seeing where his partner put the young teen down to start browsing, Viktor doesn't even look old enough to be her father. He thought. [Viktor is only 29 years old. I know he worries about his hair thinning but-]

[What about you?]

"Eh?" He blanched slightly, [Me?]

[Since we're discussing ages and birthdays...]

"Oh." Yuri deadpanned the woman slightly, but shook it away, [I turned 25 a while back.]

[Oohhhh how unlucky!]

"...Eh?"

"Yakudoshi." The older woman said, [For men in their 25th year, they are plagued by misfortune, accidents, scandal, disappointment, or even tragedy. That would explain the mask on your face and the congested sound to your voice...and having to be the sole speaker of Japanese between the bunch of you. Being in a group of bachelors, too...how sad, you must not be married yet either.]

Yuri could hardly believe what he was hearing, but there was some faint echo of recollection on the topic; both on the matter of unlucky ages and being an unmarried adult in Japan. He shook his head to make it go away though, pulled the glove off his right hand, and quickly held it up to show his ring, [I'm married.] He said simply, feeling no need to get irritable of defensive about it since no one could've seen the gold band through his clothes, [I just got caught in the rain last night and ended up catching a cold, too. Viktor has ever inch of me bundled up so I don't get chilled. We're athletes and have a competition next weekend, so I can't risk being sick through it.]

[How unlucky.] The older woman repeated, the odd hint of a knowing glimmer in her eyes.

The whole exchange made Yuri feel a little doubting and uncomfortable, but the shop-keep moved on from the conversation as though it had never happened, and she was all smiles as she went towards the Russians in their midst. To Yuri's surprise, she actually spoke surprisingly good English, broken as it was, though the words she uttered to get their kimono shopping underway seemed to fade into the background of his attention span.
...Unlucky...?

The little red Audi pulled back into the Yu-Topia parking lot a few hours later, dropping off the two teenagers and the bags of gifts and goodies they'd collected on their adventure around town. The back seat was refitted with the dog-cover and both pups were beckoned inside, jumping and excitable as ever.

"We're going to go pick up a few things for the kids and then spring Ghost from the vet's." Viktor explained, holding the door open as Yuri sat back inside with Jiro in the foot-well between his knees. He carefully shut the panel and waved to the pair standing in the doorway, "We'll be back in about an hour. Don't forget to act surprised when you get your presents later!"

"I won't!" Nikki nodded excitedly, clutching her few bags close as she tried to wave.

Viktor went around to his own side and got in as well, pulling the door closed and the belt across his chest. The car was still on from before, and he set his hands onto the wheel and gear-shifter as he got ready to back them out again, "That was actually a lot of fun." He commented, putting the shifter in reverse, "Sorry we keep having to dump all the translation duties onto you. I promise, I'll make an effort to learn it once the season's over, that way I can dedicate a lot of my energy on it. Even I'm curious what fluent Japanese sounds like with a Russian accent." He teased.

"...You have the simple stuff down." Yuri reassured quietly, eyes down on his Akita, "Remember when you tried to sell Hasetsu to tourists during the intro to 'Onsen on Ice'?"

"Ah, in true tourist fashion, telling the whole world to come see this amazing little city I'd discovered." Viktor reminisced, "I'm not sure how well it worked though."

There wasn't much of an answer that came to that, and the odd little western car made its way quietly down the not-western streets. Just as they approached the last set of stop-lights before the wall of river-front houses and businesses gave way to the river, Yuri swallowed and reached across, clutching his partner's hand where it was perched on the gear-shifter.

"...Can we go to the shrine?"

"Eh?" The Russian quipped, looking over in confusion, "Which shrine?"

"Hasetsu Shrine. The one we did our wedding in."

"...Well, sure, but-"

"This might be the last chance I have. Please?"

Viktor felt a weird pang in his chest, but he agreed without question. He clicked on the blinker to turn right and head across the bridge, back into the main part of town and away from the pet store they'd been heading towards originally. It wasn't a particularly long drive to the shrine; once across the river, the main road made it an easy straight-shot, until having to turn right at the last moment. They found a place to park across the street, and looked up at the white arches of the Tori Gates, glistening even in the bleak, grey, rain-soaked afternoon sky.

They weren't the only ones there, either. It seemed like there was a crowd gathered on the grounds, all waiting for some signal. Many of them were older members of the city's population, and a sizable chunk was men.
"...Can you at least tell me what I'm about to walk into?" Viktor asked nervously, Makkachin keeping close at his side.

"Yakudoshi." Yuri said, echoing the word spoken to him before, "Calamitous years."

"...Calami-what?"

"I've really lost sight of who I am." Yuri went on cryptically, "All this time, I thought it was the struggle of the first year of marriage, like my mom warned us about. Maybe it was me all along."

"Are you going to start making sense soon?" The silver deadpanned him.

"There are certain years in peoples' lives that are considered particularly unlucky. Even the year before and the year after are somewhat unlucky just by association. One of those years for men is their 25th. General bad luck flows through the person like a stinky wind that you can't get away from."

Viktor listened intently, even if it didn't entirely clarify anything.

"For some people, it's dumb but constant stuff like stubbing the same toe, or being late even when you leave early. For others...it's crying until you lose your voice, being challenged by your spouse's past lovers, having near-constant panic attacks, running into rink walls when you know you're better than that, making dumb choices that get your hurt-"

Viktor's brow furrowed as he realized the list sounded oddly familiar.

"...Which then cause a ripple-effect of pain that you can't seem to shake...maybe even getting into really pointless fights, sleepwalking, and standing in the rain like an idiot and not even remembering it." Yuri explained, "...All this badness started at the end of my 24th year, and we've barely started my 25th. Maybe this is all my fault."

"That stuff could've happened at any time." Viktor attempted, "You weren't without your moments of bad luck when you were 23 either."

"Maybe not." Yuri shook his head, and reached up with his free hand to pull the surgical mask down from his face, "But would you humor me on this? The lady at the kimono shop brought it up out of nowhere, like she somehow knew that I was struggling. This whole afternoon, I've been worried that this is the explanation for all the trouble that we keep going through. I forgot it all because I was in America too long, running away from all my problems... I lost sight of my history, where I came from, and who I even am."

"I won't try to talk you out of it, my love. You obviously feel pretty strongly about this..."

"If it weren't such a crazy coincidence, I probably wouldn't think much about it, but..." Yuri said, turning towards his spouse to take his hand in both of his own, looking down at it to thumb at Viktor's ring, "...January 18th and 19th are the days where Shinto shrines perform the yakubara ritual, a cleansing ceremony specifically for this."

"...Today's the 19th."

"All these people here today are either in or are about to be in a yakudoshi year. This group may be the last one that gets to participate until next year. This could be my only chance to get rid of whatever badness is clinging to me..."
the hand against his palm, and leaned aside to kiss the man's beanie-covered brow. "Then let's go. Maybe I can get rid of some of my own bad juju by proxy."
Chapter 563

CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED SIXTY THREE

The shrine's front doors were still closed for a while, even as the clouds gave way and another rain fell onto the crowd. Neglecting to bring umbrellas, most of the people who gathered either stood stoically at the mercy of the elements, or huddled under what umbrellas were available. By the time Yuri and Viktor made it to the top of the stone stairwell at the entrance to the shrine grounds, the rain had become a downpour, forcing the pair to hustle towards the temizuya - the cleansing pavilion.

Though cold out, and cold within, Yuri peeled his hands back out of his gloves, and tucked the rumpled cup of his surgical mask into the edges of his coat and scarf. The stone basin before him was about as large as a bathtub, with a rim made of darkly-stained bamboo shoots. Yuri handed off Jiro's leash to his husband, and turned back to the stone fountain, reaching for the wooden ladle from where the last user had placed it on the rim. One scoop of water from the basin filled the cup at the end of the handle, and he tipped it slightly into his left hand, letting the shockingly cold water flow over his skin. He passed the instrument into that hand, and poured a little more water into his right to do the same as before. A second time, the ladle switched hands, and water was poured again, but instead of letting it run off, Yuri cupped his palm, and brought the clear water up to his mouth. A quick swish and he spat it back out, into a rock-filled basin that lined the lower edge of the fountain. He cleansed his left hand again before letting the remaining water spill down the handle of the ladle, and returned it cup-down to where he found it. Leashes were traded back, and Viktor carried out the same ritual.

A few others who arrived later came to the basin to cleanse themselves as well, and like the skating duo, stayed under the covered pavilion to avoid getting rained on. They all waited there together in polite quiet, listening to the subtle rumble of thunder in the distant sky, until the main shrine opened a few minutes later. With the doors open, the slow procession began, with everyone moving towards the shrine on the main center path, careful to keep the middle of it clear, as that was the walking path for the gods.

The shrine itself was of the hirairi-zukuri style, where the sloping roof came forward over the doors, rather than being below the vertical facing gables that held up the roof to a point; as such, it was suited as a hachiman-zukuri.

As every person entering the shrine bowed outside its doors before going in, Viktor couldn't help but feel like a fish out of water in the crowd. He became hyper-aware of the two pups moving alongside him, and he nudged his husband to quietly get his attention, "Can we even take the dogs inside?"

"As long as they're quiet and sit still, yeah." Yuri answered, "I used to bring Vik-chan here. Other people have brought their dogs, too."

"Alright..."

It was soon their turn to bow and enter, and once inside, find seats. Just as it had been during their wedding, there were benches set up in rows that faced the altar at the front where the Shinto priest would soon appear. Spots were quickly taken up by the crowd as everyone filled out their 'exorcism request' cards, and there was a low murmur of chatter throughout, but thankfully, it all seemed to be pretty low-key. There were no sudden outbursts of recognition or excitement at two local celebrities being at the shrine. The peace was kept by the gohei-weilding kannushi, the shrine's keeper, with his staff of shide, a pair of zigzagging white paper streamers.
They found their spots at the end of the second row, on the far right of the room, and kept their two
dogs close at hand.

Viktor drew in close, as much from wanting to be near to his partner as from there being so little
room to spread out, "I used to think I knew about Japanese culture, but this is a bit above my pay-
grade."

Yuri smiled a bit, feeling more at ease in the shrine than outside it earlier, and kept the Russian's hand
tucked neatly within his own and between his knees, keeping it warm, "You've seen a lot over the
last two years. But, there's always something new to learn. Having the kannushi smack Yurio
around isn't the temple's only service, after all."

"Really?" Viktor mused.

"Mh."

"So is there a reason why we keep coming back to this shrine in particular? I know there's a bunch
in this city."

"This is a Hachiman shrine." Yuri answered, looking up to the front, "There's a bunch of different
kami that people can seek guidance from or give thanks to, but Hachiman is the kami of learning
and warriors. I always felt like I had an affinity for this place, since the Kanji that spell my name
mean things like 'courage' and 'victory.'" He explained, leaning against his partner's shoulder, "Every
shrine for every kami is build a little differently. The gables for this one are on the sides of the
building, and the door is under the front-sloping roof, but there's a lot of design variation and no two
shrines are really alike. You can go to any shrine to do a wedding...but this ritual has to be done at a
Hachiman shrine."

"How come?"

"I guess because Hachiman imparts strength onto those of us unfortunate enough to be going into
our unlucky years." Yuri answered, "Oh, here comes the main priest..."

The entire room went quiet as a man garbed in a green kariginu and black eboshi hat arrived at the
head of the space, approaching from the altar's left side. For Viktor, understanding words and
structure here and there was nice, but there was no meaning behind any of it, and he was left
confused by nearly everything that was said. By the amiable reaction of the crowd, it seemed that he
was merely greeting them and asking if they were ready to proceed, which they agreed to.

The ceremony began with an invocation by dum-beat. The kannushi banged on the instrument alone,
with two big dowels - dummdumm...dummdumm dum - until the atmosphere was well set. An
opening prayer was given, and soon after, Viktor realized the priest was reading out the names of
everyone who was in the audience. Yuri's name was called out like the others, and then his own, to
Viktor's nervous surprise. More prayers were recited afterwards to ward off misfortune and evil
spirits, and the kami was asked to protect the gathered for the following year. By the end, the priest
was at the front of the room, but on the floor-level with the crowd, and went around the room,
waving a haraigushi - a wand much like the gohei, but with dozens of white streamers instead of just
two - over each person in the crowd.

Once everyone had been swooshed over, the priest returned to his post, and everyone in the crowd
rose to their feet. All together, they bowed twice, rose up again, and lifted their hands.

KLAP KLAP
Everyone held in place for a moment, praying before they all bowed one more time; Viktor was familiar enough with that part of the shrine ritual, and didn’t lag behind. With that, the room sat back down again, and the priest thanked everyone for their generous donations-to-be, and any purchases of charms and ofuda that they would be making on their way out.

And with that...it was over. All that was left to do was to go to the donation box outside the shrine, put their 5,000 or more yen inside, and buy their ofuda before finally getting released back into the world, free of jinxes and personal black clouds.

As the duo stepped back into the outdoors, Viktor looked at the thin but large white envelope in his and his husband’s hands, "...What are these?"

"Ofuda." Yuri answered simply, "They're wooden tablets that we hang up at home. It's...basically like a certificate that we've been cleansed, and evil spirits can't stick around. We're supposed to send them back at the end of the year."

"What if we don't?" The silver teased.

"Well, the shrine has our names; I'm sure they'll know who didn't turn theirs back in."

"Do you feel better now at least?"

"...I think so." Yuri nodded, "Sorry I sprung this on you like I did. I'd completely forgotten about it all... Then, when I remembered, it all made sense."

"When's the next unlucky year?"

"Not until 42."

"So we're safe for a good while then."

"...No guarantee I'll get over my cold before we go State-side, but...hopefully nothing more will happen. Four Continents was fun last year-"

"Right up until the moment it wasn't."

Yuri made a face, "...And since Asahi isn't going, and Minami-kun is, I'm sure it'll be even better this time."

"First thing's first though; we have to go pick up the dog-beds we bought, and then get Ghost home."

The afternoon gave way to night early as it usually did in the middle of winter, but at least the rain had stopped, even if the thunder hadn't. In the back seat, Makkachin stood sentinel over the marginally-cranky Ovcharka, who - to her disagreement - looked like she was wearing a big life-preserver around her neck.

"It's better than a cone at least." Yuri offered, looking into the back seat at the sad sight as the car pulled into their covered driveway. He looked back at Viktor as the car stopped, "What was it called again? A boob balloon?"

The Russian snortle-spat a laugh, "A boob balloon? Wow~!"

"You're making fun of me."
"No way. That's officially what it's called now. It can't be anything else. That was beautiful."

"What's it really called!?" Yuri begged.

"A BoobooLoon. Like...a booboo and a balloon mixed together. But now it's boob balloon so there's no point saying differently." The silver laughed again, finding the whole thing absolutely hilarious. As he put the car into park, he raised his hand to wipe a tear from his eye, and casually leaned forward against the steering wheel, arms folded over it, "See what I mean though, my love? Unintentionally funny."

"Yeah yeah..."

Doors were opened and beds were lifted from the trunk, and Ghost was allowed to shamble slowly towards the house, the giant boob balloon around her neck acting in place of the Cone of Shame. Yuri lead the cranky Shepherd up to the second floor, and into the guest room where Minami had stayed before. One of the three big dog-begs was brought in and set down on the floor, and a bowl of water was put on a mat by the door.

"We'll be going out again, Ghost." Yuri said, crouching down by the pup as she sniffed at the bed-cushion, "We're going to keep you in here though so you don't get into any trouble. Viktor is going to bring up a little bit of food for you, since you haven't gotten to eat since last night. Until the anesthesia totally wears off though, no big meals, so just try to sleep it off, okay?"

Ghost licked her nose as she maneuvered her way onto the bed, barely able to see her nubbins under the bottom edge of the inflated collar. Big as it was though, the balloon acted like something of a pillow, and she resigned to just lay her head down.

"That's a good girl." Yuri cooed, rubbing the pup's head and ears as he waited for the small food bowl to be brought up.

Viktor wasn't long after, carrying the goodies with him; a few strips of partly cooked steak. Of course, that drew the attention of two other very keen canines, following the man up the stairs with ears and noses up. He had to nudge them both away from the door with one hand and close the door with the other just to keep them from wiggling in, "You two are coming with us to the party! You don't need this!"

The howls and whines of protest said otherwise.

Yuri smiled and watched his partner sit down close by, and held up one strip of beef with chop-sticks towards the fasting Ovcharka, "See if you're interested in this stuff, huh?"

Ghost lifted her head a bit and sniffed at the slice of meat, and something in her primordial house-wolf core got very interested, all but inhaling the piece and swallowing it whole. Her nose went up to the plate it had come from, and Yuri lifted another bit. It disappeared the same way the first one did. As did the third, fourth, and last pieces.

"That should hold you over for a little while."

Viktor pushed himself back up to his feet, and offered his hand down to lift his beloved, "With any luck, she doesn't puke it up again."

"She should be fine. She just needs some rest and quiet." Yuri answered, getting up as well, but kept hold of that hand, "Maybe we should set up a thing though."

"A thing?"
"Yeah, like...I don't know... One of our phones stays here on a charger, and stays on a continuous FaceTime call with the other?"

"Guess it's the best we can do in the absence of a nanny-cam. I'll get my charger. We'll leave my phone here."
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED SIXTY FOUR

Arriving back at Yu-Topia a bit later than they'd meant to, Yuri and Viktor's arrival was treated to teases and well-meant but harsh questioning.

"So much for an hour, huh?"

"We got delayed."

"It didn't rain that hard."

"It wasn't the rain."

Viktor leered at the blonde who was interrogating them, one foot still up as he tried to pull his boot off, "One might almost think you didn't enjoy being stuck by yourself with a bunch of girls."

"...And Yuri's dad, and Nishigori." Yurio retorted, "Not all girls, thanks very much."

"Yuri! Uncle Viktor!" The triplets sang out, practically floating around them in excitement. They were quickly distracted by the two canines trying to bat them out of the air, and the five of them went back towards the common-room in a cloud of anticipation.

"Didn't realize they'd be coming for this." Yuri commented, seeing Jiro stop at the doorway to look back at them, tail swaying, "I wonder if they just came on their own and got surprised by the decorations."

"Yuko isn't here." Yurio clarified, arms crossed as he watched the pair finish debulking from their winter clothes, "I don't think she even knows this is happening."

"Well that's not fair." Viktor pointed out, "Why would no one tell her?"

"Probably because she's still working." Yuri suggested, "I bet Nishigori doesn't want to make her feel left out as it's happening."

"Maybe we can take the party to her then?"

"A noble thought, but I don't know if it would be appropriate to bring a party to the Ice Castle. Who knows who's there right now?"

"She'll be here in less than an hour." Nishigori himself suddenly explained, coming through the foyer from the men's changing rooms, donning a spa robe, "The higher-ups said she could shut down early since the last class is ending at 7pm."

"That's a relief."

"Yuri! Vik-chan!" Hiroko called next, waving at them from the common-room doorway, Makkachin and all three of the triplets stacked up beside her, "Come on in!"

"Shouldn't we wait for Yu-chan?"

"We are! But I bet you boys haven't eaten dinner yet!"
The pair looked at one another, peeling off their jackets at the last, but then looked to Mama Katsuki and nodded. "We'll be right there."

The common-room was completely built-up for the night, with streamers and spherical paper lanterns pinned around the high corners and hung from the wooden beams. The birthday troupe had been confined to one corner of the room for the moment, allowing for the remaining patrons to enjoy their beers and dinners before heading home or giving way to the party. Yuri paused before going in and picked up Jiro, quietly tugging on his husband's shirt before nudging his head towards a different door.

They made their way down the wall a bit and peeked into the kitchen, looking around for any signs of the cake for later. They spotted a big box in the corner, white cardboard with a plastic see-through window at the top. Peering in, they spotted their query.

"Wow, it's a big one, too." Yuri commented, trying to see a better angle through the small window in the covering, "It looks like two layers."

"Don't get ideas." Viktor teased, and cocked his own head back towards the exit, "Dinner before dessert."

"Yeah."

Heading back to where they'd gone originally, the hungry duo took a table close to the others, and waved at them as they focused largely on Makkachin. Jiro wiggled free from Yuri's arms and trotted over for his own lovins, squirming under the table; a harder task than when he was younger.

Viktor eagerly looked around for Mama Katsuki, feeling the grumble in his stomach, "I didn't realize how hungry I was until your mom mentioned it. Now I feel like I haven't eaten in days."

"You already know what you want?"

"I've got a craving for that spicy garlic soba with bok choy." The silver answered, "And..."

Yuri glanced up in confusion, "...And...?"

"Since we'll be here a little while, you want to split some shōchū?"

"Your favorite?"

"Mh."

"Just a little bit. I don't want to be a spectacle. And you need to drive."

"Yes dear," Viktor mused, snogging his spouse's cheek for good measure.

It wasn't long before Nishigori slid over to the SkateHusband table, distinguishing himself as a grown-up amidst all the teens, but that only lasted a few minutes before the rest of the birthday table was hovering excitedly as well. Mari and Viktoria had even been allowed to mingle, and Toshiya was making a rare round about the space in their place. As Nikki and Yurio recounted the day's shopping to anyone who would listen, talk inevitably turned towards the pair who were still making their way through their dinners.

"Are you going to survive this competition?" Yurio asked gruffly, pointing and staring at Yuri, "You just got sick last night. You're lucky you didn't get pneumonia or something."
Yuri slurped in a soba noodle that he'd swiped from Viktor's bowl, "...Well, I'm feeling better now. I'm hoping to be over it by the time I skate."

"I told you the steam-bath would help." Hiroko teased as she skipped through behind them, carrying a big bottle of sake to another table. Yuri just deadpanned, even as Viktor snickered beside him.

"We actually got held up by going to the temple earlier." He explained, working through the rice in front of himself until he got a good scoop on his chopsticks.

"Oh, did the priest beat the sickness out of you?" Yurio teased.

"No." Yuri huffed, making a face, but shook his head, "There's a thing in the Japanese psyche that foretells of bad luck during certain years of our lives. For guys it's usually ages 13, 25, 33, 37, and so on."

"Thirteen?" Viktor echoed, looking up in thought, but then waved the notion away, "Nah, I was 12. It doesn't count."

A few people at the table blinked at him, but Yuri didn't let the confusion linger long enough to become questions, "The owner of that kimono shop we went to reminded me about it, and since I'm 25, I started to wonder if that was the reason Viktor and I keep finding problems. In any case...there's a thing that happens at the temple where the priests help banish bad luck and evil spirits from people going through these years. It only happens once a year though. On the 18th of January...and today, the 19th."

"Well, isn't that a coincidence." Yurio taunted, giving a sarcastic look from the safety of his side of the table, "So that's what took you so long."

Yuri chewed on the small ball of rice and a piece of chicken, but nodded, "Yeah. There were probably 30 or 40 other people there with us, all wanting to get exorcised, too...so, since the priest has to call our all of our names, it took a bit longer than I thought it would."

"...Do you feel different now that it's over?" Nikki asked curiously, "I mean, does it work?"

"I feel a little better, yeah." He nodded, reaching for a bit of cabbage salad, but looked to his spouse before picking any of the thin shreds up, "How about you?"

"Not sure." Viktor answered, reaching across to steal a piece of the teriyaki-glazed chicken from Yuri's bowl, "I've never been exorcised before. Is there a protocol?" He mused, popping the piece into his mouth.

"Well...the idea is you're supposed to feel like a burden got lifted. You're clearer in your head, feel more relaxed, less stressed."

"All the things you feel that make you sabotage yourself and cause misfortune in the first place?"

Yuri blanched, and deadpanned his partner, "...Yeah."

"I feel better when you feel better," Viktor was quick to note, "So if you think the ceremony helped you, then that's all that matters. You have to do what works, even if it doesn't work for everyone."

"So you're saying it didn't help you at all."

"I'm not in the midst of a yakudoshi year, my love. I'm not sure it was meant to help me."
"You said you hoped it would help you, too."

"By proxy. Because *you* needed it." Viktor explained, picking at the last half of his remaining bok choy, until the leaves were all peeled apart into segments, "Besides, what else was I going to do? Stand outside in the rain with the kids, waiting for you to come out? I wanted to go in with you."

"...I guess I just hoped you'd get the same feeling I did coming out of it."

"I did. Just not for the same reason. I'm still a bit skeptical though." The silver pointed out, "If this doesn't completely fix things, then I don't want to think it's because Hachiman wasn't listening to your prayers. I'd move the Heavens to stop the things that are hurting you, if I could. Besides, I may not be much of a believer, but one thing I learned growing up is that sometimes, God helps you by letting you sort your problems out on your own, that way you get the satisfaction of having figured things out yourself. Maybe all *you* need is to feel like something higher than us is watching out for you. If that's the case, then we'll find out by the time we land in Colorado, probably."

"This isn't really stuff that I *can* sort out on my own though. There's nothing I could've done about JJ being a rink-hog, or Sophia popping up, or the panic attacks I've had, or Asa-" Yuri started, only to stop mid-statement. He closed his eyes, straightened himself out, and took a long, deep breath, even as everyone watched him. When he let the breath out again, he opened his eyes, "...A bunch of things were beyond my control, is my point. Four Continents is being held in a place where we don't know anyone else besides those who are there as competitors, and our family and friends. It's not the *most* important competition this season, so I don't feel like I'm under excessive amounts of pressure to perform. It'll just be us against each other, and Phichit-kun, and Otabek...friendly faces that we know and like. It'll be a fun competition, not like at the Final last year or Rostelecom, where we didn't really know anyone and Yuri was still acting like he hated us."

Yurio's eyes opened wide for a moment in surprise, but he stayed quiet, turning his chin in his palm to look away like he hadn't heard it. He could feel Nikki and Viktoria's eyes on him though.

Viktor kept quiet for a moment, but he didn't want to be a spoil-sport, and put on a smile, "Yeah, I guess you're right. There's plenty of fun stuff we can do out there anyway."

Nikki's face lit up at the mention of it, "You have no idea! It's amazing out there!"

"...Have you been there?"

"Yeah! Once!" She nodded enthusiastically, "One of the times papa took us on vacation for Christmas was to Aspen, which is pretty close! We did the road trip through the parks and did a bunch of hiking! It was amazing! They've got horse-drawn sleigh rides and outdoor hot-springs that are family-friendly so we can all swim together!"

"...Together?" Yuri gulped, "But that would mean-"

Nikki paused a moment to think, but then her face went red and she sunk down again, waving her hands defensively, "No no no! Not naked! Swimsuits!"

"*Oh.* Yuri's face was the one that turned red then, "Sorry. I just assumed-"

"No, I get it! I didn't think!"

"We can go meet the wolves this time." Viktoria chimed in, "You cried the time we went so we didn't get to."

"Meet wolves?" Yurio echoed; had he ears on the top of his head, they would've been pricked
straight up, "How do you define meet wolves? Exactly."

Viktoria blinked at him, "Well...there's a wildlife sanctuary about an hour away from Colorado Springs that does educational tours and lets people interact with the wolves under supervision. You can even get your picture tak-"

"Pass." The blonde said instantly, "No facility that lets you take pictures with wild animals is a sanctuary. It's abuse."

Viktoria narrowed her eyes at him, "If you'd let me finish." She said firmly, and sat a bit taller at her end of the small table, "It's an educational event. You can't just go in on your own. They're fully grown adult wolves that are free to come and go as they please. The staff will never force them to do things for anyone. There's no drugging, no chains, no beatings involved...they don't let people do whatever they want. They're certified by the AZA and participate in the Species Survival Plan for Mexican Grey Wolves and Swift Foxes." She said with certainty, "Trust me on this one. They're good people, and they do what's right for the animals. This is about teaching people to value and respect them so wild spaces can exist for them in the future."

Yurio was unconvinced.

Nikki leaned into his space and whispered at him behind her hand, "Your thing is big cats. Her thing is wolves. She got really mad at me cuz the staff told us we couldn't go into the enclosure since I was making a scene."

"How old were you?"

"...Ten." She answered, but then threw her arms up in the air dramatically as she got a skeptical look in return, "You don't get it! Wolves are big! Like you go there thinking, oh, it's like a German Shepherd or a Husky or something! But no! These are huger than them!"

"Huger."

"BIGGER THAN YOU ARE!" She insisted, "I'll bet you cry when we get there!"

"I will not."

_Dododo dodo dodo dodo...do dododo dododo dododo dododo..._

Everyone was silent as that iPhone ringtone rang out, but Yuri looked down to his own, seeing nothing but the FaceTime call it was already on; Ghost was asleep in the shot. The noise kept going until Nikki realized it was _her_ phone. Yurio leered over her shoulder, half-expecting a half-naked picture of Otabek to greet him as a sign that it was him calling, but...Otabek didn't have silver-grey hair or look like he was in his 50s.

"Le gasp!" The birthday girl cried out excitedly, "It's papa!" She quickly answered and put the phone on the table for all to hear, "Hiii~!"

"Hey sweetie! Bet you thought I'd skip tonight entirely."

"It crossed my mind but I'm glad you didn't! Almost everyone's here...we're just waiting on one straggler to get here from work."

"Good, so I'm not interrupting then. I have a surprise for you."

"...A surprise?" She echoed, looking around at the curious eyes surrounding her, "...Are you here?"
"Yes but that's not the surp-"

"PAPA'S HERE!" Nikki screeched, jumping up from her place to go running through the resort. The front doors couldn't open fast enough, and she looked out into the parking lot to see the bright headlights of a car shining straight at her. She held her hand up to shield her eyes, but soon spotted a figure coming through, "...Papa?"

The rest of the group from inside soon joined the silver teen in the entry-hall, all looking out into the winter night with her.

"Jeesh, you didn't even let me say anything." Mikhail laughed, and clicked his phone off to put it away. He could see his youngest bouncing up on her toes in the doorway, and he quickly moved forward to satiate her impatience, "C'mere you."

"Papa!" She called out, and nearly jumped at him as he got close to hug her tight.

Viktor looked over his uncle's head to see Minako hanging back by the car, but they waved at one another as the jubilation went on between them. Once Nikki had gotten her many hugs and a kiss on her cheek, Mikhail moved over to greet his other two kids, giving each a hug but sparing them the embarrassment of kissing them, too. Those jade eyes then went up to the 'adults' amongst them, "Yuri, Viktor, everyone. Sorry to drop in like this."

"It's fine!" Nikki insisted for them all, "We were just talking about what we're gonna do when we get to Colorado. I'm super excited!"

"That's fantastic. I am, too. But..."

"But?"

"I've got a couple things for you, and your siblings. First thing's first...I showed Minako where the new house is going to be today." Mikhail explained, "It has to be built still, but everything's already being worked out. The lot is being cleared this weekend. Come Monday, the bunch of us are going to sit down together and see what all we want the new place to look like, so start thinking about it. Second..." He paused to reach into his jacket, and pulled out three envelopes, handing one to each of his three kids, "These are pre-filled VISA cards. There's $5000 Canadian on each of them. I want you guys to think about the kind of stuff you want to decorate your rooms with. Anything left-over is for you to spend however you want."

Yurio was stunned, "...$5000? Why so much?"

"Beds and furniture aren't cheap, and I want you guys to be able to get something you like, so make it last. It goes faster than you think." The elder advised, "But now...the third thing, and this is just for my birthday girl."

Nikki clapped her hands excitedly in front of herself, and watched as her father pulled out one more thing from his coat pocket. It was small, that much she could tell, but she couldn't see much else, besides a bit of light grey coloring between his gloved fingers.

"I know I messed up, and forgot that today was your day. But, in my defense, I have been keeping up with the idea that it was coming soon, so I did actually get you something in advance. You know our little family tradition of getting something very special and valuable for you guys on your 15th birthdays...so this is the thing that I got especially for you." He explained, and held forward the small item between his hands. The thing was a small grey-velvet box, and he opened it like a clamshell, revealing an extremely finely crafted necklace with a bright red gem set in the bottom section,
flanked by several smaller red jewels, "Garnets, for your birth-month, set in silver and platinum, like
your hair." He said, setting the box in his daughter's hands, "Just like with your sister's necklace, this
was custom made by some of the best craftsmen and jewel smiths in the world. I worked with them
on the design for weeks until it was perfect. I had planned on giving it to you at Christmas this year,
but...things changed pretty quickly and I got this chance to give it to you on the right day. Happy
birthday."

Jade eyes looked on at the lights reflecting off the metal and stones, giving off a luster with every
movement of the teen's hands. She reached towards it to carefully lift the intricately braided silver
chains from their holder within the clamshell case, "Help me put it on?"

"Of course." He agreed easily. Gloves came off as the teen moved her hair out of the way, pulling
the thick mass of silver waves over her right shoulder. Mikhail slipped the delicate piece around the
sides of her neck and clasped it gently behind it, then pulled back to see it, "There. What do you
think?"

"...I'm scared I'll break it." She answered nervously, "You definitely go all-out when you do stuff
like this... I remember how jealous I was of Vikki's amethysts and white gold...but, not anymore!
That's for sure! Now she can be jealous!" She laughed, but there were tears in her eyes anyway, and
she jumped forward again to throw her arms over her father's shoulders, "Thank you so much! It's so
beautiful!"

Viktor was surprised, but then smiled and leaned down towards his partner's ear, "I wonder what
kind of necklace he got for Sergio."

"Viktor!"

He snorted a quiet laugh and stood normally again, "I jest... I'm sure it was a tiara."

"I got him a watch, you gold-plated mega-dweeb." Mikhail huffed in their direction, making
Nishigori and his girls laugh quietly under their breath, "A tiara...really... Is this cuz of the grappling
thing still?"

Viktor smirked, "Sorry, papa Mimi, he'll never live it down in my eyes."

"What's going on out there?" Hiroko's voice asked, coming up from behind them all, "Is Yuko
finally here?"

"No, it's Mikhail." Yuri answered, stepping up against Viktor's side to make room for her, "He came
to give Nikki a present."

Hiroko squinted out into the lights, but spotted the man and the second figure out there as well,
"Minako-senpai...! Well, if you guys are all here, why don't you come inside for a little bit? As soon
as Yuko arrives, we were going to get the cake out! There's plenty for everyone!"

Mikhail, still holding onto his daughter, looked back out to his lady love, "You wanna stay for a
bit?"

"Sure." She agreed, and stepped forward, "You going to park the car or should I?"

"I got it. You guys go inside and get warm. I'll be right behind you."

"Yay, papa's staying!" Nikki cheered, "Let's goooo~!"
With the pair of additional revelers joining the party, there wasn't much room left at Table Nikiforov. A second table was brought in closer, and the long-side edges were put together to form one large square table, giving everyone plenty of space to sit and spread out. Shōchū was poured into small glasses between the eldest skaters, and everyone settled in around them - including Yuko, who had arrived only moments after the necklace had been presented. Her family took over one whole side of the table.

"It did feel a bit weird to be celebrating Nikki's birthday without her dad here." Yuri commented into his glass, shoulder pressed to the side of his partner's frame, "I'm glad he decided to come in the end."

"Agreed." Viktor answered, closing his eyes as he sipped his own drink. Lowering his glass, however, he spied across the table to where one certain Russian Tiger was still entranced by the VISA he'd been given, "...I think Mimi broke Yurio's brain though.

"You'd think he'd never seen that much money at once before." Yuri huffed, "He wins plenty."

"Yeah, but he has to work for that. This was just handed to him for no reason but because he's here."

"Guess that's one perk of having a rich dad." Yuri shook his head and took another sip. Just as he was about to set his glass down, the lights in the room dimmed, and all chatter simmered down to a whisper, then went out entirely as eyes were drawn to the doorway into the foyer.

"O tanjoubi omedetou~!" The first line was sung by not only Mama Katsuki, but Papa Katsuki as well, and the cook, as the two followed Hiroko through the narrow doorway, "O tanjoubi omedetou~!"

In the dark, it was hard to see Nikki's face going bright red, but it most certainly was. She smacked her hands to her face, but peered through her fingers as the procession - singing in Japanese but to the tune of the English version of the birthday song - came straight towards their big table.

"O tanjoubi omedetou, Nikki-saaaaan~! O tanjoubi omedetou~!"

Half the room was singing along by then, especially Viktor, and everyone clapped excitedly as the brightly-illuminated double-layer cake was set down on the table in front of the young teen. Two candles, one for each number in her newly minted age, were set in the top, sparkling and fizzing with flames.

"Make a wish and blow them out, sweetie!" Mikhail encouraged, hand pressed to his youngest's back as he leaned closer.

"I kinda don't want to! These look so cool!"

"Then wish for some sparklers!"

"Oh...good point." She laughed and drew in a breath, blowing mightily to quiet the flames. The room dimmed a bit and clapping returned, and Nikki buried her hands against her face again even though she was laughing.
Mikhail pulled her against his side and kissed the top of her head, "Happy birthday~!" He said, joined by other voices around the room.

The cook slowly turned the lights back on, turning the dial on the wall so the overhead lights would gradually brighten. Toshiya then came around the side then and sat on his knees at a nearby open corner of the table, presenting a tray with several small wrapped objects on it, "These are from the Katsuki Family to welcome you to Hasetsu and to Japan."

"Ohmygosh." Nikki blanched, not having expected anything from them, and everyone could see the reddish color on her pale face. Jade eyes looked at the assortment, "...I don't even know what to reach for first!"

"Here, do this one." Hiroko suggested, reaching around Minako's shoulder to lift up a plate-sized flat item. She went around behind her, then Mikhail, and finally crouched down behind the teen, "It's special."

Nikki looked at the gift, and took it gently in both hands with a nod. Hiroko looked particularly excited, watching eagerly as the paper was slowly peeled away. What greeted their sights was a thin wooden placard with a red-and-white braided rope and bell tied to the top. On its face was large Japanese Kanji in the center, surrounded by two pillars of smaller text, and at the base was a hand-painted image of Hasetsu Castle on the river.

"Oh neat!" Yuri called out from the side, "That's a tsuko-tegata!"

"A tsuko-whatnow?"

Yuri laughed, "It's a 'wooden passport.' They're not needed anymore, but back in the day, these were used by people traveling across Japan. To cross the borders into different provinces, you had to have one of those, as proof that you had permission to travel. They're hand-painted, and these days, they're like fancy souvenirs that act as proof that you'd visited." He explained.

"How cool!"

"This part here basically says, 'The bearer of this passport has visited..."' Hiroko started, using a finger to guide her reading down the kanji on the right, then moved to the left, "...The hot-spring resort 'Yu-Topia Katsuki,' in..."' She then pointed at the larger font in the middle, "'Hasetsu, Saga Prefecture.'"

"...More like 'lived at.'" Nikki teased, "This is really great though. This is way better than just a stamp in a regular passport. Thank you!"

Hiroko nodded, and gestured back to the tray, "You pick the next one."

"Okay. How abouuuttt..." She said, leaning over to look, and pulled up the largest item on the tray's surface. She sat back down as she looked it over, trying to decide which end to open it from, and shook it next to her ear to listen for anything inside. Hearing nothing, except maybe Mari stifling a quiet snorted laugh on her left, she went ahead and started to pull at the taped seams. A few moments later, she found herself unrolling a silken garment; a deep, dark blue, with a subtle purple shimmer as the light caught it, "Wow~! What is this...?"

"It's a *yukata.*" Mari answered, "It's a personalized spa robe, like the ones you get to wear here, but that one's just for you. See?" She pushed up onto the table and pointed at a folded edge, "Your name is under that part."

Curious, Nikki pulled the fold away, and spotted letters she couldn't hope to read, [ニキータ・ロゾ
Mari laughed again, and pointed to the first line as it went down, "This spells your last name, Rozofusuki. Then this is your first name, Nikīta."

Viktor pouted slightly, "...I didn't get anything like that for my birthday."

Yuri smiled innocently, "You nearly disowned the family for trying to celebrate."

"I did not."

"My dad nearly got you a bottle of RiUP X5 as a joke. I told him you'd actually need it if he got it for you."

"...What's RiUP X5?"

"Basically, the Japanese version of Rogaine for Men. He thought it was hilarious."

Viktor blanched, "...Rogaine!? He wanted to get me shampoo to regrow hair!?"

"I told him it was a bad idea." Yuri teased, leaning onto the edge of the table as he smirked into his drink, "Thankfully, he thought better of it."

Viktor couldn't help but keep the exaggerated frown on his face as he turned to eyeball his father-in-law from across the table, "...He thinks I'm going bald...?"

"No he doesn't; it was a prank!" Yuri said frantically, waving his hands, "That's why I told him not to do it!"

The silver slumped forward onto the table, all but in tears, "...I can't recover from this..."

"V-Viktor...!"

"Uh oh, man down." Mikhail mused, "Did he drink too much already?"

"I'm an old people!" Viktor whined loudly, "I'm going to be 30 soon!"

The elder cocked up an eyebrow, "Oh no, you're going to be half my age."

A river of tears suddenly flowed from Viktor's eyes, flooding the immediate area as he sobbed. Yuri frantically reached for napkins to dam the flow, "Ah great, look what you did, Mik!"

He just chuckled and looked to his youngest child again, "So, what's next?"

"Mmmmm... This one!" Nikki announced, carefully picking up a small but fancy paper bag, with colored tissue coming out the top.

"Be gentle with this one." Hiroko advised, "It's fragile."

"Oh, okay!"

Viktor managed to turn his head some and perched onto his chin, looking over to watch even as Yuri moved to dry the side of his face.

"I don't know what I'm going to do with you in 30 years." He sighed, putting the napkins down so he could brush a few stray silver hairs back over his husband's ear, "When we're both old people and
you've thought your life has been over for decades."

"Will you still love me when I'm old and wrinkly and gross!?"

"Hey!" Mikhail harped.

"You look fine! I'm talking about me!"

"You look exactly like I did at your age!"

Yuri's eyes moved between the pair tiredly, but then shook his head and curled his elbow across his partner's shoulders, pressing his knuckles against the side of his head as he took another sip from his shōchū.

'Ahaha! You look just like your mother!'

Toshiya's words echoed in Yuri's mind, and he couldn't help but imagine himself looking exactly as she did in that moment, with the long-style bowl cut and everything. He set his glass down, sighed, twisted, and groaned into the back of his husband's shirt.

Minako watched them with narrowed eyes, and crossed her arms, "You two make me wonder sometimes."

Viktor just sat up and wrapped his arms around Yuri's head, getting a tight hug around his chest in turn, and the two of them just sobbed dramatically, "...Whyyyyy..." They both whined.

"Oh wow...what is this...?" Nikki asked, completely derailing the pity party. In her hands, she held a glass semi-globe, open through the bottom with a bell and silk streamer hanging from the underside.

"This is a furin wind chime." Hiroko explained happily, "The glass globe is shaped like a cute little squid, and the streamer has sea urchins painted on it."

"...That's...strangely familiar imagery. I can't put my finger on it though..."

"It's the statue outside the train station." Yurio said, speaking for the first time since getting back inside, "It's like Hasetsu's mascot."

Hiroko hummed a little laugh, "That's right!"

"Oohhhhh yeah!" Nikki chirped, "This is adorable! It'll be great to hang outside my window at the house once it's built!"

"I can't wait to hear its chime!" Mama Katsuki said happily, clapping her hands together, "But that leaves the last one..." She added, reaching through to pick up the long and narrow item, "...This one isn't as big a deal as the others, but for living in Japan, it's kind of traditional. These are high quality chopsticks, and no two pair are alike. Not just because of the fact that your name is engraved in these, but because the pattern in the lacquer is completely unique."

"...Oooo wow." Nikki cooed, holding the small case in her hands, and spying the top parts of the sticks within; the shiny ceramic tips, wrapped in thin black cords to pad the grip. Like the yukata, her name was written in small Japanese font, with thin gold lines painted into the recesses. The color of the chopstick was dark, but had a purple luster, "It's just like marble."

"Mh!"
"Everything here is just so beautiful." Nikki added, carefully putting the thin case down on the table in front of her. She twisted around and reached her arms up over Hiroko's shoulders to hug the woman, "Thanks so much! I was already excited over just the cake, but you guys really went way above!"

"We were happy to be able to do this for you." Hiroko explained, giving the petite teen a hug back, "Moving halfway across the world all of a sudden is a really big change. We hope that this all makes you feel a bit more settled and integrated."

"It does! Thanks so much!"

Toshiya quietly went around the table and offered a set of custom chopsticks to each of the transplanted foreigners who'd been gathered, even to Yurio and Viktor, despite the fact that they'd been there so much longer. Viktor, of course, oogled his happily, showing them off to Yuri quietly before putting them back into the little folding case that they'd come in. Yurio was quiet about his examination, but was happy about it anyway.

"Why don't you go put on the gift we got you today?" Yuri suggested, looking to the young silver, "I know it's not much of a surprise at this point, but...I don't think anyone else has seen it yet."

"Yeah! Good idea!" She nodded excitedly and rose up.

Yuri lifted his head up slightly and blanched, "Ehmm... Nikki, wait. You'll need help."

"...Help? It's just a-"

"Tsst!" He hushed, finger over his lips. He quickly rose up and shuffled over to Minako's corner, whispering into her ear.

She nodded as she listened, but then looked surprised, and turned to gape at him, "How much money did you spend on this thing!?" She whisper-barked.

"Enough! Don't make it weird!"

"Okay okay! I'll go!"

"Domo!" (Thanks!)

Mikhail and Viktoria blinked at them both in confusion, but Minako pushed up to stand and ushered Nikki out of the room, "Alright, let's go. We'll be back in a few minutes."

Mikhail waved his hand slightly, "Okay...?" He turned to Yuri as he started making his way back around the table, "...What'd you guys do?"

"You'll see." The skater answered, giving a Viktor-esque wink as he found his spot again and sat down, "We'll get one for Viktoria too when it's her turn."

The aforementioned teen coughed into her drink, "...Eh?"

"When is your birthday anyway?"

"Two weeks from today."

Viktor coughed into his shōchū, "...Two weeks from now!? Why didn't you say something!?"

"...Why would I have? I'm not a mooch."
"To give us warning!"

Mikhail smiled innocently. "Surprise."
Chapter 566

Chapter Notes

So I'm kind of stupid when it comes to numbers, and I messed up on ages for some reason. Viktoria is supposed to be only one month older than Yurio...so they're both 16. I don't know why I kept writing otherwise (saying Viktoria is 17, when Sergio was also 17 just weeks before.) I've fixed all occasions in the fic I could find where ages were mentioned, but please let me know if I missed any. Sorry for the confusion.

CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED SIXTY SIX

With little to do until Nikki and Minako returned, attention went to the cake that had been sitting on the table. The blown-out sparklers still smoldered a little, giving off twin tails of wispy grey smoke where they were set against the serving plate. Mari returned from the kitchen with a stack of smaller plates and divided them up from one corner, passing them down one at a time until everyone had one. Forks were passed out afterwards the same way, wrapped in fabric napkins. They all then waited patiently for the two ladies to come back.

They didn't have to wait too much longer, thankfully.

"You guys ready?" Minako asked, looking rather amused as she stood alone in the doorway. Everyone's eyes were up on her, with Mikhail trying to look around her somehow from where he was sitting. She huffed a quiet laugh and stepped inside, holding her hand out, "You two really did good on this one."

Yuri and Viktor smiled, but Yurio got in their line of sight with his hands smacked-down on the table, "I helped!"

"It's true...he bought the footwear and all the white stuff." Nikki's voice explained casually as she came into sight, looking awkward in an ensemble she'd never worn before.

With wooden geta sandals and tabi socks on her feet, a dark blue kimono began just above her ankles, patterned with lily and lilac flowers, denser at the bottom and at the ends of the long sleeve-tails, and fading out just under the lighter blue obi going around her midsection.

Pretty-well every female in the room gasped, save Minako - who had already seen it - and Viktoria - who wasn't particularly known for such intense vocal reactions anyway. The triplets went from hushed gasps to excited cheers, rushing around the table like herd of feral cats to get a closer look. Even Yurio was somewhat aghast at the sight of the young silver.

"I can't believe you guys were able to find something like this on such short notice..." Mikhail commented, still slightly agape at the sight of his daughter. He turned to look across the table though, "Minako's right though...you did good on this one."

"I helped too damnit!" Yurio insisted again, this time getting in the middle of their line of sight.

"I was talking about all three of you!"

"...Oh." He deadpanned, and slithered back to where he'd been sitting on Yuri's right, Jiro squished
between their crossed legs. He barely had two seconds to simmer in his truncated indignation before he felt a weight fall on his back, and his eyes went wide.

"Thanks for this, Yura!" Nikki said happily, crouching on her knees right behind the blonde to hug him. She moved on to the Yuri next to him and did the same, "Thank you, too!" She stood to make the distance to her cousin, but practically tripped and fell on him instead, though he was ready for it and laughed as she dropped on him.

"Careful. Geta can be tricky the first time." Viktor teased, "The kimono itself doesn't lend to much range of motion either."

"Yeah it kinda keeps my legs together." Nikki said nervously, "This is still really great though! I feel all official now!" She laughed, letting Viktor nudge her back upright again until she could stand on her own, "I've heard about all sorts of cool festivals here in Hasetsu, especially during the warmer months, where everyone gets all dressed up in stuff like this. I'm really excited about it now!"

"The first one isn't until March, but it's right up your alley." Minako pointed out, "Hina-matsuri is a national festival, and it basically celebrates girls, and the prayer for them all to grow up beautiful and healthy."

"Ahh that's so cool! Japan has all kinds of neat stuff!"

"After that are the cherry blossom festivals in April." Yuri added, "Assuming Viktor doesn't bring a blizzard again."

"That happened one time!"

"Would anyone mind using my phone to take a picture for me?" Nikki asked, pulling the flat device from her wide obi, "I gotta show all my friends back in Banff!"

"I can." Yuri offered, pushing up to stand again. The teen excitedly handed off her phone and pranced - albeit more carefully - around the room to find a good spot to stand. Once she was in place, and the photo taken, Yuri handed it back and found his spot next to his partner again, "Reminds me of that time you had me take pics of you at Hasetsu Castle."

"And then boom! The whole world knew where I'd disappeared to."

"Pretty incredible how much everything has changed since then, just two years ago. Right, Yuri?" He asked, nudging the Tiger sitting quietly beside him, "I bet something like this never crossed your mind before."

"No..." He agreed, still carefully watching his 'sister' on the other side of the table, showing off the photo to her father, "I thought I'd never leave St. Petersburg. Not for long, anyway. That's about as complicated as it ever got for me."

"You never thought you'd train abroad or anything?"

"Why?" The blonde retorted, "Russia had everything I needed."

"Except people." Viktor pointed out, "Just like me. You had everything you could've thought you needed or wanted, but you didn't really have anyone important in your life. Well, except your grandpa I guess, but he was in Moscow."

"I'm still getting used to this." Yurio said quietly, arms crossed, elbows perched on the edge of the table, "...It's a lot more noisy now."
"Even being in my old room?"

"Just being here, at Yu-Topia. My mom's apartment was always empty except for me and Potya." He answered, watching as Mikhail helped Nikki start to cut the cake into smaller sections, "There's always people around now...and there's rules. Not hard and fast rules, punishable by death or anything, but...unspoken understandings that you have with the people you're around. Lines you don't cross, to keep the peace."

"Yeah, you didn't really care about that kind of thing until pretty recently." Yuri teased, draining the last of his shōchū, "Maybe what happened at Worlds last year was what needed to happen so you could have what you have now."

"Sometimes we need to be knocked down pretty low before we can start to pick ourselves up again." Viktor added, refilling his glass, and then his partner's, "But it is easier when we have others around to help us when we feel like we can't keep going on our own. Ne? Yuri~"

He just gawked at the orange-golden liquid being poured into his cup, "...You know I'm gonna have to drink all that, now that you've poured it."

"Mhm."

"Why do you do this thing."

"Because I love you and I want you to be happy, and you're happy when you're drunk."

"I always regret it later though."

"No you don't." Viktor laughed, picking up his glass, "In fact, I distinctly recall that every time you've had drinks with me, it's always fun. You've only regretted it on one occasion, and that's only because I wasn't there when you woke up later."

"Twice then."

Viktor gasped, "Twice? What was the other time?"

"After the NHK Banquet."

"...The NHK Banquet...?" He echoed in confusion, hearing the clink as Yuri tapped his glass with his own, "...What happened at the-"

"Snap. Yuri said, taking a quick sip from his second drink of the night."

"Ooooohhhhh!" The silver called, then burst out laughing, enough so that he had to put his drink down to avoid spilling it. He twisted where he sat and reached his hands forward, the left curling around his husband's nearest leg while the right pressed to the small of Yuri's back, and he leaned in to kiss the closest shoulder, "You didn't regret that though. You were totally into it."

Yuri took a careful sip, but looked coyly over that same shoulder as he lowered his glass-hand down, "Says the guy who had to buy me apology flowers."

"You forgave me easily enough." Viktor mused, getting nearer still, until he could coax those lips up to find that kiss between them, plus a few more.

Yurio just rolled his eyes at them, looking ahead instead, and reached with his small plate to get his portion of the cake when it was his turn. He was just about to poke his elbow at Yuri to get his
attention for his own slice, but he seemed aware enough on his own.

"I'm gonna need more than just dinner to spare myself the effects of all this shōchū," He commented, uncrossing his legs so he could reach further, and slid both his own and Viktor's plates forward.

"You're going to be running for days to burn off all these cake calories." Viktor teased.

"Better than than making a fool of myself."

"...But I like it when you do."

"Yeah, it always tends to work out rather well for you in the end." Yuri huffed, sitting back down again with two pieces on his two plates, "But not when we're at a 15 year old girl's birthday party."

"Alright, alright...maybe later then."

"You don't think it's at-all weird to be that flirty in front of so many family members?" Yuri asked, sitting back down and speaking in a quieter voice, though his immediate neighbors could still hear, Viktor being only one of them, "I mean, I get it when we're at competition, because it's all friends that we can be stupid around...but here?"

"Guess I never developed that kind of filter." The silver mused quietly, taking a first bite from the white sponge-cake with its white cream icing, "Being around family in general is still a bit of a new experience."

"It's so weird, the differences between you and I." Yuri commented, inspecting his slice, trying to decide where he'd take his first sample from, "Being around familiar faces all the time, I never wanted to do anything embarrassing in front of anyone, because if I did, I'd hear about it for days and weeks, or years..."

"Like your burnt nose?"

Yuri staggered, but then looked past his arm as he slouched some, his cheeks a bit red for being reminded, "...Yeah, exactly like that."

"I think it's adorable though. Hearing all these cute stories about you when you were a little kid. So innocent, so naïve...so pure."

"You're waxing poetic about a rather dull and average childhood." Yuri retorted, only to spot a piece of the cake being lifted in his direction. He crossed his eyes to spy it close to the end of his nose, but straightened out to realize Viktor was holding it up for him.

"I was a very lonely kid. I had my mom and the woods, practicing my Axel jumps off an old tree stump while no one was looking. I envy your dull and boring childhood." The Russian told him, holding his free hand under the morsel, and inched it forward until his husband accepted it, which made him smile more, "Even just the fact that there was someone around to take photos of you sometimes...capturing those adorable pink cheeks, and that cute little button nose." He teased, tapping a finger to the tip of that very nose before going back for another piece of the cake, "You may think it's dumb that I get so excited to see those pictures, but I feel like I can live vicariously through you with those images. It makes me appreciate what I have more, because it took so long for me to get here. So many false starts, so many mistakes...so much lost time."

Yuri listened quietly, idly cutting his cake into smaller pieces. He set his fork down though and looked back, "I bet my mom has boxes of pictures hidden away somewhere. It wasn't as busy back when Mari and I were kids, when there were more hot-spring resorts open, and my mom spent a lot
of time with us. I'll ask her."

"...Really? You'd do that?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"...Well, I mean, it's kind of silly...

"But it makes you happy, so I want to do whatever I can to help. It's such a small thing for me, so it would be dumb not to go for it, right?" He asked, scooping up a piece of the cubed cake, and held it up as Viktor had done a moment earlier, "Even if it's super embarrassing, it's not because anyone's making fun of me or anything."

Viktor took the bite, "...So you don't think it's dumb." He asked, partly covering his mouth, "...I probably sound really ridiculous."

"Maybe it would've been strange if I didn't know where you came from; you did try really hard in the beginning to avoid telling me. But..." Yuri paused, looking at another piece of the fluffy white pastry, then over to his partner, "It all makes sense in the end. I guess I'd probably want to do the same, if I were in your shoes. But...if giving up all my baby pictures is the price I have to pay for getting all your skating genius, it's a fair trade."

"Oh no, you're paying for the skating genius by winning Worlds Gold four more times." Viktor corrected playfully, sliding his free hand behind his husband's back, "The baby pictures are just because you love me."

"Just because of that, huh?"

"Yes."

"Hmm..."

Viktor set his fork down and lifted his drink again, "A toast then, to your noble sacrifice, and all the adorable photos I'm going to see soon."

"And all the different shades of red I'm doubtlessly going to turn as you look at them."

"Mini-kanpai."

"Mini-kanpai." Yuri laughed, clinking his glass to his partner's.
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED SIXTY SEVEN

After another hour of schmoozing and drinking, and Yuri was done. The entire cake was gone, as was the bottle of shōchū, but Yuri still had the smallest little sip left in his glass, and he held it up happily even as he swayed where he sat, much to Viktor's amusement.

"...This has got to be...the best birthday party I've been to in a hic...a long time." Yuri slurred, bumping into his husband's shoulder as he teetered, "E'rryone's here...e'rryone's happy... This's just the bessssst..."

Viktor chortled a cackle under his breath, and drew his tipsy lover closer, "Lean on me before you fall." He laughed, one arm and one leg going around each of Yuri's sides, pulling the man back against his chest.

Yuri, of course, seemed to have difficulty parsing the distance he'd been pulled across the floor, and his attempt at getting his lips to the edge of his glass seemed harder than it should've been. He mouthed for it, but could only catch up to that fleeting drink when he stopped moving, but then it just bonked against his face and shōchū spilled down his chin, "Ah heck...my drink's falling..." He muttered, looking down to rub his skin on his shirt, only to just-then become aware of the extra limbs around him, "Whaddinthe..." He followed the one arm under his own, around his ribs, and back behind him, and found Viktor there smirking at him, "When'd you get there?"

"You are super drunk."

"No'm not. You're drunk... Lookit you just like...swaying all o'rr the place." Yuri answered, seeing his silver spouse's image warping around, "Here lemee help you t'stay...still..." He suggested, managing to put his glass down on the table - though it clung precariously to the edge, needing a quick nudge further on by a carefully placed knee by Viktor. Yuri twisted in place as well as he could, swaying far as he pulled his left leg around to get it between them. Viktor kept him steady, finding the whole thing absolutely precious in the funniest of possible ways. Once Yuri had finally gotten turned all the way around, legs wrapped around the Russian's waist, he blinked hard a few times and shook his head, "...You're...still wobbly... Are you feeling okay...? Did you drink too much?"

"Nope, I drank just enough." Viktor smiled wide.

Minako watched for a moment but shook her head and sighed, turning to her fiancé, "Think this would be a good time to duck out?"

"Shh...this is fascinating." Mikhail whispered, observing the duo keenly, "It's like watching one of those old animal documentaries. There's like...a Nile crocodile under the water and you can see it inching closer to shore, closer to the animals that are drinking...and you're just waiting for the moment that it lunges out of the water to snatch one."

The ballerina quirked a brow at him, then looked back over to her partner, "Which one do you think is the crocodile?"

"Oh it's Viktor, that's for sure. Yuri has no clue what's coming."

"Do you?"
"I have no idea, but-"

"I'll give you a hint then... *Yuri is the crocodile.*" Minako teased, snaking her arm behind the man's back as she leaned in to whisper into his ear, *"He gets really touchy-feely when he's drunk... loses all inhibition. If we stay much longer, he'll start undressing, and since Viktor's pretty tipsy, too, he won't have the heart or willpower to stop him."*

"Oh." Mikhail said, making a face as his cheeks started to get pink, *"Was that Viktor's plan this whole time?"

"Probably."

*"That's so inappropriate! There's children here!"

Minako just laughed, *"Better intervene then."

"You want me to get into the middle of them now?"

"At least enough to say goodnight. Maybe you can convince them to stumble into a room before they get too far along. I'll let the kids know." She said, patting the man on one shoulder as she used him to prop herself up.

Mikhail watched her go, then turned to the two eldest 'kids' in the room, just in time to spot them falling partly-out-of-sight to the floor on the other side of the table. He drew a breath and grumbled an exasperated sigh, but started his slow hobble around the now-empty side of the table that the Nishigoris had only recently abandoned. He shuffled over on his knees until he barely skirted the edge of his nephew's would-be line of sight...were it not for his eyes being closed in the midst of a rather personal moment. *"Ahem."* Mikhail said, clearing his throat.

Neither men seemed to notice the noise was for them.

The elder drew in a breath, lifted both hands, and flicked the both of them on the tops of their heads, *"Oi!"

Yuri was startled enough to sit fully upright on Viktor's lap, but Viktor stayed on his back, reaching up to rub the spot as he glared dubiously at his vertically-challenged uncle, *"...What was that for?"

"Maybe you two should get a room or something." Mikhail huffed, looking more embarrassed now that he was practically in the middle of it all, *"Even your dogs think you're getting a bit... ehm... Too intimate for public viewing."* He said, nudging his head over to the kids' table, where Makkachin and Jiro were contented with the attention of the younger trio.

*"... We have to go home then..."* Yuri grumbled, rubbing his face, then pointing to the spy-cam phone that had gone dark a while ago, *"We gotta check on... Ghost..."

Mikhail looked skeptically down at his nephew again, *"You can't drive."

"Yeah I can."

"You drank half the bottle."

"I hold my liquor better than Yuri." Viktor attempted, *"My buzz faded a while ago."

"Maybe the first one." Mikhail huffed, sitting back on his knees to cross his arms, *"You probably haven't felt round two yet."
"Pfft." The younger silver piffled, flailing his arms and legs so he could sit up under his husband's weight. He clung around the man's thin frame, and suddenly felt the room spin, "Woooookay..."

"Can I say it?"

"Say what?" Yuri muttered, gratefully melting over Viktor's shoulders with a dumb-happy smile on his face.

"Wow you both are super drunk." Mikhail shook his head, then looked to where Minako had given the news to the teenaged triad, and rubbed his chin, "...If you guys want to go home, you can't do it like this. You'll never make it."

"But Ghost..." Yuri commented again, "We gotta...hic... I told her we'd come back."

The elder sighed out a breath, but then pushed up to his feet, "Why don't you two knuckleheads get ready to go. I'll be right behind you."

"You will?"

"Yeah. Other than me, Viktoria's the only one who knows how to drive a car like yours, and she doesn't know the way. I'll drive you home. Where are your keys, Viktor?"

A pale lanky arm rose up and pointed to the foyer, "In my coat... Wow my head's spinning now." He said to himself, forcefully trying to blink his eyes and regain his brain, though unsuccessfully.

Mikhail left them to their own devices for the moment and went over to the other table, crouching down between Yurio and Nikki, "Hey guys...us old farts are gonna go."

"Yeah, Minako told us." Nikki nodded, and turned in place, careful to protect her kimono where it was folded around her bent knees, and reached up to curl her arms around her father's shoulders, "I'm really glad you came tonight. You would've missed out on a lot if you weren't able to."

"Yeah, I spent half the day thinking about it. Minako can tell you. We're supposed to be relaxing but all I babbled about was whether we would be imposing if we dropped by." He answered, returning the hug, "You don't know how much I'm looking forward to going to Colorado. Detroit wasn't really much of a trip since tensions were high and you guys were still coming out of everything that happened back in Banff, and then Russia was just strange... But, we'll be in familiar territory in the States, so you guys will be more comfortable."

"Are we gonna stay at the Broadmoor again?"

"Would I make you suffer anything less?" Mikhail laughed.

"Oh thank Odin." Viktoria sighed a relieved breath, "I was hoping you'd say that."

"Really? Where else would we go?"

"I dunno... Yuri was saying that the ISU picked The Antlers Hotel, so..."

"We're spectators. We can't stay with the athletes." Mikhail explained, "But the athletes can stay with us, so it works out for Yuri, since we'll be closer to the arena at The Broadmoor than The Antlers."

Yurio seemed relieved as well, though he stayed oddly quiet. He lifted his gaze though as the sound of Viktor laughing caught his ear, and he spotted Yuri crawling out of the common-room for lack of being able to stand, Viktor stumbled close behind with one hand on the walls, the other barely
holding onto the edge of his partner's shirt. Jiro and Makkachin were both up after that, wondering what their humans were doing, and sniffed at them conspicuously.

"...I gotta take them home." Mikhail mused, shaking his head at them, "So this is goodnight."

"Night papa~!" Nikki said happily, giving and getting another hug.

Mikhail kissed the top of her head and moved over to his eldest, bending down to clasp his hands over the rounds of her shoulders and kissed her cheek, "Night you." He said, feeling a brow-bump against his ear, and fingers pressed over his own. He gave a gentle squeeze and lifted up again, heading to his awkward middle child and crouched down again, "Night Yuri."

The blonde was entirely unsure what to do, and just stayed where he was, cross-legged and with his hands buried in the gap in their center, "...Night."

"Do you want a hug?"

Nikki smirked, "Do ittt..."

Even Viktoria smiled at it, and joined the chorus, "Do it..."

"Dooo it, dooo it, dooo it!" They both said, only to make Yurio's face go red.

"Why are you saying it like that!?" He barked, embarrassed.

"Dooo it, dooo it, dooo it!" They heard more voices them, as Yuri and Viktor had joined in from the other side of the door. Viktor laughed but was confused, "What are we saying this for? Dooo it...dooo it...! Whatever it is! Dooo it!"

"Those two are hopeless." Minako huffed, smiling at them anxiously.

Mikhail was still waiting though, "Weeeelll...?" He teased.

Yurio's eyes were huge and his arms were pressed tight against himself, practically feeling the elder Russian's shadow looming over him. But, he clenched his eyes shut, and thought about all the times Yuri had given him 'training' over the past year...and tilted back slightly. A little further...a little further...touch and he was gone again.

Mikhail laughed and chased after the teen though, giving a proper hug - and an embarrassing kiss to the crown of that blonde-haired head for good measure - as he stood up again, making the whole table giggle, "Alright then...that's everyone. Enjoy whatever is left of your night, and we'll see you later. Love you all."

"Love you, too!" The sisters called back, with Nikki lightly swatting Yurio to get him to say the same, though he just muttered it under his breath so no one would hear but himself.

Minako waved at the small group as well as she turned to follow her partner out, "G'night all."

"Byyyye~!"

The elder pair made their way into the foyer, spotting Toshiya through the partly-open sliding door by his office, who in turn was looking out in confusion as his son and in-law struggled to get dressed. Mikhail shook his head again, "These two are hopeless. How do they survive on their own?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." Minako agreed, "So...how do you wanna do this? If you're driving
"Ah yeah, that sounds right. I didn't even think about the 'after we get there' part." He chuckled, heading for the locker where they'd stowed their own things.

It took a while, and goodbyes were said to the Katsuki crew, but everyone was finally dressed - and had their boots on the right feet, after a small struggle - and butts were arranged in the various cars. The dog-proof cover was pulled up from the back seat again and put back into the trunk, and the SkateHusbands fell into its place, wiggling with great effort until they were somewhat sitting upright in the rear compartment. Mikhail pushed the front passenger seat back, and Makkachin hopped into Yuri's normal place, panting happily away. Jiro pawed at the gap between the driver's seat and the car's frame, and was eventually allowed to squeeze through to be with his human in the back. Mikhail finally piled into the driver's seat, making some slight adjustments for his height, and checked the rear-view for Minako and their Lexus.

"Everyone ready?"

"It's an adventurrrrrre." Yuri mused with a slur, barely able to hoist Jiro up onto his lap without dropping the pup for lack of coherent strength.

"It's a short one, but yup."

"Who else in the world gets to say they have a billionaire for a chauffeur?" Viktor laughed, leaning his head back against the seat, "Besides usssss..."

"Oh, there's that second buzz coming hard and fast." Mikhail retorted, shaking his head, "Alright, off we go."

The two cars made their way through the late Hasetsu streets, and it was a mercifully short ride to Casa Nikiforov in the neighboring subdivision. The little red Audi was parked as it always was, inside the covered driveway, and the pups were set free to rush the front door. Minako parked just by the hedges and got out to help stumble the inebriated athletes into their house, finding it easier to keep Yuri upright as Mikhail tackled his nephew.

Getting them over the step inside was a slight challenge though, but with some effort, they all made it inside, and the two skaters were plunked down to sit on the stoop in their entry-hall.

"Well, we got your here." Mikhail huffed and puffed, straightening his jacket out and the scarf within the lapels, "Try not to hurt yourselves after we leave, okay?"

"You're not gonna take our shoes off for us?" Viktor laughed, waggling his booted-feet back and forth where his legs had stretched out.

"You're pushing your luck, kid."

That just made him laugh even more, and he dropped down onto his back on the raised wooden floor, "Thanks for driving us home, papa Mimi. I'm sure we'll be fine."

"We had a really great time." Yuri added, still pretty buzzed, but smiling and at least sitting upright, hands on his knees, "Thanks for coming and for helping."

Ghost's muffled barks from upstairs could be heard by then, and Viktor flopped and twisted like a walrus to get from his back to his stomach, trying to pull himself forward on the floor, "I'm coming...I'm coming..."
"Viktor your boots...and you're getting your jacket dusty..."

"Oh nooooo...!"

The two adults in the room looked on in amused concern as they watched the two stumbling disasters try and navigate their landing, but then turned to one another again and huffed a laugh, "Guess that's our cue."

Mikhail nodded and made his way back to open the door, extending his arm along it to let his lady love out first. Just as he was about to follow, he paused, Ghost's barking making the cogs turn in his head, and he looked down to where Yuri was trying to pull Viktor's boots off, "...What are you guys going to do with your dogs during the competition?"

"They're coming. Jiro's a working dog, you know? Hic...and Makkachin is his buddy...and now Ghost is part of things, too. They're aaaaaaall coming." He explained happily, "It was really great to have them with us at Euros."

"They're all coming, huh?" The elder echoed, mulling it over for a moment, but then smiled again and nodded, "Okay, have a good night then."

"G'byyyyyeeeee~!" The two skaters called, their two downstairs pups coming back to the front door to check on them.

Mikhail set the car keys down on a nearby railing and the door was closed; he followed Minako out to their own car, and piled in, with Mikhail taking the wheel again. As the engine came alive though, and Minako pulled her seatbelt across, the ponderous silence left the ballerina wondering. "How come you're asking about their dogs? You weren't concerned before." She asked curiously.

Mikhail set his hand on the gear-changer, "Colorado Springs is pretty canine friendly, but...like all those annoying commercials on TV always say, certain limitations and restrictions may apply." He explained, and put the vehicle into drive to start them on their way back to Minako's apartment, "I just have this nagging feeling that they may have trouble."

"...Trouble? Yuri's got that letter for Jiro though."

"Ghost is not Jiro, but Ghost is one of the most famously vicious breeds in the world."

"...She's not vicious." Minako said cautiously, "What are you getting at?"

The car slowly turned out onto the main road, and Mikhail thought for a moment, but then spoke to the car, holding a finger down on the voice-command button, "Call The Broadmoor in Colorado Springs."

Minako quirked in confusion, "...I'm lost. What are you planning?"

The cabin filled with the sound of the dial-tone, but the Russian seemed pleased with himself, whatever his intentions may be, "You ever wondered what it would be like to live in a mansion?"
Chapter 568

CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED SIXTY EIGHT

Mari had already begun helping to clean things up while goodbyes were being said, and shortly after
the eldest four of the gathered had left, Viktoria joined her in the Yu-Topia shut-down shuffle.
Feeling a bit like lumps, Nikki did her best to straighten out the common-room again, though the
kimono was restrictive enough that she couldn't do much. Yurio grumbled and got up to help her,
moving tables back to where they were supposed to be, resetting the mobile dividing walls, and
gathered up the last dishes that had been left about.

"This was a really long party." Hiroko commented quietly, looking into the oddly-empty space just
as the last table was put back where it came from, "Did you enjoy it?"

Nikki lifted her head up and nodded happily, "It was way more than I ever expected. Thanks so
much for making it possible."

"It was our pleasure." Mama Katsuki beamed, "Why don't you go change and relax though? It's your
birthday; you shouldn't have to worry about cleaning up."

The teen blanched, "Ehm...well, Minako did such a good job bundling me up...I...don't know how to
undo it."

Hiroko blinked at her, "Oh!" She laughed, and pulled her hands out of the sleeves of her haori, "I
can help you then. Come along."

Nikki nodded, but hesitated for a moment, turning towards Yurio, who practically slouched where he
stood, hands stuffed into the big pockets on the front of his sweater, "Thanks for being part of
everything." She said, catching him by surprise, "I didn't think you'd get into it, but it was actually a
lot of fun to do that shopping earlier with you and the others. You were kind of quiet during the party
itself though."

Yurio balked and looked away slightly, "I...er... I didn't know what I was supposed to do.
That...uhm... I mean, I've never done one like this before."

"Me neither!" The silver laughed, "It was great though, right?"

"...Yeah."

Arms suddenly flew out to the side though, and a particular memory of Detroit came back to Yurio's
mind. "...Hug!" She called out, just like back then. It was still awkward, but less so than it had been
the first time, and Yurio stepped forward to accept it, feeling those thin arms go around his trunk and
the squeeze they gave. He couldn't understand why, but his mind went to start comparing notes on
the differences between a Nikki-hug and a Yuri-hug, or even that rare Viktor-hug. It was over in a
flash though, and that blur of wavy silver hair and dark blue fabric trotted off towards the doorway,
picking up the small pile of presents as it went.

"G'night, Yuri!"

Emerald eyes raised again, spotting the younger teen waving at him, and he raised one hand slowly
to return the gesture. Seeing it, Nikki smiled again, and turned to walk with Hiroko and out of sight.
With that, Yurio stood by himself in the empty common-room, looking around, unsure what to do.
Feeling a yawn coming on though, he hid it behind the back of one wrist, and started to plod his way
"Myaaah!" Potya called out, toe-beans tapping gently on the floor as she came down off the bed. Her tail was straight up as the door opened and closed, and she called out again as her human stepped up to lift her against his shoulder. The purr-motor was on at full, and she rubbed on the teen’s neck.

[I wish I could let you run around the resort more freely.] Yurio said quietly, sitting onto the edge of the bed, [But there's no telling where you'll sneak off to if I did. Once Mikhail has the house though...you'll have full reign, I'm sure of it.]

She purred and kneaded her paws, making biscuits against his tummy as she sat down on his legs. Yurio watched her for a moment, but then stood back up and clicked off the light, returning to the bed so he could lie down, cat on his chest. Potya nuzzled in closer, rubbing her fuzzy cheeks and chin against his; somehow, her purring sounded louder in the dark.

'I was a very lonely kid. I had my mom and the woods, practicing my Axel jumps off an old tree stump while no one was looking. I envy your dull and boring childhood.'

The words echoed through Yurio's mind entirely unbidden, but since they'd started, more came, like a movie reel that couldn't be paused.

'It makes me appreciate what I have more, because it took so long for me to get here. So many false starts, so many mistakes...so much lost time.'

The mention of Viktor's failures was a reminder of Yurio's own, and that false sense of security he had from being so indignantly proud of how he'd survived it on his own. All those years he'd arrogantly pushed everyone away, or making fun of those who tried to get close. Standing at the top of all those podiums was like a declaration to the world that he could handle it, that he was stronger than everyone else. Those mewling masses who cried at rink-side over their losses, the adulations of those fans he'd never really let near him except by accident, even the compliments of those he'd worked with.

It was all just noise, he thought grimly. Terrible, distant noise.

'Pushing everyone away because you're scared isn't really the smartest thing to do though, honestly.' Yuri's words came in like a fast tide, 'When Viktor said we would help you because we're your friends, it wasn't a lie. He meant it, and I do, too.'

Emerald eyes looked down at the foot of the bed, and the huge, life-sized Siberian tiger plush that Mikhail had gotten for him. He sat upright, holding Potya close to himself so she wouldn't slide off, turned in place, and leaned back again, this time against the tiger's side.

[Yuri just moved to Hasetsu to be with family. He'll be training there for the rest of the season.] Mikhail's own words came to mind then, [He is well taken care of.]

I don't even remember him saying it at the time... It knew the words, but it's like I couldn't understand him... I was just to petrified by those RSF stooges...

[More than 100 years of Russian skating prowess supports us.] The words of one of those very stooges sounded, [We know what's best for our athletes.]

[Your athlete; my son.] Mikhail had corrected.

Yurio's eyes widened in the dark, and the gentle stroke down Potya's back stopped, "Did he
"Really...?"

'Like the fact that Mimi told those goons that you were his son, and they didn't question it.' Viktor's words echoed to confirm the question, 'Congrats. You graduated. We're brothers now.'

Unbelievable... Yurio thought, needing to be coaxed out of his surprise by Potya's needy mews. He blinked and shook his head, and started his idle stroke down the curve of her back again. I thought Viktor was just saying that to make me feel better about this whole mess with the Games...

He wiggled in place to get at his phone in his back pocket, and clicked it on above Potya fluffy frame. The bright light dimmed to accommodate the darkness in the room, and his suddenly-side-tracked mind went seeking for any news on that front.

The RSF page was just as it had been during the European Championship. The only other possibility was Instagram, which he nervously opened up next.

If everyone else in Russian athletics was told at the same time that this was happening, then surely someone has made a stink about it online by now? Baba...? Georgi...? Yakov must've told them to keep a lid on it for now. They've said nothing on their pages. Who do I even know in other sports...? No one whose name I can remember.

He grumbled discontentedly as his search seemed pointless. He went back to his main feed instead, and started scrolling down.

It's been a while since I checked. I wonder what everyone's been up to?

The first post he saw was from the Yuri's Angels fan-page, with a collection of pics from Euros; some of him, some of them. The next post was on Nikki's page though; she's already uploaded the photo of her in her new kimono from earlier in the night.

nikkita-roz
[pic]
16 views
nikkita-roz Thanks @y-nikiforov for taking this pic for me! This is the crazy-awesome gift that him and cousin @v-nikiforov and brother @yuri_plisetsky got for my birthday today! Shopping in Hasetsu is pretty confusing without a guide who knows the area. The streets are so cute and narrow, but it's really easy to get lost since I can't read any of the signs! I took pics of the other amazing gifts that the Katsuki family got for me with the help of sister @vikki-of-the-wolves!

#1 is a set of personalized chop-sticks! They say my name in Japanese! So cute! Everyone in the room who isn't Japanese got a set xD

#2 is an adorable glass-squid wind-chime! Mrs. Katsuki said it's called a "furin." The squid and the sea urchins on the streamer are mascots for Hasetsu! There's a statue of them at the train station!

#3 is real silk robes! *u* They're called "yukata" and they put my name in Japanese on them, too! I can't wait to wear these after a dip in the onsen tomorrow! I'm getting better at Japanese names for stuff xD;

#4 is a 'wooden passport' called a "tsuko-tegata." This one says that I came to visit Yu-Topia Katsuki in Hasetsu, but according to y-nikiforov, they used to be used as REAL passports to get around Japan a long time ago!
#5 Not to be outdone, my papa got me my very own Year 15 necklace! I don't even want to know how much he spent on this cuz it was probably a stupidly high amount. -.- You can see me wearing it in the kimono picture though! It's really beautiful! The red stones are garnets to go with my birth month ŌuŌ!

Yurio clicked through each of the photos; they were all taken in Nikki's room, probably only a minute or two ago. He could see the fabric pattern of one of the kimono's sleeve on the side of the picture with the wind-chime, so she'd been able to get out of the ensemble pretty quickly. He kept scrolling after that, only to stop dead with his eyes wide.

View all 4 comments

otabek-altin You look really pretty in that kimono. Glad you had a great birthday. I stuck pretty close to the resort when I was in Hasetsu last spring, so I understand th-

"OTABEEEEEEEK!" The teen whisper-yelled, squashing the phone to his face like he thought he could portal through it to Almaty if he tried hard enough.

It felt like it took forever, but winter clothes were peeled out of - even if they weren't so glamorously put away - and boots were removed. Yuri stumbled up the stairs to check on the cloistered Ovcharka, and was immediately bowled over by the needy pup, licking his face like he was covered in peanut butter. He flailed pitifully, but the big boob balloon Ghost still had on her neck was cumbersome and easily overpowered his dulled drunken reflexes.

"Viktoooorr...!" He called out with a whine, "Tasuketeeee... Ghost pinned me to the flooooor! Pleh! Gross she got me in the mouth!" He coughed, trying to wiggle out from under the anxious shepherd's arms. She kept licking though.

Makkachin came rushing up the stairs, tail wagging, but instead of helping, he joined in on the snuffling attention. The only canine who wasn't lavishing the hapless drunk was Jiro, who sat off to the side like the goodboi he was, and whimper-barked...because he couldn't get close between the larger dogs' frames. His soulful puppy-howls filled the halls, stopping only when Viktor himself finally made an appearance.

"I'm coming...I'm coming..." He said, trying to catch his breath, "The stairs...are evil... Too many... How did we end up with so many steps!? They go on for years!"

Yuri reached one free arm down the stairwell, and felt it returned a moment later as Viktor clambered for it, "You...can do it...! You're so close...!"

"My love...!" The Russian whined, exhausted as he made it over the last step, kissing the fingers in his grasp as he collapsed to the carpeted floor between his husband and the railing, "...I made it... It took a generation... But I made it..."

"How did we end up so drunk...?"

"...It was probably my fault...but I don't remember... It's been fun though, right?" Viktor laughed helplessly, "...I managed to put kibble down... Somewhere... I'm sure it ended up in one of their bowls. Hopefully Ghost goes downstairs to eat."

"H-Help me up... I'm all covered in slobber..."

"Oh right..." He laughed again, picking himself up before offering both hands to his partner.
Ghost slid off the younger man's frame, tail swaying, but with the sight of them both at home, she let herself rush downstairs. First to the doors, as though checking them for violators, but then to the smell of the food bowl with kibble...and the floor, where there was more kibble scattered around it.

The slow crawl on the second floor commenced, and the two inebriated men made their way into their bedroom. Yuri managed to clutch at the edge of their bed in an effort to use it to help himself up to his feet, but he barely made it high enough to toss his arms on top of the comforter before Viktor did the exact same thing to him. He didn't have the energy to look back, but figured it out by feel, and the Russian was all too eager to inform him. Arms curled around his frame from behind, and hands slid from waist to chest, finding their way over and into his clothes until they found skin. With so much shōchū still in his system, Yuri was very easy to convince, and he could feel his core starting to tingle with excited heat with every inch of skin those hands rubbed over. The tingle surged out into his arms and legs as he felt a distinctive push against his back end.

"...Now...that we won't get interrupted..." Viktor mused, whispering the hot words against the thin cloth over his partner's back, "Shall we pick up where we left off?"

Yuri did his best to rub his face on the blankets, and glanced back over one shoulder, "You know we should."

"That's just what I like to hear."
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED SIXTY NINE

Eager hands pawed and rubbed, fingers feeling at every ridge and dip of flesh. Clothing was nudged upward a little at a time, revealing an inch of pale skin at a time, revealing more space for lips to kiss. With eyes closed, arms still holding to the bed, Yuri quietly savored the moist warmth of breath and the tease of silver hair on his skin, and the heat of those kisses as they cooled in the night air.

With the night's multiple glasses of shōchū still pickling his brain, every touch felt more intense, and every need more pronounced. The rhythmic, circular pushes were something to melt into, and Yuri could feel his grip on the blankets slipping.

So did Viktor.

"You're losing ground, my love." He teased, wrapping his arms around his partner's waist to keep him from collapsing outright.

Eyes blinked heavily, but Yuri found strength in his fingers and grasped at the blankets, barely able to pull himself up a bit higher, "...I think I drank too much..." He confessed, glasses tilted where the comforter nudged them out of place. He curled one arm back around to try putting them back, but ended up smudging his fingerprints all over the lenses, and gave up quickly, pulling them off instead.

Viktor laughed a few breaths against that pale, exposed skin, and kissed one more time, "Let's move up then so you don't have to think about staying upright." He suggested, wobbling a bit as he found his own feet behind the man. He hugged a bit tighter - both to lift Yuri up and to keep his own balance - and rose up just high enough to get them on top of the bedsheets, laughing again as they tumbled like ragdolls. Yuri wriggled clumsily until he was able to flip over, and Viktor slid his hand back over that warm, velvet skin, nosing his husband's lips adoringly, "But if it makes you feel better, I think we both drank too much."

"I keep asking you not to let me..."

"And yet I keep joining you instead." He sighed but smiled, turning onto his side, hand sliding across his spouse's frame, "Forgive me, I'm an enabler in this. I have a...particular fondness for this side of you."

"My drunken dopiness?"

"Mmmh... It's a bit more nuanced than that, I'm afraid. Call it nostalgia." Viktor explained, leaning in to find a few light kisses between them, "Our first dance, to be specific."

Yuri blinked, but then laughed, "I left quite an impression, didn't I?"

"The most incredible impression. Don't sell yourself short." The silver insisted, only to find himself getting pushed down to his back again as Yuri crawled in on top of him. Perched on his lap, Viktor slid his hands up his partner's thighs and back down again, looking up admiringly, "I consider myself quite the lucky man to have gotten to see this side of you...and I don't just mean from this angle, either."

Yuri sputtered a laugh at that, "Same...on both counts." He mused, lowering down to perch his elbows over his husband's shoulders, and nosed at those lips the same way Viktor had to his own moments before. He felt hands slide up against his sides again, going inside his thin clothes, "Though
I wager more people have imagined it from my point of view than from yours."

"All the better for me." Viktor answered, looking coy, "I can selfishly hoard all the best sights to myself."

"Like the Russian dragon you are. Sitting on all your Gold medals, and all the most inappropriate sights of me."

"And your inappropriate noises. Those are even better."

"Why are my noises better?"

"Because I'm the one who brings them out of you." He answered, lifting up off the bed enough to whisper them into one ear, "Just like this-"

"Eh...Ah!" Yuri eep'd as Viktor flipped them over again, rolling one pace closer to the head of their bed. His shirt was quickly peeled off his thin frame, ruffling his mess of black hair. To his surprise though, Viktor lifted himself up, getting out from between his legs to sit on his thighs instead, and loomed down over him deviously, "...Oh."

"It's taken a long time to compile my 'list of Yuri's inappropriate noises.' I consider myself a curator of such." The Russian teased, sliding his hands over his partner's chest, pausing with his fingers over that taut abdomen, "Un connaisseur des sons inappropriés de Yuri." He said in French, moving his fingers a little further down, threading the brass button through its hole.

"...Sons?" Yuri echoed, "My inappropriate sons?"

Viktor chortled a laugh, "Sounds. I suppose I could've said bruits, but...I felt like it had a sharper edge to it so I switched mid-sentence. I'm not incredibly smart right now." He explained, lifting his arms up to peel out of his own shirt, and cast it aside as he leaned down again. He curled his forearms around the top of his partner's head and pressed in close, hands sliding over his ribs to cling to his back, "Alcohol and all." He mused, speaking the words to his beloved's lips before kissing into them.

"Buuhhhhh I hate everything." Yuri groaned, once again with his head under a towel, face over a basin of boiling water and eucalyptus oil. Liquid snot dripped to the end of his nose, try as he might to keep it in. He felt a hand pat his back reassuringly, and heard the sound of a ceramic cup being set down on the wooden table he sat at, as well as the quiet tapping of two aspirin on the saucer.

"It's decaf, but it's coffee." Viktor said, smirking into his own drink, "So you don't dehydrate anymore than you already have."

Another sound reverberated through the small room, entering through the sliding doors from behind Yuri's spot, and he heard his mom's voice after, "It took half the morning, but I think this is all of it." Hiroko explained, setting the small white banker's box on the floor beside her son-in-law, "It's a lot less than I remember... Maybe we've gotten rid of things over the years and not even realized."

"It's okay. I'm super glad you were able to find this much. I'm really excited, actually!" Viktor answered happily, setting his coffee down, "How many years do you think are in here?"

Hiroko sat on her knees and lifted the cardboard lid to examine its contents, "Probably at least until Yuri was 8 or 9?" She guessed, lifting up a small book with a red-lacquer wooden cover, and opened it, "...Oh, maybe until he was 15. There's pics of him and Vik-chan. You've seen this one before."
She explained, handing over the album with a finger on one photo, "That's from the day he picked up Vik-chan from the pet store."

He took the wooden book and set it down on the table, admiring that first image, "Ah yes, that's the one on the shrine." He said, lifting a plastic-lined stiff page to flip it over, only to gasp gently, "Oh my gosh."

"What...?" Yuri grumbled in his congested voice, and lifted his head slightly, trying to see through a crack in the wrinkles of the towel.

Viktor nudged him down again, "Get better first."

"Uggghhh Viktooorrrruuu..." He whined loudly, "Naze konna koto o!?" (Why are you doing this to me!?)

"Because I love you, and I want you to be healthy and live forever." He answered with a smirk. Slate eyes looked down to the shiny page again, beholding the heart-stoppingly adorable image of a baby Yuri asleep with Vik-chan under his blanket with him. The next page back showed a small series of 'incognito' shots, taken while Yuri wasn't paying attention; putting his sneakers on while sitting on the step in the foyer, backpack and small skates next to him; sitting in front of the television in the common room, looking up at a skating competition playing on its screen with Yuko next to him; sitting at what looked like the same table they were at now, except a much-younger Yuri had fallen asleep on one of his open school-books; there was even a picture of a much-younger Minako, waving as she and Yuri left on some adventure. He smiled at it all, "You said Minako used to go with you to competition, right?"

"Ahuh."

"This must be one of you and her leaving for one." Viktor supposed, "You're so little here. Not even half her height."

"Yuri was a very short child." Hiroko mused, perching her elbows on the table to hold her chin on her palms, "Then he suddenly sprouted like a weed and got really tall; taller than both me and his father. Somehow, Mari ended up even taller than he did though."

"Minako looks like she hasn't aged a day from this photo...but it's easily 15 years ago." Viktor commented, "I wonder how she does it?"

"No idea. Up until recently, she used to always drink, yet still stayed thin somehow."

Viktor's eyes scanned the image again, going down to Yuri briefly before going up to Minako again, "Blessed with good genes I guess."

"Are there any pictures of you at this age out there?" Hiroko wondered, "I've probably seen every picture there is of you from the time you first got into skating." She teased, nudging her head towards her son, "But nothing from before."

Viktor smirked, but then lowered his face down to look at the pictures, leafing through more pages, "I'm afraid not."

"Tha's nuht true." Yuri gargled, "Mihk hasum."

"Mimi has some...?" Viktor repeated, "How? He wasn't even around."

Yuri pulled the towel back and gasped a breath, and wiped the side of his face on the semi-damp
fibers. He reached for a box of tissues nearby and vacated his sinuses, snuffled again, and tried to breathe, "...Back in France." He said, feeling much more clear, "He has a ton of them on his phone. They were all from when he was still there, until he left. By the number I saw, it looked like Mik was a pretty avid photographer."

"...He never said anything about having pics."

"He told me he didn't want to stir up trouble by showing them. I have no doubt he would pull them up again if you asked him to though." Yuri explained, "There's a handful of him when he was younger, too. I actually thought it was you at first, somehow. You were the toddler that he was holding onto though. Your mom must've taken that photo."

"...Hm."

"How adorable!" Hiroko said excitedly, "Maybe he still has them? I have to ask when he comes back! Given how strong these genes are," She teased, leaning against her in-law's shoulder with her own, "It'll be like a cute little preview of what his and Minako's babies will look like!"

"I guess so." Viktor answered, distracting himself by looking into the box. He rummaged around a bit, until he found something buried at the bottom that wasn't a photo book. It was soft, colored in a worn out blue and yellow, with a faded yellow letter Y on the front, "OH my god."

Yuri narrowed his eyes at the tiny garment, "...Is that my shirt...?"

Hiroko nodded happily, "You wore that thing until it was thread-bare. See?" She asked, pointing to the frayed seams of the nearest sleeve, "You cried so hard when I told you it wouldn't fit anymore and I had to peel it off you for the last time. You made me swear I'd keep it, so I did."

Yuri's cheeks went pink, "...That's so embarrassing."

"That's a funny way of saying absolutely precious." Viktor corrected, leaning closer to kiss his cheek, "And you still are, by the way."

"Mmmhhh..."

The silver just chuckled fondly, and went to rummage some more. "What other treasures are in here? A...rubber ring?"

"Teething ring." Hiroko corrected, "So kids can chew on something safe while their first teeth are coming out. I'd put numbing gel on it so he'd get it on his gums without me having to stick my finger in there."

"Better than chewing on shoes I guess." Viktor supposed, "Yakov nearly lost his mind when Kubochin used two different pairs of his shoes when he was teething."

"Kubochin?"

"My very first dog. He was a poodle; I'm sure you've seen the photos." He explained, "A girlfriend later on got me another poodle puppy after Kubochin passed away, one that looked exactly like him. That's Makkachin."

"Oh, I see."

"Speaking of first dogs..." Viktor went on, lifting up a small leather belt, "This must be one of Vik-chan's first collars! It's so small!"
Yuri lifted his gaze and spotted the distinctive strip of red leather, with the two tags that hung from its loops, "...Wow, yeah...one of the first for sure."

"So the tags on the shrine by the picture-frame must be the ones he had when he passed away."

Hiroko nodded quietly, and watched as Viktor lowered the collar into Yuri’s hands. Yuri used the towel hanging from his shoulders to wipe the other side of his face, and looked into the age-dulled shine on the two tags in his palm.

"...What's this though?" Viktor asked, reaching into the box again to break up the awkward quiet. He held in his hands an ugly ivory-colored mask with big puffy cheeks and a tiny little face set into the center; bright red lips, tiny black eyes, and black hair painted to the sides, "...A Halloween accessory? Looks...bizarre."

"Oh, no...someone gave that to Yuri, years ago." Hiroko explained, "It's an Okame or Otafuku mask. It's supposed to have a partner, Hyottoko. Together, they're supposed to bring good fortune. You've probably seen them around town befo--"

Th'mp

Both brows furrowed, and Hiroko leaned back from the table, "Yuri?"

Viktor turned around, spotting his husband catatonic on his back, "...Did he just faint?"
"Dou mou?" (What do you think?)

Yuri looked awkwardly at the pale, bulbous white face in his hands, with its bright red lips and shining, smiling black eyes.

"Mouhitotsu aru. Miru ka?" (I have the other one. See?)

The other face was more beige in color, with a twisted mouth that was so distorted, it looked like something out of a horror movie.

"Okame to Hyottoko, kounna koto." (The lucky ones.) Asahi said, thinking the pair of masks were perfect, "Ne?"

"...Mh." Yuri nodded, feeling a guilty knot in his stomach twisting painfully. Ever fiber in his body wanted to give the mask back, but he just felt paralyzed instead, and the pain got worse when arms went around him. Vik-chan barked at something, and Yuri tried to focus on that instead of the feeling of an ear brushing against his cheek, using the mask he still held to keep at least some distance between them. When Asahi finally let go though, the knot didn't go away.

[I'll be back from Tokyo before you know it. Then we'll be back together.]

[...Okay.]

Yuri couldn't hear much beyond the ringing in his ears. Though he could feel himself coming back to his body, it was like he was piloting it from somewhere else, looking at a big screen that showed him what his eyes were pointing at. The sounds of voices was distant, like under water in another room.

"Did he sleepwalk again?" One voice asked, hollow and difficult to understand.

"Yeah..." The other answered sullenly; it was closer than the first, but still wasn't quite 'nearby,' "I was able to wake up and guide him back to bed this time, but it was still unnerving. His eyes were glassy like he'd been hit in the head again. Thankfully, he just got back under the covers and stayed put after that."

"That's just so weird."

Colors started to come back, but Yuri could still only really see black. The shadows moving around him were like hazy puppets behind a white screen, slowly coming into focus. He recognized his mom soon after, blinked slowly, and tried to look up, feeling the thigh propped under the back of his head. A hand came over his forehead and rubbed back, going down the grain of his hair, and he tried to move his own, his arms feeling like lead. But, his finger moved, and then his hand, and he felt a white-hot rush go through him as everything prickled back into reality.

"...I...I told...you..." Yuri tried to say, his voice quiet, but was very definitely heard, as both figures looked down over him. He raised his hand up, elbow still on the floor, but felt Viktor's gentle fingers wrap around it, lifting it to kiss his palm.
"Yuri...? What are you trying to say?" He asked.

"Let's sit him up."

The world moved slightly, and Yuri could feel a cold rush go through him then, making his scalp tingle. When he was up, he realized there was more weight on his legs than he'd remembered, and it took a moment for him to realize why. Makkachin had laid down next to him, head resting on one thigh, while Jiro propped his little Akita-nubbins over a knee on the other. Both looked up with tails anxiously swaying as he came to, but were careful not to make any sudden movements.

"Yuri?" Viktor asked again, leaning in to kiss the back of a shoulder, one hand set to his partner's back, "What's the matter? You just dropped all of a sudden."

Catching his breath for a moment, Yuri stayed quiet, but there was little he could do about the knot that was twisting around inside him, just like in the memory. It was like barbed wire, white-hot and burning. Suddenly, with unexpected strength, Yuri snatched the ugly mask from where it had been left on the table...and smashed it against the floor. Every ounce of anger poured out of him, striking the ceramic pile with the sides of his fists until the pieces were nearly unrecognizable, crying out with every hit.

Hiroko backed up a bit in fear, but Viktor held his ground, surprised as he was. He shook his head and moved forward though with haste, trying to pull his partner off of the rubble, "Yuri...! It's enough! You'll hurt yourself!"

"HE MADE ME DOUBT EVERYTHING!" Yuri yelled, struggling to get free, only to swing a leg around and hit at the shards with his heel until Viktor pulled him far enough away that he couldn't reach it anymore, "I TOLD YOU I WASN'T MAKING IT UP! HE LIED! I HATE HIM! HE...HE RUINED EVERYTHING...!" He cried out, his voice cracking until his manic rage turned to gut-wrenching despair, and he went limp against his husband's frame, tears rolling down his cheeks, "...He lied...he...lied..." He said again, gasping breaths between words, "...I'll n-never...forgive him... I told y-you... I told you..."

The last bits of shattered ceramic were dumped into the 2nd floor trash bin. What was left of the Okame mask was unrecognizable. Viktor put aside the small brush and pan set and closed the under-sink cabinet, and washed his hands. Hiroko came out of the small family room and put the box of memories on the circular table between them.

"...I've never seen him lash out." She commented quietly, "I wonder what that was all about?"

"Validation." Viktor surmised, drying his hands on a small towel, "Something denied to him when we went to Imari...something I couldn't give him myself, either."

"...I...don't understand."

"Ever since he ran into Saito at Nationals, after being apart for years, Yuri has struggled with reconciling his natural desire to be nice, with the fact that doing so with some people will inevitably cause him or others pain." The silver explained, leaning back against the sink as he crossed his arms, and looked ahead to Hiroko, "After Yuri started to remember things that happened before he moved to Detroit, the guilt he felt over it haunted him. We went to Imari so Yuri could try to make things right, but it got shot back in his face. Saito told him his memories were false, and then took off. Yuri was devastated."
"...What does that have to do with what just happened though?"

"Yuri told me that Saito had given him a gift, after trapping him in a relationship that he didn't want and was extremely uncomfortable with. He couldn't remember what the gift was though. He probably thought that memory was manufactured, too...only for it to be real, having been in that box, all these years." He said, eyes going to the banker's box on the table, "All that pent-up anger finally came out when he saw it. Everything he was made to doubt; himself, his memories, his belief about himself...all of that uncertainty suddenly became crystal clear. He's...probably been wanting to get that out since he originally left."

"He never said anything."

"He never told anyone. He made himself forget. Even I only learned about it as he remembered things." He sighed, tapping his fingers on his arm for a moment, but then pushed up and stepped closer, "I'll go check on him. Thank you for bringing up all these good memories."

"Is he going to be okay...?"

"I think so." Viktor answered, and pat his hand against the woman's shoulder as he stepped out and headed down the stairs, with Makkachin quick to follow. A quick hose-down and Viktor stepped out through the glass door onto the deck of the onsen. He spotted Yuri in the steaming water, barely hooked to the edge of the stonework with his chin buried in his loosely crossed arms.

Brown eyes raised up for a moment, but then sank again, "...Sorry." He whispered, keeping his eyes down on the deck as pale legs sallied up beside him, dipping feet into the water, "...I just..."

Viktor put his hand on the top of his partner's head, and rubbed his thumb through that damp black hair, "I don't want you to be sorry. I want you to let it out."

"Is mom okay?"

"A bit spooked, but she's fine." Viktor reassured, "She said she's never seen you act that way before."

"...I haven't."

"But I have."

Yuri's brow furrowed, but he lifted his face to look up, "...What do you mean...? I've never-"

"Not with your fists, anyway. But you've hit proverbial walls before, and lashed out with a raised voice." The Russian answered, "I've seen with my own eyes how much it hurts when you feel like you can't do anything."

"...He lied." Yuri repeated quietly, and slid the few inches over so he could cling to the nearest leg, resting his chin against it, "...I mean, I knew all along that he did...but I just... I couldn't prove it."

"I believed you."

"You took my side."

"And you were right."

"...You couldn't be sure of that until earlier." Yuri sighed, squishing his nose and lips to his partner's thigh, "No one could. It was just a story until I saw that...bloody ugly thing."
"Is it ugly because it *is*, or because Saito was the one who gave it to you?" Viktor wondered, petting his beloved's head.

"...I don't know." Yuri sighed, and lifted his head again, looking straight up to those slate eyes, "I mean, it is ugly...*really* ugly...but I've never felt compelled to smash every other version of that mask I've seen since."

"Because it wasn't *that* one."

Eyes went down again, "...My hands hurt. My heel, too."

"You hit it pretty hard."

"I can't help but wonder if he has the other one." Yuri added grimly, brow crinkled in dubious worry, "Like two halves of a damn *lover's* locket, destined to be brought back together one day and be made whole."

"You sound particularly disgusted."

"I *am.*" He grunted, "I remembered *getting* the thing as I was coming to, and I felt this incredible *pain* in my stomach. I wanted to *retch*, but I was *paralyzed.* I remembered how fondly he *hugged* me back then, and I just wanted to *scream*...and then I thought, that time he hugged me in front of you, when I *defended him.* What was he *thinking,* in that moment? When I said he'd never done it before and that it was okay."

"He was challenging me." Viktor pointed out, "He stared right into my eyes and dared me to do something about it."

Yuri grimaced, "He was trying to take me, wasn't he? To *claim* me...like I'm some *object* that can change owners."

"More like...a lion, coming into the territory of an established group, challenging the resident male for dominance of the pride."

"Yurio wouldn't like your use of lions in that analogy."

"He would know it's true, and it's not even the worst thing lions do. When a new male successfully takes over, he slaughters the cubs to bring the females back into heat. And they become receptive to the murderer of their children."

"And I suppose this means my cubs are my personality and free will. Asahi would've killed those if he got rid of you."

"I'm the stronger male. He didn't - and *doesn't* - stand a chance." Viktor mused, "And I'm particularly happy with how your cubs have developed over these past few years. Capable and strong, the best and brightest I know."

"You must be a proud father." Yuri attempted, wanting to feel better.

"I gave a helping hand, but they were always your babies." Viktor mused, "...This is a really weird way of talking about things."

"In my defense, you started it." Yuri pointed out, and lifted up onto his knees on the submerged stone bench. He shuffled over sideways until he was directly in front of his spouse, and let himself get pulled into a hug, hands going around his waist to hook behind his back, fingertips brushing the
water's surface, "...It does feel a little weird to realize that there was a contest going on for me. Makes me feel like a gazelle being fought over by rutting bucks."

"There was never a contest." Viktor reassured, "You and I are more like...penguins."

"Penguins." Yuri echoed incredulously, but smiled at least, which made his partner happy.

"Exactly. They mate for life." He nodded, and leaned forward to press their brows together, "And no other pair of tail-feathers or flippers or claws or horns is going to be enough to split us apart." Viktor added, pulling one hand back to slide it up his beloved's chest, and put a finger under his chin to lift his face, "I'm glad you got your clarity back though, even if it had to happen in such a weird way. That nagging thread of uncertainty would've bugged you forever otherwise. Now...you have the proof you needed to confirm what you already knew to be true, and nothing Saito says or does can invalidate it. He can never take that surety from you."

"...He's going to mess me up at the Olympics." Yuri grumbled, pulling his hands back over his silver's shoulders, sliding his fingers over the contours of the man's neck and jaw, exploring idly, "I'm going to see him and I'm going to panic."

"No, you won't." Viktor countered, "Besides having me there with you, you'll have Jiro. But more than that, you'll have the whole family backing you up. We still have all of Four Continents to get through before we even have to think about it, and while Saito may not make the best decisions...opting to drop from this event was the best thing he could've done. It's going to be fun. You're going to win Gold. We're going to have a great time, and we'll be refreshed to work on the Games with clear heads and high hearts."

"After all the other times we thought we'd have a good time, you really think this'll be the one?"

"This will be the first time this year that we have no problems or worries going into it. Or excessively high expectations."

"Like me winning Gold when you're competing."

Viktor puffed a laugh and stole a kiss, "Yes, Mr. Nikiforov, even with me competing. Need I remind you of your status as the current World Champion and high-score record holder?"

"Says the guy who just recently broke the world record for the number of quads in a single program, and the highest score in a Free Skate, and still holds the record for the highest score in a Short Program."

"But not at the same time."

"No... Guess not."

"So, then the most important question..."

"...Hm?"

"How's your hangover?"
Chapter 571

CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED SEVENTY ONE

Yuri snuffled a breath as he pulled his coat on in the foyer, and sat on the edge of the wooden step to pull his sneakers on. He could sense the shadow coming up behind him before he saw it, or heard it, but he felt the hand settle on his shoulder as another came around to offer a tissue from a small travel package.

"You're all stuffed up again." Viktor commented, "Like nothing we offered helped."

"I thibk the onson loosn'd sohm obv the cruhd in m'head." Yuri answered, then buried his face in the fluff. Even as he pulled back up again, it didn't seem like the worst of the 'crud' had been blown loose, and he groaned, "Thich thucks."

"Yes it does." The silver agreed, taking the wet and goopy rag into two layers of fresh ones, and tossed the whole mess away, "I'm dubious about getting you a decongestant. I don't know any of the local brands and any one of them could make you as tipsy as a drunk."

"I thot you likhed me tha'way?"

"When you're tipsy because you're drunk, not when you're high on cough syrup."

"Ehm not goin' t'be able t'skathe likh thich..." Yuri groaned, feeling worse with the goop staying put in his sinuses, not even bothering to drip out anymore; just trapped up there in his head like bad memories. Still feeling a bit guilty over his reaction to the last set that were shaken loose, Yuri stood back upright, and turned to where he could see his mother standing near the door to the common-room, "Sorry ab'l earlier, muhm." He managed, looking down to Jiro for a moment to ground himself in the moment, "I did'n mean t'hcare you."

"...Are you okay now though?" She asked, stepping a bit closer, "If I had any idea that thing would upset you like that, I would've never put it into that box in the first place. You never told me who gave it to you though, so I-"

"No-" Yuri shook his head, "I needed thaht. Iht...wa'the only thing th'could've convinshed me..."

"About that boy you helped." She said nervously, "He told me what he did at your last event. He carries a lot of guilt about it. He...even apologized to me for it."

Before Yuri could say another word, Viktor pulled the Ravenclaw beanie over his head, and over his glasses and eyes in turn, "All a rather moot point these days." The Russian pointed out, "The best thing we can all do for one another is to stay away from each other."

"Oh..." Hiroko said quietly, hands lowering slightly where she had them tucked inside her haori's sleeves, "...I guess I didn't think much about how you felt about it all, since you acted like it was all okay by the time I found out. You must've felt pretty hurt."

Viktor hesitated a moment, folding the edge of the beanie up so Yuri could see again, and flattened the lapels of that dark-blue pea-coat down against his beloved's chest. He held his hands there on his husband's frame, and looked aside to Hiroko with a strained smile, "...I've had some bad days in my life; some better, and some worse than others. That day though...that was the worst." He said calmly, the words carrying on in his mind as he beheld those anxious brown eyes, "Yuri's the only reason I didn't do something truly terrible to that boy. He looked over again and whistled though, and
Makkachin came rushing out of the common-room, tail and tongue wagging, "We're going to the Ice Castle then. Mata ne." (Cya.)

"Ki wo tsukete." (Take care.)

Yuri kept his eyes and hands on Jiro, keeping the pup balanced on one thigh as he looked out the window at all the passing buildings. He let out a long breath, and felt a hand come down on his other thigh.

"I've been thinking." Viktor started, gently rubbing his thumb against the thick denim fabric, "I don't think Saito has the other mask. At least, even if he did back then, he doesn't anymore."

"...What mahks'yu think thath?" Yuri asked, snorking a breath as well as he could behind his surgical mask.

"We both went into the only room he had, and helped him take his possessions out. As bizarre as the mask you had was, its...ehm...well, partner was even more so. Twisted even. I would've noticed it. It wasn't there."

"...Yoh're shohr?"

"Completely sure." He answered, giving a gentle squeeze, "I could do a visual inventory of all the things he took out of that room, and put into my car. Nothing looked like a mask. Nothing looked large enough to contain a mask."

The surgical mask puffed out a little bit as Yuri let out another long breath.

"I know you've gotten used to the idea of doubting your memories. You don't have to doubt me though." Viktor teased, "Ah, the accent slips even when you're congested. That's adorable." Viktor teased, "But I would like to be able to take your health into consideration. Your body is fighting off a virus. You can hardly breathe as it is...you even said yourself that you probably won't be able to skate."

"...Iht di'n't souhn'd soh damnnin' whin i'wuhs just me sayihn ith..."

"Well, then as your coach, I'm taking you out of the rink today." The silver explained, "We'll get you some hot cocoa and you can just rela-"

"Wath you get rehdy to win Golhd..."

"...Well..." Viktor's voice trailed, and he pulled his hand back just long enough to turn into the Ice Castle's parking lot. He found a spot near the concrete steps leading up to the main entrance, put on the e-brake, and let his seat-belt go. As the strap wound itself back up into its hidden spool, Viktor
turned in place, taking that nearest hand in both of his own, "I've let you compete while dehydrated, injured, and with a concussion. By all accounts, I've been an utter failure as a coach."

"I wohn Golhd all thosh time'thoguh..."

"You're not competing today, my love. Save your strength." Viktor asked, "Think of it like the old days, when you used to just watch me practice from rink-side."

"I guesth'o..."

"Let's head inside then. I'm sure this is where Yurio's probably skulking anyway. Maybe he'll be done for the day and he can keep you company."

Yuri nodded, and the whole group of them plodded up the icy steps to get inside. Thankfully, being a Sunday, there was no risk of day-long field trips coming over from the school on the other side of Castle Hill. Thankfully again, it was Sunday morning, meaning the only people crazy enough to be at the skating rink - beyond the people who worked there - were the handful of Olympic athletes who needed the ice time. Just as Viktor had suspected, Yurio was there, and perhaps half-expected, his sisterly silver shadow was with him, free-styling a leisurely pace while the Russian Tiger went through his own.

The sound of dogs barking caught their ears faster than the sound of the doors opening did, and Makkachin was out like a shot into the rink, sliding along until he could catch up with the closest human.

"Is he even allowed on the ice like this?" Yurio grumbled, gliding into a long sideways slide as he maneuvered over to the wiggly boofer, "What if he pees on it?"

"Ohayo to you too." Viktor huffed, pulling off his blade-guards as he set his bag down on a nearby bench.

"Ohayooooo~! Viktor-juukei~!" Nikki called out, looking up from where Makkachin was leaning against her knees in the middle of the rink.

"Juukei?"

"Oth'er male coughin." Yuri translated, "She'sh leaning."

"I may or may not have interrogated Mrs. Katsuki about all the words I like to use." The silver teen explained meekly, "But I plead the 5th on that one."

"Does Canada even have a 5th to plead?" Yurio huffed, crossing his arms, realizing the poodle wasn't coming for him at all, "Or Japan, for that matter."

"Canada does, sort of..." Nikki answered, rising up from Makkachin's excited prancing, "But saying I plead the 13th section of the Charter sounds a bit less concise."

Yurio just leered at her, "How do you even know this stuff...?"

"I paid attention in school." She teased, and slid off with her hands loosely clasped behind her back.

"Papa Mimi has said that Nikki resembles my mom quite a bit. He also said my mom was something of a genius." Viktor mused, putting his blade-guards on the wall as he stepped out to corral his dog, "Maybe she resembles my mom in more ways than just her looks."
"Comparing Nikki to your mom is just weird on every level." The Russian teen grumbled, "I'm going to take a break."

Viktor waved as Yurio moved off, swiping his own guards from the rink wall as he stepped from ice to concrete. Yuri looked over from where he was sitting with Jiro and their collective training gear, but looked pitiful all bundled up like a snowman, mask and beanie and all. When those green eyes looked his way, Yuri sighed and waved, "Thorry if we impterupted."

"You sound like shit." Yurio said, disregarding the rest, "Worse than yesterday."

"Ugh I know... I thook my medsh before we lehft thithmorning but'hey havem' kicked in yet."

"How long ago was that?"

Yuri pulled out his phone to check the time, "About'n hour agho..."

"It took you that long to get here? It's practically 11am already. I've been here for hours."

"We thopped by Yu-thopia firth."

"Oh." Yuri deadpanned, keen eyes spotting the roughed-up edges of his older counterpart's hands, "What'd you do to yourself? You're all bruised and bloody."

Yuri checked quickly after putting his phone away, and leered over his mask, "Ith not'hat bad..."

"Didn't answer the question." The blonde shook his head and stepped closer, leaning against the rink-wall to rest, "Did you fall on the way out?"

Hesitating to answer, Yuri reached for the pack of tissues Viktor had left with him, and pulled his mask down under his chin to blow his nose. With less liquid crud in his sinuses, at least for the moment, his voice didn't sound quite so plugged, "I wish it was that simple. No... Viktor wanted to see some photo albums my mom had left-over from before I moved to Detroit. It...happened that she saved something of mine that I wished she hadn't. I...kind of smashed it."

"You smashed something. You, Yuri formerly-Katsuki Nikiforov."

"I know, it sounds out of character for me, but it...was something I couldn't stand to see."

"That must've been some awful memory if you snatched it out of Viktor's hands and killed it in front of him." Yurio said, shaking his head, "What could be so awful that you felt compelled to do it?"

"Something Asahi gave me, years ago."

Those emerald eyes just stared for a moment, but then Yurio looked away, staring into the rink where Viktor was warming up, and Nikki was trying to get Makkachin to chase her. He looked back to Yuri though, snorkeling into another tissue, "I guess I should've known without asking. I can't think of anything else you could've been given that could've gotten you to react so strongly. Did you at least explain yourself?"

"...I think it was kind of self-evident. Viktor knew what I was yelling about as I broke the thing into a thousand pieces. He kicked me down the stairs and told me to go cool off in the hot-spring while he cleaned up."

"Cooling off in a hot-spring. That literally makes no sense."

"It made sense at the time. I knew what he meant."
"Did it help?"

"Well, smashing the thing helped more... I feel like I got a few unspoken resentments off my chest. I feel a bit clearer now. Maybe I'll even stop sleepwalking."

"Are you kidding? You're sleepwalking now, too?"

Yuri shot the teen a look, "How else did you think I managed to get myself deathly sick in such a hurry?"

"You said you got caught in the storm!"

"At 3am!? I was asleep! Viktor had to pull me back into the house!"

"...You're a hot mess."

That just made Yuri whine loudly, "I knowwww..."

"What'd he get you anyway? I'll bet it was something really weird."

"That's saying something." Yuri huffed and shook his head, "It was a mask; I know you've seen them around town now and again. The chubby-faced smiling woman and the twisted-mouthed man that goes with her."

"Oh. Yeah, those are creepy and gross. Why'd he get you those?"

"He got me one, and he had the other, at least back then he did. Viktor's certain he doesn't anymore." Yuri explained, and pushed up to stand, carefully lifting Jiro to lean the pup against the wall with him. Jiro's little nubbins held on, and watched the antics on the ice carefully, barking twice and wiggling like he wanted to go, too, but Yuri shushed him for the moment, "The masks are meant to be a pair; never one without the other. I guess Asahi thought it was quaint, because he gave me my half of the pair on the eve of his going to Tokyo, to try and secure that spot for me. He planned to reunite the masks when he came back. I wasn't there when he returned...and I didn't take the mask with me."

"With all the masks that are around Japan, I'm surprised it didn't cross your mind earlier."

Yuri shook his head, "I was gone overseas for so long, I'd forgotten completely about it. I didn't see an Okame or Hyottoko mask in over five years. It entirely slipped my mind...until mom pulled it out of that box of my old stuff." He explained, watching his husband skating wide rings around his cousin and poodle, "My mom must've thought it was something I should keep, because she knows what it stands for. She didn't know who gave it to me or why. I don't hold it against her that it was still here after all that time. I...feel like I needed to see it. The fact that it existed at all meant that my memories about Asahi and I were...right... Even though he lied about it and denied it ever happened right to my face."

"When you and Mik and Viktor went down to Imari."

"Mh..." Yuri nodded, rubbing his chin against Jiro's shoulders idly, "I've never once felt compelled to truly dislike someone before... Not even JJ, after the accident. Not even...Nishigori...for how he tormented me as a kid...not even you after some of the things you said before... I mean, I didn't like it, but I never hated any of you. I...can't think of any other word to describe how I feel about Asahi now though. It was one thing to put his hands on me; that was my mistake. It was another to make me second-guess my own mind. ...I already have enough regrets about things I've
forgotten, either from being too drunk or not paying enough attention. I really resent that he tried to screw with my head."

Yurio scoffed and shook his head, leaning into Yuri's personal space with a finger poked to the man's shoulder, "You keep walking into situations where you cause yourself pain. You practically gift-wrap yourself for it, with a big flashing sign that says 'big heart here, please break it.'"

"...Viktor would probably agree with you." Yuri pouted, leaning down against his Akita's back, "He's mentioned similar enough stuff on his own. That I have a heart of glass, and that my penchant for wanting to be nice to people ends up hurting me."

"It works just fine on most people. Just not with that one." Yurio shrugged and leaned back again, "It's good then that Saito decided not to go to Four Continents. It gives you half a minute to remember what it's like to be a competitor without all the extra baggage. You need to toughen up before the Games. If you don't, you won't stand a hope of getting on that podium at the end, even if you're the current World Champion."

"I don't know what to do though. I even told Viktor that Asahi would mess me up at the Games. He just told me that I had a big enough support system that it shouldn't...but I'm not so sure."

"You need to get out of your head." Yuri shrugged, "You're doing yourself no favors by lingering on ancient history."

Yuri shot him a look, "Two weeks ago and this morning aren't ancient history."

"I mean that you should do whatever it takes to forget that guy again. You said you'd done it before...just do it again."

"...I don't think it's that easy now. He's kind of left an indelible mark on my brain." Yuri grumbled, lifting Jiro off the wall to set him on the ground again, and followed after the pup towards the doorway in the rink-wall, "He just kind of freaked me out at the last second before. I could forget that as a fluke. This time...it's not that simple."

"It's not simple because you don't let yourself believe it is." The Russian Punk pointed out, following close behind with his hands stuffed into his hoodie, "Viktor and I have both perfected the fine art of purging people we don't want to associate with anymore."

"And I always thought that was mean. I'm not mean."

"But you say you hate him."

"That's because I don't know what else to call it. Maybe it's not hate. Maybe it's just...some weird subset of anger."

Just as Jiro got around the corner and felt his nubbins touch the ice, the doorway back into the skate rental area opened, and Yuko walked through with a lidded paper cup in her hands. She spotted her query right away, "Oh, Yuri...here's that hot chocolate you guys asked for earlier. It's the one with the little mini marshmallows in it."

"Thanks..." He answered, accepting the cup as Jiro looked up at their exchange and barked, "Yu-chan..."

"Hm?"

"...What would you do if you kept running into someone who made your skin crawl, and there was
basically nothing you could do to avoid them?"

She blanched at the question and backed up a step, "I feel like I just walked into something."

"You did." Yurio confirmed glibly.

"Gomen..." Yuri sighed, looking back out into the rink, "...I just don't know what to do. At this point, at least in my head, I'm at peace with everything. I got my clarity, I got my vindication...but I just have this gnawing feeling that if I see Asahi again, it'll somehow mess me up. I want to think I'm stronger than that now, but...I only really have history as my guide..."

"Maybe you are stronger now." Yuko suggested, "You should trust yourself more."

"She's right." Yurio agreed, "You gotta believe that you can beat him. You have to use your head to outwit your gut. Instinct is good but it'll trip you up on false alarms. You're giving Saito too much power over how you feel if you're putting this much thought into how you'll handle him when he's in your sights again. He'll beat you easy in PyeongChang if you keep that up. He'll mop the floor with you, really."

Yuri listened carefully, but kept his eyes on Viktor the whole while. After a bit though, he just slouched and sighed, "I wish I knew how Viktor did it... He went from wanting his father to drop dead to wanting to try to salvage their relationship. I don't have it in me to hold onto negative emotions like this."

"Are you saying you still want to be friends with Saito after everything he's done?" Yurio asked gruffly, "Viktor would shit himself if he heard it."

"That's rude." Yuko chided, giving the teen a disapproving motherly look.

He shied away slightly, "What? It's true! Even I can see that Viktor's exhausted by the whole thing. Hell, I am, and it isn't even my problem."

"I'm surprised you're being so supportive given how you said you'd become friendly with him while we were gone." Yuri said, his voice partly scolding in tone.

"Friendly doesn't mean friends. I just accept that he feels like shit for what he's put you through." The teen explained, scuffing the floor with a kick of one blade-guard into the concrete, "But you and him are so fundamentally bad for each other, it's no wonder he went running back to Imari to get away from you. No matter what he says or does, when it comes to you, he always loses. He'll be avoiding you two as much as you'll be avoiding him. So just do him a favor and forget him again. You aren't hurting him anymore by living your life. You're hurting him by treating him like he's broken."

"...I don't want to just rub Viktor and me into his face though."

"Yuri..." Yuko said pensively, and reached her hand forward to touch his shoulder, "...Sometimes, rubbing it in is the only way you can get the other person to let it go."

Brown eyes stared for a moment, first at the hand, then into the face of the woman who'd said the words. There was an uncomfortable familiarity there, and it ripped like lightning through his chest. The hot chocolate didn't help either, adding a burning heat to the pain of realization that went scorching through every fiber of his being. He grit his teeth and pulled the mouthpiece of the cup away from his lips, but nothing could stop the words from spilling through his mind.

...She did it on purpose, back then. She knew, all that time. He thought, feeling that gnawing pain
creeping up inside him, She wants me to do to Asahi what she did to me... It didn't stop the burning
in his eyes, nor the offense that he took, and he peeled away a few steps before looking back, [You're
saying I'm no different from Asahi, that I pined for years and never got over it, even when it was
obviously a lost cause.] He said in Japanese, the words coming out without him, like someone else
had taken control of his lips, [That's just not fair... I never tried to tear you guys apart. I never tried
to hurt you out of spite or jealousy. I... I left...]

Yurio stared in confusion, but Yuko looked partly surprised... though partly not, either.

[I gave you your space... Do you think I still...? Even now...?]

[No, of course not, Yuri-]

"Why are you guys talking in moonspeak suddenly...?" Yurio grumbled irritably.

[I can't believe... all this time... I thought you didn't know...] He went on, looking away. Jiro's ears
went back against his head. Yuri took another step away, [I'm not like him...!]

[I never meant to imply that you were!] Yuko tried, taking a step closer, [Yuri, I'm just trying to-]

[It didn't work on me, okay!?] He said bitterly, [So if it didn't work on me, why would it work on
him!?!]

[It's not about working on him.] She explained, [It's about setting yourself free from the guilt of
knowing that your happiness is going to cause him pain.]

Yuri blanched at her, eyes wide.

Yuko lowered her gaze slightly, holding one elbow with the opposite hand, [...] It's about giving
yourself permission to live your life and enjoy it. He's already done his part by leaving Hasetsu, and
saying whatever he thought would help drive you away. You've got to do your part now. It's the
only option you have now.]

"Is everything okay over here?" Viktor asked suddenly, having somehow snuck up behind Yuri
without the scratching sounds of his blades giving him away.

"I dunno what they're talking about." Yurio pointed out, thumbing at each of them, "They just started
going on in Japanese outta no where."

Yuri stayed put and silent, staring at nothing as the words rattled around in his head like an unwanted
echo.
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED SEVENTY TWO

The foyer felt particular quiet, but Yuko wrote in her logs and did her inventories like usual. It didn't preoccupy her enough to avoid glancing out to the glass doors that lead to the rink though. Her brow furrowed in worry.

When he first came back, I guess I was hopeful that he'd finally grown away from the past, She thought, squishing her cheek against the heel of her palm as she scribbled idly on the notebook. The way he'd perfected Viktor's 'Aria,' performing so beautifully even after his collapse at the Sochi Final and at Nationals after... I really hoped we could go back to being friends again like when we were younger. If not for Viktor showing up when he did... Her eyes went to the door again, barely spotting the occasional blur of someone passing by in that narrow band of sight, I don't want to think how he would've felt...

Yurio squirted water into his mouth and swooshed it around before swallowing. He leaned against the rink-wall for a moment before putting the water-bottle down to rejoin the others. At least, 'the others' as far as one teenager and two dogs went, chasing one another across the rink like children. He made a wide arc around them, arms crossed, "At some point they're gonna have to go to rink-side. I can't go through my routines when I'm worried I might collide with a fuzzy speed-bump."

"Just say the word and I'll herd them off." Nikki puffed, gliding backwards as she leaned forward, reaching for Jiro as he plodded clumsily along the frost after her. Makkachin trotted alongside easily.

"Shoo, then." He answered, waving his hands at the trio to go.

"Aren't you missing something?"

"Missing something?" He echoed, looking around the rink; the stereo was on the wall, his CD was in it, he had the remote in his hand, and other than Nikki and the two 'Pups of Nikiforov,' the ice was clear, "...I'm not missing anything."

Nikki stood upright, and looked off to the side to just her eyes, then cleared her throat, "Dear beloved sister," She declared loudly, "It pains me to request that you vacate the immediate premises with your canine compatriots. In fact, it pains me so greatly that I must...additionally...say...P, L, E-"

Yurio deadpanned her, "Please."

She smiled sweetly, "Of course, dear brother."

Makkachin and Jiro followed after her quickly, tails wagging. Watching them go, Yurio waited where he was, but as soon as Nikki stepped off the ice, he nudged himself back with a toe-pick towards the center of the rink, and the big cartoonish logo - the samurai and the snow-maiden - embedded in the ice. After a moment, he put his blades apart, and clicked the music to start.

The boom reverberated through the arena, and into the changing rooms where Yuri had retreated, making him flinch slightly. He pulled his glasses off, and pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment before setting the blue frames on the bench between his knees, and rubbed his face with both palms.

"...I can't help but feel like you're keeping me out." Viktor commented quietly, leaning against a nearby wall of lockers, "What'd she say?"
"Something that made me feel disgusting and broken." He answered, snuffling back the trickle of liquid running out from inside his head, "...Worse than this...worse than at Nationals somehow..."

Viktor shimmied down to the flat of the metal bench, sitting about a foot behind his partner's turned back, "Something about or relating to Saito, I guess."

"She said she knew I had a thing for her all along, and that she went out of her way to be with Nishigori in front of me because it was the only way I'd learn." He explained bitterly, rubbing his eyes, "And the fact that it upsets me this much to learn that, even now, makes me think I'm just like him... It's like she pulled out the idea that I never got over her, like he never got over me, and it's worse than Nationals because..."

Viktor looked aside, then down as he pressed one hand, then both to his partner's back, "Because?"

"...I can't even say it..."

"When...Minako and I went to confront Saito the morning after it happened," Viktor started, sliding closer until he could press his side to his beloved's back, "She said much the same as you had the night before...that even though you didn't consent to what happened, the fact that it did still made you feel like you'd cheated on me somehow. That's what this feels like right now, yeah?"

Yuri nodded weakly.

"I don't feel that way." Viktor reassured, "Those feelings came from long ago. They're part of your story. Since you and Yuko are still friends, I imagine that love will always be there in some form, even if it's changed over the years. You can't torture yourself over unrequited passion."

With sinuses gummed-up, Yuri could do little more than blow his nose again. His skin had been rubbed red by then, even with tissues infused with balm and lotion. He snuffled and bowed his head, "It isn't that..."

"What then?"

"The way she drew the line between Asahi and I... It's like she said we had the same problem; two lonely hearts incapable of letting things go. That just put me into his head, and how angry and upset he must've felt about everything...and I hated that I could empathize with that..." Yuri explained, feeling tense, "...I don't want to empathize with him anymore. It hurts too much. It makes me want to fix things, and that just makes it hurt more. Building this mental fort to keep him out...all it did was put me firmly back into my own head, watching him from behind my own eyes...and thinking... Wow, I really dodged a bullet... A dozen bullets... If Yuko hadn't done what she did, I would've never gotten so upset that I wanted to move halfway around the world to get away from her. I would've stayed right here...and been with him...and that's how I feel right now..."

"Like you've been with him this whole time...?"

"Like I'm dead inside. B-because I don't have it in me to do what needs to be done... To be cruel enough to make him forget about me, because I know he hasn't, even back in Imari... And for me...to be strong enough to leave him there..."

Viktor stayed quiet for a while, thinking hard on those words, but then stood up, hand sliding up his partner's back until it lifted off a shoulder, "Stay here a minute."

"...Eh?"
Blade-guards thumped on the tile floor, fading as they got further and further away. The door clicked and opened.

"V-Viktor...?"

"No," He answered, standing in the glow of the outside lights, "I want you to ruminate for a bit. Just wait here."

The door closed, and Yuri was bathed in exquisite silence. He swallowed nervously and looked around the empty space, feeling particularly claustrophobic suddenly...on his own. The distant buzzing of the air conditioning units, keeping the ice frozen and the air cold, came into clarity. The drip of water from the showers around the corner, echoing off the tile walls of the locker-room. He was sure he could hear the sound of voices behind those walls, but they were so distant and distorted that it was impossible to make-out whose voice it was, never mind what was being said. It felt like years went by in that deafening silence.

But then the door banged open with such force, Yuri was knocked clean off his seat, tumbling to the floor in a heap, legs still in the air where they leaned against the bench. The noise was still ringing in his ears when he heard the distinctive thump of blade-guards on the floor. From his vantage, Yuri tried to look under the bench to see who was coming, thinking it was just Viktor returning, but...Viktor didn't use black Revolution blades.

"Oh, you look familiar." A voice commented, "Hard to tell when all I can see is your ass though."

"...Huh?" Yuri gaped in confusion, but un-tumbled himself and tried to get up off the cold floor.

"Ah, yeah, that's the one." The voice added; it was Yurio's, harder and sharper than it had been in ages, but definitely him, "You're that talentless wash-out who quit skating a few years back. All for the better... Saved me the trouble of making you retire myself. Don't need two Yuris in the Senior bracket."

Words were caught in his throat. The best Yuri could do was cling to the bench like a life-raft.

"Why are you here anyway?" Yurio went on; that distinctive Team Russia jacket clung to his shoulders, but he kept his thumbs wedged in his jeans pockets, "The Grand Prix Final is for people who can actually skate, not has-beens."

"He's with me." Someone else commented. Yuri looked back behind himself, and stood up sharply; for a split second, he'd been sure he'd heard Nishigori's voice, but the figure that walked out of the light at the other end of the locker-room was considerably thinner, and had more hair. He couldn't bear to keep his eyes up as the figure got closer though, and kept them cautiously down. All he could think to do was take the closest arm, practically hiding behind it, "I don't go anywhere without my fiancé."

Yuri's brow furrowed, but he made the mistake of blinking, and suddenly those hallowed halls of the Iceberg Skating Palace were around him. Celestino was nowhere to be seen though, and his pleading voice was absent. To his horror though - and worse than anything else - the gold on his right ring finger was gone.

This is a nightmare... He thought in a panic, clenching his fingers down on the dark sleeve of the arm in front of him, This has to be a nightmare... I'm still asleep... I haven't woken up today...

"Fiancé?" Yurio's voice cracked like thunder; mocking and callous, "It looks like he got dug up from a graveyard somewhere." He bent down slightly to look at the trembling 'corpse,' "Blink twice if you
want us to put you back in the ground."

"We don't have to deal with this. Let's go."

Yuri felt himself pulled away, but he didn't have the will to resist it.

"You didn't even have the balls to see if he blinked!" Yurio barked at them.

"I don't have to."

Yuri turned his head back and gaped fearfully, but the hall had somehow become completely empty. There wasn't a soul to speak of. Confused, he turned forward again, but the view there changed somehow, too. The narrow hall with the seats pressed up against one side were gone, and so too was the music in the arena. A low, hushed whisper started to come back, and when Yuri blinked again, he was in that hall.

"Yuri,"

He huddled close to the arm, but looked away, spotting that red, white, and silver glow stepping right out of his dreams.

"Your step sequence could use some work."

"I won, didn't I?"

Something about their words seemed off, but Yuri wasn't about to correct them.

"Asahi-kun!"

He sharply turned around and spotted Newscaster Morooka rushing closer, though no words had yet answered him.

"What an amazing performance! All of Japan is cheering for you!" The journalist congratulated, "It's your first time at the Final and you got on the podium! That's incredible! How do you feel?"

...On the podium? At Sochi? No... Chris and JJ were always better than he was...and no one's scored higher than Viktor, not ever...

"Ready to go home and relax." Asahi answered, though it still didn't quite sound like him. Disinterested in the conversation anyway, Yuri looked away, back towards the doors that the Russians had been heading for. Yakov was still yelling at the both of them, but Viktor felt eyes on the back of his head and looked back.

Yuri blanched.

"...Oh, do you want a photo?"

Eyes were wide, but no one else in the world seemed to notice what was going on.

"I don't mind."

Yuri felt a knot in his throat, but something compelled him to move. He let go of the arm and twisted the rest of himself around, shuffling one foot away to take a step, then another. He made it three paces before something pulled him back.

"Where are you going, Yuri?" The not-quite-Asahi voice asked, "Our exit is this way."
"Yuri!" Viktor called out, smacking one hand into the palm of the other, "I knew I recognized you! You're Yuri Katsuki! You used to skate!"

That seemed to buy time, but his voice was caught in his throat.

"You came all the way to Sochi and you're not even competing? Why's that?" The Russian legend asked, stepping closer so he wouldn't have to yell halfway across the foyer, "Oh, are you here with him?"

"We're engaged." Not-quite-Asahi answered, lifting up Yuri's left hand, "See?"

Viktor just stared for a moment, but then smiled in that way he always did, "That's nice. We were about to take a picture. Do you mind?" He asked, polite but bracing. He held his hand out, "I'll have Yakov take it for us. Just come over to this side. It'll only take a minute."

Yuri felt himself walking again, even if the vice on his arm took a second to shake loose. Just as he escaped one grip, another took him, but this one was gentler, less possessive, and fit snuggly over his shoulders.

"Just over here."

They stood for a moment, and the camera flashed in his eyes, leaving Yuri dazzled for a moment.

"There. I'll send you a copy. What's your number? I can text it, or..." Viktor asked, taking his phone back from his coach. He looked down to those averted eyes, "...You don't look so good." He commented, keeping that smile on but speaking in a more hushed tone, "You used to be friends with Chris, weren't you? You kind of vanished outright a while ago. It's coming back to me now..."

Yuri's voice was still arrested in his throat, feeling the pain of wanting to say something, though nothing would come out. It's like I haven't spoken in years... I don't even know if my vocal cords still work...

"I told you, he looks like the living dead." Yurio complained, "And he hasn't said a word."

"Let's help him then."

"What? How? Are you some kind of weird necromancer now?"

Viktor laughed, "No; necromancers reanimate the dead...but clerics return the soul and restore life."

He explained, and took those two pale, quivering hands into his own, "What do you think? Do you want to come with us? We're just going to mill around until the Banquet later."

"Yuri!" Sort-of-Asahi called, "We're leaving! Let's go!"

Viktor felt the fingers grip around his hands, and the quiver became an obvious tremble. He didn't bother looking up to the source of the voice, and instead slid his arm over Yuri's shoulders again, "You'll have a great time." He explained, putting his back to the opposite door as he guided the figure out through the one near his side of the foyer. One hand extended to push the glass panel open to let them step through.

"Hey! You-"

He can't argue this...not publicly... Yuri thought, daring not to look back, He has to let me go or risk causing a big scene...
Time skipped ahead in his mind; he blinked, and he was in one of the Sochi hotel rooms. It wasn't on any particularly high floor, but he couldn't see the Iceberg Skating Palace from wherever he was either. All he could see was the black of winter night, and his own reflection in the glass, with thin curtains hanging on either side of him.

"You're looking out there like you think you'll see him coming if you wait long enough." Viktor commented from behind, "But even if he comes, I'm not letting him in."

Yuri finally turned away from the glass, and spotted his idol sitting on the nearby bed. The red and white track-suit had gone away, but those eyes were just as they had been; clear, and sympathetic.

"I told Chris that I'd found you. He was really surprised. This whole weekend, he had no clue you were here at all." Viktor commented, and pat his hand on the bedside for Yuri to join him, "The way he reacted, you'd think I'd just found someone he thought had been kidnapped or something."

Realizing there was no one else in the room, Yuri warily approached, turning around to sit, keeping his back to the Russian.

"Can I see it?"

See what...?

Viktor gently reached forward, taking that nearest arm, and eased his way down the elbow and forearm until he found Yuri's left hand. Fingers curled softly into his palm, until he could see the ring, "Kind of girly, don't you think?" He wondered, "Do you even like it?"

I can't stand the feeling of it on my skin... I've wanted to take it off since he put it there, but it's like it's melted into me...

"You don't seem like you're happy." Viktor surmised, thumbing the oddly feminine engagement ring, "Forgive me for saying so, but you...kind of look like a hostage."

There was no room for his cheeks to flush at the soft feeling of those fingers in his hand, and Yuri kept his eyes down, going lower with the sound of those words.

"How come you don't answer me...?" Viktor asked, "You're safe here. It's just us."

Yuri tried to clear his throat, but the cobwebs that had layered over his voicebox were thick like glue, and all he could do was cough feebly. He reached instead for his phone, but hesitated to click it on.

"...Are you worried he'll see what you write?" The silver asked. A dubious singular nod followed, and Viktor immediately went for his own, "Here, use mine then." He offered, unlocking the device and handing it over with a Note window already loaded.

Yuri took it, but hesitated to move. He looked around the room one more time just to be certain they were alone, and nervously pulled his legs up onto the bed, crossing them under himself before starting to type.

He has an iPad that has my Apple ID login information saved, Yuri thought as he typed, If he logs in, he can read any texts on my phone. He says he does it to protect me. I don't know if he can read Notes I write on the phone itself...but I can't risk it. He's already going mad with jealousy right now probably. He finished, and held the screen up for those blue eyes to scan across. Viktor leaned back once he was done, and gestured to continued, so Yuri got his thumbs working again. I've been wi-

...He started again, hesitating already, but felt a reassuring hand on his back, and he drew a breath to go on. I've been TRAPPED with him for almost 5 years. He made me stop skating after the first
year...I'm still not sure why. I don't even have skates anymore. When he competes...he only lets me watch from the audience, where no one knows me. We don't go to the Banquets.

Viktor read for a moment, then took the phone back, his brow contorting as each word passed before his eyes. Without giving it back, he turned to the typist, "Do you want me to help you?"

Yuri glanced back slightly, but then turned to the window again wordlessly.

"Let me have your hand again." The Russian asked, sitting upright. Yuri reluctantly gave his left arm over, but Viktor just cupped over his hand, "I want you to look."

Terrified eyes turned to the sight of those perfect hands holding his thin and clammy own, but when fingertips took hold of the metal, Yuri felt his breath seize in his chest.

"You can't go back to him." Viktor said firmly, and started to wiggle the ring at its root, turning it in place to make sure it wasn't super-glued to the man's skin, "I can't let you...not now."

The thin silver band seemed to come loose somehow, which didn't make sense in Yuri's head. It hasn't moved since being put there...how is he able to...? The ring kept going though, and before long, Viktor had wiggled it right over that first joint, then the second...and then it was gone. His skin felt cold where the band had been, and the rivet it left behind was deep, like the item had always been a size too small for his finger.

"I want you to stay here tonight." Viktor went on, tossing the unwanted item into the nearest trash basket, "In the early morning, we'll check out, get breakfast in town, and after that, I'll take you to St. Petersburg with me. It'll take two days with the train, but on short notice, it's the only real option. You need the time to relax anyway, right?"

Yuri was shocked, still feeling a bit numb from the ring being taken off, but something about its absence decrrippled his throat, and he parted his lips, "...Why...?"

"Because it's the right thing to do. You look like you haven't had a single friend in the world since you last stepped off the ice. You really were kind of kidnapped." He answered, seeing those dark eyes giving off the slightest glint of life again, though that might've just been the tears starting to well in them. He reached forward with his free hand, fingers curling around the one that still held the other, and pushed some of that brittle black hair out of the younger man's face, "...Look at you. I know you're younger than me but you already have grey in this." Viktor said, and sighed, but he managed a smile, "I'm going to make this right. You're going to be okay."

Something in Yuri cracked, but the only things that came out of him were tears. He bowed his head low and looked one more time at that ringless left hand, then closed his eyes, and collapsed.

Darkness overtook him, but it wasn't the cold, harsh place he thought it would be. It was warm, comfortable, and even smelled familiar. Looking around, Yuri really couldn't see anything, not even his hand in front of his face. His eyes stung and he felt the congestion again, but the posture he found himself waking up in didn't give itself away to feeling like a flat bed. It was curved, bent up for his knees and shoulders. The material felt rubbery, or maybe like soft pleather, but definitely not sheets or blankets. As his eyes adjusted, he realized he could see the light under a door directly behind himself, and warily let his legs hang off the edge of whatever it was he'd been lying on. Feeling his feet flat on the floor made him feel a bit more stable, and he rubbed his eyes, feeling the hard edge of his glasses frames against his chest, sitting in his coat pocket.

...Did I dream it all? It felt so real... Where am I though?

He cautiously slipped his glasses back on and stood up, wobbling his way through the dark to the
door with its faint light. He turned the knob and pulled the panel open, and was immediately greeted by the sights of Japanese posters on the walls, and gym equipment.

I'm at the Ice Castle...? I never left the Ice Castle...

He could see through the long line of windows where the treadmills were lined up, and realized it was nighttime.

Jeesh, it's been hours...

The sound of distance music caught his ear though. It was a song he recognized, but it was one he'd skated to himself before. He followed the sound of the song through the winding corridors, and slowly found his way back to where he knew one of the rink-side entrances was located. He pushed through the door and looked around nervously, seeing everything as he knew it should be, with all the unique side-boards on the inner wall of the rink, and the big banners hanging from above. Yuri suddenly realized the music was Yurio's, and looked to the ice to find the blonde.

...It's weird seeing him here like this now.

He looked around again though for the one person he needed to see, and spotted the man with his back turned not too far away. Yuri used the sound-cover of the loud music to step quietly, and just as Viktor caught sight of him out the corner of his eyes, slid into the space between the Russian's chest and the rink wall. Bent over slightly, Viktor curled over his back, and slipped those arms around him tightly.

"You look better," The silver commented, nuzzling the back of his beloved's head, "You slept okay?"

"...I feel like I was gone for years. What...did you do...?"

"You said you felt like you were with him. Maybe what I did was cruel, but...do you feel like you've broken up with him?"

"...I don't want to think about it like that." He answered, and lifted off the wall to stand more straight. With arms still around him, he lifted his own over his partner's shoulders, and looked into those warm eyes, "...I never agreed to be with him because I wanted to be. I feel like you pulled me out of a terrible situation. One that he doesn't have a choice over."

"Does this mean I can have you back now?" The silver wondered, "I miss you. I feel I've lost part of you..."

"...I...think I know what you mean..." Yuri answered, "All this time, it's like I haven't had enough room in my head for us because he was taking up so much space... He felt like a squatter after so long. Occupying all my thoughts, worming his way through my mind by sitting at the edge of all those old memories." He explained, and pulled his right hand back to look at the gold that wrapped around his finger, the only ring he ever wanted to see. He dreaded to pull his left hand back, as though the imprint of the other would still be there, "...How did you get me to see his ring?"

"Soda-can ring." The Russian answered simply, "I used my keys to make it round, but it was still pretty tight. I didn't mean to leave a mark."

Yuri finally looked, and saw a meager pink mark that slid up from the middle joint to where the 'ring' would've sat, "It's like you had to rip it off of me." He commented quietly, rubbing his thumb around it, "...It's like it was real."
"I want you to feel safe in yourself again. The mask is gone, he's gone...do you feel like I was able to evict him from your headspace?"

It took a moment for Yuri to answer. He felt himself doing a mental inventory, checking every corner of memory and experience for traces of that spurned devotee. There was nothing though. That face and voice only ever appeared in the memory-scapes he was entitled to; the ones he was meant to be in. Seeing him there didn't even make Yuri's heart seize anymore. Instead, he could feel it flutter a bit, knowing he could choose to put those memories back where he found them, and nothing would follow him out as he looked around the real world again. The face before him looked more real than it had in weeks, "...It's like I've stepped out of a thick fog, and you were there waiting for me, holding up the lantern that helped me find my way home again."

"That's perfect," Viktor hummed, and leaned closer to find a light kiss. "Welcome back, my love."
The hot iron dome sizzled with everything from zucchini slices to squid, giving rise to a delectable white steam. Bowls of rice and miso soup were doted on as each bit of grilled food came and went on the black cast iron. Yurio still fumbled with his chop-sticks, but managed to get a piece of pork slice to the griddle without dropping it.

"I'm still a bit foggy on what exactly you guys did back there." Nikki commented, turning her yellow squash and chicken over, "."It's like some weird play you pulled outta your butts."

"Not entirely, but mostly." Viktor mused, swapping squid for steak on his side, "Other than the stuff I free-styled, most of it was pretty much coming from memory, since we'd all lived through the real event already."

"Yuri's never been with Asahi though. How real could it have been?"

Yuri looked up out of his thick ceramic tea-cup, but didn't say a word.

"The circumstance was real. All three of us were at the Sochi Grand Prix Final, where I decided to host this adventure." Viktor explained, "Well, three of us as in us three, the SkateFam. Saito wasn't there. We kind of cobbled together a scenario where he could've been there, by having Nishigori as a stand-in."

"Why'd you pick that event?"

"It was the first time Yuri and I really spoke to one another." The silver answered, pausing the squid-dip into its sauce so he could lean aside to give an affectionate nuzzle to his beloved, "And we had the most available players to make it believable. Assuming Yuri isn't drunk, he usually remembers things pretty well...and myself aside, that was the first time Yuri met your brother, too."

"...It was a memorable encounter." Yuri mumbled into his cup, and tipped the bottom up to take a sip. With a good long nap behind him, Yuri could feel some relief in his sinuses, and could finally speak in a more normal tone.

"Oh my gosh I'm sorry!" Yurio sighed in annoyance, slumping back into his seat, "A thousand times already!"

"It's fine. It helped." Viktor calmed him, "Having you come at him like you did back then made it easy to put Yuri on the defensive. It was a quick way to set the mood. Plus, Yuri had never really been in the lime-light before then, so all around, that day was a great jumping point."

"I feel like you guys went out of your way to make Asahi look as horrible as possible." Nikki half-complained, "I don't think he deserved that portrayal."

Viktor held quiet for a moment, but then shrugged slightly as he turned his proteins, "Nishigasahi barely had any lines. It wasn't even really him that was the focal point of all this. It was Yuri, and how he felt about it all."

"...Asahi has poor interpersonal skills." Yuri added, "If anything's ever been brutally true about him, it's that no matter how well-meant his intentions are, at least with me, it nearly never goes the way he means for it to. Even in those really dark moments where I really felt like we'd been together all that
time, I never once thought Asahi was trying to be abusive. It just...turned out that way, because of how I am. I doubt he was much different with Riku, and Riku seemed to thrive on that kind of thing."

"We don't know what Riku thought though." The silver teen pointed out, "All we have are second-hand accounts from biased sources."

"True, but the big thing here is that Riku wanted to be with Asahi. Yuri never did." Viktor countered, chewing on a bit of squid from before, "On top of that, at least before I came along, Yuri had never had feelings for another guy. It was."

"Just Yuko." Yuri said for himself, "Which is why this whole thing got so upsetting for me. She'd just told me that she knew about how I felt the whole time. I always thought she'd been oblivious. She said she just wanted to live her life - and I don't begrudge her that, I understand - but at least for me, I feel like that could've been handled differently. Asahi may not give up easily, but I would've. I mean, sure, it would've hurt more in the moment, but I wouldn't have felt like I was being driven from home to avoid her life."

"But, for the sake of saying so," Viktork interjected, "If it hadn't been for how she chose to deal with it back then, our now probably wouldn't have happened, so I, for one, am glad she decided to prolong your torment."

"...Don't get me wrong, I am, too..." Yuri agreed, "I just...didn't like that she insinuated I was no different than Asahi in that regard. I'm nothing like him."

"Understatement of the year," Yurio chortled between bites of steak strip, "Mr. I'm gonna get good enough to go to the Final and meet Viktor but then I'm gonna run away when I do."

"Baby steps." Yuri shrugged, "The Final was easier to manage than my nerves about meeting someone I'd practically been worshipping since I was 12."

Viktor smiled, "And therein lies the key to all this; Yuri's emotional state. Asahi could've done everything just like I do, but because Yuri didn't want to be with him, it was nothing short of torture to endure it anyway. Yuri felt in his heart that he would've faded from all notice if he'd gone that way, to the point where he could be overlooked in plain sight, even by people who knew him."

"...I couldn't even speak." Yuri added, looking sullenly at his plate, and the bits of chicken and leek cooling on it, "My throat felt paralyzed. It was like I hadn't made a sound in years, and I don't think that was a side-effect of the fact that I had a cold going into this. I tried to speak, but I couldn't."

"That must've been after you guys left." Nikki surmised, but then turned to Yurio beside her, "Or at least after you asked for him to blink twice for you."

"Did you?" Viktor wondered, "Blink twice, I mean."

"He did." Yurio confirmed.

Yuri glanced down and away, "...I did?"

"Yeah, but it was fast." He answered, adding a big pile of beef to his side of the iron cooking dome, "I'm not even sure you noticed it at the time. Now I know you didn't. That's sad."

"You said I looked like a corpse, and asked if I wanted to be put back in the ground." Yuri retorted, brows furrowed.
The blonde just gave an awkward smile, "I played my part. Viktor said to go Full Asshole."

"Mhhh..." Yuri paused a moment to deadpan the teen - spotting Viktor trying to look innocently inconspicuous to the side - but then let himself continue, poking at his food with his chopsticks as he spoke, "All I knew in that moment was that I would've rather died than keep going like I had been. I don't want to imagine the things I knew had happened to me, but make no mistake, it left a deep mark on me. I didn't even feel like a person anymore...just a possession. I still have a bit of a tingle going down my spine to think about it. I'm just glad that when I woke up from it all, I knew I hadn't actually endured all that stuff for real. I felt it, but it was more like a bruise, not the psychological amputation it had been."

"That's kind of like how I felt when I had that dream on the way to Russia." Viktor commented, "It was so vivid...it was like I'd entirely relived those months. I knew that wasn't the case when I woke up, but at least for the time...it felt real."

"Wish I could've had your dream instead of the one I got." Yuri grumbled.

"I'd take your place in a heartbeat if I could."

"I know..."

"So what happened after you guys left?" Nikki wondered, "I got the gist that you'd left the event together, but I don't know where you went next."

"Well, literally speaking, I took him to the gym recovery room." Viktor answered, pulling off the bits of steak he'd grilled, and added zucchini sticks in their place to warm up in the juices, "But in the story, it was back to the rooms assigned to Team Russia. Yuri still wouldn't speak though...in his dream-theater, Saito had complete control over Yuri's communications." He looked aside to his husband, "...Can you really see iMessages if you log into your Apple ID on a tablet...?"

Yuri nodded. "Wow... That's disturbing." The silver puffed, brow contorting disapprovingly, "Far be it for me to judge how someone thinks they're protecting their lover, but damn. Either you trust someone or you don't, right?"

Again, Yuri nodded, "I can't say what he would've thought he was doing. I just got this sense in my gut that I would've been cut off from people. He refused to come out until last month though, so maybe it was just an extension of that... Maybe he thought he was protecting me from the cruelties of people who disapproved, like he had to deal with. It just kind of got out of control."

"Maybe." Viktor supposed, reaching his left hand forward for his drink to take a sip before laying that whole arm behind his husband's shoulders, resting it on the back of the younger man's chair, "When I mentioned that Chris had said you'd vanished for years, I was just kind of playing off the fact that he'd known you both for so long, and dislikes Saito personally. I got the impression from you that you hadn't spoken to your family either though."

"That's the feeling I got as well." Yuri agreed, reaching up to catch his mate's thumb between his fingers, and leaned into the Russian's side.

"Why would he stop you from talking to your family though?" Nikki asked, aghast at the idea, "That's just mean. I don't think he would've done that to you."

"No, you're right." Yuri said, looking directly across the table to the feisty little lady, "That would've been my doing. A consequence of the stuff he did. I may have been competitive in the rink, but on
my own - and especially without Viktor - I was the kind of person that gave up easily, and withdrew from things. Before Viktor came, I had given up, losing myself in the hazy blur of finishing school just to get it done, and then coming back to Japan without a plan for how I'd get back into skating...or if I even could." He explained, eyes turning downward again as the shame slid back into him, "I'm surprised I didn't imagine myself being really overweight though. Under that kind of pressure, I feel like I would've been stress-eating a lot, but I imagined I was even thinner than I am now. Like, unhealthy thin."

"I kind of had that mental image, too." Viktor nodded, biting off a bit of the zucchini, held expertly in his chop-sticks. Yurio leered from across the table, trying to emulate the position of the man's fingers, but couldn't quite get it. "Especially given the commentary that you looked like a corpse. I always envision them to be rail-thin, like someone who'd died of starvation."

"Well, the whole thing felt like it sucked the life out of me...maybe I stopped eating, too. No will to live."

"Yeah..."

Yuri leaned his head back against the shoulder behind himself, "How'd you manage to get a soda-can ring on my finger so you could take it off later though?"

"Oh... I snuck it on there when I had your hand but you weren't looking." The silver answered, kissing that very-kissable forehead while it was near, "Nishigori made a point to hide your hand from sight when he held it up, so you wouldn't see that I hadn't put it on yet."

"It still felt like it was there..."

"I imagine it did. It must've felt like a ball and chain."

"The kind with barbs that dig into my skin if I move." Yuri added grimly, "I really thought it wouldn't come off."

"Admittedly, I got a bit nervous that it wouldn't either." Viktor laughed dubiously, "It really would've killed my narrative if I couldn't get it off of you again."

"So you had that whole story planned out?"

"It planned itself." Viktor explained, reaching for his drink again and took a sip, "I had the pieces, but the words came into being as I went. All I knew was that I had to convince you that I was stepping into things, and I was going to make you leave him. So, the pop-tab being so tight kind of worked out in my favor, because it helped lend credence to the idea that-"

"...Only you would be able to remove the ring." Yuri finished, realizing, "Because I couldn't get it off myself, and Asahi wouldn't have done it for me. ...It had to be you."

"Because I'm your soul-mate~!" Viktor teased, setting his cup down again so he could snog his beloved, "Only I could save you~!"

Eating stopped on the other side of the table as innocent young eyes beheld the awkward sight of two grown men kissing one another rather fondly. Yurio gaped, but then turned, beef strip hanging from his lips. Nikki just raised her brows, pursed her lips, and looked at the wall awkwardly.

"That's so gross." Yuri complained quietly, only to get elbowed for it, "Hey!"

"It's a loving display deal with it!" His sister scolded, "Bepoliteohmygosh!"
"HE'S SICK! THERE'S BOOGERS! EVERYWHERE!" Yurio retorted, dramatically displaying the duo even as he kept his hands close to himself, "IT'S GROSS!"

"When *you* get married, all your spouse's boogers are your own boogers." Viktor teased, "And they're salty."

"GROSS."

Yuri just rubbed his nose, "...I thought my meds finally kicked in though... I'm not even leaking right now."

"You were asleep for four hours. If anything, they might be wearing off at this point." Viktor said, "But maybe this is a good sign. So far as I know, you didn't wander around during your nap. Maybe you'll finally sleep the night without getting up."

"Four hours..." Yuri echoed, fishing for more of his dinner then, "I wish I could've dreamt about that train ride to St. Petersburg."

"We would've fallen in love on the way." The silver explained happily, "And I would've gotten you back on the ice. I would've made it my mission to get you onto the podium, and prove that you never should've been relegated to the nosebleed section."

"And Asahi could've gone on to find Riku, and Riku wouldn't have died, so they could go and be happy together. Away from us."

Viktor huffed a smile, "Still thinking of his wellbeing, even after your waking nightmare."

"I don't hold it against him that we're the worst for each other. I *want* for him to be happy...just, somewhere else."

"I'm okay with this story."

With dinner done and stuffed away, the slow drive back to Yu-Topia commenced. The river snaked by, broken up by the occasional lamp post or dwelling, until it vanished entirely from sight behind tightly backed rows of houses and businesses. They passed through the last set of lights, and made that final turn into the parking lot, coming to a stop directly in front of the doors.

Yuri stepped out on his side and pulled the seat forward so the back-seat occupants could disembark. Once vacated, he put his seat back, and turned to bid the pair goodnight. Yurio already had his arm out though, "...Feels like it's been a really long time since we hugged." Yuri commented, reaching his arms around the thin teen, "Thanks for helping Viktor with my dumb brain tonight."

"I've seen weirder stuff." He commented, "Like using mirrors to get people with missing limbs to 'unclench' the one that's gone, to relieve pain."

"I've heard of that." Yuri agreed, letting go just long enough to find Nikki waiting for her own, and he smiled, "I didn't even think to ask if you had any role in the craziness."

"...Not exactly?" She answered, giving a tight hug, "I kind of did my part by staying out of the way, and I kept the dogs occupied."

"Thanks for keeping them out of trouble for us. I'm sure they're wondering why we took them home, only for us to leave again without them." Yuri mused, pulling his arm back as he put one foot back
into the car, "We better get back and make sure they haven't lost their little fuzzy minds."

"We'll see you guys again tomorrow maybe?"

"Probably." He nodded, "Minako-sensei and Mik are coming back, too. Do you think you'll still want to do a second birthday party since they showed up last night?"

Nikki shook her head, "Unless papa's already arranged something, I'm good with what we had yesterday." She explained, and leaned down to wave at her cousin, "G'night Viktor-juukei~!"

Viktor's smile twitched, and he whispered out the corner of his mouth, "Yuri, what's the word fo-

"Juu mei."

"Oyasuminasai, Nikki-juumei~!" Viktor laughed, waving, "Dobroj noči, Yuri."

"Bye nerds."

Yuri smiled, and sat back down into his warm seat, "Have a good night, guys. See you later."

With more waves exchanged, the young pair of teens backed up towards the sliding doors, and gradually made their way inside. Once the panel was set back into place though, Yuri pulled his seatbelt across, and reached over to find his husband's hand, "Viktor..." He said quietly, grabbing the man's attention as he put the car into reverse. With those blue eyes on him, Yuri brought up his free hand and gently set it to that pale left cheek, rubbing his thumb across it softly, "I can't put into words how much I appreciate what you've done for me...and put up with... I'm sorry for what I've made you go through."

"You're worth every bit of it." The silver insisted, stealing a faint touch to nose-tips between them, and pressed his palm to the back of that cool hand warming on his skin, "Your hurt is my hurt. I'd do anything for you to be happy."

"And I you." Yuri answered, closing his eyes, and leaned in closer to find the softness of a kiss between them.
Sitting in bed, with his MacBook Air on the blankets covering his lap, Yuri perused the internet while Viktor showered. He finally got caught up on everything that had been going on with both of his Instagram accounts since Euros, including the photo gallery the triplets had put together of their Exhibition there. The comments section went on for ages, and Yuri smiled, knowing it would be impossible to thank everyone for their kind words, but he typed anyway, adding his and Viktor's appreciation on the main post. Over on 'Pups of Nikiforov,' there was a good deal of excitement over pup number three, and he reached over to rub the noggin of that very boober lying on the blankets next to his legs.

"You'll be free of the boob balloon pretty soon, don't worry." He mused, getting that fuzzy brow to lift as she listened, "You'll feel right at home in Colorado, too. Hasetsu is pretty soggy in winter, but in Colorado, there's snow as far as the eye can see. You're built for that kind of weather, so you'll like it. Hasetsu doesn't get too hot in the summer either, and since we're right next to the water, you can play in the surf to cool off."

Jiro's legs twitched as he snoozed against Viktor's pillow, tongue sticking out under his nose. Makkachin lifted his head and leaned in slightly to sniff at the little Akita, but then lowered down again to go back to dozing, making his human's spot warm for when he came back. Yuri reached over to give them both a gentle scrritch.

"I don't think I've felt this relaxed in a while..." He commented, closing the laptop before setting it aside, putting it next to his phone on the nightstand. He sat back and slid a bit further under the blankets, pulling it up just under his arms, and looked up at the ceiling, "...I don't know how Viktor does it, but he's gotten so much better with me... I don't know how things would've worked out if Asahi had come back to skating last year instead of this year... Definitely wouldn't have won the Silver at the Final...may not have even qualified."

"Don't let yourself go there." Viktor warned gently, rubbing his dark, steely-grey wet hair on a towel as he came out of the bathroom, and clicked the light off, "Your mind needs a break from the terrors you put it through."

Yuri let out a sigh, "Doesn't it though?" He wondered idly, eyes following his robed husband around the bed, and he turned onto his side as Viktor sat down, "I have something better for you then."

"Oh?" The silver wondered, running his fingers through his hair as he set the towel down, "What is it?"

"Morooka-san sent an email. He wants to arrange a pre-Olympic interview with us when we get back from the States."

"Just us? Not Saito?"

Yuri shook his head, "Just us. He said they were doing their interview with Asahi tomorrow, before hopping on a plane for 4CCs."

Viktor paused a moment, lifting the towel up again to dry his ears and contemplate, but he smiled and fluffed the towel out again before folding it over his lap, "Sounds good to me then. Where's it going to be?"
"At the Ice Castle. We can reveal which programs we'll be using for the Team event."

"Are you satisfied with what you've picked?"

"Eh?"

Viktor let the bathrobe slide off his shoulders, revealing his shoulders and back before he leaned down, head coming to rest just in front of his husband's chest. He raised his arms up and draped the right over the man's blanket-covered waist, just barely having enough room to squeeze his elbow next to Ghost. The other arm went between Jiro and Yuri's pillows, fingers moving up to brush the back of a few knuckles against his spouse's cheek, "I expect Morooka to ask why I don't un-retire my 'Evoke' program, given how many records I broke when I skated it last. You did much the same thing skating your 'Aria' at the Nationals Exhibition."

"I would never dream to skate 'Aria' competitively. That's your program. I could only ever do it at an Exhibition or for fun." Yuri answered easily, softly setting his palm to the back of that nearest hand, and felt fingers weave with his own, "Do you have an answer planned if Morooka asks?"

"Just that my mindset has changed since I did that program, and I no longer have the right motivation to do it the way it needs to be done. I want to skate for love and hope and fun again, not for frustration and anger." Viktor answered, smiling as Yuri leaned down over his brow to softly nose at his hair, "Besides...I'm doing the Short Program for our Team event. I can't do 'Evoke' in that time span anyway...so I'll bring out my own SP big-gun. My hope is that no one asks about 'Evoke' at all."

"'Phillia' will be a crowd-pleaser, that's for sure." Yuri agreed, speaking the words against his partner's forehead, "That music will get everyone going. I'm really excited for it."

"Do you want to spend the whole time at the Games or do you want to come back?" The silver wondered, relishing in those soft intimate touches, closing his eyes as he felt one hand slide down the front of his chest, "There's days between each event..."

"Guess it depends..."

"We've been to PyeongChang before...so it's not like we don't know what's there."

"We didn't really do any sight-seeing last time we went. The grounds weren't finished with construction yet either. There's bound to be more to do this time." Yuri pointed out, drawing idle circles onto his husband's skin with the tip of one finger, "Maybe if it gets too hectic though...we can come home after the Singles Free Program. It'll be more than a week until the Gala afterwards."

"And you don't mind that we do solo shows there?" Viktor wondered, lifting his face to softly nose his beloved's chin and jawline.

"No, of course not. Why would I?"

"I don't know. These are the things I prefer to worry about. Skating, practice, costumes, music... As much as I enjoy our duets, it's nice sometimes to just get to watch you from rink-side, too, and bask in the satisfaction of seeing how beautifully you skate."

Yuri's cheeks went pink, and he gave a nervous laugh, "...I'll admit, it's been a while since you've used that kind of language on me, but it's nice to know that our odd experiences this year haven't soured your sense of poetry."

"It had been dulled a little bit...but you spoiled me at Nationals with your two solo shows, and kind
of reinvigorated me. I'm still not over how unique and fresh your first performance was."

"You were super skeptical when I proposed it."

"Because I'd never seen it before. Even after all these years, there's still new and exciting things to discover."

Yuri let out a dramatic sigh, and pulled off to lay down on his back again, staring up at the ceiling, "I wish I could say I was the first to think of it...but I'm afraid others beat me to it."

Viktor pushed up onto his elbows and looked back over his shoulder, but then carefully slipped out of the remains of his bathrobe - hanging it on the post of the headboard behind him, with the towel joining it - cut off the lamp-light, and slid under the blankets, nudging Makkachin over a little bit to make room for his legs. He pulled Jiro down off the pillow and cuddled the puppy against his chest, laying his head down in the warm spot the Akita had just been in, and kissed his husband's shoulder, "It was new to me so you get all the credit."

Jiro yawned a whiny puppy-yawn and licked his nose tiredly, but then wiggled free and moved down the bed slightly until he could squeeze into the cuddle-puddle between Ghost and Makkachin. Both skaters watched the lil booger go, and smiled as he flopped down to go back to sleep. Yuri dropped his head back down to his pillow, and tilted to look at his partner, "Getting a big crowded up here."

"I wouldn't have it any other way." Viktor answered, "This life is so completely different than anything I thought I'd ever have. Not even counting the stray family members who've come into it...or recently left it forever... All of this is beyond what I ever could've asked for."

"It has turned out pretty well, all things considered." Yuri agreed, and reached back to turn the light off on his own side of the bed. Pawing back through the dark, he went looking for his spouse, feeling around for where he thought the man had just been, "Did you move?"

"A little bit." The silver mused, lying still as hands went seeking for him, trying to figure out where on his body those fingers landed, "What part are you looking for?" He laughed, deftly tracing his fingertips along the forearm draped over him.

"Trying to find your head. It was just here a second ago..."

"You're getting warmer...warmer...warghk."

"There you are." Yuri teased, realizing he'd managed to stick two fingers into his husband's mouth by mistake. He pulled them back though and moved in to kiss him instead, "Mmhhh... Remember that time you did that to me in the rink?"

"I've done a lot of things to you in the rink." Viktor sputtered, drying his chin with his free hand, and wrapped both arms around that skinny frame as Yuri came up to rest his head on his chest.

"Nationals last year, right as I was about to go skate 'Eros.' I'd put my finger under your chin, and then you pulled the whole thing into your mouth, being really naughty."

Thinking for a second, the Russian then laughed and gave a squeezed hug, "Oh yeah! I was really naughty with you right before your 'Eros' performance at Worlds, too."

"Were you naughty at Four Continents...?"

"Sort of...?" He answered quizzically, "I told you to skate like you wanted me to come out onto the
ice and make love to you in front of everyone."

"Oh right... Then after, you said you'd rip my clothes off, if you could."

"If you were wearing anything else in that moment, I totally would've tried."

Yuri laughed, and turned his face down to kiss that bare chest, sliding in to get closer - or as close as he could, given the pile of dogs between their legs, "Yeah, we wouldn't want to mess up the costume."

"I kind of got you in the end..." The silver thought, "Rather recently anyway, when I got to lift you up off the ice by your butt."

Yuri could feel his cheeks turn pink again as he recalled that moment, and how he'd covered his face in embarrassment, ",...I thought you were about to mention our drunk game of Snap again."

"It crossed my mind, but you weren't skating at the time."

"Guess so."

"Yuri."

"Hm?" He wondered, turning his face upward again, and felt the warmth of a kiss he couldn't see.

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

Yurio yawned widely as he came down from the bathroom on the second floor, towel on his head and a loose robe hanging from his shoulders. Slippers and long boxer-shorts completed the 'Monday Morning' look, and he trudged his way to the common-room, expecting to find his sisters there looking just as eager as he was to start the day.

He found a different duo though.

"...What in the world are you two doing here this early?"

In synchronicity, Yuri and Viktor both twisted where they’d slumped down over a table, "Hi." They both said eerily, looking rather disappointed about something. Their pups surrounded them, and Makkachin trotted over to the soggy teen, licking his hand before prancing away again.

"It's like 7am. You guys shouldn't even be awake yet." Yurio prodded, all but stomping over towards their low table, and pointed at each of them rather dramatically, "Explain."

"We're here to beg for help from anyone who can give it." Viktor explained blearily, hair somewhat messy, like he hadn't bothered brushing it before getting out of bed.

"Help? What for?"

"Who needs help?" Viktoria's voice came quietly from just beyond the doorway, and the trio looked back to see her, followed closely by her half-asleep younger sister.

"Why is Ghost wearing a life-preserver...?" Nikki asked, blinking one eye at a time as she stared in her fog.
"It's not a life-preserver..." Viktor answered.

"It's a boob balloon." Yuri explained, completely seriously.

The three teens just blinked at them in confusion, "...Oookay."

"It's better than a cone of shame." He elaborated, pushing to lift off the table and reached over to scratch the dog's head, "It keeps her from being able to bother her incision while it heals. I'm wondering if she even needs it though, cuz she hasn't really tried."

"Not that we've seen anyway." Viktor added, and pushed up to sit somewhat normally again, too. Makkachin perched on his shoulders, panting softly as he looked around the room, and Viktor reached up to rub a paw between his fingers, "Anyway though...it's Ghost that we actually need help with. We...had an unpleasant email waiting for us when we got up."

The triad of teenagers moved over to sit at the short table, tired but curious. Yurio quickly realized he'd sat where he probably shouldn't have - using Yuri's shoulder to help ease his descent - only to hear Jiro starting to yap at him from under the table. He moved to the corner instead, and the smol Akita seemed satiated enough to quiet down again, going back to chewing on his textured rubber bone.

"So what's the email got to do with yoooooouur dog?" Viktoria asked, being oddly chatty compared to normal, but yawning her last words anyway.

"Our flight to Colorado tomorrow..." Viktor started, turning to look at the bespoken canine, "We had to give the airline all the health documents before travel, which is fine...but they're not too thrilled about taking a dog for such a long ride who's just had surgery. They're saying we can't bring her."

"...And I just told her last night that she'd love it in Colorado, too..." Yuri whined.

"I don't think she speaks English." Nikki suggested, trying to sound reassuring, "...I mean, if she speaks anything, it'd be Russian, right?"

Th'Mp

Viktor pat his husband's back, even as the smoke trailed over Yuri's head from where he'd dropped his forehead down onto the table. Nikki winced, but didn't offer any other 'helpful suggestions.' She did look up though as she heard the sound of the resort's front doors sliding open, and rose up to her feet, stepping over to the door into the foyer to see who it was.

"Mornin' sunshine." He teased, giving a hug while his daughter was there.
"Uuhhhhhhhgg...the morning is evil." She whined into his sweater.

"Come along then, let's go sit."

"How are you this cheerful this early? Are you a wizard?"

"Wouldn't that be a feat?" Mikhail mused, turning his currently-oldest-present child around by her shoulders and nudged her back into the room, with Nikki and a sleepy Minako following close behind. He plunked the teen down and sat on the short end of the table, looking at two faces he hadn't expected to see, as well as their canine entourage, "You're here early."

"We came to beg my parents." Yuri answered, lifting his forehead off the table, with the light red circular mark where he'd bonked it, "To watch Ghost for us while we're gone."

"Eh?"

"The airline won't take her cuz she just got spayed." Viktor clarified, disappointed, "Because she'd be unsupervised in the cargo hold. They think it's a liability to let her fly."

"...Oh. Well, that sucks."

"My parents don't know Ghost that well though and I don't want to just assume they'll say yes. When we left Makkachin and Jiro before, they'd at least had time to get to know them first." Yuri added, rubbing the sore spot, "I feel bad springing this on them so early..."

"Why are you two even awake right now? Minako and I are only conscious cuz the kids have to do their school stuff."

"'Conscious' is a term being used loosely." The ballerina pointed out, "I am here against my will."

Viktor reached over and put a hand on her shoulder, looking rather serious, "I completely understand."

"...We were really excited about getting to take her with us, too." Yuri whined again, squishing his cheek against the wood instead, "I really don't want to leave her here when we're taking Jiro and Makkachin...that would be so unfair. Even dogs understand fairness... She'd feel left out if we just took off without her."

Mikhail nodded as he listened, but then something made him smirk and rub his chin. He turned his head towards Minako and gave a knowing wink, then turned back to the table, "I may have a solution."

"...I don't think you can bribe the airline to let Ghost onto the plane." Viktor said, eyes narrowed skeptically.

"Who said anything about them?" The elder quipped, twisting as he reached for his phone from his tablet bag. He started tapping the screen, and then held the device up to his ear, "Let me see if I can pull this off."

The whole table was gaping at him in confusion, unable to hear the dial-tone, never mind whoever answered.

"Hey, sorry to call you so late. I need to put in a favor." Mikhail started casually, "I need the Jaguariundi in Japan, as close as you can get it to Hasetsu, as soon as it can get here." He said, pausing a moment as someone on the other end responded. He nodded a few times, his smirk ever-
present, "That's great. Sorry to spring this on you short-notice. ...No, that's perfect, let me know when you're here."

All eyes watched as the phone was clicked off and set face-down on the table.

Nikki was the first to ask though, "...What's a Jaguarundi?"

"A wildcat that lives in the Amazon rainforest." Yurio puffed, "Looks like a cougar with an otter's head."

"Yes, but no." Mikhail sniggered, feeling rather proud of himself. He crossed his arms and set his elbows on the table in front of himself, but then waggled a finger at his kids, "This is a one-time thing. Don't get used to it. I'm only doing this because Viktor and Yuri are in a bind."

"...What did you do?" They collectively asked.

"I own a successful business. I may or may not have a few really neat toys, out there in the world. One of them...is a private jet."

"YOU HAVE A JET?!?" Nikki and Yurio both barked at the same time, all but jumping onto the table in surprise.

"Yes yes, simmer down. Sit. Chill." He said, waving his hands down to get them back to the ground, "It's a business plane, so it's not like we can just keep it here to use whenever there's a competition. But...this one time, I can make an exception."

"If it's a plane for your business, how can you just commandeer it like this...?" Yuri asked skeptically, feeling his heart thumping hard in his chest.

"It's a business plane, but it's still my plane. I am the God Emperor of my company. When I say jump, people ask how high. It's pretty simple."

"...You still sounded pretty reasonable when you were on the phone, Mimi." Viktor pointed out, still skeptical.

"The thing about the MikTocracy is that I like to give the appearance of there being an option to say no. People respond more readily when they think they have a choice. But, anyone who's ever had a job knows that when the boss says to do something, you do it, even if he or she asks nicely and says please."

Viktor felt a twinge in his gut, "...And those who don't, get fired."

"Well...yeah. That's..." Mikhail started, understanding too readily what his nephew had just done, "...Yeah."

"But then you find a new boss who fits better, and the same quality work gets done without the odd tension." Yuri interjected, putting his hand on the curve of his husband's thigh, "Maybe it's even better than before."

"Yuri's right. People do better work when they get along with their peers and managers." Mikhail agreed, "Which is why I like to be the fun boss. People who like working for me will feel less burdened by my odd or short-notice requests. This is hardly the first time I've done something like this though. Sometimes even business deals have to happen within a couple days. When you're bidding on contracts, and you gotta go, if you can't go fast, you don't go at all."
"...I'm probably the only one here who feels weird about this." Viktor pointed out nervously, "It just seems too good to be true. I mean, how many people have rich uncles in their back pocket, you know?"

"Maybe not most people, but you do." Mikhail shrugged, "It's a sad fact of life that some people make it big and some people don't, even under the same circumstances. I got really lucky. Please don't feel guilty for having me as a resource."

"Don't make it weird! We've never gotten to go on his jet before!" Nikki whispered from her side of the table, "This is a great way to start a family trip!"

Yuri smiled, though awkwardly, and sat a bit closer to his tense partner, taking the man's arm into his grip, "There's nothing wrong with accepting a little help. It's not like Mik's going to send you a gas bill later or something, especially not since he's coming too, and so is everyone else. This'll be a fun trip. Besides, this way, you get all the leg-room you want!"

Though still a bit anxious, Viktor managed a smile, and turned to offer an adoring nuzzle, "You always know how to cheer me up." He said fondly, then looked back to his uncle, "Alright... I guess we'll all be traveling to 4CCs together."
"The *Jaguarundi* is a Gulfstream G650 type jet." Mikhail explained, looking up a photo of one on his tablet just for reference. He turned it around to show it to the others at the table, slowly rotating its face so everyone could get a good look, "Mine's got a bit of custom painting on it beyond the identifying marks on the outside. At the present, this jet has the farthest range of any small aircraft in the world, but we'll still have to take a rest-stop in Anchorage."

"...Why Anchorage?" Yuri wondered, holding Jiro in his lap, the pup's snoot resting on the table before them. Yurio was able to go back to his originally-intended spot at the end of the table, now that the smol Akita was in no position to argue about it with him.

"It's *about* halfway between here and Colorado Springs." The elder explained, "If we could just fly a straight line across the world then we could easily do it in a one-shot, but the planet rotates and there's wind, so the near-arctic route is the better choice."

"...Is it even *safe* to land in Alaska at this time of year?"

"Sure. Winter is the default setting there most of the time, so they have tech and technique available to manage the runways even in snowy conditions. They rarely close for weather."

"That's good."

Mikhail nodded, putting his tablet down again, "I'll need to send my pilots the same medical information you gave to Air Japan though. Can one of you two email it or something?"

Viktor nodded and pulled his phone out, "Yeah, I have it all here."

"When do you think it'll get here?" Yuri wondered, "Do you think it'll be long? This is *really* short notice..."

"My fleet has pretty good credentialing so it w-"

"FLEET?" Nikki and Yurio again blurted out, "As in more than one!?"

Mikhail deadpanned them, "...Yes, more than one. What kind of business do you think I run? A dog and pony show?"

"HOW MANY!?" They both barked, eyes wide in abject fascination.

"Two. The other one is smaller and shorter-range so it's used for same-continent travel. That was the one I had first, so it's a bit older. I got the G650 about 4 years ago."

"...How much does a private jet even cost?" Viktor asked, "Even a single flight must be absurdly expensive..."

Yuri made a face and nudged his husband's cross-armed frame, "What's this? *You're* suddenly worried about expenses? I thought that was *my* flex."

"Nothing in life is ever free; I've told you *that* before."

"And *I've* told you that those who benefit aren't always the ones who pay." Mikhail pointed out,
leaning onto his elbows again, "The jet was about (US)$55 million, after customization. This flight'll cost around (US)$350,000 for to get there and back, buuuuut it'll cost me twice that since I'm basically chartering them twice. Once to get here, and take us to the States, then a second time to get us back to Japan, and send the plane back home."

Viktor deadpanned his uncle severely, "You seem particularly not bothered by that."

"If you had to spend a single dollar out of ten grand that you had, would that bother you?"

"...No."

Mikhail shrugged, "That's how I feel about it. My company profits about (US)$20 million a day. There's multiple big projects going on around the world at any given time, as well as the equipment we build and sell to others. Since the jet is a business asset, and I'm using it in my capacity as a sponsor, I'm not even really spending my own money, but the company's. The only reason I don't personally use it more often is because little jets give off an insane amount of greenhouse gas, and if my obsession with hybrid cars is any indication, I'm not a fan of contributing to a planetary problem. As soon as there's a viable alternative, I'll sell those two planes and buy the green jets."

Viktoria half-glared over at her father over the rim of her morning coffee, "...Who's gonna be running the company when you retire?"

"I don't really think of it as a family dynasty, if that's what you're asking." He explained, "But if you happen to want to go to school for engineering and business management, colloquially referred to as CEO academy, then we can talk about you getting to be part of upper management. Even I don't run the thing by myself, especially not now. Investors play a huge role in decision making, and my board is mostly run by them. I like my company, but I hate advertising and marketing, so I need others to do that for me. I'm more like...a hunter, pointing at things I want and sending the hounds after it. I've never allowed them to own more than 50% of the company though. That's a great way for them to say 'congrats, you succeeded; now you're fired.' The Saitos in Imari didn't have that kind of acumen though, and they gave up too much control too quickly, probably thinking it was a great move. So, lesson one...pick your investors carefully, and don't say yes to anyone who insists on having too much power. They're supposed to invest in you, not consume you."

The teen just blinked slowly, "...That's too many words for this early in the morning." She said dryly, putting her cup down, and raised her hands back up for air-quotes, "'Not you' would've been easier to understand."

The elder just smiled, "Not you...unless you work for it."

Without the need to ask for help anymore, the trip back home was much more relaxed and upbeat than Yuri had expected. Spirits were high knowing that their entire pack would be able to go on their upcoming adventures, and excitement rose even higher because of the anticipation of a luxury, less-hassle, no-waiting flight. The 'pups of Nikiforov' and their humans arrived back home with their heads held high - though Ghost still kind of plodded along a bit slower than the rest. Yuri held the door as everyone went in, and closed it up behind them after the whole pack was inside, and their paws were all dried off.

"This is such a huge relief." Viktor commented, putting his things away as Yuri stepped in to begin disassembling, "I was pretty low after seeing that email, but now it's all turned out for the better."

"No kidding... Feels like we just barely got away with it though. I wish they'd given us earlier
notice.” Yuri grumbled as he pulled at the laces of his boots, "It's not like the airport only operates on weekdays. They had all weekend to figure this out, and they waited until the morning before we're supposed to leave to let us know they won't carry Ghost?"

"Yeah, it does seem a bit...delayed." Viktor agreed, leaning down to test the Ovcharka without her boob balloon, "Let's see how she reacts. If she doesn't try bothering her incision, then I think we can let her off the hook."

"Maybe that hydrating anti-itch pain-relief spray is really all she needed to forget there was anything done?" Yuri wondered, pulling off his first boot, "The vet said the itchiness from dried-out skin would be the biggest factor in her going after the stitches. If she can't really feel the difference, I guess it wouldn't draw her interest."

"Praise be to the added skin-glue, so we can actually use it on the area." Viktor mused, turning his attention to the bespoken-of dog as she started her low bark, looking at the door. Not a second later, a knock followed, and Viktor turned to carefully unlock the deadbolt and pulled it open.

"Ohayo gozaimasu." (Good morning) The figure on their stoop greeted, "Nikiforovu-san desu ka?" (Are you Mr. Nikiforov?)

"Hai, sou desu." (Yes, that's me.) The silver answered, putting his leg aside to block Ghost from getting out and barking even more. Makkachin and Jiro both held back next to Yuri, sitting with him on the wooden step that lead into the main part of the household. Jiro let out a pair of smaller barks, perhaps just to make noise in solidarity with his bigger and more actively-protective sister; being small left him feeling less brave. Makkachin just panted happily, tail sweeping the floor slowly behind himself.

"Haitatsu desu." (Delivery for you.) The postman declared, holding out a tall box, about a foot high and six inches across on all sides, "Nippon yuu-bin kabushiki-gaisha o go ryou itadaki arigatou gozaimasu." (Thank you for using the Japan Postal Service.)

Viktor took the package in his hand curiously, "Arigatou gozaimasu." He answered idly, bowing his head before turning to close the door and inspected the package more closely. For a moment, he was still too tired to realize what it was, but then...the lights flicked on upstairs and he gave a devious smile, "Do you realize what this is?"

"...My heart went into my throat as soon as I heard the knock." Yuri answered nervously, "Of course I know what it is. You said it would arrive today."

"I'm so excited, you don't even know." The silver nearly cackled, hopping by to get to the kitchen, followed by his poodle. Ghost stayed by the door to give a few more barks just for good measure, tail swaying slowly as she looked back around herself. Satisfied that the evil trespasser had fled, the fluffy guardian turned away from the door and slowly shuffled after Viktor as well, drawing Jiro's attention as she moved from the entry space to the raised wooden floor. The Russian had already grabbed a sharp implement by then and was cutting through the packing tape, and opened up the box to find his desired object inside, and laughed again, "This is perfect! I'm gonna go plug it in right now!"

Yuri could feel his face getting red again, watching his excited spouse vaulting up the stairs and disappearing from sight. He could hear the footsteps as they trotted along the floor above, and then silenced as Viktor entered their bedroom, no doubt seeking first for the outlet-convertor needed to power the foreign-bought device. When he heard the far-too-excited laughter from the upper level again though, he knew that Viktor must've found the convertor pretty quickly, and had already jammed their misbegotten toy onto it to warm for later. Yuri flopped down onto his back and stared
up at the high ceiling above him, only to spot Viktor looking back down at him from beyond the railing.

"It's getting ready." He said eerily, that devious look on his face adding to Yuri's nerves.

"...That's great." The younger figure answered, brows raised in a worried look even as he gave an uneasy smile.

"Oh bah, you're getting worked up about it already!"

Yuri blanched, his expression giving way to how he truly felt, "I can't help it! It's weird feeling like I have an appointment with sexy time. What if I'm not in the mood right now?"

Viktor pouted slightly, and leaned his chin into his palm where he slouched over the banister, "You've known in advance a bunch of times that we'd be having sexy time. What's so different about this?"

"...Other than the fact that it's barely after 8am and the only reason we're awake right now is cuz I made the mistake of leaving my alarm on, and then checked my email, thinking I'd go back to sleep right after?" Yuri deadpanned, getting a more severe pouty-face in answer to his edgy sarcasm, "...The other times we had scheduled sexy time were under different circumstances; reuniting after a while being apart, or getting ourselves going in one place and having to go somewhere private to finish. You know how much that thing has given me anxiety since I gave it to you. Just because it isn't going to feel like a glass of ice-water this time doesn't mean I'm over how much it intimidates me."

The Russian quirked an eyebrow at his beloved, "You know that the whole reason I suggested getting it in the first place was because you don't take me often enough, right?"

Yuri leveled him a look, "...I had my suspicions."

Viktor slouched over the wall, letting his arms dangle helplessly, "You're so content being the bottom in this relationship that I feel like it's unbalancing us. There's only so many things I can do to help you feel good in front, you know? Since you don't take care of yourself that much."

That brow waggled upward again, "I take care of myself plenty, usually because I know you like watching me do it. You even said how much it excited you to think that I'd just do so for no reason, and that you're practically waiting on baited breath for the moment when I get brave enough to go for it."

"Yeah but that's not the same thing." He answered, pulling his arms back to cross them on the flat top of the railing, "Moving your hips against or into something is a completely different experience from something moving on or over you. You have to know what I mean...you've taken me a handful of times. You only really got into it once... I have to assume it's because you were getting more out of it than normal."

Yuri pointed a finger up at his spouse, "Are you trying to suggest that you don't think you can please me anymore? Viktor Nikiforov?"

"It's crossed my mind." He puffed in response, eyes narrowed in embarrassment even as his brows went high in anxious admission, "Or at very least, that my methods were starting to bore you. I've done all the things that I know I liked doing on my own before finding you. The fact that we share the same anatomy means I'm the only experience I have in knowing how to please men. Unfortunately, it also means I know how easy it is... You and I are pretty simple creatures that way.
Trying to arouse women is an entirely different system. It takes a lot longer, and I always had the doubt that it was even really working; I've had enough lady friends admit that they sometimes pretend to climax just to be done with it, so they can go do things they actually enjoy. With you, all I have to do is rub a couple times and look. You can't fake arousal."

"I can't fake an orgasm either." Yuri said, cheeks darkening with embarrassment, "And I've never had to think about trying anyway. You've gotten me there every time."

Viktor stayed quiet a moment, hearing the echo of his and Chris' bleacher conversation from the Final bounce around inside his head.

"Sometimes he just...wants to be intimate because it makes him feel better in his head. He wanted that before we went to that pseudo-press-conference. But I just...I couldn't do a thing to please him, and it's been killing me." Viktor perched his elbows on the arm-rests and created something of a screen over his eyes where he laced his fingers together above them, pressing thumbs and the sides of his hands against his forehead, "It was so bad that even I couldn't finish... I've never had to fake it before with him, but for the sake of getting to that meeting on time..."

"Mh..."

Viktor grumbled a bit more, "He said he got what he needed out of it, but I feel like I lied to him anyway."

"Are you using condoms?" The Swiss figure asked point-blank, his expression not even changing as he spoke.

The Russian peeked out from under the veil of fingers, giving a confused look, "...No? We're exclusive. What difference does it make?"

"If you aren't, then he knows you didn't finish, and he isn't holding it against you."

"Maybe he just isn't admitting it." Viktor went back to his brooding posture.

Viktor sighed and pulled back out of sight, walking towards the opening to the stairwell, He never finished that time either. He probably doesn't even remember it, since it was just the morning after his injury. He paused on one step, shook his head to get rid of the odd feeling, and continued down. When he got to the first floor, Makkachin trotted by, and looked back at him after arriving to the others. Yuri had sat up in the time it took to come downstairs, but his back was still turned, looking down at his own feet.

"I know you're trying to keep things interesting," Yuri started, unsure if he should look back, "But you don't have to do that with me. Just the fact that we do make love is enough. It completely blows my mind every time we do it. You were always so completely out of reach to me, before... You remember how loudly I screamed when I first saw you here, right?" He asked nervously, looking to the edge of his shoulder, though not brave enough to look past it. He felt that Viktor had knelt down behind him, and scooted in closer to put knees around his seat, and threaded hands through the narrow gaps around his sides to hug him back into himself.

"I remember all the times you panicked and ran away from me, or refused to let me get close to you." The silver answered, speaking the words to the back of his husband's sweater, "You sent me away in
tears a few times."

Yuri felt a pain in his chest to hear it, but he said nothing.

"But all this resistance to a simple chunk of plastic and silicone makes me wonder if I'm still scaring you somehow."

"...It's...probably more a side-effect of my upbringing than it is me being intimidated and spooked by you." Yuri reluctantly answered, "Have you ever heard of that show '1000 Ways to Die'?"

"...Sort of?"

"There's...this stupid segment that I saw when I was living in Detroit. Phichit-kun thought it was hilarious, but I just thought it was rude and cruel... The segment was even so recklessly named that it made fun of my native tongue...Ichi-Boner."

Viktor had no open response, but his mind dissected it,...I guess it's a pun on Ichi-ban? Which means 'number one'...but in this context, I guess it's supposed to mean 'first erection'...? Or 'only one'?"

"It told the tale of this newly married couple who literally died of heart attacks because they were so terrified of having sex with each other, that their hearts literally gave out when they made themselves try anyway." Yuri explained, frustration tainting his voice, "...People around the world think Japanese men are really perverted because the hentai industry here is so big. No one seems to really understand that only certain people are that way, and it's a private thing they don't tell others about. There's a cultural shame about sexuality, and I was raised in that. I mean, back in the days of Shogun, Daimyo, and Samurai, if a noble house was being attacked and was on the edge of defeat, the Lady of the house would commit jigai with her knees bound together, such was the shame of being found dead by the enemy with her legs spread apart. That...shame is a part of my identity, as much as the way I look, or the sound of my voice is, too."

"...You feel shamed by being intimate with me?"

"Noooo no no!" Yuri panicked, turning around in a blur to wave his hands around in a frantic defense, "Not because it's with you! I've never felt shame being in love with you! It's just the physical stuff that gets me at a certain level. I...imagine my hang-ups would've made things difficult if I'd somehow gotten with Yuko after all. She's so headstrong and I...wasn't, before you. I evaluate myself as a rather boring and disinterested lover...because I can never truly relax unless I'm buzzed."

"I don't want to make you uncomfortable, Yuri. Now I just feel bad because it seems like I've been pressuring you." Viktor explained, lowering his head.

"Being excited about something doesn't feel like pressure to me."

"But you still don't want to use the toy."

"...I want to make you happy though. I'm just...struggling to reconcile the two together. I seem to have a habit of that lately; being incapable of sorting out two conflicting states of mind." Yuri said sullenly, pressing his brow and the bridge of his nose against his husband's crown, fingers threaded behind the man's neck, "Maybe I'm just over-tired though. All my worst thoughts about that thing came up at the same time all my problems with Asahi did. You've been able to kick him out of my head though...so maybe I can reset myself to the first night we used it. I liked it then, I just...got myself worked up about it after. That's my fault entirely."
"So you don't want to just light it on fire in the yard."

"...No..." Yuri answered, "...What I want, in the immediate moment, is to go back upstairs with you and finish sleeping. My head feels fuzzy from all the craziness of the morning. I'll be clearer once I've had a bit more rest. Maybe I'll warm up to the idea on my own afterwards."

"...Let me go up first then." Viktor asked, pulling his head back carefully, and lifted his eyes, "I'll put the ensemble away so you don't have to look at it until you want to, in your own time."
"...It's started."

There was an odd quiet over the common-room as eyes watched the weather report suddenly switch over to a breaking news segment. With no subtitles to follow a live feed, but pictures clearly showing the Olympic rings and the Russian flag with a big red line going across it, it was clear enough to anyone watching what was going on. Of course, as soon as the pictures switched over to include both Yurio and Viktor - one Russian Olympian and one formerly-Russian Olympian - eyes started to turn around to look for the blonde. He just sneered and lowered his eyes to his lunch.

"Oukina osewa." (None of your business.) Minako scolded them, forcing those curious spectators to turn back to the television or their mid-day beers and meals. She herself turned back to the teen who'd suddenly lost his appetite, "You knew this was coming...don't let yourself get upset again, until or unless it can't be fixed."

"I know... But now everyone knows..."

"Is cheating really common in figure skating?" Minako wondered quietly, "Considering how much of what you guys do is artistic in nature...there isn't a steroid or drug in the world that can make you better at that..."

"I can't imagine that it is." Yurio shook his head, "It never crossed my mind anyway."

"Viktor said he's been approached before though." Mikhail pointed out, eyes still fixated on the television, "So it's not unheard of. You can't be held accountable for things that happened when you were still in Juniors though."

"I don't think they cared about those kinds of technicalities when they've banned the whole country."

The elder held still a moment, lip to the edge of his glass, "...They will."

...brzzt...brzzt...brzzt...

Yuri snorked as he lifted his head off Viktor's back, and squinted his naked eyes across the room to seek for the source of the noise. He hobbled across his husband to reach for his phone, and put the screen in front of his face to try and read it. The letters came into clarity, and he popped upright in an instant, clicking to answer, "M-mushi mushi!" He said, startled, and started poking at his partner, "Viktor! Wake up!"

"Mnnhh..."

Yuri listened quietly as the voice on the other end spoke, giving the occasional note of understanding. Viktor had an ear to the conversation, but could barely hear it, and what he could hear was Japanese, which made his attention wane. When Yuri clicked out of the call though, all the Russian could do was bury his face down into the pillows again, "What are they saying, that they're letting Ghost come after all?"

"It wasn't the airline. It was the JSF."
That got his attention, and he flipped over to at least look in Yuri's direction, "Oh?"

"News broke. Russia's officially been barred from PyeongChang."

"Serves them right." He shrugged.

"They wanted to reassure you that any accusations made by the RSF that you've cheated in the past will be viewed with suspicion." Yuri went on, watching the steely look on his partner's face, "Even though you never gave any public indication that you thought your firing was meant maliciously...they know." He said, reassuring, "Do you think they'd go that far?"

Viktor shook his head slightly, "Nah. If they want any of their athletes to go to the Games, they'd keep their admissions to a minimum. They'd sooner blame the American CIA for orchestrating this scandal than ever admit to wrongdoing, even if in some misguided attempt to drag me down with them."

Yuri could only quirk a brow, "Blame the CIA? ...They'd really stoop that low?"

"I've heard people say it out loud, that they think the Americans are making up these kinds of scandals because they're afraid of honest competition. But...Russia's had dozens of medals and victories scrubbed from the record, and there's plenty of individual athletes who are permanently banned from the Games because of proven cheating."

"...You're still going to have to undergo pre-Games anti-doping screening." Yuri confessed, fiddling with the phone still in his hands, "The JSF is going to look at acquiring all your past test results."

"They'll have a lot to look at then." Viktor added nonchalantly, "I've been made to give samples at every event I've competed in for the last several years, including Sochi."

"Sochi Olympics are why this is happening." Yuri interrupted, "I don't think they'll take that one seriously, since it was held in Russia."

The silver shrugged again, "Everywhere else then. I'm not worried. Where do I have to go?"

"They're going to email me a link to the approved locations close to Hasetsu. They're going to bring out the Athlete Biological Passports on this one, too."

"All the power to them."

Yuri quirked a brow, "You don't seem that bothered by this."

"What's a dollar out of ten grand?"

Both brows went up with that, "...You're still salty about earlier."

"Salty isn't the right word." Viktor said, shaking his head as he pushed up onto his hands and knees before sitting back on them, "It's nothing to worry about though. How long did we sleep?"

"About four hours."

"Enough?"

Yuri leaned back to reach for his glasses, and came back, nodding as he put the frames over his face, "I think so."

"Let's go on a walk then."
With the slowly rolling tide frothing onto the stone beach on one side, and the leaf-bare woods rustling in the breeze on the other, the beachhead was a wonderland of solitude. The barrier formed by the expanse of trees made Hasetsu impossible to hear, and if not for the castle on top of its hill in the distance, it felt like they were miles away from civilization.

All three pups roamed around off-leash, zipping by as they snuffled around at every nook and cranny, turning over the occasional rock and running off with every stick they could find, big or small. Makkachin found a good-sized one that still had leaves poking off one side, drawing Jiro's attention, and he jumped up to nip at the thin bendy sticks. The poodle tried to keep the rough limb to himself though and trotted off with the puppy in tow.

"Hm...Branch manager." Yuri mused, pointing at the poodle as he watched the pair go by, then to Jiro, "And Assistant Branch manager." He turned and looked up at those distant blue eyes; watching, but not really seeing. He turned back to neutral and watched the rocks as they walked over them, focusing instead on the feeling of warm fingers wrapped around his hand inside his partner's pocket. He could sense that the gears were turning in Viktor's head, but what for, he wasn't certain.

Is it the Russia ban? Yuri thought to himself, Maybe he's thinking of how to do our Olympic interviews with Morooka-san in a way that doesn't upset or offend Yurio. Neither of us even mentioned him before... We can't anticipate if he's going to be at the Ice Castle, but he'd probably get mad if we suggested he avoided it, or worse, if we conscript someone to keep him busy at the same time. But...maybe this'll all be solved by the time we come back h-

"How are you feeling now?"

"Eh?" Yuri verbally stumbled, caught off guard by the words. He looked up and aside again, spotting those blue eyes looking right at him, the breeze making silver hair sway, "...Feeling?" He echoed, unsure of the context.

"You didn't sleepwalk last night, and your voice is better even without doing the eucalyptus thing this morning."

"Oh."

"You don't sound excited about it." Viktor added quietly, starting to walk again.

"My mind was somewhere else."

"Where was it?"

"Yurio."

"Ah."

Lazy waves washed ashore, then pulled back out to sea again, leaving pools of froth and foam in their wake for Ghost to snuffle through. The branch that Makkachin had run off with had given way, and Jiro galloped away with his section, proudly hauling it off.

"I'm worried how the Olympic chatter is going to get to him if Russia doesn't get un-banned. I hate sounding selfish, but-"

"It's your first Olympics. You have the right to be excited about it." Viktor finished, rubbing his thumb across Yuri's reassuringly, "I hope something works out, too, but I don't want you to think
"I don't want to either... But I don't know how to be happy about it when I feel like that would just rub salt into his wounds." Yuri answered, pausing slightly to get out of Jiro's way as he rushed by with his leafy stick, "After what you went through at Euros..."

"I went through a lot more at Euros than just not being able to compete." Viktor reminded, "Things that made Euros itself feel like something of a sad afterthought."

"...Which makes me want to put a real effort towards making 4CCs finally be the fun competition."

Yuri explained, stepping forward to get in front of his spouse, and found the man's other hand, drawing it out of the warmth of its pocket-shaped hidey-hole. Hazel eyes lifted, greyed in the rainy overcasted sky, "Maybe it's naïve, but...I really want to put all my faith into Mikhail. For the entirety of the last year, he's wanted nothing more than to impress you and make up for the things he missed by being gone. It took all that time to get to where we are now, and I want to know what it's like for him to really be the fun uncle he thinks he can be. This is..." He started, words trailing for a moment of uncertainty, but he shook his head and gave a squeeze to each hand as he looked up again, "This is exactly the kind of thing that I'd hoped for all along! That you could finally have a deep and meaningful connection to your family, not just mine. It...didn't really happen with Konstantin, but Mik really wants this to work. He's learned his lessons pretty hard with you. I think it's only fair that we let him be the kind of man he knows he can be for you."

"I already call him papa Mimi, don't I?"

"You're still guarded." Yuri explained, brows slightly furrowed, "And I don't blame you for that in the slightest. He hurt you really badly when you were really young, and it's something that's taken twenty years to work through. If I promise not to let my worry for Yurio's feelings get in the way of my excitement for the Games...will you promise to stop worrying that Mik's gonna ditch and ruin your life a second time?"

"...I kind of got over that worry when he got Minako know-"

"They're gonna be a family." Yuri harped, pulling both hands up just to squish them over his partner's mouth, "And those kids are going to be your family and mine."

"Mrophum."

"Say again...?" Yuri pulled his hands back slightly.

"Sort of." He answered, "Minako isn't related to you by blood."

"Blended family. She's practically my aunt, and she has no one else anyway. In a way, she's a lot like you...hooking up into Clan Katsuki for lack of your own relations."

Viktor blinked in confusion as Yuri turned and started walking again, "...I admit, I never actually thought about that."

"Me neither...cuz she was always part of my family. I started thinking about it when I said we would be able to get our koseki once your documents arrived." Yuri explained, feeling a bit uplifted again at the idea. Viktor could see that 'seeking' look in his eyes, but Yuri just kept walking, "It's going to be kind of weird... Even though we've been together all this time, and married for nearly a year, knowing it's not official here at home has always been a bit of a downer. Since you never made a big deal out of it, I didn't think too hard about it, but...apparently, in the absence of legal recognition in most parts of Japan still, people like us would actually create their combined koseki by having the
head of household formally adopt their partner, like a child. On paper it would look weird, but...it would be recognized. Maybe we won't have to go that far."

Viktor snorted a restrained laugh, "...I know some people have a fetish for calling their partner 'daddy,' but..."

"Ugh gross no." Yuri protested, spinning around with a horrified but teasing look on his face. He felt an arm snake around his back though, and pulled him closer as those blue eyes warmed a little despite their earlier vacancy. Hands lifted, and Yuri rested them on the front of his husband's chest, feeling the other arm go around him to join the first, drawing him nearer.

"...The things I took for granted in the past." Viktor commented quietly, letting out a long breath as a gust of wind whipped his hair a little, "I don't know if this feels like my eyes have been opened, or I just appreciate more how lucky we are."

"...I think the answer to that is 'yes.'"

Those slate eyes smiled, and Viktor nodded, leaning in a bit closer, "You're probably right."

The sound of waves, rustling trees, and prancing dogs sprinkled the background of that kiss' ambiance. But, it was still pretty brisk out, and Yuri could feel a chill go down his back, even with his head well warmed by his Ravenclaw beanie.

"Oh, I felt that one." Viktor teased, stealing a nose-rub before pulling back, "Your meds may have dried you out but you're still fighting the cold. We should pack it in."

Yuri snuffled a little, but nodded easily, "Yeah, probably... Yu-Topia or home?"

Walking back up the beach to return to the car, there was a strange feeling on the air. The pups seemed keen on it first, with both Makkachin and Jiro returning to their humans' sides, though Ghost stormed forward, her big shaggy body ruffled by sea-spray and surf-stepping. As she came up on the ledge of the walkway that lead into the parking lot though, she started barking, that same low rumble of a bark that she'd uttered when the postman knocked.

Viktor felt a twitch by his eye, but he looked forward to the perturbed animal, "Čto ne tak?" (What's happened?) He asked dubiously. He stepped a little faster, worried that his car had been damaged or broken into somehow, dragging a nervous Yuri along behind him. Ghost kept barking though, keeping a distance by the railing between concrete and beach.

"...Why is there a crowd?" Yuri wondered quietly, "Oh...there's cameras."

"THERE THEY ARE!"

"...Cyka blyat..."
Viktor's eyes were spinning as the crowd of cameras, microphones, hanging booms, and hyper-vigilant fans threw a barrage of questions at him from all sides. All of their words blurred together into a singular, amorphous blob of inquiries.

From off to the side, crouching with Ghost - and keeping Makkachin and Jiro out of the mass of people and their feet - Yuri raised a brow, muttering under his breath, "...I told him it wasn't going to help if he went by himself." Ghost barked at the group still, but was less loud with Yuri scritching his fingers through her thick fuzzy fluff. Yuri rose back up to stand normally again, all three leashes wrapped around his wrists, hands going into his pockets as he leaned back against the railing to watch the spectacle from relative safety. He glanced aside at the stragglers keeping a distance outside the throng, seeing the occasional side-eye towards himself, but their focus remained largely on Viktor. Yuri sighed to himself and kept watch, I guess it's nice that I don't garner as much attention. At least one of us gets some peace.

[Pretty crazy what's happened, huh?]

Of course, as soon as I think one will notice me, someone does... Yuri thought, and turned to the sound of the voice, seeing a small group of skating otaku nearby, bundled up for the cold weather and huddling together. Long and wavy brown-black hair came out from under a wool-knit hat, but those vivid blue eyes stuck out, and Yuri realized who'd spoken, [We figured something like it would.] He answered simply, [We're just glad the IOC decided to wait until after Euros before they dropped this on us. If not for Viktor's sake, but for Yuri Plisetsky's.]

[Do you think this is going to fall back on Viktor?] The lady otaku asked, keeping a slight distance from the flustered Ovcharka.

[We've already been reassured by the JSF that they're going to protect him however they can. They knew what they might be stepping into when they extended membership to him.] Brows furrowed, and the whole little group looked at him, [...]Knew what they were stepping into?] They echoed in confusion, [Does that mean he really cheated before?]

[Of course not. It means they knew he'd be accused of it simply because he used to be a Russian athlete.] Yuri defended adamantly, [Viktor was Russia's crown jewel. A completely clean and exceptionally gifted skater. They couldn't have asked for a better example of what they always claimed all of Russia's athletes were like. Instead, they threw him out because he wasn't perfect at everything, and now that they've been banned from the Olympics, Russia's reputation is falling back on him. He's having to defend himself against something he's never done.] [You sure he hasn't? Even once?]

Yuri grit his teeth slightly, but drew a long breath and let it out slowly, [Viktor's the love of my life. I trust that he'd tell me if he ever did anything unsavory like that. He says he never has, and I believe him. I'm sure the evidence will be on his side in the end.]

The crowd ahead of them seemed to warble and warp slightly, and Yuri could see that distinctive silver-haired head coming out of it. Viktor stepped back until he was against the railing, too, with dogs and husband to keep a perimeter, "I can't hear a single thing they're asking. They keep talking..."
over each other. This is nuts." He whispered.

"Kind of wish Yurio was here with us. He’d make the crowd shut up in a hurry." Yuri mused nervously.

The sandblast of words continued, and microphones were pushed forward. Ghost barked even more then, getting up and moving towards the crowd, with Jiro yipping to back her up. Makkachin stayed well behind them, leaning against his human's leg with his ears back and his tongue curiously drawn up and hidden in his mouth.

"You'll have to ask my manager!" Viktor yelled, putting one hand to cup aside his mouth, the other trying to cling to his husband's smaller frame, "He knows more about what the JSF is saying than I do!"

The fuzzy booms on the pole-mounted microphones were lowered towards Yuri then, and he hooked his fingers to his partner's coat pocket...but he paused to regroup himself, and would have none of it. Even in the oppressive cold, being surrounded like that while feeling sick made him feel slightly claustrophobic, and he did something he never had before.

He silenced them.

"Shhhhhhhhh..." He whispered, a finger up in front of his lips, turning his gaze in a semi-circle as he looked from one end of the mass - pressed up beside them against the parking lot's beach rails - to the other, where the small skating otaku group had been pushed back. Viktor joined in, putting a finger against his lips as well, but let Yuri be the only one making a sound. Ghost and Jiro's barking settled until only the sound of the sea breaking on the rocks could be heard, peppered by the distant cry of winter gulls. Stunned and confused reporters and fans alike looked at one another in complete silence, only to turn back to Yuri, who still looked rather serious, finger pressed up under the tip of his nose. Beside him, Viktor was surprised, but relieved. "He can't hear you when you're all asking him things at the same time." Coach Yuri Nikiforov said firmly, "So unless you guys learn to take turns, no one will be getting answers today."

The crowd nodded.

Yuri turned to his left, and gestured his silencing finger towards the first microphone, "One question, one answer, then we go to the next. Alright?"

More nodding.

"Go ahead."

A bit taken aback still, the local reporter needed a moment to get his head back in the game, but his sound and video crew backed him up and were ready, and he held the microphone up to his voice, "Mr. Nikiforov... H-How do you feel about the news this morning that Russia has been banned from participating in the Winter Olympics this year?"

Viktor just beamed, a smug grin on his face as he relaxed into his husband's protective aura, "I'm sad for them."

"Do you thi-"

"Ah ah, tsst." Yuri shushed him, "One question, one answer. Next please. Miss?"

The silver could hardly contain himself, screaming internally about how exciting it was to see such command over the situation. The next inquirer came forward as she was gestured for her turn.
"Mr. Viktor..." She started, carefully choosing her words so as to make the most of her question, "The accusations against Russia are dire; widespread, state-sponsored doping...athletes being told they had to participate or be cut from their teams...tainted samples being switched with clean ones in Russian labs... Are you worried that these assessments will fall back on you at some point?"

"Sure." He answered, perking everyone up with interest, "Russian athletes have been stripped of their accolades before. Thankfully, no one has ever been unfairly accused, and those people whose guilt could not be proven without a doubt were allowed to keep their wins. I have never cheated in my life, so I don't have any worries that I'll be sacked, but...I do worry a little that my reputation will be stained by proximity. My hope is that the JSF and the IOC can work together to confirm that all of my tests, and the ones I'll do after - and hopefully during - Four Continents, will solidify that I'm a clean athlete and always have been."

The lady reporter nodded and backed up into the crowd, smiling that she'd gotten the best answer so far. Others further down the line started looking nervous, and thought hard with what time they had left to come up with good questions, too.

The next journalist came forward, stepping in front of the crowd, but not too close, as Ghost was keeping the perimeter and snorted a breath at him. He winced and backed up a step, then looked to the two skaters, "Mr. Nikiforov...what can you say about your experiences or exposure to the alleged state-sponsored doping?"

"Oh..." Viktor started, making a face like he wasn't sure how to answer, "I have to be very careful what I say here. That's an extremely sensitive thing that they're going to be dealing with. ...If there is something big going on, I'm afraid I can't confirm or deny it, since I've kept my mind on the ice...and also because I've been gone for so long. I have no idea what's happened in the last two years because I've been here in Hasetsu, and our quick stint back to St. Petersburg last spring was so brief that it hardly counts for anything, really."

It wasn't much of an answer, but it was more than one word, and the journalist stepped back into the crowd while Yuri found the next person to summon forward. It was a younger lady, clearly not an employee of any major news channel, but old enough to know how the game was played. She cleared her throat and spoke with a heavy accent.

"I am...news club at Saga Prefecture Hasetsu Nishi High School. Nikiforovu-san, what I...would like to ask...anooo... Nihongo de onegai dekimasu ka?" She started nervously, looking to Yuri, hoping her request to ask in her native tongue wouldn't count as her question overall. He nodded, and she spoke, stepping back to let the translation take place between the two athletes.

"She wants to know how long you've known that this would happen." Yuri said, pulling his fingers back from the edge of his husband's pocket, and slid it behind the man's back instead, feeling more relaxed now.

Viktor blanched slightly at the question, and looked up a bit in thought, then down again to those anxious, waiting eyes, "I didn't know they'd get banned from the Games for long. Yuri Plisetsky was given advanced warning, to prepare him for the coming announcement. I imagine all Russian athletes found out around the same time, to give them a chance to think of something to say when the time came. I wouldn't have known at all if Plisetsky wasn't here in Hasetsu."

Yuri sought for the next journalist, ushering each new one forward until it was fans in the back that wanted to ask things. Though many questions started to overlap one another, getting rather similar answers, no one was given a chance to talk over anyone else, and the interview huddle ended on much more organized footing than it started on. By the end of it, they were being posed for photos, and a path was opened for them to finally go back to their car.
"That was the most bizarre thing I've experienced in a while." Yuri said, leaning sullenly back against his seat, "I'm completely drained."

Viktor started the engine and offered one last wave to the crowd, and the gathered were herded like ducks as the car slowly backed up, trying to turn around and head for the road. At the edge of the street though, Viktor paused to find his beloved's hand, and lifted it to his lips to kiss those pale knuckles, "You were amazing, my love. I don't know where you learned that crowd-control sorcery, but you should hold onto it."

"I wish I could call it sorcery..." Yuri groaned tiredly, unable to move even to rub Jiro's head as the pup licked at his free hand, "...It was just me desperately pleading for calm. They were being way too loud. Keeping them quiet and waiting their turn took everything I had. I feel like I need another nap now."

"I bet!" Viktor laughed, "Honestly though, that was really impressive. I had to really hold myself together to avoid making a scene over how incredible that was. You had the whole crowd sitting in the palm of your hand! You are truly a gem."

Yuri smiled despite his exhaustion, and leaned over the center console to rest his head against the edge of his spouse's shoulder, "I'm just glad it worked. I don't have the energy to yell right now."

"Do you even want to go to Yu-Topia anymore?" The silver wondered, rubbing his cheek across the beanie covering his beloved's crown, "Odds are good that there are some reporters mobbing Yurio, too. He may not be the Hero of Hasetsu, but he's still a Russian athlete with a penchant for saying rough things that get reporters excited."

Tiredly, Yuri managed a quiet laugh, "That is true..."

True to suspicions, there was indeed a second crowd to be found, standing outside of Yu-Topia's front door. Yurio had perched himself on the step in front of the sliding panels, and looked up and over the heads of those surrounding him as he spotted the little red Audi coming up behind them all. The gaggle of groupies and journalists all started to cheer and clap as they realized who'd just arrived. Video rolled and cameras clicked, capturing every movement of the older skating duo piling out of the small car with all their dogs in tow.

Yuri groaned again quietly, trying to hide his fatigue under the plucked-up lapels of his pea-coat and his scarf. He reached for his partner's hand as Viktor came around the car's side meet him, but paused with him there before they could get too close, "I don't have the stamina to do this again."

"It's fine. This is our drama anyway. Please go inside and rest. I'll come find you when it's done." Viktor reassured, kissing brow, then nose, then lips before he moved to try and part the gathered to let them through. The crowd was a bit less turbulent than the last one, but that may have been because they'd already been partly placated by the Russian Tiger's attention. Viktor waved and smiled as he guided his husband and their pack through, and pushed the door open as Yurio stepped aside, "Hey, I'll come stand by you in just a minute. Let me get the dogs dried off first."

"Oh...yeah." The teen said simply, only to furrow his brow as the younger of the SkateHusbands went in, "Yuri-"

Tired eyes turned, "Hey..." He answered, looking winded just from the walk, but managed to reach out his arm anyway to get his greeting hug. As he pulled back though, he gave one bit of advice, "Don't let them trick you into saying something controversial. The less you give away, the easier it'll
Makkachin and Jiro trotted inside and waited dutifully on the cowhide rug in the foyer for their wet nubbins to be dried off, sitting by the Rozovsky patriarch, who was still trying to get his winter gear on to join Yurio on the step.

Toshiya's office window was open and he watched the pair come in to deal with their dogs, "We were wondering if you would come over." He teased, "That whole mob tried rushing inside here, looking for you. Mikhail and I had to push them all back out again and make them wait in the parking lot so they wouldn't make a giant mess."

"Sorry for all this trouble." Viktor said, bowing his head, "A different group found us at the beachhead, so we came over as soon as they let us go."

"It's not your fault. If you can get them to buy something while they're here though-"

Viktor just laughed at that, and offered a wink and a dramatic bow, "As you like." He turned up and around just as Yuri finished with Jiro's paws and the smol Akita trotted off, "Papa Mimi. We can't let Yuri answer anymore questions unless the questioner buys something first."

"Roger that." Mikhail laughed, fluffing his coat out.

A few more minutes - and a few more towels from Hiroko and Mari - and Ghost's extra-long fur was dried around her legs and she was finally allowed to roam. She waited dutifully by Yuri though as he waited for Makkachin to be tended and released. Once every puppy nubbin was accounted for, Viktor rose back up again and dried his hands off on a new clean towel for his own, and handed it back so he could take his beloved's hands into his own, "If you can make it upstairs, maybe you can lie down for a bit in the quiet. Or are you considering the onsen?"

Yuri shook his head and stepped into a hug, half-using Viktor's vertical stability to keep himself upright, "I'll fall asleep in the shower before I get there. I'm gonna head upstairs. Sorry I'm so worn out already..."

"Don't be. This is just the made-for-TV sequel to the movie we were just in. Papa Mimi and I are just going to go make fools of ourselves. I'll try not to wake you up when I come up."

"Oh, please do." Yuri retorted, nuzzling at the man's neck for a moment before pulling back to get another kiss, "I'll be out as soon as I'm horizontal."

"Don't wait on me then." The silver mused, and turned to go with his uncle onto the stoop.

Yuri watched them go until the door was closed between them, then turned, spotting Minako at the far end of the hall, "Sorry for the interruption. They must've yanked Yurio out of his Skype class."

"Not your fault." She shrugged, "You look miserable though."

He nodded tiredly, the bags under his eyes starting to give him away from a distance, "I can breathe fine now, thankfully...but I guess that's just given my body permission to really fight whatever I caught. I'm gonna drag myself upstairs."

"I'll make sure you get there," Mari said, shaking her head, "Would be embarrassing if you dropped on the way."
"Do you feel worse than before?" Minako asked before they could disappear into the long narrow hall beside the common-room. She stepped closer as she spoke, "The competition starts for you on Thursday..."

"I feel different, but not worse. I'm already resigned to the idea that I won't be at 100% when I skate. Viktor will have to carry the load for the both of us." He answered, and yawned against the back of his wrist, "I'm gonna go take a nap. I'm pretty winded."

"Alright...we'll try to keep the noise on the first floor."
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED SEVENTY EIGHT

Time passed swiftly while sleeping, but there was still a sense of the ages even while floating in that sweet black oblivion. Light and color returned as warmth invaded, and Yuri felt the unmistakable jostling of his gentle partner cuddling-up behind him. The mattress depressed under him, and an arm came around his side, followed by a kiss to the side of his neck before the motion relaxed. Yuri felt the cozy pressure of that new body behind him, cradling him close, and he turned his head back against the presence without opening his eyes.

"...Are they gone now?" He asked, raising his right hand to thread his fingers through soft silver hair, the left clasping the one pressed flat to his chest.

"I watched them start to trickle away, but I wanted to come find you." Viktor whispered in answer, kissing the palm that slid down his cheek, "Looks like the kids kept you company while I was working."

Yuri smiled and nodded, pulling his hand back to find Jiro where the pup had curled up in front of him. Ghost was by his knees on the lower corner, and Makkachin was near her, now snuffle-sniffing at his human's feet where they'd parked by the small of his back, "Yeah, they all followed me upstairs. I guess they thought if Mari had to make sure I made it, they should, too."

"Good kids."

"How long were you out there for?"

"Just about a half hour I think."

"Okay... Let me have an hour and I should be recovered."

Sliding across the ice like a mannequin, Yuri slowed and eventually stopped, left boot clicking against the wall. He stared up at the high rafters, squinting slightly at the lights, listening to the sound of blades scratching the frost as they came closer. Viktor crouched down beside him on his toe-picks and poked his partner's cheek.

"I don't think you've recovered, my love."

"I feel so out of shape." Yuri whined, taking the pair of offered hands as Viktor moved to help him back up to sit at least. He heaved a breath and sighed, "This is miserable... That was only a double and I felt like I didn't have the strength to take off."

"Yeah, you didn't get very high off the ice." The silver confirmed, perching his elbows on his knee, putting the other down onto the cold for balance, "Are you sure you want to keep going? You're just going to disappoint yourself even more."

"Of course I want to keep going...!" Yuri whined helplessly, "Four Continents starts in a couple days and feel like I haven't really practiced at all since Nationals..."

"You have, and you know your programs. I just think you'd do yourself the bigger favor if you rested instead. Pushing yourself now will just make you miserable for longer." Viktor pointed out,
seeing that pitiable look on his husband's face. He smiled and crossed his arms, "Remember what I told you way back...resting is as much a part of training as anything else you do."

"I know..." He sighed again, lowering his head even as he extended his hands out again. He felt the gentle tug soon after, and he was hoisted up to his feet again, finding himself pulled into a hug. He returned it easily enough, and let himself have the moment to breathe in the scent of his partner's skin and t-shirt.

"I know you're itching to practice. I totally get it. But put it away for now and try again after we get to Colorado. Getting all the goo out of your head was only the first step of the process. Now your body's fighting a war to get rid of the thing still making you sick. Give it a chance to do the job right by not wasting your energy."

"Mmmmhhh... I know..." Yuri said again, feeling the ice moving under him as Viktor carefully started skating them over towards the nearest rink wall. One blade after another set down onto the concrete, and Viktor turned him around where he stood, giving a teasing pat on the butt to get him going.

"Do you want to watch me for a bit or do you just want to go?" The silver wondered, putting his elbows down on top of the rink-wall as he watched Yuri find his blade guards.

"You should probably figure out which Exhibition you want to do at the end of the weekend." Yuri answered, "In case I don't make the podium."

Viktor scoffed, "I didn't exactly make the podium at the Final but I still skated in the Exhibition."

"If I'm still this worn out on Sunday, I'll be a liability in a pair skate." Yuri countered, clipping the last bar onto his gold blades, and slid his arms into his pea-coat, "I want you to have a contingency in place. I can't land a double right now... I'll be lucky to recover enough to pull triples this weekend. I'll be okay with not getting onto the podium because I'm sick. I won't be okay with ruining one of your shows."

"I hope you don't mean that like you're resigning to the idea that you'll do poorly." Viktor worried, "Not after putting up such a fight in Detroit."

"I still had the energy to fight for it back then." Yuri answered, pulling his Ravenclaw beanie over his head, making it snug to cover his ears and forehead, "I'm completely worn out now though. The slightest thing saps all my strength. My arms and legs feel like useless noodles. You saw how slowly I came up the stairs earlier."

Viktor quirked a brow, "Then how come you're so reluctant to bench yourself?"

Yuri stepped closer and found his partner's face between his palms, "Because I hate doing it. I still want to win. My brain didn't stop working just because my body did." He explained, brushing his thumbs softly against that pale skin, slipping one under those silver bangs, "With all the things I was so worried about before being resolved, I kind of wanted Four Continents to be like my come-back event. I had a lot of fun skating with you in Vienna. I hoped I could get my scores to reflect that. I guess not... Not anymore."

"Don't count yourself out so early." Viktor recommended nervously, "Colds usually work themselves out after a week. If you give yourself a chance, you may find yourself recovering completely in time for the competition."

"I'm making myself be a pessimist in that regard."
"...Why?"

"Because that way, if I expect the worst, and it doesn't turn out that badly, I'll be pleasantly surprised." He explained, sneaking a kiss from his confused spouse before letting him go, "For now, if I can only watch from here...I want you to skate like you're trying to seduce me, Viktor Nikiforov."

"Oh~! Well, in that case...it'll be my pleasure."

Ghost's barking greeted them as they finally returned home, but those were her happy 'welcome home' barks. Jiro and Makkachin were quick to join her antics at the front door, making it even harder for the duo to get inside. But, once the pups were greeted and calmed, gear was put away, and doggo-dinners were placed, a calm quiet fell over the household again. People-dinners were fairly simple as well; omelets with vegetables and left-over rice, and a side of cold meds for good measure. Yuri didn't last long after finishing, falling asleep slumped over the kotatsu. Viktor carefully and quietly put away all the dishes, clicked off the downstairs lights, turned on the hall light leading upstairs, and delicately extracted Yuri from the dogs that had encircled him.

As had been the case numerous times over the past few days, when Yuri came to, he wasn't sure what time it was or how long he'd been asleep for. Acclimating to the new surroundings took a moment, realizing he was in bed, though still clothed, his glasses set aside on the nightstand on his right. He could make out the blurry shape of his phone with the charging cable attached. For a moment, he considered reaching for it to check the time, but as he had his hand hovering over it, he paused, and then withdrew, settling his palm over his chest again.

Nah... If there's anything in my inbox, it's too late to deal with it anyway. Best leave it for the morning.

He lifted up onto his elbows and sat upright, looking around the quiet room, listening to the obscured hiss of the shower through the closed bathroom door. A curious expression settled on Yuri's face though as he continued his gaze around, and spotted the plug convertor still set into one of the bedroom's outlets. His eyes narrowed slightly as his brows raised, and he side-eyed the bathroom door briefly before setting his feet on the floor.

Just a few inches beyond the edge of the open door, the plug outlet was just beside the edge of their long wooden bedroom cabinet. That meant there was only one likely place where Viktor would've stored a certain semi-objectionable object. Yuri stepped closer and opened the drawers, finding both the toy and its warming stand in their respective boxes in the middle unit. Yuri could feel the embarrassed flush paint his skin, but he scrunched his eyes closed and shook his head, making the nervous flutter fade as he pulled both items out and nudged the drawer closed again. He took a deep breath and sat back on the floor, forcing himself to look at the toy closely and carefully.

I don't understand why the idea of this thing bothers me so much, he thought grimly, looking at his reflection in the clear plastic windows of the box. It's just an object. It's really no different than anything else we use to make our time together easier or more fun. He's never once done anything to me, or made me do anything to him, that I wasn't willing to engage in. Well, not really... Yuri grimaced slightly and slid to the side, off his knees, and crossed his legs under himself instead as he let the box descend into his lap. Other than being so adamant over the summer that I take him...

' You're so content being the bottom in this relationship that I feel like it's unbalancing us.'

Yuri took in another deep breath and sighed, slouching, I'm entirely unsure how this toy would help fix that, if that's how he really feels. I thought he was happy being in control. He said that the
occasional brave moments from me made it exciting...if I did that all the time, or even just half the
time, wouldn't it lose its luster? Or is this one of those things where Viktor **wants** to give up control...?

His brow contorted into disbelief and confusion, and he shook his head to make it go away. He
looked at the two boxes again, and stood up.

Viktor closed his eyes as he sank into the warmth of the soaking tub, and let his arms 'dangle' in the
buoyancy, floating under the water. The last of the shower water had barely had a chance to drain
away before the bathroom door clicked, and he turned to open one eye in its direction, spotting Yuri
coming through with one arm already pulled out of his sweater. Both eyes opened then, and the
quiet Russian watched as his husband finished undressing on the other side of the damp glass of the
shower's walls. The condensation of droplets obscured Yuri's movements a little, but he was still
fairly easy to make out, and Viktor drank in the sight eagerly.

Once entirely stripped down, Yuri pulled open the glass door, and stepped into the soggy stall, feet
touching the wet, cold tile of the bathing section. The door was pulled back into place behind him,
and he set his eyes onto the figure in the tub, "Sorry to interrupt your tranquility." He commented
shyly, stepping up to the edge of the soaking basin to reach for the showerhead on the wall above it,
and pulled on the nozzle to turn it on.

"You say that like you think I mind watching my husband get naked and walk around that way."
Viktor teased, giving a wink before settling back again, resting his head against a folded towel on the
edge of the tub.

"It was really quiet in here." Yuri explained, dousing himself in the water before rinsing the crusty
gel from his hair, "I half expected to see candles and potpourri."

"I could arrange something."

"I'm sure you could." He mused, clicking off the shower-head and let it dangle against the edge of
the tub as he reached for the shampoo. A few squirts of opaque liquid filled his palm, and he
squished it into his black hair, barely able to start up the lather before he spotted Viktor sitting up in
the tub, and motioned for him to turn around. He did as bid, and sat on the ceramic stair at the base
of the bathtub, sitting up enough that Viktor could easily reach. Fingers pressed against his scalp,
and worked up the lather in that raven hair, until only bits of it were black against the frothing white
foam.

"We should do more romantic things." The silver commented, "The last time we really did
something nice, just for its own sake, was when you arranged that engagement anniversary dinner in
Detroit. I feel like I haven't done my part."

"You're making all the plans for our second wedding though."

"But that's in March; practically a thousand years from now." He explained, pulling up the shower
head by the hose until he found the head, and clicked it to start the water again, and sprayed it down
on his husband's crown, "We should go do nice things more often. Like...I don't know, date nights."

"Is that what you were thinking about when I came in?"

"Among other things" He answered, and combed his fingers through the wet black hair, making sure
every bit of shampoo had been rinsed away, "I was thinking about the competition, too."

Yuri nodded, and wiped the excess water from his face before pushing his long bangs back out of his
eyes, and turned on the step to look at his spouse. Viktor had idled the showerhead to find the conditioner next, but Yuri caught him on the way back, "These are exactly the kind of problems I'm happy that you have time to think about."

Viktor paused and blinked, but then let out a single huffed laugh and nodded a smile, leaning against the edge of the tub again to start spreading the creamy goop into his partner's hair, "Well...I'm glad about it, too. These are the things I prefer to worry about anyway. So what do you think? What would you want to do for date night?"

"...I...honestly would have no idea." Yuri answered, "I basically have no experience dating."

"What."

"We went from being friends to being engaged, remember?" Yuri pointed out.

"Well, sure, but... Going out on a date doesn't mean we have to be in the dating phase. It just means we go out and do something fun together, with no goal or mission in mind but to enjoy each other's company."

"Isn't that what we do all the time...?"

Viktor guffawed, "Noooooo... Going out on a date is nothing like what we normally do. The anniversary dinner was a date. The ball in Vienna was a date. ...You could almost consider our beachside shenanigans when I first got here to be dates, but maybe only I think of them that way." He tried to explain, and sank slightly in the tub as he stalled the lathering work with his fingers, "I did say I'd be your boyfriend."

"You said you'd be like a boyfriend to me, and I still told you no!" Yuri protested, "Just like I said no to the idea of you being like a father or brother to me! I said to just be yourself!"

"All the more reason for me to consider myself your boyfriend then, not just like one."

"So you really think we were dating that whole time."

Viktor gave a teasing-wounded look, "Yuri, how could it have been anything else?" He asked, one hand against his heart, "We were both hopelessly in love with each other already. Neither of us was willing to admit it to the other yet, that's all."

"I guess that makes sense. Chris did think we were sleeping together already." Yuri gave a wistful sigh, and closed his eyes as he let his partner rinse the conditioner out again, leaving his hair soft and silky smooth against his skin, "I remember him suggesting that it was our special training. I just kind of smiled and nodded at the time, not really sure what else to say about it." He reminisced, and leaned back against the outer wall of the tub, "He cheered me on at Worlds when you called me back to the hotel that one time. It's like he knew we were going to jump into bed with each other as soon as I got there."

"By then, I really was giving you special training." Viktor laughed, "I'd like to give you more..."

Yuri felt a flutter as soon as he heard the words, but he let it pass, and rubbed the water from his eyes again. He sought for a wash cloth and the liquid soap, and rubbed the sudsy fabric across his pale skin, starting with his arms, "What would you want to do for date night?" He asked instead.

"Honestly, in Hasetsu, I'm not really sure. There's stuff we could do here at home though."

"Oh?"
"We could get your console out of the box it's been in since we moved here." Viktor suggested, "You've got some multiplayer games on it, right?"

"Uhhhh..." Yuri strained to think back, "...I don't think so, actually. But, there's no reason why we couldn't buy one. I'm sure there's two-player puzzle games we could find, or something. What else?"

"I kind of want to get a fondu set." Viktor went on, "It would be perfect for the kotatsu. We'd have one pot for a really nice cheese appetizer, then another one for a savory or spicy dinner broth, and then a third one for the chocolate fondu at the end. We could get all sorts of different fruits and treats to dip, like rice-crispy cubes or marshmallows and strawberries. We'd just spend all night making these little delectable bite-size bits, trying a bunch of different sauces..."

"That sounds pretty good. What else? You've got really good ideas."

"When it's not so cold and rainy, we could go together to a ramen stand. ...I know you're not super-thrilled about drinking too much, but we could go downtown and check out the local bar scene. Do wine or beer tasting, listen to some live music..."

"What about other stuff at home?"

Viktor made a face, but then thought on it, "Well...movie night can get a bit dull if there's nothing interesting to watch... Massage night could be neat though. Get some different oils or lotions...set up some candles, romantic music... Who knows where it could lead?"

"I could suppose a thing or two."

"I don't know what you could be referring to." The silver mused, relaxing against the neck-towel again, keeping half an eye on his husband's shiny wet skin, "It was an entirely innocent suggestion."

Yuri rinsed the washcloth and set it aside, spraying himself down until all the soap was turning down the drain under his feet. He leaned up on the singular step and hooked the showerhead up into its wall-holster, and held his hand up to it for a moment just to make sure it didn't fall out and drop into the tub. He drew a quick breath and looked down at his soaking partner, "...You know, my favorite sexy time started in the water."

"Eh?" Viktor blinked, quickly sitting upright before Yuri could twist and sit back into the tub, sending overflowing water rushing over the edge and down into the shower basin. As the new depth leveled out, Viktor refocused on the fact that his naked husband was sitting sideways in his lap, and turned to pull his legs under the water, back to his chest, "...Remind me how your favorite sexy time started in the water?"

"That time at Nationals, when we had the whole hotel onsen just to us." Yuri explained, lightly fingering at his partner's knees were they came up on each of his sides, "Everyone else had left, and we were by ourselves. I nearly let us get very inappropriate in the water...but then you pulled me out onto the ledge and nearly had me right there."

"Ooohhhhhh yeaaahh...! Then the smol nugget came back and we had to pretend like nothing was going on!"

Yuri laughed, "Yeah. I don't know what it was... There was something exciting about being there, in that place."

Viktor made a face, though Yuri couldn't see it, "You know, you were perfectly ready to make love to me in front of everyone at Worlds last year, too. The only reason we stopped is cuz Yurio threw..."
something at the back of your head and yelled at us to cut it out."

"...And at the NHK Banquet..."

"Maybe you have a secret thing for sex in public." The Russian teased, knowing how bright pink his partner's face must be to hear it, "...Come to think of it, that would even explain why you were so receptive to it after my Rage Skate. We could've been walked-in on at any time."

Yuri puffed a small resistance, "I recall pushing the couch in front of the door so it wouldn't open if someone tried to come in."

Viktor pretended not to hear it, "You know what... I'm going to make a mental note that I need to take you on a hike when the weather's better. Just think about it...you and I, barely alone in the woods...taking off just enough clothing to make it possible. Ever-watchful of any other hikers who might walk by."

"Oh my god my face hurts." Yuri laugh-whined, putting his hands against his cheeks.

"Why, from smiling too much? You're that into it, huh?"

"ViktorIswear-"

"I promise this to you, my love. I've finally discovered a kink even you never knew you had. I have to help you experience it."

Yuri could hardly take it, and thrashed and wiggled to try and turn around in that awkwardly small space. When he finally managed it though, sending even more water over the edge of the tub and onto the shower floor, he put his hands down onto the submerged seat and wedge in close between his husband's legs, "I should never have told you that."

"Oh, you should've told me much sooner!"

"Well, what about your kinks then? Surely you know what they are."

"I'm working my way up to them. I need you to be more comfortable with me though." Viktor admitted, "It's nothing weird...but it's been at the back of my mind since my favorite sexy time."

"...Which was...?"

"La Première." He answered, and gave a naughty smile, "Another time you enjoyed sexy time in public."

Yuri gaped at the realization, "...Oh my god, I really do have a kink."

"I will nurture this kink to the fullest of my ability." The Russian swore dramatically, holding up one hand above the water as the other went over his heart, "On my life."

Yuri could only feel his face getting tighter from the embarrassment.
Yuri waited for the distinctive sound of long, deep breaths, before he dared to move. The room was pitch black, invisible to his naked eyes, but for the image he had in his mind for the placement of every piece of furniture, every wall, every doorway, curtain, and window sill. He twisted where he lay, feeling the hot velvet skin of an arm slide over his slim frame as he pulled out from under it, and pawed for the edge of the nightstand. He found his glasses, then his phone, and slid his fingers over the edge of the cool wooden top, until he felt the ridge of the handle to the top drawer, and pulled it open quietly. He spotted the tiny pin-size dot of green light, and delicately fumbled for the plastic cord that gave that light power. He found the knob, and dialed the switch until it softly clicked, and the little green light went out.

I'm sorry... Yuri thought dejectedly, pushing the drawer back into place as quietly as he could, and moved to find his warm spot again in the sheets. He lifted up the arm that had been draped over him before, and put it back into place, closing his eyes as he snuggled in close, I tried to be brave, but I...chickened out anyway...

The sound of Ghost - then Jiro - barking at the front door woke Yuri up sooner than his alarm was meant to, and his eyes fluttered open. The dark had given way to morning light, which trickled in through barely-parted curtains, coming into the room in thin beams. As was always the case, though with eyes that weren't as sharp as they could've been, Yuri's gaze descended onto his husband's sleeping frame, and the light shone on that silver hair with a glow that he had always thought was a figment of his imagination.

The barks chorused again, this time after a distinctive rapping on the front door. Yuri peeled himself from the warmth, fumbled for his glasses, grabbed a bathrobe, and rushed down the stairs.

Please please please please please...!

He waded through the bodies of dogs and pulled the panel open, feeling - and cringing from - the icy cold air that the house sucked in with a gasp. Outside stood the well-bundled frame of a Japanese Postal Service delivery driver.

"Ohayo gozaimasu." The figure said, bowing, a package in his hands, "Nikiforovu-san desu ka?"

"Sou desu."

"Haitatsu desu." The postman declared, just as the one the previous day had done, "Nippon yuu-bin kabushiki-gaisha o go ryou itadaki arigatou gozaimasu."

Yuri took the flat but wide package, eyes wide, and he quickly bowed his head, "Arigatou gozaimasu!" He said excitedly, and closed the door, shivering deeply with both excitement and from the cold. The pack looked up at him with anticipation, as though asking 'For me? For me?' at the Frisbee-sized article. For a moment, Yuri dared to rip all the paper off of it right there in the entry foyer, but as his fingers pulled on the cardboard tab, he hesitated. He flipped the package over and looked to the sender's section, seeing the official government logo of the Saga Municipality, and the hallowed address from which that life-changing implement would come from.

破折市 - 1-1 Nishijonai, Hasetsu Shi, Saga, 847 - 8511
"VIKTOOOORRRRR!"

That silver-haired head popped up like cold water had just been thrown over him, but before he had a chance to throw his legs over the edge of the bed and rush out in a confused, heart-pounding panic, Yuri rushed in, going up those stairs with the power of a freight-train. He jumped onto the bed, literally trembling, and Viktor blinked hard at him, sitting back down onto the edge of the bed, "What the Hell's going on? I nearly died."

"Sorry!" Yuri pleaded, holding out the package, "I can't open it. I can't open it. You have to do it."

"I don't even-

"OPEN IT!"

"Okay okay! What even is it?"

"It's from City Hall!" Yuri answered frantically, "That can only mean one thing!"

Viktor's face went gaunt for a moment, but then lit up with the same panicked excitement Yuri's had, and he tore into the package as fast as he could just as the pack rushed into the room. Several papers fell out, as well as a red, leather-like booklet. Viktor quickly grabbed it and opened it, flipping it around to show off the Kanji dominating the page above, and his photo and indentifying information on the bottom in English, "Passport!"

Yuri lifted his eyes from where he'd been rummaging through the pile, and took the passport in his hands excitedly, sitting back with it. The same awe as he'd had at the first sight of a photo of young Viktor and his first poodle crossed Yuri's face, and he passed it back, "You'll get your first stamp in that later today. This timing is so perfect."

"What else is in here?"

Yuri looked back down again, and sifted a few other papers away, looking for the one document he was really after. When he found it, he pulled it up, "...It has way more on it than I thought it would."

"What would?"

"Your koseki-" He started, only to feel his breath catch in his throat with a loud gasp. He smacked his hand over his mouth as his eyes went wider than before, and then watered almost immediately, "Oh my god."

"What!?"

Yuri shook his head, but then lightly smacked himself in the face a couple times just to make sure he was awake. He looked at the document again, "...I thought they were going to send your personal koseki, and we'd have to take it downtown to get our household under one document. But they-" He explained, feeling his voice quiver slightly, and he turned it around, trying not to cry, "They already did it-

"...I can't read it! What's it say!? Where does it say it!?" Viktor called, taking the paper in his own hands, able to recognize his own name in Japanese lettering but little else.

"Look here-" Yuri started again, pointing at the top of the page, though upside-down to his vantage, "This is our household information...my name as head of household... Below it is the dates, December 30th for the day things started changing, reason for change, marriage. Then it's my information as Registrant 1, legally recognizing my married name...and over here, it
Viktor pulled one hand back to cover his mouth, staring in stunned silence as Yuri went on, finger going down the page as he explained.

"This section is for Registrant 2, this is you! Name, Viktor Nikiforov, birthdate, father and mother's names...and over here on the side."

"It's the same character as the one describing you." Viktor said quietly, his voice barely a quivered whisper, "...It says husband, too."

Yuri swallowed, face starting to hurt again from his wide smile, "It says husband, too." He affirmed, tears streaming down his face. He had to pull his glasses off to dry his eyes and cheeks, but even doing that much just made him cry even more.

Viktor quickly leaned over the pile of scattered documents to pull his partner to his shoulder, and held him tight, "Are we still asleep?" He asked quietly, feeling the tears in his own eyes starting to form. He heard a sputtered wet laugh, and pulled back enough to see that smile again, even through the mess of tears.

Yuri tried to wipe his face again on the sleeve of his bathrobe, but nothing would help. His big hazel eyes shone brightly, "...They...they recognize us... It's not just...we're not just symbolic anymore... Japan has recognized us!" He managed, descending again into a confused mess of joy and tearful excitement. He felt the kiss in the absence of his ability to see through all the moisture, and the rest of him fell apart, collapsing against his husband's uncovered fame. He felt the wetness against his neck, and knew full-well that those tears weren't his own.

It was particularly weird to see the big black Mercedes shuttle-van arrive in front of their house, but arrive it did, and out came the driver, dressed nearly like a soldier as he went about loading the back with the Nikiforovs' ample luggage. Room was made for the travel case containing all the dogs' supplies; bowls, brushes, and Jiro's teething bones. Ghost and Makkachin hopped up into the back afterwards, and the two skaters piled in with Jiro in front of them in the farthest-back seat in the passenger area. Viktor greeted them as he shuffled by towards the window, and Yuri did the same before cozying up against his husband's side.

"You two look pretty stoked." Yurio commented, lifting an elbow over the back of the middle row's back-rest, "What happened? Did you already win?"

"Oh, we won, but not Four Continents." Viktor mused, "It probably doesn't make any difference to you, but...Yuri and I got our documents today."

"...What'd he need documents for? I thought you were the only one becoming a citizen." The teen quirked a brow.

Nikki moved from the front bench to the middle one and thumped into the seat, peeking over the back with both hands on the headrest, "You're officially Japanese now?" She asked, looking at her cousin.

Viktor proudly flipped out his brand-spanking new red passport, "Yep! But more than that..." He paused, and looked towards his spouse, "You tell them."
Yuri nodded, "Mik! Minako-sensei!" He called, getting their attention at the front of the huge people-mover, along with Viktoria nearby to them on the front-most bench, "Viktor and I got our koseki today! The Japanese government is recognizing us! I didn't have to adopt him!"

Minako gaped, "You're kidding."

The two beamed from the back-most seat like newlyweds, "It's true!" Yuri insisted.

"That's incredible!"

"Neither of us could really believe it when we saw it...but it's right there on the paperwork. We're both on the same document and we're both listed as husbands! Jeeze I'm gonna cry again."

Viktor laughed and hugged the man, keeping his arm over Yuri's shoulders, "If you cry, we'll both end up crying again. I wouldn't mind though."

Yurio wasn't sure how to respond, but he gave a few nods of acknowledgment. Nikki's eyes went wide though, "So you mean that...Japan didn't recognize you before...?"

Yuri shook his head, "No... It's only barely acknowledged in a few select places around the country. There's a spot in Fukuoka that does, but we don't live there, so..." He explained, reaching up to rub a knuckle against his eyes, and snuffled a wet breath, "I thought I was going to have to formally adopt Viktor like he was my kid, even though he's older, just to have us both on the same document somehow. I guess...since we're Olympians, it gave us a leg-up, but... Someone moved mountains to get our union recognized here. We're completely legally married now."

Viktor nodded in agreement as the explanation waned, and he chimed in on his own, "It used to be that we were legal only in Spain, since we got married in Barcelona. I had to rent an apartment for us and everything, just to say we had a residence there... We got lucky back then, too, because normally they wouldn't even do marriage certificates for people unless they'd lived there for a year or something. But...the officials in Barcelona let us get away with it, since the contract we had was for a year. As long as we didn't try to cut and run, they said they'd let us keep our marriage certificate."

"...Wow. That's a lot of work to have to go through." The silver teen commented, "Do you get any benefits now?"

Yuri made a face then, "Well... Sort of?" He winced, "It's a bit different with us because we're athletes and we're working for the same organization, but if and when one of us leaves, there's an element of support that comes out of the work the other still does. Oh...if we ever end up destitute, we get free water at the house."

Nikki blinked, "...That's it?"

"Well... A lot of the benefits are meant to make it easier to raise kids. Viktor and I are...well, you know; not able to make kids together." Yuri explained nervously, feeling the vibration in the van as the driver pushed the side-door closed, and Mikhail finally took his seat up front. Jiro barked once as he stood on one of Yuri's thighs, and looked around as the vehicle started to move. Yuri held the pup with his free arm, and felt a flutter in his chest as the van really started to move. He looked back to Nikki again though, "It's really just...about the recognition. We were just kind of a spectacle before. My name only changed on documents where people humored me - mostly with the JSF and ISU - but I was still listed as a Katsuki on everything else."

"But now you're listed as a Nikiforov!" Nikki said cheerfully, "This is really exciting!"

"Ugh, I've been crying all morning because of it." Yuri admitted, giving an embarrassed smile, "I
didn't really understand how much it meant to me until I saw our papers. Then I just... The waterworks started, and then they really started. Viktor probably spent the first hour of his morning consoling me. I didn't give him a chance to get dressed or anything."

"He nearly gave me a coronary." Viktor mused, brow furrowed but for the truth of it, "He just suddenly screamed my name from the entryway while I was still asleep upstairs. I thought he was about to be murdered or something. I haven't been up that fast ever."

"I think I know what you mean..." Nikki said, giving a look towards her father over a shoulder, "There were occasions where papa had to wake me or Vikki or Sergio up, and we were late for school... He'd yell our name from the bottom of the stairs and we knew we were as good as dead."

"That happened twice and it was never for you, sweetie." The elder contested from the front.

"Trauma by proxy, papa!"

That just made him sputter a laugh, "Alright...if you say so." He twisted in his seat as well as he could, and glanced all the way back to the end of the shuttle, "Congrats on the recognition, kids. I think that's probably the best way to start this trip, huh?"

"It definitely made the day better." Viktor agreed, "But I have to admit...Yuri's warmed me up to the idea of this private jet of yours. So, this is three really great things to start the trip."

"Three?"

"Well, because of these new travel arrangements, we get to bring our whole pack." He answered, "No one gets left behind."

"Let's keep this good luck going then and have a really great weekend."

"Yeah!"
CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED EIGHTY

The landing and docking area for jets was apart from the rest of the airport's regular traveling planes, but was still contiguous with the main airport terminal. Going a different direction than they'd gone every time they'd come to the facility for the last several years was a bit strange though. Several more members of staff attended to them to bring in their luggage, pulling the two trolleys behind the group as someone rather official-looking lead them through a quieter set of halls. Passports and the like were checked as they entered a lounge area, with the entire exterior wall made from floor-to-ceiling windows. Hardly alone in that large luxurious space though, with several other small parties waiting for their own private charters, the area still felt particularly exclusive.

Yuri couldn't help but approach the huge windows, seeing out into the stormy weather beyond the glass. Rain pattered against the panes gently, warping the lights and sights out on the concrete. The soft ambiance of what sounded like distant chamber music broke up the quiet in that huge space, spackled by the noise of the rain, and the occasional rumble of thunder high in the sky.

"Wait right here," They heard Mikhail say, drawing eyes over to himself, "I'm going to get into costume."

"...Costume?" Viktor echoed, confused, "What kind of attire do you need for flying?"

"CEO Rozovsky attire." He answered, pulling a stiff garment bag from where it hung on the luggage cart, "I try to look the part if I'm going to be playing the role."

Viktor turned to Yuri, but shrugged and smiled anyway, "If I realized there'd be a dress-code for this, we would've gotten ready before you picked us up."

"No dress-code for you guys. But you can if you want to."

Minako made a face, hands squished into her coat pockets, "We're all going to look like hobos by comparison if you come out dressed like a show-pony."

Mikhail just laughed at that, and slung the garment-bag over his shoulder, looking through the gaps in the bent brass bar that curved over the top of the suitcase pile, "You look just fine."

"Because you haven't dressed yourself up yet."

"You'll still look fine even when I have."

She gave a sarcastic narrow-eyed leer, then turned to the rest of the group, "Find your fineries, everyone. We can't let Mik upstage us."

Nikki clapped her hands mischievously as she and Yurio went right for their bags, pulling the whole stack apart, much to the horror of the wait-staff who'd arranged it. Tried as they might to stop the teens from making a big mess, it was impossible to stop them, and before they knew it, the entire suitcase pile had collapsed to the floor like a failed game of Jenga.

Yuri hesitated, but then looked to his partner, "You think we should, too?"

"Guess we'd be the ones looking like hobos if we don't." Viktor smiled, "But I'm actually kind of excited about dressing all spiffy anyway. I remember how thrilling it was to step out as Coach Viktor..."
for the first time. This is a whole new level of razzle-dazzle."

Even Viktoria resigned herself to finding her things as she watched her younger siblings trot off
towards the rest area. Mikhail watched her go, spotting Minako pull out a long garment-bag from one
of the big suitcases, "...I guess I'll say something next time?"

"It's not every day we get to pretend we're all billionaires." She answered, "Let us indulge while we
have the chance. This is really fancy."

Mikhail smiled nervously, "I suppose. Now I feel bad though."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't want to put you guys out. You can dress however you want on this plane.
Whatever's most comfortable. It's still going to take a day to fly to the States. Keeping up
appearances for the whole time will get annoying."

"Doesn't stop you." The ballerina quipped.

"Alright, alright..." He surrendered, holding his hands up a bit. He stepped around the cart then and
gave his lady love a kiss to her knuckles, "If you want to be fancy, far be it for me to try and stop
you."

"Glad you're seeing things my way." She mused, quickly pinching the man's nose in a rare public
display of affection, "See you in a few minutes then."

The elder watched as his fiancé and daughter moved off to catch up to the youngsters, but he then
turned to find Yuri and Viktor finding their own things, "I guess I should've suspected you would
want to get fancy if you could be, Viktor."

"You would be correct." He grinned as he looked up from the suitcase with his dress-shoes, and
closed the lid after Yuri pulled out his own things. Their triad of canines had already wandered off to
snuffle around, leashes dragging on the floor behind them. As the suitcase was clipped closed again,
Viktor offered his hand to his spouse to help him stand, "They say you should always dress for the
job you want, not the one you have."

"I thought that meant you should always dress like the Batman."

Viktor laughed at that, "Oh, definitely, that's true most of the time. But currently, it sounds fun to
dress like a guy who can afford a private jet. I intend to make the most of this, because it sounds like
this'll probably never happen again."

"Never say never...but, yeah, don't get used to it either." Mikhail nodded, but then nudged his head
towards Makkachin, "Shouldn't one of you wait with your pack though?"

Yuri blinked, but turned and clicked his tongue twice to get the attention of the roaming pups. They
all perked up and came prancing back, "I guess I can wait with them. I don't want anyone to think
we're not responsible for them..."

Viktor shook his head and bent down to collect the leashes, giving his poodle a head-squish for good
measure while he was there, "Go ahead, my love. I'll wait here for you."

"Oh, alright." He nodded, stealing a quick peck before he moved on after the rest of the group.

The duo of Russian 'dragons' stayed put together as Yuri moved on, but Mikhail was keen on the
situation, waiting for Yuri to be out of earshot and out of sight before turning to his nephew, "Pohóže, polët budet očen’ interesnym." (I have a feeling this flight will be interesting.)

"Počemu ty tak govorišʹ?" (Why do you say that?)

[This'll be the first time we've all traveled together. When everyone was making their plans over the summer, you had everything arranged before I even had a chance to ask.] Mikhail answered. [As soon as the Grand Prix assignments came out, it's like you had plane tickets manifest right out of the ether.]

[I had to.] Viktor mused, shrugging up his shoulders innocently, [Yuri would've had us on the ISU charter flights if he had the chance. I haven't willingly flown at their expense in ages. It was fine when I was smaller, but now...] He looked down at his legs and stuck one out, clicking his heel down on the tile floor, [I can't stand flying economy. My knees are bent into the seat in front of me, and if that person reclines their seat, I'll practically be munching on their scalp the whole flight.]

[Tall-people problems.]

[Right?] Viktor huffed and nodded, [...]I did want to ask though.]

[Ah, here it comes. I knew there was something.] The elder pouted sarcastically, [What is it?]

[What's going to happen to my father?] Viktor asked simply, his expression softening a bit, [It...doesn't sound like you're planning on going back there to do anything with him.]

[I've been trying to figure out what to do.] Mikhail answered quietly, turning to look up and out into the light storm on the other side of the glass, [He'll eventually be put into the ground next to your mother. It's an...unusual job for my people, but it's a job that needs to be done.]

[You're not going to be there when they put him into that hole?]

The elder quirked a brow and glanced back at his nephew, [Is that a really unsubtle way of asking if there's a way you can come, too?]

[Viktor's expression looked pained, and he turned his eyes away, [I'm not sure how to answer that. I don't even know how to broach the subject with Yuri. He'd have a st-]

[I get it.] Mikhail quieted him with a hand up, [I honestly don't know what my plans are. After all the Hell I caused that man throughout our lives, I feel like it would be disrespectful to be the only person to be there as he's laid to rest. I hadn't thought much about it as a result.]

[Viktor hesitated to speak for a moment, all but biting on his own lips to keep them together. He shook his head though and let out a breath, [...What if we all went?]

[Mikhail's brow crinkled skeptically, [...]What if we all went?]

[...Well, we're all together now, right? What if...we all went to pay our respects together? Everyone here with us now has met him. We all have a piece of him in our memories...good, bad, whatever they are. We don't need to put on the whole show with the funeral parade and the pries-]

[You want to lay your old man down without a priest.] Mikhail deadpanned.

The younger silver paused a moment, but then gave a helpless shrug, [Would he really notice the difference now? Funerals aren't for the dead. They're for those of us still here.]
[That is...pathologically realistic, but I can't accept it.] Mikhail shook his head, [He's getting a priest.]

[Okay, fine...priest it is... But you even said, we don't know who any of his comrades were, so it's not like we can call anyone to attend. I just...] Viktor started, and stopped, and waffled uncomfortably, [...That man ruined a huge chunk of my life. Every time Yuri touches my face just so.] He explained, sliding his fingers under the tips of his bangs, going softly over the cracks of that nigh-invisible scar next to his left eye, [...I still feel a bit of a sharp edge here. Like a sliver that never came out, jabbing me again anytime it's disturbed. But after what Yuri did at NHK, and how my father tried to come out of his shell a little bit with each of us... I mean, the fact that he tried-

[You're a paradox, nephew.] Mikhail said, subtly shaking his head, [You don't grieve for him but you still want to go to his funeral, even after saying you don't ever want to go back to Russia again.]

[I know. I don't make any sense. ...But I've had time to think about it. Percolate on what Kon meant to me and how things ended. I think Yuri and I would be safe if we went with you and your family. I th-] [Yeah. Well, most of the time, but not always. Point being...he'd practically put together a Presidential motorcade for this trip if I asked him to.]

[PA?]

[Personal Assistant. Or as I called him, my Personnel Assistant. When I was more active in my company, years back, he was with me more often than anyone else. Keeping my schedule, arranging hotels and transport, making sure I always had security, the whole nine yards. He hardly gets to do anything fun now.]

[...PA?]

[...Is he the one that you call when you're up to mischief?] Viktor was the one with a brow up then.

Mikhail smiled, [Yeah. Well, most of the time, but not always. Point being...he'd practically put together a Presidential motorcade for this trip if I asked him to.]

[Does he have a name?] [Sinclair.]

Viktor nodded and looked away in thought again, tapping one foot as he mulled the idea over. He reached up with his free hand to rub the side of his neck anxiously, [This wouldn't be an imposition?]

[No. I'm...actually kind of glad you brought it up. It was gnawing at my gut that you were so indifferent to the news that he'd died.] The elder answered, rubbing the center of his chest like he could feel the relief moving through him, [I know you didn't love him. I didn't either. But...he was...]
the man my sister chose, and her dying wish was that we all became a family again. I think...we can show respect for the man, and for Tatiyana, by at least showing up for that last moment. ...Even if it is just for us, in the end.]

Viktor slowly nodded. He perked up again though as he heard the sound of the group coming back, and gave a friendly smile as he tried to shake the odd feeling brought on by the previous conversation. He watched curiously as Nikki grabbed Yuri's attention, and the two paused together, apart from the rest of the group as they continued walking. She rummaged around in her small handbag and pulled out some items Viktor couldn't quite see from his distance, looking instead to Yurio as he returned to put their former-wear into the suitcases where their spiffy-duds had come from.

"I wish I knew this was going to happen because this is the only suit I brought." The blonde grimaced, "And it'll have travel-stink on it when I wear it again at the Banquet."

"I'll get everyone's stuff dry-cleaned. Don't worry about it." Mikhail reassured.

"Uh oh..."

"Uh oh what?"

"Look." Yurio nudged his head towards Yuri and Nikki, "She's styling him."

Viktor cast his eyes over again and watched as the silver teen stood behind his husband, who by then had found himself sitting in a low couch. Nikki was combing through that dark black hair, which had a slight shine to it from recently being wetted. Satisfied that it was all pulled back, she took the comb-handle in her lips to free up her hand, and unwound a thin black elastic from her right wrist, and started to thread it through the hair she'd collected. A few twists and tugs later, pulling a few deliberately stray hairs, and she went around to inspect from the front, doing the same around his forehead hairline. When she was finally satisfied, she nodded, clapped her hands, and put the comb away again. They exchanged a few more quiet words, and Yuri looked up, unsure what had just happened, but he stood back up again and the pair came back to the rest of the group.

A bit surprised, Viktor then smirked, "Looks like you finally had enough."

"Does it look okay? Or do I look ridiculous...?" Yuri worried, only to get a thwap on the arm by his stylist. He winced and rubbed the spot, looking at the teen like his tiny trust had been betrayed, "Not because of you!"

"I wouldn't let you walk off if you looked silly!" She scolded, "I did Otabek and Yura's hair at the Final you know!"

Viktor snapped a photo while the duo weren't looking, and turned his phone around as the flash got their attention back, "I think you look really good. You were right, about the messy man-bun suiting your image. It'll go really well with your programs. There's a sort of dark, sexy sophistication about it."

Yuri's face flushed, and he smiled, "Th-that's a relief to hear. How about now?" He asked, and pulled his glasses off.

"Oof." Nikki gasped, stepping up beside her cousin.

"Oof? Oof what?" Yuri grimaced, holding his glasses with both hands nervously.

"A million underpants just dropped all around the world," Viktor teased, "Their wearers just don't
know it yet."

"How about yours?" Yuri quipped, feeling a bit more confident then.

Slate eyes went wide for a moment, but Viktor was resolute, "Mine dropped first. Obviously." He laughed, and stepped forward to kiss that pale brow, "I have to go put on a new pair now. I'll be right back." He explained, handing off the leashes as he moved.

Yuri took them easily enough, cheeks still a rosy hue as Viktor went by. To his confusion though, something seemed to drop from the Russian's grasp, and Yuri's eyes went to the floor, seeing something black left behind in the man's wake. For a moment, Yuri could've sworn it was a sock, and trotted off with dogs in tow to get it...but he only went bright red as he realized it was a pair of his husband's black bikini-briefs, "Viktor how did you-" He stammered, snatching them up to stuff into his inside breast-pocket.

The silver just laughed and waved, "Don't question it! Just enjoy it! It's going to be a good weekend!"
Chapter 581

CHAPTER FIVE HUNDRED EIGHTY ONE

With a smile still beaming across his face, Viktor felt the twist of anxiety in his stomach, leaving his uncle behind with Yuri, knowing the conversation to come. It was particularly odd when Mikhail came into the changing room within a span of time that felt like only seconds. Viktor had barely gotten half undressed when he heard the door open, and the click of dress-shoes coming in on the tile floor.

"On soglasilsja." The elder called simply, seeing his nephew’s head pop out of a stall, like a dog confused at his human coming home so soon.

"Čto ž, èto bylo bystro." (Well, that was fast.)

Mikhail looked around for a dress-hook to hang his garment bag on. [He said he'd only agree if we use the jet to land and leave. He refuses to allow either of you to go through Russian customs or security checks again, nor be made to put any of your dogs into cargo.]

[...So I guess that means you're going to go with all that since you said Yuri did agree?]

[Of course.]

[How is it even possible for you to just do all this stuff at a moment's notice? Doesn't this kind of thing take days or weeks of planning...?]

Mikhail looked back from where he'd started undoing his tie in a mirror. [You can charter a private jet and be on the runway in as little as four hours.] He explained, looking to the reflection again, [Most of the trouble is making sure there's enough crew to make it happen. There's no way a single piloting team can manage a back-to-back cross-continental flight without a day's rest in between, so if we want to get going, we have to arrange two crews. One to get my plane here, and another to take us to Colorado while the other recovers.]

[So we'll have sleeping passengers that we don't know with us?] Viktor asked skeptically.

[No. They'll disembark and stay here. The flight is for us, not them.]

[So it's not a personal piloting team.]

[No. Most people don't fly often enough to make having a personal pilot worthwhile, so we hire pilots from companies the same way someone might hire a cab. Except in this case, the vehicle isn't theirs.]

Viktor nodded quietly and pulled back into his large stall, pulling off his under-shirt, [...Does Yuri know I'm aware of this plan?]

[Yes.]

[How'd you...?]

[After he laid down all the rules, I just told him that you'd be happy to hear it. He commented that he had a feeling you might change your mind in the end.]

Viktor made a face, and turned to stick his head out again, but only caught the tag-end of his uncle
closing a stall door down the line from him, [All that happened in the span of like 15 seconds.] He said dubiously, [He just agreed to it like it was nothing.]

[I think he'd been considering it on his own already. I barely got out the words, 'Hey Yuri, about Kon's burial' before he cut me off and said 'only if we use your jet, and only if we aren't alone. I'm not putting us through the same thing we went through before.' I then told him 'okay, we'll be there by Tuesday, I'll make sure nothing happens to you, Viktor will be relieved,' and then I came in here.] The elder explained, the sound of fabric shuffling punctuating the conversation, [He's remarkably pragmatic, that Yuri. I can tell he's terrified, but he's still willing to give it a chance, pending some adjustments.]

Viktor nodded in his seclusion, hesitating a moment to reply. The shuffle of changing clothes continued, with the sound of garment bags being unzipped and parted to pull their contents out. The young silver slid his legs into the soft lining of his black slacks, [I never thought in a million years that I'd ever tell him anything about my family.] He started warily.

Mikhail listened closely.

[I avoided the topic outright, even ignoring or dismissing it anytime Yuri asked. There was just so much anger and hurt that would inevitably come out of what I would've said...and I never wanted Yuri to see me that upset.] Viktor explained quietly, arms sliding into his button-down, [I honestly never believed I'd see you again, or that I'd ever forgive my father for what happened. I hoped I'd see mom again one day, so I could tell her about how far I'd gone with that hobby of mine that drove me from home... Turns out, everything was the opposite to what I thought.]

[I could go on for days about my regrets,] Mikhail said, pulling the stays out of his Heinrich Dinkelacker oxblood cordovan shoes, then slipped his feet inside before setting each one on the floor, [But the way things are now...it kind of makes all that stuff worthwhile. Sure, it'd be better if Tat was still here...but the rest? I'd do it all again.]

[...Me, too. No question.] Viktor agreed. The room fell to quiet as they finished changing and put their former garb into the bags. They each styled their hair, and just as Viktor was about to grab his things and head back out, he paused to marvel at the 'CEO' look his uncle had described earlier, [It's weird how you can go from being aloof to being intimidating just by putting your hair up.]

Mikhail looked over but then smirked, and put the cap back onto the pomade jar, [Until Vikki gives me my hat back, I feel like I need to compensate. Maybe I'll earn back her love by the end of the weekend.]

[Teens can be notoriously fickle creatures.]

[Kids of all ages are fickle. It goes by in the blink of an eye, too...] The elder mused, [One minute they're throwing dry cheerios at you, the next they're asking for car keys. I don't know where I went wrong with Sergio, but I'm glad I have you and Yura around. If not for my own sake, then for the girls. Or maybe I'm glad I have the girls around for Yura...not sure sometimes.]

Viktor laughed at that, [He does seem better behaved when the eyes of the ladies are on him.]

[I think there's a part of us all that's doing better to have everyone around now.] Mikhail suggested, washing his hands, [I know the last year hasn't been the easiest for you. I'm sorry for my part in that. I really did kind of take advantage of the idea that I thought I could do no wrong with you...]

[Maybe that's what you did wrong with Sergio.] Viktor shrugged lightly, [Never adjusting your approach as he got older.]
Viktor was a bit surprised, but stayed put, [What is it?]

[These kids that Minako and I are having...] He started cautiously, [Well, this isn't really something that people our age ought to be doing. We're supposed to be getting ready to be grandparents by now. If we live long enough to see them graduate from high school...I'll consider us both lucky...]

[I just got you back. I don't want to start making preparations for you to go.] Viktor pointed out.

[I'm 58 years old, Viktor.] Mikhail said firmly, [I'm trying to be realistic... Sergio, Viktoria, Nikki, and Yura...they'll all be okay. They're old enough. But these two to come...may need more than just Minako and I. I'd...like you and Yuri to consider being something like godparents.]

Slate eyes widened, [...Godparents?]

[Someone to be there, to guide them if the worst happens too soon... You'd never be without the means to support them, but I can't think of anyone better than you two to show them how to be decent. Someone who can be there to walk them down the aisle if and when the day comes...]

Viktor was still taken aback, but he could see that fear in his uncle's furrowed brow, and he nodded, [I'll talk to Yuri about it. I'm sure he'll feel the same way I do.]

[I don't want you to commit just yet.] Mikhail explained, [But just...think about it. If nothing happens, and we all make it through this thing okay, with both kids healthy at the end...then we can talk about it again. I just want you to have it floating at the back of your head somewhere.]

[You know we're going to say yes anyway.] Viktor huffed, [At least, on one condition.]

[...Condition?]

[You're worried you won't live long enough to walk your twins down the aisle for their weddings...but how about walking me down the aisle for mine?]"
Watching anxiously, Viktor did his best to remain stoic, but that look on Yuri's face crumbled his proud resolve, and he let out a surrendering sigh, "I guess I'm more predictable than I want to believe." He pouted, "So much for my ability to always do the opposite of what people expect."

"It's easier to surprise people who don't spend every second by your side." Yuri explained, "It's not like I'm mad or anything though. As soon as you said that I should go and change while you stayed with the dogs, and Mík stayed with you, I knew you were going to say something that you only wanted him to hear."

"...Yeah, he had the same hunch." Viktor shook his head in disbelief at himself, "I guess I project. But...you're right. For a long while, I was relieved about the news... I knew it meant I would never be hurt or disappointed again by that man. But, the longer time went on, the more I wondered... If his fate was sealed anyway, and this was the best I could've ever gotten from him...then I'm okay with that, too. He didn't back down or run away. He did his best...and for a guy who has believed the things he believed for as long as he did, the fact that he made the effort to try and understand us beyond what I ever thought possible. He has my respect for that. But...also..."

"Also?"

"I don't want Mími to face this alone."

"Alright everyone, if you're all ready, we can go." Mikhail called suddenly, drawing up eyes again, "There's cars waiting on the tarmac to take us to the plane."

"Ooh, curbside delivery service." Viktor mused, briefly mourning the return of Yuri's glasses. But, hand-in-hand, they followed after the rest of the group, the flutter of excitement brewing in each of them. They descended to the ground floor in a rather large elevator, feeling the cooler air of the garage pouring in as the doors opened again.

To Viktor's surprise - and yet not - the passenger vehicle was a long black stretch-limousine. Their suitcases were put into a second car, with staff piling into that one as well. Pups were able to stand and explore the interior of the limo rather than being relegated to the rear storage area, and the pair of vehicles started moving out. The sound of the rain hitting the roof added to the energy, but no one could avoid looking at the 'CEO' for any sign that he recognized one of the planes as they passed. Mikhail gave nothing away though, paying more attention to his starlight beside him than the sight of the terminal going by through the rain-mist.

It was as obvious as anything though when the cars started to approach a large jet, positioned out in the open with a covered walkway leading to the stairs that had been furled-out from the jet's hull. There was even a short red carpet that had been rolled out, from the interior to the spot where the limousine finally came to rest. The canopy was wide enough to keep the rain from blowing in from the sides, but the outdoor chill still nipped at the group as they got out. Dogs looked around excitedly as they plumped out onto the carpet, sniffing and snuffling at everything they could reach before they felt the tug on their harnesses. They kept going though until they were sniffing at the shoes of the crew, where they waited close to the bottom of the stairs.

Mikhail waded through the fluff to get to them, and accepted the handshake of the first pilot, going through what - to him - were the usual rituals of greeting the staff that would be with them for the next twenty-odd hours; one main pilot, his co-pilot, and one cabin attendant. With the winter rains coming down all around them though, introductions were swift, and passengers were quickly guided up into the jet.
The Gulfstream was large, with both of its engines pinned to the tail-end of the fuselage. There were eight portal-windows along each side, and stylish dark blue stripes painted down the side length like waves. At the front, the stripes morphed into the image of a cat-like figure, and with word 'Jaguarundi' emblazoned beside it. Yuri couldn't help but take pictures while he could, getting a few candid shots of the family as everyone started making their way up.

Inside, the entrance-way was narrow, with walls of shiny laminate wood on all sides. To the left, they could see the twin seats of the cockpit and all its myriad buttons and sensors. To the right, the rest of the plane's interior, passing by a tiny staff commissary with two coffee makers, a sink, microwave, and no-doubt a number of other appliances hidden behind the panels sporting handles. Further in, the harder flooring turned soft as the initial industrial-style carpet switched to more plush, livingroom-like carpet. In the first of the three cabin's compartments, were four huge solitary airplane seats, each one set into its own corner of the space. There were wide compartmented railings set against the walls on each side, with a deep cup-holder embedded in the ends of each by their respective seats. Curtains separated that section from the next, which were tied up against the walls so everyone could keep moving through. The middle section of the plane was set up a bit differently; there were another four large seats, but they were set into pairs on the right side, each duo facing inward towards the others, with a table between them. On the left wall, a wide counter with a television, with a mounted vase of fresh flowers beside. The final section, at the back, was cordoned off by a partition wall, which was slid out of the way into neat wall-like slots behind the second pair of seats in the middle section. Beyond the slots were two long couches, set with several pillows, blankets, and another television on the farthest wall. Wood laminate came up to mark the end of the cabin area, and a door labeled for the lavatory in the final small section. Above in all sections were luggage compartments for smaller items.

Mikhail beamed quietly as everyone took in the sight of the whole thing, but soon, even he was being gently coaxed towards finding a seat for himself. Viktor watched in amusement as Jiro and Makkachin went rushing to the back of the plane, jumping up on the couches like they owned the place already, though Ghost stayed calm and close to her chosen human's side. With that in mind, the silver stepped into section two and found himself sitting back into one of the window seats, gesturing for Yuri to sit beside him, giving Ghost the aisle beside him in turn.

"This is all incredible..." Yuri commented, lifting up the plush blanket that was rolled-up on his seat, putting it up into the overhead bin for the time being. Viktor kissed his fingers as he came to sit down, watching as Mikhail and Minako took their pair seats opposite them, while the teens figured out their seating preferences in the first section. He couldn't help but do a count though, and looked across to their patriarch, "...So if the two pilots have seats, and we have seats, where does that straggler on staff sit?"

"There's a hidden compartment in the front section where a fold-out seat is kept for our attendant." He explained, "So she'll slide the wall open to find her seat, and she'll stay in that front section preparing meals and coffee and the like. They'll close the partition behind Vikki and Yura so we don't spend the flight awkwardly staring at one another. It's pretty cozy. ...There's also a spare seat folded into the space behind the co-pilot's seat in case it's needed."

Mikhail nudged his head towards the pilot's area, "There's a hidden compartment in the front section where a fold-out seat is kept for our attendant." He explained, "So she'll slide the wall open to find her seat, and she'll stay in that front section preparing meals and coffee and the like. They'll close the partition behind Vikki and Yura so we don't spend the flight awkwardly staring at one another. It's pretty cozy. ...There's also a spare seat folded into the space behind the co-pilot's seat in case it's needed."

"I guess there's a button if we need her for something?"

"Yep." Mikhail nodded, pointing up under the overhead bins, to where the AC vents and reading lights were found. "The one that looks like a little person is the call-button." He then pointed down towards the floor, "Right behind your chair is a slipper bin, too, so we can take our shoes off if we
want. The bathroom is at the way-back. There's even a shower, with a panel that'll tell you how much hot water is left, and all the stone floors have radiant heating." He looked up then slightly and lifted up onto an elbow on his arm-rest, "Kids, if you need a table, just ask. The cabinets by the walls have a fold-out in them that can be set up once we're in the air. The little cubbies by your cup-holders have USB outlets, plugs, and phone chargers. One of you should have the television remote."

"Found it." Yurio answered, holding it up. He'd chosen the seat directly behind Yuri and Viktor, diagonal to Viktoria and the television behind her, though she quickly realized it and scuttled over to the seat opposite herself so she could see the screen later. Nikki took the final seat, with her back up against the partition to the commissary area, with the fold-out table area between herself and her brother.

"The first part of our flight will take around 9 hours, depending." Mikhail started to explain, "We won't have to bother with any pesky connecting stops in Tokyo or anything."

The crew were busying themselves with bringing luggage on board, unseen but heard, thumping through the cargo hold in the area behind the lavatory. They felt the outside door being pushed closed soon though, and the last member of crew entered the jet, pulling the passenger door closed from the inside.

"Alright everyone, if we could please direct your attention to the lovely Miss Aubrey at the front of the cabin, she'll show you the ropes for today's flight." The overhead speakers sounded, "Each seat has seat-belts in its back corners, which you can clip together by inserting the flat piece into the foldy piece. To undo the buckle, you need only pull up on the foldy piece, and the flat piece will pop out again. Pull on the straps to adjust the belt length."

"Flat piece and foldy piece." Minako repeated.

"Have to keep it fun so people pay attention." Mikhail answered, doing up his own belt in the process.

"If, in the unlikely-but-always-possible occasion that we experience cabin decompression, oxygen masks will fall from the overhead compartments. Place the yellow mask over your nose and mouth, the strap around the back of your head, and pull on the two tabs to adjust it. Always put your mask on before helping the person next to you. Your seat cushion can be detached to use as a flotation device. Beneath it is a life-vest that you need only pull over your head, and clip around your chest. You can inflate it by pulling on the tab on your left, or by blowing into the one-way tube on the right. Emergency exits are on either side of section two; just pull on the handles above the windows and push out. We ask that you keep your seatbelts on until we've reached cruising altitude and the seatbelt light goes out. This is a non-smoking flight."

"...What do we do with the dogs during take-off though?" Yuri asked warily, "Surely we don't just let them float around while the rest of us are buckled in."

Mikhail shook his head, "Miss Aubrey, would you mind buckling Makkachin into the spare seat in front?"

The attendant nodded happily and quickly singled out the poodle, guiding the pup over to the empty fourth seat in the first cabin. She pulled up a well-hidden third strap from the shoulder area of the back-rest, and slipped it through the front of the pup's harness, then buckled the lap-strap under Makkachin's chest.

"...There's still two dogs." Yuri deadpanned, though was still impressed by Makkachin's digs.
Jiro was strapped down next, being seated at the nearest end of the couch where Yuri could still see him. Buckles and belts were pulled out from under the seat-cushions, and the confused Akita was secured soon after. Yuri wasn't so certain about Ghost's demeanor around strangers, and quickly unbuckled to repeat the process on the Ovcharka himself, seating her next to Jiro in the farther section of the couch, just under the television. Once he was satisfied, he gave the two pups a head-rub and went back to his seat to buckle-in again. Miss Aubrey went to the galley and notified the pilots that they were all ready, and just as Mikhail had described, she opened the wall opposite the entryway and disappeared into a compartment to await take-off.

"My name is Captain Mitchell. I'm here with my Number Two, Vice Captain Robyn. We'd like to thank you for flying with us today, and we hope you enjoy. Please rest, relax, and we'll be in Colorado Springs in no time." The overhead speakers sounded again.

Yuri could feel the vibration in the plane as the engines started to make the whole thing move, and he looked excitedly out the window beside his husband, taking the man's hand on the arm-rest between them, "This is so much more efficient than flying commercial..." He commented, "Right?"

Viktor nodded and looked back, "I'm going to be heartbroken when we get home again." He mused whimsically, "Better enjoy this while it lasts."

"The best part about flying to Japan to basically anywhere else is that it seems like you gain time even when you take time to get there." Mikhail commented idly, taking his own partner's hand as well, "So even though it's about 2pm Tuesday right now, here, it's 9pm yesterday in Anchorage. We'll get there when it's around 6am their time, and it'll still be Tuesday for us."

"...We'll make up for that on the way back, no doubt." Yuri added, resting his jaw against his husband's shoulder.

"Better on the way back than on the way there." Viktor supposed, turning to his uncle, "How long is the refueling stop in Alaska?"

"The refueling only takes about 30 minutes itself, but we'll go into the terminal to get our customs stuff done so we don't have to do it in Colorado." The elder answered, "So, I've given us a 2 hour window to stretch our legs and let the dogs run around a bit. Staff'll spruce the place up while we're out, and then we'll get back on our way again."

"This is really great." Viktor nodded, turning then to his partner, "We'll have nearly two full days to get used to the altitude and time change, and all that time, you'll be able to use to continue recovering. Maybe you really will be totally good again by the time we skate for real."

"Maybe." Yuri agreed warily, looking up and over to Jiro as the puppy barked a few times anxiously, "Let's just enjoy the trip for now though. I can't wait to see what this private jet life is like once we're cruising."

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